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YOUR FAVORITE PLACE

by

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B.A., SEPTEMBER 2007, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, RIVERSIDE

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
Old Dominion University in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

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ABSTRACT

YOUR FAVORITE PLACE

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Old Dominion University, 2018
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My thesis is a collection of composite novel, which is a collection of short stories that can be read as a novel, with travel a common theme among the characters. Some of the characters know each other, while others know another character peripherally. All are struggling with family, love, technology, and what they want out of life. It's like *Catcher in the Rye* if the characters lived abroad.

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Way Honest

Sadie was the good daughter in the family, the cautious one with an education and a solid job, which drove her sister Lia to model in Europe and created a distance between them larger than the Atlantic Ocean. Sadie didn't want this nature that she'd inherited from her parents, but they were fearful for her safety after they lost James, Sadie's older brother who she'd never meet because he died in an accident years before she was born.

The loss of James ruined her parents for a time. A good Rockwood churchgoing couple, they were devastated when James was hit by a car the moment they turned their back on him playing to get a drink from their house. Guilt wracked them. They went to their pastor as a spiritual counselor for help. How could they move on with life?

Their pastor, a large man who carried a napkin for his sweaty forehead, urged them with practical advice. "You are still young. Have another child. Then have another one. God replenished Job when he lost his wives and children. That way, if something happens to another one, you will be safe."

Sadie's parents did that. First, there was Sadie, a curly brown haired child like her father. A few years later they had Lia, beautiful with wavy blond hair like their mother. Despite her parents' insistence they had moved on from James and were a happy family unit of four, Sadie's older brother's presence still lingered in the house. Her parents still kept yellowing pictures of his golden haired youth on the mantel along with Lia and Sadie, as if he were a ghost still present. And there was his favorite small battered baseball.

With that potential snuffed out, they poured their energy into making Sadie the model child, and she succeeded. She graduated with honors from middle and high school, went on to

UT Knoxville and returned home for the weekends for Sunday dinners as good daughters did. While Sadie excelled at living their ideal version of life, Lia was allowed to make mistakes, to fail and fall, so she could master any of life's expectations. It was why Sadie was pulled from ice skating after falling once, while Lia became a successful ice skater after falling several times. It was why her parents pressured Sadie to stay inside on the weekends while they laughed when Lia stuck her hands in dog poo, only stopping to wipe her hands with a wet nap. Perhaps her parents were too afraid of a second accident, or letting Sadie out of their sight and she'd become a misfortunate accident, another child taken away because of carelessness. With Sadie's insurance as the right daughter, Lia could afford to be careless, wild, reckless and adventurous.

Sadie envied Lia's bold nature in some ways and disliked it in others. Lia's classroom disruption, willful attitude and refusal to complete her high school assignments meant they had to attend extra conferences about her performance, sit with her after dinner to help her complete her papers, and give her extra allowance money to assure that she graduated. The only attractive attention Sadie received from her parents were the occasional pictures they took whenever she got an award for honor roll or student of the month, or when she was cheering for the football team during autumn Thursday and Friday evenings. It was Lia who the boys desired because of her wavy blond hair and svelte model like figure, while Sadie was often left out for school dance and prom dates, because she was too much of a goody goody for boys.

Perhaps it was their parents' assumption that Sadie was the first born which they had to look out for, while Lia was the second daughter which they could let roam free, which led to their emotional distance. Perhaps Sadie and Lia's relationship was predetermined before they were born, fit into molds like cookie cutters which would ensure that they'd never see themselves as equals in the same house. Or maybe it was James's their parents' beloved son snuffed out senselessly, whose death haunted their hearts. After all, his pictures were still in the upstairs mantel next to Sadie's and

Lia's school pictures, the girls' blossoming into maturity while he remained the same little boy. Since Sadie was the first born, she got James's room while Lia had her own room that no one else had occupied. Sadie studied on Friday nights while Lia went out, and when she was stuck in her room, she'd see a thumbtack or a corner and wonder if a reminder of James had been taken down just for her. Because of James, Sadie kept a meticulously clean room while Lia kept a messy room, dirty clothes mixed with clean, open CDs and books strewn about, as though Lia was learning through osmosis.

Sadie hated this about Lia, and expressed it. She was tired of her parents' complaints about Lia's room, the complaints about why couldn't she keep it clean. During Sadie's sophomore year when Lia was heading out for a Friday night movie, presumably with a friend, but to sneak out with a boy, Sadie pulled her earphones off and glanced at Lia.

"Clean your room," Sadie said.

Lia rolled her eyes. "It's been messy for weeks. Mom complains about it all the time."

"You can't tell me what to do."

"What if I told mom about where you're going?"

"Why do you care so much about this? It's not your room. You act like you're always right. That's why you don't have friends," Lia snapped. She slammed the door on her way out.

Throughout high school, the sisters didn't evolve into a sibling rivalry. Instead, they had a sibling submission, where Sadie covered for Lia's absences so they could sit on their porch swing, and Lia could share her tales of sneaking out with boys, skinny dipping at the lake and trying weed for the first time. Despite his toys shrined in the living room, Sadie and Lia couldn't be honest about the loss of James, this boy whose exit dictated how their parents reacted to them, and instead focused on what could bring them together: boys. Wandering and exploring, getting into trouble by breaking windows and staying out past curfew. In those moments Sadie

felt that Lia's attention was a sign of love. Through her role of listener and confidant, Sadie felt that Lia was at most herself. Because boys didn't like Sadie, she lived vicariously through Lia, who was reckless enough to sleep with a boy on the football field at dawn, but careful enough to sneak birth control and never become pregnant. Sadie thought that she could be satisfied with this life, of her living the right way while Lia lived the lively way, until a summer evening when she returned home from college and sat under the porch with Lia, who stopped the swing with a single lavender painted toe.

"Don't you want to get out of here? Because I'm leaving this place as soon as I get the money," Lia said.

"Don't say that," Sadie replied.

"Don't believe me? That I'm going someplace interesting? Because I am."

Sadie believed her, but didn't want to think of her sister saving up money and then leaving to try her luck at modeling in Italy, relegating their relationship to a series of emails. Lia wrote about trying foie gras in France, bike rides and cocaine trips in the Netherlands, and wine tasting in Tuscany. Sadie tried to keep these emails close to her as she started her career as a legal secretary in a high stress real estate office, with a boss so uptight that she had to assist him down to the minute. She imagined Lia running away and finding her own self fulfillment and discovery, but underneath her real feelings bubbled like peaches at the bottom of a cobbler: She was angry that Lia had left the family in such a selfish way, upset at Lia for thinking that she could just abandon Sadie in such a way, with emails as a substitute. Perhaps her parents had set them up with James, now passed down. The second child to remain dutiful to them, while Lia got to be the most honest version of herself.

Which was why when Lia announced her elopement to the family in a group email, Sadie wasn't surprised. It was a typical Lia thing to do, just like going abroad to model and travel

throughout Europe for work, and then find a husband after a whirlwind romance. It wasn't right that Lia already had many boyfriends and married at twenty-three, while Sadie was a few years older with a stable job and was technically a virgin. It was unfair that Lia had already explored the world while Sadie felt like she was resigned to her fate as a replacement for the child her parents lost. Sadie was willing to accept the world being unfair and not right, but what she couldn't take was Lia's dishonesty. By shutting their family out in a single email, Lia had shut them out and then asked for their support and congratulations. Willful. Selfish. Typical.

Sadie thought of this as she swirled her glass of cider at her parent's house, where they discussed Lia's email. Even in her absence Lia was the center of their attention, so when her mother asked her what she wanted to do for the weekend, Sadie replied.

"I'm going to go to Italy," she said.

"That's great," her father said. "For a vacation?"

Sadie smiled. "To live."

At first, Sadie thought she'd said it out of spite, or to grab her parent's attention, but it was about more than that. Lia chose honesty for herself over family obligation, adventure over rules, and now she was blessed with a husband. Sadie wanted to experience the same blessings, because she wanted to get out of America, to feel closer to her sister and get the love that she deserved.

Her parents didn't express disappointment as Sadie had expected, but excitement over her decision. The conversations changed from being about Lia, the daughter who left to being about Sadie, the daughter who was about to leave. In her off time from her stressful job, she studied for a partial TEFL course, where she'd finish the rest in Florence. Her boss and landlord wished her luck, and asked her how she felt. Excited? Anxious? For they'd wanted to explore and go somewhere beautiful before starting their real lives. They too, wanted to drink

great wine and visit great artwork, and for a moment Sadie played along. She crafted the perfect answer when anyone asked her why she was going to Florence of all places. For the pizza and pasta, the artwork, the experience.

What she didn't want to admit was that she was doing it all for love. Lia had met her husband in Florence, a city with countless model handsome men and few women. Sadie wanted to go to Florence to walk the same streets as her sister and feel closer to Lia, to meet a nice man, one with whom she could share a funny and adventurous story with her children about how their parents met. She kept this emotional secret to herself because it seemed so trite and tacky, like the beginning of a trashy romance novel, she wanted to guard her heart before she gave it to the right man. She didn't know who he was or where he'd be, but she fantasized about it. She would visit a cathedral and listen to the bell chime, pick up a candle as an offering and searched for the like, consider the darkness until she found a man with kind eyes peering back at her, a neatly dressed man, masculine yet beautiful with a romantic name like Dominic, Francisco, or Giovanni, who'd ask her in broken English if she needed a light, and she'd reply, "Of course, I'd really like that."

This was freedom. Florence wasn't like Knoxville, where she woke up at five in the morning for early workouts before shuttling off to work in busy rush hour traffic, to well-paying but highly stressful job where she had to wear a stuffy suit and pretend to be an adult happy with her life. No. Florence was freedom. She woke up to the pale summer sunlight in her cozy flat, a converted church turned long term hostel with a strict no sex policy. On trains and buses, Sadie heard people speaking Italian, not the harsh English curse words she often heard in America. Every word in Italian reminded Sadie of notes from a Charlie Parker song, exciting and sometimes tragic, but always loving. What freedom sounded like. The scents of cinnamon and the richness of butter enticed her to the trattorias and eateries around town. What freedom tasted like. The nip of the

September air lingered on her skin, inviting her to keep her bare arms cold instead of pulling out a jacket. What freedom felt like.

Sadie moved into Hostel Leonardo, which was on a street without turn signals where motorcycles and cars sped and almost nightly accidents happened. Located downtown and close to the school where she'd teach, Sadie figured she could retire home during split shifts and wander around the Bargello. When she arrived to her flat and unpacked her gray luggage, she was greeted by a girl jumping on the bed in a Yankees baseball cap and a tutu. A little unusual for Italian fashion.

"Hello!" the girl said. She jumped off the bed and stretched her hand. "Rebecca."

"Thanks," Sadie replied. "You British?"

Rebecca twisted her mouth. Sadie felt the same fear as she had with Lia, that saying the wrong thing to woman could end a friendship. Instead Rebecca laughed. "Yes, unfortunately. I wish people mistook me for an Afrikaans or Kiwi, but I'm too pale."

They lived in the same hostel, slept in the same room and worked at the American Institute, an ESL school that specialized in teaching businessmen in suits and children with thick accents. When she wasn't working she was hanging out with Rebecca, who Sadie saw as the sister she wanted Lia to be, but never wanted to be. They lived like college students with their wanderlust bug. They went to night markets and haggled over the prices of sweatshirts and spices with shawl covered old ladies. They ate cannoli-flavored gelato on the steps of Uffizi as they people watched the long lines of tourists wrapped up in sweatshirts from their almost maters -- USC, Oxford, Durham University and the like. Norwegians with wide blue eyes and French girls who didn't speak to anyone also stood in line.

"I don't want to be like them," Rebecca said as they watched the tourists. University students on that pre-world European vacation, who wouldn't experience Italy as Rebecca and Sadie would.

"What's wrong with them?" Sadie asked.

"Nothing. I think that's it. They're so comfortable in their home country they wouldn't even consider living elsewhere. So, predictable," Rebecca replied.

Rebecca was a young woman looking for cultural awareness outside of her home country. In between stuffing their faces with baguettes and pasta, Rebecca squeezed in her life story. Born in Devon, Rebecca attended college at Royal Holloway for a taste of the city life, and she was hooked. To make up for the gap year she hadn't taken in college, she'd decided to live in Italy before schlepping off to the real business of growing up, which would inevitably include a desk job and a stack of bills, possibly even a husband that she may or may not like.

Sadie laughed at Rebecca's clever summaries of life and her humor, secretly wishing that she'd had the same type of bond with Lia. But Rebecca wasn't Lia. She was a good friend. At night, they went out to bars with teachers from other schools, all experimenting with chain smoking. A haze of smoke filled the dark bar with the joyful sopranos of ABBA, the only English-speaking band in the jukebox cheered in the background.

"I want to see so many things. Besides, nothing good has come of out Devon since the Brontës and that was 300 years ago," Rebecca said to Sadie. "Don't you?"

Sadie could've been honest about her reasons for coming to Florence, but what would she have said? That she went to Florence to be closer to her sister Lia whom she rarely got along with as equals, that she wanted to fall in love so she went to the place where her sister fell in love? She hadn't talked about love or even Lia in detail, possibly because she wanted to make an identity as being her own person.

To avoid the difficult feelings, Sadie relied on her humor. "I'm over here because of Bush's re-election. Merica is on hard times."

To this, Rebecca laughed as they drank their Boudreaux when an English teacher named Ewan sent Rebecca an extra drink. Rebecca twirled her hair around her finger and swirled her wine glass. Sadie saw what happened.

In no time, Ewan and Rebecca were going out. As Lia had, Rebecca made falling in love look so easy. All it took was going to a bar for some drinks, two dinners and an impromptu glass of wine, a trip to Naples for the best pizza in the world and a night in a rustic hotel, and he was her boyfriend. It was like signing a lease, or ordering Chinese food. Love had never been easy for Sadie. Her high school and college crushes had a litany of complaints about her countless flaws: she was too short to ever have a great pair of legs, she couldn't read Dostoyevsky in Russian and never remembered to conjugate her verbs in Spanish. She requested phone calls and dates outside instead of sneaky notes and movie nights. All reasons they pointed to, that made her incapable of loving, all reasons she held on to that confirmed she wasn't meant for American men or possibly any man at all. Sadie tried to dissect a great relationship with anyone -- Lia, a man, even James who'd now been relegated to a saintly status because of his death -- as something that she could earn, like a college diploma or a high paying job. However, the truth evaded her because as Lia and Rebecca had partners, it was because a great love was something one had to find, not earn.

But Sadie didn't mention this in her emails with her parents. She hid her envy over Lia, didn't mention how she wondered if anyone found her as beautiful as photographers found Lia, or that she questioned her beauty amongst all the beautiful artwork. Instead, her emails focused on the European charm of Florence, from correcting her students by forcing them to pronounce words with wine corks in their mouths, to the austere giant of David only to find a copy in the

Piazza. Her emails to Lia were filled with the same details of the significant mundane, like the bike ride in Tuscany where she felt more along in the world while watching the gorgeous sunset over the pastel colored house with her lonely single bottle of Syrah. Lia never responded to these comments, making Sadie feel more alone than ever before. Instead, Lia replied with pithy notes perhaps intended to make Sadie jealous -- that she was redecorating since her husband was off to a shoot, and how she'd moved on from her carefree days of Florence before love had entered her life.

To avoid her loneliness, Sadie turned to work as she had in the States. She substituted for a children's class for a teacher on a mysterious vacation in Rome, even though she also taught the businessmen at night. On the last day of her temporary assignment, the beautiful secretary Olivia stopped her before Sadie entered the children's class.

"We don't need you," the secretary, Olivia said. "I sent you email last night."

But she hadn't. Sadie had already received her usual emails from her parents and Rebecca was sound in bed after sneaking in after curfew, so Sadie hadn't checked it compulsively. The secretary's brown eyes glazed over the computer screen. "He returned early," she said. Then she lifted her head, licked her full lips and a bright smile beamed across her lovely face. "He's here."

He strolled in, the teacher that Sadie had replaced who was now replacing her, a broad shouldered, blue eyed blond whose athletic build reminded Sadie of the football players she used to cheer for in high school. He was certainly striking in a provincial way, not the type of man that Sadie had expected she'd be smitten with in Italy, although he emulated the great Italian fashion sense in a powder blue collared shirt and black slacks. Before even hearing his voice, there was something about him that reminded Sadie of home, the life she wanted to have after her time in Italy, the life she deserved. He greeted Olivia the Italian way with a kiss on the cheek, but he greeted Sadie the American way, with a handshake.

"Your substitute for last week," Olivia said, motioning to Sadie.

"I'm Davey," he said.

"Sadie," Sadie replied. "Is that short for David?"

"No, just Davey."

"Your parents were lazy."

"And your parents' excuse?"

That she only existed because of James's death? That she was in Florence to do as Lia had, fall in love, and with only the exchange of his name, decided that she wanted to try falling in love with him? No, that was too personal.

Sadie kept it light. "My parents were crazy."

They smiled at each other for no reason. Olivia cleared her throat and pointed to Davey's classroom. He raised his red folder. "Class is waiting. See you soon," he said to Sadie.

"Yes," Sadie replied as naturally as a breath.

He walked toward his students, now giggling and chatting in Italian before he stopped and turned around. "How soon?"

Sadie tried to sound casual. "I'm up for anything."

She wrote down the hostel number on her notebook and faintly waved goodbye. When he looked back and smiled at her, his students erupted in laughter. Sadie left the school for the hostel, where she waved hi to Rebecca scribbling lesson plans and eating soggy cereal. She changed out of her itchy work clothes and emailed Lia.

I like someone, she wrote.

Before Sadie fell asleep, her laptop chimed. A reply from Lia.

What's he like?

Three days later, Sadie fumbled with a trashy romance novel as she sat in front of her computer, awaiting a Skype call from her sister. Sadie could've joined Rebecca and Ewan for an evening or drinking wine, or listened to the newest flatmates, a Japanese jazz band who played Django Reinhart in the living room, but she wanted to hear from Lia, the person she wanted to feel the closest to. Perhaps it was because Lia had suggested the call for once, now that they had something to talk about, which was Sadie. Sadie had always played the role of the listener with Lia, but with Lia now married, it was Sadie who'd be the center of attention because of her interest in a boy.

The phone to her laptop rang, and Sadie picked up the call. It was Lia, her thumbnail picture from a catalog shoot in Rome, her unruly blond hair curled into a perfect coif and her long neck graceful like a swan's. Sadie was confused. Why this airbrushed image of Lia when Sadie just wanted to see her sister for real.

"Don't you want to cam?" Sadie asked.

"I look a wreck now, sorry," Lia said. "How are you?"

"Got some Rose on a Friday night, the world is good."

"Who's the boy?"

The blood rushed to Sadie's cheeks, which she hated. Lia's blushing, in her magazine spreads, and even during their childhood made Lia more beautiful to Sadie, while Sadie found her own blushing childish. What twentysomething woman gets this excited over a boy? An inexperienced one. A hopeful one. A girl who took a brave step away from her comfortable life to find her soul mate, who saw a potential husband. There was nothing to be ashamed of.

"He's Canadian, I think. Reminds me of the guys back home. But he's sophisticated. I think he likes me, but he hasn't called me yet. He leaves me these notes in my inbox on pink paper that he uses for his English class. Starts every note with Bella."

"How romantic! It reminds me of my modeling days in Italy. So many handsome guys, like this one male model who cheated on me. I love the first stages of love, when it's about the chemistry and butterflies and promises. And we finally have something to talk about!"

Sadie was happy that she couldn't see Lia on Skype now, because she frowned at the screen. Since when did sisters need an excuse to talk to each other? Perhaps this flippant comment masked Lia's real feelings, that she didn't need Sadie or the rest of the family. That was why she eloped and told everyone about it later. Sadie hated when she felt this pain, an emptiness let wide whenever Lia said something that made her feel like she didn't matter.

So, she tried to counter the comment. "How's married life?" Sadie asked.

And a chink showed in Lia's armor. Behind the flashy model thumbnail, even the monthly emails back home. "It ends heartbreak. Romance is all heartbreak. I miss it sometimes."

Sadie knew from her parents with James, and from her relationship with Lia, that not all heartbreak was settled in romance. But romance offered a chance to rewrite the script of heartbreak.

"Do you think he's going to call?" Sadie asked. She avoided honesty because she liked getting her sister back.

"He might have to get some stuff in order before he takes you out. He'll call," Lia said. "Hubby and I are going to dinner."

"Ciao Bella," Sadie replied.

Even if Davey never called, to Sadie he'd brought her a chance to feel closer to Lia, even if it was through a boy. It was superficial girlhood gossip, but it was nice to have her sister through good memories of the present. Sadie finished her glass and then joined her flatmates, in time for their cheery rendition of "Minor Swing."

Saturday evenings at the bar with Rebecca and Ewan were now exhausting to Sadie. While the hostel was out partying, Sadie took advantage of the flat's silence. She sat at the common table with her leg propped up on the opposite chair. A plethora of English books were spread about the table. Pink, purple and green pens were scattered across the table as well. Sadie scribbled her lesson plans on sheets of crisp white paper although her mind wandered. She was pensive, but unfocused. Did she need to call her parents again? Read another trashy romance novel? Talk to Lia? Why did crushes derail her thoughts so much? When she was alone, she felt the most like herself and the least like being with anyone else. She wondered if she could ever feel herself with Davey. That was the truth.

Now the phone rang.

"Hello," she said.

"Hello," Davey replied. "Surprised you're home on a Saturday night."

"Lesson planning. I might call my parents later on, but I'm not sure."

"Were you thinking of me?" he asked. Sadie went silent. "Sorry, bad joke."

"Agreed. Apology accepted."

"Do you eat?"

"Everyone does."

"There a nice trattoria not too far from school. We could meet there after my morning classes and before yours start"

"When would you like to go?"

She cringed afterwards. It sounded too staged, too formal. Perhaps that was better than sounding desperate. She heard a rustling of paper, most like his planner.

"How's Wednesday? Our schedules are closest then."

"You wrote my schedule down? Were you thinking of me?"

"You can't use my own corny jokes on me," he said. When he went silent, Sadie panicked. Then he replied after a long pause. "Yes, I was thinking of you. I've thought about you every day since we met."

Sadie was happy, excited about his confirmation that he liked her. Relieved she hadn't embarrassed herself, she rushed off the phone with him before she said anything else incriminating or cocky, or that aroused any range of negative emotions Rebecca had warned her about. "I can't wait for Wednesday," she said.

"Same here," he replied.

Sadie waited for Wednesday with work and longer walks by the Arno, the brown river that flowed underneath bridges, and despite its peaceful waters was poisonous with pollution. She smiled whenever she saw couples there, either holding hands or each other, kissing in between conversations. She hoped that she and Davey would soon be like those couples. To avoid calling Davey, she played cards with Rebecca in the hostel and split a box of wine in the evenings as they talked about work, life, and boys. Since Rebecca had Ewan, Sadie looked to her advice as gold, as she often did with her sister. Ewan was a decent Scot to Sadie, a catch not because of what he did but because of the qualities he lacked -- he wasn't a cheater, a drunk, or disrespectful to women.

"What should I do," Sadie asked Rebecca as they finished their bottle of wine.

"Be yourself. Laugh at his jokes, and stroke his arm. Wear a skirt and tight heels," Rebecca replied.

On Wednesday, Sadie donned a black pencil skirt and red heels. When Davey greeted her at the trattoria, a few blocks away from the hostel. With her hair pinned in a messy updo, Davey greeted her with a kiss on the cheek and he caressed the back of her ear.

"You look lovely today," he said.

"So do you," she said.

They sat down to first course salads when Davey reached for the balsamic vinaigrette and touched her chin instead, dragging his fingers across her lips.

"I love your eyes. They're a little sad, but kind."

She smiled at that.

The chill of the late summer morning had vanished, opening up clear skies outside of the trattoria. French music played inside the cozy eatery. In between the first glass of Cabernet and finishing post dessert coffee, Davey squeezed in his life story. Like Sadie, he grew up in a horrible small town, but his was of North Wallace, that stretch of land by Nova Scotia with the friendliest people in the world. Stark with crisp white snow, skinny trees and sub-zero frost, it would've been a great place to live if one could live with the harsh six-month winters, which Davey hated. He had two goals in life -- to be a gentleman and to never have a desk job. To achieve the second goal, he played baseball in high school and went into the American military, then went to school in Guelph for zoology. He bred fish in New Zealand for sunlight and illegally waited tables in Australia, and how he was teaching in Florence for the beauty and sensory experience.

"I miss my family and my younger brother, even though we don't get along. I had to be true to my calling. Don't you think so?" he asked.

Sadie searched for the best words. She didn't want to expose Davey to the mess of her past and her family, her own tense relationship with Lia and even the sibling who she'd never met, but always felt like she was in competition with. "I know how you feel," she replied, because it was honest. It was why she quit her lucrative legal job to teach in Italy, why she emailed and Skyped with Lia instead of suggesting that they meet. She meant to say that she knew how it felt to miss her hometown yet feel trapped by it, how difficult it was to tell someone who shut her out and then ask that their elopement be celebrated. Yet she didn't know how to articulate this to Davey or even if

she wanted to, because this could change the energy of their date, make it less about knowing each other and more about spilling secrets.

"Canadian women are cold, but you're not like that. You're sweet. Uncorrupted," he said.

Davey paid the bill and left for her hostel, but once they reached Leonardo's they stopped. He didn't kiss her goodbye. "Would you like to see my favorite place in the city?" he asked.

She should've retired for a nap because she'd stayed up too late, trying to teach her Austrian flatmates how to play gin rummy, and she needed to finish her lesson plans. But she hadn't spent this much time with a man so interesting, so smart and handsome, and she didn't want it to end.

"Sure," she said.

Davey took her to the churches of the city center, to the Duomo, paid ten Euros to the stout little man by the foot of the staircase. He insisted that everyone in Florence should see this, as they climbed up flight after steep flight of stairs. Huffing from exhaustion, she was certain he was memorizing all the imperfections of her body, yet he didn't insult her once. He followed behind her silently, as if the sports he played as an adolescent and weight lifting he did as an adult prepared him for this. By the time she reached the top of that never-ending staircase, perspiration beaded her sternum, but she felt his hand wrap around her hip. She wanted to lean against him like that forever, but he pushed her forward.

"Do you ever feel lonely," Davey asked when they reached the top.

"Everyone does," she replied.

"I miss my family sometimes. I wonder why I can't just return to the friendliest place in the world, but when I see this, I know why I'm here."

Sadie looked over the balcony at the view. She saw salmon and cream-colored houses stacked upon one another, opening out to an endless blue sky as crisp as sun dried sheets. She said everything important and heard nothing mundane. Not the whine of the tour guide's voice or the bratty children, not even the chime of the Duomo's church bells ring. She heard the gush of wind and the cry of seagulls. She felt Davey's hands. His fingers, tender yet strong caressed the small of her back, claiming her as part of him. Relishing in how long it had taken for this moment of her life, knowing that a moment could never be more right or deserved, she rested her head against him, giving in. She relaxed. She adored him. She needed him. Most importantly, she trusted him.

Later in the afternoon, Sadie rushed into work late. She arrived a minute before class started and it began to rain outside. She pulled her skirt down and collected her books when Olivia the secretary stopped her.

"Sadie, why so late?" she asked.

"I was busy."

"Doing what?"

"I was out with a friend," Sadie replied, smiling.

"Davey?" Olivia raised her eyebrow. "Teachers can't be boyfriend and girlfriend. You must take this job seriously. You're here to teach, not for pasta and sausage."

Sadie hid her smile with her hand. The secretary's discipline was humorous. What American girl didn't come to Italy for the pasta and the sausage? Sadie wasn't there just for sausage, but for the wine, the artwork, to be surrounded by beauty, which was the feeling of love, but she couldn't jeopardize her job. Sadie wasn't in love yet, but in love with the possibility of love -- of shared secrets and laughter, of feeling together with someone -- because she had felt alone for so long. It was the possibility that got her through the difficult lesson, that made the walk-in heels along with the cobblestones feel easy, what made her miss Lia, and the life she might have had, a little less.

Florence transitioned into fall. Iron colored leaves fell from the ground. Tourists bought leather items, jackets, gloves and boots to keep warm and for cool pictures. Sadie and Rebecca wore leather boots and gloves, as well as scarves to keep warm, although Sadie's heart was already warm. Now that it was too cold for gelato, Davey took her to cafes where the scent of cinnamon sauntered through the air as they sipped hot chocolate. When he wasn't with her he left her lovely surprises, pink colored notes in her work mailbox that detailed his thoughts of her. He wrote that the gates of heaven reminded him of her, and that she was more perfect than the Sistine chapel, that each moment apart made him miss her more. She held these notes close to her chest, hid them in her pockets when she taught, inhaled his cologne on those notes before she went to bed, and posted them on her side of the hostel room. His absence became his presence. She wasn't just in a city surrounded by beauty, but in a place surrounded by the possibility of the love that she deserved -- Davey.

It was fun to have someone else with her when she went to bars with the rest of the American teachers, still dancing to the same ABBA songs, still flirting with smoking because the Italians made it look chic. With Davey with her, Sadie was part of a couple, not the third wheel was accustomed to being, with her high school and college friends, and with Lia whenever she returned home from her episodes of sneaking out. Sadie had told Rebecca of this, her feelings of being left out, and Rebecca was always sure to include Sadie in her outings with Ewan. To Sadie, Rebecca and Ewan's relationship resided somewhere between puppy love and potentially serious. They went at an even pace, seeming to take the romance more casually than Sadie would've, perhaps because they didn't believe their own shot at love was with each other.

On that Saturday evening, Rebecca rambled about the hypocrisy of British superiority, Sadie cut her eyes to Davey and smiled, as if to thank him for basking in her humor, her pain of

accepting the unlovable parts of Rebecca to take in the rest of her. When Davey went to the restroom, Sadie finished the rest of her wine.

"What do you think?" she asked Rebecca and Ewan.

"I like him. He's a guy's guy. The kind to brace the Scottish winters without a coat," Ewan replied.

"Same," Rebecca replied. "I thought you'd get a suave Italian, but he's all right. How long has it been?"

"Two months," Sadie said.

Rebecca laughed. "No love. I meant, how long has it been since you've had sex?" she mouthed off the last part so Ewan couldn't hear.

The answer depended on what counted as sex, as far as Sadie could understand. There had been a few boys in college, the same ones who complained about her, whom she'd kissed, gone to second base with, but other than that she couldn't get past the terror of intimacy. If there was so much wrong with her that they could see while she was clothed, who knew what infinite errors existed when naked? The fear stymied her, kept her glad to not have done it, because it was an unknown enforced by negative feedback she'd received from guys whose names she'd erased from her mind. Over the years, Sadie had assumed it was her imperfections she'd never be rid of that caused men to lose interest, because as a human being, she was imperfect. However, Lia's imperfections never had her back. There was a lot wrong with Lia. She was loud, rebellious and selfish, yet Sadie still loved her, despite abandoning the family. Sadie wasn't the same person as Lia. Sadie deserved love.

"Never," Sadie said.

"Why not?" Rebecca asked.

Sadie couldn't reveal this, so she just went to the stockpile answer. "I guess, I've just been waiting for the right person."

Davey entered the room again, with two wine glasses in hand, one most likely a glass of Malbec and the other a refill of her Chardonnay, and sat down. He grabbed her hand and kissed her on the cheek, his hands strong while his soft lips brushed against her face.

"What were you ladies talking about" he asked.

"Sports," Ewan said.

Rebecca looked at Ewan. "We were talking about love."

"They're lying," Ewan said.

"Drunk Scotsman always lie," Rebecca said. "We were talking about love, how it's everywhere yet elusive, how you can't earn it. You have to find it."

"We were talking about waiting for the right person," Sadie said as she swirled her wine glass.

"I met my first girlfriend at basketball camp when I was fifteen," Davey replied. "Over ten years ago. That was the right time for me. When was your first, Sadie?"

She shook her head. "I'm waiting for the right person." That time when Sadie said it, it felt real. Honest.

"Is it just the right person?" Ewan asked.

Perhaps it was the fifth glass of wine that clouded Sadie's judgement, allowed her to lower her guard and speak what was in her heard. "The right love," Said replied.

She looked Davey, his blue eyes widened as he smiled. He wrapped his arm around her and kissed her forehead, the same way Sadie imagined Lia's anonymous husband kissing her goodnight. Sadie wanted to feel that kiss forever, in a well lived bedroom as husband and wife, not in a smoky Italian bar in the dead of night.

"To love," Rebecca offered.

The four polished off their glasses of wine, giddy and tipsy, hopeful for the future.

Sadie Skyped Lia, eager for a video call about last night's breakthrough, but once again Lia refused to get on camera. Instead, Sadie looked at Lia's glamorous thumbnail, uncertain of Lia just wanted to remain part of her past, if she just wanted to be remembered as beautiful and lovely, perhaps not who she was today.

"It's cold in Florence finally," Sadie said.

"It's been cold in Paris," Lia said.

Sadie sipped her coffee, avoiding the questions she really wanted to ask. Would Lia ever return to the States? What was married life like? Did she ever think about James, their dead sibling that they'd never meet? James was in the back of Sadie's mind, whenever she walked past the Gates of Heaven and wondered if he would've been interested in Art History, or whenever she met a brown eyed businessman, who resembled what she imagined James would look like as an adult. Did Lia ever consider the memories she'd robbed of the family by leaving them for a temporary career? Sadie couldn't be honest about those questions, because it would lead to arguments, and she didn't want to disrupt the good place that they were in, so she talked about the safest topic which bonded them as adolescents, and now as adults: boys.

"How's that nice husband of yours?" asked Sadie.

"Alive. How's Davey," Lia asked.

Sadie wanted to stop and ask about Lia's husband, but talked about her boy instead. After all, it was she who called with pressing matters, not to talk about her marriage and joy over not being single anymore. She told Lia that they went on outings, to the Piazza where they fed the stray cats, rotund because the monks fed them, that they went to cute places for gelato and cafes, but Sadie sensed that something was off. He hadn't kissed her on the lips yet. Sometimes he wouldn't tell her

where he was at. He was unclear about the future, because they were expats who'd return to their home life after all.

"I want what you have, but I'm not sure if that'll be Davey and I," Sadie said.

Lia groaned. Sadie was uncertain that Lia was groaning about her question or marriage in general. "One thing that I learned from traveling. It puts extra pressure on relationships, makes you feel much closer than if you were back home. Ask him about those disappearances. But if he's taking you out, then he's still interested. There could be someone else."

"Are you telling me he could be with someone else?" Sadie near shrieked.

"I'm saying to be careful. Use your intuition. Don't be afraid to ask tough questions," Lia said. "I wish someone had given me that advice."

"You wouldn't have taken it," Sadie replied.

"You're still a mega smart ass," Lia said. "It would've sunk in eventually. Learn from my mistakes. He sounds great, but it's still too early to tell if he's the one for you. He may not even be thinking of finding the one for him right now. Guys are like that when they're expats."

"Thanks."

"Bye. I love you."

Sadie couldn't say the same words, so she ended the call with, "You too."

Sadie logged off her computer and frowned when she looked at her textbooks for lesson planning. She didn't want to plan lessons. She wanted to be loved! Yet she couldn't be moved to tell Lia that she loved her, even though she did. Sadie couldn't find it in her to say the words because there was something missing in order to say it. Was it the connection? No, Sadie felt that strong sisterly bond that survived their childhood, even in James's shadow. Sadie couldn't say it because she couldn't feel honest with Lia, about the feelings that hit her while students

were taking a test, or when she walked around the splendor of Florence and thought about why she couldn't feel her feelings in the most authentic way? Because she couldn't tell the truth.

She talked to Davey about this on a Wednesday, while at the Piazza dressed in thick trench coats, petting the rotund kitties that were fed because the monks fed them. Instead of talking about the lesson plans or their upbringing in the church, her counting hats and him never listening, she talked about Lia, their sisterly struggles. Why couldn't Lia understand things from her point of view? Why did they have to be apart? Sadie wondered if this was normal for all siblings, if Davey experienced this with his brother.

"Is it normal to feel so constricted?" she asked. "To feel like you can't talk to anyone? Like really talk, not just the simple how are you stuff?"

Davey held out his palm and several cats waddled to him for treats. "I feel that way sometimes. When I was in Canada, people saw me as this big, dumb jock. I couldn't get past the perfunctory details of my life when I was there, so I left. Maybe you and your sister will return to where you are. Have you told her about this?"

Sadie shook her head. She took his other hand in hers. "My last class has an exam so they'll get out early," she said, changing the subject.

Davey shook his head. "Sorry, not tonight. I'm meeting someone by the Arno."

"Who are you meeting?" Sadie asked, Lia's words ringing in her head.

"An old friend."

"What's their name?"

He shifted. "Aurora."

Sadie tried to smile as she replied, tried to seem relaxed and calm about the mention of another woman. She didn't want to betray herself. "Was she an old girlfriend?"

“No, we were never together,” Davey said, assuring her. “We arrived in Italy at the same time in Rome, now we keep in touch here.”

“And that’s it?”

“I can’t do this. The suspicion. Have I ever given you a reason to not trust me?”

Sadie shook her head. “No.”

“Then you have to trust me. She’s an old friend. It’s not a big deal.”

Sadie fixed his scarf, putting it over his neck. Didn't she trust him? Was she setting herself up to betray the idea of him or her own thoughts? Davey was right, he hadn't given her a reason to mistrust him. And if she trusted him, she couldn't act suspiciously of him. They kissed on the cheek before parting, Sadie off to teach her class, Davey to feed more cats before meeting this old, not a big deal friend.

Sadie went to class and gave the exam, thankful for her students' fear of the test and silence during the rest. After class she returned to Leonardo's, where Rebecca entered their room with a ridiculous smile.

"You got a message," she said. "Davey wants to take you as his date to a party on Saturday." They both began laughing. "I took the liberty of saying you'd be free."

Sadie laughed for no reason. Now. It was all happening now. Right now. She never thought she'd get a chance to love, and now the excitement humored her, reminding her of the fifth-grade innocence when it was appreciated and expected to be excited over a date. Rebecca giggled even harder like she was high on cocaine, and she jumped on the bed, smacking Sadie in the face with pillow while screaming, "You get to hook up with Davey!"

Saturday evening couldn't come soon enough. Sadie tried to keep busy so she wouldn't become wracked with nerves, or worse back out, but there wasn't enough coffee to drink, naps

to take, lessons to plan or papers to grade. There wasn't enough wine to drink or rounds of poker to play with Rebecca and the new flat mates, so she dropped Lia a line. Her email asked perfunctory questions about party tips, what she should wear, how she should talk. She skirted past questions she wanted to ask, such as why hadn't Lia seen her yet in Florence or why she hadn't offered to see her in Paris? At the end of her email to Lia, Sadie did ask, what Lia meant when she said that she loved her.

Lia responded a few minutes later with a curt reply, much like her marriage announcement to the family. She told Sadie that the key to being interesting is to be interested in others, and to be beautiful, to wear a cute and sexy cocktail dress. For Sadie's last question, Lia responded with her own question: You're my sister, how could I not love you?

Sadie frowned when she read her sister's response. How could she not love Sadie? For one, she shut Sadie out of her life and then asked her to be with her, on her terms. Sadie wondered if everything that possibly looked like love wasn't love at all, and just some interaction with a veil of lies. As she searched her suitcase for an appropriate dress she thought of this, wondered if there was some type of lying going on between her and Davey. They liked each other, but she wasn't sure if she liked him in a way that was too serious, too permanent for how they would've been before.

She distracted herself by picking out a black eyelet dress, red heels and jeweled silver barrette. She tucked her dark hair behind her ear so her silver droplet earring could show. When she greeted Davey at Leonardo's doorstep, he stepped back to survey her appearance.

"Wow," he said.

"Thanks," she purred.

She wrapped her arm around his wrist as they walked to his friend's flat. She wanted to be close to him to avoid falling. Sadie often wore heels for class but traveled long distances in ballet flats. Her ankles hurt because she wasn't used to putting so much pressure on the balls of her

feet. Davey talked about the party itself. Recently he'd met some new teachers at the Britannica Institute, their school's rival, who invited him to this party.

"It's good to know new people. And I'll have the prettiest girl," he said.

"You haven't seen all the girls at the party," she replied.

"I don't need to. Britannica Institute is mostly Brits. Stuck up guys and girls with no fashion sense, no sex appeal, awful teeth."

Sadie laughed. "You say the right things, make me feel like there's no other girl meant for you."

They approached the apartment door and he knocked. "Because when I'm falling in love, that's what it's like. No other woman exists."

"You have a mirror, you know you're charming. There was no one else? Is no one else?"

Davey stopped and sighed. "Why don't you trust me?"

Why didn't she trust him? Because he was vague at times about his whereabouts, like when he didn't want to tell her when he was going to the Arno? Was he hiding something? Sadie would soon find out at the party. Before Sadie would answer and possibly ruin the evening, a balding man with wide smile and a glass of wine opened the door, welcoming them. Sounds of weekend celebration greeted them -- intellectual conversations, glasses clanking, bossa nova in the background. The kitchen was in the front of the apartment, filled with suited men who seemed much older and more distinguished to Sadie, until she looked at their young faces and realized on their suits made them seem older. They reached for beers in the small refrigerator and wine in the cabinets, along with wine glasses for the stylish and plastic cups for the considerate. A pale girl in a 1950s dress dashed through the sea of men in the back of the apartment. Sadie inhaled the scent of cigars and raspberries. She was impressed. It was more sophisticated than the college parties she'd attended and she was uncertain of how to

behave, but that didn't matter. She was with Davey, her date for the evening and she hoped for the rest of their evenings. With his fingers interlaced with hers, he introduced her to the people at the party that he knew; a grey suited man who taught children like Davey, another with hornedrimmed glasses, and another who claimed to dye his dark hair red because his Italian girlfriend loved it. Davey stepped away to fetch a glass of wine for Sadie, and as soon as he left her, the bespeckled man smiled at her.

"How do you like Italy?" he asked.

"Love it!" she replied. Italy embodied beauty through the food, the artwork, the language, the land where Lia had found love. How could she not love it?"

"It's different, isn't it? My friends back home would never wear a suit to a party, but Aurora suggested it because she wanted an authentic Italian experience. You know her? It's her apartment. She's a Brit, but she's like most Italian women. Sensual, but insane."

"What's your opinion of Italy?" Sadie asked. She didn't want to ask about Aurora.

"Italians can't get a proper accent and it's annoying. Whenever I read *The Guardian* in class they groan," he replied. Then he prattled on about his own education at the London School of Economics and his British pride because the Brits were the only class of people in the world who value sophistication, unlike Americans who were confident in their stupidity with an idiot president, and the Italian who were so ignorant of outside affairs. "The British are the only ones who care about other's affairs. Shame, isn't it?" he asked.

"I have a friend who'd be perfect for you!" she shouted. She hoped to give him the impression that she was off limits.

He raised his eyebrow. "Perfect for me?"

Davey stepped in. "You'll find someone," he said to the man. "What do you want to drink?" he asked Sadie.

"Riesling" Sadie replied.

"Let's get you a glass. Nice seeing you," he said to the man wearing glasses. "He's a weird one," he whispered in her ear.

"I was trying to be humorous. It didn't work, " Sadie replied.

"He needs to find his own girl," Davey said.

Sadie smiled at Davey's reaction to a man talking to her. His possessiveness made her think that he missed her, adored her. In some ways, that he loved her. Or at the least, he could love her, as she could love him. They walked back to the apartment to the living room. The separation of the sexes reminded Sadie of the Italian saying her students repeated. Men in the city, women in the country. Men in the front of the apartment while the women were in the back. The women talked amongst themselves, smoking thin cigarettes and sipping their wine glasses, except for the couple standing in the middle of the slow, slow dragging to a jazz instrumental. They stood out because they were the only couple, except for Sadie and Davey. They looked loving. He ran his fingers through her long and curly auburn hair. She wrapped her arms his waist and buried her face in his chest. The petite girl looked toward Davey and Sadie. Her beautiful face broke out into a smile and she whispered something to her dance partner.

"Hey love," the girl said.

She kissed Davey on the cheek. Sadie cringed at the girl's cleavage.

"It's been too long since I've seen you," the girl said. "How's work?"

"The kids won't shut up," he replied. He then motioned over to Sadie. "This is Sadie."

The girl's gorgeous smile disappeared into a flat line, and although her face was still beautiful, she pursed her lips and squinted. "Aurora," she said. She didn't embrace Sadie the Italian way, but in the British way. At a distance. "You work with him?" she asked.

"We work opposite work schedules, but yes," Sadie replied. Then she added, "He's my date."

"Ta," Aurora said.

"Can you get her a Riesling? We didn't see any up front," Davey asked.

Aurora flashed a smile at Davey, but cut her hazel eyes at Sadie. Davey glanced at Aurora, the same glance Lia had given Sadie when they were in Rockwood, and Lia had broken a window when she'd tried to sneak out at night. The same glance demanding loyalty and secrecy of an intimate mistake. Aurora shoved the glass of Riesling in Sadie's hand.

"Can we talk Davey? I need some advice about my students," Aurora asked Davey.

Aurora talked at length about her class's confusion over the preposition to, flipping her hair and stroking her neck. Her dance partner returned behind her, holding her hips. Sadie was bored and comfortable at the same time. Who was this Aurora woman? Uncertain about asking the question, Sadie took her wine and toured the apartment.

