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Nine Months

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Nine Months

by

Esther Lim

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Creative Writing

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Abstract | Introduction

This is a collection of nine stories that traces a chronological movement through one family's experience of the mother's illness.

Each piece in the collection is meant to be an independent, free-standing short story. Each story is different, told from distinctive points-of-view, angles, and voices. However, every story covers one month out of the nine, in the presented order, as part of a collective movement toward the core. All together, the nine pieces hope to reflect a mosaic of sorts—one that tells a story that cannot otherwise be told.

FOR MY MOTHER
WHO FOUGHT THE GOOD FIGHT
AND WON THE GOOD RACE

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Slow Burying

The mother buried things well.

Like the chronic Hepatitis B which had come to live quietly in her body. For years the family guessed at where it may have originated before finally settling on a blood transfusion received during her second C-section. It wasn't uncommon, after all, for such a thing to happen in post-war Korea. The price for bringing a new life into the world, a dark and malignant presence that would become a permanent part of her. Because of it, she never shared cups and utensils with anyone, not even her husband, never kissed her own children, never talked of it nor indicated any signs of it. For decades it lay silent within her daily comings and goings.

She buried her exhaustion in her prayers. The exhaustion of creating meals out of a seminarian's wage, two toddlers at her knees. Of taking her children on hour-long bus rides through the smoggy heart of Seoul to have them held by their grandparents. The big move to a tropical country in Southeast Asia which her husband called the mission field, assuming a new language and culture and life. Then later, the exhaustion of sitting with first her daughter then her son to guide them through the multiplication table, the Apostle's Creed, the opening notes of Mozart's "Für Elise." Reluctant fingers drummed arpeggios on black-and-white keys, encircled by a hush-hush of neighborhood gossip that she was too controlling of a mother. But someday her children would thank her, and for that day she ignored the veiled accusations. Each night she succumbed to slumber with a simple prayer for tomorrow's strength.

She learned to bury her feelings early on when the title “pastor’s wife” overcame her. When others criticized her husband in the church, and when he in turn grew bitter in his own home, she took his verbal lashings in unflinching stillness. When she grew lonely on foreign soil without a friend to confide in, she jotted down her thoughts in a journal, read away her sorrows with “Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.” And when she had to move yet again, this time to America, she packed the bags, said her goodbyes, and didn’t look back.

These things the daughter did not know as she sat holding the mother slumped against one shoulder on their way out of the endoscopy clinic. She only knew that the mother needed to be taken to the nearest emergency room because her organs were failing: a bleeding stomach ulcer had cost her three quarts of blood over the span of two months. Two months during which the daughter had suspected something was wrong without knowing exactly what until she was getting her nearly unconscious mother into the car. The doctor said there must have been a great deal of pain. But it was pain that had been buried all too well behind simple complaints of fatigue and indigestion.

“Father Almighty, help us!” prayers burst forth from the father’s chest at intervals as he looked back at them in the rearview mirror. Holding the pale body that shifted with every swerve and pothole, the daughter’s face betrayed no emotion save for a firm impassivity that unnerved him to the core. The mother was usually the calm one, the one who thought rationally and kept them together in mid-crisis. But now, with her life seeping away from them both, it was the daughter who calmly instructed him to put on

the hazard lights and take the emergency lane, that people would understand although it was rush hour.

They pulled up at the hospital and, leaving the car in the middle of two spaces, half-carried, half-dragged the mother inside. A male nurse stood guarding the double doors between the waiting area and the emergency bay, and two women were pleading with him in a tearful blend of English and Spanish, one cradling a bandaged arm with the other. The people around the room had all been there since midmorning. Some were lying on benches, others pacing around, crumpling and uncrumpling the number slips they'd been given. A mother held her whimpering toddler to her chest, next to a young man who dabbed at traces of blood on the front of his motorcycle jacket.

The room grew hushed, a pathway was cleared, and the nurse motioned them over with quick flicks of his hand as he swung open one of the double doors. He called for a wheelchair, in the same breath asked how long she had been like this. When the wheelchair arrived, he took over one side and helped lower the mother gently down. Then someone else rushed them down the hall, running, yelled for more people. By the time they reached an empty bed, there were four pairs of hands lifting the mother onto the sheets, another pair carefully supporting her rolling head onto the pillow, adjusting the angle of the bed. One doctor began to examine her eyes, wrists, stomach, called for her head to be positioned lower. Another began to ask the daughter questions.

The father stared at the tubes they had wound around his wife. They put one around the underside of her nose for oxygen. Another was hooked between an overhanging I.V. bag and the back of her hand, already gauzed and taped over. Several

thick, colorful tubes ran out of her shirt into a machine. Its face was a TV-like screen filled with lines, squiggles, numbers, symbols. He could not recognize them, so he reached for his wife's free hand, the fingers of which curled faintly around his, cold as needles.

Later that evening, after the mother's condition was declared stable, the daughter drove home alone thinking of the hospital bag she would pack. She thought of the toothbrush, the socks, the dressing gown, of all the people she would have to call. She would call her brother who was away at college. The relatives in Korea, the grandparents, the aunts and uncles. She thought of family friends, church members, her father sitting at the bedside with his hands clasped fiercely in prayer, and finally, of herself. Each and every one of them had always loved the mother the most. They therefore wounded her the most, habitually, without reservation.

She would understand. She would always be there.

The Core

I am six. My mother brings out two large Korean apples on a tray and begins to peel them in that special Korean-mom way. Taking an apple in one hand and a paring knife in the other, she starts at the top, slides the blade under the red-and-green-speckled peel, neatly parting skin and meat. Her fingers draw the knife across the apple's surface in a practiced glide although nothing but a thin film keeps her from cutting herself. Around and around the apple she goes, working her way to the bottom, until the naked apple stands apart from a long, spiraling ribbon of peel.

At school my American friends eat their apples effortlessly, peel and all. They hold their conveniently small apples between thumb and finger. Gala, New Zealand, Granny Smith, Fuji.

But Korean apples are enormous. It takes both my little hands to hold just one, marveling at its span, its weight. If I ever tried to eat one the way my friends ate their apples, no doubt my little teeth would be on the losing end. At most a dent or two might be made with the best of my efforts. My dad would joke that with one bite my little brother and I could rid ourselves of any loose teeth, an alternative to the thread-wrapping and tugging practice that often has us in tears. At the very least, an ambitious bite into the fruit might have given either of us a painfully locked jaw. The Korean apple is a formidable opponent.

My mother, however, manages to reduce the largest of them, with a few simple strokes of her hands, to little but peel, wedges, and core. As I fiddle with the discarded

coil, the underside already beginning to brown, she carves off slices from the apple's core and lays them on a plate. The first piece goes to my dad. Dutiful firstborn that I am, I fork the largest one and pass it to him with my hands folded together. Once he takes the first bite my little brother and I are free to pounce on the rest. The living room is filled with the hearty crunch-crunch of our chomping.

As I savor the sweetness traveling down into my belly to settle against the warm weight of dinner, my mother skins then cuts up another apple. What remains after she's finished is nothing but two sets of peels and cores.

In no time the plate on the coffee table is cleared except for one last piece. My brother is eyeing the sliver, but before we can both lunge at it my mother reaches over and cuts it in two. One quick glance is all it takes to stretch my fork toward the larger half, but not before my brother's pudgy hand gets to it first.

"Hey, that's mine!" I scan my mind for a good reason to make it so, like maybe the fact that I'm older or that I helped clear the dishes away after dinner.

"Too bad. Mm, this is yummy," he taunts with a full mouth and all the lispy smugness a three-year-old can muster.

"*Appa!*" I turn to my father for support.

"Oh, so you don't want this one?" He spears the remaining piece which looks much smaller than the juicy chunk my brother just gulped down. "Well, since you don't want it, I guess it's mine." It inches toward his gaping jaw.

"Wait!" I snatch it out of his hand and stuff it into my mouth.

My mother laughs at us, holds an apple core between thumb and middle finger. The core is a naked spool with hardly any bits of flesh on it, yet I still humor a passing twinge of greed before deciding, with much resolve, that she didn't get much of the apple. She did all the work, after all.

"Umma, is it good?"

She nibbles off the remaining bits and discards the skeletal core. "Of course," she says. "You missed some here—" she dabs a thumb across my chin, pops the salvaged morsel into her own mouth. Her apple-sticky touch lingers on my face.

I am eight. I stand in the kitchen doorway while she packs my lunch. I say, "Why can't I have a lunchbox that looks like everybody else's?"

My mother fills a Ziploc bag with a neat stack of salted seaweed squares. She zips the bag shut most of the way, flattens down the pile to let out extra air, and seals it with a snap.

"I want to eat what all the other kids eat for lunch. Like a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Or a hotdog. Or macaroni. Or pizza."

Today is our class picnic. Miss Thompson will lead our third-grade class, arranged into rows of two, to Hempel Park, where we will catch dragonflies and butterflies for our science project. Come lunchtime I will settle down to eat with my friends under a large, leafy tree. Laura will peel her PB&J off the sides of her sandwich bag, lick her fingers for runaway jelly. I can see Amanda tonguing the oatmeal off her

teeth as she munches on her granola bar. Their meals always come, along with juice boxes, in their sparkly pink Barbie lunch bags.

Mine is always the same old blue plastic container with a pair of matching chopsticks strapped to the top. One of the chopsticks has a melted tip from accidentally being left too close to the stove. Even more embarrassing are the bubble letters on the container, along with cartoon penguins, that say “Penguin Love Yummy” and “Time for Lunch Meal!” The inside is sectioned off into little compartments for the rice, fried eggs, *bulgogi*, and gooey red pepper sauce. And the *kimchi*. As soon as I open my lunchbox, Laura and Amanda will both say “Ewww” before moving off to sit with other friends. Friends with normal lunches.

“I just want a normal lunch,” I say now to my mother who is standing at the sink. She’s washing yet another apple I know will be peeled and sliced. “Why can’t my snack be cookies or potato chips? How come you always have to cut up the apples, even the small ones?”

In a composed tone, my mother says something about how when she was my age her mother packed her a special lunch once a year for her class field trip, and that it was a simple tin box with not even half the things she’s putting in my lunchbox today. Back then, the only “meat” in her lunch was a hard-boiled egg or two—a rare treat to be eaten with a pinch of salt carefully folded into an old newspaper page. Just for that one day, she explains, she wasn’t ashamed of sharing her lunch with her friends.

Funny, because I’m always ashamed of my lunch. And no one has ever offered to share. She doesn’t understand that the very idea of seaweed grosses my friends out, or

that on the days she packs the *kimchi* in a separate container, I hide it in my desk to dump out later before going home. Just the other day, the *jaangjorim* in my lunchbox had leaked and stained my backpack, along with the back of my shirt. No one would stand next to me all day because I stank of soy sauce.

These are all things that cannot be mentioned to the woman who spent all of yesterday marinating *bulgogi*, then woke up at the crack of dawn to wash and cook a new batch of rice. All this just so her daughter could have an extra-special meal at the picnic. My best attempts are to point out that my friends are bringing cheese pizza and ham sandwiches, Oreo cookies, chips.

“*Umma*, don’t peel the apple. Please.”

She continues producing the same thin coil with calm strokes of the knife.

“*Umma*, I mean it. I don’t want it that way. *Stop it!*”

Her hands jerk involuntarily and the paring knife clatters onto the counter. Both of us stare as the crimson ooze from her finger spreads over the yellow apple skin like ink on paper. My eyes are stinging at the corners.

The apple in my lunchbox will be whole and unpeeled today, just like I’ve always wanted.

I am twelve.

“*Ayaa!*”—a sharp cry jolts me out of *A Wrinkle in Time*. Throwing my book aside, I rush into the kitchen with my heart thumping high against my chest. “*Umma*, what’s wrong?”

Her breath comes in irregular gasps as she clutches one hand with the other. On the counter before her is a cutting board with a half-sliced slab of meat, blood dripping from my mother's fingers in thick ribbons onto its red-stained surface.

"Give me that towel over there," she says. She holds the dishtowel against the gash and leans back on the counter. The bleeding is so profuse that it soaks through the fabric in no time. I dig through several drawers until I find a clean stack of towels to pass to her. A cut so deep she could have lost an entire finger—the thought makes my insides quake.

"What should I do?" I ask. It smells like bean paste stew, which is the only reason I can tell what she's been cooking for dinner. Otherwise, the kitchen is an unfamiliar space to me. With my mother's directions, I check the rice cooker, stir the steamy pot with a round spatula, lower the heat on the stew, and assemble the *banchan* out of the fridge. By the time my father and brother have come home from their fishing trip, the injured finger is bandaged and dinner is ready.

After dinner, we lounge in the living room with the TV on. I've set out two large apples on a tray, along with a paring knife, a plate, and forks. Only when she's picked up an apple in one hand and a knife in the other, just as she did yesterday, does my mother realize that she is crippled by a hand swathed in gauze. Not looking at her, I take them from her hands.

