



AWAKE

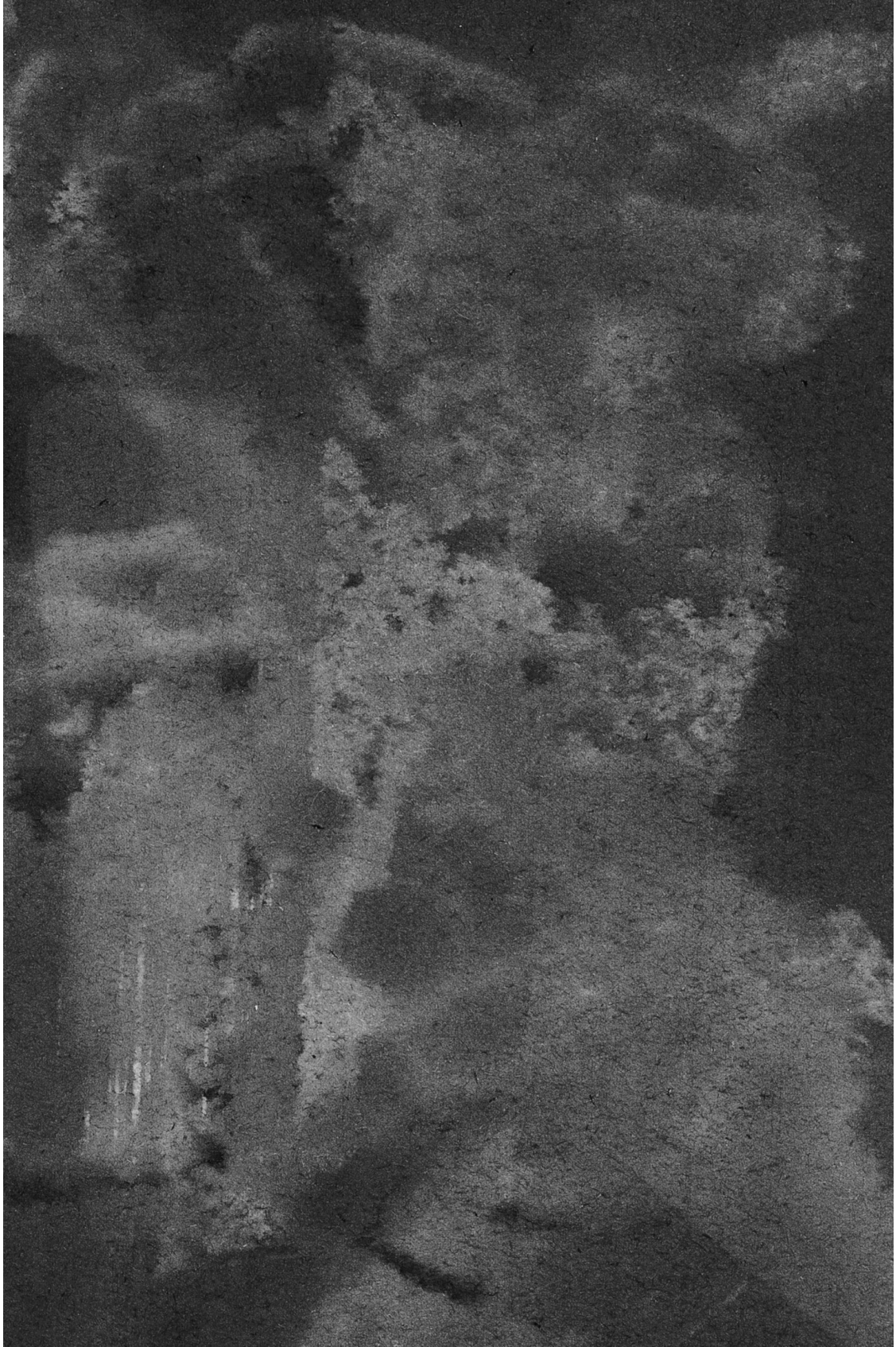
in the

FLOATING

CITY

A Novel

Susanna Kwan



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SUSANNA KWAN



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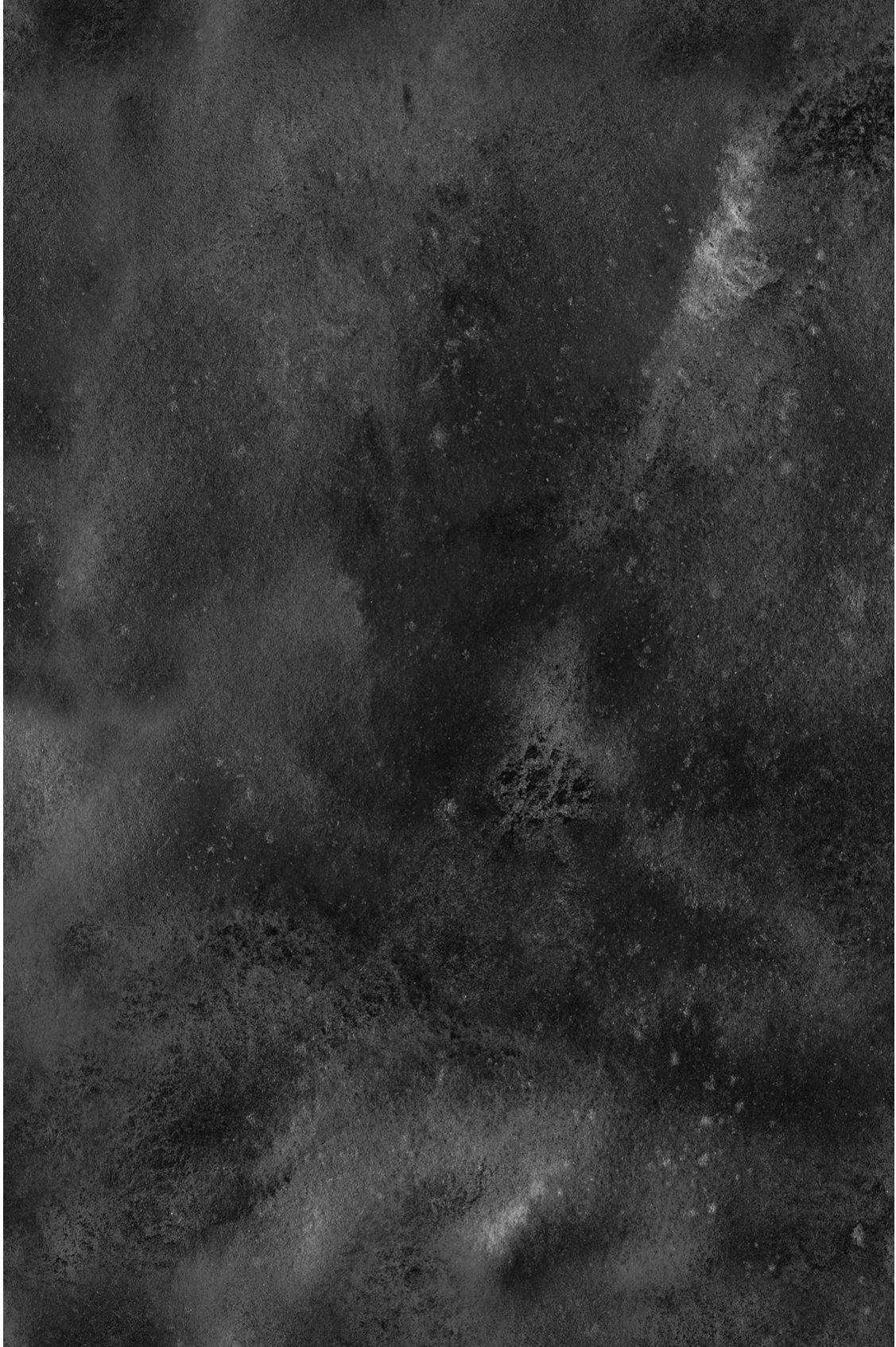
Chapter 2

Acknowledgments

A Note About the Author

For my mother

WAKE UP!



HIGH UP IN Unit 7763, each night slid in like an oil spill, filling the hours with sludge and shine until it seeped into another day. Bo was carrying on a long solitude here, stranded in the studio apartment she rented, one island among hundreds in this building, in a city inundated by rain, so saturated it could be called drowned.

The rain had kept on for seven years. It slowed some days but never stopped. Overnight, it seemed, the city had transformed into a rainforest. Vines that ran from roof to ground sucked up the water and sent out shoots and tendrils. The skyline brightened from gunmetal to green, softening the sharp edges. A steward on Tamalpais, she imagined, must have seen the sudden verdant thumb of land to the south, dividing sea and bay. Below, streets transformed into rivers, and the rivers blew out windows, tore doors from their frames, widened into buildings through the new openings. The water took down statues and leveled groves, carried entire families away. People fled or drowned—or moved to higher ground, where they relearned how to live in the city they'd known as home, a place the rain had claimed.

—

Today the quiet was punctured by ringing. Her cousin Jenson had chartered a boat, in part for her overdue evacuation, and it was scheduled to depart in two weeks. He'd been calling at least daily from British Columbia with reminders: the boat would leave at noon sharp; she should bring only the essentials; anything else could be replaced up north. She listened until he was done recording his message.

Everyone she knew had left by now, gone to Greenland or Siberia or Maine—inland, north, overseas, wherever there was an opportunity. In their messages, they asked, with the patronizing concern of the secure, how she was doing, if their family homes were still standing, when she might move or at least try to visit. They sent birth announcements and exhibition announcements, video footage of cities that had risen in just a few short

years, the occasional rumor of looming water wars where they lived. Mostly they avoided mention of the refugee camps that now lined the routes of migration that had emerged following mass displacement, the river towns engulfed by monsoons, the unprecedented temperatures that had evaporated reservoirs, fried vegetation, and filled the morgues. Bo was embarrassed not to share their urgency to leave. They implored her to find a better, safer place, and she assured them she was making plans, tried to see what they saw, but couldn't.

An electric hum pitched down and a moment later the power went out. Silence. With both hands, she lifted her preferred plate from a shelf and set it on the counter noiselessly. The swells of uncertainty paused as she pulled a few dry nubs from the mycelium wall in her kitchen and arranged an ascetic meal on the cobalt-glazed ceramic. The flowers on the trim contrasted with any food: the mushrooms, a potato, a broccoli stalk, or a halved egg, wreathed in blue. She chewed and swallowed. Then, with absolute care, as if handling glass, she washed and dried the dish and returned it to its place. A tarry feeling returned, starting low, in her legs, and as it filled her she felt soothed by its familiarity, like molten night pulling her to the floor.

—

When the sky began to darken, she forced herself up to the roof. The last two years, her twice-weekly trips to the market had been tiny anchors to the world. Life was going on outside. She'd make herself walk the aisles, trying to appreciate feeling, not just hearing, the rain. And she'd buy food—even without much appetite, she had to eat.

The rooftop economy had emerged in densely populated sectors as the flooding had worsened. Nimble street vendors were the first to move their operations up, followed by small businesses with storefronts. Together they pushed the city to expedite relocation permits and build bridges to replace the wrecked roads.

It didn't take long for everything else to follow them up. The school district cordoned off areas for recess and after-school programs. The parks department put on movie nights. Talks, concerts, and community meetings took place under the shelter of portable bandshells. But even then, there was a sense that it wouldn't last. Activity had diminished steadily, as expected, especially in the last two years, and only a third of the vendors remained now. Still, everyone left moved along the roofs, by necessity and for pleasure, for groceries and exercise and socializing, and to get from one place to another.

By habit Bo made her way to the citrus stand, past commemorative murals and cairns, her arm shielding her face from the drops. Her favorite vendor stacked his table with glowing glass jars, a wall of sun against the gray sky. An illusion of bounty. When his greenhouse lemons ripened, he preserved them in salt and oil. He sold them throughout the year, but she rarely bought any; mostly she just came to look.

"Slice some up if you have a pigeon to roast," he'd suggested on her first visit, "or nibble on a sliver if you're craving something sharp." He talked just the right amount, as though sensing correctly that she was unaccustomed to people. Today he said nothing when he saw her but pointed at a basket of finger limes labeled HELP YOURSELF. She chose one and nodded in thanks. She pushed herself to continue and bought several bundles of spinach from the next table over. It wasn't much food, but she could stretch it across a few meals before it went bad, delaying her next errand. As she made her way back to the elevator, she estimated she wouldn't have to leave her apartment again for three days.

In the vestibule, she did her ritual scan of the bulletin board, noting any new flyers of the missing and checking for the laminated photo of her mother she had posted two years earlier, just after the big storm. Plain lined face, easy smile, gray pixie cut—it was still there.

Back in her apartment, she laid the food out on a cutting board and played the new message that had come in while she was out: Jenson would ride down on the boat and make the journey back north with her. Those first months after the big storm, he'd begged her to return with him. He'd given

her space, said he understood it wasn't easy to leave home. But two years later, her doubts had curdled into paralysis. The situation was dire. Her inaction would be the death of her, he said. He had no choice but to decide for her, to come personally to escort her out.

Not much to do in these final weeks, little to pack, no one to say goodbye to. Now she flattened herself on the floor between the canvases stacked against the wall and the rusted toolbox that held her brushes and knives, paints and rags, lifeless things, none of it touched in over two years, none of it worth taking with her. The clawing inside subsided a little. She did her best to stay perfectly still.

THE NEXT WEEK, while she was assessing what to pack, a note slid under her door. *I need help*, it read. *Three days a week, afternoons. Can pay in cash.* Signed in a scrawl: *Mia, Unit 5109.*

The neighbor. For a couple of years, just after the rain began, Bo had been a caregiver for Ricardo, a man who had lived on the fifty-first floor. The old woman who had lived next door to him must have noticed Bo coming and going back then, mops and bags of produce and packs of adult cloth pull-ons in hand.

Patches of the woman's life had come through the walls and windows as Bo had worked: the static from her Cantonese programs, wafts of frying garlic, tones of complaint. Bo had often wondered about her, how she'd come to live alone here, if she had any family, but when she'd asked Ricardo, he'd said he didn't know much. He'd heard from another resident that she'd arrived in America as a young mother in the years following the Second World War, long before he was born. A supercentenarian, they called people like her. A handful of the very old—those who had survived well past a century—were known to live in units throughout their building. Advancements in medicine kept extending life expectancy, but around the world, especially in cities, the elderly found themselves abandoned by family to survive personal and regional crises alone.

Bo had stayed with Ricardo until his body had given up. She'd waited until the mortuary service had collected him for water cremation before going to the clay fridge, as he had directed, and locating his will, sealed in a plastic bag, deeding his remaining accounts to her. Not surprising, since he had long been alone, but she was neither family nor friend—just contracted labor.

It was enough to live on for a year, or several if she was frugal. This was what she'd hoped for since she was twenty: the money meant she didn't need to find a new gig—she could simply paint. But she'd found that she struggled to create with that freedom; something had changed, requiring

effort she didn't know how to expend. She worked dutifully, made aimless, soulless marks while she awaited that elusive spark. As the months passed, her patience frayed and panic surfaced, coating her eyes and skin and everything she touched with a film of failure. She'd made a mistake. Her mother was right: she'd been given a gift but had wasted it. Clinging to the belief that there was meaning in the work, she'd insisted on staying to see it through. Then came the storm surge, then the long stillness that followed. The money shrank. The rain kept on.

She left the old woman's note on the floor and attended to the plan ahead. She packed some clothes, set her suitcase by the door, and waited for the day when she would walk down to the dock. The note tugged at her like a magnet, but she tried to forget it. Two or three days passed, maybe another.

The idle, fearful years had made her mind loose. Without schedule or focus, the hours had scattered. Her grasp of time had dimmed; she'd lost all sense of how the day passed outside her apartment. She had the feeling that life was spinning away from her on a widening orbit.

As a child she'd noticed that each day followed the one before, like breaths. Her mother had hung two clocks in their home—buy one, get one—the first over the mantel of a fireplace that didn't work, and the other in the bathroom as a reminder to keep their showers brief. From the table where she ate, studied, and drew, Bo could hear both as they marked the seconds, just a hair from synchronization, pushing time forward like a damaged metronome, drawing her attention to her own heartbeat as it picked up speed and turned into a forceful knocking rhythm that drowned out the clocks.

Now she sensed the days going by through slivers and swatches of light moving between the leaves that had draped her window ever since she'd stopped cutting back the vines. She sustained a vague memory of the satisfaction of operating on scripted time.

A former painting teacher of hers, a widow, reported in a letter that her own dark period had lasted more than three years after her beloved had died. Three years before she could detect tamarind in a marinade or eat with any pleasure. Three years in which she declined to trim her nails, instead either growing them into talons or chewing them down. The black dog—that was what she called it.

It didn't help that the cycle of a year had distorted into a single interminable season.

In the early days of rain, every change had stood out. Bo had been new to the building then, drawn in by the low rent and central location after almost eight years on the west side in a poorly maintained live-work studio that she'd outgrown but hadn't known how to leave until it was condemned, the decision made for her. From her new apartment, she anxiously watched the city transform into something unrecognizable—unfathomable, at first, when for years they had known only drought and the threat of more drought. She drew daily, capturing the details, still believing the rain would end soon. Ceramic water-storage tanks filled and overflowed. Black rubber irrigation snakes secured to the perimeter of rooftop garden plots swelled and split. Farmers tried to adapt, sowing and harvesting according to this swing in the weather. Food supplies became unpredictable. People were robbed of their groceries. Sinkholes opened, like the neighborhood's collective hunger on display in the street. Mouths to swallow a city up. Inside, thick runoff stained the walls and left deposits. Streaks of copper bled down sodden curtains. She woke to putrid smells carried up through the vents from the boiler room, the basement, the street: skunk, mold, sewage, fermenting garbage. The green that blanketed the city drank up the water on its millions of fingers, and what wasn't absorbed poured down and ran into the gutters. She stopped running into other tenants on her floor and realized that most of the units had gone vacant. She watched as residents began to flee, the first of many waves of exodus, and still, the looping footage of floods on the news shocked her, no matter that she'd seen those very scenes on her own block.

The streets ulcerated into potholes in the months that followed. A moonscape. A city on a sheet of Swiss cheese. Even roads built with self-healing asphalt couldn't withstand the deluge. Beneath the carpets of tar, the sand that held up the streets swept away in rivers of muck. Before it became futile, a contingent of concerned residents, the ones who appeared on local public broadcast feeds delivering grating, impassioned speeches on the neighborhood effects of this or that ordinance, organized to draw attention to the potholes. From the window where she'd set up her drafting table, Bo noticed the crude images, the kind found in high school bathroom stalls, drawn around the holes in spray paint. She began to work neon colors into her own paintings, using an airbrush. Then she watched as a crew of people—cloaked from the drizzle in rain ponchos, armed with bouquets and hand trowels—theatrically filled each new, still-small hole with potting soil and planted hibiscus blooms. She tried to track their campaign, searching community board posts for updates and staring down at the street each day. Finally, she was rewarded. When a particularly large pothole went untended by the municipality for over a year, they threw a birthday party for it, added streamers to the orange tape that bordered the current edges, dug forks into a cake piped in frosting. Alone in her apartment, watching through binoculars, she pounded her fist on the window and cheered along with them.

Things were lively, then less so. She stopped seeing inspired displays, then stopped even hoping to see them. Her work stalled out. In a season that ran so long that other kinds of seasons were recalled with the quality of folklore, there was little room for festivity or ritual. Property minders across the city gave up on the battle with mold, wood rot, and corroded pipes. Structures played out their destiny toward collapse. Four years into the rain, her building's super had finally fled, and piece by piece, bolts, seals, and fixtures came undone. More units went vacant. The elevator and roof were serviced, but everything else fell apart, unless the remaining residents kept it up themselves. All her friends left the city, then her cousin and uncle, too—she and her mother had declined to join them.

At what point had the destruction become so commonplace it barely registered? One night, about two years ago, the sidewalks were clear enough that she could walk to her mother's apartment for Sunday dinner. There was too much food—her mother hadn't yet adjusted to cooking just for two—and neither had much to say. Bo reported on unremarkable tidbits from the week, her mother half-listening, on occasion interrupting to gripe about the price of melons or to mention another business that had closed. The streets had transformed into rapids by the end of their meal. The water tore sidings from structures and battered drainage pipes into angry, jagged sculptures. They watched from the window for a few moments before her mother said, "Guess you're staying on the couch again. Help me clear the plates." That night, wrapped in sheets that smelled of her mother's detergent, she'd slept for ten hours straight.

—

Not long after, just before the storm. She'd been getting ready for a show, her first in a while. Jenson had come to town for a work function where he would be recognized for his achievements in his field. Bo hadn't finished her paintings, so she'd skipped the event and the celebratory lunch that followed, choosing instead to work. Her cousin had been pissed, but not surprised. He'd accused her of being selfish. Her mother had disapproved, but still had dropped by with food for her that morning on her way to the ceremony. "It's important to show up for these kinds of things," she'd said as she left.

She was there, then not. She had left the lunch and then never made it home. The water had charged in with unusual force that afternoon and the lower routes still in use had been obliterated.

Jenson had stayed six months after that. He'd rented a temporary apartment in her building and left when he saw that Bo could get herself to the roof for food. And she had kept herself fed, if little else. Certainly she hadn't tried to paint. There had been times in the past when painting had been the thing that had made her feel most herself, useful even. Now it was

hard to imagine something more frivolous and meaningless. She'd chosen a painting over her own mother.

In the beginning, Bo and Jenson had searched every day. It had seemed then like everyone was looking for someone. The city had urged residents to seek high ground and stay put, but search parties formed and braved the flooding anyway. New flyers crowded the missing persons boards. Rumors of sightings fed tenuous hope. More disappeared while searching, swept off their ankles by swift-moving water.

A person could wash away. That was permanent, a fact made clearer each day. But the false starts—the familiarity of a woman's sloped posture, the overheard voice she swore she knew from birth—ignited tiny flutters inside, led to dreams more real than any waking moment. This meant, Bo was certain, that her mother was alive.

A week after the storm, the waters had receded enough that they could wade knee-high through the neighborhood as they searched. An encampment that had formed at the top of a hill the previous year was gone. It had housed a family who'd come from the outer neighborhoods to be closer to the markets but who hadn't been able to afford the vacated apartments. The wind during the worst of the storm had undone the stakes on their tents, and they'd lifted into the air like geodesic balloons, neighbors had reported. The mangled masses of nylon had floated away, impaled by poles and split planks as they moved with the currents. Everywhere, trees had been stripped of foliage, their branches now full of nests of clothing, plywood, even a two-seater electric car.

Several blocks from her mother's building, Bo saw a small figure with gray hair sleeping on a pair of seats in an old bus shelter. The glass wall behind the person had shattered, though it hadn't fallen, and someone had made an X with caution tape, two rippling yellow bands a temporary stay for thousands of ice-green pebbles. The panel glimmered. At some point the fractures would be too much, the sheet would fall, the glass gravel would

disperse and disappear into the water. But for now it held, a brittle sea-colored backdrop protecting the sleeper, who, through the angled rain, resembled Bo's mother napping.

"That can't be her," Jenson said. "Can it?"

They crossed a shallow pond and approached, and Bo placed her hand on the person's shoulder. Her heart thudded louder than the rain.

The person's small body spasmed, and right away Bo knew it wasn't her. The pallor of the skin, the yellow of the hair instead of the gray she'd imagined, the manner of fright—all wrong.

It was a child, no older than eight, bundled in a man's wool coat, eyes bright with fear. He drew a whistle from under his shirt and blew and blew, the sound so shrill and forceful that Bo thought she saw the shattered wall start to falter. She backed away, pulling Jenson with her, shouting, "We're leaving! We're leaving! Be careful of the glass."

Countless others had disappeared in that storm and few were ever recovered, it was true. But in that space of the unresolved, a tiny hope remained. Even as she reported her sighting and the location coordinates to the search boards, pushing away the unlikelihood that the child would be reunited with his family, she thought: *Someone missing could be found.*

—

Then came the eerie quieting. The unending rain muted the soundscape, and Bo began to long for the very noises that used to anger her, the intrusions and clamor of lives playing out in every direction—if not expletives shouted in congested thoroughfares below, then the shrieks of tires doing donuts at a sideshow. If not sirens and construction, then the sound systems of other artists at the live-work studios or the lonesome mockingbird rehearsing its repertoire of mediocre songs: alarms, miscellaneous beeps, the calls of other species. She tried to lose herself at the easel, but the silence seemed part of her now, dampening her thoughts and slowing her hand. Soon the blank canvas turned gray with dust and the paint tubes she'd left open dried up.

Then the nightmares, on repeat. They broke her sleep into short fits, image after image of her mother dying. A raft thrown over the edge of a waterfall. A hurricane lifting her body and swallowing it. A flash flood that carried away a row of prefab cottages, including one with her mother locked inside. None of these versions were far from the likely truth, she had to admit: like thousands of others trapped on this peninsula, her mother had almost certainly drowned.

Yet some residual belief lingered, the hope that she might still return. Jenson, sensing it, called it a delusion. He was right. Habituated to the rain, few had taken the storm warnings seriously, carrying on with their daily business and adjusting to each new disruption without thought. In hindsight, though, the unprecedented deluge that had taken her mother had been a tipping point for everyone but her. After that, no one doubted that worse would come, even if no individual storm since had been as singularly destructive. They realized they were on their own—half a decade into the rain, disaster response had been defunded into nonexistence. Most people, if they had means, found a way out.

Now Bo was utterly alone, with no friends to call on, and still she wasn't ready to leave. Not yet, not on short notice, not on someone else's terms. But here was Jenson at her door, all the way from Canada, practically shouting orders: "No more sulking around. Time to go. We're leaving in two days. Get it together. I came all this way."

"I'm packing." She gestured at the suitcase by the door, Mia's note still beside it.

He assessed the apartment, clearly displeased. "It looks exactly like the last time I was here." He went to the corner where she stored her painting supplies and old work. "You're not bringing any of this?"

"What for?" she said.

He pulled a small portfolio from a stack and held it up. "Are you serious?"

"You said to pack light."

"You can make new stuff, I guess." He looked like his father then, steady but tired. "I don't get why this is so hard for you. Explain to me what's left for you here."

He waited, but she had no answer.

"Just finish packing, okay?" he said, pointing vaguely around them.

"Yep," she said, and she meant it.

But then he left, and an unsettled feeling came over her. She crouched to pick up the note from Ricardo's neighbor. The few messages she received at this point were electronic, but this one, handwritten and delivered to her door, was unmistakably a missive from this world. She'd been alone, thought herself invisible. But somehow someone had found her.

And strangely, startlingly, needed her.

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The day of her departure, she sat by the door of her apartment. Jenson was waiting for her on the boat at the pier, calling every few minutes. Her body rattled at the incessant ringing, at the urgency in his voice, which notched up with each message. *Where are you?* The manifest had her name on it, but they would leave with or without her. *Stop being stupid. She's not coming back. Seriously, time to go.*

She stared at the note beside her suitcase, its trembling script.

When the clock struck twelve, the ringing stopped. Her cousin left one more message: *Wake up!*

She opened the door and felt her decision slip into place.

—

The elevator doors glided open at the fifty-first floor. She walked toward the end of the hall, past Ricardo's old apartment, and arrived at a door with a line of locks running down one side. A rectangular button glowed with

pink light. “Hi,” she practiced. “Hello.” She pressed the buzzer, which triggered a recording of raucous bird chatter that stopped only when the last of the dead bolts had been undone and the door swung open. The old woman stood a head shorter than Bo and gave off the musty medicinal smell of great-aunts.

Bo had seen her around the building, fussing with her plants on the balcony or shoving her way through shoppers on the roof while dragging a cart full of produce, but she hadn’t ever been this close to her. The woman’s perm resembled a bleached broccoli top. Her cardigan was the same color as her skin and looked like a mass of inexpertly woven cobwebs. Her arms, soft lumps, pushed against the sloppy lace, and her bosom melted into the rolls and dips and pockets of the larger landscape of her body. A pale jade pendant of the goddess Kwan Yin rested on her belly. Her blue-tinted feet bulged from a ratty pair of house slippers.

A weak greeting escaped Bo’s throat.

“Finally,” the old woman spat. She looked Bo over, unimpressed, but opened the door wider. “Do you want the job or not?”

THE SHIFTS WOULD be Monday and Thursday, and maybe an hour or two on Friday. The tasks were typical—clean, cook, shop—but likely to increase, Mia explained. Her legs had started to trouble her, curtailing the scope of her daily walks on one of the building's partially enclosed staircases, up to the rooftop and back. Delivering that note to Bo's door had almost been too much, the return walk more strenuous than she'd expected.

"My knees locked up a few times in the stairwell," she said. "By the time I reached my front door, I felt like I'd aged a decade in a single afternoon." Her legs had been bothering her for over a year, and her doctor had been pushing to insert sensors, which would transmit live data to his office and "help him help her." A few months earlier, during an especially painful flare-up, she'd finally agreed. As soon as he saw the reports on the locking events and her generally reduced speed and strength, he'd called to prescribe yet another new pill and prohibited her from being on her feet for more than a half hour at a time. "Not that I follow orders," she added. "Anyway, I need some help around the house, that's all, and all of my friends are dead and my family lives far away."

"I can help," Bo said, removing her shoes and selecting a pair of guest slippers from a bin by the door.

It was unexpectedly easy to step back into this role. When Bo notified the central agency that she had a new client, the representative was able to reactivate her account in seconds. "Glad to see you working again," he said. "It's been about four years, it says here." Then, upon waking on the first morning of the job, she felt immediately that the day had shape. For five solid hours, she'd be expected somewhere, her time put to use. Her malaise began to ebb, the certainty a relief; even as Mia blathered on unsolicited, Bo felt it. Jenson meant well—he'd helped her a lot, especially in the last two years—but this was where she belonged. She was meant to stay.

Even though the layout of Mia's apartment was identical to Ricardo's next door, entering the space was jarring: the messes and powerful odors,

all the details of someone else's living. Lightbulbs would need to be replaced, rugs beaten and washed. The answer button on the call machine near the kitchen was filthy. In the main room, heaps of bedding covered a set of folding chairs. A cabinet housed what appeared to be teapots, vases, and plastic knickknacks, though the glass was too clouded with oil and dust for Bo to be sure. The only accessible furniture was a reclining armchair with deflated stuffing and a worn sunken seat. She glanced into the kitchen and saw a red square that hung in diamond orientation on the wall, with gold trim bordering an embossed Chinese character in calligraphic script. The priority was to set up a clean place for food preparation and storage. She would begin there.

"What did your neighbor tell you about me?" Bo asked as she slid on gloves and began to scrub at the sticky gray layer that had accumulated on the grout near the sink.

Mia monitored Bo's progress from beside her, holding on to the counter for balance. "He said that you are a decent enough cook."

"Did he," Bo said, amused.

"And he said you are an artist who takes on support services assignments when you need the work."

Bo paused her scouring. She was surprised that Ricardo had been attentive enough to describe her in this way, but by now, she felt a great distance from that identity. She hadn't painted since her mother had disappeared. Art, she'd come to feel, served no purpose in a time like this. It belonged to another world, one she'd left behind. Her drive was gone, her practice abandoned—for the best. She felt increasingly certain about this, reassured even, leaving behind a trivial pastime.

Even before her mother had disappeared, though, her painting practice had stalled. She knew she could manipulate paint and make marks and balance visual effects in a pleasing composition, but that feeling of tapping into the beyond, of reverberating with the unsayable, was gone. Whether plein air or portraiture, it was hard to see the point. She'd lost touch with old friends, lost confidence in her movements, lost conviction. Entire years were lost to her; it was impossible to distinguish one from the next. And

while she'd been lost, her peers had been reaching and amassing and anchoring, building little empires, tucking firmly into systems that promised security.

Her friend Joey, for instance, who she used to share a studio with, had exhibited with such regularity that she'd earned an early retrospective at forty-two. A guy Bo had once dated was now directing relocation projects for communities that still had time to retreat. Jenson had bought an apartment with bay views that made visitors gasp, no matter the weather.

Bo understood that she'd missed something her peers hadn't. She'd thought that she didn't believe in safety, but now she saw that they had made themselves safe while she had woolgathered in their wake. One day she looked up from the privacy she'd guarded to find that her life had emptied; all her choices added up to nothing.

And still. And still, with the comfort of being no one to the outside world, she prized the night hours that belonged solely to her, before the light, when hints of who she'd been, who she still could be, flickered. Voices broadcast into her tiny universe from somewhere close but unknown, offering respite from the dark-cold of her mind. She listened to the hum beyond the rain. She dreamed of color. She learned to live with water. In those moments, she could say without hesitation not that she was a painter but that she was real—a body situated within a day, inside a nameable hour. Whenever she was unsettled by daybreak, and the doubt and anxiety that poured in with the light, she held to the hope of three o'clock in the morning ahead.

"I don't do that anymore," she said to Mia, returning to the grout. "I don't paint."

"Don't paint?" Mia looked disappointed. She watched Bo scrub for a moment. "Well, he said that you're dependable and thorough, most of the time. But you know, the way things are these days, it was a crapshoot whether you would respond."

"How did you know I was still here?"

"I've seen you before. And the Tran children said you buy watercress from them. They said the not-young, not-old Chinese lady cut off all her

hair.” Mia moved toward the small marbled diner table between the sink and a wall of disorganized shelves, the rubber soles of her slippers making a ripping sound as they peeled up from the linoleum. Every surface in the kitchen would need to be deep-cleaned.

Bo grazed her head with the inside of her forearm. For the last year, she’d neglected her hair to the point of manginess. When Jenson had informed her of his plan, she’d decided to shave it all off. It was a sloppy job, done without a mirror or the expectation of being noticed, though this morning she’d slapped some water on her head to tame a cowlick. The stubble had grown out and softened, and sometimes she caught herself touching it absentmindedly. It was comforting, like petting a cat.

“I didn’t realize they knew I was Chinese,” Bo said. “Some of my friends don’t even know that.” The section of grime she’d been working finally dissolved, and she felt a satisfaction too large for the task. She shook out a cramp in her hand and started on the next patch. Doing this detailed physical work again, even talking to a new person, felt strangely normal. Tomorrow she would feel the exertion in her arms, that forgotten sting of too much lactic acid.

The chairs that accompanied Mia’s table were upholstered in a glittery vinyl and had at some point been repaired with heavy-duty silver tape, which had curled and blackened at the edges. Mia dragged one out from under the table on its hind legs, making a racket as she pulled.

“Just because you’re lost in your own head doesn’t mean everyone else isn’t paying attention.”

Bo felt a flash of defensiveness at the overstep.

Mia moved a bag full of bags from the seat to the tabletop. “Anyway, I thought you must be Chinese because you look a bit like my great-granddaughter did when she was young.”

Bo turned to face Mia, who was seated now, framed by piles of clutter, clusters of pill bottles, balls of aluminum foil, and an assortment of used mugs. A clay pot served as the centerpiece, repurposed as a repository for assorted vertical tools: chopsticks with burnt tips, a back scratcher with tangles of dust between its tines. Her face had long lost its elasticity, but

somewhere in the pouches and folds and tones, Bo saw features that reminded her of her own grandmother and the elders she and her mother used to visit during school breaks. They'd bring them oranges and pomelos, trays of chocolates, potted orchids. Bo would grow bored to the point of pain in their strange, smelly houses, in kitchens not unlike Mia's, but when she'd ask why they were there, all her mother would say was "To pay respects."

Mia slapped her hands on the table, startling Bo to attention. Her hair was oddly shadowed, and Bo realized clumps of dust had caught in it. She looked impatient, ready to issue orders.

"When you're done with that section, I'm ready for my snack."

LIKE ALL SUPPORT workers, Bo had been trained to coordinate medical appointments, manage prescriptions, change a disposable brief, adjust a patient's position safely, and recognize warning signs of suicide. "As age expectancy and automation rise," the trainer had said with palpable pride, "this—the care of people—will be the heart of labor."

In her early twenties, Bo had picked up jobs doing deliveries, restaurant work, janitorial services, gallery installations—roles where employers viewed her as replaceable—to support her floundering creative practice, while her peers made their way toward expertise in sensible fields. She didn't have a college degree, to her mother's dismay, but she'd taken classes at City College and, after a few years of crashing with friends and subletting cheap rooms, eventually lucked out with a subsidized spot and a built-in community of artists at the live-work studios by the beach. When cash was really tight, she'd sold her plasma and videos of her bare feet. Jenson, who'd trained as a structural engineer, had risen quickly in his firm and on occasion transferred enough money to her account to cover a month or two of expenses so she could shut herself away in her studio for a while.

It had been Joey who'd suggested that Bo pursue nursing or caregiving. "You gotta start planning ahead. There are programs in the Bay, if you're going to stay. It's transferable. No matter where you go there will be demand, even if other jobs go robotic or dry up. And you can plan your schedule to accommodate your painting time." At first Bo had found the pitch condescending, especially coming from someone whose paintings and parents paid the bills. Joey had moved here on a whim, to see what California was about, and had quickly found community and professional success. Then, fed up with the repeat flooding in her ground-level apartment by the beach, she'd flitted off to New Zealand. Bo was used to friends drifting in and out of her transient city, but with Joey she'd felt like she was being left behind. She envied Joey's freedom, her seemingly charmed life. Maybe it would do her some good to follow her friend's

advice. She'd have to work regardless, so why not try a route that might leave room for other pursuits? She'd enrolled in a three-month training just after Joey had left.

So began her career in what she came to refer to jokingly as "attending to deaths." The first year, in between her own projects, she'd tended to a procession of hospice patients, some of whom she'd never had a chance to talk with, and she learned firsthand what the trainer had described as "the great honor of being present and offering comfort and companionship at the moment of transition few of us can predict but all of us will encounter." She sat at each patient's side, absorbing what she could about their life, and hoped they sensed that they weren't alone. But when a man she'd been assigned to care for died before she'd even arrived, his body cold and drained of color on the bed, she'd requested longer-term cases. She wanted to work with people she might actually have a chance to connect with.

There was a blanket fussiness with the elderly, but an ease of forgiving. Some held minor grudges, and others filled the hours with litanies of grievances. Her first charge was a man who cursed at her and insulted her cooking, admittedly lacking then, but after the first time he messed his bed and she switched out the linens with pleasant neutrality, averting her gaze all the while, he stopped with the verbal assaults and even once grunted in an appreciative manner when she helped him settle into a chair. She carried with her the trainer's words: "Your job is to respond to needs. Ideally they would have family nearby or family who could take them in. But we are not living in ideal times and these are not ideal situations. You are stand-ins for family."

Some families wanted to be there but couldn't. Instead, they insisted on fastidious recordkeeping, checking meal logs and medication schedules daily, making demands and even accusations that created more work for Bo. But their remote micromanagement was effective: they helped maintain continuity of care and made it known that this person was beloved. And although Bo hated to admit it, this bent her perception of the patient. She understood even the most hostile person to be someone worth caring for, someone worth her best attention.

For a while she'd been one of two rotating twenty-four-hour caregivers for a matriarch with a sweet but undiscerning temperament; it was her son who was the problem. He was in his sixties and had never been employed. He lived with his mother for months at a time in between what he called international "business trips," which sounded to Bo like extended beach vacations. Although he left all the work of caring for his mother to the hired help, she praised him for keeping her company in her old age, unlike her other children. He had an Asian fetish and used racist slurs with abandon and made lewd comments to Bo on multiple occasions, even shat with the door open when she was there on shift. But, awful as he was, he made his mother happy, which made Bo's job easier. Eventually he went on a cruise to Southeast Asia during a flu outbreak and fell ill. The crew found him, reportedly "dead of a coronary" in his cabin, when they arrived at port. His mother's brightness vanished. She died within days.

Ultimately, no matter the patient, Bo made a silent promise with each new job to uphold their agency and to listen well, to refrain from casting judgment and pity. There was dignity in order and cleanliness, and in the right silence. Despite the four-year hiatus since Ricardo's death, the longest she'd taken between jobs, it all had come back when she'd met Mia. She was prepared to do this work. Maybe she could even do it well.

—

At first she worried they'd spend all day shouting back and forth at each other to relay the most basic information—*What did you say? What?*—a repeat of the circular, claustrophobic conversations she'd had with previous clients, who hadn't been able to hear the high-pitched screech of a hearing aid battery going dead in their ear.

But to Bo's surprise, Mia, who said she had once been deaf without hope, had excellent hearing, thanks to the aids implanted behind her earlobes. "Don't shout. I can hear you just fine. The difference is that it feels like I think what you say rather than hear it," she said. But the

important thing was that she could listen and talk back—and she did talk back.

Bo spoke sparingly—hardly at all in the last two years, only on rare calls or when errands necessitated it. She'd grown disturbed by the sound of her own voice leaving her body, too aware of the minute contractions in her windpipe and the precise control of breath it took to utter a word. To string words into a full sentence was its own small miracle of logic and rhythm and rules, which, if she paused to consider the construction, rendered her speechless all on its own. But with Mia, there was no need for pleasantries, none of the anxieties of mastering a particular tone for the situation. All Bo needed was to speak plainly and directly, as Mia did herself.

One of Mia's recurring topics was her peers. She gave frequent reports on the remaining superseniors. "Those of us left," she said, "are walking obituaries." Bo pictured them scattered about the buildings like points of light plotted on a three-axis graph, dimming as they died. Failing kidneys finally stopped. Appetites fell away. Hearts twisted and clenched and went still.

Terry, the Russian baker who'd dyed his hair purple, was the latest.

"The Big D got him."

"Diabetes?" Bo pulled a sheet from a heap of clean laundry and began to fold. Like most of Mia's clothes, it was worn down to its fibers, and any color or pattern that once graced it had faded hundreds of washings ago. She made a mental note to check the boxes at the free stand for some replacements.

Mia's upper lip twitched in disappointment. "No."

Bo lined up the seams on a pajama top Mia liked to wear to bed. The buttons didn't match and made the threadbare fabric look even thinner. "Dementia?"

"No."

"Did he need dialysis?"

Mia's face scrunched and reddened. "He's dead!"

"Oh!" Bo said, her own face going pink, though she wasn't sure how she should react. She set the folded garment by Mia's pillow and patted it

awkwardly. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

—

Through August and September, they adjusted to each other. Bo restored the apartment to a baseline cleanliness, and from there the maintenance was straightforward. She formed a routine based on Mia’s fluctuations in appetite and energy: laundry during her naps, administrative tasks when her favorite shows were on, meal prep when she was talkative. At some point during each shift, they ended up in the kitchen together, with Mia directing the conversation from the table and Bo attending to dishes or dinner.

One evening, while Bo was cutting up vegetables for the week, Mia asked, “Where is your family?”

“My mother. She— I haven’t seen her since the big flood two years ago.”

“Aiya. How tragic. You looked for her?”

“Yes.”

“For how long? Nobody found her?”

“No.”

“Everybody else?”

“Everybody else?”

“Your sisters and brothers?”

“Oh. My uncle and cousin moved to Canada. I grew up with them. That’s everyone.”

“Your family is too small,” Mia said, like Bo was personally responsible. “What about your father?”

“I never knew him. My mother raised me.”

Her parents had met at a neighborhood clay studio. As a reprieve from the third-grade classroom where she’d taught for years, her mother had enrolled in a pottery class that her father happened to be teaching. Bo got her creative talent from him, her mother claimed: “It certainly wasn’t from me.” That, most of her facial features, and the unmanageable curls in her hair. Beyond those traits, though, Bo had little sense of him. She’d gleaned

that circumstances had been difficult for her mother as a single parent, at times excruciating. But by the time she'd grown old enough to see her mother as a person and not just a parent, her mother could remember Bo's father with the peace of retrospection, as if looking back at her time on the moon. It was easier to speak lightly after surviving: "He just didn't live in the same reality. He didn't want a family. I had you to raise."

Mia sniffed. "No father? Too bad."

These sorts of questions were typical, likely not meant to be provocative, but Bo felt judged. She had the small family that she had.

She went toward the door to put on her shoes, a signal that their conversation would end there, but Mia just started talking louder: "I never met my father either. I only knew him by a handful of stories."

Bo kept her shoes on but sat on a stool to listen.

—

Mia had never mentioned her exact age but said she knew she'd been conceived on a trip her father had made back to China in the early 1920s. Bo did the quick math—that put her close to one hundred and thirty.

Her father had lived in San Francisco, her mother had told her, though they were from the same village. Like everyone else, he'd come to America for the promise of good work. He'd been there when the big earthquake struck in 1906, and by chance, in the chaos, found himself next to a woman who'd died from injuries sustained in the temblor. He'd known her. She was an older woman who'd arrived in the 1880s, well known to anyone who frequented the brothels in Chinatown, including police officers and city officials, and—this was almost a miracle—she had papers.

Mia's father recognized the opportunity before him. When the fires that followed the earthquake swept through City Hall, all the records were burned, everything ash beneath the building's dome, which somehow had been spared. There was no evidence of who had been born here, who was related to whom. And so he wept beside this woman's body and refused to leave—even as residents from other neighborhoods arrived and began to

loot the wreckage, even when the National Guard troops arrived and began to loot as well—telling anyone who passed that she was his mother, and in this way he made claim to American citizenship.

No one knew the particular circumstances of how she had arrived in California some twenty years earlier, but likely she had been traded by her family in exchange for rice or kidnapped from the countryside by bandits and sold to a brothel owner in Chinatown. Famine made cheap goods of girls.

His gratitude was legend. Years later, after returning from his sole trip back to China in 1921, in which he stayed just long enough to conceive Mia before making his way to Texas, he received word that the family association, which had overseen the temporary burial of immigrants who had died in America, was facilitating the repatriation of their bones back to China. He walked right off the farm in El Paso where he'd been hired as a field hand, leaving wages unclaimed, and kept going, camping in fields, dodging rattlesnakes, at some points traveling barefoot, until he reached the familiar streets of San Francisco again, ever teeming with bachelors, and verified that the woman's bones had been exhumed. He insisted that the family association send her home to his own ancestral village, to be buried in his family plot.

He scraped and dried the bones himself before bundling them with a length of silk, setting them into a tin bone box encased in wood, and paying the two-dollar fee to return them to China. The benevolent society had written her name on a brick before burying her after the earthquake. He carefully copied the characters onto the wooden lid and saved the brick to slip into a building facade on a construction job later on.

The woman's remains, stacked among hundreds of others, made their way back across the Pacific in a reverse journey that brought her to rest beside the ghosts of strangers. The final gift of a resting place on a humid hill patrolled by mosquitoes and covered in sharp brush. Her grave marker read BELOVED MOTHER. Mia said her relatives in the village assured her that no visitor to the site ever let her grave go unswept.

It was an incredible story—the sheer chance of Mia’s father finding the woman in the rubble. Bo had learned about the earthquake and the fire in school, but the details she could recall were vague. She remembered seeing photographs of collapsed buildings and panoramic shots of smoke over the skyline, gripping the safety bars in an exhibit at the science museum that simulated what the earthquake had felt like, but she hadn’t known that the city archives had burned up, had never really thought about the actual fallout for everyday people. She’d lived in the city her whole life, through her share of moderate quakes, but there was so much she’d never learned about it. Even the handful of details about Chinatown Mia had mentioned had changed her conception of the place, which she’d always thought of as a quick kitschy stop for visitors and where she’d once gone dancing in the weird dank basement of a bar until dawn.

A century and a half of history. Her own family’s story fit in there, too, but the most she knew was that her grandparents, or maybe great-grandparents, had lived in or near Chinatown, and that her mother and uncle had occasionally indulged in a nostalgic craving for the Cantonese-style home cooking at a particular basement restaurant and the custard tarts from a bakery on the same block. Bo and her cousin felt no personal connection to the place at all.

—

Six weeks after she’d missed the boat, her Uncle Winston called from British Columbia. She answered and soon Jenson appeared beside him, too.

“I made my dad call so you’d pick up,” Jenson said. “Just to be clear, I’m still mad, but he said we should check in on you.”

A small landscape painting hung on the wall behind them.

“Is that—?”

Her uncle leaned sideways so she could get a better look. “One of your old paintings. I brought it with me. It looks nice here, huh?”

“It does.” She’d painted it from a quick study she’d done at the beach one morning. In the foreground, swipes of velvet-green ice plant sloped into

wet sand, which receded into a block of staggered gray waves. “A little piece of home.”

Jenson cut in: “What were you thinking?”

Reminded of the circumstance of their call, her uncle went from friendly to bewildered. “What happened, Bo? I thought you were coming.”

She’d seized up at the sight of her uncle’s name on the caller ID, and seeing the two of them was stirring up all her doubts.

“I really thought I was ready.”

Jenson looked baffled. “You can’t stay there forever, you know. Auntie isn’t coming back.”

“I know that.” She flinched but tried to hide it. “I have a new job.”

“What? What job? And since when have you ever cared about a job?”

“You can still come,” her uncle added. “We can figure it out.”

“I signed a contract.”

“A contract?” Jenson was rolling his eyes.

“Yes.” She’d agreed to tend to someone. She’d signed the forms. Anyone who worked in this field operated by a certain standard. When you fashioned a tourniquet or packed a cavernous wound, you made a promise to stay until the bleeding stopped. “When someone needs your help and you give it—”

Her cousin was exasperated. “Bo, listen, you can break a contract.”

“It’s more than that.” She tried to formulate a response that would make her thinking clear to him, but what could she say to someone who’d left, seemingly without reservations, whose practicality had never failed him?

“You have an opportunity. It’s the difference between being alive and living. You can be dry. You can live in a house that’s not at risk of collapsing any second. You can eat”—he looked off camera—“meat, peaches.”

His pitch was generic. She couldn’t locate where in her body she desired those things.

Still, she said, “I know.”

“Do you know how many millions of people have no one offering them passage or housing?”

“I know,” she said again, not looking at him—out of shame, he’d probably assume, but the truth was, she was feeling strangely, newly certain about staying. She changed the subject: “Uncle Winston, you spent some time in Chinatown, right?”

“Not really. Just once in a while, to eat—you remember. We used to take you two to that dinky restaurant your grandparents liked, before it closed. They barely changed the menu in a hundred years. It was the only place we could get the steamed meat patty with the salted fish.”

“Do you know if anyone in our family was here during the big earthquake?”

“Sure. We were here. We were kids then.”

“No, I mean the really big one, in 1906.”

“Oh, sorry, I don’t know. That’s pretty far back. Your mom might’ve known. She had some genealogy charts our mom gave her. No one told me anything.”

Her mother had mentioned those charts, but Bo had never spent much time with them herself. Her grandmother had hunted down distant relatives and pieced together lineages that went back generations. Bo’s mother had tried to pass those materials down to her, but she hadn’t been interested in the convoluted map of people she’d never heard of. She hadn’t cared, or had cared too late. And now that history was gone, with no one left to remember it.

She looked beyond her uncle, at her painting on their wall. The details were too blurred to see, but the coastal dune palette was familiar.

“Do you remember the earthquake plan we had?”

“ ‘Meet in the yard of our elementary school,’ ” Jenson recited.

“Really?” Her uncle turned to him. “I don’t remember that.”

“Because it was on bedrock,” he said.

Bo said, “Why didn’t we have a plan for the rain?”

“Are you serious? I did have a plan. That’s what we’re talking about right now.”

Bo shook her head, refusing to return to the same argument. The situation had changed. A city was built out of chance encounters by people

trying to make a home in unpredictable circumstances. She'd met Mia here and now her role was to support her needs. She'd made a choice.

Certain fears had followed Bo from childhood. Whereas Jenson had always been sure of his judgment and ready to act, she'd struggled with the most minor decisions. Even touching her toe to the placid surface of a pond had once set off an internal crisis. Ridges had formed on the water, a motion so tiny it was like detecting the sound of a needle released by a towering pine. She'd watched as the rings pushed out into mesmerizing patterns, moving in so many directions, as the waves lapped against the retaining wall and flowed over it, and her whole body flooded with the beauty of what she'd set in motion. But after a minute, she could no longer track the movements. The ripples had stopped. There was no sign that any of it had happened. A private misery took over then—that she should believe her skin touching the water important enough to be in some way registered, that it would have any effect at all. The unbearable problem of something she would later call transience, or impermanence. She'd felt it when she breathed hot air on a window and the steam cleared. She'd felt it in choir when she'd mouthed the words instead of singing, and the song sounded no different without her voice. In the scheme of things, she was close to nothing.

But she had chosen not to get on that boat. And now, to Mia, she was something. What happened to a person in one moment could have an irrevocable impact on another. Just a few blocks over, a woman had been crushed by rubble and became a mother to a stranger in death. There was hope and connection in disaster. By chance, you could make your way into a new life. Couldn't it be possible for her to find meaning—here, now?

“It's not time for me yet.”

Jenson sighed and threw up his hands.

“I'll be okay here.” She smiled so they wouldn't worry. She hoped she was right.