As she walked toward the front of the apartment, she surveyed the document decorated hallway. Bus, train, and plane tickets were taped to the wall, as well as computer printouts of all three flatmates -- Aurora, the pale girl in the 1950s dress and a blond -- drinking beers, sitting in movie theaters, eating eggs in the kitchen. Sadie wondered if this was the life Lia had while single modeling in Italy, if this was the life James's might have had -- exploring the world instead of staying in Rockwood. Sometimes Sadie thought about the James's would've had if he hadn't died so early; if in fact, she would've been ready to love the world if he was still here. Her heart was haunted by the absence of someone she'd never meet, a longing for love, and she wondered if Davey could be the second chance of love she didn't have with her family. Feeling alone with this unstated truth, Sadie wandered into the only empty room of the house. The bedroom was neat, with a violet colored comforter and a built-in bookstore with books alphabetically arranged. Next to the bed was a chair and a desk, and different colored pens in a ceramic brown mug. There were pictures on the wall, all

the same blond girl. Those pictures told her life story as a traveler-- walking through gardens, eating sushi and making funny faces with Asian children, making her skin seem that much whiter, her hair that much blonder. Several words were written on her wall in several languages, as well as lists on separate sheets of paper. Things that fall from the sky; things that piss me off, things that I think are elegant. Sadie wondered if there was a list of things that she loved? If there was, she'd want to put Lia and James's name on the wall. She was certain she could love Davey, but she wasn't sure if she could trust him.

"Lady Sei Shonogan," Davey said.

"What?" she asked.

"Lady Sei Shonogan," he repeated. "Brigette's read the Pillow Books and copied all the lists. She visited Japan when she taught in Korea. I might teach in Korea next," he said. He pointed to a picture of Brigitte hugging a jar of kimchi.

"What are these," she asked, pointing to the markers on the desk.

"People write their favorite words, in any language, on the wall. You should write something down."

Sadie took an electric blue marker, unscrewed the cap, thinking of her favorite word. Struggling to make large bubbly letters, she wrote down the first word that came to mind: Verdad. She'd heard it once at a Home Depot when she was looking for light bulb and the salesman asked her if she knew many watts it was. "You're looking for 400 watts, verdad?" he repeated. At the register, she asked him what it meant, and he'd explained that verdad could mean truth, or really, or right. A complex description of honesty, and now, she got to print it somewhere else.

He smiled at her contribution and pointed to his favorite word. Iconoclast was written in navy capital letters.

"I wanted to be an iconoclast. I tried to put it in every college essay. Wanted to sound smart."

"But you are smart," Sadie replied. Because she felt that he was. Because she wanted to love someone who was smart.

"I wanted to sound smart. Now I don't worry about it as much."

She looked out at the window, onto the balcony of the neighbor. The sky a violet hue against the background of light. The crisp white paper crinkled under his fingers. Sadie wanted to be here all evening, considering his blue eyes, a sea of sad, friendly and sweet. She didn't want to look at anything else.

"This is nice," she said.

"It is," he replied.

With the tips of his fingers, he lifted her head and he tilted his, and their lips met in a kiss. She held in a nervous laugh. The last boy she'd kissed was in college, when her attempted experiment with random hookups failed, because she's wanted the experience and not the boy. But this time was different, because she wanted Davey more than she'd wanted anyone. The smooth texture of his lounge, the pressure of his muscular arms wrapped around her, made her feel smaller and yet more secure, at one with him, and the powerful scent of his CK One overwhelmed her. Her own passion scared her. Was she desperate for desiring him so much? Did it matter if she was?

He stopped and smiled. Her high heels clicking against the wood floor, she walked past him and sat on the bed. She wondered if she'd be like Lia and give in on the first try, if she'd only be wearing her heels and her barrette at the end of the night. She folded her hands, and laughed at the solemn nature that washed over her. She backed on to the bed and relaxed on her elbows.

"What am I going to do with you?" she asked.

Davey smiled and tried to cover his blushing face with his hands. He wasn't the suave, confident guy who approached her when they first met. This was the first time he seemed shy, like he'd returned to being that twelve-year-old in North Wallace, embarrassed in the moonlight.

A knock on the door startled Sadie, halting her out of her private moment. Did she not deserve this?

"Hey," Aurora said. "I'm trying to be a good hostess. How are you two?"

"Fine," Davey and Sadie both said.

"Okay, I like," Aurora said. "I don't want to interrupt you two, but my boyfriend Frederico just went to get some more wine before the stores closed, and I wanted to talk to you before he returned." She pointed a manicured finger at Davey.

"This isn't a good time," Davey replied. His voice carried some finality as when he told his students Basta.

"Please," Aurora said. She pulled his arm. "It'll take a minute, and I don't want Frederico to hear this."

Sadie was still on the bed in the same position as before, when Davey gently tried to pry Aurora from him, but he failed. Instead, Aurora pushed him down on the bed and straddled him, placing her knees on either side of his hips.

"I like you in this position," Aurora purred. Then, she looked at Sadie. "You tried this with him yet?"

"What?" Sadie asked, stunned.

"I'm joking with you," Aurora replied. She turned back to Davey. "You like them green this time."

The position Sadie had hoped to be in was now occupied by Aurora, this aggravating yet gorgeous woman who Sadie wished she'd never met. All three of them were on the bed, Aurora

still on top of Davey and Sadie lying next to them, like an unexpected threesome that was heading toward the aftermath of a threesome, which Lia had told Sadie about before. A wave of regret and pain, the fear of losing someone close. Sadie was sure she was heading there, and while Aurora looked like she relished in this disruption, her long auburn hair floating down her barely covered breasts like Lady Godiva, Sadie still had to listen to Aurora. She had to know what Davey was lying about.

Sadie look at Davey. His blue eyes no longer registered alarm, but he didn't touch Aurora. Instead, the hand closest to Sadie lied next to her hand, providing security.

"You know, I came to Italy because I was tired of the daft British men and their cold ways, so when I found Federico I thought my problems were solved," Aurora said. "He buys me flowers, slow dances with me at parties, kisses my forehead, treats me like a lady. But you made me feel like a woman. I'm always thinking of you and our first few weeks together in Rome, when you saw me crying and asked if I was lonely. I think about the time we visited the Vatican after that sinful night before, when you poured Syrah down my back and licked it dry. We felt right. Can we make this right?"

Davey swallowed and stared at the ceiling. Sadie waited on Davey to deny it, to say that he was falling in love with Sadie as he'd almost told her on the way there, that Sadie deserved him and she was the right girl to love, not some mental case like Aurora. He did neither. Her shoes felt too tight. A chill ran up her leg. Sadie's fingers slipped out of Davey's, the last promise of touch they'd shared. Her head throbbed and her stomach tipper over. She wanted to think it was too much wine or the cold of the evening, but it was really from the betrayal of what not only what was, but what wasn't. She couldn't be in that house anymore, at that party, on that bed.

Sadie wanted to ruin Aurora's moment the same way she'd ruined Sadie's, but Sadie couldn't find the right words to damage her, perhaps because she was already too damaged. Maybe that was

why the evening had gone so sour. Too many damned words. She got off the bed and pushed through the crowd of people, past the hallway and the kitchen, past the drink and conversations and bossa nova serenely playing on the stereo. She felt Davey following her, from the heat of his body and the scent of his cologne, but once she closed the apartment door the nightly chill enveloped her. He'd left. Tipsy on the wine, she stumbled back to the hostel where Rebecca was up, sneaking Ewan out the back window.

"You're home early," Rebecca said.

"I know," Sadie replied.

"What happened?"

She finally took her shoes off, changed into comfortable pajamas and slipped into bed. "I'm not even sure. I'll tell you in the morning."

Rebecca raised her index finger in the air as if to ask a question. If this were a normal night, where Sadie wasn't sure if she was nursing a potential heartbreak, she'd have the decency to answer her, but she was too tired of that Saturday and that party, and wondering, why did this disappointment, this heartbreak only seem to happen to her. Did this happen to Lia? Would this have happened to James? If so, then why didn't Lia talk about it? Was this the heartbreak her parents felt about James, that they only expressed through their treatment of their daughters? Sadie slipped into bed and turned off the light, uncertain if what she wanted was even possible, or if it had been snuffed out of her, like her sibling's death that she'd always wonder about.

Sadie awoke to the pale sunlight, the scents of vanilla and cinnamon, and Rebecca standing in the doorway of their room with a wooden spoon dripping in batter.

"Morning love," she said. "I'm making waffles. Please fulfill your friendship duties and taste test them."

Sadie climbed out of bed. She grabbed a sweatshirt and helped Rebecca in the kitchen, who was tapping more flour into the batter. Ewan had challenged Rebecca while Sadie was gone, saying that she could only cook burnt toast and cereal. Rebecca wanted to improve her waffle-making skills.

"I don't want to marry him, but I can't have him think I can't cook," Rebecca said. She stirred the batter. "How was last night?"

Sadie rolled her eyes and headed for the instant coffee. Last night? The night that started well and ended with her fully clothed yet emotionally cold? She stirred hot water into her coffee, ignoring Rebecca's question. The phone rang, and Rebecca answered it.

"For you!" Rebecca said.

Sadie took the phone, watching Rebecca's failed waffle attempts. "Hello?" she asked.

"Hi," Davey said. "Did you make it home, all right?"

"I made it back to the hostel without cracking my face, so I'm doing okay. How are you?"

"Good. A little hung over. Definitely hungry."

"Come over here. Rebecca's making waffles," Sadie said. She looked over her shoulder at Rebecca pulling off another transparent waffle and laughed. Sadie wanted to be in a good mood that morning. She wanted to have a good time with Davey, to make up for that awful party. But she was ignoring the truth in her heart as she suggested he come over, fearful that it would force her to end what she thought was a pretty good beginning. Still, she pushed on. She chose lying to herself instead of loneliness.

"Let's go out. I don't want to see Rebecca. I only want to see you."

"Only me?" Sadie asked. She needed reassurance.

Davey assured her. "Only you."

Sadie hung up and showered, luxuriating for a moment until the scalding hot water burned her. She put on a knee length skirt, a simple t-shirt and ballet flats before she grabbed her purse and jacket. She waved goodbye to Rebecca and chose to focus on Rebecca's smile, not the disappointment she read in her face. Despite last night, Sadie's face lit up when she saw Davey, who looked impeccable in his khakis and green polo. They ran towards each other and hugged as if they'd been reunited after a long separation. He picked her up and wrapped her legs around his toned waist, until she heard a motorcyclist honking and remembered that she was wearing a skirt.

"You clean up well," she said.

"Partying your college life away gives you stamina," he replied. "You were the first thing on my mind when I woke up. I had no other choice but to see you."

Since they'd met, Davey was the first and last thing on her mind. At first, her thoughts were pleasant, from the anticipating of seeing with the notes, to their first visit atop the cathedral, to their evening when they fed the fat cats. Although she thought of Davey all throughout Saturday morning and Saturday night, she had more questions than answers. Who was Aurora to him? What else was he not telling her? Why hadn't he told her about this? Perhaps the biggest question was, did she want to know it? She wanted honesty, but she didn't want to have to demand it. She wanted it to come to her, much like she wanted Lia to visit her. However, if she couldn't ask, did she really deserve to know?

Instead she said, "I was thinking about you too."

It was the truth shrouded in first-love language.

They found a quaint and quiet trattoria close to Sadie's house, where they were seated and a gorgeous waitress took their orders. Davey looked over at the waitress's sashay to the back of the kitchen. Sadie felt repulsed. She knew that Davey's desire wasn't unique to her, but meant

for any woman who desired him. A sickness welled inside her and reached her stomach, the same sickness she felt when Lia shouted that she acted like she was always right, and that was why no one wanted to be her friend, the same sickness she felt whenever she looked at James's tiny baseball glove in her parents' living room. Sadie wasn't meant to be included in Lia's world, or Davey's without much compromise. Comfort was seductive, but compulsion ruled her mind. Honesty meant a sacrifice of comfort, a comfort which stopped her from asking difficult questions.

So she confronted the difficulty.

"I was thinking about you and Aurora," she said. "What she said when we were in that bedroom."

"What did she say?"

"You were there. She said that you were a couple in Rome, and she wanted to be with you again. You'd told me that she was just your friend. You never told me the other stuff."

The waitress served them their entrees, a medium rare steak for Davey and a chicken salad for Sadie, but she wasn't hungry anymore. What began as an easy lunch had turned into something dark, like the cloudy skies of the Italian afternoon, but neither knew that. Davey cut his steak into pinkish brown squares. Sadie smiled as if she'd dropped some British humor his way, but Davey didn't laugh. Sadie hoped he'd apologized, say that none of it were true, and Aurora was just a drunk crazy liar, but he ate as if nothing was wrong. Sadie couldn't pretend she hadn't brought it up.

"Why didn't you tell me?" she pressed on.

He sipped his coffee. "It was none of your business." There was finality in his voice, as if the subject was over.

Sadie threw her napkin over her food. She was offended. The statement seemed as though he was trying to erase their last two months of knowing each other, make it vanish like cappuccino

foam. If it was none of her business, why hadn't he told her about it? Why did he kiss her? Why did he hide his history with Aurora, if none of it mattered?

"It became my business when you took me to that party," she said.

"I didn't think she was going to say anything about it. What happened between us was a long time ago, when we first arrived in Italy," he said. "We were lovers when we were first looking for teaching jobs, and yes, we really liked each other. But one night we went out for karaoke, and she got into a fight with another girl. She even kicked me as I tried to break them up. I wasn't going to be with someone that jealous and violent, so before we moved to Florence I broke up with her. She wanted to remain friends. I didn't see a need to mention it because we've been just friends, and she's never made a big deal about it until now. In fact, we met at another teacher's party and she left with some sketchy Italian."

"I thought she had a boyfriend."

"She does. She did. She dumped him at the party last night."

"Was it for you?"

Davey finished his coffee and laughed like he'd just dropped some British humor, but there was nothing funny about it. "It's nothing," he said. He reached over and grabbed Sadie's hand. "Nothing," he repeated.

Sadie wanted to believe him so badly, because he was everything she'd wanted in a man, but she wanted to believe him for her own sake. She was getting older and wanted marriage, just like her sister Lia, to enter into a completed family, since hers was already broken with James's death before she was even born. And Sadie deserved true love! For she was good person with a good heart, and honest. Relationships were never easy for Sadie, and she thought that Davey would be it. That she could just go to Italy and get a great guy, but perhaps she made him to be something he wasn't, which was obvious at the party. The party turned their union sour. Davey

picked up the check and walked her home. They resembled lovers as they walked with their arms linked, as they had at the party the night before. Sadie was held hostage by her own desires and truth. She wanted to believe him because she liked him, she wanted to need him. But it wasn't about liking or not liking. It was about trusting, and she couldn't trust him.

They approached the steps of Leonardo and stood there awkwardly. Davey leaned forward.

"Can I have a kiss?" he asked.

Sadie leaned back.

"It's okay if we kiss," he said. "You should kiss me goodbye."

She wished she hadn't gone to that party. She wished she hadn't been out to lunch with him. She wished she wasn't standing there because this was the party that she hated, the part where she had to say goodbye, had to lose someone she cared about before she could get used to having them around. When he planted his lukewarm lips on her cheek and grabbed her by the shoulders, Sadie knew that they weren't going to go any further than this.

Davey backed away from her. "I'll see you at school," he said.

No future plans or smiles. Sadie almost admired his diplomacy, until she realized he'd probably parted this way with Aurora. The autumn wind gushed through the street. Sadie went back inside. Too tired and stunned to cry, she burrowed deep under the covers and locked herself up in her own world, the loneliest but most honest place.

The evenings turned darker and the lights flowed earlier. Gloves and scarves were now required. Winter was approaching and with it, the snow, the twinkling lights and caroling in the streets. Tiny Christmas trees were placed in both the American Institute and Leonardo's. Sadie's students finally convinced her to have a Christmas party before the break. Holiday festivities seemed to explode everywhere Sadie went. There was a Christmas party at the hostel, welcoming an

adventurous couple backpacking for their honeymoon, and even a party at work with the staff. Davey wasn't there. They returned to being strangers again, since their opposite schedules allowed it. Sadie never went to work during the mornings or looked at his mailbox. Pink slips with poetry no longer greeted her. He'd left her a slip of blue paper with a request. He was going to Genoa with a friend, and needed a teacher to cover his classes for the first two days after break.

Sadie showed Rebecca the note over the dining room table of Leonardo's. They drank coffee and ate marzipan together.

"Do you think he took Aurora to Genoa?" Sadie asked Rebecca.

"It doesn't matter," Rebecca replied. "You're not together anymore. For the sake of your sanity, you need to let it go. Here's what I don't get. Why do you act like he's the only man in all of Florence, when we lived in a city surrounded by guys? Sexy, fit Italian guys? Do you not see them?"

Sadie leaned back in the chair and folded her arms. One of the new flatmates, a twentysomething guy with wide brown eyes and a perfect five o'clock shadow walked in and grabbed a carton of milk. Rebecca looked at him over her shoulder.

"Jet lagged?" Rebecca asked the new flatmate.

"Never," he said in an adorable accent. "I'm from the continent, unlike you two."

"Anywhere is better than the UK," Rebecca said. She motioned over to Sadie. "Where you from?"

"Switzerland," he said.

He smiled at Sadie, but she rolled her eyes with the most deadpan expression. "See you around," she said.

Rebecca waited until he was gone. "What was that for? You could've just chased away you next beau."

"I know where he lives," Sadie replied. "Besides, unless you're my sister, nothing is permanent when you travel. It's like your life is here, and then it's back there. But relationships don't flourish, anyone can lie. What's the point?"

"Thanks, Queen of Nihilism," Rebecca replied. "Nothing is permanent ever. Buying a house, getting married, all of that stuff can be gone in a flash. But does a relationship need to be permanent to be meaningful? And if you're expecting permanence, can't you miss the point of the whole experience of traveling?"

Did a relationship need to be permanent to have meaning? Perhaps Sadie felt this way because of her parents, who expected a permanence in life, to not outlive their children, and their only son James's proved that an accident could take that away. Sadie had inherited their guilt and perception of permanence, but she wanted to get away from it. That's why she was in Italy! That's why she so desperately wanted it to work with Davey! If a relationship could survive abroad it could flourish anywhere. But if Rebecca was right? What if she looked at the outcome instead of the process? And why did she act like she didn't want another man? To spare herself the rejection she often felt, which had started with her parents, then Lia, and most recently, Davey.

"Davey just reminds me of my sister," Sadie said. "How easy it was for him to shut me out, unless I was willing to swallow every lie he told. If my own family members could feel that way about me, how could a man? He probably didn't even like me."

"Promise not to get mad?" Rebecca said. "Ok, Davey was shagging Olivia the secretary before you got here."

Horrified, Sadie covered her mouth with her hand. Now Olivia's jealousy seemed rational.

"He never took her out. He doesn't acknowledge her in public. I only know this because I caught them snogging a month before you came here."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because he did a lot for you that he refused for others. I think Davey liked you a lot, but he wasn't done with being a male whore, like most ESL teachers. He was stuck on catching the excitement of that honeymoon phase. He didn't think much outside of that."

"I guess I've always seen falling in love as a second chance at family. My own family is so quietly broken, like Davey. I keep feeling like it'll always be like this with me, that anyone I love will demand I be with them, but only on their terms, like my sister."

"Love," Rebecca said, her voice dropped down to a whisper. She reached across the table and held Sadie's hand, not as a premise to love, as Davey had at that party, but as a promise of love. "That doesn't have to be every person you meet. Davey's not the only guy you'll like in that way. Sounds like you're repeating some narrative you got from your family. Have you told your sister you felt that way?"

Sadie shook her head. "I didn't think it was important."

"If you want her in your life, or for anyone to love you, you have to be honest with them."

"It failed with Davey."

"Because he couldn't have loved you, so it should've failed," Rebecca said.

Sadie laughed at that, because she was uncertain of an ideal reaction. Most likely because Rebecca was right. "Thank you," Sadie said. "You're the sister I wish I'd had."

"I wish I had you as a sister instead of four bloody brothers," she replied. "What are you going to do for break? I might go to Devon for a week, then up to Edinburgh to see Ewan. Want to come with me?"

"I want to be with Lia," Sadie said.

"You make a terrible friend sometimes."

"Let me explain. I don't want Lia and I to be like our parents, silently arguing because of the lies we tell ourselves. I want to make it right. I also realize I wasn't a good friend sometimes when I was with Davey. Can we go to Rome in the spring?"

"My therapy services will be paid for in the form of half my train ticket from here to Rome," Rebecca replied. "Sure. Maybe once you get over her, you'll be a better friend."

Sadie was happy. She and Rebecca were honest.

Sadie drafted her email to Lia first by hand. Then she typed it, because she was afraid she'd back out if she Skyped Lia. She'd end up talking about the weather or the holidays, or some other mundane topic that didn't reveal what was in her heart. In fact, most of her conversations were perfunctory, leaving her unable to express what she really felt. However, Sadie knew that in order to feel loved, she needed to be honest with those important in her life, even if it hurt them.

Sadie began her email to Lia about small details. The holiday party at work and the hostel, the charm of the lights once the evenings grew darker. Then, she wrote about the holidays and how they'd been grim without Lia. How the family was never the same once she left. She wrote about all the possible ways to spend the break, but she didn't want to visit the London Bridge, or the Nice beaches. Her time was meant to be for her family, and she wanted to spend it with Lia, the person she'd known all her life, whom she felt like she didn't know anymore, and wanted to be with for Christmas.

Lia sent her a one word response in a few hours. Sure.

It was Christmas Eve in Paris. Sadie stepped out of the hostel she'd booked for her meeting with Lia. A blast of frosty wind slapped Sadie across her bare face as she walked to the cafe. The

snowball captured a glow of white light from the stores. She tightened her grey winter coat, which went along with the sea of gray of the other Parisian's coats. Sadie didn't focus too much on the people who shoved her, but her mind was on Lia. What would she say? How would she greet her sister? A hug and a kiss? Maybe Lia didn't want to hug her. After all, it was she who'd gotten married, whose sense of family was complete and didn't need Sadie, even though Sadie felt as though Lia didn't need her when they were adolescents.

Sadie arrived at the cafe, expecting to see Lia as she was in magazines -- gorgeous, fresh and young, her willowy figure on proud display. What Sadie saw the non-airbrushed version of Lia, less powerful and ethereal, more demure and complacent. Bags of circles were around Lia's eyes, her blond hair a matted mess and stained yellow fingernails bitten to the quick.

"Hey," Lia said.

"Hey," Sadie replied. She was too stunned to say anything else.

Lia tapped her cigarette in her ashtray. "You look great."

"Thanks. How have you been?"

"Fine."

"Where's your husband?"

"Zagreb," Lia said.

Sadie wondered if Lia had been lying about her whole life in Paris, or her marriage, if she was as happy as she portrayed in her email, and if she wasn't, then why was she lying?"

Lia nudged the chair closest to Sadie with her leather boot, inviting Sadie to sit down, but Lia stopped. "Are you mad at me?" she asked.

"No," Sadie lied.

Sometimes she was angry with Lia, and always angry over admitting her anger toward Lia. How Lia had told her on their porch, don't be mad. Please try to understand. It was in the

same vein that Davey had asked her to understand about Aurora. Understanding was a way to manipulate, to avoid truth instead of seeking it out. Then Sadie decided that if she was to remain in a relationship with Lia, then she had to be honest about her past hurts. "Yes, I am mad at you. I don't get how you could leave me like this."

"You were the golden child when we were growing. You were the cheerleader. You were the one Mom and Dad expected great things from. I was just the insurance policy, who they allowed to be a fuck up because they had you," Lia said. "I wanted to change. I wanted to be happy. You knew I wasn't happy when we lived in Tennessee. I should've asked you to come out here."

A passerby could've mistaken the resemblance in the sisters in their delicate hands and keen noses, even their softly painted mouths, and how their heads bowed slightly toward each other. But they were at the distance of strangers. Other people in their lives had known them both better than they had known each other in that moment, but Sadie knew Lia all too well. Before Europe and teaching, before Davey, Sadie would've stopped and comforted Lia, said that Lia was lovely and she was overreacting, dishonored her own truth to make her sister happy. Beautiful as Lia was, she was as flawed as Sadie. They were more than just sisters now. They were equals. They were adults.

In her clearest voice, Sadie replied, "But you didn't."

And they were honest.

Yours

Spencer thought he'd marry Aurora, since he already saw her as his. He realized this on their first night in Vietnam, in an outdoor Saigon restaurant as he sipped Larue and watched her inspect her spring roll. It was after midnight, but the city was still buzzing with energy from the locals and single expatriates who were searching for their next adventure in the clubs, on the street corners where innocent looking young men sold marijuana, and if requested, cocaine. They were tired from their sixteen-hour flight and holed up for visas at the airport with sarcastic immigration officers. But it was Aurora who introduced Spencer as her soon to be fiancé, who wrapped her model thin arms around his waist and said to every traveler they met, every flight attendant, every stranger who complimented her on her beauty, that she would be even more beautiful when he knelt and proposed. Who wouldn't be proud to have such a beautiful woman eager to marry them?

He didn't tell her this, for he was too tired.

"Why are you staring at me?" she asked.

"Because you're the most beautiful sight here," he replied.

She was, although they were surrounded by new sights that neither had seen, alone or apart. They weren't in Vietnam for a simple holiday or to celebrate their second-year anniversary. For their anniversary was three months ago when they have planned this trip. They were in Vietnam for a test of the future, although Spencer hadn't planned on thinking of marriage or even a long-term vacation for several years. She pushed it. To her, they were running out of time. She was thirty-five, and he was twenty-seven. He'd only had two girlfriends, one before university and one after university, but she'd had countless boyfriends who wanted to enjoy her beauty but never committed. Over their two years together, she'd blamed external forces for her unlucky outcomes. Blamed it on her career. First as an ESL teacher in Italy, then as a flight attendant. Both careers that attracted the adventurous, unconventional and noncommittal. They had made it work with her schedule of eleven days away and eight days off, by spending five days of

paradise in Spencer's Brixton flat before Aurora drove up to Manchester for one night alone, change of clothes, and then back in the air. London felt less like home whenever Aurora was gone. When Spencer asked her to move in, she recoiled. She was too old to move in without a commitment. It wasn't good enough. It had to be marriage.

Which was why they were in Vietnam. To see if their relationship would last being together, uninterrupted, in a new world that neither of them had seen, that could bring them together or apart. It was why they'd asked for time off work at their jobs, booked one flight to Ho Chi Minh and one flight from Hanoi, to travel from the South to the North, the old capital to the new one, and hopefully from single to engaged; to ride motorcycles and visit temples and hike mountains. If they survived it, Spencer promised to propose. If he didn't, they would separate with their separate lives, jobs and apartments intact. Spencer had agreed to why they were there, but Aurora never let him forget it.

"Beautiful enough to marry?" she asked.

She tossed back her fifth Larue as she waited for his answer. Even in her barely veiled panic there was a beauty and vulnerability in her. With her gorgeous auburn hair and wide hazel eyes, her Queen Mary education and fluency in English and Italian, Spencer wondered why she was still single. Her tearful stories were about the men. One who cheated on her and gave her an STD. Another Canadian teacher who strung her along and promised marriage, only to marry his Italian secretary. Even in their first meeting where Spencer had broken up a fight between her companion and she'd thrown a drink in his face. Aurora was careful to craft herself as a victim. The type of woman who needed rescuing and reassurance, a strong hand from a decent lad who'd deliver her into the life she deserved. But there were moments when Spencer doubted her. Like when she'd opened his mail and scribbled over any papers with female names on them, or when she'd hacked into his email to search for rude pictures other girls may have sent him. She explained it away as unresolved past trust issues, as fear of intimacy that if they were going this well, something would derail them. She feared no one would love her past her insecurities.

Spencer was accustomed to loving her past them. "Beautiful enough to marry in any Vietnam province," he replied.

The waitress, a gorgeous but tired Vietnamese teen who probably paid her way for school through this job, gave them their checks that Spencer paid.

"I'm going to marry this bloke," Aurora said.

The girl blushed. Spencer felt proud.

They walked the tiny alleyways of Ho Chi Minh, a city still called the more fitting name of Saigon, with its French inspired architecture and cosmopolitan vibe. Espresso stands, hookah bars and noisy nightclubs were on every main street, including expats looking for an interesting story about a night they should forget. Thankful he was no longer part of that group, Spencer gripped Aurora's hand and pulled her closer to him, despite the closeness of humidity that still hung in the air despite the night time. It was June. They'd booked the only room in an all white capsule hotel in District Eleven, the trendiest neighborhood, although the realities of the city were still on the sidewalks. Homeless sleeping on the sidewalk, dirty blankets and cots for the lucky ones, among rats the size of puppies. One or two odd babies were among those without proper housing on the streets unattended, wandering around in soiled diapers. Despite the lovely evening, raving youth and the smell of ginger and coffee sauntering in the air, Spencer couldn't ignore that.

"Whose kids are those?" He said.

"Not ours," she said. "We could adopt a baby! We'll have one and adopt! We'd have one gorgeous British baby and one gorgeous Vietnamese baby."

"We need to get married first."

"Then buy a ring, drop down and propose. Won't that be great story to tell our British and adopted Vietnamese children, that daddy proposed to mommy in the dodgy Saigon streets."

"That's not our timeline," Spencer reminded her. "It would be better story to say I proposed in an airport. Airports and stations make great proposal grounds."

"What if I don't care about that?" Aurora said. "Why can't you do it now? Or will you just be like all the other guys I traveled with across Europe, who promised me the world and then ditched me after a few arguments?"

Spencer grimaced. He knew that this wasn't true. They'd argued their fair share about small subjects, such as the best Ian McEwan novel. To Spencer it was *Saturday* but Aurora believed it was *Atonement*. They argued over big subjects such as age. Spencer didn't think their age difference was huge deal while Aurora told him that it was, that experience brings forward the wisdom and suffering, which can change someone for the worst. When Spencer disagreed, she hurled one of her high heels at him, only to tearfully apologize later. They'd survived the arguments and expressed their fears over their past, which he loved about their relationship. But who marries after only spending seven consecutive days together? Who proudly displays their poor track records without insight? Who sets a marriage standard based on experience and not love? Their times together were always light and fluffy, like a delicious angel cake or naan bread, but Spencer pondered this in the safety of Aurora's absence. Now, he couldn't.

Spencer touched Aurora's soft auburn hair, running his fingers through every perfect short curl, to calm himself. But even that reminded him of her past love life. Shortly after the Canadian ESL teacher had proposed to his Italian secretary at a holiday party in front of her, she'd cut her long Godiva like tresses and then mailed them to him in a box as a wedding present, since that was the only part of her that he seemed to like and commit to. She'd kept her hair in a short curly bob since then. Her pixie haircut looked good on her, matching her slender and petite frame, giving her an air of sophistication, but every time Spencer looked at her he thought of another man.

So, he spoke instead. "Yeah. I'll be just like every other man. I'll use you and dump you."

"You'll say my eggs are good enough to have your children but not to marry. Like that Italian guy."

"That French asshole."

"That Irish asshole."

"Who you faked that pregnancy test for."

"Who I had that threesome for."

"Who told you he only believed in open relationships."

"Those who fucked me over so I could find you," she said. "My prince who'd love me past my fucked-up ness, who made me feel whole again. I love that we can laugh about this. I just want to be yours."

"You already are."

"Not until we marry," she said.

She wrapped her arms around his neck, but he sensed the hesitation in her hands, jittery, clammy and cold. He loved that she was so open about her past, as most girls his age hid their mistakes with a deep shame that hung over them like London rain. Since Aurora carried open secrets, he could discuss them, acknowledge them, and move on to a future. But he hid how he felt about her feelings about them. How she treated romance casually, as if her heart didn't depend on love for life, but love for a season with an expected heartbreak. Sometimes he brushed it off as part of their age difference, that less can hurt the heart the more it's experienced. He didn't know though if her experience had given him an advantage he didn't understand, an open secret they unwillingly shared, like the puppy looking rats that roamed the midnight Saigon streets.

"Perhaps you don't want to marry?" she said.

"I do," Spencer replied.

Thankfully, life interrupted any possible argument. She had to pee badly after five delicious LaRue's, and in the middle of the street, pulled her floral print dress, revealing those shapely thighs that he adored and squatted over a vent to pee. Instinctively, he moved to shield her privacy and laughed. He liked these moments with her, when she was raw, imperfect and a real person, and he could see himself marrying that honesty, so refreshing and desirable in a woman. She brought out the protector in him. She nurtured his need to nurture her. And when she finished she hugged him and slipped her hand inside his shorts for a nanosecond, reminding him of what awaited them at the hotel room. Despite the long flights, the many beers, and even urinating in front of him, Spencer couldn't wait for her to kneel in front of him, unbuckle his belt, and tell him she loved him. It wasn't about the sex, but her submission to him. It was about the power he felt.

"You're too good for me," she sang in his ear.

By the time they'd leave Sapa, he'd find out how right she was.

Spencer and Aurora traveled like backpackers, which in Vietnam was affordable and easy despite the language barriers. The country was now awash with opportunities for travelers to turn the country into their pilgrimage through the travel agent shops on street corners and locals eager to improve their English and make quick money. They took an eight-hour bus from Saigon to De Lat, which cramped Spencer's long legs. In De Lat, they were the enviable couple whom travelers wanted to emulate when the time came to settle down in their home countries -- young enough with their lives ahead of them but with the knowledge and experience that only comes from maturity. They sipped wine and swam in rivers before heading toward Hoi An for the monthly light festival. Known for its ancient city, Hoi An was a hotbed of old class charm. They cuddled up next to each other despite the sweltering heat on their tiny boat. The owner, an old man who relished in

the idea of young love, gave them candles in ornate boxes to send down the river, to make a wish. It was muggy and their paper fans only provided hot air, but it was magical to be among the travelers and the Vietnamese, everyone in good spirits to pay homage to those who came before them.

Spencer sent out his candle first, watched as it floated onto the darkness. Then Aurora pushed hers out on the side of the boat.

"What did you wish for?" she asked him, smiling.

"A happy life filled with our love," he replied.

She stopped smiling. "Wishes only come true if you keep them close to your heart, like secrets."

"You're not going to tell me yours?"

She shook her head.

"Then why did you ask me for mine?"

"Because I wanted to know," she replied. "Maybe you lied. Maybe it'll come true, but not in the form that you said it."

"What does that mean."

"What it means," she said. "When I was a girl, my brother and I fought all the time. He claimed I was challenging and difficult. He just refused to stick up for me. And my dad was no better. I like to think that they're right and they're not. They said that no man would love me past my flaws and faults. At least not completely."

"If I wish for a life with you, then doesn't that prove them wrong?"

She turned away from him, the old man's candle illuminating her sweaty back, casting her ivory skin in a dramatic glow. "You don't get it."

What if he did? Like most of the men from her past Spencer never met her family, but they covered her self image, much like the full moon lit up the river and the lights from the eateries and tourist shops even more. If these men's opinions were so useless then why did she need to bring them up? Sometimes, when Aurora was away for work and Spencer walked to his bank job, he wondered if perhaps what they said was right, but he only believed it because she believed it. Still, he felt haunted by the words she left out and the ones she repeated constantly. He didn't know if she was emotionally cheating him, or if she believed that she even deserved the love that they had. A love that to him was like the World Heritage site -- rich with history and filled with a promising future.

At least that's how he explained it to his family. Whenever he visited in Kent, they wondered why they hadn't met Aurora, why had he fallen in love with someone older than him, and if he really understood the implications of that. His brother, a man who mirrored their working-class father with his welding job, portly wife and toddler son, pointed to the clock. He'd run on less time, and Aurora was now pointing him to that on the river. It was less about the evening than it was about the evenings ahead of them.

Aurora was known for keeping secrets. She wouldn't let Spencer visit her flat in Manchester, and although she had a key to Spencer's flat she never gave him a key to hers. But it was in the tailor shops that she revealed the lengths she'd go to get what she wanted the most. Hoi An was known for its impeccable tailors. Like most travelers and tourists, they visited a tailor to get one piece of clothing made just for them. In their air-conditioned hotel room, Spencer had told her that he got a charcoal suit for work and paid to have it shipped back to London. Yet, Aurora was dodgy in what she'd had made. "You'll, see," she said before sipping a bottle of LaRue.

Spencer visited her at her tailor in the middle of the afternoon the next day. It was humid, hot and inexplicably close, and he was thankful for the tiny water bottle the tailor gave

him. He was shocked when Aurora came out of the dressing room. A vision of white in a crisp Bohemian wedding dress, the type perfect for a spring reception in the park.

"What'd you think?" she asked him.

"You didn't tell me you were getting a wedding dress."

"They're so expensive to buy but they're so cheap to have made here. Couldn't resist. How do I look? Like I'm ready for a spring reception in Regent's Park?"

She looked exactly like the girl she'd told him about for her dream wedding, a wedding without bridesmaids or grooms' men as she strutted down the aisle, wanting to be the center of attention. She looked beautiful. Sophisticated, yet down to earth. She looked ready. Spencer's chest tightened. He drank the bottle of water in one gulp, to move his thoughts.

"Preemptive," he replied. "I haven't even proposed yet."

She frowned. "But you will. You can get the ring in Sapa."

"I don't know love. I don't know if I'm ready."

"We have until Sapa. You'll be ready to marry me or lose me. There's lots of guys who look at me over your shoulder, who stare too long. Travelers here, on those long nonstop flights to Dubai. The clubbers in Sydney. What you don't want, another man will."

"Why so pushy?"

She crossed her arms, her angelic demeanor now reminding him of a mental patient. "Because I'm well lived, and I know what I want. I've wasted too much time already. If you can't make the decision, I'll make it for you."

She stomped back to the dressing room with her head high like a pissed off princess, and changed into her harem pants and tank top. Spencer was thankful for her discretion in shipping the dress back to her Manchester address. He thought about his London friends as they walked to a cafe for coconut ice cream. They'd asked why to go all the way to Vietnam, and he told them the

real reason -- because she'd traveled all of Europe with former boyfriends and hookups, and he didn't want to be reminded of that Irish asshole, that French prick, or that lame Canadian as they rode bikes in Florence, picnicked at the Seine or drank beer in Berlin. Her airline didn't go to Vietnam. It was a place that only he could take her, perhaps become their favorite place etched in memory when the minutiae of life crept in. As he watched her lick the creamy ice cream, he also reminded himself that no one else could steal this moment. No abusive father or brother. No man.

"I'm sorry for my tantrum earlier," she said. "I did keep one of the wedding lingerie I had made."

"No worries," he replied.

She kissed him on the cheek and whispered in his ear. "I'll be on you tonight."

He smiled at that.

They talked earnestly about men from her past, but Spencer didn't confront a man in her present until they reached Ha Long. Vietnam was about them as a couple until they reached one of the seven world wonders. They rode the dusty overnight train from Hue to Hanoi, sleeping on bunk beds with a thin sheet to cover them. Once they arrived in the city, they checked into a hostel and purchased Vietnam propaganda posters. Spencer led them to a tour guide, a dashing ginger Canadian holding a Vietnamese child, to book them a tour to Ha Long and Sapa. Spencer wanted Ha Long to be the last place they went, but she wanted Sapa instead, to trek in the rice fields and visit a village. Their trip to Ha Long began as a quiet stay on a yacht with other travelers, with the clean blue sky and iridescent waters, with some backpackers on the journey of self-exploration, other travelers who just wanted to party. Spencer was neither. The yacht was loud and boisterous with music and adventure, including young blokes who eyed Aurora in her lime green string

bikini. At first, Spencer thought he could handle it, until he saw a muscle bound Australian by her side when he left to grab her a Pina Colada. His heart raced, pulse faster than the Vespas in Hanoi. He tapped the lad on the shoulder, determined to remain calm.

"Excuse me," Spencer said. He handed Aurora her drink. "Here, love."

"Thank you," she replied. "This is Tom."

"Hi," Tom said.

Tom, the tall Aussie guy with thick dark grayness hair, shirtless to catch a tan on his perfect skin. A man Aurora would've swooned over her younger days. He hated Tom.

"Hello," Spencer replied. "What are you doing in 'Nam?"

"Vacation," Tom replied. "Talking to beautiful girls."

"There are lots of those on this boat," Spencer said.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know you were together," Tom replied.

"Spencer's my boyfriend," Aurora said. "Sorry about that. Been together two years, but we're not celebrating that. We're celebrating an impending engagement."

"Congratulations! I was wondering how come you weren't married yet. You're wonderful," Tom said. Aurora winked at Spencer. "When's the wedding?"

Spencer shifted around. "We haven't decided. See you."

He grabbed Aurora's hand and led her to the Tom free side of the yacht. "What was that?" he said.

"What was that?" she repeated. "You left. Someone said hi. You're acting like we're married yet we're not even engaged."

"I don't remember you being single. You should've told him you have a boyfriend."

"There's no boyfriend and girlfriend serious commitment at my age. You're single or you're married, and single people can do what they want."

"Is that how you've led your life for the last two years?"

She sipped her drink and then shook her head. "I'm just saying. If a man talks to me I'm not going to be rude."

"You should've told him about me," he replied.

She ran her fingers through his greying hair, pouted her cherry painted lips, lips that he wanted to kiss yet had denied him. "Or what? You'll stay in your flat all alone? You won't have the best part of the month to look forward to?"

Spencer pulled away from her, irritated, and went toward the crowd of rowdy travelers and the thumping Eurotrash techno music, a group lively and free spirited over the calm waves of the sea. In London, he always felt like he had the upper hand, yet in Vietnam something cut loose inside of her. Perhaps because they were huddled together so close with no one else to depend on, like a married couple, or because her wanderlust instincts guided her moves in a way he'd never possess. He felt powerless in her grasp of this version of her. The one he saw in small doses who was a mess unless he had his arms wrapped around her from the moment they embraced at King's Cross station to the moment of departure when she left for her Manchester flat to get ready for work. He'd adored her madness, found it cute because he felt needed, but together in Vietnam, he saw the powerful side of her that she'd carefully hidden. The Aurora of her past with those other men who traveled Europe alone and learned Italian, the woman who was beautiful, yet disarming and bold. Why wouldn't a man approach her? After all, Spencer had been the man who stepped in to save her in that crowded London bar on a Friday night.

Yet, when he walked into the crowd, amidst twentysomething women with firmer breasts than Aurora and longer hair than Aurora's that they pulled into messy buns to keep the heat off their slender necks, he didn't want any of those women, because they weren't Aurora. Perhaps Aurora sensed this, because she followed Spencer throughout the crowd and grabbed his hand,

reminding him of the connection they felt in London that'd transformed itself into the best part of his month.

"Sorry love," she said. "That was mean. I don't want us to be apart. I want to be your wife."

"Single people can do what they want," he replied. "Talk to other fish in the sea."

Several travelers danced the beat of a cheesy Congo line, ready to make the six-meter dive off the boat and into the ocean, a premier activity according to the promotion ads. Spencer wasn't planning to walk off the diving board, but next to it, until he felt a hard shove from behind. He fell. The next seconds silent, lasting forever, until he felt a shatter into the immaculate water and water rushed into his ears. Forgetting for a second how to swim, he floated to the top, ready to scream in confusion until he felt a splash next to him and saw his ginger beauty next to him. Had she pushed him? He was too confused by the happiness and delight of the travelers, too panicked to ask her. Only relieved for his life.

"But those women aren't me," she replied.

Despite the sunny skies and stunning blue ocean, Spencer was happy to leave Ha Long bay, the rowdy travelers with their rampant alcoholism, the vision of what he thought he wanted his youth to look like. He was happiest to leave Tom, who stared at Aurora with an intense passion that Spencer despised. Spencer tried his best to keep Tom away from Aurora -- grabbing her hand and walking ahead of him on their visit to Monkey Island, slinging Aurora over his shoulder on the beach, making love to her for hours in their romantic bungalow not just for her, but for himself, as a reminder of the good times they were having and would continue to have -- if he proposed by the time they left for home.

Thus, Spencer was happy to reach Sapa, despite the six-hour bus ride in the middle of the night and arriving at the town center at four a.m., only to walk two miles to their hotel. Surrounded by other groggy travelers in the rustic hotel lobby, Spencer and Aurora chugged Civet coffee before heading out on their trek with Su, a teen villager dressed in Indigo-colored cardigans and pants with large dangly metal earrings.

To Spencer, trekking was a fancy way of walking, but he struggled on with the eleven-kilometer journey to the remote village, the long clay paths slippery from last night's rain. He enjoyed the expanse of the endless emerald green rice fields, the children riding grazing buffalo, and the tiny chicks on farms with hens. He took many pictures of the travelers in his group as opposed to taking pictures with them. He snapped shots of two twentysomething blonds on their own version of *Eat, Pray, Love*, a pair of snobby Chinese girls who spoke English but shut out others through their Cantonese, and of course Aurora, his girlfriend, travel companion and potential fiancé, whose creamy skin and curly auburn hair looked glamorous and immaculate against the backdrop of the rice fields, even though she hadn't showered or brushed her teeth in two days.

They posed for a picture on top of a hill so that Spencer could catch his breath, the high altitude making his breath sharp. She kissed him, her breath reminding him of mint.

"Isn't this lovely?" she said.

Her hazel eyes held the real question masked behind it. Couldn't this loveliness last an eternity? Couldn't they share this future together, without the anxiety from their past creeping in? Spencer didn't have the answer yet, but he'd have one by their last night in Sapa.

For now, he replied, "Not as lovely as you."

Su led the group to their homestay, a converted barn with mosquito nets over mattresses, their hostess, a phenomenally gorgeous village woman with long silk dark hair and a tiny mole beneath her lip. Since she didn't speak English, she welcomed them with a sincere smile and

pointed towards the beds, the fridge, the restaurant up the unpaved road. Her homestay was so large, another group of travelers was staying there at the same time, which included a tall, broad shouldered dark hair man reading a book whom Spencer immediately recognized -- Tom. Spencer tightened Aurora's hand when they him. He frowned at her. She smiled. Fortunately, Su broke up the tension.

"Want me to take your picture?" Su asked. "Such a beautiful couple. You like Vietnam?"

"Very much so," Aurora said. "It's like a crazy lover that can't let go."

"You're lucky," Su said. "I want to visit Hanoi, but it's too far. I can't speak Vietnamese, but I like our villages. Nothing's changed in fifty years, besides Wi-Fi! We got it three months ago. Are you married?"

"Next summer," Aurora said.

Spencer's eyes widened. He hadn't discussed this with Aurora or anyone else. They were just in stages of the possibility of marriage, but not the marriage itself. Uncertain if she was taking the piss or simply eager, he cleared his throat to correct her, and then stopped. What if he wanted to be married? Would talking about it matter? But then he wondered if he should be concerned about her eagerness, which often felt like pressure, if she was speaking it into existence, forcing him to decide instead of letting him decide on his own.

