ABSTRACT

UNCLE SAM CITY:

STORIES

by Nora Bonner

Each short story in my thesis collection takes place in either Bangkok or Detroit. These juxtaposed urban landscapes—the burgeoning Asian city vs. the struggling Midwestern American city—combined with varying narrative points of view, are the key elements in these stories’ attempts to understand the barriers that exist within communities. These might include age gaps, language barriers, or cultural/racial differences. The cities serve as examples of expansive communities confronted with significant socio/economic change. Even so, the narratives themselves focus on mini-facets of the larger urban populations. The stories focus primarily on the exiles of these communities—those who have been, in one way or another, expelled from the group.
UNCLE SAM CITY:
STORIES

A Thesis

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I burned down the Piotrowskis’ house the night I turned eleven. No one suspected me because on that same night, Detroit made national headlines with 816 fires reported. Each year, on October 30th, people I didn’t know burned the city to the ground. I’d sit with my brother on our porch and watch smoke clouds collect over the neighborhood. The firemen didn’t sleep that night and neither did we; their sirens were less than a lullaby. The tradition started not too far from where we lived, in Poletown, and I’ve never met anyone who knows exactly why. Some say a bunch of teenagers looking for something to do, others say a woman came home and found her husband cheating on her so she took out the whole neighborhood with a blowtorch. Mikey told me God was using the vacant houses for my birthday candles and I half believed him, imagining I had the wind in me to blow them all out.

For us, and I suppose for every kid growing up in the city at the time, Devil’s Night was just a hurdle to Halloween. We forgot about it as soon as our jaws clamped down on a tootsie roll. My mother usually took us to find costumes, the week or so before, at a Salvation Army. This trip was another annual tradition, but that year Mikey laughed at me when I asked if he was coming.

We were sitting at the breakfast table, where I pretended to read the back of a Shredded Wheat box while he watched a local news recap of a Tiger’s game. Drew Johnson showed up seconds later; his scrawny silhouette filled the yellow curtain over the front door. Mikey jumped from his seat and followed him out to the neighborhood, leaving his cereal half-eaten for my mother to clean up. He didn’t come back before it was time to go.

“Trick or treating is a children’s activity,” my mother said on the way to the store in our family’s pickup truck.

I considered telling her then what the boys did at the Piotrowskis’, weighing the pros and cons of getting Mikey grounded forever. If he couldn’t leave the house, I’d see him all the time. Then again, he’d probably hate me forever. Instead, I mentioned what a jerk he’d been to me since August, when he started high school. “Let that show you to be careful who your friends are,” she said.

Drew and Mikey became friends earlier that summer while training for their school’s track team. This was not too long after my father was laid off from Stroh’s and started working
nights as a security guard; my mother picked up shifts at a Coney Island hot dog joint to compensate for his lost income. With no parents at home, Mikey took off and did what he pleased. I spent several after-school hours at home by myself, wondering when he’d start to let me tag along.

I suppose the neighbors blamed him and Drew for the fire in the Piotrowskis’ house, though no one looked into it; by that time, the city owned the property and had too many arson cases to investigate. Drew looked to me like the kind of kid who would start those fires—bushy blond hair, tore-up t-shirts, and more rings on his fingers than a pirate. His rank smell and distant expression reminded me of the homeless guy who stood by the freeway and sold outdated newspapers. Drew never once stepped into our home; he’d just lurk on the front porch and wait for Mikey. One day I followed them and found him teaching my brother to roll a joint in the dining room where Mrs. Piotrowski once gave piano lessons.

I’m not sure how much of this my mother knew, but she did know something. She told me not to follow Mikey’s example, that she suspected him of getting into things he shouldn’t because Drew was a ‘rough type.’ “It’s probably not the boy’s fault he’s a little rough. He’s got no mom and his dad’s a cop,” she said, as if that explained anything. I knew Drew Johnson by the legacy he left at Hampton Middle School—the boy who convinced Mrs. Peters, the school secretary, that he’d brought a gun to school. He was just playing, Mikey told me, but he scared that woman so bad, she got him suspended for three weeks, even after he whipped out an empty hand to show her that he’d just pressed his knuckle against the inside of his shirt. Drew had all sorts of felonies tainting his permanent record. He liked to steal hub-cabs from teachers’ cars and to break into vending machines. Everyone believed he was held back in seventh grade because he threatened to kill a boy unless he made Drew’s science project. It seemed possible at the time. My mother then asked me what I knew about him but I held my tongue and flipped through radio stations. She turned down the volume and asked what I wanted for my birthday.

“Beats me,” I said and told her Mikey was going to buy me a pumpkin.

We made straight for the back of the thrift store, to the small section of eveningwear. I pulled a prom dress from the rack; a metallic pink gown with a ruffled waist and puffed sleeves. After some resistance, she finally allowed me to go out as Carrie. When I asked if we could make some blood out of ketchup, she said, “I don’t want you coming home smelling like a hotdog,” and suggested that we might find something better at the grocery store.
We found two Halloween aisles at Farmer Jack’s, including a shelf dedicated to fake blood. “Expensive,” she said. At that time, everything was expensive. “It can be part of your birthday.” This reminded her to grab cake mix and candles—a couple of green waxed 1s. On the way home, I asked her if we’d still leave Detroit on Halloween night, as we did every year, and go to Grosse Point where they gave out the good candy bars. It was a five-minute drive from our street, but it might as well have been on the other side of the planet with its smooth roads and houses so huge, some had servants’ quarters in the backyard. Mikey and my dad found a neighborhood for trick-or-treating where the houses stood close together; less walking for more treats to fill up our pillowcases. When I asked if we’d go there, my mother replied with her usual, “We’ll see.” I protested, afraid she’d make me trek around my aunt’s neighborhood in Warren, where people struggled just about as much as we did. “We’ll see, baby,” she said between drags from her cigarette. “Don’t fuss at me.”

I could always tell we were close to home when the roads roughened beneath our tires. I’d made a game of counting hair salons along the sidewalk, then storefront churches, then liquor stores. We turned onto our street and the smell of wet leaves came into the truck’s open windows. Few bothered to rake their lawns or sidewalks, which became blanketed by reds and browns. When my mother pulled the truck into our driveway, I thought I saw shadows moving around the vacant house next door.

* 

Mikey and I spent our childhoods watching the neighbors move away, but Mr. and Mrs. Piotrowski were the only ones we knew by name. They had blackberry bushes in their backyard and Mr. P. would catch us with purple hands and tongues. He’d chase us with a broom, shouting in Polish. Later, we’d imitate him from behind our garage, yelling “kielbasa,” “paczki,” and “pierogi” in repetition, using a rake or paintbrush for a prop. They moved out the summer I turned eight, but after that, their yard yielded enough blackberries to make us sick.

On the other side of the house, we played two-man baseball in an empty lot where Mikey taught me I had a good arm for pitching overhand. We used ghost men whenever we got on the bases we had etched into the overgrown grass. This game got old real fast, and he assured me that when another family moved into the Piotrowskis’ house, they’d have fifteen kids and we could split into teams. I sometimes peeked into the window and filled the empty living room
with the fifteen Mikey promised, most of whom were boys fighting for my attention. We would sit across a red and gold oriental carpet, stealing brownies from the kitchen.

Nobody ever moved into that house, and a couple years later, their yard turned to another field. The blackberries fried in a drought. Somebody came and shattered all the windows. I don’t know whether it was Drew or Mikey’s idea to make the house their hangout, but when I found them, they made me promise not to tell. The place worked well because it was so close—closer than my parents would ever suspect. Mikey eventually agreed to let me sit with them if I brought cans of Molson our father stashed in the garage.

*

The stench of bourbon drifted to the empty kitchen when I came in through the back. I found the boys sitting cross-legged on the floor in the dining room, playing a game of Rummy and keeping score with permanent marker across the faded red wallpaper. They passed a bottle of Jim Beam between them. Ernie Harwell called out a Tigers game from Drew’s boom box. “You better turn that down,” I told them, planting the cans in the center of their game, like an offering. “Somebody might hear you.”

“Throw these in the back,” Mikey said as he handed me the cans. The boys already had their chasers—a six pack of Coors, still secured in those plastic rings they used to show around the necks of ducks on environmental programs. Paint peeled from the kitchen ceiling and around brown water stains; the linoleum floor wrinkled back, cracking beneath my feet. The boys wrote every swear word they could think of beside the pantry door with a bottle of white-out. They’d already picked through the house and collected everything the Piotrowskis had left; just a pair of snowshoes in the basement we all mistook for tennis racquets and a yellowed newspaper in the attic from 1965, announcing the death of Winston Churchill.

Not until I sat next to the radio did I realize the boys were listening to the last game of the World Series, the Tigers vs. the Padres. Any time I asked Mikey questions about sports he’d take on a condescending tone, like I should know these things, so I waited for Harwell to announce the score: 5-3 Tigers. Then I scooted behind Mikey to figure out what he was doing with his cards. Drew won the next round and Mikey tossed in his hand. “Over there,” he said to me, pointing to the corner on the opposite side of the room. “You’re messing me up.”

Drew gathered the deck and suggested they play something else.

“One more round.” Mikey said. “I’m ten points from winning the game.”
Drew asked, “Ginny know how to play Euchre?” but I did not, nor did I know we’d need an extra person for the four-player game, which Mikey eagerly pointed out. “I’ll go alone,” Drew said and began shuffling the deck. He told Mikey to explain the rules as he bent the cards back into a bridge.

“We can teach her how to play 52 Pick-Up,” Mikey suggested.
He’d tried this on me before. “You play first,” I said.

Drew laughed until he snorted—a noise that caught Mikey and me off guard—and started pulling the low cards out for a Euchre deck. I asked why we didn’t need them and Mikey explained the game. He kept cutting himself off in the middle of sentences, so that by the end of the tutorial, I was still trying to figure out trump. I reneged in nearly every round; Mikey got angrier with each hand, demanding to know things like why I didn’t call suit if I had the right and left for diamonds. We played four games in a row and each time he won, Drew would say I was getting the hang of it and suggest we play one more time.

It was my turn to deal when Kirk Gibson hit his eighth inning homerun, giving the Tigers the lead, 8-4. The stadium crowd roared through the speakers and the boys threw their cards at the ceiling, like confetti fluttering over them while they downed their bourbon. Later that week, Mikey would cut out a photo from the front page of the Free Press and post it over his Rummy score with duct tape. In the picture, a man they called ‘Bubba,’ was the only person in focus, waving a triangular Tigers’ flag outside the stadium. His beer-gut poked beneath his wife-beater. Neon streaks of light surrounded him and behind him, someone flipped over a police car and set it on fire.

“We’re out of Beam,” Drew said after the noise calmed. He swung the bottle through the air with full force, like a baseball bat.

Mikey said, “Go home, Ginny,” and I suggested we get our mother to order a pizza to celebrate. “Tell mom we were at Drew’s watching the game,” he said. I’d never been to Drew’s house because they never let me come there. “I’ll be home in an hour.” He and Drew slipped out of the kitchen and I watched them hop over the chain-link fence dividing the Piotrowskis’ from the neighbor behind them, until they disappeared behind a garage.

My mother was sitting in the dark on the living room couch when I came in; I smelled her cigarette. When she asked me where I’d been, I just told her I was with Mikey watching the game. She didn’t ask where, just when he’d be back. “An hour,” I said.
Later, we sat at the table in front of a steaming pot of beef stroganoff and watched *Murder She Wrote* until nine p.m. By the time the show was over; the noodles had stopped steaming. She turned off the television and we ate quickly while gunshots exploded from the street. “Firecrackers,” she said, though I’m pretty sure we heard a mixture of both. “They’re celebrating.”

*

Before Drew came around, I used to sneak into Mikey’s bed after ‘lights out.’ We faced each other, lying on our sides, and held his glowing white sheet up with our knees, like a tent over us. We’d share the book-light he got for Christmas. The closest library was four miles away—further than we were allowed to ride our bikes—so I’d read from my mother’s collection of *Anne of Green Gables* books. Mikey read the latest paperback he’d stolen from the rack behind the wine section at the corner store. I’d close my eyes and listen to the faint canned laughter from the living room, where our mother dozed off while waiting for our father to come home. Eventually, Mikey piled his paperbacks in the closet beneath his dirty laundry.

On the evening before my eleventh birthday, despite the fact it was a school night, Mikey still hadn’t returned when my father came home. I woke to the sound of Mikey climbing through his bedroom window. It was six a.m., moments before the sun came up. I ran to his room and found him nursing a wounded left hand. I couldn’t see much, only what the dim outside light allowed. He let out dramatic hisses and grunts and fell back on his bed. When I asked, “What happened to you?” he sat up with a start. He took a moment to find my face and when he did, he gave me a stupid grin.

“Cut that out,” I said.

He hid his hand behind him. “Get out of here, Ginny.”

“What happened to you?”

“Go back to bed.” He grabbed a t-shirt from his closet and used it to bind up his hand. He then pulled his backpack to the center of the floor and piled clothes into it. I asked him a third time but he continued to move around his bed as if his limp hand carried all his weight. Blood seeped through the t-shirt bandaging.

He threw the backpack out the window and I ran to him, yelling, “It’s my birthday.” But as soon as the words left my mouth I knew that it didn’t make any difference to him.

“I’ll be back for cake.”
I wanted to believe him. “You promise?”

“Sure, Kiddo.” He slipped over the window ledge and called to me from the center of the lawn. “You hang tight.” Before I could ask him where he was going, he’d darted across the driveway and into the street.

I bumped into my father on the way out. “What are you doing up, baby?” he asked and stepped into the room. “Where’s your brother?”

“He said he’d be right back.”

He went to the window and gazed out for a moment; his thick arms folded over his chest. “Go to bed,” he said with his back to me. I said I would and he scratched the side of his neck before staggering into his bedroom across the hall.

“He’s not back yet?” my mother said.

“If he’s not back in two hours, I’ll go find him.”

She got up for the bathroom. The sliver of light from beneath the door hurt my eyes.

“He’s fourteen years old,” she said.

“Cut the light off.” My father raised his voice.

Water ran from the faucet before she emerged in a robe. She’d tied up her hair in a loose bun that looked like it would topple any second. “He’s fourteen,” she said. “He’s a kid.”

My father tucked his head beneath his pillow and said, “We’ll ground him for a week.”

She stepped into the hallway, slamming the door behind her, and went straight for Mikey’s room. “He said he’ll be right back,” I told her. “He said he forgot something.”

“If I find out you’re lying, you’re grounded for the rest of your life,” she said. “Did he say where he was going?” Before I could answer, she turned on the light and screamed my father’s name, Kevin. A thin line of blood ran from the windowsill to the closet, smudged along the way. The sound of her voice seemed to expand from wall to wall. It sent me running to my room.

After my father left to go find Mikey, my mother and opened my door halfway, reached her hand in, and turned on the light. “What did he tell you?” she said from the open doorway. “If you know anything, you have to say.”

I almost told her about the Piotrowskis’ house, but then I remembered watching him run out to the street. “He’s with Drew,” was all I told her.

“That’s all you know?”
“That’s it.”

She left me for the living room and forgot to turn my light off.

I crept into the kitchen an hour later, past Mikey’s closed door—a sight that lifted my mood. My mother smoked at the table. She had sections of the Free Press scattered in front of her but she wasn’t reading them. I sat across from her, waiting for some recognition that it was my birthday; that she might, as she had done for other birthdays, make some sort of speech about what I could expect that year because I was eleven. I wanted her to tell me that this was the year I’d start to mature, when I’d plant the seeds of young adulthood, or other such nonsense I’d appreciated in other years, though it irritated me as she’d said it. She gave no such speech, but kept spreading the paper in front of her, like she was trying to adjust it to its proper place. “I’m starving,” I said.

“Have some cereal.”

“Is Mikey sleeping?”

“Your dad’s still out there looking for him.”

I finished two bowls of Shredded Wheat and left my milk on the table. All the good cartoons came on Saturday mornings, so I had to settle for the kid’s shows on Canadian television, where *Sesame Street* was half in French. But I was too old for these and too young for the house renovation show on PBS, so I got dressed and grabbed my schoolbag, deciding to head over to the school early. When I reached the end of our block, I realized I’d have to sit outside for an hour until they opened the doors, so I turned around.

I came back to our house and found my mother was pulling out of the driveway on her way to work. She slammed on the brakes when she saw me and rolled down her window. “Where have you been?” she asked.

I told her I didn’t feel like going to school.

“Get in the car,” she said.

“But I don’t have treats,” I said, and made up something about how my homeroom teacher expected us to bring snacks to share on our birthdays.

The tradition didn’t carry over from elementary school to junior high and my mother knew this full well. She placed her fingertips to her lips and nodded. “Go inside and I’ll write you a note for tomorrow.” She took her foot off the brake but stopped the car again to say, “You call the restaurant if you hear anything,” and I knew she was giving me a post, not a present.
I told her, “Yes, Ma’am.”

She drove away and I went to the house next door.

I grabbed a beer from the pantry and roamed from room to room, starting in the back, where the Piotrowskis once slept. The room was empty except for a pale green carpet, stained from where water came in through the shattered window. In the dining room, I found the cards where we’d left them, spread over the worn wooden floor. I picked them up and started a game of Solitaire, half-dreaming that Mikey would show up in the doorway with a pumpkin we could carve into Frankenstein. He’d tell me Drew got a girlfriend and she was so boring, he couldn’t stand to be around her. I’d suggest that she could be the fourth hand in our Euchre game. He’d ask how I got so smart. You’re eleven now, he’d say. No kid should be in school on their birthday. The imagined thought rang true enough; I decided to wait at that house all day, in case Mikey decided to come by.

