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# Karoshi, Heartbreak, Melancholia

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WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY IN ST. LOUIS

Department of English

Writing Program

Karoshi, Heartbreak, Melancholia

by

Sung Jon Lee

A thesis presented to the  
Graduate School of Arts & Sciences  
of Washington University in  
partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree  
of Master of Fine Arts

May 2016  
St. Louis, Missouri

## Table of Contents

Acknowledgments.....	iii
1. Single .....	1
2. Potatoes and Carrots .....	11
3. Triple-Double.....	22
4. The Digger .....	30
5. Karoshi, Heartbreak, Melancholia .....	48
6. Infinite .....	63
7. Three-Hour Flight from Colombo .....	72

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Sung Jon Lee

*Washington University in St. Louis*

*May 2016*

## 1. Single

You grip the bat the proper way, the way Dad taught you. Right over left, the knuckles lined up, making a straight railroad track or like the keys on a piano—two of Dad’s many analogies and mental pictures, which he seemed to make up on the fly whenever he needed one. Don’t squeeze too hard; imagine you’re holding a bird, not so hard to squash it, but not so loose that it flies away. See the ball all the way through the contact; imagine your eyes are shooting high-power laser beams on the ball, tracking it as soon as it leaves the pitcher’s hand, boring a hole through the very center of it, until you see the ball in contact with the fat part of the barrel. Swing with your legs to start, then with the hips, then the core, your powerhouse, then the shoulders, the arms, the wrists, and at contact your hands are well out in front of you, a key and yet oft-overlooked component to easy power and control; imagine you’re one of those cylindrical popsicle sticks, a pencil essentially, with two strings attached to the top where the pink eraser is, so like tetherball, except with two balls, not one, and you hold it—popsicle stick, pencil, tetherball pole—at the bottom and twist it, and the balls go flying around the pole; that’s a baseball swing. You had a hard time with that one, lost him at tetherball, his mixing metaphors. You don’t choke up on the bat anymore, especially not this bat. No, you stopped doing that two years ago. You’re fifteen now. You’re a big girl.

You’re quite small. Compared to girls who are good at sports, the athletic girls, you’re really small. At your last physical, the nurse bumped you up. *Four...eleven and...let’s call it five even.* That was with padded socks. But you seem even smaller—*she plays small*, as sports

pundits say—because you walk around with a bit of hunch. You know this because Dad constantly corrects your posture. It's partially attributable to not getting your vision corrected sooner. You have a tendency to lean forward with your neck when taking notes in class, when watching TV, when looking at the overhead menu at Burger King, and inside the batter's box, and it's become a habit, or perhaps a semi-correctable, semi-Lamarckian physical deformity. But some of it is your willful undoing because Zach Stefano, that lanky, six-foot-seven and growing bassoonist in orchestra, walks around with his shoulders rolled in, practically tucked under his chin, his head and neck bent, sometimes sideways, but mostly out front and down lest he hit every doorframe in the school. He intrigues you. Once or twice a week you talk to him after orchestra. You wave when you see him in the hallway between classes; you accept the limp-wrist thing he does as a wave back. But you haven't decided how you really feel about him, whether he's crush material or someone merely intriguing. When you talk to him, you can hardly hear or understand what he says. Head down and shoulders tucked in, he speaks into his own chest, as if conversing with his sternum of matters grave and privileged. Words mumble out of his elongated tallboy cavity. Mendelssohn, embouchure, Judeo-Christian tension—words you're not surprised, or in fact almost expecting, to hear from his mouth. You never see him with a backpack. He carries his books—three, four jacketless hardbounds—in his stalky arm, always precariously, their bindings not aligned, but carelessly stacked like an unshuffled deck of cards. Handouts and written assignments and his charcoal drawings are tucked in those books. They poke out everywhere, hanging loosely, holding on for dear life. You find all of it intriguing. You are compelled to mimic his posture.

You get the grip right and not much else. This is only gym, after all. You're small, quiet, and, by most accounts, shy. You play the viola, and not particularly well. You imitate the posture of a misfit. You have one good friend, Emily Herner, who has many other good friends and isn't in your gym class. Your hair treatment has only two cycles: wash and towel dry. You got picked last today—the first day of gym—because they see the posture, the small girl, the towel-dried hair.

Dr. Palmer, the gym teacher standing in for both catcher and home plate ump, gave you the smaller of the two bats. The fastpitch double-wall DeMarini is an easy bat for you—easy power, easy pop, easy to hit the cover off the ball. But Dr. Palmer tossed it aside as you walked up. He'd been giving it to all the boys and some of the bigger girls, the athletic girls. But the others—most of all, you—were given the stunted bat, more suitable for tee-ball than twelve-inch softball.

Other than the grip, you have it all wrong. You don't take any practice swings. You don't stretch your shoulders and back, your favorite part of on-deck circle routine. Once in the batter's box, your knees aren't bent, your neck sticks out, and the bat is just resting on your back shoulder like a bundle. No laser beams from your eyes. No tetherball pole twisting. No wonder you swing wildly and miss the first pitch, a slowpitch, by a good six inches.

Dr. Palmer tells the kid on the pitcher's mound to come closer, as if that was the problem and is now the solution. The kid—you'll eventually learn his name, and forget when the spring term starts—obliges with two giant steps, but not before saying with some groaning *That was puurrfect*. You have no idea how the pitch was because you didn't really see it. The laser beams were never on the ball. They were too busy bouncing off inside your head. Dr. Palmer comes

right next to you to adjust your grip, not fine-tuning, but overhauling. He tugs at your wrists and twists your fingers until the bat feels most unnatural in your hands.

The second pitch comes and you track it. You require several microseconds to adjust your eyes to the slowpitch's parabolic path. You're accustomed to pitches coming in like a dart intent on piercing. You think slowpitch is for middle-age men, for men older than Dad, for men who bumble about in the outfield and barrel toward the bases, for men who play recreationally, who use sports as a pretext for manly gabbing and drinking cheap beer. Softball is also for big, athletic girls. You, however, have plans to play baseball in the big leagues with and against players like Barry Larkin and Chris Sabo. But right this moment, you have to contend with this slowpitch. You judge correctly that it has no shot at staying over the plate. You lay off and step out as it dives way to the right of the plate. You're relieved to let go of the weird grip, which, had you held for five more seconds, would have caused your fingers to cramp. *Oh, sooooo puuurrfect.* You wonder why the kid groans like that.

Dr. Palmer jogs over to the kid on the mound and sends the kid to squat behind home plate to play catcher. You see the black double-wall DeMarini leaning against the backstop, behind where Dr. Palmer used to stand. You scurry over and grab it and toss the tee-ball bat. Dr. Palmer has decided to take over on the pitching mound, except he's not on it. He stands halfway between you and the mound.

The DeMarini feels great in your hands. Its weight, its balance, it's perfect. You wish that you had your worn-out batting gloves and could spit into your palms for extra tackiness. A practice swing tells you that it's got plenty of plow-through. You take another swing just to hear the whoosh of it slicing through air. You are back in the batter's box and stop all the nonsense.



Your feet are shoulder-width apart. You don't have cleats on, but the new-school-year new running shoes' waffle soles dig in deep enough to give you a good base. After two taps on the home plate, you assume an aggressive stance: the knees bent, the shoulders turned so, as Dad would say, the pitcher sees the number on your back, the hands high and relaxed, the wrists cocked slightly forward.

Dr. Palmer's slowpitch comes. You can tell it'll cross the center of the plate at around the top of your shoulders. You consider giving it a rip. The ball is a bit high, but still well within the range of what you deem hittable. But you've been taught to play the game the right way. The only time the pitcher beats you is when he throws three more or less perfect pitches. But there are a million ways to beat yourself. Chasing balls is at the very top that list of a million losing ways. There is no game clock in baseball. You brown bag a PB&J, two bananas, and a frozen pouch of Tropical Punch Capri-Sun, and come ready to play ball all day, doubleheader, tripleheader, rain or shine. You wait for the ball that *you* want to hit, not what the pitcher wants you to hit. You channel the batter's patience. You live to see another pitch.

You don't swing at the pitch that's a wee bit high. You instinctually catch it with your right hand; you're used to doing that with Dad. You sidearm it back with some velocity, some heat, some zip, a bit of brown dijon mustard on it. That forces Dr. Palmer to take a step back.

All of Dad's coaching, his convoluted and yet somehow dead-on analogies, the repetitive drills, and baseball philosophy reduce to one play on the field: single up the middle. When you and Dad drove down I-71 in his sea green Nissan to see the Reds play—the 1990 Cincinnati Reds!—you kept the mitt on for all of the two-hour drive, and the two hours back. You were eleven. You loved playing and watching baseball, but you hardly understood the game, its

intricacies and stratagems, the ins and outs. Dad went on and on about the beauty and virtue of the single up the middle. The middle infield, between second baseman and shortstop, is the softest gap in the park, as long as you get by the pitcher. The ball naturally wants to, upon contact, reflect back in the direction it came. Since the pitch comes from the middle of the diamond, it should be hit back up the middle. Power hitters swing for the fences. Smart hitters rely on good timing and aim for a single up the middle. It gets you on base. It scores runs. It's the foundation of small ball. You were thrilled about seeing Barry Larkin play, so matters like single up the middle didn't concern you. Dad said, *Watch where Barry Larkin hits*, in his customary knowing way. You and Dad arrived at the stadium two hours early to scour for free street parking and to watch the batting practice. You didn't ask, but Dad bought you a major-league cup of Coca-Cola and an all-star bag of popcorn—stadium food came in three sizes of minor league, major league, all-star. Dad topped the popcorn with three pumps of clarified butter, then looked over slyly at you. You nodded as if in on a scheme. Dad gave it two more pumps. You insisted on carrying the Coca-Cola in one hand and the all-star popcorn tucked in the other, mittened arm. You found Section 123, Row 34, Seats 4 and 5, a vantage point that offered an uninterrupted sightline to the action on third base, then stretched out to the rest of the ballpark's green grass. You and Dad sat there alone, together, an island among the empty blue stadium seats. When Barry Larkin walked on for his batting practice, you left the popcorn, the Coca-Cola, and Dad, and ran to the front row, not caring whether Dad would follow or not. Barry Larkin's cap was on backwards, a move you'd copy the very next day. With the first twenty or so pitches, he laid down soft bunts that stopped halfway toward the mound. *He's feeling the ball on the bat*. Dad, of course, followed you. After the bunts, he started to take

bigger cuts, opening up his hips and shoulders, giving the ball a good rip. He gashed the field with one line drive up the middle after another. His swings came in quick succession, neither lingering on the flourish of his follow-through nor fully winding up for the next one. He swung the bat gracefully, but the moment of contact—*Crack!*—was violent and gave you a little jolt. *You see where he's hitting?* You nodded, but kept your eyes on each ball popping off Barry Larkin's wooden bat.

You're really good at hitting single up the middle. No dinky bloopers that barely clear the infield, or weak grounders that roll between second and shortstop. No, you hit hard balls. Line drives that make the pitcher duck and cover his head with the mitt. Bullets that leave the second baseman and shortstop motionless, their cleats stuck in the dirt.

You've hit a million balls to get this good. Buckets and buckets of balls. You plan your day around going to Olentangy River Park and hitting buckets of balls. You finish homework first thing after school. You sloppily sohcahtoa your way through the trig problem set. The triangles are drawn by hand on regular notebook paper, and you ballpark the degrees of angles and the lengths of sides. You're supposed to use a protractor to measure every angle and side, and draw on gridded graph paper. You account for the misshapen figures and crooked lines by writing *NOT DRAWN TO SCALE* at the top, above your name, above everything, and underlining it. You read the first five pages of *Of Mice and Men*, then the last three, and then a few more pages randomly selected in between, which—lucky for you, as you'll find out—contain the scene of Lennie killing Curley's wife. You practice the D major scale on the viola, the metronome set to 92 per quarter note. You race through that too, blocking out the metronome's tick-tock. Your viola teacher wants you to play it slowly, with the metronome. She

wants you to play everything slowly and with the metronome. You start a Telemann Sonata, but you don't play it through because there's a section of mostly double-stops and chords, and your left-hand fingers jumble up, touching strings you're not supposed to. You can't get past the squeaks and screeches. The sound turns even more unpleasant as your fingers tire. But none of this matters because you're just waiting for Dad to come home and take you to the baseball diamond at Olentangy River Park.

You hear Dad's Nissan in the driveway. You stop playing the viola. It's five thirty-seven, which means he stopped by Kroger's to pick up dinner—a lemon and herb roasted chicken, always dry from an all-day exposure to the orange glow of heat lamps. For what feels like a long minute, Dad stays in the car, as he's wont to do, the sea green Nissan in idle, its engine grumbling with occasional rattling hiccups. You wonder what he's doing. Is he wrapping up listening to a caller's rant about trading Chris Sabo on AM sports talk radio? Or filling in the last remaining boxes of a *Dispatch* crossword puzzle? Or is he staring into the visor mirror, contorting his face, and popping blackheads, as you often do? Your hunch is he's doing none of these, that he, in fact, is just sitting there, doing nothing. But before you start wondering about the implications of Dad just sitting in the car doing nothing, you hear the engine's grumbling cease abruptly and the Nissan door's rusty hinge squeak, which, unlike the squeaks of your viola, comforts you to no end. You resume struggling through the Telemann sonata before he comes in.

He has a rolled-up *Dispatch* tucked under his armpit—the usual item in its usual place. His tie reminds you of the drapery at Grandma's. All his ties remind you of Grandma's drapery, her upholstery, and her bedding, which are one and the same, as are his ties. When he tugs the tie's knot loose, you're mildly surprised that it's a real tie wrapped around his neck, for you half-

expected a clip-on to pop out. You think he looks better without one. He looks as if he's outgrown it, size-wise, age-wise, everything-wise. You will make similar judgments about Zach Stefano's tuxedo bow tie at Spring Symphonic Concert, pitying the way it cinches his sprouting body at the throat, as if to stem the tide of his awkward, timid, and yet indomitable pubescent masculinity, of which the pre-tied bow makes mockery. Dad puts down the bag of groceries and takes off his square-toe black shoes. He takes them off by hand. With your shoes, you prefer to push one heel down with the other, though you'll soon adopt his method. You see the roast chicken in the bag. You also see a squished loaf of Wonder Bread and the Oscar Mayer yellow on a packaged lunch meat. He tells you to get your things.

By the time Dad's set up on the mound—two orange buckets filled with major league regulation balls—and you're ready in the batter's box, you have forty minutes to bat. At six-thirty, a men's corporate softball league will come on. For those who come early, you will put on a show, a tuition-free hitting clinic. You lay down some bunts to get a feel for the ball, trying to almost catch it with the bat. Dad is doing the same, getting a feel for the ball, for his arm, for his fingers on the seams, trying to locate his pitches, to control his velocity. After a bunt that paints the foul line and dies between third and home, you tell Dad *I'm good*. You step out of the box and hold the bat—a proper wooden Louisville Slugger—between your legs. You pull the batting gloves as far as they'll go, well past the wrist, and strap on the Velcro so tightly that your skin pinches. You flip your sweat-lined Reds cap backwards. You spit a thick gob and rub it into your palms and up and down the bat handle. You tap the dirt out of the cleats with the tip of the bat. As you wait for the first pitch, you think single up the middle. Your grip is firm and relaxed, as if holding a flighty swallow. Your body gets into a rhythm. The slow rocking between the

front foot and the back, the twitchy bouncing in the knees, the easy swirling of the bat. The pitch is a fastball, right down the pipe, straight into your wheelhouse, level with your belly button, an indubitable gimme. Your laser beams are locked in. You load up on your back foot, putting all your weight on it, then explode to the front foot. Your hips open up as late as possible without actually being late. Then the shoulders come through. When your wrists are ready to pronate—*like flipping a pancake*—right at the moment before contact, your hands are well in front of you. Your hit just clears Dad’s outstretched mitt overhead.