"We're not engaged yet," Spencer replied.

Su pointed to his salt and pepper hair. "You can't wait long for children."

"I'm the old one," Aurora interrupted. "He's twenty-seven, I'm thirty-five."

"Why do Westerners wait so long to marry?" Su asked. "I'll get married next week. A boy from another village will steal me, then I'll have three days to decide."

"That's awful," Spencer said.

"That's romantic," Aurora said. "It's true love, the risk of romance. The payoff! It's deciding your life fast. I wish I'd married in my twenties. I'd be a mum by now."

Su pointed to the hostess playing with her baby. "I want children soon, but I love Western love. You choose, not your parents."

"It's great, but makes you paranoid," Aurora said. She looked at Spencer.

Su backed away, like a customer about to enter a bank when a robbery was in progress, and spoke to the hostess. She announced to the groups that dinner would be at sunset, and there was free time before that. She would return in the morning to resume trekking to the next village.

"She was nice, " Aurora said. "What did you mean by choose wrong?"

"Those past assholes," Spencer said. "Haven't you ever considered why so many? Why do you want to marry me? Timing?"

"Because I love you," Aurora said, with the finality in her voice as she took menu requests. It endeared him a little more to her. She stroked his arm, what she always did whenever she wanted something. "What about adoption? Su says it's only a hundred quid for a girl, and two hundred for a boy. Think about all those children we saw in Saigon out in the streets in the middle of the night with no parents? We could adopt one here."

Perhaps Aurora was trying to lessen the pressure by changing the subject, from marriage to children, from their present time to their first night in Saigon, when Vietnam and their relationship was still filled with the mystery of the exciting and new. Maybe she sensed Tom's presence as Spencer had, and wanted to remind him that the men of her past were just in the past, and the rest of her life was only for him. However, it made Spencer wonder why this talk? He didn't want her with anyone else, and he didn't want to be with anyone else, so he thought about buying the ring. What would be more romantic than a proposal in the countryside at sunset in the rice fields? It would've made a brilliant story to relay to the future children they'd have or

adopt. Out of the corner of his eye he noticed Tom's sedate eyes glancing Aurora up and down. He was going to the jeweler.

Instead of arguing, Spencer made her laugh. "Could we get it past customs?"

"There's a jewelry shop up the road from here. They might have wedding bands."

Spencer still wanted it to be a surprise. He wanted to marry Aurora because he'd chosen it, not because she pushed him.

He omitted that part.

"I'll take a nap until dinner," he said.

Yes, it was a lie, a gentle lie, a white one like the wedding dress she had designed and shipped off to her apartment. But wasn't a lie for the good the best kind of lie? Aurora didn't read it that way, because she didn't know. She dropped his hand and walked ahead of him, returning to the barn, pouting like a two-year-old.

"I'm going for a swim then with the Canadians," Aurora said. She motioned to the blonds stripped down from their matching harem pants to bikinis. "You're napping, right?"

"Have fun, love," he replied.

Aurora frowned at Spencer and then smiled as she skipped to the other girls. He knew she was upset with him. "I need some fresh air," she said to the girls, laughing in her flight attendant voice.

Spencer turned around and looked out at the iridescent skies and expansive rice fields. But they were surrounded by it.

Spencer roused from his nap, his hands searching for Aurora, but when he turned up with an empty mattress, he put on his shoes and walked downstairs. He took out a sheet of paper with a direction to the jewelers, although he didn't need it. He walked straight ahead and found the

jeweler's where he surveyed the cases for rings. He settled on a princess cut amethyst with a gold band. A little ostentatious but perfect for Aurora's taste. The jeweler counted his money and thanked him in her native language, wishing him a good luck in his marriage.

He felt safe, secure with the black box in his shorts pockets, that tonight would be the evening when he'd propose, tell her what she wants because it's what he wants. He was excited! The age difference, the jobs, the past, it didn't matter, because the future was forever theirs she was forever his. When he returned to the homestay he found Aurora, who greeted him with a hug and a smile.

"Love," she said. Then she motioned to two Sapa girls with identical fishtail braids standing next to her. While she was at the stream with the Canadians, she said that the girls asked them to braid their hair. "We're adopting them!" she said.

He backed away from her. "You're kidding, right?"

"We could give them homes, be a happy family," she replied. Then she patted him on the shoulder. "Don't worry, I'm kidding."

The Sapa girls pulled out handmade jewelry from their bags. They walked to Spencer, chanting the same sales pitch that now haunted him like a pop song. "Buy something! We good deal for you! Cheap cheap!" they chirped.

Spencer and Aurora both purchased five quid worth of jewelry, earrings and bracelets to give to friends and families, before the girls thanked them and ran off to their own homes for dinner. Spencer thought of his own jewelry in his shorts pockets, if he'd could've gotten down on one knee then. Instead, he waited until after dinner, when the hostess sat down plates of steaming rice and fried tofu with tomatoes, grilled chicken, Morning Glory, and mounds of twice friend spring rolls. The Canadians hailed their nostalgia for burgers and fries, while the Chinese girls ate in silence, natural at using chopsticks who laughed when the hostess withheld the forks. The evening

was strained with tension over missing home, irritation at the rice fields and the Canadian's complaining. How could this make a decent proposal? Spencer moved Aurora's hand whenever she caressed him under the table, conscious of the ring.

Then the electricity went out. Darkness swept over the village, the violet sky now back. The hostess with her baby on her lap was unbothered, but the travelers were upset, shrieking in the dark. The hostess brought them a few lit candles, and in a soothing voice she'd use for her baby, spoke to them in English. Safe, she said. They were safe.

Safe. How Spencer felt in Aurora's arms whenever they embraced at King's Cross, like long lost lovers, because they were! Separated by continents for days because of work, they were long lost lovers whenever they met in the station, and they felt like long lost lovers on the high of reunion at the beginning of their trip in Saigon. Spencer and Aurora both had lovers, her list much longer than his, who they had lost due to bad timing, bad behavior or both. Lovers who weren't meant for marriage, but were they? Aurora wanted the marriage for practical reasons. She was getting older and had less time, urgency pushing her to push him. Marriage wasn't about embracing in train stations, urinating in vents, or even sharing a single candle together in the village darkness. Their marriage could include Aurora waking him up in the middle of the night for a chip shop run, cleaning up after her because of morning sickness, balancing checkbooks and arguing fairly, and this trip had given him a glimpse into what life could be like with her. Did he feel safe? Yes, especially when she stroked his arm for reassurance that he wouldn't disappear into the star spackled darkness. He felt safe because she needed him.

"This could be our unity candle," Aurora whispered to him. She smiled and kissed him on the cheek.

But Spencer's thoughts were like the village at times -- where the rustic charm couldn't always overshadow the rougher parts of Sapa. He felt the same toward Aurora. Was she pushing

him because she wanted to marry him or because she just wanted to get married? He'd soon get his answer as one of the Canadian blonds held a candle to her face.

"This reminds me of when I used to tell stories in the dark," she said. "Here's a good question for everyone. Why are you here?"

The somber blue haired girl reached for the candle. "I got carried away with love for love's sake and I moved in because it was easier to split bills, and then he proposed and I took a bunch of overtime to pay for the wedding, only to find him fucking some Swedish bitch on our wedding day and it was too late to refund anything, and you're stuck with the bill on the Vietnam honeymoon with your brother in law who'll never be your brother in law because you just told him that you were going to chase some aspirin with vodka because you have a headache, right?"

The other travelers gasped, stunned at her story, offering their condolences over a relationship that ended and started before it even ended. Aurora tightened her grip around Spencer, perhaps to say she'd never to do this to him, to always remember her. Also as the threat to him, to never do this to her.

"You?" the blue haired girl said to Aurora.

"It's a test, to see if we're compatible for marriage," Aurora replied. "We only see each other in London for seven day increments, and I didn't want to move in without being married, because I've done it before and the bastard ran off with his secretary. So, we've traveled together for three weeks, and now we're here. Sometimes I fear he's just not the marrying kind, like every other guy I seem to attract. But he's only got twenty-four hours to propose."

"Do you want another man?" One of the Chinese girls asked.

"Never," Aurora said.

"Do you want another woman?" the other Chinese girl asked Spencer.

"Never," Spencer said.

Aurora smiled. He said the correct answer.

"Have you ever been unfaithful?" Tom asked.

His smile flashed in the darkness, irritating Spencer. Tom told the group of his marriage to a Sydney waitress that ended when she cheated on him with her boss. "She told me on the eve of our wedding that she'd kissed someone else, and knew she was going to divorce me. She was never mine how I thought she'd be."

"Kiss someone else!" one of the blond Canadians said. "What we do here doesn't count. If you're solid it shouldn't matter anyway."

"Some truth or dare!" another traveler said.

"Like my college days!" another said.

Spencer shuddered. He didn't want to do this. He wanted to drop on one knee and propose, tell her that he needed her and felt safe with her. Perhaps he just didn't want her with Tom, but with Aurora's naughty smile, she told him that she was doing it. And why not? Like the travelers had said, it took her back to her uni days and gap years teaching across the continent, in her youthful daft. But why did she need to do this? Didn't she know that he was hers? Spencer took the easy way out and kissed the jilted blue haired girl on the cheek, the same sexless kiss he would've given his mom or sister in law, and returned to Aurora to kiss her on the cheek. He demonstrated his loyalty. Spencer hoped she'd demonstrate hers, make good on closing the door on that novella of her life. She didn't though. Aurora pulled down her tank top, revealing her small but lovely cleavage, and sat on Tom's lap, wrapped her legs around him the same way she had with Spencer in their Ha Long bungalow and Brixton flat the first night they'd met, and kissed him as if it was their moment and Tom was going to propose to her, not the moment that was stolen, spontaneous and to prove her loyalty to Spencer, like it was supposed to be.

"You can visit me whenever you work in Sydney," Tom said, laughing.

Spencer was angry. Her flights often landed in Sydney.

She looked at Spencer, the candle-light highlighting her gorgeous face, filled with desire and contempt. Why would she do this? Perhaps to tell Spencer that she didn't really want the ring, or to remind him that there were other options, including an athletic and youthful looking Aussie with dark thick hair. She returned to Spencer and stroked his arm in awkward silence. What was the stroking saying now? That she was sorry? That she'd be okay if they didn't work out? That she only wanted to get married and didn't care to whom? That she didn't care if he suffered? Her smile was soft against the candlelight, and he wondered if it was easy for her to betray him, to be so graceful and charming when hurting someone she claimed to want forever with.

Spencer was awakened by Aurora early the next morning with a cup of fresh coffee. She wanted to get out of there, she said. Right now. The rains were coming, she kept repeating. She declined Su's offer to walk with the rest of the tour to another village, and hired two male villagers to take them back downtown on their motorcycles. They walked outside where the cold thin air gripped Spencer, causing him to pull out his jumper, the first time he'd used it since arriving. His mind muddy with sleep, he didn't ask any questions, and he greeted the two villagers instead. On the back of the motorcycles, they passed green mountains and luscious green rice fields. They were surrounded by green. Green, the color of hope and nature. Green, the color of jealousy.

Aurora took care of booking the room in a vintage hotel, before returning to the hustle of civilization. She said that she wanted to be a normal couple again, before returning to the working life that awaited them. They checked in and showered. They picked out mini stone statues and more bracelets from the Sapa girls as souvenirs. They watched a show of traditional village dancers dressed in their indigo colored hemp attire. In the evening, they received foot massages before their tea. They talked about pleasant things, how envious their friends would be of their trip, how much

fun they'd had. They didn't talk about the homestay, which infiltrated Spencer's mind since that morning. He couldn't unsee Tom, despite how effortlessly engaging she was now. Her anxiety was hidden below the surface of her beautiful smile, underneath her glamorous figure. It was the last he could propose or risk losing her, and each action seemed to beg him, marry me please. He thought she needed him to propose, because there may not have been anyone else, to please please love her, because she was giving him that lovable side of her.

Of course, he loved her. He wouldn't have been able to endure not seeing her for long stretches of time otherwise. He wouldn't have invested thousands of pounds or his vacation time into this trip. But he didn't love everything about her -- the sneakiness and suspicion, the hiding with the equivocating, the manipulation, the emotional cheating in front of him. And Tom. Yes Tom, whom Spencer couldn't stop thinking about. He wondered if he proposed, what would stop Aurora from seeing Tom during her party layovers in Sydney? What would make her treat him better than her other boyfriends? They checked back in the hotel room and he sat on the bed, waiting for her as he showered. He knew then that their first night had been planned, set up by her, to get his sympathy so he wouldn't question anything she did. This trip had shown him that it was in her nature to act this way all the time. Snooping through his mail wasn't a one off. Nor was contacting women he'd known before her. And there were plenty of Toms before Spencer and Toms after Spencer had married her. If he married her, he'd marry that.

Aurora exited the bedroom with a towel wrapped around her petite body. Beads of water dripped from her short hair. She was the prettiest when she was like this. Not because she was a nude, but without the glamorous clothes, her phony charm tucked away somewhere else. She sat next to him on the bed. This would've been an easy moment to ignore, to say it was in his head, but that was where she lived. He didn't want the physical intimacy that he'd love her for. He needed the difficult answers.

"We've got a six-hour bus ride back to Hanoi and then a flight. Let's make tonight special," she said.

"It may be the last one as a single man. Am I the only one for you?" he asked.

"Of course. Who else would there be?"

"What about Tom? I know this is a terrible time to bring this up, but I can't stop thinking about it."

"It was nothing. A stupid dare. Why can't you let that go?"

"Because you looked like you were enjoying it. And there were others that we talk about all the time. I've only been with two other girls."

She crossed her arms. "Thanks for shaming me. No, you weren't my one and only and I shared that past part of myself with you because you wanted me, right? The whole me, not the best parts and then throwing the rest away. That was part of me being yours, and now you're bringing it up like it's some reason for us not to be married, just because I kissed some wanker in a barn?"

"You betrayed our promise to only belong to each other. Did you not think I was taking marriage seriously? How would you feel if I made you feel like you couldn't trust me, because I didn't get what I wanted?"

She stormed back into the bathroom, put on an oversized t-shirt and shorts, her armor in this war. Not finished yet, she said that she'd taken a chance on him, a lad greener than those rice fields, in hopes that she could mold him into loving her, that she'd changed her life from the person she was before, and she wasn't that flighty twentysomething tart.

"I've been ready to marry you," she said. "You were the one who stalled our lives together. Tom was just a slip up, a moment's attention."

"What would stop you if we were married?" Spencer asked.

She was right. The rains were coming, and they were right in that hotel room.

"I just want us to be happy," she said calmly. "What would it take for you to be ready?"

Spencer then did something he hadn't planned to do. He went through his luggage and pulled out the black box with the engagement ring in it. The amethyst, her birth stone, with the gold band that glittered in the dim light. He knew that he was tired of retiring home to his Brixton flat alone, that he wanted to be married, but Aurora wasn't that woman. He just wanted her to know that.

He opened the box. "I got this for you yesterday. I was going to give it to you tonight, but once you kissed Tom it was over. I'm not marrying you."

Aurora turned red with rage. Screamed and knocked the box out of his hand, the ring falling on the carpeted floor. Then she slapped Spencer clear across the face. Without thinking of Aurora as the woman he'd hoped to live with and marry, he raised his hand to hit her, but stopped short.

"That's what you want right? Hit me then," she said.

It broke the spell. He dropped his hand, and rubbed the left side of his face, feeling the sting of hands that'd been gentle and caressed him, but were now violent. Their argument had been about Tom, yet it wasn't about Tom. It was about the manipulation, what she'd told him, and what she'd never tell him. Yes, his anger came from passion, but a marriage wasn't built on just passion. It was about bringing out the best in each other, in loving each other past mistakes and flaws. In that moment, Spencer saw that he'd never be that with Aurora, because in that hotel they brought out the worst in each other. He didn't want to be like the guy who she'd thrown her drink on when they'd first met. Although he'd lose her, he didn't want to lose his self-respect for the person he really was -- kind, forgiving, a proper gentleman.

He shook his head. "We're better than this."

Aurora ran to the bathroom door, shouting for him to get out or she was going to call security on him, happy that she'd never lived with him, and ordered for him to throw out any belongings she'd kept at his place because she never wanted to see him. For Spencer, it didn't matter because he was already packing his bags in defeat, looking to change his flight time in the morning. He obeyed all her requests, because she had never been his, and now, they both knew.

Hanseyo

I liked to think of myself as normal, a proud Korean man, a loving son to my mother and a dutiful nephew to my uncle. A useful man with a job as a McDonald's delivery driver, until my younger sister Remy returned from California to attempt a life in Anyang and failed. Our mother had sent her away shortly after our father's death, when she was eight and I was eleven, and corporal punishment couldn't tame her rebellious behavior. A widow with two young orphaned children, my mother was cloaked in shame and silenced Remy by sending her to a family friend. We treated her like a secret and pretended to be a normal Christian family, but Remy's return forced me to confront my own secrets.

I didn't think of myself as a secretive person, because I found it normal to keep secrets. Instead I focused on Remy, because her problems were more predictable and manageable. And in a way, more acceptable than my own secret. True to her rebellious nature, she got in trouble all the time. Her teachers called home to report her devious behavior, from passing notes and makeup in class to mocking her English teacher for her thick Korean accent. Mother focused on work, raising money for family, instead of attending to us like a family, and Remy was unappreciative and ungrateful for our mother's sacrifices. To avoid our uncle's wrath, I stepped in, taking the calls and walking her home from the neon lit streets of hagwon-ga whenever she was asked to leave. Remy's troubles came from her independence, insisting on being called by her English name, unproduceable on the Korean tongue instead of her perfect fine name of Heijin, and her refusal to be obedient and submissive daughter to Mother or agreeable to our Uncle. When Remy was released early from her hagwon for stabbing a boy with a pencil, the school called me instead of our mother. This was a routine. I walked her home to save her the trouble.

It was on a chilly November evening on Peppero day, with giant displays of chocolate cookies in front of convenience stores. With its glittering lights from the English academies and the neon lights of the late-night restaurants, Hagwon-ga was a nice street. Cold, I tightened my sweatshirt around myself, careful to preserve any leftover heat. I should've grabbed a jacket, but at that time I was always in a rush, running off to work, which always guaranteed an extra late-night shift. Perhaps I was always rushing to avoid my families' wrath if they knew what I knew about me. Instead, I focused on Remy's transgression.

"What's wrong with you?" I asked. "Why did you hurt that boy?"

She shrugged, pulled her scarf across her shoulders. refusing to offer it to me.

"I don't know," she said, a smile on her lips.

"His parents could complain against you."

"He deserved it," she replied. "He said he was going to get me Peppero, and then he gave it to Elin, this anorexic idiot who just wants to be the tenth member of Girls' Generation. She's just as plastic too."

"That's his choice."

"Not when you lie, NJ. You know how it feels when someone lies to you?"

I thought of Alistair, Mother and Uncle, and the church, who I lied to not with a lie, but by not telling the truth. I glossed over it and figured it would be okay, because no one needed to know about it. "Back stabbing."

"You should've said, like being stabbed in the back. Your English is terrible," she laughed.

I pushed her slightly, irritated with her. Despite attending English hagwon for a few years, my English wasn't as good as hers, a near native speaker. I admired her flawless English and American accent, but I'd never tell her that. I was nineteen and a boy, and she was sixteen and a girl, and because she was younger than me I'd never compliment her on anything.

"What are you going to tell mom?" she asked.

"You should tell her. You should be ashamed of yourself."

"I'm not, and she doesn't need to know. It can be our secret."

"Good people don't keep secrets."

We crossed the street to our officetel.

"And you've never kept a secret," she asked.

I shook my head. 'Never,' I lied.

I could only think of myself as normal when I ignored the parts of me others would disapprove of. I knew I was different or as Koreans say in hushed tones, inflicted with that Western disease. I knew this in middle school, when I hadn't moved on from the skinship of ninth grade to an interest in girls like my friends had. It was easy to pretend. I plastered posters of Sister and Miss A on my walls and hid my prized posters of Big Bang and G-Dragon under my bed. It was harder to pretend I was the same when I deflected church members and nosy ajuma's questions about marriage prospects. I said that I was too young for a bride, and too poor to afford one on my delivery driver salary. Mother could look after me, and now, I looked after Remy, and love didn't fit in with that picture. Except that it did.

Here was my secret. I was in love with Alistair, a Singapore-Chinese shoemaker, not for his posh British accent and Manchurian face that all Koreans loved, but because it was easy to keep him a secret. As an outsider who spoke little Korean, he couldn't tell anyone about us, and our relationship was relegated to Friday nights in his spacious officetel near Beomgye station, fantasizing about taking a flight to the West to live without judgement or consequence. I was comfortable with never telling anyone about Alistair or that part of me, because I didn't want to be different than the rest of Koreans. My father had died and I was an orphan. I didn't want to risk being classified as insane and undesirable, possibly lose a

chance at a career and a normal life, would lose Mother's love and Uncle would never talk to me again. I didn't want to risk revealing myself and lose everything except myself to that secret. I didn't want to be ostracized. I didn't want to be any less normal than I already was.

Still, I wouldn't tell Remy any of this. I'd look weak and like I'd need her, not like the older brother she was supposed to respect. I turned on the light in our small officetel and turned on the heat, waiting for it to warm our feet. She flicked on the electric kettle for water, and took out a bowl of cheesy flavored ramen. She picked out the last jar of kimchi from the refrigerator, eating it cold.

"Look at me being Korean!" she said in a Korean accent.

"Koreans don't eat kimchi like that," I replied.

"So many rules. Don't eat rice with chopsticks, because that's Chinese and we hate China. Never go to a Japanese restaurant, Koreans make their own kimbap. Dokdo is ours and not Japan. All maps with the Eastern Sea are wrong. Don't blow your nose in public. Don't talk back to elders or to a man. Did I miss anything?"

"You're terrible."

"You're boring."

Before I could respond, my phone vibrated in my pocket. It was a text from Alistair, asking for me to come over."

"I have to go," I said.

"Where?"

"Don't worry about it. I saved you."

Alistair's officetel was a ten-minute walk from my place, convenient because it was close to the station, but I still scanned the crowd for familiar faces who could ask me in front of my family, why was I in that part of town? I had the scheduled answers -- that I wanted to go to Lotte World to get a gift or see a movie, that I wanted to grab a beer at the bars by the station. Anything but to

tell them that I was there for love, which felt pure yet complicated through the hiding. That anxiety surged through me whenever I went up to his place, that someone could see us through the windows of his eighteenth floor officetel. It was a Thursday night, a time when he was normally at Night and Day dancing or selling shoes, an unusual day for us to meet. He greeted me at the door, careful to look for any tenants on the floor, before hugging me and offering me three boxes of pepperoni.

"Hanseyo! Happy pepperoni day!" he said.

I stepped inside. "You used the word wrong. We say it for happy times, special occasions. This isn't a holiday."

"It's an unofficial holiday."

We sat down next to each other by the bed. He smiled. I leaned in for a kiss, only to look at the boxes and think about Remy, who'd been kicked out of class early just for these boxes. Fridays, she was away at science hagwons, unable to track my movements, but tonight she could've told my mother that I was gone, and I didn't need questions.

"I can't stay long. My little sister is at the house alone. She might tell my mother."

He leaned back and frowned. The lines on his forehead told me that it was the same disagreement, the same argument we'd had for the past few months. He wanted to meet me outside of the officetel, to go feed the deer in the Seoul forest or write keepsakes at the Namseoyoung tower like a normal couple, but I always refused. I didn't need to be discovered and questioned, forced into answering why I was with this Chinese man instead of a Korean woman.

"I wish I wasn't a secret," he said. "Keeping secrets is never good. I've told you what happened to me."

"Yes, I know. You married as a cover, then spent years trying to get out of it."

"I hurt people I never should've for convenience and lies. I said I'd never do that again. Yet, here we are."

"I like how we are now," I replied, because I did.

I liked the secret meetings and flirty texts tucked away on my phone, which I looked at sometimes during the Sunday service. Whenever I was taking a difficult order, or my boss was yelling at me, I thought of Alistair as a sweet surprise tucked away, more delicate and meaningful because no one knew about us. We existed within the privacy of his house. I didn't want anyone else to know, to have knowledge of us as a couple. Perhaps I was kidding myself, in thinking that permanence could blossom from secrecy, because it had been that way for my family. That was why our mother had shipped Remy off, why she'd demanded Remy return to Korea. It was why I thought I'd be okay with living a lie, because I hadn't fully realized I was living a lie, unlike Alistair when he was in Singapore.

I tried to change the subject. I looked my arms around his shoulders, peeled back his shirt collar and kissed his neck, his tan skin supple like a ripe persimmon, a part of him that I'd always want to kiss.

"I don't," he replied. He pulled away.

Now it was my turn to frown. I wasn't the man I thought of myself as. I liked to think of myself as a kind man, who would make a great husband someday, the same way I thought of myself as a good brother. But I could only see what I wanted. I figured as the native Korean, I held the knowledge of the ridicule and shame that Alistair couldn't have understood or knew. I knew about the teen who attempted to drown himself in the Han after he was discharged from the military when someone revealed his difference. I knew about the woman who lost everything in a divorce settlement just because her husband found out, and the shame forced her to move to Toronto.

Alistair wasn't Korean, and I figured, wouldn't understand any of this. Ignoring that with the five-year age gap, he was wiser in this regard. I didn't want anything to change, but I couldn't stand that disappointed look on his face, the one which asked the question he never voiced. Was I ashamed of him? I wasn't ashamed of him, but of myself, for not being normal in how I loved, something I saw at the time as a choice. I couldn't stand to lose him, so I acquiesced.

"What do you want to do?" I asked him.

"Itaewon?" he replied. "You won't know anyone there. We'll get a taste of being a normal couple."

"We'll go," I said.

He smiled, the same one that started on the left side of his face and bloomed wide with desire. Just as he went in to kiss me, my cell phone vibrated. A text from Remy. Uncle is here. Please come. Help.

"I have to go," I told Alistair. "I'll return tomorrow night."

Since I was in a rush to go back home, I hailed a taxi to our apartment, where Remy sat on her mat with her knees drawn to her chest as our Uncle stood over her. She was very different from the loud and obnoxious teen I had left her. Perhaps she needed me to talk to him to calm him down, because as a man, I had the authority to talk another man, but as a woman, she had nothing. He looked at her with disgust, but his face softened when he saw me.

"Where were you?" he asked.

I halfway expected Remy to rat me out, and say I'd gone someplace unknown, but she didn't.

"I went to the store," I lied.

"Keep an eye on her," he replied. "I talk to her about her behavior. It's unacceptable. She must behave like she lives in Korea, not America. What did she do anyway? She won't say."

"She wasn't feeling well," I lied again. "So, I picked her up early."

"If she does anything wrong, brings shame to the family, you tell me, and I'll have her sent back to America. She is a disgrace," Uncle said. "Your mother is working late. I'll tell her you are fine."

He stormed out and left for good that evening. To busy myself, I made two cups of tea, one for me and another for Remy.

Still visibly shaken, she took the tea that I offered her. "Thanks," she said.

"You've made me a liar," I said.

"You've made me a liar," she replied. "You didn't spend forty minutes at the store. But thank you, for covering me."

"You owe me big time."

Remy smiled. Her smile reminded me of Alistair's with its sincerity. I felt bad for lying to my Uncle, because it went against who I thought I was. I liked to think of myself as an agreeable man, an honest man, but that was where my troubles began.

Winter gushed through the city of Anyang, and with it, the first snow-fall blanketing the city streets in pillow white on Christmas Eve. A holiday meant for consumerism and couples. Men and women held hands decked out in matching outfits, certainly down to their underwear. I snuck out for a few hours to see Alistair, in Itaewon at Plant, a vegan cafe owned by a South African gyopo, and we ate traditional apple pie in matching ugly sweaters. "See, it's not so bad," he said as he sipped his white chocolate mocha, and for a second, I could see what he saw. The panic I'd held onto when we went to the Seoul forest, which forced me to talk to girls just to seem normal, was

gone. To the waybooks reading their overpriced books and exchanging gifts with friends as a substitute for family, it was certainly better than where they were. That Christmas, sitting across from Alistair, I started to feel normal, even within a place that wouldn't have deemed us a normal.

Perhaps it was this gift of normalcy that lulled me into a false sense of security, that led to me taking risks in Itaewon. It was the run-down foreigner district of Seoul, where Koreans stalked the streets for American restaurants and novelties like tourists. The Russian working girls laid hidden in Hooker Hill, in video camera laden brothels which alerted them to men approaching their doors. Alistair and I often observed these girls with Soju bombs in hand because we went to the Homo Hill clubs right across from them. Those clubs had weak strobe lights, too strong drinks, and single gendered bathrooms. We celebrated the hooker's rebellion against a normal job, as well as the immigrants of African hill, who walked through those club allies to their tiny flats. Alistair and I felt like a couple, normal and complete. I felt like I could be at home and be safe at the same time.

The first time I kissed Alistair in public was in the back alleys of Itaewon outside of the dingy clubs on Homo Hill on a snowy January evening. The darkness of the alley enveloped us, the small petals of snow disappearing onto the lapel of his navy pea coat, and I as I touched his soft face, I felt safe. Then I heard my sister Remy shout and clap her hands.

"Hanseyo, NJ! You've found love!" she said.

I looked at her. She was dressed in the usual K-girl Saturday night uniform of a miniskirt and high heels. Remy shouldn't have been in this neighborhood. She was too young and naive, and should've been studying for school or making kimchi with our mother, instead of sneaking out and giving our uncle one more reason to inspect our phone. I should've shouted for her to go home where she belonged, but I was slightly drunk and highly

embarrassed, and before I could respond, a curly-headed boy took her hand and she slipped into the darkness as quickly as she'd come into the alleyway. With her, she took the power that I'd held onto in our secrecy. She could've exposed me, by simply telling our Mother that no, I wasn't putting off marriage for the mandatory military serve or for money, but because I couldn't marry at all. I could've lost my family and the normalcy of my life, now that she found out.

"Who was that?" Alistair asked.

"My sister," I replied.

I was thinking of myself as not normal, and just a person, until someone close to me found out about Alistair, and by extension, myself. I should've confessed this to Alistair, but instead I lashed out at him because Remy had gotten away.

"Why did we come here?" I asked him.

He pulled out two cigarettes and handed me one. He took a long drag before he replied. "Because we should go out like a normal couple. You enjoyed Plant."

"That was until my family found out. I was fine with us before, when that couldn't have happened."

"You're in denial, like I used to be."

I huffed a big cloud of smoke to avoid answering him. At the time, I thought he was wrong, that since it wasn't his homeland but mine, he couldn't understand the judgement awaiting me if anyone knew, let alone my noisy sister who could use this to direct attention away from her rebellion. I thought I could only love him in secret, that we were enriched by the secrecy that laid bare in those barren alleys meant for a good time to disappear into the night and away from the public. I was in denial about my denial, but I couldn't tell him that. I deflected, told him what he needed to hear, because I couldn't stand the thought of losing him too.

"I could never be in denial of loving you. It just wasn't meant for Remy to find out."

He frowned. I patted him on the shoulder.

"You're in need of another Tokyo Iced Tea," I said.

After Remy spotted me, I was the one in need of a Tokyo Iced Tea.

I wanted to think of myself as normal, even though I had a Chinese love, a love who I assumed I'd never take seriously because he'd leave Korea, but this assumption was out of fear. Not fear of the unknown but fear of the known, of ostracisation and harassment, of the military service looming over me, threatening to tear us apart, and the educated I'd never pursued. Until Remy had found out.

The next morning, I attended Sunday service with my mother, Remy and our uncle, hungover and anxious. Although Remy was Westernized and sneaking out with boys, her secret was inconsequential compared to mine. If anyone found out, she might've been yelled at or at worse hit, but she still would be part of the family. However, as a first-born male I was expected to be a protector, a provider, to not love Alistair, and the loss would be costly. Remy could've told our mother, embarrassing me and highlight the shame I brought to the family, leaving escape from Korea or my life as my only option. I liked to think of the fantasies with Alistair as an exploration of imagination, not for survival, because I didn't want my life to change.

The service illuminated the change that I hadn't faced. Before, the church was a haven of silence, where I could be alone with my thoughts, but now that Remy knew I noticed its flaws-- the cracked pews, thin carpet and fizzle of the pastor's damaged microphone during his sermon. Too scared to look at my phone for a text from Alistair I looked back at Remy, expecting her to roll her eyes at the stupidity of the church, but her eyes were closed. Maybe she was pensive over life like me. Or perhaps, she was just hung over. Over her shoulder I saw a young man my age staring at me, an occasional attendee who wore immaculate shirts

with neatly parted hair. I thought his looks were out of curiosity or lust, but I'd later find out that it was for sinister intentions.

After the service we walked back, pretending to be a normal family, not the unwed that our mother was with my father's brother to cover and prevent gossip, or the orphans that Remy and I would always be.

I shouldn't have asked her about this, but I wanted to be her protector. I really wanted her to protect me, to take on my secrets as I had when our Uncle surprise visited her. But I was asking her to lie, to keep secrets. However, I disguised it as something she needed. Because I was a boy and she was a girl, I had to question her, tell her what to do.

"Why were you out last night?" I asked Remy.

"I went to some clubs with my classmate," she replied.

"How'd you get in?"

"I'm American, I have a fake ID," she said and laughed.

"You shouldn't go to that neighborhood. There's crazy foreigners around. It's not safe out there."

"And it's safe out here," she said. "I hate this place. I should tell mom about your friend."

She walked ahead of me. I grabbed her wrist and she yelled out in fake pain. Our mother and uncle turned around.

"Something wrong?" Mother asked.

"I'm just tired from studying," Remy lied.

"She doesn't study enough," Uncle said. "Not enough for Korea."

"We'll be home soon," Mother said. She returned to her conversation with our Uncle.

"It's nothing to be ashamed of," Remy said.

I liked to think of myself as strong, but I surprised myself. Alistair was right. I was in denial of never wanting to tell anyone, and if I could share this part of myself with anyone, Remy was the right person."

"I need your help," I admitted. "Don't tell anyone."

"You need protection? I thought you didn't need me," she scoffed.

"This isn't America."

She put her gloves on. "NJ, I'm not as stupid as I act. I don't know how you'll feel about who you are, but it's not my job. My job is to accept you, because we're family."

I smiled. I no longer saw her as an annoying and rebellious girl, but my sister, someone who supported me without demands. I hadn't met anyone like that until her.

I needed to think of myself as normal, but Remy didn't need to. We talked about this when I picked her up from the hagwons and walked along the snow-covered streets of hagwon-ga, stopping for dolgalbi in steaming Styrofoam cups on our way back to the officetel. At first, I started picking her up to make she didn't get into any more trouble, or stab anymore students with pencils. I told myself that, but it was to talk to her. Outside of Alistair, Remy was the only person I felt I could be myself with-- the person who could talk about the latest episode of Running Man or G-Dragon's newest album. Once the spring time hit, it became deeper than that. I confessed my fears about the military service to her. I thought I would like the independence but didn't want to leave my family or Alistair behind. I talked about Alistair, and our jokes about our secret affair that were cloaked in honesty that it couldn't last as a secret.

"Then again, can anything last in Korea if it isn't part of the man, woman, baby combination? It's so 1950s," she responded.

"There's more to Korean life than that," I replied, because there was. There was the dancing in the park over Kim Jong Il's death, the music, the democracy, the movies and drama.

"But what's in the public eye that's not that? How can anyone survive if that's not their lives here?"

I put my head down. "They hide it."

Remy carefully ambled on the sidewalk while we walked home that evening, the sheets of ice building up from the heavy snowfall. I shared my secrets with Remy and she shared some of hers, like how she missed California terribly and our mother's friend, whom she considered to be her real Oma. The studies were boring, the boys at her high school dull and girls vapid, only interested in plastic surgery to secure a doctor for a husband, never wanting to be a doctor. She made jokes of the shallow nature, their habit of covering their mouths with their hands while they ate or laughed. She complained about our uncle who searched her phone for proof of misconduct, whom she argued with for her property, until he reminded her that he'd bought the phone for her.

"You're the only part of this place that makes sense," she told me while we ate ramen at home.

She smiled quickly but it faded. Remy didn't share everything with me. I could tell from the far-off glances and midsentence stops that something weighed heavily on her mind, beyond the high school and hagwon gossip. Our mother and uncle kept me out of it, but there was a time when I'd left for a shift when Remy was arguing with our uncle, only to return from my shift and my uncle said she was at the hospital. Springtime came, and along with it my mother's desire for a matching haircut with Remy who'd refused. After a visit to the stylist, they returned with the same short hairstyle, resembling twins, except that Remy had a bruise on her left cheek. She sat down next to mother, silent. She never told me how she'd gotten the bruise. Perhaps, because she was a girl and I was a boy, she didn't need to explain to me. What I didn't understand is that he could take Remy away from me. I should've asked, but I didn't.

Springtime brought promise and the bloom of the ephemeral cherry blossoms. I invited Remy out to a picnic with Alistair and I, to celebrate the springtime and the closeness I felt. It was on a Saturday during the Cherry Blossom festival on the Han, when many families and couples brought their metallic blankets to sit on, snacks to eat and beers to drink. Alistair and I didn't hold hands, and Remy was the only family I had at the Han, so we weren't normal, but we were happy just like everyone else. We were unified in red. Alistair and I wore a plastic band from the latest club at Homo Hill, and Remy walked in between us wearing a short red skirt, her short black hair bouncing with every step. I was beginning to feel safe and normal, until Alistair waved at a group of beautiful girls on a blanket, two Korean and two Western. He ran to them excited, and hugged one of the Korean girls he'd known from swing dancing. Then the short haired Westerner changed the subject, complimenting Remy on her skirt and saying that she missed her in class. She raised her left hand, displaying a large amethyst that glittered in the sunlight.

"Hanseyo Bonnie Teacher!" Remy said.

For good luck, for good fortune, for marriage.

"Hanseyo!" The group shouted back.

Alistair picked out a section in the grass and laid our metallic blanket down.

"What do you think?" I asked Remy and pointed at Alistair.

"He's no Baro," she laughed.

I shoved her and she slapped me on the arm. We both laughed. Alistair took out the kimbap out of the blanket and Remy pulled out a matcha flavored cupcake from her purse.

"A gift for you," she said to Alistair. "You make him so happy, and nothing here makes him happy."

"You're in a good mood," I replied.

"Love makes me happy," she said.

"Love should make everyone happy, but it depends on who loves who and why," Alistair said. "Like your teacher. Everyone is going to tell her hanseyo, or congratulate her because she's getting married. No one's going to say it to me. My life's accomplishments are behind me, aside from making shoes."

"Everyone deserves to hear it for love, because we all love someone. Not just for obligation or out of obedience, but for its own sake," Remy said.

She leaned her head on my shoulder and picked at the cupcake. Perhaps she meant that family love was the love of obligation, because we were born into it, and that there was a world outside of loving because we had to, but because we needed to, because our lives without love would mean an empty one, no matter how normal it looked.

"Love for the brand," Alistair said. "The house and the car, the salaryman job and marriage with two kids."

"I can't stand Korea sometimes because it's so scripted!" Remy said. "How can anyone truly be who they are out in the open?"

I sipped my Cass to avoid answering. I loved the predictability of my life until that point, relying on mother, the Sunday services, even the long waits for Friday evenings, but I loved it because I hadn't known any other life, like Remy had. The attempt to live differently, where every day could be like the Cherry Blossom festival at the Han, outdoors with Alistair seemed impossible but for those hours, I didn't want any other life. In the back of my head, I wondered if what Alistair said was true. At nineteen, I wondered if all my accomplishments were already behind me, that I wouldn't have a love worth celebrating because of who I loved? I didn't want to think of losing my family for the sake of an obligation based love. For that afternoon, I wouldn't have to choose. Alistair was my love and Remy my family. We took pictures on Remy's phone, comforted

that the secret afternoon of fun belonged to us and to no one else. However, the reality lingered near me, because I patted Alistair's hand without holding it. I asked Remy to keep the pictures hidden. It wasn't a lie and yet it was.

I thought our secret was safe, until our uncle came by several weeks later, and Remy had left her phone out when I was at an afternoon shift. When I returned she sat in front of the officetel, hugging her knees as she had when our uncle visited her that November evening. She handed me her phone. The pictures were gone.

"He knows," she said. "You don't know what he'll do."

"How can you know that?" I asked more for myself, to keep denial close to me like a friend.

She motioned for me to look through her texts. There was one from an untraceable number, with one sentence: You've brought shame to the family.

I wanted to think of myself as normal, but as the monsoons swept across the afternoon skies, feeling safe was more important. That summer was the summer when I went out with Alistair more, and not caring about what others thought of me. We went to the Museum of Contemporary Art for the Gauguin exhibit on his birthday, not quite holding hands but standing closer than usual. At the gift shop, I purchased some postcards for him to send to Singapore, and he patted my hand. I searched for the clerk's reaction, who was too busy wrapping them up, and I felt relieved. I no longer cared about being normal, because it seems as if I was worried about something that no one else was.

That was the first summer I started to feel safe with Alistair. Comfortable. That was also the first time that I realized how foolish I was.

I felt safe with Alistair at Homo Hills on the weekends, when we held hands in the tucked away alleys where we cheered on the Russian working girls in and knocked Soju bombs in the bars. We were lulled into a false sense of security, and stopped thinking about the danger that awaited us. On a Saturday evening, Alistair and I walked along the main strip of Itaewon when I saw a young man in a buttoned up collared shirt with neatly parted hair who waved to us. The boy from church. I started to turn away, but Alistair urged for me to say hello.

"What's the worst that can happen?" he asked me.

I shrugged. I didn't know yet, but at the same time I did. That boy was the first person from church who'd seen me out in this neighborhood, and he could've told anyone. I'd soon find out the worst that could happen.

But it was too late for me to back out, to change the course of the evening. We all exchanged hellos and shook hands. I was careful to say that Alistair was a foreign friend who I was showing around. The young man asked me if I believed in the love of Christ, because he had seen me before. I tried to sound confused to throw him off. I told him I wasn't sure. Then he said that he knew me and what I'd been doing. He knew who I was, and he empathized, but assured me that the love of Christ led him to do what he was about to do.

He pulled out a container of mace and sprayed me in the eyes.

It stung. Momentary blindness, the power of my sight removed. I couldn't see the lights of the main strip, the cabs, Alistair whose yelling rang in my ears. Nothing. I heard passersby' concerned questions, and Alistair's only explanation that his friend was attacked. Someone hailed a cab, but Alistair said he couldn't come with me. Once I could open my eyes I didn't want to. I expected to be alone, but I heard a rustling from the visitor's chair. A short haired girl in sweatpants and flip flops, dressed for urgency like I'd been dressed to rescue her from the hagwon. Remy.

"Why are you here?" I asked.

"Alistair put you in a cab and texted me the hospital address. Thanks, big brother, for saying thank you."

I tried to open my eyes but the bright and jarring hospital lights stunned me, lights the same brightness as those in airports, meant to keep passengers up so they wouldn't miss their flights.

"I was careless," I said.

"Report it," she said.

"Why?"

"Why not?"

"Gossip. Ridicule. Shame. No way out besides departing. Where would that leave me?"

"He deserves to be punished."

"Everyone will agree with him." I stopped. "What happened when you got that haircut? Was it Mother?" I asked, changing the subject.

The blindness of my own assault awakened me to hers, led me to question what was normal in our family, that I wasn't the only one keeping secrets. Perhaps what made my secrets different from Remy's is that she wanted to protect me, that in her heart, she knew what was at stake if our family knew. If we were so close, why hadn't she told me?

"You know Mother is too weak to do anything. It's our uncle. He tries to make me fit in, to do things so the family is happy. Normal, I guess. We can't do anything about him. You can do something about this."

"It's not like America, Remy, where you forget history and embrace the lifestyle of diversity, with the Filipino, the Japanese and the Chinese."

"Like Alistair, who's Chinese?" I heard the keystrokes of her phone. "I should call him and tell him you said that right now."

"I didn't mean it like that."

"But that's how you feel. It's ok to mistreat someone who's different. I didn't tell you about our Uncle because you don't have the guts to stand up for me, much less yourself. You act like you don't have a choice in life, like a victim, so I'm not surprised I'm more upset than you are at your own assault."

"I get it. No one should be treated poorly. Stop being so dramatic."

In Korean she yelled, "Then why don't you fucking act like it?"

We stayed overnight in the hospital. I slept in my bed while Remy dozed in the chair across from me. I checked out in Remy's care, and we went to the police station to file the report. I had my reservations about filing the report, because the police didn't protect and serve. The police in Itaewon provided directions for confused tourists and waygoos, did little to prevent the crime in the district. Violence thrived in privacy, and the police didn't interfere. We walked into the tiny gray police station, where an overdressed officer took our names.

"What's wrong?" He asked me.

At first, I wanted to back out, because this isn't what a normal Korean man does: goes to a police station to report an attack, expose themselves to an investigation. Remy laid her head on my shoulder and crossed her legs. Her breathing was shallow, a sign that she was exhausted. She could've studied like Mother had asked her, stayed inside as Uncle demanded of her, or trolled the foreign clubs with her friends, but she sacrificed to cover for me, to get me out of the hospital instead of having our mother found out. She protected me, as I'd protected her, but not out of

obligation as I had her. It was for love. I reported the incident not because I didn't want to be normal, but for validation of who I was, what had happened to me.

"I've been assaulted," I replied.

"By who?" he asked.

"This guy I know."

"Why did he assault you?"

"Because he doesn't like me."

"What kind of reason is that?"

"He attacked me with a can of mace. I could've gone blind," I said, changing the subject. I didn't answer his question because I didn't want to delve deeper into it, leave my personal life in the contained space of the police station.

The officer handed me some forms to fill out along with a pencil, then returned to his routine of filing paperwork. I filed them and it back to him. Then he said that police would try. Try. Why did I bother filing the report? It was less about justice but the right to be unharmed, like everyone else.

