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Aunts & Uncles

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Bard College

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Aunts & Uncles

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by
Stephanie Njeri Wambugu

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
May 2020

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Dedication:

Many, many thanks to my mother and my father who shape my thinking in all ways. Thank you to my teachers in and out of this institution: Drew Thompson, Pete L'Official, Dawn Lundy Martin, Anne Seaton, etc. I feel so lucky to have been taught by you all. This project is particularly indebted to my brilliant advisor Dinaw Mengestu who gave me a great deal of encouragement and who introduced me to writing fiction in the first place, or at least, taking it seriously. Taking my writing more seriously has made me take everything so much more seriously.

Cannot thank you enough, Elijah. Thank you to my dear friends, the list goes on and on.

Thank you to the ancestors that paved and are still paving the way in spirit/Thank you God. This project is dedicated to my grandmother.

Her life was here in the bar among this crowd of lost strangers. Fallen from grace, fallen from grace. She was part of a generation which would never again be one with the soil, the crops, the wind and the moon.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Minutes of Glory*

One

A small few of them were related directly by blood, the others by marriage. Miriam watched her family as they pooled into every warm, draftless corner of the house she shared with her mother. The women came together in the kitchen, wearing dresses with high shoulders; the men gathered in the sitting room in pants which grazed their ankles when they sat. The children, varied in age, streamed happily in and out of the two open-doored bedrooms. Ignorant of their mother's words of caution they carelessly dirtied their Sunday clothes. These were not dresses sewn for this particular occasion, but garments kept from the important events of past years. By the door, was a spectacle of shoes: high heels made out of something like the skin of crocodile, sling-backs which were square at the toe, black oxfords polished earlier in the day, lined with dust at the sides. The door was open and up from the stairwell, the voices from town poured in, indiscernible from the voices which spilled out from inside.

Miriam had been embracing and kissing people on the face for hours, when her father, The Reverend, arrived at the party, late and holding a gift in a plastic bag. The actual gift mattered so much less than the fact of a gift. For it was only a vessel for misplaced sentiment: a bible, not handed down, but new and bought some hours before. It took more than a special occasion to bring her parents together, it took something virtually unmissable. Technically they were married, but only in the most informal way one can be wedded to another. Miriam's mother was both fretful and elated which was her perpetual state. By Sunday, she was often too excitable to sit down or be still at all. This was, of course, exacerbated by the fact that in two days her one daughter would go in her father's car to Moi International and board a plane alone to Boston, where none of them had ever been, save her sister Lilian. She took long glances at her daughter,

Miriam, who though twenty-nine years old seemed not to have aged beyond the afternoon they picked her from her final day of boarding school and she began to look like a woman.

“You leave tomorrow?” The Reverend asked Miriam.

“Yes.”

“To Boston.”

“Yes.”

“That is good. I met a minister who studied there.”

“What was his name?”

“It was many years ago, I don’t remember,” and with that Miriam took the bible out of its plastic wrapping and she held it as if she cherished it already. He had given her five or six bibles over the years, each with increasing complexity of language. His gifts were few, but they were predictable. More celebratory than the presents he gave, was his appearance in a place, at all. Never mind the depth of his voice, never mind his unnerving height. It was the way his entrance into any room seemed collaborative as if everyone there were anticipating him and glad he had arrived. It was his being called *The Reverend* and that all agreed it was more befitting than his given name.

The Reverend was never a complimentary man. With him, there were none of the private affections shared between parent and child. While even the most remote fathers wore their parenthood, more or less, like a garland of laurels, The Reverend had no such sentimentalities. He loved everyone the same. In true Christlike fashion, he did not regard anyone, no matter the nature of their relationship, with any particular favor or preference. What he could appreciate about Miriam, if anything, was that she did not seem to care. He sat and she stood. She put a

hand on her father's shoulder, then took it away just as quickly. Into the kitchen, Miriam went to bring him a cup of tea.

There was more food than could be eaten. Miriam's mother and her sisters had been up since the sun rose, scaling and butchering fish, washing spinach, picking impalpable pieces of stone or grain from rice, and cubing cuts of meat. Miriam was appreciative, but could not eat for nausea. She agreed to the party only because she understood that tomorrow she would be leaving for an unspecified, but long time. She knew that she was leaving her mother childless, so she could at least offer her this small gathering to look forward to. Sitting in the yellow armchair which was draped in lace, Miriam smiled at no one in particular. She served plates of food to the older men, and when they were finished eating, she collected the dishes which only held bones and helped wash. Her mother and aunts refused her in the kitchen. Still, as often as she could, Miriam migrated there to avoid confrontation with the eyes of her family and neighbors, who for reasons she did not understand, loved her so much more than she loved them. Miriam, as her mother had rightly determined, was anti-social; she could hide it well enough, but there was always a space hanging between her and the other person in every touch or conversation. Even the people Miriam knew the longest, she kept at the polite distance of a stranger.

In any case, Miriam was still her daughter, and she adored her no less. Her mother wrung her hands, as she leaned against the kitchen table, asking the guests to eat more, choosing a new face out of the small crowd for her daughter to say *hello* to. She and no one could deny it, tried her best with Miriam. She passed onto her daughter, her own name. Miriam, The Mother, and Miriam, The Daughter, were unlike in most all ways. When her child was born, the mother took one look at the newborn and said "Miriam". It was final. And though names are prophetic, it was

never clear to her mother what alignments there were between her and her child, who seemed to behave so differently from how she had raised her.

When the guests' focus shifted away from Miriam and to strings of neighboring conversations, overlapping and leveling with one another, she ducked behind the starched brown linen curtains. On the other side of those opalescent oak colored panes, was a small balcony, large enough for two adults to stand comfortably beside her mother's broken, white plastic chair. Each time she stood against the railing, chipping greater irregularities into its paint, Miriam thought that she ought to do something about that chair. She would imagine it thrown over the banister, onto the street, or carried into the neat pile of garbage and discarded in the yard. Her mother would also look disapprovingly at the chair, but only before she sat in it. Aside from a bit of shame, they felt only love for the poor, rundown seat. It warmed and softened when the sun shone down on it; it had just enough give when one leaned into it, so that they felt they were very much welcome. The openness of the chair thrust Miriam's mind into thoughts of Okello, who was not in attendance, not invited, but whose face was more familiar, and softer than any acquaintances'. When her mother asked her if that was the sort of man she wanted to be seen with, she could not bring herself to say *yes*. Yes, Okello, the mechanic, the almost orphan. He always ran with a pack of other boys. Where any of them went, they never went alone. They all worked on cars and drank together. Okello was the mildest of them all, the least pettish. He was six years younger than Miriam. He was newly twenty-three years old. The wooly facial hair and tiredness of his eyes aside, Okello was just barely on the other side of boyhood, which extends late into a man's life. She met him while he smoked outside of the supermarket, on a day so hot

that the sky became dense. He put the cigarette out the moment he saw her and offered to help her with her bags, the way vagrants sometimes do for money.

“Can I help you?” Okello asked.

“No.”

“Let me help you,” he asked again.

“You leave me alone,” Miriam said.

“Tell me your name and I won’t bother you,”

“Go on,” Miriam waved him away, struggling with a plastic bag. He looked at her from the bottom of jaundiced eyes, his long lashes bright with sweat, and she said: “My name is Miriam.”

All that could be seen of his smile was the arch of excess skin around his lips.

Him, Okello, with one dead parent and the other too bereaved to leave his drinking alone. *How did Okello’s mother die? Run over by a blue, round Mazda on Moi Avenue hand-in-hand with another man. Devilish and shameful.* Okello was ungroomed in the best way; it was the only presentation that suited him. Nilotic, his skin was an ordinary black, it favored shades of purple and navy. Next to The Reverend, he was the tallest man Miriam knew or had seen. He often arrived still dressed in a grease-stained boiler suit and canvas tennis shoes. Miriam’s mother would not allow it; Miriam thought of him only. She met Okello in short bouts of night, or briefly in town at the busiest part of the day. In the height of her daydream, she leaned slightly off of the balcony, as if into him.

The Mother stepped out onto the dusty red balcony, and stood behind her daughter for just a moment, holding the flesh of Miriam’s upper arm in her sun-spotted, unaged hand, dearly.

“This chair...There aren’t enough hours in the day, I tell you,” The Mother sucked her teeth, straightening the towels and bathmats she had hung on the rail to dry. She stepped aside and waited for Miriam to go back in from the balcony, and resume her position in the most prominent armchair in the sitting room.

It was in that chair covered in Chantilly lace, so thick it could not tear, that Miriam sat as her mother smeared oil said to be from a holy land across the heart of her forehead. Miriam was radiant and abashed. Was twenty-nine not too old for embarrassment? No, twenty-nine was the point at which Miriam imagined her shame would peak. She was unmarried, without children, without tokens, totally at the mercy of her small world and its eyes. She stared up at her Mother and let the words of the prayer fall away from her like rain outside umbrage...*And as she goes to America, anoint her with good fortune and a sober-mind, let her not be frightened. Clothe her in dignity and strength. Make her enemies into footstools...* The Reverend nodded as his wife prayed over their daughter. Miriam began to shake, not from religious conviction, but from fear of the attention she garnered in the center of the sitting room. The pressure of her mother’s gentle hand was great. Now, after all the smaller, draining niceties she was meant to perform piety and it was not the piety that she lacked, but the ability to perform. She trembled and so the oil must have been working, for as far as all the guests were concerned, she was moving under its terrifying, awesome power.

In the past year, but perhaps longer, Miriam suffered from a series of what she privately referred to as panics. She interpreted the episodes as evidence of either a disorder of the mind or more likely, a mystical inclination. She made no one aware of her affliction. She did not tell the prim, competitive flight attendants with whom she once worked. Nor did she tell old Dr. Oneko, an old friend of her father’s and her pediatrician turned family doctor. For more reasons than

one, she didn't, and would never, tell her mother. Panic, Miriam thought, is contagious as anything. For one thing, she doubted the seriousness of her neurosis. That and she didn't want to be the patient zero of hysteria. Instead, she self-soothed the way those without harder or more potent sedatives do: with denial and avoidance. She felt her mother's hands leave her head, as The Reverend began to speak. Her mother's eyes were closed, still, tightly.

At this moment, with all eyes closed in her direction, Miriam began to reflect on the poverty of her choices, something she rarely did. Eight months ago and without any sentimentalism, Miriam left the prized job with Kenya Airways. Her goodbyes were limited to the manager who received her letter of resignation. It was not a letter at all, but a quick, awkward vacation delivered in the afternoon on a Wednesday before a short flight to Dar es Salaam. The manager insisted Miriam get on the plane, but she refused, and that was that. Needless to say, her family was beyond disappointment. At first they seemed incensed. Angry that their daughter, niece, cousin, had been given something good and squandered it. Their disappointment was not hard to bear, nor was it a novelty. After a month-long period of joblessness, Miriam found work cleaning and cooking in the home of a friend of a friend. She found it was not so different from the work as a stewardess. It lacked only the glamour. But according to Miriam's mother, her descent into house-cleaning was the gravest mistake of her life. She wasn't fired from the airline, she quit. In fact it would have been better if she were fired. Then she may have garnered real sympathy.

Nothing inspired delight and jealousy in Miriam's friends and enemies like the work with Kenya Airways did. Stewardesses were sphinxlike and worldly. They knew what others did not. The red, tight uniform was imbued with prestige. And so had Miriam been, once. Her fall from grace was puzzling, because it was premeditated. Still, graciously, they would all pray for her

(the friends and enemies, that is). Her mother hoped for the best, but became steadily disapproving. Miriam forgot, in her personal chaos, that everything she did was a direct reflection on her mother, who was kind enough, but vain. The Reverend got word of the joblessness the same way everyone else did, through rumor, and extended his help, which was modest, but even that Miriam refused.

“Miriam do you have any idea how many people want what you have?” Her mother asked her the morning after her resignation, while setting down a tray of tea and bread on the plastic-covered kitchen table.

“If they want it, I want them to have it,” she said, and would say many times; it was her stock response. It was perfectly vague, riddle-like and conveyed nothing of her true feelings. The truth is, Miriam was lucky to have that job. This she could recognize, but she did not want it. She was glad that she quit. Six years prior when she left university in the middle of the term, she was glad she quit then too. She was not of the variety of people who can do things which make them unhappy. Miriam had been swept up in the wave of believing that one cannot or should not do for survival what does not bring contentment. In this way, her mother felt she had irreparably spoiled her daughter. Miriam’s philosophies were totally incompatible with her upbringing. Of all the loving criticism Miriam’s mother had for her child, the one which worried her sick, was Miriam’s lack of seriousness. Her daughter’s failure to finish school, her husbandlessness, her childlessness, she could handle. It was the overall disregard for obligation and self-sacrifice that stirred doubt. Tirelessly, she reminded Miriam, “It isn’t too late to go back and tell them the mistake you made. *Beg* for the job back.” For six months she pleaded. *Maybe the girl is crazy*, she thought, then dismissed the idea.

A spell of housework kept Miriam on her feet, until the pay became too little and the work no longer bore any incentive. Finally listening to her mother's prodding, Miriam realized how inappropriate the arrangement was. It *was* strange to go from being somebody respectable to cleaning the half eaten remnants off of some moderately successful lawyer's table.

"Undignified," her mother said. "Undignified," Miriam ultimately agreed, but only half-heartedly. She considered going back to school, but made up her mind that she was more of the strand of woman who waited for a suitable man to marry. There wasn't any shame in that. If not a suitable man then Okello, at the very least. Her reasons were not selfish.

Now unemployed, Miriam fully resumed her lifelong occupation as her mother's project. They shared every meal and spent only an hour or so apart each day. Her mother worked from home as a tailor, and had one outright bad leg and another which was chronically pained. As it worsened, she came to grips with the pain and abandoned her nature, which was to be on her feet for as many long hours as possible, with no regard for leisure. From her seated position, often leaning over a jacket which needed letting-out or a dress in need of hemming, Her mother could still direct her sense of order and all her energies on her daughter. Miriam took her mother's judgment and her constant criticism in stride. It was her mother's love which conflicted Miriam and made her more afraid of her lack of reciprocation. The more she was coddled, the more cloistered she became. All of those affections made her contemptuous. As a child, Miriam was likable and beautiful, and so it was easy for her to feign sweetness and deliver it with a passion that overshadowed her fundamental emotional distance. Except time had made her raw and she was twenty-nine. Her life under her mother was a perversion of her natural development, to say that which she did not feel. Or to do that which she could not bear. Miriam grew more and more

afraid of the outdoors. She imagined her ill health obsessively. She could no longer bear flying. Agoraphobia. Hypochondria. Aerophobia. She lacked all of the proper names.

In her idleness Miriam began to call her older sister Lilian more regularly. Surprisingly, Lilian called back with equal frequency. It was Lilian who suggested she come to Boston. They talked and talked and time seemed to elapse in the tracts of conversation, but Miriam found that without looking at a photograph she had real difficulty recalling the specific features of Lilian's face. It seemed always to be changing. The two sisters spent long, inconvenient stretches of time indulging the banalities of their parallel childhoods, which for the first time they remembered as fond and crucial. Miriam found that their sisterhood was more weighty and solid than either ever realized. Lilian, seven years older and generally more emotionally present, could recall moods and details which escaped Miriam. For this reason, Miriam agreed to the truth of past events which may or may not have occurred. Being younger, she had, after all, no way of knowing.

On her final day in Mombasa, Miriam spoke to Lilian on the phone as she filed through her heavy suitcase. Every significant thing of quality which Miriam owned fit into one piece of luggage: her most substantial tops, all of her durable shoes, her stockings, her bras, a small concealed wad of cash, her birth certificate and a small stack of photographs. She told her sister when she would arrive; Lilian told her to dress warmly and they said goodbye as they always do, rushing off of the phone, though eager to say more. After she spoke with Miriam she sat for lunch with her mother. Blanched peas were mashed with potatoes and just before the heat was lowered, sweet, hard maize was stirred in. The meat was stewed on the bone in tomato paste and finely cut onions. Bitter greens were steamed, then fried with garlic. As they ate her mother spoke, offering up to Miriam gossip which she did not care to hear. As they cleared their plates, Miriam rose and went towards the door, slipping on a pair of rubber sandals.

“Where are you going now?”

“To Nakumatt,” Miriam said, evading her mother’s gaze.

“Nakumatt?” her mother asked, balancing her fork on her plate.

“Yes.”

“*Kwani?*”

“I have to buy a few things.”

Her mother paused, squinting, “Why lie Miriam?”

“I’m thirty years old, do I need to lie?”

“Twenty-nine,” she corrected her.

“Twenty-nine, thirty. No difference.”

“It’s good you’re going to go say bye to that boy Okello, because the way he behaves, he may not be here when you come back,” Her mother’s words were biting, but true. Miriam feared the same prospect, but compassionately. In terms of unseriousness, Okello put Miriam to shame. And, *so what*, she wondered, *if he would amount to nothing at all?* She merely had to look at him, or look at the image of him in her mind, and for hours the beauty would hang in her mind like drunkenness in his.

Miriam hailed a rickshaw on the street at the gate of her home and stared at the road through the open doors as it moved unsteadily into town. It was three in the afternoon and the sun had reached its zenith. They met on the outskirts of the market, by a jewelry shop with a blue-and-orange sign. Indistinct as it was it had become their regular place. It was a secluded corner with enough older women filling the cross streets selling fruit and fabric. Among all these many vibrantly dressed people, Miriam and Okello were unremarkable. He sat on a concrete step with his knees up to his chest, smoking in a white tank, with that same boiler suit zipped down

near his navel and the arms tied around his waist. Between his two front teeth was a fine, slender gap; around his darkened lips, a rough, patchy beard. Okello stood as Miriam came closer, wiping his hands against his leg and taking her under his shoulder.

“You’re late,” he said, as if he hadn’t been sitting there happily and idly for an hour.

“Please,” Miriam grinned shyly, under the drowsy weight of his arm.

“Will you miss me?” Okello asked as he led her through the street, side-stepping the flaxen yellow auto-rickshaws and slow bicyclists. It was too loud to hold a conversation, and so they walked wordlessly, as Okello toyed with the toothpick between his lips. Tides of cat-eyed and full-lipped women in abayas and camisoles carried oversized plastic bags down the street. A stray cat turned its lithe back into a cool alley. Men in non-specific baseball caps called out to passersby behind tables of imported imitation gold. Even older men cut into large, thorny jackfruits, larger than a sizable stone. Bananas hung from hooks above limes stacked upon mandarins upon boxes of heartless collards. A large scale sat in the window display of an outlet which sold spices by the pound. Those who sold curtains peered out of their open-air shops, and very faintly Somali rang in the air, more full of breath than the surrounding chorus. Children trailed closely behind the fathers, feeling no danger or hostility, their skinned legs bare to the world beneath their shorts. Dutch wax prints waved in the slight wind. The geometry of the textiles were striking in the light of the sun. Miriam stole fast glimpses at Okello, and the sight was heavy because she knew its impermanence. He tightened his arm around the small of her back and they turned into a quiet corridor, kicking dust into the air as they walked. Miriam leaned against the cement wall.

“Are you happy you’re going?” Okello asked, pulling the toothpick from his mouth, “Miss America.”

“I’m afraid, really,” said Miriam.

“Afraid of what now?”

“I can’t say.”

“You can’t say?” He mocked her.

“No.”

“Tell me.”

“I can’t”

“I’ll help you.”

“How?”

“You tell me *mndani*, and I help you. What’s making you afraid?”

“Okay. I’m afraid to get on the plane. What if it crashes, if it falls into the ocean? What if the pilot is a drunk? If he falls asleep? Or I get sick in the airport? Something bad like that”

Miriam’s voice grew timid and serious.

“Me, I’ve never been on a plane. But you have to be smart to be a pilot. You have to go to school and do all the courses. It isn’t quick or easy. Not just anyone becomes a pilot. And you Miriam, you were a stewardess, you know those people are no joke. I’m sure you’ve been on a thousand planes.”

“Never mind,” she said “it’s ridiculous.”

“You can’t help what you fear. I never swim, I don’t go to the beach. Have I told you that? I’ve been in Mombasa since I was born. When I look at the blue line of the ocean, I get a bad feeling. Ever since I was small. Imagine? A man’s been by the coast his whole life and too afraid to swim.”

“You don’t know how to swim Okello?”

“No, never learned.”

“I didn’t know that about you.”

“My mother hated the beach, so we never went.”

“I can teach you, we should--” Miriam slowed to silence.

“When you come back from America, you find me and you teach me how to swim. I’ll be here *mndani*,” Okello said, resting his hand on the bend of Miriam’s left hip. She leapt gently under his touch. He looked her in the right and left eye, scanning her face and its shadows in the half light of the alley. The hem of Miriam’s dress wrinkled against his cotton pant legs. She grazed his hand with hers and felt the glossiness of grease and Okello’s blunt fingernails. He pulled her closer incrementally and through the ribbing of his sleeveless shirt, she could feel the syncopated, leaden beating of his chest. He moved his right leg forward into the cavity between Miriam’s legs and she gasped sharply. The light in the alley began to brighten and the singing voice of the call to prayer resounded clearly in the air. Miriam and Okello were inside that megaphone sound, but also inside of their own silence, brushing up against one another’s faces with their lips. He kissed and kissed her (not on the mouth) and held any free place. She clasped the stained fabric of his shirt as if all of her deep feelings were final and her toes curled slightly over the edge of her sandals. Okello ran his middle and ring finger over the uppermost indent of her neck. With her thumb, Miriam encircled the round pendant at the end of his thin gold chain, into which the image of the Virgin was etched. Miriam rested her head against his rigid torso and felt the solidity of the cement wall against her back. And to her disbelief, this young man, statuesque in the orange light the day had cast, was wet-faced and weeping. She wiped Okello’s eyes and he raised his right hand to shield his face. Sweat collected on the invisible hairs of Miriam’s upper lip, it pooled like dew along the dark circles of her eyes.