"TODAY IS MY daughter's hundred and fifth birthday," Mia said one afternoon. She'd just taken a shower and was agitating her scalp with a rag. The white curls of her hair bounced up and a small bald patch above her ear reddened from the friction. She handed the rag to Bo, held the safety bar installed on the living room wall, and hopped lightly, switching feet, to wake her legs.

"A hundred and five, wow." Bo's shift was ending soon, but she was reluctant to return to the quiet of her own apartment. "How many children do you have?"

"One."

"Where does she live?"

"In Stockholm with her son's family. They've kept her busy watching all the kids."

Bo figured they'd left the area, but Sweden was far. Why hadn't they taken Mia with them? "The kids—your great-grandchildren?"

Mia sat down and counted on her fingers. "Actually, I have great-great-great-grandchildren now. I haven't met the last two generations, but they send me pictures." She gestured at the frame by the recliner. "Beverly loads them there, so I see the whole lot of them. They were here until—what is it now, thirty-so years ago?"

Bo watched a few frame changes, then sat back into her chair. She could barely remember two years ago, let alone thirty—she'd been ten then. Sure, Mia probably wasn't the easiest person to be around, but had her family not even tried to see her in all that time? "So you've spent the most time with your grandchildren."

"Beverly has one son, Grant. His other grandmother spoiled him—too much, in my opinion. She lived with them, and every morning she knelt at his feet and put his socks on and tied his shoes, so he could have an extra minute to eat the blueberry pancakes she made for him. Can you imagine!

Worshipping a child. She was raised to believe boys had the highest worth. She took every chance she had to pamper him.”

“Did he turn out all right?”

She pointed to a framed half-page magazine profile that celebrated his rise through the executive ranks of an investment firm, accompanied by a photograph of him, cross-armed and gray-haired. Beside it was another frame, with a card he’d made her in grade school. A layer of macaroni had piled up between the glass and the brittle paper, which still held swipes of tempera paint and shapes drawn in glue.

It was a proud display, aged and painfully specific, betraying a relationship of limited encounters. “Impressive,” Bo said with caution.

Mia scoffed. “He was always so busy with work, never had time for the kids. Beverly basically raised them with his wife. Beverly’s always been like that, too giving, not willing to discipline. He came over once, and right away he made a face, said it was too cramped. He had the nerve to knock on my furniture and say, ‘Po Po, this stuff is junk.’ ”

“That’s rude.”

“Very rude! Very ungrateful! He got better later on. Beverly was sick for a long time and I guess that helped him see how important it is to have family. Beverly says his grandson, I don’t know which one, is expecting another baby.” She pumped her fists, elbows pinned to her sides, and opened her mouth in performative cheer. “So everyone’s excited about that.”

“Did you ever think about living with them?”

“I thought maybe with Beverly. She said no.”

It had come up way back, she said, shortly after she’d turned a hundred herself, after surgeons had excised a tumor from her brain. Her medical team, shocked that she lived alone and concerned about who would care for her after discharge, had advised her to ask her family for support. Beverly, citing personality differences and a full schedule, had been apologetic but firm. Mia wept the full week she recovered in the hospital—“It was the drugs”—all the while berating herself for such weakness. Just before she

went home, Beverly hired an aide for the period of recovery and said she'd visit when she could.

"I should have seen it coming, that my daughter would be unwilling to provide for me in sickness. I was being evicted then, too." She fluffed her hair with her fingers, then added casually, "If she turned out this selfish, I guess that says something about me as a mother."

Bo paused before speaking, unsure of where her allegiances lay. "Oh. I wouldn't—"

"I have an American child," she said plainly. "What did I expect? I packed up my duplex and moved here. I manage okay by myself."

Until now, Bo thought, but moved on.

"So did you celebrate?"

"Celebrate what?"

"When you turned a hundred?"

"No, no party. My recovery was slow, and that summer Beverly was getting ready to move to Europe. Anyway, I always felt like birthdays were nothing special. What significance could they have? All of us were born."

Bo laughed, startling herself. How long had it been since she had? What Mia had said was true enough, coming from someone who'd had more birthdays than most. Bo hadn't acknowledged any birthdays, including her own, in recent years, though her mother had taught her to appreciate them as a simple reason to gather and be open to gifts. She compared them to the plastic rings she slipped onto her knitting needles to keep track of whatever pattern she was making: "They're colorful markers, so we can appreciate the time passing." She herself hadn't made it past seventy-one.

Mia continued: "My papers say July 5, but I don't know the actual date I was born." In preparing her immigration documents, her husband, Kwok, had estimated a date based on the season of her birth and an auspicious alignment with the lunar calendar.

To her mind back then, birthdays were an occasion to be observed impassively, like a train schedule, if observed at all. Then Beverly had begun school, received invitations to parties, requested special meals of her own. By the time she'd finished elementary school, Mia had begun to allow

and even enjoy the indulgence of making Beverly her favorite dish of steamed catfish. There was satisfaction in fulfilling a wish, and her daughter's were modest. But more than that, the meals endeared her to the girl, made her kinder and more obedient for weeks.

As an adult, Beverly had organized events for Mia's milestone birthdays. They'd celebrated her sixtieth with a giant party, with guests filling two floors of a banquet hall. Mia had refused gifts and had instead given each guest a red envelope with a five-dollar bill.

Seventy and eighty had been tamer affairs: dinners with family and an excuse to order shark fin soup. For ninety, Beverly had rented a community hall, assembled dahlia centerpieces to liven up the folding tables, and had her son give a speech.

"For one hundred, she did bring me a cake from one of the bakeries in the Sunset, a small one, the kind with whipped cream and the strawberries that taste like water. We ate it together, right here, before I went to the hospital. And that was it. Then she moved and I haven't seen her in person since."

Bo felt a pang. She remembered those cakes from when she was a kid, the airy sponge and the tasteless fruit. Her uncle would order a small one, with looping red gel that spelled out a birthday message to her and Jenson—their birthdays were just three weeks apart. They'd celebrated together into their twenties, up until the year Jenson insisted they book a VIP lounge at his friend's club rather than compromise on a more casual venue that might also appeal to her friends, almost none of whom came. After that, they kept their joint celebration to a small affair, just a slightly more elaborate version of the Sunday dinners their family shared every week, with lots of noodles and a six-inch cake, and planned separate events with their respective social groups.

Bo was apart from her family now, but she'd never considered that they might stay that way for decades.

"You really haven't seen your family at all since then?"

"Thirty years, they've never come back to visit."

"Not even when travel was easier?"

Mia started to answer, then stopped abruptly to squint at her. “Aren’t you supposed to be going home now?” she said, annoyed.

“Soon. I’m just resting a minute.” She wanted to keep hearing Mia talk. “Was that the last birthday you celebrated?”

“For me? Yes. We used to have floor parties and then the senior center parties here. You must have heard about those?”

She had—Ricardo had talked about them often. Parties had become a constant in the building some years after Mia had moved in. It was a heyday of sorts. They started with one cluster of neighbors and soon spread, with each floor coordinating their own. When management got wind of the activity, they implemented a community calendar system and oversaw scheduling to stagger the gatherings across holidays and seasons. They attributed the enthusiasm to residents being glad for the sense of community after a particularly long winter of cold weather and flu outbreaks.

Ricardo would knock on doors to solicit potluck contributions, and on the day of, all the residents on fifty-one would unlock the terrace gates they shared with their adjacent neighbors and create one long uninterrupted balcony, strung with garlands of flowers and little lights. All the way around, the feast unfolded: hummus and baba ghanoush, trays of lumpia and cold fried chicken, cakes gleaming with ganache, fermented vegetables, secret-recipe casseroles, dozens of varieties of hot sauce. When it got late and the wind picked up, out came bottles of port and thermoses of hot chocolate spiked with rum. They exchanged recipes and recommendations for medical specialists. They dispensed legal advice and offered heated opinions about movies and complained about the building’s super.

Their building was especially lively, but back then, that kind of socializing was common in the larger buildings downtown, maybe because of the connected balconies and the sheer density of units. At Jenson’s, for instance, the balconies had been private and so had the parties. And where Bo’s mother had lived, the residents kept to themselves, although she had a busy social life, always at a class or out with friends, most of whom Bo had never met. The studios where Bo had lived and worked were communal by design, but on a much smaller scale, and the tenants were all young artists,

so their gatherings tended to be more spontaneous, centered around getting high or getting laid. Once in a while, they threw a rave. Ricardo's descriptions did remind Bo of the summer block parties she and her cousin used to attend in the outer districts—but even earlier, when they were kids. Another teacher at her mother's school always invited them to join, and the minute the spring semester ended, they'd start to count down the days. They'd loved the bounce castles, the tables loaded with potato salad, japchae, crystal bowls filled with punch and sherbet. Sometimes, in an election season, a candidate would visit, looking to be photographed with the community. Everyone stayed out late, bundled in layers as the fog poured in. It felt like the whole city was on those two blocks.

By the time Bo had moved into the building, not long after the rain had started, a sharing economy had emerged. The party days had ended almost twenty years earlier, but vestiges of their spirit remained. Everyone was hungry to see neighbors, friends, ex-lovers, to gift cakes and trade soap or salt or gossip, to share tips on what was for sale at the emerging roof markets—the freshest produce, the best deal, what was in stock. They shared information on new orders and restrictions, street closures, which neighborhoods were starting to crumble and melt away, how they'd ended up in the building. One man on her floor had stayed in his family's Victorian until a cypress tree had crashed through the back of the house and almost taken him out. Another family hadn't lost their home, but every other property on their block had been flooded, so they'd moved downtown to be closer to amenities, to everyone else.

Bo had been between jobs and tight on funds then and plenty of people in the area had needed caregivers. Moving had opened her up to a whole new pool of work. And her family had been thrilled that she'd be living closer to them.

That was when Jenson had become insistently generous. He'd started shopping for them both without her asking; she'd accepted the groceries but felt awkward for needing his help. He had become the responsible one, capable of riding out hard times. Unlike her, he planned ahead and kept a full pantry, never ran out of a staple or a favorite ingredient. She joked that

it didn't matter that the stores were gone; she could just shop at his house. One small way of performing dignity until the shame retreated.

Like everyone else, she acclimated to the new world of water. She installed her city-issued mycelium wall and ate from it. She met people her age at the bar downstairs and went to rooftop shows. She started working for Ricardo and then found additional clients and took the new roof routes to visit them, hurrying across the narrow spans as they swayed in midair, doing her best not to look down. She went with her mother to see the upper-level collections at museums. She rationed her painting supplies and befriended a couple of textile artists who lived in the building, even though she felt lukewarm about them and was sure that was mutual. Briefly, she dated a guy who lived across the street, and after that ended, she would sometimes take the stairs by his window, not out of any lingering interest in him, exactly, but because just catching sight of a sign of him reminded her that she was making a new life—it made her feel awake. Still, a few times each month, her rote evenings were replaced by despair, when she could no longer stave off her incredulity at the downpour, at what had become of the world she'd always known.

During Bo's second year in the building, when the elevators kept going out of service, stranding residents with limited mobility indoors, a pulley system developed to facilitate exchanges among the network of neighbors. Some operated on a schedule, each stop decked with bells to announce the arrival of a bread loaf or bouquet of peonies. But the ropes would fray and mold, and sometimes would be severed entirely when friends had a falling-out. They lasted only about a year. Most of the elevators had been repaired by then, and anyway, people had begun to move away. Lines dead-ended at units suddenly vacated. Every so often when she'd been at Ricardo's, a bell had sounded, a phantom chime, and she'd been drawn to the balcony to see what treat was on its way, only to find another curious face peering around for movement. Their eyes would meet for a moment, almost in embarrassment, in shared disappointment, the noise having carried them both back to the novelty of a more hopeful time. But there was no basket, only wind setting off the bell.

OCTOBER CAME QUICKLY. Bo registered the change in the morning light, low and cold. It had been just over two months since she'd started working with Mia—not long, but longer than she'd spent with some clients—and while the formality of their interactions had relaxed somewhat, a reserve hung between them.

Her shift was starting soon, but she'd promised to check the roof for eggs. As the elevator made its way up, past floor 102 and the padlocked penthouses, the air changed—became heavier, with a chill that made bumps rise on her skin. When the doors opened to the roof, she was met with a rush of wet wind that drenched her front side and sent water dripping into her boots. Out of habit, she searched for her mother's face on the community bulletin board.

The rain magnified. In a minute, the threads that glimmered down from the sky thickened into sheets, then an upright river. Hardly anyone was out; they knew it was best to stay indoors until onslaughts like this one had eased.

Hunching to stay low, she headed toward the booths. If they were sold out, she'd have to check the farms on the next roof over, though she hoped she wouldn't have to cross today. Even on normal days, she felt ill at the precipitous drops beyond the railings of the bridges between buildings, no matter how short they were in span. She preferred to stick to her home roof for produce, though on days when the sunrise broke through the cloud cover, the vertigo could be worth it for the views from other high-rises, for the way the light reflected prismatic color across the city.

Most sellers had abandoned their posts for the day. The booths were bolted in place, but rain thrummed against the canopies in a roar and tarps thrashed around in the wind. In some areas where the drains couldn't keep up, inches of water collected and churned, as if a group of invisible children were splashing through it. She passed a row of ferns that hung from an awning, happy to be pummeled by the rain, and a muffled sweet voice

belonging to a child called out from behind the lush curtain: “Hi, Bo!” She couldn’t make out the figure, but it had to be one of the Tran kids. The most reliable source of cheer at the market, the duo also kept track of every transaction at their parents’ vegetable stand: who’d been up to the roof and what they’d purchased, an inadvertent log of who was left. She waved in their direction as she passed.

Relief: the egg vendor was knitting calmly in her booth, impervious to the storm. A solar lantern spotlit her hands as she worked. In addition to eggs, she sold made-to-order socks from chicken feathers she’d softened and spun into yarn. She kept a sample next to the eggs with a sign that read, NAME A FAIR PRICE. Bo had two pairs, which she rewore through numerous laundry cycles because they never developed odors, though sometimes her ankles blistered from rubbing against the quills.

“You want eggs? I have five left,” the woman said, needles ticking steadily.

Bo charged them all to Mia’s account. She wondered if the vendor would stay knitting contentedly for the rest of the day despite the storm, despite having run out of stock. She cradled the eggs in her hands, oriented herself, and retraced her steps through the rain back to the elevator.

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For Mia’s lunch, Bo loosened a fistful of enoki from the grow wall and added them to the hot wok. Unlike Bo, Mia tended to her wall, which replenished every few days with rows of cloud-ear fungus and coral-like clumps of oyster mushrooms.

When the edges of the mushrooms had turned copper in the pan, she poured in a single beaten egg, sprinkled two drops of fish sauce, and waited for it to set. It looked like a diseased, deflated moon. She folded the omelet into a small bowl on top of some rice and placed it on a tray, which she set in front of Mia, who looked up from her program and prodded at the food with chopsticks.

“I hope you like it.” Bo had tired of the flavors long ago but remembered how she’d once sliced shiitakes at their base, with anticipatory delight at adding them to a curry.

Mia chewed noisily and turned back to her show. “It’s fine.”

Fine. Bo could accept fine. She sat and watched with Mia. One character was unleashing accusations at another, who looked both smug and hurt. The episode cut off in mid-drama and a different program began.

Once she was done eating, Mia used a silver toothpick Bo had set beside her bowl and fussed at the spongy aftermath tucked into her remaining teeth. “Did that fight make any sense to you?” she asked.

“Nope.”

“Have to watch tomorrow to find out.” Mia used the remote to click to a different channel. “Did you eat?”

“Me? No.” But she found she was craving salt. It had been a long time since she’d felt an interest in food as anything more than a biological necessity.

“Next time cook some for yourself. Might as well, while you’re at it.” It hadn’t occurred to Bo that they might share meals. How foreign it had become, to eat with another person. How unexpectedly appealing to consider it.

“That sounds nice,” she said, and brought Mia’s dish to the sink to wash.

THAT AFTERNOON THE rain eased. Mia asked if they might go on a walk. She waited on the chair by the door, cane in hand like a royal staff, wearing a thick woolen vest, never mind the muggy air. She chose her old route: the outdoor stairwell.

“God forbid we run into Ronny. She’s always complaining. The room is too cold, the bingo numbers are too small, the exercise instructor goes too fast. What’s there to complain about? She gets the cheapest meals in town at the senior center.”

“I thought it shut down.” Bo patted her pockets to confirm that she had the keys, then locked the main dead bolt and stayed a step behind to observe Mia’s gait. It was their first extended outing, and she wasn’t sure how Mia’s legs would do.

“It did. I’m talking about before.”

“Where was it? Why did it close?”

“Fourth floor. The director left, then the coordinator left, then the center lost its funding. The maintenance got to be impossible with no staff. Finally the volunteers moved, too, so what could we do? We used to have mahjong, bridge, fan dance, brush painting, ballroom dance. It was funny because the only thing we had in common is that we were old—which could mean you were sixty or twice that—and we had free time and wanted someone to notice if we didn’t show up one day. We always worried when someone didn’t come to class. A lot of us lived alone. You think: Did they fall? Are they on the floor and no one knows? Like with Pamela—she kept busy, went out all the time, and even so, no one found her for a few days. If you’ve got no one who calls every day to check on you, or even if you do, but they live in Spain or Hong Kong, it doesn’t matter.”

The stairs were empty. The low light shot through the gaps in the cloud cover and backlit the rest of the sky, which glowed like a glacier on high. It almost stung to look at. There was no wind, so they were protected from the rain. They paused so Mia could regain her breath.

“Mrs. Ching was the only one I knew really well. Her I wouldn’t mind seeing. Lately I’ve been spared all the boasting about her grandchildren. One of them owns a wind farm and the other one developed that drug that reverses lung disease. My whole life I’ve had to listen to her brag about her kids and grandkids. But we’re from the same village.”

“Maybe we’ll see her,” Bo said, distracted by the tremble in Mia’s legs.

“She doesn’t recognize me anymore. She started getting confused and now she’s afraid of strangers, which is everyone. She moved into this building after I told her about all the openings. Thirty years, we saw each other every morning on our walks. I don’t know what happened to her. I haven’t seen her in months, and she hasn’t answered my calls. Doesn’t look like anyone’s living in her apartment. Maybe her family brought her to live with them, but they should know to tell me.”

“Wait. What? Have you reached out to them?”

“Her son never called me back. I looked up one of her grandkids and messaged him. Nothing.” It was entirely possible that Mia would never hear from her friend again.

“Up or down?” Bo asked when Mia’s breathing had evened out.

“Up first so it’s easier on the way back.”

At the first landing, Mia held the railing and stuck out her neck to see if anyone was coming from the floor above. She turned back to peer at the building across the way, and down toward the rivered street below.

“It was easier to keep an eye on things before the rain. You could see who was fighting outside the bank or selling drugs on the roof. Or who was wearing a big jacket to hide their pregnancy and not just to stay dry.”

“Sounds like gossip,” Bo said in good humor.

Mia bristled. “Call it what you want. You learn about people by watching and talking.”

Okay, Bo mouthed to herself.

Mia turned toward the staircase again. “She used to meet me here, so I always check.”

“Mrs. Ching?”

“Yes. She’s my friend. Even though she brags all the time.”

“Yes, you mentioned that.”

They scaled three more floors until Mia tired visibly and began to rely on the handrail and the cane.

“Let’s take the elevator back,” Bo suggested.

Mia agreed, but once they were in the elevator, she said, “Maybe we can go up to a different floor and take a look.”

They chose a floor at random and headed down the hall to a corner with a bench and a view to the southeast. The low hills were draped in green and spilled out to the water, which was tinted green, too, like a smooth extension of the land.

Mia sat and touched the glass, drawing lines with her finger across the view. “I never expected all this would be underwater.”

Bo followed her gaze, to an area she’d once known to be marshland. Born and raised in this city and she couldn’t even recall how that marsh had looked.

She could always sense, even without a clear landmark, when a film or photograph was set in San Francisco. Something about the light and the style of architecture, the old building height limits and the width of the streets. It didn’t matter if the photo had been taken a century earlier—something essential remained. Or at least that had been the case before the rain. Now the floods had revised the landscape and scrambled her internal maps. Her previous knowledge of how to move through the city had vanished with lack of use; she’d only taken the time to learn the roof routes she needed.

“I don’t remember what it looked like before.”

“That used to be the shipyard. My husband worked there after the war.”

“Where?”

Mia dragged her finger across the glass to point at a spot in the endless wet green.

“The navy started dumping radioactive waste there after the war. It went on for decades. Then later, around 2000, the city wanted to use the land for housing. The navy was supposed to clean the site up, but there was too much contamination for them to remove, so they just left it buried and put a

concrete cover on it. The cleanup contractors found toxic soil, so they collected soil from elsewhere and sent in fake samples for testing. Suddenly, magic: all clean! The developers went ahead. Later, there was a big scandal when people found out.”

“With all that radiation? You’re kidding.”

“Why would I joke about that? The company falsified their reports, but they left a paper trail. It was a big news story. Construction stopped because none of the tests could be trusted, but lots of housing had already gone up. People were already living there. They started sprouting tumors and coughing blood. We weren’t surprised. My friend Philomena’s grandson bought one of the first condos for cheap back in 2015, before the fraud story came out. We all told him then, Don’t be stupid. So many people in that neighborhood had already gotten sick. Our husbands worked there for years and every one of them got cancer. Every one. All that education, and he never listened. He was living in a fairy tale. The pretty view and discount blinded him.”

“I had no idea any of that was out there.”

“Your mother never taught you? Didn’t you say she was a teacher?”

“Sure, but not of city history.”

Mia sniffed. “Well, it started flooding there first—I’m talking years ago, way before this rain. The sea level rose and all the toxins got into the land and water. Philomena’s grandson came back to her with his hair falling out. We warned him! Later, when they were restoring the shoreline, they destroyed all of the homes on the lot.”

“What happened to the grandson?”

“He was lucky. He had good doctors and treatment.”

“Why did they ever let anyone live there?”

Mia tapped insistently at the window. “It wasn’t just there. You hear about the toxic sludge at all these military bases, the chemicals by all the power plants. People end up living there because they have no options. There’s vapors inside the homes they built on top, lots of leukemia cases. Look at Treasure Island, all those people who grew up eating lead paint

chips and playing with radioactive garbage in their yards, everybody sick. We saw it coming.”

She continued to point out landmarks, the window as their map. The area had once been a sacred Ramaytush Ohlone burial site and a Chinese fishing village, her daughters had learned in school. “Schools were much better back then,” she added. During the Gold Rush, there were slaughterhouses and tanneries. They dumped dead animals into the creek. Back when the shipyards were operating, the schools out there had been full of kids, but they’d all shut down decades ago. The teachers left for other districts, the substitutes never showed up. There had been art studios at one point, too, whole blocks that had cycled through closures and subsequent revitalization. And then they’d built the big shiny stadium that boasted seismic safety features but began to sink as soon as construction wrapped. Bo couldn’t believe that anyone had thought to build there, had dared to turn bay into land and nuclear waste into the foundation of family homes.

Before they headed back down, Bo tried to picture a dense neighborhood, the previous iterations of the city Mia had known, but her own memories intruded. She had never known that area, so kept landing back on the current view: cascades of invasive vines, bleak weather, water everywhere.

“I just can’t imagine it.”

“That’s a shame,” Mia said. “Like I said, you should pay attention to history.”

Bo’s knowledge of the city was a blip compared to what Mia remembered. Time, and more time, had shaped Mia’s conception of place, each permutation forming a version of the coastline only she could see. But there were versions Bo knew, too—other places and their histories, unknown to Mia. The streetcar she took to and from school, jobs, bars. The traffic circle the city installed after her neighbor was hit by a car and left paralyzed. The mansion, practically a private museum for all the art on display, where as a high school student she worked a catering gig for a high-society fundraiser and stole a glass bottle of French mineral water at the end of the night, out of a sense of righteousness diffused by knowing it

would never be missed. The sandstone building in the park where her mother took ceramics classes, and the carousel beside it where Bo waited for her, riding the giraffe around and around until she was sick. The café with the secret garden in back. The cathedral with the outdoor labyrinth. The pianos hidden in corners of the botanical garden at the start of each fall. The roost site off a freeway ramp where hundreds of crows landed each evening as winter approached.

So much of that was gone now, lost to time and water. Yes: it was important to pay attention to history. How many people were left here to remember the details that constituted the city, all the places they'd taken for granted?

Mia's legs were shaking again by the time they returned to the apartment. They'd overdone it. She went straight to the recliner, her eyes barely open. Bo started to prepare dinner, but Mia sent her home. "You better go now. It's best not to start a conversation in the evening, I'm finding, or I might keep talking to myself after you've gone."

IN EARLY NOVEMBER, the traveling ophthalmologist arrived in a floral dress shirt with a rolling case containing his arsenal of surgical instruments, medicated eye drops, gauze, and release forms.

Residents scheduled cataract surgeries and glaucoma procedures for whenever he was in town. Mia's first appointment with him had been thirty-some years earlier, toward the beginning of his career, when her eyes had gone milk blue with cataracts and her night vision had grown so poor that she'd taken to sleeping from sunset to sunrise, like a farmer. She liked him even though he'd been in the papers for an embezzlement scandal. He'd seen patients in his downtown office back then, before he switched to regional home visits. Now Mia had a standing annual appointment for eye injections to treat her macular degeneration.

When the bird bell chattered and Bo opened the door, the doctor ducked into the apartment without acknowledging her and headed directly to Mia's armchair.

"Nice to see you, Mrs. Yee." He pulled two metal frames out of his case and expanded them into a chair and a folding tray, both of which he set up beside her. Genial and limber, he had the quality of a children's program host.

"I'm still alive," she said, her demeanor notably warmer than it had been before his arrival.

"Every time so far," he laughed. "Well, just relax and sit back. You know the drill." He took his seat and set up his tools on the folding tray. Reclined in her armchair, Mia rested her hands on her belly and faced the ceiling. Her toes kneaded the air.

The doctor wiped the skin around her eyes with an antiseptic pad, squeezed a dab of anesthetic gel onto her eyeballs, and propped open each set of lids with a speculum. When he drew out a syringe with a hair-fine needle, Bo turned away.

It was then that he seemed to notice her for the first time. “You’re new. Needlephobic?”

“I’m support services.” Bo turned back to face him. “And no.”

He removed the needle cap and drew fluid into the syringe from a large vial filled with an amber substance. Then he tapped the barrel and braced one hand along Mia’s forehead and cheek in a sturdy C shape.

“Most of you are gone from the city by now, especially the young ones. My patients are always complaining about being abandoned.” He winked at Mia, whose eyes swiveled in acknowledgment.

“Here I am,” Bo said, the strain in her voice obvious.

Mia’s face twitched with the inability to blink. “She just started. I can’t do it all myself anymore, Doctor, and she came recommended.”

“Look to the right and hold still, please.”

“And she’s an artist,” Mia said as she obeyed, and Bo softened a little.

He slid the needle into Mia’s eye and pushed down on the plunger until the solution was gone. To Bo he said, with a detached curiosity, “An artist, huh? Can’t you do that anywhere? You must not mind being alone. I can’t imagine you have family or friends left here.” He withdrew the needle and repeated the procedure for Mia’s other eye. Then he removed the specula, ran another wipe across the eyelids, and stood up with a bright smile that made her cringe. “Me, I could be retired, but an itinerant practice lets me visit my favorite places without actually having to live in them. It’s the staying that’s untenable these days.”

Bo stopped herself from asking if his patients knew he pitied their untenable lives.

In one movement, he collapsed the folding tray and chair and leaned toward Mia. “Mrs. Yee, you’re all set until next time. I’m leaving you drops for tonight and tomorrow. Message me if you have any issues.”

Mia, still leaning back, blinked rapidly. “Okay, Doctor. The girl will show you out.”

Bo, smarting at being called a girl and irritated by his other remarks, extended an arm toward the door unnecessarily as the doctor packed up with impressive efficiency and checked his schedule for the next patient.

“Perhaps I’ll see you next time,” he said with a cordial nod.

“You will,” Bo replied, though she hoped never to encounter him again.

—

“What the doctor said the other day is true,” Mia said in greeting when Bo arrived for her next shift. “What are you going to do here in two years? Five years? Where are you going to live? There’s nowhere safe for you here. All your friends know better. You should have left ages ago.” Her comment was pointed, even accusatory, as though she’d been practicing—out of judgment or concern for her aide’s future, Bo wasn’t sure.

“I’m aware.” Bo unloaded a produce haul in the kitchen. She kept her voice light: “But then who would be here with you?”

This caught Mia off guard. She looked frustrated and a little hurt. “You’re not thinking,” she insisted, then set her mouth tight.

Bo turned toward the sink. In truth, she felt acutely the limits of her perspective. She likened it to being trapped on the floor of a well that narrowed up toward a small round of light. Out there was the promise of expansion and air, a new life. Out there, her mind would stop recirculating sodden thoughts again and again, until one no longer adhered to the next. She’d had chances; she was the one who had intentionally, literally, missed the boat. Plenty of people would have killed for that offer and would never have it extended to them.

She filled the sink with water. In the last drought cycle, this would have been a luxury. She swirled spinach leaves in it to loosen the dirt and rinsed an orange, which a vendor had added to her purchase free of charge. An offering.

“Here.” She handed the orange to Mia, whose thumbs dented the rind when she pressed in to peel it.

“This is exactly what I mean,” she said, handing it back. “This fruit is bad and will only get worse. The orchards are gone. They need to soak in the sun to produce sugar. When I had my garden, I had a big loquat tree—the fruit was so juicy and sweet. The rats nibbled them, the birds pecked off

the tops. In Chinatown, they sold for ten dollars a pound! I made visitors use the picker to get the fruits I couldn't reach and let them keep some of it. Then every year they came to help or ask for seeds."

On some level, Bo knew that Mia was right: staying was untenable. She'd been waiting for the decision to feel inevitable, and in the meantime, the reasons for delay had accumulated. But she wasn't an idiot.

So why was she still here, in this disintegrated place, without the people she'd shared it with?

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Joey had been the first with the foresight to leave, eleven years earlier. A patron had handed her a museum job in New Zealand and a place to stay for as long as she needed to get established. Leaving was easier then, before the rain began. Low-lying areas saw flooding most years, due to rising seas, but elsewhere in the city, residents were largely shielded from the inconvenience and not yet looking to leave.

"Since you're stupid and in denial and not coming with me, come help me pack." When Bo resisted, Joey said, "I'll let you choose one piece of art." The in-law unit she'd lived in, in a house close to the beach, had flooded twice, and the molding insulation and drywall her landlord had refused to replace in the interim had worsened her asthma and given her hives. On top of that, the wait for a mold-remediation specialist or even a pump rental was weeks.

"I can't believe you're going," Bo said, as they sifted through Joey's things. "Who's going to tell you how to fix your paintings in New Zealand? Who's going to stay up all night with me mixing greens?"

Joey waved her hand over her head. "We're breathing in fungal spores," she said, handing Bo a mask. "And you know this is going to happen again. And again. Even if this house keeps standing, I'm not interested in making a ritual of evacuation and return. But I'll miss you. I will."

Bo had long coveted Joey's small but refined collection of drawings and ceramics. Some of the pieces hadn't survived the floods. A pair of vases

that held a single stem at a time had cracked in half, and the pernicious green fuzz that grew on seemingly every surface in the days after had proliferated in the space between works on paper and the glass of their frames.

“I’m tossing those,” Joey said. “I suggest taking one of the mugs. Pretty and useful.”

Bo went to the refrigerator. “I want this one,” she said, pointing at a square portrait of Joey, done in a quick ink wash.

“Come on! Rosie made that for me.” Joey’s ex-girlfriend had been cocky and insufferable, but her work was inarguably sublime.

“You said I could pick.”

Joey walked over to inspect the drawing. “Fine,” she said, touching the textured paper. “But only so you remember my face, and the good old days when we painted together.”

The cold had come in with the wind, which brought the smell of salt. They carried two folding stools onto the sidewalk and sat in the drizzle to take in the sun dropping into the Pacific ten blocks down. Out this far west, it was still sand and earth and ocean. Vans without wheels rusted in driveways. The rows and rows of the wet muted pastel houses had been there for over a century.

Bo’s mother used to joyride out here with girlfriends as a teenager, tearing through red lights, the walls of ice plant surrounding them in a roofless tunnel. But the highway that ran along the beach had been permanently closed for decades. Sand management was futile—tractors would spend a full day clearing the pileups, but come evening, the wind would lift the beach and send it pouring back onto the roads. It would only get worse in the coming years.

Not long after Joey left, the sewage pipes started to blow, section by section, and a wretched stew of collective waste slopped onto the beach, contaminating the ground and seeping into the ocean. Every week, it seemed, the city issued another warning to avoid the water treatment plant area by the beach, just beyond the zoo fences that kept the giraffes and lions and elephants from wandering out to sea.

Her Uncle Winston had lived in a condo out by the water where a baseball stadium once had stood, not far from the airport. Every evening he took his rescue terrier on runs along the bay trail and celebrated with a half hour's worth of cigarettes when they returned. This was before the bay had come in and sunk the airport and subsumed the trail. Then his gout had become so unbearable that he'd had to give up meat and—his favorite—asparagus, and then cigarettes, too, fifty years into a smoking career. "I've never wanted one again," he said, "but I miss going outside, I miss the habit, I miss having it as a reward." He'd gained thirty-five pounds he hadn't been able to shake since.

He'd told Bo all this about four years earlier, on her final visit with him before he'd moved, during one of Jenson's early campaigns to relocate everyone he knew to Canada, east of Vancouver, where he'd just purchased a four-unit apartment complex. Bo's mother had declined to join them—she was busy, her life was here, she wasn't ready to uproot. They'd had a long argument about it. But she'd mentioned to Winston that she wondered if Bo should go. Her prospects were already bleak, plus both cousins were only children—wouldn't it be better for them to stay close?

"Come on," Bo said. "She doesn't want to move, so she should understand why I don't want to either."

"I'm just telling you what she said, Bo." Winston touched the wall where water had bubbled up through the paint. "There's no sealant that could stop this."

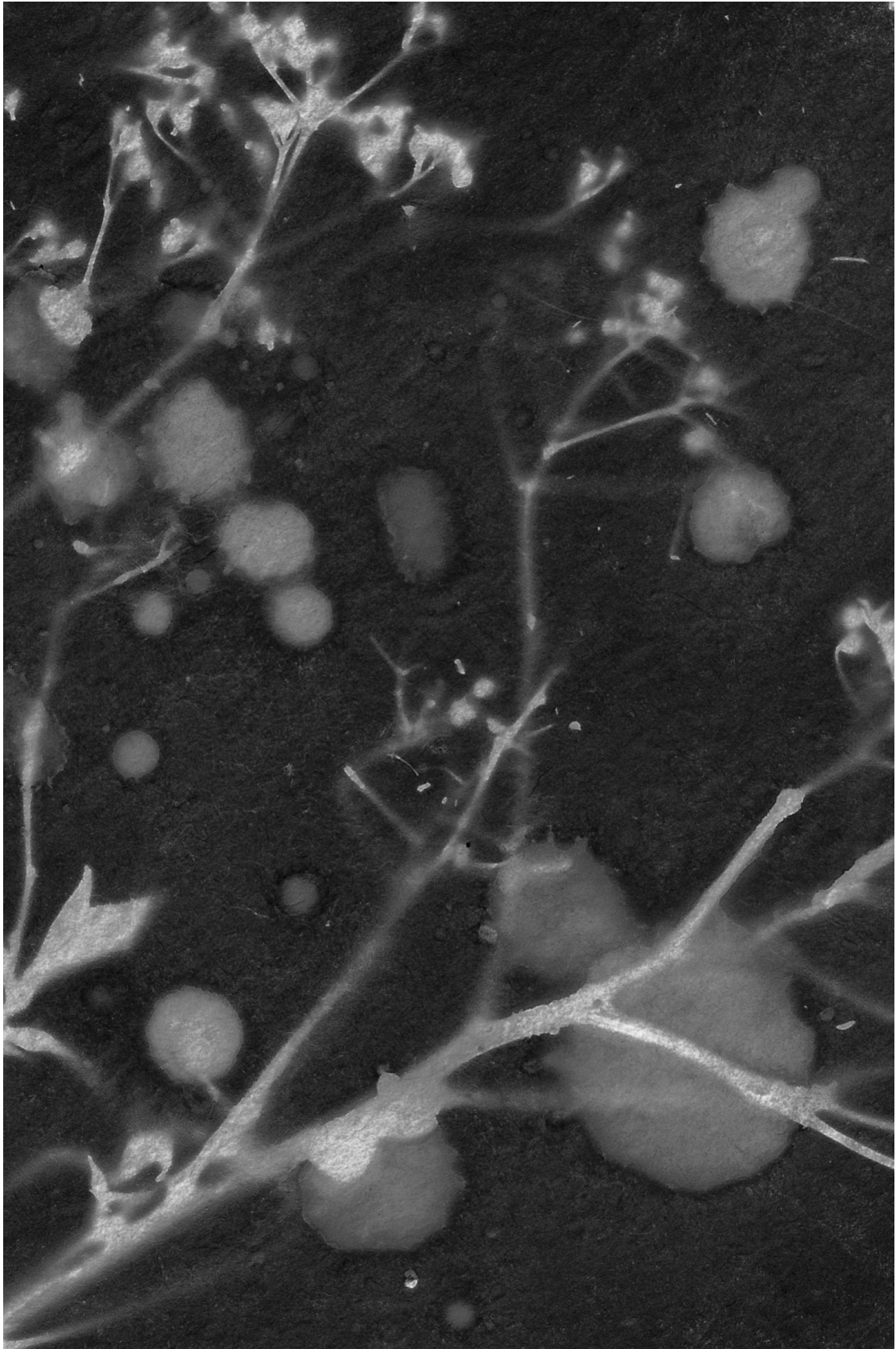
On the satellite map he pulled up, the city was a bright green spot surrounded by pale deserts and charred land, but the far northern regions showed vast swaths of continuous green. His condo sold fast, to his surprise. An anonymous overseas buyer offered cash and didn't seem to realize or mind that the bay was eating away at the coastline. Winston pushed aside his guilt and used the money for a one-room cottage on Jenson's block. After he left, he ended every update to her with a reminder: "Look after your mom." Then, when her mother was gone: "You have a futon waiting for you if you ever come this way."

—

Bo located the new bruise on the orange and pushed at it with her own thumbs. The plush sponge gave, like wet moss under the weight of toes. Her mouth rang with the pristine memory of unbroken pulp, then the bitterness that warns of rot. She tossed the fruit into the compost bin, trying to suppress thoughts of the sickly tender sites on the body from which infections spread. She drained the sink and cleared her head. A futon in a city she'd never been to, for what? She lived here. She was here to look after Mia. Someone had to make lunch.

“Well, we’ll have spinach,” she said to Mia with forced cheer.

TIDES



THE NEXT WEEK, the wall lit up with a building alert just before Bo was set to head to Mia's. A fisherman had left a whole row of buckets at the fourth-floor bar and sent out a message to all residents. The tides had been leaving heaps of moon jellyfish on the seawalls and what narrow strips of beach were left, so he'd waded out to collect the ones that hadn't already begun to deteriorate. He added to that some lobsters he'd gotten from a friend of his who'd been keeping a crustacean farm in his spare bathroom but was tired of maintaining the tanks and ready to give away his crop. Bo hurried down to claim what she could.

When she got there, she saw a man rooting through the buckets and counting specimens. It took her a moment to realize it was Eddie. He was dressed in his usual uniform of neutral greens. His hair was longer and totally wet. It clung to his head like painted stripes.

She'd met him here at the bar during a grief bender two years earlier and they'd slept together sporadically when he was in town. He was easy, and she'd needed easy—he stayed in her building and they never planned beyond his current visit. And while he was attentive and curious, he didn't pry. Likewise, she had no idea about his life at home.

"What brings you to the city?" she'd asked over drinks that first night.

"I don't know that I'd call this a city anymore." But he caught her hard look and changed course, continuing in a more serious tone: "Work keeps sending me here, you know, while that's still possible."

A conservation biologist, Eddie was on cyclical assignment to monitor wildlife in the region. He came down to track plants and animals for a few months at a time, then brought his analyses back to his organization's home base outside Missoula, where his focus was habitat restoration and educational programming.

She stood beside him now and peered into the buckets to see which one she preferred. Being near him made her aware of her own body: how it was

warm and creaky, how far it was from his. She hadn't seen him in a half year.

When he noticed her, he smiled broadly but didn't rise from his squat. "Hey."

"Are you here to collect data or dinner?"

"Both," he laughed. He shifted to balance. "It's good to see you."

"Yeah, you too." She grabbed a bucket of jellyfish and claimed a lobster. She couldn't think of what else to say to him. He'd met her at her lowest point, and she worried that he carried that version of her with him. "Sorry, I have to get back to work now."

"I'm here for a few months this time. Up for a walk sometime?"

"Sure," she said, her arm trembling from the weight of the bucket, which stank.

In the elevator, the wire handle slipped in her hand and gray water sloshed onto the floor. Anticipation—of the meal, of her plans to see Eddie—circulated through her like a drug. She meant to go directly to Mia's but found herself on the roof, heading for the stands to buy something green for garnish. It wasn't until she reached Mia's that she realized she'd been so caught up in the present, she'd forgotten to check the community board for her mother's face.

—

"Seafood feast!" Mia said, and immediately filled a tall pot with water to heat. It was the first delight Bo had seen in her.

Mia plugged the sink and poured the jellyfish in with their cold seawater, the gelatinous forms barely visible. With her hands submerged, she used a paring knife to remove the tentacles. A bell bobbed to the surface, and she slapped it onto the butcher block and cut it into bite-size pieces, then shook a bottle of vinegar over them.

"Eat these now before they melt." She jammed a palmful into her mouth. "The rest we'll cure in salt to eat later. Good for my arthritis."

Bo salivated at the memory of jellyfish salad marinated in soy sauce and sesame oil. The fresh chunk dissolved in her mouth, filling it with mild ocean flavor. Following Mia's lead, she ate another, then another.

Mia sliced the remaining bells into strips. She had to press her body to the counter to steady herself, but her knife work was expert, the cleaver an extension of her puffed purple hand. The cuts were confident and uniform. She had prepared this dish countless times, clearly. Bo felt her role shift to student as she observed, and Mia, looking pleased, must have felt it, too. Together they blanketed the strips in salt and left them to dry. The lobster clattered about in the sink basin, its claws bound. Mia chatted at it like it was a fussy toddler in her care. "Patience, honey. I'll be there soon."

The water reached a boil and Bo tried to move the lobster with long chopsticks, and when that failed, tongs. Fed up, Mia elbowed her out of the way, grabbed the lobster's writhing body with one hand, and dunked it into the pot. A short series of dull clacks followed. Ten minutes later, she plunged her bare hand into the water to retrieve it, now fever red.

Bo plated them an extravagant meal and they ate in silence, entirely focused on their food. Bo cracked the thick joints between her molars, and Mia snapped apart piece after piece of the tail, and used the narrow fourth leg to rummage through the claw and extract clumps of sweet white flesh.

When they had eaten the entire animal and covered the table with shells, Mia said casually, "Beverly had a seafood allergy. My husband discovered it when he gave her a taste of crab fried rice from his leftovers. I didn't believe it—it seemed too stupid to be true—so I made fish maw soup and added peas from the freezer because she liked those."

"What happened?" Bo said, trying to hide her horror.

"Her face swelled up within minutes and she was grabbing at her throat. He was right. And very angry. So I picked her up and walked her to the hospital across the street. They gave her a shot in her behind and she was fine. But that didn't stop them from holding it against me. Beverly said it proved I didn't care about her. She said that to me, her mother!"

As Bo swept the shells into the compost bin and moved the dishes to the sink basin, she thought of her grade school classmates with severe nut

allergies, how careful their parents and everyone else's had been to avoid an anaphylactic reaction, and here was Mia, admitting to playing games with her own daughter's life. Parenting approaches varied, certainly, but regardless of angle and outcome, it was monstrous to expose a child to a deadly allergen intentionally.

"What?" Mia challenged. Bo had failed to keep a neutral face. "I said she was fine."

She patted her belly and rose with some effort. She poured an inch of brandy for her digestif from a crystal bottle, like the one Bo's mother had used to decant larger cans of soy sauce. A giant's perfume bottle, Bo had called it, with that pungent release when the knob was pried loose. Now the whiff of brandy seemed infused with soy.

"That was a nice dinner," Mia called, retired now to her armchair. "You don't need much with lobster. It's been salting its whole life," she added, before dozing off.

In sleep, she looked harmless, incapable of cruelty.

—

A message came through just as Bo finished cleaning up: a delivery was incoming. ETA, one hour.

"It's late for a package. Did you order something?" It had to be a private carrier; the postal service operated only one day a week ground and one day a week drone, and never in the evening.

"I don't remember," Mia said, half asleep still.

"You rest. I'll wait."

Bo joined her in the lamplit room. Her body buzzed with the day's unexpected turns—Eddie, the feast, the mystery delivery—and for the first time in years she had the urge to draw. She sat on the floor by the coffee table, which was stacked with notepads and old crispy magazines. She pulled a sheet of faded paper from the pile, then found a pencil and started to draw lines, varying the pressure to achieve different weights, creating a steady dry sound of graphite on the page. She found herself thinking of her

walk with Mia, the stories of how the bay wetlands had changed over the years. She started drawing the blunt lines of marsh reeds, the straight edges of the skyline, the shadows of clouds on the land. The curves of the lobster shell, too. Her wrist started to ache from the repetitive motion. These were the first marks she'd made on paper in two years, but she tried not to think about that. She didn't want to lose her courage.

By the time the bird chatter of the doorbell sounded, she'd filled the page with lines, front and back. The side of her hand shone with familiar smudges of gray.

At the door, a teenage boy in coveralls held a large box. "Delivery from the doctor." He stepped into the unit without waiting for an invitation, set the box down, and popped off the lid. "Self-charging wheeled chair."

Mia squinted from her seat. "I didn't order that."

"Is there a note?" Bo asked the courier. "Instructions or something?"

"You have to talk with your provider. I just deliver and assemble." He removed the parts and began to join them on the floor.

"He never returns my calls and then he sends this? Some nerve." Mia rose and shuffled over to the call machine, carrying her cane but not using it.

"Doctor's office!" It rang but no one answered. At the beep, she resumed shouting into the voice-message system: "A bit premature, don't you think? I told you something was wrong with the leg sensors. I need you to fix them, not to send a chair. This is Mrs. Yee."

The courier waited for Mia to finish her message. Then he began to recite the functions of various buttons.

"Take it back," Mia interrupted. "I don't need it."

"I'm not permitted to do that, ma'am. Just following orders." He backed toward the door, hands up, and gave Bo a pointed look as he left. She was inclined to side with him: the doctor could have given a heads-up, but he'd sent the chair, so the data must have indicated that Mia would need it, probably soon.

Mia hit the closed door with her cane.

The wheelchair was well made, unlike other models Bo had seen, and it collapsed easily, requiring little effort. She parked it against the wall. Something about it—its bulky shape, its unwanted presence—hit her then; her own legs faltered. It wasn't the chair itself, or the harbinger of decline—Bo had seen many clients through loss of mobility—but, rather, the fact that Mia would get to the point where she'd need it at all. However improper to admit, it felt unfair: her own mother would never grow old enough to need assistive devices. Bo would never have the responsibility of caring for her through her final months.

"We can put it in the closet if you don't need it," she finally managed to say.

"There's no room."

"We can make some room."

"I said there's no room," Mia repeated as she turned toward the bedroom. "I'm going to sleep." She struck the wheelchair with her cane as she passed and muttered: "Not yet."

—

Then, while Bo was sweeping, Mia said unexpectedly, in a spray of spit: "What were you drawing the other day?"

Her defenses shot up before she remembered the exercises.

"Oh. That wasn't anything." She worked the broom into the track of the sliding door. The muck in the grooves loosened and clung to the bristles. "I just felt like drawing."

"It looked like scribbles," Mia said.

Bo laughed. "It was basically scribbles. Like a warm-up to drawing."

"So you weren't trying to make it look like anything in particular."

"Actually," she said, her mind going back to the page, "I was thinking about our walk the other day, the history you were telling me. The marsh, the buildings." The fishy, watery smell of that evening returned. "The lobster shells, the jellyfish. They all have different shapes and lines and colors." Fire-poppy red, silver slime.

“That stuff?” Mia said, though she seemed to perk up at the familiar references. “Why would you draw that stuff?”

“Why?” Bo stalled, thinking. She inverted the broom and pulled at the gunk, muddying her hand. “Usually I just draw things I notice. Things that stick in the brain, like your stories did. I guess I wanted to capture them somehow.”

“Well, Ricardo said you’re talented.”

“Did he? I don’t think he ever saw my work.”

Mia stuck out her chin. “Why are you using a broom for that?”

“I’m out of practice.” Bo leaned the broom against the wall and shook the debris off her hand on the balcony. “With my drawing, too. I used to have ideas all the time. The drive to get something out, to make something.”

Mia, looking disgusted, threw her a rag. “What happened?”

Bo sat on a folding chair next to the open door. “I don’t know. I just lost my connection to it. Nothing I made had any meaning. It was already bad when I was working for Ricardo, and it got worse when my mom disappeared.” She wiped her hand with the rag. “She would be so pissed that I gave up.”

“So, what? You just stopped?”

“Yeah. I mean, I kept trying for a long time. But it was all garbage. Nothing made any sense.” She’d persisted with her personal work for a little while, driven by an underlying belief that by participating in the world, she would locate her role in it. But she’d gotten nowhere. Eventually she’d started trying for paid work, landed one-off illustration jobs that led to referrals for more of the same. Another custom house portrait, another bland seascape, commissioned by total strangers. None of it was memorable or had any purpose. Demoralized, she’d started picking up extra caregiving shifts, which paid better and had a clearer purpose. It felt good to distance herself from art and any related ambitions. And anyway, the only person who’d been invested in Bo’s success was gone—who was left to care about what she did or didn’t accomplish?

“So eventually, yeah, I just stopped.”

“But you’re drawing again now.”

Bo leaned forward, scrubbing between her fingers with the rag. The last few weeks, brought out of isolation by Mia, she’d become more attuned to her surroundings. Walking home the other night, teeming with feeling, with the sense that her life had resumed somehow, she’d felt that pull toward attention return. Few of the units in the building across the way were inhabited, so from the open staircase every lit-up window she’d spotted, every scene, had felt like a triumph. A blue aquarium, arms lathering hair behind frosted glass, the smell of soap carried in on steam. She’d almost been able to make out the rattle of a collar on a terrier shaking water from its fur on the facing staircase. As she slid into sleep that night, each detail rang in her mind like notes in search of a melody. She understood that everything she’d noticed, all those vivid and particular signs of life, would disappear if she didn’t find a way to save them. When she woke, her hands felt odd, like music was playing inside them. She wanted to draw.

She smiled at Mia and folded the rag, then stood to resume cleaning. “I guess I am.”

TEN DAYS LATER, on Thanksgiving, before heading into the bedroom for her nap, Mia dismissed Bo early and told her to take the long weekend.

Neither of them celebrated the holiday anyway. Bo's family had never bothered—her mother and uncle were of the opinion that it fell too close to Christmas and the traditional dishes were too unappetizing to be worth the money or the fuss. Starting in elementary school, Bo's friends, upon learning that she had no plans, would invite her to their family dinners out of pity. But actually she'd savored those long quiet weekends at home with her mother in childhood, free of any cooking or social obligations.

With the ready-made meals Bo was packing now, Mia would be all set for days. She was finishing up when a call came in. A wrinkled face appeared in hologram and a warbled voice cut with static came through the speakers: "Mom?"

Bo adjusted the volume and checked the connection. The image and sound went in and out until finally settling enough to be intelligible. The woman resembled Mia—short forehead, wide jowls—but with fewer lines and more warmth. Beverly wore an oversize T-shirt printed with a cartoon turtle. Bo told her that Mia was sleeping and asked if she should wake her.

"Don't bother." Beverly smiled blandly, her face rigid. "You must be Bo. My mother said she finally hired some help. She says you're an artist?"

A burst of children's chatter broke through just as Bo tried to correct her. Beverly laughed as her gaze went elsewhere. When her focus returned to the call, her shoulders hunched up to her neck, giving her a stooped appearance.

"I usually call on Wednesdays, when you're not here. I just wanted to say happy Thanksgiving. I know she doesn't care, but she used to." Her chin tilted up slightly. "But since I have you, tell me: Is she treating you well? You can be honest."

Beverly's tone was almost conspiratorial. This happened sometimes—a client's family members presuming an alliance with Bo.

In her neutral work voice, she said, "Everything is fine."

"She's not being difficult?" Beverly pressed.

"She's not," Bo said, firm and a little protective.

Beverly nodded, thinking. "Okay. Well. Keep doing what you're doing. You let me know, will you, if you have any trouble with her?"

"Of course," Bo said, though she knew she wouldn't. She ended the call and peeked in on Mia before leaving. Mia was getting out of bed, and when she saw Bo, she asked for a glass of water.

