

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: DOGMEAT: NEW AMERICAN FOLKTALES
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Dogmeat: New American Folktales is a collection of creative non-fiction pieces and fictive short stories that focus on the social issues of perception, duality, and the human desire to feel belonging. Although each piece may stand alone as a separate work, the collection is meant to better function as a whole. In other words, the pieces in this collection are meant to “speak” to each other and in doing so, provide a truer vision of what these stories endeavor to express. Thus, the arrangement of this collection is more than deliberate. It is an intentional attempt to enhance the overall atmosphere in which the stories evolve for the reader. Stylistically, the pieces in this collection are created with a variety of voices, diction, narrations, and other elements of the craft of fiction. The variety used is meant to bring focus, not disorientation, to the thematic elements presented in this work.

DOGMEAT: NEW AMERICAN FOLKTALES

By

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BEANSTALK GIANTS

I had this idea about my aunts that I believed until I was 8. Until this chance came at the more thoughtful age of 9 to really sit down and think about it. Before I really thought about it, I believed that my aunts, the ones from my mother's side of the family, would eat me if they could. If one day they ever chose to, that is. Eat me as in chop me up, cook and eat me. Swallow me whole, digest me. Devour me and anyone who noticed I was missing. And then they'd get away with it. This I knew for a fact. They'd come up with a story, probably, to tell my Mom who would cry but then be comforted in her sneaky sisters' arms. They would tell my Dad for sure, and he would be angry of course, but somehow he wouldn't ever suspect them for as long as he lived. They would make him forget until he was on his deathbed maybe, until it was physically and mentally too late for him to try to do anything about it. My two sisters though, would know what really happened. If the aunts ate one of them I would know about that too. But they and I, we would keep quiet if anyone of us went missing. We would know what happened, but we'd keep quiet because we simply wouldn't want to be eaten by our aunts. And that would be okay with me, I remember thinking, if my sisters were silent at my gory, gruesome death. I would forgive them for it and they of course would instantly absolve me. I was sure of it. We were sisters.

My aunts, on the other hand, were beyond forgiveness. They were, after all, the type who could eat people and get away with it. They were incapable of feeling sadness. I was sure of this. They did not suffer any guilt, tolerate any pain from anything past or present. They were the same every time they came to visit as far as I could tell. Always vigorous, always putting on lipstick and buying fake designer handbags from K-Mart, though at home their husbands were dying, in love with someone else, or leaving. The

aunts were mean like that, and magical. Smoking joking drinking ladies who sucked cigarettes like pretzels. Screaming crying shrieking ladies who sang as sirens howling holiday karaoke until the night burned bright again, their blaring voices awakening my newborn baby cousins out of their cozy sleep. But I don't want to spend too much time on the babies, give too much pity to their plea. They were after all potential victims equally worthy of sacrifice, and when it came down to being eaten I felt better them than me. It's what I thought, when I had this idea. They were just babies, anyway. Sleepy squealing babies. They wouldn't have as much to miss as I. I had a pet rock. I liked to go fishing, liked to spear worms through their fat, bloody back. I liked to cook. Meatloaf was my favorite thing to make, besides blueberry muffins from the box. The babies, I thought, had only sleep to miss. What's more, they didn't get much of it anyway. Not at least when *they* were around.

And they were always around. In our guestroom, at the breakfast table, in our T.V. room, at our stove. They popped in and popped out for the summer, back to wherever they came from and right back to the States, the length of their visit indeterminate. They were a shifty presence, forever lurking in my mother's extra pair of house-slippers. They were her sisters after all, and had the same slipper-size. In every corner of our house they captured us, tortured us, and made their demands to EAT! SLEEP! NAP! SING! PLAY OUTSIDE! My sisters and I were helpless. We had no choice. On their command, we choked down the mongo beans and eggplant they cooked in the last night's grease. They'd tap their fingers and we would lay still on the sunroom floor, buried in blankets they yanked from our beds, the sun burning our faces and piercing our hot aching heads. When we awoke, we stood up straight for hours singing nursery songs,

John Denver songs, Christmas songs, and church songs without breaks and without water. Sometimes, we were forced to sing in matching neon outfits they bought for us, and they would sit on the couch and laugh and cough, their voices more fierce the more cigarettes they smoked. We sang and sang and sang until they passed out with their mouths wide open, emitting vapors of vodka or Jim Beam. Or, we sang until it was time for their favorite American talk-shows. Thus, *Oprah* and *Geraldo* became our American heroes. In our other waking moments, we were forced to listen to them. Listen as they told us whether we had gained weight, lost it, grown prettier than each other, bustier, more intelligent. Or, in the best case scenario, more like them. We would stand, steadfast through it all, listening, always listening because we knew we'd get it if we talked back. Talking back meant a pinch and their fingernails were long. It meant a spanking with a belt. A call to Grandma, the mother of them all, who would then want to talk to us too. Or, the most feared punishment, it meant the title of *the* spoiled American niece. The mercy of all God's angels rest on she who reaped this title. It was a title that *she* would carry to her grave, the aunts told us, if it wouldn't first be the death of her.

Though the prospect of being the dead, spoiled American niece frightened us, the idea of having to wear electric blue polyester while singing *Country Roads* eight times in a row absolutely petrified us. We came to the realization that nothing but death, either theirs or ours, would stop the mayhem we suffered summer after long, fearful summer. And since, at the time, my sisters and I were still working out the kinks in our plans to murder them, I was more than certain that the death, should there ever be one, would be one of ours. I believed that the day was soon coming when they would actually do it. Pick one of us. Kill. Feast.

My mother's presence was not a comfort when she was in the room with the aunts and me. When her sisters were visiting my mother was an accomplice, a silent partner to their evils. She did nothing to help us though I knew she could. She wouldn't have dreamed of helping us, though she looked at us longingly, standing in the shadows behind them, smiling as if she would. My father on the other hand, would have helped us if he could but he couldn't. He was too in love with my mother. Too bewitched to comprehend the shiny burning in my mother's eyes as the wickedness I so clearly saw it was. He was too infatuated when he saw her smiling with the aunts, and believed that her terrible smirking was only relief in a sort of comfort that he was incapable of providing - a reprieve in another sort of companionship that his "husband" status was not able to provide. And he, unlike my aunts, was capable of guilt. And he felt guilty, I knew, for his failure to be the woman my mother needed.

My mother is the type who needs a woman in her life. A woman who is not her daughter, because a daughter is a female that is only half herself. The type of woman she needs has to be one of her sisters because a woman who is completely unrelated certainly wouldn't do. My mother is from that idea that the only real "sisterhood" is one made through blood, real blood. That "womanhood" is not enough to bond women, nor is oppression from the opposite sex, unequal employment or education trends, or the gift of childbirth or joy of motherhood. Blood, real blood, and an identical history of genetic makeup is what my mother deems a true friendship. She swears that it's the only type that counts. For what I didn't know. Life, love and the sort I suppose.

What I did know at 8 was that I was not like my mother or her sorceress sisters. Not in the least. I looked like my father. I had, to my great disadvantage, his nose. I also

believed that I was nothing like the women from his branch of the genealogy tree. After all, the women on my mother's side were the *nice* ones of the family. The aunts from my father's side were downright ruthless. I did not want to believe that I was anything like my mother's sister-in-laws, and if for some reason I had a doubt about it, my mother made me and my sisters, in some chapter of our girlhood, sure of it. *You are not like your father's sisters*. It is an idea that any lonely young bride stuck in a different country with only with the company of her in-laws could believe in, would need to believe in. And besides, it was true. We, my sisters and I, weren't completely like my father's sisters. We are, after all, half of my mother.

What I believed when I was 8, what I wanted and needed desperately to believe, was that I was different from that old, mothball generation of women born before me. I, after all, was born on a legally different type of soil belonging to another part of the world than they were. I was American, and American from birth. True, they were American too, my mother and some of my aunts, but only afterwards. English is native to me. Igorot is native to them. I liked Abraham Lincoln. Their hero was Jose Rizal. Nancy Reagan was the correct answer to the question: *Who is the first lady?* Corazon Aquino was the first lady, but only for those of my mother's country. I was Filipino, sure but I had a hyphen and an American at the end of it. They knew it and I knew it. The whole San Diego school system knew it every time they asked and had me and all my elementary school friends fill in those infamous surveys with horribly cheap number 2 pencils: PACIFIC ISLANDER/ASIAN-AMERICAN. I filled that oval in like no other PACIFIC ISLANDER/ASIAN-AMERICAN did the world over and I was sure of it. After all, I would fill in the oval first and *then* outline it, tracing as hard as the lead-based tip would press. That

darkened little oval was as my teachers taught me, as my young, fresh, clever teachers taught me, what made me different in the country, different in the world. A unique individual. An entity all to myself with the right to pursue liberty and happiness without obstacle, without unfairness. Most of all, *it* was what gave me the right to pursue life without the threat of hungry, niece-eating aunts.

I had this idea. It was just this idea.

HOLLYWOOD NAILS

She picked the place because it was downscale. Hollywood Nails at the corner of 5th and St.Elmo's. A corner that was still considered a part of the beauty and spa district, but tucked away a bit toward the end of the strip, behind the glassy condominiums on Montgomery and Woodmont. It was the kind of corner that roomed a violin repair shop next to an army surplus store. An old pocket at the end of a city that seemed permanently dull, as if all the years of collecting dust swept down from 1st and Main had dyed every streetlight and every fire hydrant in a brown, gray finish. If she had gne where she was supposed to, picked a place that she could if she wanted to, she would have picked Pru, a glossy Scandinavian spa on Wisconsin, a store whose entrance was still seemingly wet from an electrifying coat of Kelley green paint. The door used to be a dewy, rosy hue to match the booties of the poodles that pranced through it when it guarded the front to a dog bakery. The same kind of pink that tinted the delicate upchuck of the Lhasa Apsos if their whole-wheat, pure lard, birthday cookie caught a bit of yolk in the guaranteed yolk-free icing. It was the same kind of pink she noticed, as she smoothed an invisible fray in the hem of her skirt, thathad a special way of oozing. She wat ched as it oozed and slurped presently around a mismatched collection of combs and scissors in a glass straw-container marked BARBACIDE.

“Numbah fity-four!”

She turned to face the small Asian lady behind the counter, her forehead bobbing upwards through nail polish bottles and spa menus. She stared at the lady's forehead and then, as the lady rose from her seat and walked towards her, at her nose, chin, and neck. *Rosacea!* She noticed the condition with pity as she continued to consider very carefully the hot, red clusters that pulsed towards her. *And a lot of it, too!* She shook her head. *No*

need for such a fixable condition to plague such a potentially pretty face! She was going to tell the lady essence of chamomile swabbed twice daily could ease the swelling and calm the red but, when the lady grabbed the #54 ticket from her hand, tore it in two and tossed the pieces where the shampoo girl was sweeping, she stopped. *I'll tell her later,* she thought. She adjusted her purse to a comfortable pressure on her shoulder. *The lady would understand what I am saying, appreciate the advice, I'm sure.* She sighed. *We Asians, after all, should look out for one another.* She continued to follow quietly behind the lady, staring nicely at the walls of polishes the lady flicked her fingers at until she noticed it: 3 Asian manicurists, 2 Asian pedicurists for a total of 5 Asians in the salon. She shook her head and clucked her tongue. *Unbelievable,* she thought. *At least five other of us here and none of us could help this lady to fix her face? Shame!* She rolled her eyes. She saw it all the time. Asian people, women at that, who didn't look out for their own. She just didn't understand it. She sighed, a deep sigh. It was a sigh that made her remember how thankful she was that her mother had brought her up right and not like one of *those*.

She smiled at the memory of her mother, God rest her soul. It had been twenty years since her passing but having to get through all of womanhood without her kept the pain fresh and new. There wasn't a day that went by that she didn't think about her mother, try to do what she thought her mother would do in situations had she been alive. In fact, she wouldn't *leta* day go by that she didn't do something in honor of her mother's memory, even if it was in something as simple as saying her own name: *My name is Matilda Anne **Mabatid-Ong**.* Her name was the strongest connection she felt she had to her mother, a thing that would surpass the inheritance, her mother's wedding ring,

her ancient pearls. Matilda would say her name loudly, proudly, during role calls, during her first interviews after college. She would never swallow the last name or try to soften its pronunciation. She was proud of it and every chance she got she would declare loudly her last name that showcased the Filipino and Chinese heritage she came from. *It's a hyphenated name*, she would educate everyone. *Last part like Wong without the W*. She would also tell people this if they asked her to repeat her last name for spelling. *But*, she thought, glancing at a spa menu taped on the wall, *that's something I won't have to do here*.

The idea of that she should have been coming to this salon all along made Matilda smile. She pictured herself checking out in the next hour or so, standing at the front desk, laughing and conversing with the same lady she was following now. She had a tight schedule for the rest of the afternoon but decided she would stay at the salon for as long as the lady from the front desk wanted to chat and make nice with her. Perhaps they would chat about new services, new specials they offered in the coming holiday months – all stuff of the spa world Matilda knew very well. Matilda was a seasoned spa goer. She knew that if one was really serious about a place, really liked the work they did, then one would book an appointment right after the current one was finished. She had decided long before she even got to the salon that she would show this courtesy of snatching up a future appointment but she decided to wait until the end of the appointment, until the lady from the front desk brought it up first. *That way*, Matilda thought, *the lady might feel good as if she taught me something*. Matilda grinned.

“Pick color.”

“Okay!” Matilda readjusted her purse strap. She knew what color she wanted, but she stayed a while so as not to look ungrateful for the lady’s efforts. “Thank you, very much!” Being ungrateful, as she had also been taught, was the ugliest thing a lady could do to show dishonor to someone. The only thing worse, being ungrateful to an elder. She did not want to seem ungrateful to the lady, especially since she thought the lady did such a lovely job of leading her to rows of polish on the walls. And she knew, definitely knew, that she was *not* older than the lady.

Matilda quickly glanced around the salon. *Quite frankly, I am not the oldest one here by far.* She spied a soccer mom, forty perhaps, being shuffled away into the waxing room. Her toes were freshly painted in a pale purple that sadly, Matilda noticed, did not work for her almond skin tone. She saw a potentially older woman nearby stuffed under a heated hair lamp and a cap of foil that was twisted shut with plastic curlers. Her face was smothered in the ultra-modern *Lucky* magazine, the very same issue that was in Matilda’s purse. *Lucky*, Matilda knew, usually would suggest that the woman was hip, fresh, and young. But twinkling between the lamp and tin was a yellow patch of curls, bright and brittle, that told the age and condition of the woman underneath. *Fifties*, Matilda thought, *but I could justify late forties.* She looked at the elderly, blonde woman again. *Not that there is anything wrong about being old or getting older*, Matilda thought.

She ran her fingers over the wines and burgundies and all the deeper colors she thought was age appropriate for the women who were nearly twenty years her senior. *There are some things an older woman should look forward to.* Growing older meant more respect on a job simply because you look the part, she brightened. Becoming an older woman, especially an older woman who didn’t let herself go, meant that people

would look at her and think “refined.” Yes, she thought, growing older was nothing to be ashamed about, especially if a woman was sure to not let herself go. *Why would anyone do that anyway?* Her tongue clucked at the thought. She was going to be the type of fifty year-old who had silver hair, not gray. *Becoming fifty didn’t have to be a sad thing*, she reminded herself. *Fifty is, after all, the new thirty.*

When she felt she had stared at the wall of polish long enough, she plucked a ruby colored bottle from the wall to her right, shook it, and handed it to the lady. She looked around at the salon again, until she noticed that it seemed other women in the salon were staring at her. She started to look down quickly, but then stopped. She looked instead straight in front of her at absolutely nothing and rolled her eyes, slightly but visibly, so that all who were watching could see. *Don’t they know it’s impolite to stare?* She rolled her eyes again and felt proud of herself for limiting her reaction to the salon goers around her. No need to confront or cause a scene, she resolved. *Good manners, after all, are the sign of true maturity.*

When they reached an empty pedicure station, the lady with the rosacea motioned for Matilda to get in and just as quickly returned to her desk. Matilda was a bit surprised at the lady’s abruptness. The process was new to her. *But that’s all right*, she thought. *Different strokes for different folks.* Usually, in the salons Matilda frequented, the color would have been chosen at the front desk and then brought to her at the pedicure station – a station which she would have been led to, purse carried, by the lady who would be performing the service. And then after would be her favorite part -coffee. A hot, creamy cup of coffee. Flavored maybe, with a shot of hazelnut or caramel. She looked at the pedicure station in front of her and noticed a little bit of wearing on the fake leather seat

cover. She knew there would be no coffee available here. She felt sorry for it, but then just as quickly felt bad. Guilty almost, that she had so wanted that cup of coffee. *You know what this is, Matilda?* It was a question her mother would ask had Matilda told her about the missing coffee. *Less pretentious*, her mother would answer. Matilda was sure of it. *Genuine*. Matilda sniffed when she imagined what she'd be doing now, had she made the choice an hour to go up the street, instead of down. *Waiting still, definitely. Staring at a busty twenty-one year old who is too intimidated to tell the senior spa technician that her one o'clock is waiting.* Yes, she thought to herself, stepping carefully around the station, dodging brooms and tiny squalls of nail clippings pushed and shoved along her way, *things are much better here.*

Matilda had just worked her way into her seat when her pedicurist came along and, without introducing herself, busied herself in a basket of cotton balls. Matilda lowered herself to say hello, but when she finally got low enough, the pedicurist got up again and went to restock her basket with supplies. Matilda watched as the pedicurist walked away, wondering if she and the lady from the front desk were sisters. *They certainly look alike.* She shrugged. She was sure she would figure it out later. Maybe, she thought, I'll just ask. But then she had another thought, a thought that made her hesitate, but a thought she then quickly dismissed: *They won't be offended if I asked if they were sisters.* The idea, she felt, was ludicrous. *Besides*, she decided, *we're all sisters anyway and they will know what I mean.*

Matilda tried to smile when the pedicurist came back but only managed to introduce herself to the top of the pedicurist's head. The pedicurist had bowed quickly to grab Matilda's feet. Two in one hand, she swung Matilda's feet towards the bubbling

water. It was only then that she looked at Matilda. Matilda began her introduction again, but stopped when she felt the steam on her toes rise too quickly. She moved her foot away from the pedicurist's grasp and pointed her right toe so that she could ease into the hot water slowly. But when she positioned it, the pedicurist yanked it. She grabbed back one foot and then the other, dunked them into the water, and held them there. Tightly.

"OK?" The lady smiled. There was a small chip on her front tooth. Matilda held in a tiny yelp.

"..... Yes! That's okay!"

"OK."

Matilda offered a smile at the lady, allowing a slight laugh to erase any discomfort in her face that she thought might be mistaken for a grimace. *I am the only Asian client here. I should act like it.* She felt good that she did not tell the lady that the water was too hot or that in the future she should let the client test the water before she began the foot bath. She will learn in time, Matilda thought patiently. She watched the pedicurist arrange her nail utensils neatly near her, in row, by size, warming the bottle of ruby between her palms. *Of all the people in this salon to yell at her, I should be the last.* No, she thought, the water is really not that bad. She watched the way her pedicurist opened the bottle, checked the color. She appreciated the care that she seemed to take. *Really, the water is not bad at all.*

As soon as she had the thought, the pedicurist cranked up the water pressure until a solid beam of water shot between her toes. Matilda turned away from the pedicurist, hoping that the growing flush on her face was not detectable. When the beam of water began to pierce through her ankle she turned her face so that she could show her

discomfort to the wall. But she held it in. Mustered all the strength she had, and simply grinned.

Sitting next to them on a much newer station was another pedicurist with a thin, wiry perm that seemed to float above her, as if it were only half -way attached to her scalp. Matilda stared. She had never seen hair like that, especially on a nail technician. Like black cotton candy, she thought, happy that the sight of it distracted her from the singeing sensation of her ankle for the moment. She wanted to reach out and touch the perm just to see what it felt like. She leaned closer, tried to get a better look.

“Are you OK?”

Matilda startled a bit when the pair of black eyes arose in the midst of the hazy perm and matched her gaze, and was even more surprised when the dry purple lips underneath them spoke to her. She couldn’t look away while the eyes appraised the shape of her nose, and the color of her face. She was about to smile or say hello, but at that moment, her pedicurist wrenched her feet from the water, slapped her left foot in her right hand, and pulled. She released, and pulled again. Matilda grabbed the arms of the station to keep balance.

“OK?” the pedicurist looked up at Matilda and smiled as she asked.

“Yes, just fine!” Matilda smiled back.

In the middle of one pull, Matilda’s pedicurist glanced at the other pedicurist, who nodded toward Matilda and said something in a language that was not English. *Ah*, Matilda thought, *Korean!* She felt proud of herself for recognizing it. *It’s unmistakable, the way the words glide, the way they see-saw with each other. Like birds, a flock of big, beautiful birds.* Matilda had never actually learned Korean, or any other language but

English for that matter. *But*, she thought, *I can just tell these sorts of things* She spied the elderly blonde lady at the opposite side of the salon. She sniffed.

A sharp laugh pierced the inside of Matilda's ears and she looked up. Her pedicurist and the other pedicurist with the perm were laughing, looking at Matilda. When they noticed Matilda looking at them, they stopped. Matilda smiled then pretended to be interested in her *Lucky* magazine.

"What yo name?"

Matilda was delighted. She looked up from the magazine and closed it immediately. "Matilda Anne Mabatid-Ong." She was sure to turn her eyes in the direction of the other pedicurist in an effort to make her feel welcome into the conversation but the other pedicurist was peering into her tub. She picked out a long strain of amber colored hair with two, wrinkled fingers, and released it, and stepped on the hair, grinding it into the linoleum with her slipper. Matilda noticed she was wearing tube socks with her slippers. Striped at the top. Thick stripes, red and blue.

"Where yo from? Filipin-o?"

"Yes," Matilda smiled. She wrenched her attention away from the unlady-like socks. "Philippines. But I am also part Chinese." West Coast, or La Jolla, was usually her answer at Pru.

The pedicurist said nothing and began to apply peppermint lotion to Matilda's feet. Matilda looked up around the salon. The elderly blonde woman with the *Lucky* magazine had taken off her shoes. Matilda watched. She couldn't help but think of squirrels, possums, and other animals with sorrowfully short extremities as the woman stretched her toes over the tub. Matilda glanced at the woman's hands to see if she at least

had graceful fingers and was genuinely sorry when she found the older woman had knotty log-like things thickened with veins and sun spots. She watched the sausage fingers tremble slightly, crawl over a pearl encrusted pendant and then curl into a fist that rested finally underneath the woman's sagged cheekbone. *Grape seed!* The oil not the pod, or even plain old vitamin E could help with the firming, depending of course on the condition of the elasticity underneath the eye, Matilda thought. *Or maybe - would celery root work better?* Her gaze moved upward to better assess the condition, but then she found herself blinking rapidly in response to the stare that came from the woman's eyes. Matilda turned abruptly into her purse. She stared, angrily, though a little bit of that anger, she had to admit to herself, was a bit of hurt. *She's judging me!* Stung by the thought, Matilda shifted the purse around so that the *Burberry* label was clear and definite, bold and obvious for her to see. She peeped at the elderly blonde woman to see if she was looking. The elderly blonde woman had taken off her glasses and began polishing them. Matilda sniffed. *Slim chance she would even know authentic Burberry from an imposter!*

Matilda rolled her eyes, and turned back towards the women at her feet. She decided to ignore the elderly lady. Instead, she listened as her pedicurist chirped something to the other pedicurist, who shook her perm furiously and went digging into her bucket of nails supplies. That pedicurist clucked sharply at Matilda's pedicurist who giggled and then began to pinch rhythmically at Matilda's toes. Matilda tried not to wince. The pinches were too forceful. One pinch in particular, she felt, was particularly jolting. *Perhaps I could mention some polite criticism about the massage portion of the pedicure.* She hated to say anything remotely bad about these ladies and their salon but

then decided it was perhaps necessary. Massages are definitely supposed to be relaxing and that would be a hard thing to save face against, she thought, if someone *else* decided to complain. She brightened. *I'll slip it in with a compliment!*

“How long you here?” The pedicurist asked Matilda without skipping a beat in the toe massage.

“You mean in the U.S., right?” Matilda asked. She knew what the pedicurist meant.

She nodded.

“I was born here, but I’ve been back home to China and the Philippines several times.” She warmed as she said the word *home*.

The pedicurist smiled back, and stopped the massage. Matilda held in her relief. She watched as the pedicurist took a clipper from her pocket and began clipping away at Matilda’s cuticles. In the middle of one snip, the pedicurist said something to the other pedicurist, who gave a sharp glare at Matilda. Matilda’s pedicurist shrugged, turned to back to Matilda and continued clipping. Matilda was amazed that her pedicurist didn’t have to watch as she cut away. A loud sneeze and throat clearing came from the elderly blonde woman but even so, her pedicurist’s movements remained precise. Matilda was amazed. *What a great job!* She touched her pedicurist’s shoulder.

“My Mom,” Matilda said, “had to do nails too, when she first came here.” She nodded at the pedicurist, who smiled at her. Warmly, Matilda thought. “But it wasn’t long before she made something of herself.” She didn’t tell the pedicurist about how her mother escaped Marcos’ Marshall Law in the seventies, and flew half-way around the world to be with her father. She didn’t mention a word about her parents, and how when

they first lived in the states and cut hair, and swept floors, and painted nails and ate soup all day until the day came when they could go to school, learn, and rise to the top. Those stories, Matilda knew, were for *other* people. Matilda studied the surfaces of her toes, noting how white and how well-shaped the beds of the nails were. Five perfect, little half-moons. Evident, but not obvious. Tasteful. A wonderful job. Matilda thought she should tell it to her. She leaned down to her pedicurist, smiled even bigger.

“My mother wasn’t even as good as you are!”

The pedicurist looked at Matilda. Right in the eyes. Matilda looked back. They stared without speaking to one another. Matilda leaned back, and thought she felt a chilliness emanating from the pedicurist’s stare. *Did she not hear me?* Matilda wondered. *Or, maybe she misunderstood?* Matilda felt confused, but it only lasted an instant. She shook the doubt out of her head. *No*, she believed, *we’re communicating. We don’t even have to speak to one another or speak the same language even, and yet we are communicating.* She let herself sigh, and felt it was a happy one. Her mother, she thought, would be proud.

The lady from the front desk came suddenly to the pedicurist’s side and whispered something not so softly in her ear. The pedicurist, said something to the lady, something she didn’t seem happy about, while moved to clip the dead skin off Matilda’s other foot. The lady from the front desk, walked away slowly. She walked backwards, watching the pedicurist as she went. *They must surely be sisters.* Or at least cousins, Matilda thought, and then she felt sorry for the pedicurist’s sister or cousin who looked sad because of the pedicurist’s reaction. *What was the bad news?* A cancellation? Familial trouble? Matilda tried her best to figure out the situation based on the scenario.

There were no tears in her pedicurist's eyes, so perhaps not familial, at least nothing too consequential. *Yet even though there are no tears*, Matilda thought as she looked closer, *there is a certain redness in the pedicurist's eyes*. Matilda thought about it carefully, and then realized, the redness was something she recognized. *Weariness!* Matilda could sense it. *Weariness and fatigue!* Matilda remembered the two so well on her mother's face from when she was young. She was certain it was same look that her pedicurist wore now, going through the same things her mother did, trying to make something out of herself in a country that didn't care. *Don't worry, things will get better!* Matilda tried to give the pedicurist a sympathetic look. Her pedicurist was looking down, clipping faster and faster. It made Matilda want to tell the pedicurist that one day it, life, would be better, and that she was living proof of it.

"You're doing such a great job," Matilda started.

The pedicurist kept clipping.

"A year from now, you'll probably be manager of this place." She added a smile, and a wink.

