

The Memory Mines

by

Evelyn Ka-Kwok Lo

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AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis.
This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required
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I understand that my thesis may be made electronically
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ABSTRACT

She is eighteen when she leaves home. She leaves shortly after her father's inexplicable disappearance – an event she neither understands nor accepts. She does what everyone on the cusp of adulthood does: she moves abroad to forget her past. Now, ten years later, her ageing mother is taken away. The family home is empty. The young woman returns. It is here, in her childhood home, she makes the deliberate decision to remember.

Even after so many years, the house is the same. Here, her childhood memories still live, in the spaces between walls, in the cracks in the floor, in the weft of the brocade curtains. Stories are awakened with the turn of a brass handle, the swing of a glass door, the scent of sour yogurt. The memories surface of their own will, appearing suddenly, sometimes violently. She moves through the house, reliving each memory with startling lucidity. The line between her parents' memories and her own begin to blur. She remembers things she never knew.

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To my family

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We are born into a family and into a home. In the Chinese language, there is only one character for both these things; one enduring symbol that represents these things simultaneously: family, house and home.

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SHE REMEMBERS ONLY HER NAME. She wears a thin silk slip with spaghetti straps. She might as well be naked. There is no one there except for the monkey. He bounces up and down with joy. He claps his hands. Flash of pink fleshy palms; when they meet the sound is surprisingly loud. Sharp claws graze her thigh. She looks down, sees his hand – hooked and gnarled at the knuckles. Moist pink flesh on one side and wiry brown hair on the other. Tiny black mites spring from his hide as he leaps on his toes. His mouth is stretched wide showing all his teeth. Two rows of teeth, four flat teeth in the front like hers, framed by sharp incisors. His lips flip back showing a wet and fleshy interior. White foam collects at the corners of his mouth. He grabs her hand, lurches forward, pulling. *This way, this way.* She looks around for the first and last time and sees nothing. She allows herself to be taken.

The monkey knows where to go. He drags her through empty

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space. There is nothing around, yet she feels a resistance like a thick fog. They arrive at the city walls. The city did not appear gradually in the distance. There was nothing and then there was the city. The walls are high, fifty feet at least, and made of yellow stone. The walls continue in both directions without end, without any openings. The monkey tugs on her hem; cocks his head to the left; reaches up with his right hand; scratches his temple with exaggerated gesture. *What now? Hmm?* He pauses. Brings his right hand to his chin. Forefinger extended and slightly curved, he taps his chin three times while looking up at her. *Aha!* He takes her hand and leads her away. They move quickly along the wall. She sees no openings, no gates. *Come on, come on!* He breaks into a run. She trails behind, dragging her feet, leaving parallel tracks in the sand.

An enormous archway appears out of nowhere. Iron grating spans the opening like a cage. She looks through the iron bars to see the empty landscape continue beyond. The monkey pats her thigh, reassuringly. His palm is moist and leaves a print on her bare skin. He pulls a key from around his neck. The latch is on the bottom right hand corner of the gate. The monkey inserts the key. The gate springs open. It rises on its own with invisible mechanisms, absorbed into a recess in the yellow stone. They enter the city together.

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The monkey hops from foot to foot and smacks his palms together repeatedly. *We're here! We're Here!* The gate falls shut without sound, causing a slight ripple in the sand. She looks around. There are people everywhere. The buildings are strange, inexplicably so. The houses are upside down. They balance precariously on peaked roofs, teetering back and forth like giant see-saws. The townspeople move in steady streams around her. Nobody sees her. The monkey tugs on her hem. He unfurls his right hand, stretches it outward, palm up, pointing forward: *Voila! The Grand Tour!*

The girl and the monkey weave through the crowds. Hand in hand. She scans the faces around her. She sees people of different size, age and colour. They move with purpose but in no particular direction. The monkey motions for her to stop, gestures her to look.

She sees a group of men. Their bodies bulge with overgrown muscle. They stand in line lifting weights. Only, instead of weights, they lift peas. Small green peas that are sold in the frozen section of the supermarket. Each bodybuilder cups a handful of peas in each palm and lifts them high above his head. Their faces contort in pain; they groan in orchestral unison. Beads of sweat swell on their temples and stream down their cheeks. Faces split into wide grins showing clenched teeth.

The monkey pulls her along: *On to the next!* A gathering of old

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ladies. All sit in pairs. One knits as the other unravels. The ladies are old but their fingers are nimble. They move with inexplicable urgency. One knits at a furious pace, the other pulls the strands apart. All brows are furrowed. All lips pursed. The knitted portion never grows beyond one or two rows.

Come on, come on. The monkey gestures. This time, it's children. School children dressed in uniform. Matching skirts, pants and ties. Girls' hair in braids, boys' hair swept neatly to one side. The children crouch low in a circle. She peers over the tops of their heads. The children don't notice her watching. They are busy stacking marbles as if they are Lego. A small boy plucks a fallen marble from the ground and places it on top of the pile. The pile shifts under the weight and splits apart. Marbles scatter in every direction; the children scurry on hands and knees to catch them, return to the circle, try again.

The monkey tugs on her hem. Smiling. Pieces of purple fruit cling to his yellow teeth. His eyes are searching, forcing her to meet his gaze. *So? And what do you think of our little town?* He clasps his hands in front of him, and bows deeply – ingratiatingly. She says nothing. Her eyes say nothing. She does not betray her feelings. He spreads his arms wide; his grin stretches across his face, beady eyes gleam beneath lashless lids. *Welcome, welcome, to your new home!* She whips around in all directions, looking for the iron gate. She

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sees only high walls made of stone: yellow ochre - the colour of the sand beneath her feet, the colour of the monkey's teeth. The gate is nowhere to be found. She hears a cackle below. It is the sound of monkey laughter. The monkey clutches at the key hanging by his neck. Twirls it around his index finger. She begins to understand: she is a prisoner - he is the warden.

She rushes through the crowds, spreading them apart with her hands as she moves. Everywhere she goes the monkey follows. She breaks into a run. The monkey leaps effortlessly above shoulders and tops of heads. The girl pauses in front of the old ladies. She approaches the one closest to her. The one wearing the faded green dress with small pink flowers. A thin white shawl wraps around her neck and shoulders. Gold rimmed glasses perch on her beaked nose. She hunches over her needles, shoulders curve inwards, neck stoops low. Her fingers move frenetically; the needles click at furious pace. The ball of yarn shrinks rapidly in her lap. Her partner unravels as she knits. The loose yarn grows in tangled heaps by their feet. The girl touches the shoulder of the old lady. The old lady looks up with empty eyes, but only for a moment, before returning to her needles.

The monkey leaps onto the girl's shoulders straddling her neck. Sharp claws dig into her shoulders. He grabs fistful of hair like the reins of a horse. He tugs hard, right - left - right. He bounces on her

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shoulders. *Ra! Ra! Onwards!*

He leads her to the well. She peers down the narrow shaft into an abyss. The darkness is impenetrable. She leans over the stone ledge, cocks her head to one side. She hears the sound of rushing water. The monkey nods rapidly beside her. *Yes, yes. Water!* He points to the pulley suspended over her head, gestures to the rope dangling from one end, motions for her to pull. She yanks on the heavy rope. It is coarse and frayed at the edges. It tears at her tender flesh. She pulls with both hands. Then with the weight of her entire body. The wheel starts to turn. The rope gathers by her feet. One hand over the other, she pulls. A final lurch and the end of the rope is revealed. It's a funnel. A large plastic cone, with a wide brim that tapers to a narrow opening. She unties the funnel and holds it in her hands. She looks through the open centre as the last drop of water falls onto the sand between her toes. She stares at the small black spot that disappears as quickly as it formed. She looks at the monkey. He shrugs his shoulders. Motions for her to continue. *Again, again!* No! She screams without sound. She drops the funnel back down the well, waits for the resounding splash. The monkey shrugs his shoulders: *So what?*

She glares at him.

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The monkey lowers into a squat. He pats the spot of sand beside him with one hand; a hooked finger beckons with the other. She comes close to him, sits down on the spot of sand. He cups his hands around his mouth. Leans in close. *Shhh*. He hisses in her ear. *I'll tell you a secret!* Warm breath swirls in the crook of her neck. Moist, and smelling of rotting fruit. *This is a city of lost souls. No one here remembers anything about themselves: no names, no past, no home. I take them in out of pity! Without me, they suffer!* He sweeps his right arm open towards the faceless crowd. *Without me, they suffer the madness of forgetting, alone! I give them tasks to perform to pass the day. It is an act of kindness!* He thumps at his chest with a closed fist. He pauses mid-speech, looks directly in her eyes. She stares back, unblinking.

Do you know your name? If so, you may still have a chance...

He points to the city wall where the gate has appeared. It is open. *Go to the memory mines. The old man will let you in. He will teach you to see in the dark. You need to find a single memory. Only one! It will be your ticket out! But if you fail... You must return. You will return. Join the others who have gone mad. You have one chance.*

The girl stands up. She looks at the people around her. Gray faces with mechanical movements. The crowd hums with pointless

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activity. She turns away and passes through the open archway. The gate clangs shut behind her. She turns for a final glance. There is nothing behind her, and nothing in front of her. The sand is coarse and sings the soles of her feet. She moves towards an indistinct horizon. The softly blurring line where yellow sand meets yellow sky flickers vaguely in the distance.

A figure appears. An old man. His brows are white, feathery, blanched by the sun, as is his beard. His eyes squint at her beneath heavy brow. He wears a white cotton tunic that extends to his ankles. His feet are bare, like hers. He cranes his neck forward like a turtle, the skin sagging in delicate ripples down his neck. He is tall and slender with elegant limbs. He waves her over: *Come along. I've been expecting you.*

Coarse grain grows soft beneath her feet. Scorching sand becomes tepid and then cold. Somewhere along the way, the sand has become snow. He leads her to an icy mound and gestures towards an opening on one side. The mound is half her height; the opening is small. He crouches down and disappears inside. She drops to her hands and knees. Half-crawling, half-slithering, she enters. It is completely dark. Her arms pull her body forward; her knees drag behind. She follows the old man by listening for sounds of creaking

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snow. She moves down the tunnel, head first. A rush of cold air rises from unseen depths. She looks ahead. Her sight has returned. She can make out the outline of the old man. The edges of his figure glow bluish-white in the dark. He stops moving. He turns around to face her and brings a finger to his lips. *Shhh. Don't make a sound. Tread softly.* Together, they stand up in a small clearing carved out in the snow. She looks around, sees nothing. She sinks gently in the snow until she is ankle deep. The soft, plush, snow wraps around her feet like velvet ribbons. Above, the massive dome glistens like sheets of glass. She is no longer cold. He nudges her elbow. *Look! They're all around us. Just look!* Her eyes trail softly along the surface of the snow.

They start to appear. They are all around her. They've been around her the entire time. Their edges glow bluish-white, like the old man. She bends down to pick one up. *Careful, careful.* The old man warns. The image is the size of a small photograph. Still, she uses both hands to pluck one from the snow. She holds its edges between forefinger and thumb. The image is woven from a million coloured threads. She lifts the image to her eyes and peers into the intricate mesh. She stops breathing; the slightest exhale may rupture the delicate image. The old man is beside her, nudging. *So? What do*

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you see? She shakes her head. Nothing. The image means nothing to her. She replaces it in the snow. The old man gestures with his eyes, sweeping his gaze around the space. *Try another one. There are millions down here. Don't despair. Keep on searching.*

He turns away. She hears the old man shuffling in the distance. The sound fades and soon she hears nothing at all. She is alone in the mines. She rests on her knees and sifts through the images. She looks at each one. She examines the images from edge to edge. She does not eat; she does not sleep.

She pulls an image from the snow. The icy frame is larger than the others; the embroidery denser and more vibrant. She places the image down flat. It sinks lightly in the snow. Soft, white powder seeps through the fine mesh. She bends down and stares into it, unblinking. The image grows clearer as she looks at it, like a photograph being developed. She sees a house. She brings her face closer, her breath melting the snow in patches around her. She feels a tug. She looks for the monkey, but he is not there. Something pulls at the corners of her mind. She looks at the house. She sees red brick walls with white stucco accents. Four large windows, one at each corner. Heavy stone steps at the front. She feels the coarse ridges of raw stone rubbing against the soles of her bare feet. The front door is white - freshly painted. It gleams in the sun. She remembers the brass handle. Her

right hand grasps instinctively for the polished brass, her thumb flexes to press down on the latch. The brass, smooth and tarnished at the edges, grows warm in her hand. The door swings open. The familiar sound of cow bells echoes in the empty landscape of dark green marble.

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I never saw this strange dwelling again. Indeed, as I see it now, the way it appeared to my child's eye, it is not a building, but it is quite dissolved and distributed inside me: here one room, there another, and here a bit of corridor which, however, does not connect to the two rooms, but is conserved in me in fragmentary form. Thus the whole thing is scattered about inside me, the rooms, the stairs that descended with such ceremonious slowness, others narrow cages that mounted in a spiral movement, in the darkness of which we advanced like the blood in our veins.

- Rainer Maria Rilke - Notebook of Malte Laurids Brigge

THE ICON ABOVE THE DOOR

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MY FATHER WAS A RELIGIOUS MAN. After receiving my First Communion, he gave me an icon of the Blessed Virgin Mary. She fit in the palm of my hand – and she glowed in the dark. I turned her over so I could examine her from all sides. She was molded from a colourless, translucent plastic that grew warm in my hands. Her hair fell gently onto her shoulders, merging with the drapery of her dress. I could make out the expression on her face: stoic and faintly maternal. She was without age; she had the soft beauty of youth and the wisdom of many years. I cradled her in my palm until my father took her back. I watched as he placed her on top of the door frame in my room. From then on, she rested there and every day I worried she would topple over.

My father was a teenager when he received the icon from his brother, Peter, the only Catholic in their family of thirteen. ‘Peter’ was the

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name he picked for himself when he arrived in Canada, but to everyone in the family he was only known as ‘eldest brother’. My father was fourth to be born, and duly dubbed ‘fourth brother’. Like everyone else in Hong Kong, he grew up in an apartment building. He lived at 905 Canton Road, on the sixth floor. He remembers a time before toilets and showers. His family bathed in a large steel basin in the middle of the kitchen floor. One after the other. They took turns being first – it was only fair. By the end of the night, the water was thick and murky and clung to the skin. The last person bathing that day would be better off not washing at all. The toilet was a pail in the kitchen corner with a tattered cloth hung from a bamboo rod for privacy. An old lady came twice a day to empty the pail. The old lady climbed the nine flights of stairs in the building and collected the waste in two large pails carried in each hand. She was small and frail but carried the weight with ease. My father once said that everyone in Hong Kong is like that: small, frail and unexpectedly strong.

