

[Modern Brown]

by

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A Thesis submitted to the

Graduate School-Newark

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

Rutgers University – Newark MFA Program

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Newark, New Jersey

May 2015

2015
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Modern Brown

I grew up in Hawthorne, California, in a black neighborhood where I never knew if I could say nigga, even around my best friend Marcel. Marcel said nigga all the time but he was shoe polish black and talked with an urban twang. Brown-skinned and mixed, I didn't even ask permission. We spent all our lunch periods together in the schoolyard, watching the other kids play handball, tetherball, and basketball. I've enjoyed playing those games many times, but chilling was just our thing. I was twelve, and didn't want to play as often anymore; I'd calmed down in some ways and found excitement in others. I was over kid shit, and I assumed Marcel was too. So lunch periods we leaned against the chain-linked fence, discussing basketball or rap—usually rap.

“Cam G is mad fresh son,” Marcel said, “That nigga's flow is amazing. Efen, you gotta hear his new song. Nigga in the video with mad bitches dancing on him, shoving his face in they chest. It's bananas, my nigga, you gotta check it out.” He used nigga a lot because he had the right, so I felt the need to compensate.

“Man, that motherfucker is just the pimp *supreme*. I aspire to have titties in my face like Cam G does. I watch his videos and I'm just like, how can a motherfucker *breathe*. It's like you gotta hold your breath forever to be a motherfucking rapper, it's crazy, but the titties make it worth it, they motherfucking do.” I improvised well.

But motherfucker was just a patchwork fix. I'd rather have said nigga but Pops wasn't around to be my nigga card, so to speak. Pops was one of those caramel niggas that the darker blacks hated on for getting lots of play. And there were rumors that he did. All the time. He was a man rich in Southern charm and too much charisma for his own good.

Pops had been gone for almost a year; any idiot could figure out what he was up to.

People talked. Mom usually picked me up after school and it'd begin before we'd take the first step home. Other parents from our neighborhood would eye Mom with pity; or an older sister from Hawthorne High or Leuzinger would exclaim to a friend in a too-loud voice, *Oh there go that Philippine lady, the one on Prairie, she married to that nigga. You know, that nigga.* Mom wasn't one to shy from confrontation so she cut eyes at such girls, but eyes don't scare anybody in the hood, not really. The whole walk home Mom would cut her useless eyes at this girl or that girl, filling with anger, poisoning herself for lack of someone to take it out on.

"The *dehbill* is in this house!" She'd yell as soon as we got inside, anger triggering the remains of her accent. "Even if he begs, I will *nehbair* take him back!" She'd slam the front door shut behind us. I'd freeze up and linger by the door, waiting for her to disappear into the kitchen or the bathroom. It never worked out the way I wanted; she always hovered around the living room and I eventually sat on the couch and turned on the TV, usually to Maury or Jerry Springer. I watched the shows without really paying attention; I waited and waited until I had the courage to ask about Pops. Meanwhile Mom stomped around our apartment, rearranging things, wiping picture frames down with napkins. She did everything roughly, hastily, with disproportionate violence. The only object she treated with care was a framed wedding picture resting atop the TV. She often stared into her own bright beaming face, and my father's trademark smirk; she wore a simple white dress with lace sleeves, and he wore a black tux, black vest, and a silky black bowtie; her hand was around his waist, his arm was around her shoulder, both of them with relaxed limbs; it looked easy to be that couple in the picture. Aside from this photo she rough-housed everything, especially her photos from the Philippines: a younger version of my mother

receiving her college diploma, or standing outside of a movie theater with her brothers, or petting a rooster in the village she grew up in; she'd pluck these photos from the nails in the wall, brush them hastily with a napkin, and hang them back onto the nails with a clatter, leaving the cheap Walmart frames lopsided and sometimes scratched.

After five or ten minutes of this aggressive cleaning she'd say, "Do you want a sandwich, Efren?" I'd say yes or no or maybe later, but she'd make the sandwich regardless. Even with the volume up loud, I could hear the crisp sound of lettuce being sliced. I watched the pained faces of the women on Maury and Springer, biding my time to ask Mom my questions. A right moment never came. I sighed loudly, the way TV characters get attention from somebody, but my sighs never gave me the response I wanted. Instead I got "Stop it!" The crisp cutting continued. "The sandwich is almost ready!" she yelled, "Just wait!"

So I waited. Soon enough she'd emerge from the kitchen with a huge sandwich on a plate. There'd be at least four slices of baloney in it, and enough lettuce to put the food pyramid to shame. Sometimes she'd bring me two sandwiches. If I complained she'd shout that I need to eat, that food is a blessing, and so on and so forth. For the next half hour I'd struggle through sandwich hell, and sit for another half hour on the couch, paralyzed from the rock settling in the bottom of my stomach.

After all this, I finally dared to ask my burning question.

"Where's Pops?"

Her face contorted as if she'd swallowed a marble. She always looked me dead in the eyes. "*Phool bizness*," she'd say with venom. Fool business. "Don't monkey with women like your stupid father."

My mind flashed with memories of previous visits to the grocer or deli or convenience store, where she'd point to a random woman in an aisle, or in line, or across the street outside the window pane, and claim that Pops had been with her. The woman was always black. Some looked like the high-school girls flooding the streets after school, and some looked older, more mature, age appropriate. "See that one?" Mom would say, pointing with her bottom lip like a true Filipino, "The one with the big *boo-dee*?" She'd wait until I looked. "That's what he likes! Likes it fat!"

I couldn't blame him, because I did, too, but the shame tailed me anyway.

Mom sometimes gave me different answers in regards to Pops' whereabouts. At first her face would contort as usual, but then she'd calm herself and attempt a faint smile. She'd smooth my hair, at least until I started rocking the pseudo-fro, rendering hair-smoothing a clumsy, useless act; then she'd place a hand on my shoulder instead. Her irritation showed despite her best efforts but it was OK, she was trying. She bent down to eye-level and began her speech. She always said that I only needed a mother, that there were many people who cared for me, that our family was an ocean away but God gave us prayer and telephones, God gave us heart. "*Anak*"—this means son—"Don't worry, sometimes life is like that. It's hard but don't give up."

Her words were soothing, but made me more Filipino than black. I didn't want that. She didn't answer my question in a way I could accept.

So I turned to Marcel, told him during lunch period that Pops probably left for some noble cause, whatever it was. But Marcel shut me down.

"Noble cause?" Marcel said, "Really, nigga?"

"He's a good person," I said.

“That don’t stop him from doing the Grown Folk.”

“What’s that?”

“Like your momma say, fool business.”

“Oh, but what if it’s not?”

“Is he ever home?”

“No.”

“Then it is.”

So I lost a little hope, not all, but a little. I figured Pops wouldn’t return soon, that it’d be a while longer, so I watched other blacks instead—at school, in my neighborhood, and on television. At school Marcel’s friendship made me feel secure.

Outside the school was a different story. I’d swagger home as if I were the coolest nigga alive, throwing around my lank while I listened to Cam G on my mp3, rapping along, belting out curse words but skipping over nigga—too scared to even mouth it. Niggas walked by as if I were invisible—something I considered a victory, blending in, acting *naturally*—only to hear cackling in the distance. Sometimes I overheard the same girls that gossiped behind Mom’s back talk about me; I’d hear the words clumsy, stupid, foolish. The thing that hurt most was when people directly checked me. Classmates or neighbors—it didn’t matter—would say things like: “Look my nigga, just *stop*, you in the streets looking like Shaggy from Scooby Doo. I’ll even give you a Scooby Snack to stop, just walk normal, please.” Feelings of defeat closed in on me like bullets toward my favorite rappers, and with every comment hope leaked out of me. In time, I gave up; I retreated.

I’d rush home afterschool to watch BET. I lazed around in my room, spending all afternoon watching rap videos. Cam G would pour Cognac on some girl’s booty butt-

cheeks and she'd gyrate because that's what girls do when they grow up. I was hypnotized and excited. I wanted to play their game at recess, to throw however many dollars and quarters Mom gave me for lunch at the girls that hula-hooped by the handball courts, to watch them dance as their lonely red ball rolled into various stretches of the playground. My rap self took over and I'd instantly drop the pain of Pops. Those days in front of the TV, the ignorance washed over my very being like the liquor Cam G poured on his bitches; Mom had often spoken of baptism, and I was convinced that this was it. Day by day my admiration grew for these speechless women grinding against Cam G with all hips and no brain. I'd bob and rock to the beat, and if the camera zoomed in on a thundering ass-quake I'd inch my head close—way, way, too close—to the television; I'd swear I could almost see the sweat flying off that luscious, jiggling rump. Possessed, I'd say grown-up things to the TV like *Shake it, bitch! Bust it wide open for a real nigga!* Which, of course, they did.

Sometimes Mom walked in. In her presence I struggled not to blush. She pretended to straighten out my closet or laundry, while I stared into my math book like a good little Asian. Mom hated rap and couldn't stomach the parade of flesh she feared would someday transform me into Pops. Yet she also—like me—blushed at the various brown girls gyrating, moisturizing their backsides with expensive liquor. The spectacle kept her silent—something I learned to value as I got older—while she lingered. So I watched the videos from my peripherals, sitting cross-legged on my bed, body hunched over, concealing my boner from Mom.

*

I got myself a pick for my thirteenth birthday. I knew Pops wouldn't show, and took my blackness into my own hands by growing out my fro—or what I could only hope

was a fro. The plan was simple: like Pops, I'd be the cool guy with the fluff; each hair follicle charged with charisma and charm. It'd do all the work of attracting people for me, girls especially. Marcel always encouraged my plan; he called the fro my bitch magnet. On my birthday I wore my pick to school. The pick was sturdy and metal, a perfect flag; a true declaration of who I am.

And I lost it, sometime between the breakfast and lunch periods.

Marcel and I looked everywhere. Then lunch period ended, and I spent the rest of the day morose, brooding over how I wasted the last six months growing out a fro like Pops'.

"I don't know nigga," said Marcel, "I think you need," and then hesitating, choosing the next words carefully, "*more* hair." But I knew the truth: my hair wasn't thick enough. Mom's genes had softened it—made it straight and a little wavy and unable to hold a fucking pick. Thick hair, like Pops' or Marcel's, would've held that shit no matter what, even on the turbulent bus rides to and from school. One day with a pick in my hair and that would've been that, no more compensation, which had to stop anyway since Mom had sickened of school's complaints about my use of motherfucker.

It happened again on this day, too, when the principal, Mrs. Sanders, heard me scream "Where's my motherfuckin' pick!" during lunch. Mrs. Sanders made me wait in the main office with the secretary, while she entered her own office and phoned Mom. When Mrs. Sanders came back out she said, "Look, that language won't do you any good, hon. I keep telling you that but you never listen. When are you going to stop being such a hard-head?"

I liked Mrs. Sanders, she was a nice black lady that was very direct and gentle and appropriately firm. But I was already mad.

“I can say what I want,” I told her, “It’s my motherfuckin’ birthday.”

Mrs. Sanders gasped, then said a bunch of things I ignored, pulled out several blue detention slips, and scribbled across five or six of them. She was so angry she really wasn’t counting. She handed them to me. “Don’t forget those,” she said, before storming into her office.

Mom arrived a half hour later. “What is this *mahdair pawk*?” she said, picking me up from the main office. “I don’t like cursing. Stop watching the black videos on TV.”

I pouted the whole way home while Mom grilled me about the pick, and how I paid for it, and why I was getting thinner. I wasn’t that much thinner, but since Pops had left, Mom’s attention to me intensified. She knew when I was hungry, sleepy, and even when I woke in the middle of the night to piss; before I’d even make it to the bathroom I’d hear, “Efren?” from behind her door. If I so much as turned in bed she’d hear me from her own room and awaken. The hinges on her door squeaked and I’d know that she was coming to check on me. So I pretended to sleep and anxiously waited for the door to open, and when she finally appeared she’d stared at me anywhere from a few seconds to a full minute, just watching the covers move from my breathing.

So her asking about my weight loss meant trouble. At some point during that walk home she grabbed me by the shoulder, said, “Why are you thin, what is happening?” Her eyes were wild, terrified. “Why, why, answer me!” She shook me. I wouldn’t answer, so she shook again, harder. Parents in the street slowed their pace and stared at us, but Mom

didn't care. I'd only lost a few pounds but in her mind that was a few pounds closer to death. "What is going on with you, Efren?" she asked.

I spilled the beans, told her I saved two weeks of lunch money for a pick—

She slapped me on reflex. "*Po tang ina!*" —this roughly means *mahdair pawk*— "Your teachers will think I don't feed you! In America girls throw babies in the trash. I didn't do that, I raised you, and you won't eat for a black people comb? That's crazy!"

When we got home she tossed me a loaf of Wonder bread, declared it a snack. I munched slowly on a single slice while she started up an early dinner. She moved quickly, clattering and banging dishes into and out of the microwave. In five minutes, she was done; she laid everything out on the table. "Go ahead now, birthday boy" she said, stomping out of the kitchen, "Eat, eat, happy birthday, now eat."

I sat alone at the dinner table before my meal of buttered rice, chicken adobo, steamed broccoli, and malungay soup. Mom left dessert, sliced mangos and hot chocolate, slightly out of reach. While I ate, she was on the phone speaking Tagalog in the frantic tone that Filipinas consider normal speech. Every chew stung my freshly reddened cheek, but the food tasted great; my face felt like a mixed message. I only slowed my chewing to listen when I heard bits of English in the Tagalog like: *black people comb* and *cheating* and *stupid Clyde, stupid, stupid, stupid*.

I ran a hand through my thick-but-not-thick-enough hair, and Mom turned to me, holding the phone's mouthpiece, "*Oi! Po tang ina!* That's dirty, wash your hands!"

The next day Mom dragged me to the barber and wouldn't even let me get cornrows, or a fade, or any other black style I asked for. I even asked for a Nike swoosh but she said, "Who is Nickey? What's Nickey? Is that another *kneeghere* from TV?" The

barber was Mexican, didn't say anything about Mom saying nigger, he just kind of frowned but not directly at her. From the look on his face I could tell his thought, *Money is money. Fuck it.*

Mom told him to cut everything, and he did.

In the barber's chair I watched the pieces of my pseudo-fro fall all around me. I felt hopeless, defeated. I fought back tears and gritted my teeth, hating Mom. The barber continued to sheer me, cutting Pops away from me with a buzzing violence. "Good, good," she said, "That looks much better."

The barber used a number one all around and when he finished he held the mirror in front of me. The line-up was crooked, jagged like shark teeth, and before I could complain he cut me off, "Cry less so I can cut straight. Come back soon so I can fix it."

Mom dropped me off at Marcel's house right after. When Marcel opened the door, he balked for a second, then forced a smile.

"I'll come get him later," Mom said.

Marcel just sort of nodded.

Inside, we played NBA 2K4 and I was up thirty points due to Marcel studying my head the whole time.

"Damn nigga, that mothafuckah ruined your shit. I hope your mom didn't tip that nigga..." She actually did but I said nothing. I couldn't conjure ways to speak on it without calling the barber a motherfucker. A genuine feeling—not compensation—but I didn't have the hair to say it.

*

A couple weeks after my haircut, and after serving all of those detentions, my teacher sent me to Mrs. Sanders' office. He'd pulled me outside, closed the door behind him, and said I wasn't in trouble but it was an emergency instead. I walked through the empty halls, the dozens of lockers, worrying. I entered the main office and the secretary told me to knock on the principal's door. Even the normally peppy secretary carried a grim air. I knocked on the wooden door and Mrs. Sanders said, "Come in." So I did.

I closed the door behind me and sat across from Mrs. Sanders. Her office was so small my feet banged against the ugly metal desk, letting out a loud hollow sound. There were stacks of papers and manila folders on her desk, and three or four staplers. I saw the stack of the familiar blue detention slips; over the past six months she'd hand me a blue slip with *Language* scribbled across it and her signature, our weekly ritual.

"How are you?" Mrs. Sanders said.

"OK, I guess." I looked down, stared at my feet, careful not to bang the desk again.

"Your Mom will be here soon, hon." Mrs. Sanders always said *hon*, but this time her tone worried me. She felt more like an aunt than a principal. She grabbed a stack of paper and started filling things out.

Soon enough Mom showed. She was silent and frowning. The air she brought into the office was poison. Something had happened but I was afraid to ask. Mom whispered a couple things to Mrs. Sanders, and Mrs. Sanders, with her slender fingers, softly gripped Mom's shoulder. All this tenderness was making me scared. Cold sweat prickled my back. Goosebumps raised on my arms. Mom bent over the principal's desk, signed the early dismissal sheet, and dropped the pen onto the clipboard. Mom turned toward me, offered me her hand. "Let's go," she said.

I didn't take her hand, though; I just stood up and left the office and Mom followed me out.

"What happened?" I asked, after we passed through the front gate.

"He's gone," Mom said, flatly.

"I know he's gone, but did he leave the state? Did you hear from him?"

She sighed, masking her irritation. "You know," she said, "Your Pops is gone, he's with the Lord now."

"Oh," I said. There was nothing more to say.

The rest of our walk was silent. When we got home I retreated to my room, and knew better than to turn on the TV. Even when a relative died overseas, Mom demanded a day of silence. In these moments the deaths of people I didn't know or care for became real. Suddenly, nothing was peaceful, not even lying in bed. Small things came into focus, like the tick of bugs against the window, or my own breathing. People died, and rest became oppressive. The same happened with Pops that day. For hours I struggled with his presence in the house, trying not to listen to Mom speaking Tagalog into the phone. I laid in bed, resenting Pops for dying. Now that he was dead I finally felt his presence, and suddenly, the father I'd pined for in the last six months, became an unwanted guest.

At some point Mom came in the room to check on me, and I asked her how Pops died. She wouldn't say. She shook her head, said, "It's OK, because now he's with the Lord. Trust in the Lord, *anak*." Whenever she called me *anak*—son—I knew answers weren't coming, only her hopes and prayers.

"Just tell me what happened."

"Trust, you have to trust."

“That’s crap,” I said.

Normally, she would’ve spanked me with her slipper, but instead she sat on the edge of the bed. “*Anak*,” she began, and then went on for many minutes about how the cause of death didn’t matter, that dead was dead, that all we could do was pray, and have faith, and allow the strength of the Lord to flow through us. A few times during her speech she said, “Pray, you have to pray. Efren, please pray.” I listened intently to her words; Mom spoke the truth of her heart but I felt bad because I couldn’t accept it. I didn’t have faith, and I feared losing Mom’s love should she know how worthless prayer felt to me. Prayer was like something limp and dying crawling out of my mouth; it was something that begged for life that I could never give it. I gave it a shot anyway.

That night I knelt beside my bed and tried to pray for Pops. But I didn’t know what to ask for. I’d listened to Mom’s complaints, watched the rap videos, and learned about the Grown Folk; it was easy to figure what Pops really wanted, and what he wanted wasn’t allowed in Heaven. Jesus wouldn’t let Pops monkey with women, no way, especially in the clouds, among the same fluff children watched for funny shapes. So I just crawled into bed and stared at the ceiling the whole night through, thinking about Pops, how bored and lonely he’d be in the sky.

*

Three days had passed since Pops had died, and his funeral was the following afternoon. Mom kept me out of school the last few days. Instead, she went to the school herself and picked up work packets from my teachers. I was watching TV in the living room, and she was clipping coupons in the kitchen. I could’ve gone to my room and

watched BET, but I wasn't in the mood. Pops laid heavily on my mind; Mom still hadn't given me a straight answer about the cause of death.

“*Phool bizness*” she said, irritated. “Now stop asking.”

I had a little snack money saved up so I could buy a newspaper from the liquor store; I'd look in the obituaries and find out the truth. I turned off the TV, another Maury re-run, and got up. I told Mom that I was going for a walk, and that I had to get a paper. I told her that today was funnies day, a lie. Funnies were Sunday; today was Friday. What did she know about the funnies anyway?

“The funnies are really great,” I said, my hand twisting the doorknob. “You'll like them.”

“Oi! Get back here,” she said.

“I told you, I'm—”

“Wait, sit down.”

I released the knob and walked the three or four steps across the living room into the kitchen. I stood there hoping that she'd hurry it up so I could get going.

“You heard me,” she said, “Sit.”

I collapsed into the chair, this ugly brown thing she bought at Pic N Save. It was made of metal rods. It hurt, especially since the cushion was too small. I tried not to grimace, and I stared instead at her hands rapidly clipping the coupons. The table was littered in coupons; I hadn't seen this many since the old gambling days. I watched our discount nutrition fall to the table in jagged angry squares.

“What's a *pahnee*?” she bitterly asked, clipping a coupon.

“Those pictures in the paper that make people laugh.”

“Your Pops’ picture is in there, too.” Her eyes bore through me.

“That so?”

“That is so,” she said, clipping another one. “He’s in the obituary. You know that already.”

I sulked in my seat and watched her hands, and then I straightened up in my seat again. I wasn’t so sold on the idea of the paper anymore, but I still wanted to take a walk. I remained in my seat, though, afraid to move or even fidget too much for Mom’s liking. Then she spoke:

“He’s gone but God will take care of us.”

“Just tell me what happened.”

“People die, they always die. Accept it.” She clipped another coupon, the snap of the scissors extra sharp, like a beheading.

Again I stared at the table. The 2-for-1s and 3-for-5s for Green Giant products were sad-looking, pitiful. The Green Giant pissed me off with his stupid perfect smile. Mom stopped cutting, and looked at me.

“Oh, you’re hungry,” she said.

Before I could stop her she got up. She opened the cabinet and pulled out a can of Green Giant sweet corn. Mom emptied the corn into a pot and set it on the stove. She then microwaved some leftover chicken and turned on the rice-cooker. She moved swiftly, and I never really noticed how lively she was in busy moments. Her fears and worries always paralyzed her, trapped her in such a constant state of crisis, so this un-thinking movement was a really refreshing thing. She reminded me of the T.A’s that played dodgeball with us

during P.E. She even seemed somewhat young, like in her many photos from the Philippines.

“I have something,” she said, and rushed out of the kitchen, disappearing into the hallway. When she reemerged she held an envelope and a small newspaper clipping. She dropped everything in front of me and returned to the food. While she cooked, I stared down at the clipping she’d given me: Pops’ obituary photo. No article, just the photo. It was in color, not in black-and-white like most obituary shots. She had even cut it out neatly, unlike her shoddy coupon work. People have strange ways of showing they care.

“He’s handsome, right?” She said.

“Yeah, I guess.”

“No guessing, he is, just look at it, he is,” Mom smiled. She sounded like my girl classmates talking about boys, cheery and insistent.

So I looked down at my father while she explained what I should be seeing. She pointed out Pops’ all-white suit, and how he looked like the KFC Colonel; that Pops even had the same hair as the Colonel, but thicker, and that she didn’t have to touch the Colonel’s hair to compare—she had known just by looking. She paused for effect, allowing her pride to resonate, and for me to feel the enormity of her love.

“I sent the paper this photo,” she said. “It’s my favorite.”

After she took the food off the stove and set out our lunch, she continued speaking. She went on for many minutes, then hours, and eventually all day long, during which the bubblyness of her speech grew bubblier, and lighter, her smile remained wide and vivacious, and the air filled with good, joyful feelings. Everything about the progression was subtle. Even the way she kept my attention without my noticing that my walk to buy

the paper was out of the question. I hardly remember how it happened, but I somehow stayed in close quarters with Mom, without getting racked by the tension that normally accompanied her presence. We sat on opposite sides of that tiny table, smiling, laughing. Our day went by in a blur, which was at some point catalyzed by the following words:

“Are you still hungry?—you’re hungry, I think we have more chicken...”

