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This thesis is a compilation of short stories around the theme of home. The characters struggle with how home shapes their values and desires. They seek to reconcile where they've come from with who they presently are and who they wish to become. Most of the characters are looking for a place to belong.

CAN'T GO HOME

by

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Approved by

Committee Chair

To my husband, Chris Donald.

APPROVAL PAGE

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KEEP THE BALANCE

Linh, eleven, sat down after school to write a list of all the boys she loved by order of priority. She was ready: she wore her rosary, did a Hail Mary because it had the line “pray for us sinners,” she had a clean sheet of paper and a glittery purple pencil reserved for important words. She wanted God and Jesus and Mary to have no wiggle room; they needed to keep the people on her list in her life.

Linh was alone in her bedroom, cross-legged on her twin bed. She hated being alone there, especially at night. Through her window, winter’s early dusk streaked pink and purple in the sky. The street lamps and holiday lights of her neighbors were on and would soon force shadows from the trees. She could feel how, on the other side of Lisport, Connecticut, darkness was already settling in and around the tall buildings downtown, oozing up and flowing down the icy length of Main Street, past the hospital, the city Christmas Tree, neon-signed shops, the churches, the laundromats and into the neighborhoods. The dark would not heed stoplights or signs as it spread and approached her street.

Her house was one of a dozen similar cape-style homes bunched on the sides of a hilled street. The snow-coated lawn glistened, the walk de-iced and swept clean. To one side of the lawn was a waist-high statue of the Virgin Mary that stood atop a cement platform. The platform was shaped like a large star. Her father had shaped the clean

lines, sharpened the points that jutted out in the earth. Between the arms of the star were red plastic poinsettias.

The house, it seemed to Linh, swayed and moaned with each gust of wind. Her bedroom was a small attic room with walls that slanted with the roofline. Along one wall were sliding doors that hid storage closets her mother used to store old clothes and hangers. If the wind blew hard enough, the doors rattled in their mechanisms and the hangers scratched against the door like small trapped hands. In the sound of the wind, its whistle and sighs, Linh sometimes thought she could discern pleas and threats. Many nights, she would cover her ears and run downstairs to slip between the warm refuge of her mom and dad. When she told her parents her room was haunted, they told her not to talk about it—fear and talk attracted ghosts.

Out loud she said, “I’m not afraid.”

She stroked the rosary at her neck and breathed in, then set down the first name in the list. Daddy. She smiled, felt a surge of gratitude. Her daddy loved her best of all. Next, she wrote down male relatives in Vietnam she had never met: great-grandpa, both grandpas, and her parent’s twelve brothers. Her fingers cramped. She opened her hand and shook them, then put the pencil back against the smooth pencil-indent in her middle-finger.

Her throat was tight. The name that whispered through her head day and night was next. Linh listened for the sound of her father’s gray truck on the driveway. Once he was home, there would be no time for lists. Linh had to go downstairs to greet him with her mother, a housewife. Linh gave him a kiss on his bristly cheek and, as he took

his seat on the couch, she turned on News 8. Linh left with her mother to get him a fresh iced coffee and, if the set of his jaw were relaxed, she sat beside him. She liked to lean her head against the hard muscle of his bicep and breathe in his sweat and cigarette smoke. Together, they watched the badness of the outside world.

Linh heard only her mother in the kitchen-- the bang of cabinets opening and closing, water spilling into a teapot, the click-hiss of the stove, the clang of metal on metal. Linh pressed her pencil into the paper until a dark gray indent appeared. She dragged the pencil to the first hard cross of T, next the straight line of I, and then the sharp up and down peaks of M. She breathed out and read, "TIM." It was as if, by writing his name, she had drawn a lasso around him and pulled him towards her.

Tim Olsen was a boy in her fifth grade class at High Horizons School. He was blonde haired, blue-eyed, and carried an easy smile that made the teachers shake their head and say, "What a cutie." When Ms. Moreno read out the names of the top math students each week, she pronounced their names as if they were two beats of one name: LinhTim.

Ms. Moreno held a math competition each week. The first partners to finish the worksheet with perfect scores received a gold chocolate coin. Because of some alchemy related to alphabetical order, Linh and Tim were partners. Linh later realized that this was a mark of destiny she had missed. A precious two months had passed during which Tim was nothing more than a friend. She had come to know him well: they shared a secret love of *Goosebumps* (even though that was for little kids), he liked oranges better than bananas, and he could laugh so hard it sounded like gasping.

Ms. Moreno handicapped them five minutes in the third month of school in order to give the other kids a chance to win. To win was delicious, but to win with a handicap? It was a new and deeper thrill.

Linh turned to Tim and said, "We'll crush them."

His eyes grew wide and his smile seemed to waver in the corners.

They skated down the problems until the last one. No one else had won. Annie and Deb had gone up to Ms. Moreno with their sheet, but had two wrong answers to fix. Tim hovered over the steps needed to turn 0.875 into a fraction as Linh double-checked the other answers. He wrote $875/1000$ then stopped, his pencil resting on the page.

Linh leaned in and whispered, " $175/200$."

Tim wrote down the figures, but stopped again. His breathing was shallow. He looked to her. He was panicking; denominator and numerator ending in 5 and 0 meant divisible by five. He knew this.

She took the pencil from him and wrote $35/40$ then $7/8$. She put the pencil down.

Tim laughed then said aloud, "You're awesome."

He waved his hand to draw Ms. Moreno's attention. With his free hand, Tim drew a smiley face on the corner of Linh's desk, lifted his pencil, then put it back down to draw a second smiley face, then another.

Linh felt a flutter of excitement quite separate from the sense of victory. She did not know it was love until later when he presented her with his gold coin.

"It's really yours," he said. It sat on his open palm. Linh loved the shiny gold foil, its crinkling sound as she peeled it back to reveal the sweet dark chocolate.

Linh shrugged and held her hands to stop them from taking the glinting coin. There were two rules holding her fingers back: one, they were partners and it was not fair to take his share of the spoils and two, her parents had told her it was the Vietnamese way to always say “no” first to any offer especially if she wanted it.

Tim reached out to touch the dark strands of hair that flowed over her shoulders and down her back. He held a length in his hand then let go.

“Your name is soft like your hair.”

Linh spent the rest of the day in a glittering ecstasy where the very act of breathing felt new and miraculous.

Two weeks later, Ms. Moreno announced that Tim and his family were moving to Somerville, Massachusetts. The town name sounded like endless sun. He would forget her. Linh began her list that night.

Linh traced her finger over the letters she’d written. Over and over. Tim, Tim, Tim. She saw their destiny: he would stay in Lisport; they would marry; they would have two kids, a boy and a girl. He was white and she knew, even then, that this was a problem, but love triumphed over all.

Linh took her list of names and rolled it into a tight scroll no larger than a pencil. It felt hard and sharp. With a piece of red string, she tied the scroll in place so that her wishes would not spill out. Linh kissed it. Then she lifted her mattress and the dust ruffle to get at a small hand-wide slit she had carefully cut into the box spring. She placed the paper into the slit along with the other things she hoped her parents would never find. There was the empty gold-edged journal with a lock, a birthday gift from an

American friend. She suspected her parents would not like the lock's suggestion of secrets. The slit also held three graded homework assignments with large round Bs written at their head and arm-length scraps of wood her father used to hit her.

The paper, she was sure, was magic. She had made it magical. At night, it seemed to warm the bottom of her bed. All she needed to do was keep her toes over its hiding spot. Her toes fed the paper with her longing, kept it alive and bright so that Jesus and Mary could not miss it. If she moved her toes in the middle of night, if she woke up with her knees pressed to her chest, arms wound around them, it was a betrayal. The powers looking in might think she didn't really care or worse, they might just pass her by. There was no telling how to keep things in balance.

Tim moved. Linh felt as if the powers that be, Jesus and Mary and God, had all forsaken her and she was alone. This feeling would carry her well into adulthood, crystallized into an ethos of self-reliance. But as a child, Linh wept. Then, when she remembered the other names on the list, she cried anew. Her father and her relatives in Vietnam would disappear or die and it was the natural consequence of her failure. How many nights had she woken up with her toes in the wrong place? There were already signs that she was just at the start of her loss. Her father's threats to leave her mother seemed more weighted — *Let's see how you live without me. You're nothing without me. You're dead meat.* She began to follow her father around the house and on every errand. The not knowing, the promise of some greater harm was too painful to endure in wait. If he disappeared or died, she wanted to see it.

Her father seemed to like her attention at times; he smiled when he found her outside the bathroom, laughed when he ran into her around the corner. Other times, an angry dark fog pulsed from him. She imagined how the invisible thick air spread from their house and dampened all the noise of Lisport. The whole city held its breath. But if he were not in sight, not making noise, she had to check. He might already be gone. She pressed her small body nearer even when her mother whispered to go to her room or go outside.

As long as she stayed out of arm's reach, she was safe, but he moved so quickly. One second he was at one end of the room and the next he was in front of her. He might shove her against a wall, kick her in the shin, or punch her where the bruises would not show. If she stayed still and limp and let herself cry, he might settle for yelling. He used a string of Vietnamese and English words spoken with the harsh grinding of a stuck engine. If she listened beyond the words—*stupid, ngo, useless, mac dai, you deserve this, wish you weren't born*—they were not words at all, but a rhythm of sound that beat with the clock's ticking, the hum of the refrigerator, a car door outside being shut and closed. Her mother's pleas, if they were there, were a higher note, closer to the birds or the kids' laughter outside. The metallic ring of a blow to the back of her head reminded Linh of the gold coins, the tinny taste of chocolate laced with aluminum. She thought of Tim and how all this was deserved.

#

The days, then weeks and months and years passed. Each succession of time, time that her father appeared alive and well and all her relatives in Vietnam had not died, made her less afraid. She still stretched her feet out at night from habit and superstition, but she didn't feel bad if she forgot. The hollow spot where she kept the memory of Tim had faded. She began to forget him. There was so much living to do: lice epidemic in fifth grade, Mom had a fractured wrist in sixth, the same year Linh won the science fair in went to the state finals. There was a picture published in the newspaper of her, her mom with her cast and her dad, both smiling as they stood with Linh by the trophy. She had a crush on Davey, then Nick, then Steve in seventh; she managed the whole year without speaking to any of the three and did not write their names down. There were disruptions at home from time to time—her father's fist making dull thuds into her mother or her until the house, grunt and whimper, became quiet again. And then it was a new day.

By eighth grade, the slit in Linh's box spring had grown to become three hands wide. The box spring sagged with bounty: old scrunched up papers, tests she no longer remembered taking, Cosmo magazines promising toe-curling techniques, notes from classmates complaining about their parents, the "growing up kit" that held a tampon and mini-deodorant, and a will in case her father killed her. If she stared too long at the bed, she had visions of her parents ripping open the box spring with knives, of their anger and weeping over her hidden self, especially her half-full gold-edged journal. But how could she get rid of it? Linh would have to carry the contraband piece by piece from her room, down the long flight of steps, across the living room—perhaps her mother or father

would be there and she'd have to greet them, say a word or two, get permission to leave the house (unlikely)—then inch her way out the door, down the driveway and walk the two long blocks to the corner store dumpster. And what then? Someone might see her, tell her parents, or a wind might pick up and carry the papers into the street and into the open window of her father's car door.

