FE OF LIFE

A Thesis by

Frances Rebecca Johannsen

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I have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content, and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Fine Arts.

Margaret Dawe, Committee Chair

We have read this thesis
and recommend its acceptance:

Richard Spilman, Committee Member

Peter Zoller, Committee Member
Reiko walked out toward the Sea of Japan with her infant daughter Sara strapped to her back. Tied to her mother with a wide silk purple sash, Sara slept soundly, her mouth parted, bare headed and arms swinging freely with each tentative step Reiko took. Reiko hiked her cotton yukata up above her ankles so she could see to place her feet squarely on the larger rocks. Her legs, pale and slender as a crane’s feathery neck, stood out in stark contrast to the indigo fabric. One foot slipped on an algae-covered rock. She caught herself. The stumble only rocked Sara further into sleep. Reiko’s legs shook a little from the cool damp air. With teeth clenched tightly, she set her eyes toward the sea and kept going. She was determined to get to the water. Her perfectly round moon face, normally polished like a pebble tumbled smooth by the waves, was puckered in the center like the smocking of a little girl’s dress, with pursed lips and a deep furrow drawn between her brows. The wind twisted and gnarled her waist length pony tail, so she brought it around to the front and tucked the ends underneath the sash which crisscrossed her chest. The shorter strands around her face escaped. She tried tucking them behind her ears, but the wind freed them. They swarmed by her cheeks. She swept them away with the back of her hand, but they returned to her cheeks. She rubbed her face and clawed her temples. A lioness’s high pitched growl came from her throat as she flung her arms down by her sides. She reached down to the rocks and scooped up a handful of seawater, the water so cold it felt hot. She smoothed down her hair with her palms, pressing the water hard against her scalp.

The sun, not yet above the horizon, was slowly introducing itself in layers of color through receding clouds, staining the sky in diluted washes of purple and pyrite. Chopp[y waves in silhouette, like millions of tiny black hands, each thrust up to claim a piece of the sky. They
took turns coming to shore and burnishing the rocks with frothy hands, the bursting of the foamy bubbles like the jackpot shower of Pachinko balls, steel peas clattering into a metal catch tray.

Reiko stood at the edge of the water line. The chilly morning air tasted thick with brine and dusted her skin and hair with salty talcum. The wind released her ponytail from the sash, wound the long strands around her face and neck. She yanked the pink ribbon loose and pulled the salted strands from her mouth. The wide sleeves of her cotton yukata flapped behind her. They waved their watercolor salmon peonies and stamped the dawn canvas whenever she raised her arms. The snug knot she had tied in the dark this morning to hold Sara in place now chafed the skin just below her breasts. She looked for a place where she might lay Sara, and when she found none, she leaned forward to support Sara’s weight squarely on her back. With sharp and deft fingers, she untied the knot and loosened the sash. She reached behind with both hands and supported Sara, working her around to the front until she could hold her in her arms. The bolt of purple silk, still tied to Sara, billowed and fought with the wind.

Her arms trembled with the weight of her daughter, sleeping as though the world did not exist. Reiko squinted her eyes to the sun, now perched on the horizon, and watched as tiny diamonds of light reflected on the ends of her black lashes and bounced on the ocean waves when she blinked. The tide crept toward shore and seeped into her cotton canvas shoes, its sharp cold pricking her toes. A step further in, and it pierced her ankles.

A big wave came up and soaked Reiko’s yukata up to her thighs. She gasped at the stab of cold water. Her legs ached. The wet indigo cotton now appeared black, soaked through and pasted to her legs. She walked further out with Sara, whose sleeping form she slung in her arms low by her waist. The squirming infant, with unfocused eyes and red chafed face, didn’t seem to fit in her arms. A detached thing. Sara’s head didn’t fit in the crook of her arm like she thought it
should, the little arms and legs stretched out beyond the boundaries of Reiko’s reach, her body extended so Reiko couldn’t gather it together. Like holding a big bundle of loose twigs, Reiko felt as though pieces of Sara could drop from her arms at any moment. Neither Reiko nor Sara could get comfortable. Reiko held Sara low and away from her body, repulsed by her heat and her smell. This baby didn’t seem something she could have issued from her own body. Sara slept most of the time and woke up only to be fed, looking not for Reiko but for a nipple; even an artificial one would do.

Another wave splashed up, and Sara’s dangling hand dipped below the water, waking her with a start. Reiko looked down as her daughter instinctively jerked her hand back and brought her tiny fingers to her mouth, like an animal. Like—.

Reiko eased out past the larger waves until the water lapped up around her waist, holding Sara up by her breasts above the water. She had gotten used to the pain of the coldness of the water and its cradling, rocking, caressing her in ways that until now had only been the privilege of Jonathan. She allowed herself to be carried by it, closing her eyes and concentrating on the rhythm. The hem of her yukata and seaweed fronds teased her legs; she shivered. She lowered her arms.

The water washed over Sara’s face and body. She gasped and choked. Her arms jerked, fingers reached, head turned from side to side. She squealed. The cold water had soaked her baby bunny print shirt and seeped through the elastic bands of the plastic underwear, her cloth diaper beneath becoming sodden.

Reiko pushed Sara out toward the sun and released her. The water loosened the silk sash which drifted away, Sara floating at the end of the purple pathway to the sun. Fists like tiny rice balls rubbed the water off her face, strained and pushed to stay above water. Legs kicked until
too stiff with cold and slowly sank, dangled far below her head. Water, heavy with greedy sea spirits impatient for a new playmate, grasped her thighs, her waist, her shoulders, clasped her hands, veiled her face. Silent cries bubbled to the surface.

Reiko faced the sun, clapped her hands together twice, and bowed with her hands pressed tightly together. “Amaterasu, please return this child to her rightful owner.” Two thin streams of bubbles, parallel lines, led to Sara’s flared nostrils. She had settled in a tangle of seaweed, like an amphibious creature, the sea spirits rocking her gently. She squinted and craned her head instinctively toward the sun and her mother’s face.

The diaper deliveryman wasn’t due for another week. Reiko would let him know by mail about the lost diaper and all the rest of the unused diapers. There would be a penalty for the lost one but maybe they would give her a discount for returning the clean ones. She’d also have to let the milkman know in the morning to cancel the yogurt and milk delivery.

Briny ripples lapped up and licked her breasts, heavy with milk. She looked back toward the empty shore. “I stepped on a stingray,” she would say, “and fell backwards while holding the baby. The baby got swept up in the current immediately and was pulled under before I could get to her.” If an investigation showed she was mentally unfit, they wouldn’t allow her to leave the country. If she said the baby died in her sleep, there would be an autopsy. They would find water in her lungs. At best Reiko would be seen as negligent. At worst, psychologically impaired. But what if Sara turned out to be the world’s hope for a cure for cancer, a brilliant lawyer, a famous neurosurgeon?

Sara reached out and scratched her mother’s leg; Reiko screamed as though having been bitten by a sea creature. The saltwater stung the wound. She looked down expecting to see a fish. Instead, she saw a beautiful, healthy baby girl with all ten fingers and toes nestled in a bed of
seaweed like a tiny mermaid. Long pink fingers reached for the surface. Her paulownia leaf shaped face, eyelashes that fanned the water around almond eyes, Cupid lips pursed into a frown, the nose a Phoenix temple pavilion, all mirror images of her mother.

“Oi!” a man called out to her from the shore. “Are you okay?” He shifted his weight from one foot to the other, standing on tip toe as though that would help him see her better.

Reiko’s chest tightened. Had he seen what she’d done? She couldn’t take the chance. She gasped for air, porpoised below the waves. She reached out her hand toward Sara but came up short. She clawed her way deeper, her hair floating in the fronds of seaweed, tangling in it. She tugged it loose. Sara’s upturned belly felt warm. Reiko wrapped both hands around her daughter and kicked to the surface. Sara’s chest spasmed, and she coughed up a mouthful of sea water. Gurgled cries at first. Reiko clutched her tightly against her chest and patted her back. “I couldn’t do it, Sara-chan,” she whispered. I’m so sorry your mother is a coward.” She held Sara at arm’s length. Bits of seaweed stuck to Sara’s hair and face. Tears mixed with the rivulets of saltwater. Reiko cradled Sara’s head in the crook of her arm and wiped the tears away with her hair.

“Please breath, little one. Mommy’s here.” She rocked her, bounced her, massaged her chest, grasped one of Sara’s tiny fists in hers, put it in her mouth to warm it. “Don’t go now. I need you.” She wiped her own tears with the back of her hand. She bounced her harder. Sara coughed and sputtered until she was finally able to cry, a high-pitched trill. Reiko immediately turned to the sun and bowed several times. “Thank you, Amaterasu. Thank you for giving me a beautiful daughter.” She rubbed Sara’s head and kissed her on every part of her face. She grasped each of her hands and feet and kissed them in turn. Sara’s bunny shirt smelled of warm brine. It reminded Reiko of home.
Reiko’s long wet hair hung in a wide ribbon down her back. She pushed the stray hairs from her face and waved to the man standing on the shore dressed in grey clam diggers cinched at the calves, his bandanaed head bobbing to and fro. Sara’s loud cries tickled Reiko’s ears. She smiled down at the gaping toothless mouth and pinched eyes. The man called to her again. He wouldn’t go away even though she smiled and sent him another reassuring wave of the hand. She walked back toward the shore.

“I thought you were a gonner when I saw you slip under the water like that. Tide’s stronger than people think. Nice and smooth on the surface, but it’s churning like hell underneath,” said the fisherman waiting onshore.

“I’m fine,” said Reiko trying to keep her teeth from chattering. She wrung out one sleeve at a time, shifting Sara from one arm to the other as she did.

“That’s a newborn baby. Some kind of crazy female ritual, or what?”

She wiped Sara’s face with her damp sleeve.

“I bet you’re from Kyushu,” he said. He took off his quilted vest and handed it to Reiko.

She took it and dried Sara with it as best as she could, rubbing her head until her wispy hair curled into damp ringlets.

“She’s from down there. You southerners have some crazy superstitions. Most of them harmless, I admit. But this one of bathing your newborn in the ocean. Fine if you’re down south where the water’s warm. But you gals have to understand, the water ain’t that warm all year round up here.”

Reiko made her way back to the road, careful not to turn her ankle on the rocks.

“If you’re going to keep this up, you need to plan your babies so they’re born in the summertime. Fall is too cold already,” he said.
She handed him his vest. “Thank you,” she said, bowing, and hurried down the street.

“What’s your name,” he shouted from behind her. “You and my wife would get along
great!”

Reiko waved and pretended she didn’t hear him.
Reiko looked in the vanity mirror and fingered the tight black curls at the base of her neck. She twisted each curl in the same direction. Adjusted the mirror so she could see the top of her head and fluffed up her hair in quick snippets with the tips of her long fingernails. Ebi, a stocky black pug, sat up in her lap and followed the scenery with her head as it went by. Reiko turned to Rosemary who was driving. “Sankyu for let me bring Ebi. She like Sara,” Reiko said.

“It is not a problem, Mrs. Martin. Ebi is such a good dog,” said Rosemary with a thick Mississippi drawl. She and Sara had been best friends since the Martins had moved to Smyre fifteen years ago.

“You should let me teach you how to drive,” said Rosemary.

“I too old,” said Reiko. She took out her Chanel lipstick from her quilted black Chanel purse and swiveled it up—Coco Red. She applied it lightly to her lips, pressed and rubbed her lips together, and inspected her work.

“My great-grandmama learned to drive when she was seventy. When great-granddaddy passed away, she couldn’t get around and was always having to wait on everyone else to give her a ride. None of her kids would teach her, so she just up and taught herself.”

“I no need drive.” Reiko flipped the visor up.

“If you change your mind.”

Rosemary found a parking spot near the back of the nearly full short term parking lot at Jackson International Airport. She turned off the ignition and reached over and petted Ebi on the chin; the dog licked her fingers in return.

Reiko pressed her face against Ebi’s. “Ebi-chan, you be good dog.” She clipped the leash to Ebi’s collar. Ebi looked attentively at her face while she talked. “Zey no like bad dogs in
airport. Zey shoot you. Okay?” She cupped the dog’s face between her hands and pressed her cheek to Ebi’s wrinkled brow. She congratulated herself on how well the black and white houndstooth pattern of her skirt coordinated with Ebi’s sleek black fur. A low flying plane passed overhead. Ebi jerked her head toward the windshield and wagged her curlicue tail. Reiko put on her sunglasses. They got out of the car and walked to the terminal.

They passed through the glass and steel revolving doors into the grey carpeted baggage claim area which was filled with passengers waiting for their luggage. Brightly colored shorts and t-shirts, pink button-down Polo shirts, and flowered sundresses accessorized with gold add-a-bead necklaces stood out like urban tulips emerging from old snow. Reiko, with her sunglasses still on, stood next to an elderly woman attending a young boy in a stroller. The two women smiled politely at one another. The boy, belted around the waist to the stroller, grunted and struggled with arms outstretched to reach Ebi who sat at Reiko’s feet.

The elderly woman bent closer to the boy. “You see the doggie?” she said through a wide smile, her high pitched twang clipping the ends of her words.

Reiko looked down at the boy. “Name Ebi.” Ebi looked up at Reiko at the sound of her name.

“Abby, what a cute name,” said the elderly woman.

Rosemary walked up and stood beside Reiko. “According to the board, the plane’s landed, and they should be coming right here to ‘C.’” She looked down at the struggling boy and squatted down in front of him. “Well, hello there. What’s your name?”

“Jeffrey,” said the elderly woman.
“Jeffrey,” said Rosemary as she grabbed both his hands in hers. “You look like a feisty one. I bet you get into heaps of trouble, don’t you? I should know. I have two just like you.” She looked up at the elderly woman. “How old is he?”

“Thirteen months yesterday.” Jeffrey stopped struggling and studied Rosemary’s face. He reached out to grab the sunglasses she had propped on top of her head. With the reflexes of an experienced mother, she leaned back just far enough to be out of his reach.

Reiko was disinterested in the boy and instead scanned the terminal for signs of Sara. Someone called out “Mom” in the distance, so she looked in the direction of the caller, squinting as she continued to search. The voice got louder. Ebi tugged on the leash, struggling toward the escalator. Reiko took off her sunglasses and looked up at the escalator. Sara was waving her arms in the air. Her long black hair was pulled back in a ponytail which wagged each time she turned her head. Reiko saw her own face reflected in Sara’s—the porcelain white skin, almond eyes, cupid’s bow mouth, high cheekbones. She ignored those parts that reminded her of Sara’s late father. Sara’s jeans, faded on the thighs, were slung low by her hipbones, and her bellybutton was exposed below a red tank top. “At least she’s wearing something besides black,” said Reiko to herself. Ebi pulled hard, choking herself on the tautly held leash. Reiko held her ground while she looked in the direction of the escalator and waited for Sara to reach her.

Sara scooped the squirming Ebi up in her arms and twirled with her in a circle, her ponytail held together by a bright multicolored silk scarf. She hugged Ebi tightly and pressed her face into the black fur. “Ebi. Did you miss me?” Her voice was muffled by the fur. Ebi panted and licked Sara’s face without stopping until she was put down on the floor. Sara wiped her face with the back of her hand, stepped up to Reiko, and hugged her mother, wrapping her arms around Reiko’s narrow shoulders. “Hey, Mom.” Reiko kept her arms at her sides and
strained away from the hug. Sara leaned in to give her a kiss, but Reiko snapped her head to one side to offer her cheek. Sara let go.

“You too skinny,” Reiko said as she stepped back and looked at her daughter from head to toe. “Why you buy shirt too small?”

“Mom, it’s good to see you too,” said Sara.

Rosemary hugged Sara from behind and kissed her on the cheek.

“Rosie!”

Reiko watched the two friends squealed, pressed their lips against the others’ cheeks, held each other. Reiko shifted from one leg to the other. She longed for Japan at that moment and the dictums of decorum. Ebi watched from below hopping from one girl to the other. “Ebi, sit,” said Reiko, and she did.

Sara ran her fingers through the ends of Rosemary’s hair at the nape of her neck. “You cut your hair.”

Rosemary smoothed her hair down with her hands. “Momma said it wasn’t right for a mother of two boys to be worrying about her hair all the time. She said if I was always worried about fixing my hair, I wasn’t taking good enough care of my boys.”

“Muza right. You no wan baby to get sick. Eat hair no good,” Reiko said and nodded.

Rosemary smiled and said to Reiko, “Doesn’t matter where they’re from.”

“It looks fine,” Sara said to Rosemary. “Just not used to seeing you with such short hair.”

“Enough about me. Where is this guy?” Rosemary said and looked and around behind Sara.

Sara gestured toward the conveyor belts crowded with people. “Getting our bags.”

Rosemary lifted both shoulders in an *I can’t wait* gesture.
Sara lifted her necklace in her fingers.

“From him?” said Rosemary.

Sara nodded. She turned toward Reiko. “Mom, look what Kunio gave me last night,” she said with a toothy grin.

Reiko looked up at Sara’s neck. A pendant dangled on a delicate gold chain from Sara’s long slender fingers and short unpainted fingernails. It was a small flower with a black onyx center, ruby petals, and two emerald leaves on a gold stem. Tastefully done. Reiko had to lift her head high to look down her nose at her daughter. “What you give him?”

Sara squinted her eyes. “Nothing.”

“Hmph,” said Reiko. The conveyor belts started up and cued the crowd to push in close.

“I think it’s gorgeous,” said Rosemary.

While the two friends were huddled together, heads bent close, a young Japanese man dressed in khakis and a white cotton shirt approached them from behind. The tips of the collar of his crisp starched shirt were embossed with the footprints of its stays. His blue and yellow silk tie reflected a muted sheen. The razor sharp crease of his khaki pants extended from his slender thighs to the cuffs which hit right at the tops of his polished loafers, creating a perfect indentation in front of each ankle. There was minimal creasing behind the knees. Maybe he paid for first class tickets, Reiko thought. Beneath a head of short cropped black hair fashionably moussed and finger styled, his smooth skin was clear and lightly tanned. He kept his eyebrows neatly groomed and looked as though he visited the barber regularly to have them shaped. Under his slender, perfectly straight nose, Reiko saw the most exquisite mouth she’d ever seen on a man, perfectly formed, the lower lip Lake Kawaguchi on a clear day reflecting the silhouette of Mt. Fuji rising above it. She made eye contact with him briefly before tastefully averting her eyes and nodding
her head. He returned the nod, looking down at the floor as he did so. Reiko noted his reserved manner and purposeful movements as he set down the suitcases.

Sara grasped Rosemary’s hand in hers and turned on her heel to Kunio. “Kunio, this is my best friend, Rosemary.”

Rosemary looked unsure of what to do, so she bowed slightly. Kunio extended his hand and she shook it lightly.

Sara hooked Kunio’s arm in hers and pulled him closer. He stumbled over. “And this is my mother, of course.”

He unhooked his arm from Sara’s and bowed deeply at the waist. “Hajimemashite. Minamoto Kunio desu. Yoroshiku onegai shimasu.”

Reiko placed both hands on the front of her thighs and gave him an equally deep bow. “Hajimemashite, Martin Reiko desu. Dozo, yoroshiku onegai shimasu. Tooi . . .”

Sara rolled her eyes. “Okay, okay, we don’t have to be so formal here. This is family.” She looked around the airport and motioned with her hand for them to straighten up.

Ebi sniffed at Kunio’s shoes. Reiko gave her leash a quick tug, and Ebi sat down by her feet.

Sara picked up the handle of her rollaway suitcase. “Are we ready?” With her free hand, she looped her arm in Kunio’s. Rosemary led the way out the terminal while Reiko and Ebi walked behind the three of them.

Reiko frowned as she looked at Kunio. He would have surely produced nothing less than royal grandchildren. Breaking them up would not be an easy task but one she had to carry out before things got too far. But would it get that far? Would his family even let him marry an
American girl? A divorcee? He walked upright as he looked around the terminal, not saying a
word, silent, poised—emanating the aura of good breeding and ancient nobility. Families such as
his would hardly allow the bloodline to be tainted with Caucasian blood much less Korean, and
Sara was cursed with both. Caucasian from her father and Korean from Reiko, neither one pure
in its own right. Bringing Sara to America, the other side of the world, was supposed to have
meant that Reiko didn’t have to worry about such things. Mississippi was hardly a place for
meeting other Japanese people, much less eligible Japanese men. Living in Mississippi should
have alleviated all threat of ever having to face such things as this. Reiko cursed herself for not
being strong enough at the time to have drowned her. Reiko shivered and buttoned her black
cardigan close around her neck, and she left it buttoned even after leaving the terminal.

Sara and Kunio sat together in the back seat, and Reiko sat up front in the passenger seat
with Rosemary. Ebi strained against her leash to look at Sara. Reiko grabbed her firmly, sat her
down in her lap, and gave her a silent order with just a look. The dog sat down but continued to
face the back seat.

“Kunio, how do you like America?” asked Rosemary.

Through the side mirror, Reiko could see him smiling politely.

“It’s very big. Much different than home.”

“How so?” asked Rosemary.

“More wilderness and land that’s not being used.”

Reiko saw him turn to look out the window.

“Japan’s about the size of California,” said Sara.

Reiko wondered what he was thinking as he looked out at the large straight pines and
scrubby underbrush which peppered the clay canvas, a mutable crimson clay which constantly
shifted, creased the asphalt in random but rhythmic thump, thump, thumps of the tires. Did the
decades of gin scented decaying pine needles coming through the air vents assault him as it did
her? Far from Reiko’s semi-tropical homeland with its thickly forested hills, cool streams
weeping from ancient volcanic rocks, hollow rustling of bamboo leaves. Superimposing one
image over the other in her mind only ruddied her homeland streams. She looked down at the
side mirror to see Kunio looking back at her. Panicked, although she wasn’t quite sure why, she
put her hand to her forehead and brushed aside an errant lock of hair. She fumbled in her purse
for her sunglasses and put them on. When she glanced back at the mirror, he had disappeared,
shifted out of view. How long had he been watching her, and why was he so interested? Does he
know, she wondered. Is it the shape of my face, my eyes, my cheeks, or maybe my skin that
belies my Korean heritage? More than a trace in my own blood but diluted in Sara’s enough to
erase all signs of it. Or is it? As if he could read her mind, though she was almost certain he
couldn’t, she concentrated on the scenery so as not to betray her thoughts. She looked down at
Ebi. “Ebi okay?” she whispered. Ebi glanced at her and fell back asleep.

Reiko listened to Sara’s voice as she played tour guide for Kunio. Her giggles punctuated
with kisses to his cheek made Reiko cringe. Like her father, she had always been an affectionate
child, trusting others’ affections to be as genuine as her own.

Rosemary dropped them off at Reiko’s house, and when they got settled in, Sara and
Kunio went swimming in the pond while Reiko fixed supper. From the kitchen window, she
could see them splashing and playing like two children. They raced across the length of the pond.
Sara won and was standing on the bank flexing her biceps in the air like an adolescent boy
showing off his newly formed muscles. Kunio dragged himself out of the water onto the bank in
the exaggerated posture of a defeated warrior but when he reached her, he scooped her up in his
arms and flung her back out into the water. She squealed, and it was his turn to gloat. Reiko
could see why her daughter was so enamored of him; he looked just as stunning in a pair of
soggy swim trunks as he did in his fancy clothes. Kunio extended his hand to help her up and
into his arms. She licked the water dripping off his chin and kissed him, pressing the entire
length of her body against his.

Reiko looked away and tossed her spoon into the sink. It bounced on the stainless steel
and landed in the garbage disposal. She fished it out and turned the hot water wide open. With
the rough side of her sponge, she scrubbed the spoon with quick fastidious strokes. She rinsed off
the soap and placed it in the drainer. Steam billowed from the sink as she leaned over it and
rubbed the sponge over the stainless steel. She leaned hard into each stroke. The spray nozzle of
the handheld sprayer looked dirty, so she scrubbed it and once it was clean, she used it to rinse
out the sink. The sink gleamed. She continued to scrub, rinse, scrub.

The water boiled in the saucepan and rattled the lid. The rattling freed her from the
cleaning spirit’s hold. She saw that the sink was spotless, turned off the hot water. The lid
bounced. She lifted it off the saucepan. Reconstituted dried shiitake mushrooms and kombu
seaweed swirled in the clear bubbling water. She emptied the remaining contents of a bag of
dried wakame seaweed into the water, cut the label off the bag, and slipped it into an envelope
filled with other such cellophane labels. As she scraped julienne strips of daikon radishes and
small cubes of tofu from the cutting board with the back of her knife into the water to boil, she
made a mental note to remember to give Sara the envelope and some money before Sara’s return
to New York City. She scooped out a dollop of miso soybean paste from a ceramic jar with a
ladle, lowered it into the boiling water, and scraped little smudges of the miso at a time with her long bamboo chopsticks, mixing it with the water in the ladle until it all dissolved. The sight of the thinly cut slabs of marbled beef laid out in neat rows on the cutting board pleased her as she thought of how envious her family back home in Japan would be, indulging in such luxuries. She pounded the slabs with a meat mallet until they were papery thin, placed five long stalks of scallions in a neat row lengthwise along each one, and rolled them up tightly into negimaki logs. In a cast iron skillet normally reserved for making cornbread, she lowered the negimaki into the simmering teriyaki broth. A second saucepan began boiling, so she stuffed it full of baby spinach leaves and pushed them down with chopsticks until they withered under the steam. The spinach was too hot to handle, so she put it in a colander and left it to cool in the sink.

Sara and Kunio entered the back door panting as if they had been running. Without looking, Reiko said over her shoulder, “You catch cold. Take shower now.” She waved her chopsticks toward the bathrooms. “Supper ready soon. Sara-chan use momma bassroom. Give Minamoto-san guest bass. Already towel.”

She heard Sara say, “Come on, I’ll show you where everything is,” as they passed through the kitchen to the back of the house.

She drew her place settings from her best china, carried by hand on the plane from Japan, and placed them on the dining room table. On the largest plates in the setting she arranged bite sized negimaki slices into chevrons and formed roses made from paper thin carrot strips to place opposite each peak creating the base of a triangle. She squeezed the spinach tightly, wringing the water out, and shaped it into small cones on smaller plates and sprinkled each cone with toasted white sesame seeds. Pan fried gyoza dumplings were laid out like fans on plates the size of a hand’s breadth, and on the smallest dishes she nestled various pickles in hues of bright yellow,
eggplant purple, red, and drab green. She wanted so much to impress Kunio that everything had to be perfect. There would be no discernible difference in her meal and one he would get in Japan, down to the tea. She set the kettle of water on to boil.

“Need help?” Sara said as she walked into the kitchen.

“You finish already?” said Reiko.

“I wasn’t that dirty.”

“You no enjoy.”

“What’s there to enjoy? You get in, get clean, and get out.”

Reiko shook her head. She opened the cupboard and got out a bottle of soy sauce.

“What?” said Sara, her arms crossed on her chest.

Reiko lifted her chin to an upper cabinet. “You taller. Get good tea set.”

“I don’t want any tea,” Sara said as she took the tea pot and two cups from the top shelf of the cupboard.

“You drink tea.”

“It’s too hot.”

Reiko wasn’t ready for a full argument. Not yet. She really just wanted to enjoy the company of her daughter.

Sara walked into the dining room. “Why so fancy everything? You never do this when it’s just me here.”

Reiko stood on a step stool and took down a third tea cup. “You no appreciate,” she said and stepped into the dining room in time to see Sara picking up a pickle with her fingers and putting it in her mouth. “What I tell you?”

“I’m hungry.”

“This is America.”

“Proper way is always proper.”

“The same crap,” Sara said and groaned under her breath. “Don’t lecture me about being the subservient housewife who waits on her husband hand and foot. I don’t buy it.”

“You can no make good wife.”

“You have made that clear numerous times since my divorce, so just drop it already.”

“You too young before.”

“Age had nothing to do with our breakup.”