"I'll take it in my chair," she said, sliding her feet into her slippers. She was settled in and putting on a program when Bo brought her a cup.

"I met Beverly just now," Bo said.

"Huh." Mia set down the remote and seemed to be done talking.

"Can I get you anything else?" Bo asked, about to go for her bag.

Instead of answering, Mia launched into a summary of her favorite drama. In the last episode, she explained, the characters had been feuding over an inheritance, each wielding documents and delivering soliloquies to prove that they were the rightful heir to the dynasty. She tried to relay the details to Bo—the robe the matriarch wore, the exact phrasing the son had used to convince her that she'd signed off on an addendum to the will—but the characters and events all scrambled in Bo's mind.

"Wait, so the older daughter is conspiring with the brother, who's a disbarred lawyer, but the younger daughter deserves all the money?"

"Never mind," Mia said impatiently. "You have to know the history. A lot has happened."

The series had recently passed its eighteen thousandth episode. When it began, the matriarch's children had been actual children, played by precocious actors with pearly skin and disarmingly adultlike composure. They were the age of Mia's grandson, who now had his own grandchildren.

"In the blink of an eye, as they used to say."

Mia and Grant hadn't been close, nor had she seen his children or grandchildren raised, but she had followed the lives of the children in this long-running soap, almost half of it from this very seat in this very apartment. Fashions and speech patterns had changed, as had the

technological formats for delivering new seasons to viewers, but the program had offered a steady through line for over seventy years. Mia and these characters had swum parallel in the same lap pool for decades—viewing any episode, she could touch the buoyed lane divider and know exactly where they were in time.

Bo felt sorry for her—a TV family was not a surrogate for one’s own—but Mia laughed at her concerned expression.

“I prefer it,” Mia joked. “A family that doesn’t shout back, doesn’t disappoint, shows up when they say they will. Every afternoon at three. Except days when the power’s out.”

Bo considered this. She’d chosen to be alone in a drowned city, surrounded by memories of the life she’d had, believing she could build a future here, while her only remaining relatives, uncomprehending of her decision, carried on without her a thousand miles away. Who was she to judge the definition or circumstances of a family? You embedded into some matrix or other and you made do, or better, or worse.

As several characters on the show sat down to dinner, Mia looked up suddenly.

Bo snapped to attention. “What’s wrong?”

“I said you should leave early, didn’t I?” She seemed to be questioning her memory, unsure of whether she had in fact said that.

“Oh, it’s no problem,” Bo said, waving her off.

“What do you mean? What are you still doing here?” Mia said, maybe now realizing that Bo had stayed to keep her company. “Go. I’m fine.” So Bo went.

—

At first she thrilled at the early dismissal.

But weekends had long been her most lonesome time, and even now, four months into working for Mia, days off unmoored her. After her Friday shifts, sleep swallowed her, but then she’d wake up on Saturday to a long progression of unassigned hours, no job to keep her busy, no projects to

attend to, no mood to perform, no one to talk to, nothing to take the edge off living inside catastrophe, nothing to put off her grief. The stability she'd gained in recent months, gone. It often felt impossible to step foot out of her apartment.

On bad days like that, she went for the ceramic plate her mother had made. If she focused on the shine of the blue glaze, on eating, on minding the artifact left in her care, her distress might let up. Her mother's pieces were utilitarian, not meant to be coveted or assigned meaning or treated as talismans, but Bo loved the plate for how the palm had shaped it, for the flourishes carved and then fired into the clay. Eating from it now, though, she found that the feelings didn't abate. The plate was simply a plate.

So it was that the morning after Thanksgiving, time suspended again. She lay still as a stone, veering imprecisely from blankness to terror. When every day was the same, when nothing required your attention, when you had no family and the world around you kept disappearing, you could disappear, too.

Eddie called in the afternoon, briefly drawing her out of her listlessness. He was working over the holiday but suggested a walk on Sunday. His voice and invitation were sturdy interruptions, promising purpose and place. She agreed. Newly alert, she considered how she might spend her saved day—more drawing exercises, perhaps, or restocking her bare pantry. But this state was short-lived. The daylight dimmed and she lurched back toward reeling. As she slipped down into that absolute black-green vastness, she wondered how it was that she could be seized by these despairing tides, yet other times, just as truly, feel nothing at all.

—

That night she pitched toward the reprieve of sleep, but it served up nightmares instead. Something smelled off. A woman with no face was ill in bed. Her body leaked clear fluid through the skin, oceans of it, the covers and mattress soaked. The woman screamed and Bo tried to mop up the wet, but it kept coming. The dream ended there, with rags dripping.

Her breathing hitched, she sat up, her heart on the brink of splitting with terror, coming awake to a voice saying, “What? What is it?” But no one was there. Her arms were frozen in an X across her chest. Her feet cramped and buzzed and ran cold.

The screams had been so real, a bolus of adrenaline hitting. Had it been a sign, her mother reaching out from another plane? She shook out her arms and called her mother, just in case. The line rang twice, then disconnected with no invitation to leave a message. The delusion would stop only if she slept, yet the delusion had come from her sleep.

She wished for Sunday, day-lit and scheduled. She pressed her eyes shut and pictured the sea.

She just had to make it to Sunday.

BO TOOK THE stairs to the roof to meet Eddie. She found him turning in circles, looking at different points in the sky. When he saw her, he pressed a button on his handset and three drones flew toward him, hovered, and lowered to the ground.

“Hey.” He crouched to gather them into his backpack.

“Hey,” she replied, a question in her voice.

“These?” he said, gesturing to the drones. “Yeah, we use these to do flyovers for habitat monitoring. I’ve been indoors all weekend. Just wanted to fly these around while I was up here. Give them some air. See what’s for sale on the other roofs.” He stood and smiled. “Let’s walk.”

They circled the perimeter of the roof silently at first, then wove through the aisles of garden plots and empty stands. It was dark and nearly deserted. Shapes of gray light shifted along every surface. Overhead the clouds moved swiftly, but she didn’t feel any wind on her skin—only rain. An immense, immediate relief swept through her at seeing all that space, and she wondered why she’d never thought to venture up here on any of her sleepless nights.

Just when she’d started to worry about what to say, Eddie began to ramble about his weekend. Like he’d said, he spent it inside, reviewing footage he’d collected from flyovers. All week, his team had been sending out fleets of micro aerial vehicles—birds, he called them—over their designated regions. One colleague conducted mammal counts in the savanna. Several others managed wildlife surveys way up north, where grasslands interrupted the once-contiguous boreal forest. Eddie, long ago assigned to the bay region, conducted his research alone. It was a slog of counting, analysis, scheduling, and logistics, but—he had to admit—far more effective than how they’d gone about it in the past. Traveling to Antarctica to tranquilize leopard seals just to measure them, for instance. He preferred to be out in the field, touching soil and dissecting scat, picking up on the scents and shadows of plants before seeing them. But the drones

were a superior tool for accurate long-term tracking in areas that were no longer accessible to humans. Researchers could send a fleet into the thick of a rainforest, say, or deploy them at sea to measure chlorophyll levels and krill without the hassle of divers.

His method involved simultaneously running footage from missions completed in different seasons, stacked one atop another on the monitor display, like strata. This allowed him to see changes and identify patterns, incremental or sudden.

“Nature reconnaissance,” she said, thinking of how administrative the work of saving and losing could be. She wasn’t sure if all his talking was caused by nervousness or enthusiasm or compensating for the earlier silence. They didn’t really know each other well at all. Their previous encounters had been short-lived, at the bar or in his bed. But she liked learning about the work he was doing: a window leading the eye to a living field.

He smiled. “I’ve never thought of it that way before. It’s patchwork, but I’ve been at this long enough to see the steps add up, especially with the sites we’ve been able to restore.”

They’d walked the whole roof by then and returned to their starting point, by the elevator.

Eddie was about to hit the button, then changed his mind and turned his back to the door. “We’ve been cooped up too long,” he said, energized. “Let’s just wander.”

They headed to the nearest suspension bridge and crossed over to the neighboring roof.

It was good to be in his company, beyond the bounds of her own tiny world. It was different from before. Something about the dark and the new surrounds had made her more receptive to the stream of his talk. He was usually reserved, deferring to her on how much to say or touch, but maybe he sensed less rawness in her now.

“What about you?” he said. “You seem...calmer. It sounds like you’ve taken on some work?”

He knew she was a care worker, though she'd never talked much about that—or anything of substance—with him. Most of their meetings had been wordless, purely physical, with the occasional late-night musings that followed sex. She hadn't told him anything of her art, which she'd been estranged from since before meeting him, and anyway, as had been proven many times, if you said you were an artist, people expected you to have something to show for it. She briefly explained her current situation with Mia, but hurried through it; she didn't want to hear herself talk.

"It's been good for me, working with her," she said. "I think we met each other at the right moment."

"She's lucky to have you," he said, and he told her that his own parents had been taken advantage of more than once. In the worst incident, the one that prompted him to seek out consulting projects so he could afford to move them into a trustworthy facility, a woman had entered their apartment uninvited, claiming that his father could no longer care for his mother—which, at that time, hadn't been true. The woman and an aide had forced them out of their home and into a van with caged windows. In a matter of hours, a doctor they'd never previously met had confirmed under oath that the couple was unfit to live independently, and a judge, a sworn judge, had deemed them wards of a private company, which had proceeded to seize control of their estates and rapidly drain their financial accounts as due for "services." Eddie usually visited them daily, but he'd been out of town then to study a wetlands site. He'd known right away that something was amiss when he'd gotten back and found their apartment empty. It had taken him days to track down the facility where the private company had been keeping them and weeks before he could get a different judge to sign the release. Only a fraction of the money was ever recovered. And if he'd been delayed even longer on his trip? He tried not to think about it.

Bo had heard similar stories of elder abuse from other workers in the caregiving network, from heirloom jewels pawned to property ceded by the disoriented, fortunes wiped out in a flash.

"And now?" she asked.

“Both gone now,” he said, and she thought she detected relief in his reply.

When they got back to their home roof and Eddie offered her his hand as she stepped off the bridge, her only thought was how much she’d missed touch. She felt not the electricity and exigency of their previous encounters, when the mere sight of his capable, square-tipped fingers would set her off, but, rather, a tentative ease.

The rain picked up strength just as they reached the elevator. As they waited in the vestibule, she looked up at the glass ceiling, grateful for how it held the space between the heavy sky and their bodies. Times like this, she didn’t resent the rain. The past few days that she’d spent lost, underwater, felt like another life. Eddie looked up, too, and smiled.

She pressed the button for the twenty-fourth floor.

“You remembered,” he said.

They faced their reflection in the door as they descended, arms almost touching. One day, she already knew, she would forget exactly how he looked. In some future, when they were old, they might happen upon each other in another land, their faces so changed that they’d only recognize the other’s voice, and this present, in this drenched world, would come rushing back to them.

His studio apartment had the exact same layout as hers. She’d been there many times but had forgotten the details. The unit had long housed a procession of visiting scientists, and the furnishings were generic and cheap. The kitchen was more sparsely outfitted than hers. Used dishes cluttered the counter and gave off a rank smell. There was just one bottle of soap, which Eddie moved, as needed, from kitchen sink to bathroom. The bed, set against the wall near the bathroom door, had a frame—a step up from her mattress on the floor. At the center of the room, a worktable was covered with monitors and other electronic equipment. His clothes and

dishes cluttered all the other surfaces. An old sheet curtained the balcony door, the fabric patterned with tiny purple flower buds.

She pushed it aside. A light from outside hit the water on the glass, so that it looked like stars dribbling down the pane. She slid the door open and the rain grew from a hiss to a symphony. Way down, a new river had formed on a balcony walkway.

Eddie took a seat on a stool at his worktable, his posture holding no presumption. Looking at him, she felt cautious, sober. She was out of practice, unsure how to proceed. She feared that touching him would lead to want after want, an endless series of demands from the unused parts of her.

But already the desire was brimming on her skin. It traveled the same pathways as blood, reviving a creature that, finally fed, might now thrive. She went to him.

Her breathing changed as they moved together. Her lungs strained under the weight of him, then filled to new capacity when they switched. Beside them, the office equipment gave the space the feel of a data center. Her gaze drifted to the curtain, that field of flowers hinting at imminent spring, permanently on the verge of blooming, flattening time. She looked back at him, felt his hands around her hips. Heat pooled where her palms pressed at his shoulders, where her inner thighs pressed against the outsides of his.

—

After, her skin damp with his sweat, she lay awake in bed, unable to sleep.

He'd once asked her, after they'd first met, what kind of life, or lives, she dreamed of. His question sank her—to be reminded of those infinite threads of possibility, not one of which she'd clung to with insistence. Her mother used to tell her that she had the all-reaching potential of a stem cell; she'd told her students this, too. But her existence narrowed as the storms continued. Whatever ability she hadn't yet used or claimed, time had sealed in like a lacquer.

Eddie's was a focused wandering, unlike hers. His career trajectory was clear; his work had intrinsic value. She envied the assuredness of his

vocation, one that he excelled at despite the promise of constant heartbreak.

Now, in the shadows, on her back, she asked, “How did you find your way to it?”

In the early days of his doctoral program, he said, his ornithology class took a spring field trip to northeastern California to see a bird species whose numbers were in steep decline. As the temperatures warmed, their food caches spoiled, their nests failed.

The class’s caravan crossed into Lassen County, and they dropped their luggage at their motel in Susanville, another flat American town sustained by the prison industry and hit hard by the latest drought. When they arrived at their first observation spot, they found a dried-up lake and no sign of the Canada jays their professor had been tracking for years. They waited for hours, getting burned by the high sun, then shivering as it dropped behind a mountain and left them in shade. The bird had never failed to show up before, not once during the decades their instructor had been leading this trip.

“That was a turning point,” Eddie said. “Seeing my instructor’s reaction to the jay disappearing—that was the first time I really understood what it means to observe and track a species, how it feels to learn of its absence.”

Bo closed her eyes, reaching for something missing, a place, a feeling, beyond the fresh, lush growth that smothered the city, until she found it: a color. A deep, dusty green, once endemic to this land. Seeing it now felt otherworldly—except, of course, it had once been of this world. She recited to herself the names of the trees somewhere under the spread of vines: manzanita, eucalyptus, cypress, pine.

—

With the first of daylight, the stars against the window lost their gold and ran clear. Neither of them had slept, both unaccustomed to the other beside them in bed.

“Can I ask you something?” Eddie said.

“Okay.”

“You have people you can go to. Why are you still here?”

“I have to stay. I took this job.” She gathered the sheet into mounds in her fists.

“But before—you must have had opportunities?”

It stung to hear him say it so plainly. She could see it, what he was seeing: that there was little other than danger for her here.

“I don’t know.”

“Okay. What keeps you here?” He said it kindly, with the detachment of a person whose home was elsewhere. He’d be leaving again, soon enough.

“I don’t know,” she said again, swimming in doubt. Then, without conviction, almost a question: “This is my home.”

“Fair enough,” he said, but didn’t look convinced.

When she left his apartment later that morning, she wondered how many times she’d repeated that same excuse, wielded it as a fact, over the years. “We grew up here,” she’d said to Jenson when he’d first told her that her name was on the exit list. “This is where our family is supposed to live.” Exasperated, he’d made his case again. He was her family. This place was nothing like where they’d grown up and she knew it. Even his stubborn father had known to leave years ago, and he was from here even more so than they were. Millions and millions of people had left their homelands out of necessity before them, including their great-grandparents. It wasn’t as impossible as she thought.

Indeed, what made her special in the long human history of crisis and displacement? She had followed reports of the heat waves that never subsided, outbreaks of anthrax and smallpox and malaria, continents dried to deserts, genocidal regimes, military blockades at borders that prevented passage to hundreds of thousands of people with nowhere to go, children drowning at sea. And yet the matter of her own privileged leaving felt extraordinary and without precedent, even as she registered this delusion.

“If I leave,” she’d asked Jenson, “how can I be found?”

Eyes bulging, her cousin had responded: “By whom?” Anyone could send her a message, same as always. It didn’t matter where she was.

But there was really only one person she was waiting for. For too long, she'd believed her mother might return. She knew better, and yet. Who would claim the bones if she wasn't there to do it?

"Connections get messed up. People lose touch all the time."

"Bo. You're going to get trapped there alone."

It was so obvious to everyone but her: a better life was possible. Jenson had made leaving as easy as nodding, so eventually she'd nodded. Yet on the day of departure, she hadn't been able to move. What had kept her here? The note from Mia? Maybe. But the job was temporary, she told herself now. She'd join her cousin in a few months, maybe a year, she rationalized. She'd look for the right moment and go.

—

Before heading to work, she lay on her mattress and shut her eyes—then she was in the back seat of her mother's electric hatchback as the counties of Northern California streamed by.

Day trips had been their shared joy back then. The wonders of Gold Country, vineyards, ghost towns, and beaches, all a drive away. Like Mia, her mother could tell stories for days. She narrated as they passed turnouts and mile markers. Here in this bay, an oyster farmer had gone missing, his kayak overturned and marred with the bite mark of a great white shark. Here was the road her great-grandfather had walked to get from Sacramento to San Francisco to visit relatives, allowing three days to get there in the summer heat. Here were the canneries that had processed sardines that fed soldiers in both world wars, until the industry collapsed from overfishing. Here was the village where Chinese laborers had pioneered the industry with their nets full of abalone and squid. A young scholar had recently excavated that site and found artifacts from more than a hundred and fifty years earlier, including pieces of broken rice bowls. "I saw the photos from the dig in the newspaper, and they looked exactly like the ones my Po Po had inherited from back in China," her mother had told her.

Most weekends they could find a festival celebrating artichokes or jazz, and there was always the flea market, with its hundreds of booths selling cheap electronics and hair accessories and peppers. After the frenzied crowds, Bo relished being back in the quiet of the car. She counted the blue emergency call boxes against the yellow sweep of grasses dried to straw, and felt her heart lift when she saw Mylar strips fastened to fence posts, whipping like shiny flags. She smelled the freshly tarred roads that carried the weight of glittering steel tankers that hauled milk and wine. Almost always, she spotted turkey vultures circling in the sky or hunched over the hard shoulder, faces buried in roadkill.

Her favorite was when they'd stop at a dairy to sample cheese or pull over to try a burger at a diner that claimed to have the world's best lamb. Late one summer, before she started middle school, they came upon a pie shop tucked at the edge of a gnarled olive orchard. They parked in the shade of the trees, and gravel caught in her sandals as they walked to the barn-style door. The combination of air-conditioning, the sweet warm smell of pastries baking, and her mother's undivided attention all day made her wish they would never leave. They shared heated slices of peach and olallieberry pie, à la mode. The stomachache that followed would be worth it.

When they got back to the parking lot, they found the car showered in a coat of pollen. Her mother opened the back door for her and waited until she buckled herself in to shut it. As they drove back to the city, Bo tried her hardest to memorize the day, a trick to pass the time.

"Remember this, baby," her mother would say. "This place is going to look different when you get to my age."

WINTER



CHRISTMASTIME CAME. FOR the occasion, Bo reserved a whole chicken. Despite few lights and window decorations, no shared tradition to draw on, and no change in weather, the season was worth acknowledging. A small celebratory impulse had risen—maybe because she wasn't alone this year—and instead of stifling it, she ordered a bird at the coop.

The spirit was contagious. Mia had caught a cold, and on top of that a course of steroids had caused severe dryness in her skin, which had erupted in scales and was now shedding in patches, leaving her hands raw and weeping. She winced and hissed as Bo applied ointment. But at the news of the chicken, she brightened, became more talkative, seemed to forget about the pain.

When the roof markets had opened, she said, she'd been amused. It was just like when she'd first arrived to Chinatown. Back then, families had kept chicken coops and small vegetable plots on the roofs. They'd brought the birds to the street in crates to sell, could snap and slit a chicken's neck in seconds, drain the blood, plunk it in boiling water, yank out the feathers, gut the innards, pack everything neatly in newspaper for the customer.

"Even I kept squab in my kitchen in a cage for special occasions," Mia said between coughs. "I never cared for it myself—too dry—but it was cheap and my daughter loved to suck on the ribs and pick at the meat from around the joints."

"Maybe we should postpone Christmas dinner until you're feeling better," Bo said. "We can freeze the chicken."

"We have to eat it fresh," Mia insisted. "And once Christmas is over, it's over."

"Not necessarily," Bo said thoughtlessly, then corrected herself: "I guess my family always celebrated the day of."

"See? Like I said."

Bo wrapped clean bandages around Mia's palms and secured them with clasps. This year was the third Christmas since her mother had disappeared.

That first year had been just after, when Jenson had still been with her. Last year, she'd missed it altogether, not realizing until days later that the holiday had passed. She'd never imagined that this year she'd be spending it with the old woman who lived next door to Ricardo, yet being here with Mia felt right.

"So what did you make to eat?" Mia asked.

"My mother and uncle always did the cooking." That had been true through her family's last holiday together. Bo and Jenson couldn't be trusted with the responsibility, even though they'd started gathering at Jenson's fancy new condo by then, despite how uncomfortable their parents were there, never sure what they were allowed to touch. They sat stiffly at the formal dining table, eating their same roasted vegetables and wasabi potato salad and garlic noodles, but on Jenson's designer plates, which Bo's mother complimented and Uncle Winston detested for being grossly overpriced. Their meal had stayed constant over the years, even as their traditions changed.

"I should hope so," Mia said, "knowing how you cook."

Bo nodded, unoffended. "How about you? Were there certain dishes you made every year?" She imagined that Mia, like any head of family, must have prepared certain foods year after year, the kind her daughter would come to associate with the holiday and might try to replicate for her own family.

"Oh, yes. Sticky rice, turkey, red bean soup, prime rib when we could afford it. So much work and nobody helped me. After Beverly left, I was happy to relax and let the senior center take care of all that."

"It's been a long time since you've hosted."

"Thirty years," Mia said. Then, slyly: "Are you going to see your friend today?"

"What friend?" Bo was certain she hadn't mentioned Eddie, or any friend, to Mia.

"You've been spending time with someone, I can tell."

To buy time, Bo took Mia's hand and smoothed out a fold in the dressing. She'd felt a shift in herself lately, but not anything she'd thought

outwardly noticeable. What was it that Mia could see?

“I don’t have any plans,” she said finally.

“You don’t like to talk, but I notice things,” Mia said, though she didn’t push it further. “Do you know how to braise chicken in soy sauce and vinegar?”

“Just give me the recipe.”

“There’s no recipe.” She seemed to perform some calculus of Bo’s abilities before deciding: “Better just to steam it.”

“I can look up how to do it your way.”

“You’ll have to manage the cooking yourself.” She pummeled her chest awkwardly to loosen some phlegm. “It’s hard to mess up steaming.”

“We’ll do it that way then,” Bo said.

—

Mia’s cold advanced over the next few days and Bo worried over her, taking temperature readings on the hour, insisting she stay in bed and rest. She intercepted a call from a stylist, who said he was concerned about Mia and had been trying to contact her for weeks. Apparently, until Mia’s legs had started acting up, vanity had brought her to the salon—on the third floor, which was now the bottom floor—every other Friday. She’d missed her last several appointments and hadn’t returned any of his messages. Bo promised to accompany her to the salon soon. He suggested the next day.

In the morning, a low-grade fever set Mia’s teeth chattering, but she insisted on getting her hair done anyway. The elevator opened into the salon and Bo immediately smelled hair products and pungent traces of lunch. Mia led the way to the back, leaning only a bit on her cane with a bandaged fist. They passed an altar crowded with portraits in different-sized frames, the shelf adorned with fake flowers, fake apples, and fake candles with red bulbs. A man waved them over with frantic energy.

“Mrs. Yee, I was so worried. Are you sick? Why didn’t you return my calls?” he scolded as Mia settled herself into a chair that had been readied with a booster cushion. He lowered it to a reclining position as he pushed

his hands into the ragged white clumps of her hair, being careful not to disturb her mask. All the other seats were empty. “Sit anywhere,” he said to Bo, giving her hair a quick appraisal. He was clearly unimpressed.

“What calls? I didn’t get any messages.” Mia stretched her legs and moaned. “It hurts too much to walk now. You have no idea how much it hurts.” Bo was surprised—Mia complained plenty, but not usually about her physical pain. She thought again that the doctor’s timing with the wheelchair had likely been spot-on.

Taking his time, the stylist wrapped Mia in a waterproof cape, wet her hair with a handheld nozzle, massaged her head while he worked in the shampoo, and rinsed the bubbles away. Then he poured oil into his palms and combed it through with his fingers.

“I’m so sorry you’re hurting, Mrs. Yee, but it’s been too long. Look at these curls. No good.” When he was satisfied with the distribution of oil, he set the chair upright and pulled shears from a vat of blue disinfectant.

Mia stuck out her chin. “Fix it. Make me look good.”

Eyes wide and mouth pressed into a firm line, the stylist tipped Mia’s head down, assessed the situation in the mirror, and started to cut. From the next chair over, Bo watched as Mia calmed beneath the frenzied movements of his hands. The tightness left her jaw, and the folds of skin around her mouth relaxed.

Most salons had shut down with the rise of automated cut-and-style stations, which Bo had tried once and found serviceable. She’d browsed hairstyles, selected one, and previewed it to see how well the cut would flatter the shape of her face. Then she took a seat, and a helmet lowered toward her head, stopping a pinkie’s width from the skull. A spread of blades and combs approached from mechanical arms and began to untangle, cut, coax, and feather. But that touchless, talkless experience wouldn’t have had the same effect on Mia. Even in sleep she didn’t look this way, defenseless and at peace.

An hour later, her curls had regained a tidy bounce and the frizz had been replaced with an even shine. Despite her illness, she looked refreshed, ready for a lunch out.

“Okay,” she said approvingly.

“Don’t wait so long next time.” The stylist helped her out of the seat, returned the cane, and transferred her to Bo’s side. Mia’s arm drifted over, and Bo caught it with her elbow.

“I’ll charge your account.”

Mia glanced at Bo. “You should fix her hair, too.”

“If you want, just make an appointment. I have lots of openings. I barely have any clients left,” the stylist said to Bo. Then he whispered without bitterness, “I do my best work for her, even though she pays the same rate as thirty years ago and never tips. It’s good for her I was taught to respect my elders.”

—

On Christmas Day, Mia was cheerful but still running a temperature. Bo offered again to postpone their celebration until she was feeling better, but Mia was insulted by the idea and sent her off to get the food.

Only a few booths were still open. After picking up the chicken, Bo rushed to find the vendor who sold roots and tubers. It was hard to locate him through the downpour, but eventually the red of his jacket caught her eye. When she got to him, he was already packing his stock into plastic bins, which he stacked and secured with leather straps to the iron rungs affixed to the ground. The potatoes were beginning to bob in their tubs.

“I’m closing shop,” he said when he saw her. He pointed at the sky. “Today is bad.”

“I just need ginger.”

He clipped down one bin stack and started on another. “Come back after the storm.”

“Please, just a few pieces. For Mia.”

He shook his head, but returned to a stack he had already tied down and unfastened the belt so he could access the top bin. “For Mia, okay.” He pointed a knob at her warningly. “But only because it’s Christmas.”

Bo shouted her thanks through the wall of water, held out a few sodden bills, and felt the ginger plunk into her bag.

She was grateful now for the simplicity of her task, for the distraction from Mia's illness. Mia had nodded off in the living room, although she woke on occasion to coach Bo, who allowed herself to be bossed around so that Mia could feel included, feigning that she hadn't checked the cavity for giblets or sliced off the yellow glob of fat that hung over it like a swollen tonsil, as her mother had taught her.

"Keep the fat. You can use it to cook the potatoes or shiitakes, or the livers!" Mia shouted.

Bo lowered the chicken into a pot of water and turned the heat to high, as instructed, making sure the lid was secure.

"As soon as it boils, turn off the heat and let it steam-cook for forty-five minutes."

Bo rolled her eyes in the privacy of the kitchen. "Got it," she sang brightly.

"As soon as it boils!"

Once the chicken was cooked, Bo strained the broth into a smaller pot to reduce. She heard agitated rustling in the other room, followed by a hoarse voice commanding, "Don't dump the water!"

"Don't worry," Bo called. When the chicken had cooled enough to handle, she sharpened the cleaver.

"You cut, and if it's not pink, it's done," Mia argued, though there had been no sign of disagreement.

That contrarian tone, and Bo's instinct to deflect, reminded her of her own family's holiday bickering.

"How are you feeling?"

"Hungry."

“Five minutes and we’ll eat.”

The legs fell from the body and tore the surrounding skin. Juices ran onto the counter as Bo broke the chicken down into small pieces. She pictured her cousin and uncle feasting without her and felt an outsize sense of loss.

For the sauce, she heated oil in a pan, sliced a length of ginger, scavenged scraps of garlic, and snipped a wilted, sun-starved length of green onion from its pot. When the oil rippled, she poured it over the aromatics, setting off crackles and spatter. Almost overcome by the familiar smell, she willed herself to finish her task. She set aside the bones to freeze, then scooped the meat into a bowl and placed it on a tray beside the sauce and two forks. Steam dampened her face as she brought the meal to the living room.

“Merry Christmas.”

Mia straightened to inspect the food. Her skin looked clammy and pale. She sniffed the sauce. “No cilantro?”

“There was none.”

Pleased enough, she slumped back and rested her bandaged hands on her belly. “You eat.”

“I’ll help you.” Bo dipped a piece of white meat in the sauce and brought it toward Mia’s mouth, cupping her other hand under to catch any oil drips, but Mia jerked her head and refused the bite.

“Not hungry.”

Bo set down the fork. “You said you were hungry a few minutes ago.” She pressed her wrist to Mia’s forehead, which radiated heat. “Your fever seems worse.”

“You eat,” she repeated. “Take some to your friend.”

“He isn’t expecting me.”

“Then surprise him.”

“Come on. Let’s get you to bed.”

Bo brushed Mia’s teeth and refreshed the bandages, then helped arrange her in a comfortable position in bed, with extra blankets in case of chills. The thermometer confirmed the temperature.

“Soup,” Mia said, then fell fast asleep.

—

So Bo made soup. She added the rest of the ginger to the broth and turned the burner on high. When she was sick as a kid, her mother would call in a substitute teacher, stay home, and make soups—cloudy elixirs that emptied her bowels and sweat out the toxins. The odd amalgams of flavors were estimations of what her own mother would concoct. “Cools and calms the body,” she parroted when Bo suffered outbreaks of ulcers in her mouth. “Restores balance and utility,” she insisted when Bo cowered at the stink of the brew. When a sale hit, even if they were both in good health, Bo’s mother would buy three pounds of chicken wings and boil them for a full day, so that the whole apartment—even the books and linens—was steeped in the smell of an animal coming undone. This method had a clean yield and forced the release of nutrients held in the bones. Bo would take that broth in slowly, as though she were sipping on gold.

She was skimming away the scum that had bubbled up on the surface of the broth when Mia’s call system started to chime and the walls pulsed blue with light in rhythm to it. Bo hit the answer button on the closest machine and Beverly appeared: a relief, another face.

“Happy Christmas. Is she sleeping? Don’t wake her up, I’ll just talk to you. Tell me how she’s doing.”

Bo mentioned Mia’s temperature but said overall she’d been well. She tried to keep the worry, probably undue, out of her voice.

“She’s sick? On Christmas?”

“A bit. She requested soup.”

“My mother is a big believer in soup,” Beverly said knowingly. “Whenever she notices that first sniffle, I hear her making a racket in the kitchen, slamming cabinets and smashing things with her cleaver. Winter melon soup, black herb soup, pork and barley soup. Not to comfort, but to cure, so she wasn’t left to run the household and the business alone. Having

me and my dad out of commission was a real hassle for her. But it was one of the few times she fussed over me. What kind are you making?”

“Chicken.”

“You have chicken? She’ll like that.” Beverly sighed. “I would try to visit, if I were well enough to travel, and travel weren’t so difficult. You know, I haven’t been back to the States since I left.”

Bo already knew the answer but asked anyway: “That’s how long it’s been since you’ve seen your mother?”

“I know. It’s terrible. Luckily, she’s very independent. The PTs and OTs and aides came for a few months after her knee surgery, but that was over fifteen years ago. I’ve tried to call in for certain appointments when she’s sounded concerned—my friends who’ve been through this with their parents say it helps when the medical team knows someone is looking out for the patient—but the truth is, she hasn’t needed much help.”

Bo had seen this before: a family member serving as remote administrator of her client’s life. Mia was a chore for Beverly to get through, a task to check off the list. Bo resisted her rising cynicism, but it did seem that theirs had slid into a scheduled, one-sided relationship, where Beverly called on holidays and Wednesdays and drew her line there, purposely shut off from the daily reality of her aging but very alive, very opinionated mother. And what could you do about that collapse of dimension in someone else’s mind, whether it was born of necessity or neglect or circumstance? People turned away, and she might not understand why, but it wasn’t her business.

Bo was about to assure Beverly that she was on hand for whatever was needed when Beverly said, “Honestly, I wasn’t worried until Auntie Florence started having problems. They always had each other.”

—

Auntie Florence, Bo worked out, was Mrs. Ching.

Beverly explained that the two friends had their differences, which included irreconcilable opinions on child-rearing, how to make joong, and

extramarital affairs, but they'd known each other in childhood and later, after the war, traveled together to America—to another planet, essentially—following husbands they barely knew. They'd trusted only each other, and that trust, despite another hundred years of volatile friendship, ran as steady as heartbeats.

They nitpicked and traded insults, held grudges, went through years-long periods of silent treatment. But when Mia needed something, it was Mrs. Ching who rushed to her, and vice versa. When Beverly was a child, Mrs. Ching had battled ovarian cancer. Mia had bought a turtle on Stockton Street every Thursday and cooked it for thirty hours, bringing angry revolted neighbors to her door with pinched noses, until she explained and they left her alone and endured it. It was the smell of friendship. Saturday mornings, Mia carried the soup down the street, let herself into the Ching apartment, and emptied it into their pot. Then she rinsed her own pot and brought it down to Sam's, the grimy restaurant where the infamously rude server would yell at white tourists for show, but never at children or Chinatown residents. He was known for throwing platters down on the tables so hard that you'd lose a third of the dish, which he refused to refund, but the wok hei was unbeatable, and so was the restaurant's jook. Mia had them fill the pot, tall as a toddler, and it would feed the family all weekend for fifty cents. This was the late forties, early fifties. At some point Sam's raised their prices to a dollar and Mia stopped going on principle.

Mia talked behind Mrs. Ching's back constantly, mocking her especially for marrying for love, for saying things like *Why did we come to America if not to be free?* Mrs. Ching's first husband had been a butcher and herbalist whose treatments combined poetry and tinctures, fortune-telling and prescriptions. Later she divorced him to marry a white man, which was unusual at the time. He trained her to become an accountant, which served her well after his death left her raising four children alone just a few years later. She was headstrong, unafraid of starting over. *The Chinese invented paper, pasta, and poetry.* That was what Beverly remembered her always saying. *Chinese oranges are better. Chinese eggs are better.*

Bo pictured one woman's face hovering in the other's, blurred together through a long lifetime of crises, judgmental but steadfast, then suddenly gone. She felt a surge of protectiveness for Mia. "What happened to her? I got the impression she lived in the building."

"We're not sure. My mother hasn't seen her in months, and no one is returning messages. I'm not in touch with her kids, but I'm guessing they moved her to them or put her in assisted living."

"There has to be a way to contact them."

"You'd think so, but people just disappear now. It's a shame. I can't really imagine Auntie Florence not being around. No one else remembers the houses in the village, the dialect, the famine. She and my mother came over together on the same ship. My mother was pregnant with me. All this time, they lived close by and talked every day—when they weren't fighting. Now I worry that my mother is all alone."

Bo thought of Mia checking reflexively for Mrs. Ching in the stairwell on their walk. It took so little to end up alone, Bo knew well, but it seemed particularly cruel that Mia, having long ago lost her family, had also lost her lifelong friend, with no explanation as to where she'd gone. A distressing image came to Bo's mind just then: of arriving to her shift one day and finding Mia's apartment empty.

She forced a reassuring smile for Beverly. "She has me," she managed to say.

—

After the call, Bo ate. The chicken was cold but good. She packed up the broth and three portions of meat: one for the freezer, one for Mia in hopes that her appetite would return soon, and—as instructed—one for Eddie.

On her way out, she noticed an envelope decorated with a single metallic snowflake sticker. The flap read: *For Bo for Christmas*. At first it seemed empty, but inside she found a small paintbrush with a yellow plastic handle, the kind that came with dollar watercolor sets and weighed almost nothing. Mia must have rummaged through drawers and bins, possibly while

feverish, to find this offering. A child's toy—but a perceptive and perfectly timed nudge, just as Bo was returning to her practice. She hadn't expected this kindness from Mia.

Eddie was on a hologram call when she showed up at his door. A teenage boy and a thin woman with blunt hair were being projected into the room, and all three of them were laughing. Avoiding the cameras and trying not to eavesdrop, she made a series of apologetic gestures meant to communicate that he need not interrupt his conversation, she was leaving, she was just delivering this container of food. He looked confused at first, and then grateful when she placed the food on the floor. He put a palm to his heart in thanks, then turned away and guffawed at something the boy was saying as she let herself out. She felt embarrassed, like she'd intruded on something important, and a bit slighted, too, over not having been included, though this gathering had nothing to do with her. She had no idea who those people were. She walked over to the elevator, the smells of someone's holiday cooking hanging in the hall.

At home, she had two short messages. In one, Joey waved and held up a burbling toddler dressed as Santa. *Thinking of you*, she said, and Bo felt a sudden tragic lightness about their twenty years of friendship and the tremendous distance between them, held against all the years Mia and Mrs. Ching had been neighbors and friends.

In the second message, her cousin and uncle were at a table covered with platters of food. Background voices made it hard to hear them, but she caught *Merry Christmas* and *when are you coming* and *we miss you*. The sight of them was so familiar, she started to walk toward their image, almost believing she could step into the scene and join them. Then the message ended and the light cut out. The shadows were pressing in. She switched on a lamp and stayed near it, where the light was brightest, and in her mind the day began to replay.

She folded a thick piece of paper in half to use as a card and on the front drew a handsome cooked chicken on a plate. Then she pulled out the paintbrush and picked dust from the short black bristles. It was light in her hand, like a biscuit stick. She revived old cakes of yellow and blue pigment with water and added a quick, shaky wash of color. Inside, she wrote a message for Mia: *Thank you for Christmas.*

MIA'S FEVER LIFTED a few days later. She still seemed weak but happily drank the broth and ate a few pieces of shredded chicken. A delicate fabric hung from her hand; upon closer inspection, Bo realized that it was peeling skin. She was molting like a reptile, a sign that her hands were close to healed. She insisted there was no pain.

She had, however, badly bruised her knee from knocking into the wheelchair too many times; it was still sitting against the wall collecting dust. Just that morning, Mia's slipper had caught one of the wheels and she'd struck her shin on the frame. Once she'd stopped yowling, Bo had persuaded her to start clearing the closet to make room for the chair. The week before the new year was a good time for home projects.

Now Mia situated herself at the edge of the bed to direct operations. Bo managed to jerk the door from its frame. A mass of dust poured out and choked her. The air held that familiar closet stench of must and cedar blocks and something unidentifiable but old.

Almost every pocket of space was used. Clothes hung along all three walls, and the patch of floor beneath was covered with shoeboxes and baskets full of tubes of ointments, bundled letters, tarnished office supplies, dust balls. Toward the back, four-packs of toilet paper balanced on stacks of newspapers to form a low wall, all of it sprinkled with insect husks. Bo pulled on the light switch and ducked as a flurry of large brown petals fluttered down from a top shelf: coffee filters.

"What I would do for a cup," Mia said.

Bo started with the clothes. She held up each item, and Mia made noises of recognition at the polyester blouse in a sailboat print, the sack dress adorned with gaudy neon buttons, the hand-crocheted vests, the performance fleece pullover, a sweater so pilled it looked tumored.

"You have to choose what to keep," Bo reminded her. "Anything you haven't worn in—"

"They're all perfectly good."

“We have to make room.”

“Show me again.”

Bo brought the lot to the bed. Mia inspected each garment, like a medium conjuring spirits. Finally, she chose a royal blue vest to keep and, to Bo’s surprise, agreed to let go of the rest. Bo folded the items for the discard pile.

“The only thing of real value I own is the rosewood table by the front door. My husband saved up for it when we bought our house.”

“You had a house?”

“That’s where I had my garden.”

She and Kwok had purchased the house in 1976, achieving a goal they’d had since the anti-Asian property law was lifted, more than twenty years earlier. It was in a new development that had been occupied most recently by greenhouses used for victory gardens, and before that, flower farms. The neighborhood was on a sunny hill, two long bus rides from Chinatown, but that didn’t stop her from returning to the neighborhood several times a week for groceries and social visits. She knew the shops there, the deals, the language. Chinatown always had the best prices. That house, the one she assumed she would die in, had been lost to a bad investment her husband had locked them into, a final mess she discovered after his death in the mid-nineties, when the collectors came. Forced to abandon her home and garden, she downsized to a duplex closer to downtown, where she lived for almost thirty years, until the landlord issued an eviction notice—ostensibly his son would be moving into the unit, but she found out later that it was just a ploy to remodel and quadruple the rent. The unit in their current building had opened at the perfect time. A block of apartments in the development was owned by a family she’d helped bring over from China in the 1950s, and they offered her a spot for below-market rent as a gesture of their unending gratitude, charging her just enough that she retained her pride in securing a discount.

“Once in a while I’m lucky. The funny thing is, this is the same location as the seamen’s boardinghouse we stayed in when I first arrived. It was the only place that would take us. It was full of soldiers and ghosts. Mrs. Ching

and I wore jade pendants for protection until we moved into the housing projects.”

With the first set of clothing folded, Bo braced herself on the doorframe, assessing what to go through next. She extracted a tower of Styrofoam cups from a corner and set it by the clothes. Her fingers were starting to feel tacky.

“No way. It was on this block?”

“Yes. The lot was a row of brick buildings, from Barbary Coast days. When the crews broke ground for the high-rise, the city archaeologists found all sorts of things in the mud. Lots of pianos. I read it in the newspaper.”

“Why pianos?” Bo prompted her.

Built on landfill, Mia explained, this part of the city had a long history of the ground opening up in heavy rains. Even before the big earthquake, the sinkholes were insatiable. People threw in furniture to feed them, mattresses, concrete slabs, dollhouses, even headstones. Later, when cars came, people threw them in the holes, too.

“When you see an emptiness that big, you do anything to fill it.”

Bo had continued excavating as she listened, and now something on the rack stopped them both: a shimmer of gold peeking out from behind a threadbare maroon sleeve, like a great glimmering fish. Bo pushed away the neighboring coats to make room. It was a dress, constructed for a stocky body with shoulders as broad as a football player’s, adorned with clasps wrapped in gold embroidery floss. A slit ran up each side, rising to just above knee-length. Dramatic darts angled out to accommodate a large bust. The side seams, accentuated with piping, ran parallel toward the ground, with a barely perceptible dent at the waist. The fabric held wrinkles and folds at the seat of the dress. It reminded Bo of old Byzantine mosaics, the funerary masks of ancient Egypt, the Islamic manuscripts and medieval illuminated books of hours, the opulent Gilded Age portraits—all those sacred objects on display in museums, glinting with gold like this humble dress.

“Oh, that. I had it made for my fiftieth wedding anniversary.”

Bo hung it from the top of the door so Mia could see it better. The body that had worn the dress, considered old even back then, was gone. Mia's wardrobe now consisted of shapeless cardigans that doubled as robes and roomy zip-up shirts made from insulating textiles—honestly not so different from some of Bo's utilitarian clothes. She had reserved a pair of custom-printed prescription sneakers with generous cushioning for indoor use. Sometimes she even wore those shoes to sleep. The stitching had been redone multiple times, in threads of varying colors, and the Velcro straps no longer adhered—the plastic teeth were snarled with lint and the other side had felted to fuzz. They still fit despite the swelling in her feet.

But once she'd been young.

"What did you wear to your wedding?"

"I don't remember."

"At all?"

"There were no photographs is why."

A matchmaker had paired her and Kwok. They hadn't known each other prior. At six years old, Kwok had been adopted—sold, really—to a family already in America, after his own destitute parents had lost two children to famine. Others called him fortunate for that, and for the whole of his life, though he remained bitter. But he was also an American. When he was eight, he moved with his adoptive father to a town outside Boston for what turned out to be ten years of relentless labor and illness. He worked with his father seven days a week in a laundry while somehow attending school full-time. After he finished high school, he was sent back to China—to recuperate from rheumatic fever, he thought, but upon arrival learned that his father had conscripted him into marriage.

Neither Mia nor Kwok was happy about the union. Married at just fourteen, she went to live with her new husband's family in their village. Her mother-in-law, a spiteful woman, treated her like a servant, ordering her to fetch water and scour the house, the demands worsening the longer she went without any signs of a grandchild. Mia dreamed of going to school, like Kwok had; instead she found herself scrubbing the village stairs, which were made from old headstones, the carvings clogged with dirt. Kwok's

health had improved, but he hated living there, even before Japan invaded and the daily air raids began. When Roosevelt advised all American citizens living in China to return immediately, Kwok got his ticket and left Mia alone with his mother.

Mia's own mother was a half day's walk from the new village, later a much shorter bicycle ride, but there were no bicycles back then. Mia was permitted a visit home once a year, although at the market, women who had seen her mother more recently passed along news: the toddler boy she had adopted from a relative "out of loneliness" was now old enough to work yet ill-adept at labor, so the farmwork still fell largely to her. The crops had flooded again. Japanese soldiers had spared her village on a recent raid but had buried every resident of a neighboring one. Gossip was the only way for Mia to stay informed about her mother's life.

But yes, the wedding: it had been a big event. Although their families hadn't had money, they'd saved a decade for it, invited a thousand guests, and fed them an eight-course feast with abalone and roasted pig. She and Kwok were swept up in the festivities, and maybe that was one of the purposes of a wedding. All that attention and finery convinced them that the match was worthy, created an affection between them. They had a year together before he returned to the United States and eventually joined the war. He wrote letters regularly—from back home in Massachusetts, boot camp in New York, laundry school in Virginia—addressed to "my love" and "my darling," albeit in English, thus requiring that she find a translator to read them. Later she learned that he was not a tender person at all, but during those years it eased some of her loneliness and fear to believe that she had an attentive husband and a promising future in America.

It was difficult for Bo to imagine Mia as a hopeful young bride on the cusp of her new life. No proof of that period remained, not a single picture.

"Did you write to him, too?"

Mia laughed. No, her writing skills had been rudimentary; she had the equivalent of a fifth-grade education. But she had found someone to dictate messages to. In those days, you handed a neighbor or a distant relative a letter and money for postage and hoped it would reach its destination. Much

later, after Mia had made her way to America, she sent letters and money to her mother through one of the Chinatown churches, addressed by name and village, even though her mother no longer lived there. Once the envelope got across the ocean, it was transferred to someone else, who knew where to pass it next. The pastor told Mia that there was a woman in Hong Kong who smuggled mail back to the provinces by pretending the bundle swaddled to her body was a baby.

Now Mia turned back to the gold dress, scrutinized it, then waved it away. “Toss it with the rest.”

Bo had found almost nothing worth saving as she’d sifted through Mia’s junk, yet suddenly she was the one reluctant to let this dress go. Mia had led a long, interesting life; all her stories would be lost when she died, unless someone found a way to preserve them.

She removed the dress from the hanger and thought of the time capsule of her own mother’s apartment. She’d gone back only twice. The first time was early on—she’d expected to find comfort among her mother’s belongings, in her mother’s smells, but the space, without the person who’d looked after it, had already deadened. She’d stayed just long enough to grab the “go” box, which held her mother’s birth certificate, Social Security card, and defunct insurance policies, as well as a plastic bag of old photographs of people, possibly relatives, whom Bo didn’t recognize. Then, a few months later, crazed from days without sleep, she’d wandered up to the roof and somehow arrived again at her mother’s door, where the stupor cleared and instantly she knew why she had come. Inside it stank of mildew and rancid oil. She held her breath, went to the hutch, and took down the plate with the deep blue glaze. She pressed it close to her chest and hurried back across the bridges, this time very aware of the fathomless dark below. The plate was hot from her body when she arrived home. There was no plate in the world like it.

She folded the dress into a neat square. “It’s a special piece. Someone might want it,” she said. “Your daughter, maybe.”

“My daughter? Ha! I don’t think so. No one needs an old dress like that. Who would fit it? It was tailored to my body the week of the party. It’s too

much work to alter. No one knows how to sew anymore anyway. People throw out shoes and coats at the first sign of a hole, even now! Besides, you're the one telling me I have to throw things out."

"Oh, I don't know." Bo patted it. Even out of the light, in a stack of worn garments, the fabric retained its luster. "Who doesn't love beautiful things?"

BY NEW YEAR'S EVE, they had almost cleared enough space for the wheelchair. Bo couldn't wait to be done with the project, but Mia remained eager to sort items and talk, as though she were visiting with old friends. Bo slowed down to let her savor the process.

That afternoon, she found a stack of notes bound in string. They were dated mostly in winter, beginning in 2024. Written on the back sides of envelopes and notepads that bore the faces of real estate agents, they had a throwaway quality. All the writing was in uppercase, neat as numbers on a receipt, though the longer notes loosened toward the end, signs of the hand tiring.

"Those?" Mia said. "They're just homework exercises. Why would I keep them?" She patted the pile, as if it were a child's head. "But it's true, what I'm most proud of—and I can't say it's my daughter—is that I learned how to read and write. I took classes after my hundredth. I figured if I wasn't going to be dying anytime soon, then I had time to learn."

Bo set aside the notes and pulled a plastic bag out of the back corner. It came apart, and out fell dozens of 35mm Kodak slides and a cassette tape. The tape was labeled in neat print—*Interview with Mia Yee, 1998, #3 of 12*—but the innards had crumbled. It was a recording from an oral history project.

Mia was amused but didn't recognize it. "Probably a school assignment Grant had to do. Too bad. It would be interesting to know what I had to say about my life...seventy-six years in."

Bo saved the slides; she would hold them up to the light later. She pulled out a blazer that had long ago fallen from its hanger. There was a round piece of candy in its pocket.

"Give it to me," Mia said excitedly, and held out her palm.

Bo hesitated. "How old is this? What brand is it?"

"Sugar doesn't spoil. Give it."

Mia pulled the two twisted ends of the wrapper. Color flaked off and the cellophane crinkled to dust. A little planet, swirled with gold, dropped onto her lap and broke in two. She brought a piece to her mouth.

“Wait.”

Bo scraped down the jagged edges with a utility knife, then returned the candy to Mia, who popped half into her mouth and told Bo to have the other. Bo placed it on her tongue and braced for rancidity, but it tasted harmless, generically sweet.

Mia clattered her piece against her teeth and made sucking sounds. She looked at one corner of the ceiling, then its opposite, trying to retrieve a memory. “Nineteen ninety-one,” she said finally. “My grandson ate the whole box, but he hated the orange flavor.”

As the candy dissolved in her mouth, Bo could almost remember Mia’s memory herself. They were together, on the plane of sugar, in two times. She was young again, with her cousin in a stuffy apartment, eating the white rabbit candy they’d snuck from a dish—the rice-paper wrapper melting on her tongue, the hard lump clacking against her teeth, then softening into a sweet, milky wad. Her mother was helping an older relative set up his new phone, explaining each step in her patient teacher’s voice, while he nodded vigorously and repeated, at odd intervals, “Ah, I see, I see,” which he clearly didn’t. Bo concentrated on making the candy last, trying to distract herself from the knowledge that this man would struggle with the device again as soon as they left. She couldn’t remember—or maybe she’d never known—who the man was or how they were related, but that afternoon in his home had returned now with a disorienting specificity. All this time she’d been carrying the dormant memory, and sharing a sixty-year-old piece of candy had woken it, simple as flipping on a switch.

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The next day they cleared out the last items in the closet. Bo pried up a shoebox that had gummed itself to the floor. Inside was a backgammon set

and a narrow paper box that rattled when she shook it. Her eyes burned from the dust.

“My I Ching sticks! I used to tell fortunes with those on the street corner in Hong Kong.”

A piece of paper was stuck to the box. To Bo’s excitement, it was a black-and-white photograph—the first picture they’d uncovered—of a woman leaning against a building. Her lips and hair shone with the intensity of black gloss.

“That’s me,” Mia said admiringly. “Wasn’t I glamorous? This was in Hong Kong, right after I found my husband. We both ended up there at the end of the war.”

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The Japanese soldiers had come to her mother-in-law’s village, just as they had her mother’s. At the instruction of the older women, Mia had gone into the hills with the other young women and girls. They ran and stayed hidden for days, licking dew off plants to survive, until at last a grandmother hiked up to say it was safe to return.

