

Crossing the Border

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## Chicken Bus to Puno

Something nudges her out of sleep. For a few seconds when she opens her eyes, Randi does not know where or who she is. She blinks. There is a dull, dry ache behind her eyes from the bowl of light so blinding that everything seems pale, a pastel-like watercolor. She struggles to lift her arm, heavy with fatigue, and move it out of the searing afternoon sun already burning her milky skin. With the back of her hand, she wipes the beads of sweat from her upper lip. She cringes at the smell of cat-piss on the bus.

Randi has no recollection of dozing off; there are only faint memories of Megan's sharp shoulder jabbing into her cheek, the man's thick thigh shoving into hers, and the growing stiffleness of humidity as the bus rattled down the mountain. But now, it is quiet, strangely still. Randi glances out of the window at the ivory-yellow grasslands that stretched toward the gray silhouette of mountain range in the horizon, serrated like a chainsaw. *What's in Peru?* Her mother asked when Randi turned down her offer to fly her home to Florida. Randi chuckled in reply, *How am I supposed to know?*

She jerks upright. It occurs to her suddenly that the bus, pulled to the side of the highway, is deserted, the engine cut. And her friend Megan is gone too. Panicking, Randi swivels around in the seat. In the last row of the bus a man soundlessly glares at her. With a black mess of hair that grazes his shoulders and dust that gathers in the creases of his face, the man's chocolate-colored skin is pockmarked by raw-pink splotches. Randi spends a moment to try to piece together the few Spanish words she remembers from high school, but soon she notices that the man does not blink. His eyes are murky, somehow shadowy even in the bright light. She whips herself forward again, slouches down in her seat, away from his constant gaze.

Her heart beats hard against her chest, her breathing short and hurried. Where is Megan? She wants to know, Where is everyone?

Then, like an answer—that was her nickname back in college, like Allen Iverson, “The Answer”—the bus sways. Two white people climb onboard. With a black-and-white bandana on top of her fiery red hair, the woman has broad shoulders, a bulky frame. Behind her is a smaller man, wiry almost, his brunette beard untrimmed. An unlikely couple that Randi wonders, until she notices the man’s hand on her back, if they were siblings. An ungainly sight, one of those that often makes Randi question how people come together in this world.

Relieved, she almost laughs. She feels a rush, a surge of excitement when the two of them glance at her in a friendly, knowing way. Randi asks, “Do you guys know where we are?”

“We’re nowhere,” the red-haired woman replies.

The bearded man grins, and speaks in a heavy accent Randi thinks belongs to the French sort, “Uh, it was, it was a field of peeing!”

“Mass urination,” the woman chuckles. “Absolutely fucking disgusting.”

Randi laughs. Immediately, she likes them: Mara from the Netherlands and Dean from Belgium. As the driver shouts of *Vamos! Vamos!* to the passengers milling about behind the bus, Randi discovers that Mara and Dean have been traveling for a month, from Quito to the Galapagos to Lima to Cusco—and now, like her, they are headed to Puno.

“We quit our jobs,” Mara says.

Dean laughs, “We quit our lives!”

“We said to *hell* with it, saved up for two years, and sold everything. Why not, right? There’s gotta be something better than working nine-to-five.”

Randi says, “You said it.”

“What about you? How long are you traveling?” Mara asks.

“Oh,” Randi lowers her voice, “I’m only here for two weeks.” She feels the blood rush to her cheeks. Five days so far with Megan have already made her touchy about appearing inexperienced, a fake, a counterfeit of a backpacker. It feels as if she is being introduced to a whole world onto itself, one made of hostels and sore backs, market foods and diarrhea, cheap-ass buses and sultry heat.

Megan soon comes back with the rest of the passengers, and the European couple walked back to their seats. Without so much as an acknowledgement that she abandoned her, Megan grins, lifts her long legs over Randi and sits down by the window. Like she did on the train back from Machu Picchu, Megan plugs in her headphones. The thick-thighed, pot-bellied man squeezes in beside Randi, the sour smell of his body curving its way like a scarf around her neck. The engine groans a couple of times, rumbling, before it starts. The bus pulls onto the road, and, as soon as it picks up speed, gusts of wind burst through the crack in the window. Randi is shoved back by the dense desert air, hot and dry with the smell of burning grass, dust plowing into her face. She yells, “Pull it back up!”

Awkwardly, Megan stands up, her neck bowed, the back of her head pressed up against the low ceiling. She says, “I’m trying!”

Randi can feel the Peruvians on the bus—or the Quechas, she isn’t sure what to call them—watching them, quietly shaking their heads, snickering. “Americans,” she imagines them laughing, all of them together, “Look at that, they drive hybrid cars, but they don’t know how to close a goddamn *ventana*.”

The window squeals shut. Megan says, sitting down. “I told you, we should’ve taken the overnight bus. It’d be much cooler and it’d have saved us a night of accommodation,” she says.

“Or, we could’ve taken a nicer bus. There *is* such a thing as air-conditioning, you know?” Peru, Randi read before she came, is one of the only countries down here that boasts high-end bus companies. By virtue of Machu Picchu, Peru has long laid its claim as the tourist capital of South America, and offers buses equipped with the comfort of a first-class airplane cabin—air-conditioning, personal television, blankets—all for the price of a decent meal. In a part of the world perpetually oscillating between narcotics violence and democratic order, between charges of corruption and talks—so much talk—of justice, the area around Machu Picchu is made a haven for foreigners, a little pocket where promises of first-world standards are actually met. Which was why Randi chose to meet Megan in Cusco. Everyone, by way of Lima, flies to Cusco. To teach English, to learn *español*; to eat guinea pig and drink Pisco Sour. But that morning, to Randi’s disappointment, the two of them boarded the chicken bus and rattled down pot-holed roads, away from the beautiful medley of art cafes and galleries, the idle hustle of cobblestone alleyways.

Megan asks, “Where’s the fun in that?”

“Remember the night we stole a golf cart? ‘Cause *that* was fun.”

Megan replies only with a chuckle forced from the back of her throat, and stares out of the window again. Randi swallows. Only five days ago, Randi pulled Megan into her arms at the airport. Even though she was shocked to feel the fragile bones on her back—all that weight her friend must have lost in Paraguay—it was still Megan. She was wearing the army-green soft-adventure khaki she used to wear on their weekend hikes in Colorado, and a cheap pair of sunglasses she always propped in her hair. For the first couple of nights, the two of them talked like when they had first met as freshmen in the dorm room at Colorado State, both loners, foreigners, in a strange new state. During the first couple of days along the Inca Trail, Randi and

Megan were so immersed in their conversation that they spoke little with the rest of their group. But something has happened since. Megan has grown quieter, visibly annoyed at the mention of anything from home, and Randi cannot quite figure out if their friendship, like so many from high school and college, is already spent. Maybe a year and a half is too long. Maybe the real world changes you; it seems to change everyone.

Back in Oakland, for a month or so, Randi had not been able to sleep. She spent her nights pacing around the house, cleaning up after her housemates, the dirty dishes, cigarette butts, empty bottles. All of them recent college graduates she had found on Craigslist, and like her, were working too hard and partying too much. For a while, that had been fine; it felt as if she had never graduated. But recently, that house had closed in around her like a coffin, and it felt as if she was dancing with ghosts, with people she didn't know, not really. In her bed, she grazed the coffin lid with every wheezing breath and listened to the muffled whir of engines speeding past her window.

The facts of her life had been creeping up on her, asserted themselves one at a time, and, each time, it felt as if someone had swung a baseball bat into her stomach, knocking the air out of her. Randi had wanted to move to San Francisco after college to partake in the twenty-something's hippie-happy, weed-smoking, alcohol-drinking crew; but instead, she could only afford to share a small house with five other people, in Oakland, spending most of her time working as a store team leader at Target. Which, really, wouldn't have been too degrading except for the fantasies that kept flooding back in spite of herself: how she'd come out of Fernandina Beach High School a big smiling girl with a glowing personality and a polished game. She had started as a point guard for four years at Colorado State, broken records, garnered

awards—her name even made it to the ESPN website once. But in the spring before graduation, they'd started talking about this other girl, a sophomore whose bulging shoulders made her too big to be attractive, who was already chasing the rebounding record in the conference.

And here you are, Randi thinks, down in the desolate underbelly of the Americas, riding a bus with the rest of the world. The Peruvians on the bus are so clearly aware of her and Megan, of the *gringas*—with their conditioned blonde and light-brunette hair it isn't exactly possible to blend in—but their impassive faces betray no sign of curiosity. There is something like a fury swelling up in her. Randi wants to hit, to lash out, but, as in the wake of those basketball games long lost, she is uncertain about whom to injure, what to blame. She slams her knee into the back of the seat in front of her, digs it into the Latino woman whose black, dust-encrusted hair hung too close to her nose. She shoves an elbow into the thick-thighed man wedged in beside her. All these people, a sweating load of humanity, skin stuck to together in a forced intimacy, filling the bus with the stink of too many people perspiring together. Barefoot children squat in the aisle among baskets of produce, batches of lumber, and, small cages of chickens. All of them quiet, staring at nothing, their heads bobbing to the up-and-down of the bus like a surf, impervious. She used to think that sitting in the bleachers was the dead-end crotch of any basketball career, rubbing elbows with the fat, sweaty guy with patches of hair on his arm who never had a chance of making it. How can you be okay with that? She wants to ask the man beside her.

The bus jerks to a stop. As if on cue, the thick-thighed man stands up, pours into the aisle with the rest of the passengers. A man stabs his elbow into her shoulder, another slender woman jabs her bag into her cheek. On instinct, Randi flails her arm out, swings it against the woman's torso as if she was driving toward the basket. The woman hisses *Putá!* through her lips.



Randi turns to Megan, “What’s happening? I thought you said we’re not supposed to be there for another couple hours. What do we do?”

Megan shrugs, nonchalant, condescending even. “Just follow them. Welcome to South America.”

She is so sure of herself out here, Randi thinks, having taught villagers about crop rotation and plowed fields with them; that serious, narrow-eyed girl with a controlled smile Randi had met on the first day of college seems to have found herself at the center of something vital. For a brief moment on the Inca Trail, Randi thought she had found it again as well: that weepy and exhausted soulfulness, that blissful freedom she felt when she raced down the open court against an All-American guard from Stanford, stuttered-stepped into a reverse lay-up and kissed the ball gently off of the backboard, sending an almost sold-out crowd onto its feet in the season’s biggest upset. After three days in the Andes, she hauled herself over the final step, her body spent, toward the Sun Gate. The remains of the stone walls parted and revealed to her the majestic civilization at the peak of the lush mountain: Machu Picchu, the ancient city above the clouds, built in the shape of a condor—the place of kings. *This*, the guide said, his arms raised, *This is God*. Randi felt something then, like the senior appreciation night as the announcer listed off her honors, when she believed that something momentous was waiting for her.

“You’re awake this time!” Mara says when Randi makes her way toward them, standing on loose pebbles on the side of the highway, smoking. With the sun low on the sky, the air is no cool to the touch. The long shadows cast by far-off mountains on the golden grasslands look like black, rippling pools.

“Yeah,” Randi chuckles. “Another mass urination?”

Mara laughs. She motions toward the back of the bus. In the silence, Randi can almost hear the murmur from the men gathered by the back tire, its frame sunken.

“Broken tire,” Dean replies.

“*Flat* tire, Dean!” Mara teases, “Sorry, apparently the English education in Belgium is not very good.”

It isn’t until Megan intrudes that Randi realizes she has followed her: “Well, after four years of Spanish in the U.S., most people can say, *Como estas?*”

Dean pushes his glasses up on his nose, “You travel together? Americans, *ja?*”

“Yup,” Randi replies with what she soon feels is too much enthusiasm.

A white, dark-haired man Randi has not noticed turns to them, his eyes a midnight blue. He walks over, radiant and confident, and grins, “You’re supposed to say you’re Canadian, eh?” In spite of the rip in his pants and the smears of grime on his skin, the symmetrical features of his face give Randi the image that he must have grown up with money, a manicured lawn, gardens of roses; somewhere in the Northeast, perhaps. He holds out his hand, the thready veins carved on his bronzed porcelain skin beautiful, “How’s it going? I’m Chris.”

“Why Canadian?” Randi asks, taking his surprisingly rough hand.

Megan says, an octave higher than usual, “Oh please, Americans are loud and dramatic. People hate us!” Her unfamiliar high-pitched laughter feels miles away; it sounds to Randi like an accusation of some sort, or an over-compensation of shame. Along the road, a spinning funnel of dust lifts up, and Randi watches as it drifts farther and farther away until it evaporates.

In a perfect American accent, Dean mocks, “Oh my Gawd! It’s like a bridge! Oh my Gawd! We, like, must take a picture!”

“We all voted for Bush, twice,” Chris jokes.

Randi asks Chris, “So, what brings you out here? What do you do?”

“Nothing. I do nothing.” He smiles. A lighter scratches, and Chris lights the cigarette dangling from his lips. “You girls want one?” He asks.

Randi shakes her head.

“She’s a health nut,” Megan explains in a way that angers her. “During basketball season, she won’t even drink coffee.”

“Coffee? Really!”

“Here,” Megan reaches out, “I’ll take one.”

“Miss Basketball,” Chris says as he lights Megan’s cigarette, “You know you’re 5,000 miles away from home.”

Mara says, exhaling a cloud of gray smoke into the air, “And who knows if we’ll even make it to Puno, eh?”

The four travelers around her release a casual laughter. In the stale, silver dusk, metals are clanking, banging loudly to the grunts of men at the back of the bus. All of them, Randi thinks, fit together so seamlessly, a weave of strangers that is already tied together with metal wires rather than threads, practiced in a language and routine she does not comprehend. It reminds her of her roommates in Oakland, that group of partiers Randi believes she is outgrowing: the bass of punk music pulsating through the floors of her bedroom late at night, thumping against the bottom of her coffin while she scratches against the lid, screaming. She watches Megan take a long drag on the cigarette, the butt growing dimmer, cackling, before it glows red again.

“Sure,” Randi says, “I’ll take one.”

The creature shrieks, flaps its wings violently against the cage that Randi imagines feathers fluttering in the dark. For a while, she sits still, and she feels Megan frozen beside her. The bus has come to a stop again. She listens to the quiet shuffling in the aisle, the ruffling of bags and baskets and livestock being carried away. Given the unscheduled stops along the way, Randi knows, there is no way they are already in Puno. The chicken squeals one more time with a painful finality of sound.

The shuffling stops. The bus is emptied.

Megan nudges her, “We should go.”

“Are we here? Is this Puno?”

The thick black wall rises all around her until she spots a red fleck of a cigarette that barely traces the sharp contours of Chris’s face.

Megan asks him, “Do you know what’s happening?”

“There’s some sort of a protest. They blocked the only road that goes to Puno.”

“What are they protesting about?” Randi asks.

Beside him, Mara chuckles, “What do they ever protest about?”

“So, what do we do?” Randi asks, half-hoping that the bus company will send taxis down to get them. *We’re Americans*, she wants to tell them, whoever and wherever they are.

“We walk,” Chris says, “We walk to Puno.”

The travelers pull their backpacks out from the bottom of the bus and swing them over their shoulders. When the group emerges to the heart of the road, Randi makes out a line of abandoned vehicles snaking up the steep slope of the mountain and around a bend.

“Are you sure this is where we’re supposed to go?” Randi asks, “We have no idea where this goes.”

“No one does, Miss Basketball,” Chris says, propping his army satchel higher up on his shoulder.

Randi sighs. She trusts him; she trusts them, the backpackers. She has no choice. She clicks the buckle into the clasp around her waist. They join the sea of people moving en-masse up the hill, mechanically and silently, in the dead of night, like some sort of a mass migration.

She rubs elbows against a Latino man in a wife-beater, a machete over his defined shoulder. To the other side of Randi is a slender woman in a tunnel skirt she recognizes from hitting on the bus, shuffling her sandals, a light scarf wrapped diagonally across her body, dissecting her small breasts, a baby asleep. Others balance hand-woven baskets on their heads; sleepy children grab onto their mothers’ loose clothes. A few yards ahead, Randi sees the man from the back of the bus, turning for a moment to stare at her with in that same disconcerting, unblinking way. Randi holds tight onto her purse. She tries to hunch over, to blend in. She keeps her eyes on the back of Mara’s sneakers, careful of eye contact for fear of looking too friendly, or rich, or sexy, or guilty.

A stocky man in soil-stained Salvation Army jacket, with the built of a night-club bouncer in San Francisco pushes past Randi, then Mara, then Dean and Chris. Randi focuses on her breathing, heavier now. She knows she is fit, a former Division-I athlete for crying out loud, but she also knows she is white and educated, and, as the dark-skinned people march past her, she thinks maybe that makes her body intrinsically inferior. The 13 kilograms of her backpack—she found out at the airport—are pushing down on her. The straps dig into her shoulders. Randi feels the weight of her folded jeans, of the bottle of shampoo, her Colorado State sweatshirt. She thinks about those porters on the Inca Trail, undernourished and compact, who carried twice the

load of the paying hikers. She drags on the air, but the cold stabs the inside of her lungs like needles. Her hands feel icy and fat; yet, she is hot, her entire back unable to breath.

She loses track of time, and does not realize that Megan has fallen behind until her friend calls out, “Randi, can we take a break?”

In the moment when she pauses and turns to Megan, the passengers fill in the space between her and the foreigners like a river flowing down a hill, idle rocks be damned. She can no longer see Dean or Mara or Chris. She feels people bumping her on all sides: someone jams his shoulder into her back; another steps on her foot. Randi feels like screaming. She wants to scream at Megan for bringing her to the butt-crack of Peru. She wants to scream at her for how lost she is.

Megan drops her backpack onto the ground. She sits on it and retrieves a water bottle from her shoulder bag. She hands it to Randi.

“I’m fine.”

“Shut up and take it.”

Randi unscrews the cap. The cool water drips down her throat and splatter onto her stomach. She gives it back to Megan. The familiarity of the routine feels so sweet and so painful.

“C’mon, we should go,” Randi says, holding out her hand to pull Megan up. “Maybe they’re waiting for us.” But, she knows, most likely not; they have no reason to, for Randi is raised to believe that if you can’t keep up, you get cut, left behind. She realizes that a part of her wishes she asked for their information—emails, last names, anything.

“Did I tell you?” Megan says as the two of them resume walking. “There’s a story some backpacker told me that a couple of people—a brother and a sister, I think—went trekking in Morocco and just disappeared.”

“What? Americans?”

“Yeah. They were going through the Atlas Mountains or something, but no one ever saw them again.”

“A brother and a sister? There’s something kind of romantic in that.”

“Or maybe they’re still alive and living with the nomads, wandering around in the desert. Who knows, maybe they *wanted* to disappear?”

That’s sort of what you’re doing, Randi wants to point out, cutting off contact with most of your friends at home. Through the puffs of breaths hovering before them, she glances at Megan. There is something tired and tender in her face. It occurs to Randi that in spite of her calm, perhaps Megan has no idea where she is going either.

Up ahead, the current of people bends off the road, following a narrow path of their own making. Standing apart from them, Randi notices the flickers of cigarette butts, and the outlines of three people standing over fallen backpacks.

“There they are,” she hears Mara’s voice.

Chris says, “We thought we lost you.”

“You waited for us?” Randi asks, a rhetorical question, but she is grateful—elated, even. No one in San Francisco would wait; everyone was always rushing from one place to the other.

“Just a cigarette break,” he replies.

Randi asks, “How the heck do you smoke a pack a day and be in better shape than me?”

“We suffer inside,” Mara chuckles. “We just suck it up more because we know we’ll probably die before you.”

They begin to walk again, trudging through the wet dirt, each step sinking her flip-flops further into the mud. It smells like human excrement and rotten watermelon. But Randi focuses on her legs, keeps them moving, for in her mind comes unbidden the image of the American brother and sister on the ridge of a Saharan dune, all alone, lost.

The passengers funnel into a line or two, pushing and shoving as one-by-one they tiptoe over a sunken plank that bridges a murky runoff. In two ginger steps, Chris crosses over. He reaches out for Randi’s hand and pulls her, then Megan. And onwards they walk in an exhausted silence that Randi has only known on her road trips with her family and on long rides to basketball games. The foot-steps—squish, squish, squish—falling all around her have a calming effect; all of it, rhythmic at times and un-rhythmic at others, sounds strangely musical. Randi breathes in and out with uncomplicated and mechanical strength. She watched the five of them—five people, she muses—move together, in sync like a well-coordinated offense. She remembers one night when she came back into the game after a broken finger; *for the team*, she insisted to the press, because there were just five of you out there at a time and the other four were unique in the world. She senses between them an understanding too deep to articulate, too profound.

