

Someone Else Besides You

A S T O R Y

by Viet Thanh Nguyen



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MY FATHER'S GIRLFRIEND lived in a condo complex designed as a village, the stucco barracks scattered around a flat lawn spotted with barbecue pits, black with soot. Behind one of the barracks a leaf blower whined as I followed my father along a winding brick path, past a swimming pool that smelled of chlorine, and up an echoing stairway. We stopped on the second floor, and my father used a key linked on the chain of his Swiss Army knife to unlock a condo door. When he called out her name—Mimi—it was the first time I'd heard it.

Mimi was sitting on a white leather couch in the living room, using a remote control to dial down the volume on the television backed into one corner. She stood up, and if she was surprised to see me, she didn't show it. Her plum velour tracksuit fit snugly on her slender body. Photographs of my mother before she was married show that she was once slim too, but by the end of her life everything about her had thickened and sagged, except for her fading hair. When she died,

she was wearing the wig I'd given to her for a birthday present, woven from real human hair. Mimi's perm resembled the wig, except that Mimi's hair was naturally rich and abundant, rooted to her head in auburn waves, the style of a woman in her fifties.

"I've been waiting to meet you for so long!" she said, clasping both my hands in hers. The skin of her face was beige and unnaturally smooth, like nylon stockings.

"Thanks," I said. Singing on the television was a girl with crimped hair, wearing a purple vinyl bodice and a red leather miniskirt. Above the television was a faded lacquer version of the Last Supper, with Jesus and the apostles framed in pink neon. My father bumped into me on his way to the couch, and I said, "I've heard a lot about you."

My father turned the volume up on the television. "He wants to pee."

"Of course." Mimi kept smiling as she led me down the hall to the bathroom, where I grimaced at her before I closed the door. The bathroom was immaculate and scented with potpourri, unlike the ones in the rented houses where I'd grown up, which always smelled vaguely of mildewed plastic shower curtains and ammonia. After a decent interval, I flushed the toilet. In the car I had only told my father that I needed to use the bathroom so I could see this woman's face, and how she lived. When I checked her medicine cabinet, all I found were aspirin, beauty creams, and several varieties of nail polish. I'd expected a sample packet of Viagra, like the one my ex-wife Sam once found in my father's toiletry kit after he asked her, without thinking, to fetch him his nail clipper.

When I returned to the living room, the television was off, and my father was reading the paper as he sat on the couch. Mimi was fixing drinks at the bar dividing the living room from the kitchen, where a skylight illuminated her stainless-steel oven and electric range. My mother had cooked on a vintage gas oven and stove with a pilot light that kept going out, and when an aneurysm struck her down last year at the age of fifty-three, she was working in the kitchen. I think it was the surprise of her dying so young that bowed my father down at the funeral, rather than grief or the shock of having found her lying on the linoleum floor, a pot of chicken bones simmering on the burner.

"Do you want milk with your coffee?" Mimi asked.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I have to go."

"But you just came. And I have biscotti and croissants."

"I only came to drop my father off." Above the fireplace was a black-and-white photograph framed in rosewood, of a gaunt man in his sixties, wearing spectacles and a dark suit. "His car was stolen last night."

“So I heard. That’s what comes from living in Los Angeles.” Mimi noticed me looking at the photograph. “My husband passed away five years ago. He was a senator once, you know.”

“He has to go.” My father put the newspaper down and stood up. “The boy has two jobs.”

I was thirty-three, but my father didn’t think anyone was a man until he fathered children. He’d had six with my mother. All three sons had grown taller than him, but most people, including me, tended to forget his height. People only noticed that he was a broad-chested man with muscular forearms that were still as thick as they were when I hung from them as a kid. His body remained trim enough to fit into the vintage camouflage paratrooper’s uniform that he’d worn during the war. These days he only broke out the uniform once every few months, to march in the honor guard for parades and memorials in Little Saigon. He always did so with the intense stare that Sam remembered from their first meeting, when she found she couldn’t look away from him, as if she were a wild animal transfixed by the gaze of a wilder one.

Perhaps Mimi felt the same way. Her eyes were on my father as she said to me, “Come by for dinner anytime.” For a moment I believed she meant it.

My father walked me to the door and pointed a finger at his compass watch. Its face was the size of a silver dollar, the body and band scratched but still as tough as the day he’d gotten it in 1958, at the Fort Benning airborne school. “I’ll need a ride back tomorrow morning,” he said. Then he closed the door in my face.

“Sure,” I said. “You’re welcome.”