Then another regiment came through. She was asleep on the kitchen floor, sweating out a fever, so when the elders went house to house to round up the girls again, she slept through the shouting unseen and woke in the evening, her fever broken, to a quieted village and young men in uniform who looked like they could be her cousins pounding at the door. Their clothes were caked in dirt and blood. They were hungry.

She was eighteen, and alone. She scooped half of her mother-in-law’s remaining rice into a pot and fed them. They were thin and tired, and the food made them happy. She added fibrous greens splashed with vinegar to mask the spoilage. At the front of the house they laid down their packs, undid the buttons close to their necks, and slept. All night she watched and prayed they would stay asleep forever. In the morning they asked to eat again. She cooked the rest of the rice. Bellies quiet, they thanked her and left.

The women, upon their return, told her: “You’re lucky they let you live. You’re lucky you’re not beautiful.” As if they believed beauty mattered in war, as if they believed she wasn’t beautiful.

Talk about luck—her mother-in-law, on her way home from delivering supplies to a relative, had hidden in a thicket at the edge of the next village when she heard the boys, their brash talk. The bayonets they casually ran through the bushes nicked her arm. She crouched there, not daring to move for a full day, as the girls in that village, girls Mia knew, were cut, beaten, raped.

As Kwok’s ship evaded detection somewhere in the Pacific Ocean, Mia started to run. She fled to the city, knowing little but knowing enough. And when the city became too dangerous, she fled to Hong Kong. She arrived on the eve of the Japanese invasion, two weeks before Black Christmas, which began a four-year occupation. She’d lost contact with her husband and heard from a relative that his ship had been destroyed by a Japanese strike near the equator. She never saw her mother-in-law again—and her own mother she didn’t see for almost thirty years.

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In Hong Kong, Mia said, a woman in poor health had occupied a busy street corner, throwing sticks and inventing stories based on how they landed. Beggars stole from her bowl of coins. She recycled the same vague predictions so never found a customer who came more than twice. When she died, Mia claimed her spot, her stool, even her crude sign advertising her services. Before that, she’d been hungry but afraid to eat; a man had beaten her for a leaf of lettuce that had already been trampled by infantry boots. Could you imagine it? Now she’d found a way to feed herself. To her young daughter in America ten years later, the sticks were toys, cheap magic like mood rings or the red plastic fish that writhed in her palm. But for many months, they’d been her living.

In desperate times, value fluctuated—of women, rice, gold. When you were destitute, the price was always negotiable. A piece of jade could be a

fair trade for a fistful of rice; then the tide shifted and sacks of the same grain were sold for pennies; later, the jade might be exchanged for college tuition. Heirlooms sewn into secret pockets could rescue you from an early death. Only the very fortunate, the ones who had not faced starvation, could pass jewels to the next generation.

Naïve and married, not yet shrewd like the other girls looking for ways to live in a city under siege, she had to learn fast. An opportunity, once you recognized it, was easy to spot. The explosions and gunfire were constant then. That made you think clearly. Food could be bought or found in dumpsters, in gutters, in the beds of men. When a stranger approached and extended an offer of work in a “guesthouse,” she abandoned the divination games.

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It had been nine years since her wedding, and her memory of Kwok had blurred. She found she could no longer remember his face. Some days she forgot she’d had a husband; she had never lived with him, had taught herself how to survive.

And then her cousin saw him, by chance, in the streets of Hong Kong just after the war had ended. Mia found him easily after that, in a row of American sailors on leave, walking in near unison in their pressed white pants. She waited until they were close enough that she could see the new lines around his eyes as he laughed.

Stepping into his path, she said, “I thought your ship was bombed.”

He recovered quickly from his shock. His expression moved into wonder, which then shaded with disappointment.

“Who’s this?” The eyes of one of his bold companions slid over her.

He said, she thought with both pride and shame, “My wife.”

She seized his wrist, hard enough to show that she could break it if she wanted to, and the others, startled at the fight in her, stepped back.

She said, “I found you. Now take me to America.”

People she knew had witnessed this reunion, and suddenly she had worth in their eyes. She was incontrovertibly someone's wife—the wife of an American in uniform, at that. Her body was returned to her, and she handed it over to him. She was pregnant by the time the papers came through.

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She gave birth on the ship. All those years of exclusion and suffering, and finally, eight months pregnant with a wild animal that writhed and kicked inside, she'd been labeled a war bride and offered passage from Hong Kong to America. Her contractions began more than midway through the journey, on an ocean liner in the waters just beyond Hawaii. The pain was so bright she dropped the bowl of porridge she'd been eating onto her dress. Mrs. Ching happened to be on the same ship—she'd been ensconced in a relative's apartment during the occupation years and was finally joining her husband in San Francisco as well. She and another woman carried Mia to a bunk in an area of the ship that she hadn't been to before, where it was dark and clean. The mesh cot sank with her weight and she felt the cool floor on her back as the pressure of the baby's head sent sharp, terrible spikes through her spine. Somehow she was covered in rags, in damp hands, in voices making commands she couldn't discern. She felt the edge of death. She rolled off the cot and onto her hands and knees, then howled as she pushed herself back into a low squat. This was how Beverly came into the world. In a lightless room in the belly of a ship, on a night without stars. A shark claimed the afterbirth, according to Mrs. Ching, who had tossed it into the cold waters, and for many days Mia thrashed in her sleep through fever and sweat, dreaming of rows of teeth, implanted like blades in the wet pink bed of the monstrous fish's mouth.

News of the birth spread. The captain congratulated her personally and announced the good news, which she'd already known: babies born on steamships won free passage for life, an award that parents who hoped to return to their homelands in some safer future bragged about. Mia drew

some comfort from knowing that her child would be able to navigate the seas between continents easily.

But luck, like any offer, expired, and that gift went unclaimed. Five years later the company folded, unable to compete with the rise of air travel and plummeting immigration quotas. Just her daughter's fortune, to win a prize that couldn't be redeemed. Her life, then, would be in America.

In those years, developers erected thousands of single-family homes and the sand dunes in the western part of the city disappeared from view, except in a narrow strip along the water's edge, anchored by miles of ice plant. A place for the GIs to settle after a celebratory period of bars, music, and women. Housing tracts designed by Henry Doelger proliferated on the blustery outerlands to accommodate the families they would make. Many of the men Kwok had served with bought houses out there.

After those first months in the boardinghouse, they lived for several years in an SRO, with everything they owned—clothes, pans, coffee cans, fabric—stacked to the ceiling. Greeting cards and magazine ads brightened the walls. Like everyone, Mia reeled laundry on lines out the narrow window, high over the alley, to dry. They tried for another child—a son, they hoped—but no luck.

She thought often of what might have happened if her cousin hadn't spotted Kwok that day, what her fate might have been. Many treated being in America as temporary, a place to earn a fortune before they returned to Guangdong. Some even commuted back and forth a few times a year as merchant marines or importers. But she'd had a sense when she came here that it would be for good. For those who had arrived after the war, there was a severance. It was hard to recall how dogged she had been then, and how afraid. At each crisis point in her youth, she had understood the stakes: that staying in place meant she would die. She had run—from enemy troops, starvation—and landed here. She had outrun danger and saved her own life.

Memories from that time had returned in these late years as she'd watched everyone, including her daughter, flee.

"You know this fear, too," she said to Bo, who felt it now, magnified, for them both. She nodded to encourage Mia to continue.

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Mia had raised her daughter. She'd run businesses, many of them. A laundry, a grocery, a sewing factory, all in Chinatown. She'd even sold baijiu out of her pantry. She'd helped people with their immigration papers—but for that, no charge. She'd amassed savings, meant for her daughter and grandson, but now the money was gone. She hadn't expected to be retired for half her life.

Much later, when Beverly was grown, she and Kwok had bought the house with the garden. Getting out of Chinatown brought new views, a recalibrated sense of space. The shock of having sunshine, quiet, a place to grow vegetables.

At the anniversary banquet where she'd worn the gold dress, she'd looked out at the tables filled with people they knew, at the army of waiters carrying platters of cold cuts on their shoulders, and felt proud to be the host. She still remembered the menu, from West Lake soup and whole steamed fish to eight treasures and cake layered with cream and canned peaches.

It all had happened so fast. Marriage, war, illness, work, and suddenly they were old, with a grandchild they barely knew. She'd thought they were near the end, but Kwok had lived for another decade and she'd carried on for more than another half century, her life continuing to extend with all the time she couldn't have known she'd have.

He'd required round-the-clock care after a debilitating stroke in his seventies. He'd grown more bitter, swore whenever he spoke, fought her when she changed his clothes and bedding. She never worked harder than in those years. When she spoke his name now, it was with indifference, as

though she were recalling a film or a restaurant. It turned out he'd been a temporary fixture in her life, never the center of it.

As much as Mia had divulged to her as they'd begun work on the closet, Bo was aware that they'd barely touched on the first half of her life. Some of it sounded rehearsed, some spontaneously remembered, and in between that there was a richness no one would ever be able to access, a life that by now Mia had largely forgotten, having lived so far beyond it.

Bo circled around the recognizable bits, searching for a way into the details within personal reach. The Doelger houses, for instance, she knew; Joey had lived in one. And the banquets, she could imagine. Her mother and uncle had described raucous family association fundraisers and wedding dinners of distant relatives outdoing some rival family in number of guests, the parties identical down to the menus, androgynous brocade-vested waitstaff, and emcees. Those outdated rituals had dragged on for a half century, anachronistic by the time Bo and Jenson were forced to attend the next iteration of parties, by which time the best restaurants had moved to South San Francisco or Daly City. The mainstay of bottles of apple cider and tepid 7-Up were signals of wealth—who with any sense would pay the premium for cracking open the cap, that hiss of carbonation the sound of money to burn? Loud strangers approached them and shoved red envelopes into their hands as they professed familial affection. They saw your mother or father in your face, and they showed their respect with cash. She could picture Mia as one of them.

Those dinners were the closest she'd gotten to feeling part of an extended community, with a shared lineage and a relationship to place. Her mother had said as much when she'd explained why she dragged them to these events: she wanted Bo and Jenson to have some kind of connection to their heritage. A fourth-generation city resident, Bo had never been especially curious about family history. Everyone she could trace back had grown up right here and for the most part, other than some cousins, had

stayed—until recently. She had no sense of when her family had put down roots here, or why; she hadn't been interested when her mother tried to show her the sprawling family tree her own mother had assembled over years of painstaking genealogical research. All she remembered were a few repeated details about relatives she'd never met, like the fact that more than a hundred years earlier her forebears had been locked up on Angel Island before arriving in San Francisco.

That ever-present landmass in the bay, subject of local lore. As a child, she'd been mesmerized by the dim glowing words of a poetry installation that traveled along the walls of the transit center downtown, pieces her mother told her were about Angel Island. Later Bo had visited the island by ferry on a third-grade field trip. She'd been frightened by the interrogation rooms, the metal bunkbeds stacked in the cold barracks, the Chinese characters carved into the walls. She'd been alarmed when her mother had told her that their own ancestors had been kept there when they'd arrived in America.

And Mia, when she'd arrived—had she come through there, too?

"Were you detained on Angel Island when you first came here?" Bo asked.

Mia frowned. "Huh? No. It shut down before I came. I was sent to Sansome Street, just right over there." She pointed down at an angle to something Bo couldn't see. "My husband was on Angel Island, though. Luckily just for a week, when he came as a kid. He passed his interrogation, so instead of deporting him, they let him in to meet his adoptive father."

And if he hadn't passed? Bo pictured the room, bare-walled, an American flag posted in the corner, interrogation officers and a stenographer on one side of the table, and on the other a small boy, stoic and determined, reciting the details from the strange booklet his parents had ordered him to memorize as they'd sent him away on a ship, details about a home he'd never visited: who owned the furniture, how the living quarters were partitioned, what material the partitions were made of, what cardinal direction the front windows faced, where in the village the ancestral grave site was located. If he'd missed any answers that day, a different life

would've unfolded for him, one without Mia, and Bo wouldn't have been here with her now.

—

"She told you all that?" Beverly said when she called with new year greetings.

"Why wouldn't she?"

Bo had recounted to Beverly only a fraction of what Mia had told her. Each new detail Mia had shared had heightened her fear that this irreplaceable trove of experience would soon be lost, that either Mia's family had taken for granted her constancy or that they didn't care.

"I guess it makes sense she'd be more open with someone who isn't family," Beverly admitted. "I mean, does your mother talk to you about that kind of thing?"

Bo felt her face redden. Truthfully, as much as she missed her mother, even if she'd still been around, those types of conversations hadn't been typical between them, either. For all the years they'd lived together in the same apartment, the same city, they'd operated in discrete spheres, whether school or friendships or dreams. And to a daughter, a mother was an entity too vast to know. But Bo could have been more curious. She'd assumed depths within her mother, of course, but had never asked—had never thought to ask—hadn't asked enough—to be invited in.

Beverly went on: "You know, I remember playing with the sticks. And I knew she'd been in Hong Kong because that's where she reunited with my father. But I thought she only stayed there for a few weeks, maybe with relatives. What was she doing all those years?"

Bo stayed quiet as Beverly grasped for something solid.

"I don't think she would tell me, even if I asked. My mother certainly had her secrets, but they were open secrets; it was Chinatown. She had affairs with my father's friends and her friends' husbands. In the back laundry rooms, in children's rooms. I know because she brought me to their

houses and told me to read my book while she and so-and-so ‘uncle’ talked in private.”

Listening to her, Bo was struck by how each detail Beverly recalled about her mother felt somehow like an erasure: the paradox of remembering moments that then had to represent a whole life. What remained of all of Mia’s unfolding days reduced to just an impression. A gold dress standing in for fifty years of a marriage that itself had become a far-off memory.

A person’s tenure slipped so easily from the record. Mia wouldn’t live forever; her health was dimming, Bo had to admit. So then what? There would be no ceremony, no remembrance for which her family would gather. But Mia deserved a brass band trailed by a town car, her portrait ringed in white carnations and roped to the hood, and a procession of mourners behind. She deserved a tour through the city, past all the places she’d lived, the current occupants oblivious to the history of their own homes but drawn out to the spectacle in the street.

She had to make something that would do some small justice to Mia’s life. If not her, who else would? But what could she do that would be worthy in a world that was washing away?

The hovering cloud of Beverly’s hologram vanished. Bo could hear Mia snoring in the other room, unaware of her calcifying legacy. She slipped the box of sticks into her pocket and headed home.

—

She recognized the feeling immediately: all that rich material thrumming in her, asking to be exploited. She had missed her chance to talk with her mother this way, had never thought to catch hold of the specifics of her life before it was too late. But she could try somehow to do this for Mia.

Only where to start?

Her head was overflowing with images conjured from Mia’s stories, but she didn’t know what to do with them. She needed materials she could touch—more than the handful they’d found in the closet. Beverly probably had some family albums to share; Bo would ask.

She knew, however, that this wouldn't be enough. To honor Mia was to honor their shared city, too—their home. She could look into what archives were available, but the scope of her search was so wide. There were so many beginnings. She thought again of the woman who had died in the earthquake, thus giving Mia's father American papers. Maybe it made sense to start there, with Mia's earliest connection to the city.

She doubted she'd be able to dig something up on that woman in particular; she knew so little about her. Still, it was a starting point. A good way to begin the new year.

She had some research to do.

YEAR
of the
ROOSTER



NONE OF THE old library branches remained, but select collections had been moved to two separate office spaces in sturdier high-rises. The first week of January, Bo looked up the closer location, which was staffed by a devoted librarian who specialized in local history and had volunteered to stay on as long as patrons continued to use the archive's services. She kept the visiting hours flexible to accommodate their schedules.

Librarians were, of course, not just librarians anymore. Trained in library science, resourceful and skilled at interfacing with the public, they had long ago become civil servant generalists, deployed to areas of greatest need. They delivered mail, food, and supplies to the housebound, administered antidotes for drug overdoses, connected the sick with health services, tracked the movement of illness during epidemics, monitored public housing sites, conducted outreach to vulnerable communities, stanching bleeding, exterminated pests, and even gutted building interiors destroyed by water. They cared for those who had no family left living, no family locally, the ones left behind. They were nimble, quick to adapt their skills to meet staffing needs. This librarian, Antonia, also organized a food pantry that distributed dry goods and toiletries, and managed city planning records and property deeds. If you were in need of a birth or death certificate, she was the one to ask. The bulletin at the top of her monthly newsletter listed those in the district who had passed. Beneath her signature, she always included this line: "The commons keeps changing, and I with it."

Antonia posted regular updates in which she highlighted titles in her collection and appealed to the public to visit and make use of the resources. Most of the city's archives had been lost to flooding, she'd reported when the branch had opened. Mounds of mold had devoured folios and records. Bo pictured black spores forming constellations on the covers of books, like drops of ink spread wet-on-wet, each spot connecting to another to form a map of emerging ruin. History had a history of vanishing this way, to the

elements, the librarian wrote. Think of Pompeii, of Herculaneum. Other sets of knowledge had been systematically erased over the course of human history—censored books incinerated, files wiped from servers, memories stripped from the mind by electrical current. Still, treasures waited to be discovered among the remnants. She saw herself as a custodian of thinning knowledge, tasked with ushering it from one generation to the next—and to think, there was so much more beyond this! Her current efforts were focused on reformatting materials in preparation for migrating them to yet another storage system, and she delighted even more than usual in being interrupted by visitors—a pause in an endless task.

The library was now housed in an old office building, on a floor that had been abandoned by a renewable-energy think tank. The space had a clinical feel, with low ceilings and metal furniture and a stained concrete subfloor where old carpet had been stripped. Bo followed a light to a compact windowless room and found Antonia seated at a large desk in a puffy down jacket, dutifully entering information into a database. Behind her, a shelving unit held neatly folded clothing, bedding, pantry items, a bowl, a stainless steel tumbler, and a portable stove. She broke into a broad smile at the sight of Bo and welcomed her in with a two-armed wave.

“How can I help you? What are you looking for?”

Bo smiled tightly and tried not to feel put off by her eagerness. “I’m looking for materials about the city’s history. I work for an older woman who’s been telling me about her life, and I’m hoping to learn more.”

“Hmm.” Antonia nodded encouragingly. “Any particular period?”

“Maybe Chinatown and the big earthquake a hundred and fifty years ago. I’m just wondering what it might’ve been like here, for a woman, back then. As a starting place. Images would be helpful, if possible.”

“And what do you need the materials for?”

“I’m a painter,” Bo said, unsure if that was really the answer. “I need source material to get going on a project.”

“An artist. I see. Chinatown, earthquake. Hmm.” She swiveled back to the database, set filters, and entered search terms, then scrolled through the results, muttering to herself. “Very important event in Chinese American history.”

“Yeah, if there’s anything else you think is worth looking at...”

“Chinese stuff?”

“Sure. Or just city stuff.”

“I have to warn you that we’ve lost a lot of our collection, but I can find you something, definitely.” She ran another search, scribbled a series of numbers and letters on a paper scrap, slapped it as if to seal it, and leaped from her seat. “Follow me.”

They hurried past walls of boxes, makeshift stacks, and shelves stuffed with volumes to a dark corner of the floor lined with massive filing cabinets and plastic storage bins. Weak purple light came through the tinted windows and streaked the floors in trembling shadows. Although the space was dry, the smell of stale water was everywhere. Bo’s steps sounded on the concrete, but Antonia, barefoot, moved noiselessly.

She yanked open drawers and added paper files, film reels, and digital drives to a wheeled cart, which she pushed to Bo to manage. Most images of Chinatown from the earthquake period had been taken by Arnold Genthe, a German American photographer who had captured atmospheric street scenes, primarily of stoic men. But, Antonia explained, riffling through a file cabinet, she knew of an exhibition catalog that featured photographs taken by a Chinese American woman photographer.

“Aha!” She held up the laminated catalog. “It’s actually remarkable that she was acknowledged and that this primary source still exists.”

Bo touched the catalog and felt a stir of excitement.

The cart got heavier.

“As I said, the collection used to be much more robust, but we have some pieces to work with here.” Antonia flipped through a bundle of pamphlets and printouts in protective sleeves. “Look—garment workers’ strike, San Francisco State strike, Self-Help for the Elderly, Asian AIDS Project.”

An envelope had jammed at the back of a drawer. She maneuvered it free and examined the label: 1965 IMMIGRATION ACT. She tossed the envelope into their growing pile and assessed the aisle for which collection to search next.

Bo meant to say something gracious but instead blurted out, “I’m surprised you’re still here.”

Antonia made an invisible scale of her hands and gave Bo a look like she should’ve known better. “Where would I go?” she said.

Bo flushed. “No, I understand, obviously.” She was embarrassed to be parroting a question she hated herself, to be caught judging the librarian for where she lived and assuming she didn’t have friends, when she’d given no indication of being particularly lonely or conflicted about her life. “I don’t know why I said that.”

She thought back to what Mia had told her and quickly redirected the conversation: “Do you have anything on Angel Island?”

Antonia smiled and tapped her scrap of paper. “I do. It’s on my list.” She pivoted and peered over a bookcase, toward the dark windows. “This way.”

She dug through a disorderly bin and pulled out a book. The cover design was plain, just black text on what appeared to be an aged white paper. But looking closer, Bo noticed faint shapes, the suggestion of a landmass on a band of water, seen through a dense fog. The island.

“Here.” Antonia handed the book to Bo. It was heavier than she expected for a paperback. The edges were soft and worn.

Antonia turned away and started to move a jumble of other items from the same bin into the cart. “Here,” she said again. “You might find something useful.”

Back in the office area, she put on house slippers and started to place everything into a large pack with an internal frame. She added reproductions of primary documents printed on transparent waterproof paper, a set of slide images, a drive loaded with digital files, a slide projector, and an overhead projector. Bo got the sense that she loaned material to anyone who asked, desperate to pass along knowledge: at least

this way the information had a chance of living on in the minds and projects of researchers.

“Do I really need all that stuff?” she asked, worried about how heavy the pack would be on her shoulders.

Antonia raised her eyebrows. “Well, if you want to view the stuff, yeah. Just a warning, though: there might be some hair and dust copied onto the transparencies. Most of the scanning was done in a rush, when we still had volunteers. Some of them were, hmm, less conscientious, let’s say, of how clean the images should be.”

Bo put on the pack and fastened the hip belt to balance the weight. She paused on her way out, looking back at the room of archives. “It’s a lot to remember,” she said.

Antonia leaned back in her chair, almost beaming. “It’s our job to remember,” she replied.

AT HOME BO pored over the articles and photographs.

She started with a book showcasing Genthe's work. His images of post-earthquake Chinatown had helped transform the neighborhood into a spectacle for tourists. He'd lobbied residents to hang red paper lanterns from their balconies and sold postcards printed with the image of his neighbors' daughters with raw silk woven into their braids, the caption identifying them as "slave girls." He convinced women to join a vaudeville troupe and dressed them in elaborate robes and ruched fabric that gave the illusion of cigar-size waists and wide hips, then combed their hair back before he photographed them. He used them to construct scenes that fed visitors' appetites for firsthand accounts of an underworld rife with opium and seedy commerce and prostitution. He shot a group of hunched men in black hats and black coats, chins lifted toward something off-screen; through his lens, they'd read as loiterers on their own blocks. Chinatown's bachelor societies soon gained notoriety among travelers—what curiosities, these gangs of laborers who played chess in the park, who must have been deprived of touch and headed toward a kind of extinction.

One photo showed shopkeepers hawking dried goods on a sidewalk, the barrels labeled in English: scallops, persimmon, barley, seeds. The caption stated that the scales were rigged an eighth of an ounce up; the adjustment increased revenue marginally, yet the implication was that these businesses might cheat their way into extraordinary wealth. Behind them, fresh meat hung from gates. Tied at the feet, cooked ducks were splayed open for inspection. The store interiors were too dark to make out.

Genthe's narrative repulsed Bo. He'd exploited dailiness and in the process invented a new Chinatown, one that satisfied the lurid curiosity of outsiders—yet these were some of the few images that preserved the faces of the people who'd lived there during that time. If she could just see into the shops, into the rooms in back, into the living spaces where he'd never

been invited. She touched the doorway in shadow and scratched at it until the ink came off under her nail.

She removed the rest of the library materials from the backpack. She read how the fire that followed the quake had swept downtown and slid up the streets, a churning black tunnel traveling erratically and causing mayhem. It devoured City Hall, incinerated all but the stately dome, transformed every page of public record to ash. The remaining walls, full of sand, had broken open.

These were also slides of Genthe's work; one set documented scenes of destruction. Bo fumbled with the projector but managed to set it up and load the carousel. The machine whirled and sputtered dust as she focused the first picture cast onto the wall. It fell into a low hum as she began to click through. Some slides were too degraded to view. A few were so brittle they tore.

The pictures she could make out told not of terror, which was short-lived, but of shock. Groups of men stood beside the rubble of collapsed buildings, under a sky filled with heavy, palpable smoke. Furniture and wooden beams jutted out of the mess. Department stores had caught fire, and Victorians had sunk into the muddy earth at absurd angles. Crisp facades remained, reducing buildings to two dimensions: the city now a singed paper skyline. As a child, on a visit to a novelty museum that featured salvaged attractions from a shuttered amusement park, Bo had peered into a coin-operated machine to see a medley of moving pictures from the immediate aftermath of the disaster and had felt as if she were there on those black-and-white streets herself.

She searched these images now for any clues of movement, of the moment about to follow, but they remained stubbornly still. She imagined how the ankles of each person must have shaken on the steep inclines in the aftershocks. Several times she startled, thinking she'd seen the figure of a woman among the groups of men, but they were only shadows and pieces of debris. Frustrated, she advanced through the slides more quickly.

Then, along the left edge of one photograph, in the rubble just beyond the shade of a low shop awning, a curious soft shape. She tweaked the focus

ring and adjusted the contrast to draw out a line, a form, any detail at all from that corner. But it was indiscernible, like trying to hear what an actor was whispering in the shadows of a theater's stage. Then she saw something bright: a bare leg attached to an embroidered shoe, extending from the dark.

A Chinese woman. Mia's "grandmother," perhaps? Bo imagined her leaving a boardinghouse early on that morning in April, the walls beginning to rattle, the building twisting up, the stairs coming apart. Outside, everything crumbling—bricks from facades, planks from scaffolding, men from the new gaping holes in buildings—their deep blue shapes spilling onto the street. The city coming undone. And then beside her, the voice of the man she'd just left to his dreams, a thin black line running down his face. He was crying. Windows shattered and glass arrows sailed toward them. He was crying for someone to help his mother.

She dug out the exhibition catalog of the Chinese American photographer's work. Her name was Mary and she'd taught herself the craft of lantern slide photography through textbooks, the preface read. She belonged to a camera club, prepared her own plates and images, and won awards for her work at a time when there were hardly any Chinese women present in the city and photography was reserved for white men and a few white women of means. She painted, too. What exceptional circumstances had brought her to America in 1868 and eventually, by marriage, into a prosperous family where she pursued her artistic ambitions to unlikely success, Bo wondered. It must have been lonely, to be in her position. She must have encountered bigotry, closed doors—yet this catalog in Bo's hands was proof that she'd made the work and had been recognized for it.

Bo reached for the book with the pale worn cover—the history of Angel Island—and began to page through it. For thousands of years, the Coast Miwok had traveled there on tule boats to hunt and fish and gather seed

crops. Then came Spanish rule, Mexican rule, United States rule; cattle ranching and military campaigns. Then, at some point, her own relatives.

The immigration station had opened in 1910, more than forty years after the photographer Mary had arrived, and twenty-eight years after Congress passed the exclusion act to restrict immigration from China. This outpost was an extension of that policy, the latest effort to curb the flow of Asian migrants arriving in search of opportunity. Almost immediately, the migrants had begun to chisel poems into the barrack walls of the detention center, and just as soon, administrators filled the engravings with putty and painted over them. The carvings returned, as did the efforts to conceal them, and this cycle continued until a fire forced the government to move the processing operations to San Francisco in 1940. Briefly, following the passage of Executive Order 9066, the government detained Japanese civilians in the same facilities, and later, Italian and German prisoners of war.

Then, in 1962, the island was converted to a state park. Eight years later, a park ranger discovered some remaining poems on a wall and enlisted the help of scholars and organizers to preserve the site's history as an immigration station. Their collaboration led to the establishment of the museum Bo had visited on her school trip and to the translation of hundreds of poems.

She flipped through the book in search of the translations, but some of the pages had stuck together. The edges tore as she slid her finger between two pages to separate them. A prickling feeling. Her arms went light. She set the book down and moved toward the corner of her apartment.

Before her courage could wane, she built a frame, stretched canvas over it, and gunned it in place with staples. Propped horizontally on the easel, the clean substrate seemed almost to glow with readiness. She stared until the surface glitched, betraying dimension: a picture window holding back a wall of snow, the blank of her mind awaiting her. She waited for the moment when something—an idea, a color—would break through.

SOON A SIGN arrived. One afternoon Mia grimaced oddly in her sleep, bitterness spreading across her face. Unable to get Mia's expression out of her mind, Bo borrowed it. She crept around the recliner and took photos from multiple angles until Mia, perhaps sensing that she was being observed, blinked awake.

Back home, Bo pinned a fresh sheet of paper to the wall. Better to do a study than approach the canvas. Mumbling an apology, she dipped a brush into a bottle of India ink and made a puddle at the center of the paper—a dark open dripping mouth—followed by two angry, ragged, spiraling hurricanes for nostrils. The eyes landed on top, high above the other features and to the left: two orbs shrunken to buttons, with deep creases radiating out in puckers.

Bo left the sheet hanging until night, as long as she could bear, before she tore it up and placed the pieces in a bin to be recycled into pulp, not even bothering to reuse the back sides as scrap. She'd made something monstrous, but she'd made something.

She could try to paint a real portrait of Mia, maybe. Just as an exercise. Just to keep going. All that training and dedication—she had the skills for something basic like this.

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Another evening, the logic of the day subsiding.

She returned to the easel and painted a brown oval at the center. But instead of a face, she saw an island hovering on a white sea. She pulled up the reference photos of Mia she'd taken surreptitiously and turned the canvas vertical. An old despair rattled up in her on a well-worn track. She noticed the feeling but pushed on, toward the knowledge that to paint also meant to forget.

A portrait was a story. The retelling would be her invention. Her choice of medium, her interpretation. She blocked out shapes in pink and yellow

over the brown. Before the paint dried, she added white to the area to create the illusion of transparency. The island retreated. All she saw was color, then a memory—almost unbearable—of skin. Instinct set in. Her hand moved with muscle memory across a giant featureless face, making eyes, a round nose, a shut mouth: a face she had drawn hundreds of times and so memorized its design, the wrist fastening the ghost of a bolt at the dinner table after a long factory shift. Her mother. Her mother, who would have been insulted to see this version of herself. “Ask yourself honestly,” an instructor had once said in a critique when Bo was starting out. “Are you just repeating yourself?”

That type of sting lasted. She took it personally. More than ten years later, when a painting of hers had been accepted for a juried show and she’d seen it lined up with the work of others, all she could think of was the instructor’s words. The elation of having been selected replaced with embarrassment.

It had been her first event in ages. Funds for the arts had been redirected to infrastructure and health care, but someone had scored a grant for a local exhibition. She was surprised at the number of participants. Having been out of the scene, she hadn’t realized how many artists still lived in town.

Their work was worthy and hers was not; that was clear to her. Her peers had collected accolades, honors, trophies; she, undecorated, had snuck into the show by mistake. She should’ve withdrawn her application to save face. All those art lessons her mother had sacrificed to pay for, even in lean times—what did she have to show for it? What dent had she made in the social fabric? She had done nothing with her talents and privileges.

After the closing reception, the artists splayed out on the gallery floor, full of wine, pleased with themselves, genuine and more generous than usual with their praise. They warmed with affirmation, let down their guard. The show had brought a reporter and donations of hors d’oeuvres, but no sales. Instead, to everyone’s elation, Bo and another artist negotiated a trade—his welded sculpture for her three-foot scroll of a flowing landscape—and they kissed to seal the contract while other supine artists cheered, the

echoes of their claps enveloping them all. In that moment, Bo felt again that she belonged, that she'd earned her place.

The next day she woke still riding that high, then immediately sickened at the sight of her work. Something changed after that—was it fortitude, age? She continued to paint, but without faith. A light switch had turned off. She called Joey, hoping for her trusty mix of pep talk and real talk, and Joey delivered: “No, you’re depressed. You’re phoning it in, but you’re still a painter.” All the same, the shift lasted, even as the fresh wound grew over with skin. All Bo had to do was pick at the scab.

The following year, she was solicited to show work for the same exhibition. She declined, but the curator insisted they wanted her in it—due to dwindling submissions, Bo suspected. They had to be desperate if they were asking for her. She agreed, dragged out her supplies, and made a mess of her apartment, feeling regretful and inadequate at every step. For weeks, she agonized over her painting. Days before installation, she still hadn’t finished.

That was when she’d canceled on Jenson’s event. The day of, while Bo had been working furiously to complete the painting, that’s when her mother had stopped by on her way to the lunch. Silent, arms behind her back, she’d studied the piece on the easel. Finally, she’d said, “I never thought I’d say this, but sometimes I wish you’d studied science or engineering.” As soon as she’d spoken, she’d tried to correct it: “I don’t mean it like that.”

All the faults stared back at Bo from the wall like a mirror. “How do you mean it, then?” she’d said in a low voice.

Her mother had responded carefully: “Sometimes...I just worry. Not about you—well, of course I worry about you—but, I mean, the rain.”

“The rain.”

“The droughts, the fires. Maybe if I’d pushed you in a different direction.”

“Then what?”

“Then you might have gone to college and had a little more security, that’s all.”

“What, like Jenson?”

“Well. I don’t worry about Jenson.”

“You’re blaming me for—”

“I don’t want to rehash this with you.” Her voice had been strained. “I’m not blaming you for anything. I just worry because I’m your mother and I want what’s best for you.”

“Don’t you have a lunch to be at?”

Her mother had started to speak—to reprimand her, Bo was sure. But then she’d stopped, the tension leaving her face, an intentional patience replacing it. “I’m going now. Your painting is very nice. All I meant to say was this”—she’d gestured out beyond the windows—“this isn’t the world I wanted for you.”

Bo had been short with her, as she’d been many times. The show was imminent, the unsolicited criticism had thrown her, she had no minutes to spare. No minutes for her mother, who had trekked over to her apartment with hot food in an insulated bag, who had told her good luck, I’ll see you next week at the show, take care of yourself and don’t stay up too late working. And that afternoon, a Wednesday, the most mundane of days, the flash floods had hit.

She’d pulled out of the show after that, dropped everything, put up flyers, called her district representative and all of her mother’s friends, slogged through standing water and caught an infection through her blisters, lit candles even though she never prayed. She remembered that shock of a morning when she was seven or eight, waiting for her mother to return from the store for hours, knowing for certain that she’d been orphaned, so certain that when her mother returned, her arm in a cast, Bo could only stare at her wordlessly, convinced she was a spirit, arrested by the knowledge that ghosts could be heard and smelled, that they could touch.

She’d never returned after the flood, though. For days, her mother’s apartment still smelled like the meal she’d brought to Bo; the laundry was still damp on the rack. Everything waiting. If Bo had just gone to the lunch that day, they would’ve at least had that moment together. Maybe her mother would still be alive.

The oval face looked past her blankly. The colors were wrong and she couldn't remember the right ones, let alone how to mix them. "I don't remember your face," she said, fighting tears. Her mouth rang with loneliness. It was like having been sung a hymn your whole life and now trying to write the score. She smeared the canvas with her palm until it was a muddy green blur, the face an island again, a place. She stumbled back from her mess. No portrait, then.

The next morning she set the canvas on the floor. The paint caught the light. She knelt and tilted her head to look across the surface. From that angle, the green shape of the island disappeared into a shining fabric—strangely, it seemed to be moving. It looked like a rippling lake.

“REMEMBER YOU HAVING a garden out here before,” Bo said.

It was after lunch one particularly warm afternoon in February. They were on the balcony, trying to escape Mia’s stuffy apartment. Bo felt a pinch on her arm and, too late, heard the whine of a mosquito. The basin Mia used to collect water for clearing out muddy corners had sat out too long unstirred.

“That? That was nothing compared to my old house.”

When Bo had worked next door, she’d seen Mia gardening out here. It wasn’t unusual. Many residents kept modest container gardens to save on food expenses and to ensure that they’d have the particular ingredients they wanted to cook with, things the roof vendors couldn’t be counted on to sell.

“I remember vegetables.”

Mia’s face was damp from the humidity and the blown-in rain. She dabbed at her cheeks with her sleeve. “I did okay. I got my plants to grow. I even sent Beverly seeds because I know she can’t get certain vegetables where she lives, but she wasn’t interested. She’d say, ‘What am I going to do with these?’ They live lives of convenience. They don’t even want free food!” She sat back in the plastic folding chair, exasperated. “So I gave them to the root seller instead. He was grateful. He has a thousand square feet of abandoned commercial farmland in the East Bay, and good yields. He knows how to take care of the seeds and grow them right. His parents were farmers who were forced to destroy their seeds and use government ones instead, so he understands the value, too. Of course, just the other month,” she said, pointing emphatically, “Grant asks me for seeds for his daughter’s new farm. Well, it’s too late!”

“So what happened?” Bo gestured toward their feet. “I mean, out here?”

“It got too hard to keep up.”

It had started at least ten years ago, she said. The weather kept changing. Growing conditions worsened. Hardier plants cycled through wilt and burn, and it took her longer to swap out one strain for a better one, to coordinate

seed exchanges with others in the building. Then came the rain. Ivies covered the walls and sent runners along most surfaces, and the fungal infestations rotted the soil in planters. The vines harbored rats and served as their expressway around town. One year they sampled every fruit on her dwarf apple tree and ruined the whole harvest. In a single season, squash bugs ruined the zucchini, a powdery fungus colonized the mint, and slugs devoured the cilantro and watercress. Even when she'd managed to get the aphids under control, hardly anything edible remained. The flowers wouldn't grow. The only color left had come from shreds of faded pink bakery ribbon that she'd used to make slings to support the final winter melons as they'd swollen with water.

Then the pain from arthritis did her in. When her joints started to ache and lock, she reserved her good days for walks and cooking, and gave up the garden.

She looked up from the empty patio floor. "That was it."

There was one night Bo remembered now, toward the end of Ricardo's life, when she'd been keeping vigil. She'd noticed a light fluttering across the leaves covering the patio wall. She crept to the sliding door and peered toward the source. The old woman next door was crouched on the adjacent patio with a flashlight in her mouth, splashing through the foliage with one hand and grasping a canister of salt in the other. Her focus was a small bed of gai lan, which Bo had admired on several occasions for its earth-dark green leaves and eruptions of yellow flowers, which miraculously drew in bees, and, on the underside of a leaf, had attracted a snail. Mia pried it off, and even from next door Bo could see its slick body writhe, its antennae retreat. Then Mia poured salt in its shell and let it froth for a long minute, not noticing or not minding the slime dripping down her hand, before rising to her slippered feet and tossing the snail over the ledge, into the night. Transported back to that time now, Bo remembered how struck she'd been by Mia's nimble movements; Ricardo, decades younger, lay in the next room, his body giving out.

Now sweat glued Bo's legs to the plastic chair. The air had gotten thicker and wetter, a hot sponge pressed against her face.

"I was thinking about some of the stories you told me," she said.

"And?"

"And I'd like to make something for you, something to help capture them."

"My stories? For what?" Mia looked ruffled, confused.

"I think they should be remembered," she said. "To send forward in time, but also for you to have, to remind you of everything you've done and what this place used to be like."

"A record of my life?"

"Something in that spirit," she said, though she'd meant something less literal than she suspected Mia was imagining.

Mia went still—a mathematician working out a complex equation. She looked younger somehow.

"Okay," she said finally. She nodded, seeming to come to an agreement with herself, tentative but pleased. "That could be nice. I don't know what you mean by capture my life, but if it makes you happy, do it."

For every meaningful project Bo had completed, there'd been a moment—spiky and charged—just before she'd committed to it. That was how she knew she had something worth pursuing. It pierced her now; she'd have to see this through.

Neither of them spoke or moved for a long time. Bo felt three new bites on her arm and watched as the welts widened into orange mounds, red pinpricks at their centers—horrid, hot little suns. In her misery, she scratched open the skin.

"Don't scratch," Mia scolded.

Bo slapped at her arm and stood. They had to get out of the heat. "Hungry?" she asked.

"We just ate."

"A walk?"

"Too rainy." Mia leaned over and prodded at the bites. "The flesh is too hard. Benadryl, on the shelf above the sink." She scooted forward,

preparing to stand. “I have more stories, you know.”

—

They went inside, but it was still more stifling than outside. Bo pulled the wheelchair from the closet and announced a trip to the community garden on the hundredth floor. Mia, irritable but too antsy to resist, seated herself, emphasizing, “For distances only.” The chair had lost its initial charge, so Bo pushed.

The wheels caught and spun as they entered the elevator, then locked once in the corridor for no apparent reason, but soon they were outside on the patio, breathing cleaner air.

The garden was a small enterprise, south-facing and nicely maintained by a few residents who didn’t have their own outdoor space. The gardeners kept the smothering vines at bay. Near the entrance, small plots jammed with chives and yao choy showed signs of regular harvesting. In an area protected by convertible walls, vegetables grew on heat pads under lamps. Only one other person was there: a woman, elderly, of course, perhaps in her nineties, who sat under an awning in a camping chair blaring opera on a portable speaker. She lifted a hand to acknowledge their presence.

“Don’t know her,” Mia said, loud enough for the woman to hear. She got up from the chair to inspect the beds. She checked the undersides of leaves, trimmed old growth with communal shears, picked off insect eggs and crushed them with her nails. She was enjoying herself.

The new space was invigorating. Flowers climbed and trailed everywhere, creating a pleasing network of blues and blazing orange and pale pink. It was refreshing to be surrounded by more than green, to move through planted spaces someone had composed and maintained. That morning Bo had tried to work on the painting, but the canvas had refused reentry. Here, among the living colors and textures, that pressure to make progress dissipated.

The excursion was doing them both some good. Inspired, Bo pinched off a few flowers, herbs, and sprigs of fern and tucked them into a pocket to

press later. Then she arranged a rusted bistro furniture set under a rain shield, laid an oilcloth over the table, and poured two cups of cold tea from the thermos she'd prepared.

"This used to give shade," Mia called from the far corner, her hand on the trunk of a tree whose roots had long outgrown its pot. "Now it's an umbrella."

The other woman chuckled and swung her head toward Mia to say, "You remember that, too!"

"No one's taking care of it," Mia laughed as she passed her. "Everything has changed."

"Mm!" the other woman affirmed.

Mia joined Bo at the table and sipped the tea contentedly. After a moment, she changed the subject. "Chinese New Year is coming up. Next week."

Bo turned to face her and startled at how much older she seemed in the daylight. The deep folds of her skin seemed to melt around her features. It was very possible this would be her last new year.

"Is there anything you want me to prepare?"

The grooves in Mia's forehead deepened. "Like what?"

Bo tried to think of a basic gesture Mia might appreciate to mark the holiday, but the traditions she'd grown up with were, as her mother had put it, diluted. Neither of them liked mooncake, but her mother would buy one for them to share, and they would eat it obediently in slivers over the course of a week. For some reason having to do with luck, they avoided showers and scissors. Her mother and Uncle Winston exchanged sacks of oranges, arguing about how many to stack in the bowl, and sometimes delivered them to elders as well, some of whom were relatives, though no one could trace exactly how, other than that at some point their ancestors had come from the same village. Those were boring visits, but Bo tolerated them, knowing that at some point she would receive red envelopes. Later, when she was an adult, all they really did to celebrate was look up the zodiac year.

"Oranges?" Bo suggested.

“Are you dreaming?”

“Or a new outfit?”

“What for?”

“Wait,” Bo said. “There was this vegetarian dish...” When she’d had the ingredients, her mother would approximate a watery noodle concoction with mushrooms, water chestnuts, and cabbage that her own parents used to make, the recipe poorly rebuilt from memory. Neither of them would comment on how bad it tasted.

Mia perked up. “Jai. Every family has their own version.”

“I could try to make it?” Bo said, though she had no idea how.

Mia smelled her tea, considering the offer. “No,” she said finally, maybe out of mercy. Her face relaxed. “Don’t bother. It won’t taste right.”

They stayed for over an hour. Mia tapped her fingers for a refill, then dozed. A few people came and went, and the greens gave way to rich blue shadows that eventually deepened to black, transforming the space. Before they left, Mia snipped a bouquet of bolted cilantro, gripping it like a torch. She gave Bo half when they got back to the apartment.

At home, Bo pressed her cuttings between heavy books. A teacher had taught her to do this with the wildflowers she’d picked as a girl. Dried, they would give her pleasure for a little longer.

—

Two days later, as she removed the cuttings, blue swept through her mind. She recalled a unit on cyanotype in one of her early art classes. It was a practical, pre-Xerox, pre-digital way to duplicate documents—specifically blueprints—that had been rediscovered by artists in the 1960s. For her homework that week, she’d played around with it and found herself entranced by the negative shape of each form, glowing white against a deep blue aurora. She’d turned in a tall stack of compositions of household objects, leaves, even fingernail clippings, then forgot entirely about cyanotype as the class moved on to other techniques.

But now she was seeing the possibilities of this process. She wanted to preserve pieces of history, and here was a way to capture almost any form, from botanical specimens to heirloom jewelry to weather, with the assist of arrangement and light.

She found the old bottles of chemicals in a box of supplies. After dark, she mixed up a solution and coated a few sheets of watercolor paper with the emulsion to make them light-sensitive.

The next day, before lunch, she brought two sheets of the treated paper to the roof. She draped one over the roof ledge and laid the second on the floor and pinned it in place with a rock. Then she stepped back and let the sunlight and rain do their work. It was an exercise of the present moment. Runoff streamed down the sheet on the ledge, water pooled on the sheet on the ground. Shadows dodged the prints and the emulsion turned copper green. She set the timer for twenty-two minutes, knowing the exposures would be weak, with the overcast skies blocking the UV rays. She watched the clouds. As the timer ran down, she grew impatient and found herself wishing for the impossible: strong, high-noon sunshine to speed the process along.

—

Back indoors, she had one more sheet of paper to expose. She closed the drapes and laid it by the window, then gathered the pressed herbs and flowers and fronds, utensils, a shot glass, research transparencies, a few mushrooms twisted off the grow wall. She arranged and rearranged them until she'd achieved a balanced composition. As a final flourish, she flung a handful of Mia's I Ching sticks onto the page, a story of the future written in whittled ivory. She covered the arrangement with a glass pane and opened the curtains to begin the exposure.

Then it was time. She filled the bathtub and slid in the first print from the roof. Water lapped over the paper, waking the dream-blue shapes. She held her breath as the paper transformed, revealing clues as to what had transpired on its surface for the duration of its exposure to the sun.

Indigo bled everywhere, inky, scratchy, irradiated, vascular. Milky shapes and textures glowed where the paper had been protected from light: cascades, smoke, comet tails, flecks, dribbles, blasts, grit, lines as fine as fishbones, lines as sprawling as nerve branches, rain drawn by rain. Each blue mark seemed to vibrate on the surface, like a galactic transmission, like a portal she might plunge into. She lifted the paper from the tub and laid it on the floor to dry. A trail of blue drops lined the tile.

As the second, then third sheet slipped into the water, her skin started to prickle. The blue seemed to gain an inward velocity; her first thought was of drowning.

She pressed herself against the tub, hoping to be soothed by the cold, and focused on the stark lines of the fortune-telling sticks. She'd meant for this to be an opportunity for experiment and play, but now she was on her knees, trying to remember how to breathe.

The first print had dried by the time she stopped shaking. In the bottom-right corner, she wrote in pencil: *February 15, 22 minutes, roof, with rain*. It was just a moment in time, imperfectly represented. She painted over the image with another coat of emulsion, leaving only a trace of the original exposure along the borders. She would do it again. She would collect another moment, and another, again. The residue of panic thinned, but she knew by that spike, that charge, that she was moving closer to an offering for Mia. She just needed to follow it.

THE LUNAR NEW year setup at the citrus vendor's stand featured a faltering pomelo and some tennis balls spray-painted orange, but as usual only his preserves were for sale. Bo went to other roofs to see if by some miracle anyone else had oranges. It was Wednesday, her day off, but she wanted to stop by at Mia's with a surprise.

It was noisy out now. She thought she heard the sputtering of firecrackers, but it might have been the construction crew repairing a footbridge. The foreperson alternated between shouting orders over the drilling, rumbles, and beeps and scaring off a person trying to steal power tools.

She wandered farther from home and eventually, four or five roofs over, found a booth selling cherry blossom branches. Rarely did she travel this far, though her recent trip to the library had emboldened her to move beyond her narrow circuits. On a walk earlier that week, she'd discovered an indoor badminton court with a waiting list, an interfaith church, and a textile vendor who produced leather out of apple skins, leaves, just about any material her customers brought to her.

A propulsive soundtrack of drums and cymbals was playing nearby, maybe an audio recording of a lion dance. At the table, customers jostled one another to claim the best flowers. Bo went to the section with branches they had rejected; she had begun to gather a few when she noticed a familiar face. Janice, an old friend of her mother's, had pushed to the prime spot to take her pick.

It had been at least fifteen years since Bo had last seen her. Janice had latched on to Bo at a holiday party, speaking with great urgency. Recently widowed, she'd been raising her sons alone and caring for her ailing parents as well: "Two teenage boys, can you imagine? They don't talk to me, they don't tell me anything. My father, stage-four liver cancer. My mother can't cook anymore. They call it the sandwich generation. I only thank God my in-laws passed before all of this."

“That sounds very difficult to manage,” Bo had said, looking for her mother, or anyone, to rescue her. Clueless as to how to respond to Janice’s unfiltered distress, she’d taken a step back, but Janice had stepped toward her to close the gap.

“It is. It’s very, very difficult. I keep forgetting my husband is gone. My son, he was the one who found his father. He tried to do CPR, he went to get help. He won’t talk to me about it.” She’d stopped talking then, abruptly, expectantly.

It embarrassed Bo to remember her response. After a sympathetic, insufficient pat on the arm and a mumbled assurance about the healing powers of time, she’d found an excuse to slip away. And it had worked; she hadn’t given another thought to Janice’s grief until now.

Time had smoothed the edges of Janice’s suffering. In fact, she seemed younger than before. Whereas the others around them were drenched, she looked refreshed, her mouth holding a serene partial smile as she thrust forward some bills for her purchase. Her gray hair swung in a neat bob. Beside her, a woman of similar age provided a buffer for the frantic, grabbing arms of other shoppers. The two of them nudged free from the crowd, which closed behind them.

“Janice?”

“Yes?” Still smiling, she squinted. It was the same look Bo’s mother used to have when she ran into former students in public—impossible to remember them all.

“It’s Bo. Nora’s daughter.”

“Bo!” She handed the branches to her companion, who looked at Bo curiously. “Oh, I was so upset to hear about your mom. Her friendship meant the world to me, even though we weren’t in touch that often anymore.”

To hear someone else speak of her mother—a valve reopened. Once again Bo could think of no good response, so she only nodded. She filled with new compassion for the woman who had spoken to her with such raw feeling all those years ago, when she’d been unequipped to offer any grace, too young to understand that she needed only to listen.

“This is Sue. Sue, this is my friend Nora’s daughter. She’s a very talented artist.”

Sue linked her arm into Janice’s. “Is that right?”

“Nice to meet you.”

“You still painting?”

Bo hadn’t expected Janice to remember that she was an artist. She thought about mentioning the project she was working on, but there was nothing to report other than failed first attempts. “No,” she said. “I don’t do art anymore.”

Janice leaned toward her. “Why are you still living here?” she asked, chin lifted. “My sons moved to China the year the rain started. They said, ‘Mom, you have to come with us,’ but I told them no, I live here, my friends are here. What am I going to do in China? I’ve never even been there. If they gave me grandkids, maybe, right? But otherwise, no.”

Janice’s sons were a few years younger than Bo, but their social circles had overlapped on occasion. It made sense that they’d moved; they were fluent in Mandarin, held degrees in economics, and had done a lot of business in Asia. They had always been smart and focused. She had started to explain her job when Janice interrupted again.

“For us old and older people, it makes sense to stay. But you’re still young.”

“I know.”

“Are you married? Kids?”

“No.”

“Seeing someone?”

“Not really.”

Of course, she knew it was possible for her to pursue a life somewhere else. Not China, but she had people in places that weren’t here. She felt uncomfortable now, with the homesickness of someone who was home.

“You should go where your family or friends are. Your mom would want that.” Janice jabbed a finger at Bo’s arm. “She’d want you to be with people who love you, huh?”

“Yeah, I know. I’m going to join my cousin up in Vancouver. It’s just this job—”

“Is it a good job? Pays you well?”

“It’s enough.”

“After your job is done, you go.” Janice took the branches back from Sue and extended them to Bo. “You should take these.”