Our place was small but the food was endless, because this was America, not the Philippines, so a glutton kitchen always fed Mom the most superior kind of peace. This day, she kept the kitchen smelling of rice, and ignored the condensation gathering on the windows and walls. Every time I finished one meal she’d make another. We sat in the kitchen against the backdrop of the rice-cooker’s steam, enjoying the atmosphere. As long as the food kept coming, the words would too. So from noon to seven she made food, talked about Pops, and gave me our family history with only happy parts in it. She spoke of good times back in the country, her courtship with Pops, her decision to leave the Philippines, her marriage, her pregnancy, and her perpetual faith in her Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. She spoke of everything in a happy light, even the times that I knew were bad. Sometimes I’d question her about the badness, the darkness, and she’d say “I understand, but God is always getting me through.” By the story’s end I believed that she’d told me all there was about our gene pool, which was magically fortunate in every way. The story temporarily erased the memories of my lost steel pick, the rumors about Pops’ cheating, Mom’s guarded ways. Even the Green Giant on the cans and coupons seemed like a welcome friend.

Mom told the multi-generational story of our family, of how they lived and died of only natural causes, without a single reference to hunger or violence or atheism. She only

used one adjective to describe the people in her story. Here is the part where my parents got married:

“We were a *lahbing* pair. The guests were *lahbing*, the priest was *lahbing*, and God was *lahbing*, too”

*

It was funeral day. My hair had finally grown back a little and looked decent again—it wasn’t a fro, but it wasn’t bald either. I wore a black suit; Mom wore a black dress and a hat with a veil. We were at the bus stop, sitting on a metal bench. That week I’d paid close attention to TV funerals and knew this wasn’t how it was supposed to be.

“Why aren’t we in a limo?” I asked.

“Don’t be stupid. Are you going to pay for one?”

I let the topic drop.

The bus arrived, so we stepped inside and paid our fare. It was crowded, a typical Hawthorne rush-hour, so we had to stand. Everyone held onto bars and rolled their eyes and tried not to look at one another. At stops people brushed by, saying ‘excuse me’ to no one in particular, just putting it out in the air so random niggas checked their attitudes. People got off, and people got on; and if any dirty looking fools got on the bus Mom would hold me closer than I wanted. She was my mom, yes, but I didn’t want to be touched. I didn’t want people to know that I was with the Asian lady.

After fifteen minutes Mom pulled the cord for the stop a block away from the funeral home, and we walked that single block hand-in-hand. I didn’t offer my hand, she took it. Her palms were dripping. It was humiliating and gross, but I bore with it figuring that she missed Pops the same way as me. Besides, we’d grown used to his absence in our

lives, and instead of a man to nudge and bother and wrestle, rumors filled the apartment: rumors gave me the courage to shove the pick in my hair and blurt motherfuckers like a Tourette's patient; rumors made Mom put extra food on the table that I'd gobble up so she'd feel she'd made just enough; rumors watched Lakers games with me in the evenings and laid next to my mother in the dark of night; rumors made my father and his plethora of women alive, which was fucked up, but at least that proved the existence of a father and a husband, our missing third to Mom's trinity, the missing half to myself.

But now those rumors would be gone.

By the time we got to the funeral home, I'd somehow slipped my hand from Mom's wet grasp. She gave me a look and called me a rebellious boy, but I was just honest with her, "Sorry Mom, but your hand is wet." I wiped my hand on the front of my slacks. Mom clicked her tongue and cut mean eyes at me, something I was used to, but for a moment sadness crept back into her face, which caught me off-guard, at least until the sadness left and her face was blessedly annoyed.

"Come on," she said.

We began walking up the stone path to the entrance.

The funeral home was all white. It was made of wood, and the paint job was so good that the wood must've had a fancy name: chestnut or mahogany—names that white guys praised on TV. There was a lawn and porch, like any house, except dead people lived here. There were black metal benches, the ones with the rounded grooves that are supposed to conform to your ass but just hurt like hell after a while, which didn't matter because the ghosts were supposed to sit there anyway. There was also an awning above the front entrance and a large sign hanging from it: PARKER'S FUNERAL HOME. There were

double doors with large golden handles, curvy and ornate with these little details that I suppose old people liked; it was the kind of door that you opened by pressing down on a button, the annoying kind that sometimes gets stuck. To the right of the doors stood a woman.

She leaned on the banister with her elbows, and stared into the street at nothing in particular. The distant look in her eyes made me think that she was daydreaming about love like the pretty girls do in class. She was a tall woman with smooth ebony skin and an elegant dark-blue dress. Her straight black hair lay on her shoulders like silk, framing her round face. Her plum lipstick made her already full lips fuller. Not to mention, she had curves like an expensive vase, like an artistic marvel that sitcom characters break in museums or rich people's houses. She was beautiful in a video-girl kind of way, but also beautiful in a pick-flowers-from-her-garden-on-the-first-date way. Like Mom, she wore a veil.

When we reached the top step the woman gave us a look of recognition. Mom tried to walk past her, pretending not to notice, but the woman made eye contact with her.

"Hi..." said the woman uncomfortably, trying to force a smile. Mom didn't have anything to say to her so the woman bent down to address me, "Hey honey, I'm sorry about your dad..."

Her cleavage and her nice smell distracted me, so I only nodded.

She looked back up to Mom, "Such a sweet boy. Stay strong you two," and then walked inside.

I was hypnotized. I even tried to follow her but Mom grabbed my shoulder.

"Where are you going?" Mom said, "Don't be *phoolish!*"

Later, I learned that her name was Chandelle.

Mom didn't want to follow Chandelle in so we waited a few moments, which didn't matter because Mom struggled with the door handle. She called it stupid and American, and somehow bullied it open.

We stepped inside. We paced around the lobby, searching for the funeral director. There were many black folks, Pops' friends and relatives and ex-lovers all clad in black suits and black dresses. These people shared stories and laughs, not acknowledging us. I'd seen a couple of the women before, when I was out running errands with Pops, or when he'd taken me to the racetrack, but they pretended not to notice me; they were afraid of Mom. Regardless, I eavesdropped as I walked. One man claimed that Clyde wasn't even Pops' real name; that his name was actually Clydesdale, like those huge horses, and he'd always been embarrassed of it so to pick up ladies he abbreviated his name and said he was a blues singer. Another man said that Clyde was like a brother, that he'd accompany Clyde on outings and shoo away females, to protect Clyde's marriage to Linda, the first wife. "I did the best I could, but you know him! He goes wild! Oh well, Clyde found another one!" Mom grunted when she heard this but the man didn't notice. Still, the stories reminded me of the one Mom had told me days ago, the loving one, the one consisting of smiles and light. Unlike Mom, this whole scene gave me the impression that happy moments awaited us during the funeral. I wouldn't let her foul mood ruin my good one.

"There," she said, "Found him."

I followed her across the room to the funeral director. He wore a black suit, black tie, and brass employee nametag. He was talking to a black woman. She was beautiful like Chandelle, but with normal proportions and a dress that covered her boobs. She was older

and moved in a gentle, flowing way, and her faint smile gave off inviting vibes. The woman's name was Linda and she was Pops' ex-wife from long ago, and her red lipstick, her measured smile, showed through her veil.

The director and Linda turned toward Mom. The woman's face broke into joy, and, unlike Chandelle, Mom received her warmly. They hugged and complimented each other while the funeral director watched them with a smile. They talked for a few minutes, catching up on things, convincing the other that they looked younger. *Oooh, Sexy sexy!* Mom said, as she always did, *Look at you, Miss Beautiful!*

Even in a funeral home, Mom greeted her friends as if she were variety show host. Heads turned, but that didn't stop them.

"Oh no no no," Linda said, "*You're Miss Beautiful, look at you...*"

After they exchanged a few more compliments, Linda mentioned Pops. She expressed her sorrows in a soft genuine voice. "Clyde will be missed. He had a very loving nature."

Mom's face maintained a solemn grace. She entertained Linda's monologue with the occasional agreeing nod, and sometimes responded. "I'll miss my husband very much," Mom said.

Linda hesitated. "Yes, I suppose you will." Her grin seemed a little forced but she recovered and said, "It's about time I hand you over to the kind director." She nodded her head toward the patient man. "Take care." She kissed Mom on the cheek, smoothed my hair a couple times, and walked away.

The funeral director stepped in; he gave Mom a soft hug, and me a firm-but-not-too-firm handshake. He said kind words, restraining a tendency toward the melancholic

speech that marked his profession. Then Marcel walked in with his mom and I excused myself. They both saw me, too, so his mom let him go.

“Damn I’m sorry, my nigga,” Marcel said, “I watched that news report.”

Marcel’s mom heard him from across the room and shot him the glare of death.

“I’m just sorry about your Pops,” he said, “You OK? I know it’s a dumb question, but you know, you holding up?”

“Yeah,” I said, “I’m good.”

Then Mom came back, said warm words to Marcel, hugged him, kissed him, then she grabbed my wrist, gently pulled me away. It was almost five o’clock, the service’s scheduled start.

We all began filing into the church area to get good seats, except me and Mom since we got the front by default. So did Linda. Two other women sat in the front: the beautiful Chandelle that Mom hated very much, and another dark-skinned beauty that I had never met—let’s call her Ebony for the sake of clarity. She was middle-aged and stern looking, creepily similar to Mom, and they seemed to wear the same brand of veil.

Mom tapped my shoulder, noticing my confusion about Ebony. “Must’ve been a new one,” she said.

I sat in the front row with four very loving women. A fruity smell lifted off their bodies. *Women sure love peaches*, I remember thinking.

It only took five minutes for everyone to get seated and for Reverend Brown to step up to the pulpit. Mom wanted Father Bautista to lead the service, but during the week of funeral prep, Linda had constantly bugged her about Reverend Brown, repeating that he would send Pops off with the most loving grace.

“He’s the head of my church,” Linda said, “Clyde went there often. Clyde loved him like a brother.” Mom couldn’t flatly refuse, knowing she wouldn’t be the only veiled woman in attendance.

Three of the pall-bearers were late, according to Linda, caught in traffic. They sent her texts saying to start without them because they were almost there. “Clyde’s going to be fashionably late,” Linda read from one of her texts. I fought back a laugh; Mom didn’t even smile.

“Let’s just start,” Mom said.

Linda nodded, and walked over to Reverend Brown to tell him.

He agreed, and we started without Pops.

The first thing Reverend Brown talked about was the Ten Commandments. He said that Pops led a Christian life and followed God’s law to a tee. There was a lot of noise while the reverend spoke, lots of *Yes’s*, and *Mhmm’s*, and *Give praise*. Mom and the other veiled women shifted uncomfortably in their seats. They all forced smiles. The crowd was very energetic, unlike all the Catholic masses Mom had dragged me to all my life. Mom wasn’t having it, and maintained a glassy look.

“Let us stand and pray for this virtuous man!” Reverend Brown said, “Clyde was a loving man that lived sharing love, giving love, and serving a God that loved him, too. May he rest in peace, amen.” The Reverend condensed Pops’ life to all the happy parts like Mom’s story. I loved it, and the guests did, too, but Mom still looked glassy.

“Mom, where did your face go?” I said, trying to be playful.

“It’s in there,” she said bitterly, pointing with her lip toward the aisle at the six pall-bearers carrying the casket. The three late-comers had arrived. They solemnly walked up

the three small steps behind the pulpit and hoisted the casket onto a raised platform. Then the pall-bearers took their seats, and Reverend Brown proceeded with the service, leading us in prayers that Mom had clearly requested like the Our Father and Apostle's Creed. Throughout the service, the casket remained closed.

"If you have any last words for Clyde," Reverend Brown said, "then please step up to the pulpit."

The first to step up was Otis, a tall wiry black man with a smooth bean of a head. He had been the best man at Pops' weddings to Linda and to Mom. He spoke for ten minutes of his friendship with Pops, the fifteen years of beer, cigarettes, and women—he winked at Linda—beautiful women, he added. He went on about Pops' and Linda's beautiful wedding, saying that it was a true union of harmonious souls, and what a shame it had been that they had never made a baby—a little cherubic thing, he said. Then he caught Mom's icy glare.

"And her, too." He said, gesturing towards Mom. "She's lovely. I want every one of you to know how lovely a woman Clyde's second wife is." He clapped once, keeping his hands clasp together while gradually tightening his grip, and then left the pulpit. Even though he'd been at their wedding, he'd clearly forgotten Mom's name.

After that nobody but Reverend Brown eulogized, and staying true to Mom's formula, used only one adjective. "We are all loving people and a loving man like Clyde deserves nothing less. May our loving God welcome Clyde with open arms. Amen."

Reverend Brown announced that Clyde must enter God's loving kingdom, that we must say our goodbyes. He opened the casket.

Pops looked good. They had cut his hair, made it short, and then they curled it. They shaved his facial hair, and his face just looked baby-ish and alive. He seemed in good shape. Still, I was nervous.

Mom allowed Linda, Chandelle, and Ebony to line up first, and Marcel, too, because he rushed down to view Pops with me. We watched the three women before us part with Pops. Linda acted with the most dignity as she held his hand for a couple moments, and tearfully stepped away. The other two didn't even touch him, they were afraid to, either because he was dead and icky, or because they felt my mother's stare.

Marcel and I were next. We took slow, measured steps up to the coffin. My nerves were a wreck; I was shaking.

"His hands," whispered Marcel.

"What do you mean, his hands?" I whispered back. Pops' hands were crossed over his chest, a common sight on TV corpses. His hands were the one thing I was prepared for.

"Under his hands," Marcel said, "That's where it is."

"You have me lost, man."

"They have to hide that thing,"

"What thing?"

By then we were standing over Pops' body. My shaking was uncontrollable.

"Do I have to spell it out?" Marcel said.

"Go ahead, spell it."

"The bullet wound, my nigga. The bullet wound."

I couldn't believe what I'd heard. I stared at Marcel with sudden anger, but he wasn't paying attention, he was peering at Pops' hands.

“Shot. Just like Biggie Smalls my nigga, in the car and everything. It was on the news.”

The connection was easy. Pops died in some woman’s car; fool business had gotten him killed.

Who? Why? How? None of this was ever answered. Mom chose not to investigate or even answer the cops’ questions. *He washed his hands of us*, she’d later say, *Now I do the same*.

But in that moment standing before Pops’ body, other things dawned on me: Mom’s constant evasions, the keeping me out of school, the color photo she showed me the previous day. It was a mother’s love. She thought she could protect me from the violence of the truth. She would’ve kept it up forever, however impossible the feat was. Right then, she was there, too, hovering over our shoulders. That mother love wrapped around my wrist like a shackle, and Marcel, noticing my silence—but not my mother—continued to speak.

“He really went out like a G,” Marcel said with both gravitas and childish awe, “It’s sad, but it’s gangster as a motherfuck, you can’t deny that.”

There it was, my chance, my opportunity. If Marcel was saying motherfuck then who would say nigga? My stomach sank but right then it felt as if Pops had died for this very moment. He was gone, yet also here—my nigga card had somehow materialized. There was my handsome father dead in the coffin, and here was my mother’s clamp of a hand damn-near breaking my wrist, and there was Marcel waiting for confirmation of his undeniably astute observation. I forced a smirk, appropriated Pops’ trademark cool, and said “Yeah, the nigga really did. But what can I tell you? We Jackson men are real niggas.

Look at him,” I pointed with my free hand, “This nigga is a caramel wonder but he might as well be blacker than Shaft, blacker than the ten darkest niggas in Africa put together. Hell yeah he went out like a G. That’s my Pops, real nigga extraordinaire.”

Marcel, my one true friend, arched his eyebrows, even smirked his boyish version of my father’s smirk. “Damn right, nigga! Damn right!”

And for the first time since Pops’ absence, I dropped all the pain he’d left behind. I beamed, and I could feel my face stretching and stretching. I felt light, like the kid I was before his long absence. Before compensation, before grief. But here he was, at rest, and there was no more chasing after him. That was the last of the father-son moments. A glorious one. But now it was over. Doomed always to be over. And I couldn’t help but mumble to myself, *I still want more*.

Marcel, caught up in his excitement, patted my back way too hard. I stumbled, and Mom stumbled with me. Marcel turned white—he’s black as fuck—but he turned white anyway. His face was drained and bloodless.

We both looked into Mom’s face, a tight grimace, a demonic resemblance of all the grief and anger I should’ve also felt. My chest ached as if the same bullet that finished Pops also exploded through me. Pops had left us, he’d gifted me this moment, and yet Mom’s presence drilled the guilt right into me. I waited for her to speak. Instead, she trembled.

Marcel, shaken, returned to his seat.

Mom watched Marcel for a second, and I was afraid she was going to say something, but she didn’t. She just stepped up to the coffin and stared down at Pops. Her grip was soul-crushingly tight, and my wrist was slick with her sweat.

First, she touched Pops' cold dead hands, the ones concealing his bullet wound. A long moment passed. Everyone's eyes felt heavy on our backs like a spiritual weight, an impossible responsibility. The vibe was stone cold. They were waiting for a sorrowful scene, like for Mom to fling herself over the body. Men were poised to bring her down and shake her until she regained her senses; women were scripting the reassuring things they'd say to her. After a full minute, nothing happened. Mom just stood over the body, silently crying, darkening Pops' suit with tears. Another minute passed. And then another one, and still nobody went to comfort her.

Otis, Pops' best friend, the man who had forgotten Mom's name, was standing in line and getting restless. I don't know who he spoke to but he said, "Someone tell that lady she's holding up the service—"

Mom slammed the coffin shut. She turned toward everyone and said, "Leave!"

A murmur rose up within the room, and it grew above a murmur, it became testy, antagonistic.

"Everyone leave!" Mom banged on the closed coffin with the side of her fist, right on Pops' head. The tremors of her fury shot through me. "There's *nahting* to see!"

The funeral director tried to stop her, pleaded with her, begged her to reconsider—

"No! You leave me alone!"

She banged again, and again. People stared at her with wild eyes but they didn't approach. She banged on the coffin with all the ugliness of the world; the sound filled the room, casting its spell of fear. A few people left, sneaking out with short tentative strides, their postures bent, unable to withstand Mom's fury. Chandelle and Ebony were among

the leavers, and Linda, barely able to move, at least managed to shrug off Otis' anaconda of an arm. Most—like myself—were simply paralyzed.

“There's *nahting* to see!” Mom repeated, “He's *nobahdee!*”

That grief came then, not at the sight of my dead handsome father, but at his nothingness. Moments ago it'd been so easy to posture for Marcel, but for Mom I had to ball away the violence I suddenly felt, and with my suit sleeve I wiped away a torrent of rebellious tears.

I could've walked away. I could've broken from her grip and joined the rows of black faces and expressed shock at this strange Asian lady. At that moment, it would've been easy to leave Mom. But there was no way I could punish her for the truth. Sometimes you have to let honesty hurt.

“Go easier,” I said, “I'm here.”

Mom didn't even look at me; she was consumed in her righteous anger. But she released my wrist and took my hand. Sweat flowed between my fingers like a cold goo, but my grasp remained firm.

Meanwhile, the banging of her free hand had become rhythmic. She banged as if to raise Pops from his restful sleep, calling him to rise once more before his friends, his family, his harem of women. She intended to reclaim him for what he really was: a wayward husband, a foolish father, a nothing. Then she stopped.

“He ours,” Mom said, “He belongs to me and my son.” Nobody moved, or spoke, or whispered, or grunted. The room was dead. It waited for her to raise us. Mom inhaled, slowly, her chest heaving as if preparing to suppress the behemoth of rage. She held her breath for a long, torturous moment. After what seemed like forever, she exhaled, releasing

air as slowly as she'd sucked it in. Her limbs loosened up, became slack. Even so, the rest of us remained in an arrested state of fear. She began to cross herself: first her head, then her lips, and finally her heart. She looked up, staring into the pitiful soul of the room, the whimpering mass of cowed people. "He's ours," Mom said, this time with a calm, calculated clarity, "And nobody can take him anymore."

Prince

My folks lived their lives through the pink haze of luck. They believed in the good stuff: romance, hope, dreams. They were never dead—maybe frustrated and beaten, but never dead. Their eyes were bright, their smiles were bright, and their hearts pumped God through their veins. They were beautiful people. They'd gamble and lose, gamble and lose, and always return for more. Pops had a decent job at the clinic, Mom held down the apartment, and I provided the joy, the love. Then we'd go to the track, the three of us, play-time if you will. Then it'd end, and, after another day of hard work, we'd return to the track for another family outing. The cycle was dignified. Our lives were dignified. At the racetrack, people called me Prince.

*

My pops, Clyde Jackson, was the real Prince of Hollywood Park. He made it cool to lose, to not sweat the small stuff like disappeared money, like the frustration of *almost* hitting the long shot. More than once I'd see men throw down their racing forms, curse and stomp their feet, only to catch sight of Pops' smooth face and even demeanor, and immediately cease their tantrums. *Hey Clyde*, they'd say, and Pops graciously responded with, *Hey yourself*. He'd smile coolly as if the outburst was appropriate, which we all knew it wasn't, and the man in question always composed themselves without having to feel the shame of it. Pops led by example, not scolding, not any sort of strict discipline that he'd learned in his old military days. But these days he was simply Clyde, just a working man with a penchant for the horses, yet somehow a Prince, regal and daring in his composure in spite of suffering constant defeat, of gratefully accepting the short end of everything.

It started when I was two or three years old—Prince in miniature. I was a little mixed kid, the love product of my black father and Filipina mom. My skin was real light, like white chocolate. I had these little fat hands and feet, and this little fat body. I'm told I moved in an adorably helpless way; I'd squirm in my stroller and cause a riot at the track. My mother's Filipina friends—basically my aunts, my titas—fawned over me, while their husbands stood by themselves with their rolled up racing forms. When strange women walked by they stopped and took notice and wiggled my little fingers, softly stroked my hair. My first lesson in life was that ladies possessed soft hands, a gentle touch. They touched me with their one free hand, the other hand pinching a racing ticket. Their fingers played through my hair, my curls. Some called them Prince curls, and that stuck. When I was old enough to speak I'd point to my hair and say, "These will make me famous."

The ladies laughed, their husbands laughed, my parents laughed—then they asked me to choose their numbers. They showed me their racing forms and said, Pick.

So I did.

Sometimes I closed my eyes and thrust my finger onto the page like the needled tail onto the donkey's ass. But mostly I'd point to important birthdays and holidays and the dates Mom's friends passed their citizenship tests.

"Don't forgot the important things," Mom said to toddler me, which over the years, as I became a wizened 6, 7, and 8 year old, transformed into, "Remember what's special." That was her way of telling me to remember God, but I twisted her meaning, settled instead for telling Pops to pick 10, 2, and 8 for the trifecta. He never noticed that I'd given him his birthday, October 28th, hundreds, maybe thousands, of times.

I often gave Mom 7, 2, 1—July 21st—but she'd scold me—sometimes jokingly and sometimes in irritation, depended on how badly she was losing.

“I have a degree,” she said—meaning a Philippine degree, a piece of paper that meant nothing stateside—“Trick me when you have one of those, Prince.”

I never gave my own birthday. Using your children's birthdays was common practice but in our family Mom established this as taboo. “He's here with us,” she said to Pops, “But we do not *gahmbell* on our son.” Pops nodded, and despite how little sense this made to me, I guarded my birthday from everyone else. Folks were more than happy to settle for my magic scraps.

Win or lose, my numbers were lucky; nobody actually believed that a kid could change their fates. When the adults toyed with me, they were after something else. Maybe happiness. Or just plain optimism. Either way, you couldn't go wrong with my picks. With the protection of my numbers, you just felt good strolling up to the ticket window, passing tens and twenties beneath the gap under the bulletproof glass, and receiving a ticket from some gruff movie bookie type wearing a silk vest and an armband.