But Mikey didn’t come. I shoved the cards together again and attempted one of Drew’s shuffle-bridges. I’d mastered the first part, but when I bent the cards back they flew out of my hands, fluttering into the air like a fountain. I didn’t bother to pick them up. Instead, I tried to sip the Molson. The dry taste clashed with the sweet cereal left in my mouth, so I pitched the open can at the fireplace in the living room. I hoped for the momentary satisfaction of a foamy explosion, but I didn’t throw it hard enough; it just rolled around, draining beer into the center of the shaggy brown carpet.

The next thing I remember is piling Mikey’s paperbacks in the center of the dining room floor. I went through them for what must have been hours, browsing for scenes of sex and violence—all the parts I thought Mikey was talking about when he said I was too young to read them. I got bored somewhere in the middle of Blue Highways and started ripping the books apart, crumpling the pages, and pitching them around the house. My stomach ached from the box of cheese crackers I devoured for lunch.

When the sun went down, the fire trucks began to squeal. The lack of light made my eyes hurt and I returned home. Already, smoke pervaded the air from neighborhoods burning in the distance. Stories of Devil’s Night filled every station’s six o’clock news. Reporters surrounded firehouses, some from Japan or Australia, and this too, was a news story. I watched these from the kitchen table, expecting my mother to come through the door with a carton of barbequed chicken from her work. I ran to the window every time I heard a car rush past our house, hoping
to find her pulling up the driveway, then hoping my father would come home first, with Mikey and a pizza. I wanted him and Mikey to come first, then my mother shortly after. She’d rush straight at Mikey, looking like she was ready to rip his head off, and demand to know where he’s been.

*I’ll explain later,* he’d say.

She’d yell, *What happened to you?*

Mikey would stay calm. *What happened to the cake?*

My mother returned first, about an hour later, smelling of hamburger grease but carrying no hamburger. She threw her keys and apron onto the kitchen table and asked if I’d heard anything. She didn’t even look at me. When I said I hadn’t, she went straight to her room.

I grabbed one of the lighters from her purse as soon as I heard the shower. My birthday candles were still in the grocery bag on top of the fridge, beside the box of cake mix. I was on my way out the door when my father called. As soon as I picked up, my mother stepped out in her robe and took the phone from me; her hair still limp with shampoo suds. I didn’t stay for an update, but went to the garage for a can of WD-40.

I started in the living room, placing *The Tommyknockers* next to the window where Mrs. Piotrowski’s piano used to be. I put *Blue Highways* in the center of the carpet, still damp from the spill, and sprayed the room down. *Salem’s Lot* burned in the bedroom closet. *Pet Sematary* went under the kitchen sink. A triangle of books in the center of the dining room, buried beneath the deck of cards, started it all. I finished the preparation by scattering the ripped pages in a trail across the floors of each room, like flower petals, and I retraced my steps with the last of the WD-40. The books set fire almost instantly, sending flames across the carpet. By the time I burst through the back door, I could feel the heat on my back.

I hopped through Mikey’s bedroom window, open from the night before. My mother was still in her robe, still on the phone, but I could tell by the strain in her voice she was talking to her sister. Once I’d changed into a fresh pair of jeans, I ran into the living room, yelling that the neighbor’s house was on fire. “Oh my God,” she said. I didn’t know if she was talking to me or my aunt until she threw down the phone and ran to Mikey’s room, which had a window facing the Piotrowskis’. Gusts of smoke streamed from their kitchen and soon our house smelled like it was burning. I found her trying to shut Mikey’s window but it was too hot. That’s when she thought to call the fire department.
Four neighbors we didn’t know stood at the curb in front of the burning house. A black woman my grandmother’s age told us not to worry because the firemen were on their way. My mother introduced herself and instead of offering her hand to shake, wrapped her arm around the stranger’s back. More people joined us and soon we made a small crowd; my mother kept her composure for them all, repeating that these things happened and she was just glad we were all safe. At one point she told me my father had found Mikey and they’d be home any minute. She placed her hand on my head and left it there.

The atmosphere, for the next few moments, was vibrant. No one seemed able to stop their chatter. We repeated to each other where we lived and where we were when the fire started. The man from the house behind the Piotrowskis’ said he came over because he heard his dog barking. Another woman saw the fire from her porch and swore she felt the temperature raise a few degrees. I heard these stories again every time a new person joined our group, meanwhile, making sure to stick to mine, that I was in my room about to rearrange the furniture. No one seemed to suspect I’d made it up. I grew more at ease each time I repeated the story. I suppose it was the first time I understood the other side of neglect; the freedom that comes when everyone looks the other way.

When the firemen arrived, they came in a smaller truck than I’d seen on the streets. It was about the size of our pickup, bright yellow like the rest of the fire department’s vehicles, with only two men inside. They remained in their seats while one spoke over their radio. We hushed and waited. A man holding a baby interrupted our silence when he asked my mother, “Why don’t they go to the fire hydrant?” Another woman said she thought she heard them say more trucks were coming. Eventually, the firemen pulled their truck closer to the curb. They jumped out and unwound the hose from what looked like a spool of thread in the back, using it to dampen the side of our house. The same woman suggested that they came with the wrong kind of truck, that this one was designed to put out car fires. She noted that they were saving our house until the bigger truck arrived. That sounded right to everyone. And it worked because, three hours later, when the Piotrowskis’ house stood like a charred skeleton, there wasn’t much damage to our home; just melted siding and scorch marks alongside the exterior of our bedrooms. The last of the firemen would refer to this as an “exposure fire.” This would be enough incentive for my family to move out of town.
But as we watched the two at work, we had no idea what would be saved. My mother repeated proverbs about how things are things and people are people. This wisdom earned her several ‘amen’s and ‘halleluiah’s from our neighbors.

Mikey and my dad came right when the two firemen were in the middle of blasting the side of our house, soaking Mikey’s stuff along with it. I don’t remember my brother showing much grief over his room; he fixed most of his attention on the Piotrowskis house, which by then was roaring in flame. He got out of the car but my father waited a while before he came out from behind his steering wheel. He never liked crowds much. My mother went and sat next to him and they watched the scene like they were at the Ford-Wyoming Drive-In.

Mikey came and stood by me. I didn’t dare ask what he’d been doing or where he’d been all day. I wouldn’t find out until years later, when he’d tell me that Drew’s father shot at the boys when they tried to take his car out for a spin. He didn’t know who they were. Mikey got out of it because my father decided not to press charges. By the time he found the boys walking down Mack Avenue, they’d stopped most of the bleeding. I didn’t tell Mikey about the fire until much later, but he always suspected me because he couldn’t find his books in the damp bedroom the next morning.

The two firemen left for another job before the others arrived, and the rest of us hung around to watch the Piotrowskis’ house burn. One of our neighbors snapped a Polaroid and gave it to me. I still have the picture, though she didn’t capture the brilliance of the actual fire. The image obscured over time to an unrecognizable cloud of orange and yellow, until I could no longer tell it was a house. What we watched contained a range of colors—blues and reds, sometimes greens. I didn’t know a fire could do that.

I checked to see if Mikey had noticed and poked at his bandage. “Watch it,” he said, but his tone suggested I didn’t need to worry and he had the expression of someone who’d skirted trouble. I probably had the same look. He gripped my ponytail with the hand he didn’t hurt and we waited for the big truck to come.
Sandy Harris died on her way to dress rehearsal two days before the opera premiere. Most of the ensemble didn’t notice her absence. She was nine years old. The other children in the chorus whispered her name while mothers fitted their wig-caps and buttoned their long red robes. Her costume remained on the rack, stiff and heavy over satin slippers. Before long, the stagehand appeared, miscounted, and led them to the orchestra pit.

The children passed an exit propped open with a travel mug; wind and cigarette smoke pushed into the hallway. Near the stage, a row of impaled heads leaned against the stairwell, suitors who failed to answer the princess’s riddles. Layers of drops, snowcapped mountains and Chinese gardens, lined the backstage. The principal singers remained behind doors closed to their dressing rooms while sopranos and baritones from the adult chorus attacked the empty seats with their vibratos. The children sat on the apron and dangled their feet into the orchestra pit, above a tuning tuba. “We’re missing one,” the children’s director said. “Who’s missing?”

One child raised her hand, out of habit, and told him Sandy was probably stuck in traffic. He told her to spit out her gum, threatening to replace her with someone more professional. She swallowed. Tears smudged her almond-painted eyes. He conducted their scales and they returned to the dressing room.

Homework waited in book bags. The boys drew caricatures of the girls with extended noses and wider ears. The girls filled their notebooks with lists of potential husbands, makes of cars, and dream careers. The mothers made sure they kept their fingers away from their powdered faces. They watched the door for Sandy to arrive at any moment, out of breath and apologetic. She didn’t come. The overture commenced through the intercom.

“This music is disturbing,” one mother said to another while re-stuffing her daughter’s braids into a wig cap. The opera began with the dissonant chorus harmonies; slaves beaten, crying for mercy.

“He was sick when he wrote it,” the other mother said. “He died before he finished the score.”

The stagehand reappeared and led the children backstage for their first entrance. The princess climbed into a wooden lotus flower suspended by piano wire. She didn’t return their stares while she rose into the fly gallery. The flower wobbled, bits of light caught on her icy
crown, until she disappeared into the shadows. Meanwhile, the stage manager passed out paper lanterns dangling from brass rods for the children to carry. Just when she would ask them about the extra lantern, a tenor from the adult chorus interrupted and pulled her aside.

The music stopped. An hour passed while light board operators refigured cues for the princess’s entrance.

“She’s still up there,” a child said, pointing.

“Maybe she’s sleeping,” said another.

“Less orange the director’s voice echoed over the loud speaker. “I want to see the lanterns glow.”

The children took turns balancing the rods on their curved palms. Their scalps itched. They had to wait for a stagehand to escort them to a bathroom. Girls practiced ballet positions while boys played a condensed version of freeze tag around a row of Chinese dragons.

“Children stand by,” the stage manager said.

At her command, they crossed the stage in a solemn procession. Their melded voices drifted over the accompaniment. The girl last in line nearly tripped while arching her neck to catch a glimpse of the princess floating down to center stage. Behind the curtains once again, they leaned their lanterns against a wall and flexed their aching arms. The children’s conductor waited in their dressing room with notes. He told them to hold the rods at waist-level and keep them straight, to open their mouths more when they sing, and that he noticed the girl who broke her concentration. He did not mention Sandy.

At intermission, the children darted out into the auditorium. The house-lights dimmed and act three began in front of a Chinese palace façade. Their eyes grew heavy while attempting to follow subtitles. It was well-past their bedtimes. They slipped to the floor beneath the seats until a stagehand tapped them awake.

“It’s finale time,” she said, and counted the tassels on their hats as they lined up once more. When she only counted fifteen, she glanced beneath the seats and across the aisles for the missing child. She found no shadow, figured she was tired. Paper petals drifted to the stage floor, the curtain came down, and at two-thirty in the morning, the director called it a night.

*  

One of the mothers brought carnations for the opening and set them along the dressing table. She wrote the children’s names on colored paper, bent into the shapes of fans, and attached
a chocolate kiss to each. “They can’t eat in costume,” another mother said. Sandy’s flower was pink with yellow around the petal tips.

Before the children could change into costume, the artistic director gathered the ensemble behind the curtain for a ten-minute memorial. “We’ve had a tragedy,” she said, and told them Sandy’s body was found beneath a shattered windshield on the Lodge Freeway. Her father also passed away in the five-car collision. The ensemble would collect donations for funeral flowers. The director said, “She was a nice girl,” as if she knew her well.

The children returned to the dressing room filled with her absence: quiet Sandy Harris from Farmington Hills; dark haired, wide-eyed, quick to pick up complicated melodies, always on the outskirts of their attention with a book in her grasp.

Later that evening, one of the children tore the stem of Sandy’s carnation so that it was the appropriate length to place into one of the cups from the water dispenser. The other children followed, and for the rest of the performances, their flowers lined the dressing table. Together, the petals wilted and the chocolate melted beneath the warm lights.
WHAT YOU ARE DOING ON THIS SIDE OF TOWN

You straighten your skirt and dig around in your purse for a twenty baht bill to pay the motorcycle driver. He nods and speeds down the street. On the way to the dock, you pass a small man leaning against a blackened wall. He rattles his tin cup. You drop in a few coins. He has sun-baked skin, one arm, and no legs. He does not say thank you. You don't know that he is Cambodian and lost his limbs while crossing landmines to reach the Thai border.

Around the corner, a man sells squid kabobs; the smoked creatures curl around their sticks, the color of manila envelopes. You hide your disgust with a Thai hello. The vendor gives a broad smile and turns to his wife. “The farang speaks Thai,” he says, but you cannot understand his Isan accent—any more than you understand your students when they hold five toned conversations in front of your face. You don't understand the vendor but you do know the word farang because that's what you are: A farang. You are a farang but not a tourist.

You are not a tourist but today you need an adventure. On any other night, you’d be sitting in the You Cup coffee shop planning lessons or browsing fashion magazines you can’t read, except for an occasional headline in English: ‘Look into her heart,’ and an occasional headline in almost-English: ‘Fill the unknown.’ The more you frequent You Cup, the lonelier you feel. You're tired of looking around at the familiar faces of strangers.

That's why, today, you've given yourself a destination: The About Café, which your Bangkok guidebook calls the best café art gallery in town. You have printed out a map of the neighborhood and tucked it into your purse. The street names are too long to fit near the clutter of lines and you didn't notice, while gazing at your computer screen, that they had been abbreviated. You'd brought the map into the teacher's lounge and your colleague pointed out that the gallery was in Chinatown, clear on the other side of the city. Any other person would have opted out but not you; not even after she said Chinatown is dangerous at night. She offered to be your tour guide but you told her, “I’m not a tourist. I live here.” You need to know you’re capable of getting around by yourself.

The canal taxi is as big as a bus, and all the seats are taken. To distract yourself from the rotten smell, you stare at a young monk sitting on the bench closest to where you stand. He wears a saffron robe and listens to his iPod. You are not to touch him because you are a woman, and you probably shouldn't be staring at him either. The boat hasn't moved; people continue to file in
across the scant floor space. You scoot over until the only thing left to grab is the bench where
the monk sits and you are now staring at your hand, five inches away from his shaved head. A
woman moves closer. She wears what looks like a long t-shirt and no shorts. Her red plastic
heels click against the wooden floor and you hope she doesn't fall into the water on the way out.

A tarp comes down. The boat thrusts you into the back of the bench. You do not touch
the monk but you say to him, excuse me, in Thai. A sliver of space stretches across the tarp, like
an open window; droplets of water slip through and land in your hair. The woman next to you
fiddles with her cell phone. You make a mental list of Thai words and phrases you know: I'm
from America, chicken, chili, spicy, sweet, rice, I love Thailand, numbers one to one hundred,
stop here, turn left, how old are you, I'm a teacher, turn right, I'm hungry. Your students have
taught you but you've forgotten how to say: dinner, breakfast, tomorrow, it smells, I'm hot. You
never learned how to say: can you give me directions, I'm lost, I'm going to faint.

At your stop, Asoke, you marvel at how effortlessly the woman in red heels hops off the
boat, and you hesitate a moment over the dark gap between the wobbling ledge and the pier. One
of your students shared in class that when she was a young child, she'd fallen into the canal
because the boat started to move while she was jumping off. You feel a hundred eyes on you.
When your feet hit the damp ground, you wonder how your student survived.

Everyone in the subway car seems more beautiful than you: young and poised. You hold
onto a rubber loop from the ceiling. When you glance down either aisle, you feel as though you
are standing in front of two adjacent mirrors; lines of infinite passengers fade with distance. A
pair of schoolgirls sits across the aisle, holding hands; you know they are in high school because
their uniforms match your students' white blouses and navy skirts. The one with the bigger eyes
and darker skin smiles because you are a farang, you figure, though she's also admiring you
because you are a woman alone and out of place. Five more stops to Hualamphong.

At 6:00 in the evening, the sky dulls into a pale blue. You have one hour to find the café
before it gets dark. Your map does not name the main road you stand on; the streets resemble
sections of an orange. You're looking for “Th. Mait,” but don't know that it stands for “Thanon
Maitrachi.” You see no street signs and walk ahead. Three blocks later, you stand at the
entrance to a Chinese temple, indicated on your map by a chubby Buddha. Smoke swirls around
women praying and placing incense sticks into clay bowls across a tabletop. The place smells
like an explosion of hot jasmine that's set the corridors on fire. A few moments and you wonder if you're being disrespectful, gawking at a place of worship.

Outside, four men sit at a card table, smoking cigarettes and drinking Johnny Walker. They yell at you in Chinese. You slip around them and avoid eye contact. They call you beautiful and ask what you're doing here. You reach in your purse for your map but before pulling it out, scan the block for a shop to disappear into, away from these men. As if this will prevent them from knowing you are lost.

A woman pulls a steel sheet down over her shop and locks it into place. She is the last to close on this block. You speed your step, glancing around for a 7-11 or a Family Mart corner store, but find none so you stop and pull out the map there. It would help to know what street you’re on.

A man in a red golf shirt greets you in Thai and asks where you're going. You jump and he apologizes. His face is similar to the man who sells fruit juices near your condo: lighter eyes, apple cheeks. You ask, “Where is the About Café?” in English and he shakes his head. You point to the star on the map and say “Where?” in Thai.

“This way, please.” he says in English and leads the way around a corner and down two blocks, past an open fish market and a driveway full of used shoes. The sky is gray; pale light washes out the reds and yellows on storefronts. He stops at a corner and points, saying in Thai: “Turn right at the corner and then walk three blocks. You'll cross a big road there, so be careful, then turn left, I'm sorry, turn right and the place should be on your left. Be careful.” And you thank him, pretending you understood every word.

