AFTER THE FALL, WINTER

by

Dan Hong
A Thesis
Submitted to the
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of
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in Partial Fulfillment of
The Requirements for the Degree
of
Master of Fine Arts
Creative Writing

Committee:

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Date: _____ Spring Semester 2016
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Fairfax, VA

After the Fall, Winter

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

by

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Bachelor of Arts
University of Mary Washington, 2011

Director: Susan Shreve, Professor
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DEDICATION

This is dedicated to anyone who has ever had a place for me at their table, even for a moment. It has meant more to me than I can ever explain.

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I would like to thank my family, who raised and supported me, even when doing so went against my wishes, or I made it impossibly hard: my sister, Mai-Linh Hong, my mother, Binh Tran, and my father, Nguyen Hong. Big damn heroes. Thank you to Steve Watkins, whose guidance and creative writing classes at UMW encouraged me to write. And finally, a big thank you goes to the students and staff at the creative writing program at George Mason University who helped me hone my craft and grow as both a reader and a writer.

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ABSTRACT

AFTER THE FALL, WINTER

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George Mason University, 2016

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This novel-in-stories follows a trio of Vietnamese American siblings and their friends and family living in the shadow of the most powerful city in the world, Washington, D.C. Spanning the decades between the 1980s and 2010, the stories weave around local events such as the fall of the Little Saigon neighborhood and the growth of the Eden Center strip mall, and illustrate the shifting tapestry of the D.C. metropolitan area's Vietnamese American history. The characters find themselves confronting the specters of war, refugee assimilation, poverty, violence, crime, gangs, and all the hiccups that go along with these traumas while building lives from the shards of a homeland they carry within themselves. But as the characters grow, so do the distances from each other, sometimes in violent and surprising ways.

WINTER

From the safety of his fort in the living room, little Bobby Tran watched *Sesame Street* on an old, buzzing television. As he considered leaving the arrangement of sofa cushions and blankets to adjust the tin foil on the antenna, the front door swung open, shaking its hinges and slamming against the wall. Tendrils of cold air swept through the room, and Bobby huddled deeper in his fort, the static and distortion on the screen forgotten. From a crack between two cushions, he saw his father, bloodied and pale, struggling through the doorway on the arms of Bobby's mother and Uncle Bao. Bobby rolled to his side, knocking over an upright sofa cushion, collapsing his fort. He flailed under the rubble, and the wool blanket spun around his body, binding his movements and blinding him until all he could see was fuzzy, pale light filtered through layers of brown blanket. He reached out, searching and clawing for the edge, for his way out of the dark. When he finally unraveled himself, Bobby stood and watched the adults, the blanket limp and dead at his side.

Beads of sweat grew on his father's pale, waxy face, and his head rolled back on his shoulders. His right leg dragged under him as the trio half-hopped through the living room, trembling with each step. Bobby stared at their feet as they shuffled across the tan carpet. They hadn't removed their shoes. Dark spots of red followed their procession, and each step ground bits of snow and mud and dirt into the carpet, stains left for years ahead.

Bobby wondered what his parents would say when they saw the mess. His mother looked so small, bundled as she was in a puffy winter coat next to his father, and Uncle Bao's lips formed a tight line as he shifted more of Bobby's father's weight toward himself. Bobby's head lightened and his gut clenched as though he needed to pee. He hugged the blanket against his chest, though he could no longer feel the cold, and shut the door behind them. His father must have slipped on the ice outside. Their apartment sat on a steep hill, and Bobby's parents had complained that the county's snow plows never came down their block. Bobby followed the trio on his tippy toes, as though he was afraid of drawing attention to himself. As though whatever misfortune that had inflicted itself upon Bobby's father would turn its gaze on him if he was careless.

"What happened?"

Uncle Bao grunted and tried to push Bobby away with his free hand, but he crowded after them as they lumbered down the hall and into his parents' bedroom.

It wasn't until Uncle Bao laid his father on the bed and his mother hurried out of the room that Bobby noticed what his father was wearing. For some reason, his father wore US Army fatigues, the green ones that Bobby saw on television shows like MASH. Blood seeping from his right knee colored the fabric an inky black. Bobby stared at the wound in his father's leg, a perfectly round and puckered hole surrounded by dried, crusted blood. A faint odor hung in the air, and as Bobby leaned in to peer at the wound, the heavy, sour smell reminded him of the time his mother had left old meat rotting in the sink for an entire day. His stomach churned and eyes watered, but something in the mangled flesh held his gaze, pulling him closer. He'd seen wounds like this on television.

His father had not fallen. He had been shot. Little white bugs appeared, shiny and wet like rotted rice, as if growing from his leg, squirming and crawling along the ridges of torn flesh. Bobby stumbled backward, and suddenly his uncle was there, tending to his father, blocking him from his sight.

Uncle Bao removed Bobby's father's shirt, ignoring his moans and the way his smooth face twisted. Dog tags jangled as he lay back. Bobby's mother reappeared with wet washcloths, the steam from the towels rising in heaps in the cool air, and she bent over to pat the skin around the wound. Then she pulled off her husband's pants, gingerly rolling down the fatigues over the knee, leaving him in his Fruit of the Looms. She hurried out of the room with the bloody clothes, and her grimace made Bobby want to run to the bathroom. A dark red spot blossomed on the bed sheets beneath his father's knee as rivulets of red streamed down the side of his leg. Bobby collapsed in a chair in the corner and watched the snowflakes on his uncle's parka melt into perfect little circles of water and roll down his back, leaving trails of smaller circles in their wake. Bobby twisted the corner of his shirt and tucked his foot under him. Finally, his mother returned and wrapped her warm, soft arms around him, lifted him from the chair, and pulled him from the room. As Bobby left, Uncle Bao poured something clear over the bloody knee and his father threw his head back and punched the mattress.

Later, as Bobby scrubbed the carpet with wet rags, his father called for him. Behind the bed, bright light streamed through open curtains. Underneath, his father's body, once skinny and hard, lay crumpled on the bed, darkened in silhouette, and wasted, as if everything that had once held him up against all the hardships in the world had

drained from him. Even his ever-present anger seemed to have seeped from him in some unseen moment. His eyes, flashing in shadow, rolled in his head, sunken and red. Gauze covered his wounded knee, packages of which Bobby's mother had regularly pocketed from the hotel in North Arlington where she worked. Bobby lingered in the doorway, somewhere in the space between the hall and the bedroom, and peered over, hoping somehow to escape his father's notice. His father coughed, his breath raspy, and he raised a withered and bony arm for him.

"Soldiers die," he said, his Vietnamese barely audible. He reached out and snatched Bobby's hand as he approached, his grip bony and cold. Bobby breathed through his mouth to avoid the stench of beer. "Don't be afraid. That's what soldiers do. I was supposed to die so many times. But instead I lost everything else." He gestured with his chin toward his knee. "You see what's left?"

Bobby nodded, not understanding. He remembered his father's many drunken ramblings, the way he described war, the explosions and bullets and death, and he stared at the bloody knee, wondering how war had struck his father here, so far away, so long after it had ended.

"It's not so hard for you," his father continued. "You were born here. You'll never know Vietnam. Vietnam won't remember me, and she'll never know you at all." The words slurred as they tumbled from him between fits of coughing and hacking. His face twisted and flushed bright red, and his lips, flecked with white, dry spittle, quivered. He growled. "After we killed and suffered and died for her. She doesn't care what we sacrificed. Our reward was for her to give us away, throw us into prisons to die and the

oceans to drown. I watched my friends starve in prison. Some were beaten to death, and we thought they were lucky. Sometimes we dug their graves with our hands until our fingers were bloody. And now here we are, like nothing. Less than ghosts." He exhaled and hung his head, staring at his feet, at the far wall, and his breathing slowed. Finally he looked up to Bobby. "How can she not love her children?"

Bobby had no answer, but his father listened to his silence anyway, his eyes boring into him. After a while, he relaxed, and Bobby slunk away. His father again became enshrouded in shadow, and Bobby watched him stare at the ceiling, as though waiting, as he did in the ensuing years, for something like a promise to matriculate, for something to arrive that never did.

PAYING RENT

June 1985

Bao Nguyen watched the maroon door in the corner behind the podium of Mount Bible Baptist church as he did every Sunday. On clear summer days like this, when the sun filtered in hot through the skylights and windows and curtains and rafters and past all the things that could impede the light's fall, the door's glossy sheen shined bright and pushed back the shadows surrounding it. He stared until his eyes hurt and black spots appeared in his vision. Then he looked to the dark rafters overhead and counted the minutes until the reverend finished speaking, hoping that those around him mistook his gaze for piety. Next to him, his brother-in-law, Thanh, flipped through a bible, each page moving with crisp deliberation, though he could not read English. They had not missed a single service in five years, though he knew their presence was a sham. After all, what did he know about Jesus? He had been fifteen the first time Thanh dragged him half-asleep into the congregation, still jetlagged from the other side of the world. At twenty, he was just another Vietnamese living in Arlington, Virginia, a lifetime away from his childhood as a Buddhist in a small mountain village near the Cambodian border. When service was over, Bao and Thanh quickly made for the exit, but Reverend Vernon pulled him aside at the front steps.

“Bao, how are you doing?” Reverend Vernon wrung Bao’s hand, squeezing his skinny fingers with fat, sweaty ones. Even at his advanced age, the reverend was strong. His pale blue eyes squinted behind gold-rimmed glasses, as though he didn’t recognize Bao’s face. Red splotches on the man’s bare scalp glistened with sweat, matting the white, puffy hair around his ears. Dark, angry pores spread across a bulbous nose above a long, white beard that reached down to the reverend’s chest.

“I’m okay.”

Two women in their forties, longtime members of the church, one blonde, one auburn-haired, walked by, and Reverend Vernon turned to greet them, his attention diverted. They smiled politely at Bao and lowered their voices to speak to the reverend. Bao turned to leave, but Reverend Vernon gripped his arm, keeping him in place. Standing very still, Bao scanned the crowd for Thanh. He spotted him limping down the block toward their apartment on Frederick Street. Other people walked by, all of whom Bao recognized, but they avoided his gaze and he stared at his feet, wishing very much to disappear. He listened to Reverend Vernon inquire after the two women’s availability for a fundraiser for starving children in Africa. The women promised to bake cookies and brownies, and the reverend ran his thumbs under his suspenders happily, stretching them over the paunchy gut that spilled over his belt. When they walked away, Reverend Vernon stared after them, rubbing his belly in a slow, circular motion and nodding, as though he were listening to a higher power.

“Well. Now that that’s settled,” Reverend Vernon said. “I’m setting aside a few minutes next week for you to address the congregation.”

“Me?”

“Absolutely.”

Bao shoved his hands in his pockets and rocked back and forth on his heels. “What should I say?”

“Oh, you know, just let us know how things have improved for you and your family since you arrived. And, you know, talk about the role the church has played in your lives. Whatever you’d like, really. We’re real glad we could have sponsored you and your family. After hearing such awful things about the boat people, and how horrible it was fleeing Vietnam… well, we had to do something, right? Good Christians, good people. I think it’d really help provide some closure if you spoke about your life a little. I’d ask Thanh, but your English is—is *better*, you know?” He nudged Bao with an elbow and winked.

“I don’t know,” Bao replied, trying to think of a way to refuse. Three years earlier, he had stood before his high school class and tried to present a report on Moby Dick. When he hadn’t stuttered and floundered under his classmates’ pitying gaze, he took long, awkward pauses to search for the right words in English. Even now, his heart pounded at the memory. That was the last day Bao went to school. His English had gotten better, but... He shoved his clammy hands deep into his pockets and opened his mouth to beg the reverend’s excuse. But then he thought of the work the church had done to get him, along with his sister’s family, to America, and the difficulty in keeping extended families together. He swallowed and realized that Reverend Vernon was staring at him. Finally, Bao shrugged, relenting.

“Great,” Reverend Vernon said, watching the last few people leave the church. “Just great. It doesn’t have to be long, just a few words would really, I think, help our congregation understand what it’s like to, well, you know, experience what it is exactly you’ve been through. And who knows—maybe you’ll like speaking to the congregation.” He winked. “Oh, I almost forgot to mention: we’ve had several inquiries about you and Thanh from some missionaries who’ve just returned from Korea. They’d love to meet you.” He beamed.

So it was settled. Bao jogged down the block, wondering what he might say. Nothing came to mind except images of the refugee camp in Thailand. Sometimes, memories of the camp crept into his daydreams, and when that happened, he smelled the foul smells, heard the children’s cries, saw the armed guards, and felt the fences pressing inward, crushing the people together. As the refugees piled in, they took up more and more space, and the ditches overflowed with excrement. Untold stories hung thick in the air: tales of escape, of possessions lost, and always, always of friends and family members too weak to survive the sea or the trek across land. Bao used to spend entire days at the metal fences, gripping the wires until they dug into his skin, staring at the sun as it moved through the sky. The fences’ shadows, long, thin grids, fell on the dirt and grass and golden sand, and grew and shrank as the day lived and died, the Thai guards coming and going. He wondered if the guards hated the Hmong, Laotians, Vietnamese, and Cambodians, whether they even saw them as people. At times, Bao wasn’t sure if it was the camp and its guards, or his fellow refugees, or both, that made him so weary of waking in the mornings, wondering how much more he could endure. But the church had

included him when they sponsored his sister's family's relocation to America. And for that, Bao owed them.

Ahead of him, Thanh limped through the neighborhood of old duplexes, each separated by chain link fences, picking his way over cracked and potholed sidewalks. The bottom of Thanh's foot scraped the sidewalk with each step, though his back was straight as a rod, the only evidence that he had once been a soldier. He shuffled past blue and white buildings with deep cracks in their flaky paint. Bao fell in step with the older man, his pace slowing. In the yard to their right, an overturned tricycle rusted in the summer air, the weeds and overgrown grass winding through the spokes and pedals, covering the once-red paint with spindly fingers, green and yellow and brown. On the street, churchgoers drove past, their cars cutting through the thick summertime humidity, and the ensuing breeze washed over the two men as they walked along. Finally, as they neared Frederick Street, Thanh asked what Reverend Vernon wanted.

"They want me to speak to the congregation next week," Bao answered in Vietnamese. He wiped lines of sweat from his brow.

Thanh grunted. "What are you going to say?"

"I don't know. I'll ask Mina later when I see her." Mina was his girlfriend and much smarter than him when it came to dealing with Americans. She would know. "What do you think they want to hear?"

"Who knows? We should have stopped coming a long time ago."

“It was your idea to keep coming.” Bao’s sister, as well as her and Thanh’s three children, had stopped coming to church shortly after little Bobby was born. But the two men continued going every week.

“I know it was my idea. I know.” Thanh paused before turning onto their block, a steep hill that plummeted to Columbia Pike, the main corridor through South Arlington. The street sign indicating the cross section stood crooked. The lower sign read Frederick Street, but the sign above it had long since disappeared. Thanh leaned against the sign’s crooked metal pole as Bao stood by, unsure if his brother-in-law needed help down the hill as he did sometimes. But Thanh just stared up at the sign.

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Over the next several days, crumpled drafts of his speech spilled out of Bao’s waste basket. He had written about his life in Vietnam, about dropping out of high school, about his sister and juggling her and Thanh’s children, and about Thanh’s early attempts at finding work. But nothing sounded right. Even Mina had no suggestions when he called. By Wednesday, Bao still had no idea what his speech should cover. As the day wound down, he consulted his boss, Tony Tran, the owner of Tran’s Mission Auto Shop.

“Don’t do it,” Tony hollered, sticking his head into the garage from the office. “They’re just going to parade you around like a little doll. Have some pride. Besides, you’ll sound stupid. You always sound stupid.” He disappeared back into the office.

At his workstation, Bao fiddled under the hood of a tan 1977 Toyota Celica fastback. The idle puttered and stalled. He restarted the car, returned to his place under the hood, and watched the motor shake on its mounts until he gave it more gas. It roared

to life. He stepped back and threw a dingy blue rag at the wall. *Goddamn carburetor's only eight years old. Garbage*. While rebuilding the carburetor was simple enough, he hated the tedium of labeling the countless hoses, of making sure everything was properly disconnected, cleaned, replaced, reassembled, and reconnected in a way that made all the parts recognize one another and work in unison to deliver the engine its fuel. He kicked a pile of tires before walking into the office. Bao leaned against the vending machine and pretended the machine's cold air was seeping through the metal and plastic to cool his hot, sticky skin. Tony ignored him as he flipped through piles of unsorted work orders.

"You don't think the church just wants to recognize our struggle?" Bao asked. "They've done so much for us. I just don't want to talk in front of them. Too many people. And we need a rebuild kit for that carb."

Tony nodded. He was in his early forties, short, thickly-built, and balding. He patted a pile of papers into a neat stack and glanced up at the clock. "I'll get it sent over tomorrow. Close up for the day. Cigarette?"

"Uh huh."

Outside, the sun hung low on the horizon, coloring the clear sky pale shades of blue and orange and purple. Tony sat on a van's junked bench with his feet propped on a silver boom box, and watched the ebb and flow of traffic in the shadow of the shop's three bays. Bao walked to the sidewalk and turned around. Above the office hung the shop's logo emblazoned over a painting of the South Vietnam flag. Large, looping letters painted on the glass storefront noted that the Tran's Mission Auto Shop had been established in 1979. It was one of the first Vietnamese businesses to open in the

Clarendon section of the Courthouse neighborhood. Back then there were two Vietnamese supermarkets and little else among the dense commercial blocks. Things were so different now. On the sidewalks, Vietnamese men and women milled about in pastel-colored American clothes with big, puffy hairdos and perms. Bao walked back to where Tony sat and lit the cigarette his boss offered.

"Man, goddammit, I can smell the hairspray from here." Tony snickered at a group of teenagers walking by. He pointed with his cigarette at a young man. Ash fell on the silver boom box at his feet. "Look at this guy with an earring—what's he think, he's a girl?" He leaned over and spit.

"It's cool."

"Cool!" Tony scoffed. "Church boy thinks it's cool. You a faggot?"

"Better than being bald."

Tony waved his hand, dismissing the notion, and tipped the silver boom box with his toe back and forth. "I don't know how much longer the shop's going to stay open."

"What? Why?"

"Rent's going up."

"Again? They just raised it."

"Yes. Yes! Crazy." Tony nodded and gestured vaguely in the distance at some buildings, where the metro station lurked. "Too many people come here. Now, every year, the rent keeps going up. They want us gone so they can make more money with fancy shops."

"What are you going to do?"

“Pay the rent, get to stay for a while—at least until I can’t afford it anymore. I don’t own the land, what can I do? None of us own land here. Don’t own anything, no how. They can do what they like. Uh-uh. Little Saigon, they call this place. It’s a joke.” Tony blew a long stream of smoke.

Bao paced the parking lot in short, slow steps, puffing on his cigarette, listening to the rhythm of the wind rushing between buildings, and the hollow sound of car engines echoing off corridors and alleys. In his village, the wind in the mountains sounded different somehow. Deeper, like a rumble. Here it sounded like the clatter of marbles against brick and concrete. He exhaled a cloud of smoke and watched the world through the dissipating whirls. Cars and buses and taxis filled the arteries of Little Saigon, carrying people toward souvenirs, or restaurants, or ingredients for Vietnamese dishes, or small reminders of home. Across the street, a woman and two children shuffled into a law office, the sign on the door denoting their specialty as divorce lawyers bouncing as it swung open. An old, junked pamphlet Bao recognized skittered through parking lot, its wrinkled, sun-bleached front listing in Vietnamese some of the services offered by the Department of Human Services: counseling on divorce, abuse, depression, and a host of other mental issues. To their left, plastered on the glass storefronts of a series of shops, were bright posters in Vietnamese advertising new video cassettes and albums. To their right, the dinner rush filed into the *pho* restaurant, though Bao and Tony had never eaten there because someone’s friend of a friend said someone saw a roach in the kitchen once, maybe. Bao couldn’t imagine Little Saigon filled with fancy shops. And worse, he wasn’t sure where he’d look for another job if Tran’s Mission went out of business.

“What about Eden Center?” Bao suggested.

“Where they gonna put an auto shop in a strip mall, huh? It’s too small, barely has anything there at all. Doesn’t matter, the rent’s gonna go up there too. Man, I hear in San Francisco, in Chinatown, the Chinese own the land, so they can’t get rid of them. It’s always gonna be there. But some Jewish man owns Eden Center. Vietnamese pay rent.”

“Jewish?” Bao frowned.

“Yeah. They’re like Christians, but they cut off baby dicks.”

“What?”

Tony nodded.

“That can’t be right.”

“America.”

Bao ground his cigarette with his toe. “I still don’t know what to do about my speech.”

Tony tossed Bao another cigarette and turned to watch two young women walking by in matching blue miniskirts. As they neared, Tony leaned over and hit the play button on the silver boom box. A freestyle song released the previous year, “When I Hear Music” by Debbie Deb, filled the parking lot with its electronic poppy beat. The two women turned.

When I hear music, it makes me dance

You got the music, here’s my chance

“Hey, hey, baby, come dance with me!” Tony stood and gyrated.

One shot Tony an annoyed look, but the other yelled back in Vietnamese that her mother might be available for a date. Tony pretended to be insulted, his eyes twinkling as the women walked away and he fell back onto the van's bench.

"You see that, Bao? Vietnamese girls like that wouldn't be so fresh back home."

"And their brothers stab you."

"That's how you know you're doing it right." Tony shrugged and leaned back on the bench. "Not that you would know. Mina's in charge of you."

"We're fine."

"See what I mean? *We're fine.* You sound stupid! The *man* is in charge."

Bao laughed. "You're Chinese. What do you know about Vietnamese girls?"

"It doesn't matter if I'm Chinese. I know what girls like."

"You don't know what girls like."

"Girls want a bold man. Like me." Tony laughed, his belly shaking. "Be tough!" He smacked his shoulders and arms.

"You mean bald like you, not bold."

At that moment, a gray Ford pulled into the parking lot. From inside the car, Mina Le waved.

"Huh. Look who's here," Tony snorted. "That girl is nothing but trouble, Bao. Believe me. Too smart." He waved at Mina, stood, and walked into the office.

Bao jogged over to Mina, a heavyset 19-year-old with a bright smile. She rolled down her window to accept his kiss. "What are you doing here?" he asked.

“How’s your speech coming along?” she replied, her voice high and sweet. She smiled at him with what looked to be an attempt at adoration.

Something in him clenched. “What’s happening?”

“I can’t ask?”

“You really want to know about my speech? How about you help me with it first?”

“Then I shall allow you to accompany to gain inspiration.”

“Inspiration?”

“Sure. The Nation of Islam is speaking in the Valley.”

“The Valley? Too many *mi deng* there. You want to get beat up?”

“Shut up.” Mina pursed her lips and fixed him with a steely stare. “Are you coming? I don’t want to go alone.”

Bao flicked his cigarette into the street, trying to remember if his sister and Thanh needed him to watch the children or anything, or if there were any other errands he needed to run. His mind drew a blank. He looked around and saw that Tony was staring at him from the office, shaking his head. Bao rolled his eyes. “Fine. Let’s go.” Bao waved goodbye to Tony and got in the car.

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Green Valley was the historically Black section of the Nauck neighborhood on the other side of Arlington, but everyone called it the Valley. For a while, Bao and Mina drove in silence, enjoying the breeze, the purple evening sky spreading before them, each other. They passed Weenie Beenie, and Bao’s mouth watered at the scent of half-smokes,

the half-pork, half-beef wiener that Weenie Beenie served split down the middle and topped with chili, mustard, relish, and onion. His stomach growled and he tried to distract himself.

"So what's the Nation of Islam?"

A bemused smile spread across Mina's face. "Don't you know anything?"

"Shut up."

"Well, they're a religion. They're not actually part of Islam—a lot of their beliefs are different. And they're really militant. They came from Detroit and follow their own prophet."

"Detroit."

She nodded. "They wear bowties."

"Why do you care?"

At a stop light, she turned to Bao, her face serious. "You can't get mad, okay?"

"What did you do?"

"Nothing!" She looked straight ahead and adjusted her grip on the steering wheel. "I'm writing an article for the Express."

Bao stared at her, hoping he had misheard. But she did not look at him and he knew he had heard correctly when her knuckles turned white on the steering wheel. His heart pounded, off-beat, as if stuck somewhere between fear and amazement. The Little Saigon Express was the local newsletter and had been the target of a small, pro-Communist group that had, for some reason or other, left Vietnam after reunification and resettled locally. Bricks had been thrown through the office's windows, car tires had been

slashed, and one reporter had been beaten to the point of hospitalization one night as he walked home. Bao's mind whirred, trying to process her words. "Why are you writing for them?"

"It's an internship. For college."

"That's... Are you crazy?"

"It's not a big deal."

"Not a big deal?" Bao switched to Vietnamese, his words tumbling out faster than he could think. "I know you've been here longer than me and you know America better, but Vietnam is different—Vietnamese are different. They don't care about anything—they have nothing to lose. They will kill you."

"There is no 'they,' only us," Mina snapped in English. "And there's a lot to lose, you just don't see it."

Bao opened her glove box and slammed it shut, its contents rattling. Then he did it again. And again.

"Stop," Mina snapped. "Just stop. What do you think you're doing?"

"I don't know, I don't know." Bao stared outside at people eating off their cars' trunks in Weenie Beenie's parking lot. His eye caught tiny flashes of light as the setting sun reflected off metal on cars and jewelry in the crowds. A pair of bicyclists crossed in front of Mina's car, heading toward the Washington and Old Dominion Trail. He gripped the edge of the door frame, his thumb turning white as he squeezed the vinyl and metal.

The car behind them honked.

Mina turned the car into the Valley, and weaved through rows of Cape Cod-style homes. Small children played on sidewalks and climbed over fences, yelling and laughing. They drove down neat, narrow roads until they reached a row of small brick shops. Groups of teenagers gathered in a parking lot nearby. The sign for Magic Ned's Bistro hung above the basement restaurant, blinking and shining its neon light on the concrete steps that led down to its entrance. On the other side of the street, young Black men stood along the side of a convenience store. A shiny black BMW with pitch black tint and a Washington, D.C. license plate parked across the street. With his windows down, Bao heard the clamor of talking, bragging, laughing, flirting, and somewhere above it all, the dull thrum of bass from a car stereo. Mina drove a block down, turned around, and parked.

"Look," she said, nodding.

For long moments, nothing happened. Bao rested his arm on the door frame and drummed his fingers on the cool, smooth metal. Late evening descended upon them, and streetlamps flickered on, cutting through the settling grayness. An elderly couple walked arm-in-arm toward them, past their car. They nodded and Mina waved, but Bao stared through them. When they were gone, he followed Mina's gaze to the men standing along the side of convenience store. They looked familiar, some of them, and the strings in his memory pulled; perhaps he had gone to school with them? What was it she wanted him to see? As time went on, their faces sharpened, and he realized he did know several of them. There was Jason, who he had a math class with. Avery, who slept every day during English class. And others, whose names he could not remember. Among the young men

were smaller children who looked to be in middle school. Something in the way they postured looked practiced, rehearsed. Then a dark blue Volvo station wagon pulled up to a corner, and one of the young boys peeled himself off the wall, ran up to the car, reached in, pulled back, stuffed his hands in his pockets, and sauntered away. Bao's hand wandered to the belt buckle at his left, and he absently rubbed the contraption as he watched another car pull up and the same exchange occur. What if the young men on the wall saw them? His stomach fell and he huddled lower in his seat, though he could not hide. When he felt Mina's eyes on him, he straightened and glanced around the block, looking for police.

"The Nation's coming to help them with all this," Mina said. "It's important. For us."

Bao scratched at a small nick in the window guide attached to the car door. Tiny bits of rubber fell apart, and he flicked them into the street. "You know, when Thanh first tried to mow lawns for money, he worked for a *mi deng*, and that guy tried to rip him off because he didn't know English. So Thanh had to leave or the guy would have hurt him. He can't even walk straight, but he was out there pushing that damn lawn mower up and down hills. Just trying to survive. We're not even people to them. And you want to write an article about this? What do they have to do with us?"

"It's about being heard, about everything. Can you just trust me?"

Bao cursed and stared out the window, shaking his head, angry at her, at himself. Mina was smart, the smartest person he knew. She had tried to help him with his speech in high school, had consoled him after. Her family had arrived in America in '75, already

speaking English. So what could she know about real life? They had left on helicopters, hadn't had to brave the seas like him, like so many others. To him, in some respects, she was sheltered. Still, she knew so much more than him about this country, but none of this made any sense. And the way she stared at him, as if testing his weight, his worth… He wiped his forehead.

"Fine," Bao said. He still couldn't understand how what happened in the Valley had anything to do with the Vietnamese. But he trusted her.

***

Zion Baptist Church stood tall in the heart of the Valley, a brick building with white shutters and a high, narrow peak, like Mount Olive's. The parking lot was so filled that several cars were forced to park in the clearing next to the church. The green, grassy field was flat, and three wooden crucifixes stood in the center. Over the center crucifix, a purple cloth lay draped. Bao watched children playing in the field, some chasing each other, others sitting and staring up at the sky as it darkened. Several older teenagers stood watch over the children. As Bao got out of the car, he felt relieved to see two police cruisers sitting untended at the curb of the entrance to the church. He stared straight ahead, refusing to make eye contact with anyone, and held Mina's hand as they walked toward the church. A small crowd had gathered at the front entrance, and loud voices rose above the murmuring people as they approached.

"We're from the Washington Post. We just want to cover the meeting."

"No outsiders." Three large Black men in suits, bowties, and glasses stood unmoving at the top of the steps, blocking a white couple from entering. The man in the

middle, whose baby face betrayed his youth, crossed his arms and stared over the couples' heads, his expression bored. "Sorry."

Bao waited near the back of the crowd, his hand cold and wet in Mina's. An old woman with curly, white hair in front of him nodded her head as she watched the scene unfold.

The white man looked to be about 30, the woman behind him about the same. "This is our beat, and we've covered this area a whole lot, ask anyone. We can help."

"Help?" The baby-faced man crossed his arms and raised an eyebrow so high that Bao could see its arch from where he stood. "Really?"

"Yes," the woman said, her voice wavering. "Help get the word out, bring attention to the problems here."

The baby-faced man shifted his weight, and his shoulders slouched a little, relaxing, and stared down at her. Finally he uncrossed his arms, readjusted his bowtie, and glanced over the crowd, which by now had grown thick with people in suits, dresses, tee shirts and jeans. People of all ages pressed in around them. Bao stood on his tip toes. The baby-faced man's sweeping gaze paused when he spotted Bao, lingering for a microsecond before stepping aside for a group of middle-aged men and women. He nodded to them, mumbling something Bao could not hear. When he straightened, he pointed to Bao and Mina. "There you go," he said to the reporters. "Your next project's right there. Help them." He waved his hand at Mina and Bao, shooing them away. "No outsiders. Sorry."

Mina stiffened, pulled on Bao's hand, and led him away, her grip crushing his fingers. People surged in to take their spots as the two reporters voiced their right to be there. The crowd chuckled.

The air cooled the farther they moved away from the church, and Bao sat on Mina's trunk. Mina paced around her vehicle, muttering. Next to the church, a boy and girl raced from one end of the field to the other, tumbling end over end in crooked cartwheels. Or at least they tried to. After half a dozen cartwheels, they crashed into each other and landed in a heap, their laughter and shrieks rising above the crickets and hum of street lamps. The moon broke into the opening of trees overhead, its light reflecting off the cars' metallic hues, setting the parking lot aglow. The sound of cheers floated over to Bao as another pair of children raced. Mina stopped her pacing.

"Hey, isn't that Tasha Murphy?" Mina nodded to a woman standing with two men on the other side of the parking lot, leaning against a car and watching the crowd. "Didn't you have a crush on her or something?"

Bao looked over, shocked. Mina was right. Tasha was a year older and had tutored him in history in eleventh grade. Her dress was flowery and bright and he remembered her sweet-smelling perfume whenever she leaned in to explain an amendment or help him read the textbook. The back of his neck grew warm.

"You aren't even going to deny it, huh?"

"What?"

"Uh huh." Mina smiled. "Come on, maybe she can get us in." She jogged across the parking lot, calling out to Tasha. Bao walked slowly after her.

“How’s history treating you, Bao?” Tasha asked when he neared.

“I, um, dropped out.” He shrugged. “How are you doing?”

The two men with Tasha tried to hide their snickers, but Bao noticed and his face reddened. They both wore ties and slacks, though one towered awkwardly over the other. Bao was suddenly very aware of his sweaty appearance, his old, gray mechanic’s shirt, his greasy arms, the dirt under his fingernails. He shoved his hands into his blue pants.

“Sorry. Ignore them,” Tasha said. “My big brother and his homeboy. Jerks, sometimes. Well, I’m sorry to hear you dropped out. I’m graduating this coming year. Then law school, maybe.”

Before Bao could think of anything to say, Mina broke in. “That’s awesome, do you know what field?”

Tasha shrugged. “Defense?”

The shorter man spoke up. “I told her business school, but she wants to save the world.” His tall friend patted his arm and they nodded to Bao and Mina and disappeared into the crowd heading into the church.

“School was never for me, I guess,” Bao mumbled. Mina rubbed his arm.

“I’m just trying to get through college,” Mina said. “Doing an internship for the Little Saigon Express. Do you think you can get us in?”

Tasha leaned back against the car and stared at Mina, then Bao, then back at Mina, as if weighing something. “A reporter, huh? Fine, I guess,” she said. “Come on, I’ll walk you in. Just—I don’t know—act like you live here.”

The men in bowties nodded when they saw Tasha lead Mina and Bao past. The trio slipped into a long hallway lit by fluorescent lights. Doors on both sides opened to small, cramped classrooms with chairs and desks stacked high. On a bulletin board in the middle of the hallway, crayon drawings of Jesus hung crowded and lopsided. The end of the hallway opened to a large auditorium, overfilled with people sitting crushed together on pews, or standing along the walls. Bao, Mina, and Tasha stood in the doorway with the last of the stragglers. Mina hunched over a small notepad, scribbling notes. Here and there, small children cried for attention. Tasha waved to a woman near the front of the auditorium. Bao spotted Tasha's brother and her friend leaning against the wall in the corner to his right. A middle aged man in a bright red tie carried a crying girl in a pink dress outside. Stained glass windows lined the walls, but Bao could not make out the designs against the darkness outside. The audience seemed to buzz with excitement, a feeling amplified by the hum of many voices echoing off the ceiling.

Finally, a large man strode across the stage in a suit and tie, his movements smooth and familiar, and Bao recognized that he was probably the minister. Three older white police officers sat in fold out chairs behind the podium, and the minister shook each of their hands before taking his place behind the microphone. He took a sip of water before holding up his hands for quiet.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the minister began. "We are here tonight to welcome our fine brothers and sisters from the Nation of Islam. I hope tonight is the first step in achieving some real results as we take back our young people and our neighborhood from drug peddlers and criminals. It's a great honor for me to introduce Brother Mustafa

Ahmed of the Nation of Islam." He turned to three men walking toward him from offstage. He shook hands with each as they assembled at the podium and sat on a foldout chair next to the police officers.

Brother Mustafa was a small man, his bowtie bright blue, and he gripped the podium's front edge and leaned forward until the microphone nearly touched his face. Then he relaxed and straightened, his lips pursed as he took in the crowd before him. Bao stiffened as the man scanned the room, his glasses doing little to dilute the piercing eyes behind the frames. He felt wholly out of place and crept behind the doorway, hoping to find some sort of cover.

"Brothers and sisters," Brother Mustafa said, his words calm and measured. "Friends. I want to thank you for opening your homes to us at the Nation of Islam. We have shown communities, small and large, just like yours, all across this country, how to patrol themselves, how to exert control over outside influences which diminish our humanity and degrade our worth. Now I want to make it clear that we aren't here to point fingers tonight. We are here to support our children, our families all across this land, from sea to shining sea, from one ghetto to the next, neighborhood to neighborhood, brothers to brothers, sisters to sisters."

Brother Mustafa paused, his gaze resting on Bao and Mina. "Resources are thin. You cannot trust this country to provide anything for us. Even though they see—they see with their beady little eyes—that we have the strength to change things in our communities, in the government, in the nation. We have a voice and we will be heard. We don't need anyone to speak for us, to save us. And they for damn sure don't want us

here. They don't want to be reminded that we're here, reminded of all the crimes they've committed. All the crimes they still perpetrate. So they get busy in all the countries of Africa. Helping, they call it. They're in, what is it, Indochina, or the Middle East, or in some jungle somewhere doing something to somebody in the name of saving souls and meeting goals. They want these newcomers to come in, and then ask us to go without. They set up this perfect model of personhood among minorities, and don't be fooled: they point to us with every bit of condescension in their hearts and tell us that it's our fault we haven't made it. We don't work hard. We don't work hard enough for a country built on the backs of Black slaves, over the corpses of the Native American. We aren't smart enough in a country that's stolen all the arts of the Black man and woman and repackaged them as their own. They stand their poster children up and ask why aren't we more like them. The hypocrisy. The country hasn't changed, and we haven't magically forgotten the last four, five centuries. We're right here, and we aren't going anywhere, no sir. You can't erase us, and you can't erase history, no matter how hard you try.

"We've been hosed down, strung up, kicked out, flipped all around 'till we don't know what way is what, and now what do we have? Drugs up to our necks. There's not a single Black man or woman overseeing the passage of these poisons into this country. But it's up to us to stop it spreading. Fine. Because it's for our children, for our future. Because we're alone, and they begrudge us our place in this land, and if we're going to stay, then we're going to do it ourselves on our own terms because if they had their way, oh, we would be out of here so fast…

“Now, we have some fine policemen here tonight, at least I’m told they’re fine, I don’t know—but let’s be frank: we are alone. Alone. And we will stand up. We will stand tall. After this assembly, we will speak with your representatives in the neighborhood watch, and we will go over the techniques we employ to defend our homes from drug dealers, and we will implement a plan of action that will reach out to these youths. Thank you.”

Next, an older policeman stood at the podium and introduced himself as the chief of the Arlington police to tepid applause. He reminded the audience that vigilantism was not going to be tolerated, that they hoped the Nation’s intervention would produce a positive outcome for all involved. His office was open, as it always was, he said, to their community as much as anyone else’s. That he treated everyone equally.

Afterward, Bao felt confused, unsure if he understood anything any better, and he followed Tasha and Mina from the church to the parking lot in a daze. When they reached Tasha’s car, Bao sat on her trunk, letting his feet dangle, and watched the crowds of people pour from the building, their skin brown and bright in the night air. The children playing in the field were gone, and the cars around them slowly filtered out. Fireflies blinked in the dark, small, iridescent dots left alone to flicker and die out, or to burn bright and solitary in their flight. Soon the parking lot was empty except for a handful of cars, and Bao noticed that two of their license plates were from New York and Pennsylvania. Mina scribbled in her notepad, her pen scratching at the yellow paper as Tasha paced back and forth.

“What are you writing?” Tasha asked.

“Everything, man. Everything.” Mina’s mouth twisted and she tapped the notepad with the butt of her pen. “What do you think?”

“What, you want a quote?”

“Up to you.”

“I can’t imagine my Aunt Florence taking down a drug dealer with her walker.” Tasha laughed. “The Nation’s kind of nuts, but they try to do good sometimes, I think. But we’ll see how it goes.”

Bao broke his silence. “Why’d they come to a Christian church?”

“It’s not really a church thing, or a religion thing. Hell, I don’t even go to church anymore. But I live here, and the church always finds its way into my way.”

Mina closed her notepad and hopped onto the trunk next to Bao. “Bao’s a church boy.”

“You are?” Tasha asked, her tone teasing.

“Not really,” Bao stuttered. How could he explain? Stupid Mina. “I go, but…”

“He’s even got to give a speech on Sunday in front of everyone.”

“Really. What on?” Tasha crossed her arms and tilted her head, as though she were inspecting a strange bug.

Bao shrugged. “I don’t know. About the church and my life I guess. They sponsored us, so I guess about that and about Vietnam?” He stared at his feet floating above the ground and shook his head. “The reverend just sprung it on me.”

Tasha patted his shoulder, as though she was consoling him, and with her other hand she play-punched his chin. “Welcome to America.”

"What do you mean?"

"It's like Brother Mustafa said. Some people think they're helping, they really do. Like they think it's their duty to protect people's souls, or because they have an obligation to lesser people to raise them up, or—it's all bullshit. They just want to look in the mirror and tell themselves that they're good and perfect." She shrugged. "They just want to be reminded that people like you or me can't possibly do anything without them. That they're better than you."

Bao remembered what Tony had said earlier: *They're just going to parade you around like a little doll*. He hadn't paid much attention to his manager then, but now it was as though something secret and dark was finding the light for the first time, and all the gunk and noxious matter that had covered it burned away. Mina and Tasha spoke in low tones about their futures, but Bao didn't hear them, didn't see anything for him beyond the week ahead. He thought about standing before his congregation to deliver his speech, but this time, when he lapsed into silence, he let it drag on and on and on. His silence grew and swelled, becoming a blanket that covered the people before him. They murmured and shook their heads, disappointed and ashamed for him. But still he kept silent until his breathing echoed and thundered through the auditorium and drew the churchgoers watching him out of their seats and out of the building, fleeing. And he was okay with that. *Have some pride*, Tony had said. Bao decided he wouldn't speak that Sunday.

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On Friday afternoon, Tony hollered that Bao had a phone call. When he entered the office, Tony slid his pay across the counter. Bao paused and ripped open the envelope. $300 in cash. About $200 would go to his sister and Thanh to help with rent and groceries and utilities, and the rest to whatever he needed. Finally, wiping his hands, he picked up the receiver and was met with the sounds sobbing.

"I was coming home and they surrounded me outside the People's Drug."

"Who? Who's outside?"

"I don't know, some protesters, I think. A bunch of people. They were shoving me and yelling and all this crap. I had to push some lady and run." In the background, he heard faint chanting, but couldn't make out their words. "I called the police, but they said they filed all the paperwork, and as long as they don't start destroying anything, they can be here." The sound of shattering glass filled the earpiece. "Oh my god. I think someone's throwing bottles."

"Okay, just stay put, I'm coming over now." Bao slammed the receiver down and turned to Tony. "I have to go. If she calls back, tell her I'm on my way. I'm taking the Toyota."

Bao sped to the Buckingham neighborhood, which was filled with garden-style apartments that had become popular with Southeast Asian refugees and Latino immigrants over the past decade. When Bao reached the corner of Pershing Drive and Glebe Road, he stopped, his mouth agape. Throngs of people on the other side of the intersection moved back and forth, spilling into the parking lots of stores and apartments. They blocked the streets in the neighborhood, blanketed the entrances to the stores. He

pulled into the Buckingham Post Office on his left, turned off the engine, and assessed the scene through his rearview mirror.

Mina's apartment building was next to the People's Drug, and stared down at the protestors, but all the curtains and blinds were down or closed. Gathered outside the People's Drug and around a makeshift stage was the densest group of people, some with signs that they moved up and down. A man paced on stage, speaking through a microphone. Behind him, three men waved large American flags. Bao twisted in his seat and squinted at the protest signs. He read all sorts of mottos, from *Go Home* to *My Child Died in Vietnam* to *Keep Arlington Safe*. The crowd cheered, and among them were white and black and brown faces, open and wide and angry.

The longer Bao watched the mass of protestors, the more he saw. The large crowd thinned as it spread across Pershing Drive and into the parking lot of Glebe Market. Outside Glebe Market, a man stood on a concrete barrier and gesticulated to the people around him. The people in the Glebe Market parking lot had their backs to the other speaker, and their signs read slogans like *Acceptance!* and *Fight Racism!*, yet what surprised Bao the most was the man speaking to them: a rotund man whose long beard blew in the breeze and stood atop the narrow barrier with the balance of a much smaller man. Reverend Vernon.

Bao got out of the Toyota and was greeted with jumbled chants from across the street. At first he thought he'd been spotted, but nobody was facing him. He hurried across the street to Reverend Vernon's group, hiding his face as best he could by turning it away from the protestors. As he approached, the faces of several members of his

congregation came into focus, people he recognized peppered among strangers. There were young and old faces, angry faces and happy ones, all mixed together, some having come to see the spectacle, some having come to have their voices heard. He glanced quickly at the other side of Pershing Drive. From his vantage point, he could not tell where one group ended and the other began. But people from Reverend Vernon's group, a contingent of four—two men and two women in shorts and tee-shirts—stood on the sidewalk near him, facing the others, and screamed obscenities, calling the protestors pigs, and ignorant, and assholes. Reverend Vernon pleaded for calm.

"You know, we mustn't, really, allow the basest of emotions to dehumanize us. Ladies and gentlemen, across the street you see the worst of us. They would, if they had their way, eject people who need our help, back into the oceans of misery. But they don't see, because they are blind; they don't see what is right before them: a people from the farthest corners of the Orient, here, ready to do God's work. And work they will! We see that in their relatives who have been here for decades—for centuries! We aren't talking about a group who comes here, expecting handouts, but a group who, by their elbow grease and intellect and humanity, work diligently toward making their lives better for themselves. This is the American Dream, isn't it? The Orientals have proven it—have proven they deserve a place to contribute. I say we welcome them in our homes. This is our test, ladies and gentlemen, of our Christianity, of our tolerance. And I say we must pass it, I say it not for me, but for our souls and our lives and our country."

Bao wondered what the reverend was talking about. He was just a high school dropout working at an auto shop that, at any moment, might get shut down. Thanh could

barely walk, could barely speak English, could barely find work. His sister worked and tended to the children, and worked, and tended to the children, her youth slipping away faster than any of them could have ever imagined. He slouched between two large men, and hoped Reverend Vernon would not see him. He suspected he'd be asked to stand and speak if he was spotted. He turned toward the speaker across the street, a man in his mid-forties with a brown beard and brown eyes, a face that was utterly indistinguishable from anyone else.

"Keep our communities pure," the man screeched through the microphone. "We can't afford to pay out of our own pockets to feed these people! We can't afford to feed ourselves! And we're asked to accept these people who killed our sons and fathers and brothers in *their* jungles? Jane Brandleton, do you want to pay for this welfare?" He gestured toward a middle-aged woman who held a sign over her head that read, "Vietnamese Killed My Baby" above a photo of a young man in a military uniform. She shook her head and mouthed *no*. "No," the man continued. "Of course not. They bring their problems here and expect us to help them. Well, what do you say to that?" The crowd screamed their disapproval.

A bottle from behind Bao flew through the air and shattered on the ground in front of a man with a small girl sitting on his shoulders. It seemed a blur, then. The crowd pulsed and throbbed as it rose around him like the birth of a wave, and he floated among the hands and legs and arms and torsos around him, and then the floating became pushing. People surged around him toward those on the opposite side of the street, and suddenly he was being pulled, yanked along. He spun around and faced a wall of bright

colors, shirts and pants, all moving and shifting as hands grabbed and pushed him aside. Across the street, men and women charged forward. Bao stumbled and fell to his hands and knees. All around him, random feet stomped on the ground, pivoting and shuffling, and the points of their toes and shoes scratched and clawed at the ground in their blind charge toward the other protestors. Covering his head with one hand, Bao crawled toward what he thought was the back of the crowd, toward Glebe Market. He looked down at his hand, suddenly slick with blood, and he couldn't remember getting cut. Pebbles and dirt and bits of glass were pressed into his palm around the gash, and he struggled to his feet, pushing his way to the back of the crowd. He shoved a man's face away, leaving bright red streaks by his nose. Suddenly, the crowd opened and fresh air wrapped cool fingers around him. He gasped and breathed as he stumbled and leaned against the market's brick wall. In the glass storefront, posters promoted a sale on chicken breasts.

Bao heaved and choked back whatever threatened to come up. He turned to watch the wall of people, of back muscles stretching t-shirts as they moved and shoved. Somewhere in the middle of the crowd, signs were swung like axes on the heads of others. In the street, pairings of men rolled on the ground, punching and twisting and clawing at one another. Bao could not tell one side from another. Brown and black and white and red and yellow skin rolled in the dirt and asphalt and concrete amid clouds of dust. Where were the police?

Bao ran. He didn't know the direction, he didn't care. He ran until it was quiet enough that he could turn around and see the distance between him and the goings on in the parking lot. People pushed combatants apart, signs lay strewn on the ground, trampled

in the eagerness to get at their opponents. He watched for a while, and the crowd petered and died, the spark going out, the passion and outrage from both sides lost. Soon, it was a melee of half-hearted men and women, some walking away, others running for it. Blue and red lights flickered above police cruisers that turned onto the street, and he headed back toward the mass of people, to Mina's apartment.

When Mina opened the door, Bao saw that she'd been crying, and he gathered her in his arms, trembling, silent, because he didn't know what to say, and didn't know if there was indeed anything left to say, anything left for him to do.

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Sunday arrived. Bao wore a suit that Thanh had found at the Goodwill down the street, a light brown affair over a yellow button shirt and black tie. When he stood before the congregation, his hands resting on the podium, he felt his breath catch. The 150 or so people watched him from the pew. Several men in the back had bruised and scratched faces, men he had avoided week in and week out. One man leaned toward another, their smiles bright below black eyes. He cleared his throat, uncertain of how to begin. Most of the previous night was spent writing his speech, throwing it away, starting over, and rereading what he had written. The paper he set on the podium in front of him was crumpled and stained with coffee. When he glanced at Reverend Vernon, who sat in the front row, the reverend nodded and smiled. He took a deep breath.

"When my family left Vietnam, we never thought we'd find another home. Nobody on our boat did. There was a girl from my village, little older than me; well, her mom, she died. She was old and sick. Couldn't handle leaving Vietnam. Before she died,

we tried to tell her that we would find a home, that everything in Vietnam would be fixed, I mean replaced, soon. People lost everything they had when the South fell. Lives, family, wealth, education, everything. Men were locked away like animals to do hard labor.

"So, on the boat, I remember the girl crying and trying to stop us from throwing her mother's body overboard. Someone held her back so that others could throw the body into the water. But the engine had died already, so we were dead in the water. The man who sold us the boat had taken our money and put us out onto the sea with a bad engine. So we just floated there. Up, down, all day, for a week. The body was next to us the entire time, and the girl cried, all day, all night. Her mother's head kept rubbing against the side of the boat. One of the men who threw the body overboard got mad, said she should be happy that we didn't eat her. Things were bad. My niece was only three or four, and I was afraid she'd die."

Churchgoers leaned forward. The woman sitting next to Reverend Vernon gasped into a handkerchief and the reverend put his arm around her, comforting her grief. A man in the middle of the congregation licked his lips, eagerly drinking in his story. Bao swallowed hard, choking back his vomit.

"God, and Jesus saved us that day. I can't express how much better it is in America. We knew, in our hearts, that in America, people like those in this church know how to treat others. With respect, with compassion, and with love, for every single person, no matter where we come from. My family and I thank God every day for a place here, at your table, with everyone else, as equals. Who but you gave us a chance to prove

ourselves worthy? Who but you saw us for who we are, for what we are. We're here because of you. Thank you."

People applauded, their faces shining. Several people in the back of the church stood and clapped. Bao stared straight ahead as he walked back to his spot on the pew next to Thanh, and waited for the service to end. In the donation basket, he left $300, his entire paycheck. Afterward, as Bao walked down the aisle to leave the church for what would be the last time, sunlight filtered through stained glass windows, through criss-crossed panes, and for a moment, as he looked at the floor, the shadow falling on the carpet formed a grid, and reminded him, faintly, of a fence.

MISSING

January 1989

Nobody could remember the last time Mrs. Phan had been outside. Certainly not in months, maybe even years. Nobody knew why. Whenever Kim Tran brought it up, Ly shrugged it off. Kim had only seen Mrs. Phan once, even though she and Ly had been friends since kindergarten, and that was when she brought Ly her homework after she had missed school for two days. But one icy January afternoon, Mrs. Phan stood in the doorway to Kim's family's small apartment on Frederick Street, shivering in thin satiny pajamas. She blinked swollen eyes and adjusted the light wool coat that lay half-draped over her shoulders.

"You are Kim, correct?" Mrs. Phan asked in choked Vietnamese. "I'm Ly's mother." The small bony woman eyed the living room behind Kim but it was empty. She reached up to pat a large bandage covering her left temple as if making herself presentable. It looked to be the newest thing on her.

"Yes, I'm Kim." Kim tripped over her Vietnamese. "What's wrong, Mrs. Phan?" She backed away from the door to let her into the sparsely furnished apartment.

"Oh, child," Mrs. Phan wailed. She leaned on Kim's shoulder for support as she slipped her sandals off and shuffled in. Her ratty sandals were covered in snow, her feet

bright red. Mrs. Phan turned, cupped Kim's face in thin cold hands, and leaned in close, so close Kim smelled her sour breath. Tiny spidery veins spread beneath the woman's pale dry skin around her eyes and nose. "Kim, tell your old aunt where Ly went. You're her friend, you're like sisters!"

"I don't know," Kim stuttered, shaking free of the woman's grasp. "I haven't seen her since last week. She's gone?"

Mrs. Phan nodded and ambled into the living room with a strange loping gait, as if just learning to walk, and collapsed on the sofa. She rubbed her head and the bandage on her temple tore a little. A glimmer of bright red flashed beneath it. The room shrank around Mrs. Phan and Kim thought how easy it was for the small woman to blend in with the old cracked paint, the bare walls, the secondhand furniture. A chill crawled up Kim's back and she wrapped her arms around herself.

Ly used to talk about running away but it was never real—it was too big an idea, too far out of the realm of reality. Kim assumed all along that Ly saw it the same way. Fun to talk about. But just talk. She was only 13, a year older than Kim, though they were both in seventh grade—where could she go? It was just a stupid fantasy. Except now she was gone. Questions ran through her mind. Was she kidnapped? What if she was lying dead in a gutter somewhere? How long had she been gone? Teachers at school had lectured her class on the dangers of strangers and what they did to boys and girls. Kim wiped her hands on her pants.

"So truly, Ly didn't tell you anything?" Mrs. Phan asked, staring at the darkened television.

“No.” Ly didn’t tell her these things. Not like she used to.

Mrs. Phan buried her face in her hands. Kim stared down at the old dingy carpeting, at stains left from all their years there, offering the sobbing woman the only thing she could: a small measure of privacy. She wondered if her mother, or even her father, would know what to do. No. They didn’t know anything. When they weren’t sleeping or working, they were yelling or making Kim do the most basic of tasks, like calling the doctor’s office for them, or translating their needs at the store, or helping them read notices from the bank. Kim glanced at Mrs. Phan and saw only a small huddled shape that did not resemble a person, not even a little. She looked like an old broken animal too long alive, too pitiful for pity, and too empty to be anything but a shadow. Kim felt the tickle of disdain spread swift and cold down her chest.

From one of the bedrooms, a loud crash sounded. Bobby.

Kim walked down the hallway to the alcove which split the entrances to the apartment’s two bedrooms. She stuck her head into the large room she shared with her two younger brothers. Six-year-old Bobby sat in the middle of the room between the bunk bed and Kim’s small mattress, pushing a dump truck back and forth on his hands and knees. A small action figure lay helpless under the truck’s wheels. Bobby looked up and held out the truck, his face brightening. Martin, their eight-year-old brother, had left earlier to a classmate’s house, leaving Bobby to play by himself while Kim did her homework. She shushed him with a finger to her lips. He pouted.

In the living room, the story tumbled out of Mrs. Phan in chokes and whimpers. Ly had gone to bed Friday night as normal but in the morning she was gone. Ly’s father

and Mrs. Phan had spent the weekend waiting and searching. But now it was Monday and Ly's father had to go to work or the waste processing plant would have surely fired him. So the task fell to Mrs. Phan. Soon she began cursing her daughter.

"I needed her to go pay our bills and get the groceries. What can I do now? They tell me to come back with someone who speaks English. All she thinks about is herself."

"Did you call the police?"

"Police! What do they care? Call them and even if they find her, they'll take her away. That's all they do. Kim, we give up so much for you children, and this is how we're repaid? In Vietnam, this could never happen. Children respect their parents."

Kim nodded, questioning all the while what it was a house-bound mother like her had sacrificed. Mrs. Phan hiccupped and gulped air as she shook and pinched her legs. Kim wanted to scream that if she was just *normal for God's sake* maybe Ly wouldn't have run away but instead she paced the room.

"What else do I have?" Mrs. Phan mumbled, hanging her head.

Kim stared at the television, at her textbook and papers spread out on the old coffee table. She wanted Mrs. Phan to leave. She wanted to finish her report on the Bill of Rights. She tried to think of any places Ly could stay, any names of friends who might take her in, anything to send the woman away. Mrs. Phan's bony fingers reached up to hold hers.

"Can you…"

"I can look for her," Kim said, pulling her arm away.

Mrs. Phan stared at the floor. "Thank you, child. Thank you."

And then she was gone.

From the window, Kim watched the small woman stumble and slip over the ice as she climbed the hill where their apartment was situated. The door to her bedroom opened and Bobby crept out.

“Who’s that, Kim?” he asked. He lay on the sofa and propped his feet on the armrest.

“Ly’s mom.”

“What’d she want?”

“Ly ran away.”

“Why’d she do that?”

Kim shrugged.

“Want to play checkers?”

“Go get me that green box under my bed.”

“That’s not checkers.”

“Just go, stupid.”

While Bobby was gone, Kim called Martin to come home. Martin relented after she said he could have his friend over. Bobby came back with a green shoe box and she sat on the sofa to search among her collection of photos and letters and notes. Finally she found a photo of Ly taken the previous month in the journalism room at school. Ly had stopped by out of boredom as Kim worked on the layout for that week’s edition. It was one of the few times in the past year that they had spent much time together. Kim spent her time doing schoolwork and working on projects and joining clubs while Ly was

interested in clothes and makeup and boys. In the photo, Ly rolled her eyes with a half-smile, her expression somewhere between playful and annoyed. She was a pretty girl. Plenty of boys paid her attention. Some of them stole makeup and clothes for her. Kim wondered if they expected anything in return, if they had anything to do with where she was just then. For a moment, Kim felt a sad distance from her friend, as though she were remembering the face of someone who had left her life long ago. Bobby punched her in the arm, and she waved him off.

"Stop it. I'll play checkers with you when I get back. Martin's coming home now, okay? Be good until he gets here."

"Where you going?"

"I'm going to go to Uncle Bao's to see if Aunt Mina can help me make some posters." But for a while she sat completely still except for the photograph in her hands. She turned it over and over, its image wavering in the light.

***

Kim rode the bus from her South Arlington neighborhood toward Clarendon, the district in North Arlington that was once Little Saigon, and where Uncle Bao and his girlfriend, Mina Le, still lived. When they were in fifth grade, Ly taught Kim how to use the metro system. The first few times terrified her. How did they know where the bus was going? What times did buses arrive? What if she didn't recognize her stop? She smiled at the memory of Ly laughing at her. *So what if you miss the bus? The world doesn't go on forever. You'll get where you're going, and if you don't, maybe where you end up is better*. Then she imagined her friend tied up in the trunk of a car and her smile vanished.

She wished the bus would go faster. Each stop made her curse the people that got on and she gnawed her lip as she stared out the window at the overcast sky. The bus rumbled past piles of snow towering over sidewalks and curbs, the edges of each pile grayed and soiled, hardening into ice.

As the bus approached Clarendon, empty storefronts appeared and passed. A few stubborn Vietnamese storeowners clung to their businesses but it seemed to Kim that these shops no longer had a place among the new restaurants and stores. The few Vietnamese shops left in the area reminded her of what Ly told her once about applying makeup. *Just a little will change everything. Don't overdo it. Let it bring out what's underneath.* Except here the few remaining shops seemed to lengthen Little Saigon's final days. The bus passed a boarded-up building, a massive block-sized husk that had once housed a large Vietnamese department store. Old torn flyers clung to its dark windows. She thought it looked rather scary and wondered what would take its place.

Kim stepped off the bus several blocks from Uncle Bao's apartment. The cold dry air scraped her face red and raw and she pulled the collar of her coat as high as it would go. Her nose ran and her breath drifted upward in white steam billowing from chapped lips. The sky hung low and stared at her behind gray and misshapen clouds gathering dark and dense as the afternoon stretched to evening. In yards and streets, small children played in bright snow clothes, yellows and blues and oranges peeking out beneath the white of snow. She listened to the tumult and laughter, their loud high-pitched whines arguing over whether or not someone had been killed by a snowball. The snow had fallen thick over the weekend, burying sidewalks, streets, and cars, and though the plows had

done what they could, the deeper into the neighborhood she went, the more she found herself picking her way over icy mounds crushed and hardened beneath people's boot heels. What if Ly was buried under the snow somewhere? Would she be found before all the snow melted? A snowball shattered at her feet. She ran. She reached the apartment out of breath. Aunt Mina opened the door.

"Kim," Aunt Mina said, surprised. "What are you doing here? You look frozen!"

"Ly ran away."

"*What*?"

Kim could only nod as she gasped for breath.

"When?"

Kim slid off her galoshes and slipped out of her coat as she related Mrs. Phan's story. "And Mrs. Phan won't even call the police because she thinks they'll take Ly away."

"Oh my God."

"I don't know what to do," Kim said. "I told Mrs. Phan I'd go looking for her. But we hardly hang out anymore. I don't know where she could be." She pulled out the photo. "If I make some posters, can you write it in Vietnamese for me?"

"Okay," Aunt Mina said. She walked down the hall.

In the living room, among cardboard boxes stacked to the ceiling, the television streamed the news. Police milled about an elementary school's playground. Yellow and black tape wrapped around its fence.

“Did you see that?” Aunt Mina searched among boxes labeled *Little Saigon Express*, the newspaper where she worked as the sole reporter. Its office had been firebombed the previous year, scaring off the staff. The news showed school photos of five Asian children, and under their faces, their names. The graphic screamed “Massacre at Elementary School.”

“Oh,” Kim gasped. “Where is this?”

“California,” Aunt Mina said, not looking up from her search. “Five kids dead. Vietnamese and Cambodian, it looks like. They said a couple dozen more were injured.” From a box, she pulled out a marker and a blank sheet of paper. “Some crazy man shot them during recess.”

Kim stumbled backward and fell onto the sofa. She had spent countless afternoons rubbing its corduroy fabric, giggling at the way the soft bristles on each pipe scratched and rubbed her skin. But now her head spun and stomach roiled and she gripped the seat cushions to brace against whatever was in her threatening to come up. On the television, an ambulance drove away from the playground, its lights spinning round and round.

Aunt Mina clicked the dial on the television. “Let’s go. We’ll make copies at Madam Charleston’s. She owes me a check for some ad space anyway.”

Outside, the neighborhood was empty. The sky darkened to the hue of early evening and the last bits of afternoon light faded in the west. Stillness settled around them as they walked down the block. Cars lay untouched under snow and the naked trees lining the sidewalks reached upward and outward with bare branches, their frozen fingers and

spindly twigs scratching at the air. The children had disappeared from the block but Kim heard hollow and distant screams and laughter from places she could not see. She thought about Ly and the dead children in California and questioned her belief in coincidence or luck or fate. Her only answer was the wind through her long straight hair and Aunt Mina's gentle pat, pushing her onward.

***

The bells tied to the door clattered and spoke a cold broken melody as Kim and Aunt Mina pushed their way into Dalat Market, a one-stop grocery store and fortune telling parlor off Clarendon Boulevard. Madam Suong Charleston had been lazily flipping through a magazine on the glass counter in the corner to their right but straightened when she saw them. She was a large woman with black hair tied in a bun and she wore dangly gold earrings in the shape of squares. Red paint clung to the shop's walls, a bright contrast to Madam Charleston's muted blue and green kimono. Kim passed aisles filled with baskets of Asian pears, imported fruits, sweets and candies, packages of dried noodles, and rows of bottles and cans. Shelves lining the walls rose high above her, each filled with trinkets and knick-knacks Kim did not recognize. Small porcelain figurines of children in kung fu poses stared up at them in the counter before the glass storefront. The ceiling lights were dimmed to a warm glow and the musty scent of incense lingered in the air. Kim stood next to Aunt Mina at the counter displaying rows of Virginia Lottery tickets, glass pipes in strange shapes and colors, and several copies of a book, *Unlocking Your Pet's Inner Eye for Money and Fame*. A piece of cardboard hung behind Madam Charleston. On it were her rates written in black marker

for palm reading ($10), tarot reading ($20), general psychic consultation ($35), and a warning that the store asked for identification for all alcohol and tobacco purchases.

"Suong," Aunt Mina greeted.

"Mina." Madam Charleston stared straight through them at some point in the distance. Her head remained still as she rolled her pitch black eyes down at Kim. "And who are you?"