\* \* \*

Dr. Palmer winds up for a soft lob. You know you’ll hit a single up the middle, but you still have to decide how hard and precisely where. You will hit it so hard that some of the black of the DeMarini will be smudged on the ball’s virginally supple and unblemished white leather. You will hit it with so much pop and weight behind it that the red seam-threads will fray. The kid playing center field won’t field it even after two bounces, opting instead to get the hell out of its way. You aim for Dr. Palmer’s nutsack. You hope that he moves away, or puts his hand in front just in time, though then his hand will surely break knuckle by knuckle. You don’t mean to hurt anyone, but the pitcher gets in the way of single up the middle and he’s standing too close.

## 2. Potatoes and Carrots

The potatoes were for gamjatang, and the carrots for boeuf bourguignon. The potatoes were perfectly deformed, bought from a purveyor who called them spuds and lopped off a chunk with his paring knife and put it in his mouth, dirt, skin and all. He called the carrots *carrots* and showed, in comparison, little enthusiasm for them, but they were also perfectly bundled by their green stems. I bought them on my way home from work. I kept them separate in two wooden bowls on the kitchen island's white marble countertop.

The potatoes ended up in my wife's boeuf bourguignon. This was her ninth infraction. I was left with the carrots. I told her I couldn't make gamjatang with carrots. "Why not give it the old college try," my wife said. "Because then it'd be carrot-tang," I said, and there was no such thing.

My off-white dutch oven sat porcelain-cold and empty. Hers teemed with flavor and aroma and bubbles of burgundy over low heat. She skimmed the hot broth with a long gooseneck ladle and offered me a taste. "Mmm," I said, even as it singed my tongue. Then she scooped out a piece of cubed potato—my potato. "Gamja bourguignon," she said, equal parts question and verdict. We ate standing in front of her off-white dutch oven, feeding each other straight from the ladle with a long gooseneck handle.

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“I bought spuds for you,” said my wife. They were also perfectly deformed, just what potatoes should look like, like cratered apples grown underground. But I set them aside to rot. Instead I took the carrot bundle by its green throat, cut and discarded the stems and leafy greens, chopped the orange bodies into one-and-a-quarter inch long frusta, and ran my knife’s edge over the cutting board to dump them into her dutch oven. My wife went out to the garden and picked three bay leaves. She gave them a smart rub between her palms before adding them to the dutch oven. I diced a pair of pearl onions with the fine tip of my santoku and added them, too, to the dutch oven. She scored across the fatty side of frozen pork belly, sea-salted it liberally, and laid it over the diced pearl onions. One by one, we added ingredients of our likes as well as dislikes. I uncorked a bottle of Burgundy and emptied it into the dutch oven. “The recipe says more,” she said, and then uncorked another. What recipe? After she poured the second wine bottle into the dutch oven, I covered it with its heavy lid and turned the heat on low simmer. My wife and I put on wool socks and knit hats, and retreated to the bedroom for our first sleep of the night.

“Do you smell that?” my wife wanted to know, as she shook me out of sleep. The aroma—notes of sage and hops, neither of which had been added to the stew, and a pleasing dash of lard, no doubt from the pork belly—had seeped into the room through the sliver of space under the door, the vents sprouting from prewar ductwork, the laundry chute, the cracks and seams from loosed caulking and contracting lumber, and the tiny holes to and from which mice scurried. “Mmm I smell it,” I said. “Let’s trap the smell,” said my wife, very excitedly, which made me very excited. We hurried to the closet and brought our clothes out by the armload. We threw one-pieces and button-downs up until they hooked on to the bronze horns of the chandelier. We unfurled and tossed folded indigo v-necks and tank tops, red underpants and



knickers. Soon a patchwork of indigo and red settled over the room. Some clothes latched on to the ceiling-bound curtain rods and the leather lampshade in the far corner. My wife left for the bathroom or the kitchen, but left our bedroom door open, letting the aroma in unhindered. Then I got the idea to vigorously pump the door as if working an enormous bellow, which broke quite a sweat, which in turn piqued my appetite.

I followed the smell to the kitchen. My wife was holding the gooseneck ladle, the globular end close to her nose, her cupped hand under beneath catching the thick drippings. “Come, come,” she said. The stew tasted better than the gamja bourguignon from the night before. She held the ladle between us as we ate from it together. I sipped and slurped as you would hot tea. She lapped it up. I stopped my slurping to watch her. She tilted her head one way, then another. Her tongue went in and out to skim the surface. “You’re like a cat,” I said. Still lapping, my wife looked at me, but said nothing.

I heard the voice of Dr. K coming from the front door, obsequious and pleading, as was her usual tone. It was accompanied by an incessant woodpecker knock, surely the doing of Mr. K, an impatient man in matters of Dr. K’s wishes. They lived next door. We had been feuding over their ancient oak tree—quite majestic and generously girthed—by the property line. It didn’t reach very high, but it stretched a great span, so that its branches hovered over our house. Some old and rotted branches had started to fall on us, ruining the roof tiles. If a big one ever fell, it could gash a large hole in the roof. I also suspected a more sinister invasion underground with its roots twining around our plumbing pipes, bending and possibly rupturing them. The dispute had come to an impasse that we were looking for a third-party arbitrator, though given Dr. K’s influence and connections, I doubted complete impartiality in any arbitrator.

I invited Dr. and Mr. K inside. They came bearing gifts. Dr. K presented a Dixie paper plate covered with another upside down Dixie paper plate. Mr. K had a half-drunk bottle of something. “This is our supper,” she said, lifting the Dixie plate on top to reveal buffalo wings, some missing a bite, looking cold and undersauced. “We caught a whiff of this fragrant aroma and followed it here.”

I led them through the long corridor to the kitchen, where my wife had stacked two stew bowls next to the dutch oven. By some acoustical (mis)fortune, you could clearly make out from the kitchen everything said at the front door. She welcomed them more sincerely than I had—she didn’t mind the oak tree branches and had no idea what havoc it was wreaking on our pipes; if only I could dig up and show her the evidence. When offered, Dr. and Mr. K declined to sit at the table, and said no to the bowls also.

“If it’s alright with you,” said Dr. K—oh! her obsequious voice—“we’d rather feed from the ladle with you.”

“Whatever suits you,” said my wife.

“Yes!” exclaimed Mr. K.

We passed the gooseneck ladle around; the four of us couldn’t simultaneously lap from it. First, my wife, then me, Dr. K, and Mr. K. Lovely, just lovely, they murmured. After one large mouthful, Mr. K closed his eyes and nodded slowly, before shaking his head. Then he sang a little, almost by mistake, as if overtaken by an uncontrollable joy. I recognized the snatch from a Puccini aria. Mr. K suddenly caught himself singing and apologized. But it wasn’t a show. The stew was delicious, neither too sweet nor too salty, deceptively tangy, and chock-full of umami.

“What is this?” asked Dr. K.

“Carrot-tang,” said my wife.

We continued to pass the ladle around. Lovely, just lovely. Mr. K anchored each round with a reliable gusto. Bravo! Bravo! Amidst the revelry, I discreetly threw Dr. K’s buffalo wings in the trash. To conclude the repast, we each took a swig from the half-full bottle that Mr. K brought.

We made vague promises to do this again, and soon.

“Goodbye,” I said.

“Lovely. Just lovely,” said Dr. K.

“Goodbye,” said my wife.

“Goodbye,” said Mr. K.

“Goodbye,” I said to Mr. K.

“Goodbye,” he said.

“Goodnight,” said my wife to Dr. K.

“Very well. Goodnight,” she replied.

As they walked home, they clung to each other as lovers often do when on the verge of making love at the slightest suggestion of privacy. I found my wife clinging to me in the same way. My wife and I retreated to the bedroom for our second sleep of the night.

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In the morning, reminders of the previous evening laid sprawled in the kitchen, though too stark and bare in the new light, that I was somehow unconvinced, not of what had happened,

but that these were the actual remnants—the gooseneck ladle tipped over the off-white dutch oven, the drippings on the stove and floor, the half-drunk bottle now empty. They seemed like props standing in. I ran a finger across the bottom of the dutch oven to get a taste, but everything had hardened. I was reassured to find the buffalo wings in the garbage, as inedibly damned as I remembered.

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Each day our cooking became more elaborate, more daring, and our ingredients increasingly more obscure and expensive, some overnighted from exotic locales like Gibraltar, the Sea of Japan, and Java, as well as some rather ordinary places like Topeka, Lansing, and the Hudson Valley. My wife wielded her knife unafraid of consequences, and julienned potatoes with the repeatable precision of a press. On the mandolin, I sliced carrots down to their green stubs, yielding disks the size of the loonie. She added quenelled livermush, which tickled my gag reflexes, but she nonetheless loved. I dumped a generous finger-dip of Vegemite to counter the livermush. She added poisonous rhubarb leaves cut *en chiffonade*. I wrapped an overripe lemon in cheesecloth and wrung it to the last drop, and shook it some more to get the splattering drops after the last drop. She melted ninety-eight percent cacao chocolate in a copper double boiler and ran it through a microsieve to extract only the darkest sweet. I laid out on the butcher block the three years in Boston (pork butt)—graduate school for her, perpetual temp jobs for me—and pounded it to a near pulp with a meat tenderizer. She took my mother (amish hen) and stuffed her with my mother’s own words (minced garlic and oats). I pulverized her suspected

past infidelities (cho-toro). She did the same to my likely future ones (otoro). We added to the dutch over our joys and sorrows, things unspoken and things unspeakable. I poured two bottles of Burgundy into the dutch oven. We let it simmer overnight, through our first and second sleeps.

In the morning, I didn't awake; I merely ceased sleeping at some point, and there I was, in bed, alert as could be, but unable to tie my current state to the one immediately prior, which must've been sleep, the darker shades of my consciousness. I caught the smell of the stew, more aromatic and delicious than before. The indigo shirts and red underpants were still strewn about to trap the smell. The morning light refracted through my wife's sheer and lacy red knickers slung from a curtain rod. The world seemed just right, as perfect as an imagined Christmas morning. That struck a little terror in me.

In the kitchen, my wife was standing by the stove, the gooseneck ladle in hand. "You have to try this," she said. Just then, I had a funny notion that she had fainted after trying the stew and had come back to consciousness only moments before I came into the kitchen. The stew tasted as I expected: perfectly delicious.

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Dr. and Mr. K became regulars in the kitchen. They no longer brought buffalo wings on a Dixie plate, but kept up with wine. Dr. K gradually improved on her whiny tone and turned out to be quite pleasant and a good conversationalist. When it came to fulfilling Dr. K's wishes, Mr. K was still as impatient as ever, which I began to consider both endearing and pathetic. He was

still given to dramatic gestures, what with bravo!'s and O sole mio!'s, but they were meant to be complimentary. We never discussed the dispute over their oak tree. One day, rather quietly, a crew of lumberjacks came and cut it down with an industrial-grade two-man saw.

Dr. and Mr. K couldn't believe how we were making the stew taste better each day. "This, here, is the most excellent of them all!" Mr. K would exclaim. Then the next day, he'd correct himself. But they were right. We added new ingredients, or new ratios of the old ingredients, and the result was invariably a stew like no other you'd ever tasted.

Before long, my wife and I had new guests, strangers who'd caught some word on the street about our stew or a whiff of its smell. Most came from nearby, but some came from great cities and faraway places. When I greeted them at the door, they were timid—though who would march right into a stranger's house? They apologized and equivocated. *I know this might sound crazy, but may I try your stew?* We welcomed them all, and they went away sated. The number grew to twenty, then to fifty and more. They formed a line outside the door, down the front steps and stretching to Dr. and Mr. K's driveway. We doubled, then tripled the amount of ingredients, and so fed all who came. Octogenarians came escorted by their children and grandchildren and great grandchildren. Mothers brought their just weaned babes, for whom we pureed the chunks of potatoes and carrots in the soup. Dr. and Mr. K brought movers and shakers, who waited in line without fussing and were grateful to be fed. A Congolese gospel chorus came and sang in Congolese French, and praised the soup for tasting like home. Upon tasting it, young people fell in love for the first time and old people recommitted to their old love. Many sang rapturous tunes, often about love, but also about the soup. Some broke into dancing, some spoke in tongues. My boss, a culinary connoisseur, whose questions often unsettled sommeliers and

maître d's, came not to write me up for frequently missing work lately and doing a poor job in general, but to try the soup and grant me telecommuting privileges. The local news crew came to document the phenomenon. Another television crew from a channel dedicated to airing shows about home cooks came to propose a new show. We told them we didn't even have a set recipe. But the representative of the home-cook channel said not to worry because food wasn't about food, but about the human story behind it. My boss interjected and offered to invest in the show —“my own money,” he emphasized. The representative told my boss the home-cook channel was not looking investors, or money for that matter. But my boss insisted on writing a check then and there, saying “I've never tasted anything like it. Whom should I make the check out to?”

My wife and I declined the show, and instead put everything into feeding people. We bought seven more dutch ovens from a wholesaler. Feeding people our soup became the focus of our days. It reminded my wife of childhood, when her grandmother, two parents, six siblings, thirteen aunts and uncles, and forty-six cousins would gather for a meal. Despite the many hours spent searching, some days, we couldn't find the right ingredients, or enough of them, and resorted to adding what was available. We continued to add to the dutch oven our joys and sorrows, the unspoken and the unspeakable. But we also added things like seaweed and Jerusalem artichoke, kimchee and refried beans. With our garden depleted, I dug up the old oak's roots and added them to the dutch oven. We became careless and went overboard with certain ingredients. I stretched the three years in Boston to seven, and dumped all of it, not even bothering to mash it with a tenderizer. My wife kept splaying my mother on the butcher block and deboned her and stuffed her with something mealy. We neglected to use measuring cups

when adding seasoning, so the soup often ended up too salt, too sweet, or too spicy. To counteract too much salt, we added more sugar, and vice versa, but making something unsalty wasn't the same as making something sweet. We frequently nicked our fingers while dicing and julienning. Blood gushed out—from a nick!—and got all over the potatoes and carrots.

