Brad Pitt’s Global Project

by

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A Plague Of Sorts

I work at a pet shop that features prairie dogs in the window. Their rotund bellies rise and fall to the steady rhythm of their breathing. We’ve set up a cat tree in the window for them to play on, and they perch at various levels. Pedestrians stop and take a moment, despite the cold this time of year, to point and smile at them. Our adorable prairie dogs demand attention.

The pressure is on: we need to sell the prairie dogs in the window. My boss gave a little speech to all of us last week about the importance of making sales, now that the holidays are over. “Christmas was a disappointment,” he said. “We’re gonna have to push on through and make up the loses in the New Year.”

“Push on through,” means, sell prairie dogs. At least that’s what it meant last week. Today my boss is pacing the back room. His face is red. He’s shaking his head. He goes over to his desk in the corner and picks up a crumpled issue of the Chicago Tribune. “Monkeypox!” he screams. “I can’t believe this.”

“Yeah, man. It’s fucked.” It’s all I can muster. Monkeypox sounds made-up, but my boss assures me that it’s real. He says it’s going to kill us financially.

The situation is that we can’t afford to just give the prairie dogs away, but we’re also going to have a tricky time selling them. Our prairie dogs are okay, though. My boss assures me. “They say they’ve traced the source,” my boss says. “It’s some sort of West
African virus. Phil’s Pocket Pets! That hack has distributed them all over the Midwest!”

My boss is pissed. He throws the paper down on his desk and falls back into his chair. He picks the paper up and reads the article again, sighing at certain parts. “It says the prairie dogs were bitten by Gambian rats! That’s how this started. What a fucking nightmare.”

“What do we do with the prairie dogs?” I ask.

He looks at me like he’s lost control of his car but is trying to remain calm before the inevitable collision. “I don’t know,” he says.

“Seems like a bad idea to keep them in the center of the store.”

He nods and lets out a long sigh.

“Maybe we should move them,” I say. “Dude, I don’t know. Move them to another location.”

We decide to move them to the loading dock.

“They’re not here,” says my boss as we walk back onto the sales floor. “These aren’t from the supplier that caused the outbreak. They’re from an organic farm in Wisconsin. But we can’t have people knowing they’re here. Understand? If anyone asks, they’re gone.”

“Yeah, alright,” I say.

There are dog-people, cat-people, fish-people, and bird-people. Every kind of animal draws a type of person who shares both its finer and less-desirable qualities. Rabbit-people, like their totems, are extremely nervous. They make me break out into a cold sweat.
Here comes the most nervous rabbit-person we have at our shop, and I’m behind the register. She’s a lanky blonde who lives in her sister’s basement. Her sister’s husband does not like her or her rabbit. I know these things because, unsolicited, she shares them with me. Her grey eyes are always on the verge of tears. Today she’s come in with a box, and when she pulls back the lid I see a small squirrel that’s breathing, but too weak to move.

“I found this,” she says, her voice soft.

“It looks hurt,” I say.

“I don’t know what to do,” she says.

It’s young. I can tell. People have come in with these baby squirrels before. A baby squirrel needs milk. We sell cat milk, which is what my boss gave other people who brought in injured squirrels. I give her cat milk powder and a little bottle.

“Feed it like a baby?” she asks.

“Yeah,” I say.

The prairie dogs seem to be getting fatter now that they are on the loading dock. It’s been a week since we put them back here. I’m partly to blame. I keep filling their food bowls out of guilt. I’m feeding them and filling their water bowls when my boss comes back into the loading dock. “If we don’t get rid of them soon, I need to call a vet,” he says. “The state passed an emergency measure that all prairie dogs in commercial businesses need to be euthanized.”

“Shit,” I say.
“We are going to hide them back here,” he says. “We are going to tell no one. What we need to do is find someone with a heart, someone willing to take them home. You know these people. I know these people. We find them. We tactfully explain the situation.”

I look at the prairie dogs, who are all fat and sociable on their cat stands. I have my doubts, but I keep them to myself. The prairie dogs stretch their chins out to be scratched. I scratch them and watch their eyes squeeze shut at my touch.

The blonde walks in and tells me the squirrel is dead and her brother-in-law made her get rid of the rabbit. She says something about allergies and the carpet. It doesn’t make sense. I can tell she’s been crying. The more we talk, the more I realize that she’s not here to buy anything. This is a social call, and while I feel a bit guilty, like I’m propositioning some chick fresh off a break-up, I go for it: “I have these really cute prairie dogs,” I say. “It has to be a secret though. They are . . . well, we’re not supposed to have them. We’re saving them. I know this sounds strange. Have you heard of Monkeypox?”

She shakes her head, no.

I take her to the loading dock. The prairie dogs are on their cat stand, chirping with their chins out. “They’ll all get killed if you don’t—”

“I’ll take them,” she says.
Some one forgot to flip the Open sign around at the pet shop. The blonde knocks even though it’s the middle of the afternoon. A week has passed. She comes in penitently. I can see the pet carrier in the back of her car when I meet her at the doorway.

“My brother-in-law was not okay with it,” she says.

My boss is standing near. He takes over the conversation. He explains that we appreciate her taking them. He also explains that we cannot “officially” take them back.

She seems to understand.

I understand as well.

The woman who kills them wears a white jacket and cries softly the entire time. The prairie dogs run up to her, chins out. They stand and peer at her. Their little arms dangle like T. Rex’s limp wrists. She approaches the enclosure, but the syringe in her hand does not faze them. She scratches their chins as she inserts the needle.

A quick patter of sound, and they die, one by one, adorable nose wriggles punctuating their journeys into oblivion.
Hernandez

Clear skies turned into a sudden summer storm, and rain pelted the windows. Five stories below, the flowers on the cherry blossom trees were beaten off their branches. That’s what I was thinking, that June afternoon, when my fiancée cited excessive time spent at the office as the main reason she was leaving me. She stood in the kitchen of our condo, a few choice possessions downstairs in the trunk of her father’s car, and told me I loved my work more than I loved her.

“That’s not true,” I said. I didn’t love work. The cases I was assigned to were perfunctory corporate cases; there was no trace of the noble process of justice I’d longed engaged in while in law school.

“I won’t be coming back,” she said. “I just need to leave.”

“But—”

“Ted, don’t. This is heartbreaking.”

She didn’t seem heartbroken at all, though. She seemed calm. She had her hair up in a loose bun and her purse over her shoulder, like she was going out for a stroll. Her father held the front door of our condo for her, and as she passed, he gave me a little salute. The door shut silently behind them.

I didn’t make it into the office before noon a single day that week. The week after that, I told my secretary I was sick. I knew the partners at my firm would notice, but I
didn’t care. I stayed at home, snacked, and drank beer. Associate is fine, I told myself. Who cares if I make partner now? By mid-July I had a belly. I was the fattest I’d ever been. I was flabby and sluggish. An email from the partners explained that I needed to turn things around or they’d ask me to leave. I decided I’d begin my rejuvenation by joining a gym. My plan was to start with my body and then let my mind tighten.

X-Sport Fitness Center opened nearby my condo around this same time. It was a two-story building with thick, industrial floors that once housed a series of under-frequented boutiques. A sign on the sidewalk encouraged pedestrians to stop in, and that’s exactly what I did when I got the email from the partners and realized I needed to turn myself around. The X-Sport logo decal—which consisted of a large red X that looked like it had been hastily slashed with a dribbling paintbrush followed by a dash and the word “sport” in a blocky font reminiscent of a typewriter’s definitive stamp—covered the double doors. I hesitated there, not sure if a gym membership was the solution my problems required after all, but then the doors opened as a fit young couple strutted out, dabbing sweat from their foreheads and drinking from plastic water bottles. I realized someone was behind me waiting to go in, and I entered, not of my own volition, but out of courtesy.

The first thing I noticed was the staff: They all wore black and red spandex uniforms and had impressively firm buttocks. A busty young woman approached me while I was marveling at her co-workers hindquarters.

“Are you a member or someone inquiring?” she asked.

“Inquiring about what?”
“A membership!” she chirped, smiling at me like I’d just cracked an exasperating joke.

“I was just stopping in. I—”

She turned to a long counter in the corner where men in spandex sat at computers.

“Inquiry!” she yelled in a dead, official tone of voice.

I was waved over to one of the computers by a man with biceps wider than his head. He asked me to sit on the little plastic stool opposite his section of the long counter.

“Can I have your figures?” he asked

“My what?”

“Height. Weight. Age. I need your stats.”

“I’m six-two, around two-hundred and twenty pounds, give or take a—”

“We’ll just call it two-twenty. And your age?”

“Thirty-five.”

He punched the numbers into the computer while he gazed fixedly at the monitor, which was mounted on a swivel. He spun it around. “Is that about right?” he asked.

A digital avatar of me in tighty-whities appeared on the screen. It was disconcertingly accurate.

“This is your body-age,” he said, pointing at a number in the corner of the screen.

“You’re at forty.”

“But I’m thirty-five.”

“Right, but your body-age is forty.” His fingers typed swift, percussive keystrokes. “But with a regular exercise routine . . .” He landed a few final keystrokes, alternating between his left and right index fingers. “This could be you.”
The image of my slouched, soggy-looking body swelled into a chest filled with pectoral prominence and punctuated with a sinuous six-pack. He had my attention. “I see.”

He pointed at the number in the corner of the screen. “What you’re looking at is a body-age of twenty-six.”

“Twenty-six?”

He looked me in the eyes. “Remember what that felt like?”

I was very much looking forward to being twenty-six again, so I made a point of going to the gym four days a week. People tended to hog the machines, though. Getting access was difficult. The burly men that enjoyed the workout space were less than enthused about sharing. They often came in pairs. One would spot the other on free weights. I didn’t use free weights, so that was not an issue. I did, however, use the machines, and while the burly men did not spot each other on the machines, they did trade reps. The result was a tag-team approach. I met with resistance if I tried to slip into the rotation.

One pair of men were particularly hostile to my attempts to join them. They were large, white, muscle-bound, and bald. They resembled one another more than they resembled anyone else I’d ever seen. The only distinguishing characteristic between them was that one of them was missing his two front teeth. While I was probably a foot taller than either of them, they looked like they weighed twice as much as me.

Usually the training staff was present in the weight area, keeping an eye on everybody and making sure people remained civil, but one afternoon when the staff was
all downstairs in what looked like a group huddle, these two men saw me on the horizontal leg press, and seeming displeased with this turn of events, they became tense and swollen.

“We weren’t done here,” said the man with no front teeth.

I was lying on my back on the horizontal leg press machine. My calves were spread-eagle. I stared down at my pale, skinny legs poking out of my lime green workout shorts. “We can share,” I offered.

“We’re going to be putting weight on and off if we share,” said the other man.

“Yes, well, I was here first.”

“First?” asked the man with no front teeth.

“I’m here now. I’m—”

The man with no front teeth turned to the other man. “He was here first?”

“I thought we were here first, warming up?” said the other man in mock preponderance.

“Me too . . .” said the man with no front teeth. “I guess we were confused.”

“It sure does sound confusing,” I said in all seriousness.

“You got jokes!” said the other man.

The more they talked the less I could tell them apart. It occurred to me that these men might be steroid users and that this could escalate quickly, but then I recalled seeing a documentary in which steroid users said that the rage issue was greatly exaggerated. Perhaps they would be reasonable. I sat up and raised my hands in a gesture of peace. “I think we can come to an amicable agreement.”

“Get off the press!” screamed the man with no front teeth.
Here we were, three men in our mid-thirties, and it was junior high all over again. In junior high, I’d done the bullying, though, and I didn’t like the way it felt to be the weakling. “No,” I said.

And that was that. Before I knew what was happening, the man with no front teeth had me by the shoulders. The other man had my ankles. They were lifting me off the machine. It was insane. It was savage.

“This is barbaric!” I yelled.

“We ought to throw you out the window,” said the one holding my ankles.

I glared up at him. “Go ahead and try,” I said. “I’m an attorney.” Why I told them my profession, I do not know. It was not a relevant detail. Nor was it one they seemed to like. People don’t like attorneys. I know this. I’d been an attorney for almost nine years at that point in my life, and I was fully aware of the fact that people didn’t like us. Why, in such a vulnerable situation, I would tell someone this detail seems to me in hindsight to be a particularly stupid decision. In that moment, though, it felt pertinent, so I told them.

