

ABSTRACT

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Blossoming is a collection of four short stories and a novel-in-progress that explores the mysteries of relationships amidst a world of ever-thinning international borders. In *Blossoming*, four friends in Taiwan drink tea while comparing how their lives have turned out; in *The Moon Is Fuller in A Foreign Country*, oceans are crossed and familial ties are tested; in *Animal Spirits*, Sun tries to protect her younger sister growing up in an environment that views her as foreign; in *Flea Market*, Wenwen seeks a way to mourn the father she had never met; and in *Duende*, two men and two women interpret the meanings of life through flamenco, ballet, and lust.

BLOSSOMING

By

Vanessa Wang

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

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Blossoming

Like most signboards in Taipei, the name of the café was in English, giving the place an exotic feel. “Blossoming Teahouse,” it read in flowery Victorian cursive. It being a Sunday afternoon, the entrance to the popular hangout was crowded with young women in their twenties looking to be seen.

One could always observe the newest fashion trend here. The cell phones the women used, for example, were in creamy strawberry and mint colored cases. Ice cream phones, they were called. Everyone wanted a chance to pose under the cherry-pink signboard with “V” signs by their cheeks. The raised middle and index fingers emphasized their ornately decorated acrylic nails and brought attention to the much-elaborated eyes. With the aid of in-season fake lashes and pupil-enlarging contact lenses, the young women gave off a doll-like innocence.

Mei, Ju, Lian, and Ying were to meet under the signboard, as they had been doing each month over the past three years. Mei was the first to arrive, wearing a carrot-colored tank top and skinny jeans. Mei seldom bothered to carry a purse so she chose to wear tight pants instead; that way she would be able to tell if someone tried to pick her pocket. She rolled her eyes reflexively at the flock of women taking photos of themselves. Blossoming isn’t even a good translation of *han bao dai fang*, she thought, not for the first time. An approximation of the four-word proverb name of the café was something like “with a bud, waiting to blossom.” Where was the “waiting” part in the word “blossoming”?

Five minutes later Ju and Lian arrived, their arms linked. They had run into each other at Zhongshan Metro Station. Ju wore a baggy summer sweater the color of autumn—a brownish orange her mother had warned should only appear on grandmas. But the sweater had been on sale for just one hundred yuan at the traditional market—too good a deal to let pass. The sweater hung loosely over Ju’s body, as comfortable and understanding as an old friend.

Lian was in white as usual—simple and elegant. It was a plain cotton dress, some flower embroideries at the hem. Lian was glad there had been no doctor appointments or last-minute errands to run for her in-laws this time. She had had to miss the monthly catch-ups twice in a row already. Her stomach stuck out, although only those looking for proof of her five-month pregnancy would have noticed.

Ying came last, almost fifteen minutes late, an overwhelming image of pink with huge Victoria’s Secret and Mango shopping bags on each arm. She surveyed the scene and was happy that no one carried her limited edition rainbow sherbet phone. Of the four friends, she felt most at home at the café. It was she who had chosen the venue three years ago and she who arranged the gatherings, after all. She hoped she had not made her friends lose their reservation.

The interior of the restaurant overflowed with orchids to fit the theme of the month. In purple and white and yellow of various shades, the irregular-shaped blossoms hung in bamboo baskets on the walls, their long stems arching with poise toward the center of the café like elegant necks. The six-petal flowers posed inside vases on each table, and greeted customers from the pockets and ponytails of the attendants. The featured flower of each month had not repeated itself over the past

three years—last month it had been lilies, before that, roses, and before the roses, azaleas.

For the current month the café had designed an entire new menu. One could get the *lan mei* blueberry pancake or the *lan* color Danube Earl Tea, the names all hinting at the featured *lan* flower—the orchid. Illustrations of diverse types of orchids adorned the pages: shy looking white ones that open only halfway, appearing more like bells than flowers; exotic magenta ones with monkey-like faces; passionate pink ones that bloomed so freely the flowers began to weigh down their stem.

The girls sat down at their usual table by the window. Next to their water glasses, the customers were each gifted with a tiny brooch—the souvenir orchid pinned on it was at the *han bao dai fang* phase, a plump green pouch revealing traces of purple forecasting the potential blossom.

Ying stared with longing eyes at Lian’s tiny baby bump. “I envy you sooo much, Lian! I want to get married, too!” she said, clapping her hands together, then resting one cheek against her palm in a dreamy fashion.

Catching her reflection in the window, Ying carefully adjusted her custom-made sun hat to a satisfactory angle. She gave a small pat to her newly-permed curls and fluttered her fake eyelashes. “Do you think our value is depreciating?” she asked, pouting. “There’s no way we can compete with college girls any longer! Look at us—twenty-five! Aren’t we old?”

Technically, her words were addressed to her three friends, but she smiled in the direction of a tall man in a suit two tables away. The man was seated at a table of five men on one side and five women in the other: a typical networking activity for setting

up singles. The man had a strong jaw, a thick chest, and appeared to be in his thirties. There was a shiny Rolex on his wrist. He apologized to the spectacled woman across from him for having yawned and embarrassedly looked away. His eyes met Ying's.

Hello, there, Ying's fluttering fake lashes seemed to say.

Ying's boyfriend of three years was in America pursuing a PhD. Ying had wanted to go with him, but her parents were horrified at the idea of their only daughter living half a world away.

"What if something happens to your mother and me?" her father had demanded. "Whose hand would I hold on to at my deathbed?" And that was that.

It was only a month ago that Ying's three friends had witnessed the lovers' teary farewell at the airport. Ying's boyfriend promised to Skype twice a day and Ying vowed to wait for his return.

The man with the Rolex inched toward the edge of his chair to get a closer look at Ying.

Ying pulled the brim of her hat toward herself to shield her view and turned toward her friends. "Is he still staring at me?" she mouthed.

It was all Mei could do not to roll her eyes and cry out "*ai-ya!*" in exasperation. Instead she sneaked a knowing look at Ju. Her attempt to hold in laughter came out as a half-snort.

The four girls' acquaintance went far, far back to their days at Taipei First Girls' High. Back then, Ying was the only girl in their class who had tucked her forest green shirt all the way into her black plaid skirt. She always smoothed the creases on her shirt, making her flat chest appear even flatter, like an ironing board. She also wore

her skirt too high, the waistline almost touching the bottom of where her breasts were supposed to be. To make things worse she had bad grades and her classmates joked about how she had only entered their highest-ranked school through an entrance exam system error. She was the girl no one wanted to pair up with.

Lian, who was class president, took Ying in like a kind noblewoman. There was something about the way Ying calmly accepted being taunted that amazed Lian. Ying never fought back, nor did she become withdrawn and quiet like some of the girls. She simply followed the crowd, trailing behind at a little distance if need be, but never allowing herself to be left out. Lian included Ying in all the group-projects she had with Mei and Ju. Since the alternative was to not be best friends with Lian, Mei and Ju came to accept Ying as part of the group. They neither liked nor disliked her; she was simply there, like a shorter but necessary table leg.

The waiter jotted down the girls' orders and took the menus away. Lian looked down at her stomach and patted it lightly, a smile on her face.

"I hope it's a boy," said Lian, her voice like a dragonfly kissing the surface of a lake.

Lian was the sixth daughter in her family. Her name, meaning lotus, was given in anticipation that the symbol of fertility would bring about a brother. Perhaps it would grant me a son, too, she thought.

"Your husband will be happy whether it's a boy or a girl," Mei quickly comforted Lian.

“Oh, I suppose he would,” Lian replied. “Doesn’t mean his parents aren’t waiting for a grandson! He has no brothers, after all.”

“Eh!” Ju scrunched her face in disgust. Her thick glasses, which were sliding down her nose, were pushed back in place by her expression. “What does it matter if the last name gets carried on or not? It’s not like there aren’t a million Chens out there already.”

Lian shrugged her shoulders and smiled at her belly again. “So, what have I missed during my doctor visits?”

A tentative pause lingered in the air. In the previous two gatherings, Ju and Mei had thoroughly avoided eyeing one another whenever Ying said something distinctively “Ying-like.” As long as Lian was present it was OK to make Ying a little uncomfortable with her ridiculous self—after all, Ying never let other people’s opinion stand in her way—but without Lian, Ying had suddenly seemed like a stranger, as if she were someone who just happened to be at the same table. Ying had also not been her usual self—her manner almost humble, eager to prove that their quartet could function without its leading violin.

“Not much,” said Ju at last. “Unless you are interested in my daily logs of working overtime and watching Korean drama with my mom.” Ju gave a yawn. She worked for a finance magazine.

“And Yang?” asked Lian.

“Same old same old. On a new construction project and staying in the office until nine or ten every night. We hardly see each other anymore.” Ju shrugged.

Ju wanted to get married but Yang said they needed to buy a house first. Personally Ju didn't care about the old-fashioned way people viewed marriage as the final step to all other accomplishments. A man was supposed to finish his highest level of education, serve in the mandatory military service, gain several years of working experience, accumulate a certain amount of savings, buy a car, and buy a house, before he became "worthy" of claiming a wife. Realistically it just wasn't possible. With the way real estate value doubled every few years, they might never be able to afford even the tiniest apartment. It was bad enough when the old generation didn't catch on that the world had changed; it was a catastrophe when people her own age still lived according to what Confucius and dinosaurs thought was appropriate.

Up until Lian got engaged two years ago, the girls had all thought that Ju would be the first one to marry. She had thought so herself. Over winter vacation of tenth grade Ju had gone to a three-day physics camp and returned arm in arm with the skinny and bespectacled Yang. That was ten years ago.

On Sundays they strolled in 228 Memorial Park in their uniforms—Ju in forest green and Yang in khaki. That's what couples did back then, when both boyfriend and girlfriend attended a stellar high school. People looked—and you wanted them to look.

At Taipei First Girls' High it was a daily practice for the girls to assemble on the sports field and receive conduct education from one of the many female lieutenants—women that were half G.I. Janes, half nurturing mothers. The students were chastised and nagged for anything from dyeing their hair and piercing their ears to wearing bright-colored underwear that showed through the thin-fabric of their uniforms. One

morning the instructor in the ship-shaped envelope hat and gold-buttoned uniform was more worked-up than usual. Her eyebrows were locked in a frown as she scanned her eyes through the crowd from her elevated platform.

“We received a phone call from a parent yesterday,” the officer enunciated into the microphone. “She was at a café near the Railroad Station when she saw one of our girls with a male student. A male student from a *well-known school*.” She had everyone’s full attention now. They waited hungrily for her to continue.

“Both students were in their uniforms. But the girl, the girl in *our* uniform, was sitting on the boy’s lap, her black skirt *riding up her thighs*. The mother on the phone told me she had to look away. She could not bring herself to witness how low our school has sunken. I, who unfortunately am burdened with the responsibility of receiving this news first hand, wanted to dig a hole and bury myself in it.”

After assembly Ju was called to the conduct office, and the entire school knew.

For Ju it had seemed so exciting, to be the first among her small group of four to have a boyfriend. She was showered with questions—did she and Yang take off their glasses when they kissed? Did sex hurt? Did she regret giving it to him?

Now Ju found herself comparing Yang to all the men her friends were married or engaged to. Whenever an engagement or wedding picture appeared on Facebook, she went through a mental list of why the marriage would not work. She was only marrying him for his money. Look at him—old enough to be her father! Is she that desperate? Oh, she must have been pregnant before they married—that’s why the wedding was so rushed!

Ju knew she was being bitter, and she hated herself for it. She hated Yang for making her become this way and they had less and less to say to one another.

“And you, Mei?” Lian asked. “Anything new?”

“Long nights at the lab,” answered Mei automatically. “Changing the format in my thesis. Very exciting.” Mei pondered, twirling her ponytail in her finger. How had her life become so boring?

“Oh! Yen finally got a girlfriend,” she said, knowing Lian would appreciate gossip about their college classmate. Lian and she had both been Chemistry majors at National Taiwan University.

“What!” cried Lian. “No way! Good for him, though.” She grinned back.

Lian and Mei were thinking back to the same things: Yen arranging azalea flowers into Lian’s name on the grass in front of the Chemistry building; Yen riding his bike slowly beside them while they walked, trying to get Lian to talk to him.

“I suppose he finally had to admit to himself he had no chance with you now that you are not only married but also *pregnant*,” Mei teased. Lian had been the belle in their Department. Mei was sure that every single guy had asked her out, unsuccessfully, at least once, but Yen had tried harder than anyone else.

Even Mei had received substantial attention from guys, just by virtue of being female in a department of only five girls.

Mei had attracted a certain type of men. These were men who had lamely confessed their love for her through instant messaging, too intimidated to tell her in person how much they looked up to her. They passed by the volleyball court ten times a day to catch glimpses at her during team practice. Somehow the good-looking ones

who could actually look a girl in the eye during conversation were never interested in her. The men Mei was attracted to always found her too outspoken, too comfortable in jeans, and too independent.

Mei had gone on to grad school at the same campus. The guys who stayed on in academia with her were the exact ones who had had crushes on her, only now they suddenly looked taller and better dressed. When Mei walked past one of them in the hallways that connected their labs, there was nothing to say except half-hearted “heys.” They were usually heading for lunch with their girlfriends, so what else was there to say?

She had thought to herself *there must be more than this*. So she waited.

Now she wondered if she shouldn’t have waited.

“Oh, Mei,” said Lian in her teasing voice. “When will we find you a man?”

“Not you, too!” cried Mei, feigning annoyance.

Mei’s friends laughed, knowing about her mother’s new hobby of tricking her into blind dates. In her undergraduate years, her parents had never pushed her to meet guys. If anything, they maintained that she was too young, still a child. But as soon as she hit twenty-five it was as if a red flag had appeared and she was in grave danger of becoming a spinster.

Quite suddenly, she was too old.

Back in high school Ju was going to become a CNN reporter and Mei was going to be the modern Madame Curie. They said Lian should be First Lady. Ying’s dream was to have a huge makeover in college.

“Pretty girls get more out of life,” Ying would say with a sigh. Mei and Ju never took her seriously, the girl whose hair was always oily and whose white sneakers were so worn out they had turned brown. Yet despite everything, they had accepted Ying as one of them, because in high school everyone was equally privileged to dream. As long as one studied hard. As long as one put in more sweat than everyone else, their parents and teachers would tell them, and they had believed.

After regular school ended at five they journeyed into a different classroom in the cram school district, the name of their prestigious high school embroidered proudly on their shoulder bags. They bought fried chicken cutlets and pearl milk tea from the street vendors and ate while walking along the busy streets of the cram school district behind the Railroad Station. Huge red banners hanging from the walls of high-rise buildings bore slogans such as “High Scores Guaranteed” and “Money Back if Not Admitted into Satisfactory University.”

They pictured the glamorous lives they were going to have once they no longer had to wear uniforms or spend days and nights confined inside classrooms. The future was a faraway land, a place where only their tests and scores could take them.

“Did you ever have doubts?” Ju asked Lian. “About marrying your husband, I mean. You did have so many choices!”

Mei kicked Ju under the table. She kicked her hard. Ju glared at Mei, meaning, *What’s the big deal?* Mei glared back, wondering how Ju could be so insensitive.

Last month they had visited Lian’s new home. Because Lian’s husband was the only son, Lian lived with her in-laws. The apartment was in the old general store district behind Taipei Railroad Station. The girls had to call Lian three times before

they found the building, hidden on a secret alley. While Lian stayed in the kitchen to cut up enough fruit for a party of ten, the three guests dutifully sipped hot tea and answered Lian's in-laws questions. Were they married? Did they have boyfriends? Did they live with their parents? Were they working? How much did they earn each month? It was like going to the South to meet distant relatives during Chinese New Year.

It was thirty-eight degrees that day, and the girls were drenched in sweat. Lian's guests kept stealing glances at the air conditioner. How hot did it have to get for it to be turned on?

Finally they took refuge in Lian's room and threw pillows at one another to de-stress themselves.

"So this is the bed where the baby in your stomach was conceived!" They whispered, because the walls were thin. They could hear Lian's mother-in-law's footsteps in the hallway. They giggled nervously, like little girls. There were beads of sweat on Lian's forehead and above her lips. She looked a little bit pale, like she might faint at any minute.

"Oh!" Lian said, finally realizing what she had overlooked. She rushed to turn on the small fan on the floor. "I'm sorry. My in-laws are very economical people. You get used to the heat," she assured her friends.

As Mei left Lian's house that day, she felt an emptiness in her stomach. There was something about the beads of sweat above Lian's lips that made her wonder if life was at all the way she thought she understood it. Mei noticed for the first time that tiny lines had started forming at the corner of Lian's eyes. This wasn't just

anyone. This was Lian, who was going to be the First Lady. Lian, who fixed her own computer and bicycle because she did not want to take advantage of the geeky guys. Lian, whom they all envied but could not hate, because she had always been good, like an unsoiled water lily in a muddy pond.

All the good things that were going to happen to the prettiest, smartest, and most popular among them—all the things Mei thought she could only envy from afar—vaporized, and all that was left were the droplets of sweat above Lian's lips. Mei felt sick to her stomach, like she had accidentally looked too closely and saw a rat's tail scurrying under the sink. But at the same time there was something else she felt. Satisfaction that she had an air conditioner she could turn on at any time. Relief that even the best among them only got this far.

Lian smiled at Ju's question about her husband. She knew what her friends thought about her husband and in-laws.

She had married early to get away from home. She did not come from a poor family—in fact, her father had been a successful businessman. They lived in a good area and bought expensive furniture. Still, she always had to fight for resources. Getting a new toy or even a new pair of shoes required a certain level of cunning she felt she still lacked. There was enough money to go around. It was simply that whatever money there was could always be used toward a better cause—the only son in the family.

She thought she had chosen wisely, having observed closely the examples of her five brother-in-laws. For a long time she felt a terrible anxiety that she would never find the right person, knowing all the ways a husband could be *not* good. But finally

she found the man that was good-looking, financially secure, and without any brothers to compete for resources.

Nowadays when she woke up at six AM, before her in-laws did so they wouldn't find her lazy, she wondered if her life had truly changed for the better. And yet, even though life was not perfect, Lian found herself not unhappy. Her husband, while perhaps too traditional, was a capable man, respected among his colleagues. To her he was gentle and caring.

"No regrets," she said. "They were all boys, the guys from the Chemistry Department. I wanted to marry a man, someone older. Someone who could take care of me."

"Oh, I just want to get married," said Ying longingly. "I want to move out of my parents' house. I want them to stop calling me at nine-thirty each night, asking if I'm on the bus coming home yet."

Ying looked at the man in the suit longingly. "My boyfriend's useless. I'm just going to grow old waiting for him to finish up his PhD."

Ying sent the last bite of her blueberry pancake into her mouth. The rest of them had hardly gone through half of their orders. It was always shocking to find that Ying, who wore soft-tone colors and lacey dresses, devoured anything on her plate in a hurried manner.

"So break up with him," snapped Ju. "You talk about it all the time, why don't you just tell him it's over?" she demanded.

“Oh...I don’t know.” Ying looked at Lian and squeezed her wrist to look for an ally. “Lian, what do you think? You don’t think I am terrible, do you? Shouldn’t a girl keep her options open?”

Lian smiled and gave Ying a non-committal pat. Lian threw Ju and Mei a warning stare over Ying’s shoulder, as if to say, *Tone it down*. Ju threw her hands in the air, meaning, *Now what did I do?*

“Um, hello,” said a man’s voice. The girls looked up to see the man in the suit standing beside their table. At the matchmaking table the spectacled girl who had been sitting across of him was gone.

There were large pores on the man’s face, and the hair above his forehead was thinning. He smiled at Ying, revealing a row of yellowed teeth. A car key dangled from his finger, displaying Audi’s logo of four chained circles.

“Hi,” he repeated. “Terribly sorry to interrupt your afternoon tea, ladies. I was wondering if this Miss,” he looked again at Ying, “would object to getting coffee together sometime?”

Ying smiled and managed to blush a little, casting her eyes down shyly. There was a time to be forward and a time to pull away, if only slightly. She was far from being the girl in the tucked-in shirt, her chest flat like a board.

Ying looked at Lian as if seeking advice. Lian shrugged, meaning, *It’s your life*. Ying gave out her number and waved at the man as he walked out the door.

Mei tried not to look judgmental when Ying turned her head back to the table. She stared straight ahead, not trusting herself to meet Ying’s eyes. Ju sat in a slouched position, her eyes empty, her lips forming a thin line.

“What?” barked Ying.

“What what?” Mei replied automatically.

“Stop looking at me like that!” said Ying, raising her voice. Some heads turned to look at their table. Ying squinted her eyes and looked from Ju to Mei and then back to Ju again.

“*We* are looking at you in *what* way? Why don’t *you* stop looking at us like *that!*” said Ju.

“Girls!” cried Lian.

“You two have *always* been against me,” cried Ying. “But you know what? I don’t need your approval! Go ahead. Laugh. I don’t care anymore. I don’t care! Who are you, anyway?”

“Ying!” said Lian. “What are you talking about, Ying?”

Ying got up from her seat and threw down her napkin dramatically. Her eyes had become red and moist, but she did not allow a single tear to drop.

“Don’t you see?” she said. Her voice cracked, and tears quivered at the brim of her eyes, determined not to surrender. “This is it. There’s nothing else out there.”

Ying snatched up her purse and her shopping bags and marched out the door. The bells on the door jingled as the door shut behind her. The room became painfully quiet.

“Ying!” Lian called after her. Lian looked back at Mei and Ju helplessly and looked out the window again. With a final apologetic look, Lian got up and went after Ying. The door shut against the frame a second time.

Conversation in the room resumed, first in whispers and then once again the voices became jumbled.