The cold water drips out of a hose onto her forehead, before it traces down her face, her chest. Randi barely remembers how she got there. The final incline felt as if it would last forever, but when the five of them came out onto the main street, they saw the tail-end of the protest: there were men squatting on the road, campfires cackling before them; some chatted,



others dealt cards; and scattered all over were heavy boulders so that no vehicles could come in or out. Mara found a taxi and negotiated a price they knew to be a rip-off. Yet, as the driver took them past the still walking Peruvians, Randi, squeezed snugly in the backseat, was grateful. She estimated that the taxi had saved them another half an hour or so of walking.

In the shower, Randi turns the knob and the trickle of water ceases. She slips into a clean pair of jeans and throws on a sweatshirt. Downstairs in the quiet hostel, the other four sit around a small table.

“She is here!” Dean proclaims when Randi comes down, “A beer for American lady!”

Randi sits down between Megan and Chris and grabs a bottle of Pilsen Polar.

Mara raises her bottle, “Here’s to surviving a ten-hour bus ride and a wonderful hike!”

Megan adds, “All for the price of a chicken bus!”

The dull clink of the bottles echoes like a soft, muffled clasp of cymbals. They eat and share the snacks they have brought. Chris is gnawing on Mara’s beef jerky, Randi on Chris’s dried mangoes, and Dean is inhaling peanuts Randi and Megan dug out from the bottom of their daypacks. They pass around the beers that someone—Randi is not sure who—purchased from the hostel.

“I wonder what’s going to happen to all those cars,” Megan says, taking another sip.

“The drivers probably need to walk back to get them, right? Whenever the protest is over,” Mara suggests. “What else are they supposed to do?”

When the European couple mention their coming trip into the Bolivian *Amazonia*, Chris tells them about in a Shaman ceremony in the Peruvian jungle. There, with the Quechas, he drank *ayahuasca*, a hallucinatory drug made from vines in the forest. The Shaman, Chris says, called it a rebirth, a spiritual awakening. He must have spent a couple of days—he lost track of

time—on his back, staring at the Milky Way arched across the night-sky. He vomited. It was the purging of negative energy, the Shaman explained.

“Un-real,” Randi says. “Try telling this story in the United States.”

“Back in the real world,” Mara says, “no one would believe it.”

“That’s why,” Chris says, “I don’t plan on going home.”

Beside her, Megan nods. Even though she wanted Megan to move to San Francisco whenever she came back, Randi cannot imagine her there now, not among the pasty women with manicured hands and men with biceps cut from weight rooms. She almost laughs at the image of Megan penciling in inventory, scheduling staff, getting hit on by men at the cashier who have no idea what a chicken bus was.

Dean speaks rapidly in Dutch to Mara. Megan and Chris begin to talk about the rest of their trips. Randi sips on the beer and leans back in her chair. She knows that Dean and Mara had met as E.U. officials in Brussels and that they had poured together their life-savings to travel the world. She knows that Chris had been a prep-school boy on the east coast who never finished at Columbia. But it seems to her that their pasts were things that she does not really need to know, and they, like Megan, do not want to talk about it. What seems more pertinent now is that she knows that Mara is the most efficient haggler among them, that Chris likes to make jokes at the expense of Americans, and that Dean does not like beef jerky.

What a fortuitous event, she thinks, that their paths have all somehow crossed, all of them, here, drifting on the periphery of the world. In the narrow, dimly lit-hallway, she hears snoring from what she imagines is a heavy old man, full of phlegm. Even in the stale hostel air, musty, Randi thinks she smells a nectarous scent from what she recognizes as Herbal Essence’s Rainforest Flowers. She listens to Mara’s translation of Dean’s love for the Incan interpretation

of the Milky Way, and Chris's admiration for the Quechan porters who run the Inca Trail faster than any Olympian is capable of. The colorful plethora of accents and languages bouncing around the table is such a sweet melody to anyone who paid attention that Randi really believes that she can spend the rest of her life with people like them, so courageous in their search for whatever it is they are all searching for.

"Hey," Megan leans in and whispers, "I'm glad you came."

The next morning, Randi and Megan stagger down the stairs, giddy with exhaustion, and join the others around the table, all of their faces ghostly in the pale early light. Their conversation seems slower, pausing and starting.

After a few minutes of silence, Randi sighs, "We're all going to different places now."

No one replies. She takes a sip of *mate de coca*.

Megan looks the European couple, "I can't believe you're not going to Lake Titicaca."

Dean, his beard fuller than Randi remembers, says, "Too much to see, *ja?*"

Mara repeats, "Too much to see."

Randi nudges Chris with an elbow, "Decide what you're doing today?"

He shrugs, "Probably just going to walk around town. See what comes up. Maybe I'll see about teaching English here."

Randi asks, "You didn't want to teach in Cusco?"

"Too touristy."

After breakfast, the five of them step out from the hostel, their backpacks strapped, and find that the city, dead only a few hours ago, is alive with energy: children in faded shirts run in the street, large-breasted women place loads of second-hand clothes on the wooden vendors, and

men carry water up and down the road. The travelers stand among them; their backpacks feel too big here; even their adventure wear feels expensive. Why here? The Peruvians' eyes seem to question. You have everything in the world, why are you here?

The soft breeze from the lake lifts up candy wrappers. A couple of cars honk at them, the drivers shouting out of broken windows, "*Gringos! Taxi?*" The drivers laugh, and speeds away, winding through the clusters of pedestrians, clouds of exhaust trailing in its wake. A young man on a bicycle swerve out of the way of a clucking rooster, his tires squealing to rusting bikes, yelling *Putá! Dios!*

"Chaos," Chris says. "I love it."

Mara turns to Megan and Randi, holding out a piece of paper. She says, "Hey, here's our emails." Randi is relieved. The current circumstances of her life has not allowed her to trust that people can go far away and meet up again, but Mara seems to believe so. So, she will email them tonight. Wait, not tonight. Randi doubts that there is internet access on the islands. Maybe tomorrow night, when they come back to Puno and head toward Arequipa. She will email them, tell them about spending a night on the lake. The couple will write back with tales of encountering piranhas on the Amazon River. And in this way, their friendship will continue. Maybe one day, the European couple will visit the United States—maybe even Chris will come home too—and the five of them can be together again.

The couple begins to move away. Dean takes a final glance back over his shoulders and smiles through his beard, "Keep in touch, *ja?*"

Megan says, "Yeah, it was great to meet you guys."

Randi does not know what to say. She watches their heads bob above the Peruvians. A part of her wishes she had moved in to hug them, but now it is too late. The couple disappears around a corner. The whole ordeal was painfully absent of drama.

And she knows now that when she turns around, she will see that Chris is already gone.

Megan stuffs the paper into her pocket, “Ready?”

Randi nods. The two of them walk toward the port in silence, speaking nothing of him, nothing of Dean and Mara. Randi recalls the image of the five of them around the table, fatigued and drunk only a few hours ago, singing off tune to the Backstreet Boys. But it passes. For Lake Titicaca comes into view, the immense blue shimmering under the rising sun, snow-peaked mountains in the distance. On the wooden plank that juts out into the water, Peruvian men hold up signs and pictures of the floating islands. Megan gestures for two tickets. Randi watches the few backpackers wait before the ferry, smiling, snapping pictures.

Soon, the captain shouts, *Vamos! Vamos! We go!* And the small group of travelers slowly drifts toward the boat. A square-jawed Caucasian with a buzz-cut stands beside Randi, catches her eyes and grins, “Beautiful, eh?”

Something profound is unfolding before her, she thinks. The soft breeze skirting the surface of the water and brushing through her ponytail makes her feel a flutter in her stomach, a sweetness in the back of her throat, like the beginning of that soulful sensation on the Inca Trail. But what it is yet, she cannot express. She knows she has to wait until later, one more week until she flies home, to figure out what it all means.

Randi chuckles at the man, “Don’t tell me you’re Canadian.”

“Actually, you got me. American. How’s it going? My name’s Frank.”

And with her thumbs locked on the thick straps of her backpack, Randi walks with him toward the ferry that will take them out to the largest high-altitude lake in the world. She follows them—the travelers, strangers all—onto the ferry with only the vaguest idea of who she is and who she will become.

## Dawn in Laos

“Laura, it’s time.”

She knew it was time. She had been awake since the roosters screamed into the dark. She had cringed when the pre-dawn cacophony of the women’s shrill voices and the loud groan of vehicles pierced the thin walls. Each din from this backwards town rattled her hung-over forehead with more intensity than the trunks that honked beneath their windows in Manhattan.

During the week the two of them had already spent in Southeast Asia, Kurt had made them rise early in the morning enough times that Laura could imagine the bustle outside now, in Phonosavan. Her fiancé had declared that the soul of a place can be witnessed at dawn, but, to Laura, all these mornings were the same: between the rows of cheap concrete two-story houses were *tuk-tuks* and tricycles tumbling down the road that must have been paved back in colonial times, lifting up swirls of dust, and men and women setting up wooden stalls for another day of hard hassling. Especially with Kurt’s recent promotion, she couldn’t understand why she was here. This was not her idea of a vacation.

“Laura? Are you awake?”

She peeled her eyes open, the taste of sticky rice liquor still lingering on her tongue. In the faint orange light seeping through the thread-bare curtain, she could see the contours of his handsome body as he moved about their bare room. Kurt had finally conceded to renting a double rather than sharing a dorm with college kids. But the room smelled like polluted rainwater and wet paint. For the past two nights, Laura had slept fitfully to the dripping of pipes overhead. It was as if the entire country had not progressed since the war.

“You wanna shower before we go?”

“Honey,” she replied, “I don’t consider a trickle of water a shower. I told you to get a hotel room, Kurt, a real one. Why do you do this? Just to save a few stupid kips? Aren’t we too old to beg our way across Southeast Asia?”

He smiled at her in that charming, big-boy beam that had first caught her attention at the restaurant two years ago, and had often since then diffused the tension between them. “C’mon baby, this is *the road*. Where’s your sense of adventure?”

“Yeah, honey, that ship sailed after high school. Eighteen years of Thermopolis, Wyoming, does that to you.”

Kurt half-exhaled and half-chuckled in reply, and that was the end of that conversation. Slowly, Laura placed her feet on the icy tile floor. She sighed. He was the type of New Yorker that country girls like her fantasized about: a kind of stubborn arrogance that was at once infuriating and sexy. It was that something dangerous she had loved about him, the sense of mystery and excitement when he used to whisk her off with an hour’s notice to Vermont. But recently, she was beginning to feel the pressure of thirty approach, and it weighed on her, terrified her. She had no idea how it happened so quickly—from the time she reached New York with a hundred dollars in her pocket to here, in Laos, engaged to Kurt Federer.

Yet, the entire trip seemed to have been a test of their patience, especially hers. Ever since Kurt had led her past the row of air-conditioned taxis for a *tuk-tuk* ride to the youth hostel, after a 20-hour transit to Bangkok, it seemed as if the two of them often dangled on the precipice of a fight. But Laura also understood that she was now, here in Southeast Asia, more dependent on him than she had ever wanted to be of anyone. She could barely wait for the flight home four days from now to let loose her discontent. She imagined the fight: his sedated expression that enraged her further, and the shrill sound of her voice, cracked and husky by the end, filling up



their two-bedroom apartment. She would then slip on her dress and put on her stilettos, and listen to them click-click through the city high-life, enjoying the stares of the men who smoked in front of bars. And after she spent the night at her girlfriend's, Laura would come home in the morning to the rousing aroma of his D&G cologne, and the two of them would make love as if nothing had happened.

“So,” Kurt came out of the bathroom, white toothpaste foaming on his lips, “I rented the motorbike from the hostel. I bargained it down by 50,000 kips, isn't that awesome?”

“Yay, you saved us, what, five dollars? Hooray, Kurt. You *do* know that they need the money more than us, right?”

“Please, it's the principle of the matter. They need to earn their money, just like everyone else, huh?” He smiled again, “Anyway, let's go as soon as we're packed! We'll be back in the afternoon and take the bus to Luang Prabang!”

“I still think we should take the morning bus with the others.”

“Why? We can finally get away from them and the tourist traps!”

“What's wrong with them? They're fun.”

Kurt disappeared into the bathroom again. From Vientianne to Vang Viang to Phonosavan, the two of them had practically traveled with the same group of people. It was among the company of those from Europe and North America that she had finally felt safe in their numbers, protected. With her sharp-featured, high-cheekbone face and natural bronze tan from her Native American father, Laura was used to people staring at her. But here in Southeast Asia, it seemed as if the locals were perpetually eyeing her as if she had something to offer.

Yesterday, on a guided tour to the Plain of Jars, the seven of them had learned about the muted victims of the Vietnam War: a whole Lao people devastated from a brutality in which they

took no part. Later at the Craters Bar, the group drank together, noting the irony that the only Western establishment in town was decorated with empty bomb shells. After Kurt had excused himself to wander the Laotian streets, their clique had only grown rowdier in the quiet night, and even though no one mentioned the war, Laura sensed that between all of them had grown some sort of solidarity in that unfortunate knowledge.

As she slipped on her jeans, she wondered what might happen between Chris and the Dutch woman. When she imagined the two of them strolling hand-in-hand along the Mekong River, she felt a tingle of jealousy. Clearly, the idea was absurd, for she had a future with Kurt waiting for her. But in part it was the fantasy—the possibility of it—that she envied.

Kurt emerged from the bathroom again, wiping his mouth with a towel. “Here we go! We can leave our bags at the front desk and just bring our daypack.”

“Is that safe?”

“Yeah, we used to do that all the time.” Kurt clapped his hands together, “This will be fun! Riding out to the countryside! See the real Laos!”

Laura had never seen Kurt so enthused, so visibly excited. Not on the summer vacations they had taken to Cape Cod nor the company’s Christmas parties. No, this was something else. So Laura put on her unflattering long-sleeve again and pulled her hair back into a messy bun.

For what seemed like miles on end, Laura clung onto Kurt as the old-fashioned motorbike groaned through the rolling plains of Laos. Despite her protest during their lunch break, her fiancé had insisted on driving on.

“Are you having fun?” He yelled over the deafening roar of the engine. “Did I ever tell you? I had one of these in Saigon.” Right out of college, she knew, Kurt had served at a

Princeton-in-Asia post in Ho Chi Minh—or, what he stubbornly referred to as Saigon. Although Laura had Googled the city in preparation for their second date, Kurt rarely spoke of his time there again. It was not until recently, a couple of days after she saw the ring hidden in his shoe in the closet, that she began to notice a restlessness that plagued him, waking up in the middle of the night and pacing in their living room, a heavy-bound book on the Vietnam War or an article on the Khmer Rouge in hand. And even though after their engagement Laura wanted to go to Rome or Greece—to a place that actually mattered to her—she had agreed to spending ten days in Southeast Asia. Slowly, on this trip, she was beginning to understand that a part of him, behind that single-minded ambition on his business career, Kurt was still stuck somewhat in his early twenties—an ideologue who had hand-washed clothes and hung them out his window like the Thai and Laotian families she had seen on the trip. She had tried to ask him about it a couple of times before it became clear that his fascination with the French Indochina belonged only to himself. As Kurt drove her further away from Phonosavan, Laura wrapped her arms around his solid body, her cheeks pressed against his back.

“Yeah!” She yelled back. Laura was already imagining their honeymoon in Fiji and the luxurious resorts they would eventually take their children to. Perhaps by then, Kurt would be promoted again and she could quit her job as a teacher at a public school. She would pursue something she really loved, what she had first come to New York City to do, whatever that was. For now, Laura shut her eyes. Every time they sped over a rock, she grimaced, her butt slamming against the hard seat.

Suddenly, Kurt swerved; the tires whined for a brief moment against the gravel. Laura dug her fingers into her fiancé’s stomach as he pulled the bike upright again.

“Kurt! Be careful!”

“Sorry!” He shouted, “I didn’t see that rock!”

For a while, the two of them rode silently through the empty landscape. Laura opened her eyes again and tried to distract herself by studying the strange up-and-down movement of the land, the knolls round and mossy-green like turtles’ backs. While certain patches of grass blossomed in lush green, others barely clung on in faded, withered yellow, scorched and spent to desperate agriculture. She tried to breathe in the rich mineral smell of the wet earth, but sometimes she cringed at the sudden whiffs of fetid and burned grass.

Over time, Laura began to be able to distinguish between the natural depressions in the earth and the bombed-out craters made by the American military during the Vietnam War. She was fascinated by the almost perfectly symmetrical hole of the craters. Their tour guide had told them that between 1964 and 1973, an average of one bombload was dropped in Laos every eight minutes. A total of 260 million U.S. bombs came down on this modest country, making Laos the most heavily bombed country in the world. And 80 million of these failed to explode, lurking beneath the soil and often claiming the lives of villagers who plow the earth.

Soon, they drove past a group of farmers, half-naked, hoes lifted over their glistening shoulders. She grabbed onto Kurt even tighter, and whispered in his ears, “Don’t stop.” Laura couldn’t hear him, but she felt his body shake as if he was laughing at her.

Finally, she told him firmly, “Kurt, I don’t want to miss the bus.” Laura caught his glance in the mirror, and she could tell that he saw on her face how terrified she was.

He shouted, “Fine, we can go back.”

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“Honey! Wait!” Her scream was the last sound she was aware of before everything went silent. The whole scene stretched out in her mind in slow-motion. She saw the front tire slam

against the protruding boulder. Upon impact, Laura imagined herself forced to release her grip on Kurt, flung over the head of her fiancé, and land, helmet-less, on an earth already soaked with decades of blood. But, soon, it all sped up again: Kurt whipped the bike hard to the left, swerved just enough to avoid a head-on collision with the rock. The motorbike skidded on its side, its exhausted engine groaning and the tires spinning, scratching non-stop against the gravel. The two of them were thrown a couple of yards forward in a haze of dust.

He turned his head around, “Are you okay?”

She spit the sand out of her mouth. She knew she should be upset, but for now, Laura wanted to laugh, for it seemed as if she was caught in some sort of a cosmic joke that her fiancé and the world were playing on her. “Yeah, I’m fine,” she said, suppressing a chuckle as she slowly climbed to her feet. As she patted off her jeans, she felt that parts of her legs were bruised and scratched, and she examined the shallow cuts on her arm. “Are *you* okay?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

But when he stood up, blood ran down his leg. Laura shrieked, “Kurt! Your knee!”

“It’s okay,” he spoke in that calm, flat tone. “It’s just a scratch.”

The engine gave one last moan before it sputtered and died. And then, there was silence—a deep, penetrating silence that reminded her that they were totally alone.

As Kurt limped over to the rented bike, Laura watched drips of blood trickle into the loose dirt, leaving a trail in his footsteps. Kurt lifted the vehicle upright, and turned the key in the ignition. He twisted the handle and kicked the pedals. Nothing.

“What’s wrong with it? Can you fix it?”

He twisted the handle again. Nothing. “Fuck!” Kurt hissed. He pushed the bike away from him, and sent it crashing against the earth.

Laura sat down. She shuddered. The sun was beating down on her skin as intensely as ever, but Laura felt cold.

When Kurt sat down, Laura half-attempted to mask the reproach in her voice when she asked, “How’s your knee?”

He did not answer. And as she studied him, she recognized that he had the same bottled-up look on his face as when he walked through the door each evening and collapsed in front of the television, his tie and buttons undone. Laura knew she should leave him alone, but she could not comprehend why he—not her—should get the right to be angry. She wanted him to talk, but the only thing she could think of to say was: “We’re not going to make the bus, are we?”

Again, Kurt did not reply. So she imagined herself a week from now at Starbuck’s, telling the story to her girlfriends. They would first laugh about this hippie-wanna-be side of Kurt none of them had known, then they would voice their jealousy of her once-in-a-lifetime experience. She would nod along, knowing what she would not feel then was the imminent danger she felt now. But time, she wished as she closed her eyes, had only one possible direction, and that arrow would somehow lead her back home.

Laura had no memory of falling asleep until a strange, sonorous voice squealed toward them, jerking her out of a half-formed dream. Through a thin layer of mist that had descended, Laura saw five figures at the top of the hill, jogging at a labored pace toward them, yelling incomprehensibly. Her first instinct was to run. But Kurt waved at them.

“What are you doing?” He pretended not to hear her. “Goddamn it, Kurt!” She ran to pick up her backpack and clutched onto the front pocket for her iPod and passport.

“*Sa-bai-dee*,” Kurt enunciated carefully when the men halted in front of them. “Can you help us? Help? English?”

The men squealed at them, waved their arms in the air, until one of them, whose naked upper body grotesquely revealed a ripple of ribcage, finally said, “No English.”

The man brought his two loose fists to the front of his chest, then threw his arm outwards and opened his palms. From his lips, charcoaled and chapped, released a sound Laura heard as, “Boom!” Laura’s body jerked.