Reiko saw Kunio walk in behind Sara. Reiko pursed her lips. A short “Mm” was accompanied by a look she gave Sara to indicate his approach. Sara snapped her head around and looked at Kunio. The two women became silent. Kunio stopped in the doorway. Reiko quickly put a smile on her face for Kunio, placed her hand on Sara’s shoulder, and said to her, “Ask Minamoto-san if he wan something to drink.”

Sara went up and gave him a one arm hug. “You smell good,” she said and smiled up at him. His face was freshly scrubbed and shaven, and he wore a new pair of khakis and a white golf shirt.

He put his arm around her waist and gave her a peck on the forehead.

Reiko watched this little exchange unable to turn away. She was appalled not by her daughter’s behavior but by Kunio’s. Either living in America had adversely affected him, or public social behavior had undergone a complete change in the twenty years since she had been gone. As she was raised, hugging and kissing in public was only allowed between parents and very young children.
When Kunio approached Reiko, she realized she had been staring at them and smiled right away. With both hands he offered her a slender burnt orange box tied with a chocolate brown satin ribbon. “Domo sumisen . . .”

“All right, stop it right here and now,” Sara said and put up her hands between Kunio and her mother, looking back and forth between them. “No Japanese is to be spoken this entire weekend. Understand?”

Kunio started to laugh but stopped when Sara looked at him. “This is America. We speak English.”

“You’re right,” he said.

Reiko held the box gingerly in her hands. She hated speaking English, resisted it. She thought it sounded so vulgar issuing from her mouth but spoke it now to appease Sara. “Excuse my daughter,” she said to Kunio. “She berry bad manners.” She bowed her head and held up the box. “Sank you berry much.”

He nodded.

“Go ahead and open it, Mom.”

Reiko could tell Sara had a hand in picking it out since she seemed so anxious for Reiko’s reaction. She placed the box on the dining room table. She gently untied the ribbon, folded it neatly, and set it aside. She took her time lifting the lid from the box so as not to disturb its contents.

“Open it already,” bouncing up and down.

Reiko grasped the tissue paper which was folded around what she knew would be a scarf and pressed it aside. Inside lay a beautiful silk twill scarf. It was folded so that the center medallion, a man and woman in Elizabethan dress, was featured prominently on top.
“Isn’t it gorgeous?” said Sara. “It’s Hermes.”

Afraid of soiling it Reiko grasped only the edges with her fingertips and lifted it out of the box. The scarf unfolded. It announced itself with the high pitched whine of silk gliding on silk. A dark purple border embedded with vines and silhouettes of animals surrounded rich red peacocks, doves, dogs, horses, and rams, all in pairs. She pulled the scarf slowly across the back of her hand and watched the troupe of people and animals swim by.

“All berry beautiful,” she said. She shook her head. “No need spend so much money, Minamoto-san.”

“It is my pleasure,” he said.

Sara grasped the scarf. Reiko was startled and reached out as if to break its fall, but realized the silliness of her gesture and let go.

“It’s not going to break,” said Sara.

Reiko laughed at herself.

“Let’s try it on.” Sara rolled it up and tied it around her mother’s neck. “It goes great with this outfit, especially against the black.” She grasped Reiko’s shoulders and guided her to the mirror by the back door. “See?”

Reiko looked in the mirror not at herself nor at the Hermes scarf but at her daughter. Not a trace of makeup. Sara’s skin reflected the evening sunlight coming through the window. Not a freckle or a blemish anywhere. Her eyes, a lighter shade of brown than Reiko’s, were clear and sparkled as she adjusted the scarf and positioned it just right. Her cheeks were still rosy from her shower. Sara bit her lower lip while she concentrated on tying and retying the knot, and when the knot was just right, she released her lip. It blushed red.

“What’s wrong?” said Sara.
Reiko looked at her daughter in the mirror. “Beautiful.”

Sara hugged her mother from behind. Her warmth spread across Reiko’s back. Sara sniffled. “Thanks, Mom,” she whispered in her mother’s ear.

The kettle whistled for Reiko’s attention. She went back to the kitchen and turned off the burner, poured the boiling water into a carafe, blowing the steam away from her face as she did. She wiped a tear from the corner or her eye. “Go ahead sit down. Mo skoshi ready.” She could hear them mumbling to each other and shuffling their chairs but couldn’t make out what they were saying. When she went back to the table, they were seated and waiting patiently, Sara with her elbows propped on the table and Kunio sitting upright with his hands folded casually in his lap. She opened the lid of the rice maker; a mushroom of steam rose from the bowl and dissipated along the ceiling. Careful to avoid breaking apart the grains, she scooped rice into bowls, the first one to Kunio. They began eating while she prepared the tea. She worked as though Kunio was observing her, noting her technique. It was the way Tomiko, her stepmother, had taught her. She poured the hot water into a terra cotta bowl which had a handle and a lip. While waiting for the water to cool slightly, she placed the tea cups on saucers made of polished cherry tree bark and lined them up. Her hand hovering close to the bowl, she assessed that the water had cooled down to the perfect temperature and poured it into the delicately painted white porcelain tea pot. Each cup received an equal portion, and by going back and forth among them, they were all the same strength. As she handed Kunio his tea cup, she watched the motion of her hands as if they belonged to someone else, those of a much younger woman, gentle, poised, delicate, not those of a farmer’s wife at all but of a pampered woman.

“Mom.”
The skin was white, translucent, the fingers graceful and controlled like the movements of a ballerina.

“Mom?”

“Hai?” She looked at Sara.

“I really don’t want any tea.”

The cup was balanced atop the saucer suspended between her two hands; she pulled it back and set it down gently next to her chopsticks. “Please, help yourself,” she said and motioned toward Kunio’s tea cup with an upturned palm. It pained her to have to break up this relationship, show Sara in such a bad light. But marriage to Kunio would ruin Reiko, reveal the embarrassing truth about her mixed blood. Persistence. I must remain firm, she coached herself. Mothers were supposed to uplift their daughters, place them in a position higher than their own, to gain in status and rank. Such was not the privilege of Sara. Better to break them up before too much time and emotion was invested. She served herself a bowl of rice.

“Berry hard to raise Japanese daughter in America,” she said to Kunio.

“Mo-om,” whined Sara. “Let’s talk about Kunio and his great job.”

Reiko cringed as she watched her daughter try to play the role of a jaded adolescent. She was too old for this—slouching, eating with her elbows on the table, gesticulating with her chopsticks. It was the posture she had assumed in Reiko’s presence ever since they moved to Smyre.

“Oh, it’s not so great.” Kunio enunciated each word purposefully, trying very hard to mimic the American pronunciation.

“Managing the P.R. department of Hana Cosmetics is no small thing. Mom uses Hana. Doesn’t her skin look great?”
“Thank you for your patronage,” he said and bowed to Reiko.

“Berry nice I can get in Jackson now. Use to get by mail from sister in Kyushu. Not so good in summertime. Wintertime only.”

“Yes, the ingredients are very sensitive to heat fluctuation.”

“Kunio’s dad is on the board of directors back in Tokyo,” Sara said.

Reiko held the bowl of rice up to her chin and hesitated before bringing the chopsticks to her mouth. She nodded gravely. Her daughter, her grandchildren, heirs to a corporate fortune. She’d prayed faithfully to the gods for this ever since Sara was born—success, wealth, and most of all, happiness. How could they be so cruel? The tears stung her eyes, and she hastily got up and murmured that she’d forgotten the soy sauce. Once out of sight, she pressed both hands against her face and breathed deeply. Maybe they won’t find out, she thought to herself. She took another deep breath. Maybe they won’t care. No, they would care, but there might be the possibility that they wouldn’t find out. She reached into the cabinet, took out a cut glass soy sauce dispenser, and returned to the dining room.

“I’ll take some of that,” Sara said.

Reiko sat down and resumed eating. “You hab brozer and sister?”

“Yes, one sister. She works in the laboratory. Chemist.”

“Berry smart.”

“Yes,” he responded.

“She made this new anti-wrinkle cream they’re test marketing now,” said Sara.

“We will release it very soon,” he said. “But I don’t think your mother needs to use it. She has very beautiful skin. Just like you.”

Sara smiled and kissed him on the cheek.
“Sara too much sun. No wear hat and come home wiz dark face.”

“I like the way my skin looks when it tans.”

“Your mother is right. Not so good for your skin.”

“But you don’t wear a hat when you golf,” Sara said to him.

“Men, women, different,” Reiko said.

“It’s okay for men to age but not women? That’s not right,” Sara replied.

“Not right, not wrong,” Reiko said.

Kunio’s cell phone rang. He looked down at the screen. “Oh, excuse me. I must take this.” He got up from the table, bowed, and answered the phone by the back door. “Hai, Minamoto desu.”

“No speak against man,” whispered Reiko.

“You’re living in the dark ages of Confucianism,” Sara said in a low voice. “The era of kowtowing to men is over. Our sisters fought a long battle so that we could stand side-by-side with the men.”

“My sister no protest.”

“It’s just an expression.”

“You bring shame on family if you protest.”

“Ah, lost the call,” said Kunio.

“You’ll get a better signal outside by the barn,” Sara said and pointed in that direction.

“Please excuse me.”

When the door closed behind Kunio, Reiko said, “You should no talk back to Minamoto-san.”

“Are you still talking about the hat thing?”
“Yes.”

“That’s not a big deal,” Sara said and stuffed a whole gyoza dumpling in her mouth.

“Japanese man different from American man.”

“Kunio’s not like that.”

“He berry traditional. I can tell.” Reiko picked up her tea cup, and holding it with one hand and cradling it with the other, she gently lifted it to her lips and sipped. “Japanese men no like strong wife.”

“That’s bullshit,” Sara said with a dismissive laugh.

“No bullshit. Minamoto-san get tired berry quickly. You see,” she said.

Sara sat upright, her face reddening. “Oh my God. I see where this is going. You hate him, don’t you?”

“I like him berry much, but he no good for you.”

“Why is it that every time I bring someone home, you find something wrong with him?” she whined. “Before, I thought it was because they were all Americans. But now . . .” She raised her voice. “I bring home Kunio, Mother. He’s perfect AND he’s Japanese, and you still hate him.” She shook her head repeatedly.

Reiko kept her tears in check as she watched her daughter getting angrier with each word she said. “No wan Sara to get hurt,” she said softly.

“Kunio really cares about me.”

“He just wan to play.”

Sara rolled her eyes. “You barely know him.”

“Sara-chan, you not a serious candidate for his wife. You American. You divorce.”

Sara groaned and supported her head with her hand.
“Sara-chan berry pretty. Good like jewelry—earring,” she said and pulled on her earlobe. Her hand went to her throat. “Necklace.” She searched for the right word. “Decoration. Understand?”

Sara looked up. “A stupid trinket.”

“No stupid.” Reiko put two fingers to her temple. “He sink you decoration. Just like necklace.” She pointed to Sara’s flower necklace. “Not wife.”

“How do you do it?” Sara shook her head back and forth, over and over. “You’re the only one I’ve ever known who can flatter me and grind me into the dirt in the same breath.” She looked down at her rice. “Fucking amazing.” She took the chopsticks and shoved them into her bowl of rice so that they stuck upright, sentries to the underworld. She bolted up and caught the chair before it fell. “Ugh!” she screamed while marching out of the room.

Reiko looked at the chopsticks embedded in the pearly rice. She wanted to look away but was compelled to stare. Sara knew it symbolized a death offering. She might as well have stabbed them into her mother’s heart. Numb by the conversation, feeling as if she was falling into a deep dank hole, the air closed around her like the time she’d fallen into the rice paddy. It had been the end of the day, dark already, and she had been trying to follow her father through the fields. Her foot had slipped on the rain-soaked earth, and she slid off the path, over the steep dirt wall which formed part of the terrace, down into the pond-like paddy. Mosquitoes swarmed about her face and ears. Up to her three year old shins in stagnant water, crying for help, the dirt wall rising well above her head too slimy to climb, something brushed against her leg, and Reiko screamed. Warm urine flowed down her legs. “Otochan!” she’d screamed for her father while clawing at the dirt wall, jumping repeatedly to try and reach the ledge. The waxing moon shone brightly but offered only faint light. A hand grasped her wrist. “Give me your other hand,” he’d
said in a calm soothing voice. “Come on Reiko-chan. You’re all right. Let me have your other hand.” She’d reached high up toward her father’s voice and the warmth of his strong hands. He pulled her out effortlessly and cradled her in his arms there on the ground, rocking her back and forth until she calmed down, smoothing the hair from her eyes. With the sleeve of his cotton yukata he wiped away the streaks of mud from her cheeks. “Shh, you’re okay my little bird. Daddy’ll make it all better.” Despite the calmness of his voice, she could feel his heart pound in his chest as she pressed against him, stealing his warmth to calm her shivering body.

She shivered now at the memory and pulled the scarf closer around her neck. Kunio walked back to his seat and frowned at Sara’s rice bowl with its chopsticks jutting towards the sky. He gingerly pulled them out and placed them neatly aside, laying them on a small, porcelain hashi-oki.

Reiko sat up straight in her chair. “Sara bassroom,” she said to him and swirled the green tea sediment which had settled to the bottom of her cup.

He nodded in affirmation and blotted his upper lip with a dark blue handkerchief taken from his pocket. Reiko noticed the sheen of the cotton and how it reflected the lamp light. “It is still very warm outside even though the sun has set,” he said to her in Japanese as he sat down. She responded in Japanese. “Yes. It’s like this all summer.” She took a sip and realized her tea had gotten too cold to drink. “Let me pour you some fresh tea,” she said and held out her hand to take his cup. She took his and Sara’s cups to the kitchen and poured them out in the sink. She and Sara returned at the same time.

Sara kissed Kunio on the cheek before she sat down. “Did you get through?” She reached for her chopsticks but hesitated on seeing them prone on the hashi-oki.

“Yes,” said Kunio. He resumed eating.
Reiko poured fresh tea into the three cups and set Kunio’s down on his saucer.

“Mrs. Martin, everything is very good,” said Kunio in Japanese.

“Thank you.” She placed Sara’s cup on her saucer and nudged it toward Sara’s plate.

“Wha . . .” Sara uttered but stopped as if she had gotten food caught in her throat and coughed instead. She looked over the rim of her rice bowl and said, “Thanks, Mom.”

Reiko wanted to give her daughter an approving smile but didn’t. “Hai,” she responded.
Two weeks later, Reiko Martin stepped out onto her screened-in back porch in her nightgown, coffee cup in hand, to let out Ebi, and discovered a metal stringer full of fish hanging from the doorknob. “Grant-san again,” Reiko said to the black pug. The dog sniffed the fish and barked at one of the croakers as it flopped and let out a deep hoarse sound. The morning sun peeked over the trees at the far end of the pasture. The grass sparkled with dew. Reiko brought the fish into the kitchen and set them in a bucket inside the sink and poured water into it. The water nearly reached the brim when the telephone rang.

“Hello?”

“Reiko-nesan? It’s Mariko. Happy birthday, Big Sister!” Mariko Yamaguchi shouted at the other end.

“Thank you.” Reiko’s voice went up in volume in greeting her youngest sister. She smiled at how neither of them had ever gotten out of the habit of shouting during a long-distance call.

“It’s getting late and we haven’t heard from you about your plans for August and the obon festival.”

“What plans?”

“With it being the first obon since Mom died, and Sara’s engagement and everything . . .” Reiko nearly dropped the phone. “Who told you that?”

“Nothing happens in this family I don’t know about,” Mariko said with an air of triumph. “What a wonderful birthday present, huh? I see grandchildren in your future. If Sara times this right, she could be the Dragon mother of a Golden Dragon baby, but she’ll have to hurry. No
one-year engagement. Lots of Japanese girls are holding off sex to make sure their baby arrives in 2000. If I wasn’t past my prime . . .”

“They’re not engaged, and I’m staying here,” Reiko said softly. “Maybe next year.”

Reiko’s hand shook a little as she reached for a dust rag from the counter. What else was Mariko privy to that she hadn’t told Reiko?

“They broke up so soon? Kids nowadays. Come at least for obon,” Mariko pleaded.

As a young girl in Hirado, Reiko and her family had celebrated the Buddhist ceremony honoring their ancestors each August. They had walked together to the graveyard, a plateau cut high into a steep hill overlooking the ocean. Her mother packed picnic lunches; her father and eldest brother carried up buckets of water; Reiko and the rest of her brothers and sisters brought brooms, brushes and other cleaning supplies. They had spent the entire morning weeding, sweeping the grounds, and washing the grave stones. As her mother had passed by each grave, she had ceremoniously poured a cup of water onto each headstone, clapped her hands together twice and said a prayer to the returning relatives’ spirits.

“Do you need money for airfare? We’ll all chip in and . . .”

“No. I can’t go this year.”

“Oh,” Mariko sounded sad.

“How is everyone? Shigeru?” Reiko quickly asked.

“Good,” Mariko said. “Shigeru will soon be old enough to take over his father’s business. He seems to be enjoying that pretty well. But I’m worried about him.” She sighed. “He’s still not married and there are no prospects in sight. We’ve tried, even used a mediator, to find him someone, but he just keeps rejecting them for this reason or that. He’s impossible, and he knows how desperate I am for a grandchild. Forget a Golden baby. Any baby will do.”
“I wouldn’t worry about that.” Reiko looked out into the field and watched Ebi chase a rabbit through the tall grass, the little dog’s head visible only as she bounced. “He’ll find someone eventually. Just enjoy having two men in the house to help you with chores,”

“I’m sorry, how rude of me to complain like that when you’re all alone now.”

“I’m fine. My house is paid for. The neighbors check in on me every now and then. Town’s not that far away, so I can bicycle in to get groceries. It’s really very comfortable,” Reiko said.

“Sister, why don’t you come live with us? You haven’t visited since we moved into our new house in Sagami-hara, but I know you’d like it. It’s only an hour and a half to Tokyo, and I’m sure Shigeru will marry soon, so it’ll just be Shoichiro and myself. You could have your own room.”

“It’s so sweet of you to offer. Let me think about it.” Reiko dusted the mementos she and her late husband, Jonathan, brought back from various trips together. They completely covered the desk which sat in one corner of the dining room. “Better yet, why don’t you come here?” she said, her voice hopeful.

“Hmm,” said Michiko. “I would except that with my high blood pressure, I’m afraid something might happen.”

“What would happen? Besides, we have doctors and hospitals here.”

“Not Japanese doctors.”

“What’s wrong with American doctors?”

“They may not be able to figure out what’s wrong,” Mariko protested. “Reiko, it’s easy for you. You speak English. I wouldn’t know what to say to a foreign doctor.”
“I wouldn’t abandon you. If you needed to see a doctor, I would go with you and translate.”

“I’m not so fond of country doctors.”

“Mariko, you’re making it sound like I live in a third-world country,” Reiko said, feeling a little offended.

“I thought you lived in the country?”

“Yes, but just like in Hirado, we have hospitals here, too.”

“Not Tokyo hospitals.”

“You don’t go to Tokyo to the doctor.”

“But I could if I needed to.”

“Forget it.” Reiko swatted at a fly with the cloth but missed. She picked up a water-filled glass dome that read “Key West, Florida” and held it up to the window. Clear plastic fish swirled around a scuba diver standing on the ocean floor.

“I’m sorry, Reiko. If you lived in New York or Los Angeles, I might feel differently, but…”

Reiko mumbled in English to herself, “No one came see me when we live California, either.”

“What’s that? I couldn’t hear what you said,” Mariko shouted.

“I said I don’t want to run up your phone bill, so we should probably cut off now,” Reiko said in Japanese. “Shoichiro-san will be upset with you for spending so much money.” They both laughed. Reiko felt bad that she was putting the burden of her frustration on her favorite sister.
“Never mind him, he’ll always be a tightwad. Before you go, though, I wanted to tell you something.”

Reiko held the globe up to the bright window. “Yes?” The plastic fish glinted gelt-like in the warm sunshine.

“I went to Hirado last week to visit Shigeru and to help Kimi-nesan clean out dad’s old room. Kimi is having carpeting put in. Can you believe that?”

“What about the tatami mats and the wooden floors?” Reiko set the globe down and dropped her dust cloth on the kitchen counter.

“I know, it makes me mad, too, but it’s their place now, so we can’t really say anything. And now that Mom’s gone, they have no reason not to change it. They sold ten acres up on the hill by the road to pay for the updates.”

“I wish you hadn’t told me that.” Reiko pursed her lips as she remembered walking past the large chestnut tree each day on her way to and from school. It was also there that Taniguchi gave Reiko her first kiss. She thought about how the new owners would probably want to cut it down to make room for a house.

“I’m sorry. But I did manage to convince them to leave Mom’s room alone. Anyway, while I was cleaning the floor, I bumped into the wall and punctured the paper by accident. Actually it was a hole cut into the wall and just pasted over with rice paper.”

Reiko folded her arms and leaned her back against the counter.

“There was a box in there with your name on it,” Mariko continued.

“What kind of box?”

“It’s sort of a long wooden box that’s wrapped in paper and string.”

“Are you sure it’s for me and not Aunt Reiko?”
“I’m sure. The note is addressed, ‘Rei-chan,’ and it’s written by Dad and has his red ink seal on the envelope.”

Reiko turned to the sink and looked down at the fish in the bucket; the croaker barely moved his mouth and gills.

“It’s a good thing I was there,” Mariko went on. “Kimi wanted to open it. She said it belonged to her and Shigeru now that they’d inherited the house. I told her that Dad sealed it and wrote your name on it for a reason. As much as Shinichi wanted to agree with her, he knew I was right and for once sided with our family instead of hers. I brought it home with me for safekeeping until you get here.”

“Don’t you have my mailing address?”

“I shouldn’t mail it. Whatever’s inside might break in the mail. You can pick it up yourself after meeting your . . . the fiancé’s family. That way you can tell me all about them.”

“She’s not engaged,” said Reiko. She picked up a sponge and wiped the already spotless counter top.

“Let her enjoy herself even if it’s only for . . .” Mariko’s voice trailed off.

Reiko stopped wiping the counter top and waited for Mariko to continue. When she didn’t, she asked, “For what?”

“You haven’t been here in so long,” Mariko stammered. “We were all disappointed you didn’t come last year.”

There was silence on the line, and Reiko knew it was her turn to say something, but she pursed her lips instead. She forced the sponge into the gap between the faucet handle and the base, pushing it back and forth to clean the stem. The hollow, sharp underside of the handle caught the sponge. Shredded bits of blue sponge fell into the sink.
“I really miss you,” said Mariko finally.

“I miss you, too. Tell everyone I said ‘hi.’ I'll talk to you soon.”

“Sister, please really give it some thought. I think it’ll be good for you. Besides, Sara shouldn’t do this alone.”

Reiko listened to the breathy static like the hollow sound of the ocean in a conch shell traveling through the phone line. She imagined a thick copper cord encased in black, laid out between her phone and Mariko’s, the miles and miles of mountains, desert, ocean terrain it covered, the sounds it would have picked up along the way. She thought she could hear dozens of deep water shrimp stepping over the cord with their pinprick toes tapping as they crossed, a moray eel sliding across like a violin bow.

“I’ll think about it. Bye, bye.” Reiko hung up the phone, leaned closer to the sink, and watched the croaker as its gills flapped more slowly. The sun rays shone down onto the bucket and reflected from one of the croaker’s pupils which flashed like a piece of mica. By carefully smoothing down the dorsal fin, Reiko succeeded in picking up his slimy body, but as she unthreaded the metal stringer he squirmed, stabbing her hand, and splashed back down into the bucket. She jerked her hand back, washed it under the tap, headed down the hallway to the bathroom, and sat on the toilet seat with her first-aid supplies. The blood ran into a scar in the palm of her hand. She cleaned it with alcohol-soaked gauze and applied steady pressure with her thumb.

Sara's room was opposite the bathroom. Sunlight shone through the lace curtains onto the pink walls of the bedroom adorned with pictures of Sara as a child in her ballet costume, sitting at the piano during numerous recitals, posing with her saxophone. Stuffed animals and
dolls sat in tidy rows on the bed. Still holding her hand, Reiko paused at the doorway; the central air-conditioning fan started up, fluttering the curtains.

“Why she no tell me?” Reiko said to the stuffed animals. Sara’s first husband hadn’t been right for her. Too lazy. Always talking about how much money he would make in the future but never getting there. A terrible match for her, but at least he was American, and the secret of Reiko’s birth would never have been an issue.

It had been ten years since Sara lived at home. Reiko lifted her thumb and inspected the wound. The bleeding had stopped. A piece of lint floated down and landed in the middle of the white eyelet bedspread; Reiko picked it off, walked back to the kitchen, and threw it and the wadded gauze in the trash can.

After putting the last container of fish into the freezer, she checked her lipstick in the mirror by the back door and took her floppy cotton hat from a chair and held the door open.

“Ebi, time to come home,” she called in Japanese. Ebi ran up to the house wagging her curlicue tail and looked up at Reiko who patted her on the head. “Good girl.” Ebi obediently went inside the house and watched Reiko descend the stairs. Her foot slipped on the second rotted step, where it had come loose. “Oops,” she said, not for the first time, and put it back into place. “I have to fix that.” She headed into the barn.

Reiko came back out with a green tricycle. She walked it onto the blacktop road and started the three-mile trip into town. In Japan, there had never been any opportunity for her to learn how to drive, and with all the trains and buses, there was never a need. After she and Jonathan were married, he encouraged, but never forced, her to learn. Too afraid to drive, she had settled instead on the adult tricycle which she’d brought with her from Japan when they moved to Mississippi. Although Jonathan had tried hard to describe Smyre to her, Reiko
couldn’t conceptualize how rustic life would be in the small town. The tricycle had remained useless for ten years until the county had paved the dirt road at the front of their property. The house they purchased was an old farmstead with no indoor running water. Since she’d grown up on a farm, she was used to the concept of an outhouse, but even the poorest of her neighbors had had a proper bathtub. Her family had a very large, three-foot deep, wooden tub with a cast iron base that was heated from below with a wood-fired stove. Bathing everyday had been a ritual. Reiko broke into tears when Jonathan had set the little round galvanized metal washtub onto the kitchen floor. He carried buckets of water into the house and heated the water for her on the stove, but even at five-feet two inches tall, Reiko could not hunch over far enough for a proper soak. Even when the tub was completely filled and she sat down in the water, it had barely covered her to her waist. It was five years before they could install indoor plumbing and she had stopped crying herself to sleep. Sara had adapted more quickly. Rosemary Edwards had befriended Sara at school and showed her how to take her new lifestyle in stride.

She pedaled her tricycle past the wall of pines and pin oaks which canopied the road. The rapidly warming air was stagnant save the light buzzing of cicadas. Mary Lewis, divorced mother of four, pulled up in her scarred Chevy pick-up truck and idled to Reiko’s pace. “Reiko. You doing all right?” Mary asked in her Down East Maine accent. She pulled back her waist-length salt and pepper hair, damp ringlets at the nape of her neck, sweat rings at the armpits of her drab blue cotton dress. The Pentecostal church didn’t allow its female members to cut or style their hair.

“I go to beauty shop.”

“Yes, I guess they’ll be busy over there today what with the big dance going on over at the community center tonight,” Mary said with a frown.
“I hab appointment.” Reiko smiled and continued pedaling.

“I don’t know how you can be out here in all them clothes.” Mary pointed to Reiko’s long-sleeved linen blouse, white cotton gloves and long slacks.

“I don’t like tan, Mary. I wan keep my skin white and beautiful,” she said through a smile.

Mary remained deadpan. “Well, just don’t get heat stroke out here.”

“Sank you, I’ll be fine,” Reiko said and suppressed a grin.

“Alrighty, then. If you need anything, just give us a shout. God bless.” Mary pulled away slowly and waved.

Reiko waved back. The second mile was a gradual uphill, so she stopped to rest at the crest. Grant Harrison was driving in the opposite direction; the back of his new pick-up truck was stacked with sheets of plywood and two-by-fours. He had his window rolled down, and Reiko noticed the curls of his greyish light brown hair peeking out from under his baseball cap. Since moving back to Smyre six years ago, he had kept himself busy with his carpentry business. As he passed Reiko, he looked at her from beneath the bill of his cap, smiled broadly, and waved. Reiko smiled back shyly. She took off her wide-brimmed hat and wiped her brow with the handkerchief she kept tucked into her sleeve. The downhill and the level road beyond it was a welcome sight.