The tickets said Win, Place, Show, Trifecta at the top, with the numbers smack-dab in the middle. People grabbed their ticket, hopeful, but after that first step away from the window their bright faces became grim, screwed-up with murderous intent. They'd realized their destiny and look for someone to blame. Naturally they'd scowl at the movie bookies behind the glass, assholes who no longer paid them any mind, who were then counting somebody else's money, snapping rubber bands over thick stacks of bills.

My magic only dispelled the disgust people normally felt when placing bets at the ticket window. I could protect them from the initial shame of having bet, and instead of

seeing their families flashing into their heads when they passed money under the ticket window, they saw me and my curls. Some women probably remembered the texture of my hair and focused on that. But no matter what effect my prince-ness imposed on gamblers, I couldn't protect them from themselves. God's protection, a big thing with Mom, was probably the thing these fools needed. I just didn't have the patience to deal with all that shame. My talent was a strictly kid thing: the ability to forget, to give not a single care. I could pass that on to these bitter adults but it wouldn't last forever, it wouldn't even last five minutes, but it was better than nothing.

So the adults always returned, enlisting my magic for the next race. They were free to have it, too. I loved the attention, loved making people bet the date of Mom's passed citizenship test (4, 2, 6), and loved getting my hair touched by the fruit-smelling ladies, especially the ones with light skin like mine.

The best part was that nobody took their losses out on me; they knew better. People turned to beer and cigarettes; they filled their mouths to keep them from talking. When they did talk, it was to yell at their spouses, or grunt at their children, and then announce that they were going to play another race, *just one more*. No one dared grunt or even cut eyes at the Prince; people who lost with my numbers just steered clear of me, and if they couldn't avoid me then they'd greet me with a tight-lipped smile. I was unfazed by their losses, by my lucky numbers that were mostly losing numbers. Unhappiness was normal, a completely viable way to live.

But Mom and Pops vehemently insisted that these were happy times.

They spoke of the track with a great fondness; they cherished their memories and were teaching me to do the same. They smiled at all that money lost, all those tickets they

ripped to bits before tossing them in the trash. They used cards to pay our bills. Mom explained it to me once at the grocery store: the blue card was our money, and the gray one was somebody else's. Then she swiped the gray card. As the years progressed, Mom seemed to use the gray one more and more, while Pops never handled the money. Still, they lost more races, tore more tickets, and smiled their spirited smiles.

I was eight when it happened—the pact to quit the track. Mom declared it over dinner, said it was a money thing. And Pops said so too, but like many things he merely mirrored the woman who he loved and feared. Something was going on that neither of them spoke of, at least in front of me. They made their decision and I accepted it, just like any time Mom denied me candy at the grocery check-stand, and I imagined Pops was in a similar situation with Mom, ruled by obedience.

“We are never going again.” Mom shook her head, thinly smiling, “It’s not worth it.”

“Yeah.” Pops said, dreamily, “Yeah I hear you.”

“We are giving our money to the *dehbill*, the stupid *dehbill*...” Mom was trying to convince herself. She was uncertain and strong. She revealed the weakness she sensed in herself, which in others meant bad news, but in her it proved her strength, her resolve. She’d fight the impulse to play horses with everything she had; she’d throw herself into the fire and emerge from it renewed, victorious, cleansed. As a Catholic, she knew a thing or two about sacrifice—martyrdom. The more defeated she sounded the less likely it was that she’d stop fighting.

“We stopped already,” Pops said. “We’re OK.”

“No regrets,” Mom said, “But thank the Lord that we can stop.”

“We stopped, we stopped. How many times do I got to say it?” Maybe he’d hold her, or brush Mom’s hair from her cheek, or rub Mom’s thigh like an exotic fur. His gestures were things out of TV dramas, gestures that were supposed to mean more than the actual words.

“We are never going back,” Mom said.

“We never will,” Pops echoed.

Over the next few years, they’d reaffirm their resolve through these types of conversations. No matter where they were—on the couch, in the car, at the deli—Mom would get the urge to repeat her promises to stay strong and resist demons, and Pops followed suit. I couldn’t argue because the track was kind of gross. You were always stepping on something, especially discarded butts. Cigarette smell permeated the place; it was the one thing I never got used to.

“Yes,” I’d reassure Mom, “That place is just nasty.”

She’d smooth my hair and kiss my forehead. “You’re a good boy,” she’d say, “We are going to do good for you, Efren.” She’d look over to Pops.

“Your mamma’s right, Efren. We’ll make you proud.”

Still, I was torn. At home my name was Efren, not Prince.

*

Pops wasn’t a deadbeat, though. He worked. He cleaned this defunct clinic for a living. The doctors had moved sites and hadn’t found a buyer yet so they paid Pops for the upkeep. A single work day was enough to keep the place clean for at least a month, but the doctors wanted it to always shine. They had a soft spot for the place, and were paranoid about it turning into another abandoned building in the hood. It was easy work, and I earned

my allowance helping Pops on the weekends and afterschool. Pops paid me a dollar a day to help him out, you know, carry stuff and wipe stuff down and sometimes vacuum. He cleaned all the tiles and toilets and cabinets, would never subject his child to any semblance of humiliation. It didn't matter to him that the only gunk or piss to hit the place came from us; Pops handled anything that struck him as gross. Things were always clean but we worked like they weren't. Pops insisted that we might as well sweat for our bucks, that there wasn't any point otherwise. He even snaked the toilet once after claiming to have stopped it up. He cranked and cranked and no shit came up. I figured Pops could've just used a plunger. I didn't speak on it, though, because the snake made it look like a complicated matter. After a time he cranked the snake counter-clockwise, removing it from the toilet hole. Then he flushed the toilet. I watched the roaring water spiral into the hole, and pretended to be genuinely impressed.

“Good job,” I said in my most serious tone.

“Thanks, boy,” he said, dropping the contraption onto the tile. “Today is a heavy-duty day.”

After work we'd go home and watch the races on TV.

Mom frowned on this but her irritation is one of the things you inevitably grew used to. “It's not right,” she'd say, “even on TV this is cheating.”

“Look Emelda,” Pops said, “I'm just winding down that's all. Right, Efren?”

“Yeah, Mom, I'm winding down, too.”

Mom clicked her tongue and glared but me and Pops just focused on the horses. I imagined he held the reins of the winning horse while I rode on the back, one arm hooked

around Pops' waist, my free hand victoriously waving the riding crop like a piñata stick. We crossed the finish line together, first place, a unit, a team.

*

During those years when I wasn't Prince, when I was just Efren, a bored kid that wanted to go to Disneyland, nobody listened to me. I'd half-heartedly mention it to no real avail. Mom would say *One day* in a longing voice, almost like a prayer, repeating the phrase as if Disneyland were something foreign and unattainable. At least there was a chance with her, but Pops was another story. He'd say that I was too old—even though I first mentioned it in the third grade. He'd wonder why I'd want to go there anyway. To see princesses? he'd say, incredulously. I just wanted to go because I had parents that could take me. Disneyland always seemed like a dream-like place where only my classmates went, a place with the allure and glamor of the track. I deemed Disneyland a suitable substitute for Hollywood Park. Efren, it was amazing, they'd say, You have to see Goofy. I shrugged at my classmates to disguise my jealousy, but they went on and on. Their eyes sparkled as they talked about shaking hands with Goofy; it was like seeing God, they said. When I wasn't wearing out my VHS copy of *A Goofy Movie*, I'd watch the Disney channel and stare at the cartoons with all the singing and dancing and magic—not magic tricks or lucky numbers—but real magic: Aladdin riding his carpet across the shimmering desert sands; Maleficent turning into a dragon that breathed green fire; Ursula stealing Ariel's voice. Such a place couldn't exist. Could it?

*

I continued to work with Pops. One year of work had a way of rolling into the next—I became 9, then 10, then suddenly 11. It was the same routine: we swept and

scrubbed, swept and scrubbed, and when sweeping we'd take special care to dig for the dust in the corners.

And we talked, about nothing in particular, just the Lakers or some political outrage Pops had seen that morning on CNN. Small talk, Pops called it, or—as I understood it—talking about anything but our lives.

Pops, when he sensed my boredom, eventually talked about the track. We laughed amid the clinic dust, breathing in the film of memory. We didn't even speak of the gambling, moreso the ladies and their obsession with Prince, sweet ol' Prince.

Pops recalled the ladies in detail: like the brown one with the perm, whose breasts swayed marvelously within her silk blouses, or this other chocolate lovely whose hair was erected in a tall, braided up-do like an African queen.

I mostly remembered the way they smelled: like fruit, not cigarettes.

Pops remembered that, too, and he'd clap my back and claim to have expected nothing less from his son. He even assigned me different titles, lesser ones than my regal "Prince-ness," but flattering all the same.

Lady Killer!

Smooth Criminal!

Sly Fox!

"I like Sly Fox best," I said, one day.

"That so?"

"Of course," I said, tilting my head at Pops, "Makes me sound like a real jazz man."

"Boy, don't I know it!" Pops said, slapping at his knee. He rolled his head back and laughed and laughed.

After work, the rides home were silent. These were comfortable silences, not the lonely ones I'd have years later. I'd stare out the window at the low sun, rest my head against the warm window, and watch the old buildings roll by under Cali's reddish-gold glaze. I'd delightedly replay our work conversation in my head; the power of speech renewed my memories, made them shine like the wood I polished at the clinic. Then it'd hit. We were going home, a place where I was loved, but not as much as the track or even at work. It was unsettling. I always looked out the window, contemplating Disneyland. Not so much longing for it, just contemplating. Disneyland wouldn't necessarily prove my parents' love, but I figured that I could twist their arms a bit, measure my charm by how much stuff they'd buy me at "The Happiest Place on Earth."

*

Nights, I pushed the issue. My twelfth birthday was closing in, like a month away, and now was a prime moment to strike. "When are we going to Disneyland?" I'd say at the dinner table. They'd promised after all, or rather, Mom said that Pops had promised, which he never actually did, but his guilt made the promise real. Complicated, but as a kid all I needed to know was that audible chewing meant Yes; long strained silences and mindless staring into the serving bowl of rice meant Yes. Guilt was the law my mother had invented, and we all followed it because she kept the apartment clean, the air fresh, and the table full of chicken abodo and white rice and salad. Every night the hot steam of food would mist our faces. There was no choice but to live under her law; and Pops, more than anyone, crumbled beneath its nauseating crush.

"I don't know about Disney," Mom said, "Ask your Pops."

"I don't know, Emelda," Pops said.

“Don’t tell me,” Mom said, “Tell him.”

“No, I’m telling *you* that I don’t know.”

“Oi! Don’t do that,” Mom said, passing the rice bowl to Pops. “His birthday is coming.”

I stared at Pops but he wouldn’t look at me. He shoveled rice onto his plate and mashed it into his adobo. He always concentrated on his food when he felt our eyes. We expected things and he knew it. But at this point, Mom handled him. Their quarrels weren’t my place, and Mom, on her own, was an overwhelming adversary anyway.

“You work hard,” Mom said, “You can save money. I’m proud of you, you’re my husband.”

“Do you drive?” Pops said, brandishing a rice-flecked spoon at Mom.

“I’m not driving but you are the man, you provide. You make the money, and you can drive.”

“Tell your mom to calm down,” Pops said to me, “I ain’t driving nowhere if she don’t calm herself.”

“I’m calm. I’m just reminding you that you’re the head of this *pahmily*.”

“Can’t a man eat without reminders about anything?” He resumed eating. Nobody spoke for the next minute; Pops’ disgusting chewing violated the silence.

“Please,” Mom said, “save for his birthday.”

“I’ll save alright, I’ll save.”

“We can budget later.”

“I’ll save, we don’t need a budget, I’ll save.”

“Just let me budget.”

“No, I’ll save, I told you I’ll save.” Then he turned to me. “Efren, I’ll save, it’ll be a special birthday.”

Mom stared at him with her hard black eyes. There was a hard line in her jaw, too. I knew the expression well, the straight face of doom. Pops remained cool on the outside, chewing, swallowing, but it was all an act. Opposing Mom was stressful, angering inducing, so I assumed that—like me—he nursed his injuries with resentment. His guilt, his shame, were bonding moments between father and son—not that we were actually bonding, but I felt closer to him anyway. Even so, his resistance to Disneyland confused me, but I couldn’t help sympathizing, an act that fueled my blind trust. I believed that Pops would follow through as husband, father, provider. As of now, he fed himself bite after bite, ignoring our eyes, until finally his food was finished.

“I’m done.” Pops said, pushing his plate toward the center of the table.

“Of course you are,” Mom said, still staring.

He slowly stood, then he turned to me. “We’ll talk later.” He smiled his best smile and followed up with a curt nod.

I figured he didn’t need further punishment, so I laid off of him. “Cool,” I said then.

And “Cool,” I would say for many subsequent dinners.

*

A couple weeks later, we left work early. Pops claimed that we had an extra errand to run, a fun one. I rushed around the clinic, shoving cleaning supplies back into gray buckets; I’d never been so excited for an errand in my life. I thought that we were going to Disneyland. My birthday was two weeks away but I was getting my present early. I’d walk

around “The Happiest Place on Earth,” smiling like my classmates smiled when they told me about Goofy. I, too, would have my hand swallowed by the white glove of God.

By the time I put everything away, Pops had the Thunderbird fired up.

“We’re gonna see an old friend.”

Goofy! I’m going to meet Goofy! I didn’t really give a fuck about Goofy, I could name twenty characters I liked more, but my mind was stuck on him. I was giddy, and I desperately fought the urge to squirm with excitement because then Pops would think of less of me.

“Hurry!” he said, “Who knows what else we’re missing?”

I scrambled into the passenger seat without a second thought, wondering what we were catching, and what it was that we’d already missed.

Ten minutes later, I found out.

We pulled into Hollywood Park and I pretty much jumped out of my seat—Disneyland didn’t hold a candle to the delights of the track. Pops chuckled and told me to calm down, to hold my *horses*—pun intended of course. We both laughed as we cruised through that tar-colored lot, and I marveled at the glory that was Hollywood Park.

The parking lot was large as two football fields put together, so large you couldn’t see it from end to end. The lot was mostly empty, and the only spaces near the front entrance were filled, but that still meant hundreds of folks were inside. The building façade, wide as the lot itself, cast the entire lot—the torn tickets, cigarette butts, straw wrappers, food wrappers, plastic beer cups, sandwich toothpicks, paper fry trays, occasional condom, paper soda cups, piss spots, and the multiple flocks of seagulls that scavenged these items—in shadow. The façade itself was monstrous and beige, like orange bubble-pop

that'd lost its flavor. Hundreds of intricately patterned squares juttred from the wall, replicating the designs Jockeys have worn on their uniforms over the years. Those squares told the story of Hollywood Park's legacy, a tale of thoroughbreds bolting from the starting gate, bumping, nudging, edging one another out, trampling the dreams sown into the track's dirt. Right above those hallowed squares a huge HOLLYWOOD PARK sign sprawled across the façade in a tacky mint-green cursive.

"Brings back memories, huh?" Pops said, smirking, one hand on the wheel and the other hanging out the window.

"Lots of memories," I said, awed, overwhelmed by excitement, but still managing to question the idea. "What will Mom say?"

"She don't have to know. It'll be our little secret."

"I like the sound of that." I truly did.

"I even have another surprise for you."

"You do?" I almost screamed.

"Of course, son. I always do right by you, don't I?"

"You do, you do." This one truth had always sustained me. Our bond was unbreakable.

"Look here, Efren. Part one of your gift."

So I looked, damn-near snapping my neck in the process. Pops' eyes were still on the road but his free hand was in motion. His hand scrambled within the cup-holder, making scratching noises, until finally he pulled up a quarter. He held it up like a mystic finding. My heart skipped a beat. In that moment I didn't know what the quarter was for, but it

captivated me. It glowed like real love. The sun filtered through the window, glinting against the edges of the quarter, illuminating its brilliance and power.

*

Inside, Pops led me to an abandoned part of the track, about a half-mile away from the real grown-up action. The ticket booths were empty; dust streaked the bulletproof glass like a gray sickly road-kill. There were even less torn tickets, less empty beer cups, less uncrushed cigarette butts. Still, it was the track so you couldn't help stepping on debris. The papery rustle of tickets sounded like broken hearts, and the cigarette butts just died silent, you felt those on your heel like a wad of gum. The classic track cigarette smell was still in full effect, even way out here.

“Stop,” Pops said, “We're here.”

We stood before the arcade, a mysterious addition to the track. Made from an old amphitheater, the pitted area was shaped as a semicircle, with game machines lined along the rounded wall. Dusty speakers were wedged between some of the machines, leaning at grotesque angles. Only half the floor was tiled, the rest was cement. The conversion was incomplete.

Pops opened his wallet. “Just go play. It's on me.” He shook his wallet, the coins jangled. “Go on, son. Take as many as you want.”

“Sure,” I said, playing it cool. I calmly dug the quarters out of his wallet, struggling not to snatch the coins. I just held them tightly in my fist. My closed palm sweated. I smelled a faint hint of metal.

“Have fun,” Pops said, and then he sauntered off.

I stared down at the arcade and shook with anticipation; it had appeared like an oasis in the desert of my boredom. Pops would go play the horses, the true Prince gracing the gamblers with his presence, while I'd hold it down here, winning whatever game I played. Together our shine was all-encompassing; my life felt full again.

I stomped down the small flight of metal steps that led into the throes of it all. Arcade machines circled me, buffeting me with their in-game simulations. Each machine relentlessly tugged at my attention, and I, Prince in miniature, welcomed them all. There were motorcycle simulators and a variety of zombie shooters. There was Street Fighter 1 and 2. There were a couple Tekken games, and even all three Metal Slug's. Even the boring stuff took me by surprise: the claw machine, candy machine, and a little machine where you exchange bills for quarters. Lights flickered brightly, games buzzed and exploded, and INSERT COIN continuously flashed across every screen in the arcade. There were a couple kids, too, my loyal subjects, dragging their feet across the electric ghost-town, pressing random start buttons in hopes of a free credit.

I left them to their devices and bee-lined toward Mortal Kombat 3. I fed the slot my father's love and picked Liu-Kang, a Bruce Lee look-alike that made Bruce Lee sounds, *Hoh! Wah! Oyaaaaah!* Quickly, as if the actions were as natural as walking, I landed intricate combos on my enemies, and I even shot dragon shaped flames from my hands, melting their bones. I killed and killed, and for hours the game continued to announce, *Liu-Kang wins*, though I pretended it said Prince. On my first play-through I managed to Kung-Fu my way to the final boss, the demonic Shao Kahn, when suddenly Mom's face invaded the dream, her lips mouthing *No, this is cheating, this is cheating, this is not right!*

My reflexes slackened; Reptile had uppercut my head into the murky sky. My head splashed into the volcano in the background, disappeared beneath magma. A lava bubble slowly expanded, then exploded like a belch.

GAME OVER, the screen said.

I had several more quarters in my pocket, but the arcade was empty. Even my two subjects were gone, unable to find a free game. The dark and quiet closed in around me, and even though Pops was in the building, gambling within the dim light and muted sound of the other side of the track, the crush of loneliness never felt more real.

I left the arcade, running across the track in search of Pops.

My feet pounded against the ash-stained linoleum in hollow, rhythmic slaps. A couple minutes passed before I made it to the betting area. The dozens of TV monitors on the walls announced the coming of the last race. The previous eight races did a number on everyone; people crowded the racing windows like Depression bread-lines. I bumped into a woman; I apologized but she only gave me a curious look, “Hey, don’t I know you?”

“I don’t know, ma’am.”

“You’re Clyde’s boy, huh?”

“Yeah.”

The woman smiled. “You sure grew up, Mr. Prince.”

My heart seized. I hadn’t been called Prince in years, and hearing it from this woman now shocked and invigorated me. She had mocha skin, a perm, and a beauty mark on the left side of her chin. Her large breasts ballooned within her silk blouse. She seemed familiar, but I never cared to remember all my fans, and I didn’t remember this woman

now. I only cared to charm her, to return to my own regal ways. “I grew a bit I guess,” I said. “Wait till I hit my growth spurt.”

She laughed. Then she arched an eyebrow, inspecting me, doctor-like. “Well is that so? Come see me in a few years then.” She smoothed my hair once. Like the women of my memories, she smelled of fruit. But I wasn’t happy. Her touch didn’t do enough for me, and I shied away from it. The woman frowned, then forced a smile. She pointed to the front of another line, said, “Clyde’s over there.”

“Thanks,” I said.

“Don’t mention it,” she said, and walked away.

Pops was passing a couple bills under the window. As far as I knew, he’d only bet a single twenty tops, but these were two one-hundred-dollar bills. My heart seized again, this time in a bad way. We could’ve bought Disney passes with that money. Pops grabbed the racing ticket, and as I walked over he quickly spotted me. He smiled.

“Hey!” Pops said, “You run out of quarters?”

“Yeah,” I said as sullenly as I could, “All gone.”

But Pops didn’t notice my sadness. He stayed jolly, jovial, and wrapped a long stringy arm around my shoulder. Strangely, his hand smelled of fruit, like a lotion I knew he didn’t use. But I didn’t question him. I figured since we now shared a secret, he’d tell me of the ones he’d hid from me.

“You been winning?” I asked.

“No, but I’m about to!” Pops showed me the ticket. It said Trifecta across the top, and my birthday numbers right across the middle. For the first time ever I felt betrayed.

Pops was absolutely giddy, and it sickened me. Pops was a gambler alright; he wouldn't stop gambling what was mine.

“This'll win Disneyland too, right?” I heard myself say, ashamed of my foolishness.

He pulled me close. “Let's see if your luck holds up, *Prince*.” The bastard even winked. “Let's see, let's see, let's see...”

*

I couldn't believe it—Pops actually won. He hit the trifecta. He was excited; I was excited, and on the ride home I chanted, “Disneyland! Disneyland!”

Pops just kept his eyes trained on the road; with one hand he drove, and with the other he fanned himself with money, about three thousand dollars. “You did it, boy,” he said, “You did it, you did it!” He even honked as he said it, and other people honked back. They were angry at Pops, and even though I understood the anger I didn't care. And at some point in the ride, Pops fanned me with the money, too.

When we pulled into our apartment complex my mood instantly changed. I was still happy, but wary. It was dark out; we were late. Even when I was with Pops, Mom had a thing about me being back by sundown. It was only 8 o'clock, a couple hours past dinner time, and Mom's senses stalked the complex.

We parked the Thunderbird in our spot, which was way in the back of the complex, and stepped outside. I slowly eased my door shut; Pops hurled his closed without concern. Having sensed Mom's aura, I cautiously proceeded on the path toward our unit; I took measured steps, careful not to step on leaves or gum wrappers or cracks in the walkway. Pops, however, sauntered carelessly as if his head were a joy-filled balloon.

“Wow, you did it, boy!” Pops said, awed. “You won back the electric bill!”

I didn't know what to think of that. I'd never heard Pops say such a thing before, especially since the lights had never gone off. I remembered the gray card then: Mom's credit card.

"Hey, you hear me, boy?"

"Oh, yes. Wassup, Pops?"

"You did good" Pops said, joyfully, giving me a too-hard pat on the back, "I'm proud of my boy."

"Yeah, thanks."

"Tomorrow, remind me to give you double the quarters!"

Closing in on our own unit, we ascended the steps—Pops first, and then me. The porch light glowed a dull yellow like dog teeth, casting a cheap fluorescence upon the white paint of the door. The black wooden D that marked our unit hung onto the door like a curse. Under it lay the doorbell, an old cracked button.

