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Hapa Baby

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

Melody Anne Kowach

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The Thesis of Melody Anne Kowach is approved:

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Anne lay awake in bed for most of the night before Christmas Eve. It was the night that marked her annual journey back to her childhood home. Rowland Heights was a mere hour and a half away, but it was also where her parents lived. Occasionally Anne checked the time, estimating the hours and minutes left before she got to see her father and had to endure her mother's Korean antics again. But mostly she alternated between staring at the smooth ceiling and trying to hold her eyes closed, hoping to fall asleep.

Going back to see her mother wasn't exactly what kept her up that night. She really couldn't sleep because she would be introducing her boyfriend, Jake, to her mother that weekend. She had brought boyfriends home before, and each time it had ended in disaster. The first boy she had ever kissed set the precedent back when she was in high school. She was fifteen and she had secretly been dating Andrew, a senior on the varsity baseball team. When prom season came, she knew that her parents had to meet him if there was any chance of her being allowed to go. So she brought him over for dinner to introduce them, but before they had even gotten to dessert, her mother chased Andrew out with the baseball bat signed by Mike Scioscia that he'd brought to show off to her father. Needless to say, he never did ask her to prom. Then there was Dylan, the boy that lived across from her in the dorms during her freshman year of college. He got the pleasure of meeting her parents when they knocked on her dorm room door to surprise her one Saturday morning. Her mother didn't let him leave the room, and she called the housing office and demanded that they change their policies on co-ed dorming. "You want students to canoodle instead of studying?" were her exact words on the phone. Anne

never even mentioned Jake to her parents until they'd been dating for over a year. Now, she had no choice but to introduce them since even Jake began asking to meet her folks.

It wasn't fair. His parents were so normal. Although they were divorced, she thought that they were the nicest people she had ever met. During Thanksgiving, Karen had kept offering her cranberry sauce to go with her turkey, or ice cream to go with her pie, telling her that she didn't need to watch her figure in their house. Her own mother, on the other hand, would have slapped the spoon out of her hand if she tried to scoop any whipped cream onto the sliver of pumpkin pie that Anne had sliced for herself.

Anne sat up in her bed. "That woman will be the death of me," she said. She got out of bed and padded over to her closet and jammed another blouse into her suitcase. Although they were staying at her parents' house for a few days, she had packed as if she would be staying for a few weeks. She had learned that in her visits back home, it was always better to be over-prepared than under. Plus, keeping her mother happy was the only way of giving Jake a fighting chance to win them over. She simply wasn't sure if she could keep her thoughts to herself for the whole three days. She stood, staring at the suitcase with her hands on her hips and then sighed. She laid the suitcase down, opened it up, and then refolded the blouse, packing it away properly.

The freeway was only a few blocks away from her condo, and the sound of it hummed through the window. After putting the suitcase back by her bedroom door, she cracked the window open despite the coastal December chill and crawled back into her bed. The first house that she'd lived in as a child was close to the freeway and her mother had hated the noise, but as a child, and even now, Anne found it comforting. Eventually,

the sound of the freeway lulled her to sleep, though it was too late for her to get any real rest.

In the morning, Anne hauled her suitcase downstairs and waited for Jake to pick her up. She sat in the living room, her suitcase by the door, and nibbled on a strawberry Pop-Tart. Her mother's voice chimed in her head. "Pop-Tarts have too much sugar," she would have said. Anne took another bite, savoring the sweet sugary filling.

When the doorbell rang, she got up and opened the door, smiling faintly at Jake on the other side of the threshold.

"Wow," he said. "Have you slept at all?"

"No. Not really."

"That'll be some impression on your parents, bringing home their daughter with bags under her eyes."

He picked up her suitcase and turned, carrying it to his car without giving her a chance to respond. This was one of the few things he did that irritated her; he would leave when he was ready, forgetting to wait for her. Or he would say without expecting a response from her.

Anne huffed. "Jake," she grumbled under her breath. She locked the front door and hurried after him to his car.

He opened the trunk and heaved the suitcase in. "You're starting to make me nervous," he said.

"It's about damn time." She plopped down into the passenger seat, slamming the door behind her a little harder than she meant to. She wanted to pick a fight with him, but

she knew she was just stressed. So she stayed quiet as they drove away from her house, and the moment that the tires hit the pavement of the freeway, she slept. It wasn't like the light sleeping you usually do in a car, but a deep, dreamless sleep.

The next thing that Anne knew was Jake's hand on her shoulder waking her. When she opened her eyes, the familiar Korean and Chinese neon signs along Colima Road still shone obnoxiously in the daylight, welcoming her home. She and Jake were creeping down the road in bumper to bumper traffic, another thing to add to the list of reasons why Anne was glad she had gotten out of Rowland Heights. Colima was always packed with cars and it seemed that no matter what the city did, traffic did not get better.

"Babe, you're going to have to direct me," he said. "Even the street signs aren't in English."

"Oh shut up. It's not that bad."

Except that it was that bad. The only recognizable signs along Colima were the Chevron and Shell gas stations at the next street corner. Stater Brothers was the only American grocery store left in the city since Vons had been transformed into a 99 Ranch Market. As a little girl, Anne never wanted to go grocery shopping with her mother. The Korean grocery stores where her mother shopped always smelled like fish. Worse than that, the older Korean women that worked there tried to talk to her at the checkout counter, and although she wanted to answer, she could never remember how to say what she wanted in Korean. "Naettaleun bukkeuleowum tayo," her mother would say, telling them that she was just shy when really she should have told them that she didn't really speak Korean.

Anne guided Jake as quickly as she could into the residential area and guided him the long way, taking small side streets, to where her parents lived. She wished now more than ever that the houses here had been decorated for the holidays like in Carlsbad. The community's lack of holiday spirit diminished what little she had left. In Carlsbad, even the chill in the coastal wind put her in the Christmas spirit. Sometimes she took a detour coming home from work to drive through the Village downtown because every single tree was covered in white twinkling lights and silver ornaments. Here, the most Christmas spirit you would find was the one or two houses that had put up lights. Her parents' was one of those few with outdoor decorations, thanks, she knew, to her father.

As they pulled into the driveway, Anne peered up at the house, which seemed to have a face all of its own; the two upstairs bedroom windows on the front glared down at her and the garage door opened to swallow them. Instead it spit out two small, white yipping dogs and her parents.

"Aigoo seh sangeh! " her mother exclaimed. "My baby is home."

Anne got out of the car and knelt down to pat the dogs. With her arms wide open, and the white roots of her short bob bouncing, her mother shuffled towards her. She was in her house slippers, the same style she'd worn for as long as Anne could remember, cheap plastic sandals, a green tartan this time. They would have been part of a pack bought at the 99 Ranch Market, fifteen all at once, so that her mother never ran out. Better suited for the beach or for poolside, Anne had always thought them ridiculous when worn indoors.

"I missed you!" her mother cried. She hopped from foot to foot, waiting for Anne to finish petting the dogs.

Anne stood up and hugged her mother. "Mom, it's been only a year."

"I know and then you disappear for another year." Her mother released her and stepped back, looking up and down at her. "Annie-ya, are you gaining weight again?"

Anne crossed her arms, pulling her thin cardigan tighter. "Why am I not surprised?" Though it was true she had gained a few pounds since she last saw them, she never felt fat except in the presence of her mother.

Her father stepped between them and put his arm around Anne. "Leave the poor girl alone," he said.

Her father was always saving her. He had been the one to tuck her in every night as a little girl, and he rocked her in his recliner while she cried after their first dog, April, had been hit by a car. He taught her how to drive and told her he loved her every time they hung up the phone. Anne smiled up at her father. She noticed that his eyes sunk more than usual into the sagging folds of skin around them. Every year, his face seemed older than she remembered, and every year she wished she had come to visit him more often. She hugged him tight. "Hi Daddy."

"How's my little girl?" He kissed her on the forehead and then let her go.

"Not so little," her mother said. She was chasing the noisy little dogs in circles around them.

"Hye Jin, shut those dumb dogs up!" her father shouted.

"I'm trying, Yobboh. " Her plastic house slippers smacked the ground with each step.

The trunk of the car slammed shut behind Anne and she spun around, realizing that she'd forgotten about Jake. He carried the suitcases off to the side of the car and set them down.

Anne grabbed her mother mid dog-chase and held her still. "Mom and Dad, this is Jacob," she said. "Jake, these are my parents."

Jake offered her father his hand and he took it, shaking it almost vigorously.

"It's really nice to meet you both, Mr. and Mrs. Greenley," Jake said.

"You know," Hye Jin said. "You're not as handsome as I imagined."

"Mom," Anne growled. Anne wasn't surprised though. Her mother was always throwing insults around, but Anne's friends thought they were funny. Anne couldn't see the humor. She had tried to prepare Jake for her mother as much as she could, but he had shrugged it off. "Everyone fights with their mother sometimes," he had said. Maybe now he would understand why she came home only when she had to.

"What?" her mother asked. "I'm just saying."

I'm just saying; her mother's famous last words. This was what she had said after she told Anne to quit art school. "Being an artist isn't a real profession. Don't get mad. I'm just saying." And the worst part was this phrase was always coupled with a slight frown, a tilt of the head, and an ignorant expression.

"So what you're saying, Mrs. Greenley, is that I'm still a little handsome. Right?"

Her mother had already begun to head towards the house, stomping her feet at the two balls of white fur, forcing their retreat. "Okay," she shouted over her shoulder.

Her father patted Jake on the back and laughed. "Welcome to our home."

Jake picked up the two suitcases and winked at Anne as he passed her. She sighed and followed suit.

When Anne entered the house, she was more repulsed than usual by the smell of Korean herbal medicine and she hoped that it didn't bother Jake. At least it was obscured by the smell of pine from the Christmas tree, which her family hadn't had in the house since she had been in high school. As soon as Anne and her brother were both out of the house, her mother was able to persuade their father to get a fake tree. She had always insisted on the plastic ones so that they didn't have to keep spending money on real ones every year, but her father sided with Anne and Nathan about the "real deal." In more recent years, however, it seemed that without their support, her father lost every battle with their mother.

"Mom, the house looks great," she said. She took her shoes off at the door and joined Jake by the Christmas tree, which was cluttered with the gold and silver macaroni ornaments that she and Nathan had made as children.

"Your dad did everything himself," her mother said. She said it like an afterthought, over her shoulder on the way into the kitchen, as if she hadn't really intended for anyone to hear it.

Anne smiled at the sentimentality of the entire tree. Even the small locomotive that she had loved as a child chugged around the tree's base on a track that had been

repaired in several places with gaffing tape, handiwork that could be none other than that of her father.

"Your mom helped a little," her father whispered with a grin.

Anne nodded, raising her eyebrows. "Either way," she said. "Thanks."

Jake was leaning in towards the tree, inspecting an ornament that had Anne's picture on it. "You look the same," he said.

"I do not look seven years old."

"You'll always be seven years old to me," her father said.

"Please. I'm twenty six."

"Yeah, but you're my little maple girl."

The nickname had been coined from Anne's affinity for maple bars. Every Sunday when they went to church, her parents took a dozen donuts with them to Sunday school and her father always saved the maple bars for his "little maple girl."

Anne laughed. "Dad, you haven't called me that in years." She glanced at Jake who smiled at her.

"I think it's cute," Jake said. "Maybe I'll start calling you that."

Both Jake and Tim laughed, giving Anne the heebie-jeebies.

"Please don't," she said. She picked up one of the suitcases that Jake had set down and gestured towards the stairs with her head. "Come on. I'll show you where these go."

"No!" her mother shouted from the kitchen. "Annie I need you to help me in here. Tim, show Jake where to go."

"Better listen to your mother," Tim said. Jake followed her father up the stairs and Anne watched them go.

"Annie-ya, bhali," her mother said.

Like a small child in trouble, Anne slinked into the kitchen.

"Cut the kim for the duck soup," her mother commanded.

"Really?" Anne asked. "That's the big important thing you need my help with?"

"Yes." Her mother thrust the kitchen scissors towards Anne.

Anne stared at the scissors until her mother thrust them forth once more.

"Bhali," she said.

Anne sighed, took the scissors, and sat down at the kitchen table with the sheets of kim.

She then glanced at the hideous clock on the wall above the refrigerator to estimate the time left before her mother's family would arrive. It was a clock that her mother had gotten for fifty cents at a yard sale when Anne was a kid, and it had a different fruit or vegetable where the numbers should be. "This perfect for the kitchen," her mother had said when she pulled it out of the cardboard box it was sitting in. The people hosting the yard sale hadn't even planned on selling it, it was so ugly, but her mother bought it anyway. In a strange way, it matched the rest of her décor, which Anne could only describe as over-enunciated. Like when somebody learning English tries too hard to have the correct pronunciation so their accent only becomes that much more obvious. That is what her mother's décor was like; a Korean woman trying to decorate how she thought an American woman would.

The runners above her windows were blue gingham and her kitchen was littered with chickens: chicken magnets on the fridge, chicken salt and pepper shakers, chicken bookends for her cookbooks lined up on the counter.

Anne cut the kim, letting the dark green strips fall onto the plate. The kim smelled like the ocean and it left a thin film of oil on her fingers. The oil was meant to make the salt stick to the thin flaky sheets, but it didn't really work, and even though she tried to be careful, the granules of salt still scattered all over the kitchen table.

Her mother watched her cut the first few sheets, making sure, as she always did, that Anne knew how big to cut the strips. Then, she returned to the cutting board on the kitchen counter and continued slicing the long tubes of duck. Anne had always hated that it was called duck, because when she talked about her mother's soup, everyone thought she meant the bird when actually, duck was what they called the rice cakes that went into the soup. Her mother sliced the pieces thinly, and as she chopped, her knife made a firm thud on the cutting board. Although Anne had seen her do this thousands of times before, she could never understand how she did it so perfectly.

Her mother used to let Anne slice the duck, but the texture was difficult to manage. It was sticky and squishy and every time Anne thought the knife was at the right spot to slice the right amount of duck, when she squished the knife down and the piece came off, it always ended up too big. Her mother eventually became fed up with the huge chunks of duck that ruined her soup every year, and about the time Anne graduated from high school, her mother began slicing it herself and assigned her the tasks of cutting the kim, or peeling potatoes, or setting the table.

A five-year-old could cut the kim with safety scissors, and it didn't really matter if they were cut into strips when they were going to become soggy in the soup anyway. Anne dropped the scissors onto the plate and began tearing little pieces of kim with her fingers. This was much more gratifying.

Her mother peeked up at her in that mousy way that she always did when something was bothering her, but she hadn't decided whether or not to bring it up. She peeked up at her a second, third, and fourth time.

"What?" Anne asked.

She raised her eyebrows and shrugged.

"I know you want to say something."

"Why you use your hands to tear the kim?" she asked. "Use the scissors, Annie-ya."

Anne picked up another sheet of kim, tore off a piece, and stuck it in her mouth. It was salty and oily and crispy at first, but it soon became soggy and stuck to her tongue. "It doesn't even matter," she said. She wasn't hungry, and didn't particularly enjoy eating kim by itself, but she knew it would bother her mother.

Her mother frowned. "Talk like a lady, Annie-ya."

And then she made that clicking sound with her tongue that Anne hated. The same sound she had made when Anne played a wrong note during her piano recital when she was eight. She was playing "Alouette" and had accidentally played a B instead of a C. In the split second between playing the wrong note and the right note, she had heard her mother's "tch" echoing through the auditorium.

Anne swallowed. "I said it doesn't even matter."

"I know what you said," her mother answered. She continued cutting the duck, talking to Anne without looking up. "But it matters because the kim will be different sizes and it won't be even in the soup." She chopped the duck harder now, with more force. "And when people scoop their soup, some people will have big pieces of kim and some will have little pieces—"

"I don't think anyone will freaking care, Mom."

Her mother made the clicking sound again and then put her knife down, picked up the meat, and dumped it into the pot of simmering water, the wisps of steam curling up and disappearing into the whirring vent above.

Her father strolled into the room. "Now let's not fight on Christmas Eve," he said.

Normally Anne would have thanked him for stepping in at the right time, but she was too annoyed. She kept her eyes focused on the kim in her hands and kept shredding. Jake stepped into the room and sat down next to Anne at the kitchen table. She avoided looking at him, hoping he hadn't heard their bickering.

