

Tightrope

by

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Tightrope

I've been taking the LightRail to work every day for three months. It's new, it's like a monorail. I take the early 6am train starting at West Side Ave all the way up to Newport. The sun is not up yet and the air is crisp and new and untouched. When I'm waiting, I usually stand at the very edge of the platform looking at the two parallel steel rails over perpendicular wood sleeper: rails and sleepers, rails and sleepers. They remind me of a time when I was a boy, balancing on vacant train tracks, as if I am balancing on a tightrope, thinking about life, until the train comes—quiet, stalking thing.

I'm dressed with my suit and tie, an overcoat, my suitcase and a duffle bag. No one notices me, everyone is half asleep to even care. Everybody it seems is in a dream-like state, walking like zombies, to whatever it is they're going to; where ever stop they seem to be stopping. Not everybody likes to go to where they're supposed to. Except me. I'm lucky.

The LightRail arrives and I sit at the corner on the window seat. I watch people, their heads especially. The window seaters lay their heads on the windows, a poor substitute for pillows. Most people that early in the morning, eventually fall asleep, their

bodies lay limp with lifeless sleep, as if someone had drugged them, or covered their mouths with chloroform, like in the movies.

A mother comes in with a stroller and her two kids. One child is a little girl who looks like she's in preschool. The other child is a boy, an infant, whose eyes are bug-eyed awake. The electric sliding doors almost close in on them. No one bothers to help. She can't find a seat near the doors because they are occupied and no one gets up. I almost do but then she finds a seat all the way in the back in front of me. She unfolds the stroller and sits the little infant boy, and straps him safe. The little girl sits and starts asking her mother questions. The mother is too tired to answer.

Another set of people come in the LightRail; a mix of adults, both corporate types and blue collar workers. The blue collar workers are a mix of maintenance people, retail workers, cogs to the greater whole of society. They are needed. Some more than others. Another group, are the corporate types in their suits. College finance and econ major types whose job it is is to pump new blood in the corporate heart beating, beating, beating. But beating into what? Sometimes I think about them in their cubicles, in front of their computers, and typing away senseless numbers and processing, always processing, numbers that mean nothing to them in the grander scheme of things. Their lives, most of them anyway, are lived like the screen savers of themselves, dozing off and shutting down on idle. I sometimes think about their beating hearts inside cubicles and I wonder if anybody hears them.

(I read on the newspaper two months ago about a man who died in his cubicle and nobody noticed. A forty year old man, too young to die really of a heart attack, and his

co-workers found his body three days later when the smell had reeked from his cubicle. Three days, and no one noticed he was gone; no meetings, no workload that somehow went unnoticed—three days. And it wasn't because he died over the weekend; no it wasn't that at all. It was because no one ever noticed him. Not even the janitors noticed. His existence was just merely to exist and the only time it was noticed was when someone smelled the stink coming out of his cubicle. Imagine your stink was more noticeable than your life?)

I am sitting comfortably when a fat man sits next to me. He takes up his space as well as part of mine. He reads his newspaper and I squeeze in even more. The newspaper's headlines are about this and that, war in the Middle East, the economy is shit, and local news here and there, the weather, and there's also a spike in suicide rates from this year compared to last. He skims them over and reads the gossip entertainment column. He smiles, I see it, and I look away into the window where construction is taking place. Hills of dirt and mounds of cement paint the landscape. Steel metal rods replace the trees.

The train stops now suddenly because of a delay. I hear murmur, a sigh of complaints. The fat man sitting next to me breathes in irritation. I don't know why, because most people here don't even want to go to where they're going. I often wonder, why people rush to the place they hate so much. Not me though. I have a schedule to maintain. I have to be on time.

The train starts again. It passes newly built skyscrapers and we're finally at the business district in Exchange Place. The fat man leaves but purposely leaves his

newspaper as if someone is going to read the newspaper, as if he's doing somebody a favor. But he's not, he's just littering. Most of the commuters are leaving too, and others are taking their place. Corporate men with their ties like leashes to their corporate masters. Some are coming in. One man in particular comes in exhausted. He's different from everybody else because while everybody seems to be going to work, he seems to be coming from work. I know this. His tie is loose and crooked and his top button unbuttoned. He's carrying a briefcase too, just like mine. He stands instead of sits. I can see his nametag hanging from his belt, along with his company and what floor, and I wonder if he ever thought of putting that away just in case somebody was looking at it and thought to follow him. I see him almost every day, a regular, a man of routine.

A woman sits next to me. She smells of department store perfume. Her hair is still a little damp and I can smell her shampoo and conditioner. I move my duffle bag and she says sorry, in a smug sort of way, as if this is her seat all along. She types on her iPhone.

The baby boy in front of me starts to cry in his stroller. The mother unbuckles him and carries him and gives him a pacifier. She puts him on her shoulder and the baby boy is looking at me and the woman next to me. The woman sitting next to me smiles at him, but he doesn't smile back. Instead he looks my way. I try to look back to the scenery passing by, but he's staring. I can tell he's staring. I look at him. He is wearing a little blue hat. His eyes are brown. I could see that he has dimples just like me. I wonder what he's thinking of. What are you thinking little man? I watch him and I think of his little brain, how countless neurons are already forming, making connections, electrical flashes like lightning inside the brain, tendrils connecting and forming, binding and unbinding, like a little storm. He's staring at me and he's winning the staring contest. He doesn't

blink. Little babies usually don't blink as much as adults. What a wonder this little thing is, a blank slate inside that brain, waiting for things to form, and concepts and ideas, and a life waiting to become. What are you going to become? Is there a little genius inside of you, waiting? A doctor? A lawyer? A president? Good? Bad? An angel? A monster? What are you thinking? Or are you just like one of them walking day dreamers commuting to their every days? Are you going to be like them, going about your routine? What are you going to be? When will you know? Or never know?

“I think he likes you.” The woman sitting next to me says.

“Yes,” I say, “he does stare.” She makes baby gaga noises and the baby looks at her and then to me again and then retreats to his mother's arms. The electrical voice on the train alerts us that the Newport stop is next. This is my stop. I grab my duffle bag and my briefcase. I tell the lady, “Excuse me.” The lady doesn't say a thing. She moves her legs to the side and I walk towards the doors and some other people too, as well as the man with the crooked tie and his briefcase. When the electrical voice sounds and the doors open, we leave like sheep without a shepherd, going here and there in our own separate destinations, except this time, I won't be going to my own destination.

I instead follow the man with the crooked tie. I follow his steps. I know his steps because I've been following him for the last three months. Black shoes on grey pavement, I walk behind him just as loud with my black shoes, in sync with each step, step, step. He doesn't notice because he's used to me. He's used to me going with him only up to a point but this time, I'm going to walk with him further.

His name is Steven J B. He works the nightshift at a trading firm from 10pm to 6am, but he usually leaves the office at 7am, to show his boss that he's staying a bit later. He's going home to his high rise apartment overlooking the Hudson. It is on the 17th floor, apartment C, a one bedroom 800 square foot apartment with nice high ceilings. He lives alone, no pets, not even a fish. He goes to the convenient store every other Wednesdays to pick up things for the apartment, mostly coffee, *Folgers*, "*Good to the last drop*". After he goes up to his apartment, he logs into his work laptop, VPNs in, watches video streaming of CNBC, and checks his emails one last time before going to sleep.

I know this because it is really easy to remote into Steven J B's computer. It is really easy to know somebody from the little cookies they leave of themselves in the open jar that is the internet. He has called about his broken laptop. It was a simple fix really. It was a password issue. You'd be surprised how many people forget their password on a Monday. You'd be surprised how many people use their pets' names as passwords more than their kids'; use the word password as their password; use how they feel about their work as their password like *ihatework123*; use their porn name. Steven J B is no different. I took my time fixing his problem, going into his computer, going into his pictures, going into his documents, going into his websites. From time to time, I check up on him. I remote in, it even says, I've remoted in, and then, I turn on the webcam on top of his LCD display and look at his apartment with its nice high ceilings. Some people put a little tape to cover up their webcams. Not Steven J B.

He says hello to Frank, the doorman. I've said hello to him before too, and today, I'm saying hello to him, smiling, brimming with the confidence as if to say, I too live

here. Steven J B goes to the elevator. I walk inside the elevator with him. Just him and me. He thinks I live here. I ask him to press floor 44 please. He smiles and does. He presses his own floor, 17. We both pretend to avoid each other.

He gets off the elevator. I slightly step back. He'll walk to his apartment. Open his door. Think his day is over.

But his day isn't over.

Today, Steven J B will get a knock on his door. He'll recognize me because I was the guy on the elevator. He'll also realize that he has for the past three months seen me, on occasion, in front of him at the convenient store across the block, buying cigarettes and gum. He'll know I was the guy who held the door for him on the LightRail, "Thanks," he said to me, without even a thought. He'll maybe even recognize me from work.

I walk to his apartment. I drop my duffle bag on the floor. I knock on his door. I press his doorbell. Ring ring ring. I can tell he's looking through the peep hole. I wave my arm and smile an innocent smile.

"Yes?"

"Hello." I take out his nametag. "Steven J B? Are you Steven J B. I think you dropped your nametag in the elevator." I show him his nametag.

He reluctantly opens the door. I can hear the deadbolt unlock, and the silver stainless door turning, counter clockwise.

I show it to him. His eyebrows wince up, curious. Then he looks at side of his belt and he realizes that his nametag is still there. Before he can react, I take out my hand from my coat pocket and I shove my chloroform soaked napkin over his nose and mouth and with my other hand grab the back of his head. I push my way in, I whisper in his ear, “Shhh, shhh, shhh.” Surprisingly, he doesn’t struggle. Maybe it is the surprise. Maybe it is the chloroform taking its effect faster than what I would have wanted. Or maybe it is the thought that maybe he knows me, maybe he wants to know me. The metal door behind me rushes shut, followed by a heavy bang. I lay him down gently, like a child, “Ssshhh,” I say again, “Shhhh.”

And then it’s quiet.

When I was boy, Mother took me to the circus. It was the first time Mother had taken me anywhere after Father left some time ago. She said I’d like the circus. I said I’d rather go to the movies. She said we’d both like the circus. I remembered the clowns. I remembered the elephants. I remembered the lion tamer. But most of all I remembered the man on the tightrope. It was a new trick the ring master announced. A new trick by the man on the tightrope and we were the first to see it. The tightrope man was going to balance not only himself, but something more, something unbelievable. This had never been done before, the ring master said. I was privileged. Then the stage went dark. The lion roared. An elephant wailed. Then the drums rolled. The lights danced throughout the stage, throughout the tented arena, bounced to the floor to the people, then to the man above on the edge of the tightrope with his scantily dressed assistant. He was dressed

with a suit and tie like he was a banker or a corporate type; dark blue suit with a white shirt and the top button unbuttoned. His tie was dark blue too with yellow stripes. It was crooked. He was the everyday man. He said he was going to attempt what no man has done before. He was going to cross the tightrope with his unicycle while he balanced his laptop on his head. And then he said, as the strobe light shone on the empty ground below, "Without a net!" All the people gasped. Is that possible? I heard one person say. To break the tension, he joked, "It's like it's everybody's every day." Some people laughed. Others didn't get the joke. He prepared himself and his lady assistant made sure everything was in its place. The audience waited in anticipation. My neck was hurting from waiting. He balanced a laptop on his head and it fell to his hands and he joked, "Maybe I should reconsider this." People laughed. Mother did too. I asked her for more popcorn. She said pay attention. First, he balanced on his unicycle and he did it with ease. That was simple enough. Then the laptop on his head, once, twice, three times, and the lady assistant helped him out with balancing and it did, amazingly, not wobbling a bit this time. He gave out a huge sigh and everybody laughed. "Here I go," he said. He spread his arms like he was flying. He rolled his unicycle towards the rope. Forward. Then back to the platform, then forward again and then, he was itching forward getting momentum, "Whoa whoa," he said. "Is it too late to go back?" Laughter. "I think I got this. I think I got the hang of this!" Finally he was moving forward. Everybody was silent, staring. I had popcorn in my mouth but I stopped chewing. He was almost at the end of the rope and then we heard something. A cellphone. A cellphone ringing? Who the hell could have had his cellphone on? The ringmaster said over the mike, "Please no cellphones." It was getting louder. It was an obnoxious ring tone that even today I could hear ringing in

my mind. Ring Ring Ring. The ringmaster yelled out again, "Please turn it off." We all looked at each other, it isn't me, is it you? And then it got louder. And then we noticed it was coming from the man on the tightrope. "Oh, sorry about that. I forgot to put this on vibrate." With his arms still spread, he took his right arm and picked the cellphone from his jacket pocket. "Hello," he said, "hello." A light shone on his assistant on the other side of the tightrope. She was on her cellphone. "Hon?" She said. "Yes?" the tightrope man said. "You forgot your briefcase." There was a burst of laughter from the crowd. Ha, ha, ha. Everybody laughed. Was he going to go back? He was almost at the end. "Oh, hon," he said. Then he started reversing. He went backwards and the audience clapped and clapped, smiling and laughing and cheering. Then something happened. As he was moving backwards, it looked like he was stuck. What was he stuck on? It wasn't noticeable at first, but the cloth from his leg pant got caught on the gear of the unicycle, and as he was going backwards and forwards to try to unstuck the bottom of his leg pant, his arms were flailing, trying to keep himself balanced, all the while, remarkably, the laptop on his head didn't at all move or even wobble. Some of the people started to point, aware of the situation. I didn't think anything of it at first. I thought it was another stunt. But, as he thrust one final thrust with his leg forward, a piece of fabric of his leg pant ripped and the unicycle propelled faster than he can balance. His torso couldn't accommodate for the wheel. His body fell back while his legs and the unicycle flung forward! The unicycle, instead of falling to the ground below, stayed on the tightrope, balancing itself, stuck, magnetized somehow. The unicycle was never in danger of falling off the tightrope at all. The unicycle rolled as far off almost to the very edge of the tightrope, squeaked, and rolled without a driver.

Where was the driver? Where was the everyday man who was supposed to balance himself and his laptop from one end of the rope to the other end? It turned out, that he too, was stuck. He too, was tied to a safety harness hidden behind his dark blue suit, wrapped below his shoulders and above his waist, hidden in the shadows, hidden above us, and even his laptop was attached on top of his head! How could we have not seen it? Maybe we believed in his stunt. Maybe we believed in the everyday man. But something was terribly wrong. The safety harness was supposed to pull him up but instead the separation from the unicycle twisted his body so that his safety harness wrapped itself around his neck. But he didn't die. No, not right away. It should've snapped his neck but somehow, he managed to put his left hand under the safety harness, before it had completely tightened around his neck. His left hand, now crushed and bloodied, was the only thing saving him from strangulation. From where I sat, it looked like his left hand was strangling him. The audience gasped. People looked away. Mother put her arm around me to shield me from the sight. But she couldn't cover everything. She looked away. I saw the kids next to me look away and close their eyes tight and shut as they had never shut them before. I heard voices calling out, screaming, crying, "Someone get help! Someone call 911! Someone get up there!" I moved my head just slightly, and in the corner of my eye, at the very edge, I could see him, wrangling away, his body twisting and turning, and his legs motioning, as if the unicycle was still there. I watched while others cowered away. I watched until his body stopped struggling. I watched until his body swayed like a pendulum, lifeless and dead.

I make coffee. *Folgers* instant coffee, “*Good to the last drop*”. I make it the way Steven J B would make it—light and sweet with two scoops of sugar. I’m in his eat-in kitchen and as he sleeps in his chloroform sleep, I set up a chair on top of his small round table, just for Steven J B to sit on, just so he can see the view sitting atop a chair on his small round table. There is a ceiling fan above. I take out my tightrope from my duffle bag. The same type of tightrope they use in circuses. I make sure the ceiling is high enough. It is. I make a pulley. I tie one end of the tightrope to the ceiling fan above and the other end to the strongest thing in the kitchen. It happens to be the pipe under the kitchen sink. It is a work of art this pulley I’ve made.

It is almost time that Steven J B wakes. His hands and his feet are bound. I carry his sleeping body and place him on the chair. I tie the tightrope noose around his neck. I use his crooked tie to tie it around his mouth and I face him to look out his window. He does have a pretty good view of the Manhattan skyline. I wonder how many times he's looked out his window thinking, what a beautiful view! What a lucky man I am! When he wakes, I don't think he'll be thinking about the view. He'll be thinking of other things.

His eyes start to flicker. They start to open. He must think this is a dream. I'm sorry Steven J B but this isn't a dream. “Wake up Steven,” I tell him. “Wake up.”

He's dazed and scared shit out of his pants and I see that he's already taken a number one. He drips all over his seat, and onto the little round table.

“That's disgusting, people eat here Steven.”

He shakes his head.

“Listen, it’s a lot easier if you listen.”

Tears start to swell in his eyes and I don’t like that; I don’t like that at all. I didn’t cry when Father left us. I didn’t cry when Mother was found with the car ignition on in the garage. I continue, “In this world, you really ought to know what you want to be in life. I did very early, and I was lucky, and some people like yourself, don’t, and that’s sad. That’s really sad. Well you see, Steven, I’ve been watching you for three months now. Three whole months. I know you’ve seen me around, and if you haven’t, shame on you, I’ve been the guy in the corner of your eye. You could’ve said ‘hi’. I’m surprised you haven’t.”

He shakes his head.

“Three months, I’ve pretty much seen you do the same thing every weekday, Monday to Friday. You’ve been late 4 times to work, absent, oh, zero times which actually needs commending.” I clap my hands. Clap clap clap. The news is still on the television; the financial ticker flying by at the bottom of the screen: telecom this, foreign exchange that. “See Steven, you’ve taken no vacation days, worked one floating holiday, and stayed late every day except one Friday, because you deserve that, you do. And in those three months, you’ve managed to not do anything extraordinary, not even something out of the ordinary.