This is the first time I've ever peeled an apple. My mother always makes it look so easy, the way the peel slides right off over the blade. But in my hands the apple feels too heavy and the knife too dangerous. I begin to do what I've watched my mother do

countless times. The blade bites into the top at an angle, and when I thumb the peel over it, a ragged chunk comes off. Inch by inch, small strips are shed while the apple grows warm in my hand, dented and disfigured. I finally cut several uneven slices off the core.

As the others reach over with their forks, it dawns on me that I am holding the apple core with two fingers, just like my friends, and just like my mother every time she has finished serving apple slices. I bring the apple core to my mouth.

It's sour.

Not sweet, not mildly tart. Sour. I think something must be wrong with the apple. But my father seems undisturbed by his mouthful. He's commenting on the news and oblivious to the flecks of apple juice glancing off of his teeth as he chews. My brother is only half-listening, sitting back on the couch with one hand resting on his belly. He also doesn't seem bothered by what is now his second forkful and reaches for another.

Then I glance at my mother—she's looking back at me.

I know. And she knows I know. The apple core was never sweet.

I am twenty-five.

Two weeks ago, we found out that my mother might have cancer—a biopsy of a suspicious stomach ulcer produced vague results. The doctor said perhaps she could get an operation to remove all or part of her stomach. Plenty of people lived with reduced stomachs, they just had to monitor their eating carefully. Radiation could further safeguard against any possibility of remission.

She went in for a CT scan to determine how much of her stomach would require surgery. Although she was still recovering blood and weight from when she had the bleeding ulcer, she didn't eat anything for twenty four hours as instructed and waited for another three in a crowded room. When her turn finally came, an incompetent nurse pricked her multiple times to find a good vein, unsuccessful each time. It was only when she passed out from the pain, wetting herself and blacking out for several minutes, that they called over a P.A. to properly insert an IV needle for the scan.

Then we went back to the hospital together—my parents and I—for a consult on the scan results. We told my brother on the phone that he shouldn't worry, that he didn't need to skip his classes and drive down from Santa Barbara when he'd be coming home for Christmas anyway. We were going to call him as soon as we came out of the appointment. Everything was going to be all right.

Inoperable, the doctor told us as he scrolled through the scanned images. The cancer was not contained to just her stomach. It was also in her liver, which meant it was already moving through the bloodstream and could show up anywhere. Next it could be her lungs or her pancreas. Five tumors just in the liver, the smallest of them about the size of an apple seed. There were no known successful chemo drugs targeted toward this type of cancer. It was one of the most aggressive cases he had ever seen, and without any treatment, six months was the prognosis. All this was pronounced in the doctor's English, delivered in simple Korean. I translated without faltering, mechanically, aware that if I paused to think or feel at any point I would not be able to continue.

“Oh, Lord,” my father cried out. He began to weep, reached out and grasped my mother’s hand with both of his. She covered her mouth with her free hand to suppress silent sobs. They sat huddled together, unmoving, while the doctor went on to explain that the hospital was running a few clinical trials. A well-known chemo drug for colon cancer could turn out to be effective for stomach cancer as well. This was what he recommended.

I had my mother sign and initial the forms, herded us out of the doctor’s office. Collected paperwork from the nurse. Drove us home.

Alone now in the kitchen, I make soup even though it will sit untouched for the rest of the day. My mother is still recovering from that ulcer, still on liquids and fifteen pounds less than her former self. She needs to eat.

So I wash an apple and halve it. I carve out the sour middle with a spoon and scrape the insides out like she used to do for me when I was a child. As I scoop the mush into a bowl, my eyes drift to the discarded apple core on the countertop. It sits browning around the edges, a lone seed poking out the side. Perhaps it’s because the doctor’s words are finally registering. Or is it because suddenly everything has shifted and I am someone else? Because I can’t remember exactly when I became the one who cores apples around here? I cover my mouth with sticky-sweet hands.

DAY ONE: “The kind of place that looks clean but smells dirty,” you scribble into your notebook. Yes, that is exactly how Ward 44A should be described. There’s a musty quality about the air that, between whiffs of hospital bleach and body odor, lingers doggedly on at the end of each breath. Neat angles meet planes between the floor, walls, and ceiling of the boxy hallway, all painted a pasty white save for the yellowed and pockmarked ceiling, as if the painters forgot to look up. The floors curve inward from decades of heavy feet treading through this long L-shaped corridor, the cancer wing of SCU’s old medical center. You’re sitting on a bench at the middle corner of that L looking down both lengths of the hallway—one leading to the elevator and the nurse’s station, the other a dead end.

The dead end is full of waiting people who, like you, have been there all morning. But unlike you, they are actual cancer patients and their friends and family. The old man clutching the wheeled pole with a bag of clear liquid slung over it, he sits in the farthest corner, alone. There’s a family sitting right next to him—a Hispanic couple and two little girls, one maybe about six and jumping imaginary hopscotch on the speckled laminate floor. *Uno, dos, tres*, she counts. The other, four or so, keeps burying her face in her mother’s lap, and the mother reaches out to straighten her shiny pigtails from time to time. The father is obviously the sick one, with his hunched form in a jacket much too bulky for L.A. weather, even for January. Elbows on knees and head in hands, he doesn’t look up when approached by an elderly lady holding out a pair of pale green socks in plastic

wrapping. She's dragging behind her, slowly, a small metal cart which holds more of these socks and a few scarves.

The sock lady is waved on by the two middle-aged women who come next. One of them has a pink knitted hat pulled carefully down over the tops of her ears. She looks well enough chatting and waving her arms about, but next to her rotund companion she is all skin and bones. The other woman's sweater is too tight on her, worn nubbly at the insides of the arms. This you notice because she keeps picking and flicking the little fuzzballs off and they skid across the floor in tiny puffs, in time with little hopscotch feet.

On the bench beside you is an Asian family—a husband and wife, and a teenage daughter who looks like the exact younger version of her mother. With a polite shake of her head she fends off the sock lady and resumes talking quietly to her parents in Chinese? Japanese? With this family you can't quite tell right away which one is the patient. But if you were the betting kind, you would put your money on the mother who sits between the other two and speaks the least. She's also very pale, hunched over, on closer look.

On your other side, another loner dozes off with his chin lolling across a broad chest, balding at the crown, one hand clasped over the other on his belly. The sock lady doesn't bother with either of you, just passes you by. You wonder what the man does for a living. From his flannel shirt and the deep etchings webbed across his fingertips, you guess construction or maybe hardware. You don't see a wedding band, although a faint ring of pale skin where it should be on an otherwise tanned hand, and for a moment you feel like Sherlock Holmes—constructing a life story with one glance.

In a way, that's not too far off from what you're actually doing. You—you don't have cancer. You're just a writer here on an assignment, a magazine expose based on an anonymous tip about SCU's discriminatory cancer treatment policies. The state has little room for funding the medical needs of the poor and uninsured when entire schools are being shut down. It gets a bit hairier, though, if it's true that the decision between clinical trial placement and active care is being determined by the patient's socioeconomic bracket.

It's clear from the looks of 44A's inhabitants that their files all said "Medi-Cal." No business owners here. You have one week to dig this thing up, and your editor doesn't just want hard facts and numbers. Numbers mean little to readers, but a story—a story can really heat things up. Not that you're hoping someone will keel over and die right here in the hallway, but that would certainly make things exciting. Drama. Injustice. Sensationalism. *The woman in 44A had received one too many harmful chemo treatments. A clinical trial patient—just another way to say "human guinea pig" for all the unproven drugs out there.*

Well, no sudden deaths here. Just the slow-dying and their somber-faced companions, waiting. *Uno, dos, tres.* These people are waiting to be called into their appointments. They sit scattered about the benches that line the wall and face the numbered doors that hold the doctors. The funny thing about these doors is that the numbers are painted in large, faded, primary color print across each door. As if you could pick whichever one you wanted: yellow, red, or blue. Every now and then, a door

opens to let someone out and the nurse calls out another name. It reminds you of a story you read back in school. “The Lady or the Tiger,” was it?

An elderly black couple emerges from door number four. Was it the lady or the tiger? Their untroubled faces as they creak past, hand in hand, say enough. Most others aren’t as lucky: earlier, an old woman came out of door one sniffing into a tissue. It was clear from her scarf-covered head that she was already a chemo patient. The younger man at her elbow guided her to a bench nearby and spoke in a quiet voice. “It’s okay, Ma. We’ll try out this new drug. I’m sure it will work.” He left her to go fill a prescription at the pharmacy. You made note of all this—the tears, the dialogue, the pharmacy—but you already know that on a cancer piece tears are going to be too easy. It’s going to take a whole lot more than that.

The couple pauses at the nurse’s station, where a young Hispanic nurse has been bustling about. She instructs them in loud, clipped English to come back on such-and-such day, this time for a radiology appointment in the new building. The new building, she emphasizes, is across the plaza, next to the emergency room and parking A.

Across the plaza is where everything else in this hospital is. SCU went through a massive construction project a few years back, thanks to some funding affair big enough to headline the Los Angeles Times. Only after they moved most units out to the new buildings was it revealed that the old ones failed to meet fire safety standards. Yet here you are inside the old medical building, along with a handful of cancer patients with whom you might go down in flames in case of a fire.

After the elderly couple leaves, the guy next to you is called in. The Asian girl beside you goes up to the nurse's station. She's asked once already about her appointment, about half an hour ago, with a different nurse.

"My mother's appointment with Dr. Hendricks was at 10:30," she says.

The small plastic clock at the back of the nurse's station is showing just past noon.

"Yes, honey, I know," is the reply. "But look at these other people. They've been here all morning, too."

The girl keeps her eyes fixed on the nurse. She knows the other people around the room are watching, bemused, just as tired and hungry as her mom. The nurse has already explained to several newcomers that most of the doctors are out on lunch.

"What's the last name?"

"Han. Ivy Han. H-A-N."

The nurse taps away at her keyboard, clicks her mouse a few times. "Are you sure it's today?"

The girl fishes out a yellow piece of paper from her purse and hands it over.

"Yes, yes, I see. That's strange... Let me try running her ID," the nurse mutters, peers down at the paper and types some more. She frowns into the computer screen. "So whoever put this in your appointment card wrote it wrong. I checked again, it says here your mom's appointment isn't until Friday."

"Friday?" the girl sounds dismayed. They've been waiting for almost two hours.

"I'm so sorry, honey. I don't know what happened."

“Well, I’m glad we checked,” the girl snaps. “And stop calling me honey. I’m twenty-six.”

The nurse opens and closes her mouth, slow and silent as a goldfish staring back from the other side. Down the corridor, people look away, the old woman keep sniffles into her tissue, and the little girl hops, *uno, dos, tres*.

DAY TWO: Bright warmth presses gently against your face when you step out of the elevator. Once your eyes have adjusted, you can see the sunlight reaching through the floor-length windows that make up one whole side of the suite. Yes, suite is what you would call this spacious waiting room. With the duo-toned couches and the framed geometric art hanging off the walls, it’s just like a business suite in one of the downtown high rises. Or maybe an airport terminal; there’s a suspended TV screen in each corner of the room. Beyond the squeaky-clean glass stretches Lot A, dotted with cars all the way to the freeway. You pull out your notebook and jot down: “The new cancer ward is a shiny place full of clean air and light. Smells of optimism—as optimistic as a clinical environment can be?” After all, it’s still a hospital.

There are no less than four nurses behind the station. It must be the lighting, but even their scrubs seem somehow brighter, cleaner, than what you saw in 44A. They definitely seem more cheerful. Maybe it’s the plateful of cookies sitting next to the sign-in sheet, marked by a Post-It bursting with bubbly letters: “Eat me!”

You stand behind a tall woman who is signing in. “William,” she calls out to a wheelchaired man nearby, “Do you want a chocolate chip cookie?” He shakes his head without looking at her, engrossed in a TV screen running CNN with closed captions. She takes one for herself and, upon taking a bite, asks the nurses, “Did one of you bake these? They’re amazing.”

“That’s all Vanessa,” says one of them, pointing. “She’s our in-house Martha Stewart.”

“Well, Vanessa, I may have to steal this recipe from you.”

“I’m glad you like them, Mrs. Brinkley.”

The woman turns toward you and says with a wink, “You should try one.”

You smile politely and wait until she’s stepped away and seated herself alongside a handful of other people in the waiting area. Clearing your throat, you explain to Vanessa the nurse that your mother is on her way for an appointment. You would like to sign her in, but you’re not sure of the exact time of her appointment.

You’re here to test out a hunch. The phone calls you made yesterday posing as two different people directed you to two different places: 44A and here. What you’d like to know are of any egregious differences between the treatment of the Medi-Cal folks in 44A and that of others here. What does the strategic categorical placement mean? And how far up the administrative ladder does this decision go?

“Let’s see here, you said Ivy Han? H-A-N...” she scrolls through the page on her computer screen. “I’m not seeing her on today’s appointment list. Let me check her by name.” She smiles apologetically.