Still hundreds came for the soup. But their reactions seemed more reasoned, no longer overtaken with passion. “Quite good,” they'd say. Or “hmm.” Or “interesting,” a reaction I took great offense to. The lines became shorter. Even then, some didn't bother and left, seeing that they had to wait five minutes. My boss came again. He said he came to give me a morale boost. “This investment is costing me millions, but I still believe in you.” He had a bowl of soup, to which he said, “Interesting.” Then he showed me three flowcharts representing three different corporate strategies. The first one led to a black box, which he explained stood for bankruptcy. “That's your current model,” he said. The second chart led to some enormous profit. The third ended with a line that disappeared to the top and didn't connect to anything. “Profits off the charts!” my boss said. He gave me a firm pat in the back and said, “Off the charts!” He left before I could tell him that I didn't charge for my soup.

The local news crew showed up again, but with a different reporter, who had on a black suit and spoke in a serious, concerned tone, and adept at making wrinkles on his forehead. Without warning, a camera was thrust just inches away from my face. The reporter asked about rumors linking my soup to a small outbreak of mysterious illness in the area. My wife came out of the house and put her hand on the camera's lens. “No comment,” she said, and dragged me back to the house.



The station made it the main story of the evening news. “They ran with it,” Dr. K told us next day, and predictably, no one showed up at the door. She said she was really sorry. Before she went into the house, I saw her puke into the hole where the oak tree had been.

My wife and I kept up our appearances and prepared the soup in her off-white dutch oven. From the purveyor, I looked for and bought two potatoes perfectly deformed and carrots perfectly bundled. My wife took a bunch of poisonous rhubarb leaves and sliced them into manageable sizes. I diced the potatoes into tiny cubes with my santoku, making sure to keep my little finger up to avoid cutting it.

### 3. Triple-Double

You stand there clueless. The yellowed and crinkled seams of your white Worthington Quiz Bowl team shirt push into your armpits. Only six minutes into the game, you're already cloaked in sweat. If you wring your shirt, there would be enough sweat to fill a lemonade-stand styrofoam cup. But there's a nickel of dry fabric at your belly button. You seem always to be in someone's way, in the path of chest and bounce passes never intended for you, despite your sole aim not to get in the way of anyone or anything, to be away from the action, invisible like a ghost, bodiless, transparent to other bodies, unmattered so other bodies can run right through you. When the other boys run after loose balls or rebounds, you shuffle away as if to enforce a metaphysical restraining order between you and the ball. Your game plan is to keep away from the ball. You maintain a safety buffer. When the ball goes right, you move left. When a shot goes up, you don't run to the basket to retrieve the rebound. The other boys run the length of the court on a fast break—the defense backpedaling, pumping their arms in reverse sprint; the offense running and spacing the floor like roaches dispersing in sudden light, advancing the ball in a methodical zigzag of chest passes—but you stay behind like a roach that plays dead. When someone throws you a pass—why someone would, who knows?—it invariably hits you in the head. You'd be better off dropping to the floor and playing dead. It's best for you, and for everyone else, to stay far, far away.

You've gotten really good at keeping away from the ball, which as you know is an elaborate finesse game, a dance, as it were. But as skilled as you've become at this game, you

fear how a minor foot-fault, a squib of a slip can derail your game plan. You fear how you are prone to try your courage, and to do so foolhardily. You are also a bit curious of the ramifications of a brave mishap, small and timid feelings coalescing into the briefest moment of unintended courage. You wonder what if you were to run after the ball. What if you were to scrape your knee diving for a loose ball? What if there is shoving and elbowing, some roughhousing and scuffling? What if you get punched in the face? What if *you* punch someone in the face? What if. Your mind wanders.

The ball's draw to you is instinctual like the sun's to its namesake flower. Funny how a bounding basketball tugs at you more earnestly than its rubber rind and hollow inside seem capable of. You see it bouncing toward the sideline, rolling on the floor, and shot off in a soft arc slouching toward the basket. Though you know and want to stay away, you can't help but to look or at least lean in that direction. Two years later, your driver's ed instructor will help you understand this tendency when you almost drive off the shoulder and into a cartful of heirloom tomatoes—according to the milk crate sign—because you, barely passable at driving in an empty mall parking lot, out of some inexplicable instinct, fixed your gaze on a flock of black cornfield birds, hundreds upon thousands of them, take flight in perfect synchrony, swooping up and down like little black particles composing a wave, and you steered toward them, which the driver's ed instructor will explain as target fixation and that that's how we're all wired. You are wired to follow the ball, but, kudos, you've gotten really good at staying away from it.

You've always been clueless. Clueless before you laced up your grimed white mid-ankle Reeboks in the locker room today. Clueless before you changed into your gym clothes so hurriedly that you didn't stop to fix your underwear rolled in a bunch around your plump thighs.

Clueless long before Dr. Palmer had the boys line up in single file from which you were picked second to last to the vociferous disbelief of the kid who got picked last—*seriously?! Clueless before Kirk Mayfield started shouting commands and mild threats—Box out! Call out screens! I’m going triple-double on your ass!*—at everyone and no one, but most of all at you. You’re clueless even though you know what he means. You know how to yell *pick right!*, to chest-pass, to box out, to go triple-double on someone’s ass, in theory. You know them from *The Fundamentals of Basketball*, the book Dad bought at the public library’s summer book sale. *A real steal*, he said. It smelled like expired formula milk. In the chapter called “The Fundamentals of Rebounding,” there was a sequence of four gray-scale pictures on oxidized paper showing not a boy or a teenager, but a man—mustached, his hair combed neatly to the side, a white shirt tucked tightly into his dangerously short white shorts—jostling for position under the basket, his spread-out arms cordoning off the intrusion of the man behind him, both displaying equal measures of technical soundness and make-belief aggression typical of textbook illustrations. But that is theory, not the practicum of gym class. In theory, you know how to dunk a basketball.

You’re clueless to the degree the Pink Floyd kid is chock-full of clues. He wears slim black jeans with a silver chain slung so low to hazard tripping himself or anyone nearby, and a black *Dark Side of the Moon* shirt, also slim. One of his black mid-top sneakers has a flapping tongue, which he seems to wear with a pride of certain artists like drummers and illicit mural painters. You don’t see him in the locker room before or after gym. The Pink Floyd kid bursts through the gym’s double doors right as the bell rings, black denimed and black sneakered, tosses his backpack in the bleachers. You’re surprised at how athletic he is. He is lithe and agile.

The restrictive attire and dangling chain notwithstanding, he jumps high to block shots. He drives to the hoop, throws himself in the air and into bodies, and makes difficult shots over multiple defenders. After playing his tail off for two minutes, he checks himself out, something only he does and obviously not condoned by Dr. Palmer, who tells him to run laps around the gym. You see him do the moon walk next to where the girls are playing. They point and giggle. That goads him to further comedy and obscenity. He is on all fours laughing like a forlorn hyena, or howling like a constipated wolf. He does slick dance moves, bravely attempts a split, and throws in gratuitous pelvic thrusts. You wish, like the Pink Floyd kid, to check yourself out of this basketball game, or, truth be told, gym altogether, so you don't have to listen to Kirk Mayfield scream about going triple-double on your ass or anyone else's ass. You wish to check out so you don't sweat through your favorite Quiz Bowl shirt, or avail yourself to the possibility of tripping, or scraping your knee, or getting hit in the head by the ball or punched in the face, or punching someone, Kirk Mayfield, anyone in the face. But neither do you want to moon-walk or air-thrust to the delight of the girls on the other side of the gym, though to be sure, in theory that's all you've ever wanted.

\* \* \*

Dad prohibits many things on Sundays, which he calls the Sabbath when prohibiting such things: no working, no studying, no going out to eat, no TV, no spending money, no anything that might confer carnal pleasure or require physical exertion. The Sabbath is a day of rest—even *God took the day off*, he often says—and to be kept holy. You are allowed to read the Bible and

the Book of Mormon, but no Twain or Dickens or *Journey into Mystery* or *Solarman*—remember, no carnal pleasure. For his part, Dad doesn't read the *Dispatch*, a faithful morning companion to his poached eggs and sausage patties on the other six non-sabbatical days. An elder of the ward, Dad puts in a nine-to-five at church on Sundays, though it often stretches to nine-to-six or -seven-thirty. He comes home after you and Mom finish dinner. He eats by himself, usually something that doesn't taste too terrible after reheating like chicken pot pie or broccoli casserole topped with a thick crust of grated cheddar. After dinner, he puts a cassette tape of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir into the black double-deck Sanyo stereo. You are sitting in the living room Barcalounger and struggle through a Minor Prophet—Habakkuk, Malachi, or other. Dad lays himself out on the three-cushion sofa and closes his eyes. Familiar hymns come on. *Be Still My Soul*. *Great Is Thy Faithfulness*. *Guide Us, O Thou Great Jehovah*, during which he tells you that it's his favorite. But you know they're all his favorites. You know them well, not just the hymns, but every Mormon Tabernacle Choir tape. For each track, you know which hymn comes next. You know the precise snatches where the choir sounds as if having a long, collective hiccup—sound distortions and unintended key changes—the spots where the tape has stretched from overplaying. You hear Dad singing along to phrases here and there in soft baritone. *Thy hope, thy confidence, let nothing shake; All now mysterious shall be bright at last*. Soon you hear him humming, and then humming softer still, until he settles into the drone of snores, still in soft baritone.

Come football season, Dad has an after-church ritual which he follows religiously, or as it were, irreligiously. Perhaps he ducks out of the elders' meeting early, or skips it altogether—what excuse does he give to the other elders, or does he make up a frivolous lie—but somehow

you see him home by three to watch Steve Young's 49ers on TV. He is fond of the possessive. *Steve and his 49ers are playing the best team-ball in the league. Steve's receivers are letting him down with all these darned drops.* You don't ask why he's watching TV on Sunday, why he's breaking the Sabbath, whether this makes him a hypocrite, a liar. You sit through the first quarter, paying little attention to the game, but checking the game clock on the bottom corner of the screen, willing it to tick down faster. Dad has his Steve Young logbook open on his lap and tally marks his every pass attempt, completion, dropback, handoff, rush attempt, sack, fumble lost and recovered. He subdivides dropbacks into three-step, five-step, seven-step, and shotgun. You go up to your room as soon as the first quarter is over.

You plop onto the bed with your black leather-bound Bible. Your Wall of Fame is next to the bed. The pictures that occupy the epicenter and inner rings of the Wall of Fame were put up one afternoon in a fit of actionable creativity. You had a vague notion of God, family, and country, something you'd heard somewhere from somebody, though you didn't understand all the components. Family, perhaps. But God and country seemed beyond you, your age, your experience, your station. You've always been precocious in that way, having awareness of your youngness still in progress and how certain things simply took time. But you liked how it sounded, its symmetry, a kind of neatness and rightness in the rhythm. God. Family. Country. So you put a picture of Jesus at the center, then those of you, Mom and Dad in the inner ring surrounding Jesus, then everything else—your few church friends, all of them boys, comic book superheroes, car posters. None of the pictures are framed, and they are held to the wall with thin strips of scotch tape. Sometimes when you read in bed, your eyes wander up and down the Wall of Fame. You imagine the book's plot or scene play out in one of the pictures, retelling the story

in your mind with characters and settings from your life as seen in those pictures. A raft on the Mississippi morphs into a four-people kayak on the Olentangy with, front to back, Mom, you, Jesus, and Dad on board. Or the tony subdivision of Worthington Hills takes on an unlikely Dickensian tint. When your imagination gets going, you no longer need to look at the picture. You close eyes and the world is there in front of you.

You look at the picture of Jesus on the wall, the centerpiece around which your photo-collage universe revolves, and an adequate proxy for God, though perhaps not as doctrinally sound as a picture of a burning bush. You resent him for looking like the archetypal corn-fed Midwestern jock—the long and attractively unkempt light brown hair, the tanned and sinewy arms, the easy wide smile. When you close your eyes to compose a story, Kirk Mayfield’s face transposes onto Jesus’. This isn’t immediately noticeable because Kirk Mayfield and Jesus look very alike, like Kirk Mayfield is a younger doppelgänger of Jesus. *I’m going triple-double on your ass*, says the Kirk Mayfield/Jesus hybrid. This kind of thing happens sometimes, when your imaginary characters presume too much freedom and start to ad lib. You try to reimagine Jesus without Kirk Mayfield’s face. But it’s for naught. The more you try to bridle Jesus, the less docile he becomes. *Call out picks!* Jesus sounds just like him, too. You squint and peek at the picture. It’s Kirk Mayfield’s face in the picture of Jesus, his grin as easy and wide as ever. *Hustle! Move that fat ass, fat ass!* You close your eyes again, now even more tightly, as if to thwart this satanic invasion from entering your mind through the slit of your eyes. You pray to God, the Father of Jesus, but the same triune God, thus the same as Jesus, the same Jesus who now has Kirk Mayfield’s face. You ask him to bear your affliction, to take this cup away, to deliver you, to stop screaming *Box out! I’m going triple-double on...*





#### 4. The Digger

Mr. Choi was a businessman. That was what everyone called him. He wasn't a farmer or a peddler or a shopkeeper, as most people were. Not doctor, banker, or merchant, the few and highly respected vocations. Simply a businessman. He owned and ran things. It was a title he alone commanded in all of Ulsan.

No one knew with much accuracy how much he owned and ran. Everyone knew that he had a hand, almost always invisible, in all fiduciary dealings in town. According the lore, you could make the entire 90-kilometer journey from Ulsan to Busan by keeping to Mr. Choi's land.

When Jinsoo set out to get a job, he didn't know where to start. He hadn't worked a day in his life. He had been a smart boy from a wealthy family, to wit the smartest boy from the wealthiest family.

Even when he was little, he knew he was better off than his friends. He was too young to see it as a more-money thing, but he knew he had more, better, and newer things. How could he miss that his leather shoes had hardly been broken in while other kids ran around with their toes wriggling out of the mouths of canvas slippers?

But now he needed a job. He didn't have money, like everyone else. He was no different than everyone else.

"Too small. No experience," said Mr. Choi.

Jinsoo stuck out his chest a bit. He didn't like being called small. *Too* small.

“You’re the smartest kid in town. Study for the Entrance Exam and go to college in Seoul.”

“I’ll do any work you can offer,” said Jinsoo.

“With your soft hands?” Mr. Choi shook his head. He put his glasses back on and went back to skimming papers on his desk. Jinsoo didn’t move, letting his stillness plead on his behalf. “Come back tomorrow,” said Mr. Choi, not looking up.

“Thank you, Mr. Choi. What time?”

“Early.”

“How early?”

“Very early.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Jinsoo arrived at Mr. Choi’s office at ten to six.

“We’re late,” said Mr. Choi. Before Jinsoo could apologize, Mr. Choi put on his navy-blue windbreaker and headed for the door. “Come.”

They got in his truck—a clunker with a vociferous engine—and drove. The pale predawn caught up fast behind them. Mr. Choi didn’t say anything and Jinsoo didn’t ask. Jinsoo kept his gaze out his window to preserve the silence. He studied in the side mirror the plume of dust kicking off the dirt road, roiling, rising, staying the same inside a small pattern.

After nearly half an hour, Mr. Choi turned the truck onto a walking trail. The truck lurched into deep holes and over rocky bumps. Mr. Choi gave a good push on the gas and the truck clambered over one final bump.

They had reached on a circular clearing about the size of a tennis court. Though not manicured, the grass was not unkempt. In the middle was a heap of dirt, a large truckload's worth. Trees and shrubbery lined the perimeter, as if they had courteously stepped back to make room.

