

SMILING COAST

by

Ah-reum Han

A Thesis

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in Partial Fulfillment of

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of

Master of Fine Arts

Creative Writing

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A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at George Mason University

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DEDICATION

For mom and dad, with love

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ABSTRACT

SMILING COAST

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Smiling Coast is a collection of linked short stories set in The Gambia, a former British colony in West Africa. We follow characters from all walks of life—from presidents to shopkeepers, short-term missionaries to young brides—as they each struggle to negotiate their identities in a changing world.

THE MANUAL

What Joyce Minjin Cho couldn't know when she left her nine-to-five at a private practice in Chantilly to volunteer as a short-termer in The Gambia—a *Chineso* here, no matter her Korean-American heritage—was that she'd fall in love, of all things. The rest had been just as unpredictable. For one, she missed her mother's tomato soup. Also, she'd gained weight. Seven months in to her year-long contract with Good News Presbyterian Mission, Joyce barely showed signs of her three different bouts of malaria, food poisoning, and most recently, a TB scare. Around the same time, a mysterious rash had begun on her left thigh, snaking up to her belly button in spongy red blisters. She scratched it softly now as John knelt in the dark gazebo, washing her feet.

“Then take me with you,” he said, and her stomach dropped. In all the weeks they'd met here, he'd never asked anything of her. Even the iPod she'd lent him had been her idea. The seconds ticked by uselessly.

Night had thrown a heavy blanket over the sleeping compound, and only the stars pierced through. It was enough for her to make out the buildings, all within the good walls of the mission. Up ahead was the generator tower, where the night watchman, Mr. Ceesay, probably slept; and next to that, the kitchen, the outhouse, the girls' dorm. The missionaries' house loomed to her left and the large church to her right, which partly hid

the boys' dorm, where John would return before it became light enough to make out its peeling blue paint.

"I've been praying about this," he said when she didn't respond. He pulled one foot from the water, cupping the wet heel in his palm. "Can you imagine a life for us here?"

It was 4.07 am. In spite of the heat, Joyce had let her hair swing loose passed her bare shoulders, had even made sure to pull a comb through it. It was against dress code, the teal cami she wore, but tonight the weather was unforgiving, and the thin cotton straps seemed the only thing that made sense. Besides, no one else was here to see, no other *soul to lead astray*, as Missionary Park, the director of GNPM's program, had put it during orientation. *These guidelines are for the good of the community. It promotes the Christian values we want to instill in our native brothers and sisters who live here with us*, Missionary Park had added in Korean, handing her a thick manual on community life at the mission. She'd spent the past few days studying that book again, looking for loopholes.

Some rules were more obvious than others. Curfew was 10pm on school nights, midnight otherwise; dormitories of the opposite sex were absolutely off limits; touching, out of the question. But also, the community worship services were every day but Saturday and under no circumstances should be missed, and spending money on Sundays was forbidden, as was secular music and nail polish. *The stakes are higher for you and I*, Missionary Park had said. *As foreigners, we'll be watched. But more importantly, as*

Christian leaders, we are responsible for these young converts. We must set a good example. I'm sure you understand. And she had, for the most part.

See, lately, she'd begun to question things, and this was in no way related to her recent preoccupation with John—dear, sweet John—which had led them both here, ten Saturdays down the road to this moment in this unlit gazebo. “As Christ did for his disciples, I do for you,” he'd professed just moments earlier. “You're the answer to all my prayers. Can't you see?” Her chest had staggered with the sudden possibility. But then why the hesitation? The doubt?

“It's more complicated than that,” she said finally.

“Then explain it to me.”

“Well, think about it for a second.”

“I have. For many.” John squeezed her small toe. “Cute,” he said.

She flicked some water at him with her other foot. “You're being serious?” she said, considering him again, this silhouette she'd come to know so well.

John—Momodou to his family back in Busoa—renamed himself on Christmas Day, when Missionary Park baptized him at Kartong Beach along with a few other kids from GNPM's Program. Joyce recalled that day perfectly, her first week at GNPM. She'd always known water to be blue; the rivers and lakes of her east coast childhood had taught her that. Here, she learned to love the green waters of the Atlantic, the waves so high that the baptees were soaked before they were officially immersed. The water swelled behind them, smooth as polished malachite, before it rushed past, crashing a few feet beyond. She watched from the shore with the rest of the barefoot congregation, the

sun prickling their bare skins, the waters sometimes reaching their toes, the foam like old lace.

As the baptees jumped each wave, the blessings were uttered, the names chosen. So it goes that Sulayman became Isaac and Sirumbaye, Luke; Sonia, Elizabeth; and so on. A Christian name, a rebirth into a new, eternal family. One by one, they high-stepped back to shore, fingers pointed skyward, their past lives dissolved into the Atlantic. And for the missionaries, Momodou chose John, not after John the Baptist but John the beloved disciple, the disciple who remained at the foot of the cross. He'd only admitted to Joyce recently that it was actually Wayne, John Wayne. He was a big fan of Westerns.

It wasn't John's fault that the missionaries here had such high hopes for him, a boy they'd raised so carefully here for a future in the Gambian church. He had a gift, they believed, a calling. Nineteen years old and in his final year in GNPM's Program, John often led the community services in this very gazebo. He preached with humor and with an insight that belied his age, in a vibrant tenor so rich and warm that even the youngest kids paid attention. His sermons were rooted in the Word, led by the Spirit. Everyone said so.

Between John's knees, the plastic basin rasped against the sandy floor. He lifted both her feet from the water onto the small towel in his lap. The stiff fibers loosened under her wrinkled soles.

"Of course I want to marry you," Joyce continued. "But what about school?"

"I'll graduate next month."

"I thought you were planning on Gambia College."

“And there aren’t colleges in America?” John asked wryly. He dried between her toes, around her ankles.

“Yes, but they’re expensive.”

“Have faith,” he said. He slid the flip flops onto her damp feet which, now clean, felt sleek and brittle.

“And your life here? What about the church?”

“God will provide. For the church here and for us. You’re my life, Joyce. I’ve prayed about this,” he repeated.

“But do you have a plan?” she said.

“My plan is to spend this life and the next with you,” he replied grandly. She fought the old irritation. Running her fingers over her belly, she paused to pick at a few scabs.

The missionaries were one thing, her parents, another. At first, her parents had opposed her trip to the Gambia, so far away from all the other eligible bachelors in their Korean-American community. *Honey, you’re getting to that age*, her mother told her, not unkindly. Since she’d never been considered especially pretty—what with her thick, coarse hair, and square face—she took that to mean she only had youth on her side. At twenty-seven, the tectonic plates beneath her face were shifting, the surface of her familiar world erupting in new crests and ridges at fault lines she hadn’t even known existed. White hairs were a matter of course, but these days, her skin seemed to have come loose of her bones, drooping like cheap sofa covers. John on the other hand was stocky, handsome, and he kept his hair buzzed to a thin shadow on his head. Most

importantly, he found her “exquisite.” “Devastating,” he’d declared once, putting a fist to his chest.

Her parents, both dentists, worried about Joyce, their only daughter and the only complication in their successful immigrant story. From the moment Joyce bought her first cotton training bra, her mother had feared the possibility of an American son-in-law, a man she might learn to love but would never understand. But to bring home a Gambian? Her rash prickled again. To her mother, it wouldn’t matter that John, like all the other kids raised in this compound, was so much more mature for his age, or that he was devout, intelligent, charming. He wasn’t Korean. She scratched until the rash stung.

Joyce continued, “You haven’t met my family. They only speak Korean.”

“You can teach me.” John bounced himself to his toes, sitting on his heels.

“Do you even have a passport?”

“I can get one,” he said. Losing balance for a second, he placed a hand on her bare knee. Just a light touch. Then it was gone.

“What about your family here? What will they do?”

“I can send them money. I can visit.”

“And how do you plan on getting a job that will allow you to do that?”

“So many questions, so little faith,” he teased.

“You can’t just get a job in America,” she said, frustrated. “What will you do until then? Where will you stay?”

“With you,” he said, pausing. “We’ll be husband and wife.”

She fidgeted in her seat, scratching, confused by her anger. She bit her nails and tasted blood.

For all her recent qualms about the missionaries Park and their rules, Manual or otherwise, Joyce was still one of them. She might not be administrator or disciplinarian, but she took her role as teacher, mentor, and friend to these children seriously. The missionaries trusted her. And maybe that was why the guilt had never eased, even though it had been weeks since their secret meetings began. It was admirable what the Parks were doing here, taking care of these kids, feeding them, paying their school fees. For all the kids here, the Program was an unprecedented opportunity, and in the grand scheme of things, the mission seemed to require very little in return. Simply: Christian behavior.

Not to mention, the Parks had taken care of her like their own daughter. It had been a difficult adjustment, moving to a new country, the only short-termer that year. The Parks had been patient with her fumbling Korean when she first arrived. And when she contracted malaria her second week in, Missionary Park joked that it was a small miracle. The rainy season was months away, mosquitos scarce. You must have got it as soon as you stepped off the plane, he said. A new record. At the time, his humor had helped her keep calm. Mrs. Park had starved the fever with fresh wet cloths on her forehead and made her tomato soup, a microwave recipe Joyce's mother e-mailed over. There's nothing like the taste of a mother's hand, she apologized in Korean, even though it was excellent, as were all her dishes, its only failing that it was too delicious to conjure up her mother to her bedside.

Truth was, the Parks were good people, and as conservative as they were, their beliefs never wavered. Not after threats, betrayals, unthinkable loss. What an amazing thing, really, when she thought about it. At times, she envied their conviction, the luxury of believing so completely in a single thing. This certainty gave their actions a kind of honesty she'd never had. Their faith was like a map, already discovered with its elevations and borders, in a world of settlers like her, stumbling onto new territories. To Joyce, the world was a constantly changing landscape. She couldn't think of a single time in her life when she'd been sure of anything.

"I don't have that kind of money, John. I'm not rich," Joyce said eventually.

"Well aren't we just two peas in a pod," he said, but the excitement was ebbing from his voice. He tossed the towel over his shoulder and sat beside her. Some heavy machinery moved in his head, and she could almost see it, the invisible levers and pulleys at work under the slowing movements, the quiet.

"Just give me a little time," Joyce said.

"I understand," he said quietly.

Her feet were already sweating, her rash seething beneath her shirt. For the past few weeks she'd been so happy, so unexpectedly buoyed by life in spite of all her health complications. In the safety of darkness, everything had been possible—the happy marriage, the house, the kids—but with John's proposal, everything fell away and she was left face to face with the fleshy mess of the thing.

Sitting here, an arm's length away from everything she'd surely ever wanted, she could only feel a paralyzing indecision. How to explain this to John? For the first time

since she started meeting John, Joyce felt suddenly and terribly alone. If she'd reached out just then, she could have touched his cheek, held his hand. He was so close. But as she hesitated again, unsure of what was appropriate, the gap became a gulf that yawned so wide it may as well have been the large green ocean that would either separate them or swallow them both whole.

In the following days, John noticeably cooled toward her. "Joyce, what did you do?" the girls joked. "Did you tease him about his teeth? He hates that."

Although back in Virginia, Joyce lived with her parents, this kind of community living—day in day out with the same fifty people—took some getting used to. They weren't trapped here, but sometimes it felt that way. The compound was always milling with activity, chatter. Kids moving here and there. Everyone knew everything.

Joyce tried to carry on as normal, attending services, teaching choir, leading the girls' devotions, tutoring the children after school. Her rash pooled around her abdomen. Her only relief was talcum powder, which she applied every few hours in the privacy of her room.

For John, life took on a feverish normalcy, and he did everything with an almost vindictive appetite. He ate enthusiastically, doted on the younger dorm kids, preached fervently. But around her, he wore his hurt like a hair shirt. Although John had always been careful never to appear too friendly in public, now he avoided her entirely, and when he couldn't, he avoided eye contact, pretended not to hear her greetings.

What she'd told John about her finances was almost true. If she broke her contract and left early, the money she'd saved for living expenses here would be enough to purchase two one-way tickets to Ronald Reagan Airport. But was she capable of such betrayal?

She suffered bursts of righteous anger that plunged into moments of crushing loneliness. She missed him one moment and hated him the next. She fantasized about eloping at the same time as she balked at the idea. She'd always wanted a big wedding: the string quartet, the white dress, the blessings. But now a wedding seemed laughable.

And then all the questions, the silly questions. Would it be in the Gambia or in America? Would her father even walk her down the aisle? Which of her friends, his friends, could they invite? Who would be happy for her on that day? So what if it was a simple wedding, a smaller house? The questions always seemed so trite, but they surprised her at various intervals of her day: as she helped Janke with her math homework, as she wrung washed bedsheets with Aramata. Would her parents come around? It might take years. Until then, would love be enough to hold them together so alone in the world?

More than disappointing the Parks or her parents, she was afraid of being discovered for the fraud she'd suspected she was even before she'd moved to The Gambia. Oh, I couldn't do what you're doing, her friends back home said in their e-mails. I'm so inspired by your commitment to the ministry, others said. Their words haunted her now. She'd surprised everyone, most of all herself, when she'd up and left her parents, her friends, and a perfectly reasonable receptionist job that was paying off her student

debt. Her first spontaneous decision, born of a desperate boredom: bored of her life, bored of her faith, bored of herself. And here she was.

Days passed, and in her more dramatic moments, she wondered if John loved her at all, if he was just manipulating her, just like the missionaries had implied with their careful speeches and Manuals. Without John to share the burden of discovery, she feared that their secret would disappear. She thought she heard the girls whisper when she left, or giggle when she approached.

When she overheard John laugh with one of the older dorm girls, her thoughts turned darker. She couldn't help seeing Mattie, her easy laugh, carefree gait, the tight curves of a younger body. Miserable, she blamed the missionaries, her parents, John, but mostly herself, her embarrassing inability to know what she wanted. Meanwhile her rash started to ooze, caking over her pajamas in the night so that in the morning, she'd have to crack it from her skin, dried like rawhide. It no longer itched but burned on low, a static heat. She started sleeping naked in the night.

Jealousy devolved into panic when John missed their Saturday meeting. That night, she waited as long as she could before falling into a dreamless sleep and only emerged from it at daybreak, still and alone, with the vague notion that something had passed her by. She discovered that desperation, blunted at the edges, felt like hunger.

That afternoon, she cornered John by the church steps on his way back to the dorms after lunch. She hadn't slept in days, and her rash had spread, tracking blotches, pink as gums, under her left breast and down her lower back. Her face had grown almost yellow from lack of sleep and dark clouds bruised the skin beneath her eyes. Talcum

powder frosted the edges of her shirt. She blocked his path, determined. This had gone on long enough.

“Please,” she urged under her breath. “Talk to me.”

“Hello,” he said, and she laughed softly, delirious with relief.

Neither of them filled the silence that followed.

“I’ve missed you, John,” she said finally.

Still, he wouldn’t meet her eyes. “I overslept.”

“No, I meant I miss you.” She said, the urgency rising.

“I missed you too.”

Hope bloomed warm in her chest. “I just need time.”

John now looked directly at her. Hands folded under his armpits, he scoffed.

“Time for what?”

“Does it matter?” she cried.

“Yes.”

The blood rushed to her head again. She recalled his easy laugh when she wasn’t around. “Did you tell anyone?” she blurted. The question startled him.

“No. Did you?”

“No.”

“You think you’re better than me,” he said evenly.

“That’s not true. Don’t say that. You can’t believe that to be true.”

“Then why is it so difficult for you to even consider our future?”

Joyce threw her arms up in the air. “Do you think this is easy for me? Do you even know what you’re asking?” Even to her own ears, she sounded shrill.

John looked weary. “Do you think I have less to lose? If you go home, you’ll leave behind me, this country, everyone, and go on with your good life. What could you possibly know about risk? You’re selfish, Joyce. And you don’t trust me.”

“But I love you.”

“I love you, I love you, I love you.” Each word scalded her. “Those words are so easy for you, aren’t they? So cheap,” said John

“No, it matters. It’s got to. I’m telling you that I love you. Isn’t that enough for now?”

“So now you’re the one who needs me to have faith.” He turned to go.

Filled with terror, she grabbed him by the shirt. “Wait,” she said.

Suddenly, a small voice: “Joy-joy?”

Behind them stood little Fra, hopping on one foot then the other. Joyce released John’s shirt, flustered. She wondered how much the young boy had heard and seen. It occurred to her now that she was out in the open, that anyone sitting around—in the gazebo, the kitchen, the church even—anyone could see.

“Mrs. Park wants to see you,” Fra said.

Message delivered and uncertain what to do, Fra spun on his heel and hopped away to join his friends in the gazebo. Looking at John’s shocked face then at Fra’s receding figure, Joyce felt numb. Chilled to her bones, she started shivering, felt light enough to be carried away in the wind, past the tall windows of the church, the roof, and

up above the clouds, where all of this would look so very small. Then, everything came roaring back to her. The blood thundered in her ears. Her rash flared painfully, sending pins and needles skittering over her skin. The missionaries must know.

Mrs. Park sat by the window in the kitchen, writing in a thin notebook, inked pages twisted back. Amber light filtered through the mosquito netting and glinted off her reading glasses. She looked statuesque, serene, washed in the midafternoon glow. Next to her was the Manual, its pale green cover curling at the corners.

“Minjin-*jamae*,” Mrs. Park said in Korean. “Come on in.”

Joyce pulled up a chair. Her pulse fluttered, frightened moths beneath her jaw, in her temple, in her chest. She wiped a bead of sweat away with the top of her collar. Everyone said it was unseasonably humid this time of year, a fact they said promised good harvest. The air thickened, slowed, but while the horizon had lathered with clouds, the large white shapes had thrown shadows, only shadows, across the dusty ground. In spite of the twenty-three years the Parks had labored as the directors of GNPM in Brikama, one of the large hubs of economic activity in the Gambia, they owned no fans, let alone air conditioning, and they refused to keep bottles of water in the fridge, considering it all an embarrassing luxury in a country like this.

Mrs. Park closed her book, placed her pen on top. She spoke softly, as always, so that people wilted inwards, widened their eyes to catch the movements of her lips.

“You’re not in trouble. I just wanted to talk, that’s all,” she said. “You’re just over the halfway mark, but you’ve had an especially rough time of it. A year can feel very

long. How have you been feeling?” Her gaze, though gentle, slipped through her defenses. How much did she already know?

Joyce forced herself to relax. “Better,” she said, a little too quickly. “Better.”

Mrs. Park raised her eyebrow, and Joyce caught herself scratching beneath her shirt.

“Oh, this. This is nothing,” she said. “Just a heat rash, maybe.” She lifted the corner of her shirt to reveal the tiny discolored welts.

Mrs. Park looked concerned. “You’ll let me know if it gets worse.”

Joyce’s tongue felt spongy, thick. She nodded and shifted her gaze to her feet, filmy with the day’s dirt. It hadn’t seemed so long ago that John had washed her feet. If confronted, she wondered if she should lie—it was a small lie; after all, nothing truly untoward had happened—or if she should admit it, the whole thing, beg for her blessing. Mrs. Park had always been kind. Would she ask her to pack up and leave, or would she be forgiven?

The chair squeaked as Mrs. Park leaned back. Breathing became difficult. The idea of returning home, humiliated, choked Joyce with fear as much as the thought of never seeing John again. But at the same time emerged a tiny hope, the chance of an honest life, a love without secrets, without shame. Trembling, she steeled herself for every possibility.

After a moment, Mrs. Park produced an old iPod from her pocket. “Do you know anything about this?” she said.

Joyce's jaw fell slack and her breath escaped slowly from her mouth. The beating of wings beneath her skin slowed, a soft landing. She felt emptied.

"It's mine," she said smiling brightly. "I'm sorry, it was a silly mistake. I won't let it happen again."

"It was in the girls' dorm," said Mrs. Park.

"Oh," Joyce stuttered. "I must have left it out by accident." It had been weeks since she'd lent it to John. He must have misplaced it. Someone must have picked it up. There could be no other explanation.

"Are you sure that's what happened?"

"Yes," she said, trying to hide her confusion. But how could John be so careless? And why was it in the girls' dorm?

When Joyce looked up again, Mrs. Park had covered her face with both hands. Minutes passed.

A quick, deep breath seemed to renew Mrs. Park's resolve. "Well, if one of our girls stole it, we'll need to find which one," she said. Her voice broke on the final syllable. She brushed the hair from her forehead. "This is why we have rules about things like this. You have to keep your expensive possessions within your living quarters."

It was said without accusation, and Joyce fumbled for something to say, realizing her mistake. "Actually, I gave it to them," she said.

"You gave it to them," Mrs. Park repeated. "To who?"

"Mattie," she blurted, and instantly regretted it.

“Did she ask you for it?” Mrs. Park’s expression was unreadable. Joyce’s happiness was dissolving quickly into panic.

“No,” Joyce said.

“Then, what happens after this?”

“Excuse me?”

“So, now you’ve given them this extravagant gift. And you’re here for, what, five more months. What will happen when you leave?” She folded her hands on the table. Against the grainy wood table, they looked like white petals.

Joyce started to feel defensive. “What do you mean?”

“Who will keep the iPod?”

“It was for everyone. To share.” Another lie.

“Let’s just say, hypothetically, you have enough iPods for every single person on this compound. What happens after you leave?”

Joyce’s face grew warm. She remained quiet.

“Resentment. Jealousies,” Mrs. Park continued. “And what happens when it breaks?”

“I don’t know. You’ll fix it?”

“Until when? Who will pay for that?”

It was impossible not to feel defensive. “Then it will just be broken. Everything will go back to normal,” Joyce said.

“And then what will happen with the next short term missionary who comes through?”

“I only meant to give them a chance to learn new songs for choir. I wasn’t using it anymore. It was nothing to me.”

“It might be nothing to you, but to these kids, it’s a whole different world they haven’t learned to handle yet.”

“But it doesn’t have to be,” Joyce cried, defiant now. “You could teach them how. Shouldn’t you be preparing them for a life outside of here?”

But Mrs. Park was far from done. “We’d love to give an iPod to every kid in this compound. I wish we could afford that. But we can’t. We’re barely making ends meet as it is. There’s no way to satisfy everyone, and that’s something we take into account when we make these guidelines. Here, we try and make their lives simpler. Strip it of worldly pursuits and jealousies, give them food, shelter, clothes, so they can focus on the things that matter: their education and their faith. Soon they’ll graduate, be off, and the temptations of the world will be all around them. But until then, we protect them from these needless distractions.”

“You’re removing all these so-called temptations, but where do they learn about responsibility? Self-discipline? I’ve seen iPods in the Brikama market. And it isn’t all bad, these changes.” Out of breath now, Joyce blushed. She had never been this frank. The lie had gotten out of hand, but it was too late now.

Mrs. Park took a different tone. “I’m not questioning your intentions, Joyce. I know you mean well. But you will leave and we will stay. Do you see?”

Joyce took Mrs. Park’s lead. “I’m not sure I understand,” she said, calm.

Mrs. Park continued. “This isn’t the first time this has happened. They’ve seen short-termers like you and they will see more in the years to come. Your work here is important to us, but it’s really just a drop in the bucket, your time here. Real change happens over decades. The only thing your act of generosity did is to set an unreasonable expectation for future short-termers and for us. You see how now it seems like we’re withholding things from them?”

Joyce didn’t bother answering, so Mrs. Park put it a different way. “What does your gift”—she placed the iPod carefully on top of the Manual—“serve in the long run? This doesn’t help the kids. It pacifies your sense of guilt. It’s okay. We all feel it, this guilt of privilege. That’s why we have these guidelines,” she said, pushing the Manual across the table toward her. “I suggest you go study this a little further. I have to say, Joyce. I’m surprised.”

Clearly dismissed, Joyce stood up, blushing. She felt like a child. Picking up the iPod first, then the green book, she asked, “Well, what do you want me to do with this?” The metal casing felt chilly against her damp palms.

“Give it back to them,” Mrs. Park said. “It’ll break before the end of the week.”

Joyce headed for the door without a word.

“And Joyce,” Mrs. Park said, before she left. “What’s going on with you and John?”

Joyce’s anger simmered beneath the surface, blunting everything else. “We had a falling out,” she said mildly.

“You’ll take care of it?” she asked.

“Yes,” she said.

Mrs. Park nodded. “Community living. It can be hard sometimes, but I think it’s best that everyone get along. That’s the truly Christian way. Don’t let the sun go down while you’re still angry.”

Really, when she thought about it, the questions had started with the clothes. Girls had to wear skirts that ran past the knee and shirts that covered their shoulders and neckline, loose enough to place at least “three finger widths” between skin and fabric, rain or shine. Every inch of skin was accounted for, guarded jealously. This was to remove temptation for our brothers, according to the Manual. The boys on the other hand, seemed to have no dress code, never chastised for going shirtless, and the lengths of their shorts leisurely wandered from thigh to calf. It was an ossified double standard. Chastity, apparently, was the woman’s charge.

Then, there was the matter of gifts. *We show no favorites here*, Missionary Park explained. But try as she might, she couldn’t understand why giving small things to the kids was a big deal, especially if she did it for everyone. That was fair, wasn’t it? When she asked, Missionary Park had simply said, *It only leads to the cheapening of our work here*. His vague response only fueled her frustrations, just as Mrs. Park’s responses had earlier. What was it to the missionaries if she decided to buy some juice for the kids—all the kids, equally—with her own money? If she decided to lend an iPod to a man who’d put it to good use?

The problem was that even in their fairness, the Parks set themselves apart. The rules they enforced to appear less privileged only served to reinforce their difference. Even though they kept their possessions hidden indoors, they still lived in the big house, stained and leaking as it was. There was the cassette player that blared hymns on Sundays—a kind of Christian call to prayer—the boxy television set, the medical supplies. The GNPM kids knew this was here. It only made it seem like the missionaries didn't trust them. Joyce had only been here seven months, sure, but she hadn't once seen the Parks or their young daughter, Soowun, come outside of the big house to hang out with the children like she had. Joyce doubted they had any real idea what it was really like for the kids.

