



LISA SRISURO

A FLOATING DOOR

Thinking back to the morning she dropped her son off at the airport, Arlette wondered if there hadn't been a particular look in his eye, a telling swing in his step as he headed toward the sliding glass doors of the terminal. Maybe she had missed the signs. At the time, Arlette had thought Keith more amusing than anything, overprepared and awkward, a thirty-eight-year-old man in a safari-type vest with mesh sides and a money belt strapped to his ankle (he had worn it around the house for a day to make sure it was comfortable). She had even rolled down the window to call out a final reassuring word. Keith had only ever been to Mexico, after all, and that trip had made him sick with mosquito bites and diarrhea. This country, Thailand, was twenty-four hours by plane. It was summer then in St. Louis, the rainy season where he was going.

Keith was gone for twelve days. For twelve days Arlette imagined him cocooned in an air-conditioned tour bus with tinted windows. But when he returned, Keith was tanned and fatter and wearing a blue silk shirt with an Oriental collar. His vest was nowhere in sight. He sat her down and pulled out eight booklets of photos, the covers printed with advertisements in Thai. Arlette had never enjoyed looking at pictures—she found that people tended to take too many and not very well—but Keith insisted she pause on each one. There were red and gold temples and streets crowded with motorcycle taxis and a woman selling coconuts. The tour group crossing a muddy river atop a herd of elephants. And then, in one picture, a girl appeared. She was standing in a shop with an older woman, two locals looking picturesque among colorful bolts of fabric. In the next photo, she was there again, still in the shop. When she appeared for the third time, sitting at a table peeling some large green fruit, Arlette stopped. She looked closer. The girl was no more than twenty-five, it seemed, a fragile-looking thing with long, glossy hair





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and a shy smile. “Mother,” Keith said, unable to restrain his excitement. “This is Noki. I’ve fallen in love with her. Her name means *bird*.”

Keith had met the girl in a small village, he told her, where on the third day the tour bus stopped for gas. He went into the closest shop to look for a bathroom, but the woman there didn’t understand what he was asking. Her daughter helped him with the English she had learned in school. She spent a couple of minutes straightening up the back room before she led him through. Afterward, the mother offered him a Coke but the bus was honking, so he ran out, afraid that it would leave. But that night, at a seafood restaurant on another muddy river, he found he couldn’t stop thinking of the girl. There was something about her, her contained manner, how the sharp pins fanned so delicately from her mouth—who could ever name such a thing? He could not let her go. The next day he left the tour group and took a taxi back to the shop, and that’s where he stayed for the rest of the trip. He rented a room in a small hostel. Every day he went to visit the girl and her mother. At the end of it all—“I know it’s crazy,” Keith said—he proposed and, after six hours, the girl agreed. She was moving here as soon as her visa came through. When you know, you know.

At first, Arlette reacted with a cool head. There was no use in jumping to conclusions. After all, Keith was here, sitting beside her, and this girl was not. She was stuck in a dusty shop with concrete floors, stuck on the other side of the world. She was small enough to be covered with one thumb. But then she saw how Keith was practically bouncing in his seat. “I’ve fallen in love with her,” he had said. He had never before mentioned love.

Over the following weeks, Arlette tried to convince Keith of his mistake. It was an objectively bad decision, she told him, worse than his decision to jump off of the swings when he was eight, perhaps on par with his decision to pass up the promotion at work. Decisions like these, they had consequences—his dislocated shoulder, for example, which still popped out from time to time. And was it not excruciating? Had he not in those moments, lying on a table and grasping a bucket of water and waiting for the joint to realign—had he not felt regret? But Keith remained steadfast in his plan.





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He was not usually so stubborn. Love, Arlette knew, could make a person foolish.

Now the girl was here. Arlette had seen her in the flesh. She had arrived the previous night with two bulging suitcases bound with leather belts and a gift for Arlette, a pink silk scarf too youthful for a woman of sixty-two. She stood in the living room, Arlette's living room. "You must be jet-lagged," Keith clucked, bringing her a glass of water. The girl appeared as she did in her photographs, which Arlette had examined privately over the intervening weeks: she was thin-boned and long-haired, and when she smiled it was faint and hesitant. Her attire was not well-suited for a long journey: a blouse and skirt of matching fabric (handmade, Arlette surmised from the stitching), stockings, high heels, and a straw purse. Neither was it right for the season. Outside, the wind was kicking up; leaves tumbled along the streets and bare branches scraped against the window screens.