Mr. Choi brought two shovels from the truck bed. He gave one to Jinsoo. "You dig from here..." He thudded the shovel to the ground, taking out a big chunk of grass and frizzy roots. He took six steps and struck a second blow. "... to here."

Jinsoo did as told, and dug. With two hands on the shovel, he made shallow dents on the ground. He wasn't displacing any earth.

"Ya! What is this?" said Mr. Choi, pointing at the shallow dents. "You've never dug before?"

"No."

"Here, watch me." Mr. Choi straightened his back and stood up tall, as if resetting his posture. "You have to use your whole body, not just the arms. Your back, legs." He slapped his left thigh. The sound was dense and thick—a wooden bat striking a bag of damp sand. He then tapped the same part on Jinsoo's leg. It made a different sound.

"Stick it in. Stomp on it. Now hold the top with this hand, and this hand, hold low. Then pick the whole thing up. It's all in the legs." He acted out each step. It looked effortless.

The instructions helped. Jinsoo was now digging, stomping and shoveling, putting his skinny legs to more work than they were meant for. He looked over to Mr. Choi to see his excavation. Mr. Choi's was deeper and wider.

When they had finished, the morning sun was up and about. Jinsoo wondered why Mr.

Choi, the preeminent businessman in Ulsan, was doing menial work with him. He had imagined Mr. Choi would spend most of his day yelling orders over the phone and counting money at the office, not driving all the way out here to dig a grave.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mr. Choi told Jinsoo that he had picked the job out of special consideration. It had to be early in the morning so Jinsoo would be done in time for school. As for his lack of labor experience, slight frame, and soft hands, there was no workaround, but with experience he would learn the right technique, bulk up, and develop calluses. What Mr. Choi didn't take into consideration was that Jinsoo had stopped going to school. He couldn't afford the nominal registration fee.

To be sure, kids showed up to school without paying registration fees all the time. It was a minor offense, not much different than jumping fence to pick ripe strawberries come early summer, or hitching a free ride on the back of a slow truck. A few weeks into a new semester, the teacher would hand out yellow slips to the students hadn't paid, who were told to go home and come back with the money. As told, they would quietly pack up and leave, waving sheepish goodbyes to their closest friends and desk partners. The first time Jinsoo saw this happen, he expected all of them to come back an hour later with the money. But none came back that day. The first one came back a week later. Most never came back.

There was one kid who didn't stick to this script. She was a farmer's daughter with a dirty, perpetual tan. Quiet and bold, she carried intensity on her at all times. You couldn't picture her gossiping with other seventh-grade girls about other girls or dealing with anything trivially. When the unpaid yellow slips were handed out and the soon-to-be truant kids packed

up to leave, the farmer's girl sat in her seat, straight-backed, unflinching. Her gaze was locked and impregnable.

Ms. Kim, the teacher, squatted next to Maya's desk and said, "Maya, go home and come back when you can take care of that." She spoke quietly, but the hushed room heard every word. "I'm sorry, but you can't stay here."

Maya neither looked at Ms. Kim, nor speak, nor even blink.

"You don't have to pay all of it now. Just come back with something. Ten *won*, or five. Something."

"I'm not leaving," said Maya, still not looking at Ms. Kim. "I'm going to finish middle school, then high school, then I'm going to college in Seoul."

Ms. Kim ordered her to stand in the back of the classroom with her arms up. Maya's eyes didn't speak anger or despair, only intensity. After half an hour, Ms. Kim told her to return to her seat.

Maya showed up to school the next day. Ms. Kim asked her about the registration fee. Maya didn't look at Ms. Kim, and said nothing. Ms. Kim again squatted down next to her and spoke quietly. But Maya uttered not a word. Ms. Kim made her stand in the back, arms up. Half an hour later, Maya went back to her seat. This routine became a part of Maya's school day, and watching he routine became a part of everyone else's. As she stood in the back with her arms up, some mischievous boys made fun of her, for she was too easy and the chance was too good to pass up. The boys threw tiny wads of chewed paper, made faces at her, and pushed her and tickled her armpits while walking by. But the farmer's daughter stood unresponsive. She didn't try to dodge the wads. She ignored the funny eyes and the wagging tongues. When

pushed, she got pushed, and came right back to her spot and stood there like a frozen young tree. The look on her face didn't waver—intense, always on the verge of a somber cry with big, meaningful tears. But she never broke and cried. The boys soon lost interest.

The farmer's girl routine went on for weeks. Her saga had to come to an end and the only unknown was how much noise she was going to make when it did.

One day before the morning bell, the vice principal caught Maya just outside the school's gate. In the midst of the din and madness of the morning rush of children, he spoke to Maya with no malice, just formality. While he was still speaking, she took a step toward the gate. The vice principal grabbed her arm instinctually and almost violently, just above her elbow. His large, veiny hand wrapped easily around it; it could have grabbed a bundle of little arms like hers. There was no fighting, screaming, crying, or pleading. When the end came, the farmer's daughter didn't make any noise.

The farmer's daughter's lot was Jinsoo's now. But he wasn't endowed with her intensity.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jinsoo took on the new job the only way he knew how—with impassive dutifulness. He woke up before dawn and went out to his home's miniature courtyard closed off by shallow cinderblock walls. The smell of toasted sesame seeds wafted from a nearby house. He worked the lever of the water pump. After three or four dry hisses, cold water gushed out and filled the plastic washbasin. He washed his face. An old habit. In an hour, he'd be soaked with sweat.

He looked over to his mother's room, hoping to see his father's polished black brogues by the door. A new habit. But there was only her spotless white *gomushin*. His mother kept her shoes clean and her dresses—the two plain cotton one-pieces that hadn't been confiscated—

wrinkle-free. She spent her days strolling about the town center, tucked under the shade of her parasol to prevent a laborer's complexion. She browsed through the street market, picking up knickknacks on display and nodding politely to shopkeepers. When leaving, she told them, *Keep toiling away*—a most polite form of farewell to a person at work. People murmured as she walked by. *Tsk, tsk. What a pity. What would you do if your husband ended up a political prisoner? A widow with a living husband. In her pretty dress, looking like a doll, smiling like everything is fine.*

Jinsoo picked up the *gomushin* and blew the dust off their soles. He set them down, the toes pointing away from the door. With his shovel in one hand, he set off for the day's digging site. He headed upstream along the roadside creek.

Mr. Choi was right. The key to digging was leveraging the lower half of the body—the quads, the hips, the lower back—at which Jinsoo had gotten quite proficient. Some days he dug. Other days he shoveled back what he had dug out and, with a heap of dirt Mr. Choi had prearranged, piled on top to make a mound. On this day, he piled.

The size of the mound spoke for the deceased. It was a better and louder mouthpiece than their actual mouths, now forever silent. The elderly were to be treated with respect, but the dead commanded reverence. After all, what's more elderly than dead? And reverence is nothing more than respect with eternal context. While an old woman was cared for and looked after, a dead one was worshipped. If she got the biggest room in the house while alive, then she got the most rotund mound in the village when underground.

The dead took their darkest secrets. They also took their earthly belongings. Thick coats and down-stuffed blankets to keep warm during cold winter nights. Special occasion china sets,



silver spoons and chopsticks, silk drapes. The more things you had, the more things were buried with you, and the higher the mound jutted above the ground. A big mound of dirt equated to a past moneyed life.

The size of Jinsoo's mound that day meant a dead person of considerable means. It rose above his head. He heaved the dirt with the shovel to pile higher and higher. When finished with piling, he circled the mound and patted it down firmly with the shovel's underside. Then Jinsoo sprawled out on the lushest part of the plot. He rolled his head to the side, his cheek bending the still-dewed grass, some poking into his ear. He reached into his pockets and pulled out the persimmons and dates he had picked along the way. Some looked familiar, some were odd looking. He sat up and ate.

The view in front of him captured the moment when the night receded and the morning folded in, a fleeting cusp in the earth's rotation. Foggy low-hanging clouds belted around a mountain peak, which had a faint auburn glow from the light that barely made it through the clouds. Behind him was pitch black, untouched by light.

"*Kaaaahh*, that's nice." He had heard his father and other grown men say that after downing a shot of potent *soju*, or something as pleasurable. His *kaaahhh* didn't have the requisite feel of aged masculinity and a lifetime of cigarettes. It was pubescent and scripted. But he felt no shame in trying it out. There was no one except him and a dead person.

\* \* \* \* \*

After a month of working for Mr. Choi, payday finally arrived. Jinsoo woke up earlier than usual. He had planned to go to Mr. Choi's office before going to the day's gravesite. He could wait and pick up his pay—cash in a small yellow envelope—at the end of the day, but no

one did that. When money became available, you took it right then and there. Money now didn't mean money in an hour. Now meant *now*. Money now had intrinsic worth, like food in the belly and wood in the furnace.

Mr. Choi's office was a rundown shack with rusted tin roof and mud walls pocked with holes. It had no straight lines or geometric symmetry. Jinsoo joined a crowd of thirty or so worker waiting outside. They roamed about and didn't form a line, and yet managed to funnel through the office door one by one. No one pushed or shouted. No one hardly spoke.

An ox was tied to a post by the office shack. On its right horn was an orange tag, swaying as the ox's chewing rhythm. The ox swallowed and, after a pause, regurgitated and resumed chewing. Its dark, lifeless right eye followed the procession of workers.

Mr. Choi was behind his desk, talking on the phone. Sitting next to Mr. Choi, his accountant, whose desk was bigger and messier than Mr. Choi's, handed out the small yellow envelopes. Upon receipt, no one took a step until looking inside the envelope and thumbing through the crisp bills. A particularly meticulous man took the content out and counted and recounted in front of the accountant. His look of incredulity softened to a shy smile. He said *Thank you* and bowed before leaving.

When Jinsoo came in, Mr. Choi said, "Jinsoo, come over here." He was still on the phone. He ended the conversation abruptly and hung up.

"I got a different job for you. It's a long drive, so let's get." Five-thirty in the morning, the sun a good hour away, most of the land still asleep, and yet Mr. Choi was in go-go mode.

Even riding shotgun on the dump truck, Jinsoo could feel the heft of a full load. The

engine seemed to growl at the slightest push.

“Still the top kid at school?” asked Mr. Choi.

“I haven’t been to school since I started working.”

Mr. Choi nodded. They rode in silence for a few minutes. Despite the silence, the two shared a tacit notion that a conversation had started and it would continue, albeit with long hiatuses.

“We all know what happened to your father. No one deserves that. Least of all, your father.”

Another intermission, much longer this time.

“I understand why you wouldn’t go to school anymore. You get a fancy education, do well with it, and then one day, boom, there’s a coup and all you’ve worked for is gone. Some get their education in school, but not me. I got mine working, digging, fighting, losing. And getting beat up.” He looked over to Jinsoo. “I got beat up a lot. So much so that people called me the ‘village drum.’ Mom, uncles, teachers, boys bigger than me. Even smaller boys, they’d get into a group of three or four and gang up on me. Those little shitheads.” He laughed.

“I must have been around ten. The teacher gave this homework, a little arts and crafts project. We had to take colored paper and cut out different shapes and glue them together, or something like that. Worthless school stuff. I went home, asked Mom if I could have a *won* to buy colored paper. She said we didn’t have that kind of money. That’s what she said. ‘We don’t have *that* kind of money.’ Then what kind of money did we have?”

“I went to school the next day, God forbid, with no colored-paper collage. I didn’t think much of it. Maybe a couple slaps on my palms. Those were as good as nothing to me back then.

But the teacher just went off. Had it been any other kid, I don't think she would've. I bet she thought, look who it is again? She'd had it with me. She had me stand on my desk. She took the flag down—the flag of our dear Korea!—and with the staff, she landed real good lashes on my calves. Ten of them. *Ta. Ta. Ta.*” He motioned the lashes with his hand.

“I didn't cry then. When I got home, Mom was sitting by the kitchen. I was so happy to see her. I wanted to hug her. Be hugged by her. So I ran to her. But when I got close, she saw my gashed up calves. She asked me what I did, so I told her that I didn't do my homework and the teacher whipped me for it. That set her off and she started spanking me. I got beat up for getting beat up. She kept yelling, ‘What am I gonna do with you?’ I started sobbing and screamed as loud as I could, ‘You said we don't have *that* kind of money!’ Her face right then. I'll never forget that face. I've caused her a lot of grief all my life, but never as much as I did right then. She hugged me. I buried my face in her dress. Then she went to the kitchen and boiled me an egg. I ate that egg like a birthday candy.”

Jinsoo hadn't suspected this story-telling side of Mr. Choi. Momentarily, it made him forget about the shouting-on-the-phone industrialist.

They stopped somewhere outside Ulsan, in front of a large mansion enclosed by walls two body-lengths high, topped with black metal spikes, over and behind which a house loomed.

“I'm going to back up to the gate,” said Mr. Choi. “Go out and signal when it's three meters away.”

Jinsoo jumped out and stood next to the gate. As the truck backed slowly, he waved his hand. Over the roaring exhaust pipe, he shouted *O-rye! O-rye!*—bastardized *Alright! Alright!*, another phrase he heard from grown men when directing trucks in reverse, and this, too, didn't

sound right coming from his mouth. All squeaks and youth.

*Sdohb! Sdohb!* (Stop! Stop!) The truck lurched to a halt.

“Jinsoo, step away!” Mr. Choi shooed, his stubby left arm sticking out from the window.

“Farther! Farther!”

When Mr. Choi pulled a lever, the hydraulics lifted the front end of the truck bed. Its movement was smooth, but it creaked, approaching and surpassing an improbable angle. The load held instead of sliding out the back. Mr. Choi kept his eyes on the side mirror. The front end kept rising. The creaks became less frequent and clanky, and more resonant as if they no longer came from the truck’s mouth but from its belly. Without any trigger, the tailgate swung around the top hinges and everything gushed out. A cascade of gravel blurred down. Mr. Choi quickly shifted the truck’s gear and crept forward, leaving a sizable mound of gravel behind. Only the tip of the palatial gate peeked above.

Mr. Choi came out and surveyed the entire scene. “*Kaaaahh!* That’s nice,” he said.

“What did he do?” Jinsoo saw that no one was being buried here.

“Ulsan High School’s brightest! How nice to talk to someone who’s got perception.

What do you think this bastard did?”

Jinsoo thought aloud, running off his heuristics. “Seeing the scale of this house, he’s not an employee of yours. Or a disgruntled former employee. It’s not a personal matter because leaving a big pile of gravel is public humiliation. And you just called him a bastard.” He paused to consider where to branch off to next. “He’s a business partner or a competitor.”

“Both.”

Jinsoo continued. “He took something from you. Or broke his promise. A deal that went

south. Backstabbing, bluffing. Nothing illegal. Just unsavory and unethical.”

“Ungentlemanly.” Mr. Choi’s word marked the end of Jinsoo’s game of sleuth. His stolid tone showed the deliberateness of his word choice. “Handshake. Trust. Your word. That’s what we have that animals don’t. He gave his word with intent to deceive. In that, he’s no better than a wild boar. But remember Jinsoo, even then we’re *yangban*,”—of noble birth and respectable upbringing—“not *ssangnom*, sending out muscle, going after the family. We don’t do that. We dump dirt, manage our anger, let them know how we feel and move on. Once I was so angry, I dumped fertilizer. It supposedly reeked for weeks.” He savored the memory. “I don’t do that anymore. I just stick to dirt.”