CNN is reporting snippets of world news: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, flooding in Indonesia, a political demonstration in South Korea. The last item features rows of people sitting in a plaza waving their fists in a beat, wearing funny-looking paper hats and squinting in the sun. It occurs to you that there weren't any windows in 44A.

You peer past the nurse into one of the rooms with an open door. A boy, maybe about ten, lies on a bed in a hospital gown. He's got tears and snot all over his face, and his mother sits next to him, holding his bandaged hand.

"I'm sorry," says Vanessa. "It looks like your mother is a Medi-Cal patient—unfortunately, we don't handle those cases here. Clinical trials are assigned and managed by a different care team. Her appointment schedule here says that she's not due in until Friday at 10:30, in a different building. That would be...ward 44A in the Weinstein Building."

By the time she's looked up from her screen with a puzzled expression, you've already thanked her and walked away.

DAY THREE: The elevator to 44A is broken. Taped to the door is a handwritten sign with an arrow pointing to the stairs. You stand there contemplating whether you should come back later in the day or maybe even tomorrow. With the midmorning heat outside, it's stuffy in the building already; climbing four narrow flights of stairs isn't going to be fun. You get out your pocket planner and thumb over the pages until you reach this week. You'll need at least three days to draft and revise, already spent two days making initial visits, researching online, which leaves today and tomorrow to really get the details down.

Two women come to stand right next to you, also contemplating the broken elevator sign. It's an elderly woman wearing a headscarf tied into a bun at the nape of her neck assisted by a younger woman maybe in her forties. The younger lets go of the older's arm to glance at her watch.

"Shit. Ma, I have to go. You go upstairs and get your chemo. Ari will pick you up after, okay?"

Her mother doesn't answer, just stands there in a somber droop while her daughter passes her a plastic document folder. Although you don't turn to look directly at her, you're pretty sure it's the same old lady who was sitting in 44A the other day.

"Make sure you give this to him and tell him I'll see you in the weekend. Sorry I have to go. Bye."

Before you've had a chance to put away your planner, the daughter is gone. It's you and the old lady standing side-by-side in front of the broken elevator, close enough for you to sense the tiny sigh that further deflates her small form.

It is she who moves first toward the stairs. She grips the wooden railing with pale fingers and lifts one sneakered foot at a time. Sneakers starkly black against the gray of her long dress, with thick padded soles. They're the kind of shoes you've seen on cafeteria workers.

You're staring, a fact you only realize when the Asian family appears—the same mom-dad-daughter trio from your first day in 44A whose appointment you've come to track today. Upon seeing the sign, the healthy two reorient themselves around the mother

so she can link her arms through theirs. They make their way slowly up the stairs, past the old woman, and just as they reach the top of the first flight, the daughter glances back.

The old woman with her head bent low does not see, but you do: the palpable mortification on the girl's face before she turns away. Compassion, guilt, then grief. In that fleeting moment, she's weighed the frailty of her own over someone else's mother.

You catch up with the old woman where she's stopped for breath. "Excuse me, can I help you up the stairs?"

When she looks up in surprise, she's not really that old at all. Her eyes are dark and keen, though sunken deep into her skull, the corners creased ever so slightly and disappearing beneath the fabric of her headscarf. She can't be more than sixty-five. But trapped in a slackened form and loose clothing, showing only the thin, veiny patch of skin stretched thinly across her collarbones, she could easily pass for seventy, eighty. Her mouth is stubbornly closed, but she is already wheezing, breathing heavily through her nostrils from the climb.

"My son will be here soon," she says. "I'm going to the third floor."

"Me, too."

She takes your arm, but her eyes tell you she knows you're not going to the third floor. Your shoulders are too straight, your head too upright, and a pen and notebook are poking out of your back pocket. Her eyes are not accusing, merely knowing.

You lower your body toward her so she can lean in with her weight. The head bent over your forearm is draped with a faded blue paisley scarf that's wrapped delicately around her hairline. A scarf that smells of herbs, of a kitchen where falafel and tabbouleh

are made, of family, grandchildren, dinner gatherings. But tucked carefully beneath the fabric is a scalp smooth and bare. The fingers gripping your arms are almost ghoulish, reed-thin with bulbous joints. Her nails are dry and cracked around the edges right up against the cuticles.

Each new flight feels steeper and longer. Instead of making progress, each labored step, heaving up, pausing, seem to produce more ahead. Her mouth is now open and gasping loudly. Your own legs are tiring from the slow progress, from the full weight of her body against your own.

“Why don’t we stop for a minute?” you ask. The last thing you want is for her to collapse right here on the stairs.

“Yes, okay,” she says in a wheezy half-whisper.

You help her lower herself down onto the step, take a seat next to her. Several people pass by on their way up and down the stairs, nurses, doctors, families, individuals.

“Ari is coming soon,” she says, again.

“Is that your son?”

“Yes. He’s my second. I have three children. But I live with Ari. He takes care of me now since his daddy died from a heart attack. Many years ago.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. Where were you and your husband originally from?”

“Iran. We moved to the United States when I was twenty-three. Forty years ago!” she declares, as if she can’t believe it herself.

“Do you have any grandchildren?”

“I have two. Their names are Mikey and Sean, and they play soccer in school. They’re Elia’s. She’s my eldest. Ari’s divorced and doesn’t have any children. He’s a mechanic in Westwood.”

“And what does Elia do?”

“She’s a teller at the Bank of America. Her husband is a bad man. Can’t hold a job, he gambles. Bad example for the boys.” She shakes her head.

“Elia’s the one who brought you here?”

“Yes, that’s her.”

“If you don’t mind me asking, I overheard her saying you had a chemo appointment. Are you part of a clinical trial?”

“Well, I was in one before, and then the drugs stopped working, they said the cancer is growing again. So now they put me in another one. Today is my first day taking Pacli...Pacli-something. I don’t remember the name.”

“Did the doctor mention any other alternatives?”

“There’s other clinical trials. They have many of them going at once, you know?”

You nod.

She clasps the banister and pulls herself back up with a grunt. You stand up with her, let her take your arm again.

When the two of you finally make it to the third floor, you take a moment to catch your breath at the top of the stairs. Then slowly, together, you turn the corner toward the nurse’s station.

Odd. You feel like you've landed in an alternate universe. It looks exactly like 44A--the nurse's station is right where it should be, as is the L-shaped hallway and the benches along the walls, the fluorescent lights overhead. But it's all wrong. The walls are gray instead of white and the benches are empty. No bustling bodies. It's eerily quiet here save for a light hum from somewhere behind the walls. Even the clock at the back of the nurse's station is different, with a circular wooden frame and large black numbers.

"Excuse me, when will the elevator be fixed?" you ask the nurse behind the counter.

She looks up from her magazine and pulls her face downward into a practiced smile. She's probably been asked a dozen or so times by now. "We called facilities this morning and they said they'd come by as soon as possible. Are you here for an appointment?"

"Anaya Ferouzan," the old woman says.

"Ferouzan..." the nurse mutters as she scans a computer screen. "Ah, here we go. Your ID, please?"

Mrs. Ferouzan lets go of your arm to pull out a white plastic card from the folder.

"Alright, Mrs. Ferouzan. Let me go grab your file and make sure everything's ready for you. Then we'll get you to your chemo room." The nurse disappears into a room behind the station.

You wonder if it's just your ears or if the humming from the walls has actually gotten louder. It's pressing in from the sides and vibrating against the soft hairs on your arms. There's no reason for you to stay. You've done your part. Right about now, the

Asian family is probably being called into their appointment upstairs. You were going to catch the daughter and ask her some questions.

But when the nurse calls, Mrs. Ferouzan takes hold of your arm again, this time with a simple request in her eyes. She's terrified, and you're the only one here. Not Ari, not Elia. Not the other son or daughter she didn't get to talk about. Why she's choosing to ask of you what she couldn't with her own daughter is beyond you. But now you have to stay. It's too late to pull away from her, and in your silence an agreement is sealed.

You assist her into the prepared room where she sits propped up on a bed and motions for you to take a seat close by. You watch as she pulls up her sleeves and holds out both arms to the nurse, the insides of her elbows already bruised and scabbed over. The nurse turns them this way and that to locate a fresh vein. Once the needle is secured and delivering a steady stream from the clear overhanging bag into the arm, the two of you are left alone.

"I wasn't always sick, you know," Mrs. Ferouzan says. "I was a healthy woman. Took care of my family."

"When did you get sick?"

"Five months ago, I think. I had a pain in my chest and it didn't go away. It just got worse. I tried Tylenol, Advil, nothing worked. I didn't want to tell Ari because we don't have health insurance. He works so hard, always grease under his nails, and we always have so many bills. But then one day the pain got so bad that I fainted. Ari found me in the kitchen and called 911. At the hospital, I found out I have breast cancer. Very

late stage. The doctor said I had three or four months without chemotherapy, but how could we afford such expensive drugs?"

You know what's coming next. A social worker told her about Medi-Cal and got the state to fund her treatments. That's why she's here.

Instead, she says, "I thought to myself, I am going to cut my wrist with a kitchen knife. Yes, the cancer was painful. I didn't want to die slowly with so much pain. And what about my children? When Ari got the hospital bill, I watched him drink all night. He didn't go to work the next day. I didn't want my children to suffer because of me."

You glance down at her wrists.

"I didn't do it. They would never forgive me."

She falls silent and closes her eyes.

You know you should write everything down before the details escape your memory. You should ask her more questions about how Medi-Cal works, whether the doctor who recommended this clinical trial knew she was on Medi-Cal. But the humming is louder here, holds you in place against the back of your chair like an intricate netting of invisible cords. On the bed, Mrs. Ferouzan herself looks like a permanent part of the hospital room—colorless, motionless, grim—and as you gather a careful breath, you are suddenly aware just how much like 44A this place smells.

"It hurts," she says, her eyes still closed. "Everything hurts so much sometimes I just want to die. But maybe this way my children won't feel so guilty, no? And maybe like the doctor said, this one will work."

It's a good thing her eyes are closed. Otherwise she would see that you're staring and not nodding. She would see right through you, see how by this time tomorrow you will be sitting in front of your laptop drafting a story that will reduce her, her circumstances, her life to a handful of words on a glossy page. And in a few weeks, when yet another clinical trial has failed and she's passed onto some other experiment, you will be working toward another deadline.

Band-Aids

I stack the last of the washed dishes onto the drying rack and peel off my rubber gloves, shaking them out in the sink. The clock's loud ticking runs syncopated against the hum of the landlady's running dryer as I discard my apron. I glance over the kitchen to make sure nothing's amiss. Then I head up the stairs to the room I now share with my mother. My parents' bedroom is downstairs—the only real room in the remodeled garage that's being illegally rented out to us—but my mother hasn't slept there for over a month now. It's too small and has no windows. She moved upstairs with me when she first began having trouble sleeping.

I pause at the top of the stairway and wait for my father to finish the last of his prayers over my mother. Without looking, I know he is sitting on the bed next to her where she is lying back against a stack of pillows. Their eyes are closed, their hands clasped together. I sit on the second step from the top and stare at my toes.

My father's prayers are in fervent Korean, laced with scripture throughout. "Father Almighty, you are the ultimate healer, more powerful than any doctor. You are a God of miracles. When your son walked the earth, the blind saw, the lame walked, the dead rose out of the grave. In the same way, I pray that you would give your daughter victory over this sickness. And protect us from the evil spirits that discourage us from having faith, 'for we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness.' Lord, be glorified through our faith. I pray all this in the name of your son, our savior Jesus Christ, amen."

I stand up in the pause that follows, and with a final pat of her hand my father says goodnight to both of us. He goes downstairs to watch the news. Afterward, his snoring rumbles through the closed door of his bedroom, reaching us all the way up the stairs.

There was a time when it was just the snoring that kept my mother from sleep, which was half the reason she moved upstairs. Now it's the pain.

"Umma, it's time for your medication," I say, pouring a cup of warm water out of a Thermos on her bedside table. Cold water sets her teeth on edge.

She turns her tortured eyes up to my face, away from the pills in my hand. There are three different medications she needs to take tonight. One is a clinical trial drug that's part of her chemotherapy, the second is a dose of Vicodine to ease the pain, and the third is a sleeping pill we both know is not going to work tonight, because it didn't work last night, nor the night before that.

I don't remember the last time she really slept. Was it before she started chemo? Maybe before we found out that it was cancer? Or when we thought it was only a stomach ulcer? It's hard to imagine that two short months ago, she was still the one cooking and cleaning and doing the laundry, not me. She used to pack me lunch for work. Brought up midnight snacks like pound cake from Shilla Bakery and apple juice while I labored over my grad school applications.

Now she's almost completely bedridden. She's on her fourth round of chemo, and the next time we take her in they'll tell us if the drug Xelota has been doing its job.