The building had a shared rooftop for the residents. The rooftop included a community garden with fruit trees grown in large terracotta planters and a small brood of chickens for a ready supply of fresh eggs. The rooftop was where my father and his brothers went up to play. From up there, they threw peanut shells and pebbles down

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onto pedestrians below. The rooftop was also where my father went to hide when he was in trouble.

When he was ten, his parents bought a radio. It was large and shiny with multiple functions. The radio had several dials and a pinging needle that flitted across the main display. It included a cassette player. The family could listen to their favourite songs by Dean Martin and Dinah Washington on demand. My grandparents didn't understand the words, but they knew the sentiment by the mooning melodies. My grandmother would hum to the music as she moved through the kitchen. She would close her eyes, sway her hips, drifting across the tiled floor with small rhythmic taps. My father, a young boy, would rush to her side and pull at her skirt.

'Mama! Mama! You're going to step on the turtle!'

Still with her eyes closed, she would reach for her son's hands, picking him up and twirling him in ever widening circles.

'Mama! The turtle! Watch out!' Less serious now, legs spinning in the air.

Of course she knew where the turtle was the entire time. The turtle roamed freely on the kitchen floor that was always covered in at least an inch of water. It was after dinner, so he was in the corner eating leftover scraps, out of harm's way.

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The radio also had a clock and an alarm. My grandfather owned a butcher shop and was up every day at four in the morning. He didn't need an alarm to get up, but enjoyed listening to morning show chatter and light music while everyone in the house was asleep. The best function of all was a small thermometer tucked away on one side. My father was fascinated with the bright red liquid that seemed to rise and fall of its own accord. The radio was the family's most prized possession. Even after several weeks, it was a novelty in the house. No one was allowed to touch it but the parents. Any attempt to play with the radio was met with a quick lash across the offending knuckles. A small bamboo duster next to the radio served as a constant warning to the kids.

It happened on a Sunday afternoon. The butcher shop was closed, and my grandfather offered to take the family to the movies. It was rare that the entire family went out together and a movie was a special treat. My father opted to stay home. It was just as rare to be alone in the house. His siblings shrugged as they left him behind. His loss, they thought as they raced down the stairs.

My father was finally alone. But first he had to make sure they were really gone. He climbed up to the rooftop to watch his family in the crowds below. He spotted his father's newsboy cap bobbing in the distance, and waited patiently for the cap to disappear into the

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sea of bobbing hats. Afterwards, he hurried down the three flight of stairs, darting between neighbours and the old lady with her pails. The stench of human waste followed the old lady wherever she went, but my father moved through the thick, warm air with ease and dashed into the apartment, shutting the door firmly behind him. As a final check, he raised up on his toes to look through the peep hole. He wanted to make sure the hallway was empty. It was. He paused to catch his breath.

He entered the kitchen and sauntered over to the wooden countertop by the window. The radio was on the window sill above the counter. His mother had left the cleaver on the counter along with flakes of garlic and shreds of ginger. Lunch had been a hasty affair to ensure they made the afternoon show. Safety first. He picked up the kitchen cleaver. It was heavier than it looked. He had to use two hands to properly grip the handle. The handle was cold with several nicks along its length. The broad thick blade could be a mirror if it wasn't so dull. He wiped down both sides of the blade and placed the knife in the drawer. Then, he wiped the counter with a warm rag.

He turned to the radio perched up on the sill. It was still brand new and my father admired the shiny aluminum shell. His mother kept the radio in pristine condition, wiping it daily for prints. He

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turned it on. Loud chatter burst through the speakers. He turned the volume down, spun the dial until he found a station he liked. He heard *Puff the Magic Dragon* by Peter, Paul and Mary, and left it on to play. He looked at the thermometer, fingered the delicate glass bulb at the base. The crimson liquid hovered steadily at thirty-eight degrees. He stared at it for a few moments, willing the liquid to rise without success.

He had an idea. He climbed up on the kitchen counter and rifled through the upper cabinets. He knew what he was looking for; the matches were tucked away in the back of the top shelf. He reached into the upper cabinet, fumbling blindly until he felt the sharp edge of a small book of matches. He scampered down and stood in front of the kitchen sink. He lit the first match, startled by the sudden burst of flame. He watched as the flickering flame moved steadily down the wooden shaft towards his thumb and forefinger. He tossed the match into the stainless steel bowl and watched as it fizzled out into a thin waft of steam. After several trials, he was ready for the radio. He lit his final match and placed it gingerly on the wooden counter, directly beneath the small glass bulb of the thermometer. There was an immediate effect: the red liquid shot up and through the glass casing. The tube shattered, spraying bits of glass all over the kitchen counter. But that wasn't all, the red liquid erupted all

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over the radio, hissing and sputtering. The shiny aluminum shell was stained with the red spray, and some of the buttons looked like they were melting. The match fizzled out as it did in the sink, but the damage was done. He started to cry. Quietly and to himself. He ran up to the roof to hide.

He stayed up there for hours, crouched between potted plants and hanging laundry. The rooftop surface was uneven with pools of stagnant water everywhere. The air was moist and earthy; if he closed his eyes he could imagine he was in a jungle. But today, he was distracted. The radio cost his parents a fortune. And it wasn't just their money – he was sure his older brothers chipped in as well. He sat with his knees pulled into his chest, head hanging low, shielding his neck with his arms. He stared at the small sliver of pock-marked floor between his bare feet. He didn't notice the mosquitoes darting between his knees and hands. He didn't even look up when the sun was setting, turning the pools of water into liquid gold. He kept his head down the entire time.

It wasn't until nightfall, he decided to go home. He dragged himself down the three flights of stairs, leaning heavily on the railing to one side. He could smell his mother's cooking from the hallway. His stomach clenched in hunger. No - he didn't deserve to eat. He pushed the door open with one hand and lumbered through the

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kitchen, heading straight for his room. Everyone was at the table for dinner. His spot was conspicuously empty. He averted his gaze and went straight to his room. His mother got up from her seat. He felt her follow him into the room he shared with his three older brothers. He climbed up onto his bed – he had the top bunk, Peter was on the bottom – and flung himself face down on his pillow. The pillow muffled his sobs but his entire body shook. He felt his mother’s hand. Her hand was cool and rubbed small circles on his back under his cotton shirt. First, she told him she loved him. Second, she told him she was glad he didn’t hurt himself. Finally, she told him that accidents happened – and the radio still worked perfectly. She already cleaned up the spill and it was like brand new except for the broken thermometer. No one was angry with him. She reached out, lifted him off the bed and onto the floor. Together, they walked back into the kitchen where he was greeted by the rest of the family. His brother, Peter, motioned to the empty chair beside him and prepared a bowl of rice with BBQ duck and garlicky greens for my father. My father was starving and devoured the bowl in seconds. His family watched him – all thirteen of them, laughing gently at his antics.

Despite the fact that my grandparents weren’t religious, they had a statue of a Chinese god in the vestibule of their apartment. The

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vestibule was small, less than three feet by three feet, but it was the only clear space in the apartment. Shoes were left outside in the public hallway, and just beyond the vestibule was the kitchen – the busiest room in the apartment. The statue was small, about a foot in height, and elevated above the floor on a small wooden plank. He was made of porcelain china, and painted in vivid colours. His robe, draped heavily over his knees in unmoving folds of sanguine red. His skin, a warm golden-pink with spots of rouge on his cheeks and lips. His eyes were smiling and framed by thick black brows. He had a moustache that curled upwards at both ends with a long black beard that fell into his lap. He sat with his arms outstretched, palms resting lightly on his knees, facing up, with a nugget of gold in one hand. He was the god of wealth and good fortune.

The small Chinese god was a fixture in the apartment like any other piece of furniture, hardly noticed by anyone, despite the fact that you walked past him at least twice a day. A plate of oranges was always set out in front of the statue. I saw the oranges every day, and somehow they were always fresh. I could tell by the crisp, citrusy scent that cut cleanly through the wet, dank smell of the rest of the apartment. When I asked my father about the oranges, he denied that his family took part in the outdated tradition. He seemed to have forgotten about the statue altogether. The oranges

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were a mystery to me: I wondered who put them there, who they were for and how they stayed fresh.

Another mystery is how Peter became Catholic. No one knows how he discovered the religion and what made him convert. In any case, he was the only Catholic in the family at the time. He was the first to leave Hong Kong, the first to set foot on a plane and the first to cross the Pacific Ocean. It was at the airport that he passed the icon into my father's hands, and how it eventually found its way to the top of my door frame. I don't know what prompted Peter to pass the icon to my father, but I imagine it was a last minute decision and that the exchange occurred hurriedly during the bustle of Peter's departure. I'm not sure my father knew the significance of the icon at the time, all he knew was that it was a token from his eldest brother. He slept with it under his pillow, and never mentioned to gift to anyone except for me.

I felt the same way after receiving the icon from my father; honoured to be entrusted with the heirloom, but acutely aware that neither my brother nor my sister received anything of the sort. Fortunately, the icon was small and hardly noticeable up on the door frame. Over the course of our childhood, my siblings passed under my doorway countless number of times, without once thinking to look up. The

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Blessed Virgin Mary became a constant for me, watching over me as I slept. I suffered from nightmares my entire childhood and my father told me she would help dispel my fears. I trusted him and came to trust her as well.

Those early years after my First Communion, I fell asleep under her watchful glow. My room was small, so I could see her from every angle. We had an open-door policy in our house, which meant no one was allowed to close their doors, not even when we changed our clothes or when we slept. My bed was pushed into the furthest corner, away from the door, so I could see my entire room and the open doorway as I fell asleep.

The hallway was dark, especially during the day. There were no windows there. Sometimes light would enter through our bedrooms and drift through the open door into the gloomy space. But even then, any hint of light was quickly absorbed into shadow. At night, there were nightlights placed strategically at both ends of the hallway. It was to help alleviate our fears of the dark, and also served for a practical purpose: my brother sleepwalked and my mother didn't want him bumping into things or falling down the stairs. I wasn't sure this helped; his eyes were always closed during these incidents anyway.

For me, the nightlights made things worse.

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The orange glow of the incandescent light brought the shadows to life. I watched them through the open doorway. They moved like a dark fog. They had a murky translucent quality as they drifted through the hallway and into our open rooms.

I was five the first time I was attacked by one. I still had my nightlight at the time. Its glow illuminated the front half of my room, diminishing near the doorway. I was on the edge of sleep when the shadow entered my room.

I felt its presence immediately. Instantly alert, my eyes sprang open. At first, I saw nothing out of the ordinary. I scanned the room, starting at the floor. The hardwood floor glowed dimly orange like waning embers. At the far end of the room, the pale lavender wall was marred with streaks of colour from when my brother and I finger-painted the wall. My eyes moved up the wall, above the small wooden shelf, to the mobile hanging from the ceiling by the door. One hundred multi-coloured paper cranes hung from invisible thread in a circle. The cranes hovered motionlessly in the air.

Then, a sound: a deep intake of air, a forceful rushing exhale. The delicate wings of the cranes began to tremble. They would have flown away if not tethered by invisible strings. The sound grew deeper, closer to where I lay. The low retching growl seemed

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to come from inside me, inside my ears, inside my head. That was when I saw it. The dark mass with tangled edges that were constantly bristling. It was blackest at the centre but faded outwards into cloudy translucency. It convulsed several times, shrinking and expanding as if taking big gulps of air. With its last breath, it attacked.

It sprang towards me, countless black tentacles wildly swarming. I screamed without noise. My eyes widened, refusing to close. Something pressed on me from above. I was paralyzed except for my eyes. My eyes, I could move, and they darted frantically in their sockets fixed on the dark mass. Its dark center opened; it was completely void in the middle. I could see through the open centre to the lavender wall beyond. I searched for something familiar, something harmless. I saw my stuffed animals up on the wooden shelf. I counted five in total: a duck-billed platypus, a parrot, a pink donkey, a white tiger and a turtle. The animals watched from a distance, helpless against the shadow. I struggled to breathe through my open mouth. The air smelled foul; I could taste the rancid notes on my tongue. I mustered the strength to move, nerves tingling at my fingertips and my toes, tendons taut and ready to spring. I bolted upright.

That same instant, the shadow retreated, fled through the open doorway, receded into the dark. I stayed awake the rest of the night,

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upright with my back against the bed rails and the covers pulled up high around my neck.

I grew terrified of sleep.

At night, I was completely alone in my wakefulness. Sometimes I crept out of bed and crouched in the doorway, listening for signs of life: my brother tossing in bed, my mother's raspy snores, my sister's incoherent mutterings.

After the Blessed Virgin Mary came into my room, things got better. I still had trouble sleeping, and would lay awake for hours but the shadow never returned. I fell asleep gazing up at her. She was small but she glowed brightly so I could be certain of her presence. Over the years, I rearranged my bedroom furniture several times. The desk moved from the back wall to the window, the chest of drawers to the side wall beside the closet, my bed from the corner by the window to the wall by the door. The Blessed Virgin Mary was the only constant in my room and over time I came to take her presence for granted.

I suppose Peter was the one to introduce my father to the Catholic faith, but it wasn't until he met my mother he converted. He was twenty-six when they met. My mother was a radiant beauty. At least that's what everyone said. I saw a painting of her once; she brought

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it with her from Hong Kong. It was painted with black ink on flimsy cream-coloured rice paper. Every brush stroke was apparent; every brush stroke had a purpose: two strokes tapered at the ends for the almond eyes, a swirl on either side of her face for the bobbed hair that framed her face, a vertical stroke for her sculpted nose, a delicate wave for her softly smiling lips – slightly open to reveal perfectly straight teeth. The painting is still somewhere in the house. Probably tucked behind a door in the basement.

They dated for two months before he proposed. When she asked him to convert it never occurred to him to refuse. He was young and in love.

The three of us, on the other hand, never had a choice. We were born into the religion the same way we were born into the family. In kindergarten they told us the story of our origins: the one about the storks. Couples who wanted a baby placed sweets along a window sill as a signal to the stork. The stork would return to its marsh, pluck a baby from the reeds and deliver the baby to the expectant and presumably happy couple. When I first heard this story I was struck by the inevitability of the baby's life. So, the baby doesn't have a choice. The stork picks and delivers the child at random. How can the fate of the child be subject to the whim of a stork?