You pass a crowded grocery store covered in dust and banners depicting snowflakes, Santas, and Christmas trees, four months out of season. At another intersection, you’re blinded by headlights and almost run over by teenagers on mopeds. You're not sure whether to turn right or left, so you step into an incense shop. There, a small boy runs around with a box of chocolate Pocky sticks because he already ate his dinner. His mother shakes her head to tell you the shop is closed. You ask for the About Café. Your English and then your Thai goes right over her head but she does understand the word café. She yells to her husband in the back of the shop and he comes out in a pink towel, frayed at the edge above his flaking knees. “Café, na?” he asks. “Café, ka,” you say.
You guess correctly when he tells you in Thai to go to the end of the block, but when you get there, you find a curbside coffee stand. A fat woman in a white apron stands behind a stack of instant coffee containers and a pyramid of sweetened-condensed milk cans. You cross the street, passing a dark bakery, which reminds you of the bean cake a student gave you on her way out of your office earlier in the afternoon. You took one bite out of it but didn't want to tell her you didn't like it, so you just told her you weren't hungry. Now that bean cake is still sitting under your monitor on your desk and is probably getting devoured by roaches half the size of your palm.

The map tears a little as you unfold it. The pale blue streetlamp doesn't give enough light for reading so you stuff the map back into your purse and keep walking. You don't want to pass the incense shop again; you don't want the family to see you lost, so you take a quick left. Now you are in an alley. Another group of men watches; they're leaning on parked motorcycles. Shadows cover their faces. They ask where you're headed but you can't understand them. One hops off his bike and approaches.

"I need the About Café," you say in English, but regret saying anything. Close up, he seems less harmful; lanky, not much taller than you. His t-shirt reads: 'I don't bite, I suck.' You ask, “Do you know where I can find the About Café?” He smiles and then leads you deeper into the alley, which you realize is getting darker with every step. The streetlights are out.

You stop. “The café is over here?”

The man does not answer.

Before you left for Bangkok, you promised your grandmother you'd never go for walks alone. She'd read that female tourists are targets for frequent abductions. You'd sat in her breakfast nook, eating her biscuits and you promised her. You haven't talked to her in months. You can't remember what biscuits taste like. Still, you follow the man past a line of storefronts hidden behind sheets of metal. Some are whitewashed over, marking the water level from last year's floods. Where the alley curves, you pass a dark hole in the ground; an abyss full of rats, probably. This is where you figure they'll put your body when they're done with you. They'll stuff you in that little abyss, and no one will know you're there until the floodwaters wash you onto the main road.

The man stops in front of a screened door and motions for you to knock.

“This is it?”
He nods and waits.

“Hello?” you call through the screen, too weak to be heard.

The man pretends to knock; his fist comes inches from the door, as if he's giving a lesson, and then steps back towards the main road. You think he's gone, but he's just a few feet away, standing in the shadows, watching. A woman, half your size and three times your age, emerges onto the pavement from across the alley. She carries a blue tub full of dirty dishes.

You try to open the screen but it's locked and you whip your hand away. You see no doorbell. A pair of worn red Chucks sits at the bottom of a narrow staircase, next to a pile of crumpled newspaper. You smell cats. The walls are green, freshly painted and bare. You consider knocking, that is, until you picture eight men rushing at you with rope. It's time to go home. You don't know why you hadn't thought of that an hour ago.

As you back away from the door, the man who led you here steps out into the pale light pouring through the screen. You'd scream if you could breathe. He rushes back to the door and before you can stop him, pounds on it, laughing because you are an idiot, you should have just listened to him. He does not wait for someone to come to the door. He's run off. Left you for good. You hear rustling from within.

A door opens at the top of the stairs and the first thing you notice about the man coming down is that he's a farang. “What can I do for you?” he asks you in a New Zealand accent. He unlocks the door.

“Is the About Café around here?”

“The About Café,” he says. “Yeah. Right around the corner.” He points but then decides to just take you there. You want to ask him if he's the only farang who lives in the neighborhood, or how he ended up living on this part of town, but you can't bring yourself to say anything. The old woman continues to wash her dishes but this time she smiles--bearing one tooth in the center of her mouth. You hadn't noticed the pools of light on the street from second or third story windows overhead. They are full of families; full of people you will never know because you will never be able to talk with them.

The man leads you to where the alley runs into another street. You thank him and he says, “It's nothing. Right over there, then.”

“Great,” you say but he's already on his way back to his house.
At the intersection, you find a warehouse with wide windows painted red around the rims. The lights are out, and except for an upside down table and stack of white chairs, the room is bare. There's no sign but you know this was it. You stand gazing into the window, stunned, and two women walk past you, chatting about the Canadian supermodel who will marry Thailand's tennis star, but you can't understand them. They stop a moment to make sure you are a farang and continue on their way.

According to your map, you are two roads away from the subway station, but as you start towards it, you decide to take a taxi and go to the curb. Cars rush past from the left, a sensation you've nearly grown accustomed to. You wave down a taxi—a green one with a sign over the passenger window that says, 'Love Farang,' and underneath, 'We speak English'.

You open the door to the sweet smell of toey leaves. A string of jasmine dangles from the window, which you know is there to protect the driver from bad spirits on the road. You tell him in Thai to take you to Bangkapi.

"300 baht," he says in English.
You shake your head. "I only go by meter."
"You speak Thai." The man grins.
"A little," you say, politely. "I only go by meter."
He laughs and says, "Okay, okay. Let's go."
You wait for the flashing 35 baht to appear in red over the radio and climb in. You tell him to take the highway.

"You are very good," he says in Thai, and you are elated enough to slide to the edge of your seat and lean towards the windshield while he asks how long you've been here.

This is a conversation you've had many times, with nearly all the taxi drivers, and the phrases come like clockwork: you've been here eight months, you teach English at a high school, you like Thai food, your favorite dish is tom yum soup, the chicken kind. And when your Thai runs out, you pull out your list of questions for taxi drivers and find out that this one has two children, a boy who is eleven and a girl who is six, the girl is naughtier than the boy but they are both smart, that he's worked in Bangkok for two years, and that his favorite dish is laap moo. When your questions run out, he turns up the radio and a woman's saccharine voice weaves around you, buzzing from the speakers. You stretch your arms towards the passenger windows on each side and fall back into your seat. The Thai country music seems to propel the taxi onto
the highway overpass and over the city, in and out of the blinking high-rises. You recognize the shapes, the Bangkok skyline, like constellations close to the ground.
On the playground, we held pretend funerals for Jeremy Green. The boys fought over who got to play the corpse and who got to play the preacher. The girls fought over who got to play his wife and who wouldn’t have to play his three year old daughter. The other roles we created: his overbearing father, his frazzled mother, his irritating aunt, his twin sister who got straight A’s in school and never did anything wrong, his bitter younger brother, his loyal best friend, his pregnant lover. The rest of us, the quiet ones, sat back and watched service after service, reenacted for clarity about who this guy was, why he ended his life, and why he chose us for the witnesses.

The fifth graders were the last to enjoy recess at Sojourner Elementary. Our school had three fifth-grade classes and on the playground we divided: the soccer kids ran up and down the center and everyone else scattered around the edges. Before Jeremy came, we played jump rope or cat’s cradle. We sat along the fence and told fortunes with paper we folded into cootie catchers. We chewed gum, forbidden in classrooms, and held contests to see who could blow the biggest bubble. On the playground, we played drinking games with extra cartons of chocolate milk, the rules for which we’d learned from our older siblings. We forced each other to tell secrets and made lists of things we had to do before we died. We learned to wrap our lips around cuss words and wrote our names in the ground with broken glass. This was how Jeremy Green found us.

We played in a lot surfaced with gravel and surrounded by a chain-link fence. Several of the rocks were the size of our fifth-grade fists. They were dark and iridescent, glittering like they’d exploded in outer space, caught on fire, and cooled among the candy wrappers and empty liquor bottles and cigarette butts. Smaller pieces slipped into our sneakers and cut into the soles of our feet. Each September, and Jeremy came during this time, prickly weeds grew over the north side, over the baseball field, and we’d spend the rest of the day picking burrs out of our socks and sticking them on each other’s backs so that when we leaned into a chair, they’d dig into our skin. We had no play equipment, just a slab of cement for four-square, a backstop and a bench we never used for baseball. Our funerals took place in front of one of those backstops. The kid playing Jeremy would lie down on the bench with his arms folded on his chest like he was some kind of a vampire. His family would sit off to the right, his lover waited behind the
backstop for her cue, and the preacher would start us off with a couple of phrases he’d picked up from television eulogies:

“We are gathered here to remember the life of Jeremy Green.”

His mother and sister would wail, his father would cough, and we’d hum Amazing Grace in the background.

“We’re shocked by his death, and though we grieve, we are here to remember the good things about the life of Jeremy Green.”

His sister walked slowly to Jeremy with a bundle of dandelions and laid them on his chest. He sneezed and brushed them off. Then she turned to us, her eyes on her Velcro tennis shoes, and begged us to remember Jeremy for his intelligence, his sense of humor, and his ability to take apart electronic devices and put them back together. “He always wanted to be an inventor,” she’d say. “But he just didn’t apply himself.” Then she’d kneel down by his head, pull out a wad of Kleenex and dab her dry eyes. “It was my fault,” she’d confess. “I always made him go away when my friends came over. I never let him play with us.” The preacher would then put his arm around her and tell her it was all right, that we all played a part in the death of Jeremy Green.

“Jeremy never wanted to harm nobody.” Jeremy’s best friend spoke next. “But if anyone tried to mess with me, I could always count on Jeremy to back me up.”

At this point, his mother would fling her arms in the air and shout, falling over her husband: “It’s because of you that my baby is dead! If it weren’t for you, he never would’ve been arrested!” His father would calm her, telling her to hush. She’d yell: “He never would’ve gone to prison!”

“Don’t try to blame Jeremy on me!” his friend would snap back. “Maybe if you hadn’t dropped him on his head so many times he would have actually been somebody when he grew up.”

The preacher would urge them to sit back down. They listened to him and we waited for his aunt.

“Jeremy did my grocery shopping for me. I always asked him to pick me up a bag of cheese puffs. I love those.” We laughed. “Then one night he just ran off with my money. I waited all night for those cheese puffs.” The preacher tried to interrupt her, to tell her we were just there to remember the good things, but she’d go on, wailing that Jeremy was her favorite
nephew, that she loved him like her own son. She loved to bake him his favorite cookies, snickerdoodles, and she loved to take him to hockey games. “I just don’t know what happened to him.”

His brother would get up and tell us that Jeremy used to be handsome, that he was the prom king, and that he made all the other guys jealous. His grade-school teacher would get up and apologize for always picking on him and giving him a hard time, and his wife would get up and say that he wasn’t very dependable, but he sure was funny. His daughter would stay seated and suck her thumb.

The preacher would then call on Jeremy’s father to speak last. He’d stand with his hands in his blue jean pockets and shake his head. “I don’t know what to say.”

The preacher would beckon him, “Go on, let’s hear what’s on your mind.”

“He was my son.”

“Yes.”

“He was my baby boy.”

“Jeremy was a son,” the preacher reminded us, raising his voice in a dramatic lilt. This was his favorite part of the service. “He was a brother, a cousin, a nephew, a friend.” His mother wailed. “He was a husband and a father.” That was the cue for Jeremy’s lover to jump out from the behind the backstop and announce that she was pregnant with his second child. We’d gasp. His wife would run at her and the preacher would hold her back. We’d shriek and egg them on by clapping our hands and chanting for them to fight.

We did this pretty much every afternoon, until one time when Jeremy’s lover missed her cue. We found her behind the backstop, clutching the chain-link and listening to a distant siren from the main road. We, too, noticed the sound and filed along the fence beside her. The cry grew into a roar, shaking the air and the cool metal beneath our palms. When the sirens diminished, we didn’t move. We peered at the now silent neighborhood through wiry frames in the shapes of diamonds. Cardboard cutouts of skeletons and reindeer hung lopsided in curtainless windows, deflated snowmen slumped in white piles on untended lawns. Nobody ever went in or out of those houses while we played during recess, and before Jeremy came, it was as though we were the only living creatures for miles; just us on that gravel pit of a playground.

The principal held an all-school assembly in place of recess the day after Jeremy came. Not one of our wooden seats creaked while she spoke to us in strained tones. She said we
needed to be careful about what we say but we should maintain a sense of pride because, on that
day, we could all think of ourselves as survivors. She said all of this with her weight pressed
into the piano at the bottom of the stage. Behind her, the dusty red curtains were pulled to the
side, revealing Woody Guthrie’s wheat fields and redwoods painted in loose, bold strokes, left
over from last year’s all-school music review. With her arms folded, unless she was pushing up
her glasses, she told us she knew we wanted to talk about it, but begged us, while we were in
class, not to distract each other with disturbing conversations. Then she walked up the aisle, to
address the fifth grade. She spoke just above a whisper when she told us psychiatric doctors
would be coming in that afternoon and would be available all week if we needed to talk. Some
topics needed special attention, she told us. It would take us a long time to forget, but she urged
us, please don’t remind each other.

Some of us did talk to the doctors. We thought we’d be in a closed room, in private, like
our visits to the school counselor. Instead, we lined up outside of the library. The doctors sat in
the corners at wooden tables. They spoke to us in a tense hush and asked us questions: Did we
talk to our parents about it? Were we having nightmares? Was this the first time we ever saw
someone die?

But when we asked questions, they had no answers for us. We wanted more information
about Jeremy Green. All we knew for certain came from the five o’clock news: Jeremy had
escaped early that morning from the County Correctional Facility, on the other side of town, and
ran all the way to our school, just in time for recess. He was twenty-three years old. The
stations filled our television screens with his photograph alongside footage of our now empty
playground. We’d studied his faded portrait: the thin dark scar across his left cheekbone, his flat,
greasy hair parted to the side, his sunken eyes, his pimply forehead and lanky arms, his crooked
teeth. We’d gathered bits of his biography: his life-sentence in prison, his wife and his three year
old daughter, his parents clutching each other on their dilapidated porch, refusing to comment.
Though we watched all of this, some of us multiple times because they repeated it on every news
station and then they repeated it again at eleven, the story ended before we understood what we
had seen.
We were allowed outside again a couple days later. Some kids weren’t ready to face the playground yet, so they optioned to stay in the gym and watch a cartoon version of *The Incredible Journey*. The rest of us searched the gravel for left-over bullets and whispered our survival stories.

“I didn’t even know he had a gun until he was already dead.”

“He pushed me to the ground.”

“He shot at me but I jumped out of the way, just in time.”

“Get real.”

“I swear to God.”

“I saw him smile every time he pulled the trigger.”

“He wanted to die.”

“Nobody wants to die.”

“He did.”

“Then why didn’t he just shoot himself?”

We didn’t find any left over bullets or pieces of his shirt that’d snagged and tore on the fence when he tumbled onto the playground. We didn’t find any pieces of gravel encrusted with Jeremy’s dried blood. We spoke with no evidence. It was as if he’d never come.

When we got bored with the funerals, we played Jeremy’s escape from prison. This time, we broke into two teams: prisoners versus guards. The prisoners had to strategize how they would help Jeremy get out of his cell before he got caught, but before he could leave, we had to figure out how he had gotten the gun.

At first we figured he might have grabbed weapon from his friend’s house on the way to our playground, after he’d left the prison. After all, we had no idea how long Jeremy had been on the run. Then someone came up with the idea that Jeremy had stolen it from a prison guard on his way out. This brought the game to a whole different level. We made it so some of the guards carried pencils in their back pockets, which we used for the guns, but the rest of us didn’t know which ones had them. We could get shot at any time, and several of our failed strategies ended in a pretend bloodbath.

Each day, the prisoners created a new plan and code word. Some of these included: rabbit, Napoleon, caterpillar, and Pluto. But those were too random to be effective. The guards
knew to take action as soon as we started talking about something crazy. Then we started using terms which were harder to detect, words we used all the time, like grandma, or grilled cheese sandwich. As soon as someone said one of these, we’d attempt to execute our plan of attack.

We marked the barriers for cells along the fence by digging lines in the gravel with our heels. We always started in the evening. The head guard would shout “Okay, lights out!” and we’d hit the fence behind us to make the sound of heavy levers coming down to switch us into total darkness. We indicated our inability to see by waving our hands in front of our faces. Then we’d start to whisper to each other. Sometimes he got out because two of us would pretend to be in a fist fight, and the rest of us would shout at each other, distracting the guards. Sometimes he got out because we’d pretend that his cellmate had stolen the key. Sometimes our plans would fail and the guards would shove Jeremy back into his cell. If one of us got caught trying to steal the gun, a guard would pull out his pencil and shoot us right there on the spot. That’s how it worked. We didn’t have to shoot anyone to get shot. We just had to show the threat. But sometimes we did succeed and Jeremy would burst across the field, the pencil in his fist, and the game would be over.

On the day he came, we’d just returned to school after Labor Day weekend. The ground was still damp from a morning thunderstorm. We almost didn’t go out. The monitor told us to stay away from the north side because it was full of puddles. All over the playground, the gravel was too wet to sit on. Those of us who weren’t playing soccer walked laps around the perimeter.

The fence rattled when Jeremy leaped onto it. At first we thought he was one of us. We thought the soccer ball had gotten over the fence and somebody was just taking a short cut after tossing it back into the lot. We were supposed to wait for the playground monitor to go and get the ball for us. But she never paid attention. She just sat near the door reading fashion magazines, which is probably why she didn’t notice Jeremy right away either.

