Natural Predators

Marie-Claire Churchouse

University of South Carolina - Columbia

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/etd

Part of the Fiction Commons

Recommended Citation

Natural Predators

by

Marie-Claire Churchouse

Bachelor of Arts
Skidmore College, 2011

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in
Creative Writing
College of Arts and Sciences
University of South Carolina
2015

Accepted by:
Elise Blackwell, Director of Thesis
David Bajo, Reader
Anne Gulick, Reader
Jessica Barnes, Reader

Lacy Ford, Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies
Dedication

To mum and dad, thank you for all the support. To my dear friend Sally Thompson, thank you for giving me the confidence to write.
Acknowledgments

With grateful thanks to Professors Elise Blackwell and David Bajo, your advice and support has proved invaluable. Special thanks to Professors Anne Gulick and Jessica Barnes for being part of my defense committee and offering generous and insightful feedback. And finally, thanks to Ajit Dhillon, my first and last reader.
Abstract

*Natural Predators* is a collection of short stories that take place in various countries including Japan, Russia, Hong Kong, and England. Though the stories are not explicitly linked, they share themes of violence, power dynamics, and the failures of community. The collection begins with the story that features the youngest protagonist, and ends with the eldest. Food, animals, and the human relationship with nature are also major themes throughout the collection.
# Table of Contents

Dedication........................................................................................................................................... iii
Acknowledgments..................................................................................................................................... iv
Abstract.................................................................................................................................................. v
1. Stray.................................................................................................................................................. 1
2. Water Children.................................................................................................................................. 48
3. All Flowers are Beautiful..................................................................................................................... 64
4. Natural Predators............................................................................................................................... 111
5. Saccharin.......................................................................................................................................... 128
6. We Leave at the Thaw....................................................................................................................... 154
During the last ice age, the island of Hong Kong didn’t exist. Nor did Peng Chau, Cheung Chau, Lantau, or Lamma, the islands that gave the houses in my school their name. My teacher taped a map onto the blackboard one day and showed us how during the last ice age people could walk from place to place. There are cave paintings on some of the outlying islands made by people who lived there long before us. When the ice melted and flooded the valleys, only the highest peaks remained above sea level forming a collection of small islands. Upon learning this, the whole class was silent for a rare moment, but all too soon it was as though we had always known that we lived on top of mountains.

The summer I set fire to my ballet shoes, a series of murders occurred in my neighbourhood, so that by the time school began again in September I had seen three savaged feline bodies. A neighbourhood initiative years before had cleared the area of stray dogs, and the cats had moved in soon after. The people of Jade Valley Court received these new creatures with grace, convinced that cats were no bad addition to an area of Hong Kong that had something of a snake problem. Only the year before, the family in G/F Block D had been startled by the screams of their maid, who discovered a sleeping
python beneath the sofa while vacuuming. The father, upon realizing that he, his wife, his two-year-old, and his baby, had been sharing their living room with a large serpent all winter, sold the place and moved the family to a thirtieth-story flat in Mid-Levels.

While a cat would be no match for a python, the adults believed that the smaller snakes might sense the feline presence and lay their eggs elsewhere. They were wrong. It was a favourite game of mine to steal a pair of rubber gloves from the kitchen and seek out snake nests beneath loose garden tiles and abandoned plant pots, and poke at the eggs. But never take them home, the lesson learned from a strange tadpole incident, for things that seem small and harmless in nature often grow into something else. The summer the murders occurred I had more time than ever to seek out the things that crept and slithered around Jade Valley, my freedom from days filled with dance lessons, art classes, drama clubs, swim teams, and conversational Mandarin groups, won by a symbolic act that all the tears, tantrums, and pleading in the world had not achieved.

The row that followed my mother’s discovery of my smoldering ballet shoes on the terrace, the delightful pink reduced to grey, had to be seen to be believed, but I emerged from it triumphant. Skin still smarting where the hard plastic hairbrush had been brought down on it, I sought out Sonklin in the kitchen, who chided me a little and then handed me a piece of dried mango. She was a tiny person of fifty, only a little taller than me by the time I turned eight, her feet the same size as mine. She had a round face that was too big for her body, and she always smelled of herbs and soap. It didn’t occur to me that by placing myself in her care for the summer I’d given her a lot of extra work. “Don’t you dare complain to us when you’re bored” was all my father said to me of the
matter, and later that night I overheard him telling my mother that it was the French in me, which I got from *her* side of the family.

On the days when Sonklin was less busy, she took me with her when she went to the supermarket, or to the beach at the bottom of the hill to play. Sometimes we met other amahs from our block at the beach, the women who’d watched and clapped as I learnt to ride a bike the previous winter and who often leaned out of their kitchen windows to hand me something to eat or drink. Seeing them at the beach gave the trips a festive feel, the same feeling I would later experience when I saw friends from Hong Kong in foreign countries, a welcome meeting across the seas. Sonklin sat beneath the trees during these beach trips while I ran in and out of the waves, too frightened to swim properly. Sometimes I convinced her to help me build fanciful structures in the rough sand but only once she had covered her head with a scarf to protect her skin from the sun. She huffed whenever a woman walked by in a bikini, though it was not until many years later that I understood her disdain. While on a beach near Bangkok not driven by tourism, I saw that most of the Thai girls wore shorts and t-shirts to swim, and the ones that did wear revealing swim wear prompted my companion to say “bad girl” and giggle. Sonklin always bought me a cream soda from the vending machines when we went to the beach, forbidden in our house, so I tried to persuade her to take me often.

After one of these trips we decided to take the minibus home rather than walk for it was about as hot as it can get in Hong Kong and I was sunburnt.

“What happens when your mama sees you?”
I didn’t say anything. Each jolt of the minibus as it sped around the corners knocked my sore shoulders into the seat, Hong Kong minibus drivers notorious for their rejection of the speed limit.

“You never listen to me. I always tell you to wear your shirt.”

“I’m sorry.” I sniffed.

“Tsst tsst, silly pineapple,” she said, using one of her many pet names for me. She blew cold air onto my back.

The walk down the driveway was agony. There was no shade from the sun and my burn itched and stung. Now that I was almost home I realised that my mother was going to be furious when she saw my skin. I forgot my pain the moment we saw the cat stretched out on the wall that ran along the road. It might have been sleeping had it not been for the huge wound in its side. Something or someone had torn away an oval patch of skin exposing what was beneath. It was as though someone or something had carefully cut a window to the cat’s insides, the organs bulging from the hole, intact and glistening in the sun. I stared at it. I was more disturbed by the eyes than the pink brown things that nearly spilled out from its stomach. Sonklin hissed something in Thai and I looked up and saw a stranger there next to me. The clothes were Sonklin’s but the face belonged to someone I didn’t recognize.

“Sonklin?” I tugged at her shirt and she was Sonklin again. She ran down the road dragging me behind her, the sound of our sandals echoing loud against the row of apartments. Once inside, she ran a cold bath and ordered me to sit in it before going back outside. When at last she returned I was shivering and she helped me out of the bath and dried me by touching the towel to my skin.
“Sonklin what happened?”

She stepped back and looked at me, “Pineapple, I don’t know.”

The area I grew up in gave credence to the story my teacher told in school. It really did feel like it had once been the top of a mountain. Steep and hilly, the neighbourhood was only partially transformed by wealth. Every piece of usable land had been taken by developers and bent to their will, yet more land than not resisted the machines that dug, leveled, or poured concrete, so that precious houses and spacious apartment complexes sat amongst wild jungle and steep slopes. The landscape gave magnificent views to some, and green veils to others nestled in the valleys, so that at times it was hard to believe that we lived in one of the most densely populated places on earth. Areas not claimed for humankind were populated by snakes, cats, rats, giant porcupines, lethal-looking caterpillars, centipedes as long as my arm, parrots, cockatoos, rare Chinese pheasants that had escaped from a bird sanctuary up the road, enormous moths, lizards, jewel-coloured dragon flies, butterflies, shrews, earth worms, beetles, spiders so big you could see your reflection in all their many eyes, frogs, toads, turtles, and many more beside. Sometimes they strayed out of their places and into ours, so that often I woke up to find little insects on my bed that had been sucked in through the air conditioning. At certain times of the year the giant centipedes migrated from one side of the house to the other so that when you walked at night you had to think about what your feet were treading on. Snakes often hibernated under beds and in people’s closets, the cobras worst of all, and many a mouse found death at the end of Sonklin’s broom during the winter.
The cats, well fed from a diet of smaller creatures, did not look like strays. They had found their human champion in Sonklin, who not only gave them our leftovers but cared for their wounds, kept an eye on any kittens, and sat and talked to them in the afternoons. While rubbing tiger balm on her feet, cutting her hair, polishing the silver, mending clothes, or any of the many things she would do by the kitchen door after lunch, she would sit on a little plastic stool and talk to the cats in her native Thai. There was no one else around who spoke her language. The other amahs in the block laughed at her, but I was envious of the way the cats sat with her and let her pet them. They fled from me.

Sonklin and I buried the dead cat together. We found a bit of earth by the enormous lychee tree next in front of our terrace. Each year in lychee season the tree was covered in birds, and for three days we awoke each morning to the screeches of parrots and parakeets, the smaller birds on the lower branches quick to snatch any fruit that dropped. We thought the cat would like it, and Sonklin said that next year we might not see as many birds, the little sparrows especially chased away by the spirit below. We lit candles and Sonklin chanted something in Thai and I put flowers on the grave. After, we sat in the kitchen, dipping white bread in milky coffee and talked about our neighbours. I asked her many times what she thought had happened to the cat, but always she always stroked my hair and said that life could be very cruel to the small.

The typhoon that hit Hong Kong in July was one of the most violent I ever experienced. The number ten signal was raised and the whole of Hong Kong stayed at home, except for a few who ran around in the torrential rain, many of them drunk. “Idiots” my
dad muttered as we watched them on the news, the newscasters wearing ineffectual raincoats while shouting into the camera. The wind bent the trees into unnatural positions. Branches and twigs hit the windows with loud cracking sounds that sent my mother from room to room, fearing for her antiques and ornaments should the glass give way. We were lucky not to live in one of the tall high rises. They swayed in aggressive weather, and at times the wind and the pressure were so strong they sucked windows out of their frames. I searched for Sonklin, and when I couldn’t find her in the kitchen or in her room or anywhere else in the apartment I grew frightened and leaned against the kitchen window to see if she had been swept away in the waterfall that was once our block’s driveway. As I pulled on my shoes in order to go find her, she came into the kitchen holding a sodden cardboard box. She shut the door behind her before putting the box down on the counter.

“What are you doing?” She asked me.

“What’s in there?” I replied, pulling myself up onto the counter.

“Shh shh shh” she put her finger to her lips, and opened the box.

The box was filled with tiny kittens with spiky wet fur, the eyes of some still blue. They mewled and tripped over each other, the larger ones pawing the sides trying to get out.

“Cute ah?”

“Can I hold one?”

Sonklin shook her head, but she was smiling.

“Did you rescue them? Why can’t I hold one?”

“Not today.”
“Oh please” I begged, “Please please please.”

Sonklin took my hand and guided it to one of the larger kittens. I stroked it behind the ear and it fell over and both Sonklin and I laughed. We watched them for a while and I wanted to give them milk but she shook her head and pointing to her stomach said that it was no good for them.

Soon the thunder was right above us and so Sonklin took the box and put it in her room to keep them safe. We sat on her bed and watched Korean dramas, and I peeked into the box every few minutes until Sonklin threatened to send me from the room if I didn’t stop waking them. My parents disturbed us only once. They peered round the door but didn’t come in and joked about Sonklin teaching me Thai. “It’ll give you an edge when you start applying for university” my father said, and I shrugged. I didn’t tell them about the kittens. They were our secret.

The day after the storm, I watched from the kitchen window as Sonklin lifted the kittens out of the box and placed them on the grass by the kitchen door. A calico cat ran up and nudged Sonklin’s hand with her head. The mother cat then set about cleaning her kittens while Sonklin chatted to them, I think about the typhoon. I nearly ran out to join them but stopped when I reached the door and went back to the kitchen window instead. More cats came and Sonklin brought out a Tupperware box full of fried rice and the cats ate it all in minutes.

In the afternoon we walked around the neighbourhood to see the damage left by the storm. Men in yellow and orange jackets were clearing away layers of torn branches and leaves. Street sweepers cleaned up the rubbish that had blown in from other parts of Hong Kong and littered our streets. The air smelt damp and strangely metallic. The
drains stank. In no time at all we were sweating and tired and turned back towards our block. The blonde woman from G/F Block F was getting out of her car, a dirty thing that looked odd next to all the perfect, expensive cars that lined the car park. She walked towards her apartment in little zigzags.

“Sonklin,” I asked, “why is she walking funny.”

She sighed and didn’t respond, turning away from the woman and nudging me back to the house. Sonklin didn’t like to answer many of my questions. Often my whys and how comes were met with silence, or an offering of food instead. We got home and she made coconut sticky rice while I sat and watched people returning from work from the kitchen window. All of the kitchens in the apartments looked out on the driveway and car park so it was the place to be if you wanted to see anything. After the first murder I had taken to observing our neighbours. Their movements and habits, so familiar to me, seemed stranger the longer I examined them.

I watched as the amahs walked their employers’ dogs, little things bred to sit on laps for the most part. Erica walked the terrier that belonged to the Chinese lady in 3/F Block E at the same time each morning and evening. Samuel liked to bark at the other dogs until they got close when he would become silent, tail down, and try to sit between Erica’s feet. The blonde woman in G/F Block F walked her own dog, a large gleaming Doberman called Abby who made the amahs nervous. She was huge with small black eyes, her muscles expanding and contracting as she walked beside her owner. Their walks were not regular like the others. Sometimes I would not see Abby for days, at other times she ran freely about the neighbourhood, stealing the food that Sonklin put out for the cats, which made Sonklin furious. Every evening the amahs, including Sonklin,
would gather on the driveway accompanied by dogs and the other children from Jade Valley Court. I used to go with Sonklin but I had grown resentful of the teasing I got from Erica and the others in the wake of the ballet shoe bonfire. “Chi see la” they laughed at me, the Chinese for crazy. They had teased me too when the tadpoles I caught grew legs and my parents had come home to find dozens of tiny frogs hopping around the living room, and another time when I had dropped an entire jar of dirt and earthworms in the study, but I was proud of what I had gained by burning my ballet shoes. They had no reason to laugh.

Later that evening when I went to wish Sonklin goodnight, the sky still grey from the storm, I found her crying by the kitchen door. In front of her lay the calico cat. Blood poured out of her neck with each breath and Sonklin was kneeling beside her with a rag in her hands, trying to staunch it. The mother cat’s eyes were taking on the look of the other cat, deep and empty. I sat down beside Sonklin but the cat didn’t try to run away and I knew that it had happened again.

Jade Valley Court ran on a particular schedule that varied little from day to day except on weekends. At around six in the morning, lights went on in the kitchens and the first thing I heard each morning was the sound of breakfast being prepared. By seven, the drivers filled the car park, washing and polishing their employer’s cars for the day ahead. At this time my father was already at the table, several newspapers spread in front of him. He liked to trace the correlation between a country’s wealth and meat consumption per capita. The Americans and Germans, he said, ate a lot of meat. The Chinese liked pork. My mother and I joined him around quarter past seven. No one spoke much that early in
the morning. By around eight o’clock, the exodus began as one by one my parents and our neighbours were driven to work. Sonklin and I walked with the other amahs and children up the hill to meet the school bus in term time. During most holidays, I would accompany my parents to work to be dropped off at whatever activity scheduled for that day. The summer I burned my ballet shoes I remained behind while most of the block left each morning, watching from the front door, ready to claim the neighbourhood once they’d all gone.

Jade Valley Court was among the more desirable places to live in Hong Kong, though it didn’t look like much from the outside. The car park was set along a steep hill that was covered in patches of concrete, a common sight in Hong Kong, where we have lost too many to landslides. Opposite was a row of six three-story buildings, ancient apartment complexes that like many old buildings on Hong Kong wore their plumbing on the outside. Pipes ran up and down the buildings, staining the white walls brown with rust. The ground floor apartments had gardens, while the third floor ones had rooftops, which were covered in a variety of illegal structures from conservatories to fountains. One even had a collection of Grecian marble statues. Several of the owners had repainted their own section of wall in varying shades of white so that as a whole the Court looked patchy and uneven. The value of the apartments was in their size, and their relative closeness to Central where just about everyone in the neighbourhood worked. We had gardens, both private and public, and trees everywhere, all land not claimed by housing, concrete or jungle covered in flowering bushes maintained by the gardener, who walked hunch-backed around the block in a large straw hat.
People tended to leave each other alone, except during the monthly general meeting where the owners would complain about little things, like the way that people didn’t clean up after the dogs or directed their friends to the wrong parking spaces. People didn’t really gossip during those meetings, but occasionally someone would say something in a moment of indiscretion. Marriage was a common theme, and I learned one day that Abby’s owner was divorced.

“She really should get a maid. It looks terrible in there” the lady from upstairs said to my mother once.

“I don’t think she can afford it,” my mother replied, glaring at me when she saw that I was listening.

“Spends too much on the -” she said, making a drinking motion with her hand, and my mother laughed before growing serious again.

Sonklin and I buried the mother cat next to the other. I put flowers on both graves, Sonklin chanted in Thai, but there was no talk of spirits this time. I spent less and less time inside as Sonklin grew more reticent. I went hunting for snakes by myself, finding rat snakes and garden snakes and once even a bamboo snake, its bright green skin warning me not to go too close. I watched the ants on the terrace as they dismantled beetles and dragonflies, even a lizard which remained stuck to the wall whilst they brought it bit by bit into their nest. I decided to try and befriend Abby, my nerve strengthened by the first indications of boredom, and thought long about how to go about approaching her. From the stray dogs years before I had learned that it was not wise to carry food around dogs you didn’t know, and even less wise to offer it to them. Thinking of Sonklin and her
cats, I planned to introduce myself to see what would happen, and so the next time I saw her I approached her slowly and said hello. She looked up at me and tilted her head.

“Hi Abby. Are you a good girl?”

She was still for a moment and then wagged the stump of her tail. Emboldened, I stretched out my hand and she sniffed it, tail still wagging, and so I patted her on the head, which came up to my chest, and found that her fur was warm, not soft but smooth. Sonklin was in a grim mood when I returned home and so I took the plate of fried bananas she handed me out of the kitchen and ate by myself on the living room carpet. The next day after lunch I saw Abby again from the kitchen window and ran out to see her. She walked towards me this time, and in my confidence I scratched behind her ears and ran my hand down her back, feeling thick muscles beneath the fur. We both were startled when someone called my name from behind me, and Abby trotted away down to her end of the block.

Sonklin stood with a rubbish bag in both hands, which she dropped when I came close.

“What – are – you – doing.” It wasn’t a question, and I saw something of the stranger Sonklin in her face, which was distorted by deep lines on her forehead and around her mouth.

“Playing with Abby.”

Abandoning the rubbish in the car park, she gripped my arm and pulled me back to the kitchen, so angry that she forgot to speak to me in English.

“Sonklin stop it. You’re hurting me.” I twisted my arm trying to escape but she gripped it even tighter and didn’t let me go until we were in the kitchen. She stood with
her back to the door, her arms on her hips in a gesture that I recognized from the nature channel, when animals puffed themselves up to appear bigger and more intimidating.

“That animal – no more. Don’t you – do you want to – why are you so stupid, ah?”

“Abby’s a nice dog. She let me pet her. She -”

“No. You never touch that animal.”

“But why?”

“I see you and I tell your mama.”

Never in all my years of childish pranks, tantrums, misbehaviour, or moments of rudeness, had Sonklin ever threatened to tell on me. Not once. I couldn’t look her in the face. She held out her palm like she did each time we made a pact but I put my hands behind my back.

“It’s not safe, melon. Promise me? Be a good a girl?”

I nodded and left the kitchen, ignoring the juice box she offered me. I heard the door that lead from the kitchen to the front of the block slam and hurried to the study window to see where she’d gone. She was marching towards the other end of the block, shooing the other amahs with her hand as they called to her from apartment windows. She was gone a long time, and when she said good night to me that evening she sounded like she had a sore throat.

I didn’t sleep well, for in the late hours when the sky was at its darkest loud noises from outside shocked me out of bed. Someone was throwing garden pots at Sonklin’s room next to the kitchen, but I didn’t get a chance to see who it was before she pushed me out again. The person was gone by the time my parents arrived, my mother frightened
in a silk dressing gown, my father furious and swearing. We all went into the kitchen, and Sonklin was there putting her shoes on with shaking hands.

“What the hell was that? What’s going on, Sonklin?”

“Sonklin, are you all right?”

My mother was concerned, my father tyrannical in red pajamas. The two of them questioned her but she said she didn’t know anything. Taking a torch, the three of them went outside (“Inside. Inside” were my orders), but on seeing that there had been more noise than damage decided not to call the police.

“Where the f-. Where’s the guard? What do we pay them for?” was the last thing I heard from my father before I was put to bed. My mother sat for a while and tried to answer my questions but she didn’t have any answers. I wondered if I should tell her about Abby, but my arm still ached from Sonklin’s grip. I didn’t want to get into trouble.

The death of the third cat came swift and brutal. This time I threw up. Whoever had committed the crime had crushed its skull and ripped one of the hind legs off. I found the cat while alone in the back garden. The ants had already discovered it, forming streams of black amongst the cracks and blood and muscle. A fly landed on my face and I shook my head and hands clawing at the air. “Get away.” I threw up again. I closed my eyes, the inside of my lids red with quivering patterns of black on them. I cried for Sonklin. She found me and hugged me, murmuring something gentle while I retched. She stroked my hair and face and kissed my forehead, my skin cold and numb. Sonklin, who did this?
One evening, when the daily homecoming was nearly complete, Sonklin and I heard a loud scream. We ran outside, as did others - amahs, husbands, wives, children – and saw the amah from 3/F Block E crying in the car park. Abby the Doberman had a small terrier by the neck, which the amah was trying to pull free by tugging on its leash. “Sonklin, it’s Samuel and Erica,” I took her hand, unable to look away. Abby shook Samuel, and the bones in his neck cracked. His owners arrived just in time to see his body go limp. Mr. Chen threw a shoe at Abby, and then the other but Abby kept shaking the little dog. It wasn’t until Mrs. Chen ran full speed at her waving her arms and screaming that the Doberman let go of Samuel, and ran off down the block. The crowd that had gathered was in shock, but grew angry as Mrs. Chen knelt on the floor, cradling her dead pet in her arms and rocking back and forth.

“Someone call the police.”

“Someone find a vet.”

“What happened here?”

“Who is responsible?”

“That dog belongs to that English woman.”

“Where is she?”

“Call the police.”

“Someone find that dog’s damned owner.”

“Which English woman?”

Erica was hysterical, and Mr. Chen was caught between trying to calm her down and comfort his wife. The American who lived next door to us ran in the direction that
Abby had gone. The voices grew louder and more menacing. Sonklin and I took a step back.

“What’s going on?”

My father had arrived, suitcase still in hand. He walked towards Sonklin and me but stopped when he saw Mrs. Chen.

“Jesus Christ.”

The woman who lived in 3/F A tried to take Samuel away from Mrs. Chen but she held on tighter and sobbed harder. Several of the block wives gathered around her, whispering comfort and looking at each other with as if to say “what now?” The crowd was quieter as the women convinced her to go back to her apartment, one wife supporting each elbow. Once Mrs. Chen had left I noticed that Erica and all the other amahs had disappeared in the confusion, the other children along with them. Only Sonklin remained and I thought I caught something like satisfaction in her expression. My father demanded to know what had happened, and someone said that the English woman from G/F Block F was responsible.

“She always lets that dog of hers run wild, she’s a drunk,” someone said which was followed by a chorus of angry agreement, the fury back now that Mrs. Chen was indoors. The remaining neighbours had formed a circle that seemed to pulse with every vengeful comment and they agreed that something had to be done, for “that woman” had been allowed to let her dog run loose for long enough.

“What if it had been a child?” and the group cursed. It was becoming harder for me to recognize which adult came from which apartment.
The American returned, behind him the blonde woman from G/F Block F. She wore a man’s blue dress shirt and leggings, her body thin and insect-like. As one the group turned and looked at her. For a moment they were silent, then the shouts came and they moved towards her pointing and gesticulating. I could pick out my father’s voice amongst the noise.

“You do realize that the police have been called,” he said, “and that most likely they will take that dog away from you.”

“No.” For the first time the woman spoke and the crowd drew breath, narrow eyes trained on her.

“No,” she repeated in a low voice. She sat cross-legged on the ground like a child and began to cry. She rocked back and forth as Mrs. Chen had done but she looked mad. She pulled at her hair and spoke in formless syllables and the group stepped back and scattered, individuals once more. Sonklin took my hand and dragged me away. I looked back over my shoulder and saw that all the adults were walking away too, all except the American who got down on his knees beside her, his hands hovering as though he couldn’t quite figure out what to do with them.

Over dinner, each of my mother’s questions was met with a brusque reply from my father. He had met with the police and they’d summoned the SPCA who came and took Abby away, which I hadn’t been allowed to watch. They asked me if I had ever been bitten or growled at by the Doberman and I said that I hadn’t.

“Are you sure?” my father said.

“Yes.”
I didn’t eat anything but for once my parents didn’t notice. I took my plate into the kitchen where Sonklin was washing up with slow, steady movements. She took my plate in silence. I told her that I felt bad, and she said not to worry, that it was done now. They had taken the murderer away.

“No,” I said, “that lady…” but I couldn’t explain it.

The Handover
1st July, 1997

The day of the Handover it poured. Rain so fast and heavy it hurt. A bad night for a party, to have rain so thick it turned the sky black and we couldn’t even see the main event, which was Governor Chris Patten sailing down the harbour on a boat. The handover was water-stiffened shoes and clothes cold and sticky in the air conditioning. The party was empty glasses and quick-stepped waiters, and all the familiar adults gathered at the club seemed strange, strangers who thanked the Chinese waiters more than usual.

“Will we even get to keep the ‘Royal,’” mum asked, “Like in the Royal Society for the Protection of Animals?”

“I expect it’ll just be the S.P.C.A. now,” her friend Mary said, a pale woman with red lips. “They’ll have to change all the signs.”

I was barricaded in by a wall of black tuxedo trousers, red trousers, silk skirts, and muslin dresses as words like “Communism” and “Tiananmen Square” flew overhead.

“It’s not the communists we have to worry about, it’s the markets. Can’t have investors losing their heads.”
My father didn’t approve of fear. Colonial governors like Patten might be going the way of the saber tooth tiger or the wooly mammoth, but life went on. He’d explained to me that we weren’t giving Hong Kong back to China per se, more that the lease was up. We’d only been renting it really.

“One country, two systems. What a load of tosh.” Mary’s husband exchanged his empty glass of champagne for a full one. “The island will be crawling with commies. There’ll be blood on the streets, you mark my words.”

“Tell me, John,” my father employed the quiet voice reserved for when people were in trouble, “Is the governor being spirited away on a military helicopter as we speak? Are the people rampaging about burning the Union Jack?”

John said that it was raining too hard and reached for another glass.

“I believe in the people of this city. The Hong Kong Cantonese are no fools. Riots and economic instability are the last things they want.”

My mother and Mary had wandered off. I found mum by the window. The harbour below was inky black, the lights of Kowloon side smudged by the rain.

“I’m cold. Can I get another jumper from the car? Mum?” I tugged at her elbow.

“Hmm? Oh. Yes, don’t get cold. But hurry back up. Understand?”

I took my time going down to the car. Most of the other children were at home with amahs and babysitters, but my father insisted I attend the historic event. It wasn’t like any party I’d ever been to. It felt halfway between a celebration and a funeral.

Outside was wonderful. It was warm. I stood under the awning and listened to the frogs croak in the bushes. They were happy about the rain. After fetching my jumper, I
went back inside. There were various parties going on in different parts of the club. I peeked into the main bar to see what was going on. It was smokey in there, the people more casually dressed. I spotted Mary at the far end of the corridor. She went through a door that led to the back stairs. I followed. If I stood on my tiptoes, I could see through the round window set into the door. Mary waited there, smoothing her deep blue dress. A young waiter ran up the stairs. Mary grabbed his black bowtie and kissed him. He ran his hands down her body then pushed her away. Taking her hand, he led her through a door I’d never been through.

When Mary rejoined us upstairs she was calm and pleasant to everyone as always. It was as though nothing had happened.

Stray

Part Two

There were no locked doors that night. The school seemed to expand as every office, staff flat, and cleaning cupboard was opened to us in our search for Colin. Outside, torchlights in the darkness. The boys and male teachers hunted in the grounds while we looked within, calling out his name until our throats hurt. We ran through the classrooms in the old stable buildings, slid across the tiled kitchen floor in our slippers, climbed the brittle wrought-iron fire escapes that shook beneath our feet, invaded the boys’ dormitories lifting every duvet and pulling out every draw, paused before entering the staff flats, which were smaller and dingier than we could have imagined. Girl after girl burst through the heavy oak door that divided the back of the manor house with the front,
where the walls weren’t painted in cheap blues, pinks, and yellows, but dark reds and greens, the furniture heavy and unscratched. We clambered up and down the forbidden marble staircase on all fours, howled as we ran through the library and drawing room. We unbarred every window and called out his name in the cold air. We didn’t find him.

They let us sleep with the lights on that night. They left all the lights on so that the school shone out like a beacon in the darkness, or a warning. Perhaps he didn’t want to be found. I stared at the crack in the ceiling above my bed and thought of home, but the images didn’t come. I thought instead of Colin, rubbing the sore places where his hand had gripped my neck.