“No, Okello, no. You don’t cry. There’s no need for that. It’s just a visit. That’s all. I’ll go and then I’ll come back. You’ll be here won’t you?” She tried to laugh and felt something firm and painful caught in her throat. Okello’s youth became apparent in his many shallow, tearful breaths. He held on to her still. The hushed voices of the vendors were still audible and in the distance there were quiet shouts.

“You won’t come back.”

“I will.”

“Miriam. You *won’t*. Never.”

“I promise you I will.”

“Am I a child? I haven’t heard anyone tell me they promise me anything in twenty years. Miriam, be serious, who do you know that goes to America and comes back? What for?”

“My *life* is here Okello. You’re here. My *mother*. All the things I have,” Miriam felt the weightlessness of all she was saying.

“You’ll forget me,” he said, pulling his leg and arm away.

“That’s ridiculous. Okello, look at me, I’m thirty years old, sneaking around town. I’m too old to be doing this. In an alley for Christ’s sake. To say goodbye to you. I’ll think of you and when I come back you and I will be together,” she held Okello’s face in the tight V of her hand.

“Goodbye, Miriam. Let me look at you for the last time,” Okello raised Miriam’s right and left arm against the rough wall. He pinned her there, just looking. It was as outrageous as it was heartbreaking. There Miriam stood, splayed like the postcard statue of Christ the Redeemer. Okello stared long, but not bitterly, shaking his head, holding her wrists. Of all there was that he

admired, it was the bony vulnerability of her wrists that he wanted most. He gripped them tightly, then more tightly.

“Stop it Okello, you’re hurting me” Miriam’s eyes clouded, brimming with loss and warmth. She knew, beyond doubt, that his worries were true. All of his sharp and fair assumptions. It was in fact the last time; she was also looking finally.

“Come see me tonight if you have the time,” Okello said and then kissed, very impersonally, the patch of skin by her ear where the hair collected and ran down towards her jaw. Miriam put her open hand on his mouth and she felt the perspiration, and the hair, and the hard skin of his lips against the soft part of her palm. He turned and walked with his same decisive, broad step. His stride was as quick and as unmindful as always. She could not move her gaze from him, or dull its focus. As his silhouette shrank, Miriam watched Okello untie the sleeves of his work suit and slip his arms back into it. All of the oil stains down the back began to blend with the deep blue of the cotton as well as the deep blue-brown of his skin and the night-sky of his mangled hair. Holding her stomach for fear she would lose it, Miriam took the opposing path, in the direction towards the center of the market, wishing she had at least asked him for a photograph or a scrap of his clothing. The sun receded in the sky, and through the dust in the air, muffled shades of violet and tangerine gradated into one another. Miriam decided against a tuk-tuk and walked in her acute and chosen loneliness, the whole way home.

Though she never drank, Miriam considered stopping into the club on the corner. The one with the open top floor, where women went dressed in mesh and men from out-of-town followed them. The profiles of the young people in the disco up high were illuminated in the luster of the red and green strobes. Miriam wondered, though she did not need to ask, how a place that cast such a spell with only one neon sign and a sound system, could be of such ill-repute. She smelled

the smoke from across the street and admittedly she wanted to be closer to the music and its undulation. A small ring of girlfriends crowded around the door, in short dresses with open backs, popularized in the seventies, but evidently back in style. The sheen of their straight, rigid wigs was beautiful, and so too were their plastic high heels. By the light of a flickering yellow bulb, Miriam saw the darkness of their thighs, brightly oiled. Except for the small, wavelike depressions of cellulite in their legs, which also begged to be touched, the women were enviably smooth. Their nails were manicured and everywhere that jewelry could be strung on a woman's body, they were adorned. They flicked the ash from the end of their cigarettes so easily that it looked like they were dancing. Miriam saw and believed there was no difference between these twilight girls and the women of all fantasies. They were private and alluring at once, public in their display and secretive in their proposition. Miriam did not know what, if anything, distinguished a whore from a lady and couldn't these women be both? Perhaps there was no difference at all, at least not one which mattered to their lovers or patrons. Inside, looking down from the raised deck were men in caps, there for the choosing.

It was dark now. Miriam was on her way. Everyone in the street either lived there, was going to the masjid or night mass, or looking for a drink or a way home. Miriam took in the faces of all who went by: their even pigmentation, the plum contours of their eyes, the configuration of their noses. She walked slowly, wanting to take in everything, sparing nothing. Miriam yearned to empty her mind to the sensorial clash of the avenue. But as Okello had rightly warned, she was already beginning to forget. For as she looked through the open doors of the ornate polychrome of the Swaminarayan Temple, the most stunning place of worship in town, she thought only of Boston and her journey there.

Miriam had no return ticket. The flight was one-way. Why now did she begin to feel so unlucky? It was as if Miriam was the one being cropped out of the possibilities of this town. The only one who was meant to leave and the one and only woman without memory or root. She allowed herself that bit of narcissism and ungratefulness.

Pushing open the light, broken gate to the compound, Miriam felt slowed by fatigue. Her mother was sitting at the table with an open notepad and her bible, two place settings before her and three covered iron pots. She looked up from where she was sitting, above the Beryllium rim of her eyeglasses.

“Have you eaten?” Her mother asked.

“I’m not hungry, Mum, thank you.”

“You’re refusing to eat?”

“I’ve eaten.”

“What did you eat? What’s the matter?” Miriam walked straight ahead and discontinued conversation. From behind her bedroom door, she could no longer make out her mother’s words. Tearfully, Miriam undressed and crawled beneath the thin floral cotton sheet. What occupied the time-space between laying herself down and sleep, she could not recall. Only that at some late hour, she either felt or dreamt, her mother float quietly into the bedroom and rest her gaunt hand in her daughter’s hair.

Two

The dull, leaden makeup of the airport was nothing compared to the grey mantle of the sky. Frankfurt Airport was the size of a small village, but much less suitable for living things. Here *building* is an insufficient word; the structure was an architectural mammoth. Hallways upon hallways which held in them unmarked stairways. A disregard of alphabetical order. A mess of steel. To places like these, Miriam was no stranger. Every last one she had passed through in the world was inhospitable and covered with sadness. Nothing to write home about. Cairo International was hot and claustrophobic. Moi International was doused in homesickness. Charles De Gaulle lacked both the romance and heroism its mention once aroused. But Frankfurt Airport was unparalleled in its coldness of design. It was the cleanest place she had ever seen, unsettlingly clean, as if to suggest hostility. How could it be explained, no one tracking anything in on their shoes? The small shops could not have been more than a decorative fixture and the

seats were hard for sitting. And wide, wide windows, with nothing beautiful apparent beyond them. Wind whistled through those vast windows.

Miriam could not feel a cold wind without thinking of her sister Lilian. In July many, many years ago their father brought them on what they discovered was a vacation only much later. Except it was not a vacation at all because it was unpleasant and unsuitable for children, like mission trips and all the other solemn things with which he was obsessed. Everyone called him Reverend, even his wives. The daughters too. The girls did not yet understand why or how he got his name. He was extremely unapproachable and much revered in his small community. At that time it was very odd to travel without a cause. They weren't going to see relatives. There was no wedding, no funeral, no new born, just a mountain. They didn't dare ask him why. Their mothers seemed to know Reverend's intentions better than he himself knew them, so they didn't bother discussing it. Lilian and Miriam were too young to consider the possibility of being the ones asking the questions, and not the ones being asked. What the Reverend hoped to find or do on Mt. Kenya they did not understand.

They boarded a bus and rode for two days. Miriam could remember the short, palms blanketed with dust which peopled the byways. She could remember stopping to squat in a depression on the side of the road with urine barely splashing her ankles as she lifted her skirt around her stomach. She could remember the congregations of vendors and hawkers gathering around the mouth of the bus each time it stopped or slowed, and her mother waving them away gracefully, coldly. She remembered Reverend's large, dry hands and the oily blackness of his hair, before it all went silver.

She could remember eating fibrous, sweet pods of jackfruit for the first time and with vague detail she could remember crying with her head against a cool leather seat, as the bus barreled into its second night.

The trip was the last time Miriam and Lilian's mothers ever spoke. Lilian was just finishing primary school and Miriam was finishing off those last unmemorable years of childhood, given back to her only through the retellings of others. When they arrived the air was crisp and the lodging was filled with hikers. They were eccentric and visibly American. Lilian in an effort to mimic the Reverend treated them all with disdain, as if they were invisible to her. The girls were much more interested in the snow caps and the gathering of bloated birds in the cold.

Miriam assumed the mountain was made of ice and so it radiated winter. Winter like that which she had seen in the movies, the British ones. And the story books. It was on this trip that Lilian revealed to her, "We are sisters, but not really. My mum told me so. That you aren't really my sister." It was a harsh blow and it is still what Miriam remembers the most from the days by that mountain. It was unlike the other memories, which were orange or vast or rocky or claustrophobic. The words were shapeless. They could not have been more than a semi-audible whisper. They couldn't begin to fill the room. Still Miriam, staggered for a long time, months, or more from the weight of just one fact alone. Lilian did not qualify what she meant, beyond what she said, so Miriam was left to wonder. Miriam failed to understand how two people so identical and so in love could be anything but sisters, but she conceded to Lilian. The sureness and brilliance which once filled Lilian's face was forever disfigured in her sister's eyes. It was Miriam's primary heartbreak, she had since had no others. It was too soon for Miriam to understand parentage and its seriousness. She did not know with any clarity what made the

Reverend her father and made her mother *her* mother, but Miriam saw then the breach that was there all the while in plain sight. What the mountain reflected most of all, was the steep and frigid loneliness that was as enduring as the rock, if not more.

Lilian became shadowy in the mist the mountain emitted as it moved towards dusk. The next and final day of their travels, they awoke equally sorry. Miriam never knew Kenya to be colder than it was that mid-morning. Lilian behaved as though nothing had been said and nothing had been tarnished. She taught Miriam a hand game. *They played: hoe is sharp, hoe is bitter, it cut teacher, the teacher beat me, I told my mother, mother told me, hoe is bitter.* They clapped their hands and sang, sisters after all, but different now, older overnight. Their father led them as they walked hand in hand and their mothers trailed behind. While standing by the base of that snowy, blessed mountain the Reverend faced his two daughters and his two wives in the dazzling light. He spoke long words that Miriam does not remember. Kikuyu laced with English. Obviously very important and serious, for his voice never broke. It seemed to come into him externally and pour out of him again. Miriam's mother put a firm and lasting grip on her shoulder. Her father doubled in size that day. The smaller details fall away like scales, but the weather, she remembers.

The flight was her first flight unrelated to work, the first since she had quit the position with the Airways. A January venture from the dry season to winter. The layover was a bleak stretch of eight hours. Miriam bought an unreasonably priced Big Mac in cash and ate half of it in the span of one minute, which proved to be a mistake. The rest went into the garbage which was out of character, but gratifying. She felt what people feel once they stop caring, ultimately, if

food goes eaten or uneaten. Using her carry-on as a place to rest her head, Miriam attempted to sleep, but as anyone who has passed through Frankfurt on a connection can attest, there is nothing there that is conducive to rest. So she wandered from duty-free vendors to one terribly futuristic bathroom with low ceilings. She brushed her teeth and tied back her braids in a green satin scarf as a batch of women spilled into and out of the washroom. Miriam looked up at the master clock. She turned the fine dials of her wristwatch as she stood before a sprawling display of arrivals and departures against a blue backdrop.

Something in the light or in the language, some tension in that airport, brought her incredible stress which left her terribly confused. It was as if someone had stripped her perceptions off like layers of clothing and left them down around her ankles. She knew that outwardly her body had not changed, but the repulsion and distance she felt from it were heightened. It was much more than the usual feeling. The great, endless room of the airport became too loud to cope with. At once its sound was metallic, grating, but also radiant, like far off strings. The walls and floors became unreal and images from Miriam's mind replaced them. She envisioned the doors of a plane closing and shutting her out. She was enchanted by the idea of a terrible accident involving water and desertion. She was thrilled by the possibility of her belongings forever lost.

She felt mad. Specifically, she felt the madness of a madwoman, which was more of a quiet feeling. Hysterical women are hardly found screaming. The proverbial touched woman locked in a room, could not be further from the truth. Prevalent in Miriam's mind was the desire to remain graceful, as she struggled with coherence. She did go down, but only psychically. From afar, no one could notice, but if they were to closely observe they would see, something is the matter with this woman. The dryness of her mouth was unnatural. She felt an incessant urge

to vomit, but the satisfying release of emptying her stomach never came. At every side, she was submerged by an unbearable, unclear prospect. No prospect at all. Her hands shook in the pockets of her coat. An intangible danger excited her. She fixated on the time, it must have been three then, though that was meaningless and too slow a representation.

Suddenly strangers who under no circumstances would pay Miriam any mind appeared watchful. Even as their eyes looked in other directions. A small crop of slender European women, who must have been a family spoke in quick indistinguishable words of laughter. Their shoulders shook musically as their speech swelled. The one with the most golden hair reapplied lipstick the color of persimmon. Miriam found her particularly frightening. She checked the number of her gate once and then again. Still convinced that she was lost, or had made a mistake, she walked towards a young, very serious looking attendant. His name was Jonas. Without speaking, Miriam pulled a boarding pass from a page in her bible and pointed to the gate number. "Z 13" he spoke in a shout. He pointed a pink finger just across the way. "Thank you, Jonas," said Miriam. The timbre in her voice was strained.

A very conventional family that Miriam believed she recognized sat close and quietly, sharing a bag of potato chips as they waited. Maybe they were Bengali. That is not what made Miriam suspicious. In fact, there was nothing that warranted suspicion. Had she not seen families like this one all her life? No one was more spectacular than another. The woman's dress was traditional beneath a heavy utility jacket; the man was sharply dressed in long leather shoes. But for some reason, she distrusted the father, begrudged the mother her submission, and felt sorry for the children. Miriam had a keen sense of the goodness or badness of people she did not know. Her preconceptions were never far off. She had an almost innate sense of what is right and what is sinfully wrong in a person. There is a sharp and accurate prejudice that she learned early and

sharpened with use. It was courtesy of her father or the missionary schools. Naturally, her piety was bound up in the sinfulness of others. Miriam had people figured out, no doubt. From a young age, no one was beyond her understanding. She didn't like the look of this family at all.

She felt unwell. She was certain that she was ill. Airports are a breeding ground. Dr. Oneko assured her many times that there was no real danger in flying, but she knew better. Miriam, being resourceful, found a place to sit and spoke to no one else. If youth can be measured by one's degree of corruption, Miriam was very young but old enough to know that confessing anything private to anyone in authority always, always ends badly. Amid the distortions to her sight and sense of scale, she quieted her mind. In the four hours between the onset of the panic and the flight to Boston, Miriam struggled to clearly recall where she was going what to make of the black glowing orb, hovering above her line of vision, shaped like an organ.

Waiting to board the plane in the group before her was a grandmother in a wheelchair. Miriam did not know this woman, and so it was the only presumption that made her imagine the many derivations which had sprung from her, through her children. Motherliness was more than the fact of a child, and this stranger, she had it. Her silver hair peered out from beneath a black cap. Her hands were folded below her breasts. Her skin was thick, or Miriam imagined it to be. The waxy material of her skirt was primarily orange and scattered with blue. A flight attendant who looked like a female reproduction of Jonas stood behind her, holding the handles of the chair with painted fingers. The older woman's face was rich with many flattering lines. Circling her dark pupils were two blue rings of rheum. Miriam believed the grandmother's eyes were conciliatory and that they shared something, a moment maybe. A connection more lasting than the frequent, impersonal brushing-up-against of strangers. Those gestures were fond, but empty

and on the whole, unnecessary. In place of that daily isolating distance, Miriam felt a momentary closeness, undue, but real. The exchange climaxed in a smile from Miriam and absolutely nothing in response from the grandmother.

The older woman looked away as soon as she apprehended Miriam's stare. Her mouth moved slowly and pleasantly as she spoke, not to Miriam, but to the red-lipped air hostess. *Why her and not me?* Asked Miriam, in her mind. The hostess' teeth were exposed in laughter, and so too were the grandmother's. The uniformed woman's lips were very red, her smile very white, and her skin porcelain. No loyalty, Miriam decided. That's what's wrong with Kenyans. Or people. Women, really, lack loyalty. They just can't be depended upon, it is not like before when you could count on people. From that one disappointment, many truisms could be inferred. Once you know that you know everything.

Miriam turned her head to the right and left to make certain no one else had witnessed her humiliation. She perpetually felt unsafe, but the undulating sense of being alone was a great source of worry. Her degree of exposure before the world was unrecoverable. Many people are of the mind that strangers offer an anonymous sense of camaraderie and company, but for Miriam, they only exacerbated the sure knowledge that no would piss on you if you were on fire. She hated airports. They reminded her of the worst of everything. "Now boarding Group 4," a voice said in a mechanical American accent. Miriam stood and gathered her things.

The two twins who Miriam was seated between were emblematic of a people who she did not yet know. Their hair was impossibly red. Miriam asked if they'd like to switch seats. "No," they insisted, "We're okay." What compelled them was unclear. Miriam didn't care. She cared very little. Throughout the duration of the flight, they whispered to one another across her.

"Holly, do you want half of my sandwich?"

“What?”

“Sandwich?”

“Hannah I can’t hear you,” she leaned slightly against the arm of Miriam’s seat. Her twin held up what smelled like fish and looked like white bread. The other twin shook her head and sat back in her reclined seat, her legs splayed.

Miriam had not seen her sister Lilian in nearly ten years. August 15th would mark ten years exactly. The last time they spoke in person they got into a sore argument which both insisted was only about a borrowed, unreturned and consequently lost article of clothing, but it was resonantly about Lilian’s departure. It was also about Lilian who was a self-centered heathen, who couldn’t even share with her own sister (Miriam’s words). According to Lilian, the argument was about immature people who feel sorry for themselves and pots which call kettles black. It was a white, button-front dress, which came up to the knee on Lilian and fell mid-calf on Miriam. That was what they fought over. Neither particularly cared about the dress, in truth, it was quite cheap.

In the years which constituted their relationship, their meetings were inconsistent, but teeming with girlish curiosity about how the other lived. Miriam stayed in Likoni with her mother and Miriam in Kizingo with hers. Neither had any other siblings. They were equally estranged from their father but knew him well in the way that people know folklore and gossip. They memorized the legends of him which they picked up in their schoolyards, and when they saw them, they could not see him because the idea of his power was too great and his status too overwhelming. The Reverend was famously involved in the community until his church dissolved and he found Catholicism. According to divine positive law, he was meant to choose: one daughter and wife or the other, but he rejected this breach of his traditional rearing. His

fervor for God waned in the 70s, so he went on to pursue politics, but that was not of interest to either daughter. By then his wives had stopped taking him seriously. Almost arbitrarily they all decided, Lilian was less like her father, Miriam was more. Her and Lilian bore a great resemblance, down to the hairs of the brows, but their mothers insisted that they could not see it.

The shorter-haired twin to the right asked twice in the first hour if she could pass to the bathroom. Miriam wasn't bothered by the slight inconvenience. Her mind was in the cockpit. The two young women drank on either side of her: white wine on the left, vodka, and orange juice on the right. So it appeared that they were not teenagers, but women. The one sitting on the left cried as if she were not in public, evidently touched by the movie she was watching. From the corner of her eye, Miriam watched her freckled skin flush red and she prayed that the turbulence would not be fatal. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding will guard your heart and your mind in Christ Jesus. That's Philippians. Miriam worried herself to sleep. She awoke to a landing in Boston. Beyond the tarmac was the ocean. It made no impression on her, gave her no revelation. When would it begin to feel special, like an arrival? When the aircraft touched the earth, she felt magnificent grace, but the height of doom lingered longer. This was the root of her trouble. One of the sisters, the crier, snored loudly until the other, Holly or Hannah, leaned over and shook her awake.

Miriam stood at baggage claim convinced her effects were lost. Again she saw the woman in the wheelchair, but this time she had nothing for her. She watched for her own plum luggage. The conveyor belt spun with belongings which were not Miriam's. At the end of the rotation were her large and indeed purple suitcases. She rode the escalator with a worn duffle bag slung behind her back and two large pieces in her hands. The difference is significant: when all

the voices speak in English. The language is a bit brash, though Miriam never spoke it that way. Its speakers are fast and they mumble, but they do so loudly. In Boston, Miriam noticed, there is a croak in the voice and the musicality of speech is best compared to a swinging drum. People rushed in streams before her: husbands, children in strollers, lost people, wives. She walked with purpose.

Miriam looked for her sister to no avail. It was possible that Lilian could be hidden in plain sight. Among these myriad strangers, she could be confusable with many. Odd details bloomed in her mind as she scoured, with her eyes. Lilian always had a complex about her ears. Everything she did for a time was to conceal them. Miriam coveted them because they were so reminiscent of Lilian's mother: who had prominent, flat ears and a complimentary large, wide nose. So too were her feet large. Her hands were like the Reverend's and were made serious by years of constant work as a seamstress. Her shoulders were broad. By any measure, she was a tall woman. Magnifying, she wore heavy earrings, which made her ears droop over time. Miriam found her so beautiful, even more so when she sensed Lilian's fear of resembling her. Her mother looked like Miriam Makeba. Just like Miriam Makeba and *she* belonged on The Ed Sullivan Show. The girls were so lucky, to have inherited so much prettiness, particularly Lilian. Her mother was unmatched. Miriam was not so far off and very attractive when she dressed nicely, when she had the time.