I was relieved when I made the report. At the time, I was glad I listened to Remy, but as the summer gave way to fall, I regretted listening to her. I expected the police to interrupt Sunday services and interview the church, to find the nameless attacker with the neatly parted hair, to arrest him and vindicate me. That never happened. While everyone was praying I searched around the pews, only to find he'd vanished, as if it never happened, and that I'd never been confronted. Remy's eyes remained closed during the praying, and now, a sweet smile spread across her face. I couldn't imagine what she was thinking about. Her friend? Me? Anyang? Before her arrival, I thought of myself as normal, a Korean man who didn't want anything in my life to change. I harbored my secrets like a hobby, kept them close

to keep others out, because honesty could've cost me everything -- my family, my place, future opportunities. I couldn't be honest and still stay in Anyang.

What I didn't think about at the time, was that secrets could've cost me Alistair. At first, I thought that he'd always be there for me, because who else could we be meant for? It wasn't about the connection but about the outside world, how we handled how they viewed us. We talked about this the last time we were at Anyang park. We stared at the rainbow-colored fountain instead of each other. After the assault, we couldn't be the same couple. It punctuated the safety we thought we shared, and introduced the reality of what being a couple would be like. Gone were the casual ease of Friday nights in his flat. The imaginary conversations about the flights we'd take to the West now introduced an ugly reality -- perhaps we could only be together like this in the West, which meant leaving the home I felt so safe and comfortable in. To avoid this truth, I looked at a couple holding hands and walking around the fountain. I didn't want to be them, but like them. I envied their safety and nonchalance they'd always have, because I wouldn't have that.

"What's on your mind, NJ?" Alistair asked.

I should've answered, a lot. I was anxious that the assault could happen again, saddened that we couldn't have fun like we'd used to. I thought about all that I'd lose again, imaginary scenarios that I couldn't help envisioning -- Mother finding out and kicking me out, Uncle confronting me and disowning me from the little family I'd have. My salary wasn't enough to afford a key deposit and a place to stay, so I'd end up without a home. And to avoid questions, Alistair couldn't take me in. Those possibilities were very real and scared me. I didn't want anything in my life to change, but it could at any minute.

Instead, I pushed him away. "Nothing," I replied.

He fiddled with a button on his denim colored shirt and tried to sound casual, like we were as normal as the couple at the fountain. He told me about a drawing at Night and Day, where he won a free trip to Jeju for a swing festival. "I want you to come with me," he said.

"What would I do there?"

"Be on vacation. Hang out by the pool, listen to Gordon Webster play live."

I looked down at the steps. "I don't know."

"I love you, but this is hard."

"That's easy for you," I replied. "You got divorced and moved out here, just so no one would be in your business. Would you ask me this if we were in Singapore?"

I regretted saying it as soon as I did, but it was a question that lingered on my mind after the assault. Had it been so easy for Alistair to talk of normalcy because he was always in Korea, a country where he'd never be normal even if he wasn't with me? Would he demand so much of me if he understood the risks?

"I've been hurt because I'm not normal. We're not protected. You're not thinking of that because it's not your home."

"We are normal, NJ. The whole world just isn't. It's not just here. I want to help you, but I can't if you shut me out."

Was I shutting him out because I wasn't normal? At the time, I saw myself as not being normal, but what I'd like to think of myself as. With Alistair, I didn't have to think of myself as normal, because what we shared was normal. Yet I couldn't think of the right words to be normal in the right way. I needed him, but I held onto who I thought I was even more than that. A proud Korean man without that Western disease or a crazy sister. I should've told him that I needed him, but I feared the need, should've said that I was uncertain about the

future, the mandatory military service which hovered over my head. Instead I held onto what was normal, to avoid being hurt by anyone else, physically or emotionally.

"Is there a right way?" I asked, confused about my own direction.

He pulled out a slim cigarette but didn't offer me one. While he smoked, he told me that he couldn't make me or pretend that he didn't understand the desire to be normal, because he'd faced the same troubles in Singapore, but he couldn't force me into it.

"I can't make you choose us, but I can't sit around until you are ready. You should go home instead of coming with me. Go be with your family."

I wanted to tell him that I wanted him more than anything in the country, even on the planet, but it wouldn't have been true. "I'll text you," I replied.

"When you're ready," he said.

I realized I wasn't normal on Chuesok, the fall holiday for paying homage to family. I had taken Alistair's advice and gone off to my family. At first, it was fine. I helped mother with groceries and listened to Remy complain about her school and hagwons, and for a moment, I felt safe. I didn't worry about who'd find me in Itaewon or who would assault me on God's will. Instead, I was the person I wanted to become. I returned to normalcy and being a good son, until the holiday when our uncle would accuse Remy of corrupting me. We looked like a picture of a family pretending everything was fine. Mother and Remy were in the cramped kitchen rinsing the salt off wilted cabbage for kimchi, while Uncle and I ate enormous pears in the living room. In a regular painting, we'd be the nuclear family, the women cooking and the men eating, until she leaned into me.

"Look at your mother," he said. "She's beautiful. I was jealous of your father for marrying her, and hiding it. I told him it was wrong, because they were both in arranged marriages before

running off together. I warned him not to marry for love because it brings suffering. Democracy is great, but some Western ways aren't natural. That's not who you are. You're not afflicted with the Western ways. That disease."

"I'm not inflicted with anything," I replied.

"No, you're not. You're normal, but it's her," he replied. He pointed to Remy. "She's the corrupt one. The abnormal one."

Uncle motioned for Remy to come over to him and she did, greeting him with a quick bow. She was trying to become accustomed to the Korean way, our form of normal, but it's too late for her.

"Remy, do you want to live here anymore?" Uncle asked her.

"NJ lives here, so I should too," she replied.

The answer stunned me, because she'd always talked about leaving. How the only good thing about Anyang was her curly headed friend, and the best of Korea was in the fleeting moments, like the summer monsoons or the autumn leaves. I didn't see her as staying just for me, but she was family.

"You're not meant to be in this family," he said to Remy. "I've looked through your phone. I see what you do. You'll ruin the family name."

"What are you talking about?" Remy asked.

Then Uncle called in mother.

"Tell your mother what you know," Uncle said.

Remy shook her head.

"Tell her about NJ," Uncle demanded. "About the shameful things you do, how you're going to ruin this family and that you want to return to the States."

Remy shook her head and started crying, fearful of our uncle, certain our mother wouldn't protect us. I thought she was going to expose my love for Alistair, the trips to Homo Hill, how she was the normal one and I wasn't, but instead she repeated until she yelled, "I've done nothing wrong. I just love my brother."

I just love my brother. That's when I knew Uncle's scolding of Remy wasn't about her but about me, that he'd known about the report and deleted the pictures off her phone. He wanted her to out me, and instead of following his orders she took his yelling. Because she loved me. I couldn't have family take away family who mattered, refused to have another decision removed from me, by my willingness to only see myself as a proud Korean man, the definition of normal, a loving son and dutiful nephew.

That's when I punched him. I hurt him for hurting Remy. I hurt him to protect her. It was hard enough to shock him into submission and silence, and since he was older and smaller and I was younger and stronger, I pinned him down and shouted at him to leave Remy alone, until Mother stepped in, shouting for us to stop.

"He's family," Mother shouted.

"I'd rather not have a family," Remy shouted before slamming the door.

Mother comforted Uncle while I ran down eight flights of stairs, hoping to find Remy sulking in the first-floor convenience store, but found her absence instead. I waited, watching two buses drop people off across the street and looking at the building lights brightening with the sunset. My cell phone vibrated. Remy's text. She was at the park, which I walked to. She sat on the bench across from the rainbow-colored fountain, and with her back to me, looked almost peaceful and serene. Perhaps she'd accepted her fate, or she was happy that she'd been granted her wish to return. I almost called her by her Korean name, but stopped. That would be a part of her past soon.

I sat down next to her.

"Thank you for not telling them," I said.

"It sucks. You think family is going to accept you, but home is the worst place to be. Why is it that the only people who'll accept us can't stay in our lives?" she said.

My phone vibrated again. It was Alistair, wishing me a happy Chuesok and asking, would I ever be ready? I missed him and the freedom we had together, freedom which I'd never get in Anyang. Even though there was no one else, at the time, I knew I wasn't going to meet anyone else like him, and I'd thrown it all away for family. I doubted my decision.

"To save face. We need to move out. I could go the service. If you move to America, I will too."

She beamed. "Really?"

I nodded.

She leaned her head on my shoulder, the same way she had in the hospital when she'd sacrificed for me. That evening, she sacrificed for me, protected me, because we were family. "I'm sure Mother is on the phone right now trying to get me a ticket. Hanseyo for getting out of this country."

Remy would return to the States and send me post cards during my service. I'd move to California once I finished. But in that park, we were thankful for the family we had in each other.

"Hanseyo, for family," I said.

Night and Day

Seoyoung Yoon was an architect with the English name Ivy, a thirty-year-old virgin who would attempt to separate Brandon and me. We didn't know that when we first saw her. It was an atypical night for the both of us. Saturday night was reserved for swing dancing at Night and Day, the bar in Hapjeoung with wooden floors so smooth you could glide over them, a mural with paintings of music notes, of Artie Shaw and Ella Fitzgerald singing, of Frankie Manning doing the Shim Sham-- a place named Night and Day for the song, and because it never closed, except for renovations on the night we met Ivy. Instead, Brandon and I went to Hongdae that night, the artsy part of Seoul inhabited by college students with tons of trendy bars, outside candy shops, and a 24-hour Taco Bell that always had a line out the door no matter the time.

We were at Gr8, a hookah bar with a girly pink and purple color scheme and blue lava lamps, sharing a table and shisha, when Ivy walked in with a group of other Korean women. I was slightly buzzed from the cardamom scented flavor and drinking a Cass, the foamy and bitter but cheap national beer. I huffed out a cloud of smoke, expecting Brandon to choose one of Ivy's friends who were the perfect models of Korean beauty, with their Gangnam faces and large round eyes, high cheekbones and feminine rounded jaws compliments of their plastic surgeons, clad in miniskirts and stilettos despite the cold November weather.

He nudged me underneath the table. "Banana," he said.

I rolled my eyes and blew a cloud of smoke in his face. "That's not my name. You know how much I hate that nickname."

"Sunny. Bring that girl to me."

"Which plastic one?" I said, pointing to Ivy's friends. They were smiling and taking pictures, most likely for their Kakao stories. The epitome of modern Korean beauty, innocent, harmless, vapid and insipid.

He pointed to Ivy, the only girl whose face was too flawed and individual to be the work of any plastic surgeon. With her thick jeans, ugly patterned acrylic sweater that swallowed her willowy frame, she resembled a kindergarten teacher more than a single woman looking for a man.

"That one. She's the one," he replied.

"Just like that balboa dancer at Night and Day, or that white girl at Magpie, or that British gyopo with the sexy accent," I replied.

"I won't know until you introduce us," he said.

I inhaled a long breath on the hookah. I didn't know Ivy, but I knew Brandon, and according to Confucian theory they couldn't have a relationship without an existing relationship to bridge them. I shouldn't have expected Brandon to behave in this way, turn into a playboy the minute he touched base in Korea, but it was so cliché with male gyopos in Seoul. They go crazy and want to sleep with every pretty girl they can. They can't sleep with the pretty girls in the West, because they're Asian and seen as stuffy, less masculine and unattractive, which was certainly Brandon's story when we met in Tennessee. But here, he wasn't a boring foreign guy but a Tennessee boy, who could wow Korean girls with his height, good looks and American confidence. I knew this because I was a Tennessee girl, too Americanized to be Korean in Seoul, too Korean to be accepted as American.

I didn't want to, but I walked up to Ivy's table. My stare lingered toward Ivy, who blushed under the pink lights and the hazy smoke of the bar.

"Come meet my friend," I said to her in English, because everyone in Seoul spoke English. I knew she'd also take it as a compliment, that I saw her as more mature, elegant and sophisticated than I saw her. "He's an American gyopo. Tall, handsome. He'll make you smile."

Ivy followed me to our table and when Brandon's hand clasped hers, she smiled for the first time since entering Gr8, as she'd met her future husband. All Korean girls do this, because they want to be married so they can quit their jobs and be taken care of like housewives. I rolled my eyes at the predictability of this scene, and possibly because there wasn't anyone I could've looked at in that way -- not Brandon, or even my something something in Korea, Jun. I'd fetched girls at parties and bars for him before, but when I looked at his face, his eyes mirrored hers. He hadn't looked this way at other girls who were just a conquest. This was a look of love. Not the cheesy love at first sight, but the feeling that love could happen with this person. At the time, I was envious because I wanted to share this look with others and I hadn't. Not with Jun, or Oma, who I wanted to meet the most. Perhaps that cemented my reason to come to Korea, that I wanted someone to look at me in the way Brandon looked at Ivy, but I didn't share that possibility with anyone else. When I saw Brandon's face, I feared we'd separate, but looking back at it now, I realized I wasn't going to find that love in Korea.

My unhappiness wasn't for the cliched reason of being in love with my male best friend, like a romantic comedy or a K-drama. I didn't feel the chemistry when we first met our junior year at UT-Knoxville. We were shuffled together as a setup. Irritated by my studious ways, my friends convinced me to meet Brandon at a Halloween party. They claimed that he was perfect for me, but their only reason was because we were both Korean. Amidst the Greek god imitators with bed sheets for togas and slutty costumes, Brandon and I compared notes of

stereotypes thrust upon us. We hated when others assumed we were math geniuses with karate black belts, couldn't drive or speak English properly. We bonded over shared experiences instead of an opportunity for love, and I was about to return to my friends when the CD changed to Sublime's "Doin' Time." While one of the frat boys yelled about who listens to this crap, Brandon said that he liked the original and I replied that it was my favorite Count Basie track. Then he told me to join the campus Swing Club, because he needed a partner and it would be nice to have another Korean around.

Brandon and I were both *gyopos* because of our Westernized upbringing, but he was closer to his roots than I was. We'd both left Korea at the age of three, but Brandon left with his parents while I was adopted. He spoke and wrote English outside the home but Korean and Hangeul inside his home. He grew up in Nashville around jars of pickled things and kimchi, and ate with metal chopsticks. My Christian family from Rockwood had adopted me after the Lord visited them in prayer, telling them that if they wanted a child of their own, they must first adopt from a less fortunate country. My parents chose Korea because adoptions were easy and cheap. At that time, the government was giving away illegitimate children, especially little girls like me. With my family, I studied the Bible instead of Confucian texts. I spoke and wrote English only, like most Americans. I ate turkey on Thanksgiving instead of rice cakes and oversized pears on Chuesok. I used forks and knives instead of metal chopsticks. Brandon embraced his identity as Korean American. I was American, but I was not. My family referred to me as their blessing, but my younger sister Diane as their daughter. I was an outsider, but needed. My need only pronounced that I was an outsider.

My tales of woe humored Brandon, who nicknamed me Banana for my Americanized upbringing and lack of connection to my past. For our last two years of college, we danced at weddings and demonstrations across campus, but underneath that music and those air steps hid

our anxiety about the future. With college graduation approaching and student loan debt welcoming us into adulthood and without a clear way to pay it off, neither Brandon nor I wanted to return to our hometowns to sleep in the childhood beds we'd outgrown. The weekend before spring break he scolded me for using chopsticks the Chinese way. I asked him:

"What if we lived someplace where we used them all the time?" "Banana,"

he replied. "Let's return to the home of our ancestors."

We hugged in a celebratory mood. We were reclaiming our heritage, going to a land where everyone would look like us, where we could be the same as everyone else, instead of that token Asian guy or girl that no one wanted to touch. In Korea, we'd be wanted. We'd be the majority. However, I debated telling my family about the trip. They had talked about the possibility of returning to Rockwood after graduation, since the church needed a treasurer and the Piggly Wiggly needed a baker. But I never felt at home in the church or in my home, where I was constantly reminded that I should be lucky for white adoptive parents who took me in, who treated me more like a pink poodle, a mascot of their generous religious spirits.

I wanted my independence and the unknown more than the comfort of the known. I wanted real friends who'd accept me, true love, the best version of myself, which I didn't think was in Rockwood. At first, I thought I wouldn't tell my parents until I signed the paperwork, but now I realize that I had told them to reject their approval, to assert my own independence. It was on a weekend when I'd return home, and we had gone to church like the happy family we pretended to be. Diane, in a powder blue dress that matched her delicate eyes, Mom and Dad in matching respectable dark clothing for their age. Dad and I were setting the table for our Sunday dinner while Diane and Mom put the finishing touches on the coke-baked ham and the too-sweet hummingbird cake, when we discussed my post-graduate plans.

"I'm going to teach abroad," I said, not looking at him.

"My traveling days in the army were some of the best years of my life," he said. "Where are you going? Perhaps France, or Germany? Spain was my favorite place."

This time, I looked at him, to cement my next words so as not to back out, not be convinced that I was being dramatic or that this was unnecessary, that I was American and complete, just like this. "To Korea."

Dad looked stunned. His scrunched-up caterpillar eyebrows showed his confusion. He called my mother and sister out to the dining room.

"Our Sunny has some great news," he said in a tone that meant we all knew I didn't have great news. "She's going to teach in Korea."

"You hate kids," Diane huffed.

"Where in Korea," Mom asked.

"Anyang. It's not too far from Seoul," I said.

I wanted my parents to address Diane's comment, but I knew they weren't. All of Diane's insults towards me went excused, because she was the daughter they'd hoped for, the ultimate southern belle: delicate, helpless and spoiled, with a healthy expression of racism cloaked in humor and restraint. I was the daughter the Lord told them to get: older, adopted, a charity case, undeniably different. I wanted to scream out my frustrations and tell them the real reason I was leaving. That I never felt like part of the family. I wanted to expose Diane for the tart she was rumored to be with the basketball team, but like everyone else in my life, nothing was addressed for the appearance of good graces.

Instead my father said, "Let us pray."

We bowed our heads at the table and closed our eyes. However, I kept mine open, staring at the family I'd loved when they were closest with God. I envied Brandon's Buddhist background, for never having to endure this. I looked straight at Diane, with her fragile

femininity and soft curly hair. As a sophomore in college with a charming accent, she was evolving into the daughter they'd always longed for, not the straight black hair and brown eyes I shared with none them, but with Oma, a woman who I've ever met, but the first person I had ever known.

When I was twelve, Diane had asked me about my name while we played with our dolls, each Barbie with blond or brown hair, none ever looking like me.

"I can't tell anyone you're my sister," she said. "With that name. Why not change it from Sunny to something more American, like Rachel or Tiffany? Your name sounds like Ling ling or Ting ting."

Even then, I knew I didn't want to change my name to an American name. My Oma had named me Sun, which meant goddess. Who'd want to be named after an animal when their name was goddess.

I replied, "My birth mom named me Sunny, so I'm going to keep it." "Why keep a name from someone who didn't want you?" Diane asked.

I didn't answer her at that time, just got up and left to help with dishes. Anything than to be around her after she asked that. My connection to my name was the first sign that I'd return to Korea and find my Oma, but I couldn't say that to Diane. Why would I need my Oma? I'm certain my family was wondering this as they stood around the dinner table praying. Didn't I have America, a good Christian family and a decent childhood, and a college degree from a good university. But whenever I sat in the church pews or listened to classroom lectures, I couldn't find a reflection of myself anywhere and I was unfulfilled. I didn't know how to tell my family that.

I was going to return to Korea. The place where my parents had gotten me from, where everyone looked like me, and I hoped to become a part of many instead of the only one. As my

father prayed for a safe journey, I expected to feel a rush of guilt flow through me, but instead I felt relieved -- for telling them, for departing into my own adventure, for stepping towards becoming the person that I wanted to become, not who my family wanted me to become. And when I looked down at the dinner table spread, at the buttery mashed potatoes and stewed greens, I felt sick and excited. Excited to move on, but sick because I had lied through omission, not telling them about Oma because I didn't want to lose their love. At that familial table, staring down at the usual food, I too prayed with my heart that Korea would bring me what I wanted most -- love.

Brandon and I agreed to teach English in Korea, because it was a steady income and a way to travel. Over Skype, the recruiters said that children would listen to me because I was beautiful. I gave the polite answer when asked why I wanted to teach in Korea, that I loved educating children and wanted to live in my own culture. Really, I hated kids and didn't care about their education, but I wanted to live where everyone resembled me, because I wanted to find out who I was. The recruiters only cared that I was young, beautiful and most importantly, a native English speaker. They shipped the paperwork and once hired, I packed my bags.

I taught at a hagwon in Anyang, a satellite city close to Seoul, where Brandon worked with kindergarteners who barely spoke English let alone Korean, who yelled and screamed, pulled his hair and ripped the buttons off his shirts during his lessons. He lived in a dorm sized flat to be close to the swing clubs, whereas I was under contract to live in Anyang. I couldn't afford the ten million won key deposit to secure a studio, so my coworker Miso offered me a place in her flat. Her small loft barely fit us, much less the families of four often cramped into such tiny spaces, but it was modern with shiny hardwood floors, one coffee table that functioned as a dinner table and study space, and heaps of blankets and pillows for sitting.

When I first entered her officetel, Miso told me that Koreans didn't believe in furniture because it was a Western waste of money. Miso's apartment reflected the elegant simplicity of her beauty. In a country where more single women lived with their parents, I never found out why Miso lived alone, or why it was so important to live away from her family. With wide, deep set eyes and natural full lips, Miso's beauty was the subject of gossip by her Korean coworkers, who said that her father found her beautiful face on one of the whore cards scattered at Ansan station. She was secretive about her past and open with her judgements, which our coworkers and fellow English teachers, supervisor Kayla and her roommate Bonnie accepted but never respected. Perhaps because they deserved to be judged for their outrageous lifestyles that they'd never flaunt in America.

Friday and Saturday nights were reserved for Night and Day. Sunday mornings were for Skype with my parents, when we had mukbang style sessions that were so popular in Korea. To curb my homesickness, they ate pancakes while I ate kimchi mandu. They caught me up on current stories back home while I told them about the interesting light-hearted parts of Korea: the cat cafes with designer breeds and the crowded shopping district of Myeongdong, which had trendy Western stores like Forever 21 and Anthropologie, as well as the tastiest freshly fried American donuts which I never found in America. I told them about the afternoon walks through Anyang where Koreans walked their toy dogs without leashes and the fountain that lit up with a rainbow of lights after dark.

"What are the subways like?" my father asked. "Crowded.

Lots of surgery advertisements," I replied.

I smiled at him and showed off my glass jar of kimchi and mug of sweet lemon tea. Miso waved in the background, as proof that all Korean women were stunningly gorgeous,

although the average Korean was just about as attractive as the average American. But my family didn't need that image shattered.

I was careful to portray my time in Korea in the most positive light, to save face from how I felt most of the time, or what I did to hide how I felt most of the time. I didn't talk to them about the nights Miso held my hair back as I threw up from too many soju bombs, the rampant public urination or the puddles of vomit I'd gotten used to stepping over. Nor did I discuss why Westerners came to Korea -- that they, like me, were lonely and unaware of how to cope. Bonnie and Kayla slept around to numb their feelings of being outsiders, and perhaps, to avoid their feelings around past relationships. Miso and I coped by gossiping about them while drinking in bars. Those conversations weren't edifying or interesting to my parents so I edited those out.

I was thankful to Brandon because he understood my past and my present, and within us, we had jazz to cope. The only American genre of music that represented the blended history of the USA, Korean dancers would lecture to me during the change of a music set. The music that idealized America the superpower at its height, a country steeped in democracy that Koreans idolized. The music of resistance and the youth. And jazz was here for us. Music enveloped my time in Korea, reminding me of the West and the East; the soothing Chopin in the Lotte Worlds, the Willow Smith like hip hop of the Wonder Girls in the stationary stores, and of course the melody of Duke Ellington and Benny Goodman in the swing bars, with Brandon as my dance partner. It was on those Saturday nights in the melody of jazz and the energy from the crowd that I was playful and light. It didn't matter that I still hadn't saved enough money for the adoption lawyer, or that my bosses yelled at me for my tainted American values because I was Korean like them. I wasn't without the love I desired while dancing, because during those songs I was the love of my partner's life, which Frankie Manning

advocated. It didn't matter if it was Brandon or not. Since he encapsulated my past and my present, I thought Brandon would be a part of my future, but when I brought Ivy into our lives, I realized how foolish my beliefs were.

Fall leaves floated onto concrete, leaving trees naked until blankets of snow dressed them in the winter. Koreans traded their tan trench coats for black wool ones. Brandon's Kakao Stories documented their honeymoon phase with pictures at care cafes and art museums. My connections to work kept me tethered to Anyang. On the rare mornings, when our bosses hadn't forced Miso to work unpaid overtime, we sipped mochas with fancy foam art on top at the cafe downstairs from our officetel. Miso complained about the Christian churches that shouted their messages via microphones every morning to attend their church or go to hell and ajumas with their fizzy dried out perms and permanently drawn on eyebrows who sold squid, a beloved after school snack that smelled like rubber.

"I hate those churches. Koreans only become Christian for the tax deductions," Miso said as she sipped her cappuccino. "Don't ever work for them. They lie about everything."

"You sound hateful," I replied.

"You would be too if you had to work sixteen hour days for no pay. The foreign teachers have it so lucky. We get a fraction of what you get."

"Then change jobs."

She shook her head. "It's like this with any other job. I've always wanted to do temp work in America. Take jobs all over the country, travel and see the states that way. Go to the Grand Canyon. Visit Niagara Falls. Eat fat people food, gain weight like Americans."

This had been part of Miso's dream since we'd met. She envied the American teachers who saved their money and went to Jeju-do, Japan or Taiwan for their breaks, because she

longed to do the same. Korea represented a homecoming to me, but was a prison to her. She wanted to explore the expanse and freedom of America, where one's past didn't have to follow you, if you picked the right state or took the right job, and moved far enough away.

"Anyang is a city for families," Miso said. She looked out at the thirty something Korean women with their young children, reborn into the sanctity and virtue of motherhood instead of the expired woman that Miso had become.

"Seoul is a city for singles," I replied. "Bonnie and Kayla enjoy it."

"Because they act like whores."

"Whores have fun in America," I replied.

"You want to be one?"

I shook my head.

"You're same same with me, you just don't say it."

Miso was right and she wasn't. I wasn't against the idea of anyone enjoying their body or their own expression, since many expats come to Korea to be the version of themselves that would face shame or ridicule in their home countries. Some, like the Western teachers, who outright expressed their racist and misogynist views about American women and their glowing preference for Korean women, deserved to be shamed. Others, like Bonnie and Kayla who slept around in clubs, didn't deserve to be shamed. However, both were safe in their anonymity as travelers, that they wouldn't be exposed for any of their behaviors. Miso didn't get that part.

While my life went on without Brandon, my weekend excursions to Seoul had stopped. I fell onto the usual reasons: I was busy with work and needed the weekends to catch up on sleep instead of sleeping all day. I was waiting on a pair of shoes that I'd paid the Singaporean dancer Alistair to make for me. But really, I was unfulfilled dancing without Brandon, because he was just as important as the dancing.

I missed the last-minute texts urging me to come to Night and Day to welcome an international all-star to Seoul, as well as the long, protracted debates over the appropriate use of air steps during Jack and Jill and Strictly contests, over Hite and fried chicken. Complaining with Miso over lattes before work got me through the work week and teaching those brats, and the weekends used to be for swing dancing. But once Ivy came into Brandon's life that all stopped. He was a taken man, one who posted pictures of their love all over their Kakao stories. Before Ivy, Brandon and I dredged out the week to dance until the middle of the night, when I'd return home grinning like a teen who'd snuck out to visit her first love. But when I saw Brandon's timeline with Ivy, I didn't see the twenty-four-year-old I'd wanted to see, loveable and carefree. Instead I saw the bags under my eyes, the anxiety of looking for my mother raising to the surface.

My students questioned me about this as they did everything else, since they were so nosy. When I told my youngest class that I was raised by a white American family, my favorite student Linda asked me why didn't I have blond or red hair now. I didn't bother answering their questions because they would take too long and I didn't want children prying into my personal life. However, when I started to look tired they couldn't help bringing it up. It was during the fall term when I was checking homework and passing out stickers, when my student Steven asked me why was I so tired?

"Teaching y'all," I replied.

"Sunny teacher has a boyfriend," Steven replied in a pronounced Korean accent, something that the school forbid them to do.

The class laughed at his accusation but I was embarrassed, because I didn't have an answer to his question. It could've been yes, but it could've been no, depending on how Jun would count. At the time, I saw Jun as light and easy, a something something, the type of

person who you liked passionately but would never love, the type of relationship that would break each of my students' hearts before they either found their spouse or were set up for one. This was none of their business.

I should add that I didn't consider Ivy to be a major threat to Brandon and me until the first and only time we legitimately hung out. Since they'd started going out their Kakao stories exploded with cutesy details of their relationship -- of going off to all pink doll cafes and sipping teas at the Namseyoung tower, which every Korean couple does on their second date. Since Brandon wasn't going out to Night and Day neither was I, and I couldn't bring myself to text Jun -- for, I still wasn't sure what we were doing. Instead, I attempted to branch off and find new friends -- possibly female friends, who I could discuss my feelings with, friends who didn't know me as that Asian girl in college, who I could form a new history with since Brandon was busy with Ivy. There were my coworkers Kayla and Bonnie, who taught at the same level as I did. They seemed to have exciting weekend lives where they clubbed, the Westernized, age appropriate activity for us. At first, I tried to wrangle them up as a happy makeshift family -- it would be Miso, Kayla, Bonnie and I, all on a girls' night out hungry for upscale city entertainment.

But the fantasy didn't go as planned. I asked Kayla during our only five-minute break in a three-hour class if she wanted to go out this weekend.

"No swing dancing Sunny? Tired of hanging out with the senior citizens?" She said. She fixed her red hair in the window reflection.

"They're all my age," I replied. "I just want to try something new."

What I didn't say at the time, was that I wanted to try having friends for longer than a few minutes, to see if any relationship of mine could last if Brandon and Ivy, at least.

She shook her head. "Met this boy off One Kilometer. Body builder. Hot. We're meeting up for another marathon fuck session in a Gangnam love hotel. Speaking of which, I need to do a flush in case he wants my ass again."

I shuddered at the thought. I was always in admiration and disgust of Kayla's blunt sexual discussions. "He's probably doing steroids to get big."

"I don't care. I won't be around when the damage kicks in. I can't this weekend. Maybe once I get tired of him."

After work, I asked Miso once I returned home. She was, during her Thursday night beauty routine, filing her nails and with an aloe treatment on her face, the white mask resembling a wet and worn hockey mask.

"Do you want to go to Octagon this Saturday?"

She made a thumbs down since she couldn't move her mouth. Once she washed the mask off she explained why. "Clubs, like gambling in this country is for Americans. Korean boys looking for an American girl, American girls who want to be whores for fun. You like swing dancing? That's innocent."

"Clubbing can be innocent too," I replied. At least, that's what I was hoping would act. Although I wouldn't get laid that night, it wouldn't be completely innocent for us. "It's just dancing, like Night and Day. Why are you so judgmental.?"

"I'm not. All Koreans think like this about clubbing. I'm not going."

There was no need to attempt to talk Miso into it. Kayla didn't want to spend a non-sexual moment with her body builder of a man, so I texted Brandon to see if he'd like to go. To be my third wheel with Bonnie. Really, I wanted to find him another girl to replace Ivy, one he'd charm for only a week like he used to, so we could go back to swing dancing.

Instead he texted me, I'm bringing Ivy. Date night!

I frowned when I read the reply, but didn't want to seem negative about Ivy. So, I texted Bonnie that I'd be her man for the evening instead of Kayla, who would get a good pounding to celebrate her freedom from work.

The Saturday evening started out innocently enough. Bonnie and I wore matching blue dresses to symbolize our date night. Although both of our dresses were short Bonnie stood out as a woman on the prowl, because hers was tight and she wore heels, while I wore basic flats like the average native Korean. Brandon and Ivy were matching as well, dressed in black, as if they were going to a fashion designer's funeral. We hugged as we met an Octagon, next to the Gangnam station, and for a while, we seemed like it was real. Perhaps it was only real because we were waiting for anticipation in line in the December winter, where we pointed at the latest fashions in the two story Uniqlo store across from the club. We watched people board and depart on the buses and tracked the time from the explosions of people we saw exiting the subway station. It was probably half an hour before we got in.

Octagon was worth the wait. Inside was splendid. With its multiple levels and white lighting, it was the mother of all clubbing experiences. Bonnie and I smiled and took a selfie together holding up cheap soju bombs.

"Twins!" Bonnie shouted.

"Putting it on Kakao story?" I asked her.

"Sending it to Kayla," she replied.

"She's too busy getting part of her dick quota of the week," I laughed.

Brandon tapped me on the shoulder and put his index finger to his lips. "Don't talk about that so loud. Not everyone is as tainted as you are."

"You're only saying that because Kayla didn't want you," Bonnie said.

"Who's Kayla?" Ivy asked, confused.

"No one," Brandon scoffed.

It was a lie. The only girls who became no ones to him were the ones he'd hooked up with, in love hotels, DVD rooms and his dorm. Kayla would always be the one that piqued his curiosity, because she seemed to want every Korean man but him.

"She should stay that way," Ivy said. "You already have too many female friends." She pointed at me and Bonnie.

It was at that time when I knew that Ivy had an imagination for exaggerating the truth, because Bonnie and I weren't threats for Brandon. Bonnie was a teacher like me who emulated Kayla as the Western hookup queen, but it was all a facade. She kept it hidden, but I could tell in how Bonnie surveyed men over her martinis that she was searching for something deeper than eight inches and text messages. She was just too scared to admit it. For this reason, I thought Bonnie and I would become super tight friends after a while, perhaps with the same closeness that I wanted to feel toward my college friends, because we were similar in our inability to express our fears. We'd never become super close, but Bonnie was always important to me, not exactly for who she was but what she represented. When she got engaged, she hit the expatriate version of the lottery -- the girl who leaves single and returns with a permanent love.

"You can have Brandon," Bonnie said. "I'm looking for a real man! I'm looking for a good time."

Brandon tightened his grip around Ivy, as if to tell us, he'd found his real Korean woman, who embraced domesticity and submission, who adored that wife life which us Western girls resisted.

"You're more shallow than plastic," Brandon said to Ivy.

"Want to go upstairs?" I asked them. There was no use in arguing on the bottom floor, and I hoped to break up the tension. I was trying to recreate the delight of Night and Day. Didn't work.

"We could do bottle service?" Ivy suggested. "I've always wanted to do that."

Brandon bit his lip, a sign of panic over the cost, which he couldn't support on his teacher's salary.

"We could go together," I said.

"I'll split it," Bonnie said. "No one's that cute on this floor."

Ivy pouted and stuck out her lip, like a spoiled daughter asking for a gift from her Daddy. Opa, even though she was four years older than him. She didn't say it, but in Ivy's eyes, I could see that she didn't want to be with us.

"I don't know," Brandon said.

"How about this," I said. "We'll split the first one, and then you can do whatever you want afterwards. We're double dating tonight, right?"

I tried to laugh, but I could tell that I'd killed the mood. But what was I to do? I didn't want my friend having to pay over a hundred dollars for a bottle of champagne that would most likely cost less than twenty dollars had he bought it in one of those seedy foreign Itaewon stores. We went up to the next floor to find bottle service. Although Bonnie and I wanted to sit at a table to survey the boys and dance to the music in our chairs, Ivy demanded the booth in the back, for privacy. I didn't want to argue, so I agreed.

The champagne was like the basic model in gas stations, good but dry. We tried to talk, pretend like it was a normal night.

"You two are so cute," Bonnie said as she polished off her champagne. "Young love is special."

"Thank you," Ivy said. Her smile told me that she'd wanted someone to envy her like this all her life.

"Until you realize you're in love with love, and overlook the cheating asshole that he really is," Bonnie continued.

"How long ago was that?" I asked.

"In San Pedro, so, eons ago. But it's taken me off relationships. Now I just want to have sex like a man, how my ex had sex with just about everything in a skirt," Bonnie replied.

Then, a pair of well-dressed Korean men came along, in matching shirts and ties like Bonnie and me. Of course, we were supposed to have fun and talk to them, leave Brandon and Ivy as the lovey couple who took pictures for Kakao story. Bonnie talked to guy in the black jacket while I took the one in the white, although I wasn't interested in talking to them. I didn't see that look of love that I longed for. I tried to be interesting to them, but it got lost when his friend asked me two questions: Was I American, and Did I live alone? The translation was, are you a virgin, and if not, can I sleep with you? Disrespected, I pulled on Bonnie's shoulder to go.

"These are terrible guys," I said.

"They're not that bad," Bonnie replied. "Besides, Kayla gave me this sex bet. I sort of want both."

"They don't respect us, that's sad."

"No man does. They're just up front with it. You're the one still in this fairy tale that some man really cares, and they do, but not enough to be faithful."

"You're bitter."

Bonnie's Korean guy handed her a drink. "You're right. I don't care."

"What about friendship?"

"No one cares about that after middle school, Sunny. Look, we're cool, right? Not Brandon and me. I can't stand looking those two and their lovey dovey shit. Reminds me of all the crap I wanted with my ex, and I'll probably never get."

"There's help," I pleaded.

"Yeah, it's those guys," Bonnie said. She was most likely drunk at the time. "I'd rather fuck those two just so I didn't have to feel this way. Thanks for being my man."

"Bonnie, you're drunk, let's go home."

"Mentally I'm sober. My body's ready to get boy crazy and drunk off pipe."

With that, Bonnie sauntered over to the two lads, pulled them onto the makeshift dance floor of the bottle service area, and with them to dance on either side of her. It was one in the morning. Golden confetti released from the ceiling, bathing the bottle service room in gold. With Girls' Generation blasting from the speakers, Bonnie seemed the picture of happiness and expat adventure. But that was because her insides were sad. She just couldn't face it. None of us could.

I thought that I'd left my last chance to have some form of happiness, when I looked back at Ivy and Brandon at their table. Ivy looked tired, curled up in Brandon's arms and I wondered if she was happy. Was she content because she finally had what every Korean woman desires, a man? I sat down next to them and took the last of the champagne.

"So, Bonnie just dumped me for some randoms," I said. "Night and Day would've been better than this."

"No, it wouldn't, because I wouldn't be there," Ivy said. "So, you wouldn't have gone swing dancing?" I asked. She shook her head. "Not my nature."

"Would you learn?" Brandon asked.

Ivy started to shake her head, the sign that she was a snake but stopped. "Only if you teach me."

Brandon must've felt it too, because he shifted. Now, she wasn't too comfortable sleeping in his arms in the club. "You're right," Brandon said to me. "Night and Day would've been more fun. This was kinda cliché."

"I'm going to go now," I said.

"Goodnight," Ivy replied too quickly, as if she couldn't wait to get rid of me.

"It would be cheaper if we shared a cab," Brandon said. "I'm tired, and Ivy sweetheart, you're tired too."

"But I want to stay," Ivy whined.

"You come with us, or catch a cab," he replied.

I smiled at the small victory of Brandon leaving that club with me, because he'd chosen me over her desire. In the cab ride home Ivy was asleep with her head on his shoulder, slumped over with the comfort all Koreans had for nodding off in public. I confessed to Brandon that my life hadn't been the same without him.

"It's not as fun," I said.

"Banana," he replied as if he was going to sing a Kpop song. "Don't be so melodramatic."

"It's hard finding friends out here. People are so fake. I thought Bonnie wanted to be friends with me, but she just wanted some dick tonight."

"Bonnie will be your friend until you leave Korea. Afterwards, it doesn't matter." "That's cold."

"It's university 2.0. No one cares about how they treat each other here. They're just here to get what they can get. Bonnie's having fun, but it's not funny. Funny doesn't equal

fun. Americans just want a funny time, and then trick themselves years later that Korea is super awesome."

"It's not all like this. I think about Oma sometimes, if she's asleep. Or if we would've been making kimchi on a Saturday afternoon like my girl students do with their mother."

"You don't think about Tennessee?"

"I'm relieved I'm not there anymore," I said as I looked out at the window. "Aren't you?"

"Getting laid all the time is nice. Korean girls are so easy," he laughed. "What about her?" I motioned to Ivy.

"She's different. You'll understand."

With a four-day break before winter term starting, Miso and I spent the night at Bonnie and Kayla's place in Itaewon, the foreigner district of Seoul. They lived in a Western style flat, complete with long kitchen counters and a full living room with matching teal couches. Miso and I sat on the loveseat opposite Bonnie who hid her hands over her eyes while Kayla spelled out their next sex challenge with refrigerator magnets. We were all wearing long sweatshirts and thermal leggings since their floor wasn't heated, laughing and drinking Soju bombs, eating their old baguettes. We celebrated our lives through a litany of complaints.

"Cheers to the losers back home who are too fat, ugly or lame for a girl in their country and come here to fuck and dump Korean girls way out of their league" Kayla said.

"And the bosses who remind us how replicable we are at every hweshik," I said.

"Then why are you here?" Miso asked.

"Student loans," I replied. It was true and it wasn't. I was there to pay them off, but I was also there to invest in my past. I thought it would help me invest in my future.

"So that when I'm cleaning after my boring husband I can think of those years abroad where I had a blast," Bonnie said.

"That why I became a slut," Kayla said. She polished off her fourth soju bomb and laughed. Her ivory skin, blue eyes and red hair reminded me of the American flag. She was the supervisor of the foreign teachers at our school, but on the weekend, she and Bonnie cruised the Gangnam nightclubs for bachelors with free bottle service. "If Seoul wasn't my sexual playground I'd go crazy. What we do where doesn't count. When I'm seventy years old and my tits are to my ankles, I can think of when I was young and hot and fucking hot guys. Who doesn't want that memory?"

Unsure of what to add, I shrugged. Although we lived there, Seoul was already a memory because of its transient nature, where expats meet as strangers, become close and then become strangers again. I couldn't have been comfortable in judgement like Miso, but I was no better than Bonnie and Kayla. Their strangers were the men they slept with in love hotels and outside ritzy clubs while mine were men I danced with under the Christmas lighting of the swing clubs. With strangers, we could escape from the pressure of life away from a permanent community. We often hid our insecurities in laughter, soju and men, but we longed for something more. Bonnie and Kayla longed for a second change at love but hooked up to sustain themselves. For Miso and me, we both wanted to reconcile with our families, to look in the mirror satisfied with who we were and where we came from. Brandon was on his way to that with Ivy, to being a good Korean boy by finding a good Korean girl to marry and have children with, to make his parents proud. I was uncertain if my parents would ever be proud of me.

Miso nudged me. "With all this fucking, do either of you know a good lawyer."

"Old client stalking you?" Kayla asked.

"For Sunny," Miso replied, evading the question. "She needs an adoption lawyer to find her Oma but she doesn't have all the money for the fees up front."

"I've got about three fourths," I said.

"Drew!" Kayla replied. "He's this hot lawyer who helps with adoptions. He's tall. Sexy in this super nerdy way. He ate me out for like an hour. And his dick was this big!" She tore off a piece of baguette and handed me the rest of it. It was about nine inches.

"He may not be your type," Bonnie added.

Aside from not wanting a man a friend had slept with, I asked Bonnie. "Why not?"

"Because he's Korean," Bonnie replied.

"That's stupid," I replied. "I'm Korean."

"But you're Americanized. All those language exchanges I go to, all the Korean girls fawn over these extra average, ugly souled white male teachers we have over here. I thought you had racist pussy," Kayla said.

I swirled my Soju bomb to avoid responding their false observation. Although I had known them for a few years, they still assumed that I could only love someone white. Perhaps they felt this way because I was adopted, or because the men in the clubs prided them for their white skin, for Kayla always received compliments over her pale complexion and Bonnie was always compared to Natalie Portman. Or they may have felt that because they had never seen me with anyone besides Brandon, who they had seen with too many girls. Maybe it was because Brandon had asked Kayla out before, and she rejected him for being too thin. Either way, the comment annoyed me, but unlike my family, I didn't care as much about their reaction. So, I finally found the words and responded.

"My pussy isn't racist nor does it have yellow fever," I said. "It likes who it likes?" "Does it like someone now? You might feel better if it did," Bonnie added.

"She's not getting over a serial cheater like you," Miso replied, then swirled her glass.

The room had gotten too real, too stifled with truths perhaps that we all held at some time. Kayla apologized to call a truce. Then she gave me Drew's card.

"Tell him I sent you," Kayla said.

The next week I met Drew for an appointment. His Gangnam office was more of an efficacy, an officetel with two desks and a breakfast nook, where he fixed me a cup of too sweet coffee from golden packets. I studied his face while he reviewed my application. Kayla was right and wrong about Drew. He was handsome but in a nondescript way, like the salarymen who worked in sterile offices. His black rimmed glasses reminded me of Harry Potter instead of the passionate lover that Kayla described. I laughed.

"Something wrong?" he asked.

I shook my head. "Where are you from?"

"Here, but I went to university in Melbourne. How long have you been here?"

"About two years. I've been trying to save for the fees."

"I thought I was going to stay in Australia, but when I was in unit my father died and my mother had become ill. Because most of the adoptions are private and don't have substantial paperwork, it's going to take some time. Are you sure you want to do this?" he asked.

He stopped, tapping the rim of his mug with his index finger. He looked at me not with desire but concern over what I might find out. He had been through this before. After all, this was Korea, the land of morning calm, where secrets are meant to be secrets, not exposed in the vain of self- discovery.

"I guess," I said. "I want to know who I am."

"Okay, " he replied. He shuffled some paperwork around. "Let's find her. Usually I take full payment, but Kayla explained your situation. I know you're working so just pay the remainder when I find her."

"How do you know Kayla?"

"She's a good friend."

