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Catching Fireflies

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Catching Fireflies

A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE

STONECOAST MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING

BY

Stephanie Mejia Loleng

2019

THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE
STONECOAST MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING

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We hereby recommend that the thesis of Stephanie Mejia Loleng entitled *Catching Fireflies* be accepted as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts



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Abstract

Included in this thesis are five short stories and the start of a novel. Themes include Filipino American and Filipino cultural identity, definitions of home, and first and second generational family interpersonal relationships. The stories are written in either first or second-person point of view, mainly from a female perspective. The settings for the stories feature natural and urban landscapes including locations in Northern California, New York City, the Philippines, Siem Reap, Cambodia, and Prague. The main characters are Filipino or Filipino Americans who experience feelings of loneliness, internal conflict, parental pressure, and both platonic and romantic love.

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PREFACE

The weather forecast didn't look good as I packed and prepared for my first Stonecoast MFA residency. *The New York Times* called the storm a "bomb cyclone" as snow dumped the Tri-State and up the Northeast towards Maine. I monitored my JetBlue flight out of the JFK airport to make sure I'd be able to make it in time for the first evening's festivities. Was this a sign telling me that my decision to go back to school after two decades of getting my undergraduate degree was a mistake? And was pursuing fiction writing even worth it? It felt like a risk I wasn't sure I was willing to go through with. The flight was delayed many hours, but I eventually made it to the Harraseeket Inn which was blanketed in snow. That evening, I met the other first semester fiction ladies who were wondering about the additional fiction lady who had not yet arrived. I didn't realize back then that all five of us would become close writing friends who'd email each other regularly for words of advice and encouragement.

Deciding to go back to school in my forties after a decade of doubt took a leap of faith and made me realize that writing is about taking risks. My practical side, the part of my brain that channels the voices of my immigrant parents to find a well-paying job, a good husband, and a beautiful house, told me to set aside my dreams of becoming a fiction writer. For many years, I worked in industries that involved some form of writing such as journalism and copywriting, but never devoted myself to what fed my soul—fiction writing. My parents came from a country of uncertainty where doing what you love was secondary to finding a job that paid well and would guarantee stability.

Following your dreams was a luxury. Both of my parents went to medical school in the Philippines and then emigrated to the United States with my four siblings and my father's parents. I would later be born in San Francisco after they'd lived in the US for two years. They followed a specific path that would allow them to raise a family in America. I'm grateful for what they did in order for me to be able to pursue my dreams regardless of any financial guarantee.

I knew it was a risk to go back to school in mid-life. In order to devote time for the program, I had to pause my career trajectory and take a freelance job instead of opting to stay on the corporate treadmill in order to get that coveted promotion. When I told people about my decision, most of my friends were very supportive but some people immediately asked if I planned on publishing a book or go into teaching, as if there was a monetary end goal. I told people that I decided to go back to school to become a better writer and left it at that. But, in the back of my mind, I was terrified of not making enough money to pay all of the bills I had as well as putting aside money for retirement. I didn't believe in myself and up until then, I thought of writing as a hobby that I could focus on after I made a lot of money from my career, a sort of second act. I didn't realize that writing is actually a life passion of mine that needs to take priority in my life.

My first foray into writing fiction was during the fourth grade when I was placed in the G.A.T.E program which stood for Gifted and Talented Education. There were about thirty students in a class of fourth, fifth, and sixth graders. It was an unconventional classroom which back then didn't seem strange to me, but now I am grateful for because it taught me how to approach learning in a different way. The school was located in a small working-class town and even though it was a public school, their G.A.T.E. program

attracted skilled teachers with liberal ideals. I didn't realize that at the time. All I wanted to do was hang out with my friends and nerd out on science, writing, and computer projects.

Our teacher, Ms. Dew, had us meditate in class and work on projects meant to prepare us for the world outside of the classroom such as how to run a small business and how to work in teams to complete assignments rather than working on our own. One of our projects was to write a short book that we made ourselves. We were given pieces of thick cardboard that we covered with fabric we brought from home and sheets of paper that we cut and sewed in between the cardboard. I wrote about a boy who discovers a portal underneath his bed that led to another world where he befriends a unicorn that was loosely inspired by book *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* and the movie *E.T.* Thinking about that now makes me cringe a little but it also makes me realize that moment was when I knew that I was compelled to write stories. Although that was in the distant past, the theme of a protagonist going on an adventure to a physical place or an internal space still exists in the stories I write.

As I got older and started applying to colleges, I was apprehensive of majoring in creative writing because I wasn't sure the risk would result in a financial reward. What if I wrote a book and it didn't get picked up for publication? Or what if I found out that I wasn't a good writer at all? There was too much uncertainty. I heard the voices of my parents in my head telling me to choose a practical career and so I thought that maybe I could become a college professor and major in Modern Literature and European History thinking that instead of writing books, I'd teach them. I studied mostly European authors because I was fascinated with Europe at the time and I also thought that was what serious

literature students studied. I read Jane Austen, Mary Shelley, Italo Calvino, and Franz Kafka. What I enjoyed about these writers, particularly Calvino, was the otherworldliness about the stories and the loneliness of some of the characters. For instance, in Calvino's *The Baron in the Trees*, a boy climbs a tree and decides to live from tree to tree, physically removed from the rest of society. And in Kafka's short story *The Metamorphosis*, Gregor Samsa wakes up to discover he is transformed into a large bug and has to deal with the inevitable loneliness that follows.

In my late twenties I became more aware of the oppression that Asian Americans and other people of color have faced throughout the history of American society. I did know about these issues earlier, but before then, I was so determined to not let my ethnicity define me that I pushed the notion of racism aside. What I didn't realize was that I was actually experiencing internalized racism. As W. E. B Du Bois wrote in *The Souls of Black Folks*: "It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity." After much self-reflection and connecting with others who had also gone through some form of internalized racism, I began to embrace my identity instead of dismissing it and started to realize that there was a wealth of American writers of color to read and be inspired by such as Jessica Hagedorn and Sherman Alexie. I also started reading books in translation from non-white writers such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Haruki Murakami, and Banana Yoshimoto. And the more I read, the more I wanted to take on the risk of becoming a writer myself. What inspired me the most was how each of these writers had a way of creating vivid characters that I liked reading about in cultures that were different from my own. For

instance, in Garcia Marquez's epic novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, each character is distinct and the setting of Macondo so believable even though the story itself has many elements of magical realism. The storytelling is so good that I set aside my realistic notions in order to believe in the fictional dream of Macondo.

Storytelling is a huge part of Filipino culture that I've taken for granted. I grew up hearing ghost stories and fables about otherworldly creatures such as the kapre, a hairy giant that lives in a tree and smokes a pipe, there's also the terrifying vampire aswang that splits in half at night with the upper half flying in search of their victims, oftentimes pregnant women. And then there's the story of the white lady, a ghost that appears along a desolate road and hitches rides with drivers only to show her bloodied and mangled face. Along with the Filipino fables that get passed down from generation to generation, there are also true stories of war and uncertainty. When my grandfather was still alive, he'd tell us stories about being in a prison camp during the second World War when the Japanese occupied Manila. He'd only get one bowl of rice a day and they'd beat him regularly. My father would tell us stories of himself selling pan de sal on the streets of Manila. He dropped an entire batch of the bread rolls on the ground, wipe off each piece, and sold them anyway because he needed the money for his family. And then there's my mother's story about when she was a little girl and got attacked by a hen in her backyard because she was playing with the little chicks. These stories were so vivid, and I loved hearing them as a kid. I'd like to think that this was the precursor to me wanting to tell stories of my own.

While I was in my early thirties, my father passed away suddenly and my mother found herself alone in a large house that was supposed to be the retirement home they

were to share together. I was devastated, as were my siblings, but we grieved in our own way and apart from one another. The way I grieved was to write poems, essays, anything that would help to navigate that grief. It also made me think about how short life is and how quickly the days pass before you realize that you haven't done what you're most passionate about.

I thought again about my dreams of being a writer and I set out to take the steps to make that dream a reality. My mother was more open to the possibility of her children leading lives she may not have imagined for them as long as we were happy, healthy, and making enough money to live a comfortable life. She accepted and even embraced our choices. In a way, I think she saw in me what she wasn't able to do for herself, to truly follow her passion. Before she went into medical school, she wanted to become a concert pianist but of course that was too impractical for her family to accept.

I was so nervous going into my first Stonecoast residency because I was afraid of being critiqued too harshly and that people would think that I was an awful writer. Fortunately, I had a good experience in Elizabeth Searle's workshop, which was made up of five fiction first semester students. We all felt that our writing needed a lot of help and so were all open to helpful feedback from one another. What I learned from that first residency was invaluable and it also made me reflect upon why I wanted to write in the first place. I learned that writing itself is a risk. By putting the words down on the page, writers take a stand on what they believe to be true about the world around them, even if they are writing fiction. After that first residency, I knew that I wanted to focus and do the work needed to become the best writer I could be regardless of whether or not I would ever publish something.

During my first semester at Stonecoast, Aaron Hamburger was my mentor and he gave me feedback about characterization and had me ask of my characters what is it that they want. I was working on a young adult novel at the time, a story I had started before the program. Writing it felt laborious and uninspiring as I slogged through page after page. It was as if I was writing stories that I thought I should write because I enjoyed reading a few YA novels at the time. Namely, the *Harry Potter* series by JK Rowling and the *Hunger Games* series by Suzanne Collins. I also thought that writing a book series would be fun and might lead to some sort of commercial success. It became clear during my first semester that YA wasn't the type of writing that brought out the best of my skills. The characters in the YA novel that I had been working on lacked depth. They were like cardboard cutouts of representations of characters I thought they should be. Although it was hard, I set aside that project in order to find my voice as a writer.

I started to work on short stories. This would allow me to try to write different characters in different settings and scenarios. It was a way for me to practice and get better. Just as I train for marathons, I needed to do the tempo runs and speed training in order to build the muscles to last 26.2 miles. Writing short stories helped me do the drills necessary to become a better writer like learning how to create characters that are interesting and believable and that readers want to get to know. Creating in-depth characters is something that I have often struggled with. I blame my journalism background that taught me to be an unbiased observer, but I wonder if there's something more to it than that. Writing fully realized characters is about taking a risk because even though I'm writing fiction, there are aspects of myself and people that I've come across with in the characters that I write. By revealing my characters' flaws and fears, I take the

risk of searching deep within myself for my own flaws and fears and in order to unveil something about myself. As Stephen King says, “Fiction is the truth inside the lie.”

Once I focused on writing short stories, I started to notice a change, for the better, in my writing. I’d been reading *Drown* by Junot Diaz and *Olive Kitteridge* by Elizabeth Strout for the first semester annotations and started to understand the structure of short stories. Both writers are different in tone and subject matter but convey well-crafted language, characters, and setting, among other craft elements.

In the short stories by Junot Diaz, the dialogue switches between Spanish to English which highlights the ethnicity of the Dominican American characters, adding depth to the story. Also, the characters’ motivations, frustrations, and relationship to one another are clearly shown as in the short story “Fiesta, 1980” when the protagonist wants so badly to eat his favorite Dominican treats at the family party, but his father forbids him to eat because he gets carsick. In Elizabeth Strout’s short stories, Olive Kitteridge grips a hold of the reader with every word she says and every gesture she makes. We begin to both love and hate her as we would a family member or a close friend. As John Gardner writes in his book *The Art of Fiction* “In great fiction, the dream engages us heart and soul; we not only respond to imaginary things—sights, sounds, smell—as though they are real: We sympathize, think, and judge. We set out, vicariously, the trials of the characters and learn from the failures and successes...” (31).

The short story “Snow Day” is an example of my ability to write a character that is complex. She is a grandmother but also a recent immigrant who is trying to adapt to life in a new country and a new city. Through her inner dialogue and backstory, we learn that she has a gift of seeing when tragedy strikes even if she is not physically there to

witness it. Through grit and an intense love for her family, she is able to save her grandson from a near death experience. When I first wrote this piece, I didn't place the grandmother at the center of the story, but rather stuck to my YA roots and wrote it from the grandson's point of view. However, through revision, it became clear that this was the grandmother's story.

While at Stonecoast, I've also learned that one of the most challenging aspects of writing is in revising. For me, about ten percent goes into the actual creation of a new story such as writing out the characters, the setting, the situation, and ninety percent goes into doing multiple rounds of revision. Allowing myself the time for revision has been invaluable to my process as a writer. As Truman Capote said, "I'm all for the scissors. I believe more in the scissors than I do in the pencil." Although I'm not literally cutting up my stories, I sometimes delete entire paragraphs or pages of text if the content doesn't add to the essence of the story. Before this program, I would save so much of what I'd written because it felt like a waste to get rid of all the hard work I'd done. Now I'm realizing that the first and second draft is a pre-writing exercise that helps open up my mind to what the story is really about. It's a risk I take to make decisions about who the characters are and what the story will put them through. I often have preconceived notions of who these characters are but through the act of revision, the ideas characters grow and into something different. The risk here is to believe in myself that I've made the right choices and stayed true to the story.

Rick Bass was my mentor second semester and he had me revise my short story "Running" three times. I thought that I'd already worked on my story enough so that it was close to complete, but he thought otherwise. He told me that it had a lot of potential

but that there was too much telling and not enough showing as well as instances in the story that were “out of character” for the protagonist.

I went through the story line by line changing words and phrases that seemed to not add anything useful to the story. I then brought that short story into Cara Hoffman’s workshop during the third residency where she had us employ an erasure revision technique on our stories. Each day, we were tasked with erasing an element of our story such as dialogue one day and setting another day. What was revealed were elements of our stories that we may not have noticed had we not cut away parts of the narrative. I found that my short story was actually fairly balanced but lacked in-depth characterization of the protagonist. I also noticed that there were certain personal biases throughout the story that I didn’t even realize such as gender and ethnic stereotyping.

The stories that I write are primarily about Filipino Americans and Filipino immigrants. Even if cultural identity isn’t at the central theme to a story, the characters are people of color living in America. I think about other writers who have taken this approach such as Jhumpa Lahiri who has written critically acclaimed short stories about Indian American immigrants. Her stories aren’t just about culture, but about love, relationships, heartache—in short, stories about the human experience. I also think of other writers that I became aware of only recently such as Manuel Muñoz and Jennine Capó Crucet who also write about immigrant lives as a large part of the American experience. I used to not read a lot of American literature because the majority of what I was taught in high school and what I’d see on the bookshelves at the library or at the bookstore were stories about people’s lives that I couldn’t relate to. But as more and more

stories of the American immigrant experience were being written, I started to see reflections of my own life in those pages.

Writing can be a lonely experience. I sit at my desk, at a coffeeshop, or in the library typing on my laptop four hours and hours. But even though I have a lot of alone time when I'm working on a piece, through my experience at Stonecoast, I've found a community of writers to lean on if I need the support. When I first arrived at Stonecoast on that snowy day in January, I didn't know anyone yet but now I'm friends with dozens of students, faculty, and staff that have helped to enrich my experience as a writer. Yes, it was a risk to join a program where I knew no one and yet had to open myself up to critiques and to the knowledge of whether or not I was good enough to succeed. As we get older, it's harder to make friends and close connections, but now that I reach the end of the Stonecoast experience, I surprised myself in making a few very close friends whom I know I'll want to stay in touch with for a very long time.

Being a part of a writing community has made me realize that I am not alone in this journey and with that I'm not only accountable to myself, but I am also accountable to others that look to me as I grow as a writer. I look forward to not only seeing my peers on book tour where I can sit in the audience and clap the loudest, but also see them at my very own book tour someday, sitting in the audience cheering me on. I've also learned the importance of finding confidence in creating a space for myself within the American literary landscape as a woman writer of color and to ask questions of myself and other writers—what do we want to say and how do we want to say it? Also, what can we add to the national dialogue as writers who care about what is being said and who hope to make some sort of positive change.

This thesis is a collection of short stories that have been living inside of me for decades just waiting to come to the surface. Now, I am finally willing to take the risk in sharing these with the world. What I hope to present through these stories are different shades of the human experience through the lens of cultural identity. The characters who inhabit these pages are Filipino Americans and Filipino immigrants going about their daily lives either in the United States or abroad. I don't consider this thesis as just an assignment that I need to do in order to graduate and receive an MFA in Creative Writing, but as a way for me to get closer to my writing in order to discover something about myself and about life.

I dedicate these stories to my fourth grade self who made her own book out of cardboard and fabric and wrote her very first story so many years ago. In doing so, she discovered that she could create imagined lives and worlds in her head for fun but what she didn't know was that some of us are so compelled to write we'd risk so much in order to do it. And if we are so lucky, we will find others who are like us, who can't imagine a reality without fiction. As Toni Morrison said during her The Nobel Lecture in Literature speech:

“Make up a story... For our sake and yours forget your name in the street; tell us what the world has been to you in the dark places and in the light. Don't tell us what to believe, what to fear. Show us belief's wide skirt and the stitch that unravels fear's caul.”

Boardwalk

Summer at the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk. It was 1995 and Roland stood in front of a large plastic replica of a shark's mouth, waiting for the two women to pose. They leaned in together, arms outstretched in jazz hands, fingertips touching the shark's pointy teeth. Roland counted to three, then pressed the red button on the camera. The cloudy image slid out from the camera's mouth and Roland flapped it around a few times before the photo appeared. He placed it inside a souvenir paper frame and handed it to the women.

It was his second summer working the shark's mouth photo booth and his last summer before graduating from college. The booth sat across from the boardwalk's main attraction, The Giant Dipper, a rickety wooden rollercoaster twenty-six stories high. Roland didn't understand the appeal of a ride that shook as it crawled towards the sky. He preferred the rollercoasters at Great America or Six Flags that hummed along sleek steel tracks. Amusement parks reminded him of the summer with his cousins as three Filipino families squeezed into two station wagons for a five-hour car ride to Disneyland.

Carina also worked the shark's mouth Tuesday nights. She was in Roland's American Studies class on campus and when she walked into class that first day, he noticed her right off. Her hair was in a loose ponytail and she had on a pair of flannel pajama pants and a UCSC sweatshirt with the image of a banana slug, their college mascot. When she sat in the row in front of him, he caught a whiff of her hair that smelled like sweet green apple, a scent that reminded him of fresh, Humboldt-quality

weed and getting high watching nature shows on a Saturday afternoon with his housemates.

Roland had developed a crush on her. She made him laugh, sometimes so hard his stomach ached. She wasn't a girly girl, like some of the other women he knew on campus. Those other girls with flat-ironed hair and made up faces, bodies squeezed into tiny clothes, had nothing on her, he thought. Carina could wear baggy jeans, no make-up, and her hair in a ponytail and look like a model for an O'Neill surfboard catalog. Carina was also Filipino like Roland. They talked about their parents, their siblings, and how she had two older brothers and was the bunso, the youngest in the family.

He fantasized about taking her home to meet his parents. Even his over-protective mom would like her, he imagined, because she wasn't the loud Vietnamese girl he took to the prom or the gloomy Korean girl he brought home for Thanksgiving one year, but an intelligent Filipino girl who would understand their culture and values.

Carina stood behind the white wooden stand where they kept the cash register and photo supplies as Roland counted out change for the two women customers. He thanked them and they walked away with their heads bowed while staring at the photo and giggling.

Carina walked up to Roland and tapped nudged him with her elbow. "Look what I got," she said, holding a small envelope. "Did you bring yours?"

Roland looked down and noticed two yellow unlimited ride passes sticking out of an envelope. Boardwalk employees got the passes with their pay checks every two weeks. Last month, Carina sold hers to a couple of tourists, but Roland was too nervous to sell his. If they got caught, they'd be fired, and he didn't want to move back home for

the summer. His dad would lecture him about not being responsible and his mom would make his favorite meals every night—oxtail kare kare and pork adobo—but he'd hate himself for getting even fatter than he felt. He was “husky,” a term his relatives liked to say when they saw him at family gatherings, which basically meant chubby.