“How you doin’, Miss Reiko?” said Grant as he stopped his pick-up in the road next to her.

“Sank you for fish,” she said and blotted the sweat from her brow with a handkerchief she kept tucked into her sleeve.

Grant pointed to her tricycle. “You want a ride into town?”
“I need exercise,” she said, embarrassed by the attention he was paying her.

“I’m goin up here to the Arnolds’ to work on that barn. I’ll check on you later. Make sure you got home okay.” He smiled and tipped his hat.

Reiko replaced the handkerchief in her sleeve and smiled, lowering her head until she could no longer see Grant’s face from under the brim of her hat.

“You keep cool, you hear?” Grant pulled away slowly.

The gesture was always appreciated even though she thought she was too old to be starting a new relationship. Besides, there was the age difference. Grant was even younger than Jonathan was. They had known each other while growing up, but if she remembered correctly, there were at least four years between them. If she was in Japan, a man that age wouldn’t have given her the time of day. It was only because she looked so young to the American men that they paid attention to her. A Japanese man would have guessed her age right away and left her alone. Grant was probably just being nice since she was the widow of one of his best friends. Best to keep such thoughts at bay.

Unlike most of the surrounding towns, Smyre managed to attract plenty of residents to the shops and restaurants around its town square. There were hardly any available parking spots, but Reiko had no problem pulling her tricycle up onto the sidewalk and in front of the beauty parlor.

“Hey Reiko,” two old men called from across the street who were playing checkers in front of the courthouse.

She smiled and waved to them with the grace and poise of the Queen of England.

An elderly woman pushing a walker reached the door of the beauty parlor at the same time. “Mrs. Bounds, you’re looking good,” said Reiko, and she held the door open for her.
The waiting room chairs in Amanda Bryant’s beauty shop were all occupied that morning. The receptionist, a short, stiff-haired blonde smiled and said, “Hey Miss Reiko.”

“Hello Lisa, I hab appointment wiz Rora.”

“Why, of course.” Lisa Miller looked in the appointment book. “Here it is, Miss Reiko, eleven o’clock. Why don’t you go ahead and have a seat in the chair back there, and Lola’ll be right with you.” Lisa pointed to the cutting chair.

Seating herself in front of the long row of mirrors, Reiko folded her hands in her lap over her purse and waited patiently. An elderly woman was assisted by Laura Hayes, one of the three hair stylists, to the chair next to Reiko, her hair wrapped in a towel.

“Mrs. Arnold, how are you?” Reiko said as she recognized Delma Arnold’s face in the mirror.

“Reiko, I’m doin’ fine. How ‘bout yourself?” Mrs. Arnold placed a pudgy hand on Reiko’s skinny arm. “How are you keepin’ these days all by yourself out there?” “Just fine.”

“I just love what you’ve done out front with the flowers and all. They are just gorgeous.”

“Sank you. I wish Mrs. Harrison could see it.”

“Me, too, poor dear,” Mrs. Arnold said. “Lottie always was the flowery kind. The vegetable garden may be choked with weeds, but her roses were always perfect. She must be goin’ crazy up there at the rest home.” Laura helped Mrs. Arnold’s short, ample, frame into the chair. “How old is she now? In her nineties I suppose.”

“Well, she was sixty-eight when Jonasan and I bought farm from her and Edgar and that was, mm.” Reiko calculated in her head Sara’s age when they moved in, fifteen, and how old she was this September, twenty-five. “Ten years ago. So sebenty-eight.”
“Well, I knew she was considerably older than me,” Mrs. Arnold declared proudly. To Laura, “Not as short as you cut it last time, dear. That was too much.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Laura responded obediently.

Reiko observed Mrs. Arnold through the mirror. Mrs. Arnold took great pride in her three sons and had tried pairing her youngest, Billy, and Sara together. Billy had been born much later than his brothers and did not share many of the farm chores as he was considered too young. Consequently, he spent much of his time in the kitchen under his mother’s care. He and Sara were about the same age. Reiko had heard through Lola that Billy had moved to San Francisco, but Mrs. Arnold didn’t mention him anymore.

“Habbing work done at house?” Reiko inquired. “I saw Grant-san zis morning. To your house.”

“Have you not heard?” Mrs. Arnold turned her head toward Reiko.

Reiko shook her head.

“Jerry and I sold the farm. The boys are all up in Jackson now, and we are just gettin’ too old for that big ole place. We’re movin’ out next month.” Laura straightened Mrs. Arnold’s head.

“I can’t believe you actually got Jerry to agree to move at all,” Laura said as she combed out Mrs. Arnold’s blue-tinged grey hair.

“Where are you going? Jackson?” Reiko asked.

“Oh, heavens no. Jerry would never go for that. No, we just closed on a house yesterday here in town just past Ephesus church. It’ll be nice not havin’ to drive to church every Sunday or go so far to the grocery store.”

“So, za people, zey build already?” Reiko asked.
“It’s a young couple from Jackson. They told us we could take our time findin’ a new place if they wouldn’t mind us lettin’ them start buildin’ a horse barn. We said it would be fine, only now I wish they’d have waited.” Mrs. Arnold reached across to touch Reiko’s arm. “I didn’t know it was goin’ to be such a monstrous thing.” Laura righted Mrs. Arnold’s head and snipped small sections of hair very carefully. Mrs. Arnold retracted her hand but her eyes remained in Reiko’s direction. “All that hammerin’ and sawin’ gettin’ on my nerves. I’ll be glad when we’re finally moved.”

“A horse barn,” Reiko said to no one in particular.

“The husband is a children’s doctor somewhere in Jackson. It’s the wife who wants them. She has a notion to breed some fancy type of miniature horses and sell them. To who?” Mrs. Arnold flipped her hand in the air. “I don’t know.”

“It’s good hav something to do,” Reiko said.

“I reckon so,” Mrs. Arnold replied. “How is Sara? We haven’t seen her in such a long time. Is she still up there in New York?”

Reiko hastily took a magazine from the table beside her. “Oh, she fine,” she answered as she crossed her legs, her foot bouncing in the air.

“I don’t know how she lives up in New York with all those people. I couldn’t do it. I mean, just movin’ into town was a big deal for Jerry and me.” Reiko grinned at Mrs. Arnold as she flipped through the pages without looking at them. “She divorced that skinny guy, right? What does she do again?”

“Producer at advertising agency.” Reiko saw Mrs. Arnold’s puzzled look and added, “Zey make television commercials.”
“I always thought she could do better than that Yankee.” Mrs. Arnold nodded. “Making them commercials must be very excitin’ for her.”

Lola Bryant, a tall woman in her mid-20’s, made even taller by her heels, with long, curly, red hair approached Reiko, who smiled immediately and turned her full attention to the young woman. Lola talked to her through the mirror,

“Reiko, it’s so nice to see you. Haven’t seen you in at least two weeks,” she said as she ran her long red nails through Reiko’s short, curly, black hair.

“Lola, you all dressed up today. Hab date tonight?” Reiko raised her eyebrows.

“Thanks, sweetie. No, but I sure am hopin’. Do y’all like it?” Lola twirled in front of the three ladies to show off her tight, white tank top and black satin leggings.

Laura gave her the once over and declared, “Girl, the men are gonna be on you tonight like white on rice.”

Lola squealed. “Laura, you are so sweet.” Lola brought her attention back to Reiko’s hair. “So, Reiko, the usual?” She continued playing with the hair and examining it.

“Yes, please,” Reiko responded.

Lola parted Reiko’s hair and leaned down to whisper in her ear. “Do you have time today? You may want to consider colorin’ it. A little grey is startin’ to show again at the roots. You could probably go another week, but I wouldn’t go much more than that.”

“Yes, okay,” Reiko whispered back.

Lola straightened up. “Alrighty then,” Lola said in her regular voice, “let’s put some highlights in there today.” Lola, who was head and shoulders taller than Reiko, directed her to the row of washbasins. Reiko always lied about her age. She had lied to Jonathan about it
before they had gotten married. She leaned back over the sink, closed her eyes, and remembered Jonathan’s frustration.

“You no turn in the paperwork, dessho?” Reiko had accused Jonathan as they stood together at the front gate of the Navy base in Yokosuka, Japan.

“I promise you, I did,” he said, pleading.

The MP who was guarding the gate stood at attention as he saluted cars coming onto the base and seemed to not take notice of the couple’s conversation.

“It no take this long. You lie to me. You wan me believe so you can . . .” Reiko paused to catch her breath.

“So I can what?” He started to get agitated.

“So you can . . . see other women.” Reiko turned her back on him. Jonathan spun her around and hunched his six foot frame down to look in her eyes.

“There is no one else. How can I convince you of that?”

“Marry me,” Reiko replied.

“Darlin’, I’m tryin’ to. But, apparently, these things take time. I was told the background search alone would take a year. Then there’s the approval process where they have to get everyone’s signatures . . .” Reiko shook free from his grip.

“But one year!” she said. She was desperate to get out of the country, and one year was like a life sentence.

“It wouldn’t take so goddamn long if you hadn’t lied about your age!” Jonathan had taken a deep breath and checked his anger. “What kinda fool thing is that to do?” he said as he paced back and forth. “I don’t care how old you are. So, now I know you’re twenty-seven instead of twenty-one. Who cares when you look like you’re sixteen anyway?” Reiko was
devastated that he had found out. He now knew she was eight years older than he was. She stood silently in front of Jonathan with her head lowered, both hands holding her purse in front, sure that Jonathan would never want her now that he knew she was an old maid. She wouldn’t let him look into her eyes. “Now they have to check to make sure you didn’t lie about anything else.” Reiko had remained silent. Jonathan stopped pacing. “Did you lie about anything else?” he asked as he held her chin in his hand and forced her to look up at him.

A tear ran down her powdered face. She shook her head no but thought fearfully, Oh my god, he’s going to find out about my Korean mother. Then everyone will know, friends, family. She sobbed uncontrollably.

“Come here, darlin’.”

She worried about wrinkling her new, white, silk dress as he hugged her close and rubbed her back. “It’s all right,” he said.

Reiko had mumbled into his uniform, “You station America. Lebu me here.”

“I’ll send for you, and we’ll get married, no matter where I am at the time, the minute you step off the plane. I promise.” Reiko was silently afraid that Jonathan’s patience was wearing thin over the whole process. He continued to rub her back. “I know this isn’t really the right time, but I’m gonna be gone for awhile,” Jonathan had confessed suddenly.

“How long?” Reiko pushed back from his chest and took a delicate floral handkerchief from her purse to dry her eyes. Reiko’s fear was that Jonathan would be sent back to Vietnam. She had started breathing faster as she thought about the possibility that Jonathan, like so many of his friends, might not return which meant she would never leave Japan.

“I can’t tell you.” Jonathan had folded his arms on his chest.

“Where?”
“I can’t tell you that, either.”

“Why not?” She waved her handkerchief in an arc toward the base. “All American wives know where husband go. Why you no tell me?”

“None of the American wives know where their husbands are. It’s for everyone’s safety.” He had grasped her arms. “Can you understand that?”

“I understand. You go find another woman,” Reiko had said desperately and blotted more tears.

As she sat in Amanda Bryant’s beauty parlor under the beehive hair dryer, Reiko remembered how afraid she was at the time of being left alone. Jonathan was such a patient man. Even after Sara was born, he had continued to dote on Reiko as if she were the only woman in the world, buying her gifts, taking her on trips, whatever she wanted. He’d loved Sara, too, and taught her how to hunt, fish, shoot skeet as though she was his son. These were normal activities for country kids, but they were bizarre hobbies in the opinion of Sara’s cosmopolitan Manhattan friends. Reiko recalled entertaining one particular group of Sara’s friends at her home on the farm. Sara had gone out to the shop to get gun cleaning supplies after returning from their target practice outing in the field and had left her guests alone in the kitchen. While Sara was gone, Reiko was in the next room sewing and had overheard their conversation.

“It’s so, I don’t know, bourgeois,” said one of the girls.

“If only it could aspire to be even that,” chimed in the young man. “No, honey, peasant, I believe, is the proper term. And what’s with all the tchotchkes? I don’t know where Sara gets her design sense from, but it’s certainly not her mother. Isn’t she Japanese?” He looked around the room. “It’s so not feng shui. Don’t get me wrong, she’s a nice enough lady, but ugh.” He
scowled at a plastic manatee that read “Come See the Manatee, Crystal River, Florida” and set it back down on a desk covered with other such travel souvenirs.

The girl had swooned melodramatically onto a chair and declared, “I am so bored.”

“Do you think she actually likes it out here?” asked the second girl.

“I don’t know, but I refuse to go out there again,” she pointed to her shoes, “and get these Ferragamo’s dirty,” replied the first girl.

Reiko had enjoyed walking into the kitchen and surprising the guests. “Anyone like drink? Iced tea? Lemonade? Moonshine?”

They’d all looked guiltily at one another.

“How about moonhattan? Like Manhattan, Mississippi style,” Reiko had said and smiled innocently. The two girls had looked to the young man,

“Uh, sure. Why not?” he’d responded tentatively.

When Reiko turned her back on them, she could feel them gesturing to each other wondering whether or not she had overheard their conversation.

“Reiko?” She felt a hand touching hers, and she opened her eyes. “You’re done, hon. Come on out.” Lola turned the dryer off and guided her back to the chair. The hum of the dryer and the heat left Reiko feeling lightheaded.

Lola took out all the pins and rollers and began teasing her hair with a fine-toothed comb.

“Are you goin’ to the dance tonight?”

“Oh, no,” Reiko said dismissively.

Lola put her hands on her hips. “Everyone you know will be there. Don’t you think it’s about time you started getting out more?” Lola resumed teasing her hair.

“Too old.”
“Honey, you’re never too old for that.” Reiko blushed. “How long has it been, huh? Almost seven years now?” Reiko nodded. “That’s more than enough time. You want to appear respectable but not unapproachable. Wait much longer, and you’re going to be in the latter category.” Lola brandished her comb at Reiko. “And don’t you let that happen to yourself.”

“You just like you muzza,” Reiko smiled.

Lola handed her a clear mask to put over her face, finished the hairdo with a spritz of hairspray, and held up a hand mirror to show Reiko the back of her head. “What do you think?”

Reiko handed back the mask. “Perfect.” They both walked up to the reception desk.

Reiko paid Lisa for the haircut and handed Lola a folded bill.

“Thanks, hon. See you tonight?” Lola asked as she put the tip into her pocket.

“Next time,” Reiko said as she opened the door to a furnace of hot air.

Lola called out after her, “Remember, don’t wait too long!”

Reiko paused in front of the salon to lightly pat her new hairdo and walked over to her tricycle. The two elderly men had been joined by a third, and all sat on a shaded bench playing checkers in front of the courthouse fanning themselves with their hats. She shaded her eyes from the sun to look at the clock tower above the courthouse. It read one o’clock. On the opposite corner, CeeCee Clark was closing the blinds in the Smyre Diner. Reiko waited for a passing car before crossing the street and entered the diner; the tinkling door bell signaled her arrival.

Everyone in the restaurant looked up out of habit and curiosity. She waved to CeeCee, who was taking an order at the far end. All of the booths lining the windows were occupied, so Reiko found a place between two dusty farmers at the long counter along the opposite side.
“Hello, Mr. Hodges,” she said as she sat down next to him, careful not to brush against his dirty clothes. She took out her handkerchief, blotted the sweat from her upper lip, and replaced it back in her sleeve.

“Afternoon, ma’am.” Ed Hodges tipped his worn cowboy hat to Reiko.

The menu was posted on the back wall; she put on her glasses and studied it.

CeeCee walked up, pencil propped on her ear and notepad in the skirt pocket of her shell pink uniform. “Reiko, are you fool enough to be ridin’ your bicycle out there in this heat?” she asked as she wiped the counter in front of Reiko with a grey, musty-smelling rag that should have been thrown out months ago.

“Not so hot this morning. That’s why I’m here, CeeCee.” Reiko sat with one hand in her lap and the other holding up her glasses.

CeeCee set down a tall glass of water. “Here, you be sure and drink plenty of water.”

“Thank you.” Reiko took off her glasses. “I hab french fry and a chocolate malt.”

“No burger with those fries?” CeeCee asked lifting one eyebrow.

“No, thank you.”

“Fries and a chocolate malted comin’ right up.” CeeCee wrote down the order and impaled it on a spinning order tree which sat on the stainless mantle leading into the kitchen. An unsmiling middle-aged black man in a greasy white cook’s apron appeared, tore it off, and disappeared back into the kitchen. Reiko put her glasses back in her pocket.

“You know you wouldn’t be so skinny if you’d eat a little somethin’,” Ed told her. Reiko looked up at his clear blue eyes framed by deeply tanned crow’s feet. Ed pushed his empty plate away and wiped his mouth with a paper napkin.
“Oh, this just a snack.” She giggled and lowered her eyes. Reiko had always thought of Ed as a handsome man. Even when Jonathan was still alive, she would allow herself the pleasure of catching a glimpse at Ed from a distance riding his horse as he tended his cows or mended fences by the road, his tall slender frame silhouetted in the evening sun.

“My ole lady was askin bout you the other day. Told her she ought to just go out and see you.” He took his wallet from his back pocket.

“I wish she would. Please tell her to stop by anytime. I’m always home.” Reiko offered. Ed put a five-dollar bill down on the counter and got up to leave.

“I’ll tell her. Have a good day,” he said and tipped his hat to her.

“Thank you,” she said through a smile. “You, too,” she called out to him as he walked out the door.

CeeCee set a heaping plate of fries and a tall glass spilling over with icy chocolate malted down on the countertop.

“Here you go, Reiko. You need ketchup with that?”

“No, thank you.” Reiko dipped a french fry in her drink. The ceiling fan blew directly on her; she felt a chill and rolled down the sleeves of her blouse, dropping her handkerchief.

“Mrs. Martin?” Rosemary asked, one child on either side, “is this your handkerchief?” Rosemary held out a white cotton handkerchief embroidered all around with tiny roses.

“Thank you, Rosemary.” Reiko took it from her.

Rosemary smiled proudly and patted her sons Michael and James on their blond heads and said, “Say hello to Mrs. Martin.” Michael stuck his finger in his nose and looked down at the floor. Rosemary pulled his hand down to his side. James mumbled a hello.

Rosemary pointed to an empty booth, “Why don’t you join us?”
“Oh, no. I don’t wan bother you.”

“No, no, it’s no bother. It’s been awhile since we visited.”

CeeCee overheard the conversation and helped Reiko move her plate over to the booth.

“Oh, no, too much trouble.” Reiko reluctantly moved.

“Nonsense,” CeeCee responded as she set the table for Rosemary and the boys, pen and paper in hand. “Do y’all know what you’re havin’?”

James quickly said, “Hamburger!” Rosemary gave him a wait your turn look, and he shrank back into his seat.

“I’m going to share a hamburger and fries with Michael, so if you could bring an extra plate, and three cokes,” and to James, Rosemary asked, “Now, do you want fries or onion rings with that?”

“French fries, please.”

CeeCee nodded and made her notes. “Be right back,” she said.

Michael hopped up in his seat. “I want fries, too, Mommy!” Rosemary reached across the table and pulled Michael down into his seat.

“Okay, sweetie, now sit down.” Rosemary turned to Reiko while pulling out crayons and coloring books from her large bag. “They’re excited to be out.”

“It’s fine, don’t worry,” Reiko responded. The boys flipped through the books. Each found a page they liked and concentrated on staying within the lines. Reiko resumed eating.

“Are you excited about the engagement?”

Reiko covered her mouth, “Mm,” she muttered and swallowed with difficulty.

“I wanna use that color!” said Michael, and he hit James in the arm. James shoved back.
“I got it first,” James shouted. Rosemary reached over and pried them apart nearly knocking over Reiko’s glass. Reiko grabbed it just in time and scooted over to the edge of the seat.

“Boys, stop that. I mean it. If you can’t act like civilized human beings, I won’t take you out in public.” Rosemary straightened their coloring books and glared at each one in turn to emphasize her point. “Are we going to behave, now?”

With heads bowed, they each said, “Yes ma’am,” and continued coloring.

Rosemary saw that Reiko had moved to the edge of the booth. “I’m sorry, you probably aren’t used to this since you only had Sara. Boys are so much rougher than girls.”

“Yes, girls much more quiet than boys. She no scream, she no eben talk.” Reiko quickly finished the last of her fries.

“I only saw her that one time up there, but I think New York has really changed her,” Rosemary offered.

Reiko looked interested, “You sink so?”

“For the good. She seems more confident and independent. And Kunio’s been a big boost to her ego. Especially after the divorce.” Rosemary grabbed a rolling crayon before it dropped off the table. “She thought she’d never find anyone, especially not as nice and good-looking at Kunio. You must be really excited that he’s Japanese. Sara getting back to her roots and all.”

Reiko stirred her malted with her straw. “Hm.” She took a sip and wiped her mouth.

CeeCee walked over with a tray full of food and drinks. “Here you are,” she said as she set the plates down. The boys shoved their coloring books and crayons aside. “And here’s the extra plate for Michael,” CeeCee said and handed it to Rosemary.

“Thank you,” Rosemary said as she took the empty plate.
“Anything else before I go?” CeeCee asked.

Rosemary looked around the table and touched her hand on the chrome napkin holder. “Nope, we’re all set.” Rosemary cut half of her hamburger into small pieces and placed it and most of her fries on Michael’s plate. She poured a generous serving of catsup onto one side of his plate and placed it down in front of him.

Reiko watched her intently and remembered how she had done the same for Sara when she was little, except that it was usually pieces of fish that were getting deboned and cut up. The boys silently devoured the food. Reiko wondered what it would be like to have grandchildren.

“She seems completely over it,” Rosemary said to Reiko.

Reiko looked up at her, “Hm?”

“The divorce.”

“Yes, I sink so,” Reiko said while eating her last french fry. She wiped the grease from her fingers with a paper napkin and tied her handkerchief onto the handle of her purse and took out her wallet. “I hab to go. Berry nice to see you.”

“So soon?” Rosemary protested.

“Must get home to feed Ebi.”

“Tell Sara to have the wedding in the U.S. so I can be there,” said Rosemary. She wiped ketchup off the corners of Michael’s mouth.

“Okay.” Rosemary started to get up, but Reiko placed her hand on the table. “No, finish eat. I no wan interrupt. Bad for digestion.”

Rosemary stood up by the edge of the table, “Why don’t you come out to the house sometime for dinner? We’d love to have you.”

“Thank you.” Reiko waved to the boys and rushed to the counter. “Bye, bye.”
CeeCee rang up Reiko’s order. “Those boys are a handful.”

Reiko handed her a five dollar bill for a two dollar and fifty-cent order. “No need change.”

“Thank you, Miss Reiko. Have a good day.”

The humidity weighed down her hair so that it no longer stood as high as it did when she left the beauty parlor, but it didn’t stop her from speeding out of town as fast as her legs would pedal. How could Sara leave her so vulnerable to attack? It was impossible that the two were engaged. Kunio wasn’t brought up to marry a half breed. He’d been groomed all his life to marry a woman with a legitimate bloodline; Reiko was sure of it. Even though the sun was now heading downward and was filtered by the trees along the road, the road still held its heat and was giving it up to Reiko’s tricycle, through the tires, the frame, and up to the handlebars. She sped up in the sunny spots and slowed down beneath each stand of trees, worried about her hair, but the light breeze and the shade kept her cool enough not to mess it up too much.

Cows lowed as they lounged in the shade, moving only their ears in the direction of Reiko’s squeaking pedal. She paused in front of a peanut patch, the low-lying plants stark green in contrast against the red clay earth. The shrill song of the cicadas became louder the closer the sun got to the horizon. Reiko remembered her conversation with Mariko and wondered about the box her father had left for her.

When Reiko told her father she was marrying Jonathan, he had banished her from the farm and had forbidden her from taking any family heirlooms with her. Right after her father died, Reiko’s mother sent her a lacquered box with a note in it urging her to come visit the farm again. She couldn’t imagine that her father had saved anything for her after she left. It must have
been something he put aside for her much earlier, she thought, and started to get excited wondering what it could be.

She pedaled again and rounded the crest of the hill and coasted. Normally, she applied the brakes to slow down especially since she’d just had her hair done, but today she allowed herself to pick up speed. Near the bottom of the hill when she reached her top speed, the rushing air flipped up the brim of her hat, and she had to hold it in place with one hand. Mrs. Arnold drove past going the same direction and waved to her. Reiko started to wave but held her hat in place instead.

Reiko was welcomed home by Ebi, who ran out to meet her at the end of the driveway. “How did you get out?” She picked up the dog and placed her in one of the wire shopping baskets attached to both sides of the tricycle.

As she rode down the driveway, she heard hammering at the back door and slowly approached. Grant, hunched over his work on the back porch steps. When she let Ebi back down on the ground, Ebi immediately ran up to Grant, her tail wagging so hard it shook her entire body.

“Hey Ebi! Where’d you go?” he said and wrestled her to the ground.

Reiko watched him a moment. Ebi didn’t appear to mind the roughhousing and actually seemed to be enjoying it. “Grant-san, you no have to fix.”

Grant turned around and smiled when he saw Reiko. “I was down at the Arnolds’ building that horse barn, and on my way home, I remembered seeing this broken step. I had my tools with me. Just a board and a few nails. It ain’t nothing to fix. Thank Mrs. Arnold next time you see her. It’s one of her leftover boards.”
“I can do myself,” she said and pushed her tricycle toward the barn and heard Grant hammering again. She couldn’t understand why he took so much time with her place, repairing things. When Jonathan was still alive, he and Grant would get together each weekend and recount war stories. They’d sit for hours on the back porch talking about this mission or that. Reiko hadn’t much cared for them or their stories and didn’t listen to the details. They all sounded the same to her—men fly from ship to shore, shoot people, come back. As long as Jonathan had come back, she hadn’t cared what he did.

She slid open the large wooden doors of the old barn. With its dirt floor and hayloft, the barn was dusty but cool. Reiko opened the door to what used to be one of the granaries. It was now a cleaned-up storage room for her tricycle and canned goods. She took a jar of fig preserves from one of the shelves and walked back to the house.

“You want ice tea?” she asked Grant.

He stood up, slapping sandpaper dust from his hands. “Sure.”

She stepped past him, using the newly repaired step. The house was an air conditioned oasis, and though she liked the hot weather, it felt good to feel the sweat evaporate from her skin. Her tight curls had held their shape, and she admired Lola’s handiwork in the mirror by the door, pushing, poking, fluffing it with the tips of her fingers.

Not wanting to ever be caught off guard by unexpected guests, she always kept a ready supply of iced tea in the summer, coffee in the winter, and freshly baked cakes or cookies, most of which she’d end up throwing away. She’d learned long ago on first moving to Smyre that the mark of a good hostess was to be ready at all times, and while Jonathan was still alive, the guests had been numerous. Now they were few and far between, but she kept up the habit nonetheless.
Ebi barked outside. Grant had found a frayed tennis ball and was playing catch with Ebi. Reiko watched from the kitchen window as the dog sprinted toward the pasture but hesitated at the tall grass before leaping her barrel shaped body over the grass as though she was pretending to be a gazelle.

Reiko carefully arranged the tall tea glasses and plates of sweets on a red plastic tray. She picked up the pitcher of tea and started to set it down on the tray but decided instead to put it back into the refrigerator. Bringing the pitcher might give him the impression she wanted him to stay a long time when she really only wanted to be polite.

She pushed through the screen door with her elbow. Grant seemed to appear instantly at her side helping her with the door. “I can do,” she said.

“I know,” he said and took the tray from her.