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In my mind, however, even the stork did not have a say. I see unborn babies as floating spirits captive in large crystal jars. The jars stay up in the sky, above the clouds, out of sight. When a child is born, a jar drops from the skies and comes crashing down to earth. The spirit is released and finds its way into the body of a baby. There is no selecting hand here: the jars fall on their own, dropping where they will. It doesn't seem fair; we don't have a choice about where we end up. But it is the only way. Otherwise we would all pick the best families - the ones with the warm mothers and the strong fathers.

I don't know if my father grasped the significance of his religious conversion until much later in life. As children, we took turns reading the bible. Back then it was a book like any other; it was heavy with large text and brightly painted pictures. Every night, we sat on the floor, taking turns with the book in our laps, reading aloud to one another. The book became worn with time, the pages cracked at the spine, the glue crumbled in sticky flakes into our open palms. The spine was promptly fixed with a swathe of silver duct tape. We kept track of what we read by signing each page in the top corner with our initials. Every page was covered with the letters A, D, E, except for one - the story about the devil; the picture showed a purple-skinned man with flashing green eyes - I never read the text, I didn't want

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to know what it was about. I memorized the page numbers for this story and always skipped ahead.

By the time I was a teenager, I had forgotten about the large blue book barely held together with a thick swathe of crude tape. Until one day I came across my father at the kitchen table. I was thirteen, and had gone into the kitchen for a snack. I was surprised to find my father home from work so early. He sat at the kitchen table with his head in his hands. He didn't notice me until I sat down next to him. He looked shocked to see me and only after asking him why, did he say he had only just then noticed how much I was beginning to look like my mother. A thin film of tears clung to the surface of his eyes. It was the first time I saw my father cry. When I asked him what was wrong, he said our mother 'was his cross to bear.' He spoke these words with resignation, almost matter of fact. I don't know why but it made me think of the old blue book and I remembered the story about the cross. I thought about Jesus trudging through the crowds, body bent under the weight of the wooden cross and I thought about my father. I looked for the resemblance between these two men. I tried to understand their choices. Why would someone choose a life of burden?

My father grew more zealous with age, and as his children, we

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were subject to his religious inclinations as well. The religious spells appeared without reason, and we were forced to participate against our will. During these bouts, we said grace before meals and prayed the Rosary every night. Those were difficult times. The three of us coped in different ways. My brother recited the rosary in comedic accents, my sister spoke so quietly no one could hear, I sped through the prayers deliberately slurring the words to make them incomprehensible. Our only outlet was to make a mockery of it all. Luckily, these periods of extreme religion were short lived and dissipated as quickly as they came.

The only constant was Sunday mass. Once we were there, it didn't matter what we did. My parents never paid attention to us at church. Sometimes, we were scolded by other patrons, usually old ladies who reeked of talcum powder and spoiled perfume. They whipped their scrawny necks around with surprising speed and shushed us between wrinkled lips. When they turned back around we snickered at their smeared lipsticks and turkey necks.

We sat in those stiff-backed wooden pews counting the minutes until the hour had passed. In the mandatory classes leading up to my First Communion, I learned that the Catholic Church functioned with rigorous consistency. Every mass around the world is conducted in the same sequence, with the same words, albeit in different tongues.

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I passed the time thinking about all the people around the world, sitting in stiff-backed pews, standing up in unison, flipping down the front cushion with a collective thud, kneeling simultaneously. I was fascinated by the choreography of it all, and somehow comforted by the routine.

For me, the climax was when we all shook hands, when we reached out to one another with the words: *peace be with you*. When we were kids, it was fun. The three of us grabbed each other's hands, twisted fingers, tickled palms, or squeezed as hard as we could until the other person cried mercy. When I got older, I appreciated the gesture differently. We could exchange forgiveness and absolution in a single act. I could forgive my brother for borrowing my bike without asking; my sister could forgive me for throwing up in her bed. It was deceptively easy.

Even during our family vacation in Las Vegas, we went to church. We were teenagers by then, but still forced to go. We walked past the Western Union, where homeless people loitered by the sliding glass doors hoping to catch a gust of cool air or a charitable handout. We averted our gaze from the half-dressed skeletal women with their drooping breasts outside the clubs. As we walked, small cards fell in front of us as if from the sky. Advertisements for escorts and night clubs were everywhere on the sidewalks. We trudged through the

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litter, my parents leading the way, the three of us trailing behind.

When we reached the church, I was struck by how strange the building looked. It didn't look like a church at all. It was a small square building surrounded by parking lots and strip malls. At first glance, it looked like a utility shed. The inside had a basic altar at the front, a large wooden cross and twelve wooden pews - and most were empty. Light entered the space by some unseen opening and washed the walls in a gentle glow. The priest spoke softly, mostly to himself. He fidgeted while he spoke and avoided eye contact with everyone in the room. We sat in the second row, the three of us flanked on either side by our parents. Fifteen minutes in and my father was asleep. My mother, on the other hand, stared straight ahead the entire time, unblinking.

There were a handful of other parishioners in church that day. They all shared a distinctive look: eyes deep in sockets, cradled by bruised shadows and loose skin; sallow skin crumpling into the hollows of their cheeks; drooling thick lips; the persistent grinding of teeth between clenched jaws. We tucked our chins into our chests, burrowed our noses deep into the collars of our t-shirts to muffle the stench of cigarette ash, unwashed clothes, and drink.

When the moment came, I was the only one who leaned forward to shake the hand of the man in front of us - my father was asleep,

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my brother and sister were busy torturing a green lizard on the sandy floor with a stick, my mother was rifling in her purse for nothing at all. I reached forward to grasp his hand. His body swayed uneasily, hulking shoulders curled forward as he staggered towards me. The skin on his hand was coarse, scaly, hanging in loose webs between his fingers. His veins bulged without pulse. And his large hand trembled. I grasped his hand, firmly, to stay the tremors. He looked at me with moist and pleading eyes. Afterwards, my mother scolded me for having shaken his hand. She listed several infectious diseases she was certain he had. She could tell just by looking at him.

Back home, I stopped waking up for church. Sunday mornings, I lingered in bed. I listened as the rest of my family got ready. My brother in the washroom, door half-open, steady stream of urine against the porcelain bowl. My sister's feet dragging across the carpeted hallway to the washroom where she would shut herself in for the next twenty minutes. I remained in bed until the last possible moment, when my father would march up the stairs and drag me out. Nothing I said mattered: school deadlines or major tests were no excuse to miss church.

It was in Las Vegas, I realized the church was fallible, and people too.

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We could say words we didn't mean. The charade persisted; we shook hands (sometimes, and only with those who were clean) and spoke the words – hollow, and often without a smile – and immediately following mass, everything reverted back to what they were before. Our parents were still fighting. No one talked to each other and the car ride home was torturous. The three of us, crammed in the back seat, craning our necks as we stared out the windows at the scenery streaming by. We counted down the landmarks until we arrived home: *gas station, park, convenience store, pair of white oak trees – home*. As soon as our house came into view, we instinctively reached for the door handle, fingers taut to pull. The instant we drove up on the driveway, we sprang from the car, running each to our respective rooms. We couldn't face each other. We were all guilty of play-acting.

Either we were making a mockery of the church, or it was the other way around. It didn't matter either way. I turned away from Mary. I slept facing the wall. Her glow weakened over time until it faded altogether. I learned to sleep in the dark.

We kept up the church-going pretense for the next six years, until the day my father disappeared. I was eighteen. He left on a Saturday and the next day was the first Sunday we didn't go to church.

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SLEEP HAS ALWAYS ELUDED ME. At night, I was alone in my wakefulness. The heady silence in the house deadened all sounds of life except for the occasional throaty snore coming from my mother's room next door. Until one night, I started hearing a different sound. It came from above: a soft tap, that grew louder and more insistent as the night wore on. Over the span of several weeks, the sounds grew more varied. By then, I could pinpoint the different sounds: the *tap-tap-tap*, the persistent scratch, the occasional squeak. I should have been afraid, but I wasn't. The attic above seemed less a threat than the hallway just beyond my open door.

It was early fall, and I had just entered my first year of kindergarten. We were adjusting to the new routine. My mother returned to work, and my father dropped me off in the mornings and picked me up at noon. We ate lunch together – strawberry jam sandwiches with the crusts removed - while watching *The Flintstones*. Afterwards, my

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father went to the study and worked for the rest of the afternoon. He left the door open, but told me not to bother him unless it was an emergency, which meant if I was bleeding or sick. Those afternoons were long and tedious, and I can hardly remember now how I passed the time.

Mostly, I stayed in my room. I played near the window so I could see my brother and sister on their way home from school. When I spotted them walking down the narrow lane, I tidied up and waited for the sound of clanging cowbells to signal their return. My father would emerge from the study and chat with them for a few minutes before returning to work. The first tinkling notes of the piano would float up the stairs and by these sounds I knew my sister had settled down to practice and my brother would be free to play. Those two hours before our mother came home were precious and we took care not to squander them.

The first thing I remember about that afternoon was that it was raining. We had to stay inside. My brother and I were playing hide and seek. My sister was practicing her scales on the piano; playing the same eight notes in an endless loop. She plunked each key with deliberate emphasis, pausing between notes. Each note hung in the air for several seconds before fading away. It was my turn to hide. I listened for my brother counting down the seconds. *One, Three, Six,*

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Ten. I examined several spots before settling behind the old leather armchair. The one facing the piano. This was our mother's throne, the wooden broom, her sceptre. Every wrong note or missed chord was met with a violent thump on the floor. I tread carefully here, avoiding the small circular marks in the carpet by the chair.

The armchair was pushed back into the corner, leaving only a small wedge of space to stand. I stood stiffly in the corner, my cheek against the back of the chair. The leather felt smooth against my skin, smelling faintly of wax. When my sister paused between scales, I listened for my brother. I heard my brother check the usual spots: the front coat closet, under the dining room table, behind the kitchen door. He entered the living room, asked my sister if she had seen me. The piano playing stopped abruptly. The steady rain beat against the window to my right. I couldn't hear what she said. The piano playing resumed. My sister was on the lower half of the piano now, deep, ominous notes rising as if from the bottom of the sea. I imagined my brother moving through the room. Under the coffee table, behind the large wooden TV.

He was close.

I heard the rustling of heavy drapes.

He was next to the chair now.

Then, a sudden chord on the piano that sounded like a roar.

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My sister's hands crashing down on the keys. A slipped finger, a wrong note. If my mother was here she would bang on the floor. The mismatched chord squealed painfully in my ear. I sprang out from behind the chair.

My brother was only half-surprised to see me. He said he didn't think to check behind the chair because there was hardly any room to stand. He looked me up and down and said, well I guess only you would be small enough to fit back there. I smiled up at him triumphantly. He leaped up on the seat cushion and peered over the back rest at the small wedge of space where I was standing moments earlier.

'Hey! What's that?'

He reached over and pulled out a long wooden rifle. I hadn't noticed it in the shadows. My brother was instantly distracted by his discovery. The gun was long, at least a metre in length. It had a long wooden handle, reddish-brown, polished with a glistening varnish. The barrel was steel gray with a dusky metallic finish. He ran his palm along the steel barrel. He turned the gun over looking at it from all angles. He grasped the handle with his left hand, slipped his right forefinger into the small loop with the trigger. He brought the rifle to his shoulders.

Leaping up on the sofa, he sprang from cushion to cushion, then

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along the back rest, teetering on its edge. He took aim at the small vase above the fireplace. *Pow!* He swivelled around to the trophies above the piano. *Pow! Pow!* He aimed up towards the crystal chandelier. *Pow! Pow! Pow!* The chandelier swayed above, threatening to fall. It was then my father came rushing into the room. He wrenched the gun from my brother's grasp and called the three of us over.

We sat on the sticky leather sofa with our feet dangling over the edge of the seat. My father lay the gun across his knees with the barrel pointing away from us towards the far wall. He looked at the gun in his lap. His hands traced the wooden handle, skipped across the steel barrel, fingered the trigger. Several moments passed in silence. My brother squirmed in his seat, the leather creaked under his weight. The slight sound seemed to remind my father we were there.

'This is not a toy...A gun is a serious weapon. Never point it at anyone. I mean it. Promise me.' He spoke solemnly and with pleading tones.

He watched us intently as we nodded our heads. When he was satisfied with our response, he spoke again, this time with a cheerful air. He asked if we would like to go up north to try hunting together. My brother nodded enthusiastically. I said nothing. I thought about the deer, squirrels, and rabbits, and couldn't bear the thought of

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shooting them. My sister didn't answer; she was anxious to return to the piano. Our mother would be home soon and would be angry if my sister wasn't practicing. Our father got up, slipped the gun behind the armchair and my brother and I picked up our game where we left off.

Only I was disappointed that the gun had distracted from my victory that last round.

My father came to Toronto in the 1970's. He had just completed his Masters of Engineering with Georgia Tech in the United States. He was offered jobs in the U.S., but chose to go to Canada instead. A good thing, I guess, since otherwise he might not have met my mother.

When he first arrived in Toronto, he shared an apartment in High Park with other immigrants. There were five of them; the Mexican, the Indian, the African, the Russian and my father, the Chinese guy. They communicated in broken English but still managed to foster comradery between them. They set themselves to learning about their new home by visiting the local Canadian Tire. The store was filled with all sorts of outdoor equipment: hunting gear, fishing tackle, camping equipment. Everything was in shades of army green and woodsy browns. They each picked out something

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different: a tent, a fishing rod, an outdoor stove, an inflatable raft, a rifle. They promised to share. My father got the rifle. They planned to take a trip to test out the equipment, to experience the great north, but as far as I know the trip never happened. Of course, the five of them had graduated at the top of their class, and were offered jobs immediately. They each went their separate ways taking with them their small token. My mother didn't know about the gun. There was no way she would let him keep it. Even though it wasn't loaded and no one, except my father, knew where the lead pellets were kept. It remained behind the old leather armchair, and the three of us never revealed its secret.

The days grew short and the nights grew cold. The sounds in the attic grew louder, the tapping more frequent. I could tell by the rhythm that something was moving across the rafters. The rustling sound above me reminded me of dry, crisp, leaves on sidewalks crackling under our feet. More squeaking, more squealing, like the soft mew of a cat. By now, my mother had noticed the sounds as well. Less tolerant than I, she took the issue up with my father.

'It's so loud, especially at night. I can't sleep through the racket!'

My father stood in the doorway of her room, leaning heavily against the wooden frame. His feet stood just shy of the thin brass

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strip separating the brown carpet of the hallway and the hardwood floor of her room.

