2001

Fortune cookies at the Grease Bag Café

Aimee Lee Brown
Iowa State University

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Fortune cookies at the Grease Bag Café

by

Aimee Lee Brown

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English with a specialization in creative writing

Major Professor: Barbara Haas

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
2000
This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Aimee Lee Brown

has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

Major Professor

For the Major Program

For the Graduate College
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PART ONE
The Grease Bag Café was in need of new paint. Its old paint, black and red, cracked and chipped until the café’s wood and bamboo exposed itself. At first, people did not mind brushing off a few chips of paint from their shoulders, their chests, their arms, their legs, but when black and red chipped and rained into their hair and down the openings of their clothes, they told Karen Jones, the Grease Bag Café’s owner, she needed to repaint the café.

Karen listened to her customers tell her she needed to repaint the café for over a year before she checked out books from the Pier’s Point library on how to paint. There were sections on painting different kinds of wood but nothing on painting bamboo. So Karen, bought red and black wood paint from Caleb and Crew’s Hardware Store, and she and Kid Hanson brushed and stroked until the café gleamed red and black. But as soon as they coated Karen’s café with paint, the paint peeled, and the café’s insides were exposed.

The Grease Bag Café was an old Chinese pagoda. Karen nor anyone in town knew how an actual Chinese pagoda ended up in Pier’s Point, Texas, nor how to maintain it with coats of paint. Karen even checked out a Learn about the East book on Chinese culture, but she found no more than two sentences about pagodas. They were sacred Chinese buildings. And their exact origins were unknown.

When the final bits of paint from the café landed on the top of Karen’s shoe, she kicked the café.
“I can’t paint you. It won’t stay on,” she said. Karen locked the doors to her café and fixed two Grease Bag Specials: a burger with fries, a soda, and one of Karen’s famous hand-made fortune cookies.

Everyone loved the way Karen’s sugary cookies broke neatly in half and melted in their mouths while they read their fortunes—fortunes personally typed and stuffed by Karen. Sometimes she borrowed passages from Proverbs, sometimes from Mark Twain’s quotations, but Karen usually relied on Fatty Jackson’s favorite saying. Remembrance comes to those who forget. Once, Millie Grayson, who only got to-go orders that her sister picked up, got suspicious when she got the same fortune three days in a row, but Karen made sure to give her some Proverb fortunes the next couple weeks. When Millie got the remembrance fortune again, she took it as a sign and tucked it in the side pouch of her purse so she would remember her predicted fortune when it came true.

Karen never included lucky lottery numbers on her fortune strips. No one sold lottery in Pier’s Point, Texas, and if anyone went to Marathon to buy a lottery ticket, Chu’s Chinese Hut served lottery numbered fortunes after every meal. But no one complained about the lack of lottery numbers. They just broke their cookies in half, read and tucked their fortune into secret wallet compartments, pants pockets, or side purse pouches, and asked Karen if they could buy some cookies for their dinner parties.

But Karen always shook her head and told them they were a specialty item only. One cookie per Grease Bag Special. She could not make cookies fast enough to sell them by themselves, and she refused to order them from a manufacturer. Manufactured cookies tended to crumble when people broke them apart to get their fortunes.
So, everyone in Pier’s Point came at least once a week to order a burger and see what their fortune would be. Karen still giggled sometimes when she laid a cookie next to a Grease Bag burger. She would never have thought to give each customer a fortune cookie had it not been for Kid Hanson.

Kid ordered sugar cones, plastic sundae dishes, and ice cream condiments—caramel and fudge syrup, nuts, maraschino cherries, whipped cream, candy sprinkles—from the Dessert and Sundry Warehouse after she drank herself into laughter during her monthly inventory. One night, Kid checked off 5 boxes of fortune cookies instead of 5 canisters of fudge syrup. It wasn’t until the D&S delivery chuck dropped off all Kid’s supplies that she realized she had boxes of fortune cookies and no fudge syrup. Kid’s customers had to settle for caramel sundaes that month, and Kid stacked the boxes of fortune cookies underneath her cleaning supply shelf until she could figure out what to do with them.

“I’ll take them from you,” Karen said after she found the boxes next to the ice bucket she borrowed from Kid. Karen tucked her wisps of hair behind her ears.

“Not much good for café food,” Kid said, but Karen gave her forty dollars for the boxes of fortune cookies, and Kid helped Karen carry them to her café.

“You going to have a Chinese Food Special?” Kid asked. She straightened and curled her hands before she swallowed the coffee Karen offered her.

