

JULIE OTSUKA

## COME, JAPANESE!

On the boat we were mostly virgins. We had long black hair and flat wide feet and we were not very tall. Some of us had eaten nothing but rice gruel as young girls and had slightly bowed legs, and some of us were only fourteen years old and were still young girls ourselves. Some of us came from the city, and wore stylish city clothes, but many more of us came from the country and on the boat we wore the same old kimonos we'd been wearing for years—faded hand-me-downs from our sisters that had been patched and redyed many times. Some of us came from the mountains, and had never before seen the sea, except for in pictures, and some of us were the daughters of fishermen who had been around the sea all our lives. Perhaps we had lost a brother or father to the sea, or a fiancé, or perhaps someone we loved had jumped into the water one unhappy morning and simply swum away, and now it was time for us, too, to move on.

On the boat the first thing we did—before deciding who we liked and didn't like, before telling each other which one of the islands we were from, and why we were leaving, before even bothering to learn each other's names—was compare photographs of our husbands. They were handsome young men with dark eyes and full heads of hair and skin that was smooth and unblemished. Their chins were strong. Their posture, good. Their noses were straight and high. They looked like our brothers and fathers back home, only better dressed, in gray frock coats and fine Western three-piece suits. Some of them were standing on sidewalks in front of wooden A-frame houses with white picket fences and neatly mowed lawns, and some were leaning

in driveways against Model T Fords. Some were sitting in studios on stiff high-backed chairs with their hands neatly folded and staring straight into the camera, as though they were ready to take on the world. All of them had promised to be there, waiting for us, in San Francisco, when we sailed into port.

On the boat, we often wondered: Would we like them? Would we love them? Would we recognize them from their pictures when we first saw them on the dock?

On the boat we slept down below, in steerage, where it was filthy and dim. Our beds were narrow metal racks stacked one on top of the other and our mattresses were hard and thin and darkened with the stains of other journeys, other lives. Our pillows were stuffed with dried wheat hulls. Scraps of food littered the passageways between berths and the floors were wet and slick. There was one porthole, and in the evening, after the hatch was closed, the darkness filled with whispers. Will it hurt? Bodies tossed and turned beneath the blankets. The sea rose and fell. The damp air stifled. At night we dreamed of our husbands. We dreamed of new wooden sandals and endless bolts of indigo silk and of living, one day, in a house with a chimney. We dreamed we were lovely and tall. We dreamed we were back in the rice paddies, which we had so desperately wanted to escape. The rice paddy dreams were always nightmares. We dreamed of our older and prettier sisters who had been sold to the geisha houses by our fathers so that the rest of us might eat, and when we woke we were gasping for air. For a second I thought I was her.

Our first few days on the boat we were seasick, and could not keep down our food, and had to make repeated trips to the railing. Some of us were so dizzy we could not even walk, and lay in our berths in a dull stupor, unable to remember our own names, not to mention those of our new husbands. Remind me one more time, I'm Mrs. Who? Some of us clutched our stomachs and prayed out loud to Kannon, the goddess of mercy—Where are you?—while others of us preferred to turn silently green. And often, in the middle of the night, we were jolted awake by a violent swell and for a brief moment we had no idea where we were, or why our beds would not stop moving, or why our hearts were pounding with such dread. Earthquake was

the first thought that usually came to our minds. We reached out for our mothers then, in whose arms we had slept until the morning we left home. Were they sleeping now? Were they dreaming? Were they thinking of us night and day? Were they still walking three steps behind our fathers on the streets with their arms full of packages while our fathers carried nothing at all? Were they secretly envious of us for sailing away? Didn't I give you everything? Had they remembered to air out our old kimonos? Had they remembered to feed the cats? Had they made sure to tell us everything we needed to know? Hold your teacup with both hands, stay out of the sun, never say more than you have to.

Most of us on the boat were accomplished, and were sure we would make good wives. We knew how to cook and sew. We knew how to serve tea and arrange flowers and sit quietly on our flat wide feet for hours, saying absolutely nothing of substance at all. A girl must blend into a room: she must be present without appearing to exist. We knew how to behave at funerals, and how to write short, melancholy poems about the passing of autumn that were exactly seventeen syllables long. We knew how to pull weeds and chop kindling and haul water, and one of us—the rice miller's daughter—knew how to walk two miles into town with an eighty-pound sack of rice on her back without once breaking into a sweat. It's all in the way you breathe. Most of us had good manners, and were extremely polite, except for when we got mad and cursed like sailors. Most of us spoke like ladies most of the time, with our voices pitched high, and pretended to know much less than we did, and whenever we walked past the deckhands we made sure to take small, mincing steps with our toes turned properly in. Because how many times had our mothers told us: Walk like the city, not like the farm!

On the boat we crowded into each other's bunks every night and stayed up for hours discussing the unknown continent ahead of us. The people there were said to eat nothing but meat and their bodies were covered with hair (we were mostly Buddhist, and did not eat meat, and only had hair in the appropriate places). The trees were enormous. The plains were vast. The women were loud and tall—a full head taller, we had heard, than the tallest of our men. The

language was ten times as difficult as our own and the customs were unfathomably strange. Books were read from back to front and soap was used in the bath. Noses were blown on dirty cloths that were stuffed back into pockets only to be taken out later and used again and again. The opposite of white was not red, but black. What would become of us, we wondered, in such an alien land? We imagined ourselves—an unusually small people armed only with our guidebooks—entering a country of giants. Would we be laughed at? Spat on? Or, worse yet, would we not be taken seriously at all? But even the most reluctant of us had to admit that it was better to marry a stranger in America than grow old with a farmer from the village. Because in America the women did not have to work in the fields and there was plenty of rice and firewood for all. And wherever you went the men held open the doors and tipped their hats and called out, “Ladies first” and “After you.”

Some of us on the boat were from Kyoto, and were delicate and fair, and had lived our entire lives in darkened rooms at the back of the house. Some of us were from Nara, and prayed to our ancestors three times a day, and swore we could still hear the temple bells ringing. Some of us were farmers’ daughters from Yamaguchi with thick wrists and broad shoulders who had never gone to bed after nine. Some of us were from a small mountain hamlet in Yamanashi and had only recently seen our first train. Some of us were from Tokyo, and had seen everything, and spoke beautiful Japanese, and did not mix much with any of the others. Many more of us were from Kagoshima and spoke in a thick southern dialect that those of us from Tokyo pretended we could not understand. Some of us were from Hokkaido, where it was snowy and cold, and would dream of that white landscape for years. Some of us were from Hiroshima, which would later explode, and were lucky to be on the boat at all though of course we did not then know it. The youngest of us was twelve, and from the eastern shore of Lake Biwa, and had not yet begun to bleed. My parents married me off for the betrothal money. The oldest of us was thirty-seven, and from Niigata, and had spent her entire life taking care of her invalid father, whose recent death made her both happy and sad. I knew I could only marry if he died.

One of us was from Kumamoto, where there were no more eligible men—all of the eligible men had left the year before to find work in Manchuria—and felt fortunate to have found any kind of husband at all. I took one look at his photograph and told the matchmaker, “He’ll do.” One of us was from a silk-weaving village in Fukushima, and had lost her first husband to the flu, and her second to a younger and prettier woman who lived on the other side of the hill, and now she was sailing to America to marry her third. He’s healthy, he doesn’t drink, he doesn’t gamble, that’s all I needed to know. One of us was a former dancing girl from Nagoya who dressed beautifully, and had translucent white skin, and knew everything there was to know about men, and it was to her we turned every night with our questions. How long will it last? With the lamp lit or in the dark? Legs up or down? Eyes open or closed? What if I can’t breathe? What if I get thirsty? What if he is too heavy? What if he is too big? What if he does not want me at all? “Men are really quite simple,” she told us. And then she began to explain.

On the boat we sometimes lay awake for hours in the swaying damp darkness of the hold, filled with longing and dread, and wondered how we would last another three weeks.

On the boat we carried with us in our trunks all the things we would need for our new lives: white silk kimonos for our wedding night, colorful cotton kimonos for everyday wear, plain cotton kimonos for when we grew old, calligraphy brushes, thick black sticks of ink, thin sheets of rice paper on which to write long letters home, tiny brass Buddhas, ivory statues of the fox god, dolls we had slept with since we were five, bags of brown sugar with which to buy favors, bright cloth quilts, paper fans, English phrase books, flowered silk sashes, smooth black stones from the river that ran behind our house, a lock of hair from a boy we had once touched, and loved, and promised to write, even though we knew we never would, silver mirrors given to us by our mothers, whose last words still rang in our ears. You will see: women are weak, but mothers are strong.

On the boat we complained about everything. Bedbugs. Lice. Insomnia. The constant dull throb of the engine, which worked its way even into our dreams. We complained about the stench from the

latrines—huge, gaping holes that opened out onto the sea—and our own slowly ripening odor, which seemed to grow more pungent by the day. We complained about Kazuko’s aloofness, Chiyo’s throat clearing, Fusayo’s incessant humming of the “Teapicker’s Song,” which was driving us all slowly crazy. We complained about our disappearing hairpins—who among us was the thief?—and how the girls from first class had never once said hello from beneath their violet silk parasols in all the times they had walked past us up above on the deck. Just who do they think they are? We complained about the heat. The cold. The scratchy wool blankets. We complained about our own complaining. Deep down, though, most of us were really very happy, for soon we would be in America with our new husbands, who had written to us many times over the months. I have bought a beautiful house. You can plant tulips in the garden. Daffodils. Whatever you like. I own a farm. I operate a hotel. I am the president of a large bank. I left Japan several years ago to start my own business and can provide for you well. I am 179 centimeters tall and do not suffer from leprosy or lung disease and there is no history of madness in my family. I am a native of Okayama. Of Hyogo. Of Miyagi. Of Shizuoka. I grew up in the village next to yours and saw you once years ago at a fair. I will send you the money for your passage as soon as I can.

On the boat we carried our husbands’ pictures in tiny oval lockets that hung on long chains from our necks. We carried them in silk purses and old tea tins and red lacquer boxes and in the thick brown envelopes from America in which they had originally been sent. We carried them in the sleeves of our kimonos, which we touched often, just to make sure they were still there. We carried them pressed flat between the pages of *Come, Japanese!* and *Guidance for Going to America* and *Ten Ways to Please a Man* and old, well-worn volumes of the Buddhist sutras, and one of us, who was Christian, and ate meat, and prayed to a different and longer-haired god, carried hers between the pages of a King James Bible. And when we asked her which man she liked better—the man in the photograph or the Lord Jesus Himself—she smiled mysteriously and replied, “Him, of course.”