The chemical that's been coursing through her system, destroying perfectly healthy cells along with the cancer cells. The little white pill in my hand that is making my mother cry.

Her words are difficult. "I don't want to."

"I know, *Umma*." I sit down on the bed and gently grasp the motionless hand by her side. Her cuticles are raw and bloody, peeling back involuntarily from the nails. *Side effects include*—the Xelota brochure had read—*nausea, constipation, thickening of hair*—I'd always thought chemotherapy caused hair loss—*dry skin, dry cuticles, and sensitivity to cold*. "After you take your medication, we'll bandage up your fingers again." It's what we do at night to keep her raggedy cuticles from catching on the sheets, tearing further. During the day, we air out her fingertips with just Neosporin on them.

My mother wipes her eyes with a tissue and reaches for the water, for the pills in my hand. In three small gulps, she downs them and sits back against the pillows. She holds out one hand and then the other as I inspect each fingertip, gingerly clipping off any stray cuticles and brushing the ointment on before covering one finger at a time with a Band-Aid.

"How was work today?" she asks.

"Busy. The hiring freeze is driving us all crazy. I don't know what they're going to do if it's still on when I leave for grad school—I guess Rocio and Dave will have to fill in for me."

"Dave is the handsome boy who sits next to you?"

"That's him. Mr. I'm-a-reformed-bad-boy-from-UPenn-on-my-way-to-med-school."

My mother smiles when I roll my eyes.

“He’s just bad news. Rocio and Allie have stopped talking to each other over him, some incident I don’t even remember.”

She holds out the index finger I just bandaged. “This one feels too tight.”

I carefully snip off the bandage with a pair of steel scissors. There’s a small pocket of tender flesh jutting out over the side of the nail which has begun to ooze a bit.

She says, “I think they should make Band-Aids with a longer middle.”

“Me, too.” My turn to smile. “Maybe I should write them.” She’s referring to the white gauzy space between the two adhesive tips. A standard Band-Aid might be ideal for a scrape on the knee, but we can’t have the sticky ends brushing against the sore, swollen areas where nail meets skin. I unwrap a new one, and—holding it by the middle—snip off one of the sides. Then, taking another one from which I’ve already peeled off the plastic strips, I fuse the two together into a long band with an extra-long middle.

I give the index finger another go and make sure that the only part touching the encircling Band Aid’s gummy ends is the meaty underside of her finger.

By the time all ten fingers have been covered and I’ve checked on her toes as well, the drugs are beginning to kick in. My mother’s breaths grow shorter and more labored. She’s no longer watching me work but slumped back against the pillows with her eyes on the ceiling. She keeps her eyes open because she is willing them to stay dry, even as her pupils are wildly groping, unfocused.

I put the Band-Aid box away and gently pull the pillows from behind my mother's head until she is lying down. She turns on her side, faces the wall with her arms and legs curled.

"*Umma*, do you want another drink of water?"

"Mmm."

I pour another cup of water, and she takes a small sip before resuming her fetal position. She barely notices as I pull the covers over her, her eyes closed now.

Turning out the lights, all except for one lamp, I climb under the covers next to my mother. I put my arms around her, hug her quivering back. The pillow smells of unwashed hair, unruly strands greasy and matted against my face as I hold her—as tightly as I dare—because it's the only thing I can do for her now, in this particular moment.

I begin to sing in a quiet half-mutter, "Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine..." My mind lingers on the irony of Fanny Crosby's lifelong blindness as I sing her words, "visions of rapture now burst in my sight." Toward the end of the second verse, I start humming because I don't remember the words. Then I switch to another hymn, and then another. My father's snoring floats up the stairs, the buzzing rhythm keeps time with the songs.

"Go sleep," whispers my mother after a while. Her wheezing still has not abated, becomes a groan every few exhales.

"I'll go soon."

After a few more hymns, "Go sleep," she says again. "You have work tomorrow."

“Okay.” I give her a tiny last squeeze and roll off the bed, tucking the covers in around her.

As I go downstairs to brush my teeth, check the locks on the front door, tiptoe back upstairs, turn off the last lamp, and finally fumble my way to the mattress across the room, my mother’s muffled gasps are a raw reminder of how very awake she is. How she is trying to suppress her moans because she doesn’t want to keep me awake. How the intensity of her pain will only begin to subside—and even then, only the slightest bit—in the third or fourth hour, or perhaps not at all. The only thing keeping her company through the ticking seconds in the darkness will be the steady snoring from downstairs. We will have to do this all over again in six hours when she takes her next dose.

We both know with sickening certainty that tomorrow will be just like today, and the only way to make it there is to escape into the oblivion of sleep. Those precious few hours of the night when we are supposed to find relief, which come so readily to me yet are denied to my mother. My insides are already aching with guilt as I let my eyelids droop, my mind lingering on the thought that the first thing I’ll see in the morning will be my mother’s drawn, sallow face.

At dawn, I pad down to the kitchen and check on the pot of uncooked rice I left in water overnight. The grains are bloated, promising to be gooey and starchy when cooked. I stand over the stove and stir it at a simmer until it makes enough porridge to last for the day. Once it’s done, I knock softly on my father’s door.

“I made some *jook*,” I tell him when he comes out. “You have to drain it, like this.”

I put a strainer over a large bowl and ladle the porridge over it. The watery drippings collect slowly at the bottom.

My father nods, silent.

“You have to scrape it with a spoon to break it up a bit. And I’ll leave the soy sauce here, but don’t let her have too much. Just a few drops.”

It’s one of very few things she can keep down on her good days. Despite all our efforts, she still drops another pound or two on her rougher days, so I’m hoping the whole pot will be gone by the time I come home.

My daily commute is a gray and traffic-ridden ordeal—the mindless hour drive across L.A. dodging angry drivers who weave through the lanes on the I-10. The sky grows lighter in degrees in my rearview mirror as I drive westward, from gray to orange to whitish blue. On the radio, “Ryan’s Roses” confronts yet another unfaithful boyfriend, and I reach over to flip the station to KUSC, which is playing Vivaldi’s “Four Seasons.” I’m still in a dazed stupor as I pull into the parking structure to the closing notes of the “Autumn” Adagio movement, not quite fully awake until I’ve walked into the office and am sitting stiffly at my desk with a cup of coffee.

“Mmmm, how about that brain juice, huh?” says Rocio as she walks by with her own mugful. Her cubicle is on the other side of the steel-colored partition I face. “Did you see that e-mail from Dr. Kaufmann?” she asks, now behind the wall. Her chair squeaks with the weight of her plump frame as she swivels toward her desk.

“No, I’m still looking through the gazillion e-mails Dr. Farah sent me last night.” I click through the bolded subject lines in my inbox that read, “Re: JAMA Membership Renewal,” “Avelar article on 2-D ECHO,” “Re: Fw: Re: Fresno Ped Cardio Project.”

“I still can’t believe she e-mails you after five. What a bitch. God, if Dr. Saunders did that to me...”

I don’t say anything, but Rocio knows I don’t disagree. My boss is a nationally-recognized UCLA researcher and cardiologist. I don’t mind the work I do for her—drafting grant proposals, maintaining spreadsheets of research data, scheduling board meetings and trips—because it’s stuff I can do on autopilot for much of my eight-hour day, five days a week. But on the mornings I click open my Outlook to ten, twenty e-mails labeled “high priority” that were sent overnight, I want to march into her empty office and fling my coffee across the aerodynamic meshing of her overpriced Aeron chair. She’s one of those people who are super nice but only as long as she’s not doing you any favors.

For example, she thinks that just because I’ll be gone for the day tomorrow to take my mother to a doctor’s appointment, she has to make sure I do double the work today. As if I weren’t using my accrued holiday hours to be legally paid for my day off, as if I don’t already get everything done days before the deadlines. When I was being hired for the job and told her about my family situation, about how I might have to take a day off here and there, she’d nodded with a sympathetic smile, saying, “Yes, of course, it’s fine.” Then as soon as I left, she turned to my supervisor Diane and asked her if it was too late

to retract the formal job offer—a fact I heard from Diane later, but by that point it came as no great surprise.

“Good morning, Dave,” Rocio says when he saunters in through the suite door. The bottom right corner of my computer screen reads 8:25AM. Late like always but never in trouble.

“Hey,” he says, yawning. He deposits himself in the cubicle next to mine, ours the only two decently clean cubicles in the entire suite. Like me, Dave is only keeping this filler job until he heads off to more schooling. The office is comprised mainly of administrative assistants providing clerical and research support to UCLA doctors, our small building located just off the Medical Plaza where Michael Jackson was declared dead. “Looks like Kaufmann wants someone to walk some papers over to the Wilshire office,” Dave says. He’s rolled his chair over and is peering out beyond the partition that runs between us. “Want to go and double it as a coffee break later?”

“Sorry, today’s going to be crazy for me.” I reach for a file folder in my bottom right drawer and add it to a growing pile next to my keyboard—my to-dos for the day. “I’m off tomorrow.”

“You working through lunch, too?”

“Probably,” Rocio replies for me from the other side of the wall. “You know Nina’s boss. That *bruja* probably gave her a week’s worth of work for today.” They call her *bruja* behind her back because she wears mostly black on her short, stodgy, raven-haired frame, glides everywhere instead of walking.

Dave glances back at the dark doorway of Dr. Farah's office, just beyond his cubicle.

"She's in Atlanta for a conference," I say in answer to this gesture.

"Dave," Rocio calls out, "I can go with you later."

"Sounds good," he says. "Let's plan on leaving around ten." Then, to me, "Want us to get anything for you?"

"I'm good." I indicate my mug which is sitting atop my folder stack.

"You need any help?"

"No, thanks. I think I'll be okay."

"If you want, at lunch, I could pick up a sandwich or something."

"I'm good. I'll figure something out later."

"Cool, just let me know," he says and rolls his chair back to his computer.

I'm clearly being less than friendly, but this has become our way of interacting lately. Dave asking, me saying no. And this guy just doesn't give up, hasn't since he first started working here two months ago. He knows he's attractive and hard to refuse—one of those frat boy types who's just begun to settle down with concrete plans for the future. A titillating future in medicine, maybe with a joint MBA degree. He's also one of very few guys in the entire office, which makes him a prime target for well-advertised crushes. I'd rather not be caught in any of them; work is just bearable, even without enemies.

Except Dave catches me on my way out to deliver an IRB packet.

"I have one, too." He waves a binder that looks just like the one I'm holding.

“I can take it for you.”

“Nah, I could use some fresh air. It’s my afternoon break.” He holds the door open, follows me outside. “Want to grab coffee on the way back?” he asks as we start walking.

“Would that be like your third coffee break today?”

He laughs. A jarringly happy sound that catches me by surprise. It’s too bright and sunny out and I’m tempted to go back inside.

“So I’m not the hardest working person in the office,” he says. “But hey, I get all my work done. Besides,” he pauses, looking straight ahead and continuing in a carefully light tone, “You know why I keep asking. It’s not because I love coffee. I mean I do, but that’s not why...you know.”

I already know what I’m going to say, because I’ve thought about this. I’ve had days when I wished I could just say yes to Dave, go out to a movie and a nice dinner in Culver City like I would have done a year ago. I’ve wondered how I would explain that I don’t have time for any of that. That I have more important things to do, someone who needs me even more than I need me.

It’s the last part that always gets me, the part that makes me cringe inside now as I say, “Listen. My mother’s really sick, she has cancer. My family’s going through a lot right now. And I just don’t have room for...this.” It’s not you, it’s me. Like bad lines from a movie.

“I know,” Dave says.

“What?”

“Rocio told me about your mother. I’m really sorry.”

“You knew?”

“Well, I figured there had to be a reason why you kept turning down coffee dates with the best-looking guy in the office.”

A snort of laughter escapes my mouth. “I’m not sure Justin and Art would agree.”

“Look. I’m not asking you to do anything crazy. It’s just coffee. It can’t be that bad.”

“Just coffee,” I say slowly.

“Yup. Think about it. And don’t hate on coffee.”

So at the end of the day, just before five, when I’ve slipped out of the office before anyone else, speed-walked back to my car, and joined the snailing cars on the freeway, I think about coffee

By the time I get home, it’s as dark as when I left in the morning. As if there has been no passage of time, one darkness meeting another in a perpetual chain of dimly lit nights.

The pot of porridge I left on the stove is still half full.

“I’m home,” I call out, dumping my purse on the couch. The bedroom door opens and my father steps out, bleary-eyed from a nap. He leans against the side of the kitchen sink where I’m washing my hands.

“She threw up everything today,” he says in a low tone. “Ate twice this morning, threw up both times. The third time, I couldn’t get her to eat anymore.” He rubs his eyes, which are wet and bloodshot.

“What about her medication?”

“I think she threw that up, too. But I was scared to give her another dose.”

“Did you try giving her the anti-nausea stuff?” I dry my hands on a towel.

“I did. It didn’t work.”

I sigh and turn around to face him. “*Appa*, I told you not to leave her alone. Is she alone upstairs right now?”