For some reason, the offering made her want to cry. “Oh, that’s okay. I can get my own.”

“These are the best ones. Take them. We’ll buy some more.”

“Take them,” Sue agreed.

“That’s very kind. Thank you.”

“Sun nien fai lok, okay?”

Bo smiled and held the branches close. “Okay.”

—

When Bo arrived at Mia’s apartment, she found the living room busy with shadows from a muted program that was being projected onto the bare wall. Mia was asleep in her armchair. An alarm was going off: time for her evening pills.

The vine curtain outside the window glowed as the sun dropped, washing the kitchen in flutters of sickly pea-colored light. Bo stopped the alarm and held a dish at the mouth of the dispenser as an assortment of pills poured out, cringing at the sound they made on the ceramic, like gravel on clean ice. She stood the blossoms in a tall jar.

She switched on a lamp and knocked a knuckle on the meal tray beside Mia to wake her. Mia’s glasses sat askew on her face and for a moment gave her the appearance of a confused child. She stared at the pills.

“I just took those,” she mumbled, but Bo saw stiffness in her muscles and knew that she hadn’t. She stood watch until Mia swallowed the pills, relieved when she didn’t argue further. If left alone, would she even take them?

“I brought you these,” she said, pointing at the flowers. She regretted the timing, which made it seem like a reward for taking the meds, a little treat for the obedient pet.

Mia looked but didn’t reach for them. “Cherry blossoms? How did you get them? I never see them anymore.”

“Someone helped me.”

“Put them in water so they’ll last.” She pulled a red envelope from her pocket and shoved it at Bo. “I have lai see for you.”

“You shouldn’t give that to me, right?”

“What do you mean?”

“Isn’t it just for kids?”

“Huh? Who taught you?” Mia shook her head. “You’re not married. Take it.”

Bo accepted with both hands.

“In Chinatown, every family bought a fifty-pound confetti sack for the regular new year, so at midnight everyone in the street was up to their knees in paper. For Chinese New Year, the paper was just as high, but all red from firecrackers.”

“Did you walk around in it?”

“Beverly did. She jumped in the paper all night. I made her wear heavy clothes for protection. One of her classmates got his finger blown off one year.”

Just then the call light pulsed and Beverly’s image appeared. She was hunched and seated behind a table piled high with food. A blur of children moved about in the foreground. A yellow puppy bounded in and out of view.

“Speaking of,” Bo said.

“Beverly?”

“Mom, hi, how are you doing?” They could barely hear her through the cacophony of scolding, chatter, static, and barks. “Bo, hi, hi. Nice to see your faces.”

“Happy new year,” Mia said, and Bo waved.

“Sorry for the noise. The kids aren’t cooperating today.”

“They don’t know how to behave. It’s because no one disciplines them.”

“Mom, don’t be so brutal. They’re disciplined all the time. They’re just playing.”

“Me, brutal?” Mia looked to Bo in disbelief. “Who abandoned their mother for the past thirty years?”

“Stop it. Are you doing anything special today?”

“Why are you in a wheelchair?”

Someone quickly rolled the chair out of view. The dog had reappeared and the children surrounded it, their backs turned to the cameras. Bo felt a wave of longing at the bustling scene, then unexpected softness for Beverly. That life couldn’t have existed here, not in a drowned city, not with Mia.

“Don’t worry,” Beverly’s voice called from off-screen. “I fell but I’m fine. No broken bones.”

“You fell?” Mia squinted at the image. “Where are you?”

“Hi, Po Po,” a man’s voice said.

Mia agitated the air. “Grant? I can’t see you. Who’s there?”

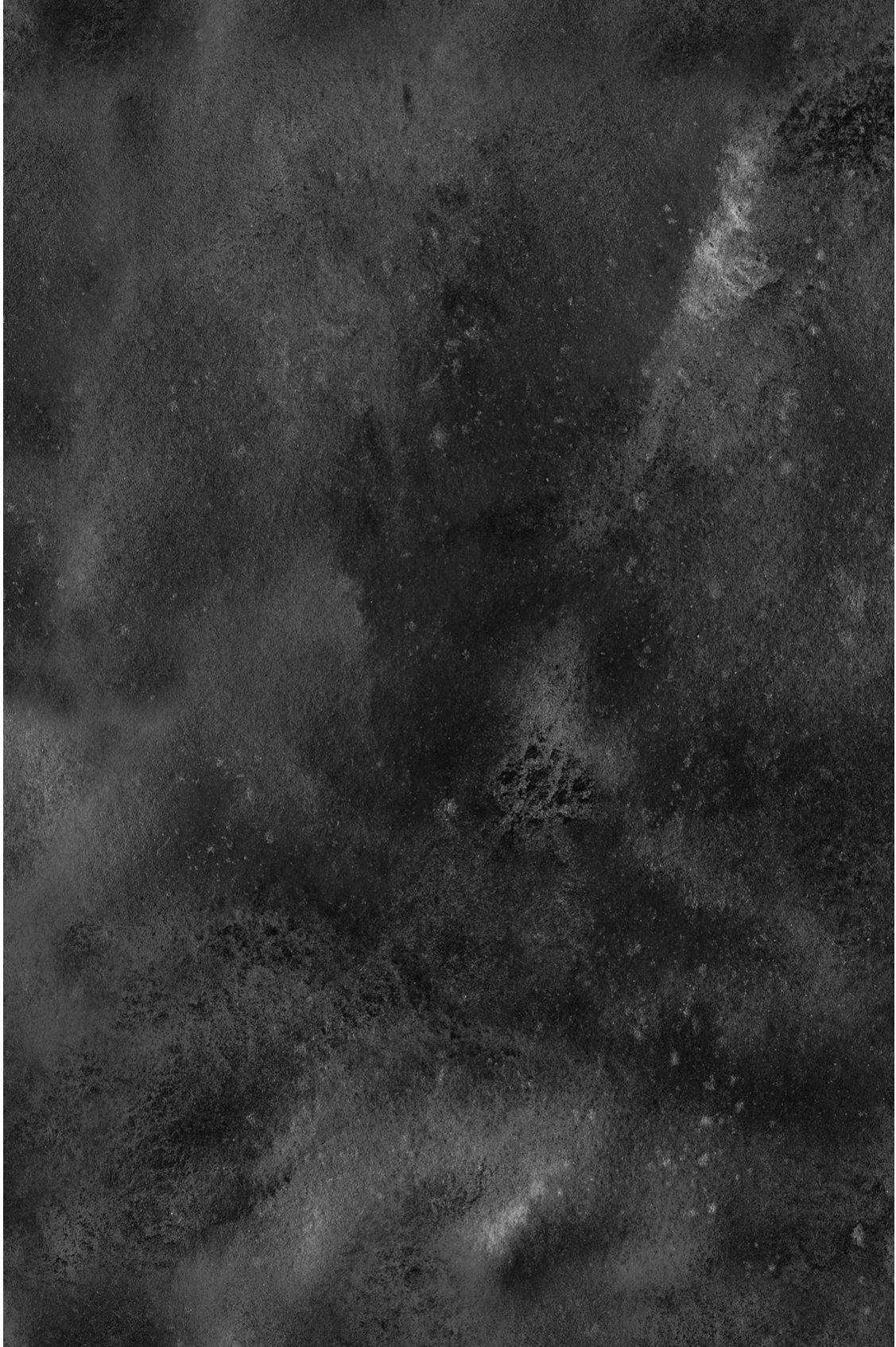
No response.

“Do you want to hang up?” Bo asked after a minute. “We can ask them to call back later, when it’s quiet.”

Mia kept watching. The children still hadn’t paid any attention to her. Some had run off, and the two boys remaining yelled “Sit!” at the dog, who complied for a second at each command, then leaped up and licked their faces, setting off a new round of giggles. Mia laughed, too. Beverly appeared again, being pushed by someone young, but neither looked up. They didn’t realize Mia was still there.

Bo moved to end the call, but Mia said quietly, “Don’t touch.” She watched in silence, one hand rubbing her shoulder, until the call cut out and the scene vanished.

THE FLOATING MUSEUM



THE FLOATING MUSEUM tilted gently as Bo stepped on board on Friday morning.

No one else was there or had been in the recent past, from the looks of it. Her shoes made prints on the dust-coated floors as she wandered past the familiar ceramics, the hanging mobiles, the arsoned church remade from charred wood and steel wire. Who knew how much longer all this would exist?

The arts commission had opened the museum four years earlier, down by the docks, in a hasty effort to consolidate and house the works that had survived from the city's long-standing museums, all of which had flooded.

At first, Bo had been afraid to confront the losses and had avoided making the trip. She'd had mixed feelings about museums to begin with. They were important cultural institutions for locals, tourists, and artists, but the cost-prohibitive special exhibitions excluded most visitors. An entire generation could suffer through one curator's poor vision. Increasingly static collections failed to speak to the evolving public; leadership boards claimed they agreed but failed to do anything about it, then blamed their inaction on funding cuts. And now the city was left with much worse: a hodgepodge of pieces thrown onto a refurbished ferryboat. Bo preferred to seek inspiration among public works, but the city's murals were rain-battered now, its outdoor sculptures drowned, the underwater installations that had emerged post-flooding studded with marine life, no longer accessible.

But her mother had eventually bought her tickets to the floating museum, and when they'd gone together, Bo regretted having waited so long to visit. Being in a gallery always helped inspire her when she reached an impasse. Alone in a room of paintings, she would feel her synapses begin to restore. She thought of Joey's reports from the Van Gogh museum in Amsterdam—how visitors stopped on their way out to weep on the steps. Nothing could match the gouged and glimmering surfaces of an oil

painting, the feeling of standing fully attentive before the hand of a long-gone friend you didn't know you had.

Walking through the museum now, Bo noticed that the galleries were sparser than she remembered and lacked cohesion. The three-dimensional projection of gilded frames, meant to replace the ones that had rotted, only added to the vacant atmosphere. One consolation was having the rooms to herself, previously impossible in museums because of the guards. Briefly she considered sneaking a piece home with her. Surely no one was monitoring the security system with any care.

The largest gallery held the largest paintings, all of them wider than the span of her arms. One was covered in furious red loops, like the illegible script of a person who'd forgotten how to write. Beside it, a painting with the same dimensions was layered in moss-green scribbles and scratch marks painted by an exuberant hand. She paused, almost spellbound by the obsessive lines, until the eerie colors of a landscape pulled her across the room. The painter, an abstract expressionist who'd been born in 1936 in Chinatown, had made several renderings of wine country while looking after a vineyard. The clash of colors in this piece had an arresting effect: yellow-blue haze, viridian-green hills against a sand-pink field that melted into pale tentative shapes, all sitting atop a charged cobalt-blue landform.

A jumble of flickering colors in her periphery drew her to a dark room at the end of the gallery. She sat on a stool while a video played on repeat, showcasing the work of an installation artist whose medium was explosives. He'd studied the history, landscape, and politics of each site for years before creating his designs. Then, when all the elements—permits, crews, weather—aligned, he shot meticulously timed fireworks that detonated into mesmerizing formations in the sky and began to dissolve instantly, the epic bursts of smoke and color streaking and bleeding and spiraling as they fell earthward. Gunpowder cherry trees in blossom in Japan, gunpowder tornadoes above the Potomac in D.C., gunpowder elegies to the environment in Shanghai, each as spectacular as live paintings by the gods. Bo watched the video twice, maybe out of a drive to commit the fleeting scenes to memory, then stumbled back into the bright gallery.

Her short-lived attempt to make a portrait had failed, but there was something to the idea that persisted for her. The subject of a portrait knew that her face would outlive her. It was a memorial, and whatever direction Bo's project took, it had to be a memorial, too.

So much of the home they'd known had disappeared, and those losses would only continue. Bo thought of a museum in Athens that her mother had once told her about, built on top of an archaeological site that was aligned just so with the Acropolis. At the entrance, an expanse of glass had served as the ground floor of the museum and the ceiling of the dig. And all throughout the museum, there were spaces designated for the unearthed and missing. An empty place for the stolen marble kore, for instance, should the British Museum ever return her to stand with her sisters. A gallery filled with the remains of sculptures of horses and warriors, all displayed with beams of light, raw wire, plaster replicas, gaps, and captions, in place of their missing parts. Monuments never built, but discoverable in the cracks and silences.

Each generation built with the intention of passing along what was meaningful, but the cycles always repeated. If not pillaging, then greed or neglect, willful or ordained patterns of amnesia, mere clumsiness or environmental disaster. The ones who came next were left to sort through whatever crumbs happened to remain.

She considered again what it might mean to honor a dying person, to honor a disappearing world. What form would hold all the pieces of a life? Of a place? That would be her aim: to create a monument for Mia, for the home they both had loved. It would be determined by her choice of medium, her curation of history, the stories she included and the stories she omitted, the way she manipulated the materials and pieced them together.

As she exited the museum, she messaged Antonia: *I'm looking for forms of memorial. Can you help?*

—

At home she stood at the easel. The canvas felt too small now, the sludge-green shape at the center too dense, like a flattened stone. The room stank of turpentine and her head began to throb—warm days reactivated the chemicals she'd once spilled onto the floorboards, a noxious reminder of her mistakes, of how long she'd lived in this unforgiving space. She turned the canvas to the wall.

Then, a lightness. She knew to expect the return of dissatisfaction, that thin steel wire running from first humiliation to a constant baseline of doubt, the body like sheet metal reverberating with regret. But today, she welcomed it. She apologized out loud, almost cheerfully, unsure of to whom. She was relieved by how easily she could let the failure go.

Her head filled with color. Sheer yolky swipes, washes of fuchsia, transparent fields of green, spills of rich royal blue. But she turned away from the paints, toward the recycling bin instead.

—

In the last minutes of daylight, she tore one of her cyanotype prints into paper scraps and started to arrange them. Her elbow hit a tray and knocked over a jar, which broke on the floor. Water wet the scraps and seeped into the planks. Instead of getting the dustpan, she reached for the angry-edged shapes. Corralling them into a pile, she lost the tiniest pieces to the cracks and the sides of her hands. She pushed the pile to hear the music of it, then lined the pieces from largest to smallest, assembled them into a no-color collage.

A shattered glass couldn't be returned to its original form. But—she sucked the spots of blood from her fingertips—maybe she could reorder the shards according to some new logic.

She sat with the paper, the glass.

Errant pieces with no organizing principle to string them together amounted to nothing. If she could just grasp the system, the arrangement would follow, she could pour it all into a shape. She wanted the elegance of

a triptych, for instance, where a color scheme or a repeated figure might connect into a full picture. Each panel would carry echoes of the others.

Purple pulsed behind her eyelids. She willed the pieces to fall into formation. She blinked to return to the room and found all of it—scraps, floorboards, walls, hands—tinted green. A heavy cloud passed; the room dimmed to dark. She let in the riddle of composition.

ON MONDAY, BEVERLY called while Mia was sleeping. Bo was beginning to wonder if she timed her check-ins to coincide with Mia's naps. She was on her feet, slicing fruit in a kitchen unfamiliar to Bo.

"You look like you're doing better than you were last week," Bo said.

"You're observant." Beverly transferred a few pieces of cut fruit onto a dish. "I had a procedure done. I'd prefer if you didn't mention that to my mother."

"Of course." Even at a hundred and five, it seemed, a daughter still kept things from her mother. After a moment, Bo shifted the conversation: "I was wondering, do you have any family photos?"

"You know, my mother put together an album when I told her I was moving. She insisted on talking me through who was who on every page." Beverly held up the knife. "Actually, we got in a fight about it."

"About the photos?"

"She wanted me to take notes, but it was a day or two before I was leaving, and I had so much to do for the move. I told her she should've written it down herself, if it was so important for me to know. She said I was ungrateful and left, didn't even see us off. She can be stubborn. I'm sure you know."

Bo smiled politely. She'd expected Beverly to be invested in, or at least curious about, this material, especially with several later generations of their family close by. But then again, hadn't Bo been uninterested in the genealogical research her mother had tried to give to her? You didn't know that one day you might go looking for this information, and by then it would be too late.

Beverly resumed cutting. "I still have the album, though, and I guess she was right—I do wish I could tell my family who everyone is. Why do you ask?"

"I'm putting together something for your mother," Bo said. "Something about her life. I'd love to see pictures from her past, if there's a way."

“Aha.” Beverly looked at Bo approvingly, then set down the knife. The dish was stacked high with fruit slices now. “Yeah, I’ll look for it. I’ll get something to you.”

—

When she got home from her shift, she saw a package leaning against her door, waiting for her.

Antonia had written: *I’ve been thinking about your inquiry, and also the idea of a memorial. Take these transparencies, too, since the projector is under your care.* The box contained more files, a bound custom primer showcasing a selection of examples from the archives, and a stack of yellowed acetate. She’d pulled all of this together in just a few days.

She’d given examples of “traditional” monuments, which publicly accounted for an absence and sanctioned it, the primer explained at its start. Stone edifices acknowledged genocides, plaques displayed iron-cast history, marble busts celebrated generals. All were markers of supposed victories or losses.

Monuments were meant to weather time, but time only ever brought change. Statuary could be additive—vandalized or enhanced, depending on your perspective—or chiseled away by wind and rain. The earth could split open and swallow a bust. Anything built could be gone tomorrow.

And then there were memorials with more “life.” Bo flipped to examples of gardens and groves, paper cranes and candlelight vigils, graffiti murals and heaps of bouquets that needed no approvals. Also commemorative holidays, digital remembrances, the annual chalk drawings to remember factory workers killed in a fire, all the hand-stitched squares for the AIDS Memorial Quilt, which had covered the National Mall, then traveled from city to city for display.

For the ephemeral, the librarian advised, look to Richmond, Virginia. One summer, during a period of national grief and unrest, activists and artists in the city had lit up Confederate monuments each night with cycling images of ancestors, leaders, and martyrs, people who spoke truth to power

or died in grave injustices. Along the base of one statue, messages scripted in spray paint; along the belly of the horse, words of justice; at the top, the general relegated to shadows. This went on until each statue was decommissioned, toppled, melted down for bronze.

Elsewhere in Richmond, there was a woman who plastered posters on lampposts across town. Each poster invited viewers to dial a phone number and listen to a recorded narrative about the history of the city, the hidden stories of the people who had once been enslaved there. Here, the recordings would say, beneath this interstate, was the site of a slave-trading complex. This sprawling lawn, now a protected site, was once a university parking lot, and before that an animal shelter, and before that a jail, and before that the site of an African burial ground and the gallows where an enslaved man was hung for plotting to stage a revolt.

It took so long to approve and erect a statue, let alone establish a museum. But with a tub of wheat paste and a designated phone line, this artist had been able to put together a memorial to engage the public in the stories of their ancestors.

The last page of the primer that Antonia had sent was about San Francisco, covering the city's first archaeological landmark, which had been located on old park land on a scenic bluff in the northwestern corner of the city. In the late 1800s, before it was a park, the place had been the city cemetery, which itself had been relocated from the future site of City Hall. There was a funerary structure there as well, set up by a benevolent association to manage the temporary burial site for Chinese immigrants whose remains were eventually to be returned to China for proper burial—like Mia's so-called grandmother. But some were never returned. Then the cemetery was relocated again, this time outside city limits, though only some of the bodies were actually disinterred and moved before the land was repurposed for recreational use. A golf course, a fine arts museum, coastal trails, and a VA medical center were all developed above tens of thousands of bodies that remained in the earth. For well over a century, construction and maintenance crews in the park routinely uncovered bones and casket parts as they tended to the property.

In the early 2020s, a group of local organizations came together to preserve the legacy of the burial ground and honor the Chinese immigrants who had been interred there. Without a physical marker, they asserted, those histories would disappear. Ultimately the city designated what remained of the stone funerary structure a monument. Antonia had included a handwritten annotation at the bottom of the page: *Can still picture it there when I close my eyes. Remained in place until the mudslides. Presumed washed to sea.*

Bo closed the report. Antonia had outdone herself. She'd intuited the undercurrents of Bo's question and answered with example after example of striking dimensional memorials that made Bo's recent attempts look embarrassingly deficient.

Bo thought back to a high-rise that had burned long before the rain, when the city was drought-stricken and dense, and she'd just begun her first art course at the community college. It was easy to be enraged. No sprinklers, no alarms, no way to usher the scores of residents out. The facade lined in asbestos panels that had turned into fuel. It had burned for a hundred hours. Various memorials had been proposed afterward. A young architect from the college who'd grown up in that neighborhood submitted the winning plans: they would leave the hollow, blackened tower standing so it wouldn't be possible to forget; they would encase sections with charcoal-colored concrete panels like armor that couldn't catch fire; they would build a garden on the roof to invite life to return to the site and, this time, flourish.

But any memorial was for the living, and the living moved with myopic urgent need. Like many public proposals, this one provoked vehement opposition. Neighbors complained at town hall meetings, citing carcinogens, arguing that all the city would be funding here was a permanent eyesore. To spotlight decay and horror and failure, they felt, would lower public morale. They pointed to the budget deficit and claimed

the land would be better used for new affordable housing, even though developers were losing interest in the region. They insisted on waiting for better, more ambitious proposals that might meet some as yet undetermined criteria. They agonized over knowing that their loved ones' remains would still be inside the wreckage.

So the idea stayed exactly that. It lived only in the project brief and the minds of those few who had seen in the concept drawings an acknowledgment of immense human loss and a design that might honor it.

Bo had seen the proposal, and it haunted her.

"When the next tower burned," she'd heard the architect say in an interview many years later, filmed at his home in the stable city where he'd moved his practice, "we remembered what we'd lost. We wished we'd gone ahead and built it."

She'd build a form, right here. Out of glue or light, chalk or metal, some alchemy of flowers, paper, stone—she still wasn't sure. But it would be something with dimension. A shape to add to the skyline. A shape for what was lost.

“NEW OLD PICTURES!” Mia said as soon as Bo arrived for her next shift. There was a slight wheeze in her voice, and her breathing sounded shallower than usual.

As promised, Beverly had shared the photos Bo had requested, loading them directly to the living room frame. There were more to come, she said, once she found them. Mia had noticed right away. The frame was in her lap, cycling through images.

Bo pulled a chair next to her. It appeared, based on the image quality, that Beverly had photographed the photographs in her possession. Bo paused the autoplay so they could look at their own pace.

It stopped on an image of the young family at the top of a steep hill. Mia with cat-eye sunglasses and shiny curls, Kwok squinting and standing contrapposto with a hand in his pocket, Beverly in a starched dress, pouting, only three or four years old. Behind them, a streak of bay was visible above the skyline.

“Everyone was so young,” Bo said.

“Mrs. Ching took that picture. Her husband had a camera, so everybody went to them when they wanted photos.” Mia zoomed in on the figures. “Look at the outfits. It must have been the early 1950s.”

There were around twenty images in the batch. None were remarkable and yet they all pulled Bo in, offered new clues into Mia’s life. A house in direct sun with peeling paint. An anniversary portrait. A tourist group posed at the edge of the Grand Canyon, the people blurry but the grooves and bands of the rock in sharp focus, glowing pink, orange, purple, red. Mia and a boy seated in front of a Christmas tree, each with a wrist draped over a knee. A man at a podium, caught in mid-speech.

“That’s Grant. He’s very accomplished, a good public speaker. A lot of organizations invite him to talk about his work. He looks a lot like my husband, more than his mother does.” She glanced at Bo. “What?”

“Nothing,” Bo said, but she was surprised, given what Mia had said before, by how admiring she sounded. “I’m sure he’d be glad to know how proud you are of him.”

The next photo was of Mia and three other adults lined up on a sofa, with many children in their laps and at their feet. She looked long at it, seemed to drop into that world. When she resurfaced, she spoke with restraint.

“These are my Stockton cousins. We used to drive up there on the weekends to visit when Beverly was young. I wanted her to have cousins at least, but they all moved to New York, so she didn’t get to know them.”

Then an image of a hand—Beverly’s, presumably—holding open Mia’s passport booklet. Her expression was defiant and guarded, signaling mistrust for the photographer.

“Do you remember who took this?”

“Of course I remember. I took it myself in a photo booth.” Mia brought the frame closer and sighed. “Look at how pretty I was.”

Bo went between frame and face, comparing. There were no obvious similarities, the features gone slack over the years, but something in the intensity of the young woman’s stare felt undeniably like Mia. A light cutting through time.

“I can tell it’s you.”

“It was a hundred years ago!”

The frame trembled in Mia’s hands for a long moment. She was traveling again. Finally she handed it to Bo.

“Take it,” she instructed. “Maybe it will be helpful in the project you’re working on.”

Bo slipped the frame into her bag and began to clean. The power went off and on, then stayed off. Mia had several coughing fits but seemed fine, just restless without her programs.

Bo mopped the floors in the meager daylight, mulling over how she might use the photos. The humble frame had kept Mia connected to her family, and now, with Beverly’s recent additions, it was returning her to the lives she’d once lived. Bo owned almost nothing that linked her to her

family, really just her mother's plate. But it wasn't too late to build something meaningful for Mia.

When she was preparing to leave, Mia called out, "Did you get the pictures?"

She tapped the side of her bag, gently.

"I got them." She was picturing Mia next to her family on the hill, coming back to life now, removing her sunglasses, turning to take in the view. "I think I have some ideas to work with."

IN EARLY MARCH, Eddie invited Bo on a boat outing. Someone he knew in Fish and Wildlife had spotted shearwaters on a pelagic trip earlier in the week, and a local ornithologist had received a report of a sighting from another craft that was out that same day. All of the recent research had indicated a large die-off of the species, and now folks in his circle were abuzz, studying the photo captures, exchanging maps and coordinates, checking historical records. He wanted to get out on the water to see for himself, though he clarified that it was “for fun, not work.” He would bring bag lunches and binoculars; she would bring herself and warm layers. It was only a day trip, but one that would take her farther from home than she’d been in years. His excitement helped ease her anxiety.

Before light, they zigzagged across roofs and bridges toward the pier. Following him was easy. She copied his steps and lost her sense of how much ground they were covering. They paused on a cliff near the city’s edge to catch their breath. She tried to map what she saw, but the structures that once had served as her landmarks were cloaked in green. Even now, she still expected concrete geometry against a clean blue sky, majestic bridges clogged with cars, the hills dry and dotted with scrub. In school, she told him, she’d learned of earlier versions of this place. Before the Spanish had arrived with guns, ranch livestock to protect, and an appetite for bullfighting, this land had teemed with wildlife. Elk and bobcats roamed in great numbers, unafraid of humans. Grizzly bears covered the beaches. But as the place was colonized, the animals had grown afraid and they’d passed that fear on to the next brood.

“Wow, grizzlies. I’d forgotten that,” Eddie said.

“It terrified me that fear could travel between beings like that, and maybe never end.” She wondered whose fear she carried in her own body. She’d always flinched at shadows, been visited by inexplicable terror late at night. What if she could trace these tendencies back, an inheritance that could be mapped?

According to a parks pamphlet that Antonia had included in Bo's research materials, for two centuries after the Spanish had first made their way to the west side of the continent, the fog had shielded the bay from view and held off the colonizers, who were ready to plunder the coast. But then came the day in 1769 when Portolá spotted the inlet, sparking a brutal era of decimation that led to a global hunt for gold—the one that had brought some of her own forebears to this land. What had his expedition seen from that ridge? Blue water promising fish, hills covered in blackberry vines and willows. What they understood was to take. Now she sensed an even older landscape behind that one, one with dustier, deeper greens, spreads of pale brown, a whole rocky spectrum of slates, and even the occasional patch of magenta and orange. Bluffs lavender with seaside daisies. As a painter who had rendered landscapes, she should have realized sooner: colors went extinct with species. The palette of a place, like its ecology, kept changing. Could it be recovered in paint? She imagined mixing a muddy yellow, brushing a stripe onto a window—a stratum of land hovering in clear space.

Eddie was waiting for her down the path. “Ready?” he called, and she hurried to catch up to him.

The bay was full, gray, alive. It was good to stand in the open, perched at the lip of the continent. A pressure she hadn't noticed at her temples lifted, a sensation so welcome her eyes prickled with tears.

They made their way down the bedrock hill to the pier, holding cables along the steepest parts of the path. At the bottom, they crossed a short bridge and stepped onto the floating dock, crouching to keep their balance as they made their way to the borrowed boat. Upon boarding, she looked back up at the hill and felt the strangeness of being, for the first time in years, at ground level.

—

“We feel like we might sink now,” Eddie shouted over the motor, with a wink or maybe just a reflex to the spray, as they left the port in the boat,

“but this used to be the ocean floor.”

The whole region had been underwater once before, millennia ago. But over the course of a century, the sea level had plummeted and what islands there had been became a jagged peninsula upon which millions of people had eventually settled. Now that ancient sea was refilling and they were steering across it.

The coast receded as they moved west. Peering overboard, Bo remembered learning at an aquarium that kelp forests off California had once thrived on the seafloor—underwater versions of the state’s redwoods. Sea urchins had grazed on the kelp, and otters and sea stars had eaten the urchins, keeping them in check. But as heat built up on the ocean’s surface, the kelp began to starve. Then disease wiped out the sea stars. The urchin population exploded and leveled the remaining kelp in a deforestation that matched the one that was happening on land. The kelp recovered somewhat, but only off the Central Coast. Otters, the docent had explained. Elsewhere along the shoreline, they’d disappeared, but here they were still present in healthy numbers. They ate down the urchins, and slowly, in patches, the forest began to grow back.

—

Eddie pulled a photograph protected by a plastic sleeve out of one of the numerous pockets in his tackle vest and held it up against the view of the shore.

“Every visit, it changes. Check it out. Last time I was here, I caught this.”

The wind whipped a crease into the photograph. Raindrops splattered the sleeve. She braced herself beside him, using his shoulder as a shield, collecting layers of wind-borne brine, everything around them wild gray, then took the photograph and steadied it so they could look together.

In the image, a mass of hillside had sheared off and dropped into the waves. He’d taken the shot from close to shore, and you could see the freed section standing vertically on the ocean like a stone skyscraper without

windows. She scanned the actual cliff, just across from them, for signs of that moment. It barely registered the loss, only displayed a brighter shade of rust on the exposed area. She saw a nearby rock face, painted in blotches of blue mineral, same as in the photograph.

Her mother had warned of this often when they'd driven along the coast: it wouldn't be here one day, the land would keep washing away. At some point, the state had finally announced the permanent closure of the scenic highway that had twisted along its edge. Too many sections had crumbled; crews would never be able to keep up with repairs. The towns linked to the road were severed from the coast, forcing those communities to retreat.

From the water, it was clear that the land had been steadily melting away. But in satellite images, California probably looked largely untouched, even as sections of rock slid seaward daily. The coastline kept updating. Years from now, lichen would spread over that bare patch of weathered cliff in Eddie's photograph—if the cliff was still there.

As they left the land behind, Eddie told her about a trip to Hawaii he'd gone on with his family. He was nine and his parents had taken him to see Kilauea, which had erupted the previous year. Before they went, he'd borrowed library books with pictures and descriptions of lava gurgling up from crevices along a slope, scorching all life on its path toward the sea, extending the land and changing the shape of the island, heating the water where it poured and cooled. But that hadn't prepared him for the mouth of the real volcano: "I'd never imagined how enormous that emptiness could be."

He'd counted six or seven forests down along the crater floor and between them crevices that released clouds of steam. A long-tailed white bird glided high above those trees yet below the crater's edge, so that he felt he was peering into a secret subterranean world. They were standing on an active volcano, the ranger explained. During the recent eruption, earthquakes had shaken the island every few minutes, and children stayed home from school all semester to avoid breathing in ash and noxious gases. She pointed across the void, where a museum teetered at the precipice, unfit

for entry. All the artifacts within would be lost when the foundation, already compromised, gave way.

Eddie decided that he wanted to walk all the way around the crater and set off, staying close to the rope guarding visitors from the edge, then running until his legs tired and the wheezing and tightness in his lungs made it clear to him that he would be able to cover only a very small fraction of the distance he'd hoped to. But even if he'd had the endurance, the road would have failed him. A large section that ran along the caldera had fallen into the pit. He could make out the ruptured lane lines through the rubble and dirt.

"All of time was on display. I saw the size of my life held up against millions of years."

"Did it scare you?"

"The opposite. Once I knew how it felt to be tiny, to be almost nothing, I went after the sensation again and again. It's my favorite part of the job."

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Next to him, she looked out at the infinite waters. Back when she got stuck on a painting, she would sometimes drive to the redwoods. She'd lie on a park bench, catch the smell of wet mulch, and look up at the trunks dressed in shredded bark, tapered to points against the ice-white sky, thousands of spindly branches filling the narrow gaps between the trees. She'd imagine the network of roots interlaced below and feel a sweeping contraction. That was the fix she came for: the rush of shrinking, scaled down to a seed, the damp and fragrant air holding her diminutive self in place. Without fail, she'd return to her studio knowing what to do next.

Eddie operated on a different clock; he thought in millennia, epochs, eras. All life lived on a collision of continental plates, he said, where magma spewed, cooled, degraded. How many times had they traveled along roads bracketed by striated rock walls that had been blown through with dynamite, oblivious to the lines of recorded time on display? There were signs of the living past everywhere.

Everywhen. That's what an archaeologist studying aboriginal people in Australia had called it, that seamless melding of time—you saw it when the great blue heron, that winged dinosaur, landed clumsily on a rooftop ledge, or when a construction site downtown slated for a new housing development regurgitated the ruins of an abandoned ship, or when you felt a warm and familiar hand rest on your shoulder at the hole-in-the-wall Cantonese restaurant in Chinatown, and turned around, expecting an aunt or an old classmate, but there was no one, only the painted brick wall you leaned your back on. And here, now, they inhabited a place that seemed to have little memory of a time without precipitation and so harbored a sense of timelessness, or time so broad and long that it allowed other time to live inside it.

"No place has no history," Eddie said, and this idea, and his nearness—it all unsteadied her. She hoped she wouldn't be sick. She watched the horizon until the land disappeared, then turned in the direction of their travel.

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The temperature dropped two hours out from the city. The ocean got darker, the waves shorter, more even. The rain had almost stopped and the sun felt on the verge of piercing through the clouds. Bo shivered and turned her face up. Eddie killed the engine and joined her at the railing. Wind slapped their faces, water slapped the boat and splashed onto the deck as they bobbed.

Eddie took out the boiled eggs and nori he'd packed.

"You seem relaxed out here," he said. A wave came overboard and they raised the food overhead.

Bo watched the water drain through the scuppers and nibbled on the wind-wilted seaweed. "I used to come out with my cousin. I love being on the ocean."

"Does he fish?"

"A bit, for fun. We were both into the whales, too."

Maybe it had been the story her mother had read them, about a humpback whale who'd lost his way in the bay and ended up wandering a

network of freshwater rivers too shallow to sustain him. That had happened when their parents had been young. A local news anchor had gotten involved and later wrote a picture book about it. They'd named the whale Humphrey. Boaters had helped turn him back toward the ocean, and eventually he'd made his way out. The cousins made Bo's mother read the picture book to them again and again. The illustrations, drawn in colored pencil and watercolor, had shown the heft of his body, the thick scores along his shining skin, the barnacles encrusting those ridges.

Another wave hit the boat. Eddie blocked her from the spray with his back, then shook the water from his hair.

Bo peeled two eggs and handed him one. "My mom told us this story about how whales used to be small dogs who walked on land and had weight-bearing legs," she began.

He looked at her intently—not in response to the whales, she realized, but because she was volunteering a story. His attention and his closeness made her feel self-conscious, but comforted, too.

She continued: "She said their nostrils traveled up the face to the top of the head and evolved into a blowhole. We weren't convinced. Her stories tended toward the fabulist. But then we took biology and the textbook said basically the same thing, with more detail. We still teased her for making stuff up, though."

The cold had made its way to her core. She suddenly felt angry, or maybe sorry. She wished she could apologize for not believing, even though her mother had delighted in their doubts. Or maybe she just wished she could hear her mother tell one more story, any story.

Eddie had a look like he didn't know whether or not to laugh. "Are you all right?"

Her mind was clear, maybe from all the wind and salt. She felt like an orphan, though she was grown. The water was a boundless cyanotype blue.

She gave in to the moment, knowing it would pass, and that she would miss it.

"I think so."

Then, an hour later: “Look! Shearwaters,” Eddie said incredulously. “This is what they saw last week.”

There were dozens of shadowy birds flying parallel to the water, darting like silhouettes against the backdrop of higher waves. Eddie counted aloud, then recounted, then checked again through binoculars.

“Ten, twelve! Oh, no way, there’s more over there!”

His focus was absolute, his thrill contagious. Her heart hurried as she tracked the birds, though she kept losing sight of them and couldn’t make out any distinctive marks.

They stayed in place, balancing on the turbulent waves, until the dancing shapes became too hard to spot and there were no birds left to see. Exhilarated, he kissed her, tasting exactly like the ocean, and somehow, she felt she was meeting someone new.

She felt split open, in awe, safe. It was the kind of day she wouldn’t forget. They smiled at each other giddily at first, as the boat picked up speed, then calmed as they settled in for the three hours back to the port. She realized she hadn’t worried about Mia all day.

He told her that he’d be leaving soon, permanently. Probably in late spring or summer. His manager had finally convinced their director that it was no longer worthwhile to keep a post in this region and had agreed to station him closer to home and put him on projects that didn’t require travel. It was good timing; he hadn’t particularly enjoyed his assignments here, and he had some responsibilities that needed his attention back home. She felt the earlier adrenaline return, but this time tinged with panic. Everyone left. She tried to ask him to stop the boat, but the air had gone from her lungs. He kept steering and waited for her to speak, uncertain of how to read her reaction. Many minutes later, he said, “We can talk about it, if you want.”

The land came into view and a thick sheen of despair returned. Now it was easy to see the places where the cliff had calved away and unveiled cross sections—raw swatches of muted orange and ash gray, history broken open to display a face striped in sandstone, siltstone, mudstone. As a child who'd collected sand dollars on the beach, she'd often wondered how it would feel to be such a relic—to be held in place, protected, for millennia, and then suddenly exposed, perhaps dug up from wet sand and prodded with small hands and rinsed in the scummy tide, released from the dirt and time that encased you, inspected and exposed to the carbon-heavy air. She tried to imagine herself as the urchin, to enter the profound loneliness of emerging on a transformed planet. How would it feel to time travel? To be the last one?

As they approached the pier, all she wanted was to turn around and head back out. Like him, she wanted more for herself, elsewhere. She didn't want to be the only one left.

When they set foot on land, her body still held the motion of the waves. He didn't mention it but she was certain he felt it, too, like the first steps after skating off an ice rink, like a dream they'd had in common.

ON MONDAY, MIA was still in bed at noon. Her lungs were congested, she was coughing a lot, she seemed offended by Bo's good health. How had the weekend gone, she wanted to know, but looked put off when Bo said she'd taken a boat trip with a friend.

"Your friend, what does he do?"

The jar of ice-blue balm was almost empty. Bo scraped up enough to rub onto Mia's upper chest. The menthol permeated her hands with its artificial cold. Even after years of this work, she found the smell repulsive. She focused on massaging the balm into Mia's skin and considered how much to say. She rarely told clients about her personal life—not that she had much of one now—but the excursion had felt significant. And anyway, Mia had known about Eddie without Bo saying anything at all. Why not share a little more with her now?

"He's a conservation biologist."

Mia flinched at her touch. "What does that mean?"

"I think mostly he tracks species for preservation purposes. Like last year, he went diving near Catalina to tag giant sea bass. The kind you said you like to eat."

"It's best baked." Mia hacked a few times and dislodged some phlegm, which she spit into a tissue. "Is he your boyfriend?"

Her cough sounded like it had advanced since the previous week. Bo hoped it wasn't pneumonia. She made a mental note to check in with the doctor.

"Not my— No. Anyway, their numbers are low again. The fish."

Mia's coughs were looser now, but her skin felt too delicate, the knobs of her bones too prominent. This was the longest that Bo had touched her. "Have you been eating?"

"What, so that's his job?"

"Part of it. He said once he had to drop poisoned sausages from a plane to kill feral cats that were eating up the birds." Bo screwed on the lid of the

balm and set it on the table. "I'm a little worried about your cough. Are you getting enough nutrients and fluids?"

"I'm fine," Mia said, brushing her off. "He kills cats?"

"He calls it 'culling.' But yes, sometimes, to protect native wildlife. Yesterday he was looking for a bird they thought might've gone extinct."

"Did he find it?"

"Yes, eventually." The flipping shapes against the waves played back in her mind. The desire to run away returned. She buttoned the top of Mia's pajama shirt. "Let's get you out of bed for some lunch."

Mia swung her legs over the bedside and nimbly rose to standing, surprising them both.

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The kitchen smelled rank. Something had turned. Bo tried to stifle her gagging.

"What?" Mia said from the table.

The sink was full and backed up. Food scraps floated in the basin. Based on the smell, it might have been clogged since Thursday night, Bo's last shift. She held her breath and moved the dishes to the counter. She pumped at the drain with the plunger until the blockage released and the water gurgled down.

Then she saw the warped wok on the cooktop. At the base, a hardened carbonized mass. A chopstick with a sooty tip lay abandoned beside it; Mia had tried to pry the burnt clumps from the pan. Bo lifted the wok and dropped it reflexively at the touch of the sticky handle. It clattered and wobbled until she placed it in the sink.

"Needs cleaning," Mia said.

"I can see that. Did you cook?" Bo tried to sound curious instead of annoyed and concerned. While the sink filled with soapy water, she fixed a small plate of crackers for Mia.

"Got hungry."

Pushing past her disgust, she sank her hands into the water and gripped the wok handle, firmly this time, and worked at the crusts with an abrasive rag until they softened and finally released. Then she drained the sink and scrubbed at the smaller bits. Black flakes came off in patches, so she continued to scour the surface until all of the grease and color had lifted and her nails had split. A half hour later, when the interior was silvery and smooth, she rinsed the wok and dried it.

Mia was at her side now, looking at the counter in horror.

“What?” Bo’s heart pounded. Out of instinct she looked to Mia’s body for the source of pain, but Mia’s attention was on the wok.

“No good!”

“What’s wrong?”

“You ruined it!”

“The wok? I cleaned it.”

“Ruined.”

“It was burnt. I scrubbed it.”

Mia pressed her thumb on the interior, in shock. “I had decades of seasoning built up on that. Where’s the black? All gone. That’s the flavor. All destroyed.”

“How was I—”

“How can you be so stupid? Didn’t your mother teach you?” She hammered her pointer finger into her temple.

Bo drew back, wounded. Both the spite in Mia’s words and her own reaction were unexpected. She paused before responding, trying to block out the motion. She pictured being back on the lulling waves.

Once she’d calmed, she replied in an even tone: “My mother never cooked with a wok.”

“Even Beverly would never do that.”

Beverly barely even speaks to you, Bo thought. She doesn’t even know what medications you take.

She stepped back and took a long breath. The relationship Mia had with her daughter wasn’t her concern. She needed to de-escalate, to sound

reassuring despite her own growing sense of failure. “We can start over. It’s not actually ruined.”

“I don’t have time to start over.” Mia was touching the pan and breathing heavily through her nose—livid or crushed, Bo wasn’t sure. “It was my mother’s,” she said, returning to her seat, biting into a cracker and losing half to the table in crumbs. “It doesn’t matter. It’ll just get tossed when I kick the bucket.”

Bo turned away to clean the sink, but scrubbing only reminded her of what she had destroyed. The nearly pristine steel of the wok gleamed, taunting her for her stupidity, her inability to take proper care. She kept her back to Mia and looked for something to busy her hands—dishrag, indestructible cups, stains to remove from the counter—while her mind again delivered her back to the simple reprieve of the boat.

She had no way to undo what she had done. The only option was to shift the air somehow. If she could get Mia talking, they might reset. Forcing steadiness into her voice, she extended an uneasy truce: “Your mother—what was she like?”

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Mia sniffed. “My mother? She was spoiled. A terrible cook. She was the youngest of eleven children, so she never had to do anything herself. She raised me, but there were always a lot of aunts, uncles, and cousins around. After I married, we didn’t see each other much. I heard about her from others. I sent money back to the village.

“Eventually she did come here, when my daughter was grown. I think 1968, after they passed the immigration law. She’d been living in Kowloon for nine years, working as a marriage broker. It was actually very lucrative. She told me she had a wallet full of photos of the unwed that she’d shop around.

“She escaped from the village to get there. The Communists had taken her family’s crops. They almost starved. She said they tortured her. Many people ended up in Hong Kong in those years. Many people.

“That’s all she said about what had happened to her. She didn’t talk about it. She was by herself, of course. My father was long gone by then. Her family was big but spread out all over the world. She did have a brother-in-law in California, but they hated each other. He was nice enough to me, but always said he’d rather die than have to see her again, that’s how difficult she could be. The timing worked out for him. He said, ‘Not as long as I live,’ and a month before her paperwork went through—this was after I told him I was bringing her over—he went to the hospital with abdominal pain. Opium, they claimed, but he never took opium. The hospital tricked him into signing a waiver in English, which he couldn’t read, for a surgery he didn’t need, and he died on the operating table as soon as they cut him open. It can happen like that. You sign a form and that’s the day you die.

“That’s why I only went to Chinese Hospital, until it shut down and we had to go elsewhere. But my mother was lucky, she could have had it much worse. Millions were starving, but she got to Hong Kong somehow, and she had family, me, in America. She showed up with rolls of cash sewn into every pocket and cuff. I found her a job in a sewing factory even though she was elderly and couldn’t stand for long. She only worked afternoons. I had to pay for her apartment in Chinatown, too. I could have used that money to open a business or make a down payment, but I don’t regret spending it on her rent. There was no way I’d let her live in my house.”

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The kitchen was clean now, and Mia’s resentment toward her mother seemed to have displaced her earlier anger. But when Bo’s shift ended, she still felt that the air between them wasn’t right. She was concerned by the messes that had accumulated in her absence. It was the first time she’d been afraid to leave Mia alone. When Mia moved to the living room and turned on a program, Bo invented an excuse to stay a while longer.

“I have some drawing exercises I need to do.”

“Fine,” Mia said without looking at her.

Bent over a folding table, Bo closed her eyes and watched the blood-orange glow of her lids. Then she reached for her colored pencils and drew: cherry blossoms, confetti, firecracker paper. Bursts of red and pink with rough edges. She kept going, though the colors were too bright and saturated, and the elements sprawled at random across the page. She focused on blending, trying to achieve the right hues, only half-listening as characters blathered on and made their chaotic choices. Toward the end of the show, Mia started breathing strangely. Bo stopped drawing and turned around, alarmed. The rhythm was ragged, percussive.

“Are you okay?”

Mia cleared her throat, setting off a coughing spell she couldn’t suppress. Bo jumped up to get her a glass of water and soon her cough subsided, though she still had a wild, flushed look.

The program ended and a new one began. Bo resumed drawing but kept alert for any signs of distress.

Ten minutes into the show, Mia rasped, “Is that part of what you’re making for me?”

Bo’s instinct was to cover the page, but she resisted. “Maybe. It’s connected. I was thinking about what you told me about the new year. The colors were in my head.”

Mia inspected the page more carefully, unconvinced. “You should stop playing around and work faster. Who knows how much longer I’ll be here to see it,” she said, then looked back at her show.

Reds blazed on the page. Bo knew the effect was aggressive, wrong. She hadn’t captured the delicacy of the petals and the cheap paper Mia had described to her. And yes, she was taking too long. An old refrain returned then: she was setting herself up for unhappiness. This was something her mother had said to her once, after accusing her of “dillydallying” her potential away. Although she’d brushed it off at the time, it had nestled into her subconscious, ready to deploy when the moment was right. Now was not the time to take her time, but she knew she couldn’t move on without getting that color just right. Only with that detail in place would the next steps follow.

But she wouldn't land there tonight. She packed up her pencils and pages, refilled Mia's glass, and bid her a strained good night.

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Waiting for the up elevator, she felt her agitation grow.

She felt awful about the wok, even as she understood that the wok didn't matter. No one would inherit it—to Beverly it would be junk—but Mia had been the most upset Bo had ever seen her, and her reaction was concerning. It could've been a blip, just a bad night. Bo suspected, however, that her aggression stemmed from the discomfort of her worsening cough.

Some clients grew gentle toward the end, as though they'd been storing up all their sweetness: the tyrannical matriarch finally tolerable to family; the husband with a record of philandering, now in memory care, who no longer recognized his wife but greeted her with warm courtesy on her daily visits and regaled her with stories of his girlfriend down the hall. One woman had written notes in an indecipherable language of short curling lines, dots, and slashes, in a trembling hand, and left them for Bo on the nightstand. Her face would break into an enormous smile and a network of fine crinkles when Bo lifted the paper to read.

Others became hostile. They snapped, lashed out, bit, scared loved ones into absence. Once, a client had fired Bo for stealing money. The family, living on the other side of the world, was unsure whom to believe. Methodically she went through each line of bank statements and receipts with them. Together they called the account representative, who guided them through the numbers with practiced patience, demonstrating how the cash payments matched the invoices for services rendered exactly. She toured them through the apartment virtually, showing them his untouched oatmeal canisters brimming with defunct quarters, the cash still tucked into the pages of books on the shelf. When the family uncovered no duplicate bills, no funneled accounts, no missing cash, no deceptions whatsoever, they began to understand the extent of his cognitive decline. Their investigation turned into an ongoing apology for believing that his

accusations had merit. They rehired her on the spot, doubling her hourly rate. They scheduled a series of consults with the best memory specialists, accumulating opinions that all confirmed what his doctors had already said.

As with the rest, she saw him through to the end.

But what if this time she didn't? In these moments, when the client wavered on the edge of civility and the challenges began to multiply, her resentment surfaced. Where was the family? Her trainer had said it was the women—the wives, daughters, granddaughters, and daughters-in-law, even the ex-wives—who, more often than not, took on the work of caregiving. The men had few friends, no social lives outside of work, and when they got sick, whom did they call but the one person who used to take care of them unconditionally. And the ex-wives—usually, they said yes. Sure enough, in the first year of the job, Bo had been hired as an in-home aide for a man whose caregiver had been his ex-wife, until she'd died unexpectedly.

But sometimes—in fact, in many, many cases—a person was totally alone. Mia had no one left, not even Mrs. Ching. Beverly had been involved, in absentia, for three decades. She was trying to show up now, as best she could, only what more could she do at this point?

This was why Bo would always have work. Solid reputation, unfazed in a medical crisis, able to predict a patient's needs. With absolute attention, she doled out medications, refreshed bed linens, fed and bathed, ran errands and paid bills, transcribed letters. But inevitably, at least once per assignment, she entertained quitting. A client's personality turned or their symptoms progressed beyond what Bo thought she could manage or they wanted something simpler—company, conversation—and she would resist, feeling that a boundary had been crossed. Then the depressing reality would set in again. In times of greatest need, people were alone. Like Eddie's parents, vulnerable and unable to protect themselves. But if a person's own daughter could leave—really, why not Bo?

Maybe, as her mother had warned, she was setting herself up for unhappiness. Maybe she should've gone on Jenson's boat when she'd had the chance. She knew there was a safer life away from here, a better, freer

one. Maybe it was time to suck it up and call her cousin to apologize, admit she'd fucked up, assure him that this time she was ready. She wouldn't waste a ticket or his efforts. He'd be angry, but he would help her again. He had to. No more dillydallying.

When the elevator came, she decided to take the stairs. At first she sprinted up each flight, propelled by a tense thrill. Then, out of breath minutes later and still twenty flights to go, she added a walking recovery lap on the odd-numbered floors.

She'd rarely taken this staircase and never at night. Now the window scenes across the street called to her. Curtains sewn from boisterous fabrics, decals slapped onto glass, furniture stacked up against the panes, a young person practicing pirouettes, someone else sweeping a floor. Maybe some had purposefully left the shades open, hoping for a witness. More people than she realized still resided at that address, each situated at their own unique coordinates. What kept them here, in this doomed city?

She walked the last flight but felt she could keep going all night, searching for signs of neighbors. In another city, another building, she could start anew—but tonight, holding close that prospect of leaving, she saw the place she knew so well brimming with new life. She would miss all of it.

—

All week, she deliberated over when to ask Jenson, worried that he might still be too angry about the missed boat to help her this time. It was also possible that his connections had dried up and she'd missed her one chance.

She called on Sunday, anxious.

He skipped all the small talk and interrogated her, but through the tightness she heard hope in his voice.

"You're sure this time," he warned. Getting a ticket wasn't as simple as before. He couldn't arrange it through his company or take shortcuts anymore. Now she would need a sponsor and official papers. He'd have to talk with some friends, neighbors, colleagues, see what he could set up.

Plus, he had committed to coordinating arrangements for his friend's parents first.

She pictured Mia in her chair, alone, abandoned, with water up to her knees, rising all around her—and pushed the image back. “I’m sure.”