There was a trick she discovered to still these thoughts and the tightness in her chest—she chose not to see the box spring. It was not there at all. When she needed to hide something, the box spring appeared again, but as soon as she laid the mattress down, it was gone. She had not-seen many things about her parents, her friend Sara's self-inflicted red scratches up and down her arms, Mrs. Vescey's glares in her direction whenever she got a math question right, Mr. Bottombaum's hand sliding down Liz's back when he thought no one was looking. Not seeing a box spring was easy.

#

Linh stood on the corner to wait for her bus to school to High Horizons. It was mid-October and the morning was full of mist. The cars drove by on the just-rained on pavement with the wet sound of a hungry tongue inside a mouth. Linh imagined running into the street and into one of the cars, swallowed whole and carried away.

She had five more years until college. All she had to do between now and then was to get perfect grades so that colleges would give her money. She would ignore anything else that might get in the way. Her parents supported her in this goal and

reminded her that the sole reason why they left Vietnam and sacrificed everything was for her success. Her job was to excel and anything short of that was both a personal and familial failure. She believed them. Her version of success, however, did not include the local college, but one far away. The only way, it seemed, to attain this dream was absolute excellence. Once she left home, her life could begin. A ruthless want beat in her chest.

One of the cars rolled up to Linh's corner. The door opened and a blast of music spilled out. Tim stepped from the car. He was dressed in a gray hoodie, his body a stretched out version of the boy Linh knew. He pulled the hood over his head, his face hidden now by a shield of cotton. The driver, an older boy, sped off. Silence reclaimed the corner.

Perhaps this boy was not Tim. He stared off across the street, his full attention consumed by a red stop sign. He looked like he wanted to be left alone. Too much time had passed, anyway, for her to greet him. A pattern had been set. They would ignore each other. What was Tim doing back? Did this mean he lived nearby? Perhaps he was standing there for some other reason. When the bus arrived, she could maybe say, "Oh—didn't see you. Going to Hell Horizontals too?" Then she'd laugh and flip her hair. Linh stared down at her shoes and kicked her toes into a broken corner of concrete. A piece loosened and skittered into the street. Tim might not remember her at all.

"Linh?" Tim said.

She blinked at him. His face was red. She could feel the heat rising in hers.

"Going to Hell Horizontals."

“What?”

She laughed. Then he began to laugh. The sounds eased into the air above them and intertwined. They kept laughing. The sound seemed to pulse backwards through time, erasing the years they spent apart. They had never been apart; that was all a dream.

Linh glanced behind her towards the white house three doors down. Could her father see that time had shifted and folded onto itself? She knew he was standing at the window, waiting for her to get on the bus before he left for work. Linh could see only the dark rectangles of the window, eyeless and hollow.

#

Tim began to write Linh letters within the week. He was not an impulsive person and kept a measured distance from great sweeps of emotion. Later, as an adult, girlfriends would complain that he was closed off. But Linh-- Linh filled him with an ecstasy that verged on pain. He wrote on a legal pad in the middle of the night, his mind fevered with the thoughts and feelings that untangled from him in a wild mass: “Dear Linh, I feel like someone is choking and shaking me when you’re near,” or “Dear Linh, Being near you is like being punched in the stomach but in a good way.”

After his third letter, Linh told him she was not allowed to date. Also, he needed to not look at her or talk to her at the bus stop. Her father watched; he was strict. She told him this with a deep blush, her voice small as if in apology. “But you don’t have to stop writing me.” Linh continued to take the seat beside him on the #5 bus. The high

brown vinyl walls of the seat held them away from the other kids and their shouts and cries. He could, if he thought she would not shrink from him, reach out and hold her hand.

Tim hadn't wanted to move back to Lisport with his mom and Steve, his seventeen-year old brother. But the whole shift of his family's life felt a little better with Linh there. Sometimes, if he looked hard enough at her—the pale skin, dark hair, the warm gaze of her attention—he found himself in a different, better world. He had her, whatever else, at least, he had her.

Tim's father had passed away six months earlier. When their mother said they had to move from Somerville, he became convinced his life was amounting to nothing more than a series of losses. He had friends. A life. How could she do this? Their mother, red-eyed, was firm.

“Look, boys, we just don't have the money....” She looked towards the dining room table. Bills lay in stacks of various heights and formed their own cityscape, the hospital the tallest building. “And we can't stay here.” She didn't say that she hated Somerville, but she didn't have to. He'd heard her say it to his father so many times echoes of it still clung to the walls.

“Fuck that, I'm staying here,” Steve said.

“Stephen, please—just this once—”

Tim mimicked his father's response when his mother complained about Somerville, his voice deep and low. “Baby, we can't go back, there's only forward.”

His mother glared at him with something like hatred. Steve laughed.

Tim Sr., had been six-foot-nine and nearly three-hundred pounds, though it was easy to forget. He preferred to sit while he spoke and walked in a perpetual lean and slouch. Laid out at the wake in a custom-sized coffin, everyone said some version of, “I didn’t know he was so big.” His father—or the thing in the coffin that looked so like his father, but was not—was sixty pounds lighter. Tim, Sr. was sick for three months and then he was very sick. Then he was gone. Gone was a hard word. It was not the right word for the sudden blankness that filled their home.

Tim expected to see his father at every turn. There was the armchair with his shape, a left sock in the bottom of the hamper, the half-empty can of shaving cream by the sink, the flickering light his mother couldn’t reach without a chair. Sometimes, he could believe that he’d entered a room just as his father left, but then the air was too still, the apartment was empty of footsteps, and he knew.

Most people found a way to ask what killed him. Tim could hear the question on their breath before they spoke it. They shifted their foot, leaned back, brows furrowed, and said, “So was it an accident?” or maybe “Was he sick?” His father’s death was their guessing game. He sometimes told the truth: lung cancer. Then he lied—*my father was not a smoker*. He was honest once. Mrs. Murphy down the street had given him a thin-lipped look that said, “Well, smoking does that,” like his father’s death was a natural consequence, right and fitting, as if he asked to leave them.

Tim knew about smoking and cancer—it said so right on the label. He wasn’t stupid. Still, after dinner, when his father said, “Let’s have a look at the neighborhood,” Tim followed him to the screened-in porch. Steve never came; he was always in a hurry

to hang out with friends his dad called “hoodlums.” Their apartment was on the second floor of a former one-family home. The porch floor tipped downwards so that Tim half-expected to roll onto the street. He pressed his chair against the wall.

They didn’t bother with lights; the neighbors could see them if they turned those on. They watched the odd car come down their one-way street; headlights illuminating the parked cars that lined the street. They interrupted the silence with comments that needed no response: “Headlights need cleaning,” or “Trees getting into the power lines.” What was it about these mumbled words that gave Tim such a sense of safety? The only other sound was the click-hiss of his father’s lighter every five minutes. The sudden orange flame would appear and cast shadows into the grooves of his father’s face as he leaned forward, cigarette in mouth. His dad puffed, the flame disappeared, and they were sunk back into a dark deeper than before. A bright point of red glowed with each of his father’s steady inhales.

Linh’s father was a smoker. He could sometimes smell the acrid hint on her clothes and if she turned fast, it lingered underneath the perfume of her hair. He said nothing of this, but he had begun to think of their fates as shared. Someday, her father might get sick too, and he would know better than anyone else what she felt. Her fixation on school and grades would come to mean nothing.

At the bus stop, Linh and Tim stood apart. His chest was heavy with the desire to be closer, to breathe in the same small space of air that Linh did. They did not speak. Her father began to idle his gray truck by the corner, his eyes fixed on Tim. He chain-smoked so that there was always a haze in the car’s cabin, as if her father existed inside

his own ecosystem. If Tim met his gaze, her father smiled and Tim smiled back. Then her father's smile disappeared quick as it came.

They both smiled and breathed easy, laughed even, once the bus pulled away. They spent the twenty-minute ride to and from school talking, their foreheads resting on the seat ahead of them, their faces turned towards each other. They complained about school, talked about least favorite foods (red peppers for her, bananas for him), whether Mrs. Donaldson was really a witch. Within a month, Tim began to tell her about his family, though he avoided the topic of his father—it felt somehow sacrilegious. He described how Steve poured vodka into his morning Coke, replaced it with water in the sink, and put it back into the cabinet like it was nothing. Or how, late at night, he could hear his mother crying. And how, in the evening, if his brother were home, his mother might join them to watch re-runs of *The Simpsons* and they all laughed together. Then his mom might say, “Wish we could do this every night,” and his brother would say, “I bet you do,” and there would be a fight.

Though Linh's family was intact and peaceful, she seemed to understand when he said, “It's like there's no sense to things. Nothing's safe.” These fevered pourings left him scraped clean and tingly. Linh began to hold his hand as they spoke, her fingers intertwined with his. Their palms would get sweaty, but neither let go. Her touch settled something inside himself and he began to feel empty and adrift as soon as they got off the bus.

“I think your father would like me,” Tim said.

It was the second straight month of hand-holding and letter-writing. They were on the bus again, their hands resting on top of each other's. They had different eighth grade classes so the bus was their only time together. Tim wanted more. He wanted to press his lips against her skin, run his hand over her body, breathe in deeply the scent of her. Anything but this endless friendship. He hoped her parents would find one of his letters, would see the depth and sincerity of his feeling.

Linh, her lips pressed tight, said, "Maybe." It was the "maybe" she used to say "no."

"Why not?"

"That's not how things are." She pulled her hand away.

"Come on—what's the big deal? Your dad and me, we have things in common. My dad smoked Marlboros too."

Linh looked at Tim. There was pity in her eyes. He was angry about that pity—that's not what he meant. But there was warmth too. He felt like he was falling. He reached for her hand and she did not pull away. Her hand was soft. If he squeezed it, it might break.

Linh put her hand to his cheek and leaned in. It seemed like she might kiss him. Instead, she leaned her forehead against his, her dark hair falling against his cheeks.

She said, "I'm sorry."

Her hair smelled like cigarettes. He breathed her in. They stayed that way for the whole twenty-minute bus ride.

#

To Linh, Tim was a wild and reckless boy. He stared at her father. He joked with Ms. Danielson, their teacher, and made her laugh. He was as tall as the adults and looked them in the eye. There was a hint of mustache on his upper-lip—not much, he had to turn just-so in the light, but the thin blond hairs were there. Nothing bothered him. And the notes! After school each day, in her bedroom, she looked through her book bag for where Tim slipped the yellow papers. They were ridiculous and wonderful and she'd never felt more alive. She kissed each page, tried to sniff them for the scent of him, then put them in her box spring. She didn't write back. She was tempted, but she was tempted by so many things—his touch, the heat of his breath. These things were better to put away. But in the meantime, there was no harm in enjoying this attention. And what was the touch of fingertips? This was just playing.

She carried around the joy, a warm secret that lived in her chest, and nurtured its glow even as her mother snapped, “What are you smiling about?” and her father's face darkened. She pitied them and their terrible Tim-less world. If she let a sigh slip or looked them straight in their eyes, her parents pounced, their mouths filled with reprimands about duty, sacrifice, and obedience. Her father pushed her against the wall and shook her as he yelled. They forbade television and confiscated her novels. Linh knew the right responses and she mouthed them – *sorry father, I will do better, I will be a good daughter, please forgive me--* but she began to say them too fast, the words dry and dull in her mouth. The last time, her father's face turned a deeper shade of red. He

punched the wall beside her head and left a cracked indent in the drywall. Linh felt a shock of fear and pleasure. She could piss him off on purpose.