Now it was morning, nine o'clock, and Arlette was dressed and waiting in her living room for signs of movement in Keith's apartment above. It was her day off at the library, and she had no plans. When finally she heard water rushing down through the pipes, she stood. In the kitchen, she picked up the platter of bran muffins she had baked earlier, walked outside, and rang Keith's bell.

"I thought you might like these," she said when he answered. "She's probably busy settling in. No time to cook."

Keith was dressed and shaved already, although he had negotiated a late day at work. "Great. All right, hold on."

He ran up the stairs. Like a teenager, she thought; she had not seen him move so fast in a long time. She waited at the door, a visitor in her own house. For years they had passed in and out of each other's apartments without so much as a knock. Keith came down to use her ironing board, and she went up to bring him his mail. On Fridays she did all the dusting, straight up the banister and into his kitchen. Now, her toes on the threshold she had just a few months ago scrubbed clean with Ajax, Arlette straightened her shoulders, readjusted her waistband. She was not good at asking people for things.

Keith reappeared and motioned her up. In the bathroom,



the shower was running. If not for that, Arlette would not have known anyone else was present. None of the girl's things were in sight, not her straw handbag or high-heeled shoes. The air smelled like Keith's aftershave and the rose potpourri sachets she had put in each of his closets. For a moment, Arlette was reassured. Nothing was set in stone, after all. There was still the possibility that things wouldn't work out. The girl would discover Keith's bad habits, maybe—his absentmindedness, his tendency to lock himself out of his car and apartment (more than once he had dropped his keys into the post box as he mailed a bill or letter). Or maybe the girl herself would turn out to be undesirable.

"My new bed." Keith gestured to the couch, where several blankets lay crumpled. He looked almost proud as he straightened the cushions. "Until the wedding. The Thai culture is very traditional."

Arlette was surprised. Somehow moving to another country to marry a man you had known for six days seemed to allow for a certain compromising of principles.

"You know I haven't been happy with this," she said, sitting down on the couch.

Keith bit into a muffin. His face showed displeasure in his way: modulated, almost perplexed. He was expecting some kind of lecture, but Arlette had not prepared one. Their last episode, just two weeks earlier, had made her cautious. She had marched upstairs, having had to endure yet another of his loud middle-of-the-night phone calls overseas, and told him he should start looking for his own place. The house was too small for three, she had said. Keith had been in bed already. "We'll do whatever you want," he had said sleepily, shading his eyes against the light. And she had stood there at a loss, the heat of anticipation rushing out of her. She felt the awful pang of regret. The next day she told him that if they kept their voices down after ten p.m., she would consider letting them stay.

Arlette continued. "But now she's here. She came for you. I can see that you have strong feelings for her."

Keith smiled. "She's just fantastic, isn't she? Generous and sweet and, my God, beautiful, just perfect. Too perfect for me."

"Now," she said, frowning, "nobody's perfect."

Keith jumped up. The girl was standing in the entryway to the living room.



“Hey,” Keith said, at her side. “Good shower? You look great, really refreshed. It must feel good to get some sleep.” He gestured to Arlette, who was still sitting on the couch. “Mom brought us over some breakfast,” he said, so good-naturedly that it almost sounded normal.

Noki was wearing another matching blouse and skirt. Her hair, still wet from the shower, was in a ponytail. She was prettier than any of the other women Keith had brought home. Those others had been older, for the most part, more weathered looking. For a time, a beat-up station wagon with three car seats strapped into the back appeared in the driveway every night, and Arlette had to endure the mother’s terrible sighs drifting down through the vents.

Noki went to the coffee table, where the muffins sat in a neat pyramid minus the one Keith had eaten. She picked one up and sat down on the love seat adjacent to the couch, moving with slightly bent knees, as if she were trying to stay close to the ground. She held the muffin in her lap. Arlette wondered if in her culture it was impolite to eat in front of strangers.

“I thought that while Keith was at work today, you might like to visit the Arch,” Arlette said.

The girl glanced at Keith.

“The Arch,” Keith explained, coming to sit next to her. “It’s this sculpture, kind of— no, a monument. Like this—” He traced the shape in the air with his finger. “I think it’s a fantastic idea.”

“Unless you’re too tired,” Arlette added.

“No—I’m fine, not tired. We’ll go now?”

“Maybe after lunch. That will give you some time to settle in.”