“Although, I have seen you talking to that girl, brown hair, light brown eyes, about hey tall, very nice smile, sometimes a little crack of a dimple when she does, not drop dead gorgeous but pretty, not only that, your type of pretty. You wait with her, or rather wait for her. She works in the same firm, I don’t want to say her name but you

probably know I already know her name, and yes, she also works late nights, but her train goes the opposite of yours. It's too bad really, it's too bad. I see you guys talking on the way to the LightRail. She would tell you about her day or rather her night, and you never really talk, but that's fine, it really is fine, and she would talk, and you like the sound of her voice, it's calming, it's nice, it's what you would want the sound to be at the end of the day, and when you get to the train platform, she would stop talking because she has to go to the other side, and you would say, 'Well, have good day', even though you want her to say more. I know, I've watched."

Steven closes his eyes now, shaking his head.

"You're still listening right? Anyway, Steven, you always want to say something more than just, 'Well, have a good day', don't you? You want to say, oh I don't know. I don't know because I'm not you. And Steven, you're not an ugly guy, no not an ugly guy at all, but you're no Brad Pitt either but, damn it Steven, any word could've worked."

Steven lowers his head now, still shaking, shaking. With his hands and feet bound, they look like they are praying and maybe he is.

"Ah, Steven," I say, "there was even this one time, it was raining, and you two were sharing an umbrella. She forgot hers or you thought, but she didn't forget hers Steven, she always brings one in her big black purse, and well, for some reason, she would rather have been under your umbrella. And again you said, 'Well, have a good day.' Steven it was a rainy, ugly day, and well how can she have a good day? She walked over to the other side of the train platform, and she didn't go under the platform canopy

or take the umbrella out of her purse. No she didn't. She smiled at you and you smiled back. And what did you do Steven? It was raining Steven!"

He shakes his head more, faster now than before.

"Were you going to her, to the other side of the platform? Maybe give her your umbrella, Steven? Were you going to step over the rails? Take a leap of faith? Over the steel rails and wooden sleepers? Were you? Her hair was starting to soak. Her suit jacket turned from grey to dark black from the rain. You should've just walked right over and gave her that umbrella. It would've taken less than 30 seconds. Instead you didn't. I know. You didn't. Your train came in first. I know because I bumped into you. I said something to you. You don't remember what I said to you, didn't you? You don't remember what I said? I said, 'Don't slip'. And you didn't slip. You did exactly what you always do. You don't slip. You should've have slipped. You never slip. You should've crossed the rails. You should've slipped. And maybe, I don't know maybe, just maybe, I'd still be on a train somewhere, going from one end to the other, waiting for somebody else, who is an everyday man. Instead you're an everyday man, aren't you, Steven? A man of routine and habit. A man of sameness. Whatever happened to that girl with the brown hair and the light brown eyes? The one with the slight dimples when she smiles? Oh, I know you can't talk. I'm sorry I asked."

I pause to take it in, so that he can take in.

"She somehow stopped waiting for you, didn't she? She left a little bit earlier. Stayed at work a little bit later. You never for some reason had your lovely occasional coincidences. It's sad, really. Sad. You could've maybe, had a moment during any one of

those random times. You could've had a moment. You could've maybe fell in love. I don't know. I don't know these things. I don't have a crystal ball. But you know. Maybe. Maybe you could've, maybe gotten married. Had a kid, maybe a boy. And maybe you and the boy would go to a circus one day, as you always promised. You've always promised the circus. The elephants. The clowns. The lion tamer. The man on the tightrope.”

Ring, ring, ring. I look at the alarm on my cell phone.

“Oh look at the time. It's almost lunch time and the trading usually plateaus from here. Trading is such a pendulum. It swings one way and it swings the other, don't you think? It would be nice if it swung your way from time to time. Swung your way maybe today? Do you think... today?”

I start tapping on the round table that holds Steven. His tears are trickling down his cheeks. I can tell they're burning. I untie the tightrope around his legs. At that point, he could kick me in the head and try to escape but he doesn't. He doesn't try. He just complies that I'm doing this. He's too scared to do anything. Even with his hands, he could have loosened the noose around his neck.

There's a commercial break on television now.

“Okay Steven, it's time for me to go.”

His eyes light up. There is hope in his eyes. And confusion. And I'm sad. I say to him, “I promise Steven that I'll never see you again.” I give him a little smile. Mother said that I had my Father's smile. I look at Steven J B, and I tilt my head and I gesture

him with my two fingers, good bye. And then, with all my hate and anger, I kick the leg of the table. The chair drops down and the table slides under. The chair makes a loud bang and his body drops down like a bean bag. He's still alive. His bound hands react and reach for the tightrope around his neck. His legs are kicking and bending as if he is pedaling an imaginary unicycle. I grab his legs and hug them down. Hug them deep and hard as if I miss him, as if I don't want to let him go, but he keeps wriggling away.

“Steven J B,” I say, “I keep my promises. I'll never see you again.”

Steven J B's body stops moving. First his legs stop peddling, away from death. Then his hands that held so violently, the noose that collapsed his throat that eventually snapped his neck. His eyes are still wide open, staring at the ceiling above. I wonder what his last images were. Maybe it was the light at the end of the tunnel. Maybe it was the ceiling. Maybe it was me. Or maybe it was an image of him and that cute brown haired girl with the light brown eyes and a slight dimple when she smiled. And see I gave him what he wanted. I hate it when people don't know what they want. What a waste of a life when they don't. I loosen the rope from his hands, and his arms fall onto his sides. I pack the rope in my duffle bag. I look again at Steven J B and look at his view, his wonderful view. I take off his tie around his mouth and lay out down to his neck and tuck it under his collar. There you go Steven. I wait around until the closing bell and leave.

I go back and wait for the next train to come, and I stand at the very edge of the platform looking down at the rails and sleepers, rails and sleepers.

Of Mice and Keyboards

Whenever the mega millions reached 100 million, a bunch of us in the office would start a pool: Dana in Communications, Angela in Programs, Umang the web guy, Barry in Finance, and me in IT. We didn't tell the managers. They made too much money. Five bucks each, equaled 25 dollars' worth of tickets. We figured a dollar and a dream times 25. We'd say our dreams. Angela wanted to travel. She had been in the army, right out of high school, and she had thought she was going to see the world. She was wrong. She was going to do it the right way this time. Barry was going to pay off all four of his daughters' college tuitions, twins already there and two more going. He didn't care where the next two wanted to go. The most expensive college money could buy. Hell, NYU if they wanted to. Dana was going to buy a mansion with an adjoining dog mansion for her dog. Inside would have grass and roses so her dog can pee and smell the roses and be house trained all at the same time. Umang was going to marry a nice Indian girl, bring her to America and eat Indian food every day and grow fat. Oh, and would also start an outsourcing company in India that outsourced to China that outsourced to America and hired people with British accents. He was going to call it New Dell-i. Me, I was going to stay.

“Bullshit,” they all said in unison. We were all in the lunch room sitting around the same table.

“No, serious,” I smirked and leaned on my chair.

“Yes, so you can change their mice, turn on their monitors, tell them their passwords, and also tell them to reboot,” Dana said.

It was fun thinking about lotto numbers: birthdays, anniversaries, favorite numbers, how many times we’ve had sex; until Lenny, the office manager wobbled in, his small legs curved like enclosed parenthesis. Angela put away the scrap paper with our dream numbers.

“What ya’ll eating,” Lenny said, clumsily trying to sit on a chair around an empty table.

“Lunch.” Angela said.

Angela had some beef with Lenny. We all did, even Umang who was vegetarian. His office etiquette wasn’t the most popular. He’d always mess up the lunch room by leaving his bowl in the sink, or he’d microwave fish. In the bathroom, he wasn’t a consistent flusher; he’d talk in the toilet stall on his cell phone and put callers on hold. He was the guy that printed 100 copies of his memoir so that people had to wait for the printer to be free. He came in late and left early, took 2 hour lunches, and breaks in between. But the worst though, was when Lenny talked about his other life. His out of office life. He always talked about his boat eventually coming in. His roosters coming to roost. The rabbits on the farm. He talked about his acting; how he knew this guy, who

knew this guy, you know that guy; how he was an extra in Law and Order (everybody in New York City was an extra in Law and Order); how he had this acting company, apparently he taught, wrote, produced, and acted in a short short on YouTube. We all laughed at that because he was a midget.

“Yo, man.” He said to no one in particular. “I just got this script. And it is hot. September man. September and I’m giving them my two weeks, if even.” He said that every other month.

I went about eating my lunch, fried rice and beef, and everybody else did too with their respective foods. We heard Lenny talking on his cell phone to his supposed agent when my boss came into the lunch room. Old Man Winter or OMW for short, I called him, because he was so old his first computer was an abacus, he’s so old that his social security number was 5, he’s so old that his first kiss was Eve, he’s so old... that’s how I would spend my days, thinking about how old he was; thinking how this guy had been hired to be my boss instead of getting promoted to IT Manager. OMW came in with a worried look on his face. “Jorge,” he said, stretching the loose wrinkled skin on his neck like a rooster’s wattle. “I have two problems... or three.” He always did that, re-counted problems.

I looked at my watch. That was my universal sign that I was out to lunch. That and a spoonful of food.

“When you’re not busy, or when you’re done with lunch.”

I never finish my lunch.

“The network is down.” In translation, OMW meant that his wireless got disconnected, not the whole office network was disconnected. “It might have been when I spilled water on my laptop keyboard,” which meant that coffee spilled on his laptop and it was now completely broken. “It’s not urgent except I can’t work right now.”

I looked at the warm fried rice and beef, perfectly proportioned on my spoon. It would be cold by the time I got back. I felt like saying goodbye.

“Oh, and the third thing,” he said, “someone stole the hi-def camera in the conference room.”

I thought about a million dollars. Just a million. After tax. I thought about unplugging all the servers and T1 line to see if OMW or anybody can plug them in. I thought about running a script that can change everybody’s password and then jetting the hell out. But most of all, I thought about a world without keyboards and mice.

Luckily it really was water that spilled on the keyboard. The network really wasn’t down, but he had accidentally turned off a switch on his laptop. I thought about putting a strip of scotch tape over it so that he wouldn’t do it again. This was the third time he had done it. The last problem was an actual problem though. The hi-def video camera in the conference room was missing. It didn’t occur to anybody because nobody had used it since our last all-team conference meeting a week ago. Once every quarter, we would all sit in the conference room and give each other praises, most of them passive-aggressive, do some team building, reintroduce each other’s job again, laugh at the sexual harassment video from the 80s, find out where we were in the company org

chart in the always reliable changing quarterly re-org, and then, listen to the CEO summarize how good of a job we were all doing despite the budget crunch, which meant, we would not be seeing any raises this year, like last year, like the year before that, of course, all this, via video feed from her vacation home in Martha's Vineyard. It was a week-long conference.

OMW and I were in the conference room staring at the empty space where the hi-def video conference would have been on top of the 55-inch HD TV. Lenny entered the room as well since the office manager had to take inventory.

“So,” Lenny said, “who do you think did it?”

OMW was looking out into space like he always did. Then he paced back and forth. He raised his eyebrow. “Do you think it could have been an inside job?”

“Could be,” I said skeptically. “Whoever did it was tall...” I looked at Lenny embarrassed sort of because I said tall. “Or had to climb the wall unit below the HDTV.” Lenny was rubbing his 5 o'clock shadow. “Someone would have had to know how to unplug the wires on the back panel that attached the HDMI cable to the speakers on the HDTV along with the USB cable on the computer. The remote was missing too so whoever stole it knew what they were doing.”

“Hmmm,” OMW said.

“At least they didn't take the computer,” I said. “Without it, the camera is pretty useless.”

“How much was that camera, exactly?” OMW said.

“\$20,000.”

“Really? Dang!” Lenny said, surprised.

Or at least when my old boss and I installed it, before he had gotten fired over stupid office politics, and before OMW came into the picture. “Probably, it’s 10K now.” I continued. “You can probably get that much on eBay.”

I waited for OMW to suggest our next steps. His pauses were epic. I saw time move forward. I saw seasons change. I saw my future wife and kids and grandkids and great grandkids. Countries and nations rose and fell. Evolution happened. I thought of suggesting something but I knew if I did, OMW would just repeat whatever I said in a different way. But then I thought about my lunch waiting for me. “Maybe we should...”

Then Lenny interrupted, “I think we should do a thorough investigation.” His voice changed. He sounded like an extra with a speaking part. “We have to report this to the proper authorities. Do we know when it was stolen? Check the office logs. Check the sign in sheet. Check who was here? Don’t touch that wall unit! We may need fingerprints.”

OMW agreed. He looked at me and said I had to work with Lenny on finding this camera thief. Not like I had anything else to do, like fix the computers or document fixing the computers, you know, my job. Lenny was excited though. He wanted to prove himself. He didn’t want to be just the guy who sat around and played solitaire on his computer or went online shopping. Sure, he had messed up the shipment that was supposed to go to LA, Los Angeles, instead of LA, Louisiana. Sure, he had always dropped the ball on a bunch of projects; he had always been late in delivering milestones.

This time around, he was going to find that camera. He was going to find the thief. He was going to be a coworker.

Lenny looked at computer login files, with my help of course, of all the people that were in the office during the time the camera could have been missing. He went to the building security guard and cross checked handwritten log files, visitors that may have gone in our office, residents of the building who worked in other offices that may have gone to our office (especially the survey company on the second floor who hired questionable people), and he even talked to one of his acting friends who happened to be a former cop and asked if fingerprints could be dusted. He interviewed everybody in the office until the head of HR stopped him and replayed the harassment video.

It was pointless. The trail was cold. Lenny had nothing. He wobbled up to me with his head down, frustrated and tired. It was late. “Whoever got it, is sure enjoying their new toy,” he said.

“I can’t imagine what you can do with a hi-def video camera without the computer.”

“People have their reasons.” We both looked at the conference room. The office was empty. “Your boss went home already?” he said.

“Hours ago.”

“Shit was wrong with what happened to you. Everybody knows it. You shoulda been IT manager man.”

I shrugged.

“You and I, we’re all on the same boat. I been working in the company way longer than you man. Either you trying to be captain or jumping ship.”

“Just trying not to rock,” I said.

“True to that. Maybe somethin’ will come up. Maybe you’ll get your mega million pot.”

“Here’s to dreaming,” I said.

He scratched his head and said, “Have a good night Jorge.”

“Have a good night Lenny,” I said.

All that Sherlock Holmes-ing with Lenny took priority over my real job, so I stayed late that night updating the computers. I was almost done when I lost connection to the conference room computer. It was probably something stupid like a disconnected network cable or the computer had gone to sleep. It wasn’t. I logged locally as an administrator. The low hard drive space warning popped up on the bottom right side of the screen. I checked the C drive to see where all the space had gone. It turned out that it was in OMW’s account and it was under the My Video folder that all that hard drive space was used. Up to 1 TB’s! I checked it out and found a video file. Had it been recording all this time even without the hi-def camera? 37 hours’ worth! I opened up the file and for a good 5 hours it had been a blank screen, most likely after someone had unplugged the camera out of the computer. So, I rewound all the way back to the beginning. OMW had been recording. I guess when he did the hi-def video conference

with the CEO, he accidentally pressed the record button. Typical OMW button slipping. The whole video conference was recorded and nobody knew. I didn't. My coworkers sure didn't. We looked so fake praising each other. Praising our fearless CEO. Fake laughing. Har har har. I fast forwarded to the scene where the conference room was empty. I thought, could it have recorded the thief?

In the recording, it was at night, way past office hours. The door opened. Two curved legs appear. It was Lenny. It can't be him. He never stayed late. He can't even reach the camera. I watched him look around carrying a book. He started reading it. His left arm was out high and his right arm was holding the book at eye level. I can't make out what he was saying, so I turned up the volume on the computer, and rewound. I could barely hear when I made out, "Who's there?" Then with a different voice, Lenny said, "Nay answer me: stand, and unfold yourself." Where had I heard this before? Lenny kept going and then I heard, "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark." Then it dawned on me. He was doing Hamlet!

For a good three hours, he played every character from Horatio, to Claudius, to Polonius, to girl parts like Gertrude and Ophelia (which was impressive), and Hamlet himself. He changed his voice. He pantomimed. He strutted. He even looked at the hi-def video camera not knowing that it was recording, so it was like watching a play within a play within a play. Then, he said, "To be..." He paused and looked at his short frail legs, "Or not to be." He stared at his reflection on the powered down HDTV. "Whether 'tis Nobler in the mind to suffer, the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune..."

I watched and realized, he was good. He was really good.

At the end, he died. Hamlet died, that is. And Lenny got up and bowed to an empty conference room. I almost wanted to clap. He pressed his shirt and made his way out to the door of the conference room. Then he stopped. He looked back. He turned around. He wobbled toward a chair and rolled it next to the HDTV. He climbed the chair, climbed the wall unit. He looked around one last time, and his hands became larger and larger and larger.

Lenny gave the company his two weeks. I caught him in the bathroom and I told him some guy from the Midwest won the mega millions jackpot. “Imagine what you could do with that much outrageous fortune?”

Lenny smirked, “To be honest, I don’t need that much.”

Say Uncle

My girlfriend of six months and I were housesitting for her parents when I saw the Jersey Devil outside. I swear to God I told her, I'm not taking the garbage out at night. She thought this was my way of avoiding taking out the garbage. She said that she already has another big baby to take care of, her Uncle Fred, who had decided that he was going to stay the whole time we were housesitting. This way he said, he'll spend some quality time with his niece. I had my suspicions. This was his way of having someone take care of him. Someone was always taking care of him.

Amelia and I were talking about taking that next big step of moving in with each other. She was at my apartment most of the time or I was at hers. We both had roommates so privacy was always an issue. It was just logical to finally find our own place. We didn't talk about marriage, not yet. We avoided that. Or at least I did. She wanted to be sure with everything, like her career. She wanted to be set professionally so that it would leak over to her personal life. That's what successful people have, she read once in a magazine. I was in IT so money was pretty good and thought that it was something I could do for the rest of my life. When her parents said they'd be visiting the Philippines for a month, she thought that it would be a good idea for us to leave

Manhattan and to housesit for them out in the boons somewhere in Jersey. This would be the test, she said. Then we'll know.

It was a two-floor ranch style house with white picket fences surrounding dormant dried frosted olive grass, a long curving driveway that led to a two car garage; in the backyard, a forest of scattered trees with naked branches; fallen leaves, brightened the ground with orange and red and amber.

“Is it all yours?” I asked Ameila.

“All ours...yes.”