On the other hand, Joyce lived in her own modest room, which shared a wall with the girls' dorm, and she liked to think she knew the kids better than the missionaries did. At least, she saw them as kids, not just souls to be won. She played cards, marbles, hopscotch, had sword fights, hiked with them to the nearby river. The boys brought her fresh mangoes; the girls confided in her. She was in on all the gossip: who was dating who in the boys' dorm (puppy love, harmless romances), who'd won what at the soccer tournament (fifteen-year-old Paul presiding), where they sneaked off to after hours to watch the newest Hollywood movies (The Darboe compound, just a few blocks away). After their twenty-three years of service in the Gambia, Joyce began to think the missionaries had stopped changing with the times, that their otherness in this country had made their boundaries rigid. For one thing, it was clear that the Gambia was changing

too. Women wore pants. Kids listened to the radio, had cell phones. Internet cafés were everywhere.

In these recent doubts, too, Joyce thought that the Program might be a kind of spiritual bribery. Weren't they just buying souls into heaven? Food, education, clothes, all in exchange for salvation? Didn't that, in fact, cheapen their work here? In comparison, her relationship with John was pure, true. This was not some summer fling. By the spirit of the law, she could not believe she was doing anything wrong. They had conducted this courtship with dignity, purity, never kissing, only holding hands once. Even that had been a mere touch, as if they were measuring their hands, his dark skin against her light, their improbable fit. Her palms remembered him as cool, dry.

Her decision seemed so obvious now. Yes, she wasn't perfect, but who is after a year in college? So far, she had led a cautious life. Even her mistakes had been carefully planned. After years of self-restraint, she'd had her first drink and lost her virginity on the same night—at a house party that fit best in her study schedule and because she thought it was time already. She recalled the experience with little feeling, neither pain nor pleasure, simply a fascination, observing the stranger's body move over her, the damp canyon between his shoulder blades. So this was what all the fuss is about, she thought, and never thought to do it again. What she and John had, however, that was different. She'd fallen into this mistake without agenda.

Unlike the single men at her Korean-American megachurch back home—boys, really, still messing around behind bowling alleys and pool halls, only to show up to church in their Sunday best, reeking of coffee and cologne—John was a true man of God.

Those Christians were lukewarm, careless. But John, these Gambian Christians, they showed Joyce what faith really was. John had lost friends, even family, for his faith. She had to admit at first she'd studied his movements, waiting for a slip: a crude joke, an unkind word, a moment of insincerity. It never came. Over the past seven months, her skepticism had grown into astonishment then reverence as she'd watched him here, preaching, dancing, singing, praying for hours into the night for his unsaved family. So what was wrong with loving this man?

This place had changed her. John had changed her. She'd seen things here, things she hadn't thought possible from her parents' townhouse back in America. That tidy little suburban life of walking dogs, drive-thru banking, and coffee shops. Back there was a woman she didn't recognize: a ghost of a woman who loved convenience, craved her own anonymity, sought it in the inane routines of her job, in the comfortable girth of the megachurch. There was a woman who loved songs easy to sing to: the uplifting bass line, the roar of the trumpets. It could bring her to tears. But she could see now. That was all show. Here, right here, was the real thing.

How was it that it had taken her twenty-seven years to finally live? Her faith had been tested here, her love, too. She was sick of wasting her time, waiting for something to happen, like her life was something she could simply stumble onto. Surely if her parents and friends met John, felt the joy with which he celebrated the risen Lord, they would understand. Back home in Chantilly, she believed that just like John had saved her, he could save them all from themselves, from suburbia, from America—*arijana*

fulanjango, the second heaven, the kids here called it. Who's to say they wouldn't be happy?

All her life, she'd done things out of fear or love, and as she powered off her laptop in her room that night, she tried to tell which was which. The blisters had travelled up her spine, but they barely hurt. Beneath the talcum powder, the rash looked pink, like vines, flowers, wrapping around her torso, curving into her leg. For the first time in over a week, she felt like she could sleep. This stillness was a bliss she'd never known before, supernatural, a peace which passes all understanding.

Before she turned off the lights and prepared for bed, she set the alarm and tore out the page in her journal, where she'd written in neat letters: *Meet me tomorrow night. I have good news for us.*

Risking discovery for the second time that night, she cupped her watch and lit the screen, noting with some anxiety that it was already 4:32am, but no John. She palmed her watch face waiting for the light to fade. Soon, there would be no need for this childish secrecy. Privacy. Privacy and Ketchup. Now those were two more things she wouldn't have to miss for much longer.

Ah, but the night was beautiful, wasn't it? Joyce found Orion's Belt, counted one-two-three around it. She closed her eyes for a moment, her thoughts drifting to the wedding—modest, outdoors—and their new marital bliss. Wouldn't he be such an attentive husband, a good father? She saw a house in the suburbs with a small garden, a house they would fill with children—by God, beautiful children—where they'd live until

they became stiff in the joints, hard of hearing together. Together. The possibilities stretched out before her, a clear night sky. She would show everyone. The missionaries, her parents, her church. Her former self, so painfully unsure, fell away. She felt unburdened, free. They would begin the rest of their lives in America. Wasn't that what America was all about?

Impatient with excitement, she got up and took a lap around the gazebo. Would she tell him as soon as he walked in, or wait until they had both sat down, caught up for a bit? She peered into the darkness, but the only thing she could see clearly from here was the front of the church, where she had first intercepted John and then again with the message a small square in her hand. He had taken it wordlessly, before walking away. She wished he'd opened it right then, watched his face change as he read the words.

The night cloaked the little she could have seen of the boys' dorm, where she imagined John was probably still splashing the sleep from his face. She contemplated walking over there herself, rules be damned. At this hour, no one would be awake to notice her pale skin, strolling over to the boys' dorm. Just the thought of it made her giggle. She felt reckless, wonderfully foolish.

She sat down again in her usual spot, resisting the urge to check her watch again. She shifted, resting her temple against the smooth concrete pillar. Soon, John would stoop into the gazebo, feigning astonishment. They'd invoke their names, as they had many times before.

He'd say, "Who knew there would be so many devout at this hour, sister Joyce?" and she'd say, "John. What a nice surprise."

Her eyes grew heavy, and she let them slip shut for a second. Just a second. He will be here soon. He will wake me up. Perhaps he'll whisper my name or shake me gently by the arm. Thinking of his hand on her bare skin made her smile, and she sighed aloud in the dark, allowing her thoughts, just her thoughts, to go a little further. Perhaps he would steal a kiss—on the cheek, on the shoulder, on the lips?—and, eyes closed, she would let him. As always, obscured by the dark, she would only be able to make out vague features. How appropriate, she thought, that they only ever saw each other this way, stripped of their earthly features down to their truest forms, merely shadows within shadows in the dark. Oh, it would all be permissible in this place, this sacred space, his fingers transgressing just a little farther than they had ever dared before.

BEACH BUMSTER AND THE MARIE CLAIRES

It's almost dawn when my father stumbles home from his latest client and takes us to our spot in the Farato mangroves. Swaying ankle-deep in saltwater, he rakes his fingers through the fine black mud, slow, like it's tangled hair. He's looking for oysters.

"Marie Claires go nuts for this shit, boy," he slurs, "Makes them want to fuck."

He thumbs a shell clean and tosses it on shore, where I crack it open with a rock. He's wearing new jeans, no shirt, flaunting the clean lines of muscle that keep us fed.

I tell him I want to be just like him, and he laughs. I tell him I'll farm, and he calls me a fool.

"Fisher or farmer, bumster or priest, the Gambia—she's a bitch to us all. Just look around."

The land buckles under the weight of the rains that never came, though we begged. Life lies dormant in this bleached landscape, blank as a page until the first rains pen life from the ground. Yes, we remember the smell of rain at dawn—*Inshallah*, this year, this year—and afterwards, the hum of dusk, the cool gasp of night.

But meanwhile, students hitchhike to school on truckbeds, eyes closed and dry-mouthed, and, facing east, vendors perform their ablutions in single beads of water, kneading the damp. In the village, ancient baobabs grow pregnant with the bones of holy men and papered prayers, and in the city, small boys beg, tin cans to their elbow. Its contents rattle like dying breath, coins to secure paradise for anyone with spare change.

My father splashes back to me, jeans damp, and he tosses a few broken shells back into the water.

"*Toubabs* always pay big money for love and war," he says, "Be a soldier, kid."

A bumster by trade, he tells me he knows something of heaven and hell, and the real heaven exists at the bottom of a bottle and on the other side of the ocean with all the lonely white women.

WHITE SPACE

Early-morning religiosity was a solemn affair, partly because it began in the dark. Sunrise services began the day at 6 a.m. sharp, and all the members of Good News Presbyterian Mission gathered in the *jemberengo*, praying into the Brikama sunrise. The Gambian students, young and old, sat in a circle, croaking the hymns, amber beads of sleep and rainwater clinging to lashes. The newest members of GNPM, five- and six-year-olds, sat by their designated older brothers or sisters in the mission compound, who gave the worst offenders a good rap on the skull with a resounding *Crack!* when they detected any sign of drowsiness. They prayed on, the rain a rattle overhead. Soowun herself had just turned eight, and her father, the esteemed Missionary Park, had finally allowed her to attend the sunrise service saying in the soft Korean voice he saved just for her, *You're growing up, princess.*

According to plan, Soo woke extra early to snag the spot by her best friend, Mariama. She normally slept through these sunrise services, one of those privileges Mari liked to mock, but she could think of no other way to get Mari to herself. She'd hardly seen Mari this week, not since Mari had moved out of her big house into the dorms with the rest of the GNPM kids. Sure, they'd played together some afternoons—the dorms were just on the other side of the mission—but it wasn't the same. She hadn't thought their house could feel any bigger.

All in all, this had been a very bad week for Soo. Soon after Mari had moved out, Soo's parents had announced they were sending her to boarding school in Ivory Coast, at least a two-day journey away. Soo had cried and begged, and one distraught Korean short-termer had come to her defense, but there was no changing her parents' minds. Although Soo was eight, she was already mixing up her Mandinka, English, and Korean, and her parents worried about the Gambian accent she'd picked up from the local schools. *It'll be hard, but you'll thank us later*, they told Soo in Korean. It made her feel no better to hear her mother cry through the bedroom walls.

The thunder sounded like falling rubble. At first, Mari had looked surprised to see Soo in the *jemberengo*, but as they relaxed into the service, shoulder to shoulder, Soo felt the world exhale and right itself, as if the past week had been a broken funhouse she'd barely escaped.

While Missionary Park paced back and forth, preaching in Mandinka, the two girls made a game of finding the sleepest children. Twenty minutes into the service, they already counted twelve small bodies slumping in their seats. One young boy drooled, remaining fast asleep when the rest of the congregation opened their eyes after prayers. Another's head bobbed so far it collided with a neighbor's. Mari elbowed Soo and pointed out a new girl, Aramata, a six-year-old who sat leaning against a pair of crutches. They watched as her chin began a slow descent into her chest, a tiny wilting flower.

Soo giggled, and beside her, Mrs. Park squeezed her hand gently to quiet her.

The *jemberengo* was a circular gazebo, big enough to seat the forty GNPM students under the missionaries' care. It had been the late Missionary Lee's idea, more an

aesthetic decision than a practical one. It used to look more like the traditional Gambian hut, with its roof of dried grass, tethered in long strips rolled around the conical frame. Even though the rains came and blew away their neighbors' roofs year after year, that straw roof had remained impenetrable to wind and rain. It grew uglier with the water, so every year it had to be unraveled and replaced. Then the roof would return to its golden flax hue and the birds would return.

Missionary Park had changed the grass roof earlier that week, when the first of the GNPM students had returned from their summer holidays with families upcountry and Mari had moved out. Men, shirtless, labored for days, peeling away the unwanted layers, bundling them up, and throwing them to the ground. Just like that, the seasonal gold was gone, replaced by static green sheets that never changed color in the rain. These morning services happened under corrugate now, just like the ones that covered the missionaries' house. The new roof clanged and roared under the rain but did not keep the water from seeping through the cracks.

Soo wiped a drop of water from the pages of her Bible.

"You are the future of The Gambia. Yes, you. And you. Our heavenly father doesn't look at age, at skin, at circumstance. He knows every hair on your head. Every hair you'll lose," Missionary Park said, raising a sheepish hand to his own balding spot. Soo watched her father's eyes drift from one person to the next. The older students chuckled, while the youngest returned his gaze, wide-eyed.

Soo couldn't think of anyone she loved more than her parents, not even Mari. She was old enough to know that they were a big deal, that supporting churches back in

Korea and America clamored to host them, that other missionaries in the Gambia sought their advice, that there would be no greater honor than growing up to be just like them, but sometimes she thought maybe it wasn't fair her parents loved God more than her. Why else would they send her away?

The service was coming to an end. The entire congregation chanted the Lord's Prayer, and next to Soo, Mari recited the bits and pieces she knew. Soo's throat tightened again. Soon, Mari would leave and Soo would be alone again.

The final Amens and *Aminis* released the congregation to complete their chores before breakfast, but Soo dragged Mari away by the hand, chattering in Mandinka, promising her a bottle of Coke at the house.

"Just for a few minutes," said Mari, reluctantly, but as soon as Soo released her hand, she raced towards the big missionary house, yelling, "Last one there's a rotten egg!"

The missionaries' house was divided into two sections—the office and the home—and they were connected by a blue door inside the office. *The office is for everyone*, Mrs. Park told Soo, *but only our family beyond this door, okay?* They'd made a special exception for Mari this summer.

Her parents had developed this system after the village kids—the unsaved—kept stealing books and shoes from their private quarters. Back then, their front door had connected their home space to the outside. Even after Soo's father sealed the door and

punched a hole through to the office to use as a kind of buffer zone, there was only so much to be done about the thefts.

Inevitably, when they hung wet clothes out to dry just outside the house, the village kids would climb over the compound walls and pluck them like ripe fruit. Once in a while though, even the GNPM kids stole, good Christian converts that should know better. Coloring pages and pens disappeared from the office, sliding into pant legs and sleeves when they thought nobody was watching. The objects reappeared mysteriously in splinters of used crayons and loose paper when Soo's mother went for a routine sweep of the dorms. Those were the days when Soo would find her mother's shadowy figure swaying at the foot of the bed, or a corner of the church, or paused above the kitchen sink, talking to God in the darkness, shedding tears that she didn't understand. Recently, it had been happening more.

It took just a few seconds for the girls to reach the missionaries' house from the *jemberengo*, and as expected, Mari got there first. She stood, one foot hovering above the office step, grinning. Right before Soo caught up, she placed a single toe on the doormat and flung both arms in the air.

"I win," she exclaimed, jiggling her hips back and forth in a victory dance.

Soo expelled loud breaths of air, rasped, "Cheat."

"Longer, older legs. More experience," she winked. "You will never beat me at this, *toubabnding!*"

Mari cackled, slapped her on the rump. They collapsed on the floor. Overhead, the rain was a mother patting an infant to sleep or fingers practicing scales on a table.

Years of untended leaks had painted sprawling tea stains across the entire ceiling. Heads touching, backs pressed against tiles stained brown from decades of dirty feet and hands and knees, Mari and imagined the water stains into people or animals or countries far away.

“What about that one?” Mari asked.

“Definitely a pig. Look: the nose and the eyes and the ears. See? You can even see the tail right there.”

Mari oinked. Soo laughed so hard she snorted. They laughed harder.

Soo knew, of course, that it wouldn't be fair if Mari lived with them in the big house now that the rest of the GNPM kids were back, but she also couldn't help wondering why Mari hadn't even tried to stay. She secretly worried that Mari liked it better in the dorms than in her room.

She'd seen Mari's new living quarters just last week, when her dad had moved in a new dresser to accommodate the extra bodies. She was satisfied that the room was nothing too special. No posters. No pillows. A few sponge mattresses without covers propped against the walls. By the looks of it, four or five of the girls would have to share a single bed. Even the small one she'd shared with Mari this whole summer would seem big in comparison. She wondered if her new school would be like this.

Soo flipped to her belly while Mari got up to see the bookshelf. They began practicing the names of the new kids on the compound.

“A-*rah*-mata!” Mari said, correcting Soo's pronunciation.

Mari ran her fingers across the dusty spines of textbooks and magazines, then wiped her finger on Soo's shoulder. She tittered. "You don't do chores here, do you?"

"I help my mom in the kitchen," Soo protested.

Mari scoffed, "Mattie told me she spent her summer farming." Without waiting for Soo to reply, she returned to her quizzing. "What about the girl with the straight-straight hair?"

"Ramatoulie?"

"Nope."

"Banna."

Mari nodded.

"Banna-na," said Soo, giggling.

Even though Soo was eager to get started, she let Mari linger in the office. She sneaked a Coke from the pantry and watched as her friend returned to the floor, holding an old People magazine. Mari pointed to a movie poster on the corner of the page.

"This man, he knows fighting, deh! Du-wayne Johnson," she pronounced. Mari burped loudly and handed the Coke back to Soo. It was warm, and she let the bubbles sit in her mouth.

"Du-wayne Johnson," Soo repeated. She wasn't sure if she'd seen the movie with Mari, but he seemed nothing special. Just another actor, although by the looks of it, maybe not from a movie her parents might let her watch. Soo held the last of the Coke to Mari.

Mari shook her head, sighed. “I should go,” she said, peering out the open door. “I’m on laundry duty today.”

Across the line of eucalyptus trees, some girls were milling outside the dorm, sweeping the floor of the porch, others rinsing pots and pans.

“No, wait,” Soo said, disappearing under the office desk. “Wait until you see these.” She hefted out the new shipment of old National Geographics from America, from a church neither of them had ever visited. Mari’s eyes spread wide, like pancake batter. Soo knew Mari would like those.

As Mari started digging through the box, Soo went through the rest of the house, opening and closing doors behind her. Beyond the blue office door was the kitchen, pantry, living room, and then further, the bedrooms and the indoor bathroom Mari had loved. Satisfied that the house was empty, she stopped by her own room. She knotted the mosquito net out of the way, straightened the sheets, fluffed her pillows. With those clean white pillowcases, they could be clouds in a summer sky, she thought. She bet clouds in a summer sky could look like angels. She emptied her box of toys on the bed, shoved her dirty clothes underneath.

Only a few minutes had passed since she left the office, but it suddenly occurred to her that Mari might have left while she was gone. Her heart raced and Soo sprinted back to the office and let out a rasping sigh when she saw Mari placing the magazines in the box.

“What are you doing, practicing?” she laughed and mimicked Soo’s gasping breaths. “Until those little legs of yours become bigger, you don’t stand a chance.”

Soo ignored her and bent over the box of magazines. “Let’s go to our room.” She planted both feet and pulled Mari by the arm.

“I really should go now. I’ll get in trouble.”

“Come on, please?” Soo whined, tears welling in her eyes. She hadn’t told Mari about the new school yet, partly because the girl was so hard to see but also because she secretly hoped her parents might have a change of heart. If she said the words out loud, then they would be out, and her mother always said that words you say can’t ever be taken back. Soo dragged the box across the floor towards the blue door by herself. “This way. You push and I’ll pull.”

Mari hesitated, then hiked up her skirt. “Alright then, *toubabnding*,” she joked, *little white girl*. “Don’t be a baby. Let’s go.” Soo wiped her tears while Mari bent down and pushed with her small bare shoulders. Together they shuffled the box to the doorway. Soo wedged a few fingers under the box to lift above the ledge separating the office from her family’s private quarters.

Sometimes before bed, Soo’s mother would bring out a photograph from the thin sheets of her Korean-English Bible, and begin to tell stories of their home in Korea. These bedtime stories—the skyscraper apartments, homemade steamed dumplings, the cold, cold snow—had stopped when Mari had shown up alone, on their doorstep, too frightened to stay alone in the empty dorms.

“This is where you come from,” her mother’s stories always began. “Here is your family.” And later, “Mari won’t want to hear these stories.”

Soo knew for example that her grandmother's favorite food was sea kelp soup, which was maybe why it was her mother's favorite too. Soo's grandmother is the oldest woman Soo's ever seen, and at first, she is afraid.

"She doesn't look very happy," Soo says.

"Back then, they didn't smile for the camera."

"Why not?"

"I guess it was new and life was harder."

Soo takes the picture in her hands, though she has many times before. She traces a finger over the lines beside her firm mouth, up to the eyes that seem barely there, like she's too tired to keep them open.

"What's her name?" Soo asks.

"Grandmamma."

"I mean her real name."

Her mother smiles and begins tucking Soo into her blanket. "Lim Sun-ae," she says.

"Tighter," Soo commands, and her mother wedges more fabric beneath her arms, under her feet. Only Soo's head remains free, and she follows her mother with her eyes.

"What does she do?" Soo asks after a while.

"Farm."

"Like Old MacDonald?"

“No,” her mother laughs, placing a dry kiss on her forehead. “But the most delicious vegetables you’ll ever eat. Green peppers, tomatoes, eggplants”—Soo wrinkles her nose and her mother pinches it playfully—“cabbages.”

“Mama, do you miss her?” Soo asks.

“Yes, darling,” she says, before turning out the light.

The rest of the photographs are kept on the living room bookshelf, but Soo’s favorite is the one of her mother on her wedding day. She has red lips, pale face, puffed sleeves, collar that shields her neck like early spring petals. Her cheeks are pale and dewy, and the color widens her eyes, like she is surprised.

Soo digs her small fingers behind the wedding photo and wiggles it loose. The plastic sleeve resists, then releases, crackling. She admires it up close.

“Mama, you’re so pretty,” she whispers, and her mother returns her hug.

“Not as pretty as you, princess.”

“What’s on your face?”

“Makeup.”

“Why don’t you wear it here?”

“Oh it wouldn’t be appropriate.”

“What’s appropriate?”

“It means doing things that fit the place.”

“No, you keep it,” her mother says when Soo tries to return it.

These days when Soo drags out one of those heavy photo albums, her mother says she's too tired, baby, maybe tomorrow. She softens the disappointment with a hand on the head, twirls a finger around a lock of hair.

Mari's bare feet squeaked against the floor as they shifted the box deeper into the missionaries' house, beyond the office doors, past the dining room, and into the living quarters. Funny to think Soo had ever been reluctant to share her room with Mari. She'd even refused to eat the whole day after her mother had shown Mari to Soo's room, saying, *It's just for a little while, darling, okay?*

But it wasn't long before the two girls were inseparable, exploring the empty dorms, climbing trees, and playing hopscotch on the tiles in the big house. It was Mari who had taught Soo how to light a match, Mari who had stitched up the charred corner of the sheet they'd almost set on fire, and Mari who had disposed of the hand towel they'd used to beat out the flame. She was so pretty, so funny, and so good with things like that, grown up things like sewing. It had been a fun summer. Mari was not only her best friend, but her sister too. She felt her chest expand, taut and warm against her ribcage. She squeezed Mari's hand.

“Ow.”

“Sorry.”

In the room, Soo let Mari sit on the bed, curl her nails into the new sheets, as Soo spread the magazines across the floor, a glossy plastic puddle. She handed Mari the good scissors.

“We’re looking for the pretty ones, to decorate.”

Before long, Mari was cutting out a picture of a dairy farm somewhere in Europe (“Nice cows”) and then one of a Ferrari (“Nice car”). She carefully cut out the picture of a Levi’s model, following his outline, while Soo pulled out a map of the Amazon basin, teasing out the staples so they barely left a mark. She considered the map of North America and another one of South Korea, then contemplated taking out the one with the Incan empire. Not much color, but some cute cartoons in the corners. She needed to make her room bright and full.

Soon stacks of maps, inserts, pictures, patterns, and letters surrounded them on the floor. Mari’s favorite was an advertisement for sunscreen, a snapshot of a happy family in the Caribbean. Soo’s favorite was a picture of a perfume bottle with a flap she could open and sniff. They began mapping where to put the pictures.

The scotch tape was locked in the office drawer, so they used the leftover Blu-tack from the walls. The girls scraped at it with their fingernails, molding and squeezing the stickiness back into the small ball. It left behind stains, but it would do.

“What would be my name if I was living in America?” she asked, handing Soo the first picture.

“Mary. Like Mary Poppins,” Soo said.

Mari nodded with approval. “And you would be Susan. Like Susan Sarandon. You know Susan Sarandon?” she said. Soo had overheard some of the older dorm girls say the name, but she didn’t know who it was. Somehow, this bothered her.

“Should we put this one here?” Soo asked instead. She positioned the insert of the Grand Canyon above her pillows, smoothed the creases, secured the corners. Together they stood back and looked at it.

“It’s nice,” said Mari.

Neither of them moved, and it was quiet enough to hear the gentle thump of the curtains against the windows. Mari yawned, looked around. She looked bored, and Soo began to panic.

“I’ve been there,” Soo blurted.

“Really?”

“Met these people too.” She pointed at the picture of a man in tan shorts, holding a toddler. They stood at the edge of the fenced orange canyon. “His name is Joel. This one’s William.” It wasn’t a complete lie. After all, the picture was in America, and she had lived there for one brief year during her parent’s sabbatical year.

“You’re lying,” Mari said, “Don’t think I don’t know a fake picture when I see one.”

Soo blushed. “No, I’m not.” She kicked herself for lying. She shouldn’t have done that.

Without speaking, they continued covering the walls around the bed and the window until the only space left was above the chest of drawers. Soo began pulling herself up the handles. She used her toes to grip the knobs, just like Mari had taught her for climbing trees.

“But what was it really like?” Mari probed after a while, breaking the silence. Soo felt a gush of relief. “You’ve been to America. Does everyone have a car?”

Soo had been to America, but she couldn’t really remember. It was too long ago. Still, the words tumbled out. “We had one that had windows on the roof. You could see the rain coming down but stay completely dry.”

“Do all the girls wear jeans?”

“The bluest you’ve ever seen.” In an effort to say something true, she added, “It’s very clean there.”

Mari seemed to consider her words. “Did you wear jeans?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Your parents”—Mari exclaimed, then repeated in a whisper—“your parents let you wear jeans? Outside?”

“Of course. So new I could barely bend my knees. I even had a belt with a buckle made of silver and shaped like a butterfly.”

Mari shook her head in disbelief, tapping a short rhythm on the ground with her nails. After a while, she asked, “Can I see them?”

“See what?”

“The jeans, silly.”

“They’re not here,” Soo said. “We left them in America.”

“Oh.” She seemed disappointed, then said, suddenly serious, “One day, I’m going to live there.”