There Lilian stood on the other side of a short partition in the airport, less slender than before, holding a baby in one hand and the wrist of an older child in the other. It was evident immediately that Lilian, in truth, outdid any photograph taken of her. She was now thirty-six and incomparable. When the eldest daughter was born, Lilian sent a fat envelope of pictures to Miriam: of herself, of the girl, the condominium (now sold), of in-laws, who were strangers to

Miriam, and a dog (now dead). The best and first photo in the stack was of Lilian leaning up against a forest green sedan, boxy, and gleaming with turtle wax. Nothing in those frames translated to the woman standing just a foot or so away, in jeans and square black leather boots. Her lips were brown and oily, upturned in a grin.

The words which were spoken were secondary to the embrace of the two sisters. So much lost time hung in the space between their touch. Miriam looked Lilian in the face. Very many knowing glances. Lilian spoke first, revealing something of her nature. Had Lilian grown taller? It must have been the shoes, which made the two women stand in perfect alignment, at an equal height. They were, as the Reverend used to drunkenly joke: morning and evening stars.

“Miriam. God. How long has it been? Alice say hello to your Auntie.”

“Hi, Auntie. This is our brother Benjamin.”

“Your brother,” said Lilian.

“Your brother,” Alice repeated.

“Hello, Alice,” Miriam reached out to shake her hand, Alice took the hand and kissed it. Alice was pretty and endearing, but it startled Miriam to see, for the first time, her sister’s child. In Alice, she saw the dissipation of their own girlhoods, which was the first milestone to morbidity.

“How was your flight, Miriam?” Lilian shifted the weight of the baby on her hip.

“You know I really never liked planes. Or airports. Funny enough.”

“Yes. I hate airports, too. They’re filthy,” Lilian flashed a smile, “Are you hungry?”

“Not very,” Miriam lied. Lilian’s husband idled outside. It was easily mistaken for a government car. Lilian dealt with the children, Martin dealt with the suitcases. Miriam sat beside Alice, who took her hand in hers, without any hesitation.

“It’s nice to meet you. Lilian’s told me so much about you..”

“It’s very nice to meet you too.”

“How was the flight? I’m sure you’re used to it by now.”

“Yes, very.” Miriam sighed.

“Actually she hates airports. Just like me,” Lilian spoke happily.

Martin turned his head a bit to address Miriam in the backseat, “You know I wasn’t going to say anything, but I hate flying too. Airports are horrible. And that’s my medical opinion.”

Lilian laughed and put her feet up on the dash. Small Alice stared at them all as they spoke. Miriam gazed out the window at tracts of silver buildings illuminated by windows which gave back the light of the setting winter sun.

“Miriam, you have to tell me everything,” said Lilian, shaking cashews out of a plastic bag with her eyes on her husband.

They were soon caught in a stretch of still traffic. Alice slept with her head in Miriam’s lap. Someone spoke in a low voice on the radio, about a crash in the market. His voice was even and unembellished. He spoke too quickly to follow. Miriam listened, uninterested in understanding. She was certain, like a child listening in on the whispers of adults, that she may not yet comprehend, but that one day she would know all this and more. He had just begun to give the report on the weather, “Cloudy in Boston. Highs in the thirties. Light snow overnight...” when Miriam fell asleep. She awoke to the sound of Benjamin being unstrapped and lifted from his car seat. “We’re here,” Lilian said, shaking Alice awake. The front door held a stained, oval plaque of wood on which the name *Morgan* was engraved.

On the other side of Lilian and Martin’s dark, heavy front door was a hallway that opened into a sunken sitting room. The sofas were meticulous, made of fine brown leather, like skin. The

fireplace, clearly unused, was no more than a decorative relic of the style of life that the home suggested. Martin carried the bags to the base of the staircase which appeared short compared to their teeming library, too large for the shelves which held it. While the house was prominent from the outside, it was its careful, and deliberate excess that gave it its grandeur. Three living room windows dressed in unblemished, splayed white curtains framed the outdoors that shone through them. Beyond the windows, the bright wintergreen of the shrubs planted on the lawn could be seen, shrouded in darkness. Lilian took all of their coats: the children's, Miriam's, and her own and hung them along a line of iron hooks. She held Benjamin in the fold of her right arm, balancing him against the slight curve of her hip.

Martin and Lilian kissed one another on the cheek efficiently. It was a gesture of habituation. As if it were rehearsed, he then kissed her on the forehead; her eyes fell to the floor as he did. It was not that the two were loveless. In fact, it was good to see that Lilian had met a man who relaxed her posture and quelled the vehemence which had once powered her ambitions. Martin had the sort of generally likable disposition that Lilian lacked. He was, in the best way, superficial. Polite and impersonal. He was the sort of man who remarked, "*Really nice to meet you,*" to every single person he met. Lilian had always been smarter than what was good for her, and she had always been marked by this. Now, in the foyer of her very normal, tasteful home Lilian became subdued. Martin opened the door, letting in the presence of the cold. He said his goodbyes and as he walked down the sloping driveway only the sea-foam blue of his scrub pants were visible in the night.

Lilian disappeared into a swinging door. The smell of roasted meat and fried onions hung in the air over the air of pine from the ornate tree in the corner of the room. Miriam stood politely in front of the black screen of the television; Alice toyed unsuccessfully with the TV

remote that her mother had taken the batteries out of the night before. Miriam removed her shoes and revealed her bare feet, which sank into the high piling of the illustrated rug beneath her. Shy and overawed, she awaited directions from Lilian: when to sit, how to be. In that way, nothing had changed: Miriam and Lilian's sisterhood was punctuated by a strange distance for which neither could account. They bore a greater resemblance to one another than they could locate anywhere else but lacked the expected comfort and ease. Irregularly, their affections swelled. Now, significantly older than they had been when they were last together, their relationship had become a collection of small tokens: a birthday here, a phone call there, the unmissable, doe-eyes they inherited from the Reverend. Like the house, the two sisters were a monument fashioned out of past time and sentimentalism. It was a lovely home. Miriam turned to face a painting of a handful of sunflowers, gathered in a vase atop a red piece of linen. She looked on in admiration.

“Sit down, Miriam, dinner is almost ready,” Lilian spoke from the next room.

“Can I help you cook?” Miriam asked. Lilian emerged through the door with Benjamin secured on her back in a sling. She wiped her hands with a checkered towel.

“No, it's all ready, I just have to put the chicken in the oven to warm.”

“You cooked?”

“Yes. *I* cooked. I'm a great cook.”

“Remember when, on a Sunday, we all went to your mum's house and they asked you to make a pot of rice and you burned it. The entire thing. I've never seen anything like it. That much black rice,” Miriam laughed, glad to recollect.

“I remember. No one lets me forget,” Lilian sighed, rolling her tired eyes happily, “Go wash your hands, Alice.”

“Something’s wrong with the remote,” Alice said and passed the black controller to her mother.

“No T.V.,” Lilian spoke absentmindedly, looking not at her daughter, but at the mantle lined with green and red candles. She hid the remote far back behind the candles and the garland, where Alice could not reach it.

Miriam and Lilian settled into the kitchen. The violet wash of night came in through the open blinds. A rotisserie chicken sat in a large baking dish. Beside it, on the tile of the counter, was the plastic that once held the bird. *She bought a pre-made chicken*, Miriam thought, all but surprised. Lilian sifted through the mail that collected in a tall pile on a kitchen shelf holding more books, more things. Miriam lifted the lid off a steaming pot of rice and stirred a pan of cabbage with a wooden spoon.

“Maybe we can eat in the living room since Martin won’t be here,” and before Miriam could respond, Lilian answered herself, “No that’s a bad message to send the children. I’ll set the table.” Miriam tried not to scrutinize the food.

“My mother and I always ate on the couch, whenever Reverend wasn’t around. I always begged her and she could never say no.”

“By the way, how is she?”

“Who?”

“Your mother.”

“Fine, she’s fine.”

“And Mr. Reverend?” Lilian said with a sarcasm that masked the heavier feeling.

“He’s your father, Lilian.”

“Please,” she sucked her teeth, carrying the chicken to a small dinette. Alice walked through the door upset, combative. The collar of her pink turtleneck brushed against her ears, her mother’s ears.

“But I hate cabbage!”

“There are people in this world praying for a plate of cabbage Alice, believe you me,” Lilian smiled privately at Miriam as she spoke.

Hadn’t the sisters heard this so many times before, no matter how unappetizing the meal? People in the world were praying for cabbage, for maize, praying for yams. According to their mothers whatever children were fed and did not want to eat, someone was wishing for, nightly. Miriam poked at Alice’s stomach jokingly. She laughed brightly. They gathered around the intimate table, made of wood painted white. Benjamin sat closest to his mother in a plastic high chair. Lilian poured water from a blue ceramic pitcher into all of their glasses.

“Will you pray for the food Alice?” Miriam and Lilian craned their necks down towards their plates, and with bowed heads, they listened. Alice clenched her small, dark hands into a fist and spoke with open eyes.

“Thank you Jesus. So much. Amen.”

“Amen,” said Miriam.

“Amen,” said Lilian, “thank you for that.”

Lilian served Alice less cabbage than what could be counted as a spoonful, gave her a piece of breast meat, and filled the remainder of the small plate with rice covered in ketchup. Miriam, who had refused to eat one of microwave thawed airplane dinners she had encountered too many times before, devoured her meal. The rice could have used more water, the cabbage was good, but not great. Lilian cut it unevenly and so it cooked that way. The chicken, though it

was store-bought, was succulent and briny; Miriam sucked the marrow from the bone. Before eating herself, Lilian made a plate for Martin. Benjamin slept in his chair. Lilian picked at her own plate of rice and cabbage which would go uneaten.

“Are you going to eat Lilian?”

“I don’t eat meat.”

“How come?”

“I’m a vegetarian.”

“You can’t be serious,” Miriam said, placing a stripped wing on the corner of her empty plate.

Three

On the second day of February, Miriam sat on the living room floor, before the television, in grey sweatpants and watched a man wearing a top hat raise a groundhog over his head, in celebration. Apparently, the animal hadn’t seen its shadow. That was the whole point. The broadcast cut to a weather woman with ash blonde hair who pronounced, “Well! It looks like it’s going to be an early spring. After the kind of winter we’ve had, I think we all deserve it.” She tapped a stack of papers against a black surface and smiled, “Back to Chris in Pennsylvania.” A song rang up from violas and french horns. The camera zoomed tightly into the face of the

groundhog. In all that fanfare the filthy, shaggy animal was made to be of real importance. They held him like a prize. A close circle of men shook hands and patted one another on the backs, their breath visible in the winter morning. Miriam switched the channel to a special on the downing of a plane in the Pacific. The aircraft sank so deep into the ocean that no diver could reach it. So the bodies were left there in the seabed sand. According to this channel's anchor, another blonde, the airline planned to take a flight-full of loved ones to a California Island close to the wreckage, so that they could be near, in mourning and meditation.

Miriam balanced a cup of tea on her knee with one hand. She lowered the volume of the television and flipped through a tabloid magazine. It was not hers, but Lilian's. She read purely out of boredom; all of the celebrity names were distant and unexciting. The salaciousness of this divorce or that affair did not carry its intended weight because the subjects of the rumor were too obscure to be interesting. That, coupled with the fact that Miriam was not, and had never been a gossip, rendered the magazine totally unreadable. Still, she thumbed through the glossy pages, interested in learning God-knows-what.

Miriam spent much of her time alone. In the days at least. Though Lilian did not work, she found myriad ways to busy herself: the children, errands, pilates, semi-frequent bible meetings, clothes shopping, Mom-and-baby yoga. She was always off to endless places, with dizzying urgency. Alice, taking after her mother, was equally occupied with whatever thing she expressed even marginal interest in doing. Last month gymnastics dominated the hours leftover from school and now it was karate. Martin expressed regular, quiet frustration with his daughter's lack of commitment to anyone leisure activity, but he spent a better part of his days in the emergency room and had little control over her parenting. During the day, were it not for Miriam, the house would be left to watch itself. Martin and Lilian often neglected to lock the

front and back doors; they left blinds and curtains wide open through the night. Why they left their home so vulnerable, Miriam could not understand. But the arrangement was ideal for her because she feared leaving the house and found great comfort in stagnation and the indoors.

The way she had seen women do in movies in times of crisis, Miriam would fill the upstairs bathtub to its edge, and soak herself. Working a flight from Mombasa to Rome during the season of rain in 1995, Miriam watched some, but not all of the movie where a Hollywood call girl meets Richard Gere, the businessman, and the two are found in love by the end of the picture. The quality of the small airplane seat-back monitor was poor and dulled Miriam's desire to watch at all, but she recalled and recalled enjoying the scene where the woman bathed happily and sang.

She submerged her head, not caring what it did to her hair. Wanting to feel even a slight severance from the dry warmth of Martin and Lilian's home, she bathed for hours. She sat quietly in the water, beside the sound of it rolling over itself. Long after the soles of her feet and the pads of her fingers were covered with deep, pink grooves, Miriam reclined deeper into the raised bath. Whether the water was cool or hot, she had no preference. Unlike Lilian, Miriam had yet to find her hobbies. Her sole pastime was finding ways to fill the day until her sister's family spilled back into their home and commanded her attention just enough for it to be said that Miriam was not lonely. Sitting in the cloudy water as had become her routine, Miriam picked at dark marks and old, faint scars which were so deep under the uppermost layer of her skin that there was no way to reach them now. She toyed with the fat around her narrow calves and turned gently to crack her back.

The quiet of the morning was interrupted by sounds of ringing and rapping on the front door. She stepped out of the bath, wet with soap, and ran a towel over her braids. Miriam walked

across the wide hallway to her bedroom with her arm across her collarbone, trying to conceal her nakedness; the knocking continued. Pulling on the first blue jeans and a fleece she found by her bedside, she hurried down the steep staircase and towards the door. Her feet were bare and left long, damp outlines in the red runner on the stairs. She zipped her fleece up to her neck and licked her lips, so as to look more presentable. The knocking ceased. Squinting through the peephole, Miriam saw a tall and slender woman with fair brown skin. Her lipstick was a deep red the color of burnt umber. Her brows were dark and painted darker.

“Hi? Lilian, it’s Linda,” the woman shouted from behind the door, furrowing her face deep into her long grey coat in the biting air. The woman, Linda, was inside the house before Miriam even fully opened the door. She slid her way gracefully, through the crack. Rubbing her gloved hands for warmth, she tucked her knitting needles and a skein of yarn under her armpit.

The first thing Miriam registered was her height. Miriam was tall, but Linda was taller. She was doused in perfume and her fingers, varnished in a brighter red than her lips, were long, uncalloused, and bare. She reached out her hand to Miriam

“Oh, you must be the sister.”

“Yes, I’m--”

“Miriam, yeah, she told me. You’re tall, huh?” she asked, looking Miriam up and down.

“You are--”

“And pretty, too. I mean, you look just like her.”

“Thank you.”

“A bit taller though. I’m Linda,” she said, readjusting the large leather purse on her shoulder.

“Hi. Hello. Are you looking for Lilian? I think she’s at some sort of exercise class. I’m not certain which”

“That’s alright sweetheart. I’m just here to clean the house,” her voice was soft, velveteen. She chewed gum quietly as she spoke.

“Oh, they didn’t tell me they had a housegirl.”

“Housegirl? Well yeah I suppose. I used to come every week when she first had Benjamin, now, not so much. She didn’t mention I was coming by?”

“No, Lilian didn’t tell me anything. Sorry, excuse my appearance by the way, I was just bathing when I heard you knocking on the door,” Miriam said, pulling up her jeans.

“Please,” Linda said with a slight wave of the hand which held the yarn, “I’m the last person in the world to be saying sorry to.”

“Do you want a cup of tea, coffee? I haven’t eaten breakfast. I was going to make some eggs, maybe. Do you like eggs?”

“Baby, I like everything. I was raised to never say no to food,” her voice was decadent, lilting. The stress of the sound of her speech fell in the most perfect places.

“Me too,” Miriam said with adulation. Linda unzipped her tall black boots and the plush silver coat which swept her ankles. Her gold earrings knocked gently against the fringes of her heart-shaped face.

Linda had already begun to pick things off the floor and place them back on their shelves as she walked to the kitchen: Lilian’s magazines, one of Martin’s books which had made its way from the shelves to the coffee table, a wine glass with a red ring of sediment at the base of its bowl. The house never looked out of sorts. Any untidiness seemed to be a deliberate marking, a favorable reflection of the people who lived in it. Even the children’s play seemed contained, and

their toys and games blended well into the careful self-awareness of the home's design. There was a photo hung in every corner that wanted for decoration. The books on the coffee table and shelves seemed to be chosen more for their appearance than their content. Miriam, up till now, had known her sister's husband made a good living, but the extent of his wealth was the maid in the spotless home.

Never mind that it was somehow ever-clean, it *had* to be scrubbed and picked for posterity, so that the children would know what to do with themselves, and so that Lilian and Martin could feel contentment.

From the corner of her eye, Miriam watched Linda who held so many small objects in the cradle of her right arm and hand. Linda ran a finger from her free hand over the top of the book shelf, to check for dust. She did not need to elongate her back or stand on the point of her toes in order to see over the tall shelf. Lightly brushing her fingertips, she followed Miriam into the kitchen.

Linda and Miriam cooked together; they were both, for different reasons, incredibly familiar with the home to which neither belonged. So they worked in tandem, in silence, at the food. The only sounds were those of the appliances. The loud, constant hum of the refrigerator. Metal grazing metal on the stove. The cartoon-like sound of the garbage bin opening and closing again. The seething of boiling water. Their delicate, large feet against the clean, cool tile floors. Miriam cracked and stirred the eggs. Linda toasted the bread. Miriam thawed the butter. Linda got the coffee going. Miriam emptied the dishwasher. Linda brought out the sugar. One scoured the refrigerator for marmalade. The other set the table. They placed the pan on an oven mitt in the middle of the banquet and ate until it was clean. The coffee was milky and light. Their lips glistened with oil.

“How are you liking it here, so far?” Linda asked, brushing crumbs from her chin.

“It’s nice...Cold. I’m grateful to be here... It’s different from what I expected,” Miriam spoke slowly.

“Everything is.” Linda said, her eyes glassy, sensitive.

“Everything is what?”

“Different from what you expect,” she said, with an empty laugh, “Don’t you think?”

“You know, now I don’t even remember what I was expecting. Milk and honey, the way everyone makes it seem. But I don’t think I expected anything. I didn’t think about anything beyond the plane ride.”

“*Milk and honey*. I love that. How long have you been here?” Linda asked, adding sugar to her coffee.

“One month. A bit more.”

“Cold month to get here, it’ll be better in Spring. I was born in April, on Easter, it’s always beautiful by then.”

“Then summer after spring?”

“Yes, darling, summer then spring, then fall and winter,” the way Linda said the word *fall* was like the caw of a crow without any of the harshness.

“I heard today that um, this animal--”

“A groundhog?”

“Yes. The groundhog didn’t see its shadow. Winter is over, they say? Have you heard about this?”

“Yeah ‘course I have. I mean a lot of that stuff’s usually fake, but if somebody tells me winter’ll be over because a rat saw its shadow then I just have to believe them. It’s just crazy

enough to be true,” Linda pulled a chrome tube of lipstick from her large handbag that sat on the table, “So do you think you’re gonna stay?”

“In the States?” Miriam asked. Linda raised her brows to say, yes, “Yes, I’d like to, but not here. In Lilian and Martin’s house. Not that I’m not grateful, it’s just--”

“I hear you, sweetheart. They’re good people. Martin’s a nice man. Lillian’s a *terrific* woman. The kids are great. And that’s good. On paper, it’s perfect. Your sister, she’s smart. Much smarter than her husband. He can’t deny that. Maybe that’s why he doesn’t let her work. Just one woman’s opinion. Now I don’t have a thing against him, like I said, he’s one of the good ones truthfully. But you don’t want your sister’s life. You’re like me. I can tell.”

“What do you mean?”

“About what darling?”

“What do you mean he doesn’t let her work?”

“Well I only go by what I hear and what she tells me, which isn’t much. She’s your sister so I’m sure you know better than I do: Lilian, she’s private, you know what I mean? She plays her cards close to her chest. Can’t get her to tell you anything one way or another, but I don’t mind that. I’ve always respected that in a woman. Actually.” Linda leaned closer, her shoulder jutting out from underneath her white blouse “What I do know is that when they, you know, got married, he made it very clear.”

“That just doesn’t seem like Martin.”

“No, it doesn’t seem like him at all, does it? You know how he made his money?”

“He’s a surgeon.”

“Before that darling.”

“No, I don’t,” said Miriam.

“His grandfather invented hair relaxer, can you *believe* it? Perms. Garret Morgan or something like that. Martin Morgan, that’s where he got his name. He grew up in Cincinnati, moved here for school. You meet a lot of those types in Boston. Twenty year olds with more money than you’ll touch in your life,” Lilian nodded as she spoke, “I’ve known Martin and Lilian for a long time. I started working for them when she only had the girl, Alice. And that was Martin’s one big hang-up. She could have and do whatever she pleased, but no school, no work. Fair enough right? You married Miriam?”

“Not yet.”

“Got anybody in mind?”

“Well there was someone back home, but that was nothing.”

“It can’t be nothing if it’s the first thing that comes to mind.”

“He,” Miriam whispered as though someone else were listening in “He, he was much younger than I am.”

“Sweetheart, I don’t think anything could be younger than you are. How old is this man?”

“Twenty-three, twenty-four soon.”

“That’s not so far off. Did you love him?”

“I’m not sure, I mean yes. Not so much as he loved me. Love is... I don’t mean to sound backwards, but I’m nearly thirty, I need a home and I need a family. He couldn’t give me any of the things I needed. I couldn’t just wait around”

“That’s your sister talking. You watch out for that.”

“I know, maybe you’re right. But I’m here and he’s there, God only knows what other women he runs around with.”

“What’s his name darling?”

“Okello.”