"So Jacob," her father said. "Anne says you work for an advertisement company?"

"Yes, sir."

"What kind of education do you need for a job like that?" her mother asked, as if she and Anne hadn't been bickering. She was such an expert at changing her mood in an instant. When Anne had been a little girl, her mother would do this to her all of the time. She would be talking casually on the phone, and then snap at Anne and Nathan for being

too loud, only to go back to being cheerful on the phone. Anne attacked the kim with more rigor.

"They usually look for people with a masters to fill my position," Jake said. "But I worked up to it."

"You know, Anne has a master's degree," Hye Jin said. "Not that an M.F.A. in studio art is very useful for getting a job. But I guess she's doing good."

"It's, well, Mom," Anne corrected.

"What's well?"

"I do well."

"I know. That's what I said."

"That's not what I..." Anne sighed. "Never mind."

Both Tim and Jake laughed but Anne simply could not see why they thought her mother's poor grammar was so funny.

Her mother continued to ask Jake questions. She asked about where he went to school, if he went to church, if he had any siblings, and what his parents were like. Anne sat helplessly by as he answered them. Her father sat down next to Anne at the table and helped her cut the kim. Her mother seemed to react fairly neutrally to Jake's responses, but Anne could tell to which answers she was pleased and which she was not. She wanted to interject several times, but her mother's fierce glances kept her silent.

Relief came when the barrage of questions was ended by the doorbell. Her mother immediately shuffled over to answer it. Anne and Jake followed her to welcome one of her mother's many sisters, Aunt Jun, and her husband, Uncle Kim. They took off their

shoes, adding them to the small collection in the entryway. Anne, a bit nervous about the whole ordeal, waited to introduce Jake, but her aunt and uncle yammered on in Korean with her mother for quite some time before anybody else in the home received any recognition. When they finally stopped looked at her, she bowed and greeted them in Korean. Then she introduced them to Jake.

"Hello. Nice to meet you," Aunt Jun said, turning to Jake. Her accent was thick, as she spoke very little English, and Uncle Kim spoke even less.

"You too. How are you doing?" Jake shook their hands, half bowing awkwardly at them. They did the same, grinning and semi-bowing repeatedly and not responding to his question. Anne had encountered this, or situations similar to this, all too many times. It was the reason why she usually didn't go anywhere with her mother's family. Her mother was usually there to remedy the situation, but those few seconds it took her mother to step in always felt like forever. And it did only take a few seconds for her mother to step in and coax Anne's Ant and Uncle towards the kitchen, but Anne worried it was a few seconds too long. She looked at Jake, and as her aunt and uncle walked away with her mother, Anne picked up that her mother was talking about her. Her aunt glanced back at Jake before they disappeared around the corner and continued their frantic Korean conversation. What Anne had feared already began to come true. She knew that her mother and her sisters would not be able to stop gossiping about her and Jake.

She and Jake quietly returned to the kitchen table, where Anne was assigned carrot peeling duty. She tried to finish peeling them as quickly as she could so that they could relocate to the living room, where he might be more comfortable, away from a

foreign language he could in no way understand. She peeled as frantically as her mother and aunt seemed to speak in Korean, and although she knew that this was simply the nature of their language, it was still grating for Anne to listen to. Even her father talked animatedly with her uncle in what she had grown to know as his "korenglish," making up for the Korean words he couldn't remember by accompanying his English words with hand motions. They talked, as they always did, about her uncle's ventures in the farming business. Her uncle grew kennep plants, and sold the leaves to local Asian supermarkets and Japanese restaurants. When Anne was younger, her mother helped Aunt Jun and Uncle Kim for extra money, bringing the leaves home by the bucket full. She would stack the leaves in groups of ten and then tie tiny rubber bands around the stems. As a result, her mother's fingers had become dry and cracked from the rubber bands, and though she had long since stopped helping with their farm, her hands had never returned to their original softness. Now, father and uncle were discussing his latest endeavors in hiring immigrant workers to help with the packaging of the leaves. Her father was against it and although she agreed with him, she had no means of communicating her agreement to her uncle. Strangely, it was't that she was never able to speak Korean. She could remember having conversations in Korean as a toddler, but she couldn't remember what was actually said or what any of it meant. As she grew up, her fluency had dwindled and it seemed that each year she sat further and further on the outskirts of her mother's family, as she and Jake did now.

Anne tried to think of things to talk about with Jake, but the splattering of Korean words around them was too distracting. Even her thoughts became swallowed by the Korean.

When Anne finished peeling the carrots, she was, thankfully, retired as her mother's assistant since Aunt Jun took up the position with joy. She and Jake escaped to the living room where it was much quieter and, she hoped, more comfortable for him. They sat down on her mother's floral couches with wooden feet that are meant to imitate Victorian furniture. Above the couch there was a huge acrylic painting that was done by the Korean lady down the street. Anne knew it was acrylic because she recognized the technique. It was difficult to achieve the thick, spikey texture that this woman had painted into the trees, which could only be done by dabbing huge globs of acrylic onto the canvas. Anne admired the work, and she thought it was quite beautiful. Still, she resented it. Her mother had chosen to display the work of a stranger and had never asked her for a single painting. Anne knew it was because her mother was ashamed of her. She couldn't tell people that her daughter was an artist. She only began admitting it to strangers when Anne got her credential and began teaching art. Anne wished it were a shitty painting so that she could have a real reason to hate it. Instead, she could only stare at it as she leaned on Jake's shoulder and hate the idea of it.

"Did you leave the paintings in the car?" she asked.

"Yeah," Jake said. "Did you want me to bring them in?"

"No, that's perfect. That way, tomorrow, we won't have to put them back in the car."

"Won't your parents want to carpool?" he asked.

Anne shrugged. "I guess we'll figure it out."

"Ok. How come your mom's family doesn't do a gift exchange?"

"They do, but it's only for the kids."

"Oh."

"My mom's family is stingy." Anne chuckled.

"There's nothing wrong with making Christmas all about the kids," Jake said.

Anne smiled at the thought as they continued to sit in silence. She enjoyed the quiet because she knew that soon the rest of her mother's party would arrive and the entire house would be thrown into chaos.

And it wasn't long after her prediction that they began to arrive in groups of twos, threes, and fours. There were a frenzy of greetings, in both Korean and English, and more awkward bowing as Anne introduced her Korean relatives to Jake. The small pile of gifts around the tree began to grow into a small mountain and shoes overtook the front entrance. The duck soup and bulgogi that her mother had prepared and set out on the kitchen table were soon accompanied by various kimchee-ed dishes. The sour-spicy stench permeated the entire house, and she knew that no amount of pine could overcome it.

She, Jake, her father and her English speaking cousins sat together in the living room while they waited for permission from the women to start eating. Hyo Mi, the star violinist in the family, was discussing her latest audition for the Los Angeles Philharmonic orchestra. Now this had always perplexed Anne. Her mother was always

comparing her to Hyo Mi. But on a literal level, Hyo Mi was an artist like she was and the only difference was their medium.

"How about you, Anne?" Hyo Mi asked. "Anything new?"

Anne shook her head. "Nope. Just teaching still."

Hyo Mi nodded. "Send me your work," she said. "I'd love to see it."

"Sure."

It was the same every Christmas. Everyone wanted to know what she was doing with her art degree, but Anne didn't mind her cousins asking. She knew they were genuinely curious. Thankfully her mother and her aunts weren't part of that conversation, because every other year when they were, the conversation always ended with her mother pissing her off, and Anne getting up and walking away. Her aunts were in the kitchen, helping her mother prepare the rest of the food, chattering away. She could tell when they were talking about her or Jake by the way their conversation would dip into more hushed tones, as if she or Jake could understand exactly what they were saying. Anne wished that they would have kept yammering on the same even when they were talking about her and Jake because at least then it would be less obvious.

At long last, Nathan and his wife, Tracy, arrived. They went around greeting the rest of the family, and her small nephews, Tommy and Kevin, shrank back from the Korean faces smiling down and trying to speak English to them. She could sympathize with them and she laughed proudly when they ran out from behind her brother to give her a hug after the formal greetings were over.

"You guys came right in time for the food," Jake said after Anne introduced him to her brother and his family.

"Well, then it looks like our timing is perfect," Nathan said. He winked at Anne and the small party of English speakers made their way to food, each of them picking up a plate and crowding around the table.

"I know this is kimchee, right?" Jake said, pointing at a plate of red, soggy pickled cabbage. "And we've got Korean barbecue, which is awesome, but what kind of soup is this?"

"Thas eess duck soup," Aunt Hye Su, one of her mother's older sisters, answered.

"It's not real duck like the bird," Anne whispered. "It's just the name of the soup."

He nodded at Anne and then half bowed to Aunt Hye Su, taking the bowl she poured for him.

"You it some. Ees belly good." Her aunt grinned, exposing the silver fillings that covered most of her teeth and matched her hair.

Once they filled their plates, she and Jake headed over to the dining room, where they were joined by Nathan, Tracy, and Tim, who looked as relieved as Jake to be amongst English speakers. Most of her mother's family sat on the ground around the short Korean table in the den; others sat on the couches and ate.

"So Jacob, I've heard Anne's side of the story on how you two met, but now I want to hear yours." Nathan's expression was jovial, his eyes serious, which frightened Anne a little bit. Her brother was rarely serious.

"We had an art history class together in college. Right, Anne?"

Anne nodded with a smile.

"What, that's it?" Tracy asked. "There has to be more."

"There is, but the rest of the story can be misconstrued as creepy."

"Oh? How so?" Tim raised an eyebrow and smiled at Anne.

"Well." Jake paused and took a drink of his soda. "I had seen Anne studying at the Starbucks on campus before class, so I made it a point to get there really early and do homework before class. Eventually she noticed and we started to sit together."

"That's not creepy," Tracy chimed. "It's really kind of sweet."

"Although a real man would just talk to her," her mother said.

Anne jumped at the sound of her mother's voice behind her. She had no idea how long her mother had been standing there, and Anne had really been enjoying the conversation without having to worry about what her mother would say.

"Honey, be nice. You know it took me a long time to approach you too."

Anne mouthed "thank you" to her father, who simply smiled back at her. She then turned to Jake and mouthed, "I'm sorry." He reached over and gave her knee a reassuring squeeze under the table.

"Yes," her mother said. "But that was only because you had to learn Korean first."

"Wow. So you learned to speak Korean for your wife?" Jake asked, impressed.

"No," her mother said. She had moved to Tim's side now and had her arm on the back of his chair. "He had to learn Korean because he was missionary."

Anne knew that her mother didn't mean to sound rude and that she was simply answering the question, so she held her tongue.

"Honey, don't be such a spoilsport."

"Yobboh, I don't know what that means."

"It means you're no fun," Nathan said.

"Tch. Yobboh." Her mother nudged Tim's shoulder gently. "I am fun."

"I know, dear," he said, laughing. "I was joking."

"Okay. When everyone's done eating, Hyo Mi's going to play the piano for everyone so bhali, eat everyone!" She turned and went back into the den to rejoin her sisters.

"Thanks for stopping by!" Tim called after her, jokingly. "Next time I hope you can stay longer." Tim's idioms never got old to Anne.

"So Anne, how come you haven't brought Jake around earlier?" Nathan asked.

"You know how it is," Anne said. "Mom makes everything a big deal."

"That's true. I think Mom almost had a heart attack when I told her Tracy and I wanted to get married."

"Remember how she wanted to meet my parents?" Tracy asked. "And she was so happy that they were both fluent in Korean when they met?"

Anne remembered the night well. They had all gone out for Korean barbecue the night that her parents met Tracy's parents. The entire night, their parents spoke in Korean, even her father, and Tracy translated for her and Nathan. That night, she envied Tracy and began to miss her brother.

Shortly after everyone had finished eating, the entire family gathered in the living room. Most of the gifts were for the children, but instead of opening gifts one by one, as

Anne would have preferred, the children were allowed to look through all of the boxes and open any that had their names on them. Everyone except Anne laughed and watched as Tommy, Kevin, and the other children ripped into their presents. Anne couldn't help but feel ashamed about the entire family laughing and clapping at the selfish and crude behavior. She did not find the squawks of the rambunctious boys, and the shrieks of the little girls cute. Every year, her aunts and uncles taught these children that being unappreciative was okay. She looked over at Jake who didn't seem to mind, and she sighed.

At the end of the night, when the children calmed down, Anne made sure that each child participated in cleaning up the mess of paper and cardboard before their families left. Afterwards, once everyone had gone and the house was cleaned up, Anne and Jake plopped themselves down on the leather love seat in front of the TV. They sat in silence with the TV buzzing in the background. They were watching a special on entire city blocks where every single house was decked out with Christmas lights, reminding Anne again of her mother's lack of a decorative Christmas spirit. The entire evening had been a cacophony of conversations and loud children, grating on Anne's nerves. But now, she didn't know what to do with the quiet. She was dying to know what Jake thought of her family, but she didn't want to talk about it within earshot of her mother. She would wait to ask him on the way home after Christmas day. She laid her head on his shoulder.

Her father joined them in front of the television, followed shortly by her mother, who served them hot chocolate and coffee. They sat quietly, sipping their drinks and watching the TV. Anne couldn't help but smile. She enjoyed being able to sit in front of

the TV with Jake and her parents in silence. She had only imagined this happening before. Although the night had had its hiccups, at least nothing catastrophic happened and now, it seemed, her mother was certainly on her best behavior. She only hoped that nothing about the rest of their visit would go wrong.

By the end of the Christmas special, her father had begun to snore softly in his recliner and was dangerously close to spilling the rest of his coffee onto his lap. Hye Jin removed the mug gently from his hand without waking him and set it on the table.

"Mom, I think we're going to get ready for bed," Anne whispered.

"Ok. Goodnight."

Anne paused. She wasn't sure why, but she waited for more. "Are you going to bed soon?" she asked.

"No," her mother said. She picked up the remote and changed the channel. "I'm going to watch my Korean drama."

Anne shrugged at Jake as they got up from the couch.

"Tell Dad goodnight for me."

"I will."

"Goodnight Mrs. Greenley," Jake said.

Hye Jin said goodnight to him, only pulling her eyes away from the television long enough to do so. Anne would have liked it if her mother had given him a proper goodnight but at least she hadn't blown him off completely.

Anne followed Jake into her father's study, which was Nathan's former bedroom, where two of her mother's yo mattresses had been stacked and set up on the floor. She

couldn't believe in all of the time and stress it took her to pack for this short trip, she hadn't even thought to bring an air mattress for Jake.

He sat down on the makeshift bed and it gave way to his weight so that he was practically sitting on the ground.

She apologized. "We can trade places," she said. "Sleep in my old bed."

"No, it's fine. I get to sleep in your bed all the time." He chuckled.

"Jake!" She shushed him and then giggled. "They might be able to hear you."

He reached out for her hand and then pulled her down onto the mattress-floor with him. "From all the way down there?"

"You have no idea." As children, she and Nathan had gotten into trouble quite often when they had thought they had been completely quiet, tiptoeing into each other's rooms to play cards or Monopoly. In high school, she had sworn that her parents could hear the scratching of her pencil because of how often they had caught her staying up late, sketching in bed.

Jake laughed.

"Either way." Anne kissed him. "Goodnight."

He smiled and touched her cheek. "Merry Christmas."

She left Jake, shutting his door, and went to her old room. But before shutting the door, she heard Tim's voice calling her softly from the bottom of the stairs.

He was climbing the stairs, pulling himself up with the railing more so than she ever remembered him doing.

"Going to bed without saying goodnight to me?" he asked, reaching the top of the stairs.

She smiled and gave him a hug. "Goodnight Daddy."

"Goodnight my little maple girl."

Anne kissed him on the cheek and then turned into her room, but he followed her and stood in the doorway awkwardly.

"Was there something else?" she asked.

He fumbled with the doorknob before answering. "Your mother and I like Jake."

Anne chuckled, unsure if she believed him.

"Go easy on your Mom," he said. "Okay?"

"Do I have to?"

"No. But remember I'm the one who has to live with her. If anything, do it for me."

"I'll try," Anne said. "Just tell her to go easy on him too."

"Will do," he said. He laughed and then left.