"This is Kim, Bao's niece."

Kim bowed and recited a formal greeting.

Madam Charleston blinked slowly and when her eyes reopened, she was staring straight ahead again. "Of course you are. What brings you here today, child? Do you wish to know how handsome your husband will be? How many children you will have? Or…" She dropped low, stared straight in Kim's eyes, and whispered in a husky voice. "Perhaps the date of your death?"

Kim stepped back and grabbed Aunt Mina's hand.

Aunt Mina tsked. "Stop it, Suong. Don't listen to this idiot, Kim."

Madam Charleston's round face spread in a smile and her cheeks glowed red. She leaned over the counter, pinched Kim's cheek, and winked. Kim let go of Aunt Mina's hand and forced a polite smile. She imagined Ly laughing at her.

"Anyway," Aunt Mina said. "Do you have the check yet for the ad space?"

Madame Charleston snorted. "Oh, and she's supposed to scare me?" She put up her fists.

"Uh huh." Aunt Mina glanced around the store. "Not much business?"

Madam Charleston shrugged large, meaty shoulders. “People will start coming again for *Tet*. Let me find my checkbook.” She bent under the counter, rummaging through files and binders, the knot on the back of her kimono bobbing in the air.

From the rear of the store, a light-skinned Latino man entered with a handcart filled with cardboard boxes, the logos indecipherable.

“Where do you want this?” the man called.

Madame Charleston’s head popped up and she squinted. She waved to the other side of the store. “Ancient Chinese Secrets,” she yelled, going back to her search.

He grunted and disappeared.

“Ancient Chinese secrets?” Kim repeated.

Aunt Mina shook her head.

“Finally!” Madame Charleston straightened and waved her checkbook in the air, her face flushed. “And yes, Ancient Chinese Secrets. Very mysterious.”

Kim turned to the other end of the store. She heard the thump of boxes being unloaded and the ripping of cardboard. “What’s there?” She imagined little furry creatures she couldn’t feed after midnight, or books with child empresses who needed new names, or maps to underground treasure.

Madam Charleston leaned over the counter and whispered. “Automatic rice cookers. Pots, pans, utensils. Chopsticks. Deep fryers, even. Tell your parents we have everything they need.”

Kim blushed. Aunt Mina rolled her eyes. Madam Charleston nodded solemnly and flipped open the checkbook, wrote a check, signed it with a flourish, and handed it over. Kim re-read the fortune telling rates behind Madam Charleston.

"Do you get a lot of customers for fortune telling?" Kim asked.

"Oh yes, sure. People want to know the future. Especially if it's bad. The good they forget, but the bad they think about for a long, long time. Something bad happens, and they think about what they should have done to avoid it. It stays with them, always." Madam Charleston leaned on her elbow on the counter. "If I like someone, maybe I'll tell them bad news, so they keep coming back to me." She winked.

"So can you find where someone is?"

Madame Charleston glanced at Aunt Mina.

"Her friend ran away."

Madame Charleston shook her head. "I'm sorry, sweetie. I'm not that kind of fortune teller."

Kim wondered what kind of fortune teller she was.

"Did you hear about those children in California?" Madame Charleston asked. "So sad."

"Mmm," Aunt Mina agreed. "It's all the news talks about." She folded her arms, turned around, and leaned against the counter, letting its edge press against the small of her back. "They keep talking about that man. They'll have his whole life story from when he was little. Watch. But nobody's going to remember those children. Just him."

Kim tugged the corner of Aunt Mina's shirt and held up the photo of Ly.

Aunt Mina turned back around. “Can we use your photocopier to make some posters?”

“You can take the cost out of my next ad. I was thinking of doing sexy poses.”

Kim taped Ly’s photo to the middle of a poster while Aunt Mina told Madam Charleston about Ly’s disappearance. Kim usually would have worried over the placement of the photo and done all she could to make sure everything was straight and perfectly angled. But it didn’t matter tonight. She listed Ly’s home phone number and filled in her friend’s height and build. After Aunt Mina finished translating the words into Vietnamese, Madam Charleston waved her off to the corner of the store where the photocopier stood.

When Kim returned with a large stack of posters, Madam Charleston was on the phone, screaming in Vietnamese. Aunt Mina looked over a poster and nodded her approval. Madam Charleston slammed down the phone.

“Stupid!” she spat in Vietnamese. “She blames me for her husband cheating? I told her how to catch him! Nobody blames him, and she wants to blame *me*. And you know what? It’s been two years. Two years, and she still calls me right away when she’s drunk.”

“How’d you know he was cheating?” Aunt Mina asked in English.

Madam Charleston sighed, stared at Aunt Mina, then slowly tilted her head and jerked a thumb at the fortune telling rates. “And you worked for a newspaper?” Her English sounded more relaxed after her Vietnamese outburst.

“You read her fortune?” Kim asked, confused.

“Shut up, Suong,” Aunt Mina said. “Seriously, how’d you find out?”

Madam Charleston walked to the large glass storefront and waved her arms as if she was presenting something marvelous. “My crystal ball.”

Aunt Mina raised an eyebrow.

“You are too hard-headed, you know that?” Madam Charleston pointed to the other side of the street. “See that restaurant? There’s another one on this side of the street, facing it.”

Kim walked around the counter and pressed her face against the cold storefront. When she pulled away, there was fog where she had touched the glass. “Those *pho* restaurants?”

“Yes, those. The one on the other side of the street was here first. A family owned it, and the wife took one day off, and the husband took a different day. Work, work, work. All the time. More and more money. Then I started seeing the husband leave the restaurant on the days the wife was off. Some girl came to pick him up. Really pretty. Always the same one, and he wouldn’t come back for hours. I saw him give her necklaces and other little gifts, right there in front of their restaurant. Who knows where they went.” She shrugged and tapped the glass. “Then the wife asks me what I think, because she thought they were missing money. I tell her I must meditate, so she’ll pay me. Finally I flip some cards, say this, say that, and that’s all. Divorce. Then she opens that shop on this side of the street to compete, to close his business. Now she calls me, says I lied, didn’t tell her the future, just looked outside. 45 dollars! She wants to harass me for 45 dollars from two years ago. These people. In America, money, money, money.

She has her own *pho* restaurant but she keeps chasing more and more. It's all she has now."

"But she's right. And you *charged* her," Kim said.

"Of course! Nothing's free. What if he found out she learned it from me? What if he comes in here with a knife?" She tapped her finger against her chest. "I should have charged *more*."

Kim looked outside at the restaurants for a while, thinking. Among the dying Vietnamese shops and restaurants in Clarendon, two *pho* restaurants seemed excessive. She imagined two birds fighting and pecking each another, their claws ripping and tearing until they both fell from the sky. The couple vaguely reminded her of her own parents, who were always missing, working at one job or another. Saving for a future, they said. She wondered if the feuding restaurant owners had any children, and what they thought of their parents. And then she thought of Ly and whether she was warm, if she was safe. Her stomach sank.

"Kim," Aunt Mina said, drawing her from her thoughts. "We should probably get going, start putting up these posters. Thanks for letting us use your machine."

Madam Charleston stopped them.

"You children, you're American," she said. "Not like in Vietnam. Your friend would never run away in Vietnam. Here you do whatever you want, no parents, nobody cares, nobody teaches you anything. Everyone just works, works, works." She cocked her head from side to side, searching for the words. "They work because they're poor, and they need to survive, so of course. But they keep looking up, up at things—chasing

things. Success. It goes on and on. It makes us all crazy. And you see what happens? Tell me who suffers."

Kim followed Aunt Mina out of the shop, shoved her hands into her coat pockets, and braced herself against the cold. Though Madam Charleston seemed pleasant enough, Kim wasn't sure what to make of her words. The stack of posters pinned under her arm shook and threatened to fly away with each gust of wind, her grip on them delicate and feeble.

***

As Kim and Aunt Mina approached the main strip running through Clarendon, more and more people materialized. By then, dusk had evaporated into night and pedestrians wandered the narrow sidewalks beneath strips of shops, looking at restaurant menus posted in storefronts or gathering to meet friends. The small park in the center of Clarendon glowed with Christmas lights that lit young couples sitting close on benches or walking arm in arm. Kim followed Aunt Mina through the crowds, hoping someone would take note of the posters they taped on lampposts and storefronts, though she did not see many Vietnamese faces. She wondered if they should head to Eden Center in Falls Church to tape up more posters. Regardless, she felt like she was doing something to help, and who knew? Maybe Ly would come home after hearing about the signs. As they put up more and more posters, Kim began to think that the whole fiasco would be over quite soon.

In front of a pool hall that used to be popular with young Vietnamese men, Kim and Aunt Mina ran into Johnny Five and an older boy Kim did not recognize. The two

boys were walking into the pool hall, but Johnny Five stopped when he saw Kim and smiled. He was skinny, though his black Redskins Starter jacket hid the fact pretty well. And at 12, he was already as tall as many high schoolers. She had to look up when they stood face to face. His long eyelashes blinked down at her.

"Hey," Johnny Five said.

"Hey Johnny," Kim said, grinning too widely. She dropped her smile and eyed the older boy, who leaned against the brick wall and lit a cigarette. He had dyed his rattail brown, and it blew in the wind. Aunt Mina handed out posters to people walking by.

"What are you doing out here?" Johnny Five asked.

"Ly ran away," Kim said. She handed him a poster "We've been putting these up." The older boy glanced over. He turned away and blew a stream of smoke. The wind swept the cloud into her face.

"Shit," Johnny Five said. He looked around, saw more posters on lampposts and nodded. "You know what, let me put these up for you. It's cold out. You should go home."

The older boy snickered.

"And who are you?" Kim asked the older boy.

"Oh," Johnny Five said. "This is my homeboy, Tuan. He's visiting from New York."

Kim did not ask how a 12-year-old boy had homeboys from New York.

"She run away, may as well find a new friend," Tuan said, his voice soft. Kim guessed he was 16 or 17.

“I should go,” Kim said, annoyed. “Thanks for the offer anyway.”

“No, seriously, let me at least help,” Johnny Five said.

Tuan stubbed his cigarette on the side of the building, leaving a black smudge in the brick, and flicked the butt under an oncoming car. He pulled open the door to the pool hall and a faint jukebox melody spilled into the street.

“Fine,” Kim said when Tuan was gone. She split the rest of the posters. “Thanks.” She tried to smile at him but her skin was cold and dry and it may have looked like a grimace.

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Aunt Mina and I will go this way…”

Aunt Mina reached for the remaining posters in Kim’s hands. “How about we split up?” She nudged Kim toward Johnny Five. “You and your friend go toward the neighborhood by the free clinic and I’ll go on this side of the street. I don’t want either of you walking around by yourself. Meet back in 30 minutes, okay?”

For a few blocks, they worked in silence. Kim relaxed. She liked feeling as though she and Johnny Five were sharing a secret. The neighborhood they walked through was icy and bright from porch lights and streetlamps reflecting off yards of unbroken snow. Several times, Johnny Five slipped and fell. Each time, he laughed and struggled back to his feet, though she had to help him twice. Soon, his black jeans were wet with slush. Kim liked that he could laugh at himself at moments when other boys would get mad, especially if they were in front of a girl. Or maybe he just didn’t see her

as a girl. She frowned at the thought. Cars drove past, their tires cutting tracks in the slush and blowing gusts of biting wind against them. They walked closer together.

As they put up posters, they talked about school and gossiped about who liked who. Johnny Five asked if she maybe liked someone, or something. He said he heard someone liked her. After that, Kim almost forgot about Ly, though her picture stared back at her after each poster went up. They passed the free clinic, an old single-story building popular among Vietnamese families because the doctor was herself Vietnamese. Kim stepped on a pamphlet titled *Family Planning*. Finally, as they were finishing, Johnny Five folded the last poster in half and ran his finger along the crease.

"So you really don't know where she is?"

"We hardly talk anymore."

"Why are you even out here then? Shouldn't her family or something be doing this? Her other friends?" He tossed the poster aside. It floated in the air for a moment, swirling and tumbling in the wind, and finally fell on a pile of snow. Water bled into the crease where the smooth outer layer of paper had been broken by the fold. Dark spots expanded from there, saturating the rest of the poster.

"Her dad's at work, her mom's doing…" Kim frowned. "I don't know what her mom's doing. She came and told me about it. I don't think she knows any of Ly's other friends." For that matter, neither did she.

Kim kicked a chunk of snow into the street. Something in Johnny Five's voice chipped away at her earlier optimism until she couldn't remember why she was so upbeat. She realized he had stopped walking next to her, and she turned to look for him.

But he was standing close behind her, and she smelled his minty breath, and she remembered that they hadn't stood this close since they were little. She could not read his eyes, though she felt her breath catch and the distance between them shrink.

"I know where Ly is."

Kim blinked. His words didn't register for a moment. Then anger. And for a moment, jealousy at the thought of her pretty friend and Johnny Five. How was Ly close enough to Johnny Five that he would know where she was? She stuttered and stumbled over random words, trying desperately to say something halfway intelligible. Anger pounded in her chest and her cheeks flushed. Finally she managed a choked, "Where is she?"

Johnny Five turned and looked down the empty street. He didn't answer. He stared this way and that. Around them, bare trees gathered in yards and overhanging branches dripped long thin daggers down at them and the night fell suddenly into great silence. Faint snowflakes floated in the air, little soft specks of white glowing from the streetlamps and porch lights, and Kim stared up at the sky, at the dim glow of moonlight like stretched cotton behind thick, gray clouds. Dots of snow clung to Johnny Five's hair, and when he turned to her, she saw snowflakes in his eyebrows as well.

"Where?" Kim asked again, raising her voice. "Why the hell did you even offer to help?"

"Keep it down." Johnny Five looked around. "Someone's going to hear."

"Fucking *asshole*." She shoved him.

“Look, I wasn’t sure you would say anything. I just, you know, wanted to help you out. I’m sorry. But you can’t say anything, okay?”

“Where is she?”

“Promise. You have to promise.”

She punched his arm.

“Kim,” Johnny Five said, rubbing his arm. “She’s fine. If anything was wrong, I would tell you. I swear. It’s not even any of your business. She didn’t tell you. That’s not my fault.”

Kim waited.

“If you tell anyone, I’m never going to talk to you again. Okay?”

Kim waited more.

“She’s out in Springfield, staying at this guy’s house. He’s like 19 or 20 or something. She’s like in love with him.”

“She’s 13,” Kim snapped. “13!”

“I mean, I don’t think it’s like that. A lot of people live there. Not just her. I don’t know if he even knows she’s there.”

“A lot of people live there? What does that even mean?”

“Like a bunch of people. His parents let them live there ‘cause they get kicked out of their house or something. They party all the time.”

“Take me there.”

“Are you joking?”

“Take me there or I’ll tell the police.”

“And how are they going to find out where the house is?”

“Because you’ll tell them. Your mom will make you.” But even as she said it, she felt ridiculous. Johnny Five didn’t care about his mother. He barely even saw her. He spent most of his time at other people’s houses, or skipping school, or doing whatever he did. “Look, just let me see her. I’ll talk to her, ask her to come home, and if she says no, then I’ll forget where she is. I promise. I just want to make sure she’s okay. Please.”

“Man…” Johnny Five ran his fingers through his hair. “Tuan needs to head back to his girl anyway, I guess. I’ll ask him, okay?”

“Good.”

Kim told Aunt Mina she was taking the bus home and circled around the block from the Clarendon Metro station. She made her way back to the pool hall, where Johnny Five and Tuan waited by an old car with New York license plates. As she approached, Tuan spit on the ground next to him. The snow kept falling.

***

In north Springfield, among rows of ranch-style homes, Tuan piloted his old Honda up and down bumpy snow-covered streets, turning this way and that until Kim was all turned around. Mailboxes passed in a blur, the house numbers and street signs invisible in the dark. Here and there porch lights shined and streetlamps buzzed, casting pale white light on empty sidewalks, the luminescence doing little to draw back the night. The car’s headlights cut beams of dull light in front of them, highlighting the streaks of snow falling from somewhere overhead. Cold air and cigarette ash blew in from the driver’s side window, hitting Kim in the face as she shivered in the backseat. They

stopped at a house and parked among cars overflowing from its driveway. Already the snowfall dusted cars with a thin layer of white and Kim scraped her finger along the side of a car as they walked by, revealing a thin line of dark paint. The cold metal and snow left her finger numb. They entered an old kitchen through the side door beneath the carport.

A fan above the stove hummed a sharp jagged tune, its sound barely registering above the laughter from the living room and the pulse of heavy bass from the basement below. Kim stepped closer to Johnny Five as they passed into the living room. Cigarette smoke hung heavy in the air above groups of young people sitting scattered on the floor. Green bottles of beer in a sea of red—red sweaters, red shirts, red shorts, red bandanas. The sounds of Vietnamese and English mixing. Tuan sauntered over to a sofa where a girl smiled and reached for him. He leaned down and kissed her hard and pressed against her, pushing her into the sofa. Kim didn't recognize anyone.

"Where is she?" Kim whispered.

"She was up here earlier. Maybe downstairs?" Johnny Five nodded at a door on the other side of the living room where people filed in and out. Kim pushed him forward. Some of the girls on the floor, a few years older than her, looked at them curiously while others shot her nasty looks. As they crossed the room, she saw a man in his late 20s sit on the sofa next to Tuan and his girlfriend, smoking and watching them make out. He flicked ash at them.

Johnny Five led her down the stairs, a narrow black corridor decorated with plastic glow-in-the-dark stars and planets. She fumbled for the handrail as the music from

below vibrated her hair and broke loud and hard against her and she pressed her palms against her ears and reached out with her toes, searching for the next step. In front of her, Johnny Five became a featureless black mass against the bright green stars and planets. They entered a large cavernous basement. Kim released her ears and the sounds washed over her again. Around her, flashing lights and black lights and neon lights and cigarette smoke and thrumming bass and teenagers grinding and swaying. Teeth and the whites of eyes burned bright green in dark blue faces and black shadows. Kim stepped in something wet. Johnny Five stopped, pulled her to the side of the room, his hand holding hers. A little sweaty, but nice. They moved around the perimeter of the basement until they reached a hallway. Johnny Five leaned in very close to her ear.

"You see her?"

Kim stared around the room, searching between the bodies for a flip of hair, a shake of a shoulder, a screech of laughter, anything she could recognize. She shook her head. Johnny Five turned and pulled her down the hallway. Three boys stood against the wall outside a closed door, their faces blurry through the haze of smoke. Hung on the wall next to them was a small framed painting of a child fishing on a small boat on a lake. Johnny Five paused, and the way he eyed the door made Kim's stomach drop. She let go of his hand, pushed past the three boys, and shoved the door open.

The room was dark, the noises loud and wet, and the movements on the bed fast and hard. Kim stepped forward in a daze. A snicker came from the side. Two boys stood against the wall, staring at her.

One of the boys, in Vietnamese: "Hey, little girl, I'm next. Go get in line."

The other: “Motherfucker, just let her go, ladies first, right?”

They laughed.

Their Vietnamese didn’t sound like her parents, didn’t sound like Aunt Mina or Uncle Bao. Their words were sharp and the rattle of their voices mean. Kim stumbled backward, the carpet somehow slipping from under her feet, and she reached for the wall. She fell against arms wrapping around her and she twisted and struck back with her elbows but it was Johnny Five. He pulled her toward the door.

“That’s not Ly,” he said. “It’s not.” He dragged her out of the room to the hoots of the two spectators. As the door closed, she looked again at the limp girl under the boy, both barely older than her. The boy never stopped. The girl lay perfectly still. Kim did not know her.

Outside, the three waiting boys glared as they shuffled down the hall, away from the party and the darkened room. The music lessened the deeper they went.

“Hey,” Johnny Five said, letting her go. “Are you okay?”

“What the hell was that?” Kim gasped for air. Where was that girl’s family? How many of those boys had been in that line, how many had heckled her as another and another and another took their turn? Did she enjoy it? Did she need help? What should Kim do? Johnny Five didn’t look surprised. Was this what Johnny Five expected from girls? The thought made her want to gag. And what about Ly?

“Calm down,” Johnny Five said. “I tried to warn you—I wanted to go in first.” He reached out for her, but Kim jerked away. “I’m sure Ly’s okay.”

“I’m fine,” Kim said, her face burning. Was Johnny Five one of the boys who waited his own turn?

At the end of the hall, a door opened and two boys appeared and walked back to the party. Something in the way the boys walked caught her attention. She pushed past Johnny Five and reached for the door, eager to prove that she wasn’t shaken. Her hand trembled as she turned the doorknob.

Two older boys sat at a small table filled with a large pile of marijuana, a metal scale, and a machete. They stared up at them. A sour pungent odor spread throughout the room. In a bucket on the floor were sandwich bags filled with clumps of marijuana the size of two of Kim’s fists. A television turned to the news sat on a dresser against the wall.

Across the room, Ly sat on an old brass bed against the wall, smoking a joint. She was wearing a sweater and jeans. Ly squinted, recognized Kim through her haze, and shrieked.

“Hey!” Ly slurred happily. “What are you *doing* here?”

One of the boys at the table stood, blocking Kim’s path to Ly. He wore a red baseball cap and a sleeveless undershirt. A tattoo of a snake wrapped around his bicep and on his forearm were five scars from cigarette burns arranged like the five side on a die. “You gonna buy or what, bitch?”

Kim froze. “What?”

Johnny Five stepped in front of her. “Naw, Gumby. It’s cool, she’s just looking for her friend.” He pointed at Ly. “Didn’t mean to interrupt, man. Sorry. Sorry. We’re

leaving right now." He looked at the other boy, who looked half Vietnamese and half white. "What's up, Brandon?"

Brandon nodded and turned to the television.

It vaguely registered to Kim that the news was still discussing the murdered children in California as she made her way across the room and threw her arms around her friend.

"Your mom is going to kill you," Kim said. "You have to come home."

"Home?" Ly said, breaking their embrace. "Fuck that shit, Kim. Hell no. What's at *home*?"

"Ly, come on, don't be like that." Kim reached for her friend's hand and tried to pull her from the bed.

"Stop it!" She pulled free and giggled. "I wonder how many people it would take to pull my arm completely off."

"Hey," Kim snapped. "Wake up. Let's go."

"Yo," Gumby interrupted. "Hey!" He set his red baseball cap on the table and crossed his arms, his bicep flexing under the snake tattoo.

"What?" Kim asked evenly. She realized he was much older than she thought. His thin face was angular and sharp and dark circles gathered under his eyes.

"Take your girl," Gumby said. "And get out. I don't have time for this shit. It's not a fucking daycare in here."

"But," Ly began.

"Shut the fuck up," Gumby said. He turned to Johnny Five. "You brought her?"

“I…”

Gumby lunged. He grabbed Johnny Five by the collar of his coat and they collapsed against the dresser and fell to the floor. The television set wobbled above them. Gumby pinned Johnny Five with his left hand and slapped him hard with his right. He reached back and pointed at the table.

“Yo, Gumby, man…” Brandon said, staring at the machete. “He’s just a little kid.”

“Then I’m gonna chop a little kid.” Gumby slapped Johnny Five again. “Punk bringing people to my house that I don’t know.”

“Stop it,” Kim yelled. She ran across the room. Ly screamed for her to stop. She lowered her shoulder and slammed into Gumby’s arm. He grunted but didn’t budge and Kim fell to her hands and knees, her shoulder numb.

Gumby looked down at her, his eyes cold and mouth sneering with rubbery lips and she braced for a punch. Instead, he shifted and pressed his knee against Johnny Five’s upper chest. “Let him go, right? Like this?” He waved his hands as though surrendering.

A whiny groan erupted in spittle from Johnny Five’s mouth as the air in his chest was expelled.

Kim scrambled to her feet. Brandon’s arms wrapped around her, pinning her arms to her sides. He lifted her away. She leaned forward and pivoted but Brandon was too strong for her to break free.

“He’s a kid,” Brandon said. “Let’s just smoke some weed, man. Fuck him.”

Kim screamed for help.

Gumby stared down at Johnny Five, his eyes boring into the boy's red squirming face. From the corner of her eye, Kim saw Ly crumpled and crying against the wall, her knees against her chest. Kim wanted to yell at her that Johnny Five needed help and *would she fucking do something*. She twisted against Brandon's grip and lashed out with her leg, hitting air and brushing the wall, far short of Gumby. Brandon lifted her again and Kim found herself facing a middle-aged woman.

The woman stood in the doorway dressed in a brown fur coat. Gold glittered at her wrist and neck and ears. Melting snow clung to her thickly-curled hairdo.

"Vinh," the woman said. Then louder: "*Vinh*."

Brandon's hold on Kim relaxed and she shoved him away.

"What?" Gumby yelled, lifting his thigh from Johnny Five's chest. He pressed his hand against Johnny Five's mouth. "What the fuck do you want?"

"What are you doing?" The woman asked in Vietnamese, her voice cracking. She backed up and half-disappeared behind the doorway. Her hand gripped the doorframe, her knuckles white. In the distance, the boom of music went on.

"Aunt," Kim pleaded in Vietnamese. "My friend is hurt. We only want to go home."

The woman's eyes were wide and her chin quivered and the look she gave Kim was confused and afraid.

"Get out," Gumby roared in English.

The woman winced. "Let them go."

“I pay all the bills here,” Gumby snarled. “Get the fuck out.”

Johnny Five grabbed the hand over his mouth and tried to pry Gumby’s fingers off. The sick sound of flesh smacking flesh cut through the room as Gumby slammed his fist into Johnny Five’s gut.

“Motherfucker,” Gumby said. “Little bitch got snot all over me.” He punched Johnny Five again.

Kim turned back to the woman but she had disappeared. Behind Kim, Gumby stood, releasing Johnny Five, allowing the boy deep raspy breaths.

Johnny Five curled into a ball, holding his gut and moaning, his face bright red. Kim bent over him and rubbed his back. He wiped his mouth and nose and swallowed hard. Next to them, Ly whimpered.

“Shit, shit, shit,” Johnny Five whispered.

“It’s okay, it’s okay,” Kim said.

Fingers squeezed the back of Kim’s neck and Gumby dragged her to her feet and shoved her against the wall. His hand wrapped around her throat, his fingers hot and scratchy like little knobs working their way into her flesh. Small cold eyes stared at her from a red and ugly face.

“Nobody touches me,” he hissed. Gumby pressed and pressed and she could not breathe and she clawed at his fingers but he leaned more and more weight against her throat. Blood pounded in her temples and ears and she grabbed at Gumby’s face but he pressed harder. Just as bursts of black and white appeared in her vision and her head

became light and began to spin, he let go. She crumbled in a heap and coughed long tearing coughs as she sucked in air and air and more air.

Gumby sat at the table and started breaking up a bud of marijuana.

"Get them the fuck out of here, Brandon."

Brandon lifted Kim, and she gathered up Ly, and together the two girls helped Johnny Five to his feet. They stumbled past the growing line of boys outside the darkened bedroom, shuffled through the throngs of dancing bodies, and finally climbed the stairs. When they could not find Tuan, Brandon agreed to take them home. Kim soldiered past the teens in the living room, holding her head high, and ignored their whispers when they saw Johnny Five's face and the raw red marks on her neck.

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Brandon's car was a new-looking Toyota Celica Supra with a row of shades on the rear windshield. By then the snow had fallen thick and heavy and the car's rear tires spun and slid as they left the neighborhood. Kim and Ly sat silent in the tiny rear seats. Johnny Five grunted directions north toward Arlington. On the radio, the news continued covering the elementary school shooting in California. Brandon turned the volume up. After a while, Kim tried to get Ly to speak.

"Hey, are you okay?" Kim whispered.

"Why the fuck did you do that? You embarrassed me."

"Your mom came to my house."

"She just needs someone to do all the work around the house. I'm not her servant."

The tinny voice on the radio droned on.

"What were you doing there?" Kim asked. "What do you think they were going to do with you?"

Ly glared at her. "You think you have it all figured out, like you're so much better than me with your newspaper and your grades and school."

"I don't think I'm better than you." Kim bit her lip.

"Well it's not for me, all right? None of that shit is. Just…" Ly shook her head. "You don't get it."

"It's not like you call me to hang out or talk anymore. I guess I'm just not cool enough."

"Whatever. Forget it."

Ly slumped into silence for the rest of the car trip. Kim stared out the window. In the distance, snow plows cleared side roads, creating piles upon piles. Her breath fogged the window, blocking the world outside from looking in. On the radio, a news reporter discussed the murderer. He was a 24-year-old vagrant, someone wandering from place to place, searching for work, expecting to find success and happiness. The reporters made him out as a crazed aberration and Kim wondered at that. She thought about Gumby paying his family's bills. She thought about the teens living at the house, the way her brother Martin never seemed to be home, and the way her own parents left her and her brothers alone as they worked and worked and worked. They needed to survive, didn't they? She thought about Madam Charleston's parting words: *You see what happens? Tell me who suffers*. And as they traversed roads growing more treacherous with snow and

things that they could not see hurling toward them in the dark, the voice on the news made no mention of the children.

FAMILY VACATION

March 1991

The blue highway sign rose like a tombstone before the old station wagon. *Welcome to Mississippi* it read. And underneath the large looping yellow letters: *It's Like Coming Home*. In the backseat, 10-year-old Martin Tran sat sticky and miserable between the door and his younger brother Bobby who had been asleep since Tennessee. On Bobby's other side, Kim read her ninth grade English book. Martin rested his head against the window and listened to the drone of wind and highway bleed through the glass and butt against the faint Vietnamese music crackling whiny and nasal through the car's old speakers. They passed the state sign and overtook a hill and on the other side the setting sun flared sharp and blinding through the windshield, tingeing the dull tan upholstery orange and gold. Martin crouched in the cool shadow behind the driver's seat. Tiny particles of airy white dust from the cheap lambskin seat covers floated in the sunlight. Up front, the children's father, Mr. Thanh Tran, lowered the drooping sun visor and stretched his thin ropy neck for shade like a baby bird reaching for food. Their mother, Mrs. Loan Nguyen, dozed, her small frame folded in a neat knot next to her husband. By contrast, Bobby's head nestled behind Martin's right shoulder and his legs curled awkward in Kim's lap. Kim shut her book.

“Are we there yet?” Kim asked like children on television.

Martin rolled his eyes. It was the eighth time she asked. Her complaints were more annoying than Bobby’s head digging into his shoulder.

“Not yet,” Mr. Tran answered in Vietnamese. “Uncle Quan doesn’t expect us for a couple hours.”

“This is taking forever.” Kim stared out the window. “I don’t even want to be here.”

Mr. Tran grunted.

“Just shut up,” Martin said. “You’ve been whining the entire time.”

“You shut up. I could be in New York with Carmen’s family.”

“Quiet, both of you,” Mr. Tran snapped. He turned the music louder.

Kim looked down at Bobby and pinched his side. His thin brown arm flailed and he pushed her hand away. She dug a knuckle into his ribs. Bobby twisted, groaned, and sat up.

“How much longer?” Bobby rubbed his eyes.

Martin leaned back in his seat and rotated his stiff shoulder.

“We’re almost there,” Kim said. “Get off me.” She shoved his legs to the floor.

“Stop it,” Bobby said. “Don’t touch me.”

Martin peered out the window as his siblings bickered. He had never been outside the D.C. area except for short trips to Virginia Beach or Shenandoah Valley and he had so far fought off the urge to sleep. He didn’t want to miss a thing.

Outside, the evidence of the wet and warming days of March lay in the passing landscape rising high above either side of the highway like walls feathered green. Swollen treetops shivered and swayed in the drowsy wind and cut a jagged line across the fading sky from trunks black and damp. Weeds stood tall like sentries awaiting the full bloom of spring. In the distance, in the midst of woods and fields, small houses adorned with sun-bleached porches emerged atop gravel driveways. The occasional Confederate flag sailed by doors or on flagstaffs while other homes flew the USA flag or both or nothing. The highway led them across an old bridge rusted to the hue of dried blood. Below, black and inky water rippled into countless facets of refracted sunlight orange and red and marched unhindered into the horizon between rough-cut banks filled with trees. The procession of silt and dirt and water slithered between the torn and splitting land, carrying small rowboats here and there, and Martin could see fishermen in some, people rowing about in others, all oblivious of his watching.

Bobby stretched across him to look out the window. “Where are we?”

“Mississippi,” Martin said. He elbowed Bobby. “And stay on your side.”

“I’m on my side.”

“Shut up and go back to sleep. I’ll wake you when we get to Uncle Quan’s house.”

Uncle Quan wasn’t actually their uncle, but an old war buddy of their father’s. That past winter, Mr. Tran received word that Uncle Quan was working outside New Orleans as a fisherman. After rounds of letter-writing and phone calls, a visit was set up for the children’s spring break. For Mr. Tran, the days leading up to the trip were filled

with excitement and an invisible weight lifted from their home. Even Mrs. Nguyen seemed to relax. After Mr. Tran, Martin had been the most excited one in the family. His classmates had stories of trips from all over the world and he wanted to know what it was like.

"What do you think Uncle Quan's family is like?" Bobby whispered to him.

"I bet they feed pet crocodiles with the bones of little kids," Martin said. "I bet they cast voodoo curses and talk to ghosts. I bet they're fun."

"Wow," Bobby whispered.

"In New Orleans, they play hide-and-seek in the cemeteries. The whole city. They've been playing for twenty years now non-stop. Every time someone gets found, another person joins. It's the law."

"Are we going to pass that city you told me about? Where they build the robots that kept the world spinning?"

Martin shrugged. "We already passed it. You were asleep."

Bobby's shoulders sank.

"Will you please shut up," Kim groaned. "He's making it all up, Bobby."

Martin shot her a mean look. *She ruins everything.*

Mrs. Nguyen woke and turned to them, her eyes blinking with sleep. "Who's hungry?"

"I'm fine," they each answered.

"Kim. Hand me the bag in the cooler," she said in Vietnamese.

Kim dug through the cooler in the back and produced a white plastic bag. Mrs. Nguyen opened it, split up chunks of French bread, stuffed them with chicken bologna, and doled them out to the children. They stared at the sandwiches.

"Eat," Mrs. Nguyen said. "Don't eat so much when we get to Uncle Quan's house."

"I'm not hungry," Martin said.

Mr. Tran's eyes flashed in the rearview mirror. "Who asked if you were hungry? Eat your food."

The bread and chicken tasted cold and soggy and the children chewed small steady bites. Mr. Tran hummed along to the slow Vietnamese melody from the tape deck. Mrs. Nguyen draped her arm over the shoulder of the driver's seat and curled a finger through her husband's shaggy hair. After a while, Martin held the sandwich limp in his lap and stared at passing cars.

"Martin," Kim snapped when she saw. "Eat."

"Shut up," he said. *Why can't she mind her own business?*

Kim reached across Bobby and yanked Martin's ear. "Now."

Martin pulled away and cranked down the window. The rush of wind buffeted his cheeks and he saw from the corner of his eye the thin tendrils of his mother's long hair float in the current and lash about her face. He held the sandwich outside and let go. The wind grabbed it and it was gone.

"Dad!" Kim said.

The brakes screeched and Martin toppled face first into the back of the driver's seat. Mr. Tran pulled into the emergency lane, got out, and opened the rear door. He clawed at Martin's tee-shirt and dragged him out. Martin found himself facing the highway, his collar bunched in his father's fist. The band strained against his neck and gnawed a thin red line into his throat. Passing cars felled loud gusts of wind upon him as his father pulled him toward the side of the road. Mr. Tran slapped the back of his head and cursed him in Vietnamese.

"You son of a bitch. Go pick up your food."

Somewhere above the din of traffic and shriek of metal-on-metal from a passing 18-wheeler, Martin heard his mother's voice. When he didn't move, Mr. Tran struck him between the shoulder blades. Martin fell to his hands and knees and gasped for air as the world spun. Tiny bits of glass glittered crystalline sunlight at him from minute pockets in the asphalt. He tensed his stomach muscles for a kick.

"Go get it." His father's voice rumbled like thunder parting cloud.

A shock of wind from another truck shook Martin's small body as he struggled to his feet. Mr. Tran pointed a thin hard finger down the length of the highway to where hill and sky met and dissolved into nothing. Martin walked past blackened cigarette butts lying among small rocks directing long thin shadows before him. It was thirty yards before he saw the remnants of the crumbled sandwich in the center of the highway. He did not see the chicken slices. A small sedan drove by the remains and the chunk of bread bounced into the next lane and under passing tires.

Martin teetered at the edge of the painted line. Dots to his left emerged from the ether and became small cars. And small cars became large cars bearing down on him with white-eyed passengers. And then streaks of color and bursts of wind and long honks of horn. Pricks from dirt and rocks sprayed in multitudes against exposed arms and blinking face. Cars diminishing to dots to his right as they came. Across the highway, in the middle of a field, immune to the violent passing of cars, an old Victorian house stood decaying in grievous silence in a dense thicket of thorns and foliage. The house stood perfectly still and Martin wondered how many years it had watched this strip of road, touched only by the ebb of time. A rotted shutter dislodged from an upstairs window and shattered upon the porch's roof. Small planks of wood slid down the awning and disappeared into the brush. Martin swayed back and forth on his heels as though he could rock the moving world to stillness and slumber. He let go a breath he held without knowing.

Why couldn't Kim just keep her mouth shut? Martin's head throbbed and his fists clenched until his nails dug into his soft fleshy palms. He wanted to scream and punch her like he did sometimes. But she always told on him even though she was much bigger. She couldn't even fight right. Despite his anger, his belly churned and bowels trembled and his eyes watered until he saw only blobs of green and black. Beneath his feet the steady pulse of cars like millions of heartbeats going and going and going.

Martin stepped into the highway. He stared straight ahead and pictured foot in front of foot and pumped his legs. His focus was such that the howls of highway faded from a distant roar to breathless silence and he saw only his next step. The sandwich

remains were not so far. Something flashed at his left and he nearly stumbled when he turned to see what it was.

A green car barreled toward him. Jutting up at the front of its hood was the outline of a small chrome pentagon with lines from each point connecting in the middle as though it were aiming. The hood ornament gleamed and caught his eye as it caught the sun's light and he wondered if the driver was blinded by the dying day. But this was no time for wondering. Martin stooped and reached out. The smeared bread felt raw and clammy and clung to pits in the asphalt. Through the tumult he heard the whirr of brakes and the shriek of locked rubber straining against road. Martin imagined his broken body floating in midair before falling gently like the final breath of the dying. He peeled the bread from the road. The car honked long and nasal and the world shook as he sprinted to the emergency lane. It flew past and disappeared with the other cars as though it had never been there, the acrid smell of burning rubber and brake rising in wind and dissipating among tree and sky.

Breath came to him in short gasps and his knees shook on the walk back to the car. His vision sharpened and colors popped bright and deep and his heart pounded adrenaline through vein and artery to fingers and toes. His father stood by the station wagon with fists on bony hips like a conquering superhero. When Martin approached, Mr. Tran limped forward to meet him, his shoulders dipping uneven and his right foot dragging. He slapped Martin twice, forehand, backhand. He ripped the bread from Martin's grip and threw it.

“Spoiled.” Mr. Tran’s eyes bulged and his thin hollow face flushed red as the muscles in his jaw flexed and blinked in the shadow of the sun. He spit and limped back to the car.

As they drove away, Mrs. Nguyen stared with wide watery eyes and when she opened her mouth, Mr. Tran glared and she stayed silent. Martin slouched low in his seat. His cheeks stung and burned with embarrassment. Bobby and Kim sat very still and did not look at him. In his head Martin screamed curses at his sister. He recalled a dim memory of himself years ago, before he learned to punch and kick, standing in the living room and hollering at Kim with words he’d heard his father use until his throat was raw and scratchy. He remembered expecting his parents to be impressed, even proud. But Uncle Bao had pulled him away. Later, Mr. Tran beat him with closed fists. Martin reached up to the window and picked at a small spot of crusted dirt. Little black specks dug under his fingernail. Outside, the sun climbed its final steps down to the horizon from its afternoon perch and purple and orange streaked across the early evening sky. The colors clung to long thin strips of cloud shaped like deep trenches as though a scythe had been dragged along the sky’s surface, rending and twisting and pulling its insides until they were revealed for all the world to see.

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The dark of evening fell as Mr. Tran piloted the station wagon down empty streets winding through the lonesome rural county where Uncle Quan lived. Houses were separated by vast swaths of woods or fields and it felt alien to Martin being in a place where people couldn’t see into their neighbors’ homes. Soon the road narrowed and trees

crept close enough to block the moon and stars and cast thick pockets of black around them. Martin stared through the window and was met with wet glassy eyes glistening at him in the pitch but it was only his reflection. The road settled after a fashion into gravel growling beneath the tires as they traveled along. They passed through swirls of dust like steam hanging before them in the headlights. A bright white mailbox marked Uncle Quan's property and they turned up a long uneven driveway lined with chicken wire fence. The dirt road wound up a steep hill and distant lights blinked behind silhouettes of trees and vines.

A hulking two-story house rose before them and swelled to either side like a bloated corpse. The lights in the windows and on the porch burned cold and silent. Its cracked white paint bled long spotty smears of dirt from siding. Next to the front door, a South Vietnam flag hung lifeless. Martin squinted into the night but could not see how far back the house went. The screen door opened and a small delicate man in a tank top and shorts stepped from the house and into the headlight beams. His body cut a ragged shadow across the house's face. He rushed down the steps to meet them.

"Thanh! My god, look at you," Uncle Quan called out in Vietnamese. The two men embraced. Martin imagined his father throwing Uncle Quan in the air like a small child. The night broke and the home grew warmer and more alive. Around Uncle Quan's neck, a gold cross flashed.

"Quan," Mr. Tran said in Vietnamese. "How did you get so fat?"

They laughed.

Uncle Quan patted his small round belly and pretended to punch Mr. Tran in the stomach. He reached up to hug Mrs. Nguyen. “Loan, is it? Thanh always talked about you. I told him so many times, *Shut up! I don’t want to hear it. She’s probably not even real.* But he kept talking and talking.”

“You’re lying, he never thought about me,” Mrs. Nguyen said, smiling.

Mr. Tran nodded. “Not once.”

She slapped his arm. He winked.

Uncle Quan yelled in English. “Sang! Get out here.”

A tall boy, a foot taller than Uncle Quan but with all the man’s delicate features, came from the house and stood straight and rigid before them in a pressed button shirt and crisp khakis. Sang looked to be a year or two older than Kim. He bowed and recited a formal greeting to their parents.

“He’s so tall!” Mr. Tran exclaimed.

“All that American food,” Uncle Quan said.

Mr. Tran introduced the children. When he got to Martin, he explained that his name was actually Cuong but he had renamed himself in first grade.

“Bow to your uncle,” Mr. Tran said.

Martin, Kim, and Bobby loosely crossed their arms and bowed as sloppy as they felt after the sixteen hour drive. Sang snickered and stared down at his shiny shoes. Uncle Quan waved them off.

“Beer!” Uncle Quan declared. “It’s been too long. Come in, come in. I’ve been cooking all day.” The adults disappeared into the house and the children unloaded the car.

Dark oak stairs gleamed at Martin as he and his siblings carried their bags through the front door. The parlor on the right was filled with plastic-covered sofas. A large portrait of a blonde Jesus Christ was hung on a pale off-white wall and little porcelain miniatures of Jesus and Virgin Mary stood solemn on the side tables. A curio cabinet in the corner displayed dishes depicting Jesus nailed to the cross. Mr. Tran and Mrs. Nguyen sat on a large beige sofa and Uncle Quan reclined in an armchair facing them. Their excited Vietnamese echoed loudly above the groans and squeaks of plastic covers as the adults shifted their weight and got comfortable. Sang walked down the hall next to the stairs and set the cooler in the kitchen, his shoes clicking on the hardwood floor. The faint sour-sweet smell of fish sauce hung in the air. Sang returned and stood on the first step.

"Come on. You'll be staying in my room," he said in perfect sneering English. "Don't piss the bed." He disappeared up the stairs.

"What a creep," Martin muttered.

Kim rolled her eyes and Bobby giggled.

The stairs creaked beneath their weight and the siblings huddled close and followed Sang down a series of narrow off-white corridors. Naked bulbs overhead cast dull harsh light upon them and their shadows fell small and black on the floor. They turned one way and then another, passing worn and faded doors tinged yellow. It all looked the same. Martin wondered how anyone could tell where they were going.

"Your house is huge," Kim said to Sang's back.

Sang did not turn or pause. "Uh huh."

“We’ll need a map just to use the bathroom,” Martin said. “How can you find your way around here? My mom’s always complaining about our small apartment. Where’s your mom?”

“She left.”

“Oh,” Martin said.

“Where’d she go?” Bobby asked.

Martin wanted to punch him.

Sang shrugged. “Try not to get lost.”

Finally, Sang opened a door to a dark bedroom smelling strongly of incense. Posters of metal rock bands clung to the black painted walls. An entire shelf on his bookcase was filled with tapes labeled Metallica, Alice Cooper, The Sisters of Mercy, and others Martin did not recognize. Lava lamps sat clustered on the dresser. An inflatable mattress lay on the floor next to a large unmade bed. A desk against the window held a small television and a Nintendo gaming system.

“You have a Nintendo?” Bobby asked in awe. “What games do you have?”

“I don’t play.”

“What?” Bobby nearly screamed. “Why not? Nintendo’s so *bad*.”

“I have other things to do,” Sang said. He walked to the desk and pulled from a drawer a zip-locked bag of green clumpy plant-like material and shoved it into his khakis. “Come down for dinner after you’ve put your bags away. The bathroom’s two doors down. Don’t mess with my stuff.”

Martin stared at the pocket where the bag had gone. Sang retreated into the maze of hallways and they were left alone.

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Dinner went smoothly. Martin did his best to ignore his parents as they bragged about Kim's grades and successes at school. The adults discussed the children and the difficulties of raising them in America. Uncle Quan and Mr. Tran compared their lives in New Orleans and the D.C. area and drank Heinekens. The siblings nibbled on spring rolls, summer rolls, shaky beef and rice, and *banh hoi* noodles and beef. They left the frogs' legs and baby clams and shrimp chips alone. Sang mumbled short answers whenever a question was directed at him and kept his head lowered. Bobby happily regaled them all with details of his newfound obsession with chess, though really he was obsessed with all games. Uncle Quan complained of the city cracking down on church-run *Tet* celebrations because the traditional Lunar New Year card and dice games involved money. Martin disliked that very much since he enjoyed the festivals and the gambling. Uncle Quan shook his head at the government's audacity. *It's like communism all over again*, he complained.

Afterwards, Mr. Tran and Uncle Quan went to the front porch to smoke and drink on rocking chairs. Kim and Bobby chased each other through the front yard outside the ring of light from the porch. Mrs. Nguyen washed the dishes. Sang disappeared upstairs. Left alone, Martin wandered through the bare dusty library and explored sad and empty rooms, rooms filled with unmarked boxes, and even braved the rotting stairs leading down to the cellar. There, tools rusted and workbenches gathered dust and cobwebs and

he found a plastic Christmas tree crammed in a corner. A single red ball ornament reflected his face in bulging warped lines. He held the ball close and turned his face left and right and wondered what he would look like when he got old. Maybe he would look like his father. Perhaps his mother. The ornament popped in his hand and its sharp remnants trickled through the plastic branches to the floor.

Martin went back up the stairs and through the kitchen, passed by his mother as she dried the dishes, and entered a large unlit sun room. Windows as tall as the ceiling spanned the length of each wall and the backyard watched him beyond the glass. The light from the kitchen cut a thick yellow line across the floor and fell on the glass door in the center of the opposite wall. His inky reflection bobbed and grew as he approached. He opened the door and stood at the cusp of night, holding upon his toes his breath and his weight. The shadow of the house lay before him, an arrow pointing to the far distance where twisted trees like gnarled fingers reached for the deep black sky. At the edge of the shadow, waves of overgrown weeds and grass swooned and curved down to the earth and blossomed the colors of pale blue night. The grass rose and sank in time with the slow breath of wind and Martin marveled at the ancient land. How long had the wind whistled through the same grass? How long would it in the future? What had it seen? For a while Martin's breath moved with the grass, up and down. Up. And down.

"Martin," Mrs. Nguyen called from the kitchen.

"Yeah?" He didn't turn.

"I'm going to bed."

"Okay."

“How are you feeling?”

“I’m fine.”

“Mmm.”

Her footsteps faded and Martin stood at the backdoor on his toes until stillness overcame the house and he felt nothing in his feet, no vibration or movement, no sounds echoing somewhere in the building’s depths, nothing but the gentle night rolling on. He stepped away and walked up the stairs and continued his wandering. Empty room after empty room greeted him. How long had Uncle Quan and Sang lived here? Did Sang’s mother take everything when she left? Corridors twisted and turned and intersected with others and soon he was lost and facing a window at a dead end. He turned back and went around a corner but came to an intersection and could not remember which direction bore him there. He went back to the dead end to look outside and gather his bearings.

As Martin approached the window, translucent blue moonlight fell on the floor unmarred and perfect like fresh snow. His small hand ran up and down the walls. The brittle paint was pockmarked and covered in minute cracks like wrinkled gossamer flesh. He heard the faint talk of adults come through the glass. Somewhere deep in the house the clang of metal rattled as the air conditioning unit woke and blew stale air from room to room. The wood flooring felt hard and cold and the boards bore his weight in silence. He passed a closed door on his left but ignored it. He was done exploring. At the window, he stared out at the front yard and down at the deep plummet of driveway winding down to the main street somewhere in the darkness. Treetops tittered around the house under blankets of blue and white light. The moon like a white penny hung high in the sky,

lighting the edges of bulbous clouds swirling black and gray before clusters of stars spreading to forever on every side. Beneath him was the porch roof and from beneath that floated the sounds of his father and Uncle Quan. He heard words like *Desert Storm* and *Hussein* and *Stormin' Norman*, but the conversation was too faint for him to make out. Kim and Bobby were nowhere to be seen. They must have gone to bed already. Martin braced his hands against the windowsill and leaned forward until his nose touched the glass. The wood croaked loud. The door behind him opened and he turned to see Sang watching him.

"What are you doing?" Sang asked. He crossed his arms. "What are you up to?" The older boy loomed over him and Martin shrank from his gaze.

"I was just looking around," Martin mumbled as coolly as he could.

"Looking around."

"I got lost."

"Go to sleep." Sang turned back to the room.

"Is that where you're sleeping?"

"No." Sang studied Martin. "You want to come in?"

The room he entered was a jumble of shadow and murky spaces bleeding into one another and within them the hard angles of shelves and boxes. Wrinkled linen sheers fluttered before the open window and a wide bar of moonlight fell across the room and over a bed of burnished brass bars. An old withered person bundled in sweaters and scarves lay under layers of ratty blankets. Martin could not tell if it was a man or woman. Drool from the corner of puckered lips dribbled shiny and untended down to pillows

piled high. The hands above the blankets were little more than swollen knuckles and spotty jaundiced skin mottled around thin misshapen bones. The cool of spring seeped through the hardwood and Martin shivered as he neared the bed. The cloying scent of feces and medicine grew thick in the air along with something bitter and burnt. Sang sat in a chair against the wall between the bed and window. On the window sill, a small yellow and green glass pipe lay next to a lighter.

"My great-grandfather," Sang said softly.

Martin pulled a chair from a desk in the corner and sat at the foot of the bed. "Is he okay?"

Crinkled eyelids shifted as the old man's pupils rolled to meet Sang's eyes.

"You can ask him, you know. He's what you might call a night owl. Ask whatever you want. Unless you don't even speak Vietnamese." Sang reached over to the windowsill and lifted the pipe to his lips. He lit one end and sucked deep as the bowl glowed like embers in a brassier.

"I can speak it a little," Martin said. "I can understand a lot more."

Sang's cheeks swelled and blew out on either side of his face like a great blowfish and he stood over his great-grandfather. The old man worked his jaw open with a hollow suck. Threads of spittle spread across the black maw from one lip to the other and his whole body trembled as he tilted his head back against the pillows. Sang leaned close as though to kiss him and instead blew a stream of smoke into his great-grandfather's mouth. Faint whirls of white wafted around their faces. The old man's chest rose and his lungs whined and rasped as he inhaled deep and long until he collapsed in a deflating

heap. His cheeks bunched in a toothless smile and he squinted around the room with pale blue cataract eyes.

Martin looked at the ceiling, out the window, at the floor, anywhere but at the old man. He felt as though he had seen a dangerous and forbidden ritual and something tickled his insides like the need to pee. When he looked up, the old man's beady eyes gleamed and Martin felt revulsion spread hot and cold up his back. Torn and yellow fingernails scratched at the blanket, gathering the fabric in a bony grip. Martin forced himself to return the old man's steady gaze with watery eyes. Around him, the room shrank and the foul smell of feces thickened and he remembered the rotted carcass of a young deer he had once come across. The back of his throat itched and he swallowed hard. He breathed shallow breaths through his mouth.

Sang sucked on the pipe. This time he held it in for a long moment before coughing. He clamped a hand across his mouth to muffle the sound and white smoke escaped in thin rivulets between his fingers and where his hand met his face. The bitter burning scent filled Martin's nostrils but it wasn't as bad as the stench from the old man.

"Do you want to try?" Sang asked. His eyelids drooped. He said something in rapid Vietnamese to his great-grandfather.

"It's good," the old man croaked in Vietnamese. "You will see."

"What's it feel like?" Martin asked.

"Like your brain has been itching forever but you never knew it," Sang answered. He slurred each word into the next. "And it's finally getting scratched. Come over here, the air is nice."

Martin moved his chair and sat by the window and the old man's gaze followed. "I don't think I want to try it." He heard his father speaking to Uncle Quan outside. The two men's voices were louder here. Clear.

"Don't be such a nerd."

"I'm not a nerd."

Sang sucked on the pipe again and this time blew smoke over Martin's head instead of coughing it out. Martin rested on his elbows on the window sill and inhaled deeply of the crisp air. A faint breeze cooled tiny beads of sweat on his forehead. Sang leaned back until the chair was balancing on its rear legs. He held onto the window casing and buoyed back and forth as they listened to the conversation below.

"So what happened to you?" Martin heard Mr. Tran ask in Vietnamese. "You disappeared." His father's voice sounded hollow from this distance.

"I got shot." Uncle Quan's Vietnamese was sharp, his syllables hard.

"We all thought you died," Mr. Tran said.

"May as well have died," Uncle Quan said. "I woke up in a pile of dead bodies. There's this young kid with no arms twisted around my legs and another guy's head's coming in really close like he wants to kiss me. Hands, legs, arms, bodies, everywhere. Whatever you can think of. Smelled terrible, like shit. You can't imagine. I roll the bodies off and stand up and see these two young guys throwing more bodies on the pile. I swear to god they shit themselves right there. They start screaming like women. Idiots couldn't even check my pulse right. How did we ever expect to win a war?"

To Martin's amazement, he heard Uncle Quan laugh. He glanced at Sang. The older boy looked bored. Next to them, Sang's great-grandfather wheezed. Uncle Quan's lonesome laughter grew and swelled to a rapid pitch like the childish sounds of imaginary guns. Its echoes rose into the night and broke harsh against the trees as if to rouse the unmoving dark. Martin shook his head, confused at Uncle Quan's laughter as it petered and died. His father wasn't laughing and he wondered if he was just as confused.

"God," Uncle Quan said, breathless. "After that, I said forget it. This was, what, '73? I'm done. Our country, but I'm done. I waited until I got to the hospital and snuck out. I walked all the way home. When I got there, everyone was gone—my uncles and aunts, everyone. I still don't know what happened to them. Maybe dead. Just my grandfather left. So I hung around for a while, and the next thing you know, I got married. Seemed the right thing to do. Sang was born in '75 and then it was over. We lost. They started rounding people up for prison the next year. So we left. *Prison*. How can you treat your people like that? And they say Vietnam is reunified."

Sang stuck his head out the window. "Dad," he declared in Vietnamese. "Go to sleep. You're old." He giggled and Uncle Quan yelled something back but Sang shut the window and Martin could not hear what he said. Sang shook his head and sat back down. "All they talk about is war."

"Yeah," Martin said, thinking of the countless times his father had lapsed into drunken ramblings about Vietnam. With the window closed, the air soured and reminded him how close he was to the old man. He cleared his throat and stood to leave, eager to withdraw from the old man's smell.

"Were you born here?" the old man asked in a voice like gravel and rust.

Martin nodded.

"We are an old people. And Vietnam is your home. Remember that."

Sang snickered.

His great-grandfather clucked his tongue. "*We are an old people*. We are descended from the dragon lord and the princess of the mountains. She laid 100 eggs and we came forth but there was no harmony. So we split. 50 children went north with the princess, 50 children south with the dragon lord. Beautiful. North or south, beautiful." He nodded, his papery skin folding in on itself. "We are an old people. We fought wars and conquered others and were conquered countless times. We threw them all off." He tensed and a series of rattling coughs tore from him. The expulsion of air seemed to Martin to be so much larger than what the withered body could contain. Sang rose but the old man waved him away. For a while he moaned and wheezed. Martin turned again to leave but the old man went on. "We survive. Always. Whatever we need to do, we do. Even if we must split. Only our brothers can truly defeat us. And so they have. But remember that we are an old people. This is your birthright, even if our country is gone."

Martin felt the old man's eyes on him as he left. The air in the hallway was cool and clean as Sang walked him back to his room. And as they traversed the maze of hallways, Martin lost track of where the old man lay.

***

Bobby and Kim were sleeping on the bed when Martin entered. He stood at the foot of the air mattress. Sang paused in the doorway.

“What?” Martin whispered.

“Want to see something cool?”

Martin could see that Sang’s eyes were bright red even in the dark. “See what?”

Kim sat up. “Where were you?” she hissed. Her hair was tangled and frizzy and she squinted at the light coming from the hallway.

Martin rounded on her, the memories of the highway throbbing. His heart thumped hard with an anger that surprised him. He clenched his fists and her eyes narrowed when she looked in his face. “Shut up…” he began.

“I was showing him around the house,” Sang said slurring.

Kim studied Sang’s face. “What were you doing?”

Martin glared at her but she didn’t look back. “None of your business,” he growled.

“I was asking him if he wanted to go see something cool,” Sang said. “You should come too.”

“She doesn’t want to go,” Martin said.

“He’s not going anywhere with you.” Kim threw back the covers and stood between Martin and Sang.

Martin stared at her back and he ached where his father had struck him between the shoulder blades. She was a head taller than him and he felt his body tense and scream to hurt her. “It’s a sinkhole,” Martin heard Sang say. “A huge fucking hole in the ground, man. It’s awesome. All the kids at my school go there, hang out, smoke some weed…” Martin drew his fist back.

Bobby sat up and rubbed his eyes. “What’s happening?”

At the sound of his younger brother, Martin stepped away from his sister and forced himself to relax.

“Go back to sleep,” Kim said. She turned to face Martin. “We are not going.”

“Go where?” Bobby whined from the bed.

Sang leaned against the doorway and a bored expression spread across his face. “Look, I don’t know what you’re so uptight about. Nothing happened. I just want to show you some cool shit. If you nerds change your mind, meet me outside in an hour. Our dads will be asleep by then. And they aren’t waking up for shit. Climb down the trellis outside the window.”

When they were alone, Kim pushed Martin toward the mattress and slapped the back of his head. “You’re not going anywhere. Dad will kill you.”

“You can’t stop me,” Martin mumbled as he got under his blanket.

“Martin, where you going?” Bobby asked.

“Go back to sleep,” Martin and Kim said at once.

Martin lay on the inflatable mattress and stared at the ceiling. His heart raced as he wondered if he should sneak out after Kim was asleep. Maybe he would take Bobby. He wasn’t bad, just overly cautious sometimes. A sinkhole was different from what his classmates told of their vacations. How did Sang describe it? *A huge fucking hole in the ground.* He had never snuck out before and he knew his dad would kill him if he was found out. But this was vacation and Martin didn’t want to miss a thing. The clock on the desk flashed the time in large red numbers, ticking away the hour. For a while he counted

the seconds slipping by but he lost count somewhere around 250 and the clock went on without him.

An hour later, after Kim and Bobby's breathing became deep and even, Martin pulled his sneakers on and climbed down the wooden trellis. The thin planks of wood were rough and little splinters dug into his hands. He ignored them. Sang stood beneath a tree and jangled his father's car keys when he saw him. Kim's voice hissed from above.

"Martin! Get back here!"

Martin walked on.

Sang walked past him toward the voice. "Let's *go*. Trust me. It'll be fun."

"Don't bring her," Martin said, stopping.

Sang didn't reply.

When Martin looked up, he saw Kim climbing down. He stomped around the dark silent house and opened the front door to Uncle Quan's Toyota and got into the front passenger seat. He locked his door.

"You are a jerk," Kim said as she slid into the rear seat. "A self-centered brat."

"Go back up if you don't want to go," Martin said. "Nobody begged you to come. What if Bobby wakes up and goes looking for us? He'll wake mom and dad."

"*I'm* going to tell mom and dad. You're dead."

"Sure you'll tell them. *Not*." She would get in trouble too, Martin reasoned. At least he hoped she would.

Sang got into the driver's seat. "Buckle up," he said. His eyes weren't as red as before, but they still looked glassy. Martin buckled his seatbelt.

“Let’s get this over with,” Kim said. “Martin just wants to impress you like he’s in love.”

The car rolled down the driveway, treading carefully over rock and dirt and disappeared from the house quietly and into the night.

***

Sang pulled the car over at a small clearing and they stepped into woods too thick for Martin’s eyes to see through. A thin flashlight beam swung in the dark before them as Sang led the quiet siblings past trees and vines fuzzy with moss and over rotted and collapsed trunks. Under Martin’s feet, a makeshift path took form, a thin line of beaten dirt hidden by weeds and brush he would have missed at a glance. He heard Kim stumble here and there but he moved on without looking. They picked their way past scratchy branches grabbing at shirts and shorts from old unseen places. Thorns scraped his shins raw and more than once he bent down to scratch his legs. The air smelled cold and new as frost formed and condensed on leaves. Finally, the woods opened and they found themselves walking a two lane road of concrete. They passed a large wooden sign. It had been painted white once but had become so cracked and faded that Martin couldn’t make out what it said.

“What is that?” Kim asked. “It looks like a town sign. You said we were going to a sinkhole.”

“This was a town from World War II,” Sang answered. “It was never lived in or anything, just made up for the government to run drills. That’s what I heard. The sinkhole

opened up and swallowed a couple buildings a few years ago. It's history, man. Get it?" He laughed and when Martin and Kim said nothing, he shrugged. "Boom."

The sky, suddenly free of trees and empty of clouds, rained down on them moonlight and starlight and the road glowed eerie white. Grass and weeds tore through the concrete with a vigor that only the decades could witness. But the marred surface was glazed with blurry light and gave the impression that the road was smooth and supple to the touch. Martin kicked loose rubble to the side. Broken buildings enshrouded in shadow materialized and as they neared, the forms became hollow skeletons pieced together with crumbled brick and decayed wood. Drywall soaked in brown rot lay crumpled against walls or on floors of some buildings while other structures opened around dirt and weeds.

The sinkhole appeared in the center of town unannounced. Along its edge, earth and concrete fell cleanly into nothing as though cut with a manmade tool. The hole covered the area of several city blocks. They circled it in silence for a while, marveling at its size. Martin stood at the precipice and stared straight down. Somewhere in the gaping black, wet rock and puddles flickered tiny bursts of moonlight back at him. It stretched to every side as though it would consume the ground he stood upon until he was left floating above a great chasm into which nothing could be seen. He opened his mouth wide and gasped a long slow breath of the sinkhole, filling his chest with its exhalation. On television, when characters stared down from great heights, the ground far below rose perilous fast, but this did not happen now. Shadow rose immeasurably thick from the depths up and up until Martin believed he stood before a wall of air dense enough for his fading balance to lean against.

Sang sat by Martin and dangled his feet over the edge. He stretched his legs out straight before him, the sinkhole stark against his pale moonlit skin. “This is crazy,” he whispered. His words were nearly lost in the greedy expanse as though it sucked all sound into itself. He shined the flashlight but the sinkhole swallowed the beam.

Kim stood next to Martin and he heard her breath catch as she looked down. “We’ve seen it,” she said quietly. “Let’s go back.”

“Not yet,” Martin said. “I can’t even see the bottom.” Kim gripped his wrist tight and they stood very still.

“Don’t get too close,” she said.

Martin nodded and felt the town press in close and crushing as though he were wearing the entirety of the world for a second skin. He tried to look away but the sinkhole drew him back and his soft breaths seemed to him paltry and meaningless.

Sang lit his pipe and blew smoke across the rim and the stream evaporated in the field of black as his coughs echoed through the abandoned town that was never a town. “Hey, look.” He nodded to the other side of the sinkhole.