“The windows don’t open,” the man with no front teeth who was holding my shoulders said.

Were they serious? “Help!” I screamed, trying to wiggle away. “Help!”

“Quiet down, counselor,” said the other man holding my ankles.

They started to carry me away from the leg press and out toward a more open section of the gym near the free weights. It was at this point that I felt a third set of hands. They were grabbing me near my buttocks.

“You want him, you take him,” I heard the man who had my shoulders say, and I was released and fell into an unseen stranger’s arms.
“Señor, Esta bien?” The unseen stranger cradled me like a baby.

I looked up into his face. He was one of the many Latino men who cleaned the gym. Staring up at the pattern of his facial hair, a fraction of an inch away from his curled lower lip. I saw his unique and inimitable pockmarks as cavernous due to the light streaming in from the windows. I realized that up until this point I’d been seeing the Latino men at X-Sport Fitness as a kind of hive being. He put me down.

“You saved me,” I said. I was in shock. The gentleman lacked English fluency, and my Spanish has never been anything but cursory. I could tell by the look on his face that we were not communicating, so I coaxed him over to the smoothie bar on the first floor of the gym where I explained to the girls who made the smoothies that he’d rescued me.

“He’s a hero!” I explained to the girls.

They smiled politely. I gathered from them that the man’s name was Hernandez, but everyone seemed uncomfortable. I recognized there was some tension, so I turned Hernandez loose and went back to the locker room. I brooded in the steam room, and when I emerged from the gym doors that day, my contemplations on the event I’d just endured led me to the conclusion that I was changed. Nothing would ever be the same.

I had a mission: I would find the man who saved my life and build a connection with him, one devoid of the racial and class barriers that separated us. My first step in building this bond was returning to X-Sport Fitness Center, where I struck up a conversation with one of the managers. This manager was a short man with a tailored five
o’clock shadow and a little beer belly. He spoke is a slow monotone, gesturing with his chin.

“Yesterday one of your employees saved my life,” I said.

“We try to put the costumer first here at X-Sport,” he said.

“So I’ve gathered. This man was Latino. He’s one of your cleaning crew.”

“Towel boy?” he said.

“He was hardly a boy. This man was in his thirties or forties.”

“Officially, towel boy. All the male cleaning staff here at X-Sport Fitness Center are towel boys.”

“That doesn’t sound official at all. You’re telling me you call grown men boys?”

He didn’t even blink. “I’m saying that the official X-Sport title for male cleaning staff is towel boy.”

“But all the male cleaning staff are middle-aged Latino men.”

“I’m not sure I’m following you.” He refused to put me in touch with Hernandez and said there were several men employed by the gym with that last name. “You’re out of luck,” he said.

“But—”

“You’re out of luck, brother.”

The partners were becoming irascible around this time. Lionel Plastics, one of our biggest clients, voiced their disappointment with a motion I’d had a hand in drafting. Three of the old guard chewed me out in a private meeting and told me to get myself in line or find another job. I had my own mission, though, and the more I thought about the
law, the more I realized I was far better suited to acts of altruism and brotherhood than I was to drafting motions and briefs. I told my secretary, Miss Brentwood, I would be leaving each afternoon for two hours to do research. “I’ll need you to take messages if anyone calls.”

“But why not have one of the paralegals help?” inquired Miss Brentwood, her round, rosy face wearing a look of genuine perplexity.

“Because this research requires my unique eye, Miss Brentwood. My own personal touch.”

“I think you may want to do it on the weekends then, Mr. Smith. Because there has been talk.” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “People are saying they may need to let you go.”

“Nonsense!” I waved the suggestion away as I picked up my gym bag and walked off toward the elevator.

Miss Brentwood watched me go, her wide blue eyes fixed and unblinking.

I was on my way to the gym. It would become my regular afternoon mission. Miss Brentwood would learn to live with my research, which consisted of using the cardio machines at X-Sport. I knew the only way to find Hernandez was through careful observation. I was able to see all the activity in the gym from the elliptical machines and treadmills. I spotted Hernandez after a week of afternoons spent carefully scanning the gym. He emerged from the ubiquitous mass of cleaners totting his backpack vacuum and sucking up stray bits of this and that on the far side of the gym. I dismounted the elliptical machine and approached him. Up until my hand fell on his shoulder he seemed to be in his own world, but once I touched him, he became rather animated.
“¿Qué es eso?” he said. “Piensas que soy maricón? No me gusta, ok? Me gusta mujeres. Joder.”

I didn’t know what he was saying, so I spoke to him as though I were replying. “Hernandez! It’s great to see you. I wanted to talk to you, to invite you out for a beer. Perhaps you could bring along a bi-lingual friend and we could get to know each other better?”

“Déjame maricón!”

A Latino man on a nearby stationary bike overheard our conversation and began to laugh. “You might want to back off, man,” he said. “He thinks you’re putting the moves on him.”

I was grateful for his input. “Sir, could you explain to my friend that all I want is a friendly relationship with him, to be brothers?”

“Dice que quiere ser hermanos de otras madres,” said the man to Hernandez.


“Please explain to this gentleman that I’m grateful to him for saving my life.”

The manager with the little beer belly who I’d spoken to earlier came stomping over before the man on the stationary bike could translate. “We can’t have you harassing our employees, sir.”

“I’m trying to thank this man for saving my life.”

“You need to get out of here.” Just like that. No explanation. No discussion. “You need to leave the building.” I was flabbergasted. I was appalled. And that wasn’t the end of it. He started escorting me out. He led me to the locker room to collect my things, and
from there I was led out the front doors to the sidewalk. He told me there’d been complaints from other towel boys. “They say you’ve been gawking.”

“Gawking?”

“Yes, gawking. And I’m sorry to inform you that this is the last straw.” He told me they were revoking my membership. My dues for that month would be refunded.

“I can’t believe this! I follow all the rules. If you’re going to kick someone out you should kick out those lunatics that scream and howl when they lift. It’s disturbing and against the rules and you do nothing. But I try and have a friendly chat with a man who rescued me in a time of need, and—”

He ended the conversation by walking through the decal covered doors. I stood on the sidewalk, chilled by a stiff breeze, with my gym bag in one hand and my water bottle in the other. Beads of sweat hung from the tip of my nose. I’d never felt so defeated or alone.

I’d been locked out. Standing on the sidewalk, I could see that. Who knew when? Who knew how? What did it even matter? A true friendship with Hernandez was the doorway into love I needed. I was going to find a way in, no matter the cost.

The firm gave me a serious severance package and “time to recalibrate.” Hernandez had misunderstood. My first priority was to correct the misunderstanding. Say what my therapist may about “boundaries” and “unhealthy fixations,” it seemed clear to me that I needed help, so I hired a P.I. and fired my therapist.

The address my P.I. gave me was a garden unit. I took the bus there because I wanted to reach the home of Hernandez via a mode of transportation accessible to the
common man. Transferring several times along the way, I anxiously referred to my iPhone to make sure I didn’t get lost. Eventually I arrived at the address, on what felt like a side street to a side street. The building might once have been a stately home, but time and neglect had reduced it to a state of fetid disrepair. I double-checked the address: This was it.

A maze of overgrowth climbed a rusted wire fence. A single tree, planted in a patch of gravel, adorned the otherwise desolate yard. Two paths branched off from the gate’s sidewalk entrance: one led to the above ground units, and the other led down towards a little stairwell where a grammatically incorrect sign hung. The sign read: Tamales for Sell.

This was the home of Hernandez.

I spent a great deal of time standing at the neck of those two paths, reading and rereading those words: Tamales for Sell. I thought of the front door to my condo building. It revolves. It’s made of pristine glass. Simon waits dutifully in his blue blazer for me to arrive, twiddling his thumbs at his desk. When I enter, he rises with visible effort from his chair and gets the door for me. I do not descend into a stairwell. I ascend. I rise in an elevator. The semiotics are a revelation in themselves. But the flowers arranged in a vase by the elevators—I really feel this to be true—are far more telling. They are lush and in bloom. Looking at that sign, I realized I’d arrived on the other side of my own experience.

Nothing here was stopping me. I could approach that door and knock. But with this imagined comparison in my head, I was frozen. I’d hit a glass wall. A barrier that had not been there before obstructed me. An internal trigger, the same trigger in the brain that
electric fences create in dogs, had flipped in me. I was going to leave, to walk back to the bus stop. But the door to the basement opened. The face of a small girl appeared.

“Tamales?” she asked. “You like to buy some tamales?”

“Yes,” I said.

She disappeared. I heard a woman speaking Spanish. Her voice was muffled by the door and not really intelligible. All I could discern was a strand of Latin conjugations, the music of a language frustrating in its indecipherable familiarity. The door cracked open. “Come in,” said the little girl. “My mom says come in. She get them ready.”

Hernandez and his family awaited. One foot followed the other. I found my way down the steps. I passed through the low doorway. I saw pressed wood walls, shoddy 1970s construction, the kind of wood composite that peels in humid weather. The living room was modest. All the furniture was angled towards the television, which glowed in the corner, resting on a milk crate. The little girl, outgoing when I’d stood in the yard, became shy upon my entry. She huddled on the sofa with her two brothers, who took no notice of me and continued to watch television.

Hernandez’s wife moved methodically in the kitchen. She was a small woman whose smile was brief and disarming. She shuffled and manipulated the cornhusks on the table, then held up five fingers.

I nodded.

She put five tamales in a plastic bag and indicated, again with her hand, that I owed five dollars.

I fished out my wallet and gave her twenty.
She collected my change from a Nestle jar on the kitchen counter, and the little girl sprang up and opened the door. It was time to leave.

I turned to look at Hernandez’s wife. The feeling of her being there, of her being his, of him being her’s . . . perhaps I was romanticizing the whole thing a bit, but I was very much taken with the experience of being in their home. The feeling of discomfort was waning. I was at peace amidst the family of Hernandez. I spoke without considering the gravity of my words. “Perhaps I could stay, until your husband gets home?”

The little girl translated to her mother, who then gave me a quizzical look.

“I know your husband,” I said.

The little girl translated this as well, and Hernandez’s wife’s face grew sour.

“He’s very important to me,” I said. “You all are.”

The little girl hesitated before translating this last statement.

Hernandez’s wife listened to her daughter. As soon as the girl was done speaking, the mother looked me in the eyes. “Out,” she said.

“Oh, so you speak some English!” I said, enthused at the prospect of a little chat.

“Out, gringo,” she said.

*Gringo?* Oh, how the word ached, how it burned in my ears! Gringo! “I am no such thing,” I said.

“Out!” She pawed at me, attempted to push me through the door and up the stairs. She clearly didn’t understand.

I turned and grabbed her hands. I spoke into her face as she tried to pull away. “I am simply attempting to bridge a variety of socio-economic and cultural barriers long up held by years of racism, classism, and xenophobia!”
Her knee crunching into my testicles sent me to the ground.

The door slammed shut and I was lying on the steps. I gathered my little bag of tamales as I stood up on shaky feet and walked up the path towards the gate. I walked past the single tree planted in gravel. I opened the gate. I walked through it, and heard a creak followed by the rattling clang of the gate latching.

I’m hopeful that I’ll find work in the new year, and I’ve lowered expenses to stretch my severance package. Traditionally, I go home for Christmas. I abandon the bustle and dread of the city and escape to the greener pastures of the upper middle class suburbia of my youth. This year that cannot be, though. I’ve not spoken to Hernandez, and I will not give up until I do. I spent the majority of November inside my apartment studying my Rosetta Stone Spanish language program and reading up on Mayan history. As I ride this bus, one of three I must board to reach his house, I am cognizant of our differences, yet hopeful that the gap between us can be bridged.

Snow is falling. It’s Christmas Day. I hold on my lap a tray of freshly baked cookies. They’re for the children. My thinking is that Hernandez’s wife will appreciate me thinking of her children. Once I’ve won over the wife, there’ll be no problem winning over the husband.

I can see it all now. I’ll knock on the door at the base of the little stairwell. Hernandez himself will open the door, his arm slung lovingly across his wife’s shoulders. The children will be gathered around them.

“Hola!” I’ll say. “Feliz Naidad!”