Several of us on the boat had secrets, which we swore we would keep from our husbands for the rest of our lives. Perhaps the real reason we were sailing to America was to track down a long-lost father who had left the family years before. He went to Wyoming to work in the coal mines and we never heard from him again. Or perhaps we were leaving behind a young daughter who had been born to a man whose face we could now barely recall—a traveling storyteller who had spent a week in the village, or a wandering Buddhist priest who had stopped by the house late one night on his way to Mt. Fuji.

On the boat we had no idea we would dream of our daughter every night until the day that we died, and that in our dreams she would always be three and as she was when we last saw her: a tiny figure in a dark red kimono squatting at the edge of a puddle, utterly entranced by the sight of a dead floating bee.

On the boat we ate the same food every day and every day we breathed the same stale air. We sang the same songs and laughed at the same jokes and in the morning, when the weather was mild, we climbed up out of the cramped quarters of the hold and strolled the deck in our wooden sandals and light summer kimonos, stopping, every now and then, to gaze out at the same endless blue sea. Sometimes a flying fish would land at our feet, flopping and out of breath, and one of us—usually it was one of the fishermen's daughters—would pick it up and toss it back into the water. Or a school of dolphins would appear out of nowhere and leap alongside the boat for hours. One calm, windless morning when the sea was flat as glass and the sky a brilliant shade of blue, the smooth black flank of a whale suddenly rose up out of the water and then disappeared and for a moment we forgot to breathe. *It was like looking into the eye of the Buddha.*

On the boat we often stood on the deck for hours with the wind in our hair, watching the other passengers go by. We saw turbaned Sikhs from the Punjab who were fleeing to Panama from their native land. We saw wealthy White Russians who were fleeing from the revolution. We saw Chinese laborers from Hong Kong who were going to work in the cotton fields of Peru. We saw King Lee

Uwanowich and his famous band of gypsies, who owned a large cattle ranch in Mexico and were rumored to be the richest band of gypsies in the world. We saw a trio of sunburned German tourists and a handsome Spanish priest and a tall, ruddy Englishman named Charles, who appeared at the railing every afternoon at quarter past three and walked several brisk lengths of the deck. Charles was traveling in first class, and had dark green eyes and a sharp, pointy nose, and spoke perfect Japanese, and was the first white person many of us had ever seen. He was a professor of foreign languages at the university in Osaka, and had a Japanese wife, and a child, and had been to America many times, and was endlessly patient with our questions. Was it true that Americans had a strong animal odor? (Charles laughed and said, “Well, do *I*?” and let us lean in close for a sniff.) And just how hairy *were* they? (“About as hairy as I am,” Charles replied, and then he rolled up his sleeve to show us his arms, which were covered with dark brown hairs that made us shiver.) And did they really grow hair on their chests? (Charles blushed, and said he could not show us his chest, and we blushed and explained that we had not asked him to.) And were there still savage tribes of Red Indians wandering all over the prairies? (Charles told us that all the Red Indians had been taken away, and we breathed a sigh of relief.) And was it true that the women in America did not have to kneel down before their husbands or cover their mouths when they laughed? (Charles stared at a passing ship on the horizon and then sighed and said, “Sadly, yes.”) And did the men and women there really dance cheek to cheek all night long? (Only on Saturdays, Charles explained.) And were the dance steps very difficult? (Charles said they were easy, and gave us a moonlit lesson in the foxtrot the following evening on the deck. *Slow, slow, quick, quick.*) And was downtown San Francisco truly bigger than the Ginza? (Why, of course.) And were the houses in America really three times the size of our own? (Indeed they were.) And did each house have a piano in the front parlor? (Charles said it was more like every other house.) And did he think we would be happy there? (Charles took off his glasses and looked down at us with his lovely green eyes and said, “Oh, yes, very.”)



Some of us on the boat could not resist becoming friendly with the deckhands, who came from the same villages as we did, and knew all the words to our songs, and were constantly asking us to marry them. We already *are* married, we would explain, but a few of us fell in love with them anyway. And when they asked if they could see us alone—that very same evening, say, on the ’tween deck, at quarter past ten—we stared down at our feet for a moment and then took a deep breath and said, “Yes,” and this was another thing we would never tell our husbands. *It was the way he looked at me*, we would think to ourselves later. Or, *He had a nice smile*.

One of us on the boat became pregnant but did not know it and when the baby was born nine months later the first thing she would notice was how much it resembled her new husband. *He’s got your eyes*. One of us jumped overboard after spending the night with a sailor and leaving behind a short note on her pillow: *After him, there can be no other*. Another of us fell in love with a returning Methodist missionary she had met on the deck and even though he begged her to leave her husband for him when they got to America she told him that she could not. “I must remain true to my fate,” she said to him. But for the rest of her life she would wonder about the life that could have been.

Some of us on the boat were brooders by nature, and preferred to stay to ourselves, and spent most of the voyage lying facedown in our berths, thinking of all the men we had left behind. The fruit seller’s son, who always pretended not to notice us, but gave us an extra tangerine whenever his mother was not minding the store. Or the married man for whom we had once waited, on a bridge, in the rain, late at night, for two hours. And for what? A kiss and a promise. “I’ll come again tomorrow,” he had said. And even though we never saw him again we knew we would do it all over in an instant, because being with him was like being alive for the very first time, only better. And often, as we were falling asleep, we found ourselves thinking of the peasant boy we had talked to every afternoon on our way home from school—the beautiful young boy in the next village whose hands could coax up even the most stubborn of seedlings from the soil—and how our mother, who knew everything, and could often read our

mind, had looked at us as though we were crazy. *Do you want to spend the rest of your life crouched over a field?* (We had hesitated and almost said yes, for hadn't we always dreamed of becoming our mother? Wasn't that all we had ever once wanted to be?)

On the boat we each had to make choices. Where to sleep and who to trust and who to befriend and how to befriend her. Whether or not to say something to the neighbor who snored, or talked in her sleep, or to the neighbor whose feet smelled even worse than our own, and whose dirty clothes were strewn all over the floor. And if somebody asked us if she looked good when she wore her hair in a certain way—in the “eaves” style, say, which seemed to be taking the boat by storm—and she did not, it made her head look too big, did we tell her the truth, or did we tell her she had never looked better? And was it all right to complain about the cook, who came from China, and only knew how to make one dish—rice curry—which he served to us day after day? But if we said something and he was sent back to China, where on many days you might not get any kind of rice at all, would it then be our fault? And was anybody listening to us anyway? Did anybody care?

Somewhere on the boat there was a captain, from whose cabin a beautiful young girl was said to emerge every morning at dawn. And of course we were all dying to know: Was she one of us, or one of the girls from first class?

On the boat we sometimes crept into each other's berths late at night and lay quietly side by side, talking about all the things we remembered from home: the smell of roasted sweet potatoes in early autumn, picnics in the bamboo grove, playing shadows and demons in the crumbling temple courtyard, the day our father went out to fetch a bucket of water from the well and did not return, and how our mother never mentioned him even once after that. *It was as though he never even existed. I stared down into that well for years.* We discussed favorite face creams, the benefits of leaden powder, the first time we saw our husband's photograph. *He looked like an earnest person, so I figured he was good enough for me.* Sometimes we found ourselves saying things we had never said to anyone, and once we got started it was impossible to stop, and sometimes we

grew suddenly silent and lay tangled in each other's arms until dawn, when one of us would pull away from the other and ask, "But will it last?" And that was another choice we had to make. If we said yes, it would last, and went back to her—if not that night, then the next, or the night after that—then we told ourselves that whatever we did would be forgotten the minute we got off the boat. And it was all good practice for our husbands anyway.

A few of us on the boat never did get used to being with a man, and if there had been a way of going to America without marrying one, we would have figured it out.

On the boat we could not have known that when we first saw our husbands we would have no idea who they were. That the crowd of men in knit caps and shabby black coats waiting for us down below on the dock would bear no resemblance to the handsome young men in the photographs. That the photographs we had been sent were twenty years old. That the letters we had been written had been written to us by people other than our husbands, professional people with beautiful handwriting whose job it was to tell lies and win hearts. That when we first heard our names being called out across the water one of us would cover her eyes and turn away—*I want to go home*—but the rest of us would lift our heads and smooth down the skirts of our kimonos and walk down the gangplank and step out into the still warm day. *This is America*, we would say to ourselves, *there is no need to worry*. And we would be wrong.

EVA HOFFMAN

From  
LOST IN TRANSLATION

It is April 1959, I'm standing at the railing of the *Batory's* upper deck, and I feel that my life is ending. I'm looking out at the crowd that has gathered on the shore to see the ship's departure from Gdynia—a crowd that, all of a sudden, is irrevocably on the other side—and I want to break out, run back, run toward the familiar excitement, the waving hands, the exclamations. We can't be leaving all this behind—but we are. I am thirteen years old, and we are emigrating. It's a notion of such crushing, definitive finality that to me it might as well mean the end of the world.

My sister, four years younger than I, is clutching my hand wordlessly; she hardly understands where we are, or what is happening to us. My parents are highly agitated; they had just been put through a body search by the customs police, probably as the farewell gesture of anti-Jewish harassment. Still, the officials weren't clever enough, or suspicious enough, to check my sister and me—lucky for us, since we are both carrying some silverware we were not allowed to take out of Poland in large pockets sewn onto our skirts especially for this purpose, and hidden under capacious sweaters.

When the brass band on the shore strikes up the jaunty mazurka rhythms of the Polish anthem, I am pierced by a youthful sorrow so powerful that I suddenly stop crying and try to hold still against the pain. I desperately want time to stop, to hold the ship still with the force of my will. I am suffering my first, severe attack of nostalgia, or *teşknota*—a word that adds to nostalgia the tonalities of sadness and

longing. It is a feeling whose shades and degrees I'm destined to know intimately, but at this hovering moment, it comes upon me like a visitation from a whole new geography of emotions, an annunciation of how much an absence can hurt. Or a premonition of absence, because at this divide, I'm filled to the brim with what I'm about to lose—images of Cracow, which I loved as one loves a person, of the sun-baked villages where we had taken summer vacations, of the hours I spent poring over passages of music with my piano teacher, of conversations and escapades with friends. Looking ahead, I come across an enormous, cold blankness—a darkening, an erasure, of the imagination, as if a camera eye has snapped shut, or as if a heavy curtain has been pulled over the future. Of the place where we're going—Canada—I know nothing. There are vague outlines of half a continent, a sense of vast spaces and little habitation. When my parents were hiding in a branch-covered forest bunker during the war, my father had a book with him called *Canada Fragrant with Resin* which, in his horrible confinement, spoke to him of majestic wilderness, of animals roaming without being pursued, of freedom. That is partly why we are going there, rather than to Israel, where most of our Jewish friends have gone. But to me, the word "Canada" has ominous echoes of the "Sahara." No, my mind rejects the idea of being taken there, I don't want to be pried out of my childhood, my pleasures, my safety, my hopes for becoming a pianist. The *Batory* pulls away, the foghorn emits its lowing, shofar sound, but my being is engaged in a stubborn refusal to move. My parents put their hands on my shoulders consolingly; for a moment, they allow themselves to acknowledge that there's pain in this departure, much as they wanted it.