Matilda thought the pedicurist still looked a little disturbed, so Matilda thought harder. I can do better by her, she thought. *I must*. And then she had it.

"A year from now actually, you probably won't even be at this place!"

The pedicurist stopped clipping. She looked up. This gave Matilda courage.

"I don't know where you'll be, but I know it'll be somewhere great. Just *wait*. You'll see!"

And then, the feeling hit her. *The feeling*. The exact feeling she had when her mother told her a story about struggling through college. The same feeling she had when

her mother told her about leaving her country, about starting life anew. The feeling she got when she heard all about her mother's struggles, sacrifices and pains. Stories that Matilda had hear many, many times. Stories that were Matilda's lullabies, her bedtime fairytales. *And fairytales* Matilda remembered her mother teaching her, *do come true*. Matilda sighed happily. Her mother, she knew, must be looking down on here. She could *feel* it. She looked at the pedicurist. She couldn't remember whether or not the pedicurist had thanked her for the compliment or not, but she wasn't going to mind that or worry about it. *After all*, Matilda thought, swallowing the empty lump in her throat, *it is really I that should be thanking you*.

Matilda gazed forward as the pedicurist looked down slowly, and continued to clip artfully, skillfully, gracefully. Her arm remained perfectly parallel, elbow to Matilda's knee. The tiny steel edges of her clippers clipped all over Matilda's toes and cuticles, trimming, cleaning, and removing. Closer and closer and closer they clipped to the fresh, pink skin. And then they bit.

"Sowry." The pedicurist smiled. Gently.

The edges had sliced into Matilda's toe, took a chunk out of it. Matilda's knee jerked out of alignment when the cut began to burn. It jerked again when she looked down at her skin and saw the opening mouth of a tiny, crimson, slit. It began to bleed. The pain stung. Cut up her leg like a paring knife. Matilda grabbed the arm of her station, and gripped forcefully to steady herself. It was an accident, she thought, it could happen to anybody. At the movement, the lady put down the clippers, and applied pressure to Matilda's small toe with her thumb and pointer.

"OK?" The pedicurist was smiling.

Matilda steadied her gaze, forcing herself to focus on the framed poster of a dolphin on the wall in front of her, the coffee colored backsplash near the sink – on anything that was not anywhere near the pedicurist at her feet. She wouldn't do this on purpose, she thought. *We communicated.* When she regained control of her posture, Matilda looked at the pedicurist, and then looked at her foot, making sure to open her eyes wide as if she were surprised, like she hadn't noticed what had been happening. The pedicurist looked at Matilda and then at her friend. Silent, they both looked at Matilda.

“Oh!...Oh, that's okay,” Matilda answered, and then a smile, and a barrage of blinking eyes. “That's okay,” she said to them both, and then a laugh. The other pedicurist smiled and quickly busied herself in fixing her station. Matilda's pedicurist reached over and patted Matilda on her calf, massaged, then patted it again. She swabbed a hot cotton ball over Matilda's toe and held Matilda's it tightly for a few seconds more. Then, after checking to make sure the majority of the bleeding had stopped, placed both of Matilda's feet the water, and wiped her hands. Matilda watched as blood emanated from her toe and dissolved into the water like smoke. *It was only an accident.* She swished her foot in the smoky water, and forced herself to believe it. *It could have happened to anybody.*

“Go school?” The pedicurist asked Matilda as she began to drain the tub.

“Yes.” Matilda forced her breath to come slowly. “I'm finished, actually.”

“What yo finish?”

“Business, with a minor in Graphic Art.” Her toe was pulsating slightly. She grinded her teeth and smiled close-lipped to hide it. The pedicurist did not seem to notice. *I'm glad she isn't noticing.* Matilda bit down on her tongue slightly.

“Working? Where yo work?” The pedicurist picked up Matilda’s feet one at a time, dried them, and prepped them for painting.

“At a marketing firm. I do document design. I edit advertisements, like for magazines,” Matilda answered. She caught her breath. The sentence had come out too quickly she knew, perhaps giving away her unease. “Like those.” She pointed at a rack of magazines that contained year old issues of *Vogue*, *In Style*, and *RedBook*. “I decide what’s pretty. Peoplebuy pretty things.” Matilda studied the tacky, beaded scrunchie in the lady’s hair. Matilda felt sorry for even considering being mad at her pedicurist. She looked at the scrunchie again. *She doesn’t know better*, she thought. Matilda looked down on the pedicurist. She had stopped what she was doing. She was looking up at Matilda, giving her full attention. *She wants to know more, I guess*, Matilda thought, *about beauty*.

“I do magazines,” Matilda said again. This time, more slowly, slightly louder. “For beauty.” Maybe, Matilda brightened, I can help her, she thought.

The pedicurist nodded at Matilda’s answer and grabbed a pair of foam dividers out of a bag of shrink wrap. She shoved the half-inch divisions between Matilda’s toes, tightened her scrunchie, and then slacked weighty drops of polish onto the nails. She looked at Matilda’s hands.

“I like yo hands,” she said quietly.

Matilda couldn’t hear. “I’m sorry?”

“Fat here,” the lady said, as she pinched Matilda’s palm and the bottom waists of her fingers. “And small here.” She pointed at the tips. “Is beauty in my country.”

Matilda laughed, surprised at it, but glad she did it. It made the pain in her foot subside a little. She laughed again, more heartily, nearly knocking over her purse. “Oh,

no,” she answered, quickly straightening her purse and her posture after she laughed some more. She cleared her throat. “They’re fat little doll hands.”

The lady wiped her tongue around the insides of her cheeks “No,” said the lady, quietly, “is beauty.”

Matilda shrugged. She glanced at the magazines, recognizing well the way the cover titles worked in and around the cover girl’s hips, bosom and arch of the lower back. *I suppose*, Matilda thought, *it just takes some people a while to get it*. Matilda looked at her hands, looked at the lady’s, and nodded. There was nothing more for Matilda to do, she knew, but say thank you, and hope for the best. One day, she knew, her pedicurist would get it.

“Thanks,” Matilda answered.

The pedicurist nodded. “You have boyfriend?” She licked her bottom of her lip.

“I do.” Matilda brightened at the thought of him. David. He was in politics.

“What he like?” The lady had stopped painting Matilda’s toes.

“Oh, he’s very nice,” Matilda assured her. She warmed at the concern her pedicurist showed. *Like an aunt or a close cousin of my own!*

“He Amer-i-can?” The lady’s hands were now on top of Matilda’s feet, cradling each as if they were small infants.

Matilda didn’t know why the answer came so slowly. “Yes.”

“White?”

Matilda was still. “Yes,” she answered quietly, feeling as if she had betrayed herself.

At Matilda's answer, her pedicurist yelled in Korean to the other pedicurist who was now three stations away, giving a client a manicure. She took herself momentarily away from painting her client's nails to look at Matilda. She yelled something back and the sound shot like pellets, small hard ones hitting off the brass and linoleum and into Matilda's head. Matilda's pedicurist gasped. The other pedicurist gasped back. Both pedicurists then gasped at each other, and then looked at Matilda. They pleaded at her with their eyes.

“Good fo you!!”

Her pedicurist had shouted at first, but said it slightly softer when she noticed the blonde elderly woman sitting at the drying station next to them. When she spoke again, it was softer, but still bold, still confident. “Good fo you ” she said to Matilda. “You marr-ry him?”

“...I don't know...” Matilda pulled her purse tighter towards her, pulled it into her belly. Her toe was hurting again.

“You marr-ry him!!” The lady's grip on Matilda's foot tightened and before Matilda could answer, the pedicurist shouted to the other pedicurist in rapid Korean. At the information, the other pedicurist shouted back, her perm round and angry. Treacherous.

It was Matilda's turn to gasp when the other pedicurist stood up from her station. Matilda inched back into her seat as the pedicurist and her perm shook angrily, like an angry, wind-ravaged tumbleweed. When she had finished speaking, she shook her head and hair once more, defiantly. Then she stood completely still though tiny sections of her hair were still popping, still moving on sheer momentum. Finally, she sat. She grabbed

her client's hands, pressed them onto the table in front of her, and resumed painting.

Matilda stared war-like at the popping, angry headdress.

Her pedicurist gently tugged Matilda's big toe. "You. *Marry*. Him." She smacked the bottom of Matilda's feet. "You see?" she asked, pointing to other pedicurist. "She say you lucky. Is good fo you marry him. Is good fo me. Marry like him, you see?" The lady shook the small bottle of ruby polish at Matilda's face. She shook it like the end of a sentence, an answer to a child's arithmetic problem. She shook and shook and shook. And then she giggled.

Matilda glared at the pedicurist's hair that shook out of her scrunchie as she laughed and giggled. It fell in slices: one on her shoulder, one behind her ear, and the others all around over her face. It stuck in lumps to the moistness between the pedicurist's lips and eyelashes. Matilda wanted to grab it. She wanted to pull away all the hair and tie it into the scrunchie as tightly as she could. But she didn't lift a finger. Her toe was screaming now, burning in pain. A familiar question came to her mind: *What would my mother do?* Matilda didn't move.

The pedicurist, in the meantime, finished giggling and painting Matilda's toes. When she was done, she removed the dividers and brought Matilda a small toaster oven-like contraption with the door snapped off of it. She shoved Matilda's feet in the front of it and pressed the timer to "on." Matilda sat, her feet in the Automatic-izer heat gelling and drying system. When the timer switched to off, she didn't bother to check if her nails were completely dry. She simply pulled on her socks, stuffed on her shoes, and grabbed her purse. She said nothing to the lady at the front desk when she asked if Matilda would like to make another appointment. The lady at the front desk didn't bother to ask twice.

“Thirty dollar.”

Matilda blinked at her.

The lady smacked her gum against her teeth, and then leaned to talk softly to Matilda. “OK.” She chewed her gum, mouth open. “For *you*, special price. Twenty-five dollar.” She gave a smile, and a wink.

Matilda stared.

“Is good price!” The lady at the front desk sulked, printed a receipt, and smacked it in front of Matilda. She crossed her arms, daring Matilda’s next move.

“Damn your cheap Korean pedicures!”

Matilda had meant to say it louder, loud enough for an echo to be borne and do what echoes do but the words fell flat, monotone, as if they were simply matter-of-fact. She waited for lightening. For sudden death. For an insurmountable wave of guilt that she knew should have floored her, filled the essential crevices in her head and in her eyes and make her sorry in the way that humans so rarely felt, and could barely stand to think about. But nothing happened. The lady sniffed. She tugged away two twenty dollar bills that were peeking out from the pocket of Matilda’s purse. Then she grinned.

“Thirty dollar.” She made the correct change and stuffed the money back into Matilda’s purse. “All done!”

Matilda stood for a second, but then she went. She stood outside, staring into the storefront. She said nothing as the pain in her toe dulled to a throb and itched against her stocking. Nothing, as she backed a way littleby little from the door . Nothing, as she turned around, paused, and looked back at the salon, the pedicurists, and the dolphin poster under the plastic panel with a shoddy, gilded frame. She recognized herself in the

dull gleam of the plastic pane of the poster across the whole length of the store, and when she did she went on her way. She shifted her toe to the right and to the left, trying in vain to walk comfortably. She swayed this way and that, her toe swelling inside her ever tightening high-heeled pump. She wobbled along home, noticing that her tummy was grumbling. She noticed that she should stop for lunch. She noticed the flowers on the sidewalk, and she noticed her shadow in the sun. She noticed several things in fact, as she walked further away from Hollywood Nails. But the one thing she didn't notice, as she limped and waddled by, was the way the elderly blonde woman in the salon was staring out the window, admiring the distinctive way Matilda walked along the street.

SLEEPY HOLLOWS

Not so long ago, my father gave me a memory that I had forgotten I had since childhood. He gave it to me somewhere in the middle to end of my teenaged years. I can't recall exactly when.

"You were only about four or five, when you went back to the Philippines" he told me, tearing the head of a plastic yellow peeler through the rind of a thick navel orange. "Lani was about nine. Amanda, of course," he said, glancing at my teenaged sister curling near the kitchen fireplace listening intently for her name (the most interesting part of any family conversation to her), "well, Amanda wasn't born yet." Ignoring the sneer that flickered towards him from the fireplace, my father popped a juicy segment into his mouth, chewed, and swallowed before he continued. "Your Grandma Victoria had taken us to see the graves. When we were done with our visits, she carried you, *aba* on her back, and she held Lani's wrists to keep her from stepping on the loose rocks."

"Mm," I said, making a conscious effort to appear engaged. My father seldom dug up memory lane but I know that when he's in the mood he enjoys it, so I try to prolong his journey as long as I can. I watched him, chewing and watching me, deliberately taking his time in revealing the story. I reached for an orange from the fruit bowl between us, and pierced its skin with my fingernail.

"So there she was holding Lani and you in tote, and I was walking behind her, listening and wondering why she was calling your names."

I wiped some spilt juice with the clean side of the napkin that was in front of me. My father grinned at me as if he was at the brink of punch line, heading towards the end of a joke. "What do you mean?" I filled in.

“She just kept calling your names but there you were, right on her back. Lani was right beside her. But she kept yelling for you walking down that hill, kicking the rocks out of her way: ‘Jasmine! *My-kan*. Lani! *My-kan*, let’s go home.’ She was very sure,” he said sternly, and leaned in as if to reprimand, “that she was calling you in English.”

I smiled but, as my younger sister had moments before, I wanted to sneer. To bare my back teeth that were perfectly straightened at a cosmetic surgeon’s office thirty minutes from Beverly Hills. Perfectly good teeth that didn’t feel shameful about not knowing how to form any language but English, with an American accent. I separated an orange seed with my two front bicuspid and spit them out into my napkin. He was staring, waiting.

“Okay,” I gave up, wondering how and where and when this memory was going to end. “Why’d she do that?”

My father’s usually unyielding gaze quickly let up and fell to his lap as he shrugged. “Oh, I don’t know,” he denied. He’s always very good at pretending he isn’t interested in the story he is telling. He does it, I suppose, to intimidate the listener into listening. Pretends like he is uninterested I guess so that the listener will clamor for more. I clean the rind off a jagged piece of my fruit, and decided to continue to wait for his explanation. I won.

“But maybe,” he answered, “she was calling you because she was afraid your spirits would be left behind if she didn’t. She was afraid that if she didn’t call you, some other soul would befriend you, possess you, and then take your body as his new home and leave the *real* you trapped in the graveyard wandering aimlessly for the years to come.” He started on a tin of peanuts he found hidden behind the oranges, an expensive

can. The type my mother used to buy for guests only. “These are really good,” he told me.

Somewhere in the background, my sister got up from the fireplace and went to try to lure my mother downstairs, an act she knew, that would result in my mother catching my father red-handed with the peanuts. While I waited for that scene to unfold, there was a murky image that was growing somewhere in the back of my head. It was an image of me and my sisters as children walking and being held by Grandma Victoria. My father was following behind. Grandma Victoria was blinking and swatting at the powdery dirt that rose up on a sticky breeze scented by the leaves of a tamarind tree. “Why didn’t she call your name?” I asked aloud, wondering if the orange juice that was drying on my hands smelled anything like a tamarind pod.

“Because,” my father answered. I didn’t realize he was still listening, “child souls,” he yawned stretching his feet deep into his slippers, “are always easier to steal than adults.” He blinked his eyes twice quickly, and then shook his head to unsettle any leftover sleepiness. “Or so she says anyway.” He put the cover back on the tin of peanuts and stuffed them back to where he found them. Above us, I could hear two pairs of footsteps edging closer to the stairs.

I scooped the broken rinds in front of me into a neat pile on the paper towel and carried it away by its corners pinched between my fingers as if it was a hobo’s suitcase on a stick, the kind of ragamuffin life-in-a-bag imagery that had been etched into my head by after-school reruns of *The Journey of Natty Gann*.

“You actually got lost there once, left alone.” My father was crunching again. He had re-opened the peanuts. The footsteps were making their way down the stairs.

“Yeah right.”

“It’s true. We found you, sure.” He had the peanuts in his hand and my sister had already made her way around the corner of the room, smiling cat-like. “Your Mom and I figured that was the reason your teenage years have been so difficult!” He tried to laugh but choked on the mush of peanuts that were in his mouth. My sister was giggling but hushed quickly when my mother entered the room. My father pushed away the peanuts. My mother walked in.

“What?” my mother asked. She was looking only at me.

I scraped at the tiny bits of citrus underneath my fingernails. “Dad just told me I was possessed in the Philippines.”

My sister retreated to the TV room for alternative entertainment. My mother sighed and walked back upstairs. My father took back the tin of peanuts. He began speaking when my mother and sister were completely out of the room.

“Jane, the house girl, do you remember her? She said that night you went to bed complaining of stomach illness. Do you remember Jane? Jane was your grandma’s house-girl during the ’85 visit.”

“I sort of remember Jane.” My grandmother had several house-girls throughout the years. The first house girl she ever had was now thirty-nine with a daughter of her own. That first house-girl’s name was Shirley. Last I heard, my grandmother was considering hiring Shirley’s daughter in order to replace Grandma’s current house-girl who would soon be graduating from high-school. Apparently, Shirley’s daughter wanted to be a nurse and my grandmother liked the idea of having a house-girl who was a future nurse-in-training. “I don’t remember the stomachache,” I said.

“Jane said you mentioned something about it before you went to sleep. That you even told her to check up on you.”

I could hear my sister watching reruns in the TV room. My mother yelled to her from upstairs, telling her to turn it down. “Nope, don’t remember.” I wondered if I would be able to squeeze in a little TV before homework.

“Well, the strangest thing,” my father continued, walking to the table where I was sitting and taking the seat next to me, “was what she said you did *after* you fell asleep.”

I looked up from the TV. “What did I do?”

“She said she was checking on you and when you woke up, you stared at her. She asked you, in English, if you were okay and if you needed anything.”

“Yeah?”

My father smoothed the front of the newspaper that was next to him. “She said you then looked at her, started to cry, and asked why she and everybody else left you alone. You told her to never leave – begged in fact. Pleaded with her. Apparently, you took her hand and hung onto it. Told her to never ever ever leave you alone again. And then you told her you didn’t want to ever go back, and that you were not going to. She said you were defiant.”

“That is strange,” I thought. Even sick or scared, grandmother’s house-girls always creeped me out when I was younger. I knew I wouldn’t have wanted them to stay, unless of course, I had a good reason. “I must have been really sick. Or really mad at you guys for leaving me.”

“No,” my father picked up the newspaper, straightened it into a pile. He crossed his hands together, and then looked right at me. “what was strange is that you told her this in Igorot.”

“I didn’t speak Igorot.”

“I know.”

“I don’t.”

“I *know*.”

“I never did.”

“We never taught you.”

“I barely understand it.”

“Your mother was frightened.”

“Well I do know one word, but only one: “Banana” - *saba*.” I looked up, sorry I had said it. My father was already smiling.

“Well,” he grinned, “you did go *sabas* that night!”

I tried to remember the graveyard and that day, and what I must have looked like slung low on my grandmother’s back in a cotton sheet. I remembered my cheek against her aging shoulder blades that folded outward instead of in, a dormant pair of wings.

“Weird,” I said. It was all I could say though I sensed my father wanted me to say more.

“And, apparently, you woke up the next day, happy as a bee. Your grandmother and Jane tried to talk to you in Igorot, but you just laughed. You asked your Mom and me to tell you what they were saying. You thought they were playing a game, or were trying

to teach you to speak it.” He brushed his hands of orange and peanut crumbs. I watched the pieces fall to the floor. I wondered who would have to clean it up. “Well, you were fine except I think your eyes were a little swollen.”

“Red?”

“No, swollen. Different from red. Everyone who saw you that day said they could tell you were really sick the night before because of your eyes.”

“Like I was crying?”

He was looking towards the TV room. “No. Just different. Maybe slightly enlarged.”

“Are you serious?” I was silent for a while before I asked it.

My father did not grin and he did not smile. “According to Jane, everyone who saw you that day, your grandma and the old ladies in the village, it was all very serious indeed.”

I sat back in my chair. “Well at least I don’t live in that village.”

My father nodded. Stood up, stretched, and looked towards the static-filled light of the TV room. “Unless the real you is still trapped in that graveyard!” And then he was finished. He went into the TV room, wheeled and dealt with my sister in an effort to try to watch the big game instead of the reruns she was enamored with.

My father would never mention the memory again. I suppose he wouldn’t have to. From that moment on it was mine and I was stuck with it. I toy, sometimes, in my head with the idea of the ghost who could be possessing me at this very moment. And then I think also of a cloudy little five year-old prancing through that mountain graveyard in a remote village of the northern Philippines. She trundles through the broken China dolls,

rotted flowers, and the plastic rosaries that people leave for their loved ones. She is singing sweetly, gobbling the *pinapaetan* people leave as offerings. They will blame on the wild dogs and she knows this. She would not want to come back, I think, if I went back to get her. In fact I am pretty sure of it. And if I ever begin to doubt it there is a tug in the middle of my stomach. A pull from the other side of my belly button. Some movement in my gut. A reminder. *Come*. It is a language no living person knows. *We're not to think of her*.

CELESTINO

The last time I saw Mr. Shaw was yesterday. Celestino – I didn't know that was his real name! He's just Tino to us. But that's really nice actually, Celestino. It fits him really well now that I think about it. He's a sweet old man. Definitely one of the more pleasant employees. Tells me I look like a supermodel almost everyday! Don't get me wrong, he doesn't do it in like a sleazy way. I do have to admit though I did think it was a little icky, just a little bit, but only at first. At least until I got to know him. I mean it's not the most comfortable thing in the world when an older guy tells me I look beautiful. I mean I like it and all and am flattered, but I mean – I don't know. Forget it. What I'm trying to say is that he was not abnormal. Mr. Shaw, when he said those things, definitely was not frightening. I mean, do you think he murdered someone or something?

Because he definitely wasn't that type. He wasn't crazy or mean like a woman-hater or something. I mean, I know that serial killers are like the last person you would expect. Like in the seventies when everyone thought Ted Bundy was too good looking and normal to kill all those girls? But honestly though? Between you and me? I could tell that Ted Bundy was a serial killer. In all those family pictures that were shown on this documentary I saw, he definitely looked a little off. Like he was too good looking – you know what I mean? People who are like, too something or other. Like pretty, smart, or perfect. Like you know something's up with that if someone is too good at being, I don't know, good. Like the perfection is a front or something to hide the thing that's wrong or really foul in their life. It's like those women who go Oprah and admit that everyone thinks they have a perfect life but then reveal that they get beaten or that their husband is cheating or gay or something. Mr. Shaw was not like that. He was not one of those. I mean is not one of those. He is okay isn't he? I hope so.

He is a really genuine person. I mean, okay, the staring and supermodel comments were a little weird, but it wasn't life threatening or anything, definitely wasn't life-threatening. I guess if that doesn't make sense then I think you really need to be like a girl to understand. The stares Mr. Shaw gave were like old-men-in-a-grocery-store-stare. If you were a girl, you would know what I'm talking about. It's when old men, like gray-hair-old-men look at your legs or butt but then when you look back to give them a dirty look you'll actually feel really bad because their eyes are like soggy or something. And then, when they know you've caught them, they'll look away but in the way that they are kind of still looking at you so you can tell that their eyes are sort of foggy. Like they're just sad or depressed or something. But definitely not like calculating.

Mr. Shaw was definitely not calculating and he was so not the Ted Bundy type. I mean he was a really old man, like grandfather old. I mean I know that even old grandfathers can be killers too but Mr. Shaw had kids! They turned out to be doctors or something. No – no one knows what happened to his wife. I think she passed away from something - not murder or anything - but an accident. Or like a deathly sickness. He's been heartbroken ever since his wife died, I think. That's where the soggy kind of look probably comes from. Actually, now that I think about it, it was Mrs. DelaCruz who told me about the wife and the illness and things, and she has a cube right next to him. So there. He couldn't have done anything bad. Did he?

Yesterday- I saw him yesterday. He brought me lunch. He got me a sandwich. I didn't ask him for it but sometimes he does stuff like that, like bring lunch for people and everything. He does it for everyone, not just me. He just does that stuff.

How was the sandwich? It was a really nice gesture. It looked interesting. Gourmet. He liked the place he got it at. He said the store was nearby the house he raised his kids in. Okay fine, I didn't eat it. But not because I thought it was poisoned or anything. Do you think he would try to poison me? If you do that's ridiculous. Why would he want to poison me?

You need to know what the sandwiches look like? Oh my God, was he like really trying to poison me? The sandwiches were wrapped in white paper. One was marked with an "M." He said the "M" was for mayo – that one was for him. I don't eat mayo except for like a special treat with tuna or something. I peeked inside the sandwich when he wasn't looking. It smelled like broccoli or eggs. It had mayonnaise, cilantro or parsley or something. I couldn't tell. There were grated carrots and the meat. Yes, it had meat. I don't know what kind. It looked like bacon but it smelled like fish. No, I didn't eat it. Well, I wasn't really hungry. What did I do with it? Why do you want to know that? Do you seriously think it was poisoned?

I don't remember exactly what I did with the sandwich. Honestly, it was just one of Mr. Shaw's sandwiches. I think I may have eaten a few of them before. I just didn't feel like eating it yesterday. Are you trying to run tests on it or something? Well, after he gave it to me I wrapped it back up in the paper. I went by his office, told him thank you and that I had to eat the sandwich on the run because I had errands to do during lunch. I threw it away in a trashcan outside on the opposite side of the building. There was nothing inside of the trashcan. I don't really remember anything about it except the sandwich was so heavy it made a thud when it fell, a loud one. I threw some napkins on top of it to cover it up just in case Mr. Shaw happened to stop by that trashcan out of all

the trashcans in the building. I didn't want to hurt his feelings. I wouldn't want a nice guy like that to get hurt. I mean, trust me, he really is a really nice person, you know, definitely not scum. If you do speak to him, could you let him know that I said hi and that I hope he's all right?

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Celestino Shaw. Accounting. Interaction with him is daily. Every morning. Well, no it is not on a personal level. Carlana, could you let McGuire know to stand by? Robert McGuire, second office down. Good guy. Sharp guy. Our CFO. My unofficial right-hand, Robert McGuire. Talk to my CFO for if you're after the more personal interactions my company had with Celestino Shaw.

Look, there are two things I don't have much of right now and those happen to be the info you want and the time you need to talk about them. Oh Jesus Christ, you can put the badge back in your pocket, son. That's not necessary. Carlana, could you call Duggan and let him know I've been delayed? No cancellation just delayed. I won't be delayed by much. Apparently I've got a very important person here who apparently needs to know about my daily two-minute interactions with an employee, thank you. No, security is not necessary. Yet. Now, about Shaw. Carlana – could you buzz me in five?

Mr. Shaw works in accounting. Every morning, quarter of seven, I walk by his office and he's sure I get the two things every boss in this red-blooded country ought to get: "Good morning" and a "Sir." Good morning, Sir. Sometimes a nod. No smile - that's too feminine. No eye contact. Looks towards me but not at me but doesn't look down. Just looks to move but move with a purpose. Moves to his office, moves to produce. There are two other senior level accountants and our Director of Finance but no "Good

Mornings” or “Sirs” come from them. Just Shaw. The rest are a coupla MBAs with no class. Apparently, they don’t teach that anymore – style, class. Not PC I guess. Not “PC” to show respect for other people’s time or title, which reminds me – is this all you need to know?

Really. Is there some little rule in your rule book that says we aren’t finished? Some government approved rule on some government approved rule list that says not to say “Good Morning” or “Sir” or let a busy man go on his way because then it would lead to immorality and corruption? Is it really the “PC” rule book that’s the reason behind our bad economy, housing shortages and rising crime? Carlena, hold my calls. Hold them until the economy picks up. Until the MBAs of this world terminate immorality and corruption by not saying “Good Morning” or “Sir.”