First, Pops pocketed the money, having fanned himself all the way to the door. Then he banged on the doorbell with the side of his fist. *Ding! Ding! Ding!* He banged continuously, drunk off the victory. He didn't mind losing, but not-losing felt great—and we had not-lost by an overwhelming margin.

"Open up, darling!" *Ding! Ding! Ding!* "Your boys are back!"

Mom opened the door.

Pops leaned in for a kiss but she side-stepped him. Pops just shrugged.

"Dinner's ready," Mom said.

We followed her into the kitchen and I detected the strong scent of my favorite foods. There were platters of rice, pansit, adobo, lumpia—shanghai style, all meat no

veggies—on the kitchen table. She even laid out a tray of sweet and sour sauce for my dipping pleasure. Pops and I sat at our normal spots, and that’s when I noticed it. There were two plates, two sets of utensils, and two placemats—not three. There was a frayed legal pad in the spot where Mom’s dinnerware was supposed to be, and a chewed up pencil atop the pad. The current page had a single number on it: *96*. It was underlined twice. Mom, lingering behind her seat, saw me stare at it. She opened her mouth to speak—

“Wow, this smells great,” Pops said. He heaped rice and pansit onto his plate and grabbed about 6 or 7 lumpias.

Mom took her seat at the table and studied the legal pad.

“Really, this is great.” Pops dug in with his hands like a medieval king. He scooped up a handful of rice and shoved it into his mouth. His face soured.

“It’s cold,” Mom said. “Warm it up.”

I didn’t like where this was going. I fixed my own plate, began eating it cold. I was already nervous sitting with these two, and making the journey to the microwave seemed a daunting task. I chewed meekly on a cold, squishy lumpia.

“It’s fine, it’s fine,” Pops said with his mouth full, plugging his mouth with another lumpia before he’d even swallowed the rice. “This is the best I tell ya, the best.”

“It was better two hours ago, but you’re late.”

“That’s fine, too. Everything is fine. I’m enjoying, and you should enjoy with us. Eat something.”

“Sure,” Mom said, “I’ll eat this.” She ripped the top page off the legal pad, and held it up for us to see. I stared at the *96* and grasped its power; its magic was similar to Pops’ quarters. An icky flow of queasiness slid into my stomach like bacon grease down the

drain. Pops just ate without pause, grabbing at handfuls of food with slick, shiny hands. He maintained a voracious pace and soon his plate was empty. He shoveled more pansit onto the plate, and ate that with his hands, too. I noticed then, that for a moment, he wasn't smiling. All he could do was eat, so I ate, too, both father and son swallowing hardened rice, stone cold deceptions. The task of silence was grueling, and nothing could distract from the *tap, tap, tap*, of Mom's pencil against the legal pad.

"What's that you got there?" I asked. "Doesn't look like food, Mom."

"Ha, it's not." Mom said, smiling like Cruella Deville. Like Maleficent. It was a cartoon evil that I recognized and feared. "It's our bank balance," she said.

"96 dollars?" I asked.

"Cents," she said.

Pops looked up from his plate, angered. "Well shit! What's new?"

"What did you do with our money?"

Pops slammed his fist on the table. "I didn't do shit! We're broke, we're always broke!"

Mom threw her hands in the air, exasperated. She looked at me. "Where were you?"

"We were out being broke," Pops said, "Breaking our backs at the clinic just to have 96 cents in a joint account!"

"I was asking Efren."

"Damn it, we were at the clinic!"

"Yeah!" I blurted, "Putting the snake in the toilet!"

"A *snheck*?" Mom said, even angrier now. "What is this *snheck snheck*? Don't play with me right now!"

“That’s just work talk,” Pops said. “What do you know about work?”

“I know that if you work, you have more than *ninety-seeks* cents in the account!

Pops wasn’t listening, though. He was enraged and frustrated. He could’ve pulled the money out of his pocket, but that would’ve been trouble, too. Pops was stuck. So he just kept shouting, raging about our broke-ness. “We never have a goddamn thing, not one goddamn thing!” His eyes watered and that confused me, made me the saddest I’ve ever been even though we were finally winners.

Meanwhile Mom stared me down. “Where were you? Tell the truth.”

“We were at work,” I said.

“Oh,” she said. “Ok.” Her eyes were solemn and sad, and she averted them away from me. She sensed my deception, and that hurt her.

“Work! Work! Work! I work all the time and we’re still broke!”

I wondered where his happiness went. I never questioned Pops, because I adored him, I admired him, and despite his betrayals, today he’d done good. He needed to know that.

“But Pops,” I said, “you won.”

All the yelling and sadness stopped, and my parents stared intensely at me. They both looked deranged, surely for different reasons, but deranged all the same.

“Show Mom the money. Come on. Show her, Pops—”

Mom picked up my plate and chucked it at Pops. He ducked, and the plate shattered against the wall. Adobo grease and sweet and sour sauce slid down the wall onto the carpet. The next moments were dead. We all wanted to say something but could only manage the hiss of air.

“Why, Mom?” I finally said, “He won! We can pay rent, and I can go to Disneyland!”

Mom looked at me, hard. “You are a smart boy, but you say stupid things sometimes. If he won, where is the ticket, where is the money?”

“I was there. He won. I saw it.”

“You know what,” Pops said, “I’m done. I’m out of here.” He pulled his car keys out of his pocket and began walking toward the door.

“Where are you going?” I screamed, “You won!”

Pops opened the front door and turned toward me. “You’re a good kid, Efren.” Pops just smiled that gambler’s smile of his.

“It’s in your pocket! Now show her! Please, just show her.”

Pops shook his head slowly, still smiling. He stepped outside and descended the stairs, the main and screen doors left wide open, and I clearly heard the rumble of the steps, the soft tremors of loss. Then the tremors stopped; the pavement muted the sound of his leaving. The T-bird started up.

“But he won,” I told Mom, almost not believing it myself.

She stepped up behind me and gently covered my ears. But the faint roar of the T-bird travelled beneath her palms. Her hands flowed down to my shoulders and I knew Pops was gone. “Sometimes you have to let things go,” she said, “Just let them go.”

I watched the sway of the screen door, the wind of my father, and as I opened my mouth to say *Yes* to Mom, a wetness warmed the top of my head, a single tear. Then another. And another. The tears kept falling onto me, the rain of a heart that wouldn’t let go.

I pulled away from Mom to close the doors. First I shut the screen. Then as I pulled the main door shut I caught one last glimpse of the evening. There were no stars. No moon. Pops was out there somewhere. And the darkness was enormous.

*

The only time I went to Disneyland was when I was sixteen, years after Pops left our lives. I went with my mom and some Titas that I sort of liked, but not enough to spend a whole day with. I even paid the ninety-two bucks for my own ticket. One of my titas offered to pay but I insisted. I'd wanted this after all, so I'd take it myself. Regardless, I was luke-warm about the whole thing. Disney didn't appeal to me anymore, though I took mild pleasure in what my classmates had said all those years—that the cast members called girls Princess, and the boys Prince.

But the magic was lost on me.

I no longer cared to be in The Happiest Place on Earth, but I played along. I rode rides—everything from Space Mountain to those bitch-ass Teacups. I ate food—a two-foot churro and a turkey leg fit for a Cro-Magnon. I took a photo with Mickey. And Minnie, too, with my hand around her supple waist. But I didn't see Goofy, just a bunch of white kids wearing those hats that featured Goofy's trademarks—his floppy ears and big retarded teeth.

I watched the parade, though, the dancing and waving and lip-syncing.

Felt like ninety-two bucks wasted, like maybe I should've burned it instead, at least until she arrived.

The Little Mermaid waved at me—or at someone behind me—from atop her float. She sang “Under the Sea” and smiled with teeth as white as the wedding dress she wore in

the movie. She was supposed to lip-sync but she offered more: the tension in her neck, the tightening muscles around her red lips—I could tell that it was real singing. Her voice flowed beneath the current of movie audio blasting from the float’s hidden speakers.

As the float rolled past my section, she waved and waved; and I waved back at her, made eye contact and everything. Her blue eyes met my brown ones. I winked and her eyes widened with surprise. Her smile widened, too, and for a split second I felt my former charm restored. Then the float passed and her eyes traveled elsewhere, but I kept waving anyway.

A blue-green bungee harness was strapped to her waist, which blended into the scales of her fin, and kept her safely attached to the top of the float. I waved at her undulating fin, witnessed her swim on air in such a convincing way. Her movements pulled ease from within me and that ease swam across the air with her; and it swam over the smiling crowds that believed in her, too. I drank in the dream she sold me, and I thought maybe I’d jump on that float, or at least touch it.

I followed her, pushing through the thick crowd. People shouted *Hey!* or *Watch it!* but I continued on. I knocked down a couple kids, a total accident, but a man grabbed me and executed a total death-grip on my shoulder. *What the hell is wrong with you, young man?* The scene caught the mermaid’s attention, and she even looked concerned. I played it cool, though, and relaxed in the man’s grip.

“Nice scales!” I yelled, smiling. “The color suits you!”

I didn’t expect her to hear me over the music, but suddenly, without warning, she blew me a kiss. Then she blew everyone kisses like any professional cast member would—but she blew me one first, without a doubt. A thrill shot through me, similar to when Pops

had won, which of course was followed by a sudden terror, like a sharp drop on a roller coaster.

The man squeezed harder. *Forget the mermaid, young man! You knocked down those kids!*

I wasn't paying him any mind, though. I just kept staring after the mermaid's float, and after the path that the kiss followed. As the float pulled further and further away, and "Under the Sea" faded out as "A Whole New World" asserted its presence (with Princess Jasmine belly-dancing at the helm of the float no less), and as my mom and titas arrived to beat on the shoulders of the man who gripped me, screaming at him as I stood there with this wide dumb-ass smile, a smile that melted away my troubles, that made me forget that there was a pain in my shoulder and irate Filipinas shrieking inches from my ears, I remembered the pre-pact days spent at the track. I smiled hard, just like the people who'd beam when asking for my lucky numbers, and like the women who'd coo over my stroller, and like my parents when they'd rip up racing tickets, and like Pops when finally he walked out of that door. Those smiles were my one true inheritance, and with them I remembered the good life then: my folks the gamblers, and I, the Prince.

Strange Blood

It started with the calls, all those fucking calls. Mom had replaced our landline with these Nokia bricks, those old indestructible cell phones, but she didn't know how to use hers. The small buttons, the menu options, the digital settings—it was all too much. She couldn't text or call or program new numbers, so her family in the Philippines directed all correspondence to me. I became the household's only phone-user, and could hardly play Snake or message Marcel because the Filipino text-flood was so severe. I kept the phone on silent, but in 2005 that still meant vibrate, that still meant annoy. The phone buzzed and vibrated in my hands, and NEW MESSAGE alerts kept popping up on the screen. My cousin Grace was the worst; she was ten years older and way too adult, too concerned. She sent the most texts, at least five an hour, and that doesn't include the ones I actually responded to. I mean five new, unsolicited greetings, even after we'd just talked.

*Hello Tita Emelda! Hello Efren! I am checking up on you two! Have a good day.
God bless!*

We're fine. I texted you that ten minutes ago.

Are you sure, Efren? Tell Tita to call me.

Okay.

Okay in the movies means you are not okay.

You asked me a yes or no question.

Oh I see! I am so silly! I will remember. Tell Tita Emelda to call me, okay?

I'd tell Mom that Grace expected a call and she'd tell me to do it instead.

“This stupid thing is broken.” Mom shook her phone.

“It's not broken.”

“Then why is it not working? Look.” She held the phone up to my face.

“Press the asterisk to unlock it.”

“What?”

“The star thing.”

“Oi, Efren, that’s complicated.”

But I just couldn’t keep up with the calls and texts—one every couple minutes it seemed—so I hardly answered. My cell went off all day at school, and on the bus, and at home where I’d lay the phone on the kitchen table, contemplating what I’d say. Each day there’d be dozens of new voicemails, long ones that basically asked us if we were okay, if anything was wrong, if we’d prayed that day. These messages were mostly in Tagalog, but sometimes they were in broken, overly proper English. Grace left the bulk of these voicemails, too, practicing what she’d learned in Filipino schools, enunciating like a spelling bee contestant: “Hel-lo, hel-lo! I prayed for both of you this morning. I hope God gives you the power to make it through today. Too-dell-loo! I think it means Good Bye! I am seeing it in a movie! The American girls say that, yes? Too-dell-loo! God bless!” Grace, like the rest of the family, was so sweet to us both, but just too many times per day.

She needs to calm that ass down, I texted Marcel.

It’s all love! Just play nice, my nigga.

Marcel, a reliable buddy as always, had sound advice. But playing nice didn’t align with my feelings, which were all I cared about then. Each call was another reminder of pain, of the struggle that the Filipino family didn’t associate with America, especially with California. Pops had died a few months ago, and instead of allowing us to get used to it, Mom’s village incessantly butted into our peace, poking and prodding at our grief without

actually mentioning its source. They never said Clyde, they never said father, just God bless. The village listened intently from across the Pacific Ocean, hoping to hear some semblance of a blessing, a gift from God that offset our surprising tragedy, an unforeseen hitch in their vision of California life.

Still, that made no real difference to me. My losses were mine, and theirs were theirs, whatever they happened to be. I knew nothing of it, just that they were poor, that they were villagers that farmed in the heat, that mosquitos drank them all day and because of it Mom's hands were killingly deft, and that the family sure didn't call this often when Pops was alive, when they could've very easily checked on him, too. I figured Mom's family intended to reclaim her since Pops had taken her away from Toril and brought her to Hawthorne, California, which, according to Pops on many occasions, *Rubbed them the wrong way*. Whenever I asked Pops why they didn't like him he'd say, *You're bright, you already know*. Then he'd pinch the back of his hand in a super exaggerated way, like a baseball manager's signs from the dugout. Pops meant his black skin, and though the villagers were tanned from the sun, actual blackness was a bit much for them. And now, except for me, the blackness was gone, and the concerns of the village took its place. But it seemed like the calls were too frequent for them to just be checking up. Something was up, there had to be, but it when I finally asked Mom about it the conversation went badly.

"Isn't it strange that they call so much?"

"They miss us. That's not strange."

"I guess, but wouldn't they have missed us years ago? This doesn't feel right."

"Stop asking questions," Mom said, irritated, "*Pahmily* sticks together, that is all."

"Okay, but why now?"

She reached for her slipper and I cautiously backed out of the living room.

I went to my room and lay on the bed, attempting relaxation, hoping a family phone alert wouldn't interrupt my texts to Marcel. I often talked to Marcel, who understood me better than anyone, but he seemed to miss the mark in this case.

It just won't stop. These motherfuckers are relentless.

You got fans, Efren! That's dope as fuck!

Not if it's the God Bless Brigade. They keep praying for me, and this one cousin keeps asking if I know Snoop.

SNOOP? For real? Tell that nigga, yes! Of course you know Snoop! Come on, man, just rock with it.

I knew where Marcel was coming from, but that didn't mean I was any less in my feelings. I just lay on my bed, a raw nerve, a ripped cuticle dipped in vinegar, an unlucky paper-cut between the webs of my fingers. I was more sensitive than people thought it possible to be sensitive. It wasn't a good look, but that's just how I felt, that's just how being in your feelings works.

Bzzt-bzzt. New message. Not Marcel, but Grace.

Life is like a box of chocolates! She was big on movie quotes. My phone vibrated again and I opened the next text. That is so SWEET. Ha ha. Do you get it? Sweet. Like chocolate. Because of the sugar.

No, I don't get it. Chocolate is sour. Life is like the box, and only the box. Empty.

Ha ha! You are funny. You and Forrest Gump would get along very well!

*

At dinner me and Mom would sit at the kitchen table and listen to my voicemails. Mom collected her thoughts before I dialed the number for her. She spoke in rapid Tagalog, asking about Lola Mina, her mother. I didn't know Tagalog but I knew my mother's tone; by then I was familiar by all her cadences of worry and concern, of panic and anticipated grief.

My Lola Mina, Mom's sole parent—her father having died when she was a kid—was always on her mind. They hadn't seen each other since Mom left the village, which was right before she became pregnant with me. She asked her brothers a million questions about Lola, and when her frenzy intensified she'd mix in some English. *Is she eating? Is she sick?* Always those two questions, food and sickness, in tones that translated no matter the language. I waited, tapping my foot on the kitchen tile. I just wanted the calls to stop, and mostly I just wanted my phone back. I anxiously anticipated my next Snake game, along with the texts I'd send Marcel every few games. It was definitely irresponsible, but that's all that made life feel somewhat normal. All I wanted was a normal life again, to just mind my own business, but Mom's people constantly intruded upon that, call alerts interrupting my games, and Mom taking the phone out of my hands. It would've been better if it seemed like this routine were effective, but like most struggle, it was endless and sad. Mom always shook with anger, practically crushing my phone. Every time she asked a question it seemed like she never got an answer she wanted. Eventually she'd end her conversation and hand me the phone.

“Turn this off,” Mom said.

“It's the red button.”

“So?” Her face tightened. “You press it.”

I did.

“My brothers are hiding things from me.”

“How do you know?”

“They sound nervous.”

“You switch to English sometimes. Maybe it’s that.”

“I don’t care. Something isn’t right. They won’t put your Lola on the line.”

That was new—they’d always put Lola Mina on the line. In fact, I mostly spoke to Lola, who, unlike my other cousins, had a workable handle on English, and whose speech consisted of recycled postcard phrases: *Come visit, The Philippines is beautiful, I love you, God bless*. Her English triggered images of white sand beaches, radiant sunsets, and tanned Filipinas in two-piece bathing suits—pretty faces, smooth skin, but no ass, no titties.

Other times she’d say, “Finish college. Get a good job. Support your *mahdair*.”

Can a nigga finish high school first? I’d want to say, but instead I’d manage, “Sure, of course, always.” Whenever I spoke silence always followed, and then muddled conferencing in which my relatives deciphered my speech. I could hear Grace translate in the background.

“I am very proud of you,” Lola Mina eventually said, which confused me because I wasn’t doing much of anything. I didn’t think of myself as special, just different from them, just an American. “I am very very proud,” she said again.

“Thank you, Lola,” I said.

I agreed with Mom: something wasn’t right about this Lola situation, but I wasn’t stricken with apprehension or dread; I just walked into the hallway toward my room, engrossed in the world of my phone.

I opened Snake and guided the black bar—the snake—across the screen, darting toward the dot, until I hit my knee against something and stumbled. The black snake collided with itself, exploding into pixels. I knew what I'd bumped into before checking it out. A CLYDE box, which is to say a Forex box with Pops' effects in it, his name labelled on it in black sharpie. There were over a dozen of these boxes within the apartment, cluttering Mom's closet, and subsequently dominating the space within the narrow hallway. I'd always wanted to look through his stuff, to take a tie or a military medal, or maybe a hat or some dress shoes I'd be able to fit in a couple years. I wanted something, though I didn't know what, but having Pops in the hallway was enough. He was larger than ever, more sprawling and present after he died, and though he'd been out doing things the Filipino family would attack—the gambling, the cheating, the abandonment—I easily forgot those things. He was just my Pops, a missed man. So I welcomed CLYDE's sudden reappearance in death, in boxes and dust, and in the darkened hall I was glad to stumble over him all the time.

I should've taken it as a sign, Pops reappearing while Lola disappeared. But more so than that, I should've answered the text Grace sent me then, or at least told Mom the contents of it. The text read: *Lola Mina is sick. Please tell Tita Emelda.* But I glossed over it. I collected myself from my fall, brushed the dust off my pants, and started another Snake game as I entered my room. The phone kept buzzing but I played and played, convincing myself that Grace could just wait. I stopped only hours later when I had to take a dump, and even then, as I sat on the toilet, my pocket still buzzed.

*

Of course Mom found out about Lola's sickness at dinner the next night. I read Mom a few of Grace's texts, omitting the existence of the twenty or so others. Mom freaked out; the look on her face was one of pure panic. "When did she send this Efren?"

"I just saw it now."

"But when did she send it? Does it say the time on it?" For someone who couldn't unlock her own phone, she sure knew a lot about timestamps.

"No, it doesn't say the time."

"Well, hurry up. Call them!"

"Let me grab the phone cards first," I said, moving to get up.

"No, just call!" She was really adamant about this, unwilling to wait the ten seconds to grab the phone cards. It'd be a buck per minute but she didn't care.

I dialed the number and handed her the phone.

Mom spoke frantically, greeting Grace, asking about Lola Mina, and then asking another question. As this particular question left her lips she stared intensely at me. Then she switched to English, said, "Yesterday?" She shot me a look of murder. "Vomiting? That is bad."

I shrank in my seat, knowing that I was screwed.

Mom held the phone out to me. "Here. Grace wants to talk to you."

I grabbed it. "Hello?"

"Hel-lo, Efren," she began, speaking slowly and deliberately as in her voicemails, "I sent you the messages yesterday so I want to explain what is happening."

"Sure, go ahead."

“Things are very hard. Lola is sick. She is fine right now, but yesterday she had a big fever. She is resting in bed but is very weak. It is no good. She cannot even keep the mosquitos from biting her.”

“That sounds really awful.”

“It is. So we will keep messaging you. Please answer us. It is important. We need your help.”

“Okay, I got it.”

“Thank you, Efren. God bless.”

I handed the phone to Mom and watched her from across the dinner table, her expression more relaxed, her tone calmer and steadier. This time she said another word I recognized, one that she repeated over and over. *Balikbayan*. The word referred to care-packages; boxes full of hand-me-downs, trinkets, Last Supper reprints—Filipino shit, basically. Whatever we had, I’m sure the village could use. Sending a *Balikbayan* box made sense.

When Mom got off the phone, her calm erased itself, and she laid right into me. “What are you doing? When something happens tell me right away!”

“I just got the text.”

“Don’t lie to me, Efren!”

“I’m not lying.”

“This is serious! That is my *mahdair*. You need to tell me things right away.”

“Okay.”

“Okay is right.”

The next day I got home from school and noticed that the stack of boxes in the hallway looked a little low. I called out from the hallway.

“Hey Mom, where did you move the boxes?”

“I sent some to the Philippines.” She stepped into the hall, her hands wet from washing dishes.

“Some?”

“Yes. Half.”

That cut right through me. Half.

“My family needs the clothes,” Mom elaborated.

“What? They don’t have clothes out there?”

She glared at me, a warning to watch my tone. “They have less than you think.” She explained that Marcel’s Mom drove by in her truck and they both went to FedEx. They made multiple trips. And Mom made clear that the rest of these boxes were going soon, too, and that the overflow of Pops’ stuff was stupidly impractical. But still, I didn’t want to see him become *Balikbayan*. I wasn’t ready.

“You know I wanted something,” I said.

“You want but you don’t need. They *need*.”

Mom went back to the kitchen while I lingered in the hall. I didn’t understand how Mom could not want all of this CLYDE—for once there was a lot to go around. I sat on a box, put my chin in my hands, and stared at a browned photo of Mom and Pops on the wall. It was from the day they met; both of them side by side in front of the Davao City mall. Pops, freshly off-duty in his U.S. fatigues, spotted Mom in the food court. He flashed a smile, bright with American promise, and Mom told me that he even took his hat off

when he approached her. *That was so charming*, Mom had told me, halfway swooning, *It was sweet*. They spent the day together, and though it was against regulation, Pops let her wear his hat, his U.S. Army beret. I knew then that I wanted that beret—his charm, his pride, the beginnings of me.

*

The following night I searched the boxes, tossing out slacks and button-ups without regard for how carefully they were folded. The contents smelled like dust and Old Spice aftershave. Mom heard the rustling and emerged from her room.