We played house as if we were a married couple. I even joked, “Honey, I'm home!” when I came back from work that first day. I had brought take-out. She had already started cooking something. She looked sexy, hot in that apron that said, Kiss the Cook. I thought, yes and more. Before we finished our meal, we had sex in the kitchen, which was amazing, and then in the living room, even better, and then in her bedroom on her twin bed, which wasn't so good. We were definitely holding back or hurried when it came to sex when we lived in our own separate apartments because we both didn't want our respective roommates to hear what we were doing, or at least, she didn't want our roommates to hear what we were doing, so it was nice having a whole house to ourselves, complete with all the things a couple needed in a house. The only thing we didn't have were kids and a dog, and that was just fine with me.

She laid down the ground rules. I was to sleep on the floor of her bedroom because the twin bed was too small for the both of us. I asked why not her parents' room with that huge king bed, and that master bathroom, but Amelia gave me the death stare.

Maybe her sister's room? She had a full bed. She didn't want that either. What if she came home to visit from college? Forget about the guest bedroom because the heat wasn't working there. I gave in. This was her house and her laws, and we just had sex, so I was agreeable to anything.

That first night, she set up a place where I would sleep beside her bed. She had done this before when she had friends or relatives over. She set up a padded blanket over the soft shaggy carpet, pillows, her favorite childhood pillows, and gave me a down comforter to keep me warm. It smelled of Amelia—fabric softener mixed with her shampoo and conditioner. Before we slept, and the room was dark except for the stars and winter moonlight peaking in through the veiled window curtain, she reached out her hand to hold onto mine. Hey she said. Hey I said. I wanted to say something, say something especially important, but we fell asleep not knowing when we stopped holding hands.

It was fun those first couple of days. Yes, we did wake up a lot earlier in the morning cold, before the sun woke up, before the sky had a touch of warmth. We used the same bathroom, I wanted to conserve and use the shower with her, but she didn't want any of that because of hygiene, more importantly feminine hygiene, did I want to see her shave in places I thought were hairless? I thought, maybe. No. I said. I lied. So we took showers separately, she, first, then me, the water not as warm as in the city, maybe because of the house, because of the cold pipes, because of old boilers. One day, taking a shower, looking through the steamy frosted glass door, Amelia was wrapped in a towel reminded me of a Degas painting.

I'd make breakfast and we'd eat rather quickly because we wanted to stay on schedule, didn't want to be late. We drove one of her parents' cars, the Volvo, to the train station, where we took the NJ Transit train to New York. Yes, it was something to get used to, our habits, our routines, our togetherness, along with our house in the boons with a huge front yard and even bigger backyard. What more can you ask for? This is exactly what I thought we wanted.

A week into our housesitting, her uncle came. We were eating take-out in the dine-in kitchen, very romantic, complete with lit candles illuminating the room with the vibe and anticipation of sex, for now a whole new record of every day in a row for six days. It was perfect until the bell rang. Amelia jumped out of her seat. I followed her and thought it was the UPS guy.

"Uncle Fred?" Amelia said looking through the screen window.

"Amelia!" His voice scruffy like the stubs on his chin. His arm waving recklessly saying hello.

She opened the door and let in the cold winter night. She gave him a reluctant hug. "What are you doing here?" she asked.

He took off his cap and scratched his head. He was about to say something to Amelia, but when he saw me, his soft pale pink upper lip that had shown from his childish smile, hid under his thick black mustache. "Where's your papa?" he said.

Amelia offered my portion of the General Tso take-out. Amelia and I ate hers. He was hungry. He said that he called up his brother, Amelia's father, and said that he was visiting. Did anybody tell Amelia?

"Kidney stones," he said, showing his left kidney. They just removed some and he was in no shape for travel. The doctor said it was better that he stay with family or loved ones. So now he was here.

"So, what are you doing here?" he said looking at me.

"He is visiting." Amelia said.

"For how long?" His black shiny eyes like marbles bouncing from me to her, from her to me.

"Until Pa and Ma get back."

"Oh?"

"Yeah."

"Yes." I said.

"Hmm." He said. Eating the last of my take-out.

Suffice it to say, I wasn't going to have sex that night. I wasn't even going to sleep in Amelia's room. No, I was going to sleep in the living room, on the leather couch

with the plastic covering over it. She felt weird that Uncle Fred was going to sleep in the master bedroom across the hall from her room.

When we stayed to housesit that first week, the weather was relatively mild for winter. I didn't mind waking up early to go outside and take a good walk from one end of the block to the other. This was exactly what I thought living in the suburbs would be like. I even waved hi to her neighbors and they waved hi back. I gave them fake suburban names like Mr. Winters and Mrs. Smith. I admired my fake world with my huge front yard with a huge driveway. The backyard was half an acre, with trees, actual trees! I wasn't used to such foliage. I thought, this was nice. But that night, as I slept in the living room, it got colder. The winter finally came. I looked out the window to see the snow falling on the grass, on our pretend front yard. I thought of going upstairs to tell Amelia, as if she had never seen snow falling, but I decided to go outside by myself. I went in the backyard and thought of maybe catch a snowflake with my tongue, something that I would have never tried to do in the city where I could have caught A/C fluid or maybe some asshole pissing out the window of a high-rise building. Snow dust melted on the warmth of my shoes' soles. Snow touch my head and melted. I thought of lighting a cigarette but then I saw two glowing orbs in the darkness in between the trees. At first, I thought it was a deer, but it was too high up and they would have emitted a green or white glow. These were red and burning. The snow started to fall thicker and heavier, but at that one spot, where the red burning orbs were, the white flakes disappeared into a black hole. Then a gush of wind blew in my direction, blowing snow and warm air to my face, and for a moment I closed my eyes. When I opened them, I saw the darkness

expand, and then a screech that chilled my skin more than the winter cold. The red burning orbs brightened. Then were gone. I saw the Jersey Devil, I swear I did.

“Maybe it was a cat. A feral cat.” That’s what Amelia said the next morning. But I wasn’t convinced. I’ve had cats. I know what cats look and sound like. That was no cat. “When it screeched, it was like a cross between a child crying and a cat hissing and a wolf howling. It was a catwolfchild,” I said. “It was the Jersey Devil.”

“Right.” Amelia said. “It was Jimmy’s dogs. He breeds them.” Jimmy was her next door neighbor. “I’ve lived here all my life,” Amelia said, “wouldn’t you think I would’ve seen a Jersey Devil?”

“Yeah you’re right,” I told Amelia. “Maybe it was your Uncle Fred.” I laughed. But she didn’t think it was funny.

Uncle Fred came down to the kitchen with his boxers and a white t-shirt. The white t-shirt, extra large enough to cover the peekaboo hole in front of his boxers. He scratched his ass and then yawned, using the same hand for both. Before Uncle Fred, that first week when it was just me and Amelia, I would make Amelia breakfast. It would be eggs over easy and toast. But now, “Scrambled eggs,” that’s what Uncle Fred said even though I had not asked him. “With some salt. Just a little. I had kidney stones remember.”

I looked at Amelia. With my eyes I said, I’m going to be late. We’re going to be late.

“That sounds good,” she said to Uncle Fred, giving me a deep kiss on the back of my neck sending goose bumps down my spine.

“Lovely,” I said.

Uncle Fred had made Amelia into super cleaning machine. If you used the stove, it had to be cleaned after it was used, not later, immediately right after. Wouldn't the food get cold? Wouldn't we be late if I made breakfast? That was my logic. After the dishes were eaten on, they had to be rinsed, dish washed, dried and later, returned to the shelves. Who was this girl that I had agreed to housesit for a month? She didn't just clean the kitchen. She cleaned everything. The bathroom was the worst; I thought about holding everything in until I got to work, maybe shower in my gym.

“Yellow droplets!” she said, when we were on the train together. “I hate yellow droplets around the toilet.”

“Droplets?”

“Urine.” She said.

“Piss?”

She glared at me. “It's pee. Don't say that other word.”

“Pee.” I said.

“Do you aim at the toilet?”

“Yes.” I said. “Of course I do. It’s a huge hole. What are you talking about?”

“Well there’s urine around the toilet. Do you need your glasses when you, you know, do a number one?”

“What? No. My aim is strong and straight.” I said. “That’s piss splash.” I just made that up. “I can’t prevent piss splash.”

“Women don’t have pee splash.”

“Women sit when they’re pissing.” I said victoriously.

She raised an eyebrow at me.

For the rest of the housesitting, I was to pee sitting down. It was humiliating. Either that, or I had to clean around the toilet after I peed. And yet, there it was more pee splash. I began to wonder about the only other male in the house and that was mister kidney stone himself. Was he using our bathroom? Why wasn’t he using the master bathroom? Why wasn’t he doing anything?

“You know who is home mostly?” I told Amelia. She gave me a smirk. “Uncle Fred.”

“I know that,” she said.

“So, I’ll cook breakfast and dinner and he’ll clean.”

“No,” she said. “When my sister and I were growing up, he was always around. He didn’t have to. He took care of us. I am not going to tell him to clean. He is a visitor. He is my uncle and he just had...”

Kidney stones. I know.

Every time I slept by myself in the living room, it got colder. The living room had a fireplace and the cold breeze blew in from the chimney and tingled my skin. I watched cold smoke come out of my mouth when I breathed. All the while, I thought I could hear the Jersey Devil outside. Nobody told me the boons were louder than the city. I could hear every little thing.

I went up to Amelia's room, and I gave her a kiss, and another one, and another one after that, that I thought that that would lead to something else, as I kissed her neck and below her ear and on ear lobe and her chin. I pressed her against me and we were both turned on. Then we heard Uncle Fred snoring. It wasn't a rhythmic snore either. It was a loud, chaotic snore. It was the kind that from time to time, became a choking of snore, a coughing, and then snoring again, and then choking, coughing, unmelodic snore that stopped me and Amelia's making out.

"I'm sleepy," she said.

I said I wasn't. "This is the perfect time," I whispered with pleading undertones. "He's completely asleep. Knocked out. We could hear, we could definitely hear him."

She pushed me away and showed me the door. As I walked by to the master bedroom, the snoring stopped. Was he really snoring? I slept that night in the cold, double layered myself, and tried to listen to the Jersey Devil outside, to hear if he was coming out. It was dead silence.

No eggs and toast for either of us. Not even for Uncle Fred who was sitting on the kitchen table, scratching the stubbles on his chin. He put a place mat on the table. He looked at the empty stove. I made cereal and smirked at Uncle Fred. I ate standing up over the kitchen sink, making sure no crumbs would fall on the floor, making sure that everything would fall in the sink and if they did, all I had to do was turn on the faucet and wash my bowl and go. I knew Amelia's super obsessive compulsive policy of cleaning. This was my workaround. No morning cooking for everyone, if it meant that I had to clean for everyone. Everyone for themselves, I thought.

Amelia came down with her hair still damp, her dress shirt wrinkled. "No one threw the garbage last night?"

Uncle Fred looked at me. I looked at the garbage bin. I was going to tell her my garbage bin policy. It went something like this: if the lid is closeable, that is, if one can still press as much garbage inside a lid, then it is not full; also, if the garbage lid can balance itself on top of the garbage without falling then it is considered almost full—I am an optimist—hence, it is not ready to be taken out. Amelia didn't see it that way. She took the garbage bag out of the bin, trying to wrap the plastic bag with its short elastic band. The crunch of garbage and things clamored with noise that I tried to deafen it with every bite of my Special K cereal. Both Uncle Fred and I watched her rush out the door, dragging the garbage bag behind.

We argued on the train ride to work. That's when I swore to her, I wasn't going to take the garbage out at night while the Jersey Devil was outside. Another baby, she said. Fine, I told her. Maybe I should stay at my own apartment tonight. Fine she said. Fine.

I didn't want to go back to Amelia's parents' house that night, anyway. I didn't want to deal with her Uncle Fred. I didn't want to deal with his timed snoring. I didn't want deal with piss-splash and piss-sitting. I didn't want to deal with the cleaning and I definitely didn't want to deal with sleeping in the cold lonely living room. "Happy hour," my coworkers said. Usually I would find a way to go with Amelia to her apartment or go to mine and just relax. But this time, I fervently agreed.

"Women are different, man," one of the older IT guys said who had three kids. "Especially when she becomes your wife and the mother of your kids. Do you know, with every kid you have, you add plus seven years to your age, every year, for the rest of your life? I'm 98 years old man. Enjoy your youth my friend," he said. Another coworker said "Are you a masochist, cuz you're whipped?" At that point I was already drinking my third beer and felt guilty for letting Amelia go home by herself. But I thought, why should I feel guilty?

I drank my fourth drink. I was talking to the girl in finance who I thought had a thing for me and the fourth drink reaffirmed it. I was in between buzz and drunk, that perfect in between state of mind that got harder and harder to get into once you got older with age, with each happy hour, with every almost drunken stupor, once you have to be somewhere at a specific time. But this time, I didn't feel like it. I didn't want to. In this in between state of mind, between overly confident and somewhat clarity, I flirted. It was

fun too. I smiled and laughed and said jokes that only I can laugh at and others had to laugh with because I was laughing at. I was having a good time until the old IT guy with three kids said he had to go, “What’s the point of drinking when you’re not going to get drunk?” It rung prophetic. Here he was looking at his watch and getting up because now his life was reduced to the NJ Transit schedule. I went with him too.

Amelia was cleaning the stove when I came home. She had on her extra extra large t-shirt from a business outing she had gone a year ago that said, BUSINESS RETREAT. I thought it was sexy when she wore it with only her panties underneath, but this time she was wearing sweats and it wasn’t sexy at all.

“I thought you weren’t coming home,” she said. “You could’ve stayed in your own apartment.”

I didn’t say anything. I gave her a hug and cupped her breasts, both of them. She pushed me back. I grunted “Fuck!”

“You’re drunk,” she said.

“I ain’t drunk,” I said. “If I was drunk I wouldn’t be here. And if I was drunk, fuck, I should be drunk to be here, so yeah I am drunk.”

“Shh,” she said, “Uncle Fred might hear.”

“Uncle Fred.” I slumped down on one of the kitchen chairs. “Uncle Fred! It’s like we have a kid. No worse. I’d rather have a kid. I mean, it’s like we missed the cute part of having a kid and we got Uncle Fred who is this ugly big kid who’s always making things

dirty and doesn't help with anything and he eats your food. Oh, and he has urinary problems. Shit I'd rather have a kid than that guy upstairs."

She stopped scrubbing the stove. Then she started to cry. I thought about getting up to say sorry.

"I'm late," she said.

"For?"

She looked at me, wiping the tears on her arm. Then I explained to her that we had only been kicking it last week and how did she know.

"No," she said. "Before. At her apartment. Probably then."

"Fuck." I said.

"See," she said. "We're not ready."

"No, I meant." And I stopped. I really did mean fuck. There was a quiet stillness to the room.

"Today when I was sitting by the window, waiting for my coffee, I saw this mother and her two kids. Both girls. They were waiting to cross the street. The mother could've been my age, maybe a little bit older, and I thought, already with two kids. There she was holding their hands and the youngest kid started talking. The mother wasn't listening. She was looking at the street, waiting to cross, waiting for the light to turn. Then it started to snow. Little white flakes from the sky. The youngest got so excited, that she started to jump up and down, but her mom was holding her hand. The

little girl couldn't jump up all the way. The little girl kept on trying though, up and down, up and down. Then the little girl stuck her tongue out to catch one of the falling snowflakes and that's when it happened..."

Amelia scratched the surface of the stove with her nails.

"...the mother slapped her little girl straight across the face. She didn't see it coming. Didn't expect it. I think it shocked her so much, that she didn't even cry. She stood there even when the light turned green."

"We don't know yet, right?"

"Why would anybody bring a kid in this world just to slap her across the face?"

She ran upstairs. It took me a while to register that she had ran, that she was already gone, out of the room, because in a way, I thought, in my mind, I ran the other way. The buzz was still in me but the fabricated happiness was gone. I got up and slowly walked up the stairs to go to her bedroom. But before I got there, Uncle Fred was at the top stair, his pants surprisingly on, wearing a hooded sweater with a flashlight in his hand. "I think I heard your Jersey Devil!"

Uncle Fred and I went outside to look for the Jersey Devil. I didn't want to go but he was excited and he wasn't going to go out there alone. Kidney stones he said. It started to snow, thick lint snow, fluttering. Uncle Fred gave me the flashlight and told me to take point while he took the back. He asked me again where I had seen the Jersey Devil and I showed him. We found tracks freshly made on the soil.

“We should’ve brought a bat,” he said, “or a gun.”

“Or the garbage,” I said.

“Ha! That is true.” He shook his head. “Amelia is a good girl. She likes you a lot, I can tell. She has goof ball eyes when you come home. That’s how I can tell. She said you are good guy too. And you sleep downstairs, even in the cold. You’re traditional. You have respect. And you make me scrambled eggs, even when you don’t have to. I could see why she likes you.”

“Thanks,” I said. I didn’t feel so good.

“In the Philippines, in the province, they have something like the Jersey Devil. The pinoy devil, ah!” And laughed. “No, they are called *aswang*. Do you know what *aswang* is?”

I shook my head no.

“They are like vampire. When I was, I think your age, like Amelia’s age, I was in my house with my wife and she was pregnant with my daughter, Marilou.” We stopped at where I thought I saw the Jersey Devil the night before. The snow started to gather covering the black ground into grey. “You know in the Philippines, when you have a pregnant wife, you put garlic outside and on your windows. I was scared because I forgot to do that. And so, when I came home, my *asawa*, my wife, said she heard something outside. ‘*Aswang*,’ she said. ‘Punta ka na outside,’ she said. Normally, ha, I would say, ‘*Loco ka ba.*’ No woman should tell me what to do. But it was my fault. Superstitious ang Pilipinos. I forgot to put the garlic on the windows. I said, ‘Shit, *O O na*, I will go

outside.' I went outside and got my pistol and I followed the whining sounds. It scared me and thought, I should just run and go inside, and just lie to my wife. But I kept on going. It was dark too. I did not have a flashlight. Just candle. It kept on going mooowhaa just like what I heard just now. Mooowhaaa. Just like what you heard right?"

"Yes." I said in the dark.

"You know what I found?"

"No."