“Well!” said Ju. “What a way to react over nothing!”

They could not leave because Lian had not taken her purse with her, so Mei and Ju each did their own thing, tapping their fingers on the table and checking their cell phones.

This is it this is it this is it, Ying’s voice lingered in the Blossoming Teahouse, until the words ceased to carry any meaning.

The four orchid brooches lay untouched, hidden among the used plates, utensils, napkins, and other objects that crowded their table, the green bud the color of the shirt the girls used to wear in high school. They used to carry the same shoulder bag with the characters Taipei First Girls’ High written at the front. They wore the same haircut, one inch below the earlobe. They studied the same textbooks and practiced from the same set of math drills, believing that each question answered correctly would carry them further in life, ahead of others.

Streaks of purple peeked out from the inside of the bud, as if calling out shyly to the world. Many people buy flowers at the *han bao dai fang* state, preferring the suspense of not knowing when or how the flowers will bloom. Sometimes they never do.

The Moon Is Fuller in a Foreign Country

Min had not spoken to her brother for six months, ever since he had gone to Australia in pursue of a PhD. Whenever Shiang called, Min quickly handed the phone to their sick mother. If Min spoke to him, she would have had to sound excited about his progress abroad, the way their mother listened eagerly and pushed for details. Min was too tired to play that part. But Shiang was arriving tomorrow, and Min would have to face him at their mother's hospital room.

Min lay awake unable to fall asleep. Her husband, who worked on the Baguashan construction site, was snoring by her side with his mouth open. She pictured Shiang, his frail frame and solemn expression—the look of a scholar. She had never been abroad, but when she imagined Australia, she saw him on a stage before an audience of Westerners, presenting in English before a large screen. She pictured his calm and refined manner, speaking softly among a room of people who listened closely to his words, the place silent and sacred like the Christian church she had walked by every day on her way to and from the marketplace. Shiang fit into that world, far away from the filth and loudness and the smell of oil and blood in the marketplace, where their family had made a living selling chicken.

“You! Come back, you!” mumbled Min's husband in his sleep and the image of Australia dissolved. Her husband waved his arms in the air like a fool, even in his sleep grabbing aimlessly at something he was too lazy to work for. His foul breath smelled of the six-pack he had finished in front of the TV the night before. Min turned on her other side to face the clock, its ticking hand pushing forcefully forward,

only five minutes away from the time when its loud vibration would announce the beginning of another never-ending cycle.

At six o four Min finally disarmed the alarm and got out of bed. She instinctively braced herself to the damp chilliness of January and, since she could not find her slippers, made her way to the kitchen on her cold bare feet. It had not stopped raining for two weeks. She made scallion pancakes with egg for her family, but for the two kids she substituted the scallions with cheese. She prepared five lunch boxes, including one she would bring to the hospital for her mother. Her mother never had an appetite and would take only a spoonful—the rest would become Min’s dinner—but Min knew that her mother enjoyed the act of eating together.

At seven fifteen she went back to her bedroom. As she put on her work outfit of pink sweatshirt and sweatpants she tried to awaken her husband.

Her husband produced a low growl. “Go away. Stop bothering me. Why are you always bothering me?”

Her husband’s ungroomed face made him look like a hooligan. A thread of saliva hung from the corner of his mouth. Min wondered how she could have once found him manly and attractive. In one movement she pulled away his comforter and the morning chill immediately sent him wide-awake.

“Crazy bitch!” he cursed with one hand still inside his briefs, a sleeping habit that disgusted Min.

“I need you to wake up and I need you to take the kids to kindergarten,” said Min, as calmly as if she were explaining test instructions at the DMV. “Lunches are

on the counter. The children will find me at the hospital at four. We will have dinner with Ma so get your own dinner. Understand?”

With that Min left the house and headed for her mother’s hospital, also her workplace for the past five years, ever since they closed down the chicken stall. She would work until two as a hospital caregiver, caring for other people’s sick old mothers. Then she looked after her own mother.

When she thought back on her adolescent years, Min remembered her busy hands. She stood behind the family’s butchering stall, a stained apron around her waist, her knife coming down again and again on chicken skin, crushing into the bones, slicing the meat into neat, even pieces. *Chop chop chop*. The rhythm was even and steady, never missing a beat. When she needed a break, she quickly wiped her knife with her apron, in one swift movement transporting the blood and grease to the white cloth, leaving the blade clean and shiny. In summertime, when the tropical monsoon climate became unbearable, she raised her arms every few minutes to dab away the sticky sweat that dribbled from her temples with her sleeves. All the while she called out to potential customers, and her ringing voice was heard above all other vendors.

“Come buy some chicken, Aji!”

She addressed all women, whether they were twenty or eighty, as aji, big sister. The ajis always wanted a better price, so Min moved the numbers around in her head and let them believe they got a bargain.

“Aji! You will make me lose money!” she’d say, throwing in a free leg here and a free wing there. But the following day she’d give them a leaner chicken.

Before Shiang started school, he followed Min everywhere. Hardly reaching her waist, he silently watched the fascinating world of the marketplace from behind their stall. He was a quiet kid, but Min saw that nothing escaped his observant eyes, that he learned arithmetic by watching the price negotiations and learned to read the customers’ emotions, too. They were twelve years apart. They had a sister between them, Ting, but the eldest and youngest shared a special bond.

Min, as well as Ting, took after their mother’s darker complexion. The women of the family were short, buxom, and had strong, beefy calves, built to endure long hours under the sun.

Shiang, on the other hand, was more like their father. Their father was exceptionally pale, so much that people called him a “pale-faced scholar.” It was meant as a joke, but their father took pride in the nickname. He liked that he was associated with the scholar-gentry under the imperial examination in ancient China. He bought nice-looking books—hardcover ones with gold-tooled titles, preferably in a foreign language—and stacked them on a chair between the caged chickens, still crowing and clucking, and the butchering stall, amid life and death. When a son finally came along after two girls, he was ecstatic to see that the son grew to look more and more like him. Perhaps Shiang would become a real scholar.

When Shiang started school and came home with perfect marks on all his tests, their father allowed this dream to take flight. The boy would receive as many

resources as possible so that he could concentrate on his studies. The family would have a real scholar. A PhD. Someone important with the title from studying abroad.

Their father's hope became the principle the family lived by. The boy was gently encouraged to stay away from the filthy marketplace and to instead use his time on books. The family spent even less on non-essential expenses to save money for cram schools. After dinner, when the daughters rose to clear away dishes and take out the trash, the boy would quietly slip away to his room and resume his studies, as he was not given any chores. Min and their mother readily cooperated with this plan. Ting, on the other hand, scowled while she butchered, cursed under her breath when she wanted to go out with friends and was kept at the stall, and threatened suicide when she was denied the money to join her middle school graduation trip to a nearby island.

Occasionally Shiang still went to the stall after school, wanting to help Eldest Sister out. Min yelled at him to go home. "If you don't do your homework now, I will butcher you like this chicken," she threatened, holding her knife high in the air. She smiled as she said this, letting her dimples show so that Shiang knew she meant well.

"You are smart, Younger Brother. Study. Don't spend your life in the marketplace. It never ends. No matter how fast your hands move there is always another chicken to butcher."

Shiang walked into the hospital room, the suitcase he carried still with the luggage tag on its handle. Min stood against a wall, her eyes cast to the cement floor. From the corner of her eye she saw that he was thinner, his cheeks sunken in, the color on his face a sickly yellow of unbalanced nutrition. He was buttoned up in a

black double-breasted coat and had on a red knit hat and matching gloves, even though the winter day, while windy and humid, didn't really warrant such heavy clothing.

"Eldest Sister," he greeted courteously. His eyes lingered on her longingly, awaiting some sign of welcome after six months away from home. Min stared straight ahead, a slight nod of the chin as acknowledgement of his arrival.

"Shiang?" their mother called out. Her voice, though barely above a whisper, overflowed with joy. She strained to get up from her lying position.

Shiang rushed to their mother's bedside, soothing her shoulders, brushing away her tears with the back of his hand. Their mother put one hand on Shiang's cheek and caressed him gently with her thumb.

"Look at you, you look just like your father. So pale you could be a foreigner. I was afraid I would not see you again. I will be joining your father in the Yellow Spring Underworld soon." Their mother said all this without fear or doubt.

"Do not say such things, Ma. You will live to be a hundred years," replied the pious son.

A tight knot formed in Min's stomach and pulled at her throat as she watched their mother fuss over Shiang. It was a tinge of jealousy, perhaps, although she wondered that the feeling still had such power over her. It had always been this way in her family. Their mother wanted to know if he had come straight from the airport, if he was tired, and if he had enough to eat in Australia, since he had no one to cook for him. It was as if *he* were the sick one. Their mother never showed such affection toward Min, although she was the one who stayed by her side each day.

Min had been so overwhelmed for the past six months, with the chemo, the supplementary pills, bills to pay, nights her mother was overcome by nausea and neither woman slept, the doctor's every verdict overruling her life. She had become numb to the sight of her mother's body chained to needles and tubes. Her mother's once curvaceous body was now withered, her luxuriant hair gone, her vibrant eyes dimmed. Min felt a pang of guilt as she realized she had become used to her mother in her current state—a drastic change in just six months—yet she was still bothered by her mother's preference toward Shiang.

Min was not the only observer. From the other side of the room, the other patient—an old woman in her seventies—watched mother and son with great interest. Her Filipino caretaker, Linda, sat peeling an orange by the bedside. In the monotone, weary environment of the hospital, visitors from abroad provided a means of mental escape.

“Silly child. I will become an old witch by the time I am a hundred,” replied their mother with obvious pleasure. “But let us talk about more interesting things. Tell me about your studies. Do you have enough to eat? Enough to wear?”

Their mother gripped both of Shiang's hands with a sudden urgency. He was still bundled in all of his outerwear.

“Are you cold?” Their mother frowned in concern. She looked around the room as if searching for a switch to turn up the temperature.

Shiang pulled his gloved hands gently away and inserted them into his coat pockets. “No. Don't worry about me, Ma. I am unused to the coldness in Taiwan, is all. It is summertime in Australia now.”

Their mother found this answer deeply amusing. She chuckled, the first smile Min had seen in a long time. This chuckle quickly turned into a cough, and Min started rushing reflexively to her side. When she saw Shiang reaching out for the jar of water and pouring its content into the empty glass, what she would have done normally, she remained where she was.

“You mean in Australia it is July right now? The months are all different?”

“No. It is still January. But this is their summer.”

“Ah, well, who would have thought! I suppose everything must be so different over there. Is it also true what they say, that the moon is fuller in a foreign country?”

Shiang smiled. “I think the moon is about the same here and there.”

Ah, so the moons were the same after all, thought Min, a half-smile twitching at the corner of her mouth. She had always found the proverb ludicrous, but still, she had been anxious to hear Shiang’s answer, as if a small part of her had never been sure that the saying was utter nonsense. In elementary school there had been a girl in her class that had spent her earlier years in America. When she talked about her big house over there, the swimming pool in her backyard, and the amusement parks she had been to, everyone gathered around to listen, even the teachers. The clothes she wore were prettier and even the way she carried herself seemed grander somehow. Min knew that there was only one moon in the sky, but still, it was tempting to believe that in a country where everything was better, even the moon would be bigger and rounder.

“So fortunate,” remarked the old woman from the other bed. She had a tendency to cut into other people’s conversations abruptly and without invitation. She was

seventy-five years old, suffering from a coronary disease, a fact necessarily learned from having shared the room for over two months.

“A pious daughter who is willing to take care of you. A son pursuing a PhD abroad. What more can one ask for? My son is in America. He has a three-story house and a BMW. He takes his family on vacation abroad twice a year. But he never comes see me. Never. All I have is this barbarian who doesn’t even speak our language.” The old woman shot a disdainful look at Linda, who looked up and smiled good-naturedly in return. From Linda’s expression one would have easily assumed that she did not understand her employer’s words. But Min knew better: Linda comprehended everything. Min gave Linda a sympathetic shake of the head.

Min took the elevator to the bathroom on the ground floor. There was a bathroom in her mother’s room, of course, but whenever she could, Min went for the one in the lobby. Plus, Shiang was with their mother now.

The lobby had a convenience store and a coffee shop, and people coming in and out of the building. The automatic doors slid open and close every few seconds, bringing in fresh gusts of wind from outside. Young students and women in smart-looking suits walked about, laughing, discussing what to buy for lunch. These were people who saw the hospital merely as a quick spot for coffee, worlds apart from the sick and old in wheelchairs, resting by the potted plants.

Min took her time walking back to her mother’s room. When she came out the elevator she saw Linda pacing around the hallway. Linda looked up and smiled at her, in that trusting, happy way, almost like a child. She handed Min half of a peeled orange.

“Thank you,” said Min. She stood against the wall next to Linda. “So,” she said, her mouth tasting of the sweet fruit, “now you’ve met Shiang. He’s the one from Australia. Twelve years younger than me.”

They exchanged brief conversations like this sometimes, with Min doing most of the talking and Linda responding with gestures and facial expressions. Occasionally Linda would answer in short, broken sentences, but for the most part she was still shy about her Mandarin. In this form of communication, Min learned that Linda was thirty-four, two years older than herself. She had left her three children back home in pursuit of a better salary in Taiwan. With her earnings as a caretaker she was able to support her entire family. Her eldest son, who was fifteen, was going to become a doctor, a *yisheng*, she shared proudly, in clear, perfect Mandarin. Min thought she could see the “real” Linda when she talked about her family—a woman that was confident, a favorite among her family and friends, and perhaps enjoyed dancing on Friday nights, a woman so different from the shy figure always silently peeling oranges for her.

In return, Min told Linda about her own life. She was not sure that Linda understood everything she said, but she listened attentively and her eyes reflected genuine concern. Min told her about how she was the only one her mother had now. Their father had died of a heart attack several years ago.

“There’s Ting, of course. But what can you expect from her, a single mother and all? I consider it a blessing when she’s not asking for money. When Mother was diagnosed with breast cancer seven months ago, I had only counted on Shiang. He had always been a good kid—thoughtful. Considerate.” Min paused here. She had

told Linda these things before, it was hardly a new story. In her mind Shiang was still the little kid hardly reaching her waist, the one who followed her around, admired her even. The thought brought a smile to her lips. “I thought the problem would be convincing Mother, for of course she refused to be looked after by her college grad son. He deserved to do more worthy things than care for a dying woman, was what she said. So imagine my surprise when Shiang took off for a PhD program in Biochemistry. In Australia, of all places. It wasn’t like him. But maybe I don’t know him as well as I thought I did.”

Min didn’t know whether it was anger that she felt. It seemed childish of her, to blame Shiang for pursuing his future. She had not been like this when she was younger. She had always wanted what was best for him. But it didn’t matter anymore. The cancer had spread faster than expected. It was a matter of weeks now, even days.

“Min,” called their mother.

Their mother reached under her pillow and pulled out a thousand yuan bill. She tucked the bill into Min’s palm as if she were giving her a fortune. The act of being able to offer something seemed to revive her spirits more than anything.

“Min, your brother is back. As a doctoral student abroad! Your father would have been so proud. Call Ting so that the three of you can have a nice meal together. Get whatever you like. There should be a proper celebration!”

Min started to say that she wanted nothing to do with Ting. The less she saw of Ting, the better. Ting had already taken away enough of the money that could have

been used to pay medical bills. But their mother appeared younger for her eyes were gleaming with happiness. Min did not have the heart to say no.

The three of them had dinner at Fuyuan, a small restaurant within walking distance of the hospital. They each ordered a dish and then sat in silence. Min had spent the day avoiding Shiang. Even during their short walk over, no words had been exchanged. Shiang did not force the situation, which seemed strange to Min. It was as if he was avoiding her, too.

The neon light signboards of convenience stores and betel nut stalls, as well as the headlights of motorcycles and taxis, made colorful patterns on the window pane they sat by. A large moon hung lowly outside the window. The moon and the rare occasion of the three together brought back a forgotten memory.

Ting cried for three days after their parents refused to give her money for her graduation trip. Min felt bad for Ting and bought her a can of Kuai Kuai candy, something normally only received on birthdays. On the first night when most of Ting's friends were having fun on the nearby isle, Min, Ting, and Shiang sat on stools in the small alley in front of their apartment and ate Kuai Kuai candies to their hearts' content.

Shiang, who was only seven, folded paper airplanes for Ting.

"I'm sorry, Second Sister. I will study hard so that when I grow up, I can take you to any country you like."

The three had sat side-by-side, putting candies into their mouths and throwing the plastic wrappers back into the large tin can. A large moon hung over the alley that

night, the same moon that was shared by everyone in the world and the same moon outside their window now.

Ting was the first to speak at the table.

“So, Shiang, you are in Australia now. A true scholar at last!” Perhaps she was being sincere, but everything that came out of Ting’s mouth sounded sour to Min.

Min thought that Ting looked terrible. She wore a low cut red sweater that showed a pair of tired-looking breasts each time she leaned forward. She had on a mini skirt made of cheap synthetic leather and rubber knee-high boots. One of her front teeth was broken in half. Her waist-length hair was so dry and brittle that the color appeared yellow though it should have been black.

“How are you, Second Sister?” said Shiang politely. He had removed his hat but did not unbutton his coat nor take off his gloves. Min had taken off her jacket and was in a T-shirt. It bothered her that Shiang should bundle himself up this way when it was but fifteen or sixteen degrees Celsius outside. Shiang had always been the “frail” one in the family. He caught colds several times a year and their mother would cook Chinese herbs for him three times a day. It did not seem like a big deal when Shiang had been a little boy, but now that he was a man, seeing him this way made Min cringe. He crossed his arms in front of him as if protecting himself, from the cold, from the hostility of his sisters, or from whatever it was that made him seem occupied and distant.

“Mother might not make it for much longer,” said Min. She felt it was her obligation to share what she knew. “The cancer has relapsed and has spread to her

lungs and liver. If we are lucky she might make it for a few more months. But things can go in any direction now. In the worst-case scenario, she might only make it for a few weeks, days. Anyhow, these are the doctor's words." She felt that the words came out of her mouth sounding cold and without feeling.

"But half-a-year ago the doctor said she had a high chance of recovery!" said Shiang. His voice sounded angry and his face had turned slightly red. His lips quivered. "He said it was a good thing we discovered early!" It was rare that Shiang, stoic as he was, spoke in this way.

Ting stared down at her lap and spoke in a small voice. "I will bring Yuanyuan by one of these days. Mother would want to see her granddaughter one last time."

Min said nothing. Family was family after all. Even if Ting had done nothing for them, blood was thicker than water.

Min raised her glass of Taiwan Beer. "Let us not forget the main reason we are gathered today. Here's to Younger Brother." She looked at Shiang, and for the first time since he arrived she allowed her expression to soften. It had been cruel of her to avoid him for the past six months, especially since he had just moved to a new environment. At least Mother would die knowing that Father's dream came true.

The three glasses clinked against one another, producing sounds that were soft and yellow, resonating at the table. But before Min could bring the beer to her lips Shiang set down his glass on the table with a heavy thud.

"There is something I need to say."

Both Min and Ting put down their glasses.

Shiang looked from Min to Ting then settled his eyes on Min. He looked as if he was trying hard not to cry. “I thought mother had many years before her. Five or ten years at least. I knew that it was going to be a long battle. That there would be many treatments and surgeries, not all covered by insurance, and that we would need money for a full-time caretaker. I thought that if I went for just a year, nine months even, I could make a huge difference. When you told me that I had to come back immediately...Oh, I didn’t know. I didn’t know. I wish I hadn’t gone.”

The words coming out from Shiang’s mouth were so different from anything Min anticipated. They made no sense. She did not know what she had been expecting him to say, but it was not this. “What do you mean? I don’t understand, Shiang. I thought PhD programs take five years or longer.”

Shiang made no answer. He only looked at her with such sadness and regret.

Min felt herself shaking. Shiang’s words were not registering in her mind, but part of her sensed that she had made a terrible mistake, somehow. She had wallowed so deeply in her own indignation that she had not seen things clearly.

Shiang unbuttoned his coat and reached inside, producing a thick white envelope. He handed the envelope to Min. The packet felt heavy in her hands.

Inside was a stack of green, yellow, and orange bills, bearing the numbers 100, 50, and 20. There were at least a hundred, maybe more, bills in her hands.

“Where did you get this?” Min tried to level her voice, to not let her emotions take over. Her hands were trembling. A hundred possibilities ran through her head. The black market. Gangster activity. Drug dealing. None of these seemed applicable to Shiang.

“They were hiring overseas workers in Adelaide. A slaughterhouse for pigs. They pay well.” Shiang continued to talk—they paid him three times what he could earn in Taiwan with his college degree, a few people he knew had done the same, what with the sunken economy, college grads with barely livable wages—but Min’s mind was stuck on one word: slaughterhouse.

Everything about the PhD program had been a cover-up. Of all possible things... Min pictured him in a slaughterhouse, surrounded by animal corpses, blood splattered over him, his delicate hands meant for writing holding a knife instead. It wasn’t true—it couldn’t be true.

A sickening feeling came over Min. She had a sudden hunch and without thinking she pulled away both of Shiang’s gloves, which he had not taken off during the whole day. Shiang cried in protest but it was too late. She saw clearly what he had been hiding. The middle finger on his right hand was gone except for a short vulnerable-looking stump.

Ting gasped. Min said nothing. She saw herself in the marketplace, soaked in sweat, her hair a mess, surrounded by live and dead chicken, a young woman not yet twenty. The clothes she wore were old and plain, the cheapest kind at the marketplace, because she saved all her money for her family. She saw now how she must have looked to the outside world. But back then she had never felt sorry for herself because she thought that every chicken she butchered brought Shiang closer to becoming a scholar. When their neighbors called them “the champion family” because of Shiang’s academic performance, she had felt that they were better than

everyone else, that their life was more than slaughtering chickens and counting coins to make ends meet.