I was used to the way he was spare with most things in his life, from his words to his ’82 Honda hatchback. When he’d come to my apartment six weeks ago, everything he owned was in the car, which was original down to the push-button radio that only picked up static-thick AM channels. Wanting to be helpful, I’d reached for a suitcase. The moment I tried to lift it, I knew I’d made a mistake. It must have contained his dumbbells, and the seconds ticked by silently as I struggled with both hands to drag the suitcase out of the trunk. When I’d finally gotten the suitcase to the sidewalk, he sighed and took it from me, lifting it with one arm and bracing it against his hip. Then he slung his duffel bag over the other shoulder and turned to the stairs. He swung the suitcase up each step with the aid of his leg, leaving me with the garment bags. Last month he’d turned sixty-three, and every grunt he gave punctuated what I should have known already. Living with him now would be harder than it was during my childhood.

ALL THROUGH the morning, while I processed refunds and listened in on my service reps, I pictured my father and Mimi lounging on the white leather couch, watching the Vietnamese channel on television. Mimi was the first of my father's mistresses and girlfriends that I'd seen, the mysterious women that my mother screamed about to my father behind their bedroom door when my brothers and sisters and I were younger. Now I had a face and a name for the woman sitting next to my father under the gaze of her husband. My father hadn't even put up my mother's picture, as custom said he should have, next to the photographs of his dead parents on his dresser.

I found it soothing during my lunch break to call Sam's home number and listen to her answering machine. "Hey there, stranger," she said. "You know what to do." Teaching geometry to tenth-graders had trained her to speak in a gentle and pleasant way. Sam was popular with her students, like my father was with his. He was a high school guidance counselor, and every Christmas, alumni would send dozens of cards to the man they affectionately called Mr. P, updating him on their careers and families. I doubted if Mr. P's students ever imagined that he had mistresses, or that once, in his past, he'd jumped out of airplanes and commanded a battalion of paratroopers. To the students, he'd merely say that he'd been a soldier once. He was a modest man who didn't like to talk with acquaintances, or with his own children, about his other life any more than I told my co-workers about how, at the end of the day, I drove to a 7-Eleven parking lot and changed in the front seat, wriggling into gray slacks and a red polyester blazer. By day I managed customer service for a company in Burbank that sold hearing aids, oxygen tanks, and motorized wheelchairs. By night I was a watchman at the Marie Antoinette, a luxury high-rise on the Wilshire Corridor near UCLA. No one could say I was lazy, as Sam had conceded during one of our arguments last year.

The job at the Marie Antoinette was perfect, because after Sam left me and my mother died, I could no longer sleep. Even so, nights at the Marie Antoinette were quiet and didn't require much of me. Every now and then I got up to walk the hallways, stairways, and underground parking garage, but mostly I sat in the marbled lobby, watching every corner of the building via a bank of video monitors. When I wasn't reading one of the several newspapers I'd brought, I played solitaire. In between games I would draw a random card from the deck, and if it was the ace of spades, I called Sam. If she answered the phone, I said nothing, waiting to see how many times she said "Hello?" before she hung up.

She was a patient woman, but her patience ran out last year, when she turned thirty-four. We had gone to Palms Thai restaurant on Hollywood for her birthday,

because she was a fan of the Thai Elvis, who shimmied and shimmered on stage in a different costume each night. That evening, he was wearing a gold lamé pantsuit as he sang a passable version of “(Let Me Be Your) Teddy Bear,” pushing his rose-tinted sunglasses up his nose with a jeweled finger every now and then.

“I want a child, Thomas.” Sam tucked a long strand of her hair behind her ear, almost shyly. “And I want to have it with you.” The strand was dyed purple, while the rest of her hair was its natural brunette. A diamond stud the size of a pinhead glittered above her left nostril, and my initials were tattooed in blue ink on her right wrist, serving as a reminder of me, she said, whenever she checked the time. For some reason her rebelliousness had charmed my father, so much so that after our divorce, he said I was to blame.

“I don’t know if I’m ready yet,” I told Sam. This wasn’t the first time we’d had this conversation. “I don’t know if I’ll be good with children.”

“Get over it, Thomas. You’re not going to turn out like your father.”

My father was someone who, for the better part of a decade, woke my brothers and me from our sofa bed at dawn to perform calisthenics with him. We did push-ups with one of our sisters sitting on our backs, and sit-ups clutching a Webster’s unabridged dictionary to our chests. We ran through an obstacle course of old tires in the backyard, and did chin-ups on the branch of an oak tree until we fell off the limb. After that, we practiced marksmanship with a BB gun, plinking away at Budweiser cans filled with sand. Then we ran for miles, not stopping until one of us vomited, proof that my father was succeeding in his goal of making us into men.

