ABSTRACT

Title of Document:	STRANGER YEARS
	KENDISAN KUSUMAATMADJA, M.F.A. in Creative Writing, 2015
Directed By:	Professor Howard Norman, Creative Writing Program

Stranger Years is a collection of three short stories and a novel-in-progress that examines both familiar and imagined landscapes. In “Thief,” two children witness a man beaten to death in Jakarta. In “Soap,” a former soap opera actress finds herself in a loveless marriage. A girl escapes a country in turmoil in “My Brother Across the Ocean.” And, finally, in *Stranger Years*, a man finds himself teetering between the decision to stay in a strange country or to return home and confront his past.

STRANGER YEARS

By

KENDISAN KUSUMAATMADJA

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
M.F.A. in Creative Writing
2015

Advisory Committee:
Professor Howard Norman, Chair
Professor Maud Casey
Professor Emily Mitchell

Thief!

I looked at the headline, read it, and read it again: “Internet Café Operator shot by Congressman Budi Tanoto.” Beneath the caption was a photograph of Tanoto, with his signature dubious smile and slicked-back hair, and next to it, a deadpan picture of my childhood friend, Farhan. I immediately thought the worst, that my old friend was dead, and instead of reading the article, which would have instantly dispelled my fear, I held the folded newspaper in my hand and observed the two photographs. Farhan had that awkward, blank expression that people often have in passport photos, when they’re told not to smile; the journalist must have found the worst possible picture of him to use. The arrangement was simple: a powerful man with an aura of smug entitlement (the perpetrator) put next to an achingly common citizen (the victim). When I think of internet café operators, it’s an image unlike the one that was before me that comes to mind: a nondescript, sleep-deprived young man in a cheap, ill-fitting, washed out T-shirt. Clearly the *Indonesia Post* had an agenda, and for good reason.

I was shocked, but the other emotions hadn’t yet sunk in. I’m not sure how long I sat there staring at the photograph until I took a deep breath and steeled myself.

Farhan, fortunately, was not dead. Apparently the bullet had only grazed his left shoulder. The article insinuated at a love triangle. Budi Tanoto’s wife was once a soap opera actress, and at twenty-eight, I’m sure she was still a pretty sight.

I put the newspaper down among the kitchen’s inordinate clutter and went to the mirror. My hair was a mess. Amina, my six-year-old daughter, had decided to

sprinkle baking flour all over my head that morning before she left for school, and because there was simply too much to do, I hadn't yet found the time to take a shower and wash my hair. I also had flour on my chin and forehead, which my husband hadn't cared to point out before he left for work. But then again, it was just me in the house, with no one to look.

I started cleaning in a kind of frenzy, stepping on quite a few Lego pieces in the process (if you've ever stepped on Lego, you must know just how excruciatingly painful it can be). After an hour or so, Amina's books were alphabetized on the living room bookshelf; my husband's photography gadgets were stored in a box labeled "P-3, for lenses and filters"; and my cupcakes were ready to be boxed and delivered to an anxious toddler next door, who had just turned three. I stood at the center of living room for some time thinking about what to do next, then I went to the sink and washed my hands. I thought of calling Bianca, another childhood friend of mine, as I rubbed my hands furiously under the sink, to vent about the state of my home, and to deliver the strange, strange news.

I've never had an interest in politics, if only because politics seemed to be a hopeless cause, but I felt angry then. Not because Farhan had been shot, and by the infamous Budi Tanoto of all people (he'd been recently exposed in a grafting scandal), but because the journalist had put that particular picture of him on the front page.

But I suppose an explanation is in order.

◆

I met Farhan when Bianca and I were in third grade. He transferred to my school from a public school in Surabaya. I knew he was special right from the start. On his first day, he introduced himself calmly and managed to pull off a self-

deprecating joke that made everyone laugh, even the mean ones. “No need to tell you where I’m from,” he said in an exaggerated Javanese accent, his *d*s extra thick, extra cumbersome. A wave of laughter followed. I remember softly whispering the letter with the tip of my tongue farther back on the roof my mouth, pressed against my soft palate. Bianca, who sat beside me, passed me a folded note. *You think he’s cute, don’t you,* it read.

For some reason the bullies left Farhan alone. They didn’t test him the way they usually did with the new kids. Rumor had it he knew karate, but later I found out that wasn’t true. Farhan was popular—he was one of those kids who are good at everything: science, athletics, card tricks—so much so that he was elected class secretary every semester since he transferred. But he was never friends with anyone, not really. Come the end of school, he’d walk to the bus stop alone, dragging his steps, as if he were avoiding the other kids on purpose.

We never spoke to each other except for group projects. Almost three years had passed before I got to spend some time with him. Bianca knew how much I liked Farhan, so when we were in sixth grade, she asked him on my behalf if he wanted to go to the movies with us. Bianca had wanted to go see a superhero film with her boyfriend Tomi and was too nervous to go without company. The four of us skipped our last period. It was my first time going to the movies without parents or uncles and aunts telling me not to stray too far or to play shooting games, which, they said, were meant for boys anyway, especially with all the blood and gore and what not.

The superhero movie we wanted to see was sold out, so we ended up with the much-censored version of *Indecent Proposal*. But the nuances of grown-up

conversation did not completely reach me underneath my bubbling excitement, and all I remember of the film was that it was very sad—I remember crying and being embarrassed about it—and that by the end of it, Tomi's hand was nestled snuggly on Bianca's lap, hidden underneath her backpack. I looked at Farhan then, but it was too dark to make out his expression. In all likelihood, he hadn't noticed Tomi's wandering hand, most young boys being the clueless things that they are. It was also possible, however, that he had not put two and two together.

After the movie, Bianca and Tomi left us to go to the bowling alley after, or so they said, and Farhan offered to walk me to the bus stop. We stood under the awning for a little while, watching the dust rise and settle back onto the asphalt each time a car passed by, until he turned to me and asked if I wanted to get ice cream, "since Bianca and Tomi went to the bowling alley." It was funny how his voice tapered and grew soft at the end, as if the "alley" was an underworld where serious crimes were committed.

We bought ice cream by a park near the movie theater and fed pigeons the crumbs of our cones. After, Farhan walked me all the way home, our fingers still sticky with melted ice cream. We walked Jakarta-pace, slowly, taking up the whole road. Once in a while, a motorcycle would honk at us, or a three-wheeled Bajaj laboriously rattling forward. My mother would never let me go on one of those "tin cans on wheels," convinced that all Bajaj drivers are pedophiliac. I asked Farhan if he wanted to take one, but he said no, because he liked walking.

"So, how come you're so quiet in class?" he said, pouring water from his water bottle over his hands. I held mine out and he did the same to mine. He let me wipe my

hands on his shirt. When I didn't answer, he nudged me with his elbow and laughed. I didn't know what to say then, was afraid that I would be a disappointment. I was thankful that he didn't press on and let us keep walking in silence. I wanted the road to keep going and going, wanted us to keep walking forever.

When we arrived, my mother was waiting for me at the gate with one of those long, spindly brooms made out of palm fiber in her grip. Our teacher had called to tell her that I was among the four students missing from her class. My mother beat me with the broom—gentle whacks, really, nothing compared to her usual—and made Farhan call his father. I cried, not because I was hurting, but because I felt humiliated (he had stood by the door and looked away; I'd seen him wince). Farhan's father picked him up, muttering apologies to my mother. I watched them get into their Jeep from my bedroom window on the second floor. After he was gone, my mother told me never to talk to him ever again.

I was certain that we would never become friends, not after that, but every day after school, Farhan and I would stop to drink soda on the way to the bus stop. He never mentioned my mother except for the day after, when he told me that his father was the same way. I didn't ask him how, exactly. I didn't feel that I needed to.

◆

No one could see it now, but I was a shy kid, always hiding behind my sketchbooks. I bought them with my own allowance. Mother always thought it was a waste of time. She was convinced that math and science were my forte. That I had to study these subjects well into the night, even in sixth grade, never seemed to persuade her otherwise. Farhan liked my drawings. "You have expressive strokes," he once told me. I thought it was neat that he called my lines "expressive." Other kids were

drawing manga and superheroes at the time. No one thought trees and people with normal-sized limbs were interesting.

He was the brightest boy in class, sliding back and forth consistently between third and first place without having his nose in books all the time. But I suppose it was Farhan's impulse to build useless contraptions out of my things that really got me. He made miniature pulleys out of my bracelets and necklaces, and I was always more than happy to surrender my things to him. The broken necklaces and missing beads didn't matter to me as much as his sheer joy at seeing light weave in and out through the rotating chains and the beads carrying the three letters in my name bounce gently along with them. It was our thing: him making small construction projects at recess, and me drawing or painting next to him. I wanted to become a painter, and he, an architect.

Farhan folded cartons around each other until they stood. Once he built the Eiffel Tower using matchsticks and kept them together with rice glue. It was a wonder that the tower managed to stand at all. I drew it with charcoal pencil and gave the drawing to Farhan on his birthday, framed and wrapped in old newspaper.

Sure enough, his Eiffel Tower only lasted two months.

◆

The thing happened when Farhan was walking me to the bus stop one day. I thought about it for years and years after. I often wondered what it was that brought us closer together. Was it my mother's temper? Was it this day? When Amina asked me what "sad" was not long ago, it was this that came to mind, and of course that night when Farhan came to see me when I was in college (but we'll get to that later). I was

at a loss for words for quite some time before I finally told my daughter, inadequately, "the opposite of happy."

It was a hot day, so hot that the treetops shook from the heat. Farhan was carrying my canvas bag filled with paint tubes and brushes. He'd mixed some detergent and water in a soda can and was blowing bubbles from it with a twisted straw. At one point, I grabbed the straw from him and blew bubbles at his face. The bubbles made tiny popping noises as they burst on his skin. He seemed to enjoy the cool liquid on his face, so I blew again and again until he begged me to stop and, laughing, took the soda can away from me.

We passed by the parking lot of an office building, just a few streets away from our school. There were strange noises, and a crowd had gathered inside the lot. I remember wondering what on earth was so important that these men would leave the cool shade of the acacia trees lining the sidewalk.

"Punk!" someone screamed, then a blunt sort of impact, like a car door being slammed shut.

"I'm gonna go see," Farhan said. I was about to follow him, but he stopped me. "Wait here." His voice sounded so stern that I halted. Farhan put my canvas bag on the ground and gave me the soda can to hold. I stayed at the edge of the lot, stirring the mixture with the straw.

A security guard clad in white stood next to me on tiptoe with his arms crossed over his chest.

"What's going on?"

He looked at me and snickered. “Oh, nothing for a little girl. Stress release, s’all.”

I inched closer toward the crowd, and closer, until I could see through the people between the ocean of arms. There were four or five or six men at the center, kicking something. All I could see were their workboots, in quick flashes. And that there was someone on the ground.

I moved back. “Shouldn’t you do something?” I said, or squeaked, or whimpered, to the guard.

“Oh, the guy stole someone’s motorcycle. Why don’t you go down to the kiosk and buy yourself some bottled tea, heh?”

“Farhan,” I called out, but my voice was small compared to the commotion. “Farhan?”

“Come on. That’s enough,” someone said.

“Nah, let him have it. This ought to teach him.”

More blunt noises followed and a crisper, moist sound that made me think of a pestle brought down on a watermelon. Screams, kicks, catcalls. The heat burned the top of my head. There was no resistance, not even cries of pain. I stepped back, still facing the men, until I reached the gate. Farhan waded out from the crowd and pulled me away. He grabbed my arm so tightly that I cried out. The soda can fell out of my hands and rolled into the gutter, leaving a trail of foam on the ground. I asked him what he saw, but he wouldn’t answer. He kept me on the narrow sidewalk while he, walking behind me, carefully avoided motorcycles on the asphalt. We arrived at the

bus stop just in time. Farhan gently shoved me on board, whispering, "He was dead and they were still beating him."

He was shaking, tears streaming down his face.

“I'm sure he wasn't dead," I said. The rusty Metro Mini, as usual, pulled away before I had both of my feet in it. I held on to one of the bars and felt grease rubbing off onto my hand. When I turned around, Farhan was already half-walking, half-running home behind the bus's grey smoke.

Some of the kids were talking about it in class the next day. They had heard from the meatball vendor, who’d heard from the parking guy, who’d heard from a driver who was there and was watching. The police came, but it was too late. No one was taken in except for the body. I suppose the weight of murder, when divided between enough people, became light enough not to hinder the culprits from going home to their wives at dinnertime, from asking their women for a back rub or telling their kids not to hit their younger siblings. And how strange it was that no matter how many thieves were beaten to death in our city, there never seemed to be a shortage of them.

When the kids asked us if we’d heard about the motorcycle thief who was beaten to death, Farhan shrugged and said no, he hadn’t. We never brought that day up.

◆

Farhan and I kept in touch the summer after graduation—a few short, awkward phone calls and several birthday parties. We played cards and drank virgin fruit punch. The boys sat on one side, the girls, on the other. Every time he and I tried to talk, the

kids would tease us. “They’re taaaalking,” someone would inevitably shriek. I always went home disappointed, feeling like I was about to lose him for good.

In July, Farhan went to a public middle school, the top school in his district, although not nearly as popular as the Catholic school Bianca and I went to. My mother made sure that I only associated with a “select” group of people, Bianca included. On weekdays, either I was home at five in the afternoon, *or else*. She kept the straw broom hanging on our dining room wall, in case I needed to be reminded. Farhan and I didn’t see each other that often afterwards, maybe three or four times over the three years of middle school. Whenever I did see him, though, I made sure to write everything down in my diary. (Everyone kept a diary then. Only recently I reread old volumes of mine in utter horror and immediately doused them in kerosene and set them on fire in my backyard.)

Farhan lived in a housing complex for the Marines. After his father retired, the old man turned their living room into an Internet hub and had him operate it after school. They didn't put up signs and avoided taxes that way, but soon enough kids from around the complex were coming to play games or to chat. The Internet was new and still pretty expensive, and being the operator meant that Farhan had it at his disposal. He went on search engines and read foreign articles online. The Internet and its gems were all he talked about when he did have time for us.

Farhan and I got together—along with Bianca and one of her “friends,” usually Tomi—maybe once or twice a year, every time a new fast food joint opened and I was brave enough to lie to my mother. He never ordered, though. He’d fidget with our paper napkins while he watched us drink our milkshake or soda. “Did you know, there

are over 800 languages in Papua New Guinea?" he'd ask out of the blue. Or: "Did you know, Americans make their high school students practice putting condoms on bananas. LOL!"

Bianca was always amused by Farhan's non sequiturs, but mIRC was more her thing, though Tomi had no clue.

Summers rolled by. I wanted to go to an alternative high school with a good art program, but my mother would have none of it. Bianca wanted to go to a coed high school, but her parents were horrified at the idea of their daughter being around teenage boys, so we were stuck with each other at Santa Maria for three more years. Farhan was accepted at one of Jakarta's top public high schools, and he did pretty well, too: a member of his high school's preliminary science Olympics team, head of Student Council, etc. Bianca and I were envious. We nagged him with questions every time we went out: we wanted to know whether it was true that the girls stapled their skirts up to fifteen centimeters above their knees (we had to wear a skirt ten centimeters below ours and a pair of long, white socks), we wanted to know what his teachers were like (ours were unflinchingly Catholic, of course), and was it true that two girls from his school got pregnant by the same boy?

Farhan indulged us with stories. Yes, some girls did staple their skirts and, during inspections, they would rip the staples off. This one girl, he said, blushing, even went as far as going to school without underwear. But no, it was not true that two girls form his school got pregnant by the same boy, although it was likely that one girl did get pregnant and ended up getting an abortion.

Though it seemed to us that he was having a blast at his new school, according to Farhan most of his classmates didn't like him much. And some of the teachers were wary of him. He was always contradicting them. But what could he do? So he was snarky. It wasn't like he could help himself.

This is what Farhan said he wrote, more or less, in his essay response to a two-hour screening of *Evolution: Our Era's Greatest Conspiracy*:

Farhan Ridawan, concerned student and citizen

So apparently those damned Zionist scientists made it all up. Here's the truth: we hunted mammoths on the backs of dinosaurs (or maybe there were no dinosaurs to begin with); the sun revolves around the earth; the earth, obviously, is only six thousand years old. Hell, maybe the earth is flat, after all.

P.S. With all do respect, Miss, do you really buy all this crap?

Farhan's biology teacher, a kind woman—kind because she kept his misdemeanor to herself—with an exceptionally soft voice, hobbled over to his seat the next day, her veil and loose robe flopping awkwardly around her.

"Are you…are you a communist?" the poor woman asked, her eyes, Farhan swore, wide with genuine concern.

The meetings stopped our second year of high school. Bianca and I were busy with preparatory courses for the much-feared college entrance exam, and just like that, Farhan and I drifted apart. When we were kids, we often joked that we'd end up at the

same university in the same city, three hours away from Jakarta. I would go to ITB for fine arts, and he'd go for architecture. Though I did not even apply to ITB, I was disappointed, very disappointed when I found out much later from Tomi that Farhan had gone to a mediocre college and was only helping his father with his Internet café. But I suppose it was to be expected. I knew from Tomi that Farhan hadn't done too well in high school and was kicked out his final year because he'd apparently punched the principal in the face over a silly argument, something about him wearing flip flops to school because the street in his neighborhood was flooded.

Authority figures are often ridiculous, no doubt, but the incident struck me as strange. When Tomi explained the details, that the principal had assaulted him first, I found myself blaming Farhan anyway. Sometimes you just have to know when to let go. You let go, or you drown.

◆

I had lost touch with Farhan for quite a while before I finally saw him again my third year in college. I was attending Universitas Indonesia, majoring in Economics, as my mother suggested. For the first time, I was living on my own, in a boarding house in Depok with other university students and low-wage workers. I don't remember what I was doing when my cell phone rang. It was Farhan, sounding agitated, saying he'd been attacked by a local mob in Senen. Senen isn't exactly a reputable area, so I asked him what he was doing there in the first place, but all he said was that he could really use a place to sleep for the night.

I looked at my watch. It was almost midnight, and my boarding house was already closed for guests. Some of the other girls would sneak in friends and

boyfriends through the side wall, but I certainly did not want to get kicked out of the house. Farhan, however, sounded desperate.

"Well?" he said.

So I said yes and gave him my address.

I went outside and waited by a warung under a flickering street light, waving swarms of mosquitos away. An hour later, Farhan showed up all black and blue, though not in any kind of immediate danger. I'd expected us to be awkward around each other, but we hardly had time for awkwardness. I motioned to him to follow me and guided him to the side alley and helped him climb up the wall. He sat atop the wall until I got in through the gate and helped him down, the rubber soles of his thongs on the palms of my intertwined fingers, one at a time. I remember thinking how light he felt on my hands; while most of the boys I know seemed to put on weight in college, Farhan had seemed tinier—"skinny" simply doesn't describe the way he looked—than he was when we were children. We snuck upstairs quietly, his slippers squeaking mildly behind me. I was terrified out of my wits of getting caught.

Once we were in my room, I told him to sit on my bed and gave him a glass of water. What a strange night it was. Farhan had this look, this horrifying look that was a mixture of defiance and despair. We were in the safety of my room, but still he looked as if he was being held at gunpoint and was quite ready to die.

I sat at my desk, my chair turned to face him.

"So, where do I start," he said, putting the glass of water down. A TV was turned off in a room down the hall. I hadn't noticed the quiet murmur before the silence.

"My girlfriend had just left the boarding house that we're renting in Senen," he continued.

I was shocked to hear that he was living with a girl, but I said nothing. I put my index finger to my mouth so that Farhan would lower his voice.