“I think he’s trying to tell us about the UXOs.” Kurt turned to the farmer, “Yes, I know. Yes. But,” Kurt gestured to the motorbike, “broken. Broken.” He waved his hands. “No use.” A couple of the men nodded, but their eyes were blank, uncomprehending.

Kurt asked, “How far is Phonosavan? Phonosavan?”

He tried a few different pronunciations until finally, the Laotian responded, “Ah! *Phonsavan!*” Laura wanted to laugh: How was that any different? The Laotian pointed and pointed in the direction that the two of them had been heading.

“I think he’s saying that we’re still pretty far away.”

“This is a waste of time, Kurt. Just give him some money and ask him to take us back!”

“It’s not that easy, Laura. Do you see a car here?”

He beckoned the men toward the motorbike. As she watched her fiancé gesture to the farmers, she wished she had gotten on the bus that morning with Chris and the rest of the group.

“Okay,” Kurt came back to her. “I think they said they can fix it.”

“You *think?*”

“Yeah. In their village.”

Laura heard her own laughter rippling through the cool dusk air. “Are you kidding? No, Kurt, I want to get back to our hotel. God damn it. I want to take a hot shower and change into my pajamas! Heck, I want a fucking Mojito!”

“You wanna walk back to town? In the dark?”

Laura resented his deep, sedated voice, and crossed her arms across her chest. “Didn’t your parents teach you *not* to take candies from strangers?”

His smile cut through the tension between them, “This isn’t New York, baby.”

“Oh, right, so the rules don’t apply.” When he shrugged, Laura said, “I hate it when you don’t fight back.”

“I bet you wish you had a door to slam in my face now, huh?” Kurt put his arm around her waist. “C’mon, we’ll get on the bus tomorrow, and I promise you, once we get to Luang Prabang, we’ll splurge. The best French food you’ve ever tasted.” When she frowned at him, he added, “in Laos. Ok, and a five-star hotel.”

“We better not miss our flight.” She placed one foot in front of the other, and slowly followed in the wake of the villagers. “Do they even have five-star hotels here?”

“As of ten years ago,” he chuckled, “No.”

“What are you laughing at?”

“Huh?” He looked at her, and for a moment, she thought he was going to say something. “Nothing.”

It wasn’t until Kurt left her in the back and walked ahead with the villagers that Laura sensed that a part of him was actually thrilled—that this was what he had wanted all along.

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In the few summer months she had spent as a young adult back in Thermpolis, she could not imagine how those people could live there for more than eighteen years and stay sane. It had seemed to her to be so suffocating, so remote, so divorced from the rest of the world. And now,



as she brought up the rear end of the group, Laura found herself at a place even more isolated, more lonely than she could have possibly envisioned.

The village looked as if it had been there forever. A few thatched huts, nailed feebly together with wooden planks, scattered about. Everything seemed to have sprung directly from this burned land. Even the roosters and black pigs milling about their feet were shrouded in dust. No wonder they hadn't noticed it: the village was camouflaged in the dull color of earth.

"Look at this," Kurt finally slowed down for her, "Isn't this fantastic? How many people can say that they've been to a *real* Lao village? I mean, a *real* one, not one of those we see on guided tours. Wouldn't this be a great story for our kids?"

He reached out for her hand. Laura took it, but she said nothing. She was exhausted, and his enthusiasm drained what was left of her energy.

"Can you imagine living here?"

She refused to think about it. Instead, she was watching a few chickens peck away at a trough made out of an empty bomb casing. All she wanted then was for Kurt to find a way back home. "I don't know, Kurt."

"This is such a simple life, huh? Wake up, walk to the farms, come home, eat, sleep. There's nothing to worry about, you know? No crazy bosses, no monthly bills..."

"Until you get blown up." She could not help but chuckle when he tilted his head sideways at her, irritated. She continued, "Blown up by a bomb from your own country, how's that for an irony?" When Kurt dropped her hand, Laura shrugged, for a moment satisfied, "I'm just saying. It's not *that* romantic."

Village life paused when they crossed its threshold. Three women stopped on the side of the dirt path with baskets balanced on their heads and a young girl at the rice mill froze, all of

them eyeing silently as Laura and Kurt followed the farmers toward an old, dusty truck sitting in front of the largest shed in the village. Behind the dark and leathery faces of the villagers, Laura noticed a chilling coldness in their eyes, glaring at them as if they had committed some deplorable crime. She became acutely aware of the paleness of Kurt's skin, even in its tanned state, and that of her own darker tone. She hunched her shoulders over, trying not to tower over the slender, compact villagers. She reached out for Kurt. After a week on the tourist's trail, she felt for the first time like an outsider, an unwelcomed intruder.

When the men stopped and placed the bike beside the truck, they began to speak and gesture to Kurt. Laura glanced around at the villagers that had slowly gathered around them. But, dressed in a variety of faded western shirts and sarong-like skirts, the villagers maintained their distance; she was no longer sure who was supposed to be scared of whom.

Laura caught the bright, curious eyes of a small girl, peeking at her from behind her mother's embroidered skirt. There was a strange clumsiness in the girl's movement as she inched toward her. It took Laura a moment to notice that, partially hidden in her mother's shadow, was a stump of a leg, bandaged in yellowing cloth. During the frustrated pauses in the men's conversation, Laura could hear flies buzzing around the girl's stub. The specks of insects lifted off and landed on the girl's cheek as well, a side of her face boiled and blackened. Although Laura forced herself not to turn away, there was enough of a twist in her face that the girl quickly disappeared again. In the ashen grey of early evening, it occurred to Laura that tonight, New York was a place far, far away. No matter how hard she forced it in her mind, the two places could not quite reconcile, could not be imagined side-by-side.

Kurt shook his head, "I'm sorry. I don't understand. No. No understand."

Collectively, the Laotian men sighed. For a moment, everyone in the village stood together, quiet and still. No one knew what to do. The darkness around them slowly became complete, wrapping them all in a solid embrace. Finally, the back of the crowd shuffled. It parted to let through a young boy whose face was caked in dried, crusty mud. He ran up to Kurt, excited, his breath wheezing from a run, “English? English?”

“Yes! Ha! Yes! English! You speak English?”

“Yes!” The boy nodded briskly, “A little. I study.”

“Yes! Yeah! Good! Good! What is he saying?”

When one of the men spoke to the boy, a wave of anticipation washed over the village.

“Say...” The boy pointed to the bike. “To-night, no...To-to-”

“Tomorrow?”

“*Jao!* Yes! To-mo-rrow!” He gestured toward the bike again, “To-mo-rrow, good!”

Kurt clapped his hands together, its sound pealing into the night. “Tomorrow! Great! Thank you!” All around them came a simultaneous, excited chatter. Kurt laughed, and Laura could not help but join in.

Laura and Kurt sat on short wicker stools, their knees huddled close to their chests. Firewood crackled on the dirt ground beside the open door, while a white-haired, petite woman shuffled around with corrugated pots. The arch of her back was so painfully visible that Laura winced. So instead, she glanced around in the half-lit room at the men and women, boys and girls, seated cross-legged on the bare floor in a circle, staring at them.

Kurt turned to the boy beside him, “What’s your name?” He pointed at himself, “Kurt. My name is Kurt. What’s yours?”

The boy shouted joyfully, his brown eyes wide and eager, “*Kahoku*. My name, *Kahoku*.”

When the aged woman handed her a bowl of rice, Laura was taken aback by her hollow, sunken cheeks. Laura whispered to her in a gentle voice, “*Khawp jai*.”

The woman hovered for a moment before Laura. Then she did something unexpected: she reached for Laura’s hand. Though taken aback at first, Laura let the woman’s wrinkled palm embrace hers, tight, squeezing, and she felt each prick of her calluses on her own untried skin. The woman stared at Laura, the darkness of her small brown eyes lingering, prolonged, in a moment that was at the same time confusing and resolutely beautiful. A part of Laura felt the urge to apologize—but for what? Then, the woman revealed a sliver of her teeth, crooked and yellow, nodded in a sure and firm way, and walked away. She served the rest of her family before she settled down in her own stool. Around the circle, chopsticks drummed against the bowls. Immediately, Laura regretted that she had always asked for forks at Chinese restaurants.

“Kurt,” Laura nudged her elbow into him. “What’s this?”

“It looks like raw meat,” he replied, his mouth full. “You should eat it. It must be expensive.”

Kahoku spoke up, “From cow. Very special. For you!”

“Here,” Kurt reached over with his chopsticks, “I’ll take it.”

Across from them, a young woman pushed the remainder of her rice into the bowl of a little girl beside her. The little girl ravaged through her food without lifting her head. Laura held her bowl out toward her, “Here, do you want more?”

The young woman grinned slightly, and glanced at Kahoku.

“More?” Kahoku asked. “Yes, more, okay!”

“No! No!” Kurt interrupted, alarmed. “No more!” He waved his hand frantically. He shot at Laura a stony, bewildered look.

Kahoku poked at Kurt’s upper arm, giggling, “So soft! No man! Where from?”

“Me? I’m from America.”

“America!” The boy gasped. He shouted, “Obama!”

The word “Obama” echoed excitedly around the circle, like a chorus or a chant. The boy slapped his palm on his thigh, and cackled again, “Yes! Obama! Very good!” Kahoku stuck his chest out, pointed his thumb at his heart. “Me. I go America!”

Laura’s stomach tightened. She thought about the grandparents, the aunts and the uncles she had not spoken to for years. And then she remembered that, even at the age of eight, in a social studies classroom learning about the metropolises of the east, she had made a choice: she, like this boy, knew at a young age that she would find her way out of Thermopolis—that she would find her way to a glamorous big-city life.

“Kurt?” Laura crossed her arms over her chest when she stepped through the door. What she had expected to be a complete darkness outside was instead a pastel grey night. She saw the silhouette of her fiancé’s body sitting against the mud-brick walls of the well. Laura pushed aside the wheelbarrow and sat down beside him. “Couldn’t sleep?”

He whispered, “Look.”

She followed his gaze upward. In front of them and above them was a silver river arched across the sky. She gasped, “The Milky Way.”

“Beautiful, huh?”

A mosquito landed on her forearm. She slapped it hard, her clap echoing over the sleeping village. For a moment, the chirps and croaks and clicks of the Laotian night ceased—and, just as suddenly, the melody resumed again.

Out of nowhere, Kurt spoke, “Look, I’m sorry I dragged you out here.”

There was something about his tone, maybe the finality of it, that made Laura turn sharply towards him. She thought she heard not an apology, but an accusation of sorts.

“How much do you think we should give them tomorrow?” It was Laura’s way of offering reconciliation, an attempt to appeal to the ideologue she believed Kurt hoped to rediscover on this trip.

“Nothing,” he said, flatly.

“Why not? Just a few dollars to say thank you. I want to help Kahoku anyway. He seems like a good kid.”

“Please, you can’t encourage them to just take from us. It doesn’t work like that.”

“How would you know?”

“Look, I’d like to think that they helped us out of the goodness of their hearts. I need to believe that there’s still some good in this world.”

Laura wanted to burst out laughing at his backward logic, his blatant self-contradictions, but the rhythmic snores drifting from behind the walls reminded her of where she was. Her fiancé sat with his feet crossed at the ankles in his pants, partially ripped in the accident and smeared with soil—one he had bought from REI just so he could dress like a traveler. She knew he would throw it away like a useless wrapper before their flight home.

Kurt said, “You know, ten years ago, my buddies and I from Princeton-in-Asia, we joked that the best way, the best test of a successful marriage, is to backpack across Asia.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m just saying...it’s what we said.”

She listened to the tunes of creatures. Here was a man who had grown up on the gold coast of Connecticut whose biggest problem was the choice between Princeton or Yale, business or law, a man who considered her having lived out of a closet in Chinatown as romantic and sexy. Before she realized it, Laura found herself saying, “I cheated on you...a couple of months after we first got together.” Her voice hung in the air, became a part of the Laotian night song. She studied him by the moonlight, but there was no change in his expression. He held his face tight, that stone-cold look she despised.

At last, Kurt spoke, “I knew. Did you really think I was that clueless?”

“But you didn’t say anything.”

“Please, that good-for-nothing barista at Starbucks? What was he? A black man from the Bronx studying to be an actor? There’s no competition, huh?” Kurt grinned. He enclosed his palm around her hand, squeezing it tight. “I knew you’d come to your senses.”

She realizes soon that he was hurting her, the pressure on her diamond ring was cutting into her bone. In the strange, ghostly moonlight, Kurt seemed to smile at the panic on her face. Through her teeth, Laura managed to say, “You have no idea.”

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Sunlight squinted through the hills and slanted across the village. As she ducked under the low door frame and came out to the dawning day, she saw Kurt standing with his back to her, looking over the countryside. Their conversation during the night hung over her like the layer of fog that hovered now over the uneven lands. But Laura did not know where else to go. She walked slowly towards him, and said, “You’ve never talked about Vietnam.”

He seemed so lost in thought that it shocked her when he asked, “Have you ever heard of Agent Orange?”

“No.”

“It’s a chemical weapon the Americans used on the Vietnamese during the war. Hundreds of thousands of people were killed or maimed. Even kids born today are born with defects. How do you talk about stuff like that to people who don’t know a thing about it?”

“I thought you said you surveyed traffic or something.”

“You’d think that there would be some places in this world they would’ve left alone.”

“Well, what can we do?”

Kurt turned to look at her. “That’s it, right? What *can* we do?” He shrugged, holding his shoulders in the tugged-in position, “I don’t know. I left. I went home.”

Down the path came Kahoku, sprinting and yelling “Obama! Obama!” He threw both of his arms in the air like a touch-down celebration, and hop-landed in front of Kurt on his two bare feet. “America!”

“Hey,” Kurt touched the blue cap on the boy’s head, “Yankees! Where’d you get this?”

“Yes! Hat!” Kahoku said. Laura felt a warmth spread over her stomach when Kurt smiled at the boy, patting the dust off of his baseball cap. She imagined watching the two of them from the dining room window, throwing a baseball back-and-forth on some fenced-in, suburban lawn. The boy took the cap into his hand and held it out toward Kurt, “You want?”

“Yeah?” Kurt asked.

“Yeah. Very special. Special hat. You want?”

“Sure, huh? Something to remember you by.”



Kurt placed the cap on his head, turned the visor so it faced backwards. Soon, the Laotian men pushed the motorcycle toward them, and Kahoku shouted proudly, “Bike, okay!”

The men placed the bike in front of Kurt. He turned the key in the ignition and fired it to life. “*Khawp jai*,” Laura said to the men as the two of them swung their legs over the cracked leather seat. As Laura wrapped her arms around Kurt’s body, she could feel his muscles jerk, momentarily, as if surprised at her touch. But that evening, she hoped, she would dig out her dress and heels from the bottom of her luggage, and the two of them would stroll toward a trendy French restaurant in Luang Prabang, arm-in-arm. She would ask him to wear his blue blazer and khakis, and maybe even gel the front of his hair into the lustrous streaks she loved. Maybe tonight, she would not complain about the wet earth and cracked pavement beneath her heels. And, like they do in Manhattan, they would pretend as if they had never fought and, tipsy with wine, they would laugh as they head back to their boutique hotel. Perhaps, it would be a beautiful ending to a vacation they would one day believe to have been perfect. The bike started to move. It was time to head home; it was time to go back to what she knew.

Kahoku kept up with them as Kurt drove the bike at half-speed, trailed by dozens of other children. The rest of the villagers lined up along the dirt road, wordlessly watching them leave as they had yesterday allowed them in.

At the edge of the village, Kurt brought the bike to a halt, and touched the boy on the arm. “All right, Kahoku, we’ve got to go.”

The boy barked into the dawn, “Today! I farm! Tomorrow, America!”

Kurt chuckled, “We’ll see you there!” He strained his neck to glance back at Laura, “You ready? Let’s catch that morning bus, huh?”

The motorbike jerked as Kurt twisted the handle, and the two of them raced away from the village whose name they did not know. Laura turned her head and placed her cheek on Kurt's back, the visor of the Yankee's cap hovering over her head. She watched the boy recede into the distance.

Maybe Kurt was right: there was nothing to do. Behind her, village life had already resumed to the routines of the last hundreds of years. Even as she tried to remember the features on that boy's face, it was already slipping away. But maybe he was wrong too; maybe the old woman would use the money Laura had left on her straw mattress and help the boy find his way.

She faced forward again, squinting into the wind as the two of them bumped through the rolling hills. The engine seemed to grumble louder than before, and Laura was grateful for its filling the silence between them. She wondered if it was possible for them to know what they knew now and still go back to their lives in Manhattan.

Laura wrapped her arms around Kurt even tighter, placed her chin gently on his shoulder. She could not smell the cologne that often intoxicated her; instead, she breathed in the sour sweat from his shirt and the occasional whiff of manure from the countryside. But the warmth of his back against her body was enough, for now—and she waited for time to take her home.

## Crossing the Border

The first time I met Larkin Thomson was on the bus in Sonsonate, a chaotic crossroads-town in the middle of El Salvador. The exterior of the bus was repainted in vibrant colors of red and green, in a montage of cartoonish flames and slogans; yet, any American would recognize the clunky, box-like vehicle as the yellow school bus we all grew up on. Under the crucifixes and Christ images tacked on the walls inside, you could still see the decal of rules meant for schoolchildren: “Follow directions the first time they are given,” “Stay in your seat with your feet on the floor.” I still remember when Kelli came home from her first day of school and asked me what to do if her feet couldn’t reach the floor.

I was sitting in the back, ignoring the wide-hipped woman and the bags of sliced mangoes she lifted up to the window. A pigeon-toed boy scuttled up too with a tray of toothbrushes whose plastic covers were nearly opaque from age and dust. Then came a group of Salvadorans from the market and a desperate projection of their voices, made louder, resounding and menacing on an afternoon when the sky was gray and black and indigo blue.

Soon Larkin climbed on, her friend Kelsey closely behind. With her backpack on her bulky shoulders and a thick band strapped around her waist, like we all did back then, Larkin walked under the “*Gracias a Dios*” sticker—swaggered, really, in a way that made me certain she was American. She had large breasts, accentuated by the tank-top fastened to a body that was not exactly hefty and not exactly fit. As she walked down the aisle, the few Salvadorans glanced at her, giving her the kind of notice that women like her must have grown up on. And I knew instantly that back home, she was the sort of obnoxious, brash woman I would’ve disliked.

But out here, things were different. Larkin and Kelsey belonged to the crew of backpackers on a circuit of Central America that I had recently discovered and was immensely

fascinated by. Other women my age were making money and getting married; they were throwing summertime parties that ended before the Colbert Report came on, tipsy on a couple of glasses of Costco-brand pinot before they drove home to relieve the babysitters. While all of my friends were moving to the suburbs and raising children, living the kind of life that only married couples could live, Larkin and Kelsey were in their early 20s, broken-off from mainstream America, unmarried to expectations and un-bonded to anyone—free. They were young people traveling with the fewest possible plans, always on the lookout for experiences that set them apart, that made them better than the people back home.

It didn't take long for Larkin to notice me. She slid into my seat and shoved into my hip. In Seattle, such a show of intimacy would've caused an agonizing awkwardness. But on the road, the rules changed. I used to call it *Contract Compatibility*. In trying to gain insight into this unique group of 20-somethings on the move, somehow developing friendships and departing again, I came up with the term earlier on and found it immensely useful. *Contract Compatibility*—through the shared philosophy of budget travel, a backpacker would find immediate company in other backpackers. Example: after I flew into Costa Rica in the waning daylight, I was standing in the intersection of two busy avenues, searching the corner building for a street name, when a young Canadian gentleman offered me his bed while he slept on a blanket on the floor. He told me then, grinning a boyish grin, *Traveling brings out the best in people*. A corollary: as a function of the limited travelers in Central America, the speed of intimacy forged between strangers increased. Such friendship was made easier here than, say, Western Europe, by virtue of our white skin among dark-skinned citizens. I called it *Fundamental Racism*. But of course, none of us would say it aloud.

“Hey,” she said, holding out her large palm with an emphatic smile, “I’m Larkin.”

“Jillian,” she squeezed my hand, hard.

“You’re American!”

“Yeah, rained and washed down here from Seattle,” I replied, immediately regretting the lame joke at which my daughter would’ve surely rolled her eyes. I asked quickly, “What about you?”

“Pennsylvania. Well, originally anyway, but hey, I’m trying to get the fuck out of there. You know what all these people think when I say I’m from Pennsylvania? They all think I’m Amish. Like, okay, not all of us are Amish.”

I chuckled. “People ask me if I’ve ever met Meg Ryan, or had I ever stayed up at night listening to ‘Sleepless in Seattle.’”

I was right—Larkin’s laughter was lavish; it came from the pit of her stomach.

“People really should get out more,” she said.

I smiled. We instantly understood each other. By definition, we were already friends.