“He’s insane.” I thought Sam would see the risks. “Aren’t you worried I’ll start my own army? Or keep a girlfriend on the side?”

“Like I said.” Sam poured herself a glass of water from the pitcher on the table. “You’re not your father.”

MY SHIFT at the Marie Antoinette ended at dawn. It was a forty-minute drive from the westside to my eastside apartment, on a side street off the up-and-coming stretch of Sunset, not far from where the boulevard became César Chávez. Stolen cars and hovering police helicopters were commonplace here in Echo Park, where I’d moved after the divorce. By the time my mother passed away during the summer, I knew what loneliness was like, and on the day after the funeral, suspecting my father might be lonely too, I invited him to come live with me. I hadn’t expected him to say yes.

Today was my day off from both my jobs, but after sleeping for only two hours, I got up and showered, shaved, and dressed in fifteen minutes. Half an hour later,

I had crossed from Echo Park to Mimi's neighborhood, the Chinese mecca on Atlantic and Valley Boulevards. She opened the door wearing a pink velour track-suit. My father was showering after his morning run, and she insisted on preparing me a cup of coffee. I heard him singing in the bathroom as Mimi returned with a glass of ice in one hand and, in the other, a second glass with the condensed milk, a stainless steel filter perched on top. While we waited for the black coffee to drip, she smiled and said, "Your father speaks highly of you."

"Not as highly as he speaks of you."

"He says you work in the medical industry."

"I sell hearing aids. In the evenings I'm a night watchman at a high-rise."

"I see." We heard the running water stop.

"It's an expensive apartment building," I offered. "The women wear fur coats just because they can afford to."

When Mimi smiled at me again, I noticed a gold tooth glinting in the far reaches of her mouth. She probably had bricks of hundred-dollar bills hidden underneath her mattress or tucked behind the insulation in her crawl space, loot from the days when her husband was a senator. "It's not good for a boy your age to be without a woman," she said. "Your father tells me you're not even dating."

"I'm recovering."

Mimi ignored my comment and began describing the young women she knew at her temple, as well as the ones from her old neighborhood in Can Tho, everyone searching for husbands with American passports. Vietnamese women, she informed me, leaning close and putting her hand on my knee, were much better mates for men than American women, who were fickle and demanding. Vietnamese women took care of their men, doted on them, really, and these same women wanted men like me, neither too American nor too Vietnamese. She nodded at my father, who had appeared in the doorway, already dressed in a button-down shirt and wrinkle-free slacks. Ignoring her, he looked at me and said, "Today we're going to rent a car."

"Are you coming back tonight?" Mimi asked.

"Tomorrow," he said. "Now hurry up and drink your coffee before the ice melts."

As soon as I'd finished, he ushered me out. He said nothing to me in the car, jingling the keys in his pocket until we came to a complete stop where the Harbor and Hollywood Freeways crossed. A squadron of news helicopters circled lazily over the freeway some distance toward downtown, its towers only ghostly silhouettes hidden by a haze of smog. I lit a cigarette, and my father rolled down his window. After my mother died, he quit his pack-a-day habit, even though she'd never complained

about his secondhand smoke, just the migraines that forced her to turn off the lights in her bedroom and lie down. It's my head, she would moan. It's my head.

"When was the last time you talked to her?" he asked.

"Who?" I thought he meant my mother.

"Sam."

"Months ago." I blew smoke out the window. "She called to say she was sorry about Ma."

"How will you get her back if you don't talk to her?"

"None of your business."

"You give up too easy." Sam told me the same thing soon after we first met, our senior year in college. "Look at you," he said.

I checked myself. "What about me?"

"You've gained weight. You haven't combed your hair. You haven't shaved." He plucked at my pants. "And you haven't ironed your clothing. A man must always iron his clothing."

"I thought Ma pressed your clothes."

"The point is that you look terrible." He slapped his hand against the dashboard for emphasis. "How many of those cigarettes are you smoking every day?"

"Six or seven."

"Put it out." When I did nothing, he snatched the cigarette out of my mouth and tossed it out the window, then grabbed a handful of the fat around my waist, squeezing it hard. "You even feel like a woman."

"Jesus Christ!" I pushed his hand away. "Don't do that!"

"You're never getting Sam back looking that way."

"Who says I want her back?"

"Don't be an idiot. You were only half a man before you met her, and you're back to being half a man now."