Soo let out a peal of laughter, then stopped. On the floor, Mari lay very still. Suddenly Soo could think of nothing to say.

In the quiet, Mari rolled over and stretched. She tore out a glossy page, the Chicago skyline, and held it at arm's length so it covered the stains on the ceiling. She had given up using the scissors thirty minutes ago, impatient to finish.

“Everybody goes to Darboekunda to watch the games during the days, but at night—at night!—they have movies and even real fights! These men, they're very strong. Chaa...”

“I can watch movies here whenever I want,” Soo said.

“Not like these,” Mari said. “Some of the boys are going tonight, and I'm going,” she added coolly.

By the time it was mid-afternoon, the skies were clear and the humidity was seeping through the mosquito net above their heads, the crisp new sheets now limp. Every inch of the wall was a mass of colors—advertisements for coffee beans, pictures of extinct birds and monstrous fish, posters of Kung Fu movies, a Buddhist monk, a satellite shot of the whole world lit up at night—overlapping like fish scales.

“Soo,” Mari said again, “I should go.”

Somewhere beyond the closed bedroom door, the girls heard footsteps. Mari froze.

Soo held a finger to her lips and shoved Mari under the bed.

Pots and pans clattered in the kitchen. Soo's mother must have returned.

Mari crawled out from under the bed, bristling. One side of her head was covered in cobwebs. Soo giggled and picked them out one by one.

“You hurt me,” said Mari.

“Don’t be a baby.”

Spotting a corner coming loose, Soo scampered back up the chest of drawers. She punched the lump of Blu-tack, pushing the picture back in place. The pads of her thumb were turning pink and she sweated slightly. Then she closed the window so the wind would stop blowing, the rain stop curling the pictures.

For a moment, the room was perfect. The sun outside was washing the sky into a pure gray. With the light streaming through the window screen, she could see the dust hover in the air, shimmer. No way would Mari go back to her old room with all those other kids. Not now. Soo looked down at Mari, triumphant. “Come on. Pick another.”

“There’s no more space.”

“Yes there is.” Soo smiled. “I said, Pick one.”

Mari looked out the window, dusting her shirt.

“Here,” Mari said finally, handing her a page at random. The picture was just a boring old building. Soo made a face. Squatting on top of the dresser, she started stacking the remains of the magazines at her feet.

“What are you doing? Help me.”

They piled the magazines, Mari handing them up to Soo, who lined them up at the corners. With the last poster in her mouth, she tested a foot on top of the pile. It stayed. She leaned her whole weight on it. Planting both feet firmly on top of the pile, both her

palms flat, she braced herself against the wall, touched one cheek against the cool cement. With the tips of her fingers, she could touch the ceiling, stained into shapes that just this summer they'd imagined into queens in royal robes and baby goats at Tobaski. "I'm taller than you now. Ha-ha."

Soo pushed the picture of the building on to the ceiling, then started adding more: a cowboy, a family of ducks, a skinny man rock-climbing. Standing on top of the magazines, she was high enough that Mari had to get up on her tip-toes to hand her the Blu-tack. When she reached down for the next photo, she spotted something folded in Mari's skirt.

"What's that?"

"Nothing."

"Show it to me."

"No."

"Come on, what is it?"

Mari pulled it out and crumpled it in her fist, but not before Soo recognized the picture from earlier, the picture of Du-wayne Johnson. She clenched her teeth.

"Put it back," she hissed.

"No." Mari folded her arms across her chest.

Furious, Soo leaned over to snatch the picture out of Mari's fist, but her hand found nothing. She felt herself falling, drifting, and in that moment, her mother's words returned to her, words that had never made any sense: *After all's said and done, all that remains are photographs, and We love you baby, but we think this is best.* She thought of

a lifetime of things that had happened: Mari turning up on their doorstep, Mari placing her clothes in her drawers, Mari teaching her new Mandinka words, Mari standing next to her on a stool in the kitchen—her mother peering over their shoulder—as they stirred pots of seaweed soup that made Mari’s nose wrinkle. She thought about all of these things, and then more. Things that hadn’t happened yet: Mari crying in the girls’ dorm, wishing to return; Mari pounding on their door to be let inside; Mari begging her parents to take her back; Mari holding Dwayne Johnson’s hand, bigger and more lifelike. In the back of her mind, Soo thought she heard the crashing of magazines, the teetering of the dresser on its corners, some of the drawers falling out, clattering on the floor. The pictures all around her were peeling off the walls and the ceiling like dying leaves. When Soo’s small body finally reached the ground, she felt the air rush out of her nose and mouth, and a sharp elbow hit her face. Mari was pinned beneath her.

Someone was stirring in the kitchen: the sound of heels hurriedly pounding towards her closed door.

On her back, breathless with pain, Soo found herself thinking about bedtime and her mother’s pictures of their family back in Korea, photos of aunts and uncles, grandmothers and cousins, smiling in large brown coats, arm-in-arm, in a park somewhere in Seoul. The leaves in the background were turning all the colors of fire. *Remember?* Her mother would ask. *Remember them?* What was it her mother called those trees: Autumn?

The walls of her room closed in on her. Her eye was swelling shut, making the walls look like old skin shedding. Everything, everything from the walls to the stains on the ceiling suddenly seemed terrifying.

“Get out,” Soo whispered.

Mari staggered up. Her knees buckled, she whimpered, cradling her wrist to her chest. An olive-sized lump was forming on one end, and her face was wet with silent tears. Soo watched her stumble to the door, use her elbow to push it open. She didn't shut it behind her.

THE BOARDING SCHOOL LETTERS

But consider for example the nine-year-old daughter, face down on her new dorm bed, who cannot possibly imagine what to write to her mother a thousand miles away. What she remembers: departure, leaving their house like thieves, by moonlight, so they wouldn't miss the first ferry or the first day of school. Dear Mama, she begins. Then her pen carves new veins into paper in the shapes of trees and flowers.

Every afternoon, the teachers stack new letters on the office desk to be faxed home after church on Sunday. The sheets lie waiting in quiet bundles, a bouquet of stories and naked pleas, the cool office air sweetening on black and blue ink. The machine will sip pages like holy wine, inch by inch, smelting each word to tickertape static before emerging, re-forged, on the other side. Mama, I miss you, writes the girl in the morning, When will you come?

The replies always arrive on a single tongue of fax paper, light as pressed flowers and still warm. Sticky hands will worry the letter to ribbons and pleats, reading the words even after the months and years hush the black to dusky yellow then glossy white, settling like sea-foam on water. Mother, the periwinkles are blooming, she begins again, And they are not as pink here.

LORD, SEND YOUR FIRE!

At evening service, Missionary Park surprised the Good News Presbyterian Mission congregation by unearthing the old television set from church storage and showing a brief clip of a strange new miracle-worker: an enormous, pale, sweaty man named Pastor Jeremiah Ham.

“Tomorrow night, you get to meet him,” said the Korean missionary pointing at the paused image. A famous man, he said. A celebrity!

Back in the dorm, all the girls were abuzz.

“Hollywood?” Aramata asked, leaning into Mattie. “Like in the films?”

“What do you think he’s like?” one girl asked in a hushed voice.

Under the dim lounge light, Mattie, head of the girl’s dorm, squeezed Aramata’s doll between her knees, unraveling its braids. The young girls sprawled around Mattie on the tiled dorm floors, and she felt their gaze waiting, expectant. They’d all seen *Alfaa-baa* pull her and Amadou, the head of the boy’s dorm, aside after the service. The girls wanted to know more.

Mattie stroked the doll’s hairs with wet fingertips, and tucked them into neat rows, while Aramata watched.

“They say he’s a very powerful man. Like Jesus,” one girl piped up.

“Shut up. You don’t mean Jesus,” said another.

“Yes I do!”

“That’s treason.”

“You mean blasphemy.”

“Whatever.”

“Hush,” Mattie finally intervened. “He’s a pastor, like *Alfaa-baa*. But from America.”

“Like Gill?” asked Aramata.

“Like Gill,” Mattie repeated, lost in thought. The famous pastor’s event tomorrow was in Kombo, a tourist town just a forty-minute drive away. It fell on a school night, but it was an opportunity they couldn’t miss, *Alfaa-baa* had said, and Mattie had agreed. She’d also never been to Kombo before.

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” Aramata gushed. She leaned against Mattie’s knee and adjusted herself, covering her shrunken foot. “So many people, and all of them crying, laughing.”

Mattie’s heart had skipped a beat, too. The lights. The people. In spite of the rapid Korean commentary she couldn’t understand, the images on the screen had been enchanting: a man in a blue shirt, so old and bent, he looked folded in half. The camera zoomed in on his hands, trembling against his knees as two young men lifted him to the stage. The preacher’s large white hand descended on the man’s head.

In Brikama, the GNPM kids couldn’t take their eyes off the screen. Within seconds, the old man’s shirt began to move, the creases and wrinkles straightening, shifting until the buttons became visible, a straight line all the way down. The man was

upright. The camera moved from the weathered face to the sweating preacher, then focused on the young interpreter weeping onstage, and panned back to the whole stage, the lights, the faces of the people swaying and weeping. The old man bowed and took the preacher's hand to his lips and raised his face to the sky, pointing twice in the air. More tears. *Alfaa-baa* hit pause, and the old man remained with tears gleaming halfway down his cheek, the preacher's hand still in his grasp.

"Hallelujah?" *Alfaa-baa* cried to the GNPM congregation.

"Amen," they replied, and Mattie joined too, chilled and excited. Tomorrow couldn't come any sooner.

It was 9.56pm, and Mattie handed the doll back to Aramata. The girls jostled around the new braids.

"I wish I'd seen it myself," said Aramata.

"Well, maybe we will." Mattie said, stepping toward the front door. "Tomorrow." She checked that everyone was in before she locked the door, then drew the curtains.

"Maybe," Aramata responded. She sat stroking her doll's braids, its perfect little feet.

One of the girls said she had really bad period cramps, do you think the Pastor could help? Another girl whined about bad acne, that *Alfaa-baa* refused to give her medicine for it. Another said she had bad dreams every night. "I think it's an evil spirit," she confided. Mattie nodded patiently, letting the girls chat for a few more minutes.

"Alright, enough of this. Bedtime," Mattie said. "Don't let me catch you talking or I'll tell Mrs. Park."

The girls grumbled in the dark and shuffled to bed. Even with the rain drumming overhead, Mattie could hear them giggling, too excited to sleep. She pretended not to hear. It really was exciting, wasn't it?

By the time her watch showed 11.39pm, the rustle of restless bodies had ceased, taken over by the steady rhythms of sleep and rain. Mattie knew that most of the mysterious containers disappearing into the missionaries' big house over the past few days would not be for them but for this Pastor Jeremiah Ham. She'd taken inventory of all the things that they would never eat: the eggs, choco-biscuits, Cokes, and knotted plastic bags she could only imagine contained fresh beef from the city. Oh, the city!

"Mattie?" A quiet voice came from her door, and she jumped. "Mattie?"

Aramata limped toward her, her doll wedged in the crook of her elbow. "Mattie can I sleep in here tonight?"

Mattie yawned, groaning like she'd just awoken, but lifted the sheet so the young girl could crawl in next to her. Aramata curled up by her side and when she finally lay still, Mattie's mind wandered back through the blue market tarps, where racks of nail polish and strings of beads—the kinds that changed color in the sun— and the hair clips with the gold teeth, waited for her to touch them, inspect their every nook and ask: *Nyaatalaa?* She lay awake for a while longer, thinking about what she should wear, and then her mind roamed further to Kombo city, the stadium, the tourist markets that she knew were close by. She imagined herself weaving between the stores, clipping by in low no-nonsense heels, when again the small voice came in the dark.

"Mattie?"

“Mm?”

“Mattie are you awake?”

“No. Go to sleep, you pest.”

“Mattie,” Aramata asked, “Do you think the American preacher can fix me?”

Mattie turned, sighed. “If you believe,” she said, “all things are possible with God, right?”

“Right,” said the voice. It was quiet, and Mattie dozed.

“Mattie?” she said again.

“What?”

“Will you help me up there tomorrow?”

“Yes, yes,” Mattie murmured. “Go to sleep now, or you’re not going at all.” The rain was steady and comforting, and with Aramata’s warm body beside her, it wasn’t long before both were fast asleep.

Barely twenty years after the Gambia’s official independence from the British, the Korean missionaries disembarked on the runway of Banjul International Airport, jetlagged, thirsty, and with ideas bigger than the sky. They chose a piece of land in Brikama, carved out foundations, planted trees, dug a well, and raised a cement wall with a rolling metal gate and a shiny metal sign that read upon entry: *Welcome to Good News Presbyterian Mission: Creating the Spiritual Leaders of Tomorrow!*

Over the years, when the missionaries filed their quarterly progress reports and newsletters back to families and supporters in Seoul, they called it a multipurpose

community center, a kind of shelter for abandoned children so to speak, and thank you thank you for your prayers and donations. By God's grace and your love, see how it's been over two decades?

Mattie Sonko was one of the first children of GNPM, appearing with the others even before the workers roofed and painted the first building, an enormous church with no steeple. The children crept in during the day, squatting on piles of gravel, or sitting under trees by the drying cement blocks. Some came silently in the night, deposited by parents from nearby villages, holding birth certificates and plastic bags with clothes, loose change. All of Brikama gossiped about their new *Chineso* neighbors, too stupid to turn away another mouth to feed.

The boys and girls accepted into the GNPM program lived in dorms on opposite ends of a compound divided exactly in half by the grand old church. The missionaries had dreamed of filling its large empty space with Gambian converts. But even now, the building remained too big for its congregation, its walls too high and far apart. These days, Mattie noticed how the ceiling sagged in the middle, bowing slowly into the aisle where they lined up to take communion, to share testimony, to give offering.

Sixteen years old, and head of the girls' dorm five years running, Mattie knew the drill: 6am devotions, morning duties, 7.30am breakfast, school, 2.15pm lunch, 7.30pm dinner, 8.30pm evening service, 10pm lights-out. She checked her new Casio watch: 8.47am, and at this rate the girls were going to be late for school. Not the way to begin their special day. *Alfaa-baa* had advised everyone being on time, or their trip to Kombo, their chance to see the famous preacher, might be gone. It was a hollow warning—she'd

seen the glow in his face, too—but Mattie prided herself in doing her job. She banged on the door of the bathroom.

“Move your tiny little bee-hinds, ladies!” Peering in, she saw the youngest girls still covered in suds, while the rest bundled up in their wrappers. “None of you brought a towel? For crying out loud!”

They filed out in tubes of twos and threes, squealing and sopping wet. “And Aramata,” she yelled, “Where’s my uniform?” The young girl gestured in the general direction of the lounge. She hopped on her good foot as she tucked the ends of her own wrapper under her armpit.

It wasn’t a bad life. Make good grades, read your Bible, don’t skip meetings, do your chores, get baptized, and you get to keep the roof overhead, eat three meals a day, attend school, and maybe even get into heaven. On most days, Mattie believed. Even at school, where the other fifth-graders teased her for praying over her food like she’d been taught, she believed.

“What’s it like being raised by the Chinese?” they asked. “Do you speak their language now too? Ching-chong! Ching-chong!”

These days she spent lunch breaks alone on a low wall by the football pitch, where she bowed her head and thanked the Lord for the food the missionaries provided, and she imagined Jesus inside her chest, below her collarbone, between her two small breasts, exactly where Mrs. Park had indicated when they had the Talk her first week in the dorm so many years ago. Over time, her Jesus had sunk lower, settling and rooting in her belly like a fetus.

Mattie wiped the face of her watch on her sleeve, then double-checked that everyone had their bags, their books, and hurried them into the missionaries' house to get their lunches by 9.14am. Mrs. Park handed them each a knotted bag and a one dalasi coin for juice, saying they're late late late! Mattie stuffed hers in her pocket and herded the girls out again. They passed Gill's house by 9.17am, the GNPM sign by 9.18am, and then speed-walked beyond the compound walls by 9.20am. By exactly 9.23am, they were on the main road, yelling their goodbyes over their shoulders, as each split off in the different directions of their schools.

“Go! Go! Go!” Mattie yelled after them, laughing.

Aramata's ironing had left lines along the clean blue pleats of her school uniform, and Mattie tried to flatten them down as she jogged through the market and toward school. For luck, she'd taken her small savings from her cupboard that morning—drink money she'd saved over the past few weeks, remaining thirsty while the sun made her sweat and her tongue dry.

She guessed she'd been around twelve for her first day of school at Kuntakinteh Lower Basic, older and bigger than all of her classmates. Now sixteen in the fifth grade, she knew that she should be far too old to care what her classmates thought. Besides, in the camp, she was an old-timer, a *maggi*, and with it came certain privileges, like getting to shower alone, the big corner room, the small girls at her bidding, and knowing anything really worth knowing. Everyone knew Missionary Park was the boss, the big man, the *Alfaa-baa*, but only a *maggi* would know that if you needed to borrow a knife or a bit of sugar, you asked Gill because the new short-termers didn't know any better and

besides, the ones from America rarely said no. She knew that she could get herself some decent shoes—or even a new watch—if she got first dibs on the overseas donations and caught Mrs. Park on a good day with a good story.

The missionaries were kind but stingy, so she learned to never ask for much. The Parks had been good to her, and she knew that if she just stuck it out long enough, if she kept getting good grades and staying out of trouble, eventually, she could be one of those women in her textbooks, a doctor, a teacher, a businesswoman, maybe, wearing makeup, heels, pearls, a new blouse every day.

She checked her watch again: 9.35am. The entrance to Kuntakinteh was on the other side of the market, and for a Friday morning it was slow. She couldn't help staring, craning her neck to see inside the tailor shops where rolls of wax cloth hung, layer after layer, and beyond that, the shirts, the jeans, the bras with sparkling purple sequins, and then the small blue coolers of ebbeh and platters of wonjo. Latecomers for the morning's produce ambled with buckets stacked with smoked caaloo, yams, onions, yellow bags of rice. It smelled of sweating bodies, busy behind the stalls, old Wolof women fanning their faces in the sun.

It was her favorite part of day, walking through the market, and her chest thumped wildly remembering again that she would be in Kombo tonight. She bet the city market was so much bigger than Brikama's, gloriously loud, smelly, dirty, and oh so alive. She imagined silk scarves on hooks, towers of hair extensions, lotions, and specs...

Mattie paused by the line of sandwich stalls. Her mouth watered at the pyramids of sticky bread, slathered in mayonnaise, fresh boiled eggs, and potatoes. The day was

bright, the night ahead even brighter, and when Mattie asked, “*Nyaatala*? No, for that one,” the man held up all five fingers.

Mattie proudly counted out five dalasis, shiny from thumb grease, the nights she’d spent counting and dreaming of what she could buy, and dropped it into the man’s hard palms, where they clinked flirtatiously. She sauntered in through the school gates, feeling light, only four minutes late to assembly.

It took two full hours to get every girl washed, dressed, and crammed into the mission bus. *Alfaa-baa* drove, Mrs. Park by his side, while Gill, the short-termer sat holding one of the girls in her lap. The boys hung out of the windows, tapping a beat. Mattie had been the first one ready, wearing the purple scarf she’d chosen specially for this day. She herded the girls one more time, counting eighteen heads, total. Aramata came onto the bus last, and the small girl handed Mattie the crutches and pulled herself up by Mattie’s forearm, flushed and smiling.

It was 7.16pm when they left, and by the time they reached the Kombo stadium, early, Pastor Jeremiah Ham’s crew were using flashlights behind the stage, revving the generator. People already milled around the stadium, more people than Mattie had ever seen at once, pressing up against the taped barriers.

At first, Mattie had been disappointed that the bus had passed no large markets on the way, but she’d heard girls at school talk about tourists in this area, the night clubs, the European stores, and she knew it couldn’t be too far. Aramata gripped her arm and pointed every few minutes at a new thing—the giant flags waving on stage, the giant

silver tubas burping their tunes—and Mattie nodded, distracted. The GNPM people all stood together, but the night was darkening, the rain clouds gathering, and the missionaries were barely paying attention. The stadium was so big Mattie knew she could easily sneak off if she wanted. It wasn't that she wanted to do anything bad. She just wanted to see the markets.

At 8.30pm, the service began in a blare of trumpets and cymbals and drums, and Pastor Jeremiah Ham opened with a prophecy, a vision that the Gambia would be the spiritual breadbasket of West Africa, the place where spiritual leaders would rise, revivals birthed. The missionaries praised their God.

When the hymns began, familiar but more upbeat, Aramata started to pull away. She limped closer to the stage, and Mattie tried not to be relieved. Already, the crowds of people were wailing, arms flailing in the air. They seemed in a trance. In the films, it had seemed so powerful, so gentle, but here, the sounds frightened her. A light rain began. Her watch showed 9.23pm, still an hour before the event came to a close. Mattie began to inch away.

The rain turned into a drizzle and the crowds began to disperse. Worried that she might be discovered, Mattie slid in with a throng of people who were already leaving the stadium, children in tow.

Mattie had reached the exit, could almost see the main road on the other side, when she heard Aramata.

“Mattie?” she said. Her crutches slipped in the mud as she approached. “Where are you going?”

Mattie whirled around, sighed in relief.

“Nowhere,” she whispered, although she didn’t know why. No one else had followed. She was still safe. “Stay here.”

“Wait,” Aramata’s voice pleaded. Her crutches slid again. Even in the dark, Mattie could hear the pout in her voice.

“I’ll be right back. Don’t tell anyone,” she said over her shoulder, speeding up.

“You said you’d help.”

Mattie felt a twinge of guilt, but she couldn’t stop now. She was so close.

“Ask Mrs. Park. Or any of the girls. You have to go back right now, before anyone notices you’re gone.”

“You promised.”

Mattie picked up her pace. Aramata was crying openly now, and in the streetlights her face was a small, sad crumple. She’d abandoned her crutches somewhere by the exit, and she hobbled on her good leg and then her bad, faster than Mattie knew she could. Somehow, the girl caught up and clung to the back of Mattie’s shirt. Aramata wiped her nose on Mattie’s sleeve.

Mattie sighed, glanced down at her watch again. 9.46pm. The window of opportunity was closing fast. “I know. I’m sorry. I’ll be back soon.”

“No, wait,” Aramata said, now hanging on with both hands. The two girls stood by the main road, and Mattie thought she could see lights on the other side. She just wanted one look. Even in the dark, just once.

“Let go,” Mattie said. “I said I’ll be right back.”

Aramata tugged, leaning her entire weight, determined.

Out of the corner of her eye Mattie saw a dark shape move towards them, heard a weak honk that came too late. Suddenly, she felt her sleeve free, and she stumbled back a step or two with the release, right as she heard the crack, saw a small body jerk and twist before crumpling by the side of the road. A man cursed, an idling engine roared, then faded into the darkness without lights.

Even when Pastor Jeremiah Ham descended from the rented stage of Kombo West's stadium, he loomed like a hot air balloon, so big he was taut at the edges. Both arms dangled from the loose junctions of his shoulders and he carried the bulk of his meat beneath his chin, wads of muscle buttressing all sides of his neck. His stomach was a solid mass above legs thin as guitar strings, which appeared to be the only thing roping him down, when every other part of him seemed on the verge of floating right off. By the time Pastor Ham's loud cajoling with the servers—and, finally, the manager—had gotten Ebou into the building and seated at a table in the hotel bar, everyone but the Pastor was in a bad mood.

“You should see. Some places I go, I'll lift my hands up like this and *Bam! Bam! Bam!* People will fall and fall, like, there will be a complete *sea* of people falling.” He gazed into the distance for so long, a server headed in his direction.

Pastor Ham waved a beefy hand at the confused man, who took a step back.

“Here, though,” he continued, “there's a thickness, a real spiritual darkness. I can sense it.

I can feel it.” A finger of sweat traced the length of his spine and he shifted to get more directly under the ceiling fan.

Unlike Johannesburg, Lagos, even Lomé, this country was much more what he expected when he embarked on Operation Salvation: Africa. Yes, this was much more like it. He loved the humidity, he loved the poorly-lit stadium, he adored the skinny black children waving and yelling. This was where the real work happened. This was where he was meant to be. What’s more, the night had been a success, Hallelujah! And the proof was right here: Ebou. Determined not to let the man escape after the meeting, Pastor Ham had insisted the three of them go to the closest place a man could grab a civilized bite to eat and have a nice quiet chat, my treat.

He’d persuaded a Korean-American short-term missionary, Gill, to join him, the only person who could understand his rapid-fire English.

“Well,” he’d said to her, “I saw a Sunwing Hotel just around the corner, and if it’s a tourist spot”—he winked—“it must be air-conditioned. And you speak African, right?”

Gill hadn’t bothered correcting him.

“Have you ever had a lat-té?” he asked Ebou now, slapping him on the back. He didn’t wait for Gill to translate, who hovered a few steps behind the two men.

“He says no,” offered Gill, peering over both their shoulders.

“Gale, please,” Pastor Ham said and gestured at the seat on the other side of Ebou.

“Gill,” she winced, correcting him for the third time that night. She dragged the chair out slowly, tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

“Three caramel lat-tés,” he sang to the waiter. “For my friend Ebou over here and this magnificent young lady.”

“Not for me, thanks,” Gill said.

“No, no. I insist.” Pastor Ham lifted three fingers at the server then turned back to Gill. “Tell him,” he said, elbowing her side, “Tell him, I can tell you’re skeptical.” He tucked his chin into his neck to gather the full effect of his furrowed brows. The flesh around his neck spread.

Ebou’s confused eyes followed the Pastor’s finger as it bounced up and down near his nose. “Oh yes,” said the Pastor in English, “I can tell in your eyes.” Ebou couldn’t have been more than forty, but he looked much older, his face lined from years of squinting.

Soon, the drinks arrived in shiny white mugs, and the server placed a basket of napkins in the middle. Pastor Ham nodded at him, then said to Gill: “Tell him, It’s okay. I don’t expect you to believe me. But spirits, demons, they’re real.”

When Gill interpreted the best she could, Ebou objected, saying, *Oh, but I do believe in spirits.*

“Well, that’s not exactly what I meant, but I’ll take that. I’ll take that.” His voice, like the shiny side of aluminum foil. He reached out and gripped Ebou’s arm. “Of course, you, of all people, must after something like tonight, eh?” He chuckled, leaned into the back legs of his chair then brought himself down onto the small table, bopping both elbows on the surface. The cups clattered. He took a sip of his drink and grimaced.

