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Million Dollar Red

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MILLION DOLLAR RED

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English and Comparative Literature

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

by

Jennifer M. Ghastin

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The Designated Thesis Committee Approves the Thesis Titled

MILLION DOLLAR RED

by

Jennifer M. Ghastin

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND COMPARATIVE
LITERATURE

SAN JOSE STATE UNIVERSITY

May 2011

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ABSTRACT

MILLION DOLLAR RED

by Jennifer M. Ghastin

The novel *Million Dollar Red* connects the lives of six women in Eastside San Jose in pursuit of a common set of desires to be beautiful, happy, and something other than what they were when they walked into Quynh's Nail Salon.

The third person limited point of view shifts protagonists every time a character comes into contact with a certain shade of red nail polish, Million Dollar Red. According to Quynh, the owner of the salon, the polish has the magical power to give women what they need but not what they want.

Once the six women have encountered the color, the narrative rotates through their lives, alternating between manicurist and client. Each client enters the salon with a personal conflict, but this conflict changes with the application of the red polish and the interaction with the manicurist. In the backdrop, the manicurists struggle with the central conflict: the impending health inspection.

Million Dollar Red exaggerates the differences and similarities of the women in Eastside San Jose, pitting their cultural stereotypes against each other comically, ironically, and sometimes tragically.

The women, propelled by a desire to be at least a little different from who they are, find themselves driven towards each other, and in some cases, realize that they do want essentially the same things, no matter where they come from.

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Introduction

In the novel *Million Dollar Red*, Quynh, the owner of a nail salon in Eastside San Jose, does everything in her power to pass the upcoming health inspection. Ironically, her comical attempts to save the shop work against her, tearing apart the community of Vietnamese American women in the salon.

Lam, a manicurist and often the agent of chaos, struggles with Quynh's new rules. Although Lam serves as a constant source of comedy, her comedic mishaps only mask the tragedy she experiences outside of the shop with her gang-curious daughter, Lynn.

Thi, the youngest Vietnamese American immigrant, can barely speak English. She looks sixteen but has, by far, the seediest past.

Each manicurist pairs with a client who has selected the color Million Dollar Red. The owner, Quynh, services the youngest customer, Kimmie, a Latina teenager who is playing Russian roulette with her Norteño boyfriend. Both women learn that there is more dimension and substance to the other than they believed. Lam, and her Caucasian counterpart Miriam, struggle with motherhood, while Thi, the youngest manicurist, teaches Perkins, an elderly African American woman struggling with dementia, to let go.

When the customers encounter the polish, life changes for both employees and customers. In most cases it is not only the polish, but the customer's interaction, however brief, with the manicurist that sparks the change in both women's lives.

Ironic Influences

While writing *Million Dollar Red*, I was reading Joseph Heller's novel *Catch-22*. Originally I had set out to write a serious and dramatic novel; however, *Catch-22* made me keenly aware of the ironies in my character's experiences, especially experiences that are typically taken seriously.

Catch-22 takes place during the End of World War II. Yossarian, a bombardier, wants to be discharged from the army on account of his insanity but discovers that there is a clause, Catch-22, which prevents it:

There was only one catch and that was Catch-22, which specified that a concern for one's own safety in the face of dangers that were real and immediate was the process of a rational mind. Orr was crazy and could be grounded. All he had to do was ask; and as soon as he did, he would no longer be crazy and would have to fly more missions. Orr would be crazy to fly more missions and sane if he didn't, but if he was sane, he had to fly them. If he flew them, he was crazy and didn't have to; but if he didn't want to, he was sane and had to. Yossarian was moved very deeply by the absolute simplicity of this clause of Catch-22 and let out a respectful whistle. (Heller 55)

Characters cannot fly on the bomb squad if they are crazy, but if they report that they are crazy, they cannot be crazy, so they must fly the missions. This is the central irony in *Catch-22*, but there are smaller catches on just about every page. For example, Major Major thinks that other characters are out to get him, so he tells his secretary only to let people in to see him when he is out, and when he is in, she should tell them to wait while he slips back out. Then, when people come to see him, they get caught in this contradiction and are never able to see him.

While reading *Catch-22*, I could not help but see the ironies around me and wrote many of them into the novel. First of all, the state requires a health inspection of nail

salons, but in the state of California there are only sixteen salon health inspectors. Last year, four were laid off, so twelve people are charged with biannual inspection of each nail salon in California. Secondly, when salons are inspected, most do not pass. The fact is that they cannot provide cheap, fast service and still pass. When the salons do not pass, the State of California issues a fine; however, the fine is so minimal that instead of changing anything in the shop, salons pay the fees and continue working, still in violation of the health codes.

In *Catch-22*, the men in charge make all sorts of silly decisions to keep the broken system running somewhat smoothly and to keep themselves in charge. In *Million Dollar Red*, the health department is the broken system. The inspections have no real consequence, as many shops do not follow safety guidelines.

On a smaller scale, I tried to incorporate humor, especially in racially charged situations. Quynh, the owner, and Kimmie, a Latina teen, both stereotype each other. The truth is the opposite of the stereotype, but by stereotyping, they get themselves into awkward situations, reaffirming the original stereotype.

Each character can be both her stereotype and a three-dimensional character beyond just that stereotype. There is not a cookie cutter version of an Eastside San Jose woman. Furthermore, there is no one immigrant story identical to another. The novel demystifies the women who sit at other women's feet and addresses the questions and stories that are usually not spoken because someone is, on some level, uncomfortable.

Lyric and Literary Influences

In addition to *Catch-22*, Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* has been influential to me. First of all, Nabokov's prose is poetic. *Lolita* opens, "Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta" (Nabokov 9). Here Nabokov uses the *l* sounds, a lyric and liquid sound, and cuts off the liquid *l* sound with the *t*, which requires tongues to touch teeth. Nabokov manipulates the reader's mouth in the very first paragraph, demonstrating his physical control over the reader.

In 2010, I traveled to Quebec to read a conference paper entitled "Deceptions in *Lolita*." While preparing for the conference, I became fascinated with *Lolita*. I found that if you map the calendar dates on a chart, the second half of the novel—the part where Humbert Humbert visits Dolores, kills Quilty, and gets caught—never could have happened. Humbert Humbert reported that he received the letter from Dolores on September 20, but on the first page of the novel it is stated that Humbert Humbert was in a sanitarium for 56 days and that he died on November 16. Fifty-six days before the date of his death is the day before he received the letter. Everything following the letter could not have happened. Humbert Humbert was in a sanatorium on the day he supposedly killed Quilty.

Nabokov laced his novel with deep subterfuge, and in doing so, the novel became multifaceted. On one hand, an informed reader can detect the literary allusions and decipher the subterfuges, and thus enjoy mining the book for meaning. On the other hand, an "uninformed" pleasure-reader is still attracted to the book's plot and characters.

Alfred Apple, who attempted the *Annotated Lolita*, did not find every allusion and deception in the novel. *Lolita* continues to be studied, and there will always be something left hidden within it.

Million Dollar Red is packed with lyricism and literary allusion but still accessible to the mainstream reader. My goal was to write a book that anyone could read for pleasure, and one that a student could enjoy studying.

Shakespearean Allusions

I have always loved to hate Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. The story is widely misread. It is not a beautiful love story but a cruel story about a bi-polar male who ruins the life of an innocent and pious girl. Romeo starts the play in love with another woman. Then in order to get over this other woman, he crashes the party of his rivals, and is surprised to find out his new crush is one of them. Romeo ditches his friends at a party, and then breaks into his crush's house. Some say this is romantic—I think it's a little manic.

When the two first meet, Romeo tries to sweet talk Juliet into kissing. He tells her to let lips do what hands do:

Juliet: Good pilgrim, you do wrong your hand too much...
For saints have hands that pilgrims' hands do touch,
And palm to palm is holy palmers' kiss.
Romeo: Have not saints lips, and holy palmers too?
Juliet: Ay, pilgrim, lips that they must use in prayer.
Romeo: O, then, dear saint, let lips do what hands do. (1.5.102-08)

Romeo suggests that hands touch in a handhold, while Juliet corrects him, telling him that her hands touch in a prayer-like pose. He interprets this touching as sexual,

asking her to do with her lips what she is doing with her hands: she means to pray, he means to touch.

Their first encounter is cut short, followed by Romeo breaking in and spying on Juliet, who is contemplating the problems of their families' feud. Romeo (who does not even think of this) reflects only on Juliet's beauty, and startles her by showing up on her balcony. Creepy, not romantic. They admit they both have feelings for each other, but Juliet explains that she will have to be married before she can "be with" Romeo. Romeo is so excited to "be with" Juliet that he plans the marriage for the next day. After the two are married, instead of staying with Juliet, telling their parents, or running away, he leaves Juliet to go tell his friends. While doing so, Mercutio and Tybalt die, and Romeo is banished, having to go back to Juliet and letting her know he screwed up, but is sorry. After spending the night with her again, he leaves a second time, this time to Mantua. Juliet, the one in the couple who actually thinks ahead, creates a plan that Romeo does not get wind of. He kills himself, and then she kills herself as a reaction to his suicide. I hate Romeo.

In *Million Dollar Red*, Kimmie has a Romeo named Mario, a manic, depressed, and crazy boy who is quick to get her in trouble and also quick to leave. She is forbidden by her parents to see Mario because of his gang affiliation. Kimmie, in the end, chooses not to be a Juliet. She does not fall for his antics. She does what Juliet should have done when Romeo left: let him go.

Magical Realism

Ray Bradbury inspired the magical realism in *Million Dollar Red*. Bradbury combines three elements that I enjoy: poetry, prose, and fantasy. In *Million Dollar Red*, magic appears only in Quynh's chapters. Quynh believes that each color possesses a magical power: Burgundy Wine to forget, Dusty Lilac to let go, etc. In the first chapter, Quynh receives a shipment of polishes, and begins her ritual incantation, calling out the names of the polishes and placing them on the shelf. She is interrupted when she experiences a Marian apparition. The Virgin Mary appears to Quynh and enchants the color Million Dollar Red. The novel continues to follow the nail polish color through the multiple narratives.

The other characters are rational, religious, or philosophical thinkers. Only Quynh's chapters have hints of magical realism. She reacts to this magic, spilling over the fanatical elements of her belief into the real life elements of the other women. Quynh believes that things are happening because of a magical quality she and the polish possess. Quynh accepts their powers as fact, and coincidentally Quynh predicts characters' needs and wants through their choice of color.

Voice

I first read J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* in high school, and I was given the assignment to write a chapter from Holden Caulfield's point of view. I could have written a sequel; I could have kept writing and never stopped. When I was done with my

chapter, I knew I wanted to be a writer. I thought to myself, “If writing can be like *this*, in the voice of real people, then sign me up.”

I want to use voices of real people. I do not want to create caricatures. I want them to be real women who exist and rub elbows (and toes) in Eastside San Jose. I want their voices to be unique to this region and this time, a tribute to all I have learned growing up in the nineties in Eastside San Jose.

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Part One

Quynh

Quynh stabbed the rusted leg of a large pair of scissors into the top of the brown box; and then drew the blade towards her belly, slicing open the new shipment.

“Good. Good. Good.” She clapped her hands.

She pulled back the cardboard leaves and plucked her newest prizes from the box: bottles of Burgundy Wine, Coral Pink, Dusty Lilac, Fiery Orange, White Pearl, Violet Sapphire, Cotton Candy, and Million Dollar Red.

“Good. Good,” she repeated in Vietnamese as she bunched the bouquet of nail polishes to her bosom and shuffled to the color cabinet—her trophy case.

Above the display rested a statue of the Virgin Mary. Her open palms trickled grace in finite streams down from heaven while the Mona-Lisa smile held something back, some secret. Under the Virgin’s feet, a serpent stirred.

Below the statue, Quynh genuflected and began the incantation.

“Burgundy Wine to forget. But Dusty Lilac to let go. Coral Pink to reverse the years. Fiery Orange to bring laughter. White Pearl to see clearly. And Red, Million Dollar Red, to—

Quynh consulted the statue as she cast the spell, but froze. The statue—it was looking at her. It always looked down like that though, didn’t it?

She backed away, studying the porcelain figure. These Mary statues—sometimes they do weird things. Sometimes they cry. It’s not uncommon. It’s possible. It’s even probable. Of course Mary was watching; Quynh asked her to. That was the point of getting the statue: to watch over her and the shop.

And just as Quynh had convinced herself that everything was exactly as it should be, the statue bent its head again and met Quynh's eyes.

"Oh my God," exclaimed Quynh, falling into a metal folding chair.

The statue slowly extended one hand out, reaching towards Quynh, and spoke, "Hand me the polish."

Obediently, Quynh handed the statue the polish.

"May the wearer get what she needs, not what she wants," proclaimed The Virgin. And the spell was complete.

"Truong? Did you see—"

But when Quynh turned around to spread the miracle, Truong was not there. The shop was empty.

The door chimed and Lam and Thi Tweedledee-and-Tweedledumed through the door with lattes—late to work again.

"You two, be quiet, and see," said Quynh pointing to the statue that was positioned hands extended, bare feet stepping on the neck of a snake.

Lam and Thi looked at the statue and blinked.

Lam whispered to Thi, "Should we tell her we're Buddhist?"

Thi just slurped her latte through a straw.

"Bah. You are too late." Quynh returned to her study of the statue while the two manicurists busied the air with chatter and laughter and slurps.

Quynh waited for something else to happen and stood transfixed in front of the statue until Thi needed Pinks for her toes, and Pearls for her fingers, and Top Coats, and Rainbows, and the day sprang back into motion.

The Virgin remained silent but smiling.

Kimie

She wanted him to want her like she wanted him. Instead she texted back to his *Wats up?* Nothing. No, she texted back “*Nothing*” and waited for something. All she got was a “Cool.”

And then Mr. Cruz confiscated Kimie’s phone.

Without her Samsung, the algebra worksheet in front of Kimie actually looked somewhat interesting. It was at least more interesting than staring at Cruz’ receding hairline or socializing with the other goons who also had to repeat Algebra 1 in summer school.

What is the value of x ?

Kimie had written “IDK,” or even worse, “I don’t care” when asked the value of variables during the school year—behavior that landed her here in this hellhole. Her problem wasn’t math; she could actually do math. It was with that word “value.” She didn’t see it here.

She saw value in Mario Rivera. And Mario Rivera saw value in something else.

Kimie calculated the equations quickly. She also calculated whether calculating the equations quickly would get her phone back. It was worth a try.

She dropped the completed worksheet in Cruz’ basket. He lowered his newspaper, reached into his pocket, and slid her phone across his desk.

“Don’t text in class, kiddo.”

“Okay.” Kiddo.

Four missed texts from Mario. In backwards order:

Just a few stitches.

Beto's hurt.

Homeboys got jumped.

Shit.

And by the time Kimmie had scripted the perfect response in her head, something that both conveyed sympathy for Mario's plight and explained her negligence to his previous text, without using the word negligence, because that would be pretentious, her battery died.

Time for a quick detour before work. Kimmie pulled into the King shopping center and parked her car in front of Quynh's Nail Salon. She had enough of a cell phone charge from the five minute drive for one quick call.

"Mario, what happened?"

"Beto—Fool got jumped."

"Were they—"

"Sureños? Naw, some little Viet wannabes."

"And Beto, is he okay?"

"A few stitches."

"So, it didn't have anything to do with—"

"Nothing like that. Just Beto being Beto."

Relieved that Mario was in no real trouble, Kimmie stepped out of her car and crossed the parking lot to the salon. Her phone began to beep.

The owner yelled at Kimmie from across the room. Instinctually Kimmie did what the woman said and sat in a chair by the door.

“Can I see you tonight?” Mario pleaded.

“Maybe after work,” Kimmie teased.

The phone went dead.

Kimmie followed the Vietnamese woman to her station. The station was cluttered with potions, polishes, and plastic fingers. It was a little gross, but this place was cheap— so whatever.

“What color you want?”

Right. Kimmie looked to the cabinet case, and her eyes rested on the brightest shade of red right in the middle of the shelf.

“That one,” she pointed vaguely towards the wall of colors.

The Vietnamese woman did not like this choice. She acted like it was all weird to paint your nails red. Like, aren't almost all the nail polishes a variation of red?

Quynh

The miracle was one of two things, Quynh decided: either a dream Quynh had while she was awake, or a Marian Apparition. But this miracle didn't leave her image stained on a t-shirt, or pressed into a medallion, or any kind of proof, which was why Quynh considered that she had, in her own way, made the whole thing up. Maybe the powders and potions combined in such a way that they acted, in this case, as a hallucinogen. That or Quynh's health was slipping. Or maybe, just maybe, there was a little magic in the world. Either way, Quynh had known it all along: the colors meant something.

Each color held something for Quynh. The years and customers had charged the hues with their memory. A certain shade of purple would bring back her sister laughing "Easy money." Her children spilling greens and blues onto the tiles while they were still children, the color of her wedding finger holding rings that would not keep, and the deep purples of his funeral flowers.

Quynh shook off the morning's miracle and broke down the shipping box, folded against her tummy and dumped it into the trashcan outside.

She read the sky. The day would be an okay day. The beginning of summer promised sandaled toes, sexy acrylic fingers, and wedding eyebrows and lips. The weather, short-shorts-weather, always a good sign.

At the corner of Alum Rock and Capital, Quynh carved out her 750 square foot "Easy money" dream: fourteen stations, blue and white tile on the walls and floor,

orchids at each station and shelf, and the Virgin Mary always watching, above the other Vietnamese women filing away at fat toes and expensive fingers.

Quynh returned to her station enjoying the smell: acetone and tangerine. Fake nails laid out on little plastic fingers, spirals and flowers and heart designs. The tiled walls covered with 80s posters of — not square tip, but rounded, red fingernails and used-to-be-beautiful women with perms. The nail stations, cubicles, all the same, small licenses with real names tacked to the wall. June was really Thi; Susan, Viet; Minh really was Minh; and Queen, Quynh. The masked women laughed, worked, and ate. Tangerine and acetone. Beautiful and toxic.

The door chimed and a small Latina girl stood with her ear pressed to her phone while she rummaged through her purse for something.

Quynh called out to the girl, “You sit there. Wait five minute.” The girl did not look up from her purse but followed directions, collapsing into a metal folding chair near the door.

“You come.” Quynh called out to the girl and ushered her into a new folding chair.

The young Latina was overdeveloped. She couldn’t have been more than sixteen but had the eyes and hips of someone much older, thought Quynh.

Her face was powdered down to a slightly thick but flawless shade of caramel. Her hair straightened and pulled back tight, her sharp brows arched. Her eyes seemed doll-like, painted on, but painted past the margin of her eyes. The lashes clumped intentionally into groups of two or three hairs to stand out, longer. Her lids and lips, a

frosted pink. Her red tank top hugged her small but full body, as did her pants, all the way down to the calves. Under the hem of her jeans a row of gems peeked out.

The girl rose and followed Quynh's chopped English and gestures into her new chair, still on the phone.

Quynh now, waited annoyed at the arrogance of American teenagers.

The girl giggled into her phone, put down her small patterned purse, and pulled her tank over the hips, covering them properly. She side-glanced the mirror on the wall and smirked at herself.

When beauty was worth having, Quynh had been too busy with school, or war, or politics, or English. Too busy to be beautiful. When she was twenty and prime, she would pull back her hair into a tight bun and wash her face hard with soap and sun that then seemed luxurious. Now she was old, too old to be beautiful. Her back curved a little with the weight of her chest pulling her down towards the earth. Her laughter left un-ironable creases across her face, her hair lost its hold of black; her waist, its figure. Quynh was not a fool. She didn't grasp at beauty the way the other women did, throwing money at silly dreams. Beauty wasn't something that was important for her to keep, so when it went, she let it go.

Batting her lashes, the Latina looked up to Quynh as if surprised to see that she was ready and waiting.

After the phone call had ended, Quynh motioned for the girl to extend her hands.

The girl extended one hand weakly.

There was nothing Quynh could do to make this girl beautiful. “Beautiful” comes from a far away place this girl does not know. A place behind the eyes and ribs—deep. You have to see something truly ugly to recognize beauty. This girl just watches TV. Beautiful is a looking-out place where people see their place next to each other. This girl has “the wanting” that will eventually steal her money, her beauty, her youth, and her dreams. She was born here. She was born with it. Latina or not, she is American. Her eyes can’t see past their lashes.

With cotton balls and alcohol, Quynh stripped back the glitter and clear coating off the plastic nail. Then, with some water and powder, she stirred the paste that would fill the gap between skin and plastic.

Quynh bobbed and brushed, bobbed and brushed, until the nails were whole again.

The two didn’t speak—they barely could, or thought they barely could. Each assumed if the other knew English, the accent would hold them back. They wouldn’t be able to find the words or find a subject where both their words could rest. Quynh thought the girl was foolish. Foolish to talk to boys on phones, and paint her face, and cover up with other colors what she really was, a kid. But foolish girls were easy money.

The girl looked in the mirror, or at the clock, or studied other customers, but never did she look at Quynh, and if she did, she never let her eyes meet Quynh’s. Not for any reason really other than if they connected, she’d have to speak to say something, and she had nothing for this woman. Nothing to say or feel.

“What color?” Quynh asked when the coat was sealed.

“Red. That red.”

Quynh followed the girl’s gaze to the dead center of the shelf. Her smug expression dropped. What’s this? Some trick. She turned to the statue:

“What’s this?” The statue smiled condescendingly.

Quynh studied the girl, who wanted to be beautiful. This would not make her beautiful—but what is it that she needs? Had Quynh misjudged the girl? There was a magic locked in there behind the eyes that cannot see. She would get what she needed; that’s how it worked. Quynh studied the girl’s eyes. What did they need?

Quynh shook the bottle from the morning delivery, twisted the cap, and stroked the pinkie finger first.

Kimmmie

A fresh stroke touched the small nail, and the cloudy plastic transformed into a brilliant shade of candied red. The old Vietnamese woman hunched over Kimmmie had clear and yellowed nails. Maybe from touching chemicals all day. Gross.

I will never be like that. Stop caring. Give up. Let myself go. Was she born like that? With the hunch? Kimmmie straightened her posture and checked the mirror. Her hair hugged her round head; her eyes, deep and inviting; her lips a soft, plump, pearly pink. Kimmmie knew she was beautiful. She knew everyone knew.

The clock next to the Virgin Mary statue said 3:30 p.m. That can't be right. Kimmmie worked at 4:00, and nails take like forever to dry. This was so not good.

Kimmmie left Quynh's with three thoughts; one, she should have picked purple; two, she really, really did love Mario; and three, she was now way late for work.

She hopped into the Nissan she had borrowed from her mother and sped down 680 to 101 and then on to Great America Parkway. She couldn't exactly afford to be late. She had her expenses: food, gas, nails, Mario.

She swiped her card, flew past security into the locker room, and stripped down to her lacey underwear (she might see Mario later) and then into her droid uniform: khaki pants and polo shirt. Again, Kimmmie checked the mirror, and she looked as good as anyone could look in an amusement park uniform.

When she arrived at her ride, Liz was pissed.

"Hello. You do this to me every day. I've had to pee for, like, thirty minutes."

Liz was a bitch.

“Sorry, Liz.”

“Whatever.”

Whatever.

She was mostly on time. Twenty minutes is a reasonable amount of time to be late—it’s not like it was a morning shift, and the ride wouldn’t open because she was late; it was an afternoon shift, Liz was there. So Liz can just deal. It’s not her fault it takes those women, like, an hour to put on some nail polish. Shit. In all her hurry she hadn’t been paying attention, and her nail already had a dent in it. And she was supposed to see Mario later too.

Liz stepped out from behind the control booth of the carousel, and Kimmie slipped into her place.

“Welcome to Great America,” she announced into the foul smelly microphone. Liz had bad breath. “Please remain seated, and enjoy your ride.” Eric, her co-worker, gave her the nod. He had checked the belts, and she flipped the green switch to begin the ride. Eric was cute, for a white guy.

Except for working with Eric, this job sucked. Take this woman, for example. She probably bought the family pass for a few hundred bucks, and now she is standing behind her five-year-old daughter making sure she doesn’t fall off a plastic horse, just holding her on there, completely paranoid. I don’t even think my mom lifted us up to the monkey bars. We had to jump, and when we fell, we didn’t cry, we beamed at the size of our scabs.

Watching this woman with her hideous mom-crop of a hair cut hug the air around her child just in case the kid teeters, was the final deciding factor: if Kimmie could help it she would rather not have kids—kinda like ever. Besides, over population was like a thing. Plus, Lupe got pregnant when she was like thirteen, and she is totally fat now, and she can't hang out or anything. Her man sucks ass too. Plus Kimmie's mom would kill her. Mom is doing everything she can to keep the family fed and housed, and a baby would totally throw her universe out of wack. If she did have a kid, she might actually wait until she was married. That'd be unconventional!

One text from Mario: *Hey baby, how's work?*

She began a sexy text back when Troy, the manager, popped out of nowhere.

“No texting on the job, Kimmie. And I just ran into Liz, you were late again?”

“There was a lot of traffic, and I had to borrow my mom's car.”

“Kimmie, I let you slide, and you do this stuff every day. You know I should write you up.”

She did that magic thing she does when she both looks at a man and tilts her head down so that her eyes appear sexier, her face thinner. She knew she was doing it. She practiced.

“Swear to God, this is your last verbal warning.” Troy took off his Great America cap, ran his fingers through his hair, and then replaced the cap.

Troy was the kind of manager that took everything into consideration, weighing his sympathy for Kimmie against her ability and circumstance, but in the end a batting of the lashes usually saved her.

“I don’t want to write you up, but I need you to take this job a bit more seriously. It’s my job to make sure that you do, you know?”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

Troy did the thing with his hat again, winced a smile at Kimmie, and disappeared into the crowd.

The ride was coming to its end. And again into the microphone, Kimmie announced, “Thank you, and have a good rest of the day here at Great America.” She said this last part as enthusiastically as she could, just in case anyone else critical was listening.

She watched Eric run around the carousel again, checking for children stuck on horses or adults taking photos and lagging. Then he ran to the front of the line, unhooked the rope and counted as the next forty customers entered. He looked okay in Dickies, she decided. Boys always do; boys and lesbians.

Eric knew the drill. He ran around and checked everything; she just stood at the station, manning the controls and making announcements. He liked doing the “easy” parts. That’s what Kimmie thought too. They were an okay team. Mostly just exchanged nods and smiles. He didn’t mind if she texted or reapplied lip gloss. She didn’t mind if he flirted with the customers, occasionally breaking the rules by slipping one his number.

Again he gave the nod; she gave the announcement, and flipped the green switch. Kimmie opened her freshly charged phone, erased the sexy text and started again:

Work sucks.

Need a little cheering up. When are you off?

Not till ten.

I'll be there.

She flipped switches, exchanged nods, and breathed into the microphone until 10:00 p.m. What a hellish day.

At 10:15 Mario was leaning against her Nissan with a Slurpee cup. He was all muscle and bone. His shirt was a different type of uniform: plaid red, dark pressed jeans, and Cortezes peaked out from beneath the pleated pants. His head was shaved and his eyes a comfortable chocolate. Kimmie collapsed into his arms, and he held her weight. He smelled like Axe body spray. She liked this.