He climbed the chain-link in a fury before he dove forward. His white t-shirt snagged on the top of the fence and he came down, head first, landing not two feet from the baseball bench. He rolled to his feet in one sweeping movement and when saw his height, we knew he was an outsider. He rushed out into the center of the soccer game and we stopped at the sound of nearing sirens. Jeremy whipped out a pistol from his back pocket, cocked it, and stretched his arm up straight in the air like he was going to initiate a race. Then we started to run.
He fired a shot into the clouds and our playground shrieks turned to deep throated screams. Some of us ran directly to the steps of the school, but most of us just ran in every other direction away from him. He fired more shots and we sped up with each one. Some of us ran straight to the north side because it was empty and it seemed like there was nowhere else for us to go. We doused ourselves in the puddles, sending streams of water into the air and adding to the confusion. We were soaked with mud and sweat, clutching each other’s damp hands and bodies, but we kept running around in circles. Four police officers darted onto the playground from the parking-lot entrance, shouting for him to freeze. He put up his hands and they pumped bullet after bullet into him, even after he had collapsed to the ground.

By then the janitor was out, and a few of our teachers. They shouted our names and pulled us into the school. We tried to crowd by the door to watch them take Jeremy’s body away, but we were ushered into the gym, where we’d wait for our parents. Some of us were crying. The rest were too bewildered to show any kind of reaction. At that time we had no idea how to put what we saw into words. We were told Jeremy came to our playground because he wanted to die a dramatic death. This was to comfort us, to assure us that he never intended to hurt us.

In our last game, we acted out the murder Jeremy committed; the one that got him sentenced to life in prison. This time, we were all Jeremy. We’d hop out from behind the backstop and barge across the playground to the slab of cement we designated as his victim’s home. The reason for the shooting varied—sometimes the man had beaten him in a game of a pool, assaulted his wife, or stolen his child—but in the end, Jeremy was always justified. We played this game until the day we got a new playground monitor. She heard us shouting Jeremy’s name and firing his pistols. She didn’t tell us to stop, but as soon as we got back into our classrooms, our teachers brought us into the auditorium for another assembly, just for us fifth graders.

The principal walked up and down the aisles and leaned into our seats. She told us how shocked she was at our behavior; that we were the big kids acting like kindergartners. She said kindergartners don’t know the difference between what’s appropriate to joke about and what’s not. Fifth graders were expected to be more sensitive. Then she reminded us that some topics weren’t to be discussed without care, that guns weren’t funny, and that death wasn’t a game. In
her ultimate act of persuasion, she threatened to take away our recess if she ever heard about us doing this sort of thing again. That was enough for us to do our best to pretend that it never happened.

After a while, Jeremy’s name fell from our lips and we returned to our old playground games. He seemed to be pushed out of our minds with the cold winds that prevented our recesses. He was almost forgotten until, sometime in the following spring, we found his name etched deep into the bench, near the spot where he’d hopped over the fence. We let it sit there for the rest of the school year, until we left, careful never to touch it.
Lek waited forty-five minutes in the university garden before he accepted that his student had stood him up for the third week in a row. Three weeks: 600 baht. A half a month’s rent he’d been stiffed. He’d planned, after the lesson, to pay his landlord but now he’d have to ask her to be patient until the following Tuesday, after his other student paid him. In just a month he’d gone from three students to one, from six hundred to two hundred baht a week. He could not live on two hundred baht a week.

He waited another hour picking arpeggios on his guitar, hoping the rich kids passing by would compliment him and ask for lessons. They sauntered in groups: boys with badminton racquets, girls with cubed watermelon they sucked from the tips of wooden sticks. Some nodded but none stopped. Across the pond, a group gathered around a boy tearing at an out-of-tune acoustic; they shouted over the simple chords of the alternative rock song in a flat-toned chorus that grated on Lek’s ears. They all wanted to play the guitar. They all needed a teacher. Lek played until the sun slipped down behind the high-rises, until a row of lanterns lit the pathway through the banana trees, until the mosquitoes swarmed at his ankles and he couldn’t brush them off while maintaining the rhythm of his strum. “Father God,” he prayed while he zipped his guitar in its soft case. “Lord Jesus, I am in serious need of some cash.”

While he waited for God to respond, he went around the corner to see if Ba Muang had anything for him to eat. The one-toothed woman scraped the last of her papaya slivers from a mortar bowl onto a clump of sticky rice and served it to him in a Styrofoam carton. She then commented that he looked famished and threw in a fish she’d cooked for a customer by mistake, which was now mushy beneath its black rubbery skin. She gave Lek this free food because she also came from his village. She knew his mother. But even when her food was fresh, the selection was mediocre compared what to he had at home. Ba Muang’s fish tasted faintly of the canal. On that day, though, Lek didn’t complain; not even in his thoughts. He sat on the curb outside a nearby convenience store and peeled the milky flesh from the bones with the end of his spoon.

At this moment, his friend Geng pulled up alongside him on a purple motorbike, splashing the afternoon rain onto Lek’s shins. He shouted to him over the motor, “Taste any
good?” but laughed while he leaned the bike against its kickstand. “Ba Muang?” He shook his head in disapproval. “I thought your Jesus would have made you rich by now.”

“If I had known you were coming I would have saved you some.”

Geng was a bass player, and the two of them once made most of their money by pocketing tips for their nightly renditions of songs by the Eagles, Eric Clapton, and the B-52s. They were just a couple of Isan boys then, boys from Srisaket Province, boys who played country songs in their market, who took their neighbors’ praise as an excuse to escape the Northeastern drought. Just a couple more Isan boys who came to Bangkok intending to become famous. Lately, though, Geng and Lek rarely spoke; not since Lek became a Christian and his pastor told him that playing in pubs contradicted God’s command to ‘walk in the light.’ Lek didn’t know much Bible scripture when he met the pastor, but he had done his best to avoid deception long before he understood what this ‘light’ was all about. And so he quit the band in obedience and tried to use his gift to earn his living in more honest ways. That was why, when Geng showed up on the same day he had lost a student, he wasn’t sure if their encounter was Satan’s tempting or God’s testing. Maybe, just maybe, it was God’s provision.

Geng sat next to him on the curb in front of the convenience store as a doorbell sounded behind them in two electric chimes. They stretched their arms, as if to collect the air conditioning that swept forth to the street. “I’ve found a drummer,” Geng said, and rambled on about how he’d met the kid through an advertisement on the web—a boy from Mahidol University, some sort of prodigy. His uncle owned a restaurant near Victory Monument and he needed a band to play a couple sets during dinnertime. “500 baht a night, Lek. Per person.”

“I’m happy for you.” Though he sounded a bit melancholy, Lek did mean it. Or at least he wanted to mean it.

“All we need is the guitar.”

“I sold my electric last month,” said Lek. “Or I’d offer to lend it.”

“We have the instrument. We just need someone to play it.”

Geng wore a t-shirt from a concert they’d once attended at Impact Arena, but Lek could not recall the name of the band. He did remember that when the lead singer appeared on stage, he shouted a greeting to the crowd in Thai but attached the feminine ending to the phrase. Not only that, but he mispronounced a tone and so it sounded like he’d said, Hello, kill! Geng stole the shirt from a vendor on the way out. It was black with ‘Death Metal’ across the chest in silver
farang letters, which made Lek wonder if the singer had intended his mistake. Now that shirt had a tear near the collar, and the fabric squeezed against Geng’s gut, lifting a little as he removed his helmet. “I didn’t think your Jesus would care if you played in a restaurant,” he said.

“I’ll talk to my pastor about it.”

“I’ll tell you what,” said Geng. “I’ll come to church with you. I’ll come to your church if you come back to the band.”

“I’ll talk to my pastor,” Lek said again and attempted to dismiss Geng with the back of his hand.

“You’re not listening to me.” There was a put-on-panic in Geng’s voice that Lek recognized. “This is good news, Lek. How do you know it didn’t come from your Jesus?”

The question sobered him. He’d attended World Outreach Ministries for nearly four months, but he still had no idea how to tell God’s work apart from everything else. He was afraid this meant that he was not a godly man, because godly men had discernment. But he wanted to be godly. He wanted to be like those men who studied in Bible classes, who understood everything God said through the scriptures because it was through the scriptures, Pastor Stevens said, that he could tell right from wrong. And even though the pastor urged his congregation to read God’s Word until they memorized it, to use the verses in a battle against the world’s confusion, Lek found that those words perplexed him as much as Geng’s question. For instance: why did God call himself bread and then command people to eat bread? Lek didn’t even like bread that much. But if learning to like bread would help him to understand what came from God and what came from Satan, Lek was willing to incorporate more into his diet. “Do you want to know God?” he asked.

Geng laughed and returned his helmet to his head. “If he agrees to make me rich.”

Lek liked to imagine Geng’s drummer riding next to him on the bus to the restaurant. He would be undoubtedly a quiet kid since most drummers were quiet, perhaps wearing a t-shirt for his favorite band—Potato, maybe, or Modern Dog if he appreciated classic rock—and there, over the rushing sound of traffic through the open window, he would confess a profound emptiness permeating his life. Lek would then be able to share with him how it was he came to the Lord under similar circumstances.
He’d describe how, after a night of gambling away a week’s worth of pub wages, he knew that his life did not satisfy him. Music was as much of a drug as the scotch he drank during those nightly card games he once played with the other men on the dark patches of their street. He’d tell the boy, and also Geng who’d be an ear-shot away in the seat behind them, the story of how he spent the next morning with his guitar strapped to his back, walking five kilometers from his home to his regular corner near Siam Square. He’d just wanted to play long enough to collect the amount of baht needed to purchase a bowl of noodles.

When he got there, he’d found a crowd gathered around a farang girl singing in Thai. If he hadn’t caught a glimpse of her, he wouldn’t have known she was a farang because her pronunciation of the lyrics sounded just like a native. Behind her, a Thai man dressed in what looked like an outfit he’d bought that day—a crisp shirt and well-fit black dress pants—accompanied her on an acoustic guitar. But though the man seemed to have money, Lek could see that he was just another amateur, strumming simple chords with no volume control. The girl, on the other hand, commanded her voice to sail above the sky train’s squeal as it passed above them, her sound smooth like a stream with no stones to interrupt it. Lek had pushed his way through the cluster of people and saw that she was a teenager, though she did not dress like one. She wore a full-length skirt and buttoned-up blouse, her yellow hair woven into a single braid that hung over her shoulder, like a rope reaching into a well.

She sang about her God—Pra Jesu—a beckoning for those who were weak with heavy hearts to surrender their burdens in exchange for a new life. Lek listened until they finished, at first so he could grab his spot once they left, but eventually because their songs clutched at him, tightening their grip with every verse. His hunger abated; he felt like he’d just finished one of his mother’s meals.

He’d tell the drummer that after they finished the songs, the girl passed out small comic-books to her audience. This puzzled Lek, even more so when he glanced over their illustrations of burning buildings and Thai people sobbing with hands lifted, crying out. He wasn’t sure what this meant, but it captured something of how he’d felt before he’d heard her music—how his money tended to turn to smoke. These drawings depicted his anger at himself, his shame. The next Sunday, he found the church from an address stamped onto the back cover.

But the church was not white, he’d tell the drummer. It did not have white marble pews in front of a large white statue of Christ. No white marble floor. Instead, the people sat on
purple folding chairs spread across a pale brown carpet. There were no statues at all—no Mother of Christ standing over them in her rich blue robe. No Christ hanging from a cross. In fact, there was nothing decorative in the room besides a row fake poinsettia trees lining the pulpit. He marveled most that the people were not white. Yes, some farangs filled the seats—later he’d think of them as the young couple from Canada, the Australian family, the Russian model and her boyfriend. He’d learned that Pastor Stevens and his wife were from Boston. But he did not anticipate the Filipinos, the Japanese man who worked for Honda, the students and families from India and Africa. The majority, he found, were Thai people; Thais who stretched their palms to the ceiling, earnestly nodding with serious expressions; Thais as devoted as those who came from Christian nations. At the front of the room, the same farang girl sang songs with lyrics projected behind her on a screen—lines of Thai script above the farang phonetic spellings. The same guitar player spoke to him after the service; he introduced himself as Mr. Tong and then told Lek that the singer was the pastor’s daughter, and that her name was Miriam. Just wait until you meet her, Lek imagined telling the drummer, and also Geng who was still listening to every word. She’s a farang but she speaks perfect Thai.

No shit, Geng would say over his shoulder. I have to meet her.

Not until you clean your mouth, Lek would say.

The thought struck him as funny until he realized he had no idea how Geng would behave at church. He would talk to his pastor, he decided—if only to warn him about the friend who’d be accompanying him next Sunday.

*  

Pastor Stevens’ condo was tucked into a neighborhood of houses protected by ornate iron fences. Branches of magenta blooms poured over the sides, providing patches of shade for Lek to walk beneath. In one of the yards, a small woman greeted him while watering someone’s garden; a Thai family, Lek figured when he heard a pop band playing faintly from a radio inside the house.

Outside the condo gate, he passed a uniformed guard who was sprawled out on a chaise and wearing sunglasses. Lek couldn’t tell if the man sleeping until he sat up and called to him: “Hold on a second there, kid.” From the man’s tone, Lek thought he was about to be accused of a recent robbery, or some other crime committed in the complex. Instead the guard said, “You’re one of the ones who came here for that ceremony.”
“Not sure.”
“No, it was you. A few months back.” He then explained that he’d been watching when the pastor held a ceremony in the condo’s swimming pool.

“My baptism,” Lek said.

The man whistled and told Lek that he’s watched the ceremony several times, but no one’s explained to him why fifty people, from what seemed like every country in world, would come to their condo only to watch a farang push a Thai man under water.

Lek started to tell him what the pastor had told him about the ceremony’s significance, about how Jesus said to do it because… He couldn’t remember. Something about a story—a story about how when Jesus had a baptism, a dove flew down from a cloud and announced he was the son of God—all of which made less sense to him now than when Pastor Stevens explained it to him.

“What I want to know is, why do they start clapping after the man goes under the water?” The man laughed. “Why do farangs love to see the Thai man get dunked?” Then the guard fell silent, and after a few seconds, asked, “So you’re still a Christian?”

“Of course.” Lek imagined the guard was squinting behind the glasses, though they were too dark to see through. “It’s about the love of Christ. Once you experience Christ’s love, you can’t ever turn around.” This was something Lek heard the Russian model say during last Sunday’s sharing time. He wondered if it was true. The man shook his head and wished him luck before he slumped back into his former position.

Lek passed the swimming pool, mostly empty save for a farang woman wrapped in a damp towel and reading under an umbrella. She sat near the place Miriam had talked to him after the baptism, when she brought him a towel so he could dry off after the ceremony.

She’d passed him the towel and then filled him a plate from the potluck table. “How do you make money?” she’d asked while his mouth was full of spicy pork salad. Her Thai was as articulate as when she sang praise songs.

“I play music,” he’d told her. “How can you speak Thai so well?”

She told him quickly that she’d been born in Bangkok. “My brothers, too.”

“You speak better than most Thai people.”

Instead of responding to the joke, she ran over to Mr. Tong and asked him if Lek could borrow his guitar. “Play something,” she said when she handed him the instrument. Lek played
Pride: In the Name of Love, mumbling over the lyrics he had trouble pronouncing. When he finished, the church members had applauded over their picnic plates and asked him for another.

Pastor Stevens waited until after this mini-concert, and after most people had left, to invite him up to their home. This was the first and only time Lek had been in a farang’s home, and even then, he only got to see the living room. Disappointedly, it looked pretty much the same as any Thai family’s living room, minus the graduation photos or portraits of the Royal family, and of course, minus the shelf of idols and incense. They did have a dining room table, which Lek appreciated was different. He sat at it while the pastor explained, in Thai less developed than his daughter’s, that though Lek was a talented guy, he should probably rethink his repertoire; that the people who wrote the songs Lek knew had disobeyed God by using their musical gifts, gifts God had given them, to bring glory to themselves.

“I’m sorry,” Lek muttered between the pastor’s brief pauses.

Pastor Stevens rested his hand on Lek’s shoulder and said, gently, “You’re a baby in the kingdom of God. No need to stay up all night worrying about it.”

Miriam, who had followed them inside with both hands full of dirty dishes, interrupted in English, and Lek listened in vain for familiar phrases in their conversation. They spoke too fast, with increasing tension. Meanwhile, Lek imagined Christ in the back of the pub with his hands over his ears, shaking His glowing head. It was an image Lek did stay up all night worrying about.

“Miriam has a suggestion,” said Pastor Stevens, eventually. “And I think it’s a fine idea.” Before she could share what it was, he said, “Miriam thinks you should join our worship team.”

Lek’s head lightened. He gripped the table for balance. “You’re not going to ask me to leave the church?”

The pastor laughed. “Of course not.” He then instructed his daughter to relay details about rehearsal times and returned outside.

Once they were alone, she whispered, “You don’t even know what those English songs mean, do you?”

It was true, Lek admitted, he hadn’t known what he was singing about. He’d chosen Pride: In the Name of Love because it had ‘love’ in the title, but never did give the rest of the lyrics much thought.
“No need to freak out, then,” said Miriam, laughing. “You’re fine.”

For the rest of the afternoon, they sat slumped on the teakwood sofa, where Lek told her of how he learned to play so well—how his mother had a job cleaning a farang’s summer home, how he’d helped her with the dusting and came across a shelf of cassette tapes—Simon and Garfunkel, Crosby Stills and Nash, both references Miriam said she she’d heard of, but hadn’t actually heard. Lek also told her how he found a Martin guitar in its case. When the farangs left for beach holidays, which was often, he’d take the tapes home with him and listen to them over and over, until he’d perfectly emulated their songs on the farang’s guitar. Miriam loved this story and asked him to repeat it on other days. She called him a genius.