They will step aside and welcome me in.
The Rat Race

The baby macaw looks like a thanksgiving turkey. His bald, pink skin and featherless wings are strange to see, curled in a blanket inside the glass terrarium. He shivers when we open the lid to peer in at him. He was hatched from an incubator brought to the pet shop; one of our staff will feed him with a plastic syringe. We want the baby macaw to imprint on humans. A woman who just started working at the pet shop desperately wants to be the one to feed him.

She keeps mostly to herself. She only came to work for us a month ago. She told me she used to work at a big corporation, but she said she left because she couldn’t stand the rat race. She stands out on the sales floor because she’s tall and has big hands. I’ve never seen a woman with hands like hers.

When she asked if she could feed the baby macaw we were all a little surprised, but she does a good job. She warms the food to just the right temperature and delicately inserts the feeding syringe into his mouth. The food fed to baby macaws smells like sawdust and warm bread. He blinks his black eyes wildly when he eats. She speaks to him lovingly in the cramped bird room, stroking his bald head, and kisses his smooth beak.

Long blue spikes begin to grow out of the baby macaw’s skin, and she rolls the spikes between her meaty fingers, breaking the opaque material that coats the fine, blue
down. She does this delicately. When she applies for health insurance through the store, word spreads about complications because she is legally a man. The other employees, many of whom are straight young men with snake fascinations, find this information humorous. They mock her and talk about her hands. They say she disgusts them. She doesn’t seem to notice, or perhaps she doesn’t care. I think she’s been through this before and that’s why she left the rat race. She keeps to herself and cradles the bird’s fragile neck in her powerful hands.

The bird’s feathers open into a variegated bloom under her care. He grows stronger and is able to stand on a perch and speak to costumers. “Pretty bird,” he says. “I love you.”

When a costumer finally purchases him, she goes out onto the loading dock and cries. It’s only the two of us in the store. I can hear her choking and sobbing. When she walks back in—her eyes still red, her lips still quivering—I act like nothing is wrong.

I’m told that when she gave her notice to our manager she told him retail was the same as the rat race.
Phyllis nearly melted the first time she saw Herman’s butt. He was working in the community garden back in Chicago, and she did a double take when she saw those two taunt cheeks framed in his Levis. They both loved volunteering at the garden, and she loved him for loving it. They used to take long walks through Chicago, spotting unclaimed ground that Herman might be able to cultivate one day. He planted seeds in her honor. Vine ripe tomatoes, fresh cucumbers—these were Herman’s love songs. He constructed a trellis from discarded lawn chairs and cultivated vines of green beans. They hung like Christmas ornaments in the fresh spring air, and Herman in his grubby khakis plucked one, broke it in half, held the freshly torn green bean beneath her nose, and begged Phyllis to smell. It smelled like the beginning of everything, and it was.

Herman became a man of some significance in Chicago’s urban agriculture community that summer. His unique knowledge of fig trees proved advantageous in the rising heat, and while Phyllis never fully understood what he was doing, she did realize he was someone who knew a little more than the rest of their scruffy, bearded cohort of volunteer city gardeners.

The fig trees thrived. Herman was considered an urban agriculture whiz. Phyllis was his groovy poet girlfriend. By the fall she was his groovy poet fiancée, and once
winter had arrived and they were burying the fig trees to protect them from the frost, she’d become his groovy poet wife.

Herman was finishing up his engineering degree and planned on going to work for a non-for-profit in Vermont. He promised her a house with a garden, fresh vegetables everyday, and he swore he’d always go out of his way to give her time for her writing. He only asked for one thing—he wanted to have a baby with her.

“Of course,” said Phyllis, because she wanted one, too, and she couldn’t imagine anyone better than the idealistic young Herman as the father of her child.

Herman finished his engineering degree and Phyllis published her first chapbook. Life was rushing full tilt towards Vermont. The same day Phyllis realized she was pregnant, Herman was offered a government job.

The job was in Nevada, far away from any major city. He was being drafted to help design a city for the future. “We are going to change the world,” he told Phyllis, practically glowing. “The United State’s government wants to build a city that can sustain itself. No fossil fuels. Extensive and innovative recycling methods. It’s everything we’ve dreamed of coming true, and there’s money behind it—government money.”

Phyllis felt herself swept away by the idea because she wanted a cleaner world and more sustainable practices, but she disliked the idea of Nevada and the government. She wanted Vermont. She wanted farmers markets. She wanted homemade wine and steaming bowls of chickpea stew with close, Earth-loving friends. What would life be like in this development? Who would their child grow up with? But she agreed to go because she loved Herman and wanted to believe in him.
The first five years they lived in a condo on a military base, and when the city was finally constructed, Herman announced they would be moving into a brand new house in the brand new city Herman had just helped to design. They would be its first test inhabitants.

Three months in, everything broke down. It was entirely unpredictable. The power started going off. The water would flow from the taps clear one day and brown the next. Herman would take exploratory sips of the brown water and say it tasted fine. “Nutty,” he once said. Herman liked to try and quell Phyllis’s concerns by claiming it was all “part of the process.”

“Part of the process,” said Phyllis. “You’ve got to be kidding me. That water looks like coffee.”

Herman’s wounded expressions rarely fazed her, although underneath her annoyance, she was sympathetic. She wanted his city to work. She knew the city’s success meant a great deal to them financially, and Herman’s pride was tied up in it as well. This was his swan song, but it was all going wrong.

Herman got home a little early carrying a large duffel bag, which he placed on the floor by the front door. Phyllis was helping Audrey practice reading. Audrey was having troubling sounding out the words and preferred to simply summarize the books in front of her based on the pictures.

“The good news is we can use the shower again,” said Herman.

“I didn’t know we weren’t supposed to use the shower,” said Phyllis. “I took one this morning.”
“Which is totally okay,” said Herman, winking at Audrey.

“We’ve been showering all week,” said Phyllis.

“I know. There was something going on with E. coli, but . . . I didn’t think we needed to worry because—”

“E. coli?”

“Yucky,” said Audrey.

“Honey,” protested Herman. “We are in the clear.” He let his voice drop to a playful and reassuring tone. “This was all in another sector, and I didn’t want to worry you unnecessarily.”

Phyllis didn’t like it. “What’s wrong now?”

“The toilets.”

Audrey put down her book. “What’s wrong with the toilets, daddy?”

“They are acting funny, sweety,” he said.

“What do you mean funny?” asked Phyllis.

“We can’t flush them,” said Herman. “Under no circumstances are either of you to flush them.”

“What happens if we flush them?” asked Phyllis.

“Well . . .” he paused for a moment. He seemed to be searching for the right words. “They will explode.”

“Explode?”

“It’s only for a few days until the pressure in the system settles down.”

“Days?” said Phyllis.

“I would imagine. Maybe weeks.”
“Daddy,” said Audrey. “Where will we go to the bathroom?”

Herman pointed to the duffel bag. “In biodegradable containers that we will bury in the yard. It will be fun. Like planting a tree.”

How had it all come to this? Why hadn’t they gone to Vermont?

Phyllis pondered these questions over the next six days as they began digging up their small backyard and “planting” their waste. Audrey enjoyed the whole process quite a bit, and Herman kept saying it was just like camping. But they were running out of space. They only had so much yard available in which to “plant.” They peed in buckets that Herman poured out into the storm drains in the street. After six days of the entire city doing this, the smell was becoming unbearable. Not only that, but the power was more and more inconsistent. It popped on one minute and off the next. Audrey had given up trying to play outside. She sat by the window in the living room instead, flipping through books with pictures and pretending to read out loud. Phyllis wasn’t sure if she should be happy her daughter was now showing interest in books, or worried that this was a sign of some sort of breakdown.

“Maybe I’m just projecting,” said Phyllis to Herman. “But do you think she’s going insane?”

“Projecting?”

“You don’t find this awful and unbearable?”

“Baby, it’s all part of the process. Remember what a sweat we used to break trying to bury those fig trees back in Chicago?”

Fig trees! She wanted to scream, but the doorbell rang before she had a chance.
It was their neighbor, Michelle. Young and lithe, she stood on the doorstep in a pair of jeans that fit like glove. Phyllis recalled her glory days before the baby weight.

Michelle slipped into the hall and slammed the door behind her. “My God,” she said. “That smell!”

“I find it bracing,” said Herman.

“Wow,” said Michelle, pumping her eyebrows at Phyllis. “So . . . *Anyways,* guess who has wine?”

“No, no, no,” said Herman. “We are not getting involved in this.”

“Oh come on,” said Michelle. “I promise we grew the grapes ourselves.” She flashed Phyllis an accomplice’s smile. “I bet Phyllis could use a drink.”

One of the most important rules of the city, according to Herman, was not bringing in outside supplies. A truly sustainable city should need only what the city itself could provide. Alcohol was a luxury they’d not had the time or the resources to produce. Occasional batches of “homebrew” surfaced in the city, but they were all incomprehensibly vile smelling. Phyllis never touched it. Herman didn’t seem to mind not having alcohol, and Phyllis pretended like she didn’t either. But she did miss it, wine in particular.

“Bring it on over,” said Phyllis. “He owes me after the week we’ve had.”

Michelle laughed. “Yes! I told Allen you guys would be down.”

They were down. The idea of being down made Phyllis giddy.

“You’re a total party girl,” said Michelle, opening her arms and giving Phyllis a hug. “You’re the cutest. Give me an hour and put on some party clothes. I’ll be back with
the hooch in a snap.” With that, Michelle slipped out the front door, leaving Hermana and Phyllis to contend with each other.

Phyllis, excited by the prospect of Michelle and Allen coming over, turned to Herman brimming and realized, upon seeing his glum expression, that he was going to be a grump. “Don’t do that,” said Phyllis. “Don’t you dare.” She took a quick shower and scoured her dresser for something cool to wear. She didn’t have anything cool to wear, so she figured jeans would be hip. She also put on a t-shirt and blazer. She felt like she was in her twenties again.

Herman put on khakis and a polo shirt.

“You should wear something more fun,” she said.

Herman’s expression made Phyllis doubt her own enthusiasm.

Herman hadn’t always been a lump. Back in Chicago, he’d once bought a hookah and spent a whole spring break smoking a mixture of hashish and apple tobacco with Phyllis. Then he’d lain on the floor while she read drafts of poems about flowers. She recalled one night he’d opened their apartment window and started throwing out bits of torn paper. “I’m making it snow,” he’d said, laughing. She’d yanked him back inside, amazed that he would litter. Now he was pouring urine into storm drains and objecting to a little wine. He was a grump and a lump, but he was also a good father . . . which reminded Phyllis. “Where’s Audrey?”

They scrambled into the living room and found Audrey planted by the window, making up stories based on the pictures in her books.

“She’s been at this for hours,” said Herman. He knelt down next to her. “Honey, are you having fun?”
Audrey looked up from her book. She had Herman’s face, his attentive little eyes.

“Yes.”

“We are having guests over,” said Herman. “Michelle and Allen are coming.

They are bringing . . . juice.”

“Audrey,” said Phyllis. “Let’s put the books away. You can have a nice time with

Michelle. You can show her one of your dolls.”

“No,” said Audrey. “I want to read.”

Herman was very good with Audrey, but he had a bad habit of trying to negotiate

with her at times when Phyllis felt he should tell her what to do. “Audrey,” said Phyllis.

“No more reading.” She took the book from Audrey.

“Mommy, no!” Audrey crossed her arms and glowered at the floor.

“Phyllis,” said Herman. “Why not let her have it until they come?”

Was he serious? In front of Audrey? “No,” said Phyllis. She took the book into

the kitchen and put it on top of the refrigerator.

Herman comforted Audrey, glancing over at Phyllis as though it was she who’d
done something wrong. She wanted to tell him he didn’t know how to set limits, but the
doorbell rang before she could.

“Go to your room,” said Phyllis.

“But, mommy—”

“Room.”

Herman looked sad as he watched Audrey stomp off to her room. “I’ll get the
door,” he said.
Phyllis watched him walk to the door and was struck by the shape of his butt: firm, round, robust—he’d managed to keep it up running around the city, sorting out toilet trouble all these years. Odd, that after such prestigious dreams he’d ended up a glorified plumber. He used to be a gardener. He brought forth sustenance. He created food from dirt and flecks of old plants, and he did it because he loved the Earth and all its inhabitants. Herman’s butt reminded her of the old days. Two round mounds of muscle and a heart of gold. She wanted to love him like she used to.

“Hey-oh!” cried Herman, swinging open the front door.

Hey-oh? When had Herman ever said hey-oh?