Clearing his throat, he added, “Tell him, this is not how they do lattes in America. Am I right, Gale?”

“Gill,” she repeated, then added, “And we should probably aim to get back to the camp by 11.30 at the latest.”

The collar of the Pastor’s shirt was partially open and as he strained around to look for the server, the dirt wrinkled under each neck-crease like icing that had dried too fast. “Can you get us some sugar please?” he said to a passing man.

“I don’t work here.”

“Ah,” he said, drumming his fingers against the table.

He pinged the edge of his spoon against the mug and held it to his ear like a tuning fork. He thought about the night.

The rains had come and gone, and the crowds below were not so much malevolent as cold and wet. The missionaries had brought their different congregations—the British Baptist mission, the Methodists from the States, the Assemblies of God, the Korean Presbyterians—clustering on dry patches of ground, on benches, and on mats. Some of the local Christians had come with their friends, and a few curious people had wandered in from the streets, attracted by the crowds and the noise. Small children slept on their father’s knees, while the women stood to the side, their whispers fading in and out.

About forty-five minutes in to his sermon Pastor Ham felt the familiar rush, the spirit stirring, moving in the crowds, a surge of overwhelming love for the people below, watching him. It might not be like Lagos with its millions, the security guards and the

camera crew, but they were here by the dozens, maybe even the hundreds, and the spirit was here!

Then the rains had started again.

“It looks like the devil is trying to discourage God’s children tonight!” He cried, lifting a soft, white hand into the sky. The young girl beside him made an attempt at interpreting into the squeaky microphone. The rain rose, and it became difficult to hear. The small crowds thinned, holding black plastic bags above their heads, the women dispersing onto the edges of his vision. He choked back a tremor.

“But this just means we have given him something to be afraid of. We will laugh in his face tonight. We will sing louder! We will pray harder! Am I right, my brothers and sisters?” His voice, like pressed steel. He thought he heard assenting murmurs under the sound of rain on dirt, on hair, on leaves, on concrete.

“Praise the Lord?” he yelled louder, squinting into the stage lights. Hazy shapes filled his periphery. The Hallelujahs came stronger this time, and his smile returned. He motioned to the man on the djembe behind him, who began beating a new rhythm to lead the congregation in another round of the chorus to “The Solid Rock.” This might not be Lagos, but they were with him alright.

On Christ the solid rock I stand— The rains had slowed but the crowds were thinning. The families with sleeping children had already taken them home, hoisted over shoulders and stealing away in the gap between the Pastor’s words and the interpreter’s, somewhere in that hair of silence. But he knew the night was not over, could not be over. —*All other ground is sinking sand*— This was no new hurdle, just a test, like before: he

had to overcome the darkness, the weakness that was threatening to overtake his will. If God was in this place, then who was he to question? —*All other ground is sinking sand*— The spirit was moving— *Yes!*—and before any more people could escape, he boomed: “Do I have any volunteers? Come! Jesus the Healer, he loves you! Come feel the power of His almighty grace. Won’t you come forward now, any of you who are sick or in need. Come forward! Come receive his healing powers.” The feedback screeched, and he flinched.

At the hotel, Pastor Ham adjusted the latté so it sat directly before Ebou. The man gazed at the foam on top of the cup in wonder, and Pastor Ham swelled with joy. Cooled and dry under the fan, he felt the weight shift off his shoulders, the ground steady beneath his feet. He wanted to laugh and to shout: *See? See?* He half-expected someone would notice the miracle that sat here; would ask, wide-eyed, “Is this—?”

“Pass that sugar, will you?” he said to Gill. She slid it across the counter, and the cubes rattled. Gill continued to stir the hot liquid in circles one way, then the other, occasionally looking at the clock by the bar.

“Ebou?” said Pastor Ham. Ebou looked up, so the pastor continued. “I’ve had this gift for as long as I can remember.” This time, he allowed Gill time to interpret. “Do you understand— does he understand when I say the word ‘gift’?” Gill said something in Ebou’s direction, and the man seemed unphased. “What I mean to say is, God tells me things. He tells me things and tonight, he told me that he chose you. Out of everyone, he chose you. Do you know what that means?”

Well, Ebou said, Many other people were blessed tonight, too.

Yes, the Pastor thought. In a way, that was true.

After his call for volunteers for special prayers, the first man who emerged was young, and he leapt easily onto the stage. The young interpreter looked confused, embarrassed, then turned to him: “The man says he needs money.”

“Ah,” said Pastor Ham. He wiped the water from his face. Sweat and rain had soaked straight through his suit. His patterned tie lay like a dead snake across his chest. Out of the corner of his eye he could see more people leaving, dissolving in ones and twos into the night.

After that first man left the stage, he was followed by an old woman, hard of hearing.

Hands cupping both ears, his prayers had resulted in partial hearing out of one ear, and he yelled into her good ear: Do you accept the Lord Jesus Christ into your heart as your own personal Lord and Savior? She mumbled something that the interpreter claimed was a yes before covering her head and retreating into the rain.

Next, was a girl with a stutter.

A baby with a cleft-lip.

A thirteen-year-old who couldn't stop wetting the bed.

He'd prayed over each of them, the baby shrieking in terror at his massive white hands, the girl with the stutter paralyzed under the lights, and the bed-wetter soiling himself partway through his exclamations. The Pastor sent them each on their way after reciting the prayers. In the cold night and the emptying stadium, Pastor Ham heard scattered laughter and he felt for the first time something like fear, a quiver in the pit of

his gut he couldn't shake. It occurred to him that he was alone, and not just because the interpreter had mysteriously disappeared. Women and children were scattering, losing interest in the show.

“Anyone?” he asked, “Anyone?”

Then his volunteer had appeared—God-sent and anointed for sure!—led to the front by a boy half his height.

“What's your name, my man?” asked Pastor Ham, and the boy interpreted.

“Ebou,” he said into the microphone, eyes unfocused and grey.

Spitting deftly into one palm and pressing it to the man's eye, Pastor Ham lifted his face to the rain and prayed. He begged. He roared, eyes squeezed shut. He clapped and lifted open palms to the sky, to his God, the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, the God that still must be sovereign in this dark land. He shouted the prayers of a desperate and broken man, simply a vessel for His will, His glory. This country must see the Lord's power! He was real! True! Kind! Just! He must be.

He only removed his hand from the man's forehead when his voice was hoarse, his petitions complete, the sticky lines of his palm still imprinted on the man's dark skin, an unread fortune. Under the harsh floodlights on the stage, Pastor Ham watched the milky cataracts dissolve like bath salts into the clear gel of the man's eyes. He looked surprised to see the pale sweating face before him.

“Do you see?” the Pastor asked, whipping from the camera back to the man. “Do you see?”

And glory be, the man said, *Yes*.

It was time for the closing prayers, and elated, the Pastor instructed the man to stick around after the service, and he gave the young boy a dollar bill just in case.

The lattes were now lukewarm.

“You know,” Pastor Ham leaned on the other elbow now, “God can tell me anything I want to know about you. Any. Thing.” There was a slight pause. “But don’t worry, I won’t ask.” He chortled. Gill emitted a nervous laugh.

“So, my man,” he said, facing Ebou, “Do you have a family?”

Of course, Ebou said. Thirteen, no, maybe fifteen brothers and sisters. Yes, all the parents are still living.

“My parents are first generation. Father was a farmer, just like you. I know a thing or two about farming myself. Farming old school, if you know what I mean.”

Ebou stared at the surface of the table without blinking, ran a finger slowly over the patterns on the varnished wood. Gill confirmed that Ebou knew what he meant.

“He was back in Korea, had a small patch of land where he grew rice. I understand you grow rice here in this country too.”

Mainly the women do here, Ebou said. He licked the foam off his lips, blinked slowly like he was raising and lowering blinds. The man seemed more interested in the shape of the mug before him, the color of Gill’s hair, all the different shapes of liquor bottles behind the bar. Ebou touched the dried semi-circles where his lips had sipped the hot beverage.

The Pastor continued, “Well let me tell you this story. A few years ago, I went to a small farming village in Guinea, struck down by Ebola. You know Ebola?” He waved

his hand in the air as if to clear the space. “Well, I know this because one of my good friends, Pastor Micah—a local pastor, mind you, he would have no reason to make this up—but anyway, this village, it was equally mixed, you know, just as many Christians as Muslims. And of the five thousand people in that village, almost four thousand caught the virus. Can you imagine? Most of your neighbors, infected? But here’s the kicker. Of all the villagers who contracted it, not one of them was Christian. Not a single person. See how the Lord works? He protects his own,” he said, grabbing Ebou firmly by the arm. “Now that’s a God worth serving.”

Ebou nodded, following Gill’s halting interpretations. He made no response, and Gale turned back to the pastor, shrugged.

For the next hour, the Pastor wheedled and prodded, trying to get a confession, but Ebou only gazed at the lights overhead, seemed to trace every crack in the ceiling with his eyes. When the Pastor asked if he was a man of God, a Christian, a believer now, the man said, *No, he was a groundnut farmer, but thank you kindly, sir, for the medicine.*

He cried, “After what happened to you tonight, how can you not say that this is the one true God?” He lifted himself up by the elbows, leaned in. Ebou looked small next to him.

Your god is certainly very powerful, Ebou said.

There was yelling in the back, but Pastor Ham ignored it, perplexed.

Gill hadn’t touched her latté.

“It’s not bad with more sugar,” Pastor Ham said, changing the subject. He extended the bowl of sugar cubes in her direction, which she declined with a shake of her

head. “Well, if you won’t, mind if I?” He took Gill’s cup and started releasing pellets of sugar, and took a sip. Ebou now seemed interesting in getting a drink, and he waved down a bartender, and the two men had a conversation in Wolof.

Gill glanced at her watch again and cleared her throat. “Pastor? It’s almost midnight. We should really head back now.”

“Alright, alright.” He flagged down the server for the check. He didn’t know if it was the same man as before, but it was hard to tell. “You take American money here?”

Gill looked relieved, excused herself to use the bathroom, and the two men were left side-by-side in the quiet. The bartender brought Ebou a bottle of beer. Behind them, there was a slamming of doors, a squeak of chairs.

Pastor Ham gestured at the two empty mugs, and said slowly, “Good. Yes?”

“Nice,” answered Ebou in faltering English. “It was very nice. Thank you.”

“May. I. Pray. For. You?” the pastor enunciated, clasping his hands together then pointing at Ebou’s chest. Ebou looked confused, started to say something in Wolof, which the Pastor did not understand. He looked around helplessly for Gill. The woman was running towards the front door. Something tickled the pit of his stomach again, and helpless to the feeling, he pushed back his chair, walked slowly towards them.

Just beyond Gill huddled two girls, one holding the other. An older girl with a purple scarf, shivering and wet, sobbed inconsolably. He recognized the wailing from earlier. As he stepped closer, he could see a shirt wrapped around the young girl’s head, where the fabric had bloomed a rusty brown, and then red, running down the face and

eyes. As he got nearer, he heard the sound of loud breathing, saw the snot crusted over the girl's chin.

The older girl spotted him, and her shrieks became louder. She shouted, gesturing at him, his head, his stomach. The girl pointed at him and then at the small girl wrapped in her arms, yelling garbled words he couldn't understand. Then, screaming. Pastor Ham froze. The frenzied movements, the wild eyes. Gill now held the bleeding girl in her lap, and the older one lunged towards the Pastor with bloody hands, almost reaching his shirt before he stepped back, horrified. Gill hushed the girls, moved them briskly towards the car.

"We need to go to the hospital," Gill said, peering at the wound under the fabric.

In the car, Aramata drooped silently on Mattie's shoulder, the older girl shaking from her sobs. Pastor Ham laid his hands on Aramata's cooling body and muttered his prayers under his breath. Pastor Ham would never find out what it was Mattie had been screaming that night. But Gill had heard, or thought she did.

Heal her, Mattie was saying. Heal her, like you did in the films.

THE NIGHT OF SILK RECKONING

In Kombo, tourists bargain for the neon rhythms of her twelve-year-old body, skin pale as barley al dente. They like her cinched with hunger, a half-year's wage dampening between dry teeth. Perhaps tonight they will find their Rapture:

Unlace her ribcage, peel back thin muscles, break her open like figs to release the wasps. And in the chimera left behind, count the colors you see on borrowed fingers. Let the sour juice seep, irrigate the channels of your thumbs, and dry into clenched fists. Let the seeds burrow beneath your nails until they sprout from your pores, split your knuckles like aged timber, bear fruit to rot sweetly in the shadows of your palms. Read your verdict there; see how life breaches your two cupped hands.

Now look upon the humble architecture of the child's face, the spires of her neck, the clean arch of her chin, the gold dome of her forehead. At Friday noon prayers, storm that temple on bloodied knees; lie prostrate with the lion, the snake, the goat, the egret. Beg forgiveness from her sisters; kiss her brothers' feet. She is meteorite, black stone polished by pilgrim hands. Watch now as the tips of her hair turn to ravens.

HAPPY BIRTHDAY, MR. PRESIDENT!

His Excellency Sheikh Professor Alhaji Dr. Yahya Abdul-Azziz Jemus Junkung Jammeh, the Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces, the Minister of Defense, and the Chief Custodian of the Sacred Constitution of the Gambia, woke hungry and alone on the morning of his forty-sixth birthday craving the taste of a strawberry rhubarb pie and his ex-wife. Strange, that today, of all days, he should be thinking of a woman he had not seen in eight years.

After morning prayers, he draped the day's white robes onto his shoulders and called for breakfast. A bearded man appeared in his doorway carrying a tray of hot pie, and a pistol flopped below his bulging stomach.

“A happy birthday, sir.”

“Thank you, Pabi.”

In the silence of his bedroom, he prepared for the day. His wife, Zineb claimed to have come down with some terrible virus which delayed her return from Morocco, but she promised to be back later, in plenty of time for the fireworks and the party here in the capital. His face already graced every billboard, thanks to Africell and Gamcel, and Christmas lights hung throughout the city although it was only May. He had declared this day a national holiday. The whole nation would celebrate tonight.

He squirted some Jergens lotion into his palms, slapped them together and rubbed it into his shoulders, his chest, his arms, cupping both elbows, and then vigorously

applied the remaining moisture on his calves and thighs. He examined his hands, softened since his retirement from the army and the farms. Straightening in the mirror, he patted his face with damp hands. He had worked very hard to remove the smell of vegetable oil from his skin and the dirt from the creases, losing those lines into the pudding flesh of his palms.

His hands paused briefly over full cheeks, rubbing the bottom of his chin one last time. It was a chin his first wife, Tutti, had always admired for its strength, and he still kept it clean shaven though now he could have easily grown a respectable beard. He was a handsome man and vain enough that it needed to appear effortless. *The face of the Gambia*, Tutti used to say. *Ageless*. In the full length mirror, he noticed a tiny purple stain on his sleeve and cursed softly. It must be from the pie. He rubbed it with mild irritation. They were already behind schedule. No time to change.

“Pabi,” he yelled on his way to the car, “Let’s change the menu for tonight.”

Kanilai was a two-hour drive from the capital, and with the elections so close, the Harley would be out of the question. He knew better than to second-guess Pabi, who had organized the entire day and who had been nothing but loyal since their time in the military. Over the years, after suffering spiritual attacks, betrayals, and conspiracies even by his closest advisors, few remained who he could trust; even fewer who could remember him back then: a soldier, a patriot, a man of God. Now there was just Pabi, and Pabi was right, as he often was. It was good for the people to see his face today, healthy, smiling. But first things first, there was his mother.

By noon, President Jammeh was waiting in the back of the white Hummer limo with the air-conditioning on high, thoughts wandering back to Tutti. His mother had never liked her, although she'd liked Zineb even less. *An Arab, no more than a pretty face*, she'd said. At least Tutti had been Gambian. He wondered what Tutti was doing now, if she still lived in Kembujeh village, so close to where they'd first met. Back then, Pabi would tell him he looked good, while Tutti would gasp with a hand to her cheek: *Arresting*. Were she here to see him now, resplendent in his white robes, polished staff, and prayer beads, she would have said he looked like some white man's god, sitting in the clouds. Tutti had always been creative in her compliments, as she had in other ways. He felt the familiar tug, the strange hunger which had woken him.

"Anything else you need, sir?" Pabi asked as he shut the door behind them. He sat by the fully stocked bar and poured the president a flute of chilled champagne. The bubbles settled and tiny gold shavings swirled at the bottom.

President Jammeh chuckled, shook his head. Pabi gave the signal, and they were off.

The motorcade crept past the large iron gates onto the streets of downtown Banjul. The flurry of sirens and flashing lights did little to drown out the throngs of people drained from the marketplace and on the streets, hoping to catch a glimpse of him, the man of the hour, their spiritual father, the adored commander of this blessed nation.

Pabi, never one to let a chance for campaigning pass by, had already briefed the green boys, the president's personal guard, on the journey ahead. Some manned the armored vehicles and motorcycles while others sat in truck beds, elbow to elbow, AK-47s

slung to the shoulder, boxes of goods at their feet. Two green boys sat at the other end of the president's limo, peering out of opposite windows. "They're the very best," Pabi had promised.

No trouble was expected today. They had brought out the big guns for the special occasion. As the procession zoomed past the Gambia High School, a few students abandoned their game of football to run after the cars, waving their shirts in the air and screaming his name. On their chests they'd painted: *We Love Our President! Thank you President Jammeh!* Behind the tinted windows, the president felt another pang. Didn't seem so long ago that he was one of them. He used to be quite the midfielder back in the day.

Pabi had chosen the long way around, so that they would pass through the busiest towns. The fleet of vehicles sped over Denton Bridge—where daytime fishermen paused from their reels to wave—and continued on the Banjul-Serrekunda Highway, leaving behind a wake of idle engines from Kanifing to Serrekunda. Older drivers and passengers sat in cars, windows rolled down, chin in hand, or stood, ankles crossed, leaning back with lit cigarette, waiting for the presidential escorts to pass.

As expected, the crowds grew near Serrekunda. Pabi opened the sunroof. A fog of heat and sound punched through, and president Jammeh downed the rest of his champagne. While Pabi ripped open the first box of cookies, the president emerged from the sunroof with his staff—waving, waving, waving—to the roar of the men, the women, the children lining the streets, screaming his name. They were all dressed in his party

colors, dark green, and they clapped, whistled, cheered. An ocean of green banners and signs crying: *Happy birthday our beloved Leader!*

It seemed like just yesterday that he had taken this very journey for the first time, from Banjul to Basse Santa Su, back when the main road had been so rutted and pocked it would have taken them at least five hours to even get to Kanilai. Who could deny what he had made of this country? Just look at these smooth roads; the streetlights; the electric poles that now extended beyond Brikama to Sibanor. And look how they loved him.

He leaned into the wind. From where he stood, all he could see were hands. Receiving a sleeve of cookies from Pabi, the president threw them again into the crowds, his spirits lifted by the sounds of the people, his body light as the wind billowed through his garments, snapping like teeth. At this signal, the green boys resumed emptying their boxes of cookies into the rushing crowds, sometimes by the armful, sometimes with hands going in opposite directions. Few were lucky enough to be caught; the rest crashed into the ground in an explosion of crumbs and sugar before being swarmed by the smaller children.

The motorcade now followed the Brikama Highway, approaching Yundum Barracks, where local police officers kept the hordes from leaning too close to the roads. Empty-handed, His Excellency, President Doctor Yahya Jammeh scanned the scene before him, smiling generously, benevolently, regally, at the people below. Every cell in his body thrummed, revved to life. He soared. His vision became watery, everything a warm mass of light and color. Suddenly, he could see everything. Sand stung his face, caught between his teeth, crystallized every inch of his numbed skin, studding him like

small jewels. He was a rock, immortal, unchanging, for a thousand years to come. Yes, they all adored him. He watched the frenzy, the shouts, the waving hands and flags, and he felt shiny, big, like a fucking giant, the worry of the elections washing clean away.

The box was nearly empty by the time they passed the outskirts of Brikama, then Kembujeh, and reached the vast rural terrain. Duty done, the president sank back into the creamy leather seats, wiped his face with a towel, and pulled a cookie for himself. He spat it out instantly.

“This is shit,” he said and tossed the half-open packet out the window.

Pabi shrugged. “Lebanese,” he said. The two men laughed.

“Cheer up,” said the president to the two green boys posted at the rear. They continued to gaze sternly out the window. “Can’t they take a joke?”

“It means they’re doing their job,” said Pabi. “The security of our country’s most valuable man is no laughing matter.”

The president gestured at the next bottle of champagne, chilling in a bucket of ice.

“But could they not smile while they’re doing this? Haven’t you heard? It’s my birthday. A happy day.”

“You heard the president,” said Pabi, and the green boys broke into a wide grin.

The president laughed. Under the fluorescent lights, the gold flecks winked on his tongue. “Now see how happy they look,” he said, taking another sip of the champagne. “You,” he said, pointing at the green boy on the left with his staff. The prayer beads clacked against the wood. “You know what this is?” He raised his glass.

The soldier shook his head, teeth white and gleaming.

“Dom Pérignon Rosé. One of these costs me thousands of dollars, American.” he said, lifting the glass close to his ear. “You hear that?” The liquid, translucent and burnt pink, buzzed softly. “It’s the sound of money,” he roared. “Smoother than wet pussy.”

Pabi laughed, but the green boy remained quiet, grin quivering.

The president drained the rest of the champagne. “Tastes like it too,” he said. “You know, I miss the days of a soldier. Remember? People used to laugh at my jokes and tremble at my threats. Everybody knew who was boss.”

“You are still the boss,” said Pabi calmly.

“Look at my hands, Pabi.”

“They’re nice, sir. The very finest hands on the continent.”

The president chuckled in spite of himself. Perhaps Pabi had learned a thing or two from Tutti after all. “That’s right. But they’re clean. Soft. Because others do my work. Do they remember who I was?” He grumbled. Two bottles of champagne in, he was beginning to feel his muscles puddle. The tightening in his stomach returned, then passed.

Pabi refilled his glass and replied easily, “A right that you’ve worked hard to earn. And of course, sir. It’s my life’s honor to serve you. And the people love you.”

The president’s mind drifted again. Tutti had worshipped him from the start. When he was just part of the presidential escort, no better than these two fools with their comically large weapons. Was this not what he had wanted all along? The blessed forgetfulness, the obliteration of his no-name past, where he had labored night and day

before joining the army? A village boy from Kanilai, he had been full of anger then, and great ambition. And look who he was now. He had mansions scattered across the globe, commanded the respect of foreign dignitaries, religious leaders, pop stars. At age thirty, he had been the youngest president in the world. And ever since, he'd been in the business of making the Gambia a country the world would remember. They would never forget who he had become.

He burped. The alcohol bewitched his thoughts, made him languorous, and he relaxed into the spell. Zineb was his second marriage, and she deserved the title of first lady, always had. Unlike Tutti, who had educated herself out of Kembujeh village by sheer will and would have been nothing without him, Zineb, the daughter of the distinguished Ambassador Soumah, took to her new role with ease. She championed women's and children's rights, peace initiatives, education, brought him a good name. But recently he began to believe that maybe this wasn't enough. Zineb didn't understand him, couldn't. What could a Moroccan princess know about hard work? Hunger? The Gambian way? But that's what he got for marrying a foreign wife. Their seven years together had only revealed new pockets of resentment, boredom, lies. A virus? He doubted it. Who knew what she was really doing in all her months away in Morocco? Anger splashed to his face, drowning the shadowy ache in his belly. It settled back in his chest, a simmering heat.

“But is love enough? Love can fade,” the president said to Pabi. “Power, on the other hand, fear: that can be maintained.”

“You are Africa’s hope. Her most powerful leader,” said Pabi, lifting his own glass of water to toast. Their glasses clinked and the president sighed, restless. His attention returned to the green boys. The guard on the left had not moved from his last position. His earlier grin had tired into a strained smile.

“Straighten up, soldier,” the president barked.

The man jerked up, rigid in his seat.

“Is this boy an idiot? Who is it you’ve allowed into my personal vehicle, Pabi?” he asked. “In my days,” he said, zeroing in on the man, “we would have been beaten ever so seriously had we shown up looking like that. You call that cap straight?”

The green boy fumbled with his cap briefly, then returned to his position, apologizing.

“Did he give you permission to speak, dog?” Pabi asked.

The president smiled. Pabi always knew what would make him feel better.

“This one we’ll fire as soon as we arrive,” President Jammeh said. “Or maybe prison. Is this treason, Pabi?”

“I have never known your Excellency to be wrong,” Pabi said, following his lead. The green boy remained silent.

“Where are you from?” asked the president.

The guard made no move to reply. Lips peeled back over dried teeth, his earlier grin now looked like a mild grimace.

“Are you deaf, boy? Did you not hear the boss?” cried Pabi.

“Massembeh. I am from Massembeh.”

“I know the place,” said the president, looking at the man through his champagne flute. The car’s cream leather interior took on an amber sheen. It bent the panel of lights near the bar. “And your mother, she’s still in Massembeh?”

“Yes, sir.” A kernel of sweat slid into the guard’s eye. He didn’t blink. The guard on the other side of the vehicle remained motionless, attention out the window.

“‘Sir’?” said Pabi. “You dare to call the president of the Gambia ‘sir’?”

“Excellency,” the man corrected himself. His cheeks twitched.

“Is your mother beautiful, soldier?” asked the President, leaning forward in his seat. He balanced both elbows on his knees.

“I don’t know, your Excellency,” the man answered, confused.

“You don’t know. You don’t know if your mother is beautiful or not. You are a bad son. I’ll ask you again. Is your mother beautiful?”

“Yes, sir. She is, your Excellency.” The man paled.

“It seems there are two of us in this car here today,” said the president.

“Or perhaps the idiot is referring to me as sir, and you as Excellency,” said Pabi mildly.

The president chuckled. “You’re too generous, Pabi, as always.” He turned back to the guard. “Now did your beautiful mother, who still lives in Massembeh, ever teach you how to dress?”

“She did, Your Excellency,” he stuttered.