His face is grim, guilty. “I’ve been up since you left, and you know I snore.”

“Just try not to leave her alone for too long.” I can see the sleep still lingering on his drooping frame, so I tell him, “Go back to your nap. I’ll wake you up when dinner’s ready.”

At the creaking of steps, my mother turns on the bed to see me coming up the stairs. She makes room for me to sit and smiles weakly as I bend down to kiss her cheek. I can see that she’s not in pain, but her cheeks are thin, her eyes drawn tightly against the hollows of her skull. It’s scary how just one day of starvation and dehydration can do this to her. I stroke a gaunt hand, finger the flattened blood vessels branching out beneath her pale skin.

“*Appa* says you didn’t eat much today.”

“I felt nauseous all morning. Couldn’t keep anything down.” She says this with a trace of shame and guilt, as if this were her fault.

“What about now?” I ask, trying to keep my voice tender. It is not her fault, and I really need her to know that. “Are you feeling better?”

“I think so.” She looks down at her hands, her raw fingertips.

“If I made that squash soup, do you think you’ll be able to eat some?”

She considers this for a moment then nods.

“Okay, let me put on some music first. How about the Three Tenors or Maria Callas?” My mother likes opera.

Back downstairs after changing out of my work clothes, I reach into the fridge for the Ziploc bag of squash I steamed yesterday. Jose Carreras’ hearty voice drifts down to the kitchen from upstairs. I puree the squash until it becomes a soft mush, then start dinner for my father and me while the soup simmers on the stove.

I wake my father to tell him his dinner is on the table, which he’ll eat while watching TV. Then I take my mother’s soup and my own dinner upstairs to where she sits listening with her eyes closed to Domingo’s last dramatic notes of “*Granada*.”

“I think he’s my favorite out of the three,” I say as I set down the tray and prop her up with pillows. “Such a rich, sweet voice.”

She wrinkles her nose. “It’s too buttery. Don’t you think Jose Carreras’ voice has more...color?”

“His vibrato’s a bit much when he gets up high.” I spoon the warm soup into her mouth.

She looks thoughtful. “Maybe when you get older, you’ll appreciate him more.”

“Everyone else thinks Pavarotti’s the best, though.”

“Oh, he’s marvelous. Makes everything sound so effortless. Did you know that his favorite food was garlic? He would chew mouthfuls of it then go on stage to sing his arias into the face of some poor soprano.”

We stop eating to laugh for a while, and I use the remote to skip ahead to Pavarotti’s rendition of “Nessun Dorma.”

When we resume with the soup, my mother swallows each spoonful dutifully, like a child forcing down peas. But she does not gag, does not throw up. She is able to eat most of what’s in the bowl and sits back when she’s finished, her eyes clearer than when I first got home. I know she should probably take her medication now, but I also know she wants a bath. It’s been a week since her last one.

I leave her to finish listening to the rest of the live concert recording and start the bathwater, doing the dishes and cleaning up while it draws. When the bathtub is filled with carefully tested water—just shy of warm—I help my mother down the stairs to the bathroom, tie her hair up in a bun. She steps out of her clothes and into the scoured tub. A faint gasp escapes her lips as she lowers herself down into the water.

I sprinkle ground oatmeal into my hands and begin to rub it carefully over my mother’s cratered collarbones, down her pale, thinning arms. The oatmeal is a trick I picked up online when I saw what soap was doing to her skin, already so dry and brittle. I scoop out goops of the powder onto my fingertips, massage the fine grain against the underside of her arm where it feels almost spongy. She rubs the oatmeal onto her drooping chest and down her front while I cover her back. There was a time when bathing my mother used to embarrass me, to see her naked body, to feel its sagging

weight. Now it's all familiar. Familiar enough for me to know each thin blue vein that stretches across her shoulder blades, just beneath the surface of her otherwise yellow skin. Enough for me to know that her shoulder bones have grown sharper, more angular. The spinal nubs that poke out in a neat row down her back have also become more pronounced. We move slowly. Down to her protruding hipbones, and finally to her legs, rubbing around the ankles, the heels, between her delicate toes. We will wash her hair separately on another day. Maybe tomorrow.

When she's back in bed, dry and in a fresh set of pajamas, my mother looks almost happy. She is able to eat another half bowl of soup and smiles at my father when he comes upstairs with the thermos refilled with hot water. I leave them alone as he begins to pray over her, his hand gripping hers and his tone rising and falling earnestly. Prayer for a full recovery, for my mother to wake up cancer-free tomorrow. Prayer for God's will to be done, on earth as it is in heaven—as if he knew what that meant.

I don't know what gives my father the courage or the inanity to pray like that. I myself haven't prayed in a long time, forgotten what to pray for, wouldn't know what to pray for at this point. My father doesn't feel the ticking seconds of the night the way we do, my mother and I. He doesn't seem to be aware that each small white pill she swallows either increases or decreases the chances of her living longer than her forecasted six months. That the pain it causes her is greater than anything felt by her tumor-riddled liver. That it's a difficult choice she must make every time she chooses the pill, knowing sleep will elude her yet again tonight, tomorrow. She'll choose it only because it's the only thing that might work.

So when my father finishes praying and I pour out a cup of warm water for her medication, she will swallow first the sleeping pill, then the Vicodine, then finally the Xelota tablet. She will sit back and watch as I bandage her fingertips, begin to convulse with pain in my arms when the drugs kick in, still be in agony as I settle down on my own mattress across the room with her dry wheezing in my ears.

But tonight, as I sit on the second step from the top and listen to my father's words, I close my eyes and whisper my own. *Dear God, please grant her sleep tonight. I'm not asking for much, and I don't need anything else. I just want her to sleep. Please.*

The Poor Americans

It was one of those cliffside Santa Barbara homes with a gardener-tended garden and a killer ocean view from all floors. A twenty-minute drive out from Goleta, but it was going to be well worth the effort if the craigslist ad was correct: a gently used Bull Bison 30-inch stainless steel Char-Griller, “free if you can pick it up today,” worth over a grand according to a quick scan of listing prices online. It was going to be the second free grill Jacob had acquired over the year. The first he’d landed from a moving family that hired him through Meathead Movers over the summer.

Jacob knew what these homes looked like inside. Heavy wooden furniture—real wood, of course, nothing like the stuff you bought at IKEA—and matching everything, from the living room curtains to the bedcovers. Photography, paintings by local artists on the walls and even in the bathrooms. A basement equipped with a massive flat-screen TV, a surround-sound system, maybe even a full bar.

He rang the doorbell again but heard no response to the hollow ding-dong that echoed behind the door. At his eye level, just above the small gold plaque that read “The Della Portas,” the wooden door was fitted with sectioned panels of glass. Jacob stared into the glass, but all he saw was a reflection of his own squinting face. Thick black eyebrows, dark circles under his eyes from last night’s party, his dad’s broad forehead, hair short and gelled upward in a pointy—he jumped back at the loud clacking rattling the door from the other side.

“Sorry, man,” said the sand-haired man who opened it, “I was down in the basement. You here for the grill?”

“Yeah. Saw your ad online.”

“Great, great. Come on in.” He motioned Jacob inside, then walked him through the carpeted living room, which looked almost exactly as Jacob had imagined it. “It’s out in the back. It’s pretty big, but thankfully it’s got wheels so you’ll only need help lifting it into your car. I can help with that.”

“Thanks. I mean, it’s an awesome deal. You sure you want to just give it away like this?”

“Moving to Colorado because of the job,” the man said with a short laugh. “Not worth the trouble to take it with us, you know?”

Jacob nodded. “What do you do?”

“I’m in law, construction defect litigation.”

They had crossed the house all the way to the back patio, where the still-shiny grill sat facing the ocean. Jacob whistled lightly. “Quite a view you’ve got from up here,” he said, scanning the coastline for Storke Tower on the closer side of campus.

“Not bad, huh? Are you a UCSB student?”

“Yup. Senior.”

“I thought so. Play any sports?” The man crossed his arms and nudged his chin up to indicate Jacob’s height.

“Not anymore. I used to be play basketball in high school.” He shrugged. “I still play for fun.”

“I played tennis back in the day, at UCI.”

“Cool.”

“Tell you what,” he said. From one corner of the patio he picked up a longish, heavy-looking toolbox. “Take this grilling stuff, too.”

Jacob stared. “Whoa, seriously?”

“You might as well.” He placed the toolbox on the shelf just over the Char-Griller’s wheels, and together they rolled the griller around the side of the house out to the front.

The guys cheered when Jacob pulled up in his SUV. They helped him carry the Char-Griller up to the balcony of their second-floor apartment where a lumpy yellow couch already sat fading in the sun. The balcony was not covered, but it hardly ever rained in Santa Barbara, and by the time it did the couch could easily be replaced with another free find on craigslist.

“Jacob man, you got this baby for free?” Diego asked.

“Yup,” he said. “I told him I’m a student, and he gave me all his grilling gear, too.” He high-fived Kell. “Look at this.” He opened the toolbox in which sat mitts, brushes, forks, and tongs of various sizes in multi-leveled compartments. “Ta-da!”

His housemates started planning a burger party on the spot. They wanted to invite the girls downstairs, run out to the store for patties, buns, pickles, more beer.

“Hey,” Jacob interrupted them, “Lunch is on me. We’ll bust out rest of the *kalbi* in the freezer, too.”

“Oh man, are you serious?” Kell gawked. “You’re actually going to let us eat your mom’s stuff?” He’d eaten at Jacob’s house several times back when they were in high school together.

“Yup, marinated ribs just waiting to be grilled and eaten. I’ll make a little rice, too.” He handed Diego three twenties. “For supplies. And take Kell with you. The white boy don’t know what to do with himself.” He tightened his abs just in time to take the punch from Kell.

“Whatever, Twinkie. My rice is better than yours.”

“Oh right, you’re a wannabe-Asian. Got a serious case of yellow fever, too. I’ve seen you flirting with Eunice Kim. Oh~” He sprang out of reach just in time to avoid another sucker punch. Kell barreled inside after him and began to hurl the couch cushions across the living room. Most of these Jacob caught and threw right back.

“You’re the one dating a white girl,” Kell said. “Maybe I’ll call your dad. ‘Mr. Han, did Jacob tell you he’s dating a white girl? Her name is Nicole, and she’s a—what was she—oh yeah, she’s a dance major.’ A dance major, what is that? Like not even a real degree to your dad?”

“Hey man, that’s not funny.” Jacob stopped. To his parents, a non-Korean girlfriend was out of the question, and not only that, a major in the arts equaled joblessness.

They stood at opposite ends of the room with loaded but unmoving arms. The casualties lay sprawled across the space between them, cushions long tuckered out with

ruptured seams. As the March afternoon breeze wafted in through the balcony window, the loose white stuffing from the cushions began to skitter about.

“You’re right,” Kell said, his freckled face solemn. “That’s not funny. He would kill you.”

Jacob relaxed his stance and threw a cushion back down on the couch. “Damn right, he would.”

He had just laid out the first batch of patties to sizzle on the grill when his sister called. He left his own barbeque party and drove down to L.A., a three-hour commute he usually made every other week. Their grandfather was very close to death after being sick over the past year. The plan was to catch the midnight flight out of LAX to Seoul.

An accident on the 101 kept him on the road for an extra half hour, and by the time he pulled into the driveway his eyeballs felt dry. Home was a remodeled two-story garage in their landlady’s backyard, in the smoggy heart of Koreatown. The first floor was a cramped space—smaller than the Santa Barbara apartment he shared with Kell and Diego—sectioned off into a bedroom, a living area pressed against the kitchen without a divider, the only bathroom.

“I’m here,” Jacob said at the doorway, but the place was silent. He took two steps at a time up the narrow stairway to the second floor, which was one big room. It was a studio-like space with lots of windows that they had converted into a bedroom by placing a bed each against opposite walls—one for his mom and the other for his sister who lived

at home. His dad used the downstairs room alone, mostly because it doubled as storage space.

Nobody was upstairs. Just a familiar body odor, not unpleasant but stronger than it should be, around the crumpled covers of his mom's bed. It was the same smell that used to comfort him as a kid when he pressed his nose deep into her pillow. He'd always been on the smaller side, quiet. Nina was the loud and adventurous one in the family. She'd be outside riding her bike or rounding up the neighborhood kids in some war game while he stole away to their parents' bedroom, fell asleep nuzzled against a lightly scented pillow.

Amidst that familiar scent now roamed something foreign and almost tart against his nose. He picked up a pale orange bottle from the edge of the bedside table. He held it right against his upper lip, like a cigar, and breathed in the plasticky smell. Bingo. A whole litter of these creatures—of various sizes and heights—nestled inside an old Adidas shoebox. The top of each white bottle cap was labeled with a permanent marker in Nina's round Korean print: diarrhea, constipation, nausea, iron, antacid, multi-vitamin—the one in his hand read "painkiller." It wasn't much fun to think of his mom taking painkillers, but at least the bottle looked mostly full.