Allen burst into the hall with a backpack held furtively to his chest. “Okay, okay,” said Allen. “Get me in here. We need to hide the contraband.”

“Contraband?” said Herman. “Your wife assured me you grew the grapes yourself.”

“Right,” said Michelle, stepping in behind Allen and giving Herman a kiss on the cheek. “Our vineyard is a secret, though.”

“Okay, okay,” said Herman, parroting Allen.

“I didn’t take you for the kind of guy who’d be down for a vino party,” said Allen.

“I love vino,” said Herman. “Love the stuff.”

It occurred to Phyllis that Herman might be trying to be more lively for her sake, but this suspicion quickly vanished when Michelle plopped herself down on a kitchen stool and stretched her hands up above her head. Bare arms, sumptuous little breasts, legs that looked limber enough to open a can of tuna—Herman’s eyes were all over her.
“You look excited Herman,” said Phyllis.

“He does, doesn’t he,” said Michelle, tossing a playful glance at Phyllis from over her shoulder. “And you look cute.” She turned to Allen, who’d pulled a bottle of wine from the backpack. “Doesn’t Phyllis look cute?”

Allen took a long look at Phyllis. He had lean cheekbones and solid, muscular forearms. She’d never felt eyes wash over her so tenderly. “Phyllis,” he said, his voice getting lower than usual. “You’re stunning.”

“Okay, okay,” said Herman. “Keep your eyes on the vino, pal.”

They all laughed. The three of them probably had a rapport from work that she was not privy to. This realization made her feel a bit ridiculous. Why had she gone through all the trouble of trying to look hip for Herman’s work buddies?

“I’m starting to think I’m the only one in the city who follows the rules,” said Herman.

This revelation made Michelle laugh, but Phyllis felt a sudden surge of rage. There were probably tons of families in the city who were eating outside food and drinking outside booze and enjoying all kinds of exciting outside luxuries while Herman cooped her up in their house with nothing.

“Mommy . . .” Audrey was standing in the hall looking in on the three of them with her attentive little eyes. “Can I have some juice?”

The lights flickered, making Audrey’s appearance feel slightly supernatural. Phyllis caught her breath. A great surge of power caused the bulbs to swell with light before everything went still and quite and dim again.

“Henry’s department can’t seem to get a grip on supply demands,” said Michelle.
“I’ve been telling him that he needs to plan for surges, but no one will listen to me,” said Herman.

“Allen told me that last week Roger went into the electrical department and started screaming at him,” said Michelle.

“Well good,” said Phyllis feeling left out of the exchange. “Because without power it’s impossible to iron.” She stopped herself. Surely a professional childless woman like Michelle would be bored by the difficulties of irons not working. But she must iron, too. Perhaps they weren’t so different?

“I’m sure it puts you out way more than us,” said Michelle. “The city gives us housecleaners because we both work at the facility. They help out with basic chores, and I’ve been telling Allen that they must be having a hell of a time.”

Housecleaners? Phyllis couldn’t believe her ears. She’d seen little crews knocking on certain doors, but she’d never dreamed those families had help and other families simply had a wife. She looked over at Herman. “I didn’t know you could get housecleaners.”

“Herm didn’t tell you?” said Michelle.

Herm . . . it seemed a bland, dopey nickname. “He’s very tight-lipped,” said Phyllis.

“Mommy,” said Audrey, who’d been standing patiently in the shadows. “I want to be with you.”

“So cute,” said Michelle.

Audrey walked over to Michelle and gave her a hug, which Michelle received gratefully. “So sweet,” said Michelle. “What an adorable little cuddle-bug.”
“I’m not a cuddle-bug,” said Audrey. “I’m a Power Ranger.” Audrey karate chopped Michelle in the arm.

“Ow!” Michelle grimaced. “That’s not very nice.”

“Audrey,” said Phyllis. “Now, was that nice?”

Audrey didn’t reply.

“I asked if that was nice?”

“She called me a bug,” said Audrey.

“Back to your room,” said Phyllis. “Stay there until you feel like apologizing.”

Audrey stomped toward the hall and paused. “No.”

“Audrey,” said Phyllis.

“She’s really something,” said Michelle.

“Room,” said Phyllis.

The sound of Audrey slamming her bedroom door made them all jump a little. Phyllis felt angry and embarrassed. She blamed Audrey’s acting out on being stuck in the house. She couldn’t stop thinking it was all Herman’s fault. She also now knew that he had been hiding housecleaners from her and all kinds of wonderful contraband. She wanted Vermont and a potbelly stove. The idea of smoke curling from an iron chimney that protruded from a shingled roof made her heart ache. But such dreams were idle amusements, and she knew it.

“I think we need a drink,” said Michelle.

“We don’t have wine glasses,” said Herman.

Phyllis hadn’t thought of that. She felt embarrassed all over again.

“We can use coffee mugs,” said Herman.
“There ya go, Herm,” said Allen.

Herman got down the coffee mugs, and Allen filled each about halfway. They all took a mug and held them up for a toast.

“To . . .” Michelle took a thoughtful moment. “To toilets flushing.”

They clinked and drank. Phyllis felt the wine warm her. It was a good feeling, like slipping into a warm bath. It had been too long. She could feel the old sensation. Wine. Warmth. Alcohol.

“Woops,” said Allen. “Looks like Phyllis has a hole in her mug.”

Phyllis had taken half the mug in one gulp. She blamed her nerves.

“Take it easy,” said Michelle. “The party might be over before we get started.”

What did she know? Phyllis and Herman used to take tequila shots back in Chicago. She never used the lime. Phyllis tipped the bottle of Merlot into her coffee mug and filled it to the brim. Then she took a healthy slurp and looked at Michelle. “Don’t worry about me,” said Phyllis. “If I can take care of that little devil, I can handle some wine.” It was meant to be funny but no one laughed. She took another healthy gulp. What did these two really think of Audrey? Audrey was precious, a real angel.

Phyllis felt dizzy. She drained her mug of wine and set it on the table.

“Honey,” said Herman. “Your don’t look so good.”

“Nah,” she said, swatting in his direction. But the swat felt bad. It made her throat tingle. She coughed, trying to stop the tingling, but that made it worse. The wine had gone straight to her head. “Carbs,” she said. She lurched forward over the counter. My God, she thought, looking up into Herman’s disbelieving eyes. But she wasn’t . . . . She was regaining control. She stood up straight and looked at Herman.
“She’s going down,” she heard someone say. But the room was a tumble quickly disappearing into a circle of light.

Phyllis was lying on the sofa, but she didn’t recall how she’d gotten there. The moonlight streaming in through the living room windows lent a long, ghostly shadow to the coffee table and chairs. Audrey stood over her, acting like a good nurse. She dabbed a cool wet cloth along Phyllis’s brow. “Mommy,” she said. “Are you sick?”

“Just dizzy.”

“Your friends went home.”

“Audrey, do you like living here?”

“I don’t know.”

“What would you think about living on a farm?”

“With chickens?”

“Yes, and a garden.”

“It would be nice. Could Beth come over and play?”

Beth, Audrey’s only friend, was a strange introverted girl who collected grass clippings. “Of course,” said Phyllis.

Herman’s worried face hovered over Audrey’s. Phyllis felt lightheaded and dreamy, like she could ask for anything. “I want to go to Vermont,” she said.

Herman’s hand took the cool wet cloth from Audrey. He kissed her on the cheek and told her to go to bed. “I’ll come check on you in five minutes,” he said.

Phyllis missed Audrey already.
Herman wiped her face with the cool wet cloth. He could be sweet. He could be confident. He kissed her on the lips.

“Stop,” said Phyllis.

“Phyllis, I love you.”

She felt a sudden panic, a feeling of helplessness so strong she couldn’t breathe, as though she was alone on a boat in the middle of the ocean. She imagined the stars draped far and wide above her. Herman had imprisoned her here, and she didn’t know if she could love him in spite of it. She turned her head and looked up at the moon, full and creamy, wavering on the roofs of the homes across the street. Any moment now, it would disappear. Any moment now, it would duck out of view. It would come back, though, because it was bound to Earth just as she was bound to Herman.

“You’re beautiful,” said Herman. “You’re everything to me.”

She wanted to tell him he was wrong, but the power came on before she had a chance to respond. Suddenly, the window contained her reflection instead of the moon, and she was startled by the sight of herself, hovering in the darkness.
Sensitive Ears

I think I’m in love with a green-eyed blonde whose name I keep forgetting. We meet in rehab. She tells me she had a hard time concentrating in high school because the world always looked like it was melting. “It still does,” she says. “And it always will. I did too much acid.”

I act nonchalant about this news even though it disturbs me.

Then she tells me she has holes in her brain. “I saw a picture of it,” she explains. “They put me in one of those machines and took pictures of my brain. I did too much cocaine.”

My heart saves its rapid momentum for the smell of her berry-scented perfume. Imagining the holes in her brain makes me sad. She’s so young. She has a round nose and soft cheeks. Her green eyes remind me of mountain stream water. It hurts to know that those innocent green eyes watch the world melt every day.

When rehab ends, we wait for the bus out of the medical center; we’re head back to our respective corners of the real world. She tells me about the time a fish bit her. “I fell off a jet ski last summer,” she says. “And it bit me.”

“Can I see the bite?”

“It’s too far up . . . I’d need to take my jeans off.”
“I don’t believe you.”

“That’s what the police said when my drug dealer raped me.”

I never kissed her, but once, I touched her ears. The cartilage was soft and pliable. She screamed when I touched them. “Stop . . . It hurts . . .” She started crying. Then she said, “I’m sorry,” even though she was the one crying.
Hanoi Vignette

Hava took one last drag from her roach and flicked it over the railing of the rooftop bar. The air on the roof was stagnant and humid. The screams of the motorbike drivers rose from the buzz of energetic motion Hava could hear in streets below. “Motorbike! Motorbike!” The hum of their engines revving and dying followed their cries. Hava held the smoke in her lungs until her eyes began to water, then let it out slowly. It was three in the afternoon and Hanoi was too hot for anything but lying on a bench, getting high, and sipping a cold Coke.

An American man Hava had met with the night before, when the bar was full of young backpackers, came walking through the doorway of the stairwell that led up from the dorm rooms below. Hava had been staying at this hostel for the past two days. She assumed the American had arrived yesterday. He was damp with perspiration, but Hava thought he was attractive. He had a lean, athletic build, thick black hair, but shuffled like an old man due to his worn-down flip-flops. He ordered a Tiger beer at the bar from a young Vietnamese woman who sat on a high stool. He turned and waved when he caught sight of Hava.

Hava waved back, smiled, and rolled onto her back, resting the Coke on her stomach. The bottle felt good. A shadow fell over her.

“You look comfy,” said the American.
Hava breathed in deeply, through her nose. She exhaled. The breath sent ripples of nausea running through her body. “I was resting. It’s too hot for anything this time of day.”

“I know,” said the American. He flopped down on the bench opposite her.

“I want to move here,” said Hava.

“To Vietnam?” The American’s accent made the question sound like an insult. But Hava didn’t mind. She’d decided the night before that she liked his tactless remarks. He’d amused her last night, and he amused her this afternoon.

“I’m going to move to this . . .” She gave herself time to find the word. “Chair.”

The American laughed. It was a chesty, insincere laugh. It flattered her; she knew it meant he was attracted to her. “So you’re going to move to a bench?”

“Yes, I’m going to buy this bench.”

“That sounds like a really interesting idea.” He took a long pull from his beer and looked out across the rooftops, still watching her out of the corner of his eye.

Hava raised her head and took a sip of her Coke. “When was the last time you were home?”

“I’m frome the States, Des Moines, Iowa originally. You know where that is?”

“No.”

“It’s in the middle of the U.S. I haven’t been anywhere in the States in over a year.” He took another long pull on his beer. “Where are you from?”

“Tel Aviv,” said Hava.

“Oh, you’re Israeli.”

“A year is a long time. You have been in Vietnam this whole time?”
“No, I’ve spent most of my time teaching English in Seoul, North Korea. But I’ve traveled all over. Thailand, Cambodia—”

“I was just in Cambodia.” Hava felt another ripple of nausea. She took a sip of her Coke and shut her eyes. She thought of the temples at Angkor Wat and the frantic activity of Phnom Pehn. She caught herself thinking of Efi and opened her eyes; she didn’t want to think about him. She turned to look at the American.