"I was having dinner—oxtail soup—on the sidewalk, and these men asked me to join them. They were drinking." He looked at me with a guilty expression. "I shouldn't have, I know. But I did anyway. I thought I should get to know the locals. I didn't get a chance to drink, though. They were all plastered. I don't think they even noticed that I just held the wine bottle in my hand."

I tried to picture him in Senen—and with a girl—but I had a hard time conjuring the landscape in my head. The area was one of those places my mother would never let me venture into. The one time that I went, of course without her permission, the streets had been wet after a long stretch of rain and the smell of moisture from old waste nobody had bothered to pick up stuck to my shirt for hours. The next day I realized I had gum on the tip of my shoe from the excursion, so that every time I think of the neighborhood an involuntary gagging reflex immediately follows. I thought, the girl must really love him.

"There was this guy, I think his name was Rocky. He had this really ugly scar down his noise. Anyway, he started talking about my girlfriend, said he'd seen her on TV. She's an actress, my girlfriend. Well, the men had been saying really ugly things about actresses in general. I kept quiet at first, but then this Rocky guy mentioned Asti, that's her name… I'm not even going to repeat what he said. Still, I kept quiet, you know. I thought, ok, I just gotta make my exit quietly.

"So this mbak came, this girl who sells siomay. She was bringing the men their orders. And Rocky, I mean, he just pulled her down, forced her sit on his lap. She was screaming, but he wouldn't let go. The men were laughing like it was the funniest thing," Farhan said, breathless. "I just lost it, you know. I smashed the wine bottle on his face. His face and shirt got all wet; it's as if he'd been pissed on, in purple."

He stopped then, and looked at me, waiting for a response. Still, I said nothing.

"His chair toppled over and the men yelled thief on me. They started beating me. I fell. They kicked me. Everyone got out of their houses, men, women, *kids*, with their brooms and hammers and shit, just waiting for their turn. It's a good thing the men were drunk or I'd probably be dead."

Farhan took another sip of water. The glass hung precariously from his hand. I got up and took the glass away from him, and put it on the floor. He gestured for me to sit next to him, so I did.

"The landlord came and broke it up, said I was no thief. I started screaming at them. Just went complete batshit. They backed away, probably thought I was nuts. I went back to the boarding house and called a cab from there. When I got home, my dad opened the door—you know what happened in high school right? I was kicked out because I punched this guy in the face. He was the principal, a complete jackass, totally deserved it."

"Tomi told me."

"So my dad, when he saw me, said he'd stop paying for college. Just like that. Said he wasn't gonna pay for some stupid college for a bunch of idiot students."

Farhan had gone to a university with a not-so-good academic reputation, meant for actresses, athletes, and working students. I assumed that was where he met his girlfriend.

"I wanted to go to a decent school for architecture, but instead I ended up at that dump," he said, laughing hysterically.

I put my hand on his. "I'm sure he'll come around," I said.

"Yeah, maybe," he said, still struggling to stifle his laughter. "But he's right. That place really is a dump. Besides, I never wanted to study accounting in the first place."

We sat there in silence. He held my hand and put his head on my shoulder.

"But look at you. A student at Universitas Indonesia," he said, enunciating my alma mater slowly, gazing at the numerous Economics books on my shelf. "You've always been a good student."

He got up and limped over to my bookshelf. I still had an architecture book that he gave me to read years back. I hadn't returned it to him because we'd lost touch. He fondled the book with his index finger. I thought he'd take it home with him, but finally he left the book alone.

"Do you still paint?"

"No, it's just as my mother expected. Painting was a temporary hobby."

"That's too bad. You were good at it," he said. "You know, I don't know why I thought of you. I left as soon as my dad had had his say. I must've wandered the streets for hours, had nowhere to go. I could've called anyone. I haven't even called my girlfriend. She'd only be worried and probably a little pissed off, too."

"I think," I said. "I think it's probably because of what we saw that day."

"What day?"

"That kid who got beaten to death. The motorcycle thief."

Farhan squinted and perked his head at me. I expected his expression to change, to betray some sort of enlightened recognition, but he seemed unmoved. "I'd forgotten. I mean, I *haven't* forgotten, but it hadn't occurred to me. You're probably right. I'm sure it's that."

I let him borrow my shirt and sarong. I faced the wall while he took his clothes off and put on the ones I gave him.

"You know. That kid. He probably wasn't a thief after all," he said amidst the rustling. "There. I'm done. You can turn around."

It was odd to see Farhan in my pink Hello Kitty T-shirt. I smiled and he laughed.

"I'll sleep on the floor," he said.

"The floor is cold. We can both sleep on the bed."

He did a double take and nodded. I turned the ceiling light off but kept my desk lamp on. I went to the bed, took the side closest to the wall, and put a pillow between us. It was odd looking at our shadow on the wall, as if we were Siamese twins conjoined at the spine, looking in opposite directions.

A few minutes later, he said, "You know, sometimes I wonder what would have happened if we'd kept in touch."

I knew that he'd called me at home a couple of times when we were in high school. I'm not sure why I didn't return his calls. I'd wanted to, but I suppose I was angry at him for screwing up his life so completely. How stupid it all seemed then.

"We'll stay in touch from now on," I told him.

That night, listening to him cry himself to sleep like a little boy, I can tell you that right then, I felt as if I had committed a mortal crime.

◆

We never kept in touch, though I did try. I called him a few times, three times to be precise, to ask if he wanted to meet up, but Farhan always had this or that to do. I suspect he was embarrassed, felt he had nothing interesting to share. You might think that I should have tried harder, but one can only endure so many rejections. Besides, that same year I met Adi, and a few months later I found out that I was pregnant. I dropped out of school and the following year we were married.

Adi does not have a rebellious spirit. Once, a traffic cop pulled us over, even though he had done nothing wrong. Adi slipped him a fifty-thousand rupiah bill. I was so mad at him, but my husband said he wasn't paying him off, precisely because he hadn't done anything wrong. Obviously, Adi said, the poor cop needed the money, otherwise he wouldn't have stood behind a tree waiting for someone who was driving without a license or registration.

When Amina's brand new BMX was stolen, Adi hoped it would do the thief some good, buy him many lunches and dinners. When the street in front of our house flooded, he said great, at least he gets to stay home with Amina and me.

Perhaps it's because of this typical Javanese nrimo attitude that everything has worked out for my husband. I'm still not quite sure if he knows how it really feels to

be utterly disappointed. He thought, when I brought up the possibility of terminating my pregnancy, that my fears of raising a child were irrational. “Are you kidding,” he said, cupping my chin, “We’d make great parents.”

I never went back to school, much to my mother’s disappointment, but you do something for a while, anything, and it becomes the only thing you know how to do, the only thing you really want to do, if one’s to be honest. Of course I don’t tell Bianca this; she’d only be furious. Bianca has twins and likes to complain about how her identical toddlers have sucked the life out of her. She’s been wanting to go to grad school for years, but somehow I don’t think she’ll ever go.

My mother has become an old cantankerous woman, the kind you see in soap operas, lashing out at the world. I see her sometimes, though not nearly enough. When I look at her, I imagine myself in thirty years. Will I be that unhappy? Will I make my daughter unhappy? I know now that parents always feel like they’ve failed their children somewhat, and I suppose I should feel some sort of tenderness towards her, because in her own way, she’d only wanted to protect me—though from what I’m still not quite sure. I know enough from what friends and extended family tell me to understand that if I don’t reach out to her, one day she will not be around, and will I be able to live with myself then? But even common sense can’t yet turn me into the kind of person I’d like to be.

When the shooting incident happened, it had been almost seven years since Farhan and I last met. For weeks, when I thought of him, what I saw was that photo. In the next few weeks after the event, Farhan’s face was all over the news, the same photograph, the same blank stare. Budi Tanoto emerged from the situation almost

scot-free, except for his reputation for being a terrible shot; the case was never even brought to court. I suspect Tanoto felt it was best that his private life was kept private. And Farhan had become a symbol of some sort, of oppression, of a certain kind of pernicious recklessness that only money seemed to make possible, or of some other vague thing that no one was able to pin down.

I didn't see it then, the reason I was angry about the exposure, about the *tone* of the coverage. I was angry not only because the man in the photo seemed to me had nothing to do with my old friend, but because it felt to me that something had been taken away from me, something bright and still, somehow, hopeful.

The other day I was browsing through one of Amina's new illustrated biology books for children and stumbled upon an interesting chapter with a cartoon of an elephant balking at the sight of a deep canyon at the tip of his feet. The small chapter, titled "Self-Preservation," discusses two responses that many species have to ensure survival: Pain and Fear. "Pain" forces you to immediately withdraw from potentially harmful situations while "Fear" compels you to avoid danger and seek safety.

I thought, billions of years of evolution, yet some of us still choose to run into fires, perhaps thinking that there is chance getting burned might yield a different result.

As for me, my self-preservation instincts seem intact, though in the little box at the end of the chapter the book tells me that "Defense Mechanism" (I seem to have acquired the knack for letting people go) is something apart and may have "either healthy or unhealthy results, depending on how often it is used" and that, if interested in the topic, I should consult their "Psychology" series.

By the time I finished reading I was laughing so hard that my shoulders started to shake. I must have been a frightening sight because my daughter ran into a corner and huddled behind her box of toys, crying and screaming for me stop. Amina had been so terrified—the last time I'd seen her that scared was when a neighbor's dog, a Pekingese, had slipped into our yard, vigorously waving its tail and yelping for her attention—that I had to spend minutes coaxing her out. As soon as she'd calmed down I held her and kissed her and sat her on my lap. We flipped through the book, her tiny fingers on my hand, until we came upon the picture of the elephant.

"What you did just now," I told her, "Here's why." ***

Soap

Sometimes, when my husband is out of town, I call Farhan and we go out to lunch or dinner. I call him up, I say hi, he says hi, I say, lunch? he says yes, and off we go. What happens next is more or less the same every time. We go to this noodle place in the North of Jakarta, where there is no danger of running into someone we know. We eat in a hurry, order coffee, drink half of it, smoke, and we leave. We drive to a transit hotel in the area. He checks us in and I follow him in after a few minutes, wearing a hoodie and a pair of sunglasses. We have sex and it's usually very emotional, at least on my part. At the end of it, I cry and he tells me I should get a divorce. We don't often do this, maybe once or twice every month, though we talk on the phone almost every day.

My husband is an actor and a politician. He is a calculating, conniving man. I know he goes behind my back and sleeps with a horde of women, you know, singers, actresses (such as myself, which drives me insane), and all that. But, like I said, he's an actor and a pretty good one, too—that is, off-screen. Like all liars, however, my husband has a tell. Once, a tabloid reporter caught a picture of him with his arm around this dangdut singer on a resort island off the Jakarta coast. He told me—note that I didn't even ask—that he was on the island for a meeting and the singer just happened to be there and wanted to take a picture with him because she was a big fan. He told me that the reporter actually offered to take the picture for them. Sure, I told my husband. He avoided my eyes during the whole thing and was constantly glancing

at his left. Another thing that he often does when he's lying is play with his sleeves, rolling them and unrolling them, which he also did then.

My friends keep telling me how lucky I am to have such a loving husband. Hah! Let me tell you, a key to a BMW X6 does not equal love; besides, I am much too embarrassed to drive the car anywhere except to yoga class, which, incidentally, is only about five blocks away from my house.

I met Farhan in college. I was still modeling then and was in the middle of shooting this soap-opera where I played the rich, evil stepsister of an impoverished girl who was left at an orphanage by her mother soon after she was born. People used to tell me that I always landed antagonist roles because of my curves. The shapeless virginal ones with big, startled eyes always got the lead. It would have been fine, were it not for the hate mail I often received from angered soap-opera fans.

Farhan hardly watched television and had no clue who I was. He was an architecture major and was always carrying this huge scrapbook of architecture clippings and blueprints taken from the internet. His hair was pink or blue or orange, depending on his mood.

We sometimes smoked together. By together I mean he smoked a few meters away from me and we exchanged cordial hellos. I was always happy when it was just the two of us, because he was one of the few people on campus who didn't stare. Finally, after a few months of seeing him around, he told me that I looked familiar and had we properly met?

I said no and said could I see his scrapbook.

We sat on the fire escape and I leafed through his clippings. Gehry is cool, I told him, although it was the first time I'd seen his name, and Farhan seemed impressed.

You've heard of Frank Gehry? he asked me.

Of course, I said.

Well, of course. It did say "Gehry" on one of his pages, right under a building that looked like a bunch of sails strewn together.

The next day we went to the movies. He held my hand and we kissed.

I'm not sure why I decided to drop in that day, seven years after I was married. I knew from a mutual friend that he was still working at his father's internet café (this made me sad; he was such a promising kid), so one day, when I was on my way to my sister's place, I made a right turn into his neighborhood and stopped my car in front of his house.

Farhan's house looked pretty much the same. Not much had changed. He had a trellised metal sliding gate, painted white, and there was the same old Jeep in his parking lot. I went inside and took off my shoes by the door.

Hello, I called out. Hello?

I went in and nobody was there yet, except for a guy sleeping on the couch in the waiting room. I suppose nine in the morning was a little early for the internet. The man had a sofa cushion over his head. I tugged at the cushion and he moaned and turned to face the backrest.

Farhan? I said.

Yes, he said from under his cushion.

And he sat up, just like that.

He looked at me as if he were seeing a ghost. His eyes were all puffy and red.

Holy shit, he said, blinking repeatedly. I thought I was having a nightmare.

Well, thanks, I said.

What are you doing here? Wait, let me just freshen up and get changed.

He disappeared into the back of the house for about ten minutes or so, during which I looked at my reflection in the mirror above the couch, and wondered whether or not I had on too much make-up.

The internet café may not have changed much since I was last there about eight years before. But Farhan had. He had shaved head and had filled up quite a bit, in a good way. He used to be so skinny. And, he was tanned.

I went outside and ordered two cups of coffee from a warung across the street and sat on Farhan's patio, smoking a cigarette.

Sorry for the wait, Farhan said, and sat on the rattan chair across from mine.

It's all right, I said. You look good.

He did.

Thanks, I usually make time to go to the gym every morning, but last night was a long one. There were these high school kids who just didn't want to leave. World of Warcraft will do that to you.

World of what? I said.

Farhan laughed.

Thanks for the coffee, he said. So, what brings you here?

I happened to be in the area, wanted to know how you're doing.

Still married to that…that what's-his-name?

Budi Tanoto. Yes, yes.

Oh, he said. Still acting?

Nah.

Got kids?

No. Hey, this place looks good.

Please, he said. I'm moving it to the business district. Turning it into a real gaming center. Private rooms, proper headphones, that sorta thing.

Nice, nice.

We both sat there, Farhan still confused and perhaps sleep-groggy due to my sudden interruption; me confused as to why I came in the first place.

Hey, is everything all right? What's up?

I put out my cigarette and lit another one.

You really need to cut down, Farhan said. He lit one for himself.

Still Marlboros, I said.

Yeap.

I should probably leave, I said, getting up.

Farhan caught my arm and sat me back down.

Let's get this out of the way. Why did you disappear? he asked. His face was so serious I wanted to crawl under my chair.

You know why. Budi. My parents, I told him.

Parents, he said. And he laughed this frightening, shrill laugh, and hid his face behind his hands.

OK, he said, blowing air through his mouth. Well, it's been eight, nine years? What are you doing here?

I don't know.

Look, whatever's happening between you and your husband, you need to get it sorted out. You can't just show up here. I think you know that whatever this is, has nothing to do with us. This isn't eight years ago.

And just like that, I started crying violently. I took the hem of my blouse and wiped my face with it and blew my nose into it.

Farhan sat in his chair looking at me with his mouth slightly open. I waited for him to say something, anything, but he kept quiet.

Finally, I got up, put on my shoes, and left.

A few days later I received an email from Farhan. He apologized and asked me if I wanted to talk. So we agreed on lunch, and that's how the whole thing started.

Farhan says I should get a divorce, not because of "us" (we'd established early on that there wouldn't be an "us") but because, clearly, my marriage isn't working. He always knew there was something off with Budi. One, you can't trust actors (I laughed at this); and secondly, you can't trust politicians—and Budi was both. Besides, what was I thinking? He was ten years older than me. Etc.

Sometimes, when I'm in a bad mood, I lash back at him. And what is he doing still living in his dad's house, when he hates his old man so much? And whatever happened to architecture? I tell him he's prostituting himself for convenience. We push each other around, sometimes literally, and by the end of it he feels guilty, I feel guilty, we make up and the rest, … well.

I'm not quite sure why we're so tangled up in each other's business. We were each other's first. We once shared a place. We both wanted to get away from our parents, so we rented this place in Senen where we could have some peace and quiet before returning to our homes at night. The place was filthy, but I didn't mind it. In fact, I thought the arrangement was working quite well until our landlord decided we were too indiscreet, and Farhan couldn't return to the place because he got into a fight with some neighborhood thugs the night we decided to find another place. I was so angry, but he never told me what the fight was all about. Farhan always had this disproportionate sense of justice, so I assumed it was one of those moments. Our relationship was headed down the drain anyway, because soon after, Farhan's father stopped paying for his tuition. He quit college at the end of the next semester and we saw each other less and less.

I met Budi my third year in college. Budi was very sweet and intelligent—or so I thought—and rich and charming. My parents loved him. My friends loved him. And I suppose I was convinced that I loved him as much as everyone else did. About a year into the relationship, I dropped out of college and married him. We had a big wedding at this wedding hall where everyone who mattered got married. According to the Javanese tradition, I washed his feet with a bowl of water and he showered coins onto my lap. The next day our pictures were in the papers.

After almost half a year, I told one of my friends about Farhan. We were drinking coffee at my place while painting our nails. Shirley started talking about her husband, Tim, who was a bule from the U.S. Shirley is very proud of Tim who is good-looking and generous and extremely down to earth. Shirley and Tim live in a

six-bedroom house just down the street from mine. They have three household helps and no children.

Tim is so sweet, Shirley said. He makes me breakfast every morning. You know, he insists on doing it himself and tells the mbak to go watch TV or something.

No kidding, I said. That's sweet of him.

I know, right? And last weekend, he bought me a dress at Obin and a matching purse, and had it altered at my favorite dressmaker. You know, because the woman has my measurements and he thought—

I slept with my ex from college, I told her.

No. Way.

Shirley looked at me, her eyes so wide they nearly touched her hairline.

Wow. Well, how was it? she said, giggling into her fingers.

It was great. But kind of sad, too, I guess.

Waiiit, Shirley said, slowly. Is everything all right between you and Budi?

Things are the same.

So why?

Haven't you been listening? Because things have been exactly the same.

But isn't that a good thing? I thought you two were happy.

I shrugged and Shirley looked at me with so much pity I almost let myself believe I was to blame.

Just make sure Budi doesn't find out, she said. He loves you so much.

I wanted to strangle Shirley, but I thought perhaps she was as clueless as she seemed.

Hmm, I said and changed the subject.

The thing about being married to a man who is both very handsome and charming, is that one can't help but be under the suspicion that everyone, your friends and family and neighbors (not to mention the rest of the country), will end up taking his side when shit goes down.

Take Shirley's husband, Tim, for example. I know that Budi and Tim go to this strip bar in Kota every month. I tell Budi he's a bit too old for drunken escapades, but he doesn't care, and like I said, he is incapable of remorse. He kisses me when he gets home and tells me I have absolutely nothing to worry about, that he only goes to keep Tim company and to make sure his weak-willed friend does not commit adultery. And why do they go in the first place? But I'm sure no one would believe that Tim is capable of infidelity, least of all Shirley.

Ramadan is when things get really strange. Budi goes around with his buddies from the Democrat Party before sahur and distribute food for the early breakfast people have before they begin fasting. And I'm always ordered to tag along, because I'm "pretty." Budi puts a shawl over my head and I sit with him in the back of a convertible Land Rover. Every time we see a homeless person, we pull a bag of rice and boiled egg and veggies from the extra large trash bag at our feet and pass it along to the unfortunate soul.