“No, I didn't bring mine. I don't think I'm gonna sell them.”

“Why not? It's the least we could do. We don't make that much here.”

Roland looked away. He didn't want her to think he was afraid of getting caught. He stared out into the sea of people, some holding cotton candy, others with bags of caramel corn. See all of that junk food made him hungry all of the sudden.

A couple and their young daughter walked up to the shark's mouth to get a closer look.

“You guys want a photo?” Carina yelled over the metallic-sounding ding of the milk bottle toss and the creaking of the rollercoaster.

“Daddy, let's do it!” the little girl said, tugging on her father's polo shirt.

“Ah sure, why not,” the father said.

Carina positioned the family inside the shark's mouth and snapped two pictures. Roland watched as Carina carefully unfolded two unlimited ride passes from her back pocket to show to the couple. He scanned the area for the bright blue windbreakers that the park officials wore and didn't see any. Carina shoved a few bills into her pocket and placed the passes and the polaroid picture into the souvenir frame.

“Thank you so much,” the dad said. “My daughter's been begging us to go on that roller coaster once she got tall enough.” He looked down at his daughter and placed a hand lightly on the top of her head.

Roland turned to look at The Giant Dipper as a car crept its way to the very top, then paused for a few seconds before speeding down.

After the family walked away Carina turned to Roland and gave him a mischievous look he'd seen on her before.

"I made twenty-five bucks off them," Carina said. "Let's do something after work. My treat."

She gave Roland a hug and it felt right to him, like their bodies fit just right, which was strange but wonderful. He remembered only hugging her once before, after they had watched *Wings of Desire* at the Nickelodeon. He told her that it was one of his favorite movies because of the camera work. He had taken a film class last semester where they analyzed the movie and how the camera created a feeling of intimacy as the angels roamed around Berlin watching people go about their lives. Those images touched something in him and he hoped that his photographs would touch people in the same way. Not the Polaroids of course, but the ones he took when he wasn't at work. He was good at taking photos. His high school art teacher told him that he had an "eye for the lens," something he never forgot.

After work, they walked over to Trader Sam's tiki bar. The place sold cheap, stiff drinks and the bartenders never questioned the validity of someone's fake ID. In the corner of the bar, next to the dart board, was an old karaoke machine and two microphones. Roland and Carina had the place mostly to themselves. They started off singing classic rock ballads and finished the night with a couple duets that made Roland think of dances in the high school gym and girls with big, curly hair.

“That was fun, we should do that again sometime,” Carina said as they walked out of the bar and into the foggy night air.

“For sure. Maybe this weekend?”

“Maybe. We’ll see.”

“You okay getting home? I could give you a ride. My car’s just over there,” Roland said, pointing into the darkness.

“I’m good, thanks. I’m only two blocks away.” Carina kissed him on the cheek and wrapped her arms around him. He tried to hold onto her as long as possible until she pulled away.

“Goodnight, Roland. See you at work tomorrow.”

He watched as she walk away towards a street lined with eucalyptus trees, the air scented with a hint of menthol. He followed her from a distance and watched as she turned the corner. The light from the lamp poles shown a murky yellow glow onto the sidewalk. He’d never been down this street before but had driven passed it many times on his way to and from work. Had he known that Carina lived here, maybe he would have offered her rides home even though he knew she preferred to walk.

He reached for his pipe that he’d kept hidden in the inside pocket of his jacket. There was just enough weed inside for a couple of puffs. He drove home in a mellow daze and dreamt that he and Carina were on The Giant Dipper holding hands as it climbed to the top. The clicking sound of the car moving along the track sounded like a countdown to the inevitable drop.

Carina was in a good mood when Roland got to work the next day. She was skipping back and forth between the shark's mouth and the cash register, counting out change and thanking people with extra enthusiasm. He liked seeing her happy like that and he wanted to join in.

“What's gotten into you?” Roland asked.

“Oh nothing. It's just a beautiful day, isn't it?” Carina gestured towards the ocean.

The sun was just starting to break through the fog cover that was typical of Santa Cruz mornings. A misty fog would hover in the air and by noon would burn off in the bright sunlight. He wanted to place his hand on her arm, but noticed she'd turned to look at a group of guys standing in front of the milk bottle toss. One of them had blond hair and was wearing a faded green hoodie. He was standing apart from the rest of the group staring at Carina.

“Do you know that dude?” Roland felt his chest tighten.

“Sort of. They came over when I got here and stood in front of the shark taking their own pictures with some cheap disposable camera. When I told them to stop, they just laughed,” she said. “But that guy walked over to me and apologized. He's kinda cute, isn't he?”

“I don't know. Looks like a jerk actually.”

“Seriously? How does a guy look like a jerk?”

“Just how he's standing there like he's so cool.”

“Please! Guys are so stupid sometimes.”

Roland felt a rush of anger building inside.

“I'll be right back,” Carina said.

Carina walked over to them and started gesturing to the blond guy, flapping her arms as if she was about to take flight. He found her silliness endearing but wanted her to stop talking to him. It was so typical, he thought, for her to be attracted to a white surfer dude that looked so much like Kelly Slater. So many of Roland's guy friends talked about how Asian American women went for white guys all the time and it bothered them. He hoped Carina wasn't one of those women and maybe she was just being friendly, but there was something about how she leaned in towards the guy that made Roland think there was something more.

Carina placed her hand on the guy's arm and nodded. She walked back with that mischievous look on her face.

"Those guys just invited us to a full moon bonfire at the cove tonight."

The scent of Carina's green apple shampoo mingled with the brininess of the ocean air made Roland feel lightheaded.

"They invited you, not me."

"No, seriously. They invited both of us. C'mon, it'll be fun."

Roland looked out at the ocean and watched the waves crash against the shore, leaving traces of white foam in their wake.

"Fine, I'll go but only for a little while." He didn't want her to go alone.

"Yay! It'll be fun!" Carina flung her arm around his shoulder. "The dude seems nice. You'd like him. He grew up here, not like us banana slugs," Carina said.

"So, he's a townie," Roland said.

"Yeah, so what."

“You know, they don’t like us students.” He wanted to warn her that all the guy wanted was to get into her pants, but he was afraid to hear her say that that’s what she wanted too.

“They don’t care if we’re students,” Carina said. “At least some of them don’t. You just have to get to know them. You’re so in your own bubble, Roland. You need to get off campus more.”

She placed her hands on his shoulders and shook him back and forth as if trying to wake him from a dream. Her grip was firm and strong. He let her shake him for as long as she wanted. The ding of the milk bottles sounded like tiny bells to Roland and the smell of the ocean air reminded him of all the nights he lay awake with his window open imagining Carina next to him, tangled in his sheets.

To get to the beach they had to drive on a long dirt road in the dark. The full moon helped to light the way. He drove down slowly and kept his eyes on the road so he wouldn’t miss the turn off to the hidden beach. Carina was humming along to an R&B song from the ‘70s that he remembered his parents used to like listening to in the car Sunday mornings on their way to church.

Roland drove up to a large dirt patch where a dozen cars were parked so haphazardly, he had to pull up too close to a yellow pick-up truck. I’ll keep an eye on her, be her personal bodyguard, he thought to himself as he put the clutch in park and turned off the ignition. He felt better with a job to do instead of standing around, getting sand in

his black old school Adidas, like the kind Run-DMC wore, while trying to make conversation with people he didn't know.

Carina skipped towards a narrow dirt path alongside a steep cliff that led to the beach below. Roland had been to the hidden beach a few times before with some other friends, mostly a little drunk and very stoned. He felt anxious walking along the path sober without the buffers of inhibition.

"Hey, Carina. Want to smoke before we head down?" Roland asked fingering the thumb-sized pipe in his hoodie pocket.

"Not yet, let's wait 'til we get down there," she said. He could just make out the curved shape of her body in the moonlight as she turned onto the path.

He thought of taking a quick drag without her, but he didn't want her to walk too far ahead of him. The ocean breeze turned into a strong wind and he could barely see the path in front of him in the moonlight. He regretted not bringing the small flashlight he kept in his glove compartment for situations like this. Carina walked in quick steps ahead of him, her ponytail whipped to the right from the wind.

"Slow down, sheesh. It's not a race," Roland shouted into the wind.

But Carina kept going without slowing down. The strum of a guitar and the staccato beats of bongos signaled to him that there were white hippie kids down below. He hated the drum circles that popped up around campus late at night. When he was a freshman, still living in the dorms, he went to a few drum circles on campus. He liked the feel of the beats pounding against his chest and imagined himself on an African safari, the kind he saw on National Geographic where the drumming was part of a ritual with dancing around a fire.

When he told his friends at the Third World Cultural Center about the drum circles he went to, they almost kicked him out of the multipurpose room saying that sounded racist and he wasn't "down." They also said that those white kids with dirty blonde dreads were "culture vultures." He'd never heard that term before, but he understood what it meant. He couldn't enjoy the sound of the drum circles ever since then.

When they got to the beach, a small group of people were dancing clumsily in the sand around a large wooden pallet, the kind people stole from the Safeway loading dock at night. It was on fire, large flames casted elongated shadows onto the side of the cliff. A few people sat on large pieces of driftwood, huddled together sharing a smoke.

Roland scanned the crowd for a familiar face, but he didn't recognize anyone. He felt out of place in this crowd. They all looked like townies to him—kids who never left Santa Cruz and worked jobs that paid by the hour instead of salaried professions. Maybe some of them sold weed and pills to supplement what little they made, he thought.

Not going to college was out of the question for him and his older sister. His parents expected both of them to make good money, buy a house, get married, have kids, basically to live some sort of American dream that most of his friends' immigrant parents wanted for their children and for themselves. His sister Betty had graduated with a master's in chemistry, bought a house, and was probably going to have a child. Despite all that, his parents didn't brag to their friends about her because she married a woman and not a man. He hated that his parents were homophobic, hated that they expected so much from him and his sister.

The drumming started to get louder and faster. Carina grabbed Roland's arm and started to pull him towards a group of people drinking from cans of beer while standing in front of the fire. He recognized the three guys right away.

"Nah, I'm good. I'll stay here. You can go though," Roland stopped abruptly like a stubborn dog on a leash not wanting to walk.

"Ah c'mon. You're seriously going to just stand here by yourself moping around," Carina said. "I want you to meet Matt."

"Is that the dude you're drooling after?"

"Shut up. I'm not drooling after him. I just think he's cool."

He stared at the flames reflected in her brown eyes and found it hard to say no.

"Fine, fine. I'll go, but if the guy's a jerk, I'm going to leave and make you come with me."

Carina put her hand on his back and pushed him gently forward. He put his arm around her shoulders and leaned into her as they walked towards the group. He wanted Matt and his friends to think they were together.

"You guys made it," Matt said as Carina moved towards him, freeing herself of Roland.

"I wasn't sure you knew how to get here." Matt leaned over to hug Carina with one arm.

"Of course, we do. I've been here a bunch of times," Roland said.

"Oh yeah, I guess the secret's out. It's better in the summer for sure though when there aren't so many banana slugs crawling around."

Roland gripped the pipe in his right pocket. He wished he'd taken a few puffs, but it was too late now, he didn't want to share his weed with these guys.

"It's a public beach. We have as much right to be here as you," Roland said. The flames were getting hotter and he felt sweat gather at the side of his face.

"Totally. I'm just saying. It's nice when we've got it to ourselves. I'm Matt by the way." He reached over to shake Roland's hand.

Roland let go of the pipe in his pocket and shook Matt's hand with a sweaty palm.

"Roland."

"Good to meet you. I'll get you guys some beers," Matt said.

"See, he's okay right?" Carina whispered into Roland's ear.

Matt handed them the beers. They weren't as cold as Roland had hoped but it still felt good going down.

"Roland's a really good photographer even though we spend most of our week at that stupid shark's mouth." Carina placed her hand on his shoulder.

Roland nodded and took a sip of beer. "Yeah, I guess. I like taking pictures. Always have."

"C'mon now, don't be modest." Carina dropped her hand and turned to Matt.

"He's wasting his talent taking Polaroids of stupid tourists. Sucks we have to work there."

"Nah, I think it's cool," Matt said. "You get to be at the beach right? It's a job and it's not that hard. I wait tables. It pays shit, but I'm hoping to become a bartender. Maybe have my own bar one day." He stared at the bonfire as if declaring it to the flames would make it happen.

“Well, this is our last summer here anyway,” Roland said.

“I don’t know. This place kind of grows on you. Maybe I’ll stick around,” Carina said.

“What? Why would you do that?” Roland asked. “This place sucks.”

Matt’s smile faded and Roland could see the flames reflected in his blue eyes.

“You don’t even know the town. You’re up there on the hill reading about life but not living it,” Matt said.

Roland wanted to punch him and watch as Matt’s tanned face hit the sand.

“At least I’m going to make something of myself and not bartend for the rest of my life.”

“How do you know? The economy is shit. You may be working at that shark’s booth longer than you think.”

“Hey, hey now. Guys, let’s just chill out.” Carina said, standing in between them.

“Let’s just go sit by the bonfire.”

“That’s a good idea,” Matt said. “No hard feelings right, man?” Matt placed a hand on Roland’s shoulder.

The drumming got faster. Roland could feel the beats inside his chest.

“Sure, whatever. We’re cool,” Roland said. “You guys go ahead though. I’m just gonna hang out here for a bit.”

Roland finished off his beer and grabbed a second one from the cooler. It was warmer than the first, but it would do.

Matt and Carina walked over towards the drum circle and Roland walked towards the water, away from the light of the bonfire. He sat down just before the water hit the

sand and smoked a bowl, stared up at the full moon and listened to the beats. His body felt like it was melting into the sand. The beating of the drums mixed into the sound of the waves as if on purpose. He closed his eyes to listen to the music and drifted off to sleep.

When he woke up, someone was slapping him on the shoulder and his pant legs were wet up to his knees. The drumming had stopped but the fire was still going. He felt a fuzziness in his head, like his brain was wrapped in cotton balls. The clapping sounds from the waves crashing helped to clear out the grogginess. The smell of green apple cut through the brininess of the ocean air making him hungry for something sweet.

“Dude, what happened to you?” Carina asked. “I thought you’d taken off. Are you okay?” She placed a warm hand on his head.

“I’m fine. I just lay down for a second. I’m okay, really.” He got up and wiped the sand off his pants.

“I think we’re gonna hang out longer. You wanna stay?” Carina asked.

“I don’t think so. I’m going home. Are you cool though? I mean, if you need a ride, I can hang out.”

“No, that’s okay. I’m going to head back with Matt. He can drop me off.”

Roland looked over at the group sitting around the bonfire. Some of them were huddled under a blanket with a Southwest-style pattern printed on it of triangles in orange, brown, and turquoise. Matt sat off to the side looking out towards the water. The golden light from the bonfire shone on his tanned face. His blonde hair stuck out in different directions.

“I don’t think you should stay here. I don’t like that guy. Seems kind of shady.”

“You’re just jealous, Roland.”

“Jealous? I’m not jealous. I just don’t think you should hang out here. I can take you home.”

“No, I’m staying. That’s it.”

Roland looked down at his shoes. They were covered in wet sand and he knew that he’d have to wipe them off as soon as he got home because he didn’t want them to get ruined. They were expensive.

“Why do you like him anyway? He’s just a surfer dude. Not very bright if you ask me.”

“Well I’m not asking you. I’m sorry. I just...it’s sweet that you are worried about me. You always look out for me, but you know I can take care of myself.”

“Yeah, I know. I just don’t get it.”

“What’s there to get? He’s cute and nice.”

“And white. The guy is like so white, Carina.”

“So what. White, black, brown. Who cares?”

Roland turned to look out at the ocean and felt a knot in his stomach. He wasn’t sure if it was the beer and weed or something else. He turned to look at Carina, leaned forward, and kissed her on the lips. For a moment, he thought she’d kiss him back but instead, she turned her head and pushed him away.

“Roland, no. We’re just friends. I, we, please don’t ruin things between us.”

She walked away leaving him to stand there all alone.

He headed up the windy path along the side of the cliff to get to his car. But before he got to the top, he turned to look down at the group of people below. Carina had

her head on Matt's shoulder. He had his arm around her. They looked like a couple who've been together for years and Roland felt dizzy all of the sudden. He steadied himself and walked back to his car. He reached for his keys and realized that he was still holding the beer can. He opened the door and threw it on the passenger's side, beer spilled onto the seat. He'd clean it up in the morning.

Carina called in sick the next day. A new guy, whom Roland had to train, covered her shift. The guy was going into his second year of college and since Roland was going into his fourth year, he felt superior to him. He gave the guy most of the grunt work like sweeping around the shark's mouth and helping the customers pose as Roland took the photos.

Roland sat on the stool next to the cash register as the new guy took his dinner break. The father who bought the ride passes from Carina the day before was waiting in line to get on The Giant Dipper with his daughter. He watched as the family walked towards their car and were buckled in by a ride attendant. It reminded him of the first time he rode The Giant Dipper, the rush of the wind against his cheeks as the car shook along the tracks. Roland turned around to look out at the beach. The sun had already set but there was still enough light to make out a few couples huddled together facing the ocean or walking hand-in-hand along the shoreline.

He waited to hear the familiar screams of the passengers as the car descended downwards but all he heard was the beeping of a walkie-talkie and someone's choppy

voice. A man wearing a bright blue windbreaker with the words Park Security written on the back stood in front of the booth saying something about the roller coaster car being stuck at the top. Roland looked up and saw the car sitting there not moving like a photograph capturing a moment in time.

“Hey, what’s happening. Why isn’t it moving,” Roland asked the man holding the walkie-talkie.

“We don’t know yet. I just hope people don’t start panicking.”

Roland heard music playing from a rock concert on the main stage at the end of the park. It was a Beach Boys song his parents liked to play in the car when they drove him and his sister down to Disneyland. Something about it being nice to get older, but he didn’t think so. Getting older wasn’t so great because you rarely got what you wanted.

“Excuse me, sir.” Roland said to the man with the walkie-talkie. “If I know someone who’s been selling unlimited ride tickets to tourists, who would I tell?”

“You can tell me. I can write it down,” the man said, taking out a small notepad.

“Okay, her name’s Carina Aquino. She works here. With me. Actually, the guy who bought her tickets is up there with his kid.”

Roland looked up and hoped the dad was comforting his daughter, and that she wouldn’t be afraid to ride rollercoasters just because of something that happened that was that was out of her control. He wished she would be able to trust that things worked out most of the time.

Sabong

The packets of multivitamins were running out. That morning we'd placed the pills into plastic baggies, the size of dime bags, for each patient to take with them after their check-up. A line of people stood outside in the heat and humidity, fanning themselves with woven straw paypays or pieces of cardboard. We had two hours left before our makeshift clinic, located in a high school gym, would close.

It was mid-January and I was in Batangas, a province south of Manila that's known for nice beaches, a sort of tourist town for the city folks. My parents were there for a medical mission and I decided to volunteer. We flew over from California with a group of mostly retired Filipino doctors, nurses, surgeons, and dentists who came to treat patients for a week for free. The mission happened every year and my parents had been going the past three years. Sometimes they'd go to a rural barangay and other times to a larger town or city.

I searched inside the balikbayan boxes where we'd packed all of the medication, mostly samples given to my parents by pharmaceutical companies trying to hawk their latest overpriced drugs.

"We're running out of everything," I said.

"Ay, don't worry. There's more. Some of the other doctors are hoarding their medicines. We'll check the other boxes later." My mother made a clicking sound with her mouth. It was her way of showing disappointment in others. I was very familiar with that sound and so was my father.

“Where’s your dad,” she asked scanning the gym. “He was supposed to come back after lunch. Yesterday he disappeared and today again.”

“I have no idea where he is. I don’t keep track of his comings and goings.”

“Hmmm. Well, go look for him. He needs to be here.” She made that clicking sound again.

A small elderly woman walked up with a volunteer who was helping to manage the line of patients.