'I don't know what noise you're talking about. I would have to go into the attic to check.'

'So go! What are you waiting for?'

'Well, can I come inside then? I need to access the hatch from your walk-in closet.'

'Hah! That's a convenient excuse to snoop through my things. I don't think so. Don't you dare come in here. Find another way. You're *so* smart – *Mr. Engineer.*'

We spent the following Saturday outside. My brother and I raked leaves, while my father checked the roof for holes. My father stood on a ladder leaning unsteadily against the front of our house. Every time I collected a pile of leaves, my brother ran through it ruining my efforts. I started wrecking his piles too and before we knew it, the front yard was covered in more leaves than before. We grew giddy from the activity and collapsed onto a bed of leaves to catch our breath. We lay flat on our backs staring up at the sky. My brother counted clouds while I watched my father up on the roof. He examined every tile within his reach. Only now, do I realize how futile his efforts were.

Our house was at least fifty years old at the time. It stood out on

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a street of ranch-style bungalows; it was the only two-storey house back then. The front steps are made of massive stone slabs, a false pediment is supported with decorative pilasters, a pair of gleaming white solid wood doors stands proudly in the centre with four large windows at each corner of the façade. The walls are bright red brick with white stucco accents. The house is defined by its front façade; the other walls are nondescript, plain red brick, hardly memorable at all, receding into the background. When my grandmother came to visit from Hong Kong, my mother exclaimed proudly that the largest house on the street was owned by us - the only Chinese family in the neighbourhood. My grandmother's only response: a quiet grunt to acknowledge what she heard.

The roof is especially unique. Every other house on the street has flat, gray shingles, while ours has curving, clay tiles, brightly coloured in Mediterranean red. Each curve concealed a possible opening into the attic. There are thousands of tiles on the roof and it would be impossible to check each one. My father moved methodically along the front of the roof, concentrating on the area above my room and my mother's. Every so often he plugged an opening with a rock. He spent the entire afternoon like this and when he came down he didn't even notice that the leaves hadn't been raked.

The sounds in the attic continued, but by then, I had grown

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accustomed to them and stopped noticing them altogether.

I did notice however, the squirrels in the backyard. One day after lunch, I spotted them through the kitchen walkout. My father had just returned to the study when I saw something on the deck outside the kitchen. The squirrel was small, with jet black fur and a wispy twitching tail. We watched each other through the glass. I saw two more in the far corner of the yard, but only this one came so close. I cracked the glass door open an inch, ensuring the screen beyond was firmly in place. The sudden movement startled the squirrel and she dashed to the far corner of the yard. I opened the door all the way, and stepped out onto the deck. My father built the deck over the summer and the varnish was still fresh. The wood gleamed like ice beneath my feet. I rose up on my toes to peer over the railing. The three squirrels were huddled together, bodies upright, stiff and bristling as they stared back at me with shining black eyes.

The next day, after lunch, I noticed the same squirrel on the deck. She took tentative steps, practically crawling with her front paws, leaping backwards abruptly, defeating her earlier efforts. Every day, she returned, and every day she came a little closer. I never opened the door again for fear of scaring her off. I watched from inside.

Then I got an idea. My father had been leaving the discarded

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crusts from our sandwiches on the kitchen table. I grabbed one of the crusts and tore it into small pieces. Slowly, gently, I eased open the sliding door. The squirrel grew tense; her tail sprang upright, her entire body trembled. But she didn't leave. I tossed out a crust and quickly closed the door.

At first, she didn't move. The crust lay halfway between the walkout and where she stood. Her eyes darted back and forth between the crust and the walkout door. Several minutes passed with no movements on either side of the glass. Finally, she bent down and crept forward. She inched towards the crust, her eyes fixed on me through the glass. Within a foot of the crust, she leaped forward, snatched it between her teeth. She took off into the far corner of the yard, and disappeared into the hedge.

Every day after she returned for more. She never came any closer, and I never stepped outside. It never crossed my mind that she might have come to rely on me, that animals, like us, were creatures of habit. I never thought about what would happen if one day I wasn't there.

It happened that one day after school, instead of going home, my father took me to the dentist. I spent the car ride remembering what happened the last time I was there. The dentist wielded torture

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devices; giant needles and curved hooks were wedged violently between your teeth. The last time I was there, I kicked him several times in the shins. I was there the entire afternoon – my father told me later it was four hours, he knew because that was the time he had to make up at work. We drove up to the parking lot and I refused to get out of the car. My father had to pick me up and carry me into the dental office. If I was good, he would take me out for ice cream after. I knew what I would get: rainbow sherbet from Baskin Robbins.

I settled into the examination chair while my father sat in the corner of the exam room, flipping through a Reader's Digest. I let the nurse prod my mouth and clean my teeth. I let her take x-rays. I kept an eye on my father the entire time, willing him to look up from his magazine. *See? See, how good I am?* The dentist came in after and examined my teeth. He patted me on the head and went to my father. No cavities this time. After hearing these words, I sprang from my seat and rushing to my father's side.

'Let's go! Let's go!' I yanked on his hand, pulling towards the door. My father laughed, grabbed hold of me, tossing me up on his shoulders. He hadn't done that for a while. I sat on his shoulders, my hands in his hair, as we went next door to Baskin Robbins.

The first thing we noticed when we got home, was my mother's car in the driveway. She was home from work, which meant we

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had stayed out longer than we should have. We got out of the car and walked solemnly up the steps. We paused in front of the door, exchanging looks. *Hope she isn't mad. Just say the dentist appointment ran late. No need to mention the ice cream.* We nodded at each other. My father inserted the key and pressed down on the latch, easing the door open in slow motion. Even the cow bells hanging from the inside handle didn't make a sound.

Neither of us noticed the squirrel until she darted between us and into the house. Flash of black fur. Coarse fur against my leg. We rushed into the house leaving the door wide open. We stood in the foyer in wide-legged stances with bent knees and outstretched arms as if we could catch the squirrel with our bare hands. We didn't know where she went. She had disappeared into the dark; her black fur impossible to spot. We stood in the foyer considering the possibilities. From the front entrance, she could have gone to the right, down the basement stairs. Or else she could have gone left into the living room which would loop around into the dining room, the kitchen and back into the foyer. In this case we should be able to spot her. Or else - and this last possibility we dreaded most of all - she could have dashed straight up the flight of stairs, onto the second floor.

My father headed for the basement. He crept noiselessly down

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the stairs and flicked on the basement lights. Except for the growing hum of the fluorescent tubes, the house was still. I didn't need my father to tell me to search the main floor. I started in the living room, peered behind brocade curtains, under sticky leather sofas and behind the old leather armchair. I moved onto the dining room, the kitchen and back into the foyer. Nothing. My father came up the stairs and I could tell by his face there was no sign of her down there either. Neither one of us wanted to consider the possibility that the squirrel had gone upstairs.

We didn't have long to wait. My mother's shriek rang through the house. Shrill with fear, heavy with rage. I ran upstairs, leaping over two steps at a time. I reached the top of the stairs and turned onto the hallway. My mother was at the other end. She stood just outside her room. Her face was unnaturally white, and her short black hair splayed outwards at the ends. She whipped around when she heard me and hissed between clenched teeth. I froze at the top of the stairs with my right hand glued to the railing.

My father rushed up the stairs. It was dark, but I recognized his silhouette, the sound of familiar steps. He carried something in his hands - the rifle from behind the leather chair. He brushed past me at the top of the stairs, and only after he passed me did I follow him down the hall. He moved quickly, with determination. As we

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neared my mother, I saw her open her mouth to speak. A deep intake of breath, a long hard swallow, and the accusations would come tumbling out her open mouth. My father was the target. He would be barraged with a thousand poison-tipped arrows.

But before that could happen, my father brought the gun to his shoulders. He stood in the doorway to my mother's room, not a single toe beyond the thin brass strip on the floor. I had seen that position once before in my recent past.

My brother - Pow!

The blast was louder than my brother's play-acting yelps, but quieter than I expected. A single shot, and it was over. My father marched directly into my mother's room – no one was allowed to do that – and emerged with the squirrel. He held her by the tail. She hung straight down, sagging limply between his forefinger and thumb. My mother shrank to one side to let him pass.

I knew immediately that it was my squirrel. I recognized the tail – wispy with sparse hairs and a distinctive spray of light gray across her back. Her eyes were open and dull like cheap plastic beads. I trailed my father down the stairs and out the door. I scouted a spot for the burial. I went to the farthest corner of the backyard, framed on three sides by cedar bushes, and marked the spot. My father returned with the shovel. The soil was soft from an earlier rainfall;

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the light fragrance of cedar mingled with after-rain mist. My father placed the squirrel gingerly into the small ditch and after a final gaze, we covered her body with loose dirt. My father used the back of the shovel to pack the dirt firmly into the ground, and replaced the overturned patch of grass. No words were exchanged the entire time. I spoke a few silent words in my head, perhaps my father did too. Less a prayer, and more of an apology to the dead creature.

I didn't make the connection at the time, but I remember noticing that the sounds in the attic stopped shortly after the squirrel's death. They didn't stop all at once. There were a few small squeaks, accompanied by a feeble mewling that faded gently into silence. It was as if the volume dial was slowly turned down low, until it was switched off completely.

FEAR OF GLASS

ESTABLISHED IN TWO SEPARATE INCIDENTS

First Incident

I WAS VERY YOUNG when I found out about my mother. I was three. I learned about my mother the same way I learned about everything else; the sky is blue, water is wet, ice is cold and my mother – she is the way she is.

It was a Saturday afternoon. My brother and I were playing hide and seek. The ground floor was our playground. There were several hiding spots to choose from: behind the brocade curtains in the living room, between coats in the front closet, tucked behind the open kitchen door. The possibilities were endless, and I was small - I could fit almost anywhere. The hard part was waiting; staying still and not making any noise. Sometimes when the suspense proved too much, I sprang out at my brother from wherever I was hiding and we would fall on the floor laughing with relief and exhilaration.

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The house was particularly quiet that day. I heard my brother's padded footsteps as he crept across the living room carpet. A pair of french glass doors stood between the living and dining rooms. These doors were always open and swung into the living room, laying flat against adjacent walls. It was behind these doors, I hid. I stood upright, my back against the wall behind me. I swung the door open as wide as possible without squishing my face against the glass. I wanted the door to appear carelessly thrown open like it always was. I knew it was a risk, hiding in plain sight. My brother could see me through the glass - if he thought to look. I kept my eyes tightly shut, as if this way he wouldn't be able to see me.

I heard him growing nearer. I plotted his movements in my head. A painful squeal of metal scraping stone - he removed the metal grate covering the fireplace. The rustling of dry ash - he prodded at the dusty hearth. A faint growl of heavy furniture shifting against carpet floor - he pushed the old leather armchair out of the corner. Rustling of heavy drapes- he checked both ends of the room where there were windows. He moved through the room, methodically and stealthily, not missing a single spot from previous games.

He drew close to where I was. He was by the piano. I was directly across from him, barely concealed behind a pane of glass. If he turned around, he would see me. I sucked in my stomach, held my breath.

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Nothing happened. I eased one eye open, to see where he was. He had moved onto the wooden chest containing piano books, flipping the lid open to see if I was curled up inside. He came towards the doors and walked right past me into the dining room.

My face flushed with excitement. I never beat my brother at hide and seek. I decided to let him search a little longer. I was less nervous now and decided if he returned to the living room, I would jump out at him and exclaim my victory. My body remained taut, ready to spring at any moment.

Several minutes passed. Maybe longer, I couldn't be sure. Someone entered the room. I didn't recognize the footsteps. My brother wore thick woolen socks that fell softly on the carpeted floor. These footsteps were different – they hardly made a sound. The person was barefoot – like me. My parents both wore slippers that slapped loudly on every surface with every step. My sister wore socks like my brother. I was the only one who refused to wear either and ran around the house barefoot – like a coolie, my mother said with disdain, like a coolie, my father said with amusement.

I opened my eyes and peered through the thick glass. I was behind a classic french door; a thick wooden frame with slender mullions formed a grid across the glass. Each square of glass was about four by four inches. The glass was thicker in the centre and

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thinned out towards the edges. When I looked through the glass at my brother, it was easy to recognize the familiar figure, the familiar movements. But now, looking through the thick and uneven glass towards the unknown figure at the other end of the room, I had the sudden impression of being in a fishbowl; everything on the other side was blurred and distorted.

It was my mother.

I recognized her small frame. She stood by the sofa at the front of the room. Her right arm jutted out from her body, bending awkwardly at the elbow. She flailed her arm, feeling for the sofa. Finding it, she collapsed onto the seat. The leather groaned under the weight. She turned towards the back of the sofa. Then, she was completely still.

It was the middle of February, the sun set early at four in the afternoon. The last of the sun's rays slipped into the room. The light grazed the short-haired carpet, revealing the fine texture of the individual fibers. It crept along the floor, finding the mahogany coffee table, highlighting the blood-red veins running through the ornately carved table. It reached the sofa where my mother lay. I should be able to see her now, almost with complete clarity if not for the uneven glass. The light crept up the front of the sofa, intensifying the fine lines streaming across the leather skin, and illuminated

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the body: smooth, supple, skin, porcelain in texture, with slightly golden undertones. She was completely naked. She faced the back of the sofa, only her back was exposed. Her spine was a prominent ridge that curved down the length of her body. Individual vertebrae protruded from her neck curling in towards the couch. Her body pulled tightly inwards, in fetal position. She was a boulder of flesh and skin— hardly human at all.

I remained behind the door, observing from a distance.

The front door opened – gently – I could tell by the feeble clinking of cowbells hanging on the door handle. A familiar scent wafted through the house - something savoury, heavily spiced and fried. My stomach clenched in hunger. I tapped lightly on the door, slipped out from behind. Keeping an eye on my mother, I spun around, dashed through the doorway into the dining room and from there, into the kitchen. My brother and sister were already there, quietly sitting at the dinner table, taking tentative and solemn bites of fried chicken. KFC was rare in the house; it was a special treat and a sign that something was wrong. The only time we ate KFC was when my uncle brought it over. And if my uncle was here, it meant something was wrong.

Uncle Phillip was my mother's youngest brother. He was a slight and shifty man, nervous around children. He had large round eyes

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that peered through thick framed glasses. He didn't speak much and when he did it was with simple words slurred between thick and fumbling lips. He was like a mute, frustrated by his inability to speak, but he was gentle in his looks and gestures. If not for him, we would have gone hungry whenever my parents fought – which was often. He seemed to have a supernatural sense and always showed up when something was wrong: either my parents were fighting or it was something worse.