Smile, Asti. And nod your head, Budi whispers to me when a potential target approaches.

Every year it's the same, and a piece of me withers away each time.

I told Farhan this and he shook his head.

This is why I don't vote, he said.

When Budi went to Papua for a meeting with one of the large mining companies there, Farhan and I decided to go to Puncak, to a nice little inn I once stayed in when I was little. It had been more than a year since we began seeing each other. We'd begun texting and calling each other on the phone almost every night, when Budi was asleep. The relationship was different from how it was in college. Probably because we were so young then. But I suppose another important difference was that Farhan was somewhat more self-sufficient and he at least had plans for himself, and I was not. Budi had become my entire life.

It was before sunset when we arrived at the inn. Farhan checked us in and went back out. He drove the car to the private parking space by the room. He'd chosen a room overlooking a terraced paddy field. I ordered us dinner, and when the room service prepared the food outside on the balcony, I hid inside and played an Android game on my cell phone.

Here alone, sir? I heard the room service boy ask.

With my wife, Farhan said.

I knew that he said it just because it was the proper thing to say, but I blushed like a child, in spite of myself.

We ate on the balcony, watching the sun go down. I had oxtail soup; he had chicken liver fried rice. We shared a bowl of stir fried bean sprouts with salted fish.

I wonder how many illicit couples are staying here, I said, if only to reassert myself.

To my surprise, Farhan seemed wounded. He frowned and looked away.

I mean, I began to say.

Quite a lot, I bet, he said.

The sun was gone. Behind the hills, slivers of violet and red and orange. We were quiet as we ate. When it got too dark, Farhan turned on the balcony light.

Watch out for the insects, I said.

I'm so happy we're here, Farhan said.

Me, too.

Soon enough, these tiny brown insects were buzzing around the light bulb. We went inside and took a bath together. I always imagined taking a bath with a man to be sexy and romantic, but the tub was so small that we had to squirm and wriggle quite a bit before we came upon the best arrangement, which was to sit across from each other. I put my toes on his stomach and he massaged them. I felt rather embarrassed, as if we were children playing at being adults.

This is awkward, I said, laughing.

Yeah, he said.

We got up and took a shower, separately.

He asked me if I wanted to get ice cream somewhere and I said no, it was too cold. So we ended up cuddling in bed with our shirts on.

You smell good, he said.

It's the hotel soap, I said.

We started talking about the old days. Remember how you put ice on my face after that fight? he asked. Sure do, I said, I was so mad at you. What was the fight

about anyway? I asked him. Oh, this guy was harassing this siomay mbak, he said. Hmm, I said, was she pretty? Yes, he said, but not as pretty as you.

Remember what you said after you'd put ice on me? he asked.

No, I said.

Well, you'd just told me about what the landlord said to you when you went back to get your stuff.

I said, The fucker looked at me like I was meat for sale, just stood there watching me pack. He jiggled the broken door handle and asked me if maybe we liked to get a little rough.

Right, Farhan said. And then you said you were so angry you could cut his tongue off and feed it to the dogs.

I did say that, didn't I?

Yup. And I laughed so hard. And then you said you always felt embarrassed. You looked like you were about to cry. I felt so guilty for laughing.

This part I didn't remember.

Embarrassed? What about? I asked him.

You said people were always looking at you a certain way. But I thought you looked so pretty then. It was the first time I said love. I said I love you. And do you remember what you said?

No. What was it?

Well, there were these dogs trying to get it on just across the street. And you looked at them, and you had this dead serious face, and you said, 'What's love? It could be whatever's hanging on the tips of their tongues.' You meant the dogs.

What? I said.

I swear to god, that's what you said.

I can't believe I don't remember, I said.

Farhan kissed me.

Well, I said, that was a stupid thing to say.

He kissed me again.

You smell really good, he said.

And we made love, but not quite, I suppose, like those dogs.

We drove back to Jakarta the next day. Budi would arrive home in the afternoon, and I had to get home before he did. There was traffic and the desperate honking that came with it. We were both becoming very annoyed and irritated.

I rolled down the window and lit a cigarette.

Please don't smoke in the car, he said.

You're kidding, I said.

It's my dad's car. He doesn't smoke.

Right, I said.

What? he said.

Never mind, I said and threw the cigarette out the window.

We were mostly quiet the rest of the way. When we arrived in my side of town, it was almost five in the afternoon.

Great, I bet Budi's already home, I said.

He stopped the car by a Circle K so I could take a cab home.

You have to talk to him sooner or later, he said.

I could get a divorce and set up my own internet café. What do you think? I said.

Asti.

Sorry.

All right, just go, he said.

I got out and hailed a cab. When I got home Budi wasn't there. Later he texted me to tell me he had a meeting at the People's Rep, but let's get dinner out. Whatever you say, I texted him back. What's with the attitude, he wrote.

Budi came home at around eight and we walked to a nearby satay restaurant. He ordered two portions of satay and a bottle of beer and I ordered goat soup. There were old men singing old tunes with a keyboard player who was so terrible he reminded me of those Betawi weddings in the outskirts of the city.

What's going on, Budi asked.

Nothing, I said.

I want to know how I can do better, he said.

There is nothing you can do, I said.

You want to leave me, don't you? he said.

Yes.

Why?

Because you're a cheating bastard, I told him.

I'll be better, he said. And he started sobbing like a little child. He said, you're the only person who really knows me.

Everyone turned to look at us and whispered.

Stop it, I said, everyone's looking at us. You don't want to get your picture on E-tainment.

I don't care, he said.

We sat there like that, him crying, me watching him cry, the whole room pretending not to be watching us.

I know you've been seeing someone behind my back, he said. I know I haven't been a good husband.

I kept still.

Lower your voice, I told him.

But please, he said. I can do better.

Now, we all know that begging isn't the best strategy to win a woman's heart, especially not after seven years of lies. I wanted to say no, that I was really leaving him, but that night was the first time I saw some evidence of his love for me. Love, need, same thing.

So I asked my husband to do something I was certain he couldn't do.

I said, Then don't run next year.

Budi swallowed and seemed to momentarily wake up from his daze. I was certain of victory.

But he grabbed my hand and held it.

Fine, he said. I won't.

Fine, I said.

We stopped talking about it and finished our dinner in silence.

That night Budi and I had sex and he told me again and again that he loved me. I felt so wretched by the end of it, that after, I went to the bathroom and washed myself once and then twice. But what can I say? I've made my bed and I have to lie in it—at least for now.

Farhan and I still see each other, usually when Budi's out of town. At night, when Budi's asleep, I tiptoe downstairs and sit in the gazebo out in my front yard and I dial Farhan's number. He tells me about his day; I tell him about mine: I make Budi breakfast, then I run for about a half-an-hour on the treadmill, then I go to yoga, and afterwards I have lunch with Shirley or Maya or Lila. And they talk about their husbands, how "good" they are, and I silently judge them.

That's sad, Farhan tells me when I'm done talking. Isn't it, I tell him. We say goodnight and there's the whole ritual of hanging up. I always insist that he hangs up first, but he always waits until I hang up, laughing or counting to three.

I sit in the gazebo for a while, listening for a car here or a motorcycle there, until I can no longer stand the mosquitos. I tiptoe upstairs and draw the bedcover over my head. Every time, I wonder how long it will be until Farhan's had enough. ***

My Brother Across the Ocean

My mother, like all adult women in our country, started wearing the special hat after the revolution. At first my siblings and I would joke about how the odd contraption made her look like a horse, or a rabid dog. What a silly hat, we'd say to her, grabbing and shaking its leather snout until the metal springs attached to its sides clattered against the round polyethylene helmet. The first year the law was passed, Mama never complained, at least not to us. She wanted to protect us, to make us feel safe. After all, we thought the hat-and-muzzle-outside rule would only be temporary. We never believed that the Soldiers of the Sacred King would win our second democratic election. Surely no sane person really wanted to see women walking around with the ridiculous oversized hats and their built-in woman-mouth muzzles. Only women politicians were allowed to wear plain hats. But then again there weren't many of them around to begin with, or none of this would have happened in the first place. At least that's what my mother used to say.

Mama kept writing for the *Atrosiopolis Magazine*, the country's leading news and politics publication, but under a male pseudonym. She wrote features and op-eds with titles such as: "The Price of Freedom"; "Speak Up, Women"; or "The Decline of One Tyrant and the Rise of Another" until the Soldiers, Sacred King youths, my mother told me, ransacked the chief editor's office. Fortunately, Mr. Bahaha—the chief editor—was careful; they couldn't find her name anywhere. The boys threatened

to kill the old man when he declined to divulge the writer's identity, but he quickly reminded them that the elections were about to take place. Mr. Bahaha, who was rumored to be so terrified that he farted not once but twice during the search, caught the first plane to France the next day, leaving his two cats behind to starve. I could tell from how my mother talked about the whole thing that she was disappointed in poor Mr. Bahaha.

My siblings and I attended an international school on scholarships, but by 2000 many of the foreigners had fled the country. Several Soldiers monitored half-empty classrooms, to make sure that the teachers weren't brainwashing us with Western doctrines. When kids at school talked about my mother's writing, I had to force myself to keep silent. I was proud of Mama but had no one to brag to. What a brave man, my classmates whispered to each other. He must be a very brave man, I'd say to them.

My father was a law lecturer at the state university. Like many of his colleagues, Papa didn't believe in the Sacred King. He stopped believing when he was a little boy, when his parents were killed in a car accident. His father—my grandfather—died instantly, and my grandmother a few long minutes after, one arm and one leg severed in the accident. Papa survived with a few scratches only to watch his mother lose consciousness and finally give up her last breath. When my great-grandfather found him at the hospital four hours later—it took the ambulance hours to arrive at the scene—Papa was supposedly drenched in blood. It used to drive him mad when people said things like "everything happens for a reason" or "God works in mysterious ways." "If God exists, He must be a psychopath," he'd snap at them. After

the Soldiers toppled our dictator in the revolution, he told all of us never to repeat his words to anyone, not even to family.

At first I thought he was paranoid, not to mention a touch cynical, but later it began to make sense. Shortly after the Soldiers were elected, they passed the Blasphemy Law, which made it illegal to renounce the Sacred King in public. The law was intentionally vague. Anything could be considered blasphemy. One of my teachers, for example, was sentenced to fifteen years of prison—they liked to call it the "facility" to make it sound more benign—for criticizing the new history textbooks, which of course were heavily censored. Mr. Halhal had said something like, "We must read with a grain of salt if we're to always remember how we got here." He was also in the habit of referring to the soldiers as "amateurish impostors," which didn't help his case at all. This was considered blasphemy because the Soldiers, according to the judge, were divine emissaries to the Sacred King Himself. To speak against the Soldiers and to question their decision to "reevaluate" history, were to question the Great One's authority. The Soldiers made sure to take good care of Mr. Halhal's son, who was only thirteen at the time. They took him in as one of their own and provided him with "proper training." After the Blasphemy Law, they passed more and more religious laws: the Witchcraft Law, the Modesty Law, which prohibits women from leaving home unchaperoned after sunset, and the Polygamy Law, which made it lawful for men to take more than one wife (it's worth noting the men found the tax cuts especially enticing). Adherents of other religions were allowed to practice their religion in private, but they were not allowed to assemble. Mosques and churches were shut down, their permits revoked.

Five years after the revolution, my thirteen-year-old brother began making new friends at the Young Soldiers Center. Although we were not a religious family, we were all registered followers of the Sacred King, and weekly meetings for Sacred King boys between twelve and eighteen were mandatory. My father dropped Toto off every Saturday at the Community Hall and each time before my brother stepped off the car, my father would grab his face gently with his hands and tell him never to succumb. Always be free here, my father would tell him, bringing his hand to my brother's chest.

I never could fathom how the Soldiers managed to beguile my brother, although I suppose we started seeing signs only months after the weekly meetings began. Toto came home one day with a book titled *The Evolution Deceit: How We Really Came To Be*. He read and reread the book until it was heavily battered. It was a beautiful book, with a colorful hard cover, on it a picture of a nebulous infant universe springing up from the Sacred King's hands, like an atomic cloud sprinkled with diamonds. The earth, the whole universe even, was created solely for its human occupants, the book said. The author listed many supporting arguments: for the universe to exist there must be a prima causa; if the universe was as vast as the scientists believed, surely other advanced civilizations would have found us; because the universe is not as vast as the scientists believed, it's within reason to conclude that we are the only intelligent beings in the universe; etc. My father was too democratic. Sometimes I find myself still blaming him for what happened to my brother. He never told Toto to stop reading, never told him that the book was a preposterous hoax. He

took our unconventional upbringing for granted, thought it was enough to shield us from radicalism.

"Papa, do you really think the universe could have created itself?"

"It doesn't matter what I think, Toto. What do you believe?" he'd say.

Unlike my friends at the international school, many of my neighborhood playmates began to sympathize with the Soldiers. Our neighbors went to the Soldiers when the state hospital charged them illegal fees; they went to the Soldiers when they ran out of rice; they went to the Soldiers when they did not have enough money to buy their children's textbooks. Before long, practically the whole neighborhood was Sacred. My father blamed the liberals. The liberals lacked motivation; they smoked and littered; they were undisciplined and unorganized.

My mother warned Papa about Toto, but he was adamant that Toto would have to make up his own mind.

"But the stakes are too high. You have to tell him it's all a lie."

"I can't do that, Mimi. Besides, what if he starts repeating what I say in one of those meetings? I don't want to put all of us in danger."

To this, my mother would throw her arms in the air or squeeze her forehead in frustration.

On the night before the election, my parents gathered all of us, me, my sister Tita, and my brother, in the living room. My father looked very serious and my mother had clearly been crying. It was an eerily quiet night. The Soldiers had imposed a curfew following a protest that quickly turned violent. No one was allowed outside

after 8 p.m. We heard their patrol vehicle pass by every hour, like clockwork, its caterpillar track grinding the asphalt road.

"Everyone inside," the speakers blasted. "Inside, inside! Glory be to our Sacred One!"

"Just listen to that," my father said, shaking his head.

Tita rested her head on my shoulder and started crying.

"Hush, hush," I whispered to her. My mother pulled Tita, only six years old then, onto her lap and held her.

"We've prepared passports and visas for all of us. If the Soldiers win tomorrow's election, we'll have to leave the country," Papa said.

"But where to?" I said, feeling a little angry that my parents hadn't told us sooner.

"To England," Mama said. "Your aunt Fifi lives there. She says it's quite nice. Woman-muzzles are outlawed in England."

"Why can't women wear the muzzle if they choose to?" Toto asked.

"No woman of the right mind would ever agree to wearing that monstrosity," Mama scowled at him.

"It's a good question, Toto," Papa said gently, touching my brother's arm. "But I would have to agree with your mother on this. Besides, would you want to live in a place where women, your mother and sisters, aren't allowed to speak their minds?"

Toto averted his eyes.

"Don't cry, Tita," Mama said, furiously rubbing my sister's back. "You'll find new friends in England, and you and your sister will never have to wear the stupid hats."

Toto scoffed at this and went into his room. Papa warily followed my brother with his eyes. I should have known then that my brother was already lost to us. Although my parents would never admit to this, having my brother around was like having a strange monster in the house. He frequently corrected my mother's outfit, rolled down her sleeves when she wore them too high up her arms; he challenged my father's ultra-liberal opinions; he reprimanded my terrible manners, constantly reminded me to cover my mouth when I laughed, etc. He scolded us when we were too loud on evenings, when the night prayer takes place, when he'd go to his room and do god-knows-what in front of his prayer wall. Whenever we had guests, which wasn't often, he'd bring Mama's hat to her, sometimes even putting it on her head, for protection, he used to say. I hated my brother then. I hated his pompous piety, hated his voice, hated the way he parted his hair—right down the middle, like the rest of the boy soldiers. He loved to mention the facility, where the strays (such as my old teacher) are committed, when we deviated from the accepted norms: "Careful, you don't want to get sent to the facility," he'd say when I complained about the curfew or when Tita told Mama she wanted pink shoes. One time, a friend of Papa's came for dinner and gave him a classical piano album. As soon as he'd left, Toto broke the CD in half and threw the pieces in the waste bin. "Western music carries subliminal messages. It's better to be safe than sorry," he told Papa and Mama, speaking slowly as if they were idiot children. But still, my parents humored and coddled him. In fact,

I'm not sure what made me more upset: my brother or how my parents treated him, like what he had was a physiological condition or a genetic defect. I, on the other hand, could not bring myself to pity him, young as he was. All I remember from those days is that I wanted him gone, out of my life. And I guess if I was any younger, I'd have seriously believed that what happened next was due to the strength of my mental will.

On election morning we all went to the voting booths, set up under smooth, white tents usually used at weddings. The plywood ballot boxes, painted green, almost looked pretty with the sunlight slanting through the sheer fabric above and falling on them like thin, flaxen ribbons. Youth soldiers, kids from our neighborhood, were lined up to greet the voters, AK47s slung over their shoulders. Once the boys reached sixteen, they were allowed—or in some cases ordered—to carry rifles. These were the boys I grew up with, hunted ladybugs and played soccer in empty lots with. They knew all of us by name.

"Good morning, Uncle Huni, good morning, Aunt Mimi. Hello, Toto, Tita, Bibi," they said.

My father responded with a scowl. He sat on one of the foldable chairs to wait his turn. Every now and then Tita would raise her arm to catch the light. From the way her face lit up, you'd think she was at an amusement park.

"Hey, Toto. Wanna see my rifle?" one of the boys said.

"Toto, no playing with weapons," my mother said and quickly added, "not until you're sixteen."

But my brother had already run off to be with the boys.

“I can’t believe the Soldiers put them here. Do they really think we’d be intimidated?” I whispered to my mother.

She put her hand on my thigh. “Quiet, Bi,” she said, smiling at our community leader who was waddling in our direction.

Our community leader, a devout Sacred, sat down next to my father. His long robe got caught in the chair; I helped him untangle himself.

“Why, thank you, Bibi—oh, but be careful. We must not touch,” he said to me, giggling as if our fingers accidentally touching was the funniest thing. “You know, Huni, at all of the voting booths women are separated from the men, but I told them, no no. Not here. After all, this is a family event, isn’t it? And what a beautiful day it is.”

Papa smiled, keeping an eye on the young Soldiers. The boys were showing my brother how to reload. The clacking of the magazine snapping in place, my brother’s awed expression, his timid, almost deferential request for the boys to “do it again”—it was too much to bear. I felt sorry for Papa, but also ashamed, of his helplessness, though I don’t suppose there was anything he could have done.

“You know, I’m very proud of our community. We’re all devout Soldiers. I know all of these people like I know the back of my own hand. In fact, you’re the only one who hasn’t come to our weekly community prayer. But ah, you’ll come around, no doubt.”

“I’m sure I will. I’ve been busy.”

“Yes, with teaching. You like your job very much, I gather.”

More clicking noises and a flurry of laughter. In front of me, rows of white round helmets bobbled in the sun.

"Yes, very much," Papa said.

"Well, like I said. I know all of us very well. I have no doubt that we will win the election in a landslide here. I can't think of anyone who wouldn't vote for the Soldiers. Can you?"

Papa exhaled, almost vehemently. Mama squeezed my thigh until it began to hurt.

"Well," the old man said, rubbing his goatee. "Like I said. A great talent such as yours shouldn't go to waste. Where would you be if not at the university? After all, you seem to love your job very much. More than anyone I know."

"Yes, these people are nothing but sheep, aren't they?" my father said, getting up from his chair. The community leader's face turned beet red. I don't think I was ever more proud of my father. "If you'll excuse me. It's our turn. Come, Mimi."