The president cackled. Taking a marble of ice from the bucket, he tossed it at the guard. The man didn't move. It landed on the side of one smooth cheek and slipped onto his lap.

"Catch it," he said, "That's a presidential order."

Without warning, he tossed another and the man dropped his weapon to catch the ice with one hand. Drops of water leaked from his fingers. He held it with pinched grin, awaiting further instruction.

"Did I say you could release your firearm? How will he protect me now? Pabi, I think this man is in danger of committing treason," he said.

On his knees now and breaking into a sweat, the guard picked up his weapon, held it with both hands. The ice had all but disappeared into his palm, slick against the cool metal. His smile twitched with the effort.

"Now," he said. "With your mouth."

Obediently, the man snapped the next one between his teeth. The president slapped his knee in amusement. "Just like those well-trained American dogs. Pabi, you try one," he said. This time, it landed short, so the man had to lunge forward. He landed, slamming onto his chest, the weapon still in both hands. The ice clacked off his teeth and skittered to the back of the vehicle.

"Again," the President said, laughing out loud. They pelted more ice cubes. Some went high so the man had to jump from his seat, wide-mouthed; others veered far to the right, so he collided into the other guard. As the car turned, sometimes his shoulder crashed into the windows. They came faster and faster. Some landed with a click against

his skull, others on his chest, his face. In a few minutes, the man was sweating through his uniform, his breaths ragged.

Bored of their game, the president turned back to Pabi. “The problem is with all those people who have been leaving,” he said in a low voice. “They go to the West, get indoctrinated with these unnatural ideas. It’s poison.”

His gaze returned to the new roads, and in contrast, the unchanging landscape of his childhood. The same clusters of villages, the stretches of dried shrubbery between where cattle grazed, everything coated in the filmy orange dust of the dry season. A young boy herding cows waved both arms in the air, momentarily excited by the motorcade. The president lifted his hand, though the child wouldn’t have seen through the thick tinted glass. They were now in Somita, only an hour from Kanilai, and this village, too, boasted the green flags of those loyal to APRC, celebrating the president’s happy day. He closed his eyes, struck by a sudden heaviness. He felt so tired. He emptied the last of the champagne.

“They’re among us right now. I know,” he muttered. “Even you can’t keep the rumors from reaching my ears.”

“We’ve tightened security for the past few months,” Pabi said, pouring another glass. “And they’re not all like this one here,” he said nodding at the green boy, who was now back in position, slightly damp. The president seemed uninterested in picking up the game.

“How can a leader lead if he is disrespected by the same people who knew him when he was a nobody? Who saw what he risked to save this country from a

dictatorship—I risked my life, Pabi!—and what do they say now? They call me a dictator, a tyrant, a madman.” He spat. A prickle began on his skin, and again the hunger.

“You’ve won the last elections, and you will again,” said Pabi.

Anger flared then sizzled, doused. “Give me your gun,” the president ordered.

Pabi handed it over without hesitation. The president balanced the weight of it in his soft hands, the grooves denting his skin.

He pointed it at Pabi, who remained perfectly still, and then swung it toward the green boy in the corner. “Pow! Pow!” he said. He let out a chuckle when he thought the man flinched. His chubby finger curled around the trigger, testing its resistance, and he tapped the piece against the tinted windows. Then, harder and harder. The men remained motionless. The clacks became deafening. Tall dry grass and stripped trees rushed passed on the other side.

Why had he divorced Tutti? Simple: children. The reason now returned to him easily with none of the distant anger. His marriage to the beautiful Zineb—fair-skinned, svelte, elegant—had come soon after that, a smart political maneuver at the time. Zineb was the champagne to Tutti’s beer, more the kind of woman worthy of a man like him. The president swirled his drink, strangely unhappy with his own comparison. Zineb made him look good, but educated to a fault, she could be one manipulative bitch; headstrong, too. She didn’t understand the importance of what he was doing, couldn’t wrap her pretty head around the significance of what he’d already accomplished. And still, no children. The spark in his gut grew into a small fire.

“Turn around,” he ordered the driver.

“Your mother is waiting in Kanilai,” Pabi said, eyeing the president.

“She can wait a while longer.”

Pabi considered the presidents’ hazy eyes, recognized the slack jaw. He approached now with caution. “She will not be happy, sir,” he said.

“I said we’re turning around.” Finger beneath the trigger, the president swung the pistol in lazy circles over his knees.

Drinking had a way of making him stumble into old memories with startling clarity. Yahya Jammeh, handpicked by Jawara himself to be part of his personal guard, had joined the other presidential escorts on one of Jawara’s last public functions, a graduation at Ichthus Technical Institute in Brikama. The founders, Chinese missionaries, threw a massive celebration, hiring a national television crew, decorators, caterers, the works.

By this time, the coup had been planned. Yahya was once again twenty-eight. Scars lightened, appeared again on sun-baked skin. The flesh around his abdomen, thighs, arms, shrank, hardened into muscle. His chin sharpened, became smooth. He strutted easily in his green uniform, size M-R, sweating faintly in the reserved front row just three seats away from the president Jawara. Diplomas offered, hands extended, smiles proffered, bursts of light, applause, applause. Cameras rolling.

After the ceremony, under the brand new roof of that church building, the women of the graduating class served refreshments. And there she was, glancing his way now and then; that one, the beauty, decked in the school uniform: pressed white shirt and grey

pencil skirt. A curiosity that grew in his belly, possessed his eyes. She sauntered over with a tray of dessert: *Chakry for you, sir? Chakry? Yes, we made it right here.* Tutti Faal was her name, she said, *More, sir?*

The tray emptied quickly as she fluttered here and there, laughing, from person to person. As she passed him, he got a whiff of her—something buttery and sweet—and saw the slight dampening on the dip beneath that full lower lip, the butterfly of sweat on her lower back. The grey skirt fell below the knee, respectably so, but he could see the dark legs beneath were free of scars, like she had never fallen, never been anything but woman, a full woman, poised, sweating, serving food, balancing her curves on the tips of her toes, the balls of her feet since the day she was born. Behind the missionary's church he had pulled her aside and bit her lip, so they were red and bleeding like swollen leeches. She'd wanted it too.

Who knew such a body could be so hostile inside? A woman of sweet words, but oh, how she'd tested his faith. Fallow years.

When they'd married, he'd tried everything to cure that ugliness within. But even then, before he'd lead the charge to the state house which would liberate the country, he'd had enemies. Their marital dilemma was a curse, he believed, cast by traitors beyond the country's borders and aggravated by ideas the Chinese had planted in their school.

He refused to see the Western specialists after Tutti's second phantom pregnancy. All the Western medicine in the world couldn't save him from black magic. So, carefully, he planned his own defense. Returning to Kanilai, he lost himself in traditional medicine,

spent days in the bush of his childhood, foraging for answers. He fashioned his own prayer beads, then ground local herbs, selecting each by its shape, the bitter taste on the tip of his tongue as he checked for freshness, authenticity.

Imagine his elation when Tutti began swelling with life. The potions, the prayers, the fasting, the beads cracking like knuckles: they had worked. She made it through the first trimester, then the second. Her hair and skin began to smell different. The woman he knew to only sleep on her back, arms flung wide, began to sleep on her side, balancing her weight on the rounded point of her shoulder, the widest part of her hip, an apostrophe curving away from him, cradling her belly. He curled in bed next to a creature he no longer recognized. Although she had never taken up such little space in their four years of marriage, he ordered a new bed. Good luck, for the new life thickening between their sheets.

Two months before she was due, she bled out, this time a stillbirth. *Your potions cured me of life*, she said at the hospital, sweating and suddenly shrunken. She laughed in his face. *Watch how my womb grows death*.

He hit her with the back of his ringed hand, the country's insignia marking her perfect cheek. Within weeks, against the counsel of Pabi and his other advisors, he got a divorce. Then, somehow, eight years passed.

Now she stood before him, fat with age.

Pabi and the green boys had followed him from the car, but the rest held back villagers, who were already swarming the parked motorcade.

“Your Excellency. What a surprise. What an honor. Come in. Come in,” said Tutti. The metal door, which had been partly open, swung all the way. She reached out to him with both hands. Dazed, the president allowed her to take his champagne glass.

The house reeked of palm oil, a vague hairy smell that came from the walls, the velvet cushions. Inside, it was so warm he began to sweat. The folds of skin between his thighs dragged against each other. He staggered into a half-finished living room, Pabi close behind. The green boys remained at the door.

“Make yourself comfortable,” Tutti instructed, flitting around the room, straightening things here and there. Pabi guided the president to a seat. “Can I get you anything?” she asked.

The president couldn’t tear his eyes away. A coolness ebbed into his limbs, ballooned in his gut where it sagged, pushed against his damp undershirt. He blinked slowly.

The heart-shaped face he’d known so well had blunted, giving way to a natural circle, the shiny putty of her cheeks. A tiny raised scar shaped like a fingernail clipping, there on the cheek. Those familiar eyes, sunk behind boggy lids, studied him closely. Her neck leaned forward slightly as if carrying an invisible child on her shoulders. Her elbows were grey. Now that he was here, his memories were leaking away, the spell lifting.

Tutti returned with two tall glasses of ice water for the men. Her fingers brushed his, and he recoiled.

“Now, I suppose I should wish you a happy birthday, Mr. President,” she said coyly. Her head cocked to the side and every wrinkle in her neck emerged, wood grains, as if they had been there all along. Underneath the swath of fabric she held to her chest, he imagined her breasts, flat disks.

This was a trap. It dawned on him suddenly, so clear now. Some evil was brewing here, and he had walked in meek, like a lamb to the slaughter. How careless. How foolish. His pulse began racing. He felt dizzy, out of breath. Leaving the glass of water untouched, he grabbed Pabi by the arm, hauling them both toward the door.

They ran past the guards, the crowds—the sun searing his eyes, Pabi pulling him up as he tripped and fell to his knees—back to the safety of his car. He didn’t notice his mouth half-open, the sweat slipping down his face. No, he was not going to Kanilai. Not today. His mother would have to wait. It was his birthday. His country. His word. He must return. He did not have to explain himself to anyone.

It was almost dark by the time he arrived at his home in Banjul. As soon as he entered his room, he removed his robe, which still smelled of the awful house. He sat back down, feeling heavier than he ever had before. In his undershirt and boxers he breathed deeply, fingers clutching arm rests for support.

At his feet, the robe lay prostrate, looking as if his body had simply disappeared from its garments. The clean white cloth looked yellow in the dim lights, and in the corner was the stain from the morning, burgundy now. He felt sick. The room began swimming before his eyes, so he closed them.

People had flown from all over the world to perform for him tonight, to shower him in gifts, compliments. There would be music, dancing, fireworks, and his wife would stay by his side, where she had always belonged, beautiful, no doubt. He wanted to sleep, but it was almost time for the party, his party, and per his instructions, there would be chakry.

IN MEMORIAM

1.

You did not survive the summer solstice, when the sun slowed but wouldn't halt for all the battles waged in your body. I return once more to the image of your usurped temple on a hospital bed so small your feet hung out. Death slipped closer by shallow seconds until they became pearls cascading from snapped string. This year, you are eucalyptus leaves crushed to fragrance, the last candle turned to puddle, or perhaps the mosquito entombed in its heel. You are the cup. This is for you.

2.

By the time your president called you vermin¹, you were mere reed and twine, a wicker basket twice unraveling. You told us you were afraid, and like fools, we prayed for your soul instead of your body. At the Jackpot Royale, you cast all your savings on slot machines saying, Hell, there's always luck. This year, I imagine we make a halo of coins on your pillow, place poker chips on your closed eyes.

3.

But who do you pray to in the midnight hour when you kneel before clean sheets to feel your lover's breath on your cheek? Speak to us of the heaven which still welcomed you, then sing us a psalm of your making: serenade us to the kora, the djembe, the balafon. Imagine peace; balance olive pits on your tongue and lash it to beggared words. Sun, don't stop, don't stop. Carry us safe to the next horizon where we will meet again at last.

¹ “We will fight these vermin called homosexuals or gays the same way we are fighting malaria-causing mosquitoes, if not more aggressively. . . . As far as I am concerned, LGBT can only stand for Leprosy, Gonorrhea, Bacteria, and Tuberculosis; all of which are detrimental to human existence.” – From President Yahya Jammeh's speech on the 49th Gambian Independence Day

AMADEUS COMES HOME AT LAST

Eager to be ordained after three long years studying in Kasoa, Ghana, Amadeus came home to his modest trailer on the Good News Presbyterian Mission compound, thirty pounds lighter, hefting a suitcase of souvenirs, and a head swelled with words like Exegesis and Isigesis, Comfort Zone and Carnal Pleasures, but above all, a mad craving for real Mandinka domoda and baked mangoes.

The Korean missionaries and his friends—boys he'd grown up with in the GNPM dorms, brothers, really—threw him a party. Amadeus was welcomed by old friends and new faces, chopati and drinks, and a banner across the church which read: *Wellcome Home Amadou Colley!*

“No, I'm Amadeus now,” he told everyone, laminated degree under one arm. “Like the famous piano player.” His friends laughed, but obliged.

“Oh, Amadou went to Bible College and came back a musician. The missionaries wasted their money-woh! The only thing in common between those two names is ‘mad,’ and who can argue with that now?” they joked. “To Mad!” they cheered, lifting their soft drinks in the air.

But nothing could dampen his spirits now that he was home, finally home, on the smiling coast, The Gambia. He had two blue binders full of notes he'd collected, hundreds of sermons yet to be preached, and detailed annotations scribbled on the margins of his NIV Study Bible. He was bursting with all he had to share. He was

Amadeus now, soon to be Pastor Amadeus Colley, and he'd never felt so prepared. Once ordained, he'd transition into the missionaries' role, running Good News Presbyterian Mission: church-planting, preaching, community-living. God was good. The best was yet to come.

Back in the familiar GNPM compound, largely unchanged, it wasn't long before Amadeus and his friends settled into some of their old routines, kicking around a football on the concrete slab or spending their Sunday afternoons by the kitchen, chatting.

“Do you know—out of all the whites, blacks, Chinese, whatever—do you know what the most expensive brain is?” Amadeus asked, gearing up for a joke he heard in Ghana.

He sat on a stool under the mango tree, surrounded by Karamo, Samson, and JJ. The boys rubbed loose skin off groundnuts, then blew the flakes into the air.

“Chinese,” Karamo said. “They're everywhere, so it's got to be good, right?”

Samson scoffed. “The bigger the supply, the cheaper the product. Simple supply and demand. Never stepped foot in a Chellarams, bro?” Six-foot-two and in his final semester at Gambia College, Sam towered over the boys. He gestured now with hands large as dinner plates. “No, I say whites. Besides, they built rockets. Went to the moon.”

“You're crazy. These days, it's the Chinese that are on the up and up. And how can you say that after all the hospitals and schools they built over here?”

“They didn't build them for me, bro. I owe them nothing. They built those for themselves.” Sam palmed a few more groundnuts and popped them in his mouth. The pale pellets let out a muffled crunch.

JJ joined in. “But you’ve got to respect Jackie Chan. Jet Li. Heck, Bruce Lee. If those guys didn’t have brains, how come they’re making millions in Hollywood, off white people, and still keeping fit, looking good? If I had brains that made money like that, I’d be fat.” He puffed out his cheeks and pulled the corners of his shirt. “I would never walk again. Servants would carry me from room to room. You’d have to make me a new door just to get me out of my house.”

Amadeus smiled and closed his eyes. He’d missed this. And he loved this hour in the early afternoon, when the GNPM compound—usually so noisy—became still. Just him and the boys again. Everybody else was inside, spread out on cool concrete floors, dozing in the afternoon heat.

Sam dismissed JJ's comment with a wave. He dusted his big hands then lifted a long skinny finger to tap his temple. “High impact sports. Their brains are probably worthless now.”

“If anyone can get close,” JJ argued.

Karamo shrugged. “I guess Bruce Lee’s dead. No value there.”

“He lives on,” JJ said, holding a fist to his chest. “Who doesn’t know Bruce Lee? Movie stars are the true gods. They’re immortal. Invaluable. Come on, Mad. Am I right?”

The boys turned to look at Amadeus, who was leaning against the tree with his ankles crossed.

“Gentlemen, the most expensive brain is a black man’s brain.” Amadeus said, and paused for effect. The laughter bubbled in his belly, erupting with his punchline:

“Because he doesn’t use it.” He guffawed, almost slipping off his stool.

“Alright, man,” Sam said. “Alright. Settle down.”

Amadeus' laughter faded, and the conversation quickly moved on without him. The boys bickered about other things—Nani's golden years in the Premier League; the cute new short-termer, Sharon; the best way to fix a broken cleat—and Amadeus nodded, feigning interest. The moment had passed without anyone taking note, but Amadeus felt exposed, like he was again the new kid who had soiled himself his first night in the dorm, or the clumsy boy always the brunt of their jokes.

His friends still made fun of him, a grown man, for the time he swallowed his own tooth, or the time he stumbled onto a beehive, or the day he almost drowned at his own baptism, a story that became somewhat of a legend in the mission, thanks to JJ.

“What was it you were saying that day, Mad?” JJ cackled. “You wanted to be called *Baajambo*,” he laughed, pounding him on the back, *Seaweed*. “You and your new names. And you almost did become food for the fish, alright, a true *baajambo*.”

That Christmas Day at Kartong Beach, Amadou had stood waist-deep in ocean water, one of the eleven waiting his turn to be baptized. The waves were high, the water warm, and the wind whipped away Missionary Park's words. Amadou was fifteen, distracted, afraid of nothing. After six years of living with the missionaries, listening to their sermons, attending their daily services, and saying their prayers, Amadou had figured it was time. Everyone else was doing it. But by the time *Alfaa-baa* got to the third baptee, Amadou had already drifted in too far. The riptide came out of nowhere.

They called him *Baajambo* for years after, laughing as if on that day, they hadn't been afraid, too. Amadeus always played along. What else could he do? He never told

them that by night, he remembered the terror, the salt stinging his closed eyes, numbing the roof of his mouth, the weight of the water like a hand pushing his cheek to the ocean floor. He remembered thinking this was punishment by God, finally, who was catching up to his years of false prayers, his dutiful but faithless appearance at the GNPM services, and now his decision to take a holy sacrament without truly believing.

Before the boats had finally come to rescue him, tossing him the orange jacket, and dragging him up by the armpits, he had—in his terror—found himself praying. Retching onto the bottom of the boat, he wept with relief. In those waters, so unceremoniously faced with the terrible silence in his own head, he found God.

Within the first few months, Amadeus had gained back the weight and more (a round belly that he thought gave him an appropriate gravity) and given away all the small tokens from his time in seminary: bookmarks, pens, key chains inscribed with the gold-leaf words, *Jubilee Bible College*.

At first, it didn't bother Amadeus that since he'd been back, his friends had yet to ask about his life in Ghana. Not really. After all, they were getting used to him—the new him—too. Five months in, he was no longer news, but parts of him felt changed in ways he was only now beginning to identify. It felt unfair to him that these realizations always came too late.

Recently, he noticed the conversation wane whenever he brought up Ghana. He didn't know if this was because of his close relationship with the missionaries, who pulled him aside more and more frequently, or if they simply didn't care, only seeing him

as the same clueless student who had left three years ago. Amadeus' ordination date was fast approaching, but what he had once found so appealing now loomed as yet another degree of separation between him and his friends that he wasn't ready to face.

Amadeus tried hard to join in the conversations, but it seemed impossible to do so without mentioning Ghana. One time, the boys—John M., JJ, Karamo, and Sam—were eating kabba and talking about the latest Kung Fu movie.

“Now when I was in Ghana,” Amadeus said, “Mr. Kwak taught me a thing or two about karate. He's a black belt master.”

Holding his arms up to his chest, Amadeus squatted, swiveled, and threw a weak kick, stirring up a mist of dust. The boys all yelled, threw their kabba seeds at him.

Fruit Ninja, they called him, Mad Fruit Ninja. Just sit down, boy.

These days, they were so quick to shut him down. It wasn't just that he felt jilted, but that he couldn't decide if he wanted to be jilted. The boys' problems always seemed so trivial—a broken shoe, a lost soccer match—that their approval would have, should have, meant little to him. He didn't really want to be part of the boys' pointless arguments, their watery faith, their blind trust in the Gambia's broken political system. Did he? Meanwhile, the boys continued to crack their jokes.

Two weeks later, in June, Amadeus and the boys hitched a ride to Serrekunda with Missionary Park, *Alfaa-baa*. Amadeus hadn't been to Serrekunda since his arrival, and he was eager to see the city.

As soon as the car turned onto the Brikama Highway, Amadeus couldn't help boasting about the size of the streets in Accra. This, he told them, was nothing.

“Six cars this way, six cars that way,” he cried, arms gesturing on one side, almost losing his balance in the moving truckbed. “The road is so good, people do what they want. You can walk with your shoulders back like this, carefree.”

“Is it bigger than the Banjul highway?” yelled Paul above the wind.

“Definitely, of course, absolutely.”

The boy looked impressed, and Amadeus grinned.

In reality, Amadeus had barely spent a day in Ghana’s renowned capital, but it was a day he would never forget. He took the bus to Accra with the monthly allowance *Alfaa-baa* sent through his friend, Mr. Kwak. With only enough money in his pockets to get to Accra and back, Amadeus had simply ridden through the entire city. Even though he never stepped foot in the city, he absorbed it all through the square bus window: the towering billboards, the shopping malls, the roads. In the safety of that plastic bus seat, he could see himself walking those very streets, imagine Brikama itself transforming into this urban bustle. He felt like he had stepped into the future. He felt a surge of pride, wonder, belonging. This was Mother Africa.

“You could not even imagine it,” Amadeus added out loud, though by this time Paul was no longer listening.

From Brikama, it took just thirty minutes to get to Serrekunda on the Coastal Road. Newly-paved back when he’d left for Ghana, the road had been carved parallel to the Atlantic coastline, before any recognizable human activity had reached the area. Amadeus remembered the burnt plastic smell of new road, the wind roaring in his ears, and a wide stretch of shrubbery, sand, and trees. Although the Banjul-Brikama highway

was the shorter route, it was so congested and old that the growing number of cars in the country were forced to weave back and forth to avoid the potholes, the market-side pedestrians, the occasional stray animal. On the Coastal Road, they could go eighty kilometers an hour, all the way there.

Gripping the bald metal sides of the missionaries' truck with his friends, Amadeus became quieter. After these past few months in the predictable routines of Good News Presbyterian Mission, he was surprised to find that The Gambia had changed on him too.

While he was gone, the Coastal Road had irrigated the virginal landscape so that buildings sprouted like weeds along its edges. New *bitikos*, low-income housing, banks, hardware stores; and as they neared Bijilo and Serrekunda, tourist hotels, camel rides, a baobab zip line course. Everything seemed to be moving in the general direction of outwards, like it was defusing some fear of the expanse: the hardy scrubs and wildflowers, the unknowable dust, and beneath it all, the impending green. Development spilled over the land like grease in a hot pan.

Once they reached Serrekunda, there was more. But this was no Accra, not even close. Here and there, Amadeus noticed messy indicators of wealth, new houses appearing between abandoned ones, sometimes on top of them, almost an afterthought. A sign with fresh paint peeling at the corners, faded paint beneath. Shiny corrugate fences nailed in place with used bottle caps. A fancy metal gate attached to no walls. The cluttered landscape filled him with a strange agitation. In his first few months, he had been so relieved to be home that he did not realize that three years had cost him more than he expected. The realization left him shaken, mute, though the boys hardly noticed.

Even after they returned from Serrekunda, the boys joking as usual, Amadeus couldn't shake the feeling that he was porous, like his shadow had come unglued from his feet. In Ghana, he had never been so sure of himself, so proud of his Gambian Mandinka heritage. But when he had disembarked that Royal Air Maroc plane, back home again on Gambian soil, some central ingredient in him had come loose, refracted into the many colors he could never again reconcile.

With *Alfaa-baa*, who pulled him aside to discuss church operations, the new GNPM budget, plans for his ordination ceremony, he was one person; with his friends, he was another. He hadn't anticipated this anxiety. He found his friends' lack of change disturbing, but he also knew the missionaries had their flaws. His time in Ghana had taught him that the missionaries were victims of their own culture, too. Why else would they punish the slightest tardiness? Why else would they need a piano, of all things, in the church? On his good days, Amadeus believed he would be a better pastor than *Alfaa-baa*, one that the GNPM church really needed, but on bad days he wanted to quit altogether. A pastor would be respected, tolerated, maybe even loved, but never included. He would be completely alone.

And he was no stranger to loneliness. Before the boys like Sam and JJ had started GNPM's program, Amadou had been here, eleven years old and the youngest in the dorm. His first week here, Amadou had wet his bed and also, in a fit of conscience, ratted out the older boys' plans to watch a porno on the church's television set. His choice marked him for years.

Behind the missionaries' back, the boys then had taunted him, so that he spent most of his days alone, playing marbles in the missionaries' office, where he could get some quiet. He grew up on the missionaries' floor. But the years were kinder, and as those boys left—some, after graduating high school; others, expelled, having wasted their second chance—Amadou stayed behind, first working as a mechanic and then later as a church evangelist. While the names stopped, the stories remained.

Amadeus had no interest in the way things were. Ghana had changed him, but no one seemed to notice. How small his world had been before he came to Good News Presbyterian Mission, but how much smaller still, now that he was back.

Around his friends, Amadeus tried to keep his thoughts to himself, but his frustrations built until he'd blurt something he'd immediately regret. He found his own voice a little annoying, his criticisms showy.

“We have a corrupt government, my friends. Jammeh is a snake, a tyrant. You think these past elections have been fair? As long as our countrymen continue to go chase after his cookies when he tosses them, we'll never see roads like the ones in Accra.”

While before, the boys teased, now when Amadeus talked about serious matters, they hassled him, saying, “Take it easy, man. We're just trying to have a good time here. Why do you have to go spoil it with talk like this? This is the Gambia. The Gambia, no problem.”

But their carefree attitude annoyed him, and helpless, he would continue.

“We need to open our eyes! It’s time that we stopped blaming colonialism. You want work? Be on time! Work hard! You want money? Get a job! You want children? Get married!”