Her mother cornered her one day after school and told her how important it was to maintain peace, to not provoke her father, how much the delicate balance of their lives relied on their quiet. Linh looked at her mother's small nervous face. Her mother's eyes kept returning to the door, as if her father would appear any moment in a rage (he hated if they whispered together). Linh thought, *five more years*. An impossible time. Out loud, she sighed, an elaborate long sound.

Her mother stiffened, then left the room.

Linh complained about her parents to Tim. They didn't understand things. They were old-fashioned. But she never said her father hit them. Instead, over time, she found ways to study Tim's lost father. Linh had studied the fathers of television and books, but their stories were false, either too much violence or none at all. The men that Linh came across-- the clerk at the store, her teacher, the principal, the bus driver—seemed kind, but she wondered what sort of terror they visited on their families. Her mother and other adults said, "You never know what goes on in other families," and Linh understood that everyone suffered at home.

In their fourth month of friendship, Linh began to circle more tightly around the topic of Tim's father. Tim avoided mentioning his father. It lingered between them, this bruised spot.

Tim, on the bus ride home, told her about the previous night. Steve and his mother were in one of their epic fights and she had picked up a clock like she was about to throw

it. She did not, but his brother left the house in a huff. Linh shook her head at this.

Steve's habit of leaving the house was the luxury of a boy in a fatherless house.

"I bet, if your dad were there, he'd be pissed." Linh leaned her head against the window so that the question seemed innocent. She imagined the elder Tim shoving Steve into a wall, Steve's head snapping back with the click of teeth.

Tim shrugged, looked uncomfortable. "I don't know."

"He never got angry?" Linh looked down at her hands.

Tim frowned. "Sure—I mean, yeah—who doesn't?"

"Did he break things?"

Tim ran a hand through his hair, sighed. He seemed to be about to say one thing, but then said, "Once, he put his plate down so hard in the sink, he broke it. My mom was so pissed about that." He gave a short joyless laugh. "Yeah, she was real pissed."

Linh pictured the fight, the way Tim's mother cried and begged his father to stop, how his father yelled as he slammed dish after dish into the sink. They would try to trace the logic of his words, look for the key to calming him, but they would fail. He would come for them next, his fists their own machines. And Tim and Steve and his mother would think, it must end soon, but it would keep going. They would begin to think their bodies were numb, but then would come another blow and a blossom of bone-deep pain. Later, his mother would come to his father with a hot towel and ointment for his fists. She would sit beside him on the couch and apologize as she massaged his hand. But that was done for his family now. They had fatherless peace. Linh felt a twist of jealousy.

Tim's jaw was set firm and he bounced his knees up and down, as if he were nervous or anxious or both. Linh placed a hand on his knee and he stopped bouncing. She guessed at the deep guilt he must feel for telling her anything at all.

"It's okay," she said and squeezed his hand.

#

Linh knew something was wrong as soon as she came home from school. She'd already taken off her winter jacket. The house was orderly as always. The living room was freshly vacuumed. The scent of lemon cleaner floated from the bathroom. The remote controls were placed on the coffee table just so. But a chill seemed laced into the air, like the cautious morning after a fight.

Linh came into the kitchen. Her mother was bent over the sink, her fingers scrubbing at a plate with a force that made Linh instantly nervous.

"Cut a tomato," her mother said without turning around. The clang of dishes was loud enough that Linh almost missed her mother's next comment. "You are a foolish, foolish girl."

What had her father found out? She would deny everything. Linh took the knife from the block. She went to the refrigerator. For a moment, the cold air stunned her, and she forgot where the tomatoes were kept. Each vegetable seemed foreign. Her father's truck rumbled on the driveway. He was home early. Linh closed the refrigerator door and placed the knife down. Her hands were not steady.

Her mother came and put an iced coffee into Linh's hands. "Go, greet your father."

Her father glared at her when she offered the coffee. He took it, but then said, "Go up to your room and bring down everything inside your mattress."

Linh flinched. "There's nothing..."

"Do it."

She walked up the steps. On her bed was a pile of letters from Tim, her journal, the whole box spring emptied out onto the sheets. She wondered if she should just maybe take one or two of the older things, claim ignorance. Someone had given her these things to hide. No, it came with the mattress. No, it was—she felt a well of tears and swallowed it down. He knew. There was nothing else to it.

Linh took an armload and carried the pile downstairs and placed it on the coffee table. Then she went back upstairs and took another. Three trips it took and her father watched the entire time as her mother stood by the living room entrance. At the bottom of the steps was the front door and Linh thought, if she moved quickly, she could just leave. Let them have their piles of evidence. Had they read it all? She longed for Tim, his hand. Linh touched her cheek, surprised to find tears.

"Is that all?" her father said.

She nodded and sat in a chair across from his seat on the couch. She wiped at her eyes. Her father reached into the pile and pulled out her journal. It was already unlocked.

He began to read, “My dad is so so mean. He thinks he’s the big boss.” He laughed. Linh felt a flash of hope—laughter was good, wasn’t it? Perhaps he would think the whole thing were some kind of big joke. He could forgive her. Linh tried to edge up a smile to join him, but he glared at her. “This is funny to you?”

“No, sir,” she said, and cast her eyes down.

Her father reached into the pile again and pulled out one of Tim’s letters. Linh’s heart flopped and a wave of nausea hit her. “ ‘Dear Linh, Being near you is like being punched in the stomach but in a good way.’ ”

He laughed again. “Is this real? You and your friend, you must laugh about how stupid your father is. Look, such a stupid man, I can write and say and do what I want. Tell me, is this what you and Tim do?”

“No,” Linh said. “No, that’s not it—” Tears began to obscure her vision. She could see no way out.

He stood up and punched her in the side of her head, a quick hard snap. Blackness and stars took her sight, but she was back again, the carpet rough against her cheeks. She forced her body upright again from the floor. The world looked strange and sharp.

Her father said, “You’ve said enough. So much to say all the time. So much to write.”

She wondered if he would kill her. If he tried, she would fight back. He struck her again and her shoulder cracked against the coffee table before hitting the ground. Should she get up? Or was it better to stay on the ground?

Her mother said, “Tell your father you’re sorry—you’re sorry, aren’t you? Foolish girl. Husband—she is sorry. Such a bad daughter. Linh, say you’re sorry right now.”

“Shut up,” he said, “This is because of you. This is your fault.”

He picked Linh up by the collar of her shirt and threw her against the couch. He began to punch her in her upper arms, her thighs, her stomach—all places that no one would see the bruises. Each time she moved, he told her to stay still, and so she stayed still. He called her a whore, a waste of space, deceitful, and evil. Linh thought of Tim. She stared at the pattern in the couch and made herself hide in it. It was a field of flowers and she just had to trace the weave up, then down, as it folded into splotches of red and blue. Somewhere in there, Tim hid, if only she could stay with it. But then a shock of pain would jolt her outside and she would have to crawl back inside again.

The blows stopped and she heard her father pant. He cracked his knuckles.

Her mother said, “Husband, you should rest. Punish her later. You must be thirsty.”

Linh felt her mother come close and place a soft hand on her head. Her voice shook.

“Shut up,” her father said. “I’m getting the sticks you hid.”

She heard him climb the steps to her bedroom. He would pull them out and lash them against the back of her legs, her buttocks, and her back until his arm was sore.

Linh sat up to a wave of dizziness.

Her mother in a quiet voice said, “It will be over soon. Apologize. Just apologize.”

Linh stood and took a step towards the front door. Her mother gripped her arm and she shook it off.

“What are you doing? Don’t do this.”

Linh turned the knob on the front door. A deep gust of cold wind startled her. The night was so dark, the lights so dim. The quiet outside seemed alien and she, for a brief moment, wondered if she could exist in it. It might not be real after all.

Her father began to descend the steps fast.

Linh pushed herself into the night, the chill air sharp and painful against her cheeks. She began to run.

#

Linh’s lungs stung with cold as she rounded up to Tim’s door. His house glowed yellow with light from within. She paused in front of the door, ran her fingers through her hair, and wiped her face with a sleeve. Her hand shook as she rang the doorbell. The electric buzz seemed to come straight from her, its deep insect scream her real voice.

Tim opened the door, his surprise edged with delight and concern. Then he blushed. Tim was in pajama bottoms; black with a ninja star pattern. She thought of his bed, his legs, the thinness of the fabric, and blushed. He might turn her away. The whole world was nothing but terrible possibility.

“God, Linh,” he said. “Come in. Where’s your coat?”

She forced her lips into a smile. She locked the door behind her, turning the knob to make double sure. The room had one exit, but surely there was a back door down a hall. The windows were curtained, which was good, though she might not see her father coming. She imagined him in the dark street, his legs pumping with the force of his anger.

“I—I came to visit,” Linh said, the smile firm at the corner of her lips. The heat felt good. She could smell meat cooking in the house. Her mouth watered at the deep sweet scent. Tim’s living room was warm, hot even, and cluttered with moving boxes and books. A bowl of potato chips sat half-full on the coffee table and an infomercial for a vacuum was on. A salesman vacuumed a rug of bolts and coins. It seemed to Linh that she could pull a blanket from off the side of the couch, curl up there, and sink into their lives.

“What’s wrong?” Tim said.

“We—I. My dad and me got into a fight,” Linh said. A triumph surged through her that was made more electric with fear. “I ran away.”

“You what?” Tim said.

His incredulity, the scrunched look of concern on his face, wounded her. She felt foolish. Still, she reached out her hand because she did not know how to ask for help. He grasped her fingers and some jangling part of herself calmed. Things would be okay. Nothing bad, it seemed, could happen.

A throat cleared behind them. Linh released Tim's hand, practically tossed it aside. His mother stood at the door to the entrance to the living room, a dishrag in hand.

"Mrs. Olsen," Linh said. She looked at Tim, who seemed angry and embarrassed. A vigorous training in politeness took over and Linh, as if from a great distance, began to speak to Mrs. Olsen with a large smile. "I'm very pleased to meet you. You have a lovely home."

"Thank you, dear," Tim's mother said. She looked at the small red-faced girl, a girl who'd obviously been crying, and the flush of her son's cheeks. She felt a touch of hurt silence between the two. When had he gotten a girlfriend? Perhaps he'd broken up with her and, heartbroken, she came to the house. Mrs. Olsen, in her day, had done a thing or two like that. Everyone begs sometimes. But Tim—how had she not known? So much had slipped in the past few months. What other secret lives did her children have? The girl looked at her with fear and Mrs. Olsen sighed. A good girl, at least, not like Steve's girlfriends, who crawled in and out of the house at all hours like her home was a brothel. "Does your mother know where you are?"

A timer went off in the kitchen and Tim willed his mother to go away. She lingered a moment, promised to return, then left. As soon as she stepped aside, Tim spoke in low tones to Linh. She still wore a smile pulled too tight at the edges. The look frightened him.

"What happened?" he said.

“My dad and me—he found some stuff where I said bad things about him, your letters.” A protective impulse controlled her next words. She could not betray her family—though she already had—though no, no, that’s not what she’d done at all.

“Oh.”

“So now I can’t go home. He won’t forgive me.” She was near tears.

“But I mean—Sure you can go home. I mean, it’s your dad.”

“I hate him,” she said. “I wish he were dead.”

Tim recoiled. “Don’t say things like that.”

“But you don’t have to feel bad any more. Your dad is dead.” Linh look at Tim’s hurt face with surprise. What had she said? She repeated herself, to try and get him to understand. “Things are better, aren’t they?”