“This woman says she has pain in her knees and her fingers,” the volunteer said.

“Okay, have her sit here. It’s probably just arthritis.”

“Kumusta, po kayo?” My mother’s face softened as she asked the elderly woman how she was.

The woman answered in a scratchy voice and spoke slowly. Although I knew some Tagalog, I could barely make out what she was saying. I stared at her as she gestured with her bent fingers and swollen knuckles, pointing to parts of her body. My mother grabbed a half-used tube of Bengay and started to massage the woman’s fingers in a small circular motion. The smell of menthol made my eyes water a little and my nose tingle.

She turned to me as I stood there watching her. “Grace, go check on your dad. I can manage on my own.”

I was irritated with her. I didn’t want to be the go-between.

“He’s not a child, Mom. I’m sure he’ll be back soon.”

“Ay naku! You’re just like him. So stubborn. Just go.”

I took that as a compliment.

“You know you’re being paranoid, Mom” I said.

She exhaled loudly and continued to massage the old lady’s hand then working her way up to the wrist.

I agreed to look for him not because I wanted to do what she told me to do but because she was getting on my nerves. I imagined my father back at the hotel watching a pay-per-view fight at the bar with another male doctor which is where my mother found him the day before. I couldn’t blame him for escaping the clinic with my mother nagging him about taking too much time with each patient. Unlike my mother, he sat with them for a while asking about their lives and not just about physical ailments. But she treated them quickly one after the other like it was a contest to see how many people you could fix. When I asked her why she was in such a hurry, she pointed to the long line and said “isn’t it obvious, Grace? There’s so many of them.”

I walked outside to ask the security guards if they’d seen my father. They looked at me for a while without answering. I could see my reflection in their mirrored sunglasses and was disappointed that my frizzy bob curled out at the ends.

“Which one is your father?” the guard on the right asked. He had a large mole on his cheek with a small hair growing out of it.

“Dr. Santiago. The one with the bushy eyebrows and moustache. He’s a bit chubby. Has a beer gut.”

“Oh, that man. He’s funny. He was here earlier but we don’t know where he is,” He looked at the other guard, smirked, and elbowed him.

“Talaga? You sure you don’t know? My mom is looking for him. It’s important.”

“No, we don’t know anything,” he said in a tone that sounded like he was addressing me like he would a child even though I was thirty years old.

I reached into my pocket for a twenty-dollar bill and showed it to them as I’d seen my father do with other security guards, hotel staff, passport agents, anyone who could give him something that he wanted.

The guard looked down at the bill and at me.

“I just remembered,” he said, taking the bill. “He’s at the sabong. The big one next to the Shoe Mart mall. Too far to walk. You’ll need to get a tryke.”

“Maraming salamat, po,” I said, using the polite form of “Thank you.”

I should have known that my father went to the cockfight. He had been talking about going to see a match since we got to the Philippines. It’s not that he liked seeing two roosters fight to the death, but he was addicted to gambling. It was like an itch that constantly needed scratching. I could understand that thrill even though I didn’t gamble. There’s that endorphin rush that comes with the possibility of getting something you desire if only the odds were in your favor.

Most cockfighting arenas didn’t allow women inside, so I went to the hotel to change into my father’s sunglasses, his grey polo shirt, and San Francisco Giants baseball cap that smelled of Old Spice and musky hair gel. I tucked my hair into the cap and put on my baggy jeans, with a hole at the knee. My hands were shaking as I stared at myself in the full-length mirror. I could barely pass as a boy. It would have to do. I took a few deep breaths to calm myself down.

The sabong arena looked grand from the outside, like a small concert venue or a newly built sports complex. The cement building was the color of leche flan when baked just right, and the roof was curved into a dome. Painted over the entrance was a large mural of two roosters—one black and the other white—facing one another inside a red circle. Underneath the circle, the word “SABONG” was written in old English script that reminded me of the tattoos I’d seen on some Mexican kids when I was a teenager living in Salinas, California. The rumor was if you saw someone, boy or girl, with one of those tattoos you should stay away from them because they might be in a gang.

Inside, paint was peeling in sections and there was dust everywhere. The sharp smell of spilled beer and bird droppings weighed heavy in the humidity of the air. Ceiling fans hung precariously from rafters that blew dust in all directions rather than cooling you off. A crowd of men stood around the cockpit, a square patch of dirt where the fighting would take place, enclosed by a thin fence. They were shouting at one another in Taglish, a combination of Tagalog and English. A rooster crowed like a siren cutting through the traffic of voices. Christmas lights hung above the ring where the fighting would take place. A few bloodied feathers lay scattered on the dirt floor.

I pulled my cap low as I made my way through the crowded cockfight arena. Discarded candy wrappers, peanut shells, and bits of chicharron crunched underneath my feet. I took quick glances to try and find my father. An elbow jabbed my right breast and I jumped to the side, hand up to protect myself, my head still down. The smell of dirty scalp and sweaty underarms made me feel nauseous, but I kept going until I reached the bottom of the bleachers where I spotted my father walking up concrete steps that led to the rows of wooden stadium seats.

He stopped and stood in front of a wooden bench behind a pair of white guys holding sweaty bottles of San Miguel beer. One was thin with unkempt blond hair, the other had broad shoulders and dark hair in a buzz cut. They reminded me of guys I would have been friends with while in college. The ones who played ultimate frisbee and snuck pony kegs into the dorms. Guys I would have slept with.

I walked up the steps and felt my heart pounding in my chest and sweat starting to form on my palms. He would see me and think that he'd been caught and that I'd tell my mother, but I wasn't sure if I would. I was just happy to have found him. As I got closer, he noticed the baseball cap on my head and looked happy for a moment probably thinking I was just another Giants fan. He gestured to the seat next to him, smiling as if he'd made a new friend. I walked over with my head down and then slowly lifted my face. His expression quickly changed.

"Grace, what are you doing here," he asked. "This is no place for a woman." He looked angrier than I'd expected, like the time in high school when I borrowed his car without asking.

"Shhh. Don't give me away." I pulled the cap down lower. "Mom was looking for you."

"So, she sends you here?"

"God, no. She has no idea I'm here. She doesn't know you're here. You should have told her that you were leaving at least."

He looked away and scanned the crowd.

“She’d nag me and tell me not to come,” he said. “That I’ll lose money. But I got a tip from someone. He said there’s an easy winner.” He looked like a child in an arcade with an unopened roll of quarters.

“But isn’t this cruel? Don’t you feel bad for the roosters?”

“No, why should I feel bad? It’s the culture. These men get paid whether the rooster wins or not. That’s how it works.” His voice sounded agitated.

“So what if they get paid. It still seems cruel.”

“Aye, Grace. Stop talking and just watch. The fight is about to start.”

The two white guys in front of us opened their wallets and pulled out a few crisp pastel-colored bills while men in green vests started to collect bet money.

“What are those white guys doing here? They stick out like crazy,” I said.

“Oh yeah, a lot of puti like to come here,” he said without taking his eyes off of the men in the green vests. “These foreigners get cheated. They bet too much, and they bet on the losers,” he laughed.

I thought about Jason, the white boyfriend I brought home during Thanksgiving while I was still in college. My father didn’t hide his disappointment when he met him. *Why don’t you date Filipino boys*, he had asked me. *Because I’m not attracted to them*, I told him. He looked hurt, like he took it personally.

One of the men walked slowly up the concrete steps towards our row. A money belt was attached to his waist, bulging from his stomach like he was pregnant with cash. I looked down to try and hide my face as my father counted out a stack of bills.

He told me that he placed his bet on the underdog, Sunny Side Up, a white rooster with black spots on his wings. I asked him why he didn’t bet on the undefeated champion

Grim & Bear It, an all-black rooster with one white spot at the top of its head. He said he got a tip that Grim & Bear It had a bum leg and that there was a better pay out for betting on the underdog.

Whistling and cheering started as we eyed the cockpit waiting for the match to begin. One of the handlers, a short balding man wearing dusty black sandals, carried Sunny Side Up to the ring. He kissed the top of the rooster's head and held him up in the air as the crowd cheered. The rooster made a strange squeal and started squirming. The man held him to his chest and stroked the back of his head to calm him down. The other handler, a skinny man in a blue T-shirt and knee-length jean shorts, held Grim & Bear It up to Sunny. The roosters faced each other with their heads almost touching. The crowd whistled, screamed, and clapped as if to encourage the two roosters to kiss.

At the sound of a bell, the handlers loosened their grips and let go. The roosters bobbed their heads up and down then circled one another like the fight scene from *West Side Story*. My dad had told me that each of roosters had razor blades attached to their legs so they could slash their opponents, as if pecking each other to death wasn't violent enough. Sunny Side Up did some sort of shimmy, flapped his wings, and was up in the air. He came down and just missed Grim & Bear It's head. Grim jumped up too, wings outstretched while in mid-air, and came down, barely missing Sunny's head. This went on for a while. When one went up, the other stayed down, over and over again, seesawing like a choreographed dance. It was dizzying, but I couldn't look away. I just stared at the cockpit waiting for one to submit to the other. I thought of the pay-per-view boxing matches that my dad and uncles watched when I was a kid. The Thrilla in Manila that so

many Filipinos in America couldn't get enough of as if they were each personally hosting the fight of the century—Muhammad Ali versus Joe Frasier in their home country.

The crowd was yelling for Sunny and then for Grim like some sort of chant and then I started yelling for Sunny along with them. My father didn't join in but was staring intently at the ring as the two roosters kept at it. And then, Sunny jumped up one last time and came down hard on Grim's head. The razor that was strapped on Sunny's leg pierced the side of Grim's body and Grim let out a high-pitched scream that sounded like a teakettle signaling to be turned off. A trickle of blood made its way onto the dirt floor. He lifted his head up twice and tried to get up but then fell on his side. His wing fluttered and his body twitched a couple of times until there was nothing. Groups of men roared while others cursed and hissed. I stared at Grim's limp body as his handler made the sign of the cross and placed a hand on top of the rooster's wing as if to inject some life back into him.

I started to feel lightheaded and thought of sitting down but I couldn't take my eyes off the cockpit even though I feared I might faint. My father put his hand on my shoulder and it helped to keep me steady. I began to cry, the tears formed pools in my eyes making it hard to see. I wiped the tears with the back of my hand and leaned in toward my father. He put his arm around me, and it reminded me of when I was a child and he'd carry me to the couch when I fell asleep in front of the television.

The men in green vests weaved through the crowd and my father removed his arm from my shoulders to collect his share of the winnings. Well-worn bills were counted out and my dad pocketed most of it then handed me a few bills. He told me not to tell my mother that I saw him there. I told him I didn't want the money but he insisted I keep it.

The two white guys in front of us high-fived each other. Beer spilled onto their shirts, but they didn't seem to care. My father was wrong. They must have won.

A man in a blue shirt walked into the middle of the cockpit with a microphone in his hand to announce the next fight. I thought that we'd leave since my father had won but he told me that he was going to stay and try to double or even triple his money on the next fight.

"We should go back to the clinic or mom will be wondering what happened to us," I said.

"No, we can't leave now. I've won. We can win more. Your mom will be fine."

"Dad, c'mon. She'll be so angry at us. Let's go."

"Just one more fight," he said.

I looked at his face and I suddenly felt sorry for him. There was a part of me that wanted to stay and keep him company, but I didn't want to witness another gruesome match.

"Well, stay then. I'm leaving."

I pulled my cap down low and walked down the steps but got lost in a crowd of men. Someone knocked into me from the side and my cap fell off. I bent down to search for it by pushing aside peanut shells and cellophane candy wrappers. My hair fell down to my shoulders and I tried to hide it with my left arm as I reached for the cap with my right hand. I tucked my hair back into my cap, hoping that no one had noticed.

I stood up and felt the jab of an elbow to my side. A short plump man teetered back and forth between me and the others. He leaned on me and grabbed my shoulder to steady himself. I slapped his hand away and he groaned, looked at my face, then

whistled. I'd been caught. Two other men, my height but probably twice my weight, turned around and looked me up and down. One of them reached over as if to pet me. Another man behind burped loudly. The sour smell of beer rushed into my nostrils and I started to cough. Monstrous laughter exploded all around me.

I tried to push my way through the crowd but fell to the ground. My cheek landed on sharp peanut shells and started to bleed. A man's hand reached out and touched my shoulder. I punched at it, afraid that he was going to grab me. I was still on the ground. I closed my eyes and started kicking at whomever I could. A hand gripped my arm and pulled me up off the floor. I screamed with my eyes still closed.

“Miss! Tama na. Okay na. ”

I opened my eyes and saw Sunny Side Up's handler standing in front of me. He was holding the rooster in the crook of his right arm and patted me with his left hand as if I were a child. The rooster clucked a few times and stared at me with its beady eyes.

“You're hurt,” the handler said, handing me a white handkerchief from his pocket.

I took the handkerchief and pressed down hard on my cheek to stop the bleeding.

“Maraming salamat, po,” I said.

He nodded and rubbed the top of Sunny's head. “Okay, na?”

“Yes, I'm fine. I'm with my dad. He's in the stands somewhere. He'll be down soon. I should have stayed with him.”

“Kawawa naman.”

He felt pity for me but I was the one coming from America with my American dollars and he was the one who made a living raising roosters to fight and die.

“We should go out,” the handler said.

I followed him to the front entrance. The sunlight was harsh and it made me squint. He told me to sit down on a wooden bench that was underneath an acacia tree. A woman selling packets of chicklets, cigarettes, cough drops, and soda stood with her cart next to the tree. He handed the woman a few coins and asked her for a soda. She reached into her cooler, popped the cap off, and handed it to him. He gave me the bottle and said that it would make me feel better. The cold felt good going down and the sugar and caffeine gave me a little lift. The rooster clucked a few times as if asking for a sip too. The man made a cooing sound in response and then told me that he had to go back inside.

My father didn't come out even after the second fight had finished. I sat on the bench waiting for him and watched the woman help customers. One man bought a single cigarette from her and chatted her up while smoking it. Another customer bought a pack of chicklets for her son who immediately started snapping bubbles. I got up to leave when I heard my mother calling my name.

She was walking towards me. A stethoscope still dangling around her neck. Her black shoes were dusty. I could tell she was mad by the way she walked; quick steps, arms stiff. I didn't want to talk to her but there was nowhere to hide.

“Grace! I was worried. You were gone too long.”

“I'm fine. You didn't need to come. I was just leaving. How did you even know I was here?”

“The security guards told me,” she said.

“They did?” I tried to picture her bribing the security guards too.

The woman at the stand stared at us while fanning herself with her handkerchief.

“Look at your face. What happened,” she asked.

I’d forgotten about the blood on my cheek. It was probably dried by now.

“I fell. It’s nothing.”

“Ay naku. We have to clean it.”

She went through her bag to look for napkins. My mother was always carrying napkins. We’d go to a fast food place and she’d grab extra napkins. “Just in case” she’d say. I think it was because as a kid, I was always spilling things. She also had a small First Aid kit with her at all times—bandages, antibacterial ointment, ibuprofen. She took a few coins from her coin purse and handed them to the woman for a bottle of water that she used to wet the napkins with. She wiped my face and it reminded me of being a child again getting scraped and scratched from playing rough.

“You shouldn’t have come here. Gambling is your dad’s first and last love I tell you. You don’t need to see that.”

“But he won and he must still be winning because he’s hasn’t come out.”

“No, Grace. He probably won and then lost and then tried to win it back again and maybe won but then lost. I just hope he’s even.”

“You mean you wish he broke even.”

She finished cleaning my cheek then placed a Band Aid on my cut.

“Let’s go. He’ll come out when he’s done.”

“But, doesn’t it make you mad? Don’t you get frustrated with him?”

My mother breathed in deeply and exhaled. I thought that she would start crying. I waited but no tears came. I searched the creases on her face, the sunspots on the sides of her cheeks, and the droopiness in her eyes. I’d seen photos of her from before she got

married and had children and was surprised to see her so young and looking so relaxed, like she had never had a sleepless night. My mother was pretty then and she was still pretty, beautiful really, but the years had replaced the rounded edges of youth with the sharp angles of age. She took my hand and we walked away from the sabong, the gambling, the things that my father did that my mother didn't want us to talk about, at least for a little while.

Catching Fireflies

The fog crawled in from Ocean Beach, up and over Twin Peaks, along the heels of Sutro Tower towards Alamo Square where I sat on a wooden bench watching a border collie catch a green ball in midair. The dog looked happy just to be playing fetch. I wished my life could be so simple. I'd been laid off from being an editor at a tech company and was feeling sorry for myself. There I sat on that bench, watching other people's lives and wondering what they did for a living that allowed them to be at the park in the middle of a workday.

I pulled my hood up, grabbed my bag, and walked down and along Divisadero towards the Castro's neon sign, rainbow flags flapping back and forth in the breeze. Music blared from a club called The Café as men in tight jeans lined up outside. I slowed down to catch a whiff of cologne mixed with sweat. The sun was starting to set and I walked down towards Dolores Park where people were lounging on the grass. The strumming of a ukulele sounded out into the air. A red-haired woman in braids and a polka dotted dress walked around selling cookies out of a basket. I bought two snickerdoodles then walked up Diamond Heights and down towards West Portal. When it was dark, I shivered into a cab that took me back to my studio apartment in the Mission.

A month later, I moved back home to live with my parents two hours south in Monterey, a city alongside a horseshoe-shaped bay so deep that whales came with their babies to fatten themselves up in the summer before heading south for the winter. The landscape was dotted with cypress pine trees, orange poppies, and lavender-colored

succulents along a coastline that framed the dark blue waters of the bay. I didn't appreciate any of that natural beauty when I was a teenager who dreamed of living in city. When I told my parents that I was moving back home to save money while I looked for another job, my mother was delighted but my father was disappointed in me.

“See, Annabelle. We told you that you need to find something stable,” my father said over breakfast of garlic fried rice and pan-seared spam.

“When we moved to this country, we only had two-hundred dollars in our pocket, but we made it, we did it. Then you and your brother were born, and we knew that we wanted better for you,” he said.

I stared down at my cup of coffee, ashamed. I was almost thirty-five years old with no job, no boyfriend, and not much in terms of savings. At my age, my parents were practicing physicians with two kids, a house, retirement plans, and some money already saved for me and my brother's college tuitions.

“I know, Dad. I've heard it. You struggled, you made something of yourself. I get it.”

“I don't think you do. You just need to find something better, something that pays a good salary. You need to earn more. You have to think of when you have kids. How do you pay for their college? And retirement. You can't count on Social Security. That's nothing.”

He looked out the window at the large pine tree in our backyard. He'd been haggling with a few tree-cutting services to cut it down but they all charged a lot more than he was willing to pay and so sometimes he'd just stare at the tree as if by just looking at it would knock it down. His dark hair had finally started to get a few strands of

grey as opposed to my mom who had been dying her greying hair since I could remember.

“She’ll figure it out. She just needs some time,” my mom said while watering a hanging fern next to the window.

“Maybe you can get a job as a drug rep,” my father said. “It pays well and it’s easy. I can talk to the girls that come into the clinic and ask them about it.” I cringed at the thought of him flirting with one of the twenty-something ex-sorority blondes who came in hawking drugs to treat erectile dysfunction.

“Eww, no,” I said. “I’ll find something. I don’t need your help.”

“Well, obviously you do need our help. You have no job.”

“I’ll figure it out. Don’t worry. Geezus!”

“Okay, that’s enough.” My mother placed the watering can down on the counter.

I took two gulps of my lukewarm coffee and got up to clean off the remnants of breakfast from my plate in the kitchen sink.

“Just leave it. I’ll do it.” She sprayed some water on the plate and set it down to soak. “Oh, tonight. The Sorianos are coming for dinner. You remember their daughter Stacey?”

“Stacey. Of course I remember her. The summa cum laude Harvard Law something or other.”

“No, not Harvard. I think she went to Yale. According to her mother, she’s working in Cambodia for some human rights thing. She was always so bright. Maybe she can help you.”