He leaned back on his bench, spreading his arms out to either side. The Tiger beer dangled from his fingers. He lifted the bottle to his lips and took another long swig.

“You’re an alcoholic,” she said.

He laughed, sputtering up some beer. He wiped the foam from his chin away with the back of his hand. Leaning forward, he rested his forearms on his knees and smiled.

“Why do you say that?”

“I haven’t seen you without a beer since I met you.”

“Well, you’ve only met me twice. And both times we were at a bar.”

“But I’m not drinking.” She paused and looked at his snide little smirk. She took in his steady gaze, dark hair, and prominent nose. She wondered if he was Jewish. Maybe that’s why she liked him. “It’s the afternoon,” she continued. “Drinking is for nighttime.”

The American sipped his beer and raised a skeptical eyebrow looking off towards the other building tops.

Hava let her head fall back, and she stared at the misty blue sky. “What did you do today?”

“I was at the prison,” said the American.

This news made Hava laugh.
“The French Prison,” he said.

“I haven’t been.” She lifted her head and took another sip of Coke before falling back on the bench and shutting her eyes.

“Afraid to lose your real estate?”

She turned and looked at him. “I don’t understand.”

He pointed at the bench she occupied. “Your home. You’re moving here, right?”

“Yes.”

“Afraid to lose it. If you go to prison, I mean.” He seemed uncomfortable. He didn’t seem to like the misunderstanding. His easygoing smirk had deteriorated into a very American expression: His eyebrows arched up, his shoulders hunched forward; he seemed preoccupied with getting his own point across.

Hava smiled.

That fixed it. He went back to being confident. “I wanted to see the cells. They put the Vietnamese in these cement cells with floors that slanted down towards the bars. They were shackled to the floors, too.”

“And the Vietnamese put the Americans there as well?”

“First the French put the Vietnamese in the cells. Then the Vietnamese put the Americans in the cells.”

“Everybody putting each other in cages.”

“Yeah.” The beer glug-glug-glugged. “War is a mess.”

*War*. She fell into spasms of laughter.

*War*. She couldn’t help it: She thought of Efi.
Efi turned to her at the border check and told her to go ahead. “Everything is on the bus. Just go. We won’t get caught.” Efi whispered this into her ear as they walked across the border, leaving their tour bus behind to carry the contraband over. It was all rushed and unexpected. Their bags were unlabeled. Perhaps it would work. But it didn’t make sense to Hava. Why had he taken the marijuana? What did he think they would do with it in Ho Chi Minh City? It seemed stupid to smuggle cheap weed from one poor country to another. Efi made the decision without asking her. He’d put the weed in her backpack that morning. He said he’d told her he was doing it. “What did you think I meant when I said, I left it on you?”

She hadn’t known; she’d never thought Efi would do anything so stupid.

Hava laughed harder the more she thought about Efi at the border, but the laughter was unnatural, forced. Then she thought about the Vietnamese soldiers shoving Efi from behind, and she couldn’t think about it anymore. She opened her eyes and looked at the American. He looked like Efi. It made her sick to think, This is why I like him. She’d never liked Americans before.

“You look cute when you laugh,” said the American.

She decided to hate him. She looked into his eyes and smiled. “You are cute, too.”

He leaned back into his bench and took another slug of beer. He looked out over the building tops. “They dry their laundry on the roof.”

“Yes.” She looked at the sky. “In Israel we dry our laundry outside as well.”

“We use dryers in the States,” he said.

This was the kind of American observation she loathed. But it pleased her to hear him say it because it made her feel less guilty about what she was deciding to do to him.
The American laughed again. He paused. “Look, tonight I’m gonna go see the water puppet show. You wanna go? I got two tickets.”

Hava rolled onto her side. “That would be lovely,” she said. “I just need to take a nap and shower first.”

It was like she was casting a spell. A part of her believed she had.

He smiled and took a long swig of beer, then leaned back on the bench. “Sounds like a plan. It’s not for another couple of hours. Get yourself all rested and cleaned up.”

Hava lifted her Coke to her lips, draining the last of it, then set the bottle on the ground and rose slowly to her feet. She stretched her arms above her head, and felt the American’s eyes on her. “I will meet you in the lobby at . . . ?”

“Meet me at seven. We can grab a drink before the show.”

“Seven,” she said.

“What’s your name?” he called after her.

“Hava,” she said, before walking down the stairs.

She walked down to her dorm room. It was a twelve-bed dorm. Three sets of bunks sat against opposite walls. There was a large window opposite the door. Its blinds were perpetually drawn. The blinds were rimmed with the orange haze of the sun. A few other travelers lay in their bunks napping or reading. Hava walked into the cramped bathroom and undressed. She took a long, cold shower. She dried herself slowly, hoping that the sickness would stay at bay. She knew she needed to sleep, but she also knew it would be difficult. She walked out into the dorm, crawled into her top bunk, and lay on top of the bed sheets. She rested her hands on her abdomen. She didn’t want to be sick again. Shutting her eyes, she hovered between sleep and a waking nightmare.
It’d been four days since she’d taken opium, and not having ever tried to kick the stuff before, she was terrified that things would get worse before they got better. Day two she’d barely been able to step away from the toilet. Yesterday was the first time since leaving Cambodia that she’d felt even remotely human, but she didn’t know how long it would last. And sleeping was almost impossible.

She only had enough money to get to Laos. The more she thought about this fact the more it made her panic. She felt the sickness swell, and then recede. She exhaled a long breath and thought of Efi: He’d taken an old Dutch man’s watch in Cambodia. It had seemed easy watching Efi do it. His training in the Israeli Army served him well as a mugger. Hava believed that somewhere inside herself the same strength existed. The only way to get clean, she’d been telling herself, was to get away from Hanoi, where with each passing day she found herself eyeing suspicious characters at the backpackers, sizing them up. If she stayed here, it would only be a matter of time before she’d find a dealer. She needed to keep moving, but she needed money in order to keep going once she left.

She felt a sharp pain and curled into the fetal position, which she knew was the wrong move. The pain grew, spider-webbed across her stomach; it felt like her intestines were splintering. A cold sweat sprung up in heavy beads on her forehead, and even though she wasn’t asleep, she wasn’t thinking anymore, either. The pain overtook her, and the past flooded in like the currents of an icy river.

*Hava and Efi stopped making love in Cambodia. She said it was because of the humidity, but the real reason was the opium: It killed her sex drive. It also gave her nightmares. She would wake up, her skin crawling. She was convinced one night in*
Phnom Penh that she and Efi were infested with bed bugs. She woke him and demanded he boil the sheets.

“Boil them? You aren’t making sense!”

She cried and begged him to take her back to Israel.

“We can’t go back,” he said. He kissed her. “After we see Bali, we will go back.”

It was a sign of his tenderness, Hava decided, that Efi never pressured her about having sex in Phnom Penh. The realization that she was a junky didn’t come all at once. Despair was common in Cambodia. Emaciated and exhausted, clinging desperately to someone who clung desperately to you, waking up in the arms of a body you used only for its arms and lips: Hava had fallen into this routine of existence.

Efi had rules that soothed her suspicions. “We can’t do heroin,” he commanded.

“Only opium.”

She thought it was a sign that they had things under control.

“People don’t get addicted to smoking opium,” he said. “That’s in the movies.”

The sex was gone, but she didn’t miss it. Nothing seemed to matter in Phnom Penh. It wasn’t until they were at the checkpoint and she felt sick that she realized her body needed the opium.

“I have enough to get us over the hump in Saigon,” Efi told Hava as they got off the bus with the rest of the passengers at the border. They had to walk to Vietnam. One of the soldiers must have seen Efi pat his pocket.

Hava couldn’t fix it. She called Efi’s older sister Miriam from Ho Chi Minh City and explained what happened, but the more she talked about it the more she realized she didn’t remember it right.
“Where is he now?” Miriam asked. “Is he in custody? What did they tell you?”

Hava had walked quickly away when it happened, just like Efi told her. She’d walked quickly away and not looked back, but she couldn’t bring herself to explain this to Miriam. The heavy phone weighed on her. She hung up.

He would have been okay if he hadn’t fought back, but Efi always fought back.

The sound of someone screaming woke Hava.

“Hana!” It was the American. “Hana! Hana!”

She rolled to the edge of her top bunk and saw him standing in the doorway of the dorm. “Hava,” she corrected him. When the word came out she felt her intestines churn. The withdrawal seemed to be getting worse. The weed masked it, but it was still there: that sick, clammy feeling.

The American came strolling into the dorm. The other travellers had cleared out while Hava was sleeping; it was just the two of them. He walked over to her bunk and put his forearms on the edge of her mattress. “You’re currently standing me up, Hava.”

“What time is it?”

“Seven. We got a date.”

“Okay.”

He seemed so chipper. It irritated Hava. His enthusiasm felt forced. This was something else Americans did: They got excited about little events.

The American left to wait for Hava in the lobby.

She got down from her bunk and got her knife out of her backpack. It was a climber’s knife with a hoop on the blade; she could open it with one hand. She hooked the knife inside the waist in the back of her jean shorts. Her plan would unfold like this:
She’d get him alone somewhere secluded after he’d had too much to drink; she’d get him close, letting him think he was getting a kiss, maybe more; and then, she’d pull the knife on him. She hadn’t thought much beyond that point, but she figured as long as she got him drunk and held him at bay with the knife, the rest would be easy.

She walked into the bathroom and inspected herself. The knife’s bulge was insignificant. She splashed some cold water on her face and headed down the stairs to the first floor, taking her backpack with her.

She could see the American smoking on the front porch through the windows in the lobby doors. He was reclining on a wicker sofa and talking to an older traveler with a wispy goatee and shaved head.

Hava leaned her backpack against the side of the front desk and waved to one of the girls. The girl was pretty. She had long straight hair and wore a crispy ironed, white collared shirt. The girl smiled with the corners of her mouth. Hava guessed they were about the same age.

“I’m checking out,” said Hava. “I need my passport.”

The girl behind the front desk opened a thick ledger filled with names. “What is your name, miss?”

“Hana,” said Hava.

“You checking out tonight?”

“Yes. I need to leave my bag here with you. I also wanted to book a bus to Laos in the morning.”
“The bus to Laos leave at eight in the morning,” said the girl. She picked up the phone, made a call, and began talking in Vietnamese. In the middle of her conversation she looked up at Hava. “Just you?”

“Yes.”

The girl concluded the conversation and hung up the phone. “You need to be here at eight. Morning time.”

“That’s fine,” said Hava, glancing out at the American, who didn’t seem to have spotted her.

“How you paying for these?” the girl asked.

“Cash,” said Hava. She reached into the pocket of her backpack and gave the girl thirty American dollars.

“I’ll get change,” the girl behind the counter said.

“Keep the change. I want my bag ready when I come back tonight. And I need my passport.”

The girl behind the counter put the money in a lockbox on the front desk. She knelt on the floor and fished around out of Hava’s sight. She came up and handed Hava her passport, which Hava tucked into her back pocket. “Thank you,” said Hava, and walked out onto the porch.

The American drank the last of his beer when he saw her and stubbed out his cigarette. “You look nice,” he said.

“More drinks,” she observed, sounding intentionally judgmental.

“Come on,” said the American. “Let’s get going before we miss the show.” He stepped aside. “After you.” He smiled.
Hava stepped out into the narrow backpacker road. The streets in this area curved off in a variety of directions: Some led to grimey dead ends, others branched off into a maze of even narrower lanes, and still others led to busy thoroughfares where torrents of motorbikes flowed like the blood of the city.

The backpackers road was less hectic. Just a few motorbikes wove through the travelers. Little restaurants and guesthouses lined the street. A sandwich cart with glass shelves on the top was filled with fresh baguettes and cheese; the proprietor leaned against the glass shelves, her silk shirt billowing around her narrow torso. Another woman in a conical hat manned a wagon filled with lychee and pineapples; she carved the pineapples into flower shapes with a tarnished machete.

The American pointed at her flower-shaped pineapples. “They’re beautiful.”

Hava looked at the pineapple flowers. It surprised her that he noticed them. Before she could respond they were at the end of the lane where traffic, both in the street and on the sidewalk, increased.