“Linh, maybe you should go home,” Tim said. Linh looked like a stranger to him, an ungrateful awful stranger who had never really listened to him. Rage blackened the edges of the room. He felt tricked. Tim wanted to shove her out, but he would not. Time folded the hurt parts of himself inside, rolled it up tight and stuffed it away.

Linh could see Tim retreat and she thought, of course. Who was she to the fraternity of men?

The doorbell rang, that horrible buzzing sound. Linh stiffened.

Tim opened the door and her father stood there. Not breathless. Calm. She saw his truck parked on the driveway behind him. He smiled at her.

“So that’s where you went,” her father said then laughed. “Time to go home now, daughter.”

Mrs. Olsen came out. Mrs. Olsen was nearly her father's height. It didn't seem possible that anyone was taller than her father, but there it was for her to see. They exchanged greetings, their smiles cordial.

"Would you like some water?" Mrs. Olsen said. Her voice was tight, her eyes drawn. She was tired and hoped he would say no. The air was spiked and delicate. Her father shook his head. This was the public father—the kind one who smiled, and joked, the one no one had to feel guilty about leaving a child with. Her father beckoned Linh to come to him. When she didn't move, the edges of his smile faded and he said, "Come on now."

Tim watched her father and he could see the outlines of cruelty, of the strictness Linh complained about. What twisted his chest with jealousy was the way he placed his hand on Linh's shoulder. It was a father's firm grasp.

Her father's grip hurt, his fingers dug into her shoulders along the bone. The night was empty and dark as they walked from Tim's house. The warmth seeped out of her. The jagged cold air ached her lungs.

THE BOARDERS

Trinh knew it might be a costly mistake, but she'd frightened David and Amanda. The siblings had spent the two weeks living with her as near-ghosts, disappearing from view in a flurry of polite apologies. She had no cause to suggest they were gangsters or thieves or tell them to not touch anything, even if they were Cambodian. They, in fact, seemed very kind, gentle, and made their beds each morning, the sheets tucked tight in the corners. So even though the fish-monger said, "No ma'am, the salmon isn't on sale," and a voice in her head said, "You paid the last mortgage payment with a credit card," she said out loud, "Three pounds please."

The deep salt smell of the simmering *ca kho* rose up in a great wave of hot steam as Trinh lifted the pot's lid. The dish was a specialty of farmers in Cambodia and Vietnam alike. Dark sauce laced with green onions bubbled around the salmon. The pink flesh was tender, destined to flake off in rich morsels, the juices melting on the tongue.

Keys rattled at Trinh's front door. From her vantage-point, she could see clear through the living room and to the front door. She half-expected her twenty-four year old son, Tom, to step through, but he'd left six months ago to follow his ex-girlfriend to Florida. She hadn't wanted him to go. Trinh tried to tell him that the part that hurt, the knotted fist in his chest, was something that he could push aside; that he would continue breathing and moving and living. She'd done it so many times herself: marrying a man

at eighteen she did not know; telling her mother she was going on a short trip before being smuggled out of Vietnam with her husband on a raft; burying her first child, a small girl with thick lashes, in the dirt corner with the other lost children of the Malaysian refugee camp; and divorcing her husband, a cruel and petty man, six years prior. But Tom had swept his hand to cast aside her words and said, “What do you know about love?”

David and Amanda spoke in Khmer in low voices as they entered, coming home from a long day at the nail salon. Their friend there, Botum, drove them back and forth. The two stopped, smelled the air, then continued on again even as their noses angled towards the kitchen. They were recent immigrants; the clothes gave it away. Though David was twenty-five, he didn't favor sloppy t-shirts and jeans like Tom, but white button-downs loose at the collar and pleated navy slacks. He wore his dark hair in a thick sweep away from his forehead. Trinh associated the style with Duong Nguyen, a handsome Vietnamese singer who specialized in swing music. Amanda, eighteen, kept her hair in a single long thick braid and added socks to her sandals to brave the winter. She gripped a McDonalds bag to her chest.

“Oh, David, Amanda!” Trinh said in English. She did not speak Khmer. Her smile pinched her cheeks as she waved her cooking chopsticks in the air. A small bit of sauce flew from the chopsticks to the wall where it dribbled down, a thin brown tear.

“*Chau Chi*,” they both said, greeting her using the only Vietnamese words they knew. Trinh followed their eyes to the steps leading downstairs to their rented rooms.

There was silence and Trinh could feel their coming apology—*so sorry to bother you Chi, we will get out of your way now.*

“Just making fish here.” Trinh said. She took the pot’s lid and began fanning the steam in their direction. The first time she made *ca kho* in the United States, traveling three hours by train to another city for the right ingredients, the first sniff of the caramel sauce and ginger brought her to tears. The smells weaved into her brain and tugged out memories of meals eaten on cool grass mats amongst the shouting laughter of uncles and aunts, cousins and grandparents. No matter where she looked, there were people who knew and loved her.

Amanda leaned forward and took another deep breath. “It smells good.”

“Oh, I have too much. Will have to throw the extra into the garbage—there’s just one of me.” Trinh paused. There were green beans stir-fried with ground pork too. Enough food for six people. She hadn’t considered what would happen if they ate nothing. “Why don’t you help me eat? Save the hamburgers for tomorrow. Come, help an old lady.”

David gave a short laugh. “But *chi*, you’re not old.”

Trinh was forty-eight, an age she deemed beyond the notice of men, but David’s kindness still flushed her with pleasure. The siblings looked at each other, their hands augmenting some hushed words. Trinh watched them sidelong as she fiddled with the stove’s knobs.

“If you will throw the food out...,” David said as they both crossed towards the kitchen.

“Oh, you’re helping, you’re helping,” Trinh said.

The presence of two more people in the kitchen seemed to change the room; it was still her kitchen, but warmer and yet alien. The kitchen had seduced her into buying the house after her divorce. And it was a seduction—how else to explain the sudden lust, the guttural need to be the woman who needed space to cook for all her friends and family. David’s eyes wandered around the room, almost petting each surface: the tiled counter-tops, the windows over the two-bowl sink, the white cabinets lining the walls, and the gas-burner stove. His eyes then moved to the kitchen table, a cheap formica thing Trinh had rescued from the junk pile at her job. On top of it were the green beans, a bowl of daikon and radish pickles, a plate of fluffy lettuce, and small bowls of seasoning.

“Oh, this is a lot of food,” Amanda said, her fingers tracing the edge of the tabletop.

Trinh saw its ridiculousness and tried to think of the right thing to say. She liked to eat well. No, that would not save her from embarrassment and their embarrassment for her.

David laughed. Trinh listened for a cruel edge, but heard none. “A party! No, no. Now I must make something too—“ He looked around the kitchen and gestured towards the refrigerator. A boyish energy made his movements seem bigger, lighter.

“Oh no, the food is all ready,” Trinh said even as she nodded, giving him permission to look through the fridge. She raised her hands then put them down again. Trinh had an automatic distrust of men cooking in the kitchen—their fumbling hands, confused faces, and the whole awkward mess of trying to say they were doing a good job

even as they disordered the whole room. She held back the voice she used on her son, a low sharp sound that made Tom stop and sigh at her.

David pulled out two cucumbers and made his way to the cutting board set out by the sink. Amanda began a running stream of questions—where were the bowls kept? The chopsticks? She would set the table. She loved fish. All sorts of fish. Amanda, a quiet person, seemed to burst forth with a string of her top-most thoughts. Trinh’s son had been the same as a child. Trinh’s fingers twitched with the urge to hold the girl by her shoulders and tell her there was time, there was so much time—don’t empty yourself of words so young—parse them out, don’t break your mother’s heart with silence in her old age.

David nearly knocked into her, but pulled back, his shoulders moving around her as he picked through knives. He was like a dancer, so quick and gentle on his feet.

“That knife is sharp,” Trinh said as she reached her hand out to take the knife from him. But he turned, gave her a smile, and continued back towards the cutting board, his toes on the seeming verge of a twirl. Though he looked at her, his eyes seemed to look into something else—the past or the future, maybe, but someplace good.

“Yum, fresh rice. I miss it,” Amanda said as she lifted the rice pot from its cooker and brought it to the table. The scent of jasmine rice, sweet and yeasty rose into the air. Amanda continued on with a description of how she liked her rice not too sticky, but not too dry, more wet, really, than might seem right.

David’s chopping, like the rapid knocking on a door, became the beat to Amanda’s chatter. His hands, tan and strong, sliced the length of the cucumber with

blurred speed. The uniform slices fell with no resistance then, with the sure brush of the knife, pushed onto a plate. A small grin played at the corner of his lips as David picked through her sauces, dribbling sesame oil then rice vinegar, soy sauce and a splash of chili oil in such quick succession, it seemed like juggling. He gently tossed the cucumbers and, as he turned to place the plate on the table, he stopped. Trinh was in the way.

His face was flushed with pleasure, but there was still the sense that he was far away. She could see him coming back to himself—the light collecting in his dark pupils till they focused on her. Trinh felt the moment he saw her.

This was not a seeing Trinh was used to—not like noticing that she needed more rock ice, or that her cactus plant at work had gotten very tall, or there was dust on her lamps. Something in his look seemed to touch her. Her breath caught, as if kissed. The steam of the kitchen pressed in, heavy and thick.

He blinked, looked down at his plate, his cheeks red. He gestured the plate towards her. With her fingers, she picked up a cucumber slice and placed it on her tongue. It was cool and tangy. She bit her teeth into its crispness, her lips against the flesh. A rush of heat tingled against her tongue—a delicious joining of summer and winter. She closed her eyes, tried to breathe through the lightness in her chest.

David smiled. He placed the plate on the table. “Come *chi*, sit, eat.”

And they did eat, their mouths filled with words or food. For hours they reminisced about great meals past until there was nothing left to eat. Even then, they dipped their chopsticks into the empty serving bowls to lick off drops of sauce.

Trinh spent that night turning in her bed. The sheets felt full of sand, each side of the pillow too heated. She told herself it was very nice to have such friendly boarders. It was this excitement and the taut pull of an over-stuffed stomach that was making it hard to sleep. She was hardly thinking at all about David's look, the flash of his lashes over eyes so dark, they seemed black.

#

The warehouse where Trinh fixed copying machines was too quiet. She worked in the repair center, a large room set off by the rest of the warehouse by thin walls and dropped ceilings. The space was divided into twenty-five sections by low cubicle walls that reached to her shoulder. Each section was once filled with a technician bent over the wire innards of a copying machine, but they'd been laid off first for efficiency and then because of the recession. There was only three now: Trinh; her boss, Banh Le; and Luis. Luis was out on disability.

Trinh used to work in the assembly lines that took up the rest of the warehouse. It was greasy, messy work, but the noise was what made it difficult. There was a constant din of ear-throbbing drilling, clanking, metal dropping on metal, the deep crank and rumble of the conveyer belt. Even working in the repair center, the sounds penetrated the walls so that, after leaving each night, Trinh could feel vibrations tickling her fingertips for hours.

Only the occasional piston and drill sound came now. They could play music in the repair center if they wanted, though her boss, Banh Le, resisted out of fear that it suggested idleness. The sharpest noise came from a maintenance crew climbing a ladder to replace chunks of the acoustic tile ceiling. The ceiling had been sagging for months, but it was only recently that the management took notice—a chunk had fallen and somehow injured Luis’s right eye.