“I’m sure she has better things to do, Mom.”

I hadn't seen Stacey since we were teenagers. Our mothers had met when they were medical students in the Philippines. They stayed in touch even after they both emigrated to the United States. A few weekends a year, my parents drove the two hours from Monterey to El Sobrante so that my mom could tsismis with Stacey's mom about the other women from their graduating class – how fat Velma was getting or how Myra's new boyfriend was so pangit and too bad that her husband died young because he was so handsome. Our dads would sit on the large leather sectional couch and watch ESPN while drinking Heinekens.

The Sorianos came at six o'clock sharp. Mr. Soriano showed up wearing a sweater as he always did even if it was warm out. He had narrow shoulders and a slight frame unlike my father's large build. Dr. Santiago was dressed in all white except for a blue scarf. She was so petite, she looked like a child from behind. Her skin was pale, almost translucent, unlike my mother's skin that was tan even in the middle of winter. We sat in the formal dining room and not at the kitchen table where we usually ate. My mother brought out the Royal Dalton china decorated with pink roses and gold trim. She cooked some of her best dishes: oxtail kare-kare, chicken pancit and vegetable lumpia. The oxtail was cooked just so it fell off the bone. We dipped the crisp lumpia into garlicky vinegar sauce and twirled our forks around the pancit like spaghetti.

I ate while my parents chatted with the Sorianos in Tagalog. Sometimes I'd catch a few words or an entire phrase that I understood and so I'd nod or laugh on cue. Dr. Soriano made her famous leche flan for dessert which she brought to most gatherings.

“I’m so sorry, Annabelle. Your mom told me about the lay-off. I’m sure you’ll find something else soon. You seem to have a good head on your shoulders,” Dr. Soriano said.

“She didn’t pick the right profession. She needs something stable,” my dad said.

“Oh c’mon, Paul, she’ll get back on her feet. I saw in the news so many of those tech companies are letting people go. It’s not her fault,” Dr. Soriano said.

“You could go back to school. Get your degree in medicine like your parents. You’re still young enough,” Mr. Soriano said. “Or go into law like me and Stacey. Us lawyers, we’re not so bad,” he said with a wink.

“No, she has to do what she wants to do,” Dr. Soriano said. “What do you want to do, Annabelle?”

“Not sure yet. I think I just need some time to figure things out,” I said.

She stared at me with a tight smile on her face. “Well, you know Stacey might be able to help. Maybe you’d like to get in touch with her. Even though she’s in Cambodia she still has some connections here in the Bay Area. Actually...” She looked at her husband. “You know that deed we need signed? Maybe Annabelle can bring it to Stacey?”

He put his spoon down. “I’m sure Annabelle has better things to do than fly to Cambodia. We can hire a courier.”

“Hire a courier? Someone we don’t know. Bakit hindi si Annabelle?”

“What’s going on?” my father asked.

The Sorianos explained to me that they were trying to sell a large plot of land in the Philippines that was deeded to the entire family, so they needed Stacey’s signature on

the documents. They said they could Fed Ex it to her but were worried the documents would get lost, or worse, stolen and falsified.

“Please, Annabelle. Say yes. We’ll pay for your flight and hotel. Give you some spending money.”

“That sounds like a good idea. I’m sure Stacey would love to see you,” my mother said, looking at me from across the table.

“I don’t know if she should go. Isn’t that a dangerous place?” my father asked.

“No, it’s fine now. Stacey has lived there so many years and hasn’t complained about danger,” Dr. Soriano said.

“Annabelle should stay here and look for a job and not go galavanting around the world,” my father said.

I looked at him with his carefully coifed hair and thinning mustache.

“Sure, I’ll do it,” I said. He stared at me like he stared at the tree outside but just like the tree, I wasn’t going to budge just because he wanted me to.

When I landed in Siem Reap, the sun had just started to set, coloring the sky a burnt orange with patches of blue. The small airport, with peaked roof and short palm trees flanking its sides, looked more like a tourist center than an international hub for flights in and out of Cambodia. We were instructed by the flight attendants to exit out the back and down a set of moveable metal stairs. The air felt heavy and moist, a sharp

contrast from the dry, recycled air we'd been breathing on the fourteen-hour flight from San Francisco.

Inside the airport, it was bright and clean like a hospital. The shiny floors made my rubber-soled sandals squeak as I went through immigration and out the doors on the other side to hail a taxi that could take me to my hotel. I stood waiting as sweat formed on my forehead, neck, and the back of my knees. Five taxis drove by with passengers already inside. A man on a dusty moped pulled up and said he could take me anywhere I needed for a good price. I asked a woman standing at an information kiosk if I could trust these pedicab drivers. She nodded then waved her hand in his direction. The driver hopped off his moped, grabbed my big backpack, and placed it on the platform in front of his seat. I thought he was going to take off with it, but instead he motioned for me to sit behind him.

I swung my leg over the seat then circled my arms around his narrow waist. His shirt was damp with sweat. It smelled like a mix of diesel fuel and burnt leaves.

“Lean with me or we fall off,” he said.

The air was thick with humidity and dust. I covered my mouth with a handkerchief that I had stuffed in my back pocket. It reminded me of the time my parents and I stopped at the side of a dusty road to buy durian fruit during a visit to the provinces in the Philippines when I was eleven. There were pedicabs there too, some carrying a family of four or five. I thought the similarity interesting and was excited to be visiting another Asian country. Aside from a trip to the Philippines when I was a kid, I only visited Europe during a month-long post-college backpacking trip with a friend and a Eurail pass a decade ago.

The driver leaned right as we turned out of the airport and onto another dusty road. His name was Benni. He laughed a lot and liked to talk as he slowed down to dodge potholes in the road. He was mostly interested in why I came to Cambodia, *such a poor country with a bad past*, he said more than once.

“It’s good that people come to visit. Because before they were afraid. Landmines in the fields. Government unstable,” he said.

We made a sharp right turn onto a wide paved road. I gripped Benni’s side and felt the bumpy outline of his rib cage underneath his thin shirt. We rode up to a small hotel with a yellow smiley face and a sign that said Happy Guest House. Next to it stood a crowded restaurant with a Coca-Cola sign out front and people slurping noodles from big white bowls.

Stacey had recommended the hotel. She said it was clean, fairly cheap, and not swarming with tourists. She sent me a short, friendly email as soon as she found out from her mother that I was coming. She lived in Phnom Penh but was going to be in Siem Reap for the week to work with clients and that I could meet up with her there.

The lobby’s white marble floors looked as if they’d just been polished, and a faint smell of jasmine drifted through the air. A petite woman stood behind the counter. Her black hair was tied up in a neat bun. She looked up from her computer and smiled. Her face was smooth and absent of any wrinkles. Her face was a bit lighter than her neck because of the make-up she was wearing. Her nametag said Mae.

“Welcome to Jasmine Hotel. May I see your passport please?”

I handed her my passport. She flipped through the pages then set it down.

“Annabelle Lopez. You’re American?” she asked. “You look Asian.”

“Yes, but I’m American. I was born in California. My parents are from the Philippines.”

“Oh, you’re Philippine. We have a few working here in Siem Reap.”

“Yes, my friend works here. In Phnom Penh actually.”

She tilted her head a little and stared at me, smiled, then tapped a few keys on her computer. She handed me my passport and the room key.

“You’re upstairs. Room 2-0-5.”

My room was barely big enough to fit a double bed, but like the lobby, it was meticulously clean. A small air-conditioning unit, turned on high, sat near the ceiling on the opposite side of the bed. The bathroom was unusually large compared to the size of the room. The shower had no curtain or sliding glass door, and the drain was dipped slightly down to prevent water from pooling.

I sat on the edge of the bed, lay back with arms outstretched like an eagle, and drifted off to sleep. I woke up to the sound of a phone ringing. It was dark out and the digital clock on the bedside table read 7:30 pm. My stomach hurt from hunger. I’d slept for two hours.

“Hello, Miss. It’s Mae from the front desk. You have a friend here in the lobby. A Miss Stacey.”

“Oh shoot, that’s right. Tell her I’ll be right down. Five, ten minutes tops.”

I’d forgotten that Stacey was meeting me at the hotel, and I wanted to make a good impression.

I quickly washed my face and changed into my nicest pair of shorts and a black T-shirt that smelled of lavender-scented laundry detergent. I grabbed my shoulder bag and headed down to the lobby.

Stacey was sitting on the couch flipping through a travel magazine. I had pictured her to be in some sort of designer outfit, not the linen blouse, flowy skirt, and Birkenstocks she wore. Her hair was cut in a short bob and her skin was tanned brown like mine.

She walked over and gave me a hug.

“Anna! You look great!” she said.

“Thanks so do you, but different. Did you do something with your hair?” I asked.

“Well, I washed it,” she laughed. “Seriously though, it’s been forever.”

“I know. I can’t believe it’s been so long,” I said.

“My mom says you’ve got some high-paying job at a tech company,” she said.

“She said that? I mean, I work in tech but not making the big bucks.”

“Really? My mom is always exaggerating about people to me. She thinks it’ll motivate me or something.”

“So, are you a hot shot lawyer?” I asked.

“What? God no. I work with NGOs out here, helping them with legal stuff. Also not making the big bucks.”

We talked and laughed about how our mothers tended to pad our resumes as we headed to a small restaurant that served French-Cambodian cuisine in a touristy part of town. Small potted palm trees flanked the entrance and the tables were set with rattan placemats and orange cloth napkins. A few tourists sipped on tropical-looking cocktails

over quiet conversation. The scene looked like an animated photo from a travel brochure. I was a little disappointed that Stacey didn't take me to a more local place.

"I know it's super touristy, but the food is excellent here," Stacey said as if she had read my mind.

The sweet smell of Thai basil drifted through the air making my stomach grumble with hunger. The waitress led us to a table in the corner and handed us a couple of menus.

"The noodles are to die for. Seriously something you've never tasted before, not even in the Bay Area," Stacey said flipping to a page with pictures of steaming bowls of soup.

"Sounds good to me. I'm starved. I haven't eaten since the plane," I said.

"Oh, damn. Then you have to get a big bowl I was gonna suggest the small one."

We ordered our food and talked about the various family functions we had to go to when we were kids. The parties with really good food and even better gossip. The women smelling of sickening floral perfume and the men doused in musky aftershave.

"Remember when I was like nine years old and in love with your brother Peter? I mean, he was like in high school," Stacey said. "I know you don't want to hear this but your brother's a good-looking fella."

"Gross. Yeah, I've heard. But to me, he still smells of old gym socks and hides girlie mags underneath his mattress."

"Oh my God. That's right! I remember when we snuck in there and looked at that one with the woman strapped into that thing."

"Okay, let's not talk about this. I don't want to think of my brother...you know...like that."

Stacey laughed. “Sure, sure. Yeah, that’s disturbing.”

The waitress walked over with two big bottles of ice-cold San Miguel beer, and a spicy green mango salad doused in pungent fish sauce. The flavors were a perfect mixture of salty, sour, and sweet. We talked about what we’d been up to since high school. She went to college on the East Coast and I stayed in California. Both of our moms liked to gossip to one another about how well their daughters were doing, as if they were trying to one-up each other.

“Our mothers are so weird. They’re friends, but constantly compete with one another,” Stacey said. “But that’s how Filipinos are, that crab mentality. You can’t move up without someone trying to pull your ass down.”

“I don’t know. Immigrants have it tough,” I said. “There’s just not enough room for everyone to make it in the States so of course you have to compete for space right?”

“I guess. But I don’t like it when my mom brags to her friends about me. I’m like lay off.” Stacey looked away.

“It’s great though that your parents sent me out here. I needed to get away. My parents are driving me nuts. Treating me like I’m a teenager again.”

“You know sending you out here to sign those documents was just an excuse to check up on me.”

“Probably. But if it’s any consolation. It seems like they are really proud of the work you’re doing here.”

Stacey nodded and finished off her mango salad.

The waitress came back with two steaming bowls of curry noodles with cilantro on top and sliced baguettes on the side. I broke off a piece of the crispy baguette and

dipped it into the curry. The savory flavors mingled together in my mouth. I tried to guess the ingredients. The dominant taste was of coconut milk but there was also the sourness of maybe tamarind or citrus mixed with soy sauce or fish sauce or both. Plus, a hint of coriander. The flavor was too complicated to break down but was like no other dish I'd ever tasted.

After we finished our noodles, I downed the rest of my beer, but Stacey couldn't finish hers. She said she was impressed at how much I could drink in one sitting and that she remembered me mostly as quiet and reserved. She was right. I was shy as kid, but something changed in college and I came out of my shell, started going to dorm parties, and realized I had a high tolerance for alcohol.

“You don't even get that Asian glow. Look at me. I'm like beet red, right?”

Stacey asked, pointing at her face.

“Well, yeah, you are kind of pink,” I said.

“You're too polite. I'm red as those fake roses by the counter over there,” she pointed at the hostess stand.

The waitress walked over and handed us the bill. The total was the equivalent of a cup of coffee and pastry at a coffeeshop back home.

“They haven't learned to rip off the tourists yet. But, in a year or two, these prices will double, maybe triple,” Stacey said.

We walked out and towards a row of noodle stands and karaoke bars.

“One more drink?” Stacey asked. “And hey, if the mood strikes, we could do karaoke?”

“What? Reunite the girl duo. What was it called again? S and M. Ha! Our parents had no idea.”

When we were twelve, Stacey and I sang karaoke whenever there was a Minus-One karaoke machine at one of the Filipino parties. One of our favorite songs to sing to was “Time After Time” by Cyndi Lauper. We took it seriously. I would imagine that instead of being in the living room we were on set, filming a video or standing in front of thousands of fans waving lighters in the air swaying back and forth in the dark. Another favorite was “Love is a Battlefield” by Pat Benatar. The two of us with raised fists in the air, full of adolescent angst, singing about the pain of romantic love even though we had yet to get our hearts broken.

We walked up to an outdoor bar dimly lit with small lightbulbs hanging over the tables. We took a seat at a small metal table near the front where a short Asian man with shiny red cheeks was singing a sad love song. A waitress walked over and took our drink order. We ordered two San Miguel beers that came in glasses filled with ice.

“I guess we drink these watered down?” I asked.

“It’s actually better with ice, stays cold,” Stacey said. “So, my mom told me you were laid off. She asked me if I knew anyone who could help you find a job in the Bay. I might. I’ll email you some contacts.”

“Thanks, I appreciate it, but I should be fine. I’ve got some leads.”

“Well, doesn’t hurt to have more right? Besides, my mom would kill me if she didn’t think I was helping you find something.”

“I’m so tired of people worrying about me.” I poured beer onto the ice and watched as it bubbled up and over the side of the glass then took a sip.

“I get it. They worry about me too you know. They think I’m crazy to be out here. Yeah, they brag to their friends about the amazing work I’m doing but the reality is, they hate me being so far from home. They’d rather me work at my dad’s firm reading over real estate contracts. Ugh. That’s the thing I want to do.”

I stared at the thin wrinkles around her eyes. We were both getting older but she didn’t look as serious as she used to, not as weighed down by responsibilities which I thought was strange and I envied her.

The waitress came around and handed us a black binder filled with songs, and scraps of paper. There were two yellow pencils on our table for writing down the song numbers. I flipped through the plastic-covered pages organized by artist, the pages sticky from spilled beer.

“They have ‘Time after Time’, ” I said, grabbing the pencil to write down the number.

When it was our turn to sing, I followed Stacey to the front of the bar. We stared at the TV screen as the lyrics changed from white to pink to indicate what word to sing when, but I didn’t need to see the words because I knew them by heart. At first, I was nervous to be singing in a bar full of strangers in a country I’d just landed in. But standing next to Stacey gave me courage and brought me back to the time when we were kids and unafraid of making fools of ourselves. We sang into our mics doing our best impression of Cyndi Lauper’s the nasally voice and sullen expression in the video of the song that aired on MTV.

When we were finished, we sat back down and toasted to ourselves with the watered-down beer. Stacey told me that she hadn't been practicing law for years and that she had been working as a fundraiser for an NGO in Cambodia.

"I haven't told my parents yet. I know they'll be pissed," she said.

"Wow, and here I thought you were this high-powered lawyer working on human rights or something amazing like that. I felt like such a loser compared to you."

"Are you serious? And I thought you were going to become a billionaire overnight as soon as your startup got bought out by Google," she said.

"Not even close. Your parents paid for this trip." I stared down at my beer. I didn't want to look at Stacey as I said it.

"Good. They should have. Don't worry, Anna. You'll get back on your feet. You're tough. I still remember you hitting that bully that one time I was scared of him, but you were like *wham!*" She made a fist and punched the air between us.

"That's only because Peter did the whole big bro thing and taught me how to fight and I was a tomboy, so fearless. Now I'm afraid of so many things."

"Me too. Shit. I can't even tell my parents what I'm really doing here." She started to tear up and wiped her face with the back of her hand.

We finished our beers and paid the check. Stacey walked me back to my hotel and told me to meet her at the Angkor Wat at sunset because it was a "must see." I told her that I'd definitely meet her there and that if I didn't get to bed soon, I would collapse. I gave her a hug and watched as she walked away.

When I got to the hallway that led to my room, I saw a short man wearing dusty sandals crouched down in front of my door holding a jar. As I got closer, I could see that

he was trying to scoop up large cockroaches scuttling towards the tiny gap between my door and the ground. I stopped and watched as he scooped up each and every one of them while sweat dripped from his forehead.

“I’m sorry, Miss. They like the air conditioning.” He laughed a little like it was a game.

“That’s disturbing. I mean, I’m sorry I left it on in there.”

“Oh no, no problem. Too humid. It’s okay now. I’ve got them,” he said, closing the lid.

Even though I was tired, my mind was racing, and it took me a while to get to sleep. I kept thinking about our conversation. Stacey wasn’t a lawyer anymore and part of me felt relieved that she wasn’t as amazing as her parents had made her out to be. When I finally fell asleep, I dreamed of cockroaches roaming the streets of Siem Reap in search of cold places to hide.

The next day, just before sunset, I took a taxi to the Angkor Wat. The driver dropped me off next to a line of tour buses. Groups of tourists stood around speaking with one another in different languages, waiting for their guides to lead them. Some were taking pictures of the Angkor Wat in the distance. It was smaller than I had imagined but still majestic. Bright green palm trees framed the entrance. A long footbridge led the way to the entrance, across a moat. The soil had a tinge of orange. I looked around and didn’t see Stacey but noticed specks of light from the corner of my eye.

Off to my right, down a narrow path, I saw the tiny lights floating above the grass and into the trees a short distance away. I walked towards the lights, and as I got closer, noticed that they were fireflies. The only time I'd seen fireflies was during a high school trip to Washington, D.C. I remember all of us were so thrilled at seeing them because we never saw them growing up in California. Two fireflies floated next to me like tiny sparks from a campfire. Their blinking lights dimmed to a faint glow almost in unison. More sparks of light appeared along the grass and into the trees. It was a mating ritual, a call and response in hopes of finding companionship. Even in the darkness, they could find one another. I read an article that each firefly has their own distinct blinking pattern, like a fingerprint or the sound of one's voice.

I held my palm out in hopes that one would land on it as I'd seen children do in movies. But the fireflies floated by as if they didn't even notice I was there. I followed them down a narrow path flanked by dense foliage and kept walking until I got to a clearing in the trees where a smaller temple stood. The sky was alight in a tangerine glow as the sun started to set. I walked up the worn stones towards the top, going higher than the other tourists who had gathered there. Indentations in the rock made the climb easier. I sat cross-legged atop the highest point and looked out into the distance. I got out my camera and took a few shots as the sun inched its way towards the horizon against a soundtrack of *ooohs* and *aaahs* from the tourists just below me, a few of them clapping in unison. I inhaled and exhaled in a slow rhythm and stared at the distance between me and the ground below. In the distance I could just make out a few blinking lights in the trees. The longer I stared, the more fireflies appeared until it looked like the night sky had fallen onto the trees. If I squinted just a little, the lights turned into a fuzzy mosaic.