“Here,” he said, “have a sip.”

She raised her brows and took a large gulp. The Slurpee stung her tongue and triggered her gag reflex.

“Oh my God. What is it? That’s nasty.”

Mario smiled, delighted with himself, “It’s a little of everything.”

“Nasty.”

“I didn’t want my aunt to know I raided the liquor cabinet, so I poured a few swigs of everything they had: a little kahlua, tequila, whiskey, rum, my mom’s wine coolers, then blue and red Slurpee to top it off.”

He extended the cup again. She braced herself this time and took a much larger gulp.

“I told Beto we were going here. He’s in the park somewhere drunk off his ass. Let’s go find him.”

The last thing Kimmie wanted to do was go back into that park, but the *absolute* last thing she wanted to do was lose Mario.

“You can’t go in with that.”

“Oh, are you security now, too?”

“No, but I’ll get fired for real if we even try.”

“Then I guess we’re just going to have to finish this here.”

They took turns gulping and wincing, and then drove sloppily around to the front entrance.

“The park is only open for like twenty minutes, and we are plastered. Let’s just pick up Beto and kick it somewhere else.”

“Let’s ditch Beto,” Mario said, sliding his hand onto Kimmie’s thigh and leaning over the clutch to kiss her.

“Let me park first.”

“No, keep driving. It’s hotter like this.”

His hand rode up her thigh further.

One text from Beto: *Dude, I’m out front. Where are you?*

“Shit, fucking Beto needs a ride. We only have a few minutes.”

He pushed Kimmie back into her seat. She managed to pull the car into a parking spot. Mario, thick as he was, tried to wedge himself in between the steering wheel and

Kimmmie, failing. She grasped for the recliner lever, snapping her new nail between the door and the lever, forcing the lever forward and the seat down.

When she reached for his face, there was more red than usual on her fingers.

“Shit. I’m bleeding.”

“You know I don’t care about that, baby.”

“No. My hand is bleeding.”

Mario rolled back into the passenger seat, while Kimmmie limply wiggled her nail back and forth, and finally with a small cry twisted the thing off. The red nail was immediately replaced by a pool of blood.

“Let me see,” Mario asked.

Kimmmie offered the hand to Mario, who smiled, “It’s just a scratch. Just a scratch. You should have seen the massacre on King earlier. Beto was lucky to walk away from that shit.”

Kimmmie pulled her white polo off with her good hand. She had a black spaghetti strap tank underneath.

“That’s what I’m talking about.” Mario slipped his hand back around Kimmmie who shrugged him off.

“That wasn’t for you.” She wrapped the polo around her hand and wondered if blood stained white clothes. She knew Mario would know, but didn’t want to ask.

She started the car back up.

“What are you doing?”

“Getting out of here.”

Mario crossed his arms and sat back in the passenger seat defeated.

Quynh

Quynh sorted the day's mail: bills for the polish, bills from the bank, and an OPEN IMMEDIATELY HEALTH INSPECTION REQUIRED.

She dropped the red-stamped envelope onto her station. The station was covered with dirty water, and she picked the letter up again, fanning herself with it.

"They are after us again," she announced to her fellow manicurists, flapping the letter in the air.

Thi and Lam dropped their heads as though by ducking they would escape the inspection.

Van and Susan sat straight up, putting down their tweezers and files.

Truong, the only male worker and accountant, did nothing. He did not even look up. These women overreact. Hysterical about nothing. All the time.

"What did they say last time?" Van called from behind a pair of brown toes.

"Build sink. We build sink," Lam answered the call.

"No worry. We build sink," Susan echoed.

"When they don't say build sink, they say more air flow, more water, more air, more plug. Always something, always more money," Quynh said to the room.

"I say let them come. Let them come see the sink," said Lam.

"I say don't worry. They look more when you worry," said Thi.

Truong said nothing.

Quynh scanned the rest of the paper. Let them come and see. Let them come and inspect. Find problem. They find problem, I fix problem. Let them find problem. She

finalized her decision and announced to the room, “Health inspection. No problem. Thirty day. No problem.” Sink, plug, mask, glove, no problem.

The heads snapped back towards their customers’ fingers and toes and paranoid stares. Were the women talking about them? Were the women complaining? What could upset them so, and then so easily be agreed upon and decided?

Quynh again dropped the letter and let it saturate this time, turning heavy and wet. She knew what it said, and even if she didn’t, she couldn’t read it anyway. They would come, maybe for the shop, maybe just for the money, maybe just for her. They would come, and try to take, take, take the everything that she had built.

“You’re playing tricks,” she eyed the statue. “I need this—we all need this.”

Did the statue smirk? Didn’t the statue always smirk?

Part Two

Lam

Lam sat with Van in the break room, which was really the private wax station, heating noodles.

“She favor social over academic,” Lam explained.

“Take her phone, then. No school, no phone,” Van suggested.

Lam reached deep into her pocket and revealed a phone covered in Hello Kitty faces and rhinestones. “I take phone. She get new phone.”

“With what money?”

Lam leaned close to Van, and her eyebrows tightened. A large wrinkle creased in the dead center of her forehead.

“She steal,” Lam confessed.

Van crossed her arms. She considered the information for a moment.

“Change school. I tell you Independence is trouble. Move her to Piedmont High. More Asian at Piedmont. Better.”

This was not a bad idea. Lam relaxed her brows, and her worry wrinkle disappeared.

“How do I change school?”

“Tell the district.”

“My English so bad.”

“They don’t care. They have translators and forms in Viet. No excuses. Change school.”

Lam opened the microwave, removed her noodles, added the flavor packet, and sat in silence considering the proposal.

“I’ll talk to Han,” Lam concluded and slurped the first noodle into her mouth.

Quynh swung open the break room curtain and stared at Van, resting on the wax bench, and Lam crouched next to the microwave. Both froze and looked to Quynh, wondering what crime they had committed.

“Rodent again?” Van questioned.

“Yes, two.”

Van hopped off the wax table and backed out of the break room.

“Where?” Lam sucked a long noodle while scanning the floor.

“You two! No eating in the wax room.”

Lam moved through the curtain to the main salon.

“Why, because of rodent?”

“No, the health inspector.”

“Oh,” Lam sighed and stood in the salon eating her noodles still.

Quynh stared long and hard at Lam with a look of disapproval.

“What?” Lam questioned innocently.

“Well, you can’t eat here,” Quynh said.

Lam put down her chop sticks and looked puzzled.

“Where then?”

“Outside.”

“Outside?”

“Outside.”

Thi chuckled from her station glad that Lam would be the example instead of her.

Quynh shot a look over to Thi, who instantly stopped smiling.

The salon was completely empty, so Quynh decided it was as good a time as any to announce the new rules. She flipped through her notepad, and then made sure she had everyone’s attention.

“Lam, come back in.”

Lam stood in the entrance, holding her noodles outside the salon, but extending her head into the salon.

“First, no eating in the salon.”

“Can we bring food and keep it in the back and eat outside?” Lam questioned from across the room.

Quynh just looked at Lam. That meant no.

“No.”

Van paid no attention. Thi made wild expressions, but said nothing. Susan nodded in agreement to each rule, and Truong continued to write things down.

“Second, masks need to be worn on all jobs, all the time.”

Thi took out her mask and put it on.

“Not now.”

Thi turned pink and took off the mask.

Van cracked a smile and returned to her serious disposition.

“Okay. Last rule for today. All equipment must be sanitized after every customer.”

Susan kept nodding. She might have been nodding off. Van remained poised in respectful silent. Truong still wrote numbers. Thi looked confused. Lam protested, “We will run out of supplies by the end of the day.”

“Good idea,” Quynh scribbled something down onto her pad of paper, “More cleaning supplies. And if you break a rule, you sanitize, and skip your turn. Thank you Lam.”

“Oh. One more idea. I wrote these liability waivers. One for you. One for the customers. Yours says that if you get sick from working here, it’s your fault.”

“If we are already sick of working here, do we sign?” Lam asked.

Van burst into a laugh, which shook Susan awake.

Thi remained silent, not sure if laughing was appropriate or inappropriate at this time.

“What does the customers’ waiver say?” Lam added to soften any blow coming her way.

“The customers’ says: if we cut their toe, or their toe gets an infection from cut, or fungus, or terminal disease, it’s okay.”

“One question. Did you write it just like that?” Lam asked.

Van now had the giggles.

“No. Truong wrote it.”

Truong look up. “No worry. We print small paper. Just put on clipboard, they think it a new sign-in system. No worry. No Spanish. They won’t read. It sound fine when you read. It sound fine. Like a sign-in. I tell them sign. No worry. Quynh no worry. I’ll do that.”

Lam was now one foot in the salon leaning against the doorway with her noodles.

“Lam,” Quynh exclaimed. “Out with noodle!”

A large Latina woman entered.

“I’ll just wait if she’s on break,” the customer motioned towards Lam caught off guard with the noodle in the O of her lips.

“Lam not on break,” Quynh said. “Lam. You blind? Come inside.”

Lam proceeded to bring her noodles back into the shop waving hello to her customer.

Quynh then chased Lam back out with a towel to the trashcan and forced Lam to dump her lunch. The shop erupted in laughter. Even Truong cracked a smile, not looking up from the numbers.

Defeated, Lam returned and escorted her customer to the nail station in the back corner across from the wax station.

Truong cleared his throat and looked at Lam.

Lam looked at Truong, who rarely lifted his head from the numbers, and he cleared his throat again.

“Oh. You sign-up here.”

A Yolanda scrawled her name without reading, and Truong smiled, proud of himself for choosing the small font.

“How are you?” Lam pretended to be happy.

The large woman leaned in towards Lam, her eyes wide with curiosity. “Oh me? Fine.”

“And how’s your daughter?”

“Oh, she’s fine,” Lam lied.

“What grade is she is now?”

“Sophomore at Independence High School,” Lam pointed towards the high school only a few blocks away.

“Oh how funny, my grandson Jose is a sophomore at Indy. I wonder if they know each other. Wouldn’t that be wild?”

Both women would bring it up to their teenagers later, who would shrug and shake their heads. No, they wouldn’t know anyone like that.

The children didn’t know, but they sat next to each other in geometry; they had for a whole semester. Neither had said a word to the other, though. It’s not that they were shy—although they were shy—it was more along the lines, of there are lots of lines that at school weren’t crossed.

For one, Lynn was a girl and that was supposed to make her good at school, which she wasn’t. Secondly, she was Asian, and not just any Asian; she was Vietnamese, which was supposed to make her super-duper good at school, which she really wasn’t.

And she didn't want anyone to know. So in class she said nothing—said nothing when the teacher asked for the answer that she knew but doubted was right. And said nothing when the teacher asked if there were any questions and was everyone ready to move on. Her papers came back with low Cs. She remained perfectly off the radar.

Jose, on the other hand, was always good at school, but that was not always so good for him. In middle school his backpack was stolen for the homework answers, and on the way to and from school, he was threatened by children who forced him to let them cheat. He reinvented himself in high school. Independence was so big that if stuff got really bad, he could hide.

Systematically Jose skipped every fourth question, the teachers gave him 75% of the credit, and he made out with a perfect C, off the radar, genius unnoticed.

Jose was silent when the teacher asked for the answers that only he had, and silent when Jose knew the perfect question that would clarify for the rest of the students. His grandma worried about things like college; Jose worried about today, and maybe tomorrow, and that's about as far as it went.

Jose didn't look up from his papers to see Lynn's struggle, and she didn't look up to see the source of relief beside her. The two suffered alone and would shrug, not knowing the other.

“That would be wild,” repeated the Latina woman, “if they knew each other.”

The Latina's grandchildren are exactly the type of thing Lam needed to protect Lynn from, thought Lam.

Lam's pocket buzzed—it was Lynn's phone: ONE NEW TEXT.

She wiped her hands on the towel on her thigh and checked the text. Quynh barked from her station across the room. “No phone when the health inspectors here!”

Thi rolled her eyes, Van ignored, and Quynh moved on to reprimand Van.

1 TEXT: *MOM DID YOU STEAL MY PHONE? FROM 4089239332*

What number was this? She would step outside to call after this customer.

“Yeah. Yeah,” Lam answered Quynh a little late.

Lam put the phone back in her pocket and strained to slop lotion onto the meat of the arch.

Massaging the frustration out of her own life and the woman’s, Lam fisted and fisted the balls, heel, and arch, turning and twisting her fist in the mouth of this heavy foot.

After the tendons had sighed and opened, and the toes wiped clean, it was time to finish the job. Lam’s wrists strained to hold the woman foot up, so she placed the fishy feet on the ledge of the pedicure station and stretched her hands.

“What color?”

“No, let’s try—that one.” She pointed to Van’s station at a bottle of basic red, and then changed her mind. “No, let’s try something lighter, for summer.”

Van moved her hand from the red bottle to a pink also at her station. The customer sat back satisfied with her choice.

Lam shook the bottle and applied a first coat, a second coat, and a top coat. She escorted the large woman to a chair and table with two small fans, one for each foot.

The large woman, as poor as she seemed, always gave big tips. That was something odd Lam had noticed over the years: the rich tip poorly, and the poor tip well. I suppose the rich keep their money, and the poor give it away.

The large woman thanked Lam again and left. Lam stepped outside to call Lynn. She wanted to tell Lynn that she had a new idea: a new curfew, and that if she had a boyfriend it was okay, they could talk, they should talk, and if she needed help with school maybe they could find some help, a tutor, or maybe what Lynn needed was a job, but really she called about the curfew, that 9 o'clock was early for bed, and maybe Lynn did need some freedom.

Lam dialed the number and it rang and rang and rang. A voice on the other end answered: a woman, a mother.

“Yes, hello, is Lynn there?”

“Sorry, wrong number.”

And then the other mother hung up the phone.

Miriam

Orange was the color of the season, she knew this. Neon orange. Mustard held a close second. That would only make stubby toes look stubbier. Miriam gave up choosing and instead started eliminating.

Dark purple only looks good on brunettes. Not blue or green. Yuck. Although it really was a pearl pink season, she settled on the safest color on the shelf, red.

She walked across the nail salon hesitantly, not sure if she should seat herself or wait. A heavy Latina woman collected her things and left one pedicure station open. Her manicurist stepped outside to text and returned for Miriam.

“What would you like today?”

“Just a pedicure,” Miriam repeated, stressing the word *just*.

“No manicure?” questioned the manicurist.

Miriam looked at her hands quickly, curled the fingers into her fists, then self-consciously uncurled them, and shook her head no.

The manicurist looked to the man at the cash register and smiled, some inside joke.

“Did you sign in?” the manicurist asked.

“No, not yet.”

Miriam pressed her name onto the sign-in, slid into the leather pedicure chair, and dropped her pale feet into the water basin. The woman below Miriam cut, filed, and picked out the dirt and sand from underneath Miriam’s toenail, occasionally stopping to

stretch or shake her wrists. Miriam, ashamed that her toes collected this junk, thought that this problem was unique to her.

The woman below didn't seem to mind—her expression remained blank as she scooped scum from toes and wiped the muck on the dirty towel hanging over her knee. She engaged a co-worker in conversation and Miriam felt relieved that she did not have to participate and absolutely paranoid that the conversation might be about her.

Two women, much more beautiful than Miriam, walked into the shop. They wore business suits, sexy ones: tight gray pants, open frilly white blouses and suit jackets more like corsets. Their shoes were high-heeled and open toed. Their hair was blonde, but grown out revealing orange and brown roots. One was Filipino, the other Caucasian, but they looked and sounded identical. Perfect French manicured fingers and toes, only here for a touch up to be even more perfect.

Miriam sank back further into the chair hoping they would not see her Target sweat pants and un-gelled mom crop. That would make them feel all the more beautiful and Miriam all the more ugly. The woman below Miriam seemed unaffected by these two beauties.

Miriam continued to watch them open and close Juicy Couture purses and fuss with their iPhones, all the while posing their hands like Barbie dolls. Their hands always bent away from the body at the wrists, to keep the expensive nails kept. Their posture and doll hands were perfect with practice. Their sultry walks, were they practiced or natural, or is that the only way to walk in those thin heels?

Did these women feel the same pangs of dissatisfaction with themselves that Miriam did? Do all women feel that? Or was it just Miriam?

Miriam tried to stop her negative thoughts as soon as they started. Her psychologist had told her to try to reframe every negative thought into a positive one: Maybe they worry about all the same things, but completely differently. Maybe they worry about not having a husband or family? Maybe their biological clocks are ticking? Maybe they have crooked teeth under their perfect lips, maybe there are scars, or freckles out of place? Maybe one boob is bigger than the other? Or maybe they are satisfied with their flaws. Then again, maybe they don't have any—yet.

Miriam read that her negative thoughts are like ants. It only takes one negative thought to start a trail of negative thinking: *I am ugly. I am ugly because I got fat when I was pregnant. I got fat when I was pregnant because I gave up being me to be a mom. That made me fat and sad. I got fat and my skin expanded until stretch marks stained my breast, thighs, stomach, and hips. Rob fell out of love with me because I fell out of love with myself. I love my kids and husband, but I don't love myself. And being a decent mom and wife is so not enough.*

Miriam's eyes pressed hard into the mirror across the room and began to swell with tears and hurt. She scrunched up her face and let out a loud gasp.

"I hurt you?" asked the woman below her. Lam put down her tweezers and tried to meet Miriam's eyes, but they were being rubbed away by her sleeves. "I'll stop."

And in one exhalation Miriam explained it all: she was depressed. It wasn't one thing, it was everything. They snowballed together. Every piece of her life so intricately

built came crashing down piece by piece: her body, her marriage, the house, her kids, her friends... one by one the pedestals fell.

The woman below her rose, wiped her hand, and strained to communicate.

Miriam had assumed the woman below didn't speak English or didn't speak English well, which had made her monologue all the more awkward.

The other woman rose and looked severely into Miriam's eyes almost as though in a trance, channeling perfect English.

"Don't be sad. I make you beautiful. You not beautiful when you're sad."

"Oh," Miriam said, bluntly. The "oh" was more in shock that the woman below broke an invisible wall, and the "oh" was because Miriam wasn't sure which one had placed it here. If they both spoke English why hadn't they spoken before?

As the woman kneaded the arch of Miriam's foot, Miriam wondered if she was beautiful there, on the inside. Was she ugly there too? Were the two—the inside and the outside—connected?

She noticed the statue of the Virgin Mary. Is she beautiful? Well, of course she is beautiful. But is she beautiful? Let's just put it this way: She's no Marilyn.

The other woman took her place again at Miriam's feet and began to stroke the toes.

Miriam cleared her eyes with her sleeve and calmed her breath. Oh great. The Barbies were watching her. She wasn't invisible after all. In fact, she was so pathetic, she had attracted their attentions from across the room.

One of the women trotted right up to Miriam and looked her straight in the eye.

“That color. What is that color?”

“Red,” Miriam whispered.

“Million Dollar Red,” echoed a voice from somewhere else in the room.

And when Miriam looked down at her toes expecting to see deformed sausages, she saw what they saw—Marilyn Monroe red, beautiful red. She saw beautiful.

Thi

Thi saved all her tips in a jar and wrote on the jar “English,” in Vietnamese. She heard a radio ad: “Perfect English. English with no accent. Only two hundred dollars.” But she had to pay her sponsor back, pay rent for her nail station, rent for the crowded apartment, and send money home. English would have to wait.

In the shop she would tell her customers, “No English” and smile and point to colors and designs on plastic hands. Too embarrassed to try the few words she did know, she gesticulated and shied away from conversation. There were no articles in Vietnamese, so any combinations of words she did mutter were without their hinges and seemed naked.

Thi hired an English tutor cheap on Craigslist. Her tutor, Ms. K—roughly Thi’s age, but considerably smaller—wore red pumps and a summer dress as a uniform and kept her blonde hair in a tight bun. Ms. K was a special education kindergarten teacher during the day and tutored English language learners in the evenings, and, in Thi’s case, on Saturday mornings at a Starbucks.

Ms. K practiced a special program with Thi designed for children with speech problems: Sound in Motion. Each letter of the alphabet accompanied a different gesture.

“Allie alligator. Ah. Ah. Ah.” Ms. K would chant. With one hand closing over the other, she simulated the jaws of an alligator clamping down, her fingers their teeth. She clapped her hands together with each “Ah. Ah. Ah.”

“The *r* sound is an unnatural sound for you—well, for many language learners. When you see an *r*, I want you to pretend your hand is a paw, that you are a lion, and that you are growling,” instructed Ms. K.

Ms. K curled her fist and purred the hard sound, while Thi sat with her hands folded politely in her lap, blushing. Occasionally the other Starbucks customers would look up while Ms. K waved her limbs into their periphery with the popping of the *p* sound and growling *r*'s. Thi turned red. When it was her turn, she curled her hand into the claw and whispered, kitten-like.

After her Sound in Motion, Thi and Katie would practice conversations.

“How *are* you,” slowly enunciated Ms. K.

“I am good, and how *are* you?” recited Thi making the same dramatic pauses.

“No, you are well,” corrected Ms. K.

“No, I am well, are you good?”

“No, I am well, and you are well.”

“I am well, and you are well.”

“Good.”

“I am well, and you are good.”

“No. No one is good, only well.”

“If you are well, that is good.”

“Fine.”

“If you are good, that is fine.”

“Fine that is good.”

Thi looked very confused, but as long as nothing was bad then everything must be well, good.

Thi was instructed to practice her *r*'s in a mirror, so she could get the "dramatic effect." In order to speak coherent English, Thi was instructed to dance and make animal sounds in a mirror at home and at Starbucks. This seemed slightly strange. Everything here seemed slightly strange.

After her English lessons, Thi walked around the corner to work at Quynh's Nails. When she entered the salon, she approached Lam first and said in slow English, "How are you," accentuating the *r* sound with tiger movements.

"I am fine. How are you?" Lam clapped when she spoke, mocking Thi's hand motions.

Mary Quynh, annoyed that Thi's lessons caused her to be late to work regularly, interrupted, "You *are* late," curving her hand into the lion position and jabbing towards Thi when she pronounced the heavy *r* sound. "Customers *are* waiting."

Quynh motioned to the pedicure station and smiled a wicked smile. Thi followed Quynh's gaze, and there sat the most difficult customer: Mrs. Perkins.

Thi rushed to the pedicure station where, she was greeted by ten thick purpled and browned nails that looked like wood and felt like leather beneath the cutters. The nails were kept on calloused, corned, and crooked toes, and the toes attached to cracked heels, knobby ankles, and varicose veined legs, all purple and brown.

The worst part was that everything hurt Mrs. Perkins all of the time, and Perkins would often scream out in pain or complain loudly and scare away the other customers.

The sign on the door said, “We reserve the right to refuse service.” Quynh reserved the right to refuse Perkins, but did not let the others exercise their rights so freely.

Thi smiled politely at Perkins and kept her mouth shut. She filled the water basin, and pumped a few squirts of soap into the water. She made sure that the temperature was perfect room temperature: not too hot, not too cold. Usually she would not be so cautious, but it was her goal to see how far she could get without Perkins complaining.

Perkins was old and had dementia, her daughter would explain, the daughter who picked her up once every two weeks to take her for a pedicure because Perkins wouldn’t let anyone else touch her feet. Thi was so lucky. The problem was not that Perkins’ toes and feet were hideous—and they were hideous—but that they were incredibly sensitive. Perkins would not even take off her socks for the doctors. If a doctor ever saw her foot, it was when she was sedated for some other reason.

“I give her two more minutes,” said Quynh. “Who wants to make a bet? Lam, bet with me. How long do you give her?”

“If I win, I make noodles all week in microwave.”

“Okay. You won’t win.”

“I give her ten minutes. If you win, what?”

“If I win, you buy me lunch.”

“I make you noodles,” Lam whispered under her breath.

So far, so good. Perkins was sitting back in the chair with her eyes closed, humming softly.

Thi reached for her left foot, and began to lightly rub off the last polish with a cotton ball. Perkins opened one eye, just to check on Thi, then closed them both again and continued humming. Her daughter had gone to the coffee shop.

Thi pulled a pair of clippers from her bag. One of Perkins' eyes snapped open and the eyebrow rose sharply. Thi watched the eye, put back the clippers and instead retrieved a metal file; the eyebrow stayed arched. Thi replaced the metal file and took out a paper file; the eye relaxed and closed. Instead of cutting the thick nail, she filed the fleshy nail with slow, long swipes and the nail came off in strips.

Lam looked to the clock, already ten minutes. "Ha. She made it."

"Bet is off. You should have made bet that was not against health code," snuffed Quynh.

Lam should have suspected as much.

Thi reached for the metal file again, and both of Perkins' eyes snapped open. Thi shrunk back a bit and hid the metal file.

"Oh. I must have dozed off a minute there. You didn't add the color yet," Perkins observed.

Thi hid the metal file in her hand; she had to clean the dirt in the nail. She had to distract this woman, to clean the toe. She did the only thing she could think to do.

"How *are* you?" Thi motioned the lion's paw as she asked in order to get the sound right.

"Good job," shouted Lam from the next station, "Nice English."

"I've been better, honey. I've been better. It's hot as sin today. Ain't it?"

Thi busied herself pulling the dirt and muck out of one nail, not concentrating on the words her customer ran together. Thi just looked up and smiled politely, and shook her head in agreement of what she did not know.

Thi whispered to Lam with clenched teeth, “What did she just say?”

“She said,” Lam translated, “when the weather is hot she likes to do evil things.”

Thi looked up at her customer and smiled and nodded and wondered what evil things this little old lady could possibly do.

“You got some sort of system to cool this place down when it’s hot as hell in here?” Perkins asked, pulling her shirt away from her chest.

Thi paused and waited for Lam’s translation.

“She wants to know what you do when it is hot. And she said you are going to hell.”

Thi, who was almost finished with the scraping of the dirt and muck, looked up to the woman with wide eyes wondering if she was a witch and that was why her toes were so crooked. Maybe she practiced bad magic, and her toes paid for it twisting up inside themselves.

“No English.”

Thi played the card that would silence any customer, but perhaps Perkins couldn’t hear, or didn’t buy Thi’s partial lie.

Thi grabbed the foot like a loose fish, hooking a metal blade in between the nail and the skin and dug the file into the crevice in the last toe, pulling up a black strip of gunk.

Perkins shot out a small yelp.

Quynh's eyes shot to the clock. "Fifteen minutes. Bah. You didn't win by much, Lam. Thi is just slow. She talk talk talk, so that you win. You both cheat."

Neither really cared about the bet anymore, anyway.

Thi placed both of Perkins' feet on a towel on the edge of the basin and lightly rubbed the pumice stone against the calluses on the balls of Perkins' feet.

"Oh. Oh. Oh. Ouch."

Perkins winced and closed her eyes, moaning some more.

"What are you doing over there, Thi?" barked Quynh from across the room. "You cut off those toes yet? Just cut them off, get it over with. I don't like all that moaning. Plus, now all the customers are afraid you will hurt their toes. Bad reputation for you."