How could he do this to her? She looked at the thin, pale man sitting before her and with every cell inside her she hated him. She hated his look of regret and his frail, effeminate build. He disgusted her. The worst was the vulnerable stump on his finger. They had spent all that money on him and now he gone and made himself an invalid.

“I’m sorry Eldest Sister. I should have told you. But I knew that if I did, you would have stopped me. It’s just that...I’ve never done anything for our family.”

Damn right he had never done anything for the family! Min rose from her chair and in a sudden burst she slapped him hard across the cheek. The smack was loud and forceful, leaving a bright red mark on Shiang’s cheek and a satisfying sting in her palm.

“How can you do this to mother? And father? What is wrong with you?”

“Eldest Sister,” said Ting in a low voice. Ting put a gentle grasp upon Min’s arm, either trying to sooth her or to make her sit down. Min was suddenly aware that all the eyes in the restaurant were upon her, but for once she did not care. Let them watch!

“What are you all staring at?” Min said, staring down at everyone in the room.

Shiang was crying now, soundlessly sobbing into the palms of his wounded hands. This made Min even angrier. What right had he to cry? He—who only caused trouble? She felt ashamed for him, crying in public like that. Min shook Ting’s clinging hand away. She did not want anyone to touch her right now, and least of all Ting, who had been nothing but selfish her entire life.

Min saw that the restaurant manager was walking toward her with a serious expression. She thought she sensed a bit of fear in the way he walked, his knuckles clenched as if nervous to speak to her, and somehow this made her laugh out loud. Before the manager could open his mouth Min spoke first.

“It’s OK. I am leaving.”

They did not come out after her.

The moon was hidden from view behind tall city buildings. Min thought about her children, who would be waiting for her to tuck them in. The older one would not sleep without seeing her, and would stay awake even past midnight, listening for her return.

With the sudden plan of having dinner with her siblings, Min had sent her children home to their father. She wondered if he had fed them any dinner, and in a sudden panic she started to turn back to Fuyuan, so she could pack the leftovers for her family. Then she remembered the scene she had left behind, and abandoned the idea.

She wondered what would happen if she didn’t return to her house that night. Would her husband call the cops? Would they all come looking for her? Would Ting look after her kids for her? She walked past the hospital and past the bus stop that would take her home, and kept walking.

Animal Spirits

“I want to see the foxes!” said Moon as soon as we entered the San Juan Zoo. She said this of course in Mandarin, the language we speak at home and the only language she has learned so far. Her waist-length black hair flew in different directions as she ran forward with all her might – aimlessly, because we had no idea where the foxes were. They had been added to the zoo collection only last week.

“Don’t you ever get tired of coming to the zoo?” I called after her. When you have a sister ten years younger than you, you end up being her second mother.

Our *real* mother named me Sun and my little sister, Moon – terrible names. Our names alert people of our exoticness even before they see our almond-shaped eyes. Each time we say our names, our difference is reinforced.

The security guard was looking at us. I could feel his gaze on my cheek but I tried my best to focus on Moon. I didn’t have to turn around to see the half-smile-half-frown on his bronze-colored face or the puzzle in his dark eyes. I quickened my pace, knowing that if I lingered he was going to ask where we were from, and I would have to explain in Spanish that we were from here.

The August sun was right above of us and sweat kept dripping from my temples. It was no wonder the place was deserted. I could picture people taking naps at home, waiting for the air to cool down a little before starting the day.

Having discovered the foxes couldn’t be found by dashing aimlessly around the entrance square, Moon came running back to me.

“*Jie jie*, where are the foxes?” Moon looked up at me with anticipating eyes half hidden behind bangs. Her lips were pressed together into a smile that emphasized her baby dimples. I smiled back. Moon is the only person in the world that can always get me to smile. The truth was that I had never seen a real fox either, and I was excited.

“See that map over there?” I pointed at a bulletin board to our right. “Let’s go find out!” I took Moon’s small hands in mine and we strolled with purpose towards the map.

“*Jie jie?*”

“Yes?”

Moon hugged me tightly around my waist and buried her head in my stomach. “You are my favorite person in the world!”

I stroked Moon’s sun-warm head. Moon says this often, but it never fails to warm my heart. Sometimes I wonder if I need my five-year-old sister more than she needs me.

It turned out that *los zorros* were at the part of the zoo farthest from the entrance, at the enclosed area that had been under construction for so long I had forgotten they were building something. Moon insisted we had to see the foxes first.

“We have to save the best for first, *Jie jie!*”

Our sole goal being *los zorros*, we went past the monkeys, the bears, the lions, the zebras...past half the animals in the zoo without stopping once. For a good forty-five minutes Moon skipped around me in circles while I purposely followed a path formed by the shades of myrtle trees. It was not a bad way to spend a summer day.

Occasionally we heard children's laughter and some mothers' gentle commands in the background, and there was a family of four that we kept running into, but on the whole it almost seemed as if the zoo belonged to just the two of us.

I could be losing weight each second as I walk, I thought contently as I listened to Moon's nonstop chatter. I love listening to Moon talk. It reminds me of a happier time – a time when I was less analytical and saw the world as a magical place.

“Jie jie, can all animals turn into humans?”

I smiled knowing that she was referring to the story our mother had told her last night.

Each night my mother tells Moon a bedtime story from Chinese mythology. She did the same to me when I was Moon's age, but occasionally I curl into bed next to Moon to listen to them again. Mother says it's important we learn about Chinese culture, even though we were born in Puerto Rico. Last night, knowing our plan to visit the zoo, Mother told Moon the story of the Fox Spirit:

There was once an honest man called Wang who sold horses for a living. He led a modest yet happy life until a local official, known for the cruel games he played on poor people, came by Wang's stable.

“If you don't race your horses against mine, I will take away your stable,” said the official. “Race your best horse against my best, your average against my average, and your poorest against my poorest.”

Because his horses weren't as strong as the official's well-fed ones, poor Wang lost the bet. The official kept coming by each day, and Wang lost more and more money.

A beautiful and mysterious woman appeared at Wang's home.

"Today when the official comes, race your best horse against his average, your average against his poorest, and your poorest against his best. You shall win two times out of three, and the official will stop bothering you."

As expected, the beautiful woman's strategy worked. She married the horse seller and soon made him the richest man in town with her clever mind. It wasn't long before the happy couple were expecting a child.

On the day the baby was due Wang went out to buy herbs for an after-labor remedy soup for his wife. When he got home he heard the vigorous cries of his newborn son coming from the bedroom. Wang quickened his footsteps, expecting to see his wife and son in bed, but when he got there the baby was alone and the wife nowhere to be found.

Something soft brushed against Wang's leg. He looked down to find a golden fox at the foot of the bed. The fox looked at Wang, her eyes so intelligent and gentle as if belonging to a person. Then the fox ran out of the house and was never seen again.

In reality the beautiful woman was a Fox Spirit, once saved from a snare by a member of the Wang family. After gathering the essence of the sun and the moon for five hundred years, she finally acquired a human form and was able to repay the family's kindness.

“So can all animals turn into human beings?” Moon asked again, impatiently.

“I don’t know,” I answered. It wasn’t a question I had ever asked myself. “What do you think, Moon?”

“They can.” Moon said this as if she knew the answer all along, and had just been quizzing me.

“Oh, really?”

“Think about Mother. She’s smart and makes decisions quickly. So she was a monkey, like The Monkey King!”

“O...kay....”

“Dad’s easy. He’s always sleeping: in front of the TV, in the movie theaters, while waiting for the red light to turn green, and even when he sits on the couch listening to Mother’s reprimands. You know what Dad is, right?”

“A cat?”

“No silly, a koala! Come on, *Jie jie*, that one was easy!”

A Chinese koala. Why hadn’t I ever thought about that?

“Then there’s you, Sun. You are silent and graceful. You are also very strong. So you are a lion.”

“Strong?” I raised my eyebrows, an expression lost to Moon since she only reached my waist. “You think I am strong?”

If anything, I thought of myself as a sheep. Maybe I wasn’t even an animal. Perhaps I had evolved from a piece of tofu.

“Yeah! Remember that one time you told those mean boys to get away from me?”

Right away I knew that Moon was referring to the supermarket incident, and I felt my face grow hot from the memory. I thought she had been too little to remember.

It had happened about a year ago. We had been at the supermarket, and as usual, Moon wanted to get a toy from the capsule vending machines. I gave her two quarters and she ran eagerly toward the machines that were located near the exit. I followed at a little distance behind. When I had been Moon's age, I hated that my mother was always just one step behind me, as if ready to pounce at whatever creature lurking in the dark. It made me jumpy and nervous.

Two boys stood by the capsule machines, comparing the items they had acquired. One was slightly taller but neither was more than nine years old. Both had tanned-color skin and curly, brown hair – local school kids. Their same haircut and matching Adidas sneakers revealed that they were brothers.

“Ya lo tengo!” complained the taller one as he punched the vending machine with his fist. He rested his forehead against the glass of the machine dramatically, as if the worst thing that could happen to a person is getting the same toy twice. The shorter one leaned listlessly against the wall.

Moon carefully examined the contents of each machine. Her brows locked in concentration as she pondered on which toy to get. She did not seem to notice the boys.

“Mira, mira!” The shorter one clicked his tongue at his brother and used his chin and eyebrows to point toward Moon.

The tall boy kept his forehead on the machine, not changing positions but turning his head slightly to get a glimpse at what his brother was signaling to. When he saw Moon he gave a small jump and stood up straight so he could get a better look.

The boys stared at Moon while they nudged each other with their elbows and whispered into one another's ears. The older one stole glances at me but lowered his eyes as soon as he saw me looking back. My presence did not seem to stop them from whatever they were planning, though.

I couldn't hear what the boys were saying but I didn't like the way they measured us up. I felt my muscles tightening, and I wanted to tell Moon it was time to leave. Yet something in me forced me to stay. *Can't your little sister get a toy capsule?* A voice in me challenged.

Moon was about to insert her quarter when the shorter boy called her attention.

"Oi! Chinita!"

It was that word, of course, that I was dreading. I wanted to flee, taking Moon with me, but Moon just looked at him, striving to make sense of the language she would have to wait till primary school to learn.

"Ese no funciona, sabes?" continued the short boy. I felt myself getting tenser and tenser. What were those boys up to, telling my sister the machine didn't work? He pretended to turn the switch on the machine with all his might, scrunching his face in fake effort, and then shrugging his shoulders as if to say "See? It doesn't work." Moon watched his act in astonishment. Her eyes were wide open and her mouth formed a small "O."

The taller boy was trying to trick Moon into giving him her quarters in exchange for the capsule he didn't want.

"No molestes mi hermana!" I said.

The boys looked up at me, their expressions surprised. *"Habla español,"* I heard one whisper under his breath.

Quickly, I dropped two quarters into the machine, retrieved the Hello Kitty capsule, took Moon's hand, and marched away. I might have gripped Moon's hand too hard, because she pulled herself away from me. She kept looking back her shoulders at the boys.

I looked straight ahead, but when we reached the exit slide doors, Moon would not keep going. She was too interested in the boys and whatever they were doing. I was forced to look at what was holding my sister back. I turned around.

The boys were pulling their eyes back with their fingers, mocking our almond-shaped eyes. The shorter boy had his tongue stuck out at me.

Reflexively I took a strong grip on Moon's shoulders and forced her out of the supermarket. For Moon's sake I bit back the angry, burning tears forming behind my eyes.

"Go back and fight for your pride!" a voice inside started. "What? Are you afraid of nine-year-olds?" But I walked away.

"Jie jie! Sun! Sun!" Moon called my name. I shook my head to forget the humiliating incident.

"Please, can I be something other than a lion?" I asked.

Moon thought hard, squeezing her eyes shut and scrunching her face in effort. “OK. You can be a cat,” she announced matter-of-factly.

It occurred to me there was still one member of our family left.

“What about you, Moon? What animal were you?”

“Ah!” said Moon, blissful excitement in her voice. “I’m the Fox Spirit! *Hu li jing!*” She started prancing about the road, singing Twinkle Twinkle Little Star in Mandarin. At that moment I wished Moon would never grow up, so she could always be carefree and happy.

It was an impossible wish, of course. There were only two months left till Moon started primary school. My first year at school was a nightmare. For three months I went without lunch because the other kids mocked the rice and seaweed my mother put in my lunch box. I also could not buy anything to eat, because so eager was I to make friends, I willingly gave away my two-dollar allowance each day.

I had tried to teach Moon Spanish, so she wouldn’t have to go through the first months of communication problems as I did. Moon didn’t like to learn things, though.

Moon was running in a zigzag manner, first dashing to my left, and then unexpectedly appearing on my right. She was light and fast, athletic, unlike me. Maybe school would be easier for her. It occurred to me that my sister could be a Fox Spirit, based on her physical abilities.

But foxes are so clever, I thought. Not that Moon isn’t smart! Even to myself, I had to defend my sister. She’s just not... quick. She’s too innocent.

“I wish *I* were a fox,” I thought. “A fox would be able to think up a way of protecting herself and the one she loves.”

We arrived at the foxes.

“*Hu li! Hu li!*” Moon jumped up and down, as if she had won a huge prize.

There were only two foxes. They were fennec foxes, tiny things that I could have held in my palms, but possessing large ears. The creatures looked lazy, as if desiring nothing more than to sleep. Their small eyes made them look exceedingly so. One gave a long yawn.

“They must hate the sun as much as I do,” I thought sympathetically.

For a long time Moon just stood in front of the fence staring at the foxes with a rare sparkle in her eyes. She was probably thinking about the Fox Spirit story. I envied her. She was still at an age when everything amazed her. After five minutes it was clear that we wouldn’t be leaving anytime soon.

“Moon, you see that tree over there? The flamboyant? I’m going to wait for you under its shade, OK?”

I was grateful for a place to rest my legs under my favorite kind of tree. From where I sat Moon appeared tiny, a small part of a large painting with pink myrtles, red flamboyants, and a low, white fence overseeing two foxes, titled *The Zoo*.

A brown-skinned boy and his mother approached the fence. The boy was only a little older than Moon, and his eyes were wide with curiosity, almost unblinking. Only instead of looking at the foxes, his eyes were locked on Moon. He tugged at his mother’s sleeves with one hand and pointed at Moon with his other. Unaware of the outside world as usual, Moon took no notice.

I stood up and started heading over, taking large steps. The boy yelled something I could not hear that drew Moon's attention. I was running now. With a mischievous grin, the boy pulled the ends of his eyes, making them small and long and tilted upwards. He danced mockingly at my sister. The mother pretended not to notice anything.

"*Chinita! Chinita!*" I was close enough to hear the sing-song words coming from the boy.

"Oi!" I cried with anger. "Oi!" I shouldn't have left Moon alone.

I remembered the first time I encountered the same situation. It had been the first day of school. A group of kids had surrounded me, calling me "*Chinita.*" I searched and searched for my mother, and then the terrible truth hit me: I was completely alone. I threw up – every last thing I had for breakfast appeared before everyone's eyes. After that I was never sure if I was mocked for being Chinese or for throwing up on the first day of school.

"Moon!" I yelled as I continue running. "Come here! I am here!"

I was sure my sister could hear me. Why didn't she respond? She stood completely still, as if deep in thought. A small frown appeared on her forehead as she observed the boy before her, dancing around with his fingers pulling his eyes. It was the first time I could not read the emotions on my sister's face. There was something different about the girl before me. What was it?

I stopped calling out and running to her.

A grin lit up on Moon's face. It wasn't a mischievous grin, like the boy's; it didn't sneak in the eyes first and slowly work its way to the lips. Moon's grin appeared the way a dark room is illuminated with the single movement of turning on the switch.

Moon's eyes were wide open with enthusiasm of some great discovery. She tried to convey this to the boy as she pointed at the foxes with repeating thrusts of her fingers. The boy stopped pulling his eyes and calling my sister "*Chinita*." Like me, his brows were locked in curiosity and puzzlement.

Moon pointed at the foxes and then at her eyes. Imitating the boy's earlier motion, she pulled the ends of her eyes. She made the victory sign with both hands and placed them on the top of her head, making ears. She flexed her fingers, as if making air quotes, but it also looked like she was wiggling her imaginary ears. Was she performing some kind of dance?

Moon pointed at her eyes and then at the foxes again. Look at our eyes, she seemed to say with her body language. She wiggled her make-believe ears again. She wrinkled her nose and started sniffing the air around her. Recognition registered in the boy's face, although I was still lost. He grabbed his stomach and bended over with a high-pitched laugh. Even his mother turned around to take a look. My sister was also laughing. In unison, the boy and Moon pulled the end of their eyes and sniffed the air. The two conversed in a secret language lost to everyone else.

That's when I realized that the foxes had the same kind of eyes we do. Long and tilted upwards. Chinese eyes.

Flea Market

The old lady sneered with her three teeth at those who passed by her stall. The one tooth on the bottom fit into the space between the two on the top. Cans with no expiration date and labeled in scripture-like writing lay scattered on the dirty cloth by her bare feet. Three fat Russian Blue cats violently sunk their teeth into the tin cans and scratched one another with their sharp claws. Like their owner, the cats hissed and snarled at passerby who dared to inquire about the foreign cat food.

Across from the cat lady, an Indian man with a white beard and a colorfully dyed turban sat next to his proud hills of spices on a table. He rested comfortably on a deck chair, his hands folded upon his belly. The tip of his beard curled up sideways against the edge of the table, as if it, too, were enjoying the Sunday morning. Cardboard signs showed the prices for each of the man's products. When a customer came forward, the Indian man pointed a finger at the signs without needing to say a word. He didn't even divert his eyes. He kept his eyes locked upon a tall woman standing on a pedestal across from him. The tall woman wore a medieval enchantress outfit and a hat with horns. She remained locked in place without moving for minutes at a time—changing positions only when someone stopped to tip her. The Indian man loved the sound of “clink, clink, clink,” each time a coin was dropped into the pail before her. There was something artistic about the string of motions, like a pebble falling into a pond and producing gentle ripples.

Ring-ring-Ring-clink-a-Ring-ding! Suddenly the steady pulse of coin ripples was interrupted by a series of disturbing noises. Ring-a-Ding-Ding-cling-ling! How

distracting they were, those chaotic sounds. They got louder by the second, encroaching upon the poor Indian man. His brows collided furiously as he searched for the intruder to his private show.

The intruder paced light-heartedly a few feet away from the Indian man, unaware of the universe she had disturbed. The Indian man did not know this yet, but the girl walking towards him was Wenwen. The noise that was so disturbing the man's peace came from the three-hundred-and-eighty-two bells she wore on her body. Wenwen also owned two-hundred-and-nine socks—none that matched.

Her neck stretched out to her left and right as she pleased in the scenery of knick-knack wonders. The flea market covered a neat square area full of street performers and vendors. She spotted antique telephones, clocks without hands, ukuleles, yellowed postcards, buttons of various sizes (one was larger than her head!), vases, doorknobs... She had a good feeling that she would find something useful here.

Each time Wenwen turned her head to see the things around her she jingled. She jingled with every step forward, every run of fingers through her straight black hair, every raise of an eyebrow, and every flutter of her eyelashes. Adorning her body were tiny bells of various shapes, colors, and sizes. A frog-shaped bell made of jade and the size of her pinky nail hung on one earlobe. Sparkling on her left ankle were a string of diamonds, which, upon closer inspection, were indeed bells—hollowed and each enclosed with a smaller, loose diamond within. Bells of more common material peaked out from between strands of hair, and these were the colors of lemon chiffon, pale turquoise, strawberry tea, tangerine sunshine, and all manners of delightful

shades. Just when one thought there couldn't possibly be another place to decorate with bells, itty-bitty crystal balls would jump to your attention, for these were carefully tied to each of the girl's finger nails, through tiny holes punched at the ends.

Wenwen was wearing six of her socks that day. She could never make up her mind on just two. On her left leg she had put on a fishnet panty hose that reached her thighs; upon that she wore pink stockings that reached above her knees; and above that she wore yellow ankle socks with purple hearts. I'll leave it to your imagination what was on her right leg.

What is this nuisance! Thought the Indian man. For the first Sunday in two years he was forced to look away from the enchantress and rise from his chair. He marched over to the girl.

“You!” he roared.

Wenwen's bells trembled in startled surprise at the man who had all of a sudden charged up to her.

“YOU!” The Indian man was beyond words for his rage. His arms pressed stiffly to his sides and his face turned scarlet red. “WHAT are you?”

Wenwen stared at the man's white beard. How un-white it was, like a dirty palette or saucepan, tinted with the smells and colors of the spices. She closed her eyes and inhaled. What were the ingredients of that beard? Thyme? Saffron? Remember them! Wenwen ordered her nose.

“What are you...WHAT are you doing?” demanded the Indian man. “You think you are a walking stall? Is that what you are? Annoying sounds—is that what you

sell? You are not welcome!” The enraged man turned around and stormed back to his booth.

“What a funny little man!” exclaimed Wenwen, talking to herself out loud. She was deeply amused. The rich smell of spices made her feel tipsy. She wanted to follow the Indian man to his stall.

“You sell bells?” asked a voice behind Wenwen. The voice belonged to Yuling, the seller of jade.

Wenwen’s eyes were still fixed on the Indian man. She observed the way he sunk back into his seat and sulked like a teenager.

“Huh?” asked Wenwen without turning to look at the speaker.