The downstairs room was empty, too. Like the others, his dad's bed was ruffled and unmade as if he had just been there napping or reading. It made him think of his favorite game growing up, the one he played whenever he was home alone. He'd pretend that his family had been raptured without him. Zapped straight into heaven in the blink of an eye, looking around in wonderment at the pearly gates and the river flowing from

the throne and Moses and John the Baptist and the entire cast of the Bible. He used think about what it would feel like to have the house all to himself, how he would jump on the beds and eat all the chips and cookies he wanted. Now he got a kick out of what his family would look like when they realized the wayward son hadn't made it. What sort of interesting explanations would his dad muster up for God? And to his fellow Presbyterian pastors?

Jacob figured they must be out on a hospital run. He stretched out on the worn leather couch next to the kitchen area and closed his eyes.

He woke up with his jaw aching at the hinges. He'd dreamt that the rapture had really happened, but only his mom and sister were whisked off to heaven. The dream had ended just when he was feeling relief at his mom's freedom from suffering, and he was about to mock his dad for being left behind after all his holy bullshit preaching.

As he sat up to crack his neck first one way then the other, the front door scraped open and Nina stepped inside.

"When did you get home?" she asked, putting her shoes away by the door.

"About an hour ago." Jacob lifted his eyebrows at Nina's blouse and dress pants. It was Saturday, but she looked like she'd been to work. "You dressed up to go to the hospital?"

"I got tired of people treating me like I was twelve. When I show up in jeans, they think I'm some teenage kid who tagged along to translate for the parents."

Saturday, he remembered, was chemo day. "How'd it go?"

“She took it really well today, mostly because we got some good news. She’s really happy and she wants to tell you herself.”

“Wait, so she doesn’t know about...”

“We haven’t told her about *Harabuhjee* yet.”

“Seriously?” He stared at Nina. “When do you plan to tell her?”

“We’ll talk about it later. Hang on, Mom’s getting out of the car.”

As soon as his mom walked in, Jacob jumped up from the couch and wrapped his arms around her. She squeezed her eyes shut and pressed her cheek into his shoulder, patted him on the back. He resisted the urge to pick her up clean off the floor like he used to. Holding her close, he could almost feel her bones shifting inside her skin. She felt smaller than the last time he’d held her, and her shoulders had begun to bow forward with the treatments, her frame gaunter. She was clutching a piece of paper that fluttered against his back as she tried to extricate herself.

“They’re shrinking!”

“*Yeobo*, watch your arm,” his dad said as he came in behind her. He meant the catheter in the inside of her arm, beneath the thick bandage and her sleeve. It connected to a blood vessel that fed her chemo drugs straight into her heart.

When Jacob let her go, she held the paper up to his face. “You see this?” She pointed to a column that listed several numbers, decimals in centimeters. “This is how big they were before I started on *Xelota*.” These he knew were measurements of the tumors in her stomach and liver from various scans. There were five total. “This is now,” she

said, pointing to the next column. The numbers were smaller, and Jacob did some quick math in his head: the measurements came out to about a third less than the previous ones.

“They’re shrinking,” he said. He let out a laugh and hugged her again. “They’re shrinking!”

“Be careful.” His dad took hold of his shoulder, his fingers firm and uncomfortably warm. “She needs to get some rest. *Yeobo*, you should go lie down.”

Without looking at his dad, Jacob winked at his mom and led her up the stairs. He wasn’t going to let his dad ruin the celebration. The chemotherapy was working. Considering that they’d been told her case was inoperable, this was amazing news. Leave it to his dad to take all the joy out of a real miracle. Wasn’t he the one who was supposed to believe in miracles anyway? The Gospels were packed full of them.

“Was there a lot of traffic today?” she asked as he helped her out of her coat.

“It wasn’t that bad. Who cares about traffic when I get to see you?”

Her eyes crinkled into a smile. “How are your studies going?”

“They’re going.”

“Did you do okay on that econ exam?”

“Let’s not talk about it. It’s depressing. Here, do you want some water?” He poured her a warm mugful out of the Thermos next to her bed and waited until she was settled under the covers before handing it to her.

She drank slowly.

“I brought your favorite bagels,” he said. She had a weakness for the poppyseed bagels from Jack’s, a bagel shop near his campus. “I even bought their twice-whipped

cream cheese—I kept it in the cooler on my way here. You can have it for breakfast tomorrow.”

“Are you going to wake up in time to eat it with me?”

“Of course...if you’re eating the bagels for...dinner?”

“You~” She slapped his hand playfully then gave it a warm squeeze.

As he squeezed back, Jacob saw that her fingertips were wrapped in Band-Aids.

“What’s this?”

“My fingers get sore around the nails, so just keeping them covered.” She pulled her hand away and tucked it under the covers. “I’m going to take a little break. You go and do whatever you need to do.” She closed her eyes.

“Okay.” He planted a loud kiss on her forehead. She didn’t open her eyes, but let the corners of her mouth ease into a pleasant curve as if she were already dreaming.

Downstairs, he found his dad watching the TV on low volume while Nina paced around in the kitchen. The rice cooker was letting out steam in the corner, filling the room with a sweet, starchy aroma that meant it was almost done. A pot of bean paste stew, his personal favorite, sat bubbling on the stovetop. Slabs of marinated beef sizzled in a pan right next to it—just the smell of it told him it was better than anything he and the guys could have cooked in Santa Barbara. Jacob inhaled slowly through his nose and trapped the great mishmash of smells inside his chest. It almost felt like old times, back when he was still in high school and Nina was away in college. When he came home from basketball practice he forgot his aching limbs as soon as a whiff of freshly steamed rice overtook his senses. When his mom used to cook these big dinners, his dad would

tell the same joke about how he felt sorry for “those poor Americans” with their greasy steaks and burgers and pastas. Afterward, his dad watched TV, his mom did the dishes, and Jacob staggered back to his room with the intention of taking a shower and tackling homework. But more often than not he sprawled himself across the floor beside his bed with his hands over his bloated belly and fell into a food-induced coma, knowing his mom would nudge him awake later for homework.

Little did he know how much would change in just two years. Now his mom rested upstairs with her fingertips bandaged, accompanied by bottles upon bottles of medication. It was Nina preparing dinner in a kitchen that she kept on her own. She worked a full-time job to pay most of the rent, had moved back home and given up grad school for yet another year. The only thing that hadn’t changed was his dad—still sitting where he always sat, leaning back against a couch that had molded into his shape, remote in hand, one leg crossed loosely over the other, eyes fixed on the TV screen. So like him to let Nina do everything as he had done with Jacob’s mom. In all the years his parents had been together, Jacob had seen his dad step into the kitchen once. That was the time when he preached a Sunday sermon about showing love to one’s family in a tangible way. When he rolled up his sleeves and picked up the first dirty plate, Jacob’s mom made a commotion over finding the camera—“to commemorate the occasion,” she said with a laugh. The picture she took that day remained posted on the refrigerator as proof until it got lost across the multiple moves.

Jacob stepped into the kitchen and started pulling on the red rubber gloves by the sink. Nina asked him what he was doing. “The dishes,” he said, “Since you’re cooking.”

“Dad’s going to do them later.”

He lifted an eyebrow at her, then over at the back of the man’s head just a few feet away.

“He’s been doing the dishes lately.” Nina shrugged.

Without turning from the TV, their dad said in Korean, “Just leave them. I’ll wash the dishes after we eat.”

“I’ve got this.” Jacob turned the tap on.

“*Aichamna*, they have to be done again after dinner anyway. Just leave them for later.”

“It’s no big deal,” he muttered as he picked up the detergent bottle and smeared a generous glob on the sponge. In the middle of the Kim’s Electric commercial jingle, the TV flickered to a silenced black screen. Jacob concentrated on the sound of the water dribbling into the sink, the simmering soup.

“Didn’t you hear me? I said I’ll do them. Why don’t you listen to me?”

He scrubbed the orangish residue from a soup bowl, put the sponge down briefly to scrape a stubborn chunk off with a finger.

His dad let out an anger-tight sigh. “Just do what I say for once.”

Jacob shut off the tap. He shook out the gloves, peeled them off one at a time, draped them over the sink’s edge. “What are you trying to say, *Appa*?” He turned toward his dad.

“When I tell you to be home more often, why can’t you come every weekend?”

“I’m here now.”

“You’re here because of your grandfather’s situation. Why didn’t you come home last weekend?”

“I had an exam last Monday.”

“What about the weekend before that?”

“It was right after a basketball tournament and I was tired. Sometimes with the traffic, driving down takes almost three hours. I was falling asleep before I even got in the car.”

His dad’s eyes grew wide. “Do you have any idea how much sleep Nina gets?”

“*Appa*,” Nina said still facing the stove.

“She goes to bed around two and wakes up at six for work.”

“Stop,” she said.

“Three, four hours a day. She works full-time then drives home in an hour-long commute, and then she takes care of your mom all night. Every single day.”

Jacob felt his insides tighten. “And what do *you* do?” It occurred to him that with flaring nostrils and tightened neck muscles, the two of them looked exactly the same. As father and son should.

“When Nina goes to work, I’m the one who stays with your mom. I feed her, I give her medication, clean up her vomit, help her to the bathroom. And the landlady says we need to move out in July. My church is about to break apart. Your mom’s family in Korea is bickering over what to do with your grandfather because they don’t have the decency to think about your mom.”

“*Appa*,” Nina said. She glanced back at the stairway.

This is how it always began. His dad dumping all his anger at the world upon his own family. Only his burdens mattered, and they were the kind of burdens that no one could share with him. Jacob glowered back with a look stripped of any remorse. He wasn't about to let his dad think that the dramatic pause he intended for his I-have-a-hard-life spiel did anything but make him even more pathetic. If he was waiting for an apology, let him wait on.

His dad stood up. "We're all making sacrifices here. Why can't you just do what little we ask you?"

"Yes, *Appa*. You're clearly making a lot of sacrifices from the couch. So what do you want me to do? Quit school? You want me to—"

"This isn't about me or you. For once, stop thinking about yourself. Do you even know what your mom is going through? Do you know what it's like to spend all day with her while she screams 'Just let me die'?"

Jacob swallowed, felt the lump in his throat shift out of place then back.

"No, you're right, I don't know. Because I'm never around. But at least I didn't do this to her."

His dad looked stunned. A hint of emotion flickered across his face, softened the lines around his eyes and mouth, and Jacob thought he might finally be owning up to something for once. Either that or this time the wayward son had gone too far.

He heard loud sobs erupt from upstairs. Sobs that heaved against the silence and the smells, all trapped inside the space between them.

It was only as he felt stinging at the corners of his eyes that he moved toward the door, threw it open, walked out into the cool evening. Behind him, he heard Nina rushing upstairs as the front door creaked slowly back to its place.

When Nina came out through the side gate, she spotted him right away. She crossed the street to join him, and for a while they just sat gazing at the landlady's house from the bus stop bench.

"He's tired," she finally said. "And he's right—so am I. I know you are, too, and that school is hard, especially with the three-hour drive both ways. Coming home every weekend—I can't imagine doing that back when I was in college." She sighed. "It just makes Mom so happy whenever you come back, you know? Remember how when I was in college, you used to call me and tell me to hurry back for the holidays because Mom would hoard all this good food and not let you touch it until I came back? It's sort of like that. She's just happier with you around and she misses you a lot when you're gone. I think that's what Dad meant to say."

Jacob chewed the inside of his lower lip and looked straight ahead. "Stop trying to explain everything. You're just like Mom. It's what got her sick in the first place."

In the pause that followed, he could feel the pressure of Nina's questioning stare.

"All those years we lived overseas and she had nobody and had to figure things out on her own. All those years of being a pastor's wife and not being able to say or do what she wanted to, always doing what was right, always smiling—'yes, yes, of course, whatever you say'—always pretending to be okay."

“I know,” Nina said quietly. “I was there, too, and it wasn’t easy for her. But you’re not being completely fair. It’s not like Dad wanted her to be—”

“I looked up stomach cancer. It’s linked with chronic stress. Think about it. When we were growing up, it was Dad who always did the yelling. He always took things out on Mom, on us.”

“It wasn’t easy for him either.”

“He says that we don’t respect him, but how do you respect someone who can’t even take care of his own family? We live in someone’s *garage*.”

Growing up, Jacob always said he would never be a minister. He would never be a missionary in a third-world country, could never do that to his family. What good was it to save souls on the other side of the world if you couldn’t even provide for the people right next to you? He thought of his mom washing little black bugs out of the rice, shuddering at their wriggling legs as they floated belly-up in the water. The squalid kitchen she had to cook in for the first few years in the tropics—the tiny sink, the finicky gas stove. They often had to make room for the less fortunate that his Dad brought home, who would stay for days or even weeks before disappearing. The house often reeked of the neighbor’s chicken coups, the power always went out during the thunderstorms, and there were cockroaches constantly climbing up through the bathroom drainpipe.