"*Ang pusa*. It was skinny too. Hungry. And there were kittens there. Six. And this *pusa* was so skinny. How did it survive? I don't know. She hissed at me protecting her kittens. I was like *putang ina*, so I pointed my pistol."

"You shot the cat?"

"No. Shit. Who do you think I am? Well, I thought about it. *Pulatan*, food. Haha. Joke. But I thought, don't cats eat their young to survive? And here she was trying to save them. I went back inside and got food and gave them to the cat. That night I put garlic on the windows. That was the best thing I ever did as a husband. As a father. The only thing."

The night sky was starless and the moon hid in the thickness of the heavy clouds. The snow started to fall harder. We couldn't see in front of us. Uncle Fred said we should go home and we did.

I thought of our first night in the house, me and Amelia. We were laying in the living room floor, half-naked and exhausted, she looked good with the light of the crackling fireplace illuminating her face, her eyes a rich chocolate brown with reflections of the burning flame inside them, her hair a mess, but right, completely right, a loose black elastic hair band dangling close to the edge. I could get used to this being my every day, I thought. “What do you want for breakfast,” I asked. “You mean, you’re staying?” she said.

As I lay in the cold dark living room, listening to the wind blowing through the empty branches, I thought of the snow falling outside, of the tracks we followed into the forest, the tracks that led to nowhere, and whether or not the cold white snow had covered them all.

Bat Mitzvah

Your wife is invited to a bat mitzvah. You ask her who's going to take care of Sally. She says she asked her parents. "It's only for the day," she says. "Our daughter will be fine."

The night before, you tell Sally that you and Mommy will be going to a party. She asks if she could go and you tell her that it is for adults, that you'd be back before her bedtime, maybe earlier. "Uh uh. For who?" she says. "Mommy's boss's daughter. It's a bat mitzvah," you say. She says, "Bats don't have birthdays Daddy." And you laugh. You read her a bedtime story about a princess in a castle. Then she goes to sleep.

Your wife has been worrying about this party ever since she got the invitation by the CEO of her company. She's never been to a bat mitzvah. You say you never have either. She looks online for appropriate presents. It says to give multiples of \$18 for good luck. She says she'd give seven times eighteen because seven is her lucky number. You say, "\$126? Isn't that a bit too much for a little girl?" She says, "It's going to be at Bryant Park. And I'm going to give her a jewelry box."

Your wife is excited. She hasn't worn a dress since Sally was born three years ago. She is happy that she could still fit in it. It feels loose she says. You are happy to zip the dress up from the small of her back to the bump on her neck. You kiss her neck. Sally

says, “You look “bootiful, Mommy.” You are happy to be with two of the most bootiful girls in the world.

You take the train from Jersey City to Manhattan, then the subway to the Upper West Side to the temple. You are uncomfortable with your suit. You don’t ever wear a suit. You are used to wearing jeans and a polo shirt. You feel like you are going on an interview.

When you get to the temple, it reminds you of church. Your wife says hello to her boss. She introduces you to her and her daughter. They look exactly alike. The whole confirmation takes two hours. You doze off from time to time. There is a lot of singing in Hebrew. You don’t understand it. The Talmud reads from right to left. Every time the rabbi says to go to page so and so, you turn the page the wrong way.

When it is over, there are three luxury shuttles outside waiting for you and your wife to take you to Bryant Park. You ride past Central Park through Museum Ave, then to Columbus Circle, and FAO Schwartz, and you think of taking Sally there one day. Your wife leans over to your ear and whispers, “How much do you think this all cost?” You shrug and think, more than our wedding.

When you get there, you help your wife slip off her jacket. It feels like a first date. You tell the coat check girl, “Fancy schmancy place huh?” She doesn’t get your humor. Your wife asks, if you can get her drink. You say sure and reach for your wallet and only have a ten. You realize the bar isn’t a place that takes your money. They aren’t taking tips. You ask for hard liquor only. No beer today.

You go back to your table and you are introduced to more people. One has a bow tie. He asks if this is the only wine they have. Another is a lawyer who is a partner in a firm. His wife works with yours. When his wife, isn't listening, he tells you, that he'd rather be golfing. You make small talk. He talks about his job. You talk about yours. You happen to say that you are thinking of doing something else.

When the music plays, your wife asks you to dance and you do. She smiles and gives you a kiss. You feel young, you are still, and you watch the birthday girl enjoying, having a ball with all her friends. Your wife asks you to take a picture with your phone. You ask the guy with the bow tie to take a picture. You apologize for the phone being cracked. You tell him to press that button. He did. It's blurry. You ask him again, please one more time, and he says sure. It is still blurry.

When you head back to your table, there is steak waiting for you. You eat it up and look to see if your wife finished hers. The steak is good. It's great. Someone on the table says that he's eaten better.

When the CEO goes up to give a speech for her daughter, the crowd oohs and ahhs. Some cry. Then they clap and you clap too. Then she gives her daughter a diamond necklace that sparkles more than the chandelier ball above. A video montage follows. It shows the little girl and her family. It shows her when she is a baby and you hold your wife's hand and think of Sally. Then it shows the family's vacation. They have been to so many places, exotic places, Machu Picchu, the Pyramids, the Galapagos Islands. Here she is, just twelve, already to more places than you ever will.

When the video is over, your wife asks you to dance some more but you say, “No, you go,” and she does and she dances with coworkers. You head over to the bar. You meet a man. His loose and crooked tie, his glasses almost falling off his flat nose, the gray strands on his head, remind you of your father, remind you of maybe, you, someday. “I’ve been to too many of these,” he says. You say this is your first.

When the music stops, you tell your wife you’ll be getting the coats. You head over to the coat check girl, and you get her jacket and yours. You give her a ten because you realize you only have a ten. She doesn’t flinch when you give it to her. She doesn’t even say thank you.

You and your wife head home. She wants to take a taxi to 33rd Street to the PATH but you tell her that you gave your last cash to the coat check girl. She says, oh, and you two walk one block over to the subway, to the PATH, to Jersey City. Your wife takes off her shoes and walks barefoot.

When you come home, Sally isn’t asleep because she is waiting for you. She says she couldn’t sleep yet because she wants you to sing to her. She wants you to sing “Mocking Bird.” You sing to her. She wants you to sing it again, and you sing it again and when you get to the part about the diamond ring, you think about the first time you went out with your wife. It is during your senior year of college at a fancy schmancy mall. She goes with her friend and they bring matching diamond earrings. They charge it on their credit cards. You are holding socks that you have to buy. You look at it. You think of stealing it. You never want to feel that way again.

You felt that way again. You never want her to feel that way ever.

Seeing Eye Dog

I was one of six. I was born first; that is why I am called Wei Wei. It is Chinese for hello hello. I don't know why they didn't just call me Hello, but I guess if you shorten it, I would be called Hell, or Lo. Whatever. Puppies are not privy to naming themselves. If it were up to me, I would be called Superdog or Rolf or Dog. Or Wolf, if I were in a gang or a reporter. Anyway, my mom was a service dog, and my dad was a service dog, and his dad before him was a service dog, and his dad before him, and so on. We are all Labradors, whatever that means. I became a service dog because I was the first. It is a proud tradition.

The second born too are sometimes called in to duty. Stinky was born second. He is the serious one. I have three other brothers and one sister. There is Gizmo, Gizmo-mo we like to call him, he is the not so bright one, but he is always happy. There is Stevie; he is the trickster because he knows all the three S's: sit, stay and shake. Moose is the big lab. He became a big lab because he was always the first to the bowl. Sometimes as a pup, he would sleep in the bowl. Then there is Pebbles, she is the bitch. I heard from the piss vine that she is pregnant again. Again? Seriously. How many pups is that now, 10? Anyway, that is how we communicate with each other, through piss. One dog smells a piss, then that dog pisses, then forwards that piss message, then replies all, and so on and

so on. It is like email. Pee-mail. I smelled from the last pee-mail that Stinky was called a hero of some sort. Supposedly, he sniffed some drugs down Newark airport and stopped illegal drugs from coming in. Big deal! Of course, you're going to sniff drugs in Newark, just like you're going to have taxicabs in New York, but I don't get any credit for *not* barking.

Anyway, I got this forwarded to forwarded pee-mail from Gizmo-mo, and he told me about his backyard, how he said, he has a tree. An actual tree! Trees and dogs have so much in common. We both have barks. We both like branches. I pee-mailed him back and asked him if he watched the leaves and typical poetic Gizmo-mo pee-mailed back, of course,

“There are days when I
am waiting and watching the
leaves fall in autumn.”

He said this in haiku piss, five drips, seven drips, five drips. He said at times, he gets to stick his head out the window and open his mouth, let his tongue fly loose, and let his ears flap in the wind. “You are like Superdog,” I told him in my piss. I am jealous.

Moose, the fat lab, usually would pee-mail me about the foods he has eaten. His favorite things to chew on are socks and shoes. Really, Moose? I don't think that is a very good idea, I pee-mailed him back. He says it is and it is good and it makes his caretaker stay with him longer than she needs to. How do you make your caretaker stay longer and keep you company? By chewing on her socks and shoes. It is good too because the

caretaker gave him a stuffed bear to keep him company and also, to chew on, instead of socks and shoes. He even calls that stuffed bear, Slightly Brown Bear, because that is exactly what he is. Slightly Brown Bear tastes just as good as socks and shoes, except less expensive. The stuffed bear keeps him company too, while he waits for his caretaker.

Stevie, I haven't heard from in quite a while. He might be hanging from his leash if all I know. Sometimes, he is always trying to find a new trick, but treats just get in the way. As for me, I am meeting my third blind man and hopefully, everything will turn out okay.

It hasn't always been the case. The First Blind Man died of old age. I didn't get to really create a bond with him. During the first month of training, it was my trainer and the First Blind Man. They showed me around his apartment. He lived by himself because he was retired. I didn't know what retired meant until my trainer and the First Blind Man started talking and then I started to understand. It meant that he no longer worked and that he could do all the things he'd never had the chance to do. That was silly. Not working? And not doing the things you never had the chance to do? Humans are strange that way. But then, what would I do if I had the chance to do them. I thought about those things and pissed them down: (1) dig up bones I've buried; (2) chase my tail and catch it; and (3) howl at the moon.

Anyway, focus. My trainer and the First Blind Man showed me where things were, made sure that I could open things like the refrigerator door, room doors, all sorts of doors. My trainer showed me where the phone was, but I obviously knew where the phone was because I could hear it, I have good ears, I'm a dog, and my trainer showed

me where the stores were around the neighborhood, showed me the First Blind Man's routines, and after everything was in place, I was with the First Blind Man by myself. I was excited because all the dog years in training, everything I was trained to do, I was finally going to do and finally become a Seeing Eye dog.

It didn't last long. He kept on calling me Sally. I'm not female but whatever. On the day he died, all he did was sit on his chair, listened to the TV, and drank his Earl Grey. Then he walked 58 steps to his bedroom, sat down on his bed, took off his cataract sunglasses, kissed a picture of a girl, said good night Sally, and then died. I knew he was going to die. Dogs have a keen sense of death. I felt it that early morning when he woke up and I thought he had felt it too. Before dying, I had heard his heart beat slower. I had heard his breathing grow slower. I had smelled his skin cells lose hold of each other, I guess, the way Gizmo-mo watched the leaves fall from the trees in autumn. I felt his breath slowing, the way a breeze fades from my snout to the very end of my tail, and I could feel the beats of his heart like when a ball is thrown, like fetch, and you watch the ball bounce and bounce and bounce until the ball is just rolling, rolling, rolling, until it has stopped. Sometimes I just don't want to fetch a ball that has stopped bouncing.

When my trainer came by a day later, I was good. I didn't pee or poop even though I needed to. I didn't eat the food even though I could have opened the cabinets and I was hungry. Because I was trained, I just waited. When my trainer came by, he was sort of upset that I didn't open the door, but I just sat there in the bedroom of the First Blind Man watching him never wake up. The First Blind Man's arm just limped off the bed. His hand dangled in the air and I laid my head below it.

The Second Blind Man didn't want anything to do with me. He wanted a monkey or a small horse. Preferably a Chinese monkey. My job was being outsourced! It wasn't that easy, my trainer said to the Second Blind Man, but he was insistent. The Second Blind Man kept on saying, he was blind all his life and if he had a monkey, it could brush his teeth for him (which I thought would be weird but whatever), scratch his ears (even weirder) or change the television with a remote (not so weird). Why the hell is it so hard to get a monkey and why is God so cruel! They got him a pig instead.

The First Blind Man and the Second Blind Man didn't pan out so well, and so I thought maybe I wasn't going to be a Seeing Eye dog. What happens to a failed Seeing Eye dog, I wonder?

The Third Blind Man was newly blind. He wasn't born blind. He said he was out in the desert somewhere and something blew up in his face. It was brighter than the sun. He was lucky he said. But I think he didn't mean it. Why do humans say things they don't mean? Anyway, focus. He wasn't used to not seeing. He did not know brail, which was good because I did not know how to read either. My trainer was kind of reluctant to put me in this situation because of my lack of successes and who knows if I was scarred by all the blind men in my life. But he changed his mind. If I failed though, where was I going to go? I was not a puppy anymore and mommy dog and daddy dog weren't going to take me in so easily. No one ever told me what happens to Seeing Eye dogs that fail.

The Third Blind Man was in the city too, New York City, Manhattan, and what better place to be a dog than a place full of men who needed best friends! Anyway, to navigate in the city was one of the hardest jobs for a Seeing Eye dog, let alone a newly

blind man whom I was going to navigate around. A house was one thing, nothing really moved in a house; the doors would always be where the doors would be, distractions wouldn't be unpredictable, nothing flew, nothing scurried, you can only fit so many people in a house and I'm sure it would just be the Third Blind Man and me. I've only been trained in the suburbs so the city was going to be difficult, extremely difficult. So for a month, my trainer, the Third Blind Man and I, would navigate our way around Manhattan.

One of the tasks is to take the Third Blind Man to his work. It is only a mile away, and it would have been more convenient to move but the rent in New York City is unbelievable. One can only imagine how much a doghouse sells for.

Anyway, focus. To go from his apartment to his job, we would have to take the subway and I've never heard of anything underground except for bones and chipmunks—damn chipmunks. We walked from one block to the next and the trainer and the Third Blind Man counted how many steps, 156 steps, and I wondered if he meant two human steps or four dog steps, and I had to assume it meant two human steps so divide that by—focus. We walked on the sidewalk and I noticed that sometimes there were grills on sidewalks as if the ground was going to barbeque someone, especially those that had smoke. I didn't know what to make of it. The trainer said, "Come on, boy, don't worry about the grills." That was easy for him to say because I had to make sure the Third Blind Man was at least 156 steps to the next block and it felt funny on my paws.

I walked around the grill, which got a disapproval look from the trainer. We didn't walk straight, we zigzagged, at times, and it was because of the grills on the

sidewalks, but that was okay, I thought, the Third Blind Man used a walking stick and I didn't want his stick to fall through the grills. Focus. This was very stressful on a dog. There were so many people bumping and walking and not slowing down or not looking down, or not looking at all to where they were going. I'm just trying to make sure the Third Blind Man went exactly where he needed to go and that was to work.

There was a street crossing and I stopped him because the light was red. But to my eyes, they were just a darker shade of... dark? This cross street didn't have the beeping beeping sound for blind people and it was my job to make sure that he didn't cross the street even though everybody else did and didn't care whether or not the color was a different shade of dark. They were just rushing along, but I had to be disciplined, trained and focused, not to just cross because there was somebody else I had to worry about and it was also my job, I was born for this, just like my mommy doggy and daddy doggy and his daddy doggy, and his daddy doggy before him, and I have to be better than Stinky because I was born first. And so, I waited until the light turned a lighter shade of dark, and I also made sure I'm looking at the street because there were these bikers now that just didn't seem to obey anything. I also looked at the bright blinking sign that looked like a human hand and that meant stay or no. It also meant give me five but that was for tricks and I'm not in the tricks business, I'm in the service business. I waited and finally the light turned a lighter shade of dark, and the sign changed from the human hand to a human walking and that's when I became a bit confused. Did that mean only humans can walk? Focus. I looked left and right and made sure the cars weren't going any place. Sometimes, I would have the urge to bark at them, but I didn't. It was tempting to just cross especially since people were crossing too, but I had to make doubly sure since there

was no beeping beeping sound that meant cross the street, and I had to know this from my own training, and after many thoughts, one of which was a bird also crossing, I decided it was safe for the Third Blind Man to walk, and even though it took me two seconds to commit to walk, it was fourteen dog seconds, and that was a long time of thinking.

I started to walk and the Third Blind Man followed. The trainer said, "Good dog!" and I wanted to jump for excitement, but I'm still on the job. There was a place for that, I thought. We walked and I noticed that the road was uneven. There I noticed that there were round metals on the road and I wondered if it was dangerous for the Third Blind Man. I made another great decision to walk around that too. I didn't want the Third Blind Man to slip, and it looked slippery. I have heard of other dogs getting injured because their Blind People slipped and fell on them. That's why Chihuahuas have no place for Seeing Eye dog employment. It's racist, but I don't make the rules here. Blame it on the humans. We finally made it to the end of the road and I had to make sure that the Third Blind Man knew that the sidewalk was on an incline, so I made sure to gently get in his way without him running me over. I'm starting to wonder about that Seeing Eye monkey. Maybe this was a monkey's job. Maybe because the monkey could've easily told the Third Blind Man that there was an incline and could have easily had thought that the walking human sign was him and could have easily pressed the walk button. Maybe this was a job for monkeys. Monkeys have hands and fingers, and all I have is my mouth and that's what I have as my hands is my mouth.

We were at the subway finally and I was looking down at the stairs going underground. I've always wondered where all the things I've lost burying stuff went. I

counted the steps down the subway and they were 10 steps. Focus. I have to remember this for the Third Blind Man. We were at the entrance and in front of us was a turnstile. This was the first I had ever seen a turnstile. The trainer told me, I had to go first, under and through the turnstile and I thought that meant I had to leave the Third Blind Man behind. The trainer said, "Go ahead boy." It was confusing because the turnstile looked like it was going to turn and turn forever like a hamster wheel. It was half the size of the adult humans and it was cold and metal and made annoying clicking noises. The trainer called me out again, "Come on boy, go under and obey." Luckily too because I thought if I had stayed I would have been stuck in the turnstile and then the countless many other people there would've been annoyed or angry. I don't think Seeing Eye monkey would have had that problem at all.