Mama got up in a hurry. "Toto, sit next to your sister," she called out.

The boys tousled Toto's hair and patted him on the back. My brother groaned, but he sat down next to me anyway, arms folded across his chest.

"Toto, did you hear what our community leader was saying to Papa? He practically said Papa would get fired if he doesn't vote for the Soldiers," I whispered.

"Please. They don't need to threaten anyone. It's not like they'll lose."

"You're an idiot," I said.

"Watch your mouth, stupid woman."

I slapped my brother across his face. A big mistake, apparently. The young Soldiers started to move in on us with a kind of boyish swagger, like those American rappers we used to see on TV—before foreign music was banned entirely, of course. The community leader put his hand up to stop them.

Mama came running toward us.

"What is it? What's the matter, Bibi?"

"Your foul-mouthed daughter slapped her brother. Women should be respectful, Auntie," one of the Soldiers said, the corner of his upper lip stretched in repulsion, as if I'd committed a capital offense. This same boy used to wear braces with glow-in-the-dark elastics.

"Now, now. Stand back. Everything is fine. Bibi, apologize to your brother," the community leader said.

I didn't hit my brother *that* hard, but Toto was still wincing in pain.

"It hurts," he said, rubbing his cheek and making exaggerated sniffling noises.

"This is downright abuse," another boy said. The others nodded in agreement.

"Bibi, apologize," Mama said. She was close to tears. Papa stood behind her, breathing hard.

So I told them I was sorry, though what I wanted to do was give my brother a good, thorough spanking.

"*Really* sorry," I added for effect.

"There, my daughter has apologized," Papa said. "Let's not make a big deal out of this."

"Well, you know what they say, those who spare the rod…" the community leader started to say.

"I'll be sure to discipline my daughter," Papa told him.

The boys shrugged and retreated languidly back to their post. Our community leader ushered my parents to the voting booths. "Children are always a handful, aren't they?" I heard him say.

"One day you're going to get sent to the facility," Toto whistled under his breath.

"I'll get you when we get home," I whispered.

He yanked my hair. I let out a cry. The Soldiers were still watching us, laughing. I sat very, very still.

"Who did you vote for?" Toto asked my parents once we got home.

"Who do you think they voted for?" I screamed at him.

"Stupid bitch."

"Toto, go to your room. You're not allowed to leave your room until five," my father said.

"Oh, you mean until they've finished the rough count? Until you know for sure that you've lost? Until a cab comes to take all of us to the airport?"

Toto stormed into his room. "Cowards!" he shouted from inside.

My mother started to sob violently. "This is terrible," she cried.

◆

After I had lived in London for almost a full year, I saw a family on the Tube, a young couple and their two children, a boy and a girl. The boy was around three, the girl a little older. The girl, with blond curls and red apple cheeks, unwrapped a

chocolate bar and broke it in half. She told her brother to open her mouth and fed him half of the bar.

"How do you like it, Johnny?"

"I wike it vewy mutt," the boy said. He put his arm around the girl and kissed her noisily, leaving brown smudges on her nose. "I wike you."

The boy twisted his sister's curls around his fingers and tried to put some of it in his mouth. The girl tilted her head toward him so that he wouldn't have to pull too hard. Their parents looked so happy and proud that it made me want to throw up. I didn't quite understand where my inexplicable hatred came from, exactly, but I watched them almost in a kind of rage. When the couple kissed each other on the mouth, I finally snapped. "Hey! Cut it out. Nobody wants to see you two slobber all over each other, all right?" I roared at them.

The husband started and was perhaps about to say something nasty back to me, but instead he began to look at me with pity, as if I was some kind of lunatic. The mother whispered something to her children and they hid behind her, clutching her dress, stealing confused and frightened glances at me.

To my relief, the family stepped off at the next stop. As I sat in the Tube berating myself for my ugly outburst, I started to think of Toto and how he used to cuddle with me at night. He was terrified of the dark. I assured him that ghosts didn't really exist. Parents in the neighborhood invented stories to scare children from going out at night, I explained. Sometimes, though, when I needed to be alone, I told him macabre ghost stories—headless priests, screaming women in one of the abandoned houses in our neighborhood, the feral ghosts of children, that sort of thing—so that he

would go to my parents' bedroom instead. But Toto kept sneaking into my room almost every night. He'd sneak his hand under my shirt and rest his fingers on my stomach where it was warm. I still remember how he smelled. Like my mother's lavender soap. Like old age.

For years I played that day in my head again and again, looking for missed opportunities, for small openings that I might have failed to take—wondering if I could have saved my brother.

When the taxi came to take us all to the airport, my father told us my brother wasn't coming. He'd climbed out his window and run to my uncle's home just a few blocks away. We all went to fetch Toto, but only Mama and Papa went inside. They made Tita and me wait in the taxi. My parents were gone for quite a while. The taxi driver started to get anxious and I was afraid we would miss our flight. When they came back out, both were crying. My father had never looked so angry and in despair.

"Your uncle will take good care of him, Bibi," he told me, holding my hand in both of his. Papa's shoulders began to shake. He cast his gaze out the window, to the utility poles rolling by, each one taking us farther away from the home we once loved so much.

◆

Like every other teenage girl in England, I had a Socialball account. I looked at the newsfeed diligently for years, to see if there was news of my brother. Whenever I chatted with my friends from the international school back home, I would ask them if they knew what happened to Toto. But they had no clue. None of them lived in our neighborhood. One day a few years ago, just months after I entered college, Socialball was banned in my home country, along with other social media and search engines

and, finally, the *Atrosiopolis Magazine*. I followed the Socialball newsfeed, looking for a miracle, but my friends' accounts were dead. All I ever saw was how Suzie went from being in a relationship to single, or how Margie spent her summer wine tasting in the south of France with Xavier, a cute French boy with a snowboarding scar above his eyebrow, or how Samantha's killer Renaissance professor failed her because she'd apparently skipped too many classes. I emailed my friends from back home sometimes, but they emailed me less and less. They were tired of politics, they said. Who cares? It's not like their situation would improve.

Mama was never the same. She buried herself in work day after day. She was invited to speak at many women's rights seminars and was once even invited to a talk show here in London. The talk show host—a middle-aged woman with a perfect row of white teeth and platinum-blond hair—was very interested in how my mother arranged homes for refugees, mostly women, from our country. Mama made sure they all had jobs, and those without skills were taught to sew and to cut hair. Mimi Lindu is a hero, a real fighter, the talk show host said, smiling into the camera and nodding her head, her blond waves bobbing ever so slightly around her.

My mother fumed all the way home after the show.

"I can't believe that insufferable woman asked me if learning how to drive was *liberating*! What, did she think I was too busy cleaning up after my children's puke before the revolution!" she barked, perhaps imagining the poor woman's neck as she squeezed the steering wheel with all her might.

Mama never spoke of my brother in public. My father was given a research fellowship at a university in London, where he taught the history of our country. In the

summer, we'd fly to one or two European countries and stay in cheap hotels. It was my father's dream to see the world, but our summer trips, our museum visits, the long mornings spent dawdling on foreign beaches, weren't enough to make him forget. My parents blamed themselves, they blamed each other, not with spiteful words but with agonizing pleasantries. And I couldn't help but wonder if I was the one to blame.

◆

The letter came the summer of 2011, right after I graduated from college with a degree in history. The envelope had no return address, but I recognized the handwriting, the crossed seven, the sloped "L", the carefulness of it, as if the letters had been written by an illiterate person copying a text without grasping its meaning.

I held the letter in my hand as I went about the house. I knew I had to wait for my parents to come home. After all, the letter was addressed to them: "To: Huni and Mimi Lindu."

Tita was surprised and excited when I told her about the letter, but hardly as invested as I was. She was only six when we left the country. Her recollection of Toto was vague. Tita's only strong memory of our brother was of him taking pictures of her in an oversized military uniform, an outfit Aunt Fifi had bought at an Military Surplus store and sent to us from England. But I suspect she only remembers because we took the pictures with us. Tita had them taped to her bedroom wall, just above her bed. I must admit she often drove me mad when she talked about Toto. All she and my parents remembered, or wanted to remember, were the good memories, as if my brother was already dead and not to be sullied in any way. They had painted this blameless picture of a victimized Toto, and every time they talked about what a good kid he was, all I could think about were his moments of mischief—like when he

doused my children's science encyclopedia with kerosene and almost set them on fire. He would have, I'm sure, if my father hadn't come home in time.

Sometimes I think he turned out that way because my parents were too lenient on him. He was, after all, their only son. They never tolerated my mishaps and ignorance, but with him they were always patient. And now that he was lost to us, perhaps forever, he had become a saint.

My parents came home at seven. They'd had dinner out to celebrate their 25th anniversary. My mother was uncharacteristically buoyant, my father a little awkward and slightly embarrassed by their obvious display of tenderness. It took them a few moments to realize what had occurred, that Tita and I were sitting at the table with a sealed envelope at the center of it.

My mother looked at the envelope and at me and my sister, puzzled.

"I haven't opened it," I said.

"We think it's from Toto," Tita said.

My father took the envelope and brought it to the stove. He put some water in the kettle and heated it up, holding the envelope to the kettle's snout. He didn't want to rip the envelope open.

"It was already here when I woke up," I said.

"Why didn't you call us?"

"I wanted you to enjoy your dinner."

The words seemed silly as soon as I'd uttered them.

"Mimi, would you like to open it?"

My mother took the letter from Papa and unsealed the envelope brusquely. Papa winced at the sound of paper tearing. She read silently, with Papa looking over her shoulder.

"Oh," she muttered again and again. Papa put his hand on her shoulder. After she was done, she dropped the letter on the table and they went into their bedroom.

"Well, aren't you going to read it?" Tita said.

I picked the letter up, curiosity getting the best of me, and read it out loud.

Dear Mama and Papa,

I finally went to see Uncle Ito last week and he gave me your letters. I've just finished reading all of them. I'm glad everyone's doing all right. I'm doing well myself. The Soldiers gave me a scholarship to go to university to study theology. I'm in my second year and will be graduating in two years. I'm now an instructor at the weekly youth meetings.

I know that you're not a believer and now I understand why. We have not known real suffering. We've led a sheltered life. For a long time I was angry at the both of you for keeping me from what I am still certain is the truth, but I know now that you were only trying your best, that you also have your own set of values, your own faith.

I also know that the Soldiers are not perfect. Some of them, especially those who are high up, are corrupt and decadent. But I believe that I can make changes happen from the inside. You have taught me many valuable lessons and I am grateful for it.

Dear Mama and Papa, the Soldiers are watching me closely as they do all of their potential cadres. Please do not send any more letters to Uncle Ito unless there is an emergency. As you well know, your names are on their watch list. I will have Uncle Ito contact you if I am in any real trouble. Please send Mimi and Tita my love.

Your son,

Toto

"What a punk," I said. "Sheltered life? Does he not remember how his grandparents died? How Papa had to take care of himself and Uncle Ito growing up?"

"But it's overall a *positive* letter, don't you think?"

"Oh, shut up, Tita. You have no idea what you're talking about."

"Well then *tell* me."

"Forget it. You wouldn't understand."

"You're so cocky. You've always been arrogant. No wonder he hated you."

I was so angry I wanted to hit her. I kept my closed fist pressed against my knee.

But already Tita had a remorseful look on her face. "I'm sorry," she said.

"Me too," I said.

Tita and I hugged each other and everything was all right between us.

"It's just that he left us. And clearly he's not sorry," I said, my sister's head still buried in my shoulder.

"God, this whole Sacred King thing is a load of crap, isn't it?" Tita sighed, pulling away. "I'm so glad we left."

Tita and I played a game of cards at the dining table for a while, but we were decidedly glum.

"Tell me what happened on election day," Tita said out of the blue.

"But you know what happened."

"Tell me again."

So I did.

"I think I remember this," she said when I told her how loud and irritating the taxi music was on the way to the airport.

It must be nice not to remember everything, I thought.

◆

My brother was killed in a hit and run almost two years after, right before his scheduled graduation and right after I married Sam, an American I met at the university. His death was hardly an accident, of this I'm certain.

Toto had gotten himself involved with the more liberal faction of the Soldiers at the university. Apparently the Theology Department at the state university was a brewery for the faithless. The New Soldiers made pamphlets and spraypainted tags on government buildings. They wanted a serious reform. Some of the New Soldiers were even women from other departments. Once, they hung woman-muzzles, twenty of them, around a brand-new statue of our—their—president at the university. A picture of the arrangement made it to the front page of *Time Magazine* with the headline: "From the Horse's Mouth: Enough is Enough."

Toto was in charge of keeping their blog. They tracked his IP and he was taken by force from his dormitory, to a villa outside of the city. They kept him there for a few days, but my brother managed to keep the identity of the movement's leader

secret. The Soldiers couldn't kill him, because they knew this would only elicit strong reactions from the New Soldiers. So they let him go.

Toto avoided his new friends for a couple of months, more to protect them than to protect himself. He even moved out of his dormitory and went to stay with Uncle Ito, who later wrote the details in his twelve-page letter to us.

It was a cool night, Uncle Ito said, as cool as it gets in Atrosiopolis. He should have known from the biting wind that something wrong was about to happen. He and his neighbors were watching a soccer match on TV. (I imagine Auntie Utri to be very annoyed with her husband's rowdy male friends smoking in their house.) Uncle Ito had run out of cigarettes. He sent Toto to fetch some from the neighborhood kiosk, which was only three blocks away.

How I wish I could turn back time and keep him at home, where he was safe, Uncle Ito wrote.

My uncle wrote down everything he knew, his tone growing more and more remorseful as he approached the end of the letter; clearly Toto had taken another hapless victim along with him to his grave.

When Sam asks me whether or not I am "all right," I tell him, yes, I am, and still he insists that I see someone. A year goes by, and then two, and my husband asks me less and less. "You know, hypnic jerk is a sign of anxiety," he sleepily reminds me when I wake up with a jolt in the middle of the night, breathless, the inescapable pull of gravity still fresh in my memory.

This is how I often picture the night my brother died, when sleep becomes an impossible reprieve:

The street is barren, as neighborhood streets always are during important soccer matches. Toto zips up his hoodie—the kind that he always wore when he was little, even when the weather was warm—and sets out into the night.

My uncle's neighborhood is a lot like our old one, with neat houses and white picket fences. Toto walks along the sidewalk with his hands in his sweater pockets, an odd smile on his face. Perhaps he is thinking of us, or perhaps he is thinking of his girlfriend, whom he hasn't talked to for weeks. A stray dog gallops by. He whistles, but the dog zips past him, chasing a willful cat until both disappear around the bend.

The kerosene lamp from a kiosk flickers in the distance. Two neighborhood men are playing chess on the wooden bench by the kiosk. One of them tilts his head up and waves at my brother, who has been helping him fix his old car.

A high-pitched screech, like a dying mouse. Toto turns around. The headlights of a swerving car—a black Volvo, the men told my uncle—blind him. He squints and averts his eyes the way he used to when I'd point a flashlight at his face in the dark, our feet touching, his breath, quickened, warm on my face.

He closes his eyes and shields his face with his arm.

Always, this is how it ends. ***

Part One:

Toy City and the Almost Wedding

1.1

I live in the city now, just a few blocks from Iris Street, on the second floor of a shophouse. It's nicer here, just in this three-block enclave, slower-paced than the neighborhood I used to live in, more provincial, ironically. A lot of noodle shops and off-the-wall Malaysian tea shops, a murtabak takeout here, a French-Vietnamese pastry shop there. At noon you'll see men playing chess on the sidewalk and cats that nobody seems to own pawing at invisible creatures in dumpsters. Sometimes I'll leave my apartment for work and for a moment forget where I am, until I turn around the bend into Delphinium and the mild disorder dissolves. People start to walk faster and seem to carry with them a sense of purpose, and they dress better. No men in wife-beaters and shorts loitering in front of shops, waving a folding fan or a newspaper in front of them. Most tourists, when they want authentic "local" cuisine, go to a night bazaar on the other side of town, with fried dough cakes sold at exorbitant prices by suspiciously friendly vendors in bright uniforms who'll go on chasing you forever. Here, people don't care so much about being friendly: the food speaks for itself. Here, the government doesn't come for inspections half as much. Perhaps they've given up on the neighborhood. It's far too stubborn anyway.

My landlord is a middle-aged woman. Her husband died of heart failure before I moved in. His name was Jonathan. Jonathan Felix Ng. I call my landlord Mrs. Ng.

She insists I call her Cindy. Still, she is Mrs. Ng to me. Mrs. Ng sells congee on the first floor. On Sundays, she brings me a bowl for brunch, and a glass of hot jasmine tea. I always offer to pay and she always refuses. She tells me I remind her of her son who is one year into his compulsory service in the Armed Forces. I keep reminding Mrs. Ng that Jonathan Junior is only a little more than half my age. No matter, she says, pushing the tip of her index finger into my chest. *You young here. You still a baby.*

◆

I wake up at five-thirty every day just before sunrise, because my apartment faces east and I enjoy feeling the air turn from cool to warm. I boil water on the stove and make myself a cup of black tea, because drinking cups and cups of coffee at the shop is inevitable, and sit on the porch with my laptop and an ashtray. I keep the ashtray there, but I don't usually smoke, not just yet. I place my pack of cigarettes on the rattan table next to my laptop to test my perseverance. Mornings are victorious; nights, not so much.

At six-thirty, the heat is concentrated on my arms. At seven, when the sun begins to warm my face, I drink my tea. I like it cooled. In between waking up and tea, I check my email and reply messages I feel are important.

Just minutes ago an email arrived from home. It was my aunt, asking me to please spend a night or two with her at the hotel when she comes.

I haven't replied. After a year, she can wait another day.

Two pigeons land on the trellised railing. I go inside to get the French bread I bought three days ago, now hardened, and throw them the crumbs. The pigeons glide to the floor around my feet. They peck and waddle around the crumbs. I strain my ears

to see if I can make sense of their clucking. Below me, the city begins to rise; behind it, the sun, a brilliant copper disk, floats above the Pacific, shivering as if from a private chill.

When the sun reaches my hanging baskets of fuchsia, I'll know it's time for a quick shower.

◆

I'm walking back to the coffee shop after an Air-Conditionless siesta. The streets are bare, characteristic of this time of day.

A schoolgirl zips past me, her tote brushing against my side, the firm edges of the country's famously thick textbooks jabbing at my ribs. She does not stop to apologize. I walk faster, though I'm in no hurry.

The shadows of acacia trees along the shophouses roll by below my feet, strangely still. I look up and the branches and leaves are suspended, unmoving, against rows of freshly painted shutters.

I stop in my tracks and think, briefly, that I might still be in a dream.

Wind does not exist in this city, at least not during the day. After six years, this has only just occurred to me.

◆

I'm at the coffee shop brewing a Mandheling when a woman enters, carrying with her the clanging of a little bell I had placed above the entrance. A tourist, I decide. She seems lost and has a fat purse squeezed between her arm and waist. The purse is so big that her gait tilts a little to one side. I wonder what is in it. A jacket, a passport, sunglasses, an umbrella. Diapers? The thought surprises me.

"Hello," I tell her.

“Hi,” she says. She scrutinizes my face and the menu written on a chalkboard, and explores my shirt for—I assume—a nametag. I notice with appreciation that the woman is pretty, with a pair of slanted eyes and fair complexion. “Indonesian?” she asks in English.

“Guilty.”

“Thought so. Been here long?”

“Long enough.”

“Like it here?”

I try to formulate a diplomatic answer in my head, but the woman must have sensed my hesitation.

“I know. Boring as hell, isn’t it?” She leans forwards and whispers, “Actually, I find it a little creepy how everyone’s dressed the same way.”