Many years later, at a stylish party in New York, I met a woman who told me that she had had an enchanted childhood. Her father was a highly positioned diplomat in an Asian country, and she had lived surrounded by sumptuous elegance, the courtesy of servants, and the delicate advances of older men. No wonder, she said, that when this part of her life came to an end, at age thirteen, she felt she had been exiled from paradise, and had been searching for it ever since.

No wonder. But the wonder is what you can make a paradise out of. I told her that I grew up in a lumpen apartment in Cracow, squeezed into three rudimentary rooms with four other people, surrounded by squabbles, dark political rumblings, memories of wartime suffering, and daily struggle for existence. And yet, when it came time to leave, I, too, felt I was being pushed out of the happy, safe enclosures of Eden.

EDWIDGE DANTICAT

## CHILDREN OF THE SEA

They say behind the mountains are more mountains. Now I know it's true. I also know there are timeless waters, endless seas, and lots of people in this world whose names don't matter to anyone but themselves. I look up at the sky and I see you there. I see you crying like a crushed snail, the way you cried when I helped you pull out your first loose tooth. Yes, I did love you then. Somehow when I looked at you, I thought of fiery red ants. I wanted you to dig your fingernails into my skin and drain out all my blood.

I don't know how long we'll be at sea. There are thirty-six other deserting souls on this little boat with me. White sheets with bright red spots float as our sail.

When I got on board I thought I could still smell the semen and the innocence lost to those sheets. I look up there and I think of you and all those times you resisted. Sometimes I felt like you wanted to, but I knew you wanted me to respect you. You thought I was testing your will, but all I wanted was to be near you. Maybe it's like you've always said. I imagine too much. I am afraid I am going to start having nightmares once we get deep at sea. I really hate having the sun in my face all day long. If you see me again, I'll be so dark.

Your father will probably marry you off now, since I am gone. Whatever you do, please don't marry a soldier. They're almost not human.

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haiti est comme tu l'as laissé. yes, just the way you left it. bullets day and night. same hole. same everything. i'm tired of the whole mess. i get so cross and irritable. i pass the time by chasing roaches around the house. i pound my heel on their heads. they make me so mad. everything makes me mad. i am cramped inside all day. they've closed the schools since the army took over. no one is mentioning the old president's name. papa burnt all his campaign posters and old buttons. manman buried her buttons in a hole behind the house. she thinks he might come back. she says she will unearth them when he does. no one comes out of their house. not a single person. papa wants me to throw out those tapes of your radio shows. i destroyed some music tapes. but i still have your voice. i thank god you got out when you did. all the other youth federation members have disappeared. no one has heard from them. i think they might all be in prison. maybe they're all dead. papa worries a little about you. he doesn't hate you as much as you think. the other day i heard him asking manman, do you think the boy is dead? manman said she didn't know. i think he regrets being so mean to you. i don't sketch my butterflies anymore because i don't even like seeing the sun. besides, manman says that butterflies can bring news. the bright ones bring happy news and the black ones warn us of deaths. we have our whole lives ahead of us. you used to say that, remember? but then again things were so very different then.

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There is a pregnant girl on board. She looks like she might be our age. Nineteen or twenty. Her face is covered with scars that look like razor marks. She is short and speaks in a singsong that reminds me of the villagers in the north. Most of the other people on the boat are much older than I am. I have heard that a lot of these boats have



young children on board. I am glad this one does not. I think it would break my heart watching some little boy or girl every single day on this sea, looking into their empty faces to remind me of the hopelessness of the future in our country. It's hard enough with the adults. It's hard enough with me.

I used to read a lot about America before I had to study so much for the university exams. I am trying to think, to see if I read anything more about Miami. It is sunny. It doesn't snow there like it does in other parts of America. I can't tell exactly how far we are from there. We might be barely out of our own shores. There are no borderlines on the sea. The whole thing looks like one. I cannot even tell if we are about to drop off the face of the earth. Maybe the world is flat and we are going to find out, like the navigators of old. As you know, I am not very religious. Still I pray every night that we won't hit a storm. When I do manage to sleep, I dream that we are caught in one hurricane after another. I dream that the winds come of the sky and claim us for the sea. We go under and no one hears from us again.

I am more comfortable now with the idea of dying. Not that I have completely accepted it, but I know that it might happen. Don't be mistaken. I really do not want to be a martyr. I know I am no good to anybody dead, but if that is what's coming, I know I cannot just scream at it and tell it to go away.

I hope another group of young people can do the radio show. For a long time that radio show was my whole life. It was nice to have radio like that for a while, where we could talk about what we wanted from government, what we wanted for the future of our country.

There are a lot of Protestants on this boat. A lot of them see themselves as Job or the Children of Israel. I think some of them are hoping something will plunge down from the sky and part the sea for us. They say the Lord gives and the Lord takes away. I have never been given very much. What was there to take away?

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if only i could kill. if i knew some good *wanga* magic. i would wipe them off the face of the earth. a group of students got shot in front of fort dimanche prison today. they were demonstrating for the bodies of the radio six. that is what they are calling you all. the radio six. you have a name. you have a reputation. a lot of people think you are dead like the others. they want the bodies turned over to the families. this afternoon, the army finally did give some bodies back. they told the families to go collect them at the rooms for indigents at the morgue. our neighbor madan roger came home with her son's head and not much else. honest to god, it was just his head. at the morgue, they say a car ran over him and took the head off his body. when madan roger went to the morgue, they gave her the head. by the time we saw her, she had been carrying the head all over port-au-prince. just to show what's been done to her son. the macoutes by the house were laughing at her. they asked her if that was her dinner. it took ten people to hold her back from jumping on them. they would have killed her, the dogs. i will never go outside again. not even in the yard to breathe the air. they are always watching you, like vultures. at night i can't sleep. i count the bullets in the dark. i keep wondering if it is true. did you really get out? i wish there was some way i could be sure that you really went away. yes, i will. i will keep writing like we promised to do. i hate it, but i will keep writing. you keep writing too, okay? and when we see each other again, it will seem like we lost no time.

\* \* \*

Today was our first real day at sea. Everyone was vomiting with each small rocking of the boat. The faces around me are showing their first charcoal layer of sunburn. "Now we will never be mistaken for Cubans," one man said. Even though some of the Cubans are black

too. The man said he was once on a boat with a group of Cubans. His boat had stopped to pick up the Cubans on an island off the Bahamas. When the Coast Guard came for them, they took the Cubans to Miami and sent him back to Haiti. Now he was back on the boat with some papers and documents to show that the police in Haiti were after him. He had a broken leg too, in case there was any doubt.

One old lady fainted from sunstroke. I helped revive her by rubbing some of the salt water on her lips. During the day it can be so hot. At night, it is so cold. Since there are no mirrors, we look at each others faces to see just how frail and sick we are starting to look.

Some of the women sing and tell stories to each other to appease the vomiting. Still, I watch the sea. At night, the sky and the sea are one. The stars look so huge and so close. They make for very bright reflections in the sea. At times I feel like I can just reach out and pull a star down from the sky as though it is a breadfruit or a calabash or something that could be of use to us on this journey.

When we sing, *Beloved Haiti, there is no place like you. I had to leave you before I could understand you*, some of the women start crying. At times, I just want to stop in the middle of the song and cry myself. To hide my tears. I pretend like I am getting another attack of nausea, from the sea smell. I no longer join in the singing.

You probably do not know much about this, because you have always been so closely watched by your father in that well-guarded house with your genteel mother. No, I am not making fun of you for this. If anything, I am jealous. If I was a girl, maybe I would have been at home and not out politicking and getting myself into something like this. Once you have been at sea for a couple of days, it smells like every fish you have ever eaten, every crab you have ever caught, every jellyfish that has ever bitten your leg. I am so tired of the smell. I am also tired of the way the people on this boat are starting to stink. The pregnant girl, Célianne, I don't know how she takes it. She stares into space all the time and rubs her stomach.

I have never seen her eat. Sometimes the other women offer her a piece of bread and she takes it, but she has no food of her own. I

cannot help feeling like she will have this child as soon as she gets hungry enough.

She woke up screaming the other night. I thought she had a stomach ache. Some water started coming into the boat in the spot where she was sleeping. There is a crack at the bottom of the boat that looks as though, if it gets any bigger, it will split the boat in two. The captain cleared us aside and used some tar to clog up the hole. Everyone started asking him if it was okay, if they were going to be okay. He said he hoped the Coast Guard would find us soon.

You can't really go to sleep after that. So we all stared at the tar by the moonlight. We did this until dawn. I cannot help but wonder how long this tar will hold out.

\* \* \*

**papa found your tapes. he started yelling at me, asking if I was crazy keeping them. he is just waiting for the gasoline ban to be lifted so we can get out of the city. he is always pestering me these days because he cannot go out driving his van. all the american factories are closed. he kept yelling at me about the tapes. he called me selfish, and he asked if i hadn't seen or heard what was happening to man-crazy whores like me. i shouted that i wasn't a whore. he had no business calling me that. he pushed me against the wall for disrespecting him. he spat in my face. i wish those macoutes would kill him. i wish he would catch a bullet so we could see how scared he really is. he said to me. i didn't send your stupid trouble maker away. i started yelling at him. yes, you did. yes, you did. yes, you did, you pig peasant. i don't know why i said that. he slapped me and kept slapping me really hard until manman came and grabbed me away from him. i wish one of those bullets would hit me.**

\* \* \*

The tar is holding up so far. Two days and no more leaks. Yes, I am finally an African. I am even darker than your father. I wanted to buy a straw hat from one of the ladies, but she would not sell it to me for the last two gourdes I have left in change. Do you think your money is worth anything to me here? she asked me. Sometimes, I forget where I am. If I keep daydreaming like I have been doing, I will walk off the boat to go for a scroll.