“Why you sell bells?” Yuling asked the question with a curtness that would have insulted Wenwen except for the accent. Wenwen recognized the accent; it was the same one her mother had and she knew the curtness was a lack of vocabulary in a second language rather than rudeness. Wenwen turned to face the woman, who sure enough had Asian features. Her large, double-lid phoenix eyes were wrinkled at the tips, indicating a weathered beauty, a rose that had faded.

“If my daughter wear that outfit I won’t let her out of house!” commented Yuling.

Wenwen tilted her head to one side and contemplated the woman. Wenwen did not mind when people were frank. She merely wondered about the woman’s daughter and why she was not allowed to wear bells.

“I have a daughter just like you,” said Yuling. In her voice there was pride and melancholy at the same time. “She’s twenty.”

“I’m seventeen,” replied Wenwen.

“What you looking for?”

Wenwen scanned the display of rare stones on Yuling’s stall. There was agate, coral, jade, amethyst, amber, cat’s eye opal, rose quartz...

Yuling tried to read Wenwen’s expression and picked up a bracelet of rose quartz beads. “Love, perhaps? Rose stones always work for love.”

Wenwen shook her head.

“Bad luck?” guessed Yuling. Yuling showed her a pair of purple crystal earrings. “Amethyst had always been used to ward off evil aura.”

Again Wenwen shook her head. She was not looking for anything as specific as love or luck. “I’m looking for...” Wenwen strived for the suitable word.

Every Sunday, faithfully, Wenwen visited a flea market. This was her first time at this particular one.

“I don’t know,” admitted Wenwen. “I am looking for an answer, I suppose.”

“You want fortune teller,” observed Yuling. “A fortune cookie tell you what to do, your lucky number.”

“Maybe...”

“Only sad people want to know their fortune. They want to know they’ll become happy.” Yuling said this not judgmentally, just matter-of-factly, as if she had said, “After fall comes winter.”

Wenwen looked away. Was she sad? The bells on her body jingled, reminding her that she was not sad.

A jade bangle dangled on Yuling’s wrist. Jades were common adornments of Chinese women. Wenwen’s mother had one, too, a dark red one with impurity streaks

that looked like blood vessels. Yuling toyed with her bangle, which was of a rare black color and consistent in clarity.

“My mother gave this to me when I got married,” said Yuling, holding the jade closer to Wenwen’s face. “She said it was good luck. She said I was lucky to marry a man that would take me to America...was it good luck? Is it good luck to be able to give your children everything – everything I wouldn’t able to give them in China? Is it good luck to raise children that become strangers? That speak differently, act differently, think differently?”

Yuling looked into Wenwen’s eyes, as if searching for an answer. Wenwen had never stared so closely at another person. Even her bells dared not make music, and were still. She counted the silver strands in Yuling’s hair. One, two, three, four...she counted until four before she blinked. The bells on her eyebrow piercings broke the silence.

“I’m sorry,” said Wenwen.

Yuling wriggled her wrist out of the narrow bangle, leaving red marks all over her skin.

“You take this,” said Yuling, placing the jade into Wenwen’s hand. “Please. Perhaps it will help you find your answer. Or your question, at least.”

Wenwen looked up at Yuling.

“I was going to give it to my daughter today,” said Yuling, looking off into the distance. “She would have turned twenty today... She will not be needing this in the underworld. It is good to be able to give it to someone who might need it.”

Wenwen looked at the ground. It was only a few days ago that she heard of her father's death. A letter had arrived at her door. She was surprised at how short the letter was, explaining in a single paragraph that her father was deceased, and therefore the monthly checks that had barely supported her and her mother would no longer be arriving. He had left nothing behind. There was no information about a funeral, and there was no return address on the envelope. Just like that, the man Wenwen had never known became the man she would never know.

Wenwen had tried to tell her mother about her father's death. As usual, her mother did not seem to understand her words. Or perhaps, she had. Anyhow, she had responded by repeating the story about her blood-red jade.

"Your father gave this to me when we were still in China. It was the most expensive jade any girl in my village had ever received. Everyone fought for it and bled over it. That's why it's red instead of green, see?"

Wenwen had never understood that story, but now she had her own jade on her wrist. It dangled against her bracelet of bells and produced crisp, resonating sounds that made her think of waking up to the sound of birds.

The addition of the jade bangle to Wenwen's orchestra of bells created a new kind of music that was pleasant to her ears. She felt something settle inside her, the way she had felt when she had found her very first item in a flea market.

"I will cherish it well," said Wenwen to Yuling.

Wenwen started to walk away. Then, as an after thought she went back and gave Yuling a string of jade bells.

Wenwen would never forget the first time she visited a flea market. It was the day of the fourth grade spelling bee contest. The entire grade was required to participate in the contest and Wenwen had dutifully played her part—spelling out the letters under her breath when it was her turn, careful not to draw any extra attention.

She had never been good at anything and she hadn't expected to win, but suddenly she was the only one left on stage and the entire school was cheering for her. The shiny medal with the blue ribbon was put around her neck and for once she felt that people would look past her worn out clothes and shoes and see something different in her.

But when the bell rang people ran past her and she was left alone, under the spotlight, the heavy medal weighing down her neck. The brightness of the gold plate seemed suddenly humiliating because no one noticed it. She watched as her classmates ran toward the ice cream truck, the boys racing one another, the girls holding hands, leaving Wenwen behind, with no one to pair up with on her way home.

Wenwen's feet worked automatically toward the cluster of houses with tin roofs, located on a hillside forty minutes away, farther than anyone else had to walk to. Wenwen took this walk twice a day, always in solitude. It was a very long walk without any company, and every morning she thought about skipping school. But she always went, anyway.

“Hey!” a voice called out behind her and for a second Wenwen was filled with hope that someone wanted to talk to her. But it was only a kid calling out to a friend.

Her schoolmates walked past her, shoving her aside as easily as if she were dust. She was too insignificant and unnoticed even to be bullied.

As Wenwen walked she stared down at her dirty sneakers. Her two shoes appeared mismatched for she had used different colored threads for each time she mended its torn fabric. She did not look forward to her arrival home.

Wenwen's mother would not notice when she arrived home. She would be sitting quietly on the couch, her legs tucked neatly underneath her, or she'd be walking about the house, her feet on the ground making so little noise that she could have been floating—there were a number of ways her mother soundlessly occupied the house, but she never looked up when Wenwen called out to her. Wenwen had always thought that her mother resembled a queen—there was a regal poise to her every movement—but her mind was in some other place Wenwen could not enter.

Wenwen turned around and started running in the opposite direction. She would go anywhere but home.

Wenwen ran as fast as she could in her worn out sneakers. The purple, blue, green, and orange threads on her sneakers sprang in motion like a peacock in flight. The medal tied around her neck in blue ribbon slapped against her chest, harder and harder each time, pounding furiously on the door to her heart.

Wenwen ran until her legs refused to take her even one inch farther. By then there was a sharp pain on one side of her stomach and she did not recognize anything around her.

She seemed to have arrived at a strange place. The first thing she noticed was how unnaturally quiet her surrounding was. Although pedestrians and vehicles passed by

her, they seemed not to produce any sounds, making the place seem artificial and cold. The sky had darkened although not much time could have passed since she had gotten out of school at two. Everything in sight was blue, even the trees and the flowers, as if Wenwen were seeing the world through blue-shade glasses. She was reminded of an aquarium.

Wenwen made out a faint sound of laughter and people's chatter, coming from a distance. Wenwen turned in all directions to locate the sounds and tried to follow it. Light also came from the direction of the sound, a relief to the ubiquitous blueness. It was an exit. Wenwen followed the sounds and lights, navigating her way slowly out the aquarium, until she found herself outside a wired fence.

It was a small flea market. There were less than fifteen booths, yet there was so much to see, the square fenced area a universe in itself. Each little stand made up a galaxy with its wide variety of objects. The vendors welcomed Wenwen with warm smiles, inviting her to look and touch and ask questions.

She had taken home a Victorian banquet lamp. The lamp had for its base a stork, with its bill facing upward. It was a mean-looking thing, so ugly that it was sold almost for free. But there was something proud and self-sufficient about the stork that Wenwen liked. The vendor looked at her with gratitude as she walked away with the large bird.

When she walked out of the fence this time the blueness was gone. The sky was clear, the way it was supposed to be on a sunny afternoon. Wenwen could feel people turning to look at her as she walked the many miles home carrying the large fixture, and she felt her steps become lighter.

The lamp was placed at the center of Wenwen's empty living room floor, where the stork pointed its bill up at the ceiling and refused to look at anyone. How different things appeared with the stork-lamp centerpiece. It transformed the bare features of the room—the old television set, the Japanese Fortune Cat figurine extending her paw toward the door, her mother talking to herself on the deflated sofa—and turned the place into a museum featuring a proud Victorian stork. Wenwen put her blue-ribboned medallion around the stork's neck.

Wenwen hadn't a memory, a photo, or even an address of her father. The only linkage she had to him, was the odd anecdotes her mother related, again and again.

“Your father was an animal scientist. He loved big cats. Once he was bitten by two large lions in a jungle and he almost died.”

“Your father's beard was a waterfall. It took me years to discover the secret it concealed: right behind it were all the smells of a rainbow.”

And then, the one time he had sent her a gift. It was on her eighth birthday.

“From your father,” her mother had said, handing her a small package. It was wrapped in crumpled violet paper with marks of having been previously used. Her mother dropped the present into Wenwen's lap and walked away without another word, and without even a backward glance to see what the package contained.

Wenwen tore open her present with deliberate slowness. It was the first present she had ever received, and her hands trembled in excitement. She wished there was a second layer of wrapping, or a box to open, anything to elongate the experience, but

the presents had been lay bare before her, as soon as the purple wrapping was removed. There were three socks and a Mother Goose nursery rhyme book.

The socks were nestled one inside another, like Russian dolls. A pink sock for newborns was stuffed within a lacey dress sock, which in turn was put inside an orange-and-yellow striped snuggle sock. Wenwen wore the dress sock on one foot and the striped one on the other. The tiny pink sock, smaller than her palm, she had safeguarded in her chest pocket.

The nursery rhyme was a used book, the edges of the thick cardboard pages already dampened by humidity or a toddler's gnawing gums. Wenwen did not recognize any of the songs inside, as her mother had never learned to read in English. Occasionally her mom hummed songs from her homeland, but even then she sang more to herself than to Wenwen. There were drawings of happy children with round noses and button eyes. They smiled in their sleep, as if someone outside the pages had tucked them in and kissed them goodnight.

"He knows about me, after all," Wenwen whispered to herself, like it was a secret. It was a secret because if she had told anyone, they would have suggested that the crumpled wrapping paper was from a wine bottle her mother bought the previous day. Then it would no longer have been a secret.

"Ride a cock-horse to Banbury Cross, to see a fine lady upon a white horse," read Wenwen. She liked the way the words sounded on her tongue, as if they were taking her to a foreign land. "With rings on her fingers and bells on her toes, she shall have music wherever she goes." She had read and reread the songs in the book, as if the rhymes would reveal to her a secret map, if only she were able to decipher the words.

The three-toothed lady looked up to the sounds of bells approaching.

She pointed at her cans with wrinkled fingers and misshaped, dirty nails. “For you or for your cats?” she asked in a raspy voice.

“I thought these were cat food?”

“Doesn’t hurt to take a bite or two yourself from time to time,” said the old lady with a wild chuckle.

The Russian Blues extended their claws and scratched Wenwen’s socks.

“Hey!” protested Wenwen. But the cats only got more excited, now standing up on their hind legs and snarling at her. Fish flake stuck to their face and whiskers, like partly devoured prey still hanging outside the predators’ mouths.

The old lady gave a crazy laugh. “Perhaps if you give them one of your bells they’ll calm down.”

Wenwen removed a string of gray bells with painted mice faces from her waist and threw it to the ground. The three fat cats pounded on one another to claim ownership to the bells. Eeeeeek! Eeeeeek! the mouse-bells squeaked.

The old lady flashed Wenwen another three-toothed grin. “Ah, much better.”

“Well.” Wenwen hesitated about what she had in mind. “Could I take a picture with your cats?”

The Russian Blues looked up at Wenwen, as if they understood. Two of them had either end of the strung bells between their teeth and was at a game of tug o’ war. The third used its front paw to play with the bells.

“Sure,” said the cat lady. “But you need to buy some cat food. Free photo with purchase of fifteen cans.”

Wenwen wondered what she would do with fifteen cans of cat food—if she even had enough money to pay for them. She looked down at her yellow sock with purple hearts. A few threads had already come loose from where the cats had scratched. She removed the sock and added it to the cats’ playthings.

The three cats discovered the secret of pulling at the loose threads to unravel the sock and purred in delight.

“Well,” said the old lady, with new pleasure in her voice. “I suppose I can’t take your gifts for free. A picture with my cats it is.”

A man with a Polaroid around his neck came over. He was such a thin man that the weight of the camera seemed to make him stoop forward, but he had an energetic, cheerful voice.

“Picture? Picture?” There was a small sign glued to his Polaroid that read “fifty cents per picture.”

Wenwen kneeled on the floor and took a picture with the three fat cats. The cats bared their teeth in good spirits at the camera.

Wenwen went to the Indian man’s booth of spices. She couldn’t stand the thought of him hating her. She could not leave the flea market without at least trying to make him like her.

Wenwen noticed that he had been staring at a woman in an enchantress outfit with a look of satisfaction, but as soon as she neared him his entire body tensed up.

“I want to buy some spices,” said Wenwen.

The turbaned-man put his hands over his ears and grunted. It was girl with the annoying bells again. “Which one?” he said without looking up.

“I want...” Wenwen blushed. “I want the flavors on your beard.”

“You want my beard!” The Indian man stood up. “You want my beard! Here!” The man pulled out his beard towards Wenwen. “How about you take a pair of scissors and cut it?” The Indian man threw his hands up in the air.

“I’m so sorry.” Wenwen’s face was burning. “Your beard...” Wenwen hesitated a second before continuing. “It brings me memories...of...my father.”

The man’s facial expression softened. “Why do you have so many bells anyway?” he said rather menacingly, although it was his way of being friendly.

“It lets people know I’m here.”

“Hmph. So if I tell you the ingredients in my marinated beard you’ll leave me? Eh? You’ll promise to give me some peace and quiet?”

The Indian man, who wasn’t as unkind as he wanted people to think, or perhaps because he could think of no other way to get rid of the annoying bells, painstakingly sniffed out the flavors that had been mixed into his beard. Wenwen left carrying bottles of poppy seed, black salt, yellow pepper, rose water, and sour mango powder. She offered to pay, but the Indian man dismissed her with a wave.

The enchantress in the yellow robe stood motionless on one foot in a yoga position, with her palms together as if in prayer. A wand with a star at its tip stood erect between her palms. Only her eyes moved and they flickered toward Wenwen as she passed by.

Wenwen pulled off two red bells from around her ankles. The bells were connected by stems and looked like miniature cherries. Wenwen dropped the pair of fruits into the pail of coins and the enchantress sprung into life. She did a little dance, waving her wand in the air. With a flick of her wrist the wand disappeared before Wenwen's eyes. The enchantress held out a pink heart for Wenwen. It was a tiny little thing, about the size of Wenwen's pinky nail. Wenwen picked up her gift and was surprised to find that the heart produced a gentle rattle. It was a heart-shaped bell. The enchantress smiled at Wenwen.

Wenwen bent down to string the heart around her ankle. Then on second thought she stopped what she was doing and walked back to the Indian Man.

Wenwen felt for the photo she had taken with the cats in her pocket. Let us imagine her walking the many miles home later that day, carrying her various acquisitions. When she arrives her mother might or might not look up to the sound of her now three-hundred-and-seventy-four bells—for she had given away eight. She would give the photo and the spices to her mother as a present. Perhaps her mother would relay another story.

“Back already?” asked the Indian man, although there might have been a hint of humor in his voice.

Wenwen gave him the heart-shaped bell. “From the enchantress,” she said.

The corners of the Indian man's lips curled upward. He joined his palms together and lowered his head in a bow.

Duende (novel in-progress)

Novel Synopsis

On Las Ramblas, a street of performing artists in Barcelona, juggler Fernando falls in love with a ballerina statue, which he names Lena. Lena comes alive one night, and thus begins their nightly rendezvous, ending each dawn when Lena turns back to stone.

Despite Fernando's many efforts, Lena does not return his love. She questions the meaning of human existence and lacks the desire to lead a human life until she meets flamenco dancer Alexeis. There is immediate attraction between Alexeis and Lena, to the dismay of Fernando and Alexeis's past lover, Natalya.

Natalya is the only one who knows about Alexeis's true identity as the Duende, a soul-eating demon. Controlled by Alexeis's powers, Natalya cannot share her knowledge. She is forced to witness Alexeis's endless game of seducing and destroying women, all the while unable to break free from her own feelings for him.

Natalya sets out to discover the strong force of attraction between Alexeis and Natalya. She seeks the aid of a psychic, and learns that history between Lena and Alexeis traces back to their past lives. In nineteenth century Paris, a secret love existed between the Duende and a poor ballerina girl. Unable to save the girl from small pox, the Duende retained her soul in marble, knowing that they would be

reunited one day when a sculptor carved out a ballerina statue. The psychic also reveals that the only way to destroy the Duende is through killing Lena.

Natalya plots an intricate scheme to murder Lena and tricks an unsuspecting Fernando into executing the plan. Believing that he is acting out of selfless love, Fernando steals the golden apple of immortality for Lena. Lena eagerly receives the gift that would allow her to remain forever young beside the Duende, not knowing that the apple was poisoned.

Natalya regrets her actions, but it is too late. As poison seeps into Lena's veins, the Duende, too, grows weak. In the final seconds before death, the Duende fossilizes Lena back into her statue form. He, however, fades away forever.

Chapter 1

They were acrobats and singers, flamenco dancers and magicians, florists, painters, illusionists, and, in Fernando's case, a juggler. They were a people dressed up in the primary bright colors that tourists equated with the vitality of Barcelona, people who entertained and were especially loved by children. "The Street Artists of Las Ramblas," the tour books called them, although, somehow, they were never regarded as "real" artists.

They worked from dusk, taking posts along the famous street stretched out for 1.2 kilometers between the Mediterranean Sea and Plaza de Catalunya, until the City Hall clock struck midnight. That was when the human statues stepped off their pedestals and the vendors locked up their carts. The tourists and locals—the "audience," according to Fernando and his friends—were reminded that it was time to head home. It was time to let the performers and vendors rest.

Children held on to their mamas and papas, and looking back over their shoulders, were gently led away from this kaleidoscope-like street dotted with glimpses of the real and the fantastical, sometimes hard to distinguish from one another. Somewhere, lurking behind one of the antique buildings on either side of the street, was a dragon. Vines crept their way from a rooftop on one side of the street to the other, creating a space that reminded one of a rainforest.

On this particular night one little boy took a last glimpse behind him at the street. He had spotted the fire-eater. A yellow flame traveled down the fire-eater's throat. The glowing light descended little by little until it nestled comfortably against the

curvature of the stomach. Like a firefly, the fire-eater illuminated the night. The little boy tugged at his mother's sleeve, pointed his finger for her to look, but by the time she turned around the fire-eater had vanished into the background. The mother of the little boy shrugged, thinking that they had reached beyond the point where the street and its contents were visible, where only an impressionistic blur of colors remained.

The mother and child continued walking along one of the many dark alleys that extended outwards from Las Ramblas like fishbones, one of the many paths that carried people home. Every couple, every family, every solitary man and woman had a preferred route to exit away from the street and return into their private worlds, and in this way Las Ramblas emptied each night.

The street performers—all save for Fernando—left by the sea-end of the street. They filed out in one direction, toward Rambla del Mar, and disappeared into the horizon where land and the Mediterranean Sea met.

“Nando!” they called out affectionately, as they waved their juggler friend goodbye. Some walked over and playfully messed Fernando's hair. They took pleasure in doing that to their small friend, who was born with dwarfism, and had a large head with a prominent forehead that reached only to their waists. They thought of Nando as a little brother although he was older than most of them.

No one ever saw Fernando leave. No one knew where he went, once Las Ramblas fell into slumber. Like a school of fish in Brazilian-carnival-like costumes, the street artists of Las Ramblas sashayed towards the moonlight spilled upon the Mediterranean.

Once the street emptied—it did not take long, it was usually a quarter to one around this time—Fernando slung his canvas bag diagonally across his shoulders and rode off toward the opposite end of the street on his kid-sized bike. The bottom of the bag hung almost touching the ground. In his bag he carried knives, flammable juggling balls, gas lighters, and torches. He carried a ladder under his arm.

A solitary life he led, this Fernando, with only two long lines of plane trees planted along the longitude of the street as companions, following him as he rode.

He reached his destination at the street's entrance, called so because it was the end closer to the center of the city. He stopped before a statue of a ballerina. She was life size, made of white marble, and faced the street. She stood upon a pedestal.

Across from the statue, a man had made a home underneath a bench. The man had a single yellow eye that glowed in the darkness. A thick thread ran through the lid of his other eye, which was sewn shut in an uneven line, the handwork of a careless person.

Fernando felt the yellow eye always upon him, wide and alert, observing his every move.

The sculpture stood in a perfect arabesque, balancing on one leg en pointe, the other leg extended behind her. One arm reached behind, in parallel to her raised leg, the other arm extended at a forty-five degree before her, as if reaching toward something, and in the direction of her gaze. Her chin lifted upward while her eyelashes cast to the ground, making her appear proud but sad.

“Good evening,” said Fernando, bowing with one arm crossed over his waist. He could have been inviting the lady to dance.

It gave Fernando great pleasure to see his statue. For an entire week he had made himself ride past the ballerina without so much as a glimpse in her direction, because of a promise he had made. But he could not keep himself away a minute longer. He positioned the ladder next to the statue.