“Oi! Stop that!”

“I need to find something.”

“What you need to do is fold these back!”

I looked at the mess in the hall; clothes were strewn about the floor like a Looney Tunes catastrophe.

“See? You can’t. Now I have to do it over.”

I glanced at the box and caught a glimpse of a U.S. Army logo—maybe the beret. I reached for it, my hand slowly gravitating toward it, a stupid instinct to savor this moment with what might’ve belonged to Pops—

“Move!” Mom knocked me over with her hip; her thin body seemed forceful as a human boulder.

I got up and Mom was piling the clothes back into the box, not even folding them, handling each article just as haphazardly as I did.

The next day I got home from school and Mom was climbing into the passenger side of Marcel’s mom’s truck. Four CLYDE boxes were visible in the back window. Both

women waved and smiled at me, and I waved and smiled back, before I stepped inside the complex and made a mental count of the boxes. Only three more left.

*

Lola Mina's fever worsened over the next couple weeks. Lola didn't have long, and we all knew this. Mom always had my phone. The apartment was filled with pieces of Mom's Tagalog. She'd say a word I understood every other minute. *Pesos...Arroz...Anak...Mahal*. Translation: sending *money* for *rice*, something about her *son*, and lots of *love*. In these moments it was hard to even move. The guilt seized me.

All the while *Bzzt* never went away; Grace always had a movie quote lying in wait.

Show me the money! \$\$\$\$\$ And then an hour later: *You complete me*.

OK, don't be weird.

I am not weird. We are one family. God is uniting us all.

One night Mom summoned me to the couch. A dusty photo album lay in her lap.

"We're going," Mom said.

I just stared at the TV.

Mom continued on, explaining to me how she'd borrow money from friends and co-workers, and that she'd apply for an advance on her tax return. And of course she'd buy two tickets, and of course I was going with her because that's what good Filipino sons do.

I nodded, just worn down. Mom, though, looked awful. The collar on her blouse was loose; she'd lost weight. "Are you okay?"

"I'm okay enough," she sighed.

Even her voice seemed weaker, less declarative. "What's that in your lap?"

Mom opened the photo album and said, “Look.” And I did; my eyes obediently followed her finger. “This is the one where...” And that’s how it started. She flipped through the pages, showing me black-and-white photos of Lola Mina. Lola wore flower print dresses in the photos—much like what Mom wore on her days off—looking young and spirited. Mom spun tales of Lola’s younger days, waitressing and dancing—the tips paying for her disco nights. She always had a boyfriend, too, each one doing boyfriend things like sweet-talking and paying for dates and giving her money for bills she said she had.

“She’s always asking to see her grandson,” Mom said. “She held you when you were baptized. You are important to her. She loves you.” Mom peered into my eyes, hoping to generate in me the desired emotion. She was hopeful and worried; her eyes gleamed with tears that would either be of joy or sorrow depending on my response. Suddenly, I could break her with the truth of my heart, but what truth is worth crushing someone for?

Not this one, not my coldness. In that moment I tried to find the nice way of letting the family down easy, an it’s-not-you-it’s-me kind of line. But none came. It was all-in or all-out, and I wondered how Lola could love me, strange blood, so easily. Me, I couldn’t force love, and only felt it for very few. A mom, a friend, a dad. I didn’t think there was anything left in me. And if there was, if I could love Lola the way she loved me, she’d soon be gone, leaving me and Mom together in the crushing.

Several moments passed before my pocket vibrated. Mom and I exchanged confused looks. “Go ahead,” she sighed. “Check it.”

Grace sent a blurry photo from her phone—a shot from the foot of a twin bed with a bamboo frame, bamboo headboard, and white sheets. Various portions of the sheet were

lumpy with jagged dips and rises, reminding me of dirt and rocks and craters—of what Philippine farmland must look like. I knew the truth, though. It was Lola Mina, covered, and she wasn't a crater, she wasn't anything anymore.

“Is that Grace?” Mom said. She closed the gap between us on the couch, and penetrated me with her eyes. Everything felt hot. My back broke out in a light sweat.

“Speak,” Mom commanded. “Say something.”

No words came. I swallowed hard.

“I don't know what your problem is,” Mom said in that irritated way of hers. “If you don't love your *pahmily*, just tell me that. Why do you act like this?”

I could've used words, said she was dead, but Mom would hear my coldness. I needed her to believe I had a heart.

So I stood up, left my phone—still open to the death and white blankets—in front of Mom. “I'm sorry...” And, feeling that was insufficient, I added, “My condolences.” Then I ran to my room and closed the door.

The rest of the night I silently sat on my bed, my head clouded with darkness and with Mom's wails. I tried to play Snake but it wasn't distracting enough. Mom's cries shook me to the core. I couldn't sleep. I laid on top of the blankets with my eyes wide open, waiting for *Bzzt* to keep me company. Nothing. For once I texted Grace first: *Sorry for your loss...*

She hit me back right away.

It is our loss, Efren. You and me, Tita Emelda, everybody. We all lost Lola. She is gone. But her soul is still rising up. Will you pray?

Unsure of what to say, I said nothing.

At some point in the night Mom calmed, but her prayers continued all night long. The eerie power of her prayers slid between the gaps of my doorframe, freezing my bones. She whispered the same one. It goes:

Our Father, Who art in heaven...

*

Two days later, we flew to the Philippines. The flight was eighteen hours, and seemed especially long for the two white stewardesses, the only non-Filipinos in the flight crew. They were easily confused by the hard accents, always leaning in with a hand-cupped ear, struggling to decipher requests for *wattair*. I mostly slept, which shielded me from Mom's iciness. She hadn't spoken in the past two days but she remained as animated as always. Mom gave me directions by pointing her lip at one item or another. The trash, the dishes, the laundry basket, a piece of luggage, a CLYDE box. When we reached Philippines airspace the cabin became an oven. My shirt dampened. My hair stank. The air thickened with heat and B.O, and my ass ached from the endless sitting. Even the landing was turbulent, though still a great relief, for a moment at least—

"Harri-up naaa!" Mom screeched, finally speaking, "You're going to forget the bags!" Mom, who sat by the window, pushed me into the glutted aisle. Bodies collided while reaching into the overhead. Sorry's and excuse me's filled the cabin.

"Harri-up! Harri-up," Mom continued, "You are in the way!"

The terminal was also a struggle. It was crowded and hot and Mom practically shoved me to baggage claim. It went without saying that I'd be carrying everything. I wrestled with our carry-ons—two duffle bags and my backpack. At bagged claim I

remembered the CLYDE boxes, my father as *Balikbayan*. Mom had shipped the last three, and she expected me to handle these, too.

I stacked the duffel bags and rented two airport carts. The boxes were heavy, but I somehow managed to load them onto the carts. I pushed the carts toward the exit, one at a time, averting my eyes from the boxes, from the word CLYDE penned in black sharpie.

A security guard took pity and helped me push a cart outside. He went first, then me. Instantly, the sun set me aflame. My skin reddened, my hair itched, and my forehead broke into a thick sweat. Mom was uncomfortable too, and she stood beside me and wiped her forehead with a plaid handkerchief. Beggars casually surrounded us, holding out dirty hands for scraps. Thin children held out wicker baskets full of goods. It seemed like everyone had rosaries and banana leaves to spare. Everyone that exited after us was welcomed the same way.

Mom surprised me though, making way for my massive carts, shooing away bums and vendors, sometimes shoving them. She even struck a child with her purse. Mom read the look on my face. She grunted. “Do not be soft, Efren. They are *bulchairs*.”

Mom and I and about twenty others crowded under the shade of an awning. After a couple minutes we were approached by a sun-beaten trio, a young woman and two grown men. They were thin, I was too, but mine was an American thin, the States feeding me the right amount to fill me. But these people were rails.

“Brothers!” Mom said, smiling. All of them exchanged embraces, and even in Tagalog I identified the you-look-good’s and it’s-been-so-long’s. I watched awkwardly, shuffling a bit, faking a smile through my exhaustion.

“Your name is Efren, yes?” the woman asked me in English.

“Yeah,” I said.

“I’m Grace.” She brightened, “Nice to meet you!” She gave me a hug, squeezing hard. I cautiously patted her back, once, twice.

*

Me and Grace rode in the truck-bed as Tito Joel, Grace’s father, drove. Mom and Tito Miguel, her other brother, packed themselves into the cab. The highway was jammed with trucks, jeepneys, and taxis, and when traffic finally moved the poorly paved highways made for a bumpy ride. The CLYDE boxes bobbed and rattled, and I had a hard time holding them down—I could barely keep myself steady. Sweat poured from my face and neck onto the boxes. Grace seemed to be doing better; she still jangled around like a broken hula-girl toy, but she wore a calm, even expression on her face. Sometimes she gently waved away the dust kicked up by both the tires and the CLYDE boxes. Her skin was coated in a light-sweat, a healthy glaze.

“It always like this?” I asked.

“What do you mean?” A mild grin played across her face.

“Hot.”

“I do not know. This is feeling very nice.”

We rode through a residential neighborhood, and though I perceived it as the super ghetto—the old houses, the thin people, the multitudes of slippers—I tried to find cool things to tell Marcel about. Take the houses for instance—they were as colorful as piñatas, painted in reds and blues and yellows and oranges. The wood was torn and chipped, which made the place seem homey, lived in, much like the endless rows of apartments in Hawthorne. There were also two small girls kicking a red ball to each other across the

unpaved road; one kicked it too hard, and sent the dusty ball soaring over the other girl who then sprinted happily after it. Her sandals slapped against the pavement, revealing dirty feet. An old man who joked with his friend on the sidewalk stepped into the street, and stopped the red ball with his foot. He joyfully kicked it back to the girl, and waved to Tito Joel as he exited the street. Further down the block a man pressed himself against the side of the house, almost seeming to hug it, and a second later the wood darkened with his piss.

Grace and I laughed.

“Some people are not very *mohdest*,” she said, her giggles tapering off.

“That small dick was modest enough.”

She didn't like that but smiled to mask her frown. “Maybe his toilet is not working.”

I nodded, embarrassed. After a couple moments of heavy quiet I pulled out my phone and started a Snake game. But the game noises attracted Grace's attention; I could feel her look, and, unable to concentrate, I lost three games within the span of a minute. I pocketed the phone and saw that Grace was visibly searching for something to say.

“Thanks for the clothes, Efren.”

That shocked me and she saw that.

“You and your mom sent the clothes, yes?”

“My mom did.” That came out with more of a bite than I intended.

“Oh. Thank you still.”

For a while nothing else was said.

We passed a couple more neighborhoods before arriving at a dirt road. Redwood trees and bamboo stalks lined the path. We were on the outskirts of Davao City, on the only

road that lead into Toril. The gigantic treetops shielded us from the sun, but the humidity remained intense. The air felt liquid and heavy; I could hardly breathe it. I sunk into the corner of the truck-bed and allowed the hard surface to abuse my back as I jangled and sweated. *Bzzt-bzzt.*

I dug my phone out of my pocket. One new message. From Grace.

Kumusta Efren! Maligayang pagdating sa Pilipinas!!!

“You text me?” I asked.

Grace snapped to attention; she’d dozed off mid-ride. “Silly,” she said, “I am always texting you.”

“I mean now.”

She gave me one of those exaggerated shrugs straight from a comedy flick. “I do not know what you are talking about.”

“Oh, okay.” I was confused, but also more tired than curious. I shook my phone like an emptied soda. “Dumb thing is acting up,” then pocketed my phone. I put my elbows on a CLYDE box, laid my head down, and before I could close my eyes Grace spoke again.

“Did someone text you?”

“It’s probably nothing.” I closed my eyes, but not before catching the curious look on Grace’s face gradually shift into something resembling a glare.

*

Finally here, I texted Marcel, as the truck slowed into a dirt lot.

Good! Take pictures!

But we’re here for a funeral.

So? A nigga just trying to see why they call so much. I know I said to accept them and all that, but even I'd be a little mad if they were living like us, in apartments and shit.

A really good point, and I wanted to text him that, but there was a mild stinging on my arm distracted me. A fat-ass mosquito sat on my forearm, drinking me. I slapped at it but the beetle-sized creature dodged and flew away near a tree, joining about ten more of the blood-thieving swarm. Together, the mosquitoes buzzed like a dinner call and sure enough, dozens more came.

Another stray one even drank me as Tito Joel parked the truck against a hut. Grace's hand came down upon my arm like lightning, leaving it red and sore, with bits of crushed mosquito stuck against it. "Ow! Thanks, though."

"You have to be faster, Efren." She brushed the remains off my arm and then her hand.

Tito Joel came to a stop and we all got out. Then I got my first real look at Toril.

The community was more destroyed than anything I'd ever seen in Hawthorne—or in life, really. The bamboo houses were decayed, hand-made catastrophes. Some of the wood was rotted-through, and nothing was painted. My eyes darted from house to house, person to person, and my stomach descended slowly as if I were in the bowels of a damned ruin. The villagers themselves, about eighty of them, smiled widely, excitedly waving their skeletal arms.

All eyes were on me and my Mom, but mostly on me. At 5'9" I was an average American kid, yet somehow here I was a Filipino giant—I had at least three inches on everyone, which included the grown men too. My skin was brown like theirs, and it was my height that gave me away, the black in me. Clearly, I was my father's child and I

wondered what they made of that. If the love they showed me on the phone wouldn't completely flip on me, if I'd at least be granted the kind of begrudging acceptance that Pops was deprived of.

A boy, maybe four or five years old, played by the chicken coop and poked a rooster with a stick—but once he saw me he stopped right then, smiled widely as if he'd been given a sweet, and gleefully ran towards me. He waved the stick in the air as if it were a flag, and the other small children, in houses and on tree branches followed suit. They were thin, barefoot, and some were pants-less. These were my cousins and they acted nothing like the sullen, dying children on UNICEF commercials. Which was beautiful—something of note to text Marcel about.

These are some tough ass kids. Dicks out and they don't give a FUCK.

Dicks out? National Geographic says wassup!

My little cousins ran with glee in their little tiny tank tops that some were getting too tall for, and their little tiny arms and legs and pumping vigorously, and their little tiny bottle-cap penises hanging too close to the body to even loll or flop around when they ran and skipped. They got closer and closer, and soon I noticed that despite their lack of clothing they'd received something from Pops: his military medals were pinned to their shirts. Even on a tank-top, it felt surprisingly good to see his medals worn. This use of CLYDE was acceptable.

But my cousin with the stick, the rooster poking, flag-bearing boy, wore Pops' green Army beret. It practically swallowed his forehead, and the beret fell over one of his eyes. On him it was both hat and eyepatch, and I couldn't decide if it was adorable or not. All I knew was that I wanted to take it off of his head—like taking candy from a baby, a

toddler basically. It'd be so easy. I didn't know if I wanted to go to that extreme, but it was a possibility. I wanted to snatch it—I definitely wanted to.

Tito Joel stepped up to Mom and told her something in Tagalog. I asked her what he said.

“They put Lola in the shed. Let's go.”

They were going to start the funeral. Mom was the only one properly dressed. She wore a knee-length black dress with thorny red-roses printed all over. I had on a white tee I'd sweated through, while everyone else wore tank-tops, and maybe they had shorts, and maybe slippers.

Everyone proceeded toward a nearby hut beside a particularly large tree. I would've rooted myself like the tree had Mom not locked our arms together. She pulled hard and I resisted. A corpse and a shed were the last things I wanted to see, but more so than that, I didn't want to be attached to Mom, the woman that'd finally returned home, drawing everyone's eyes. I drew enough eyes on my own, but with the funeral starting people looked at her, said soft words to her, and grazed her shoulders with their fingertips. I wanted the attention to be hers alone; I needed to breathe and figure out how I was going to reclaim Pops' beret. Mom pulled again, harder, and I stumbled forward. Grace was right beside us and shot me a dirty look. I averted my eyes and kept pace with Mom.

Moments later my pocket vibrated. With my free hand I checked my phone. From Grace: *I see the way you look at us. I am poor. I am not stupid.*

When I looked back to Grace she instantly sneered.

As the procession continued, Mom didn't sense the tension; her face had a stone grace, while Grace's fingers worked rapidly on her phone to send me a text in plain sight. *Bzzt.* I checked it: *You think we are dogs. I will pray for you.*

I tried to avoid looking at Grace, my eyes darting in any direction but hers'. My frantic gaze landed on a male cousin, about my age, that walked hand-in-hand with a young girl, or a maybe girl—she could've easily been thirty or thirteen. The girl's face was smooth like an egg; her eyes appeared glazed and happy, but the thoughts behind them were elsewhere. She was different, I knew, and I must've stared for longer than I'd intended. The cousin that held her hand noticed my gaze and his face darkened like Grace's had. I hadn't cared for these people, their blessings, their love, but now that I was here, now that the positivity had all burned away, I felt like the snake in the garden, the criminal element. The fire of judgment was real, very real; it was the most Catholic thing I believed in. I stole one last glance at the girl cousin, her sheer bliss, and felt awful for it.

My pocket vibrated, but I just kept walking, my eyes glued to my feet.

It took all but one minute for the procession to reach the shed. In front of it stood an old man wearing a barong, an elegantly embroidered garment which was soft and white and slightly see-through. The sight of formal attire relieved me; it made the funeral seem more like the ones on TV, more like Pops'. The old man's barong pulled the somberness together, along with the Bible he held, a book I've been told to love.

The man began the service. In an attempt to be respectful, I closed my eyes, focusing intently on the deep intonation of his Tagalog. I tried to latch on to the music of his spirit, hoping to feel something, just enough to justify my presence here. I thought about Lola's love. I couldn't return it but I could respect it. A minute passed before I re-opened

my eyes and realized that he was leading a prayer, that every head was bowed but mine. I bowed my head in pretend prayer until I heard the “amen,” but even then I didn’t cross myself. That was a lie I couldn’t tell.

My pocket vibrated; this time I checked. From Grace: *You don’t feel God like we do. That’s why bad things happened to you and your father.*

I trembled with rage and angry tears began to form. I could’ve brained her with a thick branch. Then I looked over and saw two things: Grace’s smirk, and her phone in another adult cousin’s hands. He stood within arm’s-length of Grace, tap-tapping at the number pad before pressing the last button firmly, with an emphatic finality, and turned towards me. He also smirked.

Bzzt-bzzt. From Grace:

Lumayas ka! / Para kang bata! / Wala kang silbi!

Before I could put the phone away it vibrated in my hand. It was a text from another cousin that they had passed the phone to.

Here is a secret. We are all Grace.

I wanted a demon to swallow the village, a giant serpent. There was no other way this could end. They’d open the rest of the boxes and suddenly a village full of Graces would prance around in CLYDE T-shirts, CLYDE button-downs, CLYDE slacks, CLYDE ties (maybe the one he wore to the wedding), CLYDE military medals (whichever ones he wore on his uniform when he first courted Mom), CLYDE socks (especially the ones with the little horseshoes on them), and even the CLYDE boxers that Mom often claimed smelled like other women. I thought of the CLYDE beret and the boy who wore it, and the serpent setting its sights on him—

Then I noticed the preacher's eyes bearing down on me as he spoke. He paused momentarily, as if forgetting his place in the Bible, but he didn't forget. He was staring at me. Whatever he saw in me he didn't like. Then he resumed the sermon and began to lead another prayer. Every head was bowed, each person either allowing me to stand out on purpose, or not noticing at all with their limited peripherals, like Mom. The heat stuck to me like a skin-tight suit, a personal hell, and I swallowed hard, struggling to contain my useless rage.

My pocket vibrated without end—*Bzzt* every other second. Cousins passed the phone all over, even when we were lining up for the good-byes. We formed a long line, one family in front of another family, and another family behind that one, and so on. Mom and I got priority since it was her mother they'd stuffed in the shed.

As we were led by the priest to see Lola Mina, my pocket still buzzed. Its buzz resonated among the silence; everyone could hear. Nobody said a word, but the vile buzz continued, even when the priest opened the shed to reveal Lola Mina. She was laid across the floor wrapped in white blankets with her face covered by a white cloth. Her body was the fourth thing I noticed. The first three were the shovels, the hoes, and the fertilizer.

Mom broke down in front of the body. I knew this scene well, the crush of loss, and I was expected to play the part of the good Filipino son. Showing love was a thing I could do, but it was the public display, the sharing of grief, the nausea that I felt at having to sell it. I put a hand on Mom's shoulder. "I'm sorry," I said, "She'll be loved and missed." Shame coiled within me, sinister and snake-like. But the lie was necessary. Mom needed me to include myself in the loving and missing of Lola, and I sold it like she wanted me to.

The serpent wrapped itself around my organs, growing comfortable. Sometimes with lies the healing can begin.

Mom grabbed my hand, clutched it harder than the phone. Saying nothing, she just cried and cried. I stood there shamefully, my hand wet with her tears.

My baby cousin—Mr. Army Beret—wandered out of line and joined us. My body seized—I regretted my violence but I also wanted the hat. It was right there, within arm's reach. I could grab it, before everybody here, and take what was mine. But the boy looked good in that hat, dignified like I imagined Pops might've been in his Army days. My cousin's eyes were wet and shining, his back was straight, and his stature was tall as he could possibly make it. He looked so manly in Pops' beret, and I knew then that I wouldn't be taking it, and that the boy wouldn't be giving it back.

Instead, the boy showed me his opened hand, raising it in the air as if making a pledge. "*Mahal*," he said. Instantly, my pocket stopped buzzing. Everyone watched, open-mouthed, genuinely affected by the child leader. The boy had dispelled the unrest in the village, demanding that we silence all things but love. "*Mahal*," he repeated.

Mom said it, too, "*Mahal*."

And soon enough my other cousins were saying it. They said it over and over, a litany of love. *Mahal, Lola. Mahal kita*. My cousin placed his little hand in mine. His opened hand was no bigger than my palm. I closed my hand over his, focusing, just focusing. *Mahal*, I said, joining in the echo of the village's heart. There were no vibrations, no buzzing, just the dull hum of the mosquitos in the trees. The family prayed as one. But I couldn't hear Grace. I couldn't hear myself.

The Last Variant

The BLUEBIRD exuded luck. It was the only liquor store in Hawthorne with all the letters lit up, its neon sign announcing its fortune. Seemed like the only hood spot in the world that sold winning lotto tickets, and despite its small size the store provided constant gifts. Cardboard placards covered the entire inside—the walls, the ceiling, and some parts of the window pane—with the name, date, and amount won penned in. These cardboard victories seduced the hopeful saps that happened to stop by the Bluebird or hear about it on the local news. Even folks from swanky places like Malibu and Playa Del Ray came down just to buy tickets, to steal our luck. Outside, a long line of people snaked from the shop's entrance, and on weekends it wrapped around the building into the parking lot. People smoked cigarettes and leaned against their cars and discussed their golden futures. One receding hairline would speak to another, starting all his sentences with, *I dream, I pray, I hope*, while a woman in braids rolled her eyes and another woman wearing leopard print leggings smiled in response. I'd feel it all the time at the Bluebird, the ambitions behind lucky numbers, the prayers rocketed toward the cardboard ceiling of victory, the silly and sensible dreams of Hawthorne's hopefuls.