The other night I dreamt that I died and went to heaven. This heaven was nothing like I expected. It was at the bottom of the sea. There were starfishes and mermaids all around me. The mermaids were dancing and singing in Latin like the priests do at the cathedral during Mass. You were there with me too, at the bottom of the sea. You were with your family, off to the side. Your father was acting like he was better than everyone else and he was standing in front of a sea cave blocking you from my view. I tried to talk to you. but every time I opened my mouth, water bubbles came out. No sounds.

\* \* \*

**they have this thing now that they do. if they come into a house and there is a son and mother there, they hold a gun to their heads. they make the son sleep with his mother. if it is a daughter and father, they do the same thing. some nights papa sleeps at his brother's, uncle pressoir's house. uncle pressoir sleeps at our house. just in case they come. that way papa will never be forced to lie down in bed with me. instead, uncle pressoir would be forced to, but that would not be so bad. we know a girl who had a child by her father that way. that is what papa does not want to happen, even if he is killed. there is still no gasoline to buy. otherwise we would be in ville rose already. papa has a friend who is going to get him some gasoline from a soldier. as soon as we get the gasoline, we are going to drive quick and fast until we find civilization. that's how papa puts it, civilization. he says things are not as bad in**

the provinces. i am still not talking to him. i don't think i ever will. manman says it is not his fault. he is trying to protect us. he cannot protect us. only god can protect us. the soldiers can come and do with us what they want. that makes papa feel weak, she says. he gets angry when he feels weak. why should he be angry with me? i am not one of the pigs with the machine guns. she asked me what really happened to you. she said she saw your parents before they left for the provinces. they did not want to tell her anything. i told her you took a boat after they raided the radio station. you escaped and took a boat to heaven knows where. she said, he was going to make a good man, that boy. sharp, like a needle point, that boy, he took the university exams a year before everyone else in this area. manman has respect for people with ambitions. she said papa did not want you for me because it did not seem as though you were going to do any better for me than he and manman could. he wants me to find a man who will do me some good. someone who will make sure that i have more than i have now. it is not enough for a girl to be just pretty anymore. we are not that well connected in society. the kind of man that papa wants for me would never have anything to do with me. all anyone can hope for is just a tiny bit of love, manman says, like a drop in a cup if you can get it, or a waterfall, a flood, if you can get that too. we do not have all that many high-up connections, she says, but you are an educated girl. what she counts for educated is not much to anyone but us anyway. they should be announcing the university exams on the radio next week. then i will know if you passed. i will listen for your name.

\* \* \*

We spent most of yesterday telling stories. Someone says, Krik? You answer, Krak! And they say, I have many stories I could tell you, and

then they go on and tell these stories to you, but mostly to themselves. Sometimes it feels like we have been at sea longer than the many years that I have been on this earth. The sun comes up and goes down. That is how you know it has been a whole day. I feel like we are sailing for Africa. Maybe we will go to Guinin, to live with the spirits, to be with everyone who has come and has died before us. They would probably turn us away from there too. Someone has a transistor and sometimes we listen to radio from the Bahamas. They treat Haitians like dogs in the Bahamas, a woman says. To them, we are not human. Even though their music sounds like ours. Their people look like ours. Even though we had the same African fathers who probably crossed these same seas together.

Do you want to know how people go to the bathroom on the boat? Probably the same way they did on those slaves ships years ago. They set aside a little corner for that. When I have to pee, I just pull it, lean over the rail, and do it very quickly. When I have to do the other thing, I rip a piece of something, squat down and do it, and throw the waste in the sea. I am always embarrassed by the smell. It is so demeaning having to squat in front of so many people. People turn away, but not always. At times I wonder if there is really land on the other side of the sea. Maybe the sea is endless. Like my love for you.

\* \* \*

**last night they came to madan roger's house. papa hurried inside as soon as madan roger's screaming started. the soldiers were looking for her son. madan roger was screaming, you killed him already. we buried his head. you can't kill him twice. they were shouting at her, do you belong to the youth federation with those vagabonds who were on the radio? she was yelling, do i look like a youth to you? can you identify your son's other associates? they asked her. papa had us tiptoe from the house into the latrine out back. we could hear it all from there. i thought i was going to choke on the smell of rotting poupou. they**

kept shouting at madan roger, did your son belong to the youth federation? wasn't he on the radio talking about the police? did he say, down with tonton macoutes? did he say, down with the army? he said that the military had to go; didn't he write slogans? he had meetings, didn't he? he demonstrated on the streets. you should have advised him better. she cursed on their mothers' graves. she just came out and shouted it, i hope your mothers will never rest in their cursed graves! she was just shouting it out, you killed him once already! you want to kill me too? go ahead. i don't care anymore. i'm dead already. you have already done the worst to me that you can do. you have killed my soul. they kept at it, asking her questions at the top of their voices: was your son a traitor? tell me all the names of his friends who were traitors just like him. madan roger finally shouts, yes, he was one! he belonged to that group. he was on the radio. he was on the streets at these demonstrations. he hated you like i hate you criminals. you killed him. they start to pound at her. you can hear it. you can hear the guns coming down on her head. it sounds like they are cracking all the bones in her body. manman whispers to papa. you can't just let them kill her. go and give them some money like you gave them for your daughter. papa says, the only money i have left is to get us out of here tomorrow. manman whispers, we cannot just stay here and let them kill her. manman starts moving like she is going out the door. papa grabs her neck and pins her to the latrine wall. tomorrow we are going to ville rose, he says. you will not spoil that for the family. you will not put us in that situation. you will not get us killed. going out there will be like trying to raise the dead. she is not dead yet, manman says, maybe we can help her. i will make you stay if i have to, he says to her. my mother buries her face in the latrine wall. she starts to cry. you can hear madan roger screaming. they are beating her, pounding on her until you don't hear anything else. manman tells papa. you



**cannot let them kill somebody just because you are afraid. papa says, oh yes, you *can* let them kill somebody because you are afraid. they are the law. it is their right. we are just being good citizens, following the law of the land. it has happened before all over this country and tonight it will happen again and there is nothing we can do.**

\* \* \*

Célianne spent the night groaning. She looks like she has been ready for a while, but maybe the child is being stubborn. She just screamed that she is bleeding. There is an older woman here who looks like she has had a lot of children herself. She says Célianne is not bleeding at all. Her water sack has broken.

The only babies I have ever seen right after birth are baby mice. Their skin looks veil thin. You can see all the blood vessels and all their organs. I have always wanted to poke them to see if my finger would go all the way through the skin.

I have moved to the other side of the boat so I will not have to look *inside* Célianne. People are just watching. The captain asks the midwife to keep Célianne steady so she will not rock any more holes into the boat. Now we have three cracks covered with tar. I am scared to think of what would happen if we had to choose among ourselves who would stay on the boat and who should die. Given the choice to make a decision like that, we would all act like vultures, including me.

The sun will set soon. Someone says that this child will be just another pair of hungry lips. At least it will have its mother's breasts, says an old man. Everyone will eat their last scraps of food today.

\* \* \*

**there is a rumor that the old president is coming back. there is a whole bunch of people going to the airport to meet him. papa says we are not going to stay in port-au-**

prince to find out if this is true or if it is a lie. they are selling gasoline at the market again. the carnival groups have taken to the streets. we are heading the other way, to ville rose. maybe there i will be able to sleep at night. it is not going to turn out well with the old president coming back, manman now says. people are just too hopeful, and sometimes hope is the biggest weapon of all to use against us. people will believe anything. they will claim to see the christ return and march on the cross backwards if there is enough hope. manman told papa that you took the boat. papa told me before we left this morning that he thought himself a bad father for everything that happened. he says a father should be able to speak to his children like a civilized man. all the craziness here has made him feel like he cannot do that anymore. all he wants to do is live. he and manman have not said a word to one another since we left the latrine. i know that papa does not hate us, not in the way that i hate those soldiers, those macoutes, and all those people here who shoot guns. on our way to ville rose, we saw dogs licking two dead faces. one of them was a little boy who was lying on the side of the road with the sun in his dead open eyes. we saw a soldier shoving a woman out of a hut, calling her a witch. he was shaving the woman's head, but of course we never stopped. papa didn't want to go in madan roger's house and check on her before we left. he thought the soldiers might still be there. papa was driving the van real fast. i thought he was going to kill us. we stopped at an open market on the way. manman got some black cloth for herself and for me. she cut the cloth in two pieces and we wrapped them around our heads to mourn madan roger. when i am used to ville rose, maybe i will sketch you some butterflies, depending on the news that they bring me.

\* \* \*

Célianne had a girl baby. The woman acting as a midwife is holding the baby to the moon and whispering prayers. . . . *God, this child You bring into the world, please guide her as You please through all her days on this earth.* The baby has not cried.

We had to throw our extra things in the sea because the water is beginning to creep in slowly. The boat needs to be lighter. My two gourdes in change had to be thrown overboard as an offering to Agwé, the spirit of the water. I heard the captain whisper to someone yesterday that they might have to *do something* with some of the people who never recovered from seasickness. I am afraid that soon they may ask me to throw out this notebook. We might all have to strip down to the way we were born, to keep ourselves from drowning.

Célianne's child is a beautiful child. They are calling her Swiss, because the word *Swiss* was written on the small knife they used to cut her umbilical cord. If she was my daughter, I would call her soleil, sun, moon, or star, after the elements. She still hasn't cried. There is gossip circulating about how Célianne became pregnant. Some people are saying that she had an affair with a married man and her parents threw her out. Gossip spreads here like everywhere else.

Do you remember our silly dreams? Passing the university exams and then studying hard to go until the end, the farthest of all that we can go in school. I know your father might never approve of me. I was going to try to win him over. He would have to cut out my heart to keep me from loving you. I hope you are writing like you promised. Jésus, Marie, Joseph! Everyone smells so bad. They get into arguments and they say to one another, "It is only my misfortune that would lump me together with an indigent like you." Think of it. They are fighting about being superior when we all might drown like straw.

There is an old toothless man leaning over to see what I am writing. He is sucking on the end of an old wooden pipe that has not seen any fire for a very long time now. He looks like a painting. Seeing things simply, you could fill a museum with the sights you have here. I still feel like such a coward for running away. Have you

heard anything about my parents? Last time I saw them on the beach, my mother had a *kriz*. She just fainted on the sand. I saw her coming to as we started sailing away. But of course I don't know if she is doing all right.