From his canvas bag Fernando took out a bottle of marble cleaner. He applied the liquid to a clean piece of cloth. He took one step up the ladder and, eye level with the ballerina's knee, started to wipe the foot she balanced on. He applied extra force to the ballet slipper ribbon, where there was a tiny speck of pigeon shit. He had been doing this job for so long, ever since his Papa died when he was sixteen, that his mind had memorized the arch of her fully stretched instep. He felt the veins and muscles on her calf—so fine was the sculptor's work.

For twenty-four years he had been secretly caring over the ballerina statue. No one on Las Ramblas took notice of her. Not even the Barcelona City councils took the effort to take care of their public art displays. Fernando took it upon himself to look after the statue, whom he had privately named Lena. He asked nothing in return, and certainly he did not anticipate to be given anything, until something unexpected occurred around nine months ago.

He worked his way upward toward her thighs. The ballet skirt carved out of marble had the weightless appearance of silk, and Fernando lightened his touch as if he might break the fragile layer of wrap around the ballerina's waist.

His hands moved to the statue's small, perfect breasts, flattened against the tight material of her leotard. Since the first time Fernando saw the ballerina he had grown into a middle-aged man, the tips of his black sideburns turned silver, the lines on his

dark face accentuated into an expression that was sometimes hard. But the statue had remained the same. Almost.

If you looked closely you could see fine lines forming around the corner of her lips and the tips of her eyes. Weather cracks, people said, but Fernando knew otherwise. Also, just to be objective—not that he cared the least bit—he thought that the ballerina’s breasts had sagged a little.

A soft sigh escaped the statue’s lips, responding to the hands resting upon her breasts, and Fernando smiled. The marble started feeling warmer and the texture of her skin softened. Fernando felt tiny rhythmic heaves under his palm. Color rose to the surface of the statue’s skin, a healthy, rosy color. Fernando put his hands on the ballerina’s waist, and her weight fell against him, the delicate balance of the arabesque position lost as she turned into flesh.

The ballerina seated herself on the pedestal, as always needing a few minutes to rest her muscles.

“Couldn’t they have given me an easier position to stand in all day?” she complained, massaging her calves. A paradoxical remark, because she had no awareness as a statue, and thus felt no pain. It was only when she turned to flesh that her body retroactively registered the toll of fixating in a single position.

Her hair, which a few seconds ago had been nothing more than carvings upon white marble, an attempt to mimic a tight bun, had unraveled itself, falling down her shoulders in wavy auburn locks.

“Lena,” said Fernando with a sigh, as if her name alone were the beginning and ending of a conversation. Every blink of Lena’s emerald eyes and every movement of

her auburn hair in the night wind reminded him of her newfound mortality. Her flushing cheeks and pained expression announced her susceptibility to bleed, to hurt, and to age

“Shall we go?” Fernando asked, extending his hand in invitation. She placed her hand over his, smiling shyly as she always did, since the first time they met. She took three steps toward him, her toes feeling the ground before she put down each foot. Nine months after Lena first came alive she still appeared—to Fernando—new, hesitant, each night she reentered the world.

Leaving his ladder next to the now empty pedestal Fernando got back on his bike, this time with Lena side saddled on the back seat, and rode toward his room three streets away.

We must be a funny sight, thought Fernando, a dwarfish man riding a kiddie bike with a beautiful woman twice his height behind him. Thankfully Lena had the gracefulness of a true ballerina and was able to easily keep her legs raised above the ground for the entire ten-minute ride.

Lena rested her cheek on Fernando’s back and played with the rolls of fat on his stomach. It was a gesture out of habit. The man who brought her to life each night was her only friend, her only window to the animate world. Her hands were drawn naturally to his body, the way a baby duck attaches itself to the first creature it opens its eyes to.

“I have missed you,” Fernando said into the night air as they rode past the fountain in Plaça de Catalunya. “This past week has been a complete torture.”

He regretted his words as soon as they were out of his mouth. Almost immediately he sensed a change of attitude in Lena. She withdrew her hands and made a little space between herself and Fernando.

How stupid of him! Lena did not understand what it was to “miss” someone. Her two existences were completely separate. When she was human she was human, weak as any mortal, susceptible to the physical pains of all dancers the second she gained consciousness. When she was a statue she did not feel the world around her. She had no memories of Fernando or awareness of time passing. She could not have known whether a week or a year had passed if he had not told her.

From the back of the bicycle Lena let out a long, dispirited sigh. “You promised you would come less often...” she said, her voice trailing off midsentence.

She spoke in Catalan, Fernando’s own tongue, but with a slight accent. Fernando thought the accent could be French, which seemed natural somehow, since she was a ballerina. The language had been within her, flawless, since the first time she had spoken.

Her words, though conveyed as gently as possible, pierced Fernando. “I could not keep myself away,” he pleaded. “Forgive me.”

They reached the building where Fernando lived, located in a very narrow lane without streetlights. The only illumination was the waxing gibbous moon. Fernando brought the bicycle to a stop, not knowing how to proceed.

“Forget what I said,” said Lena. “Let’s enjoy the night while it lasts.”

But her words had poisoned the mood, the expectations. As he breathed the floral scent from the nape of her neck and buried himself into all the hollows of her flesh,

he felt that he was hurting her somehow, placing his own pleasure before her happiness. He was filled with a deep sense of guilt, even as she so naturally guided him deep within her.

Lena moaned and dug her fingers into his back. Her body responded with no reserve, no self-consciousness. But was he the one she would choose to lay beside, if she had the choice? The question haunted Fernando constantly.

At the end of the night they were drained, the sheets underneath them damp and uncomfortable. They both felt the other shifting around, wanting to get away from the bed but being lazy.

The blue moonlight came in through the window and shone a streak across the bed. Lena studied her reflection in a hand mirror, tracing the tiny lines on her face. No one, taking one look at Lena's dark thick lashes and bright green eyes, would notice anything but her heavenly beauty, but to Lena those first hints of wrinkles might as well be acid corroding her skin.

Since a month ago she started asking Fernando to awaken her less often, so that she might age more slowly. She said that stones were meant to lead much longer lives, and that she was giving up too much for her half human existence. What irony, thought Fernando, for she was becoming more human than she knows, susceptible to the vanity of mankind. The first time he had shown her a mirror, how she had laughed at the idea of spending so much time on oneself when there was so much else to experience in the world.

"How often do you want me to come to you?" asked Fernando, knowing he sounded cross, fearing her answer.

It displeased him that he could not see Lena every night. Lena tucked and untucked a strand of hair behind one ear, experimenting the different effects on her reflection. It was a vain and worldly gesture, one that filled Fernando with desire and pride for Lena's beauty.

As far as he knew, he was the only one who could bring about the miracle of her being. He tried to repress the thought that she belonged to him. A monstrous idea manifested itself sometimes, and would not go away: What Lena wanted didn't really matter. What was Lena, after all, but a manmade statue? She didn't even know the differences between the passing of a year, a month, or a week, not unless he told her.

Yet the thought that Lena might not want him, not even as a guardian or friend, and would go so far as to avoid his company, filled Fernando with a sense of impotence. He had never had a woman in his life—not that he had not wanted to, but he was a shy, serious man, self-conscious of his comical physique. Out of habit he had observed life from a safe distance.

He wanted more than what they had now. He wanted her not to simply humor him or oblige him, but to *desire* him. He wanted from her what he felt for her.

Perhaps he was being an old fool, with too many romantic fantasies.

Lena put down the mirror and turned to look at Fernando. She had yet to answer his question of how often they could see one another. It did not occur to her that she had great power over the man before him. She simply knew, by experience, that she got whatever she wanted.

These evening rendezvouses were pleasant and pleasurable. Her body still felt new to her, and the simple gesture of pointing her toes or stretching her arms into the

fifth ballet position sent shivers through her muscles. Sex was almost like a dance: one followed a certain rhythm and allowed the body, rather than the mind, to lead. She had a natural talent for it, she could tell, just as she was an adroit ballet dancer. These were the traits that made up her statue, and became part of who she was as a human.

And yet...

Her large eyes danced from side to side, calculating, the idea of hiding one's expression foreign to her. She was torn between a childlike affection for Fernando and a feeling she could not name.

She is by nature tenderhearted, thought Fernando. She does not want to hurt me.

"Statues aren't supposed to age," she answered, with just enough human experience to know that this was the less hurtful excuse. A pause, and then she added, as if to lessen the blow. "If only you didn't, either."

Fernando looked away, knowing there was no use in arguing, since she could not understand. "Well, I do. A day or a week apart may not have any difference for you, but it has all the difference to me," he said gently.

"I'm sorry..." said Lena. The wrong answer. Only Fernando did not know what the right answer would be.

Fernando picked up his watch from the side table. The hands read three o five. Since it was summertime they had, perhaps, two more hours before Lena returned to stone.

"Shall I cook something for you?" asked Fernando, rising from the bed.

There was only a wooden table to divide the bed from the kitchen. From the fridge Fernando took out a bowl of wild mushrooms, green onions, and spinach. He brought out milk, goat cheese, and three eggs.

“What are we eating tonight?” asked Lena, creeping towards the side of the bed that was closer to the kitchen, wanting to see.

“Quiche.”

“What’s that?”

“You’ll see,” said Fernando, preheating the oven.

He sautéed the fresh shiitakes, black trumpets, morels, and chanterelles in melted butter, adding green onions, garlic, and goat cheese. These he spooned into a piecrust. He poured a mixture of eggs, milk, salt and pepper into the filling and placed the pie into the oven.

“How long?” asked Lena.

“About twenty minutes.”

Lena came over and sat at the only table in the room, covering her lean body only with the bed sheet, and only loosely, from the waist and below. Her pink leotard, skirt, pantyhose, and ballet shoes laid in a pile at the foot of the bed.

Deciding on something, Lena leaned over and picked up the pantyhose, sliding first one leg in, then the other, and in one swift movement pulled it up her waist as smoothly as if it were part of her body. She put on the ballet shoes, crisscrossing the pink ribbons over her ankles. She stepped into her leotard, pulling the straps over her shoulders. She wrapped the skirt around her waist and tied it in a casual bow on the side.

Fernando helped her push the table towards the refrigerator, making a small space between the stove and the bed. The created area was around four or six pedestals, the ones seen on Las Ramblas, pieced together. Lena started to dance.

She opened her arms, parallel to the floor, and looked toward the tip of her right hand. One pointed foot was crossed behind the other, and in this manner, always one foot crossed behind the other, she took a few strides forward, simultaneously raising one arm to the air. Her eyes followed her right arm, her gaze always in the direction of her movements. Depending on the path of her steps she either lifted her chin in the air proudly or lowered her head in sadness, so that even her eyelashes conveyed melancholy. Although there was no music Fernando could feel the melody she was following, heard it in the rhythm of her every gesture. In one bold step forward she stood on one leg on her toes and raised the other leg behind her, bringing one arm parallel to the raised leg, the other extended at forty-five degrees before her, ending in the familiar arabesque.

All too quickly both feet were back on the ground, the ending position gone as soon as Fernando started to think how beautiful the human body was. He clapped fervently.

“Bravo!”

Lena smiled, without looking directly at Fernando. “Thank you,” she said, and returned to the table.

“Which do you prefer? The static pose of a perfect arabesque, or the one I did just now—in motion but lasting only a second?”

“In other words, the statue you or the human you?”

Lena looked away.

“You know my answer,” said Fernando.

The quiche was ready. Fernando took it out of the oven and put it on the table between them. Lena sent a bite into her mouth and opened her eyes wide in wonder.

“Amazing!” she said.

“You like it?”

She put another bite into her mouth. “Food is one of the best parts of being human,” she said with her mouth full.

Fernando was a good cook, and Lena never tired of sending a spoonful of food in her mouth, discovering flavors so different from what she expected. There was always something new to taste.

Fernando watched Lena eat up half the quiche. She cut the tart into small bites before sending each piece delicately into her mouth. She smiled at Fernando as she chewed, her satisfaction evident. Sometimes it seemed that this was enough, that he could watch her eat.

Lena picked up a book from the floor. The cover showed twelve schoolgirls wearing large hats, with the backdrop of the Eiffel Tower. Lena’s literacy skills were perfect since the beginning, and over the past nine months she had read many number of books, including *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, *A Hundred Years of Solitude*, *Don Quixote*, *Jane Eyre*, and *Pride and Prejudice*. But her personal favorite were books with pictures. She knew they were for children, but felt drawn to them.

She traced the picture of the little girls with her forefinger, imagining what it was like to go to school, to have adventures with friends. She had not seen much beyond

the Las Ramblas, Nando's apartment, and the sights they passed by upon his bicycle. She would never have a childhood, she thought sadly.

There were many books on Fernando's bookshelf, pages and pages Lena had slowly gone through. She learned a great deal from these books—how people lived out their lives, what people valued, the things people did to one another.

She learned that people were afraid of dying. They were willing to do almost anything to postpone death.

She learned that above everything else, human beings valued love. Love was something worth giving up everything for, even dying for. People did crazy, irrational things for the people they loved. She did not feel this way toward Fernando. It scared her to think this way, because she felt that was what she ought to feel.

How could she explain these thoughts to Fernando? He was such a sensitive man, and so protective of her. She disliked seeing him sad.

A selfish idea had come to Lena since she discovered the lines slowly forming on her skin. She wanted to preserve her beauty for the man that made her feel like the characters in the novels. She wanted to remain young.

“Are you happy with me?” Fernando asked suddenly.

Lena looked up from her book. He had asked her this question many times, always with a seriousness and fragileness that made her say that yes, she was happy with him.

“I would like to meet other people,” she said, the words coming out surprisingly assertive. She glanced again at the twelve girls in two straight lines. They looked so happy, the way they walked together as a group. Their eyes twinkled with mischief,

aware that the whole world was watching them, envious of the secrets they shared.

“What about your friends on Las Ramblas? Can I meet them?”

It was as he feared, thought Fernando. Naturally she craved the company of others. She was no longer merely a statue people walked past without noticing.

He would introduce her to new friends. It didn't mean that she would leave him, he told himself.

While the sky was still black Fernando took Lena back to her pedestal on Las Ramblas. The street was completely silent. He could hear her breathing. Let the sun never rise, thought Fernando, a silent plea each time as darkness faded away.

Lena climbed up the pedestal.

“Thank you,” she said, smiling, “for tonight.” She did not say more, but Fernando knew that she was slipping away from him. Next to Lena, who stood tall upon the pedestal, Fernando felt shorter than usual, powerless. As tempting as the world was, Lena was always eager to return to her state of immortality.

From behind them the sun had begun to wake the city. Only Las Ramblas's part of Barcelona was still asleep, but soon the sunrays would reach the street, and Lena's pedestal would be the first to be touched.

Lena raised on her toes and positioned her arms and legs into an arabesque. Daylight was nearing them, and with it, Lena would be taken away from Fernando. Lena smiled down at him. Sunlight touched her foot. What had been a soft, pink ballet shoe turned back to marble, and with it, the skin, the veins, and the blood that ran through. Lena's white, clear skin turned to stone; her auburn hair, falling upon her

shoulders, returned to the solid bun at the top of her head. She was reset into her usual position, gazing toward the Mediterranean.

It did not matter if she were sitting down while she waited for the sun to arrive. It did not matter even if she were somewhere else. Once the rays of the sun reached the pedestal on Las Ramblas, the statue reappeared, same as it had always been, since 1915.

Chapter 2

On the same night Fernando made a quiche for Lena, a very different story unfolded a little distance from Las Ramblas.

In a lively bar in Barceloneta, an olive-skinned woman with well-defined features and wavy black hair watched the flirtations between a man and a woman from a distance. The observer's name was Natalya, a flamenco dancer on Las Ramblas. The man, who had the same olive-toned skin and distinct face, was Natalya's dance partner, Alexeis. The woman with him was petite, Asian. She tossed her head back in laughter at something Alexeis had said and sipped from her Martini glass. Alexeis placed one hand carelessly on the small of the woman's waist and Natalya felt a familiar pang of coldness in her stomach. She bit her lip and swallowed back the desire for Alexeis. She should know better, after all these years. She had to focus. There was something she had to do.

Natalya waited impatiently for a chance to catch the Asian woman alone. She had to warn her about Alexeis.

At long last the woman got up from her seat and Natalya followed her to the bathroom. Natalya thrust the bathroom door open violently. The petite woman turned back in surprise.

"You must leave now," said Natalya hurriedly. "There is no time to explain. Leave now, while you can."

Alexeis will ruin you, Natalya wanted to add, but couldn't. He will steal your soul. You have no idea who you are dealing with here. Natalya struggled to explain these

things but no voice came out her throat. She couldn't even mouth the words. Her brain sent the simple sequence of words to her lips, but the muscles on her face refused to deliver. Her entire body was Alexeis's tool against herself. When she tried to write or gesture the truth about him her body paralyzed, leaving her helpless against the prison of her being. It was a lost cause, a futile effort of a mortal woman trying to triumph against the Duende. But she could not do nothing.

The petite woman narrowed her eyes at Natalya. Recognition came to her eyes. "Oh...I know who you are. You are his crazy ex-lover, Natalya. Yea, he warned me about you. Get out of my way!"

Her words carried a strong accent. A foreigner, of course. Alexeis chose his targets carefully, always aiming those who were alone, who would not be missed until it was far too late to trace anything back to a casual one-night-stand.

The woman shoved Natalya aside and entered a stall. Natalya was not about to give up, even if she had failed every time before. She did this every night. Alexeis changed women frequently, and not one of them had ever escaped. Natalya always tried to warn the women.

Luckily there was no one else in the bathroom with them. Natalya locked the bathroom door from the outside.

It wasn't long before the petite woman was banging against the doorframe. "Let me out you crazy bitch!" she shouted. "Help! Someone help me!"

The prey always acted this way. So ignorant, and who could blame them? Most people didn't even know what a soul was until it was taken from them.

Women whose souls had been stolen by the Duende were everywhere. They were the ones who walked with blank expressions, that often appeared drunk, or to be sleepwalking. They strode barefoot in the snow, oblivious of the cold. When talked to they responded normally, and some even went on with their lives, caring for their children or earning a living.

But these women had lost what was most important to their existences, something they hadn't even been aware of possessing. For some it was a sensitivity, a certain way of viewing life or sense of humor. For others, it was a facial expression, a laughter, a certain manner of holding herself.

Many of these soulless women were prostitutes or beggars, people in the lowest rank of society. It was almost expected that they would show up one day and be a lesser, emptier version of what they had been. But Natalya could always tell when a woman had lost her soul.

Natalya heard the muffled cry from the other side of the door, but the Asian woman's voice was completely drowned in the chaos of the bar. It was two AM and the bar was vigorous as ever with loud music and the noise of people's laughter and beer filling glass after glass. No one would hear her.

Alexeis found Natalya before anyone came for the women's bathroom. He saw her blocking the doorway. An amused smile spread across his face.

Alexeis moved slowly toward Natalya until his forehead was pressed against hers. Natalya turned her cheek to one side so as to avoid his gaze. He breathed down her neck, a damp warmth tinged with sweet alcohol. His hollowed cheeks gave him a deceptively frail aura. His gangly physique, unshaved face, and languid body-

language all contributed to a sense of quiet passiveness. Here was a man that blended easily into a crowd.

Only Alexeis's clear marine eyes gave away his true persona. They were quick, alert, active. In one gulp they swallowed you whole into an ocean that was as deep as it was unknown. And when you looked into them Alexeis's dispirited manner was all of a sudden cast under a different light. An impatient restlessness lay right beneath the camouflage, a disquiet soul that plotted and waited with all the beauty of a carnivore.

One feature stood out, at odds with the rest of Alexeis's appearance. A long scar ran from the tip of his left eye to the corner of his mouth.

"Male's bathroom is that way," said Natalya without any humor.

"You must be kidding me," he said, the smile on his face spreading wider.

"Let me out!" The woman banged against the door on the other side.

"Get out of the way, Natalya," said Alexeis, no longer smiling. "Stop making a fool of yourself and wasting my time."

"Let me go," said Natalya. "Let me free and I promise I won't be in your way any longer. I don't care if you take a million souls. It would have nothing to do with me."

A shudder went down Natalya's spine as she heard herself say those words. If there were a hell, she would go to it for saying those words. But she already lived in hell, so who cared.

Alexeis smiled again. "Ah, the selfishness of weak souls. Very good, Natalya. I am impressed. I will think about it. Now get out of my way." With these very words Natalya felt a strong force pierce through her body and in a sudden burst of violence

her body hit against the floor. A shot of pain ran through the left side of her body. It would hardly be the first time if she had broken a few ribs.

She watched as Alexeis walked away with the petite woman in his embrace. He turned back to look in her direction, a contemptuous smile on his face. There was nothing she could do. In the morning, after Alexeis had completed his project, her body would be well again. Until then there was nothing she could do.

As for the woman with Alexeis, she would enjoy a night of revelry. Perhaps Alexeis would give her two nights, or even a week. But in the end the women all shared the same destiny. She would come out of her short period of bliss changed, unfamiliar to those who cared about her.

What happened to you, the woman's family and friends would ask. You don't seem to be yourself. You no longer like orange truffles? But they used to be your favorite!

The soulless woman herself would hardly know what had been robbed of her. She would not remember a man named Alexeis, not even if she saw him again.

Chapter 3

Fernando rode through the narrow streets in the Barri Gotic with Lena in the backseat. The Gothic architectures, their spires extending toward the sky, filled Fernando with an endearing sense of being trapped inside a dark womb. His body shifted weight in anticipation of a sharp turn even before the corner became visible, for this labyrinth was part of his upbringing, part of the city he was nurtured in. Although these cobbled streets were like an extension of his body, there still remained that thrilling illusion of being lost, that danger of becoming engulfed by these dirty walls engraved with history.