Martin looked up. A mostly-intact building stood on the opposite side of the sinkhole, its glass storefront gone. Before it, the ground jutted outward in a wide ledge, ruining the sinkhole’s otherwise-perfectly round perimeter. Martin stared through the storefront and at the building’s innards which dissolved in shadow. Thin lines of moonlight reached in here and there through the roof and fell on a solid-looking wooden floor.

“How can that still be standing?” Kim asked.

Martin looked around at the other buildings but none were nearly as complete.

"I don't know," Sang said. "Go see." He raised his flashlight.

Martin grabbed it and jogged around the sinkhole. His sister's steps followed close and as he approached the building, thin hard fingers clamped on his arm and dragged him to a stop.

"We're going back. Now."

Martin shook her off. "Don't tell me what to do. You're not mom or dad." He turned and she grabbed him again.

"This is *dangerous*," Kim snapped.

"Go back then. You don't even want to be here. *Oh, I'm missing New York*. I'm going."

Kim smacked him and his cheek burned the way it did before it welted over. For a split second Martin stared at her. With a roar, he shoved her and he felt her body give way before his weight. She flailed her arms and stumbled backward and wobbled to and fro near the edge of the sinkhole. Sang hollered something but nobody could hear him. Martin gave a low whine and reached for Kim with shaky hands. But she slapped his hands away and planted her feet wide as though she were standing aboard a raft on choppy water. Her eyes bulged like their father's and she straightened her back until she towered over him. Her face was red and angry and twisted in ways he had never seen from her before. Martin backed away and leaped through the building's opening. The room smelled wet and sour.

“Come back here,” Kim snapped at the front of the building. “You idiot, you’ll get yourself killed.”

“No. You’re going to hit me.” Martin took another step deeper into the room. His eyes darted for a safe haven but he could not see anything. Then he remembered the flashlight and turned it on.

Kim took a deep breath and when she spoke again her voice was calm. “I’m not going to hit you, just come out of there so we can go back. I swear I won’t hit you. Okay? Please, just come back. We don’t know what’s in there. What if the building collapses?”

Martin weighed her words. She seemed a lot calmer. Maybe she wouldn’t hit him again. Somewhere in the room behind him, water dripped slow and heavy. He turned away from his sister to face the long room. “It’s stood this long.”

“What does it matter how long it’s stood?”

Martin didn’t answer. He turned and walked into the roofless room, the dirt and glass and tree detritus crunching underfoot. The flashlight waved a small circle on the walls as he looked around and his steps echoed hollow on the wooden floor. The building must have been erected above a crawlspace or basement. Martin looked up and saw large jagged holes in the ceiling invite in the sky. Pale moonlight fell in beams upon scattered and rusted shelves that had been long ago painted beige or white. His toe caught on something thin and straight. He bathed the floor with light. Red and rusted nails stuck straight up from the floor in parallel rows leading up and down the entirety of the building. He carefully shuffled away, amazed that he had not stepped on a nail and turned to leave. But to his right, a thin counter that had once lined the length of the store caught

his eye. It had collapsed on its face, exposing rows of cubbies on the wall behind it. Martin walked over, carefully avoiding the nails. Sections of the counter were crushed and broken. On its corpse lay an old framed encasement. He wiped off the dirt and dust from the glass. An old newspaper faded to yellow over time was visible beneath the filth. He squinted and turned the encasement this way and that but could only make out one word: Japs. The glass shattered when he tossed the encasement aside. He ran the flashlight beam along the wooden cubbies but they were empty. But on the wall above, black spray paint had left a message.

"OUSTER OF ALL JAPS IN CALIFORNIA NEAR!" the graffiti screamed in large and tilted cursive. Martin had no idea what to make of it but it seemed angry. He heard Kim yell for him and he stepped toward the front of the store.

The floor gave out beneath his foot with a dull thud like the smack of dead flesh.

Martin screamed and twisted to avoid the nails that rose to meet his falling body. Splintered and cracked wood scratched and dug into his leg. The floor caught him right above his left knee. He held his weight with his hands on either side of the hole and his right leg folded beneath him. Kim jumped the ledge of the store.

"Stop!" Martin yelled.

Kim froze.

"There are nails sticking up." Martin aimed the flashlight at the floor, its dull beam long and thin along a row of nails.

"Martin, you idiot," she mumbled when she reached his side.

Kim grabbed his arms and tried to lift him. The floor creaked and groaned and a short series of pops reverberated as the ground bowed beneath them. Martin and Kim stared with wide eyes and bated breaths, their hands and arms wrapped around one another.

Sang appeared at the front of the building, his skin a gray and sickly pallor.

"Stop," Martin said when he saw him. "Don't come in here."

Sang nodded and ran his fingers through his hair with both hands.

"Okay," Kim said as the floor shifted suddenly. She stumbled over him and her added weight forced his leg against the jagged edge of the hole in the floor and he moaned as blood flowed light and watery down to his ankles. "Let's just go. Real fast, okay?"

"I think I'm bleeding," Martin whispered.

"Ready?"

Kim wrapped her arms under his armpits and around his chest and he tensed his muscles to push himself up. Sweat rolled down his back and the pressure from her arms squeezed breath from his lungs.

"On three," she said. "One…"

Light and uneven tapping and skittering came from the back of the building. At first just a few taps, then more and more as the sounds spread across the floor. Martin raised the flashlight and saw a glittering line of glassy black orbs moving back and forth at the back of the building. His stomach sank and his insides threatened release.

They were eyes.

Dozens and dozens of eyes.

Dogs with long lithe bodies lined the rear of the building, their black and gray fur unkempt and knotted in clumps. They moved smooth and graceful and Kim's nails dug tight against Martin's chest as she saw what he saw. From the rear of the dogs, a larger dog the size of a wolf stepped forward. The skinnier dogs cleared its path. Its coat was whitish-gray and its eyes a flat black that reflected no light at all. The joints and muscles in its legs flexed and popped as it padded toward them paw before paw. Yellow teeth opened beneath thin retracted lips and dripped thick frothy drool to the floor. It opened and shut its mouth and a faint growl rumbled from its chest. Its head bobbed to a silent steady rhythm as it took its place at the head of the pack.

"Oh," Martin exhaled. He grabbed hold of his sister. "Three, I think."

Kim yanked. He pushed free.

They tumbled toward the open storefront. Paws pounded close on wooden floor behind them.

"Run!" Martin screamed to Sang as he and Kim sprinted across the floor. A sharp pain ran down his leg where he had fallen through the wood but he ignored it. His foot worked. *Run*, he screamed. *Run-run-run*.

Sang's mouth dropped when he saw the dogs.

"Go!" Kim screamed. "Don't stand there! Run!"

Sang ran.

Martin and Kim burst through the storefront as a series of small pops burst behind them. The pops grew in speed and volume, treading on one another into a cacophony of

collapsing floor. Dogs yelped and barked and whined and were lost in the uproar. Martin tripped and fell and rolled on the wide ledge outside the building. He spit out the taste of dirt and pushed himself up to his knees on a small patch of grass. Dust exploded from the open storefront as the floor completed its implosion. Kim ran onward but stopped when she saw that Martin wasn't by her side. Martin got to his feet and saw blood issue forth in thin red lines from his leg. Kim turned and ran for him. He motioned for her to keep running and she slowed to a stop, her mouth hanging as her eyes focused on the sight behind him. Martin felt hot breath just as a heavy weight dug into him from behind.

White fur flashed and blurred as the wolf-dog dragged Martin to the ground. Rocks and sticks pressed into his back and they wrestled around the ledge. He dimly remembered that the edge of the sinkhole was nearby. They rolled over and over and he felt the rough wiry hair of the wolf-dog's tail flick between his legs. It sank sharp claws through his shirt to tear at soft skin. His small hands reached up to push its neck away and the wolf-dog's mouth snapped over and over at him with loud clicks inches from his face. Heavy lines of drool splattered hot and sticky across his nose and mouth. Martin's chest burned where the claws tore and the wolf-dog's feet scratched at his wounded leg. Flashes of white and black light burst before him and his elbows shook and threatened to buckle. The wolf-dog throbbed and twisted in renewed fury when it felt Martin weaken. He pushed and pushed but the wolf-dog came closer in rapid thrusts. Martin moaned and wondered how fast it would be, how soon before it was all over. A sharp rock prodded his ribs and he instinctively twisted to his side. A clump of fur in his hand tore from the wolf-dog's neck and he lost his grip. It drove its head down hard. Fangs sank into his

shoulder. Martin screamed and shoved its head away with the strength of fear and panic and freed his shoulder. He leaned as far back as he could and felt nothing beneath his head except for the sinkhole. Martin gasped and felt his bladder release warm sticky urine across his groin and down the sides of his hips, soaking his shorts.

A dull thud and suddenly cool night air where there was before only scratchy fur. The wolf-dog flew from him and rolled along the edge of the sinkhole. Its claws scratched at the ground to stay upright.

"Go away," Kim screamed. She stood over Martin holding a long branch like a baseball bat. The wolf-dog crouched on its haunches and glared black dull eyes from red-rimmed eyelids. Kim roared and stomped her foot. "Run," she yelled at Martin. Her eyes stayed on the wolf-dog as they shuffled toward each other.

Martin scrambled to his feet, his shoulder throbbing and sticky with blood, his leg sore and wet with blood and urine.

The ledge shifted and sank a foot. Martin and Kim lost their footing and fell to their knees. Sang appeared at their side and lifted Kim by her arm with one hand and Martin with the other. The wolf-dog turned toward the building, his paws digging at the ground. The ledge tilted.

Kim gripped Martin's hand tight and they ran with Sang across the shaking and toppling ground. The wolf-dog howled as the ledge disintegrated into streaks of dirt rising toward the moon. They reached solid ground as the abyss tore the earth beneath the building, ripping it from its base and plunged its walls into its caving floors, sending rubble and the bodies of long lithe dogs down into the gaping crevasse with a deafening

roar. Martin thought he heard the soft moan of the wolf-dog as the last echoes of the collapse faded into thick, heavy clouds of dust and ash kicking up before them.

Martin sank to his knees and Kim rubbed his back and cried as he tried to catch his breath. When Martin grabbed his shoulder, fire shot up his neck and down his arm. He sat up straight and shivered.

"What the hell," Sang mumbled. He stood next to them gasping.

Kim shoved Sang. "Dogs," she yelled. Tears streaked clean lines through the dirt on her cheeks. "Dogs. Why didn't you tell us there were dogs?"

"I didn't know!" Sang whined. "I've never been here before!"

Martin shook his head in disbelief.

"You could have gotten my brother killed." Kim spat. "Fucking idiot."

"Sorry," Sang said. He looked down at his feet. "Nobody would ever come with me before. Everyone at school said it was no big deal. I didn't know."

Martin stood and gestured for Kim to help him remove his shirt. They peeled the ripped and bloody shirt over his head. Then Martin limped to the edge of the clearing until he found a bush sprouting wide leaves. He pressed them against his cuts and did his best to wipe the black clumpy blood from his shoulder and leg. The bite didn't look so bad. The wolf-dog never got a chance to lock its jaw. He stretched and flexed his knees. His leg was just scratched and cut. They were sore but they worked. He survived.

Martin pressed another patch of leaves against his shoulder and rubbed them deep into the cuts and held them there to clot the flow of blood as he walked back to Kim and Sang. His sister was cursing Sang and calling him all sorts of names but Martin wasn't

listening. He turned to the sinkhole and stared long at its depths. The building's remains had disappeared but he caught a flicker of something catching light like glass. The wind whistled thin hisses through trees as it had always done and Martin felt comforted at that. Kim was still yelling at Sang when Martin interrupted.

"I'm sorry," he said loudly. "Okay?"

Kim shot Sang a dirty look before walking over to Martin. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," Martin said. "I think so."

"We have to tell mom and dad," Kim said. "You need shots."

Sang groaned.

"Shut up," Kim snapped at him. "My brother almost got his head bit off, you pothead."

"Thanks," Martin mumbled. "For coming to get me. Sorry for..." He sighed.

"Just stop being an idiot."

Martin shrugged. He wiped his nose and swallowed the lump in his throat. He tossed the last of the leaves covered in his blood into the sinkhole and they floated and twirled in circles as they floated above the black.

"I'm sorry too," Kim said. She watched the leaves disappear. "I should have told you how to spot poison ivy. That's going to be bad."

Martin groaned.

They laughed. They couldn't help it. There was nothing else to do. The trio turned from the sinkhole and made ready to depart. The dust from the collapse had settled and the abandoned town fell as silent and still as it had been before they arrived. They walked

beneath desiccated buildings from one block to the next. Early morning gray seeped into the dull concrete road that had glowed so brightly during the night and the cracks and scars of the years since its laying stood stark in its ruined face. Martin limped out of the town leaning on his sister. They climbed through the woods hand in hand. Drops of morning dew and frost fell gently from waking leaves overhead and the ground softened enough for their sneakers to leave light impressions in the mud. And as they stumbled into the clearing where Uncle Quan's Toyota was parked, the sun rising in the east lit the sky like fire burning away the days that had come before, leaving only trace remnants as faint as steps on the morning ground winding through the world, side by side.

THE THINGS LEFT AHEAD

August 1993

Gnats and mosquitoes swirled against the muggy afternoon air in thick clouds, thick even for summer, thick enough for Bobby Tran to think twice about going down to Bug Island. For anyone else, he would have stayed home. But Anna wanted to go. Anna, with her barely-crooked front tooth Bobby always teased her about. Anna, who didn't care how many bugs found solace in her brown hair which turned frizzy and wild when it was humid. Anna, who would enter middle school at H.B. Woodlawn in a couple weeks with the smart kids. So Bobby found himself chasing her shiny green Huffy on his rusted bicycle too small for him by a year. The beating midday sun drew heat from the ground in waves and felt like sawdust against his skin. They cut across the parking lot of the community center and cruised down a service road beneath freshly painted condos. Anna stood on her pedals to push hard up a long hill, swaying from side to side, her slight frame shimmering as she pulled far ahead. Bobby pumped his legs until his muscles burned. Anna's voice came from where the service road ended and the woods and trails began. He looked up to see her smiling back at him and blindly maneuvering her bicycle around the short yellow pole that marked the boundary.

“Hurry up, Bobby-boy!” She turned back around in time to duck a low-hanging branch.

“Be careful!” Bobby screamed.

Anna vanished into the woods. He followed. Trees on either side rose tall and stretched arching branches across the divide, shading the trail with twined fingers like lovers. Sunlight in tiny patches flaring white filtered between twigs and leaves and left before him sparse criss-crossing patterns which disappeared in his shadow when he passed. The trail was narrow and paved and abutted the larger Washington and Old Dominion Trail with a mix of declines, inclines, s-curves, and bridges. Next to him roiled heavy creek water carrying rain from the day before. Roots of stubborn trees rippled veins in the asphalt which Bobby avoided for fear of being thrown. They rode for a while, Anna far ahead, him just keeping up. They crossed beneath Columbia Pike. The sounds of cars passing over the bridge’s seams echoed hollow against rusted metal and concrete pillars. It amazed Bobby how traffic and apartment buildings and strips of stores lining the Pike hid so easily Arlington’s dense maze of trails and woods.

Bobby caught Anna on a section of hills. They fell into rhythm with one another, their legs keeping similar pace, the sounds of their chains punctuated by the pitter-patter of insect bodies against their own. Sweat beaded on his forehead and ran down into the crevices of his skin. He itched. They leaned in unison through sharp turns and swept past a crowded park and its barbecue smells. Finally they reached a flat embankment of rounded rocks spreading along the water’s edge. Here the creek ran wide enough for the sky to stare down in full blue. Anna leapt from her bicycle and let it clatter to its side on

the rocks. Bobby set his bicycle down gently next to hers and kicked off his shoes. He stood in the water up to his ankles and watched Anna roll her overall legs. Behind him, in the center of the creek and beneath a single overlarge branch, was a large pile of rocks and boulders rising nearly six feet above the water. Bobby slapped a mosquito against his sticky neck.

"You should be more careful with your bike," he said, examining his palm. The mosquito lay like crumbled grit atop tiny streaks of red in the middle of what his older brother Martin had told him was his lifeline. Or was it love? He brushed his hand against his shorts.

"I'm getting a new one for Hanukah. This one's too old and getting too small." Anna finished rolling, stood, and shrugged. "You're such a worry-wart. It's a bike. They get dirty." She leapt into the creek and shimmied her way to the island. Dark water soaked her light denim overalls to her belly.

Bobby started to reply but a gnat flew in his mouth. When he stopped coughing and spitting, he saw Anna laughing at him from Bug Island. "Shut up," he mumbled.

At its summit, Bug Island was wide enough to play on and flat enough for picnics. Anna lay down and Bobby joined her. When it was warm, children from the Columbia Heights and Barcroft neighborhoods would gather to do battle with water guns and water balloons. But today it was just them, laying side by side, watching the sun seep through the massive branch overhead. Leaves glowed and grew translucent and Bobby made out dark veins in green flesh. Bugs gathering nebulous and many hung halfway between the island and the branch. Wind shook its leaves and twigs and what light filtered through

flickered off darting insects, a soft and blinking lightshow. It wasn't exciting, not really, but it felt to Bobby like taking a breath. The noise of cars faded and the only sounds that registered were the light burble of water tumbling all around them and the thrum of his body so close to Anna's. Water from her overalls pooled beneath her and spread to him. For long moments Bobby lay next to her in silence, staring at the bugs, through them to the sky, afraid to breathe, afraid Anna would leave if he did. He imagined reaching out his hand to hold hers.

"I had a nightmare last night," Anna said. "I dreamed I was running away from kidnappers on a skateboard. But then they kept catching up to me, and when I looked at them, they turned into those ministers on television. Isn't that weird?"

Bobby watched a large bee bump its head against a twig over and over. "I don't think that's weird. Just stupid."

"Shut up," Anna said. "Like you would know what's really scary. All you ever do is play chess and worry about stupid things."

"I have nightmares. About my dad." Bobby didn't know why he said it. He never told anybody about his dreams. "Never mind. Forget I said that."

"You can tell me." She turned her head to look at him and he eyed her and saw sympathy or pity or something worse playing at the edges of her mouth.

"It's nothing." Bobby felt silly. He stared at the bugs. The boulder was suddenly hard and rough against his skin and he felt his body grow heavy. Anna already thought he was scared of everything—she didn't need to know about his stupid dreams. For a while they lay very quiet and very still. Then she pinched his hand. His neck grew warm and

his head lightened and his heart pounded. Her hand lingered on his, warm and sweaty and like everything good he could think of. When he didn't move, she relaxed and pulled away, leaving her pinky curled over his.

"Bobby."

Bobby sighed. "It's nothing. My dad's just angry all the time. I don't know why." He bit his lower lip. "All he talks about is war. War this, war that. Prison. Sometimes I dream about Vietnam and it's me fighting and I get killed. Or I go to prison like he did."

"Oh."

"You know how my dad limps? I remember it like this: he got shot here in Arlington when I was little near our apartment, and it was all bloody and gross. There were little bugs growing from his knee and it stank real bad."

"Huh?" She was confused and Bobby hurried to explain.

"I don't know how to explain it… Like, he got his limp from a mine explosion in Vietnam. But I remember him getting shot, and sometimes I dream it. Like, I *remember* that he got shot and I *remember* what it looked like. Everything. How crazy is that? But it never happened. I asked my mom once about it and she thought I was crazy. Until then, I thought it really happened like I remembered." He remembered the wound pulsing and throbbing around bits of protruding bone. Sometimes he dreamed he had reached out and dug his fingernails into the hole, searching for something, a bullet maybe, or maybe something he didn't recognize, something much worse. But it wasn't real. It never happened.

"What about your brother and sister? Did you tell them?"

“Martin would just laugh. He laughs at everything even if it’s not funny. He doesn’t care. My dad doesn’t bother him anymore, really. He’s always out and Kim’s never home either. She’s always working now. Or she’s doing school stuff or club stuff or newspaper stuff. They’d just think I’m stupid.”

“Maybe you watch too much television. I still think my dream is scarier.”

“That’s ‘cause you’re weird.” They laughed. Bobby reached his pinky around hers and gently hooked it and when she didn’t pull away in disgust he turned his head a little so she couldn’t see his smile. His body tingled all over as he brushed his pinky along the side of hers over and over. The sun slipped away from the branch and the lightshow ended and that was how he could tell the world hadn’t stopped.

“I tried to learn chess from my dad,” Anna whispered. “So I could play with you.”

Bobby blinked. “You want to play?” he asked excitedly.

“Maybe. Sometime. But it’s too—I don’t know. Too much to think about? The castle goes one way, the knight goes another…”

“The more you play, the easier it gets,” Bobby explained. “It’s simple. You just have to get used to it.” He pulled his hand from hers and waved in excitement. He imagined them spending hours together hunched over a chess set. “It’s hard at first, but later when you think about it more and more, it’s all planning and strategy and timing.”

Anna turned onto her side to face him. Bobby mirrored her, sharply aware of how close they were, how gray and pretty her eyes were, and of a feeling in his gut like fear. The boulder lost its roughness, his body felt light, and he never wanted to move. Their breaths rose and fell together and he hoped his breath didn’t stink. She curled loose

brown strands of her shoulder length hair behind an ear. A row of three studs in her ear glittered and he remembered he had gone with her to get them done. After what seemed like hours, she smiled at him a little and rolled onto her back.

"But if you think too long, you lose."

Bobby wasn't sure what she meant, but he felt something break away, lost, and didn't know how to answer her. He lay on his side a while before reluctantly rolling onto his back.

"Are you going to miss me when I'm at Woodlawn next year?"

"I guess," Bobby mumbled. *Yes*, he thought. *Yes, yes, yes.*

"*You guess*?" she mocked. "Well I can't wait to meet some new boys." When he didn't say anything, she went on. "I can't believe my parents camped out in front of the school for two days to sign me up. But we're going to be in middle school. Aren't you excited?"

"No. Kim says the eighth graders will put us in trash bins," Bobby said, miserable. "Martin says he'll make sure I get dumped the first day of school."

"Bobby, Bobby, Bobby-boy." Anna laughed and when she stopped she lowered her voice. "I have something to tell you."

"What?"

"I went down Superman Hill on my roller skates. Backwards."

"Oh my god." Bobby sat up and gawked at her. "Are you crazy?"

Anna laughed but the only thing that came out was an empty hiccupping sound as her whole body shook. Bobby frowned in disbelief. She could have died, he wanted to scream.

Bobby saw from the corner of his eye a familiar round boy biking toward the embankment. The rattle of a rusted bicycle chain and the skid of tires on loose rock stopped Anna's laughter. She sat up and suddenly they were strangers watching Sammy halt at the edge of the creek on his bike. His puffy cheeks were red and his oversized shirt dark with sweat along the stretched collar that hung a little too low on his chest. Sammy stumbled off his bicycle, his round shoulders rising and sinking under heavy breathing. He paused, staring at Bobby and Anna, and then launched into breathless song.

"Shame, shame, shame, I know your names," Sammy shouted. "Bobby and Anna, sitting in a tree! K-I-S-S-I-N-G! First comes love…"

"Shut up!" Bobby shouted. He lowered his voice. "Tell me about Superman Hill later. I can't believe you did that."

Anna smiled and her eyes twinkled at him and he didn't want to look away but Sammy kept chanting louder and louder.

"Then comes marriage!" Sammy was nine and could be so annoying. He was Cambodian and hung around older kids like Bobby and was always out on his bike talking trash and getting in trouble. When he wasn't out, he was hanging around Johnny Five's mother, who was rumored to be the only person outside school who regularly fed him. A strange thought, considering the boy's weight.

By the time Bobby and Anna reached him, Sammy was wondering aloud about the ugliness of their children. Bobby bumped him with his shoulder like he saw older boys doing sometimes. “I said shut up.”

Sammy snorted. “Your mom said you were out here.” He looked at Anna. “Sorry to interrupt your date.”

Anna smiled a little and Bobby flushed, awaiting her denial. “I’m gonna go home,” she said instead, lifting her bicycle. Water dripped heavy from her overalls as she mounted her bicycle and ran down its frame. She balanced with one foot on the ground and turned the handlebars left and right, grinding the tires into the rocks. “So do you want to go to the library tomorrow?”

Sammy laughed and Bobby shot him a look before turning to Anna. He saw her expectant eyes and soft smile and he averted his gaze and stared around her, at the trees, at the creek, at the rocks on the ground, anywhere but in her face. Sammy kept laughing. Bobby shrugged. “Maybe. I don’t know.”

Anna’s back stiffened as straight as her pursed lips. “Fine. See ya later, Bobby-boy. Bye, Sammy.” She pedaled down the trail, the water from her overalls dripping behind her.

When they were alone, Bobby sat with his feet in the cool water with his back to Sammy so he couldn’t see him stare at the spot on the trail where Anna had disappeared.

“What’re you doing hanging out with her?” Sammy asked. “She’s ugly.”

“She’s not ugly. She’s my *friend*,” Bobby snapped. “And I said shut up about it, fatty.” He reached up and shoved Sammy in his soft gut. It felt like squeezing a marshmallow.

“Anyway,” Sammy went on. “Did you hear about the haunted house in the Valley?”

“What about it?”

“Johnny Five’s mom said it burned down last night. Let’s go see it.”

“Are you crazy?”

“Nick said he’d go with us, so it’s cool.”

“Who?”

“Black Nick. With the glasses. Come on, Bobby, let’s go. Please? Please-please-please?”

“Why do you hang out with Johnny Five’s mom so much? Don’t your parents think it’s weird?”

“Shut up,” Sammy grumbled. He picked up his bicycle and stared down the trail. “You wanna go or not? Nick won’t go with just me.”

Nick was in Bobby’s grade and famed for knowing by heart the entire Washington Redskins roster as well as winning the science fair the last two years. Bobby and he had never talked too much, but it would be good to have a scientist with them in case of anything funny. Bobby imagined Anna’s face when he told her that they’d gone into the haunted house after it had burned down. “Fine. But there’s no such thing as ghosts. Everyone knows that.”

They took to the trail, and as Bug Island disappeared behind them, the water spots that Anna had left dark and wet on the asphalt before them dried and faded into nothing.

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Bobby and Sammy rode their bicycles along the Washington and Old Dominion Trail toward the Valley and stopped at the intersection of Walter Reed Drive. On their left was the base of Superman Hill, a gash of road so wide its opposing lanes were separated by a median. As they waited for the light, Bobby stared up and up and up and grew dizzy and felt his knees weaken. Sunlight glaring angry and hot against the hill's face drove from the asphalt waves of heat and he squinted and breathed the sour fumes of oil and exhaust. Far, far above, the hill ended abruptly against blue sky and he could not see what lay beyond though he knew the hill rose still higher. Bobby's older brother Martin had gone down the hill on a skateboard the summer before seventh grade and bragged that he hadn't been scared at all, though the boy he went with fell halfway down and landed at the bottom a bloodied and broken heap. Martin had laughed until the ambulance came. And Anna had already done it. He had never heard of anyone tackling Superman Hill *backwards* on roller skates. Ever. They weren't even in sixth grade yet. Why so soon? Sure, once in high school, kids would be labeled sissies or worse if they hadn't conquered Superman Hill. But they had years left. A lifetime. Bobby felt very small. He wondered briefly if she was lying to him to see how he would react as she did sometimes. The light turned green and they crossed.

Sammy led Bobby past the trail's mile markers, the numbers descending as the boys rode the border between the Valley and the Shirlington neighborhood. Nick lived in

the Valley. Vietnamese kids didn't normally hang around there, though Bobby and his older sister Kim had enrolled in summer classes one year at Drew Model Elementary School. To their right was an industrial park of auto shops specializing in imports. To their left, Bobby saw houses and duplexes through a single county-manicured line of trees, a thin barrier hiding the Valley from the bike trail and the rest of Arlington. Old Cape Cod-style duplexes lined the hilly landscape. Behind each row of houses was another row higher up and above that another and so on. Dense and wild trees casting thick shadows spread in green clumps throughout the neighborhood in yards and fields. Old cars overflowing from driveways parked cluttered along curbs and lined the neighborhood's streets. At the end of the trail, Sammy turned left into the Valley.

They wove their way down rows of duplexes separated by metal fences and stopped at a tidy one-story home adorned with black shutters over orange-red brick. Sammy looked pointedly at him until Bobby knocked on the door. An old woman, her long thin dreadlocks silvered with age and tied back in a ponytail, hollered for Nick who yelled back that he'd be out in a second. They thanked the woman who shut the door without word and they waited outside against the chain link fence. Nearby, in the middle of the road and beneath the gaze of homes standing crowded around them, a group of children close to Sammy's age circled loud and boisterous around a large chalk outline of a square. A chalked cross split the square into four smaller squares, each one taken by a child. They slapped a tennis ball at each other with open hands, the rapid patter of the ball smacking against flesh then road then flesh growing to a pitch as the game went on. Finally, a tall boy hit the ball with a resounding pop and it bounced between the legs of a

younger girl and rebounded over to Bobby and Sammy. The children hooted as the girl's shoulders sank and she vacated her spot to the next boy in line. Bobby tossed them the ball and they continued playing. He watched them for a while until Sammy spoke, his voice small and whiny.

"Bobby, will you promise to go inside the haunted house with me?" Sammy asked, not looking at him. "I'll give you five dollars."

"Yeah, right. Where'd you get five dollars?" Bobby asked. "Stole it, probably."

"Man, I got five dollars, don't worry," Sammy said, turning to frown at Bobby. Bobby saw that his face was red and sweat beaded up in his thick, unkempt hair. His eyes were wide and something in them made him look much younger than nine. "Come on, please? I just want to see."

"What's your rush? It's just a house. Nothing's in there." Bobby rolled his eyes.

"You don't know that." Sammy stared down at his fists gripping the fence.

"Man, shut up."

"Come on. I could use the five dollars to buy tennis balls for Four Square." Sammy gestured at the children. "But I'll give it to you, you go in there with me." He glanced at the house and mumbled. "Don't tell Nick, I paid you, okay? Please, Bobby?"

Bobby groaned. Sammy could be so annoying. He thought of Anna with what seemed to him to be a never ending thought. She would want him to go into the house, wouldn't she? He wondered if it was safe. Nick was a science whiz. If anyone could tell if the building was safe, it would be him. "Keep your money. If Nick thinks it's okay, we'll go in."

Sammy nodded. “Thanks.”

“What are you so scared of anyway? It’s just an old house.”

“Man, Johnny Five’s mom says it’s haunted, so it’s haunted.” Sammy looked around. “I’m not scared,” he continued. “I’ll go in, I just don’t want to go alone, that’s all.”

“Why don’t you get Johnny Five’s mom to take you?” Bobby smirked.

Sammy ignored the remark. “I’m hungry.”

“You’re always hungry. Why don’t you eat at home?”

Sammy shrugged and resumed watching the game of Four Square. Then, in a very small voice, he asked: “Aren’t you ever scared of anything, Bobby?”

Bobby sighed. Anna thought he was scared of everything. Sammy thought he wasn’t scared of anything. He didn’t know who to believe. “Ghosts aren’t real.”

The screen door rattled and slammed and Nick appeared wearing thick glasses beneath a short flattop, denim shorts, and striped socks. The word *NOT* was plastered across his black tee-shirt. As he crossed his yard, he picked up a long thin branch and used its point to absently knock rocks and gravel from the grass onto the driveway. He stopped when he reached the fence, the chain links separating him from Bobby and Sammy.

“What’re you guys doing?” His voice was congested and nasal as always.

“You said you’d come with us to the haunted house,” Sammy whined.

“You really want to go?” Nick looked at Bobby.

“Yeah,” Bobby said. “It burned down, right? Let’s go see if it’s still haunted. We figured you could tell if it was okay.”

“You believe in that stuff?” Nick adjusted his glasses and sniffled. “Kind of stupid. Science explains everything, man. Science. But, yeah. Okay, I guess, if you really want to go. We have to stop at my uncle’s restaurant first. My grandma wants me to drop off something.” He pulled a cassette tape from his pocket and shrugged.

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Late afternoon had settled by then and the sky paled until the thin lines of clouds spreading across the fading blue were nearly invisible. Nick led them deep into the Valley to a strip of stores and restaurants. Groups of older boys and girls walked along the sidewalks in the shadow of the shops and milled about an empty parking lot. The dull sounds of their light laughter and voices sounded muted and hollow beneath the blanket of humid air and the hum of electric lines above. Hot wind ballooned Bobby’s shirt as they rode and the sweat on his chest and underarms tickled. Nick stopped them at the end of a strip of stores beneath a neon-blue sign blinking the name of the basement restaurant, Magic Ned’s. The trio chained their bicycles to a signpost and walked down a set of concrete stairs. Rust had sunk into the porous surface, leaving red and brown stains sharp against the stark white. They pushed through a wooden door with stickers of credit card logos clinging crooked and uneven to the glass.

Even at midday, Magic Ned’s was dark despite the soft light falling through the small basement windows. The rear of the restaurant was a brick wall behind a lone microphone stand situated in the center of a slightly raised stage. A small chalkboard

advertising the day's specials hung from the bar gleaming to their left. Tea light candles in tiny glass jars and vases spread throughout the room on tables and along the bar. What few customers there were sat hunched over their meals far apart from one another, their features orange and yellow from the tea lights. Hung behind the bar and above shelves filled with dark and glassy bottles was a large Washington Redskins banner. The wall facing the bar was filled with frames: autographed photos of athletes and celebrities and politicians, photos of neighborhood patrons and family members, photos depicting the restaurant's renovations over the years, and encased in glass in the center was jersey 41 of the Washington Bullets covered in autographs. Sitting behind the register at the center of the bar was a skinny dark-skinned man with a white goatee and tired eyes. Smoke wafted around him as he tapped his cigarette above an ashtray. He waved the boys over.

"Grandma said to bring you this, Uncle Ned?" Nick slid the tape over to his uncle. He introduced Bobby and Sammy. The three boys sat on barstools and propped their elbows on the bar.

"Self-help nonsense." Uncle Ned scratched his chin, not touching the tape. He considered the boys for a moment. He cleared his throat. "What're you boys up to?"

They exchanged wary glances. Before Bobby or Nick could say anything, Sammy spoke up.

"We're going to see the burnt down house. See if it's still haunted." He sounded proud, daring.

Uncle Ned's eyebrows raised. "Now, if it was burnt down, what do you expect to see?"

Bobby kicked Sammy's leg and the younger boy sank in his stool and mumbled, "It's not burnt down, just burned, I guess."

"Uh huh."

"You gonna tell Grandma, Uncle Ned?" Nick glared at Sammy.

Uncle Ned took a deep drag from his cigarette, the cherry glowing angrily, and exhaled through his nostrils two long streams of smoke. "Do me a favor. Don't go inside. It's not a good place for kids, you hear?"

"All right." Nick wiped his nose with the back of his hand.

"Okay. Good. A burnt down house is no place to play. You boys eat yet?"

"We're okay," Bobby said quickly before Sammy could speak up. He didn't want to impose on Uncle Ned, didn't want to look hungry in front of strangers. "Thanks anyway."

"Just ate at home," Nick said.

Uncle Ned nodded. "Yeah. Well, don't be shy. But I mean it, no ghosts in the house, but you all could get real hurt in there. Don't know how strong the structure is, and don't know who's been going in or out."

"If people go in or out," Sammy mumbled. "Doesn't that mean it's safe?" He stared at the bar and traced the grain of wood with a small finger.

"Still," Uncle Ned said. "Who knows if the house'll fall down on your heads. Anyone goes in there, maybe they don't care. And if they don't care, then that ought to tell you something about them."

Sammy nodded, not looking up.

“There’s a scientific explanation for everything,” Nick recited. “Ghosts simply don’t exist.”

Bobby elbowed Sammy. “See? No such thing as ghosts.”

“It’s haunted,” Sammy snapped, glaring at Bobby. “Johnny Five’s mom said so.”

“*Johnny Five’s mom said so*,” Bobby mocked.

“Well,” Uncle Ned said slowly. “Ghosts, who knows. But I always looked at haunting as things that stick wrong.”

“What do you mean, Uncle Ned?” Nick drummed his fingers against the bar, frowning at his uncle.

Uncle Ned sighed and scratched his temple. He tapped his cigarette against the ashtray and its dead coils shed white ash. “Things, you know, they happen, and the world moves on, maybe even forgets. Just shifts a little or a lot to accommodate what’s happened. Over time things pile up like dirt on a grave. You see things as they are now, but you don’t remember how it got to be that way. So you make it up. You try to explain it as smooth as you can and hold on to those explanations real tight because they stick hard, harder than anything else because inside you know it’s wrong. But it’s so easy to believe and you don’t want to let that go.” Leaning his head back, Uncle Ned blew a stream of smoke straight up. “Kind of like that house you boys want to see. Must have been something like ten years now. Nick, you were just born, but a couple women were found dead there. Now kids think it’s ghosts. Haunted? Sure. Haunted.” Uncle Ned nodded and smoked his cigarette.

Bobby didn’t understand. Were the women haunting the house?

“How’d they die?” Nick asked.

“Don’t recall. By another hand, by their own, who knows. By something that kills, I suppose. Drugs, maybe. Maybe life.” Uncle Ned shrugged. “They weren’t even from around here, just got found here. People everywhere end up somewhere, I guess. Who knows the in-between?”

Nick led them out shortly afterward into the waning day, into heat and humidity that felt resurgent as though the afternoon saw desperate finality in the approaching shade of early evening. At Bobby’s side, Sammy chewed on a piece of fried whiting, having managed to swindle an order from Uncle Ned when Bobby wasn’t paying attention.

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They rode toward Drew Model Elementary School in silence through narrow potholed roads. Years ago the school served the neighborhood children of the Valley but now it was a charter school which drew kids from the rest of Arlington. So children like Nick were bused to other schools in the county which resorted to using trailers to house the growing population. Bobby remembered his summer classes there in large colorful classrooms and recesses in its playground made from shiny rust-resistant materials. When the boys reached the field in the back of the schoolyard, they found a chain-link fence towering above them.

“Oh,” Nick said. “That’s right, they put up the fence around the school.” He looked left then right, but the fence ran the length of the property.

“For what?” Sammy asked, looking around. He gasped deep breaths and Bobby saw with some amusement that the fat boy was sweatier than before. “That’s so dumb.”

“My grandma said for the safety of their students or something. They even got a policeman.” Nick got back on his bicycle. “Let’s go around.”

Sammy groaned and Bobby laughed at him.

Finally they arrived. Bobby stopped where the road met the driveway and peered up at the haunted house’s peak and ran his eyes over burnt-out window frames. Streaks of fresh soot rose in wild stringy lashes above scarred windows on the upper level. Unlike most of the other houses in the Valley, the haunted house was a two-story building built with wood siding that had once been painted dark blue. But now its façade was cracked to reveal ashen rotted wood and clung in faded and bubbled strips. The sun hung low in the sky behind looming trees in the backyard and the house stood in gray wispy shadow, its exposed openings pockets of murky black. Boards that had once covered the windows and door lay strewn about a lawn overgrown with yellow and brown weeds. Without the covers, the house looked pitted and raw and naked, a scab freshly peeled. Yellow police tape hung limp and cut from the gaping doorframe as though inviting them in. Beyond the front entry Bobby saw only diffused gray and brown.

Bobby stood with his bicycle between his legs and his hands gripped the handlebars and Sammy and Nick mirrored him on either side. The boys watched the house, waited for movement. Despite the heat, the base of Bobby’s spine grew icy cold and spread sharp and slow up his back and he swallowed hard to push back the rising fear. The wind died and infectious stillness fell upon them and Bobby’s chest barely rose as his breath lightened to nearly nothing. He heard no neighborhood children, no cars, no animals, no birds. Even the bugs had disappeared. In the front yard, a dead and withered

tree naked and covered in moss and mold hung its drooping branches low to the ground in deference to the house. A dry wind broke through the stillness and the police tape hanging from the front door streamed impatiently into the building. Bobby felt the prickly flesh on his neck rise.

"You know," Nick said. "If there were ghosts, and I'm not saying there are, but if there were, this would be a pretty good place to find them."

Bobby grunted.

"We could be like the Ghostbusters if we find something," Nick continued quietly.

"Ghostbusters," Bobby mumbled. "Yeah, maybe."

"You want to go in? Five dollars, Bobby-boy," Sammy breathed, forgetting that he didn't want Nick to know that he had offered to pay Bobby to go inside.

"Don't call me that," Bobby said in a too loud voice. Somewhere in behind the house, a cloud floating before the sun muted its light and the house grew darker. He trembled and gripped his bicycle harder.

"Oh, only Anna can call you that?" Sammy sneered. "Your girlfriend?"

"Ohhh," Nick hooted.

"Shut up, idiots. She's not my girlfriend." Sammy could be *so damn annoying*. Now Nick would tease him too.

"Yeah," Sammy agreed. "You're right. She's not. She's Joey's girlfriend."

Bobby faced Sammy. "Who?"

"Joey. You know, his dad owns that barber shop on Wilson Boulevard."

“I don’t know him. She didn’t tell me about that.” He turned back to the house. “Who cares? I don’t care.” Sammy was lying or mistaken, he told himself.

“I’m serious. I heard he kissed her and they swapped chewing gum.”

“Sammy,” Nick snapped. “Stop. Nobody cares.” He elbowed Bobby gently. “Right?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Bobby said evenly. “We’re friends. She’s going to Woodlawn next year anyway.” He chewed his lips and stared down at his fists as the handlebars grew hot and his knuckles white. His hand burned where Anna had pinched him earlier. He bounced on his toes. “What are we even doing here? Let’s just go home.” They were friends, *just friends*. He didn’t have any right to be mad. He wanted to punch Sammy.

“Home?” Sammy whined. “What for? There’s nothing to do at home.”

“We’re already here,” Nick said quietly.

Bobby simmered in silence and stared at the house for long moments. Dimly he recognized the faint scent of burning rubber. It wasn’t strong, but it was there. From the fire, maybe. He didn’t think about it much. He was thinking about Anna. And Joey, whoever that was.

Anna and Joey.

Joey and Anna.

Anna.

Anna, who read *Fear Street* and called Bobby’s collection of *Hardy Boys* childish. Anna, who each year after Hanukah since first grade brought him a fried potato pancake in a tissue with little embroidered hearts. Anna, who went down Superman Hill

backwards on roller skates. Anna, who he would no longer see at school after summer ended. The ground grew unsteady as though summer and everything with it had ended long ago and the world shifted and weathered all at once until all that remained was him and Sammy and Nick. And opposite them, the haunted house, the house everyone at school spoke of in hushed voices. Anna would go in, wouldn't think twice about it. Bobby shook his head. He wouldn't see her again, at least not like before.

"What do you think?" Bobby asked Nick.

"Well," Nick said, pondering. He removed his glasses and rubbed the lenses with his shirt. "Structure seems to be intact. Doesn't look like the fire caused much damage. Looks okay."

"Okay." Bobby dismounted and let his bicycle tumble hard on its side. He marched up the driveway to the front door. The yellow police tape clung to his sweaty arm as he passed but he pressed on unflinching.

Bobby entered a dark living room lit by dull gray light streaming through naked window openings. The smell of mildew and fouled water scrubbed the air raw and putrid and Bobby lifted the collar of his shirt to cover his nose and mouth. Beneath the odors was the sour scent of burning rubber. Sammy and Nick entered and flinched at the smell. They covered their noses and walked around the room in silence. Wherever they stepped, the floor croaked sad complaints beneath the crumple of old newspapers, food wrappers, and broken glass. Water encircled their shoes where they stepped on soggy carpet. Walls devoid of drywall stood stripped and skeletal over shapeless piles of blackened insulation. Bobby wandered deeper into the house and the light lessened until everything

was muddled to dark gray and he squinted to make out the garbage at his feet. He shuffled down a long hallway. Its drywall remained but when he brushed past the wall, it felt wavy and wet and he wondered if he could push a finger through its skin. He tripped over blankets lying in tattered tangles and kicked them aside. Ahead of him, sunlight.

Bobby paused when he heard Sammy and Nick come after him and together they walked toward the sunlit room. As they approached, a stench worse than the living room's grew thick and gagging around them until they clasped their hands over the parts of their shirts covering their noses and mouths. At the end of the hall, Bobby peered with watery eyes into what used to be a kitchen. The windows along the rear wall held old cracked glass that allowed eerie sunlight to filter in through patchy layers of stains and dirt, soaking the room with soft uneven orange hues. The floor was linoleum rubble and the only evidence of appliances was brown watermarked outlines. The cabinets had been ripped from the walls and lay broken and splintered into boards leaning against the backdoor. Draped atop the cabinets was a dead raccoon. Its skull was red and pulpy beneath peeled skin and bits of gray hair and the black fur on its body was matted and shone wet with rot.

"Jesus," Bobby whispered.

"Yeah," Nick agreed. He leaned into the kitchen and picked up the broken handle of a broom and poked the raccoon. It tumbled to the floor with a dull thud. "Been dead a while." He turned to Sammy. "Maybe this is your ghost."

“This place isn’t haunted,” Sammy said with a nasal voice. He disappeared down the hall to the living room and yelled back to them. “It’s just a dump. Nothing’s here.” They ignored him.

“Let’s go check out the upstairs and get out of here,” Bobby mumbled to Nick.

Nick nodded, staring sadly at the dead raccoon.

“I want to go home,” Sammy yelled.

When they got back to the living room, Sammy was standing by the front door, staring at the ceiling.

“You wanted to come here so bad,” Bobby said.

“Yeah,” Nick said. He tossed the broom handle aside. “Let’s go see upstairs. It’ll be fast.”

Sammy held up a hand to hush them. “I heard something. Like creaking.”

Bobby and Nick slowly turned their gaze upward.

Sammy paced the living room on his tip toes, his head tilted up and with a hand cupped to his ear. “I know I heard something. I heard it, Bobby, I swear to God.”

They waited. Nothing happened. Finally, Bobby snorted. “Come on. The house is just old.”

The air shed the stench of decay as they climbed the stairs and was replaced by burning rubber suddenly sharp and noxious. They stepped into a dim corridor illuminated by windows in opened rooms on either side. Gentle gusts of wind blew hot and humid around them and they heard the flutter of birds and squirrels coming through the opened windows. Brown stains from water and age covered the walls by the landing. But a third

of the way down the hallway began to fade and darken until the walls curdled to a shiny black. Long threads of melted paint dripped frozen beneath the soot in thick layers. A closed door faced them at the other end, a thin bright cut of light lining its bottom. Bobby led them past a husk of a bathroom and an empty bedroom and stopped at the border of the burnt section. He pressed a toe against the floor. The fibers in the carpet had melted to brittle crust in the fire and cracked beneath his weight. But it held and they went on. The last room before the closed door was entirely black and the sky came in through gaping and jagged holes in the ceiling. The walls were melted and the floor was bowed in the center. The carpet had burned completely away to reveal charred floorboards. White ash floated in pools of sludge.

"This must be where it started," Nick concluded. He coughed. "I wish that smell would go away. It's as bad as downstairs."

Bobby nodded. The smell stung his nose. A squirrel hopped onto the windowsill in the center of the wall and stood on its hind legs. Black glassy eyes glared at them. It ran back and forth along the ledge before jumping onto a nearby branch. Above them, in exposed rafters, lines of birds chirped.

"See Sammy?" Bobby said. "You heard an animal. That's all."

Sammy shrugged. He turned and opened the door to the final room, releasing a wave of the burning rubber odor.

He shrieked.

Bobby turned in time for Sammy to fall into him and they collapsed against Nick and the three boys fell in a heap. The top of Sammy's head hit Bobby's jaw and they

scrambled against the crusted carpet, leaving his skin scratched and sooty. Sammy wrestled against Nick as he tried to run. Nick pinned his arms and snapped at him to calm down. From the floor, Bobby glanced in the room and saw a figure sitting against the wall between two windows, his legs crossed, his head hanging against his chest. His jeans were dirty and ragged and he wore a heavy black jacket even in the heat.

"Stop," Bobby snapped at Sammy and Nick. "Stop. It's just a guy."

They stopped wrestling and looked into the room.

The man sat unmoved by their presence or Sammy's shriek beneath white hazy smoke. Light raspy breaths came in time with the rise and fall of his narrow shoulders. Glass vials and cigarette lighters lay scattered at his feet. Bobby stood and Nick and Sammy gathered behind him. The fumes bled through the room and all around them.

"It's okay," Bobby said slowly, not taking his eyes off of the man. "He's just asleep or something. I'm going to see if he needs help."

"What? Let's get out of here," Sammy said.

Bobby entered the room. The wall shared with the next room had turned dull black at several spots but everything else looked untouched. He shuffled forward, muscles tensed for flight, and when the floor creaked he nearly fled. Fat stubby fingers held the tail of his shirt and Bobby led Sammy deeper into the room. At the rear, Nick sniffled.

"Let's go home," Sammy whispered. "I'm sorry I wanted to come here."

"Shut up," Bobby hissed. He stopped several feet from the man. "We can't just leave him here."

“Oh no. Don’t look at me,” Nick whined. “I’m not going any closer.”

Bobby looked through the soft smoke. Brittle black hair fell thin and stringy over his face. The man was Asian. Sammy’s grip tightened on his shirt and pulled him away.

“Wait,” Sammy said.

Something hard in his voice made Bobby hesitate. He turned to see him staring at the man. His eyes narrowed and his cheeks grew red and his nostrils flared as his face twisted and swelled. Bobby looked back at the man, confused. Drool dribbled down his chin and onto a stained shirt.

Sammy pushed past and strode angrily across the floor to the man, knelt, and slapped his arm. “Hey, wake up. Dad. Wake up.”

Bobby blinked. *Dad?* Was Sammy kidding? He’d never met Sammy’s family. Actually, now that he thought about it, nobody had. He stepped backward to the door where he bumped into Nick and they exchanged confused looks.

“Dad,” Sammy repeated louder. When the man did not respond, he yanked his ear.

Sammy’s father coughed and pulled away and looked up at Sammy with red watery eyes. He gazed around the room past his son, past the two boys he did not know. His skin was waxy and his expression pinched and agitated. He worked his pale chapped lips like a fish. Sammy stood and waited with crossed arms. His father’s head rolled and came to a stop against the wall with a light thud and he closed his eyes.

“Stop it.” Sammy kicked the man’s shin. “Get up!” When his father did not respond, Sammy pressed the flat of his foot against his shoulder and pushed until the man

fell over. He stood very still, his back to Bobby and Nick, and Bobby saw him tremble. He stared at the floor. Nick shifted uneasily next to him and copied him. Smoke wafting around the windows dissipated to the outside. The sun slunk out of sight as early evening arrived pale and purple. How long had they been at the house? Bobby twisted his shirt in his hand and waited. Nick shifted his weight from foot to foot.

"Fuck!" Sammy screamed. Then he screamed it again, dragging the word long and hard as though it had been torn from his body. Bobby wondered where he found the breath and worried if anyone on the street would hear. When Sammy finished, he drew a deep breath and screamed again. His voice puttered and grew ragged and raw but still he screamed again.

His father swung weak fists at the air and slurred Cambodian protests.

Sammy snarled a reply and kicked his side. Then he did it again. And again. The man grunted as each kick landed and tried to block the strikes with limp and uncoordinated hands. Nick rushed forward and spun Sammy by his arm. His face had flushed bright red and tears streaked down his cheeks unchecked. Sammy glared at them for a moment before shoving his way out of the room. When he was gone, the man rolled onto his back and was soon snoring.

In the end, the boys left the house and Sammy's father and the whispers of ghosts under the early evening sky. The air cooled and crickets chirped as they rode past fields and yards Nick made his goodbyes at the border of the Valley. Bobby biked behind Sammy for a long time in silence. When they reached a gentle decline he pulled even. Sammy stared straight ahead.

“He’s not really my father.” His voice sounded ragged.

“Who is he?”

“My mother told me before she died that he’s just someone that Pol Pot made her marry a long time ago before I was born, even though she was already married.”

“Pol Pot?”

Sammy shrugged. “My dad was a teacher but he died. Then my mom died. And now it’s just him.”

Bobby didn’t press Sammy for details, didn’t press him for things that he wasn’t sure either of them wanted to think about. They stopped at Superman Hill and waited for the crossing signal, listening to the hum of wind brushing the electric pole overhead. Sammy stared down at his bicycle and Bobby saw his hands strain on the rubber grips.

An old Honda pulled up next to them. Bobby nudged Sammy as the rear window rolled down and Johnny Five stuck his head out. His long hair was parted in the middle and dyed blonde-brown.

“Hey Sammy,” Johnny Five called out. “Everything okay?” He stared at the boy’s face, his brow furrowed.

Sammy nodded without looking up.

“What happened to you?”

“Nothing,” Bobby answered quickly. “He’s okay.”

Johnny Five looked at Sammy for a moment longer before appraising Bobby with a look of recognition. “What’s up big man? How’s your sister?”

“She’s good.”

“Martin staying out of trouble?”

Bobby shrugged.

The light turned green.

“I’d give you guys a ride, but…” He gestured at the driver with a pained expression. “Not my car.” The car began rolling.

“It’s okay,” Sammy said, lifting his head. “I’ll come over later anyway.” They pedaled across the intersection.

“Okay,” Johnny Five yelled as the car sped up. “I probably won’t be around, though.”

Sammy and Bobby waved as Johnny Five disappeared.

“He never sees his mother,” Sammy said. “She cries about him sometimes.”

Sammy lowered his head and pedaled faster and faster, his muscles flexing, proving he was alive in the dwindling light and Bobby sprinted to keep up. But Sammy kept hunching lower, going faster, letting the air wash over him, wash away what it could.

SPRING

On late spring nights like this, dry and cool with a light, crisp taste in the air, Martin Tran often thought of his friends from way back. It wasn't due to nostalgia that he remembered them, though he did miss the camaraderie sometimes. He could find them easily enough—Vu and all the rest—even now. And though nearly three years had passed since they'd spoken, they would drink and laugh and reaffirm brotherhood in bouts of reminiscence that only alcohol could induce. No, it was on nights like this, nights spent breaking into cars, that he thought of where he'd been, and wondered at where he was going, if anywhere. He suspected that his life, like his friends', was spent wandering in circles, his steps digging grooves into the ground as he walked the same path over and over. And each day he would sink a little deeper until the path became a trench, its walls too high to scale.

Martin drove through the quiet suburban neighborhood until he came across a silver Honda and parked three houses away. As he approached the car, a spidery hint of warmth in the breeze reminded him that he would soon need to requisition short sleeve uniforms for work. During the day, Martin worked as a security officer at one of the many construction sites that had popped up around the Capitol Beltway as contractors worked to renovate the highway. He loved his job, in his own way. There was very little to do, and very little to prove he existed. In his three years there, guarding stacks of

concrete pillars and steel beams, he filed not one report, investigated absolutely nothing. He hardly saw another person except in the very early mornings when the construction crews loaded their dew-covered supplies and his manager came by to check on him. If he waited until everyone left and spent the day at the movies or a strip club or napping in his small apartment, who would notice?

Martin stood at the front of the Honda and listened. Nothing. Just his own light breathing. He ran his fingertips down the hood. It was cool. He shoved the tip of a flathead screwdriver into the weather molding around the top of the driver side window. It caught between the glass and the slot in the door, and he leveraged the windowpane toward himself, prying it open just a crack. A familiar giddiness washed over him as warm, sinewy threads of adrenaline crept down his body to his toes. He slid his fingertips into the gap, caught the glass, and yanked. It opened wide. People often thought the glass would break at the slightest pressure, but that was bullshit. Car windows were damn hard to break without a tool, no matter what Hollywood claimed. Some people used shards of spark plugs, which shattered the glass. But that was messy. Martin reached between the window and doorframe and unlocked the door.

Instantly, the car began honking and flashing its headlights. Martin popped the hood and bent over the engine bay, wincing at the alarm blaring inches from his ear, and cut the battery cable. The screaming stopped, though his ears still rang. He eyed the house, ready to flee if a light turned on or a curtain moved. It never occurred to him that he wouldn’t hear the rustle of bed covers, or the thumping of feet flying down stairs. There were no warnings, he believed, that he couldn’t sense from where he stood. The

lights in the neighborhood remained dark, save a handful of porch lights. A scattering of stars blinked down at him, watching. Martin waited, imagining the movement of clocks and gears the world over. *Ticking, ticking, ticking*. His ears stopped ringing and the remaining quiet reassured him. He was accustomed to the quiet, which reminded him of his years as a wayward teenager, well over a decade before, when he did many of the same things as this night, and worse. There must have been countless car owners over countless mornings who woke to burgled or vanished cars, each one surprised at all the things that had happened the night before, shocked at having missing so much. Gradually, the quiet lifted, and he came to feel movement all around him: in the insects hiding in the grass, in the wavering twigs and branches, in the shivering bushes, in the flutter of leaves—all the motions of all the things alive and breathing. And as the roar of the sounds of night grew, he felt the world tumble unending toward the next day, the next month, the coming years, each moment bleeding into the next, the direction and shape of the bleed unknowable.

The car was a newer model, fully loaded by Martin's estimation, but when he sat in the driver seat, he saw that it had an aftermarket CD player. He wasn't really interested in the unit itself, just in the fact that the owner decided to purchase one for the car. For Martin, car stereos were centerpieces to their vehicles, and by extension, were a commanding part of the owners' lives. He'd once read an article at work which estimated that annually the average driver in the D.C. area spent three days in rush hour traffic in addition to the normal travel time, the most in the country. And for many, their only company was the radio, or their tape players, or their CDs, or, increasingly, their MP3

players and streaming devices. Some people spent thousands of dollars on upgrading their stereos to create a soundstage that would perform to theatrical standards, while others drove in silence. The possible combinations of components were dizzying. Discovering an owner's choices reflected a level intimacy Martin felt privileged to access, a sharp bit of insight that others might find mundane. With something that may have bordered on regret, he patted the underside of the dashboard like a new lover.

Martin undid the clips around the center console and yanked off the molding, exposing the car's innards. After unscrewing the six screws that held the CD player in place, he reached into the mounting bay for the wiring harness, and stopped. He hated unplugging the unit, as doing so would erase its memory. Who knew if this person set their clock forward five, ten minutes in an effort to be on time to appointments? What if the clock hadn't been changed since the previous daylight savings time adjustment? Or what if they preferred Christian rock or Howard Stern? These details, he thought, would have made his efforts that much more interesting. For a brief moment, he fancied himself a collector of fancies, of quirks, of routines. The thought was comforting, but he had to hurry. The longer he delayed, the riskier. Finally, he unplugged the harness, accepting that like so many other things that did not belong to those who professed ownership, the bits worth keeping were lost in the switching of possessors, in the shifting of days and seasons and years, fodder for the unseen moments in which he lived.

OBJECTS IN MIRROR ARE LOSING

July 1994

The evening rain had done little to relieve the day's humidity. Summer rains were like that. They came with an abruptness matched only by the speed of their passing, and when they went, they left the world steaming and covered in a sticky film. Even the air conditioned bowels of Eden Center weren't immune to the heavy slowness leaking through the shopping center's corridors, thinning the crowds to a trickle as night fell. In the small corner restaurant where she worked, Ly stifled a yawn and ferried cold bottles of beer to tables brimming with red-faced Vietnamese men. *I've got to get more sleep*. She wove her way through the dark restaurant on high heels, ignoring the familiar throbbing in her toes, the dull ache in her calves. *I'm only 19. I'm already 19.* Cigarette smoke grazed beneath the water-stained ceiling tiles and spread through the room in a slow mist, clinging to the air above crowded tables and around wall-mounted televisions. Somewhere in the dark, a karaoke singer belted out a Vietnamese love ballad. Slurred voices joined or called for more beer. Ly hurried to each customer, ignoring catcalls and invitations to sit for a while. During a lull in her shift, she stood against the wall at the end of the bar and watched through the smoke the shadowy forms and neon-lit faces laughing and chatting and singing. Night after night the regulars came. Always the same people. They were all so familiar now. Their faces, their stories. Some nice, some not.

She massaged the bridge of her nose. It was nearly 11. *Couple more hours. Then again tomorrow night. And the next.*

Ly's pager buzzed at her side. Though it was her boyfriend's home phone number, she knew it was his mother. *Again?* While she had become accustomed to these calls over the past several months, she couldn't stop her fingers from shaking as she re-clipped the pager to the waistband of her skirt and reached for the telephone behind the bar. She paused for a deep breath before dialing.

Hoang's mother's shrill voice answered. He wouldn't come out of his room. He was screaming and punching the wall. His father wanted to call the police. What should she do? Would Ly please hurry and come over?

Ly stared through the glass storefront, across the bright hallway, and into a darkened drugstore, her mind searching for soothing words. A familiar voice yelled her name from the other side of the restaurant. It took her a moment to recognize the large man waving from a table against the wall: Stoner. She waved back. The voice on the line trembled.

"Can you come right away? Hello? Hello?"

Ly wound the phone cord tightly around a finger and wondered what she would tell her manager. She stared at her tables, tallied the tips she'd lose. "No, not right now."

"Please, Ly. *Please*. It's bad tonight."

The phone burned against her ear and she shifted the receiver to the other side. Finally she promised to come over as soon as she could find a ride. For long moments after they'd said good-bye, Ly's thumb hovered above the dead phone's glowing buttons.

She flipped through her mental rolodex of friends and acquaintances, discarding each name in turn. *Jail. Sleeping. Working. Lazy. Not reliable.* Really, there was only one person she knew she could count on at this hour, but she hesitated all the same. They had been close once but that was a long time ago. The dial tone changed to beeping. *Well, we're still friends, right?* She sighed, clicked the receiver, paged Kim, and returned to work.

"Hey beautiful," Stoner said when she approached. He rested thick, tattooed forearms on the table. "How you been?"

"I'm good. You want to eat something?"

"Something." Stoner grinned.

Ly snorted. "Uh huh. Your teeth too crooked to eat anything."

The men around Stoner hooted and he laughed and slapped the table. "Just some mango, then. And another round."

"I'll be back."

Two Falls Church City police officers were standing stiffly in the entryway to the restaurant when she turned, their pale faces fuzzy in the smoke as they surveyed the room. Ly suppressed a groan, straightened her skirt, and hurried over to greet them. The officer in front towered head and shoulders over her, his youthful face staring down at her low-cut blouse. The other officer, a white-haired mustachioed man, stepped from behind the younger officer and walked slowly around the room, patting his round belly, nodding at some people and speaking short greetings to others. He stopped at a group of four young, surly-looking men Ly had heard were in town from Texas for a funeral. He

produced a small notepad and flipped through it as he peppered them with questions. The four men stared down at their drinks and grunted short answers and avoided his beady glare. Ly tried to listen in but the younger officer interrupted.

"Any trouble tonight?" he asked, his eyes still on her body. He rubbed slow circles around a button on his belt with a fat thumb.

Ly crossed her arms. "Just a normal night."

"Hey let me ask you something." He lowered his voice, leaned close, and nodded toward an old woman sitting at one of the arcade machines against the wall. "What's she doing?" The machine's sides were plastered with card game logos. The woman tapped buttons to raise a bet.

Ly shrugged and leaned away from his cheap aftershave. "Just games."

The old woman saw the police, slipped her hands into her lap, leaned back in her chair, and stared at the corner.

"Playing games, huh?"

"Yeah."

"I bet."

Ly looked up at the police officer. His eyes were roaming over her body again. A waitress yelled for her from the bar and waved the phone. "I have to go," she said. "I'll grab the manager for you."

The officer looked up at her face and she forced herself to smile at the greed in his eyes. "No, no need," he said, grinning. His thin lips spread above straight rows of sharp white teeth. "I'm just making sure you're okay. Just popping in. I'll be around a lot, so

say hi when you see me." He winked. His partner finished circling the room and they left. She hurried over to the waiting phone.

Minutes later, after a terse exchange with her manager, Ly left work and strode down the warm hallway, her thin jacket zipped to her neck. Compared to the stuffy restaurant, the air in the hallway was cool and light and she felt the night shed from her skin. Around her, colorful Vietnamese posters advertising concerts or video rentals clung to off-white walls. She passed another restaurant and glanced at the waitresses gliding around the room in designer dresses. There was Thuy—no, she went by Tracy now—a college student from Vietnam who kept skipping class to work and go shopping. She tried to catch her eye but she didn't look over. At the end of the hallway, Ly pushed open a set of foggy double doors and stepped into the steaming night.