“You think Pier’s Point’s ready for international food?” Karen asked. She shook her head and said she would just give them away with her burgers. A real Grease Bag Special.

But no one laughed at Karen’s joke. Instead, they asked if anything else came with fortune cookies. If she knew where to get cookies that were not so crunchy when they ate
them. So, Karen made her fortune cookies less crunchy, more sugary, and served them with every Grease Bag Special—one burger cooked to order, a side of fires, a pickle spear, a handmade fortune cookie, and a medium fountain soda.

People from Marathon and Kent came to Pier’s Point to order Grease Bag Specials. Sometimes to eat at the café, sometimes to take home. Tina Jenkins brags someone from New York City came to the restaurant while they waited to fix a flat tire. The New Yorker liked Karen’s cookies so much, she wrote up an article and sent it into Cookie Courier. But Karen was not a bragger. She left that to Tina and worried about whether she would have enough cookies for the lunch rush, or the continuous chips of paint.

“Fatty, you know how to paint?”

Fatty Jackson squeezed himself into the corner family booth with Karen and shook his head. His tan skin was getting darker than hers these days. Darker and peeling.

“Maybe you should use lotion,” Karen said between bites of her burger.

“My skin’s not dry,” Fatty said. He peeled off a piece of skin from his middle finger.

“It’s dead.”

Karen sat down her half-eaten burger and did not touch her fries or her other Grease Bag Special. She did not even peel her fortune away so she could eat her fortune cookies. Karen told Fatty she could not watch him peel his drying skin. But Fatty peeled flakes of skin from his hand, his arm until there was no skin left to peel. Then, he started on his other arm.

“Well, if you’re busy, I’m going to bed,” Karen said.
“It won’t peel much longer,” Fatty said. He stopped peeling skin and held his hand out to Karen.

“If it does, use lotion.” Karen brushed her hand over Fatty’s and pulled her bottle of moisturizer from underneath the register counter, sat it on the table in front of Fatty.

Karen watched purples chase yellows chase reds chase oranges chase blues chase greens as her sun catchers trapped sunlight in their colors. She joined in the chase, tried to catch colors on her hands, but they inched just out of her reach. The colors ran to the warm spot Karen left after she got tired of trying to catch colors. Karen sat in the red vinyl booth closest to her café door and watched the colors chase each other and not invite her to their game. She did not notice paint chips sprinkling around her. They sprinkled and floated and landed and speckled her white tile floor with red and black. Soon, Karen was caught in a downpour of paint chips, then wood, then bamboo, until nothing was left of the pagoda. Her café sat outside in the pagoda’s pile, and hungry crickets hopped onto her register counter, chirped for something to eat. Spiders and lizards and birds with eyes that glowed at night joined the crickets in their requests for food. And Karen’s sun catchers. Their colors were caught underneath a pile of glass and bamboo and paint.

“Nice job on the café,” Kid Hanson said the next morning. She made herself a pot of coffee and threw the keys to Karen. “How’d you figure it?” Kid eased herself into the booth next to the café’s door, leaned against the wall.

“Maybe you should stop drinking,” Karen said. She took the patio broom off its hook and took a swig of Kid’s coffee before she went outside to sweep paint chips from her café’s porch.
Karen’s eyes did not adjust right away. The sun was too bright that morning. She held her necklace—a rainbow sun catcher on a silver plated chain—up to the sun. Karen waited until the brightness faded before pushing her broom across her patio. Before sweeping up nothing. The paint chips had stopped their rain. In fact, the paint on the pagoda had stopped peeling, stopped exposing wood and bamboo. Karen ran her hands along the rail of her porch. The red paint was smooth and not wet underneath her hands. Everywhere she touched—the front wall of the pagoda, the door, the steps, the sides, the back—Karen felt nothing but smooth, dry paint. No cracking. No peeling. No chipping.

“How much you drink last night, Kid,” Karen said. She hung her porch broom on its hook in the back room of the café and pulled Kid’s cowboy hat off her head to wake her up.

“Not enough to go painting your pagoda,” Kid said. Kid frowned and tucked her short, brown hair behind her head before putting on her hat. “I’m too sober for your jokes this morning.”

“Guess it’s just magic, then, Kid. Magic. Magic. Magic.” Kid refused to roll her eyes at Karen’s magic talk. She listened to magic talk ever since Anthony left town that one time. Kid leaned against her booth and was surprised it had taken Karen more than a minute to blame the pagoda’s new paint on her magic.

“Two kinds of magic, Karen. Sunsets and Sunrises. And I hate sunsets.”