The water is really piling into the boat. We take turns pouring bowls of it out. I don't know what is keeping the boat from splitting in two. Swiss isn't crying. They keep slapping her behind, but she is not crying.

\* \* \*

**of course the old president didn't come. they arrested a lot of people at the airport, shot a whole bunch of them down. i heard it on the radio. while we were eating tonight, i told papa that i love you. i don't know if it will make a difference. i just want him to know that i have loved somebody in my life. in case something happens to one of us. i think he should know this about me, that i have loved someone besides only my mother and father in my life. i know you would understand. you are the one for large noble gestures. i just wanted him to know that i was capable of loving somebody. he looked me straight in the eye and said nothing to me. i love you until my hair shivers at the thought of anything happening to you. papa just turned his face away like he was rejecting my very birth. i am writing you from under the banyan tree in the yard in our new house. there are only two rooms and a tin roof that makes music when it rains, especially when there is hail, which falls like angry tears from heaven. there is a stream down the hill from the house, a stream that is too shallow for me to drown myself. manman and i spend a lot of time talking under the banyan tree. she told me today that sometimes you have to choose between your father and the man you love. her whole family did not want her to marry papa because he was a gardener from ville rose and her**

**family was from the city and some of them had even gone to university. she whispered everything under the banyan tree in the yard so as not to hurt his feelings. i saw him looking at us hard from the house. i heard him clearing his throat like he heard us anyway, like we hurt him very deeply somehow just by being together.**

\* \* \*

Célianne is lying with her head against the side of the boat. The baby still will not cry. They both look very peaceful in all this chaos. Célianne is holding her baby tight against her chest. She just cannot seem to let herself throw it in the ocean. I asked her about the baby's father. She keeps repeating the story now with her eyes closed, her lips barely moving.

She was home one night with her mother and brother Lionel when some ten or twelve soldiers burst into the house. The soldiers held a gun to Lionel's head and ordered him to lie down and become intimate with his mother. Lionel refused. Their mother told him to go ahead and obey the soldiers because she was afraid that they would kill Lionel on the spot if he put up more of a fight. Lionel did as his mother told him, crying as the soldiers laughed at him, pressing the gun barrels farther and farther into his neck.

Afterwards, the soldiers tied up Lionel and their mother, then they each took turns raping Célianne. When they were done, they arrested Lionel, accusing him of moral crimes. After that night, Célianne never heard from Lionel again.

The same night, Célianne cut her face with a razor so that no one would know who she was. Then as facial scars were healing, she started throwing up and getting rashes. Next thing she knew, she was getting big. She found out about the boat and got on. She is fifteen.

\* \* \*

**manman told me the whole story today under the banyan tree. the bastards were coming to get me. they were going to arrest me. they were going to peg me as a member of the youth federation and then take me away. papa heard about it. he went to the post and paid them money, all the money he had. our house in port-au-prince and all the land his father had left him, he gave it all away to save my life. this is why he was so mad. tonight manman told me this under the banyan tree. i have no words to thank him for this. i don't know how. you must love him for this, manman says, you must. it is something you can never forget, the sacrifice he has made. i cannot bring myself to say thank you, now he is more than my father. he is a man who gave everything he had to save my life. on the radio tonight, they read the list of names of people who passed the university exams. you passed.**

\* \* \*

We got some relief from the seawater coming in. The captain used the last of his tar, and most of the water is staying out for a while. Many people have volunteered to throw Célianne's baby overboard for her. She will not let them. They are waiting for her to go to sleep so they can do it, but she will not sleep. I never knew before that dead children looked purple. The lips are the most purple because the baby is so dark. Purple like the sea after the sun has set.

Célianne is slowly drifting off to sleep. She is very tired from the labor. I do not want to touch the child. If anybody is going to throw it in the ocean, I think it should be her. I keep thinking, they have thrown every piece of flesh that followed the child out of her body into the water. They are going to throw the dead baby in the water. Won't these things attract sharks?

Célianne's fingernails are buried deep in the child's naked back. The old man with the pipe just asked. "Kompè, what are you writing?" I told him. "My will."

\* \* \*

**I am getting used to ville rose. there are butterflies here, tons of butterflies. so far none has landed on my hand, which means they have no news for me. i cannot always bathe in the stream near the house because the water is freezing cold. the only time it feels just right is at noon, and then there are a dozen eyes who might see me bathing. i solved that by getting a bucket of water in the morning and leaving it in the sun and then bathing myself once it is night under the banyan tree. the banyan now is my most trusted friend. they say banyans can last hundreds of years. even the branches that lean down from them become like trees themselves. a banyan could become a forest, manman says, if it were given a chance. from the spot where i stand under the banyan, i see the mountains, and behind those are more mountains still. so many mountains that are bare like rocks. i feel like all those mountains are pushing me farther and farther away from you.**

\* \* \*

She threw it overboard. I watched her face knot up like a thread, and then she let go. It fell in a splash, floated for a while, and then sank. And quickly after that she jumped in too. And just as the baby's head sank, so did hers. They went together like two bottles beneath a waterfall. The shock lasts only so long. There was no time to even try and save her. There was no question of it. The sea in that spot is like the sharks that live there. It has no mercy.

They say I have to throw my notebook out. The old man has to throw out his hat and his pipe. The water is rising again and they are scooping it out. I asked for a few seconds to write this last page and then promised that I would let it go. I know you will probably never see this, but it was nice imagining that I had you here to talk to.

I hope my parents are alive. I asked the old man to tell them what happened to me, if he makes it anywhere. He asked me to write his name in “my book.” I asked him for his full name. It is Justin Moïse André Nozius Joseph Frank Osnac Maximilien. He says it all with such an air that you would think him a king. The old man says, “I know a Coast Guard ship is coming. It came to me in my dream.” He points to a spot far into the distance. I look where he is pointing. I see nothing. From here, ships must be like a mirage in the desert.

I must throw my book out now. It goes down to them, Célianne and her daughter and all those children of the sea who might soon be claiming me.

I go to them now as though it was always meant to be, as though the very day that my mother birthed me, she had chosen me to live life eternal, among the children of the deep blue sea, those who have escaped the chains of slavery to form a world beneath the heavens and the blood-drenched earth where you live.

Perhaps I was chosen from the beginning of time to live there with Agwé at the bottom of the sea. Maybe this is why I dreamed of the starfish and the mermaids having the Catholic Mass under the sea. Maybe this was my invitation to go. In any case, I know that my memory of you will live even there as I too become a child of the sea.

\* \* \*

**today i said thank you. i said thank you, papa, because you saved my life. he groaned and just touched my shoulder, moving his hand quickly away like a butterfly. and then there it was, the black butterfly floating around us. i began to run and run so it wouldn't land on me, but it had already carried its news. i know what must have happened. tonight i listened to manman's transistor under the banyan tree. all i hear from the radio is more killing in port-au-prince. the pigs are refusing to let up. i don't know what's going to happen, but i cannot see staying here forever. i am writing to you from the bottom of the banyan tree. manman says**



that banyan trees are holy and sometimes if we call the gods from beneath them, they will hear our voices clearer. now there are always butterflies around me, black ones that i refuse to let find my hand. i throw big rocks at them, but they are always too fast. last night on the radio, i heard that another boat sank off the coast of the bahamas. i can't think about you being in there in the waves. my hair shivers. from here, i cannot even see the sea. behind these mountains are more mountains and more black butterflies still and a sea that is endless like my love for you.

WARSAN SHIRE

CONVERSATIONS ABOUT HOME  
(AT THE DEPORTATION CENTRE)

Well, I think home spat me out, the blackouts and curfews like tongue against loose tooth. God, do you know how difficult it is, to talk about the day your own city dragged you by the hair, past the old prison, past the school gates, past the burning torsos erected on poles like flags? When I meet others like me I recognise the longing, the missing, the memory of ash on their faces. No one leaves home unless home is the mouth of a shark. I've been carrying the old anthem in my mouth for so long that there's no space for another song, another tongue or another language. I know a shame that shrouds, totally engulfs. I tore up and ate my own passport in an airport hotel. I'm bloated with language I can't afford to forget.

\* \* \*

They ask me how did you get here? Can't you see it on my body? The Libyan desert red with immigrant bodies, the Gulf of Aden bloated, the city of Rome with no jacket. I hope the journey meant more than miles because all of my children are in the water. I thought the sea was safer than the land. I want to make love but my hair smells of war and running and running. I want to lay down, but these countries are like uncles who touch you when you're young and asleep. Look at all these borders, foaming at the mouth with bodies broken and desperate. I'm the colour of hot sun on my face, my mother's remains were never buried. I spent days and nights in the

stomach of the truck, I did not come out the same. Sometimes it feels like someone else is wearing my body.

\* \* \*

I know a few things to be true. I do not know where I am going, where I have come from is disappearing, I am unwelcome and my beauty is not beauty here. My body is burning with the shame of not belonging, my body is longing. I am the sin of memory and the absence of memory. I watch the news and my mouth becomes a sink full of blood. The lines, the forms, the people at the desks, the calling cards, the immigration officer, the looks on the street, the cold settling deep into my bones, the English classes at night, the distance I am from home. But Alhamdulillah all of this is better than the scent of a woman completely on fire, or a truckload of men who look like my father, pulling out my teeth and nails, or fourteen men between my legs, or a gun, or a promise, or a lie, or his name, or his manhood in my mouth.

\* \* \*

I hear them say, go home, I hear them say, fucking immigrants, fucking refugees. Are they really this arrogant? Do they not know that stability is like a lover with a sweet mouth upon your body one second and the next you are a tremor lying on the floor covered in rubble and old currency waiting for its return. All I can say is, I was once like you, the apathy, the pity, the ungrateful placement and now my home is the mouth of a shark, now my home is the barrel of a gun. I'll see you on the other side.

DUNYA MIKHAIL  
ANOTHER PLANET

I have a special ticket  
to another planet  
beyond this Earth.  
A comfortable world, and beautiful:  
a world without much smoke,  
not too hot  
and not too cold.  
The creatures  
are gentler there,  
and the governments  
have no secrets.  
The police are nonexistent:  
there are no problems  
and no fights.  
And the schools  
don't exhaust their students  
with too much work  
for history has yet to start  
and there's no geography  
and no other languages.  
And even better:  
the war  
has left its "r" behind  
and turned into love,  
so the weapons sleep  
beneath the dust,

and the planes pass by  
without shelling the cities,  
and the boats  
look like smiles  
on the water.  
All things  
are peaceful  
and kind  
on the other planet  
beyond this Earth.  
But still I hesitate  
to go alone.