Reiko headed toward the wooden picnic table, but Grant set the tray down on the much smaller cafe table. They both sat down, and she handed Grant a glass and offered the plate of cookies. She watched as he drank his tea and couldn’t help but compare him to her dead husband. Like Jonathan, he was a nice looking man with his mixed French and Irish immigrant good looks—tousled curly brown hair tinged with red when the sun hit it just right, blue eyes, long lean limbs. Jonathan had let himself go after leaving the Navy, slipping into a thick layer of fat like a winter coat, fashioned from the fabric of Jimmy Dean sausage, bacon, fried chicken, and cornbread slathered with butter and molasses. But as much as she could see, Grant seemed to have kept his shape, perhaps because of the carpentry business. She wondered what he looked like without his shirt on, if he still had the toned body of a Navy Seal or if his skin had started to sag like her own.
“He was the best damn helicopter pilot I ever saw. I told him he should have gone jets. It’s more glamorous. Get more chicks that way. Nobody goes for helicopter pilots, I told him.”

He looked at Reiko. “But he proved me wrong. He got you, after all.” He smiled and perhaps blushed a little. He propped his heel onto the rung of the chair, rested his elbow on his knee, and held his chin in his hand, posed like Rodin’s Thinker. “He saved my life many a time. Pulled me out of some hairy situations.”

Reiko looked in the direction of his gaze to see what he might be looking at. Ebi had lain down in the grass and was sunning her belly. Reiko uncrossed her legs, but when she tried to recross them exchanging legs, she discovered her heel had wedged in between the flagstones. She tried tugging it free, but it wouldn’t budge. She leaned down but couldn’t grasp the heel to pry it loose.

“Let me help you with that,” said Grant. He reached down and grasped her ankle. With a little tug, the heel was free.

Even though the tea had cooled her off, she suddenly felt warm, like one of her menopausal hot flashes, only that was long past. Her upper lip broke out in little droplets of sweat. Her underarms were soaking through her blouse. She opened her mouth to say something, but it was all dry. She gulped down the rest of her tea and stood up. “Would you like more tea?” she asked Grant.

He finished emptying his glass and handed it to her, nodding in acknowledgement.

“Thanks.”

The house was cool, and the sweat evaporated from her skin once more. She billowed out her blouse to try and dry the sweat rings formed by her underarms but to no avail.
After Sara was born, she couldn’t stand for Jonathan to touch her. The thought of sex with him made her want to run away screaming, but she’d always done her duty as a wife. There was no explanation for the repulsion; perhaps it had been there from the beginning, but she’d become less tolerant of it as she’d gotten older. She spent all of her time with Sara, and when Sara left home for college, she started her rose garden.

She peeked through the kitchen window; Grant was eating a cookie and discreetly slipped Ebi some crumbs. The more Reiko studied Grant, the less she thought about Jonathan until he left her mind completely.

Ebi’s muffled barks caught her attention, and Reiko went outside with the refilled glass. They had at least another hour before the sun would go down completely and the mosquitoes would become unbearable. Ebi ran up to her at breakneck speed with the frayed tennis ball dangling from her mouth. “You supposed to be lap dog. You know that?” She set the glass down for Grant.

Ebi looked up expectantly and dropped the tennis ball at her feet. Reiko daintily picked up the wet ball with two fingers and lobbed it to where the yard met the pasture; Ebi followed the ball which rolled through the field and under a pile of rocks. The dog tried to stick her stout head into the hole but backed out and barked at the hidden tennis ball.

“I’m sorry, Ebi.” Reiko saw what she’d done and walked over to the dog. Grant followed to examine the situation. The hole was just big enough for a tennis ball or a person’s hand. Reiko put out her hand but before she could get it to the hole, Grant pulled it back.

“Might be a snake in there.” Instead, he pried the large rock free from the dirt while Ebi closely supervised, sniffing and barking. Rolling away the rock revealed not only the tennis ball but a litter of newborn rabbits huddled together in their fur lined nest.
Pink skin scarcely covered by downy hairs, eyes shut tightly against the world, they shook from the sudden exposure and sniffed at the giants above them, their tiny forepaws useless and suspended in the air. After realizing what they were, Reiko grabbed Ebi’s collar and held her back. “We must cover, Grant-san.”

“What you want rabbits around for? They’ll just eat up all your flowers,” said Grant.

“Best thing’s to drown them.”

“I don’t mind zey eat flower.”

Grant threw the tennis ball toward the patio and gently placed the rock back in its place.

“I think you’re making a mistake, but it’s your place. Guess there’ll be more for me to hunt his fall.”

He looked at Reiko, tipped his head, and grinned, but she didn’t smile back.

“I’m kidding, of course. Just squirrel, deer, possum, and coon for me.”

All of the military men she’d been around seemed so aggressive and violent to her. They worked at war in their jobs and played at war with their friends when home. She had been trained, too. In elementary school, tiny tots marching in formation, carrying wooden batons over one shoulder meant to simulate a rifle. Japan readying itself for an extended war, preparing the next generation. The gods were on their side; they were the chosen elite and couldn’t be defeated. She found out later in life that she and her schoolmates weren’t alone in the world, that other nations, Germany, China, were also willing to sacrifice their young to the war god.

She released Ebi’s collar and walked silently back to the patio.

“I’m sorry if I’ve upset you,” Grant said to her back.

She was upset but not about the rabbits. She watched Ebi run for the ball and return to Grant with it in her mouth.
Grant took it from her mouth. “How about a walk?”

“No can walk. Wear heel.” She picked up the plates and glasses and placed them on the tray.

“I’ll carry you.” Grant approached her hunched over as though he was going to pick her up.

“No, no!” cried Reiko.

He straightened. “Looky what I found over here. How about these shoes?” By the steps, he picked up a pair of flat slip-on shoes and brought them over. He set them in front of her. “Let me help you get these on.”

She held up her hands. “No, I can do.” She slipped off one shoe and placed it on the ground while balancing on one foot. She was doing fine until she reached for the other shoe and nearly tipped over. Grant held out his hand, but she grabbed his arm instead to steady herself. The muscles beneath his thin cotton shirt felt solid and steady, not like flesh at all. She discreetly ran her thumb across his arm while putting on the other shoe to test its pliability. It gave ever so slightly beneath her touch.

She let go and gave him a tight smile. “Thank you.”

“Welcome.” Grant threw the ball in the direction of the pond, and they followed after Ebi.

There was no breeze that evening. The crickets were chirping getting ready for the night. Turtles that were trying to savor the last bit of sunlight fell into the water when Reiko and Grant approached. Concentric circles were left where they entered the water.

Grant skipped a flat stone over the surface of the water and managed to make it skip six times before it sank.
“Six unlucky number,” said Reiko.

“I know,” he said. He picked up another flat stone from among the grass and skipped it on the water. “Five. Maybe I should stop before I bring worse luck on myself.”

They walked along the bank toward the levee. “Jonathan hated that superstitious stuff. ‘Why’re you carrying that thing?’ he’d ask me. I always carried this little jade dragon under my wetsuit for good luck. He said it was bullshit, but he went along with it anyway and always made sure I had it before I jumped out his helicopter. I know I say this all the time, but he was a damn good helicopter pilot. Did you ever get to fly with him?”

“No want to,” she said. She walked up onto the levee and toward the bench.

“Then you missed out. I remember one time we were over in Nam. My team had been waiting forever for an extraction, and he finally came on duty. He told me later that the C.O. had his head up his ass and wasn’t ready for the S.A.R. crew to leave. When Jonathan found out it was my team out on that beach . . .”

She sighed and sat down. “Why she no tell me?” she said and crossed her arms across her chest.

“Who?”

“Sara.”

Grant picked out another stone and threw it onto the water. It skipped seven times. He threw his fist up in the air. “Hell yeah. Still got it.” He turned to Reiko. “I ain’t got the foggiest what you’re talking about.”

“Everybody know. Sister. Rosemary.”
Grant sat down beside her and stretched his legs out in front of him. He clicked his work boots together and knocked off the dust. “What’s she gone and done?” Grant crossed his arms across his chest, too.

“Whole town, except me,” she said.

“And me,” he said and uncrossed his arms. “As long as it ain’t illegal, I don’t see a problem with whatever it is. She’s a big girl; she can handle it.”

Reiko turned to him and said, “You supposed to watch her. You promise.”

“I promised Jonathan on his deathbed I’d watch out for her, help her if she needed it. And you, too. Anytime you need something, you just holler. But you can’t smother her. She’s gotta live her own life.”

“Hm.” She looked out to the opposite side of the lake toward the house. “No one life is zey own.”

She felt Grant staring at her as though he didn’t approve, but she didn’t care. Sara was her daughter, and she was going to act accordingly.

“You gonna tell me what she did?”

Reiko wondered if he really didn’t know or if he just wanted her to tell him so she could feel humiliated. She sat with her hands folded in her lap and watched Ebi sniff a frog on the other side of the pond. Each time the frog jumped, Ebi leaped in the air and barked. Her tightly curled tail fluttered back and forth like a single-winged butterfly.

Reiko wanted to talk to him, needed to talk to him, but her tongue seemed to be glued to the roof of her mouth. He had no connection to her family, but somehow what he thought of her mattered to her. How would this reflect on her as a mother?
Ebi slung her head low to the ground, her paws stretched out far in front of her, hind legs raising her rear high up in the air. The frog sat very still in the tall grass.

“I have a daughter I ain’t ever seen,” said Grant.

Reiko looked at him to see if he was just saying this to shock her or if it was true. Flecks of black dotted his blue-grey eyes. She wished at that moment she had learned how to read the markings of people’s irises from her father. Marks which told about his life as lived and his life to come. Markers of his soul and its health.

“You don’t believe me.”

“No, I mean, yes.” She looked away. A tall blade of grass tickled her calf, so she plucked it and wove its long stem between her fingers.

“After the first wife died, I said I’d never get married again.” He clicked the toes of his boots together. “Then this cute little Korean gal comes along.”

Reiko’s back stiffened.

“I’m over there for a short training mission. Can’t sleep one morning. Walk downrange early in the morning.” He brought his feet up underneath him and crossed his arms. “Make a long story short. She marries me for a green card. Follows me to the States, gets pregnant, and leaves when her five years is up. Gone. Her and the baby. No trace. I figure she called her boyfriend back home and got him over here. I’d heard about that sort of thing, but I thought she was different.” He pulled his hat down low over his brows, bit his upper lip. He turned from Reiko and spit in the grass. Rubbed the back of his fist across his lips and nose.

She searched his profile for some remnant of the tough Navy Seal but only saw a vulnerable, lonely cowboy trying hard not to let his emotions get the better of him.
“You no see daughter?” She dropped her head down lower to get a better look at his face under the brim of his hat.

“For a couple of hours. Brought her home from the hospital one day, and they were gone the next.” He looked out over the pond and squinted, though there was not much sunlight left.

“You no look for?”

“Hell no.” He picked up a rock and threw it. It landed on the opposite bank near Ebi and the frog. The frog jumped. Ebi leaped at it and barked. “That bitch better stay the hell away from me.” He wiped the corners of his mouth with his fingers, running his fingers down to his chin to smooth down his greying goatee. “I’d like to see my daughter, though.”

Reiko nodded her head. The blade of grass had become limp from handling it. She twisted and knotted it into a loose figure-of-eight knot and set it down on the bench between them.

The frog jumped into the pond and swam over to an old rotting log. Ebi followed it to the bank and paced back and forth along the shore. She sniffed the water, barked in the direction of the frog.

“Sara engaged,” said Reiko.

He pushed his hat back on his head so the bill extended toward the sky like a samurai warrior’s headdress. “Isn’t that a good thing?”

“She no tell me. I find out from sister in Japan.” Reiko placed her hands in her lap and twisted her wedding ring around her finger.

“Why do you think she didn’t tell you?”

She clasped her hands together and dropped them in her lap. Ebi continued to pace and to bark at the frog. “I don’t know.”
“You know. You’re just not saying,” said Grant.

“No.” Ebi edged closer until her paws were in the water. She barked even louder. “Ebi, Come!” said Reiko. Ebi stopped barking, looked up at Reiko, and ran around the perimeter of the pond. She hopped up onto the bench and sat down next to Reiko. Reiko sat perfectly still, her hands clasped tightly together.

Grant shifted his weight and leaned his back against the back of the bench. “I thought those Korean women were the most beautiful women in the world. Just like those little porcelain dolls you see in the department stores there.”

Reiko swatted a mosquito on her leg and shifted her weight so she sat up with her back straight.

Grant leaned forward, his arms propped on his legs. Reiko could see him looking at her from the corner of her eye. He picked up the knotted piece of grass from the bench.

“I bet all Americans look alike to you, don’t they?” He laughed before she had a chance to answer. “That’s all right. Americans think the same thing about Orientals. I used to be that way until I went over there.”

Reiko swatted a mosquito that wasn’t there. “Mosquito bite.” Stood up. “Time go inside.” She turned to the bench and motioned to Ebi with the wave of her hand.

“They don’t eat much.” He put the knotted piece of grass in his chest pocket and stood up. The flecks in his eyes looked like reverse stars in a blue sky, stars that once had been but now absent. There was not the slightest trace of a smile. He repositioned his hat so it sat squarely on his head. “What are you so afraid of?”

She smiled, but when he didn’t smile back, she walked toward the house.

Grant and Ebi followed her. They walked in silence.
She reached the table with the tea glasses and sweets and placed everything on the tray.

“Let me get that for you,” he said.

She grasped the handles and took it to the back door. Grant opened the screen door for her. “Sank you for fix step,” she said as she stepped onto the newly repaired steps.

“You’re welcome.”

She entered the house but stood in the doorway and blocked the entrance with the tray in front of her. Afraid that he might follow her in and continue the conversation he’d started by the pond, she bowed her head slightly. “I see you later.”

Still holding the door open, he propped one foot up on the step and tipped his hat.

“Happy birthday, Reiko.”

She stood still, didn’t know what to say. He’d never mentioned her birthday before. Her mouth opened, but the words didn’t come out. Her phone rang.

“Better get that,” he said and pushed the door closed. The latch clicked.

She stared at him through the screen door as he walked to his pickup truck. He didn’t look back at her. Just got into his truck and pulled away. The brake lights blinked when Ebi ran up to the truck. He waved her back toward the house and drove away.

The glasses on the tray clinked together when her arms faltered. She set the tray down on the counter in the kitchen and moved to the phone which was blocked by a large bouquet of flowers. She hesitated on seeing the flowers. “Hello?” She opened the card that was nestled amongst the flowers and without reading the inscription and skipping to the signature, she read Grant’s name scrawled at the bottom.

“Happy birthday, Mom,” said Sara.
Sara gathered a stack of overstuffed manila folders together, tapped them on their ends on the desk to align them, and put them in her leather tote bag while squeezing the receiver between her ear and her shoulder. “Did you have a good birthday?” She held the receiver to her ear with one hand while reaching across the room for a black leather portfolio which was leaned up against a bookshelf. The phone cord wouldn’t stretch that far, so she stretched her foot out and hooked the handle with her toe. The flat portfolio fell over. She stretched out even farther and dragged it by the handle toward her with her toe.

“I went to beauty shop,” said Reiko.

“Good, so you got your hair done.” Sara reached down to pick it up. Her hair fell down in her face, and she flipped it back from her face and tucked it behind her ears.

“Sara, I just . . .” said Laura, a tall blond made even taller by her heels, wearing white dress pants and a green silk blouse. She stopped talking when she saw Sara was on the phone and stood at the opening of Sara’s cubicle. “Congratulations,” she said in a whisper and leaned in to hug Sara.

Sara mouthed thank you to her. “What else did you do?”

“Nothing.”

“It’s your birthday. You’re supposed to do something special or at least something good for you like taking a walk.”

Melissa appeared from behind the cubicle opening. Her long dark naturally curly hair bounced as she came in. “I have to see,” she said. She took Sara’s left hand in hers and inspected Sara’s diamond ring. “Oh my god, it’s gorgeous.”

“Thank you,” Sara whispered and pointed to the phone.
Melissa waved to her with a flick of her outstretched fingers.

“Sara-chan work?” asked Reiko.

“Yeah. I’m packing up to leave.” She waved to Melissa.

“Oh,” said Reiko. Sara gathered more files together and shoved them in her leather tote bag. She had to compress the other files to make the new ones fit.

“You still there, Mom?”

“You busy work. I hang up now.”

“We haven’t even been on two minutes, and you’re already ready to hang up?”


Sara stopped packing her things. “It’s not costing anything. It’s the agency phone.”

“Long distance expensive.”

Sara held the receiver away from her ear and opened her mouth wide in a silent scream. When she was through, she smiled and brought the receiver back to her ear. “Before we hang up, I have some news.” Sara paused expecting to hear some reply from Reiko but heard nothing.

“You remember Kunio, right?” Silence on the other end. “Mom?”

“Yes?”

Sara shook her head and leaned on her desk. “Well, guess what?” She waited for a reply. She got none. “He asked me to marry him!” she said, her voice rising with excitement. She admired her diamond ring, a two-carat stone set in a classic Tiffany setting.

“I know,” said Reiko.

“It just happened. Nobody else knows.” He had proposed two nights before, and Sara had emailed Rosemary with the news but swore her to silence until she got up the nerve to tell her
mother. She saw Nathan walk by her cubicle, but he didn’t look in. She took a deep breath and
turned to look out the window. “Isn’t it great, Mom?”

“Mm,” said Reiko.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

Sara hugged her waist with her free hand. “There’s obviously something wrong, so just
come out with it already.” She waited for Reiko to speak. Looking down on Madison Avenue,
taxi lined up at the red light. All were occupied. Sara looked at her watch.

“He no good for you,” said Reiko.

“Please, Mom, let me be happy just this once.”

“I no care who you marry. I just tell my opinion.”

The ring twirled easily around her finger. The light turned green, and the taxis raced
down the block only to stop behind the queue at the next light. “I appreciate your opinion, but I’ll be fine. Kunio and I really love each other.” She flicked the diamond with her tongue and held it between her teeth. She let go. “I’m going to Japan to meet his family next month.” A bicycle messenger in tight black riding shorts and a skintight yellow riding shirt stopped abruptly when a jaywalking pedestrian stepped out in front of him. The messenger waved his arms in the air and yelled at the jaywalker, a man dressed in a pinstripe suit and red tie. Sara couldn’t hear the exchange behind her soundproof window. “I bought you a ticket, too. We’ll meet at his family’s house outside of Tokyo.”

“You pay?”

“Yeah. I don’t expect him to pay for that.”
“You no need spend so much money. I tell you, you need save. Woman never know. Must always have money. No spend money on wedding.”

Sara looked at her watch again and wished she had called her mother on her cell phone. “I have plenty in savings, and I’ve started a retirement account.” She threaded her arm through the straps of the leather tote bag and pulled it up onto her shoulder. Her purse was in the bottom desk drawer. “I have to go now, but I’ll send you the tickets and the directions in the mail.”

“I no go,” said Reiko.

The tote bag fell off her shoulder. She bit her lips. “Mom, I don’t have time right now to argue about this. Please go.”

“I no go.”

Sara rolled her eyes and flung her head back. She stared at the stippled white tiles of the drop ceiling and counted the number of tiles over her cubicle: five times four. Twenty. Closed her eyes. She hated her father for dying first and leaving her to deal with her mother alone.

She took her purse from the bottom drawer and shut the drawer with her foot. “Let’s talk about this later,” she said in a low voice. “I really have to go.”

“Okay, bye bye.”

“Happy birthday.” Sara stared at the phone on its cradle. She picked up the Manhattan telephone book and slammed it down on her desk. Her coffee cup with the whale handle fell to the floor; the handle broke off.

“You okay?” shouted Michaela from the next cubicle. Michaela came over and picked up the broken coffee cup. She held the pieces in her hands and placed them gingerly on Sara’s desk.

“My mother.” Sara looked down at the pieces of the coffee cup. The whale’s tail had broken off. “She won’t go to Japan with me to meet Kunio’s family.”
“So stubborn. Just like my mother. Jewish, Japanese. It doesn’t matter. They’re exactly alike. Both spoiled daddy’s girls and gotta get their own way. We should have them meet sometime. Wouldn’t that be a riot?” Michaela rubbed Sara’s arm. “Come on. Let’s go have a drink and bitch about our Jappy mothers.”

Sara hugged Michaela. “You’re very sweet.” She picked up the portfolio. “I can’t. I have an appointment at the bridal shop in half an hour. Raincheck?”

Michaela nodded her head. “Hurry. You don’t want to be late.”

Sara and Patty waited in the white marbled reception room of the bridal shop. A string quartet playing Vivaldi echoed softly off the marble and seemed to come from everywhere at once. Patty touched the white phalanopsis orchid on the coffee table.

“It’s real.”

“Are you going to behave?” asked Sara.

“It’s against my nature,” said Patty. “You wouldn’t want me to pretend to be someone I’m not, would you?”

“I feel a lecture coming on.”

Patty swung her arm in a wide arc. “Wouldn’t dream of lecturing in these hallowed halls about the ludicrousness of the marriage ceremony in which the preservation of the bride’s virginity is of such paramount importance that she must demonstrate her purity by wearing white while the male stands at the altar. In black? And I wouldn’t dare stain this pristine white virginal marble floor by talking about the symbolic breaking of the hymen by the man with the lifting of the veil in Christian rituals and, come on, the breaking of the glass in a Jewish
ceremony. In a highly aggressive violent gesture, stomping on it by the male, I might add. Mazel tov!” she said with a big smile and lifted her hand in the air while pretending to hold the stem of a wine glass. “Just answer me this. Why do we consider ourselves more civilized than those savages in other countries who practice female genital mutilation? Because we only do it symbolically whereas they, being the savages that they are, are actually being honest about their beliefs by carrying them to their ultimate conclusion?”

“You’re giving me a headache.”

Patty rested the orchid flower in the palm of her hand. “And this orchid, symbol of the female genitalia. The labia unfolded, waiting, quivering in anticipation for its defloration. Georgia O’Keefe had it right. A fitting adornment within these sacred halls dedicated to one thing, and one thing only. Know what that is?”

Sara looked at Patty and wondered what happened to her old friend. The one who used to be normal, who didn’t turn every situation into an analysis of the role of women in society, who used to be fun. “I give up.”

Patty held Sara in a dancer’s stance with one hand behind her back and the other extended. “Sex.” Patty swung Sara around and dipped her. They both started laughing.

“Sara?” asked a young woman in a simple black wraparound dress with a low v-neckline and a self-tying belt at the hip.

Patty raised Sara back up. Sara’s face with flushed bright red. “That would be me.”

“I’m Thalia, and I’ll be showing you our collection,” the saleswoman said with a warm smile. “Would you two ladies follow me?” She turned and walked to a back room.

Patty bit her knuckle and grimaced as though in pain. She grabbed Sara’s arm. Sara shook her head. They followed Thalia into a white carpeted room with a small, white carpeted
stage on which was a white carpeted dais. Mirrors covered the back of the stage in a semicircle.

“I’m in love,” Patty whispered into Sara’s ear.

“Behave,” mouthed Sara.

Thalia motioned to a large garment rack of wedding dresses. “I’ve pulled a few dresses according to your specifications on the phone. Why don’t we look through them, and you can tell me what you like.”

Sara looked at each dress. Covered in plastic, it was difficult to see the dress. She pressed the plastic against the fabric. “I like how this one is slender and beaded in the body, but I don’t like the mermaid pouffy thing on the bottom.” When she turned to look at Thalia, Patty was right beside Thalia, looking down her dress.

“You want something more like a Carolina Herrera columnar shape.”

“Yeah,” said Sara.

“I’ll be right back.” Thalia left the room by way of a back door.

“Oh my god. Did you see those breasts?” said Patty.

“How can you miss them?”

“They’re perfect.”

“Would you control yourself, please? You’re like a dog in heat,” said Sara.

“I can’t help it. Thalia has fanned the flames of my sexual drive.” Patty ran her hand over her hair, down her neck, and across her breasts to her abdomen. “I am at my peak, you know.”

“Women don’t peak until they’re thirty. You have another five years,” said Sara.

“Besides, I would have thought entering this sacrosanct homage to female fealty and subordination would have curbed your appetite and sent you screaming.”
Patty stepped over to a floral chintz covered winged back chair and dropped down into the feather cushioned seat. “I changed my mind.”

Sara looked through the rest of the dresses hanging on the rack. One after the other was pushed aside after a cursory glance.

“You don’t seem as into this as I thought you would,” said Patty who had one leg slung over the arm of the chair.

“Hm?” Sara stepped behind one of the dresses and held it up close to her, pressing the plastic flat against the dress. The crinkling of the plastic was soothing to her somehow, and she ran her hand back and forth over the plastic which covered the hundreds of tiny beads sewn onto the bodice.

“Having second thoughts?” asked Patty.

“Of course not,” said Sara with a little laugh. “Kunio’s a wonderful guy, and he’s totally devoted to me.”

Patty dropped her leg off the arm of the chair and leaned forward. “I didn’t hear you say ‘love.’”

Sara pushed the dressed away. “That was an assumption. I didn’t think I needed to say it.” She walked over to the companion chair to the one Patty was occupying and sat down.

“Actually, my mother is being a pain in the ass.” She sat back and sank deep into the feather cushions. “She’s refusing to go to Japan with me next month.”

“You could make up some excuse for her like she’s paranoid of flying.”

She crossed her hands on her lap and looked down at her fingernails, rubbed one thumb over the smooth pink polish of the other thumbnail. “Nothing’s ever good enough for her. My father. My grades. My ex-. My job. The way I dress and walk and talk and eat. My haircut.” She
held up her hands to Patty to show off her fingernails. “This pink polish? All her.” She dropped her hands back down to her lap. “Pink is proper. Red is too ostentatious. And never go bare.” She chewed on a hangnail. “Why is she bitching? It’s not like she’s paying for it,” said Sara.

“You and Kunio are paying for the whole thing?”

“I didn’t want to ask her for money.”

“You should have. She wants you to beg. She wants to feel needed,” said Patty.

“I’m tired of begging.”

“Stop your whining.” Patty stood up and looked down the row of dresses. “Does Kunio know you’re wearing a wedding dress?”

“Excuse me?”

“You know, instead of one of those kimono things with the big hairdos.” Patty motioned in the air high about her head a circular form.

Sara tugged the hangnail between her teeth.

“He doesn’t know?” asked Patty.

Sara looked down at her shoes and rubbed out a scuff mark on the toe. “I’m paying for it, so he doesn’t care.”

“You mean you’re paying for the dress,” said Patty. She rejoined Sara at the chairs and sat down.

Sara looked down at the chewed hangnail and picked at it.

Patty said, “Because usually when the bride’s parents don’t, or aren’t able to, pay for the wedding, the couple shares the cost.”

“Since when are you so up on wedding etiquette, Ms. I’m-against-the-institution-of-marriage?”
“I read those fluff magazines to keep up with the other side.” Patty took a pack of chewing gum from her bag. “Want a piece?” Sara shook her head. “Thalia should be back soon.” She put the piece of gum in her mouth. “Did you see that way she walks? Actually, it’s more like gliding gracefully, sliding through the room with those curves . . .”

“Do you mind? We were trying to figure out what to do about my mother.” Sara crossed her legs. The top foot bounced, not in time to Vivaldi, but to some silent song playing in Sara’s head.

“I told you. Beg. ‘Mom, please come with me. I can’t do this without you. You’re the expert on Japanese culture. I’m just an imposter. Without you I’ll fall flat on my face.’ Better yet, ‘I might do something to embarrass you and the family. So you see, you have to be there.’” Patty smiled at Sara while she chewed her gum.

Thalia entered with an armload of dresses. Patty moved quickly to her side. “Let me help you with those,” she said and reached deep into Thalia’s arms to take several dresses from her.

Sara watched Patty flirt with Thalia, help her hang the dresses on the rack, admire the beauty of the dresses, the cut, the beadwork, the fabric. Patty was doing everything she could to show she was interested in Thalia’s job, complementing her on her good taste. Thalia did have good taste. The dresses she brought out were tasteful and sophisticated, not overly done with embellishments, and the fabrics were all varieties of silk.