*

My mother and I reached London the day the world learned that Princess Diana had died. The pilot announced the news after we landed, and all around us people cried out in shock. Many burst into tears. Even mum wept a little before pulling a compact out of her bag and dabbing scented powder on her cheeks. “Let’s not dawdle,” she said as we disembarked, and taking both bags hurried through the airport to immigration where a red-eyed officer gave our passports a cursory glance and waved us through with a hiccup and a “Have a n-nice day.” Throughout the baggage hall groups of chattering, smiling travelers stood waiting for their luggage unaware that the princess was lying dead in a hospital in France. Some of the passengers on our carousel cast frosty looks about the room as if hoping to silence them with disapproval. I asked mum who Princess Diana was. The British family to our right looked scandalized.
“Don’t be silly you know exactly who she is,” she said, addressing the family as much as me, “I’ll tell you later,” she added in a whisper.

We hurried through duty free and into the arrivals hall, which echoed with the name Diana. Happy faces turned to horror as friends and relatives welcomed travelers with the news. We passed more tearful adults, and even one mother who had broken down sobbing, her little boy patting her on the head. It was a mad land where the grown-ups cried and the children did not, and it was only when we skirted round a toddler throwing a tantrum in her chair that the world seemed to right itself for a moment.

Mum was in a panic for the rest of the day. If her ten-year-old daughter didn’t know about Princess Diana, there was no telling what else I might not know.

“1066,” she ordered, “You must remember the date 1066. And World War II. Who did we fight in World War II?”

“The Japanese?”

She stopped worrying about it soon enough. I observed her with growing alarm during the time we spent in London sightseeing and meeting up with old friends. She was in raptures over the supermarkets, filling trolleys with fresh berries, organic yoghurts, muesli, pungent cheeses, English toffees, Victoria sponges, crumpets, ham, scotch eggs and all the other things that were stale and expensive by the time they reached Hong Kong. Over the summer I’d witnessed my friends’ lives collapse into suitcases and cardboard boxes. It’s time to go home their parents said. If mum loved London so much she might pack our little family up and we would join the great British exodus out of Hong Kong, no doubt leaving Sonklin behind. I made a point of remarking that the London
Underground was much dirtier than our one, and asked her at least once a day why there were so many homeless people in the city.

We went to all the famous department stores, from John Lewis to Fortnum and Mason, my good behaviour purchased with a day at the Natural History Museum. Despite England’s failings, I loved it there. It was a soothing place, the glossy skeletons and enormous fossils long dead, so long dead it was as if they were never alive in the first place, and I could not be persuaded to leave until mum bribed me with a plastic microscope, a T-Rex Skeleton made of cardboard, and a book called *Beetles of the World*.

Most of London came to a standstill on the sixth of September, three days before we were due to drive to Hollyfield House. We spent the day with a group of mum’s old school friends and watched the funeral on television. The hostess’s daughter, Harriet, went to Hollyfield House too. She’d been there since she was eight. As we sat there in their crowded living room, we had no idea two and a half billion people around the world were tuned into the same thing.

“Bloody drunk drivers should be shot.”

“Well, he *did* die a bloody, agonizing death I’m sure.”

“The Royal Family are up to their necks in this.”

“Those poor boys.”

Half the adults in the room cried during the funeral, but the two young princes on the screen kept their heads bowed and their eyes dry.

“Good lads,” said one of the men downing half a glass of red wine, “Good show.”

“So brave,” a woman with tremulous brown eyes added, “We should bring our flowers down to the palace.”
“Don’t be thick, Barbara,” her husband snapped, “Do you really want to fight your way through that lot?”

All the children in the room knew it was time to go into the garden. We wandered around and took turns looking through the heavy black gate set in a gap in the wall. A large group of men gathered outside the pub down the street sang “Jerusalem” and waved beer glasses in the air, rows of little Union Jacks fluttering above their heads. “They do that when the football’s on too,” Harriet said, and we watched as two of the older boys snuck out the to join them. I told her I really liked her house and she smiled and said my mum was glamorous. We sat in the grass by the shed and she showed me how to make daisy chains by cutting a hole in the middle of the stalk with your thumbnail and threading another stalk through it. She talked a little of school and how her house the Pandas had come second in the annual drama competition.

“We lose just about everything,” she said, “But this year will be different. Maybe you’ll be one of us.”

Inside, an argument had broken out amongst the grown-ups.

“Has your mum cried much?”

I shrugged and said she had a bit.

“My mum won’t stop crying. Dad gets so cross. He says it’s irrational how upset everyone’s getting. Oh well,” she put the daisy chain on her head, “school starts soon.”

England was massive compared to Hong Kong, but despite the enormity of London and the miles of green hills and fields beyond it, the drive to Hollyfield seemed to take no time at all. Mum hummed along to the radio, and tutted as the presenters argued
about what’d happened to the foreigner who’d stolen a toy left at the palace for Princess Diana. He’d been spotted right away, beaten in the street, and arrested.

Hollyfield House stood on a tall hill, the school’s property encircled by woods. Beyond that lay acres of farmland, and the uniform list sent out to the parents each year contained a small note of warning about trespassing. My mother explained that the locals might not like having us on their land and to respect the boundary marked by the fence in the woods.

“You’re not to go petting the cows or befriending the farmers’ dogs. Those animals aren’t pets,” she ordered, a small smile on her face.

We were among the first to arrive, and after a quick tour of the school the Assistant Headmaster suggested that mum leave before it all got too emotional. I was deposited in my dorm and left alone to unpack.

A pair of muddy brown shoes appeared at the foot my bed.

“What the hell is that?”

*Beetles of the World* lay open next to me.

“Ugly looking thing, isn’t it?” the boy picked up the book and peered at the large photo of *kabutomushi* or the Japanese Horned Beetle, “Didn’t know little girls were into this sort of thing.”

“Get out, Colin,” the head of dorm had appeared in the doorway, “You know you’re not supposed to be up here.”

“I’m just introducing myself to our new insect girl.”
He tossed the book on the floor. Katie smiled and told him in the sweetest voice imaginable that if he didn’t leave that instant she would scream. He slouched out, knocking a pile of CDs off someone’s bedside table as he went, but he didn’t dare touch Katie. He was big but she was taller.

“See you later, Bug” he yelled from the corridor.

“Such a prat,” Katie shook her head, “Thinks he’s so cool now he’s in the firsts rugby team. It’s weird you two being in the same year.”

She looked at me with the doubtful expression I encountered often. The woman responsible for looking after the girls, frizzy-haired Miss Flannigan, had asked mum twice when we arrived whether she was sure that I was joining the third year not the first.

“Such a short wee thing,” she marveled, “We’ll have to make sure to feed you extra.”

Katie warned me to watch out for Colin as he liked to play tricks on new students. She then chatted about classes and what to expect from the different teachers. *Don’t piss off the geography teacher* was rule number one for surviving Hollyfield House, *Keep your wits about you in the art room* was number two. It was a one-sided conversation as Hong Kong didn’t seem to interest her in the slightest, though she was keen to find out what house I would be in – the Tigers, Kangaroos, Pandas, or Rhinos.

“Not the Rhinos, right?” she frowned, “It’s just that we’ve won the Sports Cup four years in a row and, well, do you even like sports?”

Not at all was the answer, but I fibbed, and she was so relieved to hear that I was a Kangaroo she dropped the subject entirely. Our interview was brought to an end by the
arrival of three excitable fifth years who leapt onto Katie’s bed and suggested, after a brief interrogation, that I go and find some third years to hang out with.

The girls dorms were on the top floor of the manor house, the showers and baths in the attic above. All of the dorms were named after flowers and decorated accordingly. I was to spend the term in the Rose Room with its appalling pink curtains and brown carpeting. At a loss, I hung around in the corridor and then fled to the attic after an awkward encounter with a girl dragging a locked trunk. The attic smelled of fresh paint and mold, a vignette of green slime around the edges of the windows. Wishing I’d brought a book, there was nothing to do but watch the cars pull into the driveway and hope that my mother’s might be one of them, that she would change her mind. She lied when she left and promised that the nice girl I’d met in London, the daughter of one of dad’s old school pals, would arrive any minute.

“I love you sweetheart,” she’d said, “Don’t forget-” but the rest of the words were drowned out by “Candle in the Wind.”

At thirteen, Colin should have been in his fifth and final year at Hollyfield House but a serious childhood illness had set him back. A short attention span coupled with the superior attitude fueled by being bigger than his classmates meant that the teachers had to work very hard to help him scrape a pass in the end of term exams. English was the exception. He had an inexplicable streak of brilliance when it came to the great works of British literature and he liked to march around the school reciting famous poems and speeches in a loud, dramatic voice.
“Now is the winter of our discontent,” he announced, standing on a chair in the middle of the dining hall as the students filed in for the start of term party, “Made glorious summer by this sun of York; And all the clouds that lour’d upon our house in the deep bosom of the ocean buried. Now are our brows bound with victorious wreaths; our bruised arms.”

“Oh for heaven’s sake, get down from there,” Miss Flannigan pulled his sleeve as she bustled passed with a plastic tray piled high with chocolate éclairs.

“Please, Miss Flannigan.” I ran to keep up with her. “Where’s Harriet?”

Down with the flu it transpired and not due for at least a week. I was crushed. Friendless. An éclair hit me on the back of the head.

Everyone in the room seemed to know each other except for the group of frightened first years clustered in a corner. Slipping over to a window near the group, I turned my back to the room and looked out to the cricket pitches at the bottom of the valley and the forest beyond. I couldn’t have imagined such darkness, isolated as we were on this lonely hill in the middle of farm country. Everything had seemed so bright that morning as we drove through the countryside, the land that stretched out on either side of the road rose and fell gently, both hills and valleys a luminous, fresh green in the sunlight.

What I had seen of the country around London had none of the drama of my mountainous island home, where the steep peaks resisted the human claim on the land, the plants and trees wild and prone to swallow buildings whole if left unchecked. But still, there had seemed something dreamy and soft about England. It was, after all, the land of my childhood stories and fairy tales, of hedgehogs in white aprons and rabbits in blue waistcoats. The woods were full of fairies with acorn shells for hats and gnomes
who smoked pipes on speckled toadstools. Delightful creatures that wouldn’t last a day in Hong Kong, easy prey to be gobbled up by pythons or snatched from the ground by large kites that surfed the winds. Seeing the true darkness for the first time I remembered the ghost stories my father used to read to me when I was younger and shivered.

“Myra Hindley” someone hissed in my ear.

Colin was standing behind me. He pushed an entire éclair into his mouth.

“Oh I’m sorry, did you want some?” he said mid chew, opening his mouth and pointing.

“You’re gross.”

He gulped, leered, chocolate between his teeth, and pushed me to the window.

“Myra Hindley is trying to get out of prison. My dad told me. He’s friends with the Home Secretary. You do know who Myra Hindley is don’t you, Bug?”

Even thousands of miles away in Hong Kong we knew about Myra Hindley, had traded stories in the playground of children murdered and eaten on the moors in the dead of night. We didn’t know what moors were but they terrified us all the same.

“Just think,” Colin mused, putting an arm around my shoulder, “She might find her way here. Might find a new little girl to play with.”

He jabbed a finger in my ribs and I screamed. He ran away cackling.

“He’s not as bad as he seems.”

A young man had been observing us. Eighteen or so he looked much older in a room full of eight- to thirteen-year-olds. A light hanging from the ceiling illuminated his glorious deep red hair. A flash of blond ran down one side of his head like lightning. He tilted his head and smiled.
“You must be the famous Bug. Homesick yet?”

He bent down and shook my hand.

“My name’s Will. I get homesick too.”

He then picked up a penguin bar from the table behind him and handed it to me, joking that Colin had probably eaten just about everything else in the room.

“Why don’t we find the other third year girls and you can meet them properly. I bet you have some crazy Hong Kong stories you can tell us.”

Taking my hand he walked me through the dining room and I felt saved, as Harriet Smith must’ve felt when Mr. Knightly asked her to dance. As a gap year student, he was paid little and worked a lot – assisting teachers in lessons, coaching swimming and football, enforcing lights out in the boys dorms, copying and faxing, helping serve food at mealtimes – but for all this he was known most for his kindness. He wasn’t influenced by the petty tides of popularity as other gap year students were, and treated all the children as if they were the most special person at Hollyfield House.

None of the new girls slept well that first night. The first years in Rose both cried well past lights out, and my sleep was disturbed by vague nightmares that seemed to follow me into reality every time I woke to find myself in a room with six strangers. There was nowhere to go, no one to talk to. All there was to connect me with Sonklin was the gold necklace she had unclasped from her own neck and given to me just before the handover.

“This will keep your spirit safe,” she’d said as we sat outside in the garden watching red ants march on a fat green caterpillar, “Until we meet again.”
The memory was warm and comforting and at dawn I fell into a more restful sleep, which in turn was interrupted when a woman burst into the dorm shouting “Wakey wakey!” and shaking a large bell.

From then on my movements were directed by the sounds of bells. The next bell after wake up summoned us to breakfast, and there we waited at our assigned tables until the vicar stood up, rang the small gold bell he kept in his front pocket, and we all recited a short prayer in Latin. At 8:45, the church bell rang and so we collected our Bibles and hymn books and made our way to chapel for a hymn, prayers, and short reading from the Bible. The first two morning lessons likewise began and ended with bells, as did eleventhes, a twenty-minute break for tea and biscuits. From there the bell lead us to the final morning class before lunch, and then the lunch gong, rung by the head cook who took out the morning’s frustrations on the dented bronze disc that hung outside the dining hall. Yet more bells signaled the afternoon classes, with a short break in between for fourses – more tea and biscuits and, occasionally, jam buns. At half-past five we went to the dining room again at the insistence of the gong, ate dinner, and then returned our trays passing either Miss Flannigan or the boys’ housemistress Mrs. White, who checked our plates to see if we had eaten enough. After dinner, another bell reminded us to return to our class-rooms for prep, an hour of silence where we either read or finished our homework. And then, finally, two-hours of quiet until the bell rang again and we trudged upstairs to put on pajamas, gathering afterwards in either the girls common room or television room downstairs for a small meal of biscuits and hot chocolate before bed.

Classes were unsettling. The teachers had little patience for failure. Even though I went to a British school in Hong Kong, so much of what we learned seemed distant and
disconnected, floating on a mysterious sea of meaning I couldn’t reach. Breaking the second rule of Hollyfield my first day I was struck on the ear by a flying paintbrush. The art teacher had a habit of throwing whatever object was closest to hand when he thought a student wasn’t paying attention. The geography teacher, Mr. Boyle, did indeed seem always to be on the point of “going nuclear” as the students liked to say. His hair, coarse and orange and nothing like Will’s, added to this effect. And then there was the strange Hollyfield House vernacular, sprinkled with Latin and Greek words and French verbs. “Let’s allez” meant “Let’s go.” If you were the first to shout “ego!” when someone shouted “quis?” you got whatever they were offering. A “boff” or “boffin” was a nerd, either a positive or derogatory marker depending on the speaker, and being “fit” had nothing to do with your stamina.

Harriet returned the second week of school and though I had to share her with the friends she’d already made the years before, she was always sympathetic and wanted to hear about Hong Kong and what we ate there and what the handover was like. She laughed when I told her about Colin, but always called me by my real name, which had otherwise vanished. Even the teachers knew me as “Bug.” Colin had a nickname for her too, “Piggy,” on account of her pigtails, but Miss Flannigan put her foot down on that one and banned him from making comments that might in any way suggest a girl was overweight.

Of all the annoyances and little injustices of life at a small, parochial boarding school, where the students liked to scream “Chav!” and “Pikey!” out the bus window on school trips, the theft of Sonklin’s gold necklace was the most enraging. It disappeared one Wednesday a month after the start of term. As we weren’t allowed to wear jewelry
during the week, I kept it in hidden in an old shoe beneath my bed, checking on it every day after prep. Harriet was quick to warn me not to tattle as I unleashed every expletive I knew and kicked the bed and cursed Colin to high heaven.

“I know he did it. I hate him. I hate him I hate him I hate him.”

“You don’t really know, you suspect.”

She sat cross-legged on the floor, a sage monk in a green pleated skirt and red jumper. Her plan was to post notices around the school offering a reward to the person who found the necklace, and in the meantime to keep an eye on Colin. If he had stolen it, she argued, he would not be able to keep it a secret for long and would no doubt taunt me with it before the term was up. I followed her advice and watched him closely but could discern no evidence of guilt in his teasing. He did sometimes grow quiet, troubled by something, but if he was burdened with regret for taking a classmate’s beloved possession he never let on.

The loss of the necklace amplified all the things I disliked about the school. Harriet made things easier, but the rhythms of life at Hollyfield never felt anything but forced and unnatural. I hated the bells, the wake up one worst of all as the female gap year student liked to creep through the dorms, choose a sleeper, and then shake the morning bell right next to the victim’s ear so that often we woke to the sound of screaming. Within a fortnight, I could no longer sleep past six imagining that every small sound was made by the gap year student. A deep crack ran along the slanted ceiling above my bed and I took to staring at it, forcing my mind inside it, and in that space I thought of home. There you could walk through Jade Valley Court and feel the sun-warmed concrete beneath bare feet, breathe in the smell of Sonklin’s grilled fish. I would follow the sounds of the frogs
and take the path through the communal garden, not daring to step on the grass for fear of snakes and giant snails the size of a fist. As I neared the apartment I could hear music and looking through the window watch my parents dancing in the living room. I could see Sonklin in the dining room setting the table of dinner and felt so hungry it hurt.

*

The whole dining room was clapping and jeering. Colin was beside himself with glee and banged his cutlery on the table and stamped his feet, squashing the baked beans that had rolled under his chair. I was on my knees. The boy, Fred, winced as he wiped sauce from his lap.

“You’ve done it now,” Colin leaned forward, “You’ve only gone and burned his cock off.”

“Watch it, boy.”

Mr. Boyle smacked Colin up the back of the head. He then grabbed the back of my jumper and pulled me to my feet.

“Sir, shouldn’t she apologise to everyone she spilled beans on? The bottom of my shoes are ruined…”

The onlookers cheered as I lunged forward and scratched Colin on the side of his face. He pushed his chair back so fast he fell onto the table behind him where the boys started chanting fight, fight, fight! Two hands took my arms, fingers digging into the flesh above my elbows, and I was lifted into the air and held there for a moment before Mr. Boyle took off at a run through the dining hall, carrying me like I was a rugby ball. He
didn’t set me down again until we reached the heavy oak door that led to the front of the manor house.

“Headmaster…” was all he could say, huffing like an angry hippo.

“Mr. Boyle! Mr. Boyle!”

Miss Flannigan caught up with us. She pulled me behind her and told the livid teacher she would take care of it.

“Despicable,” he spat, “Despicable, rabid female-”

“You know how the headmaster feels about staff manhandling the students,” she urged giving him a meaningful look, “Let me take her.”

And with that she pushed me through the door and led me up the forbidden marble suitcase where none of the children were allowed to tread. The carpet here was so thick and plush the ground felt unsteady, as though it might collapse at any moment. I asked Miss Flannigan what my punishment was to be.

“That’s up to the headmaster, dear, now in we go.”

The headmaster’s study was a large, semi-circular room that overlooked the driveway. Miss Flannigan sat me down in one of two chairs in front of a vast desk and told me to take off my jumper. Upon observing the red marks above my elbows she sighed and announced that she would have to fetch some arnica cream, and that I would wait for the headmaster quietly and not touch anything if I knew what was good for me. Once alone, I drew my legs up and massaged the sore spot on my shin where Colin had kicked me, tripping me up so that I spilled the entire tray of steaming baked beans.

Poor Fred. And Poor Will. He too had been splashed with scalding sauce. He was the innocent victim of Colin’s tricks but would never know the truth. He would blame
me. The wooden African masks on the mantelpiece blamed me too, staring from their hollow eyes at my humiliation. I didn’t have a clue what to expect when the headmaster arrived. He was just sort of there, at meals sometimes, in chapel almost always, a hulking, faraway presence like a castle on a distant hill. When he spoke it was in quiet, measured sentences, but his power was absolute. In chapel he sat in the front pew, the naughty students behind him as no one dared to misbehave in such close proximity to him even though he never shouted like Mr. Boyle. Harriet said that he and the Assistant Headmaster often disagreed on the subject of punishments. The Assistant thought that detention was more modern, while the Headmaster believed that the punishment ought to fit the crime. In my case would that mean I was to be burned too?

His study was a museum. In one glass cabinet he kept antique padded cuffs, patient records, and medicine bottles from Hollyfield’s past life as an a rest home for the “feebleminded.” In another, rows upon rows of uncut precious and semi-precious stones twinkled in morning light. The wall above the fireplace bore a collection of sepia-toned Victorian photographs, the morbid preoccupations of the era captured in a picture of dead child, a lock of hair pinned beneath it.

“I’m sorry to have kept you waiting.”

I hadn’t heard him come in, but there he was holding a plastic tube in his hand.

“Do have a seat,” he gestured to a chair, placed the tube on the desk in front of it, and then turned to unlock a large cupboard. “Miss Flannigan has passed on some ointment for your arms.”
It wasn’t clear whether I was to use the arnica then or take the tube away with me, but it didn’t seem quite the right thing to do to rub medicine on myself in front of him, so I left it on the table.

“These are from your part of the world,” he took out a Chinese clay teapot and ivory spoon and set them on the desk. He then brought out a silver box and opened it revealing a colourful tea collection. There was a knock on the door and one of the kitchen staff entered with a thermos of hot water. She put it on the desk, bowed slightly to the headmaster, and left without a word.

The headmaster scooped four spoonfuls of tea into the pot and poured the water in releasing fragrant steam into the room. Closing the silver box he put it back in the cupboard along with the spoon and the thermos.

“Which cups should we use today.”

He walked over to the far side of the study and unlocked one of the glass cabinets, looking at each set closely before picking out two pink porcelain cups and an ornate silver tea strainer. Settling into the leather chair behind the desk, he placed a cup in front of me and filled it with tea before filling his own.

“You’ll be pleased to learn that Mr. Wetherall’s injuries are not serious.”

He paused before continuing.

“At Hollyfield House we strive to prepare our students for positions of leadership in whichever fields they pursue at university and beyond. Academics are, of course, a priority but we must take into account the entirety of a person. Her behaviour and moral fortitude. How she is perceived by others.”

He reached out and picked up the telephone.
“In cases of grievous misconduct such as this, it is my responsibility to inform the malefactor’s parents of what has transpired in the hope that their sincere concern for the success and wellbeing of their daughter will move them to act in her best interest. It gives me no pleasure to anger or disappoint the parents of our students, many of whom were students here themselves like your father, but unless I can be assured of the future good conduct of a girl these phone calls must be made. Now, I can telephone your parents at this very moment, or-” he put down the phone and leaned forward a little, “You can give me your word that you will apologize to Mr. Wetherall and behave like the pleasant young lady we all wish you to be.”

“I will. I promise.”

“Well then,” he leaned back, brought his hands together, and gave me a kindly smile, “We will say no more about what has transpired this morning. I suppose it is time for you to run along to your first lesson.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you.”

I got up and left in the most graceful manner I could manage, bowing as I left the room.

Once the door was closed behind me, I opened the bottle of arnica and sniffed it. It smelled awful. I had the feeling I’d been fooled somehow, that the victory wasn’t quite mine, but then, Colin would hate that no punishment had been given. My parents would never know anything about it. I bounced down the stairs and through the oak door towards the old servant staircase, which led up to the dorms. The building was quieter than usual as all the other students were in lessons. A hoover was being dragged up and down
one of the girls dorms overhead and I could hear the housemistresses gossiping in Mrs. White’s flat on the second floor. The boys dorms were empty then. It was a risk, a very great risk after having so narrowly escaped an awful bollicking from my parents, but I might not get another chance. Instead of continuing up the stairs to the girls’ floor I turned into the boys corridor. Finding Colin’s room was easy as the boys’ names were taped beside each dorm door. His was called Mountbatten. I crept inside and made my way to his bed, the one with all the books scattered around it, and rifled through his wardrobe and rooted around under his mattress. The necklace wasn’t there. He must have hidden it elsewhere. Not daring to stay any longer I dashed back down the corridor, went up to my dorm to fetch my notebook and pencil case, and headed down to geography class.

Everyone looked around when I entered and Colin gave me the finger, a layer of clear goop on the side of his face.

“If Bug will refrain from attacking anyone,” Mr. Boyle said turning back to the board, “We will be carrying on with our study of rivers. Does anyone recall how the islands in a river are formed?”

Colin avoided me for the next few weeks, which I took as a sign that he knew I was on to him. In my desire to catch him red handed I found it increasingly difficult to sleep. Summer had long since departed and the ancient heating system was no match for the chilly autumn winds that blew through gaps in the windows and doors. After prep, the corridors were filled with chattering students sitting on the floor with their backs to the radiators in an effort to keep warm.
One night, the week after Halloween, I couldn’t sleep at all. Deciding that some television might help, I headed downstairs to the TV room but before I got there I spotted someone climbing out a window at the other end of the corridor. It was Colin. I hesitated. It was dark outside, and cold. Whatever had driven Colin out into the night had to be important, the stashing of stolen goods for instance. There was no other choice. Reminding myself that Myra Hindley was locked up, I followed him through the window and out into the grounds.

He made for the holly bush maze that gave Hollyfield House its name. I tiptoed behind at a safe distance, my slippers soaked through. After glancing behind him he entered the maze and I waited a moment before going after him. It was even darker within the twisting paths of holly, the cruel leaves grey in the moonlight. Round and round I went until I neared the centre of the maze and stopped, planning to jump out and give Colin the fright of his life until I heard someone call out his name in a soft voice. We weren’t alone.

Crouching on all fours, I edged around the corner to get a better look at the third person in the maze. The red hair was unmistakable. What was he doing there? Waiting to catch Colin in the act? They stared at each other for a while before Will pulled Colin to him and hugged him tight, stroking his hair. Colin then pulled a plastic bag from under the holly, took out a blanket, and they both lay down on it, holding hands and staring at the sky.


“Be not afeard. The isle is full of noises,

Sounds and sweet airs that give delight and hurt not.
Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments
Will hum about mine ears, and sometime voices,
That, if I then had wakened after long sleep,
Will make me sleep again…”

I was trespassing where I didn’t belong. Crawling backwards first and then standing up to retreat, I wanted to be back in my bed. My sleeve got caught and the holly shook as I freed it.

“Is someone there?”

Colin’s voice was fearful. Not waiting to find out if they saw me, I ran back through the maze and across the lawn towards the window. It was closed. Putting my hands against the glass I pushed upwards and fell headfirst through the gap scraping my back. Down the corridor and up the stairs I went, taking care to avoid the creaky floorboards, and once safe inside my dorm kicked off my slippers and got under the covers. I lay there for a few minutes, listening for the sounds of movement below but heard nothing. Soon I fell fast asleep, and didn’t wake up again until the female gap year student shook the wake up bell in my face.

On the way to breakfast, I was accosted by Colin who pushed me into a downstairs bathroom and locked the door.

“It was you, wasn’t it,” he snarled, putting a hand on my throat and pushing me against the wall.

“Colin, I never-”
He squeezed my neck tighter for a few seconds and then let it go. He put his hands on the wall, my head in between, and demanded to know what I had seen.

“It’s ok,” I pleaded, trying not to cry, “It’s ok I swear on my mother’s life I won’t tell anyone.”

“Tell anyone what?”

“It’s ok. I understand. Sonklin’s brother is gay too.”

He hit the wall and swore.

“What the- It’s not even like- Don’t compare me with your dopey servant, worm.”

I protested but he put his hand over my mouth and told me to shut up. A group of girls was passing the bathroom and I thought about shouting for help, but despite the violence, despite all he had done to me, despite his insults against Sonklin, Colin was in that moment someone to be pitied. Pushing his hand away I swore again on my mother’s grave that his secret was safe with me, that he needn’t be afraid.

Harriet was concerned when I joined her in the dining hall and asked me what was wrong.

“Nothing at all,” I answered loudly as Colin sat down, “What’s for breakfast?”

Just as it was about time to clear the plates, Mrs. White came over and whispered something in Colin’s ear. When she was gone, he glared at me, hands trembling, and I shook my head mouthing no. Once outside, he vanished amidst the crush of students and I only spotted him again when we were all queuing to get into chapel. The headmaster was opening one of the manor side doors, ushering both Colin and Will inside.

“What’s all that about?” Harriet wondered.
The hymn for the day was “My Song is Love Unknown,” a wretched choice, and never could Mr. Boyle’s enthusiasm for singing have been more hateful. Love to the Loveless shown he bellowed, that they might lo-vely be… In the absence of the headmaster, the naughty students at the front talked and giggled through the whole service and the teachers yawned and looked bored. Mrs. White tapped her foot and flattened her hair over and over again. Miss Flannigan was oblivious. Whatever had happened, my part must have gone unnoticed and I wished that it wasn’t so, that I too had been summoned to the headmaster’s office.

*

The water frothed with drowning lice. Eleven girls in pale pajamas stood with me in a semi-circle around a basin, the thirteenth stood before it, the water from her wet hair pooling at her feet.

“Hey you, Bug, you try.”

Katie handed me a fine-toothed metal comb. I stepped forward and put it against the infested girl’s hair.

“Not like that,” the big hand gripped mine, “You’ve got to go from the top.”

“She’s too short,” someone hissed and everyone laughed.

I edged into the puddle on my tiptoes as Katie forced my hand to the top of the scalp and then dragged it down, the comb scraping skin.

“God Franny, you have such a knobbly head.”

“How many did you get this time?” Francesca asked, massaging her hair.
The girls urged me to answer and so I lifted the comb to the light to count the wriggling black insects caught between the teeth.

“Seven,” I said, and the girls gave a collective eurgh and began laughing again.

“Looks like we have a serious invasion on our hands, girls,” she pushed me towards the door, “You can tell the nurse.”

Before I could open it Harriet ran in, both pigtails in her mouth.

“Did you hear?” she asked through a mouthful of hair.

“Hear what? And for God’s sake stop sucking your hair,” Katie snapped.

She spat the pigtails out.

“It’s Colin. He’s gone missing.”

*  

They woke us early the next morning to continue the search. The headmaster interrupted us during breakfast and explained the procedure for the day emphasizing organization and restraint. Several of the teachers exchanged nervous glances across the tables. Will and Colin’s chairs were empty. After clearing our plates away we lined up outside on the front lawn and were put into groups of eight or so, each group headed by a member of staff. Katie and I were with the English teacher, and he made a poor job of trying to convince us that Colin was safe and most likely playing a practical joke.