On the return leg, without any load in the back, the truck rattled along, the engine running in long, unhindered strokes. Along the way, Jinsoo saw a grave that he had dug and piled. Ensnared in the shadowy nexus where a wet rice field met the bottom of a mountain slope, it was barely visible to anyone unsuspecting. But Jinsoo knew it was his work. Signs of flora were beginning to set in on the grave. It looked like any other grave. He took that to mean he was doing his job well.

\* \* \* \* \*

The site was the crummiest he had seen yet. Mr. Choi had assigned it to him as a side job. *Stop by here on your way back from your morning job. It’s a quick one. No money in it for me.* Mr. Choi would say that every now and then. *No money in it for me.* Jinsoo never believed him. Mr. Choi ran a business, not a charitable organization. But when Jinsoo saw the site, he almost believed that even Mr. Choi wouldn’t try to squeeze a *won* from a job like this. Mr. Choi had also told Jinsoo, *Come see me after. I’m giving you a promotion.*

The site sat behind a crumbling barn hidden from the road, which didn't lend it a sense of quietude, but rather one of relegation, an eyesore to be kept unseen. The barn didn't seem to have housed livestock in some time. But the place smelled of manure. Rather than pungent, the odor was residual and persistent, embedded in the soil. Going away from the barn was a low hill rising, bald from overgrazing, except for a few other patches of withered grass. During the wet season, mud ran downslope. Though unintended, the barn proved to be a capable levee, stopping the flow of mud. Layers of mud had collected.

On his first stroke, the shovel's entire blade disappeared into the ground. The handle stuck out like a twiggy stump standing aslant. The supple ground made digging easy—too easy, even. His only concern was not to go too deep. He was done in no time. The edges weren't as straight as he would normally make them. But he remembered Mr. Choi's words: *no money in it*. It was good enough for no money.

Jinsoo didn't stay to lie down and eat persimmons and dates. The view wasn't worth a second look and the stench pushed him to seek relief elsewhere. He headed back to Mr. Choi's office. He thought of the promotion. He didn't quite know how to describe how he felt, but he was certain that it was about the best feeling he had ever had.

The day came with a slow wind easy to chase after. The sort of wind that stayed in girls' long, pretty hair before passing over. The tips of plum blossoms quivered with it. He skipped a little as he traced the creek downstream to Mr. Choi's office. The shovel on his shoulder bore no weight on him. Had he known how to whistle, he would have done that too. He ate his dates, two at a time. He spat the pits into the creek. They shot out of his mouth with a pop and drew a generous arc. "*Kaaahh.*"

Mr. Choi was alone in the office, sitting at his desk, leaning back and looking up at the ceiling. Cigarette smoke fumed from his mouth and nostrils, lingering, then dissipating into the late morning lull. Jinsoo's heart settled down. Promotion seemed like a funny word in that moment. *Pro-motion*, Jinsoo mouthed in his head.

Mr. Choi got up and put on his windbreaker. "Come."

They drove up the familiar creekside road, wide and unpaved, narrower unpaved roads branching from it. Jinsoo leaned back and softened his shoulders. He readied for another story from Mr. Choi, wondering what wisdom he could glean from this one. He waited, and waited. But the story never came. Mr. Choi drove hunched over the wheel and kept to himself.

A ceaseless black line of a railroad track hovered above the wispy rice fields. Soon they were driving on a narrower road along the track. Mr. Choi stopped when he neared a stalled freight train. No station was nearby. A handful of workers were gathered around the train's caboose. Mr. Choi reached for a crumpled pack of Lucky Strikes tucked in the corner of the dashboard and put it in his windbreaker pocket. Not saying anything, he got off the truck.

Mr. Choi approached the train workers in his typical fashion. Air of easy confidence, congeniality and authority, as if he knew they expected to be approached by him. He proffered the Lucky Strikes. No one refused. He cupped his hand around each to light it. He stood erect while the workers bent over slightly and lowered their heads.

He spoke, they listened. All business, minimal gesticulation. He seemed to quickly spot the man in charge in the group who could give him what he had come for. He zeroed in on this man and they quickly came to an understanding. Mr. Choi looked over to Jinsoo still sitting in the truck and beckoned him out with a smart, subtle nod.



The worker in charge led Mr. Choi and Jinsoo toward the front of the train. After looking furtively up and down the track, the worker climbed up a boxcar in one brilliant leap. He unlatched the side door and slid it open. The door glided like a heavy object on a frictionless surface. The worker disappeared into the shadow of the boxcar. After a few moments, he re-emerged, dragging a rustic hexagonal coffin that was a shade darker than the shadow of the boxcar.

“Came in this morning from Seoul,” the worker said.

“I need to look inside for verification,” said Mr. Choi.

The worker hesitated a little, but didn’t retort. He went into the shadow again, made clinking sounds, and came back with a crowbar. He stood at the head of the coffin, his feet more than shoulder-width apart, and readied to stab it with the crowbar.

“No, not there. Down there.” Mr. Choi pointed to the foot of the coffin.

“But to verify, don’t you want to see...”

“No. Down there.”

The worker walked to the narrow end of the box. He jabbed the crowbar into the side and wedged it firmly between the box and the lid. With one pushdown on the crowbar, the coffin pried open.

Mr. Choi pulled himself up to the boxcar. The motion, as with his shoveling, had inexplicable effortlessness about it. The worker kept at it, taking the crowbar around the coffin to undo the whole top. Mr. Choi put his hand on the worker’s arm. The worker stopped. Mr. Choi gently took the crowbar from his grasp and took it back to the foot of the box. He put his foot on the box and hooked the bent end of the crowbar on the lid. He gave it a good jerk. The

coffin's top hinged like an alligator's mouth. He knelt down and peeked into the box, dark and hardly anything visible.

“Thank you. We'll take it from here,” said Mr. Choi, as he stood up.

The worker bowed—fully to Mr. Choi, half-assedly to Jinsoo—and jumped off the boxcar and walked down the track to rejoin the loitering workers.

Mr. Choi reached into the coffin and brought out a pair of shoes. Black leather, dusty and scuffed, dirty but with a cleaner past. Around the welted soles, dirt and mud had hardened to look like barnacles on a seashell. The laces were tied. He set them down on the floor of the car in front of Jinsoo, at his eye level.

“These belong to you now.”

Jinsoo looked at his father's brogues, the pair that used to sit next to his mother's *gomushin*. A depleting wave started at his feet and climbed up his body. His throat clenched, pushing against the wave. His brow distorted to make deep furrows. His face carried the strength his legs couldn't hold. He kept himself from crying. Jinsoo stood there and looked at his father's shoes.

Mr. Choi came down from the boxcar. He kept his distance. He muttered words of comfort as if he didn't want Jinsoo to hear. Mr. Choi took the brogues and sat on the ground, a couple steps from Jinsoo to create his own quiet space.

Mr. Choi clapped the brogues' soles against each other. Large dirt crumbs fell. He set the brogues on the ground, between his legs. He untied and yanked his own right shoe off and set it aside. He took off his sock—black, summery, thin, hitting just below the knee—and rolled it over his right hand and forearm like a puppet. He put his other hand in one of the dirty

brogues. He gave it a light spit and began to polish. His brisk strokes dug into the clumped dirt. Peeling away that layer of filth gave way to something less crude—dried black leather like the wizened hands of a carpenter. He spat again, this time more substantive. He worked the moisture into the microcracks. The leather reabsorbed its forgotten traits. Suppleness and give. He turned the shoe, so the heel faced skyward. He cleaned the back of the shoe, his effort more vigorous than before. The leather softened, but the dullness remained. He continued to polish. Instead of vigorous, the strokes were now light and swift, barely touching the shoe's surface. They wiped away the dullness to reveal a slight sheen. When he tilted the shoe, the gleam of the patina danced under the country sunlight.

He finished polishing, then handed the shoes to Jinsoo.

“Come.”

They carried the coffin back to the truck.

## 5. Karoshi, Heartbreak, Melancholia

The husband of Mrs. D's official cause of death was overwork. The coroner had signed off on it in breezy cursive with a flourish indecent for the occasion. The signature practically pranced across the bottom of the death certificate. Mrs. D was irked at the thought of an insentient bureaucrat validating her husband's death in haste or, worse yet, with enthusiasm. Mrs. D's husband had started at the firm as a young man and, at the time of his death seven years later, was on the cusp of managing directorship. To be precise, he died two business days removed from the board's up-and-down vote, which was expected to be unanimous in his favor. Such expeditious rank-climbing was unprecedented at the firm. Mrs. D's husband was always quick to attribute his success to hard work, outworking everyone on the payroll, working late nights and most weekends, working on the express commuter train to and from the office, on the kitchen island, on the bed, on the toilet, and half submerged in the soaking tub. Even when making love, Mrs. D had suspected, he was working in his head, devising ways to increase revenue in the international market in excess of the board's expectations, numbers and bar graphs flashing inside his closed eyes. But these were expected of a man who would die of overwork. Despite the apparent haste, the coroner had pronounced correctly.

Because of her husband's standing in the firm, Mrs. D and her son had claims to generous life insurance payments, which were disbursed monthly in the full amount of her husband's net compensation at the time of his death. In fact, the firm's board volunteered to calculate the benefit payments based on the substantially higher salary he would've received as managing

director. Mrs. D accepted the arrangement—who would say no to that?—but couldn't rid the thought that the gesture was the board's tacit admission that the firm was in part to blame for her husband's death. Ever responsible and risk-averse, Mrs. D's husband had purchased additional life insurance in the form of perpetuity, whose remittances exceeded those from the firm's life insurance. In short, Mrs. D's household income tripled after her husband's death.

The persistent cold of that winter, which ran through the spring months, seemed to prolong Mrs. D's grieving. She went outside only to walk her son to and from school, during which her son, surely sensing his mother's loss, as well as to overcome his own, sang silly, repetitive songs he learned in school.

*Dates fall, dates roll. Dates fall, dates roll.*

*Dates roll down and hit a pear pole.*

*Pears fall, pears roll—and on and on.*

She subsisted on sassafras tea and apricot compote on crackers. A woman of slight frame to begin with, she turned gaunt, mere skin and bones. Other parents at her son's school brought her generous portions of hearty home-cooked food along with their words of concern and distant optimism. They gave her pot roast and sweet potato casserole, vegan poutine and shepherd's pie. She accepted them gratefully, but didn't eat any, only keeping enough to feed her son and throwing away the rest.

Mrs. D's living expenses dwindled. The costs of sassafras leaves, apricot compote, and crackers were negligible compared to the new moneys coming into her bank account. She began to see her apartment, where she and her husband had lived together for a decade until his death, as a relic of her dead husband and her past life with him. The kitchen table where he worked late

nights while slurping through two boxes of Chinese takeout. The bed where they had sex, which now thinking back on it, lovingly rather than perfunctorily. The soaking tub, the sweetspot in the middle of the couch where he preferred to sit, the dim floor lamp he'd always turn on first thing once home. Even the creaks of certain door hinges and the drips of loose faucets. Overwhelmed by his reminders, Mrs. D and her son took a long vacation. They went from one island state to another, their comings and goings governed by whim alone, on a chartered sailboat with a crew of fifteen waiting on them hand and foot.

The trip enlivened Mrs. D's spirits. When she returned to her apartment, she decided, as soon as she entered, to move to a new apartment. She longed to live free of any reminders of her dead husband. She hired a realtor, who, after discussing Mrs. D's finances, showed her a unit on the sixtieth floor in a historical landmark building. The apartment overlooked a majestic and immaculate city garden on one side, and on the other, the serene blue waters of an immense lake. As Mrs. D stood looking out to the lake, the realtor told her that the adjacent unit was also on the market and suggested knocking down the wall. "From that unit's balcony, you can see the mountains," said the realtor. Mrs. D did as the realtor suggested.

Mrs. D bought new furniture to fill her new apartment with city, lake, and mountain views. She had the austere cherrywood kitchen cabinets removed, and ordered ones finished in cherry-red lacquer that gleamed in the sunlight. Her clothes seemed too plain—too wifely, she thought—for the new apartment, so she filled her closet with new bespoke dresses of every season, in every color, except black. The dresses fell exquisitely on her figure, which was no longer gaunt, but lean and lithe. She splurged on herself and her son. She bought a sea-green roadster with a hand-restored air-cooled engine, along with a pair of hand-stitched deerskin

driving gloves. Her son asked for a puppy, so she bought him ten and hired a full-time help. She'd never seen a bigger smile on his face.

One day Mrs. D told her son, "I miss your father very much. I'd give all we have to spend a day with him. Wouldn't you? My dear son, don't be given over to your vocation. But live for love and those who love you."

To which her son replied, "But if my father hadn't worked so hard, we wouldn't have this apartment, and I wouldn't have my ten puppies."

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The son of Mrs. D, the husband of Dr. K died of a broken heart. Dr. K's husband was a man of restrained ambitions in worldly matters. He was no shirk, but he aimed for happy mediocrity, doing just enough to provide for his wife and daughter. He refused promotions at work, opting for fewer responsibilities and less hours over higher pay and more prestigious work. He matter-of-factly declined invitations to extraneous work functions—out-of-town conferences, happy hours, office parties. His one concession was the firm's annual winter gala at a ritzy hotel's rotating rooftop, but only because Dr. K looked forward to such things as galas and rotating rooftops. Dr. K was his delight, the source of his life's joy and meaning. His love toward her was worshipful. In the mornings, he dressed Dr. K as she still lay in bed, waiting for her to stretch her limbs in just the right configuration so he could quickly slip on a leg here and an arm there. In the evenings, he came home from work on the first express commuter train and ran a hot bath for her. While the tub filled, he prepared savory dishes seasoned to her taste.

When Dr. K called from the tub, he came and lathered her body with Egyptian bath cream, rubbed her shoulders, and playfully pinched her toes, during which she was wont to doze off to his rendition of Puccini arias sung contralto sotto voce. His singing faded out as he carefully tiptoed backward out of the bathroom, put on his trench coat, and went to pick up their daughter from school.

Overburdened with outpourings of affection she couldn't return even in part, Dr. K set her mind to have affairs. The first successful one took place at her husband's firm's winter gala where the floor slowly rotated clockwise. She saw her husband standing still, rotating by a fern. Next to him, though not interacting with him, stood a man with benign looks and, all things considered, a general impression not much different from her husband. But that night she chose the other man.

Dr. K and her husband went about their life and marriage unaffected by the affair. It was a one-time deal and she had no trouble keeping it a secret. Her husband kept his ways of adoration. He refused another promotion, so that even after fifteen years at the firm, he was still doing the entry-level work he'd started with. His peers were fifteen years younger than him, thus not his peers. His supervisor was a decade his junior, wore a brass belt buckle as big and thick as a fist, and broke out in plump, poppable pimples after a night of dark beers and dark chocolates in tasting portions. Dr. K's husband continued to dress her in the bed in the morning and serenade her in the bathtub in the evening.