Trinh sat on her stool, studying the pristine and ordered layout of her tools and parts: wires ordered by size, IDEs, PCIs, tiny screws, a soldering iron, DC-17 and MR-5 motherboards, magnifying glasses, and manuals thick with schematics. David, over one of their lingering dinners over the past four months, had reassured her that, surely, they would not lay her off—she was intelligent and hard working. And even if they did let her go, she could learn a new trade.

She tried to hold onto David’s words. Banh Le, a few minutes prior, had told Trinh to call it a day at 1 pm. Though always a flirt, his attentions had become more persistent of late. He’d lean by her cubicle in the mornings and say, “I like your new wardrobe. Got a new boyfriend?” A silly man. But when he told her to go home early, he had looked at her left wrist, then the ceiling. Before she could ask if there wasn’t something else she could do—organizing Luis’s section maybe (she had already organized all the other cubicles)—Banh Le had shuffled off towards the quiet assembly lines.

A tight pinched feeling lodged itself in her chest, seeping acid. She tried to drown it with water, but it was an immovable mass. She willed the broken copying machines in

the world to make their way towards her. Trinh, picked up her glass of water and dripped it slowly into her potted plant, a night-blooming cereus. Its long leaves and shooting vines reached up and massed at the ceiling.

“Holy fuck,” one of the crew said. Acoustic tiling crashed to the ground.

Trinh turned to look. From a hole in the ceiling, long tendrils of bright green cereus leaves and vines drooped down.

#

Trinh had laughed nearly the whole way home, her head bowed on her steering wheel at each red light. Then she'd turned closer to her neighborhood and more and more foreclosed homes began appearing. Their emptiness seemed to pulsate outwards and into the road, creeping along behind her. The mass in her chest returned, hardened, and she spent what felt like a very long time staring up at her own home from the vantage point of her driveway. So long as David and Amanda stayed with her, she could make the mortgage payments. She avoided asking them if they planned on ever leaving.

It was such a beautiful house, how could they leave? Four bedrooms, big spaces, a yard that stole your breath if you ran the length of it. She bought it after the divorce for her son and herself. Though it was too big for two, she had imagined it filling with Tom's eventual wife and future children, their laughter spreading out into the quiet cul-de-sac. Trinh thought it still possible—but now, maybe instead of Tom's children,

Amanda would marry and her children would fill the house. Or David—at this thought, she went into the house.

#

“God Ma, I know how amazing David is. Such a good boy. Such a hard worker. Jesus, give it a rest,” Tom said. His voice on the phone line sounded tired. “You know, I’m doing well too.”

Trinh took a sharp breath in. David had been living with her for eight months. “David’s helping me. I don’t know why—“

“Ma! Stop comparing us.”

She was not comparing them. She switched tactics. “How is Jessica?”

Her son’s voice softened. “I don’t know Ma. I mean, she’s one minute happy, then one minute—it’s like she’s not sure. How can you not be sure? I’m sure.”

Trinh sighed. “What do I know?”

#

David and Amanda came home in a storm of laughter and high spirits. Botum, their friend at the nail salon, came in with them. Botum, in the past year, was becoming a regular guest. She was twenty, a nice enough girl, though quiet. Trinh suspected she was dim mostly because of the gaudiness. Botum seemed to have dunked herself in a vat of

sticky plastic jewels and glitter. There was the sparkling makeup, the large dangling earrings, the stacked bracelets and rings on most fingers, nails heaped with small crystals, and her t-shirt was bedazzled with the word “Sexy.” Trinh teased David about Botum, calling her his very shiny girlfriend. His eye roll and sigh, the firm way he pushed his hands in front of him as if to shove away an invisible Botum filled her with delight. Botum was not like them. They were simple in taste and modest. As David put it, they were, in the end, old-fashioned.

Trinh put on her best guest-face and let herself be taken along on the current of gossip and news—Mrs. Linh had made her husband sleep in his car; the new Vietnamese restaurant in town closed; Duong Hoang, a movie star, was recently arrested in France for exposing himself in the metro. Trinh did not know all the people they mentioned, but something about the off-handed way these strangers were spoken of made her feel that, in fact, she did know them very well. Everyone was someone connected to her.

David moved to and fro in the kitchen, his hands chopping or stirring, the smells rising as their mouths became wet with anticipation. Trinh stood against the counter and whenever he paused to look around, she knew by the tilt of his eyes, the wave of his fingertips just what he was looking for—the extra-long chopsticks, the peeler, the grater. As the girls talked, Trinh stirred his soup, the pineapple, tomatoes, and shrimp rising. He sipped, made a face. She nodded, added tamarind and he clapped his hands and moved on to make a dipping sauce.

It was easy then to think of him and her, the two of them, cooking and tasting for years. Trinh wasn't thinking of sex. That was base and foolish, but all the same, was it

so strange to toy with possibilities? She could let in a stray thought or two; it did no harm.

By the time the girls' talk had shifted to their own lives, they were sitting around the kitchen table slurping the sweet and sour soup, mumbling appreciation. Trinh was telling the story of her cactus plant.

"And more—more leaves and vines they kept pulling out. Pounds and pounds of it." She circled her arms in front of her chest to show them the heaps being carried, aware also that she was drawing attention to her chest. "My little plant! Everywhere, all in the ceiling. They had to take it all down. They said it was like a jungle."

David laughed loudest. He leaned over his bowl and said, "What did you say?"

"Only that it looked very nice." Trinh waved her hand. She scrunched her face into mock-disapproval. "Oh, they didn't think that was funny."

He laughed again, looking to his sister as if to say, *can you believe it?* At that moment, Trinh felt generous even with Botum. The girl had eaten her soup down to the last drop and was reaching for more. Not the behavior of a girl seeking to keep her shape. A mild wave of pity hit Trinh and she turned back to David who kept saying, "Really!" and laughing.

"This is the best soup. Delicious, amazing," Botum said, in her soft girl's voice, a voice Trinh had gotten used to ignoring. However, something about Botum's voice was too insistent and desperate that time. It demanded attention.

Botum looked at David from across the table with unadorned desire. She put more soup into her bowl until it overflowed onto her fingertips. The girl laughed, a pretty

sound that grated against Trinh's ear-drums. David stood up with his napkin, reached across the table, and patted Botum's fingers dry. The girl batted her sparkled lashes. His hand seemed to linger.

"David—there's more towels in the basement. Go get those," Trinh said. Her face felt hot. "Don't rub the girl's skin raw."

David pulled back. Botum looked at the table top. He tried to laugh. "Well, my soup is delicious."

Trinh stood up and looked into the bowl. "Did you see some glitter fall into it? I think I did. Those nails—so much of that—that-- stuff on them."

Amanda said, "David did Botum's nails. None of the crystals would fall off. He's too careful..." Amanda's voice trailed off under Trinh's glare.

Of course. They worked in a nail salon. Why wouldn't David do Botum's nails? He would sit down with her young hand in his, the warmth of their skin mingling. His hold would be gentle and steady as he selected crystal after crystal, placing them carefully on her nails. How long would it take to adorn Botum? Did hours pass in this silent worship? They would laugh and talk, joined by touch. Did he spend his nights fantasizing about that hand, telling himself that no, he was just toying with an idea?

"Well—I will go get the paper towels then," Trinh said.

David said, "We don't really need—"

"I will go get it. You kids keep talking." She stood and left, feeling their looks trailing after her. She had been mistaken, deeply mistaken. The house was cold, but there was no point in raising the thermostat. The thermostat was too old, could barely

function, didn't really count for anything. What was she doing in such a house, rattling around with no purpose? The knot in her chest throbbed.

#

Tom stood at the door, looked at his mother, and said, "Ma—you look-- nice."

"Do," Trinh said, taking the duffle bag from his hand.

He sighed. "No, it's just—" He gestured at the shirt that skimmed her chest, the jeans that were the right size. Trinh hadn't seen a reason to get rid of her new clothes; it was wasteful. For his previous visits, she'd put on her old clothes, but since she moved, she'd become indifferent to his reactions. "You know what I mean."

She shrugged. Her son was visiting from Florida and come to look at her new home. She lived not far from the ocean in a small town home. It was easy to manage and, from time to time, she saw neighbors she could call friends. The old home was gone now, foreclosed, though Tom seemed only relieved—it was too much for a woman alone to handle.

"Your wife? What time is Jessica coming?" Trinh said though she knew. She could never get used to Tom's silences.

He looked back towards his car as if an answer lay there. He shielded his eyes from the summer sun's hot glare. It burned everything white so that only the darkest things seemed real.

“Later, I think,” Tom said, walking into the town house. He took a look around, nodded. “Nice. Got some water?” He went into the small kitchen, but stopped short at the refrigerator where Trinh had placed David’s latest letter. “Your other son.” Tom’s voice was bitter, resigned.

Trinh placed the duffle bag on the couch. “I have one son.”

Tom grunted, poured himself a glass from the sink. She could tell he was trying not to look back at the letter. Probably about the time he thought she was asleep, Tom would come back to the kitchen and open the letter. It was signed, “Love, David,” the “David” worn thin from Trinh’s finger tips. The contents were dull— about a family vacation with Botum, their baby’s first steps, the weather, Amanda’s new husband. They moved to where Botum’s family lived in California, the width of the country away. The letters were evidence they still existed. David never called and she never called him; some formality had been set in place.

Tom sighed. “God, that water is good. Hold up ma, I got to make a call.” He went outside.

Trinh took the small California state magnet off David’s letter, folded the letter, and put it in her breast pocket. He would, she knew, continue to write and she would write back. Neither broaching more than a paragraph. And it would hurt each time, but she could lay that aside. What was there to do but let her body keep breathing, keep living.

THE CONSULTANTS

The other day, I spent a good three hours searching all over my hotel room for my tie. Blue, with diamond patterns. Maybe I was indifferent to that tie before, but it became my favorite tie, the end all and be all of all ties. The room was standard: a bed, a desk, a chair, a chest of drawers topped with a television, but man, how it seemed to expand, its nooks and crannies multiplying and swallowing up my hand as I wiggled my fingers into its dark crevices. By the time I'd given up, the place looked like a rock star had been there, just empty beer bottles, Red Bulls, and work papers tossed about like confetti. I had to laugh—it was ridiculous—but then, I thought, loss is so easy. I sat on my bed and shook with suppressed sobs.

My mom, she was tough and proud and couldn't stand tears. I never, not once, saw her cry. When I was in the third grade, I could really get into the schoolwork—god, just let me spend all day in a math workbook—but tell me it was lunchtime, and you could watch my face go pale. We had to line up in two lines, boys and girls, and it meant you were top dog if you got to the front of the line. Jason, a fat wad of a kid, used elbows, pinches, and threats to make it to the front. I floated alongside the back and tried not to make eye contact with Weirdo Steve-oh, Boogers, Smelly Mel, and Goodwill. I waited until Mrs. Rhoda noticed my raised hand. It got to the point where I didn't need to say anything and she just nodded to give permission.

I went to the bathroom and waited fifteen minutes. Fifteen minutes is a very long time for a child with nothing to do but hand-wash and tear toilet paper one square at a time. But fifteen minutes was the time it took for my classmates to line up, grab their small aluminum trays sagging with steamed food, and pay the lunch lady. I came to the lunch line only no one would notice me walking towards the lunch lady with my tray. To her open waiting palm—large and empty—I said, in my quietest voice, “I get free lunch.” The words always sounded too loud, like they were bouncing off the walls and into the ears of all the other kids in the room.

Of course, I was eventually found out. Jason overheard. Even Smelly Mel began calling me Food Stamps. I came home crying the first day it happened, my face a mass of tears and snot, my little body heaving with sobs. My mother, holding my chin firmly in her hand, said, “We do not cry.” She pushed her calloused open palm across my face and wiped away the wet in one motion.