I should mention Jun here. I didn't talk about him much with my friends because of their own preconceived notions, that were based on stereotypes. They believed that I was either Brandon was my true love or that I lusted for a white man, but meeting Jun confirmed neither of those assumptions would ever be true. I'd seen Jun before at Night and Day and the other Seoul swing clubs on Saturday nights, but we never danced because I left at around the time he arrived. For those few songs when we shared the same space, I could feel his eyes on me, following my skirt and then tracing back at my face. It wasn't the same look as Brandon had given Ivy. Not quite a look of love but not lust, more like he was trying to repair something that hadn't yet been lost.

I officially met Jun during the Jeju Swing Camp, the annual mid-July festival where dancers booked half a hotel to jam out to Western swing bands from sunset to sunrise, only to crash for a few hours to repeat it all again. Though expensive, the tickets sold out within three hours of their announcement, and Brandon missed the opportunity to go. So, I booked a flight and went alone, eager to explore Jeju do, one of the seven wonders of the world.

Jun and I had our first dance on the first night of the festival. The Gordon Webster band played, and I danced each song, despite my makeup running off my face and losing my breath. The mid July heat clung to my green polka dot dress, but I smiled most of the night. I was happiest when I danced, but it changed when Gordon Webster announced that they were

going to do a blues song. I wasn't a big fan of blues dancing, but Jun grabbed my hand when the band played their rendition of "Fever." Brandon and I used to make fun of blues dancing, since that terrible eighties movie "Dirty Dancing" made it look so cheesy and forced. But with Jun, it was different. It had felt right, the way I'd wanted blues to feel. It wasn't about molesting a secret crush, but an expression of love that I hadn't felt until I danced with Jun.

I planned on retiring to my hotel at sunrise when the band packed up, but when I walked back to the hotel with my shoes in hand I saw Jun sitting on the lobby's couch. He sat at space next to him. My legs were wobbly as acorn jelly, my lids heavy and skin slick with sweat, I flopped down next to him and leaned my head on his shoulder.

"I've waited for this moment all night," he said. "I wanted to tell you sweet dreams." "What if my dreams were of you?" I asked.

"What would they be?"

"If I could feel how I felt on the song we danced together."

"I haven't felt that in forever."

"Maybe you're my soulmate."

"A no name soulmate."

"Sunny," I said.

Perhaps it's strange to feel say out loud, but I thought of Bonnie in that moment. The thrill she found in hooking up. Kayla had done it for so long that she never cared for conversations with her boy toys. But for Bonnie, the best part of a hookup was the ethereal conversations of nonsense, where a couple could pretend that they were soulmates without enduring the difficult and useless relationship work. I thought that I was going to share that with Jun, but Jun's next statement would change that.

"I used to believe in soulmates, that you could fall in love at first sight like the Westerners. I married my soulmate."

"I've fallen for a married man, how tacky and trite," I said. I tried to snuggle next to him, but he pulled away.

"I married my soulmate, only to find out that she didn't want to be a wife. So, we separated."

I stopped and listened, tried to have a real conversation instead of a fun one. "Do you still love her?"

"I haven't for a long time. I just hope you aren't my soul mate, maybe you'd be my wife one day!"

We laughed at that.

"Marriage is about family, not romantic love. Where's your family?"

I hesitated in answering his question, uncertain if I was to speak about my family in Rockwood or Oma in Korea, about Drew, about my coworkers who were a family of sorts, of the family of swing dancing. "Here and America, but it's different. I was adopted. My Oma is still in Korea, I think. I want to find her."

"For family?"

"Friendship changes over time. Family is permanent." "If you found Oma, you'd stay?"

"I think so," I told him. "I'd stay for marriage, because marriage is about family."

It was a different conversation than the one I'd expected, which I thought would be about admiration and desire over what we knew would never occur. But we were the realest in that hotel lobby than I'd ever been with any other date in Korea. We were open with our hearts, and the future, which was different than the vague conversations I'd have with other expats,

who didn't know where they'd end up in the next two years, let alone interested in foraging a forever bond. But it may have felt more real because it was higher stakes, to talk marriage and family with an almost stranger. I wanted Jun to be my forever in that lobby, and I thought we would be.

For the rest of the trip, Jun felt like a budding relationship. The next evening, we met again for the impromptu pool party. Some of the women drank that terrible Cass in bikinis while some of the men played water polo. Hotel management had posted a sign prohibiting guests from dancing near the pools to prevent injuries, but no one paid attention to it. When the music started they locked their arms around each other and danced on the concrete in flip flops. Jun and I sat on his beach towel and watched everyone.

"I thought I was wise when we married, but I was just young," he said. "Sometimes, I think the only way I will love is with music. What if the only possibility at love comes in four minute songs?"

I wanted to say that I started fantasizing about us at that moment. The way that girls fantasized about babies when they met whom they thought was the one, except I thought of Jun and I competing the ILHC strictly lindy competition, probably the only Korean couple. That was how I gauged a future with men at the time -- if I could see them as my long-term dancing partner and replace Brandon. But when Jun said that, I was torn. Part of me wanted to thank him for his honesty, for volunteering the truth instead of having to extract it from him. But another part of me was disappointed and hollow, at reality interrupting another rare opportunity of connection for me. It could never have been like Bonnie or Kayla, who had perfect relationships with men for at least three hours. Perhaps Jun told me because he was older and didn't want to hurt me. Or maybe he told me because he was also confused, uncertain of the possibility that existed between us.

"What if it could for us?" I asked him.

Of course, most Seoul expats like Bonnie and Kayla were too cynical for that, too jaded by the reality of who they were before they came to Korea to understand what I wanted. That's why I kept Jun a secret from them. Because they would've agreed with his wife. I was a homewrecker and he was a betrayer, and I could've done better than him and should've met someone else. My friends didn't know the story, which the rest of the swing dancers could recite like a Greek chorus: Jun was nicknamed the Ugly Duckling while his wife was The Swan, and their impending divorce was proof that Western love didn't work. But I still had hope that Jun and I could.

After that Swing Camp, whenever I saw Jun at Night and Day, we knew that we belonged together. He grabbed me whenever I lacked a partner, and if we were partnered with others, we'd look over our partners shoulders at each other, perhaps asking the same questions from Jeju. A confirmation of the possibility of love if we were in the same room, and wasn't a possibility to love the same as an invitation to love? Couldn't we love each other?

My friends didn't understand an unattainable love because it hadn't happened to them. When Alistair texted me about my shoes I asked him for a drink, because he understood. Originally from Singapore, Alistair was a beautiful man with a classy British accent. Whenever we danced we'd laugh about what made us different from Korean standards. He was Chinese! I was a gyopo who knew no Korean! But we both loved people who were out of reach in our lives.

He devoured his chicken and coke while I picked at my food. I told him about meeting Jun in Jeju, how we looked over our shoulders when we were together, how if I was around he would only dance with me, much to the dismay of his female students. "I wish it was more like Brandon,

who just met someone and then fell in love, and they're happy on Kakao story," I rambled. "Why won't he make a move?"

Alistair stopped, took a swig of fake Seven Up before speaking. "Aside from the obvious? That he's known on the scene as a married man and is caught up in a long divorce? Divorce is like a death sentence."

"Were you married?"

"A long time ago. I couldn't divorce until we'd been married for three years. Then I came all the way out here to leave that memory. It was before I knew who I was."

"Are you happier now?"

"I'm glad I'm not lying anymore. But it's not all easy. The one I love now can't be open with me, and it bugs me. I wish we could be normal, and on the weekends or alone we are. It's hard though."

"What should I do?"

"Why do you want him?"

I paused, and poked at my cold chicken like a deflated balloon. Why did I want Jun so much? Why not? He was intelligent, easy to talk to, and it felt like I had known him all my life. He was the best dancer, the most handsome, and the best guy I had met while in Korea. At first my answers stuck to the surface of my desires, instead of the true reasons, which was why I stopped before answering him.

"When I look at him, I see myself. My desires, my visions reflected back," I answered. "I haven't felt that way about anyone."

I looked out the window, the sunset splashes of pink and orange with people wandering to bars and stores, to have a night that would make them forget their weekdays as I did.

"If we were anywhere else, I would say forget it. You're too beautiful to wait on a married man. Although he isn't single on paper, he may not be single in his heart, and may need some time. If we were in America, I suppose, you could find another man who'll love you, like they show on those sitcoms. But if you are here, there's hope. Korea is so void of love that you must hold onto the possibility once it presents itself. Be patient. Time will reveal your answer."

"Why do you say that?"

"I have to tell myself that every night to survive here."

I swirled my Coke around, and thought about his answer. It was like the cliché I told my students whenever they hollered for an earlier breaktime. That in America, we have the saying, patience is a virtue. But was it really? It was waiting for the one who you've chosen to decide to want you. Patience was the practice of purgatory, or uncertainty if someone wanted you or didn't. It produced an agony because I couldn't see on the other side of what I was waiting for.

That was over the summer, when the monsoon swept over the sky and Koreans shielded themselves from the rain with cheap plastic umbrellas. Now it was winter, and the school closed for the Lunar Year break. Snow fell from the sky, blanketing the streets with a powdery white, causing slip and falls because the city never salted the sidewalks. Families flocked to E-mart to buy oversized and overpriced apples and pears to take their families living outside of Seoul. I attempted to connect with my American family over Skype. I did another mukbang with Dad. He ate a medium rare steak while I ate twice baked cheesy pasta, Korea's interpretation of Italian cuisine. It was comforting to hear about home life -- the slow predictability of the south, and the American comforts that I'd gone without for so long. I thought I was okay with family, until Dad put Diane on Skype with us.

"I have to go now. Do you want to say hi to her?" he asked.

"Yes," I lied.

I didn't ever want to speak to her, but when I was talking to my parents, I had to pretend. We were a happy family. It only fueled my desire to find Oma so I wouldn't have to do this again.

"Hi," Diane said. Her Southern accent was still charming. "Korean babies are the cutest thing. Where are you again?"

"I told you, Anyang," I said, annoyed.

"I was doing some reading. Isn't that where the Virginia Tech Shooter was from?"

I rolled my eyes. "Perhaps I'll take some pointers from him and shoot up the church."

Diane hung up, just as I had wanted her to. My family still didn't feel like a family. No matter how much I told them about swing dancing, or teaching, I was still the outsider. It felt more pronounced because I was in Korea. It was easier to ignore when I was the only different and they were the same, to ignore the inappropriate jokes and comments by church members and classmates, and later, at college. But it was harder when I was finally away. Over the break, Miso and I flopped on floor pillows and stared at the ceiling, and talked about places we'd fantasized about going to: Cebu beaches, Taipei streets, or the Ubud mountains. Any place that was warmer and more relaxing than Korea.

I thought that Korea could stay my home so long as I had my friends. That Brandon, Miso, Kayla and Bonnie and I would reserve a certain truce. That we wouldn't be without each other if nothing changed. But things were changing already with Brandon and Ivy. Then Bonnie got a boyfriend named Spencer. A kind British guy with sparkling blue eyes and salt and pepper hair despite his young age, a man unaware of how handsome he was. I met him when she brought Spencer with us for wing night at the The Grey Goose, and I could see that she was

falling in love with him. At first, she pretended. She was kind enough to him in her introductions, but when he went to the bathroom she asked us for our thoughts.

"It's a shame," Kayla said. She surveyed the bar for potential hookups. "You're going to change your slut badge for an apron."

"He's nice," Miso said. "Not your average Western jerk."

"Do you like him?" I asked Bonnie.

"I've evolved," she replied. "I'm past liking boys. He's just a longer-term hookup."

But when Spencer returned from the bathroom, I could tell she was lying, first to us, and then herself. It was how she looked at him as she caressed a small spot behind his ear. I knew that she was looking for the possibility of love, because it was the same look that Ivy had given Brandon, and what Jun had given me over the summer. As the night ended, I tried to tell Bonnie about Jun. We left for the subway.

"You like him," I said to Bonnie. "It's how you look at him. I feel that way sometimes too."

"Is it about the racist pussy? You like one of those losers back home?"

"Of course not. I mean, I love someone. I feel like I do."

"Does he love you back?" Bonnie asked.

I looked down, because I wasn't sure.

"The worst thing that you could do is to love someone who doesn't love you back," she added. "The Tico boy taught me this."

I couldn't respond to Bonnie. I hurt for her cynicism, but worried for myself. I'd never said that I loved Brandon, because it was a part of that friendship love that was always understood. I wanted to tell Oma that I loved her for being my mother, despite giving me up, and I hoped she would love me as her daughter. And I wanted to tell Jun, but I was afraid that

it would be too cliché to say why. That I loved how he danced, or that I loved who he could be to me. I would tell Oma and Jun that I loved them, but it would be out of spite than out of love.

Lunar Year was the time when Jun and I spent our only night together. It had started on a Friday night that I had planned to spend with Miso. Tipsy from the too sweet Cabernet, we were heading to Emart to make stories about the puppies when Brandon texted me -- Night and Day tonight? Midsummer's Night's dream! Wear green and red? There was no promise of an all-star or a competition, but I canceled with Miso. She hugged her bottle of wine and fell back onto her mattress, welcoming to leave so she could carry on with her real lover, the wine. I left Miso because I missed Brandon and all he represented, the simpler times when friends were friends and didn't abandon friends for love, when lovers were not in an in between space. I changed into a red dress, grabbed my Cuban heels and headed to the subway.

I expected Night and Day to resemble the Piggly Wiggly on a holiday or a Sunday evening empty with music blaring in an empty place, with shiny floors unmarked by scuffed up sneakers, but instead it was filled with Koreans who'd chosen the Jitterbug and Lindy Hop as their family, as opposed to me who had no other family. They all danced in a cramped space, the rainbow-colored light from the disco ball casting a cheerful glow of the euphoric faces of the leads and followed as they jammed to Tommy Dorsey, Duke Ellington and the Boilermakers. I searched for Brandon and when I couldn't find him, I sauntered over to Alistair, who looked charming in his rainbow patterned suspenders with his harem pants, and greeted him with a smile.

"Let's pretend it's Sadie Hawkins day," I said laughing.

He took me in his arms with a smile, and we danced as friends did, conversing in between swing outs about our lives in the winter. How we missed the summer when we could change

from our flip flops on the street to our Keds for Lindy Hopping or our heels for Balboa, when the outside welcomed us to a cool breeze, but the winter forced us to bring a change of clothing and to brace us with the possibility of pneumonia to go from sweating inside a glorified basement to the frosty weather outside, but it was worth it. The music was worth it, the nostalgia of jazz when America was an optimistic superpower that Korea wanted to emulate was worth it, the transformation of being doctors, and students and office workers with overbearing family or in my care no family was worth it for those four minutes. However, there were times when it wasn't worth it. Alistair and I talked about that as we sat down on the bench. Because there were too many leads, men still strolled up to me with their hands outstretched, but I declined, telling them I was tired.

"How have things been, really?" I asked him.

"Cold. Lonely. I don't know how I'm going to get through the winter," Alistair replied. "My love and I split. It's not the same without him. Now I can feel how much I miss Singapore."

"I feel the same about America. Sometimes I miss how easy things were. Work is easy here, but not much else. I worry I'll never find anything permanent."

"Will any of us get the guarantee of permanence, the end of heartbreak?" he asked. Then he added. "I get philosophical during breakups. It was the same way with my married. He pointed to the door. Your BFF's here."

Brandon strolled up to me wearing a Balboa shirt and black slacks, probably because jeans would be too hot. "Hey Rainbow," he said to Alistair. "Can I borrow her?"

Alistair shrugged. "She's always been yours."

I was never his. I'd like to think that I was my own person, and would always want to be. However, when I thought about my actions, it could seem like I belonged to Brandon,

perhaps because I was conflicted by wanting to belong to someone. Brandon and I danced a few songs laughing about the nostalgia of this place and our college days, before student loans and family obligations predated our psyches. I expected Brandon to drop my hand at the end of some of the songs, tell me that he wanted to dance with some of the girls patiently waiting for him on the sides, even though the guys outnumbered the girls and they could've danced with other leads. The DJ announced the halftime section, which meant a line dance, and we moved to the side to get some drinks.

"Long time no see," I said. "She let you out tonight?"

He shook his head, fanned himself through his shirt. "She's visiting her parents," he replied.

"So, you snuck out? Bad boy. You used to be bad, acted like a typical gyopo. Just took out your revenge against every girl you couldn't kiss in college on every Korean girl who gave you a chance, on an all-out sex rampage. Then you meet Poison Ivy, and become the Korean version of Ray Romano. You must just want that virgin pussy."

I sipped my Pepsi, expecting him to crack a crude joke about how interchangeable the pink taco was, taking me back to the ease of our college days. He looked straight ahead at the dozens of people dancing Balboa to Benny Goodman on the packed dance floor. "You wouldn't understand what we have, Sunny. You've never been in love."

Brandon's comment stung. Of course, there were superficial reasons, such as never feeling the butterflies as others had for their crushes, or the envy I'd felt whenever I wandered around in Gangnam and saw couples dining in expensive Italian restaurants, or walking around in Hajeoung holding Taco Bell paper bags in their free hands. But it also reminded me of being an outsider when I didn't want to be, such as the church services with my family or when I watched Korean mothers and daughters shopping together. It reminded me of those moments of happiness that would turn into memories, moments that weren't open to me. I wondered if

Brandon spoke of love as a struggle or a beauty, and if I would experience them in the same way. What if I wasn't in a space to ever feel love? Why hadn't it happened between Jun and me? Whenever I was watching my students take their tests in class, I liked to think about what he was doing, and if Jun and I were together, would we be watching *Running Man* together, or washing dishes. Would Jun's mother teach me how to make kimchi the way Jun likes it, and if we would visit his family during the Lunar Year instead of meeting at the club?

I didn't know, but my heart raced when it was the halftime point. Ten pm, when the DJ played the song for the many line dance routines that every Jitterbugger knows. This evening it was the 'Tranky Doo, played to Ella Fitzgerald's "The Dipsy Do." It was at that moment that I saw Jun walk in, wearing a green suit with a red shirt, adhering to the dress code. Of course, we were in a sea of Christmas colors, but we matched! As an instructor, he went to the front of the line to dance. I'd like to think he went to the front to wink and smile at me. My heart was filled with joy, until I looked to the door again and saw The Swan, his not soon enough to be ex-wife and my online bully, sashay in the door in a tight black skirt and a white tea, obviously not matching. My joy turned into fear as I watched her order a drink and sit on the back bench. I wish I had studied her more, because I would've understood that she was harmful, and more than an online bully. But when Jun scooped me up for Count Basie's "One O'clock Jump," nothing else mattered. We'd determined it was our favorite song in Jeju! And Jun was my favorite dancer. When I was in his arms, I felt the closest I'd been to being in love. I belonged with him. Not to him, which was how Brandon belonged to Ivy, but with him -- with the melody and the music, with this smooth dance floor and these murals, and this disco ball that shined underneath all the dancers, turning us to the people we wanted to be instead the people that we were. He must've felt it too, because at the end of the song he kissed me. A real one. On the lips. In front of all everyone, dancers who rushed out to gossip about the news on

their Kakao messages. Kissing in public meant a declaration of love. It meant that we were physically intimate. A real kiss in front of The Swan. We were hot and sweaty, but I didn't care. I felt liked in that moment. Close to loved.

When I returned to Brandon's side, neither of us mentioned it. We fell into a silent truce for the rest of the night, as if the kiss had taken an imaginary boundary and made it real. At eleven thirty, I changed from my heels to my snow boots to catch the last train to Anyang. I waved goodbye to everyone when the Swan approached me. I liked to think that she was really the Ugly Duckling of their couple, but she was a knock dead gorgeous dancer with expensive custom-made heels by Alistair and carrot organ hair from a botched bleaching.

She blocked my entrance to the door as I tried to leave. In Korean she asked me, how could I be such a homewrecker?

She crossed her arms and leaned to the side, expecting an apology for disrespecting her marriage for embarrassing her in front of her minions that she taught and the leads she danced with who idolized her, because she was older than me, and despite cheating on Jun with his friend, still legally married and required sympathy.

The Swan wasn't getting sympathy from me. I answered her in broken Korean, sorry you feel that way, but I must go home.

She responded in Korean, does your mother know you're a homewrecker?

I was upset, but I tried to hide it. I should've stopped and left for the door, been the responsible person, the mature one as I often encourage my students to, but I wasn't at work. Her comment about my mother upset me, because I wasn't sure what I would tell Oma when I met her. Would I tell her that I have met my soulmate who is currently married? Would she think any less of me? I didn't know the answer, but knew that I didn't want to deal with mother issues when dancing the one moment when I got to escape. I wanted to expose The

Swan for the woman that she was, a woman who didn't want to be married and old, thus useless to Korean culture. I sarcastically slow clapped and shouted congratulations at her attempt at telling me off.

She threw her drink in my face.

I didn't care if she was older and the victim and I was younger and the homewrecker. I was pissed. I retaliated. I lunged at her and hit her with one of my heels, my beautiful shoes that Alistair had just made me. I took a thin made for love of music and beauty and hit the Swan in her face because this same beautiful face had kissed Jun as I once had, and I wanted to take her beauty away. I could say that it was revenge, but it was because I was right. She hit me first. The music stopped. Others watched aghast until Jun and Brandon rushed in, breaking us up.

"Are you happy?" The Swan yelled. "Are you glad to break up a marriage?"

The dancers were spectators, getting a glimpse of my own drama that I worked so hard to hide. I thought it would've been Brandon to calm me down, to get me to see things her away, as I'm sure Ivy had with him before, that it wasn't like it was in America. But it wasn't Brandon who demonstrated his guidance toward, but Jun. He took my coat, grabbed my shoes, and led me out of the bar.

"Let's go to my place," he said.

My smile was a yes. We took a cab from Night and Day to his place because the subways had closed. We arrived at his place in silence. Jun played the role of a gracious host. He hung my coat up in his closet and put my shoes next to his. He offered me one of his oversized t-shirts to sleep in, and once he changed into his pajamas, took out a cot for him to sleep on, leaving me the bed. It felt strange to be in his small but modern officetel after so much time had elapsed. With the sky light of Seoul peeking through the shades, I could've

pretended that what we shared was indifferent and not special, that he was just a friend who offered to help me in a time of need. But I would've been lying to myself, denying my own needs and the reason why I was there. Despite his slumber on the cot, there was a reason why I was here with him and not the Swan. I got up from the bed, walked over to him, and stretched out my hand.

"You belong with me," I said.

He took my hand. I pulled him up like he'd pulled me onto the dance floor earlier, and when my tired eyes considered his tired eyes, there was a connection between us. A familiar recognition, perhaps of a heart broken too many times, or our dreams and ambitions snatched from us too many times. Maybe we didn't want to lose this moment by giving into sleep. At least, I didn't. When he tilted my chin up and he lowered his head for a kiss, I didn't want to give up that moment. I wish I could say it was based on unbridled passion or lust, animal attraction which led to us dancing in the bedroom as we had in the bar. But this wasn't a moment in a K-drama or a movie. It was a vague curiosity, an attempt to repair what had been missing in others that was present in ourselves, the need to touch and caress and explore in a way that we deserved. When I considered Jun's eyes, I saw home, a reclamation of the spirit. I saw the person who I wanted to be, and in front of me the person I wanted to be with as that. So, when he took his shirt off and carried me to his bed, I thought that feeling would continue, to be swept up in the physical and leave my work, my troubles, my life escape me.

Jun ran his fingers through my long hair. "I just want to talk to you all night."

I didn't feel the stinging sensation as I had when Brandon had said it. I didn't interpret Jun's suggestion as a brush off, but to connect that went beyond the bodies. Obviously, our bodies fit together, from his hand that rested on the small of my back when we danced, to how I smiled, to that kiss. But to reduce it to just sex could ruin the curiosity, or complicate things. I

understood in that moment why Bonnie and Kayla often hooked up, because the feeling of love around every corner yet out of reach was too difficult to hold onto. It was easier to reduce an emotional connection to a physical one instead of being forced with the depth of feelings. It was easier to hook up than to talk. Jun and I didn't hook up. Instead we nestled together on his bed and confessed the secrets we held close to each other.

"Why are you here?" he asked me.

"Your bed?"

He shook his head. "Korea. You have everything in America."

"I have American problems. Super-sized debt, low self-image. I have an education and good parents, but they never felt like they were mine," I said. "I could have everything but I don't have love. I came here for that."

Which I had. I came to Korea for an attempt at love, whether it be familial love, or romantic love, but some type of love, of belonging with others instead of as an outsider. I hadn't found it in America, not on the college campus or streets of Knoxville, not the dusty roads of Rockwood, the church pews or the walls of my family home. I hoped by coming to Korea that I could retrieve a part of myself left behind that was now a treasure, like a diamond or a jar of old kimchi. But it felt odd to say that out loud, that I wasn't there to party or hookup, but for myself, the most mysterious reason to do anything.

"What was your life like in America?"

"Lonely. Sad. Americans use things to pretend they're happy. The only person who knew the truth about me was Brandon, because he understood it. Well, I thought he understood it, but he's not as anxious about his life as I am. It's not the same because he's a man."

"It's sad, because Koreans wants to be like Americans so much. It's the land of freedom, jazz, romantic love!"

I thought I had love when I saw the Swan. We met at Night and Day during a team practice," Jun said. "I wanted to defy my parents, show them the American way was better than an arranged marriage, and we had a huge wedding. But she only wanted to be a bride, not a wife. Sometimes, it feels like there's no place for me here, except when I dance, because I'm getting a divorce."

I told him that I didn't care about his divorce, that I only cared about how freely I shared myself with him when we danced. I put my hand over his heart and confessed my fears. "I'm afraid of being alone," I said.

It was the truest thing I had ever said to anyone in Korea. I hadn't told it to Bonnie or Kayla because they were never lonely, not to Miso whose judgement I feared, or to Brandon, because he was so wrapped up in love that he couldn't understand my pain. Underneath all that dancing, the teaching and smiling, the acting careless I was terrified that the reality I had would be the one I was stuck with. That I would be an outsider to all whom no one wanted to know, that no one would ever truly belong to me. But when Jun and I were together, I felt less alone.

I woke up the next morning, brushed my teeth and caught the zombie train, the first train of the day along with the salarymen and overnight partiers. Along the way I opened my phone to see a few texts. One from Brandon congratulating me on being a homewrecking whore who was now literally a wife beater. My second text was from Miso about an emergency work meeting. She needed me home to prepare for it. I called her.

"I'm several stops away," I said.

"Where are you?" she said.

"On the train. I just left Jun's place," I said smiling.

"You sleep with him?"

"It's not like that."

"Isn't he married? What are you doing with him?"

I rubbed my forehead tired of this conversation about my situation with Jun. It was complicated and it wasn't. No, we weren't together. Yes, we liked each other. We weren't social media official and we never would be, because of ridicule and scrutiny. I wasn't even certain that it was love, only that I needed him in my life.

But Miso didn't care about how I felt, just about how it appeared. I changed the subject and talked about the sunrise, how it reminded me of sherbet ice cream with its orange, yellow, and red hues. I told her that I'd take her to America one day and we'd share temping assignments, the place where she could be a free woman and nobody would question why she was single and without her family. It was a fantasy, but I felt better.

Spring lasted all of three days. It was jacket chilly on Monday, perfect skirt weather Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, with the summer heat and humidity on full assault Friday. I traded in steaming Americanos for iced lattes and scarves for fans. Korean girls who'd worn thick tights underneath their flannel shorts and long boots on their legs now went bare legged clad in heels with skirts so short you could see their underwear. With the start of a new season, I called Drew before I worked.

"Any news?" I asked him. I didn't even bother with a hello.

"I've told you to be patient," he replied. "It's a lot of files. It takes time."

"A lot of time has gone by. I'm starting to wonder if you scammed me."

"The scammers are the tax lawyers in this country, not me. What do you want? Your money back?"

"I just want you to find her. Patience has me stressed out."

"I'll find her. Don't stress."

But it was Korea, and stress was a part of my life. At the time, I saw Brandon as my bridge between the girl I'd been and the woman I'd blossomed into, but Ivy drove a wedge in between that. Jun was a sign of potential love, but even that was stressful because I never knew what was going to happen. It was too difficult to just exist in the present. Perhaps that's why I wanted to find Oma, because I saw her as that missing piece -- that she'd be the one to deliver me from being a girl to a woman, by reconnecting with my past. I sometimes thought of this as I taught the elementary students. That semester I had a rowdy group who revolted against hagwon policies of using bad words by reciting their American equivalent. I walked into class trying to appear eager to teach.

"How are you, class?" I asked them.

"Terrible," Seoyoung replied.

"We're learning about diamonds today," I said. "And wedding traditions. Who wants to get married?"

Nine of the twelve raised their hand.

"Are you married?" Joey asked.

I shook my head.

"How old are you?" Soren asked. He was a returnee from Germany.

"Twenty-six," I replied.

"You're too old to be single. Why no husband?" Doo-Hyun asked.

I rolled my eyes at how noisy he was. "No one has asked me."

"I want a wedding but I don't want a husband," Bella shouted. "Western weddings are so romantic. Big poufy dress, big rock. They last forever!"

"She...cheese sandwich me!" Hank said.

"Stop," I replied.

"She blank blank me!" Tom said.

I rolled my eyes. They worked in pairs when it came to causing trouble, and since their parents were paying for them to be there, I couldn't kick them out.

"Let's start the lesson. Have any of you ever been to a wedding?"

"Bonnie teacher will get married soon," Bella said.

"How do you know that?"

"I saw her Facebook. She had a picture and was wearing a diamond ring. No, Sunny teacher. It was like a purple diamond."

"Take out your books," I replied, refusing to engage them any further.

While the students complained about the group project I logged onto Bonnie's Facebook. Her recent profile picture of her left hand with a giant amethyst on her ring finger. The obligatory just got engaged picture where girls showed off their new ring like gang signs, with the caption: you can guess what I said if I'm posting this. Her friends and relatives posted their likes and comments of approval.

It felt like a stab in the heart, although at the time I wasn't sure why. Engagements are supposed to be happy occasions, but they aren't when you place your unhappiness over another's happiness. I also felt a little betrayed since we heard so little about Bonnie's boyfriend, but the engagement so soon rang trite, a confusing and false. I hid my insecurities about the engagement during class, and threw myself into teacher duties by listening to their presentations. Afterwards I jumped up and down gleefully at Bonnie's exciting news, although I was conflicted by it. If she wanted to belong only to herself, why get engaged?

Despite the humidity and the heat, the cherry blossoms sprung out in their ephemeral bloom. As a gift for Bonnie's engagement, Miso hosted a picnic for her, Kayla and me, buying

red velvet cupcakes from Paris Baguette that would certainly be too sweet. We settled on the Han to watch the flowers and enjoyed the river's breeze.

Perhaps it was the summer or not hearing much from Drew about Oma. Or it was Bonnie's ring glittering in the afternoon sunlight, or seeing Brandon's happiness. I texted Jun about the coldness of my days and the warmth of the night was shared, and he replied he carried the same feelings around too. Bonnie interrupted me before I could send another text, which was probably good because it stopped me from sending in something embarrassing.

"Miso thinks I should have an engagement party," Bonnie said. "I told her that it's tacky and trite. It's too smug. Not my style. "

"Like the ring?" Kayla said. "I would've thought you would've wanted something more understated."

"When you love you go big, right?" Bonnie replied.

Miso leaned into Bonnie. "Enjoy this time. A woman's engagement is the last time she can think freely of herself."

Although Miso was mysteriously single, or more married to Soju than finding a partner, Kayla was steadfastly single (but always getting dick. Her words not mine) and I was where I was, we were genuinely happy for Bonnie. I wanted Bonnie's last few days as a single woman to be a reminder of all that she'd leave behind.

"Where we doing this?" Kayla asked. She finished typing a number into her phone.

"Magpie," Bonnie replied. "Where we gossiped, drank too much, gave sexual report cards."

"Done," Miso said. "I'll set it up."

We invited our coworkers and foreigners we'd known over the years to join us. Miso would go alone, and Kayla would bring her flavor of the evening. I didn't want to try to explain Jun, so I texted Brandon to see if he'd go with me.

Ivy contacted me before Brandon could confirm. She texted me on a boring Thursday night, when the weekend couldn't come fast enough for Miso and me. Frustrated by our landlord's refusal to fix the aircon, and Miso so terrified of fan death that she would only keep the fan on for twenty minute increments, I was thankful for the cell phone dancing on the table, until I picked it up.

"Is that your married lover?" Miso said from above in her bed. She swirled her glass of wine and wiped her beautiful face with the other.

I hoped it was Jun, but I frowned the minute I read the text. It was too polite, too distant to be anyone that I knew. "Ivy," I replied. I read the text back. "I'm in the area right now. Want to grab coffee? We should get to know each other. She hasn't wanted to know me since they started dating."

"You sound skeptical."

"Because I am! Why can't you keep the fans on?"

"Because we'll suffocate, you know that."

I rolled my eyes at her superstition.

"Go see her," Miso replied. "Maybe this stupid animosity you've felt all this time will go away. Maybe she wants friendship?"

"She's not the friendly type."

"Or she needs advice, and doesn't have anyone else to turn to. At least you'll go somewhere that has working aircon."

"Or we could have a bunch of fans."

"Impossible. Go," she ordered.

I was more excited at the prospect of free aircon than I was over talking to Ivy. So, I threw on a respectable pair of shorts and headed out to the P-town subway station.

For someone who'd just gotten off work, Ivy looked dolled up in a black bodycon dress and heels. Since the autumn months when she and Brandon started dating, Ivy had blossomed from a frumpy duckling to a swan, from a girl hiding in her clothes to a girl boasting with them. At first, we drank our lattes in silence, peering at each other over the rims of our mugs until she spoke first. She wiped the foam from her lip first. A ladylike move I couldn't see her doing before I'd introduced her to Brandon.

"You look nice, Banana," Ivy said.

"Don't call me that," I snapped. "Do you even know what that means?"

"Of course, that's why I said it."

"That's not who I am."

"You didn't complain when Brandon called you that in the cab ride home. So, he can call you that but I can't?"

No, she couldn't because I hated that nickname. I hated the nickname when Brandon gave it to me, because it made me sound like a person I never was, represented the supposed self-hatred and erasure thrust upon me, but I put up with it from Brandon because I assumed he knew more about me than I did. However, Ivy using that term forced me to confront how anxious it made me, how inadequate it made me feel. She'd never get to make me feel like that.

"I should get to the point, as you say in English. You ever meet someone who you feel like you will love forever? That's how I feel about Brandon. We've talked about getting married and having children. I want that but I may not have it with a Korean man, because I've

expired. But I feel like something is holding him back, and I don't know how to address it," she said.

"Ask him," I replied.

She shook her head. "Can't. I must ask you. Korean girls aren't like Western girls. Western girls do whatever they want. He will never be mine if he has ties to Western girls."

"Meaning?"

"End your friendship with him," she said. "Why you need to be friends with him? You are a woman, he is a man. He has found me, go find someone else."

I didn't want to give her the satisfaction of knowing that she had upset me. "You've watched too many K-dramas," I replied. "Brandon and I aren't in love. He loves you, there is no competition."

"I don't have his heart completely," she said. She looked down at her mug with its now gone foam art. "It's his dancing. It's you. He's around other girls who are like you. I don't want him to dance."

"Why not dance with him?"

"Not my nature. Why can't you end it with him?"

Why didn't I end it with him? The surface answer was I didn't want her to win, but it was deeper than that. Because Brandon was my one tie to the States and Korea, my past and my present. We understood each other in ways others hadn't. We trusted each other. We loved dancing equally. But Ivy didn't need to hear all of that, because she wouldn't understand it.

"Because I don't want to," I replied.

"Woo-jin was right. You're stubborn and you don't know love. Maybe, if you are lucky enough to fall in love, you'll understand."

I couldn't articulate it at the time, but learning Brandon's Korean name from Ivy, along with his nickname for me was more than I could take. She picked up her purse to leave. It was what made me rush to E-mart, past the puppies who I used to wish a happy home, and head straight to the alcoholic beverage section, where I bought a giant bottle of Soju and a liter of fake Seven up. I told Miso I needed to drink away the pain of dealing with her, but I really wanted to rid myself of the pain of being exposed. Of the betrayal that Ivy knew my name and I'd never learned Brandon's Korean name. We drank too many Soju bombs and passed out, only to awaken at the fan's clicking noise, which Miso turned off. I couldn't dance past my pain, so I tried to drink it away, but I felt like those adorable puppies in E-mart which Koreans returned after realizing that loving a dog took more than admiring their cuteness. I felt like I had been returned to an unknown place because I was unwanted and unloved.

Before I went to the engagement party I Skyped with Dad. We had our traditional mukbang as an homage to South Korea. I was tired of eating kimchi so I ate a pizza with sweet potatoes, corn and black olives while he had McDonald's pancakes for breakfast. I told my father about the engagement party, that a coworker had found love in the form of an English teacher. Dad asked me if I had considered finding love at some point, either here or in Tennessee. I looked down at slice of pizza as if it were a magic eight ball. Would anyone have the answer for me? I had found a form of love with Jun, and I had my friends whom I loved, but I still hadn't found a love rooted in permanence instead of fleeting. I couldn't tell Dad about Oma, for fear that he'd see it as a portrayal. But that was the closest to love that I found.

Instead, I changed the subject. I showed him my knee length white dress and the white flower that I'd wear pinned to my hair. "I was teaching a lesson on diamonds, and I researched the wedding industry. Did you know that brides and bridesmaids used to dress alike to protect the bride from evil spirits?"

"Mistaken identity?" he asked.

I nodded and smiled. "Miso, Kayla, Bonnie and I are all dressing alike, and wearing a flower in our hair. White flowers mean insanity in Korea. Bonnie says that love is insanity."

The engagement part was at Magpie's brewery and restaurant where we'd gossiped, laughed and complained over quality beer. Miso, Kayla and I arrived in white knee length dresses, each a different design. Magpie was crowded with teachers, foreigners and native Koreans who celebrated not just the engagement, but a chance to drink and party like adults. In my white dress, I imagined myself as a bride on a beach honeymoon to Jun, but instead I had Brandon as my escort. He wore black vest and slacks, along with a white collared shirt and a lavender bow tie. Brandon and I could've been a Strictly Lindy pairing at a Night and Day competition.

Brandon and I may have looked like adults, but we behaved like teens. Amidst the crowd, we made fun of others as we observed them: the male teachers who were still busted despite the otherworldly beauty of their Korean dates, whose heads were filled with nothing but plastic surgery. We picked up flutes of champagne from the servers passing them out but we'd returned to the happy carefree students we were at the Halloween party.

"Kayla's her usual self," Brandon said pointing to her. Her arms were wrapped around the muscular arms of her date, the body builder who she had picked up when we were at the park.

"You were on her until she dissed you," I replied and finished my fourth glass.

"I was not. With all the dudes she runs through her pussy probably feels like this." He tossed me a marker. It took me a minute to realize what he was saying.

"You're such a jerk. She loves life."

"Only the suicidal love death. Besides, she likes all things associated with Korea. Shallowness, staying on the outside, irresponsibility."

"Why do you care? You've got your future wife. At least, she thinks she is."

Kayla stood up to get the crowd's attention. Brandon put his hand on the small of my back. "Be lucky that you don't know the responsibility like that. Be lucky that you don't know love." He motioned to Bonnie and Spencer circulating through the crowd. Miso and Bonnie kissed each other on the cheek, but Bonnie pulled Miso's prying hands from her flat midsection. "She's pregnant. It's all a front," he said.

"She's not pregnant. She would've told us," I said.

"Are you sure? Lots of people do stuff to impress others who don't really care, just to say that they've made it. They may like each other, but it's not about love."

"You're with the Korean Virgin Mary so you won't have to worry about this. She's with you because she loves you."

He looked down and scratched his head, reminding me of how he looked whenever he caused trouble at the campus parties we'd danced at in Tennessee. "Love is driving me crazy. After we met for the Midsummer's Night's Dream, Ivy went through my phone. She went off about how I had lied to her, but I never told her because I didn't want to make her jealous. She asks me to spend every night at her house, and she won't even do a hand job. She just wakes me up in the middle of the night and asks me to hold her if she has bad dreams."

Their arguments over time had gotten worse. Brandon told me about an inappropriate joke that he'd made, and how she now demanded he pay for a breast augmentation. It was a man's job. So was paying for everything and honoring her virtue. "We make fun of those losers

back home, but maybe they're right. Korean girls are hard work. I'm stuck in these lame ass 1950s morals, but I'm not sure if I'd want anyone else. And she wouldn't want a Korean man.

I grabbed two flutes of champagne for myself as the servers passed by. "Why don't you leave then, and return to being the male version of Kayla?"

He shrugged. "It's love. Attraction, the will and force that keeps two people together."

"Even without sex? I know you're with a virgin but I'm fucking," I said.

"You're not even bad enough to be a proper homewrecker. You're not fucking Jun."

"How do you know that?"

"You idolize him on the dance floor. That comes from the mystery of the unknown. You're almost in love with him."

"He's still married though. And you want a beautiful Korean woman with an ugly soul?"

He pressed his hand against mine, our palms shined against the dim lighting of the brewery. "What story would that be to tell everyone? We're both Korean. We're both from Tennessee. We both swing dance. That's so boring. No one wants their twin."

I drank my glass of champagne in one gulp. It wasn't to get drunk but to move my thoughts. My mind was on the Halloween party where we first met, a party like Bonnie's engagement party in spirit. What Brandon needed was to feel like a man, prized and adored, and I hadn't provided that for him. Then fear crept in that I wouldn't be able to provide that to anyone. Not to Jun, or my friends, my parents or in some crazy way Oma. In some ways, I was expected to be grateful for the love I'd received, although it was out of obligation. But I couldn't tell Brandon that he overlooked Ivy's jealous possession because of how she made him feel, and how terrible that was. After all, I would betray all of us -- him, Ivy and myself. I didn't want to think I was capable of that.

I didn't think about it until I saw a vision of white floating through the crowd, a second Korean woman in a stunning knee length white dress with a flower in her hair. Ivy. I thought she was going to be out of town for this, and either Brandon lied or she lied. Either way, they were both a pair of liars. Still, I wanted to be the mature one and not call her out. I didn't say anything about her dress or her random appearance. Instead, I gave her one of the fake hugs I used to give to high school girls, the hugs phony in friendship.

"Hi," I said to Ivy.

She kissed Brandon on the cheek before acknowledging me. "Hi Sunny," she said. "You look great."

"Thanks. I see you also like white. That's only for the bridesmaids," I said.

"I know, but I had this white dress that I've been dying to wear. This seemed like the perfect time," she said.

"What white dress?" Brandon asked.

"You haven't seen it," she said in a playful tone.

"Why are you even here?" I asked her. "This is for my friends, not you."

"You forget, I've met Bonnie when we went clubbing at Octagon. It's an engagement party. I'll even hand her money for the wedding once she has it," Ivy said. "And I couldn't keep my man alone."

I downed my flute of champagne. I didn't know what number I was on, and I didn't care. I was angry that Ivy had come over here, for what she said and what she hadn't. Once again, she'd managed to take an event meant for someone else and made it about her. I couldn't admit that I was also mad at Brandon, because he probably told her about the dress code. It didn't need to be a big deal, but it was. Ivy had taken my best friend, and now she'd taken my

identity! To stop myself from getting another drink just to throw in her face as The Swan had me, I left her and Brandon.

I took pictures with Kayla, Miso and Bonnie. We resembled a Kpop girl group in our white dresses with white flowers in our hair, except Bonnie. She wore a hibiscus in her hair as an homage to Korea, the loveless land where she found love. As soon as Miso uploaded the image onto Kakao story and she reported the likes, my cell phone danced in my purse. It was Drew, the lawyer. I stepped outside to take the call.

"Where are you?" he asked.

"You ask the wrong questions," I replied. "Any news?"

"I found her."

I almost dropped my phone. I was excited. I was terrified. I had drunk way too many glasses of champagne on an empty stomach. Unable to get any rational emotion out, I started drunk crying in confusion. "Really?"

"She said she's willing to meet you. I'll email you the details. Just wanted to tell you before I went to bed."

"You ever taken Kayla to bed?"

"You ask the wrong questions." He hung up.

I was happy to hear the news and drank two more glasses of champagne to celebrate. I texted Jun who asked me to tell him what happened. He wanted to be there for me on that important day. I whispered to Brandon about it, but when Kayla jumped on top of a table and gave her toast to Bonnie and Spencer, I felt pale inside. Here I was excited about the possibility of love, not even of a love itself. Brandon had a love whom he accepted, and Bonnie found a love who accepted her. Bonnie and Spencer kissed, and the crowd erupted. Despite the

cynicism of expats, we all celebrated the finding of what they had, what I had been after for so long: love.

I fiddled with a golden scarf I'd gotten Oma as a gift in a Mapo cafe. It was a pseudo European cafe typical in Seoul, one with pictures of blond men and women drinking coffee or tea with several misspelled words in cursive along the captions. This was the type of place that I'd made off with friends because of its grey sterile interior and hard looking pastries. But this was where Drew's email told me to meet her.

It was an average Wednesday but important for me. I'd argued with my boss to get the day off, citing a family emergency which he didn't question. I'd purchased a new dress with frilly ruffles in a light pink, as well as the scarf. I could've gone out to dance at Night and Day the evening before, but I didn't. I was too nervous thinking about day. Instead I talked with Miso about my own fears. What if Oma didn't want me? What would I learn about my family, my origins? Would I even look like her? I wondered if she'd look just like me, or me like her. Then my question was answered when I saw those eyes like man in search of the cafe. I imagined that I would resemble her in twenty years, and that she had looked like me when she gave me away.

She was dressed in a pair of grey pants and white blouse. the blunt ends of her dark hair grazed her collarbone. She paused when she saw me and stood at the door. I walked over to her and bowed, falling back on traditional Korean greetings and she pulled me toward her in a hug, greeting me in the Western way. We stood there like that for a while, just lost in the moment of something foreign yet recognizable. We ordered coffees and finally sat down, where I presented her with the scarf.

In Korean, she told me about her life. She'd recently started working again, thus the fancy clothes. She lived with her mother and cared for her in the evenings. Then she asked me about myself. Embarrassed, I struggled with my answer. I tried to tell her that I was teaching in Korean, but I stumbled across my words.