His words were met with uncomfortable silences, empty stares, at best, laughter. Feverish with an equal desire to stop talking and to make them see him, finally, for who he was, he was perpetually breathless, staggering between authoritative preaching and sullen quiet. He couldn't hold air.

“Calm down, man,” the boys would say, the humor gone from their eyes. “Nobody’s disagreeing with you here.”

When Amadeus Colley thought about his time in Ghana these days, it was in the safety of his trailer home. While he was gone, the missionaries had used it as a storage space, and although they had emptied it of the hymnals and instruments before he arrived, he still found bits of old sheet music from time to time: a treble clef here, an arpeggio there.

In the weeks leading up to the ordination, he focused his energies on repairing the trailer. It calmed him. The trailer—a gift from the missionaries when he had moved up from head of the boys’ dorm to, eventually, evangelist—had been raised on cement blocks, its wheels long useless, and the bottom had rusted out in places so that he could see sand or, sometimes, stray cats napping beneath. He covered the floor in plywood sanded smooth and slept in the boys’ dorm while the varnish dried. Inside, he scrubbed and whitewashed the walls, covering them with posters and small mementos of Kasoa.

Perched on the roof with his pant-legs rolled up, he scraped the blue paint from the outside, chose a light green to replace it.

“We’re kicking off in fifteen,” the boys called out, rapping the side of the trailer to get his attention. “Come play a game with us.”

“Next time, boys,” he said. “I’m busy.”

“Come on, Mad. That old thing can wait.”

“Thirty minutes,” he promised, and then never showed.

What was becoming clear to Amadeus was that the boys never took anything seriously, least of all him. He worried they would still call him Mad when he became pastor.

When he wasn’t working on his house, he prepared for his ordination, meditated on the scriptures, wrote new sermons that he added to the growing pile of papers in his blue binder. He buried himself in objects that reminded him of who he was: commentaries from Genesis to Revelation, a Koine-Greek dictionary, fresh notebook paper, always a pencil sharpened on the desk or behind his ear.

He bought a secondhand suit from Brikama market, which he pressed and hung on a hook in the wall, thinking he’d wear it on his big day. In the quiet of his home, he felt himself renewed. After his ordination and his first official sermon, he would no longer be Amadou or *Baajambo* or Mad, but Pastor Colley. It was just a matter of time.

Alfaa-baa had already increased Amadeus’ responsibilities, and he took on the roles eagerly. When the dorm girls returned with report cards showing red F’s and D’s, he made them form a line and choose a switch, beating their cupped hands one by one

until it made red streaks across their palms. The girls cried so loud that *Alfaa-baa* came out.

“This is our culture,” Amadeus explained when *Alfaa-baa* tried to interfere. It had upset the missionary’s daughter, Soowun, who was home for the holidays.

But how could the missionaries know what was at stake, when they could afford to send their own daughter to a boarding school hundreds of miles away? The plane tickets alone must have cost a year’s tuition here. It was harder to be a woman in the Gambia. Having the misfortune of being born in this country with no way out, in Amadeus’ mind, it was imperative that the GNPM girls succeed at school. And he knew even the missionaries, who meant well, would never have sent a girl out to Ghana, Bible College or no.

“You’re not trying hard enough.” He scolded the girls in turn, “From tomorrow, you’re spending every afternoon doing homework under supervision.”

The boys’ laughter soon stopped when Amadeus brought up their own failings.

“What do you call this?” he said to Karamo, who had been wearing the same dirty school uniform for the past week. “Have some self-respect,” he said. “Next time I see you wearing these rags, I’ll have you sleeping in the small boys’ room with the other children who can’t wash their own clothes.”

The boys eventually stopped inviting him to their games, and their small gatherings became quiet when he approached. Though it stung, Amadeus never showed weakness, wore their silence proudly as a badge of respect.

The sky was a clear blue eye on the morning of his ordination, and Amadeus Colley steadied his nerves with a prayer. By the time Missionary Park ushered him to the front of the Good News Presbyterian Mission church, and placed a firm hand on his shoulder—blessing him, announcing him Pastor—Amadeus’ legs were quivering, his underarms damp. The church was full that morning, many former GNPM members in attendance as well as other missionaries from the area. A lost pigeon had fluttered in that morning, and trapped, now flew in wild circles by the ceiling.

When Amadeus stepped up to the pulpit, one finger hooked in his Bible, it was quiet enough to hear the pews creaking, paper fans fluttering, the front row breathing through their mouths.

“Life without Christ is a life with crisis,” Amadeus began, timid. “Don’t let your talent rot in the ground, my brothers and sisters. That is an insult to you maker.”

He had labored over this sermon for months, memorizing lines, practicing pauses, testing gestures, but now that he was here, his courage buckled.

A cough. A chair squeaked against the floor. The pigeon knocked into a window, cooed somewhere in the back.

“Consult your divine library,” Amadeus continued, lifting his Bible in the air. He forced his gaze to travel from one person to the next. “If at all you care about your family, your parents who are unbelievers, I am here to tell you, if you want to believe in Christ, the time is now.”

His words bounced around the large church space, and he wiped his brow, ordered the congregation to turn to the gospel of Matthew. The youngest GNPM boys sat

in the front row, and they craned their necks to see him. Amadeus propped open his Bible on the pulpit with a flat palm, and raised the other hand for emphasis.

“We are living in the end of days, my brothers and sisters. The second coming of Christ is at hand. It is no secret. The Bible tells us all the signs that will take place before the end comes. Rumors of war, famine, confusion. But are we paying attention?”

The congregation remained unmoving, and Amadeus couldn't tell if they were listening, or if they noticed him at all. The pigeon landed close to a young girl who whimpered softly. Amadeus' skin felt cool, like it didn't belong to him. In one swift motion, he ripped out a blank page from his Bible and began to draw a straight line across the page, a timeline.

“The First coming of Christ—this is Christmas. And here, the seven years of tribulation, the Battle of Armageddon, the Second Coming of Christ, the millennial kingdom, the thousand-year reign, and so on and so forth.”

He pointed at each mark intersecting the horizontal line.

“We are already here,” he cried, tapping a finger close to the tribulation years. “We must be vigilant.”

Missionary Park leaned in to his wife, whispered something in her ear. In the back, Sam and Karamo wouldn't meet his eyes. Amadeus saw the young boys in front copy the timeline into their own Bibles.

“How do I know? In Africa, we have the resources for success, a continent rich beyond measure. But Africa is exploited, by richer nations and by our own corrupt leaders. We should be the richest but we are poor, bankrupting ourselves, slow to

develop. So many uneducated and undereducated, and our best and brightest leave the continent. Meanwhile, we who are left behind sell our materials to Germany, England, Japan—only to buy it back for more money. This is the evil of our times.”

In the back, some of the older boys sucked their teeth. Wings flapped. A low rumble began, and the Pastor raised his voice.

“Another sign of the times: Just look at these American television shows, see how they’re putting it in our faces. American Idol, a show whose name speaks for itself, worshipping these ridiculous, gyrating people. These are the false gods of the West. In fact, do you know what Jesus said as he was going to Calvary? He didn’t think of his own suffering. No, he said, ‘Cry for yourself and your children.’ ‘Cry for yourself and your children.’ Two thousand years on, we have more to mourn.”

The Pastor saw a few heads nod here and there, and he gained confidence. The words began to spill with ease, power:

“It’s true, the signs are all there. I watched one documentary about this wicked music industry. Here you have these famous people in America, who already signed their souls to the devil. There’s Beyoncé, Jay-Z, Queen Latifah, all dead, all now children of Baphomet, the devil. Watch their music videos, and you’ll see Satanic symbols everywhere. See how Beyoncé now calls herself Sasha Fierce. The devil is flaunting his work. Just look at her costumes—robots, motorcycles, machines. Why? Because Beyoncé is already dead. She sold her soul for worldly riches, and now all that remains is a witch, the reincarnation of Baphomet himself. And did you know Michael Jackson’s famous family sacrificed him to make millions of dollars? Look what happened. You will be rich

for a while, but the way of Satan only leads only to death. The West might worship their King of Pop, but we worship the King of Kings, Amen?”

A flurry of Amens returned from the congregation, and Pastor Colley’s heart raced.

“We live in an upside-down world, a generation of opposites,” he thundered, alive now. He brought himself up to his toes and down again. “Brothers and sisters, the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom, but where is our fear? Romans 16:19 tells us to be excellent for what is good and innocent of evil, but we know in our generation we are excellent for what is evil and innocent for what is good. We are so busy seeking happiness in material things. We hit the roof, we come down.”

The sweat poured down Pastor Colley’s face, but he didn’t wipe it away.

“Did you know there are Gambians in England who are living with more poverty than people here? They travel to England and spend all their money on drinking, smoking these drugs, prostituting. Foolish, carnal people.”

Pastor Colley’s breaths came out shorter. His chest pounded. The room spun, filled with light.

“The Bible never promises we won’t suffer, my brothers and sisters. It promises only that we won’t be tempted beyond what we can bear. There will be trouble. I guarantee it. But in all cases, we must overcome evil with good. Christianity is not a religion. It is a way to God. Now, I have a hope that one day our parents who are unbelievers, our brothers and sisters and cousins, they will all come to know the Lord. We should not compete with each other but we should help complete each other.”

The church was silent. No one moved. Pastor Amadeus Colley stopped, both hands clutching the pulpit. He breathed in and out and in again. He looked up to the ceiling, high, cobwebbed, stained from rain. The bird had disappeared. His eyes wandered back to the congregation, leisurely now, half-expecting applause.

“If you forsake Christ, you will embrace crisis. But as for you and I, may God guide and protect us. We live for him. This is the message the Lord has for us today.”

THE BITIKO

1. Old Tapha's *bitiko* is like every other corner shop in Darsilami, an eight-by-six coop of shelved walls and chicken wire, goods stacked all around: sweet mints, dried juice, boiled eggs, soap cubes, fresh bread, tea leaves, and the coldest Cokes in the village, guaranteed.
2. For five dalasis, he will pull a glass bottle from the meat freezer. Always, a slight pane of bloody ice left on the curves.
3. No, he did not always live alone in the small room behind his *bitiko*, which sits under a mango tree that does not belong to him.
4. In the rainy season, when business slows, ripe mangos drop on the roof, startling his musings. Sometimes, a child falls instead. There's a flame tree outside his window in the shape of a praying nun. Flames do not fall from this tree.
5. Tapha takes inventory every night on plain paper, though in July when supply trucks spin furrows into the unpaved roads, there's little to do but draw new lines and wait.
6. A good vendor never eats his own wares, but a good man always makes exceptions. During thunderstorms, he sips warm Coke in front of his window, bare ankles crossed on the ledge. Soon, the stormy night lights up the sky, the tree, his face.
7. First kisses clutter the sandcastle, a church drowned in the dunes. On clear nights, teens wade to the top with stolen drinks, watch closely as red taillights—the merchants, the visitors, the locals, the lost—are doused by night. For luck, they shatter empty bottles on the rocks below.
8. It's a long way to Darsilami by foot, bike, or *gelle-gelle*, and the travelers are always thirsty.

ELSE THE NINKI-NANKA

“You listen to me *cheppe*—you listen to me *faht-faht!*—or the Ninki-nanka will come and get you, oh yes he will,” said Nanna. The swampy hammock of flesh beneath her arm jounced back and forth as she wagged her two fingers at Nyima. “Go wash off that filthy river smell. Of all the days you could have chosen to be your normal fool self, dear girl, why today?”

Washed and dry, Nyima joined the girls by the kitchen. Her escape to the river had been short-lived, a brief reprieve from the excitement at home. The river’s wide brown waters bordered the village on one side, and they made her feel safe, like nothing bad could cross over. Now, seeing the compound so clean and all her younger sisters hard at work, she felt another surge of nausea. It hadn’t helped that Nanna had been bustling around since dawn, reminding Nyima that the most important day of her life had finally arrived.

Nyima sat next to Nanna on the kitchen stoop and began peeling potatoes. Nanna was the jokester, and Nyima, like all the children of Jarjukunda, grew up bending their ears to her stories, her songs. It was their best time, their very favorite, when all the girls of the compound gathered together for feasts such as this one, peeling onions, baking mangoes, pounding millet, toasting groundnuts, and Nanna would pull up a stool on the porch and say, Have you heard the tale of Hyena and Rabbit? Or, What of Ousman and the Crocodile? If the young girls nodded, Nanna would feign disappointment, sigh

deeply, then slap her forehead with a start: But surely you haven't heard about that creature of the darkness—the demon's pet!—that terrible beast of the swamps...

The children's eyes always widened. Nyima watched now as the small girls fought for the seat closest to Nanna, squabbling in hushed voices lest they miss a single word.

"My little ones, these are not safe parts, not for the black-hearted, the stone-headed," Nanna began, chewing a stained bottom lip. "Small children are his tastiest snack"—Nanna chomped her mango loudly, licked her lips with a wet white tongue—"and their flesh gets sweeter the naughtier they are. You want to know what's on the other side of those mangroves?"

"Snakes?"

"Oh yes," Nanna said. "But more."

"Monitor lizards?"

"Ah of course. But think bigger."

"Crocs?"

"Even bigger."

And with that, Nanna crooned the Ninki-nanka's tale.

Twelve years old and the oldest child of the Jarju household, Nyima was far too old to believe in Nanna's stories. Even so, she always did what Nanna asked—cook dinners, wash clothes, bathe her sisters—and she never swam after sunset, never ventured beyond the line of mangroves. Nyima was old enough to know there were many things she would never understand and things you just didn't do: you didn't sweep the house

after dark; you didn't throw out the trash at night; you didn't sit on top of an abandoned anthill; you didn't tempt the spirits because they were often bored, always fickle. Still, in the afternoons when it was too hot to work in the rice fields, Nyima slipped away to the river. Cradled by the sting of the sun on her chest and the cool of the water on her back, Nyima sometimes thought she could hear music in the water or see something lurking beneath the surface, shaking the weeds, the glint of sad, yellow eyes peering out of the murk. At these times, Nanna's voice would seep back to Nyima: Mark my words, Nanna added to every order, or the Ninki-nanka will come for you.

“They say its breath is like rotting fruit, teeth as sharp as knives, bigger than this even!” cried Nanna. She paused mid-slice to let the kitchen-knife sparkle, bouncing the sun's rays dazzlingly into the children's eyes until they squealed and turned away.

“If you dare to look beyond his rows and rows of sharp teeth, the cave of his mouth is red as hot coals.” She spat on the coals beneath the groundnuts, and it sizzled and spurted. The children shivered deliciously.

Nanna started scaling the caaloo, gripping the fish by the tail. Milky flakes erupted around her wrists. The children followed the movements of the knife: up and down, up and down. Nanna continued, “Upright, it is bigger than four full-grown men, stronger than any jinn or giant. Its body is covered entirely in scales as big as my hand”—she lifted her palm near Nyima's face, slick with fish entrails—“which cannot be penetrated by axe or dented by hammer! In its belly, it stores fires of evil, and with it senses the rebellion and the pride in people's hearts. It knows all the thoughts in their rotten minds, and it is always, always hungry for them.”

Nanna's voice was almost a whisper, and the children leaned closer to hear.

“And I haven't even told you about his eyes. They are not pure and white like yours and mine, but dirty, yellow, like disease. One glance into those ochre wells will trap you—*faht faht!*—yes, in his eyes you will see the most beautiful thing you could dream. Oh, it might not be real, but you will see it, clear as noon day, in those big gleaming disks. Once it lays those devil eyes on you, you are finished! They will draw you so you come—one step, two step, three—closer and closer until...”

When Nanna was feeling young, she would leap up, arms spread wide, and chase the children around the compound, bellowing until she grew hoarse. Nyima felt all the girls tense and she stifled a giggle. One sister dropped an onion in preparation. Another gathered up her skirt in her hands. Then Nanna took another deep breath, peered out the corner of her eye and chuckled, then continued:

“Oh yes, oh yes, in the village over between Tambasanasang and Madina Koto, there lived a young girl, around Nyima's age here—a young woman—who married a wise and kind man who loved her with a pure love.”

Nyima's heart beat a little quicker at the sound of her name.

“What was her name?” one young girl interrupted.

“Name? Alright. Let's say Fatou. The girl's name was Fatou. Satisfied?”

The girls nodded.

“So this good man gave Fatou everything-everything: rice for every meal, a roof which never leaked, even nice clothes with the new smell for the village parties. Everyone in the village spoke of her beauty, her fortune in coming in to this household.

Hearing all this praise, the girl allowed her pride to grow, large and fast as weeds in the rainy season. She boasted often, flaunted her perfumes, her new jewelry. She became lazy, too, never wanting to bend her back or dirty her hands. She spent her days wasting time, swimming in the river, never serious.

The children shook their heads gravely and Nyima smiled, feeling guilty.

“She thought herself better than her own family, forgetting even her own mother who raised her, and she never came to visit, always holding tight to her new money. Even more, the girl started to turn her nose up at her elders—can you believe?—snub her mother-in-law. ‘Help me sweep this house,’ said the nanna, and the girl responded, ‘Why don’t you do it?’; ‘Go to the market for more flour,’ the nanna said, and the girl replied, ‘Do you not have two legs?’”

The children gasped.

“The nanna—because you cannot fool a nanna!—she knew something was not correct, not good. Something not good inside this girl’s heart but also inside her belly, you understand?” Nanna moved her clean hand to her stomach, and Nyima blushed.

“One thing you know, years pass, no children. Meanwhile, the girl *chob* all her husband’s money, asking him for this thing and begging him for that thing, never satisfied, always complaining, complaining.” Nanna dusted her hands loudly. “Foolish girl. Even when the nanna begged, the man—her son!—would not take another wife. You see how now even the man is not heeding his elder’s commands?”

Nanna tittered and the girls joined in, all their little heads shaking to and fro.

“One night finally, something came knocking on the woman’s door. Kohng-kohng,” said Nanna, rapping her knuckles against her wooden stool. “Kohng-kohng.”

The girl pounding millet stopped, leaned on her wooden pestle.

“Kohng-kohng,” but louder this time.

The children held their breath, waited for Nanna to rise. Nyima could feel the tension, tight as a fist. Finally, a tremulous voice asked, “Who is it?”

“And do you know who it was?” Nanna stood, stretched her back in slow turns, then tucked in the loose ends of the skirt. She tossed Nyima another potato to peel. The thought that all of their lives could change in just a few short hours halted the air in Nyima’s lungs and her chest felt thick with it.

“The Ninki-nanka?” ventured one small, wide-eyed child.

The children’s faces flushed, bright, the smell of cooking food lifting all their spirits.

“No,” Nanna said nonchalantly, “it was the husband.”

The children let out a collective breath. The girl at the mortar and pestle giggled in relief.

“But she refused to let him inside that night,” Nanna added, “and the next time she was swimming in the river by moonlight, the Ninki-nanka found her. All teeth and scales and fire, the Ninki-nanka dragged her past the mangroves, into the deep water, and nobody ever saw her again. Not one body. The only thing remaining was her *tikko*, found there on the banks where the men today tether the boats. It was her years of overconfidence and disobedience which made her irresistible to the monster, you see?”

And that, my darlings, is a true story of the Ninki-nanka. The Ninki-nanka does not forget, deh! Never. So you be a good girl, now. Look at these grey hairs. Place your fingers on these lines here on my forehead. Would your nanna lie to you?"

"He's a very handsome man," Nanna said, "for his age. You are a very lucky young woman." Nanna poured a pebble-sized portion of vegetable oil into the center of her palm, massaged it into each hand, and smoothed it onto Nyima's bare shoulders. Nyima fidgeted cross-legged on the mat, drawing thin crescents into the orange dirt. She stroked her new *bayoo*, tracing the fabric's whirling patterns. It smelled waxy and dank, like a secret, like the things she imagined lay on the other side of the river, or the things she felt prowling the deep swamps.

"You remember him, don't you?" Nanna repeated.

"Yes," Nyima lied. She took giddy breaths as Nanna finished, holding both arms above her shoulders while her younger sisters fanned her on either side. The rest squatted on the floor, watching Nyima's steady transformation: the gold eyeliner, the rouge, the penciled eyebrows.

Nyima willed herself to stop sweating. After all this time, now how would it look for her to enter the room, wearing the clothes that he'd bought, all reeking and sweaty, like some *chaat* after playing tag? And it had not been the first gift she'd received. Just last month he'd surprised her with a slice of cake and a whole apple, perfectly green without a mark or a bruise.

Nyima has a boyfriend! her sisters had squealed. Boyfriend! Boyfriend!

She blushed with the memory. Today, they would finally meet. She still hadn't dared say his name aloud since Nanna had told her the news, elated: You see how the gods are pleased with the Jarjus, ah? Tell me if I'm wrong. Tell me! Nanna was bursting with this secret, one she could not tell her friends until the formal arrangements had been made. If everything went according to plan tonight, Nyima would be his, and her belly fluttered again with the thought of that sweet belonging.

Nyima knew how much this meant to Nanna. She had watched Nanna slip away to the edge of the village, to the sacred baobabs where she jammed her scrawled prayers into the tree's hollow knots. Nanna had once told her that these trees held the bones of their ancestors, that even the Ninki-nanka protected these trees from season to season. But sometimes those swollen trunks reminded Nyima of the other girls like her, with their puffy ankles and puffy eyes, their taut round bellies fortunate enough to have come the respectable way. Now when the image of those sad girls entered her thoughts, Nyima found herself saying his name over and over in her mind. Each time it grew to fill the gaps of her doubts, the tart crunch of the apple blooming into something more intimate and hers alone, unlike the dolls, the clothes, the rice, the shoes she shared with all her siblings. She felt her chest expand with each repetition—Nuha, Nuha, Nuha—each time, trying to restore that single memory of him, a vague image from when she was a small girl peering up into palm-palm trees where Nuha harvested his wine. The very best *senna* you will ever taste, Nuha boasted, *billai-wollai-tallai!*

With every recollection, his voice grew clearer, arms stronger, the colors brighter, etched crisply into her memory: There he was, high above the ground, securing plastic

bottles in thick clusters where the branches converged and knotted. The palm wine collected slowly, the pale sap dribbling, fermented and sweetened, into the containers. Nyima could see Nuha's trousers mushroomed below a thick fibrous strap around the waist, and him, leaning away from the swaying tree and into the tautness of that line, digging the flat of his feet into the trunk as he bounced upwards. All below was warm wind and fine sand.

It will be years before you must be a real woman, Nanna had assured Nyima, Nothing will really change. But for all this excitement, Nyima couldn't believe that was true. She already felt different, older.

Nyima had watched her sisters wash the last of the good rice this morning, watched her father bend his greying head over a roof that always needed mending, and she felt herself becoming a woman, finally, able to do what her father and even Nanna could not do. The gods had blessed Nuha, now a successful businessman in the palm wine industry across the river, and his childless wife became loud and fat on the money he sent back over the years. She bore her weight like a silk gown, sitting in the cool of her fancy home, while the rest of the women worked in the fields, transplanting rice. The villagers whispered about Nuha's homecoming—the big man's coming back to his roots!—and they wondered where the next blessings would fall.

Nyima's finger paused on a line of embossed gold on her *bayoo*, felt the squeaky rub against her skin.

Nuha: the name grew, big enough to possess a Jola woman's secrets.

“Tell me again,” said Nanna, and startled Nyima's reveries.

“Take them dinner and smile.”

“Show me.”

Nyima bared her teeth into a goofy smile, making her sisters giggle.

“The Ninki-nanka!” Nanna cried, and Nyima dodged a gentle swipe at her head, laughing.

“Nanna, I know, I know. I swear, I know.”

“Ah-ah.”

Nyima sighed, gathered her hands in her lap and gave Nanna a soft full-lipped smile, not too wide to look like a child and not too small to look sad. She recited: “Take them dinner and smile. Put the nice fish closest to him, put the bowl— gently place the bowl—in the center, so it doesn’t scrape.” Nanna nodded with approval.

“And you will go where?” Nanna crossed her arms across her chest.

“I will stand like a lady, in the corner, while Father talks, and I will— not.”

Nyima’s pause incited Nanna’s yelps again. She enjoyed seeing Nanna like this, so excited and alive, even though now Nanna pinched her lips closed with her fingertips.

“This big mouth! Oh help me, my Nyima likes to chatter-chatter-chatter. Let me tell you,” Nanna whispered to the small girls, letting go of Nyima’s lips and wiping the rouge into her palms, “the Ninki-nanka will remember this.”

Behind Nanna’s back, Nyima hunched over with her arms stretched out, curling her manicured nails into claws. She stalked back and forth making Ninki-nanka impressions. The girls smothered their laughter.

Nanna chased Nyima down to reapply the red to her lips and then instructed, “Don’t pound your heels when you walk. Bend those knees properly, so you don’t scuff the new shoes. You’ll have to wear those again soon, at a wedding, god willing.”

“I’ve never been to a wedding,” one of the girls murmured.

Nanna let out an enormous gasp, lifted an oiled hand to her chest, then lowered it onto the young girl’s small head. “Ah, my darlings, let me tell you about weddings! Us Jola women are known for more than our hard-working natures in the fields and in the home,”—she winked at Nyima—“we can dance, deh! In this wedding, there will be dancing, dancing. And music all night, all week!”

Nyima tried to keep her head still for the powder. “For my wedding,” she declared, “you’ll all have to get new outfits, every one of you, or you will be denied entrance!”

The girls cheered.

“We will slaughter these cows,” added Nanna. “More food, more meat than you can even bear to look at. It will be so rich the oil will drip from your mouths and hands. You will eat until you can’t move, until the music starts again, and then you’ll be dancing dancing dancing. Ha! You will never forget this day, I promise you!”

At this, Nyima leapt up and started dancing, arms out wide, kicking up dust in a circle. Her sisters clapped and whistled, laughing, and Nyima felt a warmth grow in her gut, like maybe this was what it meant to be a woman, like maybe this was why she was here all along.

Nanna chased Nyima down, dusted the seat of her skirt where the fine orange dirt still remained, then sent the small girls to go fetch the *tikko*, a beautiful scarf made of lace and sequins. It left the two of them in humid silence. Nanna said nothing, adjusted the zipper before she finally stepped back in satisfaction.

“Well, look at that,” she murmured. “How pretty.”