This makes her seem like a hard, cruel woman, but she was not. She loved me and did her best. Each night, she came home late in her blue cotton house-cleaning uniform, her thin body still bent as if ready to scrub the floor. In the big pockets of her skirt, she sometimes had Orange Puffs, these soft candies I lied to her about loving. They tasted like sweet vinyl and dust. We shared them together and, sometimes, she’d bring out the one photo she saved from her old life.

We were Chinese, but she was raised in Cambodia to be a lady. This is how she put it: “I was a lady.” Her father was a successful businessman, throwing large parties every weekend. In the background of the photo, there was a table heavy with fruits and a

whole roasted pig with an orange in its mouth. A servant cut into its stomach. My mother, a young woman in a western-style yellow silk dress, sat next to her father, a smiling man slightly out of focus in a suit. She was laughing, her head tilting back as if she were about to bite the air, life was so delicious. A year after the photo was taken, the Khmer Rouge came. My grandfather was murdered. She and my father fled to the US with nothing. My father left before I could remember him.

I wanted to give her back something of her old life, to see her laugh. My solution was to become successful. Some boys were good at baseball or basketball and went far with that. I was that way with school. The prize was straight As, the pointed little steps to a better life.

When she passed away, I was twenty-five, had an MBA from Wharton, and was getting notice as a first-year consultant at the Firm. She died, I was convinced, not from heart failure, but from exhaustion. I should have sent back more money, paid off fewer of my loans, should not have whined or complained as a child, should not have used her up. The funeral director told me that, with my short credit history, the amount of money I had in cash, it seemed like the “Classic Service”—the pity package, the same as free school lunch -- was the best fit for my loved one. I ground my teeth and leaned forward. I forced my response, the words sharp-cornered and insufficient, out of my mouth, “*She is a lady.*”

My mother, to say that she was proud of me, said I reminded her of her father. She never seemed to question why the local Khmer Rouge came after her family first. What small or large wrongs had my grandfather done for his success? At twenty-eight,

my early promise at the Firm stale, I had an idea—a blockbuster idea-- for my latest client, Mannings. I named it the “healthy employee initiative” and wondered at the lives it might harm, if I had what it took to get to the front of the line.

#

Nine junior consultants plus Michaela, our team leader, sat around the conference room table at Mannings headquarters. It was 1 a.m. Stacks of paper, laptops, cups, and Red Bulls from the day littered the table. Michaela, despite having flown in just that morning from another project, rippled with more energy than all of us combined. To her, we must have looked weak and slow. We needed food, sleep, and approval. Where she led multiple teams, flying in and out of different states three times a week, we only stayed on with single clients three months at a time.

Janice, a young woman with a half-undone ponytail, scribbled in near-illegible red marker everything Michaela told her to under a list that read, “Benefits cost-savings measures.” Janice was nearly done writing, “Reduce full-time; increase part-time employees.”

Michaela pointed at Steven and said, “You, write up a paragraph on pro-cons. With a chart. Don’t forget about the watchdog group.” Michaela turned back to the rest of us, her fingers drumming, and said, “What else? Come on people. Excite me.”

The white board was thick with slants of red writing. I saw the board as she saw it-- mediocrity. The recommendations thus far were uninspired: increase premiums,

reduce offerings, and, as a means of reassuring the masses that the company cared, offer a health savings account. Michaela sighed, leaned forward, and said, “There’s 500 more consultants in this firm with resumes every bit as good as yours. They’d stab their best friend for your spot. So if you’re sleepy, hey, go to bed. You can have all the rest you want.”

She looked directly at me and gave a half-smile. I sat up straighter. I had so long incubated my idea that now I wondered if it was a mistake—was it, in truth, just as uninspired? Michaela might dismiss it out of hand. The client could hate it. My hand was unsteady as I reached for my Red Bull. I had not slept well for many nights. When the Firm first put me on the project, I had immediately asked to be reassigned—my first “no” ever. It made me sick to even ask. Michaela called me that evening and said, “People tell me you’re smart, though a smart man wouldn’t back out of a project. A smart man would look at his career at the Firm and say, ‘Well, I better work harder, I better say yes to every fucking opportunity--because that’s what these are, sweet little gems of opportunity--because if I say no, people will finally notice that I’m not up to snuff.’ So David, what’s your decision?”

Matt said, “Health tests before hiring?” Despite being twenty-six, he looked middle-aged with his paunch and receding hairline.

“Illegal! Next,” Michaela said, leaning back in her chair. Matt cringed. She was older than us, in her forties, though it was hard to tell. Her face was smooth and polished, like a carefully cut gem. Dark suits covered a lean physique; no hair was allowed to move out of place.

Janice brought up the Strasburg Theorem of productivity, how it might relate to eliminating the chronically ill employees. Matt, seeking to redeem himself, tried to debate the merit of the theorem on ERSD reimbursement schematics. Everyone else began to get involved, prodding at potential loopholes, digging into the combinatorial properties of the theory.

Michaela continued to look at me while she added corrective tidbits to the conversation like, “No, the patterning derivatives don’t show that” or “use a vlookup.” She tilted her head in a move that seemed oddly coquettish—I assumed it meant she was about to pounce on me. I clicked through my spreadsheets of Mannings expenditures, hoping to find a benign statement of fact to add to the debate. The numbers blurred and I had a brief image of them clambering out the screen and jabbing at my eyes.

“A penny for your thoughts,” Michaela said to me. The others immediately stopped talking.

I laughed, the choked sound rising out of my throat before I could stop it. “I could have something—it could excite you.” I blushed, the double entendre lingering between us.

“Some brilliance gleaned from shopping at Mannings?” Michaela said. She smiled, her teeth a brilliant sharp white.

The team looked at me, a flash of surprise on their faces. There was Janice, who eliminated cheap drug competitors in rural India, spurring on record profits for her client’s typhoid and malaria medicine. Steve, who introduced a free prescription drug service for cancer patients that compelled them to remain on the client’s expensive drug

regimen. Matt had his client use a disability nonprofit as a perfectly legal front to win government preference in contracts. Steve, Paul, and the others all had done their fair share for the Firm. But they had never been inside a Mannings. Their upbringings were too rich with comfort. And now, with one sentence, Michaela had solidified a line between them and me.

“No—I.” I paused, trying to think past their stares. My idea lost its shape. The edges fanned out into infinite nothingness so that only a thin smear was left. The greasy taint of it weighed my tongue down. “We don’t have site visit data to extrapolate from...” My voice trailed off. The others looked away, a flush of pity on their faces.

Michaela shook her head, then placing both palms on the table, looked around and said, “You know what? This is an extraordinary failure of imagination.” She looked directly at me. “I am disappointed.”

She shuffled her papers together, the crisp edges hit the table in a fast rat-tat-tat. Then Michaela stood, not looking at any of us, and left. Her heels clicked down the linoleum hall until there was silence. I imagined the dark of the offices around her, how the motion detector lights flickered on with a buzz and a click as she passed the barren cubicles.

#

I craved Orange Puffs—their crisp salt-sweet outside, the soft marshmallow-like center, the lingering after-taste of sugar and nail polish. Only Mannings carried this candy.

The other consultants lined up in their rental cars at the parking lot exit, waiting for the traffic light to turn green. A street light cast odd shadows on my dashboard—shadows, which if I concentrated, seemed to be edging towards me.

When the last car pulled away, I started the ignition and headed towards the Mannings flagship store twenty minutes across Lisport. The car had GPS, but I did not need it. I'd grown up here. It had not changed since the funeral.

#

The glass doors of Mannings, a row of glowing teeth, cast light into the near-empty strip mall. At 2 a.m., every place else—the beauty supply shop, the dollar store, the plus-size women's shop—were all closed.

The Mannings doors slid open in a soft electric hush and I moved from the dark into the glaring fluorescence. For all of Mannings' gray utilitarian ugliness, I felt, for the first time, like I'd come home. My mother and I used to roam the store together in the summers, waiting for the day to cool. We played this game to pass the time—what items were ours that the store was holding onto? I selected for her a big-screen television, a hot pink hairdryer with three settings, a lamp with a jeweled butterfly on it, things that I could not yet get for her. A strange ache gripped me each time we played, our laughter and pleasure too sharp, but I always pressed her to continue—mama, what else is mine?

The store was empty except for a lone cashier in a row of registers and a tipsy-looking teenager swaying over the cranberry juice, probably looking for mixers. The

candy aisle ached with its loads of sugar. The shelves held piles of delicious treats, but I ignored them all, heading for the middle where they kept the wall of ninety-nine cent candy in small clear cellophane bags. The Orange Puffs, same as ever, were in a high corner and I stood on tip-toe to yank it down. I heard jingling behind me.

All Mannings employees had to wear rows of smiley face buttons along the bottoms of their green smocks. When they walked, the little metal pieces dinged against each other, sounding like loose change.

I nearly told the worker, without looking, that I didn't need any help, but he said, "David, man!"

When I turned, a young man, about my age looked back. His hair was long, lank, and covered his nametag. The smock tugged tight over his stomach. He wore a scraggly beard that spoke more of neglect than fashion.

"Hi," I said.

"I wouldn't have recognized you 'cept I saw you in the local papers for some prize." He laughed, a short rough sound. He shook his head, his tangled hair swaying away from his nametag: Jason. "Recognize me? Mrs. Rhoda's class."

The wide aisles were devoid of obstacles. It was only a few steps—faster if I ran—to the exit. But there were Orange Puffs in my hand and they sank me there.

"Yeah, sure. Hey," I said. His dark eyes, small and hooded by large brows, carried some hint of the boy I knew.

"Time, man. Time, it flies," Jason said. He gave me a pleased grin, some distant light of warm memory flashing in his eyes. "But man, we had good times, right? Grade

school. Fuck. Jesus fucking Christ.” On his chin were large mounds of pimples, their white heads pierced through with stubble.

I shifted from one foot to another, looked at the candy in my hand. I had never punched a man. “So you work at Mannings?” I said.

The pimples on his chin seemed to turn more red, agitated by Jason’s excitement. “Oh, yeah. Temporary. It’s not bad. ‘Cept for when the weather’s bad—they make us young guys go out to corral the carts. Don’t mind lifting heavy stuff—could do that all day, but man, pushing carts in the heat? Sucks ass. But you know how it is.”

Out there, in the summer, I could see his large feet shuffling through the melting tar, sweat running down his face and into his oily pores. He’d scratch at himself and his fingernails would become full with wet dirt. Then he’d go back to grunting and panting, pushing along other people’s abandoned carts. I did not know what that was like. I would never know. We were different, he and I. A universe apart. Yet, he stood so close, pressing his words and body into my world.

“I don’t work outside,” I said, my own vehemence surprising me.

“Yeah?” he said, pulling his head back and looking at me up and down. I was wearing a button-down, tie, slacks, leather loafers, and a new watch. My happiest moments were walking through a hotel or airport or office building, the way people could just look at me and know I belonged. But Jason—his look seemed to land on the wrinkles on my shirt, the loosened tie limp at my neck, the cuffs rolled up unevenly. He wore a wedding band. I did not.

“Hey,” he said, a new enthusiasm in his voice. He pointed to the candy in my hand. “Orange Puffs. Yeah, sometimes, when I’m real down and out, that’s all I want. Some goddamned Orange Puffs. Not to say that you look beat to hell—but fuck—it’s 2 a.m. I mean, sometimes it’s the cheap ass shit that feels good.” He shook his head. “Like, you know, take the boy out of the ghetto, but not the ghetto out of the boy.”