But in time Dr. K's affairs crossed the threshold from cleanly severed one-timers to a convoluted enterprise of trysts, getaways, and coded messages on secondary phone lines, each with its unique set of lies, pretexts, and exit plans for when things soured, as they surely would.



It was a basic scheduling nightmare. When she reached having four men to juggle—back to back weekend nights in different cities with regional airports, brunch and happy hour double-header, on top of four unique sets of phone lines, lies, and names—she waited until her daughter went to sleep, then told her husband of her affairs. She delivered her confession with sincere contrition, for the act of confessing made her plainly see that her infidelities caused deep pain in her husband. Upon hearing her, he wept like a child. Two days later, Dr. K's husband died of a broken heart.

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Yebin-Ambreen, the daughter of Dr. K, the granddaughter of Mrs. D, would become a writer of little renown and eventually die of melancholia. She was well versed in the fates of her forefathers. Their lore had been passed on with talmudic rigor and caution by her mother, Dr. K. Yebin-Ambreen learned of her pragmatist grandfather who had been a lover of industry and worldly validation. Lesson: Don't be given over to your vocation lest you lose your life. She learned of her romantic father who had lived for love and died from it. Lesson: Fall in love at your own peril. Dr. K had her own wisdom to impart to Yebin-Ambreen from her life. She said to follow politics, but never vote straight ticket. Seldom drink, but make each count. Don't ever, *ever* gamble. But if you must, go to the jai alai fronton where the truly degenerate will desperately fill any bet, no matter the odds. Dr. K died of natural causes. She was forty-two. Yebin-Ambreen was eighteen.

In college Yebin-Ambreen excelled in her studies. She readily took to subjects suitable for measured intellect: econometrics and statistics. Because these were also the subjects typically thrust upon young men from respectable merchant families who carried a vague sense of obligation for material success, she was often surrounded by young men of such ilk. Their romantic advances were frequent, and varied in degree and in kind. A bold classmate, who wore shorts year-round, even on days when snow fell sideways, approached her directly given the merest opening. He'd sit next to her in class, sideways facing her, and tell her how smitten he was with her outer beauty and that he could only imagine how much more smitten he would be with her inner beauty. He'd sprint across the street, halting cars and bicycles, to praise her brown eyes, her short brown hair, her ordinary looking ears, or some bodily feature she least expected. "But none can hold a candle to your inner beauty," he'd say. On days of indomitable beauty—bluebirds whistling in trees, a redbrick belfry swathed in newly sprouted tendrils—the brave young man professed his love. His loud voice echoed off the tree barks and the belfry walls. Most other sons of respectable merchants were either more tactful or less impassioned, so in need of some pretext to engage. They came to her when she ate alone in the cafeteria, and asked questions about some finer point in the professor's lecture that hadn't been made clear to them. They suddenly appeared before her in the Mathematics and Statistics Library's southeast wing, where hardly any students came since it was too cold in winter and too hot in summer, and accessible only via a network of circuitous underground passageways. Yebin-Ambreen liked the old wing's unseasonable chill and warmth, and the consequent solitude. But there they were, the tactful sons of merchants sidling up to her, taking her by surprise, asking whether she needed help with her regression and heteroscedasticity problem set, and if not, could *she* help them with

theirs. Then there were those faceless young men lacking in courage, leaving at her door anonymous notes of adoration—quite a few of them went on at length about her ears—and bouquets of daisies and lavender.

Yebin-Ambreen deflected and redirected their overtures to shallow platonic relations of friendly acquaintances and classmates, a delicate feat she accomplished so deftly that, even while dashing their amorous prospects, she never offended the young sons of merchants. A rumor spread that she had a suitor of unimpeachable character and credentials back in her hometown. The young men’s buzzing about her gradually became infrequent and docile, though it never stopped altogether.

Near graduation, she was recruited by a preeminent financier after whom were named the university’s concert hall, the newly built glass-dome library, and the period-authentic rococo building that housed the departments of Mathematics and Statistics. The financier invited her for an interview. He said, given her highest academic marks and commendations from professors, the interview would be a mere formality. A day before the interview, she went to a boutique with as many mannequins as clothes. There she picked out to try a pair of jacquard cropped trousers that she thought would go well with what she was wearing: a white aggressively-collared button-down shirt and navy-blue wool jacket. She held up the trousers, and one of several sales consultants approved, saying, “What a perfect ensemble.” When Yebin-Ambreen walked out of the dressing room with the trousers on, the sales consultant shook her head and brought another same trousers but one size down. Even though they cost more than all the clothes in her closet, she bought the trousers without any misgivings.

At the interview, the financier laid out the firm's philosophy ("outmanned, but never outgunned"—the firm, despite its prominence, had very few employees), its culture ("don't pick your battles; fight them all"), and how hard she'd be expected to work and how handsomely she'd be remunerated, beginning with her signing bonus. Yebin-Ambreen listened. When the time came for her to speak, she told the financier that nothing about his firm or the job fit her sense of her life. She left the interview with only a new pair of perfect-fitting jacquard trousers to show for it.

A few days after the interview, but before her graduation, the bold son of a merchant approached Yebin-Ambreen for what would be the final time. Bluebirds were singing and the bells were tintinnabulating, so he professed his love. For the first time, she saw that his words were heartfelt and not just meaningless rhetoric. She pitied him for she saw that he really did love her, that he really was smitten with her inner beauty. Yebin-Ambreen listened. When the time came for her to speak, she told the bold son of a respectable merchant that his love, and their being in love, didn't fit her sense of her life. She left him amidst the bluebirds and bells.

Upon graduation Yebin-Ambreen moved far inland. She settled into an A-frame cabin near the midpoint between the two oceans that flanked the enormous land. There were no mountains nearby. Only a wide muddy river ran behind the cabin. In her solitude she wrote poetry, loosely, if only because her many thoughts fell on her at once, as an affront to the one-word-after-another conventions of grammar and syntax. She wrote in a great rush, as if trying to fit an avalanche of her meditations through the nib of her pen. Any one of her poems was about many things, about everything and nothing, digressive and intensely focused, all at once. Her earliest attempt, for example, was musings on the simplicity and symmetry of the bell curve, that

the natural world would tend toward beauty, that it would choose an elegant bell over, say, a brutal rhombus. Simultaneously the poem was about the muddy river along whose bank she took long, aimless morning and evening walks. In the poem, she described eddies decaying into a turbulent cascade, and vortices and their mysterious origins, all of them muddy. She wrote of a leafless tree that leaned over the water, which in turn was eroding the soil around its roots. The poem also went on, rather explicitly, about her once philandering mother's betrayals of her father. Yebin-Ambreen managed to pack all those into seven lines. She read it once over and thought it was quite good, and not as incoherent as she had feared. Then she read it again, this time aloud. It sounded even better. She read the poem once more, expecting it to have deteriorated in some way. But it was still more lovely. That night, she went to bed in a state of peaceful elation, reciting the poem's words in her head until she fell into a dreamless sleep.

The following day she took the poem with her on the morning river walk. She folded it in half and tucked it in the shallow pocket of her jacquard cropped trousers. When she came to the leaning leafless tree, she read her poem. Not half way through the seven-line poem, she began to think how overwrought, how incorrigible, how prosaic! She read it twice more, each time sounding worse than the last despite her hope for otherwise. In fury she tossed the poem into the muddy current and yelled a damning pronouncement. "May you never..." but the poem had gone too far downstream to catch the end of it.

Yebin-Ambreen wrote assiduously, the two daily walks her sole reprieve. For some time, her days followed the pattern of writing poems, going to sleep deeply satisfied, despairing upon reading the poems on her morning walk, then writing again. But she kept at it. Though she still wrote in a great rush, she revised meticulously, turning each phrase several times over, rolling it

on her tongue, considering then reconsidering, then reconsidering yet again. By and by she noticed improvement in her poems even though they were still overwrought, incorrigible, and prosaic. She concluded that it wasn't her poems that had improved, but rather her disposition toward them. Emboldened by this change in outlook, she dedicated even more of herself to writing poetry. She subsisted on sassafras tea and apricot compote on crackers. Her river walks were no longer aimless. They became another stage for her mind's words to sing and leap. She brought along a pen and notepad, and jotted down new thoughts and images and turns of phrase that came to her, afraid they would swiftly dissipate and never return. Her river walks became longer, sometimes lasting from dawn through dusk. She was composing most of her poems in her head during these walks and coming home to transcribe them. Sitting at her desk, she wrote feverishly, as if possessed, as if the words were dictated to her by an impatient and spitting God. Three months after throwing her first poem into the muddy river, she wrote the last piece of what had become a lengthy poetry collection.

Upon its publication, one critic at an influential quarterly called Yebin-Ambreen's collection "incorrigible vers libre." The critic went on to say her poems were an exercise in "linguistic simultaneity deathly afraid of leaving anything unlimned and unalluded to in the nanosecond it's been allotted." Another critic mused that in form and scale, the collection was a "gesture toward *joie de vivre*, but with none of the *joie* or the *vivre*. But who wishes to meddle in the business of *joie* and *vivre*?" Still another called it a "cerebral regurgitation after a Joycean bender"; at various times, the review described it as scatological and diuretic. Other reviews were more or less in the same vein, neither outright praising nor categorically dismissive, where their judgments were cloaked in words like "incorrigible" and "scatological" and depended on

with what flavor to construe them. In total ninety-three copies were sold. She was longlisted for a prose poetry prize for women writers under thirty. She felt validated and continued to write.

Eleven months later, Yebin-Ambreen mailed to the publisher her new book's manuscript, which she had exactingly cut from over two thousand pages to tightly engineered 798 pages. She was unsure what to call it. It wasn't the kind of regurgitative free verse of her first collection. It mostly adhered to the conventions of grammar and syntax. It had a faintly detectable plot of a well-off, middle-age family man dying of overwork. Stylistically it was all over the place—minimalist, recursive, postmodern, neo-avant-garde, meta-neo-avant-garde. Structurally it was digressive, fractal-like. She simply called it a book.

The publisher's reply arrived quickly, perhaps too quickly given the manuscript's length and heft. The note was curt and advised that the story "about your grandfather would be better served as a non-fiction wherein the plot and the man's psychological struggles are more easily gleaned." In the postscript was a "friendly reminder" that her first book sold "about fifty copies." She had made no mention of herself in the manuscript, so she wondered how the publisher came to believe the book was a story about her grandfather, which it wasn't. She also wondered why the publisher rounded ninety-three down to "about fifty" instead of more sensibly rounding up to "about a hundred."

She wrote a long reply. She told the publisher in no uncertain terms that her book wasn't a story of her grandfather, despite the factual (co)incidence that her grandfather's cause of death was overwork. That she had no interest in writing *about* her grandfather. That, in fact, she found the subgenre of progenitorial derivative to be hackneyed and self-congratulatory, an insufferable bore to read and a certain, torturous death to write. The book was her own, of her imagination.

Insofar as the book had to be *about* something, it was about living, about dying, about *joie de vivre*, about living in the throes of writing, but even then she resisted reducing it to such sweeping forces. As for the commercial concern of turning a profit from selling the book, which she admitted the publisher hadn't mentioned, but insinuated rather clumsily in the postscript, she called it the Siren song that will lead to the demise of everything good and right in the world. "Those grubby fingers of yours, sheathed in the sticky green product you put on nightly, hot after the silver and gold coins, like fish after wetness, tingling over the prospect of selling a tragic true-story book, which is all the rage these days, doubtlessly already counting the money from the translation and movie rights—bind those fingers of yours to the mast and cast them in wax!" She wrote all that to the publisher.

Upon publication, Yebin-Ambreen's second book received little attention. Only a handful of reviews were written, the critic from the influential quarterly a notable exclusion. One critic observed that the book exhibited "growing pains of a young talent writing her way out of a sophomore slump," the most telling sign of which was its obsessive self-consciousness, at every turn trying to distance itself from her first volume, thus "tethering itself to the shadow of that first volume, like a theologian's son who believes he denies God despite his father, when in fact he denies God *because* of his father." Another review was only nominally about the book. The critic repeatedly springboarded off the book to bemoan the contemporary literary milieu. After the beginning two paragraphs, the review read more like a manifesto and made no further mention of Yebin-Ambreen's second book. The book didn't sell as well as her first. Neither she nor the book was up for any prize.



Her third book, a thick volume composed of love poems, would take twelve years to finish. As most love poems go, they had little to do with love—the kind of love one imagines in star-beaming eyes and tingling caresses—for, to be sure, she knew nothing of that love. The poems’ concerns, instead, were love’s yearning and betrayal, and the irreparable void after the betrayal. Writing these poems devastated her spirits, sometimes for days and weeks, sometimes to no end. She still composed them in her head while walking by the muddy river. She wept, however seldom, by the leafless leaning tree, whose roots had further eroded.

Over time her river walks shortened. And once she was back in the A-frame cabin, the compulsion to write in a great rush—dictating the words from God!—gradually deserted her. Gone were the prolific days of writing a dozen pages or more between her morning and evening walks. Now she sat at her desk and lingered. Some days she ate more apricot compote smeared crackers than wrote words. She found herself, quite unexpectedly one day, at the desk with a jar of apricot compote in her lap and her finger circling the bottom of the jar. That day she wrote down six words; the next day she crossed out all six words. With the poems she found especially intractable, after weeks of struggling to find a way forward, she left them unfinished, mid-thought, mid-clause, or mid-word. This was the case with many poems in the second half of the volume. In fact, the final poem, thus the book itself ended amid a splitting infinitive.

Yebin-Ambreen mailed the manuscript to the publisher. It went to press a month later without any edits or ado. The book received one review from a young critic at a recently founded triannual. The critic seemed unfamiliar with her previous books, calling her “a new voice intent on resurrecting love poetry, but only after first murdering it.” This would be Yebin-Ambreen’s last published work.

Long after the publication of her third volume, but while she was still very much alive, the Metropolitan Arts Society, which counted among its patrons the city's most prominent tycoons and financiers, held a monthlong retrospective on little known female artists whose works were inspired by their ancestral bind. (The Society's theme that year was Obscurity.) The retrospective's marquee artist was an oil painter. Her first painting was titled *Mother and Child #1*, and her 200th and last, *Mother and Child #200*. All two hundred paintings were in exhibit at the retrospective, painstakingly procured from little known museum and private collections in all parts of the world. The program's half-page write-up on Yebin-Ambreen mentioned her three books and their apparent tribute to her father who died of a broken heart and her grandfather who died of overwork. The most curious feature of the write-up were the years in parentheses next to her name, indicating that she had been dead for four years.

People speculated about the cause of her death. They acknowledged that her early years, when writing possessed her and she produced books of prodigious length and complexity at a clip that seemed to defy the given number of hours in a day, must have partially contributed to her eventual death. They also agreed that her later years, when she wrote love poems in great anguish, probably led in part to her death. But they concluded, in the main, the cause of her death was melancholia.