Keith clapped his hands on his knees. “You’ll get out and see the town, get to know each other!”

Noki looked at him and laughed, a quick flash of teeth before her lips realigned. Keith beamed and touched her sleeve. Arlette had to admit it was appealing, seeing something break like that. She imagined it would feel like a privilege to have been the one to do it.

For nearly all Keith’s life it had been just the two of them. Arlette left his father when Keith was just two years old. She left him by staying put; she changed the locks one night





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and claimed the house as her own. It was winter, brutal and gray, and she huddled by each door as the locksmith unscrewed the knobs and tossed them into a box. Eight knobs in all, the only things between Lenny and her, and they rolled around so uselessly, clanking dully against one another. When he was finished, the man offered them to her, but she told him to throw them away.

In the morning, she waited for Lenny to return. He had been gone for three days this time. By now, she knew that he spent his nights at Thurston's and days sleeping on a friend's couch when he should have been at work. The day before he had called from a payphone, disoriented but elated. He had won a hundred dollars, he told her. He was coming home.

Arlette put eggs and sausage on the stove and, in a rare moment of excess, turned up the furnace to fight the drafts from the windows. Keith was scooting around the kitchen in his walker. He was exploring his surroundings: the table with metal legs he liked to watch his reflection in, the vinyl hassock that Arlette used to reach the highest cabinets. He liked to pull at a corner of the yellow flowered wallpaper that was curling upward, and Arlette let him because she was planning to replace it anyway. Keith was a happy child, satisfied with most circumstances. Too satisfied, Arlette was thinking that morning, for it seemed that he had become so attached to his mode of transportation, the walker, that he had not yet tried to walk on his own. The other children on the street were already doing it, waddling from one table corner or adult to another. Arlette worried that he was being left behind, and that morning, in addition to having stayed up late the night before, in addition to wondering just how Lenny would react when he returned, Arlette was considering taking Keith's walker away.

Keith had asked her about that day when he was growing up, before they stopped talking about Lenny for good. He didn't remember anything about his father: not the brand-new dining set he came home with one day, a table and eight chairs upholstered in a garish brocade, not the depressions he would fall into. He didn't remember the time Arlette carried him into the bathroom and found Lenny lying in the tub, water drained, unable to get moving again. She had helped him out, stumbling under the weight of him, water soaking





her blouse, as Keith watched with his wide, still eyes. Arlette was sure that he had stored the image somehow, a dark spot, a nebula in his memory. Putting Lenny into bed that day, she had felt for the first time that the end was coming. She had done all that she could: reasoned and yelled and enlisted his family and friends and even his old wrestling coach. The problem was that he didn't want to help himself.

Growing up, Keith would sometimes turn inward; she could never predict when. She hated to see it, his confusion and sadness; how unfair that she couldn't fully erase what was gone. But she refused to answer his questions. She considered it a favor to him. Like a mother who was giving her child up for adoption; it was better to take it away at birth, before she could become attached.

When Lenny finally did arrive that morning, she and Keith were in the upstairs bathroom. He was in the tub, and she was kneeling on the rug. She heard the car pull in, the crunching of footsteps on snow, and all of it—the weeks of considering, the hours of waiting—collected in her bones, and she began to shake. Keith covered his head with a washcloth and let the water drip down his face. She heard the hinges on the screen door, the doorknob rattle. For a moment, she panicked—What would she do? How would she survive?—but then the knocking came, loud and impatient, and she knew she couldn't take back what she had started, nor did she want to. Keith cocked his head, listening, and then Lenny was at the window yelling up to her. He had seen the light on, she realized, and somehow the fact that he knew exactly where she was in the house made her pull Keith quickly from the water, and he cried.

Before they left the house, Arlette had given Noki a sweater, a gray cable-knit cardigan. Although the sweater was not new, on the girl it seemed especially misshapen and pilled, and Arlette thought that after today she would retire it to Goodwill. For now, though, Noki seemed grateful to have it, clutching it close to her chest as the wind gusted in off the river. She was standing against one of the metal legs of the Arch with her head flung back, and around her, several others did the same, holding their hands like visors against the sun. Arlette stood back. She knew what it looked like from





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there. It was a trick of perspective, the top curve obscured somehow so that the legs seemed to stretch interminably into the sky.