Well, if you haven’t yet found what you’re looking for, let’s try something different. Let me ask the questions. For example, where did you get your degree? Really. So, you’re a real boy then who went to real school made with brick and mortar. Well, that’s something I can respect. Better than some punk on-line college that offers downloaded thoughts all day. I do believe that thinking may be downloaded these days. That’s all my MBAs can do, click on their computers all day long and download to their thoughts and to my payroll.

Celestino Shaw? Better than ten MBAs. Knows how to make a pot of black coffee. I’ve yet to meet an MBA who can do that. After the coffee there’s not much I can tell you. Sure, I can try. Everyone should try. But I’ll only do it because you went to a real school. Carlena, buzz me back in five.

Celestino Shaw. You understand, he and me, we're a different cloak. We sit different. I sit different. Shaw sits different. Good firm planting, feet firmly on the floor. Not weak and not gay. That's right I said it – not gay, fag, not homosexual. You have to say what you mean, and mean what you say, son. There's no shame in that!

Let's see what else. I've noticed Shaw's got a good set of shoes. Good pair. Eye-talian. Dark brown leather with wing tips, sturdy soles striding around the office, to and from his helm. Gotta a good walk. No shuffle like a little admin assistant doing something bad. No hard, heavy stride like a hot-shot contractor who costs more than he's worth. No shifting like one of these college grads that wet their pants for me or the office easy. Shaw and me, we're old stock. Pure bred is what we are. Never wore a hat beyond a doorway. Never wore a collar without a tie to close it. "Good morning" and "Sir." That's Celestino Shaw. He never expects I say this back to him in the morning, he shouldn't. But of course, I do. I say it and I mean it. I say it like we were taught, like him and I were somehow taught. Like there was no difference from his office across the kitchen and mine with the city view. "Good morning, Mr. Shaw" I say. He smiles in response. That's all you should do. No teeth, close lipped. Drinks in that no sugar no cream black Arabian brew. Thank you, Carlana. Tell them I'll be leaving shortly.

Look son, I've got lots of ideas about why he didn't report to work this morning but they're none good for answering your inquiries. You've got to be kidding me - isn't this a question better answered by his wife? Did you call her? Maybe he's sick with the flu. Maybe he's got a doctor's appointment. Men our age do that from time to time.

Listen, you've got to talk to Robert McGuire if you need more information on this company's personal interactions with Shaw. All I'm giving you now is air, you've got to

know that son. You want more air? That's fine. Don't understand it but let's do it. I'll give you two more minutes, plenty of time for hot air. Maybe he's late because he's got a flat tire. Maybe he's stopping by the donut house to pick up a box of donuts for everyone. Really dedicated to company morale, that one. Maybe his daughter got married over the weekend and he had to drop some relatives off at the airport before they overtake the whole goddamned week. Maybe he took some extra time to hide the affair he's having from his wife. Maybe he's taking some time out to regret the relationships he's formed with his grown children. Maybe he's blowing off steam because his daughter picked no good bum for her husband. Maybe he's just irate of the living fact that every morning until the day he dies he'll have the exact same bowl of oatmeal and the exact same pink grapefruit under the same pair of gray eyes you married and swore your life to when you were in your twenties and didn't know any better.

Or maybe, he has the day off. Maybe he's gone fishing. Men like him and me need that sort of thing from time to time. That's possible, completely understandable and possible. Check with someone over in HR about that. Carlena – I'm coming.

*

He come Tuesday Thursday. Last week no come for long long time. Yesterday I see him go outside for lunch. I ask him, Hi Tino, how are you, haven't seen you long time. He say busy busy. He say busy busy but I see him. Go outside for lunch.

He regular. All people all office building my regular but I see them all time go outside for lunch. I ask all people - where you been? How you? Busy busy? They no tell me but I see they go outside. But I no mad when they come back, I no mad. If they come see me for lunch I smile then say hi how can help you? Try special? I ask them, smile,

and ask them would you like try special? Monday cold special like wraps and tuna and salad. Wednesday hot special. I serve soup or chicken or beef or meatloaf. Tuesday Thursday hot cold sandwich. Friday no special. Why? They ask, why Friday no special? I say try burger try egg salad sandwich. They like my egg salad sandwich. They eat egg salad with chips and pickle. Two dollar fifty for egg salad and chips and pickle. With can soda - same price. Soda cheap. I nice. I give soda to them. Sometimes they sit there by window. Eat egg salad and chips and pickle and soda. Is no Friday special but egg salad very special. Why no Friday special? You want to try egg salad or burger? This one girl small girl come ask me Friday – why no special for lunch? I smile. Why no come Monday Wednesday Tuesday Thursday? Go outside? I smile. Say try chicken sandwich hot or cold. Try salad with tuna try soup. If you try, maybe next week special on Friday. Maybe. I say it. She no come maybe, but I say it.

Tino love my Tuesday Thursday special. Eat Rueben eat pastrami. He like warm special –it help his teeth, he say it. Not my teeth, Jenny! He say it. He say: Not my teeth! I bought this pair! My teeth gone! Long gone! He old man, older than me. First day I met him he say you married? I say yes yes I married. He say where your husband he here? I say yes yes he here, just came from my country. Bring my baby my baby is three. My baby I say look like me but she like my husband cause she no talk or smile. I love to talk and love to smile. He say I know! He say Jenny, I know you so friendly! You friendly too, I know it. You. Yes you -you friendly. I see you nice face, your nice smile. You welcome. You want soda? I give you soda for free. I nice. I nice like you.

Tino not work here long time. I know I work here long time. Mr. Mike, he work on the office building, he work here long time. Like twelve year, fifteen year Mr. Mike

work here. I work here longer though. Me? Seventeen year. Yes. I long-time worker. This my second job in America. First job was cleaning lady. I sweep floor. One day I sick of sweeping floor. My cousin come to me that day and say Jenny you want come work for me? I say where. She say here here in restaurant. Serve people. They nice people. Make them breakfast make them lunch. I say okay. I like it. Nice people. I make nice breakfast and nice lunch. You eat lunch already? How about breakfast?

Tino work here almost one year. He nice man. Two days ago he ask me, Jenny why you marry your husband! I say he nice man good man. I say I like him. Tino say - He nice man? Good man? That's good Jenny! Tino say he nice man good man too. Then he smile at me and smile and smile until I say yes you nice man good man too but I married. If I no have no nice man good man I marry you. I say it. That day Wednesday – hot special. Chicken or beef or meatloaf or soup and fruit salad. He no order yet. I marry you if I no married. I say it. He no order yet. How about you?

*

Let me tell you about Tino. Yesterday he comes in my cube, throws the August budget report in front of me on my keyboard. My keyboard is right next to my in-box. My empty in-box. Plenty of room for it there! I tell him that. He said there was a glaring mistake I need to fix. It's a fuckin' eighty page report. I asked him: Want to tell me what section you want me to look at? He answers me while he walked away, little bitch. You'll see it, he said, it's obvious. I fuckin' hate that guy, that's what I can tell you about him. A retired old asshole who comes out of retirement just so that he can go to his bitch-ass country club and talk to his asshole friends about how he couldn't stay away from working because 'all his life he never knew how to quit.' But what job does he take when

he goes back to it from that big happy land of retirement? What does he apply for? Big boss? No. No boss? No. Budget Analyst. Senior Budget Analyst. Fuckin' middle-ass-management is what he looks for. Be all the bitch he could be. Mr. I-not-good-enough-to-make-it-to-the-top-so-I'll pretend-like-this-is-where-I-really-want-to-be. Mother fucker. Probably goes home and beats his wife. He beats her for not being thin enough if she's fat, or for not being fat enough if she's skinny. I could see him going either way – a fat lover or a skinny-bitch lover. Me? I love 'em all. Black-white-Asian-Thaiandese-or-mixed-mutt, I love 'em all. Beautiful, all women everywhere are beautiful. You see that girl in the front? Last week. Fuckin' hot.

Tino? I think he had kids. He 'sired' a son I know. An awkward 38 year old who's probably obsessed with a porn star. Yeah, he's probably the porn star type. Tino Jr. probably has pictures of one single porn star, been following her ever since he was eight. She's pussied up, crispy, and forty now but he still wets the sheets over her. Wets the bed when his skinny or fat bitch mother comes to pet him good night. Yeah, that's what Tino's son is like. That's the truth – you want the truth, right? I'll give it to you. Just be sure to let Tino know who did.

But let me tell you what happened. Like I was saying, two minutes after dumping that shit on my keyboard, Tino walked by and asked if I've found it yet. Bitch. I ignored him. It's like he was flirting with me. Probably thought I was playing hard to get. Nah, I don't know about a wife. –Drew, Tino got a wife? Drew? Oh, Drew Marquez. I think he's still at lunch. Drew's a dog, man, probably banging some hot chick down in HR in a closet, ha, you know what I'm sayin'? Fucking hot, man.

Oh yeah - you want to know what that 'glaring error' was? You know what that bitch-ass error was? There was a column that was justified to the right. Tino likes it to the left, old school. I pulled up my copy of the file from the F drive, highlighted the unjustified column and pressed the button that needed to be pressed. I went to his office and threw it on his keyboard and left saying something while I walked away!

What did he say to that? What do you say to that! Punk'd, man. Tino was bitch-ass punk'd! Nothing he could say to that shit. Sure, I may have talked to him later – but it was way after I walked out on his bitch-ass hungry hands. What we talked about? I don't know. Oh, I know – he asked me something about a box. That's right. He asked me for a box, or paper clips – some delivery he was waiting for. Asked me if I got one or had one. I said he-e-ll no. Can you believe that? Little piss-ass punk talking to me like I'm the mailman or that little piece of pussy at the front desk slapping office supplies in your cube while her ass goes flapping all juicy out her skirt? Damn. Oh the box? I said hell, no. Hell no, Ti-No. I ain't got shit for you, that's what I said.

When was that? Two days ago when he asked about the box. Oh yeah, you're right, that was yesterday...yeah it was yesterday. Nah, I didn't talk to him for the rest of the day after that. We have that hate-hate thing going on. Talk to him as little as possible. The box? Oh, I don't know about the box. You gotta ask Drew about that box when he gets back from lunch. I'm just saying you should ask Drew because Tino talked to him about it after I rolled out yesterday. Tino was doing most of the talking. He was standing up, like over Drew, asking him about that box - about what time deliveries came or something. Nah, I don't think he was mad at Drew. I think he was just mad that his paper

clips didn't come yet. No, I didn't offer any of my paper clips. Hell if I give him any of my paper clips.

I didn't see much him after that. I left work but they were still talking. You know -why do you want to know? Shit, is Tino-the-super-bitch hiding something we don't know about?

*

Yesterday, he called me at home at 5:47 in the morning. Ashleigh was already up and about. He didn't wake her, he never did. Clumsy though, as can be in the morning. "Mr. O-marr?" He asked in that voice. It's very good at squeezing, that voice and him. Like it hurts so well to say my name. So dramatic he seems. Such a fan of the theatre. "Mr.O-marr?" A few months ago, he called in the evening after work, breathing greedy breaths that sucked at my cheeks and blew at my nose. Yes – it was almost like I could feel it. There's a park between our houses. He lives down the way, I live up. Our abodes our far apart from each other but when he calls I can still smell the meat-n-olive sandwiches that he eats at lunch hour like a child, meat dribbling down his chin like juice. The smell slipped into the phone and into my nostrils special delivery. I always relish it.

Oh - would you like something hot to drink? I could arrange for the secretary to fix it. I could have it sent up to my office. They're very nice to me here. They like me a lot. They like me a lot otherwise they wouldn't pay me all this money. They are very nice to their contractors here. They have to be. Why? Didn't you read your Wall Street Journal today? You sure you don't want something hot and yummy? Maybe something from the bakery down the street? I love it. I love their monkey bread. It's called "Best Buns." You sure you don't want something from there? Okay. Suit yourself.

Anywho, yes, to answer your question. He calls me frequently. Mr. Celestino Shaw calls Mr. Kyan Omar frequently. He calls me always right before or right after work. He's thinking of me I know, perhaps guesstimating when I am in my P.M. shower, or when I've arrived home and had just enough time to slip into my indoor slippers. He's thoughtful, very much so. And I am certainly thinking of him. My boyfriend? Oh sweetheart no. Grown-up relationships don't need names.

Tell you about Tino? Oh this is fun. Where should I start? His cinnamon-sugar hair - would this be a good place to start? Okay, then let's talk about the smell, not the color. His hair smells like red-hots and other baking candies of the sort. Not the kind in pies, or an old bat's kitchen. More like the new scent of cinnamon that tingles inside your tongue. I tasted it but once. It was my favorite day. The ninety-second day after I first started working at here. There I was, the hot new contractor and there he was, the office quiet boy, lonesome, winsome, sitting all by himself in his little cube eating a sandwich and chipping away at his computer. We had done nothing but exchange stares previously, so I decided – this was the day! I decided it was finally time to stop in say hello.

You want to know about the stares first? Okie dokie. They were smoldering. Wanting. Lusting. They were hot for me, puppy, I could feel it. The little wifey? How unromantic! There wasn't a worse question you could ask to spoil the aura I'm creating. Oh, but that's okay, puppy. You're just doing your job. Who knows about the wife. I've never had the pleasure of meeting her. From what I gathered from Tino, I don't think he's had much pleasure with her either recently. I mean, like years. Definitely not as much pleasure or fun as we have when we're together. What did we talk about when he called? Oh now you're getting me all flustered. I can't concentrate. Let me go back to his

cinnamon-sugar hair. That's where I was. It's my favorite part. And then we can answer all your dirty little questions – deal? Deal.

Okay. Now, I had walked into his little cubbie-office with a little stride, just enough to draw attention to the fun detail on my belt buckle. It was a little cowboy belt buckle, all hard and brass, so cute. I worked it, I was working hard. And he was buying it, doll. Buying every inch of me. I stopped by his desk. He looked up. I looked right into his walnut-colored eyes. We said nothing. Then, it happened.

You want to know what happened? Oh you so want to know what happened, don't you? I can see it! You're completely captivated, I can tell. Okay. Here goes. The phone rang. Quickly and quietly like a good little mouse I leaned over to reach his little lopsided phone. I was polite, reached in back of him. Then, it happened. He pressed into me. He pressed into me. He leaned so suddenly back in his chair. I could feel the bones in his shoulders on my stomach. His head and the weight of him on my tummy. His hair was inside my nostrils. I stuck out my tongue, and licked. Just one lick. One teensy lick enough to taste the cinnamon of his hair – he's a natural salt and pepper. One soft, tiny lick of a million hair strands. He turned to me when I did it. Looked at me for a long, hard minute with brown, apple eyes. I simply smiled. Smiled and walked away. My god-mommy taught me a lady always knows when to leave a room.

That was the beginning of it. Of our little rendezvous. The adventures of Tino and me. Well no darling nothing really happened here. You can't expect much to happen here. Maybe a little grab there. A little pat here. A little lick. Licks all over. But not a lot of that happening *here*. The ambience isn't right. And besides, occasionally, I do have to do a teensy little bit of work sometimes. I suppose he did as well. Tino is a great licker.

Very good. Little warm licks. But as yummy as he is I must say, he's not the best licker I've known. You want to know who the best licker I've ever known is? Ashleigh. Oh I didn't tell you about Ashleigh? Ashleigh is my baby. She's my precious. She's the best licker in the world. Her lick today was very warm. Every morning she wakes me up with little licks at my ankle and then I let her outside to do her morning business. When she comes back in, I kiss her forehead and sniff. I sniff her belly and under her ears. I sniff her paws and at the end of her tail. And then she licks all over my face little love kisses. Do you have a dog? I love dogs. Ashleigh is a Shiatsu.

Tino never met Ashleigh. Well yes, he's been over to the house, but he's never met Ashleigh. Why? Because Ashleigh usually sleeping when Tino comes. Poor thing, she wouldn't wake up if a twister picked her up and plopped her in Oz. Oh, you mean why did Tino come over. Darling, a lady doesn't kiss and tell. Tino came over once or twice every week, brought me little packages here and there, little gifts.

What were they? Oh you really can't make me show them to you -can you really make me show them to you? That's fascinating! Well, okay, I can show them to you if you're going to be that forceful with me. Only if you're going to be that forceful with me. You're going to have to come over to my house then. I don't have any of those little boxes here.

When should Ashleigh and I expect you?

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Congratulations, you noticed the boxes. You noticed that they're a big, important deal. Fascinating. Job well done. Except, I've got to say, it isn't a job that's finished, is it? I guess you've still got to open those boxes, right? How much would you give me for

this little cardboard box? What would you do in order to find out what's in it? Can you see it? It's right here in front of you. Here, I'll let you touch it. Whoops – forgot to tell you - I'm just kidding!

I'm sorry – how about I let you measure it. You can measure it. I'll let you measure it. Go ahead and use your eyeballs to measure it. Eight-by eight. A perfect square. What do you think we could fit into this square if we tried? What do you think these things would look like? And how long do you think it would last? Do you think that, if we buried it, you'd still want to know what's inside? If we buried it, would you pretend to walk away and forget about it? And if I buried it here – right here in this place - and left it over night, would I come back and find you later, after hours digging in the dark, digging in the mud for this stupid, cardboard box?

What would you do if I smashed this box, this eight-by-eight package of possibility? Do you think I could crush it if I tried? If I let you, would you stomp all over it and hope that whatever's inside will come leaking and oozing out? Or worse, what if nothing comes out of it? Would you do it if you didn't think anything would come out of this? Go ahead, then. Try, I dare you. Go ahead. Try.

FAMILY FOODS

When you come from a big, diverse, multi-ethnic family, chances are you've seen angry rice. I mean crazy, blazing, angry rice. Rice that frightens. Injurious rice. I am talking about the kind of rice that everyone knows. Regular, steamed, white, stick-together type that your ultra-white sister-in-law who grew up in the South Carolina suburbs swears she can only find in Chinese restaurants or when she visits with you at your parents' house:

"You know what I don't get?" she'll say smiling, nodding hard at you so as to assure that whatever comes out of her mouth isn't meant to be an ethnic slur (and therefore shouldn't be taken as one), "*Real* Asian rice. I just don't get it. It doesn't stick together like it should when I cook it. It's all slippery. Your rice is like the real rice -the real deal rice. Why can't I cook it like y'all?" she will ask you and her auburn eyelashes will blink and flutter.

'Don't eat it with butter, dummy.' You want badly to say this. You want badly to say it but you just nod at her. Is it really worth it? Would it be worth risking her telling the rest of your mutual in-laws that you're the type to play the race card? Probably not and besides, your youngest brother-in-law told you that she already has. So you just nod and smile as if you're thanking her, pretend like you do know what she's talking about. You've got to do it, you know. You've got to do it unless you really feel like explaining yourself to your husband and your in-laws later, and you don't. So you do your best to seem like you are not offended. Do your best to seem as if you do not think she is dumb at all. Do not seem as if at that moment you are cursing your older brother-in-law for marrying into her southern suburban blood at will.

“Yeah,” you’ll tell her and smile, smile, smile. Your older brother-in-law thought that you spending the day with his new South Carolina bride would be a nice way to make her feel welcome, feel a part of the family. “It’s just one of those inexplicable things.”

There’s no way in hell your sister-in-law from the South Carolina suburbs has ever seen angry rice. It is a possibility though, that she has seen angry mashed potatoes and incensed okra.irate okra smattered across a linoleum kitchen floor, or seeds crushed into the invisible cracks in the dining room table. Platefuls of okra dropped from a pair of gripping, white, Southern Carolina hands. Your sister-in-law’s parents have had thirty plus years of a lousy marriage. She tells you this. You and everyone else see what must be a resemblance in her relationship with your older brother-in-law though no one of course, will ever speak about it. When you see this in them you feel sorry for her but not in a way that pities. You just feel bad for her. You feel bad because she and your older brother-in-law have just bought a beautiful, brand new house that is very, very old - a beautiful old house that they have sunk many dollars and years into. They have just refinished the 19th century golden oak floors and you feel bad because you know that all that hard work will soon be stained with smashed potatoes and enraged okra casserole. Of course, also with furious fettuccine every once in a while. Your brother-in-law – your husband’s family – is Southern Italian. Those tempers will inevitably ruin the floors too.

Rice is a grain. It is not a vegetable or a legume so you know that your kitchen floor is safe. It will never be stained in the way your sister-in-law’s floors will be. Your floors, your ugly, 1960s floor, will be safe and functional until you can find some other way of ruining them. Your clothes however - your winter wools, spring silks and the

occasional other fabrics - are another issue entirely. Angry rice destroys most fabrics. It digs into the material like a tick, hiding deep within and scarring much of the softness around it when it is pulled out. It dries, crusts over, and has to be cracked or chiseled off. You learned this about angry rice sometime in grade school, sometime in the winter, when your father lunged across the table at you, across beef and vegetables broths, and plowed into a bowl of steaming, livid rice. When he rose up from the table the rice clung. It hung from his woolen shirt in a line like a fringe of tiny, oval soldiers. You remember watching as they stood at ease and then marched quickly up and down, and as they finally retreated. They retreated deep into the wool of your father's shirt and then sunk even further beneath it. Sunk into his skin, into his thumping red heart.

You know that, after this day, your father sometimes feels like he was a bad father, or that you might think less of him because he got food on his shirt that one night at dinner. You know that he feels bad about the rice, about the soups, and probably for what happened later. He may feel guilty for what he said and what he did. You don't think he should feel guilty. You don't think he was a bad father at all and in fact, you think quite the opposite. You'd really like to do nothing more than just forget about that day and forget it ever existed but you can't tell him that without remembering it first. You can't tell him you never really cared about that day because in telling him he will think you do. And who knows. Maybe you do. But if you do it is not like how your mother or your older sister cares about that day. They will never forget that day as long as they live. It is the day that defines them. It is the day when the angry rice did not get on them. The day that they sat clean, the only thing in their lap and on their pants a napkin. A day when their squabbling as mother and first born, teen-aged daughter did not take

center stage. Your father and you, up until that moment, never took center stage at the dinner table. But go figure, your debut night, your marching-grains-of-angry-rice night, is the one night your family will never forget. Go figure.

Your family though, will never talk about the night you and your father fought, but they will talk about the nights your older sister would come home, stained in mustard, and ice-cream, and cigarette ashes after work, yelling at your mother for not letting her go out to a party, out with her boyfriend, or out with her friends. They will laugh about those all those nights. But they will never laugh about yours. They will talk about the time your mother got mad at you because you, at five years old, found an unbaked pan of coconut jam cookies and managed to lick all the jam off the cookies before baking. You blamed it on the dog. They believed you until your older sister squealed. Your older sister will laugh at this. You will too, as everyone will, but you will be the only one who is laughing but hurting. You will laugh hard to hide that after all these years, you still feel betrayed.

And feeling so betrayed makes you want to eat something. You open the refrigerator. Your choices are orange juice and peanut butter. In the cupboard, there is cereal and milk. In the freezer, left over from your sister's college graduation potluck party, is pancit, chicken tikka, ice cream cake, and behind it all, a lumpy ball of foil that you get very excited about seeing. You get excited because you know that in that ball of aluminum shine are homemade cannolis that were a part of your mother-in-law's contribution to your sister's graduation party. You grab it. You open it up and feel even more betrayed when you realize the foil holds nothing - no tender, flaky, crusty shell filled with sweet, sweet mascarpone. You hurl the foil into the trashcan, knowing that

your husband was the culprit. He is the only other person who shares a refrigerator with you now. You are angry at him. You get mad because you are irritated that he can't branch out and try other foods. You decide to order take-out.

Later, you will tell your husband about what happened and he will laugh. He will tell you that he loves trying other foods and you know it. And since you have long since devoured an order of Peking Duck and no longer miss the cannolis, you will laugh too. It will make for a good when-we-were-first-married story. Your multi-ethnic eating family will laugh when you tell it to them, feeling they can understand the dilemma of preferring cannolis over chicken tikka better than others. They will laugh and you will laugh, just like your family laughed at the lunches you used to make with pride for your father, the lunches of ketchup sandwiches, raisins, and broken Flintstones vitamins that he would pretend to be happy for but in reality throw away. You will laugh very loudly at this story too. Even though you feel that, at twenty-five, he still dismisses your very best.

But you don't feel sorry for yourself when these things happen, when your family's best dishes get eaten up before you have your share and when all there is for you to have is their worst. You don't feel sorry because it would be silly to feel that way and you can't. After all, you are married now. You will be having children in a few years yourself - in one or two if the in-laws ask. You just write this sorry feeling down somewhere for safe-keeping so that later you will remember to cook enough favorite foods for your children to have their fill. You will scribble these feelings on your *Food and Wine* subscription, or in the new *Southern Living* cookbook your mother-in-law has given you. You will write all of these things down somewhere so that you will find them. Hopefully you will find them on that one day when you are sitting down to dinner and

angry rice threatens to find its way to your shirt pocket. You will write it down so you won't forget, and so your son or daughter won't feel the way you feel when they are much too, much too old. You will find them. You will remember those feelings, and you won't cook rice on the days you are angry. This is your hope.

Your children, anyway, will have much more than angry rice to deal with. The flying fettuccine of course is one contender, as with the okra and Indian foods they will get in the houses of their cousins. You know that also, when they get older, that they may have a smorgasbord of other things to worry about. Foreexample, who will they bring home to the family if it is meant for them to be married? And what will be simmering on their stove in their pot? The possibilities frighten you. You do consider never eating any of the dangerous foods in your household and consider briefly if you can't enforce an all liquid diet, but then you realize how ludicrous the idea sounds. You know that your own children – the blood nieces and nephews of your siblings - will find a way to sneak rice fettuccine in the grocery cart when they are shopping with you one day. They will try it you know, because from their conception they will crave these things in their veins, with their teeny-tiny stomachs and teeny-weeny mouths. Will you get mad at them if they start a food fight with each other? Will you make them spit, and rinse their mouth out with soap and water? Or will you do it. Will you let them learn what angry rice looks like too?

After thinking about it you just shrug your shoulders. Offspring are not things you will have to worry about for a while. Your husband and you are content to wait. You happily delay the dying wish of your parents for a brood of grandchildren. You will wait even as your southern sister-in-law makes it clear that – even though you have been married longer and even though you and your husband have already started a college

savings fund for your progeny and they are still paying for the wedding they had last year – she and your older brother-in-law are going to get started as soon as possible. You don't get angry about this. Kids, you know, are not like college. They are not just something you do. You and your husband are responsible. You can laugh silently at your southern sister-in-law and his brother for rushing and tell yourself to feel better about the decision to wait as you do. You are better people. You want your baby to enter the world when you and your husband have done all you can to make it a better place. You want to pad your 401K. You refuse to play the game of who has a baby first with your in-laws. You are above this. You are an independent woman who is too smart and intelligent to think about anything in the same way your southern sister-in-law would. You tell yourself this. It keeps the sour in the pit of your stomach from feeling lonely.

In a big family, there is no need for you to feel lonely. In fact, it is impossible. There is always a party, a birthday, a get-together, a new home, a wedding. There are endless invites. There are tables of food. You can try to hide if you really want to – you've already tried it once or twice in your teenaged years. But there is always someone. A cousin, an aunt, a friend of your family who has over the years morphed into official family. Someone who will call you. Someone who will be unbelievably nice, unobtrusive, and reaffirming. Someone who will bake a fresh pie to satiate your husband, and bring you a box of your favorite tea. Someone who will lure you back eventually.