I glanced at Kelsey, standing uncomfortably in the aisle—I knew why too, I just didn’t say anything. Larkin had broken *Contract Seating*, a simple mathematical equation, really, which prescribed that we sit with the people we had known for a longer period of time. Instead, Kelsey placed her backpack on the seat across the aisle and sat down. I have tried often after that trip to remember what Kelsey looked like, but I never could. I know she had an oval face and light brown hair pulled back in a ponytail, but I can’t seem to recall any of the specifics. Her look was nondescript, I guess.

I thought about introducing myself to her then—it seemed like the right thing to do—but Larkin had me pinned to the window. Then, she asked, “So, where are you headed?”

I didn't think I was ever going to see either of them again. But two weeks ago, Larkin sent me a Facebook message to let me know that she was coming to Seattle on business. She asked if I wanted to meet for coffee. Not Starbucks, she said. *Real* coffee. Even over the Internet, I could hear her laugh. The message sat in my inbox for a few days, but then I thought about *Contract Permanence*. I believed, back in Central America, that friendships forged on the road were forever. I wanted to know if I was right.

I consider bringing Phil, an older man I met in the library a couple of months ago when he checked out a self-help book on marriage and I couldn't hold back a snarky comment that sent him chuckling with self-pity and delight. The initial excitement, though, is fading, replaced by the dread of knowing him further. So instead, I pick Kelli up from her father's house. In Café Vita on Capital Hill, I cannot stop fidgeting. Under the table, my daughter kicks me with those sandy brown Uggs that every girl seems to be wearing these days.

"Jillian, stop! It's so annoying!" She glances up from the iPhone she tricked her father into buying for her. She asks, "Why am I here?"

I shrug. "I want you to meet my friend."

"But why? I never make you meet any of *my* friends, who, by the way, are at the *mall*."

Kelli digs her front tooth into her thumbnail. I don't point out the bumps in her sky-blue polish nor the flakes on her skin. I can tell that she is performing a mental calculation of how mad she should be at me: how to balance the anger for the cost I have imposed on her social status with the charm she should display to persuade me to take her there afterwards. Sometimes I am jealous of my own daughter. Even with certain quirks like the badly-painted nails, Kelli navigates the labyrinthine tunnels of high school with a natural expertise I have always lacked.

I am not sure what to say, so I reply, "Because."

“Uh, whatever, Jillian.” Kelli starts typing on her iPhone again, texting, I figured, with her friends, each word chosen carefully so that she can sustain and maintain her power. I barely notice it anymore that my teenage daughter has stopped calling me “Mom.”

The bell on the door jingles. I recognize Larkin instantly. The last time I saw her had been a couple of days after we reached Antigua, when I lied about a pre-booked hotel in Lake Atitlan and I knew Larkin was headed to the Mayan ruins at Tikal. We shared a dinner of *pupusa* before I walked back to our dorm and she barhopped with other foreigners, all of them eighteen- or nineteen. I left early the next morning, while she slept. That was five years ago.

As soon as she swaggers into Café Vita, she says, a little too loudly for Seattle, “Jillian! Oh my *God!* It’s really you!”

I think I can feel the coffee burning against the walls of my stomach. All at once, I feel as if there is so much to say and nothing at all. And all I can think of now is the terrible thing we did back at the border.

I was thirty-one when I was in El Salvador, already twice-divorced, with a 10-year-old daughter from the first marriage who had chosen to live with her father. And even she had the sense to ask me what I was going to do in the most violent countries in the Western Hemisphere. *How did you know?* I had asked her.

*Mother, there’s this thing, it’s called the Internet?*

I stared at her, wondering how the little pine cone in the crib had grown up so fast. Kelli was right. It was a bad time to be in Central America; it always was. But how could I tell her that? How could I tell her that I wanted to go to Yemen or Afghanistan or, for goodness sake’s,

the Congo, but Central America was the only such place I could get to without spending too much money?

El Salvador wasn't known for many things in those days. Back then, it was infamous only for the civil war and for the Reagan-backed death squads. By the time we got there, it was known mostly for the gangs, those disenfranchised young men, birthed on the streets of Los Angeles and exported to a country rife with automatic weapons. I had also read somewhere that sixteen people had died when the MS-13 sprayed a yellow school bus with bullets and set another one on fire a couple of days before I crossed into El Salvador. This poor little country, I thought, could just never get a break.

But we tried not to think about those kinds of things. Plus, as Larkin put it one night after a couple of beers, we were Americans, for God's sakes. No one would touch us. Who was stupid enough to ignite a full-on war with the U.S. government? I nodded. I called it *American Egotism*. These were, of course, the Bush years, so I guess a lot of people did too.

We didn't know we had arrived in Juayua until the bus driver shouted *gringas! gringas!* and gestured for us to leave. We tugged at our backpacks, stuck beneath the narrow seats, slung them hurriedly over one shoulder, and bumped into the snickering passengers as we rushed off.

In the town square, a group of young men in wife-beaters stared unabashedly at us, all of them tattooed up and down their chiseled arms, their slick caramel-colored skin flashed bronze in the late afternoon sun. It wasn't until I felt Larkin shoving me toward the road that I noticed a dark-skinned, almost charcoal, man in a wheelchair not a few yards away, his eyes darting rapidly. He waved at us, the motions of his arm quick and jerky. "*Gringas! American ladies!*"

"Let's walk," I suggested. By the time we wandered to the quiet streets and felt safe enough to pull out the map, however, we were already lost.



“Are you kidding me?” Larkin scoffed. “This is supposed to be a small town.”

I said, “I’ll go ask.”

I left them at the corner, and stepped into a souvenir store down the block. To the impassive woman behind the cashier, I pointed at a hostel in the Lonely Planet.

“Ah,” she said flatly, “Hotel Anahuac. *Pero, hay mas hoteles alli.* More hotels!”

I realized then, just for a moment, that I could walk the other way, disappear into town, and never see Larkin and Kelsey again. I could feel an undeniable thrill for the possibility of it, the rush of such a freedom. I relished in the idea that life on the road was a simple thing; and marriage only a complication. Out here, there was no one to answer to. That had been the point: to be alone, to come and go as I please—unencumbered.

But of course, I went back to them. That was the way it worked. I first learned about *Contract Obligation* from a German woman in Copan. She was a young woman of few words, but I suspected that might have been partially due to the rasping way her throat protested against her smoking two packs a day. What started out as sharing a taxi to the Mayan site became a responsibility for each other: when she was thirsty, I offered her water; when I got lost, she found me. And it wasn’t until both of us agreed to go separate ways that we parted.

We hustled to the hostel and watched the owners lock the doors behind us. And out in the garden, we sipped on bottles of beers. El Salvador during raining season, especially at night, had the feel of Seattle, the smell of wet earth and the succulent tang of saplings, almost as if we could taste the dewdrops slowly slipping down the leaves. I stared at the lamp that hung from the ceiling, watching fuzzy wings of moths flap, lifting off and landing and lifting off again.

“So, tell me, Jordan.” Larkin leaned back in her wooden chair and crossed her legs, “Why are you here? What are you running from?”

“What do you mean?”

“A break up? Your parents? C’mon, we’re all running from something.”

I was here because wanted to see if Central America was going to kill me. I wanted to know if I was going to disappear. The truth was, I didn’t know why I was there. What I did know was that I didn’t want to be a cliché. Not too long ago, I had walked in on my second husband in the shower with his secretary. *How fucking cliché*, I said to him, later that evening. He told me that I was supposed to freak out and, maybe, demand a divorce, sue him for all his worth. But I didn’t. I knew I should have felt rage, that to feel something then was appropriate and human. I didn’t. I told him, *that would be too cliché, wouldn’t it?*

When I didn’t say anything, Larkin went on, “Well, aren’t you going to ask me what I’m running from?”

“What are you running from?”

“From God!” She burst out laughing.

I sipped the lukewarm beer.

“What do your parents think,” Kelsey asked, “about you traveling alone? You know, especially as a woman?”

Larkin rolled her eyes; she meant for me to see it. *Contract Irritation*—Two people who travel together for an extended amount of time would begin to despise each other’s company. They would crave for the addition of a third, impartial party over whose affection they would fight for, a passive aggression that I suspected my daughter was just about to learn.

I shrugged, “I don’t know. They’re okay with it, I guess.”

Larkin said, “I think I’d do it if I could. I mean, you get to do what you want to do and you don’t have to worry about anyone else, right? There’s something so exciting about it.”

Kelsey brought the beer bottle to her lips. So did I.

There wasn't much to do in Juayua. The Ruta de Flores, we realized, was pretty much a fraud: there weren't any flowers. One morning, the owner of the hostel hired us a guide to a nearby waterfall, which was more wide than tall, more tranquil than majestic. The day was cast in an ashen gloom; the clouds were already moving in. A skeletal turd-colored dog lay at our guide's feet, lifted his head slightly when Larkin stripped down to her bright red bikini. She jumped into the pool. "Holy shit! It's cold!" She gasped, then she waved at us, "Come on, ladies! Jump in!"

Kelsey skimmed the surface of the water with her toe, her arms crossed over her chest. The spray was already enough to make me shiver. "In a minute," I responded, trying to buy more time to work up the courage to join her.

"You *wimps!*" Larkin glided through the ice-cold water with grace, and climbed onto the polished rocks. She stood with her head bowed, letting the water drum onto her back. I envied her, that unbridled enthusiasm and the optimism of youth, the strapping upper-body from spending summers on the road, and the seamlessness of her waist from not having given birth.

Kelsey whispered, "She's crazy."

I shrugged, "Looks like she's enjoying herself. Living the life."

"She's reckless. If it wasn't for me, she'd have gotten herself in trouble."

"What do you mean?"

"She got so wasted in Cancun that she jumped on the back of this guy's moped. We didn't even know him, you know? It was just some Mexican dude who offered her heroin. Who knows what would've happened if I wasn't there. She doesn't even do heroin."

Suddenly, our guide stood up, alert. I looked up, and saw that the gray clouds shined with a tinge of silver. The sky cleared its throat.

“*Vamos! Vamos!*” The guide waved at us, “*Va a llover!*”

We followed the guide, half-walking, half-jogging, through the narrow trail nestled in the woods. I could taste the dew in the thick air, the humidity that wrapped itself around us like a blanket. And then, as the commotion of closing markets reached our ears, the sky fell down. I could hear nothing but the drone of rain pelting on leaves, on mud, on our skins. Beside me, Kelsey’s umbrella popped open. I handed her my camera, and she placed it into a zip-lock bag and stored it in her waterproof backpack. When we emerged into Juayua, the curtain of rain was so magnificently complete, so beautifully intricate that I could barely see the guide a few feet in front of me. I hooked onto Kelsey’s arm as we trudged through the puddles, our footsteps falling in sync.

It almost looked as if, for a moment, Larkin froze when she glanced back at the two of us. Then, there was a sudden twinkle in her eyes. She shouted, “C’mon, you two! This is El Salvador! What’s raining season like without a little downpour!” She laughed, her thick, wavy hair plastered in streaks on her face. Larkin opened her mouth, and turned upward to the sky. She spread her arms outward, spinning herself in circles. I couldn’t help but laugh.

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That is the woman who sits before me now, the same woman, even if she is wearing a black skirt, red blouse, and heels—even if she is made-up, mascara, lipsticks and all. The air about her is unmistakable; her presence magnanimous. She places her black umbrella beside her foot, her hair dry and curled to perfection. I glance at the coffee cup, watching the leaf wobble on the foam.

“Sorry I’m late. Meeting went long. Well, I guess I should’ve known, right? These fucking meetings always go long.”

I can feel Kelli’s eyes light up. Larkin is striking in a way that her mother is not, bold and brazen, with the forwardness of a woman who lived life according to her own set of rules.

“Yeah,” I say. I hear my daughter’s sarcastic chuckle, *How would you possibly know, Jillian?* Groping for some topic, I ask Larkin “What do you do now?” I cringe. Everyone asks that on a bad first date.

“I’m a consultant on the Hill.” She takes a sip of her coffee, a white sliver lined her upper lip before she wipes it away, “The *real* Cap Hill. No offense. The one in DC?”

“Well, you always said you wanted to get out of Pennsylvania.”

“That’s right! I did! I came home, my mother did my laundry, and I got the fuck out!”

Kelli places her phone on the table. She says, “One of my friends moved from DC.”

Larkin glances at her as if noticing her for the first time, then asks me, “Is this your daughter?”

Kelli says, “Jillian is my mother.”

Larkin chuckles, “What grade are you in?”

“I’m a sophomore. But I’m old for my grade.”

Larkin wraps her fingers slowly around her cup, pensive, trying—I am sure—to remember if she knew I had a daughter and counting the years to figure out how old I am.

But she doesn’t ask. Instead, she says, “What about you, Jillian? What are you doing these days?”

Kelli slides lower in her seat and returns to her phone. In her world, having a librarian for a mother is social suicide. “Nothing,” I lie. “I’m taking time off.”

“Wow, you’re still living the life. You’re lucky, girl.”

*Lucky*, that is a word that has rarely been used around me and I feel uncomfortable. So I say, “You’re doing well. Big consultant job?”

“Oh come on! It’s mundane. It’s *ordinary*. Working in a cubicle? Who the fuck in their right minds would want to do that?”

This puzzles me. I have always assumed that Larkin is the type of woman who will never settle for something beneath herself, a person who is used to getting her own way—a thrill-seeker who chafes at anything routine. “Anyway,” she continues, “I never asked you how the rest of your trip was. Have you traveled since then?”

“No. What about you?”

“Just for business. You know, hotels, flights, cars.”

“Sounds perfect.”

Larkin laughs, the kind of loud, reckless laugh that startles me. “That’s what you’d think. But, come on! We were in *Central America!* We jumped off of a 30-foot waterfall!”

Kelli glances up, “Wait, Jillian? No way.”

It had never been a part of my plan to go to El Imposible National Park, near the border between El Salvador and Guatemala; and yet, the three of us found ourselves hiking beside a river that cut through the forest. We trailed behind our guide in an unflattering style of bikinis and sneakers, jumping off of low cliffs and sliding down nature-made drops into pools I prayed were not infected with leptospirosis.

At the final waterfall, Kelsey didn’t jump with us. It was her own fault, really; she was too scared. And I am not entirely sure how or when I agreed to do it, but once I did the decision

was irretrievable—it was like booking the flight to Central America: once you'd told people about it, you couldn't *not* go, right?

Larkin and I waited at the edge of the cliff. My teeth chattered; my thighs trembled. I looked down, staring at the spot the guide had told us to land if we wanted a chance of swimming out. Larkin was ecstatic, bouncing up and down. She pointed out that the waterfall didn't even have a name! How many Americans have been here? I only nodded, the roar of the violent tumbling of water was deafening; strangely, though, a couple of yards away from the fall, the surface of the pool was serene so calm that I thought I could see Kelsey's reflection as she waited for us on the bottom.

I closed my eyes. Larkin clasped her palm around mine, her grip tighter and tighter, and the ground slipped out from under me. And then we fell through the air.

I guess that is the only story Larkin tells about our trip because she goes on to talk about her future plans: Egypt, she says, or maybe Morocco. But the next morning, I remember, the three of us got on a crowded bus. We huddled in the aisle, and there was nowhere for me to look but at the sweat that traces the bicep of the man inches from my face.

We were on the first leg of our journey to Antigua; we knew it was going to be a long day. Our waterfall-guide had estimated a travel time of four hours, if we had our own car, to ten. He laughed, maybe fifteen, twenty hours. He was shaking his head, *idiot tourists*.

We waited for hours before the second bus came, a dull, ten-seater van covered in splotches of dried, cracked soil. The three of us squeezed into a two-people seat, and at some point, a Salvadoran boy ended up between Larkin and me. The boy stared relentlessly at me for

two hours, his faces inches from my own. When the bus finally stopped at the border, he was sitting on my lap, still staring at me until his mother carried him away.

“Two more buses to go,” Kelsey said as we walked toward immigration.

I hung onto the rusting railing, hot from the afternoon sun, as we walked across the bridge. There were boys in the mud-colored river below. One of them, naked, swung from a rope tied to a tree, flung himself toward the middle of the river, and cannon-balled into the water. We walked under the “*Bienvenido a Guatemala*” sign. I was exhausted. A pool of sweat pasted my shirt uncomfortably to my back and when I took off my backpack, I could feel streaks of perspiration racing toward the crack in my butt. I sat down.

A few cars drove by and picked up people who had crossed the border with us. Soon, it was just the three of us.

“Are we sure a bus is coming?” Larkin asked after the shouts of the boys had faded.

Kelsey replied, “Yeah. I think so.”

“Says who? The Lonely Planet?”

I have tried since that afternoon to recall whether we sat in silence or chatted about life on the road, but I can’t. I do remember, though, that Kelsey asked me at least twice to apply sunscreen on her pinkish shoulders before a beaten Toyota sedan, a long crack that cut through the front window, groaned up to us and stopped.

The window rolled down. A mid-aged Latino in a Dodger-blue baseball cap and a collared t-shirt, unbuttoned at the chest, leaned his hand on the passenger seat. His face was wrinkled and leathery from, I suspected, having spent a few decades in the sun.

“Ladies! Welcome to Guatemala! Warning! Very dangerous country! Why are you coming here?” His laughter was heavy with phlegm. There was a gap in his two front teeth.



Larkin hopped up, and I followed her to the car. She said, “We’re going to Antigua.”

“*Bueno!* What a coincidence, me too! Come, I drive you.”

There was a pause, until Kelsey asked, “Do you know when the next bus is coming?”

His laughter came in fits and starts. “It comes when it comes! *Venga!* I drive you!” He seemed genuine enough to me, though I didn’t point out the tequila bottle I saw peeking out from under the seat. This had not happened yet on my trip; help had always come from the white folks. I found myself at a loss of what to do. “Look,” he continued, “you see here. My ID. My name is Luis Fuentes, see?”

Kelsey was still sitting on her backpack, shaking her head when I glanced at her.

A jeep pulled up behind us. It honked.

“Okay, look,” Luis Fuentes dug into his wallet again and pulled out a wrinkled photograph—a studio portrait of his younger self, two boys and a woman. “That’s my family. A bus takes very long. Just a favor, a traveler for a traveler.”

Larkin shrugged. “Okay, good enough for me.” She lifted her backpack, opened the back of the trunk and threw it in. She looked at me. “Come on, Jordan.”

The jeep honked again. I grabbed my backpack too; it was like the waterfall, I wasn’t in control of myself. I stood before the open trunk, and saw a machete lying limp in the back. I threw the backpack in, covering the blade, and in that brief moment when I closed my eyes, I felt a puff of air when the trunk slammed shut. Maybe I was falling in love with the feeling that I might die.

Larkin grabbed my hand and we climbed into the backseat. I left the door open and leaned out, “Kelsey, are you coming?”

She was standing on the side of the road, her arms crossed over her chest, “This is crazy.”

The jeep honked, one long dragged-out blare.

The last I saw of Kelsey was a receding figure in the rearview mirror, her green eyes staring straight at me. She became smaller and smaller, and then, right before she disappeared, I looked away.

Larkin and I sit at Café Vita for less than an hour. Somehow, we have deluded ourselves into believing that we can still talk as if our friendship—or whatever it was—had survived the five years of ordinary life. Our conversation is dull, strained, so that when she says she has to leave, I am relieved.

What I am going to remember from our reunion, perhaps the only thing, is the image of Larkin walking out of the door, in the same way that she had swaggered on the bus and into my life in El Salvador. Larkin Thomson. I am not sure what will happen to her. But all these years in between I have imagined that she was always watching over me, quietly judging, pulling me down another waterfall and daring me to steal another woman's husband. In that moment when we hug good-bye, I think both of us understand that we will never meet again. And all the better for it, I think: we did this one crazy, impulsive thing together. For a second there, we wanted to be those women again, the younger, bold versions of ourselves who stood on the ledge of that 30-foot tumbling waterfall, ready to die. But then I watch her walk away.

I have the lunatic urge to grab Kelli then by the wrist and say to her, "Hear that, girl? You don't know what it really feels to feel alive. Not yet. Not like we do."

But Kelli is rubbing her eyes, brimming, exhausted of having been forced to sit through a conversation she cannot comprehend. She looks at me, half-pleading, half-demanding, when she says, "Can you *please* take me to the mall now?"

That afternoon back in Guatemala, Luis Fuentes drove us from the border to the expatriate-haven town of Antigua. Larkin suggested that we pull out the only dresses we carried and celebrate the journey at an upscale Italian restaurant.

Larkin raised her glass. “Welcome to Guatemala.” She paused, then said, “Don’t worry. She’ll be fine. If there’s one person who can take care of herself, it’s her.” That was the first time since I had met Larkin that she didn’t sound entirely convinced.