“We think you should try this one,” said Patty. She held up a strapless silk shantung empire waist dress with a fitted bodice glittering from top to bottom with pin dot crystals sewn into tiny sunburst patterns like miniature starfish.

Sara stepped into the dress with their help. The silk lining felt cool as it slid up her body and pressed against her skin. With each button that Thalia fastened, she felt a little tug and a
continual stiffening of the dress until every button from the top of the dress down to the small of her back had been secured in its loop. The boning in the bodice held the dress so rigid it could have stood on its own with no help from Sara. She felt like one of the Trade Towers, standing tall and on display. This must be how a caterpillar feels when encasing itself in its chrysalis. It gets to its shoulders and has to take a deep breath, like going underwater, before it encloses its head.

“IT fits you perfectly,” said Thalia. Patty gave Sara the thumbs up. “I thought it would. This one is a special order from a young woman who changed her mind. She has a willowy figure just like yours. Normally this dress is six thousand dollars, but this one’s available for half that price,” said Thalia. She walked back to the garment rack.

“Three thousand dollars for a wedding dress!” said Patty.

Thalia returned carrying a matching silk shawl. A row of white, black tipped ermine tails dangled from the ends. “Isn’t that an amazing price?”

“Uh, yeah,” said Patty.

Thalia draped the shawl over Sara’s shoulders. “Since it’s a December wedding, you’ll need this, too.”

Sara turned to get a look at the back view. A triangular inset of fabric along the back seam created a short train which just grazed the floor behind her, something that was likely to pick up dirt and get stepped on.

“The train comes off very easily, and what you have left is a slit in the back for the reception,” said Thalia.

Sara stared at herself in the mirror, her hair swept up in an imperfect chignon just to get it out of the way, prisms of light reflecting off the crystals onto her neck, arms, and onto Patty’s
and Thalia’s faces, her bare toes just peeking from beneath the hem. She closed her eyes and flicked the ermine tails across her face over and over, addicted to the soft fur.

“What’s wrong?” asked Patty.

Sara looked at her friend through the mirror. “Nothing. Why?”

“I’ll leave you a moment to think about the dress,” said Thalia.

Patty waited until Thalia left the room. “This is an awful lot of goddamn money to spend on just the dress. Even if it is perfect. I don’t care how much money this guy has.”

“He’s not paying for it. I am.” Sara ran the fur through her outstretched fingers.

“You mean you’re buying the dress, and he’s paying for everything else,” said Patty.

Sara ignored her friend, and wrapped the shawl tightly around her shoulders. Patty grabbed her shoulders and turned her so they faced one another.

“Tell me you’re not paying for the whole wedding.”

“I’m not paying for the whole wedding,” Sara repeated.

“Oh my god, you are.” Patty stomped around the room in circles. “You don’t have that kind of money. What are you thinking? A girl’s gotta protect herself. A man can always make money. Land on his feet. Women can’t do that, yet. And the older you get the harder it gets. That’s life.”

“My mother’s already given me this lecture.”

“For once, I’m on her side.” Patty grabbed both of Sara’s hands and helped her to sit down on the platform. “This is the way I see your life with this guy playing out. You get married. He makes you move to Japan with some bullshit story about his company obligations. ‘And by the way,’ he says, ‘I want you to quit working.’ Just like that your career is over. You have two kids, one boy and one girl. Loves the girl but he’s ecstatic about the boy. I almost forgot, he’s
sleeping around on you by this time. Ten, fifteen years later, you come to your senses and realize you’re just a nanny and a housekeeper and go Nora on this guy. The divorce laws in Japan are horrible. You have no money of your own. You’ll get nothing, not even the kids. Now what? Go back to work? Doing what? You’ve been out for fifteen years. You’ll have to start over at the bottom again, but now you’re a forty year old woman competing with twenty-five year old kids.”

“Would you stop with the melodramatics?” said Sara with a laugh.

“This is serious shit. I’m really worried about you.”

“Okay, I’ll talk to him,” said Sara. She tugged at the top of the dress. The boning pressed against her ribs and cut into her skin. “I need to stand up.” She held her hands up to Patty who had stood up to help her. The glitter of lights cascaded in the mirror. She felt an odd sense of nostalgia for the yards of silk, even though she’d only been wearing the dress a short while.

Thalia returned to the room.

“Would it be possible to hold it for me a little while?” asked Sara.

“We don’t normally hold dresses,” said Thalia. She bit her bottom lip. “Although,” she said, pausing as though thinking. “The possibilities of someone else walking in here and being a perfect fit as you have are slim to none. Even still, I think I could put this somewhere where it won’t be noticed.” Thalia hung the dress on a pink satin lined hanger and covered it in its plastic sheath.

Sara and Kunio got out of the cab on Lexington Avenue a block away from her apartment. “I need some yogurt,” she said to him and walked to a small corner bodega.
“These places are so dirty,” he said and looked down his nose at the wooden crates of produce lined up just outside the store along the sidewalk. “Right out here in the open.” He pointed with his nose at the produce. “Exposed to car fumes and dirt. Let’s go to a grocery store.”

They walked past a short Asian man wearing a light blue apron who was arranging Granny Smith apples in a wooden crate so that all of the stems were pointing in the same direction. He smiled at Sara as she passed.

“You wash them before you eat them,” she said. “It’s not a big deal.”

A young high school boy sat behind the counter alternately engrossed in an open textbook and a spiral notebook laid out before him. Sara squeezed through the narrow aisles toward the refrigerated section in the back while Kunio stood by the counter, his arms across his chest. She returned with several containers of yogurt and found Kunio watching the man in the apron arrange the apples. When she approached the counter, the man shuffled quickly behind the counter to the cash register.

“He seems to be studying very hard,” said Sara.

“He have test tomorrow,” said the man. He rang up the items. “Four dollars twenty-five cents.”

Sara handed him money, and he returned her change. He placed the containers in a plastic bag. “You, uh, Korean?” he asked her.

She smiled and looked over at Kunio, expecting him to smile back. His lips were pursed and eyes narrowed as he looked first at the man then scrutinized Sara. She wasn’t sure, but she thought she saw him lean his head back a little as though to get a better look at her. The man looked eager for her answer.
“No, half Japanese,” she said.

“Oh, sorry,” he said and handed her the bag.

“My mother’s Japanese.”

“I see,” he said and nodded. He grinned so wide until his eyes were two small squints.

She took the bag. “Thank you.”

They left the store and walked along the crowded sidewalk. It was pedestrian rush hour. They made their way to Sara’s apartment. She took her keys from her pocket and unlocked the front door to a pre-war brownstone, but before she would let Kunio in, she blocked the door with her body and puckered her lips. Kunio didn’t kiss her back.

“What’s wrong?”

He laughed a nervous laugh. “Wait until we get inside,” he said.

“It’s never bothered you before.” She still blocked the door. He tried to get by, but she shifted her weight to block him out. She puckered her lips again.

“Upstairs,” he said and stopped trying to get in.

He’d never withheld affection from her before, and with no explanation for this change in behavior, it just made her mad. She pulled back and glared at him. “Forget it.” She snapped her head around and walked up the stairs to her fifth floor apartment without looking to see if he was coming. Worried for a moment that he wasn’t following, she paused at the landing to listen for his muffled footsteps on the carpeted stairs. She heard a stair creak and knew he was behind her.

Her apartment door was spring loaded, so after unlocking it, she eased it back until it was opened just a crack, enough that he would know it was open and unlocked. She took her yogurt into the kitchen, and by the time she opened the refrigerator, Kunio came in. She slammed the refrigerator door closed. The ceramic canisters sitting on top rattled. Kunio must have stopped by
the door because she couldn’t hear him shuffling around in the living room. She grabbed a bottle of water from the cabinet and walked back out to the living room.

He stood by the door and was studying an old sepia photo of Reiko’s family. Sara walked over to his side. He kept his eyes fixed on the photo. Sara studied the photo. Her grandparents, her mother, her aunts and uncles looked out at them from the photo. They were all posed in front of a painted backdrop which mimicked the parlor of a western-style home with its divided light windows and sheer curtains. No one was smiling. Sara’s grandfather, Masaru Uemura, stood tall behind his family wearing a black silk kimono embroidered at each breast with the family seal. His hair was closely cropped, his face wan. He looked at the photographer with complacent eyes. Standing erect next to her grandfather was Reiko at nine years old, second eldest of five children, dressed in her school uniform fashioned like a sailor suit. She looked like she was suppressing a smile. On his right sat Sara’s grandmother, Tomiko, with her hands neatly folded in her lap, her hair pulled back into a bun exposing her moon face which looked straight at the camera. The eldest child, Reiko’s brother, stood behind Tomiko. The other three children, two years apart in age, were dispersed to fill in the rest of the spaces in front of them. All the girls had the same style haircut--bobs with bangs. All the boys had haircuts like their father’s—shorn short.

Sara looked a Kunio’s profile and touched his arm. “I don’t want to fight,” she said.

“This is your mother’s family?” he asked.

She looked back at the photo. “Yeah.” She pointed to Reiko. “This is my mother.” She pointed to one of the other little girls. “And this is the sister she’s closest to.”

Kunio studied the photo closely. “Looks like your mother took after her father more than her mother.”
Sara compared her mother to her two grandparents. Reiko did resemble her father, especially around the eyes and the cheeks. Reiko didn’t have the plump rounded cheeks that her mother had. “You’re right. Never noticed it before.”

He slipped his arm around her waist and pulled her close and kissed her. So much heat emanated from his body, she felt as though she was hugging a furnace.

“I guess supper can wait,” she said.
Reiko had hoped Sara’s relationship with Kunio would wane by the closing days of summer. That he would tire of her. That his family would have pressured him into cutting it off. But like a stubborn child bent on defying her parents, Sara pressed ahead, accelerated her wedding plans. Reiko felt she had no choice but to try one last time. So she had packed her bags and boarded a plane for New York.

She surveyed Sara’s apartment with a mother’s scrupulous eye, searching for clues of untidiness and potential safety hazards. The bank of large windows in the mansard roof enabled Reiko to see the tops of the surrounding buildings, making the top floor apartment seem more spacious than it really was. She imagined people from neighboring buildings looking into the apartment from above at night, the lamps illuminating the room like a stage, she and Sara in its spotlights. She was glad it was daytime.

“You no can marry Minamoto-san,” said Reiko. She regretted blurting it out like that. Perhaps she should have waited until they settled in, had tea, exchanged niceties.

Sara was walking back toward the bedroom with Reiko’s suitcase. She set it down on the floor. “Excuse me?”

Reiko sat down on the sofa. She took a compact and lipstick from her purse. The plane ride had dried out her lips, and she’d felt the need to reapply her lipstick frequently ever since she boarded. “No can marry Kunio.”

Sara stood in front of her and waved her arms in the air. “You came all the way from Smyre to tell me this? Why couldn’t you just tell me over the phone?”

“I say many times. You no listen.” Reiko pressed her lips together, wiped the corners of her mouth with a tissue.
“I’m not listening because you’re being irrational,” said Sara.

“You call me stupid?” Reiko puts her compact and lipstick back in her purse and snaps the clasp closed.

“I said irrational, not stupid. It means not reasonable, not making sense.”

Sara’s wedding dress, covered in heavy plastic and stuffed with tissue paper, hung in the bedroom. “Why you buy dress?” Reiko got up and headed toward the bedroom to get a closer look. Sara rushed to the bedroom door and pulled it shut.

“Why am I rationalizing buying a wedding dress?” she mumbled. She turned with her back toward the door and her hands behind her back as though trying to hide something.

“Because I wanted to. I need a dress. I can’t get married in regular street clothes.” Reiko stood in front of her and peered around her body at the closed door.

“Too expensive. You need save money,” said Reiko. She decided she would try again later to see it.

Sara ushered her mother away from the door by gently pushing her behind the shoulders toward the sofa. “I got it on sale. Besides, it’s my money. I can do whatever I want with it. And I chose to buy a wedding dress.”

The corners of Sara’s mouth were turned up, but Reiko could see her daughter was not amused. “You take back. Get money back,” said Reiko. They stood in the middle of the living room floor facing one another.

“It’s not returnable,” said Sara. With her hands on her hips, she said, “Mother, stop treating me like a child. I’ve been on my own and doing quite well, I might add. I have a good job, and I’m making good money. It’s my life, and I’ll do with it what I see fit.” She slapped her
hands against her thighs. “How dare you tell me how to live my life and to keep me from doing the things that make me happy.”

Reiko turned and moved toward the kitchen. “I go make tea.”

“You don’t want me to be happy,” she heard Sara say behind her as she walked through the swinging door.

For a New York apartment, the kitchen seemed large, or perhaps it was that everything in it was scaled down. The cabinets, though ample, were built smaller to match the small appliances. The white Magic Chef gas stove looked like an ordinary stove that had been washed in the hot water cycle. The dishwasher next to the sink, set up on a built-in platform to bring it higher, held far fewer dishes than Reiko’s dishwasher at home. The refrigerator reminded Reiko of refrigerators back home in Japan that held just enough for a day’s worth of fresh produce and two days’ worth of staples. It was short enough she could see the dust accumulating in the serving tray which was sitting on top of the refrigerator.

Sara slammed open the kitchen door so hard it banged against the wall. “Don’t walk away when I’m talking to you.”

Reiko kept her back to Sara as she looked through several cabinets to find the tea kettle.

“That’s what this is all about, isn’t it? You can’t stand for me to be happy. It’s been this way all my life. You’re treating me the same way you treated Daddy.”

Reiko turned the cold water on full blast and watched as the stream hit the porcelain sink and splattered up the sides. Droplets landed on the front of her white wool suit. She filled the tea kettle.

“It just irked you to no end when he was happy. If he was having a good time, you had to ruin it for him. Nothing was ever good enough.”
Water bubbled over the spout of the kettle, so she turned off the faucet and drained some of it out.

“When he bought you that diamond bracelet for your birthday, you turned up your nose and said the diamonds were too small.”

Reiko set the kettle on the burner. “He no hab good taste.” She looked closely at the icons next to the knobs to figure out which knob went with which burner. She turned the knob completely open. The gas hissed, the igniter clicked, and the burner burst into tiny flames like petals of a blue chrysanthemum. She watched it burn, adjusted the kettle to center it over the flames.

“He would fix you breakfast in bed, and you wouldn’t touch it,” said Sara.

“I drink za coffee.” The tips of the flames turned golden. She adjusted the knob until only blue remained.

“You complained when he mowed the lawn because he wasn’t doing it right.”

“He don’t know how to cut grass.” The sound of Sara’s hand slapping against the refrigerator startled her.

“It’s fucking grass!”

Reiko turned and saw Sara’s cheeks and ears stained bright red. “Where teapot I gib you?” Before Sara could respond, Reiko looked through the cabinets.

“Are you listening to me?”

Reiko found the teapot. “Here it is. You hab green tea?” She set the teapot on the counter gently and opened the freezer door. She felt a slight breeze as Sara crossed behind her. The freezer was nearly empty except for two ice trays, a pint of ice cream, and two bags of frozen peas. She pushed the bags of peas out of the way to look behind them. A small metal canister
bounced on the counter next to her, and she caught it before it rolled off the counter. “You should not leave out. Lose taste. Store in freezer.”

“Every time he tried to hug you, you’d get this look on your face like he was the most disgusting creature in the world,” said Sara.

Reiko measured out a palm full of tea and poured it into the tea pot. “He always dirty.”

“Daddy was the sweetest, most loving, honest, hard working, devoted man I’ve ever known. You were lucky to have him. I would be lucky to find someone like him.”

The water in the tea pot rumbled in the first stages of heating. Reiko took the tray from the top of the refrigerator and wiped the dust into the sink with a wet washcloth. It was a serving tray she gave Sara when she first moved to Manhattan.

“Why did you hate him so much? What did he ever do to you?”

“I no hate,” said Reiko. She dried the tray with a dish towel hanging from a hook by the sink. The embossed blossoms were raised images on the smooth lacquer. She traced the outlines of a vine with her finger.

“You made him act like he was atoning for some atrocious sin he committed and had to spend his entire life trying to make it up to you. You’re right, you didn’t hate him. You were repulsed by him,” said Sara.

Reiko continued to busy herself with the tray but could feel Sara getting nearer to her back.

“When I was younger, I used to think you pushed him away like that because you didn’t want him to act that way in front of me. But when I got older, I could see that you really didn’t like him. You couldn’t stand for him to touch you.”

“Japanese no touch,” said Reiko. She took two tea cups from a cabinet next to the sink.
“Of course they touch. They have sex, don’t they? I don’t buy that crap. Maybe in public they act all prim and proper. But in private, it’s a whole different thing. I watched you and Daddy when you didn’t know I was around. You were even worse in private.”

Reiko could hear Sara breathing right behind her.

“You weren’t as polite,” said Sara.

The kettle whistled. Without acknowledging Sara’s nearness, Reiko went over to the stove and turned it off.

“You were happy when he died,” said Sara.

Reiko poured the hot water into the teapot. Steam rose up toward her face. She blew it away. “No happy.” She set the kettle back down on the stove. It rattled slightly when she did, and she realized her hand was shaking.

“Happy that he had a stroke and couldn’t touch you anymore.”

Reiko continued to keep her back to her daughter. She set the cups onto the tray with two hands to steady them.

“Happy when he was gone that you didn’t have to live with this smelly, fat, old American guy.”

She lifted the lid of the teapot to see how well the tea leaves were steeping. Sara must have been close behind her. Reiko could feel her daughter’s breath on the back of her neck, the hairs bristling. The lid slipped out of her hands and bounced on the counter. Afraid that it might break, she scrambled to stop it from falling onto the floor and caught it in time. She put it back in place. Sara pressed in against her shoulder. Reiko felt Sara’s hot breath on her neck.

“Happy that you didn’t have to keep up the appearance of being a good wife anymore for me or anyone else.”
Reiko slammed her hand on the counter. The cups rattled on the tray. “You no understand!” she screamed. The sound of her own voice startled her. She turned to face Sara.

“I understand that you were married for twenty years to a man you didn’t love. That you used and abused his generous nature. That you are a spiteful bitch who cares for no one but herself.”

“No, not zat way,” said Reiko. A burning pain seared the back of her eyes.

“What way was it? All I know is what I witnessed with my own eyes. You shoving him away and yelling, ‘Don’t touch me!’ when all he was trying to do was give you a hug.”

Reiko took several deep breaths. “Stop it, Sara-chan.”

“No. Explain. Did you catch him sleeping around? Not likely. The man never went anywhere that he didn’t take you or me with him.”

Reiko looked at her daughter’s contorted and reddened face and knew that nothing she could say would be understood. She’d rehearsed many times to herself on the plane ride. Sara-chan, you grandmother Korean. The speech was planned out in her head. The explanations. The history. The scenario much more calm. Sara understanding. But now, she couldn’t think the words much less say them out loud. She was just as weak now as she was on the beach in Japan twenty-five years ago. Time, relocation, family had not strengthened her as she’d hoped.

She poured the tea into the cups carefully and took the tray into the living room. Sara followed her. Reiko set the tray down on the dining table, served the cups for the both of them, sat down.

“What are you running away from? Every time I try to talk to you, you clam up,” said Sara as she sat down at the table.
Reiko stared out the window at an adjacent building. A young man was riding a stationary exercise bicycle and talking on the phone. In the next apartment, a young woman was just coming home with two large Bloomingdale’s bags in tow.

“Mother?”

Reiko sipped her tea and watched the woman toss the bags onto the floor and move through the apartment to the next window which was her kitchen.

“Okasan?” said Sara.

Reiko looked at her daughter’s face. She hadn’t noticed before how mature she looked. Her cheekbones had started to show through now that the baby fat had gone away. The acne she’d been so worried about as a teenager had cleared up and all that was left was smooth porcelain skin.

“I too tired to fight,” said Reiko. She looked at the brown irises of her daughter’s eyes which sparkled in the fading light coming through the windows. She pushed the tea cup toward her daughter. “No good you marry Kunio.”

“I thought you didn’t want to fight?”

“No fight. I gib you adbice. He no right for you.”

“You’ve already said that,” said Sara. She slouched in her chair.

“You too young. You no see.”

Sara crossed her arms. “Why don’t you like him? I’m truly perplexed here. What is wrong with him? I would have thought out of every one I’ve dated, this would be the one you would be most pleased with.”

Reiko grasped her tea cup in both hands. “No need make me happy. Make Sara-chan happy.”
Sara threw her arms up in the air and took a deep breath. “Here we go again. Kunio makes me happy.”

“Now, but no good later. I raise you to no be like me. Go school. Get good education. No need husband for support. Make your own money. I no hab choice. My father no send me to school. He say girl no need education. He wan me stay home wiz him. He berry jealous man. No like all boyfriend I bring home. ‘He no good,’ he say every time. So I leeb home and go to Sasebo to leeb with sister and her husband. Go to work. Make money.”

“What did you do?” asked Sara.

“Work tailor shop weekday and flower shop weekend. Make good money. Buy clothes, rings, makeup. Go to beauty shop every week, get hair done. I hab long hair. Many men like. Your father like long hair.” Reiko smiled at the memory of her long black waist length hair.

“Sounds like you were doing fine,” said Sara. “Why didn’t you keep working, get your own place, marry some Japanese guy?”

Reiko nodded her head and sipped her tea. “No can do. Father no like.”

“You were living on your own, making your own money. He had no jurisdiction over you at that point.”

“America different. Japan still need family approval. Zey do investigation of koseki. Make sure no problem in family.”

Sara leaned forward on her elbows. “What kind of problems? What did your family history have to do with you getting married? You don’t marry the family, you marry the person.”

“Make sure no Communist. No, how do you say?” The word failed her so Reiko tipped her head to one side and said, “Hoooon to shiteru.”

“Mental handicaps?”
“Hai. Handicap. All kind stuff.”

“That’s ridiculous. They don’t do that anymore. Kunio hasn’t done that, and I certainly haven’t looked into his family background.”

Sara looked so sure of herself. Her positive attitude about Kunio was so infectious. It only Reiko could let herself believe that Sara might be right, that times in Japan had progressed beyond the old Japanese traditions and had modernized, Westernized.

“Cookie be good, huh?” said Reiko. “You hab something sweet?”

“Organic carob chip cookies. I’ll get them.”

A picture on a shelf across the room caught Reiko’s attention, so she got up to get a closer look. It was Sara, Kunio, and several other Japanese couples dressed up in formal evening wear. She held it at arm’s length.

“That’s from the launch party of Hana’s new anti-ageing cream,” said Sara. She came up beside her mother and pointed to the background in the picture. “That’s the Temple of Dendur in the Metropolitan Museum. The room was gorgeous with candles everywhere. You can’t see it, but there’s a moat around the entire structure, and they had candles set all along the perimeter on the floor, so they reflected off the water. Incredibly romantic except that there were so many people there.”

In the photo, Sara looked like a Greek goddess with her hair pulled up, loose curls framing her face, her body draped in a white dress cinched at the shoulders and around the bodice with gold ribbon. “Sara look berry pretty.” Reiko placed the picture back down on the shelf and they both went back to the table. Reiko couldn’t help looking at the picture even as she sat down. “Kunio come from berry traditional Japanese family.”
Sara offered her mother a cookie. “If you’re worried that I’m getting into some relationship where I’ll have to play the traditional housewife all the time, I assure you Kunio’s not like that. He’s totally Americanized. He told me if it wasn’t for his obligations to his family to run things in Tokyo for awhile, we’d buy a house here and live in New York. But he wants to come back some day and live here.”

“He wanna move to Japan?” asked Reiko.

“That’s where we’re going to live after we come back from the honeymoon.” Sara took a big bite of her cookie. Crumbs fell into her lap. She picked them up and ate them.

“You wanna live in Tokyo?” For some reason, Reiko had assumed her daughter would live in the U.S. She’d never dreamed that her daughter would want to live in Japan and worried that Sara wouldn’t feel comfortable there, that she didn’t have a good enough command of the language to work there, that she wouldn’t be accepted.

“Why not? It’s just like New York only bigger.”

Reiko gestured toward the picture. “How he act around Japanese friend?”

“I don’t know. Like he is around everyone else.”

“Speak Japanese?”

“Of course. I don’t want him to not feel comfortable around me or to always cater to me. I understand enough to get by, so I don’t mind that he does that.”

Reiko looked at the picture and the line-up of Japanese faces. “Hm.”

“What does that mean?” asked Sara.

“Nothing.” Reiko took a small bite of her cookie.

“Mom, you’re worrying for no reason. This is the real thing.”
Reiko looked at her daughter’s face. The carob chip tasted vaguely like chocolate but
drier, coarser, didn’t melt on her tongue. Why not eat chocolate, instead? she wondered.

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

She watched Sara’s mouth move as she talked, the perfect teeth they spent years
correcting with braces. “Hm?”

“Like you don’t believe me. I know that look,” said Sara.

“Believe you.”

They sat silently sipping their tea. The muffled horn of a taxi, the police siren, not
continuous but wailing at each intersection, silent between blocks, the constant hum of
Manhattan a white noise to all who lived there but an assault on Reiko’s ears. The sounds, there
since she arrived, all became apparent at that moment of calm between her and Sara even though
she hadn’t been listening for it.

“Did you ever love Daddy?”

From where she sat, Reiko could see the eastern slice of the top of the Met Life building,
and by tilting her head one way or the other, she could see either the letters L-I or F-E but not the
word in whole. “In Japan, no marry for love. Marry for family. Love come later.”

Sara’s hand on her own startled Reiko out of her trance.

“But this wasn’t an arranged marriage. You told me your father wouldn’t consent to it,”
said Sara.

“Yes, he no like. But I berry stubborn. Marry anyway.”

Sara smiled at her. “Like mother like daughter.”

Reiko couldn’t be happy about the comparison. She didn’t want Sara to be like her. She’d
worked all her life to make sure Sara wouldn’t imitate her in any way. “Sara-chan, please gib
more time. It only five months since he propose. Wait one year. If you still love, you get married.”

Sara retracted her hand. “By the time of the wedding in December we will have been engaged nine months. Besides, I’ve already made the arrangements, rented the Pierre ballroom, the caterer, the florist, the musicians. I would lose a lot of money in deposits.”

“No matter money. I pay. Cancel.”

Sara chewed on her lower lip. “I’ll make a deal with you. Go to Japan with me to meet his family.”

Reiko held up both hands in protest. “I no…”

“Hear me out. If there’s the least little doubt in either my mind or yours after we’ve spent a week with them, I promise I’ll postpone the plans for one year as soon as I get back. But you have to promise to be honest and open minded about this. You can’t go over there with your mind all made up to hate them. That wouldn’t be fair to me.”

How could she hate Kunio’s family? She couldn’t even bear to hate Kunio. His family was sure to be just as perfect as he was. She pulled her jacket close around her body. “If he love you, he wait.”

“You’re right, but neither or us wants to wait. And right now, I don’t see any reason to put it off. But I’m willing to compromise if you’re willing to approach this with a totally open mind. Do we have a deal?”

Reiko placed their empty cups on the tray, closed the gaping cellophane wrapping on the bag of cookies and rolled it up tightly, placed it on the tray. She got up with the tray in her hands. “I don’t know, Sara-chan. I not ready to go to Japan. Too soon after mother die.”

Sara grasped her mother’s wrist. “Okasan, please. For me.”
Reiko looked down at the sparkling brown eyes, lighter than her own. Two bowls of cinnamon sprinkled with star anise.

“I know you won’t be disappointed,” said Sara. “We’ll go visit Aunt Mariko, and the two of you can show me where you grew up. I haven’t been there since I was little, and I don’t really remember much of it. We’ll take a video camera and tape everyone.”

Sara’s long lashes fanned the air between them. Reiko shook her head. “I see I hab no choice.”