Nanna touched Nyima’s face, ran her fingers along its surface like she was trying to take stock of the flawless youth hidden beneath the powders and pigments. Nyima followed her fingers from under stiff eyelids, thought she felt Nanna’s fingers waver on her cheek. Without warning, Nanna pulled her in with both arms, pressing her tight against the wide weight of her breasts.

“You understand, Nyima, why this is so important for your father and your sisters. And for me. You understand, yes?”

It was unsettling to feel the air in this tiny room enter and exit, brush the top of her head. Nyima burrowed deeper into Nanna, gripping the tired skin around her waist, where once Nanna had carried her father, who was probably already seated just on the other side of the compound with Nuha, their future.

Nyima pulled away, and Nanna let her. The old woman paused for a quiet moment, stilled her hands to place one large red hibiscus behind Nyima’s ear. Nyima felt the fear returning, the image of those young girls so miserably filled with new life. She fingered the soft red petals.

“You don’t think this is too much, Nanna?”

“No. Oh, hush, child. Here, hold my hand. No, stop, beloved, my baby, my love. Here, wipe here. Yes. There. Shh. Shhh.”

Even though it wasn't yet dark and the weather was good, the two men sat indoors, meeting by the light of a kerosene lamp.

“Our Nyima here is a fantastic cook,” her father, Ebou, murmured. “She takes care of us, don't you?”

Nyima opened her mouth to speak, but then closed it, nodded, smiled instead. Her stomach rumbled as she greeted Nuha—light pressure from the fingers with a gentle curtsy, just like she'd practiced. Nuha's hands were soft, like lips.

Standing quietly in the corner, she watched the food disappear. The two men populated the room with news from across the river.

“You know things are different over there,” Nuha told Ebou. “Hard, but not in the same ways as here. If you'd gone with me, *ndookeh*, you would know what I meant.” A slight lisp frayed the corners of his words. He took a deep gulp of water and shifted. Nyima saw the chair shiver and buckle against his plump thighs.

“Here, we are just managing. Life ambles on like it ever does,” Ebou said. “The rains, well, I don't have to tell you. You can see for yourself.” Ebou spread out his empty hands to the plain room around him.

“I must admit, you're not looking so well as I remember. I just thought you'd taken on another wife!” Nuha wheezed with laughter, scooped another fistful of rice.

The jokes, the nervous chuckles, rose like flies; they tickled Nyima's skin, hummed in her chest. With her head lowered, she could see Nuha's hand squeeze the rice, the oil spurting between his fingers. Her own shallow breath cooled the bare skin above her breasts. Nyima observed Nuha in secret, sampling in glances: his belly, his bald patch, the white wires of his beard.

In all her stories, Nanna had never once mentioned his eyes. Already Nyima felt her own punctured daydreams deflating, shriveling back into the hazy outlines of second-hand memories and hearsay. She concentrated instead on the grains of rice stuck on the sides of the aluminum bowl, on the image of her sleeping sisters balled up together in their small bedroom, on Nanna's dramatic Ninki-nanka story from that afternoon. Meanwhile, Nuha's one good eye veered and swerved, pausing on the small wooden table, the covered baskets, then back to the bowl and to her father. She tried to ignore the other eye, the stretched black pupil fixed somewhere below her chin. Standing mutely in the corner, she only emerged from the shadow to fill Nuha's water in their best plastic cup, the purple one her father normally used.

Nuha ate quickly, thumbing loose pieces of potato and fish. His nails clicked against the aluminum bowl, the shared meal emptying and creeping into Ebou's portion. Nyima noticed her father barely touched the food.

"Your daughter is everything you promised," Nuha said after his last bite, his roaming eye sinking in on Nyima. "You don't disappoint, my old friend."

Ebou parried, "Oh, I might be old, but not so old as you, ah?"

"How old are you?" Nuha asked Nyima. Her stomach dropped.

“She’s fifteen,” her father said.

“How old are you, girl?”

“Fifteen,” Nyima echoed, suddenly afraid.

“Oh?” said Nuha and gestured for the water. “You might not remember me, but I remember you from since you were a very small girl.”

Nyima poured slowly over the empty bowl so he could rinse his hand. The rice slid easily off his skin, sinking to the bottom while the oil floated to the surface. Nuha flicked the leftover droplets into the bowl.

Nuha glanced at Nyima then back at Ebou, and continued, “I heard about one woman who got married at Bonto just last year when I was in the Kembujeh area. A Karoninka. But her own people—chaaa—they charged the poor bastards two thousand!”

Ebou raised an eyebrow.

Nuha turned his entire head to look at Nyima, who had retreated to her place in the corner. “They brought the lady in, all fancy-bah, right up to the edge of the husband’s compound and then say, ‘Two-thousand!’”

Nyima tried not to meet his eyes. Instead, she imagined the bride, sparkling, jeweled, surrounded by uncles and sisters and cousins and friends, playfully bargaining at the threshold. They danced back and forth, singing, bantering, until the money came, and the woman crossed the gate and the celebrations began.

Nuha’s lisp thickened as his voice rose. “And those people, the husband’s family, they have to beg until they reduce. They have to tell them that ‘Let it be thousand-five-hundred.’ Thousand-five-hundred. The woman, the wife now, she finally enters, and the

man finds out that the woman's family trick him, that in fact, not only does she have next to no dowry, but she is nineteen years old and virtually barren. Can you believe? Pure robbery."

"Yes," murmured Ebou, "terrible."

But Nuha was not done. "In fact, before I came up river, I even heard that the woman had twins. Both dead in the womb, of course. Or all three in the end, I suppose."

This time Ebou was silent.

"Why do you look so grave?" Nuha cackled, pounding Ebou's shoulder with a flat open hand. "Tonight we just celebrate to our long friendship, to shared promises. I am a man of tradition in some things. You can trust me for that one. The life of the city-slicker is not for me."

"So you are thinking of honoring our agreement then," faltered Ebou. Nyima watched the sweat blister on her father's upper lip. A chill skittered across her skin. She tried to return to the image of the spilled wedding wine, the dust rising to kiss moving ankles and toes, the loud music seeping late into the night, but the images were slipping away, away.

Nuha studied Nyima. "Remember that I am here at your request," he said to Ebou, "and I did make my terms quite clear."

"I was hoping now that you're here, you might reconsider some points. Nyima is still quite young," Ebou said. Nyima's ears prickled at the sound of her name, a strangely tender sound from her father's mouth. She looked at Ebou, leaning forward, and Nuha, leaning back.

“Ah, but not so young as you seem to remember,” Nuha commented slyly. “I’d say this child is actually barely above ten if my memory is still any good.”

“She’s mature for her age,” Ebou recovered, speaking faster, “And you can see how blessed I am with my large, beautiful family. We have good blood, Nuha. We are good people.”

“Well, you know, the Badjies have graciously invited me for supper tomorrow.”

“Please,” her father pleaded in a low voice. “I know this isn’t what you expected.” He cleared his throat. Nyima was sweating through her powder. She had never heard her father’s voice like this, small and birdlike. She tried to block out the men’s voices which misted and clotted in the air, entered her nose, her throat, her lungs, squeezed her chest.

Nuha shook his head slowly. “I don’t intend to stay here very long. And what other guarantee can you give me? I’m afraid your word doesn’t feed a man. If this skinny child is any indication, it seems barely to feed your own family.”

“Well, how about four years? We can do the ceremony, the blessing, the party, everything else but that. Even just three years’ wait is all I ask. She is skilled in many things, and not difficult to care for.” Nyima watched her father place his middle three fingers tentatively against a palm, cracked like heels from years of labor. He added, louder, “I swear to you, until that time, you won’t regret your decision. She is a hard worker, a worthy girl.”

Nyima’s skin tingled where Nuha’s eye rested, ambling ever so slowly across her body, the crook of her patterned top, the small flare of her skirt.

“Oh, I am in no need of new workers, my old friend. And I believe the arrangement as you intend to have it only benefits you, wouldn’t you say?”

“We had agreed,” Ebou shouted. He stood abruptly, pushing back his chair. Nyima had never seen her father so angry. Nuha remained seated.

“Now, now, *ndookeh*,” said Nuha, his eye exploring the length and breadth of the barren room, “it seems the only person who has been dishonest is you.” He chuckled. “Think of this as a small gesture of faith.”

That final outburst seemed to take everything out of Ebou, and he sank slowly into his seat. He said, “Nyima, go fetch more water.”

Startled, but thankful for an excuse to leave, Nyima left the room with only a brief glance at her father’s slumped shoulders. As soon as the door shut behind her, the air entered her lungs, so clean, and she almost laughed aloud. The straps of her shoes pinched her feet, so she tossed them aside and skipped to the clay jars of clean water. She gulped the water, some spilling on her neck, and she rubbed it in to cool herself down. With Nanna and the girls nowhere in sight, the Jarju compound was very still, and the shapes of baobabs beyond their wire fences faded into the darkness, swaddling her protectively.

Nyima scooped water into the purple cup, wondering how much time had passed since she’d entered the room. Two, maybe three hours? Judging from her father’s reaction, things were not going well. The door to the room was slightly ajar, but she was too far away to hear anything. Unwilling to return just yet, she grabbed the bucket and headed to the well. The jars didn’t really need filling—one of the small girls would do it

in the morning—but she wanted to stay out just a bit longer. The swamps passed her on the left, the smell of stagnant water and rot growing stronger, strange lights floating in the distance, the night air full of flapping, chirrups, familiar gurgling. She moved quickly, holding the bucket tightly to her side. The moon drenched the world in grey, casting shadows where she had not noticed them before: dried thorns, sharp rocks, gaping pits.

At the well, she yanked the rope with both hands, finding comfort in the pull of that water, the splash of the drops returning below. Nyima worked methodically, emptying the rubber pouch into the bucket again and again. Her muscles burned and she relished the warmth it spread to her body. Suddenly tired, she slouched against the cement walls of the well, sliding to a sitting position. The weight of the full bucket against her stomach steadied her.

She did not understand what had happened in that room, but she comforted herself with Nanna's words: There would be dancing and feasting, laughing, a whole new life for her family. And as for her, nothing would really change. Not that Nanna hadn't prepared her. It was possible that if things did not go well, she would have to leave with Nuha, to live across the river and far away from her family. Nanna had helped her pack for the unlikely occasion, though Nyima had hardly anything to take. They had settled on a small sack of clean clothes, with Nanna's handheld mirror and a juju for protection against evil spirits. There was nothing to fear.

But Nyima remembered the other girls, the ones like her who had simply grown quieter, heavier, sinking into a deepening solitude, and then who had simply disappeared. "It won't be like that," she said out loud into the night. Her father and Nanna would not

allow it. She was sure of it. And with that, she returned, her steps still slow, but measured.

Nyima reentered the room with the cup of water to find Nuha sitting alone, picking his teeth. His shirt lay folded on his lap.

“Oh,” Nyima said and took a step back, unsure. She averted her eyes. Breaking Nanna’s rule for the second time that night, she blurted, “Where’s Ebou?”

“Do you see these scars?” he said. “They are from when I fell. My profession used to be very dangerous, you know.” The chair creaked as he stood up and carefully placed the green shirt on the seat. The lamp threw long shadows on the ground.

Nyima froze, skin prickling. She repeated, “Where’s Ebou?”

Nuha seemed not to hear. He sauntered towards her, stopping close enough that even with lowered eyes, she could see his taut brown navel. Nyima gripped the cup tighter. Perhaps her father had gone to look for her and would be back soon. He may have just stepped out to relieve himself or to stretch his legs. Or maybe while she had stepped out, he had settled the negotiations successfully and was now on his way to tell Nanna and the girls the good news. Oh, they would be so happy. These thoughts calmed her. She expected her father to come through the door at any moment.

The minutes passed and the door remained closed, the only sounds Nuha’s soft voice.

“Come on, now. Look,” said Nuha. He raised his left arm, revealing a jagged line, bubbled flesh stretching from beneath a hairless armpit to the base of his skull.

Nyima finally raised her eyes to see the scars, and she tried to smile, just like Nanna had taught her. The scars were glossy, raised and pitted.

Nuha nodded with approval. “And here,” he continued, “is where I hit my head on a stone.” His index finger tapped the small bald patch, where the scar tissue shone like a buffed nail. Nyima wished he would put his shirt back on.

She heard the bowl scrape as Nuha pushed it aside. He stepped once, twice in her direction, now a mere arm’s length away. Nyima’s head throbbed, heavy. The simmering excitement of the household all day, the careful preparations, Nanna’s playful stories, the smell of the food, it felt like a dream. Could a day be so long? Try as she might, she couldn’t forget the image of the tired lines on her father’s face, the slumped figure she had left behind just a little earlier. What had happened while she was gone became less important than that she knew her father would not come for her.

Nuha lifted his hand to remove the flower from behind Nyima’s ear.

“A beautiful flower for a beautiful wife,” he said. His smile gleamed yellow.

She still held the silly cup in her hand, and the water spilled over a little. The water mocked her. It was a betrayal, and she wanted to throw it.

“Touch it,” said Nuha, bending over so her eyes were level with the polished scar.

She stared down at her two feet, wondered at how they could look so far away. Examining the muddy toes and the chipped blue nail polish peeking beneath—another gift Nuha had bestowed on her along the way—she suddenly realized that she had forgotten her shoes. She thought she might cry.

Pale stretchmarks streaked Nuha's waist, his hips, and he tugged at the ties on his clean white trousers. He folded them neatly in half and draped it over the chair. He stood there in his boxers for a while, considering her reaction.

"I forgot my shoes," Nyima said, and she turned around to reach for the door. Nuha grabbed her by the arm.

"You don't need shoes," he said. The vague stink of the caaloo from dinner laced the words as he bent towards her, the tip of his tongue pink and scabby. Nanna never mentioned he would smell like palm oil, that his breath on her head, her shoulder would be hot and sticky. What else had Nanna not told her? Her throat tightened, and her heartbeat felt precious, buried deep like treasure.

Nyima dropped the cup as she pulled away, but his grip tightened and she yelped. Only then did she begin crying, and she hated the tears for falling, for making her look like a child. Nuha laughed, let go of her arm. For the first time, she thought about how she had never even seen her father naked, had never known that a body could look so ridiculous, lumpy and folded like a newborn. Every inch of Nuha's skin was mud, plaster that had dried too fast.

Her eyes flitted to the aluminum bowl on the floor, raked clean and puddled with dirty water. All their hard work that morning, all the food that they could have saved for another week, another month. Tomorrow, the Badjies would be kindly turned down. Tomorrow, Nanna would give thanks at the baobab's feet, then boast to all her village friends. The party would begin, and as promised, her sisters would dance. But what about her? The blood surged back to her chest, away from her skin. She began to shiver. She

did not want to be here with this strange man, but she no longer belonged here with Ebou or Nanna or any of her younger sisters. Who would take care of her now? The bowl glowed in the lamplight, dotted and streaked with the orange oil stains. There's nothing left, she realized, not for her sisters, her father, Nanna, not even for her. The decision had been made, and she had never felt so alone.

Filled with a despair that swelled into rage, she screamed. Nuha grabbed her and clamped his hand against her mouth, but she kicked, bit, scratched, twisting free and slipping under his arm. He staggered back a half-step, more surprised than hurt. Tripping over the chair, and knocking over a basket, she landed on her side, tearing her skirt. The lamp shattered on the floor. The room was black, except for a silver thread of light coming through the doorframe. She could hear Nuha breathing deeply, crashing into things. Fumbling around in the darkness, she felt the sharp broken glass cutting into her palms, and then cool, smooth metal. Grabbing the bowl with both hands, she hurled it as hard as she could in the direction of the noise. It connected with a clank, and Nuha bellowed this time, cursing. The bowl bounced and clattered, turning lazily on the floor. Before it could settle, Nyima burst out the door, stumbling once over Nuha's bicycle. She kicked it aside. The moon was high. She ran.

Nyima cut through the compound and spilled into the night. The wind whipped her skirt, making her stumble, so she hiked it over her knees, her legs pushing harder, stretching farther. She stayed off the paths, avoiding the well, the other compounds, running through tall dry grass on empty fields. She knew only that she was moving away.

The air stung her cold, wet eyes, whistled over every patch of skin, roared in and out of her belly and lungs, seemed to fly straight through her.

The ground thumped against her knees, and then felt soft, wet. Somehow, she had made it to the river. Her toes stuck in the mud and her knees buckled. Falling but pulling herself up, she splashed, wading into the waters. Soon the water became too deep, deeper than she had ever dared swim before, and she bounced off the river's bottom to steal gulps of air, neck stretching against the current. The silt tugged her small body, pulled her ankles, and she paddled and splashed with arms and legs, thinking she must keep breathing, must keep moving. The river filled her mouth, and it tasted ancient.

On the far side of the river, she reached the tangle of mangroves, and she gripped the slimy roots with both hands, securing herself for a clean breath. Blackened oysters crowded the waterline, marking the rise and fall of the tides, and they scratched her palms as she moved from root to root. Every few feet she swept one free arm around the water, clearing her path of floating sticks, rotting leaves. She thought something brushed her leg, and she stifled a scream.

Would Nuha follow, or would he simply slink back home to his wife, pretending that nothing had come of it? Would he stalk into her father's quarters, screaming that the deal was off? Would they just wait for her to return? After all, she had never ventured far from home: Where else could she go? She imagined her father's shock when Nuha appeared, his clothes ruined. Her father wouldn't believe it at first. He would be so ashamed. Maybe the two men would look for her together. No doubt, if they asked, Nanna would know exactly where she was. Oh, Nanna. All those hours practicing and

preparing, all her wasted prayers. She cried softly. Nuha may have lost some time getting dressed but he was faster and stronger, and he couldn't be far behind.

As her breathing returned to normal, her surroundings came into focus, and she could feel her limbs again, all her senses heightened. The river smelled terrible, and her teeth chattered from the cold. Something scuttled in the marshes. Holding onto a root with one hand and rubbing herself warm with the other, she kept an eye out for snakes, strained her ears for sounds of pursuit. For a long time, she heard nothing. Her arms and shoulders ached from keeping afloat, and she wondered how long she could stay here. There was movement in the water, and she pulled herself up higher against the swells, careful to stay in the shadows. Finally, the sound she had been waiting for: a man's voice in the breeze. Shouting from the shore. Then, silence.

In that moment, she longed to hear the sounds of home—her sisters squabbling, Nanna yelling—but instead there was the odd bird call, the jostling tides, the waters clapping gently against roots, and the croaks of the swamp frogs. Keeping her head low, she comforted herself with Nanna's stories. She thought of Rabbit, Hyena, and Elephant, who turned themselves into men to join the annual tug of war contest at Sanjal; or of Ndiiti, the fastest bird, who overcame his friends' betrayal and won all the treasures at the end of the world; or of the time when the Ninki-nanka had saved the villagers just as they were losing hope, watching bad men cross the river to burn down their forests and steal their farms. The monster had devoured the entire army as it was about to disembark on the banks of this very river. Just as they were about to place their first step onto dry land,

the Ninki-nanka rose from the water—Whoosh!—Nanna had exclaimed jumping high in the air—and threw out fire from its mouth.

The man now pushed a pirogue into the water and floated slowly along the edges of the mangroves, deeper into the river. Nyima let go of the roots and swam away, trying to get as far away from the boat as she could. But after struggling against the current for a dozen feet, she found herself in front of an expanse of water. She paused, helpless, considering her choices. She was tired, and if she kept going, she would certainly drown. So, praying to all the gods Nanna had mentioned, she floated back to the mangroves, staying as quiet as possible. She noticed the smell again, which had only become worse in the leafy shadows, so strong she could almost taste it. She wrinkled her nose, looking around for the source, but she only saw the water shift and ripple in the distance, glittering with reds and purples and golds. Even in her exhaustion, this beauty surprised her.

The pirogue was getting closer, slicing through the waters, and now she could see it was just one man. The water gurgled, sputtered, swirling in places, breaking the flat surface. The hushed breeze calmed her a little. Nyima held her breath, afraid to break the silence. She only heard the splash of oars, the clatter of the wood as he paused to scan his surroundings. A pale mist was closing in, muting the colors and veiling her from the approaching boat. The river might hide her, but not for long. She remembered Nanna's story about Ousman and the Crocodile and wished she, too, could turn herself into a crocodile by a few simple lines of song. Her fear was subsiding, but it was replaced by the crushing sense that she was defeated. It would be a miracle if she wasn't found. And

she knew she couldn't stay here forever. Her stomach growled. She had to eat, maybe sleep a little. Then she believed she could be brave again.

Nyima noticed the waters warm around her. The stench worsened. Large bubbles popped a few feet away, and dead fish floated to the surface. Even breathing through her mouth, the smell stung her nose and made her gag. It filled the air and coated her tongue, mossy and bitter, and it reminded her of dried sweat, old meat, open sores that had been allowed to fester. The boat was so close she could make out Nuha's green shirt, which he had pulled over his nose and mouth. She heard him breathing heavily through the fabric. The bubbles began rising bigger and faster, and the smell became unbearable. The waters around the boat frothed, soupy. Nuha was almost close enough to touch, and the mist began to clear. Nyima braced for discovery.

All at once, a dark shape erupted from the waters. Birds rushed out of the mangroves into the night, clouds across the moonlit sky. Nuha struggled to keep the pirogue from capsizing, scooping out water and scrambling to get the oars back in place. The hulking form loomed just twenty feet away. Nyima pressed her hand to her mouth, afraid to make a sound or look away. The creature's neck arched like a spotted snake, glistening. A long angular face swayed above, and it pulled back its lips to show a neat comb of teeth, thin as needles. Nyima heard Nuha whimper. He rammed his oars against the mangroves, splashing back towards shore. Nyima did not know if he had seen her, but it no longer mattered. Staring at those yellow eyes, Nyima had no doubt what this was. Nanna had been right after all, and Nyima almost laughed then, imagining what Nanna

would do if she knew. Maybe Nuha would stumble back to the village and tell everyone what he saw.

Just as quickly as the creature emerged, it disappeared, splashing below the water. She saw its powerful shoulders, the ridges shaped like anvils lining the length of its spine, each bigger than the next. Its tail flicked up, spraying her with water, then slapped down again to create more ripples and a single, pure musical note. Covered in shimmering green scales, each movement produced a rambling melody, the musical rises and falls of the balafon's wooden notes. She felt paralyzed, waiting. If Nanna's stories were true, it was no surprise the monster had come for her. What her father had done, or what he hadn't had the strength to do, had betrayed her; but Nyima also began to realize the extent of her own betrayal, the disgrace she had brought on her family. Could they survive another dry season? And now how would her sisters ever marry? If the monster had approached her then, she would have let it take her.

Seeing the water ripple again, Nyima curled into a tight ball against the mangroves, the way she knew animals did when they didn't want to draw the attention of their predators. The monster resurfaced twenty feet away, snout first and a brighter shade of green. The scales on its chest rippled into new colors, pink, purple, then back again to green. The hues shuffled and stirred, an oily sheen that danced and teased. The creature cooed and gurgled, and although it stayed away, its eyes never left her.

The waiting, the waiting, she couldn't bear it. Nyima uncurled, peering up at its face. She tossed a broken shell at the creature. It returned her gaze, clucked, emitted a glob of fire the size of a grapefruit. It landed with a hiss somewhere to her right. Pulling

the sticky mass from the water, she threw it back with all her remaining strength. The creature stayed put. Nyima heard chimes as the creature shook its head back and forth. Smoke spouted from its ears. It occurred to her that the monster had not touched her yet, but it had not touched Nuha either. It was true, the creature was terrifying, but it also seemed inexplicably sad. Its eyes were really more like the color of ripe mangoes, perfectly orange. The Ninki-nanka was beautiful, Nyima thought, and she knew Nanna would have liked that. Thinking about Nanna made her sad, and she began to cry again. They stayed looking at each other for a while, both unmoving.

Then Nyima started paddling towards the creature. It gave her a strange courage, which grew as she neared. She kept her head above the water so as not to lose sight of the monster. Now that she'd made up her mind, she felt like if she even blinked, the creature would simply vanish. The water became hotter as she approached. Up close, its chest and neck towered above her, warm drops of water falling from its chin and landing on her head. Reaching out, tensed for a reaction, Nyima touched its neck, first with her fingertips, then her whole hand. Beneath her palm, the skin was warm and soft to the touch, slick as the inside of a papaya. She marveled as new colors bloomed beneath her fingers. Bit by bit, the creature sank into the water.

Face-to-face with the Ninki-nanka, Nyima examined the two round eyes Nanna had always relished describing. She expected to find something beautiful, perhaps images of pretty dresses and the fields after harvest, or even a vision of her whole family, healthy and happy and together. But there was nothing there, and she sighed, disappointed. The

scales dulled and browned where her breath landed. She lifted her head again, searching for answers, and asked aloud, “What should I do?”

All the creature’s eyes revealed was herself peering back. It was an image that was not unfamiliar. Over the years, Nanna had occasionally produced a foldable mirror from her mattress, a warped square that had familiarized her with the shape of her head, the arc of her cheeks. She had caught glimpses of herself on the river’s surface at midday or in the kitchen basins as they washed and prepared for their next meager meal. Sometimes on the flat blades of knives, she had seen dulled fragments—her nose, her lips, her eyes—slices of her face that she had never recognized as her own. Looking closer in the glossy disks of the creature’s eyes, she hardly saw a trace of the make-up from earlier, all washed somewhere downstream over the course of the night. As she gazed into those eyes, she saw for the first time a perfect reflection of her face. She touched a hand to her cheek.

Before she could change her mind, Nyima grasped the creature’s neck and swung herself out of the water. Snug between the ridges on the Ninki-nanka’s back, she wrapped her arms around its thin slimy neck, closed her eyes, and waited nervously to be pulled under. When the creature began to move, Nyima held her breath. Her heart pumped in her ears, the breeze kissed her cheeks, and then she opened her eyes. The creature was skimming the surface, building speed so just her toes scraped the water. She felt the muscles tense and release beneath her legs, and she clung tighter, laughing out loud. The village lights faded, the last house a speck barely discernable from the rest of the shoreline, and finally the mangroves, too, disappeared behind her. She breathed in deep,

squinting into the night and into the rushing darkness. And really, truly, what lay dormant beyond, who could say?