In a truly big family, the first time you come back after you've stayed away for a while everyone will notice but you. But to you, everyone will act the same. They will talk to you as if nothing horribly wrong has ever happened in your family, and they will smile at you as if they didn't know what your most horrible fight was about and who it was

with. Instead, they will talk of the new babies, the new homes, and the fairy-light gossipy drama that never seems to hurt anyone. They will heap your food of Auntie Erlene's *lumpia*, Aunt Eileen's *biscotti*, and Chandu auntie's curried *dal*. And you will eat it. You will eat by the side of your sister, by your husband and by your multi-ethnic in-laws. You, your husband and your unborn children will eat your life away in these moments, never saying anything mean at family gatherings, realizing that it is prudent not to. You will go to these big family gatherings and just eat it. And with each swallow, you know that nothing will ever, ever, ever, be the same.

THE ATLANTIC

The new couple walked on the bus with ease and comfort, greeting faces they did not recognize with elbow jabs and laughter. *Good to see you!* – said the young man. *Feeling lucky today?* – he asked. He was the first part of the couple that walked onto the bus. He spilled into it jauntily, steering and clearing the way for his partner. His partner, a young lady who hopped onto the bus after him, grinned at those she didn't know and declared: *Atlantic City or bust! Atlantic City or bust!* The couple floated down the aisle as if on a cloud or on an orb, her streaming hair leaving a sort of glow in her passing, a sort of shimmer in the air that swirled around the couple and their swinging, holding hands. Her sheen and her shimmer, after they passed the passengers in the tenth row, managed to shimmy down its way through the dentures of the old woman next to the aisle. Neither the young man nor the lady stopped to pick it up.

Thus, the shimmering went along its way into the old woman's mouth at the end of a tasty yawn, though she detected it only when it tickled at the middle of her thick, lumpy tongue. She licked at it. She coughed and she spat until the hair gathered into a reasonably sized ball that she plucked out with her fingers. She looked up at the young lady who was now standing, backside towards her. The old woman eyed her streaming, gleaming, hair. She glared. *She gonna sit down, or she just gonna stand and make nice the whole way there?* It was a thought that the old woman shared aloud. Most everyone on the bus had heard her, though no one gave an answer. It was a question that was aimed at the old woman's husband, as most on the bus had justified. He was a brick of a man who was clunked next to the old woman in the middle of seat 110F. The old woman peered over at him, poked at him, and then spoke again: *Six more minutes here means an automatic six more minutes there, and don't think I'll forget!* His droopy eyes opened

and shut as she rumbled and mumbled some more but he did not answer her. For him, answering her was not a possibility because his was a face that had forgotten how to talk. It started sometime ago after their wedding with his lips. Then, some time after some anniversaries, the condition spread slowly to his cheeks. Soon, it affected his whole hard-boiled face until all that was unaffected was his baggy, slumping eyes. Heavy eyes that seemed capable only of lifting against the cool side of a pillow or the armrest of a couch. The sort of eyes that could open and shut at days, and open and shut at nights, but could never ever open against the pink and white of his wife's polka-dot skin. Eyes that could only blink. So that's what he did. He went *blink, blink, blink*. Thus, it was a tough young girl to the right of seat 110F who was left to answer the old woman. And she did.

Amen to that! - said the tough girl, ignoring the little ball of hair that the woman rolled in her hand and flicked onto the floor. *Amen to that*, she laughed and agreed, until a glimpse of an ass in the aisle made her stumble, made her stop, made her gawk at the roundness of an ass that swished under the shimmering that was near her. Made her awestruck and mesmerized as the ass paused, struck a pose, and faced her, while the young lady somewhere at the top of it searched around for two seats that were empty and side-by-side. The tough girl shook her head. *How rude!* - she thought, and then shook her head some more. And then, the tough girl swallowed as something sour swelled in her stomach and made her sad and sickened. Stricken that she was looking at an ass that was much different than her own. *How perfectly rude!* - the tough girl thought, as the young lady turned and turned, her two perfect butt cheeks marching side-by side. *Side-by-side?* - the ass in front of her asked, turning and twisting and shaking her shimmery shimmering.

Does anyone have any side-by-side? No- said the tough girl, who said it in as tough of a voice as she could – *I don't! Keep on looking, though!* So the ass and her partner did.

And a round man sitting in the middle of a row looked at the ass and her partner. He looked at them then looked away. He pretended not to see them and looked instead towards his middle, at the little bulge of belly that he held like a briefcase. At the tiny bit of tummy that he stroked like a dog. The man with the middle almost giggled when he touched it. He loved how he could roll it with his hands and with his palms. He liked to feel his stomach, see it grow and see it swell. He watered it with Jim Beam at Christmastime. He fed it with pulled pork sandwiches at graduations. He cultivated it with marriage, with mortgages, and with kids. With never-ending office hours when he would sit and type and sit. This man with the middle would never whittle down because he felt he earned the right. The god-damned right, privilege and distinction to fill his belly full of whatever the hell he felt like putting into it. This round man dismissed all the talk that his doctors gave him about “health.” He ignored all the lectures that his wife gave him on “well-being.” He was, after all, a man who lived through fifty. A man who lived through girls and their torrid teenaged years. A man who achieved retirement, a man who maxed his 401K. *I am* – he thought patting his middle - *a man who would know what he was talking about. A man* - he knew – *who has earned the right to say anything he wants!* Thus, imagine this round man’s surprise when he heard the young man speak. Imagine this round man’s surprise when he heard that young man talk:

Say! – said the young man to the man in the middle - *do you think you could move over one?* *Say* – said the young man with no middle in his middle – *do you think you could move over so we could sit here, side-by-side?*

The round man with the middle was going to tell the young man *no*. But when his eyes fell on the young lady he heard himself say – *Sure. I see no harm in that*. He was slightly stunned at his answer but he was sure to be swift, be fast. He knew the young lady was watching, so he tried to move statesmanlike. He slowed and slightly sucked in his middle. And as he was doing so his eyes grazed the top of the young lady's chest. He slowed again, and his eyes saw the taught ness of the young lady's belly. And he hoped the young lady didn't notice his belly bounce when he got up. He hoped she didn't notice when it went *boing, boing, boing!*

But the young lady did. The young lady was watching as she wiggled next to her partner. She giggled as she sat, then her hip sort of jiggled. It nestled next to her partner and pushed into his khaki corduroys. A red, velvet-covered hip that rubbed the corduroys and bothered the thigh that was in it.

The round man with the middle wondered what it might feel like to press his leg against that giggling, jiggling hip, side to sweaty side. And then his heart skipped a beat when he did. The round man with the middle had never felt a thing like that. It frightened him.

Left side: folks all prepared?

The bus driver had found that saying the word “prepared” was pretty problematic. But, after he finished his first lesson on how to stop stuttering, it was a word he could use more frequently, and with more self-assurance. *Prepared?* – the bus driver would ask it perfectly to every passenger on every trip. *Prepared?* – the bus driver wouldn't ask it until all the passengers could sit down comfortably. The bus driver did not think he recognized the young couple who had found seats that were side-by side. In fact, as he stepped on

the gas and pulled back his gear, he was certain of it. But the other thing that was certain was that he liked this couple a lot. *I like them for their bus-fare, and the fact that she is hot!* He liked them so much that he winked at them, and he grinned when they winked back in the rearview window. But when they did he startled. *Something*, he swallowed, *is horribly wrong about all of this*. And then he threw his hand over the reflection of the couple's faces. *It's empty!* –he cried inside. And then his fingers tore at the air. *It's gone!* – the bus driver yelled in his head as he hung it in despair. *Oh yeah*, he remembered, *I lost it* – and then a darkness swum all over his face. But then he got an idea. A thought, an inspiration, a clue. *I'll just make it-* the bus driver brightened - *number one on my list of THINGS-TO-DO!* Thus, winning back the “Driver’O the Month” award was number one on his THINGS-TO-DO. It was done in a sort of reluctance, for it bumped the current number one to number two. Fortunately for the bus driver, number two had been becoming increasingly easy. Number two was: PLEASE-AND-IMPRESS-SPEECH-INSTRUCTOR. Please and impress his speech instructor was something he knew he could do easily because she told him he could do it. Over and over and over....

It's over. The young man had made up his mind. *It's over. It's done. I'm sorry.* The young man was definite this time. *This* time, this trip, was the last time, the sure and final hurrah. The young lady, knew the young man, just had to know it. She had to face it. Had to feel the fact that feeling wasn't in his mouth when the young man would kiss her, talk to her, whisper in her ear to her. *She just has to know* – thought the young man – *that things are different and that we have grown a part. She must see that we have grown in different directions. She has to have noticed. She must know this in her heart.* He squeezed her hand a bit out of pity when he thought it, as if to say: *you're a good girl, a*

good catch. He also squeezed her thigh when he thought that, but that was just for fun. It's not that he didn't love her, he did, or at least he told her so. It's just that he was beginning to wonder: *is there something out there I don't know?* What he did know about life was that it was hard to live it while he was with her. What he didn't know about it was what he wanted to find out soon. He knew it was going to be impossible so long as she was sitting by his side, walking behind him, forever holding his hand. It would be impossible, he knew, because he needed it. His hand that is. To use it. To hold stuff in it. *Like dirt,* he thought, *or dirty socks, or burritos, or CDs, or phone numbers.* Phone numbers of other people, not necessarily girls. *Phone numbers of pals,* he thought, *of buddies.* And while I'm at it, *sure, maybe other girls.* He never really knew these things, these things he'd just thought up. He never really knew these things because he'd skipped them in his growing up. The young man never knew these things because for the past ten years he'd been with her. And life outside of the young lady was only that which he could infer. Life with her was that of the perfect boyfriend, the high-school sweetheart, and the *most-likely-to-be-married* superlative. With her summers were spent between families. Holidays were spent between families. Vacations were spent with families. The young man was spent on families. And what's more, he didn't want to start one. Especially with her. *And I've got to tell her sometime.* Stealthily, he took his hand away from the young lady's thigh and put it in his lap. *And today,* he thought, *is probably the best day to do it.*

The old woman near the aisle agreed. *Today,* she thought, *is a very good day,* even as she had woken up in the morning and snarled at it. Inside, she knew it was a pretty day, a bright day, a sunny day. A day that was much like the day her husband had turned to her and said: *If you were a day you'd be this one.* He had smiled when he said

it, even though at the time she scowled. He continued to drive along that day, even though she howled at him and said - *Oh go on!* That day was forty-seven years ago to the date, when her husband had called her and convinced her to go out with him on one. A date on which she certainly didn't think she would meet the man that she was going to marry. What she did think though was: *He better not try anything funny!* And after she thought it, she said it out loud. And after she had screamed it at him in the beginning of their date she felt extremely proud for she was a Catholic and valued chasteness and good virtue. She was a good girl who always kept her curfew. Yet even as she barked at him, snubbed him, and acted meanly, he didn't back away from her and instead he treated her sweetly all day long. He took her to the movies and for ice-cream, mocha chip. And then he drove off the beaten track a bit to a place called Lover's Lip. The place was named in honor of the kisses that would happen. The gentle tongues and the temperate breaths that lovers would delight in. On their fifteenth date he took her there and asked her to go further. When he asked, she looked at him and inquired: *Just where do you want to go?* At this he took her face. He brushed his thumb against her hair. He reached for her hand and she let him hold it. He kissed it once and told her of his plans. He wanted to go, he told her, to the moon and to the stars. He wanted to go, he kissed and told her, farther than the furthest far. He held her tight, so close, so quiet, and promised he would take it slow. Then his hand traced up her thigh, and how she'd wonder how high it could go. And then she remembered smacking him. Hard. Her husband married her anyway, with an inkling of hope. A believed-in chance that if he married her he'd get to take her where promised on that day so long ago. And he *almost* did. Almost on their wedding night, and almost on their anniversaries. They almost went there every couple of weeks, and

sometimes in between. But as they both got older it seemed to the old woman that the old man had forgotten where he had said he'd wanted to go. But the old woman near the aisle was determined he'd remember. She wanted to tell her husband that today they should take a shot. She wanted to tell her husband that frankly, she was feeling hot. But she felt she had to wait, to phrase it oh-so-perfectly. So the old woman by the aisle looked into it and sighed. *I'll wait for the right moment* – she said, sneaking a glimpse at his eyelashes, and licking her lips at the sight of the silver on his brow - *Just the right time to come and remember up our love.*

Her husband to the right of her, in the seat of 110F, blinked his eyes. He blinked his eyes into the back of the seat in front of him, and not to the bolster at his back. His blinks were broken blinks but rather mild, rather kind - a sort of indicator of the man he was inside. He blinked at the old woman's mumbling. He blinked at her restless sighs. He blinked at her knees, and blinked at her ankles, and then he closed his eyes. *Forty-seven years and the clock is still ticking* - he thought. *Blink, blink, blink.*

The tough girl did not like the old man's blinking. In fact, she did not like it at all. She didn't like how the bus driver was driving, or how the old woman near her was mumbling and sighing into the air. She didn't like the ass of a girl that stood in front of her, and she didn't like her boyfriend. But most of all, she didn't like how the round man with the middle looked at the ass and sighed in what she thought was appreciation. *I'm offended* - she thought – *that he would think she's swell. He doesn't even know her – how can he even tell?* She rolled her eyes and thought with disgust how wrong those around her were. *But that's fine* – she thought – *because I don't need them – not one single person on this whole damn bus!* She thought this as she reached down and grabbed her

water bottle. She opened the lip and took a sip, and then looked out her window. *I'll just ignore them* – she thought. Ignoring was something she was brilliant at. Ignoring was something she was proficient at. She ignored the fact that her fiancé would sometimes look longingly at other women. *He's just got lazy eye.* She ignored the fact that other women didn't get along with her and were often confused about what to do and how to act when they were around her. *They're just the petty type.* The tough girl thought - *They all don't know the real me!* - it was a thing she'd tell herself often. Along with that, she'd tell herself that she was happy, and that she was cool, and that everyone else was a fool if they didn't think so. *They are just jealous* – she would think, nearly several times a day – *and I am above them.* And then she'd look out a window, or look out a door, or look at something that was not in the direction of anyone who wanted to talk to her, wanted to argue with her, wanted to try to relate with her. Looking elsewhere was another thing the tough girl was brilliant at. She sighed, and the warmth from her sigh fogged up a tiny spot in her window and droplets began to leak sadly in front of her. The place she was looking at seemed a very, very cold place.

The round man who was no longer in the middle was fortunate enough not to know such a place. His life had been just perfect. Every hand he played he ached. His home was quite a lovely home, near grocery stores and schools. His backyard had a tree-house, and nine-foot swimming pool. His house had hosted two children. Two lovely, bright-eyed girls. Children with intelligence, wit, enthusiasm and curiosity. Children who earned scholarships and chose professions that helped to better humanity. His wife was quite the lady, the perfect woman, lover, friend. He could never pitch in when the boys at work would complain about their spouses because she would give him nothing good to

contribute. His marriage had endured, of course, the little spats and the moodiness here and there. But overall his wife was just. The fights were very fair. He couldn't ask for anything more. He had it all at fifty! And he didn't take short-cuts, he didn't cheat! And when he thought of it he sighed proudly, and adjusted himself in his seat. And when he adjusted his seat, it wiggled. Then the young lady in the next seat moved her hip and it jiggled. He swallowed, hard. *Her hip is very lovely* - and as soon as he thought it, he looked away. *Shame on me*. He bowed down his head and kept it towards the floor. *Shame on me*. Something in his chest jumped up and froze. He didn't understand why he felt hot and dizzy all of a sudden.

I forgive you. The young lady thought it as she sat there. She thought - *I forgive you because you're trying to make this work, spend time with me, and make up for all the messed up shit that you did to me*. She sniffed. She took the young man's hand in hers, let a bright smile lighten up her face, and then she sniffed again. *I forgive you for not getting mad at your mom when I thought you should, and I forgive for forgetting my kitten's birthday. I forgive you for last year, when you forgot what I wanted for Christmas, and when you snapped at me and told me I was being catty when I told your brother's new girlfriend that she should be careful because your brother had just broken off an engagement a month ago. I forgive you* - the young lady thought, and then rested her head on the young man's shoulder - *I forgive you because I know you're trying to make up for it now. I forgive you* - she giggled - *because I'm going to try my damnest to enjoy this pathetic idea of a fun time and tell you where I really wanted to go. And I'll forgive you* - she breathed deeply - *at least until we get to the Towers*. She giggled again and her

whole body jiggled, including her hair. And then her sheen and her shimmer shook and lit up the space around her. She was fiery.

And the glare caused the young man to squint when he looked over at her. And at his squint, the young lady seethed silently back. They glowered at each other and sat there smiling, side by simmering side. They smirked at each other, each thinking of what they would say as soon as they had the chance. They thought of the Towers and both prayed to God that they would get there soon.

B-12. That's B-12, folks, the vitamin of Bingo: B-12!

TAKE-MULTI-VITAMIN-DAILY was number four on the bus driver's list of THINGS-TO-DO-IN-THE-NEW-YEAR, perched right under his number three. He hadn't taken a multi-vitamin yet, at least not everyday, because number three was still waiting to be checked off. Everyday he looked at it, clean and crisp and check mark free, wishing that he had made it number four, because then he could take his multi-vitamins. Number three would be difficult to fulfill. And yet he wouldn't let it go unfulfilled. Fulfilling was a goal he wouldn't let go lightly or would let go unfulfilled. *Try saying that three times fast* – he thought squealing gleefully to no one in particular – *I can!* He also squealed, he thought happily, because he was not unfulfilled. Unfulfilled was what his wife was, as she sat at home and watched soap operas, did laundry and cooked mashed potato and salmon suppers. She was unfulfilled because she sits all night as the salmon got tough and as she waits and waits for him to come home and eat it. *Little does she know about the meatloaf and gravy and fondue dinners that he shares with his speech instructor* – he smiles. Little does she know about the speech instructor's apartment that is crammed with the scent of spring-rain dryer sheets that eat away at the smell of old foods and bodies on the bus

driver's uniforms. Little does she know that there are three now that alternate, hanging on a hanger in his speech instructor's peach-colored closet. Little does she know because he has told her little - and the fact that he has told her little doesn't surprise him, his wife, or his speech instructor. The bus driver has trouble sometimes finding the words to say because, for a stutterer, it's easier done than said. But the bus driver wanted to take his peach-colored multi-vitamins. He wanted to check off number three. He wanted to keep his clothes in the peach colored closet – *that would be peachy keen!* He wanted to call his wife at the end of this trip and tell her about all sorts of unfulfilling things that would follow soon after this trip that would get him that Driver O'the Month Award that he'd be framing sometime soon. He reached for his microphone.

Destination is approximately thirty minutes and approaching. Reaching a cruising speed of about 60 miles per hour.

The round man with the middle was surprised because he thought that they had been going much faster. He wiped away a warm sweat from his forehead. *Is it hot in here?* – he asked aloud. He did not hear if anyone had answered. He unbuttoned the button on his jacket, reached for his cell phone, and thought about calling his wife. *Just to say hello* – he thought – *just to make sure everything's all right.* Nothing was wrong at his house when he had left in the morning, everything looked just fine. He had went on this trip because he had a free ticket and had some time to kill. A trip to Atlantic City was better than going to the doctor's – a place he'd only go to on his own free will. *I'm a grown man!* – he reminded his wife when she had mentioned it - *I'll do as I see fit!* He slammed the door when he told her that - he knew she wouldn't mind a bit. He knew she wouldn't bother, or care to make a fuss. She'd simply roll her eyes, he knew, and then

yell outside to offer him a ride to the bus. He chuckled when he thought of her and all that she had put up with. He chuckled when he thought of her, and everything he would miss about her. And then he wondered why he was thinking like that.

But the tough girl thought she knew what the man with the middle was thinking and why he was thinking it. She knew it, and thought ill of him for it. *He's thinking that he wants to touch that girl, and that he wants that girl to touch him! How sleazy, how gross, how pitiful – and all because she's thin!* Thin and perfect, the tough girl thought. And then she shook her head. *His neck I'd like to wring! Why can't males think with their heads and not with that other thing?* She knew that if males could think with their head, and for that matter, if females could too, that her life would be a little better. Males and females would understand her, and admire her for everything she was. *Everyone would see that I am wonderful – she thought - Everyone would know that I really am a good girl. Not a mean girl, not a liar. Instead, they'd see a pearl of a woman who always acts with patience, kindness and class. And then I could be kind to everyone. And never call anyone an asshole.* But, the tough girl sighed. Until that day came, she felt she should just continue to ignore everyone and look out the window. Just like - as she checked her cell phone and saw that she had missed a total of seventeen calls from her loved ones who were trying to track her down – she was doing now.

And the old man blinked, and felt pity for himself, and continued to wait patiently.

And the old woman waited for her chance.

And the man in the middle waited too long.

And the young man and his partner waited too.

And the bus driver thought about when he should call his wife and decided that he would do it as soon as he finished what he had to do at the moment. He reached for his microphone.

Okay, folks, those of you sitting on the left can start to see the gold antenna on top of Trump Plaza. Isn't it a beaut? Pure gold. That Trump/ He's something else, I tell you.

The whole bus got excited. It lifted. It seemed relieved. Those on the left leaned and looked over into their window, and those on the right said *Oh!* and *Ah!* And the plaza glistened. It looked like silver. Shone like gold. It glittered in the eyes of the people on the bus as they thought about their hopes and their wishes to unfold. The people on the bus stretched and they yawned. They pulled at their backs, and whistled and fawned over the sight of the destinations they had waited to get to all day long like the ocean, the Atlantic, and the Towers. They couldn't wait to get out of the bus. They patiently waited to get out of the bus. The people on the bus sat and they waited. They waited, sat and stayed.

And so did the bus.

And the young lady didn't shimmer. And the round man with the middle didn't bounce. The tough girl wasn't mad about anything, and the young man was as quiet as a mouse. The bus driver adjusted his rearview mirror, and the old woman put her hand to her cheek. It was the old woman's husband who sitting to the right of her who opened his eyes wide and took a peep. He was wide-eyed at what he saw.

The old man saw the bus was stalled, not moving, completely still. It sat three miles from the hotel Towers that beckoned slightly upon a hill. The old man could see the

front of Trump Plaza, and the promise of its golden doors. Then he saw the bus driver turned up his dispatch. He saw the bus driver pick up his microphone with a shaking, stuttering hand.

F-folks, it looks like we've got a slight set-back. Not sure why. Still awaiting further word from casino officials. S-Stand-by.

The bus driver took another breath, a deeper one this time. Everyone had heard and held theirs. Then the bus driver's face lit up with hope. He saw something that everyone on the bus thought they needed right at that moment.

Folks, looks like lady luck is coming this way to touch all of us with a little bit of her magic before we hit the casino floors!

And wouldn't you know it? She was. She came from the east-side plaza, blonde, and vigorously waving a stack of white paper cards fanned nicely in her hand. It was certain that she was Lady Luck because it said so on her T-shirt. Everyone looked at her and her T-shirt longingly.

Good afternoon folks! Welcome to Trump Plaza, courtesy of your Trump Trip Tours – How are you all doing today?

Everyone on the bus was fine.

My sincere apologies in the change of plans for today's schedule. I want you to know that all of us here are so sorry at the inconvenience. H –E- double-hockey-sticks, we're just as surprised as you are at the mess! Ha ha!

The young man clutched at the armrest. The young lady clutched his arm. The old woman gripped at the sides of her chair and her husband stared straight ahead over the seat in front of him. The tough girl uncrossed her arms, and the bus driver squeezed his

microphone in his hand. The round man with the middle clutched his heart violently, and thought about how much he loved his wife and their life together. Lady luck smiled at them all.

What I have for you all are vouchers. Two per guest, good for one free meal at Jester's Buffet and a 25% discount towards a night's stay at nearby Toucan Tropicana! We hope that these will help you fill your time before you enjoy your stay in Atlantic City – tomorrow. What do you all think of that?

Lady luck was smiling. She was slapping the tickets in everyone's laps. The passengers on the bus did something. They talked to each other.

"I knew this was a stupid idea!"

"You're the one who wanted to go!"

"We almost got there, we were oh-so-near..."

"It's all his fault– he drove too slow!"

"I should have called when I had the chance!"

"I'm feeling really bad."

"I should have taken my vitamins!"

"I refuse to feel this sad!"

Lady Luck did not care for the rambling. She was proud of a job well done. *These people are headed somewhere else to continue about their fun.* She didn't care for their grunts and groans, their tiny mini-screams. Later she knew, they'd feel lucky that she dished out luck for free! Lady Luck then turned, blowing kisses to the bus, and then she tossed a bag in the bus driver's lap. The bag was full of gold, chocolate coins, and an

extra pack of vouchers. She turned when she was off the bus and gave a final wave. She wished the bus good luck. She blew it a big kiss and wished it the sincerest kind of good luck. It was after all, her job.

And the bus driver sighed towards his glove compartment. And the young man sighed at his clutched arm. And the young lady sighed at waiting one more day to tell the young man where he should have taken her. And the round man with the middle passed out quietly. The old woman sitting closest to the aisle stared into it, and her old husband blinked his eyes. The tough girl ignored everything and fiercely fought the urge to cry.

And when it was sure that they had let their moments had passed, the bus kicked itself into high-gear. It honked, pulled out, and went backwards into the horizon, making its way to no where near the place it intended to go this morning. The bus traveled along lightly, remembering how Lady Luck had waved her hand. It listened quietly to its people and all their inside game plans as it rambled to the not-so-nearby Toucan Tropicana...

DOGMEAT

Dogtown, MO. A small section of the city of St. Louis that is colored by a potpourri of art galleries, cafés, cast iron bistro tables and the prettiest street corner flower beds in Missouri. The flowers, a small miracle considering the pollution and city air, are said to be a strange mystery that Dogtown natives attribute to the times of the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair, when head-hunting Igorot warriors from the Northern Luzon of the Philippines occupied the area that was then a part of the famed "Philippine Exhibition." The Igorot warriors, small but steely and clad in nothing but their native loin cloths and blood-stained weaponry, were unanimously considered the most enthralling attraction of the fair that hosted peoples and cultures from Peru to Persia, the world's tallest living humans, and the world's first ice cream cone. The most fascinating thing about the Igorot warriors? They lived on dogs. Puppies like Fido and Skipper. They snuck out at night on occasion from their exhibit and flew through the darkness over gates and guards who were powerless to contain these startling beings. These warriors would stealthily hunt those unfortunate dogs that were left outside at night by their homeowners. The bodies of these pets would become merely a fraction of the steady supply of dog carcasses that the Igorots would butcher everyday at noon in front of thousands of dog-loving American journalists and their eager, wide-eyed cameras.

Dogtown, MO. A section of the city covered in flowers that natives believe are a natural tribute to the slaughter of many an innocent pet.

Or...

Dogtown, MO. A small section of the city of St. Louis that is colored by a potpourri of art galleries, cafés, cast iron bistro tables and the prettiest flower beds in Missouri. The flowers, a small miracle considering the pollution and city air, are the pride

of Dogtown natives, many of whom are members of the local Kiwanis chapter that dedicates a portion of their springtime efforts to the beautification of their city. And the legend that the town was named for its brief occupancy by Filipino Igorots during the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair? A legend. A made up myth that was perhaps used to teach many a young, early twentieth century Missourian child to remember to let Fido or Skipper back into the house after dinner. A legend more believable than the one that preceded it – the one that claimed the town was named by its earliest settlers who liked to keep wild dogs around their property in order to protect whatever treasure they found in the nearby mines. In comparison, the legend of the dog-eating Igorots would certainly sell a few more issues of the then newly established *St. Louis Post Dispatcher* than the legends of the dog-keeping miners would. Truth be told, the legend of the dog-hunting Igorots would sell thousands of newspapers in the spring of 1904 alone. Newspapers that forgot to mention that dogs were actually provided to the Igorots by fair administrators. Overlooked the detail that the Igorots were instructed to butcher the dogs everyday at noon though they had eaten dogmeat everyday for four months straight and were becoming deathly sick of it. Papers that forgot to document that dogmeat in the Northern Luzon mountains in the Philippines was a celebratory dish eaten only in times of birth or death in the Igorot community, and that sweet potatoes and rice were a much more accurate depiction of everyday, Igorot fare.