Sara jumped up and hugged Reiko who shrunk from the embrace out of habit. She nudged her daughter away with her elbow to keep from dropping the tray. The tea cups clinked on the tray.
Since stepping off the plane at Narita, Reiko had hardly had time to reacquaint herself with her homeland. She had forgotten how much walking was necessary getting from the plane and through a series of trains, walking up and down the stairs from one platform to another, transferring from one line to another. The further into the country she went, the more primitive the trains and the fewer the people riding them. The trains out of Narita with their deep blue velvet-covered bucket seats and fold down trays for snacks, carpeting on the floors to muffle the noise, and individual adjustable air vents were worlds away from the country train she was now riding with its ochre fabric covering the bench seat, its flattened pile smoothed by the bottoms of many a commuter, and the linoleum floors resembling the pale gold of rice straw at harvest. This rural train languishing through the countryside resembled more the ones she remembered taking as a young girl growing up in Hirado.

She wore a white wool suit with the Hermes scarf Kunio and Sara had given her and was grateful for the care with which the Japanese took in keeping the trains clean. She had decided that once she got to the station, she would treat herself to a taxi ride to Kunio’s family’s home instead of taking the bus.

Her first task after getting off the train was to find an inn. The man working at the ticket counter told her of a country ryokan not too far from the station, so she rolled her suitcase down the road in search of it. The town was composed of only a few buildings besides the train station—the post office, a general store, and a book and magazine store, a small restaurant, all constructed out of wood. Fifty yards further at the edge of the paved road sat the ryokan, a two-story wooden building with blue glazed terra cotta tiles on the roof and a narrow balcony around
the second story rooms. The front door of this flat front building was wide open, and a woman
wearing a ruffled apron was sweeping out the entryway.

“Excuse me,” said Reiko.

The woman turned around and looked down at Reiko’s suitcase. “Welcome!” she said and motioned for Reiko to enter. “Husband!”

The guest slippers were all neatly lined up ready to slip on as the guests stepped up onto the raised floor. Wooden shelves with small cubbyholes for street shoes which lined the entryway were empty. Reiko took off her shoes and put on the slippers. She left her suitcase on the entryway floor but carried her small bag and purse with her.

“You may leave your suitcase there. My husband will get it for you.”

“Thank you,” said Reiko. She followed the woman into the front room, simply furnished with a tatami mat floor and a low table on which sat a ledger and an abacus. The woman motioned for Reiko to sit down.

“How did you hear about us?” asked the woman.

“The man at the station,” said Reiko. “I would like a room for one night, please.”

“Of course,” said the woman. She handed Reiko a blank form and a pen. “Please just fill in your name and address here.”

Reiko began filling it out. She paused as she wondered whether or not to write her U.S. address in English or Japanese.

“Will it just be for one person?”

Reiko looked up at the woman and her warm smile. “My daughter will join me later.” She decided to write the address in English. “We will be visiting with friends but will be back
after supper this evening.” She handed the woman the form. Slippered footsteps shuffled in the hall behind her.

The woman looked behind Reiko. “Take . . .” She studied the form. “Mrs. Martin?” she asked Reiko.

“Yes.”

“Take Mrs. Martin’s suitcase upstairs to the mountain view room,” she shouted toward the hallway.

“Yes, dear,” came the husband’s reply from the hallway.

“Breakfast is at eight o’clock. You and your daughter are the only guests this evening. This time of year, we don’t get much business except on the weekends. So if the time doesn’t suit you, please let me know.”

“Eight is fine,” said Reiko. “Should I get a taxi at the station?”

The woman laughed. “You’ll be waiting forever. Let me call him and have him pick you up here.”

Reiko was waiting out front when the taxi arrived. She got inside and took a slip of paper from her purse and showed it to the driver. “This is the address. Are you familiar with where it is?”

The driver looked at the address. “Oh yes. Everyone knows where this is. No problem,” he said and sped off past the pavement and onto the dirt road.

“Where are you from?” asked the white-gloved taxi driver in his distinctively provincial accent.
Reiko caught him looking at her through his rearview mirror. “America,” she said and looked over the metal barrier separating the road from the drop off and the quickly receding valley below them.

“Really?” He nodded slowly as though trying to make sense of all that that one word implied.

Reiko wasn’t in a talkative mood and interested herself in the scenery. Like improperly dyed silk whose colors run when washed, the reds and golds intermingled to weave fall suits on the maple trees.

“New York?” he asked.

She sighed to herself impatiently. The driver was nice enough, but she knew that he, like most country folks, wouldn’t know anything about Mississippi and even less about Smyre.

“Yes,” she said.

“My daughter wants to go to New York. I tell her no, it’s too dangerous. But she wants to go anyway. To be honest, I’m afraid if she went, she’d never want to come back.”

She took out her compact and asked, “How much further?”

“It’s just up there,” he said and pointed out the windshield toward the tree tops.

She pressed the cotton puff gently on her cheeks and nose, blotting the traces of oil. She shouldn’t have eaten that anko mochi at the train station, but it was so good, and she hadn’t had one in such a long time. She looked at her faded lipstick. She retraced the outlines of her lips with lipstick from a small stiff brush and filled in the lines with the virtuoso of a painter.

“You’ll like working there. My cousin is the weekend cook. He won’t be there today, but you’ll see him on Saturday. Saburo’s his name. Be sure to mention me. He likes to pamper all the pretty women.” He smiled up at her through the mirror.
Reiko caught his eye and, embarrassed, looked quickly down, busying herself with the contents of her purse. She wasn’t sure why she didn’t bother to correct him about not working there.

“Minamoto-san’s a nice man and pays very well. Every year at Obon he pays for the fireworks show. Our municipality can’t afford such luxuries. He really likes children and hates to see them disappointed. We’re all just farmers out here. I drive a taxi to supplement my income.” He stopped the taxi. “Here we are,” said the taxi driver as he stopped on a gravel driveway which didn’t seem to lead anywhere.

Reiko looked out the window. “Is this the right place?”

The automatic door of the taxi opened and a rush of cool, moist air touched her face. The songs of what sounded like hundreds of birds entered the cab, and she could hardly hear the driver speaking anymore. She shivered.

The taxi driver swung around in his seat to face her. “You can’t see the house from here. What you want to do is buzz that intercom up there.” He pointed up at the wooden gates. “I’ll wait here until someone comes out to get you.”

Reiko looked at him not sure whether she wanted to get out of the taxi at what seemed like a remote mountaintop temple.

A canopy of large pine and maple trees shaded the stone steps leading to the weathered wooden gate which was covered by a gabled roof thatched neatly with pampas grass. The wooden slatted walls on either side of the gate were mostly obscured by azaleas, camellias, and giant ferns.

“That’ll be one thousand five hundred yen,” he said.
She handed him the money. He got out right away, opened the trunk, and helped her take out her overnight bag.

“I can get that,” she said and took the bag from him.

He bowed and got back into the cab. “Push the button to talk,” he said from the cab, his arm extending out from the window pointing at the intercom.

She pushed the button. “Hello?” She listened, still depressing the button.

“Let go of it so you can hear them respond,” the driver shouted.

She let go. The box remained silent. She pressed it again. “Is anyone home?” As soon as she let go, she heard movement on the other side of the gate. The gate opened revealing a stooped elderly man wearing cotton gardening pants cinched at the ankles and waist. Though faded, his shirt was pressed and neatly buttoned up to the collar. Kunio’s father, she thought. So much older and shorter than she expected.

“Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Reiko Martin. I believe you’re expecting me?”

“Minamoto-san!” the taxi driver said to the elderly gentleman. “Good afternoon.”

Minamoto-san waved to the taxi driver.

“I’ll be leaving. Good luck!” shouted the taxi driver to Reiko as he bowed repeatedly and waved with one hand while driving away with the other.

Reiko watched the taxi disappear down the hill.

“I see you’ve met our taxi driver,” said Minamoto-san as he motioned for her to enter.

She stepped over the solid stone threshold and into a courtyard lush with trees and shrubs, all perfectly manicured. The foliage was so dense it was difficult to see how large the area really was. The pea gravel walkway crunched underfoot and gave way under her heels. She nearly
turned her ankle and instinctively grabbed Minamoto-san’s arm for support. “My goodness, please excuse me,” she said and took her hand away once she regained her balance.

He turned to her and smiled. “No need to apologize. I’m an old man, but I can still appreciate the touch of a beautiful woman.”

She lowered her eyes to the ground.

“Let me take your bag. Your shoes are meant to be worn on the paved sidewalks of Tokyo, not on our rustic pathways.” He took her bag without waiting for her to offer it.

“Thank you.” She felt bad letting him carry her bag. He seemed so small and frail. Reiko followed him down an alley of yews to another thatched roof entrance, this one without a gate, which opened out to a clearing in the middle of which was the residence. It didn’t resemble any of the modern houses built around Tokyo with their cemented stucco walls and glass windows, but more like her own family’s farm house in Hirado except much grander. It was a shogunate’s ancient wooden-style house with a multi-gabled thatched roof and large overhanging eaves which shaded the papered shoji-type doors from the sun.

They entered through a side door and were greeted in the foyer by a middle-aged woman sitting on her knees and bowing. She had on a white apron embroidered with tiny edelweiss flowers around the collar and ruffles all around the outside edges.

“Welcome,” she said.

“Please enter,” said Minamoto-san to Reiko. He turned to the middle-aged woman, handed her Reiko’s bag, and said, “Take her bag and go get Shoichiro. I can take care of her from here.” She retreated quickly down the hall.

Reiko slipped out of her shoes and into a pair of slippers Minamoto-san had set out for her on the elevated wooden floor. The house was rustic in its simplicity but certainly not in the
quality of its workmanship or materials. That was apparent the moment Reiko entered the main room. The doors to the veranda were slid wide open and served as a frame, as though a portrait, a perfect view of Mt. Fuji with a Zen garden in the foreground. Reiko gasped.

“Are you okay?” asked Minamoto-san.

“I’ve never seen such an incredible view of Fuji-san,” she said.

Minamoto-san smiled broadly like a proud father and said, “We are fortunate to be able to enjoy such luxuries. My grandson is always trying to get me to visit Tokyo or go overseas with him, but with views like this . . .” He looked out over his garden and to the snow-capped mountain beyond.

“Grandson? I thought your children were not married,” Reiko said.

“You have read my father like a book,” said Shoichiro who came up behind them. “He is weak when it comes to pretty women, particularly those who flatter him.”

Reiko immediately realized her mistake. “Oh dear.” Her face flushed red.

“I’m Minamoto Shoichiro,” the son said and bowed to her.

She returned his bow.

“Welcome to our home.” He motioned to a low polished wooden table surrounded by four gold silk cushions.

They all sat down. The middle-aged woman from the entryway entered with barely a sound, carrying a tray of tea cups and plates of sweets—candied fava beans, candied black beans, petit fours, and a peeled and quartered nashi. “Excuse the intrusion,” she said to no one in particular, sat on the tatami floor, set the tray down beside her, and set the plates and cups on the table.

“Thank you, Mrs. Tsuruoka,” said the elderly Minamoto-san.
Mrs. Tsuruoka bowed and disappeared as quietly as she’d entered.

“You have a very lovely daughter, Mrs. Martin,” said Shoichiro.

“Please excuse her rudeness. This seems to be the way with Americans, and I’m afraid she’s learned that not from me but from outside the home and away from my influence,” said Reiko.

“Not at all. I like her energy. I see why my son is so taken with her. Besides, youth, beauty, and intelligence are a lethal combination. Don’t you agree, Dad?” he said, though not looking away from Reiko.

“Absolutely!” said Minamoto-san, and he held up his tea cup toward Reiko as though for a toast.

Reiko looked around. “By the way, where is my daughter?”

“They should be back soon. I believe they went for a jog. Young people these days,” said Shoichiro.

That’s Sara, thought Reiko. All this magnificent display of nature and she chooses to run through it.

Minamoto-san pushed a plate of sweets toward her. “Please, help yourself.” He picked up the plate of nashi and held it out to her. “Or perhaps you’re on a diet, like all the other Japanese women seem to be these days, and you prefer fruit.”

“Thank you,” she said. The flesh of each carefully quartered piece had been pierced in the center with a bamboo toothpick.

“Beef. That’s the problem. Kids get out of school and head straight for Mossburger and McDonald’s. Korean barbeque places are so popular now. When I was a young boy, we’d go
straight home where my mother would have homemade snacks waiting for us, baked sweet potatoes, mochi, shoyu rice crackers.”

“I grew up in Hirado near the ocean. When I was little, I’d go swimming with my siblings and all the neighborhood children while the adults worked in the rice paddies. My mother would sew little pouches for us and fill them with dried roasted soybeans that we’d secure to our swimsuits. After swimming all day, we’d sit on shore on the rocks and have our soybean snack which had been salted and reconstituted by the ocean.”

“The old time women were so clever, especially the farmers. I’ll bet your family had plenty to eat during the war if you had a farm. And with fish from the ocean. But you probably weren’t born then, were you?”

“If I didn’t know any better, I would say Minamoto-san was trying to guess my age,” she said to him and smiled.

Minamoto-san laughed. “Not at all.”

“It’s quite all right. I was two years old when the war ended. And yes, we did have plenty to eat, although the military confiscated most of our rice crop, leaving us with enough to feed the family and share some with the neighbors.”

“My wife, Shoichiro’s mother, had a very bad time. I fought in the war and was being fed by the military but my wife and son did not fare so well.”

Shoichiro added, “Mother would take her sugar rations out to the farmers to barter for food.”

Minamoto-san added, “I left them here in the mountains. It was safer than the city. But she didn’t know the first thing about farming. She tried planting vegetables, but the only thing
she managed to grow was potatoes.” He looked at Shoichiro and said, “Shoichiro ate a lot of potatoes, didn’t you?” He patted his son on the shoulder.

“I won’t touch them to this day,” Shoichiro chimed in. “The farmers in this community were a godsend. Because of them, we managed to get by.”

Reiko hadn’t yet taken a bite of her nashi and looked at it sitting so prettily on the celadon plate. She said, “I don’t remember much, but my father told me we were visited by many soldiers’ wives in similar situations as yours. Many came by with several children in tow.” She looked at Shoichiro. “My parents insulated us children from much of what was happening. Being out in the country enabled them to do that.”

Shoichiro asked, “You were not near Nagasaki?”

It was a test, she thought, of whether or not our family’s blood was tainted by the radiation. She said, “We lived on an island away from mainland Kyushu.” She sipped her tea and looked out the window. “The land continues to breed in spite of man’s folly. Despite the devastation and poverty after the war, the seasons came and went. Our plum and persimmon trees bore fruit which mother preserved and dried. Fish was salted and dried. Rice was planted and harvested. Father made mochi each year for New Year’s celebration. I still remember he and my uncles taking turns with the giant wooden mallets pounding the sweet rice while my mother squatted by the bowl carved into a tree trunk, dipping her hand in the pail of water and dutifully flipping the congealed rice ball after each stroke.”

Minamoto-san grinned and nodded as though remembering his own experience with the New Year’s ritual.
“I was always afraid she wouldn’t pull her hand out in time,” Reiko continued, “and it would get crushed under the mallet. But like a dance, they synchronized their movements, and she never got hurt.”

“Yes,” said Minamoto-san. “Hit, dip, turn,” he said and tapped his hand on the table to the rhythm of his words. “You’re right, it was like a dance. A waltz.” He turned to Shoichiro and said, “Without the water, the mochi would stick to the mallet and the whole thing would be ruined if it fell on the ground.” He said to Reiko, “Shoichiro’s a little older than you, but he didn’t experience those things. We stopped doing that after the war. My brothers were killed, and the tradition just sort of died out,” he said, his voice fading with the final words.

The sun had reached its zenith, flattening the image of Mt. Fuji and making it appear even more like a photographic image. Reiko used a bamboo toothpick, smooth and green on one side as though freshly whittled, to pick up a slice of nashi. Juice dripped down to her chin and she quickly put up her hand to catch it before it dripped on her clothes.

Shoichiro handed her a handkerchief from his pocket.

“Excuse me,” she said, embarrassed she was making a mess. She wiped her chin.

Minamoto-san said, “The taste of your home. Enjoy it! That’s all that matters. Have another!” He took her plate away and replaced it with the serving plate holding the remainder of the pieces of fruit.

Reiko tried to protest, but her mouth was full.

Minamoto-san and Shoichiro laughed, and she joined in just as Sara came running through the garden up to the veranda. Kunio came up behind her, and both of them leaned on the wooden floor, flushed and panting.

Sara said in Japanese through labored breaths, “Hey, Mom. What’s so funny?”
“We’re just laughing,” Reiko said as the laughter died down.

Sara asked Kunio, “Do you think it’d be possible to get a bath?”

Minamoto-san called out, “Mrs. Tsuruoka!”

“Yes,” she responded, her voice echoing from down the hall as she shuffled up to the room. “Yes,” she said, bowing to Minamoto-san.

“Get the bath ready for our guests.”

“Yes,” she said and disappeared.

Minamoto-san said to Reiko, “You must be tired. Perhaps you should relax with your daughter in the bath, too.”

“I’d like that,” she said.

Sara said in English, “Come on, Mom. I’ll show you where everything is.” Sara had taken off her shoes and hopped up onto the veranda. She grabbed her mother’s arm and led her away. “Being a bath person, you’re going to love this. It’s huge and has these great big windows that overlook this cute little garden.”

Mrs. Tsuruoka had set out towels and floral cotton yukatas for them in the changing room, a spacious room with wooden benches and individual wicker baskets in which to place their clothes. They undressed and entered the bathing area through sliding glass doors.

The bath, large enough to accommodate at least ten people, was centered in its own room and covered in gray-green granite tile. The floor was a mosaic of smooth black river rocks which met green slate walls tiled to the ceiling. Through a picture window which extended the length of the room bathers could enjoy their own little bamboo walled garden with a natural rock basin fountain, lush green shrubs, and a dwarf cut-leaf red maple. A wooden stool and wooden bucket sat in front of each of the seven showering stations along the wall.
“Isn’t this great?” asked Sara, her voice echoing off the walls.

“Would you like me to scrub your back?” asked Reiko.

“Yeah,” said Sara as she lathered and doused herself with water from the wooden bucket.

Reiko took a loofa sponge from a shelf by the window and brought her wooden stool closer to Sara’s, sitting behind her. Sara sat hunched, and Reiko rubbed the loofa across her back and shoulders.

“Did you have a nice jog?” asked Reiko.

“I’m trying to get Kunio into it. He doesn’t get enough exercise sitting behind a desk all day,” said Sara. “We’re hiking down to the lake tomorrow. Want to come with us?”

“Probably not.” She scrubbed her daughter’s shoulders. “We’ll see.” Reiko took Sara’s right arm and raised it. She scrubbed Sara’s arm and armpit the way she used to do when she was a little girl.

Sara giggled. “That tickles.”

She had said that when she was little, too.

“I’m having such a good time. I think I could actually live here,” said Sara. “I mean I’d miss America and all, but I could always visit.”

Reiko pushed the downy hairs at the base of Sara’s neck out of the way and scrubbed till her skin was rosy pink.

Sara turned around and took the loofa from Reiko. “Here, let me scrub your back, now.”

Reiko turned around to face the picture window while Sara rubbed the coarse sponge across her back and neck. A sparrow was standing on a bed of moss in the garden, flapping its wings and chirping at a larger sparrow that was foraging for food and ignoring the commotion. The smaller bird followed the larger one around the enclosed space of the little garden, chirping
and flapping until the larger one flew away. The smaller bird quieted, seemingly lost for the moment by the sudden departure, then it, too, flew away.

“Thank you, Sara-chan.”

They both rinsed at the shower stations. Sara was already in the water when Reiko sat down on the edge of the bath. She lowered herself slowly into the hot water until it covered her shoulders.

“What do you think?” asked Sara.

“It’s been a long time since I’ve been in a bath this nice.”

“Not just the bath. I mean everything. Kunio’s dad, his grandfather. This house is incredible, isn’t it? His grandfather stays here most of the year until it gets cold, then they pack him up and take him into the house in the city. He’s a riot. Such a flirt.”

“Sara, this is not how most people in Japan live. Do you understand?” Reiko asked.

“Of course I do,” said Sara. She wiped the sweat droplets from her face.

“You are getting a very comfortable experience of Japan.”

“You’re worrying for nothing.”

Reiko rubbed her arms under the water.

“I think I know what you’re getting at,” said Sara. “When Kunio and I get married, we won’t be living like this, right? I know that. We’ve already talked about it. If and when we move here, we’ll get a little apartment in Tokyo the size of a shoebox. That’s the way it is when you’re just starting out. I can get a job doing what I’m doing now but at Hana. They could use someone with my experience and English abilities on the inside taking care of their overseas market.”

Reiko nodded her head.

“I’m boiling,” said Sara, and she stepped out of the tub. “Aren’t you hot?”
“Feels good,” said Reiko as she continued to steep in the steaming water. She leaned back against the side of the tub, rested her head on the ledge, and closed her eyes.

Sara turned on one of the showers and washed her hair. She spoke loudly above the noise of the splashing water. “The shoot went really well. I think we got some great footage. It rained the first day, but once the sun came out, we got some really cool shots of the mist rising off the lake. The deadline’s not for another month, so we’re going to wait till I get back to the States to do the cutting. We’ll do the post production and graphics work in L.A.” She turned off the shower. Water still dripped onto the pebbles from her hair. “Why don’t you go to L.A. with me? You’d like Little Tokyo and all the great sushi restaurants.”

“You’ll be busy with work. I don’t want to bother you.”

“Won’t be bothering me.” She squeezed the water from her hair. “Think about it.” Her wet feet smacked against the wet tile. “Staying here?”

“A little longer,” said Reiko.

“I’m going to get dressed,” said Sara. When she slid open the glass door, a draft of cool air came rushing into the room and created swirls of steam above Reiko’s head.

Rain had begun to trickle outside and collect on the leaves of the red maple, causing its branches to droop slightly, the water dripping from its fingers onto the moss below.

With her yukata wrapped neatly around her and tied at her waist with a silk obi, Reiko came back out to the main room. It was empty, but she could hear Sara’s laughter and the men’s voices in the distance coming from another room. She walked out onto the veranda, the smooth
wood cool beneath her bare feet. The rain had ceased. Sara’s running shoes were still where she had left them earlier, so Reiko put them on and walked out into the garden.

She walked through a small wooden gate, silvered by a century of sun and rain, and along the wall through the garden, past a rough textured granite fountain shaped like a millstone, a constant flow of water glassed its surface and dripped to the pebble bed below. A stepping stone path led through the thick cluster of trees and downhill to a koi pond surrounded by flat stepping stones clothed in mossy mantles. Cream colored blooms sat atop lily pads as though placed there intentionally by man rather than by nature. The sun had gone down below the trees, and she could feel the mountain air begin to chill with dampness.

“I think that you’ve not looked often at the full moon,” said Shoichiro.

“Oh!” Reiko jumped. She swung her head around and saw him looking up at the sky. “I didn’t hear you walk up.”

He looked at her, and she put her hand reflexively to her cheek, embarrassed, but pleased, at the comment to her youthful appearance.

Shoichiro led her to a wooden bench nestled below a sprawling maple tree, some of whose branches stretched out over the water. “It looks so lonely when it’s full,” he said, looking up at the moon. He took out a handkerchief and brushed off the bench for them.

Reiko sat down next to him, her back erect, knees squeezed together, and her hands clasped in her lap. She said nothing but continued to look out at the water.

“As if it’s scanning the world for a suitable companion, and yet people are inadequate candidates. Never able to match its ageless beauty,” he said and looked at her.

Reiko shifted in her seat.
“You are very lucky to have such a daughter. It wasn’t enough that she should be intelligent but to be so beautiful. My son is understandably attracted to her.”

Reiko could see out of the corner of her eye that he was watching her. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I can see that you’ve taken great care in raising your son.” A cluster of ferns were nestled in freshly churned dirt, fragrant as a bowl of mushrooms. “I haven’t been so fortunate with Sara. America can be a vulgar place, made so by the demands placed on a body simply to survive.” She caressed the back of her hand. “I have tried very hard to instill grace and propriety, but I’m competing against forces greater than myself.”

He nodded as though in assent. “This home has been in my family for several generations. It’s a wonder it survived all the clan wars.” He looked up at the tree.

“It would have been a shame to have destroyed such a pearl,” she said. She stole a glance at his profile—Kunio in thirty years.

He continued, “We’ve altered it very little which is why we don’t spend winters here. Too cold and drafty. Once all the trees are bare, we’ll be packing up for the lowlands of Tokyo.”

A maple seed pod fluttered down like a single-bladed propeller, landing on the bench between them. “A good omen,” he said.

Reiko picked up the seed pod.

“My great grandfather planted this tree as a sapling,” said Shoichiro.

She held the seed pod up to the light of the moon and studied its interconnecting veins in its translucent wing. He propped his arm on the back of the bench behind her and leaned in closer to join in her inspection of the seed pod. Heat emanated from his body, and his breath whistled slightly through his nose.
Her body shook from within. “It seems even though we’re able to make choices.” She paused to catch her breath. “Our path is predetermined.”

Shoichiro leaned back slightly but still kept his arm behind her. “By our parents. Each generation paves the path for the next.”

Her hand closed around the seed pod.

Shoichiro picked up a leaf from the ground and twirled it between his fingers. “I received a copy of your family’s koseki several weeks ago.”

Reiko sat stiffly upright. No response came to mind. Though she’d rehearsed this moment for weeks, no words came out. No excuses, explanations. Not even an apology.

“Was she pressed into service like the others?” he finally asked.

She looked at Shoichiro who seemed so genuinely concerned that any anger she felt slipped from her body. She bowed her head. “My father was an only child and never learned to share. He kept my mother all to himself. It was only when her family moved back to Korea and she was forced to leave the country did he reluctantly part with her.” There, it was done. Never had she fainted in her entire life, but at that moment, the blood drained from her head, and she began to feel dizzy as though she might. She broke out in a cold sweat. Shoichiro’s hands grasped her shoulders and urged her to lean against the back of the bench. He was there and not there. She knew he was sitting next to her, but he seemed too far away to touch. She closed her eyes and held her head in her hand.

“I’m pleased to hear it was a love match. I have told no one yet, but I must tell Kunio,” said Shoichiro.
“I tried to break them up, but my daughter is too headstrong. The more I pushed, the greater she pulled.” She shook her head. “I failed.” A tear trickled down her cheek. She took a handkerchief from her sleeve and patted her eyes.

After a long silence, he said, “I was too young at the time, but I’ve since found out many things that were carried out during the war. Many things I don’t approve of. Behavior, I’m ashamed to say, that our country did nothing to stop. Ugliness. Atrocities. Treating human beings from other races worse than the lowest animal. Tortures.” He looked out over the pond. “My uncle was an army doctor. Considers himself a scientist” He took a deep breath. “Still believes there was nothing wrong in what he did.”

Reiko listened to the rhythm of his breathing. She thought maybe she felt his heart beat as it pounded through his ribcage and through the bench but realized it was only her own. The whole world knew about the Nazi concentration camps, but Japan’s own citizens didn’t know what their military was doing overseas. Reiko didn’t find out until she moved to the United States.

“He lives in Tokyo now. Retired. Spends his days sweeping the grounds of the Emperor’s palace. His son, my cousin, is a doctor. I speak to my cousin, but I don’t talk to my uncle anymore,” he said.

She pictured a thin man with a wizened face sitting cross-legged on his tatami mat covered living room floor, smoking, contempt all over his face, angry that his human experiments had been cut short due to the end of the war. “People do things under stressful conditions that they wouldn’t otherwise do,” said Reiko.

“Yes. But there are others who have forgotten the teaching of Buddha which says to do no harm,” he said.
Reiko didn’t know how to respond. He seemed agitated, but she was sure it wasn’t directed at her.

“Because I was away so much with my job,” he said, “my father was the greatest influence in my son’s life, especially after my wife died.” He looked at her face. “Kunio is my father’s son.”

She stared at him for signs of any understanding. “I’m not sure what this means.”

He looked down at the ground in a kind of embarrassed pose. “My father is very traditional, nationalistic. He, like his brother, still worships the Emperor.”