After dropping off the bucket of KFC in the kitchen, he mumbled a few incomprehensible words, gripped my brother firmly on the shoulder and went into the living room. He stayed there for the rest of the evening. Even as the sun set, and the room settled into darkness, he never left my mother's side. He covered her with a nearby throw and sat silently beside her. Every so often, I heard him speak in soothing tones, in Cantonese – our mother tongue. He urged her to get up, to put on some clothes, to go into her bedroom. He called her by her pet name, the one used only by her own family, not us. We finished eating, washed the dishes, streamed silently up the stairs into our rooms. No one spoke for the rest of the evening. No one moved either. The three of us stayed in our rooms while my mother and uncle remained downstairs. The house grew dark and the hallway still with the steady rhythm of sleeping breath.

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Only I was still awake and decided to check on my mother. I got out of bed and tiptoed across the hardwood floor of my room. I reached the doorway and peered outside. The nightlights glowed steadily at both ends of the hallway leaving a small patch of dark in between. The house was completely still. Even the shadows rested in their nooks. I left my room and made my way down the long, narrow, hall. The orange glow burned brightly, wayfinding beacons washing the walls, floors and ceilings with their comforting warmth. I tread slowly, noiselessly, through the hall. Grasping tightly onto the railing to my left, I leaned heavily on the wood posts to avoid putting weight on the creaking floors. I reached the top of the stairs and crouched down at the landing. I slid down the stairs, palms catching me on either side, as my feet reached forward for the next step below. We used to slide down the stairs like this for fun - but this time it was for stealth. My feet fell from the last carpeted step onto polished marble floor – dark green tiles that felt cold on my bare feet. I sat on the bottom step of the stair, leaned forward, and peered through the open doorway into the living room.

The moon cast a soft blue light into the room. It was easy to see the two silhouettes. My mother was sitting upright with a blanket wrapped around her shoulders. Her body trembled uncontrollably, causing the blanket to slip down her narrow frame. Beside her, my

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uncle pulled the blanket up every time it fell. My mother's face was stark white and glowed with blue undertones. Her full head of hair was a true black colour that melted into the surrounding dark. The moonlight illuminated her naked body. Her skin had a smooth and powdery texture like plaster sanded down to a smooth finish. Her eyes, two shining black circles with large glittering pupils focused intently on something in front of her. Even in this state, she exuded an uncanny beauty. Her body upright, stiffly, as if on a throne. She looked regal, terrifying – like the Queen from Snow White. My uncle looked small beside her, her great figure diminishing his own. He cowered as he patted her shoulders, speaking softly in soothing tones.

Something bolstered me to approach. I crept into the room. My uncle looked up, alarmed, eyes wide, as he gestured for me to leave. I continued to move towards my mother. I stood directly in front of her, gazed into her open eyes. Her pupils were dilated and glittering. There was no sign of recognition. She didn't see me at all.

I crawled up on the sofa despite my uncle's silent protests. The sofa squeaked under the added weight. I nestled between the arm rest and my mother. The leather felt sticky against the back of my thighs. I rested my cheek against her upper arm. Her skin was cool, her flesh unyielding.

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'Mama, it's me. Say something, *please*.'

I started to cry.

It's catatonia, the doctors said. That was how they described her state of immobility and stupor. What a beautiful name for something so frightening. Watch out for the triggers, they said, recognize them so you can avoid them. After the doctors left, my father pulled us outside, we stood at the far corner of the back yard, huddled behind the treehouse, so my mother couldn't hear. Your mother's sick, he said, we need to help her. She needs us. We can't ever leave her.

Second Incident

MY ROOM WAS SMALL, but it was my own. The walls were pale lavender with a floral trim running along the top. I had a bed, a desk and a large chest of drawers. All three pieces were white. My bed had ornate metal railings on three sides with four posts at the corners, each topped with a round glistening knob. Even now, I can remember these bed knobs with complete clarity. The knobs were perfect spheres, fitting neatly in the hollow of my palm. They were made of porcelain and they were heavy – I knew their weight from when one rolled off by accident and fell on my foot leaving behind a nasty bruise. They were fixed to the posts with a long and sturdy screw. Over the years, the connection weakened, and the knobs fell askew, rolling about in their cradle at the slightest nudge. The knobs were white and painted with delicate flowers all the way around, and

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topped with a shiny brass plate. They were cool to touch and I used to sit at the edge of the bed swirling my palms around the knobs in light buffing motions pretending they were crystal balls.

My room was rectangular, the short end faced the front of the house. This wall was hardly a wall at all; it had a large window that spanned the entire width of the wall, and almost all the way to the ceiling. Of the two longer walls, one was broken up by the closet and the entrance doorway. That meant the bed – the largest piece of furniture in the room – could only be located along the opposite wall, across from the closet and the doorway, directly next to the large window. From here, I could see the closet, the door, and the window. At night, when I couldn't sleep I gazed out onto the streets with its silken pavement basking in the warm orange glow of the street lamp overhead.

For several years, I slept with my head closest to the window, until one night when something happened, that even now I cannot explain. I was six, and for once, had fallen asleep on my own. Most nights, I had trouble sleeping and ran to my father for a bedtime story. It wasn't the story I needed, but the comfort of his presence in my room. He sat at the plastic desk chair at the other end of the room and told me fantastic Chinese legends about monkeys, pigs, and beautiful villainous women with knife-edged fans. The stories

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started strong, but after several minutes, sleep seeped into his voice, and the stories would taper off without conclusion. His head would fall into his chest and bob up and down to the steady rhythm of his breath. Only then would I doze off and I suppose at some point my father would wake and slip silently from my room for he was never there when I woke the next day.

On this night, I had managed to fall asleep on my own. I slept soundly for a couple hours until I was awakened by movements outside my window. Alternating flashes of incandescent glow and shadow slipped into my room through venetian blinds that were slightly open. Something was moving on the other side of my window. There were no trees outside, and I was up on the second floor. Then, my room went dark. Whatever it was, it had stopped moving. It had to be big, if it could blot out the entire glow from the street lamp. I bolted upright and pulled the blanket up around my neck. My skin was wet with sweat even as chills spread throughout my body. I braced myself, leaned forward, my head low with eyes just above the sill. Reaching forward with my right hand – my left hand gripped the blanket tightly around my shoulders – I spread the blinds apart with thumb and forefinger. I peered out through the narrow slit and felt immediately, the presence of an immense creature on the other side of the glass. I retreated to the farthest corner of the bed.

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I thought of running to my mother's bedroom next door, but remembered what happened the last time. I had woken up from a nightmare, stumbled into my mother's room, my face slick with tears, my body shivering with cold sweat. I stood in her doorway for several minutes before crossing into her room. I watched my mother from a distance. She slept on her back with her feet straight down, her arms resting stiffly on either side of her body. A blanket wound tightly around her body except for her arms which rested on top of the thick duvet. Her hair fell heavily on her pillow, snaking down the sides of her face in treacherous coils wrapped around her neck. Only the tip of her nose protruded beyond the edge of the black band that covered her eyes. Her mouth was open and released a slightly sour odour that reminded me of yogurt gone bad. Her breath was hoarse leaving her body in short, uneven bursts. If not for the snoring, it would be easy to mistake her for a corpse.

I crept to her side, nudged her gently, whispered that I had a nightmare, that I was afraid. I waited for a response. She remained still. The black band covered her eyes completely. I stared at the tip of her nose and the small pointed lips that barely moved even when she finally spoke. She gave little reassurance, nor did she offer to let me crawl into bed beside her. She told me to stand by the foot of the bed, to tell her my nightmare. I did as I was told, despite being

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keenly aware that I would be standing in front of the walk-in closet.

The walk-in closet was a cavernous space, with endless racks of heavy fur coats, the perfect hiding spot for monsters. I stood in front of the closet with my hands gripping the foot of her bed. I told her my dream, I started at the beginning. Within seconds, the raspy snores resumed. The forceful rush of air and the rancid smell of vinegar stung my nose. The walk-in closet loomed menacingly behind me. I knew then that I would be safer in my room instead of here, with the monsters behind me and my mother in front. My mother, the corpse with the prickly and stinging breath.

I heard a low squeaking sound as it rubbed up against the glass. A slow sweeping gesture like the windshield wiper in a car. It blocked the street light from coming into my room, and except for the faint glow from my nightlight, I was left in the dark. I peered through the blinds a second time. At first, I couldn't see anything at all. I faced an impenetrable dark. Darker even then when I closed my eyes. It was as if a heavy black shade was drawn on the other side of the window.

The monster was directly in front of me, pressed up against the glass. I stared into the dark, urging some shape to form. A glimmer in the dark. A flash of metallic forest green. The thing bristled. The dark surface revealed its speckled texture. It was the skin of

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a gigantic reptilian creature. The skin, deep green with streaks of metallic scales. Tiny blisters erupted with green and oozing pus. It pressed up against the window pane leaving streaks of moisture and mucus on the glass. The pores on the skin expanded and contracted and I could hear the low exhalations of moist breath. Its skin covered the entire surface of my window. I retreated to the far corner of my room and waited for the creature to leave.

I fell asleep, waking up several hours later to discover I was bitten by the monster and like the bite of a vampire, I was transforming into a monster myself. I could feel the venom coursing through me erupting at the surface of my body. A prickling sensation rippled through my skin. I was filled with terror and shame: what if my family saw me like this? What would they think? I ran down the hall, to the linen closet at the other end. The dark, humid space was comforting. Stacks of folded towels surrounded me on three sides like a padded room in a sanitorium. I was incredibly thirsty. Thank goodness for the pail of water by my feet. I tipped the pail into my mouth, drinking in noisy gulps. I drank until none was left and dropped the pail from hands that had become gnarled and hooked with sharply curving claws. I was shedding, large, flakes of skin, leaving behind patches of raw pink flesh, shining with pus. Dark scales appeared where once my skin was smooth, and from these scales, a mucus-like substance

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secreted forming a hard and crusty membrane. I felt cramped in the closet and the small space soon filled with a rank and musty odour that came from my own breath and body. My breath smelled faintly sour, reminding me of yogurt gone bad. The smell of vinegar hung in the air and stung my nose. I waited patiently for morning to come.

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WHEN I WAS YOUNG, I sprang lightly over the large green tiles of our foyer, touching the marble with only the balls of my feet. The foyer was a swamp, and we used to imagine alligators there, swarming.

The front door swings shut, on its own, obliterating all traces of the outside world. The only light that enters is through two slender windows flanking the doors, but even there, the blinds are drawn shut, so only the most aggressive shards of light can pierce through. A step past the threshold is a step into a pool of dark green marble. Now faced with darkness, tinged with green. The air is cool, damp. The ground should be wet, but it isn't – it's smooth, slippery, and it's cold - a shock to bare feet.

Only when my feet feel the comforting, plush, carpet of the first step of the stairs, am I safe from the gaping jaws. Thirteen steps up to the second floor and faced with a new dark. This darkness is warm, a soft brown hue like the carpet under my feet. Here, the darkness is

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a comfort, wrapping warmly around my shoulders like a soft suede shawl. There are no windows, no skylights, no openings for light to enter. During the day, only the strongest rays of light make it through bedroom windows, then open doors, into the hallway where it appears faintly, weakly, before fading into the warm, moist, darkness of the hall.

My sister's bedroom is first at the top of the stairs. The second largest bedroom in the house. My brother's bedroom is next to hers. He painted the walls himself when he turned sixteen – scarlet red: strong, bold to dissuade trespassers. From here, a sharp turn into the long, narrow hall, leads to the rest of the rooms at the far end: my mother's and my own. The bathroom is in the middle, breaking up the length of darkness with a faint wash of light coming in through the open door. A sharp bend from the straight and narrow corridor leads to my room, then my mother's at the very end. The hallway ends where my mother's room begins. The warm, soft, darkness of the hall spills into the cool, black, suffocating, space of her room.

The small square slice of hall outside my room belongs to me. It is the front porch of my room. From here, I can see down the length of the hallway, into the open doors of my brother's and sister's rooms as well as the washroom to the right. I have a clear view of the stairs, and through two layers of railing, a triangular slice of the

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downstairs foyer. I considered this spot to be my perch. From here, I could glean most of what was going on in the house. From here I watched, gripping tightly onto the railings on either side of my face, as they took my mother away.

I was four at the time, too young to join my brother and sister at swimming lessons. I was at home with my parents. We were having dinner at the kitchen table. The table was a warm, ivory, marble with a crystalline texture and light gray veining throughout the surface. I traced the veins with my finger, enjoying the fluid movement. The table was cool to touch, refreshing, like vanilla ice cream. No one talked. At some point, my father stood up and went over to the kitchen island. He leaned over the island, palms flat against the counter, shoulders hunched, and took a deep breath. He sighed - forcefully, loudly, the gust of hot air fogging up the stainless steel surface of the counter.

I looked at my mother. She sat across from me, at the other end of the long table. She sat upright, her hands outstretched in front of her, palms down on the cool marble surface. Her dark eyes grew large, blacker than before. Her small pointed lips set in her face, shining with a hint of grease. The small bowl in front of her remained untouched. No one was eating. Platters of food sat steaming and still

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at the centre of the table. I picked at the rice in front of me, one grain at a time. I held each grain, delicately, between chopsticks, turning it over, studying it, before placing it in my mouth. My father paced the length of the kitchen island. Except for the shuffling of his feet, the room was silent.

My father shook his head eyes glued to the stainless steel counter. My mother's lips smacked noisily together. She opened her mouth. A string of saliva hung between her parted lips.

My father blurted out:

'Why - why? Why do you make things up?'

My mother eyes lit up. She shot up from her chair, knocking it over behind her. The metal frame hit the floor- hard. A loud crash no one but me seemed to notice. I brought my hands to my ears. Clasped them against my head, pushing inwards on both sides until it hurt.

'Me? Make things up? I suppose you think I'm crazy! I dare you. Just say it. Tell me I'm crazy. C-R-A-Z-Y!'

I slid down my chair, hid under the table. I heard my father's voice. Soft, slow. He pronounced each word with deliberate emphasis.

'I don't know how much more I can take. It's too much'.

'Well, why don't you run off to your *girlfriend*? Run to her, tell her your wife has gone mad!'

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My mother still hadn't moved. She stood at the end of the table, spewing her words like venom. Her saliva hit the table above like drops of heavy rain. I crouched lower under the table. Brought my knees towards my chest. Buried my face in my knees, arms shielding overhead. I learned this in kindergarten; what to do in case of emergency: run for cover, duck, assume the position.