Only a handful of cars remained in the sprawling parking lot that stretched down to the tire shop facing Wilson Boulevard. Large potholes covered in rainwater and glowing with moonlight dotted the cracked and uneven asphalt. Fog drifted along the empty roads and blurred her view of the small shopping center across the street. Two police cruisers sat parked to Ly's left in front of the Ames department store. The sidewalk shops to her right had all closed for the day and lay dark and still except for a few neon signs that burned green or red in the glass storefronts. The glossy, white bricks forming Eden Center's worn façade sweated condensation and Ly marveled at how rejuvenated the old L-shaped strip mall looked at night, away from the harsh summer glare. There had been whispers of major renovations over the past few months, and the owner of her restaurant was anxious about the rent. On days when she had time to wander from shop to

shop, she heard the same anxieties playing out over coffee or tea: *Remember how the shops left Clarendon when the rent went up? They thought they could open somewhere else. Now where are they? Nowhere. All gone.*

A group of men exited the building and stumbled to their cars. One of them stopped to vomit in the bushes lining the sidewalk and his friends laughed and clapped him on the back. They noticed her and shouted something she couldn't make out. She turned away and didn't relax until she heard their car doors slamming shut behind them. *Where are you, Kim?* She thought about her boyfriend, wondered what was happening just then.

Hoang had an easy, lopsided smile, and rough, muscular hands, and whenever Ly thought about him, she felt warm and at home. But lately that feeling had become harder to find. He used to take her to street races or to tag buildings and bridges with spray paint. It was fun. Exciting. Whenever he wasn't working on his artwork, he was working on his car, his friends' cars. He could do anything. But over the past year, everything had changed; he had become withdrawn and sometimes, on nights like tonight, he threw violent fits that left lamps shattered, tables flipped, and furniture broken. His parents didn't know what to do. Nobody did. There were stretches of days when he wouldn't leave his room, not for food, not to shower. *What's happening to him?* Despite the warm night, Ly shivered, and the foundation on her face grew heavy and sticky and her long bleached hair smelled strongly of ash. She thought of her bed in her tiny apartment and wished for sleep.

An old Toyota turned into the shopping center and stopped at the curb and she got in. Behind the wheel, Kim wore a maroon apron with a crooked nametag.

"Thanks for picking me up. I didn't know who else to call."

"You said something's wrong with Hoang?"

"Let's just go." Ly glared at the police cruisers as they drove past. "Look at these creeps. They have nothing better to do."

"They're doing their jobs. Would you rather there be another shooting?"

Kim always thought she knew everything.

The streets were empty as they drove past Ly's apartment building and exited onto the interstate. On the highway, fog stretched thick and dense all around them, the haze broken by the occasional blue light blinking atop fence posts separating the road from the Metrorail track that ran between the two directions of traffic. Here and there headlights would appear out of the mist and speed past, the taillights glaring like little red eyes as the cars disappeared into the distance. Kim yawned and Ly mirrored her. She wondered if she should have called a taxi instead of asking her friend for help. "How was work?"

"I'm tired of closing by myself. It's scary. I keep telling my manager but he's a dick. What's going on with Hoang?"

Ly chewed the inside of her cheek. "He's… having a bad night."

"More drugs?"

"Maybe," Ly lied.

"Hmm." Kim's tone was disapproving.

Ly couldn't blame her friend for thinking that way. Hoang had taken so many drugs over the years. Cocaine, acid, mushrooms, weed… Everyone knew it, though it was never that serious. *Besides, he's been clean for nearly six months. The stuff happening now isn't anyone's business.* Ly stared at her reflection in the window and massaged the dark rings under her eyes, rubbing the ridge of bone beneath the thin flesh. She pulled a Marlboro Light from her purse, lit it, and rolled the window down halfway. Wind flooded the car and she pulled her streaming hair into a ponytail. She sucked deep. The smoke burned.

"You're not married to him, you know," Kim said, her voice barely audible over the wind.

"I saw Johnny Five earlier," Ly answered. What did Kim know about anything? "He came in with his boys for a second. I think they went to go fight."

Kim shrugged.

Ly smirked, a little disappointed. Usually, on the occasions that Johnny Five's name came up, Kim would roll her eyes and vent her frustrations: he's such a bum; he's wasting his life; I can't believe such and such happened. So on and so on. It was funny. *Maybe she just doesn't care anymore.* Thinking about Johnny Five reminded Ly of the way he avoided his mother, which reminded her of the way she ignored her own parents. When was the last time she had visited them? She couldn't remember. Months probably, even though she lived just minutes away. No, not *just minutes*. Fractions of entire hours. Of days. Of weeks, of months, of years. Too far.

“Anyway.” Ly flicked her dying cigarette out the window. A surge of wind breathed new life into the flame as it sent the butt spiraling to the tarmac. She eyed the side view mirror and watched orange sparks scatter across the highway. They drove on, leaving the remnants forgotten in darkness and fog. “You’re going to UVA, right?”

“I can’t wait,” Kim said, her smile in her voice.

“What are you studying?”

“I don’t know. It’s driving me nuts. I can’t believe people know what they want to do already. It’s scaring the hell out of me.”

Ly considered her for a moment. Kim had done so well in school, gotten the awards, the recognition. She’d always been so smart. And now she was scared? Ly frowned, suddenly very annoyed. “Fuck those other people. What do they know about anything? Who cares if they know what they want to do? I bet they’re just as scared as anyone. And they don’t even know what it means to be afraid. Not really. It’s just *school*. You’ll figure it out.”

Kim eyed her and drove on in silence. After a while, she nodded. “You’re right. Fuck them.”

“Fuck them.” Ly slipped her hand into the wind, her fingers growing wet with humidity as they waggled in the current.

“I’m leaving next week,” Kim said.

“Already?”

"My friend has an apartment by campus. I'm living with her for the fall for like nothing. If I go early, I can get a jump on figuring my way around Charlottesville, hopefully find a job. You should come visit."

Ly traced the edge of the window with the tip of her index finger. It came away dirty. "I have work, you know? Rent, bills…"

"Are you going to enroll at NOVA?"

"The University of NOVA Dame? Right. Be real. I'd still be in high school if people didn't let me copy. May as well throw money down the toilet."

"You never gave yourself much credit."

Ly didn't answer. She stared at the moon drifting along the horizon before them, its outline broken by the tops of trees. Soon the only sound was the dull thrum of wind coming through the open window, rattling the car's cabin as it tried to shake loose the strange numbness spreading through Ly's body. She kept thinking about Kim leaving for college, over and over, letting the idea gain momentum as it rolled around in her head. *By this time next year she'll be a college girl, and who knows what's next for her then? And what about me? Where am I going?* Other acquaintances were at that moment preparing for college or community college, but she wasn't close to any of them. And she had known none of them half as well or as long as Kim. Best friends, once. For a brief moment she wondered what it would be like to go to college. She couldn't picture it. She'd always known school was for other people, other girls. But now that fact stared her in the face, daring her to flinch. After a while, Ly rummaged through her purse for

another cigarette, lit it, and held its tip just outside the window and watched it tremble and burn as the world passed.

***

Hoang lived with his parents in Oakton in a quiet neighborhood of large houses separated by neat yards and wide streets. Kim parked behind a minivan in front of a hulking neo-colonial with an attached two-car garage. Ly unlocked the front door and they entered a foyer rising to the second story on the shoulders of oak stairs. A massive glass chandelier cast bright light from the ceiling directly above them. Ly slipped off her heels and stretched her ankles. Kim toed her sneakers off and undid her apron and bundled it in the crook of her arm.

A tiny middle-aged woman in blue flannel pajamas sitting at the top of the stairs stood and hurried down to them, her brow creased in worry. She greeted them in rapid Vietnamese. “Ly, thank God you’re here,” she said. “Hoang’s calm now, but he’s…” She shook her head and muffled a sob with a tiny hand. “I don’t know what to do. He was punching the walls all evening. Now he’s in the garage...”

“Okay, mom,” Ly answered in Vietnamese with the affectionate title. She rubbed the woman’s thin arms. “Calm down. Go to sleep. I’ll wake you if I need you.”

Hoang’s mother stood on her toes to kiss Ly’s cheek. She nodded to Kim and disappeared up the stairs. Ly stared at the ceiling, at the direction of the fading steps, her cheek moist and hot where she had been kissed. The air streaming from the vent tickled her ankle. The hardwood floor was cool beneath her painted toes and stuck to her skin when she shuffled down the hall to the darkened living room. The only light came from

beneath the door to her left that led to the garage. She wiped her sweaty palms against her thighs.

"You want me to stay?" Kim asked quietly.

"Is that okay?"

Kim squeezed her elbow.

The door to the garage swung open noiselessly. In the corner stood a skinny brown figure in boxer shorts facing the wall. Hoang's back rose and fell with deep, steady breaths, his thin frame leaning crooked to one side like an uneven brushstroke. In his hand was a black and yellow power drill so large it looked as though its weight was pulling him down. Ly struck her knuckles against the door lighter than she intended, but he heard anyway and turned. She gasped.

Hoang's face wasn't his own. It was red and pinched and he peered wildly at them through cold, hard eyes. His nostrils flared and pulsed with heavy breaths above thin, colorless lips. He pressed his back against the wall and waved the drill at them.

Ly fumbled for the doorframe, her fingers numb and clammy. She managed to grab hold, held tight, and locked her knees so her legs wouldn't buckle. "Baby?" she croaked, her mouth suddenly filled with sand.

His eyes narrowed to thin slits. The finger on the drill's trigger twitched, his arm shook.

"Hoang," Ly said, loudly this time, her tone sharp like an adult's to a disobedient child. "It's Ly. Kim's with me. Don't you want to say hi?"

Behind her, Kim whispered, "Are you sure he didn't take something?'"

Ly shook her head. “Baby, say something. *Hoang*.”

He blinked over and over. Slowly his body relaxed and the muscles in his face smoothed and color returned as recognition sparked in his eyes. He lowered the drill and straightened himself. “Hey. Hey honey,” he said, licking his lips. “I didn’t know you were coming over tonight. Hi Kim. Everything okay?” He crossed his arms and leaned against the wall, pressing the tip of the power drill against his thigh as his eyes flicked back and forth between the two girls.

“I’m good, baby. We’re both good. Just wanted to see you.” Ly slipped into a pair of flip flops and crossed the garage, walking past a little red Honda CRX suspended on jack stands. Its hood was propped open to reveal an empty engine bay. Next to the CRX, in the spot for a second car, an engine was mounted on a rusted orange stand above an oil pan. Along the walls, shelves were filled with car parts and tools and buckets of bolts and screws. Scattered all over the floor were more car parts. *There’s enough crap here to build another vehicle.* Bright graffiti murals stretching across the garage doors depicted Hoang’s moniker, *Kuneiform*. The painted letters and lines rose and fell and turned in sharp, impossible angles, completely indecipherable. Up close, Hoang smelled of old sweat and faded CK One. Ly wanted to reach for him and pull him into her arms but instead let her hands fall awkwardly at her sides. “What are you doing?”

“Nothing,” Hoang mumbled. He raised his voice and stared over Ly’s head. “Sorry for the mess, Kim. I haven’t had a chance to clean up in here. It’s been one thing after another today. You know how it is.”

Ly turned to watch her friend wander the length of the wall on the other side of the Honda, carefully stepping over piles of molded plastic and metal parts.

"It's not so messy in here," Kim said, her voice a little too perky. She bumped a stack of old, broken car radios and they crashed onto the concrete floor with a hollow crunch. "Shit." She grimaced and sat at a work table and swiveled left and right in the chair, its joints squeaking with each thrust. At the edge of the table, an unruly column of sketchbooks rose to the ceiling. She poked at it and it too collapsed, sending sketchbooks scattering. "Sorry. Jesus, sorry," she mumbled. "I'm going to stop."

Ly turned back to Hoang and reached for the power drill. "Let me have this."

He uncrossed his arms, dropped the drill to his side, and pinned it between the back of his leg and the wall. "I'm working on something."

"Did you take something?"

"No. Of course not." He frowned. "You know I stopped."

"I know, baby." *He's not looking at me. He's not looking at anything.* She studied his face. He had always been skinny, but a robust sort of skinny. Bright. Glowing. Now his brown skin had taken on a waxy sheen broken by tiny wrinkles, and his cheeks sank into deep hollows that in the pale garage light made him look as though he'd been pulled half-rotted from a grave. The long hair framing his skull fell in greasy, uneven clumps. "What are you working on?"

"My car. Crazy shit." The words tumbled rapidly from him. "You'll love it when I'm done. Swear to Buddha, baby, it's gonna be amazing. But it's a secret. You can't say shit to anyone. Okay? Don't say *anything*."

“Your mom called me.” She reached out and laced their fingers together. His hand was cold and dry, and rough around the knuckles and joints, and it lay limp and lifeless in her grip.

“It’s fine,” he said. He sucked in air between his front teeth. “She’s just—whatever. She doesn’t like my friends coming over. Shit, we were just trying to get some work done.”

“Your friends were here?”

“Zach came by,” Hoang said.

Ly frowned and tried to picture Zach, but nothing came. She recognized in Hoang’s expression the look of someone genuinely remembering. She slowly unraveled her hand from his. As much as she tried coaxing out the words, wetting her lips over and over, she couldn’t bring herself to ask. Didn’t want to hear his answer. She stared at the concrete floor and focused on an old oil stain shaped like the shadow of a cloud, using its shape and color like an anchor, and squeezed her eyes shut. No. She wasn’t wrong. When she opened her eyes, she was staring at the strap on the flip flop digging into the skin between her toes. A knot grew in her gut, urging her to go inside for Hoang’s mom. For her heels. For the ache in her calves, for anything else. She couldn’t ask. She wouldn’t.

Kim asked anyway. “Who’s Zach?”

“You haven’t met Zach? We used to be on a racing team together. Up at Summit Point in West Virginia. We were working on his Mustang just now. You guys should have seen it. It was beautiful. 1965, all original. I’m gonna help him repaint it tomorrow.

Right here." He gestured to the walls. "Tape up some drop cloths, get some floor fans, everything. Just like a paint booth."

"Oh," Kim said, her face turning red. "But I thought your mom said…"

Ly felt her friends eyes on her but could not bring herself to look back.

"Nevermind." Kim grabbed a large black book from atop the collapsed pile of sketchbooks and flipped through it.

Ly blinked back tears as her mind raced. *It sounds so real.* Maybe Hoang would change the subject. Maybe she had remembered wrong, and he really had been on a team with someone named Zach. Maybe his mother forgot to tell her that Zach had been there. *Maybe, maybe, maybe…* No. She knew everyone Hoang did. Zach wasn't real. None of it was, and knowing it gnawed at her insides. She needed to get away. She crossed the garage and peered over her friend's shoulder at the sketchbook. Kim flipped past old, familiar drawings. Sketches of Ly sleeping. Drawings of apples. Faces of monsters. Cartoons. Graffiti. A drawing of a photo of Ly and Hoang sitting in each others' arms at a fountain in Old Town Alexandria, smiling as though there was nothing in the world but them. Stupid, silly drawings. Ly's throat tightened and she sucked in dusty garage air. She stepped away, leaned over the table, and braced her hands along its edge.

Kim closed the sketchbook and cleared her throat and drummed her fingers along the book's spine. "Johnny said he was thinking about art school. Weren't you going to apply or something?"

Ly faced the corner of the garage and bit her lower lip. *Art school. Even Hoang had thought about college once. About a future.* She bit harder and felt her heart beating

through her teeth, through meat and flesh. Felt the burn of relief where she tasted blood. The lump in her throat relaxed as she waited for Hoang to answer Kim.

But the only answer was the piercing scream of the drill boring into the wall.

Vvvvvvrrr-duh-duh-duh-duh.

Ly spun around. Hoang's back was to them and she watched the thrust of his shoulders and arms as he drilled more holes. *What's he doing?* "Baby? Hoang?"

Vvvvvvrrr-duh-duh-duh-duh.

Ly made her way around the Honda in a daze. Step by step, one foot in front of the other, the drill going all the while. As she neared, she could see bunches of holes hidden where Hoang had been leaning. Rough, ragged holes. Neat ones. Overlapping ones. Streams of soft white dust fell onto his hands and legs and feet like powdered frosting. *Why didn't I see the dust before?* She was halfway to him. An image of the drill digging into her body flickered before her eyes and her step faltered. He kept drilling, its sound growing louder and harsher. Air came in short, shallow gasps as Ly stood frozen, unable to move her limbs, unable to hear anything but the whirring of the drill, the bite of the bit, the hollow collapse of holes being torn into drywall.

Hoang set the drill on the floor and cupped a hand to a hole and leaned in close to listen. He nodded and frowned in deep concentration and then whispered a response into his cupped hand, into the small hole that led nowhere. He listened to an answer. Back and forth he conversed with nothing.

Her head swam. Ly reached out for the engine stand, for the engine's cold, lumpy metal, for the slick oil in its crevices, for the grit gathering there. Hands reached for her

from behind, held her up. Kim's voice sounded like a hollow burble as though she were speaking underwater. Somewhere in the house a clock chimed as midnight arrived and the day withered to nothing.

***

The week went on and Ly avoided answering her pager. When her batteries finally died, she didn't bother to replace them. When her phone rang, she found she had to use the bathroom or decided that her mail needed to be brought in. On Thursday, Hoang left her a message on her answering machine, but she could only make out his voice mumbling the same word over and over under his breath. When she gathered the courage to call back the next morning, nobody answered, and she quickly hung up.

On Saturday afternoon, as the sky deepened to the color of early evening, Ly's guilt overrode her anxiety and she took a taxi to Hoang's house to surprise him. When the taxi turned onto his street, she saw a white commercial van parked in front of the house. She squinted and made out an address to a pagoda in California plastered on its side beneath Vietnamese words. A monk and three middle-aged men in rumpled suits exited the van. The ends of the monk's red and yellow robes dragged on the ground as he carried a large stack of colorful books across the yard. He looked to be a small, pious man dressed in too many layers, and even at that distance, Ly could see tiny beads of sweat glittering on his shaved scalp. As the taxi carried her closer, the skin on her back and arms began to itch and burn until suddenly the car was too hot and too small, and the leather seats reeked of soured and rotten things.

It was too much.

Kim's words ran through her head. *You're not married to him, you know*. And wasn't that true? Why did she have to deal with all this? *I'm only 19.* Ly sank low in her seat until she could barely see above the doorframe. She hissed at the cabbie to keep driving. As they passed the house, the front door opened and Hoang's parents greeted the monk and his handlers. Ly averted her eyes and stared down at the floor of the taxi, at the flecks of dirt and dust embedded in the tiny curls of carpet. Pretended there was nothing to see outside. She sat still and held her breath as the house receded behind them. When they reached the end of the next block, she sat up.

"Nevermind," she said, ignoring the cabbie's eyes in the rearview. "Take me back home."

***

It was Sunday evening and Ly was still in bed. Her joints creaked and head ached and her dry tongue shoved the taste of smoke around the corners of her mouth. Sleep came and went. At one point she crawled out of bed for water, but the floor was unsteady and she collapsed back under her sheets. During one of her more lucid moments, Ly tried to remember the last time she was so hung over but the only answer she found was sleep. Her girlfriends stumbled out sometime in the day and she vaguely registered hearing the door slam behind them. She woke again to the pounding in her head. *Boom. Boom. Boom.* Her eyes throbbed and when she opened them she saw red blurry light coming through her windows as dusk ushered in night. She burrowed deep in her blankets but the pounding continued. *Boom. Boom. Boom.* Over and over. It was getting worse.

No. That was the door.

Ly groaned and stumbled across the apartment. It was Hoang. She stepped back to let him in.

Without a word, he wandered around the living room, picking up blankets and sheets from the sofa and floor, and folded them against his chest. She watched him silently until he grunted and pointed at the bathroom. *Shower. Right.* As she closed the door to the bathroom, Ly heard the clatter of cups and glasses being stacked in the sink. By the time she was done with her shower, night had fallen, and through her living room window she could see street lights turning on. Hoang was sitting at the kitchen table, and across from him waited a mug of tea.

"Long night?" Hoang asked when she sat down.

"Vivian's birthday." The tea burned her throat going down. She lowered her head and blew at the licks of steam rising from the mug, the surface rippling with each breath. It was still too hot.

He shrugged.

"How'd you get here?"

"Finished my car last night," he said with a touch of pride. "Drives good. Fast. Are you working tonight?"

"No." Ly rotated the mug between her palms. The heat from its ceramic walls turned her skin red. "I'm sorry I haven't been around much this week."

"Mmm. Feel like coming with me to tag up Bunnyman Bridge?"

“Not really,” she said, examining him. He looked refreshed. Clean. His hair was neat and he smelled of soap. He had a soft smile on his lips and he picked at a lone spot of dirt under one of his fingernails.

“You have other plans?” he asked.

Ly shook her head.

“I’m checking into the hospital tomorrow.”

“The hospital?”

He nodded. “A monk came over yesterday. My parents… thought it would help.”

“Did it?”

“Gave me this.” Hoang fished out a gold necklace from under his shirt and pulled the chain taut with his thumb, sending a small white pendant spinning on its clasp. When it stopped she saw that it was a Buddha carved in ivory. “I guess they’re fed up with me,” he continued. “I know you’re scared. I’m sorry about that. I’m scared too. I had plans, you know? Now I have to try to get better.”

“I had plans too,” Ly said, though she couldn’t picture them. Children? Marriage? A home? No, those were fantasies, scenarios that would happen in a perfect world. And all of them included Hoang. Did they still? What were her plans for herself? She cleared her throat. “Whatever.”

He looked away.

She softened her voice. “I just wish I knew what was happening.”

“Yeah, but it’s happening to *me*.” His voice cracked and she saw anger ignite in his eyes when he looked at her. His voice turned icy. “Not to you. Not to my parents, not

to that monk. Do you know what it feels like? It's shit, baby. It's like I'm behind a veil, and I see enough to know what's happening, but I can't do anything about it. I'm helpless. Like I'm just going along for the ride." Hoang got up and paced around the kitchen, his hands curled into fists at his sides. He opened and closed the refrigerator, turned, and hopped onto the kitchen counter. He gently swung his legs, bouncing his heels against the lower cabinet door. One of his socks had thinned at his toe and she could see his skin through the fabric. "You remember I came in just now, right?" he said. "For me, I might remember that I've been here for hours." He rubbed his knuckles, cracked them. "The monk prayed and talked to me and chanted and shit. But he told my parents to get me a doctor." He fell silent and stared down at his feet and shook his head. "Tomorrow," he said in a low voice. "To be honest, I think I'm relieved. Like there it is, the end of all things, you know? Expiration date."

"You're not *expiring*."

"What's left?"

"I don't know. Me. I'm still here." Ly's voice trailed off.

"For now." Hoang looked small and broken sitting there, swinging his feet so far from the ground.

She went to him, stood between his knees, and cupped his face with both her hands. He rubbed her sides just how she liked. She kissed him lightly on the lips, tasted his cracked, salty skin. *I love you.* "Let me grab my purse and we'll go."

The Honda CRX smelled faintly of mildew and gasoline but Ly rolled down the window and ignored it. On the highway, a brand new Honda Prelude pulled up to her side of the car. The driver was a cute dark-skinned Latino about their age. He blew kisses to Ly and she returned them with her thumb pointed down. Hoang laughed and both cars downshifted to 30 MPH. As the lanes in front of them cleared, impatient cars behind them flashed their headlights. Hoang honked. On the third honk, Ly heard the clunk of his shoe slamming the accelerator to the floor.

The front tire chirped, caught traction, and shoved Ly deep into her seat. The engine screamed its way through second gear toward redline. Soon there was just the windshield in front of her, and through that, a blur of white lines and fuzzy treetops, and in her veins a rush of adrenaline that sent her gut floating and sinking in all the right ways. A smile spread across her face and her nails dug into the door's armrest. The wind beating in through the open window lifted scraps of paper from the floor and sent them swirling through the cabin like lost and misshapen snowflakes. Ly watched Hoang from the corner of her eye and saw him gripping the steering wheel with both hands, his back straight and tense. He kicked the clutch without releasing the gas pedal and power shifted into third gear. The two cars were even as they sped down the highway. Somewhere around 70 MPH, the Prelude began veering into their lane. At the last second, the Prelude driver pulled back into his lane and did it again, even closer this time. Hoang grunted and kept the car straight.

Anger spread hot and bitter through Ly. *Fucking asshole.* The Prelude came in close again. Before she knew what she was doing, she unbuckled her seatbelt, got onto

her knees on her seat, and leaned out the open window. For a brief moment, her senses returned and she stared at the road passing in the gap between the two cars, at the blur of cracks and painted lines. Gusts of wind roared all around her, pummeling her body and sending her hair and tee-shirt billowing. Her heart pounded and gut clenched. Every strike of wind threatened to lift her from the car and dash her against the tarmac. Her bones shatter, her heart stops. *What am I doing?* She stared down the length of the highway, into its eye, smiled, was invincible. She reached out, smacked the Prelude's window with both hands over and over. The driver looked at her wide-eyed, and she pressed her hands against the glass and leaned in close and screamed: "Cut it out, asshole!" She laughed until her eyes grew bleary from wind and speed. Then she pushed herself back into the CRX, her right hand coming away from the glass in a fist with her middle finger raised.

Hoang slapped the steering wheel and cheered and she leaned over to kiss him hard on his cheek. She buckled her seatbelt as they came upon a slow-moving minivan. Hoang jerked the wheel to the left, taking them over a rumble strip that sent vibrations through her feet and up her spine. He sped down the emergency lane and cut back onto the highway in front of the minivan. Ly twisted around in her seat and saw a cloud of dust and dirt floating in their wake. She looked for the Prelude and saw it disappear into the crowd of headlight beams far behind them. Hoang hit 120 MPH and released the gas pedal. The engine whined as they slowed. Adrenaline lingering in the air between them ebbed like a long, breathy exhalation. Ly looked at the side view mirror and saw a sticker

over the standard warning. She laughed. In small, white, block letters was a new warning: Objects in Mirror are Losing.

***

The drive to Bunnyman Bridge was filled with dark and winding roads that sent Ly and Hoang over rolling hills and around blind corners and past reflective street signs that floated in the dark like disembodied heads. Clusters of trees on either side of the road sent long, sharp branches arching overhead, leaving a thin strip of cloudy night sky peering down at them from above. At spots where the trees thinned or cleared, Ly saw old, darkened homes, or sprawling estates like the ones found in the glossy pages of magazines, or bare fields soaked in moonlight and lined with pale white fences. At the edges of other properties, the only signs of houses were dirt driveways that led off into the wooded distance.

Ly had never paid much attention to the Bunnyman legend. From what she could remember, it began in the early 1900s, when an accident during a transfer between prisons in Fairfax County allowed an inmate to escape. The authorities later found the uncooked corpses of disemboweled and half-eaten rabbits hanging from tree limbs in the woods surrounding the small railway overpass in Clifton, Virginia. The inmate later died during his recapture. On a Halloween night more than a half century later, his spirit returned and murdered a group of teenagers, leaving their bodies hanging from the bridge and their entrails dangling in tattered loops down to the road below. In some versions, a single teenager survived and was subsequently locked away in a mental institution. In

other versions, the Bunnyman was just a crazy man in a rabbit costume who threw axes at people. Nobody could keep all the versions straight.

They arrived at the bridge, which was really just an old tunnel burrowing through a hillside. The tunnel's face rose from the ground like the top half of a flat, concrete hexagon around a circular entryway. The hill continued above the concrete, its bushes and vines drooping down over the tunnel. At the very top lay the overpass, a pair of train tracks on a flattened bed of gravel crossing perpendicular over the road. They nosed their way through the tunnel, bathing its rounded walls in orange headlight beams, the color of dwindling embers. Thick, glossy paint had been caked on over the walls in uneven patches, a telltale sign that the county regularly painted over the vandalism and graffiti that appeared from time to time. Ly wondered how many pieces were hidden under the paint, how many names lay buried in its makeup over the decades. They parked a dozen yards past the bridge.

A light tinkle of water greeted Ly when she got out of the car. She walked along the edge of the road and saw a thin stream winking at her from a ditch. *I need to pee.* "How long do you need?"

The rattle of spray cans, the slam of a trunk lid.

"Not long." Hoang tightened his backpack's straps and crossed the road to the other side of the tunnel, past the concrete face, and stopped at the steep, earthy hillside. He thrust his hands into the incline's soft cover of rotted leaves, overgrown grass, and weeds. The damp undergrowth shimmered in the moonlight as he searched for a handhold. Ly heard the low pops of vines and roots as they strained in his grasp,

struggling to keep hold of the earth. He pulled and threw his weight upward, and then he was all feet and hands and crooked limbs as he climbed. Ly watched his backpack bobbing, the spray cans rattling faintly with each shift of his body. He arrived at the top and clapped his hands free of dirt and walked along the edge of the overpass, back toward Ly's direction, his arms spread out at his sides for balance.

"It's so creepy up here." Hoang stopped directly above the center of the tunnel and stared down the train tracks and deep into the woods. He leaned to his right as though trying to see around a corner. He kicked a large rock, sending it tumbling down the face of the overpass and onto the road below.

"Be careful," Ly called up to him. She shifted her weight from foot to foot at the edge of the road and looked left into the tunnel, then right, and searched the sky for the moon. It had disappeared behind a patch of clouds above the horizon. The clouds diffused its light, turning the border of sky and earth the color of ash. Around her, the street was empty and quiet but for the sounds of animals moving in the dark, their steps louder than her heart, but just barely. "Hurry up and paint and let's go home."

Hoang's voice was dull and hollow. "My buddy used to come here and tag it up like crazy. That's why they started the video camera surveillance. But even after, he still managed to get away with it. He was so fast, the police would review the tapes and one second the wall would be blank, the next second, boom, his piece was up." He meandered his way down the track, away from the road, away from her.

"Where you going?"

Hoang didn't answer.

Ly walked to the other side of the road and stood on her tip toes to keep him in sight, his slight frame dark against the cloudy sky. He stopped for an instant and cocked his head, listening. He continued walking and then he was gone. She squinted and searched but he didn't reappear. She held her breath and cupped her ears but couldn't hear his footsteps. The trickle of water flowing in the ditch along the road grew into a roar as the night winds lifted the sounds and sent them floating into the air all around her. She eyed the hillside, wondering if she should climb up after him. "Hoang, where are you?"

Her voice echoed off the road and concrete and forest, but no reply came.

The earth trembled beneath her feet.

"Hoang!" Ly yelled. Louder. "Come back here! Something's coming!"

It started as a low throb, barely recognizable in the dark, but grew and swelled as the seconds passed. A tumult of movement. The steady, rhythmic clanging of sound rising in the distance as the ground seethed. The clamor of metal on metal rumbling its way closer, its volume rising, rising. Streaming toward the overpass in a smooth thrust from the same direction Hoang had headed. Ly backed away from the bridge, her head tilted back, scanning the overpass for her boyfriend. Through the trees she saw a beam of light from the train split the darkness, stripping away in that small stretch of yellow-white the things that made up the night. And suddenly Ly was running for the bridge, screaming into the sound of engine and wheels and tracks. She slammed against the incline and thrust her hands into the soft hillside. Her slender fingers dug through mush and filth and grasped thin, ropy roots and she pulled herself halfway up the hill but the

ground gave out and she slid back down, her knees and legs slick and heavy with mud. She screamed and stared up at the hill, at the concrete wall, at the track, at the sky. She got onto her knees and searched for another handhold. The train roared overhead.

She stopped. Stopped screaming, stopped struggling against the hill, stopped moving altogether. She imagined Hoang in a padded cell, imagined visiting him there, imagined scheduling her life around his. Week after week. She couldn't breathe. Her head spun. She imagined his family needing her to run errands, she imagined explaining to her friends why she was always busy, she imagined never seeing an end to any of it. The ground shook under the weight of the train, the weight of life, and whispered for her to release the vines, release the bits of leaves and root and detritus in her grip.

She let go.

And instead of sinking into the filth and letting the muck drag her down, she felt lighter. Air returned in deep, full breaths. Her fingertips tingled, alive. The train passed. The night settled. Hoang appeared above her, smiling, his face flushed. Laughing and saying something about the look on her face. Ly couldn't hear him as she floated somewhere far away.

***

The U-Haul truck was nearly packed when Ly arrived at Kim's family's duplex. She waited awkwardly as Kim's father slid a cardboard box onto the edge of the loading deck and limped back inside. Kim's youngest brother Bobby appeared with another box, hopped into the truck and moved everything from the edge inside.

"That it?" Kim asked when Bobby jumped back down.

“How should I know? It’s your stuff.”

“Just make sure that’s all.”

He rolled his eyes and went back inside.

Kim turned to Ly. “Just in time to not help.”

“I have great timing.” Ly grinned and walked around the truck. It was huge. She looked into the cargo area. It wasn’t even a quarter full. “Why’d you rent such a large truck?”

“*Better value*,” Kim said, mocking her mother. “How are you?”

Ly shrugged and held her arms out, and her oldest friend fell into them. “You’re all grown up.”

Bobby returned, wheeling an old bicycle next to him. “I think that’s it,” he said. “Dad said I can go.”

“Going to see your girlfriend?” Kim asked.

“A girlfriend!” Ly teased. “What do you know about girls?”

He glared at them, his dark cheeks flushing. “She’s not my girlfriend.”

“That means you don’t know where to put it.” Ly winked.

“If she’s not your girlfriend, how do you know who I’m talking about?” Kim asked.

“Shut up. You’re so dumb.” He biked away into the late morning sun.

Kim’s father stuck his head out the front door and yelled that they’d be leaving soon.

When they were alone with the distant howl of traffic and the muted screams of children rushing to enjoy their last weeks of summer break, Ly jumped onto the edge of the loading deck and dangled her feet. Behind her were boxes filled with Kim's things, things she would perhaps recognize from their childhood, things she had long ago forgotten. They weren't close anymore, she reminded herself. But who else did she know as long as Kim? *It seems like we were children together just a few years ago.* Ly stared around the neighborhood for a while, watching a boy drag his mother down the street. His tiny hand was wrapped in his mother's larger hand, their bodies leaning away from each other like a lopsided V. "I just saw Hoang at the hospital."

Kim sat on the edge of the truck bed next to her. "How is he?"

"He's okay. Just kind of dead. Just sits there."

"Did they say if he'll get any better?"

Ly shook her head.

"People can live with this, you know."

"They're talking about shock treatments," she said. She wiped her eyes with her palm. "God, it's so fucked up. His mom pages me three, four times a day. He didn't tell her I… that we broke up. I don't know if I should tell her." She thought about his family and she suddenly felt alone and forgotten and worthless. She shook her head. What was she supposed to do? *At least I still visit him. Isn't that enough?* "And his dumbass friends don't even come by to see him. They always talk about, *Oh, we boys, we boys, we got you.* Everyone knows now and nobody even bothers. They see me at Eden and they're like, *Oh, how's Hoang?* Like they care."

They sat for a while next to each other, their legs kicking back and forth. The front door to the duplex shut and Kim's father shuffled into the truck and started the motor. Ly slid down and turned and hugged her friend and began the walk back home. She didn't turn around. There was nothing left to see.

THE DUMB TEAM

October 1995

The three boys stacked six cartons of 18-count eggs on the conveyor belt and patiently waited their turn. It came and Bobby's voice cracked when he read the cashier's nametag. "Happy Halloween, Mr. Baxter." He forced a smile. His voice had started changing over the summer, and he still wasn't used to it. It wouldn't have been so bad if he wasn't also the third shortest boy in the eighth grade, but now wasn't the time to think about that, and there wasn't anything he could do about it anyway except make the best of it. Behind him, Nick pulled a National Enquirer from the rack and flipped through its pages. At the rear, Sammy bounced on his toes at a speed surprisingly fast for the rotund sixth grader. The fat under his tee-shirt jiggled, reminding Bobby of a little Buddha with a dangerously full bladder.

Mr. Baxter looked down at the eggs and then glared at the boys, his pale green eyes boring into each of their faces in turn. He swept wisps of thin, white hair to one side and set his liver-spotted hands on his hips. "Making an omelet?" he asked. His jaw made popping noises as he spoke.

"Something like that," Bobby answered cheerfully. He eyed the impatient people in line behind them as they began murmuring and shifting.

Mr. Baxter shook his head and rang them up. He gingerly counted and recounted the wad of wrinkled ones Bobby gave him and slid the bills into the cash drawer. He held the change in his fist, sneered, and scrubbed his front teeth with the tip of his tongue. “Hope you boys aren’t planning on making a mess of good people’s homes.”

“No sir. Not us. They’re for my mom. She got one of those things that separates the yolk from the white. My dad. You understand. Seems like a waste to dump the yolks to me, but she says we gotta deal with it ‘cause of his heart. So now we use three times the eggs.”

Mr. Baxter snorted and tossed the change on the counter. “Next.”

As soon as they rounded the corner outside the supermarket with the bags of eggs gently swinging at Bobby’s side, the boys broke into laughter and sprinted up the steep hill winding through the neighborhood of rundown duplexes and apartment buildings. The night was warm and humid, which was strange for Halloween, but then, the summer had been unseasonably cool. It was as if all the humidity that was supposed to have come before had been swept from one day to the next, all through the summer and autumn months, until the sweat and foul smells of summer lay piled up on the final night of October. Overhead, the distant and airy clouds, their edges made translucent by the moon, crowded together, roiling back and forth as they united and split, over and over. When the boys finally reached old Briar Patch Park at the top of the hill, they stopped to catch their breaths and gathered at the rusted merry-go-round next to the fence in the corner of the yard. Unkempt bushes and branches reached for them from the edges of the

decaying park as they neatly arranged the cartons of eggs side-by-side in the center of the merry-go-round.

"Where should we start?" Sammy asked.

"I suppose here is as good a place as any," Nick suggested.

Sammy looked around. "Here? No way, man. This place is a dump. I saved for two months to pay for these eggs. I ain't wasting them on some stupid trees and rusted monkey bars. Let's go egg Carlos' house. He lives over by the library."

"Carlos who?" Nick asked.

"Man, *Carlos*. Carlos-Carlos. He's in your grade. You don't know Carlos?"

"I know several."

"Man, you say 'Carlos,' everyone knows who. He sucks." Sammy kicked a patch of dirt, sending a cloud of dust up into the white glare of the streetlamp on the other side of the fence. "Then what? We got all these eggs. We gotta get *someone's* house."

Bobby ignored his friends and yanked at the old merry-go-round. Its rusted joints groaned and the decayed patina on the handlebars felt ragged and sharp in his hand. The ride turned and its joints loosened, and the high-pitched creaks were replaced by the low whir of metal handlebars cutting through the hot, still air. When he let go, little flakes of rust and paint clung to the sweat in the creases of his palm. The foam cartons of eggs caught the moonlight as the merry-go-round completed a turn. Slowly, though they would not admit it, the boys felt cold, dense fear creep into their bellies.

"What if we're spotted?" Nick whispered. The words hung in the air between them as he adjusted his thick glasses. The tiny black curls in his short flattop shined from

moon and sweat. He mopped his brow with the back of his hand. “Think of the repercussions.”

“I don’t know,” Bobby answered. “We run, I guess, and pray they’re slower than us.” *Would the homeowner beat us if we’re caught? Make us clean everything? Tell our parents?* His heart raced and he remembered hearing stories of shoplifters standing in front of stores with signs confessing their crimes.

“Nothing’s gonna go wrong, man, Nick!” Sammy said. He jumped onto the merry-go-round and swung his bulk this way and that.

“I don’t know if we should do this,” Nick said, crossing his long, gangly arms. “The odds we get caught aren’t astronomically high, sure. But what are the gains, and do they outweigh the risks? I know it’s supposed to be fun, but…” He stared up at the sky for a moment, tilting his head left and right as though he was balancing a scale on his shoulders. Nick was the smartest boy—not to be confused with the smartest girl—in eighth grade, and he liked to talk like it. “Think about what we would be doing to these houses,” he continued. “Yolk can damage paint if left untreated, and on a hot night like this? By the time morning comes, there would certainly be permanent damage. I’d feel guilty. And frankly, if we are indeed caught, I wouldn’t want to be the one to clean it all up.” He held up a hand when he saw Bobby open his mouth. “I’m just saying. If both you guys still want to do it, I’m in. But perhaps we should have considered another tactic. Toilet paper, I’ve heard, is not uncommon. Perfectly acceptable.”

“Ah, man.” Bobby grimaced. “Why didn’t you say something before? Toilet paper would’ve been better. Cheaper, too. Would’ve washed away in the rain. Would’ve, what do you call it, *decomposed*.”

“I can’t believe this,” Sammy shouted at Nick. “We’re in middle school. You guys’re gonna be in *high school* next year!” He leapt off the merry-go-round and pushed the older boy in the chest. “You’re such a chicken, Nick!”

Nick roared and shoved Sammy to the ground. “Shut your face, Sammy!”

“Asshole!” Sammy yelled, scrambling to his feet. “There could be needles down here!”

“Guys!” Bobby snapped. “We already have the eggs. We either waste them or use them. Not much to think about.” He set his foot against the lip of the merry-go-round and rocked the ride back and forth. “And it’s not like we can get a refund.”

Nick snorted and walked over to the swing set. The seats had long ago disappeared and the chains hung rusted from their eye bolts in the crossbar like dead vines. He picked up a long branch and beat the chains, sending bursts of red dust into the air as each swing connected with a dull rattle. Sammy searched his legs and arms for cuts or needles, and when he was satisfied that he wasn’t bleeding, went over and pushed the merry-go-round. As it completed a turn, he pushed it again, harder. The cartons broke from their neat formation and slid roughly over the corrugated surface toward the edge of the spinning ride. Bobby pressed his shoe against its lip. The metal squealed beneath his rubber sole and slowed to a stop. The egg cartons lay at awkward angles around the rim of the metal bed. *Sammy’s right. We aren’t children anymore.*

“You said we’d egg some houses, Bobby,” Sammy whined. “I coulda gone with some Falls Church boys to a party. With girls, man.”

“Shut up. We’ll do something,” Bobby said. *Gotta grow up sometime, right?* He shoved the merry-go-round with his foot. “Those Falls Church boys will get you in trouble.”

“We better do something,” Sammy mumbled.

Bobby nodded. On the street, colorful gangs of pirates and ghosts and princesses walked past. A girl dressed in a pink fairy costume with sheer wings and a tiara stopped and stared, but the man following her holding a baby dressed as a pumpkin whispered something sharp and pushed her onward. The man glowered at the boys for a moment, then shook his head and followed. Bobby glared at the figures as they disappeared into the night.

A girl’s voice floated over to them from the sidewalk. “Bobby?”

“Oh great,” Sammy muttered.

Nick stopped beating the swing set and returned to the merry-go-round.

Bobby knew the voice without looking because all at once his heart raced and his head lightened and his belly felt jittery. Anna. They’d hardly seen each other since entering separate middle schools, her to the smart school, him to the other one. He’d always known they’d grow apart, had been expecting it, but still he missed seeing her every day, and when Hanukkah came in a month and a half, he’d miss the cold latkes she used to bring him, too. And now, on the few occasions they saw each other, she made him a little nervous, but in a good way.

Anna waddled over to them in a bulky Godzilla costume in a frilly red dress, waving a short, stunted monster arm covered in green scales. The mask was drawn back like a hood, revealing her broad face, delicate chin, and pale gray eyes. Her mass of brown hair, frizzy from the humidity, bounced in all directions at once. She straightened the dress over her costume.

"What are you doing?" Anna asked, seeing the eggs. A mischievous smile spread across her face. One of her front lower teeth was crooked just a little, and Bobby thought it made her even prettier. He even thought her acne was cute.

Bobby slouched a little and took a step back, hoping he looked cool. He shoved his hands into the pocket on his hooded sweater. "Nothing. Just, you know, about to go egg some houses." His voice cracked and he coughed. "I like your costume."

"Thanks. Big Time Bobby now, huh?" Anna shook her hair to give her neck some air and tried to reach up but her costume's sleeves stopped her arms from rising. "I'm sorry to ask. Can you tie my hair back? My scrunchie is in the pocket at my side. You have to reach under the dress."

Nick and Sammy snickered as Bobby reached into her pocket. He felt the warmth of her body through her costume as she leaned against him. She smelled of plastic and flowery soap and suddenly his cheeks were tingling and he worried if he was sweating too much and if he stank. He pressed her hip to turn her around. Her hair was fluffy and stringy and larger than he expected. He grasped at thick tufts with nervous fingers and tried to twist the handfuls together but couldn't get a proper grip. Finally, after some

coaching from Anna, he managed to wrestle her hair into a lopsided knot in the green and silver polka-dotted scrunchie.

"Oh my god, thank you. I didn't think it'd be so hot tonight. Just my luck." Anna turned to face him. Her gray eyes looked bright in the dark. "How've you been?"

Someone from the sidewalk called out to her.

From the corner of his eye, Bobby saw Sammy elbow Nick, whisper something, and gesture with his chin at the figure coming toward Anna. A tall boy about Bobby's age strode toward them in a metallic robo-Godzilla costume with a red bowtie.

"Anna, wait up," the boy said, his long blonde mop-top matted with sweat. He smiled when he saw the eggs. "Hey, what's up guys? You gonna egg some houses?"

"What's it to you?" Nick said with an edge in his voice. "Who're you?"

"Oh!" Anna said. "Bobby, Nick, Sammy, this is Joey, my..."

"Yeah, I know you, man," Sammy interrupted, circling the tall boy. He kicked the tail. "I know you. Your dad owns that barber shop on Wilson Boulevard, right?"

"It's a salon," Joey corrected. He eyed Sammy and his lips curled into a sneer. "We just added a tanning bed. But I don't think you'd fit. Not that you need it."

"Joey!" Anna snapped.

Sammy shoved Joey but the tall boy didn't budge. When he saw Joey smirk, Sammy roared and cocked his fist, but Nick grabbed him. Sammy grunted and twisted but Nick held tight. Joey laughed. Bobby felt his neck grow hot and he balled his hands into fists at his side.

“What—I’m *joking*!” Joey simpered, waving his hand like he smelled something foul. He turned his back to Sammy and Nick and faced Bobby. “That’s just how I joke. Come on, you don’t care. No hard feelings, right?”

“Man, we don’t know you,” Bobby said, staring hard in Joey’s eyes, trying to ignore the tall boy’s straight nose, long face, and blonde hair. He wanted very much to punch him, but instead he turned to Anna and spoke in a steady, even voice. “What are you even doing here?”

“It’s fine,” Anna said. “Just forget it, okay?”

Bobby shrugged.

Nick released Sammy.

“Look,” Joey said. “I’m sorry if you got your feelings hurt.”

Bobby snorted. “Nobody’s talking to you.”

Joey puffed out his chest. “I bet you aren’t gonna egg anything.” He took a step toward Bobby. “I bet you’re just gonna go home and watch some cartoons like a bunch of little babies.”

“Think what you want,” Bobby said quietly. “Your opinion’s shit.” Joey was much taller, but he was skinny. And the bulky costume would slow him down. It would be easy to topple him, to wrestle him to the ground. Into the dirt with the rocks and pebbles and glass and who knew what else. Bobby may have been short, but he could fight. His brother made sure of that. Behind Joey, Sammy and Nick edged closer, circling around him. But Anna glared at Bobby and he shot his friends a look and they stepped away, rolling their eyes.

Joey kept talking. “I egged some houses when I was in *sixth* grade. It was okay. I guess. But now I like putting baloney slices on cars and letting them dry. Can’t get them off without destroying the paint. You want my advice, you should try that.” He turned and clucked his tongue at Sammy who had turned bright red. “And you should try Jenny Craig, fatty.” He sauntered out of the park, his metallic costume flashing as he moved.

Anna watched him go and turned back to Bobby, her smile a little like a grimace. “Sorry, he’s really nice once you get to know him.”

Bobby stared at a spot in the darkness over her head.

“So,” she continued slowly. “My birthday party’s next week at the skate rink. You’ll come, right?”

“I didn’t get an invitation.”

“Shut up, you know you don’t need one. We haven’t hung out in forever. We should do something before it gets too cold. Like old times. I can’t believe you’re actually going to egg houses.” She shook her head, her eyes sparkling. “Bobby-boy’s growing up.”

From the entrance of the park, Joey called to her. “Anna! Let’s go.”

She waved and turned back to Bobby. “We’ll talk soon, okay? I’ll call you. Tell your brother and sister I said hi.”

“Yeah.” Bobby mumbled, but he was staring at Joey and seeing Anna’s gray eyes. His head pounded and his back was stiff and he fought the urge to punch something. “We gotta go, anyway.”

But Anna had already gone. As he watched them walk away, he thought he saw Joey reach for her hand though he knew their costumes would have made doing so nearly impossible.

"Sammy," Bobby said, his voice barely above a whisper.

"Yeah?"

"You know where that kid lives?"

Nick and Sammy smiled as Bobby piled the cartons of eggs back into the shopping bags.

***

According to Sammy, Joey lived in one of the nice neighborhoods about a mile and half north of the Route 50 overpass, the border separating North and South Arlington. The boys cut through the neighborhood surrounding Briar Patch Park and walked along Carlin Springs Road and down the steep hill to where Greenbrier Elementary School sat at its base. They stopped to argue if the elementary school's basement was really haunted. A high school boy had told Sammy that he knew someone who had once seen the ghost of a long-dead janitor wandering around the boiler room. Sammy wanted to explore, but Bobby said Sammy just wanted a break. Nick pushed them on, suggesting they buy Slurpees with their remaining money at the 7-Eleven on the way to Joey's house. That shut even Sammy up, and the trio continued walking. The night grew warmer and stickier and Bobby found himself panting as sweat soaked his face and chest. Finally he yanked his sweater off and draped it over his shoulder. He had never walked farther north than their middle school, Kenmore, which stood just before the overpass on its southern side,

and he was already exhausted. Along the way, they passed groups of children heading in the opposite direction. Each child wore an expensive-looking costume, not like the crappy plastic getups that Bobby usually found in the discount and secondhand stores. The boys ignored them and trudged up the hill toward the mental hospital.

"Bobby," Nick said, when they reached the bus stop at the top of the hill. "Why didn't you fight him?"

"Why'd you stop Sammy?" Bobby said.

Nick shrugged. "You should have kicked his ass."

"Yeah," Sammy agreed. "Scared or something?"

"I'm not scared of him," Bobby snapped.

"Yeah, okay, so I'm saying," Sammy said. "You shoulda. We all shoulda. You know? Three to one on that piece of shit, man." He swung his fist at the air. "If you ain't stop me, Nick…"

"I probably saved your life," Nick said. "But he's not wrong, Bobby. Joey's a dick."

"He's friends with Anna," Bobby said.

"So?" Sammy said. "She's ugly."

"She didn't exactly stick up for you," Nick reasoned, ignoring Sammy. "She's your friend, sure, and that's your business. Consider this: if our roles were reversed, if I were in your place…"

"Just leave it alone," Bobby mumbled. He didn't want to think about it anymore. His earlier rage had seeped out of him like sweat from his pores, leaving him spent and

confused. He no longer wanted to egg Joey's house but didn't want to get made fun of. It was his idea, after all. *Anna stuck up for me didn't she? Sort of?* He frowned. *Does it matter?* He decided it didn't. Even if she hadn't stuck up for him, they had been friends since kindergarten, and to him that counted for something. He wouldn't start a fight with her friends. Not even Joey. Egging his house, on the other hand… He felt a twinge of guilt but told himself it was better than delivering Joey an ass-kicking. He kicked a small chunk of broken sidewalk into the street where it shattered into tiny bits of concrete and they walked on in silence.

***

The 7-Eleven sat across the street from Kenmore Middle School, nestled among trees at the edge of a neat neighborhood in the shadow of the Route 50 overpass. Fluorescent light fell through the glass storefront and onto the potholed parking lot where it met orange light streaming from the streetlamp overhead. An old rusted pickup truck sat idling in front of the payphones, its headlights trained on an angry middle-aged man in a plaster-ridden flannel shirt yelling into a telephone receiver. On the far side of the 7-Eleven, an old Laundromat's doors stood open to the night, revealing long rows of unused washers and dryers. The distant, familiar rumble of a lone dryer accompanied the boys' arrival. Facing them in the corner of the Laundromat was a tired-looking woman sitting heavily in a chair bolted to the floor, her brown skin shiny with sweat. Long curls of sweaty black hair fell over her face as she bent over the Spanish-language magazine in her lap. She looked up as they neared. Worn creases and wrinkles lined her flesh like deep cuts, and her light hazel eyes followed them suspiciously as they pulled open the

door to the 7-Eleven. It chimed. Bobby held the eggs close to his side and moved his sweater to cover the bags as he followed his friends out of the heat and into the cool rush of air conditioning. The store smelled clean and crisp and his sweat and aches melted away.

At the counter, a bearded man in a dark blue turban stood bent over a clipboard, writing quick, fervent notes. He glanced up at the boys, held up his free hand to stop them at the door, finished what he was writing, and straightened. Before speaking, he removed his gold-rimmed glasses and set them on the counter with a hard *clink* and fixed the boys with a steely glare.

"One at a time," he said, his tone bored. "The other two, outside."

"Even now?" Sammy asked. "It's not even school hours."

"Even now," the cashier said, shooing them with his hand. "The school told you. One at a time. Hurry up, I have other customers."

"Man, nobody's in here," Sammy said. "We're just trying to get some air conditioning." He pinched his shirt and shook it against his skin.

Bobby looked around. "Look, the store's empty. Can we just stand right here and he'll go pay for our Slurpees? Please?" He elbowed Sammy forward. "It's *bad* outside, man. We're not gonna do anything. Swear to god."

The cashier glared at them for a long moment. "Fine. You move at all, the police will get you."

"Thanks," the boys mumbled.

When Sammy stepped forward, he bumped Nick, who moved to the side, knocking the sweater off Bobby's shoulder and revealing the eggs. Bobby scrambled to cover the bags but it was too late.

"Hey, hey, hey," the cashier roared. His face swelled and turned bright red. "What is that, huh? Eggs? Get out of here. Go! Go! I'll call the police right now!"

Bobby cursed and shoved the door open and stepped back into the hot night. Nick followed, and Sammy picked up a *Sports Illustrated* from the magazine rack and flung it across the store as he left.

"Why can't you be good?" the cashier yelled as the door closed behind them. "Huh? You ruin everything!"

They gathered at the edge of the parking lot, outside the cashier's line of sight, thirstier than ever.

"Well," Nick said, shaking his head. "That was unfortunate. What now?"

"Who cares?" Sammy whined. "I'm thirsty."

"I shouldn't have brought the eggs in," Bobby lamented. His throat was itchy and his clothes clung to him. He balled up his sweater and shoved it in one of the plastic bags with the eggs. "At least we could've got some Slurpees. I'm so tired now."

"Ain't going nowhere without a drink," Sammy declared.

"Shut up, Sammy," Nick said. "Slurpees are bad for you anyway."

"You're such a nerd, man," Sammy snapped. "Slurpees was your idea. Let's go find sodas or something."

Nick threw up his hands. “You think I’m not thirsty? We’re all thirsty. Where would we even find drinks right now? Knock on someone’s door?” He nodded at the rows of tidy homes surrounding the old 7-Eleven. “We’d probably get shot.”

“Nobody’s gonna shoot us. We’re *kids*. It’s Halloween. Instead of candy, we ask for soda.” Sammy sat on the ground. He picked at a deep crack in the asphalt with a twig. “For a nerd, you’re real dumb. We could at least ask.”

“We’re not even dressed up,” Nick said. “Nobody gives a good goddamn how thirsty we are.”

As Nick and Sammy bickered, Bobby stared across the street at their middle school. The sky was clear and moonlight fell unfiltered on the dark single-story building, coloring its old brick walls and worn concrete walkways pale white. It was a long structure with wings that split from the school’s main vein like legs on a spider. Each grade level was split into two teams with names like Pathfinders, or Schooners, or Explorers, though everyone referred to the teams, regardless of grade, as the smart team or the dumb one, and each of the teams were assigned to different wings. Bobby never took it personally that he was assigned each year to the dumb team. He figured the dumb and smart labels were exaggerations; they were supposed to be the same. After all, Nick was on the dumb team with him. But then, Sammy was also on the dumb team in sixth grade.

At the rear of the school stood a small building which housed the woodshop and art room next to several trailers that held classes for overflowing students. Bobby hated the trailers. In the winter, wind would rattle the windows and slip in under the doors and

shake the thin walls. The heat in the summer and spring brought out the scent of mildew and sweat and made it hard to breathe. Anna's school probably didn't have trailers, Bobby thought. Probably didn't have overcrowding problems either. Probably didn't even have teams. His stomach ached at the thought of Anna, at the thought of her with Joey. At the way Joey talked down to them. Sometimes Bobby fantasized what it would have been like to go to school with Anna. Bobby's mom had asked him if he wanted to go to that school just as she had asked his two older siblings. But like them, Bobby declined. Anna's parents had stood in line for days to get her enrolled, and he knew that neither of his parents could afford to take that many days off work despite the offer. But he wondered sometimes anyway.

Slowly, Bobby became aware of Nick and Sammy's argument reaching a fevered pitch. Sammy wanted to walk all the way back to the supermarket while Nick thought they should head west and cut through the neighborhood next to Kenmore and come out on Route 7 by Culmore where there were plenty of gas stations and convenience stores among the old apartment buildings. Bobby stared around them, estimating the time it would take to walk to either place. He shook his head in dismay. Everything was so far, and he was so tired, and the night was so hot. The supermarket seemed like a lifetime ago. He wanted to turn around and go home. Just as he was about to suggest they call it a night, Joey's house be damned, a thought came to him that made his heart skip a beat. He tried to dismiss the idea, but it grew and swelled and sent chills up his spine.

"Hey," Bobby said in a low voice. His gut screamed at him to shut up but he felt the words tumble out of him anyway. "You know where else they have sodas?"

Nick and Sammy looked at him.

Bobby licked his dry lips and nodded across the street. “Teacher’s lounge.”

***

The school windows stared darkly as the boys shuffled across the street in the unlit space between the streetlamps. They passed the soccer field on their right facing the Route 50 overpass, made their way along the broad side of the school where the Salvadorian boys played wall ball outside of the gym, and jogged past the main entrance. They ducked their heads and crept beneath the row of windows along the administration wing, though nobody was in the offices to spot them if they stood. When they rounded the corner at the end of the wing, Nick pulled on Bobby’s shoulder and the three boys huddled together by the emergency exit.

“Isn’t there security?” Nick whispered.

“Security?” Bobby repeated, his stomach in his throat. He held a finger to his lips and scanned the area. He peeked around the corner. Nothing. The boys held very still for a moment. Then another. As they waited, the night grew eerily silent and what wind there was died and the chirping of crickets faded. Even the streets had emptied. Bobby pressed his face against the glass opening in the emergency exit and made out on the left side of the hallway the outlines of doors in faint moonlight. Exit signs in the ceiling left sections of the walls and floor awash in soft red light. At the end of the corridor, where the wing met the main body of the school, there was only darkness. “I don’t see anything. Why would they have security?”

“You know, to stop people from doing—doing—*this*.”

"I ain't doing nothing," Sammy said, putting his hands up. "Just walking home."

"Yeah. Walking home." Bobby paused. "I think we're okay. We would've seen someone by now, don't you think?"

"I don't know," Nick said, looking around. "I've never done anything like this but I would assume, all things considered…"

"Just shut up, Nick," Sammy hissed. "Where's the teacher's lounge?"

"Uh…" Bobby closed his eyes and concentrated. After a while he managed to block the sound of his friends' low, raspy breathing, and ignore the heavy smell of oil and car fumes, and numb himself to the sweat gathering in the folds of his skin that left his neck itchy and raw. Still, it was hard to remember where anything was at night from the outside. He imagined a normal school day, walking past lockers and tile walls peppered with bulletin boards and posters on his way to class. But the images faded and slipped into oblivion when he tried to focus on the details, as though something was pulling the earth out from under him. He rubbed his temple, coaxing something solid from the blur of images. *How's the school laid out? What's next to the teacher's lounge? What color is its door?* He asked himself more and more questions, moving from one section of the school to the next until he reached an image that didn't flicker and flit away when he placed it in his mind's map. Piece by piece he built his way toward the teacher's lounge, fitting sections of the school together like a jigsaw puzzle. Eventually he arrived at a large glass case with sliding doors crammed with awards and trophies in the main hall just outside the wing housing the eighth grade smart team. On the other side of the awards case was a nondescript door of plain blonde wood. And next to that, a small

placard that read: Teacher's Lounge. Bobby opened his eyes and gestured to the rear of the school. "By the Pathfinders hall."

Nick groaned. "Fine. How are we getting in?"

"Something's gotta be unlocked. If not, we break a window," Bobby answered quickly, sounding braver than he felt. "We've already come this far."

Nick and Sammy exchanged glances in the dark and Bobby pretended not to see their nervous looks. When he moved, the silence around them broke, and the sounds of crickets calling to one another again filled the night as traffic resumed and wind somewhere high above pushed thick clouds into the light of the moon. They made their way beneath the ensuing darkness from the end of one wing to the next, cutting across the patchy lawn and leaving dust lingering in the air wherever they stepped. Finally they reached the Pathfinders hall.

Nick ran to the head of the hallway where it joined the school's main body and began gently pushing and pulling at each window as he worked his way toward Sammy, who started at the opposite end, loudly rattling each window before moving on to the next. Bobby tried the emergency door at the end of the wing but it was locked. He rounded the corner to check the windows on the other side.

Two police cruisers sat 20 yards away in the parking lot next to the woodshop.

Bobby spun and threw himself backward and somehow managed to keep a grip on the bags of eggs as he slid against the building, skinning his elbow on the brick and landing hard in the dirt. He cradled the bags against his gut, the soft padding of his sweater squished next to the cartons, and stared at his cargo with the same horror he

would have felt if he had been found holding a bloody knife next to a dead body. *Throw them away, idiot! Throw them away!* To his left, on the other side of a short field, a county trash bin rose from the sidewalk at the edge of the school's property. *It's too far… they'll see me.* Blind panic bubbled in his guts as a faded memory came to him of his father getting pulled over for speeding when Bobby was four. His mother had turned to him and his two siblings as the police officer approached. Her voice trembled through gritted teeth as she hissed at them in Vietnamese. *Be quiet, all of you. They'll send us to prison if we're not careful.* He remembered the veins bulging in her neck, her flaring nostrils, and the watery look in his father's eyes as he stared them into silence through the rearview mirror. His bony fingers squeezing the steering wheel until his knuckles turned white and red. Something in the air tasted bitter and dark and Bobby hadn't understood it then, his parents' fear, but now felt some approximation of it crawling cold and rotten over his skin as bile and panic rose from his gut. He swallowed meager breaths and listened for the sounds of motors and sirens roaring to life, for the sounds of car doors opening and slamming shut, for the sounds of heavy footsteps pounding toward him to take him away with nightsticks and handcuffs. The moments passed and nothing came. He leaned his back against the wall and struggled to his feet and waited. Still nothing. Soon his heart slowed and his hands stopped shaking and the muscles in his back and shoulders relaxed. He held his breath and peered around the corner.

One cruiser faced him, its parking lights glowing. The other cruiser parked next to it, facing the opposite direction. The drivers' windows were close enough for the police officers to pass a bag of McDonald's between them.

For a long while, Bobby watched them, long enough for the sky to clear and the moon to light the cruisers an unnatural white as the ground around them grew sharp with shadows. They chatted and laughed and ate and didn't spare a single glance at the school. *They don't see us. We're right under their noses and they don't see us*. The realization brought dizzying relief and goose bumps all over his body. He stifled a wave of giggles and when that died down, he felt very light and very alive and he pumped his fist and fought the urge to climb to the roof and scream from the top of his lungs that he and his friends were untouchable. The night smelled of life and death and fresh starts and tomorrows and yesterdays and the only thing missing then was a can of soda dripping with cold condensation.

Nick hollered for him. "Bobby, we have liftoff!"

Bobby came around the corner as Nick's sneakers disappeared into a window about halfway down the wing. Nick's head popped back out and waved for him. Bobby sprinted over and saw that Sammy was already inside, knocking over rows of books from a bookcase.

Nick reached through the window for the bags of eggs and stacked them on a nearby desk. He grinned at Bobby. "Baloney on car paint my ass, right?"

"There's cops," Bobby said, smiling excitedly.

"What?" Nick stuttered and froze. His grin vanished and jaw dropped.

"Cops. Over there." Bobby saw panic spark and come roaring to life in Nick's eyes but he ignored it and grabbed the window ledge. "Watch out." The sharp metal frame bit deep into his hands. He lifted himself up and tumbled headfirst through the

window. He had misjudged the distance to the floor and ended up slamming his left ankle into the radiator under the window as he crashed in a heavy heap.

"Why'd you come in?" Nick whispered. He put a foot on the side of the radiator and grabbed the window ledge. "You said there're cops. Let's go. Sammy, come on."