Anne shut her bedroom door and sighed. She had grown accustomed to sleeping next to Jake, either at her place or at his, and she felt lonely looking at the small twin-sized bed. She never understood why her parents had converted Nathan's room into something useful, but left most of the furniture in her room untouched. The old pine dresser and oak desk, now empty, were monuments to her past and gave her the chills rather than comfort. The walls were bare, save for a photo of her when she was about eight years old. In it, she wore a beautiful silk hanbok that her mother had given to her for

Christmas one year. Her parents stood behind her, beaming pride at the camera. The sun glinted off of her then nearly blondish red hair and the gold threads that were embroidered in the white silk. At first glance, she looked like your normal smiling child, but when looked at closer, her cheeks were splotchy and her eyes were red. Anne scoffed. She remembered that moment well. It had been on Christmas morning, and she had hated the dress. She had cried when she opened the gift, and she had cried when her mother made her put it on. It had been a miracle that they got her to smile for the camera. If she recalled correctly, her mother had threatened her with a mmae-mmae, so she had smiled only to save her bottom from her mother's hand.

As she changed into her pajamas, she kept glancing at the photo. Each time she looked at it, it became less and less familiar. The little girl didn't change or move, but her face no longer belonged to Anne. Anne tried to shake the uncomfortable feeling and turned off the lights and got into her bed.

At first she couldn't sleep and she lay there, staring at the old memory on the wall. She could only see the white dress distinctly. Even now, she recognized that the dress was beautiful and still, just looking at its figure seeming to float in the dark conjured disdain from her like it did that Christmas night when her mother forced her to wear it to Grandma Gina's. Every Christmas, in the evening, Anne and her family had gone to her Grandma Gina's house and she had looked forward to it every year, except that year. That year, Anne had fought not to wear the hanbok and, as with every argument that she had with her mother, she had lost.

She had still been sulking when they had parked in the retirement community that Anne's grandmother had lived in. Her mother hopped out and opened Anne's door.

"Annie," she said.

The beaded pattern around the collar of her mother's cardigan shimmered in the dim glow of the dome light. Her mother always got to wear pretty shimmery sweaters while she had to wear ugly puffy hanboks. Anne kept her eyes down, trying not to admire the iridescent beads.

"Annie."

Anne refused to look up.

"Annie-ya!"

Anne's eyes snapped to her mother's, the short curls of her bob coifed around her furrowed brows. Nathan and her father waited behind them, watching Anne.

"Are you going to act like this all night?" her mother asked.

Anne shrugged, looking down at the gold embroidery on the sleeves of her dress.

"Okay. You want me to take you home?" She grabbed her wrist, forcing her to look up. "Then you don't get any presents from Grandma Gina or Uncle Bill, or Aunt Julie, or anybody else. Is that what you want to do?"

Anne reluctantly shook her head, trying to twist her wrist free from her mother's grip.

"Then you stop it." She let go of Anne's wrist, thrusting it back at her.

"But I don't want to wear this," Anne whimpered. "Everyone's going to laugh at me."

"They won't laugh."

"Nobody else is going to be dressed up."

"Annie-ya. It's Christmas. Everyone is going to be dressed up." Her mother whipped around and began to walk away from the car. "Bhali-wa!" Nathan waited for Anne until their mother barked at him to follow them.

"They're not going to be dressed like this," Anne said. She climbed out of the vehicle, following behind her family with her head down like Coco and Sarang when they knew they were in trouble.

The old hollow floors of the mobile home echoed and creaked as they entered. Grandma Gina's house was dark with brown carpet and forest green walls, which made Anne feel like her dress stood out even more. She tried to hide behind her father when they entered the living room, where most of the grown-ups had gathered, but despite her efforts to remain unseen, she was greeted with a flurry of cooing.

"How adorable," Grandma Gina said. She cupped Anne's face with her powdery, wrinkled hands and then pulled her out from behind Tim. Anne kept her eyes on the carpet.

"Look what I have," Grandma Gina exclaimed. "Isn't little Annie adorable?"

"Gigi," Anne whined. Grandma Gina was standing behind her, running her fingers through her hair.

It was as if somebody had pressed a pause button. The conversations stopped and everybody was smiling at Anne—sitting on the couches, smiling, standing over her, smiling, putting cups of coffee down on an end table, smiling. Anne stood in front of

Gigi, a woman she admired and looked up to after hearing the stories from her father about how she had raised him and his three siblings alone. Gigi who she so admired, was now the second worst person in the world to Anne for showing her off. The first worst person was her mother, of course, for putting her in the awful dress.

"Doesn't she look like an adorable little Korean princess doll?" Gigi asked.

"Annie, do a cute Korean curtsy," Aunt Julie called out.

Anne tried to turn and hide her face in the folds of Gigi's skirt, but Gigi held her shoulders. Everyone cheered her on and she pinched her dress in each hand, pulling the sides out, and moved one foot back and bent the other knee like her mother had taught her to do for her piano recitals. It was one for the books, her cutest curtsy yet. Maybe if she did what they wanted, then her mother might let her change out of the hanbok. She had refused to leave the house without a change of clothes. "Fine. Just in case," her mother had said.

"No, not like that," Aunt Julie said. "A Korean curtsy." Aunt Julie chortled and the rest of the family laughed with her.

Anne looked from laughing face to laughing face, trying to figure out what they had expected her to do. Her ears were hot and her chest was tight. She had curtsied like she thought they had wanted but she had done it wrong.

"You know," Aunt Julie continued. "Like a Korean princess!"

Anne fought the stinging in her throat and behind her eyes. The only thing that could make this worse was getting in trouble with her mother for crying in front of the family. Desperate, Anne turned to her mother.

"Insah, " her mother said.

Anne frowned and shook her head.

"Bhali! Insah!"

Anne turned back to the rest of her audience, who had stopped laughing now and smiled at her. She took a deep breath, put her feet together, placed her hands on the tops of her thighs, and bowed low from the waist. "Ahnyong-ha-sehyoh, " she said. She had done this and spoken these words a thousand times to her mother's family. Every time she saw them, her mother made her insah and it never felt uncomfortable. But now it felt unnatural in the presence of her father's family.

Her aunts and uncles broke out into laughter and applause. Gigi released her, and Anne ran to her mother's legs, burying the right side of her face in the soft fabric of her slacks. She peeked out of her left eye and past her mother's leg at her cousins watching TV and playing in the den. Her female cousins were wearing dresses that looked like real princess dresses with cute frilly collars, lovely floral patterns, and sleeves that puffed out like Cinderella's did. Even their socks had frills on them. She looked down at her own feet and couldn't see them; they were hidden underneath the hanbok, which was a few inches too long.

**

Anne and Jake followed behind her parents as they walked up the porch steps to Aunt Julie's house. This was the first Christmas at Aunt Julie's because Gigi had always hosted the holiday parties at her house. But only a month after last Christmas, Gigi had a

heart attack in her sleep and passed away. Her passing had caught everyone by surprise. She had shown no signs of ill health and had made no complaints of any sort of pain.

Last Christmas, as usual, Gigi had ranted about her three ex-husbands, the musician—"the accordionist," as she liked to put it—father to Aunt Julie and Uncle Pat, then the alcoholic foreman from Milwaukee, Anne's grandfather. Her father never spoke of him, but Anne always looked forward to Gigi recounting the time she had kicked him out. "Put him right on the street," she always said, "twice!" This after he'd broken and re-broken his promises to give up his daily twelve-pack of Miller High Life. Some years she kicked him out in the morning and others she kicked him out at night. Sometimes his clothes were on the lawn and sometimes they were packed in their green vinyl suitcases as if he'd be going on a long, pleasant vacation. "A *permanent* vacation," she'd once joked. But even when the details changed, this was always the best part of the night, better than Uncle Pat's stories about hunting the Christmas turkey or opening gifts from cousins that didn't seem to know Anne at all. This would be the first year the story wouldn't happen, and it was this sense of loss that had kept Anne at her easel this past month.

Anne gripped the two extra-large gift bags that contained the twenty-five by twenty-five inch acrylics she had painted. Jake held the other two since she didn't want them banging against each other. She had painted four unique works of acrylic for her father and each of his siblings to honor Gigi's missed presence this year.

On the front porch, Anne's mother paused with her hand hovering over the doorbell. She turned towards Anne. "Are you sure you want to give those out?" She

pointed with her chin and looked down the bridge of her nose at the gifts. "This is your last chance."

"Yes, Mother." There had actually been quite a bit of uncertainty when Anne had first started on the paintings, but the more her mother insisted they were a bad idea the more she felt they were a good idea.

"But Christmas is supposed to be a happy time," her mother said. "Everyone will be sad when they open your present."

A chilly breeze funneled into the porch and Anne shivered. "Mother, it's cold."

"Honey, let her give out those paintings if that's what she wants to do," her father said.

"Okay. Fine." Her mother turned back around and rang the doorbell.

Anne nudged her father with her elbow. "Thanks," she said. She wished she could pick up on his ability to mollify her mother.

After a few moments, the door opened and Aunt Julie greeted them all with a smile and a hug. "My goodness Anne." She eyed the conspicuous gift bags. "What are those?"

"A surprise for the family," Anne said.

"Oh! How exciting," Aunt Julie said. "I love surprises." Aunt Julie wrapped her arms around Anne and gave her a tight squeeze.

Anne wanted to squeeze her back, but was only able to hold her arms out and squeeze her shoulders with her elbows because of the gifts in each of her hands. Aunt Julie was always the bubbly one, and the one who tried to entertain the kids at these

family gatherings. She was the oldest of the four children and Anne thought she was the most like Gigi. When Anne and Nathan were children, Aunt Julie always brought new games or clever toys for her and Nathan to play with. Anne's favorite one by far was the marble run. One thanksgiving, Aunt Julie had brought a large container filled with plastic yellow pieces that looked similar to the hot wheels tracks Nathan had. They discovered that they could assemble these pieces together into wild spirals and loops and send marbles whirling through the track. Her father had always said that Aunt Julie practically raised him, since Gigi was always working long hours in the court house. It was this affinity for taking care of everybody that made Aunt Julie the perfect host for Christmas after Gigi had passed away.

Aunt Julie stepped aside and they filed into the house. It was much quieter than Anne's parents' house had been the night before, although there were just as many people. The comforting aroma of the cream-cheese-frosted gingerbread cookies that Aunt Julie made every Christmas filled the entire house like it used to at Gigi's, and the familiarity of it all reassured Anne that her mother was wrong about the paintings.

Anne and Jake set the gift bags down next to the stack of presents around the ornate tree. Aunt Julie's tree was not cluttered like the one at home, but was decorated with matching gold ornaments, white twinkling lights, and cascading gold ribbon. It belonged in a department store, as though a professional had been paid to decorate it. Anne appreciated the fact that her mother had kept the old macaroni ornaments that she and Nathan had made as children, but they were undeniably less attractive than the sparkling glass ornaments Aunt Julie had.

She had always thought that the arrangement of gifts underneath the tree was as important as the arrangement of ornaments that were on it. So she moved the stack of presents, creating space behind them for her gift bags. She lined the bags up behind the other gifts and fixed the way the tissue stuck out of Uncle Pat's gift bag. Last night, most of her mother's family had simply dropped their gifts in whatever open space was available near the tree, something that Anne had long since given up trying to fix. With her hands on her hips, she stepped back and looked at the neatly arranged gifts, satisfied.

"Jacob," Aunt Julie called. She came over holding a plate of cookies like a waitress holding a tray of food. "Would you like a cookie? They're Anne's favorites."

"No, they're everyone's favorites," Anne said.

"Now I have to try them," he said. He took two cookies and handed one to Anne.

Anne took a small bite of her cookie and watched Jake as he bit into his. He closed his eyes and took a breath.

"Oh my God," he said, still chewing. "These are amazing."

"Wonderful," Aunt Julie said. "I'm setting these down in the kitchen. You kids feel free to help yourselves to as many as you want. There's milk in the fridge too." She turned and carried the cookies back towards the kitchen.

"Aunt Julie makes these every year," Anne said. She stuck the rest of her cookie into her mouth and smiled at Jake, her cheeks sticking out as she chewed.

"Nice," he said. "Want to go get a drink?"

Anne shrugged and then nodded.

They turned to go into the kitchen but before they could leave the living room, Uncle Pat stopped them. He asked Jake all sorts of questions about his hobbies, if he ever liked to spend time outdoors fishing or hunting. Anne was nervous for him because Uncle Pat had always said, "A man's not a man until he's killed his own dinner," and Jake wasn't an outdoorsman in the slightest.

"You mean you never even been fishing?" Uncle Pat asked.

"No, sir. My pops wasn't around much to take me," Jake said. "But I'd be more than happy to go sometime if you're offering."

Uncle Pat laughed. "I like this guy," he said to Anne.

"Me too," she said. She smiled at Jake and put her arm around his waist.

They never were able to leave the living room to get those drinks or more cookies. All of Anne's cousins, Uncle Jim, and his wife Marlena came over to meet Jake. Even Aunt Julie's husband, Uncle Chris, who was usually very shy (although who could blame him for being so quiet when his wife did all the talking) wanted to meet Jake. They gathered around the two of them in small groups, shaking hands and hugging him and asking questions. Once again, she and Jake were the center of attention, but this time she enjoyed it.

After dinner, everyone gathered in the living room for Secret Santa. Every year, her father's family did a Secret Santa to make sure that everyone got a gift.

As everyone settled down, Anne snuck into the kitchen and filled a small paper plate with several of Aunt Julie's cookies. She brought them over into the living room and

sat down next to Jake. She picked up one of the cookies was savoring the bite when she noticed her mother. "Geumanhehyo, " her mother said.

Anne smiled at her mother and stuck the rest of her cookie into her mouth. Her mother rolled her eyes and sighed. Anne chuckled quietly, took a second cookie, and then handed the rest over to Jake. She hadn't planned on eating all of them anyway, but she knew her mother had assumed she would.

One by one, everybody took their turn handing out and opening gifts. They watched each other open gifts one at a time. There were no screaming children, wrapping paper and cardboard was not thrown all over the floor, and it was not chaotic. As the stack of gifts dwindled down, Anne's stomach began to churn. Her mother may have been right about the cookies, she realized. And then a more terrifying thought occurred to her. But before she could form it fully in her mind, Aunt Julie called her name.

"Anne, did you want to give out your presents now?" she asked.

Her paintings were the last gifts left under the tree. "Sure," she said. She stood up and the room became quiet. Her hands began to sweat and she wiped them on her pants. Before she began to speak, Anne glanced at her mother, who had a very perplexing look on her face. She was smiling, but it wasn't her real smile. Her lips were curled up, but her eyebrows were pulled together as if worried or disappointed. Anne knew the expression in those eyebrows well and they made her stomach churn even more. She shifted her attention towards the smiling faces of Aunt Julie, Uncle Pat, Uncle Jim, and her father. Their smiles were reassuring and she took a breath. "I wanted to start by saying that you've done a fabulous job of hosting, Aunt Julie."

The family applauded in agreement. Aunt Julie tried to wave the applause away, her cheeks a touch pinker than usual.

"Secondly, I wanted to make tonight special and I wanted to honor Gigi's absence. So I've done an original and unique painting for Aunt Julie, Uncle Pat, Uncle Jim, and my dad."

A quiet murmur spread over the family and Anne began handing out the paintings. She gave the first one in a large gold bag to Uncle Pat. He stood and gave her a bear hug, squeezing her and lifting her slightly off of the ground. She laughed and her nervousness completely dissipated.

He set her down, laughing. "Do you want us to wait to open them so we can do it together?"

"Yeah, it'll be more of a surprise for everyone," she said.

Others agreed and Anne proceeded to hand out the other three gifts. Each painting was unique. For Aunt Julie, she painted Gigi and Aunt Julie hiding Easter eggs like they used to do every Easter for the kids. Anne had loved collecting those eggs every year. Only Gigi and Aunt Julie would think to hide extra special eggs with vouchers for special toy prizes in them. For Uncle Pat, she painted Gigi and Scott, Pat's son, holding up a string of fish they had caught during the one camping trip Anne's mother had conceded to going on. Anne would never forget the moment right after that picture had been taken when Gigi had cut one of the fish right around the tail and then yanked the entire spinal cord out in one go. "You got something comin' if you think Uncle Pat learned how to hunt and fish from the accordionist," she'd said. Uncle Jim's painting was of him and Gigi

at his Ph.D. graduation. In the picture she'd insisted on wearing his "funny hat." Anne had worried most about giving her painting to Uncle Pat since he was always the serious one of the bunch.