They walked down the ramp and, inside the building, joined the people waiting for the elevators. The line was short; already the weather was keeping people inside. Noki rotated slowly in place, following the murals that wound around the ceiling, a sixties-era depiction of wagon trains and horses and railroads. She was as quiet as she had been in the car, where she'd sat with her face to the window, the sleeves of the sweater reaching past her thumbs. Arlette had not attempted to fill the silence. It was the girl's responsibility, she reasoned, to make the effort.

But now, waiting in line for the elevator, Arlette could stand it no longer. She had too many questions. She turned to the girl.

"You can imagine how surprised I was," she said. "When Keith returned from his vacation."

Noki looked at her and Arlette saw relief in her smile. She nodded. "Yes, for me too it was a surprise. One day he walks into the store, a stranger, and the next day I'm here."

"I mean, we both laughed when he won the vacation raffle at work. Of all people. Keith—he's not an adventurer. An adventurer," she explained, seeing the girl's confusion, "is someone who likes different things."

Noki nodded vigorously. "When he was in Yala he liked everything—you should see him. He went out walking in the morning and came back with so many different foods. He helped in the store, cutting the cloth for customers." She laughed. "A man cutting the cloth—people came into the store to see him!"

Arlette started to clarify what she had meant, but she stopped, seeing how feeble her words would be now. She tried to picture Keith doing the things the girl had described. Taking walks by himself. Cutting fabric. He had never been good with arts and crafts.

"Your parents must have been very surprised, too," she said.

"Yes, very surprised."

"And happy, I'm sure," she continued. "For you."

"My mother likes him very much. He's polite, funny, and he eats everything."



“And your father?”

“He works in another city, and he comes on the weekend. I’m most of the time with my mother.”

Arlette wondered if she meant her parents were separated. It was an unusual arrangement for a family. Before she could ask further, an attendant began waving them forward. They crowded into one of the elevators with two older women. The elevator was an egg-shaped pod too small to stand up in with windows all around. When the door closed, a dim, fluorescent light flickered on above them, and they began their churning ascent, first tilting and moving diagonally, then straightening and moving up, and over again. Through the windows they could see a maze of metal platforms and stairs and pipes. But what Arlette was most aware of was the cramped space, all eight of their knees jostling one another at each jolting turn. One of the women said, nervously, “We’re getting up there, aren’t we?” and the other patted her on the shoulder.

At the top, the door opened into a narrow room with a row of windows on both sides. As soon as they exited, the room swayed. The nervous woman stopped, her legs braced against the floor, eyes wild, like an animal trying to pinpoint a sound. “It’s normal!” an attendant called out. “Otherwise it would break!” Noki seemed unfazed. She walked up to a window and leaned hard into the glass.

On one side of the Arch was the river, brown and motionless, which divided the city from East St. Louis. Even from this height the area looked blighted: low buildings and an abundance of gray and brown, smoke rising from the factories in the distance. The other windows looked out over downtown: the capitol with its gold-domed roof, the baseball stadium. On the streets there was only a trickle of cars. When Arlette was growing up, there were streetcars running up and down the thoroughfares and people streaming out of Union Station. Every weekend from the age of sixteen to eighteen, she rode one of the streetcars into the city to work in the Young Miss department of Famous-Barr. Even then, though, even with life all around her, she had no special attachment to the city, which felt to her exactly in the middle of nowhere. She would wait on women from Charlotte and Detroit and even Boston and dream that she might escape the landlock someday.



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Arlette looked around for the girl. She found her standing at one of the windows facing the less attractive view.

“Did Keith have the chance to meet your father, then?” Arlette asked.

Noki shook her head. “He was all the time in the other house. Working. He works in shipping, putting things onto the boats.”

“Do you visit him often?”

“No.” She paused. “He stays with someone else, another family.”

Arlette was confused. She wondered why the father would board with another family. But then the girl’s meaning became clear. She had not been direct. Was it shame? Propriety? Her father had another family. He had another house and another woman and however many more children. Arlette wondered which was the wife and which the mistress, or if it even mattered. She wanted to push the issue, to force the girl to say what she meant, but by now Noki was gazing out over the depressed landscape, a pained look on her face, and Arlette let her questions lie.

That night, Keith stopped by Arlette’s apartment. He was wearing the pajamas she had given him for Christmas, blue plaid flannels with red piping. He took the seat across from her at the table, where she was cutting coupons from last Sunday’s paper.

“She’s sleeping,” he said, as if sleeping were something to be proud of. “She’ll probably be up again in a few hours, hungry. It took me two days to get over my jetlag when I got back.”