Dogtown, MO, and the head-hunting, dog-eating Igorots. A harmless tale. A benign rumor. A story meant only to motivate a great people and great nation to manifest destiny and repair what they diagnosed as the broken and backwards people of the world. A tale that was indeed somewhat scary but only meant to be so for Missourian children

whose father would tell tales to of his visits to the fair. A myth that he would pass onto them and then perhaps to his grandchildren and so on until his story was forgotten, remembered only a hundred or so years later by a meddlesome family member who for some reason or another would take it upon herself to investigate her family's myths and folktales. Perhaps she too would never find out about the part fair administrators played in her family's beloved holiday stories. Perhaps she would never know about the masses of dogmeat that season the earth deep beneath the streets of Dogtown. Masses hidden by my great-grandfather and his colleagues who went against their God by burying unspoiled food, but still tried in vain - in compassion for their families and fellow Igorots - to stop forced handfals from being swallowed in front of a million pairs of blinking eyes. For the typical Missourian, these things would be easy to forget because odds are these things would never be told in those stories by the fire in the first place. So many of the details in my great-grandfather's participation in the fair were not meant to be discovered. So many of his stories were not meant to be told. At least not told in another way, in a way different from that early twentieth century Missourian father. But the fortunate thing about that meddling myth-debunker? There is one in every family.

I can only tell you what I know. As for the complete account of my great-grandfather and the fair, I have nothing but hints of accounts that have slipped into my subconscious. Bits of stories that have slithered into my brain. Phantom pieces of a puzzle that haunts my recollections and memories. As if I've lived them before. As if I've tasted, smelled, and suffered them. Burning wood. Flesh. Missouri snow. Rivulets of water in thick, cold, mud. Teeth. A dog barking. A boy in pantaloons whose mother, with a lace covered fingertip, shields her son's eyes when they walk past me. These are things

I feel I can recall. Made up of course. Facts that are historically true only in my head. But in regards to what I really, technically, honestly-to-godly know? To most anthropologists, I am technically third generation Filipino-American, but keep in mind I am third generation twice removed. My parents were born in the Philippines. My grandmother was born in the Philippines too. But her sister, the first child of her generation, was conceived and born in the States.

My grandmother's sister, Sylvia, was named in honor of the state of Pennsylvania. Why she was named this way is something we can only guess. Her first day of life in this world was hallmarked with a great feast of dogmeat. For my great-grandparents, it must have seemed like a celebration that would have been thrown for them at home in their village of Bontoc. On the other hand, as glares from fair administrators encouraged them to chew the dogmeat with more "gusto," my great-grandparents surely must have noticed a small difference between what was and what might have been. And surely, as they swallowed, the vastness of the space between the state of Missouri and their home in the remoteness of the Philippines must have been felt.

What might have convinced my great-grandparents to travel weeks down a mountain to the coast of the Philippine shoreline? Down to the Philippine lowlands and the rest of their nation who too concocted their own frightening tales about the Igorots from the highlands? What inspired my great-grandfather and my great-grandmother to survive for months across the Pacific, and days in an intentionally unheated train across the Rockies? Was it all for five dollars in currency they would never know how to use? For a promise whispered into their ear by an American who knew their dialect? A pearl? I will never perhaps, while I am living, have any certainty about what brought them to the

fair. No clue as to what made or tricked them into agreeing to be specimens on display in the United States of America for a fair. No indication that they understood all of it beforehand. No indication that they in fact *did* understand all of it but went anyway.

When I try to begin to think about it, I can feel the invisible tickle of a blond, itchy moustache in my earlobe. I can close my eyes and catch a glimpse of jewelry glistening in a wild darkness lit only by moonlight. It is just as shiny as a pair of green eyes that seem to weep for a rectangular piece of paper that a white man caresses in his glove. I feel something in my gut. A secret. A deeper meaning. Though I can't articulate what it is I know I should leave home. Must leave home.

Details. Chunks. Waves of information. The memories of my great-grandfather and great-grandmother come to me sometimes when I am near family, when my mother will mumble secrets that have trickled into her over the years. They come to me but then they just as quickly recede. I must be gentle when they come crashing into the portion of my brain that is reserved for recollecting. Trying to scrutinize a memory that I never truly had is a delicate thing. A thing like trying to count the grains of sand on beaches...

Detroit, MI. 1902

"*Manong* Antero, please guide us."

My seatmate looks to me because I am older, even though I am only twenty-two. There is something the matter with the air in this village, he says. He is scared. I can tell it by the way he shakes and looks to me. I must be a good leader. I must give him strength. There must be many ghosts in this village of Detroit, I tell him. Many hungry ghosts that suck the warmth that rises off the bodies of the living. We must be sure to

consider what they are trying to tell us. He nods. He covers his shoulders with his hands. We sit very still. We are riding in a bus. A bus is the same as a train car or a trolley.

“No heat!”

Our guides yell “no heat!” to each other and then they look back at us. They are sitting in the front of the train car. We see them through a see-through wall. The wall is thick.

“No heat! Are you cold? Are you cold?”

We look at them. We do not know what “cold” is. We only know that something is the matter with the air in this village of Detroit, and we know it must be the ghosts. Two of them - a pair that died behind me and my town mate on this trolley. I do not know their names. They were Igorot but from a tribe other than Bontoc. They died in their seats on this bus. I knew they were dead long before of the guides went to touch their necks. I knew they were dead well before the guides carried the bodies off the bus.

The guides have carried the bodies outside. They hang from their arms like caribou. Some of the women scream. I and the rest of them men try to stop the guides from carrying their bodies like caribou but the air makes it difficult. It is sharp on our skin like a knife. Our loins are the only parts of our body covered. They are the only parts that need to be covered at home on the mountains. Now, they are the only parts that do not feel the pain. The blankets our women brought for this trip did not fit onto our train car, the guides told us. Our arms and legs stiffen when we try to rise from our seats. Our bodies react too slowly, much slower than when we are in Bontoc. Smoke comes out of our mouths when we speak even though we have no pipes and no sorghum or trumpet

flower to burn in them. These strange things, I tell mytown mate, must surely be a message from the ghosts that died on the train car.

We cannot reach our countrymen, these no-name Igorots who died on this bus. The guides have dug underneath the ground that is hard and white and have placed their bodies inside. They did not build a funeral pyre. They did not first put the bodies in coffins. We, the living Igorots, pray.

The guides return to their seats in the front of the trolley behind the wall. The bus moves away from the burial grounds. We cannot hear the guides as they talk to each other. We only see them rub their hands together behind that clear, hard, wall. They take off the many layers of cloths they wrapped around themselves before they went outside. No smoke comes from their mouths. The ghosts, for some reason, do not bother them.

We try to think of why the ghosts only bother us, why they makes our jaw shake, why they make our arms and legs move slowly. Some say it is because they were evil men, and their spirits are now reduced to making the living suffer. But some others on the train car disagree. They were good people, these others say. From the tribe of Kalinga. They are not angry ghosts then, I decide. Everyone agrees. They must only be upset at us for leaving them. *Do not suffer, my friends.* I tell the ghosts this. *We will be back.*

My seatmate taps my arm. Maybe, he tells me, they think we are leaving them here. *Impossible!* I say it loud, so the ghosts will hear. We would not leave them in any place other than our final resting grounds. I will tell our guides, I tell my seatmate.

Every Igorot must be buried in the land that they were born on. It is the only way to please Lumawig, our God. The ghosts will be upset until their bodies are brought back home. Perhaps the guides know this. The guides know our language. They know our

people. They know our food. They've eaten our food when they came to Bontoc. We must trust them. The guides must know that we cannot leave the two bodies here. I think before I decide to tell them. Perhaps they are just leaving the bodies in Detroit for safekeeping until we come back for them. Perhaps they told the bodies this as they buried them. I tell the ghosts out loud in our dialect that we too, will not leave them. Some of the women hear and begin to cry what I've said out loud. They cry louder when they see tiny bumps on their skin begin to appear, and when their bodies begin to shake uncontrollably.

The guides look back at us from behind that wall

"Are you cold? Are you cold? No heat! No heat! How long can an Igorot survive the cold?"

I look back at them.

"We will come back, will we not?" I ask.

The guides look at me. I say it in my dialect because it is they who better understand our language.

"They will wait for us here, in this exact spot," I tell them. I taste salt on my lips. I raise my hand to my mouth and stare at the blood that dries on my finger. I put my fingers back to my lips. They feel like earth when it is cracked, like rice paddies in the dry season. I long to bring our brothers back home. We will come back for you! I tell it to the ghosts. I yell it to them. They will roam homeless around the village of Detroit until we come back. They will wait for us there and when we arrive, they will remind us that we must bring their bodies back home.

St, Louis, MO. 1903

The Empire of Japan. That is who he is. His name. Our guides had told it to me – *There lives the Empire of Japan*. The Empire of Japan and his village is across the water that is shaped like an arrowhead. He lunges at me. He grabs under my skirt and across at my breasts. I am running. I do not yell for help because there are no people here yet. The fair administrators have told us there will be no people here until the snow melts and the ground is green again. The Empire of Japan and his people, and the people of the Igorot village are among the first to be brought here because we need the most time to build the kind of houses we live in – the most time of all the people who they will be bringing to the fair. I do not yell. There are no people here.

I must cross the lake shaped like the arrowhead. The Empire of Japan cannot come into my village. No enemy can if he values his life. And I am getting closer to it. The grass that I am running on becomes wet and longer under every step. The water from the arrowhead lake seeps around my toes. The Empire comes close enough to touch my hair. He grabs handfuls of it and yanks it out. My head is bleeding, stinging and raw in the places that are newly bald. I do not reach my hand to touch it. Instead, I swing my arms to push against the air. I want badly to get home. The Empire tries to push me. The backs of his palms thump on my shoulders. I dig my feet into the ground, clutch the dirt with my toes, and pretend that I am home, climbing mountains that I must not fall. The muscles in my calves begin to slow. In my heart, I call out to our great God Lumawig to deliver me. He hears, and he pushes me past the water. He pushes me past the gate being built in the front of my village. He delivers me to my village, but the Empire is still behind me. I scream.

The spear that is thrown splits the Empire of Japan through his chest and sinks into the middle of his heart. It is the best way to kill an enemy without prolonging pain and suffering. Lumawig is a great God and he does not condone prolonged pain and suffering. The Empire of Japan dies well. He dies instantly. Bu-long-long comes and removes the spear. He and his son carry the body away to the woods. I stay and clean the blood from the spear with my *tapis*. The markings that ride above the blade far beyond the wooden handle are the same as the patterns woven on my skirt. I am thankful; the spear belongs to a man from Bontoc. His hand reaches down to pick up it up after I have cleaned it. I look at his fingers, at the sturdy veins and ridges that climb into his forearm and continue to his brow. Our sons and daughters will be handsome. I hope they will look like him.

St. Louis, MO. 1904

The coats that a fair administrator puts on me and the rest of the men before we play the gongs for the afternoon crowd are steeped in smells of cognac, vanilla, and lavender. It is what I am told anyway - that the draping clothing on my shoulders smell like these things. The wives of the fair administrators wish for us to wear these while we play - indecency is what it is called, without them. The indecency of the coat begins to ~~ith~~. The fur near my neck makes me want to sneeze but I do not want the fair administrators to think I am sick. Bu-long-long was taken away *sick* four days ago and he will not return. Those taken away from our village called *sick* never come back. We are certain that Bu-long-long is never coming back. The fair administrators are puzzled. They don't know why we grow sick here even though we were *stupendously healthy* in Bontoc. We know why we grow sick here but we will never speak it out loud. Bu-long-long died

because of the sins he and the others committed against Lumawig. We will never speak of it but we step on it everyday when we dance and play the gongs. It makes the ground stink. The boy in pantaloons covers his nose. We dance. We beat the gongs. When we beat them loudly, the boy peers out from under his mother's finger and listens. I watch him watching me. I stomp hard on the ground beneath. I think of two friends, two brothers, buried, waiting for me in Detroit. I fear it is only a matter of time before the wrath of Lumawig comes to me and I too grow sick like Bu-long-long.

St. Louis, MO. 1905

Think of how thunder talks twice. It is what I tell the people everyday at the gong dancing. Everyday for many, many days. We tell them this, over and over again. The fair administrators tell us that the people have not yet learned. It makes me sad, how long it takes for the others to learn. It is what makes my heart cry. Compassion – it is what this is called.

The way thunder talks twice is how we play the *gongsa*. I must teach them this. I must teach them how. I must teach their white, white ladies who wear boxes on their heads with feathers. I must teach them to dance and play the *gongsa*. That is maybe why our great God Lumawig wants us to stay here, even as others have begun to go home. This is what I think. This is what I tell my husband, even though he yearns to go home, is sick to go home. I must teach them this holy, holy thing. I tell him. And then maybe one day it will be our turn to return. Yes, he tells me. We must live until we can all return and die happy. He is a wise husband.

I teach as hard as I can. *Think of how a mountain can yell back at you.* I yell it to the ladies. That is how we play the *gongsa*. They smile at me while I speak and their teeth

are so shiny like necklace beads. I cannot imagine how they eat with teeth like necklace beads. They do not speak the same words as me but I know they will understand when they hear the gongsa. It is simple. It is music. It is dancing. There is no talking in music and dancing. There is only prayer and devotion. I motion to the men and they begin to play. I spread my arms in the air and soar around the music. *Think of how the bird floats.* That is how you dance to the gongsa. I put my hands to my hips and lift my feet to the back of my calves. *Think of how the fish kicks.* That is how you should feel when you dance the gongsa.

The ladies are pointing their fingers to us. They are looking, watching, talking. Some put their hands on their ears. You cannot listen if you do that! I tell that to them. The gongsa is the only time when I know I am getting very close to going home. I hear no worry while the men play. I feel no weariness. There are no mountains around me when I dance to the gongsa but the sound is still the loudest sound in the world. It delivers me. *Kick!* I tell the ladies and I strike the ground beneath me with my toes. *Fly!* I tell the ladies and then I soar like ghosts who shine up to the sky. *Dance!* I am carried by the gongsa. My blood pumps only to the beating of the gongsa. I dance and the gongsa sing over the fair and over the oceans to the mountains in Bontoc. I dance and let the great God Lumawig know his creation still works.

Silver Spring, MD. 2004. Of all the things my great-grandparents took back home with them from the fair, a journal surely wasn't one of them. And even if it was one of those things, we who are their survivors would never know. We do not have any proof that any written recollections - letters, postcards, documents besides those articles and newspapers provided to us by the Missouri Historical Society - exist to help

us understand what they might have went through and what they might have lived through one hundred years ago. But what we do know is that they certainly went through it. And we do know that they lived.

How my great-grandparents journeyed back to the Bontoc proper, in that small town high in the Philippine mountains is something that again, we can only guess at. Some rumors have it that my great-grandparents went back to the Philippines exactly how they came about two years later: through trolleys and train cars, over the Rockies, and in ships across the sea, stopping intermittently to participate in other smaller fairs across the country. Other accounts have my great-grandparents not going back to their home for several more years, and they speculate that they may have participated in fairs in places such as Alaska, and other various parts of North America. One fact that is certain, however, is that my great-grandfather Antero was not able to bring back the bodies of the two nameless Igorots who were buried somewhere in middle America, their bodies dumped there after being subjected to what present day historians believed was an experiment to see how hardy the Igorot body would be against wintertime in the prairies. The heads of these head-hunting Igorots, however, are resting today well in their homeland. Their heads – their only remains - were discovered in the early nineties, and my parents were two of the many who worked to have the bones sent back and buried in the place they called home. Somehow, someway, these heads found their way to my parents and to their manifold, life-long efforts of contributing to the Igorot people and culture. Thus, I believe my great-grandfather was somewhat satisfied. He, in a roundabout way, finished what he personally had promised to do.

We have an old, donated photo of my great-grandfather who is standing in front of makeshift hut at the fair. In it, he looks regal, standing proud, even as he wears a woman's coat, circa nineteen-hundreds. His eyes in that photo are sharp. They look out to us, and seem to dare all of us who look at it to look back. Though I don't have a photo of my great-grandmother, I do have a memory of when I was very small and went to visit the Philippines with my family for the first time. I remember being held in the tattooed arms of my warrior of a great-grandmother and being told that we share the same tribal name. Tribal names were different from the names our parents give to us at birth. One may receive a tribal name but a tribal name is never given. Rather, it is more of a calling. It is a name that someone recognizes in you instead of a name you are given. Tribal names are recognized on a person because of a look a person might give another person while she is talking to him. They are recognized because of a certain way a person has of turning her face, a certain way of doing something. A certain way with words, a certain way of thinking. A certain way of knowing things and understanding them. My tribal name, and that of my great-grandmother's, is Tagay. As a child, I would beg my grandmother and my mother to tell me exactly why Tagay was my tribal name. *Do I laugh like her? Was she funny? Was she smart? Is that why Tagay is my tribal name?* I would ask them these questions, ceaselessly ask them. *You are just*, they told me ceaselessly, *like Tagay*. I never knew my great-grandmother. She died long before I was old enough to get the chance. I never knew her. But I do.

This I also know: my great-grandmother was the type of woman men would kill for. In fact, my great-grandfather did, and she married him for it. There are alleged fair accounts of a man from the Japanese exhibit being slain by the Igorot head-hunter,

Antero, before the fair officially opened its doors. The slain man, however, was not obviously the entire empire of Japan, nor was he the Emperor of Japan. (I don't believe the Emperor ever made it to St. Louis.) Rather, the Empire of Japan is the name my great-grandmother remembered him by on that day. The Empire of Japan is how she talked about him. Perhaps it was a word merely lost in translation, in pronunciation. Or perhaps, that is what she felt like he was when she was being chased by him, what she felt was attacking her as he pushed her to the grounds in her exhibit, and came inches within raping her.

Truth. Certainty. Facts. These are matters made. Matter that is in a way, made up. Material that is forever being discovered, uncovered, and brought to our attention. Some of which we will quickly recognize as truth. Some of which we will too quickly dismiss. Some of which we will never be certain about, but will know in the trenches of our blood and of our guts, is true.

Perhaps, in another one hundred years, my great-granddaughter will get closer to really knowing the truth about the Dogtown Legend of St. Louis. Perhaps she will be able to pick up this tale of those dog-hunting, dog-eating Igorots, and better explain to anyone who is listening what occurred in that place, with those people so long ago. Perhaps she will add more stories to the pot, more legends that will have their way of steeping over time. *Why* she will want to dig up these things is different mystery, a different thing to fathom. Will she want to excavate these things in the name of truth, in the name of fact? I am doubtful. I am hopeful that she will be more intelligent than that. *Why* she will want to know is perhaps an inarticulate mystery, a matter left truly to the dogs. But *why* is not what worries me. I only worry if she will.

Go forth, and discover. These would be words I'd like to tell that great-granddaughter if she feels she doesn't have to, if she feels she doesn't know enough, or feels too inadequate otherwise to examine a legend that made her. They are words very similar, perhaps, to those that were whispered in her great-great-great-great-grandparents ears in that very early, American, twentieth century. *Go forth, and inherit the wind.*

THE DINER

She kinda blows in, like with the wind. I can smell her, the way I'm standin.' She opened the door and it's like night took a deep breath and blew out all that heat between her sweater up my nose and into my mouth. Smelled like soap and a candle. I swallow. She shivers.

"Smoking? Non?"

I ask her but the kid answers. His hand slides down her arm and into her waist. God it was tiny. Swells just enough, curve-like into her hips, like those pilsner glasses at Blackie's - the ones they keep in the freezer and serve frosted? Same feeling looking at him holding her. Wondering how he could stand there all casual like. Like he's better than me for not wanting to toss her, drink her up.

"Yes, sir. Thanks. Non."

"Third booth."

Kid nods, takes his cap off. Has the decency at least to take his cap off. She smiles and nods at me. She takes his hand, sure, but she nods at me. I try to nod back but she's already walking. Already scooting in the booth he leads her to, flipping her hair back into a bunch behind her neck. Keep my eyes hard as I could just at that rubber band she's twisting her black, black, hair around. Deep black. Ink black. Like Priscilla. Like a queen. Long enough to do the right things and tickle the right places with whomever she got naked with. I'm staring, I know it. Don't mean to disrespect the kid but then again, nothing wrong with looking anymore, is there? Nothing wrong with talking to a lady either. Maybe she'd want to go to the bathroom, how could he tell her no to that? Maybe she forgot something in the car, not her fault if she wants to do something like that. Maybe I'd open the door for her, if she came my way and say "hello" - there wouldn't be

nothing wrong with that. Chivalry ain't dead yet or nothing. Hell, kid's not even watching her around me. Tells me he don't got the sense to see me as a threat anyhow. But then again he's just a kid. Just a stupid, no good kid.

Gita walks by me. I tug at her apron string careful like not to undo it - gave me hell last time for that.

"That's you," I tell her.

Gita turns, swats the counter with her rag and smiles big enough so I see that dark space in the back of her mouth where her back teeth are all messed up.

"Yeah, John. You know I got it."

Gita's stomach is so swollen that she kinda waddles off. She's the type that blows up like a watermelon. Girl's so small I thought she'd have carried more like a pumpkin, out to the sides and all but instead she's punched out long and large, clutching onto that no-name's son between her breasts and thighs. She found out the baby's sex beforehand. Don't know why she gotta go and find out what the baby's sex is. Don't know why any woman gotta do that. Supposed to help determine what kind of color baby-clothes to buy but that don't seem good enough reason to me. Kid's a kid. Cry's a cry. Pink, blue, yellow, green and purple – it's all the same. Being boy or girl don't matter much if you look at it under those terms. But I keep my mouth shut. Gita says - *John, if I want your opinion, I'll ask*. She's got a lotta mouth on her for only being twenty. But I like her though so I don't make it too tough for her. Gita; I tell her when she tells me that; that's true. Just ask next time if you want my opinion. It'll be good and ready for you.

Gita takes some water and brings it over to the kids without spilling. Before she has the chance to waddle away, the kid must have started to order cause Gita reaches

down deep into her apron and peels her book off her belly. That's an effort she doesn't make these days 'less she knows for sure the customer's good and ready to order. The kids ain't regulars but they must have been to the restaurant lately if they didn't look at the menu to order. Usually kids like those come in, oh and ah about how "real" my diner is, how "genuine" the staff is. Kids like those. College kids. Scholarship kids. Live in this town for four five years to finish up their PhDs and feel like they know enough to make this place a part of them.

Could be also though that the kid and the girl were here coupla times before, enough so that they'd know what they'd want without even looking at the menu. Could be. If they came it wasn't on my night - that's the one thing that's certain. Would have remembered the girl.

Gita slaps the book shut, gives them her jack-o-lantern smile and walks away. She posts the ticket up and I take a glance before Colossal gets to it. He's busy flippin' corned beef anyway. I squint at the ticket: *1 – chx platter, bbq , 86 fry sub pilaf, diet coke 1 – cake platter, eggs over hard, double hash, rasp. ice tea.*

Chicken platter was the girl's and not the kid's. That's for sure especially with the diet coke and sub pilaf and all. Girl also looks the chicken platter type too. Blue jeans, white shirt, gray sweater. She probably changed out of something nicer, more stylish looking when she found out the kid was gonna take her here. I could see him asking her, all un-suave like, on the cell phone probably: "Where do you want to go for dinner?" He'd ask it like he's really interested. Then she'd say "I don't know" all soft like, and patient. Then he would say, "Okay, let's go to the diner." And then she'd say "Okay," start changing clothes, and wait downstairs for him in the lobby of her apartment.

He'd take his time through traffic to get there, I know, and what's more she wouldn't even get mad when he'd be late. She was still too young for that – that was for certain. Twenty-two. maybe, twenty three. Girls that age are looking for a ring and they're gonna be good girls 'til they get themselves that ring. She looks like a good girl anyway. Probably watches what she eats and reads about what she eats in her metro ride to work. Packs lunches, probably. Carries them in plasticware and puts them in her purse to eat at lunchtime. Not the type to eat flapjacks this late into the evening, especially with double hash. Just not that type of girl. Kid's more the double hash type. Talk double hash and you talking about that kid and every person like him.

The raspberry iced-tea threw me a loop but I knew it was probably something that the kid learned from her. She probably ordered it once and he tasted it and just liked it. Probably didn't give a thought to what ordering raspberry iced-tea at a diner made him look like. Strictly E&J is what I am. Anything else is a little light in the loafers if you ask me. I look at the kid, drinking the raspberry iced tea Gita slaps in front of him. Drinks it through a straw even. Freaking raspberry iced tea through a goddamned straw. Poor, young, stupid kid.

“Colossal,” I call, looking at the griddle. Three yellow rings of batter bubble up and spit at me. Colossal turns and looks up.

“Throw another jack on that grill for that pancake and hash platter.” Colossal shrugs his big, black, heavy shoulders. Cradles that 8 cup, mixing bowl like a baby in one arm and ladles out one more cake onto the grill.

I stay around the door as much as I can, just in case the girl remembered that thing she might have forgotten in the car. Not much comes in anyway. Slow Jo' comes in at

about eight, a little later than usual for his cheese and chicken omelet but he goes straight to Colossal at the counter for that. I leave momentarily like to put a hazard sign outside the men's bathroom, but when I come back, she's still in the booth. Doesn't look like she was going to move or has any future plans to. The kid pulls out a book and she pulls out a folder and they start reading without so much as a word to each other. Hate it when people go out to eat and do that, especially young kids. What the hell is wrong with talking to each other when you go out to a public place to eat nowadays? Don't see a ring yet on either of their fingers. Marriage ain't an excuse for them then, as to why they're not talking. Makes me want to grab the kid a little, by his neck. Makes me want to wring it and say – don't you know how to talk to a pretty lady when she's sitting right in front of your face. I could see her smiling at me if I did a thing like that. Stupid ass kid. I decide I'll let it slide this time.

They're reading papers in their folders. Papers with handwriting, papers they mark up with their red pens and pencils. They're teachers, I guess. Maybe they teach a class at the university as a part of their PhD program. Or maybe it was they're own stuff they were marking up. Can't tell. Depended on how old they really was. Kids that age get hard to tell until about ten years later when they hit my side of the road and there ain't no looking back. If there was a way they could know that – if there was a way they could look down the road and know what's coming to them - they'd be talking I bet. Looking at each other. Touching. The girl probably felt like Christmastime.

There's cold at my back. I turn around just in time to see Larry swoop in the door without so much as a word to anyone like he's Batman or Robin or something. The numbskull goes straight to the back to light up. All that yelling Gita did at him must of

finally worked itself way into his thick, jack-ass head. Gita would tell him, *don't you dare smoke those sticks near my baby. Don't you dare do it, Larry!* Usually, he would glare at her. Call her a woman and light up right in front of the bar. But Colossal must have shook a fist at him or something. Larry goes right back without even looking at Gita who glares at him anyway. On his way back, Larry turns to look at the girl for a second, trench coat flapping all over the floor. Larry picks a booth about three or four behind the girl and the kid. I follow him.

“Larry.”

“John.” He takes a drag of his cigarette. He’s in the show-off kinda mood I can tell because he blows a ring right out his nose.

“You dress up like that, in that coat, just to see me?”

“It’s raining John.”

“Bullshit.”

“Pouring.”

Colossal busts through the kitchen gate and holds a bag of trash out to me.

“Damn, Colossal,” I mutter it just loud enough so he can hear me, “why you gotta be so helpless for a big man?” I take the damn thing from him and take it outside. It doesn’t do nothing but I kick at all the dry leaves that the wind blows in the restaurant. Outside smells like pumpkins and it ain’t even Halloween yet. I drop the bags outside. Maybe Colossal will trip over them later on tonight. I wonder if the kid is gonna take the girl out for Halloween. Right now he is looking at her. He pulls a bit of hair from her face and she laughs at him.