Larkin never told me if Kelsey was okay. And I never got up the courage to ask. *Contract Silence*—there are certain things that happen on the road that you don’t talk about. There are others that you don’t want to know.

It happened. No one said a shit about it. We separated ways. And that was that.

## Waiting

They all look the same. The Korean girls in uniformed navy skirts and white blouses, their faces oval like the petals of white lotus flowers, have placed themselves between Kenneth and Tony. At night, the schoolgirls let their silky hair fall down, rippling with silver halos, soft like the flow of Imjin River—giggling, all of them, high-pitched and unbroken when the two white men drape their hairy arms over their slender shoulders. They holds up two fingers, their porcelain skin pulled back into tight-lipped smiles.

I stare at the screen of the camera, and for a moment I am distracted by my own clownish reflection. I have allowed my beard to grow out, my cheeks so hollow I doubt my parents will recognize me—if they are looking for me at all. My legs shake under the table; it is a habit I used to hate about my younger brother, a restless, edgy energy that I considered it my duty to subdue, but I find that I have been doing it a lot lately too. I start snapping pictures before they are ready—click, click, click.

In the no-name *gogigui* here in a quiet seaside town, the Sunday night is bustling. Red meat and raw vegetables are sizzling on the grill. None of the roomful of Koreans pays us much attention; we have long been the only three foreigners in town. I push the button and the shutter flutters. It pisses me off that when the schoolgirl grabs her camera back, she studies the photograph without looking at me and walks away. Such is the way of the world, I know: In Malaysia they thought me the Norwegians' walking guide; in Burma the Canadians' hired driver. Somehow, without my knowing it, I have been condemned to a second-rate existence, relegated to an ancestral line of servitude. At least, my backpacker friends joked, you get into museums for free. I pick up the glass of *soju* and tilt it all the way back. The alcohol burns down my throat, swirls in my stomach, scalding and nauseating and wonderful.

I wave my metal chopsticks at Kenneth and Tony. I command, “Come on, let’s eat.”

Tony brushes back his wafer-thin hair and grumbles, “Great, back to school tomorrow.”

“Well, here’s to a good weekend away,” Kenneth says. He is a large, red-headed Australian with the physique of a former wrestler, thick-neck and plump-faced; yet, beneath that round curve of belly, he stands on a pair of legs so lean that his whole body seems to be built in the shape of an inverted stupa. Kenneth picks up a slice of meat I placed earlier on the grill and drops it into his lion-like mouth. “I can’t believe it took me so long to visit the DMZ. What a shame.”

Tony says, “It was surprisingly informational.”

Kenneth replies, “Seriously, mate. I had no idea. I mean, North Korea, what are you doing digging tunnels underneath Seoul? It’s not the 1950s anymore!”

“Yeah, but they don’t know that,” I tease.

Beside us, a party of young men, hunched over the table, elbow-to-elbow, raised their *soju* glasses and slurred, *gunbae!* Behind me, where the schoolgirls sit, I can feel their chairs trembling against mine, fits of giggles so rhythmic and beautiful and dark like the ringing of the Brahma bell.

Kenneth points at us with his chopsticks, using them for extra emphasis, “The guide was great. Gave us a little bit more insight to really see the world—really *understand* it, *know* it, you know what I mean?” Silently, I am chuckling. I find it comical when Kenneth tries to provide some sort of a high-minded commentary, a wanna-be know-it-all, wisecracking in a philosophical way as if he was the only one trying to understand the universe.

Tony murmurs, “I didn’t know the Korean War is still going on. That’s kind of strange, interesting I guess, living in a country that’s still at war.”

“Ha!” Kenneth bursts out laughing, “Okay, *America*, when was the last time *you* weren’t at war?”

I open another bottle of *soju* and pour it into my glass, still stunned by the curious reappearance of the woman I seem to be following all over Asia. I noticed her earlier this morning when row-by-row all of us paying customers rose to file off of the tour bus. Some angle of her face caught my eye, that dip in her chin I knew so well. She was alone, plain and unguarded, styling the red Aladdin pants that women travelers wore all over.

As we fanned out from the bus and dragged ourselves behind the guide toward the Reunification Monument, I kept my eyes on her, half-expecting her to turn around and embrace me. Beside me, Tony was grumbling about the Lehman Brothers and how since then, even with his master’s degree, he couldn’t find any jobs in the West. I’d heard all about it. So I sped up. I pushed through a bunch of college kids in jeans and sweatshirts yapping oh-my-God the North Koreans are coming to get us. I passed a family of seven or eight—also Americans, I knew right away—the grandfather sneezing with an explosive loudness, the little boy clinging onto his father’s shorts, his mouth pulled apart, cheeks wet, wailing about this and that, and the father shhhhh-ing him. I wondered if he would grow up to hate his parents too.

Two men, green-eyed and blonde with surfers’ faces, strolled beside the woman. There was a gap between them, a distance of strangers; yet, soon her head tilted up to one of them and she laughed. She touched his arm. I tried to speed up toward them, but Kenneth caught up to me and chuckled, Backpackers, he said, they’re the new Jews. The wanderers of the earth, cheapsakes. They don’t know how to participate in the world—filthy, lost souls. I watched the other man lean toward the woman, saying something I could not hear.

In the *gogigui*, Tony asks me, “Dude, how much of that are you drinking?” His collared shirt is buttoned, as always, his face clean-shaven as if he is perpetually prepared for an interview. He picks up a can of Coca-Cola.

“Screw him, mate!” Kenneth places his fat palm on my back. “Drink up!”

Tony pursed his lips, “We have to teach tomorrow.”

Kenneth says, “One thing that I’ve learned in three years is that in Korea, we drink!”

“I still can’t believe you’ve been here for three years. Aren’t you bored?”

“What’s not to love, mate? The booze, the food, the ocean, the *women*? Look at us! We’re educating the future of Korea!”

“Don’t you want to go back to your real life?”

Kenneth picks up a piece of meat, “Mate, you can go home whenever you want. No one’s stopping you.”

I glare at them, glossy-eyed. Kenneth’s smile is so gleeful and Tony’s so pained that I hardly believe we are altruistic and innocent, neither helpers nor bystanders to the plight of the world. My sense of the universe is growing dimmer—the black-hearted fury, a sort of melancholy rage, is catching up to me again. It has chased me all over the Asian continent with the quickness and ferocity of a dragon. Birthed sometime before it drove me from my own country, the creature—in whatever shape it assumed back then—came during those not-entirely-random strip-searches, those uniformed officers touching my legs up-and-down and the stares of all those people, at once sympathetic yet snickering, I knew, with a ha-got-you-Al-Qaeda laughter.

When Kenneth speaks again, I can see the chewed-up meat in the back of his mouth. “So the guide today told me that he thinks reunification will happen within five or ten years.”

“Bullshit,” I say, picking up a piece of *kimchi*. I watch as it leaves a trail of red dots all the way back to my plate.

“What, mate, you think it was all just propaganda? I mean, I guess one way or another, everything’s just people trying to inflict their view of the world on you.”

The expatriates look at me. I glance at the young waiter behind the counter. He looks like our guide at the DMZ. Or the driver in Mongolia. But maybe not. I say, “I don’t know. I’m still trying to figure it out.”

Lately, I am trying to remember my life before I started traveling. I know I must have had one—it was not that long ago: the long sunny days studying the human anatomy, sprawled out with my friends on the quad at Columbia and the wonderful nights dancing with my girlfriend under disco lights. But these images have the feel of a slideshow that belongs to someone I do not know. What I do remember, in whatever scatterbrained manner my mind seems to be functioning these days, is the Belgian woman and the Portuguese man in Mongolia approaching me in the hostel and asking in a heavy accent, Do you speak English? I replied with a sudden air of arrogance, I *am* American. They laughed, and soon invited me on their five-day journey into the steppes. We rode out from the crooked thing of a street in Ulaanbaatar. Through a haze of sand and exhaust, I saw women squatting on the side of the road, eyes dark and vacant, as well as a circle of chocolate-colored men shoving a defenseless Han Chinese, pushing him, enraged, for a thousand untenable reasons. But soon, we left all of that behind. Within minutes, we were driving through a flat, empty earth running for as far as I could see until the land bent away into the horizon.

After a while, our guide, a woman of nineteen or twenty, turned around from the passenger seat, and asked me where I was from. The United States, I said. But she insisted, No,



where are you *really* from? I repeated that I was from the United States. The Belgian woman and the Portuguese man laughed. So the young guide, after she studied me up and down, touched my leg and asked me to marry her.

That night, we sat cross-legged around the fire pit in the *ger* and sipped on mugs of *airag*. I watched the Portuguese man place his hand on her knee, stroking it gently. When she told me about the summer she had spent on Long Island, I imagined him reach his hand higher up her thigh, caressing it. She said, laughing, the teenagers at the park asked if Belgium was a city and the oily sunbathers on the beach asked her why she spoke English. She raised her hand into the air, and the strings of bracelets fell down her elbow. Poor Americans, she chuckled, they don't know any better.

I find myself laughing out loud.

Kenneth looks at me, "What is it, mate? What's so funny?"

I shake my head. Nothing. Nothing is funny. Nothing and everything. The next afternoon that couple and I stood within the walls of a monastery banished to the forgotten interior of the continent. Except for a couple of temples, its grounds were bare and baked, soft and sandy like dirty flour. Three monks in gray robes nodded at us with the same sweet-strained smiles as the elderly villagers in Tibet, placid in acceptance and patience, as if they were offering us an object lesson in clarity. It is so empty here, the Portuguese man lamented. Our guide stepped toward us and said, This was the largest monastery in all of Mongolia. Ten thousand lamas lived here once, until the Soviet Union burned it to the ground. She lowered her head and walked on. The Belgian woman squinted at the cloud of dust whipped up and stirred, her Aladdin pants fluttering in the hot desert breeze.

I have to get up. I want to pace, but in the *gogigui* there is no room. I push my chair back, “I’m going to pee.”

Tony suggests, “Just wait until you get home. It’s a hole in the ground.”

“It’s called a squat toilet, man.” I feel the blood rush to my face when I move close to him, exhaling my alcohol breath on him, “We’re in A-s-i-a.” I stand up, stumble over the empty chairs at our table, almost fall down.

I remember a city somewhere in China with a half-paved, half-crumbling four-lane road lined by dull bunker-like concrete buildings. At a renovated hole-in-the-wall, one of the only air-conditioned spots in town, I sat across from a woman whose color could have been black or brown, yellow or white—I wasn’t sure. She laughed when I asked her about her ethnicity, tossing her dark curly hair backward. Maybe I’m purple. Maybe I’m orange. She said, I’m from Ottawa. She squinted at me, judging. You have no idea where it is. You must be an American. I laughed. Touché.

I listened to her stories, from living in the Sacromonte caves in Granada and hitchhiking through Iran in a hijab. Everyone tried to convert me! She cried, flinging her arms. They called me a soulless woman! But how can we—she asked—how can anyone, especially those of us who travel as much as we do, ever believe in one organized religion? Buddha or Confucius; God or Allah. Who the fuck cares? Maybe I believe in magic carpets, blue aliens. For fuck’s sake, maybe I believe in Dorothy and Toto and the Wicked Witch of the West!

Four travelers soon sat down with us and when they asked us where we were from, I shouted, proud and patriotic, America! She laughed, I’m from Canada. Yes, America! I added, aiming my thumb at her, but she’s orange and I’m purple. Laughing, she almost hit her forehead on the table. I swelled with warmth, the alcohol filtering through the veins in my body. For a

moment it felt as if we had known each other for a long time and, often that night and in the nights since, I tend to forget the truth: I'd only known her for a couple of hours.

When the four travelers left and it was just the two of us again, I asked the Canadian if she wanted to stay for another drink. What are we going to do? She replied with a curious grin crawling up a side of her face, Share our troubles and sadnesses? She told me that she would see me in another life, and she crossed the street with a wave over her shoulder. In truth, I saw her again the next day, far away down the street. I dodged into the souvenir shop and watched her bouncy gait pass by. In another life I might have married her. We might have stayed, somewhere, and built a life.

When I come out of the bathroom and make my way back to our table, I feel the owner of the *gogigui* watching me, judging, as if she knows I forgot to wash my hands. I turn. I wink at her. She growls.

I pull the chair out and study the expats. I want to punch out Tony's dull expression and Kenneth's wanton eyes. What a strange collection of foreigners here at the end of the peninsula! I ask them, "What did I miss?"

"Nothing, mate. Tony was just muttering about whether they should build a mosque."

"I'm not muttering," he nods toward the television box in the corner. "It's on the news."

Behind the reporter I see photographs that can be anywhere: Caucasian and Mexican men in hard yellow hats and neon orange vests standing among concrete blocks and metal cranes, either demolishing the buildings or erecting them. But it is not just anywhere. I have walked past it a hundred times; these were the only times in college when I considered calling my parents—but I never did, for the memory of our weekend trip to the city passed too swiftly. I was around ten back then, and it was the only time I had ever seen the towers before they were

erased from the world. I had thought nothing of them, really, but I was mesmerized by the view from the observation deck. While my parents spied on about freedom and opportunity, I was trying to dissect the anatomy of the Lego-like skyscrapers somehow pieced together, and to understand the toy cars and plastic people moving beneath us.

In the images on the television, people in suits in the background are caught in mid-motion, half-blurred, with coffee cups in their hands, all of them unaware of the camera—unaware of Ground Zero, of terrorists and deaths and fighting, of everlasting war. I look away. “I didn’t even know there was a TV here,” I say, taking another gulp of *soju*.

“Whatever, I’m just telling you guys that there’s a debate going on in the U.S. now. You know, it wouldn’t hurt to keep up with the news once in a while.”

Kenneth shrugs, ignoring Tony. So I say, “There’s always a debate in the U.S., man.”

Kenneth chuckles, “Haven’t you been arguing about the right to bear arms since 1776?”

“Hey,” Tony grunts, glaring at Kenneth, “at least we’re not riding kangaroos and shooting boomerangs.”

“Ha! And he has a sense of humor!” Kenneth pats Tony on the back, a little too violently. “But, mate, I think that says more about Americans than Australians! Waitress! Another Coca-Cola for my American friend!”

I glance around the *gogigui*. It has emptied out since I last noticed it. One of the tables is occupied by businessmen, their cheeks flushed pink, and another by a mother and her teenage son. The empty seats around them are haunting like lotus leaves without Buddhas.

When we finally reached the DMZ this morning, the tour guide told us in a practiced sigh and melancholy that he had never met his uncles or grandfather or cousins. Staring across four kilometers of fenced-off, overgrown scrubland in a theatrical sentimentality that almost made me

gag, the guide said he grew up falling asleep to the sound of his grandmother's wheezing sobs. On that cold early afternoon, we watched North Korean soldiers march along their side of the wilderness, silently pacing, patiently waiting. They look just like us, the guide said. They're our brothers and our sons and our fathers. He nodded at the meshed fence, Sometimes we leave messages here for our families in the North.

I felt a sudden urge to be alone, here, in the depressing cool mist, so I waited for the tour group to depart. I watched, impatient and disgusted, the American family snapping pictures and, as they walked toward the bus, arguing and wailing about whether to spend their evening at the pool or at the movies. I noticed soon that the woman in the red Aladdin pants was lingering too; I thought that perhaps we were wondering the same thing: what if—just what if—North Korea's the one that got it right, shutting itself off from the rest of the world like that.

There had been a baseball player at my college, a well-loved pre-law student, who had caused a stir when he vanished from Columbia at the start of the semester. We talked about his disappearance for days, speculated, scoured the news and the Internet, until most people realized that they didn't actually care; they just liked the drama of it. Maybe, I thought, maybe that was where he disappeared to—North Korea. One place in this world you would never be found.

But before I could think of anything to say to the woman, she flashed me a grin and walked away. The bus was honking.

It is time to go. I finish the last gulp of *soju*. "Yo, I'll see you guys tomorrow."

"Already?" Kenneth asks, "You don't want to stay a bit longer?"

"No, man. I'm done. Peace," I push the chair back and stand up.

It is time to go, my father called up the stairs. He was dressed in a black suit and a British top-hat he always insisted on wearing in public. From my bedroom I could hear the

engine running in the driveway, and my brother changing the music every few seconds, but my mother was not ready yet—she was still yelling at me about filial piety, about the repercussions of failed familial obligations. I was a junior in high school then, and I was beginning to discover the terrible inadequacies of my immigrant parents. Their thick accents became for me an unforgivable source of humiliation, and their drinking of tea and singing of *bhajans* were aspects of my life I was learning to hide from my friends. My mother swung her arms in the air, the gold bangles clinking against each other. She yells, Your grandfather is going back to India! It is our duty to drive him to the airport! I tell you you can miss school and you say no! In my bed, I rolled over. She was still shouting, I tell your grandfather you are too busy running around chasing after a soccer ball! Ay, ungrateful child! The horn honked. She lifted up her purple sari and hurried out of my room. She shouted downstairs to my father, Coming! Coming!

A couple of hours later, I was sitting in biology class when my teacher rolled in a television set and turned on the news. None of us whispered a word; none of us moved. Behind the reporter, I watched the second plane from our city vanish soundlessly into the tower.

And then everyone went shit-fuck crazy.

As I head down the quiet and empty street, the cold of the ocean breeze slowly sober me up. The sky is clear and dark, and I find myself suddenly awake, studying the Korean neighborhood as I first saw it in all of its sharpness and clarity: the silhouette of the layered stone tiles on the traditional roofs, blue-gray against the crescent yellow moon, scattered among the bleach-white blocks of modern houses. On both sides of the road, cars, bicycles, and mopeds idle for the night. I walk away from the only streetlamp in town in the direction of my apartment where I have been sleeping on a box-spring on the floor. Maybe it is time to go again.

On nights like this, I often feel nostalgic—for what, exactly, I do not know. And sometimes I like to imagine walking past Tony in a crowded avenue in some American city, years from now, his palm wrapped around a fucking Coca-Cola can, catching his leaden eyes and nodding in an almost imperceptible nod, until a moment later, after both of us have conjured up the same image of big-mouthed Kenneth drinking away in a Korean town, we continue down our separate ways.

I stop in the window of a house. I almost never do this, but tonight I cannot help it. The light is still on. Behind the fluttering curtain someone moves, two people, it seems like—a husband and a wife. I catch glimpses of leather couches with butt-shaped depressions, a coffee table splayed with open magazines and stained cups, and slanting rows of picture frames on the spruce lid of a piano I just know belongs to their great-grandmother. I am half-expecting to see my mother dragging us boys upstairs, grabbing our soccer balls and threatening never to return them. But, it turns out, it is just a slightly older man in pajamas, turning off the light.

At the train station today, at the last stop of the tour, there was an elderly man dressed in black, a British top-hat over whiskers of his white hair. His face was so wrinkled and pale like a crunched-up paper that I could barely make out his ethnicity—though I figured that he must be Korean. I sat down three or four seats away from him, taking glances at him out of the corner of my eyes. He held his face stern, his lips tight, his eyes fixed on the trains on the rail. There was something about him that reminded me of the man I met in Laos. His wife, a mid-aged woman, smiled the sad, tired smile of life slowly seeping away. Look at this, she told me. She pushed back her sleeves and held out her forearm and showed me the hand-woven bracelets she had gathered from each country. She sighed, I should have done this a long time ago. The man placed his hand on hers, and glared at me with the gravity and expectation of a father. Let me

tell you something. It is going to be young travelers like you, he said, pointing his trembling hand at me, who are going to have to save the world.

The train station was almost empty, except for the few American troops and the paying tourists. The woman in red Aladdin pants sat down too, across from me. She was exhausted, teary-eyed, her elbows resting on her knees. I tried to think of what to say, how to break the silence and let her know that I knew her sadness too. But I said nothing. There was so much to understand, so little we actually understood. The two of us, I think, were staring at the trains parked there on the tracks, according to the guide, since the 1950s. There was only one destination displayed on the signs: Pyongyang. It occurred to me that I had never seen a station so quiet, so lacking in commotion and hassle and motion. So still. So terribly sterile.

Our group slowly drifted toward the bus—it was time to go again. But the woman across from me did not move either, so I sat for a little bit longer. I glanced at the Korean man in the top hat again, his back straight like a ruler, his posture patient and military-like, his hands folded in his lap. They said one day the train was going to start again. And I could only imagine that perhaps the man was waiting for the train to take him home. Maybe that is all we are doing, each in our own ways, waiting—waiting for the war to end.



*Un Lumbre de Verdad; Or, Portraits of Puerto Cortes*

*“No entiendo numero cuatro! Ayudame, por favor!”*

*“Ayyeeee, Onan! Estupido!”*

Twenty or so students burst into laughter in the chamber-like classroom, their cackle echoing, bouncing from one chipping wall to the other. Behind the teacher’s desk, Megan wiped her palms on her jeans. She kept her eyes fixed on the abandoned church she could see beyond the metal bars on the windows—arsoned, rumor had it, almost a decade ago—because she knew that Onan was trying to catch her glance, trying to wink at her.