"What happened to your Korean? It's terrible," she said.

"I trashed it," I said.

I should've said I forgot, or that my Korea was only good for ordering in restaurants and asking for directions. But was I thinking about the translation in Korea, and it was true. I'd trashed it because I'd been raised in America and my family spoke English. Learning Korean wasn't useful for me. It would've been useful now, but it was too late. I stopped speaking for a moment and looked at her. I read disappointment on her face. She explained that her English wasn't impressive, but she could manage.

"What's your American family like?" she asked.

"Good," I replied. "Religious."

"You're my only child. I never had another one." She stopped. "Why did you return here?"

"To find you."

She stopped, leaned back and shook her head. "I was relieved when I found out you were in Tennessee, because I thought you'd never find me."

"Why wouldn't I want to find you?"

She sipped her coffee. "I didn't want to be found."

She explained that on her eighteenth birthday her father had ordered her to get married. She met different men on tea dates and by the third day had to conclude if a marriage could work. When she wouldn't choose, he chose for her, a man who seemed nice and stable

enough to fund her life so that she could be a housewife. But she had to ignore a lot. She could ignore the late nights when he'd said he was pressured to join prostitutes for company meetings by his boss. She couldn't ignore it when he hit her. Her family warned her against it, citing that she'd lose me in a divorce. She couldn't take the abuse, so she packed a bag and took a bus to her parents' house. She left me with my father, a drunk who didn't want me, who had dropped me off at his sister's, who then sent me to an adoption agency. She didn't want to leave me, she'd said, but she had to put survival over family. Facing the shame of divorce, she'd never marry again, nor have another child. Her own family didn't accept her until her father died a few years ago.

"I didn't not want you," she said. "I didn't want the situation."

"What about now?"

She drank the last of her coffee. "That time has passed. You have a wonderful life now. Why ruin it?"

"I've been an outsider with my family, my friends, everyone. I wanted to be one with you." I stopped before I said it. "I love you."

"I love you too. That's why I gave you away. I said goodbye to you when I left your father. I only came here to give you closure."

I looked down at my cup as if I was a petulant child, although Drew had warned me. This might not go the way I wanted it to. I thought that love would solve this angst and anxiety that I had, make me feel like I was included in someone's life instead of as an outsider, but instead love had pushed me away. I didn't know how to solve my life.

"It's better this way," she said. She reached her hand across mine, the last act of comfort she'd ever give me. "Besides, you will return to the States. You are better than a broken Korean girl. You are American."

I ran out of words at that moment and resorted to finishing the rest of my drink. It sounds ridiculous now, but growing up I dreamt of a moment like this one. When I was eight, an old lady at church had patted me on the head and told me that I should've been lucky that a chink like me got such a fantastic chance at life. I kicked her cane over, and my parents scolded me about my temper. I used to slam my bedroom door and fantasize about when I'd meet my real mother, Oma. I thought she'd love me unconditionally. That I would be her star and the same as her. Now I realized that what I'd loved was a fiction, a character I'd created to cope with the difficult parts of childhood, which were no different than anyone else's. Now this woman who stood before me wasn't the Oma of my fantasy. She was a daughter with the duties of mother and wife thrust upon her. More than that, she was a person autonomous of me. She was a person who could decide that she didn't want me, which she had.

After Oma and I parted I texted Jun, since he worked in the area. I could've texted Brandon or Miso, but I didn't need a drinking partner or to make jokes. I needed to talk to someone about it. I didn't know at the time if I was using my meeting with Oma to test our relationship, to see if it would ever graduate beyond a something something. He met me at the station after work and offered to take me to the cafe where he liked to think. He stood close to me as we walked to the cafe, but we didn't hold hands. We were quiet, locked away in our own thoughts. Jun took me to a cafe with orange and green couches, opposite of the one I'd just been to. Chopin played on the speakers. Cute and fluffy cats sat in the cafe's bookshelves. He ordered us both a lavender tea. We sat across from each other and we sipped, still quiet. I reached for his hand, the same way Oma had done to mine. I missed.

"What was your mom like?" He asked.

He was trying to be nice, but I didn't want to speak about Oma. Back then I thought it was out of shame, but now I realized it was because I wanted to talk about the two of

us. Perhaps Oma showed me that there was power in speaking an uncomfortable truth, that she wanted to give me a good chance at life by pushing me out of hers. Jun hadn't done that. I held onto the false promise that we'd be together, and turn our something something into something permanent. We'd held that intimacy on the dance floor for too long. We'd spend the night together. We'd kissed, in private and in public. I fought The Swan for him. But we hadn't been out in public until now. Even at the cafe, I sensed a distance in Jun.

"It's not worth talking about," I said. "I went to an engagement party last week, and I took Brandon. I wanted to take you. Why didn't you go with me?"

"Sunny, I can't do this with you. The relationship stuff, the dailies. I'm a divorced man. It's bad enough that my ex didn't want to be a wife. I'd make a bad husband right now."

"We spent the night together."

"We weren't intimate."

"We were intimate with our hearts," I said. It was a little too loud for such a tranquil place. "We were intimate with our minds. You know me in a way that no one else does, including Brandon. Oma left me with my father, and to her our relationship ended. I thought she'd love me because we were related, and I was wrong." I looked at him. "I love you. Do you think you could ever love me?"

Jun took out his tea bag. "I don't know."

"Then are we wasting our time?"

His silence was his answer.

The monsoon season rolled around. Koreans protected themselves from the acid rain with plastic umbrellas. Miso and I took long weekend walks in the Anyang park during the rain

storms, just to get out of the house. She pointed at any single men carrying the same common umbrella as us, singing that it was destiny to carry the same one. The summer before last, her corny humor would've made me laugh, made me forget about where I was in my life. Now it depressed me.

"Can't I make you laugh?" she asked.

"No," I said.

She pouted. "Don't be like that," she replied.

"I can't help it."

"Is this about Oma?"

We found a bench to sit down at, skin erosion from the rain be damned. It was good to be outside in the park, with the rainbow fountain and the couples walking around. Miso and I were a couple if we thought about it, a pair of friends and roommates, but the question still lingered. Why hadn't things worked with Oma? But that wasn't how I said it to her.

"Kinda," I replied. "In my head, I thought that meeting Oma would solve all my problems. So much that I sunk a bunch of money in Drew to review the adoption contracts and find her. It felt like a second rejection all over again. Why am I here?"

My words echoed through the trees and the park, reflecting how alone I felt.

"Why are any of us?" Miso asked. "Don't look at it like it was a waste, because it wasn't. She rescued you from a life in orphanages. She did what she could. She'd brought shame to her family. And you didn't turn out so bad. Otherwise I would've asked you to leave."

Miso laughed. I didn't.

"Don't be like this," Miso said. "You're not like Bonnie and Kayla. You're not here just to have fun. You're here for self-discovery. That's a more difficult journey to understand, and it doesn't look as good. You made your Oma proud. You're here because your friends are

here. You have dancing. Brandon. Me, Kayla, Bonnie, even those asshole male teachers we work with. You're here because you want to be, right?"

"I don't know anymore. No matter where I go, I feel like an outsider. I'm too Korean for the States and too American for Korea. I never feel like I belong for a very long time."

"Like a shooting star, or Korean autumns?"

I nodded. Miso hugged me.

I was thankful for Miso's generosity in that moment, to look past her judgmental self and honor where I was at. But I still couldn't face the reality of what hit me. Why was I there? At first, I thought I was in Korea to swing dance and teach, to drink and fall in love with all the opportunities of life. Looking back on it, I was in Korea to avoid the responsibilities of working in the states. Korea was an extended adolescence that should've been brief like the cherry blossoms. But I'd outgrown it.

I knew this on some level when I talked to my father for our mukbang video. He was eating a juicy medium rare American burger. I was eating bibimbap, the blanched vegetables the perfect complement to the chewy texture of beef and the crispy rice. I was hungry, but I didn't want to eat it. I told my Dad it was because I missed the burger. But it was really because I didn't see my future in the bowl. Instead I saw my present, what would soon become of my past.

"My teaching contract renewal is coming up," I said.

"Are you going to stay on a fourth year?" Dad asked.

I shook my head at the bibimbap, as if to say goodbye to Korea. "I don't know."

I looked away from my laptop screen as I pulled out a box of tissue to dab my eyes. I didn't want my Dad to see me crying. I didn't want to tell my family about Oma. I didn't want to prove that they were right about her all along. That I should've been thankful for this family

because my fate would've been far worse in Korea. I couldn't admit that I let my past dictate my future more than I wanted to. I should've told my parents about Oma, but I wanted to keep her as my secret, the piece of me that was locked away, not meant for them or anyone else.

Dad put the burger down and touched the monitor with his barbecue covered finger. "Honey, please don't cry. You're homesick. You can always come back home."

It upset me that he didn't ask what was wrong or offer to talk about it. I wasn't sure what I was expecting of him. Perhaps a reminder that home wasn't just a house, but a place in the heart. When I'd arrived in Korea, I thought it would become my favorite place, for everything it had to offer me. My trouble is that Korea hadn't become a place in my heart, and I didn't want to try anymore. A perfect place isn't about the settings so much as the people there, and I wasn't in a place where people stayed and never changed, and I foolishly thought Korea would evolve with my desires. But I was crushed that it didn't.

I told him that I was okay. It was stress. For the next two weeks, I told everyone that I was okay. However, I had too much beer and too many soju bombs to nurse my double heartbreak --the one from Oma and the second one from Jun. Miso was the only one to see me in this state. We'd been through the fun drunk times, but this cemented what I knew at the pit of my heart. I would have to leave.

I had one small diversion in the Night and Day. In the dance clubs and competitions, in the all-stars who came to Seoul. Leaving Korea meant giving that up, and I wasn't sure if it was worth it. Was the satisfaction of one amazing song worth the rest of Korea? Brandon texted me on an August Saturday night, that Night and Day was hosting an all-night dance a thon with a blue dress code. We could dance and even match like the couples we made fun of. I put on a blue dress, grabbed my heels and caught the train to Seoul.

It was only ten but the dance floor was packed, filled with a sea of blue couples who danced to the music, happy for the weekend and the dancing itself. Brandon greeted me with a hug and he swung me around, like he had in university times. We danced with each other song after song, not letting in any outsiders. Not any other follows or leads, not Jun, who I caught staring at me as he leaned against the wall. I pretended that none of it mattered. That Brandon and I were the same people we'd been pre-Korea, pre- Jun, pre- Oma. Some of the dancers asked me, was Brandon my true love?

"No," I said.

"We're friends," he said.

"The best of friends," I replied.

I thought to ask him about Ivy, but didn't need to. He talked to her about her future and expectations.

"I think she's willing to compromise," he said. "Maybe Korea will be my happy ending after all."

I wrapped my arms around him. I took comfort in the small details than I had when I'd first arrived in Korea. The murals were more colorful and jazzier if possible. The follows were friendlier to me. Some of the leads seemed cuter. Really, I was trying to convince myself that I wanted to stay. I could return to Jeju. I could visit Cebu, even Taipei! I was searching for reasons that didn't involve love of a person, but of place. I loved Night and Day. I loved the food. In the crowd with the other dancers, I felt a love for the energy, the same. I felt like I was home there.

The DJ announced that the strictly contest was about to start. As we joined the contestants for the rules, I peered over his shoulder. I knew that dress, that hair. Ivy. I tapped Brandon on the shoulder and pointed.

"She's here," I said.

He walked straight towards her where she forced him into a hug. "I've missed you," she said. "Let's get out of here."

He shook his head. "I want to stay here."

"You don't need to," Ivy replied. "Is it because of her?"

"Don't do this," I told her. "He's here because he wants to be."

Ivy and I started to argue about Brandon. I'd like to say that I was calm and compassionate about this. That I understood her position as a woman in love. But at the time I didn't care about their relationship, her heart, her need to get married because she was too old, and she needed this to work.

Then I added what I knew would upset him. I said out loud:

"She asked me to end our friendship because she's so jealous."

Brandon looked confused, then upset. He asked her if it was true, if she'd come there to force a choice. She didn't reply at first, and then started to cry. She just wanted him to herself, she'd confessed. Was it her fault that she loved him so much?

"I could deal with a lot," he said. "But you can't isolate me."

He walked back inside with me, just in time for the competition. I held him for a minute while he vented his sorrows. She was the first person he'd loved. That's why he put up with so much from her, but he'd never imagine her ugliness could extend to me. I told him it was okay, but really, I was smiling inside. I didn't have to tell him that, but I wanted my friend back. I wanted to have a connection that wasn't so tenuous. I wanted someone in my life who'd been there for years, and all other attempts had slipped away. It was selfish. I knew that now and I knew that back then. But I didn't want to lose my friend. I didn't want to lose him.

It shouldn't have ended that way though. I'd tried to convince myself that night that I'd stay in Seoul, and we'd be BFFs forever, as we'd joked around over the dance music. Night and Day was my home, but it was just one home. That was the reason why I didn't renew my contract. I'd gotten the answers I searched for. I didn't know that this would be the last night I'd dance with Brandon, but my mind was made up. There was no chance at love or permanence there. There was a job, a nice apartment and some friends, but it wasn't enough. I'd just been attempting to convince myself it could be.

What I didn't know at the time, was that it would also be the last time I swing danced. I still love the music, and I still watch ILHC annually, but I can't feel the same love when I dance. Perhaps it was because I associated with the spirit of jazz in the same way that Koreans had: it was a dance of the youth, nostalgia for America as a super power. And as I became older, it was fit for it to stay in my youth.

But Brandon didn't know that at the time. I'd kissed his tears away as a mother would a child. The music started, the crowd clapped on beat. I looked into his brown eyes and said, "Let's do this."

Belonging

To Bonnie, all women belonged to two groups: they were either wives and mothers or aunts and lovers, and she was certain she was part of the latter. As a girl, her ambitions for traveling trumped her desire for marriage and kids. She'd grown up in a small desert town too insignificant to mention only loving two things: the maps of her father's geologist traveling days and the liberation of cutting her beautiful dark hair. She watched girls pine for mullet-haired boys and laughed at their pain, for they were unaware that boys were meant to be toys, to be used and disposed of when they rendered little use. Bonnie was the unattainable one, whom some openly longed to possess but she gleefully resisted. What was the point of being tied down to one boy in her home town when there was so much of the world to see?

In college, she became fluent in Spanish and spent a summer teaching English in a village in Granada, Nicaragua. She relished in her freedom until a boy came into her life and whisked her to Costa Rica. He was a Tico documentary filmmaker who believed that he belonged to himself and Bonnie belonged to herself, that they belonged together, but not to each other. He said that in every argument about his infidelity. Bonnie resented how love made her feel caught in the grips of a relationship, unable to leave despite her desperation for loyalty and respect. When her father died, she booked a one-way ticket back home without telling her Tico boy. As the plane ascended into the sky, Bonnie felt a sense of power and righteousness over how she'd ended it, knowing this was the way to end everything, because she'd robbed him of an ending and in her absence left him. She didn't love him anymore. Goodbye.

After the funeral, Bonnie's mother encouraged her to explore with her own expression. Bonnie's mother swirled her wine glass and looked out at the desert sunset, reminding Bonnie of a Hopper painting -- sad, yet beautiful in her embrace of loneliness. Bonnie sat outside

with her mother after the wake, both dressed in black sweats as an extension of their mourning. Bonnie was careful not to discuss the Tico boy with her mother, while her mother confessed about her own marriage. Bonnie looked at her mother, noting how they shared the same raven shade of hair. With her long wavy hair, Bonnie's mother was still beautiful, although she had spent her youth in a marriage to her father, a much older retired geologist.

"Your father and I had a great marriage. No matter how great love is, it can still control you. Your father could've been my father," her mother said, "and if I hadn't fallen in love with him, who knows? I could've been an actress in Hollywood, not tied to this lame place. What are you going to do now that you're back?"

Bonnie shrugged. "I could teach."

Bonnie's mother put her hand over Bonnie's. "Explore the world while you still have your youth and freedom. Because I'm now too old for those things."

Bonnie wondered if her mother resented her marriage, the age gap, the experiences her father got to have before settling down that her mother didn't, because she had married so young. It was like her mother was robbed twice -- once of her youth, and second of her experiences associated with youth. Bonnie didn't want to become her mother.

"I'll explore the world, for you," Bonnie told her mother.

During the summer, Bonnie searched for teaching jobs but couldn't find any paying work. Frustrated, she pulled out her father's old maps. She lacked the education to teach in Dubai, the money to teach in South America, or the interest in Europe. China was too dangerous and she didn't want to wait tables in Australia. Korea seemed ideal for a few years to teach before heading to the Middle East, where the real money was. She told her mother that she was following her dream, but the real reason she chose Korea was for the chance to be alone. She imagined she wouldn't get

involved with anyone if she couldn't even say good morning in the native language, that she could go without the longing stares and attempts to force her into a box.

For a while in Korea, she was. She'd sent her mother pictures at cat cafes and regaled her mother with tales of her students, including one who'd stabbed a boy with a pencil because she didn't bring her peppero on the November holiday. Bonnie enjoyed hearing her mother's experiences about acting in community theater in her home town. Bonnie didn't tell her mother about the weekends she drank too much soju, the mean looks and nasty comments from the Western male coworkers, simply because she was an American woman. She'd gone to Korea to be alone, and the extreme side of the truth never evaded her. She was lonely. She hadn't yet practiced how difficult it was to carry that reality with her.

Perhaps it was this ennui that Kayla, the ginger senior teacher, read on her face at the staff wing night. It was here where Kayla suggested clubbing at Octagon for an outlet, for a chance to be free instead of in the constant teacher mode they were always in. In the crowded Gangnam club on a sweltering summer night, with loud thumping American pop songs, Bonnie felt a taste of the freedom she'd been looking for. She and Kayla tossed their heads back and laughed in the middle of the dance floor, their matching skintight black dresses contrasting against the all-white backdrop of the club. It was midnight. Silver confetti rained down on them from the ceiling. They laughed like the girls they'd once been, not the serious teachers their jobs required them to be. For the first time since arriving to Korea, Bonnie felt liberated, exhilarated with the club atmosphere. She thought that it couldn't get any more fun, that she was just exploring as a single woman.

This was the first night when she'd explore more.

Kayla twirled her hair and jiggled her large breasts as she sipped her champagne, careful to lead Bonnie to what she called the whales: rich and cute Korean boys with free bottle service. They

stalked the clubs until they found two twentysomething boys in matching outfits of white collar shirts and black dress pants, except with different colored ties.

The boy with the red tie patted his space on the seat next to him. Then he pointed at Kayla. His friend with the blue tie reached for Bonnie's hand.

"Red for red," Kayla's companion said to him.

"You are beautiful," Bonnie's companion said to her. "You look like Natalie Portman from *Closer*."

Bonnie blushed. She couldn't remember receiving such a nice compliment from a boy. They talked as a group, drinking glass after glass of champagne, until Kayla kissed her boy and Bonnie kissed her boy on the cheek, following suit. The kiss an invitation to the night and her body. Bonnie left with her boy for a love hotel.

The next morning, she met Kayla for the post hookup dish at Magpie, the only decent brewery in Seoul with oversized American brunches and full English fry ups. Bonnie had looked forward to this part of the hookup more than the hookup itself. She loved to dish out sexual report cards. But when Kayla asked her how it was with a naughty grin, Bonnie lost her words. Instead of laughing about a weird fetish or an abnormally shaped dick, she remembered the moment he'd left. How he kissed her on the cheek, said thank you and closed the door. She remembered how she flopped back down on the bed and inhaled his cologne on the pillow in the Pepto Bismol pink Hello-kitty themed room, a room she'd selected but he'd paid for. She thought about how last night they had been strangers, became intimate, then became strangers again. Sitting in that cafe, she'd expected to feel the high of the thrill, the power of reducing a boy to his parts. Instead she felt the magnitude of loneliness that she'd tried to embrace, but then avoided.

That was when the tears fell from her eyes.

"What's wrong?" Kayla asked, passing her a clean napkin like a practiced bartender.

"I don't know," Bonnie replied. She dabbed the corner of her eyes. The secrets from her heart spilled open because of one stranger. One boy. She missed the Tico boy and the normalcy of their intimacy, but she didn't say that. Instead she said, "I just want someone to watch an episode of Law and Order with me. Last night was the most normal I've felt with a boy in forever. It was only a moment."

"The first one is always the hardest. Brings up old shit, feels like someone took a piece of you. Did you enjoy it?"

Had she? There wasn't a thrill of intimacy as Bonnie had expected, but a strange comfort of knowing someone at their best, sharing a thousand words and some pseudo-philosophical conversations that one can only share with those who had a cursory knowledge. She liked getting the best version of a boy. It was like eating the sweet potato cakes so popular in Seoul bakeries. Much too sweet, but still worth a second, a third, fourth slice.

"Yes," Bonnie said. She was definitive in her answer.

However, Bonnie was as definitive in what she wanted with boys. She told her coworker Sunny that she hooked up to feel powerful, and that was true. Whenever she stood naked in front of a boy, the gasp and look of awe at her waxed vulva, she felt empowered, because she knew this boy would never look another woman's with the same beauty and curiosity. It wasn't so much about Bonnie but the moment it represented -- when they were both young and without responsibilities, lacking intimate knowledge of the other, her body would become their favorite place.

Bonnie didn't always feel this way with her hookups. Sometimes she longed to return to who she had been with the Tico boy -- comfortable in jeans and sweats instead of tight revealing dresses, happy without makeup, able to accept her many imperfections in front of the one she loved. But she felt wrong in admitting these feelings to Kayla, who reveled in her steadfastly single status and enjoyed the newness of strange men, their bodies and sexual capabilities. Unlike Kayla, Bonnie

disliked having a scent of a new man on her skin even after showering, his presence still lingering on her body after the fling ended. Despite not telling Kayla, these desires revealed themselves whenever she played the part of Kayla's boyfriend and fetched sanitary napkins, extra Soju, or cheap bread from the bakery close to their Itaewon flat. She'd stroll past Korean couples eating dinner in the tiny Moroccan restaurant, sitting opposite each other and staring in their partner's eyes, oblivious to the world outside because everything they needed was at the end of their tables. Bonnie wished that had been her but not just with any boy, but with a boy who loved her and only her, unlike her Tico boy. When confronted with this need, she also doubted herself that anyone would want to do just that and be satisfied. After all, if she couldn't do this with the Tico boy who she loved for five years, how was she going to do it with a boy she met in one night? Her conversations with boys she hooked up with focused on the philosophical and abstract instead of the concrete. She almost questioned this when she had her first threesome.

It wasn't an evening based on dares and sex bets with Kayla, but an awkward Saturday night at Octagon with her coworker Sunny, Sunny's best friend Brandon, and Brandon's possessive girlfriend Ivy. The night would've been better with Kayla, but she was locked up with a new boy, one who she met up with in cheap love hotels for marathon sex sessions that were high on experimentation and low on conversation, as a perfect hookup should be, according to Kayla. Bonnie thought she could replace Kayla with Sunny, and led her to a pair of boys wearing similar outfits with free bottle service. As Sunny talked to one Bonnie took the other, until Sunny stepped away. She said that they disrespected her, and she wouldn't deal with that.

"No man does," Bonnie replied. "They're just upfront with it. You're the one in this fairy tale that some man will care for, but not enough to be faithful."

"You're bitter," Sunny said.

"You're right. I don't care."

Was Bonnie bitter? Yes, she was bitter over the years that she wasted away with the Tico boy, when she could've been traveling or going to school, or setting up her career, years that she threw away and wasted because she believed in the power of love. She believed that she could love him to monogamy, and then that she could love him past the nonmonogamy, only to find that she couldn't love him enough, that no matter what she did, it would never be enough. She was right to leave him as she did. She was entitled to her bitterness, not just towards him, but all men.

"What about friendship?"

"No one cares about that after middle school, Sunny. Look, we're cool, right? Not Brandon and me. I can't stand looking at those two and their lovey dovey shit. Reminds me of all the crap I wanted with my ex, and I'll probably never get."

"There's help," Sunny pleaded.

"Yeah, it's those guys. I'd rather fuck those two just so I didn't have to feel this way. Thanks for being my friend."

"Bonnie, you're drunk, let's go home."

"Mentally I'm sober. My body's ready to get boy crazy and drunk off pipe."

At the time, Bonnie saw herself as sober, the victor in her own story, as opposed to the victim she'd been with the Tico boy. Ignoring Sunny, she walked over to them, danced with them, let them touch her under the strobe lights and the sound of Sistar's newest song "Alone," felt the gold confetti rain down on her face, as she laughed from the intoxicating feeling of desire. Talking to Sunny always felt forced and awkward, and Bonnie didn't want to acknowledge her feelings to anyone. She wanted to be wanted. She wanted to feel empowered. As she left with those boys to a DVD room, she felt powerful.

The three of them walked to a DVD room in Gangnam, amidst the bright neon lights of seedy love hotels and sketchy massage parlors. They settled on a room with black lighting, where

patrons could draw on the walls in neon chalk. Bonnie drew a heart on the space above the couch, while her boys drew smaller hearts next to hers. Her boys for the evening were handsome enough in that typical Korean nerdy way, each wearing a different color tie and slacks.

"What's your names?" Bonnie asked them. She couldn't remember if they had told her.

"Han," the first one said.

"Du," the second said.

One, two. Bonnie smiled. No names meant no commitment.

"What's your life like?" she asked them.

"We're students, so poor," Han said.

"We're single, so fun," Du said.

"I am single too, but not so poor," Bonnie said. She sat down in the couch between them. "And you were both in Octagon, so you're not poor."

They smiled. "It's payday," Du laughed.

"Why no girlfriends?" Bonnie asked.

"Girlfriends are expensive," Du said.

"Girlfriends are boring," Han said. "But not like you. You're not boring. You're so pretty, like Natalie Portman."

Bonnie blushed, happy for those moments, those conversations that seemed deep and full of promise but were really fluff, like the decorative room the boys had paid for, like the cheesy pop songs they had danced to in Octagon. Sure, it was a ruse, a fantasy, but it took her away from the reality that she often faced when she was alone in her apartment, that she missed having someone there for her, and then sadness that she'd forced herself to believe that was the Tico boy, and then she needed to hookup to distract herself from those feelings.

"Let's have a conversation," Bonnie said. "Who's your favorite band?"

"Sistar!" Han said. "Bora is the most beautiful."

"No, it's Miss A. Suzy isn't as plastic," Du said.

"I like B1A4," Bonnie replied. "I like Baro, because he's handsome."

Bonnie lied. She thought Baro looked like a gerbil, but Koreans found him handsome, and she didn't want to offend her potential conquests. After all, what's the point of honesty with a hookup?

"What's your blood type?" Du asked.

"A positive," Bonnie said.

Han and Du looked at each other with a wink. "Yes, Bonnie, you are perfect.

"How did you learn English?" Bonnie asked them.

"I started watching *Friends*," Han said. "Their English is perfect."

"Ever watch Law and Order?" Bonnie asked. She shouldn't have. Crime shows weren't popular in Korea.

"I like movies," Du said. "My favorite is *Unforgivable*. Want to watch it?"

Once Han found the movie, they put it in the DVD to watch. At first, Bonnie thought it would be less a hookup and more a slumber party, since they were more engrossed in the movie than her. There was a security in this, in feeling like a man would want to spend time with her for something else besides sex. But it might have been part of their ruse on her. After all, how could they have picked her up with such ease? Why were they so comfortable kissing her on either side of her face? They watched the movie the first quarter, started to molest Bonnie the second quarter. Bonnie gave in and hooked up with both, taking turns with each boy inside of her while the other caressed her. She felt like a queen with the boys as servants. She didn't get to watch all the movie, but she enjoyed the credits as they cuddled together and thanked her. They told her that

she'd made them feel good. She didn't get to know them, but what could they have talked about? Yes, it was a distraction, but shouldn't she do what felt good to her?

And Bonnie did what felt good to her. Again, and again. Belonging to herself in Seoul meant indulging her fantasies. It meant checking into love hotels and DVD rooms, or becoming so consumed with lust that she'd hike her already short skirt up and bang boys outside of the clubs. She could indulge the fluffier side of intimacy that was easy to share with boys, where she'd tousle their hair and thank them with a kiss. She relished this side of herself of being the woman who'd encapsulate the memory of their youth, the one they'd think of once trapped in their boring marriages, and ponder about the beautiful, free spirited American girl with the short hair. She'd be their Bright Star, as Kayla dubbed her. Magnificent to behold, but too bright to contain.

Bonnie belonged in a way to Kayla, whose company was better than any boy's. If Bonnie lit Kayla's cigarette, she'd be her man for the moment, and when Kayla bought Bonnie tampons, she'd be Bonnie's man. They moved in together into an Itaewon flat, and with a series of refrigerator magnets, spelled out sex challenges: bang two friends in one night. Have a threesome. Fuck a tourist. Bonnie did them all. She talked about these times with Kayla, and their friends Miso and Sunny, whom Bonnie didn't feel as close to. Miso was too judgmental and secretive about her vices and Sunny lacked any vices, except for loving those who didn't love her back, which from her Tico boy experience Bonnie knew was the worst vice of all. Girls were for friendship and boys were for companionship. The Tico boy may have been her first love, but Seoul was her sexual awakening. She thought she'd never have to confront loneliness again.

Then Bonnie found a boyfriend for Christmas.

She hadn't planned on finding Spencer that Christmas Eve, in that bar near City Hall with Kayla on one of the rare evenings they had off. The nearly empty bar was the epitome of sadness and despair for the Seoul expat crowd, with a few errant chairs and Western Christmas music, which

made it even more depressing. Kayla had brought Bonnie back her fourth Hite beer, a disgusting Korean brand with a high alcohol volume. Bonnie surveyed the bar for any potential conquests for Kayla, when she spotted Spencer.

"I bet you can't get him," Kayla laughed.

"Why not?" Bonnie asked.

"Because he's a Western male in Korea, that's why. I bet he's a misogynist with Yellow Fever."

"You make assumptions about every boy."

"And you don't? Not every boy is your Tico boy." Kayla stuck her tongue out.

Bonnie would normally ignore Kayla when she was like this, ignoring her own horrible past relationships and turned into a psychologist. But Bonnie wanted to prove Kayla wrong, show that she could get any man she wanted.

"What's the bet?" Bonnie asked. "If I get him, you have to pay the entire utility bill this month. If I don't get him, I'll pay it."

"Deal," Kayla said. "But you have to fuck him tonight. Get some Christmas dick. Otherwise, the deal's off."

Bonnie and Kayla shook hands on agreement. She went up to the bar, and motioned for the bartender to send him another round of whatever he was drinking. He looked up once he got the drink. Bonnie waved and he waved back, inviting her to join him. They exchanged names and laughed about Christmas memories, hers in her small American town and his in his small English town, and Bonnie felt a kinship, perhaps a beginning to a happy ending in a nearby hotel. So when Spencer asked her if she'd like to see his favorite place, she agreed. As she followed him out Kayla curled her fingers into a heart. Bonnie thought she'd trick Spencer into bed on the first night and win the bet.

But Spencer didn't take her to a hotel, or his apartment. Instead he took her to the Cheggeyeon stream, which was bathed in a blanket of snow. Neon sculptures glittered in the darkness of the midnight hour, but there were still tons of Korean couples out, walking through the snow, holding hands and cuddled up, which made sense since Christmas in Korea was like Valentine's day.

"I people watch here," Spencer said. "I like observing Korean couples."

"Korean love is so cute. It's so TV magical," Bonnie said. She was still in a space to talk of the metaphysical, eager to close the deal so she could return with her real life.

"It's like movie love," Spencer said. "But not all of it. You can tell who's really in love versus who's pretending to be in love." He pointed to a couple posing with their selfie sticks. "They're faking it."

"And what about them?" Bonnie asked. She pointed to a couple sitting on the bench, the girl's head snuggled into her partner's shoulder.

"I don't know," he said. "They're slouching. It's imperfect. They're intimate, that's a start."

"So why do you watch them?" Bonnie asked. "To take notes?"

"The real reason or the polite reason?"

She shrugged. How real could it get? "The real reason, of course."

"I was almost engaged a few years ago to this flight attendant. We went to Vietnam to decide if we wanted to get married, and I knew I couldn't. Not because she betrayed me, but because she was so casual about it. Made me wonder if the entire relationship was a lie. So sometimes I come out here, and I watch other couples. I wonder if I can guess how many years each will have, and then wonder if anyone on that Vietnam trip saw that with my girlfriend?" He stopped, and put his gloves on. "I'm sorry, I'm telling you everything. She also used to ramble about exes too."

"No, it's nice," Bonnie said. It wasn't the best conversation topic, but it was important to Spencer, and most of all, real. It made Bonnie wonder what else could be real between them. "I think we're at that age where we each have major relationships behind us, and we wonder if we'll ever get to the young love state of those couples we're stalking."

They laughed. Spencer asked, "Was there someone before?"

Bonnie nodded. "I traveled to Costa Rica to be with someone, and then I traveled to Korea to be single. It was so bad that I no longer want to even be in a relationship."

"How bad was it?"

"It'll take too long to explain," Bonnie said. What she couldn't say was that she'd been too taxed and emotionally exhausted to leave her heart bare and expose her secrets so quickly. It was easier to pick a boy up for a good time and a lay, than it was for her to talk.

"Do you think that getting into another relationship would be worth it, after the crazy flight attendant?" Bonnie asked.

"It'll be worth it for the right person," Spencer said. "This is crazy, but I feel a sense of calm with you. To just be out here on Christmas Eve and talk to someone, without the expectation of money, an English lesson, an engagement ring, or anything else that people want these days." Spencer's gorgeous blue eyes peered into Bonnie's brown eyes. "You're really here."

It hit Bonnie with a confusion at first, the emotion stirring up inside of her that she'd laid dormant through hookups and alcohol. All she really wanted was for someone to be there for her, and in the freezing cold on Christmas eve, she was really there. And Spencer was really there with her. Not in a flighty, metaphysical way, but as someone with a damaged past, whose admission of her faults could mean overlooking hers.

"You are too. Can I tell you something?" she asked. "My roommate made a bet with me, that I couldn't get you to sleep with me."

"Do you want to?"

She shook her head. She didn't want to sleep with him that Christmas night, despite the jokes she could later make about Santa's present. She didn't want to reduce their connection down to the physical, because she liked talking with him. She liked how normal she'd felt with him, a feeling she normally didn't experience with boys except with the expectation that the relationship would last for the evening.

"Same same," he said. "I'm not into one night stands. There's so much more I could do with you than that."

So they didn't. Over drinks the next evening, Spencer told Bonnie about another mistake from his ex --going too long to see her. Instead of meeting Bonnie once a week the way most expat non-relationship relationships formed, Spencer saw her every day. It didn't matter if Bonnie was working late, in a bad mood, or on her period, he still came to see her. He brought her fried chicken from her favorite Korean shop. Taught her how to play the Irish version of Uno, which she taught her students and later regretted. Bonnie took him to wing night with Kayla, Miso and Sunny, and pretended like she wanted to show him off, like a toy puppy sold in an E-mart. Spencer went to the bathroom.

"What do you think?" Bonnie asked her friends.

"So cute," Miso said. "Like a typical Korean couple. Has he brought up marriage yet? He's old."

"He's thirty," Bonnie said, frowning.

"What's the dick like?" Kayla asked.

Bonnie shrugged. "I don't know. We haven't slept together yet."

"You don't know. What the hell do you guys do?" Kayla said.

"We draw, paint. We talk about our lives," Bonnie said.

"What do you talk about?" Sunny asked.

"Last night we talked about his hair. He said it's made him think of his mortality since college. We talk about death."

"Damn, that's deep. Y'all creeping me out," Kayla said.

"It's not like that. Time is limited. So we talk about what we want to do with our lives, because we won't be here forever," Bonnie said.

"What do you want to do?" Miso asked.

Bonnie exhaled, let her breath out, like it was a secret she couldn't reveal to anyone. "Get married. Have a family. With Spencer."

"That's crazy," Kayla said. "You know Korea is the pressure cooker of relationships. You feel closer to everyone than you actually are."

"She's being a hater, don't listen to her," Sunny said. "You like him more than you're putting on. It's not just the look of love. Maybe marriage?"

Bonnie stopped trying to block out what she could feel. That the cheesy romantic interludes weren't just meant for a season, but perhaps a lifetime. It still too soon to admit that wanting to him, that he satisfied her hunger for companionship in a way that not even the Tico boy could.

Despite their daily visits, which fell into a predictable schedule, there was an impulsiveness to Spencer. On an evening visit Bonnie told Spencer about wanting to get out of the city and see the snow covered mountains, to find more greenery and wildlife that didn't exist in Seoul. The next day he surprised her with tickets to the Taobeksan Mountain Snow Festival, along with two pairs of thermal undergarments that were her size.

"You're crazy," Kayla said. "How do you know he's not a serial killer? You're going to freeze your ass off just to hang out with some boy? You don't know how safe he is."

"You sound worse than my mother," Bonnie replied.

Bonnie didn't care. She passed her weekend classes to Kayla, and hopped on a bus. She was excited by Spencer's initiative, because it awakened the sense of adventure that had lied dormant within her. Instead of memorizing the insides of DVD rooms and staring at the ceilings of love hotel rooms, she could see the outside. They took pictures together outside of the entrance, bundled together in layers upon layers of clothing, and she felt like the traveler she had hoped to portray.

The entire countryside was bathed in white, along with massive snow sculptures of cartoon characters, puppies, angels, and Steve Jobs. Children played in the snow next to them, families certainly on holiday were out. Although Bonnie's fingertips were numb, she was thankful she could share this experience with Spencer, that she could be with a boy instead of pretending Kayla was her boy for companionship.

"This is nice," she said. "I'm freezing, but the air is so clear here. I can see the sun."

"Instead of that gray mass we get in Seoul, especially in the summer time," Spencer laughed. "I thought you would like it, to be a traveler in the country you're traveling in."

"We're expats."

"Here indefinitely." He pointed to an igloo. "There's a café. Want to get something to drink?"

Bonnie nodded. To thank him for the surprise, she bought their drinks, a hot chocolate for herself and a simple lemon tea for him, before sitting on a block of ice. Sometimes she worried about running out of things to say to Spencer, worried about being cute and funny all the time instead of herself when she was silent, and pensive. But when they sat at their table sculpture of a table, she also felt an eerie sense of calm run over her. She didn't feel a need to perform, to be anything more than she already was. She felt like she was enough.

"How are you feeling?" she asked.

“Cold,” he replied. “How are you feeling?”

“The same. Kayla said I was crazy to come out here.”

“Why? There are tons of people.”

“Koreans don’t care about what happens to Americans, so I’d still be in danger. Did you hear about that school who held a teacher’s corpse hostage because the family wouldn’t pay to transport the body?”

“Must have been before I got here.”

Bonnie swirled her hot chocolate around. “I don’t know. What Kayla meant to say is it’s dangerous to go out of town. She always stays in the city for her dates.”

“I’m not following you,” Spencer said. “Does she just have a lot of dates?”

“I’ll come clean,” Bonnie said. “Kayla and I used to hook up with dudes whenever we hit the clubs. I was single, and that was part of the whole experience. We looked out for each others’ safety. She can’t do that if she’s in Seoul and I’m all the way out here.”

Spencer nodded. “It’s a different life, but it’s still risky. There’s nothing that’s safe when it comes to our bodies and our hearts.”

“She didn’t say it, but I think Kayla’s worried about what’ll happen if I don’t protect my heart. I wasn’t careful once. And Korea can feel like a pressure cooker for relationships. It can make you think you’re much closer with someone than you actually are.”

“Anything worthwhile is risky. It’s scary to get close to anyone, especially where everyone seems to be in some sort of emotional one night stand, or physical one night stand. You’ll either grow or you’ll repeat the same thing. Like, the flight attendant. She was repeating everything she’d done before me, with me. But I’m trusting that you won’t be like that. So are we closer now because we met in Seoul than if we met in either our home towns? Perhaps, but does it matter?”

“It’s just me. I’m just paranoid about the Tico boy. I hooked up so much because I didn’t believe any man could be faithful. The worst thing is to love a cheater.”

“Loyalty is my best quality,” Spencer said.

“Could you be with someone who couldn’t have children?”

“I hadn’t thought of it,” Spencer replied. “If we couldn’t have them naturally, we could always adopt.”

“You say a lot of the right things.”

“I’m a very flawed person,” Spencer said. “I just believe we deserve a second chance at loving someone, and for us that could be each other.”

Bonnie raised her eyebrow. “Does that mean you love me?”

“Yes.”

Bonnie held Spencer’s hand. She smiled. She couldn’t bring herself to say it then, because she wasn’t there completely. She felt like she could believe in loving someone again, and it felt nice to be the recipient of someone’s love. It felt nice to belong, to create their own world inside an igloo, away from everyone else, their prying eyes and their judgement.

It wasn't until their first night of intimacy that she realized her feelings were deeper than a seasonal connection. It was on a typical Tuesday night when Spencer had come over and cooked his childhood favorite of Yorkshire pudding and they drank a bottle of Pinot. Tipsy, she removed his glasses and ran her fingers through his graying hair -- his perceived imperfection that made him look older than his age of thirty -- a trait that Bonnie adored. Instead of seducing him with a practiced ease, she surprised herself and told him about those five years with the Tico boy. How she'd fallen in love with someone who equated fucking to a handshake, and in a last attempt to save their relationship, they tried to secure her citizenship by having a child, but she never became

pregnant. She told him how the Tico boy's love controlled her, and she wanted to travel the world for her lifetime, but what she was looking for was someone so great she'd stop to belong with him.

"It's about making an active choice to live," he replied. "Belonging with someone means to work through their flaws because they want to help them, not control them with yours. I want to belong like that with you," he replied.

That was when Bonnie realized it was more serious than she'd wanted it to be. It wasn't about watching *Law and Order* for a few nights, but about the possibility of a lifetime with a good and faithful man. That was why her heart sank when she found she was pregnant. She figured it out during a class when she tracked the days of her last period. Spencer had bought her foreign tampons each month, but then she realized she hadn't used them. The next day she took the test and when she got the result, she left Kayla a note in her classroom. Keep the OB's, I won't need them.

Bonnie debated over telling Spencer that same night, when she was still emotional and confused about what she was going to do. She surprised him for their nightly visit at his flat instead. She tried to be casual about it, but when Spencer revealed the flowers he'd gotten her, she covered her face with her hands.

"Irises were in bloom," he said. "What's wrong?"

"I'm pregnant," she said.

He looked down, gave her the bouquet, but he didn't hold her. Instead, he paced his tiny officetel from the entrance the window while she sat on the bed.

"I hadn't planned this," she told him. "Love is crazy, right?"

Bonnie's heart beat fast, unable to calm herself, especially after the man who'd been there for her every day didn't want to be there for her when she needed him the most. She was

embarrassed. She was nervous, and most of all scared, frightened of losing of what was going to happen next.

"Are you sure?" he asked. "I thought you couldn't get pregnant."

"I took two tests. I don't know what we're going to do."

"I don't know either. This isn't how I planned this. This isn't how I wanted my life to be."

"I thought you were serious about me."

Was Kayla right, Bonnie wondered. Was their relationship a model for expat boyfriend, to get closer to someone than your home country, because who else was there to talk to.

"I don't know anymore. I love you, but this is serious."

"I love you. I don't want to lose you. I don't want to lose us," Bonnie said. "I thought I couldn't get pregnant, and now we're here. I don't know what to do."

Spencer walked to the bed and held Bonnie, but it felt cold, as if the announcement brought forth confusion about the future instead of the security of the present. An aspect of their love which made it crazy is how mature they were about themselves, their past, their present, their work. It lacked the drama of the Tico boy and the surprises that Spencer's ex had given him. But when faced with this, how were they supposed to react?

"We were so careless," he said. "I want to be mature about this."

"How are you feeling?"

"How are you feeling?"

"Like I want to throw up. I'm so scared."

"I need some space," he said.

"You're leaving me?" she asked. This was the same phrase that her Tico boy used when he wanted to cheat with other girls.

"No, I'm not. I just need time. Can you give me time? Can you not do anything for a few weeks?"

Bonnie could've seen Spencer as a coward and a jerk, like the losers back home at her job, like all men she'd ever encountered, gotten an abortion with Kayla, but she couldn't. It wasn't like the Tico boy, who she left when she realized she didn't love him anymore.

"This hurts," Bonnie said. "I didn't believe in love again until I met you."

She loved Spencer, and wouldn't say goodbye in this condition.

Two weeks later, Spencer asked her to meet him Dos Tacos on a Tuesday evening, a Mexican restaurant with a tacky yellow and red color scheme, with mediocre food the wrong type of spicy. Since it was a foreign eatery in Seoul, Koreans flocked to it simply for its American appeal. Bonnie watched Korean couples stroll in, most likely to eat dinner before hitting the clubs, reminding her of her hookup days of yore, when she was free to be irresponsible. Now she had another pressing matter. She touched her midsection and remembered why she had to be there. She checked her phone and read her latest text from Kayla: Dr. Kim can get you out of this.

Bonnie knew better than this. She was too smart to be so careless with her body, too smart to be stressed out over some boy, someone she was sure would be an anecdote to her distant past.

But Spencer wasn't a boy. Bonnie didn't know if he would be part of her past or her future.

That question would be answered once he walked through the door. Although Bonnie was nervous, Spencer was very much how she'd remembered him, looking very British in his Oxford shirt, his immaculate gray hair and blue eyes. She tried not to think of that as he greeted her with a half hug and a cold kiss on the cheek. The waitress took their orders once they sat down. He

ordered a water and Bonnie a Korean Sprite. The waitress returned with a glass of fake Sprite set in the middle of the table with two straws, typical of how Korean couples shared drinks with their partners, but they hadn't been partners for weeks. The pregnancy created distance instead of closeness, and Bonnie removed one straw and slid the drink to her side. She wasn't sharing with him.

"Don't be like this", Spencer said.