I take a knee in the booth opposite Larry. I got a good view of the girl and the door. I can watch both at the same time from here and look like I'm not watching either. Larry holds his cigarettes out to me. I take one from the middle.

"Larry," I say. He flicks his lighter up for me.

"John."

"You know that girl across the street, from that beauty salon? Small one with the dark-rimmed glasses?" I inhale and blow it out regularly. I don't even try to blow it fancy like, out the nose, or in hoops or anything.

Larry nods, chuckles. "Yes, sir. I know the one."

"Said hi to me the other day. Asked me my name back."

Gita brings Larry a Bud and he takes it, sipping the top. I look at the girl. She's eating her chicken fingers with a knife and a fork, cutting them up in small pieces. She slices one finger up first, then dips each cut up piece into the barbeque sauce. After chicken, she has a bite of pilaf, and after that, a bite of slaw. She hasn't gone out of order yet. She doesn't notice me watching her, though she doesn't really even look at the kid either.

"That's how you know if someone is really interested in you," I tell Larry. "If you ask her her name, and she asks you what yours is back. Some women don't do that. They just say hi, maybe nod at you, but if I ask their name, and they don't ask mine back, I take that as a no." Larry laughs, says Amen, and chugs. "Ain't I right Larry?"

"You sure is, John."

"Shoot. Gotta be interested enough to know my name's John. Otherwise, how you gonna be interested in anything else?"

Larry takes another shot at his beer, nodding hard enough to shake some beer onto the table. I tear a napkin from the metal holder on the table, wipe up the mess, and fold it into a square. Larry puts his beer on top of it. I glance over top of Larry and his beer and see the kid's head is hung so low into his plate that I can see the top past of the girl's neckline. No necklace. Just a bare, creamy neckline. Kinda skin that just looks soft, plump like, like it'll bounce back at you if you press your finger to it. Sensitive. The type to get goose bumps.

"Women," I say to Larry, "say they want the sensitive type. Like the flowers and candy and shit, and holding all the time. What they don't know is that that ain't real men." The kid's head bobs up momentary like and he motions to Gita to refill his raspberry ice tea. The girl smiles at him, I guess they're making eye contact or sharing a moment, or something. Kid's head goes down and right back into his plate, right past that creamy neck, right past that smile with that pink gloss she just put all over it. Took one finger right before she smiled at the kid and touched all over her mouth all slow and soft all over it. But the kid just put his head down into his plate of hash. Put his numbskull head down into his stupid plate of hash. The girl's smile kinda turns into a straight, shiny line. It stands still and harsh like right in front of the kid's scalp.

Who taught her to make that frown come so easy like? Do women teach that to each other from when they're very young? Teach each other how to turn their mouths just so – just enough so that you have to look real hard to even know something might be wrong. Like they don't teach each other on purpose what the difference is between a regular smile and a regular frown. Damn those women. What they don't know is that it's all gonna come back to them anyway. What this girl don't understand is that this smile's

not gonna do her no good. What she don't know is that kid's too young to know he's in trouble. How's he supposed to know he's supposed to talk to her, smile and hold and pet her and shit if he ain't been around the block enough times? Kid's too goddamned young to keep up with all them fancy expectations, all these goddamned expectations of this girl. Who taught her that?

Larry's head is somehow in his hands. He dumps the sugar packets out of the caddy on the table and puts his cigarette butt into it. I pick up the sugars, slip 'em into my pocket. I grab an ashtray from the other booth for him. Put my cigarette out into it before I slide it to him.

"What they don't understand, Larry, is that all those JFK juniors, all those Fred Astaires or whatever – they're all gone. Dead or taken. What they got is just us: Larry, John. You know what I'm saying?" Larry's chuckling, saying a bunch of "uh-huhs" and "um-hmms" and spilling the beer out of his second glass, but now he's wiping up the mess himself at least. The girl reaches behind her neck and pulls out her rubber band and her hair kinda pours out. The smell of it rides on top the air right along with Colossal's cooking and got to me enough in one piece that I can taste her all over again.

"I'm not saying I'm a perfect man. I mean you know me. You know me – you know what I'm saying Larry?" I could get used to that smell. Inside my sweaters and on top of my pillows.

"I know you John." The kid's head is up now. I can't see her face, but her eyes don't look like they're smiling.

“You know I’m not saying I’m some long lost twin to Tom Selleck or nothing, but hell - I’m not a bad one.” Larry laughs, agrees with me. Chugs up his second beer and laughs it all out on the table, but at least he agrees with me.

I look over at the table. The kid says something to the girl and she laughs too. I shake when she does. I didn’t expect her laugh to be that loud. Like one of these women much older than her who come in regularly and put their arms around me and call me Johnny. Like I could hear Gita doing when she got much older.

“You not bad, John. You not.”

“Damn straight I’m plenty good for someone. Someone out there smart enough not to be fooled by all these unreal expectations and shit.”

The kid laughs hard and it bounces off the girl and comes towards me. I can’t see the table all too good from where I’m standing but I can see he reaches for something - her hand I’m guessing. He brings it up to the table and keeps his hand over it there.

“You are, John, you are!” Larry puts out his cigarette and pulls a third one out of his pocket. He holds it in his mouth and cups the lighter to it. “Hell, lookin’ at you here, kneeling with your knee all up like that, all of a sudden I ain’t so lonely anymore.”

A roar comes from the kitchen so loud I thought a burner blew out and it’s be the summer of ’97 all over again. I look at the kitchen all I see is Colossal. Big, heavy, 8 cup bowl in one arm and his stomach in the other, laughing. Holds his stomach tighter than that bowl, like he cared more about his guts spilling out on the grill than the pancake batter. Laughing so hard that little black beads fall all over him when he shakes. I can’t tell if it’s sweat or grease. Gita comes over to where I am and swats her rag at my behind. Larry laughs that little sick laugh like he can’t breathe between all those cigarettes that

plug up his lungs. The kid and the girl look over towards us. I snatch up Larry's empty mug in front of me and try to turn so they don't see me so well.

"Suck on your own John, Larry."

Gita laughs, tosses her rag in the laundry bin and wets a new one. She pinches me, then Larry, then she wobbles out the swing door and goes back to her shift.

Larry inhales deeply, and this time, blows out circles, sending it with kisses towards me. He spits into his ashtray, hard.

"Get your crotch out of my face, son."

I know I could give it hard to Larry but everyone's all laughing and good natured and all and I don't want to ruin it so I just walk away. I just play the good sport and walk away. I go back up to the front for a while, chat with Slow Jo. A coupla new comers come in all in a row - one gentleman, two teenaged boys and family. I sit them all near the booth with the kid and the girl, trying to keep it easy going on Gita. The kid and the girl split a piece of pie and a cup of coffee, one cup, and stay so long that I almost forget all about her hair and warmth until they come walking up to me, ready to pay. The kid stops Gita on the way up front.

"Those are the best pancakes I've had hands down!" He puts both hands on his stomach. I see his eyes underneath that baseball cap that he can't even wait to put on 'til he gets outside. Maybe it's the shadow from the hat, but he doesn't look so young anymore.

Gita turns. Just her face, not her belly. "Tell him that," she's pointing to Colossal, "I didn't cook 'em."

Kid gives a thumbs up to Colossal. “Great!” he says, like he’s Tony the Tiger or something. Colossal nods. He only gives a nod to the kid – not even a thanks, or a smile. Still feel like he’s a traitor though.

The girl smiles through the whole exchange, holding the kid’s hand in hers all tight like as they line up behind the counter. She smiles so big and so sweet like, pretending like she forgot the mistake the kid made at dinner, pretending like she’s not mad about it and that she’s forgotten all about it. Pretending like she won’t make him pay for it later when at someplace random, like the mall or the gas station or something, she remembers and gets upset about what happened *here* tonight. And then she’ll get even more mad when he won’t know what she’s talking about. Yeah, I knew what that smile was supposed to be doing. Big sweet smile underneath all that cherry-scented gloss. I wonder if that gloss really tastes like cherry. All these years of kissing different lips from different women and not one of them wore cherry-scented gloss.

“Credit or cash?” I ask her and she just smiles that cherry smile. Kid reaches into the candy bowl and takes the piece right in front of me. He speaks.

“Credit – I can put the tip on the card, right?” I nod. She’s still smiling her shine at me. And then it happens.

“You look like someone I know.” She speaks to me. Her voice even sounds like cherries.

I thought it was me who’d slipped up and said something to her. But the voice I heard was too soft - too high, too calm-like, and once I got it into my head that she was asking me a question, I was trying to hard to figure out how to answer or if I should. The kid’s still chewing, but he closes his mouth over the candy, and stops wrinkling the

wrapper long enough so that I can hear myself enough over him to know I get the answer right.

“I’m John.”

She looks at me a while, I can’t tell if she’s waiting or if I gave her the wrong answer or if there’s something I need to do next. I look at the kid. He’s looking at her. I want to tell him I didn’t mean to disrespect but then she reaches into the bowl, grabs two pieces of candy, and puts them into her purse. She reaches in again, this time under a blue wrapped piece to get a pink one. She puts this one in her mouth all soft and slow like.

“Oh,” she says, sucking on it sweet and gentle as can be.

That’s all she says is “oh.” Oh, like oh God. What the hell did I do wrong?

I should have said something, I know. Done something to get her attention. Hell, I should have danced, recited poetry – anything to get her attention. She asked my name - she was interested in me! Felt bad for the kid when it happened, but damn. He’s just a young kid. Girls like her came to him a dime a dozen. And besides – she asked *my* name. Didn’t she ask my name? John. I told it to her. Didn’t she ask my name?

I play the scene again, over and over in my head. I’d kick myself in the ass if I could. I should have told her something different. The kid took her hand and was long out the door before I figured what I should have done, what I could of asked when I had the moment to.

Everything else around me seems as if normal. As if nothing happened. Colossal scrape-cleans up the grill and Gita switches the midnight shift with Napoleon, and all I do is sit there, thinking about it. Larry sits in the back and blows smoke through his nose. Slo Jo goes to join him and then the two of them sit, two grown men sit and do nothing but

blow smoke rings. Don't have to worry about being Larry and Slo Jo one day. Already been there, done that. I look out the diner, looking at all the cars who stop to slow, thinking maybe it's the kid or the girl and they forgot something. I glance out the window every chance I get, hoping they come back so I'll get to play the moment all over again like it's not already going on and on inside my head.

If they come back, I could just say hello again, maybe ask what they're back for – the pancakes or the candy? That'll make 'em laugh – won't it? And the kid'll go back to the booth where they were sitting. It's empty now and it'll stay that way. The kid'll come in and pick up the bracelet or the rubber band she forgot but remembered in the car. And I would stand, talkin' in the front with that cherry-glossed girl, just keeping her company like a gentlemen should. And then maybe, right before the kid came back, I could steal a moment. Steal just the right and perfect moment and ask her: Who do I remind you of?

GROOMING HABITS

He put his finger under the spout and kept it there, waiting for the stream of tap water to do two things: run clear and get hot enough to hurt. Waiting, he thought, was the most vexing part, especially since the pipes in his Cape Cod were old ones that were over-sensitive in these weeks after Labor Day, when the absence of late summer thunderstorms allowed dirt and dust to seep into the joints and turn any still water dirty. As soon as the water that slept in the pipes the night before ran clear and close to boiling, he waited until the steam that blew up onto the mirror of the medicine cabinet smelled definitely of skin and hot chlorine. When it did, he moved his finger and shook it dry - not because the heat had stung too badly, but because - as his older brother taught him not so long ago - one should never handle a razor with a slippery grip. One should, as his brother said, hold it firmly so as to avoid any unnecessary cuts and nicks. And those sorts of minor injuries, he thought, would defeat the whole purpose of a clean, close morning shave.

When he was satisfied with the temperature of the water, he laid his razor on a bed of two sheets of toiletpaper that he previously set out . After priming his face and neck with a thick layer of cream, he took the razor in his right hand and started on the left side above his cheekbone. He pulled downwards, careful to push in with the right amount of pressure so that the double-tiers of the razor could swiftly lift and execute each follicle. When a pink, stinging sensation ripped down his face after the razor's passing, it became evident that the blades had already grown dull as they were snagging and plucking at his skin rather than gliding smoothly across. At first, he hesitated to replace it. After all, he thought, his wife had just bought the 8-pack last Wednesday, and now, this Tuesday morning, he was already on the second, going on three. The thought, however, of going

back to the neighborhood grocers on the corner of Vine and Duluth, dark and unshaven unsettled him. There would be looks he knew, stares that would be unappreciative of the shadow he would cast on the pretty fall bustle of his town – a town that arose at six A.M. and in an hour sharp was perfumed, powdered, made-up and ironed, ready to commute to the city or to tote the little ones off to the best public schools in the Casco Bay area. He was always easily up one hour earlier than the rest of them at five– the crack of dawn in the early fall of the Northeast. But he wasn't pressing suits or brewing coffee. He was kneeling rather, in the sunken living room near his kitchen, the room in his house that was the best vessel for the first light of the new sun.

A few years earlier, he would offer his morning prayer in the front yard, the only other pair of eyes around him belonging to the paper boy and his mother who were more concerned about not hitting him as they flung the dailies out onto the subscribing front lawns. To them, in the dim light, he may have very well just been an obsessive gardener out to toil when the ground was most moist, or a midnight drunk hiding a night of empty gin and vodka bottles before the wife could wake to catch him. But if they had gotten a closer look – slowed, and looked back a bit to notice what was directly in front of them - they would have seen that this was not a man who would was devoting himself to perfection, deceit, or any other worldly ambition. Instead, they would have seen the earnest expression that tightened his brows and pressed his lips, features that would have betrayed a man so desperately devoted to the divine. They would have seen him instead, as the man he knew he looked like in the morning, in the daylight – a good, God-fearing man who was honest, loving and kind. The sheer thought of it made him swallow. He

clicked the old razor into the trash. He crowned the dipstick with a new blade, and continued.

Carefully, he positioned the razor over his cheek so that it would overlap the first row he made, and tidy any sloppiness that had been left. Then, he continued in down-strokes, remembering to follow to the natural growth of the hair. He moved slowly in bold, straight, lines, rinsing after every stroke, and when he was finished with the left-side, moved over to the right cheekbone, and began again. When the cheeks were finished he turned the attention to his chin, and after the chin, a leftover of a beard that sprouted in clusters along his neck. And then, trembling slightly, he lowered his towel to see how far along the hair continued randomly down his chest. Seeing that it grew on what would be a visible neckline, he moistened the area with a splash of water and covered the area with a fresh coat of cream. Ensuring that all hairs on his neck and chest had been covered, he held the razor on the thin skin just below his throat and pressed in. He dragged the blade close and steady on his skin, mildly surprised at how it could still feel cool despite each time he rinsed it under the hot, running water. Once finished from cheek to chest, he stared at himself in the mirror thinking that his skin seemed almost rosy from the emollients in the shaving cream. Still, without hesitating, he re-creamed his face, neck and chest with a new coat, and again began the pressing, shaving, rinsing.

The goal, as his brother had warned him, was to get as much off as you could the first time around – to apply the same amount of pressure with the first stroke as you do the last. To get as clean and hairless as a schoolboy. To try to pass for some kind of Italian or some other Southern European. Or Spanish, he said, from Spain. His brother, he thought, as he pressed against his neck and shaved, could get away with that, having

inherited the softer Mongolian features from his mother's lineage. But, as he scraped the razor at the hairs between his eyebrows, he knew this was not his possibility. The breadth of his eyebrows and jaws betrayed the Persian; a royal structure of a face that could hold a stretch of linen straight across it in protection against a drying sun. The sun that rose upon him these days in the northeastern region of the U.S. would never come close to the stifling of the one he knew as a child in desert lands, but, as he was learning as an adult, had its own way of burning.

Avoiding the sight of his whole self in the mirror, he closely examined parts of his face and upper body, wondering if he had forgotten anything. Thinking of the outfit laid out by his wife at the foot of their bed, he applied a third and final coat of cream, but this time, on his left forearm. The new shirts that his wife had picked up at Macy's at their end of the summer clearance were too short in the cuff, and at the end of the day, they exposed a good five inches between his hand and his elbow – five inches that grew enough hair for him to be worried about. Afterwards, he shaved his right forearm slowly but not because he wasn't accustomed to shaving with his left arm - he had done it enough mornings now to be familiar. Rather he slowed because the figure in the mirror began to loom and he felt all too much its presence, watching him and his hairs that fell onto the sink, and in it. Neatly and carefully, he salvaged what he could from the floor and from the basin, swathing the shavings in toilet paper. But as he moved to set them on the ledge of the medicine cabinet, a gleam from the bulb above the mirror lifted his eye, bringing him face to face with the disparaged figure in front of him - the image in the mirror of a grown man stripped to his waist, nubile and naked, his skin raw and glistening, paling easily at a light that was not natural, but fluorescent. Immediately, he

left the shavings and went back to his room where he threw on a robe in silence, and then, as he always did, retreated quickly to the living room.

There, in his home, he offered the second prayer of the day - a second which he always dedicated to atonement. As he began he winced. He could never become accustomed to the searing of his skin when he threw the length of him across the carpet on the living room floor, and begged for the forgiveness of his sins. He began as he always did, with "Heavenly father." And he ended with "All this I ask, in Jesus' name." Amen.

TEEN SPIRIT

When you are an eleven year old girl in America you know that, sooner or later, you will have to start creating a wardrobe fit for other girls to borrow. Never mind your own personal preferences. Don't even think about what your blouse, pant, or jacket size really is. Forget the lame idea of telling your Mom what *you* really want for Christmas or for your birthday. Just forget it. Instead, tell her you want something that you know Tammy Harris, aka popular girl with peach-scented hair will: 1) die when she sees you in it and 2) be nice to you so that you will let her borrow it. A tight fitting black and white striped jumper dress perhaps that would complement her long, lean legs during the first warm days of school. A cool, HyperColor, long -sleeved, t-shirt that all the boys will want to put their lips to and blow on at lunchtime (this grosses you out, but Tammy's best friend Laurie Vernon seems to like it). Tell your mom you want a matching Champion short and T-shirt outfit that is the exact purple shade that Tanja Doscherari said she was dying to get her hands on. Tell your mom you will need to get the Champion outfit one size smaller because you feel you are growing and losing weight, and don't tell her that Tanja's mother was an Icelandic supermodel and that Tanja obviously inherited her mother's body. Tell your mother that those are the types of clothes that you want – no - *need* to have.

Sure, your mother will roll her eyes and wonder if she is spoiling you many more times than will take to annoy you, but she will eventually cave. She will ask you more times than ten if you are *sure* the given size is what you need. In her heart she will know better but she will let you convince her that, as a growing girl, you know your body best. Your mother, in her compassion and perhaps sheer guilt for moving you cross country to another middle school - to another place and land - will eventually buy you what you

want. She will indulge you for just this year only, or so she will tell herself, until you have had time to acclimate. She will want you to fit in at your new school. She will want to be a good mother.

Your feisty, Filipino grandmother on the other hand will be your biggest obstacle in your quest to fit in your new school. She will chastise your mother behind her back to you, wondering in both English and the dialect she knows about why your mother bought you clothes that were too big and too small. She will try to steal the too big too small clothes from your bottom dresser drawer and make you cry when she waves them at you, tells you that you are the-lucky-American-cousin and wraps the new clothes in cardboard and duct tape to send to those who must be your unlucky-Filipino-cousins. She will rip and sew the new clothes to the sizes and shapes that actually fit your stubby legs, your round tummy, and your small but chubby breasts.

You will have to fight if you want to keep your clothes in the ill-fitting conditions they were bought in. You will have to lie. You will just have to. You will have to hide the brand new clothes under you bed and tell your Filipino grandmother that your mother changed her mind and did not end up buying you new clothes after all. You will have to steal back the cardboard packages she seals them in and then create ruckus with your younger sister the day after you steal them so your grandmother will be distracted and won't notice her packages are missing. You will have to wear the new clothes underneath your other clothes that your grandmother thinks you "look smart" in. You will peel the smart clothes off in the ladies bathroom as soon as you get to school. You will have to stuff the outfits in your backpack, and dress before the bell rings, or even in the back of the bus, hidden by a lopsided shield built by your friend's vocabulary books. You will

find ways to appease both your crazy Filipino grandmother's ideas of what school clothes should look like, and how they should fit school-aged girls *and* your need to wear the clothes you must wear in order to survive middle school on the East Coast of America. You will find ways to fit in. You must.

Eventually, your hard-earned planning will come to fruition. You will win. You will have paid your new-girl-in-school dues and will have achieved semi-popular status. It is a status that gets your name out there. A status that makes you the type of person that people will talk about, and the type of status that makes people say; "Oh yeah, I don't know her but I know *of* her." People like Tanja Doscherari will confirm this. She, who is now one of your best friends, will confirm that you are semi-popular, and thus, you will know it is true. She will tell you that semi-popular is a great place - a great feat actually, considering that you just moved here. Semi-popular in middle school near achieves popular status in high school and almost cements a spot for homecoming queen sophomore year unless you decide to pick a weird route in high school and become a loner, a geek, or a druggie. You don't know how people with semi-popular status in middle school could or would ever make that choice to lose it all in high school but Tanja says it happens. It happens all the time, she will say, as she slaps her slappable wrist bracelet onto her arm over and over again. Tanja Doscherari has an older sister in high school so she would know. Also, Tanja Doscherari is popular.

Tanja Doscherari is so popular in fact, that everyone including you just dies to borrow her clothes. She has tons of European clothes that her mother buys straight from Europe every summer and winter break. Clothes like Girbaud pants, for example. Tanja Doscherari has three pairs of green Girbaud pants. Being the early nineties, no one has

ever heard of Girbaud pants but Tanja tells everyone this is a big brand in Paris and that soon, it will be a big brand in the states. She knows this. So now you know this. You persuade your mother to go out the following weekend to look for Girbaud pants but you can't find any. You even convince her to take a look around Sears and JCPenney, but still, you are not able to find any. Though you are slightly disappointed, you do not lose heart. You will just borrow Tanja's. She is after all your best friend. She is delighted to let you borrow them. She is delighted because she actually wants to borrow your purple Champion outfit. And all at once, your hard work, sweat, tears, and thefts from your Grandma have paid off. You borrow one pair of Tanja Doscherari's green Girbaud pants and feel they are the best fitting pants you will ever wear. The best part of those pants? The fact that Tanja lets you borrow her blue Guess? sweater to go with them. The sweater just goes with the pant - that's what she says. You take both, happily.

But of course, the inevitable happens. You get too confident. After wearing your Girbaud and Guess? all around middle school, you take them off and put them in the laundry hamper. Your Filipino grandmother, while doing laundry as she does daily, finds that pair of Girbaud pants and Guess? sweater that she knows she has never seen before. She checks the size and knows they do not fit anyone in the house but she also knows that if they did, the person closest to it would be you. She calls you into the laundry room.

“Whose is this?” she asks.

You freeze. You want to tell her they are yours but you can not have her try to ship them away to the Philippines. How would you ever explain that to Tanja?

“They are my friend's,” you tell her. “They belong to Tanja.”

Tanja has been over to play once or twice. Your grandmother knows of her.

“Tan-jah?” she asks. “These are Tan-jah’s?” For a moment, she looks concerned. “Why,” she asks, “does her mother not wash her clothes?”

“No,” you answer. You try not to roll your eyes. Your grandmother looks at the pants and sweater and then at you again. She is genuinely perplexed.

“Well then how did they get here?”

“I borrowed them. She let me.” The fact that you have answered surprises you, but it does not surprise you as much as it evidently surprises your grandmother and her open “o” of a mouth. The good news? She does not look mad. The bad news? It doesn’t look like she looks happy either.

“Why did she let you borrow them? she asks.” For a long time, there is nothing but silence.

For several minutes, the question stuns you. You honestly do not know how to answer her. For another minute, you consider trying to explain the concept of fitting in at a new school to your grandmother, or maybe even bringing up for discussion the idea of popular vs. semi-popular in middle school. But when you try to speak, she is still repeatedly asking:

Why, did you borrow them? Why, did you spill something on yourself at school? Why, have you already started your menstrual cycle? Why, don’t you have enough clothes that you don’t have to borrow? Why, do you want others to think you are poor?

No, no, no, it’s not that at all, and no are the things only things you can slip in between her flurry of questions. She won’t let up. *Why, do you **want** to borrow other people’s clothes?* You know it is not something she will easily understand. You are silent, but you take a deep and determined breath.

She puts her hand through size two armhole of the blue Guess? sweater and begins to invert it so she can fold it nicely. She wants to fold it nicely, you know, because she is going to make you walk over to Tanja's as soon as she is done folding to return it. You try to come up with better ways to hide the borrowed clothes next time but as you watch her, you notice she has stopped. She is looking, peering actually, at the traces of small white stains in the underarm of the sweater. Ay, ay, ay, she mumbles. At first, the mumbles are small. Ay, ay, AY! And then, they are loud and angry.

"Look!" she tells you, shoving the blue sweater nearly in your face, close enough so that you detect a faint whiff of what Tanja Doscherari smells like every time she comes back from her European vacations. You stare.

"Ay, ay, ay! You must not borrow Tan-jah's clothes. You must never borrow her clothes even if she asks you to wear them!"

You can almost feel your semi-popular status slipping away with each word your grandmother barks. *Why?*

"Because!" She yells her answer, and then quietly, softly, bends down towards you, as if you are once again her granddaughter, someone she loves and protects.

"Because – you see this here?" She points at the tiny white stains being careful to touch only with the tip of her fingernail. "She wears *deodorant*." The last word spits out of her mouth like piece of rotten food. You say nothing. She thinks you cannot understand. She explains. "American girls, they don't wash correctly. Here, they don't even know how to wash their privates. I know. They just pat. And then, that's why they have to wear perfume and deodorant. If you wear deodorant, then you will smell like they do. People will think you do not know how to wash."

She gives you a look that she is always giving you. A look that implies she knows more than you because she's seventy-eight. At eleven years of living on this world, you know she is completely wrong and that you are absolutely, completely right. You nod yes but you will not listen to her. You will return the clothes to Tanja but you will borrow again. This time though, you will remember not to put the borrowed clothes in the hamper. And from this day forward, you will tell your grandmother that you want to learn how to wash the dirty clothes and that you want to start doing this chore. She will say okay and pretend to not be impressed but she will be. In her head, she will catalogue your request away as one of the few genuine times she can honestly say you were not being lazy. She will teach you how to use the washing machine and chastise you when you use too much soap, forget to put in a dryer sheet, or forget to clean the lint filter but eventually, you will start doing the laundry on your own. She will forget to watch you and instead, turn her attentions to your younger sister who is now growing up to be the luckiest and most spoiled American granddaughter, thank God.

There are those moments though, when you do feel bad for your sister, who you will look at with sad eyes as you carry the laundry bin up the stairs to fold the laundry and get busy hiding your new and borrowed clothes in the nooks and crannies of your bedroom closet. You will want to tell your younger sister that it is not true what your Grandmother says - that she is not spoiled, and that she is lucky, but that it isn't her fault. You will look at her with sad, sad eyes when she gets yelled at, but you will not say anything. You must not.

You just continue to fold your freshly washed and borrowed clothes and think about Tanja Doscherari, boys, and whether or not you will take your younger sister to the

park later or take her to get some ice cream in an effort to cheer her up. As you fold the clothes, you begin to wonder about your underarms and wonder if you too should be wearing deodorant. Teen Spirit is what the other girls are wearing. The other girls share their deodorant too. Cotton Blossom is the newest scent that Tanja Doscherari says her older high school sister wears. But there is a rumor, you know, that the new scent due to come out next month is Ragin' Rum Raisin. If you could get this before anyone one else, a cross-over into popular from semi-popular is almost certain. You stuff a pair of Jordaches into the back of your sock drawer and will call for your sister to get ready because you want to take her out for a walk to get ice cream. If your grandmother asks where you are going, you will tell her that you just want to teach you younger sister to do something else than sit around and watch TV. Along your walk you stop by the drugstore. You run your fingers across the sexy rows of teen spirit deodorant and wonder about the best way to hide a stick of it.