'I – don't – have – a girlfriend! Enough! Just Stop!'

He pronounced each word carefully, articulating every syllable. Followed by a loud bang - my father's fist on the kitchen counter. The entire room shook. Plates, bowls, cutlery rattled on the table above me. It took a few moments for the vibrations to subside. I watched my mother's feet. She paced the kitchen table. She leaned over the table. She moved swiftly, picking everything up from the kitchen table, hurling them over to where my father stood. A cacophony of sounds: metal shrieking along the stainless steel counter, smashing glass ringing in my ears, pots and pans clanging on the tiled floor.

'You scum! I'll tell everyone about you! Liar! Hypocrite!'

Her shrill voice mixed with the sounds of crashing china. I burrowed my head lower, pressed my cheeks into bony knees, clasped my hands tight over my ears. Nothing shut out the roar. Tremors passed through the floor with every impact. I didn't realize I was crying until my clothes stuck to my skin in large patches wet with

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tears and sweat.

Then, it was quiet. My mother lowered herself onto her chair. Her feet swung freely under the table like a schoolgirl's. I peeked out from under the table. The ceiling was stained with grease, thick drops of oyster sauce hung heavily, threatening to fall at any moment. Broken dishes lay everywhere. Shards of glass lined the floor. Chopsticks snapped in two, wooden ends splayed and splintered. I scanned the scene for my father. He sat at the kitchen counter. His head in his chest. An overturned bowl on his head dripped noodles and sauce down the sides of his face. Deep brown sauce streamed down his cheeks instead of tears. His eyes were half-closed as he looked down at his hands clasped tightly in his lap.

I think of a movie I once watched with my father. It takes place during the cultural revolution in China. The soldiers scour the country looking for people to punish. They discover an unfortunate man in a rural village sharing the same hairstyle as Mao Ze Dong – a punishable offense at the time. He is captured and brought to an arena filled with spectators: neighbours and former friends. The soldiers force him on a stage where his head is brusquely shaved while the audience jeers. Afterwards, he is chained to a fence, forced to wear a dunce cap with his crime scrawled down its length. The

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man hangs heavily from his wrists, wrapped in chains. His knees buckle and his body sags barely supported by his wrists. His head flops but the cap stays firmly in place.

The worst part was that they arrested his daughter as well. They forced her to watch her father's humiliation from start to finish. They prevented her from going to him, even as he collapsed on his knees in front of the chain-linked fence while everyone around him laughed.

My father. Up on the bar stool. Elevated for all to see. An overturned bowl of noodles on his head. Streaks of sauce running down his face, his body. His head rolling into his chest. Eyes barely open. I crawled out from under the table, treading carefully around the shards of glass, pools of sauce, bits of food. I went upstairs and hid in my room.

The entire house was quiet. It was the aftermath of the storm. The walls and floors were recovering from the shock of violence. The house was completely still. I could make out the slightest noise from the kitchen, even though my room was on the second floor and at the other end of the house. I heard wooden legs scrape against the kitchen floor. My father got up from his chair. He picked up the phone. I heard him speak but I couldn't make out the words. The

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sonorous vibration of his voice traveled up the stairs and down the long, dark hallway to where I sat in my room.

Half an hour passed, maybe more. I heard someone come up the stairs. I recognized the steps: firm with a deliberate and even pace. My father. He came upstairs and went to the washroom. I snuck out of my room and crouched low to the ground. My father left the door open. Light flooded into the middle of the hallway, both ends remained dark. I crept forward on my hands and knees, onto my perch where I could observe, unnoticed. I crouched on the floor grasping the railing for balance. From here, I had a direct view into the washroom. The blue-white light burned my eyes. My eyes needed to adjust; I had been sitting in the dark up until now.

My father stood with his back to me. He bent over the vanity, washing his face. I could see his reflection in the mirror. He removed the bowl from his head, pulled noodles and string beans from his hair. He dunked his head into the sink. Except for the sound of running water, the house was quiet. He looked at himself in the mirror. Scrubbed distractedly, half-heartedly, at stains on his clothing. He leaned close towards his reflection. Inches away from his face. All I could see now was the back of his head. The thick black hair that was beginning to thin at the crown of his head. A few strands of noodles still clung to the back of his head. He brought his hands to his face.

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I couldn't tell what he was doing. All I could see was the back of his head. A firm knock at the front door interrupted the scene. My father rushed down the stairs. He left the bathroom light on. The harsh white light stung my eyes. I turned away, and retreated to my room.

Another set of footsteps up the stairs. Forceful and stomping. Slippers whipping against carpeted steps. My mother. I heard her turn the corner at the top of the stairs and into the hall. I sat on my bed in the dark, watched her go into her room. She was in her house clothes: pink and white striped pajamas, quilted silk jacket, torn leather slippers. I heard the sound of rustling fabric. Moments later, she emerged looking completely different. She wore a demure, A-line skirt that extended past her knees, and a casual silk top – both cream coloured. She had combed her hair, so her bob curled softly at her cheeks. She did her make-up as well. White powdered rings hovered beneath her eyes, a pink smear across her lips and at her cheeks.

She came into my room, sat beside me on the bed. In the dark, her scent was overpowering. Mothballs, baby powder, spoiled perfume. Her black eyes glittered, catching the light from the window. She spoke in firm, convincing tones. She said my father had called the police, that they might have some questions for me (even though I

was only four, and what did I know). She paused before asking: what did you see when your father came up the stairs?

I told her he went in the washroom. I watched from the hallway. She nodded: yes, yes, go on. There's not much to tell, I said. He washed his face, his hair, his clothes – at least he tried but some stains stuck. My mother watched me, intently, I felt her looking at me. I continued, unsure of what she wanted to hear. I could see his reflection in the mirror, I said, until he leaned so close I couldn't see anymore. She nodded again, more vigorously than before. She shifted closer towards me, brought her head close to mine, her breath always smelled faintly sour, like plain yogurt left out in the sun.

This is what she said:

If the police ask, tell them what you just told me – about your father, in the washroom. Tell them it seemed suspicious. He did something to his face. Cut himself with a razor maybe. Don't worry. Tell them exactly what you saw.

Wait, that's not what I said – that's not what I saw! I protested but she was gone. The smell of mothballs and baby powder lingered in the air; rumpled sheets and a shallow imprint of where she sat on my bed - the only traces left. I heard her slippers flap forcefully down the stairs.

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I revisited the scene in my mind. What was it I saw? My father, in the washroom. Blue-white light spilling into the hallway. I crouch at the end of the hallway, on my perch, watching. How tightly I grip onto the vertical posts of the railing – one in each hand. It is a sheer drop on the other side. The railing prevents me from falling. The posts feel nice in my hands, mahogany wood, smooth, polished, swelling in places, tapering at others. I peer through the posts to where my father stands. He is in the light; I am concealed by shadow. He doesn't know I am watching. The bathroom mirror extends the length of the wall. I see my father's face, the floral print shower curtain behind him. He is not young anymore, nor is he old. The deep grooves on his brow and by his lips have begun to form. His jaw is broad, chiseled, his cheekbones – prominent, the left one crooked from a childhood accident. His eyes are large, with deep creases above. He looks at himself in the mirror as he pulls noodles from his hair. Long, thin, flimsy strands covered in pungent oyster sauce. He misses a few in the back. They cling to the hairs by the nape of his neck. I wonder why he can't feel them – the wetness against his skin. He leans in close to the mirror. I can't see him anymore. Only the back of his head. The patch of hair that is thinning by the crown. Golden white skin peeks through between the strands. His hair is black, becoming gray. He lifts his hands to his face. This I can see

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from behind. What he does – I can't tell. I strain forward. The entire scene is preserved for an eternity. The bathroom mirror is a screen. It reveals every detail. I run my eyes from edge to edge, top to bottom. Searching for something: a glint of metal.

The police spoke to my parents first, separately, before calling me down. They called me by my English name. The foreign call rang through the house, echoing awkwardly against the walls. Here, everyone called me by my Chinese pet name 'little sister, youngest one' – soft, gentle, melodic. The sound of my pet name blooms into existence, fades into a whisper. My English name is harsh, grating, the unfamiliar sound cutting through space like a knife. Only outsiders (literally, people who lived outside of our home) called me by my English name.

I lifted myself off my bed and let my feet fall lightly on the floor. I moved towards my doorway and into the darkened hall. I dragged my feet. They scraped along the carpet floor. I ran my fingers along the linen-covered walls. Vertical ridges of embroidered thread ran down the length of the wall. I trailed my fingers along the wall, making small scratching noises as I moved. The bathroom light was still on. I stepped into the light. The bright white was blinding. I brought my free hand to my eyes. A shield. I moved on, and sank

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back into the darkness. I opened my eyes, comforted by the dark. Soft, plush, velvet resting on my shoulders. I reached the top of the stairs and grabbed firmly onto the railing with my left hand. The wood was smooth, polished, buffed by our palms and others before us. I slid my hand down the railing. Mahogany with varnish almost completely worn away, replaced with the grease from our palms. I moved with a deliberately sluggishness. I pretended I was sick, weakened, frail, about to faint. Every step forward, accompanied by pain; I had to walk slowly, carefully, to ease the suffering. Thirteen steps to the bottom. A lucky number in Chinese. I stepped into the pool of green marble in the foyer.

They called me to the study, shut the door behind me. There were two of them – a man and a woman. They looked at me with overly kind eyes. Eyes wide and round, drooping at the outer ends. Heads cocked to one side. I braced myself for the pats on my back, the squeeze on my shoulders. I avoided their gaze and looked around the room instead. I had never been inside with the door closed; the wood paneling on the wall extended along the back of the door. The planks were a deep orange colour with grooves in between. The door was completely hidden when closed. Even the vertical blinds along the front window mimicked the deep grooves along the other walls. All four walls looked the same. I felt disoriented and turned away

from the officers towards the back wall of the study. The only wall with any distinguishing features. The one with the two green sconces and the hanging pictures.

There were several paintings on the wall: a large print of *The Last Supper*, a shadow box with dead butterflies spread out and grotesquely pinned on felt lining, a Chinese brush painting of several large goldfish and a small black and white portrait tucked away in the corner. I had never noticed this last picture before. It was a simple black frame mounted between a portrait of Pope John Paul II and a kitschy painting of two fighting leopards. It was a picture of my father and my grandfather. It must have been taken in Hong Kong, before my father left for the U.S. They were sitting on a park bench under a large willow tree. My father leaned forward with his elbows on his knees while my grandfather sat back, arm outstretched behind my father. They were laughing. Their eyes closed, curving in half-moon shapes. My father had a full head of hair, long and curling around his chiseled face. His face was long and lean with pronounced cheekbones and a defined jaw. He had large and happy eyes. His hands were clasped in front of him. He looked relaxed. Happy. There was the man who taught me to read and write, the man who told me stories to ignite my imagination, the man who stayed up with me when I had nightmares and couldn't sleep. Was this the same man I

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saw just now in the bathroom mirror?

I had forgotten about the officers in the room.

The man spoke first, interrupting my thoughts.

‘The most important thing is that you’re alright. That’s why we’re here. Do you understand?’

It was the woman’s turn now. She pursed her lips, cocked her head to one side, placed a hand on my shoulder.

‘Can you tell us what happened tonight? Why your father is bleeding?’

Her open palm burned against my shoulder. I shrugged it off, her hand dropped awkwardly to one side. I didn’t know my father was bleeding. I hadn’t noticed. I closed my eyes. I looked into the bathroom mirror. I tried to see if there was blood.

The man tried again. It was like a game to them, passing the baton back and forth.

‘We see a lot of broken plates on the kitchen floor. Was your mother throwing them at your father?’

The lady tried again. She crouched down into a squat, held me by my shoulders. I tried to squirm away. This time she didn’t let go.

‘Listen. Your father called us because he is worried. He is worried about you – and your brother and your sister. If your mother is showing signs of violent behavior... It’s not safe for you guys to be

here. In this house. With *her*.'

I didn't like what they were saying about my mother, the portrait they were painting. They were strangers in this house. They knew nothing about my mother. My mother would never hurt us. She would never *really* hurt us.

I remembered all the times she made me watch. Like the time my brother broke our grandmother's vase. She called him over, and me too. He stood in front of her with his chest puffed out. A model of defiance. She sat on the rigid green sofa, with a stack of chopsticks at one side. She pulled on his right hand, tugged each finger until they were spread apart, palm up, flesh pulled taut. One by one, she thrashed his open palm with chopsticks. They kept on breaking. When it was over, the small bin beside the sofa was filled with chopsticks broken in half, splintered ends sticking out from the top. During the punishment, my brother averted his gaze, looked anywhere but at her, or at me. His palm grew whiter with every lash, the lines running across deeper, redder, until they glowed brightly like coils on a stove. Not once did he cry. The only sound was of splintering wood against flesh. When there were no chopsticks left, we were allowed to leave. My brother left the room first, and I trailed slowly behind. I glanced at my mother as I passed her. On these occasions, she looked tense

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and resolute, her face white and ashen, her eyes dull and plastic. It was how I knew she didn't enjoy giving out the punishment. It was just that she didn't know any other way.

They took her away that night. I watched from the perch outside my room. I watched as my mother put on her thick woolen coat, the dark green one with the wide collar fluffed high around her neck. I watched as she pulled on her boots, the black leather ones that came up to her knees. She wrapped a dark pink scarf around her neck and placed a fuzzy black hat on her head. She moved slowly, languidly. The officers waited by the door, firm soldierly stances, feet hip width apart, knees locked, hands clasped together over their stomachs. My mother stood up, and the officers eased open the door. The cowbells clanged against the solid wood door. My mother never looked up to where I was. I don't think she knew I was there. I pressed my face between the railings, gripped the posts tightly on either side as I watched. I said nothing, did nothing. I didn't tell the police about my father and the bathroom mirror. I didn't tell them about what I may or may not have seen. I didn't tell them about the razor I didn't see, the one my mother insisted was there. I stood on my perch, watching as they took her away. I let it happen. I let them take her away. I was four.