Those days I trudged along Hawthorne's cracked walks to tape roommate ads to the windows of local laundromats and Chinese restaurants. Mom sometimes sent me out two or three times a day to plaster Hawthorne in ads, *But don't do weird places*, she instructed. *I don't want criminals*. My route always passed the Bluebird, and once I got within two blocks of the place I could hear the steady call of, *Get golden scents to match your golden tickets! Smell golden, get golden! Peep my wares you golden people! Do it now!*

There he was: Leon, the Bluebird's mouth, its heart. Sun-up to sundown, he always worked out front of the store, peddling hand-blended perfumes and colognes to passersby. Even in heavy rain or a vicious Cali heatwave you could rely on Leon to be there, a fixture at the Bluebird like the resident drunks. Shifty and paranoid, he existed as naturally in the streets as a crack in the sidewalk, a storm-drain embedded in the curb, a manhole cover. He sold his wares from that same Everest backpack everyone has in the hood. Leon, like most others, kept his eyebrows low and back appropriately hunched. His hands were always in the pockets of that same dark-blue windbreaker he'd worn for years. His smile was cracked and bright: fucked up dentistry but undeniable joy.

On a normal day he'd advertise his experiments. *Got a new batch!* he'd say, *Cooked them up myself! Variants #45 and #46 are the best ones yet!* Each week he had a new Variant to push, something to try on the Bluebird gamblers. Both locals and out-of-towners were lured in by the mysterious name and discount prices. Many folks ended up purchasing his concoctions, and sometimes they were satisfied customers, sure to return. There were rumors that Leon had a gift for scents that smelled like home—whatever that meant to the customer—but it was mostly the out-of-towners that cherished this notion, though Hawthorne locals didn't seem to mind it either. Aside from the Bluebird's golden tickets, it wouldn't be a stretch to say that Leon contributed to the city's tourism. It was quite a sight: all the plain black and white t-shirts of the locals among a horde of Lacoste polos and Nordstrom loafers. Each of these people was at some point a customer, a valuable sponsor of Leon's quest for the ultimate scent. Leon believed in his Variants like a secret religion, and much like those who await The Second Coming, he passionately hoped that one day he'd create what he called The Last Variant. *It smells like Home to everybody. It'll*

bring your loved ones back! The son that won't talk to you! Your estranged wife! One whiff and you'll get back the missing pieces of your soul! Buy a Variant, good people! Do it for you! Do it for your souls!

But the other side of the coin was that Leon's Variants were just as likely to be ineffective as they were effective. The chance of a dud was 50-50, no more, no less. A scent would fizzle out far too quickly or sometimes even putrefy, and customers swiftly expressed fury and indignation. *This is shit*, people said, *The fuck did you put in this?*

I gave it a twist, that's all.

Well twist less, dumbass.

It even happened to Mom, about a month prior to the roommate search. I got Cheetos and she got marble cake and scratchers, and when we stepped outside Leon was shouting, *Cheap and breezy! You'll smell like the salt of the sea! Like a beautiful tropical island!* Leon spotted her, grinned, and added, *Like the Philippines! Oh those beautiful Philippine islands!* He even spritzed a couple sample sprays into the air, a surprisingly pleasing scent, and Mom, somehow smelling her island's salt, decided the moment was too perfect, too lucky, to pass up. "That thing you sprayed. I want that."

"That would be Variant #47," Leon grinned.

"How much?"

"Just fifteen of your hard-earned dollars, ma'am."

Mom tried it the next day, smelling of island salt for about an hour, before it wore off completely. She stomped up to the Bluebird to complain, enlisting me to tag along—reluctant back-up at best. "What is this garbage?" she said, "Who sells people garbage? I do not like this!" She went on and on while Leon just held his hands up in defense and kept

saying, “Hold on, lady, I got you, I got you, I made better ones, this isn’t the best I can do, I swear!” People watched as Leon ended up giving Mom two free bottles of perfumes with actual labels. *Exclusives*, he called them, which meant they were stolen. He even wrapped them in a brown bag, a stunning display of customer service, and smiled.

“Here ma’am,” he said, “just for you.”

Mom snatched the bag and snorted. “What are you smiling for?” That was our cue to walk away, but before I left I noticed Leon’s grin. There were as many gaps as there were teeth. He was a real chess-mouth but he sure was proud to show it. He received Mom’s hurled stone with honor; then he turned that smiling face toward the crowd, and resumed business. *Come get your golden scents! These Variants go quickly now!*

*

Me and Mom had a room with a bad spirit in it, and I knew it wasn’t long before I’d have to sleep there. The money crunch was real fierce; we badly needed a third. There were two rooms, hers and mine, and I was hesitant to suggest renting out either one. She’d kept her and Pops’ room in pristine condition, almost a museum replica of their lives together. She often prayed there, communing with Pops, our ethereal third. The tenant would take my room, leaving me to share with Mom, caught in the dark trap, recoiling from Pops’ sustained haunting, rejecting the father I thought I loved.

Mom constantly worked, and when she’d get home in the afternoon she ate McDonalds, guzzled Cokes, and then complained about getting fat. She wasn’t really fat, just paranoid about her shitty diet, about getting a little older—forty-five that year. She lost sleep most nights; dark circles stained her eyes. Sometimes she vented during long pained phone conversations—in English to American friends, and in Tagalog to her family—in

which her voice often cracked and sobs burst out of her like a burned out clutch. She'd shuffle into the kitchen, down another Coke, and once more declare, *Oh boy I'm getting fat.*

But that first week of the roommate search we couldn't catch a moment to ourselves. The calls were constant. Mom's phone rang while she cooked, or while we went for groceries, or during her post-work nap. I often fielded calls while she slept, my voice easily able to pass for hers. Seemed like everyone in Hawthorne was looking for a place, seeking escape from a cramped situation. I knew Hawthorne was densely populated judging from the abundance of apartments and the lack of parking; all of those mysterious apartment units seemed to contain shrunken worlds, hopes and dreams squished within the oppressive boundaries of cracked plaster and minimum wage at the factories situated on the city's outskirts.

Figuring out who could actually pay was a real process. Callers asked for "Emelda", having read Mom's name from the ad, but then asked how much she wanted. \$500, I'd say, which was over half the rent but they didn't need to know that. *I thought it said \$400.* No, I'd tell them, \$500. *Could we work something out?* No, I'd say, and hang up. Neither of us had time for dodgy broke motherfuckers, of which there was an endless supply. Some pulled the same verbal stunt in Spanish, as if that changed the numerical value.

"¿Cuanto cientos?"

"No nigga, quinientos!"

One day after school I taped ads to some laundromats before hitting up the Bluebird. Leon was out front, reveling in his trademark salesmanship. *Variants 48 and 49 are now in stock! Get them now before they're gone!* He blocked the door when all I wanted were

Hot Cheetos and a Coke, and upon noticing me he'd screw around, pretending to be my slave or servant, and whenever my mood wouldn't match his shine he'd jokingly say things like, *You're damn moody today! You have a test? Lots of homework? The world is ending, it is, it is, it is!* I tried to enter without saying anything, but he stepped aside and opened the door for me with a faux-flourish.

"Your Cheetos, young sir?" He said, door held open in one hand, the other arm positioned across his sternum as he bowed.

"Maybe," I said, entering the store—two minutes later exiting with Ruffles, and a couple Big Spin scratchers the owner knew were for Mom.

"Switching it up, I see." Leon's eyebrows arched up in amusement.

"Something like it," I said, striding passed him, ripping open my second favorite chips.

"Wait, I got something to say."

"Yeah, wassup?" I turned toward him, popping a chip in my mouth.

"Your momma the Asian lady right?"

"Yeah," I said.

"Cold piece of work," he laughed, "Bullied me out of valuable *Exclusives*."

I would've laughed with him but that seemed awkward. "Yeah, she's like that."

His laughter tapered off into mild chuckles. He reached into his pocket and produced one of our tabbed ads. "That's all right. I can tell she's good. Just let her know that I'll be giving her a call."

There were many thoughts during that walk home, all of them worries. Leon, while a street vendor, always came into steady business. He'd push me into that ghostly room for

sure, and force me to confront Mom's dreaded faith. I considered not telling Mom, but that wouldn't stop Leon's call, let alone the money crunch. When I repeated the conversation she scrunched up her face as if a foul stench wafted into the room. "That guy?" She sat up in the couch, gestured with the remote, "No, we can't. He's bad. He's ugly."

I felt relieved but defended him anyway. "What if he has money?"

"He's still ugly. Have you seen his teeth? They look like this." She waved the remote in the air, its white buttons and black surface.

"Yeah. So?"

"Don't tell me *So!* If he had money he would have fixed them by now."

"You need riches to fix that atrocity."

"Whatever." She dropped the remote on the coffee table, furrowed her brow, let out a thoughtful sigh. "You buy my scratchers? Give them here."

*

Leon called the next afternoon as promised. When Mom asked about a deposit he said, "Yeah, yeah. It's 500, right?"

When he arrived Mom let him in but told him to leave his shoes on the WELCOME mat. This wasn't a shoes-off household, so I snuck into my room to take mine off, too. I re-emerged as both of them lowered themselves onto the couch, Mom scooching away from Leon, a little too far into the armrest. I inwardly cringed but I also didn't blame her. We only knew him from the Bluebird and didn't know what kind of street germs he'd tracked in. I grabbed a chair from the kitchen and set it down equal distance from Mom and Leon, so we formed something like a triangle. As I sat there my nose picked up on various smells: the adobo Mom was preparing in the kitchen, the scent of cement, of street-

curb which lifted off of Leon's body, and the pleasant aromas floating from his black Everest backpack that he placed at his feet.

"Is that cherry?" I said.

"Something like it," Leon smirked.

Mom glared at me but I pretended not to see. "Smells good," I said.

"Thank you," Leon said, amused.

"Tell me about yourself," Mom said.

"I'm fifty, times are hard, and I need a place to live."

"Where did you live before? Who did you live with?"

Leon's smile relaxed by a degree or two. He showed lips instead of teeth. He remained silent for a couple beats, his gaze cast downward, for once seeming to reflect. "I rented a room from this family," he said, "Husband, wife, daughter, son. They were great. Just the kindest people. I practically had to force the money for utilities in their hands. I spent holidays with them. I celebrated birthdays. They made me cake, and last year the daddy even broke out the good booze for me. Beautiful people, the greatest. I stayed with them for nine years. Nine whole years. A couple more months we would've made it to ten, the big one-zero."

I watched him. He lifted his head up high and smiled; his white shambles revealed themselves once more. You could really see that he wanted to stay with those people. He was happy, but sad. His words seemed like a eulogy, a farewell mixed with hopeful longing, a variant of loss similar to Mom's prayers for Pops; Mom and Leon had both suffered devastation, but were all the more compelled to put on hopeful, shining faces for their beloved lost ones, to shower their memories in the last dregs of their joy.

As Mom looked Leon in the eye I wondered if she was moved. She paused a second, then tightened her lips, cutting right to the point. “So did they kick you out? What did you do?”

“They moved to Seattle last month. Property’s cheap, and the Momma’s family stays out there. They swore they’d take me with them but the house was only a three-bedroom. I asked if they had a basement but that was just a joke. They really thought about it, though. Took a long time to answer me, and when they did they kept saying my name real soft. Even returned my full deposit and then some for a motel in the meantime. They were good to me. I really can’t complain.”

Mom sighed, looking conflicted. Leon had a bit of money, some heart, and it was cool to hear that at least somebody liked him. He seemed less drifter-like and more consequential. So the pained contortions of Mom’s face confused me. She caught me looking at her, and sort of hissed at me, her way of telling me this wasn’t my place.

“You can stay here then,” she said, “But I’m watching you. I have rules and you need to follow them.”

“I know *you* have rules,” Leon laughed, “I won’t give you trouble, none at all.”

They talked details and deposit and household rules. Basically she said he had to bathe, and he told her, *No problem at all! Cologne baths are a thing of the past!* We both cringed, quite visibly, but Leon wasn’t shaken. He just pulled eleven Benjamins out of his sock. “Rent *and* deposit,” he winked, “There’s an extra bill in there for the kindness.”

“Tomorrow night,” she said, holding her hand out in refusal, “You can move in after I make a lease.”

Leon nodded, then said, “Sounds good, sounds good.” He put the money back into his sock, and Mom let out an audible groan. “Well I’ll get headed to work now,” Leon said, “You know how that goes.”

I opened the front door for him, showing our new tenant out. And as he stepped onto the WELCOME mat he turned toward me, took off his trucker cap, and gracefully bent into a slight bow.

*

To this day the lease Mom attempted to make for Leon may have been the most ridiculous document I’ve ever seen in my life. That next afternoon we spent fighting about it. She used a generic lease from Office Depot and then asked me to draft additional pages on my computer. We sat at the kitchen table, and Mom dictated her various rules and demands as I typed them out, incredulous, trying to translate her words into nicer, somewhat more legal language than what she used.

“He cannot stink! I do not want the room to smell like him.”

“Write that?”

“Write, No Stinking.”

No Vandalism, I typed.

She leaned over my shoulder and peered into my laptop, and clicked her tongue.

“No, no, no, if you are not doing it right then I will write it myself.”

“You can’t do that—”

“Are you dumb? This is America, you can notarize anything.”

No unpleasant smells, or graffiti, or any costly damage to the living space.

“That is better, but next time write it exactly as I say it.”

I nodded my head, wrote what she said in one doc, and my rewrite in another. Hers included rules to prohibit cooking smells, dusty clothes, raggedy decorations, unkempt hair, a nine o'clock curfew, and all sorts of crazy shit that she constantly checked to see if I'd typed verbatim. Mine included very few changes to the Office Depot default, save for a bit about *respectfully maintaining the integrity of the room*. Needless to say, I only saved mine.

Leon arrived later that night. He banged on the screen door and as soon as Mom opened it she held out the lease and a pen. Leon placed the papers against the wall, scribbled his signature—not even reading the damn thing—then handed it back to Mom. “There you go,” he said, breathing hard, in a rush. “Hey, Efren,” he said, “Help me with this stuff.”

I followed him outside and stomped down the stairs, matching his antsy pace. We both began to pick up his belongings. It wasn't much actually, just ten black Everest bags, all heavy with product, and a chalky duffel bag full of clothes.

*

There were changes, good ones.

Within days Leon had placed automated perfume spritzers throughout the apartment, one per room. I often walked by only to jump at the hiss of the spray, then calmed as the smell-good particles tingled my nose. The air smelled like what natural spring must smell like, pure air without LA smog. Every few days Leon refilled the spritzers. Our next door neighbor was a rude man; you could hear his partying through the walls, and smell his blunts when he stepped outside for a smoke, but the spritzer smell was strong enough to overpower the weed, and even Mom—critical as she was of Leon—could appreciate that.

“This smells familiar,” she grunted.

Leon couldn’t help but beam, and Mom, annoyed, told him to spit it out already.

“Variant #47, ma’am. The one you bought. Sure it goes away after an hour, but this thing sprays every thirty minutes.”

“It’s nice. It’s like the beach in my hometown.”

“Glad to hear it, Emelda. I really am.”

Most mornings Leon prepared grits and eggs for breakfast, which he offered us. Mom flatly refused—resulting in my polite refusal. But later that same day he’d cook for us, and insist that we sit and eat with him. The smells were familiar and when he set the dishes out on the kitchen table we recognized that this was a legit dinner, and not American food either, but Mom’s food. He picked up on her adobo recipe real quick, and made sure the rice-cooker was full and steaming. I almost asked him how but he intercepted my thought, said, “I just watched your momma last night. I got fast eyes, a fast mind, you ain’t even knowing.”

We were so surprised that we couldn’t say anything other than thanks, and the food was so good I even said, “Amazing.”

“Yes, it is good,” Mom said, reluctantly, “This adobo tastes different from mine. What did you do?”

Leon revealed his broken and shiny whites; he’d clearly been waiting for one of us to ask. “I don’t like soy sauce. Bad for the blood pressure, so I used beef broth and molasses and vinegar for the glaze. Taste the same, just less salt, more kick. That kicked you, right?”

Mom nodded, trying to restrain her approval, but Leon just watched us eat, and even took our empty plates to the sink. He whistled Motown tunes while washing up, and

between tunes he explained the sweet science of his food adaptations. “Believe it or not, I’m something of a scientist. Whether it’s hand-blending Variants or whipping up adobo sauce, I’m disciplined and exact. But all these folks think I just throw things together willy-nilly. Nobody wanna hear that I’m a man of science, that I’m careful with my measurements. Yeah I’m in the streets, but I own a few beakers. These folks ain’t even knowing.” He just talked and smiled, talked and smiled; you’d think he’d break a face muscle the way he carried on like that.

Leon made even more food; he pulled a mother move of his own and cooked enough pansit and adobo food to last us the whole week. He even packed Mom lunch in the same red-topped Tupperware she used every day. She tried to refuse but he insisted, *All that McDonalds ain’t good for nobody*. He didn’t ignore me either. *I can make a sack lunch for school if you want*, which I secretly took him up on a couple times so I could pocket Mom’s lunch money. His pansit surpassed Hawthorne High’s sloppy joes anyway, and these also had a special twist. Instead of lemons he’d walked to the fish market a couple miles away, and bought some Calamansi juice, basically liquid crack for Filipinos. “Giving your momma a taste of home,” Leon said, his booming laughter a balm to the frenzy of our lives.

*

The first night I slept in Mom’s room was difficult.

With all of Pops’ stuff gone, there was plenty of extra closet space for my clothes, but the wall-space, plentiful as it was, belonged to her. She refused to let me hang up my posters of dead musicians that classmates had turned me onto the last couple years:

Hendrix, Marley, Biggie, among others. Mom didn't understand; all she saw were dead black men.

“Hendrix is the one that died doing the drugs. You can't hang him here!”

“I don't care about the drugs, just the music.”

“The same with Marley, drugs gave him cancer. The answer is no.”

I rolled and rubber-banded my posters, then banished them to a corner of the closet.

“You already have things on the wall,” Mom said, still irritated. She referred to the wall above the headboard—the photos with me and her, me and Pops, some with the three of us. She grabbed a stack of frames from atop her nightstand and hung them: Perfect Attendance, Student of the Month, Honor Roll. “There, now don't complain.”

“Yeah, fine,” I said, getting comfortable on my floor pallet.

“Good,” she said, then she knelt down. I closed my eyes, unwilling to see her pray, but I could hear her. The next five minutes were tense. I inwardly burned from her litanies. When she finished she opened the nightstand drawer. She maneuvered against the bed, the sound of the springs keeping me awake.

“What are you doing?” I sat up, and, against my better judgment, watched.

Mom silently held Pops' teatree oil—his hair product of choice—and poured a small amount onto her forefingers. She gently dabbed the pillow next to her's. Greased splotches set into the fabric as if Pops' head actually rested there. The sweet scent lifted off the pillowcase, ghosting the air between us.

I saw him then, and I even felt him—the memory was so clear. Pops' clean-shaven face, golden-brown skin, finely sculpted afro and no missing teeth. Pops, when he wasn't at the racetrack, frequented the Bluebird. We went as a family: me, Mom, and Pops. We

stood in line wearing hopeful smiles. My parents tried all the new scratchers but Pops really took us there for the California Lotto. The man was an absolute fiend for the lottery and a total sucker for the dream-talk that ensued in that long line. There were many times when another man asked how he was, and without fail he'd say *blessed*, and when asked about potentially hitting the big one he'd say, *God can bless me with that, too!* When he lost, which was always, I felt his aura—undoubtedly blue—but he refused to let his torn tickets break him. Behind his various grins and smirks I sensed his ill luck and blue moods, though I didn't see his inevitable descent coming. I believed he was destined for a fated turnaround, a new leaf turned, his elated expressions coming alive with true joy rather than the empty charm that dragged him through life. Pops, that gambling man, that prince among Hawthorne dreamers, died without achieving a single cardboard victory; he'd simply disappeared from the Bluebird, from Hawthorne, and now he was here, a stain on the pillow, a sweet scent, a beloved presence my heart couldn't handle anymore.

I averted my eyes, scrunched my nose, and lay back down on the pallet.

Mom climbed into bed and switched off the lamp. The room was pitch, the darkness solid and heavy; it crushed me with the weight of my father. Mom shifted around in bed while I remained stone still.

“Good night,” she said.

“Good night,” I said, facing the wall.

We were three of us in the room. Mom and Pops, together. And me, shrinking from their union.

*

A month had passed. It was March 1st, and Leon was paying rent. He counted out hundred-dollar bills at the kitchen table with Mom. "...300, 400, and there, 500!" He smiled but Mom maintained a neutral expression. "So I have some things in storage, just a couple items."

Mom's suspicion kicked in once he said this and fears of a cluttered household, a hurricane of Leon's smelly effects mildewing in boxes all over the house, took vicious hold of her. "Don't bring too many things," she warned, "This is an apartment, not a palace."

Leon put his hands up in defense, "I hear you, Emelda. It's only a couple personal things."

Mom shot him a hard look but Leon worked in the streets, was well accustomed to hard everything.

Later on he brought in a few more Everest backpacks, and they were so heavy he had to drag them across the floor. I could hear the clink of the glass.

"You got diamonds in there?" I asked.

"Just mixing instruments," he laughed. "All the equipment has to be fresh. New beakers, flasks, measuring cups, you name it. Come on, Efren, I'm scientist."

I joined him in pushing his backpacks across the room. We were hunched over them, pushing and struggling, and from one of them I detected a thick scent. It wasn't cherry like when he'd moved in, but a muskier scent, not horrible or anything, but incredibly distinct.

"I can take it from here," Leon said when we entered the hallway.

"You sure?"

"Yeah, I got this. Thanks, Efren."

He opened his door slightly, not enough to see inside, and slid the backpacks through. Once he went in himself he closed the door, presumably to arrange shit. Mom looked at me, sighed. I sighed back—exasperation targeted at her suspicion—but she gave a satisfied nod, taking my sound as a show of solidarity, of obedience.

*

It was mid-March, another Big Spin TV day, so Mom sent me on a Bluebird run.

“You don’t want to go see Leon?” I teased

“Quit talking and get the stupid scratchers.”

I arrived at the Bluebird and was surprised that people didn’t treat Leon any better than usual. I don’t know why I expected business to boom, probably the steady showers and constant cooking, but today seemed unusually slow, a rough shift at the office. Leon seemed barbed for once, but he just sighed. He held his head down for a second, took a breath, and resumed his spiel. *Golden scents! Get your golden scents!*

“How goes it?” I asked.

“Hey, Efren! It’s a rough one today.”

“Yeah, it’ll pick up.”

“I sure hope so!” He said this with a smile but a worried expression quickly took over. Then he turned away from our conversation and burst right back into character. *Hey you over there! Buy Variant #50 right now! Smell good! Get classy!*

I watched him from inside the store; he just kept at it, chatting up the local color, at least for a few minutes before sitting on the curb. I took my time shopping, picking up this bag of chips or that. Bill the Bluebird owner/cashier was talking crap again, telling Leon he was worthless, a piece of shit, and that he’d better have his daily cut ready, the

Solicitation Fee. Leon just shrugged it off, but you could tell he was a little hurt. His mood dampened briefly, the smile dissolving into a mass of faint lines, not quite a frown, just time beating down on him. The Bluebird was the most lucrative place in Hawthorne, but that damn owner Bill always got a little ugly whenever someone seemed to do better. He always frowned when a person won three or four digits off of a lottery ticket, or if Leon seemed to be doing particularly well on any given day, shamelessly counting cash outside of the Bluebird entrance.

I bought two California Lotto tickets, three Big Spins, and a large bag of Hot Cheetos. Bill rang me up and bagged my chips, and while I exited he yelled right out at Leon who sat against the glass, “Not counting your money today, huh?”

Leon didn’t even move; he might’ve been sleeping. At home I’d probably ask him how he was, even offer him some water or to warm up a plate—some small courtesy undetectable by Mom’s sensitive antennae. I wasn’t sure if Mom liked him or not, and didn’t want to test it. But out here with Mom nowhere in sight, I patted his shoulder. He hardly stirred. That worried me until he said, “I’ll see you later, Efren.”