Sammy swept the last row of books off the bookcase. The pile at his feet rose halfway to his knees and he kicked the top few books across the floor. "Huh?"

"Cops," Nick snapped.

"Wait," Bobby groaned, rubbing his left ankle. "Just wait a second." He rolled onto his hands and knees and pushed himself to his feet. A dull ache burned up the side of his calf but his ankle bore his weight. "They don't know anything, man. They're just hanging out in the parking lot. It's like we're not even here. Nobody will ever know."

"Shit, man" Sammy said. He stared down at the books at his feet. "Shit, shit, shit. Cops, man. Cops. You tell us *now*?"

"We're already *in*," Bobby said, taking a few careful steps toward the front of the classroom. "Come on, Nick. We're in. Fuck baloney, right?"

"Are you kidding?" Nick said. "This—this is bullshit. We have to get out of here. Now."

"Yeah," Sammy said, his voice hollow. He looked down at the books. His chest heaved. "Oh god. I gotta put these back. Shit, man. Shit. What if they heard me?" He dropped to his knees and began wildly sifting and stacking handfuls of paperbacks and hardbacks on the shelves.

"Stop, Sammy," Bobby said.

Sammy ignored him.

Bobby leaned against the wall, lifted his ankle, and rotated it. “They didn’t hear anything. You don’t have to put anything back. Let’s go, let’s just get the sodas and get outta here.” He turned to his friends, his eyes pleading. “This is *it*, guys. Nick, Sammy. This is it. Nobody’s here. Nobody can touch us. It’ll just take a minute to get the sodas.”

Nick glared at Bobby in disbelief then let go of the window ledge and stepped down off the radiator. The only sound was Sammy’s husky breathing as he shoved books into the bookcase. Nick shook his head. “You should have told us before we came in.”

“You were already inside. Trust me. We’re *fine*.” Bobby’s ankle felt looser, stronger. He hobbled to the door and peered through the glass opening at the hallway and saw only darkness. When he turned around, Sammy was still frantically working through his pile of books. “Sammy, it’s no big deal. If it makes you feel better, we’ll help you, okay? Come on, Nick.”

“You help him if you want, I’m fine right here.” Nick slowly circled the room.

Bobby shrugged and for the first time took in his surroundings. He had never set foot in a Pathfinders classroom before. It was like the classrooms in his team’s hallway, but the posters were newer, the desks clean and fresh-looking. The paint, even in the dark, looked brighter. The dumb team’s classrooms seemed bare and pitiful by comparison. Everything here seemed *better*, and suddenly he felt more like an intruder than when he was climbing through the window. He got the very real impression that Anna and Joey would probably feel right at home here. He bent down next to Sammy and began arranging books alphabetically. They were different from the ones in his class.

Their spines were neatly creased, and the pages were cool and crisp to the touch. The school must have sprung for nicer supplies for the gifted and talented program.

"Look at this, Nick," Bobby said. "The G.T. class gets the fancy stuff." He stacked paperbacks by authors such as Mark Twain and Herman Melville. Ever since elementary school, his classes had read stories rooted in folklore like tales about Anansi the spider, or books about Native Americans with torn and ratty covers like *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, or novels with yellowed pages like *Bless Me Ultima*. But the smart team's books were completely alien to him.

"It's not a G.T. class," Nick said, leaning against the door. "That's just what they teach the Pathfinders."

"Oh," Bobby said, frowning. *The smart team, huh?* Sammy and Bobby finished stacking the books and gathered the eggs. Nick opened the door and the three boys stepped into the dark.

Their skin glowed red as they passed under the exit signs. At night, all alone, the halls seemed wider, the floor dustier, and the air staler. Each step echoed against the lockers that stood silent along the walls. When they reached the end of the corridor, they climbed the short flight of stairs to the main hallway and passed the glass awards case and arrived at the teacher's lounge. As Bobby reached out to open the door, something shiny and blue in the case caught his eye. He stopped and turned to a large ribbon mounted on the top shelf. He read the name.

"Nicholas Jackson, 1st Place. 8th Grade Science Fair." Printed on its tail was the team name. "Pathfinders? You're not a Pathfinder."

Nick peered at the ribbon and cleared his throat. “Not really. It didn’t work out.”

“Who cares, man, let’s get going,” Sammy whined. He shoved the door open and disappeared into the teacher’s lounge.

Bobby waited for the door to close. He and Nick didn’t share any classes, but lots of children on their team didn’t. Why hadn’t Nick told him? “What do you mean it didn’t work out?” His voice cracked and Nick snickered.

“When the year began they tried to transfer me to the Pathfinders. But he’s right, it doesn’t matter. It’s no big deal.” Nick pushed the door open and followed Sammy.

Inside, the boys stood in silent awe before the vending machine, before its bright glowing face, the image of a large bottle of soda burning against the dark. In the picture, drops of condensation on the glass bottle were as large as Bobby’s fist. Sammy pressed his body against the machine and rested his fat cheek against the plastic front as the condenser hummed.

“Finally,” Sammy moaned. “It’s so beautiful.”

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In the Pathfinders hallway, the boys sat beneath an exit sign and leaned against the lockers and sipped on their sodas as the excitement of the night slowed and died like the final moments of a rainstorm. The halls and corridors throughout the school lay still and hollow and a steady, calm silence settled around them, broken by the boys’ breaths and the occasional gulp of soda. Bobby set the bags of eggs on the floor between him and Nick. Sammy sat across the hall from them, making shadow puppets in the red light coming from the exit sign above. Bobby bent the tab on his can back and forth until it

snapped off and he flicked it down the hall toward the emergency exit. The tab hissed across the floor, gently scraping dust and tile until it stopped about three doors down. Nick squinted through his thick glasses and took his time aiming before flicking his own tab. It disappeared under a row of lockers for a moment before its trajectory curved and it reemerged into the hallway and crashed into Bobby's tab. He grinned.

Bobby twisted his mouth as though he tasted something bitter. "They teach you that on the Pathfinders?"

Nick snorted. "I guess I *am* technically a Pathfinder. But I only take math and science with them. Reading and civics didn't work out."

"How come?"

Nick took a long swig of soda. He swished it around for a moment, and Bobby thought he wasn't going to answer. Then he swallowed and whispered so Sammy wouldn't hear. "I was, um, *struggling*."

"Struggling?" Bobby blinked. "But you were good in reading last year."

"You saw. They read different books."

"So? That makes no sense. You're the smartest guy in our grade."

"How do you know? How does anybody know? People just say that." Nick sighed and stared down at the floor. He scratched circles in the dust with his index finger and stayed silent for a while. When he spoke, Bobby thought he sounded strange, like he had failed an impossibly easy test. "Do you know what it's like to go into those classes? It's really different. Like a whole 'nother world. I didn't know anyone, nobody knew me. They talked to me like I was stupid and the way they looked at me… I just didn't belong.

They're all from North Arlington and grew up together and have money and stuff. I can't explain it, Bobby. It's just—it was just *bad*. And on top of that, I didn't understand anything we were reading. I never felt so…" He frowned and took off his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose. Then he gulped the rest of his drink and crushed the can and set it on the ground next to him before continuing. "I felt like a little bug, I guess. Like I was shit. I never felt like that before, not really. I guess I just shut down. So now I'm just in Math and Science. That stuff is okay, it's good. I don't care how they look at me there. It's just numbers. Numbers don't change."

Bobby felt an immense sadness for his friend well up in his chest and he could not find the words to tell him. But when he saw the look on Nick's drawn and empty face, he realized his sympathy was tempered with shame. Shame for himself, for his team, for Nick and his secrets. It was as if Nick was revealing to himself as much as to Bobby that he was less somehow. That just because everyone on the dumb team thought he was the smartest boy in the eighth grade didn't mean that he also thought it. Bobby leaned his head back against the locker, resting against the cool metal and uneven paint, and silently watched as Sammy twisted his fingers into two shadow dogs and made them fight one another as the world seemed to shrink and grow around them all at once. Joey's house felt very far away.

The bag rustled as Bobby pulled out a carton, opened it, and selected an egg. Perched on his fingertips, and glowing red from the exit sign, Bobby offered it to his friend. Nick stared at it, then at Bobby. Sammy got to his feet, crossed the hallway, and reached for it, but Bobby pulled it away and held it up again for Nick to take.

The egg made a hollow crunch as it exploded against a locker like the sound of a shattering light bulb. Yolk dripped in slow, snotty strings down to the floor, carrying the broken and crumbled remains of the shell with it. Mesmerized, Bobby and Sammy reached for eggs. *Pop. Pop.* The three boys grabbed more, as many as they could hold, and threw them at the walls and lockers, at anything and everything. Fastballs and floaters and Hail Mary passes. The first carton gave way to the second, and after a while, a third. They laughed as the eggs flew, as their muscles and joints contracted and released, as their bodies rejoiced in the movements and pivots and stretches of joints and bone and sinew. They opened doors to silent classrooms and took aim at desks and tables and windows. Soon the yolk was everywhere: dripping from splatters on the walls, gathering in puddles, soaking the faces of posters, and dribbling into crevices and locker vents. In the science room, Sammy used a row of plants as target practice and managed to knock them all over. Their pots lay broken in piles of soil and stringy roots and egg. Bobby threw eggs at the ceiling and even broke a few of the perforated tiles. The floor grew slick and the boys slipped and slid their way down the hall, laughing from one classroom to the next. When they had finished with the classrooms, they returned to the glass awards case in the main hall and left it covered in thick layers of yolk. And the night went on. They were young.

Finally they turned back to the Pathfinders hall, their chests heaving and fingers tingling with excitement. Bobby carried the last carton against his belly. His sneakers were covered with egg and made sucking, sticky sounds wherever he stepped. His friends' arms hung limply at their sides as they descended the steps from the main hall to

the Pathfinders hall. When they reached the bottom, they heard the door to the school's main entrance open and a man's voice call out.

"This is the police. Stay where you are." His voice was deep and hard and they heard the crackle of a radio.

The lights flickered on in the main hallway. The hum of fluorescent bulbs chased the boys as they sprinted for the emergency exit at the end of the wing. Bobby slipped and twisted his ankle. Sharp pain shot up his leg and drove the breath from him as he fought back tears and tried to keep pace with his friends. They ran past egg-ruined lockers and walls, and reached the emergency exit just as the light to the Pathfinders hall came on.

They burst through the door and into the second policeman. There was a blur of dark blue and a flash of hairy arms. An elbow shot out and Nick collapsed with a moan. Sammy screamed a high-pitched death knell and ducked and twisted and sprinted for the sidewalk, his fat jiggling as he ran. Bobby tried to follow but a large hand grabbed him by the throat, squeezing his airway with thick fingers, and suddenly his feet lost their hold on the earth and he was floating and spinning and flying face first into the wall behind him. Pain shot up along the side of his head as egg seeped from the carton crushed between him and the wall. He crumbled to his side and curled up against another hit but nothing came except the feeling of cold yolk soaking through his shirt to his chest and belly and down into his pants.

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The police and school administrator had left strict instructions for Bobby's parents and Nick's grandmother to bring the boys to school before classes began. And so the sun rose on Bobby and Nick scrubbing the glass awards case outside the Pathfinders hall under the careful eye of Mrs. Williams, the school's longtime janitor. She had always been a kind, thoughtful woman, but today merely grunted or pointed an angry finger to relay the boys' instructions. Bobby's face burned bright red from shame and was swollen from his father's anger, and his twisted ankle wasn't the only reason he limped. He and Nick worked quickly but there was so much to do. They mopped the stairs leading down to the hall and threw away posters and replaced ceiling tiles. When school started, Sammy filed into the building and grimaced when he saw Nick and Bobby working the mop buckets. Bobby nodded and mouthed that they'd talk later. More and more students filed into the building, and as the day progressed, the children of the Pathfinders team wondered, with sideways looks at Nick and Bobby, at what had made them do what they did. But they quickly put it out of their minds. Luckily, the entire team got to spend the day outdoors in the field, enjoying their lessons and the weather, which had finally begun to cool as late autumn took root and the days grew shorter as the promise of winter loomed.

SENIORS

September 1997

The spray paint went on over the car's red finish in thick slashes of black. Martin worked methodically, pausing at the pivots of each letter. Fat rivulets of paint ran down the doors and into the gaps between the body panels, the nooks and crannies. His legs ached from crouching in the driveway. *Almost done. Last side.* Above him, the moon, a thin white crescent, peeked out from behind a dark smear of clouds. Its light trickled down through branches and leaves and left a faint scattering of bluish-white on the ground like buckshot. The wind rose, the shadows moved. The crackle of dead leaves skipping along the street and sidewalk mixed with the low, breathy hiss of aerosol spray bending in the wind. Behind Martin, his best friend Vu stood beneath a maple tree and spun his butterfly knife open and shut as he watched the street.

"Hurry up, man," Vu said.

"Can't rush beauty," Martin answered. "That's why you always look like shit."

"Your mom thinks I'm pretty."

"Yeah but she's old. Eyesight's no good."

Vu snorted.

Martin shifted his weight from one foot to the other and painted faster. Something at the side of the house moved and his hand faltered. He scanned the house, his muscles

tense. No lights, no movement. The fine hairs on his arms and neck rose and he felt a shiver building at the base of his spine. The motion-activated porch lights stared blindly from behind the rags they had wrapped around the sensors earlier that night. His arm tingled where an angry car owner and a baseball bat had nearly broken the bone two years before. A raccoon materialized from the shadows and watched him for a moment from the edge of the driveway before running back into the dark. Martin exhaled and returned to work. Finally he stood and swung the can down on the driver side mirror, breaking it from the car with a loud crack. The sharp report echoed against the trees, the yard, the house. He stomped on the broken mirror housing, shattering the glass, and kicked it under the car.

"Let's go."

But Vu was reading what Martin wrote. "*I can't believe you have a wife*?" He walked around to the hood. "*You cheating son of a bitch*? What the fuck?"

Martin ignored him and walked down the block to where Ernesto waited in an old, beat-up Lincoln. Now that they were done, he moved carefully, paying attention to where he stepped, to how much weight he put on each foot. He pulled open the rear door and got in. Vu got into the front passenger seat a moment later.

Without a word, Ernesto shifted gears and slowly navigated their way through the sleepy Falls Church neighborhood. In the yards, trees shivered, their edges already yellowing as autumn descended into winter. As the distance from the red car grew, Martin began imagining police blockades around one corner or another, or on the other side of a hill, or at the entrance to the neighborhood. *Stop it. What's wrong with me?*

Annoyed, he pushed the thoughts from his mind and cracked open the window. Cool air seeped into the cabin in a keening hiss and washed over him as he settled back in his seat.

Ernesto turned onto Annandale Road. His sleeve moved back and forth just enough to reveal the corners of his tattoos as he maneuvered the steering wheel. Finally, as they approached the Harvest Moon restaurant on Arlington Boulevard, Vu broke the silence.

"So? What the fuck, man?"

Martin stared out the window at Loehmann's Plaza, the shopping center across the street from the restaurant. Two white boys had robbed the car audio shop there that past winter by driving through the storefront in the middle of the night, and he often wondered how risky it was to do such a thing. More importantly, he wondered much money they'd made.

"Earth to Martin."

Martin rolled his eyes. "Somvang said fuck up the car."

"Like slash the tires or something."

No imagination.

"What happened?" Ernesto asked.

"Motherfucker sprayed *I can't believe you have a wife* and some other shit on the car."

Ernesto laughed. "Yeah? I ain't know you the jealous type, Martin."

"Now you know."

Martin grinned and reached into the front and turned on the CD player, a stolen Alpine with green blinking lights. He scrolled through the tracks until he reached "Hit 'em Up" by 2Pac and sat back and bobbed his head to the poppy, bass-driven beat.

"Look," he said, speaking over the music. "Kid owes what, a hundred bucks? Somvang doesn't care about a hundred bucks. He said fuck up the kid's car, but that's his *dad's* car. This way, in the morning, his mom's gonna see it, and then it's some shit. Even if she doesn't believe it, they still gotta get it fixed, right? In the meantime, they drive around, get pulled over for that broken mirror, yadda-yadda-whatever. And if she *does* believe it…" Martin snickered. "Either way, the neighbors'll be laughing at them the whole time."

Ernesto chuckled.

Vu shook his head. "We could've done the tires too."

"Yeah," Martin said, waving his hand. "But the point is, it's a *hassle*. Just fuck up their day, man. Get it?"

"People gonna say Somvang let that kid go."

"Fuck them."

"People gonna know," Ernesto said.

Vu shrugged and turned up the music.

It was past two in the morning when they merged onto the Capital Beltway. The street lamps painted the highway in strokes of murky orange, and above them, gray clouds roamed aimlessly down to the southern horizon. The air grew heavy with the scent of rain. Martin felt it tickling his nose. He closed his eyes and did his best to tune out the

music from the CD player. School would start in a few hours, and they still had to check in at Somvang's house in Woodbridge—a good 25 minutes away—before they could head home. He listened to the wind beat against the car, its hollow, shearing drone rising and falling as the cabin rocked side to side. His muscles relaxed and his breathing deepened, but a small, cold voice squirmed its way to him in the dark, reminding him that graduation was coming. His belly contracted as though he were standing at the edge of a cliff. *And what about after graduation? What then? Work at McDonald's? Be a cashier at some store?* He frowned. *No. Fuck that.* Maybe Somvang would take him on as a runner. Or front him some real weight. Help him make some real money. At least Martin hoped he would.

The car shifted and they barreled through the Springfield Interchange and continued south on Interstate 95. The buildings beyond the highway barriers gave way to tall, arching trees. The music played. The night drifted. Sleep would not come.

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They arrived at a large plot of land on the outskirts of Woodbridge, away from the bright lights of the Potomac Mills outlet mall in Dale City. Towering pine trees grew along the perimeter of the property, their branches weaving together to block out views of the road and neighbors. In the winter, Somvang would decorate the trees with colorful blinking lights, but for now they stood dark and looming, their twigs and needles bristling as Ernesto drove past. Up ahead lay a single-story ranch home with an attached two-car garage. Light streamed from the windows in the kitchen and garage and left squares of

yellow-white on the ground. They parked at the side of the house on a bed of gravel next to a black tow truck half-covered by a blue tarpaulin sheet crinkling in the wind.

Martin threw open the door at the side of the garage.

“Police, motherfuckers!” he barked.

Two Lao teenagers stripping down a green Acura Integra looked up at them. Pieces of the car’s tan leather interior lay strewn about the concrete floor, and in the air was the scent of copper and gasoline. Pocky, a tall chubby boy working under the hood, straightened, and Martin could see streaks of black grease running from his hands to his elbows.

“You gonna wake the whole neighborhood,” Pocky said in his low, monotone voice.

“How’s it going big man?” Martin asked.

“Same shit.” Pocky nodded toward the door leading to the house. “Somvang’s inside somewhere.”

Martin nodded and knocked on the trunk of the car. “What’s up Kong?”

In the driver’s seat, a short, bony boy with a gray baseball cap was trying to angle the dashboard through the door. He removed his cap and wiped his brow.

“Yo, this shit ain’t a joke, man. Taking me forever.”

Ernesto opened the passenger door and stuck his head in and laughed. “Steering wheel’s gotta come off first.”

Kong cursed and slapped the dashboard.

“Amateur night at the strip club, huh?” Vu joked, elbowing Martin.

“Motherfucker, what do you know about a strip club?” Kong snapped. “You don’t even like pussy.”

They laughed.

“You need a hand?” Ernesto asked.

“Chill. I’ll get it, I’ll get it.” Kong swiveled in the driver’s seat and stretched his legs out the side of the car and lit a cigarette. He leaned over and yelled at his friend. “Why ain’t you say nothing about the steering wheel, Pocky?”

“Stupid-ass,” Pocky grumbled, shaking his head. “I gotta tell you the sky is blue? Show you how to put your underwear on?”

“I don’t wear that shit. Makes you sterile.”

“No it doesn’t. And you can’t even spell *sterile*,” Pocky said, returning to work.

“Man, I read that shit, for real.”

“Now I know you lying,” Pocky said without looking up. “Illiterate motherfucker.”

Martin, Vu, and Ernesto laughed, knocked on the door to the house, and went inside.

The kitchen smelled of garlic and spices and burnt cooking oil. Somvang’s wife, Thonnie, a heavyset woman in her early thirties, was scrubbing a large pot in the sink but stopped when they came in. She sighed and gestured sharply with her chin to the round kitchen table. As they sat, the sound of annoyed scrubbing filled the air. They stared down at the teak table, at the dark finish and fine grain, at anything but each other. When

Thonnie finished, she turned off the faucet, wiped her hands on her pajama pants, and disappeared into the house, yelling for Somvang.

When they were alone, Martin relaxed and peered at the crayon drawings of horses and stick figures pinned to the refrigerator door with colorful alphabet magnets. Vu leaned back in his chair and drummed his fingers against its legs. Ernesto rolled up his left sleeve and examined the homemade tattoos that covered his forearm. He rubbed each piece slowly, with care. They had been drawn by drunk and inexperienced hands, an ugly collection of ex-girlfriends' names, lopsided rosaries, wavy crucifixes, and more. Finally he turned his arm over to where *13 Locos* had been tattooed in green stippling. He traced the blurry, distended figures, the faded coloring.

"I need a knife," he mumbled. "And some lemon."

"What're you talking about?" Martin asked.

"The acid."

"Don't even think about my butterfly knife," Vu said.

"Did I ask for that dull thing?"

Martin studied Ernesto's face. Dark bags gathered beneath his eyes, his jowls drooped, and his skin had taken on a grayish hue. He looked as though he had not slept in weeks. "You're leaving the Locos."

Ernesto nodded.

"They gonna jump you?" Vu asked, an edge in his voice.

"If they find me." Ernesto shrugged. "Fuck it."

"Damn," Vu said. He whistled and ran his hands through his long, bleached hair.

“Why you leaving?” Martin asked.

Before Ernesto could answer, they looked up to see Somvang watching them with a blank expression from the kitchen doorway in gray sweatpants. He was a short, squat man with broad shoulders, heavy arms, and hands like knotted rope. Even in his mid-forties, his face was smooth and he sported a ponytail as black as his eyes. Without his shirt, they could see dark, ugly scars running up and down his torso in slashes and curls, lingering reminders of his time in the Royal Lao Army. An old tattoo of a serpent rising from a river snaked around his ribs and across his back and over his shoulder.

“Don’t bleed on the table,” he said. He called into the other room and waited for his wife to respond. “Thonnie will bring out a razor and some newspapers. Lemon’s in the fridge.” He walked over to a cabinet and pulled out a box of salt and set it on the counter. “This will help clean it out. Any of you hungry?”

They shook their heads.

Somvang patted Martin on the shoulder and disappeared into the garage.

“Be careful,” Martin said as he got up.

Ernesto didn’t reply.

The Acura was stripped down to the shell when Martin and Somvang walked through. Its doors were leaning against the wall next to the fenders and hood, and the sunroof was stacked atop the rear seat cushions in the corner by the bumpers. Kong and Pocky stood huddled around the engine bay, hooking chains from the hoist to the engine, but stopped when they saw Somvang.

“How much longer?” Somvang asked.

“Just the motor,” Kong answered. “Almost done.”

“Should’ve dropped the motor, lifted the frame.”

Pocky grunted. “Where should we dump it?”

“Maryland. That place I showed you off Indian Head Highway. Don’t forget to take off the wheels. Keys for the tow truck are inside. You know where.”

Somvang pulled three hundred-dollar bills from his sweatpants pocket and set them on a metal shelf before walking outside. Martin eyed the money as he followed.

Outside, a damp chill had slipped like a scalpel into the night, and the wind sent the warble of bugs spiraling up into the sky. The moon had disappeared and they stood by the light spilling from the garage window. Somvang lit a Marlboro Light and offered him one but Martin shook his head.

“You been bringing that boy a lot.”

“Ernesto? Yeah. Known him since middle school, since before I moved.”

“What happened to that other boy—Smokey? Sleepy?”

“Smokey. Shit. His brother got sent back to Cambodia. So Smokey dropped out and moved up to Boston. Got some cousins up there or something. Didn’t have anyone else to live with down here. Said he was gonna chill on welfare and get his GED.”

Somvang frowned. “His brother got deported?”

“Yeah. He got locked up years ago when he was a minor. I think for armed robbery. He got out and got a job and even had a kid. But later they got him on something stupid and they deported his ass because of his record. His kid’s still over here, though.

It's fucked up. Smokey and him came to America when they were little. Don't really know anything else, you know? Now he's over there by himself. No family. No friends. Only speaks English. Smokey's scared he'll kill himself. Shit, it wouldn't surprise me."

"I knew a few guys like that back in California. Well, they're not in California anymore, I guess." Somvang chuckled and tapped his cigarette, sending little white flakes of burnt tobacco drifting around him like early snow. He peered through the window and watched Kong and Pocky work. When he spoke, his voice was quiet, barely a whisper. "How'd it go?"

"Fine. No big deal."

Somvang nodded.

"Why'd he owe you?"

He spit and took a long drag of his cigarette.

"He's just a stupid kid. Irresponsible."

He pulled a pair of wrinkled ten-dollar bills from his pocket and handed them to Martin.

"Thanks," Martin said, wishing it was more.

As if reading his mind, Somvang asked, "You want to make some money?"

Martin tried to stop himself, but the words tumbled out. "You need something delivered?" He grimaced. He had spoken too quickly, sounded too eager.

"No," Somvang said curtly. His eyes narrowed, as if appraising him for the first time.

Martin pursed his lips and gazed around the front yard, grateful the night hid his burning cheeks. He felt the man's eyes on him and he searched for something to say, but nothing came. It was just as well. He'd said too much already. For long moments, Somvang smoked his cigarette in silence. The wind died and a chilly stillness stole over them. Even the bugs grew quiet on their unseen perches. Martin imagined the world holding its breath. Waiting.

Veins of lightning streaked across the sky. Then came the pitch black as the light died, and for the span of a breath, the world seemed to have receded into nothing. Then, slowly, came the low rumble of thunder from somewhere in the far darkness, its faint peal marching across great distances in all directions, speeding and swelling before finally bursting so close and so loud that the ground seemed to ripple beneath him. As the thunder died, more lightning flickered, lighting the husk of a 1964 Chevrolet Impala sedan rusting in the corner of the yard beneath a sassafras tree. Martin imagined its moss-streaked headlights laughing at him. The lawn around the car was little more than patches of flattened grass, untended weeds, and strips of hard, dead earth littered with cigarette butts. Tiny tombstones trembling before the thunder.

Somvang dropped his cigarette and kicked it away.

"You need money, that's fine," he said. "We can do that. There's a kid, owes three grand to this guy. Not one of my guys, okay? Just someone I know. He'll pay 20 percent to anyone who collects. 600's not bad for the three of you. Maybe you do it yourself, whatever. I don't care. However you want to do it. Then we'll see after."

Martin's heart pounded. *We'll see after*. He licked his lips. "Just collect?"

“Uh huh. It’s an American, though. Some white boy.” Somvang spit. “The guy fronted him a pound a month ago. Now he says someone robbed him so he’s not trying to pay. He thinks he’ll snitch.”

“If the kid’s a snitch, why’d he front him?”

Somvang shrugged and lit another cigarette.

“Guess he thought the white boy wouldn’t be trouble, maybe he makes some money off him. He knows a lot of potheads. Lot of fiends. White boys always do.” He crossed his arms and absently rubbed a long, straight scar running along his ribs up to his armpit. “People are greedy.”

A pudgy toddler waddled out from the garage in a diaper, his face red and swollen. Lucas, Somvang’s son, ran as fast as his chubby legs could carry him and fell headfirst into his father’s side. Somvang flicked his cigarette away and lifted him and brushed the dirt off his tiny feet.

“Gotta wash you again, baby. Why you awake, huh? Thunder scare you? No, don’t be scared. You feeling sick?” He kissed his son’s forehead. “No fever. You crying? No. You don’t cry. You bad, right? You badass.”

Lucas giggled and reached for his father’s face.

“Oh, you think you can beat me up?”

Somvang flipped Lucas upside down and slowly swung him side to side by his ankles. Lucas squealed as he swiped at the ground.

Martin watched them quietly for a while before interrupting.

“How should I get the money?”

“Figure it out,” Somvang said.

Martin frowned and wondered what he’d do.

Somvang interrupted his thoughts.

“Look. People get in trouble with money all the time,” he said, his voice suddenly tired. He looked up at Martin. “They’re weak. It’s easy to fuck up if you’re weak. But it’s easy to get out of trouble, you see? You pay. It’s just money. But sometimes you fuck up so bad, man, money won’t do shit. Watch out for those you deal with. Even if you try to pay, they might refuse. You ask them, *how much?* But whatever you offer, they want more. One more dollar than you can pay. One more than you’ll ever have. It’s never enough. They own you. Always your next paycheck. Your wife’s next paycheck. Your parents’. Then it’s a problem. Then no good. Then you’re not a man. But this?” He turned back to Lucas. “Three grand is shit. Fuck him.”

“Fuck ‘im,” Lucas screamed. He laughed.

“If you want to try it, I have his address inside.”

Martin crossed his arms and stared down at the ground, making a show of considering Somvang’s words. He shuffled his feet and wondered what he would do with his share of 600 dollars. *Clothes? Girls? Parties?* He thought vaguely of a brothel his friends knew about in Annandale. “He doesn’t know anyone except the guy who fronted him?”

Somvang shook his head as he hoisted Lucas over his shoulders in a fireman’s carry.

“Okay. Give me the address.”

They entered the kitchen as Ernesto cut into his arm with a razor blade. Martin eased himself into the chair next to him and watched transfixed as Ernesto moved the dark edge back and forth, sawing through skin and fat along the *1* in *13 Locos*. Beads of dark crimson oozed up over the ink and rolled down his arm and onto the newspaper, where it bled into the day's headlines. *What's black and white and red all over?* Martin suppressed a giggle and rubbed his own forearm. Slowly, slowly, Ernesto's flesh split open. Martin heard his friend take low, steady breaths, heard the pain in his exhale. Across from Ernesto, Vu's face grew pale and still. Somvang stood over them, holding Lucas and whispering into the toddler's ear as they watched. When Ernesto reached the end of the *1*, he dropped the razor blade next to a bowl of lemon juice and salt and pressed a paper towel against the gash.

"Think that's deep enough?" Ernesto crumpled the paper towel and dropped it on the newspaper and stared down at his arm. Lines of dried blood, blotted to the color of rust, stained his skin. He spread the cut open, splitting the pale, translucent flesh to reveal a line of dark, glimmering red. Blood flowed anew.

"Seems like a lot of blood," Martin breathed. His tee shirt felt sweaty but he heard himself chuckle. "Now the lemon juice."

"What about the rest of the tattoo?" Vu asked.

"See if this works first," Ernesto mumbled.

Without warning, Somvang picked up the bowl of lemon juice and salt and poured thick clumps onto Ernesto's arm.

Ernesto kicked the leg of the table and his arm flinched back but he caught himself and stretched it out again. Somvang dribbled more of the mixture over the cut. It turned pink and cloudy as it soaked into the wound and ran down his arm.

Martin sucked in air through his teeth and clenched his fists beneath the table as he stared at the ragged, bloody line running across his friend's forearm. He imagined it bubbling and smoking.

"Open it wider," Somvang commanded. Lucas giggled and twisted for a better look.

"Fuck," Ernesto moaned as he spread his flesh wide with his fingers.

Martin leaned back in his seat. "Shit, I couldn't do it. Fuck that. I'd just be in the gang forever."

Vu laughed.

"Shut up," Ernesto mumbled. His body shook.

Somvang emptied the bowl.

Ernesto howled and doubled over.

Martin got up and paced the length of the kitchen.

"Rub it in," Somvang commanded.

Martin watched Ernesto take a deep breath and gently massage the cut with his index finger. He pressed harder and harder until he was raking the mixture across the raw, exposed tissue and Martin could see the grains of salt—red now—tearing and scratching at his skin. Ernesto gritted his teeth as he scrubbed the wound. When the lemon juice was dry, and the salt was little more than powdery streaks of pink, and the

skin around the cut was wrinkled and angry and red, Ernesto went to the sink and washed his arm with soap and cold water. Martin handed him a wad of napkins.

"This doesn't work, you know," Somvang said to no one in particular. Lucas rested his head against his father's shoulder and closed his eyes.

"It doesn't work?" Ernesto asked weakly. He squeezed the napkins against his arm. "What's all that shit about the salt cleaning it out? Why didn't you stop me?"

"It was funny." Somvang winked and turned to Martin. "I'll put Lucas down and get your stuff. Put everything away. Trash the newspapers and razor." He disappeared into the house.

"The fuck, man," Ernesto said when they were alone. He collapsed in his chair. "What the *fuck*?"

"At least you only did the *1*," Martin said.

"At least he didn't burn it out of you," Vu said. "Though I guess that definitely would have taken it out."

Martin and Vu laughed.

"It's not funny," Ernesto snapped, but Martin and Vu laughed harder.

***

Later, after Ernesto dropped off Vu, and as the rain fell in heavy sheets against the car and left the world through the windshield shimmery and warped, Martin asked him again why he was leaving his gang. Ernesto turned off the stereo.

"Two weeks ago I drove my boys out to D.C. They just wanted to cruise, right? That's what they told me. Then they were like, turn here, turn there. I don't know, I

thought they knew what they were doing. Then we're in some hood. They see some motherfuckers and tell me to slow down. And that was it."

"What do you mean *that was it*?"

"I mean *that was it*. Homeboys rolled down the windows. Shot them motherfuckers. I was freaking out, man. And they were like, *drive-drive-drive*. I don't even know if they hit anyone. Just got us the fuck out of there."

"Fuck, man."

"Yeah."

"Who were they?"

"That's the fucked up part. Nobody. Just people." Ernesto shook his head. "I guess they wanted to know what it was like to shoot up some motherfuckers. So we went to D.C. Makes no sense. I mean, it makes *sense*. But they were *people*, you know? We weren't beefing with them or nothing. And they—we treated them like target practice. I ain't no bitch or nothing, but… They were people, man. And I drove. That's on me. I gotta live with it."

"Fuck," Martin said.

Soon, the only sounds heard in the car were the rain, the whine of the windshield wiper motors, the screech of the wiper blades scraping the glass, and the slap of water against the wheel wells. In the lightning overhead, Martin could see clouds swirling and bubbling like boiling water. He'd heard of people going to D.C. for the same reason as Ernesto's boys, but he'd never paid much attention to the stories. It *did* make sense, he conceded. After all, the police were overworked, and the cases were harder to solve

without motives, especially if the shooters lived in another state. Any investigation would dig into each victim's background, but that wouldn't lead anywhere. It would appear senseless. Ernesto's words echoed in his head. *They were people, man.* They drove on through neat, sleeping neighborhoods. Martin tried to imagine the homeowners here being used for target practice but he couldn't picture it. The rain slowed to a trickle. Hard rains never lasted, he thought. And as they arrived at Martin's home in Springfield, the answer came to him how he could force the white boy to pay.

***

Night fell as Martin and Vu waited behind the dumpsters at the side of the parking garage. They watched the front of the high-rise office building at the other end of the garage, and tightened the little knots holding the black bandanas over the lower halves of their faces. The cloth did little to block the sour smell of rot and decay wafting around the dumpsters, and the shallow breaths Martin took tasted like old milk. He lifted the bottom edge of the bandana and spit but it didn't help. Parked nearby was a lone BMW, its dark green paint gleaming beneath rows of fluorescent lights. After a week of watching, they knew it would be the only car left in the garage. In the glass-encased lobby, a security guard studied a chemistry textbook.

Shortly after 10 p.m., the lobby elevators opened and a middle-aged woman with dark brown hair and a crisp blue pantsuit exited through the lobby. She waved at the security guard and pushed her way through the revolving doors and crossed the walkway to the parking garage.

Click-clack. Click-clack. Her steps echoed against the concrete and steel walls. Martin could tell the heels on her flats were hard, their edges sharp. *Click-clack.* Wait. Martin squinted and listened closer. Something was different. A scrape. *New shoes?* His heart pounded. All week, no changes. Now this. *Click-sh-clack.* Nearly impossible to hear. *She's walking faster.* Martin smoothed the bandana over his mouth, felt the thin cloth balloon with his breath. *They're just shoes. It's fine.* The wool cap itched against his scalp. Next to him, Vu tucked loose strands of bleached hair into his baseball cap.

Almost here.

Her keys were gripped in her fist at her side. The BMW beeped. Its parking lights flashed. Its doors unlocked.

Vu pulled out his butterfly knife. Metal scraped against metal as he spun it open. Martin nudged him with an elbow.

She was by the trunk of her car.

Martin hopped the short wall separating the dumpster and garage and sprinted at her.

She turned and he saw her eyes go wide, saw the spark of fear in them. She leapt for the driver's side door. Her fingers grabbed the handle and slipped off.

And then Martin was there.

He grabbed her slim wrist and squeezed the bones and swung her hard into the side of the BMW. The keys fell. Her cream-colored purse followed.

"No, no, no," she wailed.

Martin grabbed her throat.

“Shut the fuck up,” he roared.

Her neck was soft, hot. She blinked and stared at the ceiling and he could see the tears gathering in her eyes and he felt a surge of excitement. Of power. Her vocal chords vibrated as she fought to scream, fought to breathe. He squeezed. Up close, she was so small. Her knee shot up at his groin but he pivoted and slammed her against the rear door again and pushed his weight against her neck. Her eyes bulged.

“Get her money,” Martin yelled. “Hurry.” At her temples, her roots were coming in gray. She weakly grabbed his arm with her left hand. Her wedding band glittered. A dead, gold thing.

Behind them came the sound of a purse being picked up, of its contents tumbling onto the cold ground. The clatter of heavy things and little things and envelopes and papers. The clasp of a wallet opening.

“I got it,” Vu growled in a voice Martin could barely recognize over the roar of blood in his ears. “It’s here.” Vu pocketed the cash and held up the woman’s driver’s license. “That’s your address?”

When she didn’t answer, Vu pressed the tip of the knife at the soft spot where her jaw met her ear.

She glanced at her driver’s license and managed a jerk of her head. *No.*

It was a lie, Martin knew, but it didn’t matter.

“Doesn’t matter. You say anything, we’re gonna find you,” Vu snarled. He leaned in close. “Wherever you live. We’re gonna find you. Gonna take everything you got. And

then when we're done we're gonna burn your fucking house down and everyone in it. You hear me?"

Her lip trembled.

"All right," Martin hissed. "Let's—"

The security guard's shoulder slammed into Martin's back. The woman slipped out of his hold and his head bounced against the side of the car as he fell to his knees. She crumpled to the ground next to him, coughing and gagging.

Martin looked up and saw Vu swing the empty purse at the security guard's head. It connected as they fell entwined to the ground. They rolled over and over, their arms flailing and punching and shoving and elbowing. Martin heard the security guard scream something but his head was ringing and he couldn't make anything out over the man's accent.

The woman tried to stand. Martin reached up for her. She kicked him. Her heel glanced off the side of his neck and he felt the strike leave a deep scratch. He roared and leapt forward and tackled her around her waist and they fell in a heap. She twisted beneath him and curled up, covering her head with her arms. Martin punched her in the gut and when she instinctively lowered her arms to hold her stomach, he swung at her jaw. The back of her head bounced against the concrete. She was crying as she brought her hands up feebly toward his face. He punched her again, putting his weight behind the strike. Again. Her teeth cut into his fists. He swung his arms and hands down like axes. Blood rimmed her teeth. She stopped struggling. He felt his gut twisting and shaking as though his bowels were screaming for release. Screaming for him to stop. He gritted his

teeth and kept punching. Soon his vision became blurry. His arms ached. His knuckles bled. Time seemed to pass in leaps and bounds as the seconds fell to the rhythm of his strikes, and he would not have been surprised to see the sun rising in the distance. She fell unconscious. He stopped. Her face was red and swollen and broken and covered in tears and hot sticky blood. He fell back against the car, unable to get to his feet, unable to look away from her face. From somewhere else came gasps of shallow breaths and whimpering. *Who is that?* He shook his head and turned to see Vu standing over the security guard who lay in a pool of blood. The guard wheezed and held his gut as though he were cradling a baby.

Martin got to his feet and nudged the woman's side with the tip of his shoe. Unconscious, she groaned. Several of her broken teeth lay nearby. When Vu turned, Martin could see tears running down his face. Vu wiped his nose with his arm. At his side, his butterfly knife dripped little dots of red onto the concrete. The security guard rolled onto his side. Martin nodded at the walkie-talkie on the ground nearby. Vu stepped on it and kicked its remains down the length of the parking garage. It shattered against the wall into tiny little pieces.

***

Afterward, Ernesto drove them to a creek running through a quiet neighborhood in Springfield. In the moonlight, Martin held his hands in the cold stream and imagined the blood washing away in little pink clouds in the water. Vu flung the empty purse downstream. *When did he take it?* Martin's head felt heavy and his joints ached as the adrenaline left him. He dumbly watched the purse bob up and down in the current as it

spun away, bouncing against large rocks that rose from the water. It tumbled and rolled and finally disappeared.

When they were clean, they sat on the bank of the creek and said nothing. Around them, the flow of water seemed unmoved by their silence. The wind chattered through the rustling leaves overhead. Somewhere the distance they heard the hum of car engines. Martin stood up.

"We did it, huh?" His voice sounded dry and thick and braver than he felt.

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Vu snapped, not looking up. "What the fuck did we do?"

Ernesto watched them in silence.

Martin nodded. Vu was right. It wasn't supposed to go this way. They were only supposed to scare her. Once her son heard what happened, there was no way he would speak up. The white boy was a snitch. A coward. What was he going to do? Tell his parents that his mother got mugged because of him? Martin sighed. No point in thinking about it now.

"It's done, it's over," he said. His voice was stronger now. "He'll pay." He tried to smirk but his face ached and he turned away. He swallowed the knot in his throat. And rubbed the scratch running down the side of his neck. "We did it, man. 200 dollars each."

"Fuck 200 dollars. We should tell Somvang we fucked up."

"No. We're good. I know it. Somvang's gonna give us some other shit to do now. We're good."

Vu spit. “We’re good and fucked up you mean. You didn’t see that dude’s face, man. What if…”

“Don’t be a bitch.” Martin glared at his friends. “It’s gonna be fine.”

Vu turned to Ernesto. “What do you think?”

Ernesto shrugged. “It’s done. What else can we do?”

“Shit,” Vu said.

To stop his hands from shaking, Martin bent over and picked up a rock the size of his fist and threw it into the water. It splashed and disappeared under the current. He wondered how big a rock would have to be to change the direction of the water. And suddenly he felt weak. Exposed. As though all his strength had left him. As though all the things around him were crashing down, dragging him under the water and out of sight like the purse. Down to the sewers and the sea, down to where currents could pull him in countless directions until his limbs and joints gave way and his body was torn apart. His head grew light and he closed his eyes and clenched his fists as hard as he could, squeezing the bones and muscles and sinews.

“Fine,” Vu said. “Fuck it. It was your goddamn plan, right? Tell Somvang. Get our money.”

Martin opened his eyes and took a deep breath. He turned to his friends.

“Yeah. Yeah, it was my plan. And it worked.”

“You’re so goddamn smart, huh? So fucking smart.”

Vu’s words felt like a punch to the gut. Martin watched him get up and walk back to the car. He heard the car door slam shut, but he and Ernesto stayed by the creek.

Martin wanted time to go back just a few hours—no, he realized. It had barely been fifteen minutes. It seemed so long ago. *How quickly things happen.* He sat down next to Ernesto.

"Hey," Martin said. "Did the tattoo ever come out?"

"What do you think?"

Ernesto smiled sadly and patted him on the shoulder and got up to walk back to the car and left Martin alone on the bank as the moon disappeared and the night swallowed him whole.

BUGS

December 31, 1999

The guest in room 216 left behind a copy of *The Washington Post* on the nightstand when she checked out. As with all the other newspapers she had come across for the past year, Mrs. Loan Nguyen neatly folded it and tucked it safely in her cleaning apron before vacuuming and preparing the room for the next guest. As the morning wore on, the newspaper's slight weight grew until it tugged on her apron pocket like an impatient child. The itch to read it became so distracting that in one room, her partner, some new girl from El Salvador, had to restack the bathroom towels in the proper order. Mrs. Nguyen apologized after the second mishap, but in her mind she scoffed. *She probably doesn't even speak enough English to understand what I'm saying*.

Finally, her lunch break arrived. In the break room, she spread the newspaper out over the table and ran her hands over the deep creases and fine ink, taking her time to pick off little bits of crusted food as she went along. She had waited this long, what would a few more moments matter? When it was tidied to her liking, she flipped through each section, skimming headlines and articles. She became so engrossed that she didn't hear the refrigerator door open and close.

"Loan, the newspapers again?"

It was Mrs. Teresa Hernandez-Vargas, the only person tenured at the Evening Light Inn longer than Mrs. Nguyen.

"Mmm-hmm. It's tonight." Mrs. Nguyen leaned back in her chair. "Only a few more hours."

Mrs. Hernandez-Vargas sighed. "You think too much about this. Like my son, Jorge. He always worries. Homework, schoolwork, grades. He thinks the world will fall apart. He's like an old man."

Mrs. Nguyen sighed and returned her attention to the newspaper: *Y2K Bug Disaster Looms; What to Expect at Midnight; How Y2K Will Change Your Life.* She felt her pulse quicken and a small, familiar knot growing in her gut.

Mrs. Hernandez-Vargas sat across from her and quartered an apple.

"Do you really think anything will happen?"

"Bad things," Mrs. Nguyen mumbled.

"Did you close your bank accounts already? Change it all to gold?"

Mrs. Nguyen snorted at the gentle chiding in her friend's voice. This wasn't the first time Mrs. Hernandez-Vargas had asked about their accounts. Always joking, of course. Teasing. *It's nothing*, as her daughter would say. *You're being crazy*. Still, it stuck with her, these questions. They were friends, but in America, whom could you really trust?

"Rosa's *quinceañera* is next weekend. If we're still alive, why don't you bring your family over? I haven't seen the little ones in so long."

“Little!” Mrs. Nguyen looked up. “Don’t you remember? Kim has a baby now. And Bobby is going to graduate from high school this year.”

“Of course. That’s right. And the other one? My oldest thought he was cute.”

“Martin?” Mrs. Nguyen’s shoulders slumped at the mention of her middle child. “Who can say what he does?”

“Ah.” Mrs. Hernandez-Vargas smiled at her sadly. “Same with my cousin. Her son, always in trouble. She tells him, *Do what you have to, but don’t go to jail*.”

“Hmph.”

Mrs. Hernandez-Vargas finished her last bite of apple. “With your Y2K obsession, who has time for children?” She laughed.

“You laugh now. We’ll see what happens.”

“Loan, what can any of us do if anything goes wrong? Hmm?”

Without waiting for an answer, she got up, rinsed her knife in the sink, wished her a Happy New Year, and wheeled her squealing cart into the lobby, leaving Mrs. Nguyen alone with her thoughts and her articles.

When Mrs. Nguyen started at the Evening Light Inn years before, neither she nor Mrs. Hernandez-Vargas spoke much English. Even so, they gravitated toward each other, pointing, miming, and mumbling mispronounced words in half-conversations. Who had the time to take English classes, or even the money to pay for them? Not when there were so many bills to pay, children to look after. But the years passed, and bit by bit, they learned. Nearly 20 years later, there they were, still. Old now. Mrs. Nguyen smiled as she scanned another article, squinting at the long, confusing words describing the possibility

of missile silos going haywire and launching at predetermined targets. *That's different.* She wondered what it would be like to see the sky fill with thin streaks of fire, crisscrossing and raining down all around her. Her husband might know. On another page, a columnist warned that the banks had all but given up against the Y2K Bug and records of everything would disappear the moment December rolled into January.

Mrs. Nguyen nodded, feeling the weight of the world pushing down on her, not an altogether unfamiliar feeling, though in a body much changed from the one in her youth, when she ran along riverbanks in South Vietnam, selling fish and candies to the villagers. Or when she was a young bride, barely out of childhood, and already heavy with child and with a husband locked away in a prison camp. But that was all before they made their frantic escape from Vietnam with Bao and Kim. Her younger brother, Bao. He was what, fourteen when they left? So young, but already strong. Kim was just a toddler then. And now she had her own child. Had it been so long? She looked down at her wrinkled hands and stretched her rough, calloused feet, and listened to her ankles creak. In her childhood she was quick, lithe. Now she was a grandmother. Some days, she even walked with a limp, like her husband, rattling her cart along the corridors of the Evening Light Inn and looking very much a ghost next to the bright, smiling Mrs. Hernandez-Vargas.

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On her way home from work, Mrs. Nguyen stopped at the grocery store and picked up a half cart's worth of canned chicken soup. She wasn't sure what compelled her to clip so many coupons since she couldn't stand the stuff. In fact, if her doctor had not instructed her otherwise, she would have attempted to subsist on rice alone, like the

monks in the pagoda near her village. But here, her doctor told her, *in America*, she needed meat. Such a sin.

Mrs. Nguyen pulled into her driveway in Springfield and parked behind her husband's car. She had begged him that morning to leave work early and was pleased he had done so. Ten years ago he wouldn't have listened to her request. Not even five years ago. *How quickly things change.* In the living room, crates filled with a year's worth of newspapers lined the walls, stacked nearly to the ceiling, well above her head. *The Washington Post*. *USA Today*. *The New York Times*. *The Wall Street Journal*. *The National Enquirer.* Anything that held any information about the Y2K Bug. Boxes huddling around the old, beat-up sofas and underneath the side tables overflowed with magazines and books she had never read. Somewhere she had even stowed three VHS cassettes smuggled out of the WETA building by a friend who cleaned the offices there. Everything was meticulously grouped by date, though she often wondered if she should have organized everything by the types of data she had gleaned instead. She found the appropriate crate and filed her newest acquisition away.

In the kitchen at the rear of the house, Mrs. Nguyen dropped the cans of soup into an empty box and set it with the other canned goods by the sliding glass door. She caught sight of her husband, Mr. Thanh Tran, as he climbed a ladder out of a large hole in the ground in the middle of the backyard. He picked up a bag of potatoes from the pile of supplies next to the hole and gingerly lowered himself onto the ladder and disappeared back down into the earth. Mrs. Nguyen zipped up her coat and carried a container filled with packages of instant macaroni and cheese into the backyard. She stood by the open

hatch, which was camouflaged with grass and dirt, and waited for her husband to appear. The faint sound of shuffling boxes came from below, and as she peered into the dark, her breath blooming before her, she caught the glow of orange candlelight flickering against the packed dirt walls. The shuffling stopped, and a moment later, the top of Mr. Tran's head appeared and he climbed up to her.

"Where are the boys?" she asked in Vietnamese when he reached her.

Mr. Tran raised his arms above his head and stretched his back before answering. His hair clung to his sweaty scalp. She imagined steam rising from his skin.

"Bobby's in D.C. playing chess."

"And Martin?"

Mr. Tran shrugged.

She nodded. "How did you get off so early?"

"I told them I was sick."

"It's cold. I'll make you some tea."

"Mmm."

The phone was ringing when Mrs. Nguyen returned to the kitchen.

"Hi, mom."

It was Kim. Mrs. Nguyen smiled. It was always nice to hear from her daughter, even in English. She sat at the kitchen table and answered in Vietnamese. "How are you? How's Eugene and my granddaughter?"

“They’re fine. Wendy’s been running a fever, but it broke last night.” Kim’s Vietnamese was thick and awkward and she often had to switch to English. “How’s dad?”

“He’s working in the backyard. Did you use green oil on Wendy? It will help. You have to be careful when it gets cold. Make sure she’s wearing a coat if she goes outside.”

“I know.”

“Do you want to store anything here with us? Make sure it’s canned!”

“Are you busy right now? I want to come by with Wendy and take a nap.”

“Yes, yes. Come over. I’ll make dinner.”

“No, you don’t have to do all that.”

“Is Eugene coming? He likes my *nem nuong*, doesn’t he?”

“He’s on call at the hospital. Don’t make such a bother, okay? I just need some sleep.”

“At the hospital? Tonight? He should be at home with you and Wendy.”

“It’s new year’s eve. It’s going to be busy in the emergency room. Just stop, okay? Wendy and I will come by in a little while.”

“Don’t forget to bring your things to store!”

After they hung up, Mrs. Nguyen put the kettle on the stove and pulled from the refrigerator the ingredients for *nem nuong*, going over in her head how much meatball paste she would need. Her three children, her husband, her son-in-law, her granddaughter. She’d have to call to see if her brother Bao was coming by. And herself.

She couldn't forget herself, could she? What a full house tonight. She remembered her family's gatherings when she was little, and how her mother and aunts would fill the kitchen, each one working on a separate dish as they gossiped and laughed. She hummed happily as she mashed the pork and fish sauce together and began rolling little meatballs.

***

After South Vietnam fell in 1975, Mr. Tran returned home long enough for him and Mrs. Nguyen to marry and conceive Kim. She remembered mostly from this time his weariness, a marked change from the broad-shouldered, straight-backed boy of her youth. His limp seemed to worsen each day, his capacity to endure his own weight ebbing. He spent his days alone, or drinking and exchanging war stories with old friends. Even Mrs. Nguyen's father tried to talk to him, to get him to snap out of his melancholy. She thought revealing her pregnancy would ease things for him, give him something, anything, to look forward to. And for a while, it did. He seemed happy then, or at least made an attempt to appear so, a kindness for which she felt an immeasurable sense of gratitude. He even began building little trinkets and toys.

But by the time Kim was born, Mr. Tran had been taken. Reeducation camp, they called it. She and other South Vietnamese knew it for what it was. Prison.

He did not return until 1979, and what little he had kept of himself from the war had been further lessened. To Mrs. Nguyen, he was a stranger. Kim, who was already three, cried when she met him. His body had shriveled down to scarred flesh strung tightly around brittle bones. He spent his days drunk and his nights crying out in his

sleep. This lasted for months until one day he came home late at night, not stinking of alcohol.

Mr. Tran had met a man who could get them out of Vietnam, he explained. He dug through their belongings for all their gold and jewelry. He dropped them in handfuls on their bed. Rings and bracelets and gold leaves. There was the necklace with the ivory-carved Buddha pendant Mrs. Nguyen's grandmother had purchased when she became pregnant with Mrs. Nguyen's mother. It was to be Kim's. They argued. She screamed and cried. It wasn't until Mr. Tran promised that the gold would include passage for Mrs. Nguyen's younger brother that she relented. In the weeks that followed, Mr. Tran improved. He avoided alcohol. He exercised. He and Kim got acquainted. Mrs. Nguyen had second thoughts of leaving, but the possibility of Mr. Tran reverting to his old ways terrified her. And when he talked about leaving Vietnam, she saw in his eyes the spark she had fallen in love with all those years ago, and how could she risk losing that again? If not for her, then for her daughter, who needed a father, and not a broken man.

Three weeks later, on a moonless night, Mrs. Nguyen, Mr. Tran, Bao, and little Kim piled into a rotted old boat with a dozen other families and slipped into the still sea. They held their breaths as they puttered past the border, between patrol boats, and away from Vietnam. Among them were children, former soldiers, farmers. Mrs. Nguyen worried that the creaking old vessel would collapse under all the weight. But it proved seaworthy, at least in that respect. And once on the open water, they kept a wary eye out for pirates. But it was greed, not pirates, which eventually caught them.

The motor, fawned over by the man who sold them passage as newly rebuilt, gave out in the middle of the sea, stranding them for nearly three weeks with little water and less food. Mrs. Nguyen mixed flour and seawater to feed Kim, who spit it up after a few small gulps. She wailed until she could only make dry, choking noises. Around them, people waited for a sure death.

An old woman was the first to go. Her granddaughter, a young woman of about 20, refused to let them throw the body overboard. Mr. Tran tried to reason with her.

"We can't bring her with us," he said. "There's nothing you can do."

"Please," the young woman begged, her grandmother's head in her lap. "She just needs some sleep." The old woman's black, loose clothing was soiled from years of labor in the rice paddies. The granddaughter sniffled and scratched at sections of the old woman's shirt caked with dirt, staining her fingertips reddish-brown.

Mr. Tran shook his head and walked away.

Mrs. Nguyen watched him confer with Bao and another man. She knew they were on the verge of forcing the young woman away from the corpse. She crept over and sat next to the young woman and held Kim in her lap as she cried.

"We're going to get sick," Mrs. Nguyen said quietly. "Think of the children. We can't have her here."

"She's fine," the granddaughter whispered. "I told her we could make it. She didn't want to come."

Mrs. Nguyen looked around at the people who hadn't eaten in—how many days now? She couldn't remember. Too many. She bit her lip and forced out the words.

“Nobody has eaten in so long. We must get rid of her quickly. Do you understand?”

The air between them chilled, and Mrs. Nguyen saw in the young woman’s eyes an awful dawning. She pressed her grandmother’s head against her belly and begged to be left alone.

Mrs. Nguyen got to her feet and led Kim away. She nodded to her husband.

Mr. Tran turned and squinted at the afternoon sun. He shifted his weight from his good leg to his bad and back again as though he were afraid.

Mrs. Nguyen and Kim watched the clear sky spreading before them. For long moments, the boat people were silent except for the young woman’s soft crying. Waves gently rocked the boat, and the quiet, shearing sound of wind skipping over water reminded them that they were stranded. Vietnam was no longer visible, but in front of them lay the rest of their trip, an open, empty ocean, devoid of landmarks except for the stark line where water and sky met. Mrs. Nguyen stared into the distance, trying to see through water and the curve of the horizon to divine their path. She felt her husband’s hand on the small of her back, and she leaned a little against it, grateful for something on which to rely, if only for a moment. And then it was gone, and she heard him address the young woman.

“Have you said goodbye?” he asked.

The granddaughter, whose back was turned to him, sobbed.

“You’ll go crazy if you can’t let go,” he said.

His voice sounded hollow and distant and Mrs. Nguyen looked to his face to make sure he had spoken.

The young woman ignored the words and held her grandmother's head tighter in her lap, as though nursing a baby. Around them, women cried and men cast uneasy looks at the body.

As the sun set, Bao and another man dragged the young woman away from the body. She screamed, twisted, and kicked, her face a bulging, angry mass of red. Mrs. Nguyen feared she would overpower them in her grief. But she eventually collapsed, forcing them to struggle with her dead weight. Two other men hoisted the corpse by its underarms and ankles and threw it overboard. The young woman screamed and yanked her hair out in clumps and crawled to the edge of the boat, but Mr. Tran held her back, his stoic expression melting into sympathy. Finally she gave up and huddled, shaking, on the deck.

Down below, the corpse bobbed with the ocean's ripples, its black clothes dark with water. The setting sun lent the sea a burning quality, and the bright purples and dark oranges mixed together around the body, claiming it as its own. But it didn't leave or sink right away. It floated alongside the boat, rubbing its head against the side. As night fell, Mrs. Nguyen deposited Kim in Mr. Tran's embrace and made her way to the young woman and held her as she cried for death to take her as well.

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Kim and Wendy arrived about an hour after her phone call. Wendy slept in a bundle of colorful winter clothes, and when Mrs. Nguyen took her from her daughter,

Wendy smacked her lips. Mrs. Nguyen pressed the back of her hand against her small forehead and it was cool, though her little body felt warm in her arms.

"Come eat," Mrs. Nguyen said brightly. "The *nem nuong* is ready."

"Mom, I told you not to worry about dinner," Kim said with a sigh.

"But Eugene likes my *nem nuong*."

"He's working tonight. I told you that." Kim kicked off her shoes and tossed her coat on the closest sofa. She looked around with a grimace, picked up a newspaper, and shook her head at the headline. "You need to get rid of these. It's crap, mom. Nothing's going to happen. You can't even see the floor."

"Of course, of course." Mrs. Nguyen carried Wendy over to the sofa and eased herself down. "The food is getting cold."

"I'm really tired. I'll eat when I wake up, okay?"

"But I made so much."

"Mom…"

"Okay, okay. Go sleep in my and daddy's room."

"Thanks."

Kim disappeared down the hall.

Mrs. Nguyen slipped Wendy's small wool cap off and brushed her dark bangs aside. Her granddaughter looked Vietnamese, despite Eugene's Chinese blood. Strange. Of course, she and Mr. Tran had some Chinese blood too. But still, Wendy would have definitely fit right in with all the babies she remembered being born in her village in

Vietnam. She heard the rear sliding glass door open and shut, and a shuffle of feet as Mr. Tran removed his shoes.

"Look who's here," Mrs. Nguyen said.

Mr. Tran limped into the living room, his face spreading into a toothy smile when he saw his granddaughter. "Who's that, huh? You found another baby while I was outside?"

"I pulled this one from the trash. Her mom didn't want her."

Mr. Tran laughed and leaned down to kiss Wendy's chubby cheek.

"Careful, you'll wake her," Mrs. Nguyen said, scrunching up her face. "You stink. Go shower and come to dinner. I set your clothes in the hallway bathroom. Kim's sleeping in our room."

Mr. Tran limped down the hall. After a moment, she heard the water run. She stood and circled the living room, gently rocking Wendy, and after a while, wandered down the hall to Martin's room. The door creaked opened, revealing piles of clothes strewn about his bed and chair, and half-empty dishes piled high on his nightstand. Dust clung to his unused computer, and a strange, pungent, earthy odor hung in the air. It smelled faintly of skunk. *How does he live like this?* She shook her head and switched Wendy to one arm. With her free hand, she gathered several dishes and headed to the kitchen where she dumped them in the sink. On the table, her *nem nuong* grew cold. She popped a small one in her mouth. Just one wouldn't be missed. *A little greasy, but good.* A flush of guilt warmed her cheeks, but she ignored it and swallowed. Eating a small one wasn't greedy.

Mrs. Nguyen turned on the rear porch light and stared at the bunker's closed hatch from the kitchen, its slight discoloration the only clue that it was different from the rest of the lawn. She wondered what the bunker looked like with all the supplies sorted. In her arms, Wendy slept soundly. Mrs. Nguyen hesitated for a moment before slipping on her coat and gently fitting Wendy's wool cap back onto her granddaughter's head.

The bunker smelled strongly of damp earth, though the temperatures had been below freezing for the past week. Mrs. Nguyen lit a candle, and light spread softly along the concrete blocks that made up the walls. It was a small space, maybe 150 square feet, but offered more than enough room for everyone in the family. She was happy. They had constructed the bunker that past summer. Convincing Mr. Tran hadn't been easy, and once they started, the weather seemed to conspire against them at every step. Twice they had to start from scratch after heavy rainfalls had flooded the pit, causing it to collapse upon itself. But they persisted—they were, if anything, tenacious—and slowly the walls took shape. The tunnel grew. The ceiling held. And during a lucky stretch of clear weather in August, they finished. Now she surveyed their work. Large wooden columns braced against the walls on either side of her rose to the ceiling where they were connected by large beams that supported the weight of the ground above. Shelves packed with food ran down the length of the bunker. Pushed against the shelves were benches made with the same wooden planks Mr. Tran had used to build the floor. Beneath the benches were bags of candles and waterproof matches and sleeping rolls and blankets. Everything they could possibly need. There was even a small altar with pictures of her dead parents and an incense pot. At the rear of the bunker stood a wall of bottled water.

She lowered the candle and set it on the nearest shelf. A tingle of excitement crept through her, an electric humming that somewhere on the other side of midnight was proof she wasn't foolish. She wasn't blind to their disdain—her children, her friends. Their eyes said it all: *How silly. How embarrassing. What a peasant.* She had gone over everything in her head countless times and knew she wasn't wrong. Catastrophes could strike in breathless moments and their aftermath often gave birth to entirely new lives. Who could have imagined her in this strange, foreign land? Who could have foreseen her daughter marrying so young? Or the birth of the child now napping in her arms?

Wendy woke and stretched her chubby cheeks in a yawn. She turned in Mrs. Nguyen's arms and looked around, blinking at the dark, at the shadows. Her brows furrowed and her cheeks grew red as she began to cry.

"Oh, oh, oh. It's okay, it's okay." Sometimes Mrs. Nguyen imagined Vietnamese words among her granddaughter's cries and gibberish. This was not one of those times. She tried whispering soothing sounds but Wendy kept crying. She sighed, glanced around the bunker one last time, blew out the candle, and climbed back up.

In the kitchen, Bobby, her youngest, stuffed his face with noodles and *nem nuong*.

"How was chess?" Mrs. Nguyen asked. Wendy whined and Mrs. Nguyen held her over her shoulder and patted her back. She turned so Wendy could see Bobby. "See Uncle Bobby? Who's that? Huh? Who's that?"