We followed him down into the forest and walked side by side in a line, treading carefully in case we missed something. The woods echoed with his name as the different groups pushed on, people sometimes stopping to check under a bush or behind a fallen
tree. Startled rabbits fled into the undergrowth. A pheasant screeched and flew up into a tree in a whirl of brightly coloured feathers. As we passed the school boundary we heard the sound of rushing water, the river swollen from last night’s rain.

I think all of us in the woods that morning knew that Colin was dead, but it didn’t prepare us for finding his body, cold and alone in the mud, a rucksack in one hand and broken torch in the other. Nothing could have prepared me to look into his eyes, all trace of spirit and feeling gone, his forehead stained with blood.

“Away, children, away,” the English teacher said to us, kneeling beside Colin, and to himself he murmured, “Under the greenwood.”

Nothing became of Colin’s death. A small editorial appeared in the newspaper; “MP’s son dies tragically in accident at local boarding school.” We held a short memorial service for him in chapel. Will was called away on a family emergency, the rumour went, and we never saw him again.

“What if someone was chasing him,” I asked Harriet.

“This is England,” she scolded, “People don’t just chase boys around in the middle of the night.”

“But what if it wasn’t exactly a person but a thing. Like a fear, or a truth or,” I held both my hands out trying to capture the idea, “Or a judgment?”

I thought of the dead cats at home. Something had killed them, ripped open their skin and exposed their insides. We’d been looking to unmask a murderer, Sonklin and I, but the trail of dead bodies led us to a sad woman instead. We discovered her loneliness.
There’d been a kind of trial and she was found guilty. It wasn’t fair. Her dog’s crime belonged to all of us.

Harriet took my hands, “You’re just feeling bad because you and Colin didn’t get on. It was all a terrible accident. It could happen to anyone running through the woods at night.”

After Hollyfield, I didn’t think of Colin again for over a decade, not until I was sitting in a West End theatre one night at a performance of *The Tempest*, and a ghost stepped into centre stage.
2. Water Children

Smith squints at her profile, watching. This time Mona actually touches one of the Jizo statues. First, with the tip of her right index finger, she strokes the small figure’s face, and then she picks up its red scarf, feeling the softness in her clenched fist. Her face is concealed by hair. Smith prepares to change position but is startled by a sound behind him. A young Japanese couple walks hand in hand down another row of Jizo statues in the sunny temple garden, the woman smiling at the red scarves, colourful woolen hats, and all the other little presents placed on and beside the idols. The young man keeps looking at the woman, monitoring the expression on her face. Smith leans against the tree, the bark scratching at his back through his thin shirt, and pulls out his phone with practiced nonchalance. The young man glances at him and nods once. A gesture of sympathy.

The couple wanders on and finally stops before a statue at the north end of the garden, kneeling with their backs to Smith, the woman’s shoulders relaxed, the man’s head bowed. Smith turns and sees Mona meandering away down the long line of stone children, pausing to feel this one’s hat or that one’s scarf. She then stops and swoops down on a figure at the end of the row, nose to nose with its mold-blackened face. The sun and rain have dissolved whatever clothing it might once have possessed, leaving it naked in the garden, its body darker than the rest. Smith is aware of a faint drumming on his wrist. His watch and his heartbeat are in sync but Mona straightens, steps back, stride
toward the east gate and his pulse quickens. He emerges from the shadow of the tree and follows her.

The quiet disintegrates as he nears the east gate, and on the other side the world is bright and loud and full of people. Mona is talking to the old woman who sits by the gate each day at a wooden stall knitting red hats and scarves for women to buy if they cannot make their own. She sits with her back to the wall, the unofficial keeper of the Garden of Unborn Children, never looking at those who enter or leave unless they address her directly and even then she gives them just one small glance with age-yellowed eyes before returning to her knitting needles. Smith lingers on the other side of the wall out of sight where he can only distinguish stray syllables of Mona’s quiet Japanese amidst the sounds of traffic. The sense is lost in the noise, except for a bright *arigatou gozaimasu*. Smith counts to five and then looks through the gateway. Mona is crossing the road and again he follows, watching the sway of her fluid gold-brown hair.

In the mid-afternoon lull between lunch and rush hour, the streets are almost free of office workers. Old men and women, young mothers, and high school students sit under colourful umbrellas outside European-style cafes where the drinks are Tokyo sweet. It is hot on the wide pavement, exposed, the sun high above the pale low-rise buildings, and when Smith looks back at the temple which is obscured by dark green trees, it seems to shimmer like a mirage. Mona ambles several meters in front of him in her unhurried way, her unsymmetrical gait as distinctive as her hair. When she walks her hips sway more to the left than to the right, hypnotic, and Smith follows to the beat of her hips. As they near the train station he holds his breath until Mona passes by the entrance and then he exhales, stops, and loiters by the steps as she joins a bus line further along the street.
When it arrives, the bus is only half-full and bound for the heart of the city. Once she is out of sight, Smith descends into the station and finds an empty seat on a train going in the opposite direction. He pulls out a book, and like the rest of the passengers in his carriage avoids eye contact for the duration of the journey.

Smith’s apartment block towers square and white above the one and two-bedroom houses in a quiet suburb on the outskirts of Tokyo. The sun has just set as he approaches carrying bags of food, and many of the block’s windows flicker with the blue of television sets. Once a hospital, the building was converted after the Occupation, withstood the subsequent economic boom, and survived attempts during the Lost Decade to convert it into an asylum. In more recent years, the building has resisted the rapid gentrification of the area and with the exception of two small concessions – a new coat of paint and a pair of cloud pines by the front door – the block has remained much as it ever was much to the displeasure of the neighbourhood homeowners association.

The elevator shudders and still retains a faint odor of death and antiseptic, at least according to blind Ms. Nagata who lives on the fourth floor next to Smith and always leaves her door open. As Smith creeps past her apartment he holds the plastic bags away from his body in one hand and carefully inserts his key with the other.

“Smith-san?”

“Hello, Ms. Nagata,” Smith replies, letting the bags drop.

“I thought you were the FBI.”

“It’s just me.”

“They took my father away in his dressing gown.”
Smith opens his door and puts the bags inside. The old woman calls his name again and he edges back toward her apartment and peers into the darkness. Ms. Nagata sits at a small wooden table in the middle of her living room moulding fruit out of wax.

“The FBI took my father away and put me and my mother on a train.”

“Yes, Ms. Nagata.”

“They sent us to the desert.”

“Yes, Ms. Nagata.”

“There was no water. No trees.”

“We’re all real sorry about that, Ms. Nagata.”

The old lady puts down the wax grape and picks up another. The room smells of thyme and old clothes. Smith backs away and then pauses to ask if she would like the light on.

“I didn’t even speak Japanese back then,” she grumbles in reply, and so Smith wishes her a good night and returns to his apartment, locking the door behind him.

After unpacking the bags of milk, instant noodles, bread, and beer, he goes into the bathroom to remove his wig, an expensive one made of real hair. He rubs his bare scalp. When he was in middle school, he had such a bad infestation of lice that his mother shaved his head and the hair never grew back. He picks up a face wipe and drags it across his skin, removing tinted moisturizer that smells of artificial fruit. Running his hands under the tap, he then presses cooled fingers to his cheeks, the skin red and raw from the summer heat.

The secret project quiets his mind. He settles in front of his computer with a bowl of cereal and logs on to Facebook. Consulting a list of Facebook friends connected to his
study abroad program in Japan, he examines each person’s wall, posts, and recent photographs. One girl from his film class has several photos from a night out in Shibuya and he finds a shot of Mona arm-in-arm with two girls. The others pout and pose but Mona’s face is blurred from laughing. He copies it anyway. In another picture the girls are taking shots, and Mona’s head is tilted back, her neck pale and luminous from the flash. He finds only one more recent photograph of Mona on Facebook – the back of her latex Silk Spectre costume at a comic convention– and then repeats the procedure on Tumblr, Twitter, Instagram, and a few disparate Google Plus pages.

At eleven, he pulls a beer from the fridge, flops back into his chair, and spins it around a couple of times before crumpling up a worn post-it note on his desk. Mona’s online persona is limited to an email address, just her first and last name. He rewrites it on a fresh post-it and sticks it at the top of his monitor. He stares at it for a while. Ms. Nagata’s clock on the other side of the wall marks the seconds, the sound reverberating around his bare apartment. Putting his headphones on, he selects an album and turns the volume way up. He then opens a fresh browser and researches Jizo statues late into the night.

The girls to Smith’s right hold hands as Yoshimi Matsubara approaches the water tank that contains the body of a dead little girl. Oh my God someone mutters as the camera returns to Yoshimi’s apartment where her own little girl is running a bath. The water turns brown and everyone jumps when the ghost girl emerges from the bathtub, everyone except Mona who is doodling in her notebook. The Jizo statue she is sketching bears the same serene smile as those in the temple she frequents, but there is something about the
way she draws that suggests more flesh than stone. The statue looks almost alive, like a sleeping baby. In the climactic scene, Yoshimi tries to flee the apartment block with her daughter only to realize that the girl she carries is the dead one. Giving herself up to the ghost who grips her neck with pallid fingers, she allows the elevator doors to close as her child looks on in tears. When the doors open again, a torrent of brown water pours out, but mother and ghost are gone.

Students stretch, yawn, and laugh a little when the lights come on. Professor Yamada returns to the podium and asks them what they thought of the movie. The response is mostly positive and everyone agrees that it is better than the American version.

“What about the ending? Why do we return to the apartment with Ikuko all those years later?”

Professor Yamada looks around the room while waiting for a response.

“Uh, because it’s less depressing?” someone volunteers.

“Less depressing?” one of the girl’s to Smith’s right exclaims, “The mom is stuck with that creepy girl for like all eternity.”

Smith looks down at his notes about motherhood. The image of The Mother is nothing like his own. *Just join a fucking club or something* she told him the last time he offered up vulnerability in exchange for warmth. *I don’t know how to make friends*, he had confessed, *I don’t know what to be.*

Mona continues to draw as the students debate the merits of sacrifice and the afterlife. Not one to speak up much in class, she hasn’t offered an answer or a response
since they watched Ozu’s *Tokyo Twilight*, which had led to a long and uncomfortable discussion on abortion in Japan.

“It’s so weird to have abortion in a black and white movie,” a Sophomore girl had commented, “Did they even have abortion back then?”

When the conversation grew heated, Professor Yamada interrupted with a small lecture on fetus memorial services in Japan, which were held for those miscarried, still-born, and aborted.

“The *Mizuko of Mizuko Kuyo,*” he explained, “Means ‘water child,’ so those still in the womb. The services are based on Buddhist practices, the small idols they use to honor the dead named after the Bodhisattva, Jizo, protector of women, children, and travelers. But we’re running out of time so let’s return to how Akiko’s situation is portrayed in the film...”

The day after that class, Smith had followed Mona from her dorm to the station (taking a different carriage on the same train) and then on to the temple where he looked on as she circled the garden for over an hour. The next time she had brought a camera, and after that a sketchbook and a set of paint pots. The routine established, Smith sometimes waited for her in the garden, always in a different shirt and always out of sight.

“Ok, for next week,” Professor Yamada addresses the class as they pack up to leave, “you must write a short paper comparing the Japanese and American versions of *Dark Water*. Pay particular attention to the endings, why are they so different? What does a comparison reveal about different images of motherhood in America and Japan? How does the addition of a father change the story?”
Yamada has to shout the last part as the Friday afternoon excitement sets in. The students, mostly English and American, are quick to leave the classroom but mill about in the corridor as plans for the night are established.

“How’s my favourite skinhead?”

Ed punches Smith in the shoulder and takes his baseball cap. Smith snatches it back and puts it on his head. The Manchester University student is something of an irritation, something of a friend. About to change his degree for the third time, he is at times sympathetic and at times indifferent to Smith’s problem of settling on a major.

“Come on, mate,” Ed puts a heavy arm around his shoulders, “We’re going drinking.”

The buses are too crowded to travel as a group but by chance Ed and Smith get on the same one as Mona. His chest jammed against the ticket box, Smith feels the weight of the wig at the bottom of his rucksack. Mona’s friends talk loud and fast and Smith keeps turning his head to look at them until Ed makes a joke about getting laid. One of the girls overhears and flips him the finger. The streets grow more packed as they approach Shibuya and lines have already formed outside many of the restaurants. The neon signs and billboards are lit, clashing with the late afternoon sunlight. They get off the bus underneath an enormous poster of a man with a thick head of hair and too-white teeth brandishing a bottle of vitamins. Mona leads the way, cutting straight through the throng as the others dodge left and right around people.

On the eleventh floor of a high rise filled with ramen shops, high and low end sushi bars, steak restaurants, pizza joints, jazz lounges, karaoke clubs, and more bars, Kenji
B Goode recommends itself to foreign students in Tokyo with its central location, three pool tables, eclectic jukebox, and nightly drinks specials. Now that the bar is the unofficial meeting place for students from several study programs, the enterprising owner has launched a quiz night, pool tournaments, an open mic night, and a weekly beer pong championship. Ed overtakes the girls at the entrance and heads for the bar waving at people as he goes. Smith follows behind, almost brushing Mona’s arm as he passes her. The walls are decorated with framed adverts from the fifties and sixties. In one, a blonde in a pink twinset and pearls smokes a cigarette. In another, a Japanese woman in a silver space suit holds a cup of tea. Smith and Ed sit down at the end of the bar next to a picture of a young girl in a kimono eating an ice cream.

Ed orders two ginger and jaeger shots, two beers, a plate of octopus skewers, and curly fries. As each new group enters the bar they are welcomed with shouts of recognition. Mona seems to know everyone. She flows around the room adjusting to each personality with ease. Even without Facebook, Snapchat, Twitter, Whatsapp, Skype, or any of the popular platforms designed to help people communicate, she is the kind of person that someone always remembers to invite. While friends with a group of girls who listen to pop stars churned out by the Disney machine and wear Hello Kitty hair clips with their leather jackets and tight jeans, she also often eats lunch with the Japan-o-philes, an aloof group of anime fans who date only Japanese women. She goes to gigs in dingy bars with the hipster kids, and jazz cafes with a group of business majors in another program. She can argue about Yoshimoto Banana and Haruki Murakami with the book freaks - is it really Literature? - and talk football with just about anyone.
Smith wonders if she had to choose just one, which group of friends she would pick. He takes his shot and grimaces while Ed explains how he likes to start the night at the bar with a lad or two. “Get some proper chat in, you know?” They talk about soccer, which Smith knows a little about, and then new music. As he orders their third beer Ed swears and gestures to his ex-girlfriend.

“Going for a smoke. Watch out for the she-devil.” Giving the girl a wide berth, he leaves.

Smith turns back to the bar and stares at his beer. The air-conditioning vent by his shoes goes into high gear as the room nears maximum capacity, chilling his feet. The skin on his cheeks burns from the alcohol and he puts his beer to his face.

“My girl Mona,” someone behind him calls out, “Where you been? When you gonna get online?”

Smith puts the glass down and shifts his body to listen.

She laughs and replies, “Well, it’s just that -”

Ed’s ex-girlfriend flings herself onto the stool next to Smith, checks that she has his name right, and then complains about how incestuous the Tokyo dating scene has become.

“Don’t you find it so annoying how we all go to the same bars and see the same people?”

Smith glances at the back of Mona’s head.

“And there are what, five Japanese people here,” Ed’s ex says knocking back the rest of her drink.
Smith scans the room. There are at least fifteen Japanese people in the bar. Ken-ji’s is popular with young cashiers and shop assistants, some in traditional uniforms, others in flashy designer clothes. They work late and party hard. Everyone here is young, even the people on the walls, and all seem to have figured out how to be someone.

When he can, he escapes to the bathroom. Perhaps resigned to the inevitability of toilet graffiti, the owner leaves a mug filled with different coloured pens by the sink each night, and the wall is a frenzy of lewd drawings and jokes. Uncle Sam bends over. Hitler winks clutching his big breasts. A well-endowed Godzilla rampages above the urinals. On the other side of the mirror, the girls’ bathroom rings out with the sounds of doors slamming, water running, and laughter. Smith leaves and stands between the bathroom doors pretending to text, keeping an eye out for Mona. Ed reenters the bar and Smith pushes his way through the crowd to join him.

“Hey, have you seen those girls from our film class?” he asks Ed as they wait for a drink.

“Oh yeah they just left. Don’t know where.”

Smith pulls out his wallet to pay his tab but Ed pushes his hand down, and tells him to stay for just one more drink.

Smith is hungover by the time he reaches the suburbs. His road is dead quiet, and he follows the pools of orange light from the street lamps all the way home. The elevator groans. He tiptoes along the corridor but Ms. Nagata’s door is closed and she doesn’t call out to him.
Smith wakes at nine the next morning to go to the temple. He puts on his wig, smoothes tinted moisturizer on his face, and chooses a pair of sunglasses. Ms. Nagata’s door is still closed. There is a commotion on the ground floor and Smith hesitates by the elevator, listening to the tenants chatter in the lobby around the corner.

“I just knew something was wrong when I saw her door was closed,” a man tells the group, “She always left it open.”

“They say she’s been dead for over a whole day” a woman adds in a thrilled voice, “Isn’t it sad.”

The tenants murmur in agreement.

“The repair man has just told me,” the man continues, lowering his voice, “that Ms. Nagata was interned in America during the war, and that a journalist has already called the landlord asking for a statement.”

“Why are they raking all that up again,” an older male voice complains as several tenants gasp in excitement, “Haven’t they had enough?”

“They’ll be wanting to speak to that foreign boy then. The one next to Ms. Nagata. Mrs. Masuji in 4C says that she was always pestering him about the war.”

Smith backs away, runs up the staircase to the fourth floor, and locks himself in his apartment. He removes his shoes and wig, washes the moisturizer from his face, and sits at his desk. The keys clatter when he types. He stops. Ms. Nagata’s clock marks the time with loud beats.

For the next few days, Smith creeps around his apartment while waves of journalists and photographers visit the old lady’s apartment and interview the neighbours. She has no surviving relatives and so the landlord takes charge of going through her cup-
boards and drawers looking for historical documents. Each time there is a knock at his
doors, Smith freezes, taking shallow breaths while the man or woman in the corridor calls
his name and asks for information. Sometimes they push notes and business cards under
the door with questions like, “Did Ms. Nagata talk about the war with you?” and “How
did it make you feel?” On Sunday, her life story is published in all the local news
sources. Born in 1932, she spent her formative years first at an internment camp for Japa-
nese-American civilians in the Utah desert, and then in a decimated post-war Japan. Her
father died of tuberculosis while in FBI custody, and her mother could not bear to remain
in America where she and her daughter had to reply “Chinese” when asked which “-ese”
they were. “The young Ms. Nagata could only speak English,” one reporter wrote, “what
an adjustment it must have been.”

Every day it rains.

Smith doesn’t know how he would respond to the journalist’s questions, how to
speak for his entire nation. He rations his food as the newspapers continue to mourn the
dwindling wartime generation. How many stories have been lost, the writers ask, and can
the young truly understand the nature of sacrifice? Smith flinches each time he hears the
elevator doors open. During the day, he reads in bed making as little noise as possible.
During the night, he sits at his computer and consults his list. No new photos of Mona
appear.

On Wednesday, a young starlet confesses on Twitter that she has thought about
suicide and the journalists stop knocking on Smith’s door. By Friday, it is quiet enough to
for him to leave his apartment. He almost skips as he walks from the train station to film
class. A few minutes late, he is the last to enter the room and Professor Yamada nods once at him and asks him if he is feeling better.

“No Mona again today,” the professor frowns looking around the room, “Has anyone seen her recently?”

“I heard she had some kind of major family emergency. Apparently she’s not coming back to school.”

Smith is deafened by the crashing of air molecules in his ears.

The first place Smith decides to go after class is the temple. He rubs moisturizer on his face on the way to the station, and places the wig on his head on the train, ignoring the surprised and sympathetic looks of the passengers around him. At the stop for the temple, he pushes his way off the carriage and runs to the Garden of Unborn Children, slowing to a brisk walk when he nears the gate.

“Hey you,” the old woman beckons him to her stall.

Smith turns to see who she is talking to.

“You,” she insists, “Young man.”

Wary, he greets the old woman with a small bow.

She looks ancient, older even than Ms. Nagata, except for her fingers which are slim and youthful.

“I have the clothes your girlfriend requested, would you like to take them now?” she asks him winding red wool into a ball.

Smith is about to say what girlfriend? but thinks better of it and asks the woman if she has seen the girl in the last few days.
The woman shakes her head and tells him that she has not been there for over a week. “Thursday,” she adds, “Four o’clock. You remember.”

Smith takes the soft red hat and scarf and thanks the woman. He walks through the east gate into the temple grounds to think. Circling the garden, he hums a tune to calm himself. He feels the absence before understanding it. One of the Jizo statues is missing, the dark one that caught Mona’s attention. He turns and leaves the temple.

During the taxi ride back into the heart of Tokyo, he thinks of ways to give the clothes to Mona. In every imagined scenario the conversation ends with Mona shrieking and calling him a freak. Though it will scare her, he decides that his only option is to leave the old woman’s wares by her dorm room door, or in her mailbox if they fit. As they close in on her building, the traffic slows and then stops completely. Smith pays the driver and gets out, taking a short cut through a small park. The air is thick and noxious with fumes, but the space is illuminated with golden evening light. Birds call to one another in the trees, and children play beneath them, screaming with laughter.

A heavily pregnant woman in a green silk dress sits on a bench, a suitcase beside her feet.

“Mona...”

Smith’s voice is hoarse.

She looks up at him, smiles, and greets him by his first name. Smith stares at her stomach.

“It’s great, isn’t it,” she says getting to her feet, “I’ve always wanted to be a mother.”
The skin around her face and down her arms is dark, almost bruised. She brushes hair off her forehead and her smile deepens.

“Ever since I can remember, whenever someone asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up I said, ‘I am going to be a mom.’”

“You- you’re going to be a great mom.”

Smith reaches up to rub his head. His hand freezes when his fingers find the wig.

“We’re leaving the city tonight,” she says, looking out to the children playing in the hazy polluted sunlight, “Tokyo is no place to raise a child.”

Smith stares at her. He reaches into the rucksack to pull out the small hat and scarf.

“Hey thanks,” Mona puts the fabric against her lips for a moment, “I forgot all about these. There’s just so much to think about.”

A plastic ball rolls between them. A small boy approaches to claim it, and Mona returns it to him with a soft kick, biding him a good evening in a merry voice.

“Here!” she exclaims, taking Smith’s hand and putting it on her stomach, “Can you feel that?”

A small fist beats, beats, beats against the palm of his hand.
3. All Flowers are Beautiful

Part One

Kyoto

The woman wears red rubber gloves and a white cap. The skin around her nose and mouth bears deep grooves for a lifetime of pursed lips. She inches forward on her hands and knees picking up cigarette ends from where a dropped ashtray has splashed its contents across the floor. The gold bands around the filters glint in the strips of sunlight that shine through the half-closed blinds. Once she has picked up the cigarette ends, the woman sets about sweeping the ash into a dustpan, holding her breath as the clouds swirled around her. She sweeps under the sofa, and then pushes it back to reach the rest, the wooden floor beneath heavily scratched. Something clatters in the dustpan. The woman sits back, feels around in the ash, and pulls out a small object. It is a human tooth. The woman sighs and shakes her head and then looks over to a black lacquer cabinet in the corner. The door is ajar and light falls on the locked leather-bound chest inside. The woman puts the tooth in her pocket. Pulling the sofa back into place she stands up and stretches, closes the cabinet door, shuts the blinds, and collects the dustpan and brush before leaving. Her key rattles in the lock.

The monkeys have the best view of Kyoto. From the top of their mountain, the Arashiyama Monkey Park, you can see the whole city. When I first moved to Japan, I
went to the park every weekend to photograph the monkeys, attempting to capture their facial expressions at their most human, which at any moment can remind you of that grandfather you are particularly fond of or a child who made faces at you on the bus. Once I met Michiko, I didn’t exactly have monkeys on my mind. I photographed her instead. She loved to pose, but the images themselves held no allure for her. “I know what I look like,” she’d say, and so the pictures were mine alone. Worn out one Friday, I abandoned the translation I was working on and decided to visit my old friend Scarface, the toughest monkey on the mountain. It was there I first encountered Naomi.

The walk up the dirt path was quiet and lonely, old playground equipment scattered here and there shimmered in the heat, and I didn’t see a soul until I neared the top and found two monkeys basking on a metal slide. The rest played in a pond on the summit. They were like children at a swimming pool pushing each other in, diving, leaping, playing tricks on each other. I spotted Scarface on the far side sitting alone on a rock contemplating his reflection. Crouching down for a better angle, I was about to take a picture when the right side of the image went black and I cursed, afraid I would miss the shot. A girl had appeared as if from nowhere beside the pond. She seemed almost colourless in a long black skirt and blouse, hair down to her back even blacker than her skirt, her skin translucent. If it weren’t for the blue-green veins that spread across her hand I might have thought she’d stepped right out of an old black and white photograph.

I wobbled and had to stand. She was observing Scarface who felt her gaze and looked up, the scar that ran down his face silver in the sunlight. He stiffened and gave out a deep bark, and the other monkeys suspended their play to watch what he did next, but the girl didn’t move, didn’t make a sound, and so Scarface made a great show of scratch-
ing himself as if to brush off his embarrassment and the monkeys resumed their games. The girl was beautiful. Beautiful women live in a different world from the rest of us, but her face bore neither the animation nor apathy of a lifetime of praise and attention. It revealed nothing, and so I had the confidence to approach her. Many Japanese women were delighted when I spoke to them, squealing, laughing, or gasping to hear a gaijin speak their language.

“Hello there,” I said, “I see you’ve met my friend Scarface, Naomi?”

The name was stitched in crude red characters on the black leather bag slung over her shoulder.

“Your name is Naomi, right?”

She looked down and the bag and nodded. She didn’t seem at all surprised to hear me speak fluent Japanese and I felt I had lost the advantage.

“I call him Scarface, because of the scar on his face. He’s the leader of the troupe, I think. Does he not look tough? Have you been inside the shed yet, Miss? You can feed them, you know, it’s pretty cool. I mean, if you’re into that sort of thing.”

I trailed off. My Japanese had gone to hell. I was mixing up standard, colloquial, and honorific forms like an amateur. I must’ve sounded like a fool. The sweat on my skin began to sting. Did I smell? There has always been a strange thing about malodorous foreigners in Japan but I was too close to her to check my pits so I jammed my arms to my side just in case.

“Would you like to feed the monkeys?”

“Yes, thank you.”
She spoke, she even smiled a little, and I was relieved to find one of those snobby Japanese princesses, the kind you find in manga or anime that won’t give a guy a chance. We walked over to the small wooden building by the pond, damp monkeys running in front of us to be the first in line. The hut was deserted except for the old man selling paper bags full of nuts. There were a few benches and a rusted vending machine humming in a corner, but other than that they hadn’t done much to spruce up the place for visitors. I bought two bags, the old man determined not to recognise me as always even though I’d been plenty of times before, and we went to the long window, the view of Kyoto all but blocked out by a wall of monkeys hanging on the green fencing that covered the window instead of glass. They stretched out their hands grasping for the bags. One monkey knocked Naomi’s to the floor so I gave her mine and scrabbled around her feet picking up the scattered nuts.

Naomi didn’t laugh as most people did when feeding the monkeys who stuffed the food in their mouths with none of the restraints of etiquette. Some of the monkeys snatched the nuts right out of your bag, which often made people shriek in surprise, while other monkeys held out their hands, beseeching, a good strategy as these were often declared the cutest and so were given more food. Naomi didn’t flinch when the monkeys took the nuts from her outstretched palms. She didn’t try to pet them either, and I marveled at the contrast between her still, serene figure and the jostling wall of monkeys before us. I noticed that her mouth was less pale than before, the fleshy part of her lower lip almost pink.

“It’s a strange experience, isn’t it? I suppose they make us feed them in here for safety reasons. Can’t have tourists being ripped to shreds in a feeding frenzy.”
She looked up at me, her eyes so big and black and shiny I could see my face reflected in them, my face warped by their shape.

“I think all zoos should be like this,” I continued, “you know, where the humans are caged and the animals are free. Isn’t it odd being on this side of the fence?”

She returned her gaze to the monkeys and nodded.

“I loved London Zoo when I was young. They had these enormous silverback gorillas and I would wave at them through the glass hoping they’d come over. I was so sure they could speak English. My mum would take me every summer,” I paused for a moment, “Still, even though it’s great to see creatures like that up close there is something twisted about it, right? All those animals locked away.”

“I’ve never been to a zoo.”

“Seriously? There’s one right here in Kyoto and I’ve been meaning to go see what it’s like. Do you – I mean, would you possibly like to go some time? With me?”

She smiled again, but before we could make any plans we were interrupted by the arrival of a large group of schoolchildren. They rushed to the window swarming us, their teacher giving instructions in a quiet yet clear voice; one bag per pair, wait your turn, authorized food only, take care of your belongings…

“Oi,” I grabbed a lollipop being proffered to a monkey by a small boy, “no sweets. You’ll make them sick.”

The boy scrunched up his face. Wonderful, I thought, *Women love it when you make children cry.*

I realised then that Naomi had gone. I pushed my way through the children not waiting to see if the boy was upset, but couldn’t find her outside either. She wasn’t on the
path, you could see nearly the whole way down from the top of the summit, and after walking around the shed twice decided that she hadn’t gone round to see the monkeys. It didn’t make sense that she was hiding in one of the sparse patches of forest dotted around the mountain. She would’ve had to really leg it to reach one before I noticed her absence, and she wasn’t the running sort. I checked inside the hut and then peered into the pond, feeling foolish, but she wasn’t there either. Maybe she had run away. The idea made me uncomfortable. Late for my lunch date, I set off down the mountain hoping I’d find her, but as on the way up I didn’t see a soul going down.