Arlette paused over a coupon for toilet paper.

“Well?” Keith prodded. “She said you had a good time.”

“We had a fine time,” she replied.

“And? What do you think of her?”

Arlette put down her scissors and removed her reading glasses, which hung from a chain around her neck. “Does it matter what I think?”

“Of course it does! I want you to like her.”

“Why?”

Keith frowned. He seemed to be considering her question earnestly. He had always been a better person than she,



kinder and simpler. She had often wondered where he'd gotten it from. Sometimes, in moments like these, her own coyness felt to her bald and pointless.

"She's fine, Keith," she said.

"Just fine? I want you to like her. Well, you'll get to know her anyway; you have all the time in the world, to get to know her. What did you do? What did you talk about?"

"We talked about her family, mostly."

Keith watched her, trying to gauge what she knew. "Things are different there you know."

"That's what you tell me."

"You can't hold it against her. She wants a different life for herself."

"I should hope so."

"The situation with her father, it's terrible. No one likes it. But her mother depends on him for money, so they can't divorce. He doesn't want to. He has his own room in the house; it's just so . . . complicated. I stayed in the room the last night I was in town, after she said yes. I slept in his bed. He had clothes in the closet. There was a piece of dental floss on the bedside table! Noki saw that, and she was so embarrassed she threw it away, of course. She's really particular about—"

"Keith, it might benefit you to think about what this girl wants. Is it just about a better life?"

"Nah. I just don't get that from her." He sat forward in the chair, eyes wide. "Why, did she say something? Something to make you think that?"

Arlette thought: what if she had said something? Unintentionally, of course, but it would have come out all the same, in the air between her words, something to indicate that her intentions were not pure. She would have an obligation to tell her son, would she not?

She sighed. The girl was not cunning. "Not in so many words," she said, picking up her scissors.

Keith clapped his hand to his chest as if to start his heart beating again.

"But you have to assume the worst," she added.

"What's the worst thing that could happen?"

Arlette couldn't answer this. The question was unfair, she thought. Not all reasons could be picked out and held in your





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hand. It was a feeling more than anything, a feeling that your future was that much more narrow because of your choices.

Arlette and Keith ran into Lenny once at a gas station in the middle of Illinois. Keith was eighteen, and they were driving to visit her parents, who had moved to Indiana. They had stopped to use the restrooms and were walking back to the car when Arlette saw him heading inside. It was Lenny—but smaller, shrunken. His neck, longer now, gave him the appearance of being strained. She was so startled that she did little to disguise her recognition. She had known that he'd moved away, but she didn't know where to—and what was he doing in this small town? Farming? All three of them paused uncertainly, their feet pointed toward their destinations, and Arlette thought fast. He was an old acquaintance from high school, she told Keith, all the while giving Lenny a hard look.

“What a coincidence,” Keith said, shaking Lenny's hand.

Arlette watched their hands meet and grasp, and she felt sick in her stomach. Keith would know, she was sure of it; it would come to him like a revelation, the feel of his father's hand reaching far back to that black spot in his memory. The life she had made for them would come undone. She had gotten used to their routines, their division of chores, how they moved around each other in that house. In the mornings, she would make breakfast while Keith went out for the paper. In the evenings, she would do the cooking for the next day while Keith sprayed down the car with the hose. Now, seeing the two of them together, Arlette panicked. But Keith was still smiling, and Lenny was inching away, and then all three of them were parting. She was safe again. As they were passing one another, Arlette caught the expression on Lenny's face as he looked at his son, utter resignation and defeat, and for that moment, she felt sorry.

She thought of this now. How Lenny had looked at his son, and how Keith had ambled toward the car, his hand in a bag of peanuts. How turning back onto the highway, she had made a fuss about the shells he was dropping on his seat—could he find a bag? Throw them out the window? Did he want her to have to vacuum? Keith asked her how





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well she had known the man in high school, and Arlette answered, without pausing from gathering shells off of the floor, “Not well.” They never saw Lenny again. Some lies were necessary, were they not? It would have harmed him to know his father, after all those years.