Bonnie rolled her eyes. They were past the point of niceties and shallow intimacy where all that mattered was the first flush of romance. He said all that she needed to hear with what he didn't say. To not shut down and run away as she had with the Tico boy, to not stray like she had with all the other boys. He was asking her to stay in this pain with him. She pulled out her phone and showed him the last text he'd sent her, the one where he'd requested a break after she told him about the pregnancy.

"Who sends this?" she asked.

"We're in love," he said.

"You abandoned me."

Abandonment was the pain she was forced to share with him as she had every other boy in her life. The fear that one would leave and escape from her. She'd confronted that fear before with the Tico boy, and now she could only accept it if she left first. She wanted to leave Spencer. She couldn't.

"I needed time to think," he said. He shuffled around and pulled out a red velvet box. "I know this isn't the most romantic way to say this, but open it."

She did. Inside were a pair of matching white gold rings, one a basic wedding band for him and a sparkling amethyst in an oval cut for her. A little flashy, but the right birth stone. The engagement ring for the West and a set of two to honor the East. Symbols of love and

commitment. What every woman was taught to want, but Bonnie wasn't every woman. She couldn't get past the circumstance. She doubted him.

"Is this an engagement or an arrangement?" she asked.

"Does it matter?" he replied.

"That's not funny. How are you so certain we'll make it?"

"I'm not. It's a commitment, not a guarantee."

She slipped the engagement ring on, the base of her finger feeling heavy with the new addition. She placed the wedding band on his finger. Spencer moved to her side of the table and kissed her forehead, the first part of her body he'd ever kissed. She leaned into him and relaxed into his embrace, admitting how much she'd missed him, leaving out the excitement she couldn't feel at this moment.

She didn't say yes.

She didn't say no either.

There was a fun in belonging in this way. The next morning, Bonnie posted the obligatory engagement ring Facebook picture with the caption: if you see this then you can guess my answer. Comment applause and congratulations exploded on her page, from random Korean girls she'd met at language exchanges, to coworkers and old friends. They applauded her for finding love, or what they didn't write but was implied. With her upcoming nuptials, her past didn't matter anymore. With this engagement, her virtue had been restored. Bonnie was bitter about it. When she'd gone off to teach in Granada and work in Costa Rica, no one offered emails of even safe travels for a decision that she'd chosen. Yet now she was receiving praises for an action that Spencer had done.

Belonging meant a rallying of support for the next phase of her life from her friends. To celebrate the engagement, Miso suggested a picnic at the Han during the Cherry Blossom festival, the one time of year when the suicide friendly brown river transformed into a place for Korean families with adorable babies, and lovers who cuddled on metal blankets. It was one of the few spring days of the year. Her coworkers Sunny and Miso, and of course Kayla bought their own metal blankets. Sunny brought homemade gimbap and red velvet cupcakes, Bonnie's favorite. The girls grabbed a case of Hite beer, Korean's beer version of Two Buck Chuck, while Bonnie secretly purchased a pear juice. Despite their busy work schedules and own pressing matters, they turned their attention to her. They asked about the engagement itself and travel plans for the wedding. Bonnie lacked the answers, but she enjoyed being the center of their attention instead of the center of a boy's attention, which was a relationship with the lifespan of the Cherry Blossoms. She liked showing off her ring to her former student, who shouted her congratulations for finding love.

"We could help," Sunny said.

"A party?" Miso asked.

Bonnie shook her head. She didn't want to be the basic girls she'd seen in her home town, who put engagement announcements in the local paper to celebrate their walk down an aisle. She turned to Kayla for help but instead saw Kayla trailing behind a muscle-bound Korean who'd circled their blanket several times. Still boy crazy, Kayla was getting his number, and Bonnie felt an odd sense of relief that she didn't have to do that anymore.

"I don't want one," Bonnie replied. "It's all those people, it's the attention that'll drive me crazy. And everyone's just going to use it as an excuse to get drunk."

Miso pulled Bonnie's shirt and urged her. "A woman's engagement is the last time she will freely think of herself."

Bonnie wanted the party.

Belonging meant a celebration of friendship, when friends evolved into guardian angels to help her through this transition. As an homage to her nights in the Gangnam clubs, Bonnie suggested a champagne service. Kayla and Miso hosted the engagement party at Magpie because it was in Itaewon, the foreign district that was a strip of the West, with a McDonalds, seedy nightclubs and rampant crimes. Waiters passed out champagne on trays. In the dim yet intimate lighting of the bar, everyone behaved themselves -- the teachers and their dates, even friends of friends. Instead of treating Magpie like a giant frat party as they did Korean owned bars, they were low key, enjoying their time to get fancy drunk and ponder about love. They behaved liked adults. It was a classy affair. Bonnie was happy with her decision.

Miso, Kayla and Sunny all dressed like Bonnie, in short white dresses with flowers pinned to their hair, except Bonnie's flower was a pink hibiscus instead of the white flowers they wore. They'd researched the history of bridesmaid dresses, and wanted to look alike to protect Bonnie from any evil spirits. It was cute, and the girls reminded Bonnie of angels as they circulated the bar. Belonging meant that she could be at one with her friends in a way she hadn't before, that she could feel closer to them because of her own life transition. The evening was good, but deep down, Bonnie knew that it wouldn't get as good as this. The knock dead gorgeous Korean dates of male teachers mobbed her with hugs and kisses, eager to reveal their own bridal desires. They talked about the expensive fairy tale weddings they'd wanted to have, the ones they saw from American and British television, oblivious to the fact that their weddings would most likely take place in crowded casinos and last less than ten minutes. They envied Western love, for it was about freedom and choice, not family and financial obligation. Bonnie couldn't tell them the truth -- that she was scared and terrified of being alone, and that in fact, she hadn't fully agreed to the marriage. Instead, she offered her thanks.

Belonging to Spencer was a blessing for the evening. With her fingers interlaced in his they traveled the room, accepting the congratulations with gratitude, smiles and hugs, and Bonnie remembered the time when she'd been desperate to share this with the Tico boy. It meant the end of goodbyes and eventually the end of heartbreak, she'd thought. But saying hello to one person scared her more than anything. It sounded crazy. But wasn't that why she and her friends wore flowers in their hair, the sign of insanity in Korea. Wasn't love a form of insanity, of promising to do the same thing and expect a deeper love?

That was when Hannah Chloe approached them. Bonnie figured she wanted to give her thanks, but Bonnie frowned. Hannah Chloe was a foreign teacher at Spencer's school, a pencil shaped Kiwi with a phony British accent and a stork like nose who, worst of all, was one of those annoying straight edged vegans who was so self-righteous that she refused the champagne because it might have been processed with eggs. Bonnie never liked this girl. She tightened Spencer's hand as Hannah Chloe made her way to them.

"Crazy pants!" Hannah Chloe said and laughed like a toddler, pointing at Bonnie's flower.

"I am crazy-- in love!" Bonnie replied.

She kissed Spencer as if on cue for a sitcom. Yes, it was corny, but wasn't that one of the perks of a fiancée, to say corny things for the amusement of others? The flower had been an homage to Korea and the ideal of love, the hibiscus a flower of symbolic insanity and the alienation for the mentally ill in the land of morning calm. Bonnie liked to think of her love for Spencer like this flower, beautiful yet crazy, because wasn't it crazy to marry someone under these circumstances? Miso had guessed earlier that evening from Bonnie's refusal of champagne for pear juice instead that she was pregnant, placed her hands-on Bonnie's midsection which Bonnie snatched away, and Miso said this whole marriage was crazy. But was he marrying her because she

was pregnant? She didn't know. Bonnie would soon find out, but for now she basked in the glow of a love worth celebrating.

"How have you been?" Spencer asked Hannah Chloe.

"Sad you're leaving soon. You know how Korea is, just this emotional desert where you never really know anyone, and you felt like the first I've ever known." Hannah Chloe slowed down at the word known.

Bonnie tightened her hand again. She was suspicious.

"Why are you even getting married?" Hannah Chloe asked.

"Because we love each other," Spencer said.

"Why rush it though?" Hannah Chloe asked.

She swirled her pear juice before laughing. "For a Brit, you have a terrible upper lip. You know how it's just university 2.0 and no one ever gets serious with anyone especially American girls who treat this place like a sex buffet."

"HC, don't be like this," he replied.

Before she could throw her drink in Hannah Chloe's face, Bonnie excused herself to the restroom.

To Bonnie, belonging brought anxiety and fear, where others would be openly catty and shamelessly jealous. This was the part of belonging that she'd hated. The Tico boy had exploited that part of her belonging, forcing her to meet the girls he cheated with. Had Spencer just done the same thing? Bonnie had hated Hannah Chloe the first time they met. She was suspicious that something something had went on between Hannah Chloe and Spencer no matter what he said to her. But belonging meant to navigate that fear, to calm it and remain loyal to the engagement or arrangement. As Bonnie fixed her hair in the mirror, she pondered over this. Would belonging

mean to constantly deny or ignore the threat of others to maintain their relationship? And if so, how honest was that?

As she came out of the bathroom, she overheard Spencer before she could ask him. He was having a beer with his male coworkers who congratulated him like everyone else, adding that Bonnie was sexy despite that short hair. Then they asked him, wasn't it scary? One girl, one fuck for the rest of his life?

Spencer shook his head and Bonnie was relieved.

Then he replied.

"Bonnie's the only girl I want right now. I don't know what's going to happen in the future, but I'll deal with it."

Bonnie came out of her hiding spot and his male coworkers disappeared, claiming they were eager to discuss fantasy baseball. She couldn't articulate how she felt about his comment, but when Spencer asked her to stand next to him because he missed her, Bonnie spotted the spark of his blue eyes, the first part of him that she loved. It was that sparkle along with Kayla's bet that had drawn Bonnie to Spencer, and she was uncertain she could ever say goodbye to it.

Kayla demanded the DJ turn off the music and clinked her glass for a toast. She took off her white heels and climbed on top of the table.

"I'd like to congratulate the couple like everyone else, but first let me say that I'm proud to be anti- marriage." The crowd erupted with laughter. "At worst, I think it's a way to keep women in the home instead of venturing out into the world where they truly belong. At best, it's a shallow and romantic delusion of two people who don't realize how miserable they're going to make each other. But when two people decided to go in with the clear expectation, aware of who they are, then they begin the rough work of knowing each other. That's admirable in this emotional desert we're stuck in. In the sea of physical and emotional one night stands, you Spencer, have found a Bright

Star. Your Bonnie has been the Bonnie to my Clyde in the classroom, at home, and in Gangnam. My anchor. Now she's all yours. Take care of her."

Bonnie and Spencer kissed.

The crowd cheered.

Bonnie laid her head on Spencer's chest, counting the slow beats of his heart as she listened to his breath. After the engagement party, they'd checked into a love hotel as a mini honeymoon and made love in a feverish haste, anxious as if the other might disappear. The rush had reminded Bonnie of her first times with boys, although she wasn't sure why. Perhaps it was the presence of this foreign object insider of her privy to her most intimate moments (almost like a nonconsensual threesome that she'd laughed at and then stopped because it was a little creepy). There was also the high from the party, from the congratulations, from the spirit of love that was usually absent from the Seoul landscape. The taboo of the initial hookup had resurfaced as a potential reason, but then she realized she'd missed the light conversations she often engaged in that went like this:

Her: Let's have a conversation.

Him: Let's have a conversation about having a conversation.

Her: Let's have a conversation about having a conversation about having a conversation.

Him: Better! Let's have a conversation about having a conversation about having a conversation.

Then she'd smack him in the face with a pillow and kiss him so hard it ended any conversations they pretended to have.

Those talks where the mystery and rush of the newly dominated were ending, and now she was caught in the normalcy of these moments, when she'd rather talk to herself than wake up

Spencer. But her loneliness, her need for validation trumped any imaginary conversation she was having with a past boy.

"Are you asleep?" she asked.

He nodded.

"Can you not be?"

"I can listen."

What did she have to say? The new gave way to mundane talks they'd have as husband and wife across the span of a lifetime. She missed the fresh and witty banter that perfectly encapsulated an emotional and psychical one night stand.

"I'm starving," she replied. "Could we hop in a cab and go to Butterfingers? They have great French toast."

He groaned.

Feeling chilly, she wrapped the down comforter around her. She loved this room. It was all white decor with a Jacuzzi tub.

"Thank you for surprising me with this room," she continued. "I've never been in a room this nice. At least I don't have to worry about staining the sheets." She ran her fingers through his hair. His sign of mortality and maturity, while hers was on the inside. It scared her.

"Does the pregnancy scare you?" she asked.

He shook his head.

"It scares me," she replied. "Why do you want to marry me?"

"Because I love you."

"Why do you love me?"

He shifted. "I just do."

Love. It hadn't been enough for the Tico boy, who couldn't stop cheating despite his love for Bonnie. It wasn't enough to erase her mother's dashed dreams for her father. How could Bonnie be so sure it was enough for Spencer, when she'd become pregnant at the same time?

She got out of bed and put her slip back on. She didn't want to be vulnerable and naked in front of him during such a hard moment. "You have to have reasons."

Spencer sat up. "Why are you asking about all of this now?"

"Because we've only been together for six months. I'm scared that you only want to marry me because I'm pregnant."

"You accepted, we had the party. Why are you bringing this up?"

"I overheard you. Last you said if you met someone else, you'd deal with it?"

"Were you sneaking up on me?"

"That's not the point. Tell me what you meant."

"I can't give you the answer you're looking for, Bonnie. This isn't some romantic comedy. I haven't always been yours, and you certainly haven't always been mine. I was okay with that. You even told me about your slut stage here, or did you forget that? If we're going to be married, we should be realistic about who we are, not some ideal."

Bonnie shook her head. She knew that he was right, but she couldn't help feeling betrayed, as if the real version of herself wasn't good enough for him. But she was only telling herself that she wasn't good enough. He never said that to her. Still, she used this opportunity to force his honesty.

"While I was debating if we were over and to get an abortion, did you sleep with Hannah Chloe?"

Spencer looked away. He didn't answer her.

Now Bonnie couldn't stop with the truth. "Since we're being realistic and you want to bring up my past, let's bring up yours. Was I a rebound for Aurora, that flight attendant?"

Bonnie stared at her ring and realized that she and Aurora shared the same birth month.

"Is this her ring?" she asked.

Initially Spencer didn't answer her, just sipped the hotel's complimentary hot water. She asked again and again and again, her voice escalating each time until Spencer replied.

"I never gave it to her," he said.

Bonnie yelled at Spencer for the first time ever, saying that he wasn't a god man but an average one, a liar and cheater who never wanted to belong with her. That it was clear he wasn't the man he'd made himself out to be, that he was just like the Tico who'd broken her heart and she couldn't take another heartbreak. She removed the tarnished ring and threw it across the room, expecting Spencer to challenge her or deflect, to attempt to pacify her with good sex like the Tico boy had. Instead of offering her a hug and kiss or a compliment, Spencer put on the rest of his clothes, said he needed to be away from her for a while, and slammed the door.

She sat in the chair opposite the bed and looked around the room. These were the types of rooms she'd been used to. It was elegant, sleek, and offered a bit of the naughty possibility she'd hungered for, yet with Spencer it was different. This room wasn't the stage for a second act play of the evening where some boy would be her fantasy. Rather, this room represented the beginning with Spencer. These would-be rooms where she'd go to spice up their marriage, and the rest of her life with him would be about the dailies -- of grocery shopping and sorting out bills. This was a future she'd wanted with him, but not with the beginning she had now. She touched her midsection. She was angry at herself for how foolish she'd been, first with the Tico boy, and now with Spencer. When she'd wanted a child, she couldn't have one. Now she realized she'd have a child when she didn't want it. But would that drive Spencer away? Was her freedom worth losing him?

She called Dr. Kim and told the doctor of her troubles. Dr. Kim didn't need much explanation at all. As an OBG-YN, she'd seen women like Bonnie all the time. It was a simple arrangement. Same day, two hundred and fifty thousand won. Cash, no questions, asked. Dr. Kim texted her the officer directions. Her appointment was at six p.m. in Suwon.

Bonnie packed her bags and headed for the station. She took a cab to avoid the subway traffic. She headed to the benches to search for the next train to Suwon, to there as fast as she could. She called Kayla to go with her to the appointment.

"If you want to do this, I'm here for you. If you don't, that's fine too," Kayla said.

Bonnie missed their old intimacy. She could safely expose her bad parts to Kayla. But she also knew that intimacy could suddenly end, if Kayla got married or left Korea. They couldn't be committed to non-commitment forever.

"Have you ever had one?" Bonnie asked.

"I cheated on my last serious boyfriend and I had to visit Dr. Kim alone. I was miserable but my freedom was worth it. Are you sure you want to do this? You might lose Spencer."

"When can you get here?"

"Give me an hour. I'm saying goodbye to my hookup. Stay strong, Bright Star."

Bonnie purchased the tickets to Suwon and bought a lemon ginger tea to calm her nerves. Her phone vibrated insides her jacket pocket and she pulled it out, expecting Kayla.

It was Spencer.

He asked where she was. She wanted to tell him off and lie, but she knew she'd only leave if him if she didn't love him anymore. The problem was, she still did.

"I'm at Seoul Station," she said.

When Spencer arrived, she expected to a man like the Tico boy, angry and imposing, who'd demand the unspeakable and become insistent about owing her nothing. Spencer looked different,

but not with anger. He'd never been a boy to her. In front, her stood a man aged beyond his years. His graying hair seemed less premature and now a sign of distress. His blue eyes which normally spoke of wisdom were filled with pain. She wanted to embrace him, but she stopped herself.

Accepting of her distance, he sat beside her on the bench. There wasn't an introduction. They were too far gone for that.

"I was really mad when I left," he began. "I just wanted to get drunk and hope it would all go away. I'm sorry about this morning."

"I'm sorry too," she replied.

"You were right. We can't work on this without being honest with each other, and there were some things I didn't tell you because I didn't think they were important. If you're the one I share my life with, then there are some things I need to share with you."

She put her hand over his. "I can listen," she said.

"I'd bought that ring for Aurora but she never wore it. I never gave it to her. I'll get you a new one."

"I don't care about the ring."

"While we were on a break I slept with Hannah Chloe. I shouldn't have done that, but that was when I knew I was going to marry you. I kept wishing she was you. I knew you're the one because I think of you when I look at other girls."

Bonnie was at a loss. The betrayal was like the Tico boy, who never stopped despite her crying, screaming, and threatening to leave him. However, with Spencer, it had illuminated his need for her. Through his infidelity he'd found his fidelity to her. The betrayal hurt, not because he wasn't hers, but because he hadn't lived up to his truest nature. He was a good man, but imperfect.

She took his other hand.

"It's over between you two?" she asked.

"It was only one," he whispered. "Do you forgive me?"

Bonnie forgave him.

"Why are you even here?" he asked.

"I'm going to Suwon for a doctor's appointment. I'm not doing this because I don't love you anymore. I feel like I could love you more, but I don't want to start out this marriage because I got pregnant. I want to have a time where we belong to each other and not to our children. I want to live. I'm not ready to be a mother yet," she said. She ran her hands through his hair, the same way she had the first night they were intimate. She longed to feel that intimacy forever, despite how hard saying it was.

"I'm getting an abortion. I don't want to lose you, but I want my freedom more than this child. It's not fair to anyone if I continue with the pregnancy."

Bonnie had spoken her truth. She was terrified to lose him but even more terrified to being a marriage with such a sham. She'd thought of the Tico boy, because she feared moments like these. While she'd succeeded with a shallow intimacy because she could hold a boy at a distance, she wouldn't be content with just living on in a boy's mind as a perfect vision, one wild evening, one connection. That wouldn't sustain her. She had to be okay with her imperfections visible to her husband to be cherish, even if that meant going to Dr. Kim.

But she surprised her. He accepted her.

"It'll hurt me if you do this, but it'll hurt more to lose you. I'll do this for you," he said.

"Do you mean this?"

He kissed her forehead. She tried to relax, but she felt a slight poke at the end of her foot. It was an ajuma with a mountain climbing stick, compete in expensive hiking gear. It was early summer, the end of the climbing season.

"You speak English?" the ajuma asked.

"Yes," Bonnie and Spencer answered.

"I like speaking English," the ajuma said. "Feel very sophisticated. You nice looking couple. I love Western couples because they chose love."

A few of her female friends gathered around.

"Very beautiful," another ajuma said. "Will you get married?"

Spencer smiled. "I was just in the middle of that."

Spencer and Bonnie stood up. He knelt on one knee and took off the ring he'd been wearing.

"Bonnie, will you marry me?" he asked.

She was definitive in her answer. "Yes."

He took the ring meant for him now but for her, the ring he'd brought in Seoul with her in mind, and slipped it on her finger. A plain yet elegant white gold band, this ring transformed by the moments before, and there wouldn't be another ring more perfect. The hiking ajumas clapped and laughed, shouting their congratulations at the newly minted couple. This was proposal was cheesy romantic, but did they not deserve each other, a second chance at love and all that it had in store for them? For this was where the hard work started, when they chose to be in love instead of fall in love, when they would belong with each other and not to each other. Bonnie embraced Spencer, thankful for his support now and for their future, securing in knowing, that this was where she now belonged.

The Believers

We should've known that Hannah Chloe was going to ruin the Chaing Mai Fruit Festival but we were distracted, by Megan's impending engagement to Eli, and Eli's fight with Michael Alexander, and our Youtube channels that advertised our carefree vegan lifestyles and hid out denial. We were vegans because we hated animal exploitation, and travelers to escape the corrupt politics, underpaid jobs and nuclear families of the Western world. We wanted to show our viewers that they too could escape toxic modernity and unhealthy lifestyles through cycling, the Thai sunshine and a fruitarian diet!

That was the lie we told ourselves.

We believed because we felt lost and needed to belong, after our loved ones mocked us by oinking while eating bacon (on whom we wished heart disease) and dates rejected us for our crazy vegan diets (on whom we wished erectile dysfunction). For five Junes, we maxed out the reservations at the Royal Inn and the Meridian, hundreds of us crammed together, vlogging our lives through our smart phones. We were so powerful that we arranged for the hotels to lift their no durian ban. We weren't PETA vegans, Direct Action Everywhere vegans, or academic vegans. We were athletic, beautiful and young vegans, who believed that showing the ease of the lifestyle would convince omnivores to convert. We were social media personalities who relied on Patreon to fund our travels, and the occasional handouts from our parents. Some of us, like the twins Bella and Linda, lived in Los Angeles full time and worked as actresses, while others like Andrea and Steven were macrobiotic chefs. We billed ourselves as conscientious health nuts, natural beauty gurus and minimalists, but most importantly, high carb vegans whom Eli had brought into the life through his

Youtube rants. He was a Wisconsin-born intellectual who'd chosen to be right instead of easy when he refused to run his family's dairy farm. He encouraged us to quit our jobs, drop out of university, and spread the vegan message through Youtube and social media. That was how he toured America, wrote e-books and met Megan, the beautiful Californian beauty who'd become the love of his life and fiancée for a day. Then Hannah Chloe showed up.

She walked into our lives the second week of the festival, when we ventured to the canyon for a swimming trip. Before jumping in the lukewarm water under the immaculate sky, we used our smartphones to film ourselves hugging bunches of rambutans and mangosteens, claiming with smiles that fruit blessed us with our beautiful bodies. We stripped down to bikinis for girls and board shorts for guys, showing off our toned abs and athletic legs, ending our episodes with the slogans that the fat you eat is the fat you wear, and to go vegan for beauty, for animals, and for the planet. We uploaded pictures onto our Instagram accounts with hashtags to get them trending: #thisiswhatfreedomlooklike, #carbthefuckup, #vegansteez.

After we turned our phones off, we greeted each other on an impromptu fruit luck with Megan and Eli, our king and queen of veganism, the microfamous who earned their living through ad revenue on their channels. For their viewers and us, they were the perfect pairing, like papaya and cucumber, or as Jackson admitted in one of his videos after the festival ended, dates and peanut butter (which wasn't high carb because peanut butter is so fattening). We thought we knew Megan and Eli until their recent vlogs in Taipei where Megan promoted a collaboration with The Buddhist Vegan, who was more beautiful than Miyoko Skinner, and then pulled out of the collab without explanation. Their beliefs were unclear. They believed in nonmonogamy (at least Eli did). They didn't believe in having children (at least Megan did). When Eli asked Megan about marriage in their recent "Vegan Girlfriend Tag" video, Megan's lips flattened when Eli said he never planned to

marry, and Eli frowned when Megan said she'd never have children unless she was married. They had trouble before Hannah Chloe walked into our lives, but she made it worse.

But who couldn't forget their troubles in paradise, with the clear waters and gentle canyon sunshine? We were in love with the moment, oblivious to any problems that lay ahead. Megan modeled her hot pink bikini as Eli snapped pictures with his phone for his private collection, not for the viewers. He kept his privacy by locking his accounts because he tended to lose his phones. Hannah Chloe would return Eli's phone to Megan at the end of the week, which would start this drama, but we didn't know that at the time. Hannah Chloe waddled to the canyon, carrying an oversized watermelon. Her mousy brown hair and pale thin arms told us that she lived someplace gloomy. Her pencil shaped legs told us she didn't cycle up Doi Sutep every morning like we did. She didn't even have a phone. Certainly, she wasn't one of us. But her magenta skirt told us she envied and longed to emulate us, and we couldn't help liking anyone who envied us.

Hannah Chloe wasn't one of us. Eli wanted her to be.

He offered her a spot on the towel next to Sandra, along with the food purchased for the fruitluck after the swim – mangoes, grapes and cherimoyas. We exchanged names and she explained that her only close friends called her HC. She was Hannah Chloe to us.

“Why did you become vegan?” Eli asked.

We rolled our eyes, expecting to hear the standard answers from our own “Vegan Story” videos. That we couldn't stop crying when we watched “Earthlings,” that we played with a turkey and realized it looked just like our dogs, that a family member fell ill to a preventable disease and they refused to change their diet.

She hid her plain face in her hands. “My vegan story is dreadful,” Hannah Chloe replied.

“Fake vegan,” Megan whispered to Peta with a scowl.

We shuddered. Those were fighting words. Megan was jealous because of the annual rumors that surfaced about girls who like Shondra Drake, or Michelle E., or Sarah Jane, who were suspected of sleeping with Eli and later kicked out of the festival. But these were all rumors. From what we could tell, Eli was just a flirt who believed monogamy was unnatural in human males. Still the marriage question loomed over our heads. Megan wanted a gorgeous high carb vegan wedding. In their “Vegan Girlfriend Tag” video, she’d given him a week to propose.

Hannah Chloe ate two mangoes and squeezed out her disturbing vegan story. When she was fifteen and her much older brother had returned home from college, she’d gone on a hunting trip with him because she liked one of his friends. They’d shot a goat but hadn’t killed her, and discussed leaving the maimed goat for dead. To Hannah Chloe, that was far more cruel.

“I bashed the goat’s head in with a rock. Twice,” she said.

We gasped at the atrocities, reminding us of the animal slaughter house footage we’d shared and reposted on our social media accounts. Yes, we’d eaten meat but never murdered an animal with our bare hands. We fancied ourselves too sophisticated, intelligent and cowardly like those back home who we mocked.

“I’ve never felt so connected to anything than to when I watched the light leave that goat’s eyes. She didn’t deserve that. So, I stopped eating it,” Hannah Chloe said. “Michael Alexander was my crush at the time. You know him, right?”

Eli huffed a stuffed a date in his mouth. He hated Michael Alexander, therefore, we hated Michael Alexander. Michael Alexander was not one of us. He was a pro-vivisection, anti-sectionalist postgraduate dropout with a personality drier than week old kale chips, who had been friends with Eli. They’d made collaboration videos together, until Eli changed some of his rhetoric, and Michael Alexander sued Eli over copyright infringement. Since the lawsuit was dismissed as tort, Michael Alexander had gone from his dry philosophical videos to call out videos, the most

recent one days prior where he'd accused Megan of being a fake vegan for putting animal tested breast implants in her C minus body. We'd fight Michael Alexander if Eli had asked for it, but Megan begged Eli to calm down about the video. Michael Alexander was like an afterthought to us, like the afternoon monsoons that swept through Chaing Mai.

Megan changed the subject. "Where was your compassion for that goat?" she asked Hannah Chloe.

"I didn't have it for animals until I killed her," Hannah Chloe responded.

Hannah Chloe looked at Eli with a lifted brow, perhaps for support since most of us looked away, still in shock and disgust over the story. This was Megan's attempt at a sign of connection, what we'd later learn she missed so much. We didn't know if she received that connection, but Eli returned Hannah Chloe's gaze.

"Are you a good person?" Megan asked Hannah Chloe.

"Of course, she is," Eli replied. "She's vegan like us."

Hannah Chloe looked down at her mangos teens, her hands stained purple from the shell. "I don't know."

"Your smile is brighter than a thousand Thai suns," Eli said to Hannah Chloe.

She smiled. We'd never admit it, but it was so bright.

"Why do you care so much about her?" Megan asked.

He split his expensive cherimoya in half, carefully removed the seeds and handed Megan a piece. Not a ring, but a peace offering.

"I just do," he said.

Once Megan left for a swim he gave Hannah Chloe the second piece. An opened door.

Hannah Chloe was a mystery to us, unlike Megan, who left every aspect of her life available to her viewers. Megan showed off her chiseled abs, lipo free waist and breast implants that Eli implored her to get in her videos, and like the average non-vegan viewer we adored her for her beauty and charm. Unlike Rachel, or Nancy or Giselle who failed at imitating her, she kept it real, because it was the only currency on Youtube, with details of her life. Megan vlogged about difficult periods of her life, including her mother's divorce, her alcoholic father, to her "A" in Organic Chemistry, when she met her best friend, Jade at UCSD. Jade wasn't one of us because she wasn't vegan, nor did she have a Youtube channel but she was close enough to us that we felt her pain, her longing whenever Megan mentioned her during the Q and A sessions.

It was during our daily Q and A sessions when Megan mentioned Jade when Pete, the Controversial Vegan, asked her what she thought of marriage. It was a spring day in the park, when the heat was heavy, humid and explicably close. After all, Eli had crept upon the subject on his channel, saying in his rants that his girlfriend was hot, smart and conscious – what more could a man need? But until that point there was no proposal or engagement ring, and we felt divided. Some (mostly the girls), felt that Eli should've been ready. If a girl was ready to change her lifestyle for a guy, then he was the one for her. It was predetermined that she'd love the animals, if she loved him! And others (mostly the boys) felt that Eli had every right to be single and free, nonmonogamous, uninterrupted in the exploration of his masculine identity that a marriage would tear down. We laughed about it at salt free dinners at Happy Green after the Q and A, but the answer was clear and unclear. If Eli and Megan stayed together, it meant that we could stay together. For the girls, it meant a vegan partner, and for the boys, it meant an abundance of hot vegan girls. But we couldn't say that. During the Q and A sessions at the park in the sweltering heat, we laughed at Megan and Eli's jokes, until Megan looked straight at Eli and said that her best

friend Jade, a girl so talented and intelligent, was being degraded as a side chick, and she'd never stay with someone who degraded women like that.

We knew what she meant. No woman should be disrespected or treated as a second-class citizen, and we hated for any sentient and non-sentient beings to be treated like that. We also suspected that Eli was capable of treating women like that but not animals. Our feelings were heightened, tensions higher than the Thai temperature when Hannah Chloe raised her hand and asked Megan, if she was so secure with herself, then why did she get breast implants? Eli's reddish blonde eyebrows rose alarmed and Hannah Chloe smiled, but Megan handled it elegantly, since she was beautiful, smart and of course one of us.

"I am for what makes women feel beautiful," Megan replied. "And getting them made me feel beautiful."

It was a safe enough answer without offending anyone. Of course, Megan would've looked scrawny and unfeminine without the breast implants. But didn't Eli want them? He'd admitted in his many kitchen floor rants that he's asked Megan to get them, because she'd look more attractive, and bring in more followers to the vegan lifestyle with a perfect figure. And everyone wanted to feel beautiful. But there was still an unease that hung in that close Thai humidity, as Hannah Chloe fanned herself under a tree, feebly attempting to stave off the heat. And instead of attacking the real question, Megan did what she did best: presented herself to her viewers. She turned on her camera phone, implored us all to take a walk down the park's path behind her as she recorded herself. We obliged, recording ourselves on our phone, strolling down the path of green as we waved to our subscribers and fans, cheerful and elated as we waved, because we were happy, excited to be with our idols and inspirations, Megan and Eli, relieved to show off our healthy lifestyles to our families and friends, to say, yes, we succeeded at something. Yes, we were safe together, and wanted no one else but ourselves.

But it was vegan makeup guru Jason who looked over at Hannah Chloe during our park stroll, who noticed a sadness in her eyes as she fanned herself in the corner. As bright as her skirts were, her shoulders remained sunburnt despite the sunblock, we realized she wasn't one of us or interested in being one of us (We didn't need sunblock). Why had she come here in the first place? We wondered this after a tantric workshop when Hannah Chloe broke down crying and refused to hug a man. She was frigid, terrified of intimacy, and had come to our festival to take instead of giving herself, when Sarah asked the workshop if we were such good friends with Megan, why wouldn't we talk to her about all of this?

We had our reasons. If Megan and Eli stayed together, then we could stay together. We could ignore the infidelity as rumors and assume that our lives would be okay, eating fruit and traveling as opposed to getting jobs in our home countries, which were hostile towards vegans. We feared our answer if they broke up, that what we were doing was wrong and we'd have to return to the worlds that rejected us. We believed that what we were doing in Chaing Mai was right, to focus on the viewers who watched us with envy instead of examining our own lives. On a sunny Thai morning, we picked up our daily fruit from the markets where we took videos of animal carcasses hung up and stripped of skin with flies buzzing, and juxtaposed it to the beautiful and appealing fruit we'd purchase and eat because it made us beautiful and appealing. Junie Martin saw a royal blue Koh Sok trapped in a café, frantically flying around, and in a moment of empathy with his Buddhist teachers' compassions and philosophies, he asked to purchase the bird, only to release the latch and let the bird fly out, its wings flapping fervently to freedom. We ran through the market, dodging the fruit and veggie vendors, the women selling soaps and clothes as the owner chased us down. He demanded payment for the bird, which we didn't have, when saw a sunburnt woman and a lanky man rushing toward us.

Hannah Chloe! Michael Alexander!

Hannah Chloe apologized to the owner while Michael Alexander spoke to him in fluent Thai. They worked out a deal so Michael Alexander paid for the bird, for our mistake. Despite our previous call out videos and animosity toward him, he explained that we were all friends vacationing to the seller, and that we'd just gotten carried away. We were just kids.

The owner was still unsatisfied. "Lotus eaters!" he shouted. "I've traveled two hours each day to sell goods for my family and you do this. I should go to the police but your friend paid for your mistake. Go back to your home countries and do something with yourselves."

We laughed, some from disbelief of the owner's attitude, others for the bird's new freedom, but most out of nervous energy of the accusation. Although we were safe we knew the Thai weren't, from the suspicious looking bombers with traveler like backpacks who crossed the street before detonating. But we were safe because of Michael Alexander, Eli's nemesis and by extension our enemy, but also our savior. Ashamed and embarrassed, we turned our phones off.

"You could pay for our meal," Hannah Chloe said.

"You owe us," Michael Alexander said.

We went to Café Om across from the market, where Michael Alexander and Hannah Chloe had sat down for tea (which we hated because high carb vegans don't drink caffeine, because caffeine is a drug, and we didn't do drugs) before they heard the owner. It was a cute vegan restaurant, with floor pillows, colorful Tibetan freedom flags and a message board full of yoga classes, master cleanses and water fasting retreats. We ordered copious amounts of steamed potatoes, Morning Glory and fruit salads without nuts, beans, oil or salt. We looked at Michael Alexander. From his monologues, he resembled a malnourished and scraggly Rhys Ifans but in real life he was warm, genial. And friendly.

"I told him I'd be in town and he's on his way to Japan," Hannah Chloe said. "So, we met up here."

“I wouldn’t meet her at that stupid festival,” Michael Alexander said.

“Because Eli banned you?” asked Paul.

We rolled our eyes at Paul’s awkward timing.

“I still wouldn’t have gone if Eli invited me, because I don’t believe or eat like you,” Michael Alexander said. “There’s more to life than eating bananas and bikini activism. I’m not that shallow.”

“Beauty motivates change,” Claire said. “We’re getting people to convert to veganism by showing them how beautiful they’ll feel. Isn’t that admirable?”

“Beauty doesn’t amount to anything profound,” Hannah Chloe said. “I’ve searched for beauty as an ESL teacher in Seoul, and found a man, only for him to hook up with me and then get engaged to his slutty girlfriend. He said I was a parenthetical in his life, who he’d think about when he’s bored, but not meant for his present. I don’t need to be a kind thought to someone, I need to be the main storyline, not some stupid parenthetical.”

“How does this relate to veganism?” Jackson, Yessenia’s boyfriend asked.

He snapped a picture of his girlfriend, Instagram model and teen idol Yesenia Curie and uploaded it for hundreds of hearts and comment applause.

“Does it need to? Can’t someone just care about me?” Hannah Chloe responded.

We looked around, silent as we fiddled with our chopsticks and napkins. Perhaps Hannah Chloe’s silence could relate to our own need for connection, which some of us in later videos said was desperate, but really was the outward expression of our fears. A few months back, Eli had posted a video claiming that all non-vegans deserved to die, including his family at the dairy farm, and we made response videos in coy agreement, but we were afraid to admit that we missed our family and friends back home, and despite their unhealthy lifestyle and indoctrinated beliefs, didn’t want them to die. That admission could make us look weak and without resolves, that we didn’t

believe as we shared on social media. But we discussed these same questions when we'd visit each other in our hotel rooms for spare baby pineapples or to borrow a bike pump. Would this great conversation, this make out session, or video collaboration matter because we'd part in a few weeks? Was our rejection of the Western lifestyle expectations a mask that our own lives as travelers was one giant parenthetical? Did anyone care about us, not as amateur models or vegan vloggers but as one sentient being care about another sentient being?

"What about Eli?" Greg asked.

Hannah Chloe fanned herself. "It's none of your business."

"You guys never blog about real Thai problems like politics, or the Myanmar civil war, or even the mosquitoes in your videos. You edit all of that out. Why don't you talk about that?"

Michael Alexander asked.

Gracie wiped her mouth. "No one cares about that."

She was right. Our viewers didn't care for the real Thailand like the bird owner but neither did we, because it wasn't fun or glamorous like the videos we uploaded. When our lunch ended, we shook our heads in disbelief over what had just happened. We ate cooked food in the morning, which was against the fruitarian lifestyle. With Michael Alexander! We liked him. We hated that we liked him. We wanted to believe that Eli was right, but in person Michael Alexander was humorous, intelligent and to Gracie, kind of cute (but she had questionable taste because her boyfriend was Ralph the Intuitive Showerer). However, we disagreed for the first time about telling Eli that we'd eaten cooked food with the man who tried to sue him. Eli's minion Ricardo told him about it at the later Q and A's, with Hannah Chloe hiding in the tree's shade, and Eli denounced anyone who talked to that crackpot narcissist as fake vegans. Instead of challenging him we shuddered and kept silent about the time that Eli's nemesis had saved us.

Still, Michael Alexander had left an indelible print on us. That evening we strolled through the night markets for trinkets and jewelry, and we vlogged about the Thailand not advertised on our channels -- Thai prostitutes who sat straight up in their chairs on display, while their pimps and military service men slouched, the jagged sidewalks that scraped our thong covered toes, and the shop vendors who traveled hours to Chaing Mai because it was too expensive to live there, and the Myanmar refugees thankful for their cramped apartments to work in beauty salons to service us, thankful to avoid conflict. We never posted these videos.

Eli proposed to Megan on their day trip to an elephant sanctuary, but they didn't post the engagement picture until sunrise the following morning. Excited, we logged onto social media to like and repost the picture. It was lovely – the backdrop of the elephants bathing with Megan and Eli in the foreground, her blonde hair blowing in the scorching Thai wind, him kneeling next to her with an ethically sourced diamond. We posted hashtags not only to trend the picture but because it reflected what we wanted in our lives, our desires for the future: #heputaringonit, #veganmarriage, #veganrelationshipgoals!

The engagement announcement gave us optimism and hope on the last day of the festival, before we parted and some of us returned to our dreary Western lives while the rest stayed in Thailand and traveled. We talked of Megan's engagement during our morning Doi Sutep bike ride and the evening Q and A session. What were her wedding colors? Where would they get married? Who would be her bridesmaids? Would she vlog the wedding? She responded with the ideal answers. That she was more concerned with the marriage than the wedding. Now she could build a future in a home and not out of suitcase hotels, and she'd evolve (although some of us saw it as flip flopping) into having as many children that Eli wanted. During the Q &A she kept touching the ring because she felt safe, and by extension we did too.

Hannah Chloe, however, didn't feel safe. We didn't see her on the last day of the festival. Maybe she was curled up into a ball in her air-conditioned room, saddened by the second refusal of a man who'd promised her so much yet offered it to someone else. Perhaps she was embarrassed and couldn't face us because we were so happy. But Hannah Chloe knew the truth that we'd later face: that Eli wasn't who he claimed to be in his videos or to us, that he flip flopped over his love for one versus his love for many, that he would become a sellout. She may not have meant to destroy us when she visited Megan. Perhaps she just wanted to illuminate what this festival meant to her. It may not have been about us, but a chance at love, and the rejection was the crushing blow.

Like the conversations between Hannah Chloe and Eli when he'd creep to her room for a midnight fruitluck or to get some ripe rambutans, we'd never know everything between them. But six months after the festival when Megan returned to Los Angeles, she gave her viewers a slice of what happened when she posted the video, "The Real Reason Why the King and Queen of Veganism broke up...no clickbait."

The last night of the festival Eli went to a juice bar to celebrate with some of us while Megan was Skyping with Jade. Hannah Chloe knocked on her door and asked to talk to her, and the pair walked past some of us eating durian in the lobby. They talked in the darkness and privacy of the parking lot.

"Remember when we first met and you asked me if I was a good person?" Hannah Chloe asked.

Megan nodded. "Yes. Those who are good deserve love."

"I'm not a good person, but I really want to be."

"What's this about?"

Hannah Chloe pulled out Eli's phone that he'd claimed he lost. She showed Megan a picture timestamped a day before the elephant sanctuary trip, with Hannah Chloe giving Eli a blowjob.

Megan covered her mouth and told Hannah Chloe that she should've known known that they were a couple, even if she didn't watch their channels. Megan was upset but didn't yell at Hannah Chloe or tell any of us that night what happened. Instead she asked, "Why?"

Now, Hannah Chloe confessed their nightly visits weren't about animal ecology or the hypocrisy of pro-pet vegans but about Eli and Megan's dying relationship, where he'd said this trip was to end it with Megan and start afresh with a woman not consumed by social media celebrity. "He said he was going to break up with you at this festival. I was weak. I believed his lies."

In that, Megan admitted to his lies that she's also believed in, that it wasn't about parents' divorce or a commitment to nonmonogamy, but that Eli would be her everything except her husband, and he'd never put her needs above his. "I believed the bullshit fantasy he'd fed me too," she said. Then she asked for something that even shocked her. "Will you hold me?"

In Megan's video, she explained that she needed a hug, a human touch from someone real who'd just told her something real, no matter how unpleasant it was. She needed intimacy that wasn't based around a lie. Hannah Chloe held Megan as they sat on the curb. To a passerby, they could've been mistaken for best friends or sisters hugging, Megan's sorrow over a recently deceased cat, embracing to shield themselves from danger, when Hannah Chloe had been the danger. In the humid Thai heat with sweat soaked clothes, why hug the betrayer? Megan said that she needed a connection not as a vegan to a vegan but as a person to a person, and Hannah Chloe told Megan in that parking lot that she'd felt compassion for the first time for another person. Megan needed a connection not based on ideals but honesty, no matter how messy. Their pain awakened them.

"I don't care if you marry him," Hannah Chloe said. "We deserve the truth."

Megan said that Hannah Chloe was the most real out of all of us, and that for hiding it from her, we were all liars. "We lie all the time. We act like all we want to do is eat fruit and ride our bikes, like no one wants to be fucking normal."

"I understand how you feel. That's why I came here," Hannah Chloe replied.

They stood up to part, hugging one last time. Megan took Eli's phone.

"Being a good person means to accept that our work is never done. Then we can love," Megan said.

Megan returned upstairs and called Eli from her phone. Her Squarespace said that Michael Alexander was at Om. She told Eli where Michael Alexander, the man Eli despised and attacked, who Eli wanted nothing more than to beat up was at. She added that as her fiancé, he should defend her honor. "Do what you have to do," she said.

Some of us predicted that confronting Michael Alexander was a bad idea, but Eli grabbed his most loyal to assault him at Café Om. With its singing bowls and tranquil vibe, it wasn't a place for a brawl, but it would be that night. Eli climbed up the stairs to Michael Alexander, his lanky frame hovering over a bowl of fatty Pad Thai, when Eli shouted to him.

"You need to pay for that lawsuit and talking shit on my fiancée," Eli said.

Michael Alexander calmly said, "I don't apologize to fake vegans, so fuck you."

That's when Eli shoved Michael Alexander, but Michael Alexander rebounded by punching Eli. Then Ricardo and Andrew jumped Michael Alexander, but they couldn't subdue him. We fell back, landing on some of the other Western and Thai patrons, dragging them into this mess. It wasn't just Michael Alexander and Eli fighting, but some of us and some of the patrons, with the pixy sized owner calling the cops at the front door. Yes, it was wrong. We should've stuck to our motto, to make smoothies and not war! But we went against our nonviolent, compassionate beliefs. If humans were animals too, how could we protect animals but not humans? At the time, we didn't

care who we attacked, what we damaged, or how our futures would change, because they did once the cops arrived, handcuffed us and put us in jail.

We called for help from rusted payphones to those at the hotel, but the sheriff laughed. We'd be detained overnight and put on the next flight to Bangkok, then deported to our home countries.

Karen showed up to our aid. "What about a fair trial?" Karen yelled.

"This is a dictatorship, not a democracy," the sheriff yelled back. "Thai government doesn't want the worst of the West!"