“Cool,” I said, and kept walking.

I turned around halfway down the block and Leon was up again, gesturing at passersby, and one even took the bait, approached him. Leon slung the backpack off his shoulders, hurriedly unzipped it, and opened it widely for what was likely the only eager customer that day.

*

That night me and Mom chilled in the living room—Mom laying on her couch, and me on a kitchen chair—both of us watching Big Spin. The host, this old Bob Barker

wannabe, said cordial things to an overly-excited Latina lady in a Big Spin T-shirt. *Where are you from?* the host asked her. *Guadalajara!* she screamed. *Wow, great, Guadalajara! What part of Mexico is that?*

I couldn't stand that Mom wanted to be that lady, telling everyone where she was from, believing this cheesy roulette would lift her out of perpetual brokenness.

Are you ready to spin the wheel? the host said.

Miss Guadalajara couldn't even speak, just grabbed the giant wheel, nodded her head like a crazed squirrel—

There was a knock at the door.

“Who is that?” Mom asked, a mix of exhaustion and untamed exasperation, “Who knocks at night?”

I answered the door.

“Is Leon there?” It was the next door neighbor, the blunt smoker. He was light-skinned, bald-headed, and wore a Champ jersey shirt and Adidas warm-up pants. It annoyed me to see him in person, this man who made our shared walls vibrate with his late-night company—his stomping friends with their hyena laughs, and the women that at least had the tact to apologize for their thoughtless hosts during daylight hours. I could smell the dank on him.

“Do you need anything?” I asked, more tired than annoyed.

He wanted to see Leon about bad Variants he'd purchased. I yelled for Leon to come the door but he didn't come out and just shouted from his room, “Tell that nigga to see me in the street!”

“Oh come on, man!” the neighbor said.

“Hey, hey,” I interrupted, trying not to cower, “Don’t yell in here.”

Mom just lay there, gritting her teeth, seething. She couldn’t concentrate on her favorite show, her one true dose of dream-time. The TV showed an Acura commercial. The lady had spun the wheel and we missed it, didn’t even know if she won a thousand bucks to clear her bills, or won ten grand, a new car, a family cruise, and some random extra like a ConAir fridge.

“Hey, just tell Leon to get out here. I have business with him—”

“Move,” Mom said, “You’re getting drug smell in the living room.”

“Not until I get my money—”

“GET OUT OF MY DOOR!” Mom screamed, absolutely livid.

And of course the neighbor hurried away.

But in the days that followed this same dude kept coming back, asking for Leon. Their conversations never got anywhere. The man kept claiming that Leon owed him a refund for some Variants he bought weeks ago, but Leon said that dude only bought *one* Variant, and that there were no refunds, only exchanges. But the man never had the Variant in question to return and left angry. He’d always come back, though, which proved problematic because the visits all happened in the mid-afternoon and early evening—when Mom was home and trying to nap. Sometimes she answered the door herself, her hair a mass of tangles and quilt lint, and said, *It’s dark! Who are you to come here?* Once, Leon made the mistake of yelling over Mom’s shoulder, as if she’d appreciate his back-up. “Don’t you have respect? You’re disturbing our peace. Come during my hours at the shop.”

“The shop? I can believe you calling it a shop.”

“That’s my place of business, isn’t it? This my home, now go!”

Home. Me and Mom both heard it the same.

Later that night when Leon was asleep, Mom came into the room, sat at the edge of her bed, heaved out a long sigh. “I don’t like this,” she said, gravely, “He’s sneaky.”

“It’s fine,” I said, adjusting my floor pallet, “Just sleep.”

But she didn’t. Like most nights, she knelt with her head bowed and her hands clasped, her knobby elbows pressed down into her/Pops’ side of the bed, her litanies a ghostly song to my father. Her whispers were cutting and precise, a contained frenzy. She ended once more with a dab of teatree oil for the pillow, and instead of ‘good night’ she said, “This oil smells good, not like Leon’s junk. You hear me, Efren?”

“Yeah, Mom, this smells good.”

“Okay, good night.”

*

I ran into Leon on the way to the Bluebird. I greeted him but he sort of mumbled a Hi, and as I matched his tired pace I felt Leon’s silent struggle, a million small deaths fading into the background noise of life—much like the dissonant clang of the shower pipes, the crunch of cockroach bodies under pilfered McDonald’s napkins, the steady clink of glass in his backpack.

“Hey motherfucker!”

We were within a block of the Bluebird, and right at the corner stood the next door neighbor. We tried to walk around him but he barred Leon’s way.

“Hey don’t ignore me. What you think this is?”

Leon didn’t say a thing, just casually tried to walk around him, but the man thrust a hand to Leon’s chest.

“Stay right there. I know you got something for me.”

“I got things for sale if that’s what you mean. Variant #50 is on fire.”

The man gave Leon a hard shove, and he stumbled off the curb, landing right on his backpack. Glass broke, and the smell of various colognes and perfumes lifted up in a dense, stinging cloud. Scents peppered my eyes and nose and I jumped away from Leon, burying my face in my shirt. The man, unfazed by the needling aromas, bent down and frantically searched Leon’s pockets. He yanked out a roll of bills, mostly twenties and tens. Then he dropped a one-dollar-bill onto Leon; it floated down softly like ash in the wind, until finally kissing Leon’s grimacing face. “Grab something off the dollar menu, you bitch.” Then the man ran away.

Leon slowly got up, his backpack wet, his eyes red having been buffeted by the scents, too.

“Need help?” I asked, my voice shaky. “Just let me help with something!” But seeing the pained look on his face, the wet spots on his clothes and on the cement, I felt dumb saying it.

He handed me the wet backpack—glass jangled from within—and I grabbed it, pinching onto the top of it like a soiled diaper. He didn’t say anything but I knew to dispose of it. I walked toward the trashcan at the corner, the perfumes dripping, the streets peppered with the scent of cherry among other things.

*

I expected Leon to leave—or maybe I secretly wanted that—because the scene at the Bluebird shook me. Who knew that street vending entailed actual street shit? I didn’t. I’m sure Leon did but I wanted him to move on, for both of us at least. At any rate I kept

quiet to Mom about it, thinking Leon would mention it, especially since the neighbor lived directly above us.

But that evening Leon didn't speak, or even sulk, though he wasn't jolly either. He microwaved some of the pansit he made, waved to Mom, then disappeared within his room.

Late that night the grunts and moans from above us were incredibly flagrant. The man had coupled his robbery of Leon with a celebratory fuck. I laid awake on the floor pallet while the man kept saying, *Give me that ass! Back it up, girl!* in alternating succession.

"These people have no respect," Mom clicked her tongue, "And he's not even married. It's not right."

Naturally, I pretended to sleep.

*

Several days passed with Leon in a semi-stupor. He ate leftovers, waved when he saw me or Mom, but he just wasn't his usual motor-mouth self. When Leon's Filipino food ran out Mom just started bringing home McDonalds and didn't seem to mind, actually seemed more at peace.

Leon even stayed home from work one day. Having to watch his back in his own apartment complex was stressing him out, but he just told Mom he was sick.

"Don't breathe over here then," Mom said, a bit too quickly.

Leon seemed hurt but recovered. "I won't. I'm just going to sleep."

When he left the room Mom dug under the kitchen sink, and returned to the living room with Lysol. She sprayed so much I could've sworn we lived inside a lemon.

Later on when the place was in full shut-down mode—Mom in the room praying, me on the couch putting my schoolbooks in my backpack, waiting for Mom to finish, and Leon pacing the darkened living room, flossing—I finally broke our silence.

“Hey Leon, you okay?”

“I’m always okay.” He then adopted his butler shtick. “Thank you for your concern, young master.”

“For real. You’ve been mopey.”

“Mopey, huh?” Leon laughed. “I’ll cut that out then.”

“Is this normal?”

“Not sure what you mean by that, but doesn’t seem like much has changed.”

“You know what I mean. Is it gonna happen again?”

“Probably.”

A shudder ran through me. “Aren’t you gonna do anything about it?”

“Well, I was thinking about upping the prices on Exclusives for a while to recoup my losses.”

“That neighbor can just rob you again, though.”

“That’s just business,” and when I didn’t respond right away he added, “Don’t worry, Efren. I factor losses into the budget.”

“Makes sense, I guess.”

“What can I say? It’s a tough business.” And then, after he stopped to pick something out of his teeth, he said, “Don’t tell your momma, but I think I might leave.”

“But you paid rent. You like it here.”

“It’s just a possibility.”

“Stay,” I blurted, unsure of where the word came from. The air changed; I couldn’t see it but I imagined Leon cocking his eyebrow in the dark. I knew that we weren’t obliged to make him feel wanted, but he cooked the food, made the money, and brought the scent of the Philippines back to my mother. That counted for me and I wasn’t sure if it counted for her in the same way. Still, Leon mattered, and I convinced myself that Mom recognized his value as well. “We want you here. My mom likes your pansit, too.”

“I never thought about it that way. Your momma seems to treat me like a tenant, a rent machine, you know. That’s really good, I’m really glad to hear this.” I felt his smile and figured that I’d actually done good.

“Yeah, Leon, just stick it out. Things are good here.”

“Alright,” Leon laughed, “I suppose I’ll stick it out. I’ve dealt with worse than that man up there anyway. But your momma sure is a tough one.”

“Yeah, that’s her.”

“She sure is wonderful, though. Reminds me of a woman I married many years ago.” The longing in his voice was pained and hopeful. I saw his dream then: a stable domestic life. He wanted that more than he wanted The Last Variant. I burned from within, much like in the presence of Mom’s prayers. “Those days are long gone,” Leon continued. “But this is nice. I could get used being here, just the three of us.”

“Good for you,” I laughed, though my nerves were shot. I shook in the dark and dropped my math book while rising from the couch. Leon tried to help me but I politely refused and told him to keep flossing. “Good night,” I walked past him to the room.

“Good night,” he slurred, his words getting tripped up by the floss.

*

Leon came home with another thing from storage. It was a framed print for his wall, a large 20 by 18 framed art piece depicting tiny chickens in a house set on a grassy field. One of the chickens was building the fence, another could be seen in the window cooking scrambled eggs, and there was one baby chicken outside on the swing, a speech bubble coming from its mouth that says, *Wheeee I'm flying*. The photo was a little too adorable for Leon, whose life up until now seemed to be composed of wreck and ruin, yet here he was holding up this ridiculous chicken print to our faces. “Read the bottom,” he said, “It’s great isn’t it?”

Home sweet home.

“That’s not going up here,” Mom snapped.

“I was thinking it could—”

“There’s no room, we have too many pictures...”

“I was—”

“No, no, we cannot, we absolutely cannot.”

“Hold on, Emelda! It’s just a homey touch! Can’t I at least have that?” Then after a silent moment of heavy breath and fiery stares, Leon added, “It’s only going in my room. Please.”

“Just make sure I don’t see it.” Then Mom stepped back into the kitchen. She grabbed a pot but she wasn’t going to do shit with it because Leon had already done the weekly cooking—his first try at pansit, and it just about equaled Mom’s. Though we’d planned to eat his leftovers for dinner, she didn’t want Leon to see her warm them up. Leon looked at me with dejected eyes and I couldn’t maintain eye contact for more than a split second. I felt ashamed. He left for his room—I didn’t see this—but I heard his feet drag

across the carpet, and his door opening, then closing. He left the apartment a couple minutes later, taking his duffel bag of clothes. He claimed to be back and was just doing laundry, which was hard to buy, but I bought it seeing as he left everything else in the room.

I entered the hall and found the chickens sadly leaned against his doorknob, diagonal, dark shadows obscuring the luster of those hopeful kindergarten colors. *Hissss*. The automatic spritz but no smell of Mom's island; Variant #47 had run out.

A scent hit me, though, an odor coming from the picture, earthy and thick like the chickens' yard. I figured it for a scratch-n-sniff portrait, and it would've made an adorable house-warming touch if it weren't so pungent. I sniffed at it again, and my mind seemed to fade from the fight, the apartment's tension, and drift into the chicken field. I felt like a kid again, like the baby chick on the swing-set, kicking my feet, going higher. I kept sniffing, once more, twice, and maybe a couple more indulgent times, dreaming, swinging, even after I realized what this was.

*

Mom smelled it, too. At first she was curious about the missing Variant, and entered the hall only to get hit with the powerful scent. It wasn't from the photo but inside the room.

"I knew it." she said, her face in utter disgust.

"What? Smells pretty good."

"Are you crazy?"

"No, I'm not."

She snorted. "Efren, you must be. I want to throw up!"

I watched as she pulled keys from her pocket—room key at the ready on her keychain—put in the one that fit, then twisted.

*

Inside the odor strengthened; it gut-punched me like a hard truth. While the room looked mostly the same, there was enough for Mom to kick him out anyway. Some of the frames with Pops' photos now had Leon in them. Leon as a young man, missing only two teeth, on the high school graduation stage. Leon in an apron and hairnet, looking much like I did years later at Louie's Cuisine, taking a spatula to a vat of oil, frying fish. Middle-aged Leon with his arm around a dark-skinned woman in a silky purple blouse and a fresh perm; she held his arm, a return of his affection, and there were rings on both of their fingers. There was an empty frame too, somewhat ornate, with gilded lions stalking the corners. If there was a frame that would've contained his family, his precious nomads, it was that one. He'd lived with us for close to two months, but hadn't forgotten his old family, his pride and joy, and though they now lived in Seattle, Leon had taken their photo on an outing, a small journey, something to commemorate their ten-year anniversary. I didn't know the exact date—just that this was a special time for Leon, and that Mom and I had ruined it.

But he'd left this smell—nothing bad, but interesting. Where did it come from? It wasn't any of Leon's trademark scents—not the open bottle of Quorum that laid against the wall, or the Giorgio Armani on his nightstand that he convinced the costumers was *Legit as MC Hammer*. And it wasn't the stale odor emanating from the empty canisters of Axe Body Spray glutting the wastebasket (along with dozens of mall price-tags, no receipts). Couldn't have been the measuring cups and beakers that stuck out from under

the bed, dried substances staining the insides. There was a whisk at the foot of the bed as well, and even a wooden ladle—both items were soiled, but without scent.

The smell came from the closet. This scent rose out from the several Everest backpacks crowded together on the floor. Dusky windbreakers and raincoats hung from plastic Target hangers, casting the backpacks in muted shadow. The new scent floated beneath the potent, ill-gotten Macy's smells, like a shy child hoping to be forgotten behind its mother's skirt. I shuffled toward the closet and opened the door gently, finger-tipping it with both reverence and apprehension. I bent down and unzipped a backpack, spread its mouth open, and peered into the dark for a long, unnerving second. Then, slowly, I inched my head in and took a deep, faithful whiff of the mysterious aroma. And there it was, a complex smell comprised of at least a dozen scents, though what I mostly noticed were the hints of cherry, of Pops' teatree oil, and even of the Calamansi Mom loves so much. This was certainly the fruit of Leon's labor, the culmination of his years of struggle at the Bluebird. He'd left this here, for us as a gift. Leon's whole vision revealed itself, and I felt it right then, my variant pieces all coming back to me.

Louie's

You're eighteen and brown—a halfie, a mulatto, black with an unfortunate twist—and you work at Louie's, a soul food restaurant in the heart of Inglewood, California. The line for food is a black snake; it begins right in front of you on the other end of the glass food protector, and gets so long it extends out the door and sometimes around the corner next to the Crenshaw street sign. For a place so small—cozy as a Southern home some customers say—it's popular, it's crowded, absolutely packed with old nostalgic black folks. Louie's serves food all day; a constant flow of dark faces file by the steamtable—that familiar C-grade Chinese restaurant set-up. Customers enter from the door on the left and the line begins there, where they first select their meat, then slide over to the right for their sides, and then continue on to the cash register. A few glass tables are set up along the wall-sized window panes, along with these uncomfortable wooden chairs that hurt after a minute or two of sitting, but people suck it up and cram their six-person party around tables made for four, and happily declare that this feels just like Home.

Today is Sunday, church day, the busy day. On weekdays these customers come in frustrated having already suffered an eight-hour shift or rush hour on the 405. But Sundays are turned up several notches: entire families flood into the restaurant, an absolute riot of brightly colored suits and dresses, leather dress-shoes and sanctified heels. They're restless and testy and ready to drop their alligator jaws onto chicken or mac-and-cheese or greens—or your head if you move too slowly or run out of shit or speak to them firmly because You Don't Have The Right. Louie's is their sanctuary, their home base, and each customer will search your features to catch a hint of an origin that belongs. They will find none. Young niggas won't see the hood in you. Old ones won't see the country. You lack the swagger,

the accent, and the skin tone for Inglewood—let alone Georgia, Arkansas, Missouri, Mississippi.

They think you're just there to listen to orders, musings, complaints, and while that's definitely in the job description and really all Louie expects, you hold onto the naïve notion of Bridging The Gap. It appears all over—in your high school yearbook with kids whose signatures mean less to you each day, in admissions catalogues that come in the mail, and on that Devry billboard at the edge of town with some black chick wearing a cap and gown—and sadly you believe in it still. It's not like you don't know better, you do, because you understand real clearly that there's no bridge between you and the customer, just a stone ass wall, and even though you all share a bit of color, some fucking black, it isn't nowhere near enough to bleed through.

The Real Mississippi not here? an older gentleman asks you, a regular. He brings his three teenage grand-daughters every Sunday, all dressed in clean whites and yellows, except for him who wears the same bright blue suit. If you didn't see him so often you'd think he was a pimp, that he had church girls for sale. The Real Mississippi don't work today? Mr. Blue Suit asks, I wanted to hear brothaman sing!

He says this in complete adoration of Ted, who actually does have the voice of an angel, and you even wish he had the wings, too, so his ass would never have to set foot in Louie's again. But you detect a slight edge in Blue Suit's tone, something like an accusation that you've done away with The Real Mississippi, that you're somehow a fraud, a cheat. His granddaughters look at you, too, with neutral enough expressions, but you feel judged anyway. Blue Suit and his girls wonder why a maybe-Mexican is rocking the white apron, the hairnet, the yellowish latex gloves, and why the hell does Mystery Mothafuckah get to

hold the tongs, the serving spoon. They wonder where the other guy is. Where is Ted, you also wonder, where is that old man with his big smiling gums and soulful voice? Where's the hero, the star? Where's Mississippi's Finest?

He's not in yet, you say as you fill his plates. One person does the meats, the other does the sides, but because Ted starts late on Sunday—having to go to church himself—you get stuck doing both, facing the customer for twice as long, subjected to twice the pressure for more food, for extra *juice* as the customer says which in reality is just grease and fat. Blue Suit's eyes are still on you so you add, His shift starts in an hour, sir.

Blue Suit snorts, grunts in disapproval, then looks you dead in the face as you're filling his Styrofoam trays with ribs, and before you even finish giving him his portions he says, You're not doing it right, No, No, No, No, No.

Forty hours a week of No, No, No, No, No. Forty hours a week where you hold your tongue, where you bite your lip purple trying not to say the wrong thing. There are any number of comments that'll set the customer off, and you mutter the ugliest ones as you bend down to pack the plate, hiding your lips. All they see is the top of your head, which you soon raise from the steamtable with a bright smile and say, Would you like anything else? Yes, the customer says, Gimme more Mac (or) Gimme more yams, pack it on, son, pack it on (or) Where's Ted? I like that brotha. He gives a lot of food (and then eyeballing you like a fly, like a buzzing gnat) A lot more food. You've already been written up today for overfilling plates ever since Louie came in wearing a suit and pressed shirt and baby Jheri curls in his greased white hair and said, Hey slow down on the ribs, Efren! You tryin' to *give* the restaurant to these mothafuckahs? They don't even *like* you, boy! I

ain't make a cent tryin' to please these fools, and you damn sure won't either! Don't test me, dammit.

But the echoes of Louie's threats and Blue Suit's No, No, No, No, No compete with one another, and you attempt to find compromise, which is nothing short of a foolish endeavor, useless flailing.

You add an extra rib to each of Blue Suit's plates, and even throw in a wide smile, an eager tug for a kind response. You don't even need a thank you, just a curt nod, anything that looks halfway like respect. Here you go, sir, you say, Please enjoy. But Blue Suit doesn't respond to it, and probably didn't even see it; at the very least he shuts up and slides over to the right toward the register, his blank-faced granddaughters trailing behind him like whipped pups.

Your gaze follows their path and you see Louie right behind them, scoping things out, eyeing you real meanly for giving in to Blue Suit. Then he smiles—for the customers, never for you. He stomps back toward the far right of the room, and sits behind his desk nudged into the back corner. His eyes aren't on you anymore but he's mentally cursing you out and you know it.

Louie is old, Southern, hard. The softest things about him are the snake-like words he feeds to customers, and these damn driving loafers he wears. Expensive, probably worth thousands of bucks—a habit he picked up once the restaurant got popular. He's always wiping dust off of them, especially while scolding you. You betta be listening, he usually says, giving his feet a couple agitated swipes, you overfill any more plates and that'll be your ass.

Louie, being Louie, doesn't give away shit. Even on your break he still cashes in on your time. He'll approach you out in the parking lot and assume you want to hear his success story, which he tells you like every other day. It actually manages to impress you each time. He sniffs out your interest and spins the tale about how he seized control of the restaurant from the old motherfuckers that nearly ran it to the ground; he tries to instill lessons in you because he's child-less, and, you've decided, it can't hurt to take a lesson from a man like Louie, honest and mean, a scrapper, a defender, a true success. You're a soft, baby-faced boy in the midst of the summer vacation before college, before what Louie would consider not real life at all, just glorified laziness, and his lessons of grit and gravel are comparable to gold.

I bet they taught you about that segregation shit in school, he says, But don't go feeling sorry for nobody. I might've drank from the colored fountain but I still won. The rest of these niggers didn't, and now they wanna come in here, acting like we're brothers, like I owe them? The nerve of these self-pitying motherfuckers! Fight, goddammit, fight!

Still, Missouri got bad enough for him to move to L.A. in the mid-sixties, where he got a cooking gig at a nameless hole-in-the-wall. After three years the former owners couldn't make rent and abandoned ship. Louie, who saved every penny, who just lived off of restaurant leftovers instead of buying groceries, who stayed at a run-down motel called the Heaven Inn, earning himself a discount rate by dicking-down the white lady that managed it—his own small revenge against the South—put everything he had into reviving the place, blessing it with his name-sake of course. It's a goddamn mystery how these dumb fools had a restaurant at all, Louie says, King is getting shot, Malcolm, even JFK, and these no-good fools get to run a business. The old owners even came back asking for *jobs*. For

management positions! I said, Look, y'all you get one discount meal, twenty-five percent off, then you niggas have got to *go*!

After telling his story he dusts off his loafers. They seemed clean to you but he swipes at them furiously as if he scuffed the fucking things. Then he shoots you a harsh look—

The same look he now gives you from behind his desk, his sudden awareness of you as shocking and sharp as a stab wound. His scowl says exactly what he tells you in the parking lot, things he never allows the customers to hear. What you lookin' at, Efren? Get back to work and let's make this goddamn money!

*

Ted comes in, throws on his apron, and works his hands into latex gloves, the palm end snapping sharply against his wrists. He doesn't do a hairnet, hasn't for over two decades he's told you, and dons his trademark chef hat. Ted's not the chef—technically Javier is—but you let the customers think Ted runs the show. The recipes are Louie's and the hat is Louie's too—the façade of Chef Ted serving as an ingenious marketing scheme. Louie shams like a true businessman, and Ted's job is to play along, packing plates as if he'd made the food himself, as if packing his belongings for a flight home.