Karen smiled and charlestoned her way to her fryers. She turned them on and waltzed back to the refrigerator to pull out vegetables for the morning prep. Kid waited until she heard Karen whistle her broken version of some Willie Nelson song, then slid her hat over her eyes.
“No respect for cowboys,” Kid said. She closed her eyes and could not figure why Karen could never get Willie Nelson’s songs right. She grew up listening to them.

Karen filled one of her sinks with water and tossed in two heads of lettuce, six tomatoes, three onions, and emptied a bag of potatoes. She stopped whistling her Beethoven song and turned on her radio that sat on the shelf above her sinks and her prep counter. She left Willie Nelson on until she thought Kid was asleep, then put in her classical tape she secret ordered from Pier’s Point’s music club.

“Make sure you don’t tell anyone. It’ll get back to Kid, and I don’t feel like any cowboy lectures,” Karen told little Buddy Jenkins when she ordered the tape. She handed him money for the tape and the extra ten dollars she promised him to keep her secret.

“They’re gonna tell mom and she’s gonna want me to take one of them piano classes,” Buddy said. He wrinkled his freckled nose and held his hand out.

“I’m not giving you anymore money. We shook, remember?” Karen said. She gave Buddy another two dollars for ice cream at Kid’s ice cream parlor and watched him slam her café door shut. Watched paint chips fall from the door frame. “I hope you become a real piano playing genius.”

But Karen got her tape. She waited until she heard Stravinsky’s violins before peeling the outer leaves from her heads of lettuce. The violins grew louder. Karen peeled faster. She peeled off the outer layers of onions, pulled the stems from the tomatoes, and removed eyes from the potatoes. Karen chopped and diced and minced and cubed. She chopped, diced, minced, cubed her way to the end of Vivaldi, to the end of his spring, and it was not until summer that she saw Fatty standing next to her and dropped her knife.
“You still like that stuff,” Fatty said. He put his hands behind his back so Karen could not see him peel the skin around his fingernails.

“Not everyone needs words to make music,” Karen said. She picked up her knife and wiped it off on her overalls before she continued her chopping.

“Don’t know why you hide your music,” Fatty said.

“I tell Kid, she gives me hell. She tells Tina Jenkins. Tina tells Ms. Grayson. Ms. Grayson tells the whole church at potluck dinner. Calen Paulson tells the guys at the hardware store. Before you know it, I’m on the front page of Pier’s Point Weekly and Mitchell Gordon is wanting to come over on Saturday and talk about the feel of the music.”

Karen pulled the Tupperware containers she bought from Tina Jenkins from the shelf above her sinks. She dumped in her lettuce, her onions, her tomatoes, her chopped french fries. “I just want to listen to my music in the morning without everyone wanting to know if this is a sign of Armageddon.”

Fatty nodded. He leaned against a stack of milk crates and looked for skin on his arms. There was no more to peel, and his skin was still tan. Ever since he swallowed those three bottles of tanning pills, his skin never lost its tan. And the fat from his forehead and his cheeks pushed his eyes into permanent squints. With his tan skin, his squinted eyes, his silk sheets he had Tina sew into shorts for him, and his Pier’s Point High tank top that barely touched the top of his shorts, Fatty thought he looked like a varsity team sumo wrestler if Pier’s Point had a sumo wrestling team. No wonder Karen thought he was her father.

Anthony Morgan was Karen Jones’ father. He never denied that. No one in town ever denied he was her father. No one but Karen. Ever since she was a baby, Karen laughed
when Anthony held her too close. Anthony with his bleach white skin and too green eyes. Anthony with one crooked tooth in the back of his mouth that twisted and cut into his cheek when he made kissing faces at Karen. Anthony who called Karen his daughter. His only daughter.

It wasn't that Karen did not love Anthony. He was the only person besides Kid and Fatty who never asked why her eyes were slanted, why she did not speak Korean. At night, he helped her read her Curious George books and work on her handwriting. He even let her live with him in the pagoda. And truth was, Karen accepted Anthony as her father. Her adopted father. She just did not believe he was her father. He spent too much time talking about fire and never tanned in the sun. And Anthony's explanations about how he was her father were too ordinary for Karen. Too ordinary for a girl with magic powers.

Ever since she read The Magic Finger in third grade, Karen knew she had magical powers. The story itself did not reveal Karen's magic powers, but rather the fact that Fatty Jackson appeared at the exact moment she pointed her finger at the Miller brothers. Only at the time, Karen did not know Fatty Jackson had appeared.