“I like them, yeah,” I said. The candy in its crinkly wrapper looked too dry, more like cotton balls than food.

He gave me a look tinged with pity. Then flashed another smile. “You know what we got in back? Brand new flavor. Lemon Puffs. It’s good. Hold up, I’ve got its stocking number somewhere here... .” Jason began patting the pockets of his smock, making the whole thing jingle. The clumsy grope of his large hands was so eager. He said, “Shoot.” He gestured with one finger to signal a minute. “I will be right back.”

He jog-walked towards the end of the aisle and turned away from my view. I stood a moment, faced with his sudden absence. Would he be back? I put the candy on a hook, hesitated, then walked down the aisle, out the door, and into the darkness of the parking lot. The whole way, I had the sensation that Jason was staring at me, feeling sorry for me. But no, he was the sorry one. Nothing connected us. Nothing. I was nothing like him.

#

I knocked on Michaela's hotel room door. It seemed thin and weak, as if a single hard blow could destroy it. It was 3:30 a.m. and it occurred to me, only then, that she might be asleep. Her steps shuffled towards the door and she opened it, her body taking up the space between frame and door.

"David." She said my name slowly, with no alarm, only mild curiosity. Michaela was wearing a loose Red Sox t-shirt and shorts that exposed the length of her legs. She wore no make-up; thin lines edged from the dark circles under her eyes. She seemed soft, vulnerable.

"I wanted to talk to you about an idea—for Mannings." Anyone watching might think I was coming or going. I felt tawdry, but if I did not tell her then, right away, it seemed that somehow Jason would win.

She tilted her head and, again with the slow voice, so different from her normal clip, "Yes. Well. I suppose you ought to come in." She turned from me and walked into the room, her steps ginger and deliberate. Without her heels, she was so small.

All the lights were on. The room had two Queen-sized beds. Papers and notes littered the untouched bedding in thick piles. On the desk, amongst still more print-outs, was a bottle of wine. A lamp shone through it, revealing its emptiness. A clear plastic disposable cup held traces of red wine.

Was she drunk? I nearly made some excuse to leave, but Michaela curled up on the armchair, tucking her feet underneath her thighs. She wore red nail polish on her toes. They were chipped.

“Well, are you going to stare at my feet or are you going to talk?” she said, her speech moving faster now. “I could fire you right now. Bam. Easy as lighting a match.” She sighed, a bored look crossing her face.

There was nowhere for me to sit, so I remained standing. Had my grandfather ever found himself in a situation like this? I thought of Jason, how in the summer, he’d be just as bent as my mother, spending the whole day chasing carts. He was unable to see that I had transcended such things, transcended beyond any feeling of his, most especially pity. I wanted to make the line between us larger, the Great Wall of China—hadn’t the wall been built on the bones of workers?

“I call this idea, ‘Healthy Initiatives.’ We limit uniform sizes. No more smocks, only fitted shirts. More expensive up-front, but it means overweight workers won’t be able to dress for work.”

Michaela furrowed her brows, tilted her head, a signal to keep talking.

No one helped my mother, no one was there for her. In this world, you were alone. I continued, “Link BMI to healthcare—standard, I know—but make it more expensive—make Medicaid seem like a better alternative. You shuffle them off Mannings’ healthcare that way.” I took a breath. “Then—then, you say, physical labor is part of the job requirement. Make everyone collect carts. In bad weather too. The people who use up health care the most will quit.”

“Like the old folks? The disabled?” Michaela said, her head pushed now against the back of the armchair as if she were trying to inch away from me. But then she leaned forward as I spoke.

“All of them.” My voice was soft, but the air held onto them, adding an impossible echo. The flesh and bone of my legs seemed to give way, held up now only by thin wires. I turned towards the bed, pushed the papers aside, and sat down.

“So, we bill this as making the workforce healthier...” Michaela picked up the plastic cup and tapped the last drops of red wine into her mouth. “Well, you’re a real bastard. Savings?”

“Mannings will save \$15 million dollars,” I said, laying myself down on the bed now. My body had gotten very heavy. I felt the crunch of her papers underneath me, their sharp edges pushing against my shirt.

Michaela laughed. It sounded like Jason’s laugh. I watched the beige ceiling throb. Just beyond my eyelids was the black pit of exhaustion. It was reaching for me. I saw a lifetime of hotels like this, of days and nights spent in their cocoon. I was at the front of the line at last.

TAKE MY PICTURE

I'm called Porsché. Decided that last month on my sixteenth. Let me tell you why. In this world, you got to sell, sell, sell and it starts with a Name. People got to remember you. My mama named me Deeane, but there ain't no oomph to that. You forgot it already, didn't you? Now *Porsché*. That's a name that says two things: one, fucking expensive and two, smooth curves. You go home and say you met someone named Porsché, and bam, like I done smacked them myself. No one forgets Porsché.

Me and Que-E, my classmate and assistant, are out by Seaside Park getting ready for my photoshoot. We've put a towel out on the grass and are sitting on it. Que-E rubs canola oil onto my arm so that I'm nice and shiny. Alvin and Eddie, the photographers, are doing something with their cameras. Noise and frowning, pushing buttons.

Got to focus on my breathing, bring all that hotness in. I'm 120lbs of liquid loveliness poured into five feet, four inches. My little gold bikini can barely keep all this goodness covered. They say mixed people are the most beautiful and damn if my blood don't got more countries than the United Nations. Going to melt me some lens.

"Your hands are shaking," Que-E says as she rubs my forearm. "Nervous?"

"What do I got to be nervous about?" I say. I pull my arm away, annoyed because she's thrown my rhythm. My game's been off and I don't need any negativity, not right before a shoot.

“I mean, it’s cold, so you must be cold,” she says. Que-E gives me a little smile and I ease up and give her my arm again.

Que-E, like my mom says, isn’t “much to look at.” In fact, I nicknamed her Que-E after a Q-Tip. She’s all head and feet and nothing to catch your eye inbetween. First time I called her that, she was kind of quiet, but I laughed and she laughed. I think we get along, though, because she doesn’t try to compete with me or get jealous. She’s one of those girls that’s okay with not being all that attractive, but maybe too okay with it.

Que-E’s a real rule-abiding type. She says she don’t believe in jay-walking, like there’s a religious rule about crossing the street. Anything a teacher says is true cause, “they would know, right?” Half an apology’s always ready in her mouth. Probably would never have bothered talking to her if she weren’t like that, but now that I know her, it seems plain sad. (Okay—I’m not going to lie. I only started talking to her because she lives in a two-family house where the other half was my ex, Julio. She could tell me whether he was stepping out on me with some other girl. That relationship didn’t work out, but Que-E’s my friend now.) So, even though Que-E loves looking at my pictures, her whole wall is covered with pages ripped from magazines, and she’s been begging to come on a photoshoot, I wasn’t sure if she’d cut school early to come with me. But I gave her permission to do what she wanted. I told her that I really needed an assistant or else I was going to be half-naked with two strangers all alone. She bit her lip, smiled, and said, “Well, if you need me...”

Me and Que-E just walked right on out of school today during lunch, right through the back gym door. The security guards were too busy busting up a fight and

snatching cell phones from people recording it. We held up the bottom of the chain-link fence for each other and caught the #3 down Madison Ave to the park.

There's nothing to look at in Lisport. The whole way there, all I saw were these old beat-down houses all boarded up. You could tell they used to be fancy, but it's like they said "Fuck it" and just threw themselves down. Downtown was nothing but people that look like bums, real bums, and all the places bums sleep—the library, the station, store fronts with cracked windows. Sometimes I think no one around here gives a damn.

Julio, my ex, said that there's nothing wrong with Lisport. Almost snapped my own neck doing a double-take. I'd just told him I quit my part-time job as a cashier at Mannings so I could do more photo shoots. We were at his house, in his room. He had a poster of Eminem on one wall and another of Beyonce in a bikini on his ceiling.

He said, "I don't see why you got to keep getting your picture taken. Don't you got enough pictures? Who are these guys anyway?"

"Look Julio, I know what my assets are and I got to capitalize on these looks before they go. Can't waste my only God-given talent under fluorescent lights, saying 'paper or plastic?'"

"But you're not getting paid."

"I'm trading modeling for photographs. It's called building a portfolio. I'm thinking long-term."

"It's conceited is what it is. Just giving these guys something for their spank bank. You don't even look that good."

At the time, I didn't know what to do or say. Felt like he punched me. But I've had time to think about this. By the look he gave me, the way he grabbed onto my elbow, he was saying that I got up at 4:30 a.m. to do my hair and make-up just for him and that I should be happy with that. Like he owned my looks and could tell me whether it was good or bad. I'm not making my mama's mistakes. I should've responded, "I am fucking hot. Everyone stares at me. Married men. Old ladies. Little kids. And you know why? Cause I make them. I make it happen everyday. With power like that, you think I'm going to sit here and take this from you? We are so done, pencil-dick."

At the time though, I think maybe I said something like, "What?" or some noise that probably wasn't words. Then he broke up with me. I started bawling—that fucker made me cry. Mascara rolling black down my cheeks. Snot pouring. I ran out of there and it was like—damn, I had nowhere to go. Thing is, when you look like how I look, girls aren't trying to be your friend. Their eyes too busy spilling green. Only person nearby was Que-E. I'd talked to her maybe three times about who's coming in and out of Julio's side of the house. But I knocked and she opened the door. She took me in, got me some soda, told me how Julio looked like he fell from the ugly tree and hit every branch on the way down. Then me and Que-E banged against his wall calling him an asshole till his mama came over and told us to quit it.

Que-E gestures to my other arm and I stick it out. She rubs the oil in hard and it warms my skin up. She's humming a made-up song.

Maybe Julio was right about one thing—Seaside Park in Lisport is decent, nice even. One side faces the ocean and there's just beach or rocks the size of large guys to

keep back storms. Probably take a whole damn day to walk the boardwalk from one end to the other. The rest is trees and lawn and baseball fields. Around the edges, Lisport creeps in. There's broken glass, these twitchy guys eyeing you, and empty gray factories shrugging up on each other. But it's something else inside the park. Even got these big bronze statues of old white guys on horses or chairs. It says something though that they're not looking behind them at Lisport, but out to the water. There's a dark gray line out there. That's Long Island, where the hundred-gazillion dollar mansions are. P.Diddy drives around in a whole parade of limos with his entourage, and everyone and everything, including the leather seats, are covered in Louis Vuitton. White people smile at him, say things like, "Mr. Diddy, won't you pretty please come by my 23-bedroom chateau for a party?"

"Maybe these pictures will get in a magazine," Que-E says, her eyes big.

"That'll be so cool." She looks at Alvin and Eddie.

Eddie squints up at the sun like it's in his way. He's not bad-looking, with his dark hair and muscular body, but I avoid eye contact cause I don't want to encourage anything. Anytime a pretty girl looks at a guy, he thinks it's an invitation. Besides, he's old. Mid-30s, white, clean-shaven, wearing a black t-shirt and jeans. Alvin's about the same age and in the same uniform, but he's fat. His body swings around him when he moves.