Noki started cooking dinner in the afternoons. When Arlette came home around four thirty, the vestibule was already filled with the unfamiliar smells. At five, Keith came screeching into the driveway, slammed the car door, and went bounding up the steps two at a time. She imagined the food was delicious, that Keith ate hunched over his plate, exclaiming after each bite. One of the first evenings, curious about what the girl was making, Arlette went upstairs to return a coffee mug Keith had left at her place weeks ago. “You have to try this,” he said, spooning some stew into a plastic container and ushering her out the door. She ate it as soon as she got back downstairs and was disappointed to find that it was indeed delicious. Tender chunks of chicken and potatoes in a thick, red broth. She was accustomed to more subtle flavors. These she felt in her throat and chest and stomach; these lingered in her mouth even after she had brushed her teeth.

After dinner, Noki washed the dishes. Arlette knew this because Keith was usually rough, and now all she heard was the gentle clinking of silverware. Then the two of them set out for a walk. Through the living room window, Arlette watched them head down the sidewalk. The moon was rising and Keith was angled toward the girl, talking, his hand on the small of her back as she picked her way along. They were gone for an hour, an hour and a half, who knows where to. The park maybe, or the shops along Delmar. One time they returned eating peanuts out of a paper bag. Another time Noki was wearing a pair of bright white tennis shoes. Arlette remembered when the girl told her about Keith and his morning walks through the village, how unlikely the image had seemed at the time. Now, watching him guide the girl down the sidewalk, her old high-heeled shoes clasped in his other hand, he seemed like the kind of man who saw a problem and fixed it.

At night, Arlette lay in bed with a paperback. Her eyes scanned the words, but her ears were listening for signs that





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the sleeping arrangements upstairs had changed. Footsteps across the living room, the creaking of bedsprings, even their voices, however uncomfortable that would be. Keith's bedroom was directly above hers and shared the same heating vents. She was accustomed to hearing him talk in his sleep. He had always been an active sleeper. When he was young, he would cry out with such force that she would check on him. One night she found the door locked and although he called out to her, telling her he was fine, back in bed she began imagining that someone was in there with him, forcing him to speak. The man was bald and muscular and wore something camouflage—an army uniform that would help him sneak through trees and grass. He would wait until she was asleep again and then sneak her son out through the back door. Although she knew she was being foolish, she stayed awake for an hour, listening for footsteps.

Now, like then, Arlette lay in bed attuned to Keith's noises. She thought about the girl's mother and father in their separate rooms. It was a strange arrangement, yes, but not so unheard of. She had known couples here who did the same: Maria, a younger woman who worked at the library, even her own cousin Elizabeth, who slept with her husband in two single beds in the same room, a night table dividing them as if they were in a hotel. She wondered what it would have been like with Lenny, if they had stayed together.

Keith did not move. The house was still except for the sound of the wind across the chimney and her own mattress shifting beneath her.

Lenny had not always been so irresponsible. In high school, he was healthy and strong, a wrestler, no less. Before she knew him, she heard talk of his long runs—*Even in the winter! Even in the dark!*—and the strict diet he followed to make weight. Between classes, she saw him in the hallway cutting a path through the crowd of chattering students with a solid stride, eyes trained forward. She was seventeen then, more put-together than beautiful, a girl who had always felt older than her peers. She preferred working at Famous-Barr over going to the lake or shopping or whatever the other girls did on the weekends. She enjoyed helping the women who came in the store, dispensing her knowledge of how to care for different fabrics and what petticoat could take the





most wear and tear. She had dated only one person, Louis, who worked in Shoes and played the clarinet and was too sensitive for her taste. He kissed her once and his lips were soft, and when she touched his arm, his back, his flesh gave beneath her fingers.

Lenny the wrestler intrigued her. She admired his discipline. One day after school she went to one of his matches. She sat on a splintered wooden bleacher and scanned the crowded gymnasium and finally spotted him sitting on a bench against the back wall. His eyes were closed and his hands were on his knees. Around him, people were rolling out extra benches for the spectators and his teammates were slapping powder onto their arms and legs, but Lenny sat perfectly still despite the noise, despite the billows of white dust riding the air. He was in a different place altogether, it seemed. She was sure that a person like him could not fail.

Afterward, in the bathroom, she applied lipstick and blotted her face, which had become shiny in the humid room. When she approached him, he was wiping his arms and legs with a wet towel. Even then, even after he had won, he seemed indifferent to the activity around him, and she imagined that he had better, more important places to be. She introduced herself and asked him what he had been thinking about on that bench with his eyes closed. He said he imagined his opponents. He tried to think of them not as people anymore but obstacles. He had to beat them in order to get to a door behind them. She asked him what kind of door it was and he said just a normal one, like inside a house except without a wall around it. A floating door. "What's behind the door?" she asked, and he shrugged. "Anything," he said. "Something important. Something you want."