He paused as though waiting for Reiko to say something, but she had nothing to say. She had known this about Kunio since the first day she met him back in Smyre. His entire demeanor exuded an old world charm despite the Western clothes. She was surprised to find out, though, Shoichiro did not feel the same way. Perhaps he wasn’t the most progressive man in the world, but he might possibly be the most progressive man in Japan.

“I will leave the decision to Kunio,” he said. “Our children are grown adults. It’s not our place to tell them what to do. If Japan is to progress and be competitive with the rest of the world, we must give our young people room to be creative. That’s what’s so wonderful about Sara.”

She searched his face, trying to find an alternate meaning to his words. Surely he wasn’t going to allow the marriage to take place. As modern and forward thinking as he was, he still had to function in the real world, and the real world would never accept Sara and Kunio’s marriage. It would ruin Kunio’s career.

He turned her hand over and opened her fingers to reveal the seed pod. “Take this back with you and plant it in your own garden.”
“I’d like that,” she said. “I’ll plant it next to my pond to remind me of your beautiful garden.”

“Would you do me one favor?”

She waited for him to continue.

He laughed. “Don’t look so worried.”

His laughter warmed her, and she blushed as his breath brushed against her cheek. Even when she turned away, she could feel him looking at her.

“You must send me a picture of its progress each fall.”

She took her floral handkerchief, unfolded it in her lap, and placed the seed pod directly in the center, rolling up the handkerchief like a jelly roll. She started to tie the ends together when Shoichiro held out his hand.

“Allow me,” he said and took the rolled up fabric. With very little effort, he tied the ends together into a complicated knot and unfurled the ends to create a fabric flower. As he handed it back to her, he said, “Consider it my contribution to the gentrification of your adopted home.”

She accepted it in her two hands and admired his handiwork. “Very beautiful.”

They sat silently gazing at the still pond and the reflection of the moon’s soft caress. No sooner had an insect settled on the moon’s surface than a koi reached up and sucked it down to the bottom, cracking the moon into liquid pieces.

Sitting so close to Shoichiro was a pleasant experience for her but made her feel uneasy. Not able to forget that he now knew, she wondered what he must be thinking of her. She detected no animosity or prejudice in his demeanor, but she wondered if he might be overcompensating for his disappointment.
“Sara is a spirited young woman. She has taught my son to see the world in ways I could never have taught him, nor would he have experienced what he has had he not lived abroad.”

She looked at him out of the corner of her eye. He was sitting still with his hands folded in his lap.

“I wanted to raise him to live in a modern world. My father raised him under the old ways.” He sighed heavily. “The outdated ways will eventually die.” He nodded repeatedly.

A flock of geese flew in formation overhead, bobbing with each wing stroke, laboring to keep their bodies afloat on the wind current. Reiko’s heart rapped against her ribcage, and she hummed in time to the rhythm. The old ways weren’t so bad. They offered stability, pattern, comfort. Habits were good. They allowed her not to have to think. To think, she’d have to stop, and stopping would be dying. Living on instinct with its routines and rituals, that’s the way the world was supposed to operate. Shoichiro’s arm rested against her back. Startled by the introduction of Shoichiro humming the folk song with her, she stopped and looked up at his profile.

“Why did you stop?” He sang softly while looking up at the moon, tapping her shoulder on each down beat.

It was so obvious to her that Kunio had inherited his good looks from his father. She followed the outline of his forehead, down over the slope of his nose, and paused at his mouth which was elegantly forming the words to the song, enunciating each syllable but blending them together into a flowing stream.
They had been laughing so hard that they didn’t hear Reiko and Shoichiro enter the room. Who knew that an old aristocrat like Muramatsu-san could be so funny. He had charmed Sara with tales of Kunio’s childhood antics and had her laughing so hard, she was lying on the floor, holding her sides. Her mother gave her a look that told her she wasn’t acting very ladylike, but she didn’t care. She was having such a good time watching Kunio and Muramatsu-san tease one another. Kunio seemed to be very fond of his grandfather, laughing and joking right along with him.

She sat up. “I have to use the restroom,” she said and got up. She rushed out of the room for fear that she would wet herself from laughing so hard.

The bathroom was tucked away in the back of the house, an afterthought. One bare fluorescent light bulb directly over the commode soaked the white walls with a greenish haze. Small square windows were set high up the wall near the ceiling and were always left open. The room was clean enough but felt no more cozy than an outhouse. The narrow white porcelain commode was elevated off the concrete floor and built into a knee-high wooden platform. Sewer gases seeped up through the wooden commode lid, and when she lifted it off and set it aside, the commingling of raw sewage and rose scented sewage treatment nauseated her. She breathed through her mouth to avoid the smell, but then she could taste the smell, and that made her stomach heave. Breathing through her nose was the better alternative. If Japan was so technologically advanced, why couldn’t they adopt stink-free Western style toilets? She took comfort in knowing that the plumbing in Tokyo, where they would be living, was more advanced.
The commode resembled a miniature bobsled with its elongated body and hooded nose more than it did a commode, and except for the gaping hole with its direct access to the septic tank, two small babies could have fit into it one behind the other and used it as a sled. The idea of the platform was not so that one could stand on the floor and it could be sat upon Western style but to stand on the elevated platform facing the far wall and squat over it.

Her urine dribbled onto the sludge in the septic tank below, not the pleasant trickling sound of water on water like the tinkling of crystal glasses in major keys, but the heavy splattering onto an unforgiving gelatinous pool with bits of detritus embedded in its surface. She reached for the loose roll of toilet paper while keeping her balance and tore off several sheets. She stood up to pull up her pants, and when she stepped down off the platform, she accidentally knocked the roll of toilet paper down the gaping hole.

“Oh,” she gasped. She held back her hair and looked down at the fat roll of toilet paper ten feet below. It balanced askew in the sludge, blues and browns seeping slowly up its sides, staining the bright whiteness. Something moved in the sludge next to the toilet paper, pushed aside impediments, crawled up past the stained area to the white. Sara shivered and slammed down the wooden lid, pushed her way out of the bathroom, shuffled down the hall to the kitchen. She squeezed dishwashing liquid into her palm and rubbed her hands together, working her way up to her elbows. With her fingernails, she scratched up and down her arms with the tenacity of a doctor scrubbing for surgery. There was no hot water tap, so she rinsed with lots of cold clear running water, bending down low to rinse her arms. As the soap cleared, she saw red streaks on her arms like highways leading to her elbows. With a nearby dishtowel, she rubbed her skin until the streaks disappeared and her entire arms were bright red.

“What are you doing?” asked Kunio behind her.
She whipped around. “Washing my hands.” She wrung her hands roughly in the dish towel and hung it back in place.

“There’s a sink in the bathroom.”

She straightened the towel. “I got creeped out in there.” She stretched out her arms and stepped up to him, snaking her arms around his neck. “Were you worried about me?”

He unhooked her arms. “No.”

She stole a quick kiss. “What’s up?”

“I thought we’d go for a walk,” he said and walked to the foyer without looking back at her.

She shrugged her shoulders and followed him. “Okay,” she said. “But I’m starving. When’s supper?”

He had already slipped into his shoes by the time she reached him and was walking out the door. Instead of running shoes, he was wearing slip-ons that were open in the back. They weren’t going for a serious walk but more like a romantic stroll, so she did the same and slipped on a pair of backless sandals.

The valley below turned into a thick midnight blue shag carpet at night, the lights flickering from farmhouses littering the carpet like flecks of dust. Sara ran to catch up to Kunio, grabbed his arm, bounced about like a happy go lucky puppy. Something about the mountain air gave her infinite energy and a big appetite for food, life, Kunio, couldn’t get enough of him. She jumped up on his back and wrapped her legs around his waist. Any other time he would have grasped her legs and held them close, but tonight, he pried apart her arms, leaned back, and deposited her back on the ground.
“Spoil sport,” she said and pouted her lips. The blood rushed to her head as she watched him walk away. “What’s the deal?” She jogged to catch up and planted herself in his path.

He stopped and looked at her. “Stop acting like a child,” he said and stepped aside and continued walking.

“Excuse me?” she said. “Not ten minutes ago we were laughing in there and having a great time. What happened?” She saw that he wasn’t slowing down. “What is your problem!” she screamed.

He stopped.

The words and the high pitched tone rang in her ears, echoed across the valley. She felt as though every one of those farmhouse lights had heard her, and she regretted having raised her voice to him. A dog barked in the distance. She caught up to him. They walked together in silence through the entrance gate and down the road.

The road snaked back and forth and followed the contours of the mountain. Trees loomed high overhead, blocked out the moonlight, like bandits they seemed to surround them on all four sides. Sara couldn’t see the road but felt it beneath her feet. She thought she was following Kunio’s body heat through the twists and turns, but when she reached out to touch him, he felt cold. He cringed ever so slightly, barely noticeable, but left her hand suspended in midair. The heat must have been coming from below instead, from the asphalt road. Kunio remained silent. She retracted her hand. Buffeted on each side by the cold forest, she felt instead for the warm open places of the road.

A snap, a hiss, and the glow of a match lit up Kunio’s face as he lit a cigarette. “You don’t smoke,” she said. The smell of sulfur from the match burned the insides of her nose.
“Sometimes,” he said. He inhaled so hard the end of the cigarette burned white hot, the singeing of paper and tobacco crackling between his thumb and forefinger.

“I’m sorry I yelled at you back there,” she said.

He stared into the darkness and exhaled the smoke through his nose. The smoke lingered between them in the stagnant air. “We must cancel the wedding.”

“Did my mother put you up to this?” Sara stomped her feet on the ground like a child, fists clenched tightly by her sides. “Dammit, she got to you, didn’t she? She went after you and your dad. I should have known.” Kunio’s dark figure barely visible in the darkness, only his face shone with the reflection of the moonlight. “She’s always been one to sabotage my life. If you want to put it off, I’m willing to accept that. But don’t do it just because my mother wants you to.”

Kunio took one last drag from his cigarette and flicked the butt on the ground. It hissed as it singed the damp grass. The acrid smell of the burning filter drifted up.

“That bitch!” she said and stomped her foot. She cupped his face in her hand. “Don’t you dare give in to her, honey. If we give in now, she’ll run our lives from now until she’s dead. It’ll start off with the little things like what to have to supper or how much money we should spend on a TV, and before you know it, she’ll be dictating when we should have sex . . .”

“There will be no wedding,” said Kunio.

Sara strained through the darkness to look into his eyes. Gone were the smile lines around the corners of his mouth and eyes she was used to seeing whenever he looked at her, the lines she would trace with her fingers before they made love, soft and approving creases. His face now expressionless.

“It has nothing to do with . . .” Kunio started to say.
“What did I do?” asked Sara.

“How did I do?” He pulled away and lit another cigarette.

She pulled hard on his arm. “You don’t break up an engagement over nothing!” She walked around to face him and grasped both his arms. “Tell me what I did.” Her chest tightened and she collapsed against his body. She tugged at his arms and tried to wrap them around her, but he held them closely at his sides, his body rigid. Sobbing uncontrollably, she fought to catch her breath. “Please don’t leave me,” she said and clutched handfuls of his shirt in her fists. “I love you so much, and I know you love me too. I can feel it.”

She nuzzled his neck and kissed him behind the ear where his cologne smelled sweetest. “I love you.” Desperate not to let even an inch of space come between them, she pressed herself tightly against his chest while she untucked his shirt and fumbled with his belt buckle.

Kunio grasped her hands and held her at arm’s length. “No, Sara.” He held the cigarette between his lips and tucked in his shirt and refastened his belt.

She smoothed back her hair and wiped the streaks of tears with her sleeve. “It’s someone else, isn’t it?” He straightened his collar. She grabbed his arm and shook hard. “Tell me, goddamit!” Her words echoed through the forested mountainside.

Kunio wrenched his arm from her hand and stepped back. Immediately, he squared his shoulders and crossed his arms. “It’s your family.”

“You said it wasn’t my mother.”

Kunio took a long drag on the cigarette and tossed the butt to the ground. He ground it into the dirt with his heel and walked briskly back toward the house. Sara nearly ran to keep up.

“Stop jerking me around,” she said. “You owe me an explanation.” He continued with his pace. She ran ahead and stood in his path. “Just tell me what’s going on,” she pleaded. He
walked away from her. Seeing his retreating form, she felt panicked, desperate to stop the bleeding from the huge hole he’d torn in her heart. “If you don’t stop right now and tell me what’s going on, I’m going to stand here and scream until all of your neighbors come out to see what’s going on.” He continued to walk. She drew in a deep breath and screamed the shrill scream of an injured lioness.

Kunio ran to her and clasped his hand over her mouth. She felt some small satisfaction in being able to still push his buttons. “You’re acting like a spoiled child,” he said and looked around to see if anyone responded to the scream. He looked down at her and took his hand away slowly.

“A child who’s been punished but isn’t being told why.”

Kunio drew back. “Your mother is not full Japanese.”

“And neither am I,” said Sara, “but you said that wasn’t going to be a problem with your family.”

“You are half American,” he said as though that should mean something to her.

“So.” Sara shrugged her shoulders.

“Your mother is half Korean.”

Sara cocked her head to one side. She wasn’t sure whether or not to believe him, but even if it was true, the implication was lost on her. Shouldn’t it have been less controversial to be mixed with another Asian race rather than her own caucasian race? “I don’t get it,” she said.

“Americans showed their superiority when they conquered Japan. We don’t like it but accept it. Korea, on the other hand, was conquered by Japan, and if it hadn’t been for the Americans, it would be ours today.”
She couldn’t believe what she was hearing. “So they’re an inferior race because of that?” She’d spent countless hours with this man for the last year. They knew each other’s intimate secrets. How could she have not known something this important about him? “Are you for real?” She struck an exaggerated thinking pose with her index finger on her cheek. “So let me see if I get this right. A nation of hybrids displayed their superiority by conquering a pure breed country like Japan, so they’re okay. Yet, when one of your own produces a hybrid, that person is rejected even though she may actually be an improvement on the species. You realize this smacks of Nazism?”

Kunio shook his head. “You don’t understand.” He turned his back to her.

“I’m trying to, but you’re not giving me much to go on here.” She circled around to face him. “Let’s look at this scientifically. In the animal world, purebreds don’t do as well as mixed breeds. Look at dogs. The purebreds are the ones with the most health problems, but good ole Heinz 57 variety mutts tend to be smarter and suffer fewer health problems. How about incest? Why do you think incest laws are in place? It’s not for moral reasons alone but for practical reasons. The bloodlines are too close. When there’s not enough diversity, the resulting offspring suffer physical deformities and mental defects. Diversity strengthens the bloodline, not weakens it. So what is it that I’m not understanding?”

“They’re dirty, uneducated, uncivilized people,” said Kunio, his lip curled up as though he’d just tasted something bitter.

“Sell them soap and help them build schools. Do you call what you’re doing to me civilized?” She threw up her arms. “I can’t believe how blind I’ve been.” She stepped in close. “If you were just a misogynistic pig, I could have worked with that. But a racist supremacist?”
Kunio didn’t back away, but he avoided looking at her face and looked over her shoulder instead. “You don’t really believe that, do you?” He looked around. She pressed in closer. “Do you?”

She studied his face, pallid in the blue moonlight, and felt as though she was staring at a statue, an art object in a museum that she’d looked at a hundred times but had never touched. Its essence unknowable, locked within the marble. “I don’t know what to say. I’m disappointed, disgusted, stunned, hurt.” And as she said these things, she felt her own voice as detached from herself, floating in the air through the trees and high over the mountains, out to the ocean beyond, carrying with it all of her feelings of anger, leaving behind a painful void. She brought her face inches from his and yelled, “You fucking bastard!”

She turned and ran. Feeling her way in the general direction of the house, she missed the road completely and ran through the thick underbrush which clawed her bare arms and legs. She regretted having worn the slip-ons shoes when one got caught on a branch. She didn’t stop to look for it.

The house looked on fire from within like a paper lantern. Every light must have been turned on. Sara shoved the sliding front door, and without taking care to remove her shoes, she ran upstairs. Reiko was sitting on her knees packing hers and Sara’s suitcases. All of Sara’s clothes were laid out on the tatami mat floor in neatly folded piles ready to be placed in the suitcase.

“What are you doing?” asked Sara.

“Packing. We stay in town tonight.”

Sara wiped her tear stained face with the back of her hand and sat down on the floor by the door.

“You know.”
Reiko looked down and continued folding Sara’s sweater. She placed it gently into the suitcase. Next in line was a beaded top and a pair of black silk evening pants. Reiko rolled Sara’s socks and underwear into tube shapes and placed them in even rows along the edges of the suitcase.

“Go ahead, say it,” said Sara.

“Nani?” Reiko looked up.

“‘I told you so.’ You were right, after all.”

Reiko folded Sara’s jeans, careful to crease them along the seams. “I no wan to be right.”

Sara found a rough spot in the tatami mat and began picking at the loose straw while watching her mother finished packing. She heard the metallic snap of the latches and something inside her snapped like a rubber band stretched to its breaking point. She slapped her hand down hard on the floor. Her lower lip quivered. She jumped to her feet and went to the window. That thing inside snapped again, and she struck her thigh with her fist. Maybe the pain inside wouldn’t hurt so bad if the pain in her leg hurt more. She struck her thigh again. Her mother’s hand reached around and offered her a handkerchief. She took it. There was a knock at the door.

“The taxi is here, ma’am. May I help you carry this down?” said the housekeeper.

“Thank you,” said Reiko.

Sara heard shuffling behind her and the retreat of the housekeeper’s slippered footsteps going down the stairs.

Reiko smoothed down Sara’s hair. “We stay in town tonight. Tomorrow go home to Hirado. Sister meet us there.” Sara wanted to speak, but she couldn’t get the words out, her teeth were clenched too tightly together.

“I meet you outside,” said Reiko.
Sara looked out over the garden below, barely visible except for the reflections of the moonlight on the pond. She thought she saw Kunio enter the house through a garden entrance. She smacked her fist hard into her thigh. Tears rolled down her cheeks.

She turned to leave and was startled to see Kunio’s father standing in the doorway.

“I do not mean to scare you,” said Shoichiro. “I just want to apologize. My son made a big mistake.”

Sara blotted the tears, but on hearing Shoichiro speak, they came down even faster.

“He will regret it one day,” said Shoichiro. “I am embarrassed by my son’s behavior. I have only myself to blame.”

Sara looked down at the floor at her feet. Her remaining shoe looked terribly out of place in the meticulously clean room, and she felt ashamed that she’d been so disrespectful not to take it off when she came in. Shoichiro’s feet approached her own, and he stood so close to her that her head nearly touched his chest. With a gentle hand below her chin, he lifted up her face to meet his. With both hands, he held out a small package wrapped in handmade paper embedded with bits of rose petals and fern leaves and tied with a single strand of pampas grass.

“I want you to have this,” he said and nodded toward the package.

She cradled it in her upturned palms.

“It belonged to my wife. She was very beautiful and smart like Sara.”

His wife? Why was he giving this to her? “I can’t . . .”

“Shhh. After Kunio’s behavior today . . . My wife would want you to have it. I want you to have it.”
Sara looked down at the neatly wrapped package. The bow was no ordinary shoelace bow but an intricate knot twisted in on itself and tied to resemble a button sized chrysanthemum. She looked up to thank him only to see his back disappear around the corner.

Sara had been ushered into the inn by Reiko and the proprietess. They had helped her take off her shoes and slip on the inn’s slippers with the logos embroidered on top of each slipper of the outline of the inn, and she now found herself sitting in the middle of the floor of their tiny room. Sparsely decorated with just a single low-lying kotatsu table with its top that doubled for a green felted card table on one side and a smooth veneer tea table on its reverse. Two futons covered by ample floral print blankets were spread on the tatami mat floor in the corner next to the window. Small oblong pillows which looked more like fat Tootsie Rolls than pillows sat at the head of each futon.

She heard the clattering of plastic make-up accoutrements against the table as Reiko unpacked her toiletries from her day bag.

“Sara should take bath,” said Reiko. “Make feel better.”

Sara hadn’t the energy to lift her head and stared at the floor, counting the number of weaves in the straw mat. All uniform as though rice straw grew the same length and width every time. Perfectly woven together. The ends tucked under and out of sight.

Reiko sat on the floor in front of her, sitting on her knees, her feet tucked discreetly underneath. She took off her jewelry and placed it in her purse.

“You still young. I meet daddy when I twenty-eight. No hab Sara until thirty. You hab plenty time.”
Reiko untied the Hermes scarf that Sara and Kunio had given her, unrolled it, and folded it neatly next to her purse.

Sara took the folded scarf in hand and fondled the silk lightly between her fingertips.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

Reiko took a deep breath. “I try.”

Sara shook her head slowly. “Not hard enough. I could have avoided all this if I’d have known.”

Reiko closed the clasp on her purse. “Maybe. Maybe no. You not know Kunio. You probably no tell him. Not to hide from him, but you no sink about it. No need to say you Korean, because you American. American don’t care.”

Even without her jewelry and the scarf, her mother still looked coiffed and put together. Her short permed hair curled and sprayed. Ready to step outside at any moment. Always ready to face the world no matter what time of day or night.

“But you knew he’d care.”

“I try tell you. No listen.”

Reiko’s hands rested on her thighs. Nails all uniformly filed and polished. Even the half moons of her nail beds were all the same size.

“You’re the parent. It’s your responsibility to make sure I listen and understand.”

Whenever her mother wiped the corners of her mouth with her fingertips, Sara knew that whatever it was that was happening at the time didn’t meet with her approval. “I’ve been listening my entire life, but you insist on talking to me in riddles that trail off into long silences. And I’m supposed to interpret what those silences mean.”

“I try tell . . .”
“And what’s with the broken English. Why have you resisted learning proper English all this time? It’s not ‘I try tell you.’ It’s ‘I tried to tell you.’ It’s as if you’re biding your time in America and just waiting until you return here. A visitor who doesn’t really want to be there but has to for whatever reason. Residing in America but not living there. Your mind is here. It seems to me like you ran away from a problem but you never really left it behind. And because of that, you were never present and never gave me anything to hold on to. You used Daddy, didn’t you? Shame on you. Daddy was my rock, and when he died, my world died with him. My biggest mistake was being so fucking naïve into thinking Kunio would replace him.”

Sara unfurled the scarf and laid it between them.

“Look,” said Sara. She pointed to the Renaissance couple in the center medallion. Tears fells from her cheeks onto the scarf and stained it a darker blue. “This was supposed to be Kunio and me. I picked it out especially for this drawing. The hearts and the vines, the animals all surrounding us, celebrating our love.” As she watched her mother stare at the scarf, sitting absolutely still, a picture perfect statue, she longed for a different mother. Any mother. Maybe one of those Italian mothers she saw when she was in Italy who was always hugging and pinching her children, touching them to acknowledge their existence, caressing their hair, wiping their faces, straightening their collars. She could count on one hand the number of times her mother had hugged her, and even for those few times it’d been more of a pat on the shoulder. Her muscles ached as though having run a marathon. She didn’t have the energy to hold her head up any longer and collapsed in a heap onto the scarf. Her cheek pressed against the cool silk. She grasped the corner of it and rolled over, cocooning her head and shoulders. Drew her knees up to her chest. She hadn’t the energy to cry. The tears came on their own.
Defoliated wisteria vines, gnarled and twisted, covered the crystal dome in the garden. Outside the dome, the garden was sunny and blooming with sundry trees and flowers and birds. Inside was barren. The grass had died and was brittle beneath her back. Like Alice, when she’d entered the crystal dome, it had been the size of a coliseum, but now, either it had shrunk or she’d grown. It pressed in so low that she had to lie on her back to keep from touching the surges of electricity like lightening that spiked across its surface. As long as the lightening traveled freely and died out, she would be all right. They appeared intermittently at first. Not enough to really notice. They increased slowly, and as they became more numerous, she instinctively knew their collision would be inevitable, disastrous. Her heart beat so hard she could feel it pressing against her back. Like the wheels of a railroad car in one of those old westerns, the lightening came more frequently until she couldn’t distinguish one from another. She closed her eyes but could still see it. And it happened. Two collided dead center at the top of the dome. Her heart stopped beating. She held her breath. She thrashed about, lashing out her arms and legs, trying to break free but only got tangled up in the wisteria vines.

She woke up with a start in her grandmother’s room to the faint sound of her aunt’s voice speaking softly in the kitchen. She pushed her sweat soaked hair from her face. As she studied the sun slanting in through a small opening in the door to the veranda, she remembered she’d been up late the night before watching the news reports of the Trade Towers collapse and trying to get through on the telephone to friends. Lines were busy for hours, but she managed to talk to Patty who told her all of their friends were safe. After she hung up, she realized she’d forgotten to ask about Nathan.
Sara’s soft rhythmic breathing coming from the other side of the room told Reiko she was still asleep. They’d been at her family’s home for three days, and in as much time, Sara hadn’t spoken more than two words to Reiko. Reiko tried at first to make conversation but finally gave up. She anticipated Mariko’s arrival this afternoon and hoped that having her there would help bring Sara out of her depression.

As she lay in Tomiko’s room, the early morning sun, cut by large wooden pillars hand-hewn by Meiji-era ancestors, streamed across the futons. Reiko’s tears were absorbed by the tatami mat floor.

“Hm,” she mused as she wiped her face with the back of her hand. They seemed to come now at the most inopportune moments: on the airplane when the young, brown-haired stewardess asked her what she wanted to drink, when she dropped her favorite handkerchief into the toilet on the bullet train, when she forgot how to say “window.” She had been desperate for air. She extended her arm across the wooden floor to the sturdy pillar and traced the grain, darkened maple burnished by dutiful generations of wives and their daughters, suggestions of their faces still seen in the mirrored surface. Her sister-in-law’s muffled footsteps passed by outside the shoji screen walls, no doubt listening for signs of life, but she put off getting out of bed. Jetlag was always a valid excuse for sleeping in.

Reiko ran her eyes along the pillar to the exposed-beam and mud ceiling. Tomiko’s room remained the sole sanctuary for their ancestors, just as Mariko had promised. She took a big breath and held it, thinking maybe residual traces would seep into her bloodstream to be carried back home. The incense burned by Tomiko for three decades in effigy to her deceased husband colored the ceiling in a thin veil. Particles floated into and out of view in the streams of light.
She exhaled and sent streams of sparkling dust motes flying toward the ceiling where they swirled around a sharp notch cut out of one of the beams. Like the scar on the palm of her hand, it was the physical souvenir of her father. Images from that night replayed from her memory in sharp detail.

“Quickly, your father will see you. Get under the covers,” Tomiko had said and tucked in her children and walked to the door. The futons were all neatly aligned east to west. Each child had pulled his blanket up tightly over his nose and mouth; five sets of brown, almond eyes peered up at their mother. She tried to hurry out of the room, but her stride was encumbered by the multiple layers of her heavy cotton kimono. A samurai sword tore through the flimsy shoji screen. She staggered back. The children all jumped out of their futons and hovered together in the far corner.

“I expect you to come when I call,” Masaru slurred as he stumbled over the wreckage.

“I had to put the children to bed,” Tomiko respectfully replied as she backed up and bowed simultaneously feeling for her children behind her.

“What are all these damn children doing here anyway?” Reiko was huddled together with her brothers and sisters. Masaru grabbed her roughly by the arm and pulled her to his side. “Reiko-chan, what are you doing in here? Why aren’t you in your room?” He pushed her behind him towards the shattered door.

Reiko tripped on her kimono and fell onto her back cutting her hand on the shards of wood. She looked down and saw blood but didn’t dare to cry.

Masaru raised his sword high with both hands above his head. Tomiko shrieked as she shielded her children with her body and bent her face close to them. Masaru thrust his body forward with an unsteady aim, but before the sword could make its downward arc, it caught on
the ceiling beam and was jerked out of his hands. The shockwave of misdirected energy made him stumble; he fell to the floor and passed out from the exertion and the sake.

The scar was faint now but still visible, cutting across her life line. A familiar bird’s song, a reminder that she was in her father’s house, cut through the morning mist. “Ho, hokikyo,” sounded off in the distance. Reiko had mimicked the sound of the little songbird to Jonathan when they first met in Sasebo.