He stands on the left side of the serving line, where all the meat is, while you stand on the right, to deliver the sides. He's only supposed to put three pieces of meat whether the customer orders chicken or pork chops or ribs—and he always seems to double that. You'd think God were in the kitchen conjuring fresh everything instead of just Javier slaving in the heat with pots and pans and a food-splattered timer. Ted passes the tray over to you, as well as the customer expectation of fat servings of mac, succotash, mashed

potatoes, yams. They want a plate too heavy to hold with one hand, something that'll make Louie rage. Ted gets away with it, too, and rightfully so, because he's the self-proclaimed Real Mississippi. He, too, like Louie, was a young man in the South during the early sixties. Ted never speaks of Southern struggle, just that he sung in the church, sung with some neighbors, and then came out west to sing to some fine L.A. women. He always says this in a joking way, and though his story lacks details his joyful telling seems to check out as true, so you don't press him on anything. He just positions himself behind the food, singing and funk dancing; his body grooves in a distinct, freeing way, like a Ray Charles or something. Snap a photo and you'd have a poster for the ages. Ted's the man, the anchor, the root running from the building's foundation in SoCal stone all the way to Southern soil, siphoning Down-Home soul through its very minerals. God sent me here, Ted has always said and will continue to say until his spirit leaves his wiry body, I'm God's messenger and he sent me to sing ya'll the blues! Ted sings along to his favorite old-timey hits that he plays from his iPod docking station. There's only about fifty songs on his iPod but his renditions makes them timeless, forever beautiful. His soul rides every note.

The Temptations, Billie Holiday, B.B. King, Stevie Wonder. The names are familiar but what they're about is lost on you. Ya don't know what ya missed, says one customer wearing a lipstick red three-piece abomination. Just another suit, another stupid mouth. Ya hear me, boy, this is *real* music.

Sure, you say, and adding, despite your better judgment, tell me about it. You mean it, too, you want to understand, you're making an earnest attempt, because silence doesn't bridge gaps—it widens them.

But like the other times in which you've said nothing, he just shuffles toward the cash register, straightening the collar on his ugly red suit that you swear he must've stolen from the King of Hearts.

Once again you're mistaken for one of those kids that exclusively listens to the new wave of booty-popping rap. And yes, you like that shit, but you also like indie and alternative. You know what the white boys are going on about when they come into the restaurant. They usually catch a bite before heading to the Great Western Forum. It's located a mile down the street at the very edge of Inglewood. The Lakers used to play there before moving downtown to the Staples Center, so now the Forum just hosts concerts. Hey ya'll, Ted says to the white boys, I don't know how they do it where ya'll from but 'round here we tip. And they do. The tip jar atop the steamtable fills with ones, fives. When they leave Ted smiles, showing off his big beautiful gums. I love them tourists, he says, handing me my un-earned half of fresh tips, When the Lakers used to play 'round here we raked it *in*.

Last week you caught a Paramore show down the street at the Forum; you were a lone hoodie in a sea of plaid. You bought a band T-shirt and regretted it as soon as you got home. The ticket was already four hours of work, the shirt close to three.

Today you're back at work saving for Radiohead tickets. No white boys in sight—the Forum isn't booked this weekend so they're likely downtown at the Echoplex, that hole-in-the-wall live-house, that hipster haven.

You missed a golden age, Ted kindly reminds you in his jumpy Down-Home accent, You're too young to understand but back then we sang with *love*. A couple customers nod in agreement, pitying you, so you smile and say you need to get more

cornbread from the kitchen. One of them customers turns on you, a man in a crème suit and a thin moustache, his false pity revealing itself as full-blown annoyance. Hurry up with that cornbread then, he snaps, these greens can't go without it!

You hide in the kitchen, taking your time, and try to stay out of Javier's circuit as he bustles this way and that. You turn on your iPod, plug the earbuds in with the volume high enough to drown out the customers, and low enough to catch pieces of Ted's passionate renditions, and definitely low enough to hear when Louie finally yells for your return to the serving line. But until then you close your eyes and slow your breaths, and instead of feeling like a gnat you take a strange solace in the fact that *You're a creep* (and additionally) *You're a weirdo...*

*

Louie is on your ass like a hound on meat. He normally sits at his desk in the corner of the dining area, running numbers. He's watching, always watching. Like now when he catches you in the kitchen and chews you out for taking an unauthorized break. He threatens to dock your pay for the fifteen minutes you were M.I.A. "Creep" on repeat almost wasn't worth it.

The break was supposed to help—and it did—but now you're back on the serving line, this time on the left side doing meats. Ted wanted to switch it up, claiming that the change would keep you both on your toes, but you notice the attractive woman peering at the sides, a caramel lovely with a Hallie Barry cut and a soft round face. Ted holds her food tray open expectantly, asking her if she'd like anything else, as if the six pieces of fried chicken he put on her plate weren't going to destroy her goddamn arteries. Meats are a nightmare, given Ted's monstrous precedent of dishing out double what Louie told you

guys to give, and while you try to compromise by dishing out four ribs instead of Ted's six, Louie's three, the old lady you're serving gets all hissy about it. There aren't enough ribs on the plate, she says, you put it in and closed the lid so I couldn't see, you're cheating me. You look at the closed tray and see bits of rib spilling out the side, sauce oozing down the plate. Way too much but *The Customer Is Always Right*. Louie never said this, he'd likely have a stroke if he ever actually did, and in fact he once declared that he'd shoot the motherfucker who invented the saying, but it's in your head anyway—from white bosses on TV, from your own pushy mom when she's haggling at the swap meet, sweat beading the pale skin of her forehead as she works herself up into a frenzy. The customer is correct, and when you're stuck between a stubborn customer and Louie then that's pretty much the definition of fucked. Louie's stingy ass is definitely going to overhear and even though he's great at assuring the customer that they've got plenty of food, The proper serving size, he will say, he'll surely kick your ass for being careless with the ribs again. He may suspend your weekday hours, exile you to exclusively Sundays like today, where the customers are more numerous, the orders bigger, and the line so constant you'll go all ten hours straight without a break.

The old lady—no teeth in her mouth—yammers on, You gave me the broken pieces, too, I'm elderly, I don't have time for this young man. You hold the tray dumbfounded, staring at her fat gums. You look over to your right at Ted for help, to throw some charm over your way. You even say, Ted! Ted! Ted! No answer, not even a look or a glance, partially because he's a little hard of hearing, but really because he's hit a total soul zone as he croons "Just My Imagination" to that Hallie Barry lookalike. A couple customers even cut around her to pay, while she remains captivated by Ted's charming

voice. Wonderful, she says, absolutely wonderful. Meanwhile the toothless hag is still there, nagging you. Young man, the old woman says, Young man, she keeps repeating like garbage trucks in the early morning, like nightly sirens cutting you from sleep. The customers behind her are looking, judging, becoming impatient. And now Louie is looking, too—he's over at his desk but now he stands, he wants to know why the line is getting longer, the woman so fussy, and Tonya the cashier bored and tapping the register with her long green press-ons.

Is there a problem? Louie says. Is there anything I can do for you, ma'am? She tells him about the light plate, the broken ribs which Louie assures her are so tender they fall off the bone. You won't even need your dentures, he says with his winning smile and then puts a hand on my shoulder, This boy gave you the good ribs, I promise. The customer is more confused than satisfied; she doesn't know what to say. She doesn't want to be wrong but now she's excited about the food, about savoring the soft ribs that her old ass might as well drink through a straw, and kindly proceeds to pay. Louie has done his job but before walking away he squeezes your shoulder, hard. His smile is gone and he's shaking his head, Too many fucking ribs man, You think we kill the hog in the back? You nod absently in a way that says, Yes, Yes, I know, *I know*.

Ted suddenly appears right there in our little huddle. Go easy on that boy, he whispers, It's just busy that's all.

Louie chuckles—strictly for the customer who might take this huddle as some light ribbing, a bonding moment between the Louie family. Especially the moment Louie leans into Ted's ear, and whispers, We've known each other mighty long but I swear the moment

your voice give out I'ma cut your ass loose. This restaurant is *mine*, you giving away *my* food goddammit.

Ted doesn't flinch or let his smile break—in fact it widens—and he returns to fake Hallie Berry's plate, and softly nudges it toward the register.

Louie walks away and instead of returning to his desk he's headed into the black snake, into the heart of Mississippi, to greet the customers, to entertain the people in this line that became so massive during the scandal of Rib-Gate. All day the line went out the door, but now it's halfway down the block, and more people are parking and putting money in the meters and queuing up still. The window pane is barred with bodies and the end of it isn't even visible—it's definitely reached the corner of Crenshaw, maybe even around the block. Louie just calmly proceeds from person to person, chatting them up, smiling like a total asshole. He starts from the restaurant entrance, and moments later you can see him out the window, too, shaking hands and such. Somehow, in spite of his hatred for these people, he manages to glide through the crowd with ease, and every time he does this the envy stabs at you something vicious. They're black, and you're somewhat black, and while you stick around this place hoping that it'll mean something, your half-baked basis for solidarity, connection, some basic ass recognition, counts for zero, zilch, more zilch than you'd reasonably expect in a lifetime.

You check the clock: just a little past three. Five more hours.

That crushes you, makes you want to curl up, go fetal. You need another "Creep" break, or just to sit out on a parking block while Ted and Louie and Javier and green-nailed Tonya somehow disappears all this fucking work. You want to relax. You want to go home.

But mostly you want your mind wiped of the day's events because Louie's is ruining black people for you.

But Ted still sings. He soaks up the atmosphere, bent over plate after plate, crooning. Two old men who have been nodding their heads, digging the vibe, drop fives into the tip jar before even ordering. Ted, one of them says, You're better than the Temptations, where are your albums? I would buy one for each member of my family. The other one nods, says, Mhm, over and over. Ted just smiles at them and continues singing, staying on key; he scoops a little extra mac onto their plates—in addition to his already heavyweight portions—because as he's prone to saying, Love is earned.

Hey Ted, you say, Lemme ask you something.

What's up, Efren? He says, pushing the fat plates toward Tonya.

Tell me for real, how you end up working soul food for forty years? You say it with an impressed inflection but you're not all that impressed, just curious, and a little bit sad. It's incredible, you add, I couldn't be that devoted? You what I'm saying?

God put me here, Ted says, full of confidence, bravado, and he looks at you with shining eyes, He had another plan for me.

You're completely underwhelmed, disappointed even. You wanted him to confirm that he was too good for this place. You simply expected more, especially out of a man like him.

That's right! A customer says, God is good, God is so beautiful.

Then it happens. You look into Ted's face. The smile gone. All lips, no gums. His eyes focused, hard. He stares right through you, straight into a figment of the truth of his life. For the first time in Ted, you see some semblance of pain, a great loss. Maybe it had

to do with the South, with the stuff Louie says all the time that Ted never speaks of. Maybe it happened after—forty years is a long time for things to go wrong. But there it is written all over his face, he missed something in life, or rather, in him something was missing.

You pat his back, flash a smile, and say, If this is The Plan, then you're right where you belong.

And there they are, those big beautiful gums. God's plan is *The Plan*, he says, joyously.

The massive line grows—or at least seems to grow because you can't see the end of it. While the day seems to go smoothly for Ted, it doesn't for you. Most customers either give you lip about your servings or ask about your origins. Where ya from? Ya born in Inglewood? Tell me ya roots, young man! They even try to guess. Brazil? Egypt? There's one guy in a purple button-down and a dark tie that nods his head, absolutely confident that he has it right, You Saudi Arabians are absolutely fascinating. Did you ever get to meet your king?

You look over at Louie for a save and notice that he's been staring at you the whole time, almost scowling, warning you to deal with it. The mandate is silence, it's always silence, but this time you try it Louie's way, the amiable way, the sucking up and brown-nosing type of way.

Yes, actually. My King pays my tuition out here.

Is that so? the purple man says, tilting his head in curiosity and awe, captivated by my royal people.

His Majesty has hundreds of servants.

I suppose he should, shouldn't he?

You lean over the steamtable, inch close enough to the purple man's face to tell him a secret, and in a whisper you say, He owned *slaves*—and then, after a too-long pause, you add—Saudi ones. But not anymore.

Purple is confused, and isn't quite sure if he should either be offended, or just grateful for the cultural exchange, the overseas lesson. You fill his plate with Louie's portion sizes—miserly to you, but hearty toward the business. Tonya will handle you at the register, you say, sliding his plate to the right, sending him along with a smile. Louie, irritated that he couldn't hear the exchange, just walks away, at least satisfied with your serving size.

A couple minutes later Louie waves you to the kitchen—because he doesn't let things go, not ever. His face is still that of an angry pitbull's, but the hand he places on your shoulder is soft, something like kindness. He opens his mouth to speak; he is about to drop wisdom it seems. Listen here, Light-Skin, he says, These Negroes see your tan complexion and figure you must have wandered here off a tour bus. Shit, you think you got problems? That ain't shit! You ever drink from a colored-only fountain? You ever uproot your life and build from scratch, with your own hands? Hell, you ain't ever been called a nigger! Do you even know what a moon cricket *is*? Oh, hell no, boy! Don't complain! Don't even *go* there—

Grand Gesture

We've been perched on the telephone wires all day, bearing gifts. There are many of us, more than you can count. Each beak holds a special something. One of us holds a Simply Lemonade bottle-cap because that's Girlfriend's favorite drink. A couple of others hold discarded Wendy's wrappers from Asiago Chicken Sandwiches, because Girlfriend loves them; she swears they're cooked with crack. Many others hold fortunes from those Chinese cookies, or assorted clips, pins, and other shiny things. I, myself, hold a live salamander. It's squirming and I feel sorry for it. The other pigeons think I'm strange and stubborn, that the salamander suffers for no good reason, but I am the leader and that means respect. The others don't fight me on the things I consider important. *This reptile will be the vessel for my feelings*, I told them this morning. *Trust me, I know these things*. More pigeons land on wires all around me, and they do trust me; that's something I appreciate. So we've remained perched all day in the August swelter, thrusting our breasts forward as if we were robins and not pigeons, silent and imperial. Girlfriend's out, but she'll be back soon. We watch and wait.

A red Mustang flies into the neighborhood, disregarding the STOP sign, and brakes on a dime. We know who the car belongs to and we're immediately compelled to crap on the windshield. I catch one of us hunching forward, prepping for flight. *Wait*, says my gesture, a single raised wing, *Let's just see what he does*.

Boyfriend remains stopped in front of Girlfriend's house, right in the middle of the street. He doesn't even bother flashing the hazards, he just puts it in park, sits there daring the traffic with his Do-Something-Nigga expression. Cars whip around him violently, grazing the front bumper of the Nissan heading the opposing traffic.

A black man hops out of the Nissan, angry, but exposed, and cars blow by him. Now, instead of an accident victim, he's just someone else in the way. "Move, nigga!" a driver yells, and leads several cars in speeding past the man, nearly clipping him. Drivers proceed carelessly as if the black man were nothing. Even the children playing basketball in narrow driveways, or double-dutch on the cracked walk, have to pause and step further away from the curb. The black man hops back in his Nissan, slams the door, and drives off.

The children resume play: business as usual.

In that moment the black Nissan driver was one of us, caught in the whirl of a rough city. Drivers speed up when they see us in the road; passersby fling unfinished food at us; ketchup and mustard and saliva spray our dark feathers.

Girlfriend leaves us alone. She slows when she sees us. *Come on birds!* she says, drumming the wheel, *Ya'll got wings, now go!* But she's patient in her own way; she sees us pick crumbs out of the road, going about our business of survival. Girlfriend doesn't fault us. She just lurches forward in her Honda Accord. She wants us to move. If she accelerates, she knows we'll take flight and scatter instantly. She waits instead, annoyed. But I feel her protection, her bleeding heart that refuses to risk hurting us. We appreciate the gesture, the kindness.

Honk! Honk!

Everyone jams angry palms into their horns, honking at Boyfriend's red Mustang. Boyfriend also honks, because even though he's the problem, the red Mustang blocking the middle of the road, he wants the hood (as he's announced many times before) to see his big fruitful nuts and manly warrior chest. Now he wears the fierce scowl we're used to

seeing, the scowl fired toward anyone who dares challenge him on his stomping grounds, in his hood, and right in front of his girl's house too, his *girl's* house.

We wait for someone to tell Boyfriend to move his car, but that's not going to happen. Boyfriend is the-nigga-you-don't-mess-with as the locals often say. He's tall and muscled and even if he were a bird it'd take many of us to stop him. He's the one that empowers dark skin in the night. In these parts, dark people grow powerful, cloaked by the urban dark. People say it, so we believe them. But we never get to see for ourselves; the streets are mostly empty at night. The people are afraid of each other.

Boyfriend steps out of the car, clenching his fists. He glares at the stopped cars and the air suddenly changes.

No more honking. Everything goes quiet.

Cars slowly make their way around Boyfriend as if apologizing. I imagine the cars standing on their rear wheels, tip-toeing—tip-*wheeling*—around a really big man. Truth is, he should move, but he doesn't—he won't. He doesn't have to. Fear is his superpower.

But Girlfriend won't have any of it, and Boyfriend knows that. That's why he's here, even though she told him not to come back. *Nigga you on Time Out*, she'd said, *Time Out. I better not see you for three months, or ever.*

Time Out isn't over, it's been two days, but Boyfriend is here anyway. With some planned brilliance I suppose.

Boyfriend closes his eyes and breathes deep, doing a couple ins-and-outs, something we've never seen him do before. He reaches a hand into his right pocket, lets the hand linger there for a couple seconds, and takes it out. "Control," I hear him say to himself, "Impulse control, like momma told me. I got this. Impulse. Control." Like the

impulse to not do the things we're used to Boyfriend doing. The things that made all the cars apologize to him and his red Mustang, which is still parked in the middle of the road. The things that drew us to Girlfriend's house in the first place—other than Girlfriend herself—in case Boyfriend got out of line, or out of control, again.

Boyfriend eyes Girlfriend's door like a target and steps onto the curb. He advances up the cement path toward her front step. His gait is measured and steady, his back straight and tall, and his face has softened from a scowl to something neutral, a calm expression. He's not slouching or stomping or furrowing his brow like we're used to. His peaceful façade makes us nervous. *The quiet before the storm*, people say, and that's true. Our senses are keen and we're gone long before the first drops hit, before the sky grays with the storm to come.

We cinch our gifts hard in our talons and beaks, anxious for Boyfriend's next move.

The salamander in my mouth wriggles wildly. It's thrashing in pain because I almost killed it, but it's alive, which is what matters. It's alive. The thing's got fight.

Boyfriend reaches the door and knocks.

“Baby?”

Boyfriend's deep baritone nearly rattles the windows. We're waiting for Girlfriend to get home; he thinks she's there. She left dressed in her best, for church and then family time. That's what she does—especially when Boyfriend isn't acting right. He knocks again.

“Baby? It's me. I know I'm on Time Out and all that craziness but I just wanna tell you that I'm sorry. I apologize from the bottom of me because I know I hurt you, though ... I didn't mean to do all that ... all that stuff I did to make you raise up on me like that, I was just having a moment, a bad moment, that's all.”

Boyfriend looks worried. He breathes in, breathes out, and knocks again. Meanwhile Girlfriend's Honda Accord pulls up behind his Mustang. She makes an angry face at the familiar car, but remains stopped, turns her hazard flashers on. She watches Boyfriend shuffle on her doorstep, speaking from the bottom of him and all. She doesn't say anything, just joins us in our watching, and listens.

"Now," Boyfriend continues, "if you could just like, tell me what I did, then we'll be straight. We'll be cool and all that and we can get back to all the lovey stuff we be doing 'cause girl, you really bring out the soft in me, you know, that huggy feely type nigga that don't come out. Baby, you know I'm troubled. What I do, though?"

He reaches into his right pocket, leaves his hand there, rolls it around a bit, feeling.

"Seriously though, how you gonna put a nigga on Time Out and not tell him what he did though? How can I learn from what I did and what I'm sorry for if you don't guide me into what's right? I just need you there for me so I can be there for you, you dig? I did things. And you did things. But this, Timing Out, I don't know babe, it's questionable. Not quite objectionable or anything, not there yet, but it be getting there, though."

He waits for a response. Nothing. Girlfriend is still where she's at, listening, losing patience because she takes Time Out seriously. She's flustered even though she's always so tightly in control, and you can see her thinking hard, looking pained because reflection is tough business. As birds, all we have is the sky and our thoughts. We come down for scraps and then fly back up into blinding meditation. Things down here are so complicated. These people do too much, torture themselves by how much they're always doing—even Girlfriend.

Boyfriend pulls his hand out of his pocket. He's holding a condom in a black package with gold lettering: Magnum. He leaves it on her Welcome mat.

"Anyway," he says with a deep smirk, "I learned my lesson, and I'm sorry. So yeah, just hit me up babe, when you ready for the, you know, that Make-Up Sex. You know what it is, how we get down. Just call me, I'ma be waiting wherever I am, in Time Out, you dig."

He begins to leave and sees Girlfriend in the walkway, stomping angrily toward him.

I look across the telephone wires at my brethren and they look back. They're waiting for my signal. So I give it to them; I raise both wings and they go flying.

Girlfriend continues her advance; she's at the curb, then halfway up the cement path toward her door where Boyfriend waits, smiling widely. He opens his arms to receive her in a hug; Girlfriend cocks her fist.

One of our brothers drops his item, the Simply Lemonade bottle-cap he's gifting Girlfriend. It lands between Girlfriend and Boyfriend, bouncing, rattling, rolling, and after a couple of seconds, finally stopping.

They both look up.

We pigeon brethren circle above, casting dark moving shadows over the house. Now they're all dropping their special something's for Girlfriend. Pieces of Styrofoam that once contained her favorite Hawaiian Fried Rice, wrappers from Asiago Chicken Sandwiches, fortunes she's thrown away from Chinese take-out places she frequents—all of it falling like snow, floating down slowly, ceremonially, like small papery blessings.

Boyfriend goes running because he feels attacked. He flies into his car and yells to Girlfriend, “Go inside! Call me later!” And then he winks, says, “I know you will,” before speeding off.

The children playing in the streets, and the neighbors walking by, follow suit. Everyone scatters, running to their houses, fleeing this stretch of sidewalk.

Bottle-caps and clips and pins and hair-bows and other gifts we think suit Girlfriend also come flying down. They land around her and she’s scared; she’s terrified; she looks as if she’s about to cry—but that’s not something we can help. Girlfriend is afraid and she’s ready to go inside, shut us out, reject our goodwill. She steps toward her front door and quickly stops; she sees the Chinese fortunes peppering the doorway.

Life ebbs and life flows. If you allow it, life will bring great joy.

Winning numbers: 7, 23, 5, 38, 10, 12

Happiness exists. It’s closer than you think.

I descend toward Girlfriend, swiftly, with the salamander still thrashing in my grasp. I land before her, impeding her path to the doorway. We lock eyes. Her pupils shimmer with tears she refuses to release. But she’s still here, waiting, giving us the chance that nobody else would.

My brethren circle above in the shape of a human heart, something we find on trashed red cards, trashed flowers, and on all of Boyfriend’s apologies. My brethren circle and continue to drop gifts.

I lower my beak, reverently setting the salamander down. It’s injured, its spine crushed, but it manages to crawl toward Girlfriend, slowly, tenaciously. The salamander crawls and gets closer and hisses something that I can’t understand. Something guttural

and hurt. But the salamander persists. It won't stop. It crawls closer and closer to Girlfriend. It's almost there, almost to the tip of her shoe. In our animal tongue it hisses Girlfriend's name, *Jacq! Jacq!* She shouldn't understand, and in fact she's confused, but her eyes soften.

Girlfriend bends down and cups her hands toward the salamander because she knows. She knows.