The Miller brothers were fifth graders noted throughout third grade for pulling the back of their victim's underwear until it wedged in between their victim's rear ends. One third grader was rumored to have been found hanging from a hook that stuck out of the tire swing post. The Miller brothers hung him by the back of his underwear when school let out on Friday. And even though his parents formed a search party, he was not found until Sunday. His underwear soiled, and his pinkie finger dead from frost bite.
The Miller brothers never picked on kindergarten through second graders. Their teachers shepherded them too closely. The minute one of those kids hollered, a teacher would stealth their way over and send the bully to the principal’s office for harming one of their flock. And the Miller brothers never picked on kids in fourth or fifth grade. All those kids were too big. Third graders were their targets of choice. Third grade was the start of freedom. Teachers did not keep as close an eye on them during recess, after school, or in the halls. They wanted to start teaching the kids about independence, and this meant teachers could go to the lounge while their kids took bathroom breaks, played on the school grounds, or got on their buses or walked home.

The particular week Karen read The Magic Finger, the Miller brothers targeted in on Karen. They did not like her slanted eyes or the fact she did not make a face when they called her gook. Karen just buried her nose further in her book and walked sometimes ran to the nearest escape. But on Thursday, one Miller brother ran after Karen while the other waited for her on the other side of the schoolyard.

“We’ll teach you to be scared, Gook,” the fatter Miller brother said. He and his brother inched Karen close to the school wall that read Pier’s Point Elementary.

“I’ve got a magic finger,” Karen said. “Go back now, and I won’t use it on you.” She was glad she wore the dress that hung around her ankles. She did not want the Miller brothers to see her knees knock against each other.

“And I’ve got magic hands for magic wedgies,” the skinnier Miller brother said.
Karen pointed her finger with the chewed fingernail at both Miller brothers and told them to go away. And as quickly as the Miller brothers came, they went. Karen looked at her finger and saw nothing but the chewed fingernail.

"You’re okay," a voice behind her said. The voice tickled its way down Karen’s neck before she turned around and saw nothing but the school building wall.

From that day on, the Miller brothers did not come near Karen. In fact, every time she saw them eyeing another third grader, she pointed her finger at them, and every time, the Miller brothers ran. Karen was the new third grade hero. Her magic powers earned her brownies from kids’ lunch boxes. Girls and boys who laughed at her and called her nerd and teacher’s pet when she read her books at recess or stayed after class to clean the chalk board, now invited her over after school or to their weekend slumber parties. Karen got first choice of cookies and grab bags during school parties. Kids gave her their favorite stickers, pieces of candy, brand new pencils, stationary. One boy even asked her to be his girlfriend and promised her his collection of Pez if she said yes. For the rest of third grade and most of fourth grade, every time Karen pointed at something with her magic finger, she either got what she pointed at, or it disappeared if she did not like it.

By fifth grade, the kids were tired of doing everything Karen said, but they were too afraid of her magic powers. They still remembered the new boy from last year who threw things at Karen during math hour. He sat behind Karen and kicked at her seat until she turned around. He then threw wadded notebook paper, plastic bouncing balls, pencils, erasers, miniature candy bars, school yard pebbles, crickets, and plastic army soldiers at the back of Karen’s head.
“I don’t like girls who order everyone around,” the new boy said.

“I don’t like boys who throw things,” Karen said. She turned around and squinted her eyes even smaller. “And I hope you never throw things again.” She pointed her finger with the chewed fingernail at the new boy, touched her fingertip to the biggest freckle on his nose.

The next day, the new kid’s desk was empty. Ms. Grayson told everyone he moved to a new school in Abilene. Janie Wilson, the girl who lived close to the new boy told everyone at lunch that Ms. Grayson lied. She never saw a moving van in front of the boy’s house. All their furniture and pictures were still inside their living room. The boy’s bike was still parked next to the side of the garage. She even saw his parents get into their car while she waited in her driveway for the school bus.

Everyone in Ms. Grayson’s class knew Karen made the new boy disappear. Ms. Grayson was covering for what the adults could not explain. Karen lowered her head inside her denim jacket and told the new kid she was sorry. She did not really mean to make him go away. She just wanted him to stop throwing things.

At recess, Janie Wilson looked over her shoulders before telling fifth graders from other classes about the new boy’s disappearance. They put their arms around each other and formed a huddle to prevent their words from reaching too close to Karen. Everyone agreed Karen’s powers seemed to come from her hand. She always pointed her hand when things happened.

“We have to cut her power off,” a boy from Mr. Harris’ class said. “They kill dragons in the heart. They cut horns from the unicorns. We have to take Karen’s hand off.”
“But will it still be alive?” Janie Wilson said.