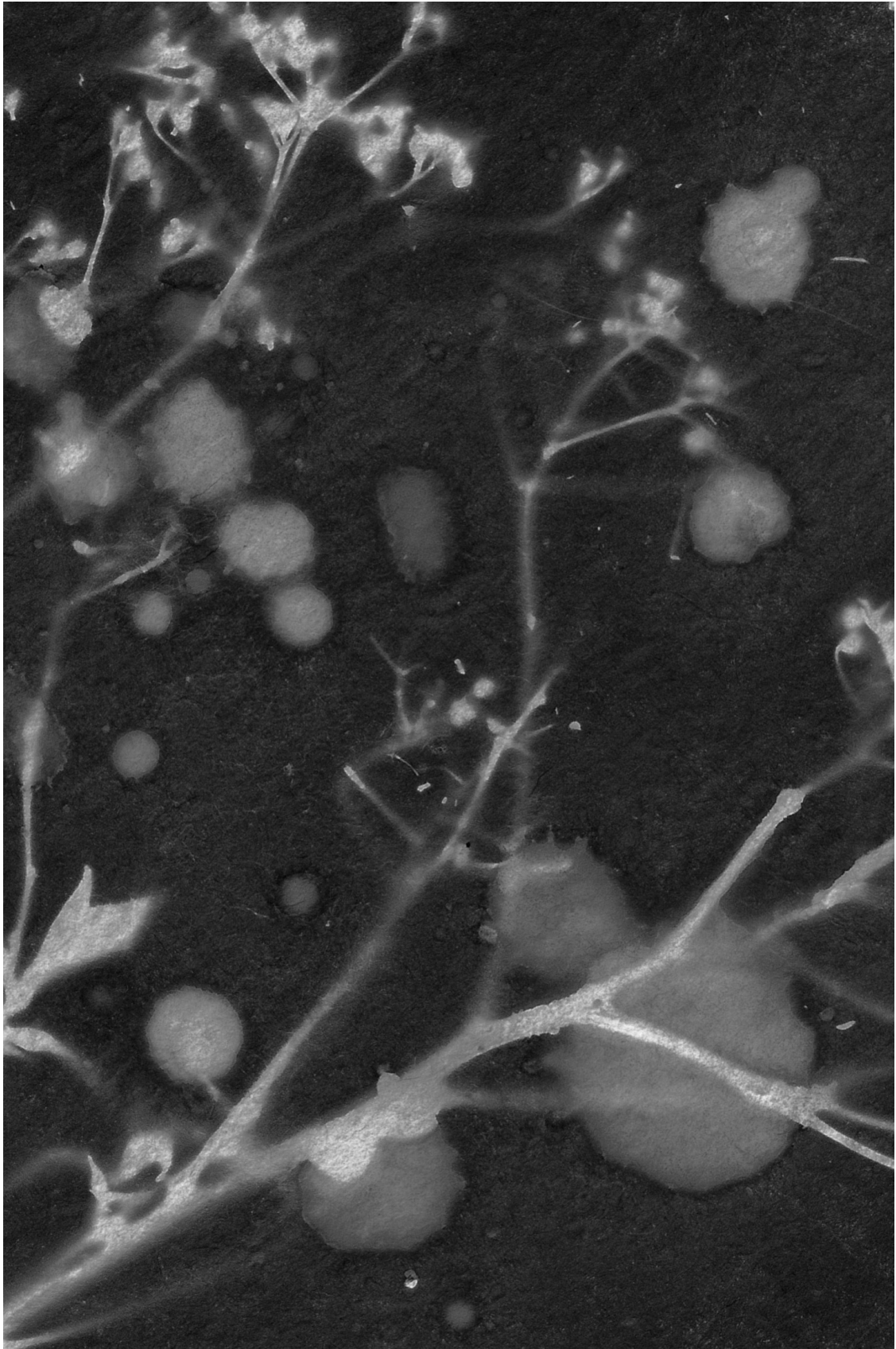
“It’ll be three or four months,” he said. “Wait, do you even have a passport?”

“No.” She’d never left the country. “But that gives me time to get things in order.”

“It could be anytime, though. You can’t be choosy. Get your paperwork in. Don’t mess around this time.”

“I’ll be ready,” she promised, and hearing herself say it, she edged closer to believing it.

TIME IN TIME



SUNDAY EVENING, SHE went over to Eddie's. When she got there, he was on an audio call, looking serious. He waved, pointed at his earpieces, and held up a finger to indicate that he was almost done, then went out onto the balcony and slid the door shut. While she waited, she helped herself to some dried fruit he'd left out in a bowl.

He came back inside a few minutes later. "Hey! Sorry about that."

"Everything okay?"

"My son got into some trouble."

"Oh." Somehow she hadn't even entertained the idea that he might have a family. She was surprised to feel hurt by his words. Obviously she hadn't been imagining a future with him, but still. How had she never thought to ask him something so important? "You have a son?"

"Oh! Yeah, yeah." He looked embarrassed at her surprise. "I thought I— Yeah, he's fourteen. My wife takes care of things when I'm away, but sometimes it's too much."

"Right, I should've guessed. That's who you were talking to on Christmas—"

"We're married, but open, you know, when we're apart," he added.

"Oh, of course." A new rift between them, small but real. She stepped over it to feel close again. "Your son, is he all right?"

"Shoplifting." He shook his head. "We talked it out." He took a breath, as if to start over, and focused on her. "You look nice."

In the daylight hours, he spoke in the precise manner of scientists. He had the attention of an assessor, attuned and counting. He could recite the details of his monitoring work, from the step-by-step preparations he took to lure raptors into nets, to the talon and wingspan measurements of the juvenile birds he trapped, to the serial numbers of the tracking units he affixed to their wings.

But when it got too dark to spot diving terns through his binoculars, and he was too tired to log the calls of band-tailed pigeons and great horned

owls, his position of expertise fell away and he returned to a simpler, more tender version of himself that wasn't poised to name or analyze. When they met in the shadow hours she felt more at ease, more willing to be spoken to and touched, more rounded.

She prodded bits of dried apricot in her molars with her tongue until they loosened, then gave the pieces another chew. The new rift pulsed gently. They had limited time together; she could let it be sweet. He smiled, and she remembered his teeth bared in the cold wind that day on the boat, the long strong shape of his arm, the feeling that he could blow away, that without anchors they both could.

"Come here," he said, nudging the air with his shoulder, and she went to him.

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Later that night, she asked if he missed home. The balcony door was cracked open to let the windows defog. Cold streamed in, as if fed by a river, freshening the warm air they'd created. He was quiet for a long time. Finally he said he missed his son, and she felt that he was answering from both the present moment and some other place and time. After another long pause, he started to talk about the earthquake that had hit the Northwest twelve years earlier and prompted his family's move inland to Montana. The aftermath extended far beyond the terror of the initial forty-five seconds—the aftershocks, the two days when he and his wife had been separated from their kid's preschool by blocked roads and a downed overpass, the following weeks, when they'd learned who had survived and who hadn't. All this to say, it had devastated him to see his city in crisis—"I felt as sad as when my father died"—and he realized how much that place had come to mean to him.

Maybe it was hearing that he had a beloved city, and a father and son he missed. He belonged to a place in the way she belonged to hers; this made her trust him. She slept easily that night, straight through until early morning, and when she woke twisted in his sheets, feeling him hard against

her back again, she pressed toward him, aware that one of these times, maybe even this moment, would be their last.

She had drifted off: he was singing in the shower. She lay on her back and listened to him practicing a song, the sound amplified by the high ceiling and tiled walls. He was struggling to push aside dominant notes he knew by heart to discern the harmony tucked just underneath—a moving target he chased with his voice, the nearly parallel through line that gave the song its emotional impact but was rarely heard in its own right.

Then, suddenly, there were two of him. Two voices, both his, singing behind the bathroom door as the water hissed and steam slipped out from the bottom edge, just visible in the dim light. The first voice ran without pause and the second interrupted haltingly. He had recorded himself singing the melody and was now playing the track and singing along, testing his grasp of the harmony, creating such dissonance that she recoiled involuntarily under the covers.

He restarted the track and tried again. His voices continued layering—one steady, the other unpredictable—until the water shut off and the singing stopped. As he dried off and brushed his teeth, the song replayed imperfectly in her ears, intersecting in pleasant and unpleasant intervals, and a blue image of flowing, overlapping forms began to take shape in her mind.

Those forms were an answer, she was certain; she could feel it. They would guide her to what came next, but if she didn't follow them now, they'd be lost. She had to get back to her studio. She hurried off the bed and found her clothes. Eddie emerged from the bathroom and suggested breakfast. She could see his disappointment when she declined.

"I'm sorry," she called as she stumbled out of the apartment. "I had a nice time. But I have an idea and I have to get it down."

When she arrived at home, she canceled her shift at Mia's for the first time.

“It’s for the project,” she explained, breathless. “You’ll see it soon, I promise.”

“Go ahead.” Mia’s voice was hoarse and wheezy.

“Your cough—” Bo began.

Mia cut her off. “I’m fine,” she said through the crackles. “Do what you need to do. I’ll see you Thursday.”

Bo went to the projector, utterly awake.

PROJECT A FACE over a set of faces—that was one way to bring people together. Or a world over a world to collapse the passage of time.

She took in the materials that covered the floor. She'd been collecting histories of the city but hadn't found the right way to connect them. Lost landscapes, staggered time lines, Mia's stories, mixed media, ephemera from the archives—if she could bring them together onto a single plane, thereby removing the boundaries between them, that could solve the problem.

She pulled up the files on Mia's frame. Beverly had loaded another set, mostly family snapshots from the 1960s and '70s, taken at parks and at Christmas gatherings. A stout woman with thinning hair appeared in holiday images: Mia's mother. In some, she wore a scowl. In one, with a baby Bo guessed was Grant, she was caught laughing, her eyes shut and front teeth missing, her cheeks flushed with delight.

Then she remembered the slides she and Mia had found in the closet. She held the slide viewer to the window and inspected each image, squinting to blur the artifacts—dust on the lens, mildew stains—until she found one of Mia's mother, older and taken from a different angle.

Bo taped a transparency to the window and began to draw her. Moving her gaze between slide viewer, frame, and page, she tried to capture the woman's likeness. She made sketch after sketch until the woman's features felt familiar and reproducible. Then she covered the window to shut out the light and turned on the overhead projector.

The projector rumbled. A rectangle of light shivered on the wall. She placed a photo reproduction on the glass, a portrait taken by the lantern slide photographer, Mary. With an adjustment of the knob, the edges of the shapes trembled, then tightened up: an older woman sat regally in a large chair, framed by a carved backrest. Stiff pose, painted brows, floured face in deadpan bordering on scowl. Her feet were flush with an unseen floor. The highlights were blown out—all around this stranger from the archives,

who had once sat for her portrait in Chinatown, was emptiness. A queen in a blizzard. Who better to serve as the base layer?

The next image came from an unidentified periodical. She placed it atop the first and felt her pulse jump in her neck. The image shimmered and filled in: a young woman with smudged features seated on a moving train on a cloudy day. The two women sat beside each other now, but at different scales and angled oddly, overlapping at the arms.

She took a blank transparency and drew a silhouette of someone extending recording equipment toward them: an oral historian. Her marks were crude against the fine detail caught on the film. She tossed the sheet and started again.

She decided to send the women to dinner. She fished around and found an image of a dining table loaded with a Thanksgiving spread, no guests in view. A floral centerpiece hovered above the two women like a chandelier, and a feast wallpapered the body of the train. Aligned with the dining chairs, the train windows stood in as hosts. The cabin melted toward darkness. Both women started to disappear.

For the fourth layer, Bo added one of her sketches of Mia's mother. The distinct contoured lines she'd drawn created the effect of a topographical map. Now this was a place, with implied dimension, walkable and inhabitable.

It didn't matter what it was; the fifth layer would erase the women for good. The dinner platters and skies were mucked by the worlds she had stacked. The train was undetectable. Little triangles of light made it through the stack of filters, bright cut-up shapes that were impossible to read.

She snapped off the switch and the images vanished. The wall was again bare, as impenetrable as a tomb. In the world behind, the sky kept unleashing rain. The months of half steps floated away. At the museum, watching the firework installations, she'd felt herself longing to defy surfaces—to push beyond—and here she had done it. She'd found a way to conjure any subjects she wanted and bring them together in one glowing frame. Arbitrary, and a bit chaotic, but it made a kind of compositional

sense. Her body sparked, a live wire. She felt time pause, then collapse, then sail ahead.

—

She put on a pot of rice and some music, an old album someone used to play on repeat in the live-work studios, where it had infused her own practice to the point that she'd become dependent on those sounds to work. The songs channeled outer space, she had thought. In between a screeching reedy voice and the lull of a harp playing in polyrhythm was an empty cosmic sensibility. A conditioning blankness that freed her arms to paint. She couldn't remember when she'd stopped playing it, but it had been long enough ago that she couldn't readily recall the lyrics or anticipate the next track anymore. Maybe it simply had been when she'd stopped painting.

The floor needed a mopping, but she lay on it anyway and listened. Until she'd heard Eddie sing in the shower, she'd forgotten the pleasure of being on her back, utterly still, while music filled the air around her. She'd missed this.

On rare summer weekends in Bo's early years, when they had nowhere to be, her mother would play records on a turntable she had rescued from the sidewalk and connected to an ancient stereo system. The records had come from her own mother's collection. It was nostalgic behavior even then, one that preceded a popular resurgence of vinyl. While her mother read on the couch, Bo would lie on the crocheted rug beside the dust-pelted speaker, recalibrating her knowledge of each song to include the scratches where the record skipped. It was her job to flip to the B-side when the needle lifted and swung to its resting position.

The album ran on loop now, without pause. She waited for the digital track to skip and warp, and when it continued unbroken, she felt hot tears run down her temples and fill her ears. She could sense her mother behind her, reclined under a throw, a novel blocking her face. A slip along the fault that ran inside her, a terrible widening of space.

When she rose to check on the rice, she felt a pang to find herself alone and grown. She'd added too much water to the pot so she ate porridge, which was soothingly plain. Just as the music receded beyond her awareness, she could picture her mother's face exactly—short forehead, high cheekbones sloping to a closed mouth, rigid chin—no book or haze obscuring it, and the clarity made her choke on the gruel.

A song provided passage from the present station back to a place and time, distinct and palpable. The trip was quick, a sled tearing down a luge track, the body sensing its arrival before the mind could register the journey.

Image, too, could serve as time machine. On the floor, she lined up eight sheets of acetate, four by two, and knelt over them. In one corner, she painted a girl squatting, beside her a bundle of fortune-telling sticks, and behind her a sky the color of an aerogram. She painted a woven raft that instantly lost its familiarity; she kept mistaking it for a slice of toast, so she painted narrow black stripes through it and the raft came apart.

In another corner, she drew heaps of sardines and abalone shells. Then, aiming a dry brush, she hammered scratchy dabs of the darkest green she could mix over them. Her wide brush slid easily across the film, leaving a slick band of earthy orange threaded with black—a fire sweeping through, but wet and contained.

She stopped there, suddenly struck by all she would never be able to put on the page. She'd known this—that the nature of the task was to save, and the only possible outcome failure. Her aim wasn't to make a history book or a facsimile. No, she was reaching for slippery scraps, secondhand and thirdhand and speculative accounts, driven to capture and compress and cohere them, to express something inarticulable but true about this place, to telegraph that truth to another person, for safekeeping, in part, to have some small hand in what might survive into another time, but her tools were crude, her vision underdeveloped, her gestures fallen short. No matter what she did, worlds would be lost.

But the important thing to remember, Antonia had said, was this: a memorial was a carrier of lineage, short-lived as any body, holding hope and violence, like any projection. Its moment in the commons was brief, a blip on most timescales.

Every form meets its finish and leaves behind spaces another spirit might fill. A river rises and runs through the canyon's void like a memory of the glacier's defining cut. A lost world could return—as meltwater, progeny, history, art. As a shared memory rising into the air of the present, permeating its listener, joining them, that entangled form then pouring into new shapes—

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She knew she had to hurry. All that work ahead and her departure pressing on it—but a deadline could serve her. There was no offering she could deliver to Mia that would make up for abandoning her, but this idea, if she could pull it off, would be worthy of her.

Bo had exhausted herself from work. Her body felt full of tiny holes, porous like old cooled lava. The damp came in from the windows and passed through her in waves. Beads of condensation collected on the acetate she'd left on the floor. She had relied on the confines of her mind and the walls of her apartment, but now she feared that anything could pour in, leak out. Barriers were an illusion. You couldn't count on a shut door to keep anything out or in. She felt suddenly that if she didn't find a way to assert her physical form, this condition might kill her.

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Eddie arrived in his green clothes within thirty minutes of her call. It was the first time she'd invited him to her place. He studied the room, the painted sheets on the floor. He took it all in with wonder, looked at her with a new curiosity, differently than he ever had before. "I didn't know you did art."

"I used to a lot more."

“What are you making?”

She didn’t want to say, to trigger questions that would force her to explain. She wasn’t ready. She touched his shirt instead, near tears. “Take it off,” she said.

Sex didn’t rid her of all the wind-dampness in her bones, but it brought back her sense of solidity. She no longer felt like a dead field of coral. At first it felt like a contradiction: he crossed a threshold and moved inside her. His sweat dropped onto her face and chest, her skin drank it up. But something about his weight, about all the tugging, confirmed the borders of her own body. Then the warmth that quietly radiated in pulses between her legs spread to the rest of her, and cycled back through again on a closed circuit. Muscles held her skeleton in place while volumes of water moved along pathways within her, her mind cradled by her skull, and her skin, like a building envelope, bounding all of that.

A friend, a lover—neither described how she considered Eddie. It was different with him than with other men. With him, space seemed to expand. Her senses sharpened. The world became simpler, yet vaster, too, more astonishing. He exuded a calm, loose order, like trees. In his absence she didn’t miss him exactly, and she knew that would remain true when they both left this place for good. Even as he finished on top of her, she had already taken leave of him, the sweat and breath of him enough to make her own body real again, and her mind clear, so that she could focus on the project—for instance, solving the problem of imprecise color that had troubled her while she’d been drawing at Mia’s the previous week. Not firecrackers, not cherry blossoms—so then what? The coastal bluff carpeted in seaside daisies floated back. Maybe she’d temper that red into mauve.

OTHER WEATHER



THE POWER WENT out that evening. The room went black. The fan whirred on, still holding a charge. Eddie had left.

She wasn't due to work until Thursday, but she went down the lit-up stairwell to the fifty-first floor to check on Mia. The neighboring building was all shadows; it, too, lacked functioning battery storage units. Farther down the street the windows glowed as usual. Luckily Mia wasn't dependent on oxygen and her medications didn't require refrigeration. Bo thought of how Ricardo's electric bed would get stuck in one position for days or even weeks during outages, making it impossible for her to arrange him comfortably.

The apartment was dark and smelled fishy, and for a moment she imagined the worst, but then she noticed a flicker coming from the kitchen. She followed it to find a single candle on the table, and behind it the faintly illuminated mass of Mia.

"You come to check on me?" she asked, chewing noisily.

"You need anything?"

The smell was far worse now. Bo switched to mouth breathing and mentally retraced the meals she'd prepared last week to determine what might have spoiled. The odor was bad enough to be meat, but when had they last had any? Most of the staples were sealed in cans and jars.

"I'm fine. I'm just having my dinner."

"The radishes?" Bo asked doubtfully. At least Mia's lungs sounded better.

"I don't know. It's just mush that's left."

Another waft hit Bo and then she had it: the mackerel she'd prepared the previous Monday. The leftovers had likely gone forgotten until today on a back shelf of the refrigerator, which was fully charged but hadn't been holding its temperature due to a torn gasket. Had Mia resorted to eating it because Bo hadn't prepared enough meals for her on Thursday?

“Whatever it is, it’s too old for eating. Let me make you something else.” She tried to take the bowl away, but Mia swatted at her hand and drew an arm around it. Dramatic shadows loomed on the walls.

“Go home. Go back to working. You can cook tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow’s Tuesday,” she began, before changing her mind. “But I can come.”

“There’s plenty to eat.”

“It’ll just take a couple minutes.” Bo set up the portable stove, opened a can of boiled string beans, and emptied it into a bowl, then tore a handful of mushrooms from the wall. She worked fast, aware each time Mia spooned in another mouthful of rancid food, guilt pooling under her skin for canceling that morning, even if any work she had done on the project was also for Mia. Nothing would stop her from making choices like this when Bo wasn’t here. But even if she were, she couldn’t keep watch every minute of the day.

“How’s your project going?”

“I was working on it today.” Bo hesitated, faced Mia, then turned back to the food. “I’ve started thinking of it as a memorial, actually.”

“A memorial?” Mia looked like she was deciding whether to be insulted. “I’m not dead yet.”

“I know,” Bo said, taking care with her words. “But it’s the best way I’ve found to describe it. I want you to be able to see your life acknowledged. I want to give you that.”

“Huh.” Mia sat up a little, warming to Bo’s explanation. “I don’t know anyone who’s had a memorial made for them. No one even does funerals anymore. There’s no acknowledgment that you died.” She picked up her chopsticks. “So what is it that you’re making for me? Are you almost done?”

“Uhh.” Bo mixed a scoop of fermented black bean sauce into the bowl, then transferred the contents into a pan to heat. There was no way to summarize the last day. “Not done yet, but I’m working on it.”

Mia tsked, so Bo said a little more: “It’s hard to explain. But there’s this stage in every project where I feel like all of my preparation is mashed

together and heating up to become something else.”

“Like a compost pile.”

“Exactly.”

“That’s interesting.” Mia took another bite. “Are you using the pictures from Beverly? The one Mrs. Ching took of us is the best one.”

“I’m definitely using some of them,” Bo assured her. “It is weird, though, because it’s your memorial, and I’m working from your stories, but they’re all mediated through me. The things you’ve shared with me won’t look how you expect, but I hope you’ll still recognize them.”

“I guess we’ll see.”

“It’ll make more sense once I have something to show you.” Bo stirred the beans and mushrooms. “Anyway, right now I’m having issues with my workspace. I think I need to reconfigure it.”

“What do you mean reconfigure?”

“I’m not used to working in my apartment anymore. The setup isn’t great. It feels cramped.”

Her old studio had had a joy about it. She still missed having that space for work, and the spontaneous energy that came from sharing air with other artists. Recently, she’d been thinking about the evenings when she and Joey had escaped from their studios down to the beach to watch the sunset. They’d find a patch of seawall without fresh bird droppings to sit on. No matter how many times they went, the colors and forms were always different. One night: bright, pink, clear. The next, a lineup of clouds as taut as balloons. The next, the sky a canvas of erratic swipes of white and gold. They’d sit there until the water went dark and there was just enough light to walk back and still feel that the whole night was ahead.

Bo had taken for granted that the show would continue forever, that the waves would never stop unfurling onto that beach. But the sand had vanished just a few years after Joey had left. Now it was her turn. In Canada, she’d learn new skies, investigate studio options, maybe get to know some other artists again. Other weather was waiting for her, a future beyond rain.

The vegetables were done. She put them on a plate and set the dish in front of Mia, took away the rotted fish to dump. Mia didn't protest this time, though she poked suspiciously at the new meal with her chopsticks before tasting it. Bo sent out a silent plea for forgiveness, and for Mia's gastrointestinal ease.

"If you need space, why don't you take the apartment next door to you?"

"Take it?" Bo repeated, confused.

"For your art. It's been empty, hasn't it?" Mia said this like it was the most obvious thing in the world. "We don't have a lot these days, but we do have plenty of space."

It was true. There were so many abandoned units going unused. And anyway, it would be a temporary setup—she wouldn't need it for long. If a space was available, why not use it?

—

By morning the power was back on. Bo went onto the balcony and lifted the latch on the gate that separated hers from the next. It swung open. The sliding door was unlocked. A loud suction noise released when she pushed it open.

In an instant her space doubled.

The vacant apartment was a mirror image of her own, but wiped of its specificity, as hers would be soon. Mia was right. The blankness gave her a rush. All that space in which to think and work again. It wasn't the beach, but there was plenty of water around.

She wiped, swept, scrubbed, and burnished until the surfaces gleamed. She taped down the floorboards where a section of them had warped so she wouldn't trip. Around lunchtime, she made a quick stop at Mia's to prepare a stash of meals, then hurried back and spent the rest of the afternoon shuttling materials into her new unit, and each time she stepped through the door the nagging feeling that she didn't have the authority to enter diminished. Soon, it would seem like this had always been an extension of her apartment.

By evening she was ready to work.

WHEN BO ARRIVED at Mia's on Thursday, she found her on the floor. Her upper body was tilted over her legs, which stuck straight out. She was panting but asleep.

Bo dropped to the floor and gripped her shoulder. "Wake up."

Nothing. She checked her pulse: fast.

"Wake up," she said directly into her ear. A command and a plea.

Mia's cheek twitched. Bo gave her shoulder a firm shake.

"Wake up," she said again, louder.

A gasp, a run of coughs, then blinking, quiet.

"I was just napping," she said, annoyed.

Bo sat back onto her heels as the fear dulled. "On the floor?"

"I bent down to pick up my pills and my knees gave out. I couldn't get back up."

Pink and white capsules had rolled into a depression under the table. The utensils drawer was jammed open, and an overturned teacup sat in a puddle of brown water on the counter. A few more pills were scattered near the meds dispenser.

Bo rose and braced herself behind Mia to help her stand.

"Here." She was supporting Mia's full body. It surprised her but maybe it shouldn't have: all of the grudges and stories Mia carried, all of her bite and stubbornness, seemed to have collected inside her like bricks. There were moments when Bo almost believed Mia would live forever—she was the kind of person who just might—but there was no question that her health was in decline. "How long were you sitting here? You should've called me."

Mia flexed her ankles, and bent and unbent her elbows. "What for? I knew you were coming today."

Bo resisted the urge to argue. "Hold on to me. You're not steady yet." She waited for Mia's hand on her forearm. "You have to call me next time."

Mia was looking at her strangely, a black shine to her eyes. At first she seemed to be challenging Bo, but her stare was penetrating, almost childlike with fright. She started to speak, only her lips were dry and stuck to her teeth, and that seemed to rattle her even more. She glanced down and wiggled her mouth around until it released. Then her eyes returned to normal, and she took Bo's arm and pointed her chin toward the living room. The moment seemed to have passed.

"Call me," Bo said again. "I mean it."

"If you want," Mia said.

—

Bo's hours increased after that without any formal discussion. She worried about Mia all the time. She extended her shifts and showed up on off days, and Mia compensated for her surprise by sending her on repetitive errands or nitpicking her laundry-folding techniques. The apartment seemed to shrink, and some days she felt they'd had a bit too much of each other.

It took a couple of weeks before they adjusted to the fuller schedule. Bo would do longer shifts on Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday, with check-ins on Tuesday and Saturday. Her days off would be Friday and Sunday, still a good amount of studio time. When she contacted the agency to request an official schedule change, she found that the social worker had already preapproved the increase, having anticipated the need before they had. As she logged the extra time, she reminded herself that she was taking the right steps to prepare for her departure. Her replacement would be all set with plenty of hours and Mia would be well looked after—and Bo would learn to live with the guilt, eventually.

Meanwhile, she submitted her passport application and waited on updates from Jenson, who was trying to set up a nanny position for her with a young couple who lived in his father's apartment complex. They were expecting a baby that summer. Bo had hesitated when he'd told her, and Jenson had snapped that she couldn't be picky. A newborn was challenging, but her excitement had grown as she'd thought about it: it

would be a welcome change to care for someone who had their whole life ahead of them.

With so much to do, the hours grew scarce. Bo longed to be in the studio—she was finally gaining some traction on the project—so as soon as she was done at Mia’s, she’d skip dinner and jump back into it.

One evening, in the last hour of daylight during a power outage, she picked through her piles of images, then laid the best ones on the floor and began to arrange them. A line of protesters and a row of exotic dancers. Aerial views and an herbalist posed in front of his apothecary cabinet. A woman with a baby on her back walking toward a bridge under construction. The Polo Field, an ice cream shop, a free clinic, a taqueria awning. And—courtesy of Beverly—a black-and-white photo of herself as a child, standing in front of a cable car in buckled shoes, frowning.

It was almost dark. She shuffled the pieces, but no matter how they were ordered, the effect was heavy, clumsy. She cracked the balcony door open for air. If she could move her materials toward something lighter, with slip

Just then the power returned. Sparks blew from a socket, and she dived to unplug the overhead projector to save it from the surge. She glanced over at the mess of images, then plugged the projector back in and brought the square of light into focus on the wall.

First, she drew with her back to the wall. The bulb illuminated her hand as she made unsteady marker lines on the transparency. When she turned around, the image projected on the wall was unfamiliar, magnified and displaced.

This gave her a rush of courage. She had no shortage of blank film sheets. She could draw and draw. She let the marker drift along the acetate, the motion silky, the lines roaming. The wall grew dark, as though covered in coils and clumps of black kudzu, an accelerated time lapse of a species that had found the conditions it needed to thrive. When the sheet was

almost completely black, with only tiny patches of light coming through, she lifted her hand and looked again. The wall had transformed into a glassless window looking into the night, with a few smears of stars.

For hours she drew like this, working down the stack of acetate, learning the nuances of a medium she had previously used only to label moving boxes. The sweet chemical smell had built up, making her feel faint. When her eyes started to burn, she turned on a lamp to ease the contrast and tried a red marker instead. The walls seemed to constrict, like muscle. She had to get outside.

She dragged the cart to the balcony and pointed the light beam at the facing building. A weak square of light landed on a patch of concrete just above the window of an uninhabited apartment. A misplaced, misshapen moon. Now she drew live, throwing hazy scribbles onto the building. She drew freely until her marker ran dry, then placed her finger on the off switch and took a final look.

A curious white light flashed on the spot where her drawing was still cast, and for a brief moment the brightness hid her image. Then another flash, and another. Someone in her building had been watching her work.

Judging by the angles, the person had to be no more than two or three floors down. For several seconds the laser, snow bright, stayed unsteadily in place. Then it began to follow the perimeter of the image she had projected, tracing the soft edges of light.

The beam completed its outline and vanished. The sudden vulnerability of her image on the wall made her nervous, so she flipped the projector switch and canceled the light, keeping her eye on the patch where her work had been. The beam returned and vibrated in place, then blinked off for good.

Her first spectator, a mystery neighbor.

Mia had always been her intended audience, but maybe she wouldn't be the only one: who else might the project be for?

THROUGH THE REST of March and April, they settled into new routines. At first Bo suggested they resume regular salon visits. The last one had been at Christmas, and Mia's neat signature perm had since melted into a coarse helmet, pressed flat at the back where she slept on it. She complained constantly that her roots were yellow and untidy. But her stylist had stopped taking appointments. He'd found some other work—doing what, he didn't say, but he hinted that it was lucrative compared to his earnings at the salon, which had started to flood. Bo contacted another salon, which advertised home visits, but the person who answered her call was confused by the request and hastily advised, "If you're worried about the yellowing, try vinegar or lemon!" After a clumsy experiment in which Bo kneaded lemon juice into Mia's hair, burned her scalp, and failed to make her roots any lighter or cleaner, they settled on a basic twice-weekly shampoo. Soon they both looked forward to those sessions. Mia relaxed when Bo tilted her head back in the chair and poured cups of warm water over her hair. Bo found it almost meditative to work out the tangles with her fingers. Urgency slipped away.

It was at the end of this ritual that her decision to leave felt most real. The room would return to focus, the closeness of the moment would lift. As she dried Mia's hair and picked off the strands that had fallen onto her shoulders, she'd be confronted by the same realization: soon it would be their last session. More than once she started to tell Mia her plans, but stopped short, not wanting to ruin the moment. It wasn't time yet.

And yet Mia's condition worsened steadily. Bo noticed her tiring more easily. On a walk one afternoon, she barely talked and didn't care to pause for views on the upper floors. When Bo suggested a visit to the garden, all she said was "If you want to." She fell asleep in the wheelchair before they

got home. Bo had been planning to go directly to the studio after making dinner, but she stayed to see her to bed instead.

Beverly must have noticed the change, too, because she started calling more often and sent a box of vitamins. Mia inspected the labels, sniffed at the capsules, then refused them. She was disappointed that her daughter hadn't sent something "more interesting or useful."

Mia's naps became more frequent. She began to complain about a new spreading pain in her lower-left back: "It's like a hot iron, all the way to my bones." The wheelchair made it worse, so they scaled back their outings to once a week.

After lunch one day, she announced, "I'd better go down for my second nap."

"Second? What time is it?"

"I had one before you got here."

Bo stayed late more often, torn between keeping Mia company and making progress on the memorial, which at this stage was nothing more than a glorified slideshow. She almost resented being kept from her studio those nights, but it was clear that Mia needed her more than ever. She resolved to work faster and sleep less. She had to finish this for Mia before she left.

At night they watched programs together. Bo preferred a show that broadcast live views from strangers' windows all around the world. The unpredictable imagery soothed her and sparked ideas that fed into her art. Spring scenes glowed into the living room: churning rivers, a smoky sunrise over minarets, a campsite seen from an open tent flap, goats among wildflowers, bicyclists in dappled light under sycamores, raccoons rummaging through a dumpster. She could eavesdrop on partial conversations, catch glimpses of the places her friends had moved to. But apart from the time they saw a deli window strung with barbecued meats, Mia thought the show was dull.

A channel that reran old nature shows suited them both. Most of the documentaries cataloged extinctions, showed once-lush regions transformed by disasters of industry and climate. They were bleak and frightening, even

the ones from twenty or thirty years earlier, yet Bo drew comfort from the long panning shots and the authority in the narrators' voices. Both the aerial footage and the close-ups had her rapt, simply by virtue of not being her own perspective.

Mia loved anything with animals, especially a program they found one night about the mating dances of tropical birds, with their neon plumage. She was so charmed by the acrobatics and barking songs they performed that she insisted they watch it again the next evening. "What clowns," she said, laughing fully through the whole half hour.

—

Another night, as they started a half-hour episode on piranha invasions, Bo noticed that Mia's energy was waning. She looked exhausted but hadn't made a move toward bed like usual.

"You done for the night?"

"Eh."

Mia leaned forward as if she was about to get up as dramatic music began, accompanied by footage of a duck being reduced to skeleton and feathers in under a minute. They both gasped, in awe. For the rest of the show, Bo was totally absorbed, but when the next episode started, she glanced over at Mia. She was in the same position as earlier, hands on the armrests, ready to push up. Had she been locked in place that whole time?

Bo immediately went to her side, trying to hide her alarm. "Here, let me help you get washed up."

Mia took Bo's arm with both hands, but her grip was too weak to give her enough leverage to stand. Her back heaved with the effort of breathing. Her eyes were wet and black again. She blinked at Bo slowly, as though trying to comprehend an unspeakable situation. Bo slid her arm across Mia's back and lifted her. As Mia stumbled the first few steps toward the bathroom, Bo saw new fear on her tired face.

THIS WORK WOULD always be needed, they had repeated in Bo's training. Age, accident, or disease—the body faltered. A child needed a trusted guardian to dab tincture on a bruise, to peel astringent skin from an unripe fruit. A patient needed an attentive person to insert an IV and notice what telemetry could not. This labor was irreplaceable. Only a hand could tend to a hand.

But there was a danger of being patronizing, too. When Bo had first started in this line of work, consumed by her own interests and dramas, she'd found it hard to reconcile that the people she cared for—with their aged bodies, their confusion and stubbornness—had once carried on far-reaching lives. They had married multiple times, raised children, survived regimes, served in wars, built buildings, composed symphonies, tended gardens; they had developed full repertoires of dishes their families missed, had known languages they no longer understood, had been children. She'd held the foolish belief of the young that certain people did not feel desire. As though famine didn't teach them the first and deepest wants. As though a body were not a body. She'd been ungenerous, her imagination small.

Feeling sorry for her own mother when she'd entered retirement, Bo had encouraged her to pick up substitute-teaching jobs, to take up a sport. One day, out at a café, Bo turned at a laugh—familiar but not—and was shocked to see her mother leaning on the arm of a younger man, close to Bo's age, at a booth in the back. A fold-up kayak took up the rest of the bench. Bo turned away quickly and left—what she'd seen was delicate, secretive. She scanned for signs of him in her mother's apartment and waited for her to mention him, but she never did.

By now, Bo knew better. The gaps in her knowledge were vast; in her interactions with Mia, she only ever learned snippets. A person was only ever marginally comprehensible, and every day you spent with them, that truth deepened.

Yet still, she was guilty of condescension more than she realized. One day that spring she congratulated Mia on finishing her porridge after she'd gone for several days eating very little. Mia shrank in response.

"What?" Bo asked.

"You pity me."

"That's not true."

Mia needed more help now; they knew that. Her strength had declined. Her daughter had left her, and soon Bo would, too. But Bo thought she'd been respectful in this transition. Theirs wasn't a friendship, exactly, but these months had built a shared intimacy that went beyond any caregiving work she'd done before. She spent more time with Mia than she had with anyone else. And Mia had returned her to art again, to a project entirely inspired by her. Bo tried to pinpoint exactly what she'd said to upset Mia, but she suspected it was bigger than that moment. Her recent preoccupations had disturbed the balance they'd maintained all these months, calibrated to their patterns of needs and service.

Mia said mockingly, "Wow, I ate my breakfast."

"I didn't mean it that way. It's just you haven't been eating much."

Mia glared.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said it like that."

"I'm not a child."

"I don't think of you as one." The dining table dwarfed Mia. She looked ancient sitting there. Bo felt something in her center crumple.

Mia stewed a few moments longer, then lost the strength to continue.

Finally she said, "I don't want to be dependent on you."

"You're not."

"It's getting to be that way."

"In part," Bo allowed. If she'd left as planned last summer, it would've been so simple. It felt wrong to be pulling away from Mia now, as her suffering grew. But there would never be a convenient time to leave. Nothing could reverse the course of her decline, yet there was no telling how long it would extend. Bo couldn't sacrifice her future again, not for an indefinite commitment. They still had a month, maybe two, together. Mia's

memorial would be done by then. She pictured herself on the boat, leaving.
“But you do well without me, too.”

GUESTS



SPRING WOULD BE ending in a few weeks. The weather wouldn't change, but she felt the season turning as the days got longer. Restlessness bubbled up through routine. The schedule and everyday tasks that had been a source of comfort began to feel stifling. Even with the extra space next door, Bo felt constricted. Then in late April, Jenson called with an update. The nannying plan had fallen through. His idea had prompted the couple to bring over their own friend instead.

Bo panicked. "Does that mean I can't come?"

"No," he assured her. "It's not great, but I'm working on alternatives."

He promised to be in touch soon. In the meantime, Bo obsessively checked the status of her passport application, but nothing could stave off her feeling of helplessness.

Lately Mia seemed to be retreating. Her joint pain continued to worsen, and she seldom wanted to leave the apartment. She spent longer parts of the day in bed, sleeping while Bo kept house, waking up every few hours when Bo presented pills or a meal. On Wednesdays, when she knew Beverly would call, she put on a nicer shirt. Regularly she accused her daughter of being good to her only when she was unwell.

They fell into a kind of stasis. Sometimes Bo looked over at the sleeping figure, searching for signs of the resourceful woman she'd been, the wife, business owner, gardener, philanderer, friend—those versions of her that almost no one on the planet now knew. Her body was getting tired, her mind winding down.

The rare times when she wasn't with Mia, she was agonizing over which pieces to include in her memorial, which ones would, in aggregate, do justice to Mia's life. Every image that had once excited her now felt dead in her hands. She'd come to a standstill with the projector as well, unable to imagine how to use the tool for the finished work. She considered giving it all up every day, worried that she really had wasted her gifts, that she would fail Mia, and that was that.

Mia seemed to intuit Bo's doubts and pushed for an update. Bo said, maybe too curtly, that she was working on it, and Mia responded, "What's taking so long?" Irritated, Bo unnecessarily clanged a ladle against the pot while scooping stew and dropped the bowl onto Mia's tray from an inch too high, but felt immediate remorse when Mia flinched. She added a dab of fermented shrimp to the bowl to make amends. Mia slurped up her meal and nodded once, which Bo took as an indication of truce. On hard days like this, Bo told herself they were just placating each other until time was up. It pained her too much to think beyond the present moment.

Anxious for different air one afternoon, Bo slid open the balcony door. Humidity flooded the room and within minutes their clothes stuck to their skin. She shut the door for relief, only to repeat the sequence minutes later. Fruit flies had hatched in the garbage; now they hovered in her face. The fogged windows made the room feel like a trap. She longed to be outside, somewhere, elsewhere. To invite disturbance to the days. Jenson still hadn't called.

Mia waved a paper fan in Bo's direction as an act of charity.

"Your birthday's coming up in a couple months," Bo said, needing to distract herself. "What do you think about having a party?"

Mia looked confused. "For me?"

"Why not?"

"That's ridiculous. I don't want one. Beverly was the one who always wanted to do something for birthdays."

"I'll plan it. We can do something small."

"I don't even know how old I am anymore."

"You'll be what—around a hundred and thirty?"

"Wah!"

"We could use one of the rec rooms, the patio."

"Who would come?"

"Well...we can invite anyone you want."

“No. It’s not worth the bother.”

Our last chance, Bo almost said. But instead: “I’ll make a cake.”

Mia hesitated. “What kind?”

“Something simple.”

“Fine,” Mia said, unable to resist. “But only if it’s simple.”

—

It worked. The party plan cut through the malaise and gave them something to look forward to, a new levity. Mia seemed more energetic and alert—she slept the same amount but had a brightness about her during her waking hours. Bo returned to the studio revived, distracted from guessing when her cousin’s plans for her would come through. The party was the deadline by which she needed to figure out what she was making. Although it shamed her to admit it, even her worry over Mia’s worsening health fueled her, heightening the sense that this was a race. In the past she’d never felt the need to check the live feed of Mia’s stats, but now this “light surveillance” lent her a tenuous freedom. As long as she could see Mia’s steady heart rate and oxygen levels, she could keep working.

HER STUDIO TRANSFORMED over the next two weeks. She sorted through her piles and found the images that still had some spark, then spent days spreading them out on the floor, joining them together, pinning them to the wall, tearing them into parts, trying endless configurations. She stacked them, willing depth, willing liveliness.

Soon her floor was covered in acetate shapes that stuck to her palms and heels and gathered in clumps like clear kelp along the room's edges. She returned to the projector constantly to test out compositions, but the glass surface was too small, limiting the size of what she could cast onto the wall. Something was missing, but she couldn't put her finger on what, other than that she needed something bigger.

The balcony door. She started to tape overlapping transparencies into a collage on the glass. Soon it formed a sprawling backlit cloud. In the evening, the transparent sections turned nearly opaque as they reflected the lights from inside. The glass door became a mirror, too, showing her a wavy version of the studio interior and herself.

She studied the cloud from the floor. Her eyes unfocused and she imagined it ballooning into three dimensions, the soft form illuminated from within by flares of light, as if powered by fireworks. As her eyes refocused, an idea arrived: holograms.

It was so simple she should've realized it sooner. You could engineer light to translate a design into the illusion of a ghostly form. You could create a sense of dimension, of life. There were many ways to do it, she read. Pepper's ghost, stereoscopy, touchable holograms that used ultrasound. Rudimentary holograms could be as basic as marks scratched onto acrylic plastic and set at the correct angles to a light source. The setup would take some work, but she was sure she could figure it out.

She had just finished taking notes when the far bell yanked her. It rang again as she took the balcony back to her apartment. It was Eddie, unannounced, animated. He'd just returned from a work trip.

"What are you doing here?"

"Did you miss me?" he said cheerfully, seeming not to notice her displeasure. He brought in traces of elsewhere, a brightness, dinner.

She blocked the door as she considered how to respond. One knock or quick question could break her focus and ruin her plans to work through the evening. Her anger—over not just the disruption but the sheer fragility of her attention—made it impossible to get back to that state. He couldn't have known this, but still, why had he shown up with no warning?

The damage was already done. She let him in and they shared the pasta salad he'd brought on the balcony. She ate ravenously.

He leaned against the railing, eager to talk while she ate. He'd spent the last week in the Central Valley assisting a colleague stationed at a network of wildlife refuges, which had been established a century earlier through an unlikely collaboration between farmers, hunters, scientists, and government agencies, united in the need to mitigate the human damages to the natural habitat of the region. Agriculture had wiped out the wetlands and riparian forests in the area, as well as the wildlife that had once lived there. Migrating birds arrived and, finding their usual sources of food and shelter gone, turned to the new crops and decimated them. The land had sunk fifty feet from the loss of groundwater to irrigation. To lure back the birds, the coalition had planted native grasses and facilitated the return of vernal pools—a capsule version of what the valley had been. Over a hundred years later, the ducks and geese were still coming back, raucous and in the millions, twice a day swarming the skies in unpredictable formations, a honking symphony on high. Clusters of white-faced ibises fed along the refuge perimeter. Herons hunched in the willows and hunted in the reeds, plumes fluttering.

She could see how thrilled he was to be supporting a colleague in a place where conservation efforts were actually succeeding, and his excitement spread to her—she hoped to keep hold of it.

She excused herself to the bathroom. When she returned, he was gone, not in her apartment or out on the balcony. She found him in her new studio near the projector, touching pens, paper cuttings, slides, studying her drafts, one hand resting on her open sketchbook, taking it all in. She panicked. This space was private, her failures strewn everywhere. It was still too early for anyone to see the work.

He startled as she entered, held up both palms and apologized. He'd been gazing around with such wonder, his face flushed pink, that she had trouble reconciling her alarm at seeing him there. He looked admiringly at the cloud taped to the balcony door, then back at her.

"Wow. I mean, wow." Cautious, as if he'd frightened a small animal. He touched the projector. "You know, I've never seen one of these in person."

"I borrowed it from the library," she said, trying very hard to sound neutral. She didn't move from the door. "I'm making something for Mia."

"What is it?" he asked hopefully, scanning the room again. "Or what will it be?"

"It's evolved. It's evolving." She felt herself relax as she told him how she'd been inspired by Mia's stories, how she wanted to make something to honor her. She knew she needed to bring all of it together somehow, in layers, to project it for viewing, but she was fumbling toward a conclusion on a tight deadline; something was eluding her.

"Wait." He looked concerned. "What's the tight deadline?"

She nodded and folded her arms close and drew in a deep breath. "I'm leaving." She exhaled. "I'm trying to finish it before—"

His eyes went wide. "Bo! What? That's huge."

She looked over at the cloud, then beyond it to the rain and the facing building. "I know. I'm not sure how it happened. It just felt like time."

"When do you go?"

"Not sure yet. I'm waiting to hear back on my transportation and papers."

He nodded with his whole torso, thinking. "I'm surprised. But I'm so glad to hear it." He went to hug her, but stopped short and kissed her awkwardly instead. "Where are you headed?"

“Canada. East of Vancouver. It’s where my cousin and uncle live.” Telling him her plan was making it feel real and imminent.

“Your family. That’s so great.” He paused. “And Mia?”

Bo forced a smile. “It’s hard. Her health isn’t good. She doesn’t have anyone else around, no family. But I’m going to let the agency know as soon as I have the details, and they’ll find someone for her.”

“She doesn’t know?”

She shook her head. “Not yet. I’m trying to focus on getting this done.” She gestured around the studio. “I’ve been stuck. The pieces are talking to each other, but I feel like they need to be enlarged or filled out or something. So today I started researching holograms. I think I might get somewhere with it.”

He took in the room again, this time even more amazed. “It seems like a lot to do before you go.” He faced her, put his hand on her arm. “But it’s exciting. I can’t wait to see how it turns out.”

THROUGH MAY, THE party plans proceeded. The menu would be simple: cake. But the guest list was another story.

Whenever Bo initiated a discussion, Mia was reluctant to name names and suggested they cancel the plan altogether. Bo reassured her that it didn't need to be a big deal—a few guests, no more than two hours.

Mia agreed to invite her stylist and the ginger vendor. After that, she looked defeated. “There’s no one else left.”

“Are there any other neighbors you’d like to see? Anyone from the senior center days?”

Mia stared off at an invisible Rolodex. “You can invite Frank, I guess. He used to have us over for dinner. He made good pork chops.”

“Frank?” A new name. “What’s his apartment number?”

“Eighty-eight, on the thirtieth floor. You know how Chinese people like eight.”

“I don’t, actually—”

“But he has trouble hearing and can’t get the ear surgery. He lost his hearing aids and isn’t eligible for a new pair for another couple years, so you have to shout.”

Bo drew an ear next to his name in her notebook. “Got it.”

“He gets up to no good. Once he got caught stealing succulents in Monterey and spent a couple of months in jail. He was smuggling them to China, making good money on the black market, but some hikers saw him loading garbage bags full of plants into his trunk and reported him. Fish and Wildlife came, the police came. Then customs got involved and found out he was calling them ‘vitamins’ on the forms. He served his time, said he was sorry, but they banned him from ever going into another park in California.”

“Did that stop him?”

“Who knows. That guy, whatever he wants to do, he does it. He acts like a child. He had good taste, though. He collected art his whole life. That’s

what he did with his money. His family had the building manager auction off all of it in a mystery lot when he died.”

Bo froze.

“What?” Mia said.

“No. Go ahead.” Bo understood: the memory of someone could be so real, you might speak of them as if they were still alive. “What were you going to say?”

“That it was a shame. His family didn’t even come to sort through his collection themselves.”

Bo crossed his name off the list in her notebook.

—

The next time Bo raised the topic, Mia immediately swerved the conversation in another direction.

“We need to make plans for what to do with my body while I’m still sharp.”

Bo wasn’t prepared for the sadness that hit with her words. “We can do that,” she said, recovering, “but your birthday—”

“Deathday first. I know there are lots of choices for what to do with your body now. I bought a combo tombstone and plot when Kwok died. Buying two was a better deal than one. I got the engraver to carve in his birth and death dates, and add my name, too. They said, We leave your name in red, and when you die, we paint it white and add the date.” She handed a close-up photograph to Bo, who didn’t want to look but did. For the headstone, Mia had provided the photo from their fiftieth wedding anniversary, the occasion of the gold carp dress. It had been printed onto imitation ivory, an oval portrait meant to last at least a few generations. Their faces and clothing came out pixelated and flattened in grayscale. “Of course that’s where I thought I would be buried. How could I have known I would outlive him by a lifetime? That the cemeteries would all wash away before my turn came around?”

“Did you have any specific...method in mind?”

Many people Mia knew had been cremated. A woman from the senior center had her ashes placed in a copper urn and housed in a niche two slots above the floor of the columbarium; the height had been chosen so that her great-great-grandchild could visit without a step stool or a boost. When the family had then left the city, they'd brought the urn with them. Other friends had gone a similar route—to the incinerator, then to the garden or the sea. One had even chosen to have her carbon remains crafted into diamond memorial jewelry. But the prospect of heat breaking down her body put Mia off.

Bo researched other options for her: recomposition, aquamation, vertical burial in another state. In lieu of a tombstone, a family could opt to have a digital image collection made or a tree planted in their loved one's name. She compared vendors and costs, looked for reviews and discounts. It struck her how casual their talk about this was, like discussing items on a grocery list.

Bo's own recent ancestors had been interred in costly plots scattered across cemeteries in a nearby town. She and her mother had gone on twice-annual pilgrimages there to pay their respects, timed just after the spring and fall festivals to avoid crowds, a caravan of cars full of members of their extended family, hitting each stop just long enough to wipe bird droppings from the headstones and fill the cups with flowers. The old Chinese cemetery was pitched on a steep hill. Over the years, erosion had steadily erased each grave site, unveiling the degraded caskets and heaps of rock as the layers of earth had slid away. Eventually, the excess water had pooled underground and loosened coffins from their plots. Bones from the hilltop had floated down through the muck, gathering more bones as they passed through the sections for the Chinese and Irish and Russian dead, and the wet earth coughed up dress shoes and bits of old marble slabs. It had been the first cemetery to shut down. When Bo had heard, she'd been secretly relieved not to have to return.

But soon it began to disturb her that they'd abandoned the old cemetery and the great-great-uncle whose remains had been placed there with the expectation of permanence. "Bo, these things don't last forever," her mother

said. “It was just a place for us to remember him, but we can remember him in other ways.” This struck her as unlikely; the only time anyone had ever spoken of him before was during those visits to his grave. He was an important relative, everyone claimed, yet in the years since the closure, no one had mentioned him at all. And now—when was the last time she’d spoken of her mother? It wasn’t enough to remember someone in story alone. She found herself wishing, again, that “permanent” burial sites still existed, even though her mother’s body had never been recovered. Although what would it matter? Soon enough, she would be gone herself. She’d abandon this place, which was tied to every granule of her life, to join what family she still had left, far from here.

—

Bo glanced at Mia, who was looking at a photograph of an organic burial suit woven with mushroom spores.