Stacey apologized for being late. I saw her after I climbed down and walked over to where the tour buses had parked. She told me there was some drama at work and that she rushed over as fast as she could, but hoped I'd caught the sunset anyway.

"It was a must-see, just as you told me," I said.

"Good, good." She looked out into the distance. "I see the fireflies are out en masse."

"Yeah, it's beautiful. You don't see that in California."

"True, so true. California. Hmmm." Stacey started to cry. I stood there not knowing what to do.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"Sorry, actually, there was no work drama," she said, steadying herself. "I was on the phone with my mom. That's why I was late." She rubbed her eyes with the back of her hand. "I wanted to be honest with her, you know, like what you talked about. Being fearless."

I looked at her dark eyes and placed my hand on her shoulder as she cried.

"She asked about you. Did you get in okay? Did I sign the paperwork yet and I said not yet but that I'll be sure to sign it before you leave."

Stacey looked out into the distance and watched as the tourists started stepped into their tour buses.

“I told her that I quit law. Just like that. I said it and I felt brave...until she said that I was being foolish, that I was making a mistake and I should leave Cambodia, come back to California and work with my dad. Like I would ever do that.”

“I’m so sorry. But...I’m sure she just needs it to sink in right?”

“No, my mom is a stubborn ass woman. She’ll never let it go.”

“Maybe our parents will never be satisfied,” I said. “They expect too much of us.”

“I did all the right things. Went to the right schools, got the right job, but it nearly killed me. When I came here, I felt so free being so far away from them,” she said.

It was getting dark. Off in the distance, sparks of light floated in the trees creating patterns that looked like constellations.

“Wow, look at all these fireflies,” Stacey said. “I always get a kick out of seeing them, like a kid. Silly huh?”

“Not at all. It’s almost magical.” I held my palm out as one floating by. It landed for a few seconds, then floated off again.

I thought about that song Stacey and I used to sing when we were kids, the one we didn’t sing at the karaoke bar about love being a battlefield. But love shouldn’t be a fight, it should be about accepting one another without expectations. Something as simple as the fireflies emitted their sparks of light in the darkness, hoping to be found.

Running

Sara leaned against the bar, took a sip of her gin and tonic, then checked the time on her phone. Ben was late. He'd been working a lot lately trying to get the attention of the CEO who he hoped would give him a coveted executive position. When Sara first met him, he didn't talk about climbing the corporate ladder, but eventually the allure of money and more responsibility motivated him. She couldn't blame him his ambition. If she were in his position, she would want the same for herself. But she couldn't stand it when he was late. It was their wedding anniversary after all, and she hoped he would have put in the effort to be on time.

Both of her parents had been in the military and made it a point to arrive five minutes early to everything. On Sunday mornings, her mother would rouse Sara and her sister out of bed with the smell of longonisa, eggs, and garlic fried rice, hours before they had to be at church. When Sara realized how early it was, she'd try to stay in bed longer, but her mother insisted she get up. This punctuality stuck with Sara into adulthood. When meeting friends for dinner or drinks, she'd get to the place early and order a seltzer water or a cocktail.

Her phone buzzed a text from Ben:

Still at the office. Fixing a bug. Done soon.

Sara texted back:

Really? It's after six.

Ben texted:

So sorry. Leaving soon. Promise! ☺

Annoyed, she scrolled through her Instagram feed. Her co-worker Carla posted a blurry photo of a fuzzy-haired newborn, her cousin Bebot posted a photo of fried chicken drenched in gravy next to a lump of white rice, and her friend Derek posted a photo of his puggle Milo showing off a toothy grin. She scrolled through her Facebook feed and stopped at a post from Jeanine, her friend from college, that said, “It’s always darkest before the storm.” She remembered Jeanine in the common room of their college dorm late at night, wearing a baggy sweatshirt and boiling hot water in an electric kettle for ramen. Sara typed, “thinking of you, hugs!” in the comments. Two decades had already passed since those all-nighters cramming for exams and Jeanine was still as gloomy.

Ben chose the bar where they were to meet. It was in Nolita and was one of his favorites. Sara considered it a dive, but he disagreed, saying that it was “neighborhoody” and had just the right amount of charm with its mismatched seats and hardwood floors that smelled of stale beer and cleaning detergent. The happy hour drinks were cheap and the bartenders were unpretentious – two qualities that were increasingly hard to find in the city.

The ice in Sara’s gin and tonic began to melt as she swirled her glass in small circles. She sipped the last of it and ordered another one. A rum and coke this time. She needed the caffeine to keep her awake for the evening because she’d gotten up early to get in a six-mile run. After drinks, her and Ben had planned to take a stroll to the West Village for dinner, but with the rain, they’d probably get a Lyft.

The bar started to fill up with office workers rushing to make it in time for happy hour. A group of people walked in together, crowded under a few umbrellas. Each of

them wore orange tags with their names handwritten in black marker underneath a logo that said WorkRelate. One of them, a man with greying hair named Carl, grabbed a couple of drink menus while the rest of the group crowded around him to take a look. It reminded her of getting drinks with co-workers when she still worked in an office writing copy for a small ad agency.

Thursdays at six o'clock she and her co-workers would head over to the Mexican restaurant across the street where they'd get two-for-one margaritas and complain about their prickly boss. Sara missed their company. Lately, most of her days were spent either writing at home or at the coffeeshop a few blocks from her apartment. She thought it was a good idea when she accepted a job at a company that let employees work remotely, but she didn't anticipate the loneliness. Sometimes she'd meet up with a friend for lunch or take her French bulldog Rudy for a long walk in the park in the afternoon to get some fresh air and observe the goings-on of the neighborhood.

The door to the bar opened and Sara felt a rush of cold wind against her cheek. A man stood there for a while letting the cold air in. He scanned the room searching for someone. She hated it when people didn't close the door right away. As if to match the autumn leaves that started to change color and fall onto the sidewalks all over the city, he wore a dark orange parka and brown corduroy pants. He was slim and tall—a runner's body, Sara thought. She recognized him. He was in her marathon training class that met twice a week at Columbus Circle. They were in the same pace group but had never been chatted with one another as did some of the other runners. She had wanted to talk to him a couple of times but was always too tired or too shy. Besides, she thought he was almost too handsome and was afraid that her attraction to him would show. Unlike some of the

other runners, he wasn't bony with long limbs as if they'd been stretched out. He looked fit but not in a fanatical way, like someone who worked out more than the average person but not spiraling into obsession.

He leaned over the bar two stools down from her and ordered a whiskey. As the bartender made the man's drink, Sara grabbed a thick paper coaster from a stack on the bar and fingered it with her right hand. She was suddenly nervous sitting near him out in the wild, outside of the running group, and needed a distraction. She placed the coaster halfway off of the edge of the bar, flipped it, and caught it in midair. The man moved towards her with his drink, sat down on the stool next to her, and took a sip. She could just make out the peaty smell of the whiskey and the clink of ice against glass as he set the drink down. She flipped the coaster again.

"Nice one," he said, leaning in.

"Thanks. Trick I learned in college." Sara placed the coaster back on the counter.

"Ah yes, it's funny how we can remember the drinking games we learned, but not historical facts or scientific theories," he said.

His dark hair was slick from the rain. He brushed it away from his eyes with his left hand and Sara noticed he was wearing a thick silver wedding band that was a nice contrast against his brown skin.

Her phone buzzed a text from Ben:

Still at office. Leaving soon.

She texted back:

Ok, but hurry. Sucks sitting here waiting.

Ben texted:

Aww, I know. Packing up asap. I swear!

She placed her phone on the bar and took a sip of her drink. The man pushed his stool closer to her.

“You’re in that running group,” he said.

Sara felt her face get warm either from the drink or from the fact that he recognized her. “Yes, we’re in the same pace group.” She wanted to take back what she said, to be coy and pretend that she hadn’t recognized him at all.

“We’re supposed to do 14 miles tomorrow,” he said. “Not sure I should be out tonight.” He looked at her glass. “Maybe you shouldn’t either.”

“Ah, c’mon. What’s a few drinks gonna do? We’ve been training our asses off for a few months now. I’m sure we’ll be fine.” She raised her glass. “To us!”

“To us,” he said, lifting up his glass to meet hers. “Let’s hope for dry weather on race day, not like tonight.”

Sara watched as two of the women from the WorkRelate group sipped on their cocktails and giggled at something one of them said. There was an ease to how the two women interacted with one another that made Sara long for her friends back home in California. Since moving to New York over a decade ago, she’d only made a few close friends and all of them had left the city either for work or to move back to their much more affordable hometowns. Ben’s family lived upstate and the subject of where they’d eventually settle down came up from time to time. She wanted to go back to the Bay Area, but he preferred to stay in New York. Neither one of them had attempted to make the final decision yet.

They had tried to have children but Sara couldn't get pregnant and when she turned forty, she decided they should stop trying and Ben agreed. She didn't want to put her aging body through all the infertility treatments anymore and it meant she could train for more marathons without taking a break. Training had been tougher after turning forty, but Sara was determined to get faster and stronger until she couldn't anymore. The thought of her body rushing headlong into middle age scared her. She didn't admit that to her closest friends and not even to Ben. He was five years younger than she and didn't seem to care about getting older like she did.

"I'm Vijay by the way."

He looked much younger than she did. Sara wondered if she asked him to guess her age what he would say. Did he notice the creases at the corners of her eyes when she smiled and the crepe-like skin on the back of her hand as she lifted the drink to her mouth?

"Sara. Nice to finally meet you."

He ordered another drink, a beer this time. Sara watched his Adam's apple move up and down as he took a sip from his pint glass.

"Have you done any other marathons?" Sara asked.

"Yeah, this'll be my third. How about you?"

"My tenth actually."

"Wow, ten. That's impressive."

"Impressive...or crazy," she said. "But whatever it is, I'm addicted."

"Me too. I never regret having gone out for a run," he said. "I'm a freak, we're freaks. Love it though. Makes me feel like I've accomplished something."

Her phone buzzed on the counter.

Heading to Union Square to catch the train. Be there soon!

Sara stared at the screen for a moment but didn't text back. She placed the phone in her jacket pocket, then took another sip of her drink.

"Everything okay?" Vijay asked.

"Yes, everything is just fine," she said.

When Sara first started dating Ben nearly a decade ago, he showed up to all of her races to cheer her on, no matter how short the distance. He even went to the 5K fun runs. Their first Thanksgiving together at her parents' house in Sausalito, he got up early and cheered her on at the Turkey Trot in neighboring Tiburon. But after a year of dating, they moved in together and he stopped going to most of her races. Sara understood. She raced a lot in those days. Running was the only thing that kept her sane. But in those early mornings before a race, as she sipped her cup of coffee and munched on a banana, she wondered if it wasn't a metaphor for their marriage. Her other coupled-up friends seemed relatively happy in their relationships, but Sara wondered if they were all just playing a complex game of Jenga, taking turns removing and replacing blocks from an unstable structure.

"My wife thinks I'm certifiably insane," Vijay said. "She thinks running is boring. I used to too, but after I turned thirty, I felt like I was getting old and like men do, I wanted a physical challenge to prove I was still vital," he laughed. "Three years and three marathons later, I'm hooked."

Sara liked talking to him because it was easy and they shared a passion for running. She couldn't remember the last time she and Ben had shared something they were both passionate about. She swirled the ice in her glass.

"My husband doesn't get it either. I keep telling him that I'm literally running away from a mid-life crisis," she said.

"That's funny! But I doubt you're in mid-life."

"Hmmm, well, you'd be surprised how old I am."

"Age is just a number, really. And you're fast, I've watched you run." He placed his drink down and put his hand on the bar next to the stack of coasters.

Sara stared at his lean fingers and imagined them moving slowly across her body. She placed her hand on his and thought he might pull away but he didn't. Her cheeks felt warm and she was lightheaded. The WorkRelate women smiled at her and pointed to Vijay. One of them raised her glass as if to toast to her.

Vijay's cell phone buzzed on the bar. He looked down at a text he'd received. The light from the screen illuminated his angled cheekbones and long, dark lashes.

"Damn," he said. "Excuse me for a moment." He moved his hand from underneath hers, got up of the stool, and maneuvered through the crowd towards the door.

Sara took a sip of her drink and texted Ben.

Take your time. I ran into a friend.

She placed her phone down and waited for the ellipses to appear on the screen to show that he was writing a reply, but there was nothing. She scrolled through her Instagram feed. Colorful pictures of faraway places posted by travel bloggers filled her

screen. One photo showed a group of elongated wooden boats on a river in Thailand, filled to the brim with fruits and vegetables that looked almost alien. Another photo showed rows of neon-colored macarons displayed from a patisserie window in Paris.

She and Ben hadn't taken a vacation together in over a year. She'd been traveling for work a lot. Apparently, remote work meant she still had to go to company headquarters in Portland, Oregon four times a year. And Ben didn't want to take too much time off anyway in hopes of getting that promotion.

"Would you like another?" asked the bartender, a petite woman with a pixie haircut and a peacock tattoo on the inside of her arm.

"Sure, but make it a beer this time," Sara said. "The hefeweizen on tap, thanks."

"You been here before. With a different guy," the bartender said, pulling the tap down, the beer bubbling over the pint glass just a bit.

"Yeah, I've been here a few times," she said. "It's sort of a regular place, I guess." She motioned to the empty stool next to her. "This guy here...we just realized we're training for the New York marathon together."

"Really? Dang, girl. I can barely run a mile without passing out. And you're doing a marathon. Good for you!" She placed a coaster down on the bar and rested the beer on top.

"Thanks. The training's been grueling, but I think we're ready."

Sara reached for her purse that was dangling from a hook underneath the bar.

"How much do I owe you?"

"On me. For the marathon. Come back here to celebrate."

Sara imagined coming back to the bar with Vijay instead of Ben for a drink after the marathon. They'd wear their medals along with the other marathon finishers to trade stories about the route; the long elevation of the Queensboro Bridge and the adrenaline rush that comes when running up Fifth Avenue with crowds of spectators screaming from both sides of the street.

Vijay came back inside and placed his hand on her shoulder. She leaned into him. He smelled of city rain and his hair and shirt were damp. He grabbed his drink and downed it then asked the bartender for the check.

"I gotta go. My wife...she's at Union Square but they're not letting anyone in the station. Apparently, there's police activity. People are saying a suspicious package, maybe a bomb, but who knows. It's all hearsay. She's freaking out, so I told her I'd meet her there."

"Union Square? Are you sure?"

"Yes, Union Square. That's what she said. That's where she is."

Sara checked her phone for a text from Ben but there was nothing. She picked it up to call him but after a few rings it went straight to voicemail. She checked Twitter for any news updates and saw something posted about a bomb threat at Union Square.

"I need to go. Ben, my husband, he was texting me from there. He was late. Why was he so late? I wouldn't have done that at the bar." She spoke to him as if trying to confess.

Vijay kept his hand on her shoulder. "Why don't we go together? We can get a cab, an Uber, whatever."

"No, no. Go without me."

Sara picked up her handbag and jacket that were hanging on a hook under the bar, then pushed her way through the crowd to get to the door. Vijay was yelling for her, but she didn't turn around. She stepped outside. The rain was falling down steadily. Sara began to run. The only thing she wanted to do was run. She surged forward down East Houston and up Lafayette St. Her boots hit the wet pavement, first one foot then the other, back and forth in a staccato rhythm that helped her keep a steady pace. One block, two blocks, three blocks, she was almost there. Her lungs started burning but her legs stayed strong. The streets were packed but she weaved her way through the masses dodging precariously held umbrellas and people walking too slow on the sidewalks.

She thought of Ben waiting on the platform, relieved to be off work, not knowing the danger that was awaiting him. He would be happy to see her. He was always happy to see her no matter how busy or how tired he was. Sara couldn't forget that. She swung her arms back and forth and lifted her knees as if running up Harlem Hill. Ben didn't run with her, he preferred cycling the park instead. Once, she ran past him walking their dog Rudy and watched them as if she didn't know them and felt that sense of newness you get when meeting someone for the first time.

At Union Square, a crowd of people stood under umbrellas and gawked at the police cars, firetrucks, and ambulances parked on standby. Blue, red, and white lights blinked off the rain-soaked pavement. News cameras shone spotlights onto reporters from local and international news stations speaking in English, Spanish, Cantonese, Mandarin. Yellow police tape hung from the metal railing leading down to the station. Sara stopped to catch her breath before she squeezed her way through the throng of press and

passersby. Four police guards stood in front of the entrance not looking at anyone in particular. Sara walked up to one and he held his hand up.

“Ma’am, stop, move back. You can’t get any closer,” he said.

“But my husband, he’s in there, somewhere. What’s happening? I just want to know,” Sara said.

“It’s being handled, ma’am. Please move back.”

“What’s being handled? I heard there’s a bomb. Is there a bomb?”

“We don’t have any information. There was a suspicious package on the platform. That’s all we know, Ma’am. The bomb squad’s checking things out.”

“The bomb squad? Then there this is a bomb. Please. My husband is down there,” Sara took a step forward. If only she could run down the stairs and see for herself, all would be okay.

“Ma’am! I said move back.” He held up his arm to block her.

Sara stopped and walked backwards not taking her eyes off the policeman. She squeezed herself into the crowd of people. A black lab wearing a bright yellow raincoat stood next to her as if waiting, along with all of them, for something to happen. Sara placed her hand on the dog’s wet head. The dog looked up at her and yawned. If that were Rudy, he’d be sniffing the ground, confused at the smells that had blended together in the rain. How would Rudy react if Ben never came home? If the pack dwindled down to just the two of them?

Her jacket pocket buzzed. She grabbed her phone and saw a text from Ben.

I couldn’t get on the train. Chaos at Union Square. Walking to restaurant.

Sara stared at the words on the screen. Ben was safe. She would walk to the restaurant where they were to celebrate their sixth wedding anniversary. She'd place her umbrella next to the front door and survey the room until she found him as she'd done many times before. They'd share a bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon and both have different pasta dishes so that they could share. During dessert, Sara would look outside at the other couples rushing to get to wherever they were going, the rain falling all around them.

Snow Day

Beatriz Lumaban fastened off the last stitch of her blue and red crochet blanket with a gentle twist of her wrist, then carefully spread it on top of her bed. She'd finally finished after months of working on it, stopping too many times from the pain in her arthritic hands. The massage oil she rubbed on them almost daily helped, but not for long, and not if she used her hands too much. It got worse in the winter because of the dry air from the radiator that her son and daughter-in-law complained about almost every day. It pumped out excessive heat in loud clangs that sounded like a steam engine groaning to life. Beatriz didn't mind the heat. She just wished it came with the humidity that reminded her of being back home in the tropics.

This was her second winter in New York, and she was slowly getting used to the rhythm of a new city and a new country. After her husband Eduardo passed away, her son Junior pulled her aside after the funeral while she was pouring herself a cup of Nescafe coffee, black with a teaspoon of sugar. He told her that she should move in with his wife and their three kids. Her tourist visa was approved earlier that year, but if she didn't visit soon, it would become invalid and they would have to re-apply for another one, which could take years. She was already seventy-five years old and didn't have much time left, he said. Beatriz wanted to tell him how morbid that sounded, but instead, she said she'd think about it.

At first, she didn't want to leave her home, but eventually most of her friends and family started leaving for the United States after years of waiting for their petitions to be

approved, like a lottery ticket to a life filled with American dollar bills and endless possibilities. Feeling the tendrils of loneliness creep deep inside her and a need to witness her grandchildren grow up, Beatriz sold her house of fifty years, packed her bags, and took a flight from Manila to New York City.