*“Es Tang Dynasty! Que estupido, Onan!”*

None of the students, except for Allyson, knew that Megan understood basic Spanish. She knew that Onan had just asked the class for an answer on the exam, but Megan said nothing. It seemed like a small price to pay to allow the students to speak freely in front of her. In this way, Megan was privy to pieces of the otherwise cryptic lives of the Honduran society. It gave life to the place, some sort of a narrative despite its fragmented form, and she enjoyed having this power over the students—that she was getting something from them without their knowledge—in a way she couldn’t quite articulate.

The cheating had shocked her at first. It wasn’t just the cheating that bothered her, though, but the theatrical wide-eyed innocence these high school seniors performed when she used to confront them. But what could she do? The principal had shrugged because she had no proof. And then it got worse: the boys had begun to welcome her crusade as some sort of a sexual challenge, a form of adolescent male-bonding in mass flirting—because Megan was young, pretty, white. One morning, Onan had written answers on an eraser and passed it around the classroom. The boys could barely hold their laughter in, all of their bodies trembling,

practically gagging on their smirks. At some point—she did not remember when—Megan had stopped indulging in their running tease. Still, it hurt her; it had the feel that what she was doing here did not matter.

“Miss, can you just pass me, *por favor?*” Onan’s voice was deep and beautiful; it wheezed through his shaped lips with the breath of a whisper. This had become disconcertingly sexy when she noticed that his eyes glowed with a midnight blue and a skin tone that was paler than the other students. It had aroused her curiosity, but since the New Year’s incident with Alejandra, a seventh-grader, Megan had learned not to ask certain questions here. “Ay, Miss, you’re leaving anyway, no?”

“You’ll pass,” Megan replied carefully, trying not to smile, “if you pass.”

In the back corner of the room, Allyson lifted her head slightly and peeked through the thick hair she had professionally straightened in San Pedro Sula every couple of weeks. The girl grinned. She lowered her head again and resumed writing.

Today was going to a porch day, Megan thought, and she was going to drink herself stupid. In the afternoons when she did not feel like riding the bike to the beach, Megan would sit on the cool tiles in front of the cheap concrete house the school provided for foreign teachers. In her first couple of weeks in Puerto Cortes, she had shared the jungly yard with a stumpy man with frosts of gray in his greasy hair, draped always in the same soil-smeared, oversized uniform. He used to stand under the coconut tree, a toy-like gun slung over his shoulder. Megan eventually told the school that she did not need a guard—the padlocked gate was enough. In Paraguay, where she served for a few months as a PeaceCorps volunteer, her bungalow didn’t even have what she would consider a door.

When the bell rang for recess, the students tossed their exams on the table and fled from the classroom as hurriedly as the army of ants on her floor when she turned on her lights at night. To her delight, though, Allyson was still there, walking towards her with her paper.

“Ay, Miss, this was difficult,” the girl said.

“Did you study more after you left?”

“Of course, Miss. But why do we need to learn about Chinese history anyway?”

Megan chuckled. Good question. It was one of those things she tried not to think about here: how the school justified using American middle school textbooks dated in the early 1990s.

“Hey, is it my turn yet?”

The girl smiled, “*Si*, I got 25 points for ‘boxer.’ Triple points on the ‘B’”

My gosh, this girl is really something. Megan glanced at Allyson, a big-boned *latina* with the bearing of a queen. The girl placed her hand on Megan’s shoulder in a gesture that managed to seem both casual and intimate. She pleaded, “Miss, can you grade it now? I need 83 points!”

Megan chuckled, for it had become a running joke between them. “I know you do. If you’d gotten a better grade on the first test... 17 points! It’s worse than your score in Scrabble.”

“Ay, Miss! It was before I liked you!” Her laughter was loud and abundant. Allyson had a warmth, a kind of self-humor Megan adored. “At least I didn’t cheat, right? Can you pass me for not cheating?”

Megan grinned. No, she did not cheat. And it was little victories like this that sometimes made her feel close to something real.

That afternoon, she counted four empty bottles on the front porch by the time the mosquitos came out from the shades. At first, she was convinced that the habit had started

because of the daily grind with the students. It had taken her a while to finally admit that it was because she had nothing else to do: most of the teachers worked afternoon jobs and the only other American in town, Nicole, was a mother of three. Sometimes, Megan found herself missing the company of the guard—though the two of them used to co-exist in silence, there was some sort of a camaraderie in the mutual understanding of an awesome loneliness.

In the past couple of weeks, though, Megan had grown to like these afternoons by herself. She came to adore the cheese-colored auto-shop across the street, and she was intrigued by the boys who rode on the crossbars of rusting bikes. She counted the yellow school buses that groaned past her, still half-believing that one day she would recognize a name from Oklahoma printed across the vehicle. When the slender Garifuna women came by with their boys in tow, Megan bought a bag of *coco de pan*, even though she knew there were already three or four unopened bags in the fridge. But she also knew that before Allyson, sometimes this had felt like the most constructive thing she did all day.

\*

Alejandra Benavides. Thirteen years old. Her oval-face and anime-sized eyes give her an endearing look that promised, already, an easy womanhood. Yet, according to the students, her absence from school in the days after New Year's is a ritual, as routine as the fireworks in town square. She writes English papers about a fantasy she falls asleep to every night: somewhere in the United States, a limousine driver pulls the vehicle up to a gated estate and she sprints into her Papi's solid embrace. But what most people whisper behind her back—what most people believe—is that her Papi probably lives in the cramped closet of some squalid basement and labors for a despicable white man.

Before her father was kidnapped and ransomed, rumor has it, the Benavides had owned the an entire slope of a hill at the fringe of town. Within a couple of days of the exchange, though, the family had sold all of its properties for the coyotes who guaranteed him a safe passage north, smuggled him across the border.

That was New Year's Eve five years ago. Her friends report that her Papi does not call anymore. But no one can say for certain why she does not come to school after New Year's.

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*Tough luck*, her foster mother had said when Megan crossed into Honduras with fifty-five bucks left in her bank account. *Find your own way home*. Megan was not surprised. Her foster mother's tough love was her mantra and livelihood; it was what had steered that overdosed teenage girl back from a certain path toward self-destruction. For a few days, Megan had lived in a squalor hostel in Tegucigalpa, panic-stricken. As she wandered the streets for a job during the day and searched the Internet at night, she wondered if the karma of her messed-up teens had finally caught up to her. It seemed fitting that she should have to spend a few years in a place ridden with gang warlords and drug traffickers, a classic Third-World basket case with the highest murder rate in the world.

"My God, is this really happening?"

Megan was sitting on the couch in the living room, her legs propped on the plastic chair in front of her, staring at a small television box that reminded her of the psych ward and quietly sipping on bottles of *Salva Vida*. She had turned the news on mute. She liked the sedative effects of watching the reporters' lips stretch in infinite shapes. Most of her attention was on the laptop on her thigh opened to the Scrabble page, a half-serious game Megan indulged in if only to see what Allyson could come up with.

“What’s up?” Megan asked without looking up.

At the kitchen table, Nicole scratched her red pen angrily against the pile of papers before her. “Ten lines! Ten lines in a paragraph and no punctuations! A one-sentence paragraph!”

“Are those the senior essays?”

“Yeah. You’d think, after twelve years in a bilingual school, they’d stop writing one-sentence paragraphs!”

“Huh,” Megan said, her eyes fixed on the television, chuckling. “The federal budget is about to collapse. Seriously? The US government’s going to shut down. Like that’s ever going to happen.”

Nicole slammed her pen on the table and exhaled, heavy with the half of a decade she had already spent as a foreign teacher in this town. “What has this world come to?”

Megan took another sip of beer. She knew Nicole did not care about news from home, and neither did she until a month ago when she booked her flight. She had started to turn on CNN because she knew that after almost three years in the armpits of the New World, her American reference had turned to mush. She was not sure she could go back and live with any semblance of normalcy—what did that even mean? But hard as she tried, Megan couldn’t bring herself to care about the U.S. post-office shutting down while she lived in a Central American hellhole, such a hopeless place that even the NGOs avoided. It was strange to think about public servants leaving federal prisons to waste away, unemployed, on their couches when her favorite student had spent the better part of her eighteen years driven around in a bullet-proof SUV out of necessity.

In the corner of the house, the fan clicked to a stop. The television screen flashed, first silver then blue then black. The lights flickered out.

“Of course,” Nicole said. “When else would it go out other than when I have to grade?”

Nicole reached for the lighter and lit the candles on the table, the routine as practiced as washing dishes after a meal.

Megan pulled her plastic chair to sit down across from Nicole. She could feel the warmth of the candles. Slowly, a drop of sweat congealed on her forehead and traced down her cheek.

“Hey,” Megan asked, “How’s Allyson doing in your class?”

“Ha! She doesn’t even care enough to cheat, that girl! She needs an ‘A’ on the final to pass.”

“Do you think she will? Pass?”

“If she studies. She knows me well enough by now to know that I’ll fail her ass. Then she’ll have hell to pay with her family. Ha! Imagine, the first Guzman that’s supposed to graduate since they opened the school, pretty much just for her and her sisters. She’ll have *hell* to pay. But someone’s got to teach her a lesson, right? Not everything in this world is going to be handed to her just because she’s a Guzman.”

“She’ll study,” Megan said.

“She should’ve been held back at least twice already.”

Megan wondered if the girl would call tonight. Two or three times a week, the two of them would sit by the fence between their houses and talk, mostly about nothing, but the routine had become her favorite thing to do in Honduras. It had started one late afternoon about a month ago just as Megan was about to pick up the empties and head indoors, when quarreling voices came screaming from the Guzman compound next door. Megan had heard enough rumors about the Guzmans to be curious, so she stood on the porch and lit a cigarette, listening, trying in vain to decipher the words. A small voice soon came from beyond the fence—*Miss?* The quiet,

choked whisper belied the girl's big-laughter persona at school; it was just enough to touch her. Maybe it spoke to some basic goodness here in Honduras, Megan wasn't sure.

Under a full moon where shadows danced beneath the branches, Megan watched the streak of tears dissolve slowly into the girl's cheeks. That night, Megan had found out about the clubs that these under-aged students frequented; she had learned about Onan's Caucasian father from Texas, how the boy had tracked him all the way to Houston only to find a man already with three small children and an irrational temper. Sure, it had seemed curious that Allyson did not talk about the shrieking in the house or the shattering of glasses, but it felt as if the girl was welcoming her to the country.

Over time, their relationship blossomed into chats at night and a virtual Scrabble match. As exam week approached, Allyson had asked Megan to study with her. Megan hesitated about the implications of helping a student study for her own test. But how could she refuse help if the girl actually asked for it? Finally, with the girl, she was beginning to feel the sense of purpose that had evaded her in her short service in the Corps. Many of the volunteers she had met in and out of town gave up their hopeless causes for pleasure, taking the tax-free money to indulge in expensive expatriate meals, the most luxurious hotels—to take the two unaccountable years traveling in South America. Megan, on the other hand, delved into some kind of a depression at the realization that the work she was supposedly doing there was futile: she was just plowing the fields side-by-side with the farmers, a show of camaraderie that seemed pitying and degrading at best. She had left her post, dismayed. This, though, was it. Allyson was giving her an opportunity to make a difference, a second-chance to do something worthy.

“Identical papers!” Nicole wailed again, “Two of them handed in the exact same papers!”

Megan laughed, “Who was it?”



“They weren’t even smart enough to hand them in separately. They placed them right on top of the other. You know,” she said as she scratched a big red “X” across the paper, “They complain so much about government corruption here, right? And here, they’re doing the same thing. This is where it starts, right here, the breeding ground for what’s wrong with their country.”

Megan chuckled again, half-teasing, “The country’s already ruined.”

“So these are the brats we’re sending out to lead their country. What the heck are the teachers or the principal doing, right? As long as the Guzmans have their beach house, who gives a rat’s ass about education? It’s just you and me, here, fighting the good fight, helping a country that’s eating itself from the inside out.”

Megan had heard it all before, and she had yet to figure out how to respond for the conviction in Nicole’s voice left little room for opinion. And Nicole could spiel like that for hours, an elevated preach that sometimes sounded like the president’s call to action. But, as she got to know Nicole, Megan suspected that part of the mid-aged woman’s fight for education was inspired by her oldest son’s uncertain future—one year away from graduation, and with neither money nor resources back in the States.

“You heard they’re putting in a pool? The Guzmans?”

“Kind of wish I’d be around to use it.”

“What?”

“Nothing.” Changing the subject, she asked, “Hey, how’s Jorge’s citizenship coming?”

“Ugh. Is it ever coming? I can barely pay for my kids’ food on our salary, how can I afford to go to Teguce *and* pay the \$300 application fee? It’s not like we’re married or anything. Or have an American daughter together.”

Megan took another sip of beer and looked around the spartan house. She wondered what she would leave here, and what the new foreigners might deduce about her from her books and her clothes, just as she had tried to unravel the mysterious personas of the countless travelers that had lived here temporarily, coming through Puerto Cortes for one reason or the other.

\*

Nick Fletcher. Seventeen-years-old. Not only does he stand out as the tallest, lankiest kid in school, but Nick is white, as pale as freshly fallen snow. Five years ago, he should have fought his mother when she decided to move them—him and his brother and stepsister—from a backwater town in Michigan to some God-forsaken place in Honduras because his Honduran stepfather was about to be deported. But she promised it would be temporary, and he was too young to know any better. Now, on a Wednesday night, he sits in front of the television with his younger siblings.

The beautiful girl from his class asked him to study for the chemistry final, but his mother shook her head. *It's too dangerous*, she said. She still will not let him leave the house at night. Then, she mentioned she had a meeting at school, but he knows that she went to the local bar with his unemployed, alcoholic stepfather, drinking away the money that runs dry at the end of every month. So, he watches Latino soap operas with his brother and stepsister he is always burdened to take care of.

When his stepsister holds her hand out for the last piece of cookie, he gives it to her. Soon, he will have to put them to bed before his parents stumble home. He tells the beautiful girl he would rather study at home.

\*

By the time Megan reached the teacher's lounge, the Honduran teachers were already gathered around the table, hands linked, heads bowed. The physics teacher, a balding man who somehow maintained the sculpted shoulders of a former wrestler, had the Bible open in front of him and recited in a rapid *español* that always made Megan queasy.

On the couch beside the wall, Nicole was brushing her lashes with mascara. She lit up when Megan walked toward her and said, "Happy last day of school!" Then, Nicole nodded toward the door, "Uh, Meg? I'm pretty sure she's not here for me."

Allyson was standing outside, gently tapping the glass and waving Megan over.

"Miss," the girl said with a wide smile when Megan came out to the empty school yard. "I have something for you." Allyson picked up a bundle of navy blue and dark yellow hammock and held it out towards her. "You said you wanted a hammock from Honduras, no?"

Thank goodness for a girl like her. Megan wanted to cry; she wanted to melt. Megan wanted to tell Allyson that she did not belong to this place; that she deserved a better life. What Megan wanted—what she fantasized about—was to rescue the girl. But before she knew what to say beyond *muchas gracias*, the principal, a portly woman with a helmet-haircut and glasses on her rotund face, came out of the office. "*Venga, Allyson. Va a clase!*" Her voice was low and husky, powerful.

Allyson smiled, "Good-bye, Miss! Thank you!"

Back in the teachers' lounge, Nicole flipped her hand-held mirror shut. The Honduran teachers chanted *Amen*. Megan cuddled the hammock in her arms and carefully placed it on the couch beside Nicole.

"What's that?" Nicole asked. "I thought you said you couldn't afford it."

"A thank-you gift from Allyson. It's pretty, huh?"

“It’s one of the better ones.”

“So, how did Allyson do on your exam?”

“Ha! How do you *think* she did? I gotta go into a meeting. Frankly, Megan,” Nicole said as she grabbed her shoulder bag and stood up, “I’m not sure what you see in that girl.”

Megan spent the next hour cleaning out her cabinet and eating in the empty *cantina*. She stared at the sunbaked *gancha*, a sad sandlot fringed by wisps of yellow grass and enclosed by slanted, rickety fences. In her first couple of weeks here, in an absurd moment of inspiration, Megan had tried to carve out a corner of the dying *gancha* and to recreate a small island of beauty. She had put together a small “green” club of elementary school children, and had worked with them to plant a garden she had half-seriously thought she would name after herself. But over time, the children gave up and the garden never bloomed. The makeshift poles now lay half-buried, trampled on by the boys’ *futbol* games. The dark-colored soil she had bought was already covered in splotches of blond sand, and what sprouts of green had peaked through were brown and dead.

Megan was trying to figure out how she would explain this place to her friends at home when she carried a stack of student files into the office. The barrack-like waiting room was already crowded with a few voluptuous Honduran mothers, but none of the women showed her any interest, not like they had done when she first came to town. *I’m still here*, she wanted to say. Not even Allyson, who Megan soon noticed was sitting in a chair, her thick legs crossed, her head buried behind her hair, raised her eyes enough to notice her. Megan had counted the days since Allyson last came by the fence—exactly a week ago, when she had helped the girl study for the exam on China.

“Oh please, this is about doing what’s right, *nada mas!*” From the principal’s office not a few feet away came the unmistakable projection of Nicole’s husky voice. Megan inched herself past the Honduran mothers, whose chatter Megan now believed to be a façade. There were a few large men with pot bellies and thick greasy hair; their presence made even more imposing by their ominous black suits that felt more out of place than Megan’s brunette hair and white skin. What, exactly, did these men do and who the heck were they? They men most certainly had enough money to get out of the country, but they had chosen to stay and Megan could not understand why. Life here, Megan knew, was strange; it functioned under some sort of a broken logic, cracked and absurd like a shattered mirror. It had taken Megan a while to realize that Puerto Cortes had its own internal rules that shifted as soon as you get close to figuring it out.

Megan shivered. So, she thought now, Allyson had failed English. It was all Megan could do to repress the desire to wrap an arm around the girl and take her away. But maybe Allyson deserved to suffer the humiliation to have to repeat her senior year. Maybe then, only then, would she learn about responsibility and education.

Before Megan could force herself to walk away, the well-dressed Honduran men marched out of the room. Their intense swagger and pace exhumed the chill and rage of men with too much power that the simple force of the air around them pushed Megan against the wall. “*Vamos, hija!*” One of them shouted in a deep, potent voice—and it brought out the fear in Allyson’s eyes. The girl immediately complied as she trailed them out of the school, disappearing among the suits, swallowed and carried away like a powerless twig in the white-foam current of a great river.

\*

Victoria Guzman. Thirty-nine-years-old. Her notoriety is an air that follows her name around Puerto Cortes for the spectacle she caused almost a decade ago. Not only did she win the affection of Manuel Guzman as a stunning twenty-year-old, but a few years into her presumed joyless married life, she found herself on the run with a beach-comber from the shanty, unpaved part of town. The Guzman' security tracked her down, three months later, in the Cayos Cochinos and she came back to her young daughter and wrathful husband. No one seems to know what happened to the beach-comber, or remember what his name was.

Since then, Victoria makes little public appearance except for news-worthy events that demand the couple to hold hands and smile in public. Rumor has it that a security guard watches over Victoria almost every weekend, while Manuel flirts with women at the bar and takes them to a beach hotel at night.

\*

Megan watched the cab sputter away, and found herself alone in the middle of the street along the Coca-Cola Beach. Across the water were blurry splotches of lights where the port, she had heard, served as the entryway to the illegal arms and drugs smuggled into Puerto Cortes each night. Except for the haunting whisper of the ocean breeze, the beach was silent. She felt the creep of violence lurching in the shadows crawl upon her skin.

For a second, Megan was blinded by the powerful beam as it swung in her direction. She almost jumped when the gate behind her hummed, and a SUV pulled in front of it. She followed the vehicle into the beach house, where, immediately, the blasting music and disco lights embraced her. The gate closed, and here she was, in a house with silver table clothes and velvet couches and bartenders and a pool—a house that exhaled affluence, a flair of unfettered privilege.

Megan slid into the seat across from Nicole and her husband, Jorge. Even in the dark, she could see that his eyes were already bloodshot and his cheeks were burning pink. He said, “How you doing, Megan?”

“Good.”

Jorge asked again, “How’s the packing going? You finish?”

“Almost.”

For a while, none of them talked. Megan stared at Nicole, who refused to meet her eyes. Jorge shrugged, cracked a crab leg, splashing the juice onto Nicole’s low-cut dress.

“So,” Megan finally said, “What are we doing here, at Allyson’s graduation party?”

“Celebrating,” Nicole replied as-a-matter-of-factly, “You see, out here, it’s a big deal when a Guzman girl graduates.”