Lam smiled kindly at Thi, whose frustration was growing, "Quynh gave you her customer, you know. She was scared of those toes."

Thi had to cut the two big toenails with the metal clippers. Now that the woman was squealing, she'd just have to do it fast. She bit the metal teeth and cut the woman's left big toe, and instead of snapping off, the nail was chewed off like a piece of tender meat. The woman screamed. All the other customers looked at Thi. Thi ducked her head down and busied herself with the other toe. She bit the next toe and again the woman screamed, followed by Quynh's bark, followed by Lam's shush, and then the sequence repeated with the next snap.

Feeling defeated and fearing the loss of her tip, Thi decided she again must distract the customer.

Thinking of nothing else, Thi blurted out, “What do you do when hot?”

Perkins’ eye lit up, her body slid forward in the chair, and her toes curled up and away from Thi. Her whole large frame was coming down on top of Thi. Just extending over for a little whisper.

“What did you say, honey?”

“What you do when so hot?”

“That’s what I thought you said.” Perkins slid back into the chair and closed her eyes in deep thought. Thi was able to quickly massage both legs and prep the nails for paint with a light dab of alcohol.

After the brief meditation, Perkins opened her eyes and shook her head, “I suppose I take off my clothes.”

Thi caught some of the key words and again Lam translated chuckling to herself, “She get naked. She’s going to hell too.”

Thi nodded smiling. She would drill Lam later for the truth; that, or ask Van.

Quynh was now spying hard on Thi, impressed with both the excited look on her customer’s face and the fact that she and her customer were having a conversation in English.

“What is she talking about?” asked Quynh from across the room.

“About naked people in hell,” Lam answered in Vietnamese.

“Tell her to stop scaring customers with her bad English.”

“She said she always rip you off every week. Every week she complain, complain, complain, and then leave you no tip. If she no complain, she would have to tip big,” Lam made up.

Quynh’s face almost burst with anger. Perkins was smiling lovingly at Thi, and that was about all Quynh could take. Quynh began to shout and complain.

“That woman,” said Perkins, again scooting forward and curling in her toes, “She’s always shouting, isn’t she?” Thi understood “shout” and “complain” and giggled to herself, nodding.

After Thi had filed, brushed, scooped, hacked, and cleaned the nails, she asked what color. The woman explained that she was half blind. Her one eye, and she pointed to the one that had been watching the file earlier, didn’t even work: it was glass. Thi seemed young and fashionable, Perkins explained, loud enough to reach the ears of Quynh who again sounded off in the background about Thi’s sense of fashion. Van and Lam giggled. Thi should pick the color.

Thi grabbed the top color from Lam’s cleaning kit. Quynh stopped her yelling and carefully watched Thi’s handling of the bottle.

“She picked that color or you?” Quynh demanded from across the room.

“It was here, so I picked it up,” Thi explained.

“I see. I see.” Quynh was deep in contemplation. “She didn’t want purple; orange maybe.” Quynh approached the cabinet, sure that she could pick a better color, a different color for the customer.

“She said to pick, so I picked. It’s fine. Good color.”

“I know good color. I know,” whispered Quynh to herself, eyeing the statue.

Thi was just about to swipe the first toe when the loose fish fell out of her hand, and the elderly woman’s body bent down towards her and said, “Honey, it’s hot as the blazes—hot as hell I tell you.”

Thi understood “hell.” She knew if there was a hell, she’d go there. But she was Buddhist and not completely convinced that she hadn’t already been there.

Thi had been lost in thought for a few moments and nudged back by Lam. Perkins was still leaning close to Thi.

“Me hell too. No clothes,” Thi blurted. Perkins smiled and leaned back.

Lam busted open with laughter. Lam’s customer shrank back in disgust, and Perkins’ eyes rolled back and shut, satisfied with her treatment. They were the same. Thi painted ugly toes red.

When the job was done, Thi helped Perkins out of the raised leather chair and into a metal folding chair near the door. Thi placed a towel under Perkins’ feet and one mini fans in front of each of her sets of toes. Perkins searched in her pocket book and handed Thi one twenty and one five. Ten dollars too much. Thi tried to hand back the five, but Perkins just smiled and said, “Beautiful, just beautiful.”

Perkins

Perkins' daughter, Ebony, rushed her eighty-six-year-old mother from one activity to the next: breakfast, bingo, a car ride to the other side of town, pedicure, ice cream, bingo again, and would leave her (despite Perkins' glaucoma) in the library.

"You should see DeShawn all dressed up in a uniform for his T-ball game. He's five now you know. Would you like to come out to the next game?"

Perkins smiled and nodded to be polite, but closed her eyes and hoped her daughter would forget the invitation or that something would come up.

"And Mama, Terrence, he's been real busy at work, and buying up lots of Apple stock. I know the market's been bad, but he says that Apple is a solid product, despite the economy going to hell and all."

Ebony flicked her signal to turn right into Willow Street Ice Cream Parlor and noticed her mom, eyes closed, mouth open, drooling and snoring. She pulled into a parking spot and started to text Terrence. Perkins' eyes snapped open.

"Why the hell are we sitting around in a car?"

"Mama. You fell asleep."

Perkins was less sure of things and relied on some things just plain being told to her, like what was funny, or what was said to her, or how something looked. This getting old business is pretty lousy. Things that used to work stop. You have to figure out brand new ways to do that goddamn same old thing, like stairs, and getting in and out of cars, and up and off chairs, and just about damn near everything. You'd have thought the

scientists would have figured out a cure for old age by now, but they are all too young to worry about that. It's coming for them. It's coming for them all.

“Mom, you wanna just stay in the car? I'll bring you a cone, vanilla, right?”

After, what has it been, her whole life, and that girl can't get it straight?

“No. I am coming in. And it's strawberry. It's always been strawberry.”

For all the comforting and cooing and coddling that that damn girl does, she sure is a goddamn pain in the ass. The irony of the whole goddamn situation is that if Perkins had not been dragged along on this sunny little outing, she'd be at the nursing home's ice cream social. They'd be hand-delivering that strawberry cone, but now here she goes, lifting her heavy ass out of this too-big van, lucky if she doesn't break her neck.

Ebony opened her mother's side door and Perkins fell out of the car and into her daughter's arms. Ebony grabbed her mother's elbow and pulled her towards the ice cream parlor.

There were no seats in the shop; only a long glass counter housing the basic flavors along with the latest inventions.

“Who would have thought to flavor an ice cream with pistachios?” Perkins focused her good eye in on a bright green barrel. “I'll tell you who. It was the Mexicans. They invented pistachios.”

“Shush, Mama. You can't say nothing about the Mexicans in public. It's not PC.” Ebony nudged her Mom in the ribs a bit when she spoke to get her attention.

“Plus, Mama, God invented the pistachio, and you like God, right? And the Mexicans, they invented the churro, and you like them too, so shush, Mama. You be saying things racist.”

“Racist! I’m allowed to be racist,” Perkins raised her voice and shouted, as though accusing the entire ice cream parlor of thinking she was racist. Only a bubble-gum-chewing teenager propped herself up at the register, and she didn’t register the comments.

“You know what you’re gonna do, Mama? You’re gonna sit down.”

Ebony grabbed her mother by the arm, waltzing her outside to a bench and gently but firmly dropping Perkins into the chair in a time out.

Ebony reappeared a few moments later with two vanilla cones. Perkins shut her eyes deciding this was her own personal hell, and she had created it—literally, she created Ebony.

“Ebony, honey, tell me two things.”

“What’s that, Mama?”

“Why is it that you care more what that little white girl in there thinks than what I think?”

“Mama. Don’t call her that, and I don’t care what that girl thinks, more than you. Why do you say that?”

“Well, you’re shushing me over the pistachio ice cream, but you don’t want to offend that little girl by talking about the Mexicans. Who cares what she thinks?”

“That’s not how that is. However you see that, that’s not how that is.”

“I see.” Perkins closed her eyes in meditation.

“What was the other thing, Mama?”

Perkins’ bad eye shot open, unbeknownst to her. It almost found Ebony too, before saying, “And why the hell do you order me vanilla every goddamn time I say strawberry?”

Ebony stared out into the road, licking her cone, with no answer. She could have said, “To piss you off.” But instead she lied, “I suppose I forgot what you said.”

But, like all good daughters, she remembered too grudgingly most of the things that her mother did say. Doted on them. Repeated them. Tried in her mind over and over to detect a motive for the ugliness that she felt. That was passed down. Ebony tried to say only loving things to Terrence and DeShawn.

She’s trying to piss me off, thought Perkins, and she bent forward and lapped at the tasteless cone. She saves this stuff up all week, designs ways to torture me. This is revenge for something, I don’t know what. She had it easy, easier than most do. Thankless child.

They both stared into the road, disconnecting further and further. And when the last cold drop of milk was sucked and the cone devoured, Ebony again hoisted her mother and dragged her towards the car.

The ride to the nursing home was no more bumpy and uncomfortable than the ride there. Silence that was heavy with sadness, joints that screamed with forced movement and the bounce of the city road.

“Look. There’s Billy,” Ebony rolled down her window to wave at the half crazed man.

“I can’t believe he does that every day. How long does he do that?”

Every day Billy, another resident of the Willow Glen’s Assisted Living Community, woke up, put on his helmet, and rode his bike very slowly up and down Locust Street. The same street. Just the one. Every day. And it made him so happy.

He waved furiously at Ebony and Perkins. Perkins’ eyes remained shut and her arms crossed until the car stopped.

She shoved her own door open this time and rolled out of the car until her feet caught the ground. Ebony came rushing around to her, but the job was done. Perkins landed on her two feet and did not need an escort after all.

She tried to hobble fast away from Ebony—a race almost, quickly lost—but Ebony caught a firm grasp on her mother’s elbow.

The two walked with identical penguin gaits through the gardened foyer, into the fanciful entrance piazza, and then into the damn library, conveniently missing the 2:00 ice cream social. There would have been lots of strawberry ice cream and no one to give a hoot what you said, because no one was saying anything, and even if they did, half of them couldn’t hear you and the other half couldn’t remember. That way Perkins’ senile universe maintained its peaceful balance.

“Well, Mama. I’ll check the time of DeShawn’s game this Saturday. I’ll give you a call. Okay, Mama?”

“Okay, sugar.” Perkins would have to remember to not answer her phone; that way she wouldn’t get the official invite and she could skip the fiasco altogether. The sad thing—not so much that it was a sad thing, but the truth of the matter—was that Ebony knew that if she said she would call, Perkins would not answer the phone. If she wanted her to get info, she wouldn’t say anything about calling, and if she brought up calling, she’d already decided against actually bringing her mother to said event. Both were satisfied with this miscommunication.

Ebony pecked her mother on the cheek. When Perkins was sure that Ebony had driven off, she left the library, turned down a long empty pastel hall, and walked into her room, marked 417.

In her room, she only retained a few of her original belongings—photographs mostly, of Art, her husband, and one of all her children taken when they were children in the 1960’s. She had her bible, although she no longer read it, her crucifix, the original one that her mother had given her, her rosary, some clothes, and a few dress pins that she hardly ever wore. Her roommate slept most of the time. A small shower like curtain divided Perkins’ side of the room from Florence’s side of the room. Dead flowers sent by grandchildren for holidays, nothing that could be kept, only perishables and flowers, the home had instructed in a flyer sent home. There no longer were personal belongs, other than socks, and underwear, and those would be switched around in the wash even if they were properly labeled.

Once closed away in her room, Perkins sat on the edge of her bed and pulled off her black slippers. A row of red caught her eye in her otherwise strictly purple, white,

and grey room. Did I say red? She tried to remember. Tried to stretch back time to this morning in the beauty parlor. What had she said? She remembered the strange conversation she had had with the little Asian girl. She must be losing her mind. Did the little woman tell her that she likes to walk around naked? No, that must have been from a daydream Perkins had sitting there too long in the chair.

She thought of the bible then; how couldn't she, of Eve and Adam walking around naked all the time thinking nothing of it. They didn't think anything was wrong with anything until God told them they had sinned. Isn't that right? God told them there was something wrong with being naked, didn't he? Oh, those silly two. On the one hand, if they had just listened to God, they would still be naked, and on the other hand if they didn't listen to God about apples and nudity being shameful and such, then hell, they'd still be naked. Things are only wrong and evil, if you think they are, I suppose. So how does that make any goddamn sense? After Adam and Eve knew they were naked, they didn't like being naked? I know I haven't done a damn thing so wrong as to deserve this hell of a hand I'm being dealt. I'll tell you; I swear to God, there ain't one thing wrong with being who you're born.

And with that thought, she unbuttoned the front of her dress. Usually she had someone to help her along, but really, it wasn't needed. She just had to maneuver the buttons through the small slits all the way down to her thigh. She would do it without looking. When no one was looking, she would do everything without looking. She knew— and had known for a while—that she was going blind, and instead of waking up

one day without any sight, she thought she would practice not seeing; ease into it. Hell, she never saw half of what she was looking at before she was blind.

She wasn't afraid of going blind; more of the commotion it would stir among the family, the pity party they would have, the dead flowers and phone calls to specialists and grandchildren who would all poke and prod and question things that needn't be questioned. She didn't need to see to see.

She held her eyes closed and pulled the dress out from under her bum, unhooked her bra and lay it on the bed, and then in one tug, pulled off her slip and panties, and let them fall to the floor.

Dressed in nothing but the small red film of polish on her swollen toes, she rose and slowly circled the room.

“You seeing this up there? You seeing this up there? There ain't no seeing and there ain't no sinning down here.”

Part Three

Quynh

“I know how to fix this,” Quynh announced. “Lam, you will paint my nails.”

Quynh never, ever painted her nails.

“Why?” Lam questioned, wondering if this was a test.

“Oh, never mind why, just do it,” Quynh ordered.

Lam looked to Van for confirmation that his was an odd request. Van and Thi both watched Lam fill a dish of warm water, unwrap her tools, and prep her station. The women waited for the trap to close on Lam.

“No manicure, just paint. Here, here. Here is the color.”

Quynh pulled the red off the shelf and eyed the Virgin.

“I’m on to you!”

“Excuse me?” questioned Lam.

“Not you.”

Again Lam looked to Van and Thi, who, despite the fact that they were holding ankles and wrists, kept their attention pinned on Quynh. Thi shrugged to indicate she did not know what or who Quynh had spoken too. Van just raised her eyes, amused by Lam’s trials.

“I’ll show you,” Quynh continued eyeing the statue. “I’ll get what I need. You’ll see.”

“Who will she show?” Thi whispered towards Van.

“What does she need?” Van questioned back.

Lam took the red bottle from Quynh, shook it a few times, and started the application.

Lam bent her back over Quynh's crooked fingers and stroked the color from pinkie to thumb, pinkie to thumb. All the while, Quynh smiled wildly and eyed the statue.

"What's this?" Quynh complained, looking at her not-red nails.

"What's what?" Lam answered.

"What trick is this?" Quynh splayed her knobby burgundy nails in horror.

"Burgundy to forget. Idiot! Why did you paint my nails this color?"

"Because you asked me to," Lam's response was more of a question than a statement.

"You lie," Quynh sneered. "Where's the red I gave you?"

"There was no red."

Thi and Van were pleased that the drama was playing out.

Quynh redirected her anger, crossing the room to face the Mary statue.

"What is the meaning of this?" she confronted the Virgin waving her dark fingers.

The statue said nothing and held its innocent pose.

The red bottle, like the snake, lay under, waiting.

Quynh doused her fingers with nail polish remover, only to leave them brown with streaks of the burgundy.

She would need a less magical, more practical approach. The salon was more than just some store. It was Quynh's American dream, Lam's family, Van's medicine,

and Thi's refuge. Quynh had considered two approaches to saving the shop. The first was for all the employees to paint their nails red, which would take some serious convincing. The second idea was to write an itemized list of fix-its and to-do items that would prepare the shop for the inspection.

Quynh obtained an inspection list from the Internet and began her own imitation health inspection. First, she circulated to make sure everyone's licenses were posted at their station. Then, to make the fake inspection official, she decided to do a formal roll call.

"Van Nguyen," called Quynh.

Van's eyes rose from a magazine she was reading and waited for Quynh's command.

Quynh approached Van's station and decided to simultaneously check list items one and five. She found Van's license posted on the left hand side of her station, slightly hidden from customer's view.

"You need to move your license."

"To where?"

"Somewhere more visible. Hang it on the wall behind you."

"But it's taped onto the station. If I move it, it will damage."

Then Quynh's eyes flickered madly with her latest idea. She ran to her purse and cursed. Then she ran to a back closet and rummaged around for a bit. Van went back to reading, leaving her license in place.

"I need a camera. Who has a camera?"

Thi offered up her phone with the built-in camera.

Quynh stared at the phone for a minute or two and then handed it back to Thi.

“Make it a camera.”

Thi flipped through her options and pulled up the camera feature. Thi explained to Quynh that she must hold down the “Okay” key for three seconds.

“Okay. Okay. Okay.”

Quynh, with camera in hand, charged back over to Van. “Van, you need picture on your license.”

Again, Van lifted her eyes from her magazine. “But they did not take picture with the license.”

“Bah! I take picture and add to your license.”

Van wondered why she was Quynh’s victim for this experiment; usually Lam or Thi were Quynh’s prized guinea pigs. Quynh must have been feeling bored or bold to extend the annoyance out to one of the more senior employees.

Van put down her magazine and stared blankly at the camera. Quynh held the “Okay” key and counted to three out loud. When she released the key, she stared into the phone.

“Thi. Where is my picture?”

Thi ran up from her station, her platform sandals slapped the ground behind her. Thi pressed a few buttons, and Van’s blank face appeared on the screen.

“Perfect. Now, how do I get the picture out of the phone?”

“You need to email it to yourself, and print it on a computer, or at Kinko’s.”

“Bah. New idea. Thi, you take picture of everyone’s face and print me small picture heads.”

Van smiled; she knew that this would come back to Thi or Lam somehow. Then she straightened her face. It was unskillful to laugh at Lam and Thi’s misfortunes; unskillful, but funny.

Thi circled the room, slapping her sandals and snapping her phone. Then she clacked off to Kinko’s to print the little faces.

“Van, show me your license.”

Van moved a few bottles of polish to the side and revealed her license taped to the side of her station.

“Hand it to me, Van.”

“It is taped on. I taped the paper, so it would not get damaged. I taped it to the station, where you told me to. If I take it off, it will ruin. The health inspector will not like it damaged.”

“Bah!” Quynh reached over the taped paper and began picking away at it, pulling up bits of tape, and eventually peeled the paper from the wall.

“Van Ngyuen. License 1996. Expires in January. In January!”

“Yes, I will renew. Don’t worry.”

Quynh took the license and began to position it on the wall behind Van. She put a small piece of tape on the back of the now yellow and curled laminated paper, and walked around the station to squint at the license from the customer’s chair. Bad idea, she decided, and started again, holding the license and circulating around Van’s station.

Quynh decided that the perfect place for the license was right where it had been. It wasn't a good place, but it was the least bad place. It would have to do. She began taping it back in place when Thi returned with a little Van head stuck to her index finger.

"They asked why I need the head, and they made me sticker heads. I made extra for fun. I have ten mini Van heads! Where do we want them?"

"Bah, not everywhere. Give them to me. Do not stick them anywhere else in this shop."

"Quynh. Oh no. I forgot to make a sticker head for you."

Thi held up her phone and took a quick picture of Quynh's furrowed brow, squished forehead, and opened mouth half saying "Bah." Then Thi disappeared out the door and to Kinko's.

Van cracked a smile.

A small Latina walked through the door unaware of the sticker heads, the licenses hidden behind bottles and vases and fans on counters; the poison left out and unlabeled, the absent cleaning system; the unsanitary eating practices, and unwashed hands, and tools, and stations, and small diseases hanging on the end of metal appliances poised to prick her red pedaled toes and dainty plastic fingers.

"My nail broke," the girl said, revealing a stumped plastic square on the end of her baby-smooth hand.

"Thi's turn," called out Quynh.

"She is at Kinko's getting picture stickers of your head," Van reported without looking up from her magazine.

“You, then.”

“I am still on break.”

“Lam! Where is Lam? Customer, Lam.”

“You told her to label poisons in the back.”

Lam’s head popped out from behind the wax station curtain. She finished chewing before she replied, “I’ll be right there.”

“No. No. You busy. I’ll do it.”

Quynh pointed to her station and the girl sat down, annoyed that she had to be in the shop any longer than she had to be in the shop.

“I do these yesterday. What happen?”

The girl found the question accusatory and gave Quynh a dirty look, each convinced the break was the other’s fault. The girl recalled what had happened (Great America parking lot, car seat lever) and decided to lie.

“I don’t know. It just broke.” And when she said these words, she narrowed her eyes as if accusing Quynh of breaking the nail, of giving her extra-weak, breakable nails.

Quynh soaked the finger in a plastic bowl to loosen the glue, then pried off the nail and soaked the finger some more.

“You no school? Summer vacation?”

The girl nodded and checked her phone with her free hand, a sign that she was uninterested in the conversation.

Quynh did not like this girl. The girl had something very special and she wasn’t doing anything good with it. The girl had her whole life ahead of her, and she wasn’t

directing it, moving it. She was letting it be moved by family, and boys, and friends.
Stupid, stupid girl.

Quynh didn't know this, per se. It was more something she had not judged, but sensed. Quynh felt that she had a magic power to look into someone's eyes and see their soul. Well, Quynh thought everyone had this power—just not many people utilized it. When she looked into the girl's eyes, she couldn't see a soul. Not because it wasn't there, but because there were a lot of things obscuring it.

The girl sat in the chair and did not see Quynh place a plastic crescent on her pointer finger, seal the moon with glue, swipe the clear coats, and then shake the Million Dollar Red.

She studied the girl's soulless eyes, although the two pairs never did connect. She painted the sacred color in long, exaggerated strips down the plasticized finger. May this color quench and not fuel, may this girl let go of her burdens, and may a path form under her feet, that takes her away and away and away from herself, until she finds her lost soul elsewhere.

After the spell was cast, the girl smiled awkwardly at Quynh, as though she either sensed the intent, or noticed Quynh was staring at her for the most part of five minutes.

The nail was complete and the girl was moved to the fans. She dug in her purse for a tip, found a two dollar bill, left it on the counter and ran out the door.

“She doesn't deserve it,” Quynh said under her breath to the statue, who remained unmoved.

Kimie

Kimie had dropped off Mario with his homeboys unsatisfied. She had school in the morning and had to go to sleep. Thoughts of Mario kept her up, so she journaled:

I love him. I know I love him, but I can't help but feel that something is wrong. Mario, pros and cons. Pros: He's hot, I mean, I'm attracted to him. He always texts me and tells me he loves me. He smells good. He's funny, sometime. He always has something fun for us to do. There's probably more I'll think of later. Cons: He sometimes get me in trouble with alcohol and curfews. My mom doesn't like him. My friends don't like him so much. He doesn't like them so much. I don't like his friend. And I wish he wasn't, but that's out of my control, I wish he wasn't... in a gang.

He wasn't always like this. Kimie had her theories. She had known him twice. She knew him before he was involved, and she knew him now. And she liked him infinitely better then and thought that somewhere in there, deep in there, was still that boy from freshman year who did know the answers to the equations and blushed when he was made to share them. She would have never imagined that a boy like that, a smart and gorgeous boy like that, would do something as dumb and stupid as he did: join a gang.

Now, it's one thing if your family are gang members and you are born into the world associated with a gang. That is somewhat forgivable. It's not like you had any control of the situation, and your environment did influence you on that one. And it's another thing if some of your family is in a gang, and your family considers gangs to be a part of life, like survival. But when you come from a family that loves you, when you did pay attention in school long enough to make a life for yourself, have a nice job to

support a family, and have a nice family, and you throw it away on a gang—now that is stupid. And why? So that in gym class, no one will question if you sit on the bench out of uniform; so that in the locker room, no one will look at you; in the hallway no one will bump you; in class no one will ask you to join their group; the teachers prod a little less; and when you get in trouble they send you home instead of counseling you; because when you are in a gang, you really can't be helped.

Mario went home his freshman summer beautiful, shy, intelligent, and loveable and came back to school sophomore year head shaven, arm tatted, covered in an oversized plaid button-up, oversized and creased dark jeans, and the signature Cortezes. The cookie-cutter Norteño. No one questioned it. His old friends didn't approach to question or ask why; his new friends immediately noticed and took him under their wing; and Kimmie just observed at this point, almost wondering, but also knowing, this was how it was in high school: everyone does what they have to do to survive. Not, like, for fear of death, but more for fear of social suicide. You could date the wrong person, pick the wrong friend, or lab partner, and that was it, you could be socially dead, not invited to the parties, and BBQ's and sleepovers. He was doing what he had to do.

Unofficially, the two had met a hundred times. The first time they fell in love, they didn't even know it. Their lockers were diagonal from each other, Kimmie's diagonally right over Mario's. She would stand slightly to the left of her locker, giving him room to crouch down and dig his supplies out of his. This was freshman year, when Mario had supplies and used a locker. She dropped something one day: a piece of paper, an inconsequential piece of paper. It was probably blank even, or maybe it had just a

perfect “Kimmie” scribbled in bubble letters across the top. The paper fell into his locker, and he looked to her. She waited awkwardly with her hand extended like the statue of the Virgin Mary, waiting to retrieve the paper. When he handed it to her, their fingers touched; not for an instant, but for several moments, both waiting for the other’s to unlock, and then in a nervous gesture they smiled and caught eyes. His cheeks must have burned because she smiled sympathetically at the awkwardness of the exchange.

She’d bring it up later. “Do you remember when I dropped something in your locker, and you gave it to me?”

“What did you drop?”

“A paper or something.”

“Nah.”

“Do you at least remember that our lockers were by each other freshman year?”

“No.”

He was locked in there somewhere, she thought. And she thought he was worth finding and that she was capable of finding him.

They met the second time after his transition. It was at one the parties. Marcia, Kimmie’s older sister, just started letting Kimmie tag along. Marcia’s circles were on the edge; some people just liked to party, some people only partied and didn’t do school at all—she had the gang-curious kids too. Those kids still had friends on the outside, not just the hardcore gangsters. She ran with a rougher crowd than Kimmie, for sure.

Mario was in the backyard of the house, standing in a group of boys circulating a joint. Kimmie was looking for Marcia who had disappeared, and since she really hadn't met anyone yet, she felt a little awkward being alone.

Her eyes hadn't adjusted to the light. When she stepped outside, she stepped too near the circle of boys to be ignored. She recognized the smell, but was not fazed by the activity.

"You want some, mama?" invited a voice from the circle.

Kimmie didn't exactly want to smoke pot, but she preferred it to being alone at the party.

The thin joint was offered to her by a hand from the circle; none of the faces had yet come into focus, and maybe they never would.

She had smoked before, but only in situations like this, only a few puffs.

She gripped the joint with her index finger and thumb and sucked two quick breaths in, held for a moment, let her mouth fill with smoke, and exhaled a cloud into the circle.