Through my window, I could see into the low-slung Mitsubishi next to us, where miniature TV screens, embedded in customized headrests, broadcast a scene of a crowded highway. The camera zoomed in on a team of highway patrolmen in tan uniforms with their guns drawn, surrounding a car. It was our highway, captured live from a news helicopter.

"What about you?" I said. "Are you going to marry that woman? And then find yourself another one on the side?"

Someone behind me began honking, and soon cars all over the freeway took up the noise. I remembered my mother pulling me aside once, when I was eleven or twelve, demanding to know where my father disappeared to on Friday nights. I had

no idea. For some reason her question terrified me more than the time she chased him into the bathroom. When he locked the door against her, she tried to beat it down with a chair, the legs leaving fist-sized holes in the hollow door.

“Sam’s a good woman.” My father reached over and pressed the horn once, twice, and a third time. “You should never have let her go.”

As if to prove how little of a man I was, I started crying.

My father stared straight ahead, and I knew he must be thinking of the funeral. He hadn’t shed a tear during the Mass, and neither had I, but when I drove him from the church to the cemetery, something broke inside me, and the tears gushed out. My father had stopped speaking then, too. He was worried, I think, about the chances of my crashing the car. Only when I finished crying did he resume talking about the wake. But today, with horns honking all around, my father sighed and said, “That’s enough. It’s time we did something about you.”

Traffic began moving. The horns stopped, and my father turned on the radio, picking one of the soft-rock stations where Paul McCartney and Michael Jackson were singing “Ebony and Ivory.” I didn’t know what he meant by “doing something,” which was what he said whenever he was about to punish my brothers or me. It was also what he said the time I came home one day in the fourth grade and reported that a kid up the street had spat on the lunch of sardines and rice my mother had packed. Then the kid called me a slant-eyed fag.

My father wasn’t yet a high school guidance counselor. He was a night-shift janitor in a downtown office building and a part-time student at Cal State L.A. Wearing his janitor’s uniform, he made me walk him from our apartment to the other boy’s house, where I waited on the sidewalk as my father went up the stoop and knocked on the front door. The man who came onto the porch was taller than my father by six or seven inches, and wore a mechanic’s blue overalls unzipped to the bottom of his paunch. Curly brown hair sprouted from the back of his hands, and over the top of his T-shirt, and from his ears—everywhere except for the top of his head.

I didn’t hear what they said, both of them speaking in low, angry tones, until the moment the other father said, “Like hell I will.” My father kicked him in the groin without another word or warning, and, when the man doubled over, punched him in the throat. After the man fell facedown onto the porch, I saw his son standing behind the screen door, wide-eyed. My father didn’t bother looking behind him as he walked back toward me. There was no joy or excitement on his impassive face as he put his hand on my shoulder, and for a moment I thought he was going to make me fight the man’s son. But all he did with that hand was to steer me home, patting me gently the entire way and saying nothing.

WE PICKED UP a rental car from the Enterprise lot in Los Feliz, a Ford the size of a golf cart and only a little more powerful. Then my father took me to his barbershop in old Chinatown, in an alley off Broadway, where a man with orange hair and a studded belt ran clippers through my hair and chuckled over his good times with the twenty-dollar whores in Saigon. After he was finished, I wasn't sure which was uglier, the rented Ford or my haircut, so short I looked like I'd been discharged from the army. I could feel the breeze on my scalp that evening, blowing in over Baldwin Hills to Sam's doorstep. She had moved here after the divorce, to a townhouse on the heights above La Cienega, overlooking a field of petroleum derricks.

"This is a mistake," I said.

He knocked on the door. "We haven't seen her in a long time, and we're just going to talk."

My father had said we would have the advantage of surprise, even though we were on Sam's territory. But he was getting old, because this was the extent of his plan to do something about me. He'd forgotten to reconnoiter or prepare for a worst-case scenario. Still, even if he had, I don't think he could have been prepared for the fact that when Sam opened the door, she would be wearing a maternity dress with ruffles of crepelike material, making her swollen belly look like a piñata.

"Oh," she said. Her hair was shorn into a blond pageboy, its brown roots showing. "You're the last people I expected to see."

"You're pregnant," I said.

"It's kind of you to notice, Thomas. Hi, Mr. P."

"Well," my father said. "Look at you."

"It's good seeing you, too." Behind her, someone was talking on the television in the living room. "I don't mean to be rude, but you should have called."

"We were just taking a drive," I said. "And we thought we'd stop by."

Sam knew my father and I never drove together just for fun, but she beckoned us in anyway. I expected another man to be there and entered cautiously, checking either side before stepping in. Stacks of student exams were arranged by grade on the avocado shag carpet, at the chrome feet of a couch made from fake black leather that we'd shopped for together in the Korean shops on Western Avenue. "Sorry for the mess," Sam said, easing herself onto the couch.