Yesterday Bo had called the caregiver agency to let them know she’d be leaving. She needed to feel like she was doing something to prepare. The representative had appreciated the advance notice. They were having a difficult time with placements everywhere; there were simply not enough trained workers to meet the demand. The agent would look into posting a short-term assignment first, to improve the odds of finding a replacement for Bo. Maybe that was all Mia would need, the way things were going.

“The client has been informed of your plans, correct?” the agent said.

“Not yet. I’ll tell her.”

The agent went silent for a long, admonishing moment. When she spoke again, her words were swift and direct, like a truck approaching head-on: “Tell her soon.”

Any day now, Bo told herself. She knew the situation wasn’t ideal, and she would do everything in her means to set up the next person assigned to Mia’s care for a smooth transition.

Beverly had been pleased to hear that Bo was planning a birthday celebration for Mia. Her reaction had made Bo want to downplay the whole

thing. She knew a party wouldn't make up for the fact that soon she'd be letting them all down. And as the call had cut in and out, Bo had been reminded of how far Mia was from her family. Beverly wouldn't be taking over managing Mia's medical care from afar, and there was no chance she'd show up at Mia's door. Time and half the planet sat between them, unbridgeable. Like families the world over, they simply wouldn't reunite.

Bo scanned through the options offered by a biodegradable coffin company, suppressing the agent's voice running through her head. She tried to sound cheerful as she listed the materials she thought might appeal to Mia: seagrass, wicker, cardboard.

"You seem weird," Mia said, staring her down.

"Do I?" Bo said dismissively, but she felt her composure slip. She looked away from her research. The room was the same—but, strangely, deeper. The feeling grew as she turned back to the burial options. "Oh, they have banana leaves."

Mia frowned. "You're distracted."

Bo's skin stung, like moonlight was inside her. Somehow she was in three different times: Her hands were here, sorting through lists of mortuary services. And yet here was her mother, reading her a story about a whale. And here was the new support worker in Mia's kitchen, making a meal. More times were gathering still at the edge of her awareness—she could sense them, their presence almost unbearable. All the times she'd needed to speak to her mother, to learn from her what she didn't know herself: the weather on the day of her birth, the English names of her grandparents, when her mother had known, if she had always known, that she wanted to be a parent. She waited for the feeling to crest, to lose its cool heat.

"I guess," she began slowly, "I guess I've been missing my mother."

"Hmm." Mia sounded skeptical. But then after a minute she said, "You wanted her for longer."

"Yes," Bo said, and time crowded her.

"But you get the time you get."

Bo took a deep breath, the cold trickled back.

"Freeze-dry," Mia said finally.

Bo's hands shook as she pulled up the price list. "Zero carbon emissions, but it's not cheap." She shuddered at her own comment.

"Freeze-dry," Mia repeated.

"You got it," Bo said, keeping her voice steady.

She could still feel her mother in the room.

THE NEWS CAME on an afternoon in early June while she was washing Mia's dishes.

"We found you a sponsor," Jenson announced.

"No!" A spoon slipped from her hands and clattered into the basin. She peeked into the living room; Mia was snoring, her mouth agape. She lowered the call volume, just to be safe.

"Immigration is almost at this year's quota already, but we got you someone."

Bo whispered, "Who is it? Is it for sure?"

"My dad's neighbor, a different one. He needs in-home help. He almost canceled because he hates the color my dad painted his door, but we got him to sign."

"Okay. Okay." Bo managed to catch her breath. "Thank you. I owe you. Thank you."

"This guy is vouching for you. If you get in trouble or miss your lease payments, he's on the line." Jenson was trying to sound grave. "I just sent you your proof of employment. You'll need it for your visa. I'll let you know when I figure out your boat."

As she finished the dishes, she absorbed the news. It all depended on her cousin's timing, but she wouldn't be able to delay telling Mia for much longer, and she'd need to wrap up the memorial project soon. Just a little longer—if she rushed, she could get it done.

—

The next week, Mia's palms had split along the creases. The wounds weren't healing, and no amount of ointment could keep them from cracking. All Bo could do was refresh the bandages again.

"This is going to sting."

Bo dabbed at the sites with cotton doused in alcohol, which seeped into the hangnails on her own hands until they glowed red. She welcomed the

momentary distraction of the pain.

Mia winced but kept still. As Bo fanned Mia's hand dry, she felt a sudden call to honesty—no secrets at the end.

"I've been meaning to tell you—"

"What?" Mia looked up almost in defense, as though expecting Bo to betray her.

Bo's cuticles were raw. Her fingers burned with guilt. How would she even word it? *I'm leaving*. Her courage drained away.

"Would you change anything? If you could go back to other parts of your life?"

"Oh." Mia relaxed. She said, matter-of-fact: "When you get old, you take account. You ask yourself: Was it worth it? All the stupid stuff loses importance. You know, Beverly still scolds me for forgetting the names of her school friends. People from a hundred years ago! I used to feel bad about it, but that kind of thing doesn't matter. I remember what's important. She got old, too. She should know better by now. Everyone feels disappointed sometimes."

Bo cut a new bandage and wrapped it around the wounds on one hand, then did the same for the other. She thought of the pictures she'd seen of Mia as a young woman, stylish and severe, making a life in a city far from home.

Mia continued: "Like I said, you remember what's important. When I was little, in the village, I saw a family leave an infant girl on the step outside their house. They thought if they kept a sick child inside, it would bring bad luck, so they put her out front, shut the door, and waited for her to die."

"You saw that happen?"

"It's the worst thing I ever saw, and I've seen a lot. Who would do that? What mother would be so cruel?"

Bo waited for her to go on, trying not to think about the baby alone on the stoop. She finished the dressings and tugged down Mia's bunched sleeves.

“I wasn’t too bad as a mother.” She held her cradled hands up in a gesture that looked like an aggressive act of prayer. “No one is immune to suffering, I know. I know what it’s like for your family to be lost in an instant.”

Bo felt like a wave had hit her. In an instant—

“I know what it’s like for your family to abandon you,” Mia continued. “I have no expectations anymore, though she must know that I’m dying.”

“Dying?” Bo said gently. “You’re doing all right.” But inside, a lurch. Soon she’d be abandoning her, too.

HOLOGRAMS SKITTERED THROUGH her mind all through the following week. Images piled on images sailed by like soft undying plastics. She was gathering and taming them all in her studio, mentally assembling a composition that kept expanding. She could finally admit that the memorial had long outgrown its intended parameters. The canvas would need to be much larger than a wall, enough to accommodate the unwieldy shape of what she was making. But how large could it really be?

Early one afternoon, a burst of noise cut through her thoughts. Eddie had come with food again, this time knocking at her studio door. “I was thinking,” he began as he removed his shoes. He extended a container of warm beans.

A flare of annoyance. Time was short, and she had so much to do. It had taken her a full morning to reach this semi-focused state, and his arrival had once again upended it—yet, seeing him there, seeing the sweet intensity of his face, she didn’t not want his company. And the beans—a nice thing for a person to do. His bag slid off his shoulder and bounced as it caught at his elbow. She took the container before the food could spill.

Tentatively, yet somehow in a rush, he started again: “I was thinking you might find some of the equipment I use for monitoring useful.”

“For Mia?”

“For your project.”

While she ate, he did a lap around the room. He stepped with care and took in the disarray with a lightness she appreciated but also resented. She suppressed the excuses flying to mind to defend against any perceived failures and willed him to stop or at least hurry up with his looking.

At the projector, he examined the collage she’d been drafting. Then he touched where it glowed flatly on the wall. “How big is this all going to be?”

“I was just wondering that.” She looked beyond the balcony to the side of the facing building and knew she had to think bigger. The jumbotron at

the baseball stadium, where her uncle had taken her and Jenson a few times, was visible to thousands of spectators—maybe something like that?

“Are you thinking you’ll project it in just one place?”

His questions, like fuel. All this rich material, crammed into the shapes she’d imagined—she knew it would never fit on a single surface. She pictured her pieces extending beyond the stadium walls, across the boulevard, side streets, the bay. “No. Somehow it needs to be in lots of places at once.”

He seemed already to understand.

“What about using the birds?”

“You mean the drones?”

“They’re old, but they work fine.”

She considered the idea. It made complete sense. The birds could travel. They could fly at altitude or hover at street level. They could carry her images anywhere.

“What about 3-D projections?”

“Oh!” He turned his attention to the photo projection, excited. “Definitely doable. I have the animation software for rigging and all that. Yeah, it’ll be basic, but 3-D is doable.” He explained that it was the same program scientists used to look at genetic material and map out galaxies, surgeons to simulate complex procedures, archaeologists to render underground civilizations, militaries to bomb. A surfer buddy of his had even borrowed the system to study wave forms before a tournament. He patted the top of a stack of papers and transparencies. “Come on, bring your files. I’ll be out in the field for ten days starting tomorrow, but I’ll help you before I go.”

—

Back at Eddie’s apartment, the machines on his worktable blinked and hummed. His apartment let in more light than she’d remembered, or maybe she’d never visited during the afternoon. He set up two chairs in front of the

display wall and powered up a program while she navigated to the files, which she'd digitized during two all-nighters in between shifts at Mia's.

"That's a lot of stuff."

"It's too much."

This was what she had to show for months of work. Each digression she'd followed had prolonged the time she needed to complete the project.

"No. Nope. Don't worry. Look."

He pulled up a regional live map and dragged one of her files—an entry taken from a field guide—onto the coordinates for their location. The map zoomed in on the neighborhood. A field of California poppies blazed across the familiar rooftops.

"You have as much canvas as you need. You try."

Image to map, image to map, she began to place her collection on the cityscape. A redwood forest cast onto a parking lot. A network of tree roots on the side of a church. She tilted the image and expanded it until it extended below ground level, as deep as the building was tall, like a luminescent funnel cake overtaking the site. They rotated the view of the science museum and one of her own paintings—an indulgence—spread like a mural along the back side, a burst of color along the concrete.

Even in this rudimentary form, there it was. The whole city. The city she knew, still there under and behind and above the plane of their present. The city she'd found in her research, the city she'd invented. All of these places existing at once.

"It just occurred to me," Eddie mused, "we're sort of doing the same thing."

She sat back and rubbed her thumbs. "How do you mean?"

"This wildlife census I've been working on—the report is from data I collected this winter, but it's only a snapshot in time. It becomes useful when I hold it up against numbers from previous years. I always fixate on the new data and lose sight of the bigger time line until that stage. But you—you're looking at the bigger time line."

He understood exactly what she was doing and had articulated it better than she had been able to. She was staging the pieces she'd collected, and

together they were beginning to tell a new story about place. Yet what meant the most, what she'd never expected, was the kinship he was proposing between their work. For months she'd worked toward this vision in isolation, only she hadn't really been alone. The project for Mia had always reached out to the vaster world.

Eddie opened an image of a California quail on a small monitor. "How would you feel about using this? It's been extirpated for ages, but I've never stopped looking for it."

"Let's add it." She dragged it to the center of the map, admiring the plume that hung over the bird's face. "Where should it go?"

He crossed his arms and considered the wall. "Put it in the park. I'm sure no one will notice, but it will make me happy to know it's there."

The park, another canvas. Now a giant quail covered a section of the green strip running east-west.

"Don't forget that some surfaces move. Trees, bodies of water, anything organic."

"Can you project videos?"

"As easily as still images. You just need to assign how each bird will deploy."

She selected a video clip of the amusement park that had once sat at the western edge of the city and returned it to its original location, now underwater. The new shore rippled under the superimposed footage of roller coasters and concession stands. A Ferris wheel spun through the shallow water, kicking up foam. A giant animatron of a woman with red ringlets and a missing tooth rocked back and forth, waist-high in water in a ghastly version of treading.

Bo added a composite image that she'd made out of photographs of the bathhouse near that site. Now, beyond the carousel, along the cliff, a group of women in bathing suits and caps climbed through the ice plant and blue-eyed grass. Two teenage boys huddled in a crevice and shared a joint. She'd been making her way to this structure without knowing it, but all of a sudden every move felt exactly right.

As she drafted, Eddie drew circles to mark trouble spots. Streetlamps could interfere with the lighting. Certain angles would be tricky. The effects would be different on a night of heavy rain than on one with a drizzle.

“So pay attention to the forecast. The rain itself could be your canvas. And luckily, it won’t be migration season—birds and bats would be drawn to the artificial lights.”

She zoomed in on a building that she’d adorned with a flock of plovers whose bodies seemed now to be drooping.

“They’re melty from distortion,” Eddie said. This happened when you stretched images across new surfaces. He searched for more pictures of the shorebirds and loaded them into the program to aggregate. The new layers of information overlapped on the map, and missing details began to fill in. After a minute, her image automatically corrected itself to match its placement on the wall. “There. Some warping is inevitable, but some of it we can fix.”

It was only a draft, mocked up in a dim apartment, but for the first time, she could see the shape and scale of what she’d been making.

Once she’d grasped the basics of the program, Eddie left her alone, and the next day he took off for the field. While he was gone, Bo spent all of her time outside of her shifts with Mia at his table, adjusting the size of the images, cropping out distracting elements, truncating video clips, then arranging and rearranging the map to test the best placement for her pieces. She played with how long each might display, reconfiguring the progression until she’d memorized the cycle of images and cataloged them in her mind.

—

While she cut and pasted like a kindergartener and coasted on the engine of creation, the need on the fifty-first floor grew. One day at Mia’s, toward the end of June, Bo heard a faint thud and found her in the bathroom, her cane just out of reach. She’d fallen again. Bo could tell by her humiliated expression that she wasn’t badly injured, but she fussed over her anyway, joking that the floor had some nerve to give out under her feet, checking her

forehead, tailbone, knees, and ankles. She bent down and braced her core to lift Mia to standing, but still nearly strained her own back. Then, for the first time, she transferred Mia to the wheelchair, pushed her into the bedroom, and transferred her to her bed.

After Bo tucked her in, Mia asked: “The memorial?”

“I just had a breakthrough,” Bo reassured her.

“A what?”

“I figured something out with my friend’s help.”

“What was it?”

“You’ll see.”

“Will it be done in time for my party? At this rate, I’ll be dead before you finish.”

“Don’t say that.” Though Bo had had the same thought—either she’d be gone or Mia would. “I’ll show you soon.”

She stayed a little longer after Mia was asleep, sent a message to the doctor to alert him to her fall. Her own knees ached from the lifting. Her heart fluttered with extra beats at the memory of the thud. A strange light spilled into the kitchen as she prepared food for the following day. She set down the knife, leaned under the window, and found the moon. She felt a rippling under her lungs, wishful and terrified. The cool light seemed to touch every surface of the city—the buildings silver, her hands on the ledge aglow. For a moment she felt the tides holding all their lives in place. For that one moonlit moment she knew her exact position in the great net of things.

EDDIE CAME BACK from his work trip the next day with his own news. His manager had finalized plans for his relocation. The seacraft was booked. He'd be returning home for good in one week, the day of Mia's birthday party.

"That soon?" Bo said.

"I know. It all happened fast."

He was happy, she could tell.

She must have looked troubled, because he asked if anything was wrong.

"No, no." Maybe it was the short notice, or realizing he'd be gone before she was, before she'd had a chance to finish the project, but his leaving made her feel like she was being left.

"Are you sure?"

"It's great," she said. To persuade him, she added, "We should celebrate."

—

They headed up to the roof and, once there, passed a shot glass of vodka back and forth between them.

"Cheers. To big changes." She lifted the glass, sipped, and handed it to him. Her lips burned.

"To changes—whatever they may be." He sipped and recoiled, then sipped again. His teeth clicked on the glass.

She laughed. "Are you glad to be going home?"

"All my training tells me to worry, wherever I am. Between the fires, floods, and extinctions, I feel like I never sleep. But I'm glad I'll be with my kid. I'm glad."

The vendors, the lush gray sky. Her cheeks hot with vodka. Each moment slotting into place in a countdown.

"I have to admit," he said, "I've never understood why you've stayed this long."

“My mother said she didn’t think she’d ever be ready to leave. I guess I felt the same way. I’ve never lived anywhere but here, so it’s been hard to imagine.”

“She’d want a future for you.”

“I think so.” She hid her face in her hands. “She’s not doing well, you know—Mia.” The shot glass was empty now, warm from their hands. “And we’re really leaving.”

He nodded. They were quiet for a minute, listening to the torrents. Then he asked, “Where are you with the memorial?”

It was possible she would run out of time. Somehow, she’d both underestimated her vision and let it get too big. Soon her cousin would confirm her ticket out, the agency would find her replacement, and she’d be off—to care for a new person—whether or not the memorial was done.

“At this point, I’m rushing. If I can just finish it before I go, I hope that means I can say goodbye to her on good terms.”

“The timing is perfect. It’s going to be an incredible gift.”

Just then, they saw the Tran children running toward them, shouting their names, barely able to contain the question they’d been carrying.

Vic, the older child, told them that a pair of birds had built a nest on the sill of their bathroom window. She pulled up a photo: two white eggs and a wet brownish-gray bird about to sit on them, spots on her tail, a black coin eye reflecting a spot of light at the center.

The younger child, Nathan, tapped at a pocket at Eddie’s knee; Eddie pulled out a magnifying glass.

“What kind of bird is it?” He was impatient and looked very serious.

“Let’s see.” Eddie turned to Bo. “Sometimes we use this tool to study bugs and leaves.”

“Eddie, but what happens when they hatch?” Vic asked, pulling at his sleeve.

“Eddie, but, Eddie—she makes noise when we turn on the light,” Nathan said, nudging between Vic and Eddie to claim the better view.

Both children mimicked the cooing sounds, which made Bo laugh.

With his eye to the glass, Eddie inspected the photo. "Okay, it looks like you have mourning doves."

"We see them in the morning sometimes!" Nathan exclaimed.

"It's actually a different kind of mourning. It means the sadness of losing someone." He pointed at Nathan knowingly. "I had a hunch this was the bird based on your excellent imitation."

Nathan beamed, then added, "We saw the crows doing somersaults."

Eddie returned the glass to its pocket and patted it. "Oh, neat. Yeah, crows like to play."

"Our farm has to close," Vic said abruptly.

"We're moving," Nathan added.

Vic glared at him. "You're not supposed to tell anyone yet."

"Oh, no," Bo said. "I'm sorry to hear that. Are the crops failing?" The news unnerved her, but she stayed calm. Everyone left was always leaving, but certain people you took for granted would still be there.

Vic looked uncertain, then suddenly shy. "Our mom says people are going to starve. She says it's too expensive and she's tired."

"Ah." Eddie looked at them both with sympathy. "The food shortages are very serious."

"I don't want to leave," Nathan said, as if stating his position for the record.

"You know," Eddie said, "we're leaving, too."

Nathan placed his hands on Eddie's knee. "You're leaving?"

Eddie nodded.

"You, too?"

Bo nodded. Both children looked relieved.

"Big changes feel scary sometimes," Eddie said. "But they can be exciting, too." He gave Bo a look and she felt a rush of gratitude for him. "When's your boat?"

Nathan straightened and reported: "Next week."

"Hey, mine, too. This will be fun. We'll be together for part of the journey."

Vic's eyes lit up, ready to let go of her distress. "Really?"

“Really.” Eddie bumped Vic’s arm lightly and changed the subject. “You know, I saw the ice booth is open today.”

The ice lady came a few times a month—less, lately—to sell in bulk to other vendors, but she also offered treats to anyone who knew to ask—which was apparently everyone but Bo, who was hearing about this for the first time now.

They headed over to her stand, and Eddie ordered ices for the four of them. As the vendor unveiled an ice block and scraped shavings from it into cups, she told them that shave ice originated when a Chinese emperor sent troops into the mountains to bring back a room-size chunk of ice to be served as a short-lived delicacy. A dessert for royalty, she said with a wink.

“She tells this story every time,” Nathan whispered to Bo, who smiled and said, “Shh, I haven’t heard it.”

They ate together under the booth’s awning, savoring the cold mounds of syrup. The children shivered happily, faces and hands sticky with sugar. Bo let herself enjoy the unexpected sweetness. Soon they would disperse, off to separate lives. She drank what was left in her cup, to the last drop.

THE NEXT DAY, Bo received a message. The State Department had notified her that her digital passport was ready. Another box checked off—she could relax a little knowing that the job and sponsorship documents were in place.

The map was far from done, but she set it aside to learn how to operate the mechanical birds, which required another program and Eddie's expertise. She rushed, knowing she had only a week until he left.

He helped in between data logs and packing. Despite his clear tutorials, she still struggled with the basic setup. She was slow to understand the functions that would allow her to control the birds, and had trouble following the logs that relayed commands to the separate image-mapping program. She was afraid of making a technical error that would compromise the equipment or cause the map to freeze.

She'd get the hang of it, he promised; everyone did. The programs were designed to talk to each other. If she was worried about malfunctions, she shouldn't be. The fleet could perform in inclement weather and biodegrade if abandoned. If, for whatever reason, a bird couldn't be called back—one went missing at least once per mission—it would dissolve where it landed.

The main issue was that every element was currently positioned to be viewed from her perspective. She needed to consider the viewpoint of the observer. Where was that person looking from and what did she want them to see? She had to plan the flights with that in mind.

The scope of her work had grown far beyond what Mia would ever see, but Bo had never really changed her notion of who the audience was. And yet strangers would be watching, too. People would be at their windows or up on the roofs, repeated in buildings across town, proof that the city wasn't as empty as it felt.

Once she determined the optimal viewing points, the program would line up the light beams and coordinate the visuals so that the expected viewer perceived one complete image, a collage of history. The birds would drop

into alleys and aim her work onto walls, then fly to the next location. They'd hover over a high rooftop, say, and cast images onto it, then zip down and reconfigure themselves to create a new display on a lower rooftop visible from the first. They'd cover the whole city this way, paying visits to areas she'd never been herself, where entire communities still lived. The show would run on a night with heavy rain, which would serve as another surface for projections.

She stumbled through the work, through the frustration and anxiety ratcheting up as she programmed. It seemed impossible to pull it off without Eddie. But she was close.

—

And then it was happening: Jenson messaged her the reservation confirmation. A cargo ship was stopping in the port in fourteen days. It didn't typically take passengers, but he'd worked out a deal with the captain, who was the sister-in-law of a guy he swam laps with at the gym. Soon after, her visa was approved.

He had come through for her. People she'd never met had agreed to help. Before she knew it, all this would be behind her and she'd be back with her family. Safe and dry. For the first time, she let herself want it, and the feeling was such a relief that she wondered how she could have deluded herself for so long into believing that she didn't.

She called Jenson to hear his voice, so she could be sure the news was real.

"Bo, don't fuck this up—"

"I won't," she said before he could finish his sentence.

"And don't get distracted. I had to call in some gnarly favors."

"I won't."

He was quiet for a moment, then closed out the call by saying, "I'll come down to get you. See you in a couple weeks." Bo could tell from the change in his tone that he was excited. She knew he'd forgiven her for not being ready last summer.

The time had come. She had to tell Mia soon—after the party.
The rest of her life was almost here.

THE HOUR
of the
LUNG



THE MORNING BEFORE Mia's birthday party and Eddie's departure, after hours of practice with and without his help, she figured out how to sync the mechanical birds to the map. She had grouped the birds and assigned their positions and flights. Now she just had to finalize the images and their exact placements. Soon—not soon enough for the party, she'd come to realize, but very soon—she'd be ready to show it to Mia. She would wheel her up to the roof and choose the spot with the best view. Eddie wouldn't be around to assist, but Bo had the tools she needed. She couldn't quite believe she might pull it all off. She had just ten days left.

That afternoon, she went up and over to the building across the way. Her plan was to place a birthday message in the windows Mia looked out at from her apartment. It took some time to find the right ones. The hall layouts were unfamiliar. Bulbs had blown, and rodent droppings peppered the walkways. The fifty-first floor there didn't line up with the fifty-first floor in her building. Searching for the staircase, she passed a moldering mountain of pulp, a heap of unopened mail, presumably abandoned by a postal worker. The top was splotched with soft green growth.

The fifty-second floor was well lit by tulip-shaped sconces. Everything looked recently cleaned and the ceilings were dry, no signs of leaks. What a difference one level could make.

Counting paces, she found the unit she was looking for. The door was unlocked. She slipped in and went to the window, which looked slightly down into Mia's. She'd hoped to catch sight of her, but reflections blocked the view.

She taped up the large yellow letters she'd cut out but soon ran out of space. The window read, HAPPY BIRTH. There was no way to make the whole message fit.

She knocked next door, and almost instantly a tiny blue-haired woman answered, dressed in a maroon velour tracksuit, a jump rope slung over one stooped shoulder. She looked like she was about Mia's age.

"Who are you?" she asked, jogging in place, like a runner warming up.

"I live across the street." Bo pointed past her. "I was wondering if I could use your windows. I'm putting up a surprise message for the person who lives over there, but I ran out of room next door."

Just then, several other doors swung open and the hall filled with superseniors, all in athletic dress, too. One man with no teeth looked Bo up and down and licked his lips. Two women approached and one exclaimed, "Who's this young person?"

"She says she lives across the way," the first woman said, then turned back to Bo. "Okay, that's fine, honey, but do it fast. We have exercise hour starting in a few minutes."

Bo couldn't believe it: a whole floor of elderly residents, organized and carrying on all on their own. She'd assumed these communities had languished—like Mia's shuttered senior center. Maybe Mia would've moved to this building, if she'd known so many others lived here. Bo imagined her among them, going to dance class, picking arguments, gossiping.

She hurried inside to finish slapping up DAY, MIA! while the hall filled with buzzy chatter.

The woman squinted at the window, activating deep lines in her face. "Aim...what? Never mind. All done?" She ushered Bo out and closed the door.

—

On her way home, Bo stopped at Mia's to put up decorations. Mia was in her armchair watching an out-of-season Christmas episode of her soap. Bo held up the bundle of streamers she'd made from the leftover acetate and yellow paper she'd used for the window message.

"Go ahead," Mia said, watching her now instead of the show.

“I’ll be quick,” Bo said. “I have to get back.” She set up a step stool and taped the strips over the doorway and directly to the ceiling. They were scrappy but cheerful, swaying and glinting like seaweed twisted with tinsel.

“Okay, all set.” She returned the step stool to the closet and started for the front door. “Do you need anything else?”

“The cake?”

“Going to make it now.”

“Do we have enough forks for our guests?”

“You have enough forks.”

“Okay, just making sure.”

Mia was gazing at the streamers, practically beaming, like a child at an aquarium exhibit. Bo regretted all the times she’d never even thought to make simple gestures like this. It took so little to make Mia happy.

“All right, if there’s nothing else?”

Mia shook her head. “See you tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow,” Bo said, and as she closed the door, she saw the streamers shivering.

BACK HOME, BO cut more streamers and mixed oil, eggs, and cricket flour into batter for cake. The chocolate coins Eddie had donated to the cause had warped into a dusty-looking clump. She snapped a piece off, and it became fudge in her mouth: it would work. She melted the rest in increments, then folded the black gloss into the batter. The cake would have three tiers. With only one pan, she'd have to bake one at a time. The smell of chocolate, so sweet and rich, pumping through the ruptured seal on the oven door disarmed her, crowded her head with memories. She mixed up frosting and squeezed a full dropper of food coloring into it; the white slurry bled grass green. Impatient, she spread it onto the cakes before they cooled, and the green disappeared into the sponge. She stacked them anyway, the strata just perceptible at the uneven edges, and slathered the last of the frosting on top. It held its structure this time, stood out like a crooked shrub.

Later Eddie came to spend the night, luggage in hand—just a backpack and a medium-size duffel. “Interesting colors,” he said as she slid the cake into the refrigerator. “Looks like a cut of earth.”

Around nine, Mia sent a message: she couldn't find any clean cloth napkins, so could Bo make sure to bring some tomorrow? She was going to bed early to rest up for the big day.

Bo pulled out a stack her mother had sewn out of old curtains. She took a photo and sent it to Mia with the caption “Get some rest.”

—

Bo returned to the map: removed images, added them back, took them out again. She riffled through a heap of drawings, ran her hand along tubes of paint. She could aim for the night before she left, but she had to work fast.

Eddie was under the covers. “You need to sleep. Your eyes are super dilated,” he warned. Moments later, he was asleep himself.

But Bo was wired, ready to tinker. All the images had traveled through her hands. All these months, this arrangement had been her private invention. But now that was about to change. Soon Mia, and a whole audience beyond her, would see what she'd made—and after that, it would belong to them. Even if they didn't recognize all the references, she knew that the apparitions would awaken something in them. Their own memories would arise within and around her projections. The audience would witness the show, and wear it, and contradict it, and become part of it—with their own lives, they would bring it to life. She could count on that. The memorial had grown so that no one would be able to see the whole at once, not even her, not even close. It wouldn't last, but for one night it would bring the city together in her vision. The next morning the whole thing would take on the quality of a dream. Someone might consult with a neighbor: *Did you catch that show last night? The whole city lit up. I've never seen anything like it.*

It was a memorial, yes. A farewell. For Mia and for them.

It was the practice of remembering.

—

Late and later, she drifted into the hours that attuned her to the edges of another world. A behindworld, an in-between world. She reached out to touch a face hovering in front of the wall. Her hand joined the image now cast over it.

She tested more holograms until her grasp of time fell away. They moved through the room like celestial party guests. Eddie shifted in his sleep.

For a few weeks in her twenties, she'd risen at three thirty in the morning to catch a bus to a temporary conference-setup gig downtown. It surprised her how readily she fell into the routine, recognized the other riders, and accustomed herself to the driver, who blew through stop signs and red lights because, as she asserted, while accelerating and staring down

in the rearview mirror anyone who dared comment, laws didn't apply during the third shift; on this route, she owned the roads.

On that bus—like now, at last—Bo sensed her heart going permeable. Mystery seeped in. The predawn commute had taught her to anticipate sunrise, a sequence of dark giving way to kaleidoscopic reflections on the high-rises, the sun lifting through a narrow column between buildings to transform the skyline into a three-dimensional center of commerce that broke the spell.

Mia referred to it once as the hour of the lung: “If you wake between four and six, something is wrong with your breathing.” And no wonder: so many times, paralyzed awake, Bo had wished to sleep through those spells, to escape that place that ran broad and deep and harbored terror. But she had sought it, too, staying awake all night painting to get there, that very feeling of breathing differently, breathing with—

—

By dawn the room was itself: solid surfaces, machines, Eddie's form, her mess. The waning moon still showed, palm pink. In a blink, a cloud mass slid by and erased it—compass lost. Bo tried to get her bearings. She checked the time: seven. Four hours until the party.

In the bathroom she avoided the mirror. The shelves were so bare, they would take no time to pack. Her urine was orange. She flushed the startling color away.

Eddie was awake, drinking water at the kitchen counter. He looked worried. “Have you slept?”

“Not really.” He looked poorly rested himself.

The night state snapped off. The fear switched off. In the early light, desperation replaced it.

“Are you okay?”

Her arms and legs rushed with heat. She waited next to him, close but taking care not to touch him, not yet. Tomorrow he would be gone. In less

than two weeks, she would be gone. And Mia? Now came that guilt, or grief, or pre-grief, or whatever wild feeling she'd been pressing down.

"She's dying. She has been, I know. But it's happening fast now, and I won't be here."

This was the expected trajectory, the reason for her job. But seeing Mia in bed during the day was almost unbearable. The other day, delirious from lack of sleep, Bo had had the same disturbing wish for it all to be over, for the waiting and suffering to end for good, and then Mia had shouted, Is the party on Saturday or Sunday?, her abrasive voice a sign of the life still in her, of all the lives folded into the shrinking but stalwart shape of her, and Bo couldn't believe how close she'd been to accepting, even hoping for, that finality—which would make the matter of her leaving clean. Now she only felt dread. She wanted badly for Mia to rest as much as she needed; she wanted just as badly for her to be well enough to stay awake. She was a coward to be leaving, a child to be feeling that it was unfair that a life had to end. Even the party was a selfish distraction, practically a bribe so she might be forgiven when she left Mia.

He set down his glass and rubbed at his eye. "How long, do you think, before?"

She shook her head.

"Hey. These things...you've been there for her all this time. That's the best anyone can do."

"It's not."

"Come on."

"I'm abandoning her."

"No. You're..." He took her hand, which she allowed for a moment. "She's lived a long life."

She extracted her fingers from his, understanding that anything he or anyone else said would be the wrong thing, that she needed something that wasn't words: him, heat. She pulled at his waistband, her face inches from his neck. He moved back slightly and looked at her searchingly, seriously, but she could tell he would be pliant, could smell the sweet animal sweat coming off his skin. She struggled out of her clothes, then waited as he

removed his. He pressed his back to the refrigerator so she could climb, but she kept slipping, water against rock, pressing toward his smell and slipping, even when he slid down, legs steeled, and gripped her to make it easier. A stack of nested bowls rattled above their heads, she fixated on the sound to stop the tears from breaching. His body felt like a stranger's this time, startlingly separate, made of its own hard, coordinated parts, the bones of his shoulders holding up a form she hurled herself toward but couldn't reach. Still, he was warm, sturdy, apart but there. He waited until she brought herself to breaking, until she rode out the series of soft, surging waves. Her need retreated. The extraneous once again fell away.

After, she faced the table clutter and tried to remember the task at hand. He tried to lead her to the bed, both understanding that they wouldn't see each other again.

"Soon," she said, a house at the edge of a cliff.

She crawled back toward the work. Her head stung at the temples and throbbed everywhere else. Her eyes and teeth felt oily from no sleep. When she shut her eyes the sensations amplified, then abruptly vanished. Just a short nap—

—

She dreamed patchily.

Pure terror and a current of joy tucked under: she cycled through a rickety wooden roller coaster, the dips and turns so irregular it took several rides to notice the scene she kept passing at the boarding station: a faceless woman—her mother, but not—waiting at the platform, and behind her the smoking ruins of a city, burying stories that would never be broadcast up to the surface.

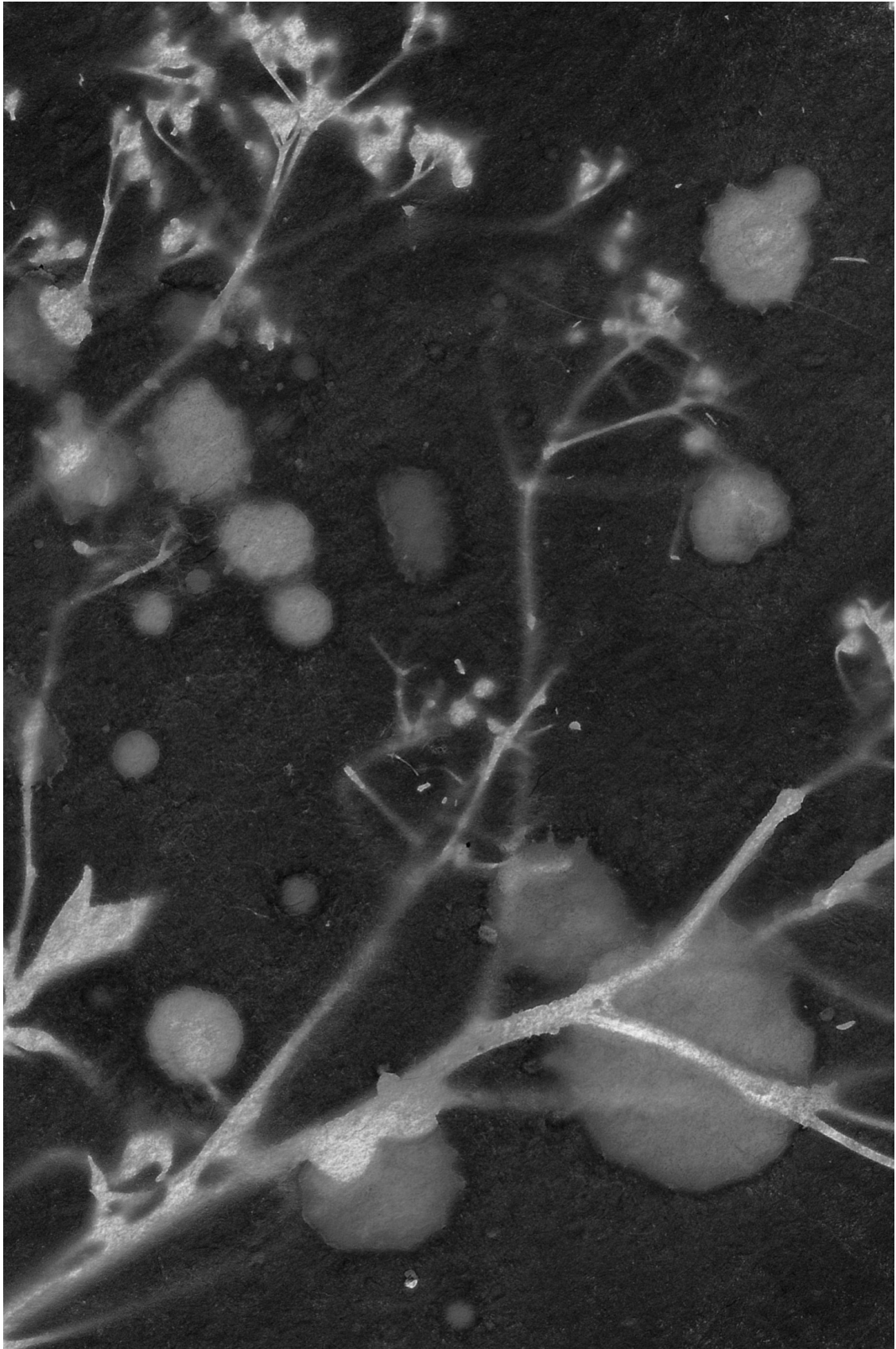
Then, red lights: electric birds with transparent bodies, their hearts blinking from the strain of flight. A harsh bell—cheerless mechanical birdsong. The eyes of—a rabid dog? A possessed coyote?

—

She woke. The bristle end of a brush was lodged between the floorboards, leaving a scuffed trail of green paint. She'd fallen asleep on the floor like Mia.

Her message light pulsed and dinged without pause, signaling many recordings. She'd slept through each call, through the notification lights and the alarms. The light outside said it was afternoon. Her bed was empty. The elevator was stalled. She ran all the way to the fifty-first floor.

IMAGINARY WALKS



THE HALL WAS quiet except for her running. She flung open the door, praying to find that a guest had lingered. The paper streamers trembled from the force of her arrival, the only sign of movement in the room.

The armchair. Mia was slumped, head looming over lap.

Pure fear streamed through her, like melting ice. “Mia!”

She stirred as Bo guided her upright.

“Where were you?” she asked weakly.

She was moving and speaking. Instinct took over, and Bo began triage. She took her pulse, checked other vitals, everything read as normal. She feared what she might be failing to notice. Mia looked tired, a bit disheveled—but physically fine? After a few minutes of repeated tests, mostly assured there was no emergency at hand, Bo stood and stepped back. The cold was letting up now, her guilt returning.

“Feeling okay?”

Mia looked sternly toward the front door and back. The streamers were still swaying at the entrance.

“I’m so sorry I missed the party.”

Mia said nothing. She was buttoned into a maroon blazer over a cream blouse. The collar had set off a rash at her neck. Three gold pendants on delicate gold chains rested on her chest. Her hair rose in irregular fresh curls around her face, but at the back it was flat and matted. She’d set the curlers herself. In her lap was a knitted cap Bo had never seen, woven through with metallic ribbons that erupted in a tassel at the top. She’d waited here all morning.

“I stayed up late and lost track of time. I came as soon as I woke up.”

Mia wouldn’t look at her. “You’re never late.”

“I had the alarm set for ten so I could come finish setting up. I don’t know how I missed it.” Bo pulled a chair beside Mia and held her own knees. “I’m sorry. It’s not an excuse.”

“You must have been really tired.”

“You were looking forward to this. I was, too.” Bo couldn’t tell if she was making things worse. It was impossible to make up for her failure. Like a parent who missed a child’s recital—no repeat performance at home or special dessert could undo the disappointment and humiliation of that absence.

“It was your idea anyway.”

“I’m really sorry.”

Mia scratched at her neck. “Jacky brought me a present, though.”

“He did?” So the stylist had remembered. Someone had shown up.

Mia pointed at an attractive black wig on the folding tray. “He came by to see me, just for a minute. It’s a good one, made with real hair. Someone left it at his salon and never claimed it. He cleaned and curled it and set it for me.”

“Did you try it on?”

“Later. I told him you were probably finishing the cake, but he couldn’t wait. He was wearing a wig, too, to be funny.”

The cake. It was something.

“Let me go get it,” Bo said to Mia, hoping she might be able to salvage something of the celebration.

She berated herself all the way home and back, unable to push away the image of Mia waiting, the bare fact of her deteriorating condition. She paused before reentering Mia’s apartment, so that she might present the cake with some cheer. It was lopsided and the frosting on top had collapsed into a blob, but Mia perked up at the sight of it. The red on her neck was flaring out toward her chin.

“So you really made it.”

Bo moved quickly in the kitchen. She cut Mia a generous slice, knowing she wouldn’t be able to finish it, and for herself, a piece so thin it buckled into a heap. The dyed frosting left green oil smears on the utensils and plates.

Then she noticed a small crate of produce, all its offerings in shocking bright colors. According to the packing slip, it had come from a farm in British Columbia. “Did someone send these fruits?” she called.

“I ordered them special for the party.”

Her heart dropped. Eight plums and a jar of plum jam, one lumpy yellow tomato and one orange tomato, perfectly spherical, two green figs with milky drops at the stem. She hadn’t seen such decadent fruit in years. They had to have been costly and very difficult to procure. She poured the packing puffs into a bucket to decompose and fought back tears as she cut and plated the fruit.

Mia admired the platter and sampled it all. Her eyes grew wide as she bit into a plum—“Sweet!”—and she immediately went for another piece. Finally she motioned that she was done with the fruit and moved on to the cake. She said, casually, “Whatever you were doing must have been important.”

Bo nearly laughed. “I was working on my gift for you, actually.”

“Ah, my memorial. So is it ready now or not?”

“Almost,” she promised. “In a few days, I’m hoping.”

Mia scratched again at her neck. The green on her fingers left streaks on the silk collar and her skin, but the rash was smaller now, and pink instead of red. She dabbed at some crumbs and transferred them to her tongue. “You don’t have all the time in the world.”

Just nine days left.

“You have to finish it before I die.”

“Look.” Bo swallowed and pointed to the wall to change the subject. “You have a message.”

A young girl shimmered into the room, Beverly at her side. They were at a counter in aprons. The girl held onto the rail of a step stool.

Mia waved at the hologram. “Hi, honey.”

“They sent this message a few hours ago,” Bo said.

“We’re making 1-2-3-4-5 pork!” the girl announced.

Beverly tilted the contents of a pot toward the camera. “Happy birthday, Mom. We’re doing your braised short ribs recipe. In honor of you.”

“I can see that,” Mia replied.

“It’s a recording,” Bo reminded her. It was incredible—smiling beside the child, Beverly looked like she’d lost forty years.

“That’s Beverly’s great-granddaughter,” Mia explained, and Bo wondered if she knew the girl’s name.

On cue, she continued: “After grandchildren, you feel a distance, a natural remove. Their children have very little to do with you at that point. They don’t know your stories, they never come to visit. They probably don’t even know your name.”

It was true: Bo didn’t know any of her great-grandparents’ names. She thought of the monarch butterfly, how five generations manifested in one migratory season, the first starting the journey north from Monterey in February and their great-great-grandchildren heading back down from southern Canada in October, knowing by some cellular memory where to return. Her mother had taken her to see them once, when they were nearing extinction, clusters of black-and-orange wings like licks of fire in the eucalyptus grove. A child, Bo couldn’t fathom a home before the one she shared with her mother, nor a family so unlike her small one. If you could remember a place from generations ago, what about generations ahead? Would you know, in your body, where to go? Shortly before her disappearance, looking down at the rivered streets, her mother had mentioned them again, as she often did: “If we had thought far enough into the future, things might have been different. We might not have saved the monarchs, but we might have seen the world we were making and decided to make a different one.”

Now Mia’s great-great-granddaughter was panting with excitement. “We put one spoon of sugar, then two spoons of see yao, then three of, of, of—”

“Black vinegar,” Mia and Beverly said at the same time.

Beverly smiled. “She knows, sweetie. Remember, she’s the one who taught me how to make it.”

The girl held up a small sheet of paper with a hand-drawn rainbow. “I made you a card.”

“What does it say?” Mia asked.

Bo leaned forward. A searing tenderness was spreading through her. “Happy birthday, Great-Granny’s Mommy.”

The girl dropped the paper into the pot and knocked over a measuring cup as she reached to remove it. Both Mia and Bo cried out.

“Agh!” Beverly pulled out the card, now dripping with glossy brown sauce. She pinched the girl’s cheek mock-angrily and sopped up the spill with a towel. “Mom, we have to go. Sorry we couldn’t be at your party. Baby, say happy birthday and bye.”

When they vanished, the room felt emptier than before. Mia looked exhausted, ready for bed by midafternoon. She pushed her plate toward Bo, the cake barely eaten. “It’s too sweet. I’ll finish it later.”

Bo helped her change into her bedclothes. The rash had started to spread again but subsided as soon as the blouse was off. Her neck was purplish red with lesions from scratching. She stumbled getting her feet into the pant legs and grabbed Bo’s arm to steady herself. Her fingers gripped tightly, but Bo could barely feel them.

A message from Eddie arrived. Already he seemed worlds away. He wrote: *I didn’t want to wake you. I’m on my way now, four stops and two days till the port, then three days till home. Maybe I’ll see you sometime when you get up this way.*

Her cousin would be boarding in five days, heading south to meet her. The conviction that had compelled her to act, to make a plan to secure a real future, hadn’t left her—but now, with Mia’s feather grip on her hand, it was turning. This place was barely recognizable, dissolving and reshaping endlessly, and soon there would be even more water and one day everyone would be gone, but in that undecided meantime, wasn’t it still her home? Weren’t there still lives to attend to?

It was then that she remembered the message she’d put up in the window.

“Just one more thing before you sleep.” She led Mia to the window and pointed up.

“ ‘Happy birthday, Mia,’ ” Mia read. She laughed tiredly and tapped at the glass. “Okay, very nice.” She turned toward the bed and waited for Bo’s arm to guide her back.

THE DAY AFTER the party, Bo installed call equipment in the bedroom. With a button or a shout Mia could invite the world into her room from bed.

When the first call came in on the new setup that morning, the camera turned on and autofocused on Mia. The live feed displayed her to herself, a hologram mirror: a withering figure consumed by quilts and pillows. Bo felt a miserable twist in her gut.

Mia squinted. "Who's that?"

Beverly beamed in, her image replacing Mia's before Bo could answer. Mia looked confused; Beverly, worried.

"Hi," Bo said, hoping to project calm. "Your mom's been feeling tired, so we decided it would be nice if she could take calls in here."

"I see. Mom, you're not feeling so great?"

"I'm breathing. If you see the sun set and the moon rise, you're all right."

"That's what Dad used to say."

Mia paused. "That's right."

"He said that to sound cheerful whenever someone called to check on him," Beverly explained to Bo, "but I don't think he ever meant it."

"Are you going to come visit?" Mia asked, and Bo had to look away.

"Mom. We've discussed this. It's just not possible."

"You could try."

"Even if I could work out the travel, my hip needs another replacement."

"Another one? Your mattresses are too soft. You better take care of that."

"It's not the— Don't worry." She regrouped, put on an accommodating smile. "I'm getting so old, we're practically peers, Mom."

"Don't be ridiculous." Mia flinched, like she'd tasted something unappetizing. "I'll always be your mother."

"Are you eating?"

"Some."

Beverly looked to Bo, who managed a noncommittal shrug. “Do what Bo says, Mom. You gotta eat.”

Mia ended the call.

Until now, eating hadn’t been much of an issue for Mia, at least not compared to Bo’s other clients. Ricardo, for instance, had tossed the list of approved foods his doctor had prescribed him for low sodium intake and ignored Bo’s attempts to coax him into eating bland grains, instead sucking on the salt from his stash of fish jerky until only the sodden fibers remained. Another man she’d cared for had type 2 diabetes and needed his glucose checked around the clock. When the sensor embedded under his skin for continuous monitoring led to an infection and they couldn’t find a skilled technician to repair the laser in the backup spectrometer watch, she dragged out her old-school kit and pricked his finger with a lancet ten times a day, her client yelping each time and both of them praying that the device wouldn’t emit a screeching alarm. During her time with him, she’d taken to carrying jelly beans in her pockets to reverse his sudden blood sugar crashes.

But now Mia barely ate. Her teeth bothered her; she was sick of every flavor. She’d been getting picky, asking for duck heart and other meats that were impossible to come by.

Beverly called back in the late afternoon, when she knew Mia would be asleep, laying into Bo with increasing concern and a tinge of blame: “She says that? She says she doesn’t want to eat?”

“I mean, yeah.”

“Really?” She had an imploring, disbelieving look.

“She doesn’t want to. I can’t force her.”

“Is this because...”

Bo waited, the sense of a challenge growing.

Beverly’s gaze intensified. “I know you’re planning to leave.”

Bo could only stare back.

“The agency called me about approving your replacement.”

“I didn’t—” She searched for the right words—not to deny, but to try to explain—but Beverly cut her off.

“We’ll talk about this later.” She looked troubled, but also like she might regret having brought it up.

“It wasn’t my plan to—”

“Later,” she said, and hung up. The silence that followed was so thick and ripe Bo thought she might suffocate.

—

At dinnertime whines emanated from Mia’s belly, but she insisted she wasn’t hungry. So when she asked for a milkshake the next afternoon, Bo whisked fast to froth evaporated milk into an approximation of one.

Mia sipped the drink. If it disappointed her, she hid it.

“I never answered to my husband,” she said suddenly. “But I am a woman, so I depended on him for a lot. To own property, to open my businesses, to earn an income to raise our daughter. I needed his signature for all of that. I didn’t have any trouble adjusting after he died, though. I felt more free. The laws caught up to me during my marriage. I missed him—he was my companion for sixty years—but I hadn’t relied on him for a long time. Of course, I was grateful for his pension in the years I needed it.”

“What made you think of that?” Bo asked.

“If I’d met you sixty years ago, I’d be judging you, asking why you weren’t a lawyer or a doctor, or at least married to one. Beverly doesn’t believe it, but I don’t think like that anymore. But I do wish for a companion for you, so you won’t be all alone. Look at you, spending all your time with a dinosaur nearing her last days.”

A dinosaur? She was a companion, Bo thought. *A companion and a friend.*

Milk sputtered then from Mia’s mouth, a sudden firework. She coughed so much her body heaved and trembled, like she might fall apart. Bo tensed but held off panic: coughing meant breathing. She drummed Mia’s back and felt stark profusions, a mountain range pressing against her palm.

“Wrong pipe,” Mia gasped. Eventually the fit passed. She insisted she was fine, but each sip after seemed a struggle.

The next caregiver would look after Mia as best they could. But how would they know that the deepening droop of her mouth actually meant she was pleased, that her lack of interest in food was unusual, that her eye twitched when she was in pain? No one, not a person in the world, was attuned to her needs as Bo was.

BO HAD PLANNED to spend a few more hours getting ahead of her tasks before heading down to her studio, but she had underestimated how much needed to be done. The to-do list was long with all that had slipped her mind in recent days—cups and dust everywhere, hamper full again, and she still hadn't folded the towels and sheets from the load she'd done earlier in the week. And then Mia requested an "outing," the first sign of interest in anything that she'd expressed all week. Her legs could bear almost no weight—how could Bo turn her down?

They took an imaginary walk. With her armchair reclined and the footrest popped out to support her swollen legs, Mia looked primed for an eye injection. Her purse was strapped securely across her body. Bo tucked a blanket under her chin. Mia closed her eyes.

"Where should we go?" Bo asked.

"What's the weather like?" Mia responded.

"Very funny."

"Might as well go up to the roof. We can take the stairs."

"That's a lot of stairs."

Mia's eyes snapped open.

"Right, right. To the stairs." Bo tried to dial in to the present moment, to build something out of nothing. "Maybe the roots guy will be up there today."

Mia nodded once and closed her eyes again. "Ginger tea would be nice. Anthony always gives me a good deal. Though he didn't come to my party."

"The stairwell's crowded today. I don't recognize any of these people."

"You always see someone different, even with all the vacancies."

"Forty more flights to go."

"My legs will be upset with me later."

"We'll soak them in hot water tonight. Did you want to make a stop at the patio on a hundred?"

“Why not?”

“It’s busy here, too.”

“That was fast.” Mia frowned but let it go. “Who’s here?”

“Some people are napping and weeding. There’s a guy. He’s sweeping leaves from the puddles in the sunken section.”

“I wonder if anyone still lives in the units underneath. I’m sure they get leaks from the pooling water.”

“Did you...do you want to go down real quick and check?”

“We could look.”

“Just one flight down here.” Bo estimated the steps and counted silently. “The hall is pretty dark.”

“I hear something,” Mia said. “Voices, from behind the doors.” Her forehead scrunched. “I can’t hear what they’re saying.”

“Should we knock?”