The boys chuckled at her method, and this started an exhaling competition. The boy to her left, who had large ears and a too big-shirt, blew three consecutive smoke rings, a pro. The boy to his left, a round boy who looked more loving than tough, blew the smoke out his nose. He looked like a demonic tiki mask when he did. The next skinny boy blew all the smoke slowly out one side of his mouth. And the boy to his left, and Kimmie's right, squeezed her hand. This was the boy who had offered her the joint first, who had called out to her in the dark. He took the joint, inhaled slowly, and then

guided Kimmie's face towards his. Still holding in the smoke, he pulled her lips to his, and exhaled the smoke into her mouth. She swallowed the smoke, coughed, and the crew began to laugh loudly. The joint was about done. Again, Kimmie pinched the butt of the joint, sucked softly, and exhaled smoothly, this time like a pro. She passed the joint again, and this boy, the one with the large ears, sucked hard all the way down until there was no paper left, just a stick of ash. Then he dropped the butt on the ground, and the group dispersed. Some went to find booze or other ladies, and the one with the ears searched for more pot.

The boy to Kimmie's right slipped a cigarette out of a pack and offered one to Kimmie. She shook her head. He poked around the pack and pulled out another joint and held it up.

"Just for us."

It wasn't the joint. It was the "just for us," that Kimmie nodded to.

"Not here, though."

He held her hand and walked around the side of the house and down the street. Kimmie thought about Marcia, about how she might be missed. Kimmie decided that she would like to be missed for once, worried about, and looked for. Let her miss me. Let her look for me everywhere. And when the night comes to a close, Marcia can hug me and exclaim that she missed me and was so alone without me.

Mario's hands moved from Kimmie's fingers to the curve of her lower back and lead her towards Vinci Park Elementary School down the street.

"The swings," Kimmie suggested.

“No,” and the boy smiled a secret smile, a perfect, dimpled and full smile, a smile that made you smile.

They approached a chain link fence near the back of the park.

“You go ahead first, so I can catch you if you fall,” he smiled.

Kimmie gripped two diamonds in the fence and pulled her weight upward. The boy placed two hands on her butt and pushed her.

“Hey,” Kimmie turned, and he gave her a little squeeze.

He hoisted her to the top of the fence and instructed her to straddle and not to go over the fence. Then he gripped the metal, hopped, and scrambled to the top. Both straddled the fence, holding onto the top, hooking their feet into the diamond wedges. He leaned towards her, knowing that she was uneasy and unbalanced, and kissed her softly. She could not let go of the fence and drew balance from the connection.

“Okay. Like this—watch me.”

The Mario scooted along the top of the fence until he reached where the fence met the side of a portable elementary school building. He held the top of the fence and popped up, like a surfer standing on his board. He moved one hand to the portable wall, then the other. He gripped the roof of the portable, wedged his foot against a drainpipe and threw his weight onto the roof of the building.

Kimmie wanted to be able to do such a stunt, but seriously doubted her abilities. Plus, if they smoked the joint up there, how the hell were they going to get down high? So far, she hadn't felt too affected by the earlier pot, but right about now she was starting to get nervous and dizzy.

Kimmie scooted her weight towards the building. Mario lay down on the roof and offered a hand to Kimmie. She almost pulled his arm out of the socket trying to stand on the edge of the fence. Then, he reached down with his other hand and pulled her body onto the roof.

When they were both seated on the roof, they began laughing.

“I didn’t think I would make it,” Kimmie admitted, pulling a stray hair away from her eye.

“Of course, you would. I’m with you,” he said.

Mario pulled the joint out of his cigarette pack and with a red Bic, lit the end. He dragged nice and slow. When he passed the joint to Kimmie, he scooted his whole body towards her and engulfed her like a blanket. She sat with her knees pulled into her own chest and leaned back against him.

“You’re Marcia’s sister,” he said.

“Yeah.”

“I’m Mario.”

“I know.”

“How do you know?”

“How did you know I was Marcia’s sister?”

“Well you look like her, and you’re a little young.”

“You should be talking.”

“How do you know how old I am?”

“We had lockers next to each other freshman year,” Kimmie blurted, then felt embarrassed.

“We did?”

“Yeah. I dropped something one day?”

“Was it your number? I should have called.”

“No,” she blushed.

They were silent for a long time. Their hands touched passing the joint. Kimmie wanted to test something, so she grabbed his hand with her hand and felt her pulse through his grip. She pivoted so that they were facing each other, and she looked into his eyes, still holding his hand. She was looking for something that she saw there once, a long time ago.

He tossed the joint off the roof and took her face in his palm, kissing her hard. He crawled on top of her, still kissing. He let his Levis grind against her lightly, still kissing. She spread her legs, accepting the motions, and they continued like this until a phone vibrated in his pocket.

“Sup?” Mario answered, rubbing Kimmie’s back as he spoke.

“Oh. Okay.” He closed the phone. “They’re looking for you. What do you want to do?”

“Who’s looking for me?”

“Your sister and her man. Someone told her we left together, and she wants you back.”

“Then we got to go.” Kimmie sat up quick.

Mario scooted towards her and placed his hand back on her thigh, brought his lips to her neck, and kissed lightly, then hard

“Are you sure you want to go?”

Kimmie pulled away from Mario. She shook her head.

“I have to go. I’ll get in trouble.”

Mario studied her eyes, deciding if he would let her go, and saw more potential in letting her go now.

She stood up and looked off the top of the portable into the black fall that awaited her.

“Here, wait,” Mario said. He swung himself from the roof, to the fence, and from the fence to the ground, then crawled back up the fence, coaxing Kimmie to fall back into his arms.

She gripped the roof and let her feet glide down the drainpipe, lowering her body slowly until Mario grabbed her ankle and led her foot to the top of the fence. Then he grabbed her thigh.

“Let go. I’ve got you. Just let go.”

She did. And when she did, she scratched her arm on the top of the fence, hard.

“Shit.”

“What?”

He looked down at the wound that sliced from her left wrist.

“Shit.”

She pulled her hoodie sleeve over her hand and decided to worry about it later. They had to get back. They just had to get back.

At the party, Marcia was loaded and pissed. Her boyfriend Michael was just loaded.

“Where the hell were you?” Marcia drilled Kimmie.

“I just went to the park.” Kimmie hid the wound. She pulled her sleeve down and felt her jacket saturate.

“With him?” Marcia pointed to Mario and her whole face crinkled up as if she swallowed a stink bomb.

Kimmie just looked down. She knew. She knew from his uniform, from the coax in his voice, from the brand of his shoe, from his haircut and crew; she knew exactly what she was doing. And it really wasn't any different from everything Marcia had always done.

“We're going home.” Marcia turned to collect Michael off the couch and find her purse and Michael's cigarettes and jacket. And when she had her back turned, Mario slipped Kimmie a piece of paper. It had his name sketched in hurried lines, and his number below. Then he disappeared into the crowd and left Kimmie.

That night, Kimmie laid in bed spinning. Her stomach, her brain, her heart, circling and circling, like the flush in a bowl. It was like Romeo and Juliet, she thought, forbidden love. It was stupid; he is deadly. Around and around, her logic followed her emotions, and her emotion chased her logic. It was wrong to deny how she felt, and it was wrong to feel any way about this boy.

She pulled out her phone, entered in his number, and pressed save.

Then she texted him: *Hey. It's Kimmie.*

When can I see you again?

IDK. I am dizzy.

Are you in bed, lying down I mean?

Yes.

Put one of your legs on the floor.

Kimmie followed his instruction and let one of her legs fall to the side of the bed and rest on the floor, and her spinning stopped.

Lam

Lam felt like folding over and snapping off at the torso. In fact, she thought she had, and the pain that was in her gut shot up through her spine and burst through her temples, leaving her dizzy, her vision blurred. Then she realized she was still intact and began to dry heave.

This is what it felt like to fight with Lynn. To love and love and love and love and have it only be met with hate.

When Lynn came home, Lam was at the dining room table with the cell phone ready to make her bargains: Lynn wanted freedom, Lam wanted peace of mind. There must be some middle ground; hopefully it wasn't too far away.

But Lynn didn't come home. Lam thought she could just call Lynn, but then she lamely turned her daughter's phone in her hands.

The home phone rang. Lam jerked out of her stupor to answer it.

"Hello, this is the SYPD. Can I speak to Lam Quan?" the officer spoke in perfect Vietnamese.

"This Lam."

"We have your daughter and a few of her friends. You need to pick her up."

"Yes, yes."

"We have the kids detained in the Great Mall Parking Lot by Dave and Buster's. Do you know where that is?"

"Yes, yes."

Lam hung up the phone and wished Tim was here to help her. Tonight he worked late, and she was alone on this one. Lynn was not evil; she was just mad. Mainly at her mother, mainly for not trying harder, having more, being like everyone else with their television channels, cell phones, name brands, and fancy cars. Lam and Tim were just making ends meet, sharing a home with a few other families, sharing one car amongst their family and another. Having to walk and take the bus and buy recycled clothes and not eat pizza, even it was only five dollars because you could get noodles, lots of noodles for one dollar.

Lam remembered she didn't have the car. Tim had the car. If she called Tim, he would come home, but they would lose money. They would lose money anyway; the officer said there was a ticket.

Lam wouldn't call Tim and couldn't explain to the SJPD that she couldn't pick up her daughter, so she did something she really wished she didn't have to do: she asked one of the families she lived with to borrow a car.

It was late, but not too late, almost twelve. And Lam crept through her large house spying to see if anyone with a car was awake.

Lam rocked the phone and cried and cried. Not in the entire world was there a soul that she trusted or who could help her. Not in the entire world, not even here.

On the counter she spied her housemate's car key. She'd return before he noticed.

She snatched the keys and started out the door to the Toyota Corolla. He had one of those electronic car openers. She hit the open button, the lights flashed, and the car

beeped twice. Lam swore a curtain moved, and two eyes from the house followed her down the driveway and out of the neighborhood.

Lam didn't want to be this kind of mother. She wanted to be able to fight for and care for her daughter better. What Lynn didn't understand was that this, even without a car, was infinitely better than another life they could have easily kept. Lam smiled, calming herself: no matter what happened, Lynn is safe now with the police. I am thankful that they were there to protect her, regardless of the cost we will have to pay later, and I am thankful that my biggest problem tonight was that I do not have a car, a car, Ha! The luxury. But Lynn does not understand that cars are a luxury. I should be happy that Lynn does not understand that. Maybe this is why we do not see things the same. For us things will never be the same. Lynn cannot imagine hunger and poverty. She thinks this is it. Ha.

Lam composed herself and prepared for the interaction with the police and Lam.

She pulled the car around the single cop car and the cop and her daughter sitting on the ground waiting.

“Officer Tran,” the cop said, extending his hand.

“What took so long, Ma?” Lynn looked annoyed at Lam.

“What did she do, officer?”

“Her friends vandalized a wall behind the mall over here. Actually, I wanted you to come down so I could show you.”

Lam and the officer walked over to the parking structure. Lynn sat on the ground near the cop car, bored.

“Do you recognize these words?”

“How can you see any words in there?” Lam studied the graffiti and made out an occasional letter amongst a bunch of shapes and lines.

“This is gang related. That’s why I wanted to show you in person.”

Lam’s eyes widened and looked back to her daughter, beautiful and bored, sitting next to the cop car.

“Now, your daughter was with other kids earlier, and they had the paint in their backpacks, a little on their hands. Your daughter was clean. She had nothing on her. I suspect she did not participate, which is why I am just giving her a warning, but the kids she is hanging out with are dangerous. You see her friends with these letters, you keep her away.”

“What should I do?”

“You should keep her away from those friends of hers.”

“How?”

The police officer took out a pad of paper and scribbled down a few words.

“There’s a gang prevention group for parents.”

Lynn waited until the cop had long pulled off before she asked her mom about the car.

“Where did this car come from?”

“I borrowed it?”

“Um, does the person you borrowed it from know that you borrowed it?”

“No. But I will tell them if they ask.”

“Mom, that is so bad. I was just hanging out. Borrowing cars is way worse.”

“Gangs are worse.”

Lynn didn't say another word to her mom, for a while.

Miriam

Miriam's new red toes gave her a small confidence. They shined. She waddled back to her Subaru station wagon in the neon green foam flip flops the salon supplied because Miriam didn't bring her own pair of open toe shoes.

In the car she pressed the "scan" button and stopped on a pop song (she hated pop), rolled down her window, turned up the radio and bobbed her body all the way to Kids Park, to pick up the children.

"That was so cool," Kyle said, running up to hug his mom's hips.

Kyra caught sight of her mom and ran up to join the hug.

"Can we stay?" Kyra asked.

"For five more minutes."

Miriam watched her children slide, bounce, and laugh freely. She laughed with them.

"Can we come back?" Kyle asked.

"Maybe," Miriam smiled. Maybe she had done the right thing. Maybe she should do it more. Maybe women who scratch their itches itch less.

Rob texted her to come home early for a surprise. In the car Kyle narrated the names of the children he met at daycare and the superpowers they each had. He offered to share his superpower with Miriam. He had super human strength. She said that she would like that.

At home there was another round of group hugs, this time centered on Rob, who came home early from work with pizza and the Shrek 3 DVD.

“You look beautiful, baby,” he said, stretching beyond the children to kiss Miriam’s cheek. He said this every day, and most days she shied away from him, wondering why he would lie to her. Today she agreed with his observation and smiled boldly.

“Really, baby. Something is different about you. You’re glowing.” He paused to examine her: same old mom bob, still no make up, the shirt from the 5K they ran to support Kyle’s elementary school, old jeans, and the neon flip flops.

“You got new shoes?”

Miriam’s toes remained invisible to him. Only she could feel their power. Perhaps the flip flops shadowed her toes. Perhaps he thought her toes always looked like that. Perhaps he didn’t see them at all.

“I almost forgot to tell you,” Rob said, “There’s a message on the machine. You got the interview.”

“Oh.”

“Well, don’t do it then,” Rob smiled.

“That wasn’t a bad ‘Oh.’ I just didn’t think... That’s a good ‘Oh.’”

This was her big chance to get baby food out of her hair and get a life. A career. She envisioned herself dressed like the Work Barbies she saw today. Could she pull it off? Could she actually pull it off? Career Barbie?

Tonight there was pizza and Shrek and red toes. The four cuddled up on the couch in their usual positions: Rob on the far right, Miriam under his left arm, Kyle curled into her left, and Kyra on Rob’s lap, a blanket covering them all.

Maybe perfect didn't have a sexy strut or doll hands. Maybe it was all in her head. Perfect. Now keeping it perfect was another thing entirely.

Thi

Beautiful. Just beautiful. Beautiful was somewhere else, far away, a long time ago. In a small village, in a well, a world away, waiting.

It was the sun rising in a valley to meet the paddy fields, held back by humidity and fog. It was the smooth stalks of rice, God's gift. It was 20,000 shades of green.

Thi remembered beautiful: beautiful was the moment before she realized what she had wasn't enough.

Thi walked out of her village, along an unpaved dirt road, across a fisherman's river to a school in town. Diem would often join her, and they would joke about lessons, and families, and boys, and futures.

"I am leaving after high school, and I don't care where," Diem would say.

"Where?"

"Anywhere."

"Like where?"

"Maybe the United States."

"So far? What about your family?"

"If they want to live like this, everyday the same, they can. It's not for me. I want to be in movies and wear pointed shoes and drive cars."

Thi couldn't see Diem starring in movies. Diem's teeth were not all in the right places, and her eyes were either too far apart or her nose was too broad. If Diem wore a business suit, what kind of business would she do in it? Driving cars, now, that did sound thrilling. But they could move to the city or a bigger town for that, not around the globe.

“You wouldn’t miss it here?”

Thi looked around and saw soil pregnant with fruit and family. This land held their small farm, their deep roots, and the bones of their ancestors. The sky met the ground with a magic shade of pink and purple. Thi knew the land like she knew the recipe to grandmother’s soup, by heart.

Diem saw nothing but dirt roads, village huts, and poor fishermen with their pants rolled up to their knees and knee deep in muck, fishing and hoping to pull something from the land and sea enough to sustain them. People with their limbs so deeply rooted in the ground that they were stuck. Diem did not want to be stuck here in the mud, toothless, with her children husking rice and grandchildren crying, in a grave, next to a grave, next to a grave, marked with the same name forever.

“How would you go?” asked Thi.

“I would save my money for a year and run away. I would take a boat, or hide on a boat, and when I show up I would start working any job I could find. Then I would find a famous director and tell him that I took a boat across the ocean to follow my dream, and I would sing him a song, and dance. We will fall in love, and I’ll star in all the Tom Cruise movies. You’ll see me on the TV and say, “Oh. That’s where Diem went. She married Tom Cruz.”

When the two arrived at school, they parted and each went to their own classes. For the next eight hours the girls silently buried themselves in their arithmetic and writing. The teacher wrote the pages on the board and diligently the students raced each other to completion.

On their way out to exercise, the girls crossed paths again, and only caught eyes. They were instructed to follow a class leader through the routine poses. Thi had them memorized and could have been a class leader herself, but she was too shy to do the poses in front of the group.

Thi was best at exercise. She did it without thought. She did it fully, and it relaxed her. She stretched her arms and breathed the thick, wet air into her lungs and held it there. What if she did go? She could picture her life if she stayed here with her family. She would graduate high school and not go on because she would not ask her family to save the money, and there were too many brothers and sisters for Thi to ask for the money to continue school. Besides she did not want to be a scientist, or an engineer, or a doctor, so why would she stay in school? She wasn't particularly good at school, not one of the best, so moving to college was not the plan. Staying on the farm to help her parents until she was married and moved to her own farm seemed very likely; not favorable, but this would be the plan unless she took the planning into her own hands. She could move to town or to a city and work for a factory, or even answer phones at a company. She would meet another factory worker or man at the company, they would have children, and those children would repeat that life. Suddenly Thi was struck with a terrible pang.

If she did nothing, she too would be stuck. Earlier she would not have seen the village lifestyle as one that was stuck; she would have considered it a cycle. She would have been happy to think of it as one. Diem had changed something in Thi, infected her in a way. Gave her an itch.

On the walk home, Thi searched for Diem. She ran home thinking that Diem must be in front of her, over the bridge, across the path. When Thi had run home and not found Diem, she ran back towards school.

When Thi got home, the sun had already set behind the hills and supper's soup began to simmer in a large pot. Mother, grandmother, and the four other siblings were ready with their bowls posed at the mouth of the pot when Thi came in.

"You are very late," her mother said, scooping cabbage and water into her grandmother's bowl first.

"I'm sorry." Thi lowered her eyes.

"You neglected your chores." A pile of vegetables sat uncut in a bucket, and the water barrel was very low. Too low for dishes. Thi placed her school satchel near the door and took up two buckets in her hands and left her family without a word.

She should have poured out the water in one of the buckets now it will be wasted. Now, she would not finish her homework, she will still have to do her chores, and probably some as punishment for being late. She will be punished by her mother, and then again by her school teacher. Thi felt ashamed that she let Diem fill her mind with nonsense and run around in circles after school.

The well wasn't far from the edge of the village. Stupid well should have been built in the center of the village; stupid village should have been built around the well. Maybe it was intentional this way, so that people didn't use up all of the water every time their face or hands were dirty. Maybe the town was blown by the wind away from the well and towards the richer soil, or maybe there really just wasn't enough here to hold

you in place. Thi attached her bucket handle to a hook and lowered the bucket into the well.

The well had scared her as a child. There were a hundred stories of children who played near the well, and fell in. It was days before they were retrieved. In one story, a fat boy fell in the well. There was no rope strong enough to pull him out, and every day the villagers lowered down food to him, until a village elder came and observed the situation. The elder said, "Feed the boy no more food. When there is no food, he will become smaller, and we can pick him up with the rope."

"But he will starve to death," his mother called.

"Then give him only one fruit a day, until he is skinny," instructed the elder. There were two lessons there: take only what you need, and do not under any circumstance play near the well. With all the stories of children who fell in the well, it was surprising that the water was still clean. The stories were lies.

Thi pulled up her bucket and stared into it, seeing her reflection clearly. She was a bit relieved. She always felt that something horrible or magical might happen one day at the well. Maybe she would pull up the bucket and see a witch, or that she had aged to be 100 years old. If she stayed here stuck, she would pull up bucket after bucket and in each one find herself a little bit older, a little bit older, until she pulled up her last bucket looked in and saw a wrinkly ugly old hag and die at the sight of the witch.

"You are vain," said a voice from behind Thi.

Thi, startled, caught Diem's reflection next to her own, moments before she dropped the bucket and spilled the sacred water back into the dirt.

Thi scrambled for the bucket, held it close to her chest, and whispered as though she needed to whisper harshly to Diem, “Where were you today after school?”

“It’s a secret,” Diem said smugly and began to turn around to head home herself.

Thi groaned, annoyed at Diem, and let her saunter back to her own home. Thi was annoyed that Diem would not be punished, would not have to stay up all night with chores and homework, would not be scorned; she would probably do her homework thoughtlessly in the morning before lessons, and sleep fully tonight, that lazy girl.

Thi held each bucket heavy at her sides and let the buckets pull her shoulders down towards the ground as she walked slow, steady steps along a soft dirt path back to her home.

She entered her house silent and observed that her family had finished their meals and stacked the cups and spoons in a pile for Thi to wash with the new water. Her mother had put aside one small bowl of soup, but Thi kept it as a reward for after her chores.

Thi used just a bit of water to wash clean the bowls and cups and spoons. What little pieces of food were left, she walked out to the small animals.

She returned and divided the water into the bathroom and kitchen and cleaned both. She took some feed out to the chickens, who, too, were angry at her negligence. She changed their water and realized she would have to make a second trip to the well tonight. It had been hot today and much of the water had evaporated.

On her second trip, Thi tried to calculate in her head how many times she made this journey in her life so far: If she went to the well twice a day, and there are 365 days

a year, then she goes to the well over 700 times a year. And if she has been going to the well for the last ten years, then she has been to the well 7,000 times. And if she continues to go to the well for the next 70 years, she will go 700 times 70, and she couldn't do the math in her head. Thi bent down into the dirt and scribed the numbers: 49,000. Fifty-thousand. She put the buckets down in the dirt and sat down in the middle of the path. Fifty-thousand.

Something snapped. She would not go to the well 50,000 times. And 50,000 times she would clean the cups with just an ounce of water, and 50,000 she would brush her teeth with a twig brush, and 50,000 she would walk the path to town and back, across the dirt road, over the bridge, along the tracks, and into town, and 50,000 she would say good morning and good night, and hello and goodbye to the same twenty people.

She approached the well, snapped the first bucket on and lowered it fast into the well. What if this time was the last time? This was the first time Thi was not absolutely content and meditative when she approached the well. When the bucket surfaced, she didn't see the face she saw 7,000 times before. She saw a face hungry with want, whose eyes were starved and whose heart was raging, one who had been infected by Diem's ugly dreaming. What if there was something better, and what if once you had it, you still wanted something better; would anything ever be enough again?

Thi walked back across the path and saw a light turn off at Diem's house. Then she heard the scratch of a window opening and the shadow of Diem slipping out. What was that girl up to now? Thi hid herself behind a bush near a near the well and watched Diem slip over the bridge and into the night.

Perkins

They can all go to hell for all I care. She stood momentous and whole. Her hair clipped close to her scalp. There used to be a sheet of black satin on tight chocolate skin, now a cap of grey on lines and veins hung loose over curves and holes. Without even her jewelry on, only her red-red nails and small grey cap, Perkins twisted the knob and stepped boldly into the empty hallway of Willow Glen Assisted Living Community.

Her eyes didn't catch Ms. Detsin sitting backwards in her walker. Ms. Detsin just smiled and waved while Mrs. Perkins continued to lap the halls naked.

"Jesus, Perkins," boomed a voice from behind.

Mrs. Perkins didn't even turn her head to acknowledge the exclamation.

"Perkins, what are you up to now?"

"Oh, be quiet and live a little," she shot out over her shoulder.

Milo thought he would, but he got his kicks following Perkins around the circular hallways until she got caught. That would be decent entertainment for the day he thought. So he stayed about halfway down the hallways, and like a child, chased Mrs. Perkins as she wandered around the halls.

She made it down the first hallway unnoticed by the attendants and nurses and turned left down the next stretch of hall. The facility was designed like a large square donut. Residents on the outside ring of the donut faced streets and parking lots, and residents unlucky enough to be on the west side of a facility faced a brown fence. Those on the inside ring of the donut faced a public courtyard. Perkins had completed one leg

of the square donut and then started down the next hall. A set of marching feet came charging behind Milo, who had not yet turned the corner.

Milo turned towards the marching feet. There, crossed-armed stood Carla, the strictest nurse in the community.

“Carla, doll, you’re looking chipper this morning,” Milo lied.

Carla stopped to study Milo. Why had he said that? Where was he going? Where should he be? She stood deciding.

“Why thank you Milo. Shouldn’t you be in tai chi? I’ll have someone take you.”

She pulled her walkie talkie off a clip on her belt and radioed in Milo’s location.

“Carlos, I have Milo here in front of 504. He needs to be in physical therapy.

Take him down to the 12—”

Carla caught Milo’s eyes studying the corner. She didn’t finish her transmission. Instead she dropped her walkie talkie and marched to the corner to peek, and then finished her sentence.

“1204 to tai chi, Carlos. I’ll wait here with him until you pick him up.”

“Copy.”

“So Milo, your room is down the other hallway. If you were on your way to group social, you would have had to turn left, but you turned right.”

In that moment, Milo noticed that Perkins was completing her lap, still naked, and now right behind Carla.

“I’ll be damned,” Milo let out. “She made it.” Milo smiled, relieved and joyful.

“Who made what, Milo?” Carla glanced at her watch.

Perkins pushed open her unlocked door, and slipped into the room unnoticed by Carlos, who just turned the corner and raced towards Carla and Milo.

“He made it, I mean, Carlos. Weren’t you timing him, doll? I’ll tell you, he’s quick. I bet I didn’t miss a thing of that tie cheese.”

“Tai Chi, Milo. And good thing because you could really use that exercise.”

“Thanks for looking out for me now, Carla doll.”

Inside her unit, Perkins sat in her armchair, still naked, wondering if maybe everyone was as blind as her, or if she was turning invisible. She imagined that when her vision faded away entirely, so would she.

“Christ, Perkins, bad enough I have to share a room with you,” her roommate complained.

“Oh, thank god. You can see me.”

“Of course I can see you—problem is, I see too much of you.”

“Oh, be quiet already, I’m getting dressed.”

Perkins rose from the chair, further exposing herself to her roommate, and slipped on a thin cotton dress, no bra, no underwear—too much trouble. Better to annoy the hell out of this roommate than to be invisible. Then she lay back on her bed, closed her eyes, and was.

Part Four

Quynh

“He’s here now. Be quiet.”

The women in the shop sat poised perfectly with sticker heads tacked next to their new American names: “Hello, my name is Kim. Hello, my name is Sue. Hello, my name is Susan. Hello, my name is June.” Their names badges posted next to their coffee brown and newspaper gray licenses sealed with clear masking tape and positioned to the left of each of their stations. “Warning poison” was written in Sharpie or taped to large containers in the back. Lam-Kim wasn’t sure what some of the containers were used for, so she marked them *poison*, just in case, as a precaution. She thought that most likely everything, if inhaled or consumed, was deadly. Once Lam-Kim had that thought, she put down the Sharpie marker and decided if she really did label everything that was poison: “poison,” Quynh would have a fit, and the customers would be concerned, and Thi would laugh and laugh and laugh.