“Sounds like a beautiful name.”

“It was. It is,” Miriam’s voice softened. She felt the alley all over again, its hard, stony wall and Okello’s dewey skin.

“So no husband, good for you. You have a job?”

“No,” Miriam shook her head.

“You want one?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, that’s good. That’s the important thing. Not necessarily having a job, but wanting one. How old did you say you were?”

“Twenty-nine,” Miriam said.

“God, *twenty-nine*. I remember when I was twenty-nine, *Jesus*,” as Linda said this, her expression became both young and old. There was as much triumph as there was gloom brimming in her voice as she said *twenty-nine*.

“How old are you now?”

“Well that’s not a very polite question to ask a lady...I’m just giving you a hard time, I’m forty-two. Forty-three in the spring.”

“You look so much younger.”

“No stress, no getting hung up on anything. That’s my secret. When I was your age, I left my husband. I’m gonna tell you why. Everyone thinks a marriage has to end badly, like it has to be this big thing, but nothing happened between Manny and I. Manny, that’s my husband. My ex-husband. I was nineteen when I got engaged, twenty when I married. Sure I loved him but I had no idea what I needed or wanted. Nineteen, now that’s young, even for a woman. You’re

practically a girl at nineteen. You have no business getting married anyway. But my parents loved him, he was traditional, so we did it. Never mind that we had no money, no car, not a thing to our names. Twelve years we were together and it was okay you know. He was loving, right up until the end, showed me a lot of loyalty, he was good to me. Maybe I'm crazy but I just didn't love him. A lot of people'd call me crazy. He owned an auto body shop, and I managed the books. The money was good, but it was his. Everything in his name, every last dollar: his"

Linda's voice cracked with high emotion and loose consonants, "I don't care what anyone calls me. People say: you left your husband to clean houses. They call me a bad mother, they judge me, but they don't know how unhappy I was. They never stopped to ask me what I wanted. What it was I *wanted* out of life. I knew what I needed: not to sit back and use up my good mind and my able body and let someone else decide who I am or what I'm worth," Linda ran her lithe fingers around the rim of her cup, her brown eyes, nearly green flickered in the light flowing in through the window.

"After a while I just hated coming home to him. It made me sad hearing his key in the door. Once that happens, once you dread the man you married, there's nothing you can do. I used to fall asleep on the couch just so I didn't have to get in bed with him. I never wanted another child besides my one daughter, she's sixteen now. Beautiful girl. 46 Lilian met her. So one day, while Isabella was at school, I told him I wanted a divorce. The funny thing is, I think he saw it coming. We stopped laughing together. Stopped wanting to sit on the same side of the booth when we were out to dinner. Started calling each other by our first names. You know? Little things like that."

"Has it been hard to be alone? With the child?"

Linda seemed to not even hear the question. She continued where she left off, staring dreamingly into her cold cup of coffee, “I’m telling you this because it’s the advice I needed, when I was young as you are. I didn’t know a thing. The way I was raised: your husband’s hungry, you feed him, he’s naked, you wash and you iron and you clothe him, he’s small, you raise him up. Forget about what a woman wants, her dreams. If you have dreams, it’s even worse, not like anybody cares. If you so much as suggest you aren’t happy, forget about it. Then it’s, *well she’s a bad mother, she’s a bad wife, she’s a bad woman,*” Linda shrugged her shoulders, freely, as if she were telling somebody else’s story and cleared her throat before as she said,

“What I really wanted was a restaurant. Always dreamt about having one. Just a small place. I found a spot up for lease, on Blue Hill Avenue. We had the money, I *saw* it. The auto shop was doing good, we’d been saving. I even set aside some cash on my own. But Manny said no. He never took me seriously. That’s the way he was raised: if it’s not broke, don’t fix it, I guess. In a way I saw where he was coming from, but when he wanted the shop, when we had nothing, every dollar I made I put into that thing. Every free hour I had I gave him. It wasn’t that he wasn’t grateful, it wasn’t that he didn’t love me, it isn’t really about love. He just couldn’t understand that I didn’t want to just pour myself into his thing, that he wanted and that he built, just to have to ask somebody for permission before I withdrew one hundred freakin’ dollars. I couldn’t live like that. Ever.

And it broke my heart, feeling like I had to choose him or me. Because you tell me, what kind of choice is that? Your happiness or somebody else’s. Nobody wins with that kind of choice. So I decided if I have to choose, let it be me. I learned the hard way. I lost a lot when I left him. I knew what I had to lose. He remarried seven months after we filed the divorce. I

mean, I'm Catholic. His family and mine, we're Cape Verdeans, I mean we've been here for generations, but you know how people are. Believe me when I say it wasn't easy. I *knew* it wouldn't be easy. I never got the restaurant, but God-willing, one day I'll have it, name it after myself. Linda's.

Now every single morning I pull my socks up and I do whatever it is I need to do to keep myself fed and clothed. Freedom isn't free, darling, and if you're like us, you have got to pay up. Sweetheart, you listen to me: A woman needs to have her own. You got to. Otherwise you'll wake up one morning and wonder what the hell happened to your life and how in the hell can you fix it. You and I don't know each other very well yet, but I see you've got the same thing your sister's got," Linda looked around the kitchen, which had become airless and terrifying as she spoke. All the light was gone, and now it was grey as the sky beyond it. Pointing a stern, loving index finger on the edge of the table where Miriam sat, she said,

"You're smart, so I won't lecture you darling. All I'm gonna say is, this is your one mind and your one life. You cannot afford to waste it. Understand?"

Miriam was electrified. Whatever this strange woman, her sister's maid, had endowed her with, she needed like nothing else. She wanted to get to the essence of Linda's resolve and plant it all in herself. The truth of what Miriam had heard hung in her mind like drunkenness. She could not steady herself, she couldn't do anything but sit and share the gaze of a woman who was virtually a stranger, but had come closer than a friend. Linda's advice was not marital, it was existential; at a loss for words or questions, Miriam attempted an unsuccessful smile.

"Thank you."

Four

Miriam and Lilian were born six years and thirteen days apart. From the time of Miriam's birth, onwards, they celebrated together, mid-March. The Reverend made marginal efforts parenting in the emotional sense, but he was always heavily involved in the planning of his two daughters' birthdays. Through his influence, their birthday became a religious event: a stuffy, phenomenal, ritualistic affair. Whether or not they looked forward to the ordeal was irrelevant, for when it came, they were ready. Even after Lilian's total estrangement from the Reverend and Miriam's polite avoidance of him, they regarded birthdays with the same pious compulsion. Without excitement, they planned and they organized and spared no expense. For many years, they and their mothers put aside their differences rose at dawn and cooked for many, many guests. The significance of this particular birthday, which did not actually fall on the days of either's birth, was heightened by the sense of reunion between the sisters. So, through Martin's generosity, they threw yet another joint-birthday party, marking three decades worth. They ate and communed with friends and strangers, and after a long bit of drinking, many of the people, excluding Miriam and Lilian, danced.

Lilian introduced her sister to a group of women who she called her *other mom-friends*, which was an altogether new category for Miriam, who didn't understand the need for the distinction. There was Grace, who Lilian met at Northeastern. She was employed by a non-profit that used art education to spread awareness about *FGM*. There was Anne who was a very serious dancer in New York until she married David, at which point they settled in Boston; she and Lilian met through Grace. There was Fatima, an Orthodontist with twin sons, who Lilian met in a

prenatal class. There was another woman, whose name was either Ellen or Elaine, who taught at Alice's Montessori school. The self-description of the fourth woman, to Miriam, had become a blur and so had her name. She could, however, remember that she had very athletic arms and a barely audible, sweet voice. All of the women were African. Miriam did not ask but felt that they were, and as they spoke about themselves, she focused more closely on Lilian than on anything they had to say. When the women smiled, and Lilian looked on at them with ardor and approval, Miriam also smiled, glad to be a part of the whole thing. And when Lilian looked stern and compassionate when one of them talked about their work or their children, Miriam offered a more careful, sober look. Hearing the ringing phone on the other side of the kitchen, Miriam interrupted the women to say, "So nice to meet you all, I'm expecting a phone call and I think that's it now."

The women's responses followed suit. It was, echoing Miriam, very nice to meet and they all expressed that they should all like to get together somewhere soon.

With the help of his third wife whom neither Lilian nor Miriam knew or cared to know, the Reverend called his daughter's home in Boston and spoke to Miriam only. Lilian refused to come to the phone. All three knew she did not speak to her father and that between them, there would be a stony, cool silence forever. The Reverend tended to speak of the distant past with happy recency. It was never Lilian, my eldest daughter, to him, but Lilian, my small child. Desperately, he used memory as a salve for their severance. That there was a time before resentment, before old age, was a great consolation to him. When that did not suffice, he turned away from the world of the living, towards the blanketing forgiveness of God. After all, they were his daughters, and he was their father.

“Do you remember,” he asked Miriam over the phone, well into their conversation “when I took you and Lilian to the beach and we taught you how to swim?”

“Yes,” Miriam said, remembering in severe detail: the camel led down the beach, salt in her throat, and suspension on the face of the ocean.

“You cried until you realized you were floating,” he laughed; she imagined the folds of excess skin falling on his face, obscured by a mossy beard.

Their conversation, as always dwindled, into well-wishes, questions about marriage and a prayer, so fast and fervent Miriam could hardly make out its words. Wanting a quiet corner to collect herself in, Miriam wandered into the dining room. The surface of the table was not visible, for the food, but all the guests were gone. There, sitting at the head of the table eating a cluster of green grapes was Isaac, his right leg folded over his left. He looked at Miriam as if he would not speak until she did, he was in no rush to finish enjoying the tart sweetness of his grapes. He stared and wiped his right hand dry against the side of his trousers, before reaching out his hand. He startled Miriam. Startled her in a way she had not been since she first discovered an unknown attraction to boys in Form 3 (they were not yet men) and in a way she had not been startled since. Not since Okello had she felt anything more than coldness when her hand, for example, brushed up against a man.

Miriam limply took Isaac’s hand, he held it and shook it firmly. The gesture was impersonal. He had a strong hand. When he greeted her in Kiswahili, she spoke back in English without even a moment of hesitation.

“You must be Miriam”

“Yes, hello, thank you for coming to our party.”

“Isaac,” he said with his hand over his heart, “I can’t go without giving you a gift,” he continued, pulling a thin leather book from his sport coat pocket. He scratched at the paper with a blue pen and ripped one sheet from the others. “Happy birthday.”

“No, this is too much,” Miriam said, holding the check of \$175 with both hands.

“You’ll insult me if you don’t take it,” he said sternly, reaching for more fruit: a slice of cantaloupe.

“Thank you. Are you a friend of Lilian or Martin’s?”

“Your sister was my student, Martin is a friend.”

“At North East University?”

“Northeastern, not North East,” Isaac placed the rind of the melon on a white cocktail napkin. Suddenly, Miriam was sitting in the chair perpendicular to him.

“What did you teach?” she asked, tapping her fingers distractedly against her leg.

“I taught. Chemical biology. I’ve since retired”

“Biology. Seems interesting.”

“You don’t have to be so polite Miriam.”

“I don’t know what you mean by that...Why’d you retire so young?”

“Young?” He tucked his checkbook back into his jacket and smoothed its lapels, “My oldest son is just a bit younger than you, he’s young. I, on the other hand.”

“What do you do now?”

“I export medical equipment back home. I go back and forth. Six months here, six months there.”

“Is there money in that? Exporting medical equipment?”

“Some,” he smiled, picking the stem from a grape.

“And your children, where are they?”

“They stayed with their mother,” he said, not wanting to say more, “and what do you do?”

“I used to be a stewardess. Then a housekeeper. I’m-- what do they call it? Between jobs,” Miriam scanned the room as she spoke.

“Are you in school?”

“Me? No, I never finished.”

“What did you study when you were in school?”

“Hospitality.”

“Were you interested in hospitality?”

“To tell you the truth I wasn’t very interested in anything. An older friend suggested hospitality, so I tried that. For whatever reason, I stopped going. God willing I’ll go back,” Miriam explained herself, with a loss of face.

“Faith without works is dead. That’s what I always say.”

“Faith is better than nothing though, right?” Miriam said, unsure of her own logic. She smiled shyly.

“I never found that to be the case,” said Isaac, unwavering.

“It’s worked for me,” she unraveled under his seriousness. He looked at Miriam with a sudden curiosity.

“You know, my mother has been dead twenty-five years. She was a Ugandan. I remember her sitting me down when I was a boy and telling me - and you know the way mothers are- *Isaac, Familiarity is like the sea that kills the fisherman,*” he picked a strawberry from the fruit platter with a small fork, “I never took her advice, I was too proud a young man.”

“So you’re giving me the advice she gave you?” Miriam asked.

“No, no. I’m just talking. I don’t advise anyone. Live and let live, that’s my philosophy.”

“Alright. I have a piece of advice for you. Something my mother told me.”

“Okay, let’s hear it,” Isaac leaned the weight of his arms against the table.

“She would always say: no one’s going to buy the cow if they can get the milk for free,” Miriam said, and then began to shake in a fit of laughter, glad that he was laughing too.

“I’d want to taste the milk before getting the cow, wouldn’t you? Just a glassful. Couldn’t I taste the milk and *then* see if I wanted the cow?”

“Isaac, I don’t know, my mother didn’t tell me anything more or less, so you’d have to ask her. Either you buy the cow or you get the milk for free.”

“A cow is a special, special animal. Sacred.”

“Did you know that cows hate to be alone? A cow only goes away from the herd to give birth or die,” said Miriam.

Lilian stepped into the threshold of the dining room, carrying a sleeping Benjamin. Though she was much shorter than the door, she filled the frame.

“Miriam, I’m glad you and Isaac have met,” an odd expression filled her face.

“I’m boring her,” he cast his eyes towards Lilian and gathered up his napkin, the humor leaving his eyes.

“You aren’t,” Miriam felt an implacable embarrassment.

“Isaac was my professor, while I was at Northeastern.”

“Yes, he mentioned it.”

“Your sister was one of the best students I’ve ever had. It was a sad day for me when I learned she was dropping out in the middle of the term,” he spoke as if he were addressing

Miriam, but he was only speaking to Lilian. He shook his head a bit and breathed dryly through his nose, “In any case...”

“Well,” Lilian paused, pulling Benjamin tighter in her arms, “We’re going to pray before everyone leaves in a minute or so. If you two will join us.”

“Right away,” Isaac said, standing with the peels and seeds in his left hand. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a faded business card and placed it by Miriam’s open hand on the wooden table. He tapped the phone number in the corner.

“I have another gift for you, Miriam. You give me a call and I’ll bring it to you. Okay?”

Miriam shook her head so as to yes and remained seated. She clasped the card in her hand. Barely visible behind the napkin and the plastic cup in Isaac’s hand was a thin, brassy wedding band.

Lilian studied her sister’s posture and bearing. Her shoulders were open wide, her knees turned in, touching. One of Miriam’s hands clasped the other uneasily. Her eyes hung on Isaac, who looked no older sitting across from this very young woman. Her dress was high at the neck, long in the arms, the skin of her legs was covered by black stockings. She looked at Isaac as he walked towards Lilian, to the door, and turned to say, “Happy birthday to you girls. It’s time I get home.”

“I forgot, Isaac’s the only African I’ve ever met who doesn’t believe in God,” Lilian said. It was always impossible to tell whether she was serious or joking.

“Surely I’m not the only,” Isaac bore a grin so wide it revealed his gums, “it was nice to meet you, Miriam. Lilian.” He patted Benjamin on the back and was gone with the swing of the door. Miriam handed the check to Lilian and Lilian handed it back, impressed.

“He seems like a nice man”

“Nice man, bad man. I’ve never been able to tell the difference,” Lilian said as she picked the lint off of Miriam’s dress. She walked out of the dining room as light-footed as she entered. Miriam caught her own reflection in the glass door of the wooden armoire. She sat awhile.

Five

A continuous stream of bathwater poured over Alice as she sat cross-legged in the clawfoot bathtub of the upstairs washroom. The room of white tile extended from Alice’s

sprawling, pink bedroom. It was enterable only through the door by her closet and it was excessive for a child, Miriam thought. But if her parents wanted to spoil her, then O.K. Her niece demanded she keep the faucet running and the drain loose. They had argued about the wastefulness many times before, but the child outwilled her. Alice was small and meek, but unbending. Miriam told herself, in many moments with Alice, that she could make concessions to other people's children, but never her own. Since Miriam had no children to prove her own discipline with, she tried and failed with Alice. Her success was in growing close with the child, who seemed already at age seven, like the product of a strange upbringing.

Alice spoke to herself. It no longer came as a surprise when one of them heard what sounded like conversation coming out of a room where Alice sat alone. She didn't speak quiet, private words, but engaged in full-fledged, inflective, sensitive speech. Now, in the bath, she craned herself away from Miriam like a bird in a shallow marble pool and appeared totally mysterious, as all small girls do. Her fixations seemed no different from the things which interested Miriam when she was a girl. The things which made Miriam reflective or made her glad and obsessed, as a child, were only more dated versions of what Alice spoke about. Alice overused the words *I wish, so cute, so perfect*, and *I want*, to no end. She grew excited as she talked with herself. Miriam did not interrupt. Her voice swelled and filled vacant space. Alice was still at an age without self-consciousness. Miriam hardly worried about her disobedience; she felt that the innocence that came with it was a fair trade. Lilian was convinced that Alice's behavior was a developmental issue. Martin suggested Adderall. They spent hardly any time with Alice and could not believe her unruliness at the dinner table or in front of guests. Miriam was often too highly-strung to notice anything other than her own eccentricities. Those of others'

did not bother her at all. She found it a waste of time to give opaque names to conditions which simply were and would continue to be.

Miriam laughed at the sweetness of Alice's high-pitched voice, and how quickly she spoke, in a slur. She talked like the TV, which was of course where she learned to speak and be. Growing tired of running water down the drain, Miriam rinsed the remaining soap from the skin behind Alice's ears, holding her woolly head of hair in her palm.

She lifted the child from the bath and ran a towel over her skin. Alice shivered from the draftiness of the old house. She was home sick from school and Lilian, overwhelmed by Benjamin, left her daughter in Miriam's care. She sat Alice atop the bathroom counter and dug out a helping of Vaseline from a large plastic tub. Alice's skin gleamed beneath the oil. Miriam pulled striped stockings over her legs, then a white t-shirt and an auburn corduroy dress. She gathered Alice's hair tightly in her hand and smoothed it with a boar bristle brush, tying it high and neat. It would not stay fastened in its elastic. Miriam picked the brush back up and tried again.

"Can I watch TV Auntie Miriam?" Alice asked, using her mild sickness best as she could.

"Your mother won't allow you."

"Do you allow me?"

"It doesn't matter what I say. Your mother says no."

"You can tell her yes."

"I can't."

"Do you let your kids watch TV?" Miriam's attention shifted away from Alice's hair, unto her face. She could not understand where the question came from.

“What do you mean Alice? I don’t have any children.”

“How come?”

“I don’t know, I just don’t.”

“Okay. I’m bored Auntie Miriam”

“How about this Alice? If you sit still while I do your hair, I’ll tell you a story that my parents used to tell your Mom and I. It was her favorite.” Alice sighed, unappeased.

“Fine.”

“Alright. So it goes: once upon a time, there was a man who had two wives. He married one woman and another. The first wife had a daughter named Kalisanga and the second wife had a daughter named Kaliteyo. Kalisanga and Kaliteyo were sisters. They were born only a few days apart. They had the same thick hair, the same deep eyes, the same black skin, the same round noses, the same small hands...They were like twins, but with different mothers. They were raised together. They did everything together. When it was time to do chores, they worked together, when it was time to go to school, they walked together, and when one was tired, the other became tired too and they both slept together. They were best friends, you *never* saw one without the other. The only difference was that Kalisanga was more beautiful. She was the prettier sister. She was a very, very pretty girl, like you Alice.

One day Kalisanga’s mother got very sick and had to be put in the hospital and she never ever got well again. She stayed in the hospital forever. So, Kaliteyo’s mother took care of both girls. The girls grew even closer as they got older. Nothing came between them. When they went collecting flowers from the garden, they went together. When they went to buy milk from the market, they walked together. When it was time to cook, they cut cabbage and roasted meat and they ate together,” Miriam quieted her voice to a whisper.

“They were *so* close that they even shared the same boyfriend. But it did not matter how much Kaliteyo loved her sister Kalisanga. Kaliteyo’s mother hated Kalisanaga because she was more beautiful than her own daughter. So she did everything that was in her power to ruin and get rid of Kalisanga.

One morning, the mother came up with a plan. She decided she would send them on different errands, so she could split them up. This made the daughters very sad. Remember, they did everything together since they were girls. Kaliteyo’s mean mother thought, once they’re apart, I’ll get rid of Kalisanga. So, she sent Kaliteyo to the supermarket and she made Kalisanga stay in the backyard to shovel the snow. The girls pleaded and begged with their mother: *Please, can’t we go together? We always go together.* She refused.

The supermarket was miles and miles away, so she knew Kaliteyo would be gone for quite some time. She was going on foot and it was a long, tiring journey. When Kaliteyo was gone, her mother called for Kalisanga to put down her shoveling and come inside. Cold and tired, Kalisanga agreed and went back into the house, where she was alone with her sister’s mother. Then out of nowhere, Kaliteyo’s mother grabbed Kalisanga and took a wide drum, a drum the size of your toy chest Alice, and she stuffed the girl inside. And she sealed the drum. Then she pulled the drum past all the houses, past the school and the park, and the church, past the place where the road came to an end. She pushed the drum into an icy river, and she ran home as if nothing had happened. She wanted to make it home before her daughter Kaliteyo.”

Alice was incredulous. Her small mouth hung open. “What happened to the girl in the river?”