Aunt Julie gave her a kiss on the cheek when she handed the white bag with poinsettias to her. The silver gift bag was for Uncle Jim and the last one, a dark green with gold stripes went to her father.

"Honey you didn't have to make me one too," he said.

"I know, Dad." She kissed him on the cheek. "But I wanted to."

She knew that even if her mother had been right and the gifts had been a bad idea, at least her father would be on her side. He would appreciate the effort and thought she had taken to complete the paintings. "Merry Christmas," she said. She squeezed her father's hand and then returned to her seat next to Jacob.

"Good job," he whispered.

"Thanks."

"On the count of three," Aunt Julie called.

Anne clasped her hands together. Everybody in the family knew that she was a painter and an art teacher, but she doubted whether any of them had ever actually seen much of her work. She'd had a digital rendering of a surrealistic underwater scene published in an art magazine right after she'd graduated from her master's program and her mother had bought several copies of the magazine to send out to the family and she was certain that was the extent any of them had seen her work. Even when her work was shown at her senior art exhibition, Nathan, Tracy, her parents, and Gigi were the only

ones who showed up. Anybody else would be disappointed by the small turnout, but her father and Gigi's support was all she felt she needed. "I don't know where you learned to paint because it sure didn't come from your folks," she'd said. "Neither of them have a creative bone in them. You musta got it from me!" That compliment alone had made the sleepless nights completing her senior exhibition worth it. Now, she hoped the rest of her family would see what Gigi had seen then.

"One, two, three!" Aunt Julie exclaimed.

The room burst with movement and shouts of excitement. Tissue flew into the air in a flurry and the house was filled with the sound of rustling paper. Anne swelled as her father and his brothers and sister pulled the paintings out of their bags.

"Wow, Anne," Scott said. "These look like real photographs." He looked over Aunt Julie's shoulder at her painting.

"Thank you," she said, smiling. However, the smile on her face faded as the laughter subsided. The room grew still again, the tissue papers on the ground. Uncle Jim, Uncle Pat, and Aunt Julie all stared at their paintings, each of them holding them at arm's length. They all wore their smiles still, but Anne could sense the hollowness behind them.

"Anne, they're beautiful," Aunt Julie said. Her eyes were filled with tears and she looked at Anne. "Really... really, they're amazing. It must have taken you forever to paint all of these." She clutched the painting to her chest with one hand, her knuckles turning white. Tears escaped her eyes and she wiped them away with her free hand.

Anne tried to smile back and wanted to say so much to her aunt. She wanted to tell her that they did take a long time, but that she didn't mind doing them because she

missed Gigi so much. She wanted to run over and hug her aunt and tell her not to cry. All she could muster was a feeble, "Thanks."

Anne wiped her hands on her pants again and looked down at them. She was afraid to look up at Uncle Pat and Uncle Jim, so she wiped her sweating hands. Jake put his arm around Anne's shoulder and gave her a squeeze. She shrugged him away. Somehow the gesture felt wrong. She knew he'd meant to comfort her and she wished she could let him, but it reminded her that her mother had been right all along. Surely her father didn't think giving out the paintings was the wrong decision.

She looked up at him, and his eyes were cast down at the painting he held in his hands: a painting of Gigi kneeling down and holding Anne as an infant on her hip and hugging Nathan with her other arm. It had been Anne's favorite picture of her and Gigi because she loved the way Gigi's bright red hair popped even more than the orange autumn leaves on the trees behind them.

She held her breath, afraid that if she exhaled the tears she could see in his eyes would fall. Before she could see if they did or not, however, her own vision blurred. She tried to blink her tears away and she clenched her hands, digging her nails into her palm. She wiped her eyes with the back of her hands. Aunt Julie and Uncle Pat had put their paintings down and began gathering the tissue paper around them quietly. Anne stood suddenly and collected the rest of the tissue paper from the floor. The crinkling paper was the only sound in the room. She didn't look up at anybody, and she carried the last of the scraps of paper to the trash bag in the kitchen. She paused and took a deep breath, wiped her eyes once more, and returned to the living room.

When Anne sat back down next to Jake, her mother came and sat down beside her. She put her hand on Anne's. Her hand was warm and her touch was soft and light. She moved her hand up and down across the back of Anne's, rubbing it gently. Anne watched this for a moment, numb.

"Kenchana, Annie-ya," her mother said.

A simple phrase and her face grew hot. Her mother's touch suddenly felt cold and she slid her hand out from underneath her mother's and stuck it between her crossed legs. "It's okay," her mother had said in Korean. She might as well have said, "I told you so."

During the drive home, Anne's parents chattered about her father's family members as Anne and Jake sat silently in the backseat.

"Annie, I didn't know you could paint so well," her mother said. "It was almost like a photo."

"Clearly you don't know a lot about me." The curtness of Anne's response was startling even to herself. Still, a silent fury bubbled in her throat at her mother's inattentiveness over all the years. "I mean, I did go to art school."

"But you've never brought any of your art home," her mother said.

"That's because you were always criticizing me."

"I didn't criticize you, Annie-ya!"

They'd had this conversation several times before and Anne sighed at its redundancy.

"Your mother was trying to compliment you," her father said.

Anne didn't respond and focused on the soothing motion of Jake's thumb slowly moving up and down hers. Nobody spoke. They arrived at the house. Anne wished that she had brought her painting supplies with her. She couldn't get the image of Aunt Julie clutching the painting to her chest out of her head, and Anne thought painting it would help.

They pulled into the driveway and her father switched off the engine.

"Mom," Anne said. "I'm sorry for being curt."

Her mother shrugged and left the car without saying anything.

That evening, her mother spent hardly any time downstairs. She stayed in her room, her Korean dramas blaring so that they could be heard even from downstairs. She always got her Korean dramas on VHS from the ninety-nine-cent Asian rental store down the street, and she still used the family's ancient VCR, even though Anne had bought them a Blue-Ray player a few Christmases ago. As a child, they had only had one television in the house. Anne had always fought with her mother about what to watch, and when her parents had bought a new one for their bedroom, she thought it had been a godsend. Now, it seemed like just another way for her mother to irritate her.

Her father tried to be social and stayed downstairs with Anne and Jake. But he eventually gave up and left Anne and Jake to sit alone in the living room, joining Hye Jin. As they sat there, Anne listened more to the TV upstairs than the one in front of them.

"God," Anne said. "Does my mom think she's deaf?"

"Babe, it's not that bad."

"I swear she's doing it to annoy me."

"It's really not that bad," Jake said again. "You know, your Mom isn't as bad as you think."

Anne laid her head back on the couch and closed her eyes. "Please. You're supposed to be on my side."

"I am. You guys are a lot more similar sometimes than you realize."

"Not. Another. Word." Anne said with her teeth clenched. She was *nothing* like her mother.

"You're both stubborn."

Anne lifted her head back up and glared at Jake.

"I'm just saying," he said.

I'm just saying. Her mother's voice echoed in her head and heat swelled in her throat. There was no way he could have known what those words would do to her, but she couldn't help how angry they made her. "I'm going to bed," she spat out.

She shot up from her seat, turned her back to Jake and left him in the living room. She was dizzy with anger and she gripped the rail as she climbed the stairs, trying not to stomp her feet on her way up. The last thing she wanted was for her mother to come out of her room and ask what was going on.

Once in her room, she crawled into her bed without changing and lay awake, festering in the darkness. Her parents' voices could be heard more clearly now that she was upstairs. She couldn't be sure, but it sounded like an argument. Her father was always on her side. He was the one to convince her mother to let Anne live in the dorms for college. He was the one she always showed her work to. And he had called her his

"own little Picasso" at her senior exhibition. She wished she came home more often to see him.

The TV downstairs clicked off and she listened to Jake's footsteps coming up the stairs. She turned to her other side and stared at the light slipping through the crack at the bottom of the door, afraid to blink. His shadow paused in front of her door and there was a soft knock.

"Anne?"

She wanted to answer; she just didn't know what she should say. So she watched his shadow until it left the door a few moments later and the light that shone through the cracks of the door went out.

In the morning, Anne stood in the bathroom, letting the hot water run over her hands. She closed her swollen eyes, and enjoyed the warmth of the water. She splashed her face and rubbing water into her eyes, trying to wash the puffiness out. Then, she smiled at herself in the mirror for a moment, took a deep breath, and smiled once more. Her mother had taught her to do this as a child to cover up her puffy eyes. She did it a third time and held the smile, leaving the bathroom. Even from the top of the stairs, her parents' voices and Jake's could be heard talking cheerfully about how much fun they'd had that week. The topic of their discussion made her stomach curl.

She paused at the bottom of the stairs to fix her posture and then entered the living room.

"Good morning Annie-ya," her mother said. She set down a plate of pancakes on the table and gestured with her chin for Anne to sit down.

Her mother always made pancakes on the morning after one of their fights, even when Anne was a child. It had always worked when she was a kid until one day, in middle school, it wasn't enough. "I don't want pancakes, Mom. I want an apology," she had screamed at her mother after being badgered about why she refused to eat. Regardless, her mother never apologized and she continued with the tradition. Anne sat down and stared at the plate in front of her. Her mother had tried to make a happy face out of syrup on the pancakes, except the eyes and the edges of the mouth ran down the sides, creating more of a horribly smeared clown face. Anne knew that not eating would end in another fight with her mother, and she wanted to say goodbye to her father without having to apologize to him, so she ate the damn things.

After breakfast, Anne and Jake packed their clothes and her parents followed them out to the car.

"Bye my baby. Drive safe," her mother said.

Her mother hugged her briefly.

"Mom," Anne said. "About yesterday...."

Her mother waved her hand in front of her face as though she smelled something bad. "Khenchana. "

Anne smiled and then turned to her father and kissed him on the cheek.

"I love you, Daddy."

"I love you too," he said.

As they drove away from the house, Anne turned and looked. Her mother had shuffled down the driveway and halfway to the next house, waving at them the entire

time. Anne waved back until they reached the corner of the street. She couldn't remember a time when she wasn't sad, watching her mother in the rear view mirror. It always made Anne wonder if her mother wished they could go a few days without fighting too.

For the first hour of the drive home, neither of them spoke. Jake had his eyes focused on the road ahead of him the entire time, and when they reached the coast, Anne leaned her head against the window, watching the water in the distance. The salty coastal air usually comforted her, so she rolled the window down a bit, but it just made her sticky.

She turned her head and looked at Jake. His eyes flickered sideways towards her then back to the road. He was driving with both of his hands on the wheel, his posture perfectly straight. This was how he drove when he was tense. She took a deep breath. "Okay. I'm sorry I got mad at you last night."

Jake shrugged, keeping his eyes on the road.

"And I know there are a lot of things I've inherited from my mother. I just hate being compared to her."

"Why?" he asked.

Anne searched her vocabulary for the right words, but none that she knew seemed suitable: she must have inherited this from her mother as well. "Because she's my mother," she said. "That's why."

Jake continued staring straight ahead.

"Well at least I apologized," she huffed. "That's one thing my mother and I *don't* have in common."

Jake cracked a smile and chuckled.

Anne smiled back at him. She ran her fingernails around his neck in small swirly patterns and listened to the humming of the wheels turning against the pavement.

**

The next day, when Anne was nearly finished unpacking her suitcase, her hand froze on the unopened box of tampons that had fallen to the corner. It was two days after Christmas. She dropped the box of tampons back in the suitcase and checked the calendar in her studio. Her period was definitely late. Her stomach fluttered as she counted how many days she was late. Christmas Eve should have been the first day but she had forgotten completely about it. She shook her head and smiled. That was it. The stress of the holidays must have thrown her off and everything would probably be fine within the next few days.

Except it wasn't. She spent the next two days trying to forget her late period. She'd been late before due to stress, especially back in grad school. But she had a feeling in the pit of her stomach that told her this was different. She went to the store and bought an at home pregnancy test.

When she made it back, she locked the bathroom door even though she lived alone, and sat down on the edge of the tub. She stared at it in her hands for a moment, and pictured herself pregnant, at full term. It wasn't necessarily a bad picture, but she could hear her mother making baby noises and baby talk in Korean, and she shuddered. Taking a deep breath, she ripped open the box and spilled the contents onto the countertop.

She read the instructions carefully and sat down on the toilet. There were two tests that came in the box, so she picked one up and tore the hard plastic wrapper with her teeth. Following the instructions perfectly, she counted four Mississippi's to make sure she peed on the little strip for the minimum three seconds the directions asked for. When she finished, she set the test on the counter and looked back and forth from her watch to the strip. After two excruciating minutes, two pink lines appeared in the result window of the test.

She stared at it blankly, as though one of the lines would disappear. With shaking hands, she snatched up the directions and reread them, twice. Maybe there was something wrong with the test; she should try it again. With the second test, she tried to remain calm as she repeated the process. Another few minutes later, two pink lines appeared on the second test.

Her eyes darted between the result windows of the two tests, the two pairs of hot pink lines sitting side by side on the counter, and she got dizzy. She leaned against the wall and slid down it to sit on the blue tiles, wrapping her arms around her knees. The tiles had been blue before, but now they were baby blue. The bathroom walls seemed to push in around her as she tried to picture herself as a mother. Cradling a baby. Breastfeeding. Pushing a stroller. Holding the hand of a little girl as they walked through the park. Every time she tried to picture herself doing these things, the image of herself in her head looked more and more like her own mother. Her shoulders shook as she stared at the blank wall. Her breathe grew sporadic and she tried to control it. Her heart seemed to be beating in her head and she used it to time her breaths. Inhale, two, three. Exhale,

two, three. What would her parents say? And suddenly the tears began. They spilled over her lower lashes, dragging mascara down with them like water color.

She unwrapped herself and lay down, sobbing uncontrollably on the dusty baby blue tiles. Any other woman in her mid to late twenties, with a steady job and a steady relationship would have been overjoyed. Anne had begun to wonder if something was wrong with her. The possibility of motherhood had never crossed her mind until that moment. When she was in college, she had decided that she never wanted to have kids. She and Jake had never talked about or considered it and she had been thankful for that.

Anne gained control of her tears and stopped crying. The solution was simple. She stood up and looked at herself in the mirror. Her swollen red eyelids rested on her pink and splotchy cheeks. Black mascara reached down her face like the roots of a tree. Even as a child, when her friends played house she never wanted to be the mother. She washed her face in the sink, splashing cold water on her cheeks to cool them down and then wiped her face on a towel, baby blue to match the tiles. Her hair was tangled and rather than brushing it out she pulled it back into a pony tail. As she did so, she stared directly into her own eyes for so long that she looked unfamiliar even to herself. Then she sighed, smiled, pouted, smiled, pouted, flicked the light switch off, and left the bathroom.

As she emerged out of the bathroom she felt strange and she wandered into her studio. A fresh canvas was already waiting for her on her easel, and she squeezed black acrylic paint out of its tube and onto her palette, setting it down on the TV dinner tray next to her chair. She picked up the empty plastic cup that had remnants of various colors

crusted in rings on the inside like layers of the earth and took it to the guest bathroom next door, filling it halfway with water. When she returned to her studio, she sat down, adjusted the height of the easel, picked up her #16 filbert brush, and fixed her eyes on the white canvas.

Without removing her eyes from the canvas, she dipped the tip of her brush into the water, into the acrylic, and painted a long strip of black across the top, dragging the synthetic filaments back and forth across the canvas, and when they held no more paint, she did it again.

Her brush slowly covered the canvas in black, and her thoughts began to slow until eventually they stopped and there was nothing left but the smooth feel of the bristles against the canvas and the quiet sound they made, hushing her into peace. Even after the canvas was covered in black, she continued to paint, adding a second and a third and a fourth layer of paint. Her hands moved back and forth slowly, then to the paint, then back to the canvas, then back and forth slowly again. She was so deeply entranced in the swaying motion of painting that she didn't mind the sky darkening along with the room. It was as if the black from her canvas had spread to color her world. She didn't mind the aching pain in her arm and back. She could hear the several times her phone buzzed, and the doorbell, and the subsequent pounding on the door, and the rumbling of the garage door opening, and his voice calling her name, and his footsteps as he climbed the stairs, but she never thought to answer. It all seemed so distant, as if she could tend to the rest of the world later. The black canvas had consumed her and she was calm.