The sticker heads were posted on top of little printed signs that Truong had made that said, “Hello my name is.” Quynh said this was a chance to redesign our image, Americanize for our customers, make it easier when they wanted to book an appointment so that they can pronounce and remember our names. The women had twenty minutes to think of a name before being assigned one so that Truong could make the signs. Lam knew right away that she would be a Kim, Thi chose June, Van let Quynh name her Sue, Susan stayed Susan, and Truong stayed Truong since he only handled money anyway. Quynh transformed to Queen, despite Lam’s argument that Queen wasn’t an actual American name.

“What if my customer already knows my name?” asked Thi.

“Tell them Thi is June in Viet,” Thi tilted her head considering.

“Sue!” Quynh called.

“Yes,” Susan replied.

“No, you are Susan. Van is Sue.” Quynh corrected.

“Why not name Van something else, so it’s not confusing?” questioned Thi.

“Bah. I already have the signs, that’s why.”

“She couldn’t think of American names that’s why,” snipped Lam-Kim.

“Sue!” Quynh tried again, but Van’s eyes remained glued to a magazine she was flipping through.

“Why did you name Van my name? Call her Ann or something different,” Susan pleaded.

Quynh took the printed “Hello my name is,” wrote Ann under the Sue, and crossed out the Sue. It looked like Sue Ann.

“You be Susan, and Van can be Sue Ann.”

“That’s even worse!” complained Susan.

Van paid no attention. Customers did not call her by her name. If they liked her, they waved and pointed and just walked over. She did nails silently, without all the chit chat. And if her name tag, which would be blocked with polishes and flower vases, said Ann, or Sue, or Sue Ann, it didn’t really matter. And if she had a sticker head, next to her flower vase, it didn’t really change anything. The poisons were exposed, the

procedures were still all at your own risk, and if the health inspector wanted the shop, he would have it, sticker heads, American names, Sharpied “poison” labels and all.

“Sue Ann Van Nguyen! I am talking to you!” Quynh stood with her hands on her hips in front of Van’s station. Susan stormed out the front door.

Van’s eyes rose, and she placed her magazine down on her station table.

“Yes.”

“From now on you are Sue Ann Van Nguyen, do you understand?”

“Fine.”

Quynh who was expecting a protest and not receiving one continued to prod Van.

“So when I call Sue Ann Van Nguyen, you will answer, okay?”

Lam burst into laughter, “She doesn’t listen when you call her Van.”

Quynh grew irritated and decided to redirect her anger to Lam.

“Lam. He is coming now, and if I see one noodle—”

The door chimed, and in its threshold stood a thirty-something tan man in a business suit and leather shoes. His hair was greased back into a perfect arch, and his brows were neatly shaped around large brown eyes. He was medium build and beautiful, too beautiful.

“Hello, sir,” Quynh grabbed the man forcefully by the arm and pulled him into the shop and out of the doorway.

“Hello,” he breathed in a deep and unrushed breath.

“I’ll show you everything,” Quynh offered the man who seemed not to mind his special treatment.

Quynh pulled the man towards Van's station.

"Everyone's licenses are here. Next to name and picture." Quynh pointed to Van's display.

"Hello, Sue Ann," the tan man smiled.

Van raised her eyes and smiled a forced smile, then folded her magazine in her lap, prepared for questions.

"Sue Ann, you must enjoy working at such a friendly place," the man added.

Van smiled tighter and held her teeth clenched and shook her head. Thi, behind her, was doing all she could to not laugh. Lam stood in the back by the wax room almost hiding from the man, that and hiding her noodles in her purse, afraid he might even inspect there.

Quynh, afraid Van might say something unwise, spun the man away from Van and dragged him to the back of the shop.

"This is the bathroom. You see, new sink, very nice. No chemicals in the bathroom. Very nice, very clean."

The man inspected the bathroom, and it was very normal. Just a toilet, some dirty floor tiles, some peeling wall paint, and a roll of toilet paper. The sink, although Quynh claimed it to be new, looked very much like a basic sink. Nothing special.

The man nodded his head, agreeing with Quynh that the bathroom was all right. Quynh then dragged him to the storage cabinet and pointed out that everything that is poisonous was kept here.

"Poison?" questioned the man.

“Yes, if you eat, you get very sick.”

“I promise I won’t eat any of the nail polish,” the man smiled.

“You want to see files, papers, wax room?”

“The wax room, please.”

Quynh shot a look at Lam, and Lam raised her hands to show no noodles.

Quynh walked under the statue of the Virgin Mary deliberately avoiding her gaze and across the back of the salon to the wax room.

There was a simple hanging cloth that separated the wax room from the rest of the salon. Inside the room was a shelf with more bottles Sharpied “poison,” a microwave, and a leather bench.

The man and Quynh entered into the wax room. Quynh noticed the man hadn’t written anything down.

“You need paper, a pen?”

The man shrugged, wondering what it was he was supposed to write. Quynh left him in the wax room and ran to her own station to search for writing utensils.

When she returned with the paper and pen, the man was lying with his hands behind his head, in a white buttoned shirt, white socks, and absolutely no pants or underwear, completely exposed on the leather bench.

Quynh shrieked.

The man sat up quickly.

“Quynh, you okay?” Truong asked while counting money.

Quynh popped her head out from behind the curtain and replied, “The health inspector needs a wax, I guess.”

“You need a wax?” she asked him.

“I saw a sign on the window that said wax. I need to wax this general region,” the man motioned his hands across his genitals. This made Quynh both dizzy and nauseous.

Quynh poked her head out from behind the curtain again and caught Lam’s eyes.

“Lam, the health inspector wants a wax. You do it.”

Lam rushed behind the curtain and switched places with Quynh. The man didn’t seem to notice.

“You want me to wax all the hairs?” Lam questioned.

The man nodded and kept his eyes closed.

Lam popped a cube of wax in the microwave and moved an old bowl of noodles to the trashcan.

“Put this there,” Lam tossed the man a small hand towel to better cover himself.

When the wax heated, she spread a thick layer across his already trimmed hairs. Then, she pressed a small strip of paper across the wax and ripped away his pubic hairs. The man tightened his smile and breathed slowly.

Lam continued to spread and press and pull the beautiful man’s hairs. When she finished a section of his body, he would turn and request another and another, his chest, the back of his arms, his brows, and she would spread, and press, and pull, and he would tighten and tighten his smile.

Quynh stepped outside, confused by her interactions with the health inspector; in all her planning and preparation she did not prepare for a health inspector who wanted a Brazilian wax.

While the health inspector was in the wax room de-hairing, another man walked into the shop. He also wore a business suit, but loosely over his skeleton frame. His head was spotted and bald, and he did have a clipboard and badge. His skin hung from his face, and his hands were shriveled as though he had touched the poison.

The man walked in and presented his credentials to Throng. Truong called out for Quynh to begin her rehearsed presentation again, but she was gone.

The man started at the front door and scanned the room thoroughly, letting his eyes sweep over every square inch of the room. He inspected the entrance, the signs on the walls, the listed warning, prices, and posters. He went to each station, checked boxes, and circled items on his clipboard. He went from woman to woman, looked her up and down and looked her license over. He almost asked them to show him their own nails to inspect for dirt, rashes and disease—to make sure that none of these were transferred.

He poked through their bottles, put on plastic gloves, and even inspected their tool sets.

He started with Thi. He eyed her and pulled one tool from her bag. He turned it about in his hand and laid it on her station, on the right hand side. Then he eyed her again, took out another tool, raised his brows and placed it on the left hand side of her station.

Thi felt like she did when she had a doctor examine her. The touch was both bad and okay. Okay if he touched her coldly, objectively, and bad if he paused. He separated all of her tools into two piles, and then scribbled a whole paragraph onto his paper.

“Sterilize the tools on the right,” the inspector instructed Thi.

Thi’s English was not so good. She looked for Lam, who was gone, and Quynh who had vanished, and then to Van. She looked at Van silently, expecting Van to see the worry in her face.

“He says clean the tools,” Van whispered.

Thi wrapped the tools in a dirty towel, stood up, walked across the room, and pulled a plastic bucket from the poison cabinet. She poured liquid sanitizer into the bucket and tossed the tools in. She eyed the clock and waited while the man stood looking at her. When two minutes had passed, she took a clean towel, wrapped the tools, and returned to her station with the cleaned supplies.

The man did not smile, did not suggest if this was right or wrong, but just scribbled more onto the second paper on this clipboard.

Quynh now entered the store with a tea from Starbucks, since she dared not use the microwave in the room with a naked health inspector.

Just as Quynh entered, the real health inspector slipped into the bathroom and began scanning.

The man from the wax room couldn’t hold it in anymore. He began to moan in pain when Lam pulled the strips from the insides of his thighs.

Both the real health inspector and Quynh moved straight to the wax room and arrived at the curtain at the same time. They simultaneously flung it open.

“What the hell?” exclaimed the naked beautiful man.

“What’s this?” exclaimed the health inspector.

“Whoa man! Privacy please.”

Quynh began hitting the real health inspector, whom she thought was a pervert, and shooing him out of the wax room.

He began scribbling furiously outside the curtain.

Quynh stuck her head in again and said, “Shh.”

When she closed the curtain, she studied the pervert and noticed that he too had a suit and leather shoes, but he had a clipboard and a small plastic badge that read “Harry Health Inspector.”

“You, the health inspector?” Quynh blurted.

The man humphed and continued to write.

“Why did nobody tell me sexy man not the health inspector?”

Truong sat blank faced. Thi’s hands were covering her face. Surely she had failed the test. Van busied herself with a customer who had snuck in during the commotion and in doing this, stayed out of the drama.

“I am Quynh. This is my store. I didn’t know you here. I show you everything.”

“Quynh, I’ll tell you, I think I’ve seen more than enough. You’ll be hearing from us soon.” The man clicked the top of his pen twice, glanced once more back to the wax room and snapped the heels of this leather shoes all the way to the door, turned once,

faked a smile, which looked more like a constipated wince, and snapped his heels down the sidewalk and out of their morning.

“What did he say?”

Truong continued to stare blank faced at Quynh.

“Throng, he must have said something, what did he say?”

“He said nothing. He wrote a lot, but said nothing.”

“You did not ask him?”

“No.”

Susan replayed the events for Quynh, how Thi was drilled, how he did see the little stickers, how he spent a lot of time in the bathroom, how the beautiful man moaned, how the health inspector saw the beautiful man naked, and then Quynh slapped him, how he wrote a lot, and was very quiet.

Quynh sank into the chair at her station, in disbelief that she had missed the inspection.

“Do you think we passed?”

“Don’t we always pass?” questioned Truong.

“No, we always need something more, something less, always something, and always a fee.”

“Yes, Quynh. There will always be a fee, but we will always pass. It is a scam to get more money from us is all. No one can have nails without poison, no pretty feet without shaved calluses, no bikini wax without pain. I guarantee there will be a fee, and I guarantee they do not shut us down, so that next time they get more fees.”

Truong had it all figured out and went back to counting. Van, too, had it figured out, so she kept painting; Thi hunched her shoulders in self pity and waited for Quynh to find out that she, Thi, was responsible for everything, that everything was wrong because of her, that she had failed; and Lam, when she was done waxing, went back to heating noodles.

Kimmmie

Kimmmie had been texting Mario most of the day. Stuff like: *What are you doing now? Or I want to be with you.* He had been texting sexier things; things that made her blush and keep texting. Things like: *I want to feel me inside you, or I'm hard thinking about you.* Kimmmie's come-backs were a little tamer.

Today on Kimmmie's schedule was her cousin's quinceañera. Kimmmie didn't have one: her mother didn't save. Lupe, Kimmmie's cousin, saved since the day she was born—well, her mom did. The dress alone was almost one thousand dollars.

Kimmmie's mom had asked her if she minded not having one, if it made her sad. At the time Kimmmie replied, "I can always have a sweet sixteen, if I change my mind"—that was last year. The truth was, if Kimmmie had twenty thousand dollars, she would go to college and get a career. Money spent on a dress, a party, a day, was silly.

When Kimmmie returned home, the house reached the height of its commotion: Mom chatting on the phone with one of her sisters working out the last-minute arrangements. Marcia, Kimmmie's older sister, was locked in the bathroom, putting on make-up. Her boyfriend, Michael, on the phone while pacing in the front yard. Their children, Isaac and Elijah, attacking each other in the living room. And Gabriel, Kimmmie's younger brother, hunting through the house for his other black sock, his only other black sock. Tio sitting on the couch oblivious to the chaos, flipping through channels and chugging a Tecate, two empty cans sat on the table next to him. Paco, a small Chihuahua terrier, barked at the front door; he had been left outside.

Kimmmie slipped up the stairs unnoticed by her family and hid herself in her room before she was recruited to clean, feed, or dress her nephews. She sat on the edge of her bed and contemplated getting dressed. She planned to wear the tight yellow dress that used to be Marcia's before she had the babies and high strappy black heels. Kimmmie snuck into Marcia's room and dug around for the heels. Then she returned to her room with the box. She tossed off her flip flops and laced the new shoes up around her ankles. She stood easily three inches taller. Now she probably came up to Mario's chin. He would think this was hot. Her were legs erect, her back straightened by the force of the arch. She peeled off her tank and shorts and slipped the yellow dress over her plain white bra.

She looked like Marcia at Tio's wedding. She didn't like that thought. That was the spring before Elijah when Marcia still thought she would go to art school and move to San Francisco. Since Kimmmie was about ten, she had been witness to the horrors of Marcia's failing dreams: not going to school, not getting married, not having a job, welfare, Medical, and crying children all day and all night and all day and all night and everyone having to help and not being able to stand on two feet because you created a load that you could never carry, that it would take a whole family to carry. That's what Kimmmie looked like in Marcia's dress and in the high black strappy shoes and with Mario's text messages filling her inbox. Not what she wanted.

* * *

“Can I come over?” Mario cajoled into Kimmmie's receiver.

“No. Everyone is here. Plus I have to be getting ready,” Kimmie had the phone pressed between her shoulder and ear as she slipped off the borrowed straps of her sister’s heels.

“I’ll just slip in and out.”

“No.”

“Then, you come out for a minute. I have to see you.”

“No. I’m telling you. I have to get ready.”

“We’ll tell them we’re going to the 7-11, for Slurpies.”

Slurpies was their code word.

“I can’t go get Slurpies right now,” and with that Kimmie flipped closed her phone, and then immediately opened it to begin a heated text to Mario.

Text: Baby. I love Slurpies. I mean with you. I just have a family thing. You understand. Right?

No text back. In ten minutes, still no text back. And although Kimmie really did need to be getting ready, instead she sat frozen waiting for her phone to beep and tell her everything was all right, everything was normal. That Mario still wanted her as badly as he had always wanted her.

* * *

It was “that time of the month” for Kimmie. Her patience pulled thin around her like Marcia’s old dresses.

“See how thin Marcia was,” her mother stood in the door admiring her youngest daughter.

“Too thin,” Kimmie turned to the side and saw a small bulge where her flat stomach usually met her thighs, un-curved.

“You look perfect,” her mother entered the room and petted down Kimmie’s already flat hair.

“I look fat,” Kimmie pouted.

“You look beautiful,” her mother repeated.

Her mother’s hair was styled up with the bangs curving down and crossing half the forehead. Her makeup was evenly and thickly applied so that her skin looked purposefully flawless. Her eyes were stenciled dark black on top of the permanent makeup on her lips, and her lips darkened to an almost maroon. She wore a satin red dress that hugged all the right places tightly and fell loose around the other places. Her legs were bare, and she had not put on her shoes. Her toes matched her lips.

“No. Mom, you look beautiful,” Kimmie wrapped her arms around the neck of her mother, who pulled away to adjust Kimmie’s dress, maneuver Kimmie’s hair, and then sat on the bed behind Kimmie, working on the hair, attempting to pin the same updo that she had mastered on her own head; a hairstyle so precise that no strand was loose, all had their place, but also so fragile that a bit of wind, an opening of a car door window, a bump, a scratch would send the entire style into disarray. When the hairs were twisted and pinned into a finished product, she sprayed them thoroughly, so that they would lock into their places.

“You look perfect,” she whispered.

Kimmie didn't see Marcia in the mirror anymore, she saw her mother. She was more satisfied with this image than the other. Kimmie waited in the mirror to see if her own image would emerge.

"Mija, your nail." Her mother reached for the broken fingernail.

Kimmie pulled back the hand ashamed.

"Let's fix it before the party," her mother suggested.

"No. Don't bother."

"No one will notice. You look beautiful." Her mother kissed her head and left Kimmie looking in the mirror.

The women in Kimmie's family were beautiful, thin but with curves, dark full eyes that locked on the things they wanted, smooth skin from lots of rest and water and dancing—lips that were so full and always listened to.

But this beauty had brought the women of Kimmie's family nothing but struggle and sadness. Usually in the form of men that could not look past it, or women who would try to measure it, or fights with themselves to keep it when children swelled within them and challenged their shape and left scars like maps across their arms, thighs, and centers.

What was it that Kimmie hoped to see if not beauty in the mirror? Success? Would she prefer to stare back at someone who didn't let her body be invaded and conquered by men? When Kimmie did look in the mirror, her tall shoes pointed slightly inward, her legs were more stick-like than sexy bowling pins; and her breasts were better small and hidden than large and breaking free from the satin top. She saw more than

anything now, a child. That child didn't care if the boys were looking, or if the other women in the room were more beautiful: she expected them to be. Maybe Kimmie hadn't celebrated her sweet fifteen or sixteen because she didn't want to celebrate it all going away.

Her mother kissed her forehead and left the room. It would be silly to pull out her hairpins and run outside barefoot in the satin dress, but at the same time, Kimmie had the greatest desire to do just that. Not having to worry about the adult things that her mother and Marcia faced, like how she will buy baby formula and diapers, and why the baby won't stop crying when she holds it like this, and rocks it like this, and sings and sings and sings.

One New Text: I'm outside.

Kimmie toddled across the room in the pointed heels, and pulled back the curtain. Below Mario leaned against her mom's car. He looked proud of himself. He shouldn't. He's not supposed to be here.

Marcia ratted on Kimmie and told their mother that Mario was a gangbanger. Their mother said he wasn't allowed to come around the house. Marcia would chase him off if he came around the house or to parties, protecting her little sister, but school was sort of a safe zone for the couple. No one could prevent them from sitting on the ledge of the library in each other's laps cupcakin'.

Kimmie closed the curtain.

She flipped open her phone to call him, but he was calling her.

“I just saw the hottest chick just now. Damn she was so hot all these other chicks were all doggin’ her. She don’t even know how fine she is. Her eyes, man. Damn she has nice eyes. Her eyes are like hotter than Angelina Jolie’s eyes. Real Talk. Her lips, man—I just want to touch those lips.”

Kimmie stuck her head out from the curtain and glared at Mario hard but playfully.

“Damn I just saw her again. Talk to me angel.”

“Real talk. You shouldn’t be here. Marcia will call the cops on you.”

“Let her.”

“That’s dumb. Then I really won’t be able to see you.”

“See me now. Come down here.”

Again, Kimmie opened the curtain and motioned with one finger for Mario to wait and closed her phone. She looked into the mirror, seeing the child with the imitation mom hair, and the Marcia dress, and this is how it was, how it really was. She was a child, and as a child she played at grown up, but she was just playing. She checked her makeup, smoothed down her dress, and still felt bloated. Her confidence leaving her the longer she stared in the mirror. She opened the door and checked the hallway: empty.

She took off the clumpy heels to better sneak down the hall. She passed her mother’s room, and her mother was back on the phone with one of her sisters. The other hallways doors were closed. Marcia was no doubt behind one of them and could very well see Mario standing outside if she was looking. Kimmie crept down the steps and Elijah played with a Spiderman figurine on the bottom steps. She stepped around the

child and avoided making eye contact with anyone in the kitchen or her grandmother and Tio in the living room. Michael was still outside on the phone to one of his women; he was oblivious to any drama outside of his own. Kimmie hurried along the side of the house to avoid being spotted by Marcia.

Mario caught sight of Kimmie and walked towards her boldly. The two ducked into the alleyway besides the house and the neighbor's fence. Children's bikes and empty planters scattered about the otherwise empty pathway.

Kimmie swung around and faced Mario. Her cheeks were flushed from his heated texts and her vapid escape.

He wrapped his arms around her waist, leaned in for the kiss, but Kimmie pulled back before their lips met.

"Look. Are you serious about me? Or are you just messing with me?" she asked.

"I'm more serious about you than anything."

"But are you serious about anything?" Kimmie questioned coyly.

"What do you want me to say?"

"That you are serious."

"But I am."

"Forget it." Kimmie rolled her eyes, broke his hold, and started, barefoot, back down the alley and towards her front yard. Mario grabbed her wrist. He pulled her to him and held her close. His hands were licking the nape of her neck where her hairs were pinned the tightest. She pulled away.

"You're gonna leave me just like that?"

“Just like what?”

“Unsatisfied.”

“Unsatisfied?”

“Unsatisfied.”

He pressed himself to her, and although she rejected the idea logically, physically he could not be resisted. When he kissed, she kissed back hard.

From inside the house, she heard her name; and then louder and near the kitchen window above their two heads.

“Yeah. Unsatisfied,” Kimmie said.

Mario took that as a sign to kiss her again. He ran his hands down her back until they rested on her hips.

“I have to go.”

He kissed her again. And began to walk down the pathway away from her.

“What are you doing later?”

“Waiting for you to come home.”

“I’ll be home by twelve.”

“I’ll be here.”

“Mario.”

“Yes.”

“I forgot what I was going to say.”

“I’ll stand here until you remember.”

“Naw. I’ll keep you standing there.”

Kimmie received a text from her mother: *Where are you?*

“I have to go.”

Mario bridged the gap between them one last time and kissed her on her forehead, and then stole out through the neighbor’s yard and onto the street.

Kimmie texted her mother back: *Coming.*

Kimmie strolled along the length of the alley. At its end she saw her mother. Her mother looked down the alley behind Kimmie, suspecting.

“What were you doing?”

“I just was looking for something?”

“What were you looking for out here?”

“Just a ring I lost the other day.”

“Kimmie your hair. What did you do?”

Kimmie felt that she had for the most part taken good care not to damage the folds and flips and curls.

Her mother marched her back upstairs to straighten out the stray hairs that had escaped their pins at the base of her neck.

“You know I don’t like that boy,” he mother warned.

“What boy?”

“What boy! I expect more from you. Do you want to be like Marcia?”

Didn’t everyone expect her to be just like Marcia?

Her mother twister the hair tighter this time, less lovingly. When she pushed the pins into the hair, she scraped the scalp in punishment for Kimmie’s lie.

“There are other boys.”

Kimmie bowed her head, ashamed to have disappointed her mother.

“I really like him, though.” Kimmie swung around to face her mother’s strained and reddened eyes.

“I really liked your father. What good did that do?” Tears broke from her mother’s eyes. Black makeup ran down her face perfect face.

“I’m sorry, Mom.” Kimmie hugged her mother, and her mother’s body felt limp.

“I worry about you. I worry about you more with that boy. Marcia said he was in a gang, even.”

Marcia and her big mouth.

“He is, but he’s not like that.”

“He doesn’t have to be. Being in a gang is bad enough. If he is in a gang, and you are with him, you could get hurt.”

“I know.” And Kimmie hated that this was true. She wanted Mario, and she wanted him to be so different than he was. She wanted him to come to the door in a button shirt and greet and charm her family. She wanted him to have her over to his house where his mother would cook meals and point out his good report cards lined up on the refrigerator. And on the weekends, they could go on dates to the mall and movies, cuddle up with popcorn. And he would ask her to all the school dances, and when they went they would look like Prince Charming and Cinderella. They would take pictures, and both their mothers would frame the pictures and display them in their living rooms. When high school was over, they would pick colleges together, move far far away, get

good jobs, get married, and buy a big house with their good jobs, and have many children. Not the other way around.

But as it was, they snuck behind a bush and off to a park to hook up. And instead of flowers, he usually showed up with herb; instead of M and M's, he'd sneak in a forty. And instead of pictures in prom dresses, he had half naked pictures of him on her cell phone, texted to her in the middle of the night.

Lam

When Lam saw the first health inspector, she clutched her noodles to her chest, backed towards the door and stood outside, nervously jabbing the noodles with her chopsticks and chewing fast.

She peered inside the shop, watching Quynh escort the man around to the stations, the bathroom, and finally to the wax room. Lam was relieved she had made her escape and was not discovered microwaving her noodles like last time. That had cost the shop fifty dollars. Lam had put both noodles and “chemicals” in the microwave. Quynh took the fifty dollars from Lam’s pay.

Quynh was so silly, how she held the poor man by the arm as though on a leash, not letting him see anything she did not see that he saw. Lam smiled when it was Van’s turn to amuse the man. Van was Lam’s favorite. Always calm, composed, and, underneath that irritated and hilarious.

Lam thought she would just stay outside, better that way. This way Quynh will not get mad. If the health inspector asks, she is on a break. On second thought, Quynh will kill her for taking a break while on the job. She turned back to the window and continued both hiding from and spying on Quynh.

A second man in a black suit pulled up and stood next to Lam staring into the window.

“What are you watching?” asked the man.

“Health inspection,” Lam pointed at Quynh and the man.

The second man settled into position, and the two watched Quynh while hiding.

Quynh led the man behind a curtain and into the wax station; she closed the curtain behind her and screamed.

Flushed, Quynh pulled back the curtain and started screaming for Thi, then Van, and then Lam.

Lam left her noodles at the foot of the door and still appeared to be slurping the last one down.

As though a soldier reporting for duty, Lam stood ready to do whatever nonsensical thing Quynh commanded.

“You go in. Health inspector needs a wax.”

Lam wiped her noodled hands on her pants and tossed back the curtain.

The health inspector lay with his hands behind his head, eyes closed, in a relaxed position on the wax bench. His shirt and pants were off.

Lam’s eyes widened and tossed back the curtain to question Quynh.

“He wants what waxed?”

“He said Brazilian. I said no Brazilian. Then he say everything, he pay.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. I need a walk. Too much work, health inspections.” Quynh tucked the curtain closed and shuffled out of the shop.

Lam patted the curtain behind her, noticed a bowl of old noodles on a shelf, and quickly dropped it in the trash before the health inspector noticed.

“You want wax?”

“Yes,” the man kept his eyes closed.

He decided no matter how good of a wax, he probably wouldn't come back. He did not feel comfortable; sure, he felt comfortable, but not comfortable here. The place was a little "ghetto."

"What you want wax?"

"Yes. Wax."

Lam was puzzled. "No, where?"

The man opened his eyes, sat up, and in a low voice pleaded, "You sure you can't do a Brazilian?"

"You want all your hair off?"

"Yes, here, and here." He motioned. Lam looked.