“To-chan,” Michiko asked through a mouthful of strawberry bonbons, “how many girls have you slept with?”

“She was lying on her front across the end of the bed, naked, reading a magazine.

“I don’t know, maybe twenty?” I lied.

“How old were you when you lost your virginity?”

“Seventeen.”

“That’s old.”

“Thanks very much. What about you then?”

“Shh I haven’t finished. So that means you’ve been having sex for five years, which means an average of – four girls per year. Oh dear,” she bent her head closer to the magazine, “that isn’t very high.”

“Hey it’s about quality not numbers,” I replied, “those magazines are rubbish. I mean, what happens if you have lots of sex with one woman? Doesn’t that count?”
Michiko had more sexual experience than I did, it was clear from the start. She may as well have walked around in a shirt with the word SEX on it. It wasn’t a question of low-cut tops or too much makeup. The way her hair swung when she walked made your throat hurt. The first time we met she’d marched straight up to me in a red skirt and tight black and white striped jumper, put her hands on my chest, and rested her forehead on my neck.

“Forgive me, Chistopher-san,” she whispered in Japanese, “Do you mind if I stay here a while?”

I looked around to see who she was hiding from. Broad-shouldered and muscular with a sallow face and low, thick eyebrows, the man bore a thuggish look. He clearly wasn’t a student at the college. I put a hand on Michiko’s back and held my breath, waiting for the fight, but he spat on the ground instead, lit a cigarette, glared for a moment, and then walked away.

“Thanks,” she said as she stepped away rubbing her earlobe with her thumb and index finger, “I didn’t know how I was going to get rid of him.”

“Any time. How do you know my name?”

“Your employer taught my boyfriend.”

“That guy?”

She threw her head back and laughed, hands on her stomach. Several people stopped to look at her.

“Not him. He’s stupid. I meant my last boyfriend. He graduated already. Hey, do you want to go to this great coffee place?”
“Sure,” and just like that she grabbed my hand, told me her name was Michiko, and led me to a cafe that played good jazz and served almost perfect coffee. The walls were decorated with hand-stitched images of trees and mountains.

“You could’ve taken him,” I told her as we sat down.

“What?”

“No really,” I leaned forward and put my wrist next to hers, “Your wrists may be small but you’re fiery. He’d have no chance.”

She leaned forward to and asked me to teach her how to fight.

“To-chan, why are you smiling?” Michiko threw a bonbon at my chest.

I’d spaced out.

“Nothing. Just thinking about the first time we met.

Michiko kicked her feet in delight.

“Did you think I was sexy?”

I stretched out a hand and ran her hair through my fingers. It reminded me of Na-omi.

“Yes, I did.”

She pushed herself up on her knees and straightened her shoulders, her hair falling down to her breasts.

“What about now?”

“Especially now.”

She pouted and hunched her shoulders forward. I grabbed the purple feather boa hanging on the bedpost and threw it around her neck. She pretended to struggle. I kissed
her forehead, nose, cheeks, and mouth until she surrendered, bonbons dropping to the floor.

I was troubled that night. Michiko had fallen asleep before I’d had a chance to tell her about the girl on the mountain. She would’ve made a great model for my series of photographs taken around the old capital, I’d planned on telling Michiko. Her face belonged in the secret sunlight that shone through the bamboo trees and illuminated ancient temples hidden in the forests. Though I’d lost Naomi, that my personality might have sent her flying down the mountain, I wished that I might see her again. I grieved that she would never know my name. At first light I gave up on sleep and pulled a book out of my backpack, but it wasn’t long before I put that aside and just sat in bed, staring around the room.

Michiko lived in an old two-story house in a quiet neighbourhood of Kyoto, not too far from my Japanese inn. The ceiling in her room was slanted giving it a crowded feel exacerbated by the enormous number of objects Michiko had to cram into it. A large broken birdcage stood at the foot of the bed. She’d hung dozens of necklaces, bracelets, and mismatched earrings all over it, and the bottom was covered with letters, postcards, doodles, and cinema tickets. An indistinguishable lump of clothes filled the closet. Multicoloured clothes hangers poked out here and there at odd angles, and on these Michiko had hung tinsel, ribbons, ties, scarves, shoelaces, belts, a realistic pair of handcuffs, and several dusty riding crops.

The clothes that didn’t fit in the closet were draped over every piece of furniture, and strewn about the floor. A cheap sexy schoolgirl costume lay crumpled next to me.
Her latex full body suit was hanging on a hook on the door. I got up and put it on the pile of clothes on her desk. Something about it hanging there made me uneasy once the lights went out. Michiko kept her many shoes under the bed and it was a wonder that she ever found a matching pair. Her bookshelves were lined with jars of sweets, piles of old magazines, moth-eaten stuffed toys, a few text books, a broken game console, tin boxes with seasonal pictures on them, several stacks of playing cards, candles, boxes of novelty condoms, half-finished packets of gum, crushed cigarettes, a yo-yo, colourful plastic figurines, a stone carving of a child monk. One shelf was clear apart from a framed photograph of her mother as a young woman. It was the only part of the room that looked clean.

At eight, I went down to the kitchen to make a cup of tea. Aside from Michiko’s bedroom, it was the only room in the house that showed signs of life. Michiko took cooking seriously, her specialities minced pork and kimchee bolognese, and a miso-based bouillabaisse. While the kettle was boiling, I went for a wander around the house, poking my head into her father’s room, which was cool, dark, and empty, and much more traditional with sweet-smelling tatami matts and a dark blue futon rolled up in a corner, its occupant away on a business trip. The living room was likewise clean and abandoned, the only clues that people had ever lived there a row of photographs on a low table. There was a picture of newborn Michiko lying asleep in her mother’s arms, another of her mother and father on their wedding day, her mother slim and elegant in a western style wedding dress, her father failing to hold back a smile in a grey tuxedo. Most of the photos were of the family on vacation; toddler Michiko and her father feeding deer at Nara park, the three of them holding ice cream cones on a beach somewhere, Michiko and her
mother sitting on a swing by an old mountain house, her mother dancing in a long dress at a party, Michiko standing beside her father in blue and white uniform on what looked like her first day of school. When Michiko was about five, her mother disappeared from the photographs. There were one or two of Michiko and her father at family events as well as several school portraits, but the expressions in these were grave, their eyes impenetrable.

“She was a real knockout, wasn’t she?”

I jumped. Michiko was standing in the doorway in a silk Chinese-style dressing gown.

“Yes,” I hesitated and then asked, “What happened to her?”

“She died.”

The electric kettle in the kitchen clicked.

I’m sorry. My mum died too, when I was eight.”

“Was your father upset?”

He must’ve been. I can’t remember it all that well to be honest.”

“My mother died my first year of school. I think my father died then too.”

I nodded, unsure what to say.

“Are you making tea?”

“Yes,” I said, relieved, “let me get you some.”

The following weekend I stayed in my own room. An essay I’d translated bothered me. The professor had written about Enchi Fumiko’s novel Masks, and focused on the essay written by one of the characters about one of the women in The Tale of Genji. It
had occurred to me that I was translating an essay about a novel that contained a fictional essay about another novel. Full of doubt about the value of my work I felt parasitic, feeding off work that in turn fed off other work. Yet, in Enchi’s fiction, how a character interprets a poem or story is revealing. In *Masks*, the essay is the sole ingress to an elegant and terrifying woman’s mind. Was the interpretive act of translation just as revealing? And what did I fear more, insignificance or exposure?

I felt better away from Michiko’s cluttered space. Though my father was the one responsible for the room, the one who’d contacted his old Oxford connections to find me a cheap living situation, I couldn’t help but love the place. Traditional Japanese inns tend to be pricey, but mine was affordable. My room was in the attic and though bare with only a futon, closet, desk, chair, and fan, it felt more like home than our house in England ever had. The windows were covered with rice paper, and a diffuse light filled the space. The dim corridors of the inn were decorated only by the variation of shadows on the walls and floor, dark shadows against light shadows, and on reaching the attic and unlocking the door, the effect was a profound immersion in pale, luminous light.

The neighbourhood was local, I never saw another westerner the entire time I was there. I spent pleasant hours exploring the family-owned junk and curiosity shops, which sold a diverse range of odds and ends from grass brooms and plastic flip flops to antique maps and gramophones. One place nearby had a stuffed polar bear in the window. In the evenings, I sometimes brought a book and a bottle of beer to the Kamo river and read with my bare feet in the water. Children played there in the evenings, and herons stalked the reeds, plucking fish from the shallows.
Once a month, I went to afternoon tea with one of my father’s friends from his Oxford days. I’d attended a small liberal arts college in Massachusetts, and though father never forgave me for refusing to apply to Oxford, he forced me every opportunity he got to socialize with alumni and forge the connections I’d failed to make while at university. One such connection had landed me my job with a semi-retired professor from Kyoto University, Ogawa Sensei, who never seemed impressed with my translation work but paid me all the same. I worked hard, especially on academic books and papers, spending half the night on one paragraph sometimes, trying to find just the right combination of vocabulary, grammar, and syntax to bridge the divide in meaning between Japanese and English.

“Fiction,” he liked to say, “Is easy. Make the translation beautiful and your work is done. This here is serious work. It requires diligence yes, but something more. You must commune with the ideas, understand them absolutely, steep your mind in the spirit of the writer, otherwise your work will be as grating as a concerto played by an inferior violinist.”

Ogawa Sensei sometimes accompanied me to tea, but more often I went alone. My translation of the Enchi essay had been posted back to me with so many corrections that the margins appeared to bleed red ink. I knew sensei wouldn’t join us. Father’s friend Mr. Y had ties to one of the “Big Four” zaibatsu companies in Japan, but somewhere along the line his side of the family had diverged from the main ancestral branch and set up business elsewhere. He was wealthy then, and lived in a large elegant house by the Philosopher’s Walk that ran between the Ginkaku and Nanzen temples.
On the way there, I took a detour to H____ station to pick up cakes from a popular bakery. While I waited in line outside the shop, I could make out the Arashiyama Monkey Park in the distance. I thought about Naomi. Two high school girls in front of me whispered to each other, one telling the other about a date she’d been on the night before. If the one speaking had known I spoke Japanese, she might’ve saved some of the details for a later date. I could tell that the middle-aged man in front was listening in one their conversation. He had turned to face the street so that his left ear was near the girls, and he gave a nervous cough when they started giggling about how the night had ended. I wondered if Michiko discussed me with her girlfriends. Did she refer to me as her boyfriend? Perhaps they laughed about my sexual prowess, or possibly, lack thereof.

The street was busier than usual. A rainstorm the night before had drawn some of the heat from the air. When I at last reached the front of the line, I thanked the shopkeeper, who always gave me a few extra cakes, and checked my watch, annoyed to discover that while I’d been standing in a queue watching the world go by time had raced on without me, and unless I hurried I’d be late for tea with Mr. Y. On the way back to the station, I bumped into a woman with long black hair pushing a stroller. She didn’t curse at me as someone back home might’ve done but I apologized all the same. She seemed a nice lady, with soft brown eyes, a kindergarten teacher perhaps. Her little girl had a red bow clipped to her hair and enormous black eyes that looked up at me without expression. I was again reminded of Naomi, could recall her face in almost perfect detail, and my chest ached with mortification. A moment later, I saw her in the flesh. At first she seemed a hallucination. I couldn’t believe that of all the streets in Kyoto she should be walking
along one in full view of the mountain where we’d met, but it had to be her. She was wearing the same clothes as before and moved with the same serenity down the street.

“Naomi, Naomi.” I dodged my way down the pavement and tapped her on the shoulder. She turned around and smiled, pleased maybe, her lips pinker than before. Her cheeks were a healthier colour too though I detected no signs of makeup.

“Naomi,” I said with an awkward half bow, “Nice to see you.”

She bowed back.

“Look, I have to run because I have something I can’t be late for, but here. Take this would you please?”

The idea had come to me the moment she turned around. I pulled a pen and piece of paper from my bag and scribbled down my name, phone number, and address.

“These are my details. Hang on a sec–” I also wrote down a date, time, and the characters for the Kyoto Municipal Zoo. “I can’t believe I have to go right now, but listen. You may not like me, you may think I’m stupid and pushy to be always approaching you like this, but if you are free on this date and would like to go to the zoo, I’ll be waiting at the entrance for you, alright?”

I placed the piece of paper in her hand. Not waiting to see her reaction, I turned and ran back to the station, cakes bouncing around in the black and gold cardboard box. I leapt onto the train just as the doors were closing and threw myself onto a seat. Naomi. In detective shows they always like to say that there are no coincidences, but a monumental one had just occurred. Either that or I had developed summoning powers overnight. She probably wouldn’t even show up at the zoo but I hoped. I’d be better. Confident, not some babbling juvenile.
Mr. Y’s cleaning lady opened the door when I arrived. She looked dour as usual but improved once I’d pressed a cake into her hand and given her a wink. Mr. Y. was sitting in his study, a large room on the ground floor that always smelled of wood polish and incense.

“Christopher-san, how nice to see you.”

“Good afternoon, Mr. Y. I hope that you are well.”

“Who cannot help but be well on such a day as this. Let us take tea in the garden.”

The garden at the back of the house was shaded and cool. On one side there was a Japanese-style koi pond with a little bridge with green painted railings over it. The other side of the garden, where we sat and drank tea at an ornate white metal table, was designed to look like one you’d find back home in England. Red, pink, and white flowers (he shunned all other colours) had been planted without the precision of a traditional Japanese garden giving this side a cheerful untidy feel, perhaps a fond reminder of his years in Oxfordshire.

“How is your father, Christopher-san. Is he still working as hard as ever?”

“I don’t think my father will ever stop working.”

Mr. Y. laughed. He had a quiet voice but deep, not the sort you took lightly.

“Your father wasn’t always like that. You should have seen some of the mischief he got up to at Oxford.”

I couldn’t picture my father as a young man. He is one of those people who looks like they eschewed youth altogether.
We spoke at some length about Ogawa Sensei and I avoided the subject of my recent translation work. Mr. Y. had a way of keeping me on my toes as he spoke in both Japanese and English and it tired my brain switching between the two.

“What have you been doing in your spare time?”

“I walk around Kyoto with my camera a lot. It’s nice to discover things by accident. Sometimes I take a train or bus and get off at unfamiliar stops, just to see what’s there. The other day I found a stone temple, pre-Edo I think, that was closed off to the public…” For a moment I regretted mentioning the temple as I’d been trespassing, but while Mr. Y. was erudite I also sensed that he had a more playful side. He wasn’t the sort of man addicted to rules.

“It was ancient. To get there, you have to climb a fence and walk through a forest of green bamboo. The temple was in a clearing lit by streaks of light that shone through the bamboo, we call them “God Rays” at home, and the God Rays illuminated all this dust in the air. It was magical, like something from a Miyazaki Hayao film.”

“Did you go inside?”

“No, that felt sacrilegious somehow.”

Mr. Y. sat back in his chair and put his hands together, thinking. I could hear the sound of a vacuum from somewhere inside the house.

“Let me show you something.”

He led me to a room I’d never seen before. The blinds were shut and the room was dark except for the spotlight that filled a large glass box at the far end with light. The box contained a beautiful kimono.

“Come and take a closer look.”
He drew a handful of small keys from his pocket. There had to be a key to every door in the house and more besides. He unlocked the box and stepped back, ushering me forward with his hand. The kimono was a silver colour, the fabric dominated by a misty mountain scene painted in shades of grey, white and black.

“It’s fantastic.”

“Isn’t it,” he crouched down, his face animated, “and see here at the bottom, there’s a small pagoda.”

“Yes, and there’s a woman on the bridge. Is she meant to be someone?”

“This kimono was made during the late Edo period for a celebrated geisha of the day. The man who commissioned it was very wealthy, very powerful, and he loved the geisha such that he gave her many priceless gifts.”

“Sounds like a fairy tale.”

“Indeed, but a fairy tale of the old sort. After he met her, he stopped talking to all the other geisha. He wanted only to spend time with her. He spent less and less time outdoors with his friends, preferring this woman to horses and war games.

Soon his friends and acquaintances began to laugh behind his back saying that she led him around by the neck like a lovesick donkey. The rumours began to fly. The geisha would make him crawl on his hands and knees and ride him, or make him eat rice from a bowl on the floor like a dog. He was a proud man, and when these rumours reached his ears he was furious. He sent his servant to tell the geisha that he would never see her again, that she disgusted him and would never be anything more than a common prostitute.”

“That’s terrible.”
“Yes, but where a man’s reputation is concerned such soft feelings of love and devotion must be put aside. She was not his wife.”

“What happened to her?”

Mr. Y straightened up and traced the kimono’s collar with his finger.

“She went to the woods where they used to walk together and hung herself. See here,” he turned the collar ever so slightly to reveal a brown stain, “this is the blood from where the rope cut into her neck.”

I shuddered.

“My family had many beautiful kimono, famous ones, like oil paintings in the west. During the war they sold the collection piece by piece, our legacy falling away like dying leaves.”

“My father says that my family had to sell almost all they owned during the war.”

“Yes, these are the sacrifices we must make,” he said with a sigh closing the glass case, “We were fortunate in that we regained many of our treasures in later years, but the kimono remained out of our reach, except for this one.”

We returned to the garden and I picked up my backpack, thanking him for the tea and for showing me his kimono. He asked if I was attending a talk given my a prominent history professor at the university and I explained that a friend was taking me to Tokyo.

“A girlfriend perhaps?”

“Michiko? I suppose so. Yes. She is.”

He frowned at the mention of Michiko, but didn’t ask me about her.

“And what does a young couple in love do in Tokyo these days?”
“I’m not sure actually,” my stomach contracted, I’d probably eaten too much cake, “I’ve booked the hotel but Michiko wants everything else to be a surprise.”

“Yes, that sounds like a woman. Take care of yourself, Christopher-san. Send my regards to your father.”

As I went down the front stairs I heard the door open. The cleaning lady was peering through the crack in the door but closed it when I turned to look.

“Suffering from the rancour of the dead -

Or might it be the devil in one’s own heart?”

There was no writer who made ghosts more believable and less likely than Murasaki Shikibu, poet and author of *The Tale of Genji*. As I walked down along the canal that ran from north to south, I glanced back as though the dead geisha were tiptoeing along behind me.

Part Two

Tokyo

*Lord in the dark, it’s just you and I*

*Not a sound, there’s not one sigh*

*Just the beat of my poor heart in the dark.*

*Now in the dark, I get such a thrill*

*When he presses his finger tips upon my lips*

*And begs me to please keep still in the dark.*

- “In the Dark,” Lillian “Lil” Green.
I dreamt of her in pieces. The white crescent in a thumbnail, a faint crease around the neck, a strand of hair. When I woke I was half-blind, eyes hot from the heat of the sun shining through the train window. It was Michiko, not Naomi, leaning against my shoulder, Michiko smelling of sweets and coconut shampoo.

“To-chan,” she asked, lips stained pink from the red licorice stick dangling from her mouth, “are you awake? We’re almost there.”

We were speeding through the chaos of the Tokyo outskirts, the crowded houses and concrete blocks draped with endless miles of thick black cable.

“It’s so ugly,” I murmured.

“It’s not so bad,” she replied.

Since meeting Naomi, my dreams had grown more surreal, as though I were touched by her otherworldliness. There was something about her that gave the impression she was broken somehow, an impression I also caught from candid photos of Michiko. In my casual fantasies I pictured myself saving Naomi from something, a gang of rapists in an alley, or an unscrupulous salesman. In all these vague imaginings I saw myself from behind, the dream self confident in a fitted suit like the ones Mr. Y wore, but I could never quite picture my own face. Michiko was never jealous of Naomi in these thoughts but happy, as though I’d saved her too.

When the train neared the station, the passengers stood to collect their belongings and formed jagged queues by the doors. I held our bags high like shields as we descended onto the platform. The station was even worse than I remembered. Four hundred thou-
sand people rushed through the structure each day to reach one of three thousand trains on time.

“We’re taking a taxi,” I told Michiko as she led us towards the subway.

The yellow exit signs pointed in every direction and it was enough to drive you mad, but Michiko knew the place well and we surfaced near the Imperial Palace.

The driver grinned when I gave him the name of our hotel. A famous “love hotel” in Shibuya, the building was designed to look like a fairy tale castle. Each floor was decorated with a different kind of flower, and the rooms were all unique in some way which, the website boasted, made the time you spent there even more special.

“You do like chrysanthemums, right?” I asked Michiko.

“The rose rooms were booked.”

“All flowers are beautiful.”

She loved Tokyo though she’d once said there were things about it she wished to forget. While I was ever conscious that we were blocked in by city for miles and miles in every direction, Michiko talked and laughed like one who is at last free. I watched her as she stared out the window pointing at things that amused her, her face cast red, blue, yellow, orange, green, or even pure white by the neon lights of Shibuya. As the sun vanished behind the wall of high rises around us, the city brightened, lit up like Broadway in New York or the West End in London.

“Mister,” Michiko tapped on the partition, “Mister would you please stop here?”

She handed the driver some money and then jumped out. I fell out after her with our rucksacks, not quite prepared to leave the sanctuary of the car.
“I’m sorry, To-chan,” she said, putting her hand on my face, “But I’m so hungry I just had to get out.”

We waited for an hour outside a small restaurant that was more celebrated than the humble front door implied. It was not the romantic candle-lit place I had pictured for our first night but rather a noisy room filled with long wooden tables covered in pitchers of beer and fried chicken. Salary men and women with their ties loosened and top buttons undone shouted their orders to the wait staff. College students with flushed faces bumped their glasses together making toasts. Shop attendants tucked red paper napkins into their uniforms and ripped crisp battered skin from the chicken with their teeth.

“This is my favourite restaurant,” Michiko explained when we were seated, “When I come here, I feel like I’ve lived in the city my whole life.”

“Have you ever thought about moving here?”

“Of course! But it’s so expensive I wouldn’t know where to start. And really, I don’t want to settle. If I lived in Tokyo, I’d want to be in the real Tokyo, not out in some cheaper neighbourhood that could be anywhere.”

“Well then,” I replied, smiling despite the odd feeling in my chest, “While we’re here let’s pretend we’re locals. We can even change our names if you like, be entirely new people.”

She was thrilled with the idea and I was pleased that I’d made her happy, even if the game was dishonest on my part. I’d never shared my feelings about Tokyo with her.

A young waiter appeared to take our order, asking Michiko with a wink if she’d like the chicken mild or spicy.
“My girlfriend Ayumi and I,” I interrupted in polite Japanese, “Would like our chicken spicy. We would also like a pitcher of beer. That will be all for now.”

Michiko mock scolded me when the waiter had slouched off.

“You men, you might as well be dogs peeing on the pavement. It’s like you never grow up.”

“Women are always saying that, but it’s not as though the twenty-first century female is all that more mature. Look at Japan, everyone, both men and women, still read cartoons. And there’s a roaring trade in soft toys and figurines made for adults. We’re as immature as each other.”

“No To-chan,” Michiko argued as the waiter placed a jug of beer and two frosted glasses in front of us, “I think life needs girls to be women much sooner than it needs boys to be men. Just look at me. I got my period when I was nine years old. Can you imagine? I thought I was dying but I was too ashamed to tell my dad. It was only when old Mrs. Nagata noticed the stains on my dress that anyone took the time to tell me what was going on, and even then my dad was too embarrassed to buy what I needed from the pharmacy.”

“Little boys don’t exactly have it easy either,” I poured us each a beer.

I went on to describe the agony of watching the clock count down the minutes to the school bell while hunched over the desk, praying that the lesson went on for longer, and the nerve-wracking walks between classrooms clutching a folder or book bag in front of my trousers. Michiko was entertained by these stories and pestered me for more. I obliged, pausing when the waiter dropped a basket of chicken and a pile of red napkins in front of us.
“Look, school is just a series of awkward moments for boys and girls,” I furthered my point, “We all have to grow up sometime.”

“Maybe,” she replied, pulling crisp skin from a chicken leg and popping it in her mouth, “but you know, the world really changes when you start to grow breasts.”

After the meal we headed back into the night to look for what Michiko called an “old timer bar.” We found one by following the sounds of a saxophone into a basement beneath an office building. We chose a small table at the back and watched the musicians on stage play in the light of red lamps. I ordered an Old-Fashioned for both of us from a waitress in a short black skirt who commented that she didn’t often see such young people in the bar.

“What a compliment,” Michiko lied, “I just turned thirty!”

The waitress gave us a benevolent smile and told us to enjoy the music. As if on cue, a spotlight shone through the darkness and lit up the centre of the stage. A woman in a long silver dress stepped into the light and welcomed us all in a husky voice.

“We’re gonna have us a good time tonight,” she added in English and her audience whistled and cheered and then fell silent when she moved closer to the microphone.

“Come on,” I whispered to Michiko as the band played the opening notes of “In the Dark”, “We’re dancing.”

“But I don’t know how—”

“It doesn’t matter, just trust me, you’re going to love this.”

We joined the other couples on the tiny dance floor. I pulled Michiko close holding her cold little hands in mine.
“Lord in the dark, it’s just you and I...” the woman sang, her voice penetrating and layered with meaning.

“This music is so romantic,” Michiko murmured in my ear, “But I can’t tell if it’s happy or sad.”

There in that dark bar, lust untempered by the knowledge that I would be returning to Kyoto the following day alone, I decided that I loved Michiko. I hoarded the feeling, unaware that in a few hours time the yellow and white chrysanthemum wallpaper in our hotel room would be stained brown from the drink I threw, that Michiko’s latex catsuit would lie abandoned on the bathroom floor, taunting me as I packed up my belongings. Had she really taken the earlier train, I would wonder, or was she still in the city somewhere I could find her? My hands, steady and commanding as we danced, would fail me after midnight and shake when I tried to do as she asked me. As Michiko murmured in my ear, my mind was not yet infected by the words that would so torture me:

*Christopher-san, I’m bored.*

Part Three
Kyoto

Like most of Kyoto’s tourist attractions, the municipal zoo was old. While the muted gleam of time-darkened wood enhanced the natural beauty of temples and historic houses, and countless generations of moss and lichen made even the most simple tiled roof or stone structure seem magical, the zoo was in no way improved by age. The animals were held in steel and concrete cages, relics of a crueler time, and the overwhelming
effect of the faded buildings, grey concrete paths, and tarnished metal bars was one of lifelessness. On the day that I’d arranged to meet with Naomi, I went early and bought two tickets. I stood in front of the main entrance and awaited the inevitable humiliation, which would occur in direct view of several ticket vendors and zoo employees, and was quite prepared to enter the zoo alone with the spare ticket in my pocket. That Naomi show up at all, not to mention precisely on time, had not been part of the depressing day I’d envisioned for myself, and so when I saw the black figure walking towards me I all but forgot the loneliness of the past weeks.

She looked healthier, her lips now a strong shade of pink, her skin luminous but less pale. The first two times I saw her she had been still, uncannily so, but this time she tilted her head when I spoke to her and rubbed her right earlobe once or twice.

“Hello,” she replied to my enthusiastic greeting, “How are you?”

“Happy to see you.”

“And you are well?” she asked, her eyes narrowing ever so slightly.

“Well enough. Shall we go in then?”

Inside, the sounds of people talking and laughing were punctuated by the hysterical rhythmic cries of an animal hidden in one of the concrete structures. We walked over and peered into a small circular pit filled with dirty green water. A lone sea lion swam in frenzied circles around his enclosure, a slimy plastic ball bobbing in the waves. After watching him for a while, we moved on to the next enclosure and then the next, and the next, examining the inhabitants of each cage without saying a word. In one, a polar bear lay panting in a shallow inflatable pool, his fur yellow and rank, and his eyes held no more life in them than the stuffed one in the antique shop near my inn. An enormous tiger
paced in a concrete box nearby. The tiger’s lustrous fur was vibrant against the drab grey of her bare cell. When she looked at me with her wild yellow eyes I averted my gaze.

“It looks like we’ve accidentally stumbled into Soviet Russia,” I joked a little later while we were standing amongst an especially worn collection of steel and concrete structures.

Naomi didn’t respond. I suggested that we find a cafe somewhere to cool off. Looking for the nearest exit, we strayed into an area towards the back of the zoo that was piled high with small transport cages and an array of tools.

“Look,” Naomi said pointing to a cage placed behind a tower of boxes.

“Christ,” I muttered.

The old monkey inside sat in a pool of his own filth, his hands and feet twisted and bent beyond use. With one of his deformed hands he tried to scratch at a fly resting on an open sore on his shoulder but he couldn’t reach. His body bore the marks of more than one fight and it was likely that the trope of macaques in the large enclosure in the centre of the zoo had rejected him because of his disfigurement.

We should go,” I said, touching Naomi on the shoulder, “We’re probably not supposed to be here. This must be where they take the animals before they put them down.”

“You seem tired, Christopher-san,” Naomi commented some twenty-minutes later.

The cafe we’d found was what my grandmother would describe as “twee” with light wooden window boxes filled with fake tulips, mugs hand painted with pictures of cats, and plastic lace table cloths, but at least it was well air-conditioned.
“It’s been a tough few weeks,” I admitted, “My girlfriend and I broke up.”

“You were engaged to be married?”

“No! Nothing like that.” I hesitated for a moment before continuing. “It’s only that you get used to certain things, like having someone to text with, to wake up next to.”

Naomi cocked her head to the side, puzzled.

“You had nightly relations, but you were not married?”

I laughed at the quaint expression. It suited her.

“Just your regular modern sinners. But what about you? Do you have a boy-friend?”

Naomi frowned and in that moment she looked a lot like Michiko had done the night of our terrible argument. She stirred the ice around her drink with her finger.

Dressed in the same or similar loose black garments she wore when I met her, she looked a bit like a nun.

“There was a man,” she said at last, “But he was a bad man, very bad.”

She said no more about it, and it took great patience to extract any more information from her. By the time I boarded the bus to get home, I knew only that she had grown up in the mountains, loved snow, and moved around a lot. I gave her my phone number as before and set another time and place to meet.

“It’s not a date,” I explained, “I don’t think either of us are in the right frame of mind for that. But I would like to see you again.”