“This way,” said the American. He walked them past the bootleg bookstore that sold cheap copies of American novels. An electronics store stocked with top-of-the-line stereos sat across the street. On either side of the electronics store were overpriced restaurants selling western food. Low hanging awnings forced the American to crouch down as they walked along the street. “I hate those restaurants,” he said, pointing across the street to the places selling western food. “Who the hell travels to Vietnam to eat pizza and burgers?”

Hava shrugged. “People miss the food they know.”

“Hava, you’ve had one of the sandwiches from the carts, right?”
“Yes.”

“It’s like one dollar. One dollar for one of those sandwiches.”

“They are very affordable.”

“Tell me that is not the best sandwich you’ve ever had?”

“They are good,” said Hava. She was only half-listening, though. She noticed a few travelers eating at the cafes who looked like they may be users as well. The idea of scoring just a little opium before she left, to help with the sickness kept creeping into her mind.

“So good,” said the American. They were coming to the end of this road and about to turn onto an even busier street. The motorbikes were numerous; they stirred a breeze that Hava could feel on her cheeks. The American stopped and pointed back at the people in the restaurant.

Hava pulled his hand down.

“Those people are eating shitty pizza that costs five, maybe ten dollars. They could be eating a delicious sandwich for a buck!”

“Yes, people are crazy,” said Hava.

“Crazy,” said the American. He took Hava’s hand in his. His face became very serious. “Do you want to say a prayer before we do this?”

“Do what?” asked Hava.

“Cross the street.” He turned and pointed into the chaotic street filled with ever present motorbikes carrying multiple passengers.

“You want to cross here?”

“The theater is just on the other side of the street,” he said.
They were standing in front of the intersection of three major roads. There was a circular island in the center of the intersection. Hava had never gotten accustomed to crossing the street in Phnom Penh, and here in Hanoi it was even worse. There weren’t really spots to cross. You were supposed to walk slowly and steadily into traffic, and the drivers would careen around you. Efi always said it was just a matter of letting go and feeling the traffic, but she could never quite do that. She’d avoided these main roads since coming to Hanoi. The American wanted to take her across the street, but she could only think about it getting dark. She saw the motorbikes turning on their headlights. Hava felt her pulse quicken, as if mirroring the pace of traffic.

The American took Hava’s hand. “Nice and easy.” He stepped into the street, pulling her along with him.

The motorbike drivers swerved around them. Hava felt sick, and this time it wasn’t from the opium; it was fear. She looked over at the American. His face was glowing, a big smile spread across his lips: He was crazy. Why would anyone like this?

After five or six steps they’d reached the circular island at the center of the intersection and stepped onto it. Hava’s heart pounded in her ears. She looked down and saw that her fingers and the American’s were intertwined. She pulled her hand away.

The sound of the motorbike engines was loud. The American raised his voice. “People told me that Vietnam was the worst country in South East Asia. They told me that people were mean. But I love it. I love the sandwiches and the beer. I love these streets. Have you ever had such an adventure crossing the street?”
Hava was about to tell him that it was similar in Phnom Penh, but kept quiet when she recalled that he’d claimed to have been to Cambodia. She began to doubt him. She decided it was good she’d chosen him because he was obviously dishonest.

“You ready?” he asked, his face one big smile.

Hava shrugged. Crossing this side wasn’t scary at all. A motorbike driven by young a man whizzed by. A woman holding an infant perched on the rear of the vehicle. They were inches from Hava and the American. She felt calm and at ease amidst the flow of traffic. This was what Efi must have been talking about: It was like stepping into a storm. The sick feeling was receding. She felt in control, even though everything around her was chaos.

They reached the other side of the street, and were standing in front of the Thang Long Water Puppet Theater. It was an unimpressive beige eyesore. Hava felt good until she looked down and realized that she was holding the American’s hand again.

He smiled at her. “We made it.”

The seats at the water puppet show were too small for the American. He looked silly with his knees poking into his chest. The Vietnamese families coming to see the show pointed at him and smiled. “I must look like a goof,” he said to Hava, a big smile on his face.

“Goof?”

“I must look stupid,” he clarified.

“Oh,” she smiled, despite herself. “A little.”

The house lights dimmed, and the stage lit up.
The last time Hava had been to a show that required tickets was the last night she
and Efi made love. Efi bought tickets to a night of traditional Northern Thai dancing and
dinner in Chang Mai. The three-hour event was gruelingly dull. Efi kept dozing off. They
laughed about how boring the show was as they walked back to the hotel, and Efi
promised to take her to Cambodia to see Angkor Wat the next day, a promise he kept.
They’d fly from Chang Mai to Bangkok and catch a bus from there over the Cambodian
border. Efi kept talking about Cambodia as a way of distracting her. He had a surprise
for Hava. Their hotel room was upgraded to a room with air conditioning. She walked in,
felt the cool blast, and smiled.

They both took long showers and lay comfortably in bed. They made love, and his
arms felt warm and comforting for the first time after so many hot and sticky nights with
a fan pointed directly at the bed.

Efi woke her up several times with kisses on the back of her neck until she shot up
in bed. “Efi, enough,” she said. “Let me sleep.”

He fell back into his pillow, closed his eyes, and slept that deep, peaceful sleep
that only Efi seemed capable of attaining. He’d told Hava many times that after his
service in the Israeli Army he lived to sleep. “Everything is a dream after seeing what I
saw there.”


The large pool of water was imbedded in the center the stage. The water level was
even with the stage top. A curtain hung behind the water. The puppets emerged from the
water as traditional Vietnamese music began to play. They were large puppets, about the
size of a small child. The American whispered the particulars of how the puppets worked
into Hava’s ear. “There are bamboo poles under the water,” he explained. “Men are behind the curtain submerged up to their waist. They control the puppets with the poles.”

There were a variety of vignettes. They were mostly agricultural themes: A farmer planted seeds and then many plants emerged from the water; a farmer tried to catch a fish, but he was smoking opium from a pipe and couldn’t pull the fish onto the boat. Instead, he fell in the water. The American was delighted by them all and laughed louder than anyone in the audience. He clapped his hands and slapped Hava’s knee.

“Tell me you don’t love this,” he whispered into Hava’s ear; the curtains parted and the audience clapped for the puppeteers who stood half-submerged in the water.

Hava clapped, but said nothing. She didn’t want to think about the show. She wanted to get him drunk and get the whole thing over with.

Hava and the American headed out of the theater and onto the sidewalk with the rest of the audience. The moonlight competed with the illuminated building facades and the yellow glow of passing motorbike headlights. The motorbikes drove by calling out to the audience members. “Motorbike!” they yelled. “Motorbike!” The drivers idled, doing their best to solicit rides. The American set his hand on the small of Hava’s back. “Let’s take a walk,” he said. “Have you seen Hoan Kiem Lake at night?”

“No,” said Hava, brushing his hand away, afraid he might feel the knife.

“It’s beautiful,” he said. “Come on.” He grabbed Hava by the wrist and pulled her into the street.

A motorbike came close to clipping the American, and he held up his arm in apology.
“Be careful!” snapped Hava.

“I’m so buzzed from the show,” he said, pulling her the rest of the way across the street.

Hoan Kiem Lake’s dark green water reflected the light of the moon and the many buildings surrounding it. The American led Hava up a stone path that wove around the edge of the lake. Other couples walked along holding hands; some looked like foreigners, others looked Vietnamese.

The American grabbed Hava’s hand. “Do you know the story of Hoan Kiem Lake?”

“The story?” Hava was not in the mood for stories. She wanted to get him drunk and rob him.

“The name translates to something like Lake of the Reclaimed Sword, or Lake of the Returned Sword,” said the American. They were walking in a section shaded by trees. The water was smooth and dimpled with the movement of insects. A beggar lay on the ground a few yards ahead. He was one of many around the lake. Like most beggars in Hanoi, he was maimed. This man had no hands. He held out a hat pinched between two gnarled stubs. The American reached into his pocket and pulled out a wad of bills. He tossed a note of Dong into the hat. Hava saw Vietnamese Dong wrapped around a great deal of American currency before he slipped the money back into his pocket. She’d chosen well. Now she just needed to get him somewhere secluded.

The American turned to Hava once they were out of earshot of the man. “That’s from landmines. During the war with the U.S. this country was covered in landmines.”
“You see the same thing in Cambodia,” said Hava. They were at the south end of the lake. Hava had been walking there the previous evening and gotten frightened because there was a section of streets that was quite secluded. It was only a few blocks from the French Prison, but this time of night, it was almost empty. She’d hurried away the previous evening, afraid something might happen, but now she wanted to get the American there.

“It’s terrible,” said the American. “I can’t stand to see these poor people. Have you noticed that when paralyzed people are begging they just lay on the ground? It looks like they drag themselves there. Their pants are filthy and soiled. It’s awful.”

“Tell me about the lake,” said Hava, looping her arm through his.

“The legend?”

“Yes,” she said. “Tell me over drinks. I know a bar up here where we can talk.”

She led him away from the water. The traffic wasn’t as bad there, and they crossed easily. There were a few bars close to the water, but Hava wanted to take him further into the city. They walked a few blocks past restaurants with tables on the sidewalk serving Vietnamese food. Vietnamese men sat on small plastic chairs at small plastic tables sharing large bottles of beer and eating Pho.

They came to a small bar situated on the corner that served beer and local whiskey. They sat down at one of the tables and Hava called over to the man at the bar, ordering two shots and two beers from an older Vietnamese man who was manning the bar and bringing drinks over to their table. He had a patch of long black hair growing out of a mole on the side of his face, and the hair on his head was thinning and unkempt. His eyes were yellowed. Hava wondered if he was an opium user, if perhaps this bar, which
seemed rather rundown compared to the others closer to the lake, was actually a front for drug sales.

“It’s on me,” said the American, digging into his pocket. Again, she saw the money.

“Thanks,” said Hava.

The man with the hair growing out of his mole was slow to get the shots and beers. He took slow, careful steps, too and from the bar. He brought the beers first, spilling a little on the way, and then he brought the shots, which he placed in the center of the table without so much as a word to either Hava or the American.

Hava waited for the American to pay the man with the hair growing out of his mole, and then she pushed the shot towards him. She flung hers back and burst into a fake cough, sputtering up the liquor.

The man with the hair growing out of his mole scowled at her disapprovingly.

“Party foul!” cried the American.

“Get us another round,” said Hava. “I’ll keep this one down.”

The American ordered two more shots, looking her over skeptically.

The man with the hair growing out of his mole brought over this next round and gave her a similarly skeptical look before shuffling back to the bar.

“Now,” began the American, “just swing it back. Don’t think.” He lifted up his shot glass and waited for Hava to do the same. “Just swing it back. You gotta fight this nasty local stuff.” He smiled then took his shot.

Hava sniffed her shot. She feigned a mock wince. “I’m so sorry,” she said. “But I cannot.”
“Really?”

“Too strong for me,” she said, pressing her hand to her chest.

The American looked disappointed. “Well,” he took the shot glass from her. “I guess it’s mine then.” He shot it back, wincing. “Woo!”

Hava lifted her beer.

The American lifted his as well.

“To . . .?” Hava didn’t know what to toast to.

“To water puppets!”

They clinked glasses.

The American’s face became red, and he smiled more readily than he had before.

“Tell me about the lake with the sword,” said Hava.

“The sword . . .” He took a long sip of beer. “Lake of the Reclaimed Sword,” he said to himself, his face growing ponderous and dreamy as he drained the last of his beer.

“You want another?” he asked.

“No, I’m not done yet. But you go ahead.”

He ordered another beer, which the man with the hair growing out of his mole brought over and plopped on the table. Once the American had the beer in his hands, he continued. “The future emperor of Vietnam came to the lake and met a god.” He paused and sipped. “This god, who appeared in turtle form, gave the future emperor a sword. And this sword . . .” he took long gulps of beer, nearly emptying his glass. “With the sword, this future emperor managed to expel the Chinese in a revolt.” He finished the beer, and ordered another. “Now, the Chinese . . . they’re gone.” He burped softly. “And
the sword . . .” The American paused receiving his new beer from the man with the hair growing out of his mole. “Thank you.”

The man with the hair growing out of his mole shuffled back to the bar without attempting to make any kind of response.

The American lifted his arm as though he were holding a sword. “The sword is still here, in Vietnam. And the man who is now the emperor, he had it. He goes out on the lake and is enjoying a boat ride, and a turtle comes up, the god-turtle, and takes the sword back!”