"Okay. I do for you."

The man rested back with his eyes closed. Lam heated the wax, prepared the paper strips, and began to slowly drip and smooth the melted wax across the man's pelvis.

She cleared a strip, and the man smiled. He did not look, but he held his face in a winced smile. She continued like this.

Oh no. Stupid, stupid Lam. Oh no. Lam froze. He had tricked her? The sneaky half naked health inspector *had* tricked her. No Brazilian that is what Quynh would say. We don't want to take risks. Expose customers. We only have curtains, not enough privacy for Brazilian. But was it against rules, did you need a special permit? I don't see why you would. Is it against the law to take off your pants for a wax? Probably not. But

that's how those laws are. Half the time, you don't know what they are until you've already broken one.

Lam decided that it was probably okay. And since she had already started, it was a bit too late. Or else this man would have one centered landing strip of pubic hair missing, and that would not be okay. She would have to finish the job she started wrong or right. Too pent up with doubt, Lam broke her own awkward train of thoughts with a bit of light conversation.

“You surprise me.”

“Why is that?”

“Usually you guys don't ask for wax.”

“A lot of people I know do.”

“Oh. It must be new. I better tell Quynh.”

“Is Quynh your boss?”

“Yes.”

“I'm sorry.”

“Okay. You tell me. Was everything okay so far?”

“I hope so. You tell me.”

“No noodles for me,” Lam shook her head proudly.

“No noodles?” The man opened one eye to peek as Lam worked under his belly button, dripping and ripping.

“I don't eat no noodles for you this time.”

The man opened both his eyes and wondered if he thought that she thought he wanted something other than what he wanted and was a bit afraid.

“Fifty dollar last time, for my noodles.”

“You shouldn’t do that.” The man sat up a bit, which disturbed Lam’s process.

“I know. Quynh tells me everyday. You can get sick, from the wax?”

The man pulled all the way to a seated position now. He was sure that he was in the ghetto now.

“What are you doing? You want wax or no?”

“Just wax. Right?”

“Yes. Now, I have to do other side.”

“Now I only eat my noodle outside.” Lam continued her story.

The man dropped his smile. Lam positioned herself so that she could get the hair behind his genitals.

The man was perched on his knees and elbows as Lam worked under him from behind.

Quynh pulled open the curtain. Lam and her customer looked to Quynh and then the man standing next to Quynh.

“What are you doing?”

“What are you doing?” Lam questioned back. “Who is that?”

Quynh turned and slapped the man to her left as she dropped the curtain back to cover the dirty waxing.

“What was that?” the customer asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Who was that man?”

“I don’t know.”

The man was sure now that he was in some sort of risqué dirty, dirty place. His friend told him that a Vietnamese salon would be cheaper than a spa and just as good a job, but never did he think he would be propositioned and then part of a peep show. He should report this place. He just held his breath. It would all almost be done, and if he left a virgin he would have to reward himself with a stiff drink after at Antonio’s.

“Okay. Okay. You done.”

“Thank God.” The man’s crotch burned and was red. A bit of blood dripped down his leg. He hoped this was normal.

“Oh.” Lam launched a towel towards his crotch. The man jumped afraid. “You are bleeding. Sit down.”

The man followed Lam’s orders, and she crouched so that her eyes were balls height with the seated man. She dabbed the bleeding hair follicle, and then stuck some tape over it.

“Did we pass, you think?”

“Pass what?”

“Inspection.”

Were you supposed to inspect them first? Is that how that works. He would have to ask his straight friend Dave who’s been to a real brothel in Amsterdam and then another one downtown.

“I have to think about it, you know. I’ll let you know.”

“You don’t need to write anything down?”

“No. I can always look it up online.”

Lam walked the man over to her license and sticker head and showed him her name. “Remember. I am Kim.” And he saw that she was not really Kim. And then she whispered. “And if they ask. I only eat noodles outside now.”

“I’ll remember that.”

The man dropped a few twenties down on her station then rushed out the door.

Quynh began hitting Lam the moment her customer left.

“What? What? What?”

“We failed. We failed.”

“No. I think we pass.”

“No we failed. For sure we failed.”

“One question. Why did the health inspector give me fifty dollars? Maybe he felt bad about my noodles last time.”

“That was not the health inspector, idiot!”

Quynh began to tear the little sticker heads off the stations, and then the little fake name stickers.

“What are you doing?” Truong noticed his work going to waste.

“No matter. No matter.”

“Thi mess everything up. Lam mess everything up.”

Thi bowed her head at her station.

“No Brazilians. No noodles. No knives. No chemicals. No masks.”

Quynh buried her head in her hands.

“If that was not the health inspector, why are you worried?”

“The other man. The other little man.”

Lam remembered the man at the door, the man who opened the curtain.

“Oh,” she lowered her head and felt ashamed.

“Yeah. My customer didn’t seem like the health inspector.”

All the customers had left, and it was before the after work rush. The women sat in the heat, not talking, not watching TV, just sat in a sort of sad reflection of the day. Truong counted things and wrote things. Quynh’s head had been down most of the afternoon. Van stared out the window, Thi stared at her hands, Lam stared at everyone. It was too hot to move, to talk, everyone would be too irritable.

Lam’s phone rang. It was Lynn. Lynn never calls. Lam flipped open the phone and stepped out of the shop for some privacy.

“Mom. Can you help me?”

“Where are you? What’s wrong?”

“I just need you to come get me. Kinda quick. I’ll tell you when you get here.”

Lam closed the phone. She would need a car. Most of the girls walked. Here options remained: ask Van to come, borrow Truong’s truck, or steal Quynh’s car. Okay, not steal, but borrow without asking. That was a terrible idea.

Lam poked her head in the window and waved at Van to come out.

“Can I borrow your car?”

“Why?”

“Lynn’s in trouble.”

Van considered the position.

“I’ll go with you.”

“No. Stay here.”

“Can you drive?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Do you have your license?”

“Of course not.”

“Then, I will go.”

“No.”

Van walked back into the shop and sat down. Always the same problem. Lynn’s in trouble, and I can’t save her. I’m in trouble, and no one will save me. Lam walked back into the shop. Reached into Quynh’s bag and pulled out her car key.

Van raised her eyes in harsh, but silent warning to Lam. Lam narrowed her eyes at Van.

“I’ll be right back.”

Lam adjusted the back mirror, the side mirrors, and the seat so that it was closer to the pedals, and then she peeled out of the shopping center parking lot and down Capital. She turned up Penitencia Creek Road, and wound about for several minutes leaving civilization, and climbing a small hill into the wooded entrance to Alum Rock Park.

She took Lynn here as a child. They would catch tadpoles in the creeks, go on hikes and picnics. The park was big, too big to look for Lynn. She drove up to the kiosk at the entrance, but since it was a weekday, the kiosk was unmanned. Lam pulled out her phone but got no reception at the Park.

A car beeped from behind her, and she let it pass. Then she started up the road again, into the park.

The speed limit read 15 miles per hour, but she needed to save Lynn; Lam was pulling near twenty five miles per hour. Of all the places to need to drive, this one was probably the most dangerous, the road winds around blind bends, and trails dump women with strollers and bicyclists right into the middle of the street that is not wide enough for both. Lam turned and twisted around squirrels and joggers, and then slammed her brakes when she saw Lynn in the middle of the road waving her down.

Lynn ran around to the passenger side of the car.

“Drive. Drive. Drive.”

Lam stopped the car in the middle of the road.

“Tell me what is happening.”

Tears smudged Lynn’s makeup. There was a scratch on her cheek and shoulder had a purple stain of bruise.

“Please drive. Please just drive.”

Lynn held her stomach and threw her body forward, both hiding from something and preventing herself from hurling.

Lam drove forward deeper into the park.

“What are you doing? We have to get out of here. Now.”

Lynn sat up and directed her mother to make a U-turn and speed down the hill.

Lam kept checking her back and side mirrors for the daemon that was chasing her daughter, but she didn't see anything.

Lynn ducked down in the car.

“Where should we go, Lynn?”

“Somewhere, no one can find me.”

“Lynn, I borrowed this car. It's Quynh's. I have to go back there.”

“Perfect. No one will look for me there.”

Thi

Diem had a plan. It was in her eyes all day in class. Thi could see from across the classroom that Diem was staring at her. Diem was up to something. On the way out to exercises, Diem bumped Thi and said matter-of-factly, "Meet me after school."

Not again. Diem's parents were very lax with her, that or they just didn't expect much. She did not have the responsibility that Thi had. And Thi was annoyed with Diem for that.

After school Diem was waiting for Thi at the entrance to their foot path. She was about to burst with her big secrets.

"Tell your parents you need to go to town with me on Sunday."

"No. Why?"

"I have an address of a man who helps girls go to American and be rich."

"Where did you get it?"

"Never mind where."

"No. They won't let me go."

"Tell them we need to get supplies for school."

"Supplies you get in the village."

"Tell them we need something, anything. A dress, a book, a special book."

"Where did you get the address?"

"A man passing through the village at the market heard me talking all about America and gave me the address. There. Now you have to come with me. I already

told my parents that you wanted a dress in town, and you could only go if I went with you.”

“And they believed you?”

“Of course. Would I lie?”

Thi couldn't believe that she would ask. She now would lie, and she did not like to lie.

“I'll ask.”

“Oh. And bring money for your special dress my mom will ask about it, and I'll need to describe it to her.”

“Then you bring money for my special book. My mom will want to see that.”

Thi hurried down the path and away from Diem who would stroll and stop and chat, and take her time avoid being delegated responsibilities in this round about way.

Thi imagined her mother's response to the request to go to town. She would have to plan when she asked her. Of course she could not come home late again and expect a reward. She would have to work extra hard. Thi plotted the extra chores she would do. She would have to do double chores in order to get the day off to go to town.

Thi pushed open the bamboo door and saw her mother had set out vegetables for her to chop and prep for dinner. Thi slipped into the kitchen beside her mother and began to prepare the food. She cleaned the stalks using minimum water, stripped them, and cut thin slices. They would have vegetables and rice. Thi boiled the water and placed the diced vegetables into the brew.

She wiped her hands and took a load of laundry outside to wash.

“Laundry and cooking at the same time?” questioned her mother.

“Yes.”

“First one, then the other.”

“Here.” Thi’s mother took her arm and brought her back to the vegetable broth.

“You need to watch the water. You need to see it change and adjust the heat and add water when the bubbles are too high and add heat when they die down again. When you cook. Just cook.”

Thi’s plans were falling through. Her mother calmly and sedately stirred the vegetables and added spices and herbs to the mixture, as if the mixture was telling her when to do so. She could read the water.

Thi was transfixed by her mother’s study of the food. Her mother worked so hard for the smallest things. Not that dinner was a small thing, but sometimes that was her purpose, that she had brought the dinner to the family. And that job was enough to make her take it seriously and be contented by her purpose.

“Are you happy?” Thi blurted and then became embarrassed by the boldness of the question.

“Why shouldn’t I be?” Her mother looked quizzically at Thi. “We do not have a lot, but we have enough.”

This was true. There was always enough vegetables picked from the garden, always enough cloth to make the shirt, not like the dresses in town, but simple and enough to keep skin from sun.

“Thi. Do not look for happy. You won’t find it if you look for it.”

What a horrible and ugly thing to say, that Thi can't find happiness.

"It's like rainbows. You can't get any closer than you already are."

Thi sank into a chair set next to the table. But she had already started to look for it. And discovered that it was not where she is now.

"I need to get the water."

"No. I told you. Watch the water when you cook."

"But you are cooking, now."

"No, I am teaching you how to cook."

"I already know how to cook."

"Not everything."

Yes, everything. Thi had picked, cleaned, chopped, diced, stewed the same vegetables a thousand times before all the same and all always under the gaze of her mother's eyes. And tonight, of all nights, was the day she would get the formal lesson.

Her mother raised her eye while stirring and watched Thi sulk in the chair. Her mother knew there was something Thi wanted. You can only feel that disappointed and dissatisfied when you want something and are afraid you will not get it. Her mother knew from the way that Thi rushed around the kitchen and tried to do her chores sloppily in double time. Something in Thi was changed. First you watch the water and learn its lessons, and then you see the water in other things, in food, in the air, in Thi as she stirs about unsettled by the calm surrounding her.

Thi, like a wave, erupted again against her mother, who was the earth.

"Can I go to town with Diem?" Thi did not lie.

“What does Diem want in town?” Studying the waters.

“She wants to see things that you can only see in town. She mentioned dresses and books. Books the village doesn’t have, for school.”

“Diem wants books for school?” The mother raised an eyebrow scanning again the waters.

“No. But she said that I might like the books in town. That I might not like to see dresses, that I would like the books more.”

Water can be contained sometimes, most of the time, but not for all time. Mothers will carry as best they can, for as long as they can. But the tricky sun can tempt the water, call to it, to change, to join him. And the tricky sun will let the water go somewhere else. Sometimes as ice, or cloud, or rain. Water can be contained, sometimes, but not all of the time. And something had tempted Thi. She was stirring, bubbling, and changing. If her mother were to cover the boiling water, it would bubble over or explode the clay pot. The best thing to do was to add more vegetables and turn down the heat.

“If you take your sister.”

Thi considered the proposition. Diem would not like this and not understand that it was the only way. And knowing mother, it was really the only way.

“Thank you, Mother.”

“When will you go?”

“This Sunday.”

“I will give you a list of things that I would like and some money. If you get my things and there is change, you may also buy the book.”

“Thank you, Mother.”

Her mother moved away from the pot and motioned for Thi to take over. She read the bubbles, stirred the vegetables, and when the colors had changed and slightly yellowed, and when the vegetables were soft like rubber, she announced to her mother that the job was done.

Her mother peered into the pot, wafted the smoke towards her nose, and closed her eyes.

“Are you sure?”

Thi copied the motions of her mother and noticed that there was a sour smell. She added a few drops of fruit nectar to the pot to sweeten the stew. She wafted and looked to her mother for counsel.

“Now it is ready.”

“Now it is ready.”

The smell leaked out of the kitchen window and summoned the children who were tending the garden. The smell wrapped into the other rooms and brought out grandmother, and when the first bowl was poured, father walked in the front door home from work and sat down to his meal and family.

After dinner Thi brought in water from the well, cleaned the bowls and kitchen, and sat up to do some of her schoolwork before bed.

When Sunday came, her mother handed Thi the list: cans of fruits and vegetables Thi had never eaten, colored threads, and a newspaper. Attached to the list was the money she would need.

Minh, Thi's little sister, wore her best dress and combed her hair down with water and a bit of wax. Thi smiled to see her sister so excited for the trip.

Thi and Minh walked a few houses down to Diem's house. She was not yet up.

"I heard you want a special dress," Diem's mother asked.

"Well, the dress is for my sister. I want to look at books."

Minh smiled so excited at the thought that she would now be getting a dress. Thi regretted the lie that would only disappoint Minh later.

Diem appeared in the hallway in her night dress, her hair a matted mess, and her face puffy and red.

"You are here already?"

Already? Thi had woken up, tended the gardens, brought in water, fed the chickens, bathed and dressed.

"Yes. We are ready."

Minh and Thi waited while Diem ate and tried on various outfits, matted down her hair, and begged her mother for more money that she had already begged her for.

Once Diem was completely ready, most of the morning was gone. It was now approaching afternoon. This was not good—they would have less time in town.

The three walked to the village and Minh asked questions about town, the things they would see, the stores, the jobs that town people have.

“When I grow up, I will live in town,” Minh announced.

“Don’t tell that to mother,” Thi replied.

“Mother used to live in town,” Minh said.

“Why did you say that? No she didn’t.”

“Yes she did. Ask her.”

To think of it, Thi was afraid to ask mother about most things, assuming she would already know mother’s answer. If mother lived in town, Thi certainly would have known. What Minh said was some sort of child fantasy or invention.

“She worked in a factory, a sewing factory.”

Diem’s interested peaked.

“Minh, if your mother lived in town, why did she leave town?”

“She met a man in town and fell in love, and they moved to the country to have children and a farm, and a garden; and it was a dream come true, and town made her sad, but the farm and garden and babies, Thi and me made her so happy. She hated the town. It was an evil town. Something bad happened in the town when she was there. Something very, very bad.”

“What happened, Minh?” Diem was red eared and holding Minh’s hand as they invented Thi’s mother’s story.

“Bad men came.”

“Of course the war. But that would mean that she lived in town many years ago.”

Thi began to worry that if this was true, Diem should not be hearing about it. She decided to change the subject.

“Diem you’ve been to town. What do you like to see in town?”

“Mainly, I like the candies and the boys.”

Minh giggled. She was too young to like to boys thought Thi.

The three arrived in the village and waited for a cart to take them out to town.

They paid a man some of their money and sat on the back of his cart. He took them to a bigger village that would have a bus come by in the hour.

The three sat and Thi took some fruit out of her pack and passed it out to the girls. Diem greedily ate the fruit and tossed the pit into the dirt. Thi and Minh savored their pieces and sucked on the juices until the bus came.

The girls entered the bus and moved towards the back and sat down almost on top of each other. That was the only way because the bus was crowded with men from villages going to town to sell things and a few women sent as delegates with supply lists from other families. Villagers had large baskets and bags. Some even had a few animals with them, seated next to them or in their laps.

One man on the bus wore a suit and kept his body pressed towards the window and away from the other people around him.

“Look,” Minh pointed at the man. “Will they all look like that in town?”

“What do you think? This whole bus is going to town?” Thi asked sharply.

“They all look like that in America,” Diem said. “The man who told me about the place we are going looked like him.”

“What man?” Minh asked.

Thi suddenly felt flush. She was not sure how she would divert Minh's attention when Diem went to see the men. She would have to stay with Minh, but Diem would tell her everything she was sure. Maybe when Diem talked to the men, Thi could do her mother's shopping.

"Diem met a man from town, and he told her about town. That's what made her want to go."

Diem was dumb at most things, but good at lying and caught on quick.

"Yes. I want him to be my husband."

The bus traveled through farms, forests, across lakes, over bridges, and would drop off villagers, and pick up villagers, and bump and crawl along the single paved road. Minh rested her head on Thi's shoulder, and Diem rested her head against the window. The two girls fell asleep, leaving Thi to watch for the exit.

The bus came to a stop, and everyone piled out onto a paved street. The streets were crowded with people and tents selling fruits, baskets, jewelry, and drinks. Behind the tented boutiques, a two-story stucco building invited customers with its pretty printed signs. Diem unfolded an address from her pocket, and asked the bus driver for directions before he pulled away.

"Minh, Diem has to do an errand first. While she does her errand, we can look around in stores. But first we need to find an address."

"You're not coming?" Diem snapped at Thi.

Thi widened her eyes and looked to her sister and then back to Diem.

"Can't we take turns or something?" Thi whispered.

“Fine. We’ll figure it out when we get there.”

Diem led the pack past the vendors and general stores to an unmarked building.

“This is the address.”

Thi looked around and spotted a grocery store.

“I’ll be in there. Come and get me after, and I’ll go too.”

Diem nodded and ran up a flight of stairs, leaving Thi and Minh alone in the town.

Thi crossed the street, unfolded her list, and began her mother’s shopping. Minh wandered up and down the aisles of the store picking up things and putting them down until she was reprimanded by the owner for touching things. From then on, she hid behind Thi until Thi finished up the shopping. After paying the owner, Thi had quite a sum of money left.

“Maybe we can get you a dress after all.”

Minh’s eyes lit up.

“But not here, right?” Minh questioned still hiding from the owner behind Thi.

The sisters stood outside, and Thi studied the sun. They had been in the store a while.

“We should wait for Diem.”

“Where did she go?”

“She had an appointment to talk to the business man,” Thi answered honestly.

“About what?”

“About an opportunity.”

“Oh”

“Are you going to talk to the man about an opportunity?”

“Maybe. Just for a minute.”

“Can I go with you?”

“No.”

“Why?”

Diem popped out of the door ecstatic, practically floating.

“What happened?”

“Well they said— wait. Shouldn’t we go to a candy store or something?” Diem eyed Minh.

“Or a dress store?” Minh asked.

“Should I go?” Thi questioned.

“Yes. But just for a minute. I asked a lot of questions. They just want to see you for a minute. To see if it will be a good fit.”

“Oh. Was the errand for a special dress?” Minh figured.

“Yes. Thi has to see if the special dress fits,” Diem lied.

“Can I see the special dress on Thi?” Minh pleaded.

“No. You will see a special dress on Minh,” Diem joked and pulled Minh down the street. “Come and find us when you are done trying on your dress.”

Thi watched the two disappear into the busy streets, and she opened the unmarked door to climb the stairs.

Perkins

“When did you start letting yourself go? How old do you think you were?” asked Tommy, a boy required to spend time in the Common Room. He needed a certain amount of community service for what he would not say.

Perkins snapped one eye open. “I haven’t let go.” Then she rested her eye behind the lid.

“Well, your looks then. When did you stop caring about them?”

“What the hell are you talking about? Let my looks go? I should slap you for your mouth.” Perkins had both eyes now pointed on the boy, and her body was falling forward towards him.

“I’m being serious. When did you all start looking old? Was it forty? Fifty? Or does it all hit when you are, like, 70? How old are you anyway—80?”

“Eighty-six. And if you look half as good as I look at eighty-six you’ll smack yourself for being a little ass.”

One of the attendants caught Perkins berating the boy and came to shush her.

“Perkins, honey, he’s just a volunteer. Isn’t it nice that he came to spend time with you? You should be nice to him. He’s being such a sweet kid to you all.” The nurse rubbed Perkins’ arm, patted Tommy, and walked off.

Dolly, a woman who lost her voice (and everyone assumed also her senses), groaned loudly in protest of the attendant and in support of Perkins.

“Thank you, Dolly. And as for you, wise guy. You best keep your mouth shut. If I do smack you, they’ll just sedate me a little, and I’m fine with that.”

The boy found picking on the seniors far more amusing than reading to one of them, or, God forbid, doing dishes. Maybe they'd let him call out the bingo numbers again. Sometimes he would do it wrong on purpose just to cause a real stir. S 11. There's no S 11. Sure there is. And they would study their cards checking. That's when he was new. The kid had about 100 hours left, and some made it their personal goal to outlive his time here. One hundred hours at one or two a day seemed like infinity.

"What's wrong with your eye, by the way?" asked Tommy.

"It don't work is all."

"Does the other one work?"

"Why sure, that's how I know you're so ugly." She snapped her good eye open at him. "It hurts to even look at you." Then she let it roll back in her head but kept it open just long enough to see Tommy's face tighten white and scared.

"Is the other one going to stop working too?" Tommy asked seriously.

"Yes. Soon."

"Are you afraid?"

"No. I won't have to see you anymore. That's something to look forward to."

"When you were a kid, were you afraid of getting old?"

"No. I don't suppose I thought much about it."

"Well, when you got old, were you afraid of being old?"

"Tell you what. When you're old, you're not old. Old always seems like a bit older. I am eighty-six, which is old, but ninety-six, now, that is old."

"Well is it scary?"

“No, honey. It’s all right. I’m tired is all.”

He wanted to ask her more about death. Was she afraid of dying? He was afraid of dying, but maybe when you are old you get used to it. Maybe you see it’s coming and get stronger.

“What do you think happens when you die?”

“Well, don’t the angels come and get you and take you up to the castle in the sky?”

“Do you really think that?”

“No. Plus, I haven’t been that good, if that is all true. I’ll get the other place. I’ll be in there with Art and we’ll be chasing each other around with pitch forks laughing at how ugly we is to each other, and to tell you the God’s honest truth. I prefer that version.”

“Art’s your husband.”

“A long time ago. He passed.”

“So you really think he is waiting around for you with a pitch fork.”

“No.”

“Then what do you think really happens?”

“Nothing. I think you’re dead, and that’s it. You’re just dead. You stop being.”

“Does that scare you?”

“It used to.”

“I’m tired. It was all right talking to you. You’re a pistol you know that?”

Carla came by and patted Perkins again, “Nice to see you getting along with our little helper.”

“Yeah. He’s just cheering everyone right up,” Perkins popped her eye open to check how her joke landed.

Tommy gave her a pained smile as though it was uncomfortable for him to look at her.

Perkins didn’t let herself go. She’d been leaving herself, and the way that works is you lose yourself from the inside out. The better you keep yourself the harder it is to lose yourself. And there was no reversing the past. Hindsight’s twenty-twenty, and Art shouldn’t have smoked.

Carla helped Perkins to her feet and led her out of the library and down the hallway towards her room. Let herself go? The nerve. That kid. Let herself go. Where do kids get off like that? He wasn’t so bad today. He’s just a little scared of all us old fogies. He’s just scared like everyone who is young is scared of not being young, and he’s scared like everyone who is alive is scared to be dead. He’s just a kid. He’s just a scared little kid, acting out. Those teenagers, they don’t know nothing.

Perkins passed Milo in the hall.

“Ms. Perkins,” he said, tipping his hat like a gentleman. “Will you being going on a walk later today?”

“No. I’m going to take a nap.”

“Well, I’ll come see if you want to walk in an hour then. I’ve been trying to find you to ask you all day.”

Carla pushed Perkins passed Milo, who was just standing there and seeming like just standing there was about all the energy he had to do. He stood there poised at his door so that the two women would not see him limp along and stumble as his legs tried to carry what was left of him down the hall.

Carla pulled down the bed sheet. Perkins sat down and removed her shoes.

“There you go. Want me to tell Milo not to come on by like he said? I can take him to the library, give Tommy something to do.”

“No, honey. I don’t care whatever Milo does. I’ll go on a little walk if that’s what he wants.

Perkins drifted off and then back with a rapping at the door. Jesus Christ, I just sat down. Perkins looked at the clock and an hour had passed. She pulled her body up in bed, dropped her legs down, and walking on thick ankles to the door.

Milo stood there with his bathrobe on, smiling widely like he had had a drink or three.

“What are you so God damn happy about?”

“Our walk.”

“We’ll I’ll have to put on my shoes. Hold on a minute.”

“Oh. I didn’t think you’d wear your shoes.”

“Why wouldn’t I wear my shoes?”

“The other day. Remember how you were walking the other day?”

Perkins could not remember the other day.

“You didn’t wear your clothes.”

“Why the hell would I walk around without my clothes?”

“I don’t know why the hell you did it. But I thought it was a good idea since the moment I seen you do it.”

Milo opened his robe and let Perkins peeked inside at his droopy and naked body. What was left of his genitals resembled the hooked body of a petite shrimp.

If Tommy only knew what was coming for him.

“Milo you are crazy if you think I’m walking around naked with you in the hallways. I’m gonna call security right now. They’ll get a kick out of this one.”

“Perkins, I have not lost my mind. You have lost yours. This is the best idea we had all year. Think about how wild it will feel!”

Letting go was not always a bad thing. Sometimes it is better not to know what happens when you die or what will happen if you do something harmless and insane. Sometimes when you can’t see anything, you can finally see everything. That what is right and wrong is not always right and wrong, all of the time. And to walk around with Milo naked would be wild, would be insane, would be the most alive thing she had done all day, all year, and would require her to completely and utterly let go.