“Oh, but the healthcare is top notch.”

“Fair enough.” The woman laughs. “Apa yang enak?”

She wants to know what is good. I answer in English. “Luwak if you’re interested.”

“Isn’t that like civet cat poop?”

I nod and place the cup of Mandheling on the counter. Another customer, a regular, takes it to go.

“How much is it?”

“Fourteen.”

“That’s insane. I’ll have a Toraja.”

“Tubruk, Turkish, or French press?”

“Tubruk. To take away, please,” she says.

“That’ll be three.”

She rummages through her purse and pulls out a couple of two dollar bills. “Keep the change,” she says.

“Thank you.”

She begins to turn around and stops. She delves into her purse once again, pulls out a one-dollar coin, and drops it into the tip jar. The coin lands on the glass bottom with a jangle.

My “assistant,” an Indonesian scholarship student at the National Island University, whispers to me, “She’s an actress. She’s like, super famous.”

“No kidding.”

“Yeah, Boss. Really. Look her up: Helena Pantouw.”

“Maybe I will.”

A few minutes later, when the coffee is ready, I call her name: “Helena.”

Helena does not seem surprised. She leaves her purse at her table by the door to get the coffee. “Thanks. By the way, do you know where St. Paul’s is? You know, the hospital? I’m lost. And I’m a little scared of the cab drivers here.”

“They’re not exactly a happy bunch, are they?”

“No, not at all.”

I find a piece of paper and draw her a map with as much precision as I can manage, taking my time.

“It’s practically across the street from the Prosperity Plaza. You’ll have to take a cab,” I tell her.

"Thanks. I left my mother there."

"I hope she's all right."

"She will be," she says and leaves, taking her purse on her way out.

I call Yanto from the backroom and tell him to do exactly as I say. "Go after her and give her this. Tell her I'm busy with a customer. Tell her: 'My boss wants to take you to dinner, but he's only available tonight. Here's his number, if you're interested,' and leave."

Yanto rushes out to catch up with Helena. I sit on the bar stool by the register and watch him hurry into the street. He gives her the paper with my cell number on it. Helena laughs and mutters something. A few seconds later, Yanto returns, breathless.

"She says she'll consider it."

"Well done."

"What would Miss Trang say about this?"

"She'd laugh."

"Well, you'll have to teach me how to do it, Boss."

"Focus on your studies," I tell Yanto sharply. He laughs. I tell him to wipe the tables.

I keep telling Yanto that the only way to get a girl interested is to show her that you care, but not too much. I tell him that eagerness somehow translates into threat. Remember, care, but not too much. You don't need women. Or you do, but do yourself a favor and make yourself believe that you don't. Compliment and follow with a gentle put-down. The other way around works, too. But be brave when you're at it. Make sure you come off as funny and not cruel.

Yanto listens when I give him relationship advice that I would never give my own children, if I ever have any. He's been rejected more times than anyone should have to endure. I tell him that in ten years, these girls he's infatuated with won't matter. He's bright. It's their loss.

Yanto brings his assignments to work, a canvas bag full of documents and a thick laptop. I let him study in the backroom when the coffee shop is not too busy. He thinks I'm doing him a favor just by letting him work for me. He tells me I work too much, that I need to let them take over some of the things that I do. Work? I tell him. What work? Yanto shrugs at this. I can tell he thinks I'm wasting my life away, waiting for something to happen.

Maybe I am.

◆

No Trang tonight. She's doodling away at her painting class with a bunch of retirees. I pretended to sulk and she, as usual, hung up. She's still angry at me.

I bring a novel I recently bought online to the balcony and try to read, but to no avail. White ants quiver around the light bulb above my head. They collide into the wall, into the light, into each other, their shadows dancing wildly on the pages of my book. Not a night for reading.

My cell phone beeps twice. A text message.

Hello. I know it's a little late, so not dinner but maybe a drink? –Helena

I open my laptop and type in Helena's name. Apparently Helena has a Wikipedia entry. How convenient. Our birthdays are only a few days apart. Indonesian father, Australian mother. An impressive resume of horror films. Married twice, divorced twice. Two children, twins, from her second marriage, both with her ex

husband. Arrested once for cocaine possession. In short, a bag of trouble. Not that any of it matters.

Delete?

A car somewhere honks its approval.

Delete.

It would be pointless to give Trang another try. She is irritated at me because I refused her request to take her to Bimbim and Wulan's wedding—I've apparently talked about them too much for my own good—as well as her request to introduce her to my two aunts who are arriving in a few days from Jakarta. Trang isn't interested in an exclusive relationship, is convinced that people aren't meant to be monogamous, yet she wants to meet my childhood friends and especially my family, although I'd already explained to her that my father won't be attending. I knew Papa wouldn't come to the city, not even for Bimbim's wedding, especially now when the pre-campaign operations are underway. He did, however, leave a message on my voicemail. The family is staying at the Regal and *it's in my best interest*, he said, to spend a night with them. He'd already paid for the room and wired some money to Bimbim. His wedding gift, no doubt with a catch of some sort. I oblige because I despise conflict, and Papa knows this all too well.

"Are you embarrassed of me?" Trang said last night after a failed attempt at lovemaking. As usual, she'd wanted to try something new; I, on the other hand, am a creature of habit.

We lay on Trang's king-size bed, her in a new corset lingerie that made her look like an Amazonian, me still in my work polo and trousers. She'd been listlessly

tugging at my zipper for minutes, the promise of sex clearly gone. The request came after she'd given me an insider's scoop on her family history: divorced grandparents, then parents, then uncles and an aunt, which is why she told me she will never marry.

"Of course I'm not embarrassed."

"Then why? Are they not nice people?"

I couldn't tell her how Tante Martha once said all "uneducated" people were trite and "impossible to have interesting conversations with" (Trang never went to college), or how Tante Sita once flew to Europe and stayed for two months because her husband had forgotten to tell her about a business trip.

"Not your kind of nice," I said.

Trang squinted her eyes, always a sign of trouble.

After a long pause, she sighed and said, as if pondering a stove that would not turn on, "Well, this isn't working." Then: "Leave."

So I kissed her and left. Even if she wasn't mad, she would have tried to kick me out at midnight anyway. Trang is odd that way. She likes her privacy, her bed all to herself, yet insists on sharing intimate details.

I don't mind this particular idiosyncrasy. What drives me mad is her fondness for irregularity, which can manifest in several different ways: a ticket to the night safari sent to my email with a picture of her under a life-size stone elephant wearing a conical hat, captioned: "Take a cab. Fast."; an Angora cat suddenly appearing in her bedroom, only to be accompanied by a turtle the next week, and all that after her confessing to not be into pets; and, of course, these odd sexual experiments, which I

find quite terrifying, to be perfectly honest, especially when it involves strange contraptions and outfits that are extremely difficult to shed.

Of course the other reason why I can't bring Trang to the wedding is that I want to keep her secret. Not because I'm embarrassed, but because I want to keep her separate from "home." Why Bimbim and Wulan have to get married here, of all places, is beyond me. Bimbim told me, perhaps jokingly, that it was to save money: only five hundred mouths to feed, as opposed to the customary ten thousand at Jakarta weddings. He forgets that I know his father is footing the accommodation bills. I'm under the suspicion that my otherwise dear friend is attempting to torture me with his entourage. *If you won't come home, we'll bring home to you*—which he's threatened me with before—or something along those lines.

Then there is Natalia. Yet another reason why I can't bring Trang to the wedding is because there is still a chance that Natalia might be there, should the universe approve.

My fondness for regularity is not without reason. Natalia set passwords for her electronics, her cell and laptop, before she left the first time, one year after we'd begun seeing each other. I know because sometimes I'd borrow her phone and laptop to play games, and one day I couldn't. I was intrigued by this minor adjustment, but not jealous. Jealousy, I thought, was a sign of weakness.

I never found out exactly why she decided to leave, only that she did. What I knew was what she told me: that she was homesick, that she'd found a better job in Indonesia (none of which, I felt, were good enough reasons). A month after she moved back to Jakarta, we decided that the occasional screen time was not enough. She said

maybe it was time for me to return home. She must have known that I was not yet ready.

The first few years after Natalia left were easy. I kept telling myself that I would only go on in this country another year, maybe two. I would sooner or later figure out what it was I was looking for. Or perhaps I'd even convinced myself that she would return. But she got married instead, and to some British guy twenty years older than us. It's been over four years since she left and three years since I last saw her, yet here I am still.

Since Natalia, there have been others, short spurts of optimism, a local, a German, a Japanese. Never an Indonesian, not seriously, anyway. Then there is Trang, who is a Vietnamese-American. None of the usual optimism here: she does not want me, not for the long haul, but at least she's honest.

Love is easy enough, and she knows this. It comes too easily. People who say otherwise are not being truthful. That is what I believe. What comes after is the difficult part. Knowing what one wants, when the other seems to know exactly what she wants, knowing where to grow old, where to invest, how many children, how many dogs, or cats. When you don't even attempt to object or to compromise, when you are open to everything, the other quickly learns that you are a ghost, just passing through, in transition, and she treats you accordingly.

1.2

A restless night (involving fragmented dreams of me chasing a black horse through a prairie, along the Ganges, and finally into a neon-happy shopping mall)

followed by a frenzied morning. Nothing seems to work, not the electricity—which is practically unprecedented in this city—and not my brand new, custom-made coffee roaster. I call the engineer in Malaysia and argue for a half hour. He talks to me as if I'm a child who does not know the difference between a screw and a nail. I raise my voice, but the Malaysian is unnerved and keeps spewing the same instructions, all of which I had already attempted before I left last night. I hang up after much nonsense has been exchanged, fuming, and pace the shop, still closed at eight-thirty. Even Mohi—short for Mohammad—who has never complained, is irritable. He mops the floor once and then twice, since it is the only thing he can do without electricity. By the door, Yanto types away at his laptop with impressive agility. The mechanical clacking of his fingers on the keyboard nearly drives me out of my mind. Tens of customers have already been asked to return later in the day. And the shop is parched. But Yanto, who is nearing the end of his semester, can't seem to be bothered.

At eight-forty the lights come on; the AC beeps and emits cool air.

"Finally," Yanto says and shuts his laptop. Instead of relieved, he seems disappointed.

I go outside and light a cigarette. At nine, my aunts and my cousin Tabitha will come to pick me up. They arrived at dawn and insist that they make a stop at Bunga Telang Beach, so that their time here will "at least be well-spent." I fondle my pant pocket for my "happy" pills, and swallow the last one without liquid to chase it down. I inhale my sweet clove with my tongue on the filter, to get rid of the bitter sting. After my cigarette is done, I light another one.

"Mind if I join?" Mohi pops next to me.

"Not at all. Want one?"

"Nah, got my own."

Mohi takes a single clove from behind his ear, an Indonesian brand like mine, and strikes a match.

We stand next to each other quietly.

"Was there something you wanted to talk to me about?" I ask him.

"Nah, man. Just wanted a smoke."

His face has assumed an uncanny calm. Mohi the ice king. It occurs to me that I know nothing of him, only that he is nineteen and has decided not to go to college. Mohi came in last year in July to get coffee, wearing a hoodie and shorts. He left with his coffee and in a few minutes returned to ask for a job. I said yes without asking for a resume and now I can't remember why.

"Are you a native?" I weigh the word in my head, wondering if it's 'correct'. "Were your parents born here?"

"Yeah. As far back as anyone knows."

"You're not interested in college?"

Mohi sniggers and puffs out hoops of smoke. "College is for boneheads."

I laugh at this.

"Hey, I didn't wanna pry. But let me know if you want me to have a look at your roaster."

I think of the seven thousand dollars I spent on the machine and wince.

"I know a thing or two about machines."

"Let me think about it."

"No sweat."

Two uniformed kids on skateboards roll down the street in front of me. The pavement rattles underneath them. My shop is on a slightly uphill road, or downhill, depending on where you stand. Once in a while, children glide down the hill on skateboards on their way to school. These kids, however, are obviously late. Or perhaps they are playing hooky. Who knows.

The street is off a busier, more commercial street with noodle houses and more coffee shops; it's a minor detour from the Delphinium U-Stop, but customers make the ten-minute diversion on their way to work. I like to think it's because they appreciate my coffee. But it might be that they like the street with its little park and age-old banyans, its roots, like thick strands of hair, sagging toward the soil. These fat, shaggy trees give the area an almost mystical, enchanted aura, but one only needs to look up to crush the illusion. A gated residential complex lies on the other side of the park, with rows of eerily uniform two-bedroom houses, Stepfordian, even. I looked at a few a couple of years ago, which was pointless since they were exactly the same. In the end I decided that I would not like to live in a house that I couldn't tell apart from my neighbor's. Or was it around the time Natalia left? Some things you choose not to remember, or to remember incorrectly.

"I've never seen you smoke this early in the day," Mohi says to me.

"I don't, usually."

I drop my cigarette butt on the ground and crush it with my shoe. Mohi picks it up and holds it in his free hand, to throw away later.

Not even Mohi, who thinks college is for boneheads, tolerates litter.

◆

At ten, the bell tinkles and my two aunts arrive with Tabitha, my cousin, and Saras, a family friend. Saras's father, Oom Rizal, went to university with Bimbim's and Wulan's parents. He was a cabinet minister twice before the reform, and I doubt it was due to his competence. Oom Rizal is not a particularly pleasant man, loud and obnoxious, and extremely dense—the joke is that he cannot walk and take a drag from his cigarette at the same time without tripping over his own foot—but Saras is proud of him. We, meaning the more sensible of us, make fun of Saras behind her back, because she is a caricature of Jakarta's "haute noblesse." She believes that anything is possible whenever her family name is involved, and to make it worse, she believes it with such innocence.

We dated when she was seventeen and I was twenty-one. She lost her virginity to me, and not a day goes by that I don't wish I could undo my stupidity.

Yanto and Mohi look up from the bar at Saras, who is wearing a beach wrap and a bikini top with a sheer cardigan over it, and politely avert their eyes.

"Hullooooo," Tante Martha says. My aunt is practically sparkling, her skin slippery with fresh sunscreen. "So sorry we're late!"

"Hello, hello. Welcome. And please order anything you want," I tell them, and to Yanto, "Make everything to go."

"You haven't changed anything since we visited last year," Tante Martha says. She glides over to my jars of roasted coffee beans and puts her nose into each one.

Tante Sita drops her bag on a table closest to the door. "You should order for us. Anything but luwak."

"Why not? It's on the house."

"Yuck," Tabitha says, shuddering.

"What's luwak?" Saras says.

Tante Martha turns her head to Saras with a theatrical gesture of disbelief. "My goodness. You don't know what kopi luwak is?"

"Well, I'm sorry, Tante."

"Civet cat feces," Tante Sita says curtly.

"Civ what what?"

"Five French presses to go," I tell Yanto. He waits for me to specify. "Papua, I guess."

"I've never had Papua," Tante Sita says. "You know, those civets… They're cramped together in small cages, tens of them, and are only fed coffee beans. After a while they start go insane. Did you know that? They bite their cage and some even lose their fur. All that so they can extract beans from their excrement."

"No, I did not. Thank you for telling me. When I go back to Indonesia I'll have to go to Gayo to make sure that my little friends aren't being tortured."

"Well, *I'm* not having any," Saras says.

Three plane crashes in less than two years and my aunt is lecturing me about the fate of civet cats in Indonesia. But today is not a good time to remind her, not with the sun out and the grey clouds off to make gloom somewhere else. Besides, the alprazolam seems to have taken effect and it's always best not to fight calm.

"How are we getting there, Tante?"

"Taxi. It's waiting outside. Don't worry, it's a minivan."

The coffee grinder whirs steadily. A few minutes later, Yanto brings the coffee to us on a tray. He lingers next to Saras, folding and unfolding the hem of his apron, the tray held between his arm and side. Mohi looks at him curiously from the register, a slight, unreadable smile on his lips.

"So you're from Indonesia?" Yanto asks her in Indonesian.

Saras does not look up from her coffee. "Yeah."

"Me too."

"Cool."

An oppressive two-second silence follows. Poor Yanto does not shirk and is still waiting for Saras to engage.

"Oh, how nice. Are you a student?" Tante Martha asks him rather belatedly, as if in hindsight.

"Yanto goes to NIU, on scholarship," I say, addressing Saras, who I know was not accepted, not that she was ever serious about attending.

Tabitha gets up and goes to the door. "All right, it's late. Let's go, go , go."

Saras does not react to my gibe. She nods her head listlessly two or three times as she gets up from her seat. "Well done," she says in a puzzling, unconvincing tone that comes off as glib.

"Thank you," Yanto says and returns to his post in a hurry, like a dog running from a fight it is about to lose, with its tail between its legs.

Tante Sita drops a ten dollar bill into the tip jar.

"For school books," she says.

"Thank you," Mohi says to her coolly. Yanto is still following Saras, who is already out the door, with a pensive gaze that makes me want to weep.

The ten dollar bill nestles against the curve of the glass jar, its edges resting on a scattering of coins at the bottom. School books. Tante Sita may understand the importance of money, but it's unlikely that she will ever be able to comprehend its value.

◆

The taxi winds its way through the city's modest traffic and lifeless suburbs until it reaches the undulating hills of the island's northern region, with pine trees on each side of the road and the ocean rising and sinking behind the conical tree tops to our right. The cab driver, a Mr. Najjar, preoccupies himself with quarreling with his wife in a foreign language via bluetooth and makes no effort to respond to Tante Sita's pleasantries. "It's hands free," he explains to us distractedly five minutes into his bickering, forgetting to lower his voice. Saras, who is sitting next to me at the back of the van, has put her purse and canvas tote between us and seems to be diligently studying the shape of the trees rolling by. I poke her arm and she glares at me with the fierceness of a she-wolf. Tante Martha and Tante Sita, as usual, are engaged in scandalous gossip over a friend of theirs who is now in prison for grafting.

"Did you know," Tante Sita says, "When the reporter from *The Jakarta Globe* went to interview her, her prison cell—or suite, from what I hear—was locked *from the inside*. Would you believe it? The prison guard had to knock."

Tante Martha laughs. "Not surprising," she says. "Although I do feel bad for her. AC or no AC, ten years from now, they will remember her as the woman who ordered French pastry from Le Méridien in prison."

"That's exactly it, though, isn't it," Tante Sita responds. "Those people who were practically fawning over her are now almost embarrassed that they're associated with her. The hypocrisy."

"Well," Tante Martha says, "The law is the law. But you know, what's even more strange is why Harsanto took the blame for the bailout."

"Now, *that* is a real shame, isn't it."

And so on.

By the time we reach Bunga Telang on the other side of the island it is already almost eleven. The taxi bill comes to 120 dollars. Tante Sita offers to pay, but Tante Martha slaps her hand away and quickly reaches into her purse. She gives the cab driver an extra 30 and tells him to wait in the parking area.

"It's so hot!" Tabitha puts a towel over her head and gallops towards a pathway leading to the beach.

I've only been to Bunga Telang twice in six years here. The beach is a mere two-kilometer stretch; one can easily walk from one end to the other in under twenty minutes. Shophouses, in the colonial style, with white wooden shutters and candy-wrapper walls, outline the beach, separated from the sand by a concrete walkway. These shophouses, unlike the ones in the city, are new, most were built only in the past decade. And it shows. I don't quite know why, since architecturally there doesn't seem to be anything wrong with these buildings. Perhaps they used the wrong paint or tiles—everything seems too shiny, too fresh, too much like an amusement park. Before, there were small huts with thatched roofs along the beach, selling cigarettes and instant noodles. The sand was a deep brown, but they'd dug it up and replaced it

with sand transported from Sumatra (the irony does not escape me). There are three manmade atolls only a few rows of the oar away from the bank, each planted with two or three palm trees taken from elsewhere, Thailand, perhaps, or Malaysia. A depressing sight, but tourists flock here anyway, even those from Indonesia.