"Is everything okay?" Jake asked.

Anne whipped around, startled, nearly painting a line across the front of Jake's shirt. She abruptly dropped her brush into the cup of water and swished it around. "Yeah. Why?" She tried to sound nonchalant.

"Because you were painting in the dark." He switched on the light.

Anne blinked as her eyes adjusted to the sudden brightness of the room.

"Oh. I hadn't noticed."

"Mm hm." He motioned to her black canvas. "Plus, you only do this when something is wrong."

"Oh. Well, you know how I get when I paint," she said. She picked up the cup and her palette and walked past him to rinse out them out before the acrylic became irreversibly crusted onto them. "I'm fine."

He followed her into the spare bathroom, stood behind her, and put his hands on her shoulders. She shrugged them off. He sighed and stepped back, leaning against the wall. "I can tell when you're lying. What happened while I was at work?"

"Nothing," her uncontrolled voice was louder than she had intended and she rubbed the brush so hard that a few of the filaments came out.

"Anne, don't lie to me."

"Damn it, Jacob," she said. "Will you drop it?" She shook the brush violently, flinging droplets of water onto the mirror. "And how did you get in here anyway?"

"I used the code for your garage door."

She set the brush down and began to scrub and scrub and scrub the palette. She could hear her heart pounding in her head as she continued to scrub the clean palette.

They were quiet and for a moment she thought he left. She looked up at the mirror and he was still standing behind her, his eyes fixed on her back. She set the palette down and turned off the water and gripped the sink, leaning forward with her head down and her shoulders up like some strange bird.

"I guess you really are like your mother."

Anne whipped around. "Don't fucking compare me to my mother," she screamed. She was breathing heavily as they stood there face to face, looking into each other's eyes for only a few seconds. Jake sighed and then turned and left. She didn't move, couldn't move, and when she did, she ran to the top of the stairs. But he was long gone.

**

She probably looked as good as any other girl who had to wear khakis and a polo shirt could look. She never thought she would be thankful that her middle school enforced a strict dress code. It certainly made deciding what to wear on her first day of middle school easier. Getting ready to go back to school was always her favorite part of summer because her mother took her and Nathan back-to-school shopping every year. This year, her mother even let her buy some new bras from Victoria's Secret. Not the plain, old-lady bras that her mother shopped for at JC Penny, but cute ones with bright colors and patterns. She just hadn't told her mother they were also padded. Now she wondered if the padding was good or bad because she could see the outline of her bra through the fabric of her shirt. She'd spent a good ten minutes in the bathroom, trying to smooth it down, but after her hand passed over the fabric, the outline was still there.

"Annie-ya!" her mother called from downstairs. "Bhali! Bhali!"

"Coming!" There was nothing she could do about it now because returning the bras meant she had to tell her mother she had gotten the padded ones. She grabbed her backpack and hopped down the stairs. Her mother handed her a five-dollar bill and a banana and they were out the door with Nathan following behind.

On the way to the school, Anne pulled down the visor and opened the mirror. She applied her shimmery-pink Smackers Chapstick in the mirror and then fixed her bangs.

Her mother turned her head slightly towards her. "Annie, it's Chapstick, not lipstick."

"So?" Anne smacked her lips together and then snapped the mirror shut.

"Why you want to wear make-up already?"

"Mother, it's the first day of middle school. I can't help it if I'm getting older."

Her mother laughed. "You're still little girl!"

"Whatever you say." Anne drummed her hands on her lap until they pulled into the school drive way. She and Nathan both jumped out of the car and shouted bye over their shoulders.

Anne had come with her mother every day in the past year to pick up her brother after school, and this was the first time she had arrived as a student. Anne clutched her schedule and followed her brother onto campus. She already knew that she and her best friend, Hanna, didn't have any classes together since they'd already compared schedules over the phone. Still, she was disappointed that she didn't even see her in between classes. Sure, she had friends from her elementary school in a few of the classes, but she

and Hanna had spent the past three years sitting together in class and recess. Anne was sure though, that at lunch time they would sit together.

Lunch at Alvarado Middle School was like her brother had described it. Students swarmed the quad as Anne wandered around looking for Hanna. Groups of kids herded around specific tables as if they had some sort of claim to it, and it seemed like nobody was actually eating. Several oak trees that grew out of the elevated concrete block planters shaded some of the tables, but the sun baked the asphalt and the smell of hot tar was dizzying. She circled the quad and spotted her brother sitting at a table among people she'd seen before and others she hadn't. He'd brought friends to their house to hang out, but he'd always told her to leave them alone, so she knew sitting with her brother was not an option. A few other kids seemed to be wandering around like she was, which made her even more worried that she wouldn't find Hanna. It was possible that Hanna was looking for her too and they were making circles around each other.

The rumble of the crowd filled her head as she circled once more and then she saw Hanna sitting in the corner by the front of the quad. She was sitting at a cluster of tables that had been pushed together surrounded by people Anne didn't recognize.

"Hanna!" she called, waving to her friend.

Hanna looked up and waved her over.

"Hey. It totally sucks that we don't have any classes together," Anne said, sitting next to her friend.

"I know, right?"

"So is this where you're going to sit for lunch everyday?"

"Yeah, I think so."

Anne recognized one or two others at the table from her elementary school but she realized that most of the kids sitting there were eighth graders. "Do you know these people?" she asked.

"Not all of them. Geoff invited me to sit over here." Hanna pointed to an eighth-grader on the other side of the table who didn't look friendly at all. "He's in my P.E. class. Isn't he cool?"

"I guess so. Is it okay that I'm sitting here?"

"I'm sure it's fine."

Anne said hi to the other students she did know and tried to smile at the other eighth graders, but they didn't seem to see her. She listened quietly to the conversations around her and after a few moments, when she had a chance, she asked Hanna if she wanted to get food.

"Nah, I'm saving my lunch money to spend after school. We're probably all going to hang out at Geoff's house after."

"Oh. Good idea."

Anne stuck her hand in her backpack to make sure her five dollars for lunch was tucked safely away inside. No wonder nobody at this table was actually eating. It was probably best to follow Hanna, so she sat back quietly, wishing she had grabbed another banana that morning. Hanna seemed to get along with the other eighth graders so effortlessly, talking animatedly with them. Somebody must have said something funny made a joke because everyone around burst out laughing. She joined in, unsure of what

she was laughing about and, she realized, Hanna seemed different, but she couldn't quite figure out what it was.

"So, who's this?" Geoff took a seat next to her and put his arm around Anne.

Anne straightened up and her shoulders immediately stiffened under the weight of his arm.

Hanna introduced them and Anne smiled at Geoff, turning her face slightly towards him. If she'd turned completely she was sure her nose would touch his.

"Anne, huh? What's your last name?" he asked.

"Greenley."

"You guys are BFFs?" He chuckled and squinted at Anne. "Anne, you know what table you're sitting at?"

His arm around her seemed to get heavier, as if he were leaning on her. Anne looked at Hanna, who shrugged at her and Anne shook her head slowly.

"Come on," he said. "Didn't you know we have designated tables?"

Again, she shook her head.

"You have to be invited to sit at any table at this school."

"Hanna invited me," she said timidly.

"That doesn't count." His leg was touching hers and he was altogether too close.

"Oh come on, Geoff." Hanna said.

"No, no. Rules are rules." He took his arm off her shoulders and she tried to scoot away. "Take a look around this table."

She looked around and realized she was the only girl who wasn't wearing a shirt that was a size or two too small. The other girls seemed to have curves that Anne was sure she didn't yet have and they were all wearing makeup. Even Hanna was wearing eyeliner and her shirt clung to her body. All of the buttons on her polo were undone, revealing the soft pale flesh underneath her shirt and the shadow between her breasts.

"What do you see, Anne of Green Gables?"

"I've never heard that one before." It was an impulse, but Anne immediately regretted saying it. She looked to Hanna again, for reassurance, but Hanna kept her eyes down, picking at invisible dirt underneath her nails. Anne looked down at her nails, and then stuck them in her pockets because there was a small line of dirt underneath them and the ends of her nails were crooked.

"Alright, you got me," Geoff said. "But really, what do you see when you look at our table?"

Several of the other kids had stopped talking and were watching Anne. She tried to see what it was that he wanted her to notice. Certainly it wasn't the way the girls were dressed, or the fact that they were wearing makeup. She told him she didn't know.

"Bitch, are you stupid?" he asked.

The other students who were listening in on their conversation started laughing, even Hanna.

"We're all Asian, duh," one of the eighth-graders said.

"Okay, so?" she said.

"So you have to be Asian to sit at the Asian table," Geoff said.

"I am Asian."

"No you're not."

"I am. My mom's Korean."

"Asians don't have brown hair like this," he said, pulling up strands of her pony tail.

Anne batted his hand away and as the other students laughed, she stood up and then looked at Hanna. Hanna was laughing with the other eighth graders, but when she looked up at Anne, she immediately looked away and pressed her lips together.

Anne whipped around and walked away.

"Don't take it personally," Geoff called after her. "It's not you! It's us!"

Anne tried to ignore the laughter behind her and walked as quickly as she could towards the other corner of the quad. She walked by Nathan's table, which was looking even more enticing. He had a piece of pizza in his hands and was listening to a girl sitting next to him. She could go tell him what happened and she was sure he could beat up Geoff. Nathan was bigger than most of the other eighth-grade boys and she sometimes teased him about it when they fought at home. But beating Geoff up would probably draw more attention to her, and at that moment she wanted to disappear.

She heard someone calling her name from across the quad and turned to see her friend Fiona waving at her. Fiona used to sit with her and Hanna at lunch at their elementary school sometimes. Anne remembered the first day Fiona arrived in their class in first grade. She had come from China and had spoken very little English. They had been in the middle of learning about shapes when Fiona was introduced to the class. After

she was assigned to sit at Anne's table, Mrs. K continued the math lesson. She had pointed to a triangle and asked the class if anybody knew what that shape was called. Fiona's hand was the first one in the air and when Mrs. K called on her, she outlined the shape in the air with her fingers and said, "It's chai-an-gow." The class had snickered at her accent, but Anne thought she was the bravest girl she had ever seen. On that first day at lunch, Fiona had sat alone to eat and it had been Anne who convinced Hanna that they should go and sit with her too. Now Fiona was returning the favor.

Anne approached the table and smiled at the others around the table, most of them from her elementary school.

"Sit down!" Fiona said. She scooted over. "I was looking for you earlier. Where's Hanna?"

"Over there." Anne nodded in the direction from which she came and then sat down.

"Oh. That table," Fiona said.

Anne reached into her backpack and fingered the money she had tucked safely away.

"Want to go get lunch?" Fiona asked.

Anne nodded, and every day after that, she and Fiona sat together and ate lunch. Sometimes Anne looked over at Hanna's table, but the two of them never spoke again.

**

Anne turned over in bed and closed her eyes. She had succeeded twice that morning in going back to sleep and hoped it would work again. She simply didn't want to

wake up and think about her fight with Jake, among other things. She turned over again and glanced at the clock. It was almost noon. She had left the TV on all night and now some morning show was on and the in-studio audience was cheering. Anne stared out the window, half listening to the woman on the television talk about New Year's resolutions. She and Jake were supposed to go to Fiona's house for her annual party. Fiona worked at Jake's advertising company as a copy editor and she always held a New Year's party to which she invited all of her coworkers and friends. At their high school graduation, Anne sat with Fiona during the ceremony and they held hands throughout the pomp and circumstance. Anne had cried because Fiona was going to community college and Anne was moving to Santa Barbara. When college started, they talked on the phone at least once a week, sent letters to each other, and Anne came home to visit almost every weekend, to see her father and Fiona. When Jake took the job in Carlsbad, Fiona had encouraged Anne to go with him. "We made it through college apart and you shouldn't pass this chance up," she'd said. It was actually Jake who, a year later, helped Fiona get the job at his company. Since then, she'd had a party at her apartment every New Year, and she and Jake had always gone together.

Anne sat up in bed and looked at her phone. Normally, Jake would have texted her by now to say good morning. She didn't need to check her phone to see if she'd missed a message, but she did anyway. No missed messages. She tried calling him and it went straight to voicemail. She clutched her phone and got out of bed.

She wandered down the stairs, feeling each bump and imperfection of the finish on the banister as she went down. She made a pot of coffee and sat at her kitchen table

while it brewed, spinning her phone her phone on the table while she waited. They had gotten into fights before, about him working late, or going out with his friends without telling her, but he'd never left like he had last night. And usually, he'd answered her calls after a fight. Anne called again, and again, it went to voicemail. This time she left a message.

When the coffee was finished, she poured herself a mug, mixed in her vanilla soy milk, and took a sip before going back up stairs. She stopped in front of the open doorway to her studio and looked at the black canvas still sitting on its easel. She brought the mug to her lips, sipping slowly, and the steam from the cup blurred her vision, the black canvas was a blurry background and the wisps of steam the moving foreground. And then she saw it; trees. Trees, and darkness, and fog. She set her coffee down on the dresser in her studio and checked her paint drawers. She needed more black, since she'd used most of it the day before, and she could probably use more brown and green. "Why your paintings so dark?" her mother had asked at her senior exhibition. She rarely painted brightly colored or overly cheerful paintings. She found the depth of the darker colors to be beautiful; the spectrum of colors hid and resonated better in black. Almost all of her paintings were dark, not necessarily sad, just dark in color.

Anne decided to go to the store for her colors. Instead of waiting for Jake to call her back, she would paint, but she needed her colors. She drank the rest of the coffee, carrying the empty mug with her to her bathroom to get ready.

She was taken by surprise by the strange feeling she got when she went into her bathroom. It was all unfamiliar, like staring at a picture for too long until all of the faces

seem different. There were cracks in the grout of the tile where she hadn't noticed them before, and the cream colored walls reminded her of her mother's bathroom at home. She hadn't realized till that moment that they were the exact color of the towels her mother constantly bought when she was younger. Those cream colored towels had always smelled of mildew, because her mother never let them use the towels only once. Her mother would go into her room or Nathan's room when doing the laundry and pull out any towels from their laundry baskets, sniffing each of them. "These towels still clean!" she used to say. "You use again," and then she would hang them back up in the bathroom. They had to garner a strong smell before her mother would wash them, that way she could save water and electricity by doing the towels less often.

She smelled mildew, grabbed her tooth brush and hair brush, and left the master bathroom and went to get ready in the guest bathroom down the hall, where she usually washed her paint supplies. After she got ready, she grabbed her keys, and headed out the door for the art store.

At the art store, she went directly to the black tubes of acrylic paint and avoided even looking at the soft blues and pinks. She picked up two tubes of black, a tube of green, and a few other colors, and then browsed up and down the aisles, touching the tips of all the brushes as she passed them. The soft fibers tickled her palms as ran her hands over the brushes. She picked up a couple of extra brushes. The softness of brand new brushes was one of her favorite things about painting, second only to the slick, smooth, feeling of painting with acrylic. She touched the new brushes to her face as she considered the canvases, trying to remember if she needed to buy new ones or not. She

decided against buying them; she wouldn't mind making another trip back later if she needed to. She perused the rest of the store, looking at different supplies. A pack of box-cutter razor refills were on sale, and she wasn't sure what she would use them for, but they were so cheap at five dollars for a pack of twenty-five, that she got them.

"Every artist should use any resource that inspires them, whether or not it is a tool intended for art," Professor Cartier, her senior exhibition advisor, had told her once. Since then, whenever she thought there was even a possibility of using something in her work, she bought it, or picked it up from the sidewalk. She'd picked up several couches and other discarded furniture sitting on the sidewalk, and used the fabrics, or frankensteined the furniture, using whatever feature had originally caught her attention. Once, she'd found a couch that resembled her mother's couches. The flowers were embroidered throughout the fabric, rather than printed on, and the thick thread used for the embroidery gave the flowers an interesting texture. She took the couch home, and immediately cut out as much of the fabric as she could. Later, she built frames and stretched the floral embroidered fabric over them, creating textured canvases. She primed the floral canvases with white, but the texture still came through. They were her favorite canvases to paint on, and she even sold some of this work to small art distributors and galleries. One of them, a cityscape with the textured flowers coming through, hung in her living room still.