“Oh, fine.”

Perkins unsnapped the front of her dress, Milo shifted his weight around, excited. She sat on the bed and pulled down her underwear and sock, and Milo had to help her unhook her bra.

His hands shook. You would think they were going to do something other than flash a bunch of nurses and senile residents. You would think he was sixteen and hadn't unhooked a bra the way his hands shook.

"I can't see the hinges." He twisted at the white satin. "God damn they make these things even more technical these days." Neither thought they would be doing this, teaching each other how to undress each other, not at eighty-six. At eighty-six you don't think your days will have many firsts left in them, but here they were, unhooking her bra, for the first time. Finally, he got it, and the thing slide off.

She stood up and tried to open both her eyes. They sort of rolled around in place, and she saw her body briefly in the mirror. It was how she thought it looked, but to Milo it looked beautiful. A woman's skin, no matter how sagged or elongated in unwanted places, would always look beautiful to him, now more than ever. His body looked the way it always looked not-good-enough.

Her one eye rolled up in her head, and she kept the good one open. He took her by the arm, and they entered the hallway slow and steady, leaning on each other. Milo's steps were smaller than Perkins'. She just rested in between steps and stood proudly.

In her youth, Perkins had been naked with strangers before and after Art. Naked with Art, was like naked in the bathroom naked; it didn't feel naked at all. But being naked with the others embarrassed Perkins. They might notice some small imperfection, and focus in on it, and that imperfection would outweigh any part of her worth seeing. And then there was shame. Naked was wrong, wasn't it?

But Perkins was no longer embarrassed because she didn't care what Carla saw. The nurse had scrubbed under her bosoms and thighs anyways and had already seen everything. And if Tommy saw he would know that Perkins was still very much alive. And if the other residents saw, they wouldn't remember.

Milo's face was plastered with a drunkard's smile. His eyes were all lines and creases, crunched up by the lift of his cheek and the rise of his grin. He walked fast for Milo, stepping with alternating feet, not dragging his toes. Each body equally supported the other.

Dolly rounded the corner and caught sight of the two nudists. Her eyes widened, and she stopped in her tracks to make sure that what she was seeing was what she was seeing.

"Good evening there Dolly," Milo said.

Perkins checked with her good eyes, "Oh, hello there Dolly."

Dolly just stood frozen in place, and when the two passed, she turned to watch their sagging behinds sway down the rest of the hall. Dolly then smiled, and let out a little giggle.

"See you around, Dolly," Milo shouted out to answer the giggle.

Next, Carla walked down the hall fast studying a chart. She almost walked into the naked couple. And when she was but a few feet away from them, she looked up and squealed. She felt about her waist for her walkie talkie to report this and call for back up before it was needed and found that she had lost her radio. She dropped her chart. The two broke arm contact and just walked around the nurse who was now on the floor

picking up the loose paper of the file she had dropped. The two pretended not to see her. Carla grabbed the papers and ran back to face the couple.

“Stop it right there.”

“Hello, Carla,” Milo said.

“What are you to doing?”

“Walking,” answered Perkins.

“Naked?”

“Oh. We are naked. How embarrassing. Milo did you notice we were naked?”

“Oh, heck. We must have forgotten to get dressed before we went on our walk.”

“Like hell you forgot to get dressed.”

A hallway door swung open, and a little woman with rattling teeth began laughing hysterically. Another door flung open, and the laughter was joined. More doors were opening and people were walking out into the hallway.

This made Carla very nervous. She had lost control. What if they rioted against her? What if they all took off their clothes? What if she got in trouble for not having her walkie talkie and some of them had sex?

“Wait here.”

Carla walked into the nearest room and pushed an emergency help button on a cord near a bed. Surely Carlos and Juan would be up here soon, and they could escort everyone back to their rooms while Carla found her walkie talkie and reported the situation.

Several of the residents began pacing slowly up and down the halls. Some were laughing, others were talking to themselves. Carla began pushing residents back into their rooms, while Milo walked Perkins back to hers.

“Thank you for the lovely walk.” Milo’s eyes looked like a teenager with a crush.

“You’re welcome.” Perkins was shocked that at this age, in this saggy skin, in this insane asylum, with no eyes, no teeth, no memory, she could still have this effect on a man. She still had it after all.

“We’ll have to do this again some time.” Milo stood lingering at the door, not ready for this to be the end.

Perkins stood with her eyes closed, smiling, and then when she opened her eyes Milo was being escorted away from her room by Juan and Carlos. Carla was running towards Perkins room with another female nurse. Perkins slammed the door and shut her eyes.

Part Five

Quynh

Quynh sliced the end of the new thick brown envelope open with a pair of metal nail files. She removed three forms and a return envelope. Attached was a checklist. She scanned the document for words she had feared to stand out, and then handed it to Truong.

“Tell me.”

“You can read. Why me tell you?”

“I get too nervous. Just tell me.”

“Okay.” Truong flipped through the paper glancing at the tops and bottoms. Then said, “It say send in \$150.” Then Truong began to fold up the papers and hand them back to Quynh.

“No. What else does it say?”

Truong unfolded the paper again and lied, “Quynh is super duper beautiful. Send in \$150.”

“Bah.”

Quynh snatched the papers back from Truong, hit him with them, and then rounded back to her own station to dig for her reading glasses.

She adjusted the drug store glasses, and with her mouth partially open, scanned the document.

“Here,” Quynh pointed to Truong. “See you didn’t read the bad parts.”

“No Quynh I read the facts parts. You owe them money. They will always find something wrong. You can’t fix that. It’s how the system works. You could go around

the shop a million times and make it perfect, and they will always find one or two things, so that they can collect their money. You are lucky it is only \$150. You hit the man.

Quynh you are lucky we are here.”

“Lucky or no lucky. We are here. People taking your money just to take your money is not why we came here, Throng. I don’t like it.”

“What are you going to do about it?”

“Nothing.”

“Quynh, they could have closed the shop. Some of the tools they found are illegal. The poisons were still improperly labeled, and the tools were improperly cleaned.”

“The tools, that was bad. Thi didn’t know. She isn’t used to things still. The poisons, that was because I gave the job I should have done myself to Lam. The tools, in order to clean the tools properly, we would have to charge twenty dollars extra just to pay for the equipment. Not possible.”

“I know Quynh. That’s why we just pay the money and be happy we don’t need a new sink, or pipe, or machine this time.”

“Bah,” Quynh circled the shop with her hands on her hips, ready to point to Thi for not knowing, or Lam for not caring, or Van for not reacting. Or she could point at herself.

Quynh took her check book and scratched away a check for \$150, sealed it into the return envelope, and licked it shut. Maybe this is not the worst thing that could happen. Maybe this is just another thing that happened.

“You can’t fix everything.” Truong repeated filing away the papers, scratching and reentering the women’s names in the schedule. “Concentrate on the things that you can fix.”

Kimie

At the quinceañera, Kimie watched the boys her cousin had picked to be her chamberlains dance in their princely suits, tight pants, ruffled shirts, all matching, all the same. She wondered if a life with any of these boys would be more satisfying. She looked at the men at the tables sitting and sipping their drinks, talking to each other or letting their wives talk to them in long endless streams of tape. Would these boys with their nimble jumping legs, turn into these men with their pants too tight pants, arms crossed against their wives? Would she turn into the women posted at the tables with big noses too tired to dance? Would she want these children running wild around under the tables? Was this what her mother wanted for her?

One of the chamberlains crossed all of the folding tables, to Kimie's section of the room. He bowed when he asked her to dance. She let him hold her hand and lead her weaving through the elaborately decorated folding chairs and tables, in the dance hall to the wooden and smoothed dance floor aglow with the lights of the chandelier.

He bowed to her again. And like in a dream where she played a princess, she curtsied back. He held her waist loosely with both hands. She locked her fingers behind his neck. The song was a slow one, and their feet moved clock-wise, spinning their bodies in tight, but slow circles. The boy's eyes looked past Kimie's, even when he spoke.

"What is your name?"

"Kimberly."

"I'm Mark."

“Oh.” Was all Kimmie could think to say.

“She’s my cousin.”

“She’s my cousin too.”

“She must be your cousin on her mom’s side, or we’re related,” the boy looked down at Kimmie. His eyes meet hers but there was no connection. She could see herself in his eyes, like little mirrors, but she could not see him. He looked away quickly.

The boy was long and boney. His features were sharp. He spoke with a bit of an accent which made Kimmie think of him as a little funny. This boy must be from Mexico she decided. That made him only a tad mysterious, but mostly strange.

When the song ended, the boy bowed again, and excused himself, leaving Kimmie alone on the dance floor. For a moment she felt rejected by this boy whose eyes she couldn’t see. Then a younger pudgier boy with an identical outfit took up Kimmie’s arms and immediately began bouncing to the now upbeat song. Kimmie bounced back for a moment, but then excused herself.

The night was a series of awkward bouncing with ugly boys in uniforms, and even more awkward conversations with adults who wanted to know everything, and Kimmie was not sure about anything. They wanted to know about her father, her mother, her sister, her nephews. They did not ask about Kimmie. How she was doing in school, or where she went to school, or what she would do over the summer, or where she was working. Better that they didn’t ask this. She would have to lie.

Kimmmie stayed away from her cousin Vivianna. They didn't really get along. She didn't want her cousin to see her in her dress and comment on how pretty she looked and lie, and she didn't want to have to tell her cousin how pretty she looked and lie.

A circle of females surrounded Vivianna, as though to contrast Vivianna's dazzling dress and eyes. She had handpicked her ugliest friends to stand next to her and make her seem all the more beautiful.

Like a magnet, Kimmmie stayed repelled from her cousin and the other girls. Her mother, at some point, forced her to break her force field and dragged her by the arm up to her cousin. Vivianna smiled with her teeth and told Kimmmie thank you for coming, and warned her with her eyes to stay away from the chamberlains. Kimmmie smiled at the thought that this parade of monkeys was all designed for this spoiled, spoiled girl. She can have her ugly groupies, awkward chamberlains, chandeliers, and be Cinderella for a day. She could have it. For such a price.

"One more thing," Vivianna floated in her princess dress up to Kimmmie, as though in a dream. "You disgrace us."

Kimmmie's felt heat in her cheeks and was tempted to slap that brat, but kept her cool. She turned her back to her cousin and began to walk away.

"Everybody knows," Vivianna called out, taunting Kimmmie.

Everybody knows that Vivianna is straight from Mexico? That if she dated a gang member he would be the other color. Everybody knows what? Nobody knows... what it is to love and love and love.

When the night came to a close, Kimmie checked her phone: No texts from Mario—that and it was three in the morning, not twelve like she promised. When they rounded in their minivan into the driveway, she thought she saw him in the bushes, but when she popped out to look for him, nothing but a cat.

She kicked off the too-big heels, peeled the dress off her body, and began to unpin her hair. Although it was three in the morning, she was still waiting for a text, a sign that he had waited and was mad, or a good night, or something sexier.

She slipped into bed and clutched her phone to her chest waiting for it to vibrate. Suddenly she felt guilty that she had not been home by midnight like she said. She wondered if he had waited. She painted a picture of him waiting with the flowers in one of the chamberlains' suits, telling her that he had stopped his gang life, and when they went to college it would have to be far away so that no one would ever find him, and they would be safe. She replayed the fantasy of the rest of their lives, and when she got to the end, she replayed it back from the beginning, adding details, the colors of the walls in their house, the names of their children. She held her phone waiting and waiting and waiting.

Lam

“No. No. No. No. No.” Quynh shook her head at Lam.

“Just for today.”

“Isn’t today a school day? Shouldn’t you be in school?” Quynh pointed her questions now at Lynn, whose head bowed to Quynh and did not make eye contact.

“It’s summer. No school.”

“What about summer school? Shouldn’t you be in summer school?”

“No. I did not register her in summer school,” Lam lied.

“Well. I tell you this Lynn. You do well in school or you do nails. You like fat ugly toes? You like to go like this, and scrub feet all day? You like to wash feet Lynn? You mess up in school, you wash feet all day. Want to wax a toe? You like school or toes?”

Lynn kept her head down.

“I don’t care anymore. Fine. She can stay. I have to go pick something up.”

Quynh pulled her purse out from under her station and walked out the door.

A small smiled crept across Van’s face.

“You think she’ll need her keys?” Van whispered to Lam.

Lam pulled the keys out of her pocket then tossed them on the ground near Quynh’s station.

“You’re not going to hand them to her?”

“No. Then she will know.”

“And if you hide them from her, she will not know?”

“Yes.”

Van smiled, amused. A few seconds later Quynh returned to the shop, swung the door open, and announced, “My car— stolen.”

Her face was white and sweaty; and her eyes like a blowfish popping.

“You didn’t put her car in the same spot?” Van said under her breath.

“No. It was taken. I didn’t remember where it was.”

“Where did you park it?”

“Just a few spaces, maybe a couple spaces over.”

“How many spaces over?”

“Just a couple or a few, or a row or two. I don’t remember.”

“And you don’t want to come clean now?”

“No. I’m not going to tell you. And you don’t tell her either. She’ll look for it more, and find it; then think she parked it over there.”

Quynh did not even realize that her keys were missing, she was aghast in the reveal that her car was gone.

“I don’t understand who would steal my ugly truck. Why?” She buried her head in her hands and just stayed like that a few minutes.

“I’ll call the cops,” Quynh decided.

Lynn shot a look at her mother begging her to admit their lie. Van just raised her brows smiling that the whole fiasco would become a lot more interesting.

“911. My car has been stolen. Toyota pick-up. 1990. Yellow. Capital and Story shopping center. Thank you. My number, yes. I give you the shore number. Yes. Nail

Salon. Here is the number. Insurance? I don't know. No. I don't know. I will check. I don't know."

Lam and Van stepped outside to discuss the situation.

"If I tell her I borrowed car, I am fired. If cops find car and she thinks I stole it, fired."

"Where is her car? Point it to me."

"It's there." Lam pointed to the back of the parking lot.

"She always parks it in the same spot. Why would you park there?"

"The spot was filled. I wasn't thinking."

"Let me think."

Inside the shop the cops returned Quynh's call. The car, they said, was parked in the parking lot of her place of business. Is she sure the car was stolen? Could she have forgotten where she parked? They were not going to investigate any further.

Quynh ran out of the shop past Lam and Van.

"Where is it? Do you see it where?"

Lam guilty pointed towards the car, and Quynh ran to it; then she rummaged through her purse looking for the keys.

"Ah ha. Proof that the car was stolen. I don't have my keys!"

As Quynh was walking back towards the shop, Lynn stepped outside holding the keys, "It was me. I moved your car."

"Why? You don't even drive. Why move it from there to there?"

"I saw your keys and moved your car," Lynn lied.

“See. You cannot be here. You are trouble. Trouble. Trouble.”

“Actually. There were birds shitting on your car where you parked, so I moved the car so that it would not be under a nest of crappy birds.”

Lynn pointed to a small white splotch of fresh bird droppings. Quynh inspected this and then Lynn’s face.

“You see how your daughter is Lam. Get her out of here.”

Lam and Lynn walked down Capitol and towards their crowded apartment.

“Thank you, Lynn.”

“No. Thank you, Mom. You have to put up with her every day. I can’t believe you stole her car. That is so bad. Mom, worse than me,” Lynn smiled.

“What trouble were you in?”

Lynn, who moments before was so proud and happy with her mother, more so than she had been since she was a child, changed back into teenager Lynn who wouldn’t let her mother in.

“It was nothing.”

“Nothing almost got us both arrested. Hello. I am a car thief for your getaway.”

“You wouldn’t understand.”

“I can’t understand what you do not tell me.”

The two walked in silence back to the house, a tension building between them. When they got to the house, Lynn went straight into her room and closed the door. She put on her headphones, turned on the computer, and plugged in to a world other than the one surrounding her.

Lam pulled shirts off the floor, rummaged through the refrigerator, but then decided to do something different. She tapped on Lynn's door announced that she ordered out special. When the pizza came, Lam knocked on Lynn's door, but Lynn said through the closed door that she wasn't hungry. Lam just stood there with the cardboard box.

Miriam

Miriam stood in the mirror attempting to button a black pencil shirt, failing. She hadn't worked for close to five years—in five years a lot had changed. She put the skirt in the when-lose-ten-pounds pile and reached for a brown pair of slacks. The buttons touched, but did not snap, so she peeled these off, and they went in the pile too. She'd have to go shopping.

If she was going to get the job, she'd have to look less like a mom and more like a professional.

“Mommy,” Kyra called from the bathroom. “Can you help me?”

Miriam arrived at the scene. Five-year old Kyra had tried to wipe her butt this time, but clogged the toilet and got poop on her hand. Miriam was half in a pair of black slacks that almost fit, when Kyra pulled on the leg of the pants with the poop hand.

Miriam sighed deeply. Typical.

Miriam first tackled Kyra's hand, holding it at the wrist, and moving it to the sink so it couldn't do any more damage. She swiped the rest of the poop off Kyra's butt and pulled all of Kyra's clothes off so that the poop could not spread. Then Miriam began to dab at the poop stain on her own clothes, noticed she had poop on her own hand, washed it and took off her pants.

She remained calm because this was not the first or second or third time this had happened. When your child makes a mess, you do not yell, you just help each other clean up the mess, and when it is all over, and there is no stress, you discuss what caused the

mess. Miriam had got this bit from the family counselor she saw last year, when she almost lost her mind from apple juice in an Apple.

All of the poop clothes were in one pile, and now Miriam could attack the toilet with the plunger. She placed the suction over the hole, gave three hard pumps, and all was well. Miriam instructed Kyra to stay put while she sprayed the clothes and started the wash. Then Miriam picked up Kyra and began to walk upstairs, since the downstairs bathroom only had a toilet. Kyra was going to need a bubble bath. So was Miriam.

Rambo, the terrier, began to bark indicating that the mailman was near. Kyle, who was only exploring the source of the bark, decided to open the front door wide, and in doing so, exposed his half dressed mother to the Fed Ex man standing at the door poised for a signature.

“Kid, is your mom home?”

“Mommy!”

The man followed Kyle’s gaze down the hallway to Miriam holding her naked child wearing nothing herself but panties and a white collared work shirt.

“Excuse me, Ma’am,” said the deliveryman quickly diverting his eyes from Miriam’s thighs. “I’ll just... wait... over here.”

“Kyle!” Miriam screamed in horror.

And then Rambo ran charging from the window in the side room, down the hall and straight out the door and to the Fed Ex man. Rambo stood there growling and barking.

The man backed away from the house. Rambo followed him.

Miriam grabbed a blanket from the living room, wrapped it around her like a roman empress, and ran outside to retrieve Rambo. Kyra followed her outside crying, mostly from being tired, but partly from no longer being held.

Miriam scooped up the dog.

“I’m sorry. My son shouldn’t have opened the door. We were in the middle of a little emergency.” Miriam blushed apples.

“It’s alright. Should I come back, or do you have a free hand to sign the form?”

Rambo was growling. The barking had calmed down.

“Here. I’ll sign.”

Miriam reached for the form, Rambo lunged out from her grip, and Miriam’s blanket dropped. She reached for the dog without retrieving the sheet and in that moment Rob pulled into the driveway: Miriam was chasing Rambo around the front yard in panties and a white work shirt, the Fed Ex guy was observing simultaneously embarrassed and amused, Kyra was wailing on the porch naked herself, and Kyle was inside hiding.

Rob signed the form, caught the dog, wrapped his coat around Miriam, bid the Fed Ex man goodbye, picked up Kyra and took her to the bathroom, and found Kyle under the kitchen table.

Miriam sat in the downstairs bathroom and cried.

Thi

Thi left in the middle of the night, without any goodbyes. She neatly folded a few shirts, pants, a brush, and her life savings into a satchel. She had nothing else to pack. Diem rapped at the window and crouched in a bush with all of her possessions tied up in three bags.

Thi opened the window and slipped out into the night. It had been planned for weeks, arranged that day in the town. The girls wouldn't need anything. Everything would be taken care of. Just a change of clothes. When they go to America, they will buy everything they need. They will be rich. So said the men in the upstairs apartment downtown, as they smoked long cigarettes that curled their lips and mustaches. The men who crossed their legs when they lied.

The girls took the journey by cart and bus back to town. By the time the sun rose, they were back face to face with the business suited men in the small apartment.

"It has all been arranged," the taller man said to the two girls. "You were told to bring nothing. What is this?"

The tall man motioned to Diem's bags.

"They are my things."

"You won't need things. You will have so many things where you are going. There is no room to take things."

Diem's eyes welled up confused. She couldn't possibly take them back, and it would break her heart to leave them here.

"Are you ready, or are you going to stay with your things?"

Diem bent down to open one of the bags to retrieve a last minute possession. She was struck on the check by the shorter man.

“He said no things.”

Thi backed towards the door, certain now that this was a mistake. Whatever arrangement had been made in her mind was off.

She touched the door knob with her hand behind her back. Still facing the men, she began to turn the handle.

The door opened from behind. A very large bald man entered grinning.

“Lady trouble?” he asked and eyed Thi, who shrank back from the man and into the center of the room.

“You see. I already bought your tickets, and you already signed my papers. You are going to go to America. And you are going to do what I say when you get there. And everything will be fine.” The tall man straightened his suit. The girls ran to each other, leaving their bags by his desk and held each other’s arms.

They were taxied out of town and to the airport. The tall man shoved a ticket into the bald man’s hand and explained that the girls might need some calming down.

The bald man offered the girls a little drink, and the little drink made the girls a little funny. The airport noises and sounds swirled around them. Crowds of people bumped them, but they reacted in slow motion to each push and bump. The girls were guided by the man with his sticky hand pressed into the small of their backs. He would grab and turn their waists, sit them down, pick them up by the arm, and move them about the airport. He even adjusted them into their seats on the plane and secured their belts

across their waists. The girls mostly bobbed their heads with their eyes half open, and occasionally drooled. Sometimes one of them would murmur something to the other, but the other was too far into her slowed world to decipher the message and murmur back.

On the plane the two girls collapsed into each other's laps. Sometimes the bald man would pull their bodies off each other and rest them back into the chairs, only for them to fall again into each other.

The reason no one asked about the girls was because everyone knew about the girls and assumed that even the girls knew about the girls. Strangers would shake their heads, but not protest the scene. Although this was wrong, it was more wrong to stop and protest for the girls. Surely they must have known what they were getting into. Nothing is for free. And America is very expensive.

If one of the girls began to stir, the bald man mixed another drink and poured it into the girl's mouth before she could resist swallowing. Soon the girls were both asleep again. Eighteen hours later the plane landed, and the bald man woke the girls.

"Now, forget the crap back in the town. I'll help you girls out. I just gave you a little something to relax on the flight. How do you feel?"

"Oh. I think I'm alright," Diem answered convinced that whatever happened back in the town was either still part of her dream or on the account of her excessive packing, and not all that bad. Thi, on the other hand, trusted no one and was uneasy with the man.

"And how do you feel?" The man look to Thi.

"Fine," Thi lied.

“That’s good. That’s good. The men can be a little rough back in town. Sometimes things do not go the way they plan, and they get a little angry. Can’t blame them though. Can you?”

“I guess not,” Diem was ready to see the world. To hop off the plane and go straight to Hollywood. “Where are we?”

“We are in California.”

Diem’s eyes lit up. “This is my dream to become an actress.”

The man helped the girls up. They were still a little wobbly.

They exited the plane through the long tubular passage and found themselves in the bright and busy San Francisco airport. English signs and sparkling photographs of coffee, beaches, and women with straight white teeth cluttered the walls. Men in suits passed in every direction, women in heels and suits and heels, and people of sizes clicked and passed and pushed through the international terminal.

The stood in a line with other Vietnamese and were given papers and pictures. They showed the Americans their papers and pictures and purses and passed.

“We need a car,” said the bald man. He led the two women away from the crowds, through the bustle of the airport to a separate section where people waited in lines to fill out more paperwork and rent cars.

“Wait here,” the man instructed and pointed to two chairs in the waiting area.

“I do not trust him. I think they drugged us.”

“Of course they drugged us. It was to make the flight easy. Think how nervous we would have been if they had not drugged us.”

“That is no excuse. Do you know where he is taking us?”

“No.”

“You do not wonder where he is taking us?”

“He said it would be fine now. He said he is not like the angry men.”

Thi sat back in her chair and crossed her arms. Diem batted her eyes and watched all the Americans in utter fascination.

“Look at their shoes,” Diem giggled.

Thi looked at their shoes and did not giggle.

“How can the women work in those shoes?”

Thi sat back in her chair and closed her eyes hard to try and figure out what they should do. They were not kidnapped, but where they here legally? She did not know. If she ran from this man, she might end up in a prison, or sent back home, or maybe both. She had better keep quiet.

The bald man returned with car keys and escorted the women into the back of a black van.

“Okay. You are going to need to know a few things. A few rules. You were sponsored to come here by a man named Claude. You cost Claude over ten thousand dollars each. Claude runs a business, and he invites you to work at his business until you have paid him back. At the same time, you will receive some lessons. At the end of the lessons, you have to take a test. You have to pass the test, or you will be sent home or to jail. Do you understand the rules?”

“Yes,” nodded Diem thinking that the game was fair.

“What is the business?” asked Thi.

“You will see when we get there.”

Diem smiled watching out the windows all the glorious American things:
billboards and shops filled with jewels next to shops filled with junk,

Thi saw men peeing in the grey streets, grey rain clouds, and grey cars. Thi did not find American beautiful.

The car pulled up to a tall three story building made of bricks on an empty street. The women followed the man out of the car and up the apartment steps. A large iron gate opened, and they went through the front door.

They walked up a second set of stair cases and approached a woman reclined in a chair. She was Vietnamese too and dressed in a tight red sequenced halter top with black short shorts; her hair straightened, her lips and eyes painted on. She looked like movie stars with her dark makeup; her penciled eye brows exaggerating the arch.

“Where is Claude?” the man asked her.

She did not raise an eye to him and sat on the chair painting her nails.

“I don’t care.”

“Where is he?” the man asked again, his patience strained.

The painted woman uncrossed her legs slowly and sauntered off into a room.

“No matter,” said the man. “We can wait for him.”

The girls shared the chair once occupied by the painted lady and a few minutes later, a man in a business suit walked up the stairs.

The two men spoke English, deliberately.

The man from the plane waved goodbye to the girls, who were now being left with this new stranger.

“Kelly,” the new man called, and the same painted woman appeared. “Show these girls around.”

Kelly seemed annoyed at her task, but she seemed annoyed at everything. She led the girls up a third flight of stair and opened a door. There was a large bed, fancy red curtains, and mirrors.

“This is beautiful!” Diem exclaimed.

Kelly seemed surprised and crossed her arms, leaning against the doorway.

“Is this my room? Oh, can it be?” Diem exclaimed.

“Sure. This can be your room.”

“You are joking. I know it. This must be that man’s room.”

“No. Claude does not stay here. He is seldom here.”

“Then whose room is this?”

“This will be where you work.”

Diem shrugged at the idea of working in a room this beautiful. Her eyes still twinkled. Thi elbowed her in the ribs.

“What type of work?” Thi asked lowering her eyes, already knowing the answer.