My father occupied the armchair, and I was forced to sit on the far end of the couch from hers. I toed a stack of exams, one with a red C on the topmost sheet.

"They're not doing so well."

"I think I'm losing my touch," she replied.

People say a pregnant woman glows in a beautiful way with love and expectation, and I'd always imagined this glow as a halo, or aura, but the shine on Sam's puffy face was reflected from a glaze of oil and sweat. "I'm not as energetic in the classroom as I usually am," she went on. "It's rubbing off on the students."

"A teacher must lead by example," my father remarked.

"So you've always said, Mr. P." She closed her eyes for a moment, as if she were tired. "If you'd like a beer, you can help yourself. Getting me up almost requires a crane."

"You have beer?" I said.

"I keep it for guests."

We should have refused out of politeness, but my father immediately went to the kitchen for the beer. Sam rested her hands on her belly and gave me a neutral look. "What have you been doing, Thomas?"

"Working. And sleeping."

"Me, too."

"My father moved in with me."

She laughed. "That must be interesting. Who does the cooking?"

"He's the cook, of course." My father returned with two bottles of beer, a bowl of pretzels, and a glass of water. "The master of instant noodles."

"Thanks, Mr. P," Sam said when my father handed her the glass. "I need to cool down. I'm having a hot flash."

We lapsed into silence and watched the show on television, about the finite and dwindling supplies of fossil fuels. When my father broke the silence and complimented her on the house, Sam explained that most of the decorations belonged to her roommate, another teacher who was out for the night. My father pointed the tip of his beer bottle at the TV, on top of which was a pipe, carved from teak and in the shape of a dragon with a ball of opium in its mouth. "From where did you buy that?"

"Hue." She spoke the city's name with the correct rising accent. "But you can't actually smoke anything with it."

"You went to Viet Nam?" my father and I said at the same time.

"Last summer. I didn't teach summer school and went backpacking instead. Sometimes"—she paused—"a girl just needs a vacation."

"Did you think about me?" I said.

Sam shifted her weight on the couch, uncrossing and recrossing her legs, the ankles and calves swollen. "Of course I thought about you." She smiled at me like I was one of her students. Then she looked at my father, who was studying the cottage cheese ceiling. "And you, too, Mr. P."

“I will never go back.” He rapped his bottle of beer on the coffee table. “You do not know the Communists. I know the Communists.”

“They’re not so bad. They just want to move on with their lives.”

My father shook his head emphatically. “You are a foreigner. You know nothing. They take your money and say nice things to you.”

“Maybe you should go back,” Sam said quietly. “You can get closure.”

“I will never go back.” My father slashed his index finger across his throat and made a guttural noise. “If I go back, they will call me a war criminal. They will put me in reeducation, and you will never hear from me again.”

Sam grunted softly as she pushed herself off the couch, rising before my father got started about what evil the Communists had done or would do. He would tell these stories for an entire evening. “Excuse me,” Sam said. “I have to use the bathroom.”

After she left, my father turned to me and hissed, motioning to his belly and making a round curve in the air with his hand. I ignored him and got up to look around the living room for traces of a man. All I saw were the trappings of our life together. I’d given Sam everything when we divorced except half the money, but I hadn’t expected her to keep our mementos on display. Above the mantel were figurines of hula dancers from our honeymoon in Hawaii, and on a bookshelf were crystal paperweights in the shape of dolphins we’d bought in Puerto Vallarta. By the heater was the Robert Doisneau print I’d bought her in senior year, the black-and-white one with the man and woman kissing on a Parisian street.

Next to the paperweights was a lacquered jewelry box etched with mother-of-pearl, which I assumed she’d bought in Viet Nam. We’d talked often about visiting, but I’d never really wanted to go. I wasn’t even born there, my mother having given birth to me at a refugee camp in Guam, where my father named me after the American advisor who’d gifted him with the compass watch. I didn’t understand what drew Sam to Viet Nam, except maybe a need to find closure of her own. Perhaps she’d found it. She seemed happy when she brought out two envelopes of photos from her trip and told us the stories behind them. “A beautiful country,” she said, which was what everyone said about it. “Poor and hot, but beautiful.”

Despite himself, my father grunted in pleasure as he studied the pictures. Sam had landed in Saigon and traveled north to Hue and Hanoi, with detours to Ha Long Bay and the mountains of Sapa. Most of these were places he’d only read about, since the war had kept his generation from seeing their own country. He passed me a picture of Sam on the deck of a boat, wearing a safari hat and a powder-blue North Face hiking jersey, the one I’d bought her for Christmas. Her freckles had faded to

invisibility against her skin, pink from the sun, and she was leaning into a man with sandy-blond dreadlocks draped on his shoulders.