Alvin's got a rag and he's wiping the white bird shit off of this bronze cannon statue. Nothing about them should worry me. Besides, I like that cannon. Anyone that's grown up in Lisport has pictures of themselves as little kids sitting on this cannon. It's

the only picture I got of me, my mom, and my dad. Course, he's left us now. My mama said my dad used up all her pretty and left her too old to start again. I don't really remember him. But in that picture, I'm like two years old, in a white dress, matching hat, and ruffly socks. I smile wide at the camera like I was made to have my picture taken.

“Yeah, it'd be cool to get in a magazine,” I say.

I've got thirty pictures posted on my ModelMadness.com portfolio from thirty different photo shoots. I'm a veteran. Que-E helped me pick the best ones to share. They were all done for trade—me trading modeling for photos. I use ModelMadness to advertise myself and find and book shoots. It's how I met Alvin. I've only been paid once, one-hundred dollars. The way to getting more paid work is to keep publicizing myself, keep working and doing photoshoots so that no one forgets me. I'll be getting paid left and right, up to my eyes in cash. But I got to keep on working.

Still, I know how it looks. My mom was worried about it, or as worried as she can be before she gets distracted or forgets. I'm not stupid. I keep a squirt gun with bleach in my bag. That shit will blind you. I know it's the internet and there's crazy shady people out there. People lie all the time. I lie too. When I posted I was 16, no one would do shoots with me, but I changed it to 18, and all these offers came in. I saw Alvin's photos and they're good. He knows all about Photoshop. Never worked with two photographers at once before, though. But Alvin, on the phone, said Eddie was his friend and wanted to get into the business. Twice the photos for the same amount of work. Good deal, right?

Queie passes me the oil, still humming her song, and breaks out The Shoes to put on my feet. The shoes are purple leather six-inch L.A.M.B. stilettos that cost \$325. They just about set my mama's credit card on fire (I had to sneak the card out of her purse). I put clear packing tape on the bottom of the shoes so I can return them after the shoot and before the credit card is due. These will give me a high-fashion edge. Make some modeling agency stand up and take notice.

I rub the oil on my chest and over my cleavage. When I catch Alvin staring, I stop and turn my shoulders away from him. I think he ought to treat my prepping like there's a dressing room here. You can't see through dressing room walls. Alvin asked me to go with him to his apartment where he's got his lights "set up perfect." I said no. The last photoshoot I was at, right after Julio dumped me and made the biggest mistake of his life, I went alone to some guy's "studio." It was just him, an empty house, his camera, and his hard-on. Looked like a gummy worm. Never laughed so hard in my life.

A breeze from the ocean picks up and I breathe it in. Whenever my mom is feeling low, she drives out to Seaside and parks her car with the windows down. She'll sit out there looking at the ocean for hours, even if it's winter and the wind comes so hard and fast and cold that your face feels like it's shrinking past bone. I used to sit with her, shivering so hard I thought if I talked, I'd bite my tongue off. I think I get why she did it now. There's warm places to be and cold places too, and lots of people telling you what to do or what they want, but who cares when there's the whole fucking brown ocean out there swallowing up whatever gets in it.

"You okay?" Que-E says as she helps me put on my shoes.

Before I can answer, Alvin walks over to us. His camera, big and black, sits heavy on his chest. “Looking hot there, Porsché. You ready?”

I smile and nod. When I’m in front of a camera, I’m one hundred percent there. Two hundred percent. One thousand fucking percent. Nothings in my mind. Que-E has to help me stand up and I think, alright, the curtains have now parted. The star is ready to leave her dressing room. I walk over to the car with not just any walk, but my oh-my-God walk. Ta-dum. Ta-dum. Ta-dum. Shabam. Hip jut.

I can feel Alvin and Eddie’s eyes all over me as I reach the canon. They’re holding their breaths and thinking, “Lord almighty, you can kill me now and I’ll be a happy man.” I let that power just wiggle through me, give strength to my limbs. There ain’t nothing in the world but this body and their worship.

I give them a smile. Not too big. Just a taste. Too eager and guys lose interest. Nothing good is easy, as my mama says. But I know what they want from me, how they want me to move my ass, my breasts just so. I’m going to climb the cannon, slide around on it, and they’re going to think, “Yeah, my dick is that cannon.” I am covered in oil and that cannon is metal, but I know how to make that slip and slide look elegant. Like I spent my whole fucking life climbing cannons. I find a foothold, swing one-leg over and mount the thing between my legs. Alvin whistles.

I start posing with it, treating the cannon like my lover, caressing it with my hands, moving my hair, my legs, and arms just so. Sad. Lonely. Wanting. There’s a place above my stomach where I funnel all my hotness, shove it in real tight, then let it

spill out. Slow and different angles so that it's always new, interesting. I'm just power and beauty.

Alvin and Eddie are clicking away, so I know they're loving this. The cannon's cold against my breasts. I can see Alvin didn't get all the bird shit. That doesn't matter. That's not the focus. I turn over and balance one leg on top of the cannon, the other at its base and arch my back. The focus is the click of the lens. That's the sound of my future. A half-hour goes by. Doesn't matter who's behind the camera so long as I'm in front. The waves crash and the seagulls squawk and the world doesn't matter. I don't give a damn about Alvin or Eddie or anyone else.

Wait, where's Eddie? I didn't notice he'd stopped taking pictures. I scan for him and find him near Que-E. She's got her shoulders bunched together the way she does when she's feeling really shy. Eddie's saying something to her, laughing, pointing at me. He leans to whisper in her ear and her face turns tomato red.

I slip and just about gouge my leg with the heel. My arms feel a little weak, shaky.

"Hey, careful," Alvin says. He does not stop taking pictures.

Que-E looks up at me, frowns. I say loudly, "Que-E what time is it?"

"Baby, we got plenty of time," Alvin says. "Think you can kneel on the cannon? Hands on hip?"

I do it, but it's wobbly. Eddie puts a hand on Que-E's shoulder and she actually leans towards him. She looks him square in the eyes and stays that way. Like she's looking for something in them. Que-E's just a kitten. Like a baby. She ain't grown.

A breeze carries Eddie's voice. "How'd you get a name like Que-E?"

She looks away, embarrassed and says, "Oh, that doesn't mean anything... Call me Sara."

When I went alone to the last photoshoot, I liked the way the guy said my name. Gentle and soft, warm against my ear. *You're so beautiful.* I hear that all the time, but when he touched me, I felt like I would always be beautiful. He would keep me that way. I'd drunk two rum and cokes, maybe more, and everything felt so right. The world was nothing but yellow light and this man who wanted to love me. *How can you keep all that to yourself.* He tugged at my shirt, my panties. My arms felt heavy and too soft, like there was no bone in them. And I guess I let him. It hurt to look at the pictures later. I looked out of my mind, a mess. He paid me though.

Alvin snaps his finger at me. "Hey—alright. Lean your chest forward—yeah. Squeeze them between your arms, right—"

My body feels weak. I lean forward. My knees slip out from under me and I fall off the cannon. My face hits it hard on the way down. There's pain and dark and stars and the taste of blood in my mouth.

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I open my eyes to sky and Que-E's face leaned over me.

"Oh my God, Deanne. Are you alright?" Que-E dabs at the corner of my mouth.

I feel my lip. It's swollen already. The side of my face hurts. When I touch it, I don't feel much, like I'm pressing myself through a thick layer of blanket. Fuck, my face. Who wants a model with a busted face?

Alvin and Eddie lean over me too.

"Shit," Alvin says. He looks nervous. "What do we do now?"

"Photoshop," I say. I'm still sexy. I can still deliver. I sit up. "No big deal."

Que-E winces. "Maybe you should sit for a little bit."

"Yeah, rest up," Eddie says. "We can kill some time and take Sara's picture."

"She's not a model," I say. My lip hurts each time I move it. He's close enough that I could punch him in the face or stick my fingers into his eyes. "You leave her alone."

Que-E looks surprised, then anxious.

Alvin mumbles something about drama.

Eddie puts up his hands. "It's no big deal. Just some pictures. Don't you want pictures, Sara? See? She's not saying no. That's like saying yes. I swear I'm being serious. I think she's beautiful." On the last sentence, he turns and looks at Que-E. She smiles at him. When did they become best friends?

My head hurt. Que-E helped me stand. I dug my nails into her arm until she said, "Ouch, ease up." I squeezed her harder.

"Just a few minutes Porsché," Que-E says, her eyes begging.

I want to just leave, but all three of them are looking at me. They've got me cornered. Is this what they wanted all along? Que-E? For me to mess up and give up? I

look out at the ocean. The water's probably cold, the kind of cold that sucks the air out of your lungs faster. In this world, you're alone.

“Whatever. I don't care. If that's what Que-E wants,” I say. I walk over to where we were sitting and put on a sundress. It clings to the oil and grit stuck to me.

I expect Que-E to look at me scared, but instead she smiles. Looks happy. She starts chatting away, asking where they want her to stand. Eddie directs her to the boardwalk. She starts posing right away, like she's got these ideas stored up. Who is this girl?

Eddie starts clicking and she's so stiff. Terrible. I'm not surprised. This is what happens when you turn on your friends. You look like an asshole. But something changes. Que-E kind of just leaves and someone else moves into her body. She's got this look on her face. Calm. That's what it was. She starts channeling something intense. Moving liquid-like. Even Alvin was starting to get interested. This isn't Que-E. No one's who they say they are.

Que-E, her face flushed and eyes bright—I know the feeling, modeling does that—comes kneel by my side. “Your face looks less puffy. That was fun! I was really nervous at first... but then Eddie's so nice...he says they're going to be great. Alvin too.”

I give her a smile, just kind of pull up the edges of my lips. If she asked me what was wrong, I wouldn't even know what to say. I feel like I lost something. Don't even know what it is to look for it.

“Did you see me out there?” She lowers her voice, her eyes bright, “Eddie’s kind of old, but like a cute old, don’t you think?” I don’t like the way she says Eddie. His name in her mouth sounds too comfortable, too happy. Like she’s already laid claim to him.

“He’s not cute,” I say. I want to take her by the shoulders and say, this isn’t how it is. That’s just right now. You’re just a little girl. Can you do what it takes? Can you lay there and let things happen to you? You pay for feeling good. All’s I got is my looks. But this ain’t Que-E’s world. She’s far away from it.

Her eyes narrow. “Eddie said you were kind of jealous. He’s on photoshoots all the time and says it’s really normal. He really knows his stuff, Porsché.” She looks sad a moment. “I’m just having a little fun.”

“He’s just using you for his spank bank,” I say. Que-E flinches. I feel bad, but then I say again. “You’re a whore, Que-E. Just a dumbass whore who don’t know nothing. You going to let him fuck you? Is that it?”

Que-E flinches, but then looks at me like I’m lower than dirt. And I am. She should hate me. I’m nothing and never will be. I touch my lip and press it hard till it hurts.

Eddie comes over, all smiles, his gear packed up. Alvin seems to smell the tension between me and Que-E and waves good-bye without coming nearer.

“Sara, want a ride? You too Porsché.”

“Yes,” Que-E says. “She might not want to come.”

Eddie gives me an amused look, like Que-E just said a joke. “Least I can do is drop her off. Who knew? A modeling casualty.” He laughs.

I get in the car with them. It doesn’t matter what I do. As soon as we pull out, Eddie starts in on how Que-E’s really just going to be the next big thing. He’s singing this to her, telling her how beautiful she is. Que-E’s bouncing. Happy. She keeps putting her hand on his arm and tries not to look at me. I need to press my head against the glass, to feel it’s cool. It takes me awhile to notice we’re not in the right neighborhood. Or are we? Everything looks like places I don’t know.