She paid for her supplies, then left to grab lunch and head home.

It was as she was pulling out of the Subway parking lot, only four blocks away from her condo, that she saw it. She hadn't realized that there was a Planned Parenthood

so close to her house. She would have missed it completely if a young woman pushing a baby stroller hadn't left the building. She made note of its location.

Anne threw herself into her work the following few days. Each morning she tried calling Jake, but her calls went straight to voicemail. And each day, she sat at her easel for longer and longer periods of time. The painting that had been inspired by the steam from her coffee cup began as a forest scene, with giant redwoods and beautiful lush fern growing out of a cracked concrete ground. She'd taken a recent fascination in work that blended the modern and natural worlds, and she was pleased with her first attempt at creating such a rendition. As she peered between the trees, it was all darkness and fog.

On the morning of New Year's Eve, she was at the Cézanne stage of her painting, where she added more black to all of the colors in her painting. In college, she had admired Paul Cézanne, particularly his dark period paintings. The darkness that he brought to his paintings, even simple images like his *Landscape with the Mill*, was beautifully sorrowful because of its darkness, a quality she tried but always felt she could never achieve. One of the reasons she admired Cézanne was the way he died. He had been caught in a downpour while painting and developed pneumonia. Anne had cried in the library when she'd read it. If only she could be so dedicated to and believe so much in her own work. The textbook she had read it in had said it so matter of fact. It mentioned nothing of his commitment to his craft, or his love for painting. It said, "Cézanne had been caught in a downpour while painting. He continued to paint in the downpour, and caught pneumonia, passing away a few days later." Anne had seen him, in her mind,

painting in the rain. Though it was physically impossible, she imagined the water running down his paint, streaking the colors together, and she imagined that he loved it. Such was the nature of art for her. Beauty and new discoveries of color revealed themselves in the mistakes, the accidents, and the proverbial wrench that the world throws into your color combinations.

She sat back and considered her use of black in the painting so far, and then reached over to her brushes and pulled one out that had paint permanently crusted into the bristles. She slowly dipped the very tip of it into the black acrylic and scratched the black across the shadows in the fog and across the concrete ground. This was a technique she had learned accidentally in college, when she couldn't afford new brushes because her mother refused to pay for her art supplies.

She switched brushes and used the smooth black to add more darkness to the cracks in the concrete and to fill in the cracked bark of the giant redwoods and then dropped it into the water. She stood and walked to the end of the room to look at the painting; a few more shadows and then she'd get ready. Without sitting, she added more black into the tree's shadows onto the concrete. She rinsed the black off in her water cup and picked up some white and yellow: needed more light shining in through the trees. She added to the light and then dropped her brush into the water, switching to the crusty one. She dipped the tip of it into the dark grey and then barely touched the edges of her brush into the black and white and blotched the colors onto the concrete ground, creating splotches of light and shadow. When she finished, she sat back to look at the painting. It was finished, but she wouldn't declare it finished for a few more days. Whenever she

thought she was finished, she had to give herself time without looking at it before she decided for sure.

She picked up her pallet, cup, and brushes and took them into the guest bathroom to rinse them. Once they were cleaned, she set them on the counter to dry, and then turned on the shower. She checked her phone: still no messages from Jake. He hadn't called her back in the five days since their fight. That night was Fiona's party and they were supposed to go together. Regardless, Fiona was her best friend; she was going to go with or without Jake. She undressed, plugged her Ipod into her stereo and put on her favorite reggae playlist. She hummed along to the music and stepped into the shower.

She had taken all of her necessities out of the master bathroom and had taken to getting ready every day in the guest bathroom. As she conditioned her hair, "Three Little Birds" came on and she sang along to it. She soaped herself down as the song ended and then rinsed off. She turned off the water, wrapped herself in a towel, and stepped out into the steam filled bathroom, the fan whirring above her head, barely audible over Bob Marley. She hit the back button and listened to the song again, strutting along with the music into her bedroom. Again she sang the song, putting on her white cocktail dress and then dancing back into the bathroom. The mirror was still fogged up, so Anne took the towel that she'd wrapped her hair in and wiped enough condensation off of the mirror so she could see herself.

She realized then, looking at herself in the mirror as the hole began to refill, that she was smiling. As her own image faded, she laughed, shook her head and continued to get ready. How strangely therapeutic painting had been these past five days. This calm

that she got as she neared the end of a painting was the reason why she painted. It made all of the insecurities, the inner critic, the voice of her mother in her head, the thought that she was wasting her time, everything became worth it for the feeling she felt at that moment, looking at herself in the mirror. She finished getting ready and headed over to Fiona's.

Fiona lived in a fairly upscale apartment complex. She half-heartedly looked for Jake's car as she circled the complex. Nearly all of the guest parking spots in the complex were taken up, but Anne scored a spot right by Fiona's building when another resident left. As soon as Anne stepped out of the car, she could hear music and chatter coming from various residents. Of course, Fiona wasn't the only person in the complex throwing a New Year's party. She approached Fiona's door and realized that though she wasn't the only party, she may have had the biggest turnout. Fiona was always making new friends and attracting people wherever she went. It was a trait that Anne had always been a little envious of. In the three years that she'd lived in Carlsbad, Anne had made a few friends, mostly teachers at the school. But Fiona was constantly introducing new friends that she'd made to Anne. It was a wonder, Anne had sometimes thought, that Fiona still had time to be her friend.

The front door was already ajar and Anne stepped into the apartment. There were small groups of people here and there, mostly faces that Anne recognized from Fiona's other parties or events. She wandered through the house, looking for Jake, and for Fiona.

"Anne!" Fiona found her in the kitchen first. She hugged her tightly and when she withdrew, asked, "Where's Jake?"

Anne shrugged. "I came alone."

Fiona gave her that look that she always gave her when Anne didn't confide in her right away.

"What happened?" she asked.

"I don't know," Anne said. "Can we talk about it later?" She motioned to the crowd of people around them.

Fiona raised her eyebrows, and then frowned.

"Please? Let's celebrate New Year's and I'll tell you all about it tomorrow."

Fiona sighed and said, "Fine."

She turned around and pulled two Coronas out of the fridge and popped the tops off with her bottle opener. She handed one to Anne and then tilted her beer in for a cheers. "To a happy new year," she said, smiling.

Anne clinked the top of her beer to Fiona's, smiled, and then put the bottle to her lips.

As she gulped her first swig down, her stomach sucked in as though it had a gravitational pull of its own, and she realized what she was doing. "You know what," she said. "I'm going to go to the bathroom."

Fiona waved her off with a grin, taking another swig of her beer.

Anne wandered through the crowd, smiling at the people around her on the way to the bathroom. She recognized Fiona and Jake's work friends, trying not to stop long enough for anyone to ask her where Jake was. When she made it to the bathroom, there was somebody already inside. She waited by the door, leaning against the wall with her

left toe pivoting, the heel swinging back and forth as if she were squishing a bug. She kept her eyes down, focusing on the imaginary bug under her toe until the door opened.

Once in the bathroom, she set her beer on the counter and gripped the sink. She chuckled at herself in the mirror, but it felt strange. She imagined that her reflection was the real person and that she was the figure in the mirror. She imagined her actions were not her own, but that they belonged to the other girl in the mirror. "Why am I always hiding in the bathroom?" she mumbled. She poured the beer into the sink. She dropped the empty bottle into the trash can and, without another glance at the mirror, left the bathroom.

She saw him when she was coming out of the bathroom. He had just walked through the front door and he was wearing the outfit that she always complimented him on. It was her favorite outfit, his black slacks, grey shirt, and black vest with a blue tie. She had helped him pick that outfit for his interview at the advertisement firm and it had been her favorite ever since.

She stood there, outside of the bathroom. She couldn't remember the last time that she had gone five days without seeing him and looking at him across the room she wanted to laugh and cry and beat him up all at the same time. He was smiling and greeting his friends at the door and then locked eyes with her for a moment. She took it as a good sign that he was even there. She reasoned that if he didn't really want to see her, he wouldn't have shown up, so she was able to move her feet, and he smiled at her as she walked up to him.

They both said hello and stood there.

"What have you been up to?" he asked.

She wanted to reach out and touch his face. She could tell, by the smoothness of his skin, that he had just shaven, and it made it that much more difficult for her to not grab his face and kiss him.

"Anne?" he said.

"Hm?"

"I said what have you been doing?"

"Oh," she laughed. She shook her head as if trying to remember what she was going to say. "Sorry. I've been painting. I actually started this new painting that crosses the natural with the industrial. I'm not quite done, but I'm getting close and..." Her mouth kept going, describing the painting and what stage of the painting she was at. She was sure he didn't need that much detail, but she couldn't stop talking because she was afraid that if she did, he would walk away. She had described the painting in complete detail, and in doing so, realized that she probably needed to add more curly wisps into the fog like she had originally seen in the image through the steam of her coffee that morning.

"Wow," he said. "Sounds like you've been busy."

She chuckled and nodded.

"Well I should probably go say hi to our hostess." And without even another look, he turned and walked away from her.

Anne stood there, watching the back of him go. The front door opened behind her and she moved out of the way to let the newcomers in. People crowded around them,

some of them bumping her, so she wandered towards the kitchen again and took a seat at the counter.

She tried to enjoy the party, catching Fiona when she could or talking Fiona's friends but she simply felt unsettled and nervous the entire time. Her stomach churned and she couldn't focus on the conversations around her. The only thing that somehow calmed her nerves was making a list in her head of what she should and should not do while pregnant. She included even the things she already didn't do, like smoking.

Around eleven o'clock, Fiona's sister, Anabelle, showed up to the party with her two kids. They were the type of children you couldn't help but smile at. They had perfect round eyes, skin that looked airbrushed, and dark wispy hair. Tony was three and Jocelyn was five. Both of the children hid behind their mother's legs as she sipped her beer. Anne added "Bringing children to a party with liquor" as the first thing on her new list of what not to do with children. She had been to plenty of Fiona's family parties and knew that having kids around with all of the adults drinking was not unusual. Still, no matter how many of their parties she went to, Anne never felt comfortable drinking in front of all of Fiona's little cousins and especially in front of her nieces and nephews. "Loosen up!" Fiona had always told her, but with kids around, she couldn't.

Now, instead of making lists, she watched the children. After they got tired of hiding behind their mother, the children began playing together on the kitchen floor with Batman and Superman figurines Tony had produced from his pocket. She had always thought that Tony and Jocelyn were the most well behaved of all the small children in Fiona's family. They usually played by themselves with whatever toy their mother let

them bring. They reminded Anne of her and Nathan growing up, always playing together and ignoring the adults around them. Anne approached the children and knelt down by Jocelyn.

"What are you guys playing?" she asked.

"Batman and Superman, duh." Jocelyn said.

"Oh, I can see that." She continued kneeling, watching them play. "Do you remember me?" she asked.

Jocelyn looked up at Anne and then back down to the Superman figurine in her hand. "You're Auntie Fiona's friend."

Anne swelled with pride. "Yup. You can call me Anne."

Neither child said anything and they continued banging their Batman and Superman figurines against each other, making punching and kicking sounds with their mouths.

Tony accidentally dropped his Batman.

"Ha-ha! Superman can beat up Batman!" Jocelyn said.

"No!" Tony shouted. Tears welled up in his eyes and he bit his lip.

"Don't cry, baby," Anne said.

"Yeah, don't be a crybaby," Jocelyn said.

"That's not what I said," Anne grumbled.

She put her hand on Tony's shoulder, but he shook it off and stood up. "I'm not a crybaby!" He dropped Batman and clawed at his mother's leg. "Mommy," he began to cry. "Josie is calling me names."

Anabelle picked him up and smiled at Anne. "Sorry. Are they bothering you?"

Anne shook her head.

"Jocelyn," Anabelle said to her daughter. "You stay here with Miss Anne while I take your brother to the bathroom to wash his face." She stood up and looked apologetically at Anne. "Sorry. Do you mind?"

Anne shook her head and Anabelle carried Tony away.

The whole ordeal had been her fault. She frowned at Jocelyn and wondered if she'd done it on purpose. "That wasn't very nice," she said.

Jocelyn left the Batman and Superman figurines on the floor and climbed up onto one of the barstools by the kitchen counter. She crossed her arms. "Can I call you Annie?" she asked.

"Don't change the subject." She picked up the figurines and set them on the counter. "You have to be nicer to your brother."

"Why? Are you a ghost?"

Anne was baffled. "What?"

"Are you a ghost?"

"No."

"At our house we have a ghost. And Tony cries at home when the ghost breaks thing or hides things."

"How do you know it's a ghost?"

"I don't know. Mommy always says it's me but it isn't."

"So why would I be a ghost?" Anne was still trying to figure out how their conversation turned from being nice to Tony to ghosts.

Jocelyn shrugged. "Because you're wearing a white dress. Also, ghosts only talk to children and I haven't seen you talk to any grownups."

"I talked to your mom, didn't I?"

"That's true."

"And you know I'm your Auntie Fiona's friend, so I can't be a ghost," Anne said with a grin. "And besides, I don't believe in ghosts."

Jocelyn seemed to be considering this. "Then what are you?" she said.

Anne thought about her answer. Several words danced on the tip of her tongue but none of them were right. So she settled on, "A person."

Jocelyn giggled. "Everyone's a person, silly." She swung her legs back and forth. Anabelle and Tony had come out of the restroom and Jocelyn spotted them. "Okay, bye." She hopped off of the stool and pranced over to them.

Anne shook her head. Children don't belong at a boozy party, she thought. Everyone seemed to be oblivious of the presence of the children completely, and then she spotted Jake. He was smiling and watching her, and her cheeks immediately became hot. He raised his eyebrows at her as if to say, "What are you doing talking to kids at this party?"

Anne walked into the other room. They hadn't really talked all night, and yet he had been watching her and she just couldn't take it. But once she was in the other room,

she didn't really know what to do. She couldn't find Fiona, so she walked out the front door.

The night was crisp and dark. It was so quiet outside. She took a deep breath and then exhaled slowly through her teeth, closing her eyes briefly. Her phone buzzed in her purse and she pulled it out. Fiona had texted her asking where she was.

"Out front," she texted back.

She waited there, breathing slowly and listening to each breath, and a few moments later Fiona came outside.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

Anne shrugged. "I'm going home."

"What? It's still an hour till midnight!"

"I know. I'm tired."

They went back and forth but Anne was determined to go home. Fiona gave in only after Anne promised to tell her what was going on in the morning. They said goodbye, and Anne got into her car and drove the long way to her house, along the coast. The streets were nearly empty and the interior of the car grew brighter and more orange as she approached each street lamp along Pacific Coast Highway, flickering back into darkness immediately after passing it. She felt calm, being alone and in her car. If only she could drive, or paint, or be alone, forever.

**

Anne woke up to the ringing of her cell phone on the first day of the New Year. She rolled over and looked at the phone on her night stand. When the phone eventually

stopped ringing, it was almost eight. She shut her eyes, unwilling to get out of bed, or to even see who had called her. She didn't need to. Her mother called every New Year's Day and they had the same conversation every year. Her phone rang again and without opening her eyes, she reached over and picked it up.

"Hi Mom."

"Annie-ya! Are you coming to Haraboji's to Seh-beh?"

"Do I ever come?"

"No, but you should."

"That's an hour-and-a-half drive. So no." Anne could hear all of the chattering coming through on the phone. Her mother spoke to someone else in Korean and Anne could see them in her mind's eye: all of her cousins and aunts and uncles sitting around in her grandfather's cramped retirement apartment. Two bop songs were probably set up in front of the TV, littered with Ban chan.

"Annie-ya? Hello? Hello?"

"Yes. I didn't hang up."

"At least say Happy New Year to Haraboji on the phone," her mother said.

"Okay, fine." Anne waited again, listening as the phone was passed to her grandfather.

"Yehbosehyo?" Her grandfather's voice was raspy, as if he hadn't spoken in days. Her grandfather was always a quiet observer, speaking only when somebody asked him a question. He hadn't always been this way. When Halmoni was still alive, he was loud and often shouted over his daughters to be heard. He had been a heavy drinker too, and as a

little girl, Anne had been afraid of her grandfather when he was drunk. He would speak to her in Korean, as if she understood, and then would get frustrated and yell at her when she didn't respond. He quit drinking when she was a teenager, but she was always a little bit afraid of him.