Megan arrived at the station with a zip lock bag containing Eli's cell phone and the engagement ring. She handed both to the sheriff and went to Eli's cell where he smiled, zen like from his fiancé's rescue until she spoke.

"You'll need a good lawyer. Sell that ring," Megan said. "Because you don't have a fiancé anymore."

The Daily News wrote several articles about the Chaing Mai fight. "Angry Militant Vegans Deported from Thai Paradise – They Should've Eaten Protein!" No longer the social media elite, we admitted the truth in our videos. Bella said the fruitarian diet and the festival had triggered her eating disorder, while Yesenia wrote a book proposal about her rise to teen idol microfame and *Good Morning America* interviewed her. Michael Alexander had escaped without punishment and now taught English in Japan, still making sololiquous and pompous videos. Eli boomeranged to his parents' farm and changed his channel context to ethical omnivorism (the real fake vegan) and Megan returned to Los Angeles to where she now lived with her best friend Jade. She posted a picture of them together eating coconut ice cream with the caption: The breast implantless, improved version of myself, along with the hashtags:

#thisiswhatfreedomfrommaleoppressionlookslike, #reclaimnaturalbeauty, #fuckthechaingmaifruitfestival, #fattenthefuckup. Hannah Chloe commented on Megan's picture that she was glad to see her well, thankful for that time in the parking lot, and that she too, was continuing her journey. Although Hannah Chloe didn't have social media accounts, we knew it was her from the signature HC, which Megan liked and replied, thanks for being a friend in hard times.

With the fruitarian diets now demonized as extreme and fringe eating, and the Chiang Mai Fruit Festival a punch line, we tried to return to normal life, where we weren't nutritional and beauty experts, but sales associates at clothing stores, janitors mopping floors and servers in non-vegan restaurants. We were still vegans proud of our ethics who relished in calling out injustices. When Bella and Linda filmed a Burger King commercial, we loved getting on our mics and blasting them for losing their principles. When Kenny the Mukbang Vegan changed his channel to fast food mukbangs, our video responses reflected our distaste. It felt good to rail against wrong actions, but it wasn't the same, for we no longer had each other in Chiang Mai. The one opportunity for some of us to escape the ridicule of our families or to unite in our beliefs was gone, and we were forced to face how far behind we were. While our friends and families back home had moved on with apartments, careers and marriages, we re-enrolled in high school and college courses, working low wage jobs as nobodies. As we mopped floors or dozed off in lectures, when our families complained about our diets at loveless dinner tables, our minds drifted to Hannah Chloe's question-- if anyone ever really cared about us.

An Irreplaceable Love

Jade met Victor at the lowest point in her life. She was twenty-five, living in Taipei after her mother had shipped her off for her birthday, because her mother couldn't stand to look at her, a post-graduate failure who couldn't find a decent job, an embarrassment for a daughter who fell short of her mother's expectations. At first, Jade saw her indefinite time in Taipei as an excursion, a long-term vacation that she'd bolster up to her best friend Megan, but, she was miserable. She hated Taipei. Hated sleeping on a thin mat instead of a big comfy bed, hated the ridiculous subway rules prohibiting her from chewing gum, and she hated the unbearable summer, which left her sweat stained and exhausted despite her best efforts with any fan. But it wasn't until her Grandma Mei sent her out to buy vegetables and tofu for breakfast that Jade's world started to look up. She fumbled with change at the tiny shop, and with her poor Mandarin, couldn't haggle over the prices as she'd like. Then a man stepped in -- poised and confident with his own bag of stuff, who bought her everything she needed for her home.

"Thank you," she said to him.

"It was hard when I first moved back. It was the least I could do. Victor," he said, outstretching his hand.

"Jade" she replied. "Are you from here?"

"Yes and no. My family is, but I lived in Sydney for university and afterwards. Then I had to come back."

"Everyone comes back home. For better or worse. Do you always buy your breakfast so early?" She asked, motioning to his loaf of bread.

She searched for a ring on his left hand, thankful to find it bare, until he said, "My wife likes this kind of food."

At first, Jade thought it was just a conversation, a kind gesture from one stranger to another, with the shared experience of the West and the East, a familiar journey she was certain he'd had with different girls in his lifetime. But he wanted to continue. He gave her his business card, and told her to call him. Not in a sleazy or presumptuous way, with the demands of sex or no time offered. Instead, he asked her to call him if she needed someone in this place. If she wanted to talk, because he could share his ear with her.

Share. That's what kept Jade from throwing his card out, from dismissing Victor like she'd had others in college, callow boys filled with arrogant swagger who attempted to flirt with her by comparing her to Asa Akira, or saying hello in a bad Chinese accent. She shrugged them off, wondering if she'd ever meet someone who was worth it. Suave. Sophisticated. Elegant. Was this man Victor? She stared at his card for a solid week, hid it from her Grandma Mei, who presented their lunches with an opulence that Jade's mother reserved for the Lunar Year: steamed pork belly, oyster vermicelli, and Taiwanese fried chicken. Food was the best part of Taipei, for it was Grandma Mei's declaration of love despite Jade fighting with her mother, despite Jade's inability to find a job. Grandma Mei was the only person in this lonely city to share anything with Jade, but when she looked at Victor's card, she remembered that he too, wanted to share. Perhaps this could be the one opportunity to share with someone she wasn't related to.

Jade took a chance, but reduced it to its menial parts -- that she didn't want anything from Victor besides a fun afternoon in the park. She was in denial about the truth of her life, that she contacted him because she was bored and frustrated, that she needed a distraction from her present because her future looked grim, and she relied on the past to get her through the rough times. That she romanticized her college life so much that she needed a man in Taipei to snap her out of it. But she just met up with Victor under the pretense to talk.

They met at the 228 Memorial Park, the place commemorated for the mysterious violent deaths, like a lot of the city. Without touching hands, they strolled through the green lawn and red pagodas, Jade careful not to reveal everything in her heart. Despite being ten in the evening, it was still sweltering hot outside. Victor offered to buy Jade an iced tea and to sit down. To talk. To share. Jade figured that Victor sensed her resistance and opened first, about his life before he moved back to Taipei.

"It'd always been a dream of mine to speak English, like they do in Western films. So, I went to school in Sydney. I washed dishes at this Chinese restaurant and sent money back home. I thought it'd be my life, until my dad got sick. Then I had to come back," he said.

"Everyone comes back. Like a homecoming or the Odyssey," Jade said, trying to sound witty. But there was a silence that hovered between them. From his calm demeanor and patience, Jade believed that Victor was older than her. Certainly not a boy amused by the charm and grace of the exotic. "It sucks that mom said she'd never come back here, and then she shipped me off like damaged merchandise."

"What about your father?" he asked.

Jade swatted a mosquito off her arm, but mainly for movement. She wasn't certain if she wanted to talk about her father, who Victor reminded her of a bit. The only person she'd detailed her family past to was Megan, and only because she was her best friend in America -- a land where marriages routinely end over affairs and no one mourns the family break up. Jade had vowed to never become the woman her father left their family for, a mistress named Wen who wore too much makeup to cover her old face. Jade didn't want to be the other woman, because she didn't want to bring even more shame to the family, to become that selfish coward Wen, who took the only man Jade and her mother had loved. But Jade didn't see anything in her Taipei life as

permanent, so what did it matter if she spewed her emotional vomit before Victor? Besides, he said he'd wanted her to share.

"He left the family for another woman. Haven't seen him since I was twelve," she replied.

"That's hard."

"I've gotten used to it."

"Have you? You lost the most important man in your life."

"I lie to myself about it," Jade said. That was a truth she'd never admitted to Megan. "I say it's okay. It's the American way. You leave for the sake of love, not obligation."

"Not everything Western is good."

"Tell me about your wife."

Victor leaned back. "She's kind. A good mother to our son. A good wife. It's an arrangement. I had to marry her as soon as I returned. It was my father's dying wish that I continue the name."

"You did it for family?"

"I do everything for family. This job, the apartment. Everything is for them. What's nice about the West is doing something for yourself."

"My mom says I'm selfish."

"That's not bad."

"Are you?"

He shook his head. "I have everything I want. I have no reason to be."

Jade had nothing she wanted. Therefore, she had every reason to be selfish. Perhaps that's why she refused to work as a nail technician at her mother's salon, why she held on to her college days with Megan instead of moving on, why she hadn't settled for a job teaching brats at some

English language school just to move out of Grandma Mei's apartment. But she hadn't considered how selfish she'd become after their first evening together.

She expected Victor to come on like college boys had, to approach her for sex as if she owed them money. He didn't. He hailed her a cab and paid for it, promising his presence if she needed it. But it was when he hugged her goodbye that Jade's feelings started to change. His hands soft yet strong, caressed the small of her back delicately. He didn't verbalize it, but his eyes spoke the truth which he couldn't say out loud. That it was he who needed to share and escape from his boring life. That it was him who needed her. As Jade snuck back into her flat, she felt a sense of power in their evening together. She'd found a man who she'd never get serious with or have feelings for, who could help her in this time of her life and then become an amusing tale of her wild and young days when she was a thirtysomething at American cocktail parties. Victor.

She didn't realize that she needed him more than she cared to admit, because his approach was smooth and unprecedented for Jade. He took her to fancy dinners at Tony's, the Italian restaurant overlooking the expanse of Taipei on top of the 101. Amongst the backdrop of the city lights and the indigo skies, he leaned in to kiss her. She accepted it. When she said she needed a job and a place to stay, he found her a position at the furniture manufacturer that he worked at, as an office assistant. He paid ten thousand New Taiwanese dollars as a key deposit for her office apartment, as well as paid her rent. Every season he took her shopping for stylish dark colored tailored suits, booked her appointments at top salons for Japanese style cutting edge haircuts. He expressed his need to feel needed through Jade, who needed happiness.

Jade believed that it was still a lighthearted affair, not like her father's mistress who succeeded in breaking up the family, because they treated it like an affair and a relationship, the true pairing of romantic love. Outside of their first date at the memorial, he never mentioned his wife. He kept an extra set of his soap and cologne at Jade's apartment to be careful. They were a

secret. No one was getting hurt. Where was the harm in loving for the sake of romantic love? Everyone loved romantic love.

It wasn't until their first anniversary that Jade started listening to the stirring in her heart, and her mind asked questions. She didn't ask if his wife knew that they were in Beitou or how he'd managed to get away for an entire weekend. Instead, Jade luxuriated in the expensive hot springs, the massages and facials that Victor paid for. She enjoyed the soft lighting of the ivory hotel room. She loved the idea of being the mistress, the one meant for true love instead of obligation, the expression of Western love and individual choice over Eastern obligation and the family choice. She adored that Victor never made her anxious that accomplishments were never enough, as her mother had. With Victor, all she needed to do was exist.

She sat down on the plush bed next to Victor, who gave her a tiffany blue bag. Jade expected a highly sexual gift, like a silk kimono or lacy lingerie, as most of his gifts were. Instead, he gave her a box which she opened, revealing a large seven jade necklace on a golden chain. At first Jade was stunned, since she'd always approached their arrangement with a sarcastic sense of relief. She tried to trick herself into believing that they were together for crude purposes, but that necklace with its soft emerald called to Jade, reminded her of the necklaces her father had given her mother, which her mother pawned off after their divorce.

"We said no gifts," Jade said, trying to compose herself.

"We never said that," Victor said.

"But not for anniversaries."

"Let's pretend. This is the first one. Let's enjoy it. A jade for my Jade. Do you like it?"

Still uncertain of trying it on, she let Victor take her to the mirror where he draped it over her neck. Jade looked at her reflection, seeing a woman who was elegant, sophisticated and well

loved. She didn't see the flighty college girl her mother had been so ashamed of. She saw a person of importance. A woman in love. The person she'd wanted to become for so long.

"I love it," she whispered.

"I love you," he whispered back.

Victor picked Jade up and took her to bed. With her legs wrapped around his trim but strong waist, she briefly thought of her father. When had he told his mistress that he loved her? And if Victor said it was love, did it change anything? Jade would never know when her father said it, when his lust turned into love, because he left her once he left her mother too, who threw herself into work at the nail salon and drowned her sorrows in wine. Jade was unaware if Victor's wife knew. After all, she might not know that what they pretended to be was a farce, but Jade forced herself not to care. He felt too good. They felt too good, on top of those soft sheets, with lavender scented candles perfuming their romantic hotel suite. He disrobed her, leaving her naked except for the necklace.

At her most vulnerable, wearing the most valuable thing he'd given her, she said it.

"I love you too."

He smiled and he kissed her.

She knew it was wrong, about the judgement that awaited her if anyone knew. But they weren't her. They didn't understand her need for compassion, her desire to be touched. They didn't get the pain that gnawed in her stomach at night, a hunger not for food but to be loved. In Beitou, Jade was at a high point in her life. It was spring, the time of rejuvenation, when the city enjoyed a month of perfect weather before the monsoons swept in for the summer.

Jade's reunion with Megan would reflect the sorrow which awaited her.

It was summer in Taipei. Afternoon monsoons bathed the city. Chinese teens dyed their hair hot pinks, dramatic greens and electric blues. Sitting on the window sill of her spacious modern apartment, Jade gazed out the window at the people fervently fanning themselves, a useless attempt to escape the inexplicable hot and humid summer evening. It was a Friday night. Thursdays and Fridays were Jade and Victor's personal time together, when his wife took their son over to his mother's house. Awaiting his arrival, Jade was startled at the sound of her usual Skype tune. She smiled when she saw it was Megan, her college best friend surprise calling her.

In their college days, it was Megan who was deemed the beautiful one, with her blond hair, blue eyes and gorgeous figure despite her small breasts. A California dream. And it was Megan who listened to Jade in their sophomore year of organic chemistry, who Jade confessed her family history with for the first time. Jade had tried to cloak it in humor, saying that her family life was a bad soap opera cliché, where her father ran off with his coworker, dooming her mother to be a functional alcoholic after he dropped her like bad car rims. It was Megan who Jade envied throughout the years because of her easy connections with men, including her steady monogamous relationship the vegan Youtube celebrity Eli that catapulted Megan into microfame, and with her natural looking implants, was now the envy of thousands of women.

"Hi Love," Megan waved as she turned on the camera. "Nice place."

"Got a great job," Jade said. She didn't add, and a great man.

"Got some great news. Eli's taking me to Taipei before the Fruit festival! We get to see each other!"

Distracted, Jade looked at her phone wiggling on the window sill. Victor. For a moment Jade, worried that Megan might ask to crash, as she often did whenever she vlogged for her channel with fellow friends. Victor had a rule about no visitors in the house. He wanted to keep their

arrangement secret, which meant to keep company out of her apartment. Coworkers, possible friends, even Grandma Mei. People invited suspicions and questions, which evaded a love that they wouldn't understand.

"Where are you staying?" Jade asked.

"Eli 's found a homestay for us with another Youtuber. I can't wait to see you!" Megan said.

"The same!" Jade said before clicking off.

A week later Jade and Megan met on a sunny Saturday afternoon in front of the Chaing Kai-shek Memorial, running towards each other and embracing despite the humidity. Megan was dressed as the Bohemian beauty she'd now blossomed into, in royal blue harem pants and a crop top to show off her toned abs and blue belly button ring, a signature look from her channel. Jade's attire also reflected Victor's taste, and she wore a tailored floral dress and tan shoes, looking similar to the glamorous professional women she hoped to emulate someday. They laughed together, jumping up and down with the happiness that only a reunion could master, until Megan turned on her camera phone, and started to vlog. At first, it was okay when she surveyed the Memorial and museum, but Jade covered her face when Megan focused the camera phone on her.

"Put that away," Jade said, upset.

Megan cut her eyes to Jade in disappointment, but she put the camera away. "Why are you so uptight? I've told my viewers about our times in college. You're a friend of mine so you're their friend too."

"I'm not part of the fiber eating club. They don't need to know about me."

"You're no fun."

Jade didn't want to say the real reason --that she felt fat and uncomfortable on camera, and she didn't want to disobey some imaginary rule Victor also had. If visitors weren't allowed in her

flat, would a viewer count as a visitor in her life? She watched Megan's videos, intrigued by the premise of a full-time job involving sharing your life with anyone who watched, like a more intimate and unscripted version of reality tv. Peaceful and serene on camera, Megan didn't reflect the anxiety she'd often shared with Jade about where her future was, if she could find a life partner who didn't want children. And Jade didn't agree on every point in Megan's vegan videos, that she didn't care if meat eaters disliked her message. How could Megan carry such judgement of others' imperfections when Megan was such an imperfect person?

But focusing on Megan's imperfections made Jade think of her own, lingering in the back of her head in the same way that Grandma Mei talked about her missing friends during the White Terror. If Jade's arrangement with Victor was so casual, a farce for an interesting story, why had he given her the necklace, a piece of jewelry that anyone could see, unlike the lingerie or other kinky gifts that he got her? If it wasn't serious, then why did she wear it all the time, only removing it for showers? Jade touched the necklace like a security blanket and she and Megan entered the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial. They held hands as they met their tour guide, a twentysomething man most likely trying to work on his English.

"You're both so beautiful," he said. "Do you love each other?"

"Yes," they replied in unison.

"Are you lesbian?" he asked, curling his hands into a heart.

They stopped holding hands and shook their heads. "No," they replied in unison.

They followed their tour guide as he talked about the memorial. He explained that the flags faced West to symbolize the reunification with China, that Chiang Kai-shek ate proletariat foods to relate to the people, and that his marriage rivaled the Western love stories. Jade studied Megan's face as she listened. The arch of her eyebrow told Jade that something weighed heavy on her mind, like when she'd told Jade that her father was diagnosed with end stage cancer. What mysteries

alluded Megan? What had Megan been keeping not only from her viewers but Jade as well? Were they the same ailments as Jade?

The tour guide went to the section of the memorial dedicated to Chaing Kai-shek's wife, when Jade figured out what Megan was holding back. They listened to the tour guide instead as he showed them pictures of Chain Kai-shek, who looked more relaxed than happy with his wife.

"She was some woman," he said, impressed. "When Mr. Shek wanted to marry her, she had three requirements. First, he had to become a Christian. Second, he had to conform to her parents' way. Third, he had to divorce all other wives. He was a playboy before her. For her, he became a decent man. A revolutionary."

Megan's trance like voice finished the sentence. "She made him monogamous."

"The changing of the guards is happening soon, let's go to the front," the tour guide said.

Monogamous. What Jade wished for with the same sarcasm that she asked for world peace, Tibetan independence and the cure for AIDS. What Victor wasn't and Jade was uncertain if she wanted him to be, for he wouldn't have given her his business card if he truly was. Sometimes when Jade was with Grandma Mei or when she talked to her mother on the phone, she wondered what a life with Victor would be like. There was fun in sneaking around, in having spares of the same suits to change into and an unwise knowledge that she was getting the best parts of him, the side of freedom and romance, that slice of the West he was forced to drop to return to family obligations. She wondered if their lives would be fun if they married, or if he'd force her to quit her job and subject her to a lifetime of cleaning his facial hair from the bathroom sink or cooking elaborate Chinese dinners when he returned home. Jade had crudely thought she wouldn't have to worry about his son, until she remembered that her father had cast her aside when he abandoned the family for that same illicit and romantic Western love.

They watched the changing of guards at the top of the house with the rest of the memorial attendees. Like the rest of the Western tourists, Megan captured the drama of the expressionless yet meticulous guards with their pictures. Megan leaned her head onto Jade's shoulder and played with her bare ring finger. Then she touched Jade's necklace.

"You're so lucky to have this. Post college life is poverty," Megan whispered.

"You're lucky to have a boyfriend who travels with you in public, makes videos with you," Jade replied.

"We only look good on film. Off camera we're a mess. How'd you get this anyway?" Megan asked.

"Victor, my married boyfriend."

"Married?" Megan asked.

Jade flinched. She regretted revealing her lovers' name and marital status to Megan, her beautiful, compassionate and judgmental best friend. Megan scoffed and walked out of the ceremony, leaving Jade to run after her outside. Why run after her? Because Megan was the only connection Jade had to the outside world besides her family, a mother who'd put even more distance between them and invalidated her existence, and Grandma Mei, who saw Jade as her bright star, not the other woman. Jade didn't have to confront that if she obeyed Victor's directions and never told anyone, but she'd brought up her shame.

"It's not like that," Jade said once she found Megan. She stood outside of the memorial, arms crossed. "It started as an arrangement but we fell in love."

"Yes, it is like that, and you of all people should know. Do you remember how you cried about your father taking you to the park, only to never speak to you again? How your mother was destroyed by the person she loved and trusted the most? And you're going to be a part of that?"

Was she, Jade wondered, just like the mistress who ruined her family because of love? Jade didn't want to see herself like that mistress because she wasn't greedy with Victor. He never led her on to believe that he'd leave his wife for her. In exchange for her fidelity, he gave her things, a better life than the one she would've had, teaching English to brats or dealing with her mother's disapproving stares in the nail salon. Jade saw herself as proud and empathetic with reasonable life expectations, but Megan's question stirred her. She hadn't wondered if her father's affair with his mistresses had begun in the same way. Lying out expectations that one would never fall in love, then changing them as feelings changed, like seasons.

"I'm not like Wen," Jade said. Her father's mistress's name stung her mouth like a beetlenut. "I have no intention of taking him from his wife."

"That's how it starts," Megan said. "And your intentions don't matter. That's still someone else's husband. Someone else's life you're destroying. Would you say this to her face? How would you feel if Eli did this to me?"

Jade crossed her arms, shielding herself from Megan's questions, which felt more like accusations, since this was the first time Jade had answered to anyone about it. "I'd ruin his life if he hurt you. Why do you care so much about her?"

"Why don't you care so much about yourself. You deserve better than being bought."

They stood opposite each other, arms crossed and not touching like enemies, their present puncturing their close college bond. Megan called her boyfriend Eli and told him she was returning to their hostess's flat, leaving Jade to take the subway home. She took the long way to the subway stop, carefully looking at the women pushing strollers, holding their children's hands, enjoying the weekend afternoon without their husbands, who could've been at work or drinking in seedy dimly lit bars. She tried to imagine one of those women as Ling, Victor's wife who they never talked about, women whose husbands might be having affairs without them knowing. But as Jade

watched these women, she wondered if she would soon become one of them, pouring the love she needed from a husband to her child. There was also her mother, who stopped loving once her father cut them off.

She returned home an empty apartment, the sunset casting a pink glow around her furnishings. She checked her phone and saw a missing call from Victor and a missing text from Megan. She needed a place to stay since their hostess had asked them to leave early. Jade was cautious of Victor's request, but she smiled slightly at Megan's misfortune. She wanted to show Megan out, to show her what an honest arrangement could get with a man who cared. Jade texted Megan the address. She prepared sleeping mats for Megan and Eli and greeted them both with a kiss on the cheek. Jade could tell from Megan's expressionless face that she was embarrassed at having to ask for help, likely defeated in her judgmental attitude. If Megan's relationship was so Youtube perfect, would she really asked to stay with Jade, the other woman? Jade felt a slight vindication in this, but she didn't need to voice it. Megan's silence was Jade's victory. Jade prepared corn tea for her unexpected house guests. She stepped into the bathroom when Victor called her again.

"What's up?" she said.

"Home is awful, and I miss you. Want some company?"

Megan knocked on the door and asked Jade if she wanted to go out to a vegan buffet called Spring Vegetable. "I'll pay," Megan said. "I just need to get out of this place."

Jade nodded and continued her conversation with Victor.

"Who's that?" he asked.

"My best friend," Jade replied. "We're going to a restaurant. Want to come?"

Victor sighed, a sign that he was tipsy off Johnnie Walker and coke. He was upset. "You're not supposed to have people over there."

"She got put out and she doesn't know anyone else in this city. What was I supposed to do, tell her no?"

"Yes."

"That would've looked extra suspicious. Coming out with us will make you forget about home life. We can pretend you're single again."

She said this more for Victor's sake than her own. She wanted to pretend that Victor was single again and be as single people are, public with a love so honest and amazing that they'd never hide if from anyone, not as people who whitewashed their love with poor humor. She wanted to show him to Megan. She wanted to make him feel better.

"Like my single days in Sydney, when I washed dishes for extra money. I was poor, but those were the happiest days. You remind me of that. My little slice of sanity."

"We haven't gone to a restaurant together in a while," Jade said. "It would make me happy."

She waited, fiddling with the jade necklace that he'd given her when they first confessed their love, staring at the reflection in the bathroom mirror, hoping for a glimpse of the woman that Victor loved, and by extension, the version of herself that she could love.

"I'll see you," he said, hanging up.

Jade stepped out of the bathroom. "Victor's joining us," she said.

"Her married boyfriend," Megan said. She looked straight at Eli, who wasn't brave enough to return the look back.

Victor fetched them in the cab to head to Spring Vegetable, where they all pretended to be happy. In the restaurant with its hundred plus buffet style of vegan entrees, they looked like two content couples, one a pair of blond Westerners and the other dark-haired Chinese.

But Jade could still tell from Megan's sadness with her food that something weighed heavy on her mind. Would Megan ever tell her why she had to spend the night with her, explain what happened with the other Youtuber? Did Jade care? As a friend she did, but she stopped thinking about it when her phone buzzed again. A text from Grandma Mei. Her mother was coming in the winter to visit. Jade grimaced. She didn't want her mother's nosy questions about her life, taking pictures for her friends at the nail salon to envy, because with this job that Victor had gotten for her, with this apartment that Victor had secured for her, she was a good, obedient, successful daughter. She didn't want to confront that.

Despite the awkward silences, Megan tried to make conversation and ignore her boyfriend. "How did you two meet?" she asked Victor.

"At the food market. Jade had this panicky look that foreigners get lost in a sea of the unknown. I've felt that way twice. When I went to Sydney and when I returned here," Victor replied.

"I've never felt so understood," Jade added.

And she hadn't until Victor came along. Who else besides another returnee would get the angst of her realities, the obligation of family, the attempt to build a life on top of a tragedy, much like the city of Taipei?

"It's just hard that no one else understands it," Jade said.

Victor shifted in his seat, his brown eyes staring at her. "No one understands it, because it's just about us," he replied. "It's hard to love in this city for the sake of love. She's the only woman I've felt that way about."

Megan shook her head, as if she was ready to cry into her eggplant soup. "No, no one understands love the way that you understand love."

Jade couldn't tell if Megan was talking about herself or her relationship with Victor.

Still, a silent truce fell over the table. Although Jade felt the guilt tugging around her neck like a scarf, she couldn't deny the honesty that she felt for Victor. Yes, Jade had to hide her love for him, but she also felt vindicated, that at least she and Victor could talk. At least that could be happy in each other's presence, and even be proud of their love.

Jade should've been happy to take her Grandma Mei out, but she was conflicted. That feeling would lead Jade to her final low point in Taipei.

It was autumn. Luscious burgundy, gold and hunter green leaves lined the trees of Taipei. With a warmth of sunny days and cool early mornings and evenings set in, people wore stylish trench coats for those two weeks of the year. The city was cast in a perfect glow of urban life, making Taipei Jade's favorite place for that time of year. And if she only had Victor to think about, their love shining bright like the autumn trees, Jade could be happy. But her mother was coming into town soon, and she had to reconsider the life she'd built for herself in a city far away. The great professional job and the beautiful modern apartment gave Jade an enviable life, but would who she loved fit into that picture? Her mother wouldn't approve of every part of her life.

To distract herself, Jade surprised Grandma Mei with an outing at Beitou hot springs. They sipped hot chocolates on the tiny bridge, feeling the steam from their Styrofoam cups and the sulfuric water. Jade took a selfie with her Grandma Mei. Their hair told their life stages. Jade's long hair pulled into a messy black bun while Grandma Mei embraced the wisdom of her long silver hair, unlike the other elderly Chinese women who resisted their age of dyes, perms and tattooed eyebrows.

"I haven't seen you in forever," Grandma Mei said. "How have you been?"

Jade shrugged. "Okay. Busy. Excited to see Mom?"

Jade left out the part about Victor, who she expected a text from soon. It was a Saturday, the day he usually reserved for his wife Ling, but there was drama at home. Victor was secretive about it on their Thursday and Friday nights in the office apartment, only telling her that marriage was stress, and he was thankful for their love as an escape. This made Jade happy, that the peaceful side of Victor belonged to only her, something his wife didn't have. But guilt crept into the back of her head, because she was certain she'd end her outing with Grandma Mei as soon as he gave her a time, to get showered and put on whatever nightie he requested, whatever perfume he wanted, to become his vacation from his mundane life.

"As excited as you are," Grandma Mei said. She frowned before smiling. "When she ran off with your father, she said she was never going to return. She wanted to choose crazy romantic love over traditional love. But romantic love is unstable. She was too inexperienced to understand that. I don't see much of you since you moved out."

Jade looked down into her cup and blushed, for she missed Grandma Mei too, her only honest comfort since her father had left her. "I miss you too. I miss being unemployed."

Grandma Mei peered closer into Jade's deep brown eyes, eyes that she'd inherited from Grandma Mei. Jade wondered if she'd have Grandma Mei's wisdom after looking back on this part of her life, when she'd sworn she'd never fall in love and then do that. "You're in love," Grandma Mei said. "Who is it?"

"No one," Jade lied.

She felt bad about lying to her Grandma, but when her cell phone danced in her purse she pulled it out and smiled. A text from Victor, the man who'd given her the jade necklace she now touched to calm herself. For Lunar Year he was planning to take her to Sapporo, the Japanese Alps, despite having to construct a big lie to his wife for missing the holiday. Jade's happiness

eroded any guilt she felt, until Victor dressed up to go home on their weekly stolen evenings and she thought of her father, then of her mother's beautiful face swollen from sobbing.

But it didn't stop Jade from smiling about the text.

"You're a terrible liar," Grandma Mei said.

"You'll meet him when Mom comes into town," Jade replied.

She hadn't even told him yet, but it seemed like the next logical step. He provided for her. He'd given her that expensive necklace. He'd met her friends, so why not meet her family? That would prove to Jade that they were serious, not just a love for hotel rooms and late-night meetings, but as a husband and wife. They'd become legitimate, the next step to a proposal, and romantic love, that Western ideal, would become stable love. It would stop Jade's guilt.

They walked to the space. "We want to make sure he's worthy of your heart," Grandma Mei said.

Later that night, Jade wondered if her family would think Victor was worth of her heart as she welcomed him into the apartment. Why wouldn't he be? He was why she went from hating Taipei to finding her purpose. He was the first man since her father to tell her that she loved her, who made her feel important and special because he saw her as important and special. She expected him to be his usual self, sweet and expressive with a small gift, but Victor pushed her into the apartment without even the greeting of a hug or a kiss. He stripped her, pushed her down on the bed, forcing himself inside of her the way her first boyfriend had, after he told her about his yellow fever. This wasn't the man she loved. Victor was rough and aggressive, who used her body for consumption. He scared her.

Victor untied Jade, a beat of his sweat dropping onto Jade's navel. He lay down on top of her, exhausted. She ran her fingers through his damp hair and kissed him to forget the pain, certain he'd made her bleed. She tried not to think of that, that his actions may not have been a man

worthy of her heart, and instead reminded herself why he deserved her. Within those four walls he was hers. He was loving as they spooned together and she relaxed in his embrace, remembering that man she'd fallen in love with, to comfort herself.

"I'm sorry about tonight," he said. "I'm just stressed. It's hard getting away from the Lunar year."

"What did you tell her?"

"I didn't lie. I told her I was going to Japan, she hates Japan because it's so old. But she asks too many questions."

Would Jade ask too many questions? Could she tell Victor that despite his best attempts to keep his family out of it, that Jade went looking for it? She'd copied the schedule that she kept from his office and knew Ling's movements whenever he was gone? Jade had done this after Megan's visit, when she'd asked Jade would she consider his wife's eyes of unlike Wen, her father's mistress. But she couldn't tell him her own didn't lie, because she was scared he'd talk her out of it. Instead, she buried herself into Victor's arm as if he'd disappear, reminded her of the last year her father was with the family for Lunar Year, before he left the family.

She told Victor about that Lunar Year when she was eleven and her mother taught her to make pork dumplings, because she'd soon do that for her husband. "We served them on our good China and waited at the table until Dad got home. He showed up after midnight, and when Mom asked where he'd been, he ignored her and ordered her to get him a beer and she did, like an obedient housewife. Then Mom tossed out all the food into the garbage." Jade left out the part about how she'd been angrier at her mom for making her sit at the feast of a table, then forced to go to bed hungry without reason, because she understood her mother now. Her mother was suffering silently, trapped in a loving turned loveless marriage, so Jade must suffer, because her father wouldn't suffer. A dodged promise of the stability of love, romantic love turned unstable

love. "Turns out, he'd been with his girlfriend on Lunar Year. Two years later, my mom served him divorce papers."

"Why are you telling me this?" he asked.

"What's your wife like?" she asked.

Victor groaned.

"Does she cook big dinners for Lunar Year? Is she beautiful? I can't forget that you're married."

"I'm not married when we're together."

"Did she ask you where you were going tonight? Is that why you are so late?"

"Let's not do this."

Jade knew that tone, the same tone he reserved for difficult business calls, or when he scolded his subordinates. Don't talk about the outside world. That's not a mistress's job. A mistress should be cheery and attentive to his needs. She exists to relieve stress, not increase it. Yet here she was, becoming that woman who defied her place and asked questions, who wanted to erase the line of fantasy and the real because she was more than a fantasy, more than a body to rip clothes off from and use. She was that woman who wanted to take Victor away from his family and make one with her like Wen, the woman who'd taken Jade's father away from her.

"I want to introduce you to my family," she said.

Victor wiggled from Jade's embrace, put on his clothes and headed for the door. Jade noticed the pink wet spot on the bed and went to Victor. With her naked body pressed against his fully clothed body, Jade felt like a child, vulnerable and scared. Why had every man she'd loved never fully belonged to her? Why was abandonment always an undercurrent of love? She uttered the same words she'd said to her father when he took her to the park to leave her, the last time she saw him.

"Please don't go."

Please don't leave our family, she'd wanted to say to her father, what she said now to Victor. Please don't abandon me on this island of a country, because I'm without anyone to help me, because I don't think I can make it without you.

Instead, she showed him what he wanted to see, became the woman needed to make Victor stay. She said she was sorry, although she wasn't sure what she was sorry for. Sorry, for the change in her heart perhaps. Sorry for wanting to be loved. He turned around. She knelt in front of him, submissive how he liked her to be. As she unbuckled his belt she thought of his wife, if she did this for him too. She wanted to be turned on and excited to please him, but she was pretending.

She widened her eyes and asked him to fuck her. Hard.

He fucked her so hard she forgot that he was married.

The next morning, Jade shouldn't have been in that Da'an cafe, but she was, sipping her Oolong tea while pretending to read 1Q84, searching for Victor's wife Ling, and his young son, Edward. She should've been bartering in the markets with Grandma Mei, but she lied to her Grandma and told her that she was ill. Instead, she'd chosen to sit in that cafe an hour away from her place, her stomach knotted like the winter ocean. Why? Because she needed to know if Ling was beautiful and worth lying to.

She looked outside and then at the clock on the wall. Eleven fifty-seven. Every Saturday at noon, Ling would get her usual latte before shuttling their son Edward off to English academy and then piano lessons. She needed to prove that she wasn't a homewrecker, to lie to herself that she wasn't coming between a loving couple, and instead it was obligatory love, not romantic love. She needed to know that she wasn't a coward, how Jade's mother had described Wen in hundreds of phone calls she'd made to his mistress. Jade didn't want to be a coward, the type of woman like

Wen who stole another woman's husband without confronting the wife, Jade's mother often yelled in wine induced rages. Cowards steal husbands and refuse to look them in the eye, acknowledge that they've betrayed, violated and stolen, Jade's mother often had said as she parked in front of Wen's house in an unmarked car, with Jade terrified as she sat in the back. You want him so badly, Jade's mother would say to Wen, tell me to my face. Look at the pain you caused. Admit to the homewrecker you are. Wen never returned these responses.

Jade went to Ling, because she wasn't like Wen, as Megan had said. Jade wasn't a coward.

Her love of Victor was so deep and severe that she was willing to look Ling in the eye. If she could handle what she saw, then she wasn't a coward and could continue with Victor, knowing that his happiness was with her and not his wife. She wouldn't know that unless she saw Ling. That was why she waited in that cafe, to survey the potential damage of a broken heart.

Ling walked in at noon, decked out in a gray coat with an adorable boy who looked around six. Jade watched her order a drink, and a box of juice and a croissant for Edward. Before they sat down, Ling removed her coat, revealed a powder white dress. Jade was right. Ling was beautiful. She also wore the same jade necklace as Jade did.

Jade fidgeted in her seat, her tea now tasting like mud, and she couldn't be bothered to pretend to read anymore. Nervous at the confrontation, she gulped her tea and headed for the door, terrified at the clarity she'd come for. Looking one in the eye was so melodramatic, like those Korean soap operas that Grandma Mei loved so much. But she felt a small bump and looked down to see little Edward, with a confused look on his face and a croissant on the floor. Ling walked over to her son, bowing to Jade in apologies. Jade said that it was okay and offered to buy him another one. She handed the fresh buttery croissant to Edward as her own apologies that she couldn't explain, not because of her poor Mandarin but other excuses. Was it a consolation prize for taking Edward's father from him, an assuagement of her own guilt, or preparation to tell

Ling? Jade didn't know. Jade and Ling exchanged thanks in Mandarin, and Ling whispered to Edward. Asking him to say something to the kind young lady.

"Thank you," Edward said in the same Australian accent as Victor.

"You're welcome, Edward," Jade replied too quickly.

There. She said it. Jade had let her presence be known that she existed in the world outside of Victor's expectations, that others were affected by their affair. Ling looked confused. At that moment, Ling was free to hate Jade, unlike her father's mistress, who'd snuck into her family's life and stolen him away. But now Jade saw Wen's distance with respect. Wen didn't want to cause more drama and heartbreak, to show off to Jade's mother. Jade should've apologized and left, but Jade touched the jade necklace and Ling touched her own necklace, copies of each other. Same necklace, same man. Hurt and betrayal replaced the confusion on Ling's face.

Ling said in Mandarin. How could you?

How could Jade? Because she wanted to fall in love. Now Jade was in love with a man who let her need him in the romantic way, but at the expense of Ling and her family. Jade was that woman like her father's mistress, but was it worth it to carry that shame?

Jade saw the look. She had the answer but she was still a coward. She apologized to Ling and Edward before leaving the cafe.

Monday morning. Jade watched young couples in matching trench coats walk while holding hands, envious of the privilege she'd never have. At work, Jade's mother texted her. She'd reserved a table at Diamond Tony's 101. Should the reservation be for three or four to accommodate Jade's boyfriend? Jade wanted to tell her mother four, convinced that she could convince him like she had with Spring vegetable, but she held off on the reply. Victor came by and flashed his gorgeous smile to Jade's boss and asked to steal Jade for a minute. Jade walked with Victor to the

boardroom, the gray office where they'd hooked up before, but this time he squeezed her wrist a little too hard before locking the door and turning to her.

"Did you talk to Ling?" he asked, and before she could answer, added, "Stay away from my family."

Jade crossed her arms, thought about her answer. She should've been apologetic and submissive, desperate for his approval and love, but she wasn't. Anxiety wrecked her, kept her up at night, caused fights with Megan and lying to her family, because she wasn't only betraying Ling, but those around her. She should've been Victor's comfort, his stress reliever, embodiment of his fantasies, but Jade didn't want to be a mistress anymore. She wanted to be the woman that she'd been when he gave her that necklace, who didn't need to lie to keep love in her life.

"Yes, I did," she said. "My father's mistress was a coward, refused to look at my mom and the misery she'd caused. I had to be brave. You need to be brave. You want to stay with her forever?"

"You want to be Ling?" he stepped closer to her. "You think if I meet your family and leave my wife, they'll be proud of you, but you don't get it. Marriage isn't about love. It's about compromise, bills, raising our son and saving for the future. My life would be the same if I stayed married to Ling or married you. Marriage is a replaceable love," he said. "But what we have isn't. You possess a part of me no one else does."

Jade moved away from him, hurt. Those stolen moments in hotel rooms and apartments was a fantasy. Romantic love was unstable love, but was a replaceable love worth pursuing? Would her life be the same if she hadn't chosen Victor?

"I can't keep sneaking around like this," she said. "Don't you love me?"

"Love you," he said venomously. "I helped you. I handed your life to you here, but we can be out of love. Move out of that apartment and teach English to brats if you want to be out of love. I love you more than anyone in my life, but we have to keep our families out of this."

"This isn't how I saw my life," she replied. "It's not about making my family proud. I can't be proud of who I am if we're hiding."

Victor embraced Jade and kissed her on the cheek. Dangerous at work and a valiant attempt to save them, but it wasn't what Jade wanted. She didn't want publicity whenever it was safe. She was at another low point because she wanted a love worth her heart, but that wasn't the love she shared with Victor.

"You don't mean this. You're just upset, but we'll get back to where we were before. I'll call you tonight," he said. He left.

Jade looked down at her mother's text. This wasn't how she saw her life unfolding, as a mistress trapped in love, a love that brought her pain and abandonment with each thought, and after considering Ling's eyes, a love that hurt everything it touched. Perhaps she could reconnect with Megan and room with her. Or she could travel with some of the money saved up. Jade knew that she'd go to Sapporo with Victor and pretend their irreplaceable but temporary love was enough. Afterwards she'd resign from her job and move out of the apartment, to return to Grandma Mei. This would be the only Lunar Year that Victor would spend away from home, so that his wife would never have to send divorce papers or force their son to go hungry. Jade didn't want to disappear into a love's powerful control like the millions who'd gone missing from the White Terror. Her life didn't start once she found a good husband. It was all happening now. Shouldn't she pursue an honest life now? Shouldn't the next romantic love be a stable love?

Jade's heart would be broken for years, but for now she replied to her mother to reserve the table for three. For now, she fixed her hair, and returned to work.

VITA

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Education

Old Dominion University, Norfolk, VA

Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing May 2018

Concentration: Fiction

GPA: 3.96

- Relevant courses: Participated in workshops of Fiction, Nonfiction and Poetry.
- Contemporary World Literature, Nineteenth Century American Literature, as well as Literature for Writers and Contemporary Classics, which are two Literature courses from the Creative Writing perspective.
- 2015 recipient of the Perry Morgan Fellowship, an in-house writing fellowship offered to only two first year MFA students. Chosen out of a class of fourteen.

UC Riverside, Riverside, CA

Bachelor of the Arts

Major: Creative Writing

Queen Mary, study abroad

GPA: 3.9

- Relevant courses: Participated in workshops of Fiction, Nonfiction and Poetry.
- Studied English literature at Queen Mary, University of London, which is the third highest ranked English program in the United Kingdom at the time, after Oxford and Cambridge.

Relevant Experience

Old Dominion University, Norfolk, VA

Department of English, Teacher

January 2017 to Present

- For three semesters teach Introduction to Freshman Composition.
- Instruct and discuss the craft of writing exploratory, persuasive and research essays with students.
- Evaluate and oversee their writing process through essays, outlines, and reading responses.

Student of Engagement and Enrollment Services, Communications Department

Marketing Intern

September 2017 to Present

- Edit and write for the SEES internal magazine.

- Develop a documentary series that markets on campus student organizations to increase awareness and campus involvement through marketing and social media.
- Audit and edit SEES websites to provide clarity to pages.
- Assist with administrative tasks when needed.

Department of English
Teaching Assistant for World Literature class
August 2016 to December 2016

- Assisted professor by grading papers for class.
- Facilitated class discussion.

Mace and Crown
Contributing Writer
March 2016 to December 2016

- Wrote several articles for the Arts and Entertainment and News section of the paper.
- Coordinated with the theater department to review ODU productions.
- Reviewed contemporary books to promote writing culture related to ODU.
- Interviewed local writers, such as Poet Laureate Tim Siebles for the newspaper.

Barley South Review
Fiction Reader, Fiction Editor
August 2015 to May 2017

- Coordinated with students to discuss fiction submissions for the Fall and Spring issues of each year.
- Recruited graduate students to read for the fiction genre of the magazine.
- Edited author's work to make it ready for publication.
- Organized reading submissions for volunteers and supervised their reading response and return times.

Korvia, Chungdahm, and GEPIK, South Korea

ESL Teacher
August 2011 to May 2015

- Taught students a wide selection of English lessons, from lower level work to TOEFL test preparation.
- Performed administrative tasks in an academic setting.
- Developed curriculum with additional visual learning materials.
- Recruited students for advanced English club, where students read and discussed literature.

Americorps VISTA, Oakland, CA

Experience Corps Volunteer Coordinator
August 2007 to August 2008

- Developed and expanded marketing materials for volunteer recruitment within the communities the organization served.

- Performed administrative tasks in a nonprofit and academic setting.
- Organized and supervised volunteer and student relationships.
- Recruited volunteers to work with at risk students in schools.
- Assisted with fundraising.

UC Riverside, Department of English, Riverside, CA

Gluck Fellow

August 2006 to May 2007

- Developed curriculum for a five-part Creative Writing course for middle school students, teaching about the craft of fiction.
- Encouraged students to imitate famous contemporary authors, showing them that they too could write like their favorite authors.

Conferences

Association of Writers and Poets

February 2017

Washington, DC

- Attended the 2017 conference to learn more about the craft of writing as well as for professional development.
- Became more familiar with the contemporary writing culture.

Voices of Our Nations' Arts Residency

June 2017

University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA

- Workshop participant at VONA, one of the ten most selective writing residencies in the country, with a thirty percent acceptance rate.
- Attended in the travel writing genre.
- Became more familiar with contemporary writing of people of color.
- Used social media to fundraise tuition and fees.

Other Experience

Miller Mart

Norfolk, VA 23508

Deli and Sales Associate

March 2016 to Present

Interests and further information

- Writers in Community Volunteer, March 2017 to December 2017
- People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals Volunteer, August 2015 to Present

- Old Dominion University LitFest Volunteer, September 2017

The word processor for this thesis is Christina Marable