When you get home, you will have trouble finding a good place for one to hide a stick of deodorant. You will have trouble until your little sister comes into your room and smiles at you for the big bag of chocolate cookies you bought her at the drugstore, the same bag of chocolate cookies that concealed the deodorant that you snuck into the house. They cookies are now sitting, she tells you, in her toy chest that is sprinkled with broken crayons and a thousand pairs of Barbie's high-heeled shoes.

"I hid them there!" she tells you, squealing, and jumping on your bed. "You can have some if you want."

You smile at your little sister. Never mind that you want to tell her that you bought the cookies for her and that *of course* you can have some if you want.

“Cool,” you tell her. You finger the stick of deodorant that is still in the front of Tanja Doscherari’s Girbaud pant’s pocket.

In a little while, you make your way to where the cookies are hiding. You open the trunk and shove around the dark, jumbled spaces until a triangular shaped nook forms from the bodies of three, naked, Malibu Barbies. You proceed to wedge in your precious stick of deodorant but then you stop. You take a moment. You pop off the plastic cap and take a whiff of it. While you, though only eleven, are one hundred percent certain that it smells nothing like rum, nothing like raisins, and nothing like rage, you are ecstatic. You are invigorated by the smell of it. You think of tomorrow and feverishly hope that you will be able to pull this one off and escape the forever roving eyes of your Filipino grandmother. You think of tomorrow and how the chance to wear perfection nearly makes you sweat.

MILK MONEY

What I remember that morning is that I tried to look important like my father did that morning, like he did every morning. I knew he was important because I would sometimes peep down into the kitchen from the upstairs hallway as I tiptoed to my room after my morning shower. I would pause to watch him from the top of the stairs, squinting to get a better picture of what went on in the mornings without me through the railing: *Ma-ma*, he would call her, even though she was really his mother-in-law, *No time for breakfast. I have to report early today. Inspecting ensigns at 0700.* She would never say anything to him. He would put on his officer's hat and tip it to her, fearless. The eagle and the anchor gleaming from my polishing the night before. I always felt like crying for my father when I heard his engine start. I would trample to my bedroom window over parts of my school uniform, kicked off the end of bed in my sleep, when the glow from his headlights shined victory into my window. I would reach my hand into the beam and wish desperately that I could transport myself into his car, with him to work, or anywhere that was out of the reach of my grandmother who was waiting, as she did endlessly throughout my childhood, downstairs in the kitchen.

I remember that day, when I zipped up my book-bag and jacket, that I had a more particular feeling of dread than usual. I walked as quietly as I could so as not to be detected to the table near the front door and bit my tongue when I accidentally knocked my lunch money off the dish. Grandma was listening, had heard, and had started coming towards me. In my head I cursed myself, but then I changed my mind and cursed my mother instead. She was the one who put the money on the silver dish. And she was the one who called my Grandma to come stay with us when my younger sister was born. I thought about getting mad at my mother later for the spilled money but I knew she would

just sigh at me and say she didn't have the time to put it in my coat pocket or in my room. But she could have, I knew. She always could have. She would sometimes come into my room and stare at me when she would come home late at night. Though I would never fall completely asleep until she came home I would just to roll over and close my eyes when I heard the whistling of my bedroom door opening, like the only thing that bothered me was a hot side of the pillow or a sleepy arm. I bent with my knees to pick up the money.

Behind me, Grandma took her time in walking towards me. Her slippers were not yet beside me and were still shuffling up dust from a floor she had yet to sweep, but even then, her breath was stuck up my nose. I remember I had a cold and couldn't breathe clearly at the time, but I could smell it. Her breath that day was like ground meat, uncooked, the kind she sometimes mixes with garlic and black pepper, picks up like dough and slams into the tin-pan my mother uses to bake blueberry bread in. The smell gave me a headache.

"Jasmine, you need to finish your milk before you go to school."

"But the bell rings at 7:50am. I'm going to be late." I knew it was a futile try. She gave a husky sigh.

"Jasmine, I *said*, you better finish your milk. Otherwise, you will faint in school."

I stood up, fingering the money in my pocket. Her boobs were in my face. Two small lumps held apart from each other like opposite ends of two magnets. They are covered by purple crochet that she learned as soon as she came over to the States. My Mom bought her needles, a basket and a sack of yarn for Mother's Day. I made her a card at school that said Happy Mother's Day, Grandma, and I remember she glanced at it and then threw it away. I remember thinking that day that her purple sweater looks like a

chunky spider web. I thought about a book I had to return to the library soon that said some spiders can be poisonous.

“You want to be strong, don’t you? And smart?” She smiled and her lips were a shade darker than her sweater. I tried not to look at her eyes. I stepped back.

“Don’t you want to be beautiful?” I stepped back towards her. She had asked the magic question and had my attention. Her slanted eyes were watery under her glasses, and they were black, blacker than mine. I think they should be. For some reason, it just made sense to me.

“If you drink milk, you will be beautiful.” During those times, my grandma had straight hair, and her face was shaped like the wide octagons we were dissecting in school to study fractions. My nine year old self thought that she was not beautiful, but I still I continued looking at her. I remember I believed that she could still know what beautiful was and that she could tell me how to get it. She was smiling. I could see the metal digs that anchored her teeth into her gums. She licked her teeth.

“Don’t you see, in those commercials? The women? They drink milk. They have blonde hair.”

“Like Christy Brinkley?” I barely heard myself. It’s only recently that I wonder if she even knew who Christy Brinkley was.

“Yes, yes. Like Christy Brinkley. Milk can make your eyes blue. Milk can make you blonde. Don’t you want to be beautiful?”

“Really?”

“Yes, take a sip. Let’s see.”

I grabbed the glass and held it to my lips. It was very warm.

“Ah – I can see it already happening,” she chanted. I began to sip and swallow.
“Now drink all of it. Go on. That’s it. There, see? Not so bad. Go on, drink it.”

I stood still drinking, thinking of how milk was like a potion. I stood still drinking, waiting to feel the tingling I was sure would happen when the transformation would begin.

The Interview

I watch him from behind the bar. Let them wait for a while - they told me to do this before I came here. They said the people in this town need this place, this job. They've been looking forward to this for a while and they're excited it's finally here. They told me - this place is like your Café Milano, your Kincaid's, your Wolfgang Puck's. Our chicken fingers are what they consider filet mignon. Hire the best you get - it's what they told me. Let them know you have your pick. I look at my watch and decide five minutes is long enough. I fill up a clear, plastic mug with ice water and bring it over with me. The rule is to ask him if he wants something to drink. If he does I'll get it for him, and before we get up to do the walk-thru part of the interview, I'm supposed to pick up my mug and make a note of whether or not he picks up his. If he does, then that's a good sign.

It's only when I reach out to shake his hand that I remember to look at his application for his name. He grabs my hand and I resist the urge to wipe off the stickiness he somehow manages to deposit in my palm. I know it would be rude, and I don't want to be. An approachable managerial approach is what I'm aiming for. It is my goal, what I intend to be. I go over in my head what I do know of him. I fold both of my hands on the table, neatly, in front of me. He's a college student – I know this for a fact. There is a small one in this town, a small college named Yost's. It's behind in the KFC and the May's Hardware that's missing the "y" in May's. I feel better knowing he's taking classes because I think it must slim the chance that he was on a farm before his eight o'clock interview. I tell myself that the stickiness in my hand is probably from breakfast, or something food related. Or maybe, I think, it's just soap, and he didn't rinse well after

he was done washing. I make a mental note to run through how to properly wash hands before food preparation later on in the interview.

“I’m Annie,” I tell him, making sure to smile. “I’m from corporate. I’ll be doing your interview today.”

He smiles and nods. He rolls his right hand into a ball and shoves it into his left palm. He drops his fleshy fist to his lap and stares at it. I look at his resume. I don’t recognize his first name. It looks like it may be a family name - a last one, not a first. Like he’s from one of those families that name their first born son with his mother’s maiden name. To preserve something, or something. My name preserves my mother’s early fascination with Woody Allen and NYU, and the time she hobnobbed with women he slept with during his Mia phase. Or so I’ve been told, anyway.

“Boy-see McCoy?” I try.

He looks up and when he says his name I can’t make it out. He’s shy - a slurrer with a lisp. I work on his name some more. I know there’s a “b” and I know there’s an “e” but I can’t tell how to make out the correct pronunciation. When I don’t say it back to him he says it again. It doesn’t help. I don’t know if it’s the twang, the country, or the slurring that’s confusing me. I grin. “Mr. McCoy,” I start. He chuckles. I go on with the interview.

“So you’re going to turn eighteen in six months.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Well, I think we’re all filled up for server positions through then, but there are plenty of busboy openings, as you know, and the bar-back slots are still undecided.” I grin. I know the bar-back position is a highly coveted one. He snorts up some snot that

has been peeking in and out of his nose since I tried to pronounce his name. I eye a stack of napkins at a nearby hostess stand but thankfully, he pulls a yellowed handkerchief from his pocket and blows it all out before I can reach for the napkins, mopping up his nostrils with a clean corner of the handkerchief each time he brings it to his nose.

“That’s fine,” he assures me, “really, anything is fine, ma’am. I’d be happy to do jest about anything.”

I smile at him and do my best to look as if I approve of his answer. And I do, but what’s more interesting to me is that I’ve never heard happy with an “r” in it before. I see myself calling my boyfriend tonight, telling him about this interview, trying to capture exactly how my first one said “happy” with an ‘r.’ I’ll tell him the people here are quaint and charming, and that he should come visit me since it will probably remind him of his childhood home. Only of course, if he can get away from the office. My boyfriend is pre-med. Johns Hopkins.

Behind Mr. McCoy’s head, I watch the hostess mist the front windows with Windex, then watch as the liquid drips almost down to the bottom. She catches the drops in her paper towel before they disappear into the sill and scrubs hard, probably realizing that I’m watching. She scrubs until the glass begins to squeak. At the sound, Mr. McCoy’s shoulders twitch. I know must be making him nervous so I turn all my attention back to him.

“So, what can you tell me about Ruby Red’s, and family dining in general?” I ask him. I take a sip of my water, cross my legs even though he can’t see under the booth, and then lean back for his answer. He clears his throat. He looks prepared.

“It’s all about the attitude.”

I'm amused. And pleased. "Interesting," I say, "please, tell me more about your experience in family dining and your work ethic as a restaurateur." I'm pleased with my word choice, it just came to me. I used the term 'wait staff' in previous interviews and decided 'restaurateur' sounds more professional. He looks confused and for a moment I feel nervous, but then I remember I'm the one from corporate. He's probably not familiar with the term. "When I say restaurateur, I mean wait staff, of course." He smiles.

"I know we should aim to be our guest's first choice, to be a good investment, and to be a great place to work. That's pretty much how I feel about it."

I am almost touched by the fact that he's memorized our mission statement. I wonder if they offered a business course in the town college. I wonder if maybe he spoke to his business instructor before he came here for the interview. If he did, good for him. He's a smart one.

"Good, good," I tell him. I don't tell him that there's probably a better, less tacky way to tell someone you've done your homework. Work it in through a work experience story, or wait until I get to the humanity part of your interview, I want to tell him. The humanity segment would be a good leeway, I would say, if I were his instructor. Make it look like our mission statement is somehow intertwined with your personal life ethic. But Mr. McCoy, I know, is trying. And I can tell he must not be used to having an interview with a woman, especially a young, successful one like me. "So you're a junior at Yost," I say, trying to cut him some slack. Making someone comfortable is the key to a great interview.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Your major is agricultural studies with a minor in art history."

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Wow, that’s great, really interesting.” I hesitate, but I just can’t keep myself from asking, “What do you plan to do with it?”

He just smiles.

I almost go onto ask if they’re any internships applicable to his major but then I remember where I am. *Lumberland*, Ohio. I remember telling my friends when I got my senior year internship assignment a few months ago, in the spring. I’m going to Lumberland for a semester. Except they misspelled, I would joke, and now it’s on the map as Cumberland. I smile to myself, thinking of my last day home. Then I realize that Mr. McCoy is staring, indicating that he has probably answered me, but I didn’t hear it. There’s hammering to the side of us as the contractors steady the beveled glass centerpiece at the top of the bar.

“You’re going to have to learn how to be loud and obnoxious, Mr. McCoy, and you’ll also have to excuse my hearing handicap.” He looks surprised, and I hurry to explain that I was just kidding, that I’m not really deaf. “I mean it gets really loud in this business,” I tell him, “and I’m used to noisy, boisterous busboys – even before I hire them as busboys.” I smile at him, thinking of the staff I worked with at my home store. I didn’t hire a single one of them.

“That’s it.” Mr. McCoy shrugs his shoulders and turns his attention to the fist that is still in his lap. It’s become squished between the underneath of the table and his belt buckle. I think he’s either slouched forward or I’ve somehow pushed the table nearer to him. He takes a deep breath through his mouth and lets it out through his nose. I feel the

table between us rock, and I can't tell if the momentum has come from his breathing, or his stomach.

"I'm sorry?" I ask.

"Like you just said – boist-e-rous. My name without that end part."

It takes a few seconds to realize what he means. "Oh, Boise! Like "noise" with a B, and a little harder at the end." My laugh is quick and high-pitched, and it fades away too quickly at the end. "I'm sorry, Boyce." I say it, loud, and slow. "I'm terrible with trying to pronounce names for the first time." Boyce lets out a thick breath through his chapped mouth. He grins, and the tip of his tongue dips out to lick a cold sore stuck in the tender middle part of his lips. I think the sore is why his mouth hasn't completely shut or open this entire time of the interview, and forgive him for it.

"That's oh-kay," he sighs. The booths are small enough so that I can smell potatoes and maple syrup as the air from his mouth blows towards me. I wonder who cooked breakfast for him - if it was his mother, or his brother's wife. This place – it's the type where families live with other families. If his brother's wife or mother didn't cook him his breakfast, I knew it had to be some other female that was related to him. There are no dorms at the college he goes to so he wouldn't have eaten there. I didn't consider that he'd go to McDonald's. People here eat breakfast at home on the weekdays. I think about going to McDonald's for lunch and then notice that parts of his face are a shade of maroon slightly deeper than his shirt. I've embarrassed him. I feel pretty bad about it. I smile and laugh, apologetically.

“That’s oh-kay,” he says again. He must sense my embarrassment, my unease of being in a new kind of place for the first time, picking up the accents, the smells, the names.

“Thanks,” I tell him. I acknowledge to myself that his is not a bad first interview. I begin to relax.

“You speak English real nice.”

I look up and behind him, the hostess is still wiping her window though it is clean enough so that I begin to recognize the outline of my face in it. For a moment, she stops. She greets an elderly Asian couple and leads them to a table nearby. They smile and wave at me. I don’t know them. I look at Boyce, watching me watch behind him. I pick up his papers and focus on his application. I feel heat rise from behind my neck and it makes my eyes smart. From the dryness of the air, I think. I explain this to Boyce while I fan myself with his papers, and then I curse the contractors for not fitting the temperature gauge on correctly. I tell him I think that must be the problem.

“To hell with them,” I say. And he laughs at me, grinning and smiling. I take a sip of my water and wipe away with my finger the drops that leak from the plastic mug. I hear myself asking about his part-time management job at KFC, if it will go on if we decide to hire him here, if KFC will complicate his commitment to us. Boyce tells me he’ll quit and devote his time to us and school of course.

I want to ask if he can tell that there’s an eighth Belgian in me, that that’s why my eyes are slanty and not because of anything else. I want to but I don’t. He is busy telling me that his two older brothers were busboys at DiFrancesco’s during the summer and that his uncle is actually the owner of Dutch’s Daughter, the town’s most popular

smorgasbord. He is busy convincing me that being a restaurateur is in his blood, and a way of life for his family. He tells me that he's worked in restaurants all his life, and that being a busboy, and possibly waiter, is something he's always been real good at. He mumbles something about how his grandmother told him never to tell people what you think about yourself because they probably won't believe you and that the best way to impress someone is to shut-up and do. I just smile at this. After a while, I have no idea what's he's saying and what he's talking about, but I am smiling with my hands folded neatly on the space in front of me. I don't speak any other language but English. I want to tell him but I don't think he will understand.

I realize, somewhere during the whole process, he has grown silent. I jump up, a little more than I meant to, and ask him to follow me back to the kitchen. He gets up and pulls a section of his polo shirt down over his belly, and packs it back into his pants. I watch as his stomach folds and jiggles underneath. He waits until I take the lead, and then he follows. We leave our sweaty glasses on the table. I think about picking them up, but think twice. When you are a manager, never clean-up after yourself in the presence of your employees – it's what they told me. So I leave them. The hostess watches and the glasses leak into clear, thin puddles that drip a mess all over the floor below.

PERENNIALS

Grandma Sylvia was the oldest of the seven handsome sisters, and for two years she raised me on kumquats and Vienna sausages. I was only three years old when I began to go over to her house in the daytime but I still remember peeling the slippery skin off the small fruit picked ripe from her kumquat tree. It was a potted tree, one that never got to fully enjoy the gluttony of the San Diego sun, but it flourished and produced nonetheless in the murky shadow of Grandma Sylvia's sewing table. Next to that old, yellow Singer was the small half of a trundle bed on which I would pretend to nap during the hours of one o'clock and three – a two hour spell under which Grandma Sylvia would sit in front of her TV and watch Hope, Marlena, and other soap opera heroines escape the deceit and love poisons of every evil man who fell in love with her. Through the thin, leafy branches I too would watch the soap heroine's big-eyes and open mouths. I would see her gasp and sigh at the occasional return and departure of her lover, who would momentarily come to rescue their beautiful ones from ruin. I would watch Grandma Sylvia fixed to her seat in that dark, un-sunny, side room of my aunt's California rambler, knowing that though the soap hero would somehow meet an obstacle, and that it would be yet another episode until he could try once again to save his lady love, Grandma would never leave to get up off her couch. She would sit, I knew, bound under the perpetual hope that her mortal self might somehow see the length of the soap journey, and be able to witness how the hero comes back again to save his love. It was during these hours I learned what it truly meant to feel secure. It was perhaps one of the only times in childhood that I didn't feel anyone was watching as I scoped out those kumquat branches rustled only by hands, and leisurely plucked the fruits that were bright and fleshy.

On other days, the kumquats usually were served for dessert after a meal of Vienna sausages, ketchup and rice. These foods were eaten not as one dish but a series of small ones, usually consumed in this order. When I wasn't hungry, I would squat by the backdoor and push the pink, mealy sausages through the screen and watch, mesmerized as the tiny stick was instantly transformed into long strings of potted-meat pasta, a meal that Grandma's terrier would yelp at, and just as quickly lick up. But – for Vienna sausages and kumquats – I was usually always hungry. Vienna sausages with rice and ketchup were my favorite meal as a child especially if it was followed by a round of kumquats. I didn't know kumquats were sour until the fourth grade, when a teacher of mine told us to never try them because we wouldn't get the sourness out of our mouth for days. Up until then I thought they were my favorite fruit. I haven't tried one since. I'm terrified she might be right.

Grandma Sylvia was not my *real* grandma. She was her older sister and everything my own Grandmother Victoria was not. Sylvia was the gypsy, born at a World's Fair in Pennsylvania under the fizzing, popping lights of an American journalist's turn of the century camera. Victoria was the traditionalist, born and bred in the Philippines where her mother was born, and her mother before her, and so on, since the beginning of time. I was born in the middle - in the country of my ancestors, but on a piece of land owned by the U.S. government. I belong to neither and both, simultaneously. My overseas birth certificate, a thin, blue, frightened little piece of paper that documents my hazy origin is made up of half silk and half wood pulp. I know because I accidentally got it wet once and when I dried to pat it dry it blossomed. The ink, instead of smearing, rose up like a welt and branded **PI-US** into the inner lining of my

eye. I saw the image as I went to bed I went to bed that night, haunted by the fear that one of my parents might discover the birth certificate before it fully dried. Though they never said anything about it the next morning, and though I do believe I did get away with it, **PI-US** was something that would re-occur, usually when I went to sleep. It was never clearly a dream, or nightmare. Simply, it was a vision that stood as a rock, when all the other happenings of my childhood swam and lapped against its base.

San Diego, to my five year old mind, was an ocean. It is peppered, occasionally, by a stretch of brown beach, and by some benches littered with Kentucky Fried Chicken boxes that can be found in Bakersfield Park. But for the most part, San Diego is only water, and I wear only a red swimsuit lined in white piping, and I am usually playing by myself, my older sister and her other friends are way too cool and mature to be explicitly seen with me in the general public. I never told on my sister for having pretended that I didn't exist. In fact, I rather liked exploring alone the sand and the salty water that would wrinkle together in the shoreline.

Once, I had a kickboard and I floated on top of it as I cupped my hands and rowed myself against the tide. I floated and rowed between people, beach toys, and seaweed unfettered until the only thing obstructing my way was an occasional wave that shook my little boat briefly. I remember looking back at the shore, and wondering which of the skinny dots was my sister. There was a small part of me that felt that I had broken something by being so far away, but instead of frightening me, I was romanced. I felt I was a mermaid, whose iron statue sat on a rock at Mission Bay and cried for the surfers who would run by her twice daily at the sun's first and last hours. I had fallen in love with her when I found out she was frightened by the fact that her father thought evil of

everyone of them, her own lover kin to the kind who went tried to conquer her ancestral universe. I fell in love with her, and felt that I could understand.

Grandma Sylvia had a way of understanding that consisted of a smile and a few words that were very rarely English, though she could (if she wanted to) speak it very well. It came of her tongue in a soft voice that was like static. There were traces of her Filipino-Igorot ancestry as she muted her “r’s” and rolled her “t’s” up into “l’s,” but otherwise, her English was as American as her birthright. She heralded both only when she felt needed to, and usually only to help her communicate and connect with her grandchildren.

Sometimes, in my car or at the grocery store, I think of Grandma Sylvia and her garden jungle of kumquats, gardenias, and crystal charms. I remember she would hang these charms on twine or stitching yarn, and deck the bushes and trees with them every dawn, as if she was preparing them to court the morning sun. Though the crystals could never capture sunlight for keeps, I do remember they caught a neighbor boy who would sometimes appear in the middle of her jungle, or in the thick of her gardenia bush. I don’t remember that he ever used the front door or went through the garden’s gate. It seemed he would just materialize out of the shadows, or out of the leaves. He used to play baseball with my cousin Charlie, Grandma Sylvia’s real grandson. The boy was a star athlete until he twisted his knee in the middle of a furious pickle, and I think that’s when he started to appear in the middle of my garden. Grandma Sylvia smiled at him the first time he came over, and told him to have a seat, clear his head. She plucked a crystal off a bush, chanted, and swung it in different shapes around his knee. The next day, Charlie said the boy hit four home runs. The boy still came to visit after that, sometimes with

Charlie, but most of the time without. When he came, Grandma Sylvia would smile and invite him in. I on the other hand, would watch closely this intruder who came into my world, knowing that he was there to steal some of it back with him.

When I was five we moved to the other side of the U.S. and I never saw Grandma Sylvia again. Instead, it was my mother's mother, Grandma Victoria who came to live with us on the eastern coast. She too, brought with her a world that I didn't want to share with anyone else, but it wasn't because it was magic and it wasn't because it was beautiful. It was because, as a child, I thought it was my biggest embarrassment. Her room was lined with wall-to-wall bookshelves that kept random items she had saved throughout her life. Boxes of plastic wedding favors, wrapping paper, plastic bread fasteners and washed, empty cans of Spam mingled with mothballs, and a few housedresses and aprons. Pictures of a blood-stained, crucified Christ decked the few empty spaces on the walls, along with a wooden backscratcher and a flip-flop shaped flyswatter. When Angela Lesser, my best friend in the second grade, first saw the room, she didn't believe me when I told her it belonged to my Grandma Victoria.

"Grandmas don't have rooms like this," she whispered, shaking her honey-amber hair all around her shoulders, in disbelief. And then she looked at me for the longest time, I remember. Wondering probably, where I went wrong.

Grandma Victoria never really liked Angela Lesser. "Last-class," she would say, when Angela would leave without saying thank you to Grandma - thank you for anything, thank you for everything, thank you for letting her stay, eat, move, blink, breathe. "American girls," she would mutter. "Don't get too close," she'd warn, as if the

“American” was poison – a wild sprig of ivy that could be tossed in the wind for days, but yet still grow roots if given the chance to settle.

Settling into the earth was never a strong suit for Grandma Victoria. Farming, planting and agriculture were things that reminded her of her past, a past that she had worked hard in the mining and steel industry to progress away from. She skulked for months when her only acknowledged son, my uncle Roman, gave up his degree in medicine in order to run the family farm of his then bride-to be. It was my Grandma Lucia, Grandma Victoria’s youngest sister who eventually mended the fences between them.

“Ay apo, *manang*,” she said to her, during a visit over to look at the new silk worms my Grandma Victoria had acquired. “he is still Roman,” she said, “still your son. And anyway, he is still making things grow.”

Grandma Victoria had apparently snarled in her usual fashion, and told her little sister that the statement was the stupidest thing she had ever heard, and that the only thing growing was a baby in his then fiancé’s womb. But eventually, she spoke to him, and his wife, but only after they were married. She bought the coffin and headstone when their first child was born still.

Uncle Roman’s older sister, my mother, is Grandma Victoria’s third child out of six and has a talent for breaking apart plants. If she walks by a tree, or a bush she likes, she breaks off a piece of it - a twig, a branch, or a upturned root – puts in her pocket, and then buries it in the ground when she gets back home. The twig, the branch, or the root always takes hold of whatever piece of earth she lays it upon, and by the next season, it is blooming, and in the years to come, it hardens into a stalwart piece of the garden, a plant

that is so inherent, that I cannot remember a time when the garden existed without it. I've tried my hand at my mother's gift several times, but the consequential failures keep me to just habitually breaking off pieces of plants whenever I walk by any, and can get away with it.

"There are certain types of plants that you can only do that with," my mother told me once, as she watched me break a piece of holly from my sister's front garden, "and only certain types of soil. If you don't get the combination right, you'll end up poisoning one or the other." I didn't ask her which ones were which, but I watch her more closely now, and note the plants that she brings in from Canada, or the twigs that she smuggles in from Hawaii. She is an avid traveler and these plants are her souvenirs, postcards and pictures. So far, she has not yet planted anything that didn't eventually find a way of grasping the salty, red, earth. And nothing she has ever planted has ever died. These foreigners are my favorite types of greenery, when I go back home and see them daring to live on in Maryland clay. They look hopeful.

I don't remember Grandma Victoria being particularly good with plants, or particularly bad. I do know though, that she had a way with killing any sort of pests that would threaten any greenery, gypsy moths promising the most threat to the flowering shrubs and marigolds she had planted in near the window in front of her basement room to keep away the mosquitoes. It was when I saw her set elaborate homemade traps and toxins that I started to fantasize about what kind of creatures these gypsy moths were, what they looked like and how they flew. I formed a secret alliance with them, and snickered away quietly when I saw her, shaking and perspiring, yanking away at holey marigolds, and greasing her windowsill with thick handfuls of Tiger Balm and setting out

bowls of water that would supposedly charm the gypsies away from their flight, and drown them to their death. At night, after dinner, I would sprinkle sugar on the marigold petals, thinking that if this did not help the gypsy moths, it would most definitely mask the bitter fragrance of the marigolds, and help the mosquitoes to irritate my Grandma further. My alliance with these pests made me feel as if I had some magic. And at the very least, it sweetened the sting of her reprimands:

“You’re like a gypsy,” she would scold, whenever I would be late to dinner, or stay out too long after dark. “Do you want to be a gypsy when you grow old, and have no roof over your head? You better listen to what I tell you because I know best, ah? Do what I say or you’ll become nobody,” she warned.