She arrived in the middle of July in the suffocating heat and humidity of an island made of concrete and steel, not like the island heat that she was used to. Junior met her at the arrivals lounge looking eager and tired. He pushed a luggage cart towards the baggage claim area where they waited for her two suitcases. One had all of her things in it and the other was filled with pasalubong from the divisoria; bags of peanut brittle, sweet polvoron, and tamarind candy for the kids, wooden bowls, woven fabric placemats, and capiz shell candleholders for Marianne and Junior. Beatriz didn't pack many clothes because Junior said he'd take her shopping for new winter clothes. He warned her about the cold winters in New York and that even autumn would feel too cold to her at first, but he reassured her that she'd get used to it.

She spotted one of her suitcases rolling towards them, reached over to grab it, but Junior gently moved her arm aside.

"Ma, I got it. Don't strain yourself." She shrugged and let her son carry the suitcases onto the luggage cart.

She settled into a small bedroom adjacent to the kitchen, near a back door where they placed their garbage for a porter to pick up. She didn't mind taking her garbage out herself, but Junior and Marianne insisted that no one in the building took out their own garbage. The building reminded her of the high rises in Makati, an upscale neighborhood

in Manila, where celebrities and wealthy politicians resided. The shiny lobby and friendly doormen made her feel like she was an imposter living another person's life.

Marianne and Junior worked at a hospital on the east side of Central Park, a short bus ride from where they lived on the west side of the park. Their son Eddie was eight years old and he treated Beatriz like a stranger when she first arrived. He spoke English fast and confident, just like a real American, she thought. Eddie had a stubborn streak in him, just like his father. Both had the same unsettling and unwavering look in their eyes when they didn't get their way. The same look that her husband Eduardo used to give her when he was angry with her for something that she thought was trivial like not putting enough sugar in his coffee and it annoyed her throughout their marriage, but what she would give to see that look again. It pained her to think that Eduardo never got to meet his grandson. They had planned on visiting America shortly after he was born but then Eduardo got sick.

Every time she looked at Eddie, she saw her husband's sharp cheek bones and her son's deep-set eyes. She knew it was genetic but a part of her thought of something more magical, the two most important men of her life combined into this human being that she needed to protect at all costs. But because of his hard-headedness, Eddie didn't do as he was told most of the time which proved to be both frustrating and exhausting to her.

Beatriz insisted on picking up Eddie after school when she found out how much Marianne and Junior were paying someone to do it. *It's not like the Philippines*, she had said to her son. *Here, it is too expensive. A waste of money.* Junior said that him and Marianne made good money and could afford it, besides, it wasn't about the money, but that he didn't want to trouble her in having to worry about navigating the neighborhood. What did he think? That she was a naïve provincial girl who didn't know how to cross a city street properly. He didn't remember that when he was a child, she took him with her on the bus from the province into Manila to shop at the Divisoria where she'd get hard-to-find ingredients and small items for the house. Oftentimes, they had to dodge tricycles carrying families of four, reckless taxi cabs, or lumbering jeepneys filled with passengers.

The youngest of seven children, Beatriz was quiet and preferred spending time in the back of the house where they raised pigs instead of with her brothers and sisters shouting at one another in the sala. She liked watching the piglets walk around the pen with their tiny hooves and their curly tails as they crowded under their mother, reaching their mouths up for milk. One day, she noticed that the runt of the litter was struggling to get past the other piglets. She watched as it kept at it, mesmerized by its fighting spirit and decided to name it Rizal, after the national hero of the Philippines.

Later that evening, while sitting at the dinner table, Beatriz stared at the food on her plate while her brothers and sisters talked loudly over one another, vying for attention from their parents. A sudden pain shot through the back of her head and pulsed there as she closed her eyes. She saw an image of Rizal the piglet dead on the dirt floor of the pen. She opened her eyes and started to cry. Her mother asked her what was the matter.

Beatriz rubbed at the pain in her head and told her mother about her vision. Her mother looked scared, grabbed her hand, and pulled her with such a force, Beatriz nearly fell off her seat.

“Don’t ever say things like that again. EVER!” Her mother screamed close to her face.

In the morning, they found Rizal dead in the corner of the pig pen.

The visions would happen over and over as she got older. One time when she was sixteen years old, she saw an old man pushing an aluminum tub filled with fresh taho in front of their house, ringing his bell into the street. As soon as he turned towards her, the pain started at the back of her head and she closed her eyes. She pictured him lying on a bed with no sheets, his body drenched in sweat. He didn’t come around for a week after that, but then one morning showed up in front of her house, ringing his bell. She asked him where he’d been all those days. He said that he caught the flu and couldn’t get out of bed.

In her vision, she saw that he lived in the squatter’s area on the other side of the rice fields from her house. The place consisted of ramshackle houses with thin walls and aluminum roofs. Her grandmother, Lola Lourdes, took her there once to help carry a basket of herbs and oils for a woman who was going into labor. When they got there, the woman was pale from losing so much blood. Her baby was twisted in the wrong direction making it a difficult labor. Beatriz watched as Lola Lourdes lit a few of the herbs and started to massage the woman’s belly with the oils. Her strong hands moved across the woman’s body as if carefully working dough for pan de sal. After a short time, the baby was born.

Beatriz's mother didn't like talking about Lola Lourdes' healing powers even though everyone in town sought her help, at one time or another, when the local doctor couldn't make it in time, or when the midwife needed assistance.

“Oh, Betty. Your Lola spends too much time with those potions, like a witch. Don't mind her. She's not right in the head.”

Despite her mother's warnings, Beatriz liked spending time with Lola Lourdes and listened to all of the stories she had to tell. Stories of people she had helped to recover from fevers, tremors, hallucinations, hearing voices in their heads, all with special herbal remedies, massages, and incantations.

Before she died, Lola Lourdes gave Beatriz a book filled with handwritten recipes for her remedies. She also showed her how to massage away almost any ailment from the body. As she packed her belongings for the US, she wrapped the book in red and black Ifugao woven fabric and carefully placed it in her suitcase. She tucked it away on the top shelf of her closet, behind her wedding album, and sewing supplies that she kept in an old Danish butter cookie tin.

She spread the crochet blanket on her bed and stepped back to admire her work. Outside, the snow fell in large clumps and the wind rattled against her window like someone knocking impatiently to be let in. Eddie was home even though it was a Tuesday because of the storm outside. He explained to her that it was a “snow day” which meant they didn't have to go to school. This reminded Beatriz of the monsoon

floods she experienced as a child when no one could even walk across the street without fear of being swept away. Forget having to walk the three kilometers to school.

Her *yaya*, the woman who cooked, cleaned, and took care of her and her siblings would make them *lugaw*, a rice porridge with boiled chicken and green onions. They'd play games and sit around making *kuwento*, telling stories. Her *yaya* would tell them about when she was a small girl in a faraway village living in a *nipa* hut with no running water and no electricity. It sounded like a fairytale when she was a kid, but as *Beatriz* got older, she realized how poor her *yaya*'s family must have been to live in such conditions.

She wished she had all the ingredients for *lugaw* to make for *Eddie*'s lunch, but sweetened spaghetti sauce with chunks of hotdog would have to do. Besides, her spaghetti was one of his favorite dishes to eat and it made her smile every time he cleaned off his plate. Cooking for her family gave her a sense of pride and the more authentically Filipino the dish the better. She thought that by making the dishes she ate as a child, she was passing down something of value to them. When she first moved to New York, she told *Junior* to take her to the Asian grocery stores in Chinatown and the Filipino markets in Queens for the ingredients she needed. He whined most of the time, telling her that they didn't care if the dishes weren't authentic, but she cared so he did as she asked.

Eddie was sometimes embarrassed by the *merienda* she made for him like mashed avocado mixed with sugar and milk or peppered apple slices in vinegar, especially if he had a friend come over to play video games. When his friend *Chris* came over, *Eddie* apologized to him about the weird food and insisted that she get the potato chips and pretzels inside the cabinet instead. She could tell that *Chris* liked the sweet avocado, so

she didn't understand why Eddie seemed embarrassed by the snack. She liked that Chris always said thank you and ate whatever was put in front of him but she didn't like that Eddie had a black friend.

Beatriz had never met a black person before and everything she saw on television back in the Philippines showed black people as drug dealers who shot one another from moving cars. She pulled Eddie aside and asked him why he was friends with Chris. He yelled at her and said he could be friends with anyone he liked and that she was being racist. Beatriz wanted to slap him across the face for speaking to her like that, but she didn't. Instead, she told him to tell Chris to go home.

When Junior and Marianne got home that evening, carrying Chinese food cartons filled with beef broccoli, chicken low mein, and vegetable fried rice, Beatriz told them what had happened and thought that they'd take her side but they didn't. She was shocked at how angry Marianne was. Junior didn't say anything at first. He carefully placed the Chinese food on the counter, grabbed plates and utensils, and yelled for Eddie to come to the kitchen because dinner was ready. But Marianne yelled at her and pointed a finger at Beatriz as if she was scolding a child. Junior stood between them, held his hand up in front of Marianne, and told her to stop.

"Please don't. I don't want to start a fight here. That's how they think in the Philippines. You know that," he said.

"But, I just can't let her say those things to my son."

"Please, just let it go for now. Why don't you go get some waters for the table," Junior said.

Beatriz knew that her son would come to her defense. She wanted to put her arm around him and thank him.

“And, Ma...why would you tell Eddie he shouldn't be friends with a black kid? You've got a lot to learn about living here. Eddie's friends, regardless of the color of their skin, are all welcome.”

“Ay naku! Junior. But, he's black. You know the blacks...”

“Ma, shush. No more,” Junior said.

They all sat at the table except for Beatriz who said that she would sit on the stool at the counter in the kitchen and eat the leftover chicken adobo she had made the night before. When Junior said she was being ridiculous, she glared at him and said that he was the one being ridiculous spending money on takeout food when they had plenty of leftovers in the refrigerator. Later that night, as Beatriz crocheted in the large armchair in her bedroom, she could hear Marianne telling Junior that he needed to stand up to his mother. She wanted to hear him tell Marianne to mind her own business, but she heard him say that his mother was an old woman with old-fashioned ways.

Beatriz watched as Eddie ate two servings of spaghetti.

“Oh good. Eat as much as you want so you can be strong like your father,” Beatriz said.

“He's not that strong,” Eddie said slurping up a noodle.

“Don't say that. He's a very strong man your father.”

“Whatever.”

“What is this ‘whatever’ you keep using? It’s like you don’t care about anything.”

Beatriz grabbed a wet rag and started to wipe down the counter where Eddie’s slurping created small specks of spaghetti sauce.

“It’s just something us kids say. You wouldn’t get it.”

“Aye, I get more than you think, Eddie. I may be an old lady, but I see things, lots of things that would surprise you.”

Eddie looked at her as if he was about to ask her something but then changed his mind and finished off the last of the hot dog slices, leaving a few noodles on his plate before getting up.

“My friends are going sledding. Can I go? Their parents are going too so we won’t be alone,” Eddie said.

“No, no. You stay home. It’s dangerous outside.”

“It’s not dangerous. We’ll be fine. I’ve done this so many times.”

“I said no. Stay home.”

“C’mon. It’s a snow day. Lots of kids will be out sledding. You just don’t get it because you’re not from here.”

Beatriz didn’t feel like arguing anymore. She knew that the more she told him not to do it, the more he would want to disobey her.

“Hoy, finish your food.”

“But there’s not that much left.”

“So then finish it. You’re lucky you have food on your plate. Where I grew up, some kids didn’t have anything to eat for days at a time.”

“I’m so glad I didn’t grow up where you did.”

Beatriz felt a spike of sadness and anger when her grandson said that. She wished Junior had taken Eddie to visit her when Eduardo was still alive, then he would have seen the beauty of the country for himself and feel the pull of the land in which they are rooted.

Eddie sighed dramatically then grabbed his fork and finished the rest of his noodles. Beatriz grabbed his plate and placed it in the sink. She would clean it by hand later even though they had a dishwasher.

“Go watch TV or play in your room. I’m going to go lie down.”

Beatriz moved her slippered feet along the cold tile of the kitchen and to her room where she closed the door behind her, leaving a small crack open.

She turned on the radio to an oldies station playing songs from the ‘50s and ‘60s. The music reminded her of being young again, sitting on the rattan furniture in their sala with her brothers and sisters. Her parents would turn on the radio, a bulky thing that sat atop the wooden cabinet where they kept all of their photo albums. If her parents weren’t fighting over something that her childish mind didn’t comprehend, they’d dance on the polished floor in front of their children, showing off the jitterbug, the swing, the boogie twist. Beatriz loved to dance and would get up and imitate their moves. On her wedding day, her and Eduardo danced until their feet hurt. The rush of the music and the wine made her dizzy with joy. She hoped she was still alive when Eddie married.

She pulled the crocheted blanket over her small frame and listened to the harmonized voices and twanging guitar sounds of her favorite crooners and drifted off to sleep. She dreamt of the mango tree in front of her house growing up. It was nighttime and the wind made it sway like a drunk. Its branches spread out like arms longing for

something out of reach. The spirit that lived in the tree, as her siblings had warned her time and time again, was shy and only came out at night. If Beatriz squinted her eyes and stared long enough at the tree, she could see a pair of glowing eyes blinking back at her.

In her dream, the wind brought a monsoon rain that turned into a blizzard. Day turned into night and children, bundled up into marshmallow-shaped outfits, carried sleds along the road. A snow day in the Philippines. How could that be? Her head hurt so bad it felt like it might burst open. Tendrils of pain shot up from the back of her neck and up the sides of her head to her temples. She saw Eddie at the bottom of a large snowy hill lying down as if he was sleeping but he was wide awake. He was rubbing his leg and groaning. No one was there to help him.

Beatriz got out of bed, turned off the radio, and put her slippers on. She walked into the kitchen and poured herself a glass of water. The slate tile unnerved her. The cold hard surface was just waiting for her to drop a glass. Their kitchen was too modern for her taste. The stainless-steel refrigerator looked too polished even though Marianne had described it once as brushed silver and modern. Beatriz preferred the white or beige refrigerators she'd see families open and close multiple times on American television shows. She walked out of the kitchen and down the short hallway that led to the living room. Two fuzzy puppets were talking to one another on the television screen, bobbing their heads up and down in excitement.

Beatriz called out to Eddie thinking he was sitting on the floor on the other side of the couch, but there was no reply. As she moved to check if he was there, a sharp pain rushed from the back of her head to her temple. She reached for the couch arm to steady herself and saw that the girls weren't there. She turned off the television and walked

down the hall to Eddie's room. The door was closed so she knocked and called out for him, but there was no reply. She opened the door even though Eddie had placed a "No Entry" sign that looked like a stop sign. His clothes lay everywhere—on every surface of his bed, on the floor, and dangling off the back of his desk chair. It smelled of wet socks and candy bars. Underneath all of the clothes was a lump in the shape of a body curled up, but she knew even before she pulled the bed covers that it wasn't Eddie sleeping soundly. He'd placed two pillows and some clothes underneath the sheets. How could he do such a thing, she thought. Deep down inside she wasn't surprised though. He would do what he wanted regardless of the consequences.

Outside the window, the flurries swirled almost violently and the hissing of the wind through the window made Beatriz fold her arms around herself with the thought that he was out in the cold all alone. She was angry at him for being so reckless, angry that he was so stubborn like her husband and her son. She rushed towards her bedroom to change into her warmest clothes—a pair of snow pants that her son bought for her, a thick hooded sweatshirt with large pockets, and wool socks. She picked up a silver rosary from her bedside table, held it to her lips, made the sign of the cross then tucked it inside her pants pocket.

The closet in the entryway had been left open and Eddie's winter coat was gone. Beatriz bundled up as best she could. She put on her dark blue down parka that reminded her of the spacesuits those men wore when they landed on the moon. She put on her gloves, scarf, hat, and snow boots. She hated the cold of the snow but loved how it blanketed the city to cover up the trash bags on the sidewalk, scraps of food or old paper,

and dog poop. A quiet hum descended upon the city too when the snow fell, muffling the piercing sounds of sirens or taxi drivers leaning on their horns.

She took the elevator down to the lobby level where Willie stood behind the doorman stand.

“Good morning, Señora. Wow, you look very ready for the snow. That’s good. It’s bad out there,” Willie said.

“Eddie left without telling me,” she said a little out of breath. “I have to find him.”

“He didn’t tell you he was going out? He told me that you let him go sledding. I should have called up. Señora, I’m sorry.”

“Willie dear, it’s not your fault. Eddie is so hard-headed. I told him to stay home.”

“Kids these days. They think they know everyone. My Pablo. He’s thirteen going on thirty. I swear that kid.”

“I need to go Willie,” she said.

Beatriz knew that if she let him, he’d keep talking about his kids. She usually liked hearing about them, but this wasn’t the time. Willie ran over to the door just before she reached out her hand to open it herself.

“I’ve got it,” Willie said. “Be careful out there okay? The kids are probably at that big hill. You know the one to the left of the entrance. That’s where they all like to go. I brought my kids there once...”

“Thank you, Willie.” Beatriz waved her hand up in the air and waved goodbye as she walked through the door.

The snow was falling diagonally with the wind as Beatriz walked out the door and onto the sidewalk. She was grateful for the sturdy snow boots that her son bought for her. When she first put them on, she could barely walk because they felt like bricks on her feet. He'd told her that it would take her awhile to get used to living with the harsh winters, but she didn't realize that would mean learning how to walk through the snow.

Beatriz twisted her wool scarf closer to her neck to stop the falling snow from creeping in. She had to walk around a couple of people who were shoveling snow from the sidewalk. Across the street, a man stood at the traffic light waiting with a large black dog at his side. She wasn't sure what he was waiting for because there were no cars coming. A woman in heavy boots similar to hers was running towards the subway station. Beatriz couldn't imagine having to go to work in such bad weather even though her son and daughter-in-law had left early in the morning. They'd only had coffee and not even the buttered toast that she had prepared for them. She'd hated that they left the house hungry, and hoped they were able to eat something when they got to work at the hospital.

At the entrance to the park, Beatriz felt a sharp pain in the back of her neck and had to sit down on one of the green benches. She closed her eyes and saw the image of Eddie again. Her heart was beating so fast she could barely breathe. She waited to catch her breath and watched as people walked by, some with children dragging sleds behind them. The snow had slowed to a few flurries. A young couple stopped to ask her if she was okay. She told them she was just resting and asked if they knew where the hill was, the one where the kids liked to go sledding. They pointed to a path that wound its way up and around a corner. They offered to help her up, but she waved her arm at them frustrated that they thought her so frail. In their eyes, she was just another old lady, weak

and in need of help, but she didn't feel that way most of the time. Eddie needed her and she was determined to find him. She didn't come from oceans away to let her only grandchild suffer from his own stubbornness.

The path to the hill was steeper than it looked. She had to stop a few times to rest and catch her breath. When she was almost there, she saw Eddie's friend Chris standing with a group of other children and a few adults. She was hesitant to go up to him at first but she needed to find Eddie, and Chris would know where he was. She walked up to him and asked if he'd seen Eddie. He didn't answer her but instead, looked at a man standing next to him.

"Go ahead answer her, Chris. You know where Eddie is," the man said.

"Um, I don't actually know. He went off with Tommy and those guys."

"I'm so sorry, ma'am. My son is being ridiculous. Your Eddie's grandmother right? He's told me all about you. I'm Chris's dad. It's nice to meet you." He reached out his hand but Beatriz didn't shake it.

She looked up at him. He was nearly a foot taller than her and had wide shoulders. She was scared of him, but if he knew where Eddie was she would have to put her fear aside.

"Yeah, I'm the grandma. Where is he? Where's Eddie? I think he's in trouble."

"He's fine. He went with some of their other friends and they were with a parent so there's no need to worry," Chris's dad said.

"Ack. I don't know who these people are. I need to find him."

Beatriz walked away but Chris grabbed her arm.

"Aye, what are you doing!" Beatriz screamed.

“I’m so sorry Mrs. Lumaban. I didn’t mean to scare you but those kids that Eddie went with...they’re not our friends. They make fun of us. I don’t know why Eddie went with them. They’re going to this other hill. The big hill. I can show you where it is.”