“Wait, mama, let me finish. When Kaliteyo came home from the market, the first thing she did, of course, was look for her dear sister. She looked everywhere: upstairs, downstairs, in

the yard. She couldn't find Kalisanga anywhere. So she asked her mother: *where is my sister?*
Her mother said *you tell me, I don't know.*

As soon as she heard this, Kaliteyo became worried and fearful of her sister. She went to her grandmother's home but did not find her there. She went to the neighbor's, but she did not find her there. After she had looked everywhere, near and far, she went to their boyfriend's home and they told her: *we have not seen Kalisanga here.* Kaliteyo was hurt and confused. Without her sister, she was lonely. After all her hopeless looking, she asked whether Kalisanga had returned home while she was out searching, but she was told no one had seen her, she was still lost. Now, even their father who was a very busy, powerful man looked for his daughter everywhere. Even he could not find Kalisanga. So they decided, she *really* must be lost.

Losing her sister broke Kaliteyo's heart. She couldn't eat, she couldn't sleep, she couldn't even watch T.V. She cried and cried because her sister was lost and there was nothing she could do.

One day she left home and happened to walk to the same icy river where her mother had thrown her sister. Spring was coming, and it was growing warmer, so the ice in the river had begun to melt. Standing by the water all alone, Kaliteyo began to sing” Miriam began to sing the song the way her father had:

“Oh Kalisanga, Oh Kalisanga

My mother's child, Kalisanga

With whom will you grind?

With whom will you walk?

With whom will you collect flowers?

My mother's child, Kalisanga.

Kaliteyo sang that sad, sorrowful song for a long time. Over and over she sang. When she paused she heard a voice that sounded like that of a sick person, singing from the direction of the river.

She listened carefully and heard the voice sing:

Oh Kaliteyo, Oh Kaliteyo

My mother's child Kaliteyo

With your mother, you will grind

With your mother you will walk, Kaliteyo

My mother's child Kaliteyo.

Kaliteyo had no idea where the singing was coming from. She became very afraid. Kaliteyo sang her song again, wondering if the other voice would sing back. When she was quiet, and the only sound was that of the wind in the trees, Kaliteyo heard the voice answering her.

Kaliteyo was 100% sure that the voice was her sister's and she ran home to tell her father what was going on. Their friends and neighbors walked back to the riverside with Kaliteyo and her father. Again Kaliteyo began to sing as she had before and Kalisanga answered her again, same as before, with a hungry, quiet voice. Their boyfriend sang along. Then the drum that Kalisanga had been trapped inside, floated towards the mud at the edge of the river and they all helped one another pull it out of the water. The drum was heavy and when they opened it Kalisanga was inside. She was rotten and sick and bruised from being inside the drum in that freezing river. When Kaliteyo saw her sister looking so hurt and so bad, she ran home and found

whatever food she could carry: milk and porridge and sweet potatoes. She ran with the food in her hand, quickly, back to her sister Kalisanga's side, and fed her until she was strong again.

Kalisanga and Kaliteyo could not believe that one of their mothers would do something so mean, so they took their things and never went back home. Their boyfriend said, *You can come with me, I'll marry you and we can build a house of our own.* So they married and they built the house. A tall white house, overlooking the river, with sunny windows and flowers in the yard. Kaliteyo and Kalisanga were together again. Never again would the sisters leave one another's sides. From that day on they lived together in the most perfect love, happily ever after," Miriam elongated those last words in a stretch of time too long. She held Alice's forehead and gelled down the stray hairs, of which there were many. She reached her hand deep into the bin of ribbons and hair elastics: Then, for no reason at all, Miriam began to cry.

Six

Lilian stretched out on the hot brown leather of the living room couch and her white socks sunk into the deep red of the Turkish rug. She fanned the day's newspaper an arm's length in front of her face. Benjamin rocked back and forth in a bouncer a few feet away. The TV was off, but the radio which was connected to the surround sound system was turned up low and played an incessant loop of nursery rhymes. Benjamin seemed wholly inattentive of his mother and the music. Lilian could not withstand more than one full sentence without looking at the child.

A funeral is being held for a dead, she paused to look up at Benjamin.

Three million dollars found in an empty, she stole another glance.

Big tobacco facing legal, she could not take her eyes off of her son. He rocked quietly, not quite smiling, but taking generous breaths, maybe enjoying the idleness, maybe not. As Lilian looked at the child, she worried; why doesn't he laugh? Where is his dovelike coo? She would be happy to even hear just a wail or a short sob, but Benjamin simply sat, quietly, showing no sign of need.

Lilian and Benjamin were inseparable. Theirs was a mutual dependency. He was always attached to her: by a sling, or a carriage. Benjamin was never more than a short distance away. It had been, since his birth: mother and son, at all times. To Martin's disfavor, she still let him, nearly one year old, sleep in their bed, initially between them. Martin gave up without protest and had since taken to sleeping on the long couch in the master bedroom, apart from his wife. Thankfully, he typically worked overnight or well into the night and so it became a convenient arrangement. Whatever distance accumulated between him and his wife was filled by their son, who was as simple and unemotive as his father.

Lilian never left her child alone, not with his father or his aunt. The sole exception being her exercise classes, where he stayed with the caretakers, older women, at the gym. What the mother and son shared was love, but also a kind of mutual guardianship. Benjamin kept Lilian's life at bay. All the attention she received was mediated through him; she made everything about Benjamin and hoped her husband and daughter didn't internalize the estrangement. Lilian looked, more intently now, into Benjamin's glassy eyes and smiled at him. She told him that she loved him. Benjamin rested his eyes on his mother, then he looked away. Suddenly, Lilian was seized with a desire that came only sporadically since the birth of her first child. She wanted, very urgently, with all the life force that was in her legs and all the restlessness in her hands, wanted to smoke a cigarette. There was a pack hidden in the inner pocket of a brown monogram purse with many, many small uniform *F*s which she never carried. She wrapped the silver-gold lined Marlboro carton in a checkered handkerchief and put that wrapping inside a thick leather coin pouch and covered that with an amassment of receipts, and put the purse far, deep into the back of her closet. Lilian often thought about smoking. She recalled herself at parties in college

lighting a smoke with a match on a high fire escape. She envisioned herself, not in America, but at a disco somewhere drinking out of a thin, tall glass and blowing smoke out of the side of her mouth. She imagined herself deep in a boxy, grey city where she was perfectly anonymous asking a stranger to borrow a matchbox and leaning up against the damp wall of a sooty building and feeling light and empty in the head as she exhaled. Rarely, though, did she act on this feeling. But today all the news was bad, and her son was unfriendly. She had no yoga, no pilates and no errands.

Lilian picked Benjamin out of his distractingly colorful rocker, turned off the speaker system and walked upstairs towards the guest bedroom. She could hear Miriam humming as she moved about the room on the other side of the door. Lilian knocked gently, before pushing the door forward to a crack, then to a large opening.

“Hi,” Miriam smiled, “I didn’t know you were home.”

“How’d you sleep?”

“Good.”

“That’s good,” Lilian sat on the edge of Miriam’s bed, and smoothed the comforter, “Do you like this room, we can change it around if you want to.”

“You know me Lilian, I’m not particular about that kind of thing. There’s a bed, there’s a window, it’s a bedroom. I think it looks very nice.”

“I’m glad you like it. I have something to ask you, by the way?”

“What is it? Is everything alright?”

“Everything’s fine. Do you have any plans for today?”

“Plans?” Miriam misunderstood.

“I’m just asking because Alice is at school and Martin’s at work so I thought, maybe I’ll go for a walk by myself. I’m just wondering if you’re doing anything. Maybe you could watch Benjamin. It’ll only be a little while.”

“Oh is that something you usually do?” Miriam squinted at her sister, who was looking at the hair on Benjamin’s head.

“Yeah. I love to walk. Sometimes...It’s just, the weather is so beautiful. It’s always nice to see the neighborhood. Look at the trees and watch birds.”

“Is everything okay with you Lilian?”

“Of course, why?”

“I mean you never ask me to watch Benjamin. I’ve been here almost six months and you won’t even leave me alone in the same room with him. Alice, no issue. But you want to go out and leave me with Benjamin? So you can take a walk?”

“I’d just like to be alone for a bit.”

“I think that’s wonderful Lilian.”

“You’ll stay with him?”

“I’m happy to.”

“And don’t say that.”

“What?”

“You’ll get married, you’ll have children. You shouldn’t be in any rush. Nowadays 35 year old women, 40 even, are still getting pregnant.”

“You enjoy your walk Lilian, don’t worry about me,” Miriam said, lifting her nephew out of his mother’s arms. He laughed at the sight of his aunt, and reached his small hands deep into a row of her braided hair.

“Thank you Miriam,” then Lilian focused as if she had forgotten something, “I love you.”

“Bye-bye,” Miriam raised Benjamin’s fat arm over his head and waved it for him, as a puppeteer waves the arm of a doll, “We love you.”

Lilian, shutting the bedroom door tightly behind her, bounded lightly down the steps letting her hand glide along the banister. She walked quickly, privately down the dim wooden hallway, towards her bedroom. She opened the towering closet, the heavy doors sounded against their hinges. She saw through the rows of cotton and polyester, deep, down, back into the hooks lining the far side of the closet. She pulled the small gaudy saddle bag out of its placement. Unzipping it, and finding the pocket which held the receipts, which held the handkerchief, which held the pack itself, she pulled out a single cigarette. Close in the fold of her fist, she held it.

With her free left hand, she pulled on a thin, unlined spring jacket and walked towards her cluttered vanity. She selected, from a smaller shelf one vial out of many sample perfumes, then a matchbox which she hid in a small square jewelry box. Then quietly as she could, Lilian walked out of the back door, off of the porch. She walked towards the narrow, swinging door in the fence which one could only notice if they knew it was there. There were toys scattered by the fence. An overturned play car with no bottom, faded red to pink from being left out in the sun and rain sat near a ball which was losing air. Kicking it out of the way, Lilian used the point of her elbow to swing the wooden door ajar. She did not lock it back in place.

That same way, with discretion and by routine, she walked down the quiet block. All the homes were like well-ordered imitation houses, for children’s dolls. They were, without exception, built of brick. Maybe a navy trim here, or a deep army green shingle roof there, but above all else, steady red rows upon rows of clay. It was as if everyone were silently competing for the best brick house. In Lilian’s mind, none bested the other. For a woman with a beautiful

home herself, she didn't seem to very much care. Hers was one of the only white houses on the block, and when Martin bought it in 1982, it was coveted and it was tall. Sitting atop a small incline, the flowerbed on their front lawn angled out like two open hands.

Her neighbors kept hydrangeas. Before Lilian came to Boston, she had never seen the flower, not even in photographs. Now, in springtime they were ubiquitous. More rare were the bleeding hearts. They lived best in the shade. The way the sun sat in the sky now, the red puckered flowers and their white pendants were partially illuminated under the dusky shadow of an oak tree on the far side of a patch of grass. Lilian did not know the name of the woman or the man who owned the home, but sometimes she saw them bent down among the tulips or adjusting the sprinkler before retreating inside. Lilian saw here and there lawn signs held up by metal posts, all blue and bearing names which Lilian knew but reserved with no strong feeling.

She walked down that curved street, it was not quite a cul-de-sac, but the bend in the road suggested an eventual perfect roundness. For a long time she walked. New homes became apparent to her. One had a large window, exponentially wider than the double door. It was without curtains or blinds and could be seen straight through. Lilian was uncurious about the goings-on of those who she did not know, but even she found that large window tempting. Potentially inviting the wrong kind of attention. When the homes of her neighbors were no longer within sight, she put the white slender log of tobacco between her white, white teeth and struck a match.

Lilian let the cigarette fall to the ground, and she put out its faint light with her flat leather shoes and then doubled over to pick up the bent butt which was like cotton. She moved towards the green acrylic trash bin by the mouth of the cemetery and threw the filter in the garbage and brushed her hands against one another. The light had changed in the afternoon. At

this hour, the suburb was perfectly quiet. The springtime wind could be seen riding the leaves and the delicate branches of a weeping tree. All the children were in school and everyone, all the people who lived around here at least, were at their day jobs in the downtown part of the city. Martin was there, at Mass General, working as always, working like someone with a pressing anxiety over survival.

Lilian couldn't stand cemeteries and looked away at funerals, she wanted to turn back, but she did not want to go home. She carried on knowing that the children were safe. Alice would finish school, then be driven to dance by another girl's parent, then stay there for hours and since it was Friday, she would have some sleepover arrangement. She knew that Benjamin's needs were few and that he would be okay with his aunt, or with anyone. Lilian was very alone. She walked in a direction she had not taken. The way she went opened to a grid of very busy roads where people only walked if they had somewhere to be. Away from the headstones hardly visible through the rugged arch of the graveyard entrance, she walked. She slowed once she remembered the perfume. The way one must do in order to smell themselves, as opposed to their surroundings, Lilian lifted the collar of her shirt and then the sleeve of her jacket up just under her nose. She breathed in the clinging, lingering smell of blackened smoke, of dried tobacco leaves beyond the point of burning and she enjoyed that off-putting air. Twisting off the top of the glass cylinder, Lilian doused herself in perfume. She applied a bit of it in her scalp, as if it were oil. Floral women's perfumes never adequately render the flowers they are made to emulate. What claims to smell of lilac lacks the earthiness, the dirtiness. In that extract, there is none of the faint, fecal smell which makes up the other side of the honeyed, grassy leaves. Rubbing her wet wrists together, she walked farther and farther down the avenue.

The traffic light on the stretch of road which ran alongside the zoo was broken, so cars slowed to indefinite stops, before speeding through the red flashes. Lilian jaywalked, that is she crossed the street at any place. She passed that threshold, where Jamaica Plain became Roxbury, but she did not notice. It was summer when she was last here. That was very different, Benjamin was not yet a year old and she was bringing the children to the park. The July air was hot and uninviting, it hissed. She was always surprised by the ability of Massachusetts to grow so hot. That day, as they retreated into the Lexus and drove around this neighborhood to enjoy the air-conditioning, Lilian had not thought of it as a place where people lived. It was very empty. It had its own kind of emptiness, like every other building was evicted. Now it was abundant. Windows were open and one did not need to look in to know that there was somebody in there, because there was music.

The exterior of the homes seemed to suggest that they held more people inside of them. The streets themselves held more. An auto body shop was curiously placed beside a nail salon beside a bakery with fliers hanging in the window by tape. Lilian was hungry. She hadn't carried a bag or a wallet, and as of late was hesitant to buy anything for herself with Martin's credit cards. She had taken to stuffing fist fills of small bills into her jacket whenever she left the house. It was never more than one-hundred dollars, but she rarely had cause to use to cash. At the mall, she used a Lord & Taylor Card, at the grocery she used the AMEX and Martin always put gas in the cars. He handled the bills. Lilian almost never touched money, except for when she was putting it in her pockets. Two older women sat braless on the steps of a purple row-house. Large pieces of cement were missing from the concrete stairs. They spoke to one another, but looked out at the street they were facing. The women, one grey haired and the other with neat, black

braids, did not bother with any niceties. As Lilian walked by, their gaze did not shift, their mouths did not smile and their hands were not waving, but politely folded in a fist, in their laps.

A slightly younger group of men were already drinking, they had brought out their own plastic chairs. Aside from their very varied tones of skin— one was a cool black, one like the shell of a speckled egg and the others falling somewhere between—they looked like brothers. They sat with their legs spread wide and their tops unbuttoned to reveal clean undershirts. Loudly, happily, they spoke in a chorus the way they had been speaking all their lives, safe to assume. On the balcony, a woman with birds in a wire cage was not very high up above the men. She leaned the weight of her upper body against the wooden rails as she spoke on a phone.

“Be quiet Jesus, Rob,” she yelled below to the men, they waved her off and clinked their bottles.

She, the woman in green on the balcony, had startled her birds. Their music was faint against the layers and layers of noise. Even their distant shrieks could be called music, for they were songbirds: bright, excited canaries. African birds. Lilian had never loved animals. Something in these birds collected the affections in her and produced longing. They reminded her sharply of somewhere she had been long ago and she was not sure if that place was real or invented. She only knew that she would have given something to go up to that low balcony and be with their song. Then perhaps she thought, maybe it is not the birds. Maybe it's the woman leaning off the platform, half hanging in the air. It could just as well be the color emerald of her lounging dress, which was tellingly missing from the street below. As her mind worked at remembering the inclinations she had lost at first gradually, then all at once, she decided it was better to forget those desires. There is nothing very special about birds, or emerald green or balconies.

The gas station on the corner was no longer pumping gas, but the corner store enclosed by the shade of its metal canopy was still in slow business. Lilian turned towards the shop. With the force of her hip and her upper arm she pushed open the weighted glass door, a bell chimed as she entered.

“Hi Miss,” the boy said. He was tall and soft-spoken. He had to bend slightly in order to be seen behind the upper display of the register. Bubble gum and chocolate candy filled the plexiglass case which surrounded him and above his head, calling cards hung on hooks. Lilian did not notice him, her back was turned towards the refrigerator. On one side were the tall cans of beer and on the other respectively, were bottles of juice, soda, energy drinks and water by the liter and gallon. She pulled one from the shelf and reached for the money folded thick in the pocket of her jeans.

“Hi Miss,” he said again, so that she could hear him.

“Hello,” Lilian replied. She was the only one in the store. He was incredibly young. His skin was very dark. The light from the ATM machine flashed through all the primary colors.

“Just the water?” He said, as \$2.49 appeared in neon on the small monitor.

“That’ll be all,” Lilian looked at him, very closely. His eyes were downcast, he was incredibly shy. He looked only at the money. His hands and fingernails were clean, this was something she always noticed, “Why aren’t you in school?”

“Oh, I’m nineteen miss. I finished school last year,” he spoke slowly.

“Where are you from?”

“Um, Roxbury.”

“Where are your parents from?”

“Senegal.”

“Alright, keep the change,” Lilian said as she turned to walk out the door. She drank half of the bottle of water in one go. Her thin, gold wristwatch read one o’clock, she had been walking for close to an hour. Following the smell of cooking food, she turned the corner and came upon a restaurant, which was steamy at the windows. The banner over the door was blue, it had plates of chicken, rice and a snapper, still whole, printed on it. On the far side was a palm tree. When Lilian went inside, the only sound was that of a large hanging fan and a woman shouting on the phone. A soccer match was playing on the television which sat above a refrigerator. She went up, behind the two men in line to order.

“Which rice you want?” The woman said, pausing her conversation, by moving the phone away from her mouth, towards her shoulder.

Lilian pressed her index finger against the glass display and pointed to the white rice on the other side. Moving in tandem with the woman with gloved hands, whose hair was tied up in a silk floral scarf, she pointed towards the goat. It sat in a black stew. The bones sounded against the metal spoon as the woman pulled the soup up into a styrofoam plate for Lilian.

“Cabbage?”

“Yes. And can I have a beef patty and a ginger ale?”

The woman closed the styrofoam plate and erupted in collected, baritone laughter over whatever had been said to her over the phone. Among all of her white and bony teeth, there was one which was gold; it gleamed. Lilian paid for her meal, slid a tip in the carved out opening of a plastic jar and held it closed with two hands. She took the seat at the two person table by the window. The light from outdoors streamed in through the painted words in the glass and made the unsteady chair hot. Across the street, visible to her through the wide open window, was an office building. It was the sort that was often fashioned out of what was once a home. Earlier in

the year, upon Martin's suggestion which became a demand, Lilian visited a psychotherapist in one such home-turned-office building. It was around this area, no more than three streets away.

The distance felt shorter by foot, as if the event of entering the car created a boundary which did not exist and only came to be through the form of transport. The first session was about Lilian's marriage: Why, the therapist seemed to ask, did Lilian take pleasure in making her husband sleep on a daybed. The second session was about her daughter. Her therapist had full, slightly fat ankles which were visible under her sheer stockings, which she always wore. Her hair was always ironed straight and pulled back with a clip which matched the color of her dress. Her skin was olive and Lilian could not place her race one way or another. She revealed little to nothing about herself, other than her name which was Sheila. When they spoke about Alice, Lilian remarked that she did not really know anything about her daughter and when her therapist asked if she felt this was normal, Lilian said she believed it was. Seeing no affirming expression in Sheila's face, Lilian qualified what she had said:

"It's not *normal*, as in it isn't ideal, it wasn't always this way. Alice and I were very close, but it's as if you think you *know* your child and then you realize they're a stranger, and every day they're evolving and you don't know what to do with them or...what's effective, what's ineffective. I mean you know how it is right? Our generation, our parents weren't worried about: am I giving my child a complex? Am I getting to know my child? Do you know what I mean? Do you have children?"

"Do you think you're giving Alice a complex? Tell me more about that."

"I mean, my mother grew up in a rural town in the 50s. She was one of eight children. Everyone was depressed," Lilian laughed.

“Okay, that’s a good place to stop. I think we’re making progress here. I’d like to speak more about that but we’ve run out of time Lilian. I’ll see you next week.”

“Thank you. By the way, would it be possible to update my billing information.”

“You can speak to the receptionist, Claudia. She’ll help you.”

“Thanks again.”

There was no fourth session. Lilian carried with her, that entire week and beyond, a deep sense of shame over what she had been willing to reveal. She believed that she understood the crux of therapy before ever having gone. All she had to do was surrender sensitive information about herself and her true pathology would be translated into diagnosable and thus forgivable terms. So that if she was simply a bad mother, she could leave at ease knowing that it was because she was depressed. If she was content to see her marriage fail, or worse knew it was destined to, she could at least say she tried. The following week, on Tuesday, when her appointments always took place, ruining Tuesdays forever, Lilian arrived early and left five minutes before, saying nothing. She did not care that the receptionist had seen her. She did not care that they would bill her. As if by magnetic force, she got back into her car and she sat a while. It was Autumn and she marveled at how unfamiliar the city looked at the precipice of every new season. She would never acclimate. For all the time the counseling wasted, it had made that much clear to her: in the sequence of the remembered days of her life there was no clear logic to be found. Clearer was the fact that Lilian needed no prodding to admit the things she was: materialistic, cold, fault-finding, unambitious and devoted to nothing.