What intrigued me most about the gypsy moth was the soft rounded shape of its head, and how it could seemingly nuzzle its way into the underbelly of any leaf or branch. I loved also, how its head would open up and span into a cohesive, boat shaped wing that would enable it to glide from shrubbery, to tree, to flower without the help of any legs, feelers, or other accoutrements found on any other normal garden insect. It was a head, transformed into a wing that housed a hidden annex: a body that was kept hidden out of existence, a form that eludes any person who tries to smash the gypsy moth, and instead of a pulpy mass, finds a smattering of paper thin pieces of a delicate wing, not convincing proof at all that it was harmed.

Sometimes, at night, I hear Grandma Victoria’s voice in my head even though she is now thousands of miles across international waters. I lay awake in bed, listening to her taunting me, scared to death she might have cursed me enough to seal my fate when I was eight. Sometimes too, I toss in and out of sleep, dreaming of Grandma Sylvia. All I

remember of her dreams is the fury – rage for letting that boy come into our world and steal some of our magic, desperate, because it's the only thing powerful enough to weaken Grandma Victoria's curse.

I never saw or spoke to Grandma Sylvia after we moved to the east coast. I remember hearing she died some years ago, I can't remember exactly when. It was either in the middle of my high school years or in the middle of my college years. I know this because she didn't pass during a transition in my life. It wasn't at the end of one thing or during the beginning of another. Usually, I remember life this way. Because it seems I can't remember, I must assume she left somewhere in the middle. In the middle of college, of boyfriends, of summer jobs and future dreams. A time when everything had a focus and a reason, so long as if at the center of these rooms, was me. But now here I am. At a beginning of something as I try to remember her. I'm just wondering if it's too late to remember.

Time is the enemy to my Grandma Victoria. For her, every day is a race, and in her letters to me and my sisters she always training us. Don't get married until you are thirty, she coaches. Finish school, have a job, establish your career and save money before you start your family, she says, breaking it down for us yearly, so we can see where we will be and what we will be doing in ten years time, fifteen, and twenty. The chance to attack life in a series of five-year plans was never her luxury. Arranged for and married when she was sixteen, life came to her in a flood of moments and memories that she is still trying to catch up to, and remember. Time was a toy to Grandma Sylvia. Too often she got bored with it and took a nap, until she was ready to come back and deal with it again.

There are several stories about Grandma Victoria that I tell to other people on a daily basis, but I don't talk about Grandma Sylvia too often. I don't talk much about her even though I could tell anybody for certain that just when they think they can sink their teeth all the way through golden, juicy, kumquat flesh – a hard as cement seed will jump up out of nowhere and can chip your tooth if you're not careful. I could tell people lots of things and lots of secrets I learned in the jungle garden. But as I get older, I find that I can only tell so many now. As hard as I try, I can't remember her voice or any of the words she spoke it with. Some of those missing secrets would be useful to me, like how to make pain in the body disappear. She would laugh, I think, if she knew that I suffer from migraines.

My Grandmother Victoria was Grandma Sylvia's sister, and everything Grandma Sylvia was not. She says that time is what you make it and that winners make it what they want. Grandma Sylvia would spin crystals, and swear it was enough. She grew herbs and told everyone that in them was the secret of life and probably death too. On occasion, I think of these ancient ladies and wonder who I should believe. I sit breathing. Living or dying depending on which way you look at it. I breathe with both of their blood coursing through me, belonging to both and neither, simultaneously.

HAPPY TALK

Years don't soften her like they usually do to women. Instead, as she advances, I see time grows a thick, steely, gray atop her skin, all over her body, each passing month a chain-mail layer defending her engine heart – vroom, vroom, vroom! Only four years since I last saw her and she'd grown a suit. Hard-boiled, encrusted. Her armor creaks and groans. It whistles when she lifts to scratch her brow. I can hear my traitor stomach moan. At once, she is in front of me. I look into her eyes and take a step back. But then I hesitate. It's only now that I realize she used to tower. Now, standing in front of me, she looks small. I blink, and for a second her cheeks seem a frail veil of crinkles. But then she coughs. A whooping one that reddens her face and rids it of droopiness. She yawns. It is big enough to let her pink tongue shake at me – big enough to wag and thrash, at me. Things being normal now, there is no more reason to delay. I get the visit started.

“Hello, Grandma!” I give a big smile full with teeth and gums.

Then it's the usual. A grin, a hug. A long enough look into her eyes so that she is able to scan efficiently for flaws and all the unfortunate developments of my existence. My height perhaps, the miserable sixty inches of it. Sixty that tower over all of her forty-seven and three-fourths, but yet are somehow insignificant, poorly bred, feeble. Or, maybe today it'll be my feet, chubby and flat-footed. It is warm, summertime here, and I am wearing sandals so she can see them. Smashed-up little end toes – she doesn't like those. It reminds her of child field-hands who would steel harvest from the family rice paddies and eat the tiny grains wet, green, and raw. I remember the children's laughter. It would shatter. Burst against the mountains and splinter down town as they ate and spat. Many of them were orphans. Third-world starving children. ‘Grandma dear’ made sure to beat them away with a branch that still had bark.

“Hmm,” she grumbles. She is the only person I know who can grumble a sigh.
“*Ed-wi-na*.”

So she opts for the name. She says it, heavy on the ‘*d*’ and ‘*wi*,’ making the unfortunate girl version of my father’s name, given to me as a middle one, all the more offensive. “*Ed-wi-na*.” She sputters it out. Wipes her mouth with a hankie she pulls from her robe and mutters it out.

I always felt that if I were British, I could have gotten people to buy the name as ‘handsome.’ A name of a heroine in a classic novel. An 18th or 17th century lady or duchess of York, Earl, or Something-Shire. Someone who had something to do with education or otherwise saving small children. But instead I visit family in the Pacific Islands. Sort of Asia, sort of not. Forgettable, poor, hot, clusters near the bottom rim of the South China Sea. A place that demotes the name to a lowly consolation prize for my father, who had believed he was getting a tiny namesake to take on trips to the hardware store when mama was pregnant with me. A boy, male, boy, who I think he would taken to the hardware store with relish from under the snarling nose of his mother-in-law who came Stateside to raise me. But I was a girl, girl, girl. His name felled to a middle-one. Our relationship to a wave of his brown-bag lunch when he went to work, while my Grandma, holding my shoulder as I waved back, forced down a glassful of chalky Tang. When I was five she was seventy-two. Her hand a cold, heavy clamp that tightened my shoulders like screws. At that age, all I wanted to do was jump up and fly.

“You wait,” she barks. “Just wait.” She motions for her girl to sweep up my surrounding luggage to the upstairs bedroom. She looks towards her radiant T.V. “Let me finish my *sce-nee*.”

She trundles the six feet from her front door to her living room sofa. She begins to descend on her yellow, vinyl throne when something stops her. She pauses, mid-squat. I panic, thinking something is wrong. To the side of me grows a paper-thin shadow. Without looking, I know Grandma's girl is behind me ready to help, prepared to assist.

"Shit." I didn't mean to say it aloud, but it comes out softly and Grandma doesn't hear. Shit. This time I remember to say it silently. Is she sick? Is this an episode? I'm not sure what to do. Another fear strikes me: I don't know what to do, and someone will find out when I screw up. I knew it would happen. Not only was Grandma's girl behind me as a witness, but I had also made the mistake of calling back to Manila to the home of my aunts when I reached the Petro station near Grandma's house. Now, eight hours later, I know all twenty-three sisters on my mother and father's side have been thoroughly informed that I am presently in Grandma Victoria Antero Apolinar's living room. All know I am here, living, breathing, being with her. Of the forty-seven living women in the family, it would be too typical for the old bat to clock out under my watch. *Al-lah!* The aunts would say, *Al-lah!* And they would not be referring to God. *Auntie Vic died under the care of the Americana ! Al-lah!* And then they would 'tsk.' They would all get together and 'tsk.' Like locusts. Like the plague. They would do it at her funeral I know, under their black veils, looking at Grandma's corpse, then looking at me. My ears smart. Grandma is turning to me, she is lowering even closer to the ground.

I reach to catch her. What if she is hurt? What if her joints are aching? I don't know where she keeps her clean underwear. I know she will make me change it before we are allowed to even call the doctor to check up on her. I try to talk to her girl but I'm

not sure of her name. Marly? Chun-lee? Before I reach her, Grandma stops. She straightens and she faces me squarely. She nods at my hands and outstretched arms.

“Oh,” she grumble-sighs again. “How was your trip.”

I ease up. Evidently, it was only manners that were getting to her. The trip to Grandma’s house is the same as it’s been since my parent’s left their hometown, since the seventies and the reign of Marcos, Imelda, and Imelda’s billion pairs of shoes. Over the rivers and through eighteen hours of rock-torn, mud roads cubby-holed with rockslides, run away drug carriers, and sixteen year olds with machetes and busted, rusted guns. To grandmother’s house I go.

“Good,” I tell her. I reach back and put my hands behind my head. “Good to be home.” The longest I’ve ever visited the Philippines was two months and that was when I was a baby. I don’t even remember it. “Very good to be *home*.” I lie outright to my grandmother – lie loudly to the lady who taught me how to read when I was two. Actually, I lie *and* I smile. I hope she won’t sense my discomfort with myself.

“Hmm,” she sniffs. “Oh-kay, fine, fine.” She smiles back, an oh-so faint one. “You sit. Rest. I’ll finish my sce-nee.”

I choose the rattan rocker to the left of her. Scene. Sce-nee. She pronounces it ‘see-knee.’ I have a vision of her as she says this word, swathed in her green, cotton robe, pointing with her pupils as she lifts up her brown, wool, skirt as high as she can from her ankle. Then she would point with her fingers, and scold; See-Knee? See-Knee? Like when she taught me to read as if English wasn’t my native tongue. My first readable word? Spam. I have a clear memory of it. A laborious, sweaty sacrifice on her part during *One Life to Live* pointing out the block of letters on the blue, trapezoid can. She tried

valiantly to get at the concept, tried to make it crystal clear. “S!” She would scold, trembling the Spam that stood like a lowly foot-soldier between me and Grandma Vic. A wavering soldier, that would voyage the length of the linoleum kitchen bar in Santee, California, for the next seventy-two hours until I was defeated and learned how to read. “S- s!!! S-s-s,” she would spit. I check my cheek for saliva.

Playing on the twenty-inch Samsung is the ending courtroom scene in *A Few Good Men*. She is watching like it’s the first time. Her profile is dark against the thickening sun that leaks through the drapeless windows. Even so, I can tell she is mouthing the words. Sucking them softly away from the lips of a dapper Jack Nicholson. Her tongue licks at the words, laps at the effeminate lilting of the Tagalog voice over. She stops. Takes a breath when he stops. She straightens her back in defense to the young Tom Cruise’s accusations, and then readjusts herself to counter with her own onslaught of loud, lurid words. It doesn’t bother her that the dialogue is not in-sync but it sure irks the hell out of me. I grow uncomfortable. I feel voyeuristic watching her.

“He-e-e’s guilty!” I sing aloud, trying to shake off the queasiness that has gathered in my stomach. No one notices. But then again, I didn’t do it for them. Grandma’s girl is lurking lightly in the kitchen, peeping around the corner when she thinks I’m not noticing. My hips that fill in petite sizes back home now feel gargantuan under her laser gaze. I decide to try not to stand up when I am next to her. I don’t ever want her to look at me, and think I think I’m very tall. When she emerges from the kitchen, a cake knife and saucers in hand, I nod hello to her. I smile as warm as I know I can. She places her load down near the edge of a pan of something, avoids my attempt at nicety, and doles out a jiggling heap.

“*Manang*,” the girl asks, eyes lowering, always lowering, as if it was in the job description to look after the ground. “*Lyden co-ppee?*” Two and a half seconds for my ears to register.

“Please.” I never learned the dialect of my grandmother, my family, and the thousand million relatives before me, but I can figure it out. Likewise, grandma’s girls were always those who would only learn English in college, but they could figure me out. “With cream, please,” I ask her nicely. “With *milk*” I wince when I hear my tongue land heavy on the ‘ilk’ part of the word, as if saying it with a heavier accent would help. “Thank you.” I am an idiot, is what I really want to tell her, but then again, she probably thinks she has this figured out. I resent her for this. She pours me a cup, smiles and nods, blinks at the floor, then fades into the warped, wooden wall of the kitchen. I want to pick up her face. Squeeze her eyeballs straight and tell her to never ever look down again.

The fat slap *crack!* of Grandma’s thigh draws my attention to the television just in time to see Jack Nicholson being escorted out of the courtroom. “Good,” she approves, “very good,” rubbing her leg in the spot where a bruise from the slap is most likely forming. I make a mental note to look for the ice before she goes to bed. I know she will be howling for it later, and I know I must beat Grandma’s girl to it. I watch Grandma, exhaling a sigh through sticky pneumonia prone lungs, shifting the remote from her right hand to her left. The shift is heavy and clumsy in her hand. As if she was tired from carrying it. As if she had just retired from a battle. She lifts the electric rifle to her face, pauses, aims, then “offs.” I raise my coffee in a sort of touché as the T.V. swallows in one bright line the electric glow of her *sce-nee*. I know I’m the next performance.

I wait for the cue, for the director to rise and waddle to her room-for-ten table and sit at the head of it. Then I take my place on the other side. I'm a natural at the script that usually follows Grandma starts :

“So.”

Look open – easy. Agreeable. Willing to talk.

“Your mother, how is your mother.”

“Doing well, doing well,”

“And your father. How is your father.”

“Good, good.”

“Your sisters – how are your sisters. Where are they and why are they not here?”

“Charlotte is in school, Grandma. She is finishing final exams and her first semester at college. Amanda cannot get away from work. She and Nelson are working a little overtime now, to try to save money for when they have a baby. Nelson wants for one of them to be able to stay home when they have a baby.”

“Hmm,” she nods, “Umm-hmm.” Grumble, grumble.

At this point one of two synopses can occur. Grandma may take the sibling route, and give it hard, in any order, to Charlotte, Amanda or grandson-in-law Nelson Barnabas, or she may choose to go straight to me for the kill.

“Why, is Barnabas willing and able to provide for a baby?”

Thus, option one it is. I rearrange my posture, breathe and sit back into my chair, taking on the role of a concerned, level-headed middle child. “Yes, Grandma Victoria, Nelson is a good provider. He wants so much to take care of Amanda. So much that he

wants to make it so that she will be able to stay home when and if they have a child.” I don’t mention that my brother-in-law isn’t opposed highly at all to staying at home either while Amanda toils to pay the bills.

“Hmm. Why are they waiting so long to have a baby. Why don’t they have a baby. Why, is Amanda infer-tile?”

She says the word ‘infertile’ as if it’s the new trend that everyone wants to spackle their kitchen or living room floors with. Like Per-go. Infer-Tile. She asks the word again, and at it, I confirm no, stay quiet. Mock silence, awe, and dumbfounded ness at the idea of any married woman of reproducing capacity who isn’t popping out babies like pez. I nod my head slowly, face the left and then the right. I think of my career driven, successful, neurotic thirty-three year old without-child older sister, and admire her while I cluck my tongue in disgust over her barrenness.

Grandma goes on. “And Charlotte, she does not have any silly boyfriends. Does she have any silly boyfriends? You tell her not to have silly boyfriends. It’s dangerous. They may force themselves on her and she may live to regret her life for one moment of heated passion.”

“Oh no, she doesn’t have any boyfriends, Grandma.” Charlotte’s boyfriend’s name is Sam.

“Hmm,” Grandma says. “Oh-kay. This is Oh-kay.”

At the end of this dialogue, we sit back, sip our coffee, and stare at the conglomeration in the middle of the table. It is a carrot-and-cream like concoction. A butter-soaked sponge. A pimply, pulpy pile of mush. I wink at it.

“Looks delicious,” I say.

She nods her head and wills one of the saucers full of “cake” in front of me. I pick up my spoon and make an honest attempt to dig into it. It bounces off, rejected. I retreat.

“I’ll wait for you?” I ask.

She refuses. Puts out her hand as if to plug any more from spilling out my mouth. “I already ate.”

“Hmm.” My turn to sigh. I plunge in my spoon and manage to sever off a piece. I shove it in my mouth. A pastry with the consistency of pate. I don’t think about the taste. She’s grinning as I chew. When I swallow, she smiles. Her smile is wide enough to reveal her naked gums.

“Eat it,” Grandma points with her head. “It’s good for your eyes. You. You like your reading, reading, reading. You’ll go blind.” She wraps a thin, cotton handkerchief around her index finger and begins to dig at the opening of her oval-shaped nostrils. She blows into her hankie.

The stuff in my mouth won’t go down so now I have to think about what it tastes like. Garlic and liver flavored Cool-Whip with a consistency that’s probably close to Grandma’s snot. Not since I was a little girl have I wanted to grab at my throat, gag, and spit something up. She watches me, carefully mopping up the edge of her nose. I work on getting it down a humble little opening in my food pipe that allows a little bit of it to trickle down. I hate that she doesn’t bake cookies.

“So,” she starts, leaning in on both elbows, “what can I do for you?”

“Oh, I’m okay. I’m okay, Grandma. Things are well, very well. Better than they could be.” Chuckle.

I feel thankful for the chance to escape, but I feel worse knowing now that I suffered only a decoy. The food makes my stomach uneasy and is causing my head to hurt. I reach into my pocket feeling for an Excedrin gel-tab, but find an old, wrinkled napkin with a hand-written personal number on the back. One of the guys I'm seeing is a lawyer. Or so he was saying. He said he was twenty-nine, but he looked more like twenty-two. It didn't matter though, at this moment. In fact, I am just grateful for the material. He is something to talk about with Grandma. *I am dating a lawyer.* Truly it would be a fine thing to say. I must remember to try to tell Grandma this. She'll like it. I'll slip it in somewhere, naturally. I place my palm to my right temple. It's cool enough to relieve the hot, steady pumping that's shooting through my right pupil.

I look up at her and see that her eyes have probably already moved up to that invisible friend of hers who always sits on the ceiling. He is always included in her conversations with me.

"Well," she tells him, "I told you to marry before twenty-five but after school, didn't I tell you?"

At the thought, she flutters into the dialect, "*Apay, no lyden a-sar-sar ecow? Ay, ay...*" and she continues into a chirping of hands and tongue that I know is condemning my careless error to turn twenty-six, single. Outside, I hear a street cleaner sweeping. Dried coconut husks that whip dust from the curb of a house, courting the person that owns it. It is a lonely sound. I envy it. I hear her again, revving up the English.

"Well, that's oh-kay, that's oh-kay," she nods. "You can be an academic." She tsks and tsks, and I listen, genuinely fascinated in her efforts to fix me. "Take up something more, graduate studies. PhD. It's not too late. *A professora.* Law maybe."

I see my chance to tell her about my lawyer boyfriend but she cuts me off with a cough. Before I can get a word in, she is speaking again.

“Or medicine. Yes, better take up medicine. Be a *doctor*.” At the sound of the word, the friend on the ceiling loses Grandma’s attention. She shoots rays at me. “Gloria is a doctor,” she says, referring to my Philippine bred and born cousin, the first grandchild of the family. “She will be somebody yet. Yes, take up medicine. You’ll be much better off.”

I take a breath through my mouth and release slowly through my nose, trying to slow the pace of headache that’s approaching. If my quasi-boyfriend had been a doctor, I could have continued to put it out there. But Gloria? Plain unfair to compete with. I poke at the garlic-snot pastry with my spoon. I chuckle. Grandma makes me. I look at her. Her egg-shaped body is nestled tightly in her old, wooden chair that has warped from too many summers in the humid heat of the mountain tropics. For an instant, she looks tired and old. It startles me, and then it worries me. I’ve seldom known her face to look sad.

“It’s okay, Grandma,” I try to comfort her. “I’m doing okay, really. Happy.” I smile hard. I sit back in my chair and draw in through my nose a thick breath of fried bananas that – Carly? Daryl? - was frying. I am trying hard to remember the house girl’s name, but I am genuinely stumped. Marley? No, it was something much more interesting than that – had to be more interesting than that. I sigh. Whats-her-name is sizzling in the kitchen. Southeast Asia; the smell of salty preservatives and fresh fruits fried till oily. I look at Grandma’s stomach and wonder if she is hungry. I reach to clear her plate, but I notice her muscles within heave in and out and in and out as she breathes.

“Put that down!”

I put the plate down. I suppose she doesn't quite like how I've answered the previous question, suppose she doesn't like that I've told her I was happy. The white polka dots on her faded, light blue apron grow wide, then shrink down to half-moons and grow wide again as she ponders possible ways of speaking to me with words she thinks I could understand. It's the kind of breathing adults do on sit-coms when they decide it's time to tell their kids there's no Santa Claus. Oddly, my headache eases. I sit down. I don't look anywhere near her plate. She continues. "You think, you *Americana*, you are so smart, you know what 'happy' is?"

There is a small, metallic *ping!* From the kitchen and I can see Grandma's girl, snickering at the Grandma's rebuke. She is thankful perhaps that this time it was not for her. I look at her, and watch the house girl's sleepy eyes lift triumphantly for a moment, but droop quickly. When she sees my face, she watches the floor again. She goes back to the stove and flips a fried banana. Grandma sniffs hard enough to wobble the table.

Grandma leans over, still staring but this time, she is looking at the mess on my plate I've somehow created. My spoon is too heavy to handle, and it dings as it slides out of my hand onto the plate. Swiftly, I wipe the butter off the tablecloth, making sure to use an unsoiled side of the napkin with each swipe. Scraping together what I can, I pile it on the plate, lift it up and begin to walk to the kitchen.

"Sit down," I hear her call softly as I reach the kitchen doorway and begin to hand it to the girl. "You're not finished yet."

"I'm not hungry, Grandma," I tell her just as quietly. "Thank you, it's very good, but I'm not hungry just yet. I'll wrap it up for later."

“You’re not listening,” she hisses, leaning halfway across her banquet table. “I said, sit down. We are not finished yet.”

Half of her body sprawls snake-like on the table, and I notice the soft lumps underneath her apron skin. I sit cautiously on the other side and carefully place the plateful of mush between us, hoping it will do well as a distraction in case of sudden attack. Pacified by my stillness, she slithers back into her seat.

“Now,” she starts, oh so quietly, “you come all this way.” She folds her hands in her lap. “Tell me something interesting.”

I try earnestly for several minutes to think of what it is she wants me to say, but nothing comes to mind. Somewhere in the middle of it, Grandma’s girl flutters in and out of the room, and murmurs something low. Her gait reminds me of Gloria. *Gloria*, Grandma said, and I could hear the trumpets and feel the rush of carpets unfurling at the sound of it. Gloria is somebody, and soon will have a little somebody. A beautiful baby-somebody who will be my Grandma’s namesake. Two Victorias to run around and plug up the family picture books. I look at Grandma’s girl, wondering just what the heck about her walk makes it similar to the way my cousin goes, though admittedly, it’s a bit different. Gloria bends her knees a lot more, most likely from the weight of her belly. She is more bouncy than Grandma’s girl. I stare at Grandma’s swinging ancient door that opens gently for her, seemingly before she even touches it.

“Shirley will go and get something,” Grandma tells me. *Shirley*. Shirley, like Temple, will exit the kitchen and leave me here to do the entertaining. I watch her airy light steps that quicken her out of the room. Grandma and I sit staring. I am silent. So is she. We both know we can sit this way for a very long time. I could become content with

counting the polka-dots on her apron, I project there are close to forty-two, but before I can double-check my calculations she rises. Suddenly, she rises. She turns her back to me. Turns her old, woolen covered back to me after a twenty-two hour plane ride and a rock-torn road trip. I move towards her but she keeps going. I can tell she feels me behind her, but even so, she keeps on moving. When I clear my throat, she snorts. A snotty little snort that reverberate through her body. It makes me want to yell.

“Just where do you think are you going?”

I didn’t mean for it to sound so disrespectful but it did. I didn’t mean to say it aloud, but the words have already been spoken. I prepare for the unexpected. Whatever it is, I am sure I deserve it. Grandma turns to me, excited. My toes, I just notice now, are full and flat. They plunge into the soles of my sandals. We are both standing eye to eye, neck to neck. In her house, in the mountains at this moment, we seem very, very tall.

In a heartbeat, Shirley emerges with a syringe and a black-brown bottle of goo. There is also a hand-pumped I.V., and a battery operated pulse-reader. She flutters underneath us, and attaches Grandma, plugs her into all the finery. She punches the old lady into her seat like dough, but Grandma still watches me. I will be damned if I lose her attention again. I take a step towards her.

“Didn’t your mother tell you? I am dying.”

The plastic suction goes over her mouth and now, she is only breathing. She breathes heavy enough so I can hear it over the ticking and clucking of the palm-sized battery. She watches me, small, black, shiny beetle eyes over a plastic mouth that hushes her. Her eyes dare me to do something about it.

I sit. I take a sip of my coffee. It is cold syrup, the powdered cream accumulated at the top like dust. My insides are turning. I reason with myself. Nothing wrong is happening here. People die everyday. Grandma is old. Close to ninety-four. I only see her about every four years. We are not so close that it should make me instantly cry. I want to call my older sister and I don't want to tell my little one. I'm panicking and there's no need to do it, or anything at all. I sit. I sip. I sit and sip. I look at her. A stringy old body waiting, daring me to break, wondering who I am and what I'll do. I decide to be strong.

"How are you feeling?" I try to ask it so it sounds like a question. It doesn't.

"Good. Very good. Very good." And then she coughs. She is almost choking, she coughs so hard.

"You don't sound good." I try to say it with conviction, like I am the grown lady I never – when talking to anybody else – doubt I am. But I hear myself. I sound like I am five years old.

She snorts. "Then clearly," she says, clearing mucus that mottles up her throat, "you are not listening." Before she can finish her sentence she is coughing again. She is shooting out coughs. Loudly.

A giggle. It trickles out of me. Drips out, dribbles out, creeps and leaks and oozes out. I don't know how or where it comes from. But it is mine. And she hears it.

She laughs back. The old frump chortles back. Shirley is so nervous that she dares to hold the plastic mouth tighter to Grandma's face. Her chortling threatens to bump it completely off, and instead of helping, Grandma yanks it off, leans to put it on the table, knocking over the open bottle of goo.

We snicker as we watch it fall, and snicker when everything underneath is pink. My blue Samsonite that Shirley has still not removed from the doorway – a bag that has been checked in Paris, checked in L.A. – is now covered in sticky pink and stuck to the concrete floor of a little shack in the middle of a no-name town in the Philippine tropics. Grandma sees this, and laughs louder, forcing up phlegm that damages her windpipe. We are standing, gagging at everything around us that is all of a sudden so funny until Shirley shoves us both into our seats. I'm still sniggering. Grandma sits next to me, titters in her chair, and resumes her dying.

My insides are trembling. Grandma pats me with her palm, trying to steady me, but it falls thumping. A paper-crinkly paw that nearly puffs powder it is so dry, so faded. I can see that Grandma's eyes are bright and moist. She coughs. It is a damaging cough but, thankfully, Shirley's hanky-covered hand appears to clear away the phlegm.

"Tell me something interesting," she says, "and hurry before I start coughing again."

I move quickly now. I look at her face, at least all that I can see of it behind the tubes and plastic layers. Her eyes flash fiercely. I take a breath. She smells like Vicks vapor rub and onions. I start.

THE END