On Arlette's day off, there was a knock on her door. It was Noki. She was wearing her new sneakers and the gray sweater. Her hands worked in the pockets like two small animals. She took three steps into the kitchen before she stopped, awkwardly adrift.

"Keith told me to wait," she said. "But it's not right, to not say something."

Arlette sat down. The girl was looking anxiously at her, waiting for a signal, and Arlette felt a tremor in her knees. She knew what the girl would say: that she was pregnant,





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that somehow, in the last week, despite Keith's blankets on the couch, despite Arlette's vigilance in lying awake at night, she had gotten pregnant. Or maybe it had happened before that, during the vacation; maybe the couch was a formality.

"That's right," Arlette said calmly. "It's not good to have secrets, among family."

Noki smiled gratefully.

"Would you like some tea?"

She nodded and slid into the chair across from her.

Arlette went to the stove and poured water from the kettle. As she sank a tea bag into the mug, she pressed her arm hard to her side to prevent it from shaking. She was not one of those women who dreamed of being a grandmother and besides, Keith had never expressed interest in having children. And now he was almost forty, too old to be a father. It was difficult enough raising a child when you were young.

She brought the mug to the table and sat down. The girl straightened her back, looked her in the eye.

"I would like to tell you that I have already married one time; I have a husband at home—but it's not a real husband, not like you think. It's two years now since I saw him."

Arlette's face tightened. This was not as bad as a baby, but it was alarming all the same. "A husband is a husband," she said.

"Yes—but my mother, she arranged it with his parents. It was four years ago. He was in the government, a clerk in the taxes department in our town. Not very high up but a good job. He seemed good, but it was a mistake, a bad mistake. He won't give a divorce because his family, they would be ashamed, shamed, and his job . . ."

"And children? Do you have children too?" Arlette asked. She kept her voice restrained and steady.

"No, no." Noki shook her head vigorously.

"Why did you leave?"

"He had another woman. One that he loved, but she wasn't reputable; she had a child already from another man. His family didn't like her, so he couldn't marry her. But she lived in his house, our house, cooking and keeping things clean."

"All three of you together?"





“Yes.”

“And the child?”

“He lived with his grandmother, the woman’s mother.”

Arlette tried to make sense of it. Keith was right: it was complicated. What was right and wrong, accepted and not. People agreeing to things that they didn’t want. Or maybe they did want these things, maybe need was not so different from want.

Now that her secret had been revealed, Noki breathed deeply. Arlette could see her loosening like a spool of wire.

“Go on,” Arlette said.

Noki told her about the man, the husband. His name was Suchin. He was ten years older than she, not too handsome, short with a large mole on his chin. But he had a good job and knew how to act among others. One day she waited on his mother in the shop and afterward, although she didn’t know this at the time, his mother began talking to hers. For a few days Noki’s mother disappeared for hours at a time, saying she was taking the train to Patani to visit a sick friend. Then one day Noki came home to find the two women sitting on the wicker couch in the back room of the shop with tea and cookies, like they were discussing the latest soap opera. They made their proposal, and when Noki hesitated, they told her to think hard. She was getting old, after all; twenty-eight was a hard age to marry. And Suchin had some money, not a lot but enough to be comfortable. Later, when it was just the two of them again, Noki asked her mother why the man was still alone if he was so attractive. “He’s too busy working,” her mother said. “No time to meet women.”

Noki was scared, she admitted; the women had been very convincing. She didn’t want to end up alone, and what would become of her when her parents were old and retired? How would she survive? She knew the business of the shop well, but she was not as talented a seamstress as her mother. So she agreed. She woke up one morning and knew that it must be done; she dressed and told her mother, who gave her a tight, pleased smile, and two weeks later she was moving into the man’s house across town.

The maid was named Lai. She did little to keep the house tidy, and Noki even suggested to Suchin that they find some-



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one new. Suchin brushed her off, told her that she was not to cross Lai in any way. That was the first sign that the relationship between her new husband and the maid was not innocent. Lai never spoke to Noki, but she did come into the master bedroom every morning to open the windows or replace the sticks of insect repellent. Usually Suchin was at work by then, and the room smelled of his cheap Chinese cigarettes, which he smoked in bed and ashed into one of the roses carved along the top edge of the headboard. It had a depression in the center, the perfect size, and he had only to reach above her head in the dark and tap. So the room smelled of smoke, and the maid would enter without knocking and move around loudly, regardless of whether Noki was asleep or not. Once she woke to find the woman sitting in the chair by the bed reading a magazine.