(TRANSLATED FROM THE ARABIC BY KAREEM JAMES ABU-  
ZEID)

MARJANE SATRAPI

From  
PERSEPOLIS 2: THE STORY OF A  
RETURN

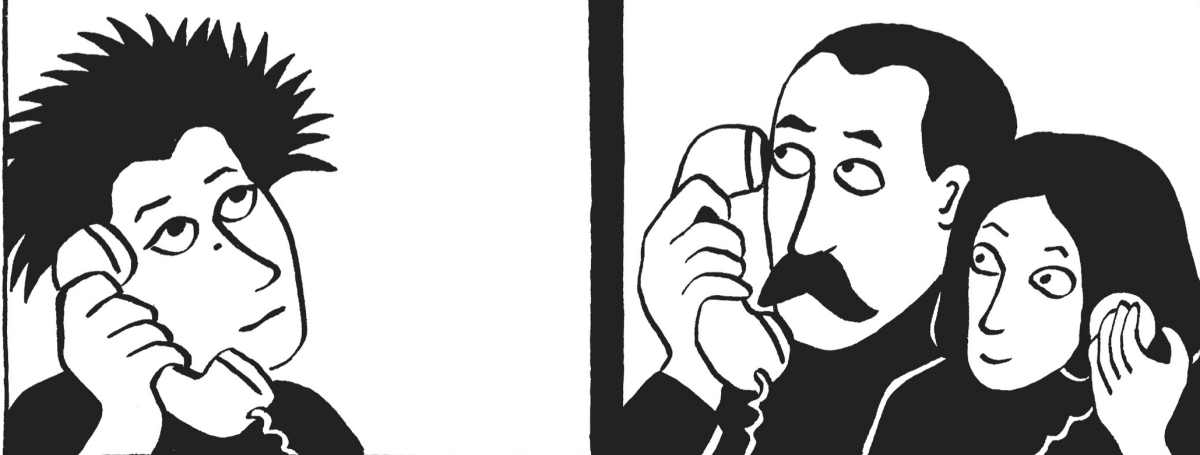
THE HARDER I TRIED TO ASSIMILATE, THE MORE I HAD THE FEELING THAT I WAS DISTANCING MYSELF FROM MY CULTURE, BETRAYING MY PARENTS AND MY ORIGINS, THAT I WAS PLAYING A GAME BY SOMEBODY ELSE'S RULES.



EACH TELEPHONE CALL FROM MY PARENTS REMINDED ME OF MY COWARDICE AND MY BETRAYAL. I WAS AT ONCE HAPPY TO HEAR THEIR VOICES AND ASHAMED TO TALK TO THEM.

- YES, I'M DOING FINE. I'M GETTING GOOD GRADES.
- FRIENDS? OF COURSE, LOTS!
- DAD ...
- DAD, I LOVE YOU!

- YOU HAVE SOME GOOD FRIENDS?
- THAT DOESN'T SURPRISE ME, YOU ALWAYS HAD A TALENT FOR COMMUNICATING WITH PEOPLE!
- EAT ORANGES. THEY'RE FULL OF VITAMIN C.
- US TOO, WE ADORE YOU. YOU'RE THE CHILD ALL PARENTS DREAM OF HAVING!



IF ONLY THEY KNEW ... IF THEY KNEW THAT THEIR DAUGHTER WAS MADE UP LIKE A PUNK, THAT SHE SMOKED JOINTS TO MAKE A GOOD IMPRESSION, THAT SHE HAD SEEN MEN IN THEIR UNDERWEAR WHILE THEY WERE BEING BOMBED EVERY DAY, THEY WOULDN'T CALL ME THEIR DREAM CHILD.

I FELT SO GUILTY THAT WHENEVER THERE WAS NEWS ABOUT IRAN, I CHANGED THE CHANNEL.



IT WAS TOO UNBEARABLE.



DID YOU WATCH TV YESTERDAY? YOU MUST BE WORRIED.

NO, IT'S OKAY! I TALKED TO MY PARENTS. THEY'RE FINE.



I WAS LYING. I KNEW NOTHING AND I DIDN'T WANT TO KNOW MORE.

I WANTED TO FORGET EVERYTHING, TO MAKE MY PAST DISAPPEAR, BUT MY UNCONSCIOUS CAUGHT UP WITH ME.





I EVEN MANAGED TO DENY MY NATIONALITY.



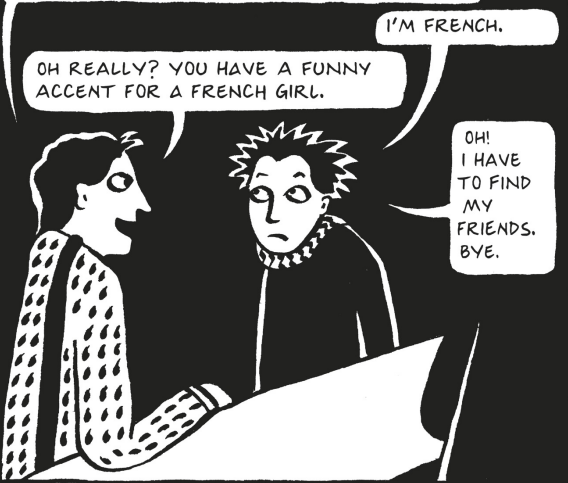
DURING A PARTY AT SCHOOL.



HI, I'M MARC. I GRADUATED LAST YEAR. YOU'RE NEW! WHAT'S YOUR NAME?

MARTJANE. I'VE BEEN HERE A YEAR.

AND WHERE ARE YOU FROM MARIE-JEANNE?



OH REALLY? YOU HAVE A FUNNY ACCENT FOR A FRENCH GIRL.

I'M FRENCH.

OH! I HAVE TO FIND MY FRIENDS. BYE.

I SHOULD SAY THAT AT THE TIME, IRAN WAS THE EPITOME OF EVIL AND TO BE IRANIAN WAS A HEAVY BURDEN TO BEAR.



IT WAS EASIER TO LIE THAN TO ASSUME THAT BURDEN.

WHO'S THAT GUY?



MARC? HE'S ANNA'S BROTHER, THE GIRL IN THE STRIPED SWEATER. HE'S A JERK FROM BOURGE. YOU SHOULDN'T TALK TO THOSE PEOPLE.

AND WHEN I GOT BACK THAT NIGHT, I REMEMBERED THAT LINE MY GRANDMOTHER TOLD ME: "ALWAYS KEEP YOUR DIGNITY AND BE TRUE TO YOURSELF!"

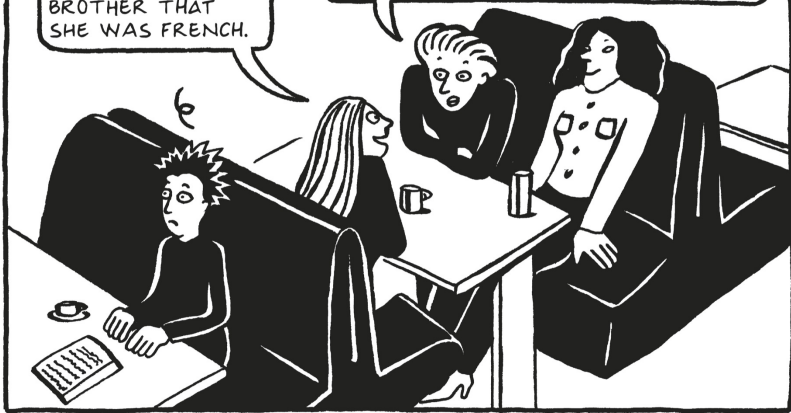


OH GRANDMA ...

UNFORTUNATELY, IT ALL CAME OUT IN THE END. A FEW DAYS LATER IN A CAFE NEAR SCHOOL.

SHE TOLD MY BROTHER THAT SHE WAS FRENCH.

AND YOUR BROTHER BELIEVED HER?



WHAT DO YOU THINK? HAVE YOU HEARD THE WAY SHE TALKS?

HAVE YOU SEEN HER FACE?



BUT YOUR BROTHER WAS HITTING ON HER OR WHAT?

OF COURSE NOT!!

AH, THAT'S A RELIEF. CONSIDERING HOW UGLY SHE IS, IT WOULD BE REALLY UNFAIR IF SHE GOT A GUY LIKE MARC.



HA, HA, HA! I WOULD COMMIT SUICIDE IF MY BROTHER WAS GOING OUT WITH A COW LIKE THAT!



I DON'T KNOW IF YOU'VE NOTICED, BUT SHE NEVER TALKS ABOUT EITHER HER COUNTRY OR HER PARENTS.

WELL, OF COURSE! SHE LIES WHEN SHE SAYS THAT SHE'S KNOWN WAR. IT'S ALL TO MAKE HERSELF SEEM INTERESTING.



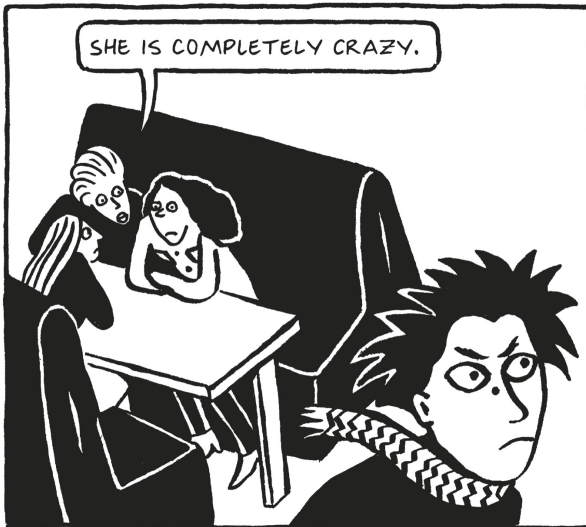
ANYWAY, HER PARENTS CLEARLY DON'T CARE ABOUT HER, OR THEY WOULDN'T HAVE SENT HER ALONE.



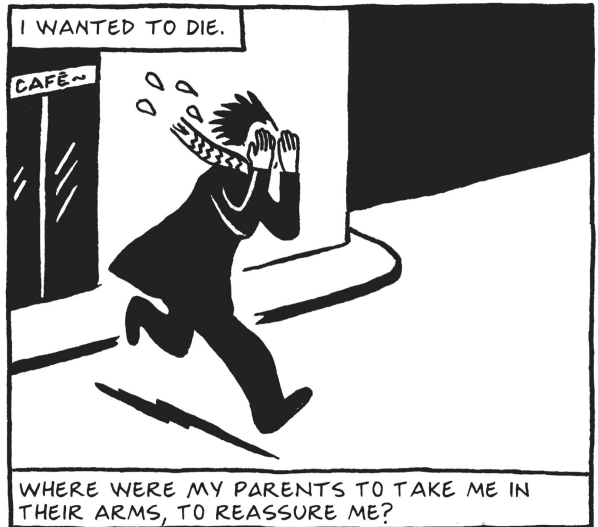
THAT WAS TOO MUCH. I SAW RED.