“Is this the father?” I jabbed at the man’s face with my finger.

She sighed. “Please don’t be stupid, Thomas.”

“It’s just a question.”

“You had a chance, Thomas. We had a chance.”

My father said, “Excuse me,” got up, and walked out the front door without another word. After the door closed, Sam shook her head and said, “Neither of you has changed one bit.”

“I wouldn’t say that.”

“How have you changed, Thomas? Besides your haircut?”

“You’re the one who’s changing.” My voice was loud. “You’re changing the subject.”

“A woman can have a baby by herself.” Her tone of voice didn’t rise as it used to when we fought, but stayed subdued, as if weighed down by the unborn child. “A woman doesn’t need a man to be the father of her child, Thomas.”

“You might as well say the earth is flat.”

“Oh, my God.” She stretched the words out sarcastically, imitating the way the students spoke in her classes, the ones she used to talk about over dinner. “What century are you living in?”

I wanted to ask her what a woman is without a husband, what a child is without a father, what a boy is without a man, but the questions wouldn’t come out. “Who’s the father?” I said.

“You don’t have any right to ask me that.”

Perhaps it was another teacher, or somebody she met on the Internet, or a stranger she got drunk with in a bar one night. Perhaps it was even some lucky Vietnamese tour guide. The thought of these other men made me drink the rest of the beer, not so much for the taste as to give me something to do besides throwing the bottle into the television. When I was done, Sam got up and walked to the door, leaving me no choice but to follow. My foot was on the threshold when the unexpected sound of my name caused me to turn around, hopeful.

“You shouldn’t call me anymore, Thomas,” she said. Over her shoulder, the television narrator was intoning about corporate pipelines and Nigerian strongmen. “You know it’s not good for either one of us.”

MY FATHER WAS WAITING for me in the Ford, smoking a cigarette from the pack of Camels I’d left on the dash. The stereo was on, and because American music didn’t please him, he’d brought along a CD of brokenhearted ballads sung by Khánh Ly. He

liked to say that whenever he listened to her, it might as well be 1969 all over again. I got into the car and turned off the stereo. The street was empty and quiet, except for the hum of traffic from La Cienega and the barking of a dog somewhere up the hill.

“That was a great idea,” I said.

He tossed the cigarette out the window. “So did she tell you who the man is?”

“She wouldn’t say.” I released the brake and eased the Ford into the street, lined with cars parked bumper to bumper. Halfway down the street, he said, “Stop.” Sam’s Toyota was next to us, pointing downhill with its wheels turned to the curb. The car was weathered and gray, and on the dusty rear window someone had drawn a frowning face.

“Kill the lights,” my father said. He waited until I turned them off before he slipped out his Swiss Army knife and got out of the car. After walking once around the Toyota, he knelt down and braced himself against the driver’s side wheel well with his left arm, the knife in his right hand. He drove the knife hard into the tire, working the short blade against the rubber for several seconds until the incision was several inches wide. If the knife made a sound coming out of the tire, I didn’t hear it.

Once he’d repeated his work on the other three tires, he snapped the knife shut, stood up, and inspected the car with his hands on his hips. I looked over my shoulder, up and down the street, but the sidewalk was empty, and though some windows were lit with the blue glow of televisions, no one was looking out. When I turned back to the Toyota, my father was gone, and for a moment I’d thought he’d run away. But then he rose into my vision from the other side of the Toyota, a rock the size of a grapefruit in his hand. He hefted the rock over his head, paused to check his balance, and then hurled it at the car, throwing his whole body behind it. The windshield of the car cracked and buckled under the impact, but the sagging glass held, cradling the rock even as the echo bounced up and down the hill.

When he climbed back into the car, I said, “You’re crazy, you know that?”

“Just drive.” He spoke through gritted teeth. “Don’t turn on the lights until you get to the bottom of the hill.”

I waited until I turned the corner before I flipped on the headlights and accelerated. “I don’t know you.” I banged the wheel with my fist. “I don’t know why anyone would do something like that.”

“She’ll blame it on the blacks.”

All the cars around us had black drivers.

“That’s not what I meant.”

“So why didn’t you say something?” My father leaned his head against the headrest and closed his eyes. “You should have rolled down the window and stopped me. You could have honked your horn, made people come to their windows.”