Lek noticed that when he spoke to Miriam, his words came out as though filtered through the lens of Christ; he was able to recognized God’s hand in every detail he related to her about his life. He figured she saw him as a godly man. He was not a godly man, but he wanted her to believe so. This is why, he decided as he rang the pastor’s doorbell, he could not mention Geng’s request that he join another cover band.

Miram’s brother, Benjamin, answered and said, “You’re just in time for dinner,” in the perfect Thai that never ceased to startle Lek to hear from the mouth of farang. “We’re going to eat outside and watch the sun go down.”

On the balcony, Miriam slid across the bench she shared with her youngest brother, Daniel. Lek squeezed into the space across from Benjamin and closest to the edge; the two of them poked a leg through the railing, dangling them over the neighborhood. The pastor took a seat at the head of the table and called Lek a ‘pleasant surprise,’ which Miriam interpreted. At that point, the only food item on the table was a basket of sliced bread and individually wrapped packets of butter. Lek braced himself for how he would try to smile as he chewed.

The five waited as Mrs. Stevens filled the small table without their help, first with a bowl of pasta saturated in more butter and caked with parmesan, followed by a pan of snap peas. The smells of each made Lek’s stomach turn. Then she brought out a plate of pink beef soaking in a pool of bloody juice. Before he could catch himself, Lek said, “I don’t eat beef.”

“That’s right,” said the pastor slowly in English. “I forgot you Thais don’t like e a good steak.” He laughed. “Left over from your Hindu heritage, I’m guessing.” Lek didn’t ask for an interpretation, but smiled politely, as if the pastor had just told a funny joke.
Mrs. Stevens sat next to Daniel and folded her hands in her lap while gazing at her array of edible accomplishments. “Why don’t you ask Lek what he would like to drink?” she said to Miriam.

“We’ve got milk or water,” she said.

“Water,” said Lek. He wondered if it came out sounding rude. “If it’s not too much trouble.”

“Not at all,” Miriam said without much emotion, and went to the kitchen.

“Grab him a plate and a fork while you’re at it,” said the pastor, and then asked Lek to say ‘grace.’

He waited until Miriam returned with a pitcher and filled his glass before he closed his eyes and thanked God, in broken English, for the family and for the food. “Amen,” he said, and opened his eyes.

“Lord, thank you for bringing our brother Lek to the table tonight,” Pastor Stevens said with his eyes still closed. “Bless his walk with your son, Jesus Christ, who died for his sins. And bless this food to our bodies. In Jesus’ Name.”

Everyone said in unison: “Amen.”

Lek lost his appetite as he spooned the pasta onto his plate and could only manage a few bites. While the others ate, he remembered Geng for the first time since he’d arrived at their door; if Geng could see him now, he’d never let him live it down. “I have a friend who wants to visit the church,” he said.

“You’ve been sharing the gospel!” Mrs. Stevens exclaimed.

“Very good, Lek,” the pastor said.

Lek glanced at Miriam for a reaction, but she gave none. “He’s from my hometown,” he said, and then explained that Geng was a musician.

“What does he play?” Miriam asked.

“Bass. We used to play together.”

The pastor then preached about how God was using Lek to connect to the music community in Bangkok, how Lek had done a good thing by sacrificing his secular work and redirecting his talent to the Lord. “Now the other musicians will see the meaning behind their gifts,” he said. “God will teach the Thai people, through Lek, how they might use music for worship.”
“Do you believe it, Lek?” Mrs. Stevens asked.
“I’m not sure,” he said. “I mean, I want to.”
“You’ve got to believe that God can do big things through you, Lek,” she said. “He has big plans for you and your talent.”

This silenced him. He turned from the table and watched the sun, a perfect orange disk in the city smog, stretch to the distant row of skyscrapers before it passed behind them. He continued to sit there, long after the boys had cleared everyone else’s plates away. Miriam moved to the other side of the table, where Benjamin had sat, and asked, “Weren’t hungry tonight? You didn’t touch your food.”
“It’s hard for me to eat like a farang,” he said, and smiled.
“If we had known you were coming, we’d have picked up some som tam.”
“No, it’s okay. I can eat it. I’m just not hungry tonight.”
“All right,” said Miriam, unconvinced.

The sky darkened and lights appeared in windows across the city. He asked Miriam if she ever thought about how many people lived there, and how God knew all of their names?
“Not really,” she said.
“Dishes.” Mrs. Stevens stood at the screen door. “Then you’ve got your math homework.”
“In a second,” Miriam said.
“Miriam,” the pastor called through the screen but from out of their view. “Now.”
She rolled her eyes as she stood. “I don’t know why they call it homework.”
“Because it’s school work you do at home?” Lek asked.
“I’m home-schooled,” Miriam said. “All my work is homework.”
“Then they should just call it ‘more’ work.”
“Exactly.”

He picked up his plate and followed her into the living room, where the pastor sprawled across the coach, and he thanked everyone again for the meal. Mrs. Stevens said it was a special treat to have him, and took his plate without acknowledging the food he’d left on it. He felt bad about it anyway, but couldn’t find the words to apologize.

On the way home, he tried to understand what Mrs. Stevens meant when she said God had a plan for him. He pictured a stadium full of Thai people lifting their hands and crying, like
in the comic book, surrendering their lives to God while he and Geng played from the stage, leading their nation in songs of praise. Maybe, he thought, it was God, not Geng who had brought him to Bangkok. Maybe this is what God had intended for him all along.

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After the service, Geng and Lek shared a large bowl of chicken _tom yum_ from a nearby food stand. It was a definitive April day in Thailand—the humidity heaped upon their skin like a layer of wool; an occasional cloud pushed through the sky, too sparse for rain. In addition to this discomfort, the day was not going at all as Lek had anticipated. For one thing, he thought Geng would have dressed a bit more respectfully, and wondered if he was wearing that same ‘Death Metal’ shirt just to spite him, or, at least, to show he didn’t care. It was hard to tell why Geng made these choices. Sometimes he seemed oblivious to what other people expected from him; at other times, he seemed calculated and cruel. Lek supposed that Geng wore it because he hadn’t gotten around to taking his clothes to the laundry woman. Darker clothes appeared cleaner longer.

He also thought that Geng would be bubbling over with questions from the experience—that he’d want an explanation of the sermon, which they’d listened to in translation through headphones. But Geng did not ask about the sermon. Instead he said:

“You didn’t tell me you played music with a farang.” He dipped his spoon into the broth and lit it drip slowly over his pile of rice. “How old is she?”

Lek didn’t know her exact age, just that she hadn’t yet started college. “Farangs don’t like you to ask.”

“Farangs like to make money,” Geng said as he chewed. “She could get us work in a hotel lobby. How about Khao San Road?”

“Forget it,” said Lek. “It’ll never happen.”

“Think about the tips we’d make from all those farangs on vacation?”

“She’s the pastor’s daughter.”

Geng waved both hands in front of him with an expression of exaggerated shock. “Since when have you been so uptight? This is what happens when a man becomes a farang.” He sipped his water, splashing it on his chest.

Lek picked at his food but did not take a bite. “You come to Bangkok and become a mess.”
“You go to church and become a complete ass. You’re so busy looking for your Jesus on the moon—you don’t even notice the stacks of cash piled in front of your face.”

“I’m glad you’re looking out for me,” Lek said, pulling his wallet from his pocket. “You can forget about the band. I’m not interested.” He placed his last twenty-baht bill next to the half-empty bowl. As he stood, he almost said, ‘Good luck,’ but left Geng without a word.

He passed roasting chickens on the way home. Steam rose from vats of noodle soup, fresh fish lay across ice piles on countertops, sea bass waiting to be fried. He slowed his steps when he noticed others staring at him over their bowls and plates of food he couldn’t afford. Why didn’t he at least stay to finish the soup? It was the last good meal guaranteed to him in God knows how long. His stomach rumbling—this was God. God was telling him what happens when he tries to satisfy himself with the ways of the world. Now he would be punished for getting distracted. The Lord had found a way for Geng to come to church and Lek just let the opportunity slip on by. He didn’t even think to ask Geng what he’d thought of the sermon. That might have been his only chance. Geng might end up in Hell and it would be Lek’s fault. He would go home and ask for forgiveness, he decided. Then he would go to Ba Maung’s and ask for dinner.

But when he reached his apartment, he found his landlord on the steps with her small son on her lap, feeding the child bits of pineapple from a plastic bowl. She returned Lek’s greeting but ignored his smile. “It’s the second week of the month,” she said to him.

He nodded. “I can give you half. Two hundred more on Tuesday.”

“We have someone looking to rent. If I don’t see it all today, I’m going to show her your place tomorrow.”

He nodded again and ran up to his room. He turned on his fan; its stream of hot air lifted the dirty curtain over his open window and pushed loose sheets of worship music across his floor. He kneeled to pick them up but then rolled to his side, where he clinched his eyes tight and prayed hard in repentance. After repeating his apologies, he waited for some intuition of a response. He felt none. “You’re supposed to be helping me,” he said, pleading. “You’re supposed to be providing for me.” Still, he felt nothing. A dull pain spread through his abdomen and his arms throbbed as he reached for a worn envelope from beneath his sleeping mat and counted the cash he’d saved. Three hundred baht—two hundred short of what he thought he’d had. He squeezed the envelope in his hand until it crinkled into a tube. Tears filled his eyes and
he wiped them with the back of his hand. “You’re hungry,” he said aloud, and went to find Ba Muang.

But when he got to her stand, another vendor stood in her place; an older man selling homemade perfumes. He told Lek that he did not know where Ba Muang went—that he’d purchased this section of the sidewalk that morning to set up his shop.

Lek then returned to the pastor’s condo. He stood across the street and spotted the family outside engaging in another meal. They didn’t speak—all six were more preoccupied with their food than with each other. Even Daniel ate stiffly for a five-year-old. From where he stood, Lek couldn’t see Miriam. She sat behind her father. If he interrupted them, what would she think of his begging for money? He almost went up anyway, knowing they would ask him once more to sit down for a plate. If he did that, though, Miriam’s father would ask why he was there, and she would think he must not have faith after all because if Lek had faith, God wouldn’t be punishing him this way.

And so he ended up outside of Geng’s room. Lek pressed his forehead against the grate over the window but saw no shadow of movement. He pounded on the door but there was no answer. The purple motorcycle was not where Geng parked it, so Lek sat with his back against the wall, swatted at mosquitoes, and waited.

“Shouldn’t you be in church?” Geng asked when he tapped him awake. He laughed and then asked him if he’d eaten dinner.

“I’ve lost another student,” Lek said. “Now I’m going to lose my place.”

Geng invited him inside and tossed him a bag of dried squid. He sat on the edge of his bed and watched Lek finish the entire snack, until he was wiping the salt from his lips.

“Thirsty?” Geng asked and then went to his refrigerator. He was out of water, but offered to run down to 7-11 and grab some more. Even though Lek didn’t answer him, he slipped on his sandals and took some coins from a dresser drawer.

Lek followed him downstairs and stood outside the store while he watched his friend stand over the cookie aisle. When Geng came out, he opened the bag for Lek to see what he’d purchased.

“Bread,” said Geng, pointing at a piece of pound cake wrapped in cellophane. “Since you’re a farang now, I bought you a piece of bread.” He laughed, and after a moment, Lek laughed along with him.
By the end of the week, Lek had transferred his mat to Geng’s floor and pooled the money he’d saved for rent to help with meals. He’d gone each day to the university garden and played his music, but no new students asked him for lessons. He broke down and put out his guitar case for the kids to toss coins into. They rarely did. On Tuesday, Geng returned to the apartment accompanied by the drummer, who they called Maao. He was a skinny kid, quite tall, but shy. Geng enjoyed ordering the boy around, and sent him out for a six pack of Heineken, which Lek refused to join them in drinking. On Wednesday afternoon, the three of them went down to Victory Monument and auditioned for Maao’s uncle, who hired them to play that very evening. Lek used the restaurant phone to call Miriam to reschedule the worship practice for an hour before the service. He did not mention why. By Saturday, Lek had pocked 2500 baht of wages and tips. He told Geng that he would use the money to ask his landlord to take him back, that he would play in the band for one more week (and that he needed Wednesday off), before he could go back to trying to find students. He was just using these two weeks to get back on his feet.

“Give it three weeks,” Geng said, as they were packing up their instruments.

Just then, a farang from the audience interrupted Lek. The man had whisky on his breath, and he said in broken Thai: “You don’t know this song, but I want to hear Funky’s Dilemma.”

“Punky,” Lek said and played it for him, though he faked some of the chords and hummed most of the lyrics. The man thanked him and thrust a fifty-baht bill into his palm.

“See what I told you?” Geng said on the bus ride home. “Imagine what we’d make if we played Khao San.”

“She’s the pastor’s daughter,” Lek reminded him. “I’m not going to cause her to stumble.”

“Stumble?” Geng laughed. “You don’t even drink.”

* 

When Miriam was fifteen minutes late for worship practice on Sunday, Lek wondered if she’d forgotten about their rescheduling. The bass player, Sam, arrived first. He was a chubby Australian boy, a student at the international university and a mediocre musician, but he was good enough to get them through the worship service. His Thai was worse than his musicianship, and so the two didn’t have much to say to each other. Still, when Lek’s knee
shook as he tuned his guitar, he wondered if Sam would be able to tell he was hiding something. This is why, when Miriam finally did arrive, Lek was extra sensitive to her sour mood. She interrupted his introduction to How Great is Our God and said, “Really, Lek. We’ve played that song two out of the last three weeks.”

He passed her the stack of music. “You choose, then.”

Without looking at it, Miriam ran her thumb across the edges as if it were a flip book. “I don’t really care,” she said. “It’s all the same song, anyway. They all sound the same to me.”

She passed the music back to Lek, and he hunted through the titles looking for something that would speak to Miriam. It didn’t make sense that these songs, which were supposed to be pleasing to God, were not pleasing to her. But as he sorted through the titles, Lek, too, had trouble connecting to any of them. In the end, he chose All for Jesus, Come Go with the Lord, and My Redeemer Lives because of their variety in tempos. Miriam sang through these with her eyes glued to the words, appearing as though she were trying to translate them. In addition to that, her voice had a slight dullness to it, and Lek obeyed the urge to say, “I’m sorry I made you wake up early.”

“It’s fine,” she said without a smile.

At the end of worship practice, Geng and Maao showed up at the church. They didn’t mention beforehand that they were coming. When Lek saw them enter among others in the congregation, and that Geng was wearing a clean shirt—a green one bearing the silhouette of a bearded farang wearing a beret—he closed his eyes and thanked the Lord. As he introduced them to Miriam, he told her once more that he’d grown up with Geng, and that they were once in a band.

“Maao’s a drummer,” Geng said. “We play rock.”

“Where do you play?” she asked, but before Geng could answer, Lek pulled her aside to check the microphones.

Even though, during his previous visit, Geng sat in the back with his eyes closed for most of the sermon, he chose to spend this Sunday’s service in the front row—a row the rest of the church usually avoided, save for the worship team. But there they sat: Geng nodding with enthusiasm, Lek taking notes, Miriam sketching Lek’s guitar onto the back of her bulletin, and Maao hunched as though he were in an interrogation room. He let his translation headphones
slip to his shoulders and stared into his lap as though he were afraid to look Pastor Stevens in the eye.

This week, the pastor retold the story in Matthew 18 about the shepherd who had ninety-nine sheep until one ran away. “In order to find the lost sheep and bring it back,” the pastor said, the shepherd had to leave the rest behind, unprotected, susceptible to wolves.” Lek wrote the words, lost sheep onto his bulletin and circled them. When we disobey, we put the whole family in danger. At this, he glanced up to see if the pastor glared back down at him. Their eyes met for a moment, but then Pastor Stevens wrapped the microphone chord around his palm and stepped to the other side of the pulpit. “We know what Jesus says about this very thing,” he said. “And we know that Jesus didn’t take this subject lightly. ‘Anyone who causes another to stumble—’ do we know this verse?” Lek did not, but from the tone of Pastor Stevens’s voice, he should have. And so he dictated this, too: Anyone who causes another to stumble deserves to have a stone tied around his neck and be thrown into the sea. Did Jesus actually say this?

It didn’t seem to bother Geng as much as it did him. Geng grinned widely, nodding with approval. He grinned through the end of the sermon, through the breaking of bread and the taking of the grape juice, and he grinned as he threw a handful of pocket change into the offering bin. And when the pastor beckoned sinners to the pulpit during the alter call, Geng grabbed Maao’s arm and yanked him toward the stage, both of them grinning, even as the pastor prayed over them. After the service, Pastor Stevens shook Geng’s hand, then Maao’s, and welcomed them to the Kingdom of God. Geng said that he’d always wanted to be a Christian, and after what he’d heard, he knew for sure that he was one.

Lek then reminded him that Geng was the childhood friend he’d told him about and the pastor said, “We’re glad to have you.” He smiled at Lek with light eyes dancing as if to say, ‘Well done, faithful servant,’ though he actually said, “These fellows look like they could use some som tam.” He then gave his daughter a wad of bills from his back pocket and told her to send them all home in a taxi after the meal.

Lek started to tell him that he and Geng could just go home by motorcycle, but Geng cut him off before he got two words out. “Thank you, sir,” he said in Thai, and in English: “You are so beautiful.”

“To me,” said Maao, and he bowed to the pastor with thanks.