YOU ARE GOING TO SHUT UP OR I AM GOING TO MAKE YOU!  
I AM IRANIAN AND PROUD OF IT!



SHE IS COMPLETELY CRAZY.



I WANTED TO DIE.

WHERE WERE MY PARENTS TO TAKE ME IN THEIR ARMS, TO REASSURE ME?



BUT REALLY, I HAD NOTHING TO CRY ABOUT.



I HAD JUST REDEEMED MYSELF.



FOR THE FIRST TIME IN A YEAR, I FELT PROUD.

I FINALLY UNDERSTOOD WHAT MY GRANDMOTHER MEANT. IF I WASN'T COMFORTABLE WITH MYSELF, I WOULD NEVER BE COMFORTABLE.

(TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH BY ANJALI SINGH)

MARINA LEWYCKA

From  
STRAWBERRY FIELDS

“Irina, my baby, you can still change your mind! You don’t have to go!”

Mother was wailing and dabbing at her pinky eyes with a tissue, causing an embarrassing scene at the Kiev bus station.

“Mother, please! I’m not a baby!”

You expect your mother to cry at a moment like this. But when my craggy old Papa turned up too, his shirt all crumpled and his silver hair sticking up like an old-age porcupine, okay, I admit it rattled me. I hadn’t expected him to come to see me off.

“Irina, little one, take care.”

“*Shcho ti*, Papa. What’s all this about? Do you think I’m not coming back?”

“Just take care, my little one.” Sniffle. Sigh.

“I’m not little, Papa. I’m nineteen. Do you think I can’t look after myself?”

“Ah, my little pigeon.” Sigh. Sniffle. Then Mother started up again. Then—I couldn’t help myself—I started up too, sighing and sniffing and dabbing my eyes, until the bus driver told us to get a move on, and Mother shoved a bag of bread and salami and a poppy seed cake into my hands, and we were off. From Kiev to Kent in forty-two hours.

Okay, I admit, forty-two hours on a bus is not amusing. By the time we reached Lviv, the bread and salami were all gone. In Poland, I noticed that my ankles were starting to swell. When we stopped for

fuel somewhere in Germany, I stuffed the last crumbs of the poppy-seed cake into my mouth and washed it down with nasty metallic-tasting water from a tap that was marked not for drinking. In Belgium my period started, but I didn't notice until the dark stain of blood seeped through my jeans onto the seat. In France I lost all sensation in my feet. On the ferry to Dover I found a toilet and cleaned myself up. Looking into the cloudy mirror above the washbasin I hardly recognized the wan dark-eyed face that stared back at me—was that me, that scruffy straggly-haired girl with bags under her eyes? I walked around to restore the circulation in my legs, and, standing on the deck at dawn, I watched the white cliffs of England materialize in the pale watery light, beautiful, mysterious, the land of my dreams.

In Dover I was met off the boat by Vulk, waving a bit of card with my name on it—Irina Blazkho. Typical—he'd gotten the spelling wrong. He was the type Mother would describe as a person of minimum culture, wearing a horrible black fake-leather jacket, like a comic-strip gangster—what a *koshmar*!—it creaked as he walked. All he needed was a gun.

He greeted me with a grunt. “Hrr. You heff passport? Peppers?”

His voice was deep and sludgy, with a nasty whiff of cigarette smoke and tooth decay on his breath.

This gangster-type should brush his teeth. I fumbled in my bag, and before I could say anything, he grabbed my passport and Seasonal Agricultural Worker papers and stowed them in the breast pocket of his *koshmar* jacket.

“I keep for you. Is many bed people in England. Can stealing from you.”

He patted the pocket and winked. I could see straightaway that there was no point in arguing with a person of his type, so I hoisted my bag onto my shoulder and followed him across the car park to a huge shiny black vehicle that looked like a cross between a tank and a Zill, with darkened windows and gleaming chrome bars in the front—a typical mafia-machine. These high-status cars are popular with primitive types and social undesirables. In fact he looked quite a bit like his car: overweight, built like a tank, with a gleaming silver front

tooth, a shiny black jacket, and a straggle of hair tied in a ponytail hanging down his back like an exhaust pipe. Ha ha.

He gripped my elbow, which was quite unnecessary—stupid man, did he think I might try to escape?—and pushed me onto the backseat with a shove, which was also unnecessary. Inside, the mafia-machine stank of tobacco. I sat in silence looking nonchalantly out the window while he scrutinized me rudely through the rearview mirror. What did he think he was staring at? Then he lit up one of those thick vile-smelling cigars—Mother calls them New Russian cigarettes—what a stink! and started puffing away. Puff. Stink.

I didn't take in the scenery that flashed past through the black-tinted glass—I was too tired—but my body registered every twist in the lane, and the sudden jerks and jolts when he braked and turned. This gangster-type needs some driving lessons.

He had some potato chips wrapped in a paper bundle on the passenger seat beside him, and every now and then he would plunge his left fist in, grab a handful of chips, and cram them into his mouth. Grab. Cram. Chomp. Grab. Cram. Chomp. Not very refined. The chips smelled fantastic, though. The smell of the cigar, the lurching motion as he steered with one hand and stuffed his mouth with the other, the low, dragging pain from my period—it was all making me feel queasy and hungry at the same time. In the end, hunger won out. I wondered what language this gangster-type would talk. Belarusian? He looked too dark for a Belarus. Ukrainian? He didn't look Ukrainian. Maybe from somewhere out east? Chechnya? Georgia? What do Georgians look like? The Balkans? Taking a guess, I asked in Russian, “Please, Mr. Vulk, may I have something to eat?”

He looked up. Our eyes met in the rearview mirror. He had real gangster-type eyes—poisonous black berries in eyebrows as straggly as an overgrown hedge. He studied me in that offensive way, sliding his eyes all over me.

“Little flover wants eating?” He spoke in English, though he must have understood my Russian. Probably he came from one of those newly independent nations of the former Soviet Union where everyone can speak Russian but nobody does. Okay, so he wanted to talk English? I'd show him.

“Yes indeed, Mr. Vulk. If you could oblige me, if it does not inconvenience you, I would appreciate something to eat.”

“No problema, little flovver!”

He helped himself to one more mouthful of chips—grab, cram, chomp—then scrunched up the remnants in the oily paper and passed them over the back of the seat. As I reached forward to take them, I saw something else nestled down on the seat beneath where the chips had been. Something small, black, and scary. *Shcho to!* Was that a real gun?

My heart started hammering. What did he need a gun for? *Mama, Papa, help me!* Okay, just pretend not to notice. Maybe it’s not loaded. Maybe it’s just one of those cigar lighters. So I unfolded the crumpled paper—it was like a snug, greasy nest. The chips inside were fat, soft, and still warm. There were only about six left, and some scraps. I savored them one at a time. They were lightly salty, with a touch of vinegar, and they were just—mmm!—indescribably delicious. The fat clung to the edges of my lips and hardened on my fingers, so I had no choice but to lick it off, but I tried to do it discreetly.

“Thank you,” I said politely, for rudeness is a sign of minimum culture.

“No problema. No problema.” He waved his fist about as if to show how generous he was. “Food for eat in transit. All vill be add to your living expense.”

Living expense? I didn’t need any more nasty surprises. I studied his back, the creaky stretched-at-the-seams jacket, the ragged ponytail, the thick, yellowish neck, the flecks of dandruff on the fake-leather collar. I was starting to feel queasy again.

“What is this, expense?”

“Expense. Expense. Foods. Transports. Accommodations.” He took both hands off the steering wheel and waved them in the air. “Life in vest is too much expensive, little flovver. Who you think vill be pay for all such luxury?”

Although his English was appalling, those words came rolling out like a prepared speech. “You think this vill be providing all for free?”



So Mother had been right. “Anybody can see this agency is run by crooks. Anybody but you, Irina.” (See how Mother has this annoying habit of putting me down?) “And if you tell them lies, Irina, if you pretend to be student of agriculture when you are nothing of the sort, who will help you if something goes wrong?”

Then she went on in her hysterical way about all the things that go wrong for Ukrainian girls who go west—all those rumors and stories in the papers.

“But everyone knows these things only happened to stupid and uneducated girls, Mother. They’re not going to happen to me.”

“If you will please say me what are the expenses, I will try to meet them.”

I kept my voice civilized and polite. The chrome-bar tooth gleamed.

“Little flovver, the expense will be first to pay, and then you will be pay. Nothing to be discuss. No problema.”

“And you will give me back my passport?”

“Exact. You verk, you get passport. You no verk, you no passport. Someone mekka visit in you Mama in Kiev, say Irina no good verk, is mek big problem for her.”

“I have heard that in England—”

“England is a change, little flovver. Now England is land of possibility. England is not like in you school book.”

I thought of dashing Mr. Brown from *Let’s Talk English*—if only he were here!

“You have an excellent command of English. And of Russian maybe?”

“English. Russian. Serbo-Croat. German. All languages.”

So he sees himself as a linguist; okay, keep him talking.

“You are not a native of these shores, I think, Mr. Vulk?”

“Think everything vat you like, little flovver.” He gave me a leering wink in the mirror, and a flash of silver tooth. Then he started tossing his head from side to side as if to shake out his dandruff.

“This, you like? Is voman attract?”

It took me a moment to realize he was referring to his ponytail. Was this his idea of flirtation? On the scale of attractiveness, I would

give him a zero. For a person of minimum culture he certainly had some pretensions. What a pity Mother wasn't here to put him right.

"It is absolutely irresistible, Mr. Vulk."

"You like? Eh, little flovver? You vant touch?"

The ponytail jumped up and down. I held my breath.

"Go on. Hrr. You can touch him. Go on," he said with horrible oily enthusiasm.

I reached out my hand, which was still greasy and smelled of chips.

"Go on. Is pleasure for you."

I touched it—it felt like a rat's tail. Then he flicked his head, and it twitched beneath my fingers like a live rat.

"I heff hear that voman is cannot resisting such a hair it reminding her of men's oggan."

What on earth was he talking about now?