THE LAST HEIFER

Not long after the rebels passed through Busoa, trampling through the village crops, the cattle grew sick, began to die. A German volunteer came to help and the children stole all his shoes while he patched the neighbor's doorframes, caulked bullet holes with sawdust and glue.

Still, the man began his work in the fields, running gloved fingers over sores hard as knuckles, dressing mealy lesions. He kept his supplies behind bolted doors, slept to the groans of cows listing into fences, scraping their skin to meat and sinew on barbed wire.

While the cows grew thin and hairless, spines emerging like baby teeth, the children descended on his trash, taking emptied bottles and cans, syringes. Ashamed, the man threw nothing away, rewashing plastic bags and wearing holes into paper plates. He began to carry everything in his pockets: crumpled toilet paper, foam cups stained pink with juice.

In the third month, the last heifer buckled, seeping blood from its eyes, surrendering to the seasonal grass. Unable to coax it to rise, the man returned to his room to find the last of his belongings gone.

That night he lay awake on the floor with his window open while the hyenas came for the carcass. It was quiet except for cracking and splintering, jaws. When morning came, all that remained were damp bones and a dry flap of hide which by afternoon—after he was long gone, barefoot—was turning to soot with flies.

RIVER HOME

I almost miss my taxi, and it's because I'm fluffing my hair. I'm not usually one for primping, but on my way out I double-checked my purse for everything I'd need: Chapstick, mirror, wallet, ticket, passport. Passport. I make the mistake of lingering over my nineteen-year-old face: thin lips, sharp jaw, rolls of thick, shiny hair. The picture isn't so old, but I recognize myself in the vague sense of a distant relative, the way blood recognizes blood. I panic.

I have to fix my hair. Even though my suitcase stands packed by the door, I stand by the mirror, ruffling and scrunching and spraying, trying to replicate that passport picture. People back home used to say we could be sisters, me and my mom. Maybe even oceans apart, we'd developed a web of similar lines and folds. I attack the thinning patches with a comb and a blow dryer. My hair rises in a wild tangle, fuller but somehow still frail.

The phone rings and it's the cab company again. I answer it on speaker, making fantastic excuses.

"Ten minutes, please!" I shout over the blow dryer, forearms deep in a bramble of hair. I peer down into the street from my window and see an elbow hooked over the driver's side window. "I'm here, I'm here. I can see you. I'll be right down," I promise. The driver's too professional to curse, but he's getting impatient.

As I mess with my hair, I'm horrified to find myself losing more strands. I pluck them from my shirt, my shoulders, and stick them back with mousse, gel, spray, anything. Hair, that's just another thing I've lost to the bonafide American education that was supposed to change our lives. In my mind, each strand weighs heavy as marble next to all the other things I've lost along the way: my complexion, my mother's precious savings, twelve borrowed years. The things I have won: two diplomas in clearance frames, thirty extra pounds, and a phone call that summons me home too late to be received in my mother's arms.

The driver calls again, and he growls, "Miss? I can't sit here all day. You can call us later at your convenience." I see him start to pull away so I just grab a hat, lean out the window and wave both arms in the air.

"Please!" I yell. "Wait!" I see brake lights. Clattering downstairs, bags in tow, I don't bother to lock the door. I tumble into the vehicle.

He says one word when I shut the door: "Where?"

I tell him the airport. On the way, he glances into the rearview mirror, and I know he sees my swollen eyes, my crazy hair. The hat hasn't helped. I lean my head against the window and watch the runners on campus. The rest of Englewood is turning purple with evening. We sit in silence for a while, the radio barely audible.

"Where are you headed?" he asks at a stoplight.

"Home," I say, my mind already on Seoul.

I close my eyes and unbutton my jeans as the plane launches itself into the air. They are new and too tight when I sit, and again I am conscious of how much I've changed. Outside, we are above the clouds. Inside, it smells like wrapping paper. This is it, I think to myself, I'm finally doing what I was meant to do all along, what all the student visas and temporary driver's licenses and on-campus work studies had made me promise again and again: to leave America.

Now, seated beside this thin brunette, who has already reclined her seat all the way and tucked some blue foam buds into her ear, I feel nauseous the way I did when I flew here all those years ago. And then I feel relieved, I don't know why.

Just a few minutes earlier I had frozen in the middle of the aisles, stunned by the familiar dread. I almost turned around right then, pushed through the line of grumbling passengers behind me and marched right off the plane, onto the ramp, and back to the safety of the anonymous gating area. It wasn't the plane. That's something all the conferences across this country had cured me of, all quasi-important affairs that I reported to my mother in a Korean that started to falter, making our conversations shorter from year to year.

"What are you eating?" she'd ask.

I'd tell her rice and *banchan*, biting into a cold pizza. "And how are you?"

"I'm doing well," would be her reply. "You too?"

"Yes, *umma*, I am fine."

"How are your studies?"

"Fine."

“And you’re healthy?”

“Yes, very.”

“You’re not lying to me are you?”

“No, mother, I would never.”

“As long as you’re healthy and happy. A mother can’t ask for more.”

She never told me that she remarried, but in the end, the phone call had come from him. A thick southeastern dialect, a husky voice, though whether it was from emotion or not, I didn’t know. I only responded in my clipped Korean, too confused to cry. He insisted on buying the ticket and picking me up at the airport. It’s what she would have wanted, he said. It must have been nice to have known what my mother wanted so well.

The fastest I could leave was in three days, in time for the cremation. In the days leading up to my departure, I cried. And of course when I did, it was impossible to stop. I cried until my sides ached and I fell asleep from exhaustion, waking up still, voiceless and alone. The grief alternated with the anger, and they washed over me sometimes gently, and other times with a force that took the air so completely out of me that I wondered if I would ever speak again. I listened to the man—my mother’s husband—speak of my mother’s last wishes and excused myself to the appropriate people at the university, cancelled classes, and bought a new suitcase, which led me here, doing the very thing I knew my mother would certainly hate, leaving so abruptly in the middle of the semester.

I admit, I have never been the motivated one. Even after I arrived here in America, I'd been unable to shake the inertia, slipping from one year to the next, from one degree to the next—a bachelor's to a master's and now a PhD, accumulating like dishes in the sink, simply the vestiges of time. Sometimes I believed this life of education was a distraction, a spiritual limbo, a way of buying time until I could decide why I was. I'd always assumed the future was a place I could stumble into if I just stuck around long enough. In the end, I supposed all these years of education had only perpetuated the childhood never could escape. What I left behind, who I left behind, remained in this uncertainty, even this boredom.

But what I lacked in ambition, my mother made up for with a fevered determination. What would she have thought of my life here? If she knew of my American lovers, my teaching, my sloppy apartment, papers, textbooks, laundry spread throughout. My mother hadn't graduated high school, but from the time I started elementary school in Seoul she'd emptied herself into my education, hiring personal tutors, then later, sending me to the best English language *hakwons* in Seoul, waking me early each school morning and buying me a brand new lamp to study with late into the night. "It's better for your eyes," she'd say, squinting proudly at my neat English sentences.

By the time I left for America, my mother still maintained her beauty with the kind of careless ease that only comes with age, and she never dyed her hair even when it started turning grey in her early twenties. She was a woman you couldn't ignore though she was barely five feet tall. A hard worker, my mother, with the most beautiful feet.

Every night after work, she would come home and soak her feet in a bucket of hot water and black stones from the river. She'd press her feet against them after a long night's work, nursing them until the water became cool and her soles, white and soft. This was what I knew of my mother's life, not the strange man on the other end of the phone.

My mother had never dated, and perhaps that was why I only dabbled briefly in online dating, turning down compatible match one after the next—too fat, had kids, hated books—none ever quite good enough. I suspected my mother had refused men on the same grounds, especially at the restaurant. But this man with his provincial accent, his overbearing kindness, his submissive tone, this was not who I imagined my mother would have wanted. No, it must be a mistake. Before he even hung up—telling me to take care, to pack something warm, that he was excited to meet me—I hated him, and I knew I'd hate him when I arrived. I'm not proud of it.

The plane begins its descent, and I gasp awake with the feeling of wetness in my chest and throat. The girl beside me still has her ears plugged, but her eyes are now open, her seat upright, and she leans slightly to peer out the window, where we see the craggy cityscape below. The sky is grey with the promise of sunrise.

They call our home the Land of the Morning Calm because at dawn our mountains wake dressed in dewy-virgin mist and all you can smell are wet pine cones. Then the sun charges in with his exhaust fumes, commuters, and halogen lights and strips her.

My mother moved to Seoul before I was born, a new widow in need of a new story. First day in the big city, she found a job bussing tables at a *samgyupsal* joint, and with her first paycheck, she took the bus to Yeoinaru Park and dipped her swollen ankles in the Han River. She named me after that river. It flows through the belly of the metropolis, its waters stretching all the way north, unhindered, beyond the demilitarized zone.

Back when my mom was in grade school and the city still bore the scars of the war, the Han River was rank with chemical waste, human refuse, and dead bodies. On my tenth birthday, she took me by the hand to the Mapo Bridge, and pointed out the exact spot from which her brother had flung his sixteen-year-old body.

“Here,” she said, “is where he decided.”

The cold November air had pinched my cheeks red, and I kept one gloved hand in my pocket, just wanting to go home where it was warm and dry. “Han Ga-ram, are you listening?” she said. “It was hard to be in those days.” And she let my hand go to toss something into the river. Even in her calls to America, my mom never let me forget myself. She always called me by my full name, my real name: “Han Ga-ram,” Han River, a name none of my American friends could pronounce, though they tried.

It became a thing, us going to the river: Sunday afternoons, Wednesday nights, any time my mother could get a day off. And I liked her best then, when she would take off her shoes. Sometimes on the grass under the bridge, sometimes on the mossy concrete by the water, she told me things she never would in the house. “Hans come from the same ancestor,” she whispered once. “We share the blood of queens and scholars.”

On the banks of that river, she taught me to long for the faces I don't remember having forgotten. She kept them alive through stories of the uncles and great aunts and sisters and cousins and sons across the barbed wire.

“*Dae Han Min Guk*, that's what we Koreans call our country,” she said. *One nation, one people*. “This new generation, it's not the same. Can blood be split in two after forty, fifty years?” Even at night, when all I could see was the reflection of apartment lights on the water, I felt her gaze following the river's entire length, north.

It was a small miracle when she won the government's reunion lottery. I was nineteen, right before she sent me off to America. There were rumors of peace, and on TV I saw families bowing, weeping, and holding each other for the first time since the War. She wasn't on TV, but my mom was there. She left that morning clutching gifts—clothes, food, pink foxgloves—and returned the next day cradling the flabby blossoms against her chest. Even as I was packing for my life overseas, the dried blossoms sat by the candles she lit every night for her lost family.

The plane skids on the runway, and we bounce a little before the roar of the plane's wheels settles into a steady hum. We taxi for a while and I unbuckle my seatbelt and button up my jeans. I pull out a handheld mirror and dab concealer under my eyes, tuck stray hair back into my hat. I do not want to be welcomed by this man, this stranger.

Thinking of the stacks of ungraded student essays in my tiny LA apartment, the classes I will have to make up, the life of deadlines and essays that all seem to have amounted to this moment, I can't help but feel this a false return.

What good is it now? I want to ask. What am I supposed to do? I still have so many questions. All this time, she never visited, never asked me to come home. I want to ask her why. Was it too expensive? Were you too busy? Did you miss me? When I arrive, I will hold her once more and then return her to the waters she loved so dearly. I imagine myself on the banks of the Han River, twelve years, three thousand miles, and half-a-head-of-hair later, and I'm terrified that I never knew loneliness after all.

The man holding the sign with my name is younger than I expected, maybe early-forties, and the puffy windbreaker does little to hide his thin figure. He's wearing a blue cap, and the white cardstock sign he holds with both hands has my name written in large Korean letters, then underneath, in English. In the corner is an old picture of me in my middle school uniform, as if to remind me who I was. Then again, I wonder if my mother had no recent pictures of me.

He locks eyes with me as soon as I leave the departure area and he waves, though with some surprise. Next to the crowd of thin, pale girls at security, I'm not difficult to spot, and the static has done my hair no favors. I pat down stray hairs defiantly. I wasn't what he was expecting.

"That's me alright," I say, nodding at the picture before the formal greetings are made. I know it's rude, but he looks at me and smiles. Up close, he's not much taller than me, but he must have towered over my mother.

He takes my suitcase before I can protest, and he talks rapidly and without pause, as if I am the first person he has seen in years. In person, his voice is less gruff, though

his accent still remains strong. It's difficult to understand. We walk to an empty taxi, and I'm not surprised when he unlocks it and loads my bag. The cab is his.

I choose the back seat and settle in as we pull out of the airport. We are headed back into Seoul, he tells me, Dongjak-gu to be exact, close to Chung-Ang University, and for the whole drive home, he speaks quickly, using honorifics. This unusually cold autumn weather, the upcoming elections, the terrible afternoon traffic, the renovations downtown, these are all things he uses to fill the space between us. He calls me *ahgassi*, young lady.

My answers become shorter as we weave through downtown traffic: Yes, I'm tired. The flight was fine. No, not hungry. I feel his gaze on me through the rearview mirror.

"You're just as I imagined," he says now. "I have to tell you, you look just like her." And in the rearview mirror his gaze softens just a bit before he turns away and honks at a car that swerves into his lane. "She told me so much about you, you know. She talked about you all the time."

"She never talked about you."

He doesn't flinch but looks at me, intent again. "Oh, well, I suppose that doesn't surprise me either."

The cars ahead of us have slowed to a crawl, and Seoul outside is a dizzying array of activity already. Store signs blink to life, new plaques appear in floor-length windows. The morning fog has cleared and now people mill on the streets, overpasses, and crosswalks. I recognize nothing in this city. The car turns up a steep road. He turns more

sharp corners in the narrow streets, without slowing, and we move higher and higher, away from the bustle of the main road.

“So you live in this part of the city?” I ask. The houses are old and brick, and though it’s not entirely unpleasant, it looks rundown. New life oozes from the cracks, green and black.

“Yes, not far now,” he says, eager to answer. “This wasn’t the bustling district it is now when you left, I imagine. I’ve been here four years now and I can barely keep up. Oh, I don’t know how you young people do it nowadays.”

I cringe at the comment and the accent, but he doesn’t notice, and continues: “We live in a remarkable time though, an incredible country, really. You probably don’t remember, but back in the IMF days, you know, life was hard then. Brutal. Senseless even. I dropped out of school when I was thirteen, started working odd jobs here and there in Daegu—you know, fake ID, everything, not that they ever looked closely back then.”

“That’s where you’re from?”

“Yes. Whole family’s still there.” The car whips to the left to avoid a cyclist, and he honks again. “Crazies,” he mutters. The car smells like a beach cocktail, and I feel sick.

“Most of these houses have been renovated. Or razed and turned into giant apartment blocks. Your mother first refused to move, but once we married, I convinced her. It was close to the university, and I had a good thing going with my cab. I didn’t

want her to walk to work. I drove her back and forth every day, her own personal chauffeur, she said. We weren't married very long, you know."

"Yes, I know."

The car is quiet, and the man fiddles around with the radio. He settles for a local news station and titters.

"I did tell her she should call when things began to look bad, but she wouldn't listen. She was very sick by that time, and there wasn't much to do then but to stay at the hospital." He glanced back in my direction as the car finally slowed. "It happened very fast."

"Why didn't anyone call me?" I ask.

"Well, it was so sudden. She was just coughing for a few months, a common cold, we thought."

"No, I mean you. I never even knew about you. Why didn't anyone tell me?" My voice wobbles, like it's losing balance. "Why didn't she tell me?" The heaviness in my throat expands, threatens to spill over, and my eyes begin to sting. The man parks the car on the street, squeezed between a driveway and a truck. He turns off the engine and pauses.

"We got married quick, a sort of last minute thing, if you know what I mean," he winks.

"No, I don't." For the first time, his smile falters.

"She didn't want to worry you," he says finally. "You know how your mother is." he shrugs helplessly, as if we both share in some secret.

I ignore the comment.

“Well, this is it,” he says, breaking the silence.

He takes my bags into the brown apartment building, and I sit in the car, shaking with dry tears, waiting until the wave passes. Then, I fall asleep.

He lives in a nice two-bedroom apartment and everywhere I see evidence of a life I don't recognize. A large wedding photo in a silver frame hangs from the living room wall. There's also a modest television, an ottoman, a black space heater, a few end tables, and a small but comfortable leather couch. In the photo, my mother is in a church, surrounded by a group of people, some I recognize from work and some I don't. She's smiling, happy. Her hair is curled and black.

“If you're hungry, there's rice and *banchan* still in the fridge,” he says, relieved to see me in the house. He'd waited for me to come inside, leaving the door slightly ajar as if I were a stray dog.

“I ate on the plane,” I say, hoarse. The idea of eating my mother's cooking right now feels wrong, even though I am starving.

“Okay, well, I'll give you the grand tour.” The house isn't much, and after we go through the bedroom, bathroom, and kitchen, we're back in the living room. He straightens a mirror on the wall as he walks past. “You'll be staying in here, if that's okay with you,” he says, leading me to the last room. “I tried to clean up before I left this morning.”

Inside, I see pale green sheets on a twin bed, old pictures, a diploma from Chung-Ang University, and a letter in my mother's handwriting on the corner desk. On the far side of the wall are large canvas paintings, an easel, and more sheets of watercolor paper.

I go through the room gently, afraid to touch anything. I am startled by pictures of my younger self. I had spent the last dozen years of my life in America without any reminders, sometimes happily so. As far as my American friends knew, I was born nineteen, just like that picture in my passport. Standing here, I realize I never sent my mother any pictures while I was away. In this room, I am again six, riding a bicycle with training wheels; twelve, in my first middle school uniform; fifteen, holding my certificate of achievement; but I am never older than nineteen, standing next to my mother at the airport smiling so confidently into the camera.

"Your mother used to work in here," he says. "She was planning on having this room, you know, for when you came back."

"She painted all these?"

He stands shyly by the door while I kneel on the ground and go through them one by one. They are striking, sharp lines and sheer colors, some of landscapes, others of people. I recognize one of me as a child, another of the river from under the bridge.

"Yep," he says, with some pride, "She sold a couple. First to friends, but later to people she didn't even know. She donated some to the church mission fair. Sold out there."

I am getting used to his accent, but I think I misheard him. Before I can ask, he points to the last painting, the bridge over the river, and he says, “Here’s the place I was talking about.”

I balance it on my knees and we look at it together. It’s exactly as I remembered, and the memories bring back the vertigo. I’d only agreed to come after he had told me my mother’s wishes: to scatter her ashes in this place. He didn’t know where it was; she had never taken him there. I admit feeling some triumph in this. Now all I feel is weary.

I get up as he places my middle school picture into an empty frame on the desk and straightens it. It seems a strange courtesy. It’s strange to see my face next to the other black and white photos of relatives in the North, tea candles, its wicks a black whisker. On the side, an old bouquet, a cluster of dusky pink bells. So, she had lit candles for me, too.

This room tells me that maybe all these years of separation meant something to her. Relief pours over me, then wavers. My mother had waited for me to return, moving, painting, studying, even marrying. But without her here, the canvases, candles, and childhood pictures make it feel like a museum, or a shrine to what I had always thought she wanted me to escape. I can smell her here. It takes me back to the nights I fell asleep alone on the floor of our tiny apartment in Sillimdong, when my mother would come home late at night, silently washing and then curling her body around me. In the winters, we had kept each other warm this way, with the heat on low.

“*Ahjussi*, when is the service?” I ask.

“She didn’t want a big service,” he says, and he sounds almost apologetic. “So it’ll be just you and me. But the cremation is tomorrow. You should get some rest. We have plenty of time to talk when I get back tonight. I’ve never been on one of those planes myself, but I know how hard travel can be.”

He zips up his windbreaker again and pats down the pockets of air. He looks small, frail, but held together by boyish confidence and goodwill. Briefly, I see what my mother must have seen. But not yet ready to forgive his happiness, I let the thought pass.

“Thank you,” I manage.

“Of course.” Clearing his throat, he leaves me alone in the room. He has to go back to work, he says, and he writes his phone number on a pad of paper telling me to let him know if I need anything, anything at all.

We head to the Han River together, *ahjussi* and me, praying that it doesn’t rain. I hold the urn in my arms as we walk across Yeoinaru Park. It’s spotless, green, and we pass a couple on a rented tandem bicycle. I recognize Mapo Bridge, but everything else is new, clean. There’s even an amphitheater. We’ve been walking for two hours now, and I don’t want to tell *ahjussi* I might not be able to find the spot.

This morning, I woke to the screech of a fire alarm and the smell of burnt bacon.

“This is what you have for breakfast in America, right?” he asked, sheepish, already in suit and tie. He ate his rice and soup, mercifully quiet, while I gulped down the burnt bacon and scrambled eggs, though I was suddenly hungry for what he was having.

He hasn't stopped talking since we left with the ashes, driving down the north riverside highway. Despite the brisk autumnal air, he's sweating slightly, and I am too. My low black heels tick against the sidewalk.

He says, "What is it they say? A year and a day? We would still be newlyweds, though it seems a little silly to say that considering our age."

"I get it," I say, tired. "You just married, didn't have time to tell me."

"That's not what I meant." His brows furrow.

He brought the painting, and now he holds it in front of him like a map, peering at it and then the bridge we are approaching. Already, I can tell this isn't the place. I glance around nervously.

"A little farther," I say to him. I've made an effort not to look at the painting, after all, it's a place I know so well. I'd returned to it again and again in my mind, especially in my first lonely years in America. When I close my eyes it comes back to me in clear, stark lines, the lapping waters, the lanky weeds; but when I open them, I am confused. Perhaps over the years, I have furnished the space with bigger trees, greener leaves, smoothed out the rutted concrete lowering into the river. These areas are now grass. Some garish yellow paddle boats float in the water up ahead. A group of teenagers on rollerblades hurtles by. I keep walking. He follows.

"You know," he says, "we were going to have our honeymoon in America. Saved it for the summer so she could come see you. She always said you were very busy. She was so proud of you. She knew how difficult it was over there."

"How could she know?" I had never told her, and she had never asked.

He continues, "I remember the first time we met, your mother and I."

I can feel him looking at me out of the corner of my eye, so I ask, "Was it at the restaurant?"

"No, well, yes. But the first time I saw her, really, that was in church."

"My mother doesn't believe in a god."

"She was sitting in the back by herself, arms crossed. But she was praying, eyes shut, lips moving." He pauses. "I recognized her, of course, from the restaurant. Your mother was a beautiful woman."

"Did you follow her there?" I can't help it.

"No, no. Nothing like that. I just saw her once at the restaurant, then by chance at a church. I walked in to a random church, mind you, and it turned out in the end she had done the same. Funny how these things happen, don't you think?"

"You don't need to do this."

He ignores me and continues, "Well, now that I think about it I guess that can only count as the first time I saw her. She never opened her eyes, never saw me. I'm not sure what the story would be for her. But I mean really saw her, the way you can only see a woman if you know she isn't looking back."

I remain silent, but in spite of myself, I am interested.

"I knew right then that she was going to be my wife."

"You didn't even know if she was already married or not," I blurt.

"No, I suppose I didn't."

"If she had kids or not."

“It wouldn’t have mattered.”

“So what happened then?” I ask. “Did you go talk to her?”

“I kept coming to church.”

“And then you asked her to marry you?”

He paused, thoughtful. He put the painting under his arm again. “Eventually,” he says.

We stay on the concrete path along the river. I wheeze with every breath. We have walked so far that we’ve passed by two bridges. The wind is picking up but I know if we walk just a little farther, I’ll be able to find it. I look around for markers, a boulder, a tree, a dip in the grass, anything that will jog my memory. I pick up the pace, and *ahjussi* matches it easily. My breathing is getting ragged, my throat cold. I finally stop at an empty bench on the path.

When I catch my breath, I ask, “What was she praying about?”

“What?”

“You said when you first saw her, you thought she was praying in the church.”

“Oh, she was praying alright. She wasn’t the type to tell me what about, or to complain. But I could make my guesses. There was only one thing she ever prayed for after you left.”

Thunder claps in the distance. I stand up again and resume walking. “We’re almost there,” I lie.

“Look, all I’m trying to say is, she loved you. You must know that. And we’re sorry.”

“We?”

“I loved your mother, too,” he says with some misery. “I never had a daughter. I’m sorry.”

Then it begins to rain.

He opens a small black umbrella. “I only have one,” he apologizes, “Your mother never used one.”

“It’s okay,” I laugh. I can’t stop. His suit is already soaked through and he holds the umbrella while I shelter the urn inside my jacket. Before long, the pathway has turned into a small brook. My heels squelch. Wet makeup makes grey lines down my cheeks. I stumble ahead, hiccupping. This whole thing was just like her, a cheap, no fanfare service gone wrong.

The path is slick, and I almost fall. Except for a few black umbrellas, we are completely alone. These bridges bear no resemblance to the place I’ve stored in my mind. It has been too long. Looking around, I feel the weight of the years that have passed. They betray me with the new sidewalks, walls, lakes, forests I’ve seen in my travels, all transplanted into that sacred space when I wasn’t paying attention. This is the real price of leaving home, this forgetfulness. I have lost the only thing my mother and I ever shared these past twelve years.

“*Ahjussi*,” I say, “Was she happy?”

“Mostly, yes. Yes, for a while, I think we were very happy.”

And what’s more, I believe him. I sit on the wet grass, tossing my shoes aside. I can go no farther.

“I don’t know where I’m going,” I say.

He runs his fingers through his thin hair and nods, quiet. He knows, has known this whole time. He folds the umbrella and sits beside me, placing the painting down carefully between us. I place the urn on top. It seems foolish, suddenly, to move at all. So we sit, waiting out the storm.

BIOGRAPHY

Ah-reum Han graduated from Dakar Academy, Dakar, Senegal, in 2008. She obtained her Bachelor of Arts from Carson-Newman University in 2012. Her work has appeared in *Flyway: Journal of Writing and Environment* and received an Honorable Mention in *Glimmer Train*. She received her Master of Fine Arts from George Mason University in 2015 and was the 2014-2015 Fiction Thesis Fellow.