“The emperor went for a boat ride with his sword?” asked Hava.

“Yes!” The American laughed and took a long gulp of beer. It seemed like this beer was already almost gone. It was despicable how drunk he’d gotten. Hava could barely look at him. He leaned on the little table, sweat pouring down his face. “They looked for the turtle and the sword, but they could not find either. The legend is the god—” he burped softly again. “He took it back.”

“That’s an interesting story,” said Hava. She felt he was sufficiently inebriated to move on.

He seemed eager to drink more, though, and ordered another beer once the one he’d just ordered was gone. The fact that she wasn’t keeping up with him, and empty beer glasses were collecting on the table, didn’t seem to bother him. He drank this final beer greedily. He then addressed Hava, as if he’d just noticed her. “You’re so beautiful.”

“Thank you,” said Hava. “I’d like to go dancing.”

“Dancing?” The suggestion took him aback.
“Yes.” She was glad he’d gotten so drunk. It made everything easier. What had been charming and endearing about him was now out of control and irritating.

He stood up, knocking his plastic chair over, and slammed too much money on the little table.

“You’re overpaying,” said Hava, taking some of the tip for herself.

He laughed.

Hava took him by the arm. It was going to be easy.

She led him down one street and another, then up an incline to a small road just a few blocks from the French Prison, to where she’d been frightened the previous evening. Hava leaned against an empty stretch of wall. Heavy red tiles ran along the top of it, poking the back of her head. She felt sick, but did her best to keep from shaking. She let her chin fall and glanced at the American. She smiled and kept her eyes on him.

“It’s up there.” She pointed lazily up the road. Wouldn’t most men be getting close to her now, trying something? He just stood there with his hands in his pockets swaying. She pushed herself off the wall and heard something hit the ground.

“Oh!” He bent down. “Something fell . . .”

Hava felt the back of her shorts: her knife was gone. She panicked. She’d never done this before. It was a stupid plan; she realized that now. Nothing was happening the way it was supposed to. She grabbed hold of the American as he leaned forward and slammed his head into the wall as hard as she could. There was a heavy thud, and he let out a groan. He put his arms on the ground and didn’t quite fall over. She shoved him into the wall again. The sound of the staccato dribble of blood trickling onto the pavement
followed. He moaned. A large piece of tile at the top of the wall came loose and fell onto the back of his head. A crunching thud, savage sounding in the dimly lit street, startled her. She stepped away from him.

He muttered something, reaching around the base of the wall with his hand, before he turned his face to the side and went silent.

Hava looked at his eyes. She wanted them to blink. She pressed her hand against his neck, but couldn’t find a pulse. His chest was still. She reached into his pockets and found the wad of bills. She pulled out the money, and a passport came with it. She was amazed because hotels usually kept passports. She examined it. It was American; he smiled disarmingly in the photo. She couldn’t bring herself to read his name. He was dead. The fact that she’d spent the past two years in South East Asia and hardly knew South East Asia at all seemed insignificant. The fact that Efi was gone and wouldn’t be coming back felt like a dream. Her whole body trembled as she picked up the knife and put it back in the waist of her shorts.

Hava rushed down the dimly lit street. From Laos she could travel south to Bangkok. In Bangkok she could sell the passport. The money she’d get from selling the passport would be enough to get her to Indonesia. Bali might take some time. She could always just keep moving.

Strings of lights hung over the street. A few Vietnamese men crouched on the side of the road smoking cigarettes. She relaxed her pace. The night air felt fresh and cool. She told herself that in Laos she would only smoke weed. In Bangkok she would switch to cigarettes. In Indonesia she would get clean.
Efi promised on the bus heading out of Cambodia that they’d get clean in Indonesia. He held Hava close as they drove through the countryside. This was before the border check, before the border guards found the opium in his pocket, before she learned that the weed was in her bag. “We’ll just smoke grass in Saigon,” he said. He was lying. She knew that now. She knew there had been opium in his pocket. It calmed her at the time, though. “Then, when we’ve gotten some money together, we’ll go to the islands in Indonesia.” She was cold and shaking on the bus ride despite the humidity. She’d surrendered to Efi. She was riding the waves of his endless plans. “We’ll fly down to Bali, once we are feeling steady,” he said. “Before you know it, we’ll be in Tel Aviv. You’ll see your mother again.”

“She won’t want to see me,” said Hava.

“Everything can be forgiven,” said Efi, as the bus halted at the Vietnamese border.

Hava walked along the edge of Hoan Kiém Lake. No stars were visible in Hanoi’s night sky. She saw a stone tower illuminated by electronic spotlights on the island in the center of the lake. It glowed, alone amidst the city’s reflections. She felt like crying. Now, more than ever, she needed to believe Efi.
Frozen Food

The pet shop where I work doesn’t sell live food for carnivorous pets like snakes. We sell frozen food, which in the pet shop industry means frozen mice. Their strangely contorted bodies are frozen in a mass at the bottom of a plastic freezer bag. Sometimes their whiskers are frosted.

We carry two kinds of frozen mice: pinkies and small mice. Pinkies are dead baby mice. Their eyes are usually closed and they are the color of most people’s tongues. They have no hair and their soft limbs never had a chance to develop. Small mice are a little older. Their feces sometimes end up in the bag, frozen to the insides of their legs. They have white fur and little claws. When their eyes are open, a cataract-like frost forms on the eyeball.

In order to feed their pet, costumers are supposed to put one frozen mouse in a plastic bag and let it float in warm water. Once the mouse has thawed and gained an alluring, life-like temperature, we advise our costumers to fashion a hook out of a paperclip and puncture the tiny skull to release the pleasing odor of blood and brains. We also encourage our costumers to drag the dead mouse around their pet snake’s terrarium on the paperclip, thus exciting the snake’s hunting instincts.

Some owners confess that their snakes seem uninterested in frozen food.
I encourage them to keep trying. In a week or so, hunger will drive the snake to accept the previously frozen food. “Live food is inhumane,” I tell them. “We don’t sell it here.”
Busy childless couples and even singles who cannot afford to take extended leaves are now shipping their children-in-the-making to state clinics to be implanted in the wombs of surrogates.

In a growing practice, embryos from the fertilised eggs and sperm of the couple are couriered in controlled cool conditions and delivered to infertility clinics which are then transferred into the surrogate mother's womb!

-The Times of India, August 29 2012

The clinic in Borsad, India attracted many women. Men walking in the dusty streets and busy downtown market noticed the women coming in from the surrounding villages. These women, in their late twenties and early thirties, came to Borsad, their eyes cast down, not wanting to be recognized or remembered. They carried only the bare essentials in their suitcases, and reminded themselves on every leg of the journey that they were earning money for their families, and that a child was the greatest gift a woman could give. Never mind that the children they would bear would not be their own.

Aanchal was one of the most recent recruits. Like all of the other surrogates at the clinic, Aanchal had already given birth to all the children she and her husband desired. She was carrying the child of another couple in order to get enough money to pay for her son’s schooling. She’d had read about the director of the clinic, Dr. Shivani, in a

brochure. Dr. Shivani had been educated in the United Kingdom and established her clinic with money she received after the death of her husband. Already an accomplished midwife, she found it easy to get involved in the booming surrogacy industry. Many Western families chose Indian surrogates because Indian surrogates had no custody rights to the children, and it was more affordable than using a surrogate in their own country. The families could send the embryos to India in controlled cool conditions. They need only fly to India once in order collect their baby when the surrogate came to term. Each month more families, mostly American or Canadian, contacted Dr. Shivani’s clinic, asking for help in conceiving a child. Finding enough surrogates was becoming a challenge, and Dr. Shivani now recruited women from provinces as far south as Vidarbha.

Aanchal was still in her first trimester, and Dr. Shivani was keeping a close eye on her. All the women at the clinic underwent a psychological exam before they were impregnated, and Dr. Shivani found the results of Aanchal’s exam somewhat troubling. The psychologist told Dr. Shivani that Aanchal would not be interested in keeping the baby, and she probably would not cause any trouble around the clinic. But he also warned Dr. Shivani that Aanchal had visions.

“Visions?”

“She sees spirits.”

“Spirits? Flying around in the air?”

“From time to time. But I think this is an eccentricity and not a reason for her to be excluded from carrying a child.”
Dr. Shivani found this detail more troubling than did the therapist. While she never directly asked Aanchal about her visions, Dr. Shivani often wondered while examining Aanchal if Aanchal was seeing spirits.

Aanchal was not seeing spirits. She was very nervous, though. More than anything she wanted the pregnancy to go well. Her husband had been injured working for Larsen and Toubro Construction; his foot would never be the same. They needed money to help with the upkeep of their home, and more importantly, to secure the costs of their son’s education. The surrogates could abort their pregnancies at any time, but became responsible for the costs the parents incurred. If they lost the baby, they would not receive full payment. Aanchal, like most of the women at the clinic, needed the full payment.

“How are you feeling?” Dr. Shivani smiled and looked into Aanchal’s eyes. “Are you seeing anything . . . odd?”

“No, I feel very well.” Aanchal felt as though she were being inspected for evidence of a lie, so she smiled back, hoping this would reassure the doctor. “I have never felt better,” said Aanchal.

“This is what I like to hear,” said Dr. Shivani.

Borsad’s dusty air turned the screens of the clinic brown. The window glass, too, had become hazy. Aanchal slept in an overcrowded dormitory room that seemed more crowded every week. Nusrat, the oldest of the women, slept in the bed next to Aanchal’s. This was Nusrat’s fourth surrogacy, and Dr. Shivani had told Nusrat it would probably be her last. Women were not supposed to have more than three surrogacies. This was
already Nusrat’s fourth. She believed she could have a fifth. “The doctor claims it is too dangerous,” said Nusrat. “But last year I was walking home from the market with fresh okra. I was knocked down by a Sadhu who was deep in a spiritual trance and stomping up the road. When he realized he had knocked me down, he knelt over me, and placed his hand on my belly. ‘Ten extra children!’ he cried. ‘I grant you ten extra children!’ The doctor does not know this, and thinks I am a normal woman.” Nusrat eyed Aanchal. “I am considering finding another clinic, better than this one. Dr. Shivani is a cheat. She wants to cheat me out of the babies the Sadhu promised me!”

Very little Nusrat said made sense, but due to the forceful manner with which the older woman spoke, it was difficult for Aanchal to disregard her. Even at night, Nusrat spoke quite a bit before going to sleep.

In the darkness, while the dust beat against the windows and the ceiling fans whirred and ticked, Nusrat talked to Aanchal. “Now that you are carrying an American baby, the pregnancy will be more difficult,” said Nusrat. “They are more demanding. It is a new experience, but you seem up to it. The most important thing is to trust other surrogates and be careful of the doctor. She is tricky. You would be wise to be careful of her.”

Aanchal was not certain how to reply. She tried to think of her son.

Nusrat fell asleep and began to snore. Her snores troubled Aanchal, who could not sleep amidst their rumble.

Piki was an experienced surrogate, like Nusrat. This was her second American baby. Like Nusrat, she felt compelled to take Aanchal under her wing. Aanchal, however,
was less susceptible to Piki’s words. Piki had a reputation at the clinic as a very disturbed woman. Nusrat gossiped about her. “Her first American baby was deformed,” explained Nusrat, sitting on the floor during their afternoon meal. Due to overcrowding, the women ate their meals on the floor in the hall outside the dormitory. The last dining room had been turned into a dormitory. Nusrat spoke with her eyes on Piki, who’d just finished giving Aanchal a little speech about walking with her back straight; it made the American babies more comfortable. “Listening to her is a mistake,” whispered Nusrat, glaring at Piki. “She is a liar and a storyteller.”

“I tell only what I know,” said Piki, glaring back from the other side of the hall. “You would have me cast out like a lunatic. But I am here again because my baby was healthy.”

“It was deformed, Piki,” countered Nusrat. “I saw and so did others. It was sick, and its legs were misshapen.”

Piki shook her head. “She is the storyteller. We never see the babies of the other surrogates. If Nusrat saw anything it was a dream. And she dreams of disfigured babies.”

Piki looked hard at Aanchal as she spoke. “Aside from your posture, you must also pay close attention to your dreams. You dream what your baby will be. I dream only of Brad Pitt. All my babies are handsome Americans.”

Nusrat laughed at Piki and gave Aanchal a knowing nod, as if to say, see, she is a fool.