“Cut it out.”

Nicole took a bite of ceviche. “You wanted her to graduate.”

“Not like this, you know that.”

“You’re leaving tomorrow, aren’t you?” Nicole grabbed her margarita glass and tilted it all the way back. “I’m going to get another drink.”

Nicole pushed back her plastic chair and stood up. Her red dress hugged her body and breasts firmly, revealing curves Megan had never noticed. The back of the dress dragged on the cement ground as Nicole strolled to the bar.

“Is that a new dress?” Megan asked.

Jorge grinned, his eyes half-closed, “We bought it in Teguce. Beautiful, *no?*”

“It looks expensive.”

The music suddenly picked up speed, the bass pulsating like the chaotic heartbeats of a corrupted soul. Under the disembodied disco lights on the dance floor, Megan could not make out a single student in the sweating, seething bulk of humanity hopping, frenzied, up-and-down. Megan felt dizzy, fuzzy, as if the whole celebration had an edge to it, a nervous undertone piercing her body like keys scratching back-and-forth, defiling their own cars.

The lights flashed blue and green, and when Nicole returned Megan saw that there was something off about the way her pale skin was smooth, completely free of wrinkles. Plastic surgery? Megan shivered. How had she not noticed it before?

It was not until Nicole reached the table that Megan realized the principal stood beside her. Nicole said, “Megan, Miss Diana wants to say thank you.”

Miss Diana spoke loudly in a rapid Spanish that Megan could not catch on over the noise. Nicole translated, “She said she wish you a safe trip home.”

“*Y muchas gracias,*” Miss Diana embraced Megan’s hand with both of her fat palms, and pulled her lips, caked in bright red lipsticks, apart to reveal her perfectly straight teeth.

“Of course. Thank you for having me here,” Megan smiled.

After Miss Diana walked back to her seat among the men in suits, Megan thought she was beginning to put it together. “So,” she asked Nicole, “What happened?”

“What do you mean?”

“Where’d you suddenly get the money to go to Teguce?”

Nicole shrugged, and took another sip from her glass. Finally, she said, “You know, maybe what I’ve figured out here is that we’ve gotta be selfish, like everyone else, take what belongs to you, when you can. It’s a fucked up country. Maybe there’s no room here for the greater good. Maybe the kids are doomed anyway.”



“It’s not right.”

“I tried to do the right thing, I really did.”

Megan said, “I know she studied. I *know*. The girls’ good in English. She’s smart.”

“You don’t know anything.”

“*You* don’t know who you’re hurting.”

“And you do, Meg? Please, I’ve seen the likes of you come and go. Five years, I’ve *tried*. What about you?” Nicole glanced down at her table, “You got your hammock, Megan, you can go too.”

The thunderous squeal as the plastic chair grinded against the cement marked the end of their alliance. Nicole lifted a spoonful of ceviche to her mouth. As she walked away, Megan thought about the way the girl’s hand had clung to the fence at night and the faded finger marks imprinted on her forearm made even more haunting by the moonlight.

In her mind, she walked up to the principal and the men in suits. She used the old argument of justice and honesty she had tried almost six months ago on the students; she pleaded them to stand up for what was right, for the education of a young woman. But this was not what she did. Megan reminded herself that Miss Diana did not speak English. And for all she knew the principal too had committed the sin of complicity just like everyone else. How could she expose the scheme of corruption if everyone here knew about it? To whom was she supposed to reveal such a heinous crime?

Megan caught a glimpse of Allyson among her friends, dashed in the radiance of her yellow dress, with the appeal of a high-class Honduran woman, gorgeous and self-assured. Megan wanted to ask the girl if she had studied—maybe it didn’t matter, but it mattered to Megan—but she understood then, as Allyson slowly turned towards her, that whatever she

answered wouldn't be the truth. In the center of the dance floor, Allyson, twirling and laughing, was fulfilling her duty to be beautiful to a rich family in a country ravaged by violence and poverty. Perhaps, she was a girl raised to live inside her gated beach house, to a society that shut its eyes to the realities of what went on outside.

Before Allyson's eyes fell on her, Megan moved behind a waitress. She felt hot and heavy, the heat from the dancing bodies pressing down on her lungs. None of it made sense to her, this life—it was all as if she had existed in the last six months on a constant high, some sort of a disjointed dream, its logic and rules fractured; or maybe it was her, maybe something was wrong with her. Turning, she bumped into someone. His chest was sweating and heaving. He squeezed her forearm. *Ay, Miss Megan!* The familiar breathe of voice from Onan made her jump. *Want to dance?* Her cheeks flushed. Her stomach burned. With the back of her hand, she wiped her forehead. Then she called her cab and walked away.

\*

Onan Lanzas. Eighteen-years-old. The man the teenage boy considers his father stands before him at his birthday party with a rectangular box in his hands. "Open it later," his *tio* says, patting him on the arm, "in your own room, *mijo*. A grown man must protect himself and his family, *verdad?*" Onan nods; he knows. He is already a man built of muscle and speed, for he spends his afternoons sprinting on the beach and lifting in the gym. Yet, he detects a glimmer of worry in his uncle's eyes, that slightly downward tilt of his face that never ceases to acknowledge the boy's half-white skin, his set of bright blue eyes.

The teenage boy waits for the crowd to disperse from his house and retreats to his room.

He opens the box: a handgun.

\*

*Cuadra Avenida* was the last paved street in town before rows of dirt roads took over, before the fenced gardens gave way to metal sheet houses. In the corner of her block, where Megan turned her squeaky bike onto the unpaved street, three men idled. As always, they whistled when Megan passed by, “*Gringa!* Teacher! Beautiful lady!”

She pedaled past a dark-skinned woman twirling tortillas and skinny Garifuna boys in torn t-shirts kicking deflated soccer balls. For a moment she wondered how many of them dreamed of playing in sold-out stadiums. Then, through the swirl of dust flung up around her, Megan saw the parched landscape unveil to her, as it always did, her jewel, her beloved secret, glittering in the distance. She bumped off of the dirt roads and onto the silver shore. After she locked her bicycle to the trunk of a tree, she felt the sand sink beneath her flip-flops with each step she took. Soon, she stood alone on that long stretch of beach. She felt on her skin the soft kiss of the sun, and breathed in the salty Caribbean breeze that ran like melted chocolate down her throat. She was going to miss this, she thought, the waves in a constant fight against each other, and the sliver of lost sandals and plastic bags where the high-tide broke.

A couple of hours later, Megan left her bike in front of her house. She grabbed her backpack and trekked down the street, the bundle of hammock locked in one arm.

Up until the minute the yellow school bus came wobbling up to her, Megan held onto the hope that Allyson would show up, surprise her, and send her off. It made little sense, she knew, for Allyson didn’t even know when she was leaving—the girl hadn’t asked. It occurred to Megan that when Allyson had waved her goodbye in the schoolyard, she had been saying goodbye forever.

As the bus started away, Megan leaned her forehead against the tinted window. Here she was again, she thought, leaving, walking away the same way she had walked away from the Corps. What happened to her? How much had she changed since she first flew to Paraguay, an eager-eyed idealist, heeding to the call of the greater good, with promises and dreams of changing the world? She plugged in her headphones as the bus drove past the railroad abandoned decades ago by the United Fruit Company from which Megan used to watch naked children jump each afternoon into the lagoon of sewage and waste. She watched the port town disappear: the barefoot women at the market, the mountain girls with stacks of tortillas, the sweaty men with machetes over their shoulders—completely indifferent to her passing. She pulled the bundle of hammock closer to her, clutching at it, cradling it like a dream already fading from memory. And just like that, Puerto Cortes was gone.

\*

Megan Shelley. Thirty-five. She slides open the backdoor of her minivan, and helps her little girl with an absent-minded grin climb out of the car. As the two of them head toward the school gymnasium, a pale chubby hand wrapped in her larger palm, she is not sure which one of them is more nervous: the little girl who attends her first dance or the mother who lets her go.

In the partially dimmed gymnasium, she waves to the other mothers, grinning, beaming with pride at how far she has come: to a well-off San Diego suburb and a beautiful family. She asks the Mexican caterer for Coca-Cola. She watches her oldest daughter sway shyly to the music in a bright yellow dress, and for a moment she freezes, the can of Coca-Cola hovering just before her lips. There is an image slowly shaping in her mind, a déjà vu she struggles to form, to call to memory.

“Mommy! Look at me!” In the middle of the dance floor, her little girl twirls, her puffy dress flaps. Megan grins.

What Megan will never find out is that somewhere not too far away, a four-hour flight from San Diego, Allyson ran away from her marriage with Onan and their two young twins. That two hours after Allyson returned in disgrace to her childhood room in her father’s compound, yards away from where Megan once lived, she stood in front of the open window that overlooked a collapsing meshed fence. She tied back her thick bundle of hair, and for a moment, she felt a whisper of the soul-sucking breeze as she had all of those years ago when she had experienced the fleeting, fervent desire for so much more from life than she had been given. There, on the eve of her younger sister’s graduation night, the full moon made a halo around her face. She took a deep breath. And then she lifted the gun and placed the cool, hard barrel against her temple at the age of 25.

This, Megan will never know.

## The Atlas

### I.

Adam sprints suddenly up the hill. The two men follow, their silhouettes vanishing into the cloud of sand sprung up in his wake. Larkin, left alone among the sparse shrubs and scattered stones, shifts her backpack higher on her shoulders and chases after them. She winces as the water bottles beat against her lower back. But she refuses to lose. Her exhausted leg muscles tighten. In the scratching of feet against loose gravel and the dry-crunching of twigs beneath her sneakers, she hears the rhythmic clanging of metals in the work-studios of the medina, the Arab men hammering, golden sparks flying; she thinks of the dark-skinned natives drumming on coconuts with their dusty palms she could be listening to now, a mojito by her side, on the beaches of the Caribbean. And she speeds past the naïve, garrulous British man of Indian descent whose name she never learned.

“Look at that, mates! Look at *that!*” Adam’s voice booms above her. Even after three days of hiking, the vigor in his soul remains undepleted by the merciless Moroccan sun. When Larkin finally pulls herself up to the knoll, she watches Adam walk in circles around a tree. His fingers rub the stubble on his chin. Then he raises both hands in the air and bows, “All hail! The tree of life! There it is, brothers! Nobody ever told us this was in Morocco! Of all places, Muslim Africa!”

She breathes; she swallows, exhaling, “Wow.” In the middle of this dry and barren landscape, the tree blossoms in a green she has not seen since they ascended from the valley, watching over the rest of the Atlas Mountains from its kingly seat.

“Yes, this is wonderful, isn’t it?” The British Indian gasps, as he brings up the tail-end of the four-people group. “I wonder how it got here! Miraculous, isn’t it?” Larkin eyes the splotches of sweat under his armpits, and she can see the curve of his belly through his shirt, stuck now to his skin.

“All right!” Larkin claps her oversized hands. “Let’s take a break here!”

“Wait, we just took a break,” Keaton said, his voice barely a whimper. “Shouldn’t we keep going?” It is only through years of shared childhood that Larkin is attuned to her younger brother’s quiet murmur. For Keaton is by nature soft-spoken, but she mostly blames it, as well as his latest insistence on calling himself an artist, on their sheltered parents.

Larkin rolls her eyes and snaps in a tone harsher than she means, “Damn, Keaton! Learn to relax! Enjoy the goddamn world a little bit!”

Even though she sees the hurt in Keaton’s eyes, she cannot offer an apology. Instead, she releases the clasp on her backpack and sits down beneath the tree. The Indian follows her.

Adam whistles, a teasing, dragged out whistle. He lifts his shirt over his head and throws it over a branch. “Look at this, mates!” He spreads both of his arms out, his slender, naked body pale against the blue teal sky, and bellows, “I am the ruler of Africa! The king of the world!” Then he lets out a wolf-like howl. “Can anyone out there hear me?” The mountains bounce his voice, distorted, back-and-forth until it turns into a whisper of wind and vanishes completely

As Keaton struggles to position himself on the ground, Larkin sighs, “How’s your foot?”

Her brother mumbles, “It’s fine.”

“Is it getting worse?”

“It’s fine.”

Larkin stares at him, studying the eyes that refuse to meet hers. Over the past week in Morocco, something about her brother has bothered her. It is as if he is still that same high school kid, so withdrawn into himself, so quiet and shy. By the time she left for college, she had become embarrassed to be seen in the hallways with her scrawny, awkward brother. And in the first two summers when she still came home, she had been ashamed by his tamed adolescence, one imposed by their goody-goody suburban parents against which Larkin had rebelled in the ways of tequila shots in Wal-Mart and car racing in its parking lot. Yet, an image keeps coming back to her recently: squeezing into a laundry basket with Keaton, sitting in front of him, and pretending to maneuver their spacecraft through their make-believe world. They had never told their parents where they went in those days, draped in white bed-sheets: Keaton was following her to the sacrificial ceremonies on the Acropolis and to find secret passageways in the Hanging Gardens of Babylon.

The Indian asks, “We’re almost there, is it? The village tomorrow will be nice. Maybe we can shower a bit, clean ourselves. That will feel fantastic, don’t you think?”

No one responds. They exhale a collective sigh, their bodies relaxing against the belly of the earth. Here the four of them are, tucked deep in the Atlas Mountains, not a parched weed stirring, not even a gecko awake. For as far as Larkin can see, it is the same bronze of the bare, sunbaked rocks, the same harsh, jagged earth. It has been two days since they saw a Berber tent. She imagines the nomads of the past—turbans, camels, and all—traversing silently, resolutely, through the Sahara only to encounter the rugged range that cuts down the length of Morocco. Somewhere in the distance, she thinks she hears a jackal howl, but none of the men reacts. It must be one of those mysterious tricks the ancient mountain plays on the senses.



Out of habit, Larkin reaches into her pocket for her iPhone only to remember again that it has died. She guesses that it must be around two o'clock, but she has no way of knowing.

Beside her, Adam's foot tap-tap-taps on the root of the tree. She asks, "How's the shoe?"

He replies with a bark of laughter, "Bloody rubbery!"

"It was such a bargain, wasn't it, in the market?" The Indian man pulls a towel out of his pocket and dabs it at his forehead. "I bought Calvin Klein underwear there. It was so cheap!

The shopkeeper said it was real—*real* Calvin Klein! Such a bargain, wasn't it?"

"It *is* in your blood to bargain, brother, isn't it?"

Larkin laughs with Adam, "Yes, it *is*!"

"Oh, right, right, because I am Indian. Right. Ha-ha."

Keaton stares at Adam's mismatched shoes. "I can't believe you were going to make the trek with one shoe."

"I can't believe they let me buy just one shoe!"

Larkin smiles. She wonders how old Adam is, for his ceaseless, youthful vigor belies any evidence of age. Life to him is simple: Adam lives out of a knapsack. He wants to wander to the end of the world, to be a present-day, Western nomad—and he is doing exactly that. It is because of Adam's liberty and spontaneity and enthusiasm that Larkin readily agreed to a self-guided trek. He is the rare breed of man who has the ability to make such impossible trips a reality.

Adam says, "I wonder how long it would take to walk to the Sahara from here."

"You'll never make it," Larkin replies. When Adam glares at her with hard, cold eyes, she mocks, "Not with one shoe."

The Indian asks, "You're going to the Sahara after this, is it?"

Adam ignores him, “Maybe I’ll walk to Algeria! Anyone want to come?”

Larkin replies, “I wish.”

The Indian chuckles, “And I’ve got to get back to London, you know, the accounting tasks can’t take care of themselves forever, isn’t it?”

“Ah, the motherland!” Adam yells.

“You’re from the U.K. as well, are ya? Whereabouts is it?”

“Manchester.”

Keaton speaks, too quietly, “I thought you said you were from Oxford.”

“Tell the motherland Adam says ha-llo, will ya?”

## II.

Larkin walks behind Adam and Keaton. The men have grown silent in the hot air as they trek step-by-step up another slope. It seems to her as if they are following beside a ravine, cut by water a long time ago. Behind her, falling further and further behind, the Indian pulls at his feet, wiping his face every couple of minutes with a towel where dust and sweat have gathered. She breathes, hard. There is only one image in her head now: the white woman in the medina. The woman held a smartphone in front of her, for she refused to acknowledge its futility in the labyrinth of narrow and winding and unnamed alleyways that made up the ancient Marrakech maze. As the Lonely Planet had told them, the point of the medina experience *was* to get lost. So Larkin and Keaton strolled behind the woman, watching her bump into shopkeepers, crash into bicycles and donkeys, and walk head-first into a wall when the mud-brick lane bent away.

When Larkin glances up, Adam and Keaton have stopped before her, their backpacks tossed on the ground. Adam shouts, “Here we are! Our last sleeping place in the Atlas!”

Within a few minutes, Keaton and the Indian begin to hammer away at the stakes, pitching their tents. Adam lies down on the ground, his hands behind his head, his ankles crossed. Larkin sits down on a rock beside him. She asks, “How long do you think it will take us to get to the village tomorrow?”

He nods over at the Indian down the slope, his oversized backpack supine on the ground, its contents—books, electronics, underwear, t-shirts, jackets, water bottles, baseball caps—spilling out. “Depends on how much Fatty slows us down, *isn't it?*”

Larkin throws her head back, listening to the sweet melody of her own laughter and that of Adam's. The sun, crawling toward the horizon, grazes her skin like a warm blanket, snuggling her. Finally, Larkin stretches out her arms, “And then we get to hire a car and go to Ouarzazate for the tour. Say what you will about tour companies, mister, at least I get a car and a mattress. What are you doing tomorrow?”

“My only plan is that I have no plan!”

Larkin hears a clap-clap-clap, and she glances up to see Keaton slapping his hands, puffs of dust wheezing from his palms. The tent stands upright; the neon green glistens.

“Hey, guys,” Keaton holds out a plastic bag as he approaches them. “Want an apple?”

Larkin reaches in. She bites into the apple, its juice swirling around in her mouth. She nods toward the Indian, chuckling, “He probably thinks that the tent is actually from REI.”

Adam laughs, but Keaton remains silent.

“Wait, how do you say his name again?” Keaton asks.

Larkin shrugs, “Something Indian. I don't know. Whatever, it's not like we're ever going to have to talk to him again.”

Keaton chews the apple, “Oh, these are his apples you're eating.”

“Whatever.” She sends her teeth crashing into the fruit again.

Before them, the sun swells slowly, pulsating to the crunching-crunching of the apples. Larkin takes a deep breath. The cooling mountain air fills the corners of her lungs. A week from now, she knows, this will seem as if it all came from another life, another person. The same thing had happened when she returned from Central America: except for the pictures that popped up once in a while on her screensaver—of her and Kelsey and Jordan and all the backpackers they met along the way—it hardly seemed possible that she had crossed borders on chicken buses. So she stares, studying the curves and the hues of the Atlas Mountains, swallowing the landscape, the country, wishing that it will become a permanent part of her. As shadows creep into the zigzagging valley below, she listens to the crickets and geckos come alive in the shrubs.

“You should paint this, Keaton. Think you can capture this on canvas?” Larkin asks, laughing.

Adam turns to Keaton, “You’re an artist, brother?”

“She’s mocking me.”

“Oh, come on, Keaton! How are you going to support yourself as an artist? Remember when I wanted to study History? But where would that’ve gotten me? Still living with Mom and Dad? Please! Look at this, Keaton, the world outside of Hicksville, Pennsylvania!” She nudges him with her elbow, “See? Isn’t this better than France? And we would’ve never been here—in the middle of Morocco!—had we planned our trip! There’s *no* one here, Keaton! How fucking amazing is this? I’d be happy just to die here—peaceful and quiet—you know?”

“Sure, Larkin.” Keaton pulls the lace of his shoe, a little too quickly, too hard, that his face twitches in sudden pain. Carefully, he slips off his sock.

The Indian shuffles through loose pebbles toward them, and Keaton asks, “Hey, can I get another bandage from you?”

“It’s infected, is it? I’ve got three bottles of hand sanitizers if you want to clean it out.”

Larkin chuckles, “You have three bottles? For a one-week trip?”

He does not hear her or pretends not to. He drags his feet down toward his backpack.

### III.

Gently, the unzipped flap of the tent skirts against the ground. Larkin bundles up her hair and lifts it, places it behind her neck. She cuddles the cheap blanket closer to her chest. She flips to her side to face Keaton. But her brother is not there.

Larkin slowly gets up, pulls the hoodie over her head, and scuttles out of the tent. It seems like any other early morning in the Atlas. The contours of the rocky ridges still mesmerize her; it looks like a painting, a line drawn across the ashen gray canvas of pre-dawn Morocco. But there is something starkly different; she feels a shudder in the air.

“Hey,” Keaton’s voice comes from the semi-darkness.