Here in America, years later, things were not all that much better. It didn’t mean anything to have green cards and be well on their way to citizenship. His mom now slept in a room full of secondhand furniture donated by church members, and Nina did the laundry at a coin wash up the street. Their home, after yearly moves to avoid rent raises,

was an illegally remodeled garage that had to be vacated whenever the landlady received an inspection notice from the city.

No, Jacob was never going to let this happen to his own family, was never going to be like his dad. He hoped he would never speak the words of a hypocrite: judgmental, accusing, defensive. Never so blind as to neglect all the tell-tale signs.

A bus lumbered up Crenshaw and passed by, leaving behind a trail of noise and fumes. Nina drew up her legs, tucked her knees beneath her chin like a gymnast. She was getting that look on her face: making up her mind over something and choosing the words to say it. Finally, she said, “Mom can’t eat those bagels.”

Jacob frowned. What did the bagels have to do with anything?

“She hasn’t eaten solids in weeks. She can barely digest soup, and that’s if she even eats. When you come home, those are usually some of Mom’s best days.”

The words “best days” caught him low in the gut like a punch he wasn’t ready to take. What he’d seen over the past couple months was her best? His energetic and industrious mom, the woman who made giant batches of kimchi and hand-delivered them to each church family. Asked him to look up the cheapest seats at the Hollywood Bowl for a concert playing Tchaikovsky or Schumann. Drove three hours on a whim for a Santa Barbara beachside picnic with her son. Who washed and reused Ziploc bags until they fell apart but always stocked his school apartment freezer with several pounds of marinated *kalbi*.

Nina continued in a careful voice, “Dad’s not making things up, Jacob. When you come home is usually when the last dose of chemo is wearing off. Mom actually starts eating again and feels better in the weekends.”

“So during the week she’s worse?”

“She can’t keep food down. She’s dropping two or three pounds a day.”

“I know. I can see that.”

“She tries so hard to act okay around you.”

Jacob closed his eyes and rubbed them in agitated circles.

“We don’t want you to get worried. Being away at school and—”

“Bullshit. Bull. Shit. Who the hell is “we,” Nina? You and Mom and Dad?

What am I? Not even part of the family? I’m sick and tired of you guys thinking I can’t handle it. I’m not five.”

“Mom didn’t want you to know. When the drugs start taking over, she’s not herself. She says things like how we should have just let her bleed to death when she had the ulcer, that she hates us for making her eat, she’d rather starve than feed the cancer.”

Jacob stared out into the street, at the asphalt road dotted with a fading white line, the empty beer bottles and plastic bags littering the sidewalk, the hazy light on the landlady’s front porch.

“That piece of paper she showed me means nothing.”

“Don’t say that. If she can keep up with the treatments, we might have a chance.”

His mom was in this alone, and there wasn’t a thing they could change for her.

But at least his sister and his dad saw her as she was. They fed her, washed her, held her

enough to know exactly how much of her was seeping away with each passing day.

What had he seen? A picture of his mom that he had mustered up—fighting the good fight, winning as she often did. For as long as he could remember, she was the heroic core of goodness and hope in the family.

They were right. Twenty-two-year-olds didn't have heroes.

Jacob stopped just outside the door. "You go ahead," he told Nina. He peered in through the glass panels on the door once it closed behind her. His dad was on the phone, pacing back and forth in front of the TV with a stricken look on his face. There were deep lines around his mouth and bloodshot eyes, deeper than Jacob remembered. At his temples were shocks of white and gray and his shoulders drooped forward, as if he himself were a chemo patient. He looked small.

Jacob waited until after his dad hung up the phone and walked in, half expecting to be ignored.

"Pack your bags," he said without looking at him. He was digging through a pile of documents next to the couch.

"What?" So this was how his dad intended to resolve this? By throwing him out?

"We have to leave now to get the standby tickets at the airport."

"So you told Mom?"

"She can't go. Nina's staying behind with her."

"Does she know that?"

His dad paused, and when he looked up, Jacob saw a plea.

Once, back when they lived overseas, he had gone to the grocery store with his dad. It was one of the nicer stores that only foreigners and upper class people frequented, with imported Gala apples and bars of Cadbury chocolate and Japanese bubble gum. Standing in the checkout line just before them was a man who looked clearly out of place even to a sixth grader—face unshaven, thin blue windbreaker, a faded baseball cap with split seams on the sides of the visor. His tanned fingers counted out coins from a fanny pack, the signature mark of a *becak* driver. Outside the grocery store were ten other men just like him who waited by their bicycle rickshaws to haul customers and their shopping bags home.

He was emptying his fanny pack to pay for a small box of feminine hygiene pads. Jacob almost laughed out loud when he saw this, but stopped when he followed his dad's gaze out the sliding doors. Sitting inside a *becak* was a girl about his age anxiously watching the whole scene. It all clicked into place: supplies for his daughter who had likely just begun her periods—pads that he could probably never afford to purchase for her again.

The line grew longer behind them. Customers were beginning to crane their necks, some were sniggering.

"This isn't enough," the cashier was saying. His tone made it very clear that he wasn't at all surprised.

"It's only a few more *rupiah*. I can come back tomorrow and pay the rest."

"We don't do that here. I'm sorry, but you're making the other customers wait."

Jacob felt his cheeks grow warm.

Then calmly, with a slow and barely perceptible movement that would not be seen from the outside, Jacob's dad tucked a bill into the *becak* driver's back pocket. The man whipped around in surprise. He reached back and drew out the bill, stared at Jacob's dad. But Jacob's dad was already looking away, reading the label on a chewing gum packet.

Jacob finally understood why it had to be that way. It was the same reason he had to look away now.

He ran upstairs to where Nina lay on the bed holding his mom. He wedged himself next to her on the other side, clasped her dampened face close to his own, and said, "I got a free barbeque grill today. Did I tell you that?"

When Rabbits Scream

Pete contemplated the choices on the display before him. Bottles and bottles of Pantene Pro-V, Herbal Essences, Head & Shoulders, Finesse, white and green and purple and blue—but no baby shampoo, which came last on the list Nina had jotted down for him. The shopping basket hung heavy at his side as he scanned the shelves from top to bottom. He puffed out his cheeks and let a sigh escape. No baby shampoo in sight. He strode down the length of the aisle: conditioner, body wash, hand soap, lotion, then around the corner in the next aisle, toothpaste.

He imagined his wife without hair. A silken dome of soft skin stretching beyond and around the edges of her face. No wavy strands to tuck behind her ears. No more of the downy fuzz framing her face where her hairline had begun to gray between home dyeing jobs. Ivy had had glossy black locks for as long as he could remember—in their early days she kept them longish and straight. In the more recent years, she styled them into loose shoulder-length waves with occasional perms at Hana Hair. Lately her hair was growing straight again, unpermed and undyed, matted with pillow grease between the days when their daughter Nina coaxed her into a gentle bath. Ivy's skin was growing increasingly brittle with each chemo session and the doctor had told her fewer baths, less soap.

He walked back to the shampoo section and stood staring at the bottles again. A passing store employee stopped to ask if he was finding everything okay. He nodded the guy away and wandered through the other aisles until he finally came by the baby

shampoo next to diapers. Even here, there were four or five different kinds, which seemed excessive. He knew that Ivy needed something mild, but wasn't all baby shampoo supposed to be mild? Tossing one of the translucent yellow bottles into the basket only added to his annoyance. He already knew what Ivy would say when she saw it.

Outside, he put the grocery bags in the trunk of his Hyundai and pulled carefully out of the narrow parking space. A speeding silver car swung past behind him as he emerged, just missing the corner of his bumper. The other driver honked loudly, shouted obscenities in Spanish. The only thing that kept Pete from shouting back was the conspicuous sticker on his back bumper. Next to "UCSB Dad" was a fish symbol with the letters "IXOYE" in the middle—the classic acronym for "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior."

It was still rush hour despite the near-dark sky. Not wanting to leave Ivy alone at the house, he hadn't started out for the store until Nina returned from work. Now it seemed the whole world was out shopping or eating. Olympic was full of cars trying to find street parking for the crowded restaurants, and so was Crenshaw when he turned the corner. As he crept up the hill toward home behind a fuming bus, he pressed the stereo on.

A dynamic voice blared out from the speakers—his own—in a recorded sermon from weeks back. It was part of a series on Exodus he'd begun with the new year. "Moses feared that his own people would reject him, the very people he was supposed to lead into the promised land. So God said—" He tapped on the fast-forward button until

the ending hymn came on. The sound of his own voice irked him. A voice full of conviction meant to hearten his congregation, but sometimes he wasn't sure if he believed in that conviction himself. He was just another guy driving home to his family with the groceries for the week.

As soon as Ivy saw him unloading the plastic grocery bags in the kitchen, she said, "What'd you buy that for?" She was just out of her bath, draped in a dressing gown and on her way upstairs.

Pete didn't answer. He finished putting the groceries away, washed his hands, and followed her up the stairs.

Ivy was due to start soon on a different chemo drug, another clinical trial. Xelota had stopped working, her pain and weight loss trumping the benefits of diminishing tumors—tumors that were no longer diminishing. Tosedaxel and Irinotecan were next. Pete figured that the longer the name, the more powerful the drug.

Tosedaxel worked for breast cancer, the doctor had told them, and he hoped it would work for the liver, too. But this was the one that caused hair loss.

Hair loss, among other things. What good were oily follicles and stringy dead cells to someone fighting to live? Did it matter if one no longer had to shampoo and rinse and towel and dry and comb? Wasn't it just another nuisance in the end? But through the months of weeping and writhing through Xelota treatments, the moments of not giving up between little-changed scan results and too many lost pounds, Ivy still had her

hair. Still looked like herself when she was just out of her bath with her dewy head pressed against a fresh pillowcase.

“Did you tell your dad to buy that shampoo?” she asked Nina.

“Your hair won’t fall out for a while,” Nina said as she tucked a wet strand behind Ivy’s ear. “Besides, some people don’t lose their hair at all.”

“It’s okay, I can handle it.” She held her upper arm out so the layers of wrapping around the catheter could be removed.

“Look, Mom. I think the Saran wrap worked—the bandage is still dry.” Tossing the wrap, Nina peeled back a padding of gauze to reveal the plastic tube stump poking out from the inside of Ivy’s arm. Three or so inches of it, filled with saline, stuck up a vein that ran toward her chest. The end was clamped shut with a screw cap.

Pete looked away when Nina began to carefully dab at the area with an alcohol swab. He didn’t like to think of the clear, alien tube that stretched far beyond the crust-rimmed hole in Ivy’s skin. Of how it snaked its way through a maze of veins in her arm, shoulder, and chest, all the way to the center of her slow-beating heart. It was the pipeline that ushered into her body those chemicals with long, convoluted names—chemicals too strong to be injected or taken orally, intent on destroying healthy and cancerous cells alike, that had already obliterated forty pounds of his wife. A body at odds with itself.

The dressing on Ivy’s arm needed to be changed daily to keep the opening from infection, a task Pete refused to touch after his first attempt drove her to tears. He didn’t have the same kind of finesse that Nina had for sterilizing, measuring, and taping down

the tube at an angle. A new piece of gauze then had to be fastened over the arm which, after weeks of sticking and peeling, was beginning to rub raw. The challenge was to find a new patch of skin for the tape, skin already flaking, fragile from chemo.

With a clunky hand he passed the ointment to Nina for dabbing on the sore areas. He wadded up the used swabs, wrappers, and gauze, dropped them into the bin at his feet, straightened out the covers at the foot of the bed.

“*Yeobo*, I want some water,” Ivy said. “Warm water.”

He picked up the nearly empty thermos from the bed stand and plodded down the stairs to the kitchen.

106.8. A third of a pound less than yesterday, Pete calculated as he jotted it down in the little blue notebook. It came last in a string of numbers that, through the span of several multi-columned pages, had diminished at a persistent pace from the initial 148. A third of a pound was good. There had been days when the figure had plummeted by several whole numbers between the ritual morning weighings. Now that the Xelota was wearing off and Ivy was in her third week of respite before starting the new drug, her alarming weight loss had finally slowed, steadied.

Ivy stepped down from the glass-topped scale and sat on the bed. “Take me to Hana Hair,” she said.

“What?”

“I’m going to get a haircut.”

“You don’t want to wait for Nina and go with her?”

“Hana Hair will be closed by the time she comes back. Who’s going to cut my hair then? You?”

He let out a breath with puffed cheeks. Along with physical recuperation, the break from chemo had also brought back the old Ivy: the one that set irritatingly sensible goals and couldn’t be dissuaded from following them through. Hers was the gift of roping everyone else along, abetted by a fortunate pairing of charm and practicality. This time last year, Ivy had thrown a baby shower for the poor couple at church with a few strategic calls—Mrs. Cha, will you bake us that lovely cake again? Mrs. Shin, your floral arrangements would really brighten up the party—what do you think of daisies? And if Ivy thought it was appropriate to get the lucky couple a Babies“R”Us gift card instead of a gift, you did it because you knew she was right and just like she said they needed bottles and pacifiers much more than a frilly outfit for their baby girl.