Two weeks had passed since the night of quiche. Their conflicts remained. Fernando sensed Lena become unhappier each time. He would surrender her to the rest of the world soon. But not tonight. There were still so many things he wanted to show her.

How many times had he rode through these very streets, alone, wishing he had someone to share his thoughts with?

Coming from behind stone brick walls, Fernando heard stumbling footsteps of drunkards finding their way home and intimate whispers of couples in the excitement of fresh love. Many streets away, perhaps outside the Barri, the shouts and laughter of young people engaged in a botellón could be heard. By daybreak empty bottles and drunk teenagers would be found all over the sidewalks, and only then would the fiesta come to a temporary end. There were so many sounds in Barri Gotic, sounds

belonging to people just behind a wall, where Fernando could not see. A private place within a public space—this was what Fernando loved about the Barri.

Not trusting himself to say anything, Fernando listened for Lena's silence and tried to understand it. Was she impressed by the Roman ruins, dating back to the twelfth century? What did she think of Catedral de la Santa Creu i Santa Eulàlia, with its gargoyles of dragons, unicorns, and medieval warriors?

"Some of these building date as far back as the twelfth century," offered Fernando timidly.

"Hmm," mumbled Lena, not bothering to stifle a yawn.

Fernando's heart dropped to his stomach. Why—why did a yawn have such power over him? He had failed yet again. The hills of El Carmel, the surreal Gaudi architectures at Parc Guell, the top of Montjuic—none of those places had stirred any interest in Lena, and still she maintained that she'd rather be a statue, frozen in perfection, than be human, subject to aging and the loss of beauty. What was this lethargy towards life—this utter indifference? He had managed to awaken the ballerina statue, to give her life. She moved, she talked, she danced, she even had sex with him, but still something was missing.

"Are you tired?" Fernando inquired nervously.

"No," answered Lena, yawning once again.

"You are tired," insisted Fernando, starting to turn around the bike.

"I told you that I am fine!" barked Lena, her angered voice echoing into the solitary night.

Fernando rode on, working his legs faster and faster on the pedals. If only he could run away from his own heart.

The smell of vomit and excrement permeated the air. Without needing to look around Fernando knew he had taken a wrong turn. He had avoided this alley for many years, but in his sorrow he had entered this familiar backstreet bounded by tall walls on either side. With his arms stretched apart he could touch both walls.

Sitting against one wall was a woman cradling a bundle in her arms. It was hard to say why Fernando noticed her in particular, out of all those around her. Once Fernando saw the woman it was impossible to turn blind to the others, a population that was more shadow than flesh, lined up one by one against the wall, living from this breath to the next, kept alive by breathing in each other's stench.

Wretched souls, thought Fernando. The putrefied reek brought tears to Fernando's eyes. He was consoled by the moist in his eyes, for the tears confirmed that his body was rejecting the pitiful human condition around him. There was a time when he was all too used to this animal stink, when he would have laughed if people told him he smelt of rancid fluids. It was all too easy to dissolve into your environment, to fade into nothing but a dying stench.

Fernando accelerated the bike. His only weapon was to speed past this scene, to put those putrid bodies behind him. But Lena tugged the back of his shirt for him to stop. Fernando could not refuse her request. He would try to comply with any wish of hers.

Lena wanted to see the woman. Something about the way she carried the bundle had aroused Lena's curiosity.

The woman sang to the bundle in mumbled words. The tune was discordant with the natural flow of harmonious notes, resulting in an off-balanced aura, yet she sang with great concentration. The woman was completely bald on the left side of her head. A clear line of division ran between the sparse, long hairs on one side and smooth hairlessness on the other. Rats nibbled at the fabric of her rags. She was surrounded by people like herself—people without homes and without anything but the rags on their bodies. They did not speak to one another. The only sounds of their existences were moans and whimpers.

The sight of her was revolting—anyone would agree so. Looking at the long line of weary bodies seated against the wall, Lena could hardly tell where one ended and another began. Yet the woman looked so caringly at the baby in her arms. It must be a baby, thought Lena, although she could not see into the bundled rags. Tears rolled down the woman's cheek. The bundle was soundless, unstimulating.

Lena walked near the woman, taking small, fearful steps. She was afraid of what she would see inside the rags, but she had to see.

The thing within the bundle let out a whimper. It was a soft cry, a gentle protest. Lena moved closer and closer.

Lena peeked into the bundle to find a face with slits for its eyes and long, grey whiskers. It was not a baby, but a kitten. Its eyes were still closed from being recently born. It was dying. It hardly let out any sound, just a mellow cry to mark its brief existence. It had seen nothing of the world, and already, it was leaving it.

The woman cradled the kitten close to her heart and put her cheek against the furry creature. There was nothing she could do to postpone or change the inevitable.

Suddenly the woman looked up and stared straight into Lena's eyes. Although there were tears in the woman's eyes there was also calmness and acceptance. She handed the kitten over to Lena.

Lena had no choice but to take the cat into her arms. She did not particularly care for it as it was dirty and smelled bad. Nevertheless she held the creature in her arms. It was like holding a ghost, light as it was. She had never experienced anything like it. Something so fragile in her arms, something that was about to pass by.

This was life, so short, so sudden, so inconsequential.

Fernando had never seen this side of Lena, never seen her protect another being. She was a baby herself, made of marble, needing to be protected at all cost. Now another life lay in her arms. Lena looked at the kitten with such tenderness that Fernando momentarily saw her not as the woman he desired, but as a mother, a nurturer. He wondered if he had ever been held this way. Did a woman once carry him in her arms, and love him unconditionally? He had never known his mother.

A tear rolled down Lena's cheeks and she handed the kitten back to the woman. The women exchanged a look. No words passed between them.

"How do you endure it?" Lena asked, turning to look at Fernando.

Fernando started to ask what she means, but he understood. Life. That was what she was asking. Death. How did one endure being human?

Chapter 4

A burst of air rushed into her lungs. She was alive. Within her a heart beat and blood flowed through her veins. Pain seared through her muscles as Lena realized she was falling forward, losing her balance. A pair of hands supported on the sides of her waist. Someone was catching her fall.

“Lena,” she heard the familiar voice of Fernando. Timid. Gentle. But there was something new in the voice. Excitement. She sat down to rest her legs.

Her last memory was of Barri Gotic. She remembered the dying kitten in her arms.

The street before her blasted with life. She had never seen it this way—filled with people, music, colors. Las Ramblas, for her, had always been silent, dormant.

She spotted a woman adorned in papier-mâché, in gold and silver paper, with artificial branches and leaves. The tree woman stood very still, her arms positioned in such a way that it was hard to tell where her body ended and the branches begun. A strongly built man, naked from the waist upwards, extinguished fire with his mouth. This must be the fire-eater Fernando had told her about. The yellow blast of flame, the full moon, and the Christmas lights that adorned the street all year long illuminated the darkness of the night, willing her to explore.

“You said you wanted to see the street with its people—to see my version of Las Ramblas,” said Fernando. His voice shook, betraying feelings of pride and anticipation. “I’ve asked my friends to stay past midnight, so that you may see.”

Lena glanced toward Fernando, squinting her eyes. She understood what he was saying, but the words made little sense. She was distracted by her own thoughts, and the sight of the small man, her only friend, did not fully register in her mind.

In the scattered nights throughout the past month, Fernando had taken her to different parts of the city in attempt to change her mind about the way she felt about being alive. They spent nights by the sea, and on the hills of El Carmel, in presence of the surreal architectures of Gaudi at Parc Guell. They strolled through all the corners of the Barri Gotic and sat in cafes that never closed. But she had never seen anything like the sight before her—the wide range of spectacles, the multitude of art forms. Everyone on Las Ramblas was performing, except for Fernando and she.

It was suddenly clear to her that the whole show was set up for her, and for her only. She rose from the pedestal in graceful steps and set out to accept her gift.

Fernando quickened his steps to stay by Lena's side. He observed her expression and was pleased to see the clear amazement in her eyes, wide with alertness. On either side of them were musicians, dancers, a man displaying his head as the main dish of a Catalunya dinner, florists, jewelers, a baby in a stroller with the head of a fully-grown man. A medieval enchantress produced gems from thin air. A woman stood behind a display of fruit juices as colorful as an artist's palette. There was no crowd to squeeze through tonight. The two—one tall, one short—promenaded through the path naturally created between the street artists aligned along either side of Las Ramblas.

The performers were equally amazed by their spectator, a striking woman who had been a statue just seconds ago. How many times had they walked past the

ballerina statue without really noticing its existence? So this was Nando's secret—the little sneak kept a beautiful woman all to himself! But they felt nothing but happiness for Nando. The good man wanted to impress him woman, and they would help him.

Lena's steps lingered before a heavy man in a chair playing a guitar. The tune he played was sorrowful and ancient, as if coming from a far away land. His fingers strummed the chord with a careless grace, unhurried. His voice, deep and hypnotic, sang to the melody, a melody many would recognize. It was an old Russian Gypsy folksong called Two Guitars. The rest of the street seemed to dissolve away as Lena's full attention was captured by this solemn yet unpredictable tune, each note leading its way into an unforeseen path.

A second man, this one lean and tall, with soft, brown hair that fell around a pair of blue, enigmatic eyes, moved forward and danced to the music. A long scar ran from the corner of his left eye to the tip of his mouth. It was the first noticeable thing about the man, but Lena was caught by the preciseness of the scar. It started exactly from the eye and ended at the mouth. The scar looked utterly separate from everything else, as if Lena could reach out and remove it like a leaf that happened to rest on the man's face.

He wore a loose purple blouse, the sleeves puffy in the style of aristocrats. A black vest, black pants, and boots that reached his mid-calves.

His movements purposely procrastinated an eighth of a beat behind the gentle rhythm of the guitar, as if each of his gestures was labored from deep within his soul. Yet his feet were light as a child. The most difficult steps—through him—seemed effortless. With his right hand he hit the inner part of his left ankle, and this he

repeated with his left hand. He was beating all parts of himself as if his body were a percussion instrument: his chest, thighs, and ankles. His movements were colored with a passive despair that somehow made his performance all the more passionate. He was not fighting against sorrow, but rather, claiming it as his own, integrating it into his every breath.

Despite the highly visual nature of dance, the man's gestures spoke of intangible things devoid of form, of stories so old that they had lost everything save their flavors. Yet the flavors alone, when authentic enough, were enough to reconstruct an entire dynasty within the imagination:

Long roads. Hungry horses. Deserts. Poverty.

Stolen food. Stolen nights. Winter. Snow.

A full image spread out before Lena's eyes. In a shift of the feet and a turn of the wrist Lena saw all these things and much more. Lena could almost make out the outline of the dancer's story, if only the music would linger a little longer on each note. Alas the dance was only a taunt, a quick glimpse and taste into a soul Lena felt strangely familiar to, although it could not be possible. Stronger than she had felt for anything in the world thus far, Lena experienced a connection to the man's dance.

At a turn of the melody a curvaceous woman joined in the dance. She wore a floral top that exposed her shoulders and a matching skirt she swayed like a flag. Like her partner she was olive-skinned. She had large, brown eyes and black, wavy hair hanging down her back.

They were of a race that had walked over every inch of soil in Europe over hundreds of years. In Spain they call them Gitanos—Gypsies—a word grown out of a misconception that they came from Egypt. In truth they originated from India, but that was of no importance to people like the dancing man and woman. For many generations they were called Russian Gypsies, until fate had brought them to Barcelona, where they learned to speak Catalan and Spanish at a young age. They were masters of both Russian folkdance and the Andalusian flamenco. They were children of both cultures and of neither.

The long-scarred male dancer appeared to be in his mid-thirties. His eyes belonged to someone much older, though, as if they had witnessed enough for two lifetimes.

The woman dancer was, perhaps, two or three years older, although Lena sensed in her a more restless spirit, as if still yearning and searching. The woman did not wear her age well. The looseness of her arms and the visible softness of her belly between shirt and skirt, suggested so. The lines that adorned her eyes were born more out of hardship than of time.

Nevertheless the woman was attractive, desirable. Instinctively Lena knew that the ripeness of the woman's moves—the way her arms and legs complemented rather than shadowed the rhythm of the song—was not something she would be able to reproduce even if she were to memorize her every step. The roundness of the Gypsy woman's hips and the slight sag of her full breasts was a kind of beauty Lena had never known or imagined until this moment. Without knowing why she envied the

Gypsy woman for all the things she had seen and experienced. Lena even envied the male dancer for his ugly scar, if only because of the story that lay beneath it.

“What is the name of the dance you were performing?” asked Lena of the male dancer.

“It is a kind of Russian folk dance, integrated with many elements of the Romani people. Natalya and I, we learned it when we were kids, before we came to Barcelona.” The man bowed with an arm crossed before him as a way of self-introduction.

“I am Alexeis,” he said.

“The music. The dance. They were beautiful.” Lena struggled to find words. She had so rarely spoken to others besides Fernando, and never to a man who made her so distinctly conscious of herself. What was that heart that beat against her chest? What were those limbs that she was able to control with a single thought? What about the lips and eyes? What gifts they all were!

“You dance, too. I can tell,” Alexeis observed.

Lena blushed. “Yes,” she replied uncertainly. “I am a ballerina.” How weird to introduce herself in this way! She felt embarrassed of how childish she sounded.

Although Fernando adhered to her every wish, Lena hadn’t longed for anything, save occasionally quiches and the acceleration of a novel’s ending. Now a new kind desire was born within her. How she yearned to be the woman dancing next to Alexeis!

Chapter 5

Natalya saw Alexeis enter the tavern with the redhead ballerina—the one Nando the dwarf had brought to Las Ramblas the previous week. The performers had been talking about the girl all week. Who would have thought there was such a beautiful woman within the statue?

Natalya had been secretly worried about this new girl. Statue or not, she knew that sooner or later Alexeis was going to get his hands on her. And here they were.

She wondered where Nando was tonight. Had he gone to the statue, ready to wake her as usual, and found out that she was already gone?

One could hardly imagine Las Ramblas without Nando—it seemed as if he had always been there, same as his papa, the jolly Tio, had been there before him. But privately no one knew Nando well. He was a quiet man that preferred to keep to himself.

The redhead was breathtaking with her large emerald eyes and milk-like skin. Natalya felt every pair of eyes in the tavern turn toward the door, some with desire, some with envy. She wore a flamenco dress that matched the color of her eyes, with the ruffled sleeves and many layers of skirt. The skirt was made of softer material than the usual traje de flamenca, more suitable for ballet movements. She wore flamenco shoes, black and made of suede, with four-centimeter heels. Her auburn curls flowed down her back and a green flower was pinned above one ear.

Natalya had seen Alexis walk into this bar with different women for over twenty years and only once did she act out by throwing a beer glass at his lady friend. Even that was more than a decade ago, when she was young and very drunk.

Filipe, Natalya's good-for-nothing boyfriend, tightened his grip around her waist and grabbed at her breast. He was aroused by the sight of the redhead—something Natalya normally couldn't care less about, but tonight she was deeply irritated. There was something about this redhead that aroused more jealousy in her than usual. It was the way Alexis kept his eyes locked on Lena, even when the woman was looking elsewhere and there was no need for him to pretend. He seemed gentler, more *human* somehow, besides the ballerina. Natalya slapped Filipe's groping hands away.

Filipe raises his arms in the air. "Bitch!" he cried. Natalya moved to a different corner of the room, where she could be left alone.

Every man in the room was looking at the redhead. Most women had their eyes on Alexis. His soft, brown hair fell around a thin face and accentuated a pair of eyes that were so blue they were almost transparent. Alexis's lean, tall body was in a white blouse, black vest, and black dancing boots. It was always a shock to see the ugly scar on his left cheek, a long, loud scar that started from the corner of his eye to the tip of his mouth. It seemed unreal, such an abrupt interruption to an otherwise flawless face.

Alexis moved to the center of the room, and people automatically made room for him. It was a small space, but Alexis claimed every inch of it with his erect posture and lifted hands, his body readying for a performance, simultaneously feeling for and manipulating the rhythm around him. A different air claimed him as he began to

dance. His eyes never wavered from Lena, the only object of his desire tonight. He kicked his left foot in the air and slammed it down on the wooden floor, creating a crisp, loud sound that immediately silenced everything else. The bar tender stopped pouring beer into glasses. Men trailed off mid-sentence in their flirting with women. The night paused so that Alexeis's dance might begin.

A man sitting at the corner diagonally across from Natalya—the violinist that came on certain nights of the month—brought the instrument to his cheek and poised the bow. He looked toward Alexeis with a concentrated frown, as if to search for the tune in the dancer's expression. The bow was brought down hesitantly to the string and a note was produced, short and unsure of itself, a taste of the sound. Another note was played, this time with decisiveness, and with it set the mood for the night.

Alexeis followed the slow, lazy notes that opened up the song with circular motions of his wrists in the air. After the first few phrases it was evident to all that the tune was Habanera from Carmen. The second verse opened, a repetition of the seductive first, and Lena rose from her stool and walked toward Alexeis. She extended one leg fully in the air before her, her skirt sliding back to her waist to reveal endless silken skin. She leaned backward and threw her head back in abandonment, as listlessly as a cat, a motion that was deceptively careless for it required years to train the necessary muscles. When her body returned to its upright position, her face flushed from the riskiness of having begun with such a difficult movement, Alexeis placed his hand on the small of her back and pulled Lena toward himself, locking her in a position that left no room for the two to breathe.

They gazed into one another, Lena's eyes large and bright as daylight, Alexeis's dark and secretive as night. With sudden force Alexeis pushed Lena away and broke into a solo session of hand-clapping and foot-stamping, all the while encircling Lena—his dance an invitation, a lure, a hunt. Lena, in turn, circled around Alexeis, never dropping her gaze from her partner's eyes.

There wasn't a speck of doubt or fear in Lena's eyes, their thick, dark lashes performing a different kind of dance. The way she set her feet on the floor, the way she lifted her chin to meet Alexeis's eyes, even the way her chest rose with each breath conveyed nothing but pride and sureness. For to falter, to fall behind Alexeis's steps for even a quarter-second, was to admit defeat. Even more than an enticement the dance was a dare. Were you strong enough to love him? The most beautiful women were quickest to fall into this trap.

Usually there was, in Natalya's feelings for Alexeis's preys, enough pity to counter off her jealousy. She pitied them for their eventual fall—for to be with Alexeis was to heighten one's senses, to be alive in a way most people never were. You jumped out of bed in the morning blaming yourself for drifting off to sleep. What a waste to spend time sleeping! For the first time, you tasted an apple, tasting more than a sour-sweetness that began at your teeth, savoring a color, a region, a season. You discovered that every body in the world was a unique musical instrument, and that the possibilities of composition and performance were limitless.

To fall from that—and turn into a soulless thing. Most people didn't even understand what happened to them. They could not know that the man named Alexeis was truly a timeless creature called the Duende, and they could not know that this

Duende fed on women's souls. The Duende gave these women a short period of happiness and then forever stole something away from them.

Occasionally the soulless women sensed a change in themselves. They'd wake up one morning, the fading taste of a dream still in their mouths. In the dream there was a different woman, a fuller, more fleshed-out version of herself. For a brief moment they wondered whether they had it all wrong, that dream was reality, and their reality, a dream. But it was a fleeting thought. They did not care enough to try to recall the details of the dream.

The memory of a man named Alexeis was forever erased from their minds.

Natalya came to this bar each night to watch these women. She pitied them and envied them, but she had never succeeded in saving any one of them. Night after night for more than twenty years, a masochistic—or perhaps it was sadist—impulse drew her to witness what Alexeis did to these women. It pained her to watch these women she would never be again. She had had her turn many, many years ago, when both she and Alexeis were young. Never again would she feel the way Lena felt right now—alive, as if for the first time.

Natalya did not know if Alexeis was kindest or cruelest to her. He had not devoured her soul, as he did with every woman he had ever been with. Rather, he kept her soul locked within a locket around his neck. Natalya's soul was not diminished, but it was no longer hers. She was the only woman on earth who remembered her time with Alexeis, and therefore the only who suffered from the pain. He wanted her to remember. He needed at least one person to witness his existence. Even demons grew lonely. And who better than Natalya.

Did any of the other women, as a baby, play with Alexeis above the frozen mud in Moscow? Did any of them hold in her arms a sobbing eleven-year-old Alexeis, the night not long after they had crossed the border of Spain in their caravans, and his mother—the only surviving parent between the two of them by then—closed her eyes for the last time?

These thoughts brought Natalya no triumph or condolence tonight. The redhead ballerina was a true match for Alexeis and a real threat for her, if ever there was one, for all these years she had consoled herself in the belief that Alexeis would never allow himself to belong to anyone.

Or would he? What the redhead lacked in history with him she made up by her unflinching stare—not only responding to his dare but raising the stakes. As if she had never known defeat, and could not even imagine a broken heart. Did she even have anything to lose, Natalya wondered, the woman who was after all a statue. Perhaps there was no soul to steal from. Alexeis looked back at Lena with curiosity and wonderment, a rare praise coming from those eyes of his that saw through everything and had not been surprised for many years.

The Habanera had come to its end. Before the violin could complete its final note Natalya's voice broke out in a low, coarse, and mournful cry—the beginning of her song—that immediately permeated every pore in the room. She did not know that she would sing until the words were coming from her mouth. This was the way with flamenco. It must be improvised. The performances that went on three times a day, at set hours, all throughout Spain—how could they have any meaning beyond entertaining those who didn't even know how flamenco came to be, that didn't

recognize it as an art of protest? Alexeis turned and looked at Natalya for a brief second. It was possible that he was the only one present who understood what she sang.