Lilian did not stop at the meat on the bones. She went further, licking at the tendon and sucking on the slightly sweet marrow. Her mouth swelled with the first warming and then hot spice. Anise and pimento berries lingered on the back of her tongue, where bitter tastes go. Lilian

enjoyed herself. Eating the corners of the styrofoam plate clean, she did not look up. When a bit of rice fell into her lap, she brushed it away onto the floor and wiped her lips with the backside of that same hand, continuing to eat. When she finished the plate, she closed it with the plastic fork inside and unwrapped the patty. Lilian waved to the woman behind the counter, so as to say *Thank you, goodbye*, but her back was turned and her eyes were on the television.

Lilian ate as she walked, holding the pastry in unclean hands. The outside air was springlike. Undeniably, April was coming to its height. There were fewer trees here than in her neighborhood, but the pollen was fragrant and yellow wildflowers had come up through the deep grey cracks underfoot. In the place where she was born, there was no spring season. After nearly fifteen New England winters, Lilian understood why the turn away from the cold and into regenesi s was so prized and long-awaited. Even the unexceptional blossoms were beautiful, and even more so when she recognized that only some months ago there were dead, bare limbs in their place. It was well into the afternoon now, but still bright as morning. A feeling of contentment came over Lilian with all the weight and the urgency of exhaustion. Without a pocketbook or a pacifier to fill her empty hands, she felt light even in her weariness, all of it self-imposed and finally bearable. Tiring from the long way she had come, she stopped by a blue post on the side of the road where the buses let off. She gathered the coins and in her pocket and she waited.

Seven

Miriam read in one of Lilian's magazines that it was best to wait before calling a man. She did not understand the logic of the advice because it seemed impolite and fruitless, but she had slowly begun to find these women writers reputable. Putting impulse aside, she heeded their

direction. She waited one month, before calling Isaac. It was not one full month, but four entire weeks and the better part of the 29th morning before she took down from the upper corner of the refrigerator door, Isaac's business card which was held up by a magnet in the shape of the letter A. Each day of that month, Miriam thought of the ways her life and his would change once she called Isaac. The daydreams were unclouded and strikingly lucid. And because April in Boston generally held a false promise of outdated and floral romance, she was all the more expectant. Miriam sat atop the marble island in the center of the kitchen in a pastel blue robe, borrowed from Lilian. The phone played a high pitch over the ambient sound of the house which was empty, except for Miriam. The faucet dripped imperceptibly. Six times the dial tone rang. She played with the bowl of fruit beside her, holding a firm, green apple, then releasing it. He did not answer. Greater than her disappointment, was the excitement she felt at the entrance of Isaac's voice into the room in the form of his answering machine.

"Hello, this is Isaac Mwangi," he cleared his throat and it became static in the speaker, "I'm not able to come to the phone right now, but leave me a message and I will call you promptly. Be blessed. Good bye."

Despite the sound prompting her to leave her own message, Miriam felt as though she were talking to Isaac himself.

"Hi, it's Miriam, Lilian's sister. How are you? . . . Anyways, I'm calling to just say hi and ask if you would still be available to give me that gift, that you mentioned. Alright. Bye then,"

Satisfied, Miriam put the patent navy blue telephone back on its hook. She felt the considerable difference between the warmth of central heat, and the warmth of the sun sticking to the black ceramic tile of the kitchen floor. The bottom-left burner ticked as it ignited to a blue

flame. Miriam filled a saucepan with milk which had gone slightly yellow from sitting in the cool part of the fridge. Lowering the heat under the pot, she stepped outside onto the back porch, her skin very much blending into its red oak stain. From this high point of the rectangular yard, she could see over the tops of both neighbor's fences: one's dog, the other's small, potted trees. There were no irregularities in the neat manicure of the grass. The sprinklers went systematically, barely grazing the small crop of wicker furniture arranged in the shady corner beneath the one pear tree, which stood above all of the others. Miriam felt the yard was underused. It was a sizable piece of sunny land and it was a shame that there was hardly anything planted in it, beside the pear tree which she had never seen Martin or Lilian pick or eat from. Tomatoes could thrive here and spinach, anything really, since there were both bright and bosky parts.

Miriam brushed her feet on the thick braided doormat before stepping back into the kitchen, which had filled pleasantly with the steam of boiling milk fat. She washed her hands and watched the pot. Onto its frothing, white surface she poured a half-cup of dry, black sprigs of tea and stirred them further into the pot as the milk began to darken. Miriam was accustomed to cooking for two, at the very least. In this house everyone ate alone. Lilian ate less than her children and Martin often brought home brown paper bags of takeout which always ended up in the garbage. She began to feel the wastefulness of her expectation that what she cooked would be eaten. Over the months, she had learned to make smaller and smaller portions so as not to have excess, which only became waste. Cooking itself, marked her loneliness. In the midst of the preparation of a meal, she realized that now, her only responsibility was to feed herself, something which had never occurred to her before. The phone began to ring and Miriam nearly ran to it. All day long, she took messages over the phone, mostly for Martin and sometimes for

her sister. All the while, as she spoke to these strangers, who were trying to reach someone else through her, she wished it were Isaac, unable to withstand waiting any longer. Cable providers, credit card companies and every sort of telemarketer imaginable called throughout all business hours. Miriam practiced and perfected the ability to answer the phone in a rehearsed American-adjacent accent.

“Hello, with whom am I speaking,” she said, letting the end of each word trail on, as if she were singing.

“Hello,” Isaac answered.

“Good afternoon.”

“Is this Miriam?”

“This is she, may I ask who’s speaking?”

“It’s Isaac. Hi Miriam. I was glad to see that you called. You must have been busy. I still have your gift”

“Things have been a bit busy, I must say.”

“How are you?”

“I’m fine. There’s so much to do all the time, but I’m managing.”

“Thank you for finding the time,” said Isaac, “What have you been doing?”

“Just the same old thing. I don’t know where the time goes. There really aren’t enough hours in the day.”

“I know the feeling. I always think its better to be busy, personally. Will you be free anytime this week?”

“I think any day this week should be fine.”

“Tonight?”

“What’s tonight? Oh, Tuesday. I’m not busy tonight. I’m never busy on Tuesdays.”

“Okay, wonderful. Can we meet? There’s a Chinese restaurant on Centre St.. Very close by to you. Seven o’clock, is that alright? Do you like Chinese food?”

“Seven is great, yes, I *love* Chinese food.”

“Okay, goodbye Miriam. Tell Lilian and Martin and the children I say hello.”

“Alright, I’ll do that, Isaac. Goodbye.”

Miriam chose one tile out of the kitchen backsplash, arbitrarily, and stared at it trying to empty all other senses to the recollection of Isaac’s voice. She had lied for no reason. Another piece of advice she had gleaned from the magazines was that it was best to seem busy and unavailable. More than available, she was willing. Had she impressed him? He, no doubt, had impressed her and left her with the idea that the Chinese restaurant held more joy and gratification than one could dream. She looked deep into that same royal blue glass tile and could see in it, Isaac’s face. Miriam could not imagine his nose, or his eyes, or his chin agreeing with any other features she had ever seen. From all she could remember, his eyes were his, his nose was his alone and if just one trait were altered slightly, the whole thing, perfect as it was, would fall into disarray.

The milk on the stove was burning. The tea had foamed, risen, crested and then overflowed into the depression under the burner. Miriam did not realize she had turned her back to the stove for so long. As the phone call had consumed her, it had also made her hunger less serious. Forgoing breakfast, Miriam walked down the hall, through the old, ornate double doors of the master bedroom and went into her sister’s closet. Lilian left a note that morning that she would be gone until noon. She left the name and number of the hair salon where her appointment was scheduled. Scrawled on a diagonal at the bottom of the page, she wrote that Alice would go

home on a playdate and that Martin may be home early, but she was not sure. The doors of Lilian's wardrobe slid open easily. They were covered in mirrored glass. She kept her things separately from Martin, likely because she had so many articles of clothing and he, so few. Touching the rows and rows of meticulously placed fabrics felt like touching a person. All of the density was there, and the resistance. She understood, at once, what fixation Lilian had with shopping for clothes. They were alive. A garment did not cease to have life once its owner removed it. Every last pair of trousers, every blouse, hung there with personality and animation that Miriam could not deny.

Now, on the day she was meant to meet Isaac, her interest in clothing peaked. She knew once again all of the things that a blouse could convey, or the expression of a pair of pants, as opposed to a skirt. There was something that her regular variation of jeans and unmarked t-shirts lacked, that she sought to find among her sister's clothing. Having no inclination towards one color or another, Miriam picked one orange, one brown, one cream and one white item out of the mass. She laid two dresses and one shirt, still on their hangers, across the king sized bed, which was sharp at its corners. Undressing before the mirror, Miriam pulled the orange dress up over her knees, then stomach, and saw immediately that it was too short. Modesty was not something that Miriam generally considered, because it was a fixed norm in her mind. There was an acceptable and unacceptable length of a dress, which she did not try to negotiate. Still, what the dress revealed of her legs, excited her. It was a feeling that she felt was worth exploration. Lilian often begged Miriam to buy new clothes. Time went on and Miriam disagreed, so Lilian had taken to putting piles of nearly new hand-me-downs in her bedroom while her sister slept.

Miriam felt a certain eagerness, which compelled her to take all of the clothes into her arms and go into the kitchen to phone Lilian to ask if she could take her to *Lord + Taylor*, a store

that Lilian mentioned several times a day. Lilian was in total, immediate agreement. She would be home within the hour and would be happy to accompany her to the Prudential where, as Lilian insisted, stood the tallest and most promising shopping center in all of town, perhaps the world. Miriam took a bath in the master bedroom, which was clean and unused, because Martin and Lilian preferred showers. Her own bathroom, connected to the room where she slept, was good enough for her, but the luxury seemed appropriate, there was nothing to do, but to wait. She turned all the jets closed, so that the water was still. Miriam was out of the bath and dry for only some minutes, when she heard Lilian's car pulling up crooked in the driveway.

For the first time the sisters were together without the children. When apart from Benjamin and Alice, Lilian was incredibly talkative. All of her frigid silence yielded to her desire to say that which had been on her mind for days and weeks, with nowhere to go. They sat in the car, Miriam who could not drive was in the passenger seat. It was a Volvo, large and made specifically for people with children. Lilian referred to the car as a gift from Martin. Its interior was light leather, bright and so clean it looked unused. Lilian's hair still smelled of the salon: lye, blow dryers and flatirons. She drove, with the windows open, far beyond the speed limit. Her nails were freshly painted such a transparent shade of pink that the varnish was hardly visible. It was only when it caught the sunlight, through the moonroof that it appeared to Miriam.

“Isaac, called today,” Miriam said offhandedly. Lilian looked away from the road.

“Did he call for you?”

“Yes, I called him.”

“Why did you do that?”

“He asked me to. You remember?”

“What did he have to say?”

“He asked me to join him for dinner.”

“*Dinner?*”

“Yes.”

“Just the two of you?”

“I think so.”

“Hm. When?”

“Tonight.”

“Tonight?” Lilian looked at Miriam and at the road, then back at Miriam, “Did you say yes?”

“Yes.”

“Miriam, just know what you’re getting into.”

“Just dinner.”

“It isn’t just dinner, Miriam.”

“What’s the problem? What’s wrong with dinner?”

“Nothing wrong with dinner, its who you’re having it with.”

“He’s your friend Lilian, I met him because you invited him to the party. Now he’s a problem, because he called me?”

“It isn’t you, it’s him.”

“If he’s so bad, why are you friends with him?”

“He’s not bad Miriam, he’s *married*. You do with that information what you will,” Lilian turned into a parking garage.

“He doesn’t seem married.”

“My baby sister,” Lilian looked long and pityingly at Miriam as she slowed into a parking spot, “You have *always* been like this. Don’t be naive. You do whatever you want, far be it from me to judge, but call a spade a spade. Please. That man is married, with children.”

“It’s just dinner,” Miriam shifted uncomfortably in her seat.

“Of course it is. Let’s get in there before everyone rushes in on their lunch break. We’ll find you something nice to wear for Isaac, yeah?”

The name *Lord + Taylor* had taken on a visceral association for Miriam (she could feel the rise and fall of the escalators by simply imagining them). She had always been averse to shopping, but she would do most anything to appease Lilian and that was the way it had always been. Lilian led the way past the perfume counters, up an elevator where all of the women’s clothes were propped up on round metal racks, like bouquets of silk and polyester. Lilian filled a shopping cart, faster than Miriam believed was possible. She estimated Miriam’s size and pulled article after article into the basket, quickening in pace, excited by things from afar. For Miriam everything Lilian chose was too formal or too restrictive. She could not think of any place serious enough to require this style of dress. All the things which Lilian gravitated towards reminded Miriam of uniform, and may as well have been. Not the sort of uniform one wears to school, but the kind that people wear on television.

At a younger age, Miriam had enjoyed the prospect of new clothing. It was less the clothing and more its newness, its ability to replace that which she had become accustomed to seeing herself in. Now that that clothing was available in masse, and someone was imploring her to buy it at every turn, it had become worse than unattractive, it had become repulsive. Miriam had come to regard the semi-frequent trips to the mall with Lilian with a sadness which had no

logical root. The Prudential stood so high above Boston, it was a wonder that it did not blow with the wind. Today, Miriam could not afford any hang-up with sadness, because in just a few hours, she would be having a very important dinner. The shopping basket was filled with turquoise, coral and very unnatural shades of yellow. Lilian saw beauty in these colors because she was also beautiful, and well-groomed, as if the first were not enough. There were no bright colors that did not suit Lilian and she welcomed the attention that they drew.

“Do you want to start trying things on?” Lilian asked, pulling hand lotion out of her purse.

“Are these things all for me?”

“Yes, you like them right?”

“I don’t usually wear these sorts of things, but it’s all very nice...”

“This is what everyone’s wearing, Miriam, it’s in season.”

They walked towards a row of fitting rooms with white shutter doors. Lilian sat outside on a black ottoman, fixing her hair in the full-body hallway mirror. Miriam stood in the bright lit room the size of a kitchen cabinet, looking at herself naked and pretending to try on clothes. She jutted out her chest and then crouched her shoulders forward, deciding which stance was more flattering. She turned her back to the mirror and then bent her neck around to look at the other side of her legs. She noticed, as she had forgotten, her tallness, her solidness. Holding up the clothes by their hangers, she decided at once, that none of this would do. Was it her or the clothing which had failed? Hadn’t it, she thought, promised to make her over and to make her new? Though the opportunity to descend into self-pity over beauty or lack thereof was open, she chose against it. Since money was no object for Lilian, Miriam picked one dress and one blouse

at random and walked out of the narrow dressing room, putting on a content face. She was prepared to be done with it.

“Did you try anything on?”

“I tried it all.”

“That fast?”

“It doesn’t take long.”

“Why didn’t you let me see?”

“I didn’t think you’d want to,” Miriam checked the price tags hanging from plastic off the garments.

“That’s why people go shopping together Miriam. For a second opinion.”

“Well, you picked everything out so I thought that was enough of a second opinion.”

“Just let me see, Miriam, please. We never spend time together. Now you’re ready to go home?”

“Alright,” Miriam said, walking back through the open door, “Okay.”

She put on a mid-length sea blue dress with a halter at the neck, its hem was asymmetrical and its neckline round and low.

“Okay, here”

“Oh it’s perfect. Look at your shoulders. You should wear things like this more often. Not...”

“Not what?”

“Nothing, you look very nice. That’ll be perfect for dinner.”

“Do you like it? I think I look naked.”

“Come on, it’s 1999. You aren’t somebody’s grandmother.”

“I don’t dress like a grandmother,” Miriam laughed.

“You do,” they laughed together, “like a good-God fearing woman.”

“I do not.”

“Well, anyhow, you look very nice. I think teal is your color.”

“Teal,” Miriam repeated, turning slowly as she watched herself in the mirror behind Lilian.

“Where did he say he was taking you?”

“A Chinese restaurant, I think. It’s near the house, he said.”

“I’m telling you that man is unbelievable.

“In what way?”

“In the *way* that he thinks that Chinese restaurant is an appropriate place to take a woman.”

“I don’t see anything wrong with it. I’ve never had real Chinese food, I think it will be exciting.”

“Miriam, do you respect me?”

“Why are you asking me that?”

“I am asking, does my opinion mean anything to you?”

“Of course it does. Why--”

“I’m asking because our whole lives I have always tried to tell you all the things I knew to be true. I try to give you direction, and lead you in the way I think is best to go. It never seems to me like you’re listening. With this though, listen to me when I tell you not to be stupid about this.”

“Lilian, it’s only dinner.”

“It’s a nice dress. Are we finished here?” Lilian cleared her throat. Miriam changed back into the ordinary clothes in which she had come dressed. They walked towards the register making small talk. What one of them replied, seemed to have nothing at all to do with what the other had said. For as they spoke, one thing was on both their minds. Neither brought it up aloud. Compelled by reasons which were altogether the same, they thought of Isaac. But Lilian was always thinking of Miriam, so the idea of him was only a short tangent, of topical interest. The truth of what she had told her sister reverberated with clarity, which was lost on Miriam. Though Lilian lacked any sort of gentle delivery, she had always been earnest in her efforts to protect her smaller sister. It was uncertain what she had been guarding her from until now and here. It was the loose mass of everything which Lilian feared: a certain way of living, a wrong set of attitudes, a total descent into poverty of character. Following Isaac, going to dinner with him no less, there was no chance for Miriam. Lilian felt sorry. The cashier rang out the dress, which was \$140, Lilian paid by card.



The night was warm as home and it was windless. The trees had become picturesque and everywhere, were flowers which seemed untrue, too irradant and much too fragile for Boston. Somehow they were very much alive. She had not called Isaac to confirm their plans, she was going by faith. Lilian offered her a ride and she refused it, feeling that her first venture alone in this place should be tonight and towards him. The restaurant was, as Isaac explained, just a left turn, and a right turn and a quarter mile walk from their home. Miriam walked down to the end of the street. It had become familiar enough and it became even more substantial by foot, than it could have been by car.

The walking gave her a sense of living in it. She turned a corner where a small fruit and vegetable stand was situated. A man wearing a dusty baseball cap nodded *hello*, and she returned the gesture. He was short and his skin was very brown and he seemed to be rearranging the fruit with just a fluid stroke of the hand. He passed his wide palm over the crates and the apples fell into place perfectly. She passed a bank, where the lights were all off. She walked alongside the foggy windows of the laundromat with all the tall indoor plants growing in clay pots over the machines. The vines climbed up along the shelves. The windows became semi transparent with the steam so that through some of the panes of glass, only the silhouettes of the leaves were visible.

Miriam reached a row of houses which made her linger. They were quaint houses, but well-kept. It was as if someone had sliced a knife down the middle of Martin and Lilian's home. Beside a woodland green house with an orange stained door was one made from brick with wide storybook windows and a tree in the front yard. Its cherries had begun to fall into the uncut grass. There was a white house with a wrap around porch and beautiful wicker furniture, where you could sit in the morning. It was not like the house she lived in, it seemed much less aware of itself. Miriam learned then, that she loved the old, poetic Jamaica Plain houses even those that were slightly falling apart. The house which moved her most of all, was violet and ruinous and had a tire swing hanging from a sturdy branch, hanging by a rope which was beginning to wear away. She walked on, knowing something about herself which she had not known before. On the corner of the following block, was the restaurant. Lilian told her that she would know it when she saw it because it had a large neon sign in the shape of a curled dragon and many potted cacti and bamboo plants in the display. She could not miss it.

Isaac was always early and was already sitting inside as Miriam looked over the shoulder of the hostess, to see if he was there. She walked up to the table where he was sitting with his back to the door and she sat down wordlessly. He beamed upon seeing her. It was not the brightness which comes from a smile, but the brightness of eyes widened in surprise or in gladness. Isaac was drinking a cup of coffee from a metal pot which he lifted to the cup and saucer set before Miriam, who had still said nothing.

“I’m happy to see you Miriam.”

“I’m happy as well,” she stirred sugar into her coffee.

“That’s a lovely dress.”

“I bought it today, thank you.”

“You didn’t have to buy anything new. Do you take milk in your coffee, I can ask for some.”

“I’m alright,” she raised the cup to her lips, “Lilian insisted.”

“Looks like something she’d like. Before I forget, let me give you your gift.”

Isaac put a box wrapped in newspaper on the face of the table. It was half the size of a shoebox, perhaps smaller and very light in weight. He pushed it towards Miriam, who shook the box and smiled.

“Be careful.”

“Should I open it now?”

“Please.”

Miriam carefully undid the wrapping at its seams and put the wad of paper beside her on the vinyl seat. She undid the folds in the box and held up its contents, trying at once to understand the object itself and what he meant by it. Carved out of wood, smooth and painted

black in some places, was a cow-shaped figurine. It was freestanding and it looked like a toy, though too simple for any child today. She turned it over in her hands thinking it encased something else. Miriam began to laugh ecstatically, deeply, from her stomach. Isaac joined her. She placed the cow near the lip of her mug of coffee, as if it were drinking from it.

“What do you think?”

“Of the cow?”

“Yes. I thought you might appreciate it.”

“Why?”

“It reminds me of something you said. Do you remember?”

“I don’t think I said anything about a cow.”

“You did. You told me, *No one will buy the cow, if they can get the milk for free.* You remember.”

“I did. I remember. My mother told me that.”