A smile cracked across Kelly’s face, “You don’t know?”

The Diem chimed in, “Really, no one told us.”

Kelly began laughing. Laughing so hard that she had to hold her stomach as she did. Her breasts jiggled so as she laughed that one almost popped out of her tight shirt.

“Really you two are too funny.” Kelly did not answer the question, but continued the tour.

“Here is another work room.” Kelly opened a room filled with white sheets and crystal lights, but in this room the sheets were strewn about and all over the floor. Women’s clothes were sprinkled across the furniture, stocking, and panties, and even a brassiere.

“We work on this floor. We sleep and eat downstairs.”

She led the girls back down the stairs and to a kitchen, where a larger woman sat at the table dressed as poorly as Kelly. Kelly did not introduce the woman.

She led them down another hallway, not decorated, and opened a door revealing a room with two bunk beds and floor mats rolled and rested along the wall.

“We all sleep in here. We take turns. Some sleep during the day. Some at night. Some sleep only a little and work all the time.”

Thi sunk down to the floor and held her knees into her chest.

“How long? How long are we here?”

“It’s not that bad. They feed you, house you, and you got what you wanted didn’t you? Didn’t you dream to come to America?”

Diem nodded her head. “It’s always been my dream.”

“Oh Thi! It will be fine. We are together, and we live in a beautiful San Francisco apartment with beautiful Vietnamese women, and we get to work in a beautiful hotel.”

“Hotel?” Kelly laughed again.

“Diem, this is a whore house,” Thi corrected her.

Diem’s stupid happy smile dropped off her face, and she sat with her eyes popping open, as all the pieces came together: women crammed on little floor mats, the underwear on the floor upstairs, Kelly crossing and uncrossing her legs as she sits, her painted pretty face.

“I don’t know how to do that!” Diem whispered.

“You will,” Kelly smiled revealing her own also crooked tooth.

Diem nodded, eager to know everything, to be American, while Thi sat staring out the window watching her soul slip from its shell the more American she became. The less human. The more animal.

Perkins

“We’ve had a little situation here,” Carla explained to Ebony.

“What kind of situation?” Ebony crossed her arms.

“Well, in a way it’s a sexual situation, in a way, it’s really nothing.”

Ebony burst into laughter, and then covered her mouth with her hands, “I’m sorry. Did you say a sexual situation? My mom is 86. I wasn’t aware she was still having those sorts of situations.”

“Oh be quiet,” came a groan from behind the curtain. A wrinkled hand tore at the sheet and revealed her daughter and nurse gossiping away.

“Mama. You want to tell me what you’ve been up to?”

“Oh. It was all Milo.”

“Mama! Who’s Milo?” Ebony questioned Carla.

“Oh,” Carla said. “He’s been transferred to our sister site. And he is on a warning. One more move, and he gets the boot. This is what I wanted to talk to you about.”

Ebony braced herself as though it was now her turn to sit in the principal’s office.

“Your mother and Milo were caught walking around naked holding hands.”

“Mama!” Ebony’s eyes widened. She was not sure whether she should laugh at the image, or be scared that her mother had completely lost her mind.

“Mama. Why did you do that?”

Her mother stared coldly to the ceiling as though she didn’t hear the question.

“Now, Mama. I know you heard me. That man, was he, were you? Now tell it straight Mama. Were you just walking holding hands like Carla said, or was there more to it?”

“Of course there wasn’t more to it! You think there’d be more to it than that? Me and that old fogey Milo? You’ve got to be kidding.”

“Clearly Mama still has her sense about her,” Ebony said to Carla. “Then, why Mama, did you do that?”

“Oh. I don’t remember.” Then Perkins rolled her eyes back into her head and rested as the two younger ladies sorted out the consequences.

“I’m sorry about my Mama. She can be a little crazy at times.” Ebony tried to remember back to the principal’s office in high school and remember that the madder her mother was the more quickly the office excused the entire situation. If, on the other hand, her mother responded coolly as though she didn’t understand what the problem was or why it was even a problem, then the office held them both there until they knew the error of their ways and were ready to repent.

Ebony, then addressed the nurse coldly, “Can I please have a moment to set my mother straight?”

Carla consented and slipped out of the room.

“Mama. Wake up. I know you’re not sleeping. Now, open up those big old scary old eyes and listen up.”

Perkins focused one eye on her daughter, and the other came swirling to catch up. She was a bit shocked to be reprimanded by this juvenile, the one daughter who was always caught with the boys out late with cigarettes in her purse.

“Now, Mama. You pay a lot of money to be staying at a nice place like this. And I know you are not half as crazy as those doctors think you are. If you get thrown out of this nice place. I don’t even know what. I swear to God.”

“I think I’d have to bite someone to get thrown up,” Perkins said.

“That is not even funny.”

“Mama. Being sexual is one thing. Walking around halls naked. I wouldn’t even do that.”

“Sorry, honey. If I’d have known I’d get caught, I don’t think I’d done it.”

“I think I told you that once.”

“Did you? What for?”

“I think when I took daddy’s car. And the car ran out of gas, and me and Marco pushed it to a church and called you, and said not to worry we weren’t kidnapped, and the car weren’t stolen, we just stole the car to go to church, and you said like hell and whooped us.”

Perkins smiled. “Least you were okay.”

“Same to you Mama. Now ain’t you going to tell me what you were thinking?”

“I don’t remember thinking much.”

Carla came back in and asked Ebony to accompany her to the director’s office.

The director's office was a fake meeting room. Well it was a real meeting room, but phony-like. There was a skinny wooden table where important conversations were had and documents were signed. There was a fake plant, one that no one would have to remember to water. The chairs were leather, a definite upgrade from any other chair in the entire place. So that when you sat down, you might think: check out these nice chairs. I am sure making a good decision if I am sitting in a nice clean leather chair like this. The pens were wood or heavy metal pens, not plastic. The table took up most of the room, and there were no posters or pictures of windows or other options, just the chair, the plant, the wood desk, and the heavy metal pen, in and out with a signature.

The director, Eleanor Crammer, sat behind the table with no paperwork in front of her; this meant that the meeting was just informative. No decisions needed to be made today. This was more or less good news to Ebony who preferred to make decisions after good news, not bad.

“Hello Ebony. I've asked Dr. Ranstald to join us. He'll be just a minute.”

Carla closed the door behind Ebony, and she rested back into the leather chair and watched director eye the clock and fidget with her bracket. Her hair was blond and held back tightly into place. She wore a sharp black and white business suit. She was all business and she had to be, because people died here, and there was no being emotional when you collected rent, even from the dead. She was hardened like that, punctual, and stiff herself.

“Here he is.” She sounded relieved.

“Ebony Perkins,” Doctor Ranstald extended his arm and shook Ebony’s hand, announcing her name as a courtesy although he had just looked it up outside.

The doctor waited a few seconds for the director to begin the meeting, but she just cleared her throat and looked at him, with a raised brow. “Well, I am sure you know some of the stunts your mom has been up to,” started Ranstald. Neither of the women cracked a smile. Instead Ebony raised her brows and crossed her arms.

The doctor retracted his amused expression, cleared his throat, and started again, “Well, after the incidents, we had your mother examined, both physically and mentally. And we have some good news and bad news. The good news is it doesn’t appear that your mother was engaging in sexual intercourse with the Milo gentleman. The bad news is her dementia is getting worse. So much so that the director feels it might be time to talk about transferring her to a facility that has a dementia unit.

“You see, we house residents who need minimal assistance, and your mother has displayed a needed for more attention.”

“I see. When? When does she need to be transferred?”

“As soon as you’ve arranged the transfer, essentially.”

“Huh? Come again.”

“We want what’s best for your mother.”

“Like hell they do,” Perkins mumbled eyes still closed.

Ebony stayed in the chair as the other two excused themselves explaining there was more to be done.

After a few minutes, Ebony broke the silence, “Mama, you got the boot.”

“I did, did I?” Perkins seemed impressed with herself, and had not even recalled how she had done it.

“I guess I got to pack you up again, and find you a new place. You wanna stay with me, Mama? I could clear out the guest room. Hell, I could keep it the way it is, and we don’t have to bring over all your junk. Her junk consisted of pictures of relatives Ebony had never met, little wooden statues her father had carved, a hat of her mother’s, her mother’s hat pins, and a copy of the bible.

“I don’t want to be a bother.”

Part Six

Quynh

The boxes came. The boxes always come filled with the infinite potential charged within them, a hint of pink from flowers on islands far away, a shade a green from roots of plants from a place called home. Chemicals imported, exported to hold them, to make the colors last, to hold to the nail already dead, to keep the dead part strong, to make the dead part beautiful.

Lilac for lovers who are quick to leave, bright orange the color of summer, always Saturday, fade to nude, almost natural, almost yourself. Pinks hold hands and chip off the candied toes of teens, and women who want to be teens again. Dark red for the sultry ones, and peach for the innocent. And there in the bottom of the box, a red so red, blood red, lip red, a red that reminds you of all the things you've ever wanted and puts them right there on your fingertips, right there for you to touch and touch and touch, and never fully possess, because if you had the things you really wanted, what would you do then? Want something else maybe? Keep it forever? Give it away when you are bored?

Quynh thought that she should hide the color, lock it up perhaps. They say in America you cannot have your cake and eat it too. What if you get sick of having your cake and one day eat it: then you had your cake and ate it too. That is fine when you are old and tired of cake.

Quynh believed with all her soul that every color had a power, and everyone woman had a color that she needed. It was not always this red. No, it was better not to want at all.

Quynh knew and circled the shop dropping the colors for the customers into each manicurist's basket. She pressed each color in her palm, said its name, and infused it with her power of her intent.

She watched like a statue silently as the women chose their colors—the ones she had set before them. Somehow they saw what she saw, they knew what she knew.

You think these things come from elsewhere, these decisions we make? You think it was you who decided that you wanted bangs or French tip nails? There are powers at work to keep the universe in balance beyond you. A silent Quynh perhaps, someone invisible, who doesn't need to know you to know you. Only the hesitancy in your step, the tuck of a loose hair behind an ear, an extra piercing, the tip of a tattoo peeking out from behind a hem of a shirt or pant leg, and your story is known.

Quynh sat back on her throne, under the Virgin Mary, in a salon in San Jose, California and made women beautiful, beautiful, and more beautiful.

Beautiful was a woman who could look herself in the mirror straight and like what she saw no matter the age or race, or weight, or history—to see it for whatever it was and be satisfied.

Quynh could look too into a mirror, with her spotted face, blackened teeth, yellowed eyes, and hunched backed. She could look square in the mirror satisfied with her definition of beautiful and laugh, “Bah.”

The Latina regular came in through the door. The chimes announced her, and her eyes were red.

“How much to take them off?” she asked through sobs.

“No manicure, just take off?” Quynh questioned.

The girl nodded, and tears welled up in her eyes.

“No charge, sit down.”

Truong looked up, and almost corrected Quynh that there was a take off charge, but Quynh was the boss so he stuck his nose back into the books.

Quynh warmed water in a dish and placed the girl’s hands into the soapy basin. The plastic loosened in the water, while Quynh tried to pacify the girl.

“You no like nails?”

The girl shook her head and avoided eye contact.

“Why you no like nails?”

The girl held up her hand and revealed that one was broken; the other looked torn off, not fallen off, torn off.

“What you do? Get in a fight.”

The girl did not respond to the question, just gave a shutter.

Sometimes the customers didn’t know how to have nails. With nails you can’t work with your hands, you cannot pick and dig in the garden, paint the house, and labor physically. Nails suggest that you do not have to, and you most absolutely with nails cannot fight.

“Who you fight with?” Quynh leaned close to the girl.

The girl didn’t look up to answer.

“You sure you don’t want longer nails. Then no one will fight with you.” Quynh leaned back.

The girl partially smiled.

Quynh reached into the basin and dried off the girl's right hand. She saw the color. She remembered this girl, the girl on the phone, the day she got the letter. The girl who does not know how to be a woman, but who chose the color, the one color, the only color—and there it was cracked and crusted and pulled from her nails, the same color of fresh blood.

Quynh blotted a cotton ball in rubbing alcohol and began to scrub the nail, taking back the color. The color held tight to the girl's nails and bled slowly onto the cotton ball.

It was too soon for this child, thought Quynh, to wear her nails red. She couldn't know this color yet.

“You want lavender or maybe a pink?”

The girl shook her head.

“Nothing. You want nothing on your nails?”

The girl nodded, and Quynh was a bit shocked. Nothing? Nothing meant the possibility of anything. Nothing meant lack of want and disregard for need. Nothing was monumental. Nothing was really something. A girl who wants nothing deserved red, and a girl who wants red will get nothing.

She continued to blot the nails. When all the color was removed, she pulled with her metal pliers and pried up the plastic bits. Some came off easily, and other needed pressure applied, which pulled on the real nail and caused the girl to wince and even once bleed. Quynh blotted the blood with another cotton ball and threw it away before the girl

complained. Then Quynh went over the nails once with a buffer, so that even though they were clear, there would be some shine to them.

The girl noticed little yellow moons on her nails.

“Can you get that off?”

Quynh picked up the girl's hand and smoothed over her nails with her forefinger and thumb.

“Sometimes red polish will stain the nails yellow.”

“So my nails will be yellow now?”

“They will grow out.”

The girl sulked back into her chair.

The girl had the evil look back in her eye, and Quynh knew that soon she would change again; she would want plastic and color. Soon she would her want would fill her so badly that she would burst again.

Quynh, like the girl, wanted nothing. She could keep her shop. She had no reasons to play games with Lam, Van, and Thi. She could sit back in her chair, under the statue of the Virgin Mary, and be contented that there was nothing more she wanted—her perfect universe had maintained its balance.

Women would come and go and some would want love, and Quynh would color their nails red. Others would want dreams, and they could have purple. Others would need laughter, and they could be dyed bright orange. And now that the universe was balanced. Quynh could see clearly and color the world clearly. There's too much red, already.

Poison Ivy, poinsettia, apples—all poison, all red. Was the world touching her with such harsh a stroke that she must touch it back in this way?

She went to the shelves and noticed that all the colors had red in them, the purples, the oranges, even the light pinks, were all a little red.

The colors change, thought Quynh, and then dropped the jar she was holding. It spilled out of its jar onto the ground, a puddle of bloody goo.

Kimie

At work, Kimie was pushed hard from behind. She turned to face two other Great America employees who wore double uniforms. Underneath the polo shirts and khaki pants were the numbered tattoos. The two girls' hair pulled back too tight and their makeup too dark. The lines in their faces angled harshly; never could these edges come together to form anything pleasant to look at. They were much harder than Kimie, calloused all around.

Kimie tried to back away slowly, when she was pushed again from the front by the shorter one.

“What the hell?”

“Stay away from Mario,” warned the smaller one.

“Why?” Kimie questioned.

The taller one lunged at Kimie grabbing hair in the center back of her head and dragged her by the head towards a pole. Kimie fought her way out of the position, and stood panting and tangled. Her nails had stabbed at the big one, and instead of penetrating, snapped off.

“That why,” answered the smaller one. “Unless you plan on learning to fight.”

The larger one, again, went for the hair. This time grabbing a handful above the ear and successfully smashed Kimie's face into the pole. Kimie's head rang. She put her hands up to protect from another jab. She closed her eyes, waiting for another blow to the head, but when she opened her eyes the girls were in the distance walking away.

Kimie dropped to a seated position with her back against the pole and cried.

“It wasn’t Mario” she pleaded to her stepfather who had thrown her against the wall in her own room.

He had thrown her against the wall because she had come home late with a black eye and a split lip, and had said it wasn’t Mario.

“Of course it is Mario. Every trouble you get into is because of that boy.”

Kimie just tucked her legs under her arms, dropped her face in her legs and cried.

Her stepdad slammed the door. She flipped open her phone and began her texting:

New text from Mario: *Are you okay?*

No. I’m all messed up and totally grounded.

I wish they would just leave you out of it.

Me too.

Maybe everyone is right. I don’t want it to be like this. Maybe we shouldn’t see each other. At least for a while.

Kimie’s door opened and her mother came in with a bag of ice and a wash cloth. Tears were streaming down Kimie’s face, and she cuddled into her mother’s side.

“I know what you are going to say,” in between heaves of breath, “and you don’t have to. You’re right.”

Her mother stroked Kimie’s hair, “And what was I going to say, honey?”

“That this is all because of Mario.”

Her mother just kept stroking her hair. She had nothing more to say, and all the time in the world to listen to her daughter who sat curdled in a ball and completely crushed by the people around her.

“I wish things were different,” Kimmie exhaled.

Her mother held her tighter and said nothing.

“I wish he was different.” Kimmie repeated. “And I hate that Marcia was right.”

Her mother smiled.

“Why don’t you say anything? You always say something!” Kimmie tore from her mother and stared hard in her eyes demanding some sort of opinion or truth or comfort.

“You know better than me, baby doll.” Her mother brought her daughter back to her, and held her again. Both had wet eyes.

“Mom. What if they come after me?”

“Do they know where you going to college?”

“No. Mario might guess at it, but he doesn’t even know. I wasn’t even going to go. But now I think we’re over.”

Kimmie ducked back into her mother’s arms and emotions deep into her gut welled up into her chest, bursting out her lungs, and eyes, heavy tears.

“They’ll forget about you soon enough. They forget what they hate so badly, they hate so many things.”

Kimmmie straightened up a bit. Her mother looked at her daughter's purpled eye and pressed the icepack onto it. She cleared the smudged lipstick from her daughter's face. She reached down to touch her daughter's hands, to hold them, and noticed a nail missing entirely.

"Baby, wanna get these fixed up together? I'll take you."

Kimmmie watched the windows with her hoodie pulled up and around her face, while her mother drove the few blocks to the nail salon. Her mother went into a back room to get her eyebrows waxed while Kimmmie waited until the owner motioned her into a chair. She sat down and splayed her broken fingers.

"You fight?"

Kimmmie said nothing to this woman.

"Why you fight?"

Kimmmie hardly fought. She was almost flattered but partially insulted that this woman thought she would fight. Flattered that she looked tough enough, insulted that she looked ghetto enough to fight at all.

She didn't tell the woman, like she didn't tell her mother, what she would always tell herself: that she was mad at all the decisions she had made, mad at the priorities she had set, mad that she had given herself away to a boy who would forget her, forget her more with each puff of marijuana he smoked, mad that she had positioned herself socially next to thieves, who broke into liquor stores with knives, mad that she hadn't listened to the ones who loved her, mad that when she started over she would have to do so far away from home, far away where no one would know what she had done, that she had fallen

madly and helplessly in love with a criminal, who almost got her killed, who broke her heart, seventeen and there it was broken, with regret that when she loved she hadn't been so wise, responsible, that she should have known better, that she should have counted the red flags each and every one of them, and then pulled out when it became too much.

Kimmie wasn't thinking of a color, at all, she wasn't thinking of anything. Her nails and blood all mixed into the same dirty and cracked reddish color. She looked like a whore she thought; she saw her missing nails and chipped paint.

The nosy Vietnamese woman asked, "What color?"

The room was grey, the Vietnamese woman's face was grey, the walls and ceiling tiles were grey, the other women's hairs were grey, her skin was grey, and all the colors on the wall were grey.

"What color?" repeated the Vietnamese woman.

"No color." I don't want color.

Lam

When the first gunshot was fired, no one knew where it had gone; only that it had, like in liquor stores and in the sides of cars, entered the window so perfectly that it left only a hole the size of a dime. Lynn was at her mother's station paging through her geometry homework. Lam was sitting at the feet of a customer—so were Van and Thi. Quynh was like a statue at her own station.

The second shot broke the glass and sent the women at the pedicure station leaping out of the water, rushing around the shop with their toes pointed up, waddling, wanting to hide but at the same time, not wanting to ruin their paint job and fresh toes.

The car that had fired the shots sped off. Quynh dialed 911, while she stood to survey the damage.

The window had burst into a thousand pieces in one panel and sent those pieces like bullets into the shop. The floor glistened with glass, some in red chip and yellow, in the paint that used to read *Quynh's Nail Salon*.

Quynh was on the phone when moans came from the shoeless woman. A Latina girl ran to the wax room. An older black woman sat frozen in the tub, eyes closed, listening. Lynn was pushed out of the way by a white woman when the first bullet struck. She hid under her mother's station. She recognized the car. Her first thought was that they knew where she was; her second thought was the damage she had caused.

Thi screamed and began to yell repeatedly in a Vietnamese Lynn could not make out. Lynn turned to Thi who knelt over Lam.

Van pushed Thi aside and cradled Lam in her arms. Quynh dropped the phone when she noticed the true damage.

“You get up Lam,” Quynh order. “You get up.”

Lam had a perfect smile on her face and no motion. There was a deep red coloring the outside of her shirt, in the center of her stomach.

“It’s the polish, not blood. You get up Lam,” Quynh continued.

Quynh ran out over the glass floor, letting it break and crunch under her. She ran through the window, which could have sent pieces down into her too.

“Help. Anybody. Help. Starbuck call police. Help.”

Circles were forming thick outside the shop, all peering it at the scene. The customers still splayed their toes so that the polish wouldn’t bump, wouldn’t ruin, and wouldn’t dry badly.

Lynn surfaced from under her mother’s station. She crawled to her mother, and checked, checked for breath, for a pulse on her wrist, she held her hand over the chest, wishing that if she stopped the blood, then the life could return.

“She is gone,” Van said coolly, holding the body, like a mother would a child.

“Ma,” Lynn whispered.

Quynh directed the cops across the glass and through a room sprayed with the red and pinks and purples of polish and blood. The cops took Lam from Van and moved the women back, away from the glass, away from the body. They took the body up on a stretcher and took it away. Just like that, away. They didn’t ask Lynn to go, or Van, or Thi; they just took the body away.

Van, pressed her body into Lynn, and held Lynn. Lynn shook against Van. There were no words, only the shaking. Only the horror, and the guilt, and every word Lynn hadn't said, and all the horrible ones she had, all racing through her mind over and over again, shaking her, and beating her down, now heaving into Van's chest, just heaving, for a long while.

"It was because of me," she finally said, and with this released emotions from even further within her.

"Nothing is because of you."

"Everything is because of me."

"You are wrong."

"How do you know?"

"Everything is because of everything. Nothing is because of you. If it wasn't you, it would have been some other girl, some other mother, some other stranger. Your mother would be so happy to see that you are alive. She would not have traded it."

"I would have."

"Yes, and that is love."

Miriam

In the mirror, Miriam saw the straight-backed confidence of last week's Barbie dolls. The deliberate hair, poised, careful hands, and corseted suit. Then a bomb sounded. Another. And another. The blue grey eyes fell first off the face, the mouth splintered then exploded. Then shards and shards of boob, arm, and hair came crashing down, like ice cracked and shaken loose from the tray.

When her reflection was gone, she saw a child, not her own, sitting under the raining glass. She lunged from her seat and pulled the girl to her. Gently but firmly, she guided the child to safety under a station. With her own body, she blocked the shards of glass, and red, red, red, showered the room.

Miriam closed her eyes and turned her face away, and let it harden with true motherhood. Let it harden as she gave and gave and gave.

Thi

Diem wore the red halter top, the black short shorts, and straightened her hair, the teeth they could not fix. She followed Kelly's instruction, and when it was her turn, she went to the room.

Diem came back to show Thi, her fifty dollars. Thi did the math, two hundred. If all the customers paid fifty dollars, they could leave after two hundred.

"Could you do that two hundred times?"

"Sure. Why not? It's easy money. Besides, what other job are we going to do here?"

Thi did not know.

When it was her turn, Kelly pulled a tight black dress over Thi's small frame, and then ran the thick strands of hair through the iron straightener and painted her lips and eyes, until she no longer looked like a child.

"They'll be easy on you."

Kelly led her to the room upstairs. The bed was large, big enough for a family. The sheets white. The room decorated with fake, gold objects, an old fashion phone, and dresser with a lamp.

"Just sit on the bed," Kelly instructed.

Thi lay on the bed and closed her eyes.

"You don't have to do or say anything. I'll let the customer know you don't know English. I'll be back in a minute."

Thi kept her eyes closed when Kelly came back and kept them closed when the tiger crawled onto the bed.

Her breath quickened, but she dare not peak. Warm hands tenderly moved about her, rearranging her clothing, resting on her tender parts, almost lovingly. Nothing more.

He spoke words to her she didn't understand. Calm words, smooth American words.

“Beautiful, just beautiful,” he repeated.

Perkins

“I didn’t see nothing.” Perkins leaned back into the car seat ready to leave the parking lot.

“Mama. Like hell. The cops had me backed up in Starbucks for an hour. For an hour. I saw the ambulance. I swear to God I thought they were taking you off for good, Mama.”

“You wish they were taking me off for good.” Ebony didn’t hear her. She was rounding the car to the driver’s side.

“I did a lot of thinking up in that Starbucks,” Ebony said, climbing into the car, “and I said to myself. I swear to God, if my Mama is alright. I prayed, Mama. And I said, Jesus, if my Mama is alright, and you don’t take her home with you, I’m taking her home with me.”

Ebony pulled the car out of the parking spot, squealing.

“Lord, save me now.”

“Mama, it’ll be fine. I got a cot and a guest room, and Terrence’s old dresser for all your knickknacks and crap and personal items.”

Never looking where she’s going.

“Lord, save me now.”

Ebony ignored her mother, checked her mirrors, not to see the other drivers, but to see herself, to smudge the eyeliner back into place.

“What color you get anyway. Mama?”

“I don’t know. I can’t see a damn thing. Where are we going anyway?”

Ebony turned down Capital Ave and towards the 280 freeway.

“Home, Mama.”

“It goes so fast.”

“I’m only going forty.”

“No. Not that.”

“Oh Mama. You gonna love it. We gonna treat you like a Queen Mama, like a Queen.”

Part Seven

Kimie

Kimie sat in the desk etched with the word *Mario*, but the color of the etching had been rubbed off by a janitor with bleach.

To solve for the variable you need to balance the equation. And to balance the equation you need to subtract X from both sides of the equation until it is gone. Then, you will be left with Y. And your answer.

Quynh

It was very quiet in the shop. Just the sound of the mini fans humming, hardening the new colors, the faint, faint beeping of buttons pressed into phones so women could communicate out into the ether unseen by their lover, best friend, or mother.

Quynh made no sound at all. She painted, massaged, and washed feet with a bowed head. She unpacked shipments and stalked shelves with no incantations, no magic.

But inside a pool grew, swelling. Inside the pool Lam twisted noodles with a fork giggling and giggling. Quynh muffled the sounds of Lam by holding them under the water. But the noodles floated to the top of the water, like Pho and Cup of Noodles, and Quynh sat at the pool of her heart jabbing the noodles deeper and deeper down.

“Why did you take my Lam?” she finally asked the Virgin.

“Was she yours to keep?”

“Is she in heaven?”

“Where is heaven?”

“Where you are.”

“Where am I?”

“Here.”

The Virgin, the model woman, the original Madonna, the mother, she spread her arms—you know why she spread her arms? She could not keep what she had been given. She spread her arms to let the grace go. To let it all go.