## 6. Infinite

You shiver standing poolside in your swimming trunk. You shiver despite the breezeless warmth of early June's morning. You shiver despite the sun peeking over the greened copper roof of the school's pool house, not blazing, never blazing, but reliably decent, adequate, Midwestern. You shiver a good hug-yourself-and-rub-your-arms shiver. Your body retreats into itself to minimize exposure to the chill. The kids around you are shivering, too. Some are walking in place, waiting to be thawed. The morning warmth of early June isn't quite warmth enough, not a warmth that seeps into the skin, but rather hovers overhead, only portending the real warmth of midday, or with more forethought, of August. You see the three flagpoles sticking above and beyond the pool's privacy hedges. Old Glory and the Ohio Burgee are hoisted high, though drooped and sad without any breeze. You wonder why the royal blue school flag is at half-staff. You have some misgivings about how the first day of summer school will go—it'll turn out fine for you, as will the rest of the summer—but that hardly explains anything. Not the cravenly retreat into your body, nor the shivering. The cement floor under your feet is wet with cold pool water.

The boys have on trunks of varying lengths—boardshorts with big, bright-colored prints that hit mid-shin; Speedos that only accentuate and magnify the one part they purport to cover. You are wearing an inconspicuous mid-length in dull blue that diverts undue attention. The girls are split evenly between conservative one-pieces and still, somehow, conservative two-pieces.

You think how odd to see familiar people with their skins bare, as if sensing a shift in some basic terms.

You stand between two one-piece girls, close enough that your arm's goosebumps graze one of the girls' downy arm. You survey those around you, their bodies made of unwieldy limbs and adolescent protrusions, their bodies pale, almost translucent like the snake's underbelly, ready to take on color for the summer. Once, after fooling around with Alison Lane in her room, on her bed, while her mom was somewhere in the house—*she doesn't care*, said Alison Lane—you stared at her body lying next to you, pale and lanky, translucent and protruding. Your body braided and pressed against hers. The contrast was easy to see in the unforgiving daylight coming through her sheer-curtained window. You thought how yellow. Actually yellow. You looked at your hairless, pubescent torso next to Alison Lane's full porcelain-white bosom, and thought how yellow. Your thighs next to her milky-white thighs, your arms next to hers, all how yellow. So you told her. But she saw it differently. She saw you and she were the same.

You hear the downy-arm one-piece girl next to you talking to a two-piece girl next to her, something about too early to be getting in the pool. The two-piece girl replies that her swim team practices start at five-thirty every morning except Sundays, so she's used to it. You hear one of them snap on her latex swim cap. You stand there keep hugging yourself and rubbing your arms.

The last stragglers run out from the changing rooms. A uncapped boy with long hair is shod in long blue flippers and makes a show of running in them, lifting his knees high like a clumsy cartoon miscreant, each step synced to a tuba fart. Dr. Palmer blows his whistle and reminds there is no running around the pool. He shakes his head at the flippers and writes

something on his clipboard. A girl in a charcoal grey two-piece comes running and finds her place in front of you.

Dr. Palmer demonstrates pre-swim stretches. They start off basic. You extend your arms in front of you and interlace your fingers. Then you push, the palm-side out, and then push further. You feel, or perhaps merely imagine feeling, your shoulder blades sticking out. You see it happening with the two-piece in front of you. They protrude so far out that you think they might pierce through her skin. You see why they're called blades. Then slowly—*slow, slow!!* says Dr. Palmer—you take your arms up and feel the shoulders and sides stretch. You notice a bit of Dr. Palmer's white belly peeking out between his royal blue polo shirt and his square royal blue shorts.

That a girl died in this pool last summer is a memory that you have, but one seldom called upon. The *Dispatch* dedicated full-page spreads to the tragedy in its immediate aftermath and serialized opinion columns and investigative reports for months after. The girl's death headlined Channels Two, Five, and Six's evening news for most of the following week—she died on a Sunday. You would start out watching Channel Five, whose team of anchorwoman, anchorman, meteorologist, and sports guy you'd long ago inexplicably deemed most trustworthy. Then during commercials you'd switch to Channel Two or Six, and watch what was essentially a repeat of what you had just watched on Channel Five, except now delivered by the news team at Channel Two or Six. You watched with the curiosity of a thief. The details, some horrific—at which you cringed, but couldn't get enough of—some of the benign administrative sort, came forth piecemeal and, once compiled, revealed an unlikely string of mishaps, oversights, and plain bad luck that led to the girl's death. *A perfect storm of unfortunate events*, said the Channel Five

anchorwoman. The girl and her dad had entered the pool at 7:14 a.m., according the timestamp on their ten-pass punch card, whose saving amounted to two free days when compared to paying for each of the ten days separately. Only a very few people were at the pool that early in the morning. A sparsely attended 7 a.m. aqua aerobics class was in session at the shallow end of the side pool. Two wife-and-husband amateur triathletes in full-body wetsuits were swimming steady laps in the middle two lanes at the main short-course pool. Denise Shoemaker, the little girl, was five years old and sporting a new pink snorkel that her dad had just unboxed in the family changing room. A brand new snorkel for the new pool season. The only on-duty lifeguard, a high school sophomore and a newbie on his second day on the job, minded the geriatrics in the aqua aerobics class, as specifically requested by the instructor that morning between 6:45 a.m. and 6:55 a.m., and neglected for intervals up to three minutes the kiddie pool where Denise Shoemaker was. Another more experienced lifeguard was on the schedule to be on-duty also, but he was perpetually late for his early morning shifts, which in reality—with the glaring caveat of the Denise Shoemaker incident—seemed to matter little since so few pool patrons came that early. He typically clocked in, based on his time-card history, between 7:26 a.m. and 7:43 a.m., well ahead of the first rush of people, consisting of kids in the Rovers and Cruisers swim classes, which started at 8:15 a.m. The tardy/no-show/truant lifeguard got a lot of flak following the death of Denise Shoemaker. In fact tardy, no-show, and truant were some of the monikers the local TV news outlets ran—for example, Channel Five stuck with “TRUANT LIFEGUARD”—along with his name and low-res, blown-up yearbook picture. He declined all interviews. He couldn’t be, so wasn’t, charged with any unlawfulness. However, the community meted out its subtle, lasting moral judgment. A six-year veteran lifeguard at the pool with a good

shot at becoming the next seasonally salaried shift supervisor, he was promptly fired. On the Lifeguard of the Year plaque next to the pool office, his two engraved brass nameplates were first taped over, then eventually removed. Soon after his termination, he moved to a coastal or mountain town in the Pacific Northwest.

Denise Shoemaker's dad, copiously sunscreensed and bespectacled in reflective green aviators, was sitting in a deck chair by the pool, half reading the current issue of *Golf Digest* and half reveling in the simple pleasures of a morning at the pool with his daughter, Daddy's little girl, cutie pumpkin, honey boo boo, schmunchkin, doodle-bug, his little Denise. He, moreover, probably looked her way once or twice, for no other reason than to ascertain that his little Denise's life was not in peril, even as her lungs filled up with the baby blue pool water that seeped through the cracked mouthpiece of the new pink snorkel. She flailed and kicked vigorously. But she'd always been a ball of energy, a fearless tomboy, a happily obedient child who kicked vigorously in the pool because her dad had taught her, *kick harder and you go faster*. Denise Shoemaker's dad saw the flailing and kicking, and thought yet another snapshot capturing life and play bursting forth from his raucous daughter, while it in fact meant the very opposite. Only when she ceased kicking, flailing, and moving altogether, her still body afloat just beneath the baby blue surface, did her father jump in, then the newbie lifeguard. Denise Shoemaker died with the new pink snorkel's mouthpiece in her mouth. The county police investigators found the plastic mold packaging of the snorkel in the family changing room's trash can. The *Dispatch* ran several follow-up stories on the dangers of that particular brand of snorkels. Last you read, a lawsuit is pending.

You thought how terrible that such a young girl had to die, and that it had to happen in front of her dad, who would surely shoulder all the blame and refuse any path to atonement. You thought how terrible that you sense a tinge of sympathy—a sinister and potent tinge—for the truant lifeguard who was, as no one would deny, forced out of town. You thought how terrible the mild and perverse excitement you derived from seeking, unearthing, and worst of all, imagining every detail, from the mundane to the lurid. You imagined her dad’s sunglasses, his *Golf Digest* with wet spots. You also imagined her floating body, facedown, limbs splayed in a snow angel, motionless save the lulling bob with the dying ripples from the last of her vigorous kicks.

Dr. Palmer has moved on to stretching the triceps and upper back. This one is a little more involved. Your right arm stretches back over the right shoulder, so the elbow points straight up, and you can touch your shoulder blades. Your left hand reaches back from the side and touches the small of your back. From there, it crawls as high as it can on your back. The charcoal two-piece girl in front of you, whose shoulder blades were on the verge of cutting through moments before, must be double-jointed or merely freakishly flexible because her hands go way past each other until they’re clasping her elbows. Your hands bare meet and you have to really extend to make them lock. You feel a good stretch. After a five count, Dr. Palmer says, *Switch!* But you can’t do it the other way—left arm over, right arm under—which means you need to improve flexibility in your right shoulder. Switching makes no difference to the charcoal grey two-piece, double-jointed girl in front of you.

You see the pool’s surface shimmer under the decent morning sun. Beneath is infinite baby blue, ocean deep. If you were to stand at the edge with your toes hanging over and look



straight down, you'd see the fleeting ripple of a tiny insect alighting. You'd see the translucent and yellow reflection of your face rocking gently and being distorted in all kinds of amusing ways. You'd hear the slurping and gulping of the skimmer. You'd smell the chlorine and think it oddly appetizing. But you won't see the bottom of the baby blue. You won't know how deep the baby blue goes.

\* \* \*

You and Alison Lane are alone at her house, lolling in a chaise longue by the infinity pool. You ask Alison Lane when her parents are coming back. You haven't seen them all day. *The fuck I know*, she says. You like the sound of that coming from her mouth. Alison Lane's mouth. Easily a top-five popular girl in the school, which makes you a top-something popular guy, a varsity softball starter as a freshman, a youth group leader at her Methodist church, who will be voted Homecoming Queen and graduate salutatorian, but here she is the-fuck-I-know-ing with you. You like it because Alison Lane the future Queen and salutatorian is trying with you. You see that her body has taken on summer colors. You don't seem so yellow anymore, but you've taken on some color. She gets up and walks toward the pool. She enters the water hardly breaking the still surface. She swims to the other side. She makes no sound or splash.

You sit up on the metal-mesh chaise longue and look past the infinity pool, past Alison Lane, to Muirfield's famed eleventh hole. A brook winds through the fairway. Across the brook runs a crude pedestrian bridge, a layer of gravel laid on steel planks like the kind you see beneath freeway overpasses, only shorter and thinner. You take a sip from the can of lukewarm, fizzless

Coca-Cola you've been nursing since midday. You get a hint of the chlorine-treated pool water. Alison Lane is at the infinity edge of the pool. Her back is turned to you, and she is submerged from the shoulders down, as are the tips of her wet glistening hair draping the back of her neck and shoulders. She is looking out to the eleventh hole, the brook and the bridge, the inert yellow triangle flag, and anything beyond, unless she has her eyes closed, which seems likely since she's in the path of the setting sun. She looks to you but a silhouette. *Come*, she says, and slips into the water, no sound or splash.

The water is ankle-deep when you stand on the first of the blue-tile steps. You let the cold water lap over your feet for a little. You take two more steps and the water touches your knee caps. Your cargo shorts are still dry, though no such luck if you were wearing pants, or harsh luck if wearing fancy pants made of wool, silk, or suede. You wade in farther, just one step, to the last of the blue-tile steps and the still water belts around your waist, which feels funny on your belly button. You wonder whether it'd make more sense to undress since your shorts and underwear are now wet, though not in a gross way because the water is cold. You ford along until your heart is underwater, where sound travels well and nothing is ever perfectly silent. Alison Lane can probably hear your heart beat. Two more steps and you're past the big drop-off. Your head, thus all of you, is submerged, your ears blocked and your eyes pinched shut. Go on and open your eyes. They'll burn a little but suffer no great harm, so go on and open them. Do you see the prismatic cloudiness from the singular light beam cutting through the water toward you? Do you see tiny bubbles rising from your arms waving for balance? How about the fat, plum-size bubbles from your nostrils going up fast right in front of you? You see her swirling in the beam, a shadow of shifting kaleidoscopic patterns. Her hair is fanned out and

suspended like a drop of color diffusing in clear water. Her legs and arms move languidly to keep her afloat, the toes balletically pointed. You feel the waves of those movements press against you. You feel her warmth, for she's surely floating toward you. Hold your breath and count to three, to ten, some finite number.

## 7. Three-Hour Flight from Colombo

Geethan was a man who appeared a good three inches taller on account of overwhelming personality and puffed up chest. He boarded a budget airline from Colombo headed to an outpost across the Indian, where he owned and operated a furniture empire. His wide body lurched down the impossibly narrow aisle, negotiating each row with bearish force until each seat's back invariably succumbed. In the wake, he left a pungent waft that betrayed his lunch—laksa, toasted garlic, a pint of arrack—and Italian cologne that came in a small bottle with a cap shaped like a cut diamond. The smell lingered in the stale air of the cabin. He looked for seat 14C.

He was feeling both triumphant and sour, that is to say, boastful and a bit angry. He had met with a hardware supplier—screws, hinges, ballbearings—over lunch earlier in the day, when they signed a deal that was nothing short of extortion. He didn't see how the hardware supplier wouldn't lose money, unless the supplier in turn took extortionary measures with his business associates further up the supply chain, or cut the wages of his factory workers by at least a third. Geethan's furniture empire accounted for a critical portion of the supplier's revenue, a fact that afforded Geethan the enviable basis to name his price, however unreasonable, knowing that it'd be met. Or else he'd find another supplier who gladly would.

A no-nonsense negotiator—who's a nonsense negotiator?—Geethan had stuck to the bottomline: price, deliverables, terms. He took hardly a minute to convey them, after which he leaned back in the white plastic chair and waited for the young man to bring his lunch. A throng

of people walked by their table on the sidewalk, inadvertently bumping into Geethan every now and then. Before long, the young man brought two bowls of laksa.

The hardware supplier had sat staring at his bowl of laksa. He had the look of someone mulling a counter to a clever chess move, his face written with furrows. He sighed as if to concede his lot. All the while, Geethan ate his laksa the only way he knew, loudly slurping the noodles and drinking the broth straight from the bowl. In between, he ate toasted garlic to give his palate something different and potent to deal with. He noticed a gold watch on the hardware supplier's wrist, and amused himself with the thought of tossing it in as a last-second addendum to the deal. It would make the supplier's furrows deeper, thought Geethan. He then looked to the supplier's untouched laksa and considered asking if he was going to eat it, but thought better of it.

“Hey boy!” Geethan yelled toward the kitchen in the back of the small sidewalk laksa joint.

The young man, the only one working there, appeared at the door, wiping his hands on a dirty, chicken blood-stained rag hanging from his waistband.

“Bring me another!” said Geethan, holding up the empty bowl.

The second bowl was served promptly with another side of toasted garlic. Geethan slurped and gulped as before, while the hardware supplier stared and sighed some more. Once done, Geethan pried out deeply lodged pieces of chicken and arbol chile with a toothpick, examining them briefly before putting them back in the mouth. The hardware supplier eventually relented and agreed to all the terms as delineated by Geethan.