Beatriz looked at Chris and saw a softness in his expression. He looked as worried as she felt. “Thank you, Chris. You’re a good friend to Eddie,” she said and placed a hand on his head as if to pet him.

The three of them walked down a narrow path through a group of trees that opened up into a clearing. On the other side of the clearing was a steep hill that was too high for Beatriz to climb so she waited at the bottom while Chris and his father walked up it to look for Eddie. The snow had picked up a little with flurries dancing in circles all around her. The park was beautiful blanketed in snow, she thought. A bright red cardinal flew in front of her and landed on a tree branch a few feet away. She walked over to get a closer look at the bird and noticed a dark green coat underneath a snowy bush. It was Eddie. His eyes were closed. He was shivering. Beatriz placed her gloved hand on the side of his head and he opened his eyes.

The EMTs came faster than Beatriz thought they would. Maybe because instead of calling 911 on the cellphone that Junior gave her, which she only used for emergencies, she called Junior at Mount Sinai. She had heard him scream to someone to send an ambulance quick or his son might die. They let her ride in the back of the ambulance with Eddie. She felt anxious in the cramped space next to her grandson. As

the EMTs hovered over Eddie, she quietly recited the rosary. She heard them say something about hypothermia and keeping him warm. Beatriz held the rosary in her pocket while reciting the prayers as the EMTs worked on keeping Eddie safe from slipping into unconsciousness. She knew the distance to the hospital was short, but the ride felt too long and too bumpy for a child who was in distress.

Junior and Marianne met the ambulance at the front. Beatriz watched as Marianne held Eddie's hand on one side of the stretcher. She thought that Marianne looked too casual for a doctor in a large city hospital in her plain black flats and beige slacks. Beatriz preferred she wear a bit of a heel and a colorful dress to greet her patients and to direct the nurses. But as she watched how Marianne held Eddie's hand and stroked his forehead, she saw how much Marianne loved him and felt grateful for that. Beatriz wanted to follow them into the room where Eddie disappeared into, but Junior told her she wasn't allowed passed the large metal doors that led to wherever they were taking Eddie so she sat in the waiting room and waited.

The waiting room smelled of stale coffee and cleaning products. A small television was playing the local PIX11 channel. A woman in a wool cap and a bright blue jacket was standing outside somewhere in New Jersey talking about the storm. Beatriz thought she looked too cheerful to be reporting the weather. It was getting dark outside and Beatriz would normally be preparing dinner. They would all be hungry later, but there was not enough time to cook anything, she thought. Maybe Junior would drive to Jollibee. Eddie liked the Chicken Joy plate with extra gravy and a peach mango pie as dessert.

She felt a throbbing at the back of her head. A vision. Eddie on a bed with his eyes closed, hooked up to a machine that beeped to signal that his heart was still beating. Beatriz lingered on the vision, willed it to remain inside her, and waited to make sure he was safe from harm.

Synopsis: This is the first part of a novel about a twenty-year-old Filipino American studying abroad in Prague from 1995-1996. She discovers a locket on the ground outside of a Vietnamese restaurant and befriends the waiter and his family who are the owners of the restaurant. She learns about the Vietnamese community in Prague while also discovering more of her own ethnic identity during phone calls to her family in California. In part, the story illustrates the experiences people of color have while living abroad in a country that may or may not view them as true Americans.

Having Pho in Prague

PART ONE

When I was in college, I saw a brochure at the study abroad office with an image of the Charles Bridge draped in snow and the Prague castle in the background. It looked like a fairy tale city where magic happened. I had taken a literature class on Franz Kafka and the teacher, a short woman with a commanding presence, had talked about how Kafka's characters were outsiders trying to navigate a system that worked against them. Professor Suková was from Prague and she was sophisticated like a Parisian but without the air of

snobbery. When she told us about the Velvet Revolution and how masses of Czech students protested in the streets to “force the Communists out of the city,” there was a look in her eye of defiance against authority that I admired.

I went to her office hours and told her that I heard Prague was like Paris in the 1920s, full of expat writers that were taking advantage of the fact that it was a blank canvas upon which they could create something. She dismissed the idea and said that there was no blankness to the city but that the Czech artists and writers had been there all along but were now free to express themselves, and that the Americans would eventually get bored and move on to another city. Her sentiment towards the Americans in Prague didn't deter me from wanting to go because I knew that I wouldn't treat it as a passing fling. I pictured myself staring up at the castle pictured on that study abroad brochure with my journal in hand, writing my own fairytale.

When I told my parents that I wanted to study abroad in Prague they didn't want me to go at first. They were paying for my tuition and housing and so I had to figure out a way to convince them. My mother didn't want me to live so far away from home. I had told her it would only be for ten months, not even a full year. My father, a history buff and news addict, started to rattle off facts about the Habsburg Empire and about Vacláv Havel, the political dissident and poet turned president. He was afraid that Prague was too close to the war that was going on in the former Yugoslavia at the time that he'd seen images of on the nightly news. My parents called the director of the program and spoke with him at length about whether or not it was safe to go and what courses I'd be taking. The director reassured them that Prague was safe and the school where I would be enrolled in was one of the best in the country.

Before I left, my parents had a going away party for me. My mother's sister, Auntie June, came early to cook some of the dishes they would be serving like chicken rellenito stuffed with ground pork, carrots, pickles, and raisins, lumpia Shanghai stuffed with shrimp and ground turkey, and pancit noodles with shredded chicken, shitake mushrooms, and julienned carrots and cabbage. My aunt lived nearby and came over most weekends, especially when my father went to the office for work which he did a lot. I knew my mom was happy to have my aunt around. They were only two years apart and got along really well. When Auntie June heard that I was going to Prague she was so happy for me and said that it would be like a great Eastern European adventure. I was surprised that she even knew where Prague was. Her daughter Melinda wasn't as thrilled. I suspected she was jealous. I tried to avoid her during the party but she was like a heat-seeking missile looking for her target. She cornered me at the dessert table as I was scooping up some ambrosia fruit salad, one of Auntie June's specialties. I was looking forward to the green pandan jellies and the sweet macapuno coconut strands but before I could even take a bite, she placed her hand on my shoulder and leaned in as if to tell me something important.

"I heard you're going to Prague. Isn't that so cliché though? So many Americans are going right now."

"Yeah, because there's a lot going on there. Lots of artists, lots of writers."

"Hmmm. I guess, but it's like everyone and their best friend are going. I dunno, I'd feel silly if I were you."

I felt my cheeks flush and I wanted to throw the ambrosia in her face but instead I composed myself.

“It would actually be silly for me to stay when I get to live abroad,” I said.

I took a bite and let the sweetness linger in my mouth for few seconds before I walked away. I tried not to let it get to me, but it did. What she said hung in the air. Was I being cliché, like one of those Americans that Professor Suková was so eager to dismiss?

My brother Joseph came up to me and took a bite of the ambrosia without asking.

“Dammit, Joe...get your own,” I said.

“I saw you talking to Cruella over there,” he said.

“She told me that I was being silly for going to Prague.”

“Well, she’s right,” he said and then saw the look on my face. “I’m just kidding. It’s great you’re going. Get out of the States for a while. Do something totally different. I should have done that when I was in college.”

“Yeah, at least Mom and Dad are supportive. It took some convincing,” I said.

“Well, you’re the baby and you’re a girl. They’re always going to be overprotective of you.”

“I think they’re getting better about that though. As long as I don’t mess up,” I said, taking another bite of ambrosia.

It was deceptively warm in Prague when I arrived in late August. The sun shone so bright that day and I was even wearing a sun dress. I didn’t realize then that the bitter cold of winter would eventually come, and I wouldn’t be prepared for it having never experiencing a non-California winter. Before I’d left, I bought a winter coat but instead of

opting for something down filled and puffy that would certainly keep me warm, I went for cardigans or flannel that were in style but didn't really keep me warm.

The one class I had the most trouble with was Czech. I couldn't make sense of the sentence structure and all of those hard-to-pronounce words with multiple consonants. I sat in the classroom with other students in my program trying to keep up. Sam and I sat in the back and stared out the window most of the time. The teacher was a thin woman with cropped blonde hair. She wore tight-fitting skirts with nude hose and silk blouses that opened far enough to reveal a glimpse of lace from her bra. She never got my name right. She'd come up with some Asianized version like Miyako or Yi Ling. I told her that my name was Lizbeth a number of times, but she didn't care. Hannah, my suitemate and closest friend in the program, yelled at the teacher once and said she was being racist, which embarrassed me.

Our dormitory was housed in a big, grey block of a building constructed during the Soviet Era that was made more for function rather than architectural design. Hannah and I shared a suite with a girl named Lindsay whom we hardly ever saw. We suspected that she had met someone from another study abroad program and spent most of her time with him. We all had our own room and shared common areas like a tiny kitchen and a small living room with a coffee table and two chairs. I was surprised at how quickly Hannah and I became friends because she was intimidating at first with her New Yorker brashness.

Aside from Hannah, I mostly hung out with Sam, who was also in our program. The first week we were in Prague, we all went out for drinks. Hannah left early but I stayed with Sam and kept drinking. I got so hungry sitting at the bar, I asked him to come

with me to get food. We walked to a stand where a man was grilling large kielbasa sausages that he served with slices of white bread. I ate one so fast that I vomited it out on the sidewalk as we were waiting for a taxi. I blamed it on the fact that I mixed beers with red wine and cokes, but Sam blamed it on the sausages and told me to promise him that I'd never go there again. He helped me get back to the dorm and handed me a big bottle of water and some Tylenol.

Hannah didn't like to do drugs and she barely drank so if I wanted to do any of that, I turned to Sam. Sometimes Sam and I would get high and walk across the Charles Bridge and into the Old Town Square to stare at the astronomical clock or play with the large marionettes that hung from some of the shops. Hannah didn't like Sam much and said he was one of those annoying Americans that goes abroad to just party. I thought Hannah was being too harsh as she usually was when it came to a lot of the other students on our program.

One night as the bitter cold of late autumn started to set in, I started to feel homesick. I think it was because I missed my mother and aunt's cooking and the different types of food that I ate in California. I headed out of the dorm and walked down towards the castle through Hradčany and Malá Strana across the Charles Bridge and down a side street a few blocks from the Old Town Square where I found a Vietnamese restaurant. I wouldn't have noticed it if I hadn't made a right turn rather than a left, but I was distracted by something shiny on the sidewalk. The light from the restaurant reflected onto a locket. I reached over to pick it up. There were etchings of tiny flowers on the outside. I opened it and saw a black and white photo of an Asian child with dark hair that

stuck out at the top. I placed the locket in my pocket and walked into the restaurant hoping to find out who the locket belonged to.

As I opened the door a bell rang, breaking the silence of the dining area. There were no customers inside. Each of the tables were covered white lace that looked like an oversized doily. I sat at a table towards the back near the cash register. The waiter, a tall Asian guy with wide shoulders who looked to be my age, brought over a laminated menu with pictures of the dishes and descriptions written in English and Czech. I ordered the Pho Ga, a noodle soup made with chicken broth. The waiter seemed to be waiting for me to order more but when I didn't, he nodded and took the menu from me.

“Excuse me, but...” I reached into my pocket and took out the locket. “I found this outside. Do you know who this belongs to?” I asked.

He looked down at the locket. I opened it to reveal the photograph inside. He shook his head and then turned to shout something towards the back of the restaurant. An older Asian woman came out from behind two swinging doors. She wore a floral apron and was much shorter than him. She squinted to see the small photograph in the locket then shook her head and said something in Vietnamese.

“My mother doesn't know about this locket,” he said. “And she asks are you Vietnamese.”

“Tell her no, I'm Filipino, from California.”

He translated for me and she seemed satisfied with that answer as she nodded and went back into the kitchen to prepare my meal.

I sat down at the table and grabbed a book from my bag to read as I waited.

“What you reading?” the waiter asked.

“Kafka, what else? I’m in Praha aren’t I?” I showed him the cover of the book. It was *The Castle* and this was my second attempt at finishing it. I’d started it a year before but couldn’t get through it. I left that copy back in California and thought that if I’d purchased a copy in the city where Kafka actually wrote it, I would be inspired to finish.

He seemed uninterested at first, but then got up and picked up a book from behind the cash register. It had a maroon cover and I knew right away what book it was even though the title was written in Czech.

“Oh, is that *Catcher in the Rye*?” I asked.

“Yes, yes. It’s interesting book. The Holden boy is angry a lot.”

“I know,” I said. “When I first read it, I could relate because I had so much teenage angst. You know, but I tried re-reading it again as an adult and the character annoyed me.”

“I feel sad for him. He seems lonely,” the waiter said. “But I hope to read it in English one day.”

“I’m sure you’ll be able to. Your English is very good.”

“Děkuju. Thank you.”

He placed the book back behind the cash register.

We talked as I waited for my food. He was interested in what I was studying and asked me if I missed home. I told him that I was studying literature at Charles University and that I didn’t miss being home. He said he wanted to try and read books in English. He showed me a shelf of used novels and travel guidebooks, all in English.

“Where did you get those?”

“A lot of tourists come here, and I tell them they can take a book if they leave a book.”

A bell rang from the back and he walked towards the back through metal swinging doors and returned carrying a large bowl of pho that had fresh basil floating on top. I was surprised to see the basil. The only fresh vegetables I saw at the supermarket on the ground floor of the K-Mart were short, wrinkly carrots and small heads of cabbage. I took one sip of the broth and the savory flavor of pork mixed with a hint of sweetness and the distinctive taste of Thai basil brought me back to the times I ate pho in California. I took several more sips of the broth before adding plum sauce for even more flavor and chili sauce for a little kick. I slurped up the noodles as the waiter sat behind the counter reading his book.

“Did you like the pho?” he asked, clearing my table.

“Yes, it was very good. Where did you get the basil from?”

“My dad grows it at home, in our kitchen, near the window.”

“That’s really great. I’ve noticed it’s hard to find fresh vegetables in the winter here,” I said. “The food was really very delicious. I’ll be coming back for sure. What’s your name?”

“My name is Vinh.”

“Nice to meet you, Vinh. I’m Lizbeth.”

“Liz...beth,” he said it slowly as if asking a question. “That’s interesting name.”

“Yeah, it’s weird. My mom was really into Elizabeth Taylor when I was born and so it’s from that.”

He nodded politely but seemed to not understand or even care who Elizabeth Taylor was. I thanked him and paid the bill. I knew that I would be back again to escape the cold for a good bowl of pho but also for the company of another Asian person.

I walked back towards the Old Town Square to meet up with Sam at the bar with the picture of a red hat outside. He went there to buy drugs from dealers who said they'd gotten their stash directly from Amsterdam. I went for the intrigue of it all and for the cheap beers. Sometimes I bummed a hit off hash or weed from Sam, but I didn't always like the way it made my head feel fuzzy and my thoughts scrambled.

As I approached the bar, I saw Sam's skinny frame standing outside. He had a green beanie on his head and a cigarette dangling from his fingertips. The snow had left patches of white and wetness on the sidewalk. I didn't have the right shoes for the snow, only a pair of high-top Converse that I'd bought in California before the trip. Sam made fun of me for wearing them in the winter, but I didn't care. They represented my West Coast style. He was from Maine and so had all the right clothes for winter. More than once, he'd swapped jackets with me when he said he couldn't stand to see me shiver anymore.

“What's up, Sam? You got another.”

He reached into his jacket pocket for a Gaulois cigarette and lit it with his cigarette before handing it to me.

“Where were you? I thought we were meeting earlier?” he asked.

“I had to get something to eat. I was starved.”

“Did you go to the sausage man? Tell me you didn't go back there after the last time.”

“No, no. I went to a pho place.”

“Fuh what?”

“Vietnamese food, dummy. It’s noodle soup.”

I shook my head and looked in the other direction at a group of American tourists handing over cash for dime bags of weed or pills from an older guy.

“Damn, they’re getting bold. Selling out here. Won’t they get caught?” I asked.

“I don’t think the police give a shit, really,” Sam said.

We finished our cigarettes and went inside. It was a Thursday night and crowded. I squeezed in between a group of tourists standing near the bar and ordered two pints of Staropramen. I handed the bartender the equivalent of five dollars for the beer plus tip, a lot less than what I was used to paying back home which meant more nights passed out at the bar. That was okay though, I always found my way back to the dormitory. There was no curfew so I could stagger in at all hours. I probably should have felt bad for spending so much of my parents’ money on beer and going out, but they didn’t know what I was up to and besides, my grades were fine.

I brought our pints to the high table where Sam was talking with the drug dealer who was selling to the tourists outside. I didn’t like the guy. He acted like a used car salesman always trying to close a sale saying things like “this is straight from Amsterdam” or “you can’t get this kind of quality anywhere else in the city.” Sam bought from him the most though because he had the best selection and he was at the bar most nights. I told Sam that I needed to head back to the dorm soon because I had to call my parents so we walked over to the Charles Bridge to make our way back to the dorm but

stopped to listen a few Czech teenagers singing along to “Hey Jude” being played on an acoustic guitar. Sam started to sing along too but I wasn’t in the mood so I left.

I walked along the almost empty streets back to the dormitory. The full moon helped to light my way along with the few streetlamps with their dim yellow glow that offered more atmosphere than actual light. I stumbled a couple of times on the cobblestones and wished I’d heeded the advice from the study abroad brochure about wearing good walking shoes. I stopped at the top of the hill next to the castle to look out onto the city skyline and the different types of architecture on the centuries-old buildings that survived the bombing of wars. There was talk going around that Walt Disney was inspired by the buildings in the old part of town when he built his magic kingdom. It probably wasn’t true, but I liked how it added to the allure of the city.

When I got to the lobby, I signed my name in a thick ledger that kept track of when we entered or left the building. I wanted to go straight to bed but I knew that if I didn’t call my parents they’d be worried about me and I didn’t want them to suspect that I was doing anything wrong. There was a pay phone in the lobby near the front desk where a woman sat behind a plexiglass window with a small circular cut out. I had a plastic phone card with a chip that I used to make the call. The card was blue and had a picture of a small car with the word ŠKODA written on it. My parents didn’t want me to have to pay for the call, so as soon as one of them would answer the phone and realize it was me they’d call right back. If I didn’t have the card on me for some reason or another, I would tell the operator that I wanted to make a collect call.

I dialed the number and my mom answered right away as if she was waiting by the phone or, more likely, sitting in the kitchen going through her mail.

“Oh, Lizbeth. What’s happening? You okay?”

She always started our phone conversations with questions that sounded like I had called her because I was in distress or had done something wrong. But, that’s how it sounded in English, if she were to be speaking to me in Tagalog it would sound like just a normal greeting from a mother to a daughter.

“I’m fine. Everything is good,” I said stifling a yawn. It was already past midnight and my buzz was wearing off.

“What time is it there?”

“I’m not sure. Not too late.”

I could hear her counting the time difference on the other end.

“Hoy! It’s twelve na! Why are you up so late? Were you out? Don’t stay out late. You’re a girl. You have to be careful.”

It was the same warnings her and my dad used since I was a teenager. My brother Joseph didn’t get as many warnings as I did. I’d tell them that they were being unfair and used the term “double standard” multiple times but they would just say that this was how the world worked, and they didn’t want to raise a wild daughter who didn’t have any common sense.

“Are you studying? You better study hard even though you are out there,” she said.

“Of course I’m studying,” I said.

“Good. Keep your grades up, Lizbeth. Who are your friends there?”

“Hannah and Lindsay. My roommates. I told you about them.”

“Oh, that’s right. That’s good you have friends, so you are not so lonely. BUT don’t let them distract you. And no boys huh!”

In the background I could hear the drone of an anchorman’s voice.

“Turn the TV down, I can’t hear her,” my mom screamed to my dad. “If he’s home, he’s watching that football or news, always news. It’s hard for me to think. I just go outside and do the garden. Here talk to him.”

I could hear her saying something to him in Tagalog and the sound of the television lowered.

“Lizbeth. Everything okay?” He sounded annoyed.