A fleeting rare smile and she was gone, elusive as ever.
Not keen to return to my lonely room at the inn, I stopped in at a small bar nearby that also sold second-hand kimono, the kind worn by waitresses, hostesses, and tour guides around Kyoto. I’d intended to bring Michiko one day. I fiddled with my phone and then made a decision. The week after Tokyo, I’d walked around campus seeking out Michiko’s friends, and found one by the library. She was suspicious when I described the man who’d pestered Michiko, the one with the pugnacious face, but her expression cleared when she heard my reasoning. In order to get over Michiko, I needed to talk with someone who’d understand. She gave me the number with a sympathetic smile, and promised she wouldn’t tell her friend about my request.

I called Kenji. If he was surprised by the invitation he didn’t let on. He told me to give him an hour and hung up. I read while I waited, nursing my beer and hoping I hadn’t made the wrong decision.

He arrived sooner than I expected, and seemed impressed with the bar.

“I heard that you and Michiko broke up,” he said as he sat on the stool.

“Yeah. In Tokyo.”

“That’s rough,” he signaled to the bartender for another round of drinks, “Guess you need some company.”

“Hope you don’t mind me calling. Know it’s a bit weird.”

“Not a problem,” he grinned, “Guys’ve got to stick together.”

Kenji was not the man I remembered. Though he looked like could hold his own in a fight, he was also relaxed and good-natured. Sitting there in a red Hawaiian-print shirt, he reminded me of one of the more happy-go-lucky gangsters in a Beat Takeshi film.
“You thought about a rebound?” He gestured to the kimono around us with a smirk.

“I’ve just been on a date actually.”

“That’s great! Where’d you go?”

“The zoo.”

“Pretty miserable place, isn’t it? It was months before I could even talk to another girl after Michiko. She really did a number on me.”

We sat quietly for a time drinking our beers and watching the other customers. To break the silence, I asked him how he met Michiko.

“We go way back,” he explained leaning forward, “Way way back. We were in kindergarten together, and then school and college. Her mom was the first person I ever knew who died.”

He went on and talked about their childhood together, almost idyllic from the way he described it, and how their friendship had developed into something more serious.

“She was always looking for an excuse to leave home. Her dad’s kind of depressing to be around, you know?” Kenji shook his head, “The whole thing’s real sad. Anyway, she came to my house almost every day after school and by the time we were twelve we were kissing whenever we could. We made love for the first time when we were thirteen. We sucked at it, but still, best day of my life, man. The best day.”

Kenji sat back on his stool and stretched.

“Everything changed when we were fourteen, fifteen. I don’t know about what girls are like in England, but here that’s when they start going crazy. Michiko was so
moody. She’d scream at you for the tiniest thing. Anyway, she just went and broke my heart one day before school. Said we needed to see other people.”

He slumped on the table.

“I tell you, it was years before the other kids stopped calling me crybaby. I wept like a runner-up beauty queen. No wonder she broke up with me.”

I shrugged and said that teenagers always found ways to torture one another.

“Just before she turned sixteen, she dropped out of school for a while. The rumour was she was pregnant and everyone assumed it was mine. Called her house every day but her dad just said she was recovering from some illness, can’t remember what he said it was. When she came back she just laughed off the pregnancy gossip and pretended like everything was fine, but I knew something was up. She really changed.”

“Did you ever find out what happened?”

“Sure you really want to hear it?” Kenji folded his arms and squinted at me, “I don’t know, you still seem pretty raw to me.”

I convinced him that I was fine, and so after downing the second half of his drink and ordering another, he told me the what he knew. Like many girls in her school, Michiko had developed a taste for older men, but in her case the man had been a lot older, a man with a great deal to lose.

“Some dirty old rich guy,” Kenji spat, “What a creep. It gets worse though. Michiko once got drunk and told me that they only actually did it one time. All the other times he just did stuff to her.”
A gang of teenagers entered the bar and sat at the table next to us. Kenji got up and pulled one of the racks of kimono between our tables, ignoring the eye rolling and “ru-ude” that came from the invading group.

“It was-,” he lowered his voice, “Kinky. Not your usual S and M stuff either. Some real freaky shit, you know?”

I did know, but only a little. In Tokyo, Michiko had described some of her previous sexual experiences before I stopped her. I blinked away the image of Michiko’s mouth, a cockroach writhing between her teeth.

“I’ll get you another,” Kenji said, waving at the bartender. “Anyway, it sounded weird. Not my deal. It went on for a couple of months until he noticed that his little teen dream sex doll was putting on weight. Guess it kind of ruins the fun when the girl gets pregnant. So he sends her to Tokyo to get a fancy private abortion, tells her they can’t see each other anymore, and pays off her dad.”

“Pays off her dad?”

“Yeah. He had something to do with her dad’s job. Probably some upper management loser with too much time on his hands. It’s disgusting. That’s why I’ll sure as hell never be one of those white collar corporate zombies kowtowing to the boss.”

The bartender, refusing to serve the high school students straight beer, walked over with a tray of shandies, a large bowl of peanuts, and strict instructions as to when they would be allowed to order their next drink. There were now several people in the bar I recognized from around the neighbourhood, such as the man who sold homegrown organic fruits and vegetables on a wooden cart in front of the supermarket, and the two old ladies who ran a European style sweet shop next to my inn. Our conversation had no
place here among these people with their environmentally sound produce and old-fashioned treats.

“She said she was in love with him.”

“What?”

“Michiko, she said she was like crazy in love with him. But that was years ago. Why did you guys break up?”

I said that I wasn’t entirely sure and Kenji burst out laughing.

“That’s Michiko. Hey, look, I know I just met you and you’re going through some bad times, but I think you’re better off. I love the girl, honest, I’ll always love her but she wants so much, you know? More than anyone could ever give her. Smoke?”

He offered up his pack but I declined and sat peeling the labels off the empty bottles before me. Later, after Kenji and I had got quite drunk together and made vague plans to meet again, I went to the nearest convenience store and picked up one of the “ladies’ comics” hidden on the top shelf, the kind of magazine no girl I knew would admit to reading. *Written by Women, for Women!* the banner declared, and beneath it a beautiful young woman was bound to the back of a rocking horse, straps cutting into her skin as four men looked on with bared teeth, her genitals hidden behind delicately drawn flowers.

*

The woman removes her white cap. The leather chest gleams in the darkness of closet. The woman drags the chest into the light and wets her fingers with fragrant yellow
oil. She rubs the oil into the leather with slow circular movements, one side at a time, while the grandfather clock in the hall marks the seconds. Her master sits on the sofa reading. The clock strikes nine and the man marks his place with a black ribbon before setting the book down. The woman rubs the oil deeper into the leather, nodding once when the master bids her farewell. He leaves the house. When she finishes conditioning the bottom of the chest, the woman sits back and pushes a wisp of hair from her face with her knuckles. Wiping her hands on a damp cloth, she makes to push the chest back into the closet. Something small and golden reflects the light of the lamp. The woman stretches out her hand to pick up a small key from the floor by the sofa. Feeling for the lock with her finger tips, she inserts the key and turns it. She waits.

The woman opens the chest. It is filled with neat rows of unmarked books, some bound in leather, others silk, the pages dusty and soft to the touch. She selects a small one wrapped in jade green silk. The characters inside are faded, written in a controlled hand. She turns to a page in the middle of the book. A sketch of a naked woman with dark shadows beneath the eyes looks back at her. The words beside it speak to her from a time when the emperor was God.

The young man leads his horse through the forest. All about him trees stripped of their bark stand naked and pale in the morning light. Blue smoke rolls along the ground thick with animal smells. The man turns and roars and earth stained children emerge from their hiding places behind the trees and scatter.

“Your grandfather will be most displeased when he learns of your return to our polluted realm.”
Another young man emerges from the smoke to address the visitor, his face sharp as a courtier’s, his hands soft with grease.

“My grandfather is feeble and blind and commands his subordinates to mete out his punishments.”

“And?”

“And I tell his subordinates that if they value the hearts that beat in their chests, they’ll whip the serving boy instead.”

The two men descend into the low valley side by side and enter the village of the outcasts. The animal smell is so pungent here the air seems thick with grease. Smoke rises from the centre of the village where men cut the skin from dead creatures with sharpened metal discs. Here, young men rub the hair from the skins with urine and wood ash. There, old women boil tree bark and the young rub the tanned skins with oil rendered from the fat of other dead animals.

“Death will cling to you if you remain too long in this place.”

“Superstition horse shit.”

The young women run away when the visitor approaches and his friend laughs merrily.

“Is it ready?”

“Only the finest example of its kind. My father prepared the skin himself, you’ll see how soft it is yet how resilient. You,” he summoned a boy with black hands and feet, “Tell them to bring out the special order. Touch it yourself and I’ll beat you.”

The boy rubs soot from his eyes and obeys. The visitor sighs and mourns the loss of his bull, the finest in the county,
The boy soon returns followed by a man with a broad chest and deep set eyes carrying a leather bound chest, the bull’s final gift to his master. The visitor lets out a whistle and runs his finger over the gleaming skin.

“I used a secret recipe passed down in my family for generations,” the old man explains, eyes shining with pride, “For very special orders, we boil the brain of the animal and—”

“Thank you, you are truly a master craftsman.”

The old man bows low and backs away. His son secures the chest on the visitor’s horse with great care and walks with him back into the woods.

“The date of my marriage has been altered. The old tyrant will have me held fast in the bonds of matrimony by the next full moon.”

The young tanner shakes his head in sympathy and congratulates him.

“Let this be my wedding gift to you then,” he says, leading the wealthy visitor to a small clearing where a young woman with a blue birthmark lies trembling on a straw mat.

“You are wasted here, my friend.”

He circles the mat before bending down and lifting the woman’s chin to examine the mark on her face.

“Do me a favour and take my horse for some water.”

The tanner pulls the horse away, leaving the visitor and the woman together, dirt-streaked children watching from the trees.

*
The first Friday after my disastrous weekend in Tokyo, Mr. Y had invited me to tea. I’d arrived late and without my customary box of cakes but Mr. Y waved my apologies aside and said that we were beyond such petty formalities. He led me to the room with the grey silk kimono and the maid followed us carrying a heavy silver tray laden with cups and saucers, an ornate ceramic teapot, and a plate of biscuits.

“You look unwell, Christopher-san,” he said as he settled into a black leather armchair opposite the sofa where I was sitting, “Has something happened?”

“I’m just tired from my trip to Tokyo.”

“It did not quite go as planned then,” he surmised, reading something of the truth from my expression.

In a few brusque sentences I explained that Michiko and I had broken up and that I’d returned early.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” he said, switching to English.

Outside, the rose bushes shuddered in the wind.

“Ogawa Sensei was just telling me about your latest translation. I believe the word he used was ‘exquisite.’”

“Really?” I said, straitening up a little, “I suppose misery is always good for something.”

“It seems so. Your father will be proud.”

I doubted that but thanked him anyway. He offered me a cigarette, a Turkish one rolled in thick black paper, and lit it with an antique gold lighter.
“Like most things in this house,” he said with a wry smile, “this lighter has been passed down the male line for generations.”

We smoked in silence watching the smoke unfurl in the diffuse grey light that came in from the window. The tobacco was heavy and sweet, leaving me with a dull headache behind the eyes.

“Christopher-san,” Mr. Y. said abruptly as though having just come to a decision, “I’d like to take you out to dinner. In our Oxford days your father would always insist that we eat steak whenever confronted with a problem of a, let us say, delicate nature. I’d like to continue the tradition with his son, though we can leave the subject of women out of the conversation if you prefer.”

Surprised and much gratified I accepted at once. He looked at his watch and asked if I would forgive him if he left me for a few minutes to change his clothes. I wandered around the room examining the various treasures housed there while I waited. I kept catching glimpses of the tragic geisha’s grey kimono out of the corner of my eye and, were I a superstitious person, might have thought that there was someone over in that side of the room watching me, but there was no one. I admired the black cabinet, noting how in the low light the lacquer took on the depth and beauty of a still dark pond. I opened the doors to look at the interior and found the old leather chest I saw last time.

“I see you’ve discovered another family heirloom.”

I hadn’t heard him come in.

“It’s really beautiful, it must have been made by a master craftsman.”

“It is the only one of its kind in the world. In that respect, it is priceless. Shall we go? We can stop by my club for a drink before dinner.”
Over dinner, Mr. Y. asked if I would like to become involved in one of his charitable ventures.

“How does sparing young hoodlums from a life of poverty, illiteracy, and crime sound to you?”

The red wine and steak, each bite so rich it dissolved in your mouth, had left me pliant and inclined to please, and so I agreed with no hesitation. The next fundraising event was to be held in two weeks time, and as it was taking place just outside of Kyoto it would be the perfect opportunity for me to meet donors and the men who ran the program.

“Excellent, your father will be pleased to hear that you are keeping busy.”

“Would you mind not mentioning my break-up to him? It’s not the kind of thing we tend to talk about.”

“It’s our secret,” he said, emptying the bottle into my glass.

“It’s not that bad,” the inn’s manager scolded, standing on tip toes in front of me fussing with a bowtie, “You’ve just lost some weight. You should be pleased, most men only get fatter.”

The day of the charity dinner I stood in front of the floor-length mirror by the front door, aghast. My best suit, the one given to me on my eighteenth birthday, looked as though it had been made for a much bulkier man.

The manager had grown fond of me in the weeks after Tokyo, especially when she learned of my connection with Mr. Y.
“He’s so wonderfully rich,” she’d exclaimed with glee, “And from such an old Kyoto family. You must tell me if you’d like to invite him to tea one of these days and I will polish my grandmother’s tea service.”

Ogawa Sensei arrived at six thirty in his ancient Mercedes to drive us to an exclusive Italian restaurant just beyond the city limits. He didn’t say much except to tell me that he would leave the event at ten, and that if I wanted to stay longer I would have to find another way home.

The path leading up to the restaurant was lined with torches. I was amazed to see what look like an authentic Italian villa nestled against the Japanese hillside.

“How come I’ve never heard of this place,” I asked sensei, who pulled out a handkerchief and sneezed.

“This place is so far beyond your pay grade that it might as well be in space. Mine as well, come to think of it.”

“It doesn’t seem like the most logical choice for a fundraising event then.”

He gave me a withering look and then sneezed again.

“Damn flowers.”

The main entrance hall and the dining room beyond were filled with extravagant bouquets of red and pink roses. Hundreds of candles flickered on the tables beneath an enormous crystal chandelier, yet somehow the room remained cool. Mr. Y stood in the centre of the room talking with an austere-looking mogul, a prominent scientist, and several politicians I recognized from the newspaper. A young pop star dressed in a provocative white dress stood next to him, her smile wide and chemically bright. She touched his arm lightly when she addressed him, gold nails flashing in the candlelight.
“Remember, ten o’clock,” Sensei hissed as we approached this interesting collection of people.

“Gentlemen, and ladies,” Mr. Y. said with a slight bow to the woman next to him, “Allow me to introduce my dear friend Christopher-san. This young man’s father and I caused our fair share of mischief in the old Oxford days.”

“Oh I can imagine,” the star tittered, “Tell me, just how many poor girls’ hearts did you break?”

The men all smiled at her indulgently.

After the introductions had been made, Mr. Y. excused us and we went to a dark corner by the door to the kitchen. I turned around once to see Ogawa Sensei bolting to the bar. From our vantage point Mr. Y. subtly pointed out the men in the room I should talk too, apologizing that he would be too busy playing host to make official introductions.

“I’d begin with our head liaison manager,” he said gesturing to a diminutive man hovering by one of the drinks stands, “One more champagne and he will be completely unintelligible.”

Slowly, I made my way around the room, careful to speak with all the men that Mr. Y. had pointed out, hoping that the questions I asked were at least halfway intelligent. There were many beautiful many women there dressed in glittering evening dresses, but like the villa itself they didn’t seem quite real. I imagined that they would disappear at dawn’s first light, leaving only the heady scent of their perfume behind.

As befitting such a place, the food was beyond anything I’d ever eaten. Seated at the same table as Ogawa Sensei, we both abandoned any pretense at dignity and ate everything that was set before us. They served each guest a baked cattle bone with a tiny
spoon to scoop the marrow out, and after that an endive salad sprinkled with goat’s cheese, a rare luxury in Japan. Truffle risotto, kobe beef tagliata, squid ink pasta with grilled scallops, the food kept coming. Kenji texted me to ask if I wanted to join him for a beer, several errors in the message denoting the state he was in, and I ignored him. As they were clearing the plates for dessert, I leaned over and asked sensei if he knew a man sitting at the next table.

“I recognize him from somewhere, does he teach at the university?”

“Who?” sensei grunted.

“That man there, the pale one with the white hair.”

“Oh that’s one of Mr. Y.’s accountants or lawyers or something. I can’t be expected to remember everyone I meet at these infernal events.”

I watched the man for some time. He must have felt my gaze because he glanced over catching my eye and I looked away embarrassed.

The rest of the meal passed without incident except one. As Mr. Y. was walking around the tables talking to various people as they ate their dessert, a young waitress crashed into him, dropping a tray loaded with drinks. Mortified, she fell to her knees and swept up the glass with a cloth, dabbing at the liquid that had spilled on Mr. Y.’s shoes with her apron. Mr. Y. ignored her as she floundered below, and just when it seemed that he would never acknowledge the poor girl, he looked down, stretched out his hand, and bestowed upon her a smile of such warmth that she flushed even darker.

“Old bastard,” sensei muttered, “He’s still got it.”

The girl bowed low after being helped up and dashed to the kitchen.
Ogawa Sensei tapped his watch and gestured to the exit. I was ready to leave, unsettled by both the strange man at the next table and the small incident we had just witnessed.

“That dinner had nothing to do with charity really,” I told sensei on the drive back to the city.

“Oh I’m sure those underprivileged boys will gain something out of the occasion.”

That night I slept badly, the rich food fueling a succession of disturbing dreams. I woke with a shout. The pale man’s face had appeared to me just as I had first seen it - in the framed photographs in Michiko’s living room.

Throwing on some jeans and a pair of trainers, I thundered down the stairs and out the front entrance. I ran the two miles to Michiko’s house and banged on the door with my fist, hitting it so hard that the lock failed and the door swung open.

“Christopher-san,” Michiko cried, arriving downstairs just in time to see me trip over a large beige suitcase, “Have you gone mad?”

“Tell me his name,” I demanded gasping for breath, “Tell me who it is.”

“Who? Christopher-san, what’s happened?”

“It’s Mr. Y. isn’t it? Mr. Y is the one who ruined you.”

Michiko stepped back, crossed her arms in front of her chest, and told me in a quiet voice to leave her house.

“Kenji told me everything, *everything*. And now you’re leaving? You’re running away with him?”
“That’s none of your business.” She pulled the suitcase close to her body.

“Is this why you dumped me? Because I’m not a freak who likes to hurt women? Is that why you left me alone in that terrible city?”

I collapsed by the door and hid my face behind my hands.

“To-chan,” she pleaded, “To-chan please don’t cry. I’m not running away with anyone. I’m moving to Tokyo by myself. It has nothing to do with you.”

“Don’t lie to me. It’s him. He’s given you money hasn’t he. Are you his mistress now or just a common prostitute?”

Michiko snarled and looked around for something to throw.

“A prostitute? You silly little boy. What do you know about prostitutes, what do you know about anything?”

She took a deep breath. Her demeanour changed, her face hard, as though she’d drawn all her anger back inside herself.

“I am leaving, and leaving alone. I will not linger here and die in this miserable house like my mother did.”

The ceiling creaked, footsteps above.

I begged her not to go, but she stood her ground, defiant to the last at the foot of the stairs.

“I think it’s time for you to leave now.” A man’s voice.

Michiko’s father edged down the staircase in his dressing gown.

“Michiko, I love you,” I said, my voice weak, but it was no good.

I left the house and stood blinking in the sunlight until the neighbours threatened to call the police.
I had no money with me, no phone, nothing. Exhausted, I wandered through the streets red-eyed and mumbling, scaring small children on their way to school. Then, the gentle sound of water. The canal. I turned and walked north.

Birds twittered happily in the trees above as I followed the path below, fists clenched. My heart was racing as the mansion came into view, but the way was blocked by a crowd of people. Something was making strange animal noises at the centre of the gathering, groans and howls like nothing I’d heard before.

Four men, their faces dripping with sweat, were holding a young woman down by her arms and legs.

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” a woman whispered to another, “She must be insane.”

“Has someone called a doctor, or the police?”

“She keeps screaming something about vengeance. Mr. Otsuka told me that she threatened to kill someone.”

I pushed my way passed the onlookers to get a better look at the girl. A bruise blossomed on her right cheek. The colours seemed to throb and swirl. A cut then split her eyebrow though no one had struck her. She must have sensed me watching for she suddenly stopped writhing and snapped her head up. Eyes black as lacquer found mine, her dark clothes torn and dusty. The bag with her name on it was missing.

“Help me,” she said.

The men holding her looked up at me amazed.

“Do you know her?” one of them asked.

“Help me,” she repeated through bloodied lips, struggling again to free herself.
People in the crowd began prodding me, asking if I knew her, demanding I tell them her name.

I stared beyond them at the figure in red gloves and a white hat surveying the scene from Mr. Y.’s porch.

Someone grabbed my shoulder.

“Do you know her?”

“I don’t know her.”

I stepped away from the girl.

“I don’t know her.”

Turning, I stumbled back down the long path by the canal known as the Philosopher’s Walk.
4. Natural Predators

Kir’s uncle was buried in a camping ground in Australia. Buried deep, only the people who’d known him as Zarista Moon even knew he was there at first. But the family found out, eventually. Kir’s mother washed dishes. Her dad stared at his wife’s hands in the water as he told them his brother was dead. Their own mother had never liked him much anyway, he said.

The next night, as Kir rubbed salt into a cast iron pan with sore fingers, she listened to her parents argue in the TV room. Between the sounds of studio laughter she caught pieces of their fight. “Why is she coming here?” Her mother was angry, her dad defensive. Kir’s feet were half-numb on the cold kitchen tile. “No one will find out, if we’re careful. No one will find out.” The studio audience applauded as her mother started to cry. Kir rinsed the pan, dried it, and conditioned the iron with oil. She set it down in the cupboard, and crept out into the hall but the floor creaked and her parents stopped talking.

The walls in Kir’s room were soft with layers of posters. She moved the posters around, bringing old ones to the front and rearranging the images so that her room was always changing. Kir at twelve had lived in a kaleidoscope of animals, flowers, and boy bands. At sixteen, her collection was more eclectic. After washing the oil from her hands, she freed a picture of Van Gogh’s Wheat Field from behind a large photo of a Russian ballet dancer and pinned it next to her bed. She rested her forehead against the frenzied blue sky.
“Kir?”

“Here mum.”

“Kir,” her mother opened the door but didn’t come in, “I’m going to need you to pull out the spare bed, alright. Your aunt’s coming to stay.”

“Who?”

“Your uncle’s first wife, Janine. You never met her.”

“Wait,” her mother started to close the door as though she hadn’t said anything important, “When’s she coming?”

“Two days from now.”

“Are her kids coming? My cousins?”

“They’re not kids anymore and no, they’re not coming. Thank God.”

“Why ‘Thank God’?”

Her mother rubbed the bump on her nose and exhaled. She came in, closed the door behind her, and sat on the end of Kir’s bed.

“It’s just a bit complicated, darl’. Your dad and Simon never really got on.”

Kir asked whether it was because her grandmother had liked dad better, choosing the question with care. She didn’t want to frighten her mother away.

“Something like that.”

“Why?”

“It just happens sometimes, I don’t know. I only had you, didn’t I.” She reached for Kir’s long dark hair and stroked it. “I wish you’d let me give it a cut.”

Kir asked if she could meet her cousins some time but her mother stood up with a brusque “maybe” and she knew she’d gone too far.
She turned off the lights and lay awake long after her mother had left her. The Wheat Field looked menacing in the dark, the flock of birds almost monstrous. When she went down to get a glass of water she saw that her dad was still sitting in the TV room. The blue glow of the television illuminated the group of empty beer bottles beside the chair.

“Night, dad,” she whispered but he didn’t respond.

The following morning, Kir’s dad made his own breakfast while her mother leaned against the stove cradling a mug of coffee against her chest. No one spoke. The two men on the radio exchanged quips over the sounds of The Beach Boys and reminded their listeners to tune in to the Golden Oldies hour. Kir’s dad threw out his cereal and washed his bowl and spoon before putting on his jacket and leaving out the back door.

“Bye then,” her mother shouted.

“I should go too. I’m on coffees today.”

“What? Oh. Remind them you’re starting school again next week.”

“Will do.” Kir zipped on her jacket and ran out of the house. She uncovered her new scooter, an unexpected boon granted on her sixteenth birthday. Her dad had insisted that she have one despite her mother’s reluctance and so for a time Kir had felt more kindly towards him than usual. Almost their entire relationship had been mediated through her mother. They rarely had much to say to each other and so Kir had taken the bike as a gesture of respect, a father’s way of saying that he recognised that his daughter was growing up, or so she’d hoped. She revved the gas with a grin imagining her mother’s face and sped off into town.
Kir breathed more easily out in the open. She cruised down the curving road passing rectangular homes that looked very like her own set upon hills or in the valleys between them. There were two main streets in town, one that was designated “historical” because of a sixty-year-old art deco style bank building, and another that lay along a section of the country’s original highway where the businesses catered mostly to people passing through. Kir worked for a woman who had sought to distinguish herself from the other local businesses and opened The Pink Church, a converted church, now a cafe and gift shop.

She parked the scooter and paused to pick up a flyer on the stone steps. “THERE ARE NO NATURAL PREDATORS IN NEW ZEALAND.” The words were printed on thick red paper. “END THE AVIAN HOLOCAUST. KEEP ALL CATS INSIDE.”

“Pat,” Kir walked into the shop frowning at the flyer, “Pat, what’s this?”

“What? Oh Christ, ignore it.” Pat was hanging a string of small multicoloured paper lanterns above the cash register.

“With every Kea, Takeha, and Mohua slain,” Kir read aloud, “We demand a dead cat in return.”

“Get rid of it before anyone comes in. My customers like cats for God’s sake, just look at all this stuff,” she gestured towards the hand-knitted merino wool scarves and paua shell figurines, “This is the sort of crap cat-people buy.”

Kir dropped the flyer into the bin and went upstairs to the cafe housed in the old choral platform. The rough painted white walls still bore messages of love and boredom carved into the wood. “Church sux” someone had scratched in large letters by the stairs.
An amused Pat had fixed a gilded frame around it. An older girl was already there pulling chairs off the tables with one hand and texting with the other.

“Heya Kirkir,” she sang, “What’s been happening?”

Kir shrugged. “Not much, how was the beach?”

Cassandra told her stories in great detail, the parties she’d been to, the new tattoo she’d got, the boys she’d met on the black volcanic sands of Taupo, stopping only to look down at Kir’s pale arms and legs and suggest that she spend some time in the sun too. Kir told her she was thinking of going to Australia to visit her cousins.

The cafe was busy for a weekday. She fell into her work rhythm. Focused on making coffees, wiping tables, and cleaning cups. Soothed by the smell of fresh-ground coffee beans and the sounds of people stirring their drinks with metal spoons and talking and laughing, she forgot to watch the clock.

“Don’t you want your break,” Cassandra said, poking her in the ribs, and Kir went down the stairs, catching a small child by the hand as he was about to tumble down them. She returned him to his mother and then went outside.

Leaning against the side of the church that faced the hills, Kir lit a cigarette. She used a hair clip in lieu of a proper cigarette holder to keep the smell from her hands. The sun was high in the sky now, the day half done. Not long till Aunt Janine arrived in her camper van. Kir glanced at the road half-expecting to see her. A large Maine Coon sauntered over carrying a dead sparrow. “They’re not wrong about you, are they,” Kir said scratching the cat behind its ears. It dropped the bird at her feet and looked at her as if to say, “And what have you killed today?”
Inside, her way back to the cafe was blocked by a local man in dark green overalls who asked after her dad.

“D’you know if he’s had a chance to look at my loan application yet?” he said, standing close.

“I really don’t know anything about that stuff.”

“Please,” he cleared his throat and bent his head down to hers, “just tell him– tell him Mike said hi. No. Tell him I sent my regards, would you?”

“Looking for a present are you, Mike?” Pat emerged from the back room polishing a snow globe, “Something for the wife?”

Mike shrugged, said it was expensive, and walked out.

Pat returned to the cash register grumbling about the men in this town. She made Kir promise to tell her parents if anyone ever bothered her about her father’s work.

“You tell them about Mike, promise?”

“I promise,” Kir lied.

For a large part of the afternoon, much of the cafe was commandeered by a local mother’s group. They ordered complicated coffees while their children raided the ice cream fridge. Cassandra vowed in a low voice that she would never have children, but they made Kir laugh. She moderated a debate on the best Pokemon and wiped sticky hands with a damp cloth. The hands of children were so different, she marveled, they were soft and unmarked while hers were dotted with freckles and scars and turned an ugly purple in the cold.
“Kir, darl’,” the woman spoke with a drawl, “Where’s your mum? She missed tennis.”

“She never misses tennis,” another added and they all looked up at her.

Kir plead illness and the women leaned back in their chairs, satisfied, except for one who commented that she’d never known her to be sick. When the group stood up to leave, this same woman pulled her aside and offered to come by in the next few days with her homeopath husband.

“You can’t, she’s contagious,” Kir said making a point of looking at the woman’s small son, and the woman conceded leaving with the promise of a phone call instead.

After closing, Kir fled feeling hounded. Red flyers fluttered on telephone poles and store windows all along the main street. She took the short way home, passing the run-down golf course where two of her classmates dressed in shorts and singlets were playing barefoot on the brown-green grass. She accelerated to round the corner before they saw her.

Kir and her mother ate a quiet dinner at the kitchen table. Her dad’s place was empty, but her mother put food on his plate anyway and filled his glass with water. Kir imagined that he must be in the pub, unusual for a week day.

“When does Janine arrive again?” she asked by way of making conversation.