Geethan called the young man again. “Bring a bottle of house arrack! Your finest bottle!”

The young man brought a bottle to the table and said, “This humble looking number is the finest among the great many fine bottles in our cellar, just as you asked.” Then he poured two glasses with a theatrical flourish—somewhat exaggerated imitation of certain Parisian sommeliers Geethan had witnessed—holding the bottle’s bottom, tilting and raising it slowly, never breaking the steady amber stream, not even a slight flutter. The young man finished with a little rounding motion of the wrist reminiscent of a ballerina. He made a quick, and again, somewhat exaggerated, bow before exiting to the kitchen. Geethan thought he saw the young man’s hand go across the chest when he bowed.

The arrack was badly underproofed and tasted of burnt molasses, not unlike some homemade remedy, and nothing like the finest batch. Geethan suspected the young man had been mocking him, what with the “humble number” and the opera house bow.

“Hey boy!” he shouted again toward the kitchen.

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As Geethan was wont to do when feeling boastful and a bit angry, he looked around the plane’s cabin to make judgments and order the world around him. He peered over the seat, leaned to the side to see up and down the aisle. He even stood up to survey the rows behind him.

The woman next to him across the aisle kept getting up to adjust the overhead vent just so, turning the dial this way and that. Once in her seat, she held her hand up to the vent and

followed the path of the draft. Before boarding, Geethan had seen her inside the airport with two roosters—one dark brown with a golden breast, the other dove white streaked in crimson—in cages made of twiggy frames and wire mesh whose holes seemed big enough to let the fowls' heads through. She had had no luggage other than a low-slung satchel with frayed sashes, and the roosters. She had been talking to a man, who seemed a bit older than her and blood-related. They went back and forth for some time, the rooster cages between them. At first, they alluded to the roosters, pointing and gesturing at them. But soon they were pointing and alluding to only each other. Then the man abruptly picked up the cages—the dove white rooster flapped its wings as if to find its bearings—and walked away. The woman landed some last words on the back of his head. Now sitting next to Geethan, she still had the satchel on, the strap around her neck and the bag in her lap. She restlessly stroked the frayed sashes when she wasn't fidgeting with the air vent.

A Buddhist monk draped in grey stopped at each row, looked up to see the row and seat numbers, looked down at his ticket, then proceeded to the next. He also paused to acknowledge anyone he passed with a nod and smile, which reformed his full face, squinting his eyes to a pinch, his cheeks pushing the round-lensed specs up and off his nose. He carried only a cane, though he didn't seem to rely on it at all. He stopped next to Geethan, looked up and down, then nodded and smiled.

“*Tashi talek*, bhante,” said Geethan, getting out of his seat. “Is it my lucky day, that I get to sit with a spiritual man, a man not of this world?”

“*Tashi talek*, my friend. I might be lost.” The monk showed his ticket to Geethan.

“Alas, bhante, you are lost. You're up there. Second row.”

The monk looked up again, then down at his ticket. “I suspected something was amiss. These numbers go up, but this here is unchanging. I sensed they were diverging.” The monk turned and ambled to his seat, nodding and smiling as he went.

More people filed in. An old woman with a badly humped back was escorted by a man, perhaps her grandson, who seemed to catch the old woman’s fall at every step. A twenty-something looking couple teemed with youthful love and all its bliss. They somehow managed to make locating their seats a moment of joyful discovery. A trio of tall backpackers, possibly speaking Dutch or Flemish, had to stoop down to avoid knocking their heads. A middle-aged husband and wife carried a baby swaddled in a green, worn-out overcoat.

“Excuse us, sir,” the husband said to Geethan.

My blasted luck, Geethan thought. First, no wise monk, and now, a baby.

The wife and baby went in first, so the husband sat in the middle seat next to Geethan. The couple were mild-mannered people, whispering to one another, cooing at the baby, but never in excess. They looked simultaneously rural and educated, and near forty. The man, slight in heft and stature, hadn’t much hair left, a half dome with a trim of thin hair marking the periphery. The woman had hair, but much of it had gone grey. The baby, a little fleshy thing of no more than a few months, was clearly their first.

The rooster lady across the aisle from Geethan continued adjusting the vent and stroking the sashes of her satchel. The Dutch backpackers, somewhere in the back, were laughing and talking loudly in their guttural language. And the baby, the fleshy little thing, for all the sweet cooing, had begun to cry little whimpers that came and went.



Geethan put on headphones, reclined his seat, and closed his eyes. The voice of Mario Lanza, tremulous and piercing, soared over the din and calmed his heart. Just as the tenor neared the climax of a Puccini, Geethan felt a tap on the shoulder. He opened his eyes and lifted one of the ear cups.

“Sir, turn off your electronics and straighten the seat. We’re taking off soon,” said a flight attendant, and proceeded down the aisle.

Geethan reclined his seat even farther back and put the ear cup back on, but kept his eyes open to follow the flight attendant. Mario Lanza had moved on to the next track.

The flight attendant sat down in her seat in the front, facing the passengers. She looked directly at Geethan, a kind of cold, bureaucratic stare.

The flight attendant had learned to deal with Geethan’s brand of innocuous and yet obnoxious insolence long ago from an incident that nearly cost her the job. At the time, she had been a flight attendant for just over a year. On a three-hour route from Colombo to a Southeast Asian outpost, on which she was the only attendant, a man went to the lavatory shortly after takeoff and locked himself in. He was a portly young man wearing a wrinkled black suit two sizes too big for him. After about fifteen minutes, the flight attendant knocked on the door, two polite taps. “Sir, is everything okay?”

“Yeah, yeah. Just a minute please,” said the man from the lavatory.

She knocked again a few minutes later. “Are you okay, sir?”

“Not now.” He sounded breathless.

After her third attempt and a similar response, she notified the captain, who, unalarmed and slightly amused, said, “Sometimes a boy needs to be alone.”

But she kept knocking, asking if he needed something, pleading with him to come out. His responses were short, “Not now” or “Let me be.” After some time, he stopped responding.

She pleaded even more earnestly, thinking he might be suffering physically, perhaps unable to speak because he was having trouble breathing, or unconscious, or even dead. The captain refused to be bother by it. No matter, she went on knocking and pleading. The man in the lavatory gave no response, but she could hear him sniffing and blowing his nose, which gave her some comfort that he at least wasn't dead.

Caught up with the locked-in young man, she failed to attend to her other duties, like filling the passengers' drink orders and collecting their trash. She even forgot about the landing protocol. During the plane's quick descent, in that instant of near freefall, all the neglected responsibilities of the world besides the one of her and the young man divided by a lavatory door suddenly came to her . She rushed to the front of the plane. But as she picked up the intercom receiver to tell the passengers to buckle up, the plane touched down.

The young man exited the aircraft with the crowd, not by himself after it had emptied, as she had expected. His eyes, red and puffy, sweat soaked through the suit jacket, he muttered to her, “Sorry,” and was gone.

When she examined the lavatory, the smoke detector showed no mark of tampering, no graffiti, nothing broken or dirtied. Only all the tissues had ended up in the waste bin. Hidden among the sappy tissues, she found a razor blade and an unfinished note that began “Dear God.” The handwriting—surely the work of a trembling soul—was hard to decipher, and deteriorated quickly to something wholly illegible by the third line. Based on the few words that could be made out, the letter was a trite, childish reminiscence of home, how much he missed home, that

he'd be coming home soon. Given that, "Dear God" seemed like a slip; "Dear Mom" or "Dear Dad" would've been more like it. But if it were in fact addressed to God, she was baffled why anyone would write a suicide note, as this clearly was, not to leave behind, but to take with.

The young man and the captain were quickly exonerated. But the flight attendant had to meet with her superior, who wrote her up, and then her superior's superior, who wrote her up also.

Now with a minor rebel like Geethan, she hardly flinched. For his part, Geethan closed his eyes and fell asleep to Mario Lanza.

Geethan was awoken by a stench. The baby had relieved itself. The smell was of fresh baby feces with strong hints of putrefaction and animal death. But more than the pungency, its inescapability made it suffocating; whichever way he turned, it latched on. The baby was now with the husband, which meant it happened right under Geethan's nose. The threadbare overcoat did nothing to contain the smell. It was as if the baby had done it right on Geethan's lap.

Geethan tapped the mild-mannered husband with his elbow. "You need to take care of that," he said, pointing at the baby.

"Certainly." The husband obediently got up with the baby and managed to squeeze his way out of the row, but only by holding the baby up near his face so that when he swung around to head to the rear lavatory, the baby's bottom, the epicenter of the horrid stench, came so close to grazing the tip of Geethan's nose—in fact, had he not reflexively retreated, his whole face would've gotten broadsided—that he felt the heat of the mess seeping through the old overcoat,

and the smell—oh the smell!—manifested itself unfiltered and naked, a whiff, that inexorable wave, as it were, like the smelling salts to a knocked out boxer, gave Geethan a jolt.

“Keep that thing away!” said Geethan, wiping his nose with his palm, half expecting to pick up a smudge of baby turd.

“Sir, my apologies,” said the husband. With the baby, he hurried to the lavatory. The wife promptly followed.

Geethan sat down, angry at what had just happened, but enlivened by the jolting sensation.

“Do you believe this? Some people with their babies.” He said aloud to anyone who’d hear, but mostly to the rooster lady, who had settled down and was no longer fastidiously minding the air vent.

“Kids are no good,” said the rooster lady after some time. “Especially when they’re little, like that one.” She reached under her seat.

“Kids are not the problem. It’s people who don’t know how to raise them. Weak parents.”

“Weak parents, weak kids. Same difference to me.” She had taken her shoes off and was watching her toes wiggle.

“I’m no weak father. And my girl, honest to God, she’s the joy of my life. But don’t tell her mother. She’s a jealous woman.”

“What joy your life must be.” The rooster lady was picking something out of her toes.

“You aren’t a mother, I can tell. Wait till you have one to call your own. I’ll show you pictures of my...” He reached into his suit jacket.

“Oh spare me the agony! Me, a mother? Never.”

“Look,” he said, opening his wallet. “She takes after her mom. Fair complexion, big eyes. Beautiful by any objective measure.”

“I’ll run for the hills, jump in the sea before I bear a child,” she said, turning away.

“Prim is her name.”

“I’ll run, no question about that.”

“She’s going to the UK for her baccalaureate studies.”

“Best to let kids fly far away,” said the rooster lady.

The mild-mannered husband and wife and their baby returned. Geethan got up to let them through, put his wallet back in the jacket, and continued talking to the rooster lady.

“For my Prim, I bought the most exquisite doll from Italy.”

“Dolls don’t cry, at least.” She was picking her other foot’s toes.

“Every little girl in Milan from a family of some stature has one. The eyes are made of real gemstones.”

“Sounds expensive.”

“Anything for my Prim.”

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The flight attendant came rolling her drink cart, the bottles clinking softly and pleasingly.

“I’ll take arrack,” said Geethan.

“Sorry, sir. We don’t serve arrack. Perhaps vodka or whiskey?”

That a flight from Colombo didn't serve arrack always surprised him, but he never ceased to ask. "Whiskey then." He took the mini-bottle, but waved off the flimsy plastic cup.

After a sip, he asked, "What are the roosters for?"

"What's with everyone and the damn roosters!" said the rooster lady. "First it's my brother. And now you. My Ama and Tata, may God rest their souls, if they're alive, they'd be talking about the damn roosters too. Now what a girl like me, not improper by any stretch, but not much to show for, you understand, in the way of an education, or family fortune, or in the least, a wee bit plot of land in her name, a girl like me gets married off to a foreigner, a man with different customs and ways of thinking and doing things, and then me, his new bride, shows up with not one rooster, but two"—she held up two fingers to his face—"two roosters, what kind of message does that send to my foreigner groom and his family, mind you that would be the first thing they'd see of me, this little satchel"—she held up the satchel—"and two roosters"—two fingers—"right there in front of their house, hello I'm your new bride and I brought you two roosters, cock-a-doodle-doo!"

"Hm, yes," said Geethan. "I can see how that would be odd. But I'm not sure what kind of message that'd convey." He took another sip from the bottle, then put it in his breast pocket.

"But that's the point. There's no message. Has no message. Just two roosters and cock-a-doodle-doo."

In that moment, a violent jolt shot through the cabin. Some shrieked, but only briefly because the plane immediately returned to smooth cruising. Other than some spilled drinks, there was no damage. The captain spoke over the intercom, urging the passengers to buckle up for a short stretch of turbulence, while reassuring them it's nothing serious. The flight attendant

rushed to the front with the drink cart, locked it in the galley, and buckled herself in the seat facing the passengers. The baby next to Geethan began to cry.

“Ah even that baby sounds like a rooster. Make it stop!” The rooster lady pressed her palms firmly against her ears.

The baby’s cry only became louder. And the louder it got, the more it resembled the crowing of a rooster.

“Make it stop that cock-a-doodle-doo!” screamed the rooster lady.

Another jolt. More shriek. The baby got louder, practically sounding like a rooster at dawn.

“Make it stop. Cock-a-doodle-doo!”

The mild-mannered husband and wife cooed at the baby, now cradled in the mother’s arms.

“Do something!” said Geethan. “It’s driving this woman insane.”

The rooster lady was screaming “cock-a-doodle-doo” continuously, as if to combat the baby’s cry with a raucous anthem of her own. Her eyes rolled back.

Another jolt. Everything became even louder.

The husband and wife looked over to the rooster lady and saw a woman devoid of any faculties, seemingly only reacting to the sound of their baby’s cry, more rooster than human.

Geethan looked at the mild-mannered husband and wife—perpetually polite, easily conquerable, weak parents—and scooped the baby in his arms. The husband and wife protested little. Quickly unbuckling his seat belt, he got up and stood in the aisle, so as to rock the baby in

large sweeping motion, and bounce on his feet. The baby's cry continued to get louder, as did the rooster lady's crowing—cock-a-doodle-doo!

“Passenger in 14C, please take your seat and buckle up.” The flight attendant's voice came through the intercom, the same flat tone as when she asked him to straighten his seat or when she said that they didn't serve arrack. She looked right at him while making the announcement from her seat facing the passengers. Still looking, she hung up the phone receiver, and went back to reading *Golf Digest*.

After the announcement, people turned to Geethan and the baby. Everyone seemed to be yelling something. “Sit down! Put the baby down!” he heard. Even the youthful love couple were yelling, though Geethan couldn't make out exactly what. The three Dutch backpackers were fast asleep. The monk, all the way up in the second row, had turned in his seat and was yelling, too, brandishing his cane. The mild-mannered husband and wife pleaded earnestly that he not hurt the baby. All the while, the rooster lady and baby reached a new decibel level that rose above the din of others' yelling.

Geethan took the mini-bottle of whiskey from his breast pocket, and put a dab of it on the baby's mouth. He took a sip before putting another dab on the baby. Then he began to sing an aria from Puccini's *Tosca*, as he had done many a sleepless nights when his Prim cried inconsolably. His voice, from deep within that puffed up chest, rose above all, the passengers' screaming, the flight attendant's intercom, the rooster lady, and the baby.

The plane jolted again, for what would be the last time on this trip.