Miriam laughed, and leaning into Lek she whispered, “Your friends are cute.”
During lunch, Geng must have complimented Miriam over a hundred times about her singing. The first couple of times it was all right, but by the end of the meal, Lek was ready to toss his old friend into on-coming traffic. “What a voice,” Geng said to her. “You are a masterpiece.”

“I know,” she said, and laughed a little too loud. She returned the flattery by showering him with questions about what it was like to be a ‘real musician,’ as though the music she played with Lek wasn’t real. She asked about the crowds, about the moment Geng saw new faces, about the times an audience member asked for a song he’d never played. Was he nervous? Lek had never seen her act this way—never seen her use so much volume when she talked; she hiked the pitch of her voice up three notches.

But the way Geng was acting, Lek recognized. This was the Geng of his youth. The Geng who, the summer before they left for Bangkok, convinced him to take a month in the monastery to make up for some of the merit they’d lose before they left for the city; the Geng who then spent most evenings making monetary promises to the young temple boys in exchange for their leaving the grounds and returning with a six pack of beer. When a monk caught them in the sala, where they were supposed to be practicing silent contemplation but instead shouting the words to their mothers’ favorite country songs, Geng managed to convince the others of his repentance and to let him stay. And this was the same Geng who, the very next night, convinced the boy to venture out again and return with his girlfriend in addition to more drinks. Even after that experience, even after growing up together, Lek did not know what Geng was capable of. The only things he knew to expect were surprises.

This is why he wasn’t surprised when Geng and Maao showed up unannounced to Wednesday’s worship rehearsal with their instruments, though Geng knew full well that they already had a bassist and didn’t need two. But Geng was better than Sam, and when he heard Geng play he dismissed himself and said he had some studying to do at home. Without that kid, they were able to run through the hymns in fifteen minutes, after which Geng handed Miriam a stack of songs to learn: Wild World, Mrs. Robinson, Losing My Religion.

“No,” Lek said. “No way. We are not playing those here.”

“Chill out,” said Geng. After he’d directed them through a set list, he announced that they all had an appointment for an audition at the Sabai Bar on Khao San Road.
“What time?” asked Lek.
“In one hour,” said Miriam.

To everyone else in the room, it seemed perfectly natural that she would answer this question, but Lek was beside himself. “I’m not going,” he said. “Not until we get her father’s permission.”

“I already talked to him about it,” said Miriam, standing up from her seat in the front row. “He said it was totally fine.” She didn’t convince Lek and he told her so. “We’ll be fine,” she insisted. “Lighten up.” She pointed to Geng. “I’m riding with him,” and the two of them left the church together.

While he waited for Maao to finish packing up his drum, Lek slumped in a chair and buried his head in his hands. He tried to pray but his mind was too cluttered to focus on any particular words. “Please,” he whispered. “Please.” But he didn’t know what he was asking for.

Farang tourists packed the Khao San sidewalks—boys with dreadlocks and ratted t-shirts, girls in flowing cotton skirts and bikini tops. A tuk tuk driver stopped Lek and offered a ride. Eventually he spotted Miriam talking to a beach clothes vendor, who was so enamored with her Thai that he didn’t notice Geng stuffing sundresses into her backpack. By the time Lek reached her, Geng had scurried into the bar behind the booths.

“Please,” Lek said, placing his hand above her elbow, making her jump a bit. “It’s not good for us to be here.”

“I’ve got three of you looking out for me.” She leaned into him and guided him towards the bar, but Lek resisted.

“Please let me take you back to your condo.”

She freed herself and said, “I had no idea you were so forward,” and darted past a row of tables that stretched out to the sidewalk from the bar.

The stage was tucked in the back of the open-air pub, where Thais and tourists shared Singha and Chang beers over candlelight. Geng introduced Lek to the bar manager, Tee, who was a loud man with a kind demeanor. Tee showed them where to plug in their instruments and then checked their amp levels on the soundboard near the entrance. After everything was in place, Miriam came out of the restroom wearing one of the sundresses Geng had stolen—a pale blue strappy thing that dipped a little lower on her chest and hugged her hips a little more than
Lek was ready to see. On top of that, she’d unbraided her hair, letting it fall over her shoulders in a crinkled mass.

Geng stood at the microphone and introduced Miriam to the audience as ‘Miss Thailand,’ before he welcomed her to the stage. “Miss Thailand Country Band,” he said in more English than Lek had ever heard him attempt to speak. “This is Miriam. Give it up!” Sparse claps spread through the audience.

“Hello,” she said, first in Thai, than in English, and tapped the microphone. “Can you hear me, okay?”

If what followed was an audition, the bar’s customers hadn’t a clue. They applauded and whistled after every song, and Miriam returned their accolades with a thank you, first in Thai, then in English. They didn’t seem to mind that she was reading the lyrics from a music stand, or that she made up tunes for some of the more complicated songs. During Wild World, Lek jumped in and sang the melody while she harmonized. The crowd members loved this, too, especially a farang boy a baseball cap who sat near the front. He liked them so much that he bought everyone in a band a beer and placed them around the stage. Miriam picked hers up to take a sip, announcing: “This is the first beer I’ve ever tasted,” before she gulped down nearly the entire bottle. Everyone laughed because no one believed her.

They finished a five song set and Maao, Geng, and Miriam filled the last three stools available around the bar. Lek asked the bar tender to pour her a glass of water. “This is not a good place for you,” he whispered. “Your father will never trust me now.”

“My father doesn’t trust anyone,” she said, quietly. “But he’s not going to find out. I told him we were passing out tracks to backpackers.” At this, she finished the last of her bottle and set it down so hard that it toppled, dripping beer onto the counter top.

“He thinks we’re sharing the Gospel?” Lek asked while he grabbed a napkin from the dispenser. He didn’t know whether to be appalled or impressed.

“I lied,” she said.

“You didn’t fool me.” He dabbed the counter. “Your father is waiting for you to come home after worship practice.”

“Not that,” said Miriam.

“Your father is probably running across town with a police detective and a warrant for my arrest.”
“Not that,” she said again. “I lied when I said he didn’t trust anyone. He trusts you. Geng told him you would protect me and my father said it was okay.”

Geng wasn’t listening to them. He was explaining to Maao how he might get a job on a cruise ship—a back-up plan of his that he had once explained to Lek on the train down from Srisaket, in case they didn’t find someone to sign them onto a major label. Geng spoke of trips to Australia, to the Philippines, and for a moment, Lek imagined Miriam on one of these boats, in the same dress, but standing on the deck with an orange lily in her hair to match the sunset. He wanted to ask her if she trusted him, but was afraid she would say that she didn’t. Or maybe it would be worse if she said that she did. He was supposed to be her brother in the Lord, but a good brother would not look at her this way. A good brother wouldn’t lie. “Nobody should trust me,” Lek said and left her there to stand outside, alone.

The bustle of Khao San was something Lek usually avoided. Images of this road appeared on the television he watched with his family, and his mother warned him and his sisters of this place where Thais wore hill tribe costumes, dancing around for the farangs, lying about the values of their plastic Buddha amulets. He recognized these vendors, yes, but the road functioned also like a travel agency; hawkers hawked bus trips to Cambodia and Malaysia, to Phuket and Samui. They did not offer trips to Srisaket, which may have been why his mother never wanted to sell their farm and move somewhere with more rain.

Across the street, a string of banners announced Songkran 2010—the tourist version of the Thai New Year. The sign amused Lek, as it used the Christian Calendar to advertise the week-long national water fight to usher the 2553rd year on the Buddhist calendar. Now that he had the money, Lek figured he should probably buy a bus ticket to Srisaket, where he could celebrate with his family. He wondered if the pastor trusted him enough to let him bring Miriam along. With Miriam, maybe his mother would better understand if he tried to explain to her that he loved God. He wondered which she would hate more—his new faith or his new job. He returned to the bar, where his band waited for him onstage.

“We’re in,” Geng said as Lek picked up the guitar. “We start next weekend—he’ll pay us extra for the Songkran celebration. You won’t believe this: 700 baht.”

“Per person,” Maao said, crashing is drumstick across the cymbals.

The manager had also agreed to pay them 500 baht that very night if they played for another half hour. At the end of their set, Miriam searched her way through What’s Up? and the
crowd encored her for just one more song. “I’m out,” she said, laughing. “We’ve sung all we
know.”

“Bullshit!” someone called, so she turned to Lek and told him to choose one for her to
sing along with. Without much thought, he started to play a jazzed riff of the chords to *Take it
Easy*. The others on the stage fell upon this song almost immediately, and soon the entire bar
was singing with them.

Lek had played this song so many times that the words muddled together and lost their
meaning, so that by the time he hit the solo before the final verse, he was not aware that he’d
allowed his fingertips to run down the neck of his guitar until he was playing a song none of
them had heard before, though it sounded like something he’d learned long ago in the Srisaket
market square. He continued this new song long after the lyrics were to start up again.

Geng and Maao didn’t seem to notice, Miriam didn’t know the difference. Lek closed his
eyes and saw Srisaket; not the parched land he’d left, but Srisaket in a thunderstorm, where the
thick gray above pushed rain onto the fields, and the endless rows of rice sang back to the sky in
a vibrant green. In this place, he and Geng were boys again, racing through paddies, skipping
over puddles, covered head to toe in warm mud that cooled against their skin as they ran.

And then Lek returned to lyrics of the last verse. Not because he was counting measures,
but because he felt it was time. The others followed him to the last word and when the song was
over, he and his band exhaled together in that short moment of silence before the applause. It
was no longer than a couple seconds, but it was long enough for him to catch Geng’s eye and
exchange with him a short volt of gratitude.
This week: five more of us. The first two were from Western and Kettering. Both walking home from school. The East Side one reported herself: bruised and scratched, but she’s alive. (Thank you, Jesus.) The girl from Western is a Muslim. Not Nation of Islam—from Lebanon. Her daddy runs a carwash in Dearborn but they live over here. Her daddy reported, but she wasn’t on the news, either. Just in the paper: local section, third page, a couple paragraphs and no picture. We didn’t hear about them ‘til later. (Both happened on a Tuesday.) Both happened the same night.

The next two were both from Cass Tech. (But that school is large.) One right after the other (Wednesday, Thursday). One alive, one dead. The alive one, in the morning, on her way to the bus stop. She went to school anyway, reported when her teacher asked her why she was late. (“Why’s you late?”) They sent her to the hospital. Cops found the other in the Corridor, in the empty streets with whores and vets. They found her the next morning, in that old hotel with the billboard for Crown Royal. She was on the front page of Friday’s local section but they didn’t mention the other two.

Five girls this week. The last one disappeared. (Laticia Jones.) She’s on the front page, with photos and the numbers. Fourteen since March. Twenty this year. (Laticia was number twenty). We knew her.

Friday and five minutes past the bell. We stand in front of boarded windows, blackened brick, a wheezing smoke stack; it’s May and raining. We file the sidewalk, dodge puddles, avoid car splashes. I.D.s out, phones off, bagged unzipped and on the table. Belt buckles moan, class rings moan, and sets of keys—the guard in khakis waves us through. We echo stairwells:

*Three more weeks, we out this mess!* Stomp, clap, and sing: *We out this mess!*

The principal yells: Quiet to class.

*We out this mess, we gone!*

We leave our energy at the door and slip into desks for first-hour naps. Month old equations evaporate in dry-erase: F.O.I.L. method. Foiled again if you think we care. When Mr. Jenkins calls our names, we dangle our fingertips at the end of arms stretched and we do not lift our heads. He calls, “Laticia Jones?” but she ain’t here. “Laticia?” We pay no mind. More than
half are missing and the rest of us make a point not to learn anything post-Easter. We forget homework together. We take tests together. We checked out.

Second period: AP English. Rain drips against the window. Mrs. Barnett takes attendance while we write the vocabulary she’s chalked in cursive. She shuts her green book and says, “How will you all face the real world?” but we don’t answer rhetorical questions, as a rule. “How will you make it anywhere if you don’t drag your ass to school in the morning?” We the ones with asses dragged. Still, we do not speak when spoken to. Taps of pencils, snaps of gum. “Moving on,” she says.

We know the drill. Write down the words: rueful, perdition, disposition, ruminate, woo. Use them in our own complete sentences, emphasis on ‘your own’ because Mrs. Barnett does not tolerate community tests. We pass our pages forward. She notes our lack of answers and passes them back. “Let’s give this another try.” We groan. This time, she reads the definitions from the margins of her teacher’s edition. This time, we write: We know you rueful over us. Don’t care about your disposition. Can’t make us ruminate nothing. School is our perdition. Woo.

Monday first hour: this girl Erica (Erica Miller) went classroom to classroom with the front page of that morning’s paper, showing those who hadn’t seen. She passed the page around. The headline said, ‘Missing since Friday: Twentieth Assault Victim?’ (Nothing but a big old question mark.) All it said was that she was missing, and that she was one of twenty this year. (Recorded). One of the twenty recorded. A couple of sentences about her life. (Said she attended Wilbur Wright) Said her mama was the last to see her that morning. Her mama insisted Laticia wasn’t the type of girl to run off, that she must have been picked up, and the reporter just went along with it. No mention of suspects, no witnesses, nobody.

Erica left. Mr. Jenkins came in a few minutes late, all quiet, all serious. We got quiet too, and he grabbed a chair and sat on it backwards, facing us. (We were like, oh lord, man’s ‘bout to make a speech.) He said: “It’s a dangerous world out there” (tell us something we don’t know) “especially these days, for girls especially.” When we didn’t say nothing, he said, “What do you all think about that?” and this girl, Mia, was like, “What do you think Mr. Jenkins?” and he was like, “I think it’s a damn shame, Mia!” (and we were like, damn).

Mia got up. (Must have read something in his tone?) No idea. Caught us off-guard. She rammed her palm into the back of her chair (big swoop, like this: bam!). The desk flipped; her
purse dumped (tampons flying across the floor), the battery popped off her cell phone, her cosmetic compact rolled beneath our seats before it tumbled in front of Mr. Jenkins. (She was a mess.) We thought he was going to snap, tell her to take a seat, but he handed her the makeup and said, “Did you know her, Mia?”

(Did: Like we already knew Laticia was dead.)

Then Mia looked like she was ‘bout to cry, picking up her things, and Mr. Jenkins told her to take a walk and come back when she cooled off. (Teachers always tell us that.) He kept his calm. She slammed the door on her way out. Oh man, so then, Mr. Jenkins leaned up on his elbows and was like, “I know this is touchy” (--oh man--) “but I’m here if you need to talk.” (“I’m available if you need to talk about this, we can talk about this now if you want.”) And we were just like, huh?

(Then this boy Clayton--) Clayton was like, “Not with you.” (We were like, damn!) We all thought it. Nobody could have said it better. Seriously, though: this man is our fucking math teacher and now he’s trying to get all Dr. Phil on us? (Seriously.) Thinking he can come in one day, whining about how impossible we are, and the next day he’s all like, *Come here my children. It’s time for a big old hug from Papa Jenkins.* (Man must be out his mind.) The rest of the day seemed normal though: Mrs. Barnett just showed us the *Othello* video, hardly brought it up at all; Señor Allan made some speech about thoughts and prayers (short and sweet) but still gave our Spanish quiz.

Laticia’s story (or lack thereof) was all over the cafeteria. She was in marching band, so the musicians were all upset. They sit at the table way on the side (until that day). That day, everyone was over there causing a ruckus, trying to figure out who she was: trumpet player, dark skinned, used to date Darnell Curtis, no boyfriend at the time of disappearance (she was nominated for homecoming court her freshman year), B average, kinda chubby. (You either knew her or you didn’t.) We were freaked out enough just by knowing that this girl had been in our hallways. (Been there just a few days before.) Sat in our desks. Drank from the same fountains. The Bible club stuck a paper cross above her locker and a bunch of kids (even those who ain’t never talk to her), posted notes of good wishes, telling her to come home safely, come home soon.
On Wednesday the line through the metal detector moves silent and slow. Bags open on the table top, suspicious items confiscated: nail files, glass bottles, home economics sewing kits. Belt moans, student patted, keys moan, student patted. We whisper, “What the hell?” They tell us, our safety. But we know what’s up. She won’t come back. She’s gone.

Breaking news, Wednesday night: Laticia found in vacant house. Students advised to walk together to school. Snatched before the sun came up. A block away from her bus stop, tossed across the kitchen floor, arms scratched, forehead bruised, evidence that she fought hard, though who she fought, we still don’t know. Press conference with the police commissioner: “We’ll find him. He won’t strike again.” Students must stick together. Autopsy said the cause of death was dehydration. Fingerprint examinations do not match the other victims. There’s more than one, and they all over. Mayor advises students to walk in pairs.

Our principal rounds the classrooms, interrupts Spanish saying he’s there for a ten minute discussion we know will be a lecture. He says, “You’re responsible for your own safety.” Asks if we understand. Sort of. We say we do. Let him put it this way: “We got a thirty million deficit in this city. Police stations shutting down left and right, empty corners, and so on.” We won’t go near abandoned houses, we tell him. We’ll stay away from empty streets, we tell him. He leaves us with a message from the school board: We must not leave the premises without a partner. Try to arrange rides home, rather than taking the bus, if we must stay late for after-school programs. Stay in groups on sidewalks. “You’re to keep each other safe.”

Rain stopped, Grand River bus: we on our way home. The kids in the back shouted and laughed, putting on a show. (Old people near the front.) Old people wished they took a taxi that day. (You know that’s right.) We were loud. Us and kids from Cass (they the stop before ours), we loud as hell. Their principal told them the exact same thing. This city can’t afford our safety? Please say they’re not serious.