“*No me des más pena,*” she sang in Spanish, do not give me more pain. Each syllable was drawn out at length, cracked and split at will, until the words, already unintelligible, dissolved entirely into music and even music drowned underneath the more dominant emotion. It was pure emotion, the *cante flamenco*.

Natalya sang with a fervor she had not felt in a long time. She had become numb to her own futile desire but tonight she felt it once more, the unfairness of love. It was she who loved him first. She loved him from the very beginning, the kind of love that is taken for granted between two people who spent every day of their lives together. She loved him before she learned of his true identity, and she continued to love him after she learned what he was capable of.

Despite her sadness she felt more alive than she had been in years. She loved him whether he was man or demon. Would always love him and would never love anyone else. Her ability to feel the pain of his love made her triumph over all the other women. She would rather feel the pain than to forget everything.

There was a time, when they had first gotten to Spain, in which their caravan was their entire world. It was only the two of them by the time they arrived—little Alexeis, eleven, and Natalya, thirteen, her first period marking her womanhood. Their two families, both starting out from Russia, had travelled together for many years. By the time they reached Girona they were completely orphaned, and their older siblings having run off to join other clans along various points of the journey. Their lone

trailer parked near an abandoned lake, away from other Gypsy communities. Although there had always been many clans of their people in Spain they were new to the country and language, and had to see who could be trusted.

Natalya loved Alexeis as a little brother, even as a son, for if she lost courage who else would he have? This thought kept her strong and she allowed fate to take her whichever route survival was possible. She had stolen, swindled, lent out her body for money, but her conscience was clear, for every living thing has to eat and drink, and there was no shame in that.

It wasn't long before Alexeis started desiring something more than sisterly love from her, and when he reached underneath Natalya's clothes one night she readily returned his embrace. She had been waiting for him, after all. It was as natural as a pebble falling into water, giving birth to gentle ripples inside her body and soul. It was as easy as removing the last film of barrier between them, for they had already spent their entire lives sleeping side by side.

Natalya's voice trilled up and down or quavered willfully on a single note, accentuating certain beats in the twelve-count siguriya. Her eyes remained intently on Alexeis. He may have been dancing with the redhead, but it was to her voice his body responded.

The dancers' movements were fast now, the furious session of feet stamping in perfect coordination to the intensity of their expressions, as if in pain. They danced to the rhythm of Natalya's hand clapping. Lena understood the essence of every element of the dance—the snapping of fingers, the movements of her head as she swayed her skirt from side to side, the decisiveness and preciseness of each position, right on the

beat, for to dance was to live ever in the present, ever in the current tempo. Shouts of “ole” and “arsa” emerged from the crowd.

Lena was new to the flamenco, but she used her dexterity of ballet to her every advantage. Her arms followed an invisible trajectory above her, the wrists drawing small circles, her eyes cast longingly to her fingers. There was a gracefulness to her movements usually seen only in ballet, which after all was born in the French courts, far removed from the grittiness of street-born flamenco. Her body responded to the music with an intuition that came with only the truly gifted. Natalya found herself wondering if she had been this good at nineteen.

Only the strictest critic could have pointed out shortcomings in Lena’s movements, and even then he would have immediately forgiven her for her youth and beauty. But Lena’s greatest strength was also her fault. For all the virtuosity in her body’s movements, there was something lacking in her dance. There was no soul in her dance. For even artistic performances had souls. The soul of a dance was what moved an audience to break sweat and tears, to tremble, without knowing why. The soul was not a question of ability, but of true, living style, of blood, of the most ancient culture, of spontaneous creation.

Lena’s brows locked in pain but every part of her body danced with the lightness of being young and blissfully ignorant.

Do not give me more pain

For I shall be

A slave of yours

Until the day I die

The melody of Natalya's siguiriya was a dark one, and to those who didn't understand it, it may have seemed more like an accidental ethereal wail than a form of art. But every palo flamenco had its strict rules and patterns, much like any piece of poetry, and it was only the soul of each cantaora's voice that gave each song such wide ranges of variations and freedom. It was through the soul that each piece assumed life.

Few performers ever claimed the soul within their art. Some went throughout an entire lifetime, chasing in vain for something that could never be forcefully found. It was a rare and fleeting thing, not unlike the human soul, and yet any layman could feel its presence when a dance or song strung a cord within him and made him tremble.

At the end of Natalya's song Alexeis and Lena were left facing one another, panting, perspiration glistening their cheeks and necks. A fervent clapping broke out around them. They smiled at each other amidst the shower of whistles and cries of encore. Their first dance together.

Natalya had seen enough. She got up and walked out into the solace of night.

Chapter 6

Before Natalya the Mediterranean Sea reflected lights from all the bars along its shore, the bars that adorned the encircled body of water forming a harbor. As usual, the tranquility of night—the stillness of the seawater and its vessels—engulfed the loudness of those who resisted it. Nightlife noise was but a low mutter out here.

“Lost your way home, little boy?” A jeering male voice followed by bursts of cruel laughter.

About twenty steps from Natalya, three men in their late twenties, each with a bottle in hand, stood in the way of a small man that reached only the tallest one’s waist. The voice belonged to the tallest, whose unshaven face and disheveled appearance gave off an animalistic sense of threat. Instinctively Natalya took three strides toward the edge of the wharf, where the line of boats parked unevenly along the plank hid her from view.

The small man stood with his back to Natalya, and she would have easily assumed him to be a child, except that his head was disproportionately large at the same time his limbs were thick and short. He was none other than Fernando, the dwarf juggler.

In the twenty or so years of their acquaintance, Natalya had never seen Nando around this area. Come to think of it, she never saw him outside of Las Ramblas.

Fernando made no acknowledgement of the wasted lot and tried to continue on his way by going around them. The tallest pushed one palm against Fernando’s forehead, and laughed as the small man uselessly tried to break free.

“What’s your name, little boy?” the tall man taunted in a sickly sweet voice. “It’s dangerous to be out alone past midnight. Where’s your mama?” They broke out in amused laughter. With a strong thrust at Fernando’s forehead the tall man sent the small man falling on his bottom.

“What’s the big deal?” Fernando cried.

“Oh, look, it can talk!” Laughter. “What else can you do, little boy? Can you bark like a dog?”

Natalya had planned on waiting till the course was clear to continue on her way. Instead she reached inside the back of her jeans and pushed the button to a device she kept on her at all times, wondering if it still even worked. The sound of police sirens approaching broke through the air. The men looked about in confusion and despite their drunken states were startled enough to start running away from Fernando. Natalya got out from her hiding spot and ran toward them.

She was knocked to the floor by the one closest to her. “Oi!” she shouted, but they didn’t stop to even look at her.

Fernando walked over and pulled her up from the floor. He shook his head.

Natalya brushed the dirt off her jeans. “First time I see you around here,” she said. She looked about to make sure the men were far out of sight before silencing the siren.

Fernando raised his brows in surprise. “I guess I owe you one,” he said. He was of light brown skin and of eyes that shone like onyx in the darkness of the night. His hair, thinning out at the top, was black except for the sideburns, which had already turned white. Natalya suspected that there were Moors among his ancestors.

“Nah,” said Natalya. “I owe you.” She held up her hand to show him the wallet she had picked from the man who’d knocked her down. She’d purposely run into him, of course. Inside there were more than four hundred Euros and she gave out a long whistle. For the second time Fernando raised his brow at Natalya.

“What?” she cried. “You think those guys didn’t deserve to be picked?” She reached underneath her pink tank top, into the cup of her bra, and left the money there. The rest of the wallet she tossed to the floor.

“They probably stole it from someone else, anyway.”

Fernando offered no comment. His eyes searched among the many bars nearby.

“Have you...have you seen Lena?” he asked timidly.

Natalya rolled her eyes. So this was why he had come out tonight. He idolized that woman. That statue, she couldn’t help thinking bitterly. He did not stand a chance. Not after what she saw between her and Alexeis tonight.

“You had better forget her,” she said, her voice coming out gentler than she expected. “She isn’t worth it.”

“She’s with Alexeis, isn’t she?” murmured Fernando. He looked broodingly toward the lights and noises, as if he could see the two of them together from this distance.

“Come,” she said, guiding him by the shoulders. “I need company to spend the money I earned.”

The last thing Natalya wanted to do was to spend the night comparing heartaches. But she couldn’t bear the thought of him walking in on the scene of Lena and Alexeis gazing into one another’s eyes. She had never seen him with any other woman.

Natalya led the way, knowing exactly where to find alcohol at two AM, if not in the bars. Fernando trailed a few steps behind, looking at the ground.

Beneath the shadow of one of the boats, a man emerged. He had yellow skin, small and skinny, easily unnoticeable unless one was looking for him. Before him was a cardboard box, as unremarkable as any cargo one saw around there.

“Chino,” Natalya called out. As soon as he saw her he reached into the box and held up two cold bottles of San Miguel. Natalya bought from this vendor at least three nights a week and knew his name was Pepe, but she still called him Chino.

“Four,” she said, gesturing Fernando. Pepe reached for two more bottles.

The two picked a spot that wasn’t blocked by vessels, where they could oversee the entire basin. They made themselves comfortable on the plank.

Whenever Natalya came here she tried to forget about the architecture built around the water, and focused on the sea itself. We have everything in Barcelona, she thought. Music, dance, Picasso, Gaudi, the Mediterranean Sea, and for the cash—lots of tourists. What more could she need? She took a sip from her bottle and laughed out loud.

“It was my fault, really,” said Fernando, more to himself than to Natalya. “I have tried to keep her for myself. You can’t keep a pretty woman like that away from the world.”

I am already regretting this conversation, thought Natalya. Going home with Filipe would have been a healthier way to pass the time until morning.

Natalya’s mind drifted to the bar. She had too much on her own mind to care about what Nando was saying.

She could picture it all. Alexeis would have ordered them each a glass of wine and he would not need to talk. He would simply let his eyes, deep as tunnels, do all the work. The ballerina would blush, surely. His look always made a woman blush, whether she was fourteen or seventy. He would lean slightly forward, cast a shadow over her with his body, and without knowing so she would already be overpowered. She would notice the oval locket dangling from his neck, and because he was making her feel defenseless she would be desperate to say something.

“That’s a beautiful locket,” she’d say.

“This locket was a gift from someone very important to me,” Alexeis said in Natalya’s mind. He opened up the locket and showed the ballerina a faded photo of a girl of about thirteen years old. The girl had large, brown eyes and black, wavy hair. She had the mischievous smile of a playful and daring personality. Her eyes twinkled with intelligence. The girl was none other than Natalya.

Her soul was right there, trapped within the photo of her thirteen-year-old self. It had been taken during the happiest day of her life.

It was the morning after the first time Alexeis made love to her. She had walked out of the caravan face flushed, ready to repay the world with good deeds. She would give food to the old beggar woman when she came by today, she decided. She would offer something to her for at least three days.

There was a small community by the lake by then. They had felt comfortable enough not to relocate when one by one, three other caravans moved close to where they were. They were all newcomers in Girona.

A middle-aged man saw Natalya dancing barefoot on the grass, her large body of hair flowing freely behind her. He was a large, strong man with a kind heart. He had no wife but lived with his brother's family. He kept an eye on Natalya and Alexeis, made sure they were not picked on by others.

“You became a woman last night, didn't you?” the man teased.

Natalya blushed and grinned.

The man had a Polaroid. He had insisted on taking a picture of her.

“You'll always remember this day,” he said.

She had been truly happy that day. Until then Alexeis had belonged only to her, and she had thought that was the way it was always going to be.

A few days later Alexeis started going to other women. Different women every few days. She learned of his evil powers, a fact she could never unlearn nor forget, because Alexeis would not let her.

At the other side of the harbor, behind the vessels and cars and trees, at that point where they could not possibly see from where they sat, was Las Ramblas. Both Natalya and Fernando were gazing at that point. It seemed that wherever Natalya went she was never far from Las Ramblas. All her life she had always been on Las Ramblas. Even before she had ever set foot upon Barcelona, she and her family were always on some version of Las Ramblas—performing, singing, dancing, making a living out of what came most natural to them.

“I kept her to myself, you know?” the dwarf was still saying. “Assumed she belonged to me, because I found her. Took her only to places with few people.

Couldn't risk losing her. She trusted me, completely. But she had no desire to live, was becoming bored with me. I had to do something. Even if I knew it would lead to this...I had to try."

Fernando stared blankly ahead, his short legs spread out in front of him. His head was too heavy a burden for his little body. A man who had grown old before having the chance to grow up. A man who even his mother must have known was ugly, thought Natalya.

"How do you plan to win her back?" asked Natalya.

Fernando looked to the floor. "Wait for another miracle, I suppose."

Chapter 7

“Heading to the bar with me tonight?” asked Alexeis when the city clock stroke midnight and the last crowd around the flamenco dancers broke away. Some dropped a few coins in their bucket before heading off. Most didn’t bother.

Natalya started counting the money they had earned. A third for Pyotor the guitarist, a third for Alexeis, a third for herself.

Alexeis clutched Natalya’s face with one hand, forcing her to look up from the money and look at him. “I asked you a question,” he said.

The tender caress of his voice and the twinkle in his eyes belied the violence of his grip. His fingers crushed into the hollows of her cheeks, turning her molars into blades against the inside of her cheeks until she tasted blood. Still his fingers dug even deeper into her skin.

Pyotor gave an amused chuckle. To him this was a game between lovers. He counted his share of earning and silently left.

Natalya broke away from Alexeis’s grasp with even stronger vehemence. Her defiance against his hold brought a deeper wound in her mouth. Her blood tasted salty and warm, healthy and full of fight. Alexeis would never allow her to die. He wanted her to bleed, little by little, day by day, minute by minute, until all the life within her trickled away. She swallowed the blood in her mouth, licking her lips so as to make sure she didn’t waste a single drop.

“What for? To watch you and the redhead dance?”

A month had gone by since Alexeis showed up at the bar with Lena. He never spent this much time on a woman.

A smile crept across Alexeis's face. "There's no need to be so jealous, Talya. You know you are my special one. Other girls come and go, but I will never let you go."

She slapped him on the cheek, right across the long scar on the left side of his face.

She felt the shape of his scar, curved like a stretched out crescent moon, brand into her palm and burn into her skin, the heat seeping into her vessels. She hated that scar.

She was the one who had planted the mark.

He still came to her some nights. He turned up without notice. There was no door or lock that could keep him away. She would come out of the shower and find him there, his back to her, looking out the window. These nights meant nothing except to remind her that she belonged to him. Still, she could not refuse him. He stayed with her for as long or as short as he wanted.

She had tried to run away many times. She waited till he fell asleep then took the locket from around his neck. She vowed to never stop running.

She went as far as Lisbon once. She looked across the Atlantic Ocean and thought, *I could leave the continent, never turn back*. It was in her blood to travel.

But in the end she always turned back. Her soul desired to be with Alexeis. The locket needed to be around his neck.

One night, instead of stealing the locket, she ran a blade through his skin. She pushed the tip of her knife down the corner of his left eye and drew a smooth line to

the corner of his mouth. She watched the blood gush out his wound and felt satisfaction.

She thought of continuing, to let the knife cut through his lip, down his neck, rip open all the veins and drain out the blood within him. But she couldn't bring herself to do it.

He didn't even feel any pain. He had smiled at her and returned to his sleep, the wound already healing into a scab.

He kept the scar to mock her, she believed.

Alexeis walked away, unaffected by her outburst of anger. "Suit yourself."

Natalya strolled slowly along the street. She seldom stayed this late. All the performers and vendors had already left.

She walked to where the ballerina statue was. The pedestal was empty, as expected.

She had not come to look for Lena. Instead, she turned toward the bench across from the empty pedestal, and looked into the yellow eye of the man underneath.

The man lay in a curled-up position. As Natalya approached he reflexively backed away further into the darkness of his cave. His yellow eye, wide and round, looked back at Natalya with the frightened vulnerability of a small animal.

In the many years of Natalya's acquaintance to the yellow-eyed man, he had not appeared to age. He looked exactly as he had been twenty years ago, the first time he called out to Natalya.

She was walking on Las Ramblas when she felt someone pulling at the hem of her skirt. She looked down, expecting to see a beggar kid, and instead found a homeless guy hiding under a bench. It must have been a different bench back then, she couldn't remember.

It was hard to tell the man's age. There were wrinkles on his forehead, but he had the innocent expression of a child. His left eye was bright yellow and she was reminded of a nocturnal animal looking out into the dark. His other eye was deformed. Someone had done a bad job at sewing the lids together.

"Could you spare me some change, lady?" he asked in a timid and obliging voice, the voice of a child begging for candy.

Lena threw some coins at him so that he would let go of her.

"Would you like your fortune told?" he called after her. "To repay you."

She almost chose to ignore him, but because she was having bad luck and money was tight, she thought why not.

The man studied her for what seemed like a long time. What he was looking for she did not know, but then he rolled his eye upward and the yellow iris disappeared, replaced with only the white of the eye. In a trance-like state, sentences tumbled out the man's mouth.

"You are troubled by a man. You've known him for your entire life. But he is only half-man, the other half-demon. You wish to fight him but you can't. You are too weak on your own."

Natalya was shocked that the man knew all this. The truth she could not share with others sounded like a comfort to her ears, and she was overcome by a sudden feeling of loneliness.

“Is there anything I can do?” she asked.

“The Duende can be destroyed by killing someone else. You will meet that person in the future. For now you must wait.”

Natalya wanted to ask more but the man’s yellow eye returned and his trance state ended. He seemed not to remember the things he had said.

Every once in a while Natalya came to him. Sometimes she asked him specific questions, like what numbers to bet for the lottery, whether someone on Las Ramblas would survive a sickness or die, whether she should leave Filipe or move in with him.

He told her to stay with Filipe but keep her own place. He correctly predicted the date and time of the contortionist’s death. The numbers he gave never won her anything. It was hard to say how much accuracy there were in his words, but anyhow he was the only one who she could talk to about the Duende. Sometimes she went to him just to make sure she wasn’t crazy.

Natalya placed a sack of coins, her earnings for the night, before the yellow-eyed man.

“What have you come for today?” His voice was high-pitched, like that of a child, but also raspy. He hadn’t spoken in a while.

“I want to know about the statue.”

“She went away with Alexeis for the night. They are at the bar by Barceloneta. I can tell you that for free.”

“I know that,” replied Natalya impatiently. “I want to know who she is. Why can she turn human? Tell me everything you know.”

“For that you would have to give me more.”

Natalya put two hundred-bills before the man. Thanks to the men that had taunted Nando, she actually had some money with her.

“Don’t leave out anything. You once told me that the Duende could be killed through someone else. A woman. Have I met her yet?”

The man replied with a blank stare, as if he didn’t understand what she was saying. It sometimes seemed to Natalya that the man didn’t blink. She waited a long while but nothing happened.

“The yellow eye cannot tell the fortune of a statue,” he finally said.

Natalya didn’t bother to argue. She picked up her money. “Forget it,” she said.

“The yellow eye can’t. But my other eye can.”

With visible effort, the man forced open his long unused eye. Natalya winced at the sight of the threads snapping, but the man showed no sign of pain.

There were two pupils, one next to the other. One purple, one green.

“Purple for the past. Green for the future,” said the man.

Natalya looked into the purple eye first.

Chapter 8

The year was 1869. Lena waited anxiously for her turn on stage at the Palais Garnier. Only eight dancers in the Paris Opera Ballet were given the opportunity to audition for the main role in Coppelia, the newly completed ballet composition which was to debut the following year at the very theater they were.

Lena sat alone at the far corner of the first row. The other ballerinas sat behind Madame Fontaine and Monsieur Blanche, whispering to one another as each candidate was called on stage.

They had all worked hard toward this day, and each believed she deserved the role of Swanhilde. The most promising candidate was Michelle, the tall, blonde ballerina, who had already demonstrated her ability through the leading role of Giselle, and was rumored to soon receive the title of *etoile*, the star of the company.

It was the third time for Lena to audition for a leading role, the previous times having been unsuccessful. She practiced nine hours a day and never missed a day of practice. She was the oldest of all candidates, her twenty-first birthday to arrive soon. In terms of skill she knew she was second to none, yet it seemed that favor was never on her side. Twenty-one-year-old ballerinas were considered old, and with each passing year Lena feared she distanced farther and farther from gaining a leading role and an *etoile* title.

The Palais Garnier seated an audience of almost two thousand. An imperial box, spanning three levels and directly facing the center of the stage, was reserved for Napoleon III, Emperor of France. A majestic bronze and crystal chandelier weighing

seven tons—the very one which would haunt generations to come when it crashes during a performance of *The Phantom of the Opera*—projected its sparkles to every corner of the auditorium. Lena had been performing in this theater for five years now, her first time at the age of fifteen when she played one of the Wilis in *Giselle*. The grandeur of theater never ceased to amaze her.

“Elena de Subligny.”

Far too soon her name was called. Lena took a deep breath and made her way up the side stairs, her chin slightly lifted, the ruby hanging from her gold diadem icy against her forehead. Her corsage was decorated in gold embroidery and had frill sleeves that just covered the shoulders. A bell-shaped tutu stopped below her knees. She extended her legs straight as she took each step forward so that her toes landed on the ground before her heels. She knew she was already being evaluated, even as she walked.