“No bird really sounds like that,” Jonathan had said to her. She was trying to describe this place to him, her home in Hirado. Jonathan was assigned to the U.S.S. Providence which was in port at the time for repairs.

“It’s my mother’s favorite bird.”

“Ho, hokikyo.” Reiko heard the bird again and pushed away the covers. She eased open the outer shoji-screen doors looking onto the koi pond and stepped onto the back porch which extended along the entire length of the house. Slowly, so as not to wake Sara, she slid the door closed.

Mist lingered in the valley down to the ocean below. The back half of the house was one very large room partitioned by shoji screens into smaller rooms. Every room had its own back door which looked out onto the pond. She remembered her mother’s cleaning sessions when they would slide all the doors and partitions wide open. The salty ocean air would travel up the hill and circulate through the house. Everyone who wasn’t old enough to work in the rice paddies was enlisted to help. Reiko rubbed her bare foot on the smooth wood and remembered how she and her siblings pushed small cotton sacks stuffed with rice meal back and forth across the wood to polish it. They would hold races; someone always got hurt. “Ho, hokikyo,” echoed up over the tea bushes accompanied by the ocean’s continuo. A calico carp spied her and came
up to suck the surface of the pond expecting to be fed. Her great-grandfather had the pond built before even the house was conceived. He walked the imaginary outlines of the pond until he drew what he believed to be the perfect shape in harmony with the landscape; he supervised the placement of every rock, tree and plant. Ornaments were brought in from all over the Far East, the koi his adopted children. So long neglected, the trees now needed pruning, and weeds choked out the beds of purple iris. Her eldest brother saw the pond as merely serving a function—to harvest freshwater eels in the summer. She studied the pond and could just make out the original contours. A large rock was half-submerged on its side in the water, tall grasses growing in its footprint on the bank.

She looked back at the bedroom door and hoped that Sara would sleep a little longer. Perhaps in sleep, she would gain respite from her heartbreak. She was glad for the distraction of the Trade Tower attacks. At least it took Sara’s mind off of Kunio for a few hours. Maybe she would see her life in a different perspective.

She stepped down off the porch, put on a pair of slippers, and knelt down on the wet grass. Her hands grasped the rock and pulled, but it wouldn’t dislodge from the mud. She leaned in further and dipped her hands down into the cool, clear water to wrap her hands around the base. Not having enough leverage, the rock stayed put. The creek, flowing faithfully for centuries down the mountain over the same mossy black rocks, gurgled into the pond next to her hands, like a baby gurgling with delight. She thought about Sara’s birth day.

“It’s a girl, Mrs. Martin.” Reiko had looked up at the bloody squirming infant. She held out her hands greedily. The Army nurse had swaddled the infant and laid her gently in her arms.

“Thank you very much,” said Reiko.
The nurse smiled as she wiped the sweat from Reiko’s brow. “I-will-be-back-soon-to-get-you,” the nurse said slowly and loudly to Reiko and the baby as if Reiko didn’t understand English. “Be-back-soon. Okay?”

“Yes, okay.” It was the most perfectly clear and pleasurable memory she owned. Reiko had looked down at the little bundle and spoke to her in Japanese. “Did you know you’re a dragon baby? Yes, you are. You’re going to grow up strong and powerful. My perfect little girl.”

She was so engrossed in nostalgia that she failed to hear her sister-in-law, Kimi Uemura, walk up. “Reiko-nechan, living in America has made you soft.” Reiko was startled by Kimi’s voice.

“Sister, you scared me.” Fifty-nine year old Kimi had just come in from working in the rice paddies and was still wearing her navy blue farming trousers which she had tucked into her muddy rubber boots. Her fingers were gnarled, the knuckles knotted from arthritis. Like Reiko, Kimi cut her hair short and permed it into tight curls; Kimi’s perm had grown out, so the curls were not as tightly packed as they should have been. She tried smoothing down the flapping mass with the back of her free hand, but it only sprang back towards her face. She lifted the top off the wooden bucket she was carrying and held it out toward Reiko.

“Take a handful.” Reiko did and tossed it a little at a time to the koi. Kimi squatted along the bank and did the same. Goldfish previously hidden under rocks and branches came out to greet them; the water churned and whorled as the koi vied for the best dining spot. The sun came out from behind a cloud and reflected off the pond. “It’s nice today. We’re expecting rain tomorrow.”

“The rain should be good for the rice.” Reiko continued feeding the koi.
“We’ve been lucky this year. Last year wasn’t so good, so we had to irrigate to flood the fields.” Kimi tossed the food out so it fell in a wide arc like a fan. She looked toward the bedroom door and nodded. “The news reports are still filled with footage of New York. Sarachen still asleep?”

Reiko ran out of fish food. “She’s always been a late sleeper,” she said and busied herself with pulling out weeds. “When was the last time Shinichi got out here and weeded this place?”

Kimi chuckled. “You know how much he hates dealing with this pond.” Kimi watched Reiko pull up a big clump of weeds. Unlike Kimi, Reiko’s hands were pale and unblemished. Reiko wore a large diamond wedding ring on her left hand. “If you’re going to do that, let me get you a pair of gloves and some work pants. You’re going to ruin those nails. And see, you’ve already gotten your nightgown dirty.” Kimi pointed toward Reiko’s legs. There were two dirty green spots where her knees were touching the ground.

“I guess I’ll be washing today.” Reiko stood up and headed back toward the bedroom.

“Give it to me and I’ll do it. I have a load to do anyway,” Kimi whispered as she took off her boots and stepped onto the porch.

Reiko held her nightgown taught against her legs and examined the two green spots. “I really don’t want to bother you with this,” she said.

“No bother, it’s just a nightgown.”

Reiko took off her nightgown on the porch and draped the filmy white cotton over Kimi’s outstretched arm. “Thank you.” Kimi disappeared through another entrance along the porch. Reiko eased into the room. Sara was asleep with her back to her. Reiko couldn’t hear her breathing, so she walked over to check on her but stopped. The gesture hearkened back to when
Sara was an infant and she would check to see that she was still breathing. Reiko watched the slight rise and fall of the covers and stepped back.

She opened her suitcase and sifted through her clothes: silk blouses, suits, dresses, pantyhose. She put on a white cotton pantsuit and a floral print silk blouse. She sat at Tomiko’s makeup table and opened her makeup bag.

“Tch. How could I forget to pack it?” she said to herself. She rummaged through the tightly packed bag and paused as she thought what she might have done with her lipstick. She decided she must have left it at the inn.

Tomiko’s makeup table had been left exactly as it was when she died three years earlier. A red lacquered hand mirror with cherry blossom carvings, the handle worn down nearly to the wood, sat on top of a yellowed lace doily. The drawers were filled with unused tubes of lipstick, blush, and powder. “This is the lipstick I gave her.” She swiveled it up to its full height and examined it. “Not used at all.” She found a lip brush tucked under a yellowed handkerchief. Careful to stay within the outlines of her lips, she brushed on the red color. A small black and white picture of Tomiko standing in her garden wearing a faded cotton print dress and a white apron sat on the table next to her. Tomiko was smiling amidst rows of staked bean plants. Reiko looked at the woman’s tanned face as she powdered her own.

The door slid open and Mariko looked in. “Nesan!” she said.

Reiko put her finger up to her lips and pointed at Sara. Mariko hunched her shoulders and said, “Sorry.” She stepped in and sat on the floor next to Reiko.

Sara rolled over and flipped off the heavy covers. “I’m awake,” she said in Japanese. She smiled at her aunt Mariko. “It’s good to see you.” She got up and gave her aunt a hug. Mariko hugged her and stepped back to look at her.
“You have become such a beautiful young woman.”

“Auntie, you’re supposed to say that,” said Sara. Her eyelids were puffy and her eyes red from crying the night before.

“I tell the truth!” said Mariko.

“You’re very sweet,” said Sara. “A liar, but a well-meaning liar.” She sat on the floor with her feet in front of her, hands stretched out toward her toes, and her head resting on her knees.

Mariko turned toward Reiko. “Nesan, I’m so glad you’re here. It’s been too long. You look just the same.”

Reiko knew Mariko was lying. The wrinkles around her eyes told her that when she was putting on her makeup. Even the lipstick didn’t glide as easily as it used to, and she was always having to touch up with powder around the outlines where the lipstick would travel in spidery lines around her lips.

“Sara-chan still do gymnastics?” ask Mariko.

“No,” said Sara, her voice muffled in her lap. “I just like to keep flexible. I mostly just jog now.” She sat upright and stretched her neck muscles.

Reiko filled her lip brush with lipstick and paused before applying it, the brush poised in the air in front of her lips. “Aunt Kimi said they’re still showing news reports about the New York.”

Sara straddled her legs and stretched toward each leg in turn. “You two have a lot of catching up to do. I’m going for a walk.” She rolled over toward her suitcase and took out a pair of shorts and a t-shirt.
While Sara’s back was to them, Mariko looked at Reiko and cocked her head to one side. Reiko shook her head slowly.

“Anyplace in particular I should go?” said Sara.

“I know,” said Mariko. Why don’t we all go for a walk up to the cemetery to see Mom?”

Reiko had had no intention of leaving the house while there. The long walk up the mountain to the cemetery did not appeal to her. She particularly was not interested in seeing Tomiko’s grave, especially now. This was the woman who had deceived her for so long into thinking that she was her mother. Why couldn’t she have just treated her as the inferior daughter that she was instead of pretending to be her own? All it did was make it harder for her to accept her Korean status and the shame that ensued. Why not tell her from the beginning and let her live her life as a truth rather than as a lie? It would have been different if it had been her real mother’s grave. But that wasn’t true either. She had no desire to see her mother, the woman who deserted her and left her to face her shame alone.

Sara got dressed and seemed to be trying to hide her face. Reiko had listened to her cry off and on all night and knew she must be exhausted. Reiko blamed all of this on her mother, Sara’s heartbreak, her own loveless marriage, the anxious string tugging at her heart and always urging her to run far away and alienate herself from her family. She loved her sister Mariko, and not sharing their adult lives together had been the hardest part of all of this.

After much coaxing, the three ladies set off on their walk to the family gravesite. Sara seemed as unhappy as Reiko that Reiko was going. Reiko listened to Mariko prattle on about the family, catching them up on all of the gossip, picking up as though only a short vacation had separated them rather than an ocean and ten years. She let herself be carried outside and up the
mountain by Mariko’s lilting voice. Mariko was only three years younger but seemed to be so much more energetic, bounding over the rocks as though an agile teenager.

“Go ahead. I’ll catch up,” said Reiko who stopped to catch her breath. Down below on the first large plateau sat their family home. The cobalt blue ceramic roof tiles glistened in the sun. The sun sparkling off the koi pond could just be seen through the tangle of trees and brush which surrounded it. Down in the bay she could see “Little Mount Fuji,” a scaled-down version of its namesake so named only because of its prominent peak and perfectly shaped cone-like body. Next to it was a tiny rocky island only visible during low tide.

Far off on the horizon, a fishing boat trolled slowly by, one like her father’s boat, chugging and spitting through the waves. When his friends would ask why he didn’t spend some of his money on a new boat, he’d say that he was rather fond of that old boat. That it held more than just his fishing tackle. Her father had met her mother, her real mother, in that boat. That shabby wooden boat with its too small engine, which passed down from her father to her eldest brother, held her father’s most precious cargo, his memories of Reiko’s mother. He’d told her the story many times of how they met, but not until her twenty-fourth birthday did she find out that he was not talking about Tomiko. He never called her by name, either out of discretion or because it was too sacred to utter out loud.

Her mother had been a young girl swimming with her brothers and sisters. Not being a very good swimmer, the current had taken her out and deposited her on that tiny rocky island no bigger than her family’s koi pond. It was farther out than she could swim back. They had swum too long and misjudged the tide which was coming in quickly. Her two brothers had attempted a rescue with a small rowboat, but their underdeveloped pre-adolescent arms gave out against the incoming tide. The young girl watched as the rowboat was deposited back onshore and her
siblings ran inland toward their house for help. The rising tide was the best time to swim because
the water kept you up and out of the reach of the seaweed tentacles which littered the ocean floor
near the shore, but high tide also covered the little rocky island.

Masaru had been out that morning fishing alone, which was his habit to do on sunny
summer mornings. He never caught much; he didn’t need to since they always had plenty to eat
from the farm. He’d inherited a sizeable fortune from his seafaring grandfather, a trading
merchant who’d made his money importing goods from China and Korea, so he didn’t need to
earn a living. Carrying on the family name was his only familial obligation. Fishing was his way
of getting out of the house. Normally, he would have given the rocky island a wide berth, but
that morning he spotted something perched on its mound. From a distance it looked like a
beautiful white crane with long slender legs and a crest of long black plumage on its head which
flowed down its back. It looked as though it was straining to see something onshore, its wings
flapping, but when Masaru looked toward the shore, he couldn’t see what it was fussing about.

The bird crouched down and folded its wings over its head. He moved in closer. A snowy
white crane with a black flowing crown, a rare bird, and he had to have it. If it was hurt, he
would nurture it back to health, build an elaborate bamboo cage to keep it safe, and treasure it
forever. If it died, he would take it to the taxidermist. He knew exactly where the crane would sit,
in the tea house on a table by the window overlooking the ocean.

He anchored a safe distance away and dove into the water with his net in hand and a rope
tethered to his ankle on one end and the boat on the other. The incoming tide gave strength to the
currents which were made worse by the irregular outline of the rock formation. He came up for
air, caught a small wave which propelled him onto the island and slammed him onto its scarred
rock ledges. The swell dispersed and played sentry over the rocks before sliding back out to sea,
taking Reiko’s father with it. He managed to wedge two fingers into the pockmarked rock and hang on until the next wave, which pushed him farther in to a more secure spot.

He pulled his legs beneath him and stood up, but as he came ashore, he discovered that while he had been beneath the waves, the crane had magically transformed from a bird into a young woman. The white feathers had become a pure white tunic that seemed to melt into her skin. The same intense Hirado sun which had tanned his skin the color of fermented tea had bleached hers to bone. When he reached out and touched the crouching creature’s long black hair, she became startled and stood to her full length. She was taller than any woman Reiko’s father had ever seen, nearly eye level with him. Long black hair cascaded down to her waist and framed her face, an oval of ivory. Thick black eyelashes softened the chiseled outlines of her eyes. He was drawn to her mouth, made even fuller by pouting, and caressed it with his fingertip, ran his finger along the outline of her slender jaw. She stepped away from his touch.

She looked down at his arm and tore a strip off her short tunic, exposing even more of her long straight legs. She scooped up a handful of sea water and rinsed the blood from his elbow, taking care not to aggravate the wound. With deft fingers, long, slender, and rounded at the tips to graceful arcs, she wrapped his elbow with the precision of a surgeon. Who was rescuing who, he wondered. The wind pressed her tunic against her body, and he could see the outlines of her fecund figure. A flush of rose stained her white cheeks; she hugged herself tightly. Neither spoke a word to the other.

He untied the tether from his ankle and cinched it around his waist and hers, an arm’s length of rope between them. Gently, as though fearing she might fly away at any moment, he took her hand and led her to the edge of the island. High tide smothered their ankles and would soon swallow the rest of the island. He looked at her and nodded. She nodded back.
They dove into the waves together, she tethered to him and he, kicking with the powerful legs of a lifetime of swimming, brought them to the safety of the boat. It was those same legs which rescued his Reiko’s mother that would begin to atrophy from neglect two years later when she was taken from him and forced to leave the country, the same legs which would fail him completely when Reiko, child of his crane, his favorite child, had announced she was leaving him forever. Reiko never knew her mother’s name. She’d only heard him refer to her as Crane.

The rocky island, lying in the shadow of Little Mt. Fuji, was clearly visible now in the low tide, its burnished surface drying in the sun. She looked around for Sara and Mariko. The path ahead was empty. She plucked a leaf from the branch by her head and walked on.

When she reached the cemetery, she found Mariko giving Sara a tour of the tombstones. Reiko got closer to listen in, but as she did, Sara turned away. Mariko acted as though she didn’t notice and continued to tell her stories.

“You should have been here when Mom was buried, Nesan.” Mariko plucked the weeds which had grown at the base of the stone pillar. “It was a beautiful ceremony. All the children, the grandchildren, and the great grandchildren were there.”

Reiko took a deep breath. She felt herself becoming agitated, not at Mariko but at standing in front of Tomiko’s grave.

“She wasn’t her mother,” Sara said.

“Hm?” said Mariko who turned her attention away from the grave and to Sara.

Sara stood next to Tomiko’s grave and pointed to it. “That’s not her mother,” she said more loudly this time.

“Don’t be silly,” said Mariko and laughed.
“You don’t understand,” said Reiko. She stared at the pillar of granite which marked Tomiko’s grave. Her name was engraved in Chinese characters and the engraving gold-leafed and burnished to a reflective shine. Was her mother still alive? If not, did her grave occupy such a place of honor in Korea? Or were her cremated remains buried in some mass pauper’s grave?

“Maybe you two are the ones who don’t understand,” said Mariko.

Reiko turned to face her younger sister who was a head shorter than she was.

“There’s not much that goes on in this family that I don’t know about. Do you think I don’t know about ChoSun?” said Mariko.

Reiko wasn’t sure what Mariko meant about this person ChoSun. Was that the name of her real mother, or was she referring to something else? It sounded Korean. Even now, she felt herself backing away from revealing the truth, even though it no longer mattered. What further damage could it do? Sara’s life was ruined. Nothing else mattered.

“Did you not know the name of your real mother? Silly girl. If you had taken the time to read your family lineage when you got married, you would have seen it. Right there in the list of our family’s names.” Mariko smiled warmly, trying to reassure her. “Like most Koreans living in Japan, she went by a Japanese name, Chiyo, but her real name was ChoSun.”

Reiko felt so stupid. She’d just assumed all these years that there’d be no need for any of the family to access their temple records, so there was no opportunity for them to find out. “You knew?”

“Of course! Since I got married.”

“Twenty-two years?” Reiko looked at Mariko for any sign of disappointment or disapproval. “Why didn’t you say anything?”
“No need. You’re still my sister. That doesn’t change anything.” Mariko smiled and laughed her usual happy laugh when something amused her. “Daddy married Mother out of family obligation. He married ChoSun out of love. He couldn’t help who he fell in love with. It’s just something that happened.”

“She was Korean.” Reiko turned her head away and looked at the neat row of bamboo vases filled with fresh greenery and flowers. She didn’t want Mariko to see her face flush with shame.

“I know,” said Mariko. She turned to Sara. “And I’m only sorry because it’s affected Sara’s happiness. I could care less otherwise.”

Sara turned away, tore the leaves on a low branch, and walked into the forest.

Mariko retrieved a rustic homemade twig broom from behind a tree and swept around Tomiko’s grave. She swept the dirt clear around Reiko’s feet. “You should have told Sara.” She swept the fallen leaves from between the graves. “A long time ago.”

Reiko watched as Mariko poured water into each of the bamboo vases with a wooden ladle dipped from a rough hewn wooden bucket. Water trickled into each bamboo vessel in turn, rising from bass to soprano as it filled. She saw through Mariko’s words that she’d been needlessly secretive. Even if her other brothers and sisters would have disapproved, she should have trusted Mariko enough not to turn from her. And the result was a strained and forever severed relationship with her daughter. Guilt filled her like the water in the vases. A tear fell down her cheek. She wanted to sit, but there was no place near, so she squatted down in front of Tomiko’s grave and wept silently. Mariko came over and handed her a handkerchief.

“It must have been a terrible burden. But there’s no need to carry it any more,” said Mariko who had squatted down beside her. She rubbed Reiko’s back. “We Japanese are too
secretive about such things. Keep it all inside and worry too much about the outside and what people see. Don’t worry so much about the past. Worry about your daughter instead. She needs your help.” Mariko squatted lower to look into Reiko’s face. “I heard about this Minamoto-san. He’s very progressive for a Japanese man. So I thought maybe there might be a chance. But I guess I was wrong.”

“His son,” said Reiko between sniffles. “He takes after his grandfather.”

“Ah ha!” Mariko’s head bounced up and down. “That explains it. Too bad. Reiko wiped away the tears running down her cheeks. “I’m afraid it’s too late to patch things up with Sara. I’ve ruined her life for the last time.”

“Sara wants to please you. Ever since she was a little girl, she has worshipped you and wanted to do nothing else but make you happy. Talk to her.”

“It won’t do any good. She’s hardly said a word to me since we left the Minamotos.”

“While you were lagging behind, I had a few minutes with her. I promise, it’s not hopeless.” Mariko stood up. “Where’s Sara?” she said in a loud voice.

Sara emerged from the trees. “Right here, Auntie.”

Mariko took a pair of pruning shears from her pocket and handed it to Sara. “Why don’t you and your mother go cut fresh greenery for the other graves. I’ll go fetch more water from the spring.” She picked up the wooden bucket, leaving Sara and Reiko standing by Tomiko’s grave.

Reiko opened her mouth to speak to her, but Sara walked away and down the path. She followed her to a ledge which afforded a clear view of the ocean below. Rhododendron, ligustrum, a large gambling tree with its white inflorescent blooms lined the mountain side of the path. An irregular boulder covered in moss and milky green lichen served as a bench for Reiko while she watched Sara clip branches of ligustrum. “It’s too bad they’re not in bloom,” she said.
Sara either hadn’t heard or was pretending not to, because she didn’t respond and instead moved on to some low lying pine branches. Sprays of pine needles like feather duster anemones pouffed from her clenched fist.

Reiko tugged on the frond of a painted fern which was growing alongside the boulder.

“Are your friends okay in New York?”

“Fine,” said Sara.

“That’s good,” said Reiko. She caressed the fern and ran the fronds between her fingers.

“There’s a pretty red maple back in the woods here.”

Sara said nothing and brushed past her.

“Sara-chan.”

Sara continued walking down the path back toward the grave sites. Reiko grasped the fern frond and tore it from the plant. “Sara!” She threw the frond to the ground but regretted it when she saw the poor mangled thing, its leaves crumpled, lying in the dirt.

Sara turned and yelled, “What do you want?”

“Don’t be this way.”

“What way?” said Sara.

Reiko studied her daughter’s face, lips pulled taut, her pupils tiny pin dots focused on Reiko’s face. “I want to tell you a story,” she said. “About your grandmother.”

Sara stood with arms crossed and legs straddling the path.

Reiko sat down and patted the boulder next to her. “Sit with me.”

“I’m fine.”

Reiko looked out at the ocean. She pointed to the small mountain island. “That’s Little Mount Fuji.”
Without looking at it, Sara said, “I know.”

“Do you see the tiny little island in front of it?”

Sara craned her neck over the ledge to see it. “That’s not an island. Just a big rock.”

“Your grandfather called it the island where he met your grandmother. Your real grandmother.” She watched Sara’s face for some reaction but saw none. She just kept staring down at the little rock island. “It’s the only story I know about her. The only one he told me, but I didn’t know he was talking about her until right before I married your father. He and Tomiko kept it from me my entire life.”

“Am I supposed to feel sorry for you?”

“No.”

Sara set the greenery down on the mossy slope and sat down beside it. The downy hairs at her temples, what Reiko called baby hairs, fluttered in the breeze. From the front, she seemed to resemble Reiko, but in profile, the outlines of her nose and particularly her chin, the way it curved slightly to an elegant “U”, were reminiscent of Jonathan. Reiko had mistreated him in life, and now in death, she hadn’t honored his memory. Her resentment of him had been her own, not from anything he had done. Up to the end, she knew he loved her. She’d told herself that the pain she saw in his face during his last days had been from the stroke, but she knew better. Not once had she comforted him with a touch or a word. It was her duty to take care of him, an invalid during his last months, but other than her obligatory duties of seeing to his toilet and feeding him, she had left him alone for long stretches during the day while she went about her business. Communication was impossible. She interpreted his grunts however she pleased, feeding him when she liked, turning on the TV when it suited her. Was she really that cold?
Anger and an ill-temper had become such a habit with her that this must have inadvertently spread to Sara.

“Your grandfather rescued her from drowning. That’s when they first met,” said Reiko. She watched her daughter closely as she retold the story exactly as her father had told it to her as a little girl. Hoping for some sign of forgiveness but not expecting one. Sara pretended not to listen, but Reiko could tell she took in every word. When she got to the part about the two lovers tethered to one another plunging into the waves, she thought she detected a slight movement, an eyebrow twitch. “People don’t marry in Japan for love. They do now, but I mean back then. You married who your parents told you you should marry. Love came later.”

“But it doesn’t always,” said Sara in a low voice.

Sometimes it ends in . . .”

“Resentment.”

Reiko and Sara, though they’d fought most of Sara’s adolescent and adult life, were still very close, and because of that, they knew equally well how to heal and hurt one another. “I was scared.”

“No excuses. I’ve heard them already.”

“Ho, hokikyo” sounded off in the distance through the trees. The sound of the ocean waves didn’t reach this far up the mountain.

“No more excuses,” said Reiko. She stood up and smoothed the wrinkles from her slacks and blouse. She took a step toward Sara who got up abruptly and stood with muscles taut beneath her jeans. Reiko saw it as a positive sign that Sara stood her ground. A wounded animal attacks because it can’t run. “I wanted to marry a Japanese boy I’d met I Sasebo. He was a nice boy. Worked for his father in his grocery store. My father said no. Said he wasn’t good enough
for me. That he would find someone higher for me to marry, but he wasn’t looking, and I was twenty-five and threatening to become a “Christmas cake,” old and stale after the twenty-fifth. That was my third proposal of marriage. I wanted to marry for love, but he wouldn’t let me. And the truth is, no one was good enough for his daughter. I would have died an old maid if I didn’t take matters into my own hands.” She sat back down on the rock. “I told him I was leaving home to go live with my sister in Sasebo. That’s when he became angry. He forbid me to ever leave him. Kicked a big hole in the wall and tore the sliding doors off their runners and threw them into the koi pond. Tomiko heard and came rushing into the room. She positioned herself between me and him. That’s when he threw her to the floor and grabbed me by the arm. It hurt so bad I was down on my knees at once.” She covered her cheeks with her hands. “He said some awful things to me. Things I know he didn’t mean. Like my real mother was a dirty Korean whore who was sent back to Korea, and that the only reason he kept me was because my blood ran through his veins, and he thought I would turn out differently. I remember so clearly looking up into his face, all red and bloated, and thinking I didn’t know who this man was. This devil man with death’s grip on my arm. I was so frightened I ran out of the house, and I could hear him behind me shouting at the top of his lungs that if I left him now to never come back. I later heard through Tomiko that he’d disowned me. Not legally, of course, which is why I’m still listed in the family registry. Just banished from my home.”

Sara plucked one of the leaves from a branch next to her and tore pieces from it. “Did you ever see him again?”

Reiko shook her head. “He died right after you were born.” Sara tore all of the leafy parts away and left only the core stem of the leaf. “That lacquer box with all the ribbons in it you used to play with when you were little?”
Sara nodded.

“Tomiko sent that to me when he died. I left with nothing. Only the clothes I was wearing. That box was a gift from my father when I was young. Every time he went to town or on a trip, he’d bring back a new hair ribbon for me. I kept them all in that box.” Tears ran down her face. “I was so angry when I left that I went straight to the beauty shop and got my hair cut real short.” She took a handkerchief from her pocket and pressed it against her eyes. Cried silently. She felt a hand press her shoulder. Sara sat down next to her. They sat in silence looking out at the ocean.

When they returned to the grave site, they found Mariko pouring water into the granite basins carved into the base of each tombstone. Reiko stopped in front of her father’s grave. It looked similar to Tomiko’s, a pillar of rectangular granite, its top carved into a pyramid shape, pointed. His name chiseled into the face, a few flakes of gold leaf left in the kanji’s crevices. Mariko set the bucket in front of Reiko and held out the copper ladle. She took the crudely wrought ladle and poured water over her father’s tombstone and watched the water slide down its length, soak into the porous rock and stain it in elongated streaks.