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I didn't sleep that night. I saw my mother in the cell. I saw her from up high, a bird's eye view, as if through the unblinking lens of a camera perched in the upper corner of the cell. A cold fluorescent tube light buzzed above her. The white flickering light made it impossible to sleep. The floor was rough - unpolished concrete gouged out in places. The walls too, were concrete. A sliver of stainless steel jutted out from the back wall. It was the only place to sit in the cell. It faced the open end of the cell, towards the vertical metal bars, evenly spaced, extending the width of the room. Polished black boots with metal heels clicked along the floor on the other side. Sometimes they rapped on the bars with a stick. A harsh clang to keep the inmates awake. Sleep was a luxury not afforded to prisoners. My mother didn't even try. She sat perched on the stainless steel bench, her feet firmly planted on the floor. Her back upright and some distance from the cold concrete wall behind. She stared straight ahead through the vertical bars. Her scarf tightly wound around her neck. The pink and green of her clothes the only splash of colour in a landscape of concrete and steel.

She came back the following morning. I spent the previous night awake in my room. When morning came, I waited for the sound of the cowbells to signal her return. She came home and went straight

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into her room. She didn't come out for days.

That was the first time they took her away. The second time was much later, after my father left. I wasn't there when it happened. I was in Germany by then. My brother called to tell me the news.

They found my mother walking in circles around the block. Except for the ratty, torn, slippers on her feet, she was naked. It was the middle of February, the coldest month of the year. My brother said it was our neighbour, Mrs. Fitch, that called the police. *Fitch the Witch*, we used to call her. Mrs. Fitch planted a thorny hedge of bushes between our houses shortly after we moved in. Roses the colour of blood – a warning signal: Stop, No Trespassing. We used to watch her from a distance; her big pointed hat bobbing above the thorny hedge as she hacked away at unruly branches with a sharp pair of shears. We never saw her face. The wide-brimmed straw hat she always wore, cast shifting shadows obscuring her face. I wasn't surprised she was to call the police. She didn't like us.

The police came and took my mother away for a second time. They took her away for the second time and for longer than one night. She's been at the institution for several years now. A place called Meadowview Lodge. My brother said it was for the best, my sister agreed. I wasn't here when it happened, so I didn't get a say.

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She got worse after our father left, and this way we knew she was safe. I knew my mother would find Meadowview as much a prison as the other. But at least this time I wasn't there when she was taken away; I wasn't complicit in her imprisonment. This time, at least, it wasn't my fault.

MY MOTHER'S ROOM

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MY MOTHER WAS A COLLECTOR OF THINGS. Our house was the largest on the street yet it always felt small, cramped even. My mother frequented yard sales, thrift shops and scoured the neighbourhood looking for discarded items left out on the curb. She filled her own room first. Hers was a bedroom of mismatched furniture, heaping piles of second-hand clothing, half-used perfume bottles, stacks of old magazines, mementos without meaning. She never threw anything away. It wasn't long before these things spilled into the rest of the house. The upstairs hallway, narrow to begin with, was lined with metal shelves stocked with cardboard boxes filled with her things. These things seeped slowly into our rooms, snuck into the slot behind open bedroom doors, squeezed between hangers in our closets, wedged into black plastic bags under our beds. They trailed farther down the stairs and into the living spaces as well.

There was no such thing as open space in our home. There,

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on the mantel were trophies we didn't win, souvenirs from places never visited, paintings of unknown people. Sometimes it felt like we were living in some other family's home, surrounded by some other family's artifacts. Often we felt like visitors in our own home. When the three of us moved away, out of our childhood bedrooms, any open space left behind was quickly replenished with my mother's things. We never understood our mother's compulsion to fill the house. All we knew was that she suffered from a fear of empty space.

My mother's room is at the end of the hall. I could just as easily say the hallway ends at my mother's room. It is the final stop down the long dark hall. We seldom strayed so far down. We seldom entered her room. My brother and sister stayed at their end of the hallway, but I had no choice. My room was next to hers. The three of us climbed the stairs together, but one by one, my sister and brother dropped off into their rooms while I continued alone. My pace would lag; my feet dragged across coarse brown carpet, my hand gripping the wooden railing to my right. As I drew closer to my room, my steps would lighten; if she was sleeping, I didn't want to wake her. Her door was always open, but I never looked inside. It would be too dark to see anyway. Her blinds were always shut. Near the end, I would be on my toes. Dash in through my open door and sit on the

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bed. Waiting. Tense. Ears strained for the slightest stir coming from her room. If I heard nothing, I was safe. All of us were.

We were not allowed to enter her room. Not without her permission, and certainly not when she wasn't present. My father warned us once, he said she would know if someone had been in her room, touched her things. Everything was arranged in particular disarray. It was like a trap, he said, every piece of furniture, every object in the room - a wire waiting to be tripped. She would know if something was moved, or out of place.

But she isn't here anymore. I'm an adult now. I shouldn't be afraid. I am alone in the house. Her room calls to me. Her room keeps her secrets, or else guards them.

The door is open. My toes inch forward but not past the thin brass strip on the floor. I stand at the edge of the hallway and look inside. Her room is exactly as I remembered. The same olive-green paper hangs on the walls, now faded in spots, lifting at the edges. The walls look paper thin: fragile, and cracking. They threaten to crumble into dust. The plush pink headboard of the bed clashes with the olive-green pattern of the walls. The cream-coloured duvet is flung across the edge of the bed, crumpling at the hardwood floor. A shallow

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trench runs down the centre of the mattress in a straight line - the imprint of her body from so many years. The bedsheets are yellow with age and infrequent washing. I pause for a moment before entering. I notice the brass door plate hanging crookedly from the wooden frame. The latch was torn from the frame when my father kicked open the locked door. The wood frame was splintered from the force. Shards of wood splay out like tiny needles. They are sharp and threatening. I resist the urge to touch them. I know I will bleed. I know the tiny sliver will sink into my flesh; a splinter that will only exit my body with time. The brass plate dangles from a single screw. No one fixed it, even though the incident happened over twenty years ago.

I step over the threshold. I pause. My body braces for alarms: blaring sirens or flashing lights. Nothing. The silence that greets me is unsettling. I step onto the thick, plush, woolen rug and stand in the centre of the room. This is the largest room in the house with an ensuite bathroom and a generous walk-in closet. It is the master bedroom but my mother lived here alone. Large room, tiny woman. Somehow it makes sense.

The large bed takes up most of the room. It is actually two twin mattresses pushed together. My mother only ever slept on one side - the left side. After a nightmare, or else when I couldn't sleep I would

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run to my mother's room. I would beg her to let me sleep in her bed. There was so much space beside her. Sometimes she let me crawl up onto her massive bed. This accompanied with a rule: I had to stay on the right side of the bed, the thick seam dividing the two mattresses was the border. The raspy snores resumed. I was abandoned in my wakefulness. Alone in the dark, I longed to inch closer to my mother. During these moments, the divide between us grew; the mattresses drifted apart, ice floes on a moving ocean surface. Darkness spewed forth from the widening chasm, shooting upwards forming a wall between us; a wall of impenetrable dark. A darkness that would devour me if I strayed too close. I stayed on my side. Trembling, not sleeping, afraid to move.

Now, the right side of the bed supports heaps of fabric, miscellaneous clothing, sewing notions and kits - my mother's unfinished fashion projects. She only ever bought used clothing, convinced she could rework them into high fashion pieces. We used to be embarrassed to be seen in public with her. We thought everyone would know she was wearing clumsily reworked, second hand clothes. But she always pulled it off; she had command over her clothing; she wore the clothes - not the other way around. She moved with an enviable grace and elegance: her head held high, her high-fashion bob curling

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softly at her cheeks, heavy sunglasses concealed her eyes like a movie star. Even when she wore two-dollar second-hand suede blazers patched up with mismatched fabrics, she looked good.

I look at the walls. I see the olive-green pattern on the cream-coloured paper. I turn away. If I stare for too long, I am not sure what I will see. The last time I faced the wall paper was the last time I spent an extended period of time in my mother's room.

I was five or six. It was a Saturday afternoon, and Chinese school was cancelled. My mother didn't know what to do with us. It was a sunny day, and one of the rare occasions my mother rolled up the blinds. Sunlight streamed in through the massive window. My brother and I stood on our toes, peered over the sill, admired the view of the backyard. There was a family of rabbits, huddled together in the far corner of the yard. Five of them, just like us. My sister sat at the foot of the bed, reading a book. My mother was on her way out. Before she left, she told us not to leave her room, not to open the door to anyone and insisted we lock the door behind her. After my mother left, my sister got up. I heard the sharp metallic click of the lock. My sister returned to the bed, resumed her reading. My brother and I sat cross-legged on the floor playing thumb war. The only sound in the room was the sound of flipping pages. Several hours passed. The sun

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began to set and the room was cast into shadow.

It was then, the walls came to life.

The walls are a faded cream colour with an intricate pattern of olive-green line work throughout. The pattern repeats in all directions. A cursory look at the walls gives an abstract pattern of ornately curving lines. A closer look reveals a finely drawn scene: a large willow tree, trunk thick and gnarled with age reaching upwards and outwards into a massive canopy of foliage and curving branches above. A young man stands beneath, he holds a small guitar. A young girl sits at his feet, her back rests against the base of the tree. The tree's roots grow beneath her, around her, cradling her. The young lovers look towards each other. There are no straight lines. Every line is fine and curved, drawn with a deft hand. The image repeats endlessly, obscuring the individual scene into a pattern of abstract curving lines that are strangely hypnotic.

It began with a slight movement behind my brother; a minor shift in vision that made me wonder if I had blinked too hard just then. I blinked again, keeping my eyes closed for a solid few seconds this time before opening them. Now, I was certain, the lines on the wall were quivering. A flash of movement and the lines were rearranged.

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The majestic tree with drooping leaves was gone. The young lovers disappeared as well. I couldn't make out what was left. The lines flickered, undecided as to what form to take. I leaned in towards the wall, drew closer and nearer to its face.

A silent roar tore through the paper.

A phantom appeared; a monstrous arrangement of olive-green lines formed the bristling teeth, two large drooping holes the eye sockets above. It glowered with empty eyes. The gaping hole of its mouth gnashed its pointed teeth. The phantom multiplied across the walls. There were hundreds of them. I looked at my brother and my sister. Neither of them had noticed. My sister was reading her book, while my brother plucked at the fibers of the rug with his fingers. I shut my eyes, clamped my hands over my ears to shut out the incessant howl. I let out a scream that rattled my entire body.

My hands dropped into my lap. I heard rapid footsteps coming up the stairs. It was my father. Within seconds he was at the door. He pushed at the door but it remained firmly shut. He called out to us to unlock the door. My sister said she couldn't, mother had told her not to. My brother said nothing. I started to cry. My father rattled the knob, called out to my sister again, insisted we open the door. My sister was crying now too. Still, she refused to open the door. She mumbled between cries, gasping heavily in between words for air.

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A sudden crash. The sound of cracking wood and scraping metal. I looked up to see my father in the doorway. He looked stunned, his right foot frozen in mid-kick. He scooped me up and checked to see if I was hurt. I wasn't. He sent us to our rooms where we spent the rest of the evening. I'm sure my parents fought later that night but that's not what resonates with me today. Instead, I think about the walls; the images they show, how quickly they can change from a scene of love to one of horror.

Today I see the willow tree and the pair of young lovers. No matter how long I stare, they remain. I turn towards the back wall. A large TV screen takes up the majority of the wall. It sits on top of a wide dresser. Dark openings flank both sides of the dresser. One is the walk-in closet and the other the ensuite bathroom. Both doors are open. It has always been impossible to penetrate the pitch black of both rooms from outside. They are the source of the infinite darkness that seeps into my mother's room and into the rest of the house.

I step into the bathroom. The cream-coloured tiles are cold against my bare feet. Dark mildew grows in the deep grooves between tiles. The sickly-sweet smell of mold stings at my nose. I stand between the vanity and the bathtub. The shower curtain is drawn shut. Something is on the other side. Something presses against the

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flimsy vinyl curtain, causing it to crease, creating a shadow. I reach out with my right hand and fling the curtain open. Tiny metal hooks rattle on the rod as they are swept to one side. The bathtub is filled with clothes, piled high in the deep well of the tub, and hanging from a rod above. I remember now that the bathtub hadn't functioned as one for years. And faintly, weakly, I remember why.

I was two when I almost drowned. My mother had just come home from work and was running the water for my bath. She left me in the bathroom while she went into the bedroom. I stood naked on the floor peering over the ledge of the bathtub. Water gushed from the faucet. I leaned over, dipped my fingers into the tepid pool. Reached farther still, thrusting my entire hand beneath the surge of rushing water frothing white. The red finger paint on my hands from earlier, rinsed off easily under the running water. Delicate strands of crimson red drifted across the surface of the pool. I climbed up onto the ledge of the tub, dipped my toes into the frothing pool. That was how I fell in. That was how I broke through the surface and slipped slowly under. My eyes remained open the entire time. As I slipped under water, I reached up with my hands, grasping at the elusive strands of crimson red. I sank into the smooth porcelain cradle. The sound of rushing water was deafening, a persistent roar silencing all other

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sounds. A forceful quiet. A heavy calm.

My mother's hand from above. I recognized the slender fingers, the neatly clipped pink fingernails, the porcelain skin. She scooped me up with one arm; I rested in the crook of her elbow. Hair pasted to my cheeks and dripping wet. My mother was still in her work clothes. Water seeped through the folds of her thick woolen coat, the forest green colour darkened to black. She pulled me close, curved her body around mine, gripped on to me so tight it hurt. Her thumb and forefinger pressed into my elbow, my thigh, like sharp hooks. I started to cry. My mother looked down at me, her eyes grew wide. Her lips parted slowly, she whispered my name. She was astonished - I was alive.

There were supposed to be four of us. There was another baby before us. Even as I think this, I turn towards the cavernous opening of the walk-in closet. My mother has hidden something there; a secret nestled deep into the folds of her mink fur coats, velvet gowns and silk duvets. My mother never entered the closet. She used the bathtub instead for her every day clothes. The walk-in closet remains in the dark. It is a coffer for her most precious things: heirlooms from her parents, treasures from Hong Kong, secrets from her past. The plush, dark fabrics envelop her secrets, protecting them, concealing them.

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The closet has two metal rods on either side, extending the length of the small room. Fur coats on one side; shipped all the way from Hong Kong. My grandmother thought Canada a cold and desolate place. She had the coats custom made for my mother. They fit her perfectly, but looked unwieldy and awkward on her small frame. The other side is for silk and velvet gowns; dresses my mother never had occasion to wear. The pungent scent of mothballs stings my nose. At the far end of the closet, pushed flush against the back wall, is a small chest of drawers. The chest is made of solid wood. Cream coloured with light gray veins peeking through the varnish. There are two delicate brass handles on each drawer. You have to pull both to open the drawer. There are three drawers in total. I know the contents of the top two drawers: silk camisoles and slips on the top, stockings and gloves in the middle. My eye is drawn to the bottom drawer. The drawer remains firmly shut as if sealed at the edges. It may as well be locked. There is no key for it to be opened. I have seen it open only once before - sometime before I was born. That was how I knew what lay inside.