"Crazy. There's hardly any surf," Saras says. "The water is so still."

It's true. Flutters of wind play upon our hair, yet the water is unaffected; it is smooth, frothless, like turquoise glass.

We sit on recliners under two yellow umbrellas in front of a noodle shop, the only unoccupied seats on the beach. The beach is teeming with tourists as is probably the norm on any given Sunday. A group of German girls lie sprawled on the sand under the umbrella next to us, drinking what seems to be orange juice and smoking electronic cigarettes, unmoved by the scenery.

Saras takes off her cardigan and beach wrap, and lies down on her stomach on the wooden seat.

"Rio, would you mind?" Saras says sweetly, reaching into her bag on the sand and pulling out a sunscreen lotion.

I pour the lotion onto my hand, globs of it, and splash it on her back.

"So much!" she protests.

I told her to be quiet and spread the lotion, cold and sticky, all over her back and her arms. My two aunts stare at us with a look that is a mixture of amusement and mild reproach. Tabitha has run off into the water in her tank top and bicycle shorts. I glance at Saras's bikini bottoms and hesitate.

"Why are you stopping?"

"Saras, that's not nice," Tante Sita laughs, shaking her head. "Give my nephew a break."

"Well, it's just that you have these stretch marks. Are you still on that tape worm diet?"

Saras sits up, her face flushed red. She grabs the lotion from me and applies it to her legs.

"You know," I tell her. "It's not a good idea to lose weight so fast. I've heard all sorts of terrible things about tape worms."

"Oh dear," Tante Martha says. "You two are behaving like teenagers. Is there something going on?"

"Not a chance," Saras says under her breath.

"I'm not good enough for her, Tan," I say.

Tante Martha giggles and gets up. She sheds her satin button-down shirt, drapes it over the back rest, and wades into the water to where her daughter is. Tante Sita stares into the sea, at a grey cluster of islands in the distance.

"What is that? Indonesia or Malaysia?" she asks.

"Not sure, Tante."

"I bet it's Thailand," Saras says.

Tante Sita bursts out laughing. "Thailand! Silly girl. Thailand's a way off from here."

"*I know*, Tante. I wasn't being serious."

I take off my shirt and lie down on the sand with the book I've brought with me between my face and the sun.

“You’re not going in, Rio?”

“Maybe a little later.”

“Well, I am,” Tante Sita says and saunters off.

The sun, practically searing, sends me into a soporific daze. My lids start to grow heavy; I read the sentences over and over, failing to process the words.

“What are you reading?” Saras asks me.

“Tohari.” I lift the book to show her the cover.

“Hm. I’ve seen the movie they made out of it.”

“What did you think?”

“The usual. Drawn out, a bit sentimental.”

Hardly, but I decide to let it slide.

“Rio.”

“What what what?”

“This place is so god-awful boring. Don’t you think?”

“I do.”

“So why stay?”

“Well, healthcare and education are free for residents. The public transportation is superb. They have actual sidewalks that people can walk on. People are treated like people, like human beings. For the most part.”

Saras lifts her head from the towel.

“Isn’t that a little naïve? You really think there aren’t miserable people here? It’s not as if the Island workers will ever be able to afford their own place.”

“Like I said, for the most part.”

"You're jaded."

"Maybe. But Jakarta is a lot worse. Even you know that."

"I don't think so."

"Oh, you don't, do you? Honestly, Saras. It doesn't matter what you think. Fact is, Jakarta is brutal. You'd know if only you've ever bothered to take the bus or wandered elsewhere other than Central and South Jakarta."

"Why are you picking a fight with me? Can't we be friends and treat each other with some respect?"

For once, she is attempting a serious conversation. I should apologize, but instead I say, "Look, I'm trying to read this book, which, by the way, isn't sentimental bullshit."

But Saras is not in a forgiving mood anyway. She sits up, squinting her eyes angrily at me. "I've had it, this high-and-mighty attitude. You know what the girls are saying about you? That you're easy. That you've slept with everyone, except for Wulan, and if anyone wants to get laid, all they have to do is come here and give you a call. It's become a joke between us, did you know that?"

I'm not sure why I should care, but I'm stung nonetheless.

"That's a great deal of trouble, isn't it, flying all the way here just to get laid?"

Saras gets up and walks up the beach, away from us.

A handful of women friends, not more than I can count with my ten fingers, have come to the city in the past few years to "catch up." Now I'm thinking, how stupid I've been, carefully navigating their innuendos, which seemed to me nothing but innocent banter, until of course it was clearly not. All the motions that one makes,

the back and forth ritual that I thought was spontaneous, spur-of-the-moment, had actually been the sure outcome of foresight on their part. There are worse things than being used, but nonetheless, the thought of these women sharing anecdotes…

The unpleasant sting, however, is soon replaced by pity at the sight of Saras sitting alone on a rock, facing the ocean, arranging her hair into a French braid, like a country girl waiting for a long-lost lover to spirit her away.

I get up and amble toward her, the sand scorching my toes. I sit next to Saras and put my arm around her.

"Sorry."

I expected Saras to be crying, but her eyes are dry, and she is smiling sheepishly.

"Me too. I'm just…"

I wait for her to finish, but she does not continue.

"What is it?"

Saras lets out a sigh.

"Everyone, your aunts, *you* especially, treats me like I'm this idiot kid."

"Not Tabitha."

"Tabitha…" She laughs, tilting her head back. "She's twenty. I'm best friends with a twenty-year-old. See the problem with that? And she's only friends with me because I pay attention to her."

"Where is all this coming from, Sar?"

"But the worst is… The worst is all these memes you find online."

"Memes?"

Saras looks at me with concern. “What century do you live in? Memes are these pictures that they put words on. Pictures of people. There’s one of my dad at the party convention early this year, wearing the yellow jacket. They’re calling it the ‘jackass’ meme. The things they say…”

“Like what?”

“Well, the first one that came out was of him with his index finger pointing up, you know, he’s making a speech. And the text,” Saras says, kneading her knee with her thumb. “At the top it says: ‘Fighting corruption is a top priority, he says.’ Then below his picture: ‘Has a basement full of luxury cars; daughter keeps a collection of fifty designer bags.’”

I cringe at this and wonder if there are ‘memes’ of my father floating around in cyber world. What would they say? That he has a slut for a son is one possibility, I consider with uncomfortable humor.

“I can’t even look at my Facebook newsfeed without having a panic attack. Our friends, Hamid, Tesli, and others, they’re supporting the other guy. It’s almost as if they’re possessed. You should see the things they post on their walls. And it’s not like *they* haven’t sinned, or their parents.”

“Hamid and Tesli? Really?”

“And others, like I said. All the intellectual types. Lani, Fahmi, Gugun. You’ll see Fahmi soon enough, I guess. He’s coming for the wedding.”

All were involved in my father’s gubernatorial campaign six years ago, though not to the extent that Bimbim was, or Wulan. It’s no surprise that Gugun quickly jumped ship. After enough people were dissatisfied with Papa, he made sure to speak,

or rather type, the loudest. Funny how he never said a word when everything was fine, knowing what he knew, which was more or less what I knew. Gugun's friends with a group of artists and writers, the bohemian types, some have been in prison, and for some reason he acts as though he himself has been incarcerated. I deactivated my Facebook and Twitter accounts some years ago, almost on a whim, not quite knowing the reason for my sudden, rather prophetic apprehension towards social media.

"They never say anything to my face," Saras says. "Which is suspect, since I know how they feel about Papa. I can only imagine the things they must say as soon as I leave the table."

"You could move here and be done with Jakarta. Open a boutique."

Saras laughs. "You know I can't make money to save my life. That kid who works for you. He's got it easy. A good school, a scholarship, a part-time job."

"True, but he's a brat. More so than you."

"Is he really?" Saras kicks up sand with her toes.

A seagull plummets and dips into the water, and soars back into the sky with nothing in its beak.

"I can't imagine that there's actual fish swimming around," Saras says.

"Who knows. Maybe they'll bring in a shipload of them from East Indonesia, put a net a kilometer away so that the fish don't run off elsewhere," I said. "So, are there memes of my dad?"

"I don't know. Probably. Anyway, did you get to talk to Natalia?"

"No."

"Are you still in love with her?"

"I haven't talked to her in ages. Let's talk about something else."

"Then let's not talk," she says.

Saras leans into me, presses the side of her arm against my ribs. I smooth her hair with my fingers, coil them around the twists of her braid until they come apart. Today she does not smell like perfume, but of sunscreen mixed with salt. Even her hair smells uncharacteristically human. She must not have taken a shower before she left the hotel.

Memes. I will have to remember to look them up when I get home. Or have Bimbim send me a few. But do I really want to know?

◆

After a quick splash in the water, we have lunch at a semi-outdoor Malay restaurant. Tante Sita and Tante Martha both look exhausted and burnt, their hair matted and damp still. Tabitha is tapping away at her iPhone; from time to time she takes pictures of us without warning.

"Bitha, I don't want my face on Facebook."

"Why not?" she says listlessly, her eyes fixed on her phone.

"Listen," I tell her, irritated. "Hey, look this way."

Tabitha looks up. "What?"

"Don't. Upload. My. Picture. On. Facebook. Understood?"

Tabitha grunts, pushes her bowl of laksa away from her and gets up. "Jeez, lighten up." My cousin marches toward the walkway and plops down on the rim of a giant, plantless terracotta pot, her phone still in hand.

"Did you have to yell at her like that?" Saras says.

Tante Martha takes a sip from her iced tea. “My daughter often has that effect on people.”

I’m surprised at her snub. “It’s not her. Sorry, Tante.”

“She’s fine. How’s Bimbim and Wulan, Rio? Do you know?”

“They’re great.”

“That’s not what I heard,” Tante Sita says.

“Why, what did you hear, Tan?” Saras asks.

“Well, one hears all sorts of things. I shouldn’t be saying anything,” Tante Sita says, feigning nonchalance.

“Then don’t,” I snap at her.

Tante Sita does not seem to notice. Tante Martha cringes and takes another big sip from her tea. “Oh dear.”

“Why can’t she tell me?” Saras asks.

“Saras, if I don’t know anything, there’s no reason why you should.”

Too much. I leave the table to look for a cigarette vendor before realizing that these vendors have become obsolete. The red neon circle of a mini mart blinks some half a kilometer off.

I hear Tante Martha say behind me, “He’s terribly exhausted.”

I walk along the pathway, smoking the only cigarette left in my pack. Tante Martha catches up with me.

“I’ll walk with you.”

“Sure, Tante.”

Two white kids in swimming trunks run in our direction and squeeze between us before zipping past, forcing us to twist into each other.

"How cute," Tante Martha says. "So, how's Wulan and Bimbim?"

"They seem fine."

She exhales.

"Why shouldn't they be? Why, what's Tante Sita saying?"

"Didn't get a chance to hear it."

"Tante, did you know about the memes?"

My aunt tilts her head at me, puzzled. "Memes?"

"Never mind," I say. "So, who do you think is going to win the election?"

We stop in front of a hot dog vendor. Tante Martha unwraps her loose sarong and ties the ends firmly at her waist. Elderly tourists in wide sunhats, some leaning on canes, disembark a tour bus in the parking area behind the row of restaurants. Soon the pathway is overflowing with throngs of them, burbling in an unrecognizable Germanic language. We move along, pushing through the clamor discreetly, muttering apologies.

"You haven't been following the news? Sixty-five percent approval rate for Number Two," Tante Martha says as soon as we've past them.

"How do you feel about it?"

"How do I feel? Well, a lot of people are panicking, my sister included. But the people want what they want, and from the looks of it, they will get it. The alternative is frightening, really. That fascist as president? I can't even begin to imagine what the country would look like in a few years."

We link arms. "Papa's supporting him."

"So is your other aunt. But, you know, what one does and thinks don't often match up."

I'm astonished by this.

"Anyway," Tante Martha says. "I'm not voting."

"Why not?"

"Because either way, it will not sit well with my conscience."

We arrive at the mini mart. My aunt waits outside while I buy myself two packs of cigarettes and a bottle of coconut water. I wait for the cashier to swipe my card, watching my aunt who is looking into the ocean at the distant islands somewhere in Malaysia or Indonesia, her back toward me.

At twenty-two Tante Martha married a Western-educated, rich Burmese who worked at the UN until he died some thirty years later. Unlike Papa and Tante Sita, Tante Martha is unaffected by politics. She has her inheritance and a dignified line of work, with no personal stakes in the matter. It makes me wonder how much chance has got to do with who gets to act upon which principle.

1.3

The official presidential campaign period in Indonesia begins three months from now. Papa sends me texts once in a while or leaves me voice messages, tries to sound enthusiastic when he calls, because he knows he'll soon need me. I call his cell when I know he's already asleep, and leave short messages. I try to be kind to him because he's no longer young. There must be some good inside him, even if I don't know it yet. I was always my mother's child. She read to me before bed, saw me

perform the violin at the music school and complimented my bumbling attempts at Mozart; she took me to soccer practice on Saturdays, bringing with her a lunch bento she'd prepared herself.

I left home when I was eighteen, to attend university in the United States, and returned home every summer. I didn't know, when I said goodbye to her at the airport the summer before my graduation, that it would be our last time.

The last memory I have of my mother is her standing on the other side of the security glass, watching me put my bags on the X-Ray conveyor. I accidentally dropped my hard-case suitcase on my feet. She brought her hand to her mouth and cringed, her other arm clutching a tiny purse. But I'd had on a pair of boots. I mouthed "I'm fine," to her. She tilted her head back and laughed with her mouth open, her eyes disappearing into her face.

Mama was diagnosed with advanced stage lung cancer my last semester at Boston University—ironic, since unlike Papa, she never smoked. She told me to finish school, since I was so close. So I did.

When I finished, she was already gone.

Papa had already begun his gubernatorial campaign by the time I returned home. It took him no time at all to recover. I was still interested in politics then and thought political consulting would make a fine job in the current climate, democracy being a new, vibrant thing, supposedly. Bimbim, Wulan, and I, along with some of our cousins and the children of our parents' friends, spent nights and weekends at the base in South Jakarta, in a rented house. We helped write Papa's campaign slogans; we drafted his statements, made them appealing to the younger, more skeptical crowd; we

coached him for interviews; we invented clever hashtags and tweeted industriously. The dizzying talk of politics, the thousands of cigarettes and cigars, Papa's hidden stash of single malt Scotch, only drunk when the volunteers had left for the night, must have pulled a haze over our eyes, must have turned us into fools.

Some days we visited Jakarta's untended pockets, Papa always at the front, shaking hands right and left with me behind him, holding envelopes, each carrying a twenty thousand rupiah bill, and a bag of T-shirts with his face and slogan printed on them. He made sure that these people were all registered to vote—the shantytown populations, after all, weren't exactly the most enthusiastic voters. I suppose I knew even then, when I looked at the faces of these people, women still in their nightgowns, their barefoot children clinging to their arms looking on with mild curiosity, shirtless men grinning defiantly at each other, at us, food carts parked in front of their plywood huts, that Papa couldn't care less. Why I let it slide—the envelopes—still escapes me.

After the election was over and he'd won, I flew to this city to see the hospital where my mother was treated. I made an appointment with her oncologist. It was a Saturday. The oncology wing was packed with patients and their families. I thought of Mama, and the only picture of her I had at the hospital, sitting up in bed, wearing a wool hat and a hospital scrub, blowing a kiss into the camera. Papa had emailed me the photo, and I had it printed out and tacked to the wall of my room in Boston.

I sat on a long cushioned bench against a wide glass window that spanned the hall, overlooking the courtyard. An elderly couple sat on my right, a family of three—young parents in their thirties and a girl about eight years old—on my left. There were perhaps twenty of us sitting on that bench, our thighs pressing against one another's.

The waiting room smelled of medicine. I was reminded of how my breath smelled when I was treated at a hospital in Jakarta for typhoid symptoms. The doctors had made me swallow a bag full of antibiotics, even though there was probably no need for them. The smell was bitter, unnatural, the kind you feel at the back of your throat.

I had number 57. After hours and hours of waiting, I was finally called into his office. The doctor was old, with side-parted, oily hair and what seemed like a mild case of dandruff. He seemed exhausted.

I asked him if he remembered my mother.

What was her name again? he asked.

Astuti Sumartono, I repeated.

The doctor put his knuckles under his chin and told his nurse to get her file. While the nurse was away, he scribbled notes on a piece of paper and put the paper inside a thick folder. Our eyes did not meet.

The nurse came back with the file. He opened it and scanned through the pages.

Oh yes, I remember, he said. I'm very sorry. Astuti was already at a very advanced stage when she came.

Of course, I said, knowing that he hadn't, in fact, remembered my mother, not until he'd seen her file.

What was your question?

I thought about it. What was my question?

I thought I'd see the hospital where she was treated, I told him.

The Doctor cocked his head.

I wasn't here, I explained.

I see, he said.

I asked him how many patients he had. He mentioned a ridiculously high number, something like a hundred and twelve, or two hundred and twelve, or a hundred and twenty-one. The doctor told me almost half of his patients were Indonesian. Interesting, I told him, it must be hard being a doctor, especially with so many patients. I thought, most of them terminal. Sometimes it is, he said.

I left shortly. What was the point anyway. He did not remember her, and besides, she was already gone.

I walked along Capitol Road, marveling at the order, at the waves crushing into the sand beside me, beyond it, the crystalline tide receding for miles and miles into the sky. And the sky, I had never seen such a generous blue. I thought, if I reach my hand up, I could probably touch the clouds. I remembered an article in *TIME* I'd read as a student in Boston, praising the prime minister's achievements: twenty-two years of hard work and, finally, the only country in Southeast Asia in which there are no slums.

The next day I flew back to Jakarta and asked around for a job in the city. A friend of mine hooked me up with an editorial job at an Indonesian magazine based here, a news and politics magazine with a small circulation, targeted for Indonesian expats. Perfect, I thought. I applied for a work visa and returned within two months.

Six years have flew past, as they say, in the blink of an eye. Well, the thing about opening one's eyes is that one might end up not liking the view, after all.

1.4

It's night. I'm at a mini mart buying a gallon of mineral water. Even after years of being here I still can't make myself drink tap water. Bimbim finally returns my calls.

"So you're staying at the hotel?"

"Looks like it."

"Good. The boys are going out for a drink after. You should join."

"I'll think about it."

"OK." A long pause, then: "Natalia."

Interference. The phone crackles.

"Bim? Come again?"

"Natalia is here, Rio. She's been here two weeks. Her son is being treated at the University Hospital. I thought you should know."

"OK."

"Just OK?" Bimbim laughs. "Are you doing a little dance right now?"

"I'm not stupid. She's married."

"You conveniently forgot about that small fact a few years ago."

"True."

"One more thing. You been talking to Wulan?"

"No, not really. Why? What's up?"

"Just wondering. Well, see you tomorrow. And wear a proper suit."

"Bye, Bim."

"Rio?"

"Yes."

"Don't go looking for Natalia. I gave her your number and email. If she wants to talk, she'll contact you."

"I know."

The store clerk peers at me from behind his glasses.

"Done with talk?" he barks.

"Sorry."

I give him a ten dollar bill and don't wait for the change. The air is humid, stifling. The sidewalk slides under me, blurred in the motion. If I keep looking down, it looks as if I have not moved at all. What to do. Go home, I suppose. Go home, shower, read the news, maybe some television.

I fondle my sweater pocket for my apartment keys. They fall to the ground. I pick them up. Again they fall from my hands. Again I pick them up. I finally notice that my hands are shaking.