We drove past the oil derricks, visible as shadows, in the shape of gigantic pelicans, nesting. Until Sam moved to Baldwin Hills, I hadn't known Los Angeles even had oil. But I guess oil was to be found in every part of the world, just like anger and sorrow. A person only had to know where to look. I said, "No one has ever told you anything that would stop you, not from doing something you wanted."

"That's because everything I've ever done I believed in." The car hit a bump on the entrance ramp to the Santa Monica Freeway, and he cursed, claspng his hand to his neck as if a bullet had grazed him.

"What's wrong?"

He opened his eyes. "I think I pulled a muscle."

"Serves you right."

"You wouldn't know right from wrong." There was no trace of anger in his voice. "The only way a man knows right from wrong is when he makes a choice."

"So was it right to cheat on Ma?" Far ahead of us, the sparse lights of downtown's towers glittered. "Was it right to drive her to her grave the way you did? Do you believe you did the right thing?"

My father sighed the way he did all those mornings of my childhood when he came into the living room and saw us asleep, or pretending to be asleep, hoping he might forget to drag us out of bed. I waited for him to clip me on the ear or sucker punch me for what I said, but he didn't. He kept quiet until we were driving through downtown, when he said, "I never loved your mother."

"I don't want to hear it."

"But I respected her," he continued. "She was dutiful. She was a good woman. My father chose her for me because she was a virtuous girl, even though he knew I loved someone else. And this is why I never chose any woman for you. I wanted you to find a woman you loved."

"Don't make this about me."

"Who else is it about?"

He closed his eyes once more, and from downtown to the apartment, we didn't speak again. He made it up the stairs and through the door by himself, but when we reached his bedroom, I had to help him take off his shirt and lie down, holding him by the shoulders while he braced his neck and head. I saw the six-inch scar on his chest that I'd sometimes seen as a child, after he'd come out of the shower with a towel around his waist. Since he never told us anything about what he'd done in the war, we made up stories about how he'd been shot through the chest, or stabbed by the husband of one of his mistresses. The scar was a vivid bolt of red lightning in my memory, angled between his sternum and his heart, but in the dim

light of his bedroom, it was only a pink zipper holding the rumped, loose skin of his chest together.

I found sleeping pills in a drawer of his nightstand, along with a bottle of eucalyptus oil and a box of Salonpas. “Take one,” I said, dropping a pill in his mouth. He swallowed it without water and I rolled him over, because even that act required a man to use the muscles of his neck. I splashed some of the eucalyptus oil onto his shoulders and neck and began massaging him. Soon enough he was breathing evenly, and once he was asleep, I bandaged him with the white strips of Salonpas, their medicinal scent reminding me of the times when he would lay them upon me after particularly hard mornings of exercise.

After I was done, I picked up his shirt and opened the closet. The hanger was in my hand when I glanced at the shelf above the closet rod and saw my mother’s wig, resting on its Styrofoam head. What compelled him to save this, of all things, was beyond me. I hung up the shirt quickly and turned off the lights before I went to my room. There I lay in bed, listening for the police helicopters that cruised overhead almost every night or the Spanish rock that was always floating up from the crowded evangelical church down the hill. But everything was so strangely still and quiet, I thought I wasn’t even in my own apartment, and when I closed my eyes I saw the head’s oval face once again, marked by an arched nose and thin lips, its expression white, blank, and eyeless as it gazed down upon me.

LATE THE FOLLOWING DAY, the police found my father’s car on a side street of Boyle Heights. The next morning, while I was sleeping between shifts, my father went with Mimi to retrieve the Honda from the impound lot. They returned by the time I was awake and drinking my coffee, black and without sugar. My father was whistling a tune I didn’t recognize when he opened the door, Mimi trailing behind him. “Miracles do happen after all,” he said. “The car’s in one piece. The police think it was just stolen by kids looking for a joyride.”

“Lucky you,” I said.

“The little bastards even left me a gift.” He chuckled and showed me a cheap removable stereo in his palm, his movement stiff and awkward from his strained neck. “I guess they couldn’t stand the radio.”

“The stereo’s probably stolen, too.”

“If the police don’t have a problem with it, then neither do I.”

After he went outside with a vacuum cleaner and rags to clean up the car, I was left alone with Mimi. She sat on the edge of the futon, wearing a purple satin tracksuit with clean white sneakers, hands folded on her lap as she smiled at me. The

early morning sun coming through the living room windows reflected off the satin and illuminated her in the halo of dust floating up from the futon. Seeing her with my father made me think that perhaps Sam had made the right choice after all. Perhaps she was thinking of my father and mother when she divorced me. Perhaps she knew then what I know now, that they never should have married each other. The truth of the matter was that my father and mother should have married other people, even though, in that case, I might never have been born.