After we went through the turnstile, we were at a platform. We were waiting for the train. Here was where I froze. I had never seen a subway train before. Will it be a big humongous chipmunk because chipmunks live underground and we were underground? The track was wider than four Marmadukes and as long as 100 tails. I prayed to God (because all dogs go to heaven) that it wasn't a monster chipmunk that humans used for travelling because I remembered as a pup that I was mean to chipmunks and I told myself then and there that I wouldn't be mean to them ever again. But when the subway train came along, it was different. It was just like cars but bigger and longer. I've learned not to bark at cars and this one was no different. I guess I was afraid of one big chipmunk for nothing.

I started to move forward to lead the Third Blind Man, but then he didn't move. I saw that he was listening. He tilted his head like a bat listening to sonar and I thought that

this might not be the right subway train to go to. I looked at the train again and I nudged again, but he stayed still. The trainer didn't say anything either and then we heard a scratchy chipmunk voice through the walls. It said mumble mumble blah blah static static train coming. The Third Blind Man completely understood this and so, he started to move and I moved too but also made sure that he didn't fall through the gap.

We found a seat. A kind lady decided to give her seat to the Third Blind Man. She wanted to pet me but the trainer asked gently not to pet me, although I did want to be petted. The trainer pointed to the sign on my dog vest that I'm a service dog—that's right—which meant I can't be petted. Unless of course, my service dog vest was off, and that meant I'm on my day off, and then that's a different story.

I lay down. It seemed as if it had been dog hours since I rested. I looked at Third Blind Man's pocket where he kept my treats. I thought, maybe he forgot that I get hungry too.

The train started to go and I felt the floor move. I'm unsettled and tried to hold down my bearings. My ears were in high alert. I realized though that this was the way. This was how the train moved. I lay down again and I watched a lady play with her shoes. I wondered if she hated her feet so much that she had to stuff them in those shoes. Her feet looked like a goat. I wondered if Moose ate his caretaker's shoes because he was just trying to prevent her feet from looking like a goat. Anyway focus. I had to make sure I paid attention to all the comings and goings.

There was a man who was dressed in partial dirt as if he rolled around in mud, like what I used to do as a pup. He stuck out his hand and started asking for change. I

could smell him. He smelled like pee. Could he be pee-mailing? But it was stuck. So many pee-mails were stuck on his body. No one ever replied. No one he forwarded to. It must be sad to have meaningful pee-mails and only receive junk mails. I lay my head to rest and listened to the Third Blind Man even though there was so much going on, so much other smells, so many other sounds. Focus.

When the train stopped its fourth stop, the Third Blind Man got up and wanted to leave the train. I led him to the exit and the trainer went as well. I led him to the turnstile, but it was a bigger turnstile this time, it went all the way up to the ceiling. I looked at the trainer and he didn't look back, but I thought how hard could this be? I know what to do this time. I went in first just like last time, but this time it closed in on me and I was stuck like in a cage and I was never ever caged, not like this, and I've heard of other dogs stuck forever in cages, to no fault of their own, and they were left there barking and howling and I could not help but panic. I started barking and my bark was so strong that there was so much commotion. It echoed in the subway that I was sure all the chipmunks inside the walls would've heard and laughed at my panicked barking. The Third Blind Man covered his ears because my barking was so loud. I was afraid because I didn't know what was going to happen. Am I going to be stuck here forever? Is this where service dogs go, when they are no longer serviceable, stuck inside a huge turnstile? "Bark bark bark," I kept on saying. The trainer yelled at me "Heel, heel! Stay," he said, "Sssshhhh." I was stuck and people were all around walking fast and covering their ears and looking at me with looks of disapproval. I could not keep my bearings in order. The monkey was going to replace me, wasn't he? I will lose another blind man.

The Third Blind Man put his hand on the trainer's shoulder and the trainer stopped commanding me. Then the Third Blind Man raised both of his hands like the crossing sign, dropping his walking stick. Then he placed his hands on the cold cage turnstile door and slowly pushed. I couldn't help but move too, slowly, until I was at the other end, free. He kept on pushing the turnstile door until he too, felt the exit. I moved closer to him and he felt for my harness. I moved closer still, so that he could find me, and I felt his hand hold on to me and we walked away from the turnstile.

The trainer soon followed and gave the Third Blind Man his walking stick. We started to climb up the stairs into the open air. "15 steps to the stairs," the Third Blind Man said. This was the first time I really heard him say anything. I made a note of the steps in my head and divided it by 4. Eventually I'll figure it out.

When we finally reached the Third Blind Man's work, the trainer said that he had to step away for a second. It was already late in the day and the sun was starting to come down. The Third Blind Man looked tired. I could hear it from his breathing and I could hear it in his heart beating. We walked a couple of steps to the park, his walking stick kept on tap tap tapping until he tapped on the leg of a bench. "Want to rest?" He said. He sat on the bench. "Wei, that's your name right? Wei Wei?" I didn't say anything. I was still kind of ashamed that I had barked so loudly and had panicked at the huge turnstile. "Here you go Wei," he said, and he gave me a treat. I ate it and I licked his fingers. "There's a dog park not so far from here. 79 steps."

I can hear the other dogs barking and woofing and having a good time. I can hear tails wagging. I can smell tongues flapping and I can taste the air of other dogs. I heard

laughter and I wondered if dogs laughed what would it sound like to humans? I think it would sound like my tongue loose and my mouth wide open, breathing and panting. I wanted to piss and tell my siblings everything, even Stinky, but I couldn't, I was on the job.

“I miss this,” he said and sighed. The sun slowly came down and he looked where he thought the sun would be. And then I thought about when I was a pup and we were pups, and we all napped together and we looked like a big gold ball of fur, and we thought, we were as big as one big adult dog. I remember when we all fetched the same ball and it didn't matter who had the ball as long as it was dropped and bounced and fetched all over again. I remember when we chased each other's tails, and we barked and we chased our own, round and round and round, until we were dizzy with each other. I remember when we practiced our barks and we pretended to howl at the moon like wolves, and we didn't have to pee-mail how we were doing, we just knew; and I remember when we were all six.

I looked at my Third Blind Man and I can see his eyes close and I can hear him breathe in the fading sun. And I did the same too.

Ray

My cousin Ray was four years older than me. I was ten and he was fourteen when my mom and I came to America. It was the winter of '85 a year after my dad died. It was the first time I ever felt winter. My thin, tanned warm weather skin shivered at the first touch of the cold February breeze. Tito Junior, my mom's only brother, his wife, Tita Tina, and Ray were waiting for us at the airport.

“Steph-on. Is that your real name?” Ray asked.

I nodded yes.

“You can't be going around calling yourself Steph-on, little cuz. You'll get beat here in the States. How about Stevie?”

We lived in Jersey City in the basement of Tito Junior's small house. Mom worked at nights. When she came home, she brought me breakfast from the hospital—Jell-O, butter roll, and apple juice. Then she took me to school. This was her end of day and it was my beginning. Ray picked me after school until I got used to the neighborhood. It was on his way from his high school so he didn't mind. Every day, he would pick me up. I waited at the gate as he said. I was the only one waiting. There were other kids around too, but they weren't waiting for anybody and nobody was waiting on

them. I missed my school in the Philippines. Dad was the one that would pick me up after school.

One day Ray was late. I stayed at the gates as he said. A black kid who was a grade above me started playing with his fade with a pick. I started daydreaming and thought it looked like an eraser on a pencil and I started laughing. He looked at me. I looked away. He said “Whatcha’ laughin’ at, Ching-Chong?” I looked at my fake Converses. “I said, ‘Whatcha laughin’ at’?” the kid yelled. His Puerto Rican friend roused him up. “Yo, that Ching-Chong with them Chatties be makin’ fun of you.” Other kids started to gather. I stiffened up. I held the shoulder straps of my backpack like a lifeline. It looked like I was making a fist. “Shit man, he thinks this be Kung Fu Theater,” the Puerto Rican kid said. “Kick his ass man. Kick that Ching-Chong’s ass.” And so he did. There was a punch in my gut so hard that I tasted what I had for lunch—tuna on Wonder Bread. There was another punch at my eye and my head cocked back hitting the wired gate. My knees buckled under me and I was on the floor on all fours. I heard laughter. “Yo man. You kicked Bruce Lee’s ass.” Then I heard running footsteps. I cried and cried and I got up leaning on the wired gates.

When Ray came around, he saw my puffy eye. “What happened Stevie? Who did this? Tell me. It was those black kids, wasn’t it?” I didn’t say anything. I just wanted to go home, back to the Philippines. I kept on missing how it was back then, our house before Dad died, before everything went wrong and we had to come here. I thought of the mango tree outside the house. When the mango was ripe, we wouldn’t have to climb up to get one. It would just fall to the ground and all you had to do was take any one of

them, just like that. But climbing, it was the best part. Climbing I knew, someone below was there to catch me.

Ray packed ice in a zip lock when we got home. He said to put it on my eye. "I'll make you a ghetto sandwich," he said. It was one slice of bread spread with mayo and then folded in half. I wasn't in the mood for sandwiches because I could still taste the tuna sandwich and stomach acid in my mouth. "What do you want Stevie? Anything Stevie. Just don't tell your mom."

"Mango." I said not knowing I said it aloud.

He opened the fridge and found lemons. He peeled them, his nails digging in, the scent of citrus vaporized in the air. He took a bite. His face crinkled. "Lemons, Stevie?" He hesitated. "They are somewhat like mangoes."

Ray said that in order to survive the ghetto, he was going to teach me everything he knew. The first thing he wanted to teach me was real English. Filipino English, or Taglish wasn't good enough. "You have to talk ghetto, man. You need to know a couple of words, Stevie. One of those words is 'yo.' You have to say it all the time. Yo wassup. Yo what cha doing? Yo this and yo that. You got that Stevie? If not, those kids from the projects will take you out."

"Got it. Yo. Yo Ray." I said repeating him. It was my first true American word.

"Nice. And the next thing you have to control are your Rs. Say tree."

"Three," I said, surprised that I couldn't somehow repeat him.

“See that Stevie. Not thRRRRee. Tree. You’re rolling your tongue like a Puerto Rican.” He rolled his tongue and spit drizzle flew from his mouth. “Just say it plainly. Don’t roll your tongue. Tra- tra- tree.”

I echoed him. “Tra-Tra-tree.” I cried out, “Tree.”

“That’s right Stevie. You might survive after all.” He smirked satisfied.

“Tree. Tree.” I said repeatedly. Ray laughed.

“Basketball, that’s another thing you have to learn when you live around here. Or at least if you don’t want the kids around here messing with you and all,” Ray preached. There was a basketball hoop atop Ray’s parents’ garage. Ray played before going to school, practicing his free throws and after school, he played a pickup game with his shadow. Back to basket fade-aways, reverse layups. He practiced his dribbling. Right. Left. In between his legs. His left hand, his weak hand, driving left and then like a ballerina, a silky smooth layup. “I’ll teach you basketball,” he said.

“Sure,” I said. That was the first time I ever played basketball. My arms were barely strong enough to get a shot out without him slapping it out, or if he didn’t slap it, which he did on purpose, the ball barely touched the rim. I dribbled with two hands. I had trouble following the bounce of the ball. “Rhythm,” he said, “you have to have rhythm, Stevie. That’s how you dribble. If you want to get from here to there, you have to know how to dribble. And if you want to know how to dribble you have to have rhythm.” I had

no rhythm. I travelled. I walked. I had no skills whatsoever. “You just have to practice. Practice.”

So that’s what I did. I practiced. I played ball with the same passion that I thought Ray had. I practiced so much that I tried out for the basketball team in grade school. I made it to the second team beating that one kid that called me Ching-Chong. But, I wasn’t as good as Ray. There was a rhythm in the way he played ball. There was a smooth effortless to which he glided in the courts. I once saw Ray play ball back his freshman year of high school. It was one of the few times that I saw Tito Junior take off work. We were in the stands and we saw him light up the floor. He scored 25 points. The game high. He was unstoppable. I’ve heard athletes call it being in the zone where everything slows down for them. It’s different for every athlete, so they say, different for every sport. In baseball, a batter could see the spin of the ball, the velocity, the speed, and even the stitches on the seams. A basketball player sees the hoops wider. They say he’s in the zone but Ray called it rhythm. I never experienced the thing that Ray called rhythm. But Ray says you don’t have to be doing anything at all. He got all deep about that once. What did you mean by that Ray? I wanted to ask him about that, but I never got the chance to. I imagined, he meant that it’s not just in sports but I hope in anything. I imagined, it’s listening to the waves crash among the sand and rocks and the sound it makes, like listening to the harmonious prayer in church. I imagined, it’s the silent sound snowflakes make when they fall in a blanket of white in the dark of night. I imagined too, it’s the rhythm of two friends’ laughing, just enjoying time. I hope I understood what he really meant.

For Ray that night, he was in rhythm with basketball. He was in rhythm with every nuance of the game; rhythm with the beat the ball made on the hardwood floors. He was in a dance with his body and hands, his arms and legs, all synchronous in a smooth choreography with the ball. He made music with every swish of the net, with every cacophony of his dribble, with every squeak of his rubber soles. Ray had one of those moments. He was in rhythm. We screamed and yelled his name at the top of our lungs, my uncle and I. And Ray, my big cousin, didn't hear a thing.

My mom and I lived in Tito Junior's basement for three years. We moved a town away, in Bayonne. I told Ray that we were leaving, and he already knew. He had his music playing in the background. The walls were vibrating from the bass. "He said it's not the end of the world. It's just a town away right?"

"Right," I said.

"And plus," he said, "I was supposed to teach you everything I know."

We lived on the second floor of a two bedroom duplex apartment. I was happy that there was a retractable basketball hoop in the driveway that the landlord didn't mind my playing on. We lived there for months before we had any visitors. It was until my birthday that Ray visited.

Ray looked different, though. His hair was longer, more gelled, and moussed, and hair sprayed. He had the spit curl in the front, like Superman, but he said it was

“*Morrissey* Stevie, you know from the Smiths,” but I didn’t know what he was talking about. “Shoot you have to get rid of that rice bowl hair of yours.” He wore a black leather jacket even though it was pretty hot that day in spring, Doc Martens instead of his usual Converse, and jeans that were cut up with a hole on his right knee. He smoked now too, just like Tito Junior, but he didn’t want me or anybody else to say anything. A pack of Marlboro Reds inside his jacket pocket, he smoked like he was kissing a girl, breathed her in, and sighed letting her go. He even closed his eyes too. He didn’t look like he was in high school anymore. He looked older. But not old like a man. But in between.

“Do you want to play ball?” I asked.

“Ball? Shiiiiit. I haven’t played ball since my sophomore year, Stevie.” That was his new thing, saying shit all the time. He puffed another whiff of his Marlboro, this time not closing his eyes. “Not since those *egots* started talking shit on the courts. Those *egot* man. Do you know what an *egot* is Stevie?”

“No, what’s that?”

“Fucking black kids,” breathing in his Marlboros. The fire lit up at the end. Ash fell from the cigarette butt and faded to dust in the light wind. He picked up my new basketball from the driveway pavement, and he dribbled it left and dribbled it right, dribbled it in between his legs, all at the same time with the butt hanging on his lips. He stopped, looked at the basketball—no dirt and oil had touched it yet. He looked at the lines and the letters. Felt the leather, spun it between his hands, and sighed. He breathed in the air and the smoke, and shot it up to the empty wind. Swish. “And one, Stevie.” He smirked with an air of confidence that I didn’t find amusing.

“I heard you play at your school. What position do you play, huh, Stevie?” he asked as he flung his dying cigarette butt. It shot down like a falling star.

“Point guard,” I said with my chin up. I dribbled the ball in between my legs. I practiced that for hours before I can get my left, off-hand, to catch the ball and then re-dribble back in between my legs and to my right hand again. I was wondering if he saw that.

“Shiiit, point? I played the two guard Stevie. Sometimes the three. You get more points that way. Michael Jordan not Mark Jackson. You starting?” he asked.

“No, I’m second team.” I said looking down.

“Bench warmer? Stevie, didn’t I teach you better?” He took off his jacket. “Come on, let’s get a game. I’ll teach you some more of my moves. 21, Stevie. 21. Rim, take out. What’s out of bounds?”

“The street, and the bushes behind the basket. Take out is this crack on the driveway.”

“Your ball. You’re shorter. It’s your house.” He joked. He bounced pass the ball hard to me. It almost left a ball print on my shirt. “You’re not point guard here now, Stevie. No one to pass it to.” He said. He crouched and spread his arms. “Or maybe I’ll let you take the first shot.” He let ease his defensive stance and stood there waiting for me to take the first shot.

My heart was pounding. My adrenaline up. It was the first time I really played with my cousin. All the other times, I just watched him play or I was just a shadow to his

ball playing. "Come on, Stevie. Your first shot is free." I looked at him, determined, jumped and took my first shot. My shoulders square, my wrist released. Everything was silky smooth. The ball spun in the air. The arch was right. The distance was good. Sweet I wanted to say. But it clanged on the back edge of the rim. I overshot.

"Nice try, Stevie. You got good form though." He rebounded the ball and dribbled his way back to the crack of the driveway to reset play. "Come on, Stevie. Defend." I took my stance. He dribbled low. "Listen to the rhythm of the ball, Stevie, if you want it." I tried to poke the ball away from him but my arms were too short to reach. He swung my arm away with his off-hand. "Rhythm Stevie, rhythm." He started right, dribbled between his legs and then with his left, crossed dribbled behind his back and sprinted right again to the point that my body was frozen where I thought he was going to be. I almost busted a knee. He passed by me and took one, two steps, and glided like a ballerina. His right hand with the ball, then he finger rolled the ball in. The net swished. It was smooth. It was sweet.

When he landed, I heard a metal clang on the hard pavement floor. When I looked, it was a shiny aluminum object. I ran over to it and picked it up. It was a butterfly knife. "Did you see that Stevie? That's two, Stevie." He said, not knowing that he dropped his blade.