At least once an evening Suchin would disappear into the maid's room behind the kitchen, saying he needed a shirt ironed or a package that needed to be delivered to the post office. He would be in there for a half hour or more. Strangely, though, Noki found she did not mind the arrangement so much. It was not inconvenient to have someone to receive his energies. What she found unbearable was being alone in the house with Lai. The woman was not well in the head. She muttered to herself and yelled at the chickens. She threw boiling water out the window without looking to see if someone was below. One time she walked by Noki and pinched her on the arm hard enough to make her cry out.

Noki began escaping to the shop during the days. As the months went by, she stayed longer, past dinner, even though her mother was angry with her for running away. Eventually she stayed overnight, and then she did not return at all. One day, she walked to Suchin's office to ask for a divorce. He was sitting at a small metal desk in a room with several other desks; men were talking on the phone and clacking at their calculators. She had not expected he would not be alone, and, flustered, she asked to speak with him outside. He was annoyed but led her out to the street. They stood on the sidewalk as passing motorcycles kicked up dust around their legs and she made her plea. He refused. His reputation would be compromised, he said. He had aspirations, as she knew; he had thought she understood that when she agreed to marry





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him. He had plans. To move up in the government, to eventually move to a larger city and work as an elected official. A divorce would not do.

Noki stopped speaking and finally took a sip of tea, now cold. Arlette's legs ached, as if her blood had not moved for some time.

"Did your parents know that he had a woman already?" Arlette asked.

"I don't know."

Arlette recognized the sudden pain in Noki's face. At the Arch, looking out over the depressed landscape, she'd the same look. But then she thought: was the girl not here? Had she not found a better husband? Noki was drinking her tea thirstily now, both hands wrapped firmly around the mug. She would not drop it. There was a plain kind of wisdom in her, Arlette saw for the first time, and she admired it.

Outside, Keith's tires crunched in the gravel. They sat silently as Keith's boots bounded up the stairs and paced the floor before coming down again. He threw open the door to the kitchen. In the moment before he saw them sitting there, his face was wild with panic. Then he smiled, and Noki stood up to leave. It was silly, Arlette thought, his panic. What could have happened to her? Where would she go? It was clear that she was here to stay.

Arlette thought about that morning thirty-five years ago, Lenny yelling up into the bathroom window and Keith warm in her arms. She brought him out to the hallway then, where there were no windows, and for a few minutes of silence, she thought Lenny had given up. But then he returned with help, and the world descended upon them. Keith rolled around in his walker, blind with his crying. He was a baby who hated disruption, waving his hands furiously whenever a voice was raised, and now there was commotion all around them, the phone ringing and a police car spinning its lights in the driveway and a new voice yelling and pounding on the door. Arlette sat with her knees to her chest while Keith wailed, his fat legs propelling him without direction, moving for the sake of moving. The sound of the wheels against the wood floor was deafening. Arlette saw the whole of her life, dark and narrow like a tunnel. She thought of that day of the wrestling





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match; she thought of the door, the floating door, how it had actually appeared to her like a real thing, hovering in the dusty air of the gymnasium. A promise. The men were breaking in now. Keith was nearing the head of the stairs. She had the vague thought that she should stop him, but she didn't. Before Keith could fall, Lenny's red face was below, looking up at them. She reached out and snatched Keith back, and the door vanished.

Now, in bed with her book, Arlette sat up. Above the wind, there was a noise: the low whine of bedsprings. She had not been listening for it this time. She sat perfectly still, afraid she would lose the sound. It was the girl she was thinking of, the girl and her husband. A man with a mole and yellow teeth, a man with plans, rubbing against her. The other woman in the chair by the bed reading a magazine. And the girl at the center of it all, lying on her back with her eyes open. She was wearing the sweater, Arlette's pilled gray sweater, and her hands were working in the pockets.

But no, Arlette thought. This was not right. That girl she was imagining, it was not Noki; it was just the shell of a person, nothing but air behind the eyes. The girl was here. Arlette could almost hear her breathing. She had vacated her body and her life, and Arlette felt glad.