If only Mrs. Ng could see me. Still a baby, she'd say.

1.5

Five thirty, an hour or so until the wedding ceremony. I watch the street below from the hotel window, the glass cold on the tip of my nose. Pedestrians rush forward like battalions of ants ready to charge, but there's hardly any traffic. Seeing as we tend to move in the same direction at the same exact pace, a superior being might doubt we're sentient beings after all, might use it as an argument to devour us, should the need arise… Then again, around sunset is always depressing, all those hard-working

residents on their way home to their narrow apartments shared with grown-up siblings, crotchety parents, incapacitated grandparents, not to mention nephews and nieces and distant cousins, fresh arrivals from the mainland. And all that after long hours of pushing paper or tending to a slew of intoxicated tourists.

The walk sign switches from green to red. Not a single vehicle, but people stop anyway. It's impressive how patient people can be in this city. Impressive or plain spooky, depending on where you stand.

News of the plane crash on TV: week-old footages of charred debris; foam spilling out of pump, blue seats; half of a wing; the 747 capsule split in two, like a decapitated whale or a soda can, squished and sawed through. "The investigation is yet to take place; questions remain unanswered," the Indonesian reporter says with practiced sympathy, behind her an open field of wet grass and the stark absence of bodies—though we know there must have been over a hundred of them not so long ago, scattered here and there. Body parts are too much for television, anyway; people are interested, but truth is, they would not like to be made uncomfortable. Only last week a major Indonesian newspaper drew sharp criticism for its front page photo: a close-up of a young woman wailing, red-faced, snotty-nosed, only seconds after the death of her sister was confirmed.

Tante Sita fidgets in her seat. Tante Martha turns the volume down with a remote control. "Coffee, anyone? Rio?" she asks, hoping, perhaps, that the judgment in her voice does not come through.

"No thank you, Tante."

Tante Sita sighs and changes the channel. The plane crash is replaced by an earthquake somewhere. I turn around to see her expression. Nothing.

"Look, Tante. Here's Wulan in the *JMag*," Tabitha says, or rather, yelps. There is a copy of the *Jakarta Magazine* in every room, an inevitability since I'm sure the hotel accommodates quite a number of Indonesian busybodies. Tabitha holds up the magazine for Tante Sita to see. "Bima Sadrusi to marry a young, successful entrepreneur, Wulan Gumulya," she says, as if Wulan is her own flesh and blood, something she herself concocted. She talks this way about anyone that matters, her voice full of ownership and confidence. Sometimes I wonder if she speaks of me in this manner when I am not present. Or maybe those days are long gone, and for the better.

I hold my tongue, thinking I should have paid for another room.

"Lovely. She's lost a lot of weight, hasn't she?" Tante Sita says casually from across the room, pushing down her glasses. Tante Martha doesn't look up. She is busy blowing her freshly painted toes, her lips pursed into a whistle, her hair an immovable tower above her head. A less jagged miniature version of the Sydney Opera House.

"A little more and she'd have a fantastic pair of legs like yours, Tante," I say.

"Now, now, Rio," Tante Sita says. But she is amused, the little devil. I indulge her with a conspiratorial smile. My aunt often forgets that she is closing in on sixty; she's used to being beautiful, being admired. I blame it on her skin and uncanny metabolism. One has the sneaking suspicion, when she compliments other women, that silent comparisons are being drawn.

"Shall we?" I say.

“What’s the rush? Well, I hope this color isn’t too risqué for an old woman such as myself.” Tante Martha lifts and squiggles her carmine toes.

“We’re waiting for Saras,” Tabitha says, then to Tante Sita: “Tante, what a horrible mess, isn’t it? The plane crash? We prayed for you in church last Sunday.”

Tante Martha frowns, sensing danger. She glares at her daughter, but Tabitha does not notice. Tante Sita’s eyes widen as she takes a slow sip from her coffee cup.

“That’s nice, darling.” Tante Sita’s eyes widen yet again. She looks imploringly at me. But I’m thinking, let this play through.

“It’s terrible what they’re saying,” my cousin says. “After all, you weren’t the one performing inspections on the planes.”

“It’s good that they let you leave the country,” I say.

“I haven’t been officially made a witness yet, but I have a feeling things will change once I’m back in Jakarta,” Tante Sita says. “We’re paying each family Rp1 billion. It’s a strange idea, isn’t it? As if people are replaceable.”

There it is, the guilt. I shouldn’t be surprised, yet I am.

Silence settles as if into a deep well. Tante Martha glances at her daughter admonishingly, her toes still pointed at the ceiling. Tabitha flips through the magazine, the sound of paper sliding against paper like a sharp knife slicing through a crisp fruit. My cousin has a look on her face that I can only interpret as smugness. Tante Sita has shrunk in her seat, looking small and vulnerable.

“It’ll be fine, Sit. Just give it time,” Tante Martha says to her.

“That’s not what I meant,” my aunt mutters and takes another sip from her coffee.

I grab my suit and head to the door.

"I'm going to check on Bimbim," I say on my way out.

◆

On my way to the Jasmine Ballroom, I think about my coffee, the burlap sacks of Toraja, Mandheling, and Aceh Gayo that arrived at my coffee shop today. I can't wait to go through them, to feel their textures, muted between my gloved fingers. There is nothing more comforting than to sit in the backroom and to take in the coffee's distinct fragrances, to know that everything around me is just as I wish it to be. If it weren't for the wedding, I would have had time to grind a cup's worth myself, extra fine. I'd pour slightly cooled boiling water over it and let it sit for a few minutes, tubruk style, sans milk and sugar, just hot water poured over finely ground beans. When customers ask for an Aceh Gayo cappuccino I offer them a shot of tubruk and ask them if they are absolutely sure that they would not like to drink it plain. But of course I am rehearsed enough not to betray judgment in my voice.

Natalia was the one who suggested that I start this business of importing Indonesian coffee into the country, of setting up my own coffee shop. She made me enroll in a barista course since I was "obsessively" in love with coffee. At first I told her I was tired of the city. I want to go back to Jakarta, I said. This city was dead, a city of automatons. I missed seeing people jaywalking, breaking rules, spitting on the sidewalk. I missed having gum on the sole of my shoe.

"You're ridiculous!" she told me, laughing like it was the funniest thing she'd heard in years. "We almost *never* had gum on our shoes. Besides, you would only complain about these very things once you're home. You might as well make use of your PR status. And don't you dare run off to Jakarta now that I'm here."

Well, now she isn't, or at least not for long. One day she was here and the next day she wasn't. I'd found myself hoping, when Bimbim and Wulan told me they were marrying here of all places, that Natalia would come to the wedding, but Bimbim had said she wouldn't be able to make it. Her husband would be in London teaching and she couldn't possibly leave Jakarta with her kid in and out of the hospital and all. But I guess she figured this country has better hospitals, and it's close enough to home.

"Did she ask about me?" I'd asked Bimbim.

"She's married, she has a kid, a very sick kid, why would she ask about you?" Bimbim snapped.

"Well, the husband is kind of a prick, isn't he? Leaving her and the kid in Jakarta like that? If I were him, I'd stick around, or I could at least bring them to London. Don't you think?"

Bimbim ran his hands over his face. "It's really none of your business, Rio."

He was angry that I slept with Natalia after she was married. But waking up with her long gone on her way home to her husband was punishment in itself, although I don't suppose Bimbim needed to know the details. Even now, when piety has decidedly become a vice in our circles, a frowned-upon silliness only fit for monoglots and illiterates, Bimbim dutifully unrolls his prayer mat five times a day and bows toward Mecca. He's always been a prude, incurable to the max.

Bimbim and I were in Europe one summer years ago, visiting two friends who were attending university in Germany. We and the two boys bought Eurail passes and went from one country to the next, "debauching," as Bimbim put it, although in fact the whole affair was quite PG, with a few rather fuzzy exceptions. We went to

Amsterdam at the tail end of our trip. After two or three reluctant visits to museums—the four of us were all exhausted by then—we wandered into the red light district. We dragged our feet along the narrow canal, watching women in various shapes and sizes on display in a kind of awe, our heads mildly spinning from watered down Psilocybe varieties that tasted much like dirt, consumed only moments before. But even I felt a sobering, uncomfortable pang watching these people, not all of them beautiful, standing or sitting behind the polished glass, their eyes glazed over, bored senseless. Perhaps the rest of us felt it too, this odd, guilty revulsion, as if we were also somehow culpable, but even so, we hooted and laughed, if only to be polite with each other. Once we got to the hotel, Bimbim—sober and upright as always—pointed out what fools we'd been making of ourselves. "Tourists! Spoiled Asian brats!" he barked at us. It was after midnight, and there was porn on TV. We didn't change the channel, to annoy Bimbim. I hid the remote control under the bed. He was practically fuming. The male actor had the female's hair wrapped around his fingers and was yanking her head toward his, spitting mouthfuls of obscenities. "Disgusting," Bimbim said over and over, his eyes glued to the TV screen, "I could never do that to someone I love." We all laughed at him, of course. "Bim, go to the bathroom and take care of it, will you?" I said, eyeing the bulge in his pants. "Seriously, mate. What are you, in middle school?"

Bimbim's face turned scarlet. He was the only person in the room with an erection.

Wulan and Bimbim have been saving themselves for marriage, a common error among the devout. According to Bimbim, sex is a "hollow act" without the purpose of

creating life. And Wulan at least pretends to agree with him. It's no use telling Bimbim he's only brewing trouble.

◆

The Jasmine Ballroom is draped in red and white, the theme of their wedding. It is, after all, mid-August. Nothing like a show of patriotism to begin a marriage. In fact, there is a nice symmetry to it, symbols of freedom and servitude side by side, one clearing the path to the other, although perhaps not quite in the right order.

Empty champagne buckets are set on each table, not yet filled with ice. I look around, but Bimbim and Wulan are nowhere to be found. Some of their family members, aunts and uncles, are gathered around the wedding organizer, a big woman in her forties with hair pulled at the crown of her head and mushrooming out like the top of an antique china vase. She is giving them instructions. "Walk slowly in the direction of the platform, sync your steps to your heartbeat. Slowly, like this," the woman says, breaking away from the circle and walking very slowly indeed, her hand drawing invisible circles in the air. I find myself estimating the amount of hairspray she consumes each month.

Fahmi is sitting at the bar with a drink that looks a lot like gin and tonic in front of him. He waves his hand and mouths for me to come over. I think of what Saras told me at the beach.

"Rio, have you met Poltak and Dino?" he says, gesturing at the two men standing next to him.

"Hey," says one.

"Dino," says the other.

We shake hands. Dino is tall and lanky; Poltak is bald and stocky. Side by side they're like the number ten, the front of Dino's abundant hair slicked upward like the tiny slash above the number one.

"Poltak is an engineer, Dino owns 'Bistro,' a restaurant in Menteng. We're 'quote unquote' neighbors," Fahmi says. Fahmi owns a small bilingual bookstore in posh Menteng. The profits are meager from what I hear, but then again, he's never had to worry about money. "Rio owns a coffee shop here in the city. Great coffee. Stop by when you get the chance."

"What's it called?" Dino asks.

"Brewbird."

"Catchy."

"Poltak went to Northwestern, Dino went to ITB, got his masters from Monash."

If you're an Indonesian with half a brain, you either go to Universitas Indonesia or Institut Teknologi Bandung. Fahmi does this when he introduces people, goes over everyone's CV until someone eventually stops him.

"So, how do you know Bimbim? Or are you here for Wulan?"

Poltak grunts and laughs. "Gosh, you really don't remember me, do you? I helped your dad with his campaign six years ago. That's how we met. Granted, I was a lot slimmer then."

The campaign. Whatever our motivations were, we were still bright-eyed and bushy-tailed optimists, believing we would make a difference, though the unfortunate fact is that we were not quite sure what the "difference" was supposed to be, exactly,

only that we had to be part of it. We were in love with politics partly because politics made us very much in love with ourselves, and I suspect the man standing in front of me was no exception.

"No?" Poltak raises both eyebrows, waiting. I take off twenty kilos in my head, but still he looks unfamiliar.

"Sorry," I tell him.

"No worries," he says, smiling. "So. Your father's in a bit of a mess, isn't he?"

Fahmi clears his throat.

"Yeah, I guess he is."

"Well, it's a good thing he didn't run for a second term. What do people expect? That Jakarta would magically snap into order?"

"No kidding, right?" Dino says, though I suspect only out of courtesy.

"The city's practically sinking. I dare anyone to try and fix *that* in five years."

"The new guy seems to be doing ok, though," I tell him.

Dino says, rather shyly, "For now. I imagine he'll be able to do a lot more once he's president."

"Once?" Poltak roars, bringing the palm of his hand down on the bar. Fahmi's gin and tonic wobbles then clatters to a stop. "Surely you mean *if* he becomes president."

Fahmi chuckles demurely. "Man, it's gonna happen. You wait and see."

"Horse shit. Naïve euphoria is all. Sure, the guy did a good job with Solo, but the whole country is a different story. He's in way over his head. Now, Rio's father

knows which side to pick. He's publicly announced his support for Candidate One, hasn't he?"

I nod.

I don't tell them why: clearly, the desperate reach for a lifeboat on a ship that is destined to sink.

"See? I mean, come on, the other guy doesn't even speak English," Poltak continues.

It occurs to me that we've been speaking English the whole time, so I say, in Indonesian, "Neither does Putin."

Fahmi and Dino burst into laughter. Dino pats my back, whinnying like a horse.

"Rio knows what I'm talking about and he hasn't been home in, what, five years now?" Fahmi says.

"Six."

"Jesus, man. That's a long time," Dino says, chugging his Scotch.

Poltak shrugs, looking distraught. "We've hired a foreign consultant and he seems to think we've got a good chance," he says.

Fahmi moans. Dino glares at Poltak with unnerving hostility. "The key words here being 'hired' and 'foreign.' You're talking about a guy who makes a career out of ruining countries. Look, can we stop? You're hurting my head."

"Who are you voting for?" Fahmi asks me.

"Not voting."

"Why not?"

"Don't see the point, really."

"Have you been following the news?" Dino says.

"Not in the past few months."

"You should vote," Fahmi tells me with a glint of judgment and reproach. "It's different this time around."

"It's always different. Look at America." Poltak sniggers. "Like I said, naïve euphoria."

Well. I contemplate my options: to go to Bimbim's room, where the parents are and no doubt other members of his family, or to enjoy a moment of solitude.

"Gotta go check on Bimbim," I tell them.

"Come with us for a drink later," Fahmi says, tipping his glass.

I head back to the elevator. It's been a while since I've given politics a serious thought, but even *my* head is beginning to hurt. Papa had won in a landslide back then, but now things are different. Papa's hotels are under scrutiny for tax discrepancies. Skeletons are walking out of closets everywhere. People, some we've known all our lives, begin to tumble. I follow online news from here and no longer recognize the rhetoric. So much anger, so little room for forgiveness. And for good reason. The country is changing and from the looks of it, not quite everyone has caught up. But at the very least there won't ever be guillotines and disembodied heads on spikes. We Indonesians are known for our kindness, after all.

◆

There are fifteen, twenty people in Bimbim's room, cousins, more uncles and aunts, distant and immediate, and Bimbim's parents. Oom Rahman, the father, is

sitting on a couch in front of the television, surrounded by three of Bimbim's cousins. A glass of wine hangs precariously in his hand.

"Rio," he calls out.

"Rio," the others say, nodding in my direction.

"Care for a glass?" Oom Rahman points at a wine bottle on the coffee table.

"No thanks, Oom," I tell him, although I am tempted.

"I admire you. I'm in this city ten seconds and already I feel like drowning my head in a bucket of Scotch," Oom Rahman says, grinning in his particular way, with one eyebrow raised, as he usually does when he's about to say something clever. "But do you know what these people do remarkably well?"

"What is that?"

"Fold. No, really. The top sheet is folded and tucked in so tight you can hardly get into bed. And the bathroom towels! These people must carry around rulers in their fanny packs."

Not quite so clever, but I nod, and emit an unintentional simper.

"An unimaginative bunch, but they can sure fold. And clean. There isn't a speck of dust in this city."

"Not a speck," one of the cousins says.

"Not a single one," another joins him.

"I agree," I say, nodding still.

"If only they'd bother to own their language, you know what I mean?" Oom Rahman continues, sensing my dissatisfaction. "One can't order an entrée without

having to repeat oneself three, four times. Such an eye for perfection, yet all of it goes into absurd details."

"Well, Oom, the housekeeping staff and waiters aren't all of the locals."

Oom Rahman shrugs it off; he dislikes being disagreed with. Sometimes I wonder where Bimbim gets his complete lack of self-involvement, if maybe the hospital where he was born had given him to the wrong couple.

"A lot of the hotel workers are fresh off the boat," I say, attempting to mitigate, but instead I sound insistent.

"Rio," I hear Bimbim call out.

Oom Rahman is squinting intently at the wine glass in his hand, as if it's a perplexing work of art whose vague meaning is at the tip his tongue, almost within reach. "Yes, true. Immigrants," he says in an air of supercilious concern. "Like yourself. I don't mean it disparagingly, of course, just pointing out a fact. There, my son wants you."

The men look at each other and smile embarrassedly at me. To think that I grew up practically worshipping this man...

I glance around the room. One of Bimbim's relatives, a man I have never seen, small, bespectacled, and looking like he is out of place, points to the bathroom. I find Bimbim in the master bathroom, in an armchair in front of a long mirror. The make-up artist, a young, snappily dressed woman with an immaculate haircut that reminds me of Uma Thurman in *Pulp Fiction*, is patting Bimbim's face with a cotton pad smeared brown.

"Sit still," the woman says to Bimbim when he turns around.

"Rio," he says with an exaggerated exasperation.

"Bim. You doing all right?"

"This is why we only get to marry once."

"Some of us don't."

"All of us should," he says, shaking his head. The woman pinches his shoulder. "Ouch. Was that necessary?"

She giggles.

"I see you're in good hands. Ready for the big game?"

"I'm in it. Why don't you check on Wulan? I'm not allowed to see her."

"Why not? We're not Americans," I say, then: "I'll check on her."

"Thanks."

"Can I get you anything?"

"One of your pills would be great."

The woman looks at me curiously.

"Out of the question, Bim."

Bimbim laughs. No need to tell him.

"So. Is Natalia coming?"

Bimbim groans. "Get out, Rio."

In the bedroom, Bimbim's mother is fixing the bespectacled man's tie in front of a mirror.

"It just looks wrong," she says.

"Does it?" the man says, agitated. I notice that he has a slight Javanese accent, barely perceptible. He shifts his legs and pulls his tie to one side.

"No, no. You're making it worse. Rio, what do you think is wrong with this picture?"

I appraise the "situation" and see that the man is wearing a ready-made department store suit that is a size too big. Plus, his pants are a shade off and a little too long.

"You look perfectly fine," I tell him.

"Hmm." Bimbim's mother tilts her head and runs her fingers on her cheek. "If you say so."

The man blushes. He clears his throat and undoes his tie.

"Let me try again," he says and proceeds to do his tie over, eager to please.

Bimbim's mother throws her hands in the air in frustration but keeps herself firmly planted next to him. It seems that she's made herself believe that the success of the wedding will depend on how this distant relative wears his tie, or perhaps she'd rather the poor man does not turn up downstairs at all.

I am about to leave the room when one of Bimbim's aunts pulls me aside by the door. Her eyes are crusty with make-up, and still some of her wrinkles are showing through. When she opens her mouth, I see a lipstick stain, a deep maroon, streaked across her upper teeth.

"So your Papa has joined the team, huh?" she says.

"So I've heard."

I turn the door knob, anxious to leave. I hear her say behind me, "We need more youngsters. Come home. And give me a ring!"