“The day after tomorrow.”

Kir poked holes in her boiled potatoes with a fork. Her mother had forgotten to season the food and everything tasted bland and lifeless. It began to rain. The back door flew open and her dad came in, stumbling over the shoes lined up by the mat.
“Oh how charming, Kir. Your father’s drunk. On a week night too.”

He sat down at the table, his head hanging low, and picked up a carrot eating it in tiny bites.

“Go run your father a bath,” her voice had softened.

“But—”

“Please, love.”

Kir slouched into the hall and her mother closed the kitchen door behind her. She thought she heard her father sob.

She opened the bathroom window to let out the steam. The moon was hidden behind rain clouds and the whole world looked blacker. The hills seemed closer together in the darkness as if they were crowding in on their home.

“I can’t believe she’s coming,” her dad’s voice echoed in the stairwell, “I can’t talk to her, Marnie, what can I say to her?”

“Shh shh shh,” her mother hushed him.

“He was my brother. My evil brother—”

“Kir,” her mother called out cutting him off, “that bath run yet.”

Once ejected from the bathroom, Kir went into her bedroom and locked the door. She spent an hour rearranging posters in her room, sticking her fingers with pins as she muttered to herself:

“Why don’t they just tell me.”

She fell back on her bed, breathless with frustration. She felt a light wind on her face. Her parents must have left the bathroom window open. The posters rustled, whis-
pering to her. She tried to relive every conversation she’d ever had about her family, but she could only remember brief moments, could only put together abstract details about the ones who’d left New Zealand the year after she was born. Janine, she’d learned somewhere, was a New Age type who liked to paint. Kir knew she had several cousins, but only two of them were Janine’s children. And all the children had deep, sad eyes, she knew, but wasn’t sure why. There was older knowledge too, an image of a camper van broken down in the red Australian desert. The image felt like a transgression, a stolen memory that shouldn’t have been hers in the first place.

She opened her laptop, pulled up her Facebook account, and typed her oldest cousin’s name into the search bar. It was unusual enough that there was only one. She selected “Add Friend” and decided to include a message.

“Hi,” she wrote, “This is your cousin Kir. Your mum is coming to stay with us this week.”

She leaned back against the pillows. On the wall opposite she had pinned a large poster of a man sitting in a rocking chair smoking a pipe. The smoke from his pipe became the stars, a vision of the universe.

“Hopefully you and your sister can come visit too,” she continued.

“Your generation will never understand,” her father liked to say, “You take the internet for granted.” But Kir did understand. She felt the wonder of it. Late at night, eyes dry from staring, she sometimes put a hand behind the screen as though to feel if something was there. She reread the message to her cousin and then deleted it, sending only the friend request before closing her laptop and turning over to sleep.
“Janine comes tomorrow,” Kir watched her parents’ faces, hoping to catch them off-guard. They both made noises of assent. Her mother was serving her dad sausages and fried tomatoes. She shook the ketchup bottle before handing it to him and brought him a fresh cup of coffee. For a moment Kir felt for her uncle, rejected by his mother as she was now shut out by her parents. The moment passed. Her father left for work and her mother turned up the radio.

Kir remembered where she had seen her cousins’ faces before.

“Mum, where’s the key to the shed?”

“What do you want that for?”

“I –,” Kir faltered, “I need something.”

“Well you can wait until your dad comes home then. He doesn’t like when you move things around.”

But Kir didn’t wait. As soon as her mother left the kitchen she went to the miscellaneous drawer, moving thing around with care so as not to make too much noise. She found the shed key tangled up in some thread and stuffed the whole lot in her pocket. From upstairs came the sound of running water, and Kir knew that her best chance to enter the shed unseen was when her mother was in the shower.

*Secrets make liars of us all.*

She’d read that somewhere and as she pulled the thread from the key decided that she wasn’t going to feel guilty.

The old cowshed was cold and dirty. Dusty cobwebs fell from the ceiling when she opened the door. They left a lingering feeling of stickiness on her face after she’d bat-
ted them away. The bulb wasn’t working so she left the door open, following the path of light to the back where her dad had installed metal shelves. She opened up box after box, searching, gingerly moving aside musty clothes and old books and magazines. When at last she had found the photo album she jammed it into her bag and left, locking the door behind her.

The roads were slick after a night of rain and Kir, almost clipped by a truck going the other way, nearly skidded off the road. Her skin still tingled with the shock of her near-accident when she reached the converted church. There were more flyers on the steps but these ones were green and read, “Prevent animal abuse! Save them from the world’s greatest natural predator” complete with a childish drawing of a man holding a pair of binoculars.

“This is getting out of hand,” Pat said tugging at her cropped, newly blonde hair while Kir read the flyer, “Chuck ‘em. Think you can handle the cash register this morning?”

It was just what Kir wanted. The shop was always quiet in the morning, giving her time to find her uncle. When Pat was gone she drew the heavy album from her bag. The pages were stiff from water damage, the photos faded and coming unstuck, but they were all there; her mum and dad on their wedding day, both sets of grandparents, numerous pictures of children she didn’t know sitting in tin baths or on swings, photos of her as a baby, her dad and uncle sitting on either side of their mother, her dad relaxed and smiling, her uncle serious. Simon had a pale, pinched English face while her dad favoured his Maori granddad who had a broad nose and a warm expression beneath black tattoos. Her father had traded tribal tattoos for a suit a tie, but the resemblance was strong.
Kir went through the album with care, bringing each photograph up to the light so that she wouldn’t miss anything, not one detail, not one expression. In one picture, Simon and her dad stood side by side in Boy Scout uniforms. Her dad stood like a soldier, shoulders back and feet wide apart, but Simon was half-turned away from the camera, back bent, squinting off into the distance. In another, he sat on a front porch somewhere with two girls on his lap. They looked up at the camera with distrust. There were two photos of Janine in a loose brown shirt, flowing orange skirt, and sandals, but her face was too blurry to make out. She looked out of place next to Kir’s mother who wore loud eighties prints and big hair. The final picture of Simon and his family looked as though it was taken in Australia. They sat around a fire in front of a camper van eating baked beans out of cans with party hats on their heads, the desert wide and bright in the background. She must have seen this image before, but Kir couldn’t remember why she thought the van had broken down.

She went through the album three times looking for something that might explain why there were no more photographs. The newer family album on the coffee table at home contained only pictures of Kir, her mum and dad, and their friends. She could feel the secret taking shape in her mind. Surrounded by lanterns and fairy lights and all manner of pretty, sparkling things her dread felt ugly and out of place. The murmur of voices from the cafe above made her nervous and she started to wonder whether they were talking about her, laughing at her.

In the afternoon, Pat sent her back up to the cafe. She received a notification on her phone as she walked up the stairs. Her cousin had accepted her friend request. There was no message to reveal whether she knew who Kir was or not.
“Watch out,” Cassandra told her, nodding to a table of people in the corner, “The bird weirdoes are in the house.”

Six men and women sat crowded around two small tables, a few crumpled green flyers before them.

“This is a deliberate attack against us,” a man addressed the group, white hair quivering as he spoke, “We must retaliate.”

“I agree,” a woman smoothed out a flyer and pointed at the drawing, “Look at the binoculars. They’re laughing at us.”

The others nodded. Kir poured them coffee.

“Young lady,” the white-haired man addressed her, “Do you own a cat?”

“Mum’s allergic.”

“You see,” the man sat back in his chair and spread his hands, “allergies! Twice as many people are allergic to cats as dogs.”

The other members of the group chimed in talking over each other.

“Dander is toxic.”

“All those babies smothered each year.”

“And toxoplasmosis.”

“We don’t want to put all this on the new flyer, do we?” the youngest member said, pen and paper in hand. The others stared at her.

“I mean, aren’t we trying to convince people to keep their cats inside? Won’t all this stuff encourage them to let their cats out even more?”

She was berated by the two oldest members, hardliners, who wanted domesticated cats banned outright. Others came to her defense, and an argument broke out about what
was to be done with the offensive animals. As they squabbled, they became more like birds themselves with hard eyes, sharp movements, and piercing voices.

“Really makes you wonder, doesn’t it,” Cassandra said, watching from the counter.

“About what?”

“Adults. Life.”

She took a picture of the group with her phone and sent it to Kir.

“If I’m not out of this town by the time I’m twenty, send this to me, ok?”

“I promise.”

The cafe was busy all afternoon, which suited Kir as she wasn’t ready to look through her cousin’s Facebook page just yet. It was Friday so they closed early, but Kir chose to linger in the late afternoon sunshine and took the long way home. She passed the pub, and could make out Mike gesticulating as he addressed the other mill workers at the picnic bench. Kir suspected he was complaining about her father, as many did when the bank failed them.

No one ate much at dinner that night. The radio was unbearable. Kir switched it off and ate her peas with her fingers, picking at them one by one.

“No beer, not tonight,” her dad said when his wife offered him a bottle. “You should get rid of it. All the alcohol. I don’t want any in the house when she comes. She’ll see we’re respectable people.”

“Why would she care?” Kir asked, “Doesn’t she live in a caravan?”
He got up, scraped his food into the bin and put his plate in the sink. Kir’s mother reached out and tried to pat her on the shoulder, but she pulled away and followed her father into the living room, grabbing her bag on the way.

She dropped the album on the coffee table, photos spilled out onto the glass.

“Tell me what happened.”

“Kir, leave you dad alone. He’s had a long day.”

“No.”

She hadn’t meant to shout but she did, and that let the anger out. He had never played with her as a child. Ignored her still. He regretted letting his wife have a child.

She had never seen her dad look more horrified.

“Oh Kir,” her mum said.

“You never tell me anything and now you never even look at me.”

“Kir, love—”

“Stop,” her father put his hand up.

He picked up the photo album and opened it.

“I never thought about what it would be like having a daughter,” he said, glancing up at Kir as he turned the pages, “I always pictured myself with sons. When you came along we were so happy, but things were happening in the family.”

“You mean Simon.”

He dug his fingers into the sofa fabric.

“I mean Simon. They left for Australia soon after you were born. Janine sent us letters and photos for a few months and then nothing. We had no idea where they were, what they were doing.”
It was during that time, Kir’s mother explained, pacing back and forth across the carpet, that the rumours started. Friends stopped inviting them round, neighbours avoided them in the supermarket. A social worker called to request an interview. She didn’t warn them that she’d be bringing a pair of policemen with her.

“They asked us all sorts of strange things,” Kir’s mother said, moving over to her husband and rubbing his back, “But never told us what they were after.”

“Finally Janine wrote to us. Simon had run off with another woman and the girls were taken into foster care. Janine wasn’t always the most—,” he looked down at a photo of her, “Reliable.”

“Away with the fairies,” her mother spat.

“The thing with Simon is complicated. People talk about cycles of abuse and overbearing mothers, but the truth is we don’t know why he was like that. Why he did things to girls.”

Kir accepted the secret. It had shape and weight and seemed to press down on her insides. She sat down next to her father.

Her mother finished the story, telling her about how they’d had to move to the other end of the country, how their old school friends had looked at them like they were monsters. They set up an education fund for Simon’s children but never went to see them.

“His death?” Kir asked, “It wasn’t an accident?”

Her parents shook their heads

“We think someone finally caught up with him. It’s wild out there in the bush.”

He relaxed his grip. He left nail marks in the leather.

Kir nodded and rolled her bottom lip between her fingers.
“We have to make sure no one finds out,” she said.

Both parents agreed. Her mum went to heat up some milk and honey while she and her dad sat on the sofa together, going through the album in silence. Marnie returned with a tray and the three sat together through the long night, waiting for that woman to arrive.
5. Saccharin

As she stood waiting for the three buzzards to notice her and fly away, mascara-blackened sweat stinging her eyes, Maud thought about death. She could make out the cat’s shiny, heart-shaped tag against flattened fur and indistinguishable organs. The heat had no doubt increased the rate of decomposition, and the buzzards feasted greedily, stripping the dead pet before it rotted away. For the past three days Maud had encountered the birds, always three, no more no less, and waited for them to move off the road. She cleared her throat and the buzzards stared at her for a moment, their faces pinched and ugly from a diet of rotten things, before sauntering away.

Giving “Annabel” a wide berth, she walked on towards the crossroads nestled between an abandoned truck service station, a desiccated lot, and a row of old houses. With some alarm she realized that the small person on the sagging porch to her right was “yoo-hooing” to her. She fumbled with her iPod in the hope that the woman would think she hadn’t heard and leave her alone. She didn’t. And before long Maud found herself on the porch refusing offers of iced tea and water. The front door of the house shook and the fierce barking inside contrasted with the happy, sing-song voice of the woman before her who seemed impervious to the heat. She could’ve been anywhere between forty and sixty years old with short hair that she had obviously cut herself and clothes that were far too big. There was a bruise by her left temple and a cut across her chin.
Maud could not stop herself from glancing at the front door, and the woman opened it and introduced her to Barnabus, who was a good deal smaller than the noise had suggested but solid with stout legs and a long snout. The sight of the stranger enraged him to such a pitch that he stopped barking and let out wet, strangled growls instead.

“They keep trying to kill him but I won’t let ‘em” the woman said cheerily as Barnabus tried to bite his way through the screen door. Maud thought that they had a point but murmured something about love and pets and the woman squealed at her accent, which was a mixture of her mother’s English and her father’s American. She asked for Maud’s name and introduced herself as Teresa.

“I never met an English person before, or a Maud either.”

“There aren’t many of us around. Mauds went out of fashion ages ago.”

“I thought maybe you were Irish with this hair of yours,” she said taking Maud’s long red braid in her hands and stroking it. The gesture was oddly sweet.

“I think I have a great-grandmother who’s Irish. We’re a pretty mixed up family.”

“Just like Barnabus over here,” Teresa gestured to the dog now almost beside himself with rage. “He’s part Australian shepherd, with some spaniel and Lord knows what else. You know twice they tried to take him away, twice, ’cause he went and bit the Labrador across the ways last year, and attacked two of those little brown fluff-ball dogs the year before but he didn’t mean it.”

“He seems very protective.”

“He is and he’s got me a whole lot of times.” She lifted up her arms to show Maud the delicate, white scars that crisscrossed all over her skin. “But how could you do
that to Barnabus?” Her blue eyes widened, “I went on down and made them give him back to me.”

“He’s a lucky dog.”

“Me and Jonesy, that’s my husband, James Edward Jones, we just love him to bits.”

“How could you not,” Maud said as Barnabus began bashing his head against the screen door. “It was nice to meet you but I really ought to be off, I’m expected at work.”

“Well anytime you need anything, anything y’hear, you come by and have a visit with Teresa here. We got water, iced tea, some lemonade I think, and I know old Jonesy keeps some beer out back so you just come on down.”

Maud thanked her, and though touched by the strange woman’s kindness, she wanted to put some distance between her and the dog that had somehow twice been plucked from the hands of the executioner despite two savaged Pomeranians and a traumatized Labrador. She also did not want to meet the owner of the big red pick-up truck parked next to Teresa’s house.

The large blue house before her looked exactly like the large blue houses on either side of it. Maud could pick out the shrill voices of the three children within and considered turning and fleeing. The mother Diana opened the door looking preternaturally calm as she fixed a gold and pearl earring to her left ear.

“Thank goodness you’re here,” she said without much enthusiasm, “we’re running late again. Ian. Ian.”
The handsome man who appeared had for some time featured in Maud’s fantasies, inspired by a cheesy porno her friend Pat had shown her where the naïve teen babysitter, who looked about thirty despite the pink lipstick and pigtails, was seduced by the moustached husband. Having once spent five minutes alone with him, however, while Diana changed outfits, Maud had emerged from the conversation about airline travel bored, the fantasy ruined.

“Hell-oo-hoo?” she called once Diana and Ian had left. There was a thumping of little feet and a skinny, brown nine-year-old came flying out of the kitchen holding a crudely sharpened stick.

“We’re playing Rapture!”

“Right.”

“Shh! Don’t let them get you!” and with that she raced off into the living room.

Maud wandered into the kitchen to figure out what she was going to give them to eat. Tinned peas, beans, and tomatoes were stacked in neat rows in the cupboard. The fridge offered the usual assortment of sandwich meat, eggs, artificially sweetened yoghurt, three kinds of bread, skimmed, semi-skimmed and full-fat milk, flavoured vitamin water, left over mashed potatoes, “I Can’t Believe it’s Not Butter,” and an army of condiments. A lone apple lay putrefying in the vegetable drawer.

“Oi!” she yelled taking a frosted box out of the freezer, “How does pizza sound?”

Dinner in the Waterford household was always depressing. Their fridge and cupboards were filled with things that Maud rarely, if ever, ate, the list of e-numbers down the sides of the packages made her queasy, and she’d given up trying to give the children anything that resembled a well-balanced meal, the lesson learned from a nasty cabbage
and swede incident. She supposed she ought to go disarm Hayley, and confiscate God-knows-what from the other two, but it was nearly four o’clock, hallowed T.V. time, so it didn’t seem worth the trouble. She had never fully thought about what would happen if any of the kids were hurt while under her care. She had a vague notion that if they did wound themselves in some way that ketchup would come oozing out, not blood.

As predicted, at four the bangs, pattering, squeals, and whimpers were replaced by the hyper jingles of the Cartoon Network. The youngest, Benjy, came into the kitchen crying, his arms and legs smeared with dirt and an old tie fastened around his head Rambo-style. Dragging a tennis racket in one hand, he was sucking the thumb on his other hand, the arm red from an Indian Rubber burn.

“Benjy, you look like you’ve been in a war. What side of the Rapture were you on?”

“A-Allie hurt me,” he moaned, gasping for breath between sobs, “and Hayley p-pushed me off my chair.”

“You shouldn’t play such violent games. Come on, let’s get you sorted.”

Once Benjy had been soothed, washed and put into pajamas, she led him back into the living room where the two girls were stretched out on a sofa each, their weapons abandoned on the floor. Hayley gave Maud a “hi!” and a grin, but Allie ignored her and stared unblinking at the television screen. Eleven, she could easily have passed for fourteen with long, disproportionate limbs and a knowing look. While Maud questioned Hayley about school and swimming lessons, Allie picked at a knot on the beige sofa and started growling. Maud had learned most of her child rearing skills from Caesar Milan,
seeing little difference between three children and a pack of dogs, and so knew better than to approach Allie, and instead waited for Allie to come to her.

Hayley chattered about swimming, and art classes, and the large booger that her friend had wiped on the homeroom teacher’s jacket, and Maud nodded and laughed, and commented on Hayley’s outfit, which consisted of a ballet leotard, football shorts, knee-pads and fluorescent green rubber boots. Both girls had drawn war paint on their cheeks with iridescent lipstick but while Hayley looked childish and charming, Allie looked a touch menacing. Maud had at first felt rather sorry for Allie, who had a flat masculine face and the air of a British bulldog, but after receiving several sharp kicks to the shins during an altercation about bedtime she lost any such tender sympathies.

“How’s my favourite college dropout,” Pat greeted her some hours later as she picked dried tomato sauce off her shirt.

“Thirsty. I hate children.”

“You hate everybody.”

“True.”

They were at their usual table in their bar. An underground labyrinth of rooms that always smelt of disinfectant, it was the sort of place that was difficult to find your way out of once you’d had a few drinks. Populated with old pub game machines and coin slots that emitted loud jangling sounds and themed catch-phrases (“A hole in one!”,” “There’s a snake in my boot!”), it was the perfect place for those who wanted to leave the surface world behind for a while. The background noise rendered conversation optional,
if not unnecessary. Maud liked it because no one in there ever tried to make friends with them, and because they served organic beer, which Pat thought tasted like crayons.

“What’s up?” Pat asked, poking her in the arm. Maud had been staring at the yellow lights on one of the machines, thinking that it was almost the exact same shade as the yellow glow given out through the age-stained blinds of Teresa’s house when she had passed it on the way to the bar. Maud couldn’t imagine what it must be like living in such a house with such a dog and such a man.

“I met someone today,” she began, “a neighbour, kind of. I think she’s being beaten by her husband.”

“Oh jeez, that’s fucked up.”

“Yeah. I feel like I should do something, you know? She’s got this massive bruise and a cut on her face. But what the hell are you supposed to do about stuff like that? I mean, I don’t even know her, but I feel bad.”

Pat nodded and stroked the uneven stubble along his jaw-line. He didn’t answer, but Maud knew he got what she meant. He seemed to know the names of all the drunks, crack-heads, crazies, and homeless people in the city, not in that obnoxious “do-gooder” way she so despised, rather he treated them like “normal” people. Beneath the tattoos, scars, and ratty heavy metal T-shirts was the most humane person she had ever met. For-ever on the verge on being arrested, his appearance so distinct in an area filled with polo-shirted fraternity boys, he moved through the world with his guard up. He was the only person she didn’t mind laughing at her.
At last he answered, telling her that there wasn’t a whole lot she could do for the moment other than simply being nice to Teresa, and keeping an eye on her in case things got really bad.

“You don’t even know if she is being beaten. She could easily have fallen or bumped into something.”

“That’s what they all say. ‘Oops. I walked into a door.’”

“I’m just saying don’t jump to conclusions. Take her up on her offer of lemonade and stuff.”

“She’s so poor though, I can’t take her lemonade.”

“That is the most patronising thing you have ever said. You gotta let people be kind. Who are you to decide what they can and can’t give?”

Maud traced the rim of her pint with her finger and didn’t answer. She couldn’t look Pat in the eye.

“Hey, come on, it’s ok. You can reciprocate and shit. You just gotta stop treating people like charity cases if you like them and enemies if you don’t, that’s all I’m saying. You’re actually pretty nice under all that bitch.”

Maud laughed, and they spent the next few hours talking about children and their messed-up games, the ethics of cyborgs, a ridiculous Monsanto seed patent case, and whether animals could show gratitude. At two they staggered out into the humid night and made their way to Pat’s apartment a couple of blocks away, a tiny collection of book-filled rooms in a large rectangular building peopled with TVs. Even at this late hour many of the windows still flickered grey-blue, the lights of the screens shining out in the darkness. Once upstairs, Pat pushed Maud towards his bed before collapsing onto the so-
fa. The room whirling around her, Maud drifted off to sleep half-conscious of a strange rhythm in the sounds of a leaky faucet, doors opening and closing, Pat snoring, lifts rumbling up and down the building, and a microwave dinging in the flat next door.

The second time Maud saw Teresa she met the husband as well. He was at least two feet taller than his wife. His burnished silver wedding band was much too tight, and his skin bulged out around it.

“Nice to meet you,” he said, “Teresa, leave the girl’s hair alone.” She had taken Maud’s braid in her hand again.

“Look how long it is. Such beautiful hair.”

“I don’t mind. Really,” Maud told him. Barnabus was quiet now that the master was home, but he growled twice to remind Maud he was there.

“Now, in England they got the Labour Party and the Conservative Party. Is that right?”

“Yeah.”

“And the Conservative Party is kinda like our Republicans over here.”

“Sort of.” Maud was less than keen to engage in a political conversation with the man. She was spared the trouble by Teresa who told her that she never could understand much about the government, unlike Jonesy, who read the newspapers all the time.

“Ever since my accident, way back in ’82, car accident, I can’t make much sense of anything. Wanna see my scar?” She bent forward and parted the hair on the top of her head revealing a deep, jagged groove in her skull.

“After, in the home, they put me in a home you see after I got out the hospital-”
“Now come on, darlin’, you don’t need to talk about that.”

Maud’s stomach tightened.

“My aunt had a similar experience,” she lied.

“Your aunt had a car accident too? My oh my they are such wicked things. That’s why I never leave the house except when I’m with Jonesy here. Every time I get into that big truck of his, every time, isn’t that right Jonesy, every time I say, ‘Jesus, don’t let me get in another accident,’ and I guess he must be listening because I never have.”

The three of them stood in silence for a moment. Maud looked passed Jones and through the dusty windows of the kitchen. She could make out the rusted sink and the plywood cabinets, several of which were bolted shut with iron locks. A safeguard against thieves, she thought, or perhaps Jones had the only set of keys. She was convinced that the man beat his wife, lovely Teresa who always seemed so happy. She couldn’t understand it. The “home,” she knew, was a mental home. She could tell by Jones’s embarrassment. Had he found her there? Taken her for himself? And that damned dog. What sort of man would leave his wife trapped at home with a creature that had caused her such harm? Her anger made her even sicker.

“Hey, you don’t look so good.” Jones touched her arm and she recoiled.

“I’m – I’m fine. Sorry. It’s just the heat.”

“You poor thing!” Teresa cried, “Come, sit here. Sit right here.” She took Maud by the hand and led her to a deck chair emblazoned with the university mascot.

“Can I take you to a doctor?” Jones asked looking, Maud thought, convincingly concerned.

“I’m fine. So silly. I’ll be ok.”
“Well alright, but I’m getting you some nice sweet tea.”

“You don’t have to do that-” but he’d already gone inside.

“It’s so hot today I really don’t know. Hotter ‘n hell I reckon.”

“Yeah. I’m so sorry Teresa. I’ll be right in a minute.”

“I keep trying to clear the yard but it is so hot. ‘Lord,’ I say, ‘give me strength.’

It’s so hot I get a rash right here between my legs. Right here,” she repeated pointing to her crotch, “My poor thighs just burn.”

“Now Teresa,” Jones was back with a bottle, “Maud don’t want to hear about that.”

“You should try wearing cotton. It might help.” Maud sipped the iced tea. It was so sweet it stung her mouth, but she had to admit it did make her feel better.

“Thank you so much for taking care of me. I really have to go though, I’m running late for my babysitting job.”

“How many kids?” Jones asked.

“Three…Lord give me strength,” she replied giving Teresa a smile.

“Would you care for a ride?” But Maud refused with as much politeness as she could muster even though it meant walking past the dead cat on the road. Nothing would ever get her into that man’s pick-up truck.

Every Tuesday morning at ten o’clock, Maud’s mother called her from London. Before this schedule they could end up going for weeks without talking to each other. After the divorce, Louisa had moved into a trendy flat in Chelsea, her new life modeled on episodes of Sex and the City and re-runs of Absolutely Fabulous. Maud loathed hearing
about her romantic sagas with younger men, which were disclosed in Charlotte’s Kings Road English (“Totes, darling, totes”).

“Hallo darling!”

“Hi mum.”

“How are you? I got the sweetest postcard from your cousin Theo today. He’s in Namibia, you know, saving cheetahs or something.”

“Mm-hm.”

“And Lucy’s having a wonderful time in Thailand. Aren’t Gap Years fun? I wish I could go on another one but I suppose I’m too old now aren’t I.”

“Surely not.”

“Though David says…”

Maud turned to see a hulking silver truck roar down the road. Black smoke billowed from the exhaust pipe and dispersed, no doubt absorbed by the rows of Maud’s herbs on the porch. She made a note to examine their leaves for signs of contamination.

“Are you there?”

“What? Oh, yeah mum. What was that?”

“I asked how university was going.”

“Fine. We’re doing Renaissance stuff at the moment.”

“How fabulous. You must talk to David about it when you visit. He’s simply potty about Da Vinci.”

Maud cut the conversation short with the promise that she would think about going home in June and put the phone down with a sigh.
Every time her mother called, Maud feared that she had opened her mail, which sat for months on end in a pink ostrich skin box by the door in the Chelsea flat, and found something that would let her know that her only daughter had dropped out of university. It was just as well that her father was so busy or he would’ve noticed that a certain large sum of money had not been taken out of his bank account that January. Maud had found herself a job at an organic supermarket, the sort of thing he would have loved for her to do as a teenager, excellent for resumes and building character, but now that she was supposed to be on the road to law school or the like, he would be less than thrilled.

Maud enjoyed working in the supermarket. She liked getting there early so that she could wander the aisles touching the produce as she went, the funny misshapen carrots or the bruise-coloured heirloom tomatoes beautiful in their natural ugliness. She was soothed by words like “Cage-Free”, “All Natural”, and “Nothing Added.” The fish looked wonderful in their glass case, their eyes shiny and vital even in death, their scales a myriad of shades that you could only truly make out if you leaned in close enough. She felt safe there surrounded by real food and people who used paper bags instead of the plastic ones that clogged up landfills and choked dolphins. She scanned each item in a trance, smiling when a customer complained about a thirty-cent discrepancy on their bill, telling them she understood and that she would of course take the issue to the manager. People didn’t annoy her as they usually did when she was in her supermarket. Even the manager, with his bureaucrat attitude and superiority complex was nothing more than a mild noise in the background of her day.

This particular supermarket day had been ruined, however. Tuesdays always started off with the grim call from her mother, but this time her plans to go drinking with
Pat had been interrupted by a last minute call from Diana who needed her to take care of the kids while they went to Ian’s office party.

“I wasn’t going to go, but we decided it would look better if we went together,” she explained, “I hope you can come.”

Maud decided that she needed the cash more than the beer, and agreed but she was in a bad mood for the rest of the day. She sometimes thought of asking either her mother or father for money so that she could drop the babysitting gig - both assumed that she got funds from the other one anyway, but she could not bear to be beholden to them. And this way when they eventually did find out that she was no longer going to college, she could at least defend herself in part with her financial independence. She comforted herself with this thought as she walked to the Waterford’s house, and held her breath when she passed the stain that had once been somebody’s pet.

One of Maud’s earliest memories was finding a dead baby mouse in the garden. It’s furless body lay bloated and dark purple in a puddle. She ran inside and got her mother, who screamed and pulled Maud towards her. Later that night her father sat her down and explained what had happened to the mouse. *It’s dead, Maud* she could remember him saying. *Do you understand “dead”?’* Maud nodded. *Daddy, she said, I never saw a mouse that looked like that.* He sighed and said *No honey, but don’t you worry about it.*

When she was eight, her mother’s mother passed away at ninety-three years of age, though she looked at least two decades younger having lived on a diet of fresh vegetables and fish, eschewing anything that came in a can and insisting on a glass of sherry or brandy each evening before dinner. Maud was proud of her grandmother when she
overheard the undertaker praising the condition of her body to his partner, saying that there was almost no need to embalm her, the body had stayed so fresh. When her father’s mother had died a year later, however, Maud was horrified to learn that a mere two days after death the body was in such bad condition that there was no possibility of an open casket. A lifetime of heavy meat consumption and general unconcern regarding her diet had meant that her body had blackened and started to decay immediately, the science too confusing for a scared nine-year-old with a habit of listening at doors.