Erica Miller stood in the aisle. (She’s going to be a preacher, probably, because she’s always preaching.) Every chance she gets. That day was no exception; her arms flew every which way, like she on some cartoon. She was like, “If I had a ride, you think I’d be on the bus?” (We busted out laughing.) “Acting like I have a choice. ‘My house ten minutes from here by car, forty-five by bus, but no thanks, Dr. Mullen. I’ll take the bus to school because I like getting up at the butt-crack of dawn!” She sat. (The whole bus applauded.)
Then this girl called from the back: “How do they think we can avoid the empty corners?”

“She sprout wings,” said another. “Fly over them.”

“They act like all our streets aren’t empty.”

“Tell them to hire me a private escort service.”

“They be taking us home in a limousine!”

(We just about fell out our seats from laughing so hard.)

Erica got up again. “Now they tryin’ to put it on us! Now they tighten our security.”

“They must be crazy,” we shouted. “Don’t make no sense.”

“They just lazy,” said Erica. “Telling us we got to be responsible so they don’t have to deal with it. They tryin’ to make this one hundred percent our problem, ‘cause they don’t want to think about it!” We was all torn up by that point, hollering and clapping like a Sunday service, until the bus driver’s voice crackled over the intercom:

“Sounds like you all need to write you some letters.”

“Letters won’t do nothing,” Erica shouted back. “If we want them to do something, we got to show them sooner, before they got the summer to forget.”

(Then the bus got all quiet.)

The sun went down; everything turned red and gray; neighborhood after neighborhood, like the city went on forever. The door squealed at Oakwood Boulevard, at what used to be a shopping center back in the day. (Before the days of freeways.) Parking lots of crumbling asphalt and cement, grass through sidewalk cracks. They don’t sell nothing there now. (Legally.) Some get on, some get off, we moving again. Carrying on. Erica went to the front of the bus and said, “Now here’s what we got to do.” (Nobody really listening.) She asked the driver for the intercom. He shook his head but laughed and handed it over. “Listen up, everybody, here’s the plan.” We all listening now. “On Friday, we all gonna walk out. Every last student in the city. Tell your friends to leave the school after first hour.”

“Friday?” somebody shouted.

“Two days away?”

“Why not Monday?”

“Because, Sherlock.” (Erica was annoyed.) “If we walk out Friday we got ourselves a long weekend.” Everybody laughed. “Moving on.” Her voice was all shrill over the speakers.
(We moaned about it.) “If we all start walkin’ by nine o’clock, we should be at the school board by noon. See you there.” We went crazy, clapping (some of us dancing in the aisle way). Erica looked satisfied.

The next day, she and her girl Mia went class to class, making sure everybody knew what to do. Some kids tried to shut them up, said it’s not going to work. Mrs. Barnett told us to alert the superintendent, the chief of police, the mayor. She wrote the business letter format on the board, saying this is how civilized people protest. Erica said, “You think we ain’t civilized, Mrs. Barnett?” (She was right, though.) Ain’t nobody about to write a letter.

(Ain’t nobody going to read it.)

The weather is warm on Friday morning; the sun’s out. We’re in line, holding cardboard. PROTECT OUR SCHOOLS. SAFETY FIRST. Some kids start talking about once we get on the news, we’ll all go down to Belle Isle for a barbeque. We’ll look at the camera and say, “Mama, bring me some chicken wings, some soda pop! See you this afternoon!” Saying we’ll invite the whole city to celebrate via celebrate Channel 7 Action News. Nobody needs to be in school on a day like this.

Teachers wait past the metal detector, confiscating signs. They tell us to stay put. “You ain’t going nowhere.” So some of us take our signs and hide them behind the dumpster for later.

In Mr. Jenkins class, Erica and Mia never acted so sweet. They’re raising their hands, asking questions. We all do. Kids on they best behavior, doing math problems on the board, trying hard. Mr. Jenkins pleased as hell, though he for sure knows what’s going on in our heads. Then the bell rings and we rush down the stairwell without a word.

At the bottom: tables over the doors. Chairs stacked. Mrs. Barnett standing with her arms folded, turning us away. Dr. Mullen outside his office, yelling about instant suspension. Señor Allan at the other door, talking about how the police will pick us off the streets, how they got a law now about kids under sixteen taken into custody for being out of school. Some go back to class, but the rest of us sneak into the music room because Mrs. Trevethan won’t come in until noon.

“They can’t do nothing to me,” Erica’s saying. She all in a rut, sounding like she about to cry. “I’m eighteen.” She got a point. We tell her so.

“Then help us get a window,” Mia says.
The windows in that room got a big old curtain over them. Takes us a moment to find them in the dark. When Erica pulls it aside, light pushes across the room in one long streak. It stops in front of a chair buried under flowers, Winnie the Pooh dolls, ribbons. We don’t say nothing. Don’t move, either.

“Come on.” Erica slides beneath the curtain, running her hands against the window panes to find a loose one. They painted shut, so she shakes them. Soon, we’re all shaking them, making lots of noise. We shake these windows so hard, they knock knock knock and that paint cracks away. A window slides open. Mia screams.

We pop out from behind the curtain, still shaking from shaking the windows, ready to see Laticia’s desk flying across the room. “Go!” Erica shouts. She and Mia run behind the curtain while the rest of us stand in that room, waiting for Laticia to crawl out of the floor. But it’s the door Mia was yelling about. Mr. Jenkins. He’s looking at us. We looking at him. The second hour bell rings.

“I didn’t know you all were in band,” he says. He goes to the curtain, like he about to snatch it open. “Anybody else in here with you?” He puts his hands in his pockets, glaring at us with his eyes all squinted, like he reading something on the wall behind us.

Clayton comes out from the curtain and says, “Just me, Mr. Jenkins.”

“Go back to class,” he says. So we do.

On the news: Out of all the city’s students, just 32 made it to the school board. Mia was one of them. The police waited there to pick them up, sent them home with fines for their mamas to sort out. (500 dollar fines.) They can’t afford no lawyers, so they just waiting for someone to step up for them. There were these other kids (The kids who didn’t make it down.) Three from Kettering got arrested because they threw bottles at the police. Five more got detained for inciting a riot. (But not Erica). We looked for her, but she didn’t show up on the TV. She didn’t show up at school no more, either. But that didn’t mean nothing, necessarily, since most of us stopped coming after the first of June.
UNCLE SAM CITY

A crowd filters through the sidewalk on Ramkhamhaeng road, past clothing vendors and vats of oil jumping from pork chunks. Among the crowd: a girl. The one in the blue sundress, blonde, three inches taller than the rest. She approaches the corner as if she’s floating, frail but stiff, like a branch pushed by a current. She’s used to people staring at her.

She’s used to people pulling her aside and asking her where she’s from. She’ll say she’s teaching English at the public university across the road. She’ll say she’s from Royal Oak, a suburb north of Detroit, and that her name is Amanda, pronouncing the first part as an ‘amen’ and emphasizing the final syllable in a Thai falling tone. Then she’ll chuckle; she’s adopted this pronunciation as an impulse because that’s how her students refer to her: Ah-men-DA. She will say she’s been here for just a couple of weeks. She knows it is not polite for her to ask Thai people where they’re from or what they do. She will say, nice meeting you, and slip back into the crowd. She does not expect to see any one of these people again.

In a similar manner, she meets Jeab—a Thai woman somewhere between the ages of sixteen and sixty. They spot each other in a crowded café on the soi where Amanda rents a cheap apartment; cheap, because the street dead-ends into the canal. The café has only three tables and today, Amanda must sip her cappuccino while leaning against the wall. Jeab offers the seat across from hers. They manage to converse, despite Jeab’s limited English and Amanda’s lack of Thai. Jeab says she sells school uniforms at a nearby booth. Amanda complains about the canal—the sulfur smell, the noise and crowd from the water-taxi—but Jeab argues that it’s good for business. When Amanda asks if the shops around there make much money, Jeab says most do, but not this one because for some reason, the owners have a hard time staying open for long. The café was most recently a movie rental and before that, a sushi restaurant.

Not until they stand does Amanda remember to ask for her name. She extends her hand and says, “Amanda.”

The woman squeezes her fingertips and says, “Jeab.” Amanda has been here long enough to know this is a nickname; that Thai parents assign these at birth, usually words for animals or fruit, like crab or watermelon, but this woman says her name means “baby chicken.” Jeab’s face is long and slender; it’s hard to imagine her as baby anything.
She asks Amanda why she came to Thailand and where she’s from. When Amanda says the US, Jeab nods and says, “My sister lives in Cin-Cin,” apologizing that she can’t pronounce the name of the city. Amanda guesses Cincinnati and Jeab nods. “I try to visit but cannot get a visa. My English is not good.”

“It’s better than my Thai.”

“You must to slow down,” Jeab says and laughs. “What was your work in the US?”

“I studied opera,” Amanda says. “Performed a bit with the Michigan Opera Theater. I was a singer.”

The last word Jeab understands. She asks for a pen. Amanda fishes one from her purse and Jeab scrawls two Thai words onto a clean piece of tissue from the table’s dispenser. She writes the phonetic spelling: rong pleng and below, in English: sing a song. A moment passes before Amanda realizes that this is not a command, but a vocabulary lesson. They will now spend weekday mornings improving Amanda’s Thai and Jaeb’s English over murky coffees, thick with sweetened-condensed milk.

They meet regularly until one morning, two months later, Jeab’s statement about the building proves true: the café is closed. A white sheet covers the cash register and the tables are gone. Amanda wonders if the friendship is finished. She knows very little about Jeab outside of this setting. She cannot read the for sale sign hand-written in Thai, but beneath it, someone has posted a bulletin announcing a clothing drive for cyclone victims in Burma. Across the street, Jeab is already hanging skirts onto a rack to begin her day.

She invites Amanda to accompany her to Siam Square, where they will spend the following Saturday searching for bargains on wholesale clothing. When Jeab suggests they play pool with Westerners in Patpong, Amanda agrees to go. She is not comfortable there. The farang men startle her with their heights, which make the small women they’re hovering over seem even smaller. Amanda wants to leave but Jeab thrusts a cue stick in her hand before she can say anything. She tugs her to a table, to a group of waiting boys. Their unshaved faces and wrinkled shirts repulse Amanda. “You can speak to them,” Jeab says in Thai. “You can have a new boyfriend.”

If they wanted girls like Amanda, they would have stayed at home. “You can have them both.”
“They’re babies,” Jeab says as she stands between them. “Same age as my nephew.” She puts her hands on their shoulders and says, in English, “And where you come from?” When they tell her the UK she shouts in Thai over the pounding music: “We won’t miss you when you leave!” She and Amanda laugh, refusing to translate, and for the first time since she’s arrived, Amanda feels like she belongs in Thailand. She wonders though, how many people think to shout this at her?

* 

Amanda now sits at a noodle stand near the university. A heavy rain falls. She didn’t think to bring an umbrella because the sun was out this morning when she left her apartment. Students she doesn’t recognize crowd the restaurant’s skinny banquet tables and in front of her, a large group of boys crack jokes too rapid for her to understand. Their bursts of laughter drown most of the punch lines.

Jeab once explained to her the Thai tendency of playing with their words; one word can have several different meanings depending on the tone and two more depending on whether the speaker uses long or short vowels. In English we call them puns, Amanda told her. Jeab had thought pun meant, “To hit a man with your fist.” No, Amanda, explained. That’s punch, with a ch. Amanda already knew that in Thai, pun means “a thousand,” so she joked, *Pun pun:* a thousand puns. Jeab laughed and said, Look at you. Two months in Thailand and you’re Thai already. But Amanda knows she will never be Thai. She will never be able to understand what these kids are laughing about.

The rain picks up as the boys stand to leave and she orders a second bowl of stringy noodles in chicken broth. She’s just finishing this when another boy takes the now empty seat across from hers. She figures, from his white t-shirt and jeans, that he is a student out of uniform. He asks for his *bamee tom yum* with pork and no vegetables in an accent she does not recognize. After the server brings his soup, the boy stirs three generous heaps of dried chilies into the broth. He shakes his head with every sip, sniffing audibly when he swallows.

“Spicy enough for you?” she asks him in Thai.

“Almost,” he says in English. “I prefer my food extra spicy.”

The monsoon holds them captive beneath the restaurant’s ratted tarpaulin for over an hour. They watch the streets flood with rain and pork grease. She learns that his name is Myo, and that he is one of the few Burmese men lucky enough to get a visa to work in Thailand. He
teaches training courses in Information Technology at the same university where she teaches Basic English. He tells her that he sends monthly portions of his salary to his wife and daughter, still in Myanmar. It’s been four years since he’s left Burma, he says, and pulls a photograph from his wallet, cupping the picture in his hand to protect it from the rain. “Min,” he says, introducing his wife. She has dark circles under her eyes and a worn expression that contrasts with his daughter’s eager smile.

Everything Amanda knows about his country comes from what she’s read in the Bangkok Post: first, the junta’s violent rebuttal against protesting monks and more recently, the refusal of foreign aid for cyclone victims. She tells him about the flyer posted on the empty coffee shop and asks if his government will accept clothing donations from Thailand.

“Maybe they will,” he says, and points at the picture with his thumb. “This one is trouble.” Amanda can’t tell if he’s referring to the woman or the child.

“They weren’t affected by the cyclone—”

“Those people were from the villages.” This is the extent of his commentary on current events; for the rest of the evening, he redirects the conversation back to her. He guesses she’s Australian. She corrects him. He asks if she knows any celebrities. When Amanda says no, she’s from Detroit, he nods and tells her, “I’ve always dreamed of working in Silicon Valley.”

The rain stops and the sidewalk fills again with people warning each other of puddles as they pass. “See you again soon,” Myo says, with confidence.

“It was nice meeting you,” she says, and remains seated as he pays the server for his soup and then runs to catch the bus across the road. She does not expect to see him again.

*

She sees him again the next week, waiting in the public van that will take them both to the immigration office. Their visas happen to expire on the same day. He calls it luck.

They sit on worn benches in a hall murmuring with echoes in several languages. They’re waiting for officers to call their numbers, to review their paperwork, and to send them off for an interview. Amanda asks to see his passport. He takes it out from the back pocket of his jeans. She hopes to find an outdated photograph—wide rimmed glasses or a floppy haircut—but the Myo in the picture doesn’t differ much from the Myo next to her: same spiked hair, same thin glasses.
She studies the passport’s cover, with *Union of Myanmar* in dull gold above swirls of Burmese script. It resembles a collection of c’s in varied lengths, stacked and turned to their sides. She asks if the Burmese system is more complicated than the Thai.

“I don’t know. I never learned to write in Thai.” He tucks the passport into the breast pocket of his polo shirt. “Speaking, they’re not so different. Pali is the mother language so some words are the same.” He pulls a ball-point pen from the same pocket and asks her for a slip of paper. She gives him the back of an old bank receipt but the pen can’t mark its glossed coating. Then, without asking, he grabs her hand, turns it over, and writes something across her palm. She waits for him to finish before asking what it says.

“My name.” He points to each syllable. “Myo Lwin Thu.”

She says, “Write mine,” and catches the stare of a woman in a sari sitting on the bench across from theirs. She holds an infant in her lap while the man Amanda figures is her husband dozes beside her. Raising her voice so the woman can hear her, Amanda says to Myo, “When will you send for your family?”

“It’s not so simple,” he says.

Though Amanda allowed him to sign-in before she did, she finishes talking to her officer first. Upstairs, the second interview doesn’t take long either. She receives her multiple-entry stamp and roams the hallways, peering into each room for Myo. Each feature the same benches filled with waiting people and the same dark streaks across the tiled floors. After half an hour of searching, he waves from his seat at the far end of one of these rooms and nods at the line ahead of him. Fifteen people, at least. Amanda offers to keep him company.

He’s quieter there, perhaps out of nervousness.

“This reminds me of going to the Secretary of State,” Amanda says. “We have to go every year and renew our license plates.”

“You do this for all three of your cars?” He grins.

“I suppose,” she says, not quite understanding the joke.

Rain falls again as they leave the office. The next van to Ramkhamhaeng won’t leave for another hour, so Myo suggests they explore the Chinese market across the street. They roll their pants and step cautiously through the flooded road, across planks of wood against the curb. Most of the vendors sell used clothing, but Myo finds a fruit stand and buys a sliced pineapple. “Why did you come here?” he asks between chews.
“I got tired of people telling me how to sing.” She prepares to tell him about how she accepted the position at Ramkhamhang on the same day the Cleveland Opera asked her to play one of Turandot’s hand-maidens, but isn’t quite sure how to word it so that he’ll understand.

Before she can speak, he says, “Your degree is teaching,” as if he’s reminding her.

“Music,” she says. “I told you that.” His smile suggests that he remembers everything she told him at the noodle stand. “But my minor was English as a Foreign Language. I got a teaching certificate.” He nods while dipping a square of pineapple into a bag of chili salt, and she can’t tell if he knows she’s lying.

“What about your husband?” He tosses the plastic into a bin.

“No husband. Just me.”

“In my country, everyone gets married.”

“I have a hard time believing that,” Amanda says.

They sit in the van’s far rear seat on the way home. The engine’s rumbling forces them to strain their voices, so they fall silent. Traffic lengthens the trip, and soon the other passengers are asleep, or pretending to be. Amanda is just about to join them when Myo shifts to his side and places his head in her lap. She stiffens, but then combs her fingers through his hair, separating strands clumped with gel. He closes his eyes tight, as if he’s in pain. That night, she will lie in bed thinking of his small daughter on her welcome mat, pounding at her door.