Larkin groans as she struggles toward him, her entire body aching from the long treks and hard floors. “My God, we should’ve brought more clothes. Who would’ve thought that we’d need more than a sweatshirt in *Morocco*?” She sits down on a rock beside him, her arms folded across her chest. “Why are you up? Did we beat Adam? That man rises before the sun.”

“He’s gone.”

“What do you mean?”

“I thought he went for a walk, but he took all of his stuff with him.”

“What, that one bag he has? He could come back.” Larkin pauses for a moment, and realizes that a part of her is not surprised. Finally, she says, “You think he’ll be okay?”

It is a rhetorical question and Keaton does not answer. Behind his cold-stone features, she can feel that he is irritated, maybe even enraged. In his naiveté, Keaton still believes that people are good, loyal. Neither Keaton nor their parents understand the cruelty, the betrayals in which most people in the world take part.

Even eight years after she has moved out, his fruitless attempts to get her home to visit remains persistent, sometimes infuriatingly so. Most of the time, Larkin does not even pick up the phone when he calls, for she does not need Keaton’s reminder of her guilt, her attempt to distance herself from their tucked-away Pennsylvania suburb. But Larkin also knows this: it is his desperation and patience that sometimes serves as the only thing that makes her feel as if she is not alone.

“Who the hell does that? Just leave someone like that, in the middle of the desert?”

“We’re going to be okay,” she replies. “We just need to keep going east.”

Larkin wants to hold onto her brother’s arm, but she cannot reach him. Instead, she glances up, watching the last star flicker—so far away—struggling against the inevitable, waiting for the sun to swallow it, for it to disappear.

“Good morning, everybody!” The Indian emerges from his tent, jaunty, rubbing his palms in lavender-scented sanitizer. “Now, where’s this Adam? Still sleeping, is it?”

“He left,” Keaton says.

“For a walk, is it? That’s a nice morning for it! It is, really!”

“No. He grabbed his bag and ditched us.”

His smile vanishes. “Oh my God! But where did he go? Should we look for him?”

Larkin says, “I’m not sure if he wants to be found.” She wonders if Adam had planned this all along. Or, is it that the three of them were too much of a burden? Why didn’t he ask her to come?

“Why would anyone do that? Golly! That’s like a suicide wish, isn’t it?”

“I get it. I think it’s courageous.”

Her brother turns toward her, “Do you?”

“Should we tell someone?” The Indian asks.

Larkin considers it. Maybe. But when she tries to think about *what* to tell whom, she realizes that she knows next to nothing about him—this guy who had just materialized and vanished from their lives, never to be seen again.

“Oh my gosh!” The Indian cries out, digging through his bag, tossing a shirt here and underwear there, exasperated. “He took my power bars! Oh my gosh! And a bottle of water! What am I going to do?”

“At least your backpack’s much lighter, right?” Her throat croaks with the beginning of a chuckle, but without Adam, the laughter sounds hollow, meaningless. She shuts her mouth. Instead, Larkin slaps her thighs just as she feels the sun touch the back of her neck. She rises and commands, “We should get going. It’s going to get hot in a minute.”

#### IV.

The vacation that Keaton had envisioned was the Bohemian scene in Paris, the Renaissance paintings in the Louvre. Not this: bumming around in a *riad* in Marrekech in the dead of summer, drinking glasses of mint tea, waiting in the idle heat for a plan to take shape. He had yearned to show Larkin this side of him he had re-discovered in the last couple of months

of college, rescued from the days when she used to splash colors on him in the backyard and run through the house, laughing as he chased her, both of them touching their parents' walls with paint-stained fingers. But then she had changed the trip—*his* graduation trip—to Morocco. At the very least, she had agreed to come; so Keaton had shut up, like all the other times when he had said nothing at all.

Keaton did not even see where Adam came from before he sank into the couch beside his sister. Immediately, Keaton caught a whiff of his sour-sweat stench, and recognized him as another backpacker, another lost white soul hanging around Marrakech. Keaton had not grown up—his parents always stayed home—thinking that people could do this, go to faraway places, repeatedly, all over the earth, starting and finishing lives elsewhere, until his sister in her heartless and reckless way left Pennsylvania.

Adam stretched his arms along the back of the chair, “How are you guys doing, huh? Melting from the heat yet?”

“Ha! Just about!” Larkin wiped a strand of wet hair from her face. She nodded at his feet. “Dude, you’re only wearing one shoe.”

“Yes! Is it that obvious?” His laugh was un-refrained; the cackling ricocheted off of the walls of the *riad* and shot upward through the open-air courtyard.

Keaton asked, “Where are you from?”

“Oxford! The home of British intellectuals and I’m its AWOL child! Ha! What about you, brother?”

“We’re from Pennsylvania.”

“Amish country! I love those little buggers! Or, is it called buggies?”



“Well, *I* live in D.C.,” Larkin said with an unmasked snobbery, her voice loud and forceful. She sat up, squaring her wide shoulders, her muscles accentuated by her tank-top, away from Keaton and toward Adam. She was doing it again. It seemed as if, throughout their week in Marrakech, Larkin kept trying to get away from him, going to Moroccan baths by herself, meeting backpackers in the Jemaa el-Fnaa square—leaving him in the *riad* while she frequented the basement bars and slept through the morning. She was here, but not really. When Larkin had first started high school, she had thrown a fit for weeks, until their parents finally converted their father’s workshop into a dingy bedroom for Keaton. As soon as he moved his belongings out of their room, she had started to lock the doors. He would stand outside, listening to her girlfriends whispering and laughing. Keaton had felt suddenly abandoned, as if there was some part of his sister’s life he was no longer privileged to know. So Keaton dipped his head away. He poked a finger into his sock, rubbing a spot near his ankle that had begun to itch.

“Ah, DC. Democracy, hypocrisy! Democracy, hypocrisy—what’s the difference?”

“So,” Larkin asked, “What happened to your shoe?”

“I lost it a long time ago.” He releases a manic peal of laughter, “Or, maybe I burned it! Set it on fire on the side of the road!”

“You burned it?”

“Who needs a bloody Nike anyway?” Adam shook his head, his body rocking, “Elitists.”

A thin film of sand and grime caked Adam’s face. The shadows cast by the ridge of his nose and sharpness of his cheeks fell against his pale skin, which, glimmering in the afternoon sun, gave him a ghostly complexion. From the phantom silhouette came a mad gleam of enthusiasm from Adam’s eyes. It seemed strange to Keaton that his sister should be drawn to his

patched-up pants, one leg rolled up to the knee, a cartoon-like portrait of a self-proclaimed itinerant.

“How long are you in Marrakech for?” His sister asked.

Adam replied, “I’m crossing the Atlas Mountains, baby!”

“Hey, we were thinking about doing that too. What company are you going with?”

“Company? Company!? No! Being rushed from here to there, taking pictures that we can find online? *Hell no!* I’m doing it myself!”

Just then, two women stepped into the *riad*, putting a pause to their conversation. The women’s heads were tilted up as they eyed the carved railings on the upper floors. The thick bands of their backpacks were wrapped tightly around their waists, and the upper strap cut just above their breasts. Both of their skins, where visible beneath the streaks of black and brown, glowed red. They were sun-weary and exhausted; yet, Keaton detected a hint of triumph.

Adam reached for the rusting silver pot that sat on the table, and poured the mint tea into a glass that had belonged to Larkin. He threw in two cubes of sugar. Adam lifted the glass to his lips, the steam rising toward his face, “And what winds blew you ladies in?”

The women jolted, noticing them for the first time. “Egypt,” one of them smiled.

“Yeah?” Larkin asked, “You just flew in today?”

“No. Actually, we hitchhiked.”

“From Egypt?!”

“Yeah. From Cairo. It took us, what, four, five days?”

“In the middle of a revolution?”

But the woman seemed not to have heard, for she continued, “Yeah, and finding this damn hostel was the hardest part.”

The other woman picked up without a pause, “Right? We hitchhiked all the way across northern Africa, but we had to pay an Arab boy to help us find this place. A *hostel!*”

“I think we gave him too much money. He seemed too happy.”

“Oh my God, I was *just* thinking that. But we did forget to pay that one guy for gas in...”

“Libya. That was not our fault though! He rushed off as soon as we took our backpacks. He did look very confused by us.”

“I think he thought we were working for the U.N., so he *had* to drive us!”

The women touched each other’s forearms, laughing, “Poor guy!” Between them was a tenderness that was only shared by siblings, an affection that could only grow out of difficult situations, of too many shared hours in car rides and close sleeping quarters. Although the women appeared to recall tales of their experience for the sake of the three travelers on the couch, it was clear that their reminiscing was for their own sakes.

It was Larkin who interrupted them, “Hey, aren’t you boiling in that long sleeve?”

“Well, we wanted to be respectful in the Muslim countries.”

Adam lifted his glass to them. “My hats off to you, ladies! Champions of backpackers, proud daughters of the Lonely Planet!”

The owner of the *riad*, dressed in *gandora* and leather slippers, emerged from the kitchen. “*Bon jour!* Welcome! Welcome!” Keaton studied the handsome smile that flashed his white teeth against his dark skin. “Come! Come into the kitchen. I give you map and information about Marrakech!”

Larkin became restless in her seat; her legs bounced up-and-down so quickly and forcefully that Keaton could feel the vibrations on the floor. Her eyes were fixed on the grime on their backs as the women followed the owner into the kitchen, and Keaton knew that in his

sister's mind an idea was forming—of what, he did not know yet. Then, she turned to Adam, “Hey, when are you leaving for the trek?”

“Tomorrow!”

She brought her hands together in a thunderous clap. “Great! We’re coming with you!”

Keaton felt his stomach drop. He leaned into his sister, “I thought we wanted to go to Essaouira?” But what he really wanted to tell Larkin was that this was not a competition. What he really wanted her to know was that this trip was supposed to be about *them*. He wanted her to realize that, since she moved out eight years ago, the two of them had yet to have a real conversation.

“Oh please, Keaton! We can figure that out later! When are we ever going to get a chance like this again? An un-guided tour into the Atlas!”

“We don’t have anything prepared. I’m wearing shoes from like three years ago.”

“Oh, come on, Keaton! It’s time to get out of Hicksville, little brother. We’ll hit the market this afternoon and get what we need.”

From the kitchen came the two women’s laughter. Keaton thought about those rare moments on the trip, like when the white woman walked into the wall in the medina, when the two of them would crack up like they used to.

He asked Adam, “Do you even know how to cross the Atlas?”

“Brother, all you need to do is head east. They say if we keep walking east, we’ll be there in four days.”

“Who says?”

“Huh? Everyone, brother. Everyone.”

An Indian man stepped down the stairs, the flesh hanging below his arms bouncing. When he leaned over the railing, his glasses fell down lower on his nose. “Oh, hello! You’re talking about a trek to the Atlas, is it? I was looking into that as well!”

Keaton scratched his ankle.

## V.

It must have been hours since they stopped for lunch, and eaten the last bite of their bread in a strange silence Larkin attributed to Adam’s absence. They had believed then that they would be able to see the village once they got over the mountain. But when they finally stood on that ridge, they saw nothing—nothing but the same brown earth.

“Must be the next one, then, is it?” The Indian man asked, hopeful. And onwards the three of them walked, lifting up clouds of dirt as they sped down toward the valley.

Now, at a much slower pace, they labor silently up the slope again. Larkin, with the irregular beats of Keaton’s footsteps close behind and the hard grunts of the Indian farther off, fixes her eyes on the highest clutter of shrubs and rocks. While she treks at what she hopes is a calm, measured tread, a terror slowly creeps up on her.

With each step she takes, the water in the half-filled bottle swooshes back-and-forth, and the plastic thumps against her back. Just for a moment, she closes her eyes, her legs mechanically carrying her onwards. She tries to recall the images of her journey in Central America, of the long waits for buses that ran on no particular schedule, of the rattling vehicles that wobbled from side-to-side—but the buses always came, and she always got to where she wanted to go. When she opens her eyes again, the pile of shrubs and rocks is still as far off as

before. Larkin feels a pain of exhaustion in her legs, and places a hand on her knee as she climbs.

The afternoon Keaton called to invite her on a post-graduation backpacking trip through France, Larkin had been packing her suitcase for a business trip to Seattle. She immediately turned him down, for the thought of filthy hostels and long-haul buses tired her out, especially compared to the vacation she had planned to the Bahamas. But the night she landed in Seattle, Larkin, on a drowsy and jetlagged impulse, messaged the woman she had met in Central America. For an hour or so at a cafe, she and Jordan relived their adventures in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Belize, and when Jordan finally asked if Larkin still traveled—like *really* traveled—somehow the words that came out of Larkin’s mouth was that she was going to Morocco with her brother. No one they knew had ever backpacked in Morocco.

Larkin stops. As she waits for the boys, the panic climbs higher and higher, her pulse beating against her throat, for she sees now what she could not have before: a depression lies before her, a whole terrain to cross. It seems as if the earth keeps stretching itself out, pulling the peak farther and farther away.

Soon, Keaton and the Indian stand beside her, their thumbs locked around the straps of their backpacks in an exasperated silence. Keaton voices what Larkin could not bring herself to say: “We’re lost, aren’t we?” When those words float finally between them, it first brings about a relief, a sigh that the long-dreaded suspicion has finally become a fact. Then, panic.

As Keaton unscrews his water bottle, each turn of the cap squealing against the plastic sends a shock through Larkin’s nerves. Just as his lips touch the rim of the bottle, Larkin shouts, “Keaton! Don’t!”

“It’s just a sip, Larkin, it’s not going to kill me.”

The Indian's voice quivers, "What shall we do now? Where do we go?"

"Do we just keep going straight? Do we think the village is still over that mountain?"

"If we had been going in the right direction, we should've been there already."

"We just need to be going east, isn't it?"

Larkin watches her brother grimace as he sits down on a rock, his hand reaching for his ankle. She says, "We *have* been going east."

"You're sure, is it?"

"Yes, it *is*, man. That's all we've been doing is heading east."

The Indian says, "Now, let me just get the map out here."

Before he reaches into his backpack, Larkin says, "Dude, the map's useless. We don't even know where we are. Come on, let's just go."

So they continue to walk. Larkin wonders where it was they had gotten lost. Was it when Adam sprinted up the hill toward the tree? Was it before lunch or after lunch? Then she begins to wonder, terrified, whether they had ever been on track, whether Adam really knew—or cared—where he was going at all.

"Oh my God! Keaton! Look!" She stops. She can barely believe her eyes for it seems as if her prayers have actually worked. Off in the distance in the shadows cast by the descending sun, a couple of figures are moving step-by-step away from them. "Keaton!" She waves frantically at her brother. "There's people! The Berbers!"

The men jog toward her, faster and faster. When they finally stand beside her, the Indian asks, huffing, "Where? Where?"

"There!" She points again.

Keaton squints, “Are you sure those are people?”

“What else could they be?”

“I don’t know,” the Indian sighs and pushes his glasses further up his nose. “We should stay here, so we know where we’ve been going. I mean, this *is* the way, isn’t it?”

But Larkin is off, jumping over rocks and shrubs, racing down the hill. “Come on, Keaton!” She hears herself shout, the echo soon drowned out by the hot wind whipping against her face. Larkin knows that Keaton will follow, and, sure enough, when she takes a glance backward, she sees that her brother is hobbling as fast as he can behind her. The Indian, however, stands in the same spot.

She faces forward again, still running, still sprinting, her legs carrying her with minds of their own, her eyes fixed on the dark shadows before her—the figures that split sometimes into five people and sometimes dwindle to three. She takes a look back again: Keaton is chasing her but the Indian has become a dot in the horizon. Larkin feels the bottom of her foot on the rugged side of a rock, and before she whips her head back around, her body is falling forward, hanging in midair—and crashing into the pebbles and the dirt.

It is not until then, as she lies on the earth, that she hears her brother’s voice booming toward her, “Larkin!”

She throws the backpack off of her shoulders, and sits up. She pats the sand off her arms.

“I’m okay! I’m right here! I’m okay!”

Keaton reaches her. He locks his fingers behind his head, the weight of his body unbalanced, his chest heaving. He takes a deep breath, and exhales, “Larkin, they aren’t people.”

“What?”

“Look! They’re trees! Those are just trees!”



“No!” Larkin snaps her head around. “No! Over there!”

“Those are trees too!”

“What?! Keaton, no...” But even as she shakes her head, she hears her own voice trail off. The two of them turn, at the same time, toward where they thought the Indian had stood, but now there is nothing. Larkin looks around her, over her right shoulder then her left—it is all the same, the same dying earth and the same withering shrubs. She looks at her brother. They want to scream for him, but neither of them knows his name.

It is, she knows, the last drop of water. She places it carefully between her dehydrated lips, and, of course, it does nothing to quench her thirst. Larkin and Keaton have not spoken since the sun fell. They lie down on the ground. She settles her head on her backpack. A dull, dry ache seems to have taken root behind her eyes as soon as her muscles relaxed; yet, her mind refuses to doze off. Because everything hurt: throat, legs, feet. Her body becomes suddenly immobile. She wonders if the mountain is going to swallow her, if she is going to perish, to become, indelibly and permanently, a part of the Atlas Mountains.

Slowly, Larkin feels her heavy eyelids fall. Maybe she is not actually here in the Atlas Mountains; maybe this whole trek is another daydream concocted during a dimly lit afternoon at work, after which, she will take the bus to M Street and order dinner from the deli on the corner. Four times a week, the Hispanic woman greets her in Spanish, and on Thursdays, the pleasant old man shouts her order to the kitchen before she crosses in through the door with an enthusiasm that feels like a drill through her exhausted forehead—but now, thinking about him, his stout frame and whiskers of hair that flairs on the top of his glossy skull, it makes her laugh.

“What?” The words seep weakly through Keaton’s chapped lips.

Realizing she has dozed off, her eyes shot open. “Nothing. I just wish we were home.”

“We will be.”

“You know what? We *can* go now. If Adam can leave in the middle of the night, so can we! We shouldn’t waste any more time!” She grabs her backpack from beneath her head and rushes to her feet. Larkin stands beside her brother, towering over him, expecting him to rise.

“It’s too dark.”

She takes a couple of steps away, waiting for him to change his mind. But when she hears Keaton’s voice again—“Just sit the fuck down,”—it does not seem to belong to him: it is deep and powerful, delivered from the pit of his stomach. She glances over to see that her brother is sitting up, the silhouette of his shoulders broad, his muscles cut and defined. He had grown up. And so uncompromising is this adulthood, at that moment, so firm and unstinting is his command that Larkin walks back to him and settles down beside him. After a couple of minutes, she asks in a mocking tone that attempts to conceal her genuine curiosity, “Wow, where did *that* come from?”

She listens to the crickets chirp and the locusts click. Larkin looks at her brother, but in the blanket of darkness, she can barely make out the nose and cheeks once so familiar to her. There is nothing to do now but wait, so, lying down, Larkin stares at the densely clustered stars above her. Before the trek into the Atlas, she had never encountered a sight so breathtaking, so majestic. Under the dome of whole worlds winking at her from light-years away, she inhales, with a deliberate, exaggerated sound. For a brief moment she understands how people of the ancient world could see warriors and princess, Gods and Titans in the night sky. There is, she thinks, something that smells like timelessness here.

“You had to say it, didn’t you?” Keaton whispers in a gentle voice that reminds her suddenly of their childhood room, their beds separated only by a nightstand, where, before she had started high school, the two of them often chatted late at night. She thinks about her home now—not her apartment in D.C., but her real home that suddenly seems so precious to her—and how her and her brother were always surrounded by picture books of Egyptian pharaohs and Roman emperors. And here she was, across the Atlantic, side-by-side with Keaton again, looking at the same night sky that all of those fabled people, who had once been a part of their childhood imaginations, must have at one time admired. They were a part of the continuum, she thought, the human civilization that went back thousands of years.

“What?”

“That you’d love to die here, here in this beautiful, beautiful God-forsaken place.” He pauses, “And the perfect daughter of the Thomson household gets her way one last time.”

“Oh please, Keaton.” Her voice cracks. Her throat feels as if she has been struck there repeatedly with a baseball bat. For a while, neither of them says anything. But the mountain echoes his words back to her, repeating them in her mind, and Larkin cannot tell whether there is a sarcastic truth in his tone or whether it is an innocent brotherly joke. Larkin wonders what it will mean for their relationship—what will happen to *her*—if Keaton stops chasing after her.

“Hey,” Keaton whispers, drifting off, “What if I can’t walk tomorrow? What would you do? Leave me?”

Larkin closes her eyes; she murmurs, “Don’t worry, Keaton, I have no idea where I’m going.” She smiles, for there rises in her a feeling that this remark contains within it a profound wisdom.

In the distance, she hears a jackal howl—a long and lonely howl.

Maybe, Larkin thinks, maybe it is Adam.