“Yes, everything’s fine. I’m good. I really like it here.”

“Is it cold?” he asked.

“Yes, it snowed the past few days.”

“Really? I didn’t know it snowed there. Hmmm. You meet any Filipinos? Are there any Asians there?”

“I haven’t met any Filipinos and there aren’t any Asians on my program, but I’ve made friends. It’s fine.”

“Well, be careful okay and don’t stay out in the cold too long, you’ll get sick. I should give you back to your mom.” I could hear the shuffle of the phone and her tell him to talk to me longer but he didn’t.

“Your dad, sometimes. Ay naku!” I’d heard that annoyance in her voice before, but it seemed to be happening more frequently. “Just call us anytime if you need anything.”

“Okay I will,” I told her. “Love you, Mom.”

“Love you too, Lizbeth.”

After I got off the phone, I went upstairs and changed into my pajamas. I took the locket out of my jacket pocket and placed it on my desk. I looked at the photo of the child and wondered if the owner of the locket lived in Prague or was just visiting from another country. I was tired and hungry. We had a kitchenette in our suite that had a two-burner stove, a toaster oven, and a small fridge. I heated up a pot of water and threw in a packet of instant ramen. I grabbed an egg and a packet of frozen vegetables that I added to the ramen as I'd seen my mom do when she got home from work and made an easy dinner for us. I poured the ramen into one of the white bowls that Hannah and I bought from Kmart and carried to my desk.

Hannah appeared at my doorway with her curly hair tied up in a loose bun that fell to the sides of her face. Her blue eyes were magnified behind her glasses making her look almost child-like. She was wearing a tattered pair of grey sweats that were threadbare at the knees and an oversized college T-shirt with a fading logo.

“Why are you cooking at one o'clock in the morning? You insane?” She made her way to my bed with her stocking feet and sat across from me.

“I was starving. Sorry for waking you.”

“I wasn't asleep. I was just in bed reading. What did you end up doing tonight?”

“Met up with Sam and hung out for a couple beers. Walked home.”

“Sam. Hmmm. So, you walked home? Isn't it still snowing out there? I didn't even walk home and I'm a New Yorker.”

Hanna liked to bring up that she was a New Yorker any chance that it made sense. But she was right. I walked more than she did even though I was used to driving

everywhere when I lived in California. Something about walking through the centuries-old streets of the city, especially when the snow was falling, made me feel as if I was living in a fairytale or a moody foreign film.

“I like walking around the city. Everything is so beautiful and so European,” I said.

“I guess, but be careful out there. It’s late, it’s dark, you’re a woman.”

“Don’t worry. I was raised by paranoid immigrant parents who didn’t trust anyone.”

She laughed at that because she had heard all of my stories about my overprotective parents not letting me spend the night at friends’ houses or date until my senior year of high school. I showed Hannah the locket, opened it up to reveal the tiny photo inside, and told her where I found it.

“How precious is that. Wow. It almost seems like you were meant to find it,” she said.

“Why? Because I’m Asian?”

“No, c’mon! It just seems like you were there at the right time. Almost like a cheesy movie where you find this locket and it belongs to your soulmate. He’s out there, you just have to find him.”

Hannah was funny like that. One minute she was a jaded New Yorker and the next minute a hopeless romantic that still believed in finding “the one.”

“Stop. You’re making me sick with all this sappiness.”

I took the locket back from her and set it down on my nightstand. It gleamed against my desk lamp and I started at the tiny flower etchings. The silver looked a bit

tarnished and I told myself that I'd polish it with a dry cloth in the morning. I hoped to find the owner and return it looking shiny and new.

During Thanksgiving, Hannah's mother came to visit from New York. When I said, "It's nice to meet you, Mrs. Goldberg," she told me to call her Rachel and that Mrs. Goldberg was her mother's name. She took us out to one of the nicest restaurants in the city, a French place with a view of the Vltava River. I had a coq au vin made with red wine from Hungary. For dessert, Rachel ordered us slices of rich chocolatey sachertorte topped with whipped cream accompanied by glasses of champagne served in gold rimmed glasses. Even though I enjoyed the entire meal, it felt too decadent and intimate for Thanksgiving. I was used to family gatherings where we ate buffet style, seated around the living room wherever you could find a place to sit like a piano bench or an ottoman. Our plates would be filled with roast turkey, lumpia, pancit noodles, rice, honey-baked ham, mashed potatoes, and the peanut-flavored kare kare oxtail soup.

"I can't stand my mom sometimes," Hannah said later that night as she packed her bag to stay with her mother in a nice hotel near Wenceslas Square.

"Your mom's great. What are you talking about?"

"She's such a show-off. That dinner. She was just trying to impress us."

"Maybe. But so what? It was damn good."

I tried to understand why Hannah was so annoyed, but I couldn't. Their relationship seemed almost ideal from the outside because they shared some of the same

interests, and her mother was easy to talk to and joke around with. Hannah didn't like how her mother over-indulged, but to me it seemed like her mother knew how to enjoy herself, something that I hardly witnessed in my own mother. Instead, I saw someone who had chosen a life of working and raising a family without room for her own interests. My mother would never spend Thanksgiving in a European country, let alone, take me and a friend out to a nice restaurant for dinner. She'd much rather cook at home than pay someone else to cook for her in a restaurant that she would probably feel uncomfortable in anyway.

We had a two-week break over Christmas and some of the other students decided to travel over the holidays, but I chose to stay and have the suite to myself to get up late, make coffee, and read or write with no distractions. I did that for the first three days of vacation but then got bored and lonely. The dorms were quiet but there were a few others who stayed behind. The day before Christmas Eve, I put on one of my nicest outfits—a fitted wool dress with tights and black boots and wore the locket around my neck.

When I walked outside, the sun was out, and the skies were blue, but it was so bitter cold. The area around the castle was overcrowded with tour groups that I tried to dodge. I felt superior to them because I wasn't merely a visitor, but a resident, at least for the year. I knew my way around the central part of the city no problem and could even give directions if asked. I could give recommendations to a good coffeeshop, pizza place, bookstore, and lots of bars. I almost wanted to go up to one of the groups of tourists to

tell them to follow me to one of the cutest streets in Malá Strana the small neighborhood on the west side of the river. I'd take them to the jazz club there, the one that serves good red wine for cheap, where musicians play late at night for free.

My heels clicked on the pavement as I walked fast to keep warm. The frigid air felt good against my cheeks. I wondered if my mom and aunt were already preparing the ingredients for a Christmas feast. My parents and brother would gather at my aunt's house. My mother hosted Thanksgiving and my aunt hosted Christmas every year since I could remember. Melinda would be there and I was relieved that I didn't have to see her. As I walked passed the tourists, families bundled up, teenagers looking bored, toddlers stumbling on the cobblestones, parents trying to keep everyone together, I missed my family.

A sadness creped in so suddenly, I almost teared up in the middle of the sidewalk. On the other side of the square I saw a wine bar with couples sitting at tables for two, talking, laughing, and sipping slowly from their glasses. I felt like an observer watching a movie that I wasn't a part of, that if I stepped inside the bar, the scene would change as soon as the one lone woman walked on screen. I didn't want to go in there by myself. It seemed too pathetic to be a woman on her own, especially so close to Christmas. I had a book tucked away in my bag, I always had something to read for occasions such as this, but even with the pages of a book to keep me company, I felt too self-conscious so I kept walking.

At first, I wasn't sure where I wanted to go but then I got hungry, so I walked to the Vietnamese restaurant. There was a family of four seated at one of the tables towards the front and two women seated a few tables away from them. I was happy to see that

Vinh was working and wanted to say that it was good to see him again but it seemed like he didn't recognize me. He handed me a menu and told me I could sit anywhere. I chose the same table in the back towards the cash register.

The two women seated at the table next to mine stopped talking to one another and stared at me. They looked to be in their thirties or forties. I placed the menu down and looked back at them. I smiled but they didn't smile back. Instead, they turned to one another and continued whatever conversation they were having before I sat down. I'd gotten these stares before, usually from Czech women. Maybe it was fascination at seeing an Asian person that didn't fit a stereotype. I wasn't a worker at an Asian restaurant. I dressed and carried myself like an American. But regardless of the reason, it bothered me to be an object of fascination for reasons I had no control over.

I listened to them as they spoke in Czech, only catching a few words here and there. I thought I'd be good at learning another language because I grew up in a bilingual home but my parents never taught me Tagalog and so I never really acquired that skill. Not that I blamed them for it. They were both fluent in English and didn't see the point in teaching their kids a language they didn't have to use. It made me sad though. There were words, sayings, idioms in Tagalog that can't be translated into English, like parts of the culture that can't be explained.

I looked down at the menu and decided on the vermicelli noodle bowl with lemongrass chicken, and a bottle of Budvar beer. Vinh wrote down my order on a small note pad and took the menu from me.

"You are back. The girl from California," he said.

“Yes, you remembered. Last time I was here you were reading *Catching in the Rye*.”

“Oh, I finished it. I’m now reading *To Kill A Mockingbird*. Very different.”

“You like American novels huh? It’s like you are reading through my high school reading list or something. I mean, the books I had to read when I was a teenager.”

“Yes, yes. Books for young Americans.”

There was something so innocent about him that was invigorating to be around.

“How old are you, Vinh? It’s Vinh right?”

“Yes, Vinh. I’m twenty-one. Not in school anymore, but still learning.”

When the food was ready, he brought over the bowl with a side of imperial rolls. I told him that I didn’t order them, but he said that they made extra. He went over to sit behind the counter to read his book. I liked how his bangs hung down over his eyes. I poured a vinegary sweet sauce over the noodles and chicken then dug into the bottom of the bowl with a fork to get at the lettuce, cucumber, and cilantro. I continued to mix the ingredients together and then took a bite of lemongrass chicken. The combination of savory and sweet mingled in my mouth and the softness of the vermicelli noodle followed by the crunch of lettuce was just as I remembered from all the times I’d eaten the same dish in California.

The imperial rolls weren’t nearly as good as the ones from back home though, because they were mostly filled with cabbage and carrots, but the wrapper had a nice crunch to it and the filling was warm. I could hear the clanging of a metal spatula sliding against a wok and the sizzling sound of meat or shrimp searing in oil and its own juices.

We sat and talked until the restaurant closed at 10pm. He told me that he wanted to try and read *The Catcher in the Rye* or *To Kill A Mockingbird* in English. I told him that was a good idea and that I looked forward to seeing him reading in English the next time I came to the restaurant. I offered to help him read English if he needed it, but he seemed to shy away from that idea saying that he'd like to try it on his own first. I thought of asking him out for a drink but decided against it. I didn't want to shift the balance of our friendship into the romantic realm. I liked his company and I didn't want that to change.

When I got back to the dorm later that evening, I called my parents and told them about the really good Vietnamese food that I had. My mom was happy that I was eating Asian food and my dad was surprised to hear that there were Vietnamese living in Prague. I told him that I was surprised too. I later learned that during communism, the Czechoslovakian government invited Vietnamese people as guest workers, many of whom stayed, started families and made a life for themselves in a new country.

“Don't eat out too much though. Save your money,” my mom said.

“It's hard to cook in my kitchen. The stove is so small and we don't have a real oven,” I said.

“That's okay. You can make do with anything. When we first moved to San Francisco, nothing worked correctly. But we still managed.”

“And you walked twenty miles in the snow,” I said.

“There’s no snow. What are you talking about?”

“Mom, I’m being sarcastic. Geez.”

She sighed loudly for dramatic effect. “You always like to joke. But I’m serious. Save your money. Don’t go out so much.”

“Yes, Mom, I know.”

“Talk to your dad.” She handed the phone over to him.

“What are you doing for Christmas?” my father asked.

“Spending Christmas with some friends.” I didn’t like lying to them but I didn’t want them to worry about me.

“That’s good. Just be safe okay. And call us if you need anything.”

“Say goodbye to your mom,” he always cut our conversation short and handed the phone to my mom without saying goodbye. I made a mental note to myself to try and make him talk to me longer and to ask him why he never said goodbye.

When the sun shone its light onto the rooftops of the city, and I’d be on foot taking in the view, those were the moments when I realized how lucky I was to be in Prague. That feeling of wonder would follow me as I walked around the city trying to remember everything that I saw so that I’d have mental images stored away for when I was feeling nostalgic. It was the day after Christmas, and I walked to the English-language bookstore for a cup of coffee and an excuse to browse the shelves. I told myself not to buy anything because I had way too many books to read already but then I saw a

copy of *The Catcher in the Rye* and thought it would be a nice post-Christmas gift for Vinh. The bookseller even offered to wrap the book for free using wrapping paper that they had left over from Christmas.

The streets were busy with tourists, so I took the long way to the restaurant. I wound my way through the narrow alleys and streets that held unique architecture details. No matter how much I explored the city on foot, I would be surprised by something new that I hadn't seen before. Walking around like that made me feel that this was my city, at least for the moment, and that the tourists could have their over-visited sights all to themselves.

It was nearly empty when I got to the restaurant and instead of Vinh greeting me at the door, there was a woman who I hadn't seen before. She was tall like Vinh and had the same pointy chin. I asked her if Vinh was working and she asked in Czech what my name was. When I answered her, also in Czech, she switched to English.

“How do you know Vinh?” she asked.

“I've been here a couple of times already. We're friends.” I regretted saying that because I wasn't sure who she was. If she were his girlfriend, she might get jealous.

She looked at me a while and then told me that he had the day off because he worked ten days in a row and that their mother wanted him to rest before they got busy for the Lunar New Year.

“Oh, so are you his sister?” I asked, hopeful.

“Yes. I'm the sister.”

I reached into my bag for the book.

“Can you give this to him?”

She stared at the wrapped book but didn't take it.

"He's in Holešovice meeting friends. You can give to him."

She wrote something down on a piece of paper from the notepad she'd been holding and handed it to me.

"This is where he is."

She had written the name of a bar and a metro stop.

I thanked her, took the book back, and headed out the door. I'd never been to that part of town, but Sam had told me that he'd heard there were some good dance clubs and art galleries there and that we should check it out sometime. I walked to the subway station and took the red line across the Vltava River to the outskirts of the city.

When I got off the subway, I was surprised to see that I was in a quiet residential neighborhood. There was a woman pushing a stroller and an old man walking a big black dog. I looked down at the paper Vinh's sister had given me and double checked that I got the right station. I stopped the man with the dog and showed him the paper and he pointed at a street to the right. I followed the street and saw a small neon sign with just "BAR" in red.

I walked in and saw Vinh playing pool towards the back with two other Asian guys. He looked different. His hair was gelled at the sides and spiked up in the center and his jeans were torn at the knees. The look seemed to suit him better than the khaki pants and collared shirt that he wore at the restaurant. The bar smelled of stale beer and the bottoms of my shoes stuck to the floor as I walked. The bartender, a large man with stubble on his face, stared at me as he wiped down the counter with a dirty rag. He said something in Czech that I didn't understand but I assumed he wanted to know my drink

order so I asked for a beer, “Pivo, prosim.” He nodded and filled a pint glass with whatever was on tap. I paid him the equivalent of one dollar and walked over to the pool table where Vinh was waiting for his turn.

“So, this is what you do on your days off?” I asked.

He turned to look at me and almost dropped the pool stick he was holding.

“Lizabeth. I’m surprised. Why you here?”

“Well, I’ve been wanting to check out this neighborhood.” I reached into my bag and grabbed the book. “Actually, I went to the restaurant and your sister told me you had the day off. I wanted to give this to you.” I felt embarrassed all of the sudden and asked myself why I didn’t think this through before coming. Did he think I was a stalker?

“What’s this?” He put his pool stick down and looked at the wrapping.

“You can open it later. Finish your game,” I said taking the book back.

“No it’s okay.”

He introduced me to his friends who were also Vietnamese and had known each other since childhood. Vinh said something to them in Vietnamese. They nodded and he placed his pool stick on a rack against the wall. We sat at a booth together while his friends continued to play pool. He ripped the wrapping paper and when he saw that it was *The Catcher in the Rye* he thanked me. When he looked down at the book, his bangs fell in front of his face and I wanted to brush them away from his eyes but I didn’t. He tried to read the first few sentences but it was hard for him so I helped. We sat there like that for a while. I’d read one sentence and he’d read another.

“You’re getting there. It’ll just take time,” I said after we’d finished the first page.

“It’s frustrating to learn. Thank you for helping,” he said, placing his hand on my shoulder. He leaned in towards me and I thought that he was going to kiss me but he was just reaching for his beer.

“Do you still have that locket? The one with the photo,” he asked.

“Yeah, I do. It’s in my room. Why?” I asked.

“I was thinking it might be one of these guys, that kid in the photo.”

“Oh really?”

“Yes, our mothers are friends. They come to the restaurant. Maybe they drop it.”

“Aha! Maybe. I can bring it by sometime,” I said.

“How about tomorrow?” he asked.

“Sure, I can come by for dinner. My friend Hannah is going to be in town and I can bring her with me.”

I left the bar and promised him that I’d see him at the restaurant the next day. I took the metro back towards the Old Town Square. The buildings were lit with a majestic glow that made me feel as if I were walking into a movie set. I stood there and stared for a while trying to burn the memory of it into my brain.

Later that evening, I woke up to a loud pounding on my door. I looked at my alarm clock and it said it was four in the morning. I got up out of bed and threw on a sweatshirt. I left the door chain lock attached just in case there was a psycho standing outside in the hallway waiting for an innocent American to open the door for him. There

was no psycho, but instead it was the woman from the lobby standing in front of the door with a scowl on her face. She said something in Czech that I couldn't understand and so I kept saying "Promiňte, nerozumím."

She shook her head and started to gesture like she was holding something up to her ear.

"You. Telefon," she said pointing down at the floor.

"Oh, telephone. I have a call? Okay. Děkuju." I smiled at her but she didn't smile back.

"Ano. Telefon." She looked even more annoyed at me and started walking towards the main staircase.

I followed her down to the lobby and behind the glass window where she usually sat. The fluorescent light inside made everything look brighter, like an overexposed photograph. She handed me the yellow receiver and for a moment I didn't want to know what was on the other side of the line. The only number my parents had was for the pay phone in the lobby but there was someone using it. They must have gotten the dormitory number from the contact list in the folder that was given to us at the start of the program. In my groggy state, I still managed to figure out the time difference. It was eight o'clock in California on an insignificant day. The day after Christmas, Boxing Day to the Brits, but nothing special to Americans or Filipinos.

I held the phone to my ear and spoke into it softly, "Hello. Mom?"

"No, Lizbeth, it's Auntie June. Your mother...she's very upset. I'm sorry to bother you but I think you should come to see her. It's bad."

“What do you mean? Why? What happened,” my hands were shaking. My mother was like a rock, the one person in our family that held it together.

“Well, I’m sorry to say but your dad.” Auntie June’s voice started to tremble. “He’s...there’s someone else. Ay naku, Lizbeth. It’s terrible. Your mom is devastated.”

“What do you mean someone else?” I asked.

“Someone from work, talaga! He’s so tanga. I’m sorry to say that about your dad, but he’s so stupid.”

I tried to think about all the women I had seen my father with. He worked at the PG&E power plant as an engineer but it was mostly men that he worked with. There was his boss Alberto and his co-worker Jerry, but I couldn’t remember him talking about any other women. I’d been to his office once when it was the day most of the dads brought their daughter to work and then another time with my mother. And then I remembered a woman I met briefly. She was sitting behind a desk with piles of paper in front of her. She looked not that much older than me and I remember thinking she was kind of pretty, not gorgeous, cute maybe. Did she even talk to my father? I couldn’t remember.

“I don’t know if I can leave though. I don’t know if I can with the program and everything.”

I had another week and a half left for winter break so I could have flown home, but I didn’t want to. The situation felt too overwhelming. What was I supposed to do? My Auntie June was there and could help my mother. They didn’t need me.

“I really think you should come.” She sounded scared like someone’s life depended on it.

To Be Continued...

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