Aanchal wondered how any of these women had passed the psychological exam.
The window beside Piki’s bed was broken, and she was screaming at Dr. Shivani. “A rapist was here in the dead of night trying to break into our dormitory! He wants to take us because he believes we are whores!” She pointed at the broken window as though it were a signed confession.

“Nonsense,” said Dr. Shivani. When the Americans came, Dr. Shivani always charmed them with her British English. She only spoke Hindi to the surrogates, though. The surrogates suspected her of knowing all their languages and dialects, but choosing to keep her secrets. (“Secrets are power,” Nusrat had explained to Aanchal.) Dr. Shivani was flushed due to the extreme heat. The dust in the city was spilling in through the broken window and screen. Due to her diminutive height, Dr. Shivani had chronic neck and shoulder pains. She rubbed her neck with her hand as she considered Piki’s story.

“Men storm the clinic at night,” said Piki. “They are a bunch of sister-fuckers. Dogs!”

“You are going to make the other girls hysterical, Piki,” said Dr. Shivani. “No one is raping anyone. You are making up stories.” Dr. Shivani pointed at Piki’s belly. “And acting like this is not good for the child.”

Piki became still.

Most of the other surrogates lay flat on their backs in bed. The ceiling fans whirred and ticked. Nusrat and Aanchal lay next to one another in Aanchal’s bed, watching the commotion from the corners of their eyes.

Dr. Shivani turned to the room of women. “I will find out who broke the window.”

Piki stomped over to her bed and looked forlorn.
Nusrat sighed a long, fatigued sigh.

It was Piki who had broken the window. No one knew why. She’d broken it in the dark, thinking no one had seen, but they had. She’d screamed, waking up most of the room. “They are trying to break in and rape us!” she’d screamed.

No one had stirred. Her stories were like bees buzzing—she was a constant and immutable noise.

Piki lay in bed fanning herself and complaining of a fever. “I am burning!”

“It is because she sleeps by the broken window,” said Nusrat under her breath to Aanchal. “She has worked herself into a frenzy trying to cause a scandal, and now she is sick. Look at her heaving in the bed. And now we are exposed to it. She has done herself in, but it is wrong to ruin everyone because she cannot control herself. Dr. Shivani should remove her. She is sick, and she may lose the baby. She will be thrown out into the street with barely any compensation. The Americans have spent a fortune, and losing the baby means losing her payment. She is a fool.”

The idea of losing a baby frightened Aanchal.

Piki’s moans were steady.

“You are not in so much pain!” hissed Nusrat.

“Who is sick?” Dr. Shivani’s voice caused the entire room to stir.

“It is Piki,” said Nusrat. “She has made herself sick sleeping by the broken window, and now she is trying to poison all the American babies and ruin us.”

Dr. Shivani approached Piki. She placed her palm on Piki’s clammy forehead.

“You are ill?”
“I am seeing terrible things!” cried Piki, her voice exaggerated and raspy. “I was peacefully sleeping and dreaming of Brad Pitt when those villainous rapists broke the window. Now I am a victim of a terrible disease!”

“Nonsense,” said Dr. Shivani. “You are simply ill. It will resolve itself. We must take tests to make sure the baby is okay. You must drink many fluids.” Dr. Shivani turned her attention to the entire room. “You all must drink many fluids.”

The surrogates nodded, their brows furrowed. Aanchal wondered if Dr. Shivani was able to see that these women were suspicious. Nusrat was to blame. Her stories of Dr. Shivani cheating her out of babies had made the other women suspect that she was cheating them as well. Only Aanchal seemed to believe in Dr. Shivani’s abilities. Only Aanchal remained silent when the other women gossiped in low tones over their afternoon meals. Only Aanchal had any intention of drinking many fluids.

“She is dehydrated,” said Dr. Shivani to an attendant who stood in the doorway. The attendant was a lean woman in her mid-thirties who was also educated in England. The attendant left the room and came back with an IV.

“They will drug me!” cried Piki.

Piki complained of an unnatural hunger. “I feel like I am an empty bowl,” she said. “It is the American baby. It eats and eats. I have never felt such hunger. American babies require more! I am certain that is why I was more susceptible to this sickness. It came through the window and into me because it saw that I was weakened by the American baby.” Piki leaned back on her bed and let out a loud moan.

“If you are sick, you should leave,” said Nusrat. “You will poison all of us.”
The clinic was becoming unbearably overcrowded. No one seemed to be sleeping well. Each week, new women arrived. Some were forced to share beds, not because there weren’t enough beds, but because so many beds had broken springs or torn mattresses. The surrogates agreed to share beds. Aanchal and Nusrat had begun sleeping together.

Piki managed to keep her own bed. She was so noisy and sickly, no one wanted to sleep with her. But Aanchal felt uneasy because Piki was not as noisy as usual. She heard only faint whispers coming from the direction of Piki’s bed. Concerned, Aanchal woke Nusrat. “She might need our help,” whispered Aanchal.

Nusrat peered skeptically through the darkness at Piki. “She is acting.”

“No,” Piki’s voice was soft. “I am not acting. I am sick. I am losing it.”

“Dr. Shivani!” cried Aanchal.

The night attendant came into the dorm, flipping on the lights. The springs of the overcrowded beds creaked as the surrogates readjusted themselves, shielding their eyes.

“What is the trouble?” asked the attendant.

Piki moaned.

Aanchal saw Nusrat’s disapproving gaze, but she ignored it and spoke. “Piki is sick. She is losing her American baby.”

The attendant walked over to Piki’s bed and looked down at her. She noticed along with the rest of the women nearest Piki, that blood stained the sheets.

Aanchal covered her mouth. She shut her eyes.

Nusrat wore a blank expression that seemed to quaver. “Piki,” she said. “I will help you clean yourself.”
“No,” said the attendant. “We must call the doctor.” She left the room to call Dr. Shivani.

Nusrat rose from her bed and walked over to Piki’s bed. She sat on the edge, making the springs creak, and reached out, to touch Piki’s hip. “You are sick,” said Nusrat. “You must rest and think only of better things.”

Dr. Shivani arrived within ten minutes. Most of the surrogates in the dormitory were pretending to sleep. “Piki,” Dr. Shivani said gently, “we need to remove you from the dormitory.”

Piki nodded weakly. An attendant came in with a wheel chair, but Piki swatted away the help she was offered and got into the chair herself.

All the women looked away as she was wheeled out. Aanchal focused on the small stain on Piki’s sheets. It seemed to be growing. She thought she could see a tiny form in it, red and soft, its head as large as its body. It looked big enough to scoop up in her hands. She thought she saw it moving it’s small, translucent appendages. The eyes, black, half the size of the head, blinked milky eyelids. No, this was impossible. But then, an almost imperceptible mouth opened. Out came a raspy growl.

Aanchal shut her eyes. It must be a dream.

She heard the growl again.

“No,” she said, rolling over in bed. The sound of the attendant clearing the sheets gave her momentary peace.

Aanchal could not sleep. Nusrat was deep in a dream, and she kicked at Aanchal’s ankles. Aanchal pulled her legs up in the bed, and rolled onto her other side.
The creature she’d seen in Piki’s bed was sitting on the edge of her mattress. It was slightly bigger now, and its translucent flesh had become a soft, rubbery pink. No bigger than a newborn kitten, it gazed at her with its large black eyes. A smile spread across its tiny, lip-less mouth.

“Hello,” said Aanchal. “Do you have a name?”

“My name is Brad Pitt,” said the creature.

“What are you?” asked Aanchal.

“I am an American,” said Brad Pitt.

“Are you Piki’s American?”

“I was,” said Brad Pitt. “But now I am not hers. Now I am free to be American, and do what I like.” He blinked his smooth black eyes. “Does it make you nervous talking to me?”

“No,” lied Aanchal.

“I can tell that it does,” said Brad Pitt. “You are not used to talking to Americans.”

“I’ve never spoken to one before.”

“We are not as polite as Indians. We are more direct. Have people told you stories about us?”

“I was told that Americans were arrogant. But I was also told that in America there are many nice things. Why are you here and not in America?”

“Because I have nowhere else to go.” Brad Pitt wrapped his little arms around his naked torso.

“Are you cold?”
“Yes, let me crawl into your hands.”

Aanchal opened her hands, and Brad Pitt crawled in. He felt cold and clammy against her palms. She held him, wrapping her fingers around his little belly so that his head was visible. She could feel the satisfied wriggle of his arms and legs in her hand.

“Blow into your hands,” said Brad Pitt.

Aanchal raised her hands to her mouth. Making a small hole where her thumbs met, she pressed her lips to the knuckles of her thumbs and blew warm air into her cupped hands. She could feel Brad Pitt’s little appendages relax.

“Thank you.” He purred against the side of her index finger.

“What do you eat?” Aanchal asked. The mother in her could not stand to see this little creature uncomfortable and potentially hungry, but she did not know what to feed him.

“I live on dreams,” said Brad Pitt.

His answer startled Aanchal.

Brad Pitt’s large black eyes narrowed beneath his smooth pink eyelids. “You are scared?”

“How do you eat a dream?”

“I don’t eat them!” Brad Pitt let out a laugh revealing a thin, red tongue and no teeth. “I am not here to eat your dreams. It is dreams that are keeping me here, my parent’s dreams.”

“They are dreaming of you now?”

“Yes.”
“Why did you leave Piki if they were dreaming of you?” asked Aanchal. “Don’t you want a family?”

“I had no choice,” said Brad Pitt. “I think it is only a matter of time before they are told what happened. Then I will be gone.”

“What do you want? What can I give you before you go?” Aanchal wanted to give Brad Pitt something he could cherish before the news reached the Americans. “Tell me. I will do whatever I can.”

“Tell me you love me,” said Brad Pitt.

Aanchal kept Brad Pitt hidden beneath her sari the next day. Now that she held him, she felt closer to the American child she was carrying. Nusrat had said that American babies speak to you in your mood. “An American baby talks to you by making you sad or making you happy. They are not like Indian babies. They do not grow and wait to be born. They will make you grumpy when they are grumpy and sad when they are sad. It is important to listen to your mood. It will be your American baby talking to you.” Aanchal felt sad walking with Brad Pitt beneath her sari and thinking about the baby she carried. She wondered if Nusrat was right, if the American inside of her was sad, too.

Brad Pitt had been still and dour all day. Aanchal could not tell him she loved him because she barely knew him. It didn’t seem right to lie. After her afternoon meal, Aanchal lay in her bed, rolled onto her side, and pulled Brad Pitt out to speak to him, but he had very little to say.

“Are you feeling well?” asked Aanchal.
“I suppose,” said Brad Pitt.

“What can I do for you?”

“Only what I asked.”

“I cannot, because it would be a lie,” said Aanchal.

Brad Pitt hung his head and swallowed with difficulty. “I think the news has reached them because I feel very weak.”

“Is it painful?”

“It is like nothing. It is like falling asleep, only I am forgetting myself.”

“I will remember you,” said Aanchal. “Perhaps if I remember you, you will not be completely gone.”

Brad Pitt became still in her hand. His tiny arms became stiff. His skin became dry. He looked like a large pink raisin in her palm.

Three men came to fix the window. When they did, they told all the surrogates to wait in the hall. Dr. Shivani was there, talking to the women rapidly in Hindi, her wide eyes looking up at them. “It is sad about Piki, but I am sure the rest of you are very healthy. And we are fixing the window. Drink many fluids and all will be well.”

Aanchal was beginning to feel more aware of the child she carried. Its movements were slight, like a feather brushing through her belly; she questioned whether they were real or imaginary sensations. Nusrat had claimed that American babies like to move. “They demand that you know they are inside you,” she’d said. “It is important to be distant and think of other things when they kick around. You do not want them to miss you when they fly back to America. When my babies kick, I become still. You cannot
show them love. It would not be fair to the baby.” But Aanchal was beginning to feel a fondness for the child she carried, despite the fact that they would never meet, and this fondness made her sad.

Listening to the doctor speak, she made a conscious effort to think of Brad Pitt. She imagined him as he had been on the edge of her bed. She recalled his lively laugh and the animation of his tiny limbs. He could have become anyone, and possessed many riches, especially if he was going to America. She imagined a large house with a yard and fluffy, yellow dog. A crowded birthday party, presents piled to the ceiling. Two happy parents, arm-in-arm. It was bliss just to think of it.
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