Lena tried to ignore the faint snickers that came from the other ballerinas. Her petite and slightly plump figure was a constant source of amusement. Like most serious ballerinas she ate reservedly, never taking in more than the basic minimum, but there was a roundness to her figure, a babyish excess that could not be removed however she starved herself. Contrary to the vigorous suggestions of her physique her facial features gave off a sickly, undernourished impression, which, at its best, could be described as plain and forgettable. Her pale green eyes lay dormant like a lake, and her short, scarce lashes did nothing to add life to them. She had washed-out, reddish brown hair dry as straw. It was twisted into a tight bun at the top of her head.

To her tall, lean colleagues, Lena was a joke, a parody of a ballerina. Ballet, with its long leaps through the air and fluffy tutus, were designed to give off an air of feather-like weightlessness and to embody female beauty. Lena, with her short legs and buxom figure, could never be graceful.

The stage was huge, the pulled-up red velvet curtain hanging from twenty feet above. Lena danced her favorite scene from Act 2, where Swanhilde, dressed as the life-like doll Coppelia, tricks the mad doll-maker into believing that his creation has come to life. The challenge was to play someone pretending to be someone else.

Counterintuitive to the usual smooth, coherent movements of ballet, Lena navigated her body in short, staccato jolts to mimic a doll's rigid movements, yet still retaining vividness and a refined elegance. Following the playful rhythm of the music, *slow, slow, quick quick quick*, Swanhilde experimented her new gift of shrugging her shoulders, *one, two, one two three*. Pretending to react to the doll-maker's black magic, Swanhilde tried out the use of her legs, first raising a stiff, unbent leg into the air and then performing an nimble dance of jumping and landing on toes. Her face remained fixed in a wide-eyed expression until the doll-maker conducted her to blink, in time to the music, *one, two, one two three*.

It was a dance of contradictions: on the one hand Lena played a woman posing as an inanimate object, on the other hand she was a lifeless doll, with such human likeness that it gained human mobility. Human imitated object imitated human.

Lost in the endless reflections between life and art, Lena experienced a sense of freedom she lacked in her every-day existence. She was shy and self-conscious, a

prisoner to her own yearning for acceptance and love. How nice it was to be a doll, oblivious to human emotions, free from the heart that forever hungered.

Lena had been orphaned at nine to tuberculosis. Her only relative being a retired ballerina from the Paris Opera Ballet, Lena was arranged to serve as maid and assistant to other dancers at the Opera Ballet School, for which in turn she received lessons and boarding. Unequal in status to the other pupils, most whom came from rich families, Lena led a separate and lonesome existence. After classes her fellow pupils often gathered in someone's private room, playing games and chattering. They paid no attention to Lena, who brought tea and cleaned up after them. At night Lena slept in a room shared by five other dependents of the company.

With what little spare time she had, Lena devoted all of it to the barre. When she danced she could momentarily forget the hollow in her heart, the grieving pain of losing a family and a home. When she pushed herself to perfect a pirouette, spinning on one leg so many times that she became nauseous, the world blurred into an impressionistic painting that was not too harsh to look at.

The moment of truth came when Monsieur Blanche announced the results. Lena felt a flicker of hope within her. She had carried out every move perfectly, even the difficult cabriole and echappé leaps. She had remained more than a second in air before landing on her feet.

Alas Michelle took the leading role of Swanhilde. Lena struggled to swallow back the warm pressure of tears forming behind her eyes.

The other dancers cheered for Michelle. Their happiness was genuine, for Michelle was their role model and friend, and after all, most of them were only seventeen or eighteen, and each was confident that her turn would arrive.

Handsome and well-dressed young men came forward with flowers to congratulate Michelle. These were men with blonde curls and blue eyes as light as their laughter and body language. Life had never put weight upon their shoulders. How seductive was the suggestion of their softness, the promise into a life of velvet and chiffon silk bed sheets. Hugs and kisses were exchanged as the group discussed among themselves how to celebrate the occasion. As usual they purposely avoided eye contact with Lena and even stood in a circle with their backs against her as if to discourage any attempts of self-invitation.

Lena fled the scene out into the hard winter night, a proud contempt in her heart fighting the quivering of her lips. She had devoted her youth to disciplined repetition—a life devoid of pleasure and distractions—and for what? She would grow old and never become anything more than what she was now—a second-rate dancer, someone easily replaceable. And plain. Embarrassingly plain.

The night ahead gave her nothing to look forward to, nothing except dreams that would haunt her with young men in smart-looking suits, the velveteen fabric tailored perfectly to their graceful built. Their hollow eyes, like those of mannequins, would call out to her, wanting her, and when she finally gave in and entered into their embrace they would push her away in disgust, mocking her for believing that anyone would want her.

“Lena, my child,” a tender voice called out from behind.

Lena turned to find Madame Fontaine, a woman whose faded beauty was still visible through subtle hints: expressive brows, an elegant jawline, a long neck, and shoulders that dipped at the perfect slope. A thin shroud was wrapped around her shoulders to ward off the icy night air. Madame, while strict in the classroom, was in fact the closest person in the world Lena had to call a friend. She saw how hard Lena worked, and saw that there was talent in this young woman, although circumstances were not in her favor.

“I’m sorry you did not get the leading role,” she said, with real regret in her voice. Monsieur Blanche was the one who made the final decision, and she knew that the deciding factor was not skill, but appearance. Not only did Michelle make a more handsome Swanhilde, her lean physique was also better suited to the aesthetics of ballet. Yet she had been able to speak favorably for Lena after the announcement was made, enough that she hoped the news she brought the girl provided some solace.

“Monsieur Blanche agrees with me that your portrayal of Swanhilde as a doll captured the very essence of that scene. Your interpretation of the doll dance was bewitching. I’ve never seen anyone do anything like that—at one point I quite forgot who you were, and believed I was seeing a doll come to life. In that one scene alone you are irreplaceable. You will play Swanhilde in that scene.” Madam smiled warmly at Lena.

A shared role as leading actress. Lena walked the cobbled street between closed shops toward her modest attic, the only thing she could afford. It was only one scene, but oh—she was finally playing the leading role! She was filled with an overwhelming desire to have someone to share her good news.

It was pitch dark and quiet, with only the moonlight to guide her. She heard the howling of a dog from someone's home. A long shadow was cast before her, a slimmer and more elegant version of herself.

A second shadow, a black silhouette in the shape of a man, emerged from the dip of her waist. The shadow crawled its way out, beginning with the head, using its hands to push against its ties to Lena's body. Soon the shadow separated itself and was walking next to Lena in the form of a tall man with marine blue eyes. He wore a three-piece ditto suit with a white bow tie and a top hat, the fashion of the time. His footsteps made no sounds.

Lena could not suppress the upward turn of the corner of her lips. Ever the lover of dramatic entrances, here was the Duende.

"Go away, Duende," said Lena. The words tumbled out reflexively, carrying no real menace. It was her way of greeting him, the phrase having lost its meaning over the many years of their acquaintance. It was what she had been taught to say to the demon as a child.

The man responded with a grin. "Good evening to you, too, Lena." He spoke unhurriedly, in a rich, alluring voice.

Lena still remembered the bedtime stories her mother used to tell her. The Duende was an orphan of an angel and a mortal, doomed to be accepted by no one, belonging nowhere. He could not die, but neither was he as strong as the deities. He fed off the weakness and lust of young women. He lured young girls into the forest and made them lose their way home. When he was bored he played with children and stole away their toes. On a few occasions he had guided lost people home and took

care of parentless children, leading people to believe he had a kinder side. But the Duende was not to be trusted.

“Do not talk to the Duende. Pay him no attention. He likes any kind of attention. Even resistance. The only thing you should say is Go away, Duende, and even then only with complete apathy. Do not show fear.”

It was a story all mothers told their daughters. Go away, Duende became a mantra, whether to ward off evil or strange men—it was the same thing. Lena had always assumed that the Duende was a myth, much like Santa Claus.

Yet it did not surprise Lena when the Duende appeared to her the first time when she was nine. Less than two months had passed since she lost her parents. He had presented himself as a boy of about twelve or thirteen back then, with the same pair of clear, blue eyes. He appeared in the mirror when Lena was practicing in the studio on her own. When she turned around he was standing behind her. Right away she knew he was the Duende, and she was not frightened. He was such a handsome boy, with an erect posture and an air of aristocracy. Friendless and lonely as she was, she had wanted his company, but still, she had said “Go away, Duende.”

Perhaps the Duende detected the doubt in her voice. She had not said the words convincingly enough. He did not leave but stayed and talked to her, to her relief.

The Duende appeared at will. He came several times a day or he did not appear for months at length. Lena had no way of anticipating his arrival. He emerged from her shadow or as a reflection. He came through her window in the form of a moth. Sometimes she detected his laughter in the wind, and the next second he would come forth. Lena was seldom startled by his appearance, unexpected as they were. She was

always anticipating him. She found him in every leaf and every cloud, and thought he was always with her, even when he would not show himself.

“Did you come to congratulate me?” asked Lena, unable to conceal the delight in her voice.

“Did you not wish for someone to share your joy with?”

“Since when did the Duende answer prayers?” asked Lena in a teasing voice.

“When do you plan on devouring my soul?”

A couple glanced behind their shoulders at Lena. In the eyes of others she was a crazy woman talking to herself. It did not matter.

“Not yet. Not just yet,” answered the Duende. No one heard his answer except for Lena. Lena allowed herself to smile. There was still time for her.

Lena knew that the Duende regularly approached women, usually lonely women like herself. He did not take the women’s lives or suck their blood, leaving their corpses on the street—it was nothing dramatic like that. What he did was much more subtle, often undetectable. The women fell in love with him, and in the process, he took away their souls—but what was the soul? One did not need a soul to stay alive. The soul was just one little detail that made a person who he or she was. The “essence” of one’s being, as the Duende put it.

The Duende looked at the mortal woman beside him. She was by no means attractive. She had dull, green eyes that stared at you blankly, almost stupidly. She had a matronly physique, too mature for her age and suggesting nothing. She was doing that again—romanticizing him, thinking of him as a temperamental god with a

hidden, good side. He was not. He was an orphan, belonging nowhere, responsible to no one.

Yet he had spared her life for all these years. It became lonesome to roam the earth alone, every woman he met forgetting him a few days later. He had never known a person for as long as he had known Lena. She had come a long way from the nine-year-old he met twelve years ago. She had worked her way up in the ballet company from a quadrille, to a coryphée, to a sujet, to her current title of premiers danseur, with nothing but hard work and sheer will. She practiced until her toes were almost deformed. Each time she failed an audition she would cry into her pillow, unable even to fall asleep because of her inflamed feet. She wanted the étoile in her lifetime, she kept telling him. She wanted it before she grew too old or before he took her soul from her.

He could take her soul whenever he wanted, at a second's decision. It really was as easy as that. He would take her soul, and with it, her love for ballet, her strive, her determination, her frustrations and disappointments. It would all disappear if she no longer cared. Some people wished for that numbness when they were most stricken. It was a tempting means of escape. He had offered to take it all away the first time they met.

"I can make you forget this pain," he had said to the mirror reflection of the nine-year-old orphan. "I can take away years of loneliness, a lifetime of missing your parents. All you need to do is give up a little something. You won't die. You won't remember what happened."

She had looked at him with those flat, unmoving eyes. She considered the choice for only a few blinks' time. "No. I'd rather keep my sorrow and my pain. They're the only things I have now." There was no hesitation in her voice.

Such an unexpected answer, coming from so small a child. Perhaps it was her determination to guard what others so easily gave up that had moved him. He decided he would give her more time.

He watched his mortal friend—if he could call her a friend, he had never had a friend—struggle. Mortals were always struggling. For food, for shelter, for safety, for love, for recognition. He was overcome by a feeling of impotence beside Lena. He could snatch thousands of souls, but there was nothing he could do to help her get what she wanted. And she was always against the competition of time.

He liked his human companion. He liked having someone to talk to, who remembered their previous conversations. He wanted to see her succeed.

"Will you come to my performance?" asked Lena.

"I'm always around, even when you don't see me. You know I am."

It was the day before the debut of Coppelia. The dancers gathered at the Palais Garnier for their final rehearsal. The orchestra tuned their instruments and positioned their scores. The conductor looked to Monsieur Blanche, and with a nod of approval, the music began.

The first scene opened with Swanhilde and several people gathered in the village during a town festival. At the cue of the cheerful music, Michelle began her dance. She pirouetted across the room on tiptoe, waving her arms elegantly along the

direction of her movement. She made a leap and her fiancé, Franz, caught her in air. They were planning to get married during the festival.

But there was something wrong. Michelle's expression was blank, as if her mind was elsewhere. Her movements were rigid and forced, at odds with the light atmosphere of the music. There was nothing about her that suggested the excitement of a bride-to-be.

“Stop!” cried Monsieur Blanche and the music halted. “Is this some kind of joke? We need your full attention, Michelle. There's no time for fooling around.”

The conductor signaled for the music to proceed. The peaceful sound of string and woodwind instruments filled the hall, creating a festive mood on stage. But Michelle was doing the same thing. There was a far-off look on her face, as if she didn't really care about the dance and was not aware of her surroundings. She could have been daydreaming, her mind wandered off without her body.

“Enough!” Monsieur Blanche stormed onto the stage. His face was bright red. He looked angrily into Michelle's face.

But Michelle didn't even seem to notice him. She stared blankly into space, not caring to meet Monsieur Blanche's eyes.

With a loud smack across her face Monsieur Blanche sent Michelle tumbling to floor. There was a loud gasp in the room but still no expression registered on Michelle's face. Without a word she got up and stepped off stage.

Lena could hardly believe what was going on. It was the Duende's doing, of course. Why, why did he do this?

Monsieur Blanche put a hand to his forehead. No one made a single sound in the vast auditorium. Finally, Monsieur Blanche pointed a tired finger toward where Lena was standing at the side of the stage. "Please tell me you know all the movements?"

Lena couldn't fall asleep that night. Was she happy to finally get the leading role? It seemed so sudden, so easy. She imagined the crowd before her the next day. They would all be there for her. The entire Palais Garnier was hers.

She thought of Michelle's dull, vacant eyes. They stared ahead, almost unblinking, almost as if they couldn't see. They reminded her of a doll's lifeless eyes. How ironic, that now Michelle was the one who more resembled Coppelia.

She wanted to talk to the Duende. She would confront him about what he did. He had betrayed her by stealing success from her. This was not how she had imagined it, night and day, for the past twelve years.

But the Duende would not come and at long last Lena gave up and willed herself to sleep. She would talk to him after the performance. Surely there was something he could do. There must be some way Michelle's soul could be returned to her.

Lena never got to play the role of Swanhilde. The following day the Franco-Prussian war broke out, and the performance was postponed. It wasn't long before the Paris Opera closed down.

The war brought diseases into Paris. More people were killed by illnesses such as cholera and tuberculosis than by combat. In her misery of once again having success pass her by, Lena contracted small pox.

She was covered in chickpea-sized lumps from head to toe five days into the disease. She could not look herself in the mirror—what had she become? She could not bear to touch herself—not an inch of her formerly smooth skin remained. How she longed for her homely face and buxom body now!

How could everything she once had—youth, health, a promising future—go away so quickly? She had been so close to what she wanted. The Duende could have taken her soul years ago, but she had been spared.

Life became clear in the face of death. She was but twenty-one. The journey was ending before the ship ever embarked. She had missed out on so many things—friendship, love, the privilege of youth—and for what?

Lena burned with fever. She could not tell her time awake apart from her time asleep. Both were nightmares where her body burned and burned. Was this the end? The Duende did not visit her in her attic. No one did. She would die alone.

On the twelfth day Lena knew her time was up. Her pain would soon be over. She thought she heard a crowd cheering, clapping, throwing flowers to the stage. She seemed to remember a little girl in a red dress in the arms of her mama and papa. People gathered around a Christmas tree full of presents, and everyone was laughing. The memory of laughter made Lena feel warm and safe. It was time to sleep, and this time, Lena knew, she would not wake up to the burning fire again.

She awoke to the sound of music, a tune which light, ethereal notes fell like water upon leaf. He was with her. Her friend. Her only friend.

“Lena, my dear Lena.” The Duende cupped Lena’s face in his hands. They had never touched before. To her surprise, his palms were warm.

She had wanted to confront him about what he did to Michelle. Before small pox hit her she had planned out the things she would say to him in her head. Now it did not matter. Life was a dream. A brief and cruel dream.

The Duende's eyes were moist as he looked into Lena's. He had never cried and the tears felt warm and new to him. He had spared her soul throughout all these years, caring for her in a way that he thought was impossible for him. He had even taken a soul for her.

Yet there was a force stronger than himself. There was Death, the other soul collector. He had never been sad to see a departing soul. Soon Lena would be an empty body. He would no longer have someone to visit and talk to. He cradled Lena's head in his arms.

"It's so unfair," said Lena. Her voice was barely a whisper.

It is unfair, thought the Duende. Here was another woman that was going to forget him, and it was not through his own choice. He would always be lonely. Any companion he sought would always leave him.

"Is there an afterlife, Duende? What will become of me?"

The Duende did not have the heart to shake his head. There was no afterlife. Death took souls. It did not release them to live again.

"Yes," he lied. "You will reincarnate again and again. What kind of life do you want next time?"

Lena smiled, a dreamy expression on her face. "I would like to be pretty. I would like to be loved. And I would like to be a ballerina, again. I will always want to dance."

The Duende could feel Lena's life slipping away. Her heartbeat was slowing down and her breaths became more and more labored. Every soul was irreplaceable. Once she closed her eyes Death will take her soul and he will never see Lena again.

A sudden thought came to him that he could take Lena's soul before Death did. Perhaps he could somehow retain it, not consume it but guard it for her. He had never tried it before, but it seemed worth trying. Lena was a first for so many things in his long, monotonous existence.

He would safeguard her soul until he found her a new body. It would be a beautiful one, like she wanted. An idea started forming in his mind. It would be many years before they would meet again, but at least this was not good-bye.

“I will not let you die. You will never die, Lena, never again. You and I, we will live forever. No matter how much time has passed, we will meet again and again. We will spend an eternity together.”

Chapter 9

The year was 1914. World War I had broken out and people were killing one another everywhere in the world. Churches were burnt down, architecture destroyed, and art-work—the last thing on anyone’s mind during war—suffered the most damage.

Amidst the self-destructive fire that had taken over the world, Alejandro hungered for creation. Lucky for him, he lived in Spain—neutral Spain—which actually profited from selling goods to both the Allied Powers and the Central Powers. The modernism movement continued to thrive in his hometown, Barcelona.

Alejandro was a sculptor apprentice in El Raval. He had been assisting and learning from his maestro since he turned thirteen. For four years he had assisted his maestro, often by copying clay model designs onto sculpture materials and measuring with a pointing machine. His maestro was particularly fond of experimenting with different materials, and Alejandro had come to know the materials by heart. Wood was light and easy to obtain, but vulnerable to insects and fire. Metal, stone, and bone were cheap options for large projects. Sometimes Alejandro was sent into the woods to collect bones from large animal carcasses. The maestro carved deer out of deer skeletons and birds out of birds. Occasionally, the maestro put on a show in his shop and carved with ice and sand. With wealthy patrons, luxury works made from ivory, gold, and jade were possible.

Alejandro had straight, black hair reaching his shoulders. When he worked on his sculptures—mostly he practiced with wood—he never looked away from his hands,

and his hair would hang to his sides like curtains. The local girls whispered and giggled among themselves while watching him, not daring to disturb. They had many fantasies of the good-looking apprentice, who never talked more than a few words at a time.

Alejandro was not particularly interested in women or dating. The women around him were lively and high-spirited, and some, he supposed, were good-looking and even attractive, but none of them stood out for him in a way that made him want to spend more time getting to know her. He preferred spending all his time on his art.

One night he had a dream of a woman in white. She was white from head to toe. Even her hair and pupil were white. But he was not scared because she was dancing so gracefully. She stood on her toes and pirouetted across a room. Then she leaped into his arms and to his surprise he caught her by the waist and lifted her to the air with practiced familiarity.

When he woke up he was still thinking about the woman. He remembered clearly what she looked like, her small waist, and the ratio of her torso to her legs. At first he was puzzled by the meaning of her whiteness but then he understood. She was a statue. She was his muse.

Alejandro set out for the Coto Pinoso quarry in Alicante. Coto Pinoso was famous for the ivory-colored crema marfil marble. Alejandro had always known that he wanted to carve with marble. The rare metamorphic stone, transformed from limestone under the right amount of heat and pressure, was the only stone that approximated the translucent quality of human skin.

The quarry covered an area of twelve square kilometers and ran fifty meters deep. Alejandro ran his palm over the creamy, beige stone. It felt smooth and cool. He could, of course, buy pre-selected blocks of marble from manufacturers, but Alejandro felt the impulse to choose his material from the original mine.

He took his time exploring the mine, examining the variations in spots, veins, and color found on the marble. He looked for clear veins and uniform color. He avoided chunks with obvious spots.

The presence of the material formed the shape of his art, and consequently the art guided Alejandro toward his material. The marble he wanted was of a pale shade, almost white, for he felt this was the color his statue must be. On the third day Alejandro found the perfect piece. There was no question of it. A huge chunk of marble, exceeding eight cubic meters in volume, was almost completely uniform in color and of a pale ivory shade. The veins were thin and could only be seen under sunlight, as the veins on a person with pale skin. He was going to sculpt a young ballerina dancing. Now that he had found the block of material he would work on, the shape of his work was clearly sketched in his mind.

Alejandro carved directly into the marble. He knew that some sculptors could work this way, but most, like his maestro, needed a clay or wax model as guide. Alejandro knocked off large portions of unwanted stone, knowing instinctively where to move his chisel and mallet. He felt as if the marble was telling him what to carve, and he recalled Michelangelo's famous claim that his job was to free the human form trapped inside the block.