“See, you remember. When I used to teach, I would decorate my office with carvings and soapstone sculptures I brought here from Nairobi. That cow was my favorite one. I kept it on my desk. Every morning I looked at that cow. See it’s hind leg is a bit chipped, so it stands uneven. However, it’s still a very nice cow.”

“It’s the best carved cow I’ve ever seen.”

“You aren’t just saying that to be nice, are you?”

“No. It’s a fine gift. Thank you.”

A young waitress with cropped black hair, wearing a white apron with an embroidered dragon at the chest, came to the head of their table. She took their order, which Isaac gave: *beef and broccoli with an extra side of rice.* Broccoli reminded Miriam of the frozen dinners she used

to eat aboard planes. She trusted the taste and the palette of another Kenyan. Beside that, she yearned for food and had not eaten all day, save a protein bar which tasted of wheat flour and dates. She sat with a feeling between pride and gladness to be across from him, and to know him, as a friend. The fabric of her dress rode up her leg, as she leaned closer into the table, putting all of her weight on her sharp elbows. As Miriam ate, Isaac spooned more food onto her plate. The cow stood beside the empty cup of coffee for the duration of their meal. Isaac waved a patient hand towards the server, and placed two crisp green bills beneath the red and white handwritten check. When he lowered his head there were patches of deep grey in his hair which made her feel that she could depend upon him. As he looked up again, lifting the dish towards her that was empty aside from one piece of meat, his eyes were blameless and his hands appeared clean.

They stood on the street, neither sure of what was to come of the night. Isaac put his hand on the roof of a small silver Acura. His hand closed into a fist, and he knocked against it gently.

“Thank you for the food and the gift.”

“You’re welcome, Miriam. Can I drive you home?”

“It isn’t a far walk.”

“You shouldn’t walk in the dark,” Isaac turned away to force a key into the passenger door and pull it open for Miriam. The shoes she wore were borrowed from Lilian and a half-size small. She walked nimbly in them. Isaac shut the car door after her, careful of the skirt of her dress. Going around the other side, Isaac started the car. Warm air came through the vents. They were still and Miriam looked only at her own reflection in the rear view mirror through the open window. Leaning over the center console, Isaac smoothed the head of the cow that Miriam held in her left hand. Her focus shifted from the sight of herself, to that of his hand, against the wood, against the cerulean polyester of her dress. Even in the dark, she could see the hands on the face

of his gold watch move. Isaac pulled back his hand and centered himself in the driver's seat, rolling his window farther down. The voices on the radio were muffled by the static. He turned the volume dial leftward and it was quiet. The car eased out of the tight parking spot. Miriam was the one to break the silence.

“Where do you live?”

“Close by. Technically it's still Jamaica Plains, but it's a bit further east.”

“You live in the same neighborhood as Martin and Lilian?”

“I helped Martin find the house actually. A friend of mine was the realtor.”

“You're all old friends, the three of you?”

“Well that was a long time ago. Twelve years.”

“Do you live alone?” Miriam shifted so that she leaned towards Isaac, the left side of her face pressed up against the leather headrest.

“Yes.”

“And your wife?”

“We're separated, I mean” coming to a yellow light, Isaac slowed and returned Miriam's gaze.

“The children?”

“My daughter is in Nairobi with her mother, my son is in London.” He looked away.

“Sorry for asking so many questions.”

“Ask me anything you like.”

“Lilian says you're still married, but I told her that wasn't true.”

“I don't think things are so black and white. I know Lilian tends to think that way.”

“I know what you mean,” Miriam leaned her right arm out of the open window and felt as if she were riding the air above the street, “Isaac?”

“Hm?”

“Can we go there? To your house?”

He drove in circles before taking the left onto Armory Street, congested by the cars and trees which lined both sides of the road. The drive, the walk from the car up to the front steps, the unlocking of the doors and the switching on and off of the living room lights, seemed to be all unbroken parts of one single gesture. In the memory which followed, Miriam could tell the first night and morning she spent with Isaac, from the second or fourth. The dissolution of old units of time came not from the lack of structure of their days, but from the subtle melding of her very solitary life with his very solitary life. They both found the days less long, and their boundaries less apparent. Miriam seldom went back into Lilian and Martin’s house after that. Martin, politely, said nothing on the subject. That was to be expected. Lilian, surprisingly, did not express her judgement because she knew that she had waited too long to speak, and that now it would fall on deaf ears. Isaac, Miriam, Lilian and Martin met for dinner most Sundays, but felt the tremendous space between them flare back to its previous size. And though the dinners were somewhat routine they felt as forced, dreaded and haphazard as running into a person who you did not wish to see. The sisters had returned to speaking over the phone, predominantly in past tense about events that belonged to their childhoods. Lilian offered Miriam money here and there, but she refused, depending suddenly and comfortably on Isaac.

So as not to scandalize her sister, Miriam left some of her belongings in the spare bedroom at Martin and Lilian’s, but they both understood that it was only to keep up

appearances. After two weeks of boxing up small pieces of medical equipment with packing peanuts to be put into shipping containers, Miriam decided to take a job of her own.

It was the biggest hotel on Boylston Street. The clientele were mostly businessmen. There was always at least one man in a long coat, very cleanly shaven, smoking unabashedly beside the no smoking sign, at any hour of the day. Miriam had asked for the early morning shift, but that opening had been filled, so she took afternoons and evenings. The manager was an old, short and slim Portuguese man named Abel and a long-time friend of Linda's, who recommended Miriam for the job. Since Miriam had experience cleaning, and had been given a good word, she was hired without an interview and without a page of paperwork. For the most part, it was not strenuous: the washing, the folding, the disinfecting of the rooms. Rarely, because it was such a nice place there were stains in the bed linens and the woman in the washroom would have to soak them out in buckets of bleach and cold water. This was the only thing Miriam found particularly unpleasant, because chemicals burned her skin and by the time she finished loading, ironing, folding and making the beds up again, she would wince with pain. It was good work, all in all. All of the women, excluding Miriam, had children and it made her life feel more full to hear them speak about their sons and daughters, some who were in high school, some who had come home from overseas or doing time and others who were having children of their own.

Sunday was the only lonely day in the hotel basement, because most everyone refused work on the sabbath and there was no one who would deny them their right to refuse. Miriam had no objection to work on Sunday and so, Wednesday to Monday she got a ride from Isaac and she took the 8:15 PM bus home to his condominium on the side of Jamaica Plains which bordered Roxbury to the east. The late, setting sun through the wide, rectangular windows of the

public bus made Boston seem like something else entirely. So too, did Isaac's neighborhood because it was ordinary and felt like somewhere that Miriam could conceive of a life in. It seemed like so much of New England: whatever happened to be left behind of a settlement that was once teeming and had since quieted down from its height. His was an old place, a brick building which must have been a school house once, long before they split it into twelve units and put a washer-dryer in the damp basement. He kept things rather nice, considering he was a bachelor and ran an import/export business out of the spare bedroom. There was a treadmill in the living room, some weights, folded cardboard boxes for the smaller medical equipment and stacks upon stacks of textbooks lining a mahogany desk.

Home again, Miriam eased a suede brown coat off her back and let it fall to the bedroom floor. She would be the one to pick it up later. Isaac took a shower in the next room, with the door ajar. Yellow light washed over the darkening bedroom. As she walked around in the half-light, putting his shirts and jackets back in order, Miriam removed each layer of her housekeeping uniform. The cheap, tight non-slip shoes were the first to go. Then she untied her white apron, still humming with the smell of ammonia. She unbuttoned her boxy blouse, high in the shoulders, one size too big, and hung it on a bedpost. Lastly, in one elegant maneuver, Miriam rolled down her stockings and slid out of her long pleated skirt. Undressed, she made her way into the bathroom. Leaning on the edge of the sink, watching Isaac's tall bathing silhouette, Miriam brushed her teeth.

"How was your day?" He asked, the sound of his voice muffled by the shower and sink water.

"It was okay,"

"Do you want to get in the shower?"

“I’ll just wait,” Miriam said and sat down on top of his towel on the lid of the toilet.

“Join me.”

“I’ll wait.”

Slouching as she sat, Miriam propped her feet against the door of the shower. She caught Isaac’s eye, their contact obfuscated by the shower door’s frosted glass. She ran her fingers over her toes, which were hardening from hours spent on her feet. Her soles were cracked and they were swollen. The red varnish she had put on her toenails just the week before was beginning to chip away. Isaac turned off the water and Miriam stood to hand him his towel. They kissed hello and she stepped in as he stepped out. She stood on the far end of the shower, where the water did not reach her and waited for steam. What felt like the soot of the day, washed away from Miriam under the hot pressure of the shower head. The soap Isaac kept smelled like infants. Miriam scrubbed her face with vigor, cleaning over and over behind her ears. She bent down to get her feet, but could not be thorough because the slight ache in the small of her back had peaked. She was content to stand still and feel clean. The small half-moon window encircled by white tile was full of purple, not black. A rich tone that was like the skin of a Concord grape, or a plum, or very dark bruised skin. Faintly, she heard the sound of Isaac’s clippers, running over the skin beneath what was not yet a beard. When Miriam stepped out of the shower onto a striped beach towel which they had repurposed as a bath mat, Isaac put down what he was doing and embraced her with a dry bath sheet from the drawer beneath the sink. It was long and wide enough to wrap her twice over. Miriam never accurately registered her height in relation to others. Objectively she knew she was taller than Miriam, she knew she was shorter than her father, but it was only then standing beside Isaac that she felt the embodiment of height. They were within one inch of one another. Depending on how straight she stood, or how high he held his head, that difference

between them was indiscernible. Miriam ran floss deep between her teeth until it cut slightly at her gums in a way she enjoyed; Isaac put on aftershave and ran the faucet, flushing hair down the drain.

“They want to visit Cape Cod, they wanted me to invite you.”

“Who’s they?” Isaac asked.

“Martin and Lilian, they have a time-share.”

“Ah, the time share.”

“You’ve heard of it?”

“Many, many times.”

“What’s a timeshare anyway?”

“I’m not sure to tell you the truth,” Isaac laughed.

“I’m asking seriously.”

“A time share is, basically, a group of people owning a piece of property in common and they share the time there. So you own your stake and you all decide who gets it when.”

“Like a merry-go-round?”

“Not exactly.”

“So will you come?”

“Generally, I would say no, but if you’re asking me, I’ll go.”

“I just don’t want to be alone with them, do you know what I mean?”

“I know, I’m the buffer between you and your sister.”

“There’s nothing in between Lilian and I. We’re very close.”

“Does she ever speak to you about me?”

“And say what?” Miriam put a comb with wide teeth into her damp hair.

“I don’t know. I’m asking. Did she ask me to come to Cape Cod, or did you ask?”

“I don’t remember who asked who. What is Cape Cod like?”

“I’ve only been once before, but as far as I know, it’s a place where wealthy people go on beach vacations. There’s a lot of seafood. The water’s cold.”

“Don’t be negative, Isaac.”

“Is that negative?”

“Yes, why say that the water’s cold? Just because you don’t like Lilian. Or you feel she dislikes you.”

“I think Lilian is a wonderful person. The water just happens to be cold.”

“So will you or won’t you come?”

“If I’m invited, I’m happy to go.”

“Thank you,” she looked into his reflection in the wet mirror. Isaac stood half a foot above her.

“When are they going.”

“We leave Friday, until Sunday.”

“This Friday?”

“Yes, I’ve already asked for the time off from work. You don’t have another obligation do you?”

“No. Friday is alright. Should we eat?” He asked and they did.

Miriam changed into a robe which she often wore at the dinner table. It had become routine. They spent the days apart, they showered together in the evening, they sat in the living room after dinner and flipped through the news channels until one of them fell asleep. He cooked, which surprised Miriam. Full meals, nothing pre-made. Dinner had usually already been

finished and begun to grow cold by the time Miriam was there to eat it. He was not indulgent in the way he ate. It was all very traditional food: no pork and a conservative use of salt. He made maharagwe, pilau, every possible variation on spinach and cabbage, he drank nothing but water and tea at home. His refrigerator was covered with photos of his children. Mostly his daughter, but also one group photo and two school portraits of his elder son.

They sat at the table, him in his towel tied at his waist and her in her robe. He had set out a still steaming pot of rice and chicken cooked in tomato, on the bone. In a Tupperware were sweet potatoes with off white flesh and cracks in their purple skin. Isaac made Miriam a plate, his portions were always more than she could finish. Still, she was unable to say no and more unable to leave behind for waste, even one grain of rice or one piece of skin of the food he had made. Isaac did not pray before eating. Miriam, made to give thanks for every meal by fear of what would happen if she didn't, would bow her head alone and say a silent prayer. The two did not speak while they ate. Miriam was not a talkative person, by nature. Her disposition was a product of The Reverend's, who believed silence and solitude were a direct command from God and her mother's, who was economical in all ways, and did not speak unless it was fruitful to do so. Isaac seemed to always be listening to sounds inaudible in the air around him. There was always an inadvertent squint in his eye. A good part of the time, he seemed to be both in love and focusing on Miriam, but otherwise he closely studied things which she could not locate. He was, in effect, engrossed in something very far from Miriam, even as they sat at the same table. She had gone for a long time without a curiosity in what was on others' minds. In similar fashion, she had all but forgotten what was on her own.

“How's the food?”

“Very good, you always ask and I always tell you it's very good.”

“Not too much salt?”

“It’s just right.”

Eight

Martin rented a Suburban for the weekend. It was black and hearselike. The inside smelled of a shoe store and fit nine people comfortably. Lilian bore an enthusiasm that was new to her face. She loved the ocean and Cape Cod by extension and had drunk half a bottle of Cava with her breakfast: a buttered slice of rye, two pieces of turkey bacon and a half a pear. When Miriam and Isaac arrived at the house twenty minutes late, Martin was loading coolers and beach umbrellas into the open boot of the car. Lilian sat in a short blue, yellow and black terry cloth dress on the stone wall that lined their very green front yard. When she waved hello, the tennis bracelet on her wrist shone brightly. Alice danced in the grass, as Benjamin crawled nearby. Martin, wiping the sweat from his brow, warmly embraced Isaac and was just as glad to see Miriam. Unreadable as he was, Martin was always amicable and complimentary to the mood of all those around him. Though it made him a generally boring person, no one could say with good reason that they disliked him. Martin turned to ask Lilian a question, but he spoke so quietly that they appeared to be communicating nonverbally. There was an incredible privacy surrounding them.

Miriam sat down beside Lilian on the rocks as Isaac went to help Martin carry more than what seemed necessary from the backyard shed. Alice climbed into her auntie's lap, pulling the ends of her short braids as she spoke to her. She had missed Miriam and it occurred to Miriam that she had also missed Alice. Lilian smiled at them both, her sister and her daughter. It was a sincere smile, which seemed to curve almost into laughter. Lilian raised the round sunglasses from her eyes, to the top of her head.

“I wish I had a camera,” she said.

“We should go,” Martin called out as he came through the open front door, carrying a fishing rod and a box of bait.

Lilian put the children and her bags in the rental. Isaac left his car parked on the street and did not bother rolling up any of the windows. It could not have been safer there and the neighborhood was emptied of its residents. They were, similarly, gone for vacation. Martin drove and replied to the talk radio host periodically, at anything that caught his attention. The Friday morning traffic was typical in town, but they travelled away from its center-point: through Braintree which was one long overpass, through Hanover and Marshfield, both fairly empty. The highway narrowed to a thin, two lane state route. The cloudless blue of the sky became more saturated as they moved into the Cape. Miriam did not need anyone to tell her when they were near. Martin followed no map, no written directions. Lilian looked often into the two back rows of the car through the rear view mirror. It was unclear who of the four she wanted to see: Isaac, Miriam, Alice or Benjamin. Isaac gently rested his head on the cool glass of the window and read something with a tattered cover, with unwavering concentration. Miriam smoothed the linen of Alice’s dress down her back over and over again. In the crisp air blowing from the front of the car, Miriam felt for the first time that a part of her life in this country could be devoted to leisure. She was not wasting time, but dwelling in it and for no real reason other than the fact that she was able. She sunk deeper into her dark leather seat upon this realization.

Martin went down a backroad that was enveloped by large, grassy private estates. There were few fences and tall, manicured greenery in place of wire and wood demarcations. Lilian filed her nails in the front seat and Alice toyed with a handheld video game as she between her Aunt Miriam and her Uncle Isaac. Benjamin slept in the row behind them, where Lilian had fastened baby sunshades on either side of him, to protect him from the blistering sun. Perhaps,

Miriam was the only one paying attention, because she was the first to gasp, as a white-tailed doe stepped gracefully into the road in the path of the speeding, black Suburban. Martin reacted soon after, slamming abruptly on the brakes and clenching his hands on the suede steering wheel cover. Isaac closed his book with calm recognition. Alice's Gameboy fell to the floor, somewhere beneath the seat. Benjamin did not wake from sleeping. It was a large car, slow to stop. One would have to be listening closely to hear the faint crack of the bones, the quiet flattening of the animal. By the time the thought of the beauty of the deer passed, the event was over. Miriam had seen the animal for the first time and seen it dead not a moment after, but in the same moment. Martin put the car in reverse and they rolled back slightly. Blood marked the windshield and the sunlight shone through it.

“Are you all okay?”

“What happened Daddy?”

“Just a second Alice.”

Lilian's was the only response of note. The car was undamaged, that was obvious, without looking. The collision had not even startled the baby. Still, Lilian recoiled. The look that filled her eyes was not annoyance, not compassion for the animal, but betrayal. Martin had killed the deer and it had caused her offense which had nothing to do with the life of the deer. She did not care to go out and make sense of its condition. He did not understand the correlation between the event, the killing, and the resultant, her disgust. He could clearly see the severity of his error from the intensity of her wet, slanted, sickened eyes. Lilian was staggering when angered, but more frightening when hurt. It took a great deal to elicit any visible dejection in her. Her arms crossed in a way that was juvenile and quick to anger. Martin, lost sight of the dead animal and

paused in his seat, not taking any action, not switching on the windshield wipers to clear off the blood on the dash which dropped lazily as tears of wine.

Miriam was the first to open her door, suddenly uneasy over the blood. Martin followed her to the front of the car. The doe's legs were unmoving and bent elegantly, like taxidermy. A dark, viscous pool gathered around the gape in its neck. Isaac, walked out and stood across from the hood of the car. He rolled up the sleeves of his powder blue shirt and pulled the animal out of the road by its hind legs.

"Don't touch it," Lilian leaned her head through the window.

Isaac looked down as if to make an assessment. He lifted the hind legs of the carcass some inches off the ground, to see if he could bear the weight. In one easy motion, Isaac continued to pull the animal to the grassy depression on the side of the road. A streak of wet, red hair followed it. Miriam stumbled, supporting herself with the body of the car. Before she could reach a comfortable distance, she vomited. She couldn't help herself. She held her side and bile and all she had eaten fell at her feet. In truth, she had felt the uneasiness in her stomach the entire morning and all the days of the week before. The sight of the wide, frozen eyes of the slender deer and Isaac handling it without trouble, brought her discomfort to a head. She coughed and began to gag. Alice quietly crept behind her aunt and tapped the back of her thigh, handing her a plastic liter bottle of water.

"Is it dead?" Alice asked. Miriam took the water and drank quickly, making her sick once again.

"Go in the car, Alice"

Without protest Alice did, Gameboy still in hand. Isaac looked at Miriam and said nothing about the vomit. She turned the bottle out towards him. He washed his hands with the

remaining water, which splashed at their feet as it fell over his skin. Interlocking elbows, they walked towards the car as Martin was cleaned off the blood on the dash with a varicolored beach towel. Lilian leaned her small torso over the driver's seat and turned on the wipers. It took some time and some effort on his part, before it was clean. He went back into the car and did not speak or make mention of what had happened. They settled back into the seats that they sat in before. The high pitched arcade sound of Alice's game was the only noise, aside from the smooth contact of the wheel against the broken road. They continued on. The volume of the radio was high now. Martin was no longer engaged with the day's news. In the back seat, Benjamin enjoyed his rest uninterrupted, still; Lilian moved to sit beside him. She too, felt the weight of sleep and all the volatility of the morning come upon her and shut her eyes.

She woke only when they pulled into the sandy driveway and Miriam shook her to let her know they were there. It was like all the houses that neighbored it, in that even its renovations had begun to look dated. This strip of homes in Sandwich were loudly and clearly owned by tourists. The families that the properties passed through had tried to keep what they believed was authentic to the architecture and design sensibility of the idyllic, seemingly untouched town. The resultant of that was white spray-painted wicker furniture, starfish paintings and anchors which were all out of place and off-putting. The stain of the shingles was distressed to look more aged than it was. While someone had tried to make the house look shack-like they had failed by making it exponentially larger than any shack needed to be. Isaac helped Alice out of the car. She had undone the twists her mother put in her hair and one orange butterfly clip was hanging loose from her head. Miriam walked alone around the perimeter of the house. Her feet slid out of her plastic sandals and the pavement and sand were hot against the soles of her feet.

The dress that Miriam wore was one of many that Lilian gave her in a box of hand-me-downs. It was tie-dyed a range of colors from red to teal and made Miriam look and feel like the perpetually younger one of the two. The back of her neck was slick and she wiped the sweat with her hand and onto a dark patch of the dress. Taking a towel from the canvas bag she carried, she walked a short distance and sat in the sand of the in-between, where the yard ended and the coast did not yet begin. Through a sliding glass door, Isaac made out her silhouette. Carrying Alice on his back, he came out towards Miriam. She was not startled, because she could hear his heavy footsteps shifting the sand as he came close. Martin and Lilian's shouting voices traveled in the air through the open door until one of them shut it closed and muffled the sound. None of the three turned to look. Miriam spread her legs and patted the open space in the towel for Alice to sit. She began to fix her hair, with her fingers as a comb. Isaac crouched on the left side of Miriam and she leaned into him as she refastened the clip in Alice's braid. She took the elastic from her own head to tie the other side, where the barrette was missing.