"Oggan?"

He made a crude gesture with his fingers.

"Be not afraid, little flovver. It reminding you of boyfriend. Hah?"

"No, Mr. Vulk, because I do not have a boyfriend."

I knew straightaway it was the wrong thing to say, but it was too late. The words just slipped out, and I couldn't bring them back.

"Not boyfriend? How is this little flovver not boyfriend?" His voice was like warm chip fat. "Hrr. Maybe in this case is good possibility for me?"

That was a stupid mistake. He's got you now. You're cornered.

"Is perhaps sometime we make good possibility, eh?" He breathed cigar smoke and tooth decay. "Little flovver?"

Through the darkened glass, I could see woods flashing past, all sunlight and dappled leaves. If only I could throw myself out of the vehicle, roll down the grassy bank, and run in among the trees. But we were going too fast. I shut my eyes and pretended to be asleep.

We drove on in silence for maybe twenty minutes. Vulk lit another cigar. I watched him through my lowered lashes, puffing away, hunched over the wheel. Puff. Stink. Puff. Stink. How much farther could it be? Then there was a crunching of gravel under the wheels, and with one last violent lurch the mafia-machine came to a halt. I opened my eyes. We had pulled up in front of a pretty steep-roofed

farmhouse set behind a summery garden where there were chairs and tables set out on the lawn that sloped down to a shallow glassy river. Just like England is supposed to be. Now at last, I thought, there will be normal people; they will talk to me in English; they will give me tea.

But they didn't. Instead, a pudgy red-faced man wearing dirty clothes and rubber boots came out of the house—the farmer, I guessed—and he helped me out of Vulk's vehicle, mumbling something I couldn't understand, but it was obviously not an invitation to tea. He looked me up and down in that same rude way, as though I were a horse he'd just bought. Then he and Vulk muttered to each other, too fast for me to follow, and exchanged envelopes.

“Bye-bye, little flovver,” Vulk said, with that chip-fat smile. “Ve meet again. Maybe ve mekka possibility?”

“Maybe.”

I knew it was the wrong thing to say, but by then I was just desperate to get away.

The farmer shoved my bag into his Land Rover and then he shoved me in too, giving my behind a good feel with his hand as he did so, which was quite unnecessary. He only had to ask and I would have climbed in by myself.

“I'll take you straight out to the field,” he said, as we rattled along narrow winding lanes. “You can start picking this afternoon.”

After some five kilometers, the Land Rover swung in through the gate, and I felt a rush of relief as at last I planted my feet on firm ground. The first thing I noticed was the light—the dazzling salty light dancing on the sunny field, the ripening strawberries, the little rounded trailer perched up on the hill and the oblong boxy trailer down in the corner of the field, the woods beyond, and the long, curving horizon, and I smiled to myself. So this is England.

PAULINE KALDAS

## A CONVERSATION

“You want me to go back? I’m sixty-five years old.”

My hair is gray, and my body has grown into its age. I have settled into myself. No longer the young girl you met, the one who flirted and teased, who wore her black hair like a shield, enticing you to ask for her hand. No longer the one who agreed to wrap herself around you and fly across the ocean, willing to release each strand that held me close to family and home, believing in this miracle of America. I’m old, and my steps are solid on this land where I have learned to live; they cannot turn around now and go in a different direction.

—

“We can retire there. Do you know how much our money is worth? I can buy a beautiful apartment. We can live on the corniche and look at the Nile every day.”

I left, only a young man with little in my pocket. My family held me back, ridiculed my dreams, told me I would never make it in America: that my life could only be wrapped in this place with a job pushing me each day to make only enough to feed us and hold a roof up, that I was a fool to imagine myself in the open space of a new land, that I would return to beg for a morsel of food. Now my money can take me back to every ice cream my mouth drooled for as a young child. These dollars I have bought and sold will multiply till they’re an endless chain of pearls. Like the rich, we can buy an apartment, two stories, with marble floors and gold faucets, and a balcony that lifts us above the city so our eyes can stretch over the Nile each day.

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“We’ve been in this country for forty years.”

Forty years is a lifetime. Your mother died before she turned fifty; her heart failed after we left. You could not even tell her the truth about our immigration, trying to convince her it was only a short excursion, a youthful desire to see the magic of the other side of the world. But she looked at our faces, the anxiety of our anticipation, and she knew that her only son was leaving. My father died only years later, barely reaching the age of sixty. We could not even return so I could stand by mother’s side as she buried him. Forty years we have built a life and left one behind.

---

“You can have everything there. I’ll buy you whatever you want.”

Those early years, every penny we had to hold tight in our fists. I watched you cut coupons, squint your eyes at the price tags, and stretch each pound of meat with bread. Every birthday I failed you, and even a single rose was an extravagance I held back. There I can buy you dresses to sparkle on your body, jewels to circle your wrists; whatever your eye rests on, I’ll offer you as my gift. Don’t you want to enter a store and lay your finger on any item, to have it be yours like the magic of wishes coming true?

---

“And do you have enough money to get rid of the pollution and the crowds too?”

When we decided to go and everyone’s talk of foolish dreams and the struggle of America failed to keep our feet still, my father sold his land by the pyramids so we could have something to hold us as we began our new lives. My mother took off her gold bracelet with its snakes intertwining around her wrist and sold it so there was enough to buy the tickets. What can your money buy for us now? The streets in Egypt are brimming with the poor and hopeful, and their dreams release the stench caught in our nostrils. You can’t walk without the

weight of people bumping against you and inhaling the smoke and garbage that fumes the city. Our money will not release us from its grabbing fist.

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“We can go to the Red Sea. We’ll buy a chalet, and we can go when we like.”

Do you remember our honeymoon in Hurghada? We rented a small chalet, and each morning the slender waves lapped at our door. I held your hand as we crossed the sand, and we walked toward the corals beneath the surface, laughing when the tiny fish nibbled at our ankles. I unfolded my arms like a hammock to hold your body so the sea could carry you. And at night, the sand winds whistled at our door as we floated inside each other, my body surprised by the softness of your skin like the caress of each wave. The beach was almost empty that October, and we owned each grain of sand as we spoke our dreams like the drops of water glistening on our skin. We’ll buy a chalet to make it our own, a place we can inhabit at our will. We’ll own the corals and the waves and the sun’s dreams, walk across the edge of sand, marking our ground.

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“After we’ve come here and struggled and built a life?”

You couldn’t find a job, and when you came home, I saw your face like a stone engraved in silence. You took a job washing dishes. Your hands became red and brittle, the fingers bending in and your knuckles hardening against the harsh soap. A year until finally you found something in a small company, each day sitting at your desk. But I knew the boss looked over your shoulder, touching his pen to your work, marking corrections. You stooped over that desk for years, the fear of losing the job etched in your eyes. I found work, punching in time cards, leaving my children in day care centers, afraid I would forget their faces. It took years till we saved enough that you could shrug off the choke of having a boss and strike out on

your own. We have built this life with our hands; each stone in this house we have carried on our backs.

---

“We can live like royalty there.”

What do we have here? Our house we pay for each month, the bank looming over us. It is empty space, the walls turning their corners, tucking us inside their angles, keeping us cloistered. We live like monks, our lives restricted. In Egypt, our hands would touch nothing. We can purchase each task: a servant to clean the house, a man to deliver the groceries, a cook to stand in the kitchen. And we would be free to come and go as we please. We can stay at the Oberoi hotel in Giza, lounge at the pool, and watch the sun set over the pyramids, each drink and each plate delivered to us. Imagine your life at your fingertips, only making the request to have it be granted.

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“These are dreams. No one lives like a king there.”

You remember only the beauty of things; maybe that is why I married you. Your eyes have always stretched their vision beyond the boundaries of the horizon; you follow a dream that no one else can see. Egypt has no more kings or queens. Its days of glory are over. The country is crowded only with leftover peasants. The kings gathered their wealth and ran, leaving only those who know how to struggle for the same bread they eat daily. Their bare feet are caked with the mud of the Nile as they carry their loads and scrape their few piasters each day. The river’s water has become poisonous and the land abandoned to those who cannot nurture it.

---

“Over there life is good, and the people have morals.”

A sense of decency. People look in your face. Greet you with respect. We take care of each other—not like here, abandoned, every man for himself and no one stops to help lift those who fall. People

can still feel with their hearts. There, even those who have nothing share their bite of food.

---

“Over there people are eating each other and everyone is just for himself. You’ve forgotten why we came.”

The corruption. The bribes. The connections you need to take even a small step. The poor scramble for a few scraps of nourishment, while the rich play their Monopoly with real money. There is nothing but the hardship of each day. Each man tumbling over the next to win.

---

“We’ll have everything. At least people will respect us. Not like here. Forty years and the Americans still look at us as if we were cockroaches walking on their land.”

I have learned their language, their slang, their clothing, how to eat their food, how to laugh at their jokes, how to make their money. Still they grimace when they meet me, they scratch their heads instead of shaking my hand, they scowl when they learn I live in the best neighborhood. I changed my name, so I could erase the sour look on their faces when I introduce myself. America welcomes you into its land so you can mop its floors. I want to hold my head up high again, to breathe my name and have it heard.

---

“What are you saying? We found good work, and we bought a house. Our children got educated here. You want me to go back and not see them?”

Look, look at what we have. This house that is large and grand. In Egypt, we would have stayed in that two-bedroom apartment. I found a job here and went in each day to earn our living. No one harassed me, and no one told me I wasn’t smart enough. We raised our sons in this house instead of cramming them between the walls and the alleys. We paid for their education with our blood, and one is



a doctor and one is an engineer. In that country, they would have stepped on them like vermin because they're Christian; every door shut in their faces till we would have been lucky to see them sweep the streets for a living.

---

“They'll come visit us.”

We'll bring them to see us. They will know where they are from, and they will be part of their family. They will bring their children to play on the sand and bounce in the waves of the sea like you and I did when we were young. We will pull our family together again and loosen the tight grip of isolation. We will all return to settle our feet into the sand and water of our homeland.

---

“You're dreaming. Our children will never leave this country.”

Your thoughts are like a fairy tale; you weave light and air to make a tapestry of magic colors. Our sons have settled their lives in this country. They have found a place for themselves, and already they are piling the stones to build a home for their children. From their birth, they claimed this land as their own, and the thread that ties them to Egypt has become a thin sliver too invisible to follow back.

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“I want to live the rest of my life in peace without struggling.”  
To look out on the sea and own the world.

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“I came here, and I'm going to die here.”  
This life I have built, I will not let it go.