"Oh, Ahnyohasehyo Haraboji," she said.

"Annie-ya? Kenchanehyo?"

"Neh, neh. Haraboji, seh-heh-bhongmani-padusehyo."

"Aigoo, Jalhesoyo!"

"Neh. Kaham-sahamnida.

Anne listened as the phone was again passed to her mother. "Okay, Annie."

"Hey, Mom?"

"Hm?"

"Happy New Year."

"Happy New Year, Baby-ya!"

"And tell Dad I said—" But before Anne could finish her sentence, her mother hung up the phone in classic Hye Jin fashion.

She stared at the ceiling and for a brief moment, she wished that her house had the popcorn ceiling that her mother's house had so she could look for faces and shapes in it like when she had been a kid.

On the second day of the New Year, Anne woke up too early. She didn't feel tired in the slightest, so she decided to paint, but as she sat in her studio, getting ready to mix her paints, she wondered if the smell of her acrylic paints could be bad for the baby. It

was an involuntary thought, a reflex, and she dropped the tube of paint she was about to squeeze. Even her thoughts didn't seem to belong to her anymore.

She went back into her room and threw on a sweater and scarf. Whenever she couldn't paint, she walked. It was a technique she had developed in undergrad when she had to paint on her professor's timeline rather than her own. She liked to look at the colors around her when she walked, like what kind of blue the sky was that day, or what shade of green was on one side of a leaf versus the other and could she create that color. She slipped boots on over the bottom of her pajamas and headed out of the house.

She pulled her knit scarf tighter around her neck and pushed through the early morning marine layer. The air tasted of salt and at any other time that taste would have made her want to take her canvas and brushes to the beach but this time, it only tasted like salt. She continued walking around the complex, thankful that most of her neighbors weren't out yet. She walked like she was on a mission, and though it was cold, she began to sweat. Eventually, she reached the small playground and stopped.

She had always known the playground was there, but she had never really noticed it. It was fairly simple. There was no sand like in the playgrounds she had grown up playing on, but a sticky looking rubber surface instead. The rubber was probably cleaner and safer for the children, but building sand castles and volcanoes could only be done at the beach then. There were two swings, a small jungle gym, and a red slide. The entire structure was painted to look like a pirate ship, and she wondered who got to pick the themes of the playground. It was as if children no longer had the imaginative capacity to decide what type of structure their jungle gym could be. Tommy, the younger of her two

nephews, probably would have liked the pirate ship theme. Kevin would have wanted it to be an army tank, or helicopter, or even a fighter jet. Jocelyn might have imagined a castle, and Tony probably saw the Bat Cave. It was such a pity; now it could only be a pirate ship.

Anne wiped the sweat from her top lip. She loosened her scarf and turned and walked away from the playground. She swallowed again, wondering at the lump that had formed in her throat, baffled at being upset about the pirate ship jungle gym.

"Good morning, Anne," her neighbor, Mr. Henderson, called. She had passed him and Chandler, his dachshund, without noticing.

She turned and said, "Good morning."

"What are you doing out so early?" he asked. "And on winter break too!"

"Oh. Walking."

"In your pajamas?"

She shrugged.

He peered at her, as if he didn't believe she was only on a walk.

"Well, happy New Year's," she said. She turned and continued walking.

"You too!" he called after her.

She swallowed and swallowed as she walked away from Mr. Henderson.

Chandler barked, but he seemed so far away already. When she turned the corner of the building, a breeze spiderwebbed her hair across her face and she tasted the ocean. As if the breeze had the force of a strong wind, she crumpled down onto the curb like a small child, and the ocean sprang up through her eyes.

"Forgive me," she whispered.

**

Standing on the step stool in her parent's bathroom, Anne leaned over and spit out her toothpaste.

She asked her mother if she'd brushed long enough. She looked at her mother in the mirror, who was sitting in her bed flipping through the most recent volume of *Reader's Digest*. Her mother asked if she brushed her back teeth without looking up from her magazine and Anne nodded her head until her mother looked up at her and told her to rinse.

Anne leaned over the sink again and rinsed her mouth and toothbrush out and placed her toothbrush in the cup alongside her mother's and father's toothbrushes. She used the master bathroom because she liked to watch her mother get ready in the morning while she brushed her teeth. And besides, Anne still needed her mother to help her get her hair ready.

Anne hopped down off of the stool and skittered across the oak floor before jumping onto the bed with her mother.

"Mommy, I'm ready."

"Chal-ja, " her mother said.

Her mother kissed her, and then Anne hopped off the bed, shouting goodnight as she went down the hall. She tiptoed past her own door to Nathan's room and peeked around the door. Sure enough, her father was still kneeling besides Nathan's bed, talking

quietly. She tried to listen, but couldn't hear what he was saying, so she went into her room and climbed into her pink and white canopy bed.

In turn, she kissed the plastic noses of Teddy the bear, Bunny the bunny, Mrs. Tittlemouse, and Scrunchy the dog. She said goodnight to them one by one and tucked them each under the covers. It was a good thing her parents bought her the big grown up bed so that she could share it with her favorite stuffed animals. She crawled under the covers and looked up at the pink canopy above her and imagining that she was waiting for her father, the king, to come in and tuck her in.

After a few moments, he appeared in her doorway. "There's my little maple girl," he said. He padded over to the side of her bed and knelt down. "Did you do a good job brushing your teeth?" he asked.

"Yes, Daddy. You can ask Mommy."

He smiled and reached out his hand. Anne placed hers in his, her fingertips barely reaching the callouses on the edge of his palm. He put his other hand over hers and shut his eyes; Anne pretended to close hers, but she squinted and watched her father's face through her lashes.

"Dear Heavenly Father," he said. "Thank you for blessing us with Anne. Protect her tonight as she sleeps and walk with her tomorrow when she goes about her daily business at school. Help her to be good and to know the difference between right and wrong. Forgive us when we're bad and help us forgive each other. In Jesus' name we pray...." Every night he paused right before the last word so that they could say it together.

"Amen."

Anne smiled up at her father as he opened his eyes.

He leaned over and kissed her.

"Goodnight, Daddy."

"Goodnight, Annie." He stood up and walked over to the door, turned around, and then switched off the light. His silhouette filled the door before he turned and closed it behind him. Anne closed her eyes and she prayed, whispering because she wasn't sure if God could hear her if she prayed in her head. "Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for Mommy and Daddy and Nathan. Help me be good and make them happy. Forgive me if I'm bad. In Jesus' name, Amen."

**

Anne eventually made it back home. She shivered as she walked into her cold house. She raised the thermostat a couple of degrees and without removing her sweater, plopped down onto the couch. The heater grumbled to life and she slid down to a lying position, face down on the couch with one arm hanging down to the ground. Her fingers dug into the carpet and twisted around and around the fibers. She shut her eyes, and as if on cue, her phone began to buzz. She pulled it out of her pocket and looked at the screen; of course it was her father's name that showed up. He had a knack for always calling at exactly when she needed it. Or did she usually call him when she needed it? She couldn't remember.

Her finger hovered over the "Ignore" button and when she was certain the call would go to voicemail, her thumb flew to the answer button.

"Hello?" She pressed the phone to her ear and closed her eyes, picturing her father's face.

Her father's voice crackled over the phone and he asked how she was doing. She lied, and told him she was fine and asked how the festivities were at Haraboji's house.

"You know how it goes," he said. "Same thing as every year, but now I'm sitting at home, staring at the four walls and thinking about you."

Her father said this kind of thing to her all the time. Usually she would come back with a quip. This time she didn't know what to say.

"Annie? You there?"

"Yeah, I'm here."

Her father continued talking as she listened, as was the case with many of their conversations. When they talked on the phone, she liked to close her eyes and imagine his facial expressions. She always knew what he was thinking by his facial expressions. Like when he disagreed with her mother he did a smile-frown, where his eyebrows frowned and his lips smiled. Now, he was telling her about how they hung up her painting in the front room, across from the big painting that her mother loved so much. He probably had his eyebrows raised, like he did in the picture he had taken with her at her college graduation, and at every other occasion when he had been proud of her. This was the face she remembered him making when he had caught her at the bottom of the new twisty tube slide at Schabarum Park.

"Daddy," she said, interrupting him. And then she couldn't stop, the sobs poured out of her.

Her father was quiet as she cried.

"Daddy," she said between hiccups. "I'm pregnant."

She listened to the faint white noise coming through on the phone, trying to control her hiccups and sobs. She sat up on the couch. "Say something."

"Anne," he said. "What do you want me to say?"

"I don't know."

"How could you be so irresponsible?" Something began to bubble in his voice. It wasn't quite anger, but more akin to sorrow.

"I know. I'm sorry, Daddy."

"What am I going to say to your mother?"

Anne slid down off of the couch so that she was sitting on the ground. "Please don't tell her."

"I can't do that, Anne. You know that."

"Please?" She couldn't hold the urgency in her voice back.

Her father paused. "What did Jacob say?"

"I haven't exactly told him yet." She was the worst girlfriend ever. "Daddy, I don't know what to do."

"First of all, you need to tell Jacob and then the second thing is to tell your mother."

"But—"

"But nothing, Anne."

It had been years since her father spoke to her with such authority and she suddenly felt three feet tall. "Okay," she said.

"But talk to Jacob soon and your mother too. You know I'm a terrible liar."

"Thanks Daddy."

"Oh, and Anne."

"Yes?"

Her father paused and she listened with the intensity of a curious child.

"I love you."

The heater grumbled back on and the blinds across from the living room vent shook in the warm moving air. "I love you too, Daddy."

After speaking to her father, Anne realized her secret had been heavier on her shoulders than she had thought. Jake still hadn't called her, and she was okay with putting off having to tell him, as her father instructed.

She felt more relaxed at the end of her first day back to work than she did at any moment during winter break. Her classroom was the same, the students that were late to class every day were late as usual, and the same students and staff said goodbye to her when she walked to the staff parking lot after class. It seemed like nothing had changed and that winter break was far behind her.

She realized, however, that she had relaxed too soon when she pulled into her complex and saw her father's truck parked out front and a familiar figure stooped over by the rose bushes in her small front yard.

Her mother was squatting in front of the rose bushes that lined Anne's front walkway with her broad brimmed straw hat and bright orange gardening gloves on. She stopped snipping the roses and stood, smiling and waving her pruning shears at Anne. To anyone else, it would have appeared that her mother lived in the condo and Anne was the one visiting. Her mother had always been that way, acting as if she owned whatever place Anne lived in. Even when she visited Anne's dorm in college, Anne had to warn Jenny, her roommate, when her mother was coming because she would look through any papers or books that were left out.

Anne parked her car and walked through the house to the front door. "Mom, what are you doing?" she asked.

"What does it look like?" Her mother waved her pruning shears now at the roses. "You know if you prune them they grow better and bigger flowers."

"That's not what I mean." She stepped out on the small front patio, closing her front door behind her. "What are you doing *here*?"

Her mother moved over to another bush and squatted. "I don't know what you mean."

Anne crossed her arms. "I *mean*, what are you doing at my *house*?"

"I'm moving in with you." Her mother didn't even lift her head. She kept snipping at the roses.

Anne stared at the tip of the huge brim on her mother's hat. "What?"

Her mother pulled her gloves off. "To help with the baby."

Anne grumbled and then rubbed her right temple. "I can't believe Dad told you."

"You think he can lie to me?" She set her gloves and shears down on the top step of Anne's patio and walked down the front walkway to Tim's truck. She instructed Anne to help bring her things into the house. Anne refused to help, but she followed her mother anyway scrambling to think of what she could say that would change her mother's mind.

"It took me two days to make him tell me, but I know something is wrong the whole time," her mother said.

"So you left him at home?"

"Don't worry, Annie-ya. He's not a baby."

Her mother opened the truck bed and pulled out two large duffel bags. She handed them both to Anne, who set them down. "But even if I did have this baby, it wouldn't happen for at least eight months or so," she said.

Her mother shot a look at Anne, her hat nearly hitting Anne in the forehead.

"What you mean if?"

"I don't know. I meant—" Anne stumbled for the words. Of course her mother would read more into what she said than she actually meant. She hadn't *actually* thought of what to do, in fact she hadn't thought of much at all. "You know, there's not even going to be an actual baby for you to help with until at least eight more months."

Her mother squinted at Anne, her irises barely visible between her eyelids. She huffed and then pulled two more suitcases out from the bed of the truck. "You mean you don't even know when it's due?" she asked over her shoulder. She pulled the handles out of the suitcases and rolled them along behind her up towards the front door. "Bhali-wa."

"I'm not helping you, mother. And I don't really need your help, anyway."

Her mother stopped and whipped around. "Aigoo-cham!" She made that clicking noise with her tongue. "Why you never want my help?" she asked.

Anne leaned back on her father's truck. Her mother stood at the end of the walkway.

"It's not that."

"Then what?" her mother shouted across the front of the house. "I am your mother. It is my job to help you with baby."

"There's no baby yet!" Anne tried to keep her voice calm but it shook like it always did when she tried to reason with her mother. The only way to keep it steady was to talk louder.

Her mother stormed down the walkway towards her. "Of course there is! Right there!" She stopped in front of Anne and pointed to Anne's stomach.

Anne stepped back as if her mother had landed a physical blow on her. There wasn't a baby in her belly, not yet. It was a thing. Not a baby yet.

"I already brought stuff here so I'm not going back." Her mother turned back around and picked up her suitcases where she left them.

This was what her mother did, for as long as Anne could remember. There was never any discussion in her mother's decisions. Once she made a choice, you could only be on board or off board or whichever she chose for you. Like when she wanted Anne to learn piano in the first grade. She had picked Anne up from school and they drove straight to her new piano teacher's house. Her mother gave her no preparation, or warning. They drove to Mrs. Kim's house, walked up to the front door and knocked. And

when Mrs.Kim opened the door, Anne's mother said, "Okay, Annie. You go with Mrs.Kim and learn piano. I will wait in car." It wasn't until the seventh grade that her mother let her quit piano.

Anne sighed. She would not win. So she picked up the two duffel bags and lugged them into the house and up to the third bedroom which was practically unfurnished, save for a dresser and the futon couch-bed from Anne's college days.

They made several more trips back to the car to bring the two yoh mattresses and the rest of her mother's boxes into the house.

"You know," her mother said, setting the last box down. "Your house is very nice. I like it. But I would have gone with wood floors instead of carpet."

"Exactly."

"Exactly what?"

"Nothing, I just like carpet." This was the first time since she'd moved that her mother had been to her place fully furnished, and the second time her mother had seen the house in general.

As her mother began to unpack, Anne to her phone into the garage and called her father and begged him to make her mother leave.

"You know your mother is too stubborn for that," he said. Anne could hear the exasperation in his voice. "She's like you. Flight of fancy."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"Don't use profanity with me, young lady."

"Dad, she's going to drive me crazy."

"Look. You got yourself into this and now you have to live with the consequences and unfortunately for you, your mother is one of those. At least accept the help she is trying to give you."

"She's not helping!" she shouted. She threw the phone onto the floor. She couldn't believe even her father was behind her mother on this one. She stood there, staring at the pieces of her phone, breathing like of her students did when they had to run to her class because they were late. "Fuck."

It wasn't her father's fault that her mother was the way she was, but Anne still found herself getting mad at her father when she should have been mad at her mother. A pang of guilt shot through her and she wanted to call him back to apologize, but her phone was in pieces and she certainly would not ask her mother to use her phone and have to explain what happened to her own. So she left the pieces of her phone scattered in her garage and went back inside.

Living with her mother again made Anne feel like her life had been set back ten years. Instead of coming home from teaching at Carlsbad High School, she felt like she was coming home from attending Carlsbad High School. The only perk that Anne could see of living with her mother again was the food. Her mother made breakfast for her, packed lunches for her to take to the work, and made dinner every night too. The only craving her mother would not allow her to fulfill was her craving for kimchee. "Of course you want kimchi when you're pregnant," she had said when Anne asked. "All women in our family want kimchi when they have first baby. It means you will have girl."

Of course her mother would still believe in the old country. She tried to remember back to when Tracy was pregnant with Tommy or Kevin. She was already in college at the time, but she was sure her mother didn't inundate Tracy with all of the Korean juju that her mother was enforcing on her.