"I think this is yours," I said. My palms were sweating.

"Oh, yeah. Thanks. 2 nothing Stevie," he said, as he tucked his butterfly knife back into his back pocket.

He started to dribble again but we were stopped by a loud beep on the street. A bunch of boys were inside a small red Acura Integra. All had black leather jackets that now I started to hate. All had Superman or rather, Morrissey-style haircuts. All probably had Doc Martins. The stereo was busting Depeche Mode through the speakers. There was a kid sitting on the passenger seat that waved to my cousin. He had thick sunglasses and his face was all scratched up.

“Stevie, sorry man. I have to get going. It’s 2 nothing. We’ll get this game again. Happy birthday little cuz.” He took his leather jacket and dropped the ball near the crack on the driveway. I heard the car door close shut and watched the car speed by. The ball rolled into the empty street.

I often wondered what happened that night he left with those kids. I heard from one of our relatives that Ray stabbed a boy in the park near the courts. There was a commotion, there was an argument. There were fists flying, whiffing the wind, cracking bones. There was spit mixed with blood, mixed with sweat, colliding the dark empty air. And then there was screaming. There was a sound of a body falling on the tar covered ground. And then there was Ray, motionless, stopped. Red and blue and white lights of cop cars swirling all around him. The sound of chaos screeching behind him.

They gave him a choice. After serving some time in juvie, they said he could either finish his 15 years in jail or get deported. He wasn’t a U.S. citizen, so they could do that. Tito Junior and Tita Tina chose for him. He was going back to the Philippines. He was going to live with a relative he never knew.

The day before he left for the Philippines, my mom and I went to Tito Junior's. It was New Year's Eve. He was outside smoking a cigarette. Old Christmas lights on the rails blinked red, blue, and white and green on his face. He was looking at the dark sky. There wasn't a star to wish from. When my mom saw him, she hugged him like he was her lost older son and in a way, he was. The way he took care of me when I was a kid all those years, he was like an older brother to me.

"Ray," my mom said, "I missed you." She rested her hand on his face the way she did to me when she tried to remember me from a different time.

"I missed you too, Tita," his voice sounding so familiar again. He was 21 now, but he looked much older. He was taller than me but he slouched, his back slightly arched so that he and I were almost the same height. His hair was shorter and combed, with no hint of gel and mousse and hairspray for control. He looked simple and defeated.

He looked at me and smiled. "Stevie," he said. "You got tall little cuz."

I hesitated whether I should hug him or shake his hand or both. I didn't do either.

"I'll let you two talk," my mom said and went inside.

"So I heard you applying for colleges this year," he said finally.

"Yeah," I said.

"Man, Stevie. I haven't seen you since... how long has it been?" he reflected. He looked at his cigarette as if it was his only friend.

“Could I get a smoke Ray?” I asked wanting to somehow copy him for the last time.

“Smoke?” he asked surprised. “Sure, sure,” he said. He opened his pack and gave me one. He lit up my cigarette butt with the end of his. I inhaled and let out a gag.

“Shoot, Stevie. Are you sure you want a smoke?” he said.

“This is my first time,” I coughed and he laughed. It was the first time I heard him laugh in a long time.

“Man, Stevie. You looked like you were eating lemons the way you were smoking like that.” His laughter trailing off. “Lemons. You don’t remember, huh, Stevie? You used to eat lemons, peeled whole lemons and your face used to pucker up just like that.” Ray sucked his cheeks in and squinted his eyes. The way he copied me somehow, he looked young again. Like a kid again.

“Lemons, huh Ray?” I said, shaking my head.

“Yup, lemons.” He smiled. He shook his head too. He looked at the basketball rim, rusted and netless atop Tito Junior’s garage. “I heard you were All-County. Man, All-County.” He said amazed. “I could’ve been All-County.” He could’ve been All-State, I thought. He looked at the rim as if he wanted to jump and touch it. “Shoot Stevie, you’re way better than me now.” But it was never about being better than Ray. It was just about being Ray.

“I used to watch you play ball here all the time,” I said.

“Yeah, man. Those were the days. Sometimes I would forget about the time.”

“Do you think that rim is still good?” I asked.

“Why? Do you want to get a game, Stevie?” He gave me this mischievous look.

“Do you think you can take me?” He took one last puff out of his dying cigarette.

“Do *you* think you can take me?” I said back, jokingly.

“Who do you think taught you all your moves?” He said accepting the offer. He looked for the basketball in the garage. Cobwebs and dust blanketed it as if it was sleeping. It still had a bounce good enough for one last game. Ray bounced the ball hard into the driveway pavement. He took a practice jump shot. His jump wasn't as high as it used to be. His feet barely left the ground.

“HORSE?” he asked reluctantly.

“21.” I said.

“21?” he said, “Alright, 21 it is.”

“Your house. Your ball.” I said, cracking a smile. “2 nothing, your ball,” I said.

And I hard bounce passed the ball to him.

He chuckled. “That's right. 2 nothing,” pumping his chest. “My ball.” He started dribbling the ball, the sound of ball on pavement echoed into the night. I jumped the rhythm and stole the ball from him. I faked right and crossed left, and then behind my back, caught the ball, set, jumped and faded. We both looked at the ball arch into the night sky. The moon and the stars lightly lit the sky like lamp posts on court playgrounds. The ball twirled and danced around the cold steel hoop, skipped and clanged behind the backboard until finally bowing in.

“2 even,” I said. “2 all.”

Ray smiled and shook his head. “I’ll give you that one, Stevie. I’ll give you that one.” Then he mussed my hair like when I was a kid. Like when I was his little cuz. Like when he was my big cuz. We laughed. We played ball. We lost count after 2. When his mom came outside and said that it’s almost New Year’s, it’s almost time, Ray said, “Not until this game.”

Condom Stadium

We played baseball at a parking lot near Mikey's apartment. It was me, Cam, Mikey, Sammy, and Pete. After school, the parking lot was mostly empty except for Mikey's mom's broke down car that we treated as first base. Second base was the pothole on the lot entrance; third base was space 14; and home plate was Pete's backpack because he carried the least amount of books. That was the infield. No sand. No grass. No straight lines that connected first and third to home, no path to second that made a baseball diamond. Just faded white lines that marked parking spaces, and sometimes, white damp unblown balloons that weren't balloons, scattered on black broken pavement. "Don't touch those," Mikey said.

The street past the parking lot was the warning track (because you had to look both ways to catch the ball) and the cars parked on the far side of the street was the home run fence, but everybody knew it wasn't. If you hit the ball that far, it was pretty much an inside the park home run. But the real home run fence was way past that, past the cars, past the sidewalk and over the 10-foot chain linked fence that housed Roberto Clemente's Little League Stadium. No one was going to get the ball after that. No one has ever hit the ball past that. That ball was souvenir to the green grass that grew on the only place on the block 'cept for the cracks on the sidewalks. Sometimes though, we'd throw our

taped up wiffle bats, climb over that chain linked fence. We'd run across the fresh blades of grass in centerfield, run to the sandy diamond, and tag each base until we exhausted ourselves into the dugout. We'd sit and pretend we were chewing tobacco and spit. Sammy was the best at it because he had a drooling problem. Mikey and Pete would argue who was managing that day. Most of the time, Pete would win because he was the oldest and he would always crack on Mikey. Mikey was the worst player in our team, but he always thought he was the best. He'd swing the bat like a ninja. Pete would call me up. Efen, you're leadoff today. I liked batting leadoff. I was the fastest, and I didn't have the power that Cam had, who always batted cleanup, but I was the patient one, I was the only one that can actually bunt. "Steal a base if you get on," Pete would say. Then I'd walk out of the dugout, take the wiffle bat, tap my Mets cap, and walk up to the batters circle. I'm a switch hitter, but I'd bat left most of the time. I'd dig my feet in, take my batting stance (who was I going to be today, Mookie Wilson, Lenny Dykstra, or shall I pretend to swing for it all as Strawberry). I'd spit, and tap home plate with my bat. I'd look at the imaginary pitcher. Maybe it was Dwight Gooden or Ron Darling. I'd always wanted to get a hit off my favorite pitchers, or maybe it would be one of the Catholic kids that played Little League; how I'd just want to smack the first pitch coming out of the mound, hear the crack of the bat, the ball hitting the heart of the wood, zinging straight through, the ball barely missing the pitcher's head and on to centerfield. I'd race to first, then round to second, but then I'd break, check the centerfielder and run back. I'd look back at the imaginary Catholic school kid, and smirk, and think, you got nothin' on me you spoiled bastard.

That's what we would do, pretend to play baseball, become our favorite players, take the field, me on first, Mikey covering third, Pete at short, Cam catching, and Sammy taking the mound, until the Little Leaguers would come. We'd see them coming out of their vans, their moms kissing them, their dads giving them high fives. We'd watch them with their clean uniforms and their cleats, we'd hear the clang of their aluminum bats on the sidewalk, and sometimes, I swear, I could smell the leather of their baseball mits in the spring air. We'd watch them and we'd stop pretending to be somebody else.

Then we'd run out to centerfield, jump over the warning track, and hop over the fence. We'd run pass the bleachers and climb another fence out of the stadium and we'd run across the street, to the parking lot, where we played our own brand of baseball.

But Sammy would always be the last one off the fence. He'd always be the last to look back. He'd always be the one to hear the Little League kids yell the loudest, screaming at the top of their lungs, "Run ghetto kids. Run! Go back to your condom stadium."

The Line Dancer

My dad can't dance. "I have two left feet," he said jokingly with his thick Filipino accent, "because I'm left handed."

Joanie, my little sister, laughed. "That doesn't make sense Papa."

"Do we have to go to this?" Pa said.

My mom didn't answer. Of course, we had to. We had to go to this barrio every year, during Labor Day weekend. Grandma and her sisters were all born in September, and even my mom, Mi, my little sister and I called her, short for Mommy, was also born in September, so we couldn't miss it. Pa, every year though, wanted to it to be simple. Just us. Every year he got shot down and this year was no different. This year especially so, because Grandma was celebrating her 65th birthday and Mi was celebrating her 40th.

We were all upstairs in my parents' bedroom getting ready for the party. It smelled like makeup and perfume, cologne and deodorant, hairspray and mousse, and ironing starch. I was trying to tie a tie, and I didn't know how, so I asked Pa. He found a clip on tie and he clipped it on my collar. Thanks Pa. Joanie wore her favorite dress. She was excited because she was going to see the white balloons she had picked with my grandparents the night before. She loved hearing the balloons thump, thump, thumping

inside the car. She told me that there were so many balloons that the car was going to fly. She meant to collect each one after the party, and set them free into the sky and into balloon heaven. She didn't like the way boys hit them like punching bags.

"You're going to be forty?" Joanie asked Mi. "That's like four times all my hands combined."

"Yes, it is." Mi said.

Joanie was showing off her arithmetic because this year, she was going to kindergarten. As for me, I was twelve, and going to middle school, and I was a bit scared about that.

"Gabe?" Mi said to Pa, "Are you go to wear a tie? You're not going to just go with a polo shirt are you? Wear the *barong* if you're not going to wear a tie."

"Sure, sure," buttoning his *barong*, and then running downstairs to get his famous *dinuguan*, ready for the party.

Mi looked at me next. I straightened up my clip on tie, then tugged the bottom of my shirt. "Let me take a look at you, Francis." She bent her legs a little. I was almost as tall as Mi. She looked at the bags under my eye. "Were you up all night last night?"

"We all were." Joanie said. "Pa was in the bathroom, doing who knows what, and I kept hearing music in Franny's room."

"Music?" Mi repeated.

"And moving feet." Joanie gave me a she-devil smile.

“It was the TV, and don’t call me Franny!” I said.

“TVs don’t have feet,” she said.

I gave her a heat vision, laser stare. Nothing came out of my eyes. “Is Tita Tess coming to this?” I asked my mom.

“Why?”

“Because of Melinda MA LA NA.” Joanie said it, singing it like it was a song. “Is that why you were up last night?”

“Alright, enough. Let me take a look at you.” Mi said. She combed my hair with her fingers, pressed it in place like she was ironing the strands of my hair. “Stand up straight.”

I did. But it didn’t make me much taller.

“Look at you *noy, guapo, guapo*, handsome, *na.*”

I did look impressively handsome.

She turned me to face the mirror and smiled at my reflection. I looked at her and then we looked at each other. She smiled again. I shook my head and mussed my hair.

“Alright, then,” she said, “my turn.”

Joanie and I sat on the bed while my mom applied makeup on her face. Joanie looked at Mi as she was having makeup applied to her. When Mi put on her eyeliners, Joanie widened her eyes. When Mi put on blush, Joanie sucked in her cheeks. Her lips, Joanie pursed to kiss. When Mi was done, she looked at herself, really looked at herself.

She moved her head slightly left, then slightly right. She bent forward on to the vanity mirror. Then lifted her chin up, puckered her lips, just a little. She reached for her makeup again, as if to cover something she had thought was wrong. And then she stopped. She accepted it. She pressed her dress down. Her tummy was slightly showing as if she just ate. She looked at it and looked at me and Joanie sitting on the bed as if to say, you two lived there once.

Pa came back upstairs and whistled. Mi looked. But he was whistling to me. He needed help in the kitchen. I jumped off the bed and followed him.

“You look beautiful, Mi!” Joanie yelled at the top of her lungs. “Doesn’t she look beautiful, everybody?”

But Pa and I were already walking out of the room.

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Melinda Malana is Tita Tess’s daughter. My mom and Tita Tess were best friends since high school back in the Philippines. They were such best buds that Tita Tess named her only daughter after my mom. (So yes, it was weird having that stomachy feeling for Melinda especially since that was my mom’s name, but I didn’t know my mom had another name other than Mi.) She lived a town over, but we would see her on holidays and birthdays or if Mi and Tita Tess would have their moms’ night out. Her mom and my mom would go shopping and did lady things, but Melinda didn’t want any part of that. Melinda and I would rather watch the Sci-Fi channel until we were both in outer space.

That summer though was different. Tita Tess came over with Melinda, almost practically every other night. Sometimes they slept over. Her mom would sleep on the couch. Melinda would sleep with Joanie in her room. Some nights, Melinda would sneak over to my room because I had the small television and we would watch Star Trek. We'd put it on mute because we'd already know the words, and she would call me "Number One," like the way Captain Picard would say to "Number One," to Commander Riker, and I would call her Captain because she wanted to have a starship "to seek out new civilizations, to boldly go where no man has gone before," and also, to be more like a boy, but she wasn't, not the way her brown eyes had drops of green on them; not the way her chests started to get bigger, and when I basically bumped into them, my thingy down there, got, I think a cramp, because it got all stiff, and I pretended to be frozen and stuck in time, like the screaming angels in Dr. Who, another one of our shows, and I told her, I'm an angel, and don't blink but stare at my eyes. I stared at hers. How did it have drop of green on brown, and how did her hair get so light brown with streaks of blond? How did she have freckles because I'd never seen a Filipina with freckles? I told her if she blinked, that she'd be transported back in time, like those angels in Dr. Who. "Don't blink!" I said, but she did. She said, "What was so bad about going back in time?" Then she hugged and wrapped herself around me like a blanket. I thought, if there was a blanket just as warm it would be called Melinda.

I had asked Mi how Melinda had greenish, brownish eyes, and freckles, and such. Mi had said that Melinda was half Filipina, half Lebanese; she was Filipanese or Lebanina or Lebanay, or a Pinoyese. Why didn't she look like her mom, and Mi had said that sometimes, when a father and a mother have a kid, the one who is in love the most,

will look like the kid. I had asked, “So, who do I look like?” And she had said, “Both of us.”

Yeah, so I was up all night thinking about Melinda Malana. You know a girl is pretty when you call her by her first name and her last name. Her name sounded like a French kiss, whatever that meant, because I never kissed a girl before, let alone a foreign country kiss, but my best friend Pete had said that that’s what her name was like, as if every syllable of her name touched each one of your taste buds. I said, “That’s a lot of taste buds,” and he said, “Yeah,” because he’d done that several times before—he swore to God.

I thought of several ways to tell her how much I liked her, I mean really liked her. I thought of just telling her. “Hey, Melinda, I like you. I mean, I really like you. Well, that’s it, have a good day. And life.” It sounded easy enough. I thought of three things that could come from this:

Scenario 1. She would say, “I like you too. I mean, I really like you.” And then we would hold hands and watch the sunset. Then maybe we would kiss. But I haven’t thought that far off yet. I know only two languages. Some Tagalog and English. French isn’t want of them. I like their fries. I like their toast. But I’m no expert in their kisses. It might be easier to give her a Hershey Kiss than a French one.

Scenario 2. She would say, “Gross! Yuck! (Spit sound).” She would then dose her ears in ammonia so that she can clean her ears of those disgusting words that had

come out of my mouth. She would then start to drown me in ammonia so those same words would be cleaned right out of my mouth. I'm not entirely sure where she would get that ammonia, but girls have big purses and there are all sorts of things in there. It's like Dr. Who's TARDIS. It is bigger in the inside. I once asked my mom for tissue because of my runny nose and she got out a roll of toilet paper.

Scenario 3. She would say, "I like you too... as a friend." This might not be too bad. But according to Pete, this is not something I want to be. This is the worst. Worser than being drowned in ammonia. This is death but a slower, longer death. He said to be in this "friend's zone" is like being assimilated into the Borg. Remember when Picard was assimilated. Yeah you have no say anymore, and you can be with her and all, but you can't show any emotions. Nothing. All you can do is follow her around with all these emotions stuck inside you. That's sad I thought. Pete must have been in love what a girl I don't know about, or worse, "in like" with a girl.

Scenario 1 would be awesome. I would just tell her and she would feel the same exact way. I have to be like Riker who always gets the girls. I just have to be smooth like butter. She'll melt on my words. But at this point, all I can think of is "I like you, I like you a lot." Although, I don't know how I could trust myself to remember that sentence. In 1st grade, we had a play about hygiene, and all I had to say was, "My two front teeth." I got stage fright. I said My teeth. I couldn't count. So I couldn't rely on memory for

anything. I wrote it down. First, I thought, write it on my hand but my hands sweat and that's disgusting, so I couldn't write it on my hand. Not even both hands. So I thought to write it on paper. What should I write? I asked my dad, well, I tried to ask my dad, "If you had something good to write, what would you write." He said the winning lotto numbers. Thanks Dad. And then I asked my mom, "What would you write if you could say what you really wanted to say," and she said, "What are you trying to say, and I just said, "I'm just saying, that's all," and left. Pete was the only one that gave me real advice. He said to say how you really feel, that's how he got all his French kisses. Right. So, I wrote what was on my mind. And everything would be like in the movies, there'd be sunset in there too.