Mia was still, listening. After a moment, she said, “No, leave them alone. It sounds like they’re doing fine.”

“Let’s take the lift the rest of the way, give our legs a rest.”

Bo air-tapped a button and let a minute pass. “Ah,” she said, to announce that they had arrived.

“Well?”

“Well,” Bo said, gazing around the living room and landing on the balcony door. “The visibility isn’t too bad today. We can actually see the other rooftops. Probably some people doing their reps and laps up here. Are you hungry?”

“No. I see Anthony.”

“His crates look full. He has piles of ginger. Potatoes, too.”

“What I like about him is he lets you pick what you want. Not all of the vendors do.” Mia shifted in the armchair, readying herself. “Your eyes are better than mine, you pick them. Watch out for the dried-up pieces and blue mold.”

“These look pretty firm. No blue that I can see.”

“Okay. Buy those.”

“Done.”

“What about those kids? Do you see them anywhere?”

“The Tran kids?” Those ices on the roof. They were with Eddie now, their ship on its way. “I heard they moved.”

“Huh.” Mia looked surprised, then pleased. “Finally. Their parents got smart.” She made a sucking noise with her tongue and bobbed her head around. “Is anyone selling a chicken?”

“Hmm...there’s a lady over there who has a bunch to choose from.”

“Pick a small bird. More flavor. If it’s the woman who wears all those rings, haggle. She sets her prices high and most customers don’t bother challenging her on it, but she likes to negotiate. I’ll wait here on this bench.”

Mia sat back, contented.

Bo counted to thirty silently, then said, “I have the chicken. I talked her down a few bucks.”

“The booths really have thinned out up here. People are leaving again.”

“Are you ready to go home?”

“Yes, I’m getting tired.”

“We can take the elevator.”

Mia paused. “Press L. Let’s go down to the street.”

“Is the lobby open?” Bo had never actually seen it herself. By the time she’d started working for Ricardo, the main entrance had moved to the roof. The lowest internally accessible floor, as long as she’d known the building, was level three.

“It’s open twenty-four hours. I always run into someone down there. I should check my mail.”

“Yeah, I see a lot of unclaimed packages over there.”

“People have no manners. They let their mail collect. It’s rude to do that in a building this size.” Mia stuck out her chin. “How do the floors look? Clean?”

“Uh, pretty clean.”

“Can you see out the windows?”

“I— Can you?”

“What?”

“Yes. Lots of...cars. It’s noisy.”

“Do you see anyone sitting around?”

“Yes. There are a few people reading.”

“Reading what?”

“Newspapers?”

“Newspapers!” Mia laughed. “It hasn’t been that long.” She patted her own hand, her smile lingering. “Okay. We can go home now.”

“Pressing fifty-one,” Bo confirmed.

It was almost dark as they wrapped up, the contents of the living room transformed into silhouettes. “I need a rest after that,” Mia said, drained but also satisfied, like she’d just passed an endurance test.

Bo rose quietly to check the freezer and found the chicken carcass she’d saved from Christmas, now in a skin of ice crystals.

“I’ll get that chicken started.” She covered the bones with cold water and dropped in a nub of ginger. While it simmered she finished a laundry cycle. When the timer went off, she ladled broth into a rice bowl and topped it with a few shreds of meat scraped from the bones.

Mia woke, nose twitching. She drank half the bowl. “You know, it’s silly, but I thought we might run into Mrs. Ching on our walk.”

She looked so tired, so casually hopeful, sipping the weak broth. All Bo could manage to say was “Maybe tomorrow.”

Mia wiped her mouth and sat back. “Soup’s not bad.” Soon after, she was asleep.

Everyone wanted Bo to believe that there were better places out there, places that weren’t under relentless threat. They called this city a death trap. But she knew the truth: it was terrible, sometimes, everywhere.

Here, they had plenty of problems to contend with. Infrastructure disappearing, waterborne diseases, the recent inevitable news that the

reinforcements for the apartment building's water-damaged foundation would likely, finally, fail—but they had enough to eat, didn't they, enough to sustain the most important economies, enough to keep a museum even, albeit an unstaffed one. Enough to carry on with one another in their own ways.

In this strange, indelible season, she considered, what was more right than staying awake and seeing her promises through? She felt it, a drop in the heart: her conviction to set foot on the ship curdling. As much as she was afraid to stay, she was more afraid not to.

You couldn't outrun the world.

O VER THE NEXT few days, she worked sporadic hours on the project, any she could get, moving with open-ended urgency as she switched between caregiving and the installation. As she tended to Mia, the map she was building hovered, not quite complete. *You can't have all my attention*, she almost said on a hard day, but that was unfair.

This was the final push. The tasks left were technical and tedious. She compressed files, fine-tuned assets, rendered commands. She switched out images she'd placed for ones that worked better, then went back to adjust the perspective and mechanical settings. Her mind continued this work in her sleep, and even at Mia's, where her eyes flitted to the corners of the room as though dragging images across a map.

Mia sensed that her attention was elsewhere. Her mood turned, as if a crisis was unfolding inside. She looked even smaller than before.

"You can't imagine what it's like. To not have one friend left in the world."

Bo glanced up; the map faded.

"I'm all alone. At my age, some days you don't want to be alive anymore. Your family is too busy for you. Everyone you know dies, and you don't even hear about it. They're just gone, even if they were fine a month ago, and no one was with them."

"Beverly would come if she could," Bo said, though she didn't believe it herself.

Mia pointed forcefully at the air. "I hate flying, but in 1983 when my cousin died, I got on a plane to Boston for his funeral. It was important to do that. You can't do that anymore. Now people die and there's no service, nothing." She sniffed. "Anyway, people say they'll come visit and they never come. Who wants to wait around hoping? To be a chore—it's no way to live."

These sentiments were common to hear in this line of work. Life could be so long you began to wish for the end, for the certainty that your time

was finite. Mia was losing her tethers to the world, and no call or meal or drug could repair that. Usually she brightened during calls, and immediately her pallor and mood would improve—reassuring Bo and even Mia herself, an indication of health. But that boost cloaked the suffering and, when it passed, left her feeling worse than before.

“You’re not a chore.”

“You’re young. You can’t understand unless you’ve had to rely on someone.”

“Everyone has to rely on someone. And you have people who care about you.”

“Where?” Mia challenged.

Here, Bo almost said, and in that moment, it felt truer than leaving, more real than her visa or the ship. But instead: “They may not be close by anymore, but they’re there. Maybe if travel were easier, they’d come. Maybe if there was more time.”

Mia’s mouth contracted. “I don’t need more time. I got more time than I ever wanted. I got double time.” She looked beyond the wall, resigned. “Too much time.”

—

The next morning Bo left another message for the doctor, who still hadn’t answered the last one she’d left, when Mia fell. She listed the areas of growing concern: appetite, skin health, mobility, swelling, weakness, will.

Then she set about her routine. Bought greens on the roof, touched up images on the map, went to Mia’s, cooked her lunch, sat with her as she ate. Mia’s soap opera was on, but she wasn’t watching. Her face was puffy, her neck bowed toward the plate. Every movement seemed to tax her, even shifting positions in the chair. She kept dropping her spoon, wheezing between bites. A scab had formed on her earlobe, just above the gold stud pinned into the flesh, which was pink with the first sign of infection. Her systems were failing. Bo felt it then, like a storm gaining strength, like a magnet about to flip. It didn’t matter how skilled or gentle her replacement

was, it would be a stranger at Mia's side at the end. She knew, then, that she couldn't let that happen.

She messaged Jenson to let him know—early this time. Maybe someone else could go in her place. At least she'd save him the trip.

He wrote back immediately: *What the fuck? I'm boarding in an hour.*

With new certainty came new perspective. She had a leaky home, a condemned home, but she had a home, in the place she'd lived her whole life, as had her mother. It was a changed place, a changing place, but she had memories of what it had been and, for now, a studio of her own. She was finally starting to see the shape of what she was making. She was needed; she needed.

Don't come. I can't go, she wrote, and waited for his response.

???

???????????

Unbelievable. So irresponsible and stupid.

A few minutes later: *What are you waiting for? You're going to drown.*

Then: *You're breaking my dad's heart.*

Then: *Again!!!*

He wasn't wrong. She knew he just wanted her to restart her life. But she had restarted it. Here.

I'll call you later, she wrote.

A better life was always conditional; safety would always run out. She pictured the ship down at the piers, anchor lifting, departing for the north. All she felt was the sharp, pinching impossibility of leaving with it.

—

After he'd had a few days to calm down, Jenson made a sober, defeated plea. The ship would still be at the dock the next day.

"Just get on it."

How could she explain it to him in terms he would understand? Hopeless as it seemed to him, this was still the place she belonged to, and she wasn't done with it. She was choosing to stay this time, not acting out

of avoidance or fear or delusion, as she had before. She knew he couldn't see the difference. Her life was here, and maybe all she had at this point were memories, but if she left now, she'd lose most of those, too. And Mia needed her. If she left, Mia would die alone. She hadn't been able to be with her mother at the end, but she could be with Mia.

"You made a promise? For what? To do chores. To wait. To be of service to a random person. I don't get it."

True—a year ago she hadn't even known Mia.

"It's not that."

"Then what?"

Then she'd answered Mia's note. She'd built a new life.

"I appreciate you taking care of me. Everything you've done for me. I mean it. I do."

He sighed. "Look, I'm not trying to—"

Her uncle appeared then. His hair had gone completely white, but he looked healthy. He looked so much like her mother.

"Hi, Uncle Winston," she said.

"I thought he might convince you," Jenson said.

"Bo, I'm worried about you. It's not safe there. You're all by yourself. Why aren't you coming to be with us?" He gripped Jenson's shoulder and shook it.

Looking at them together, she saw them differently, as her mother might, as her family, and she recognized, maybe for the first time, embarrassingly, that her loss had been theirs, too. The thought was almost too shameful to admit, but there it was again, cutting through her conviction, fighting just under the skin: she could just leave.

"Happy to see you," she said, trying to shake it.

Winston laughed. "Ah, so come be happy all the time, right?"

She smiled: a wavering apology. "I thought I could, but I can't."

Jenson pressed a hand to his forehead. "Don't do this."

Winston pulled him closer. "Ahh. Can't? What is 'can't'? We're your family."

"You are," Bo said.

An ache woke in her right wrist like an old sprain and moved into the rest of her body. There they were, her family, hanging translucent in the room. She kept her eyes on them, tried to memorize the shape of them. It was like trying to pin light to air.

A WEEK LATER MIA could no longer walk, even with assistance.

The mirror steamed as Bo filled the bathtub and helped Mia onto the reclining tub lift. The vapor soothed her sinuses. Mia cowered, then relaxed, as Bo lowered her into the bath and placed a foam bumper under her knees. Her mouth opened, gluey lips coming unstuck and letting free a current ripe with bacteria. When had she lost all that mass? A doll body made of toothpicks, the skin drawn on with blue and maroon and silver markers. She smelled elemental, like minerals.

“The temperature is good,” Mia said, so quiet Bo almost didn’t hear.

Bo folded the bath mat to cushion her knees and braced her forearm against the tub ledge. Mia flinched at the texture of the washcloth, so Bo switched to a soft sponge to soap her. Water lapped at her neck and knees, depositing short-lived mounds of foam on her exposed skin. The rest of her was submerged, suddenly ageless beneath the forgiving movement of water.

Mia’s shoulders twisted up into a shrug. Bo opened the hot-water spigot. The churning and splashing echoed off the tiles and hung in the steam. She swished the water to distribute the heat until Mia visibly relaxed. She had done this before, for Ricardo in the bathroom next door, identical right down to the tub fixtures and crooked tiles. Close to the end, he began to ask for baths.

She gently rubbed dead skin from between Mia’s toes and around her ankles with the sponge, taking care to avoid the bruises, which had deepened and spread up one leg over the last week. She applied the lightest pressure she could manage and Mia inhaled sharply.

“Still hurts?”

Mia scowled to show, or maybe bear, the pain. The spots were now unfixably purple and tender. Bo would have to take extra care when handling that leg.

Then Mia asked, her voice even quieter now, “Will I get to see what you made me?”

After months of humming just outside Bo's focus, the composition was finished. It had happened almost without her in this last stage, by some sidecar logic or magic that ran parallel to her awareness. As soon as she fixed a few bugs and did a run-through, the show would be ready. But how hadn't she realized it before? There was no way she could get Mia up to the roof to experience the full piece. She would have to adjust her plans.

"You will. I only need another few days."

Mia was watching her, doubtful.

She would set up a preview instead. She would select the parts that would mean the most to Mia and show her only those.

"I promise."

Her back ached from leaning over the ledge, but she held that position until Mia signaled that she was done. She raised the lift out of the water and guided Mia upright. Mia shivered as if with fever while Bo pressed the towel to her skin and hair. Even after she was dry and clothed, and Bo had safely transferred her to bed and settled her under the blankets, she still shook until she fell asleep.

ONE AFTERNOON LATER that week, Mia's lips pulled back, teeth exposed, and Bo understood the plaintive sound that followed as a howl. She searched Mia's body for the muscle spasm, the pinched skin, the site of pain so she could relieve it, but found nothing.

The doctor finally called back. Bo relayed the week's worsening symptoms with measured precision, careful not to let panic ramp up in her voice: she was a professional, levelheaded, not desperate. She was ready to act on the doctor's expertise, but he only said what she already knew: "Sudden frailty. That means she's given up."

Mia had said as much herself. She slept through her programs, declined to sit with Bo on the balcony, refused nutrients, craved only cold drinks and sugar. "What do you need," Bo asked, and Mia answered, "There's nothing."

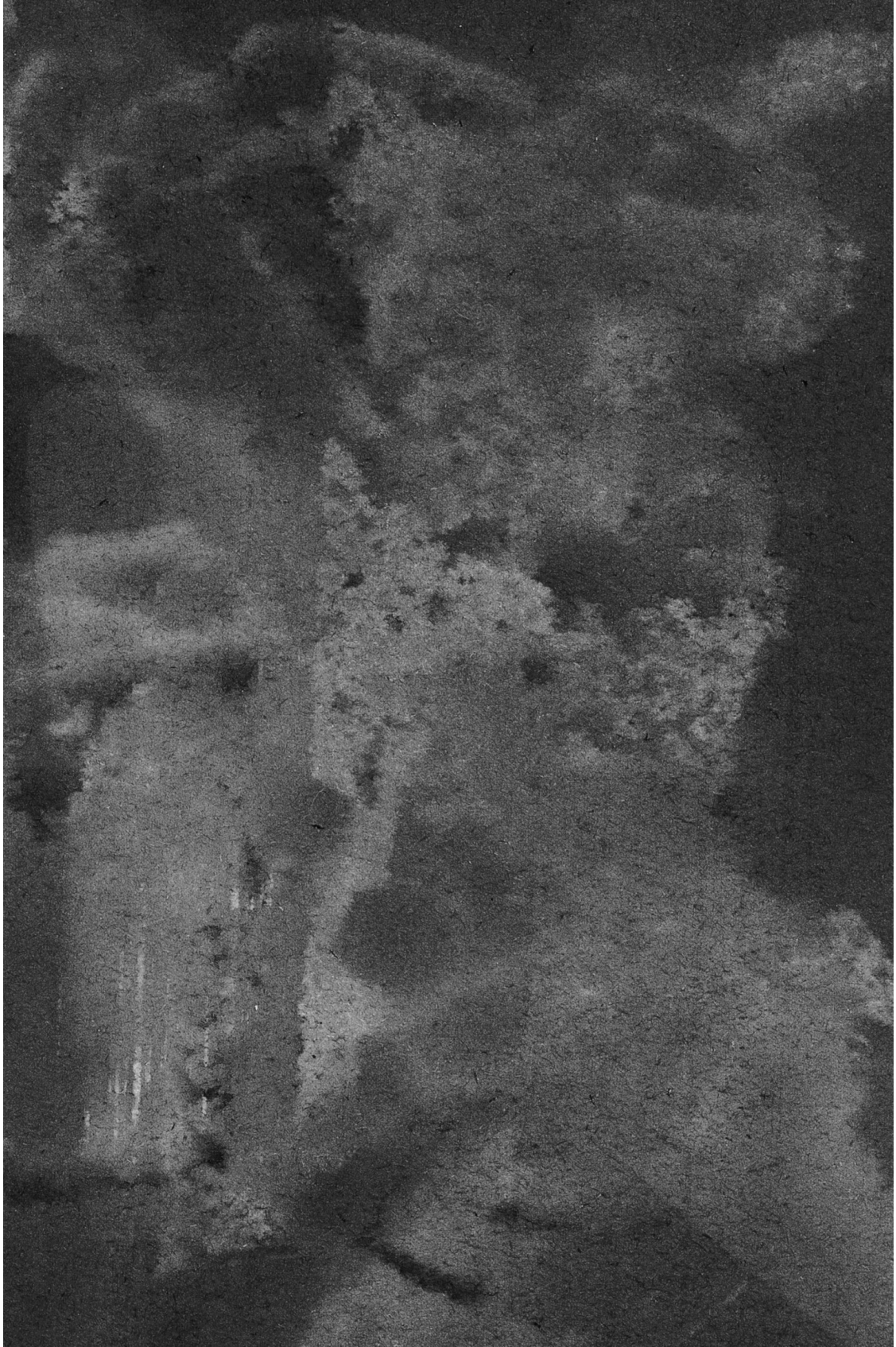
Caring for the dying, Bo could do. At this point it was all reflex. But the finality of the doctor's words, and seeing Mia in want of nothing, called up in Bo a dissonant wish to take leave, to be absolved of responsibility. She pushed it down. She understood that in some way this was a do-over for the most important death. Her mother had gone too fast, died before anyone had known that she had. Whereas Mia's death was long; one could be attendant. But there was a horror in lasting so long. The end always coming, the body always stopping, the protracted days leading up. Bo wouldn't go. She wouldn't.

This time last year, Mia had been walking fifty flights of steps to run her own errands while Bo was alone, pinned to a corner of her life by an unbearable gravity. In the acuity of grief, in the blank of depression, in the estrangement from painting, in the absence of touch, she had needed certainty, and Mia had given it.

And now that pull had refined: the orchestra warming up before the conductor's arrival, then the oboe's first guiding notes sounding out, tuned taut and clear. Soon her path would diverge from Mia's, but that night, she

set up a cot in the living room and stayed over for the first time. She barely slept, her ear attuned to every cough and mattress creak. They had been together for the breath of a year. Her task was crystalline: to be at Mia's side as she slid into her final days. There was no more important job.

ARRANGEMENTS



THE PREVIEW WAS ready the next evening. When the rain picked up, she grabbed the equipment cart and hurried to the roof. It was darker than usual—no moon, few lights on in nearby buildings. She called Eddie, so that he could assist remotely. They sent the fleet out on a quick test run.

The first bird lifted from the ledge and glided for a few seconds, then plummeted at a sharp angle, sucked in the direction of the wind. The thick, humming air suggested that the rain would get even heavier.

“I followed your instructions!” Bo shouted.

“Not a problem! We expect to lose some! There’s a learning curve!” he shouted back, unfazed by the immediate failure.

The next bird teetered at eye level but stayed in the air long enough for the lights to activate and shine an image onto the rain falling in front of her. She shielded her face, and through the glare she could make out an eye, a nose, indistinct shadow shapes. Eddie entered an adjustment on his remote control, and the features sharpened.

“Oh!” she gasped.

It was a picture of Mia as a young woman, trembling on sheets of rain. She was life-size, phosphorescent-looking. Bo stared back, almost captive, until a sound like horses on cobblestones approached and cold pebbles struck her skin and broke the spell.

“It works,” she said, just as the bird swiveled away toward new coordinates, dodging the hail and leaving her in the dark for a moment, electrified, bereft, until another set of birds whirled into position.

Eddie’s voice came through the speaker: “It’s time.”

—

Bo hurried down.

“Come, come.” She wheeled Mia to the window. “Your memorial is ready.”

Mia held tight to the armrests and waited expectantly. “Finally.”

Bo switched off the lamps and messaged Eddie. A light beam swung down, then up, out of view. He was readying the birds she'd left on the roof.

On the building across the way, in their direct line of sight, light-pictures began to populate the wall. At first neither of them could parse what they were seeing. Then the images began to fill in, like ice forming. Hearse-like cars lined a steep sidewalk. Pedestrians in hats and tailored clothes bustled by, then disappeared. Someone handed another person a live chicken.

"Wah! It's California Street." Mia pressed her hand to the window, as if trying to reach the scene. "The cable car used to run there. The conductor made us get off and walk up that hill—it was too slow with all of us riding." She leaned forward and slid her fingers along the glass. "The bank was on that corner. My friend's jewelry-repair store was right next door."

Straight ahead, on a section of wall framed by foliage, a bright square trembled. A woman's face appeared, her skin the texture of the concrete wall. The rain fractured her image. One window over, a figure dined alone in silhouette, unaware of the show outside.

"Who's that?"

The glowing patch began to cycle through portraits of women, all Chinese, sketchily drawn, missing features, as though part of an automated slide presentation; you could almost hear the *chi-chik*. Partial face after partial face. One of the subjects wore a vest crocheted in the same pattern as Mia's. Another had Mia's features copied onto the incongruent bone structure of Bo's mother's face. Above the portraits was a steady swipe of foreign flat blue sky.

Mia's mouth hung open. Her eyes moved up, around, down, to make sense of the display. Bo slid the window open and pushed the chair inches closer for a better view. The damp hit their faces and exposed hands.

"My grocery!" Mia pointed at the storefront projected on a lower level just as a coyote darted across the plane, followed by the matriarch from Mia's soap opera. Mia laughed, then watched in wonder as the character's children and grandchildren came into view behind her.

"Can you show me my old house?"

"It's coming next. Beverly sent me the pictures."

A green billboard-size blur focused. On moss-colored carpet, a young girl with blunt bangs sat cross-legged and mugged for the camera, as if defying an order to smile. Out the window behind her, greenhouses crumbled in disrepair. All the way back, past the strips of bay and land, the peak of Mount Diablo formed a gray triangle.

Mia was rapt. She seemed larger, stronger somehow, held up against the pieces of her life Bo had been able to return to her.

When she spoke, it was with precarious pride: “My daughter.”

“There’s more, too.” Bo leaned out the window to feel the rain on her face. “I haven’t finished the bigger project, but this part is for you.”

“What do you mean bigger? How big?”

“Like this, but on more buildings at the same time.”

“All of me?”

“Not all, but some. I wanted to remember as much of this place as I could.”

The picture switched to Mia and Kwok’s anniversary portrait: the couple stoic and elegant, their gazes cold. Mia admired it briefly, then said, “Show me Beverly again.”

Bo messaged Eddie. Moments later, the angry girl returned. This time Mia took note of the birds and watched them swoop, rearrange, and hover to remake the image. She stared hard at Beverly, taking a last long look, then leaned back, depleted. “Okay,” she said. “She never lived in that house, but okay.”

Exact replication had never been the point, though. Bo had made this for Mia, and Mia, receiving it, was the one who made it all real. Wasn’t this how history carried on? In flashes of understanding and light? In attention arrested, renewed, remade?

She’d promised to honor Mia. To stay, even though staying might seem absurd. To tend, render, serve. To catch hold of what was slipping away. And she’d done it. Tonight or tomorrow—soon—Mia would be gone. The memorial would move beyond her, spilling onto nearby structures, reaching toward the water. But these, tonight—these were the most important parts.

In the dark, Bo wheeled Mia back and resettled her in bed.

“I’ll let you get some rest now,” she said, straightening the covers.

Mia looked toward the window. “What you made, it surprised me.”

“I’d hoped it would.”

“I’m an ordinary person. No one has been interested in my life before.”

She exhaled loudly through her nose. “There’s so much I didn’t realize I had forgotten about.”

Bo fluffed the pillow around her head, then sat next to her. “You’ve had a remarkable life. I just wanted to make something to acknowledge that.”

“You did a pretty good job.” Mia paused, staring up at the ceiling. “All those lights coming down from the sky!”

She was quiet for so long, Bo thought she’d fallen asleep and rose to leave.

Then Mia said: “I used to wake up to helicopters hunting for someone on the run. So noisy! The spotlight came through the curtains. I thought, How can you find someone who’s hiding in the dark this way? The light is powerful, but the shadows are much more powerful.”

“Did the lights bother you?”

“No. They just reminded me.” Another minute passed. “It’s funny. I’ve lived alone for almost sixty years. Why does the dark bother me now?”

Bo offered to install a night-light, but Mia said it would only make the room feel emptier.

“What am I saying?” She expressed this without confusion, without seeking an answer. “Sometimes at night I hear a noise and think it’s you.”

“Last night? It was me. I was right there in the other room.”

“No. Even before, I heard things.”

Those late hours were quiet, charged with spirits.

“Does the noise bother you?”

“No.”

“Is there anything I can do?”

There would be no visit from Beverly, no funeral, no wailing mourners, no motorcade to the cemetery, no chrysanthemum wreaths. But Bo had managed an honest offering, one that had shown Mia the reaches of her life. She had done that, at least.

Mia was starting to drift—the bed, a raft in the deep space of night. Beside her, Bo felt a child’s homesickness for her own bed. She moved the cot into Mia’s room.

All that mattered distilled: breath, company.

“Don’t worry,” Mia said. “I’m not afraid.”

IN THE DAYS ahead, Beverly started ringing so often that they began to leave the line connected all day: one long call. She wanted to be there as much as possible, she said.

One morning when Mia was asleep, she told Bo, “My mother messaged me the other day. She asked how she could get out of there. If I could help her get to Sweden and put her up.” Her voice caught. “She sent it in the middle of the night.”

“Was she being serious?”

“I couldn’t tell.” Her gaze fell off, as she searched for the right way to explain what she meant. “I always worried this would happen. I didn’t want her to end up stuck in that old apartment. But she used to have social events, lots of friends. I called and she never answered because she was out. It’s so much worse now. She’s inside all the time and nobody’s there.” She looked back at Bo, her head at a tilt. “I know you’re there. But it’s different.”

“I’m not family.”

“I know you must think I’m a bad daughter.” She sighed. “It wasn’t that I didn’t want to take her in. I’m old myself. Even my son is old. I know I’m lucky, I live in a house full of family. The food’s not good here, and the young ones ignore me once they get to a certain age, but I’m in the middle of it all.”

“I think she’s glad to know you’re together over there.”

“I don’t blame her, not anymore. We turned out fine, we’re happy. The way she is is how she survived. But when you’re young, you need your mother more.”

The way she was looking at Mia—could anything be as tender and brutal as a daughter’s pity for her own mother?

She spoke more softly now: “You continue with things the way they are. You learn to live with what you didn’t know you could live without.”

Mia woke then.

Beverly cleared her throat and waved. “Hi, Mom.”

“You came.”

“Sorry, Mom.” Her smile was watery. “You were asleep when I called. I’ve been chatting with Bo.”

“I don’t feel like talking,” she told Bo drowsily. “Hang it up.”

“I’ll leave it connected, but you don’t have to talk.”

“I was asleep?” Mia asked. Seconds later she was out again.

Bo watched Mia’s face loosen, then turned back to Beverly.

“I decided not to go.”

“You don’t have to explain to me.” Beverly smiled ruefully. “Really.”

“I should’ve said something. You shouldn’t have found out the way you did.”

Beverly raised her hand. “I was just worried about her. I wouldn’t have blamed you if you left. I know what it’s like. Fortunately, my late husband went quick and didn’t suffer. But I was left with his father, who took five years to die.”

“That’s a hard job.”

“It’s a thankless job. He fell asleep smoking in bed. He refused to cook, so I had to fix all his meals. He couldn’t walk well and wouldn’t do his physical therapy, so I always had to be nearby to help him move around, always—and he was a big man. And when he was awake it was: Get me this, get me that.”

“It can be tough.” Bo wondered what Beverly had told Mia about those years spent caring for her father-in-law, whether Mia had felt slighted or sympathetic or even proud. “He was lucky to have you.”

“I just remember feeling so used. Has she been like that at all, with you?”

“She’s been fine. She helps me, too.”

“Good. I’m glad. I’m glad.” Beverly sounded skeptical but was quick to move on. “She isn’t one to praise, but I know you being there means a lot to her.”

“She’s been talking about an incident when she was young. There was a baby girl in her village—”

“Ah. The newborn they tried to kill.”

“She said they left her outside the house to die.”

“Her stories are always changing. I haven’t heard her talk about that in ages. The way she told it usually, she woke up and saw a group of women trying to suffocate the baby. Or maybe burn her? I remember her saying it was all done by firelight.”

“My God.”

“But the baby refused to be killed! Only days old. She fought and screamed and kicked so much. Her spirit frightened the women, including the baby’s mother, into believing she was sent by the gods. So they let her live. Then she went on to enjoy more privileges than any of the boys in the village.”

“In the version she told me, the baby died.”

“Oh. Did she?” Beverly didn’t sound surprised. “Who knows which one is true.”

“I wonder why she’s thinking about that now.”

“I guess now is the time when you find out what you could never forget.”

—

“Thirsty.”

Mia was saying this a lot. Asking for ice, mouth quivering like a hamster’s.

Plain water didn’t satisfy. But granita was easy: just water, sugar, attention. Bo brewed a few dehydrated chamomile buds. She slid the cooled tea into the freezer, and twice an hour stirred and scraped the forming slush. When it had the consistency of gravel, she scooped it into a cup and listened to the crystals crunch against Mia’s molars, smelled the warm florals escape as the ice melted in her mouth. Soon she’d be asleep again.

“I know I’m not family,” Bo would say to her then, “but I’m here.”

—

Mia cried out. Her muscles tensed beneath the skin, ready to engage with some force, but the bones seemed too tired to move. Her eyes roamed the room in agitation, fixed on nothing, on something Bo couldn't perceive.

"Are you in pain?"

Her mouth peeled open. Her top lip lifted skin from the bottom, leaving a raw pink-purple spot that shone. Tiny spots of blood sprang to the surface at the edges. She didn't seem to notice.

"No, no pain."

"What do you need?" An absurd question, and the only question left.

"My family was very difficult."

"You don't have to worry about that now."

"I didn't know I'd be alone for all these years. I was never alone as a girl or a mother. Then—"

"I'm here."

Bo applied petroleum jelly to Mia's lips and blotted at her face and neck with a damp washcloth, taking care not to tear the skin. Her forearms were baby soft and papery, the ripples too fine for fingers to detect. As systems wound down, and care switched from curative to palliative, the body left behind all the texture it had accumulated over a lifetime and earned peace.

After, Mia allowed Bo to feed her a few spoonfuls of corn soup.

"I'm glad you answered my note."

Her voice was so quiet, with splinters and breaks.

"Me, too."

Luminous greens vibrated on every surface of the room.

"It's not a normal artwork you made."

Bo laughed. "No. It's probably not what you had in mind."

"You'll finish it?"

"I will."

A corn kernel was stuck to her cheek. A line of saliva dropped from the corner of her mouth to her cardigan, shining as the lamplight hit it like a length of charmed spider silk. Bo wiped her face gently and dimmed the lamp.

"After I'm gone, you'll restart your life."

Two impossibilities, approaching fast.

“You will,” Mia said again, without attachment. “Whether you go or stay.”

Then, like an admission: “I was lucky.”

Later, Beverly returned. Sitting with Bo, she noted that her mother’s early life had been dictated by floods, so it was fitting that it would end the same way—terrible rain at both ends. The region she came from was prone to flooding, and after flooding came famine, and after famine came drought, and after drought, flooding. Lagoon, delta, river, sea. Devastation; renewal. In summer, hundreds of thousands of people evacuated the floodlands. In fall, some never returned. Bo thought of the endless painters and poets who had speculated on the fate of sunken civilizations—Atlantis, Chicago, Kiribati, Tenochtitlán. Waters swallowing time.

“She didn’t want us to move to Europe, but she understood. She told me, It won’t be easy, but you can rebuild your life. It helped, to hear that. To know she’d done it herself, in a way.”

“Do you ever regret it? Leaving when you did?”

“Never.” Beverly watched Mia sleep, then smiled at Bo. “It’s late where you are. Go to sleep, Bo. I won’t bother you anymore.”

“You’re not bothering me at all.”

Even at a hundred, in this moment she had the look of a child. She stayed on the line. They were just waiting now, the sound of three breathing people. Finally, she said in a loud whisper: “When it’s time, Mom, rest. Give some space for your dreams.”

Early morning. The room smelled of scalp and sulfur, grass and grease, faint persimmon. Nonenal, Bo had learned in her training. Coming out of sleep on the cot, she felt green with sick, green with vitality.

“Are we going to Jennie’s?” Mia said.

Bo rose and leaned closer. She didn't recognize the name. Crust sealed Mia's eyes, little pockets of sugar. Beverly was in view but asleep.

"What was that?"

"Jennie," she said, slightly irritated. She picked absently at the bedsheet. "Are we going to Jennie's later?"

"Yeah. We're going," Bo said, almost believing her own words. "Don't worry."

"Remind Beverly."

"I will."

Mia's breath, light and steady. Bo matched her exhalations to hers.

—

Mia's spine settled into its final curvature. Her face twitched with signs from the mystery of the wave she was riding out.

Her hands sprang out, then dropped.

Bo leaned toward her. "I'm here."

"People are talking to me." She almost sounded annoyed.

"Who?"

The room was quiet. Bo checked the line. The call had disconnected. She dialed Beverly again, leaving the line open for when she returned.

"Who?" she asked again.

"I didn't think you would come." A long silence. "Tell Bo."

Bo drew even closer and spoke into her ear: "I'm here."

Then her voice, firm as ever: "Tell Bo thank you. I was all alone. I thought no one would take care of me, but she came and she stayed."

To think—how close she'd been to choosing otherwise, both times. A decision rippled out forever.

"I'll tell her," Bo promised.

—

Soon the last strands of coherence fell away.

“I’m here,” Bo said again. What else was there to say? *I have nowhere to be but here.*

Mia’s sleep was seamless now. Her toes bent as she walked through it, scratching against the sheet.

“I promise to remember you.”

Something began to unhinge from Mia’s body, the mild complaint of a door as it shut. Her eyes flickered and rolled beneath their lids, powered by some dim engine. Upon each exhalation, she let out a long hiss. Not the sound of warning or malice or disapproval or fear—wholly impersonal, so simple that hearing it gave Bo comfort. Sweat sprang up on Mia’s forehead and fell into the folds of her skin. The hissing halted and a crackle took its place. Her face held no tension. Her head tilted away a fraction. The crackle deepened and stopped.

The walls shimmered with green shadows as the light came through the foliage. The room seemed to transform into rainforest. Mia’s hair shone like peat, damp and cast in green. Her skin, sunlit kelp.

A great tenderness spread through Bo’s body but didn’t leave its bounds. This warmth was now hers alone to feel, yet she willed it to pass through her palms to Mia.

A force was pressing in, artless and terrestrial. Asserting the distinct shape of her own life. She watched her own hand, laid over Mia’s. She pictured a current admitting Mia and carrying her away gently on a warm bed, down the street, through the gutters and tunnels, into new lakes and revived creeks, and maybe, eventually, out to sea. She wished her safe passage. She brimmed with new loneliness. Her fingers felt alive.

Mia's body cooled. Her lips took on a blue tinge, the memory of a spring sky.

In the afternoon, a young man arrived to retrieve her, to ferry her body to a facility. There, according to her wishes, they would freeze-dry her corpse and shatter it. Food for the fish.

He lifted her with such care that Bo couldn't tell if she was leaden or light as a leaf.

ELEVEN DAYS LATER, the full show was ready to go. Jitters consumed her, though the weather forecast for that night was in her favor. Checklist in hand, she tested the battery charge on each bird and replaced bulbs that had burned out. She reviewed the master map and ran through the simulations, but it all read as gibberish; she'd looked at it too many times.

As she triple-checked the equipment and loaded the birds into crates, she worried over all that could go wrong. The downpour could taper to a mist and render the projections unreadable. The city could perceive the lights as an attack. Worse yet, no one would be awake to see it.

On the roof she unloaded the crates. The city thrummed around her. She imagined she could see torrents all the way to the bay.

She hit Play and the fleet of mechanical birds lifted in formation. The tiny motors hovering above the building began to buzz. Dozens of spotlights blinked on in unison, like a beast snapping out of hibernation.

It was out of her hands now. Anyone here would see it, anyone awake.

"Look!" someone shouted from the far side of the roof. Several figures gathered at the ledge, necks craned up. She went to join them.

The drones whizzed out of view to other neighborhoods, flew toward the water, took up their coordinates. A few stayed close and zipped into arrangements to spread more pictures onto the rooftops and building faces. The images focused.

She had choreographed all this in her studio, but now that it was playing out, in action, in space, it had lost its familiarity. As the forms gained height and motion, she struggled to identify them. The twisting apparition across the street: Who was it? Did they move in dance or defense? Just above, lines curved over the glowing face of a merchant in a squat: the markings on a map; no, a blown-up fingerprint—the librarian's? The show was

almost as new to her as to the people gathering beside her, the people watching from other parts of the city.

Say the light pulsed strangely against eyelids, calling sleepers to wake. Say the whirl of drones lured them to windows, the curtain edges lit up in an electric frame. Say the mystery of lights compelled them up to their roofs. Say—

GNARLED MASSES OF coast live oak spread over a hospital, enclosing it in bramble. A forest of irises rose out of warehouses and the abandoned eighteen-wheelers parked alongside them. Cows grazed on a pasture of brackish water, the roots of rushes below radiating hazard red. A marching band floated past slaughterhouses and tanneries, past gas stations and shippers and an opera hall, the musicians blowing into brassy trombones and tubas, the trailing hearse a glinting body of chrome.

On a hill in Chinatown, a public housing complex served as canvas to illuminated blocks of hanzi: the poems lifted from the barrack walls, scaled up and recast in light. From the window by his bed, a child saw something he'd dreamed of, but not quite like this: a stagecoach lurching along its sky route, dragged by reindeer. The tall wheels spun uselessly, a set of wooden stars. He lost sight of the coach as it sailed over cannons aimed at the sky, over statues buried in ivy, over gargoyles guarding bank entrances, in its presumable chase for gold.

Sunset colors swirled on the surface of a reservoir, which had once been fed by gravity from the Sierras. Belowground, a system of forest roots ran deep, mycorrhizal and aglow, with tiny pianos tucked into the coiling branches and fibers. Below that, tectonic plates scraped up against each other and coastal ranges rose up from the rupture on repeat.

Way out on a rock outcrop near the mouth of the bay, the citrus vendor watched a cordillera of orderly white peaks flutter: rows of military-style tents inhabited by earthquake refugees. Children darted about, women rinsed laundry in buckets, men chopped wood. A long line snaked toward a food truck marked by a sign for FREE HOT MEALS HERE.

To the northeast, on an inlet that was also Market Street, people emerged from colorful tents pitched among abandoned ships. Some looked hungry. Some gathered around propane stoves. Some wore shirts that read, WE ARE THE 99%. All around, glass structures protruded from a sprawling landscape of spearmint. Beside a shell mound, sailors dug for clams. From a lower-

level window of a condemned building, a young laborer saw papier-mâché puppets toddle by like blimps.

Framed by the columns buttressing City Hall and spilling onto the front steps, a quartet of bachelors spat tobacco and played a riotous round of chess as the dome over the rotunda glinted gold. Newlyweds posed for photos. A woman in a beret raised her fist, and a few steps over a younger woman in round glasses and long hair did the same.

A crowd amassed on the sidewalk, extending past the courthouse, prepared to march. The front line held a banner that displayed a continuous loop of demands: BOYCOTT GRAPES, SAVE THE I-HOTEL, END GENOCIDE, PUBLIC BANK NOW, BRING HOME THE TROOPS, BLACK LIVES MATTER, THIRD WORLD LIBERATION FRONT, NO ONE IS ILLEGAL, SAVE OUR PLANET. A child surveyed the protest from a perch on a parent's shoulders. The parent held a poster screen-printed in so many layers that the paper buckled and the surface took on height, now a tactile map. Across the street, a supercentenarian in memory care peered through window bars down at the scene, unsure of what she was seeing, and thought then about a young man—yes, her son—who had once lived up in a tree for a year to protect it from loggers. A few buildings over, Janice, watching with Sue beside her, remembered the boys she'd gone to school with who'd been drafted for war and never came home, and during that same period—the memory sharp, though she hadn't thought about it since that time—the years of no grapes.

To the west, a dragon kite as large as a streetcar slithered among treetops in the park, flashing its red and gold scales. A child of equal size crouched in the rippling blue-green canopy of eucalyptus and peered through a magnifying glass at a monarch butterfly's wings, wrought-iron windows holding back orange skies choked with smoke.

Lost creeks revived in neon-blue lines. Segments of freeway and train tracks flashed in gray and copper. Hay-yellow pools lit up along the coast: recovered prairies blushing with needlegrass. In the highest penthouse, surrounded by glass, a former developer looked down at the greenery, searching for the grid that had once portioned out the land, seeing only crackles of light.

At the ocean, the beach was remade. A mirage of sand shimmered atop waves. Bears and bison grazed. The Ferris wheel churned.

Faces pressed against windows to look up, down, across. Lamps switched on and faded the images written over the faces, light erasing light. Neighbors leaned out of windows for better views and stuck out their arms to catch projections on their skin. The roofs had crowds now. Everyone was pointing at walls, at each other, saying, *Look*. A few people lit sparklers and waved them skyward.

Specks of white swirled in the light beams.

“Snow,” someone said incredulously.

“Ash,” another guessed.

Eddie would have said, “See? Birds and bats.”

“What a mess,” someone complained. “I woulda done this real different, if it were me.”

From below, an anguished voice echoed up: “Turn off the goddamn lights!”

On the wall facing Mia’s window, a jerky outdoor scene played—degraded but legible footage from Beverly’s son’s first birthday. The camera followed the baby as he was passed through the arms of doting adults, most of whom wore chunky square-framed glasses. Children chased one another with water pistols in the background. Everyone was in summer clothes, everything was in sepia. A toddler ran through, mouth open in a shriek.

A shirtless man placed the baby on his shoulders and toured the yard. The camera moved to a short, stout woman in a coat who reached up to pinch the baby's plump thigh. Her white hair was wound tightly into a bun, which left patches of scalp visible. The baby began to crinkle his face in distress but then, seeing the old woman, gurgled happily, and the man, hearing this and feeling the joyful slaps on his head, crouched low so she—Mia's mother—could place a kiss on the baby's face.

On a yacht anchored in the middle of the bay, a ghostly troupe of muscled young men in ruffled satin pants performed a lion dance through two couples dining in formal attire on deck. Behind, short-tailed albatrosses shot up from the water in a reverse dive, like comets undone. Below, flightless diving ducks glowed as they foraged through bioluminescent plankton for fish. As this week's northbound ship left port, the captain slowed the engine so the passengers, on their way to another life, could linger with the city just a few moments longer.

Below the penitentiary on Alcatraz, the words INDIAN LAND lit up the cliff. A crowd encircled dancers and singers, multiplying until the ceremony spread across the full beach. Cedar burned and sent smoke tendrils high. Nearby, porpoises chased sardines, streaking the water with silver.

On a steep slope leading down from the detention center on Angel Island, a wigged nightclub singer dressed in sequins sang a ballad into a microphone for an audience of cypress and rock.

Close to shore, a small orange boat bobbed in the shadows. A woman balanced on the single seat. The outer edges of her boots braced her against the sloping walls. She was pointing binoculars toward a dark patch of water. Bo's mother, steady and focused. Bo had resisted giving her a ferry and a capable crew; the rowboat was enough. She was dry. Tucked for this moment into the mouth of the safe harbor.

She was across town, too, on a rooftop covered in pink desert sand, testing the sharpness of cactus spines on her palm. She was at Civic Center, holding a sign that read, LIVABLE WAGE FOR TEACHERS. She was walking across a footbridge with an insulated bag in her hand. And there she was again, reading a book, floating above the intersection where she'd last been seen. Like she'd been there the entire time.

—

Back in Chinatown, a narrow alley was transformed into a photography studio. Everything was blue. The walls rattled and burned. Under prints drying on a clothesline, impervious to the surrounding disaster, a young woman pinned up her silk sleeves, dipped photo paper into a basin, and peered down to watch the image develop.

And here, on the roof, beside Bo, a birthday banquet. Guests of every age sat at a round table draped in maroon cloth, their faces blurred and brown, unreadable as in dreams. At the center, in place of a lazy Susan, a record player spun.

And on the concrete face of a clock tower, at the limits of her view, what looked from afar like stains. Not graffiti, not pictures—but script. Up close, across each handlaid brick, it read: *Mia*.

THE DIVER



SHE HIT THE switch. The beams went dark, the images vanished, the present city resumed.

It was over. The birds, most of them, zoomed back. Soon the blue-yellow signs of day would eat up the shadows and make the scene plain.

Already her high was plummeting. Already she was beginning to doubt whether it had actually happened. Come morning, no longer heady with the thrill of the show, many would surely wonder the same. A cold wave broke over her; she felt emptied yet—overflowing. She wanted to grab every person still looking at the sky and ask, *Did you see it?*

—

In the down elevator, two women spoke excitedly.

“My husband was up and woke me just after midnight. I couldn’t make out what it was supposed to be. I thought moonlight at first, but tonight was the new moon. Do you know who put it on?”

They both glanced at Bo, seeming to take note of her cart full of equipment. She fixed her gaze on the reflection of her own feet in the elevator door. After a moment, they turned toward each other again.

“No idea. At first I just saw a mess of lights. I thought I was having a seizure. I grabbed my kid and went up to the roof right away. Did you see when the pelicans flew by?”

“No, but I swear—”

“What?”

What, Bo thought.

“I think I saw my father.”

The child beside the speaker pulled at her arm. “Are we going back to bed now?”

Bo leaned her head back, resigned, relieved. The elevator wall was cool against her skin.

“Do you think it’ll go again tonight?”

“I doubt it. It felt like a one-time thing.”

—

She went back to Eddie’s old apartment and dismantled the gear and prepared to clear the data on the central drive. In his absence, the space had reverted to a generic state. She put her hands on the cold birds. They were still now, machines awaiting their next orders. All they contained, months of work, would be erased in an instant. She’d tried to bring back what was gone—a fleeting solace. And now it would be gone again.

This was the plan, she reasoned. Her younger self couldn’t have imagined it, too caught up in wanting to make something lasting, something attached to her name. But impermanence was alive, malleable. For a moment, the mess of the world was illuminated and you could find your place in the entanglement. Other people out there must have seen something in her work that mattered to them—a tree, a face, a structure—and felt their own memories rise to meet it, and they would carry that version, twisted with hers, forward.

She went ahead and deleted the files and left through the open front door. Now she would go home. She would rest.

SOMEHOW THE ELEVATOR opened on the fifty-first floor. Had she pressed that button by mistake? She exited anyway.

Mia's apartment had staled in the last week. The armchair dominated the living room with new weight. Even with the lamps on, the space felt cold and dim, drained of spirit.

Exhausted, but still feeling a rush, Bo tried to make herself useful. Out of habit she went to empty the dish rack, but struck with the sense that she was disrupting a still life, she couldn't follow through.

Food was easier to face. The refrigerator was practically empty. She took inventory of the pantry and tossed expired cans. She packed a box of dried ginseng, an unopened jar of pinecone jam, a stack of banana leaves—things she would never use herself. She would bring the box up to the free stand and someone would snatch it up right away. She wrapped the blue rice bowls in towels, hoping someone might want those, too.

She hadn't kept up with the mopping. The floor was gummy again, and hair had wound around the table legs. In the recess between linoleum and baseboard, half-buried in bits of lint and crumbs, she found a gutter full of pastel pills. She pried a few from the crevice and placed them on the table, and they rolled back toward the wall, hit the baseboard in a series of pleasant ticks, then bounced back into the crack.

—

She needed to sleep but kept going. In the bedroom, she located the family photographs and set them aside. She would mail them to Beverly and hope they arrived overseas. The rest of Mia's belongings could be donated or dumped. She started a toss pile. She would post anything in decent condition for neighbors to claim and haul the rest to the dumpster.

Then the closet was empty of everything but the prized anniversary dress. Upon closer inspection, she saw that sections of it had deteriorated. Dark splotches stained the backside and armpits, and one shoulder had torn

where the sleeve met the hanger. No one would want it—the fit too particular, the damage not worth the repair—but it pained her to trash it. For one evening a lifetime ago, the garment had perfectly served its purpose. She cut a strip of gold fabric from the hem and placed it in her pocket to keep.

Unable to stay awake any longer, she went toward the bed and straightened the rumpled covers, then felt a sweep of panic: she had erased the impression Mia's body had made, her last mark.

The cot beside the bed was still unmade. She got under the blanket without undressing and slept.

—

When she woke, night was over. The bed beside her was empty, rain thrashed at the window. The city glinted in the early light, like ice thawing.

At the end of a commitment, there was air. She was by herself, not expected anywhere. Alone, again—not desolate or rattled with fear, but awake from the year of unexpected company.

—

Bo grabbed two sacks of clothes to bring downstairs. On her way out, she pressed Mia's doorbell. The lights flashed, the birds squawked.

At the green dumpster, an old man hoisted a crate of vegetable peels onto the ledge and tipped the contents into the compost pile. Dark liquid dripped from the crate onto his hands. A stomach-turning stink followed. He made an apologetic face to Bo as he headed out, and a pang went through her to see those deep carved lines around his mouth and eyes.

Holding her breath, she approached the blue dumpster and shook out the sacks until the last garments fell out.

There was so much to remember. So much she hadn't even thought to include in the show. At home, she grabbed a sheet of paper and drew a square. She rushed to rescue the details still within her grasp, marking them with stars, X's, arrows.

Here was her preschool, the library, her cousin's favorite noodle shop, her uncle's house along the bay, the school where her mother had taught, the café where she'd bussed brunch plates one summer—her first job.

Here was where jellyfish washed up, radioactive, cradled in beds of seaweed and coated in sand. And up the street, the studio she'd shared with her friends.

Here was the hospital where she'd had her foot sutured after she'd stepped on glass at the beach.

Here was where they'd exhumed segregated cemeteries to build single-family houses.

Here was the cookie-cutter apartment where the heart of a woman born thirteen decades earlier, a stranger who became much more, finally had stopped.

Here was her favorite farmers market.

Here was the Museum of Craft and Design.

Here was her mother's clay studio.

Here was the gas station where her mother would fill up before a day trip.

Here was where the air tasted sweetest, where they'd harvested fog in times of drought—maybe she'd live there next.

Here was the bay they'd filled with sand and turned into a port, which later had become the Hall of Justice, and then a luxury hotel overlooking the city's first park, under which they'd built the parking garage where her mother and uncle would leave the car so that Bo and her cousin could play their favorite game of chasing pigeons in the playground before family dinner.

Here, far above the tectonic rift, under the rain, under the green, histories rose and flattened and lifted away like weather.

—

That evening, at home, blue light blinked on her walls. A message from Antonia, with an attached article dated four years after Bo's birth: *I saw*

your show last night and recognized the pieces from the archives. I feel honored to have been a tiny part of what you made—I hope you don't mind! Seeing it reminded me of this story I came across recently. Congratulations and best of luck to you. Please take care and stay safe. Maybe I'll see you around?

Bo turned to the article, about a man who, for years after losing his wife and daughter in the tsunami that followed a catastrophic earthquake in Japan, went diving every weekend in the bay near where their house had stood, looking for signs of them. The Coast Guard divers had done it in the immediate aftermath, but when they'd stopped, the man had gotten his diving license and continued the search himself. Nothing from his home had survived the water, no photographs or heirlooms, garments or dishes. He found animal bones, soda cans. He found thousands of signs of others' losses in the sediment, even reunited a tennis trophy with its owner. He came to know the patterns of the currents in the port. After a year, he called his nephew, a painter who lived in Berlin, and asked him to make a portrait of his daughter, whose face he could barely recall. The painting of the smiling girl hung in his sterile new apartment—too large for the room, the landlady had said, but he found comfort in its size and bold colors.

—

Was it the diver or the painter, or both, that had made the librarian think of Bo? She didn't remember mentioning her mother's disappearance, but maybe she had, or maybe Antonia had noticed or read or intuited something. Maybe the loss glowed through her skin. Her own searching returned to her now in surges, those hopeless, hopeful days, streets churning with water, the ocean everywhere. She'd never stop, she wouldn't; a memory couldn't be drowned.

A chime sounded through the rain and drew her to the balcony. Across the gorge, the windows were dark. She watched for a light to go on, to see who might appear—maybe a neighbor who'd heard it, too.

No one yet, but she would wait. High up, the buildings tapered to a cut of sky where the rain fell in. Below, the rapids folded in the rain. The night air seemed to vibrate with worlds just outside of comprehension. A future hovered, soaked through with memory, between the buildings and beyond. Her future, ready to be met.

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A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR

SUSANNA KWAN is an artist and writer from San Francisco. *Awake in the Floating City* is her first novel.



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