Bobby blew out his cheeks and puckered his lips like a fish. Long strands of noodles hung from his mouth. Wendy giggled and he swallowed.

"Chess was fine."

Mrs. Nguyen set Wendy on the counter and washed her hands. When she was done, they sat and she fed Wendy noodles from Bobby's plate.

"Where do you play in D.C.?"

Bobby shrugged.

"Hmph." Mrs. Nguyen fed Wendy tiny bits of *nem nuong*. She drooled and smiled, her round cheeks pushing the folds of her eyes nearly closed. "Have you seen Martin?"

Bobby shook his head.

"You'll stay in tonight?"

"I don't know."

"It's dangerous."

"Yeah." Bobby got up and put his dish in the sink. He took Wendy from Mrs. Nguyen and swung her gently through the air, eliciting squeals and giggles.

Mr. Tran came into the kitchen, his hair still damp.

"I'll take her downstairs," Bobby said.

Mr. Tran snorted as he heaped noodles onto his plate. "For what? To teach her how to play games?"

Bobby shrugged and made farting noises against Wendy's cheek.

Wendy laughed.

"She needs her milk," Mrs. Nguyen said.

"I'll feed her." Bobby and Wendy went into the living room for Wendy's bag and headed downstairs.

When they were alone, Mr. Tran scowled.

"He plays too much. He sees me walk like this, and he doesn't help with the boxes."

Mrs. Nguyen nodded sullenly. Her arms felt naked.

"You're not eating?" Mr. Tran asked.

"I already had some."

Mr. Tran patted her hand. "Don't get too skinny. Remember what the doctor said."

"Hmph."

"Is Bao coming over?"

"I called him earlier but he wasn't home."

"Too bad. Did you see the bunker yet?"

Mrs. Nguyen smiled and squeezed her husband's hand. "Thank you." She sighed. "Even Teresa at work makes fun of me."

"Nobody knows how bad it can be."

"Mmm."

As evening turned to night, Mrs. Nguyen wondered where Martin was, whether he'd even come home. *Do what you have to, but don't go to jail*, Mrs. Hernandez-Vargas had said. What did she know about jail? An image of Martin came to her, as skinny as Mr. Tran had been when he returned from the prison camp. She bit her lower lip, remembering Martin's terrible temper. He had once beaten Bobby so badly they had to keep Bobby out of school for a week for fear that Mr. Tran would be blamed. Mrs.

Nguyen watched her husband's jaw muscles clench as he chewed. His cheeks had fattened over the years. Even so, she wondered where they had veered off course, if somewhere between Vietnam and Thailand they had lost their way and never recovered. Perhaps Martin was born lost. She shoveled about three quarters of the remaining *nem nuong* into a plastic container for Kim to take home with her.

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A little before 11 p.m., Mrs. Nguyen and Mr. Tran began bundling themselves up in their heaviest winter clothes. Kim and Wendy had already left, and Bobby stayed shut up in his room. With much reasoning from Mr. Tran, Mrs. Nguyen left Bobby alone, and together they suited up to ring in the New Year down in the bunker. As she dressed, she went over in her head the many problems to expect: airplanes dropping from the sky; missiles launching; banks no longer working; everything else falling apart. Power, water, cars—everything—relied on computers nowadays. Who knew what would survive in another hour? She slowly pulled on her zipper, counting the click of each tooth as her husband tied his bootlaces.

The front door opened. Martin had come home.

"Is there anything to eat?" he asked when he saw them. He opened the refrigerator.

"Where have you been?" Mrs. Nguyen asked.

Mr. Tran walked outside.

"Out," Martin said in a bored voice. His shirt was wrinkled, and from across the kitchen she could smell cigarette smoke and alcohol on him, though he was only 19.

“Well, we’re going into the small house,” Mrs. Nguyen said, unfamiliar with an English word to describe the bunker. “Are you coming with us?”

Martin snorted. “Where’s all the food?”

“Why didn’t you eat? You always have money to throw away.”

“I don’t like eating at Eden at night.” Martin closed the refrigerator door.

“Eden! What’d I tell you about that place?” After several shootings years ago, Mrs. Nguyen warned her children against going to the Vietnamese strip mall.

“Whatever. I’m going to bed.”

Mrs. Nguyen wanted to scream at her son, to hold him, but instead she watched him disappear down the hall and slam his bedroom door shut behind him. She filled a glass with cold tap water. It tasted stale and faintly of metal. The lump in her throat persisted. She took a deep breath and went outside.

Lit candles stood scattered around the shelves when Mrs. Nguyen climbed into the bunker. Mr. Tran sat on a bench, the gentle candlelight lending his skin a soft, orange glow that stripped away the years and the stress and whatever terrible anger was in him that kept him alive for so long, and for a moment he looked a boy again. But the illusion fell away as she sat next to him and he put an arm around her. She felt cold.

“Martin’s not coming?” he asked, his voice as gentle as she had ever heard it.

She shook her head.

“So selfish,” Mr. Tran said.

“There’s so much food down here,” she said, numbly poking through a shoebox filled with small, thin packets. “Broth mix. What do I need this for?” Her chest swelled,

and when the urge to throw something came, she didn't fight it. The shoebox bounced off the wall of bottled water. The pouches scattered. Her eyes blurred and she tilted her head back and stared at the ceiling. She watched a beetle scurry across a beam and disappear where the wood and dirt joined. Then there was another. And another. Her eyes focused and she realized there were dozens of beetles crawling along the ceiling, moving back and forth. The bunker seemed alive with them. Normally she would have sprung to her feet, rag or rolled up newspaper in hand, ready to kill them all. But now she felt as though she and her husband were intruding on the beetles, that the dark and the earth were meant for them, an entire world she and Mr. Tran were unwelcome guests.

Mr. Tran rubbed her back.

"We should have never left Vietnam," Mrs. Nguyen whispered.

"We had to."

"Mmm."

For a long time they sat, letting the flames from the candles dance and move in the soft breeze of their breaths. Along the walls and packed dirt ceiling, the light grew and shrank, climbing in and out of the uneven dents and dimples in the dirt as shadows rose and fell between the stacks of goods they'd collected. When she blurred her eyes, Mrs. Nguyen imagined she saw the silhouettes of her children and her brother and her dead parents, and she wished that instead of seeing their outlines, she could feel them. She wanted to touch their heft, their presence, but the creeping doubt in her mind told her they were beyond her reach, that the only things left to her were shadows dancing on the wall.

A screech of tires jolted her from her daydream. Mr. Tran's arm tightened around her waist. Then they heard distant cursing and yelling.

Is that Martin? Why is he screaming?

Mrs. Nguyen exchanged a glance with her husband. They scrambled up the ladder and burst through the hatch. For an instant, the night was still and normal. But then everything fell on her at once. The sound of a car speeding down the street. Echoes of screaming. And then she saw it. A ring of hazy orange surrounding their house. Through the sliding glass door she saw the source of the glow.

The living room was on fire.

Rough hands pushed her aside. Mr. Tran limped toward the house, his shoulders dipping unevenly as he moved.

"Don't…" she began.

Mr. Tran waved a hand toward their neighbor's house. "Call the fire department!"

Mrs. Nguyen ran.

The elderly woman they rarely spoke to left the screen door between them but assured her she would call the fire department. She thanked her and hurried to the front sidewalk. There she saw the front door standing open, and through a broken bay window she spotted Bobby beating a burning sofa with a blanket. Flames crept up the wall behind him, high enough to lick the ceiling. Around him, Mrs. Nguyen's collection of newspapers and magazines and books and three VHS cassettes burned. The air swirled with sparks and bits of burning paper. Mr. Tran appeared behind Bobby and unloaded a small fire extinguisher at the sofa. White smoke filled the room and spilled out through

the broken window and rose in a thick gray plume. From the corner of her eye, she spotted Martin running toward her from down the block.

"What happened?" she yelled. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Martin snapped as he headed toward the front door.

Mrs. Nguyen grabbed his arm as he passed.

He whirled around, his eyes hard and cold and black, and she felt her heart skip a beat. He pulled free of her grip and charged into the house.

A page of burning newspaper fluttered out through the open door and the wind dragged it along the sidewalk to where she stood. The paper burned to nothing. Her gut clenched and waves of nausea swept over her and she felt her head spinning, spinning. She bent over and vomited acid and saliva and what little else was in her stomach. When she was done, she wiped her snot and tears as hiccups shook her body.

A moment later, just as she felt the ground teetering beneath her, Mr. Tran and Bobby appeared from the side of the house, covered in sweat and black soot. Bobby rubbed his arms in his tee shirt and sweatpants and she saw him shivering as he approached. Mr. Tran reached for her and she gratefully fell into his arms.

"Where's Martin?" she asked.

"He went to his room," Bobby said.

"*What*?" Panic drove away her nausea and she turned toward the house. Much of the smoke from the extinguisher had cleared, but the living room still burned.

"Martin!" she screamed. "Come out!" Mr. Tran tightened his hold on her but anger and fear lent her the strength to pull free from her husband.

“Goddammit,” Mr. Tran said, grabbing her wrist. “Stay here. I’ll go find him.”

Before Mr. Tran could move, Martin stumbled through the front door in a coat with a black bandana pressed to his nose and mouth. He had his backpack slung over a shoulder.

Mr. Tran rushed forward and grabbed him by the collar. “What happened?”

“Let go,” Martin snapped. He pried his father’s hand loose. “Some car drove up and they threw a bottle at the house and everything started burning. I don’t know why.”

“You don’t know?” Mr. Tran roared. He looked his son up and down and pointed down the street. “You don’t know them? How don’t you know? Huh? You chased them down the street.” He pushed him. “You’re lying. You’re a liar.”

In the distance, a fire engine’s siren screamed.

Martin shifted the backpack on his shoulder. “Get out of my way. I have to go.”

“Go where?” Mr. Tran hissed. “You can’t tell the police what you saw?” He grabbed Martin’s backpack. “Or you can’t let them see this?” He yanked at a strap.

“Get off!”

Mr. Tran punched Martin on the side of his head. It landed with a wet smack. At the same time, they both pulled the backpack in opposite directions and it burst open at the zipper. Five large, clear, plastic bags, the gallon-sized Ziploc ones, tumbled to the ground, each bulging with clumpy green material. A pungent, earthy odor filled Mrs. Nguyen’s nostrils. It smelled faintly of skunk. She looked down at the packages and up at her son.

“Don’t fucking touch me!” Martin screamed. He shoved his father with all his might, driving him backward.

Mr. Tran stumbled, lost balance, and collapsed.

Bobby wrapped Martin in his arms and pulled him away.

Mrs. Nguyen hurried to her husband’s side. He waved her off and slowly stood, his bad leg shaking as he straightened. His eyes burned and his face was red and mean. She held him by the elbow but he didn’t move.

Martin broke out of Bobby’s hold and silently repacked his bag, shooting glances around the neighborhood. When he finished, he glared angrily at them before spitting and turning away, disappearing into the night.

“Go on!” Mr. Tran yelled after him. “Don’t come back here! You’re just an animal!”

“No, no, Cuong, stop!” Mrs. Nguyen screamed, using Martin’s Vietnamese name. “Come back, Martin!” She looked to her husband, to Bobby. They would not meet her gaze. She screamed for Martin again.

But he was gone.

Mrs. Nguyen fell to her knees and scratched at the hard, frozen ground, at a dead tuft of brown grass, at dirt and tiny rocks. Her fingernails cracked and broke and she felt heat and blood as her hands grew slick. She pressed her forehead to the earth and wished very hard for her son but when she sat up there was no reply. There was only the sidewalk, only darkened houses and porch lights, only floating, curious faces appearing behind curtained windows. Only shadows.

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The firemen put out the living room before the structure took much damage. The police took their statements. There was no mention of Martin. Mr. Tran and Bobby went to an all-night hardware store to find plywood to nail over the broken bay window. Alone, Mrs. Nguyen wandered around the living room, keeping a silent inventory of what had been lost in the fire, what could be salvaged. Her fingers throbbed in the haphazard bandages she had wrapped around her hands. The clock in the hallway chimed three times and she felt her strength further drain with each intonation. She longed to forget the night and sit with her feet in Mr. Tran's lap. She longed to wake to a morning in a home unchanged by the events of the night. She longed for the hours that had passed. The minutes. The air grew thick and heavy around her body, as though it meant to squeeze the breath from her lungs. Beneath the burnt walls lay lumps of ash. Puddles of black. Her newspapers. She crouched down and slid her fingers into a wet pile and watched it crumble into flakes and fall through her fingers, like sifting through sand, like so many other memories.

SUMMER

The day had been sweltering hot, and as evening fell, Kim Tran and her father, both tired and soaked with sweat, took a break on their trek home. They left the paved trail winding through Barcroft Park, and sat at a wooden picnic table. Kim rolled up the legs of her jeans and kicked off her shoes. The evening air felt cool between her toes as she waggled them about, stretching the aches away. She rubbed her feet in the dry grass, letting the strands tickle and scratch her skin. Her mother would yell at her later for getting grass stains on her feet, but that was later. Mr. Tran rested his leg on a bench, undid his tie, and massaged his gnarled knee. Dusk fell thick around them as the last people in the park filtered down the trails toward the parking lot, leaving them alone save for the trees and shrubs surrounding the picnic grounds and playground. The smoky aroma of cooked meat clung to the humid air and Kim felt her stomach squirm. Mr. Tran lit a cigarette and blew swirls of smoke, masking the pleasant scent with a sour, musty one.

"Thanks for helping," Mr. Tran said in low, rumbling Vietnamese. "You don't mind helping, right?"

Kim shook her head and pulled at her shirt, letting the air cool her skin. She was small, and even though she had turned nine earlier that year, she looked much younger.

"I think the Safeway will call me back. The manager seemed nice."

What if I'm not home? Will you even be able to speak to him in English? Kim grabbed a twig with her toes and brought it up to her hand. She heaved it with all her might and it landed in the grassy slope on the other side of the trail. She hated accompanying her father on his job hunt around the neighborhood, translating for him and seeing strangers eye them funny, a crippled man speaking through his undersized daughter. A group of seven cyclists whizzed by on the trail in bright tights, yellows and oranges and reds and blues streaming, and she watched them disappear into the curves and hills, the distant whirr of their pedal strokes echoing through the trees.

It wasn't fully dark yet when the first firefly darted out in a sweeping arc, its light bathing the branches of a nearby sapling in a yellow-fluorescent hue. It stopped in mid-air. Something in its glow caused Kim to approach, silent. Fireflies were not uncommon in these parts, but this was the first time she saw one hang just so, completely still, as though suspended by invisible wires, the space around it pulsing. She reached out with hands browned from long summer days. Her skin became sharp with shadows reflected from the firefly's light. She clasped her hands quickly, capturing the delicate bug in cupped palms. When she opened her hands to peer at her small captive, its light dimmed in surprise. It saw its chance and flew away, wings a blur of relief.

Other fireflies appeared, quietly peppering the night with yellow glowing dots. Before she knew it, Kim was leaping after them, reaching, reaching. Bounding across the playground, she grabbed at the fireflies, their wings lending her flight. She studied each as she caught them, her eyes following the soft yellow lines on their shells before releasing them and chasing new ones. Soon, she gave up trying to catch single fireflies

and instead aimed for pairs and triples. She tumbled and spun and chased dozens, hundreds—zillions, even—with no goal, no expectation but to capture, if only for a moment, their fleeting light.

The sound of her father's shuffling walk brought Kim to a stop mid-spin, her chest heaving. She turned and saw her father bent over a rusted trash bin, rummaging through its overflowing contents. He dug through stacks of paper plates and crushed Styrofoam cups, picked at bones and decaying food. Little flies circled his head. She glanced around the darkening park, but luckily they were alone.

"Dad," she snapped. "What are you doing?" *Was he hungry?* She had never seen him go through the garbage, and she imagined what the children at school would say if they saw her now. Her cheeks burned.

Spots of ketchup and mustard and what must have been blood from undercooked meat appeared on the cuffs of Mr. Tran's shirt, but still he dug. Kim walked over to pull him away, but before she reached him, he held up a half-full pickle jar.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, his smile triumphant.

"You want pickles?" Kim hissed.

Mr. Tran unscrewed the glass jar's top and dumped its contents on the ground. He limped to the water fountain by the port-a-potty and rinsed it out. He tossed the jar to Kim.

"Put them in there," he said. He ran water over the spots on his shirt, and picked at a particularly difficult stain with his fingernail. "But don't tighten the lid too much, or they'll die right away."

She turned the jar over and over. “Okay.”

Kim returned to the chase, this time herding her captives into the jar, and soon the small black bugs covered its bottom and sides. She set her captives on the picnic table and stared at them, hypnotized. Mr. Tran rested his chin on the picnic table and peered close. One firefly hovered near the lid, intent on breaking free; another flew in circles, mindful of its boundaries; but most simply crawled along the sides and bottom, watching the world through the warped glass. Night fell quickly around her, but the light from the pickle jar glowed bright, keeping the dark away. She held the jar above her head like a beacon and ran around the playground as though the soft yellow light could revive the day. But eventually, despite her wonder, the lights flickered and waned.

“Let’s go home,” Mr. Tran said. He stomped on his cigarette.

Kim held the jar tight and stared down at her fireflies, silent, not wanting the night to end, willing them to burn brighter, though they paid her no mind. Her fingers clung to the glass, sticky with sweat and pickle juice. But finally, after Mr. Tran called to her again, Kim removed the lid and shook the jar, evacuating her captives in a cacophony of light. They rose in whorls and blooms as she bid them goodbye and returned to her waiting father. He reached out to put his arm around her small shoulders, and they made their way down the trail, him limping, her walking slowly. Behind them, the fireflies glowed in the night, a trail of floating breadcrumbs lighting their way home in the dark.

ALWAYS KILL THE KING

November 2003

As was his usual response when something of substance was required, Bobby said nothing.

"Hey," Anna slurred on the other end of the phone. "Did you hear me?"

Bobby lay on his misshapen antique bed, its old, worn springs creaking beneath him. The noise comforted him. His mother had found it at a church yard sale ages ago (for a good price, she liked to remind him whenever she could) and he couldn't bring himself to get rid of it. The dull, eggshell-colored walls were suddenly bright and harsh and he squeezed his eyes shut and searched for calm, but found only dry air that raked his lungs. At the end of the bed lay a pile of dirty laundry that he kicked onto the floor.

The silence dragged. The cell phone burned against his ear.

Finally, knowing she wouldn't speak until he did, that she was content to wait him out, he mumbled: "You're drunk."

"I love you." Her voice was pitchy, irritated.

He grimaced. "Anna…"

"Oh my god," she snapped. "*Bobby!*"

He imagined saying so many things. Mean, sarcastic things. Honest, loving things. *Are you sure you want to have this conversation now? Can you call me*

tomorrow? Did you confuse me with—what was that guy's name she was most recently obsessed with? Do you really need me to say it? Don't you already know? I love you. I LOVE you. I love ya. OF COURSE I love you, dummy. He reached out and spun one of the bedposts' brass bulbs. It emitted a low whirring sound, like pennies dragged across the sidewalk. Dull, coarse spots of oxidation marred its brass finish, and he absently rubbed one of the larger spots with his thumb.

Finally he lied.

"I love you, too."

The lie wasn't that he didn't love her, because he surely did, or at least as much as he understood the notion. It had nothing to do with what he said, but with his inflection, the way his voice sounded two notes higher than usual. The way he laced it with insincerity as if he were speaking out of resignation and resentment. It was a coarse, petty thing, the lie, and he hoped she was too drunk to notice. Or sober enough to see that he meant it. Right away he wished he could have taken it back. Said it differently. Said it right. Said it to wash the rotten taste from his mouth. *I love you. Of course I love you. How could I not?* But the moment passed, as moments do, coldly and alone.

If Anna registered anything amiss, she didn't react other than to breathe a contented sigh. She hung up shortly after, very far away in her dorm room in her college in Pennsylvania. Alone, Bobby stared at the ceiling from his bed. To his left, the clock blinked that it was just after 2 a.m. Wednesday morning. He wanted to go somewhere, though he didn't want to risk waking his parents, particularly his mother, who was a notoriously light sleeper. He also had class in the afternoon, and homework to finish.

Bobby stared at his cell phone, flipping it open and shut. He thought about calling someone to discuss this unexpected development but all his friends had gone away to college or started full-time jobs since high school. Hell, even Sammy had joined the Army, though rumor had it that Sammy had to choose between prison and the army because he had gained citizenship and couldn't be deported. And besides, Sammy never much cared for Anna. Bobby briefly wondered if his older brother was awake. Or their older sister, Kim. He scratched that immediately; his sister had enough on her plate with her husband and daughter. He settled on Martin. No answer. Maybe he was sleeping, or maybe he was just doing whatever the hell it was that Martin did at this time of night. He considered playing some video games but knew he wouldn't stop until late morning, and then he'd sleep all day, and he couldn't risk missing another class. He squeezed his eyes shut and tried to sleep, though rest was a long time coming.

***

It was years ago, at Anna's 16th birthday party, and Bobby absently wandered through crowds of people he did not know. His family had moved to Springfield two years before, and while he and Anna spoke on the phone often and chatted on America Online late at night when outside phone calls wouldn't interrupt their modems, they rarely saw each other. In fact, ever since she had gone to a different middle school, they seemed to exist in completely different worlds. But since it was her birthday, he came. There were faces here and there that he recognized, but by and large he kept to himself. As the night lengthened, he found himself outside by the smokers on the deck overlooking the backyard. While not a smoker, Bobby liked the solitude, the space carved

around them, the quiet. Anna's backyard had a large, twisted tree that overshadowed much of the lawn. Plots of flowers and bushes lined the fences. Three boys about his age huddled at the edge of the patio, laughing and drinking beers. Nobody noticed him, and Bobby concentrated on his half-empty bottle. A slight tug on his jacket turned him around. It was Anna.

"What are you doing out here?" she asked, her face a little flushed. She smiled brightly, and he couldn't help but smile back. Her lower front tooth was still crooked, just a little, and he felt comforted by that constancy. Anna wrapped her arms around his neck and without thinking he pulled her toward him, a wholly new sensation, but it felt normal and comforting as much as it did exciting and new. They hugged for a while, and her hair smelled like strawberry bubblegum. She was only a little shorter than him but he felt like he could pull her into him, fitting their bodies into a warm knot. He was amazed at how well they seemed to fit together, and he nuzzled his nose against the side of her neck. He felt her cold ear press against his cheek, its little ridges pinching him. She giggled.

"Happy birthday," Bobby whispered.

"Thanks," she whispered back. "I missed you."

"I hardly remember you."

"Shut up. I mean it. I need to see you more."

"I'm around."

Music leaked from the house and they rocked slowly back and forth. She looked up at him, smiling with her crooked tooth and gray eyes, and he felt his neck flush. Her hair was done up, and he traced the outline of her neck behind her ear, gently brushing

the soft, untamed hairs. Little details—her pores, her freckles, the coarse hair in her eyebrows—came together to form her face, but the sum was so far removed from its parts, so much more than a nose and a set of lips and a couple of eyes. A gentle sensation, not unlike a tickle, seemed to spread over his brain. Surely it was a biological process, a stimulation of glands or nerves that released various chemicals that told him he was happy, excited, but instead of marveling at the complexities of these reactions, all Bobby noticed was Anna looking back at him. He wanted to kiss her. And he knew, more than he had known anything before, that she wanted him to.

This realization did not go very well for Bobby. He blinked. His neck shifted backward a fraction of a millimeter. And just as quickly, Anna was gone, smiling a little as she slipped out of his arms and into the house.

Bobby stared around the yard in a daze, and cold panic spread from his gut to his lungs, gripping and squeezing breath from him.

She was probably just cold, Bobby thought. *It's November.*

He looked around the backyard. He was alone.

Inside, the house felt stifling and too bright. The pale yellow walls pushed the space upward and outward, creating the illusion that there was more space than there actually was, but the people crowded in on him anyway, oblivious to the illusory details of the home's décor. He sat in a corner on a sofa. It was the same one he and Anna had used as a fort when they were little. They had positioned brooms like pikes above the structure to ward off enemies (namely her cousin who had been visiting). But inside, they had a nice tea party with her stuffed animals. There had always been an easy balance

between them, a give and take that was both fun and lacked any effort. A girl interrupted his thoughts by sitting next to him.

"Bobby motherfreaking Tran!" She was slender and blonde highlights streaked through her long hair.

Bobby blinked. She seemed vaguely familiar.

"It's *Cammy*," she said, slurring a little.

"Holy crap," Bobby said. "I haven't seen you in forever." Cam Le had grown up down the street from him, and was a year younger.

"I know, right?" Cammy exclaimed, as though it was the most incredible revelation ever uttered. She curled her legs underneath her and leaned in close. "How are you?"

From the corner of his eye, Bobby saw Anna watching them from the kitchen, her back stiff. She turned away.

"I'm good," Bobby answered, staring straight ahead. If he turned his head, he was afraid their faces would be too close.

Cammy rested her hand on his shoulder. Bobby gazed across the floor and saw Anna looking at them again. He tried to hold her gaze, but she walked to the stereo, and turned the music up a little before pulling at a boy onto the dance floor.

"Bobby," Cammy whined with her drunken breath. "Hey, Bobby."

"What's up, Cammy?" He leaned back in the sofa and shifted toward her completely. Her eyes looked glazed.

"Is it true when you went down Superman Hill you stood up on a bicycle?"

Bobby looked around reflexively for Anna. She was dancing within earshot but seemed very intent on the boy grinding against her. Bobby cleared his throat, searching for something to say.

"Superman Hill's not really big deal," he said finally.

"What are you talking about? That's crazy!"

"No, no, it wasn't a big deal. I just, you know, didn't think about it. I mean, everyone does it."

"Yeah," Cammy purred. "You gotta have balls for that."

The song ended, and Anna leaned in between them, her presence somehow forcing Bobby to lean away from them.

"He's the only one I've seen go down Superman Hill standing on a bike," Anna gushed at Cammy, not looking at Bobby. "You should have been there. It was *amazing*. He's just being modest. You hear about people doing it like that, but Bobby's the only one I know who did it for real. He's really special."

Another song came on, and the boy next to Anna wrapped a meaty arm around her waist and pinched her side. She laughed, pressed her hips against him for a moment before grabbing his hands and pulling him toward the center of the dance floor. She never looked at Bobby; her eyes never left the boy. Bobby kept his breath even. He forced his posture to remain relaxed. His fists stayed unrolled. Cammy moved in closer, reminding him that she was there, and Anna was not.

"I used to have such a crush on you," Cammy whispered.

"Really?"

“Uh huh.”

Anna was on the dance floor, their bodies entwined, swaying slowly together, just like she and Bobby had been outside. He saw their hips move left and right, as though everyone else had disappeared. He turned away, his heart skipping.

Cammy’s lips tasted like cinnamon and beer with just a dash of cigarette smoke.

When they broke apart, Bobby saw Anna pulling the boy into a room by his hand.

Bobby told himself that they were friends. It seemed a refrain that he’d repeated over the years, through her boyfriends and crushes. They were friends. He had no right to impede on that. He had no right to say anything. He had no right to whatever it was that he was feeling, whatever it was that he was pushing against. Whatever it was that screamed for him to beat that boy’s face in with whatever things were lying around. He forced himself to stay very still. A strange sense of dignity fluttered across his mind. He settled back in the seat and ignored Cammy and her advances for several minutes until she finally got up and stomped off in disgust. The entire time, his breathing stayed relaxed, stayed even. He stared at the ceiling, at the people he did not know, at the drunken game of spin the bottle in the corner. He did not stare at Anna and the boy; they had not returned, and by the time he had left the party, they had still not come out of the room.

Anna called Bobby the next week, complaining that the boy had gotten the wrong idea, that he wanted to date her now. They had smoked weed the rest of the night and fallen asleep together, but she thought he was annoying. And though in his mind Bobby

raged at her, cursed and yelled and screamed, he outwardly said nothing. He listened and said nothing of substance.

***

The Monday after their phone call, just before dusk, Bobby took the metro to Dupont Circle, where he sat hunched over one of the chess tables encircling the fountain, losing his money.

"You're not thinking," Thomas said from the other side of the board. "Just moving things around." The graying man's breath hung between them. His navy blue sweater, the one he'd been wearing for months, looked more ragged than normal, a little patchier. Underneath, strange lumps from many layers of shirts protruded through the wool. He reached out with nicotine-stained fingers, moved a knight, forking two of Bobby's rooks.

Bobby glanced at the timer and tapped his foot under the table. Even though he had stopped playing chess years ago, he made the trek on the blue line to D.C. fairly often, usually in a sad attempt to clear his head, and Thomas was always ready to take his money. Bobby had been a serviceable player once, even won a few tournaments among middle schoolers. Nothing official. He moved a rook away from Thomas' knight and clicked the timer.

"Man, what is that?" Thomas heckled. "Too soon, too soon. Bobby, what are you thinking? You think I don't see your bishop?"

Bobby shook his head. "I don't know."

Click, Bobby's move. Click, Thomas' move. The board's pieces danced back and forth, blocks and feints, cornering one piece, only to have another burst through the lines to change the battle's dynamics. Each move carried with it countless possibilities that had to be considered. Bobby watched his pieces get captured, silently tallying the point value of each, adding it to the total of his losses.

"Bobby, Bobby, Bobby," Thomas lectured. He captured Bobby's queen. "You can't do that, man. You're doing worse, and that's saying something. What's going on man? What's going on."

Thomas had a way of outthinking Bobby that was both effortless and obnoxious, though because of Thomas' advanced age, Bobby found it somewhat charming. He liked the man. Bobby figured he and his companions around the fountain delighted in stumping those like Bobby, suburbanite chess players who flooded Dupont Circle everyday to play the homeless chess hustlers. Crowds of people walked to and fro on the sidewalks, and the traffic circle was congested to nearly a standstill. A young woman seemed to emerge from the chaos around him as Bobby glanced around. She moved with a simple grace, a sway of her hips that was familiar to him. Anna crept into his head. Thomas captured another pawn.

Finally the time ran out. It was just as well, since Bobby was a handful of moves away from being put in checkmate. Bobby extended his hand with a neatly folded five dollar bill in his palm. They shook. Five dollars for a five-minute game. Thomas set the board back up, his hand darting back and forth with practiced precision. He peered at Bobby from over the rim of his sunglasses.

"You okay, Bobby?"

Bobby shook his head and wrapped his arms around his gut, trying to stay warm. That November had been even cooler than normal. "I have a lot on my mind is all."

"Yeah, well, you need to practice. I'm not going to take it easy on you."

"Let's play without the timer."

"For what? You're too lazy. No focus. I'm not going to waste my time." He looked around for another opponent, but nobody seemed interested.

"We stalemate all the time."

Thomas snorted. "I let you stalemate. Stalemate ain't shit."

"So beat me." Bobby picked up a rook and polished it with the hem of his sweater. The green felt glued to the bottom clung to bits of lint and he picked them off.

"*So beat me*," Thomas mimicked. "You rely on others too much. When I was your age, man, I was killing opponents. Just making them *cry*. No, there's no point. You move and move and move, and you never attack. It's like you're too scared to do anything, Bobby. It's B.S., man. Chess just ends in surrender. The king stays the king. I always imagined little treaties being written up after the game. Land goes to one side, maybe a daughter gets married. Kingdoms fall. But then you play again, and he's still the king." He laughed. "Nothing changes. You play Chinese chess? I took it up a little bit in Vietnam during the war. Our translator taught it to me. He was an all right kid. In Chinese chess, you take the king."

"So?"

“Always kill the king, Bobby.” Thomas looked around the fountain for an opponent who did not appear. A handful of other matches were underway, and a large group of bystanders crowded around a table where a young boy played a round, elderly woman. “You see that kid playing Galina over there? Man, he almost beat her last week. Can you believe it? *Nobody* beats Galina.”

“No shit?” Bobby watched the boy’s small, furtive movements. He was a skinny red-headed kid and looked to be in elementary or middle school. Galina was something of a legend among the chess players in DuPont Circle. She had appeared about five years ago in rags and carrying countless plastic bags filled with clothes and blankets and spoke very little English. There were rumors that she was a disgraced Russian Grandmaster. That she beat Kasparov in his heyday. That Fisher fled a country to escape from playing her. That Gimpy Jimmy over on U Street had to play her best of five, and still owed her the final four matches but couldn’t be found because she had broken him and he was locked away in a mental institution somewhere.

“No shit, man. She had to stalemate him.”

“You play the kid?”

“His dad just brings him to play Galina.” Thomas nodded at a skinny man hovering over the red-headed child, whispering to the boy with each move. “Probably has a bunch of private chess tutors. But us, no. Not us peasants. Pissants. You want to play timed again?”

“You hungry?”

Thomas looked up at the grey overcast sky, drummed his fingers along the edge of the table, and finally nodded. “You pay, I’ll owe you a game. Be good to get out of the cold for a few.”

“What if I beat you?”

Thomas grinned and packed his chess set away in a crisp leather case.

Bobby had never spent time with Thomas outside the confines of the chess board, and for a moment he worried that the staff at Lenny’s, a deli a block away, would kick them out. The cashier eyed them warily but Thomas seemed to ignore it. To Bobby, Thomas moved with a youthful energy, though he must have been in his 50s, easily. He was bald except for short tufts of white hair around his ears and the back of his head, and gold studs glittered in his ears. When they sat down at a small table, gyros and bottles of soda in hand, Thomas removed his sunglasses to reveal sunken, tired eyes beneath a heavy brow. He peeled the aluminum wrapping from his gyro and bit. His head bobbed as he looked around. The shop was nearly deserted. The cashier kept staring at them. Bobby returned the stare and gestured to Thomas. Thomas shrugged and shook his head.

“You know,” Thomas said, wiping his mouth. “After I got back from Vietnam, nobody wanted to give me a job. ‘No room for veterans here, mister—move on.’ All that crap. And Black too? Sometimes I wondered: why even come home? This wasn’t a place for me, even before I left for Vietnam. Imagine that. I’ve seen all sorts of things, did all types of stuff. Fought people who never did a thing to me. For a country that would’ve strung me up sooner than give me a job.”

“At least you’ve been there,” Bobby said. “You know more about Vietnam than me.”

Thomas laughed. “Man, lot of guys… Couldn’t cut it when they got home. You hear about it from time to time, you know? So-and-so killed himself, or such-and-such went crazy, got locked up. It’s out of this world. People just get stuck sometimes, and they do the damndest things to get themselves going. Not just vets. I just about gave up for a while, started hitchhiking when I could, which wasn’t often. Who’s going to pick me up? Just kept walking, seeing what all was out there. It’s like a whole different world you go an hour in another direction. How weird is that? I even stayed in the desert in New Mexico for a time. Real pretty. Was a guy I met out there, met him in Albuquerque cleaning some white people’s swimming pools. Young kid, crazy as hell. Anyway, we hook up, and we think we should get our asses up to Seattle. Don’t even remember what for. Thinks he’s gonna be a rock star, maybe. But we head out, right? And every so often, we stop at a gas station, or a rest stop, or whatever’s out there. He goes to the bathroom, and he pisses on the door handle before he leaves. Or he’ll wipe his ass and wipe it on the handle.”

Thomas laughed and pounded the table. The cashier folded his arms and Bobby tried to signal Thomas to quiet down, but he just kept laughing and gasping for breath. Finally he cleared his throat, the last of his laughter leaving him.

“Then, after he did that, he’d wipe the handle down real quick. Not to the point that it was clean, but enough so that there’s a residue, okay? People probably wouldn’t

notice it till they left. Walk around all day with shit on their fingertips. Crazy son of a bitch."

"He told you that?" Bobby asked, chuckling.

"Man he *got* me!" Thomas nearly yelled. "We walk about an hour after I used the bathroom and I'm like, why the hell does my hand smell like that?" He threw his head back, laughing.

The cashier approached.

"You're going to have to leave," he said, his arms folded. "You're disturbing the customers."

Thomas stared at him, suddenly serious. "What customers?"

The cashier shook his head.

"We're almost done eating," Bobby protested. "We paid for our food."

"Out. Or I'll call the police."

Bobby stood up and slipped his coat on. He stood awkwardly as he waited for Thomas to get up.

Instead of getting up, Thomas glared at the cashier, leaned back, and rested his foot on another chair. "You heard, we paid for our food."

"Get out," the cashier said. He grabbed Thomas by the shoulder, but Thomas shrugged him off.

"Don't touch me," Thomas snapped.

"Now." The cashier gestured to the door. Behind him, several employees emerged from the kitchen.

“Do not touch me.”

“Come on, Thomas,” Bobby murmured. “Let’s get some food somewhere else. Let’s just go.” He gripped the top of his chair.

Thomas stared at Bobby, his eyes cold. Bobby looked away as Thomas slowly stood, shaking his head. As they walked toward the door, Thomas kicked a chair over. He turned.

“I’m so very sorry. Assholes.”

Outside, the sun had set, and the night was lit with orange and yellow lights from shops and cars. For a while neither of them spoke.

“Bobby, man…” Thomas shook his head.

“I didn’t want any trouble.”

“That’s not trouble, Bobby. I’ve seen trouble, and that’s nothing. Nothing. That’s people every day. And you, I don’t know. You’re an all right kid, but I hope you’re not like that with your friends.”

They walked back toward the fountain, and for a moment, Bobby wondered what Thomas would do when it got much colder. He realized he knew very little about the man though they spent hours huddled over the same small board. Thomas had his own story, had his own life, and Bobby felt as though he had been intruding on him all the years they’d known each other. Standing up for him would have been such a little gesture, an understanding that he saw Thomas as a friend, as someone who was worth something. But Bobby had done nothing.

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Two days after Bobby's trip to Dupont Circle, Anna was home, and they arranged to meet at the top of Superman Hill to watch some neighborhood kids attempt the local rites of adulthood. Bobby arrived a little early and waited for Anna at the hill's apex, and wandered briefly through the grove of trees that lined the street. The trees were sparse and bare in preparation for the coming winter. After he tired of walking through dead leaves and empty hollows of abandoned nests and rodent crevices, he walked to the bus stop nearby and waited for Anna, and watched people traverse the hill. The metal bench under the bus stop's awning was cold and ridged. He stood and walked to the curb. A cyclist streamed by, little more than a blur of bright colors. She screamed at Bobby to stand back from the curb. He watched her disappear in the middle of the hill. Superman Hill rolled in such a way that it dipped in its center, so that from a pedestrian's viewpoint at the top of the hill, if someone was low enough, he or she could disappear midway down and reappear at the bottom. From the top it didn't seem so bad for some reason. Maybe it was too big. But from below, it looked like an insurmountable thing. Bobby once stood on the bicycle trail and stared up until disorientation forced him to turn away.

Superman Hill was a section of South Walter Reed Drive that plunged into South Four Mile Run Drive and towered over South Arlington. At the foot of the hill, the Washington and Old Dominion bicycle trail cut across. Nobody was sure when kids began going down Superman Hill; nobody was even sure how it got its name, though it probably wouldn't have been until the Christopher Reeves movies gained popularity. For

many, it was just Superman Hill, and it had always been called such. The wide street spanned two lanes in each direction, and included a center median and parking lanes. Every winter, the county made sure to plow it straight away for fear of accidents at the large intersection at its base. Children considered it a solemn duty to conquer the hill before high school, no matter what efforts the local authorities attempted. School assemblies, letters to parents, even police patrols—nothing worked. Children still went down, still got hurt, still grew up.

As Bobby paced back and forth on the sidewalk, looking around for Anna, about ten middle-schoolers appeared. They were a mix of different genders and backgrounds, Hispanic, and Asian, and black, and white. Some rode skateboards, while others walked, or rode bicycles. They filtered into the tree grove one by one. A white boy, the smallest of the bunch, pushed a shopping cart. Bobby listened in.

"Come on, man, let's do this, I ain't got all day!" the little boy said. He rocked the shopping cart back and forth.

The largest of them, a Hispanic kid who was clearly losing the struggle against adolescence, snapped at him. "Shut up, *puta*. We going in a minute. Where's Alfonso at?"

"Man, you chicken, man," the little boy mocked. "You chicken. I ain't got all day. I got girls to see, man."

The boy reminded Bobby of Sammy when they were young. Always talking trash. From behind, a small hand pulled his arm. It was Anna. He nodded at her and gestured to the children with his chin. She stood close to him, and he took a deep breath.

“How’d you know they were going to be here?” Bobby asked.

“I know a lot of things, Bobby-boy. Call it my womanly wiles.”

“That right?”

“This girl from high school I ran into said her little brother’s friends were coming up here. Little idiots.”

“Says you. Who do you think’s going down?”

“Down? Or *down*?”

“Either. Both.”

“Hmm.” She crossed her arms and watched the group stand around, posturing and yelling. Bobby took in her appearance. Her sandy, light blonde-brown hair had been freshly cut, just above her shoulders, framing her face and accenting her wide, high cheeks.

How could anyone ever call her ugly, Bobby thought, remembering what his friends used to say. Her black pea coat was open, and she wore a red sweater underneath. She was never flashy, and Bobby liked that about her. Or maybe she didn’t care what he thought. He didn’t like that. Finally she fixed him with a stare and rattled off her predictions.

“The little one’s going to crash. I think that big kid’s going to do fine. Those twins in the back will chicken out. They keep looking for another kid, and he’s not going to show. Others are just watching.”

Bobby looked over her guesses. The big Hispanic kid would probably finish first. The twin black girls looked to be even younger than the white boy with the grocery cart.

One of them wore pink braids and smiled toothily at her sister, who wore purple braids. "That's your guess?"

"Have you no faith?"

"In you?"

"Whatever. Sometimes, you have to trust your gut."

"How much you want to bet that little one doesn't go down?"

"Dinner then."

"Fine," Bobby said. He made a grand gesture of spitting in his palm and extending it.

She stared him dead in the eye, spit in her palm, and they shook.

"I have expensive tastes," he warned.

"You're like the cheapest guy I know."

"Not when it comes to your money."

Anna laughed her hokey laugh, the one which shook her whole body and sounded as though she was choking. Bobby realized how much he missed her, how the anxieties he felt when he thought about her easily washed away when they were together, no matter how long they'd gone without seeing each other. He always hated the term 'two peas in a pod,' but what else could they be? He smiled at her, trying in some way to convey to her the admixture of strange sensations and memories and hopes and dreams and resentments—all the negatives and positives, all the fondness he felt for her. Her gray eyes flicked in some small, minute way—a question perhaps, or confusion.

They fell into silence and resorted to watching the children procrastinate. Bobby swallowed, disappointed in ways that felt so familiar. His heart pounded, and he searched for a way to broach the subject of their phone call. He'd never felt so nervous, not when he lost his virginity, not when his mother threatened to run away with him and his two siblings, and not even the first time his father took him to Upton Hill to try to teach him to swim. His father had offered him a piggyback ride. But once he was on his father's back, his father pinned Bobby's legs to his ribs and jumped into the deep end of the pool. Bobby had not learned to swim that day. Finally he realized that there was nothing to do but just say it.

"You called me a few days ago, do you remember?" Bobby asked.

Anna looked away. "I was drunk."

"Yeah."

"Okay?"

"So you didn't mean it?"

She shrugged. "I don't know, Bobby. I don't know what it means. It's not a big deal. We don't have to talk about it."

The children lined up, taking over most of one lane. A boy held the little one's grocery cart still as he climbed in.

Anna crossed her arms. "You remember when you were about to go down on your bike? Before ninth grade? You were the last one of all your friends. It was just you and me up here."

Bobby cleared his throat and watched the boys finalize their positions. “I remember, sure.”

“You remember standing on your bike?”

Bobby smiled and chuckled.

“Three… Two… One… Go!” A boy screamed. Three children rolled down. Only one of the twins had backed out.

Should have bet on them, Bobby thought.

“Did you ever decide to go down?” Anna asked.

“I would have told you if I went down.”

Anna nodded. “I think I would have just known.”

The three children, two on bicycles and the little one in the grocery cart, all hunched down and gained speed. Bobby looked back to make sure no cars were coming. He watched the street light far below. It was red. Cars in the perpendicular lanes drove across the intersection, oblivious to the children’s descent into adulthood. The trio disappeared into the hill’s blind spot. For a split second Bobby imagined he was one of them. He felt the breeze, the sheering sounds of wind, and the echoes of cars in the distance, and watched as the little pits in the asphalt blurred and turned into little black lines in faded tar, and he felt, for that instant, like he was flying, like he could grab the sky as though it was a thing of substance and not just a trick of light. His breath caught. The children reappeared, about halfway down the hill, like tiny little bugs. The largest boy was in front, pedaling with all his might, his shoulders and hips bobbing with effort

against the pedals and gravity. He heard a sharp cry from behind him as the twin's sister screamed her support. They had less than a third of the hill left.

That was when the boy in the grocery cart began rocking, left and right, as though he were desperately trying to swerve to miss something. As it shifted, the wheels under the cart came off the ground, and Bobby imagined them swiveling wildly. Sunlight glinted in the faded metal. Bobby saw it then: the boy's brain splattered over a car, his small, brown body tumbling head over feet into the intersection. He took a step forward before Anna grabbed his arm.

"Wait," she said.

The boy careened violently to the side and tipped over. They watched him huddle in the cart as it slid down Superman Hill, a little black silhouette cut up by the cart's polished grid. Sparks flew from where the metal contacted the road, like little splashes of electricity. The children behind Bobby and Anna burst into screams and ran down the hill after the grocery cart. The twin girl and the Hispanic boy had already reached the bottom of the hill, and turned to watch. When the cart finally slowed to a stop, the little boy stumbled out, his arms raised. He jumped up and down and pointed at the other two.

"You owe me dinner," Anna said. She hooked her arm through Bobby's and they walked down the hill. "And I have *very* expensive tastes. Steak's for beginners."

"Yeah, but I was going to put out afterward," Bobby said, grinning.

"Bet you say that to all your boyfriends."

"Only the disappointed ones."

"Hey Bobby?"

“Yeah?

“You think you’ll regret not going down Superman Hill?”

Bobby thought about it. He was always amazed that Anna had, without blinking, told all their mutual friends that he had gone down Superman Hill while standing on a bicycle. He never asked her to; it didn’t even cross his mind. Finally he answered her. “No, I don’t think so. I’m not scared or anything.”

“I didn’t think you were.”

Bobby paused mid-stride. They were about in the middle of Superman Hill. He turned to look up at the apex, then down at the base. He shifted around, and Anna released his arm.

“I mean, it’s *scary*. But it’s just a hill. It’s scary in the way your report card is scary when you’re small. You almost always know what’s going to happen. You see it right in front of you. At the top, you look down, and you’re staring at a lane in front of you, at stop signs and stop lights and brakes on your bike, or whatever. I’m not scared of things like that. There are only a few outcomes, and the worst ones are next to impossible if you’ve got your head on straight. No, I didn’t see the need to go down Superman Hill. It’s got nothing to do with me. It’s easy.”

Anna looked at him, frowning. “So why the lie?”

“I never lied about it. You did. I didn’t want people to call you a liar, is all.”

“Oh, you did it to protect me.”

“I didn’t care about me, you know. But for a while I thought about going down Superman Hill just so I wouldn’t feel so bad about you lying for me.”

“Still not doing it?”

“I just had to let it go, you know? Say goodbye to it. By the time I actually considered doing it, it was too late. The moment passed. They all pass. So I let it go.”

Bobby walked on. By then, the children had left in search of sodas and junk food from the convenience store or into the parks and bike trails for one of their last reveries before the winter. Anna walked next to him, their footsteps a matching beat. He didn’t feel anxious. The distance between them had closed. He felt her breath, match his. His heart pounded a greeting to whatever it was he was bringing upon himself. Bobby reached for Anna’s hand, not looking, and found it where he always knew it would be. As though it was the easiest thing in the world to find.

RESOLUTIONS

February 2005

Even though today was *Tet*, the Vietnamese New Year, Martin's thoughts were on tomorrow. Thursday. Payday. He stared out the glass storefront from his table at the rear of Café Xuan and waited. He considered himself a patient man, but it had been weeks now, and he needed the money. Across from him, his friend Vu slowly shoveled grilled pork and rice into his mouth and kept his eyes stubbornly focused on his dish. The only sounds between them were the smacking of Vu's lips and the clatter of metal against porcelain.

Outside, cars and people from all over the east coast milled around Eden Center's snow-packed parking lot and walkways, shoppers and remnants of the crowds from that morning's dragon dance. Martin watched them moving beneath the gray afternoon sky, their voices and laughter heard like a dull hum through the glass. There were coats of all kinds, sporadic pops of bright color against a dark wall of leather and wool. Little children, excused by their parents from school for the holiday, scrambled around the legs of out-of-towners and streamed through the lunchtime crowds, waving sparklers and throwing snappers.

The building shivered as a gust of wind blew in through the front door. A pair of Vietnamese men, bookending a tall white man and a short black man, filed into the

restaurant. Beneath the four men's expensive-looking coats hung bulky identification cards on bright yellow lanyards. They sat at a nearby table.

Yuppies, Martin thought as he eyed their khakis and buttoned shirts. He sucked in air through his teeth like a curse and sipped his water. The two Vietnamese men ordered noodles, maybe. He wasn't sure. He could usually understand Vietnamese just fine, but he wasn't accustomed to their dialect, and their words came too quickly. Too easily. Martin never bothered ordering in his native tongue. He would point and grunt. Why embarrass himself? Most of the servers and bar owners knew him and simply nodded. The server left the yuppies' table and Martin ignored their discussion of networks and meetings and budgets, talk as cryptic as their Vietnamese.

Vu scraped the last of his meal off his plate and called over to the man behind the counter for a cup of coffee.

"So what's up man?" Martin asked. "You gonna tell me or what?"

Vu sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. "Man…"

"Is it because of me and your mom?" Martin deadpanned. "You overhear us at night? Is that why you won't tell me?"

"Oh great," Vu groaned. "Here we go."

"I want you to know it's really awful. Human rights, dignity. Out the window. Me and her, it's crazy. You must smell it from your room. No?"

"You're a dick."

"That's all I am to her." Martin laughed, noting, not for the first time, how different they were in their tastes. Where Vu was neat and flashy in expensive designer

jeans and a black turtleneck, and had probably spent a good ten minutes styling his hair, Martin was subdued and sloppy. In fact, Martin prided himself on looking clueless. He shopped for clothes at discount stores and chose cuts that looked more at home on his parents than someone in his mid-20s.

"Look, for real," Martin continued. "You said you'd tell me where Phong lives. It's payday and homeboy dipped out like three weeks now. I got a lot of shit to take care of, man. I got people to pay. Philly covered that seven points." Martin slid his glass back and forth on the tabletop and watched a trail of water rings bead up on the laminate. "Fucking Patriots. If they weren't going to cover, they should've just lost. First half, second half, whole game. All Eagles. Bullshit, man."

The Super Bowl had been played the previous Sunday, and the bets had come in lopsided, with over 18 grand riding on the Philadelphia Eagles against the spread. The over/under came out in Martin's favor, but won him something like 500 dollars, which sounded ridiculous compared to his losses. Bigger bookmakers could adjust the line as the bets came in, but bookies like Martin only took bets 30 minutes before kickoff or tipoff, and the spread was set for that half hour, reopening briefly at halftime. He had enough cash to cover about half the bets, but he needed to collect Phong's debt so he could pay the rest. He couldn't risk his reputation. He'd be out of business in no time if word got around that he couldn't pay.

A slender hand set down Vu's iced coffee. Martin looked up, surprised. Ly, his sister's childhood friend, smiled back at him.

"Damn," he said. "What the hell? You're still alive?"

“Shut the hell up,” Ly said. She lightly slapped his shoulder. “Still an asshole.”

“How’ve you been? You remember my boy, Vu?”

“Yeah, what’s up?” she answered, nodding at Vu. “I’ve been all right. Just moved back. I’m the manager here now. Other than that, just taking care of my son.”

“Shit, that’s right. How old is he?”

“Almost two. I’m bringing him to your parents’ house later.”

“Oh, yeah. My mom called me this morning to remind me. Man, almost two already. You’re looking good though. Hey, we should go together tonight. You can show me how you lost that baby weight.”

“Whatever, *cu nho*.” She snickered and walked away.

Vu laughed.

“What the fuck does that mean?” Martin cupped his hands around his mouth. “Girl, I’d lower my standards just to be with you.”

Ly turned and rolled her eyes at him.

“Baby, that’s *romance*.”

Ly held her hand up to her eye and made a closing motion with her index finger and thumb, stopping when they were about a centimeter apart. She laughed as she disappeared into the kitchen.

“All right, well, I’ll see you tonight! We’ll talk about that love connection.” Martin laughed and made a mental note to show up at his parents’ *Tet* party. He turned back to Vu, his smile gone.

“So, what, man?”

“I don’t know. I feel bad for dude.”

“Man, don’t feel bad for him. Feel bad for me. What if I let Phong go? That’s a shitload of money, man. What if people start talking about how motherfuckers can bet with me and not pay? Fuck that shit. Fuck it. You gotta be kidding. We shouldn’t even be having this conversation. You and me, we’re supposed to be brothers. The fuck, man? Fuck that dude. Dude was so stupid he didn’t know the police weren’t even looking for him.”

Vu smiled sadly. “Yeah, motherfucker was jumping from couch to couch for like two months. Should have seen his face when me and Mikey called the police to check on his warrants.” He shook his head. “He wanted to celebrate, I guess. He’s a good guy, man. But he got nothing.”

“So he bets shit he don’t have? Come on. That’s stupid.”

“You know he probably ain’t even in state, right?”

“Man, look. His parents gonna tell me where he’s at or they’ll take care of it. Either way’s fine.”

“Shit.”

Martin nodded. Vu lit a cigarette and stared at the crowds in the parking lot for a while, occasionally tapping ash onto the linoleum floor. Martin knew his friend was thinking, and knew not to push him or he’d get stubborn. On the TV to his right, CNN reported a bombing in Iraq. *What else is new?* On the sidewalk outside the restaurant, a pair of little boys shoved each other. They stumbled back and forth and jerked at their heavy coats, one in red and blue, the other in silver and black. They reminded Martin of

the Transformers, and a smile crept across his face as he whistled the theme song. Optimus Prime tripped and landed heavily in a pile of snow. Megatron fell on him, fists swinging. A large, round woman appeared and yanked the fallen boys up, her face puffy and red as she dragged them away. Martin chuckled.

An odd pair of customers entered the restaurant, blocking his view, and Martin turned his attention to them.

The man in front was a short, skinny Vietnamese man Martin recognized, though they had never formally met. His name was Toan and his skin looked waxy and thin, as though it had been stretched over the sharp contours of his face. He scanned the room with dark, sunken eyes before heading to a lonely corner on the other side of the restaurant. Martin briefly wondered how much crack he'd been smoking. It was a small community, the young men who frequented Eden Center's cafes and karaoke bars. Sometimes it seemed like everyone knew your business. But Martin couldn't remember ever having seen the man who followed Toan. He was in his late fifties or early sixties, and white. Beneath his bomber jacket, he wore a plaid button shirt that barely covered the belly hanging over his belt, and a baseball cap embroidered with military-looking insignias. He sat next to Toan. Martin kicked Vu under the table and gestured to the pair with a flick of his eyes. Vu glanced over, grunted, and looked away.

"Who is that?" Martin asked quietly.

"You never seen that guy?"

"I seen Toan. I mean that white dude."

"Yeah, that's Terry. Terrence."

“What’s he doing with Toan? He a cop or something?”

Vu shifted in his seat. “He, uh, goes around and buys drinks and hangs out sometimes. Really into Vietnamese shit.” He cleared his throat. “Toan probably needs some money or he’s in trouble or something.”

“So? He just gives away money?”

Across the room, Terrence draped an arm around the back of Toan’s chair.

Vu shrugged. “I just hear he helps people out if they’re in a jam. Like, he’s got a lot of money, and knows lawyers and shit, so you know, motherfuckers need legal help sometime. It’s whatever, man. None of our business.”

Martin watched the man’s puffy face as he spoke to Toan, his jowls hanging like an ill-fitting mask. Terrence curled a loose lock of Toan’s hair around his finger. Toan sat very still, his hands clasped in front of him on the table.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Martin asked.

Vu shrugged again.

“How come nobody’s fucked him up? He’s like a predator or something.”

“I don’t know. People make their own decisions. It’s their life. Who cares?” Vu saw the look on Martin’s face and cleared his throat. “Look, fine, let’s just go, man. I’ll take you to Phong’s parent’s house. We’ll get your money. Just don’t do anything stupid, okay?”

Martin snorted, glad his friend had come to his senses.

“Man, when do I ever do anything stupid? I’m just gonna tell them what’s up.”

“Uh huh.” Vu threw some cash on the table and got up.

Martin could have obtained the address from someone else, but he could rely on Vu for help. Vu spoke perfect Vietnamese, his southern, rural dialect left over from his childhood in Saigon. Martin envied his friend's fluency, which to him seemed like a key to countless doors. While Martin felt comfortable among Eden's shops and regulars, they only made up a small part of the community. To everyone else, he must have seemed like something less than Vietnamese. Less than trustworthy.

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Phong's father, bald but for the swath of white hair circling his ears and around the back of his head, glared at Martin, defiant, like the younger man was stupid. He had planted himself at the foot of the porch, blocking access to his rundown duplex in South Arlington. But that was fine with Martin. Gossip would spread among the cramped neighbors the longer they stayed outside. Behind him, Vu leaned against the chain link fence at the edge of the property and watched the empty street. Martin spat into the snow-covered lawn and inspected the black Honda Accord in the driveway as though he were buying it. Road salt covered its black paint but he could tell it was new when he peered through the windshield and saw the clean, bright upholstery. He imagined the new car smell, a soapy scent tinged with hints of glue and plastic, and the pride Phong's father must have felt when he first sat in the driver seat. The car was the newest thing on the block. It had been that way when he was growing up nearby in the apartments on Frederick Street. Neighborhood blocks filled with old, tired things. The sun dipped beneath the clouds and lit the frost on the yards and rooftops a dazzling white. He took a

deep breath, the cold air scraping the inside of his chest, and turned to the old man, squinting in the sun's glare.

"You know that language is important?" he asked.

The old man looked away.

"I mean it," he continued. "Language is more important than you know."

"I speak English," the old man snapped. He had probably lived in the country for years and years but his accent was still there.

Probably a decade or more. Long enough to raise a son, but not enough to speak the language right.

"You don't get what I'm saying." Martin ran his hand along the car's rear quarter panel. The gritty salt came off in black streaks on his skin. The paint underneath was shiny. He bent over for a fistful of snow and slowly washed his hand with the melt. His fingers turned pink and numb. "Language allows us to look at the world. It tells us how to think."

A little two-door car rumbled down the street faster than the posted speed limit, and Martin watched the driver—some skinny white kid who looked like he was still in high school—speed past. Vu hollered at the disappearing car that his shit looked slow. Martin remarked on how stupid kids were now. The old man glanced warily at the rusted screen door.

Martin suddenly turned to his friend. "Hey, Vu, you believe in fate?"

"What the hell you going on about, man?"

"Fate, man. Like, oh, you're destined to be a great king or some shit. Fate."

“This is some stupid shit.” Vu sounded bored, but Martin recognized the practiced façade, caught the tension in his voice.

Martin turned back to the old man. “You? You believe in fate?”

The old man didn’t reply.

“There’s some Indian tribe, some native people—I don’t remember who—they don’t have the concept of the present in their language. They don’t have a word for it. It’s either in the past or it’s in the future. That’s it, you know? Because they look at the world like everything is changing, and whatever’s coming falls to the past. So even if you get to a certain point in your life, there isn’t a single instant when everything stops and it’s the present, okay? You’re already moving on, even if you don’t know where you’re going. Like it doesn’t matter *what* you decide, the point is that you *will* decide, that you *do* decide. Then you’re moving on to your next decision already. Choice after choice, whatever it is, you’re already past it. You could spend years building something, working, struggling, bleeding for it, but it’s falling apart as it’s being built. So how can you be like, when I grow up, I’m gonna be such and such? You get it? You’re always growing into something and out of it at the same time. Fate’s just where you were born, and where you die. Everything else is just scenery. Vietnam. This neighborhood. Me, here, with you. It’s gone. Like dust. All that’s left is to argue over what you’ll remember.”

“Dude, you’re high,” Vu said.

Martin waved at him to shut up.

The old man sighed. “I don’t know where my son is.”

Martin stared at him for a good long while, recognizing the slow motions of a drawn out script, like how his father described the old battle plans in Vietnam, when the soldiers couldn't tell which way was which and who was who. But you do it anyway, his father said. And you wondered, later, if you could that is, if your commanders were even looking at the map the right side up.

Vu broke in.

"Uncle," he said politely in Vietnamese. He spoke quickly and Martin had to concentrate to keep up. "Everything your son has done is done. It's over. What we're talking about now is what is going to happen. What is in the future. Is he going to fix the problems he's created? He made bad choices, and he owes money to my friend here. I made him promise not to do anything stupid, and he's very fair, but you have to work with us."

The old man closed his eyes and rubbed the side of his head. Martin knew he wanted pity, sympathy, compassion, but Martin knew he didn't have it in him. He raised the boy.

"Everything you did," Vu continued. His Vietnamese slowed, as though he were concentrating on every word. "You sacrificed and you suffered, and you did it for him. But where is he now? He left you here with this. He knew this would happen—how could he not? You either raised him to be a weak man who won't face his problems, or you're going to teach him to be a better man. That isn't written yet, but it will come to that soon enough. But that's up to you."

"It's too much money," the old man said quietly, shaking his head.

Vu sighed and turned toward the street in silence.

"Too much," Martin snorted. "You got a house and you got a car and you can't help your son out. Too much?"

In the dingy white duplex, the drapes moved and an old woman's face appeared.

Martin smiled cheerfully and waved. To the old man, he spoke in a low voice. "You want me to talk to her instead?"

"No!" the old man said, his eyes suddenly wide. He licked his lips and repeated himself more firmly. "No."

"Tell me where he is," Martin said. "Everything Phong's done in his life has led to this. And I don't want to hear no excuses from you because goddammit you were there every step of the way."

The old man wrung his hands and looked around the lifeless neighborhood. His skin was raw in the cold air and Martin saw the thin, sinewy vessels and capillaries in his nose glowing bright red. *He's a drinker.* The old man took a deep breath, and as he exhaled, his shoulders sank. The lines in his face deepened in the afternoon sun, and his cheeks grew thin and hollow. He seemed to shrink, to diminish. Martin watched him struggle with whatever was in him—anger, fear, resentment. All that and more. It didn't bother him. His patience had come to an end. For the first time since they arrived at the house, as he looked at the old man, his dignity stripped bare, Martin felt angry. Not annoyed, or offended, but really angry. Disgusted. He wanted to scream at him, to curse him, to slap him. A familiar warmth ran up his spine to his neck.

Vu coughed.

Martin was suddenly aware that he had walked up to the old man without knowing, and was now an arm's length away. There were knots of tension in his shoulders and back, and his head was lowered and his knees slightly bent, as though he were coiling, preparing to strike.

The old man mumbled with downcast eyes that he needed two days.

Martin straightened and stepped back to the car and took a deep breath and watched the mist disperse. He waited until he knew his voice would sound steady, calm.

"No."

"No?" The old man looked as though he had been slapped.

Martin patted the roof of the car. "I'll come back tomorrow night. For now, get the keys."

"How can we go anywhere?" the old man moaned. "Go to work?"

"It's a new year. Walk. Lose weight."

The Honda smelled how Martin imagined it would. Better, even.

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"Bet on the crab," Martin told Wendy, his six-year-old niece, from his seat on the sofa. He took a sip of beer. "Lot of people get crabs. Just ask your Uncle Bobby."

In front of him, in the middle of the living room of his parents' home in Springfield, a group of children sat huddled around a glossy sheet of poster board, arguing over their wagers. Six images split up the paper: crab, stag, rooster, prawn, drinking gourd, and fish. Dollar bills were piled on most of the images. At the head of the paper, Bobby, Martin's little brother, sat cross-legged with a stack of dollar bills pinned

under his ankle. He shook a large bowl, its opening covered with a plate. Inside the bowl, three dice marked with pictures of each animal clattered loudly.

"Shake it louder, Bobby," Martin said. "Look at them. Fucking animals."

Bobby grinned and leaned forward, shaking the bowl like he would a can of paint. "You all done yet?" he asked with mock impatience.

"No, Uncle Bobby! Not yet, *not yet*," Wendy whined, biting her lower lip. Her fat cheeks were red with worry. Martin thought of the childhood photos of his older sister, Kim, and how much Wendy and she looked alike. Wendy's eyes roamed the poster for a moment before looking up at Martin with a frown. "But I don't *like* the crab!"