“Maud, can you read us a story?” Benjy asked, looking angelic in blue-striped pajamas.

“Yes, please Maud, please,” Hayley added.

The three of them were all sitting on Benjy’s bed. Allie was nowhere to be seen.

“Ok, pick out your favourite book.”

“No. We want a *new* story.”

“Um, ok. You want me to make one up right now?”

The two children nodded, and Maud pinched her bottom lip with her fingers while she tried to come up with something she had liked as a kid.

“No, I’ve got it. A long, long time ago, in the Victorian era-”

“What’s Victorian?” Benjy asked, raising his hand.

“Victorian is what they call the time when Queen Victoria ruled Britain. Anyway, in Victorian times a lot of children didn’t go to school like you do now.”

“Lucky.”
“Not really. Often, the poorest children were sent to work as chimney sweeps and in mines and other places that were too small for grown-ups. There were all sorts of jobs that children did back then and many of them couldn’t even read. Now, the rich people then were called upper class, and the poor people were called working class. Those in the middle were called middle class, and the middle class people wanted to do all the things that the upper class people did. The rich people got to eat all the yummy food, like sweet cakes and roast goose and all kinds of jam. Rasberry jam was very popular, but it was expensive and middle class people couldn’t really afford to eat it all the time even though they wanted to be just like the upper class.

One day, a clever person came up with the idea of making fake raspberry jam and selling it at a discount rate to the middle class. So he concocted a recipe made with gelatin, sugar, red dye and other things, but he had a problem. Rasberry jam, you see, has lots of seeds in it, and so he had to find a way to put seeds in his fake jam. He thought and thought and suddenly it hit him. He could carve the seeds out of wood!”

Maud stretched her hands out in front of Hayley and Benjy.

“This job would be too difficult for grown-ups though with their big, clumsy hands, so he hired children, and had dozens of them working for him, all sitting there day after day carving little wooden seeds to put in the fake jam. Can you imagine doing that every day instead of going to school?”

Both the children stared at her.

“That sounds really gross,” Hayley said with a giggle.

“Yeah,” Benjy agreed, “What’s jam?”

“It’s a lot like that grape jelly you always eat.”
“That was a really shit story,” Allie was leaning on the doorpost, leering at them.

“No swearing in front of your brother and sister.”

“Shit shit shit. Fuck fuck fuck.”

Hayley and Benjy laughed and looked nervous.

“Very clever.”

Allie was tapping her foot. Maud was reminded of the way a tiger paced in his cage at the London Zoo when she was a child.

“Why don’t you read a story for Hayley and Benjy. Show them what you can do.”

“Don’t want to.”

“Fine. Why don’t you go and put a movie on then?”

“What’s this?” Allie pulled out a glass container from behind her back. Maud recognized the dinner she had made for herself before coming over.

“It’s really rude to go through other people’s belongings.”

“Is it puke?”

“No, it’s my dinner.”

Allie screeched with laughter. “You eat puke for dinner?”

“No. That’s fish and bean stew.”

“Ew-ew. Sounds like puke.”

“Give it back.”

“Nope.”

“Give it back right now or I’m calling your parents.”

“There’s a kid in my class who eats puke too. He’s a freak.”
Maud stood up and put her hand out. Her ears were ringing and she felt short of breath. Allie slowly began to unscrew the cap and it made a squeaking noise that sounded loud and unnatural in the tense silence.

“For the last time give me that right now.”

“Freak! Freak!” Allie screamed, opening the cap all the way and throwing the contents at Maud’s face. Maud stepped forward and gave her a resounding slap across the cheek.

Ian was surprisingly kind as he walked Maud down the driveway. He even gave her a little extra money, and told her not to worry about Diana who had been very cold when Maud had told her what had happened, scrunching her nose at the fish smells that wafted from Maud’s clothes.

“My dad used to smack us when we were bad,” he said, “but it’s not what people do now. We’ll confiscate her phone for a week.”

“I – I can’t tell you how sorry I am. I don’t know what came over me.” Maud was on the verge of tears.

“Accidents happen. Are you sure you’re alright walking home by yourself?”

“I don’t live too far away, but thanks.”

“Ok then,” he shook her hand, “Take care.”

“Thanks. You too.”

As soon as she was a little way from the house, Maud called Pat, her throat aching from holding back sobs.

“Hey friend. What up?”
“Pat, thank God, it’s so great to hear a friendly voice. Let’s go to the bar.”

There was a pause. “I can’t right now, maybe tomorrow?”

He sounded awkward.

“It’s just that I thought you wouldn’t be out till late and I met this chick…”

“You’re on a date?”

“Kind of. Yeah.”

“Oh ok,” Maud worked hard to keep her voice from rising an octave, “no worries. Let’s hang out tomorrow.”

“You sure? ‘Cause I can always -”

“No. Really. Have a good time. I want to hear all about it tomorrow.”

“Yeah. Cool. Well…”

“Night night.”

“Night.”

Maud hung up feeling, if possible, even worse.

The next day, she skipped work at the supermarket and spent the whole afternoon with Teresa. She hadn’t intended to, but she was so worn out from crying half the night, and felt so lost that she couldn’t resist the sweet woman’s company. Teresa told her more about the home she had lived in for much of the eighties. Maud thought it sounded awful but she seemed unconcerned, her only worry now her backyard. She offered to help but Teresa refused, saying she couldn’t have an educated person moving heavy pots and tools around in the hot sun. Maud was mortified by this, but couldn’t convince her to let her help.
They sat out on the porch. They watched an older couple down the road drag a faded red couch and several mismatched chairs onto the curb. Not five minutes later a car drove passed and screeched to a halt next to the abandoned furniture. Two college boys jumped out and put the chairs into the trunk and backseat before getting back in and driving away.

“The circle of life,” Maud murmured to herself.

She looked at Teresa who was staring at the sky, her face smooth and serene, the reflection of clouds passing across her eyes.

“Don’t you ever want to go anywhere by yourself?” Maud asked. She couldn’t help herself.

“Where would I go without Jonesy?”

“Well, you could go to the cinema, or go shopping, or take a walk in the park.”

“I never thought about doing none of that. And Barnabus would get so lonesome.”

Maud wanted to shake her at that moment, shake her and tell her to wake up. That dog is evil, she wanted to shout, and where was Jonesy all those times it attacked you? But she couldn’t. She couldn’t do anything at all.

Maud’s mother called her numerous times over the next few weeks breaking their normal phone schedule. She was determined to introduce her daughter and boyfriend, and Maud suspected that David had made noises about getting married. She complained to Pat about this one evening as they lounged by the river getting stoned.

“Good for her,” he said, watching a snapping turtle struggle against the current, “You should be happy for her.”

“No, I mean, yeah sure. Of course I want her to be happy.”
She thought better of the rant she’d stored up for this conversation.

She lay back and looked up at the silhouette of leaves and branches against the evening sky.

“You should go,” Pat said, “Why hang around here all summer?”

“I can’t leave Teresa. Bad things always happen in summer. The heat makes people crazy.”

They argued for a while, Pat adamant that she return home and spend time with her mother, and Maud agreed once he’d promised to keep an eye on the blighted house.

“You have to walk by at least once a day.”

“They’ll think I’m casing the joint.”

“Then put a pair of sneakers on and pretend you’re jogging.”

They both burst out laughing. Pat never wore anything but worn-out army boots.

They settled on a different plan, one that involved Pat offering to walk his neighbour’s pit bull.

“Just watch out for the hell hound,” Maud warned.

“Kimbo’s more than a match for him I reckon.”

“And what will you do if something does happen, like you catch Jones in the act?”

Maud sat up. When he didn’t answer, she asked again, poking him in the chest with a water bottle. He batted it away and sat up too.

“We-ell, I guess I’d first make sure he wasn’t a cyborg.”

“That man’s no cyborg,” Maud said, her face severe.

“How do you know? He could be one. Hell, you could be one.”
Pat was teasing her, avoiding the subject of what to do if something bad did happen to Teresa while she was away. Maud told him she knew she wasn’t, and again he asked how she would know.

“Because cyborgs would be clean somehow. More machine than biological. And I don’t feel clean. Not ever.”

She tipped her bottle back and forth, watching the water run from one side to the other.

“I’m polluted. When it rains I can feel the chemicals on my skin, it almost burns. When I eat out, the food makes me sick. All the salt and preservatives and flavour enhancers. I can feel them being digested and absorbed into my body. Even this water here. Bought it because it was cheap and I was thirsty, but the longer the water stays in there the more it leaches poison from the plastic. I can taste it. It’s in every part of me.”

She stopped, ashamed, and crushed the joint against the sole of her shoe. Pat fiddled with his laces.

“I promise I’ll keep an eye on her, ok?” He gave Maud a light punch on the shoulder. “I’ll send a report each day. It’ll be our summer mission.”

She thanked him, and sent her mum a text to tell her she’d be coming home.

*

As promised, Pat sent daily emails when she was in England, giving detailed accounts of Teresa, Barnabus, and Jones.

*Hell hound has fleas. Won’t stop scratching.*
Jones switched to Bud Light. Suspicious.

Teresa ok. Bruised right arm. Possibly from yard work. Will investigate.

Maud read the emails on the balcony of her mum’s flat where she lounged most days with a pile of books and magazines. Summer in the American South was a torment, but she’d forgotten how much she loved London in the sunshine. When Louisa asked if she’d consider coming home for good when she graduated, she’d even given a noncommittal “maybe” instead of her usual “no.” The boyfriend, David, was on a new diet and so they ate delicious fresh food every day; cooling cucumber gazpacho, shaved squash pasta with green goddess dressing, beetroot and ginger smoothies, bowl after bowl of fresh berries. Maud was beginning to feel almost well when an email from Pat sent her running to her room to pack.

Ma not doing so good. Taking Greyhound home. No Teresa today. Sorry.

She replied, full of concern for his mother, and told him not to worry about Teresa though her stomach ached just thinking about her.

Her mother called and invited her out to lunch to their favourite restaurant. Maud agreed and then sat on her bed, the suitcase half-full, and pulled her laptop closer. It was easy to change flights, but it meant leaving London much sooner than planned. It meant returning to America and eating her meals alone. She thought about staying for just one more week. She could lie on the balcony and read and eat good things, but there would be no daily emails from Pat. No news about Teresa.

She booked the next available flight back and gave her mother a weak excuse about a summer job opportunity.
The evening before she was due to fly, she joined her mother and her mother’s friend for a girls’ dinner at a new organic cafe. The two older women gossiped throughout the main course while Maud squashed her tofu with a fork. As she’d suspected, things were getting serious between her mum and David. They wanted to move in together. The friend was fascinated by Louisa’s younger boyfriend.

“Emphasis on the word ‘boy.’” Maud muttered.

“God, Maud, sometimes you can be so toxic.”

Maud was stunned. The friend examined her nails, embarrassed.

“You’re even worse than mum,” Louisa continued, “I thought if I named you after her she’d get off my case, but instead you turn out just like her. Just as mean.”

“Mum, I’m sorry. It was just a joke.” She was conscious that several people on nearby tables were watching them. “I like David. He’s cool, and really smart.”

“Let’s change the subject,” her mother sniffed, pressing a napkin to her nose.

Maud talked about how much she loved the Chelsea flat, the friend quick to agree, but Louisa remained subdued for the rest of the meal. When she dropped Maud off at the airport the next morning, she didn’t even park the car and come inside giving her a quick hug in front of the terminal instead.

On the airplane Maud sat and stared at the movies on the screen in front of her, listless, but once the second plane landed in Columbia her energy rose and she raced through the airport. Pat had last seen Teresa five whole days ago. She dropped her luggage off at home and pulled out a tin of shortbread, her excuse for visiting Teresa so late, and jogged over to the house. Pat would tell her she was being paranoid, tell her to calm down and take a shower for Christ’s sake.
Inside, the house was unlit. Jones sat on the stairs in the feeble glow of the porch light, his head in his hands.

“Mr. Jones?” Maud asked, “Jonesy? Is Teresa in?”

He looked up, and she was taken aback by his bloodshot eyes and the dark shadows etched beneath them.

“Teresa – Teresa passed away.”

Maud gasped, struck cold.

“Oh my God. I’m so sorry. I don’t know what to say.”

“I always said I’d take care of her.”

He began to weep and Maud, who’d never seen a grown man cry before, could think of nothing to do but sit down next to him.

“They found her all the way on the other side of town…hit and run…I wish I could – I wish I knew what she was doing. They said she was right by that park down there, but why didn’t she bring Barnabus with her then? It don’t make sense.”

Maud felt as though her chest were collapsing in on itself.

“Jesus,” he said, rubbing his face, “Look at me. I’m sorry, Maud.”

Again, she didn’t know what to say.

“She was always real fond of you. She liked to talk about her friend Maud. I kept a look out for you. I wanted to invite you to – to the funeral.”

He broke down again. He told her about Teresa’s confusion. How she’d once nearly killed herself by getting her medicines mixed up. How another time she had left the stove on all day and almost burnt the house down.
“Going to bury her on Friday. Please come. If you can. She didn’t have a lot of friends, but she sure was something special to me.”

Maud promised she would, and asked after Barnabus.

“Police took him. Bit that labrador again. Without Teresa they just don’t hear me. Could never understand why she loved that dog so.”

“They’re together now,” Maud said.

“Teresa would like that.” He got up. “I’m going to take you home now. Teresa’d say it’s too late for a young lady to be wandering about.”

He went inside to fetch his keys.

Maud put her head between her knees and retched. Her vision pulsed with the beating of her heart so that the world seemed to go in and out of focus.

Jones’s shadow loomed large and blocked out the light. Small and weak, she stood and followed him to the red truck, her hand gripped tight around her collarbone.
6. We Leave at the Thaw

Alexei Poupko played the wrong note. The court orchestra was poised for the final “God save the Tsar” and from Alexei’s violin came a single mournful tone that was quickly buried in noise. The conductor looked apoplectic. The players on either side of Alexei edged away, wary of the conductor’s wrathful gaze. After the anthem was played out, Alexei searched the crowd to find the Tsar’s face, desperate to see whether the great giant had noticed anything, but he looked as he always did. He wore the same frown, and the large dome forehead, which suggested less of intelligence and more sheer pigheadedness, was no more furrowed than usual.

None of the players met Alexei’s eye as they milled around the small antechamber after the concert. Though the room was hot, he felt a chill crawling up his arms and legs towards his heart. The crowd parted as the conductor made his way towards the corner where Alexei was hiding. A heavy quiet filled the room he led him away, the faces all about him somber, some even sympathetic, as though he were a condemned man waiting too die. “Too young,” a cellist whispered to another as he passed. Silent, Alexei stood still as the conductor screamed at him using every curse he knew, his face purple by the time he ordered the violinist to pack his bags and leave the city before first light.

Alexei walked back to the dormitory in a daze, his footsteps loud and unnatural as he crept up the dark staircase in the servants’ quarters. As he reached for the handle, the dormitory door opened and a hand took his and pulled him inside. Several violinists and
an oboist were there waiting for him with a large jug of sweet wine. He took the jug with both hands and drank. Wine ran down his chin staining his shirt. The men patted him on the back and squeezed his shoulders. They made jokes about the conductor’s mother and claimed in bright voices that they were envious of the chance he now had to make a new life for himself.

“So young,” the oboist sighed, “Only sixteen.”

“A child and yet a man,” the first violinist agreed, a melancholy man with lambent pale skin.

Someone had already taken out his ancient black bag and placed it on the bed, and he felt that he might very well fall into the black rectangle on the white sheets and plummet down to God knows where. They drank for hours, following each sip from the jug with a bite of dried sturgeon fin pilfered from the kitchens by an audacious maid. They sang together, sang songs of love and home, quiet at first and then louder. When Alexei could barely stand he knew it was time to leave. The first violinist was indifferent, the third magnanimous when he bade them farewell and headed out into the night.

And so Alexei was banished. He was still drunk when he reached the outskirts of the city, his skin clammy in the damp early morning air. Dogs barked as he passed. Here and there, a cock crowed in the weed-strewn yards of the outliers. He thought of Orpheus as he turned to take one last look at Saint Petersburg, which had never looked more lovely than it did now as he stared weak-eyed and exhausted. He walked on and thought of returning to the court to play for forgiveness but he did not dare look back, afraid that all he would see when he turned was empty sky.
For months he wandered east playing weepy love songs and lively reels in taverns in return for food and a place to sleep. His hands grew hard from the weight of his bag and violin, his shoulders stooped like those of an old man. He wandered on and on through the hot summer, sometimes offered a place on the back of a cart, often walking for days without seeing another living soul. He filled his pockets with red flowers, and once with stones, setting his belongings on the bank of the river and walking out into the current. He stood there all through night. The stars are brightest in the darkest of places his mother had said before she died. At dawn he pulled out the crushed flowers and cast them across the water, he let the stones fall to his feet and then returned to the riverbank. He walked on.

The days grew shorter and at night his body was ravaged by cold winds. He longed for a bed of his own. One evening, he came across a group of men sitting around a campfire on the side of the trail. They hailed him and gave him a tin cup of hot stew which he swallowed in one gulp, scorching his throat. The men spoke with shining eyes of a place called Yakutsk where there was a fortune to be made.

“In the beginning,” their leader Kalinych said with kvass-sweetened breath, “When God flew over Yakutia to survey the world he had created, it was so deathly cold that he dropped all the treasure from his frozen hands, sowing the earth with diamonds and gold. What do you make of that?”

Alexei shrugged, unsure what he would do with such things.

“Where are you going, stranger?” another man asked, and they all laughed when he replied, “Anywhere.”

*
Richard regretted lending Oleg his Discman as the contents of his stomach lurched with the swaying of the train. The man on the seat opposite was dead to the world, his face youthful and serene in sleep, and it was with some bitterness that Richard noted the mud smeared across his beloved leather suitcase from Oleg’s boots. He had spent almost every night of the past few weeks lying awake with a pillow over his head as Oleg had fucked his way through Saint Petersburg, Moscow, and Omsk. The woman were generally older and as far as Richard could tell Oleg was none too particular about quality, bringing home a strange assortment of heavily made-up drunks, prostitutes, and old acquaintances, including his teacher from primary school. In Moscow one morning, Richard had wandered out into the kitchen of their borrowed apartment to find a vicious-looking young man eating cereal by the fistful straight from the box. “Who was that?” Richard asked, bringing Oleg his customary cup of long-stewed cabbage shchi doctored with vodka, but Oleg just grunted and then begged for the curtains to be closed.

Richard had long been bored by the view from the window, the summer sky, once gorgeous, was now sunless and white, casting a bleakness over the landscape. He had little to entertain him but his thoughts. The awkward movements of the train make reading or writing a sickening experience not helped by the large quantity of horseradish and beetroot flavoured vodka he’d drunk the night before. A lone cockroach scrambled over his foot and he stomped on it as loudly as he could but Oleg didn’t wake. Richard felt his face grow hot as his stomach tightened with nausea. He stumbled out of the compartment towards the bathroom afraid that he was not going to make it in time. With shaking hands
he locked the door and then fell to his knees before the toilet. He vomited. Red liquid splashed against the yellow bowl.

When he was finished, he stood up and looked at himself in the mirror. The dark purple around his eyes were more marked against the whiteness of his skin. His lips were stained a vivid, beetroot red. “Bloody hell,” he muttered, “You look like an old queen.” He cupped his hands under the tap and dipped his face into the cool water. Feeling better, though a little sheepish, he tottered back to his compartment where a large woman was watching Oleg sleep. The train gave a violent jolt which sent Richard careening into her and he bounced off her chest and hit the window with a smack. Sliding the door closed against the unintelligible torrent of abuse, he then sank down onto the seat. “Richard,” Oleg purred, one eye half open, “that is no way to get a woman.”

Oleg was wide awake by the time the train drew into Yakutsk. He stared at the place of his childhood, nodding every now and then, muttering, “Yes, yes, it is different but it is the same.” Of all the stops on their trip, Richard had looked forward to this one the most. He’d been dying to see where his mercurial friend had come from, obsessed with the story of Oleg’s fifteen-year exile from Russia. Throughout their journey, Oleg had transformed as he left his London self behind. The lean, urbane man that Richard had come to know now seemed tougher, stockier, his emotions less restrained. He had not lost the profound effect he had on women and Richard had come to dread the looks that came Oleg’s way, sentencing him to yet another bad night’s sleep.

Yakutsk is the coldest city in the world in winter but warm and dry in the summer, and Richard was sweating as he lugged his suitcase to a rusty car by the station. The
bag was lighter than it had been at the beginning of the trip, Oleg an enthusiastic bearer of gifts, but still contained the bulk of the English treasures intended for his family. Oleg leapt into the front seat next to the driver who was unfazed by his passenger’s frantic energy, keeping his eyes on the road and answering all his questions with a brusque da, nyet, or shrug. Richard groaned as they drew up beside a grotty pub in the shadow of an ugly block of flats. He paid the driver and dragged his suitcase from the boot, his hands raw and blistered. Oleg pulled his bag out with one easy movement. Most of the heavier contents in his luggage had long since brought smiles to the faces of the various officials, policemen, and drivers they had encountered on their journey through Siberia.

“Aren’t you keen to get home?” he asked, but Oleg didn’t answer. They’d spent days and days crossing the thawed continent, and a few more hours didn’t seem to matter. The pub was all smoke and bodies and Richard fought to keep up with Oleg. Men and women of varied age and race sat on uneven stools and tree stumps around mismatched tables. Others stood along the walls. The old barman squinted at them through thick, oily glasses, giving Richard only a passing glance before leaping up with a shout of recognition and leaning across the bar to embrace Oleg. “Lyubochka,” he shouted through a door in the back, “Lyubochka.” A tall woman with sleek brown hair and thick black lashes came out. On seeing Oleg, she too shouted and rushed towards him, kissing his cheeks, and clasping him to her chest weeping.

“Richard, come.” Oleg beckoned him and before Richard knew what was happening he found himself pressed against Lyubochka, tears falling on his forehead. Her body heaved and Richard patted her on the back with a “Pleased to meet you.” She released him and rushed into the backroom to fetch drinks, food, and glasses while her husband
reclaimed a small table from a group of very young men. When all four were settled, a
small glass of pink spirits poured for each, Oleg raised his drink, paused for a moment,
and said, “Nu, so” and they all drank.

“Lingonberry,” Oleg smiled, holding the bottle up to the light, “Never did I think
I would taste this again.”

He ate a piece of dried fish and his smile broadened.

“Balik.”

The smoked sturgeon of his childhood. Richard ate a piece too, but for him it held
no precious memories of hunting trips with friends, of lighting stolen cigarettes under the
stars. It just tasted like fish.

“For you, anything,” Anton said refilling their glasses, “Welcome home.”

Anton and Lyubov were true Yakuts, Oleg boasted to Richard, “With Russian
names,” Anton added with some bitterness. Richard knew a little of what’d happened to
ethnic “undesirables” throughout the century. He could only imagine what their families
must’ve done to survive. The couple could craft a drink out of anything, and not just
make it alcoholic but good too. Men and women from all over the region brought them
what they could spare - bread, corn, fruit, medical spirits, fuel - and these alchemists
would transform the ingredients, adding their own flourishes, a hint of cucumber here,
some herbs there, into a substance to delight the senses.

“We make it safe, you see what happened to poor Michil over there,” Anton said,
gesturing to an old man in the corner, “the antifreeze took his sight.”

In return for their talents, people traded food, equipment, favours, even
knowledge, and both Anton and Lyubov could speak several languages including English
and Italian. The late eighties had treated them better than most, the value of their skills raised by the “hunchback’s” calamitous anti-alcohol campaign, and so the unofficial name of their pub was Gorbachev’s Folly.

For over an hour they sat around toasting each other’s good health, chasing each shot with a bite of fish or pickled radish. Richard was all but silent as the other three exchanged stories. In his excitement, Oleg switched to Russian. By the tenth or fifteenth shot Richard was dizzy and his friend gave a great shout of laughter when he asked for a glass of water. “These Englishmen,” he said with relish, “they cannot drink.” Lyubov scolded him and brought Richard water and a bowl of wheat kasha which left him homesick and missing his mother’s porridge. At some point in the evening, someone handed Oleg a guitar and he pushed his chair back and played.

He began with a languid song about the motherland and the entire bar stopped to listen, but then his posture changed, he sat up, grinned, put three fingers to his lip and waggled his left arm before continuing the song at a livelier pace. The audience roared with laughter at this impression of Stalin. The next song was an old love ballad, “My mother’s favourite” Lyubov whispered in Richard’s ear, Oleg’s voice so deep and rich with feeling that people cried. Then once again his persona changed and the sentimental song became a parody. He went on in this style for well over an hour and the whole bar seemed to revolve around him, women sidling up, placing glasses of wine and, oddly, cucumbers on the table before him. Richard was confused until he read the expression in their lust-blackened eyes. He didn’t know whether to laugh at the absurdity of this strange mating ritual at the far end of the world or hit the table in frustration.
At around eleven, Oleg disappeared for a long period of time leaving Richard to man the empty table, Lyubov and Anton busy at the bar.

*

Alexei passed the first winter of his exile in Vyatka. Kalynch invited him to stay with his aunt who took a great liking to the young violinist. She grieved that he had come too late to speak with Alexander Herzen and the other writers and thinkers who too had passed their exile there, his tragedy worthy of their pens.

“My aunt has it in her head that she’s to adopt you,” Kalynch told him one evening, “You could stay here if you wished.”

“I want to go to Yakutsk with you,” Alexei replied and the older man smiled, satisfied.

“We leave at the thaw.”

What Alexei desired in Yakutsk was not gold but distance. He was assaulted each week with news from Saint Petersburg. Vyatka even resembled the capital with its domed churches and grand central square. When he left the house half-conscious in the early morning, he sometimes forgot where he was, and when he remembered, he suffered the shame of exile anew. He worked on the new railway with Kalynch and the other men bound for the Russian Far East and felt hope when they spoke of how far they must travel. He longed for Spring.

Winter receded at last, and Kalynch’s aunt begged him to remain with her as they prepared to leave. She trembled at the thought of the wild men out there in the boundless
expanse of Siberia. She augured all manner of vile misfortunes. Alexei embraced her, stroked her hair, blessed her for all that she had given him.

“But you must understand,” he said, holding her face and brushing away a tear with his thumb, “I must seek my fortune in a new land. You must let us go.”

She conceded, swearing to cherish them in her prayers, and on the morning they began their journey gave Kalinych her Bible and Alexei a sturdy pair of shoes. They left Vyatka singing.

Alexei stopped his horse once to admire the view of the city from afar, and then turned his thoughts to the city that awaited them.

The Evenki man they had hired to lead them to Yakutsk was known only as The Hunter. Some of the men were wary of this stranger with his dark skin and slanted eyes. The tribes of his race were devoted to shaman, holy men and women who, it was said, communed with ghosts. Alexei was captivated by him, and The Hunter was likewise bewitched by his music. He hummed his mother’s songs and Alexei repeated them, a comical figure playing the violin on horseback.

The journey lasted several months. They rode deeper and deeper into the vast, uncultivated land of Siberia. They traversed rocky valleys and ancient forests where creatures crept through their camps at night and made them uneasy. There was much that Alexei did not know, and The Hunter taught him how to skin an animal, how to lay traps. He showed him the plants that soothed pain and drew infection from a wound, and the mushrooms that nourished and those that killed. He described the migration of spirits, and the years of wandering before the soul joined its ancestors in the world below.
As they neared Yakutsk, The Hunter grew tense. The Yakut people, he confided in Alexei, were no friends of the Evenki and soon he would have to leave them. The young violinist wanted to protest but held his tongue. He gave him his spare bow.

“Strung with the finest horse hair,” he said.

The Hunter gave him a knife engraved with his name. Alexei stroked the strange markings.

“What is your name?” he asked, “Will you tell me before you go?”

The Hunter shook his head and smiled. “I believe that if no one speaks my name, my spirit will not be tied to the earth when I die, and I will rejoin my family in eternity.”

He left them by the River Lena and rode back into the wilderness alone. The horses snorted and shook their manes as Yakutsk came into view. The men were no longer weary from restless nights on hard ground. They called to each other in joyous tones, what they would eat, what they would drink, who they would make love to when they became rich. All except Kalinych who was pale. His face was damp with sweat. He fell from his horse in a faint. Alexei leapt down and knelt beside him.

“He’s on fire,” he said.

“What’s wrong with him?” someone asked, “Was it something he ate?”

Alexei found the cause soon enough. He had a deep gash on his left ankle. Angry red lines spread out from the wound.

“Get a doctor,” he cried, and two men took off towards Yakutsk at a gallop.

The others formed a circle around them. Someone suggested sucking the infection out, another said something about amputation and was quickly silenced.
“Why didn’t you say anything?” Alexei murmured as he pressed a wet cloth to Kalinch’s forehead.

He died there, his friends around him.

Some men lead the horses, the others lifted the body, and they walked into the fabled town bearing the body of their leader.

*

“Why the hell do you want to go to Russia?” his editor had asked when he requested two months’ leave of absence, and Richard hadn’t been able to give him a straight answer. “Well alright then, but be careful,” his editor frowned, “I can only pay you for half, but do try to come back with something we can use.”

Richard had worked in the newspaper’s research department for over a decade, his focus genealogy, and there were few people in England with a more intimate knowledge of the family secrets of the highborn and famous. When he wasn’t needed at the paper, he worked freelance helping people piece together their past. The work was slow and painstaking with hours spent sifting through birth certificates and death notices and parish records. Tact was essential, and Richard had fashioned a veneer of detached fascination that made people feel special and, mostly crucially, that they could trust him.