"Can we swim?" Alice asked.

"Ask your mother first Alice," Isaac said, helping both Miriam and Alice to their feet.

"Can you ask her for me Auntie Miriam?"

"I think it'll be fine, the beach is so close."

"I think she should ask for permission Miriam."

"Alright, Alice. Go ask and come back. Are you wearing your bathing costume?"

"Yes."

"Alright, we'll wait for you here."

"I'm afraid,"

"Afraid? How come?" Miriam bent to meet her at eye level.

“Can you ask her for me Miriam?”

“Auntie Miriam.”

“Auntie Miriam,” Alice repeated.

“Alright, you both wait,” Miriam turned towards the house, now barefoot. As she touched her palm to the door to slide it open, Martin and Lilian went silent. Lilian leaned against the counter holding Benjamin with a short empty glass of ice in her left hand. Martin unloaded the contents of a cooler into the refrigerator with his back turned to the room. The kitchen had been made to look as if it were lived in. Bright, crisp apples were arranged stat

“Sorry to interrupt.”

“What are you talking about? You aren’t interrupting anything Miriam. Do you like the place?” Lilian said, standing upright.

“I haven’t even looked at the inside yet, but the yard is beautiful.”

“We’ve been coming here for years,” said Martin.

“It’s a very nice home. Thank you for inviting us. By the way, is it alright if we take Alice to the water to swim?”

“Of course. That would be so much fun for her. I was just telling Martin how exhausted I am, it’s been a long morning, I think I’m going to sleep for a bit. At least while the sun is so hot, it isn’t good for Benjamin’s skin anyway. We’ll go out when the sun sets”

“Yeah, you rest. I haven’t been swimming for I don’t know how long. I might be more excited than Alice.”

“Oh, that’s right,” Lilian beamed, then turned down the hall “Okay, you be safe. There’s sunblock for Alice in that pink bag there. Let me know if you need me.”

“Do you want to join us, Martin?”

“I’d be glad to. I’m sure you’re all hungry. I can pack us something to eat if you aren’t in a rush.”

“Take your time.”

“Any dietary restrictions?”

“None at all.”

“That’s refreshing.”

“I’ll be outside. Come when you’re ready.”

In the corner of the yard, which was makeshift itself, was a makeshift outdoor shower. It was three short walls of blue floral tile and a wooden door with wide openings, the floor beneath it was a single large grey stone with a white line running through it. The water only ran cold and it came down with uneven pressure from an ever-leaking faucet five and a half feet above ground. Concealed by the enclosure, Miriam undressed and pulled a white swimsuit over her feet, knees and torso. Martin waited outside, sitting atop an upturned milk crate as she washed the wet sand that clung to her legs. The water fell outside of the shower through the open door, loose on its hinges. Martin and Miriam walked alongside one another further down the slope of sand. Martin spoke out of discomfort with the silence they shared, though Miriam was not paying attention. They came to the place where Isaac and Alice were kneeling, over the Gameboy, the way they had been when Miriam left them. Alice ran to embrace her father and he lifted her onto his back. The moon would soon be full. Its vague outline hung above the otherwise bare horizon. Brine permeated the air around them.

Miriam and Isaac walked ahead. He gave her his belongings and went into the water. She sat on a prominent sun-bleached rock close to the coast. Her knees folded up against her chest and she looked younger, in a way. The fat of her calves was luminescent and inky against the

pale stone and sand. Martin assembled a collapsible beach umbrella and positioned it by the rock where Miriam sat. He spread a wide blanket on the sand. It was weighed down on the bottom corner by a pair of shoes, on the adjacent by a beer bottle, and by the cooler and on the other by a Tupperware full of sliced, seeded watermelon.

Isaac stood in the water. His towering height was a constant surprise. The beach was blocked off for the private use of the town's residents and there was hardly anyone else there. Except for one small family some meters away, it was empty. Isaac's dark silhouette was clear in Miriam's view. He dove into the mounting waves and disappeared only to emerge seemingly smaller and smaller as he delved further out. Martin covered Alice in zinc sunblock which liquified and spilled onto his own hands, whitening them and making them gray in the sun. They too, went into the ocean which by now was making Miriam sick from sight alone. The narrow, filthy white wings of the seabirds cut across the sky. She came down from the rock and laid corpse-like under the shade of the umbrella propped firm in the sand. Her stomach ballooned under the thin luminescent polyester that clothed her. She closed her eyes, not in sleep, but in quiet acknowledgement. Miriam prayed only in moments of real desperation. The thoughts that came to her as she reclined in the sand were not devotional. She had longed for the ocean or at least for the feeling it gave, and she now felt glued to the earth. That want was replaced by the desire to feel only firmness at her back and solidity at her feet. When she felt she would be sick again, she simply swallowed deeply and the pang subsided.

She thought of the night she spent with Isaac. The first one, where sunrise came all of a sudden and the clock on the nightstand felt inaccurate. Miriam still did not know where she found the courage to invite herself into his home, much less where she found the courage to stay. That night she was totally alone even close beside him; the distance was great. He turned his

back to her as they slept and though there was no intended coldness, she knew it was not coincidental. Tracing the outline of his back beneath the thin striped sheet, Miriam thought of Okello. Almost every thought she had of Isaac was coupled with the memory of the other man. Her and Okello had only been in each other's company in daylight. Something in that detail satisfied her imagination. Theirs was a different kind of secrecy, one which was totally necessary and therefore pleasurable. Okello's being far-away was no fault of his own. A sharp pain bloomed low in her torso. There were no days when she did not wonder about him, no hours if she was being honest. She had conflated the faces of the two men so closely that she believed her meeting Isaac was a symbol, if not a placeholder. If she loved him, it was a swift continuation of the love she had not admitted all that time ago. To the extent that Isaac gave Miriam a life, she had given Okello many small fleeting moments that swelled like yearning. The gulls cried close-by. Isaac's footsteps approached, but made no more of a sound than the gradual shifting of sand over itself. He sat on her left side, more in the sun, than in the shade. He removed his wallet from the pocket of the light washed jean shorts he had been wearing. Drying his hand he took Miriam's arm in his.

“I have something to give you.”

“What is it?”

“Wait,” Isaac turned her hand by her wrist so that her palm was upward and open. He pulled out a plain ring with an oval cut diamond, it was light in Miriam's hand and weighed almost nothing. She sat very still before holding it between her index finger and thumb.

“Serious?”

“I want to be married.”

“Why?”

“We’re already living together. Why not?”

“Not really.”

“Yes really, Miriam. We are living together.”

“When did you buy this ring? Where is it from?”

“That’s what you have to say. Is that what you want to know?”

“It’s just shocking. I didn’t expect this.”

“I just thought--If it’s no, you can say no, but please think about it.”

“Don’t be upset, I’m not saying no. It’s not so simple.”

“You really are a strange woman, Miriam.”

“Don’t be upset.”

“I’m not upset. I don’t mean to offend you by calling you strange. The whole thing was irrational on my part. Just keep the ring. It doesn’t change anything.”

“Thank you,” Miriam removed the gold rope chain from her neck and placed the ring around the necklace. It hung just below the midpoint of her collarbones.

“Please think about it,” Isaac said, brushing sand from his eyes.

“You don’t have to ask me to think about it. I do love you. I just need to be sure.”

Alice and Martin retreated from the shallow edge of the water they were sitting in. The twists in Alice’s hair had fallen apart in the ocean. The salt in the water dried her skin. They sat and ate the fruit Martin had packed. He unwrapped sandwiches from foil wrappers and fed Alice. He passed around paper bags filled with food and opened two bottles of beer for him and Isaac. Seeing Martin apart from Lilian with relaxed shoulders and an unshaven face cast him in a new light. Miriam had never truly looked at him. She had seen his face in passing many times and in

photographs, but he now looked less tidy and less unreal. He threw scraps out to the birds against the warnings of the signs at the entrance of the beach. The white of his eyes reddened.

“How’s work, Martin?” Isaac asked.

“Some good days. Overall, a bit depressing to tell you the truth.”

“You’ve been at it for a long time.”

“It’s not easy work. I’ll tell you that. It just doesn’t get easier.”

“Do you ever think that maybe you should just quit?” Miriam said, fidgeting with the ring at her neck.

“Never. Some days are better than others. Mostly, it’s just your garden-variety ER patient, a broken bone, a rash. Then every once in a while it’s something more, you know, *serious*. The things that go right never hang in your mind, but when it goes wrong...man. Seeing clergymen praying with people you know will pass. Seeing people bleed out in front of you, death on a weekly basis, it takes a toll. Certainly”

“I’ve never found work rewarding. The way people say if you love your job you’ll never work a day in your life. Never experienced that myself. It’s always felt like work, every last job. But I admire what you do. It’s important”

“Thank you Isaac. Means a lot.”

“What did you want to be when you grew up Isaac?” Miriam asked.

“Probably the president or an MP, something useless like that. My father hated Winston Churchill, so I loved him. I knew nothing about the man.”

They broke into laughter, Isaac remained the most composed of the four. Even Alice, who did not understand joined them. That same way they shared the area of the cotton sheet in the sand and spoke for hours. Tossing rinds into a hole in the sand as they ate. The two men

recounted the distant memories they shared and Miriam pulled Alice close with love. They came to know one another deeply for the first time. Miriam felt a compatibility with Martin and Isaac that was not only empty from her life but was formerly unaccounted for, unnamed, undesired. For Alice, Miriam felt an oversensitive protection that she herself longed for as a girl and could only ever (scarcely) find in her own emotional reserves. The sky warmed from its earlier pale blues. The sunlight lowered until it was no longer and the moon was nearly pink beyond the clouds. They rose to make it home before dark, loosely gathering their belongings. No one bent to collect the skins of fruit, neither the orange peels nor the melon rinds, they simply kicked them deeper into the sand and walked on.

From an arrangement of logs already nearly cut and stacked in the yard, Martin pulled enough wood for a fire. He filled the iron pit with balled newspaper, a small stream of lighter fluid and stoked the flames. Alice sprawled out across a short trampoline by the failing flower garden. Isaac heated a large and complicated grill. All the lights were off in the house. Miriam stepped lightly into the kitchen. She intended to put the ring deep into the folds of the bag she packed, between the excess changes of clothes and the roll of cash she kept for no reason at all.

“Miriam,” the floorboards of the kitchen creaked as she walked. With dusk settling in, filling the long East-facing windows, the house seemed smaller than it was.

“Miriam,” her voice travelled through the thin walls. It was hoarse and strained, but it chimed high in pitch and belonged unmistakably to her sister. Miriam gathered herself and clutching the hard edge of the marble counter, she turned on the water, hot and cold. She went to the trash bin and bent over it. When she was finished, she gargled warm water and followed the voice through the dark angular hallway. Each time Miriam passed a window, the flame outdoors burned higher and more impressively.

“Is that Miriam? Come.”

When she entered the room, Lilian was sprawled on a bed made up in neat cream silk sheets. Her neck bent awkwardly against the light wood headboard. She continued to stare at a spot in the wall even as Miriam stood a foot away from her. Benjamin slept by the out-of-use fireplace in a plush pack-and-play.

“Can you lay down with me?” Lilian asked, with no pleading in her tone.

“Are you alright?”

“I’m okay. Come lay down, If you don’t mind, I just haven’t been feeling...Actually, that’s so selfish of me, I meant to ask, are you feeling better from this morning?”

“This morning? I must have just eaten something bad or the motion sickness you know?”

“Miriam.”

“Hm?”

“I heard you vomit just now, that was you right?”

“Getting the last of it out.”

“Sit down with me. Please. We never talk anymore. I remember when you were small and everything I did or had, you wanted. I never took that seriously, I should have looked out for you more. I love you, I’m not an affectionate person so it takes a lot to say this, but I’ve always loved you very much. You were so smart, you didn’t need me, I needed you, more. I couldn’t help you. I give you all this advice and it’s a waste. You know what you need. You were always that way. I remember...just from the beginning—”

Before Lilian could complete what she began to say, Miriam climbed into the bed, sand and all. Lilian pulled the green glass bottle she was holding closer and put it up to her lips, taking a deep, slow sip.

“What happened with you and Martin earlier?”

“Don’t worry about that. Just a heated discussion,” Lilian laughed, “Do you think Alice heard?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Kids aren’t easy. They really aren’t. I thought I was prepared, but I think they made me lose my mind. Alice and Benjamin.”

“You’re a good mother.”

“Well. Sometimes I ask myself—obviously I love my children— would I do it all over again? God no. Sometimes I have dreams like that, Lilian, it’s 1980-something, you get to go back in time and do it all over...I don’t think it would make any difference. My choices would all be the same. Maybe a different man.”

“You’re drunk Lilian.”

“Cheers Miriam...I’m a grown woman, but you,” Lilian waved her pointed finger in the near dark and whispered, “You’re pregnant. How many weeks are you?”

“Be quiet.”

“You haven’t told him?” confusion wrinkled Lilian’s face.

“He wants to get married.”

“Isaac? Well of course he does. Wouldn’t put it past him.”

“Every day I wake up and feel like I’m making a mistake.”

“Me too,” Lilian drank again, wiping her lips dry with her free hand, “have you taken a test?”

“At the hotel.”

“You should tell him. At least then it’s real.”

“He bought me a ring, he gave it to me today by the water.”

“Let me see,” Miriam lifted the gold chain from beneath her sheer dress and unclasped it, rolling the thin gold ring off of its thread. The diamond was small but caught what light remained in the room. Lilian reached out her hand to hold it.

“I told him I wasn’t sure. He said to keep the ring.”

“It’s beautiful Miriam. Modest. Have you tried it on?”

“It’s a bit tight.”

“You can get it resized.”

“Do you think I should marry him?”

“I think you’d be good for Isaac, I question if he’d be any good for you. If you asked me a month ago I would ask God to strike Isaac down, you know how I feel about him, but lately I realize it’s not my place to judge. Have the child and see. You’ve always been good with children.”

“You think I’m good with children?”

“People in general. You’re good with people Miriam. All people love you. I’ve never had that.”

“You’re the best person I know Lilian. You’re the only person I’d tell. I wouldn’t trust anyone else with this.

“Not even your mother?”

“Only you,” Miriam said.

“You’re just saying that. You’ll say anything.

“Miriam laughed.

“You could have the wedding in our yard.”

“I haven’t said yes Lilian.”

“But you will.”

“Maybe, it depends.”

“On what?”

“How I feel.”

“How you feel? As if it makes any difference,” Lilian took a long sip from the bottle and screwed the green lid back onto the gin, staring not at Miriam, but beyond her through the window pane. The fire grew and small embers rose up above it. She put a stick of gum in her mouth and smoothed out the creases in her dress.

“Don’t you want to enjoy your vacation? Let’s join them outside Lilian. Relax.”

“I’m relaxed,” she smoothed the skirt of her creased dress, “Do I look okay?”

Nine

Mornings were the most painful by far. It was in the dewy, early hours of day that Miriam felt, not the physical ache of a body disrupted, but many frantic waves of longing which began to retreat the very moment they came into view. All of that illusory pain would later become naive, but not until so long after its emergence. She was not without food, she was not very poor. She had not thought about money for a long time. Miriam had no cause to consider wealth or poverty because her responsibilities had all been assumed by others. Rather than feel lucky that she had happened into such a rare arrangement, she felt sorry about all of her free time. Moreover, she feared the time was neither free nor hers. Miriam wanted for nothing tangible. Loudly, still, the child's voice in her spoke of a terrible unfairness. *Would it be this way always*, she would ask the mirror as she took the rollers down from her hair. *When if ever, will the dull hurt cease?* It could very well go on forever. It was unpleasant enough to be noticed, but mild enough to ignore.

Isaac worked from home, so there was very little distance between the two of them and he insisted on doing all of the housework so that she could avoid being on her feet. Her desire to keep the job at the hotel was a constant argument between them. So she quit, and the condo became the world. She felt its walls more firm and impassable than ever before, its cabinets more deep and disordered than she could manage. Miriam believed, as she had before, that she was

losing her mind. Many small gestures kept her lucid, but they could not give her the satisfaction she had always pursued at the expense of anything else. She had no work left to quit, no relationships to discard and now was confronted with the heavy strain of staying in a place, for good. She drove her idleness away and invented her own busywork. She began to read every book on Isaac's peeling, living room shelf. They were all either thrillers or historical fiction. What did not fall into those two categories were textbooks from Isaac's old line of work, which she considered unreadable and did not bother to open. The historical fiction, she found dense. She mostly skimmed the thrillers, until they became too frightening to finish. Miriam began to miss the emptiness of living in Lilian and Martin's home. The small details were no longer small: the four bathrooms, the kitchen island, the dish sets in glass displays. Not everyone lived this way. She saw a strangeness she had not known before. She could no longer tolerate the way her sister or her somewhat husband lived, but in turn she wondered who would ever tolerate her. So she kept routine and followed Isaac's gentle command.

Whenever he cooked, she chopped the vegetables. When he slept longer than she did in the morning, she was quiet and still. When he called his wife, she went to another room and pretended she was occupied. She did not ask about the photographs of strangers on the refrigerator, because she understood that Isaac loved her more than she loved him and it was not worth the interrogation. Two nights came which brought her new devastations. She dreamt of Okello, Lilian, their mothers, and the Reverend around a table, eating from one large plate. The conversation which ensued was forgotten before she was fully awake. Miriam decided that the dream meant nothing, but the excitement of it left her feeling empty handed in her waking life. She made a pot of tea on the stove and went about another day which held nothing for her. The

second night, she did not sleep at all. She only lay awake in bed and stare at the speckled ceiling. The popcorn roof seemed to fall above her.

The next day while Isaac made an international business call, the kind that never seemed to be for business, Miriam slipped out of the door unheard. She had plans to meet Lilian later, but the morning was open. She took one bus and then another, following the directions she had written in detail on a note pad. She pulled the yellow cord to signal her stop. The building was unassuming. Red brick, and a flat roof and tinted windows so that you could not see inside, the doors were printed with logos in white. The light of the sky was grey as she walked inside. There were only women in the foyer, some young, some old. The floral arrangements were all plastic lilies and palms.

The receptionist was unusually youthful. Her face was round and bright. She was distracted when Miriam approached her. The uniform top she wore was printed with cartoon characters all over.

“Do you have an appointment?” she asked.

“I didn’t think I needed one.”

“You need an appointment, dear.”

“I can wait, if need be.”

“Well you can fill out the paperwork, but you do need to make an appointment. It’ll be a long wait.

“I don’t mind waiting.”

“Okay. Can I ask why you’re here?”

“I need to see a doctor. I’ll just wait.”

“What’s your name?”

“Miriam.”

“Alright, Miriam, why don’t you fill this out. We’ll call.”

“I can’t take a call. I don’t have—never mind, that’s alright. Thank you. I’ll just go.”

“Okay, it’s alright. you fill this out. Have a seat and we’ll get you the soonest available appointment. Alright?” the young man smelled heavily of perfume.

“Thank you.”

Miriam sat in the rough, tight waiting room seat, then was beckoned into the cold leather bed of the private rooms of the clinic. The doctor had very pink lips. She was once blonde and now grey. She did not care very much about the doctor’s name. She followed her gentle instructions. She put her feet in the stirrups and closed her eyes as if she were thinking, though her mind was a deep blank blue. The metal went inside her sharply. Then it became a dull and natural pain. She began to feel numb. Her legs were spread wide by the doctor. She bled. It was only a matter of minutes. Miriam sat alone, until she was allowed to leave. The rest of the exchange: the money, the pain medication was insignificant. She was glad it was finished, forever. She left as soon as she could, boarding the next bus that arrived to Jamaica Plain. She emptied her mind further as she rode. She was nobody’s mother, no one’s anything-at-all. An appalling lightness came with the fact that she reached this age and produced nothing. Miriam wondered how it felt to be a woman who longed for love or dreamt of marriage. Neither her, nor her sister had ever been that way. Love had always been very troublesome and taboo in her eyes. There was no logic to be found there. There was some joy, that Miriam sought in it, but even that did not last. She felt the idea of that childish happiness blow out of the bus windows as she came closer to Lilian’s home, late for their wedding plans. By the time she arrived there, she had sobered from the haze that remembering brings.

Miriam bowed her head as she came up the long, winding driveway. She stood a while on the stone path, staring down at it. An August rain was already falling. The manicured trees on the street had grown so full, that she forgot winter. In the extremity of summer warmth, she could not recall anything else. The shower was heavy and it bent the short grass. She began to feel her hair unsettle and though she tied it painstakingly, just a few hours before, she did not care. She stood in the mist. At another time in her life, the feeling may have been a provocation for tears, but she dwelled instead in the magnitude of quietness which settled around her. All things, fundamentally, could change and nothing outside would be different. What could she feel?

Lilian's small frame was delicate and nimble through the wide living room window, obscured only slightly by the sheer white curtains. She moved about the large room lightly. Inside she pulled stems of fresh flowers out of their vases, putting them into others. Miriam would marry Isaac, but the wedding was Lilian's. She shopped for the flowers, she spoke to the caterers. Miriam did not believe they needed professional catering because she did not think anyone would come. Lilian insisted. When Miriam knocked on the door, she answered holding a bouquet of white peonies with hair dyed auburn. Lilian touched her sister's stomach and smiled, wider than she had in all of her adulthood, all of her adolescence. As long as Miriam could look back, she had never seen Lilian so happy, so vapid. There was no one who occupied the heart-mind space that Miriam occupied in her sister. Lilian clutched her hands and walked further into the living room, the petals of the flowers she held, open and plumb.

"I picked up some sample arrangements, which do you like?" She asked, there were at least ten displays of flowers in all corners of the room, "I think these orange ones might be nice"

Miriam pinched the stem of a pale pink rose and brought it closer to her nose, her voice broke as she spoke,

“I like these.”