"Nobody likes crabs. That's why you gotta be careful."

"What are you *talking* about Uncle Martin?" Wendy rolled her neck back and stared at the ceiling as though she were begging the heavens for a hint.

Martin took another swig of beer. Laughter and loud, boisterous Vietnamese came from the kitchen and dining room, crowding out the sounds of the basketball game on the television behind the children. The Washington Wizards hadn't done as well as expected in the first half, despite being heavily favored over the San Antonio Spurs since Tim Duncan was out. Martin clucked his tongue and yelled to the kitchen, inquiring when the food would be ready. Nobody answered.

Bobby raised the covered bowl over his head and shook it hard one last time and slammed it plate-down on the floor. The children stared in hushed excitement, their eyes wide with greed. He left the bowl in place over the dice, and after a moment, the children started to murmur and fidget. Martin smiled, remembering the handful of times he had

played the same game, and others like it, in his childhood. A lifetime ago. He thought of his friends, who would be playing cards just then and drinking late into the night at someone's house.

"Okay," Bobby said. "Last chance." He looked around solemnly. "What are you gonna play?"

Tiny bodies leaned forward as several last second wagers went on the fish. One child closed her eyes and rubbed the bowl with the tip of her finger and set a dollar on the drinking gourd. Wendy groaned before gingerly stacking eight dollars on the stag, one bill at a time.

"Good bet," Martin said.

"Okay," she exhaled. She showed Martin her crossed fingers on both hands.

The boy to her left scoffed. "Stag *never* wins." He looked older than Wendy by two or three years. She stared daggers at him, but he was looking at the money she had placed on the stag; it was much more than anyone else's bet. "You're gonna lose all of that."

"Yeah," someone else said. "Stag's dumb."

"Bet on the shrimp!" another boy suggested.

"It's a *prawn*!" a girl corrected, not that anybody could tell the difference anyway.

"Just give me your money," the boy next to Wendy said. "I'll win for you." He reached for her stash of ones, but Wendy clawed at his hand. He yelped.

"Hey, shut up," Martin said. He leaned forward and wagged a finger at the boy. "Hands to yourself. Don't touch other people's money."

The boy sat back and rubbed his wrist where Wendy's nails left deep impressions in his skin.

Wendy turned with a toss of her short black hair, a little pink barrette by her temple, and nodded to Martin.

Bobby looked around at the other children. "Okay. All set?"

"Uh huh."

"Yeah!"

"I have to potty. Hurry!"

Bobby lifted the bowl with a flourish. "There we go, there we go."

Martin snorted. Little moans filled the air, and beneath their disappointment came Wendy's squeal of joy. All three dice showed the same picture: stag.

"Oh man!"

"Get out of my way! I have to go! I have to *go*!"

"Mom, I'm out of money!"

"Oh my god, oh my god," Wendy mumbled. "It's so much."

"Okay, calm down," Bobby said. He poked at Wendy's wager. "Eight dollars? So," he paused. "You get 24." He grabbed all the money wagered on the other images and counted out Wendy's winnings. She held her breath as he handed her 24 one-dollar bills. The rest of the money went into Bobby's own pile under his ankle.

Martin congratulated his niece. "Now you can buy me some beer."

Wendy stuck out her lower lip. "I'm not old enough, Uncle Martin."

Martin laughed. "Well, buy a fake ID then. Don't be stupid."

Wendy turned to the boy next to her and took a deep breath. “You smell bad.”

With a huff, she stood and walked over to where Martin sat and climbed over his lap and spread out her winnings on the arm of the sofa.

“See? I told you crab was no good.”

“Good job, Ugly,” Martin said as he kissed the top of her head. “What are you going to do with all your money?”

“Don’t call me ugly!” she screeched. She counted her bills. “I don’t know. I’ll buy a car. Or a spaceship. Maybe a shark.”

“You can’t buy a car,” Martin mused. “And any decent spaceship would start at double that price. Shark, maybe. A small one.”

“But,” she protested. She quickly finished counting. “This is *47 dollars*.”

“You can’t even drive,” Martin said. “And I’m pretty sure you have to be at least ten to pilot a spaceship. Except in Montana. But they’re crazy there. Militias on ostriches.”

“Maybe I can’t drive but I can *ride*. I’ll give it to my mom and dad to drive me around in.” Wendy hummed happily as her plan took form.

Martin smiled and glanced at the basketball game’s score on the television. He was waiting for the final five minutes, when the teams would sink flurries of baskets and commit desperate fouls and attempt high-stakes foul shots. Other than those few minutes, he found the sport boring and often wondered why he offered NBA spreads at all. Of course, if he didn’t, he would lose much of his income. The football season finished with the Super Bowl. NBA ran for another four months—nearly every night until June. In

August, it would all start up again with the NFL preseason. He had summers off, just like a teacher.

Kim, Martin's older sister, appeared from the kitchen, blocking Martin's view of the game, and interrupted her daughter's plotting.

"Wendy," she said, with her hands planted on her hips. "You can have ten dollars. The rest will go in your bank account for college."

"But…"

"Wendy."

Wendy's withering look did nothing to break her mother's resolve. Her face swelled and flushed to an unsightly red as she gathered her winnings close to her chest.

Kim sighed. "Baby, if you need something, we can discuss it. You have to learn to save."

Wendy looked at Martin with a silent plea.

He shook his head sadly. "I can't help you. In this, *vaya con Dios*, Ugly."

"It's mine," Wendy whined. "I won it!"

"The *li xi* is for your future. Don't just gamble it away." Kim put out her hand. *Li xi*, or lucky money, is given out to children on *Tet*, usually by their aunts and uncles and parents' friends. Most children use the money to gamble at cards or dice games, though some parents make their children give up their money with vague promises of the future. Martin never believed in that.

"Fine!" Wendy shouted. She handed over her money, her face screwed up to hide her tears.

Kim tucked the *li xi* into a small red envelope with gold-colored Chinese characters and returned ten dollars to Wendy before lightly smacking the back of Martin's head.

"Whoa. I'm not in this at all. What'd I do?" he asked.

"I don't want her gambling."

"Do you see me gambling?" he hissed. "I'm not even playing with them!" He pointed at Bobby who sheepishly put down the bowl of dice.

"*Bet on the crab*!" Kim mocked. "Great example."

"It's Vietnamese fucking New Year. Who cares? Jesus, people gamble every year. Even you when we were little. Let her be a kid." Martin noticed the game's score as the final minutes winded down and his mood soured. He did some quick calculations in his head and winced. The Spurs began fouling the Wizards. "Hey where's Ly? I ran into her earlier. Said she was coming."

"She's going to be late," Kim said. "Not that it's any of your business. Look, whatever. I don't like Wendy being obsessed with money. And watch your mouth."

"People with money always say that shit. *Stop being obsessed with money*," Martin said. "It's easy when you have it." Now the Spurs were down by eight. Another free throw. Nine. *Great. This shit is over.* There was still time on the clock, but the likelihood that the last few seconds would give the Spurs enough time to launch a comeback to cover the spread was too small. Kim saw him concentrating on the game.

"How much are you losing?"

“I don’t gamble,” he said automatically. And he didn’t. Bookmaking and gambling weren’t the same; other people gambled, he just took their bets and waited for them to lose. *Let them hang themselves*, he often said. He chugged the rest of his beer and crushed the can and left it on the floor. He turned to his niece, who was watching the other children. “Hey, Ugly. Go get me something to eat.”

Wendy hunkered lower in the couch and deepened her frown.

Kim leaned over and kissed Wendy on her cheek and returned to the kitchen.

For a while, Martin let his niece pout in silence. He scanned the room. Through the sliding glass door in the kitchen he saw the moon creeping through the clear night sky. Warm sounds of laughter and gossip came from the dining room where his parents and their friends ate and drank. The house seemed relaxed, cozy, a feeling Martin had never felt when he lived there. Wendy started slowly banging the back of her head against the sofa cushions.

“Stop that,” Martin said, wrapping an arm around her small shoulders. “You still have ten dollars. Go play with it.”

“Mom will just get mad again.”

“Well, she’s kind of right. Gambling is bad.” Martin thought of the next day’s games as he stared at the wall above the television where one of the few decorative elements of the house hung: a triptych of rectangular planks of wood in a shiny black lacquer finish. Their lines had been etched in shimmery mother of pearl, silvery veins with streaks of pink and purple. The first frame featured a long, sweeping line of villagers marching into the distance as two women rode among them on elephants, urging them

forward. In the second frame, the two women led a violent charge across the landscape from the backs of their elephants, scattering men before them. In the corner, a woman dressed in noble garbs swung a sword as she carried a baby with her free arm. In the last frame, a river ran zigzag through the background; in the foreground, the elephants and warriors mourned on the beach. Martin nudged his niece.

"Do you know why your middle name is Trung?"

Wendy shrugged, pretending to be bored. But he knew she was listening, as she always did whenever anybody talked about her.

"See those two women on the elephants? Those are the Trung sisters."

"So?"

"Well, your grandma told us their story when I was real little like you."

"I'm not that little!"

"Okay, so when I was ugly like you. Better?"

"Uncle Martin!"

"Can I continue?"

"Hmph."

Over the centuries, he explained, Vietnam found herself at constant war with neighboring lands, particularly with China, who invaded from the north on many occasions. During one such period under Chinese rule, the husband of the elder Trung sister was executed at the command of the overlord in their region. The Trung sisters, who were born into a noble military family, rose up and united the many provinces of Vietnam and drove the Chinese out of the country. Their army, comprised of mostly

women, held the sisters in such high regard that one of their captains, a pregnant noblewoman, gave birth on the front lines of a battle and continued fighting while holding her newborn. For two years they ruled Vietnam but eventually China reinvaded with a massive force. Ultimately facing defeat, the sisters threw themselves into a river rather than risk their honor in captivity.

"And today," Martin finished. "They have their own holiday in Vietnam. Though I think the warrior with the baby is my favorite."

"So like Mulan?"

"Jesus." Martin sighed. "No, not like Mulan. Mulan is a fairy tale and has Eddie Murphy being funny in it. This really happened. There's no make-believe, like a funny Eddie Murphy. And that's a Chinese tale, it has nothing to do with us."

"But I'm Chinese." Her father was an emergency room doctor whose family had immigrated from China several generations before.

"And I'm really sorry about that, baby. But you're only half, so maybe you'll be okay."

"Hey!"

Martin laughed and gave her a squeeze. "Anyway, your mother loved that story so much she gave you the middle name Trung."

"I never liked it," Wendy replied. "It's ugly."

Martin nodded in understanding. "But so are you. That's the thing."

"Shut up, Uncle Martin!"

“Who knows? Maybe she should have named you Mulan instead.” He laughed and stroked her hair for a moment before pushing her to her feet. Wendy slunk back to the circle of children and sat by Bobby and watched the other kids gamble. Soon, she began offering another little girl her sage advice.

Martin understood his niece’s dislike of her Vietnamese name. It wasn’t graceful, it wasn’t pretty. It was a hard, single syllable that sounded mean and uncooperative. When Martin entered kindergarten, he refused to tell anyone his name for two days because he hated it: Cuong. All around him, kids struggled with its pronunciation, teachers hesitated when calling roll, and people never thought he spoke English. He decided to call himself “Martin” in second grade and stuck with it.

His cell phone vibrated. It was Vu.

“Yeah,” Martin answered.

“Where you at?”

“Springfield, at my parents’ house. You wanna come by?”

“Phong called. He’s at Eden.”

“Now?”

“Now.”

“All right, I’ll pick you up.” Martin got up as his stomach rumbled. *When was the last time I ate?* He put on his coat.

Kim stopped him.

“Where are you going?” she asked from the kitchen. “The food’s almost ready. And how are you going to pick up anybody? You don’t have a car.”

“I borrowed one,” Martin lied. “I’ll be back later.”

She turned away, shaking her head.

***

Phong waited for them at a table at the far end of Saigon 82, a small corner restaurant in Eden Center. The dark bags under his eyes were evident from the doorway, even under the black and neon lights. Martin smiled grimly, glad their visit with his father had worked, though Phong didn’t look like a man sitting on thousands of dollars. Even worse, Martin’s gut tightened when he saw that next to him sat Terrence, the white man from earlier in the day. He and Vu slowly made their way through the crowded restaurant, patting a shoulder here or there when he passed a person he knew. Loud karaoke music echoed against the walls, where large televisions projected scenes of young men and women strolling along beaches, or wandering through flower gardens, or hugging in rainfall. A slight man in the corner with a wispy goatee that looked more at home on a middle school boy than a grown man sang into a microphone at a rate that more or less matched the scrolling words on the screen. Martin slowly dragged his chair from the table and sat, his eyes trained on Phong.

“What’s up?” he said.

Phong nodded, his lips a thin, hard line.

“You have the money?”

Phong looked away.

Terrence’s pale, flabby arm reached over and picked up the beer in front of Phong. He drank from it before speaking.

“Let me buy you boys some beers,” he said. He spoke with a southern drawl. “This round’s on me.”

“We can pay for our own beers,” Martin said without looking.

Vu waved to the waitress and hollered for two Heinekens. A slender woman in a tight tube dress with a large designer logo printed on its side hurried over in platform heels with a tray of two Heineken bottles and two glasses of ice. She poured the beers and they nodded their thanks. She flashed them a smile that didn’t reach her eyes and left, her long, bleached hair flipping in her wake. Vu lit a cigarette and Martin slid the ashtray over to him.

“I love coming to Eden Center,” Terrence said, watching the waitress disappear. “It reminds me of Vietnam in ‘72.”

“Uh huh,” Vu said. He blew smoke from his nostrils.

“Have you been to Dalat?” Terrence asked.

“Nope,” Vu replied, drawing bored little circles in the condensation on his glass with his fingertip.

“It’s gorgeous.” Terrence reached across the table and drew a tiny circle on Vu’s glass with the tip of his finger. He smiled. “This is just like Vietnam. I feel more at home here, I think. Except for everyone’s hair. I don’t know how you boys do that. I wouldn’t let you do it like that.” He gestured toward the layers and spikes in Vu’s hair and winked.

“You must really know what it’s like to be Vietnamese.” Vu sat back in his seat, as though he had lost interest in the beer, and blew a cloud of smoke across the table.

“Oh, yeah,” Terrence continued, ignoring his sarcasm. “In the countryside, I can spend all day doing nothing. It’s simple living. Tranquil. Here, it can be too much. Always clambering about, going this way and that way. People, you know? There, hell, it’s perfect. Nobody’s around. Peace. Beauty.” He nodded and set his arm around the backrest of Phong’s chair.

Martin turned and felt a wave of nausea when he looked in his face. Stories of poverty his mother had told him ran through his head. “It’s not fucking peaceful,” he snapped. “It’s not fucking beautiful. It’s fucking *poor*. You want to be in Vietnam? Go take a shit in a hole on the side of the road while people walk by. Go beg for scraps.”

Terrence’s face darkened.

“Don’t like that?” Martin continued. “It’s not like the five star hotels and guided tours, huh? No, no. You like throwing your money around and being treated like a king. Get your boots licked. That what you’re into?” He stared at him hard in the eyes and felt his skin grow cold. “You come in here acting like you know something.”

“What is the problem, young man?” Terrence asked. He sat back and adjusted his hat.

Loathing, clammy and rotten, grew in Martin’s gut and though he wasn’t quite sure why he hated the man, he was overcome with the need to hurt him, to shut him up. Everything about him made Martin’s skin crawl and the hairs on his arms and neck stand on end. The way his mouth moved when he spoke. The way he looked at them. The way he acted like he was at home.

“I don’t know what it is you’re trying to buy,” Martin growled. “But it ain’t for sale.”

Phong slammed his hand on the table.

“Martin, what the fuck do you know about anything?” he snapped. “You aren’t Vietnamese. You can’t speak Vietnamese. When’s the last time you were there? You just sit here and take people’s money like you think you’re such a badass. You don’t know shit. And you want to talk about being Vietnamese like you’re one of us? Fuck you. You’re petty and small.”

The table next to them grew quiet and out the corner of his eye Martin saw customers trading worried looks.

Vu pointed at Phong. “You need to shut up right now,” he snarled.

“Fuck you too, Vu. I thought we were friends. You take this motherfucker to my parents’ house? He’s a fucking leech.”

“Shut the fuck up,” Martin said. “That’s on you. You made your own goddamn decisions. You think you’re better than me ‘cause you grew up in Vietnam? You know why it’s so fucking easy for you and everyone else to act like you’re so much more Vietnamese than me? It’s ‘cause people like me and my family were here first. Why don’t you move to Bumfuck, Nowhere and see how Vietnamese you are then.”

“Man whatever,” Phong said. “You’re as white as they come.”

The rest of Saigon Lounge was silent except for the loud music. A pair of customers slipped out the front door. Eyes gleamed at them from the shadows. Martin

seethed in his seat as he imagined slamming Phong's head into the table and stomping his face.

"Look," Terrence said, trying to defuse the situation. "Let's just start over. Okay?" He reached across the table toward Martin's arm.

Martin jerked his arm away and jumped to his feet. "You stay the fuck away from me. You think you're in Vietnam? That this is like Vietnam?" He waved in the direction of the parking lot. "That's Wilson Boulevard out there. There used to be a GAP across the street. This isn't Vietnam. You think those flags in the parking lot would be in Vietnam? You think any of this would be there?" He picked up his bottle and threw it against the wall where it shattered with a loud pop. "Get the fuck up."

Martin stepped around the table as Phong stood. But as he got close enough to grab him, several small hands grabbed him from behind. He jerked away but they persisted and when he turned he saw that it was two waitresses pulling him back. The manager of Saigon 82 tumbled out of the kitchen and hurried between Martin and Phong as the waitresses shoved him toward the wall. Martin didn't struggle. He put up his hands and let them drag him away. A third waitress pulled Vu along with them.

The manager waved at Terrence and Phong to leave.

"You'll get your money," Phong said as he turned away.

"Suck his dick real good you piece of shit," Martin yelled.

After the door closed behind Phong and Terrence, Martin and Vu sat and ordered another round of beers. They lapsed into silence. Martin's hands shook as he drank his Heineken straight from the bottle. He wanted to punch something. He ran his tongue

against his teeth and the roof of his mouth until his taste buds burned. Another karaoke song came on, another singer took the microphone, another round of beers arrived. After a while, the adrenaline left and all he felt was tired. And the night went on.

"Happy New Year," Vu said.

Martin shrugged and gestured for the check.

"That motherfucker," Martin said quietly, unsure if he was referring to Phong or Terrence. Or himself. "Hey. What do they call us in Vietnam?"

Vu watched the karaoke video as it scrolled through the lyrics of what sounded to Martin like a sad love song. After a moment, Vu answered without looking over. "*Viet kieu*."

"*Viet kieu*," Martin repeated. "We're not real Vietnamese. None of us." He smiled and nudged Vu gently in the side with his elbow. "If I ever visit, at least I can pretend I'm Japanese or Korean, maybe. Then they won't fuck with me. But you're fucked."

"I can pretend I'm Chinese."

"Nobody's that desperate."

They laughed.

Vu nodded at the puddle of beer pooling around the shards of broken glass where the wall and floor met. "Look what you did man. It's a mess."

"Yeah. Last time I made a mess like that was with your mom."

"Fuck. Walked into that one."

The check came, and Martin tried to decipher the Vietnamese words, but couldn't comprehend anything other than the digits. He did some math, and left an overlarge tip. He wondered if it was enough.

YOU JUST HAD TO BE THERE

September 2006

Kim woke alone to the distant, brassy sound of shovel cutting through dirt. She rubbed the dust from her eyes and blinked at the pale sunlight filtering in through the window sheers. The damp of early autumn mornings lingered in the air, and on the nightstand, the alarm clock's ticking drone was broken by the sound of digging coming from below the window. *Eugene*. What was her husband up to? She swung her legs over the side of the king-size bed as the bedroom door opened and a small blue alien filled the doorway.

"Zap!" The alien pointed an index finger and flicked its thumb—oops, its *trigger*—and Kim fell back on her bed.

"I'm dead!" She groaned and flailed her arms. "Never let your father remarry."

"Mom!" Wendy whined, her shoulders slumping.

"Tell him. Tell him I'll be watching from the grave…"

"That wasn't supposed to *kill* you." Wendy stomped forward with all the impatience a six-year-old could muster. "That's silly. I turned you into a stingray."

"A stingray?" Kim propped herself up on her elbows. "Why a stingray?"

“Because a stingray killed Steve Irwin. *The Crocodile Hunter*.” Wendy whispered the name. She bowed her head and crossed herself before continuing. “A stingray killed the unkillable. Now you’ll never die.”

“Do I have to sting Australians now?” Kim wondered where Wendy learned stuff like crossing herself. And, well, shooting things.

“Only if they’re picking on you.”

“Why can’t I explain to them very calmly that they shouldn’t pick on me?”

“Why do we think jet fuel can melt steel beams?” Wendy threw up her arms.

Oh brother. She’s been listening to Martin again.

“Fine. But nobody could hurt me anyway.”

“He died last week.”

Kim waved her daughter over and examined the streaks of blue marker covering her chubby cheeks. *Should probably hide the permanent markers*. “This is going to hurt. It might be easier to take off your skin with a potato peeler and start over.”

“Is that how you take off your makeup?”

“Not always. Just sometimes.”

“You’ll show me how? I bet I can do it myself. Better than anyone else.” She climbed onto the bed and slid under the sheets and rolled around until she was completely wrapped like a large burrito. “Help! I can’t move!”

Kim tickled her squirming daughter as she unrolled her. When she was free, Kim brushed the wild and tangled hair from Wendy’s round face, kissed her forehead, and nodded toward the window. “What’s all that digging?”

“Dad said he has a surprise for you.”

“Uh oh.”

“Uh huh.”

Kim drew back the curtain and peered down from the second floor of their two-story home. In the space between their house and their neighbors’ stood Eugene, digging a hole next to a small, uprooted rosebush. *A single rosebush? That’s odd.* She pressed her face against the window, searching for more. But no, there was only the one. She watched Eugene squat over his work. Then he stood, rubbing his chin, and glanced around before kicking dirt back into the hole. When it was filled, he took a step toward the neighbor’s house and began digging once more. Kim smiled. *Always the perfectionist.*

Behind her, Wendy skipped out of the room and ran halfway down the stairs before jumping onto the lower landing.

“Be careful,” Kim yelled, though she knew her daughter couldn’t hear.

Kim left the window and threw on a gray bathrobe, ignoring the creaking in her knees as she moved. In the hallway, she slipped quietly past her writing room, which had devolved into a holding pen for stacks of dusty moving boxes. She stared straight ahead. *Tomorrow. I’ll start clearing everything out tomorrow. Then I can get some work done. Finish some stories. Submit them to some journals, maybe. Tomorrow.* Downstairs, the loud sounds of videogame lasers and explosions spilled from Wendy’s room. *Just like Bobby. Games, games, games.* Kim’s youngest brother had been obsessed with toys and games when they were little, though they could only ever afford secondhand board games. Kim had been reluctant to buy Wendy any electronics for her room—tablets, a

laptop, a television, gaming consoles, any of that—but Eugene had insisted. *I had a TV when I was growing up, and look at me, I'm a doctor,* he had argued. *Besides, kids these days need all that stuff just to keep up with the world*. And if she really thought about it, how could she deny her daughter all the things she never had?

Outside, Kim crossed the lawn toward Eugene, admiring the way his shirt clung to his torso as he dug. He had always been in great shape: tall with broad, well-muscled shoulders, and a set of long runner's legs. When she came close, she blew a low, flirty whistle.

"Do you have a tip jar, or do I just slide the dollar bills into your thong?"

Eugene stopped and brushed his sweaty black hair from his eyes. Even though he was in his mid-30s, his face was young, and the wrinkles that appeared around his eyes when he smiled smoothed to nothing when he relaxed.

"Who says I'm wearing any underwear?" He winked and thrust his butt at her.

Kim laughed as she twisted away. "Keep that thing away from me!"

He leaned over and kissed her lightly on the mouth.

"My breath stinks," she warned.

"Where's Wendy?"

"Her room. Video games or something."

Eugene nodded at the hole. "So?"

Kim circled the rosebush. It lay unevenly on its side, its thin and wiry vines a wild nest of thorns and leaves and rosebuds. At its base, its roots dangled like tiny, broken threads from a knot of black dirt. Despite its rather ratty demeanor, the bush's green color

looked deep and healthy and she imagined pops of red bursting from its branches. She hoped there would be enough time before winter to see it bloom.

"It'll be pretty," she said. "Um. Just one? Seems an odd place to put just one. Are we even on our property anymore?"

"I think so. Should I move it over?" Eugene looked at the bush, then the two houses. He shifted his grip on the shovel. "I doubt it matters."

"I guess. Anyway, aren't rosebushes usually set up in rows or wrapped around something? It's sitting in the middle of nowhere."

"I'll have you know I spent a lot of time deciding where to plant it." Eugene pointed up at their bedroom window, then down at Wendy's. "We can see it from our bedroom, and Wendy can see it from her's. And if you're on the deck in the backyard, you won't see this single one so it doesn't change the view at all there. Why do more work for the same thing? It'll be fine."

Kim couldn't stop herself from smiling. Eugene was a practical man, if anything.

"I didn't think of it like that."

"I can pick up more if you want."

"No big deal. And thank you, they're sweet." Kim reached down and brushed a thorn away from a petal. It pricked her finger. "You're going to have to clean up all of Wendy's cuts."

Eugene snorted and turned back to digging.

Last fall, Wendy had jumped blindly into a pile of leaves covering several cement blocks in the neighborhood park. Luckily she walked away with just a bruised side. *And a*

smile she could barely hide. Who knew what each day would bring when it came to Wendy? Once, after learning about the Greek goddess, Athena, she spent the evening examining Eugene's scalp with his otoscope for any sign that she may have sprung forth from his head. After an hour of carefully combing through his hair, strand-by-strand, she finally gave up with a pout and the promise of a bowl of ice cream. She later named one of her dolls 'Athena' and bestowed upon her a permanent seat at her tea party table—a *very* prestigious honor, she informed Kim, as other potential guests faced a waiting list that ran for weeks. Kim knew Eugene had always pictured having a daughter would involve dolls and tea parties and pretty dresses and all that. And sure, Wendy loved those things, but she was also obsessed with aliens and science fiction movies and kung fu actresses and the like. *That stuff's for boys*, Eugene would whine. Kim rolled her eyes whenever the subject came up. *Well, that's his problem. It's not one or the other. Wendy can like what she wants.*

The curtains moved in Wendy's window, and her small, blue face peeked out at them. Kim waved. Wendy narrowed her eyes and slunk back, disappearing as the curtains fell back in place. Kim chuckled, and as she turned to head inside, she heard her neighbor's rear, sliding glass door open. Her gut sank.

Lola and Thaddeus Anderson-Smith crossed the lawn toward them, arm-in-arm. They looked to be about 30, Kim's age, but she knew they were at least ten years older. Their matching sandy hair bounced in perfectly-coifed unison, and their spotless outfits looked straight out of the stock photos in the generic picture frames sold at arts and crafts stores.

Kim reminded herself to smile.

“A rosebush,” Thaddeus declared. He nodded approvingly. “Very nice.”

“Thanks,” Eugene answered. He shoved the head of the shovel into the dirt and rested his foot on the edge of the blade.

“I’ve always been partial to roses,” Lola said. She looked around. “Where’s the rest?”

“Oh,” Eugene said. “Yeah. Kim was just saying…”

“Yes, yes,” Lola said. Her loud green nail polish flashed as she squeezed Thaddeus’ arm. “A single one is so strange, don’t you think? I can’t believe they didn’t realize it.” She gazed up at her husband, who towered over them all.

“You’re right,” Thaddeus answered. “Definitely.”

“I think one is enough,” Kim said evenly.

“Sure.” Thaddeus winked. “At least we know you’re not trying to block us out, huh? Look, place an order, and I’ll help you with all that heavy lifting when you get them in. Show you how it’s done. How’s that?”

“Uh,” Eugene said as he readjusted his gardening gloves.

“So,” Lola went on, smiling. “We’re throwing a potluck barbecue tonight about six. And you have to be there. I can’t remember the last time you were over.”

“Yeah,” Eugene said, glancing at Kim. “You know, I don’t think we’ve ever been over.”

Kim pursed her lips.

“But I think we might have plans,” Eugene continued. “What do you think, babe?”

“Nonsense,” Thaddeus said. “Look, the whole block is coming. Bring a little something to share. We’ll see you then.”

And with that, the Anderson-Smiths walked to their driveway, got into their hybrid vehicle, and drove off.

“Great,” Eugene said, shaking his head. “They’ll probably bring out leather whips and chains.”

“They seem the type, don’t they?” Kim said.

“Now I kind of want to go.”

“Ha.”

“Maybe we should stop in and say hello.”

“Dude…” Kim groaned.

“Come on, they’re not *that* bad. We’ll stop in, and if it sucks, we’ll leave after five, ten minutes. Besides, it’s been a year, and we’ve hardly met anyone in the neighborhood. Maybe we’ll meet some parents with private school kids around Wendy’s age.”

“Don’t drag Wendy into this.” Kim bit her lower lip. “Fine. We’ll go. But it’s on your head if they’re some weirdo hippy cult.”

“I doubt they’re that interesting.” Eugene kissed her cheek and wiped his forehead with the back of his gardener’s glove and went back to digging. For a while, Kim watched his biceps flex and move as he worked before turning to peer into the Anderson-

Smiths' backyard, at the neat, flat lawn, the large, spacious deck. It was insufferably clean. She sighed. *Maybe the food will be good.*

***

Kim slammed the front door behind her as hard as she could, wishing the gust of air would snuff out the sounds of the barbecue and blow away the sticky, humid night. She kicked off her shoes and paced the length of the living room and ignored Eugene as he collapsed onto the couch. The cool, hardwood floor against her bare feet irritated her. From Wendy's room came the sounds of video games.

"Turn it off," Kim yelled. "Get ready for bed."

"Calm down, babe," Eugene said. "It's not going to do any good to get mad."

"Don't talk to me like that."

"Talk like what? It's not like they were being mean." Eugene twisted his mouth as though he were searching for something. "Maybe you misread. Maybe it was in your head."

Kim slid onto the couch next to her husband and pulled his hand into her's. She pinched the skin between his knuckles.

"Ow, stop!" Eugene rubbed his hand.

"I love you. But don't patronize me."

"You're just looking for a reason to be upset. It's not that big a deal. And, to be fair, it's not like we're super social with any of them."

Kim's brother Bobby came running down the hall, laughing as Wendy chased him. He sock-slid to a stop and Wendy slapped his thigh.

“You’re *it*, Uncle Bobby!” She spun around to face Kim and Eugene. “Old people!” Wendy leapt onto Kim’s legs and rolled onto the sofa and nestled her head in her mother’s lap. She looked up with big, happy eyes. “What’d you bring me?”

“What, a gift?” Kim flashed an annoyed look at her younger brother. “Nothing. We were just next door.” She firmly patted her daughter on the rear. “You shouldn’t ask for gifts.”

“I meant *food*, mom!”

“You didn’t feed her?” Kim asked Bobby.

“Ah.” Bobby sat in the armchair. “I was just about to make her something.”

“I guess you were going to pocket the money we left you for pizza.” Kim rubbed her temples. “You’re 24. Grow up.”

“Babysitters get paid, dear sister,” Bobby said.

“How was she other than that?” Eugene asked.

“Not very good,” Bobby replied. “She kept dragging dead animals inside and tearing up newspapers. Peeing everywhere.”

Eugene laughed. “I asked about my daughter, not a stray cat.”

“You say tomato. I say Blind Melon.”

“Jesus,” Kim said. “What is wrong with this family?” Kim sniffed the air and groaned. “Bobby, I can smell you from here. I told you not to smoke around Wendy.”

Bobby wagged a finger at his niece. “That’s all her. I told her to stick with menthol.”

Wendy sat up and screamed. “Uncle Bobby! Don’t blame me. You’re a liar!”

"All right, all right. But in my defense, I'm very good at lying. Besides, I went outside to smoke. You know not to smoke, right? What'd I tell you?"

"Steal daddy's pre-scrip-tion pad." Wendy stumbled over the word.

Bobby nodded. "So what happened? You get into a fight over there?"

Eugene cleared his throat. "They were just…"

"Being jerks," Kim finished. She wrapped her arms around her daughter. *She's getting so big now*. "I can't believe we have to live next to them." She combed Wendy's long black hair with her fingers. "They were so condescending."

"White people," Bobby said, shrugging.

"Shut up, Bobby. And you, you're not even upset!" Kim elbowed her husband. "*Oh, a few more minutes. In a little bit. We'll go in a little bit.* I felt like such an idiot."

"Whoa," Eugene said. "This isn't my fault."

"They kept talking about Vietnamese food," Kim continued as though Eugene hadn't said anything. "*I love this, I love that. Have you been to this restaurant? What about this one?* I worked so hard on those brownies and they were like, *we were hoping for some spring rolls*. Why didn't you idiots *ask* then?" Kim had spent hours that afternoon making different batches: gluten free, peanut-free, regular ones. She kicked the coffee table. Pain shot up from her toe.

"Was that it?" Bobby asked. "It doesn't sound that bad…"

From the corner of her eye, Kim saw Eugene shaking his head at Bobby. She ignored them both, pulled her knee to her chest, and rubbed her toe until the pain dissipated. Wendy reached up and tugged on her collar.

“I’m still hungry.”

Later, after Wendy had been fed and tucked in, Kim stood in the corner of the front wraparound porch, staring at the new rosebush. It looked sad standing there in the moonlight, hunched over to one side, the lawn around it draped in faint blue moonlight. The night cooled and the humidity lifted. Kim rested her elbows on the faux-wood railing, its fresh white paint smooth and dry, and she breathed the last echoes of summer, a sweet, earthy scent that tasted faintly of raw acorns. Though she tried to stop herself, she looked to the Anderson-Smith’s house, which had settled sleepily into a swollen look of self-satisfaction, as though it had consumed a great meal.

Why am I so mad?

No answer came.

I’ve got to let it go.

Kim turned her thoughts to the children’s book she had been planning, a mystery populated with talking frogs and ducks (because Wendy liked frogs and ducks). Would it be a murder mystery? A heist? Or should she aim for a younger audience and give up on the mystery altogether? Maybe write a rhyming book of cute lessons on sharing? She tried to settle into this stream of thought, but after a while, her anger returned. She picked at a scratch in the railing’s white paint, chipping away at the imperfection. *Where is all this coming from?* Behind her, the door opened. She heard the flick of a lighter and the thick scent of cigarette smoke.

“Give me one,” Kim said, not turning around.

Bobby handed her a cigarette.

Kim examined its pale, crinkly wrapping, its neatly cut tip, its packed tobacco. Its white paper looked scrubbed and fresh and clean. She pinched it and rolled it between her thumb and index finger, imagining the poisons seeping into her skin. Bits of shredded brown tobacco rained down into the grass. She ripped the cigarette in two and let one part drop and flung away the spongy filter. The wind caught it and it fell misshapen and dead somewhere on the lawn. Her fingers felt greasy and she wiped them on her shirt.

"When did you even start smoking? I can't remember."

"Still upset?"

"How do you think Martin deals with all his shit? I've always wondered."

"Martin? I don't know. Why?"

"Just seems like, you know, I'd be stressed. All the time."

Their brother, Martin, had always been a troublemaker. She never knew what he was into, how he made money, or how he survived, and she wasn't sure she wanted to find out. Even though there had been periods of estrangement over the years between him and the rest of the family, he was her brother. She worried.

"I'm sure he's stressed. But not about shit like…" Bobby nodded toward the Anderson-Smiths' house. "It's like, *who are they to me*? You know? People like that don't exist to him, and people like Martin don't even register for them. You know what they say about different worlds? They'd see right through each other, like they weren't even there."

"You think?"

“Maybe.” Bobby shrugged. “Who can say?”

“You know, I went to college. Eugene’s a doctor. They talk to us like we’re idiots who don’t know anything. Or like we’re children. They always have something to say. Oh, and—don’t tell Eugene, he’ll just get mad—but there was this creep who kept following me around all night. I was trying to avoid him, but every time I turned around, he was staring at me.” She felt slimy just thinking about it. “This other lady kept asking me where she should go eat, like I’m a food guide. I don’t know, they were all just—like we’re some novelty, you know? Eugene doesn’t even see anything wrong with it.” She sucked air through her teeth. “They were talking about the rosebush Eugene planted. Laughing. Lecturing us about how yards are *supposed* to be set up, how they’re *supposed* to look, how this and that is right, and everything we’re doing is wrong. All that crap. Like it’s any of their business.”

Bobby turned the lighter over and over in his palm.

“You ever play a racing game?” he asked.

“No.”

“All right. When I was little, I used to go to my friend’s house and play video games on his Nintendo. He had this racing game. Basically you stay on the track, and you go around, racing other cars, trying not to hit anything, okay? But then, in the background, there’s always a city, or a forest, or something the programmers put in there. It’s just a shitty little whatever, way out in the distance. Some random setting.”

“So?”

“I never finished a race. I took my car off the track, and headed toward the city, toward the forest, toward whatever was out there. Sometimes it was just a flat blue sky and green ground. Other times it was a few black squares arranged like the skyline of a city. I used to imagine that I’d get there, and it’s this whole world you can explore. But it never gets closer, it just stays over there, out on the horizon.”

“It’s not real.”

“Right. Flat. It’s an illusion. You’re supposed to race. But it doesn’t mean you have to do anything just because you’re in the game. Games now, though, sometimes there’s something there to explore. Not usually, but sometimes.”

“So?”

“So I’m just saying. Fuck them. Do what you want.”

Bobby finished his cigarette and tossed the butt in the empty pot next to the front door. He patted her shoulder and walked down the steps toward his raggedy old car. Its rusted hinges screeched when he opened the door, and the muffler hissed and rattled as he drove down her neighborhood’s wide, smooth street running through the heart of Burke, Virginia. *A suburban wasteland*, she had teased when the realtor showed them the listing the previous year. But it wasn’t so bad, and besides, the suburbs were the only thing available, as D.C. was too crowded and too expensive and too far from her family and Eugene’s job. They had lived previously in a rented townhouse in Annandale, a neighboring suburb that everyone knew as Korea Town, a place filled with 24-hour Korean barbecue spots, mom-and-pop shops, and multitudes of Latino and Asian people. But the traffic had grown steadily worse, and as Wendy grew older, Kim and Eugene

wanted a place with a yard, a home away from all the cars and clamor. So, Burke it was. After all, the house was in a *good* neighborhood. With *good* schools. And oh-my-god, the property value! Location, location, location!

After the puttering of Bobby's car disappeared, Kim listened to the little chirps of crickets and the occasional leaf floating in the wind and scraping the ground where it fell. The days were still long and autumn had just begun, and she wondered where the dead leaves would go, where the wind and rain and footsteps would take them, whether they would end up rotten and clogged in sewer drains, or perhaps somewhere wonderful reserved for the prematurely dead. She pictured the landscapers who maintained the Anderson-Smiths' yard and imagined the sounds of leaf blowers that were sure to soon appear, their roar waking her far too early on weekend mornings.

Kim left the porch and walked to the shed in the backyard. There, with the moon offering its gentle guidance, she rummaged through boxes and buckets of tools. Her hands grew gray and black with rust and grease. Finally, in the back of the shed, tucked safely away on a dark, wooden shelf, next to a pair of green hedge trimmers, she found a large hobby knife. Its case had been painted red once, but the color had chipped away long ago, and the blade, when extended, bloomed with circles of rust. She ran the knife against the plywood shelf. It cut cleanly.

Kim hurried through the dark, her anger a handful of sand spilling from her fingers. She came to the Anderson-Smiths' driveway, to where their hybrid vehicle was parked, and knelt by the car's front tire and pressed the edge of the blade against its flesh. She hesitated. She had never done a bad thing in her life, not really. *Just do it. Just do it.*

Just do it. She imagined her brother, Martin, and she imagined the Anderson-Smiths staring straight through her, as though she weren't there. Eugene's face appeared to her then, his high cheekbones, his square jaw. His dark eyes, usually bright with wry humor, grew dark and angry and confused. She bit her lower lip, tasted salt and sweat, and pushed the knife into the rubber, digging and grinding and twisting.

For a moment nothing happened.

Then the tire gave way, and her hand slipped, sending the blade slicing into her other palm. She grunted as blood beaded up in her hand and air washed over it. For a moment she couldn't feel anything. Then her entire arm felt as though it had been set on fire. Her hand shook as she held it, fascinated, in the stream of air. Thin rivulets of blood dribbled down her wrist and forearm. Tiny red drops fell onto the asphalt driveway. She closed her hand into a fist. She moved on to the next tire. Three more times she repeated herself, and three more times she held her hand in an expulsion of air, of release, of relief.

***

On the counter separating the living room from the kitchen, Kim found a tray holding a plate of two hard-boiled eggs and two slices of toast: her favorite breakfast. While simple enough to make, it takes delicate timing to get everything just right. The toast can burn so easily, the eggs need to be watched. One wrong move, one moment of distraction, and it's gone. Using a cold, hard spoon, Kim chipped away at one of the eggs, squeezing its shell gently in her un-bandaged palm, careful not to let it slip. She eyed the note next to the tray. Eugene had gone to work and would be home in time for dinner. The egg collapsed in on itself. The white drooled down her fingers and the yolk was dark

and drippy. He had taken them out too soon. For someone so nitpicky, he could be awfully absentminded. Kim rubbed the fluids between her fingertips, letting the sticky, pulpy mess sink into the crevices around her fingernails. She dumped the rest of the dish into the trash and washed her hand in the sink with water hot enough to leave her skin red and irritated. Her injured hand throbbed at her side and she reminded herself to redress it after breakfast.

The doorbell rang.

Even though the porch was a step below the front door, Thaddeus looked down on Kim through the screen in his blue suit and black tie. His eyes flicked around the room, briefly pausing at her bandaged hand. She fought the urge to hide it.

"Is Eugene in?"

Kim shook her head slowly. "He's at work."

"Did you see anything last night after you left the barbecue? Anything weird? Someone slashed my tires."

"Wow. Was the car okay when everyone left?" Her mouth was dry. She cleared her throat.

"I don't know. I'm sure someone would have seen something if it happened during the barbecue." Thaddeus bounced on the balls of his feet.

"That sucks. I'm sorry. I didn't see anything." Kim stared right at the spot between his eyes, right through him. *Stay calm*. She gripped the edge of the door and moved it back and forth as Thaddeus studied her face. The back of her neck grew hot and she felt her shirt under her bathrobe grow warm and sweaty.

“What happened to your hand?”

“Oh. I cut myself when I was making Wendy dinner last night after we got home.” The lie came easily.

“I see.” He gave one last desperate glance at the living room. “Should have brought her some leftovers.”

“Yeah, seems that way. I’ll keep an eye out for anything suspicious.”

Thaddeus sighed. “Great. Now I have to cancel my appointment to wait for the police.”

“Teenagers, I bet,” Kim lamented. Her voice cracked.

“Right. So long.” He didn’t wait for a reply.

***

Later that week, a letter arrived from the neighborhood association. The rosebush was a foot over their property line, putting it squarely in the Anderson-Smiths’ yard, and needed to be moved. They had one week to move it. Kim threw the letter in the trash and didn’t mention it to Eugene.

***

On Friday morning, Kim woke to Eugene cursing and changing out of his work clothes and into shorts and a tee shirt. She sat up.

“What are you doing?”

“Some asshole kicked over our trashcans. The garbage people won’t take the trash if it’s everywhere like that.”

The alarm clock read 7:05 a.m. The garbage collectors were due shortly. Kim threw on her bathrobe and followed Eugene outside to help.

Not only were the trashcans tipped over, but someone had torn the bags apart so that decayed food and trash lay spread out over the sidewalk. She bent down and grabbed a large handful of trash with her unwrapped hand and tossed it in the trash bin. The stench made her gag.

"Who the hell would do this?" Eugene grumbled.

"Animals, maybe?"

"No," Eugene said. He spit and wiped his nose with his wrist. "Animals would leave little claw and teeth marks. Somebody did this."

Kim stole a glance at the Anderson-Smiths' house. The lights were on. "Just go to work, babe. I'll finish. You're going to be late."

"What's this?" Eugene held up a crumpled sheet of paper: the letter from the neighborhood association about the rose bush.

"It's nothing," Kim mumbled. She turned back to the garbage, grabbing a handful of slimy, rotted vegetables.

Eugene scanned the letter. "Did you see this? We have to move it."

"Screw them." She kept her head down, focusing on the trash. She worked faster.

"Kim…"

"*Screw* them," she snapped, turning toward him. She stood.

"It's on their property!"

“They didn’t seem to have a problem telling us what to do when they thought it was on *our* property. They have no right to tell us crap about anything. If they want it moved, they can move it themselves.”

“Why didn’t you show me?”

“Just go to work.”

“Damn it, Kim.”

Eugene walked back inside and re-emerged in his tie and button shirt and drove away without another word. Kim slammed the last of the trash in the trashcan and slammed the lid as she closed it. She looked around for something to wipe her hands on, and ended up running her fingers through the lawn, letting the morning dew clean off what it could. When she turned to head inside, she saw Lola standing on her porch next door, watching.

“Teenagers,” Lola said loudly through cupped hands.

“Probably.” Kim waved and went back inside.

Lola crossed her arms.

Kim scrubbed her hand under the kitchen faucet. Wendy appeared from her room, her hair pointing in all directions, and sat down at the kitchen table.

“What happened? Why was daddy mad?”

“Someone pushed over our trash so we had to put all the trash back in.”

“Maybe it was monsters.”

“Maybe.” Wendy was so smart. What could she tell her? Was she old enough for the truth? Kim turned off the faucet and dried her hands and studied her daughter’s

chubby face. She sat across from Wendy at the table and lowered her head so they were eye-to-eye. “I think Mr. and Mrs. Anderson-Smith are bullying us because they think we messed up their car.”

“Oh.” Wendy scrunched up her face. “But you *did* mess up their car.”

Kim froze. Her gut clenched.

“Where’d you hear that?”

“I saw you.” Wendy traced little circles and knots in the kitchen table’s wood with her small, pudgy fingers.

Kim’s heart pounded and she felt her stomach heave. Until then, she hadn’t felt guilty over her actions. Indeed, she remembered the night with fondness. But now her mind raced, weighing the benefits of defending her actions to denying them to lying. *Well, the truth is the truth.*

“Do you know why I did that?”

“They were mean.”

“Well, yes. And I was mad. But maybe I should have talked to them.”

Wendy rested her elbows on the table, her hands cupping her cheeks. “What’s going to happen now?”

“I’m going to shower. Then we’re going to make omelets.” Kim watched her daughter groan and press her forehead to the kitchen table. “Okay?”

Wendy didn’t look up. “I hate omelets.”

***

Eugene stayed silent through most of dinner that night. Kim pretended not to notice. Wendy chewed her meatloaf noisily.

"Chew slowly, please," Kim said, not looking up. The gravy from her mashed potatoes dripped dangerously close to her peas and she swept them to one side with the edge of her fork. *Borders must be respected*, she thought.

Wendy slowed her chewing. "Zaira ate so fast at school once that when she laughed it came out of her nose." Wendy grinned. "It was a chewed-up French fry."

"That's disgusting," Kim replied with a smile.

Eugene sipped his water.

Wendy pushed her plate away. "I'm finished. Can I go play video games?"

"Go ahead," Eugene said before Kim could tell her to finish her peas and carrots.

Wendy emptied her plate into the trash, set it in the sink, and left.

"She needs to eat her vegetables," Kim said.

"You should have told me about the letter. You're not the only one in the family."

Kim chewed on her meatloaf. It was dry and left a lump in her throat when she swallowed. "Okay, fine. You're right, I should have showed you. But you would have moved the bush."

"Kim, we still need to move it. It's on their property. We can't just leave it there. That's not how life works."

Kim glared at her husband. From across the table, he looked almost a stranger. "Don't talk to me like I'm a child. If they want to move it, let them. They treated us like… like…"

“Who cares? Why does this even bother you? You’re acting crazy.”

“They think we slashed their tires, and then they kicked over our trash,” Kim exploded. “Why *doesn’t* this bother you? People look down on us and you don’t even care. Wendy can’t see that and think it’s okay. I won’t allow it.”

“Slashed their tires?” Eugene blinked. “Why would they think that? We didn’t slash their tires. And you don’t know that they had anything to do with our trash. What do you want, for Wendy to see that it’s okay to act out? Without proof?”

“I’d like her to stand up to assholes.”

Eugene threw up his hands. “What are you talking about?”

“Wait—why am *I* the bad guy here? They condescend to us, and you’re okay with that, but if I do anything, suddenly *I’m* the bad guy?”

“Do what? You just threw away a letter.”

She pressed her lips together.

He drained his glass of water.

“You’re not looking at this logically.”

“And you need to figure out that people can’t push others around and not expect any pushback. You—you just jump to me being the bad guy. And you call me crazy?”

“I’m going to move the bush in the morning.” He picked at the remainder of his food.

“You were *there*.” Kim stood up. “You saw how they treated us. It’s not in my head just because you’re too dense to *see*.” She shoved her dishes in the sink. “I’m going

to sleep. Come to bed when you remember who your wife is." As she passed Wendy's room, she heard the familiar sounds of video game play.

***

The hobby knife was where Kim had left it, next to the green hedge trimmers in the back of the shed. She pocketed the hobby knife and tucked the green hedge trimmers under her arm and backed out of the shed. The blades gleamed sharply when she held them up to the moonlight.

Wendy stood at the back door, watching.

Kim licked her lips before heading over to her daughter.

"What are you doing, Mom?" Wendy's voice trembled, and suddenly Kim wanted very much to drop her tools, and scoop up her daughter in her arms.

But Kim didn't hold her and whisper reassuring things in her ear. She knelt.

Wendy reached for the hedge trimmers.

"Don't touch. They're sharp."

"What are you *doing*?"

"Why are you awake?"

"I had a nightmare. Monsters were chasing me and I didn't have any more cactus plants to kill them. So I had to climb up a tree but it kept sinking. Then I wanted water."

Kim set down the hedge trimmers and rubbed her daughter's arms. "There's no such thing as monsters, baby."

"Where are you going?"

There's no such thing as monsters.

"Come with me."

The rosebush stood lopsided between the two houses, its vines and branches lit with a pale starlight, a gray-blue glow that left its rosebuds nearly translucent. *He always wanted a girly daughter. Whatever that means.*

Wendy's small fingers gripped the green hedge trimmers, though they were unwieldy and unbalanced in her hands. Kim covered her daughter's hands with her own and guided her to the closest branch. The trimmers made a sheering sound as blade rubbed against blade and a single, thorny vine fell to the ground. Wendy stared, as though transfixed at her power. Kim guided her to another branch. Then another. Kim and Wendy worked, side-by-side, as quiet as the coming days and nights that spread out before them.

***

Kim woke alone and immediately went to her window and pulled back the curtains to see the remains of the rosebush. She felt the late morning cold radiating through the glass. Eugene was outside, squatting over the barren rosebush, the wheelbarrow next to him filled with all the hacked and splintered branches and limp vines. Next to them lay a brand new rosebush. She went outside, stopping a good 15 feet away from him. The new rosebush looked like the same sort of tangled, sloppy mess as the last. By then, all that was left was the trunk. Eugene gripped with both hands the knobby base sticking up from the ground and heaved. For a moment nothing happened. It had taken root so easily. But then the ground popped and groaned and mulch and grass and dirt and rock gave way with a low, tearing sound. Eugene tossed it in the wheel

barrow atop the branches and vines. Then he grabbed the shovel and leaned it against his side as he clapped the dirt from his gloved hands. When they were relatively clean, he stared at them, as though he didn't know what to do, and finally let them dangle awkward at his side.

Kim ran a curl of loose black hair behind her ear with a finger and crossed her arms.

"Morning." Eugene shifted and Kim knew he wanted to hug her, to hold her, but she had chosen the spot away from him with care. Finally he mirrored her by crossing his arms. "How're you feeling?"

"Fine," Kim answered. He nodded absently and stared at the gaping hole in the lawn. Eugene looked stiff, stiff from a need for her to say that they were okay. But Kim just stared at him.

"What are you going to do today?" he mumbled, uncrossing his arms. He swung the shovel handle back and forth between his gloved hands.

"Slash some tires. Egg some houses." Around them, the air grew warmer as the morning moved onward, and a soft breeze blew the bottom of her bathrobe just a little. The neighborhood was still asleep, as early as it was on a Saturday morning. They were alone. She smiled a little. "It's quiet. I always liked it here in the mornings. Didn't think I would when we moved in."

"Me too," he replied. He lifted the shovel and moved to return to work.

“Remember when you thought Wendy and I were kidnapped?” Kim asked suddenly. “And you were about to call the police and launch a full-scale search and rescue and everything?”

He smiled a little. “Your car was in the driveway. Who walks anywhere around here?”

Kim nodded. “My phone was dead.”

Eugene cleared his throat and turned back to his work. He cleared the loose dirt from the hole and grabbed the rosebush by its branches and wobbled it over until it sat firmly in the ground. He hadn’t dug a new hole.

“So just the one?” Kim asked.

“Just the one,” he said, not looking up. He got on his hands and knees and began patting the mulch around the bush’s base.

“You’re not digging a new hole.”

He shook his head.

Kim turned to go inside, where Wendy would soon be waking and asking for breakfast. And their day would go on.

IT'S A START

April 2008

Warm air blew in through Martin's open windows as he drove down M Street. The streetlamps in Georgetown glowed brightly above the heads of well-dressed 20-somethings. Here and there people crossed the street or smoked outside bars or stood in lines to get into lounges. Taxi cabs and cars with Virginia and Maryland license plates surrounded him. He enjoyed driving through Georgetown in the spring, past women wearing less and less as the weather grew warmer. Past the long, narrow stairs from the *Exorcist* film that teenagers dared each other to climb each Halloween. Past the places he imagined had once held slave auctions. Past the colorful boutiques and shiny signs. This was a rare night off for him. No NBA games to take bets on. No stress. The basketball season had been busy for his sports book and he felt like a slow, pleasant night was the perfect reward. The disposable phone in his pocket buzzed. It was Vu.

"Yo," Martin said, feeling good. "Where you at?"

"Eden got raided," Vu said, his voice fast and nervous.

"Fuck you mean Eden got raided?"

"Café Noir, Café Xuan. Bunch of other places."

"That's crazy." Martin let out a low whistle. "FBI?"

"Man, I don't know. Police, I guess."

“Shit. So, now what?”

“It’s a problem. They took the machines.”

For a moment, Martin didn’t understand. *What machines?* Then it dawned on him. *His* machines. Or, more accurately, the *incredibly expensive* machines he was in charge of. That he was responsible for. His breath caught in his throat.

“Fuck.”

“Yeah,” Vu said.

In addition to his sports book, Martin managed dozens of the touch-screen arcade machines found in some of the coffee shops in Eden Center where patrons could play arcade-style card games like poker or blackjack. If a player won, then the shop’s manager paid out. The machines were on loan from some Chinese guys in New York. Each month, Martin sent them money through the Chinatown Bus, a commercial bus line that offered cheap bus fare between the Chinatowns in D.C., New York, and Philadelphia. *Diversify your portfolio*, he heard once on television. *It’ll pay off in the end*. He slapped the side of his steering wheel, pulled the car onto a side street, and double-parked outside a closed bistro. He hit the hazard button and listened to the clicking sounds the flashers made, his mind churning. He turned the situation over, searching for its corners, for a thread he could unravel. One question kept coming up. *How much do I owe for those machines?* His jaw ached. He didn’t realize he was grinding his teeth. *Relax. Breathe.*

“Yo,” Vu said. “You there?”

“I’m thinking.” He focused on the main problem: paying back the cost of the machines. The bulk of his money was held by several coffee shops and restaurants.

Hopefully it would be enough. The problem was he wasn't sure if it was safe to show up at Eden, much less speak to the shop owners who had faced the police. He needed more information.

"All right," he said finally. "Meet me at my house."

***

Martin's "house" wasn't really his house. It was their code for Bangkok Express, a rundown corner restaurant in Arlington in an aging strip of six stores. A faint murmur of music could be heard as he arrived. From the outside, the restaurant looked closed, and all the neon signs above each of the stores were off. Even though it was nearly midnight, well after closing time, a handful of cars remained in front. Martin parked and walked the length of the white building, past dark stains running down from the roof, and ignored the trampled Styrofoam cups, crumpled newspapers, and discarded napkins in the gutters. The music grew louder. Heavy black drapes covered the glass storefront. He knocked on the glass and the curtains rustled in response. A slender waitress opened the door, the hem of her tight red skirt hinting at a tattoo snaking around her upper thigh.

"You early today," she said, smiling.

Martin had never learned her name but grinned back at her.

"I wanted to see what you were doing," he replied with a wink. "You cheating on me?"

She laughed and stepped aside.

He kissed her cheek as he passed.

During the day, Bangkok Express operated as a normal sit-down restaurant, and not, despite its name, a carryout joint. At night, the flat screen televisions lining its walls screened karaoke videos while partiers drank and lined up at the bathroom to snort cocaine. About thirty people were scattered around the restaurant, their faces flushed as they laughed and danced and sang. Plastic cups crowded the tables around the room. Even though Virginia law demanded restaurants stop serving alcohol at 1:30 a.m., Bangkok Express continued serving until 3 a.m. in the plastic cups, their contents easily dumped on the carpet in case of police. Martin slipped past groups of dancing people, found an empty booth in the back, and a waitress brought him a Heineken in a tall green cup.

He downed half the beer. It was cold. Bitter.

Are the police looking for me? Are they watching me? What if somebody tells them about me?

Martin went over the previous day, searching for clues or omens: black cats, walking under ladders, stepping on cracks, broken mirrors. Nothing stood out. It felt so random, like a car accident, though a raid required delicate planning. Somehow he had missed an entire world working within his, slipping its fingers here and there until its hold grew strong enough to shake him awake. He nursed the rest of his beer, turning his attention to the restaurant's patrons writhing with nervous energy in designer jeans and expensive, rumpled shirts. At the bar to his right, two girls who didn't look old enough to be out on a school night laughed and joked in tight dresses around a skinny man in his thirties sitting at an arcade machine at the end of the bar. It was one of Martin's

machines. The man's fingers moved deftly over the screen, pressing, sliding, tapping. Tattoos covered his bony forearms, his stringy muscles flexing thin and hard as he played. Martin saw flashes on the screen: playing cards. Some flipped over, others not. Then, after a moment, the trio cheered. The man waved to the bartender. Martin grinned into his beer. The bartender, a large man with bleached, spiky hair, nodded and disappeared into the kitchen. There was shouting. Praman, the manager, stumbled out, wiping his nose. He shook the sour look off his face and smiled as he sauntered over to arcade machine. He peered at the total on the screen and patted their backs and pulled out a wad of twenties and counted out several hundred dollars. When he was done, he saw Martin and came over.

"What's up, my friend? How is everything?" Praman spoke with a slight lisp, his mouth unaccustomed to making the hissing *S* sounds in English. They shook hands and Praman sat across from him and pulled out a Marlboro Light. Martin watched him fumble with the lighter. His hands were bony and jagged, the skin around his large knuckles cracked and leathery. Worn. When he finally managed to light the cigarette, the glowing cherry reflected in his dark eyes, and though he hadn't yet reached forty, deep lines appeared around his mouth when he sucked on his cigarette. Despite his skinny build, Martin had seen Praman beat men twice his size bloody with chairs, car keys, or whatever else was on hand. But maybe that was the all the cocaine.

"Gotta stop using the machine for a while," Martin said, nodding toward the bar.

Praman frowned.

"Eden got raided," he explained. "Took all the machines."

“Oh my God.” Praman braced his hands on the sides of the table. “Very bad. But you? You okay?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know anything.” He shrugged. “Vu’ll be here soon. He should know more.”

Praman clucked his tongue, patted his breast pocket, and nodded at Martin.

“No. Thank you.” Martin never took up Praman on his offers of cocaine. He scooted out of the booth. “I’m going to get the tally. Then put the machine away. I’ll come get it later this week.”

Martin sat at the machine, pretending to play, and inserted his key into the side. He bypassed the card games, went through the options menu, and typed in his combination code to access the settings. One of the settings dictated how often the customer won, which he had set to 40%. He found the directory holding the profit records. A little more than a grand for April. *Not bad for a week and a half.* He printed a receipt from the machine, sat back down in the booth, and handed the printout to Praman. A quarter went to Praman, the rest to him. Praman glanced at the paper and nodded.

“I’ll get it when I leave,” Martin said.

“Okay.”

They sat for a while in their mutual unease, sipping their drinks, Praman puffing on one cigarette, then another. The neon lights on the purple walls pulsed as lines of light flashed across the room. A drunk man stood in the corner of the restaurant, belting out “Hello” by Lionel Ritchie. Around him, people chanted the lyrics, some in English, others in some sort of approximation. Martin hummed along. He ignored the karaoke

video and watched the red, ruddy faces of the partiers instead. Their laughter calmed him a little. Enough to relax. As the song progressed, the crowd sang louder, and Martin found himself singing along as they arrived at the chorus. By then, three friends had joined the drunk, linking their arms and shoulders in a semi circle around him, swaying to the rhythm.

Hello!

Is it me you're looking for?

I can see it in your eyes

I can see it in your smile

You're all I've ever wanted

And my arms are open wide

'Cause you know just what to say

And you know just what to do

And I want to tell you so much

I love you

People hooted and clapped, drunk on the song, on their friends, on their drugs. Whistles, catcalls. A lit lighter sprang up in the front of the restaurant. Praman gestured to a passing waitress for her to bring the singer and his friends a round of beers. Then he got up, shook Martin's hand, and wished him luck before returning to the kitchen. Martin checked his burner and saw a missed a text message from Vu. Maybe it was good news.

The message read: *Vivian with me.*

Martin groaned. *Word travels fast.*

He guessed Vu had picked up Vivian up from D.C. since she didn't drive. Vivian managed the D.C. branch of the Chinatown Bus and usually hung around the office or stared down through the window from her upstairs apartment during the weekdays, chatting on her Bluetooth headset, pretending she didn't understand English when rude customers approached, or the mood suited her. He didn't know how much money he owed for the machines, and he was sure Vivian wanted to sort that out pretty damn fast. He choked down the rest of his beer.

1 a.m. came and Vu showed up with Vivian and another man Martin didn't recognize. Vivian wore her regular outfit, a shimmery pink tracksuit that clung to her stocky build. Her long, black hair was tied back in a tight ponytail. Her Bluetooth earpiece blinked in her ear. She saw Martin and led the group over. After her came Vu, who nodded stiffly as they approached. The new man brought up the rear. He looked to be in his mid-30s, square-jawed and blank-faced with a buzz cut. He wore a red and orange Hawaiian shirt with a crease running across its middle as though he had just purchased it. He was shorter than Vu, muscular, and walked with his toes pointed outward. Vu sat next to Martin, and Vivian and the Hawaiian shirt sat across from them. Vivian didn't bother with introductions.

"It's going to be 80." She folded her hands in front of her. "You understand, this is as little as we can accept. It's not a *fuck you*, okay? But…" She opened her hands, palm up, as though to ask, *what can we do?*

$80,000. Shit. Martin let out a deep breath.

The man next to her scanned the room, his head cocked to the side as though he were falling asleep. Martin glanced at him and then back at her. Vivian stared. Not hard, not mean, not friendly. Just waiting.

"Okay," Martin began. "But…"

She shook her head and held up a hand. "This isn't a car dealership. That's the number."

"Fuck." Martin leaned back. It would clear him out, but he could pay it. He thought of his sports book. If anyone won big one week, he would be in trouble. His stomach did a somersault at the possibility. He looked at Vivian. She didn't say anything. *What choice do I have?*

"Fine," he said. "Fuck it. I'll get it. Just gotta see if it's okay to go to Eden."

Then Vu spoke.

"The police took all the money when they raided Eden." He spoke slowly, his words heavy footsteps on a layer of fresh ice. "Legit money, whatever. Everything. Heard it turned out to be like a million or something."

Shit. All of his money, gone. Martin's mouth turned dry.

"That machine's still here," he croaked, nodding to the bar. He took a deep swallow of beer. "Still have that one."

"76, then." Vivian twisted her mouth. "Do you have it?"

"How can I have it if the police took everything?" He spoke slowly and evenly, realizing at once how futile everything he had to say appeared. How petty and small. He

should have been mad, but all he felt was tired, his insides raw. Open. “How long do I have?”

Vivian frowned. “A week.”

Vu broke in. “Whoa. Yo. Who can come up with that in a week?”