Once she reads what I wrote, we would dance. Yes! Like the line dancing couple in all of my grandma's party. That's what I thought of love. I'd watch them and I knew that's the way love should be. Not like my parents. Not the way they never danced even when they said this was our song, (what song was it?); they'd just look at the dance floor like two people watching for something to happen.

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When we arrived at the fancy shmancy hall, the parking lot was already packed. I scanned around to look for Melinda Malana's car. Melinda was already there. My heart started pounding. It wasn't like that before but everything changes when you're twelve.

We went inside. I helped Pa carry the *dinuguan* inside even though my arms were thin and he had to really carry the load. After we placed the pot on the buffet table, Mi told Pa not get drunk, not this time please she said.

Joanie was looking around at all the balloons. Some were tied to the chairs and some on the centerpieces of the tables. Some had already floated up to the ceiling, way up high near the disco ball. Joanie's mouth widened from cheek to cheek in a grin. She told me that she had a secret, and I told her, it's only a secret if she didn't tell anybody. She said she was going to free all the balloons, and I said good luck with that.

All the old relatives were already there so I went over to get blessed by them. It was customary to be blessed; I bowed down my head and they gently touched the back of their hand to my forehead. Sometimes old ladies didn't want to bless me, though, because it reminded them of how old they were. Sometimes they just wanted to be kissed. Some commented on my dimples, and said how I looked like my dad and how I'm starting to grow tall and taller even now than my mom. "Handsome, handsome boy," they said.

"Guapo na."

It was annoying saying hi to everybody but we finally made our way to our table. My grandparents were already there, and Grandpa blessed me and Grandma gave me a big wet kiss on both cheeks. She was especially happy today. "I have a very important job for you," she said, "Very important."

I shook my head, sure, but I was still looking for Melinda. "Look at me," she said. She gave me a serious look. I gave her a serious look. I counted the greys on her head. I looked at the wrinkles on her forehead. They looked like a maze, and wondered how many times she got confused to have such a maze on her forehead. If I had a pencil, could I find my way out?

"I want you to give this note to the music guy okay?" Grandma said.

“The DJ.”

“Yes, the music guy, that’s what I said. I want you to tell him to read everything. Repeat that for me, Francis.”

“Give to DJ. Read everything.”

“Everything.”

“Everything,” I repeated. Then she put the note on my shirt pocket.

That’s when I saw Melinda Malana. I looked at Melinda Malana, all dressed up and pretty. She was sparkling as if the disco lights stopped spinning and one strobe light shone on her; the fog machine made smoke all around her. She was hot. She saw me and smiled. I raised my arm to wave hello but my arm was frozen, paralyzed, and all I can move was my hand, waving hello to the ground. Stupid arm. She waved again. I have two arms, please, at least one work. But an adult got in front of me. It was the priest. Dammit. Sorry. “Hello, Father Paul,” I said annoyed.

“Hello, Francis,” he said and mussed my hair.

I lost sight of Melinda Malana with all the adults standing up and greeting Father Paul. Excuse me, I wanted to say. Get away. My grand aunts blushed as if they had never seen a priest before. Grandma kissed the golden cross on his necklace. Then he shook my dad’s hand, and said something about the spirits being calm. I’ll do my best my dad said in Tagalog. Then he went up to the podium where the DJ was and took up the microphone. He started to pray over the food. He said bless this food, blessed this daily grace, blessed this holy day, and Pa snickered. Mi bumped him with her elbow.

After Father Paul blessed the food, people made their way to the buffet line. Grandma looked at me, giving me the cue to walk over to the DJ. Okay Grandma, I said with my eyes. I was walking over when I felt someone tap my shoulder. I turned and it was Melinda. Sweat started pouring down my forehead. It rained in my armpits. I could've solved a desert drought with the torrential downpour from my skin pores. I felt a lake building up under my pits. Lake Superior of armpit sweat. I guess that's why Pa had told me to wear a T-shirt under my white collared shirts. I put my hands in my pockets and I thought of giving Melinda the letter.

"Hello Number One," she said. My goose bumps started to fly.

"Hello, Melinda Malana, er, Captain," I said.

She smiled. I stared at her eyes. And then I didn't. I stared at her freckles. And then I looked somewhere else.

"I have to go."

"Where you going, Francis?"

"Nowhere," I said.

She looked down. And I looked down. There was a lot of this looking down, and then looking around, and then looking somewhere else, instead of her eyes, her face, her everything, so that my mind didn't flutter and my stomach wouldn't be filled with butterflies. I walked away. I felt so stupid. I shook my head because all I had to do was say what I needed to say, or read what I needed to say, or better, just gave her the letter in my pocket. I looked back and Melinda was looking down. She looked back at me, turned,

and walked over to the buffet line by herself. I wish I would have said something more to Melinda. I wish I could just tell her how I felt, when I felt it, instead of rehearsing it, or writing a handwritten note.

I dragged my feet over to the DJ. His head was bobbing even though there wasn't any music coming through the speakers. I cleared my throat to get his attention, but obviously, he didn't notice. I gave him a note, and he looked at it, surprised. "Read everything," I said, "You know, for stuff."

"You sure, kid?"

"Yeah," I said. "My grandma will wave at you. Read everything."

He shrugged his shoulders. "Hey, kid, what song do you want?"

"I don't know," I said. "You're the DJ."

I watched Melinda sitting by herself. She's playing with her food and looking at her Coke. Maybe she was looking at the bubbles. We once tried to count all the Coke bubbles inside a glass. She counted and counted and she said she and her dad used to count together and she wanted me to do the same. She liked it when the Coke bubbles kinda bubbled up to the top and gathered together with all the other bubbles, like snow falling at night, but instead of going down, it was going up as if the cloud was calling the snow back up. One night, she said she waited by the window for her dad to come home. It was snowing. She kept on wiping the window with the side of her palm, then she blew on it and made happy faces and paw prints and happy suns and hearts with an arrow going through it. She put initials on them. (I wanted to ask, "Whose initials?") She said

she wrote him a letter while she waited because she loved handwritten things. She said she never got the chance to give it to him. Her dad never came home.

Joanie asked me what I was staring at and I said mind your own business. I strolled over to the buffet line and got myself some food. Pa's *dinuguan* was almost gone. That's good because I never liked pig's blood. I got some rice, of course, chicken adobo and beefsteak. Maybe that would take my mind off of Melinda Malana.

When I got back to the table, Pa was already getting up to get more drinks. I couldn't believe he had already finished two drinks in the span of four songs. Mi looked at him and tried to catch his eyes, but he walked away avoiding her stare. His *barcadas* called him to the bar, calling for another round. They toasted their shot glasses together, and they all laughed at a joke they've probably told a million times and millions toasts before that. I looked at Mi wiping her hands with her napkin. She patted the edges of her lips, making sure not to smear her lips. She tried to listen to the music.

I was eating, but I couldn't help but look at Melinda. What happened to us? How come it was easier back then to just sit and eat and laugh together when we were younger? Is it because she grew breasts? I swear, if I didn't accidentally brush against them, and if I didn't all of a sudden have dreams of her, then wouldn't it be easier to just say hello? None of this handwritten note to say exactly what was on my mind, but then again, what was on my mind? I kept thinking of pre-conversations that I could have had with Melinda. I kept on thinking about pre-complements like if I were to see her in a dress, which she was in now, I would say, "You are breathtaking like a punch in the gut." I just wanted us to be normal like before. But when did she get so pretty? I wanted to ask

Mi if that's the way it was with adults because adults didn't seem to talk much anymore, about just fun things to talk about, and fun things to do, like counting bubbles, and fogging up windows so that we can write our initials on them.

Joanie tugged on my clip on tie. Joanie was getting annoying. Then she kicked me on my leg. "What the hell Joanie?"

She looked at me sad. "All the boys are hurting the balloons."

"What are you talking about?" I said rubbing my leg.

"Look." She pointed at the boys who were her age and some younger. They were punching the balloons that were tied on the chairs and some tied to their wrists. She covered her ears and said, "I hate that sound. The thumping sound. Thump. Thump. They're going to explode!"

"It's okay, Joanie. Balloons don't have feelings."

"You're wrong. If they don't have feelings, why are they made of air? We're made of air."

"That doesn't make sense, Joanie." I took a spoonful of rice and beefsteak and chicken. I wanted to argue but I was so hungry.

"It's the same air we breathe, *kuya*."

"So what do you want me to do?" I said, food still in my mouth.

"Save them."

I gulped the food. “They’re just balloons, sis.”

She made a frown and crossed her arms. Now she was angry. What was it about girls today?

You could tell the time in a party with the amount of breaks the DJ takes. DJ Scratch N’ Spin talked over the music. “Awwwwwzzaaaa” he yelled, “DJ Flipster in the HOUSERrrraaa... East Coast FLIPS, West Coast FLIPS in the hooouuusseeee.”

“I’d like to flip you off stage.” People laughed.

As expected, it was a line dancing song and as if on cue, the professional line dancing couple got up from their table. They were dressed as if they picked each other’s clothes. His tie matched with her dress. His hair was tightly combed, each strand of hair perfectly aerodynamic. He smiled and his teeth twinkled like the disco ball. His shoes had taps on them because he had to make that dramatic entrance. He lifted his elbow and she nodded and took it. He walked with her, guiding her to the dance floor, her shoes just as loud as his. Her dress sparkled like someone bedazzled it, as if she had in mind, to blind people. Her legs glittered so every step was like a diamond being born from the coal darkness of her pantyhose. They both bowed to the audience, as if they had to, and then, looked at each other, gave each other a kiss, but a kiss without really touching, and then, they both nodded at the DJ to play their music.

When they danced, they were telepathic. They didn’t have to say a word, they just knew. Sometimes, when Melinda and I are so close to each other, we are telepathic. Like when we’re talking and we say the same thing, we say jinx, and then double jinx because we know each other so well, and then we can’t talk to each other anymore but that’s

okay, because we know exactly what we're thinking. But now, I don't know, I can't seem to know what she's thinking, the same way when Pa and Mi fight, they just give up talking all together and I think that love, is somewhat like dancing. Some couples only know how to slow dance. Some don't dance at all, at least, not anymore. Some could dance any dance: slow, fast, the salsa, ballroom dancing, some can even dance to hip-hop together, like the professional line dancing couple because they know each other, every step, every hold, every rhythm, and they can dance as if there isn't any space in between their closeness. The professional line dancing couple was dancing and I didn't care if they were all flashy and brighter than the disco lights above. They seemed to have something everybody wishes.

When their song ended, the line dancing song came in and the professional line dancing couple gathered everybody up as if they somehow mesmerized people to the dance floor. Mi got up and she wanted me to dance. Me, no way. Nah ah. But she had already pulled me into the dance floor. DJ Scratch N'Spin was playing *Todo Todo* and every Filipino knew how to dance to that, and yet, the professional line dancing couple was leading the way, saying one two three, one two three, turn, twist, turn, one two three, one two three... Mi knew the dance, but I fumbled. I was starting to think that I've inherited the two left feet Pa was always saying he had. I looked over to see if Pa was looking, but I couldn't find him at all.

Mi waved Melinda and her mom over.

"Francis!" Melinda yelled above the song, as if she was greeting me for the first time.

She started to dance.

I put my hands in my pocket and felt for the letter. She put her hands on my elbows and started to sway my body using my arms, left and right, left and right, trying to make me, somewhat dance. Then she put her hands on my hip. She was actually touching the sides of my hip, right below my belt! An inch lower and further down, and she would be touching the side of my ass cheeks. My body froze. She felt me freeze. "I have to go."

"What?" she said.

"I have to go." I walked over to my table but then I thought, if I sat, I would still have a clear site of Melinda on the dance floor. So I kept on going and going and going to the bathroom.

I thought about sitting there on that toilet until the party was over. Really, I did. Maybe build a fort. Maybe a castle. There was plenty of water for a moat. That's what Pa would say if I stayed too long in the bathroom, "Do you need anything for your throne, your heiny-ness?" I would've stayed there too, if I didn't hear the sound of someone vomiting in the stall next to mine. The coughing at first. Then, the choking. Then the vomit and the familiar. I knew who it was. It was like the sounds in the bathroom last night. Growing up, Mi had a way of hiding things. We had clothes that were too tight. Clothes that were too long. Clothes that somehow, we never thought belonged to somebody else before. Her engagement ring and her wedding band, were jewelry passed down from her family, instead of given on bended knees. And then, the sounds she hid so well. Maybe we had thick walls, or waxy ears, or maybe it was that when Pa drunk himself and threw up in the bathroom, Mi was there, turning on the faucet, turning on the

shower, drowning out the sound of his vomiting. Or, maybe we were all telepaths. Maybe we just knew not to hear it.

“Pa?” I knocked on the bathroom stall. “Pa?” My voice lowering.

“Fran?”

“Do you need, Mi?”

“No, Francis. It’s okay. It’s nothing. Go back to the party.”

I didn’t wait for him to get out. I didn’t want to stay. I wanted to run to Mi, but instead, I turned on all the hand dryers. I flushed all the stalls. And I turned on all the faucets. I hoped all the sounds would silence his vomiting.

I walked out of the bathroom and into the hallway. I heard the music playing in the hall. There were some kids running around. Some were punching balloons, chasing each other, tagging each other to see who was it. I was only a couple years older than them, but I wasn’t them anymore. I wanted to run out of there. I wanted to just go outside and wait until the party was over. Maybe I thought I could just walk home. But then, Melinda called my name.

“Is there something I did?” she said without looking at me. She’s looking down. She’s rubbing her arms to keep warm. But it wasn’t cold.

“Um,” I could only say. “Um.” And then, I remembered I still had her letter in my shirt pocket. The letter felt weird. Felt short. Felt legibly handwritten. I took it out.

“Here,” I said. I was so nervous, I almost shoved the letter in her face.

She started reading the letter. Her eyes looked confused. “What is this?” She looked at the letter again and was even more confused. “What does this have anything to do with you ignoring me and just leaving me like that?” She dropped the letter and walked the other way. My heart was hurting. Every step she took was like a punch in the gut. She was breathtaking after all. I picked up the paper and put it in my pocket.

I went back to the main room. My heart was beating just as hard as the beat of the songs. DJ Scratch N’ Spin lowered the music and hushed everybody up for the announcements and the shout-outs. He started calling people out on their special occasions. He started calling out for some people’s birthdays. First to the youngest birthdays that month, and slowly to the later ones. I couldn’t really think and my mind was still on Melinda. Why was I so stupid, why couldn’t I just tell her that I liked her, that I liked her a lot? What happened to my tongue? Just because my voice was starting to change, didn’t mean I didn’t know how to speak. Why didn’t she like my letter?

Then it dawned on me. I saw DJ Scratch N’ Spin trying to read a piece of paper and I thought, my God. *Aye dios*. Shit. *Tae*. That was *my* letter. I reached for the letter in my pocket and I started to read it and it had the names of my Grandma, my *lolas*, and my mom, and their birthdays. This wasn’t my letter. This was my Grandma’s letter. I gave Melinda and DJ Scratch N’ Spin the wrong letters. Then he started reading: “Dear Melinda. You are my Captain. And I am your Number One. Do you want to dance?”

The lights suddenly dimmed. A faint light moved from the DJ to each table until it was on my table, where my mom, and Joanie were sitting. “Tita Melinda,” someone called out. People oohed and aahed my mom. She didn’t know what to do but stand up. I

shook my head, no, no, no, as if, through telepathy I wanted to tell my mom, no that wasn't for you. It was for Melinda Malana. It was my letter. She walked up to the dance floor. Smiling and blushing. People whistled and clapped. I saw my aunts and my uncles smile and I saw my *lolas* and *lolos* wake. The DJ started playing the song. It was a slow song. A love song. Mi looked around at first. She was smiling. She looked all over for Pa, even tiptoeing to see if he had been behind somebody. But all the faces weren't Pa. Her cheeks reddened. As the song continued to play, first from the musical intro to the lyrics, she felt Pa was nowhere. She couldn't find him. Everybody started to look too. Turning their heads. They stopped looking at her and started whispering, asking each other, "Where was Gabe? Where was Gabe? Gabe!" Joanie called out, "Pa! Pa?" The slow song was almost to the chorus almost to the end. From where I was standing, my mom's cheeks went from red to moist sweat. I could almost feel her eyes water, a twinkling water drop like the blinking glass shard of the disco ball. She stopped looking for Pa. Her eyes looked down. I think she thought to stay at least until the song was done. Knowing Mi, she was loyal like that even to songs with no partner to dance to. But I think she gave up. She took a step to our table, just one step, and it sounded louder than the slow beat of the love song.

And that's when I called out. "It's ELECTRIC... YOU CAN SEE IT, IT'S ELECTRIC! BOOGGIE WOOGGIE WOOGGIE!" It wasn't the song that was playing. I ran to the middle of the dance floor. I yelled out louder than the stupid love song about holding hands. I yelled, "YOU CAN FEEL IT, IT'S ELECTRIC. BOOGIE WOOGGIE WOOGGIE." My voice was squeaky but loud. And then I wiggled my butt left. I wiggled my butt right. I knew it wasn't the dance, but I didn't care. I walked danced left. I walked

danced right. I prayed that I wouldn't trip over my own feet. Maybe I should've tripped over my feet. I kept on singing the song to the Electric Slide: "IT'S ELECTRIC. NOW YOU CAN HOLD IT, IT'S ELECTRIC. I'VE GOT TO MO-OOVE, I'M GOING ON A PARTY RIDE. I'VE GOT TO GRROOOVE GRROOVE, AND FROM THIS MUSIC, I JUST CAN'T HIDE."