Her name was Jasmine, named after the flower and the fragrant white tea. She was born a year after my parents got married. She was the fruit of their marriage, a symbol of their union. She was

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supposed to be a blessing from God. She weighed less than four pounds when she was born. She came three months early, and spent several weeks at the hospital. They pricked her with needles, fed her with tubes. The first weeks of her life were spent surrounded by machines that whirred and blinked at her. The first weeks of her life were without human touch. My parents weren't allowed to hold her. She was too fragile, they said; she was missing several fingers and toes. Tiny filaments had grown inside my mother's womb. Clear and threadlike, but strong like fishing wire. They snaked around her fingers, her toes. Coiled several times around, pulled taut until they broke through. She lost three toes and two fingers.

Still, she was born and she lived for six months. Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, they said, but my mother knew it was the pills they gave her while she was pregnant. My mother discovered the body in the crib, on her stomach with her face turned to one side. She scooped her up and cradled her in her arms. Her cries rang through the house and sank into the walls. Her face wet with tears, her body wet with sweat. She sat on the floor, back against the crib, legs crossed on the floor. The body nestled in her lap, pulled close to her breast. It was the only time I saw my mother cry. A lifetime of grief poured forth that night.

The police came, the paramedics too, accompanied by their

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flashing lights and blaring sirens. Nothing roused my mother. She rocked the baby in her arms. Her black eyes dull beneath heavy lids. Her fingers curled tight around the baby's wrists, ankles. The police tried to pry the body from her arms. She refused to loosen her grip. She didn't notice everyone around her. Watching her, watching over her.

Finally, she stood up. She moved calmly, controlled, her eyes half-open, as if in a trance. She moved towards the closet, to the very back. She disappeared into the shadows. I strained forward to see. I could make out her silhouette. She lingered in front of the small chest of drawers. Opened the bottom drawer. The lustrous sheen of ivory silk scarves glimmered weakly in the dark – white, the colour of the dead and mourning. My mother knelt before the open drawer, her feet tucked beneath her. She leaned over and gently, laid the body down. She shrouded the body in silk, covered everything but the face. She took a final look at her first born child, and shut the drawer. My mother held vigil in the closet. Several days later, she emerged. The darkness receded behind her. Her face was white and powdery. Her eyes sank heavily in their sockets. Her lips pursed tightly together. Her movements were heavy, rigid. It was as if she was made of stone.

I am on my knees now. Feet tucked beneath me like my mother's so

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many years ago. I lean forward and trace the brass handles with my fingers. They are cool to touch. I reach for the handles, one in each hand. I stay like this for a moment. My hands drop into my lap. I lean over, bring my forehead to the floor. I bow three times. I do not disturb what lays inside.

Farewell, to my sister I have never known.

PURGATORY

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I descend into the basement. A rush of cool air, dank with moisture, settles on my skin. The steps are carpeted, but the carpet has worn away leaving a coarse netting that chafe at the soles of my feet. I reach the last step. One foot on beaten down carpet, the other on cold concrete floor. I straddle the threshold between house and basement, living and purgatory – I do not want to think about death. I sink into the dark. The concrete slab is a cold unwelcome into the unfinished space. The floor is damp and rough with sharp stones jutting out, captured and forever suspended in the stone pool. There are centipedes down here. Brown, scaly insects with hundreds of legs and twitching antennae. My brother spotted a nest once, or at least that's what he said. I can feel their tiny legs scampering over my bare feet.

I reach out with outstretched arms, I need to brace myself or I will fall. My hand falls on the smooth contours of a carved piece

PURGATORY

of furniture; I recognize the fiddlehead knob of my father's rocking chair. I run my palm over the curved end. The arm rest is smooth, polished like silk. The wood grows warm in my hand. The chair wobbles unsteadily at first but soon gives way into an undulating swing. I hear the familiar sound of creaking wood and rushing air in time with the rhythmic pulse of the swing.

The darkness here is impenetrable, a pure blackness that is crushing. Only shallow breaths down here. The air is thick, damp. It stings my nostrils, sinks heavily in my throat. Suffocating. With every breath, I taste the sour notes of fermentation, faint bitter after notes of mold. I move forward with slow and tentative steps. I map out the path in my head. There should be a light switch by the door. I run my fingers along the wall. Flakes of dry paint fall from the ceiling and cling to my skin, my hair. The sky is falling. The lightest touch and everything crumbles. The walls are peeling too. Paint falls off in patches and I feel the soft powdery interior of raw gypsum. It is strangely warm, almost moist. It is the raw and oozing flesh of the diseased and the dying. I find the switch and turn on the light. A cackling of circuitry and a burst of electricity. A faltering buzz grows into a forceful hum. The fluorescent tubes flicker intermittently before reaching a steady glow. The room is cast in a blue-white tinge. The icy cold light slices through the thick black fog. This is a cold

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and sterile space.

I am in a morgue. Surrounded by corpses of discarded furniture. My mother never threw anything away. Instead, pieces were cast down the stairs. The basement is a haven for the useless and unwanted, a purgatory of sorts. A place for things to wither and wilt without shame, without guilt. The rocking chair by the stairs gives a final shudder before coming to a stop. The only sound now is the hum of fluorescent light above. I weave through the debris. Everything here is deformed in some way. The baby pink vinyl sofa with a deep gash across the seat. My mother found it on the curb of an abandoned diner. It went straight into the basement. A coffee table missing a leg. The solid teak top rests on the corner with no leg. The other three legs splay out awkwardly in mid-air. I am reminded of a cripple who has fallen over and can't get up. A cracked mirror rests against the wall. I peer into the glass. My face is pale, sallow. My skin looks white, unnaturally so, as if dusted with powder. My eyes, shining black pearls. I see the sculpted nose, lips that are tightly pursed, the small pointed chin. It is my mother's face. I wear it like a mask. I turn away. I do not recognize these other pieces. Tables, chairs, desks, cushions. None of these made it upstairs. Relics and discards from the houses of others; floating debris in the water after a shipwreck. I move towards the smallest room at the far end of the basement – I

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move towards my father's room.

The door is open. The fluorescent light stops short at the entrance. I stand at the edge, on tiptoes although I'm not sure why. My shadow is thrown in first, absorbed into the dark. I am pulled forward as if by strings. I enter the room. The darkness drops on my shoulders like a pail of cold water. There is no light switch in this room. It was supposed to be a storage room. I remember a floor lamp in the back corner by the bed. My body leads the way. My fingers trail the wall. I stay close to the edge of the room where it's safe. My toes touch on the metal stand, my fingers fumble in the dark, I find the beaded chain. A gentle tug and the lamp turns on. It gives off a dim glow, no brighter than a candle. The bulb grows warm, stronger with every passing second. I am sure this is the last of the incandescent bulbs in the house, down here, in the farthest corner of the basement, in my father's room.

The room is empty but it has always been this way. It is tiny, much smaller than my own up on the second floor. If I stand in the middle of the room and reach out with both arms, I can graze the walls on either side. The room is barren with few signs of habitation. There are three pieces of furniture: a mobile rack for clothes, a compact dresser, the twin bed my brother outgrew at sixteen. It is the room of an ascetic; a direct opposition to my mother's hoarding

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tendency.

I turn to the only window in the room. It is a foot-high slot near the ceiling. It runs along the length of the wall. Iron grating extends the length of the pane on the other side. The window is prone to leaking. During heavy rain and early spring snow melts, the window leaks from unseen cracks. Silent streams of water flow into the room. The wall below is permanently stained with streaks of water resembling tears.

Over the years, the wall has been ravaged with black spots of mold like a disease. Now, the spots have grown larger, darker, deeper. Bacteria has been gnawing on the foundation wall for years. I smell the sour scent of decay. I can almost hear their gnashing teeth. I feel their insatiable desire for destruction. Soon the colony will eat through the entire wall and the house will collapse. The smaller spots will merge together to form one great big one. It is the Black Spot from *Treasure Island*. It signifies inevitable death.

I sit on the bed. It creaks beneath my weight. The mattress is a thin foam pad, the kind you can roll up and take away with you. It provides little cushion against the sharp metal springs below. The bed sags heavily in the centre. Empty hangers dangle on the mobile rack. I turn to the chest of drawers. There are five drawers stacked on top of each other. The thin wooden drawers rattle loudly as I open

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each one. All are empty. He was able to take his clothes with him this time.

The last time he left, he didn't take anything at all. I was fourteen. I had just come home from school and was surprised to see my father's car in the driveway. My mother was home too. I recognized her tall leather black boots in the foyer. The leather was worn and cracked and could no longer stand upright. They fell over in tired heaps on the dark green marble floor. My parents were in the dining room. I heard the low murmur of my father's voice, but couldn't make out the words. He spoke quietly but his tone was firm. I took off my shoes and crept up the stairs.

The familiar notes of an impending fight floated up the stairs, down the hall, and entered through my bedroom door. Their fights have always taken on an orchestral quality; a dramatic progression that always reaches an inevitable roaring conclusion. It begins with the soft notes of my father's voice - soothing, gentle, pleading. Met with silence, a purposeful lull for dramatic effect. My father's voice again: deeper in pitch, firmer in tone, sonorous with deep vibrations reverberating across the large mahogany table. He is cut short by a sharp and grating note from my mother. His voice grows feeble, exasperated, a dying trombone without breath. He fades into silence.

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The silence grows stronger, headier, as if with crescendo effect. It is a silence that can be felt. It lingers in the air, presses down from above. The wait for the climax is unbearable. You brace yourself for what's to come. The piece isn't over yet. The silence conceals a powerful build-up. There is to be a piercing climax. An eruption of pure energy, a black mass of rage that has been forming inside my mother's tiny body for the past several hours, days, years. Her shrill voice slices cleanly through the thick, stale air of the house. It signals the end.

That afternoon, I heard the scraping of a wooden chair as my father pushed himself out of the seat. I heard the loud clang of cowbells at the front door and turned to my window, I peered out through the blinds and into the front yard. My father appeared below my window, wearing a small backpack and walking briskly away from the house. He was halfway down the driveway when my mother appeared as well. She wore only her house clothes and a thin pair of slippers. Those slippers, I knew were old, and worn in patches in the sole. Her feet must have been cold. She wore loose cotton trousers that billowed out at the sides, and a thin cotton blouse that hung limply from her narrow frame. She rushed to my father and trailed behind him as he walked down the driveway. Her screams were muffled through the thick glass of my bedroom window, but I could tell from

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her face she was yelling.

My father turned onto the side walk with my mother trailing a few paces behind. I could see her face now – stark white with blue undertones and an unnaturally smooth and powdery texture. Her black eyes shone from deep within their sockets. She glowered at my father, even though his back was turned. Her gaze was a leash that prevented him from straying too far. Her hair spun wildly around her face, teased and tangled in a black wiry nest. She lurched forward, releasing a large glob of spit that hit my father at the back of his neck. My father continued walking down the street. His head low, his gaze on the ground just beyond his feet. His hands thrust deep into his pockets. He had developed a slight hunch in a back that I hadn't noticed before. I saw the white spot of bare skin at the crown of his head – a bald spot that had grown immeasurably since the last time I thought to look. His face was heavily lined, and his lips turned down in a permanent frown. His eyes too curved down at the corners. I watched as his figure receded into the distance. My mother disappeared as well. At least twenty minutes passed before my mother returned home, alone. I felt the gust of cold winter air whip up the stairs as the front door opened. The loud clang of cowbells as the door swung violently open and shut. She stomped up the stairs, her slippers flapping forcefully on every step and down the

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hall. She turned the corner and passed by my open doorway and went into her room. My father returned a few days later. This happened several times during my childhood. The dramatic departure, the silent return. Every time he returns I want to ask: where he went, why he left, and more important why he came back, but I don't.

The room is warm now, the orange glow brighter. I spot something on the dresser I didn't notice before. A small white envelope. I pick it up and turn it over in my hands. The envelope is crisp; the corners are sharp. The letter is addressed to my father. There is no name, only an address: Vancouver, B.C.

My father's family immigrated there in the 1970s, all thirteen of them including his parents. They chose Vancouver for its coastline. They grew up in Hong Kong, along the ocean and wanted to stay near the water. My father eventually chose Toronto, which meant he chose my mother, over the coast, over his family.

I turn the letter over. The seal is tacky; it has only been opened once or twice before. I unfold the paper inside. It is a single sheet, folded in three. The letter is written in Chinese. I recognize the characters for my father's name, it is among the few Chinese characters I still know. I trace the character with my finger, commit it to memory so I never forget. I have always loved my father's name. It

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sounds like the Cantonese word for 'red', but it is written differently with a different meaning. His parents went through three different names before settling on the word for 'hero'. I skim the letter. It is futile to decipher any meaning. It might as well be written in code. Every so often I come across a character I know. The character for 'come' is repeated several times, or is it 'come back'? I reach the bottom of the letter. I do not recognize the name. The script is elegant, floral; I am certain it was written with a feminine hand. His sister maybe, or the other woman my mother claimed existed for so long.

It has been ten years since I last saw him. By now, he could be anywhere. The important thing is that he is no longer here. I take a final glance at the barren walls, the unfinished floor, the narrow window that never lets in any light. The basement reeks of decay. The walls are damp and lined with mold. The air cold, stifling. The basement has been neglected for so many years, yet still manages to support the house above. When these walls collapse, so will the rest of the house. It is only a matter of time.

NOTE TO READER

I did not invent the *City of Old Emperors* nor the *Memory Mines* mentioned in the beginning of this story. I first encountered these places in one of my favourite childhood books, *The Neverending Story* by Michael Ende. In his story, he describes the *City of Old Emperors*; a final resting place for those who suffer the madness of forgetting. The only sane creature here is Artax, the shriveled-face monkey. Of all the wild and imaginative places described in the story, the *City of the Old Emperors* was for me, the most frightening. All these people, blubbering and dumb at the mercy of a conniving monkey warden. The only way out is by visiting *the Memory Mines*, a reservoir of all the world's memories. If you are lucky enough to remember, you can be saved.

I borrowed both these places: *the City of Old Emperors* and *the Memory Mines* from Michael Ende's story, and reimagined them to tell my own.