“That’s what it is. But, remember, this isn’t even the real price of the machines. They’re giving you a discount. And you don’t have to cover this month’s commission.”

“Wow,” Vu said. “Small favors, huh?”

Vivian glared at Vu for a moment before pointedly turning to Martin. “You can pay ten points a month in the meantime. $7,600.”

“Fuck this,” Vu snapped. “This is bullshit. What if he goes to jail?” Then his voice lowered. “What if they start looking real hard at the machines?”

The man in the Hawaiian shirt turned his body toward the conversation. He stared at Vu, his face blank and expressionless. Martin didn’t see a light in his eyes. No anger. No annoyance. He didn’t see anything. Just dead weight. His skin grew cold and the hairs on his neck stood up as he watched the Hawaiian shirt stare at Vu.

“The machines?” Vivian scoffed. “What Martin does with the machines is his own business. What does anybody know about him or what he does?”

“It’s cool, Vu,” Martin said. He drummed his fingers on the table. “Can’t I just get my ass kicked or something?”

“They don’t just kick your ass for 80,” she said, shaking her head. “76. Sorry.”

Martin rubbed his temples, the music suddenly too loud. He stared up at the ceiling and noticed that the corner tiles were stained brown from leaks. They reminded

him of middle school, when he and his friends stole the school's ceiling tiles, leaned them against the wall behind the cafeteria, and kicked them to pieces. They had broken dozens of tiles before the administrators found the boys and sent bills to their parents and them to detention. That was one of his good memories. Everything was so much simpler then, when all he had to deal with was his father's rage, his fists, his yelling. Martin wondered if he should squeeze the coffee shop owners for his money but immediately discarded the idea. They'd make a deal with the police. Vivian drew him out of his thoughts.

"They said you could work it off." Her lips formed a thin, tight line. "If you want."

"Fine," Martin answered automatically. He just wanted the night to be over. From the corner of his eye, he saw the Hawaiian shirt smirk as he watched the room.

"You'll need to pay a month of juice first."

"And?"

She pulled a pen from her purse and wrote down an address on a napkin. She slid it over to him.

"Bring the money there tomorrow night," she said. "$7,600, right?"

"Tomorrow?" Martin said. "How am I supposed to get that much by tomorrow?"

Vivian rolled her eyes. "Stop being a baby. Charles will take you through the rest of it tomorrow night."

"Charles who?"

The Hawaiian shirt grunted and nodded at him.

***

Martin got out of bed at noon the next day, nearly as tired as he was when he got into it. He stumbled into the living room of his small one bedroom apartment and found his younger brother, Bobby, sprawled shirtless on the couch. He nudged him in the side with a toe.

"Yo. Wake up."

"Huh?" Bobby groaned.

"When the fuck did you come in?"

Bobby's face scrunched up as he stretched for the pack of cigarettes on the coffee table. He sat up and lit one before answering.

"Alejandra kicked me out."

"What the fuck happened this time?"

"Man…"

Martin didn't wait for an answer. He went into the kitchen and grabbed two beers from the refrigerator. He tossed one to Bobby and put an ashtray before him.

"So?"

Bobby shook his head and set the beer on the table. He sucked on his cigarette and when he spoke, curls of smoke came from his nose and mouth.

"I don't know, man. Just wasn't working out."

"You never know shit. Nothing works out when it comes to you."

"Kim's birthday is in two weeks."

"I remember," Martin replied. He swished a gulp of beer around his mouth for a while. *Alcohol kills germs, right?* "You gonna be staying here or what?"

“Is that cool?”

“I have some shit going on. If you don’t care, then I don’t care.”

Bobby stood and pulled on his shirt. “It won’t be long. Maybe I’ll move back home with mom and dad.”

“You got a key.”

“You want to put money together to get Kim a present?”

Martin flinched at the thought of money. “Now’s not so good.”

“It’s cool. I’ll put your name on the card. Say it’s from both of us.”

“My name. Yeah. Thanks.”

“All right,” Bobby said. He stubbed his cigarette out in the ashtray, stood, and slipped on his shoes. “I’m going to pick up my stuff and bring it over here. Thanks.”

Martin grabbed a six-pack of beer and opened the balcony door and sat outside. A light afternoon breeze blew against the building and he leaned back in his plastic patio chair to enjoy the rest of his breakfast beer. The balcony faced the woods and he listened to the chatter of birds calling to one another. He regretted telling Bobby he could stay with him. What if the police raided his apartment while his brother was there? He leaned to his side and spit. More than likely, Bobby would make up with Alejandra or shack up with some new girl. What was this, the fourth girl since last summer? *Must be a day that ends in Y*. Soon Martin’s head grew light and his stomach growled but there was nothing to eat. He was on his third beer when the sliding glass door opened and Vu joined him.

“You okay?” Vu asked.

Martin nodded slowly. “This is bullshit.” His tongue felt heavy.

“Doesn’t matter, really.”

“Yeah.”

They sat in silence for a while.

“You don’t have to come tonight, man,” Martin said. “This one’s all me.”

“I got you. I don’t trust that motherfucker. Hawaiian shirt? What the fuck.”

“Still need that 76. Praman paid me $750 last night. Gotta go see if Tuan has what he owes me.”

“I got three Gs on me. Just get it back to me later.”

“Thanks. I have some money inside. With yours, and after I collect from my other customers, I still need like two grand. Tuan better have it.”

Vu cracked open a beer. “Tuan ain’t giving you shit.”

“He’s gonna have to come up with something. I don’t wanna go robbing people.”

Vu nodded.

Martin’s beer grew warm in the sun.

“How’d Eden get raided?” Martin asked to nobody in particular. “Makes no sense. The machines been there forever. Not like the police couldn’t look out their office and see what was happening.” The Falls Church City police department manned a satellite office inside the strip mall 40 hours a week but largely left people alone. A wall-sized two-way mirror next to the office door was the only indication that they existed, though once in a blue moon someone with an outstanding warrant would get dragged inside.

“Politics, man,” Vu answered. “Make a big show, gain a few votes. Who knows.”

“Yeah.” Martin pulled out the napkin Vivian had given him with the address. He texted it to Vu. “Sent you the address. I’m gonna go collect then head over to Tuan’s place. After I send out the line for the games tonight, I’ll head over there. Probably get there about eight.”

Vu pulled out his cell phone and read the text.

“Okay,” he said. “I’ll probably go see Maia. She’s been bitching.”

“She should leave your ass. Lock up when you leave, huh?”

Martin went into his room to get dressed.

***

Tuan lived in an apartment in a rent-controlled neighborhood in Falls Church made up of three-story tall buildings of orange brick covering a square mile. Its low rent kept the yuppies away. Three Vietnamese teenagers watched Martin in silence as he pulled into a parking spot. They walked slowly along the sidewalk in tank tops, their red bandanas dangling from their back pockets. Their glares went unanswered as he hurried past the empty police cruiser parked in front of Tuan’s building. He jogged up the stairs to the second story. When he reached the door, he forced himself to pause to catch his breath.

Tuan answered after a few knocks. He wore an old tee shirt stained with food and baby vomit from years ago. He was a few years older than Martin and looked even more disheveled than normal. His long hair was tangled and he looked like he hadn’t shaved in days.

“Hey, Martin,” he said, surprised. “Come on in.”

Martin looked straight through him as he stepped inside. The carpet, which had been white once, was now various shades of gray and brown. He kept his shoes on. The worn, out-of-style couch matched the barren apartment and creaked when he sat. An old television broadcasted the news, and empty instant ramen packages littered the dining table at the rear of the apartment. Tuan sat on an old plastic milk crate.

"I'm going to need all of it," Martin said slowly. "Tonight."

For a moment Tuan didn't seem to hear him. Then his mouth fell open and his eyes widened. He didn't say anything.

Martin repeated himself.

"Tonight. Everything. No excuses." The $6,000 debt had accrued over months, and Martin had never bothered Tuan for the money. They went way back. His wife had left him and their daughter, and Martin guessed Tuan needed a break now and again from fatherhood, from life. He knew Tuan would pay what he could when he could, though several times Martin wondered if he should cut him off. But he would find someone else. Someone not so understanding.

Tuan licked his thin, reedy lips and stared at the floor, his shoulders slumping. He ground a patch of dirt into the carpet with his toe and cursed the Washington Redskins under his breath. A small cough came from the other room. Tuan clenched his fists and relaxed them several times before crossing his arms over his belly. More coughs. His daughter called for him. Tuan looked toward the voice but didn't move. He turned back to Martin.

“How can I get that much?” he asked. “Look around, what do you see? You said I could have some time.”

“It’s been months, Tuan. Look, we’ve been friends for a long time. I never bothered you for it, right? Not really. Normally, I don’t give a shit. But this is some bad shit happening right now and I need it. No bullshit. I’m going to sit here while you call whoever you know and borrow whatever you need. Or…” Martin shook his head. “Man, you’re getting it. Tonight.”

“Can’t I have at least until tomorrow? The banks—maybe I can get a loan.”

Martin pointed to the cellphone sitting on top of the television.

“Make some calls.”

Tuan’s lips shook as he pulled a pack of Newports from his pocket. With shaking hands, he offered one to Martin, who declined. He nodded and lit one for himself and began dialing. Martin settled back and stared at the television, not paying attention to it. Instead, he listened to the faint sound of coughing.

Over the next two hours, various people arrived at Tuan’s apartment, some of whom Martin recognized. But they all avoided his gaze and simply handed small stacks of money to Tuan and left. Tuan’s younger sister was the only one who looked at Martin, and the rage in her eyes made him look away. Tuan hurried her from his apartment, thanking her for the hundred dollars she had mustered for him. By then, the coughing had subsided and Martin reluctantly looked in on Tuan’s daughter for him. She was asleep, her small body curled around a large teddy bear. Streaks of dried tears ran down her thin, sunken face. Her forehead burned.

“You should take her to a doctor,” Martin said when he returned to the living room.

“No insurance.”

Tuan didn’t look up as he sorted through a pile of money that looked well short of $6,000. His fingers shook as he counted.

In the end, Tuan handed Martin just over $2,000.

Martin’s gut ached as he pocketed the money. But beneath the guilt, he felt the familiar flutter of exhilaration. Of power. Of relief that he had come up with the money. And with it, the memory of the look of disgust on Tuan’s sister’s face. She and Martin had grown up together, the first girl he had ever kissed. They thought they were in love. They hadn’t spoken in nearly a decade, and now Martin was the guy who forced her to bring money to save her brother. He tried to speak but his voice was dry and he cleared his throat.

“I’ll give you some more time,” Martin said finally. “I wouldn’t have come here if I didn’t have to, Tuan. I really wouldn’t have.”

Tuan blinked wet eyes. He nodded.

Martin looked away.

***

The address Vivian gave him led Martin to a large single-family home in a quiet neighborhood in Vienna. The sun had set and he parked a block away and walked over to the house under a darkening sky. The lawns were pretty, the cars new. Sprinkler systems

hissed and drained out onto the street. At the door, a tall Chinese man in a black tee shirt and black slacks with forearms the size of Martin's calf muscles greeted him.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"I need to see Charles. Tell him it's Martin."

The Chinese man closed the door. Martin stepped down from the porch and looked around. *Where the hell am I?* Moments passed and the evening grew chilly. When the door opened again, a severe-looking older woman stood in the doorway, looking as though she were in the middle of teaching a sewing class. She eyed him beneath a tight bun of graying hair. Her gold-rimmed glasses clung to her hooked nose and she wore a dark green cardigan, black slacks, and a white blouse with green trim. She waved him in.

Warm lamps lit the living room around three large, plush couches. Two flat screen televisions were mounted on the wall above the fireplace.

"Charles's with someone right now," she said. "Just have a seat on the couch. Would you like a beer?" Martin shook his head and sat down against the large window facing the street.

She turned and called to the kitchen.

"Linh, bring the gentleman a beer."

Then the old woman disappeared into the adjoining room.

Linh, a small, skinny girl dressed in lingerie walked unevenly from the kitchen, an unopened bottle of beer dangling from her small hand at her side. She couldn't have been more than 15 but somehow looked even younger than that in her pink satin nightie with breasts that barely registered. Martin stared at the floor. She nudged his shoulder with the

bottle of beer. He looked up. He was wrong. Up close, her glassy eyes and bony cheeks made her look much older. She smiled and when he took the beer he noticed fresh needle marks in the crook of her arm. She curled up next to him on the couch and Martin scooted away to give her some space.

"Do you want to go upstairs?" she asked. Her eyelids were half drawn.

"No. I'm good. Thanks. I'm here to see Charles."

For a moment her eyes cleared and Martin saw something dark flicker across her face. She turned around with her knees on the couch and moved the curtains aside. She cupped her hand against the window and peered outside.

"Are you in trouble?" Her voice was barely a whisper.

"No." He shook his head. "Maybe a little."

Why did I say that?

Linh nodded and looked around the neighborhood for a moment longer before sinking back into the cushions. "What are you going to do?"

"I don't know," Martin answered. "Whatever I need to."

But she had stopped listening. Her head lolled back and her breathing slowed. Martin took a swig of his beer and followed it up with another.

Half the bottle was gone by the time the Chinese man emerged from around the corner. Following him was a sad-looking, older Vietnamese man. His hair was thin and untidy, and he wore pants too large for him and a khaki jacket. Martin imagined him fidgeting with a bowler cap in his hands. The Chinese man walked over to Linh and slapped her lightly on the face. She blinked and sat up. He jerked a thumb at the older

man, who stared at the floor. Linh nodded and as she struggled to stand, Martin saw she wasn't wearing underwear.

"Bye," she mumbled as she walked to the stairs.

The Chinese man led Martin around the corner to another set of stairs.

Downstairs, Martin stepped into a basement large enough for a pool table, desk, wet bar, and several stools. Five flat screen televisions mounted on the wall faced the desk. The blinds on the mini-windows were drawn. The Chinese man went back upstairs. Charles tapped away on a laptop as Martin approached and sat. He was still wearing the same red and orange Hawaiian shirt as the day before. After a few moments of being ignored, he took out wads of cash and started counting. Charles stopped him.

"Don't bother counting. It shouldn't be wrong."

Martin nodded and pushed the money across the table. He drank from his beer.

Finally, after tapping a few more keys, Charles closed the screen.

"Linh's upstairs?"

"Yeah," Martin answered.

Charles leered at him but Martin wouldn't meet his stare. He set the bottle on the table. Charles's smile vanished and slid a coaster over to him. It bounced off the bottle and Martin repositioned the beer on top of it. Charles picked up the money and set it in a drawer in the desk.

"Where's your boy?" he asked.

"Should be here soon."

"When he gets here, we're gonna take a ride."

“Where?”

“You want a freebie with Linh before we go?”

Martin shook his head.

“Where we going?” he repeated.

“Baltimore.”

“What’s in Baltimore?”

Before Charles could answer, footsteps came trundling down the stairs. The Chinese man appeared with Vu behind him. Charles opened a desk drawer and pulled out three 9mm Glock pistols and set them on the desk.

***

The silver Toyota Camry smelled new and Charles ignored their questions until they got onto I-95 toward Baltimore. Then he explained the plan. They were going to the home of a Vietnamese jeweler in the Baltimore suburbs. The jeweler’s son owed a bookie in New York a large sum of money, and in exchange for a release on his debt, he sold them information on his family: there was over $100,000 in a safe under a hidden panel in the floor of the home’s office bathroom. The son would leave the rear door unlocked. Martin and Vu would tie everyone up while Charles retrieved the cash, and then they would leave.

“We going to buy masks or something?” Martin asked from the backseat when Charles finished explaining.

Charles looked in the rearview mirror with an expression most people reserved for a small child.

“For what?”

“To hide our faces.”

“Don’t be stupid. They’re not going to call the police.”

“How do you know?” The gun felt cold and heavy in his waistband. His stomach turned. He grabbed the door handle. “Stop the car, man. I’m not doing this.”

“Shut up, Martin.” Charles continued driving for a while before answering Martin in a cool, emotionless tone. “They’re not going to call the police because they don’t want to report how much got stolen because they haven’t paid taxes. They’ll swallow the loss.”

In the front passenger seat, Vu leaned his head against the window and snoozed.

As the ride lengthened, Martin went over scenario after scenario in his head. What if something went wrong? What if the son lied? What if the police patrolling the neighborhood saw them through a window? He imagined leaping from the car to freedom. Maybe he could beg for the money from Kim. If she and Eugene even had that much. But he didn’t want her to see him like this. Would she even allow him near her daughter, Wendy, any longer? Would he be the uncle nobody spoke about? What if Kim told their parents?

They entered the Baltimore metropolitan area as night fell thick on the city. They decided to grab some food. Charles, it turned out, was a purveyor of fine fast foods. He bragged that he knew the best fast food joints along I-95 between New York City and Richmond, Virginia.

“It’s the cooks,” Charles explained as he stuffed his face with a taco, eyeing the jeweler’s shop in the rearview window. “They have recipes, but they still have to make it. It’s the little things that can change.”

***

Martin, Vu, and Charles found the jeweler’s neighborhood in the suburbs of Baltimore. The houses along the street towered over them. Now and again a car drove past. *It’s still too early.* Before Martin could protest, Charles parked, turned off the engine, and got out. He walked to the next house over, to a home with a red front door that matched its red shutters, their paint a deep crimson that appeared almost inky black in the moonlight against the slick white siding. Vu yawned, stretched, and followed. Martin cursed and hurried after them as they slipped along the side of the house and headed to the rear. The lawn grew thick and rich and the backyard opened to a field lined with a dense thicket of trees. Nobody saw their approach. They waited at the foot of the stairs of rear deck, watching the house through the kitchen’s sliding glass door. The lights were on inside and the glare on the windowpanes stopped anyone from looking out at them. Martin licked his lips. The corners of the pistol tucked in his waistband bit into his skin. He felt his bowels shift.

A fat Vietnamese man in striped pajamas wandered into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. Tufts of dark black hair circled his splotchy bald scalp. His wife, a plump woman with a face built to smile, washed dishes at the sink. The son, a young man of about 20, paced the kitchen and shot furtive glances at the sliding glass door. *Can he see us?* Martin felt Charles and Vu tense. He licked his lips, feeling as though he were

teetering on the edge of something, a cliff, a canyon mired in a fog. He prepared to jump. To fall.

They crept up the stairs and slid along the house and Charles threw the sliding glass door open.

Vu sprang into the kitchen, yelling and waving the pistol over his head. Charles leapt after him. Martin followed, moving to a chorus of screams. He pulled the door closed. Charles grabbed the jeweler by his collar and shoved him against the wall, the muzzle of his pistol pressed into a fleshy cheek. Vu grabbed the wife by her throat, and hissed at her to shut up. Vu shoved her forward and she stumbled and fell on her side. She squeezed her eyes shut. Her fleshy throat trembled as she gasped for breath. Martin aimed his pistol at the son. It felt heavy and cold, its ridges sharp. He pointed to the floor and the son lay face down.

Another scream came from the entryway.

A little girl stood frozen, her eyes wide.

“Fuck!” Vu snapped. He grabbed her from behind and muffled her scream with his hand. He pressed the barrel of his gun against her head. “Be quiet.”

Her pants grew dark and a puddle formed at their feet. The color drained from her face.

Vu threw her down to her mother.

“Goddammit, she pissed all over me!”

Charles laughed.

“Keep her fucking quiet,” Vu hissed. “Fuck. This is disgusting.”

The jeweler's wife grabbed her daughter by her arms and begged her to stop crying. Her knuckles turned white.

"Stop," the jeweler moaned. "Don't hurt them."

"Still talking?" Charles kicked the back of the jeweler's leg and he fell to his knees. Charles waved over to Martin.

Martin took his place behind the jeweler and pressed his pistol against the back of the man's head. It wasn't so heavy. Everything slowed down. His heart pounded. He felt alive. The kitchen lights were soft and warm. A hint of turmeric and garlic in the air. Sweat shined on the jeweler's scalp.

"Okay," Charles barked as he paced the kitchen. "Now keep your mouths shut. Got it?"

The little girl whimpered and her mother cradled her head in her fleshy arms. Little arms wrapped around the woman's neck.

"I need to change my clothes," the girl whispered, her face wet.

"Shh," her mother answered.

Charles ignored them and bent down to face the jeweler eye-to-eye and said something sharp in Cantonese. The jeweler shook his head and whined something back to him. Charles smacked him and waved his gun at the hallway. The jeweler got up and stumbled past his family. They stared at the floor. Charles followed him out, his gun ready at his side.

"Wait here," he told Martin and Vu.

Vu leaned against the wall and lowered his pistol to his side, tapping its shaft against his leg.

Martin sat on a stool by the kitchen counter and held his gun in his lap, his shirt clinging to the sweat on his back.

"You'll be okay," Vu said in a bored voice. "We'll be out of here in a few minutes."

Nobody moved. Nobody spoke. The smell of urine wafted through the room and Martin sucked light breaths through his mouth. A minute passed. An eternity.*What the hell is taking Charles so long?* Martin got up from the stool and rummaged around the kitchen. In drawer after drawer, he found scissors, pens, pencils, paperclips, toothpicks, rubber bands. All junk.

"What are you doing?" Vu asked.

"Watch them for a minute."

Martin walked into the living room and threw the round, porcelain table lamps onto the floor. They shattered. He stepped on each of their bulb sockets and yanked the cords free. When he had three cords, he returned to the kitchen and he and Vu tied the family together side-by-side with their arms locked at their elbows. They put the little girl in the middle and she yelped when Martin yanked on her arm to get it to fit through her mother's. He slapped the back of her head. She shut up. When Vu tied the son's wrists, the wire dug deep into his skin, and his hands turned deep red. Martin nodded to Vu and left to go after Charles and the jeweler.

At the end of the hallway on the second floor, a door stood ajar, the light from within spilling out onto the carpet.

"Hey," Martin said as he pushed the door open. "You in here?"

The first thing he saw was the jeweler, crumpled on the floor against his desk, bloodied and gagged and hogtied with a phone cord. What hair he had was matted in thick red clumps against his scalp. His eyes bulged when he saw Martin. A deep indention lay in the edge of the desk, an impression that Martin guessed came from Charles slamming the jeweler's head into the wood. At the rear of the office, the bathroom door stood open. Charles stood with his back to them, his shoulders heaving as he breathed.

"You get it?" Martin asked. "Let's go."

Charles didn't turn around. "Come here."

Pink, soapy water beaded up on the white bathroom sink and thin streaks of red ran down its porcelain walls toward the drain. Charles's bright red and orange Hawaiian shirt may have had blood on it too, but Martin couldn't be sure. *Maybe all his shirts are like that.* In the floor in front of the toilet was a large hole surrounded by scattered passports, birth certificates, insurance documents, and other inconsequential papers.

And in the hole was a safe. And within the safe, where stacks of hundred dollar bills should have been, there was nothing.

"Fuck." Martin dropped to his knees. "Oh, fuck. Fuck." He reached into the safe with a shaky hand and felt cold metal. He combed around, his fingers scraping the corners and edges of the safe. But there was no false floor, no illusion, no trickery. *God*

fucking damn it. He sat back, resting his head against wall's cold, hard tile, suddenly very tired, and thought about home. He wanted to forget about Eden, about the machines, about the money. He wanted to give up, to let go. The feeling washed over him, a thick, greasy sludge that dragged at him down into nothing. He kicked a passport across the bathroom.

Charles went back into the office.

Martin heard grunts and the sound of slapping flesh. He got up and pulled Charles away from the jeweler as Charles stomped on the side of the jeweler's head.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Martin stood between the two.

"Getting the money." Charles poked him in the chest. "Getting *your* money."

"Look!" He waved at the bathroom. "There's nothing here! There's no money."

"Fine," Charles said. He threw up his hands and stepped away. "Come on. Bring him."

Martin undid the knots around the jeweler's feet and helped him up and they and followed Charles out. In the dining room, they found Vu eating an apple and sitting on the counter, his gun poised next to him.

Charles squatted at the son's head, slapping him, and mumbled in angry Cantonese. He stood and gestured for Martin to lay the jeweler down next to the son, head-to-head. They looked each other in the face. Charles took several steps back and leapt forward, shoving his foot down on the back of the son's head. Martin heard a sharp crack as he screamed. The little girl next to him twisted and wailed.

“You know how much this piece of shit owes us?” Charles stepped on the son’s head, pushing his face into blood pooling there. “He told us you had money in here. Where’s our money?” He removed his foot, leaned down, and poked the son in the temple. “Where?”

The jeweler’s wife sobbed and spoke, her voice shaky. “There’s no money. Let us go.”

“Let you go?” Charles asked. He looked at Vu, then Martin. He laughed. “Did your son want us to let you go? He’s the one who brought us here. He sold you out. For money. For fucking money. So where is it?”

“It’s in the bank,” she said, her voice shrill. “Where else would it be?”

Charles shook his head and kicked the son in his side. Once. Twice. Again and again. Blood covered the side of his face and his eyes rolled back in his head.

“Stop man,” Martin said. “You’re gonna kill him. If it’s not here, it’s not here.”

“Yeah, man.” Vu sounded unsure. “We’ll figure something out. Come on. It’s enough.”

“You think this is enough?” His eyes narrowed at Martin. “What do you think is next? You can just go home? As much as you owe?”

Martin froze. He thought that coming along was enough to clear his debt. He fumbled for words that did not come.

Charles smirked.

“Yeah. See? We’re not done here. You should be the one doing this, not me.”

“You said…” Vu began.

“I didn’t say shit. He’s gotta work it off.” Charles kicked the son again.

Martin took a step backwards. Charles was right. Vivian hadn’t said for how long. Before entering the house, he had visions of the robbery being a simple in-and-out job. And then it would be over. He could get on with his life. It seemed so long ago that his machines worked smoothly at Eden and he hadn’t met Charles or the jeweler or his family. He grabbed Charles’s arm as he prepared to kick the son again.

“Stop.”

Charles jerked his arm away. His eyes burned when he looked at Martin.

“He doesn’t owe as much as you. You understand?” He gestured toward the family. “All this? You can get this, too.”

“Yo, that’s not right,” Vu said.

He stepped forward but Martin put out an arm to stop him.

“It’s cool,” Martin said. “This one’s on me, right? My responsibility.”

Vu grunted.

Martin stared down at the four people. He listened to them softly crying and fought the urge to vomit. The little girl looked up at him, her eyes red and swollen. He imagined his niece, Wendy staring up at him. Her chubby cheeks, red from all her jumping and prancing and laughing. He thought of the way her voice sounded shrill when she got mad. When was the last time he had seen her? He wondered if it would be too late to show up at their home when they got back. Or maybe he would make an effort to show up for Kim’s birthday next week. Maybe he would find the time to shop for her present after all. He just had to make it home.

Martin kicked the little girl across her face. Her head snapped to the side. A tooth rattled across the floor.

She cried, her gasps blowing red bubbles from her mouth. Blood poured from her nose and the cuts on her lips.

Her mother cried and pressed her head against her daughter's but the girl screamed and screamed.

Charles stared at him in silence.

"I said let's go. We'll get the money from somewhere else."

Martin left the kitchen, holding his breath as he and Vu walked across the deck. He didn't know what to do if Charles didn't follow. Would he and Vu rush back in there, force him to leave at gunpoint? Fight him? Footsteps followed them into the shadows. He didn't look back.

AUTUMN

The autumn rains had struck the week before, drenching the trails and paths that wove through South Arlington's parks. Dead and soggy leaves made the asphalt slick under Wendy's sneakers, and more than once, her footing slipped. Luckily, her grandparents were there to catch her, lifting her smoothly into the air by her hands. Each week, regardless of rain or sun or snow, they made their trek to South Arlington, to the old neighborhood where Wendy's grandparents had lived upon arriving America, and where Wendy's mother had grown up. The creek that anchored the multitude of trails overflowed with rainwater, rushing along, undisturbed by traffic that clogged the streets. Wendy basked in the privacy the trails offered. Around her, trees simmered and popped with life as the last breath of summer evaporated like rainwater seeping through cracks in the paved trail. She loved these weekly walks with her grandparents. This week, in addition to their normal walk, they promised to take her to an island where the local children played, and even said they would climb it. She pictured a large plot of land teeming with wildlife and surrounded by gentle waters.

"We had to ask where the island is," Grandpa said proudly, his English harsh in the raw air.

Grandma waved off the notion. "We! Hah! Me. I asked."

"Hmph," he replied.

“Was Vietnam like this?” Wendy asked as she jumped over a felled log. She spread her arms outward and spun around, referring to the dense trees and bushes and rolling hills and trails. She stopped and waited for her grandparents to answer, as she loved their stories of Vietnam. She imagined often that it was a mysterious place of magic. Her mother and uncles hardly ever spoke of Vietnam, and didn’t seem to be that interested. Her own grasp of the language was nearly non-existent except for a few choice words she used at restaurants.

Grandpa waved his hand, dismissing the question. “Better. We lived at the base of a mountain, near Cambodia.” He spread his arms wide. “There was a huge pagoda in the mountain and the monks would come down during celebrations. And in the rainy season the rains would fill the streams and they would become wide as rivers. It was real, not like this. The county makes the trails pretty.”

They wandered the twisting trail for a while, dodging squirrels on the hunt for nuts and berries, though Wendy could not imagine where they would find these supplies for the oncoming winter. Whenever she ran too far ahead, she reminded herself to slow down for Grandpa, who limped along happily.

“How did you get your limp, Grandpa?” Wendy asked, breathless, sliding her hand into his rough, calloused one.

“War,” he answered. “Some explosion. Boom!”

“Does it hurt?” Wendy stared down at her grandfather’s knee, suddenly worried that their weekly walks were painful for him.

He laughed. “No way, José. I’m a *man*.”

“Oh.”

Grandma chuckled and leaned against him as they walked along. “It’s his fault. Too slow to jump out of the way!”

Grandpa clucked his tongue and shook his head.

“He’s happy for it,” Grandma continued. “If he doesn’t want to mow the lawn, clean the house, he complains about his knee.”

They walked for some time in silence, dodging the random cyclist and jogger. Occasionally they passed graffiti spray painted on the trail itself, though they did not acknowledge it. Wendy ran up and down the banks of the trail, winding back and forth from one side to the next, criss-crossing the path ahead. Finally, after passing under a huge bridge, they came to a large, flat area bordering the creek. Grandpa stopped and looked around for a moment before announcing that they had arrived.

They stood at a wide section of the creek, and in the center was a broad, flat boulder. The boulder stood so high that the swollen creek left much of the island alone. Wendy guessed that it was wide enough for a handful of children to climb and stand atop. It didn’t seem very impressive to Wendy, but she withdrew her phone and took a picture anyway. She kicked off her sneakers and wondered if her shorts were going to get wet. She stood at the edge overlooking the island, and wondered why the children would spend so much time there. Behind her, her grandparents undid their shoes and rolled their pants partway to their knees.

“Why does everyone play here?”

Grandpa grunted. “I don’t know why they do anything.”

“Your uncle Bobby said they play war here. They try to capture the island. One side over there,” Grandma gestured toward the opposite bank. “And the other side over here.”

Wendy stared for a long moment at the island, absorbing the loud rushing sounds of the creek. She imagined children crawling through the water to reach the boulder, pushing and jumping on each other until one side dominated the other. She guessed it was more fun than she originally thought. Grandma and Grandpa slid their hands in hers, and together, they stepped into the water.

The current broke against Wendy’s bony ankles, the smoothed rocks pushing upward into the bottoms of her feet. Heat and steam hovered over the rush of water, and in the distance she sensed the movement of bicycles and joggers and children playing. Between her toes she imagined the nibble of fish and the slickness of algae. Her grandfather stumbled, his limp slowing him down, but he pushed her on, holding her hand steady. Grandma, bringing up the rear, stepped into a hole that was deeper than her estimation, and splashed water on the three of them. She wiped her face, the water coming up nearly to her belly.

“Be careful,” Grandpa warned.

But soon enough, they were at the island, and Wendy scrambled up the rock and stood at its center as Grandpa helped Grandma up. They gathered around each other, assessing its wonders. Somewhere hidden in the foliage around them, a bird chirped. A candy wrapper floated by.

“Hm,” Wendy said, disappointed.

But her grandparents did not hear her. They were staring directly upward. She followed their gaze to a branch which hung high over the island. And through the haze of the autumn afternoon's gray pallor, she saw the bugs. They weaved back and forth among the leaves, suspended between the island and the tree, moving back and forth, some slow, some fast. Soft beams of light spread through the branches above, hitting the bugs, changing them, muting their movements and colors, the blacks and browns and reds and greens and whatever else shone brightly in the autumn air. They hovered in the air as they had, she imagined, for years before, and as they would for all the years ahead. None of the bugs flew low enough to bother her or her grandparents. They stood for a long time in silence, staring upward, their hands intertwined, with Wendy in the middle. At that moment she loved her grandparents more than ever, loved the warmth in their hands, the ways they teased her and talked to her and told her stories of a long ago time. Wendy stared in wonder at the things they showed her, and at all the things they would show her in the oncoming years.

THE SPACE BETWEEN

October 2010

John Vo shifted in his airplane seat and stared at the sheet of paper in his lap. On it, printed in large, neat letters, were an upper-case B, and a cursive, lower-case z. He eyed the letters' lines, tracing the black ink over and over, and lingered on the white expanse that separated the two characters. With his index finger and thumb, he curled the upper left corner, rolling it back and forth, like the coming and going of the tide, and watched the paper soften and wrinkle. It was usually taped to the wall above his desk at the design firm where he worked in downtown San Antonio, and once, someone had asked him about the letters, what they meant. John had shrugged, glibly explaining that he just liked the look of them. He wasn't sure why he brought the paper along on the plane trip; he had simply grabbed it from his workstation as he hurried out the door the previous day. Outside, the ground slowly disappeared in a haze of cloud as the plane ascended, leaving Texas for D.C.

The day before, in her apartment in Arlington, Virginia, John's mother had died. And other than booking a flight from San Antonio to D.C., John had no idea what to do, or even who to tell. They were, he thought, strangers. During his childhood years, she had often been absent, working at her two jobs as a maid or at the local deli, and he never really got to know her. And, if he was being honest, he never felt the need to make the

effort. He wasn't sure if she had any friends, or if she even had any family other than him. Of course, there was Sammy, the Cambodian boy who lived nearby and looked after her, who took her on walks or to the store, and who made sure she got to her doctor's appointments. It was Sammy who had found her, cold, dead, and alone, in the middle of her small apartment, and it was Sammy who called John at work to break the news.

John knew his mother had been Buddhist, so that was something; but it didn't tell him how to organize a proper ceremony, and he had no idea who to ask. Brief internet searches were unhelpful, and being Vietnamese complicated the matter, since most Buddhist literature he found was for Indian ceremonies. John's vague recollections of his father's funeral ceremony involved white headbands, chanting, and monks, but this was all so long ago, when he was barely in elementary school, and he had not paid attention. His mother had taken care of everything, and now that the responsibility was his, he wondered why he had not prepared for this eventuality. He wondered if this was because she had occupied such a small place in his life that, until it became real, her death seemed irrelevant.

As the people around him settled in for the flight ahead, some snoozing, others simply staring out the windows at the passing clouds or down at the cragged, brown and green masses of land below, John withdrew a small packet of Post-It notes, and started drawing on the yellow paper.

***

The summer break before John entered fifth grade was a scorcher. Across the D.C. region, local weather records shattered. The creeks that wound through Arlington's

parks evaporated, thinning out until they were little more than collapsed veins. Waves of heat, shimmering, wafted from the asphalt, the fumes smelling bitter and stale and toxic. Like many of the other nine- and ten-year old kids in his grade, John had an old bicycle, but pedaling was too difficult on days like this; the air left his chest feeling raw. So he and his mother, who had a rare day off from both her jobs, spent most of the day indoors, in their small, one-bedroom apartment, watching television. Planted on the brown corduroy couch in their living room, John surfed through the five or six channels that the antenna provided. Around them, the living room was cluttered, as always, with boxes filled with cans of food, folded blankets, and gallons of water.

"Why do we have all this stuff?" John asked in slow, halting Vietnamese. He eyed a box filled with bundles of chopsticks, each tied with thick, red rubber bands.

With her feet propped in his lap and her head resting on the armrest, John's mother dozed. Her hair lay crumpled under her, wavy and thick and peppered with gray. The creases on her face and the droopy folds under her eyes disappeared from gravity's pull. She wasn't old, not really, but looked it.

"Mom?"

She snorted. "Hmm?"

"This stuff. Why do we have all this?"

"Just in case."

"In case of what?"

Before she could answer, bright colors and quick movements flashed on the television. *Cartoons!* John threw the remote aside and concentrated on the show, his

mother forgotten. But it quickly became apparent that it wasn't a cartoon show; it was a special behind-the-scenes look at how to make cartoons.

"What is this?" his mother asked, poking John with a toe.

"Cartoons."

"What are they saying?"

He waved at her to be quiet.

"You watch too much TV," she whispered. She rolled on her side and pulled her knees up, hugging them. Soon her breathing steadied and John forgot about her as he eagerly watched on.

On the screen, the host appeared, a fat man with a brownish-gray beard and thick glasses. He introduced an artist, a thin man with long, greasy hair, who flipped through a stack of drawings over and over again. John watched, fascinated, as the drawings of a bowling ball, rough, wild-looking sketches, moved with each flip of paper. The ball rolled down a lane, knocking over pins. The drawings weren't clean, the lines not solid—they looked messy, smudged. Lines of varying darkness and thickness seemed to fly everywhere. John's drawings never looked like that—his lines were much cleaner, thin, neat, and carefully applied. But the drawings on television looked more complete somehow. Better, like the wild lines had created a weight, a depth that he knew instinctively he could not replicate.

The host explained the process that filmmakers used to create a cartoon: an illustration drawn on a clear plastic sheet called a cel was placed over a painted background; its picture was taken; then another cel, slightly different from the first,

replaced it, and so on and so forth; then, the images were put on film and run through a projector, creating an illusion of movement, a mimicking of life. Next, the artist took out a sketchbook filled with drawings, and flipped through the pages. And between the pages, the drawings moved, breathed, and lived. The artist called it a flipbook. John wondered for a moment about the missing links between the drawings. Everything seemed to move flawlessly, and he marveled at how his eyes didn't register the missing pictures. Then the artist held up a yellow Post-It notepad and said he got started in animation by drawing frames on each note.

After begging for a week, John's mother finally agreed to buy him one Post-It notepad. But soon, library books, textbooks, loose leaf paper—anything that could be flipped—became a flipbook to him. He drew elaborate, violent fights, and used crayons and colored pencils to simulate blood splatters and brain bits exploding from stick figures. By the time he was eleven, his mother grew tired of his hobby and refused to buy any more supplies for him. That was fine, because by then, he and his friends had become really good at shoplifting.

***

John shuffled through the crowds at National Airport. He had grown up with its original name and refused to call it Reagan National. The airport's arched ceiling overhead reflected the jumbled noises of footsteps, speech, and announcements down to him, filling the corridor with a hollow, warped echo. It sounded to John like he was listening to everything while submerged, and the tinny, distant sounds seemed to build a buffer between him and the crowd. No matter how much the people around him pressed

in, forcing him through thick pedestrian traffic, John felt alone. He saw no fond farewells, happy greetings, or Hallmark moments. Just hustle, bustle, and flow. A woman ahead of him in a beige pantsuit dropped her briefcase, and the clamor, the instant ripple through the crowd of people readjusting their paths as they walked by, put John at ease, reminding him that they were, after all, people—humans—and prone to clumsiness.

Outside the airport, a late autumn wind, crisp and dry, swept through his short hair as he carried his duffle bag to the curb. Almost immediately, he spotted an old green Honda Accord station wagon puttering along, its driver scanning the crowds. There was something oddly familiar about the face behind the steering wheel, and John squinted to be sure. Yes, it was Sammy. John waved.

"Thanks for picking me up," John said, after stowing his bag and getting into the passenger seat.

"Yeah, man, no problem. Of course." Sammy was about eighteen, eight years younger than John. His dark skin and thick, tightly-curled hair was cropped short and neat, like he was in the military. He grinned. "Johnny Five, back home again. Crazy."

"Man, nobody's called me that in years." John shook his head, smiling. "Just John now. But look at you, man. You got skinny." He hadn't seen Sammy for three years, back when Sammy was still a short, pudgy, fast-talking kid who always hung around older boys, toughs and crooks, eager for their approval. Sammy's growth spurts must have stretched him pretty thin. "You look good, just taller, you know? I'm amazed I even recognized you."

“Well, thanks. You know how it is.” Sammy drove for a while in silence, navigating their way out of the airport, until he took a deep breath, somber. “I’m sorry about your mom.” He said it delicately, almost a question.

“Yeah. Thanks. How had she been doing?” John bit his lower lip, not really wanting to know.

“Not great. Weak, tired. But, you know, kind of happy. Like she had plans or something. Since you’d been sending her money, she wanted to quit one of her jobs. Who knows what she would have done with her time—probably take up mountain climbing or something.” He chuckled a little, and let it die. “I was supposed to take her to her cardiologist that morning….” Sammy spoke slowly, in barely a whisper. “Yesterday. It was only yesterday. She didn’t answer her door. I kept knocking until finally I had to get the landlord to let me in ‘cause I didn’t have a key.”

John numbly stared at the window, at his reflection, at the finer details in his face, at the nose and eyes he had inherited from his mother. He used to hate his long eyelashes. In high school, a girl said they were feminine, and for years he wore sunglasses as often as he could to hide them. They no longer preoccupied him, except now, when he considered his mother. He wondered if he would develop bags under his eyes like her, or start to swell and bloat as she had as she aged; and somewhere underneath those questions, he wondered if his heart would give out, if he would also die alone, listening to panicked knocking coming from the other side of his front door. Slowly, John came to realize he had been holding his breath, and he gently released it, fogging the window where breath and glass met, blurring the reflection he owed his mother.

“Thanks for everything, Sammy. I mean it.” John sighed, suddenly feeling very tired. “So what’s next?”

“You already called Baker Funeral Services to pick up her body, so we just have to go decide what type of casket, time of funeral, all that stuff.” Sammy shook his head. “I mean you have to decide. Not we.”

“Yeah. Well. You did more for her than I ever did.”

Sammy didn’t disagree.

For some people, organizing a funeral for a loved one meant a sense of closure, of keeping busy, busywork to keep their minds off the things around them, and more importantly, to keep their composure. Up until that moment, John wasn’t even sure he cared. But as he and Sammy drove through the Crystal City and Pentagon City neighborhoods, John felt an overwhelming sense of claustrophobia, a suspicion that just over the hills, or around the bends or corners, just out of his line of sight, stood solid walls, and that what he saw around him was actually a box, its sides hidden. He felt the walls press in, pushing, kneading his skin and bone and muscle, and he wanted them to press harder, all around, to squeeze him until nothing was left. His vision filled with tall buildings and long shadows, but John kept noticing the trees and the orange and brown leaves that peppered the landscape, and he searched in those spaces for an escape from everything, for a way to return to yesterday, the day before yesterday, and all the years that had led up to today. They merged onto I-395, and headed south, toward home.

***

John was fifteen, and known as Johnny Five because of the V in his last name and the movie *Short Circuit*. It was late spring, and though it was a school day, he was at home, the first time in nearly a week, changing and getting ready for a barbecue. In the living room, the telephone rang. Johnny ignored it and searched through his closet for a Polo shirt he had stolen from Hecht's the week before. Surprisingly, Kim Tran was going to be at the barbecue, a goody two-shoes who got straight As and competed in essay contests or whatever else their high school wanted her to do. She was also pretty, and nice, and funny, and she never annoyed him like some other girls did. Johnny had always felt at home around her, having known her since they were in kindergarten, though they'd grown apart since they entered high school. The phone finally stopped ringing as the answering machine picked up. Johnny found his shirt, pulled it over his head, and modeled in the mirror as the voice of his mother's boss from the deli filled the air. He heard the woman say that his mother wasn't in trouble for not coming to work, but that they were just worried, and that she should get in touch.

Johnny froze. His mother wouldn't skip work, not the way he skipped school or left home for days without feeling anything that even remotely resembled guilt. Something was wrong: he'd have to find her. But the barbecue had been planned for the past two weeks. Money had been saved, food purchased, meat marinated, and girls invited. If he left in search of his mother right then, he might miss the barbecue. He thought of Halloween from the previous school year, when he dared Kim to kiss him, and the way her lips tasted like waxy cherry. An image of his mother, crawling on the ground somewhere, bloodied, crept into his head, unbidden and unwelcome. Johnny tried to fight

it, argue that she was probably fine, that he should go to the barbecue, but the image grew larger, and he heard her call for him: her son, her only child, her only family. And in his mind, he didn't answer her. He stripped off the Polo, threw it hard against the wall, and put on an old tee shirt.

Outside, Johnny scanned the street, and the playground at the center of the apartment complex. They were empty. In the distance, he saw bicyclists speed along the Washington and Old Dominion Trail that ran past the community gardens that the county had set up, and decided to start his search there. But when he reached the bridge overlooking the creek, well short of the gardens, he paused, and leaned over the railing to watch the water. The creek bubbled along smoothly, despite the rocks that lay along the bottom which, if they were big enough, sometimes broke the surface. He had only searched for a few minutes, but he already wanted to give up, to forget about finding her, but was afraid to do so, to abandon her. How long would he have to search for her? That bothered him the most, once he thought about it. He had started the search, and now he couldn't stop; the mere act of looking for her indicated that her absence was enough to warrant worry; stopping the search implied he didn't think her important enough to continue on. However, he reasoned that if he simply pretended he had not heard the message, or didn't think it important, then he'd have an excuse to go to the barbecue. Who could blame him? Shame flooded him, or was it guilt? He wasn't sure—how could he not know? He wondered if his mind was creating an illusion of what he was supposed to feel at moments like this, and he just wasn't accustomed to feeling either emotion. Frustrated, he stared at the right bank, which was concrete and sloped at a steep angle,

hoping his mother would materialize so he could get on his way. She did not. Johnny gripped the brown metal railing, letting the uneven paint dig into his skin, and twisted. Bits of paint and dirt chipped off.

From below, faint but excited cheering floated up to Johnny, a little boy's victory cry. He leaned way over the edge and listened. Yes. He heard splashing, and decided to go down to see what was going on. Maybe the kid had seen his mother; at least he was someone Johnny could ask. He made his way down the path next to the bridge, reached the concrete bank, and stopped, stunned.

Standing in the shadow of the bridge was a small woman with rounded hips whose arms were spread upward, cheering. Her short, round body shook with laughter, a high-pitched, tinkling sound that barely rose above the rush of the creek. For a moment he couldn't process what he was seeing. His mother, laughing. Johnny frowned, unsure if it was really her. After all, her back was to him. But no, he recognized the bright red polo shirt and black pants, thrift store clothes she had found months ago which she thought made her look more American. A little boy, fat and brown, ran down the creek, chasing a little handmade raft as she cheered him on. Johnny had never seen her so relaxed and energized, and he wondered who this woman was. He watched them for some time, leaning against the support pillar of the bridge, feeling like an intruder. The boy, on his second trip upstream, saw Johnny, and froze. Johnny's mother turned to him.

"Your work called," Johnny said loudly, walking toward her. "They're worried. Why aren't you at work?"

His mother didn't flinch. She walked out of the water to him, her expression suddenly sour.

"I call sick," she said. "They stupid." She didn't ask why he wasn't at school. She never did. Water from her pants pooled on the ground between them.

Johnny stared at her for a moment, nodded, and walked to the edge of the bank. "What are you doing?" he asked the boy. He had not intended it, but he recognized a hardness under the question, an accusation.

The boy came over to Johnny and held out the small raft with a toothy grin. "Check it out, man. She made me a raft. It's so *bad*."

Johnny scratched his chin, appraising the raft. It was little more than a stack of long twigs twisted together with blades of grass and string. A little twig shot upward from the middle, a makeshift mast. He was impressed. He had no idea his mother had any experience building anything at all. Johnny's mother peered at the raft, took it from the boy, and moved into the light to examine it better, her sandals making spongy sounds as she walked along the concrete embankment. She mumbled to herself as she replaced a broken twig in the raft's base, her fingers working in small, fast, and jabbing movements. When she was done, she handed the boy the raft, and pointed at its naked mast.

"Okay, boy, use plastic bag. Tear, stretch." Her hands moved as she spoke, trying to convey the instructions to make a sail out of plastic.

The boy nodded enthusiastically and ran upstream along the bank. After a few yards he stopped and turned around. "Thanks!"

Johnny's mother smiled and waved him off.

"That Sammy," she said to Johnny. "*Nguoi mien*." Cambodian.

"Why isn't he in school?"

She shot Johnny a look of annoyance. "Who cares? Huh? You don't care."

"He's a little kid."

She waved her hand and turned upstream to watch Sammy.

Johnny fell silent and followed her lead, watching the boy jump into the water. Sammy bent low and held the raft in the current; the creek pushed and pulled at it, searching for a way to wrest it from his grip. Johnny saw him stiffen for a moment as the nose of the raft twitched and moved, like a directional compass gone haywire. Then he let go.

As they watched the raft float slowly away from Sammy, his mother switched to speaking Vietnamese, as she always did when she had something long to say. Johnny had grown wary of her speeches over the years, annoyed at her attempts to reach him, to control him, and started tuning people out as soon as he heard them speak Vietnamese. But she knew he could understand her, even though his limited vocabulary prevented him from answering. Usually he just nodded and made agreeable grunts. Perhaps it was because of this that she lectured him in Vietnamese.

"I remember," she said softly. "When we first came to America, we were so scared. You were so young, and Daddy and I worried that you wouldn't remember Vietnam." She never spoke about his father, who had died in an accident at the warehouse in Springfield where he worked, loading and unloading photocopying machines.

Johnny stayed silent, watching Sammy splash through the creek, lumbering after the raft.

"There was a little Vietnamese girl," his mother continued. "She was about four or five. This was in 1982, I think." His mother waved her hand, as if it didn't really matter. "She was walking on the street by Stonewall Jackson Middle School."

"Uh huh."

She paused and watched the raft as it weaved around rocks and held steady through miniature whirlpools and waterfalls.

"Someone ran the little girl over and killed her," she said finally. "Terrible. The only child in the family."

Johnny grunted and shook his head.

"The police didn't know who did it. People were so upset—they wrote in to the newspapers, called the radio stations…." She shrugged. "Some people said she deserved it. They said Vietnamese people didn't belong here." She bent down and rolled up her wet pant legs. "This isn't our home, anyway. It's not for us."

"Did they ever catch the driver?" Johnny asked, concentrating on making the right sounds with his mouth.

She nodded, her mouth set in a grimace, like she had tasted something bad, and stepped into the creek. She turned back to him, shaking her head. "It turned out to be a little girl who hit her. Sixteen, I think. She just got her license and didn't even know she ran over someone. She thought she hit an animal. Then one day her mother spoke to her about the dead girl, and how terrible it was that the driver just left her there to die. She

wanted the driver to be found and punished. Then the girl was very quiet and asked, 'What if it was me?'"

Johnny stood silent, not sure how to respond. "Wow," he said finally.

"Mmm," she agreed, nodding. "I wonder if the parents of the dead girl ever had more children. I bet not." She walked to the middle of the creek, the water breaking against her legs, readjusting around her, fitting her in its path, moving with her. She looked down at her feet. "This reminds me of the beach in Malaysia when we arrived at the refugee camp there. You probably don't remember, but I always held you, and we stood in the water, like this, and watched the waves come in and out. Every morning, before everyone woke up. It felt so peaceful standing there. We were in-between everything, far from home, nowhere to go. Like we were outside, or behind everything. Just off to the side, waiting. We almost died—should have died—leaving Vietnam on that boat. Then, we were there at the camp, and I had you and the water every morning, just for a moment, to breathe the beach air, away from the smell of the toilets and the filth, and watch." She drew a squiggly line in the air. "Like that. That's how the water looked when I looked down at my feet. The tide came in, went out. For hours." She turned her back to Johnny and watched Sammy sprint back upstream, the raft in his hands. "It was so beautiful, but then I would turn around, and it would be ugly, because the refugee camp was so full. People everywhere. Nobody cared about anyone else, just themselves and trying to get somewhere, to America or Australia or France or who knows. But going there—anywhere—was the end."

Johnny watched her watching Sammy for a while, trying futilely to pull from his memory the refugee camp, the mad dash out of Vietnam on the boat, and, after a fashion, Vietnam herself, and all the things that were lost to his mother and to him.

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John's mother's apartment seemed to him to be more unkempt than ever before. For a moment he stood, staring around the empty living room, trying to imagine her, sitting on her floral-patterned sofa, or watching television, but mostly he tried to remember something about her, anything at all. He wondered where she had collapsed the day before, where her life petered out of her, draining into—into what? The empty apartment? The air he was now breathing?

In the dining area, on the floor in the corner, a small altar pot with burnt sticks of incense sat, cold and untended. A small, blurry photo of his father in a cheap drugstore frame leaned against the wall behind the altar pot. Boxes filled with canned goods, blankets, and utensils were scattered along the wall, under the coffee table, and next to the sofa. John's mother never told him why she had collected these things, why she didn't put them away when she purchased them and brought them home. He shook his head. Despite the clutter, the apartment seemed empty, vacant. A thin layer of dust covered her things. He realized with a jolt that perhaps she wasn't able to clean as often as she wanted anymore. Her cardiologist had warned her to rest as much as possible, that her cholesterol and blood pressure were at dangerous levels. Walks and an avoidance of stress and strenuous activity had been prescribed, along with medication and a booklet on heart surgery. His mother had left John a message telling him all this the year before, and at the

end of the message, she wondered, shyly, if he might want to come back from Texas to find a job in D.C. “Lot of jobs,” she had said, her voice high-pitched and hopeful. He returned her call with an unfulfilled promise to visit.

Her bedroom was neat, sparse. A full-size mattress, a rare extravagance, sat against the wall on the floor. The plain, dark green sheets were neatly made, the blanket folded and crisp. John lay on her bed, tired, even though it was still light out. Sammy would pick him up in a few hours for his appointment at the funeral home.

As John stared at his mother’s bedroom ceiling, he thought about dust. He had heard once that dust contained high levels of human skin flakes, and that the bed one slept in logically contained the most detritus from that person. John knew it wasn’t true, that while there was inevitably some human skin in dust, it was a negligible amount; but now, for a little while, he let himself believe it. He held his mother’s blanket, absorbing its minty, spicy smell, its scent reminding him of the green rubbing oil she always used on minor injuries. With his eyes squeezed shut, John willed her to him, to wrap herself around him in an embrace, to remind him that she was there, alive, waiting as she always seemed to be. The past few years, after the parties and drinks were done with, and after he got his degree in graphic design and found a career in Texas—all of that seemed unimportant, insignificant. Through it all, he barely remembered her being there, a ghost while she still lived. What had she done in her spare time? What was her life like in Vietnam? What made her laugh, made her happy? He had simply never bothered finding out, having considered her little more than a nuisance, someone he quietly suffered as he grew up and away.

John huddled on his mother's bed in her empty, lifeless apartment, and wondered what it would be like to die, and how she must have felt in her final moments. It wasn't her dying that bothered him, but her fear. When had she known her life was over? Was it when pain coursed through her arm, and pressed against her chest? When light burst behind her eyes? When she fell to the floor, wondering where Sammy was? Sammy. Not John, not Johnny, not Johnny Five, not anyone in her family, but a boy, a stranger who took care of her more than her own blood ever had. John imagined her floating on her back, bobbing up and down in the ocean, alone, staring at the sky, at peace. But she began to sink, slowly at first, then faster, like someone was dragging her down by her ankles. She instinctively took a short, sharp breath, and threw her head back, trying to keep her nose above water. But she plummeted into the foggy, grey ocean, its mix of blues and blacks and browns swirling, covering her head. Her fingers clawed at the water around her, her eyes wide, and she whimpered and kicked. But still the ocean's surface rose higher and higher above her, and the deeper she went, the colder she got. She was vaguely reminded of her escape from Vietnam aboard the makeshift boat that should never have made it to Malaysia. The waves at night during that terrible week towered over them, and she had clutched John, just a baby then, in a death grip, refusing to part from him. But they had made it through. Perhaps the ocean was now simply collecting a debt decades overdue. She stared straight up, at the fuzzy, distorted light breaking through the surface above, and thought she should have died somewhere between Vietnam and Malaysia, that she had wasted the ensuing years gifted to her after giving up her home, her life, and her family. The light dimmed. Down, down, down she sank, her

heart pounding in her head, the beat announcing her to whatever was coming. And as her air ran out, her instincts took hold, and John's mother stretched her arms upward, desperately trying to reach the surface, knowing she wouldn't, until at last she resigned herself, maybe, or cursed her only son for not seeing her, now or ever.

John buried his face in her blanket then, pressing hard, shaking, thinking about the things she would never do, never see, and never accomplish. She'd never visit Hawaii, or see the northern lights in Alaska, or travel the world, or remarry, or give birth to a son who would spend the time to know her, to acknowledge that she was worth knowing. Whatever her life had been was done and over, and John realized that what little he knew of it—of her—would never be enough. And he mourned for what he could not know.

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Rupert Chinn, the owner of Baker Funeral Home, was a large black man, mustachioed and white-haired. He spoke with a slow, southern drawl and a gaze that simultaneously looked weepy and reliable. His office was small, and framed photos of him with various friends and family filled the wall to his right. Behind him, sunlight filtered in through his drawn shades, warming John and Sammy. In the middle of Rupert listing the prices for burials, cremations and various types of caskets, John stopped him.

"Do you do Buddhist services?" It was a wild shot.

Sammy shifted next to him and gave him a strange look, but remained silent.

Rupert paused. "Naw, you'd, ah…." He leaned back in his seat. "Let me see." He stared at the bookshelf to his left, not really searching. "Ah, I remember. Vietnamese, right?"

John nodded.

"You have a normal viewing and all that here, right? Most get cremated, but I don't think it's important one way or the other."

"Okay."

"You got to find a temple, right," he made slow, chopping motions with his left hand and leaned in toward John and Sammy. "No, sorry, it's a pagoda, not a temple. And, ah, let me think." He tapped his fingers on the desk between them. "Pretty sure you got to hold a memorial service there, and the monk'll lead it. Not a big deal, right? So, you got to go and hold a service once a week for seven weeks. About an hour. They'll give you everything you need, I'm sure." He gestured to his forehead. "The white bands you wear. You seen them before?"

John frowned. "Guess I have to find a pagoda for her."

"I know where she went," Sammy said quietly, nodding. "It's this place out in Annandale. It's just a house full of women-monks. They can't get the permits to erect a full-blown pagoda. Government thinks they're terrorists or something." He shrugged, a bemused look on his face. "I don't think they speak English though."

"Okay," John said, grateful and jealous at the same time.

They continued discussing the prices. In the end, John chose a cremation and a round, simple urn with little waves carved into its neck. As they got up so John and Sammy could see John's mother before they started preparing her body, John paused and turned to Rupert.

"You know a lot about the Vietnamese stuff," John said. "Lot more than me."

“Well,” the older man replied. His tongue rolled around his mouth, searching for something. “The Vietnamese started coming some twenty, thirty years ago. Long time.” He nodded as if it was obvious. They stepped outside the brick building, past huge, cursive, white letters on its side that spelled “Baker Funeral Services,” and walked down a short flight of stairs to a separate basement entrance. Rupert paused as he gripped the handle. “We got the third largest Vietnamese population in the country. This one guy told me that, and I doubt he’s lying. What’s the point, right? So we get a good amount of services for Vietnamese. You just pick up on things along the way. Don’t have to know everything, just got to know enough to get a picture of it. Enough to get by, right?”

Rupert led them, single file, into the basement and down a long hallway. John followed Sammy, silent. Fluorescent lights hummed overhead, and a bulletin board on the right was empty except for a few red and green thumbtacks. At the end of the hall, Rupert opened a set of double doors for them.

“My mother told me once that here was just a stopping point,” John said as he stepped past Rupert and into another hallway. “Like she was going somewhere else. This wasn’t home, you know? I mean, it’s my home, sure. But maybe not for her, not ever. I don’t know.”

Sammy laughed. “Yeah, sounds like her.” He shrugged. “Maybe she wanted to go somewhere else. Maybe back to Vietnam.”

“We’re going this way,” Rupert said. He led them into a sterile room that resembled a laboratory.

The lamp overhead cast a bright light down on John's mother's body, which lay on a metal table in the center of the room. A cloth covered her up to her collar, and her arms were arranged at her sides, above the cloth. John looked away.

"Give you a few moments, right?"

The door clicked as it shut behind Rupert, and they were alone. Sammy crossed the room and leaned against a tile wall, facing John. They stood, awkward and silent, not looking at each other, not looking at the body. John folded his arms and stared at the floor, at the grey streaks from the rubber soles of shoes. Slowly he turned to look at his mother's face.

She looked the same as she always did, but empty, like a doll. John stared at her, his eyes traveling along the cracks and crevices of her face, the hollows of her cheeks, the bridge of her nose, and he kept expecting her skin to be smoother, the creases around her eyes, nose, and mouth to be painted on instead of actual wrinkles. He'd heard people say that the dead looked like they were asleep, but to him this wasn't accurate. Something was missing, something that gave her mass, or depth, or weight.

"She doesn't even look real," Sammy said, perhaps reading his thoughts.

"She looks like I remember. But different. I don't know." John sighed. "It's been two years." He pulled up a stool next to the table and sat for long moments in silence, not staring at her, not staring at anything. Just staring, somewhere distant inside. "I shouldn't have left her alone." He could not remember a time when he hadn't left her alone, hadn't run from her, hadn't struggled to be free of her presence. From the corner of his eye, he saw Sammy bow his head, misunderstanding, and John recognized in the

younger man a generosity he never really acknowledged. “I don’t mean you, man. You were great, Sammy. Better than me. I should have been a better son, is all. Or any kind of a son, maybe.”

“It’s fine, man. I’m going to wait outside, okay?” Sammy smiled at John, a sympathetic look, an acknowledgement that he had already said good-bye, had already in his memories the things that John would never have. He clapped John on the shoulder as he walked past. “You know, when I met her, I didn’t know she was your mom.” Sammy shook his head, his face looking suddenly young and childish. “Johnny Five’s mom. Coolest guy around. Sometimes I hoped I’d grow up to be you. But you were always gone. Never there. And she was good, you know? I didn’t have anything, less than nothing, really, and she treated me better than anyone else had ever treated me. I don’t know what I would have done without her all these years. But you’re her son. No matter what, that doesn’t change. Take it or leave it, it doesn’t matter, you know? She loved you—how could she not? It’s still going to be there at the end of it all. Everything she did.”

And then, Sammy too was gone. John stared at his mother. In front of him was her hand, cold and stale on the table. For a long time he sat there quietly, grasping at something he couldn’t quite place. Finally, he reached out and covered her hand with his own. It was tough, like old bread. He felt the knotty knuckles and little scars that adorned her skin, each one with its own story. His mother had worked her fingers hard over the years, in scalding water, through cuts and nicks and sprains. He intertwined his fingers

with hers' and blurred his eyes, pretending that they were connected, that they flowed seamlessly, mother to son, child to parent, blood to blood.

Once, in art school, an instructor declared that people didn't read letters by the shape of the letter; people didn't identify words by the lines that skewed, stretched, or curved to create symbols. They identified words, she had said, by the space between the letters, the shape of the empty, negative space. That it was in that empty space that words took shape, that meaning was given. John hadn't believed her, but now, for a moment, with his mother, he understood. He knew that his view of her, incomplete and consisting of only short moments, and filled with the empty, negative space of her absence, created something more, something solid, with multiple sides, and a story that only she knew. And the image he had of her was filled with that space, that sense of unknowing, and, taken with what little he did know, drew a complete picture. She wouldn't be who she was to him if that empty space was filled with anything else, anything at all. She was his mother. Whatever that meant, John accepted it with something he hoped was love.

John quietly got up and pulled from his pocket the stack of Post-It notes that he had drawn on the plane. There were no stick figures, or violent deaths, or fights, or cartoon figures. It was filled with squiggly lines. He set it down next to her head, and flipped through it. The lines moved up and down the pages, slowly receding before rushing back. It went on and on like that, until he reached the first page, which was the last. Then he flipped it again, and imagined what it would be like to stand with his feet in the sand on a beach in Vietnam or Malaysia, and watch the water move in and out. The pad's sheets fluttered, compressing the empty area between the pages as they flipped in

rapid succession, releasing a short breeze, and pushing out something that felt to him like a living breath.

BIOGRAPHY

Dan Hong graduated from Falls Church High School, Fairfax, Virginia, in 1999 and received his Bachelor of Arts from the University of Mary Washington in 2011.