And that's when I just looked down. It was a survival instinct against the preying embarrassment. I tried to remember all the dance moves. I tried to remember all the music videos, all the dances. I closed my eyes. I imagined all the dance moves the professional line dancing couple had performed all those years in all the *barrios*. I tried to do the *Cabbage Patch* but it, I think was too fruity. I tried to do the *Running Man* but it looked more like a speed walker. I tried to do the *Moonwalk* but I was going forward. My *Breakdancing* was broken. I was doing the *Bart Simpson* but it was more like the *Millhouse*. I heard maybe laughter. I heard someone yell, "You have two left feet!" But I didn't care. I kept my eyes closed and just pretended I was a professional line dancer.

And then, I bumped into something. Or someone. I hoped it wasn't my mom. I hoped that it wasn't just my mom and me on the dance floor. I peeked. I saw my dad's back. He was swaying left. He was swaying right. His left arm bent slightly out as if he was pledging or promising. His left hand holding onto another hand, and I could see a ring shining like a star. It was my mom's ring. I opened my eyes a little more. Dad started turning and I saw Mi, her head slightly tilted, looking up at him, smiling and blushing and relieved. Dad started to smile too, a drunk smile, but a smile, his dimples deep like mine. Then Mi put her head on my dad's shoulder. They were dancing.

I don't know how long I stood there, just watching.

I don't know what song was playing, when I felt a tap on my shoulder. I turned around and there she was, Melinda Malana, brown eyes under sparkles of green. She hugged me and laid her head on my bony shoulder. Then we swayed.

More people stepped on the dance floor. The professional line dancing couple started, of course a line, and more people got up too. Joanie tugged at my clip-on-tie. I looked down, and she was holding white balloons in her hand. "You have two left feet!" She burst out running with her arms spread like wings holding onto the white balloons. Boys younger and older than her started chasing her, and as she laughed and ran, she let go of the balloons. They floated up to the ceiling, up to the twinkling strobe lights to the white ceiling above, and the balloons looked like snow falling upwards back to the clouds, up to balloon heaven, up to where no boys would hold them.

The Last Beautiful Girl

On Sundays, there's a little girl, twelve years old maybe that visits the nursing home for somebody. I don't know. Her grandma maybe? Her grandpa? Sundays she visits. There are times she drops by my room on her way wherever she thought she was going. I pretend I don't see her. I look at the tree outside my window, or I just stare at the cold vinyl floors. Or my shoes. Where are my shoes? Instead I have these socks and slippers I don't remember wearing, and she says, "Twinkies are soul mates." And I say, "Huh?" And she gives me one. And I feel my mouth open, my mouth dry. I take it slowly and my hand shakes because of my arthritis. Shakes sometimes like a boy with a crush, like I'm supposed to know her. She toasts her Twinkies with my Twinkies and before I could eat it, it goes away, and I'm looking at the cold vinyl floors, looking for my Converse, but I can't find them. I only find brown moccasins and white slippers but no black sneakers, the ones the Bob Cousy used to wear, and I think that Sundays I always lose things—always try to find something I'm supposed to look for.

I find Gabriel and I say, "Gabe, did you steal my Twinkies?" and he says as if he's never heard of Twinkies before, "Twinkies?" And I say, "Yes Twinkies. Did you steal my Twinkies?" And he says, "Junk food is not allowed here, remember? Policy. And plus you have diabetes," And I say, "I would've shared."

Gabe is my orderly, or as they say at the nursing home, my caregiver. His uniform is white and his pants are white and his shoes are white. His socks are probably white too, but I don't bother to look. He wears these fancy insignias on his left shoulder, I guess to show that he has all the certificates and whatnots, to be a caregiver. He makes my bed a couple of days a week. I forget when those days are. He cleans my bathroom. He mops my floors. I piss on them so he says. He thinks my bladder has shit the bed but that is not true at all. The truth is I piss on the floor. That's right, I piss on them. Well, sometimes I don't piss. I would take a cup of my piss, the piss I don't flush, and I spill it on the floor, right next to the bed, right where my Converse shoes are supposed to be. Or sometimes I would spill it near the bathroom door to make it look like I was trying to get to the toilet, and oops, oh so close. It is quite a feat for a man my age. I give him hell. Only on days, I suppose when Gabriel is around. I make him work, that Gabriel.

On Mondays, it's empty like my walls. There's nothing on my walls. Just white. And sometimes, it's dirty white. Sometimes it's plaque. I remember I did have something there. But now it's Jesus because he's not something I should forget. The Portuguese lady across the hall tells me, "Your wall is empty. Your room is empty. You should have Jesus in your life." And she nails a picture of him on my wall—on my plaque wall. I nod when she hangs him. It is a picture of him looking puppy-eyed with a halo on his head, bright and shining like sunrise, and his heart wears a crown and has dove wings, and I want him to hug me, but he has no arms. It is just a picture of his head, his shoulder, his chests, his protruding heart, beating sometimes I think, in the night. I imagine someday I would find his arms amongst my empty plaque wall.

I say to Gabe, “Gabe what happened to all my pictures? All my frames? I only have Jesus, now. I know they were there because there’s nail holes. There’s nail holes! But no nails and no frames.”

He says “I’m sorry Francis but you can’t hang up anything on them walls. You can put them on top of your small dresser there or I can put them by the windowsill—if that’s what you want.” That’s what Gabe says.

“What are you talking about Gabe? These walls used to have pictures on them and now we can’t hang anything? See I’ll show you, Gabe. I’ll show you the nail holes Gabe.” I walk over and touch the walls but they are smooth, cold and empty. “Gabe, they were there I swear to you. They were there, the pictures.”

I start yelling. “Gabriel,” and now I’m angry because I’m calling him by his whole name, “Gabriel, first you take my Twinkies and now, I know you stole my pictures.” I yell at him and let him have it. I scream. I grab him by the collar but he doesn’t move. Did I even move myself? I yell, “Where’s my frames Gabe? Where’s my pictures?” And he says something but I don’t understand him. All I kept on thinking about was the time I did have pictures. It was a long time ago, wasn’t it? At home, it was at home. And yet, I’m not at home.

I am clutching his collar. His white collar. Yelling at him. Telling him, “Why are you here? You’re not supposed to be here. Why are you at my home?” But I am already in bed holding my blanket. I say, “Gabe. You’ll keep those pictures safe right? Keep them safe?”

And he whispers, "Until you come around, yes. I will Francis. I will. You had a long day Francis."

When you're old, the present is an echo. When I woke up, my arms are still outstretched, holding to a collar that isn't there, holding to air that I once thought was solid. It happens that way a lot. I get stuck in time. But that is not true. I am not stuck in time. It is that everything is slower. A lot lot slower. It's like glass. That's what I heard once in the Discovery Channel. On Tuesdays, I watch the Discovery Channel. A man in the Discovery Channel said that glass is between the state of solid and liquid-- a jammed matter. So when the nurses here yell at me to take my medicine, I hear it, it echoes. I know it. I'm not deaf. I'm just somewhat like glass. But they don't watch the Discovery Channel. The man in the Discovery Channel said that glass will take millions of years before it shatters and falls. It will only take me a little of that. Eventually in time, I'll get it. I don't have to be told a million times. I'm not dumb. I was a science teacher in high school once. I taught thousands of kids. Maybe even that nurse's mom or dad who thinks I'm dumb or deaf or both. But everything when you're old is waiting. Like glass, I'm jammed matter now. You can look at me and see through me like glass, but eventually you'll see you too. I know that. This is a theory of mine. But I have many theories too, I do.

But it is not always that way, just some days. When the doctor said that I would lose my memory some day, I wanted to kick his ass. What is memory to you, doctor? Amelia was there. My daughter. She was there. Who else would be? He talked to her

more than me because he probably thought I was already gone—that I was already in space. But I'm not Neil Armstrong. I'm here. I'm not the man on the moon. And I thought, I know you. I know I know you. You were once a student of mine, yes? I used to tell my students the best way to memorize something was to connect what is a truth to them. That is right. What is a truth to them. "Make it an event," I used to say. "Make it an event. Things remembered should be an event."

Amelia took it hard. I wanted to tell her think of something good and happy. But I mumbled, I believe I mumbled, and she didn't hear me. I do that a lot—I mumble. She covered her face and I wished she didn't cover it. Because all I can remember now are her hands. Sometimes I do and sometimes I don't remember how she looks like. But I do remember her hands. They say that you can tell a person's soul in the eyes but what if you have cataracts like the little old Portuguese lady that gave me Jesus? She's always wearing sunglasses and her eyes are grey now, sometimes white, like white empty clouds. And I think I cannot see her soul except now, in her hands. Like Amelia's hands. Her diamond ring had shone like the North Star, Polaris. I remember those hands. I used to hold them before crossing the street, my hand covering it like mittens. And her wedding day dance. I do remember that. Her hands shook. They were soft. They disappeared into my neck and hung on my shoulders when the song ended. And yet, I can't remember her face now. I know they were beautiful like my wife's. I remember holding both of their hands once upon a time. I did. It was mine. I know.

On Wednesdays, they take us to the park outside of the home. I brush my hair. It's still black but thin now like floss. I don't use floss because Gabe said I have no teeth but I have dentures and I think it's because he has my Twinkies. I wear my black socks, and my brown moccasins but I would rather wear my Converse. I remember to bring my handkerchief. It's silk. I put on my sports jacket and I look for my umbrella but it's nowhere and I say, "Gabe, where is my umbrella?" and he says, "I don't think it's going to rain, Francis." And I say, "That's stupid Gabe. It always rains." I find it eventually, I always do.

It's not really a park. It's a yard outside with a fake pond, with nice bushes and baby trees on crutches, and they make us walk around it like fishes in a bowl, thinking we'd forget how small the park is. I forget too and try to walk away from the circle but a caregiver whose name isn't Gabe leads me back to the circle and I circle and circle like a forgetful fish. It's stupid and I mumble or I say, "This is stupid," but they don't hear me. They do that a lot—not hear me. I instead look at the clouds. I look at cumulus clouds the most. They remind me somewhat of a brain. Don't you think? The brain shoots out electricity like lightning when it remembers, yes? And I think, let it rain; let there be a lightning storm today. If the cloud is the brain then raindrops must be memories or at least scattered memories, no? That is my theory. I think of the millions and millions of raindrops that fall and all I need is a puddle, just a puddle. And then I hear the thunder coming, and the lightning will come soon and I think of my brain and I think and I hope and tell it to storm because all I need is a puddle of memory. I tell the orderly who isn't Gabe, "It's going to rain," and I smile, and he says, "Sure old man," not like the way Gabe says, "Sure Francis," and I smile and I mumble but he doesn't understand me. This

is when it happens. I say, "This is always the way it happens." But it doesn't. It doesn't rain. I open my umbrella but it doesn't rain. The cumulus clouds are gone. They are white and thin and transparent and gone. The sky is blue and it is empty.

They bring me to the home and I don't know they changed me but I am already in a white robe. I feel my cheeks on my pillow and I see my hands, brown and leathery and cold. I feel a water drop not a rain drop slide from my eye, across the bridge of my nose, to the tip, and to the empty dark hole of my nostril. Some fall to my lips and I taste the salty bitterness. It's like it knows where to go. It's like the wrinkles show them where to go. No? Tear drops leave wrinkles. Leave empty, dry rivers across my face. I feel old. It's dark now. I must have lost the day. Lost and missed the rain because it always rains, doesn't it? Why does it always rain but not today?

There are pills on the night stand. One is for my memory so the nurse says, and the other one is for sleep. The memory one doesn't work. Memory I say to the nurse, "If you want to remember, make it an event." I say. I yell. But I think she wasn't listening at all.

I listen to my heart to try to sleep. It echoes now in my frail ribs like two cacophonous beats. I listen to the beating. Listen to it as if it is a tune I once danced too. Listen to the wind outside. I'm not that far gone that I can't hear the wind outside. Think of it as woman's hum; a song that she only hums to me, and I remember, try to remember the song that now is just a hum to me. I hum too and in the dark, in the night, the caregivers pass by, and they think I'm gone but I'm dancing in my insomnia.

Thursdays are sometimes days I think I never woke. I ask Gabe, “What day is it, Gabe?” and he says something and I don’t listen. He fixes my bed and I forget to piss on it this time and I tell Gabe, “You’re lucky this time Gabe,” but he doesn’t understand what I’m talking about but I give a little chuckle if that’s what I have now instead of laughs. On most days, he makes my bed like a machine. The bed sheet whips the air with a thud. Like a thunder almost. When the other caregiver is there, I don’t know her name, but her hands are long, her nails are always done with streaks of white and silver behind a dark blue, as if someone stopped a shooting star racing across the sky, Gabe looks at her quite fancifully. He doesn’t think I notice but I do. He thinks I’m staring into space, but I’m stargazing at them, and especially him and his inability to slow down time. Gabe plays this little dance with his eyes. He’s at the other side of the bed looking down, but catching her at the corner of his eyes. She acts like she doesn’t know. But she knows. She fancies him too, I think. No, I know. I want to say something but I don’t. I drool. My wrinkles cover my smile. Gabe says, “Could you help me with this?” And she nods. She smiles and I remember something. What is it? She starts humming a tune I want to know. “What are you humming?” I ask but no one hears. Gabe says, “Lovely day isn’t it?” and unfolds a clean white sheet, holds on to the corners and throws it up in the air. She catches the other side. The slowness of the falling blanket reminds me of two people under an umbrella.

I ask Gabe, “What was she humming Gabe?”

“Who?” he says.

I say, “What do you mean who? You know who. The girl you want to slow down time for, that’s who. “What was she humming?”

“Humming?” he asks.

“Humming,” I say to Gabe. “The humming reminds me of my wife. Do you know my wife, Gabe?”

“What girl?” Gabe asks, and I just look at him like he is dumb. I’m not dumb. And I start to tell him my story.

“I’ll tell you a love story Gabe. I’ll tell you, I swear I will.”

Gabe says nothing, he doesn’t even seem like he is there. “Are you still listening, Gabe? This is a love story. It was raining, I know, because I had my umbrella, and she... Gabe, who was that girl Gabe?”

Gabriel says gently, “It’s time for bed, Francis,” and I say, “Already?” And he says, “Yes.”

I try not to forget. And I promise I won’t. I remember constellations. I remember three stars. When the night is clear, I look out the window and look at the stars if I can. Fridays more than any other days. If I can see them through the bars, through my own reflection, which I can’t stand, my old face pressed on the cold steel bars, and I can see three stars brighter than the moon, visible through the transparent clouds. “My constellation,” I say. I mumble it. “My constellation.” I try to picture my wife among stars that have died millions of years ago and I think, that’s what they did before, to

remember where they're going, no? The sailors and travelers, a long time ago. They used the stars to remember. To try not to forget. To try to get home. "They're like constellations," I say and a voice says, "Tell me again."

I close my eyes, close them so hard that I can see a white light inside the darkness of my eyelids and I feel like I'm home, and I'm finally home, but how? How? Is this...

I'm on the porch. We're waiting for the clouds to clear the night sky. She is resting on the chair with a quilted blanket that covers her legs up to her toes. "Your beauty marks." I say. I trace them from her elbow, to her shoulder, to her neck, pointing at them gently with my index finger. She smiles. Her eyes fading into sleep. I trace beauty marks in her lovely face. "A beauty mark, faint but there, above your left lip." I gently touch her smiling dimple, a crescent moon it seems pointing to a star. "Another beauty mark hiding in your hair, right there, right above your forehead," I say. She wears a silk purple bandana around her head, covering what was left of her hair. "It means that you're smart." She smiles a little and tries to listen—to stop from fading into sleep.

"There's a twinkle of a beauty mark right below your left eye and you can only know if you stare," and I've stared a million times more than the stars. "Circinus," I tell her. "It meant compass." I kiss her three times each on every beauty mark on her lovely face. And she says, "We used to do this all the time, remember?" Her eyes already shut. Her head snug on my chest. "Are the clouds gone yet?"

I remember the constellation Circinus and it means compass and I stare at it, lost. And I think, growing old, watching the constellation in my wife's face, the smiles that grow old and fade into layers of skin like rolling clouds covering the brightest of stars,

how even then, she is the most beautiful girl I know. She wanted to see the stars that night. Our old routine when Amelia was still a little girl. But that night, the grey clouds never left the dark sky.

When I woke, Gabe tells me I have a visitor. It is Saturday. It is Saturday. There is a lady. She says, "Hello." And I say nothing at all. I want to say something but I don't. I want to get up but I am stuck. She comes closer to me and she combs strands of my hair with her soft hands. It feels like waking up to a gentle breeze. "Are you to take me home?" I say finally. "They take my Twinkies here. They take my pictures."

She stands there silent. She stares at me and I don't want her to stare. I look away. I look to my empty walls. She says, "Twinkies, Papa, Twinkies. Mama used to say you two were like Twinkies. They're soul mates you know." When she speaks, her voice places an echo to a million scattered memories. I want to say, tell me more. Tell me more. She says, "Do you remember Papa? Do you remember Mama lived next door to you all your life? And you never did say a word until it rained. 'This is a love story,' you used to say. 'This is a love story.'" I remember. I remember. I promise I'll remember. "The first time you talked to Mama was in the rain."

It always rains.

"She was going home. She lived next door to you. She forgot her umbrella. Her hair was soaking wet. You gave her your handkerchief."

It was silk.

“And you said...

...‘Lovely day, isn’t it?’

She lays her head on my stomach and wraps her arms around me like a blanket. Her hands disappear under my pillow. I gaze at my daughter and smile. She reminds me of the last beautiful girl I know. And I close my eyes.

Summer nights, back when Amelia was still a little girl, my daughter and Astrid, my wife, would have our Sundays. We would lie in the backyard lawn on a white blanket and we would feel the edges of the green grass and the small stones beneath. I would lie down, my hands as my pillow behind my head. Astrid would lay her head snug on my chest. Her hair would smell like lavender mixed with the grass and the trees and the air outside around us. She would hum sometimes church songs. Amelia would lay her head down on my stomach. She would count each star until she ran out of numbers. I talked about the constellations. I talked about their stories: Sagittarius the archer is to the West; Orion the hunter is always pointing to Scorpio; and then the love story of Perseus and Andromeda. When the first shooting star sped across the night sky, I wished this for me. And as the lights from neighboring houses and the street lamps dimmed in the course of the night, the stars in the sky grew brighter and brighter and brighter.