*

The following Saturday, Amanda and Myo ride a ferry across the Chao Praya River. They eat papaya salad while watching the public aerobics class near the old Fort. Later, long after Jeab has closed her shop and returned home for the night, Myo walks Amanda to her apartment. They pass the site of the old coffee shop. White sheets now cover the windows and a woman sells ice cream in front of the construction area. “Not even a scrap of sidewalk in Bangkok goes wasted,” Amanda says.

“No even at night.”

They sit on her apartment steps without conversation, their shoulders almost touching. She wants to invite him inside, but she’s afraid he might accuse her of being too American. At the very least, she wants to grab his fingers, which are spread across his knee closest to hers, but she doesn’t know how he’d react to that either. She wants to tell him that in Thai, the words for need and want are the same. She learned this when Jeab brought sesame cookies to their lesson.
and asked if she needed dessert. Amanda hasn’t found a way to explain her confusion at this notion. Maybe it’s the same in Burmese. She says, “Good night,” and lets her fingers brush his arm as he stands.

“Wait,” he says. She does. “Did you ever go to the ancient city?”

“Not yet,” she says as if she’s heard of it.

“I want to see that place.”

“We can.”

“Okay,” he says. “Sweet dream.”

He waits until her window glows before he turns to catch a motorcycle taxi. She waits until he’s out of view to turn off her light, crawl into bed, and place her hand onto her hipbone, pretending that it’s his. She pretends he whispers, “I want you,” in his native language, though she has no idea how that might sound.

Amanda manages to excuse herself from her usual dinners with Jeab—first with a made-up seminar about quality assurance, then a rock concert on campus. Eventually Amanda tells her that she’s started private tutoring after school. Jeab doesn’t ask questions, until one day, Amanda and Myo carry a bookshelf past her booth without acknowledging her. They set up the shelf in Amanda’s apartment and pass Jeab a second time on their way to the corner. Amanda taps his arm. “I want you to meet someone.”

“Another night,” he says, and climbs onto the back of a motorcycle.

Amanda shields her mouth from the diesel exhaust and waits to make sure his driver will cross the highway without a collision. By the time she returns to the clothing booth, Jeab has dropped the black bags into a large wooden box and secured it with a padlock. “Your friend is shy,” she says.

“We’re seeing each other,” Amanda tells her in English.

“Who do you see?”

Amanda tells her in Thai that she has a boyfriend. It’s strange, expressing the idea in a language that isn’t hers. Nor his, for that matter. Even more strange, that she’s not sure if the term is correct. They have never held hands, but Amanda takes this as a cultural decision. Thai people avoid any sort of romantic display; she figures the Burmese are the same. Considering this, and without taking time to acknowledge other complications, Amanda’s not quite sure how
she determined Myo is her boyfriend. But she used the Thai word, fan, which, if she’d used it in English, would have been more appropriate. She’s his fan. That seems right.

“Is he Thai?” Jeab asks, and Amanda tells her Burmese. “How about his family?”

“His wife and daughter still live in Burma.” As soon as she says this, Amanda realizes that Jeab was asking about his parents, whether she’s met them, whether they approved of their son dating a farang. She helps Jeab spread the tarp across the box and says, “The other night he mentioned a trip. Some ancient city.”

“Ayutthaya?” Jeab laughs. “Of course he wants to take you there. It’s the place that Burma destroyed.” Amanda doubts this is the reason and says so, but Jeab waves her hand and says, “Why did you want a Burmese boyfriend?” as though Amanda’s mail-ordered him from Rangoon. “All this time I’ve been teaching you the Thai language so you can get a Thai boyfriend. We’re speaking farang from now on,” she says in Thai. “Now I can get a farang boyfriend.”

They stack the clothing racks around the box and Amanda notes that this is all Jeab needs to feel safe about her things. She’s never expressed concern that someone will push the racks aside and run off with her merchandise. Once they’re finished, Jeab says, “I’ll take you to Ayutthaya.”

“I think Myo already bought the tickets for the train.” This is an obvious lie. Most people buy tickets the day of their journey.

“He can’t come,” Jeab says. “Just you and me.”

“He’s cute.” Amanda nudges Jeab’s shoulder.

“I’m your sister.” She grips Amanda’s arm above the elbow. “Family before lovers.”

Tonight, for the first time, Amanda meets Myo in the Burmese neighborhood where he lives. He waits for her at the curb with his hands in his pockets and the sleeves of his work shirt rolled just below the elbows. Before she can interfere, he pays her motorcycle driver. His apartment faces a condensed area of townhouses, and many of his neighbors have formed restaurants from their ground floors and slim front yards.

They order samosas and biryani from a living room. A woman he refers to as Grandma prepares the food. He chats away with her in Burmese while she dumps rice into clear plastic bags and fastens them with rubber bands. Amanda wonders if she’ll ever be able to understand a
few words of their language; she can’t sense any similarity to Thai. The old woman collects their money in a tin box she’s placed on a small table near the television.

On the wall, next to a bookshelf, Amanda spots another flyer announcing the clothing drive for cyclone victims. She points it out to Myo and says, “They’re still collecting.”

“Our government is accepting the aid now,” he says, leading her to the sidewalk. Then he laughs. “Then they stamp it with the Myanmar seal. They want people to think the military is their hero.” They step to the side so a small boy can pedal past them on his bicycle. An even smaller girl sits on the handlebars, her chubby legs dangling. She cannot be older than two years. Amanda checks Myo’s expression to see if he notices her, if he’s thinking of his daughter. If he is, he shows no indication, but says, “We have corruption in Myanmar,” as if she hadn’t heard.

They sit on a bench near a basketball court and peel the rubber bands from their bags of rice. He hands Amanda a spoon. She chews, listening to him lecture on about how a few army officials have all the authority to run his country but little understanding about their people’s problems. “It’s sort of the same in my country,” she says with her mouth full.

“It’s nothing like your country.” He wraps his rubber band around his index finger. “We have nothing. They have mansions in Singapore. They come home only to show us their private airplanes.” His tone is not one of protest; he speaks of these things with a numbness that startles Amanda. She asks him what will help, suggests sanctions, but he laughs at her. “Forget it. Nothing will save that place.”

He drops his uneaten bag of rice into a bin near the gate and asks one of the students playing basketball if he can join. He slips around them, raising his arms to guard their shots, making some baskets but missing most. If he wasn’t in khaki pants and a button-up shirt, he’d fit right in. He plays until his sopping hair is pressed to his forehead and he collapses on the steps, gulping what’s left from Amanda’s water bottle. “I need a bath,” he says. She finds it hardest in these moments to remember that he’s a father. “Come to my place. I want to show you something.”

Amanda laughs. “What’s that?”

He walks slightly ahead of her all the way to his apartment building and then darts up the stairs. He’s left the door to his room open wide; she knows it’s his because he’s left his shoes by the door. She hears him in the bathroom, filling up a bucket for his shower. She sits on his bed
and calls to him, “I’m here. What did you want me to see?” but he doesn’t answer. She can hear him pouring water over his body; the splashes hitting the floor. When he comes out, he’s wearing only a pair of cheap basketball shorts and is rubbing a towel through his hair until it springs into damp spikes. “My family sent something to me,” he says, and grabs a brown envelope from his bed-stand. It contains an official document in Burmese, which he places in her hands as though she can read it. “It’s my wife,” he says. “She’s in prison.” Min is a school teacher, he explains, a good job in their city. This is why she didn’t accompany him to Bangkok. The document says that she’s been teaching outside their curriculum.

“I shouldn’t be here,” he says. “I didn’t come for the money.”

“You’ll have to go back?”

“I can’t go back.” He then tells Amanda that he left because he was on the government list for hacking into foreign websites. “They watch us,” he says. “They tap our phones.” His cousin worked at the university in Thailand and found him a job. Myo crossed the eastern border by foot. If he’d been caught, he’d be in a refugee camp up north. His family now forges his paperwork in Myanmar. They file his taxes, making it look like he never left. “I think somebody from Min’s school found out. I think he turned her in.”

He reaches across Amanda’s waist, as if to pick up the envelope at her side, but instead grabs her shoulder. His grip is tight, almost to the point of pinching. She holds her breath until he releases. A few moments pass before he pulls his hand away and says, “I’m pain.”

He doesn’t correct himself so she says, “I’m Amanda. Nice to meet you.” He doesn’t laugh. She hooks her finger on the elastic band on his shorts. “I can help,” she says, though she’s not sure what she means. “If you want.”

He grabs her wrist and lifts it over her head and with his other hand, gently pushes her to the thin sheet twisted over his mattress. “I want,” he says. “I want.”

*

Amanda schedules two trips to Ayuttaya: Saturday with Jeab and Sunday with Myo. When she and Jeab arrive in the city, it seems like any other—storefronts and billboards, crowded restaurants—until they spot a stupa in ruins at the center of an intersection. Its foundation of scorched bricks flattens into a long spire, a steeple without a cross. The road splits around it and they continue on, passing paddy fields interrupted by crumbling towers. Jeab leads Amanda first through a temple garden, more or less intact, that features rows of sitting Buddha
The statues covered in gold cloth. Their eyes open in slits, and the monks have given each a distinct expression by painting their pupils. The trees haven’t blossomed; their tangles of branches arch overhead.

For lunch, Jeab asks their driver to drop them off at another temple by a river, and then invites him to join them at a restaurant. His name is Gai, which means chicken, so Jeab calls him Pa. Their meal conversation involves several jokes about siblings lost in the hard boiled eggs soaked in tamarind sauce, which they’ve ordered alongside tapioca pork dumplings, red sea bass doused in lime, prawns with asparagus, and curried fish mousse. Amanda tries to follow their jokes, but doesn’t want to dampen their energy by making them pause for explanations. Instead, she focuses on the water behind her, counting fish that lip the surface. She flags down a waiter and gives him a few coins in exchange for a loaf of bread, which she’s spotted on a shelf near the cash box. A young girl in an orange dress brings the bread.

Maybe it could work, Amanda figures. Maybe she could earn enough teaching private piano lessons while Myo completes his coursework at Wayne State, or somewhere. She could help him prepare for the entrance exams. They could send his daughter to school and help her learn English. Amanda then imagines receiving a letter announcing that Min had died in prison. She tears the bread tosses a piece into the water.

After lunch, Jeab leads her through areas more heavily destroyed. They pass more Buddhas but these are burned completely black, some with missing limbs, others just headless torsos. Jeab describes how monks once hid valuables inside the sacred images, but the Burmese soldiers decapitated them anyway and ran off with their plunder.

“In their private jets,” Amanda says in English.

At first, she refuses Jeab’s demand for a translation, but then Jeab reminds Amanda of a rule they agreed on, that they must always attempt to translate. This was Amanda’s idea first; she was paranoid about Jeab teasing her without her knowing. “It’s not like that,” she says, and tells Jeab about her idea of helping Myo bring his daughter to the US.

“Careful, na,” she says. “Has he asked you to marry him yet?”

“That’s not fair,” Amanda says. “He’s going through a lot right now. He told me last night that his wife’s in prison.”

“He told you,” Jeab says. “She’s probably at the kitchen table waiting for him to stop playing around in Thailand and come home. Now he wants you to take him to Uncle Sam City.
for more fun.” She laughs as if this is the funniest joke she’s heard in weeks. “You’re his ticket to Uncle Sam City.”

They finish their tour at a monument for the first Thai King, Naresuan—the man responsible for defeating the Burmese armies and establishing the nation. He sits on a horse, directly facing the last remaining Burmese temple in Thailand, which, in comparison to the monument, seems slumped and pathetic. “Competitive,” Jeab says, obviously proud of her English vocabulary.

“Keep it up,” Amanda tells her. “You’ll have a farang boyfriend in no time.”

She then understands Jeab’s reaction when she’d mentioned that Myo wanted to bring her here. It was odd. Still, she wants to believe that he suggested the trip because he thought it would be romantic. If so, he was right. There was something romantic about four-hundred-year-old destruction, about a horror so ancient, nobody alive remembers what it feels like. By the time they reach Thailand’s successful second try at constructing a capitol, their familiar metropolis of highways and sky trains, Amanda wonders if Ayuttaya might be the better place to live, after all. The air was cleaner and there were fewer people to trip over.

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Sunday at the bus stop, every man with spiky hair is Myo until they pass and she can see that they are not him. She calls him and while his phone rings, imagines he’s still asleep with a sheet tangled around his legs and drops of sweat on his forehead. He doesn’t answer. He’s probably on the motorcycle and can’t hear. Behind her, “Hotel California” blasts from a loudspeaker at a used-CD stand. The 71 bus comes and goes. She calls Myo again. He doesn’t pick up. Half an hour passes.

A woman on the corner sets up a large pan of oil for Chinese donuts and Amanda’s stomach grumbles at the scent of fried dough. She buys a couple; her stomach fills before she’s finished, so she gives the rest to the man selling music. “Where will you go?” he asks in English.

“Ayutthaya.”

“Have you been there before?”

“Yesterday.”

He asks how she will get there and she tells him by bus. Another 71 stops in front of them.
“What’s your name?” he asks. “I can take care of you.”

“I’m all right,” she says, “Thank you.” She moves to the steps of a nearby bank. Another hour passes. It’s possible that Myo got confused about where they were supposed to meet. He might be waiting outside of her apartment. Maybe his phone ran out of battery. By this time, he would have returned home. She flags down a motorcycle taxi and directs the driver to his neighborhood.

They slow at the intersection, behind a commercial tour bus, and inch past a single cop car with lights flashing, a vegetable truck pulled off to the sidewalk, and a motorcycle in pieces in the center of the road. She asks the driver to drop her off. “You scared, na?” he asks, not pulling over.

“Not scared,” she says. “I can walk the rest of the way.” She hands him a ten baht coin and hops to the sidewalk.

A police officer sits on the hood of his car and smokes a cigarette. “Aren’t you warm?” Amanda says as she greets him. He’s sitting in the sun, which must make his thick uniform unbearable.

“This is Thailand,” he says. “Where do you come from?”

“Soi 29.” She asks about the accident, if anyone got hurt, and he says the driver and the passenger went to the hospital. He tells her the passenger was a woman, that she had a small a child. A girl.

Amanda asks, “How old was the child?” as if she might know her. As if she’s somehow connected to this accident, one of the many, maybe hundreds, of motorcycle accidents that occur in Bangkok every day. When the officer tells her that the girl was an infant, he tosses his filter into a stream of murky water flowing along the curb and into a nearby sewer grate. “So sad,” Amanda says, and walks back to her room. She tries to call Myo again. Still, no answer.

She spends the next morning reviewing all of their conversations in her head, trying to figure out when she’d said the wrong thing. These thoughts distract Amanda from preparing her lessons. She fills class time by splitting her students into groups and asking them to discuss their favorite hobbies while she passes from table to table, pretending to listen for mistakes.

The next afternoon, Amanda musters the courage to visit his apartment. She finds his pile of shoes missing from in front of the door. She knocks, waiting for his shadow in the
window. He doesn’t come. On the way back to the main road, she passes a woman playing badminton in the street with a young boy. They stop their game to watch her a moment and continue. Behind them, the gate to Grandma’s restaurant is open, so Amanda stops at the screen door to the living room and finds the old woman serving chapattis to a lone customer at one of her two tables set for dining.

“Have you seen my friend?” Amanda calls through the screen. She almost asks this in Thai, but then remembers the woman is Burmese. “My friend,” she says. “I’m looking for him.”

“She doesn’t speak English,” the customer responds. He meets her outside. She guesses from his tan corduroy pants that he is a professor. His white hair starts just beyond his ears. He says, “What is the name of your friend?”

“Myo.”

“I’m Myo.” He brushes a mosquito from his neck.

“Nice to meet you,” she says. “My friend is shorter.” She measures his height with her hand. “He works at Ramkhamhaeng University.”

“I don’t know that Myo,” he says. “We have many people with that name around here.”

“Please ask her, then.”

The old woman stirs a pan of chicken, orange and oily, without moving her eyes from Amanda. She taps the spoon against the metal and wipes it on her apron, but she doesn’t put it down.

As the man speaks to her, the woman places the spoon on the counter, and then leans, letting all of her weight fall into the extension of her thin arm. Her words come out in tense vowel sounds, like she is pleading. She stops for the man to interpret. He asks, “Did you know about his wife?” and this catches Amanda off-guard. She says yes, though she doesn’t say what she knows. “His wife is not well,” the man says. “And he is not here at this time.” Amanda thanks him and asks if he knows anything else. He raises his thick eyebrows and says nothing.

She turns to the old woman. “Thank you,” she tells her in Thai, out of habit.

“My pleasure,” the woman responds.

“I like your food. Next time, ka.”

The man laughs from the table and says, *chok dee*, Thai for ‘good luck.’
When Amanda returns to her soi, Jeab’s busy handing black skirts to someone in the small fitting room she’s made from a single sheet hanging from a triangle of clothing racks. Amanda starts to cry.

“Have you eaten?” Jeab asks.

Amanda wishes this were the problem. “Not yet.”

“We can try the new place.” She points a skirt at their old coffee shop, which has now reopened as a sparse lunch buffet with outdoor seating—pink plastic tables and chairs. It starts to rain, so when Jeab’s customer leaves, they rush to close her shop, spreading the tarp on top of the wooden box.

They eat near a window and watch the street transform into a river. A man pedals down the center—the shallowest part of the soi—pulling a fried chicken stand fastened to the back of his bicycle. Streams ripple from his tires. “The flood gets worse every year,” Jeab says through mouthfuls of shrimp-fried rice. She reminds Amanda of a prediction she’d heard on the news, that in twenty years, Bangkok will submerge. Certain neighborhoods will be covered with water and the government won’t be able to clear them. “But never mind. We can just swim to work.” It’s not so hard to picture. From all directions, the people trudge through muck up to their calves and stumble over puddles they could set sail through.