Now she wanted to cut her hair to make that preemptive strike.

“You know what I mean,” he said. “Nina would want to be there.”

With her toes, Ivy nudged the scale back to its place behind the bedskirt. “I already told her I was going to do it. If I have less hair to begin with it’ll be less shocking. The nurse said so.”

“All right, then. I’ll go get ready. But eat your soup first.”

She lay back against the pillows and closed her eyes. “I will.”

“We’re not leaving until you eat.”

“I will. I haven’t thrown up since Sunday.”

He returned the notebook near the table lamp, next to Ivy's Bible and the blue-green colored pencil she used for underlining verses. Back in the thick of Xelota treatments, she had relied on Pete and Nina to read entire chapters aloud to her. Now that she was able to read quietly to herself again, the book stayed open with the pencil wedged in the New Testament. Part of Acts 20 was newly re-underlined: *However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace.*

"When we leave," Ivy said her with lashes still resting atop her cheekbones, "Can you find me the green rabbit fur sweater with the pearly buttons?"

As Pete got dressed downstairs, he thought of the last time they'd owned rabbits. Back when they were living in the tropics and the kids were still young, he had left the rabbits in a cardboard box so he could give the cage a good cleaning. It was a large box in which the TV had once arrived, comfortable enough for two small rabbits to sit in with their downy noses resting over clawless paws. Not wanting to stink up the house, he left the box on the front porch—the first mistake.

The second was leaving the gate open. He'd only considered the rabbits getting out, never supposing that the neighbor's dog would get in, a bad-tempered mutt that had been chained up and fed raw chicken scraps for most of its life, that had somehow managed to get loose that day. He heard the drumming of approaching paws, the growl and the thump of the final leap, turned just in time to see the wolfish tail descend into the box.

At first he thought the screams were from the dog. After all, could rabbits really scream? They weren't so much sounds as they were hideous sensations—shrieking from vocal cords meant never to be used, never to be heard. Yet he had heard them all too clearly, and by then it was too late.

Ms. Chong made a fuss of welcoming them. She was one of a handful in their community close enough to still visit from time to time, always with a boxed set of Korean apples or some new hair products she was promoting at the shop. In Pete's church, she held a deaconess position and tithed faithfully from her salon income.

"*Omomo*, look at you!" she declared in her raspy voice. "You look so much better than the last time I saw you. And you're up and about." She led Ivy to a chair with her magenta manicured hand.

There was only one other customer in the small salon, an elderly woman whose sparse short hair was being wound up into finger-thin rollers by Ms. Chong's assistant. Facing the opposite wall which—like the one Ivy was facing—was lined with mirrors and dressers, they bobbed their heads in acknowledgment at Ivy and Pete. He sat down on a couch several feet away with Ivy's purse next to him.

"That's a fabulous sweater you've got on, and such beautiful buttons too," Ms. Chong said before she draped Ivy with a black sheet and pumped the chair up a few notches. "Mrs. Yoon came in the other day and she was wearing one just like it, with the wraparound belt and everything. She said she bought it at that boutique in the Galleria. You know her husband's a dentist and they live in San Marino. But," she dropped her

voice into a whisper, “The buttons were so ugly. Big, gold ones and they didn’t even match her earrings.”

Pete smiled politely at her wink. Although he saw her every Sunday at church, it was his first time inside her salon which smelled of perfume and warm chemicals. There’s was also a hint of coffee—he spotted the steaming Mr. Coffee pot in the corner, next to a tray of rice cakes. Between the mirrors on the walls hung faded posters of assorted hairstyles on men, women, children. Women’s magazines littered the coffee table. He flipped through the first few pages of a style magazine and came upon a long, straight hairstyle that reminded him of Ivy back in her twenties. He put it away.

“So what am I doing for you today? A trim? A perm? Tsk, tsk, your hair has gotten too straight, my dear. It’s been too long since your last perm.” Ms. Chong fingered a lock of Ivy’s shoulder-length hair and held it close to her glasses. “Very healthy though.”

“I want to cut it.”

“You mean like a trim so we can give you waves, right?”

“No, much shorter.”

“How much do you want me to cut?”

“I want it all chopped off, very short, like yours.”

Ms. Chong paused to contemplate this, the tuft of hair trapped expertly between her index and middle fingers. She watched Ivy through the mirror they were both facing.

“You want me to cut all of this off?”

Pete sensed her hovering dread. It was the same gut-deep feeling he negotiated when he thought of Ivy losing all her hair, but somehow more transparent and therefore more fragile. In the moment, he recognized that Ivy's hair meant more to these women than he could understand. What would he do if they burst into tears now? Reach over and hand them each a tissue? Step outside to give them space?

"Oh, you know," Ivy's steady voice pushed through although her eyes were too bright and glossy. "Nina has to help me wash it all the time and it's such a hassle to take care of. I figure shorter will be easier to maintain. Save us all a lot of trouble, don't you think?"

Ms. Chong's charcoal eyebrows eased back into place, as did Pete's stomach. "Right, of course." She nodded enthusiastically. "Of course. I'll make it short and stylish, and maybe give you some bangs. But *omomo*, you think just anyone can pull off this style?" She primped the bangs of her own pixie cut.

Ivy and Ms. Chong both broke down into loud giggles with hands over their mouths, fanning at their faces, their shoulders shaking.

Ms. Chong continued as she dabbed at the corners of her eyes, "You can't just get this hair anywhere, either. I have to go all the way across K-town to my favorite stylist Rubio."

"You mean to tell me you don't cut your own hair?"

"Of course not, you silly woman. How am I supposed to cut my own hair? What about the back?"

Pete suppressed a smile.

“Well,” Ivy said, “I guess I’ll just have to settle for whatever you give me. Maybe I’ll try for something not quite as short. Something layered, maybe? Do you remember when Elizabeth Taylor used to have that short style?”

“Yes, I do. But Asian hair won’t cut exactly like Elizabeth Taylor’s, you know. She had those natural waves and all. You’re lucky I’m so good at what I do. Let’s get you shampooed. You’re going to look fabulous once I’m done with you.”

After shampooing, Ms. Chong squeezed Ivy’s hair dry with a towel then ran a comb through it. It reached down to the middle of her shoulder blades, straight and sleek. With a pair of shears Ms. Chong cut across the hair in a neat line from shoulder to shoulder. Several inches fell to the floor. She paused as if to give Ivy a moment to reconsider, but Ivy only stared back through the mirror with a look of calm resolve.

The second flurry of snipping took a few more inches off, leaving Ivy with a short bob that sat flat against her head. It reminded Pete of black and white yearbook photos from back when Korean high schools mandated short hair and uniforms. Girls had to keep their hair chin-length or shorter, the boys military style. The look was too austere and it made Ivy seem almost like a different person.

“More?” Ms. Chong asked.

“Yes. More.”

Ms. Chong began to pull out sections of hair horizontally. She lengthened a lock between two fingers and ran a comb through it at a precise angle before snipping deftly in a straight line, just above her knuckles. Pete could tell from her furrowed brows and her mechanical movements that Ivy had, for the moment, become a work of art, a subject. It

was almost hypnotizing the way her nimble hands worked around the head until short wisps of hair fell in layers close to the scalp.

She turned Ivy around in the chair to contemplate her face—not so much the features but the overall shape—and ran the comb lightly between crown and forehead in a part. A layer of hair fell over Ivy’s forehead.

“I’m giving you bangs. Maybe slightly to the side.” She tried sweeping them in one direction, then in the other, before going back to the first. She said, “Close your eyes.”

Ivy obeyed so Ms. Chong could work her magic, give her bangs like she promised. She looked almost childlike now, her eyes trustingly closed, her neck bare and white where it emerged from the gown draped around her shoulders. Her eyes remained closed even when Ms. Chong finished trimming the bangs and swiveled the chair back around.

Pete wished he could close his eyes, too, but he watched on in feeble fascination. Ms. Chong drew out a small electric clipper from one of her apron pockets. She plugged the cord into an outlet, turned it on and began to tidy up the back of Ivy’s neck, retaining the natural hairline while catching loose hairs. When the buzzing stopped, she put the clipper down to take Ivy’s head lightly in both her hands and turn it from side to side. She took a step back and looked at Ivy through the mirror.

Pete was glad Ivy’s eyes were still shut, she couldn’t see the poor woman reaching quickly under her glasses to dab at her eyes.

“We’re almost done,” Ms. Chong said in a cheerful voice. “I’m just going to blow-dry your hair. You’re going to love what I did with your bangs.”

Blow-drying added volume to the short strands, brought the bangs to a pleasant curve over to one side. Ms. Chong put away the blow-dryer and held up a small round mirror behind Ivy's head.

"You can open your eyes now."

Ivy smiled warmly when she saw herself in the mirror. With a pixie cut, she looked younger and maybe even stylish. "It feels so light," she said, turned her head slightly to check the back. "Thank you. I love it."

"You know, your face is egg-shaped, so you can pull off pretty much any hairstyle."

"Look at these bangs," Ivy said.

"*Omomo*, why are you so surprised? I told you I was good, didn't I? What do you think, Pastor Pete?"

Both women looked over at him.

He cleared his throat. "It looks nice."

104 pounds. The day after Ivy's first Tosedaxel treatment, she was back to vomiting and diarrhea. It didn't matter what she ate: rice porridge, vegetable soup, tofu, broth—her body rejected them all. None of this was new to Pete and Nina. The trash can, no matter how many plastic bags they lined it with, smelled of sour stomach acid. After changing the bedding several times, Nina ran out to the grocery store to buy adult diapers.

"It's not working," Ivy whispered in a croupy voice an hour after swallowing two of the oblong Vicodin tablets, the same dose she had maintained with her first chemo

drug. The first pangs of Tosedaxel had struck earlier in the day and her stricken body lay gasping on the bed between waves of pain. Her eyes were wild, oozing at the corners. One arm pounded the mattress like a wrestler caught in a grip. Every few minutes, she thrashed about, her limbs flailing as she let out a hideously raw sound, cried out over and over again in a strangled voice, “Father!” She was beseeching her heavenly father. Calling on God’s name. At times her tone grew almost reproachful, like someone betrayed by her most trusted one.

“You need to take the new painkiller,” Pete told her. She had a new prescription for Oxycodone. The doctor had told them to expect this.

She shook her head with a jerk. “More Vicodin.”

He wished Ivy would stop being so stubborn about taking medication. She clung to the idea that she might build resistance to the painkillers if she took too much of them. She refused each time he offered a higher dose, as though some bodily wisdom had told her that she would need them a great deal more someday, had warned her to brace for when at last the biggest dose of the strongest medication would not be enough. After a while, he’d stopped trying. She was fighting herself already; it felt wrong for her to feel she was fighting him, too.

The problem was that she wasn’t taking nearly enough. When the time came to refill her prescriptions, Ivy still had a quarter of the tablets left in those hazy orange bottles. She accumulated extra pills over the months, in the same way she used to save nickels and dimes for Daily Bread donations, and soon had enough extras to fill an entire

bottle. It was a stalwart addition to her inventory of anti-nausea, anti-diarrhea, and antacid pills, none of which did what they were supposed to do.

“Take the Oxycodone,” he said again.

“Vicodin.”

“It won’t do any good.” Pete felt his chest constricting. “Please, *yeobo*. Just take it.” He removed a pill from the bottle and held it out.

“No.” Ivy squeezed her eyes shut.

“Please.”

She turned away.

He took her gently by the head, brought it back toward himself. He pulled open her mouth and pressed the small, round pill onto her tongue. She didn’t spit it out. And when it was chased by a gulp of warm water, she didn’t resist. Over the course of the following hour, Ivy’s moans became shallow panting. Her chest rose and fell quickly, short breaths escaped through dry, parted lips. Her limbs had fallen flaccid and heavy against the mattress. When he reached down to touch her hand, her fingers didn’t curl around his. No more bouts of thrashing. In the place of pain was something more disquieting, far more present and deeply contained.

“Ivy?” he called in a soft voice. The end of her name broke slightly in his stiffened mouth.

He reached out to touch her face.

Ivy stared, unblinking, straight through his arm, straight through him.

“Ivy?”

With a careful hand he wiped the damp hair away from her forehead, the tufts that would—in a week’s time—fall away in clumps and leave him helpless while she sobbed into her pillow. She would continue to dwindle away just beyond his grasp, the numbers would drop 104, 102, 101, 99. He wanted to hold his wife, close the maddening gap between them so he could lend his own energy, his life, to her unfeeling body. Keep her from ebbing away. He wanted to undo everything and start over. He wanted to tell her how sorry he was for failing her.

Instead, he picked up her Bible, flipped the pages back to the Psalms and read in a loud voice.

God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging. Selah.