Before he befriended Oleg, he hadn’t realised just how bored he was of sitting around listening to other people talk on and on about themselves, their classic British reserve forgotten as he sat prim and still, listening, sipping endless cups of tea, *mm*-ing and nodding in all the right places. They’d met two years before the trip at a Turkish bath-
house in Pimlico on the twentieth anniversary of his brother’s death. Every year, Richard went to his parents’ farm for a special lunch (dinners having been abandoned for his father was rarely still conscious by evening, more often than not he was passed out in an old armchair with a large gin on the floor beside him) and he always returned to London feeling worn out.

Richard had sat with his head in his hands, willing the steam to draw the wretchedness from his bones when a voice called to him from the mist. A tall man with a soft Russian accent emerged from a dark corner in the room and sat beside him, his skin and curly black hair gleaming with moisture, so good-looking that he struck Richard as being not quite real. They talked idly for a while and discovered a shared appreciation for food that prompted Oleg to insist that they meet again for dinner. A week later, they met in a small Italian bistro near Clapham Common where the food was so awful they abandoned the meal halfway through, something that Richard would never have dared to do before. Oleg dragged him to his flat and prepared an Uzbek-style stew; the browned mutton shoulders nestled amongst potatoes, fresh tomatoes, whole garlic cloves, chickpeas, carrots, and spiced with cumin, crushed coriander seeds, and whole chilis from the Indian store down the road. “Three hours,” Oleg said, and so they sat at the kitchen table while the stew cooked, drinking red wine and talking late into the night.

Richard was surprised at how easy it was to confide in Oleg who, though changeable, seemed just as interested in Richard’s past as Richard always pretended to be with his clients.

For the first time he spoke of Alex’s death, running a finger against the grain of the wood as the white candles dripped wax onto the table. Alex had been the village hero and Rich-
ard adored him, only a touch resentful of their father’s overt preference for his handsome, athletic son. One sunny afternoon not long after his thirteenth birthday, a police car had pulled up in front of the farm, and Richard had watched the two men walk slowly up the garden like pallbearers. He would never forget his father’s strangled scream as they regretfully informed him of his son’s death. Both Alex and the girl he was with were killed instantly by the force of his car hitting a tree at seventy miles an hour. He was drunk, of course, but no one ever said that out loud.

Oleg listened. He did not look away when Richard grew emotional. There was no embarrassment at the sharing of this most private of stories. When the sun went down the room was lit only by candles, and Richard felt that he had entered a profound ritual of healing. Oleg told stories of his own. He spoke of the first time he ate rotten cabbage from the ground, a starving runaway in Moscow. At fifteen, he lived on the street with the alkogoliks and believed he would die with them.

Oleg suggested the trip to Russia the year after the Soviet Union fell apart, and Richard agreed at once and even offered to pay for their flights. He assumed that money was the reason that Oleg hadn’t returned when the borders first opened in ’87. When he was with him, he felt as though he were waking up after a twenty-year sleep. He needed to see where this man had come from. He further rationalised the long journey across Siberia with the pretext of doing research on the Permafrost Institute in Yakutsk. He counted down the days to their flight like a child before Christmas.

Richard was dozing with his head on the table when Oleg returned. The bar was nearly empty. “Come. Let’s go,” he said. They hugged Anton and Lyubov and pulled out
a pile of CDs, several pairs of jeans, lipstick, books, and a bottle of Hendricks gin insisting that they take them. Lyubov took Richard’s hand on the way out and whispered, “Take care of him.” There was a car waiting outside, and Oleg carried both their suitcases and nodded to the back seat, which Richard clambered into with a yawn. One of the cucumber ladies sat combing her hair with long purple fingernails. The car shuddered as Oleg shut the trunk with a bang and got into the front seat beside the woman. They drove in silence for about thirty minutes until they reached an old wooden house that leaned to the left, a lonely house that like most buildings in Siberia bore the scars of many a long winter. The path to the front door was illuminated by the dim light that shone through flowery curtains on the ground floor. A dog whined from somewhere within. Richard lingered as Oleg fetched the bags and the woman drove off, leaving the two men standing side by side looking up at the house. “Home,” Oleg said and with that he strode purposefully to the front door and went inside. The Bludny Syn had returned.

* 

Alexei’s first winter in Yakutsk nearly killed him. Men died easily in the extreme cold, their bodies set aside for months until the ground was soft enough to dig again. He had been lucky to find a bed in the attic of a popular tavern where he shared the room with five other men. They sat huddled around a bottle of spirits most nights carving figures out of reindeer antlers and telling stories of better days long passed. Many men starved that year, the gold and diamonds they sought trapped beneath the frozen earth.
Others died in bar brawls, the last of their money spent on hollow-eyed prostitutes who exchanged their bodies for a warm bed.

When the snow melted there passed a week of mass burials where dozens of men were laid in nameless graves and the survivors lifted their eyes to God and thanked him for his mercy. Alexei found himself a lonely piece of land and built a small house. The next winter was as harsh as the one that had come before it but somehow when the snow melted he still lived, and with each year he grew more accustomed to the darkness, more skilled in laying down smoked meats and pickled vegetables for the lean months. The winter of 1899 was strange, men and women either hopeful or afraid at the approach of a new century. Alexei was glad. He learned new songs. “A prodigy,” the owner of the tavern told newcomers, “He speaks only with his music.” He was the best musician there but his hands were now hard and calloused and his violin did not feel the same as it once did. His music had no soul. It passed the time and that was all.

For years he lived alone with a one-eared mutt he found half-dead by the side of the road. The town flourished into a city as men and women poured in from all over Russia lured by the promise of treasure. After the Bolsheviks deposed the Tsar and killed God, even more people came through Yakutsk speaking of the starvation in the cities. Alexei avoided those who had come from Saint Petersburg, choosing to pretend that the city had been destroyed in a catastrophe. When he was not sleeping, playing his violin, hunting, or tending to his garden, he sat by the River Lena. He was old before he knew it and wondered what had become of his life.

The summer he turned fifty he met Iliana. She was a sweet slip of a girl but serious. Her bottom lip bled from the way she chewed it when thinking, and by some miracle
she fell in love with him. They married that year and lived together in his crooked dacha with the offspring of his one-eared dog. They did not speak much but at night made love in the rusted wrought-iron bed that had been the only thing of any value her father had given her. Each morning she swept up the fine reddish powder from beneath the bed and tossed it out the window into the air. Winter had descended by the time they discovered that she was with child and Alexei cried with joy and kissed her eyelids, wrists, and stomach before drawing her to the bed and holding her tight, stroking her hair as it was the only way he knew how to tell her he loved her.

Iliana sickened as the months wore on. Her stomach continued to grow but her body thinned and her hair fell out. Alexei braved the treacherous roads seeking help from any doctor, apothecary, magician, or secret priest he could find. The night of the birth he sat clasping Iliana’s hand as she screamed and raved, gripped by fever. The old midwife tried to make him leave but he refused to let his wife go. The first boy was born quickly, his face perfect and serene. The second boy fought harder and entered the world roaring, a purple little thing with an ill-favoured look. Iliana leaned back against the pillows and closed her eyes. Both babies were in her arms when she died.

Alexei named the first boy after himself. He named the tiny murderer Veniamin.

* 

Richard woke with a giggle. Something was tickling his foot and he sat up to find an enormous wolf-like mongrel licking his toes. “Get out of it,” he hissed, batting the
beast away with a pillow. For a moment he was confused by the small camp-bed, but then he saw the curtains and remembered where he was. He was in Oleg’s house at last.

The woman wiping down the plastic-wrapped sofa in the living room wore a dress made of a flowery material much like the curtains. Every line of her was round and soft, her hair light and fluffy. Richard was embarrassed but pleased when she threw her hands up at the sight of him and pulled him into an enormous hug. She had kind eyes, and though her pale skin had been beaten ruddy by the weather she was quite beautiful. She led him into the garden and down a path between rows of vegetables to the outdoor kitchen they used in the summer. Oleg’s father, Veniamin, sat at the table fixing a new handle to a shovel. When they were introduced he examined Richard with an intensity that made the young man blush, his eyes a pale blue beneath enormous grey-black eyebrows that fanned across his forehead. The left pupil was much larger than the right giving him a sinister expression. He then dropped his gaze and went back to work losing interest in Richard.

He showed no interest in Oleg who emerged soon after rubbing his eyes like a small child. Oleg kissed his mother on both cheeks and then drew her into a little waltz around the stove until she tapped him with a spoon and told him to sit down. They ate chopped fried kolbasa and eggs for breakfast, Richard’s fondness for Anna growing with each bite. With the exception of Veniamin, the scene before him filled Richard with a profound feeling of contentment. But then he felt something of the toska that Oleg had once described, that distinctly Russian sensation of spiritual anguish, an aching of the heart. He yearned for a domestic circle of his own. He would never go so far as to marry someone, yet there was something to be said for kitchen moments.
After breakfast, Oleg disappeared. Veniamin remained outside in the garden. Richard spent the day with Anna inside, first helping her dust her spotless living room, and then sitting beside her on the sofa as she showed him her treasures. She kept her most precious things in a tin biscuit box that featured an idyllic painting of a man in uniform holding a rosy-cheeked child. She pulled out a little map of the U.S.S.R. and pointed to Moscow, where her father came from, and then to Odessa, the lively sea town to the east where her mother was born.

“You see,” she said, spreading her hands and then bringing them together, “All of Russia in my blood.”

There were letters too, pages torn from old recipe books, sketches and small watercolours of the Yakutia landscape as well as portraits of Yakut women in colourful native dress, a collection of postcards with pictures of the ballerina Galina Ulanova. Richard was most interested in the photographs, which he handled with care, the worn edges marking their value to the woman beside him. How often had she gazed at the images of Oleg, he wondered. In one, child Oleg smiled at the camera holding an armful of wild flowers. In another, the child was long gone and a pugnacious teenager glared at the camera, arms folded across his chest. Anna then showed him her extensive book collection that contained no less than four copies of Anna Karenina, her namesake she told him, and most beloved heroine. She pulled out a large book of old Slavic fairytales, the illustrations hand-tipped, the volume likely worth a small fortune, but to Anna no price could persuade her to part from it. Oleg was named for one of the heroes in the stories.

Anna and Richard ate both lunch and dinner alone in the garden. They watched chipmunks gambol in the bushes nearby before Anna had to shoo them away as they at-
tracted vipers that nested in her husband’s flower pots. Veniamin had gone fishing, and Oleg was still out with friends. Richard went to bed early feeling sorry for himself. As charmed as he was by Anna he didn’t like being abandoned so without an explanation or apology. Oleg had been dismissive of Richard’s delight in Saint Petersburg, which was the city of tsars and foreigners not true Russians like Moscow. He was inconsiderate in his dealings with women, and towards his friend was cold one moment and mocking the next. Richard suspected that he’d been used in some way. Perhaps Oleg knew he would offer to pay for the flights. Hours later, after the sun set around ten, he heard Oleg stumble home drunk knocking over several chairs and something made of glass, and he ground his teeth in resentment. The fake antique clock in the room marked the seconds with loud ticks and lulled him to sleep. His mind played its favourite nightmare, the one he had suffered through on and off since Alex died. In this dream he padded down the carpeted stairs that led to the living room in the farm. The room was always large and distorted in the dream. His father’s armchair loomed in the far distance, a bottle glinting in the moonlight, and Richard felt heavy as though caught in slow motion. He walked towards the chair and touched the back of it.

His father sat there, a yellow corpse, skeleton thin with skin stretched tight over bone. Richard rubbed the back of the chair wondering why it was so damp. As he examined the viscous fluid on his fingertips his father’s eyes snapped open and the corpse let out a strangled scream that shocked Richard back to consciousness. He sat up and retched. After putting on a fresh shirt he lay back down and took deep breaths to slow his heart rate. As his fear gave way to shame a noise outside his door startled him back into a sitting position. He was sure that it was Veniamin, the rhythm of his footsteps unmistakable.
ble. He lay back and pulled the covers up to his chin and listened to the ominous beat of heavy footsteps on the stairs. Richard remained still as the footsteps made their way to the room above his, Oleg’s room. He heard the door creak and Oleg stir and give a small moan of protest.

The noises began. Human sounds, animal sounds, the scraping of the bed frame against the wooden floor. Richard scrambled for his Discman but the batteries were flat. He pressed his hands to his ears and hid his head beneath the pillow. *When I was one I had just begun*, he recited in his head, *When I was two I was nearly new, When I was three*... And after that the Lord’s Prayer, then the Grace they had chanted each lunchtime at school, then Rupert Brooke’s “The Soldier,” on and on until the footsteps descended the stairs and passed his door once more. Several minutes later his own door creaked and he gasped. A wet nose nudged his hand and he leant down and put his face in the thick fur of the wolf-dog.

When Richard emerged in the morning, Anna was on her hands and knees in the living room scrubbing the carpet. Everything in the room gleamed, from the plastic on the sofa to the glass picture frames on the walls. The air smelled of vinegar and disinfectant.

“Dear Richard,” she cried, “Breakfast, come, come.”

“Thank you, but I believe we’re going to the Permafrost Institute today.”

He went upstairs and knocked on Oleg’s door.

“Let’s go to the Institute today,” he said, not daring to open the door.

“The Permafrost Institute, I think we should go today,” he repeated in response to Oleg’s muffled *What?* “I’ll wait for you downstairs.”
He returned to his room and unwrapped a chocolate bar. He picked up his notebook without thinking, stared at it, then put it down again. The night before, it didn’t seem real. Memories of conversations with Oleg resurfaced, their significance hidden from him until now. He thought of how Oleg had run away at fifteen and lived rough in Moscow until he’d been saved by a man who offered him a job with a film company. Richard recalled the pinched faces of the young men that prowled the dark corners of Moscow and Saint Petersburg, and of the vicious-looking boy who ate cereal by the fistful. The photo of Oleg as a teenager, his expression angry, it occurred to Richard that the look was familiar. He’d seen it in the eyes of the boys in the Russian cities, and in other young men too, like those who wandered in Clapham Common at night.

He walked to the window, and was astonished to see an old man, curly-haired and barefoot in the garden. He wore a red hooded sweatshirt and Robert believed that it was Oleg, that he had aged thirty years overnight.

“Alyosha,” Anna called, “Alexei.”

The man turned, a blissful smile on his face, and took a plate from Anna. She went back into the dacha and returned with shoes, kneeled on the ground, and put them on his feet while he ate his breakfast.

“Richard, ready to go?”

Oleg stood in the doorway. Robert nodded, picked up his notebook and pens, and they walked out to the old car at the front of the house. Anna waved to them, wished them a good day, and asked them to stay away till dinner for she had a “special surprise” in mind for them.
“For you,” Oleg handed Richard a necklace made of teeth once they were in the car, “Wolf, from Lyubov.”

Richard ran the necklace through his fingers like a rosary. He’d received this totem too late. He opened his notebook and asked Oleg questions about his family.

“What do you know about your grandfather? The violinist, you said?”

Oleg shrugged.

“Do you know when he was born, when he came to Yakutsk?”

Oleg shook his head.

“No matter, I can find out for you.”

They drove without speaking for a time. Richard tapped the open pages of his book with his pen as he looked out the window. He took in the wall of green pine trees, the lower branches covered in a layer of brown dust from the road. The road, more a dirt track carved into the grass, was pitted and gouged and more than once the car almost tipped over.

“Should I-” he paused and examined Oleg’s face, “Should I ask you about your father? Do you want to talk about it?”

Oleg laughed and stopped the car.

“Yes, and you wrap it up in those womanish words of yours,” he looked down at Richard’s small, neat handwriting, “Are you going to rescue me, Richard?”

Richard closed his notebook and Oleg started the car with another cruel laugh.

“No, I’m not here to rescue you. In fact, I don’t know why I’m here. But if you ever do need to talk about it, I want you to know that I will always listen, as your friend. Even though,” he caught Oleg’s eye in the rearview mirror, “You think I’m a fool.”
The Permafrost Institute was not how Richard had imagined it. The notion of eternal frost was romantic, yet the white building was plain in its Soviet simplicity, the surrounding area shabby. They were met by an energetic Chinese lab assistant who told them, his Russian translated by Oleg, that Richard might be the first Englishman the place had seen since the seventies. He also apologized that his more senior colleagues were away testing instruments in Western Yakutia.

“Permafrost,” Oleg translated, “Refers to soil that has remained at zero degrees celsius or below for two or more years. If the ice content of the permafrost exceeds two hundred and fifty percent, it is classified as massive ice. Permafrost is found in areas where the average temperature remains below the freezing point of water, but exceptions may be found beneath more temperate glaciers, their bases warmed by geothermal heat…”

If Oleg was bored by the lecture, he didn’t show it. He translated the increasingly scientific language with eloquence, stopping a few times to clarify some small detail, and relayed Richard’s questions in return, smiling at the young scientist’s enthusiasm.

“My passion is the permafrost found in un-glaciated areas, Siberia and Alaska, remnants of a much colder age.”

A dreamy expression came over the man’s face as he spoke of the ancient ice and the wondrous things they had found there, from animals that no longer walked the earth to clues about the formation of the continent. He showed them aerial photos of Yakutsk, then the small earth-covered ice mounds called Pingos in Northwestern Canada, ice wedges in Iceland, the bizarre polygonal ditches that spread out across the colder regions
of the planet, the stone rings on Spitsbergen, an example of Solifluction on Svalbard, which looked to Richard a bit like lava once it cooled and hardened.

He finished the tour by taking them to the underground laboratory beneath the main building, low rough-hewn tunnels that burrowed deep into the soil. The cold there shocked Richard.

“So Siberia never really thaws,” he said, marveling at the thought, the ice secreted away beneath a blanket of green trees and fragrant grass throughout the summer.

The lab assistant brought them to where a dead Siberian tiger lay curled up in the icy soil, the half-exposed creature one of the saddest things Richard had ever seen. The assistant’s favourite discovery was a semi-preserved baby mammoth, which had started to fall apart once they pried it from its grave and so was not on display for visitors. He pulled a photograph out of his front pocket.

“Magnificent creature, isn’t it?” he shook his head as he spoke, “I wish I could’ve seen one alive, just once. We are a wicked species, aren’t we?”

Oleg and Richard thanked the man, who seemed a little sorry to see them go, and returned to the car. They still had a good four hours before dinner, and so they drove into the city and walked around, stopping here and there to pick up presents for Richard’s mother and father. He bought his father an elegant bone-handle hunting knife and his mother a hat lined with silver fox fur. Richard found whom he assumed were native Yakuts friendly, the whiter Russian people less so, but he kept these thoughts to himself. His mother liked to talk about “projection,” something she’d read about in a magazine, and he thought that perhaps he was “projecting” his recent experiences on the citizens of Yakutsk. Yet Oleg was now loquacious, pointing out sights of interest, most of them per-
sonal, almost his London self once more. Richard listened with increasing pleasure as Oleg described the hours spent in queues, the social heart of Soviet life, how gossip flowed up and down the lines, how they all watched in envy as pregnant women went straight to the front.

When they returned to the dacha, all the windows were open, and Anna ran out wearing what looked like her best dress, green silk embroidered with gold thread.

“It’s in the oven,” she said, kissing them both on the cheek and running a hand through Oleg’s hair.

“It smells wonderful,” Richard exclaimed, “What is it?”

Anna shook her head with a wink, and told him that first he must change. The whole house seemed to shimmer with the aroma of her secret dish, and Richard, who hadn’t eaten anything since the chocolate bar that morning, felt faint with anticipation.

Oleg had turned gloomy on the drive home, so Richard had amused himself with the thought that he’d experienced a small portion of the Russian hunger that had toppled the tsar, and pushed Gorbachev’s failing empire into the rubbish bin almost a century later.

He chose a scarlet shirt to compliment the hostesses’s dress, and joined the others in the garden where Alexei was sitting at the table, knife and fork in hand.

The woman beside him was his keeper of sorts, who long ago opened her home to men and women who were “touched” in some way. Together with her sister, Klementina cared for people like Alexei, taught them useful skills to fill their days and bring in a little money where possible. Richard felt that he was in the company of someone special. Anna came out with a carafe of wine and told them all to sit. Venemin sat at the head of the table, Alexei to his left and Anna to his right, and Oleg sat at the other end next to Klemen-
tina and Richard. Anna poured the wine and urged them to eat her Salat Olivier, a celebratory dish, in this case made with potatoes, carrots, peas, and tinned ham all drenched in vinegary Russian mayonnaise. Klementina was delighted, and piled both Alexei and Richard’s plates high with the salad describing her memories of eating Salat Olivier at her grandmother’s house on national holidays. Richard said it reminded him of eating egg salad sandwiches at the village fete, or his mother’s coronation chicken, only without the chutney and curry powder.

An alarm sounded from the indoor kitchen and Anna dashed inside, returning with a large ceramic dish.

“Kulebiaka,” she announced, placing the pie on the table, “A feast fit for a tsar.”

“Never heard of it,” both Veniamin and Oleg said together.

“It couldn’t be,” Klementina said in wonder, “Surely this dish hasn’t been seen since Chekhov.”

Anna pulled a small piece of card from her apron and presented it to Klementina with great reverence. The recipe was written down by her great-grandmother, and the women in her family had treasured it for generations, preserved it through war and famine.

Anna served the pie saving the biggest slice for Oleg, and even he was transported by the first bite, his stony expression replaced by one of pure delight. Richard counted seven layers, each separated by thin crepes dripping with juices, and filled with fish both fresh and smoked, mushrooms that Anna had picked from the forest floor, butter-softened grains, bright green herbs. Richard and Klementina spoke of the pie in raptures, and Alexei said “nyam-nyam” so loudly he frightened a bird in a nearby bush away.
Venemin closed his eyes, butter dripping down his chin, and for a moment he looked a lot like his brother. Anna poured more wine, her cheeks pink with pleasure, and urged them all to eat, eat.

They finished the whole dish and mopped up the gravy with pieces of sourdough bread. Each person leaned back in their chair, relaxed. They told stories and laughed, and Richard almost believed that nothing had happened the night before, that it had all been a dream.

“My son is a child of the kosmos,” Anna said, gesturing to Oleg with her glass, “He was born the same year Yuri Gagarin went to space.”

Veniamin snorted.

Oleg had really been born two years after during one of the most catastrophic crop failures post-Stalin, something he’d told Richard with pride as though it marked him for survival, but no one corrected Anna. She was seeing the world v zabutylie as Oleg liked to say, through a bottle. She pointed out the candlestick holders, replicas of the ones that illuminated the house of her great-grandfather, a distant cousin of the Romanovs.

“You will write this,” she beamed at Richard, “In your book?”

“Of course, but I-”

She interrupted him with a cry and ran back into the house for the dessert. Veniamin said something ugly in Russian when she placed the pound cake before him and left the table.

“You must forgive my Veniamin,” she lamented patting Richard on the arm, “He has so many emotions.”
Richard noticed that her dress was worn, the golden thread loose and frayed.

“Men are always so practical, always worrying about money, and now we must be practical too,” Klementina said squeezing Alexei’s hand as he yawned in the waning daylight, “Time for bed.”

Anna protested but Klementina was firm. Oleg offered to drive them home. He didn’t come back. A chill breeze drove Anna and Richard inside where she opened a bottle of Lyubov’s lingonberry vodka and continued to talk about her family, about Oleg’s heritage. He wrote it all down, even though she contradicted herself often and the tales grew more outlandish as the night wore on. Richard felt sorry for her, more than he thought he should. She’d masked the pollution of her house with pretty things, paintings of flowers and bucolic landscapes, faux lace table covers, porcelain figurines of dancing girls, lampshades dressed with frills. She barricaded herself in with her books, armed herself with nostalgia. Richard was reminded of his own mother, who whipped cream by hand and made elaborate cakes and puddings for desert even though her husband was drunk and there was no one else around to enjoy them.

Oleg spent little time at home for the rest of the visit. After Anna’s dinner party, he vanished for a whole week taking the family car all the way down the road to Magadan, the road built on permafrost and the bones of dead prisoners. Richard walked a good deal. He dropped in on Klementina and her sister daily. They were fond of their charges, especially Alexei, who lived “without a secret thought in his head.” Richard read to him, the uncanny man, who looked so much like Oleg. Anna went around and around the house always cleaning, except when he convinced her to rest and tell him
more about herself. At night, a chair pushed against the door, he wrote a long report about the Permafrost Institute for his editor and organized his notes. He sought facts amongst the stories. He sketched out family trees. When Veniamin was around he shrank into corners and up against walls and spoke only when spoken too, though the old man tended to ignore him.

The night before they were due to return to Saint Petersburg, Oleg took him camping with three friends - Boris the schoolmate, Yegor the soldier, and Yury with hashish-stained fingers. They didn’t speak much English but Richard did his best to communicate, cheered by the anticipation of returning to Saint Petersburg and then home. He didn’t mind being left out of the conversation. They laughed that particular laugh when men say something dirty. The caviar they scooped straight out of cans reminded Richard a little of the metallic flavour of blood. He washed the taste away with a few mouthfuls of vodka, and then only pretended to drink when the bottle was passed to him.

Oleg sat close to the fire, and Richard compared his face to the one illuminated by candles in a London kitchen the year before. His striking features were blurred by thick stubble. His lips chapped. There was a deep groove between his eyebrows. This was not a face to confide in, not a face to call to witness.

Richard went to bed before the others. He didn’t like the way that Yegor was eying him with a smile like a hungry crocodile. He’d learned to recognise that shift in a night of boozing, when wild words and bad ideas extricated themselves from people’s minds. His sleeping bag smelled like Oleg’s dog, but he soon drifted to sleep, the tent hazy with fire smoke.
It was dark when four sets of hands grabbed his arms and legs, hands like those that had pushed him against the wall after school, punched him in the stomach and groin, boys spitting and shouting Queer. But these hands belonged to men, not boys. They lifted him off the ground and carried him outside. They pulled his trousers down. “Stop,” Richard screamed over and over, “Stop.” He fought, and the hands dropped him. The four men fell back spluttering with laughter.

“They want to see an Englishman’s khui,” Oleg panted, and they all howled as though it were the funniest thing in the world.

Epilogue

The man in fluorescent trainers turned his computer around to show him his Facebook page. Richard demurred, surely he was too old for social media, but his young colleague insisted.

“Just trust me,” he said, typing with the speed that Richard envied in the younger generation, “You of all people, you’ll love it.”

And he did. It was strange seeing his name and picture there at first, but soon he’d added over a hundred friends, then five hundred.

“Not bad,” Eric smirked when Richard showed him, “Not as many as me, but you’re getting there.”

He uploaded two decades worth of photographs from his travels around the world, cheetahs in Namibia, golden temples in Burma, giant redwoods in California, air balloons in New Zealand, glasses of Scotch chilled with thousand-year-old glacier ice off the coast
of Tierra Del Fuego, and so on. He chose only the best images, the ones that evoked the soul of each journey. Every “like” and enthusiastic comment filled him with satisfaction. Within two years he’d connected and reconnected with over twelve hundred people.

Richard was fascinated by what people revealed on the Internet. His dour university tutor changed his status at least five times a day; reviews of movies he watched, favourite quotes, how he was feeling, the food he ate. One friend posted only pictures of her grandchildren. Others were more political and argued in long comment threads over the state of Britain’s immigration policies, the approaching Scottish referendum, what President Obama had done right or wrong that week. He traced marriages and divorces, children and grandchildren, followed the expanding web of friends, clients, and acquaintances.

“My God,” he exclaimed one afternoon to Eric, “Oleg’s just friended me.”

“Who’s Oleg?”

“Someone I knew a while back. We went to Russia together after the fall of the Soviet Union.”

“Cold War and caviar, eh?”

“Something like that.”

Richard enlarged Oleg’s profile picture and peered at the faces of the two boys sitting on his lap. They had to be his sons. There wasn’t much else on his page. He tapped the rhythm of a popular song on his keyboard, thinking, and then sent Oleg a message saying they should meet for a drink. His old friend replied saying he would get the afternoon train from Norfolk to London that Friday.
Richard arrived early and sat against the wall of a pub on Bond Street. Bumble bees flew around the hanging flower pots above his head. He took a picture of his beer, honey-coloured in the sunshine, and sent it to Eric with the caption “Drink of the day.” Eric responded with a photo of a martini.

“Richard?”
“Oleg?”

He stood and shook the man’s hand. The handshake turned into a hug. Oleg smelled of fresh linen and cigarettes. They sat down, examined each other, and tried to figure out when they’d last met.

“It was at that party in Wimbledon when the tennis was on, Joanna something.”
“Georgie I think,” Oleg said, “But no matter. It’s been quite a period.”
“Ten years, can you believe it?”

Richard ordered them a round and asked Oleg about his life.

He’d moved to Norfolk with his wife after the birth of their first son. It was quiet up there, but he liked living by the sea. In the summer he took his boys sailing. They ate Cromer crabs and smoked herring in the garden. Richard told him about his work in return, how the newspaper industry was changing.

“I’m not sure I like this Facebook,” Oleg said, “I tell my boys they are making their own dossiers.”

“For who?”

“Whoever is watching.”

He glanced at the cluster of cameras at the intersection and Richard was struck by this new paranoia. It was as though Oleg had never truly left Soviet Russia.
“That’s for the next generation to figure out,” Richard said.

He gave Oleg his old notebook. It contained all that he’d uncovered about his family.

“You were never that interested, I know,” he said as Oleg turned the book over in his hands, “But I thought your boys might be curious one day.”

Richard had returned from Russia hurt and furious. He almost burned the notebook. He drove all the way to his parents’ farm to use their fireplace, but once the fire was lit the ritual seemed ridiculous. He held onto his notes and added to them over the years. His work seemed important again. A person could still be haunted by their past, even if they knew nothing about it.

“Dear Richard,” Oleg said, “I thank you.”

They caught up for another half an hour, and then Richard excused himself. He was meeting a client for dinner.

“She’s taking me with her to Gibraltar,” he said as he stood to leave, “I’ve always wanted to go there.”

“So adventurous now, Richard,” Oleg stroked his chin and looked up at him,

“And are you happy?”

Richard thought for a moment.

“I’ll tell you next time I see you.”

He left. As he waited to cross the street, he looked back. Oleg was reading the old notebook, a new drink beside him.