“Sometimes I feel so sorry for you bachelors,” she said.

“Mimi.”

“My housekeeper does a great job,” she went on. “She’s looking for some more work in case you need help cleaning.”

“Aunt Mimi,” I said. The coffee’s bitterness only made me aware of how dull my mind was.

“She cooks, too, nearly as good as I can.”

“You know he’s going to cheat on you, don’t you?”

For a moment she said and did nothing, her expression unchanging. I thought she might not have heard me, or if she had, that she was too shocked by the truth even to react. Then she stood up, brushing away the cloud of dust with a wave of her hand. I expected her to say something, perhaps how she was not like my mother, but she didn’t say a word. Instead, she walked to the door without looking at me, her smile fixed on her face, and for a moment I believed she might just ignore me. It was with her hand on the doorknob that she changed her mind.

“Tell me something,” she said, turning to look at me. The curve of her smile straightened into a thin, hard line. “Aren’t there times when you’d rather be someone else besides you?”

I WENT TO WORK. Then I changed my clothes and went to work again. Near dawn of the next day, I came home from the Marie Antoinette and was so tired that I wasn’t even aware of crossing the threshold of my bedroom and falling asleep, not until a staccato pounding woke me up after what seemed like only minutes. Someone was knocking on the front door. The alarm clock said it was seven-thirty, and when I looked down, I saw that I was still wearing my pants. My shirt and shoes were on the carpet. I waited for my father to answer the door, but when the pounding only became more insistent, I had to climb out of bed.

Whoever it was kept beating on the front door until I opened it. Sam was standing there, right hand raised and clenched. She was wearing an unbuttoned red cardigan over a black top and matching black pants made of stretchable wool. Her

pregnant belly protruded over her waistband, and her top had ridden up, leaving an eye-shaped sliver of her flesh exposed. The navel at its center was like a pupil, its iris the gold belly ring she'd acquired in her freshman year one drunken night.

"I didn't know you had it in you," she said, brushing by me.

The sunlight behind her was blinding. I blinked and said, "What?"

"My car!" She pivoted in the middle of the living room to face me. "I spent all day yesterday getting it fixed. How could you do that? How?"

My watchman's jacket was thrown onto the armchair by the door, and in the breast pocket was an envelope full of cash that I had gotten from the bank during lunch yesterday. My plan had been to slide the unmarked envelope under her door that evening. I took the envelope out of the jacket and offered it to her.

"What's that?" she said, arms folded above her belly.

"It's enough to pay for the car."

Sam looked at the envelope for a moment and hesitated. I kept myself very still. If I so much as shook the envelope or said another word, she'd refuse it and curse me on her way out. While she was making up her mind, the sight of her belly ring and the smooth, tight canopy of flesh it rested on transfixed me. I wondered if she'd named the baby yet, or if she knew the sex of it, and, above all, if she'd told the man who was going to be the father.

"When I saw what you'd done to the car, part of me wanted to kill you," Sam said, taking the envelope. "But another part of me thought you cared in some strange, screwed up way that was completely your own."

I stepped forward and put my hand on her belly.

"Mostly I wanted to kill you," she said, frowning.

I leaned closer and put my other hand on her belly, the navel and the ring between my two hands. I waited for the baby to kick or to turn over in the womb, and when nothing happened, I knelt down and placed my ear against Sam's belly. There was a life hidden there, a life that if I were to hold it in my hands would weigh almost nothing. When I spoke, it was so softly that only the stranger curled up behind the belly ring could hear. Then I said it once more, louder: "I can be the father." Feeling Sam's hand grip my shoulder, I said it a third time, just to make sure they both heard me right.

"Stand up, Thomas," she said. "I want you to stand up."

I stood up. We faced each other, her belly buffering us. "Do you know what you're saying?" she asked. "Do you have any idea what you're doing?"

"I have absolutely no idea," I said. Sam bit her lip and looked down, but she didn't back away. I saw a new etching of wrinkles by her eyes, and a pattern of three age

spots by her jawbone. They had not been there the year before, when we had drawn up the divorce agreement with pen and paper, without lawyers and with a bottle of wine. I touched the wrinkles with my fingertips, and traced the slope of her cheek to the jaw, where the age spots were arranged like the dots on a die. A floorboard creaking in my father's room announced that he had crept out of bed and was undoubtedly standing against the door. Sam and I turned our heads to the sound, but we heard nothing more. He was waiting, just like we were, for what was to come. ■