My head is *really* starting to spin. I pretend not to hear and head over to Wulan's room down the hall. I knock, just in case someone is getting changed.

Wulan's mother opens the door.

"Rio is here," she shouts into the room.

There is screaming and rustling before Tante Mira opens the door a bit wider. A gust of warm air, sweet like incense, oozes into the hallway.

There are about ten women behind her standing and walking about in the room, chattering wildly, their voices assuming a higher pitch than what is perhaps the norm. Wulan's cousins—all of them familiar in various degrees—are all wearing knee-length, light brown bridesmaid dresses that remind me, for some reason, of frosted cake, the cheap kind one finds in supermarkets.

"Hi, Rio. There are several half-naked girls here. Not sure you want to come in," she says.

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe I do," I say.

Tante Mira laughs and waves one hand in front of her chest. "Oh, you haven't changed. Wulan isn't here. She's done with make-up, said she needed time alone."

"Can't blame her."

"Well, she'll be back."

"I'll see her when it starts, I suppose. She is all right, isn't she?"

"Why shouldn't she be?" Tante Mira seems chipper, genuinely excited, despite the dark pockets under her eyes, clear evidence of sleep deprivation, and the sweat trickling down her forehead and clavicle. Tante extends her hand to touch my face and looks at me affectionately. She says, "So. My daughter is getting married."

"Congratulations, Tante."

"Maybe the next wedding I go to will be—"

Yours, she is about to say. I finish her sentence. "My father's?"

"Wouldn't that be something?" She laughs giddily. "It seems like only yesterday that the three of you were toddlers, wetting your pants, getting spoon-fed, taking violin lessons. And in an hour my daughter will be married. To Bimbim of all people."

"Gotta hand it to him, Tante. Bimbim's been eyeing her since he was in diapers."

"The three of you used to go everywhere together. When are you going to stop this silliness and come home?"

"We'll see, Tante."

"Give me a hug," she says.

I give her a big, hearty hug. Tante Mira is warm and soft. What's more, she smells like a proper human being.

"All right, go have fun." Tante Mira pushes me further into the hallway and closes the door. Once again there is excited screaming coming from the room, now muted as if coming from a far off place.

I go to the second floor, where the outdoor swimming pool is. Surprisingly, the place is deserted. No one about, except for a lady mopping the premises. A sharp trickle of water comes from a tap somewhere I can't locate. I take off my dress shoes, my socks, roll up my pants, and dip my feet in the swimming pool. Weddings, all the

fuss put into them. But I suppose Bimbim was right. They should at least serve as a deterrent, if nothing else.

The sun is gone. Low on the horizon, city lights along the coast bleed orange and red into the sky. A myna flits across the row of tulips neatly lining the pool then takes a confident plunge over the ledge. Tulips … in the heart of Southeast Asia. Even the landscape design is uninspired. A row of tulips here, a row of Mexican Palmettos there. The willful thoughtlessness, the comical precision of it, is almost maddening.

Natalia was such a rebel when she first showed up here. She never wore make up; her hair was always a mess; she never bothered to blow dry her hair or to straighten it, like women often do in the city. Natalia was always proud of her big, wavy hair that went down halfway to her hips. Her colleagues at the advertising agency called her "the snippy poodle" behind her back. She said I was the only reason she was able to endure living here.

It's funny how weddings always snap the most untimely memories into focus, not that I've been to plenty in the past six years. Natalia and I were both opposed to marriage at first, we thought—childishly—that the contract presupposed a cynical outlook on partnership. We agreed to an open relationship, which her friends didn't appreciate. But it was Natalia who suggested this, and I never did care to see other women back then, not one, not that it was any of their business. After a few months of the ridiculous pretending that neither of us wanted an exclusive relationship, we decided to move in together, to rent a cheap apartment in some god-forsaken area. We quarreled with oafish neighbors over the laundry line; we ate canned foods, frozen dinners, but on weekends we either cooked nice meals or went into the city to eat. We

cuddled in front of the TV at night, her head buried in my chest and my nose in her hair, while the Underground, growling on its way to the airport, rattled our walls.

Still, after all those years without one phone call, one email, even after Bimbim had said no, Natalia would not come, I find myself hoping she would miraculously appear.

A short chime. A text message from Trang.

How long r u stying at htl?

I type back: *Not sure.*

A few seconds later, she replies: *Let me know. Mz u.*

I'm about to dial her number when I realize that someone is hissing my name behind me.

"Rio. Rio!"

Wulan, wearing an elaborate white and silver kebaya, is hiding behind a massive tropical plant.

I gather my shoes and socks and walk toward her.

"Why aren't you upstairs?"

I notice that she's been crying, is still crying. When I saw Wulan yesterday for a quick lunch, she'd seemed perfectly happy, her normal self.

"I can't do this," she says, her shoulders heaving, her speech violated with sobs.

"Don't be silly. It's just cold feet. Everybody feels that way before a wedding," I tell her, though I am alarmed by her sudden change of mood.

Wulan shakes her head frantically, the corners of her lips turned down, her mouth quivering. I think of the time when we were not yet ten and she was caught crushing her mother's lipsticks. She'd wanted to make a new hue and was about to roll the mixture into small tubes and stuff them in the fridge. Tante Mira is much too tender-hearted to yell at anyone, much less her own daughter, but still Wulan had that look when she was caught red-handed—quite literally, her fingers smothered in lipstick—as if she had murdered someone; it was the same look that she has now.

Wulan takes a deep, choppy breath.

"I slept with someone last week."

"No," I tell her, surprised and appalled at my brief feeling of triumph. "You're not in love with Bimbim anymore?"

The pieces are at last coming together, and the picture is looking bleak.

"I was drunk. Oh, that's a stupid excuse. But I should tell him. I should tell Bimbim. I feel so terrible."

"No, you won't. Listen carefully. You won't tell Bimbim or anyone else. Who else knows about this?"

"Just my cousin—"

"Well, no one else should know. Do you love Bimbim?"

"Of course I love him," Wulan shrieks.

"Then keep your mouth shut. He'd forgive you, but trust me, he'd just be shattered, Wulan," I tell her, squeezing her shoulders. "Promise me you won't tell him."

“Fine. I won’t,” she says. Wulan dabs her face with her satin purse. I give her my handkerchief, the one that came with the suit. She takes it and blows her nose into it. “I won’t tell him,” she repeats. “But couldn’t he tell?”

“No. Not all women bleed their first time,” I say, squeakily, feeling as if a thorn is being pulled out from the roof of my mouth. “Are you feeling better?”

“No,” Wulan says. “It was so silly. There was this guy—“

“Stop. I don’t want to hear,” I say, a little too sharply. Wulan flinches, apparently stung. “Look, the less I know the better.”

“I see,” she says, unconvinced.

“Want a cigarette?”

“Don’t be stupid.” She frowns. “Those will kill you.”

“Do you want to spend the rest of your life with Bims or not?”

Wulan nods, purring.

“Then go upstairs, wash your face, and put on some makeup.” I glance at my watch. “And for god’s sake, get back down here as fast as you can.”

I pry open her fisted palm and slip her half a Xanax, something I’ve learned to always have with me. Wulan looks at me, confused, but she takes it into her mouth anyway, and leaves.

“We’ll talk after the wedding,” I tell her, but it’s no use. She’s disappeared inside.

Adrenaline writhes through me like an army of springs. Run, it’s telling me. He’ll see your face and he’ll know.

The chlorine-drenched air pushes against my face. I toss my handkerchief, put on my socks and shoes, and hurry inside, remembering a coffee shop just outside, across from the hotel. I take the elevator down to the ground floor and walk past the rows of impatient, well-dressed ladies and tuxedoed gentlemen. A mainland boy offers me champagne in broken English. I don't take it. I walk past him, the memory of alcohol like needles prodding at my nostrils.

I keep walking until I reach the lobby. I scramble inside my suit pocket for a pack of cloves. There are hordes of people getting out of their cars and taxis. I hide behind a giant pot of anthurium to avoid familiar faces.

A reluctant calm courses through me. The cigarette is stale; the pack has been in my pocket for weeks. I don't smoke often. No one seems to in this country with the deformed babies and cancerous throats on the cigarette packs and what not. But stale or not stale, I am nevertheless thankful for it.

Then the guffaw of an alto. I look up.

And see Natalia, walking up the steps with a round-faced little boy.

◆

Seven o'clock sharp. The live string quartet ploughs awkwardly through a timeworn piece originally written for the piano. There are perhaps five hundred in the room with us, a small crowd for an Indonesian wedding. Apparently the virtue of celebrating a wedding in another country is that not everyone shows up.

Natalia is standing at a far corner of the hall with her boy, waiting, like everyone else, for the procession. She does not notice me, and does not seem to be making an effort to search for me in the crowd. Does she look different? I can't

decide; she is wearing make-up and a proper red dress. She's all grown up. And why not? She's a mother, after all.

She smiles at no one in particular, and I smile, from where I am, thinking stupidly for a brief moment that perhaps us smiling at the same exact time will send her a telepathic notice, and that she will turn her head and our eyes will meet. But what will she think? Perhaps she'll think nothing at all, not with more than four years between us. And a son. Her son, whom she gave birth to, who is now very ill. A private world that I can never again trespass—even if I had a chance, I would only find myself out of place.

The old woman standing next to me nudges my arm.

"She's beautiful, isn't she?"

"Yes?"

"The bride," she says, lifting a finger and pointing it discreetly to where Wulan is.

The procession had walked past me without me noticing.

I turn my eyes to the platform. "Yes, she is."

Bimbim and Wulan are on the stage, flower petals on their suit and dress kebaya. The ijab kabul is about to take place. What a strange wedding. The procession, Bimbim's tailored suit, the practically kitsch music, the flower girls, the champagne bottles on the dining tables in the dining hall next to this one—all imported from the West, followed by a recitation of, let's face it, a rather primitive, if not downright barbaric, transactional contract: what amount has been paid for the dowry, etc. Such nonsense.

My eyes travel back to Natalia, and this time she is looking at me. She looks at her son and back at me. Her face reveals nothing; she is giving me a friendly enough smile, her eyebrows lifted in surprise in a reserved sort of way, the kind of smile I would give any old acquaintance. The palms of my hands begin to sweat. So this is it, then. If Natalia feels the slightest bit of excitement, she's making a successful effort at concealing it.

Feedback from the microphone, like a speeding car turning around a sharp bend. The crowd murmurs disapprovingly; some of the women daintily plug their ears with their fingertips.

Natalia returns her gaze to the platform. Wulan and Bimbim are on the floor, Wulan kneeling and Bimbim sitting Indian style. The officiant speaks in Arabic.

There is a slight commotion. Wulan's mother rushes to her daughter. She tries to get her up, but Wulan falters, and would have landed on the floor if Bimbim hadn't caught her fall.

◆

It's all over. I'm back at the poolside, catching my breath, smoking what must be my fifth or sixth cigarette of the day in a dark corner, facing the emergency exit. Someone taps my shoulder. I turn around and find Saras in a little black dress, her face beaming like she has hit the jackpot.

"Fancy suit. You look beautiful. I mean it. Like a Russian painting," she says, slipping an arm around mine. Tonight she smells expensive, her perfume so sugary it's almost sickening. "I was watching you all night."

"Like a Russian painting? I'm not even sure what that means."

Saras points at my sports bag on the floor. “You’re not spending the night? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong.”

“Ah, you’ve seen her.”

“Seen who?”

Saras lets out an elaborate sigh. “You know, Rio,” she says. “You used to be so interesting. But now you’ve sort of become predictable.” She pouts her lips. “Anyway. I can’t believe Wulan just passed out like that. Whomp! And she’s out cold. Five hundred flights bought for nothing. Tabitha said she had taken an antianxiety pill. Who would’ve thought?”

“Wedding day jitters, no doubt. Completely human.”

Saras does a double take. “Is there something you know that I don’t?”

I study her face. She’s genuinely in the dark, I decide.

“Yes.”

“Well? Aren’t you going to tell me?”

I push her against the emergency exit door and bring my lips to her ear.

“Rio, what is it? Everyone is looking.”

But of course no one is out by the pool.

I put my mouth on her earlobe. She doesn’t pull away. I trace my fingers along the back of her neck and then around and down her chest. I stop where her dress begins. Her face is hot. She leans forward to kiss me. I let go.

“Look who’s predictable.”

“Bastard,” she says.

"Wulan's dress was too tight," I tell her. "She'd been starving herself the whole day."

"Oh."

"Let's get out of here. What floor are you in?"

"I'm next door, Rio, at the boutique hotel," Saras mutters shyly. Her face is still bright red.

"You know what? I think I'll hang around, you know, just in case Bimbim needs me."

Saras shrugs and walks away without a word, her middle finger in the air. She is not happy with me, but at least now her mind is preoccupied with something other than Wulan.

Poor Bimbim has no clue. I connect the dots in my head. Wulan arrived in town a little before last week, to make sure that the wedding arrangements went according to plan. The thing must have happened after she arrived. Which brings me to my earlier point: this city brings you nothing but suffering. Bimbim's principles may be infantile, but surely he does not deserve *this*. Seeing Natalia and her son—before, I could at least make believe he wasn't real—was the punctuation to a long-winded, cruel joke.

Speaking of jokes, Poltak had managed to find me just as I was about to leave the suite with my clothes; he gave me his card, said to call him as soon as I get home.

"Look, Fahmi's got no sense of reality, thinks the world of Indonesians. He forgets not all of us have been to Yale. Typical bleeding heart type," he told me,

breathless, card in hand. “So. Tell me. What do you think? Are we ready to be governed?”

I kept my hands on the strap of my sports bag. I let him wait, held his gaze. After a few seconds, Poltak frowned, embarrassed, and stuck his card into my pant pocket before saying goodbye to my aunts in a hurry.

My aunts did not care to protest when I told them I would not be spending the night. I’ve said my goodbyes, told others I would see them in Jakarta before the month is over. A lie, of course, and one that I’m sure they know perfectly well. These people, friends and relatives, come to the city often enough, to shop and what not. They tell me they admire what I’m doing, making it on my own without any help from Papa. But I see what they’re not telling me in their eyes, their puzzled looks, their mild concern. They must know that if I could have it any other way, I wouldn’t be here at all, “retreating into obscurity”—Tante Sita’s affectionate words—the way I did.

I glance at my watch. It’s eight-thirty and the city seems to grow louder by the minute. I leave through the emergency stairway, my bag bouncing against my hip on the way down, and walk alongside the edge of the parking lot to the main road, to find a taxi queue somewhere else. Wind from the Pacific, tepid and smelling faintly of curry, laps gently at my collar. I take off my suit, drape it over my arm, loosen my tie. Tourists have seized Capitol Road, families, couples, solo travelers perusing their smart phones, looking at Maps, perhaps, or at restaurant reviews. A 40s standard quivers through the night, sung by an unmistakably Asian man with a gravelly voice. In the background, the accompanying piano plunges and rises through a series of oblique harmonies. The sound is light, unself-conscious, transmitting a kind of

restrained, unaffected rapture. Something in me stirs at the recognition of talent, at this tiny gift the night has granted me. I look around but cannot locate the source among the ocean of travelers and the feverish din of traffic. The vocalist attempts to rise to the occasion, raises his voice, and falters. The piano softens, graciously lets him take over. A few seconds later, a smattering of broken chords and the piece is finished. What's left is the sound of laughter and goblets clinking, coming from a nearby restaurant. I pick up my pace, palm trees rustling next to me against the dark ocean.

Farther down, a scraggly stray dog with a distinct limp bobbles down the sidewalk across from where I am. Pedestrians walk around it like a stream rushing around a rock. In all my six years in the city, this is the first time I've seen a stray dog; the sight is jarring against the eerie tidiness of the neighborhood. I'm about to cross the street to where it is, not knowing what I will do, what it is I *can* do, when a white van pulls over, and two men in blue uniforms, gloved and wearing surgical masks, jump off and sweep the dog into the van, using a wide net of some sort. The dog emits a short, almost perfunctory whine, and is soon quiet. The back door of the van snaps shut and the vehicle rolls away without ceremony.

"Sad," the man walking in front of me says to his girlfriend.

The couple, tourists from what I can gather, begin talking animatedly about the Lion Dance they're about to see at an amphitheater by the Quay. Soon the dog will be put to sleep, because no one will want a defect. But the couple, so clearly in love, didn't come to this city to contemplate misery. Here one does not talk of such things, pretends they don't exist. There is only the greedy, almost surreal, insistence on perfection. Perhaps it's the unwillingness to let history run its course, to let it recede

into the background, as if nothing new can offer excitement. I suppose this city feels *made up*, if that's the right phrase, and for a particular audience. After years of being in the city, I am still impervious to its sure signs of authenticity, in a way no different from the dizzying swarms of tourists who have taken over the night. To them this place is exotic, with its colonial-era hotels, its arched walkways and sparkling canals, and broken English (do they think it's charming, in some twisted way?)—it's a time machine, transporting them to the luscious, dearly departed East Indies. I, however, feel that this city has traded genuine charm with clumsy affectations. People say that back in the 70s the city was a lot like Jakarta, chaotic, un-self-aware yet utterly selfish, unapologetic when it comes to baring its dirty laundry, nothing like the airbrushed version that it is now. Still, people aren't happy. Highest suicide rate in Southeast Asia, free healthcare and all.

Perhaps it's the music, or seeing Natalia and knowing that soon she will return to the only place I've ever called home … the homesickness is overwhelming. I keep walking until I come upon a taxi queue at a hotel on the corner of Capitol and Victoria, and assume my position at the end of the queue. The bellhop, an old Indian man in a long-sleeved uniform with big, round buttons and a drummer's hat hauls suitcases into the trunks of cabs. For him, too, it has been a long night, yet he greets each customer with earnest enthusiasm, unfazed by the silliness of his costume. I wonder how long the man has been doing this—all his life? In front of me, a row of suitcases awaits.

I can't wait to be in my apartment, to take a cold shower, turn the ceiling fan on and watch an old movie, something that will take my mind to a happier place. But, alas, it is Friday. The queue snakes halfway around the circular driveway and into the

street. Minutes pass, then half an hour. A family of six argue at length over who gets to take which cab. Behind me people rap their feet anxiously on the ground.

Another text from Trang.

I passd by ur place otw bar jus now. Woman looking 4u. Pretty. Left in cab.

Name?

Idk. Have u been naughty?

No. What else?

The bell hop gestures for me to step to the front of the line.

Red dress. A kid. Otw to airport.

The ground swells. Coda. Frenzied scalic passages up and down the keyboard.

"Where to tonight, sir?" says the bell hop.

I try—really try—to breathe.

"Leaving us already?" he asks me in mock disappointment, eyeing my bag. The man is breathing heavily, islands of perspiration on his hat band and armpits.

The cartoonish sound of a liner horn splits through the brief silence, its pitch wavering, uncertain, neither here nor there. The man recoils then perks his head at me, waiting. ***

Overview, *Stranger Years*:

The presidential election is about to take place in Indonesia and the overwhelming majority of the people are in support of the populous second presidential candidate, a former small-town mayor and Jakarta's new governor. The other presidential candidate, a former high ranking army official with a not-so-wonderful track record enlists a foreign political consultant. The result is an over-the-top smear campaign, one that ultimately boomerangs.

Rio, the protagonist, is an outsider, living in a self-imposed exile in an unnamed city-state. Disappointed with how his father's tenure as Jakarta's governor panned out and especially with his own role in putting his father in office, Rio decides to shun politics altogether. After an encounter with an old flame who is now married at his best friend's wedding, Rio decides to return to Indonesia, determined to win her back. Once in his home country, Rio finds himself forced to commit allegiance in the midst of the campaign period and ultimately experiences a shock at just how changed the country is after six years of absence.