On the first Saturday morning with her mother, Anne awoke to Mozart drifting into her room from across the hall. She turned to look at the time and on her nightstand was a bowl of already peeled oranges. The photo she'd had of her and Jake on her nightstand had been replaced by an Anne Geddes postcard. The picture frame was the same, but the picture was what had been replaced.

"Mom?" Anne called, sitting up in bed. She picked up a piece of orange and popped it into her mouth.

"Yes?" Her mother stuck her head in the doorway more promptly than Anne had expected.

"Thank you for the oranges, but I don't need breakfast in bed."

"No. You eat orange in bed. It's good for baby to have smooth skin."

Anne rolled her eyes and asked her mother about the changed photograph, wondering if her mother had changed it while she was sleeping.

"I put it in drawer," her mother said. "You need to look at pretty baby every day to have pretty baby."

Anne popped another piece of orange into her mouth. "I don't really think that's how it works."

But her mother had already disappeared from the doorway and Anne shook her head. She stuck the last piece of orange into her mouth and went into the bathroom to brush her teeth. She had begun using her own bathroom again because avoiding her actual mother trumped avoiding the bathroom that resembled her mother's.

"I was going to put this in the kitchen but I think it should go on your nightstand," her mother said. She walked in with a potted orchid that had three or four flowers ready to bloom.

"What's that for?" she asked. She didn't really want to know. Now she was teasing her mother, knowing full well that her mother would take her literally.

"You have to look at pretty things to have pretty baby. But remember," her mother said, shaking a finger at Anne. "Don't look at flowers already cut because they are dead. Dead things means dead baby." She put the pot on Anne's now cluttered night stand next to the framed Anne Geddes postcard.

Anne went to brush her teeth and when she returned, she moved the orchids to the windowsill in her bathroom. At least there they would get light. She went back to her nightstand, opened the drawer, and pulled out the picture of her and Jake. It was a picture of the two of them in the poppy fields only a few miles from her house. She remembered the day well. It was the first time they had gone there. Anne smiled at the memory and put the photo back in its frame.

She set the frame back down on the nightstand and then the doorbell rang. "I'll get it Mom!" She raced as quickly as she could out of her room, but her mother had already opened the front door and then slammed it shut.

"Who was it?" Anne asked.

"It's nobody," her mother said. She didn't move from the door.

"Mom," Anne said sternly.

The doorbell rang again.

"Please move. This is my house and you shouldn't be answering my door as it is."

Her mother made that clicking noise and then stepped out of the way and Anne opened the door only far enough so that her mother couldn't look over her shoulder through the doorway.

Jake stood on the other side of the threshold. It had already been over a week since she saw him at Fiona's house and nearly two weeks since their fight. In her head she had rehearsed her reaction to seeing him again. Sometimes she imagined slapping him for taking so long, sometimes she imagined jumping into his arms. Now her mind was a complete blank.

They stood there for a moment, unsure of what to say, so they started off talking about easy things. He asked if she finished her painting. They talked about the weather, and about how work was, and why Fiona had been avoiding him at work. At the end of it all he asked, "Why is your mom here?"

"Because you ruin my daughter!" her mother yelled from the living room.

Anne made a face as if the words had been intended for her instead of Jake. She stepped outside and then shut the door behind her. "Sorry, it's a long story."

"Alright," he said. He sat down on the top step of her porch. "I have time and you have a lot of explaining to do. Tell me what the hell is going on."

Anne sat down next to him and sighed. "Where do you want me to start?"

"Your mother?"

Anne glanced sideways at him and he was staring intently at her, waiting with that ever calm face. She took a deep breath. The bushes along her front walkway had almost not roses on them. Her mother had pruned too many roses off and now her front walkway was barren. She had liked the overflowing of flowers before, even though she often scratched herself or caught a sweater on the prickles.

"My mom is here because..." she began. She took a deep breath. "She's here because I'm pregnant."

She was too scared to see his expression so she looked down at her hands. There was still blue paint stuck underneath her nails from painting at the school. She usually left the paint under her nails, but now she was determined to get them all clean.

"And you've known since that day I found you painting in the dark."

Anne nodded, picking at her nails.

"It's been two weeks and you haven't told me?" he asked.

"I was going to tell you."

"When?"

She shrugged.

He stood up and went down to the bottom step. "When, Anne. When were you going to tell me?"

"I don't know," she said. There was green under her right ring finger nail.

"Fucking look at me," he shouted. He shot up out from his seat, whipping around to face her and then froze.

Flinching, she accidentally jammed her thumbnail too far under the other nail. She shook her right hand and then squeezed the fingertip between her thumb and index, peering up at him.

"Why does your mother know before me? I thought you hated her."

"I don't hate her."

Jake sat down again and held his head in his hands.

They sat together without speaking, him clutching his head and her clutching her injured finger until Anne could take the silence no longer.

"What do you think I should do?" she asked.

He was quiet for a minute and then said, "I don't know."

Anne took a breath. "I don't know if I'm ready to be a mom." She fought the lump in her throat.

He turned his head sideways, still holding it in his hands and looked at her over his shoulder. "What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean."

He sighed then, and to Anne it sounded like relief. "I haven't had as much time to think about it, but I really don't think I'm ready to be a dad yet either." He lifted his head and picked up her hand, stroking the back of it with his thumb.

Anne watched the back and forth motion of his hand. She knew she was supposed to feel relieved that they both felt the same way, but she didn't.

The next month with her mother passed without too much incident, other than the occasional snide remark about Jake. Although she hadn't needed to do it very much, Anne never really forgot how to dodge her mother at home or how to make excuses about where she was going in order to see Jake after she got off of work. She didn't really have to lie because Jake was the father of her baby and her mother had no choice but to accept that. But it made things easier. There was less explaining.

Her mother had already found a local church that she liked. Of course it was a small Korean church, and every Sunday morning she woke Anne up to try and convince her to go.

Saturdays seemed to go relatively undisturbed until Anne woke up one Saturday morning, to the repetitive sound of plastic bags being crinkled up.

Anne slipped out of bed and went down the hall to her mother's room. There, her busy-bodied mother was emptying a number of shopping bags out onto the bed.

"Mom, what is this?" Anne asked. She stepped into the room and picked up a pale pink onesie from the pile her mother had created on the bed.

"Babies 'R' Us had an early bird sale. We need to make nursery soon."

"A nursery? Where is that going to go with you living here?"

Her mother didn't say anything and simply shrugged and continued dumping bags out on the bed.

Then it occurred to her what her mother was planning on doing. "Oh no, Mom," she said.

"What?"

"Don't even think about it."

"That's the only other room, right?"

"Yes, but you are not going in there."

"If I was going to have a nursery, it would go in this room," Anne said.

"This is my room." Her mother finished emptying the bags.

"This isn't your room, Mom." It was all Anne could do to keep from shouting.

"This is my house. I never asked you to come here."

"You don't need to ask me," her mother said. She turned away from Anne now and picked up the clothing that had fallen off of the bed. "It's my job to help you, so I come."

"That's not what I meant." Anne stepped closer to her mother's bed. She resisted the urge to kick the purple baby blanket that her mother bent down to pick up.

"You're not using that other room anyway." She began folding the clothes and stacking them on her bed. "You teaching now, not painting. You don't need it." Her mother continued folding and talking without even a glance up at her. "Besides, if you put nursery in here, where will I stay?" As she continued talking, Anne stopped hearing her mother's words and only saw the stack of clothes her mother had created.

"Mom." Anne stepped closer to her mother, trying to make eye contact, but her mother didn't look up and continued talking. "Mom."

She continued to ignore her and picked up the clothes, which folded up were no bigger than her wallet and they fit perfectly between her mother's small hands and

suddenly Anne hated that stupid ugly pile of clothes. "Mom, listen to me!" she shouted. She snatched the clothes from her mother's hands and flung them across the room. Anne was breathing heavily and she listened to her own breaths, counting them and trying to control them. Her mother's hands were frozen in the air as if she were still holding the clothes. "You're wasting your money and you never fucking listen to me!"

"Why can't you be thankful?" She grabbed the purple blanket and began hitting Anne on the arm with it. "Even though it was on sale, baby clothes is expensive. But you laugh at me? Say I'm wasting money? You're pregnant Annie-ya. Baby is coming!"

"I know that. But all I'm saying is even if I had this baby, I can't give up my studio."

"There it is again!" Her mother stopped hitting Anne with the blanket and now waved it towards her, using it to gesture as she shouted. "Why you keep saying if? You're pregnant. There is no 'if.'"

"Yes there is."

"Aigoo-cham!" Her mother threw the blanket at Anne.

"'Aigoo-cham. Aigoo-cham' is all you ever say." Anne clutched the purple blanket so hard that she thought she could feel her nails digging into her palm through the soft fabric. "What if I don't want this baby Mom?"

"Moreba? " Suddenly her mother began shouting in Korean, words and phrases Anne had never heard before.

"Mom I can't fucking understand you! Stop shouting at me!"

"I said go! Go now then if you want to kill my granddaughter." Hye Jin charged at Anne, pushing her out of the bedroom. "You're so sure you don't want this baby, then go. Bhali-ka! " Anne was still in her sweats, but she didn't care. She grabbed her purse and flew down the stairs and out the door. She wasn't sure why she was listening to her mother but she was on autopilot and she drove straight to the Planned Parenthood down the street from her house.

Anne gasped for air as her eyes flew open. She sighed, recognizing the pink canopy above her and the soft glow of her night light. Still, she couldn't shake the panic from her nightmare and she cried. Her little fingers sought Teddy and found him nearly by the foot of her bed. She clutched him close and crawled out of her bed. She dashed across the hallway and into her parents' bedroom. Her father was snoring, as usual, his typical deep rumbling noise. She padded up to her mother's side and softly squeezed her arm.

"Mmm?" Her mother half opened her eyes.

"Omma, Muh-soh-wo." Anne said softly.

"Muh-sunil isoso? "

"I had a bad dream again."

"Okay. Irowaba. Kenchanayo. "

Anne crawled into the bed next to her mother. "Omma, can you tell me a story?"

"What kind of story?"

"Can you tell me about the snow in Korea?"

Her mother yawned. "We always like the snow in Korea because it meant no school." Her mother stroked her hair. "We would all go out into the snow and build snowmen and snow forts."

"Are you good at building snow forts?" Anne already knew the answer because she asked her mother to tell her the same story every time she got scared. Anne secretly kept an old black-and-white photo of her mother when she was a teenager. She'd had long black hair then and in the photo her hands were stretched open and she was smiling up at the snow that she had thrown into the air. The snow was a blur. This was what she pictured every time she asked her mother to tell stories of the snow in Korea. Anne closed her eyes and rubbed the rough seam of her mother's silk pillow case between her thumb and her knuckles.

"Of course I was good. My sisters and brothers and I did it every winter. We were poor, you know. So we didn't have TVs or games. And since there were exactly eight of us, we split up into two teams and had a war. There was one time we had a snow battle of girls against boys. Even though there are five girls and three boys, it was more fair because girls are smaller. And so we piled up so many snow balls"

Anne never heard who won the fort battles of her mother's stories because she was usually asleep by the time her mother got to that part of the story, and she always forgot to ask for the end when she woke up the next day. But no matter how many times she missed the ending, she always woke up in her bed. She was never sure if it was her mother or her father who carried her back into her bed. Although when she thought really hard about it, she seemed to have a memory, or maybe she dreamt about it once, that she

had opened her eyes one night while being carried to her bed, and in the darkness she could make out the shape of her mother's curly bob.

Anne turned her car off and sat in the Planned Parenthood parking lot. When she tried to recall the actual act of pulling into the parking lot, locating the spot, and then parking, she could not. Her mind had gone blank as soon as her mother had pushed her out the door and she went. Simple.

Now that she was here though, it suddenly became less simple. Her fingers fumbled through her purse until they found her cell phone. She pulled it out and scrolled through her contact list until she spotted Jake's name. She called him and prayed for an answer. There was none. She hit redial.

"Come on, please," she said. A second time it went to voicemail.

She sat for a moment, unsure of what to do. Then her phone buzzed, but instead of Jake's name lighting up the screen, it was her mother's. Anne immediately sent the call to voicemail and stepped out of her car, slamming the door behind her. She could hear her mother's shrill voice. '*Bhali-ka!*' Over and over and over again. She made it to the door, but it was locked. Next to the door there was a small speaker box and a button. She pressed the button and the speaker buzzed before a woman's voice came through. "Can I help you?"

Hye Jin's voice was so loud inside of Anne's head that she couldn't respond. It was as though she had to remember how to speak English. "...Um. Yes, hi. I don't have an appointment," she said.

"That' s okay. Come on in."

The speaker box buzzed once more and then the door made a clicking sound and Anne went inside. Several faces in the rather large waiting room turned towards her; most of them young, some of them old, all of them women. Across the rows and rows of chairs, she saw the small window and walked towards it. She thought it was a little strange that the receptionist was sitting on the other side of a glass window, like a bank teller.

"How can we help you?" the receptionist said through the glass.

"I'd like to get information on..." Anne had to pause to swallow the spit that the word caused. "Um...an abortion?" She tried to say it as quietly as possible.

"Alright ma'am. Have you been here before?"

She shook her head.

The woman grabbed a clipboard and several pamphlets and stuck them onto the clipboard. "Here. Fill out the new patient information. I've put some reading material in there of your choices and the services we offer. Read up on those and then you'll have a consultation to discuss your choice with one of our assistants." She slid the clipboard through the small space underneath the glass.

Anne took the clipboard and scanned the rows of seats for somewhere to sit. She picked the chair in between the door and a girl who looked about 16. Her eyes were glued to the screen of her cell phone, and her fingers were tapping away. The words danced around each other and no amount of squinting could stop them. *Bhali-ka!* She tried to pen the answers carefully, but she couldn't remember some of them, obvious ones, like her

address, or her age, or her ethnicity, and the girl next to her was tap tap tapping the glass screen of her phone. It seemed to take her forever, and she'd nearly gotten to the end of the paperwork when she heard a familiar voice outside of the door. The voice was muted, but it had the undeniable caw of her mother's accent.

"I need to stop her," her mother said.

"Stop who from what ma'am?" Anne could hear the receptionist's voice coming through the speaker box right outside the door.

"Just open. I have to stop my daughter."

Anne kept her head down and listened.

"Ma'am this is a safe environment. I cannot let you into the building if you don't calm down."

"I am calm! I need to stop my daughter. She's going to kill the baby."

"I'm sorry, but I cannot let any suspicious persons into the building."

"Open the door! Open!" Her mother was shouting now and shaking the door.

Other women were looking at the door, or at the receptionist to see what she would do.

"Ma'am, if you do not leave, I will have to contact the authorities."

"Oh my God," Anne said. She stepped outside and grabbed her mother's arm, pulling her away from the building into the parking lot. "Are you crazy?"

"Annie-ya!" her mother yelled, slapping Anne across the face.

"What the hell?" Anne gently touched her cheek.

"I can't believe you came here."

"You told me to! And how did you know I was here?"

"I'm not stupid. I follow you! What is wrong with you?"

"You're the one who said I should go take care of it now."

"I was mad!"

"So was I."

"Annie-ya." Her mother was crying now. Anne had only seen her mother cry when Halmoni died. She wanted to reach out and hold her mother, or at least put an arm around her, but instead she stood there with her hands in her jacket pockets.

"Okay, calm down," she said. She stood there, fiddling with a ball of lint in her right pocket.

"So what are you going to do?" her mother asked.

"Mom, I don't know, but I don't want to have to bail you out of jail today."

"Aigoo-seh sang eh," her mother chuckled, wiping the tears from her face.

"Okay, okay. Go home. I'll meet you there."

"Ppeong-chiji-ma. "

"I'm not. I'll meet you at home."

That night, on her way downstairs to get a drink, Anne heard her mother talking on the phone in her room, but her voice didn't sound like her mother's voice at all. She stepped closer to the door to listen.

"Chagiya, " her mother said. "Na uh-dduk-hae? "

Anne realized her mother's voice was hoarse from crying. Anne whipped around and walked away from the door as quickly and quietly as she could to the safety of her room. She lay in her bed that night, staring at the ceiling and listening to the clock tick

by. Maybe it was her, half falling asleep, and maybe it was half a dream, but the clock seemed to tick sporadically, faster sometimes and slower others.