Karen waited until Ms. Grayson and Mr. Harris laughed before she slipped in the back door. She kept her magic finger bent until she got to Ms. Grayson’s classroom and opened the new boy’s desk. She pulled out Bazooka Joe wrappers and half-used pencil wrappers and a spelling book and a math book and a quarter and a red-covered notebook that said Class Journal.

“Please come back,” Karen said. She pointed her finger at everything from the boy’s desk. “I don’t want you to go away. I want you to come back.”

Karen flipped through the new boy’s journal. She read about the wooden car race in Boy Scouts, his dad who backed over his dog, the third place badge he got at summer camp, why he did not like bean and sausage soup, the way his mom looked at him when he kicked the back of the pew in church, the way his dad touched him when his mom went to bed, and why he did not want to live with his grandma.

After the kids voted to bury Karen’s hand next to the tire swing, the boy from Mr. Harris’ class told everyone he had a camping knife in his pocket. He brought it for show and tell, but Mr. Harris showed a movie instead. Janie, the boy, and the others nodded and unclasped themselves from the huddle. Karen was not in the wooden tower above the monkey bars. Karen liked the tower. She heard the kids whispers in the tower.

The kids slipped opened the side door of the school and tip-toed to each door. When they got to Ms. Grayson’s class, they found Karen reading the boys journal.

“I can’t believe she’s taking his stuff,” one of the kids said.
Janie opened the door, and the rest of the kids ran in behind her. Janie grabbed one of Karen’s arms while a boy with freckles pinned her magic hand down. The other kids grabbed her legs, put their hands over her mouth. The boy with the camping knife pulled the knife from his pocket. Karen coughed from all the salt she swallowed from the kids’ hands.

The boy did not close his eyes when he cut into Karen’s wrist. He pulled the knife from her wrist to get a better grip on her arm. And at first, Karen’s wrist did not bleed. It pulsed and showed the flesh underneath. When the boy cut into her wrist again, red filled the valley his cut made.

Karen tried to straighten her fingers, but she could not move them, and then, like that, the cutting stopped, the gripping stopped, the salty taste in her mouth stopped. The kids pressed their feet heel-to-toe as they backed out Ms. Grayson’s door. Their I’m sorries slid across their lips and bounced around the white walls of the classroom.

Karen screamed for the first time when Fatty Jackson held Karen’s cut wrist in his hand. He touched the red from her cut with his finger, and Karen saw her cut was no bigger than the one she got over her right eyebrow when Anthony Morgan accidentally threw a rock at her. The red in her cut turned pink then white then scab then flesh. Had it not been for the hand prints on her arms and legs, Karen thought she might have imagined the kids were cutting her hand off.

“You’re okay,” Fatty said.

“I’ve heard you before. The Miller brothers,” Karen said. She tried not to look at the bunions on his bare feet. Instead, she focused on his tan skin, his squinted eyes. Skin and eyes like hers.
“I’ve seen you before. I’m Fatty Jackson,” Fatty said. He released his grasp from Karen’s wrist and pulled his shorts up. “I’m sorry I left so quickly before.”

“It’s my magic,” Karen said. She rubbed the place where her cut was against the side of her denim jacket. “You left because of my magic.”

But Fatty Jackson did not leave Karen again. He followed her home to the Chinese pagoda before its paint started to chip, before people ordered Grease Bag specials, before red vinyl booths and white tile floors, before it was the café. When they got home, Karen threw her denim jacket onto the bookshelf next to the door.

“I have to leave. You’re okay now,” Fatty said. He pulled his silk shorts from his legs and turned around.

“Wait, I want you to meet Anthony,” Karen said. But when she called, Anthony did not answer. Karen looked in the bathroom, in Anthony’s bedroom, out back, but Anthony was not there.

“Your Dad had to go,” Kid said when Karen came out of Anthony’s bedroom. “He had to go say good-bye to someone. You can stay with me until he comes back.”

“He’s not my father, Kid,” Karen said. “He’s adopted. And I don’t like staying in your ice cream parlor at night. Smells too much like Mr. Henry.”

Kid pulled a grass blade that wedged itself in-between her boot tip and her boot, threw the blade of grass into the trash can. She told Karen she would call for her at dinner and shuffled out the door. Karen waited until Kid was gone before she started crying.

“I didn’t want you to go away, Anthony,” Karen said. She curled her magic finger and promised not to use it again.
“Anthony your Dad?” Fatty said.

“Not my Dad,” Karen said. She grabbed a tissue from a box on the coffee table.

“Just a guy who needs a daughter.”

***

“Time to open the parlor,” Karen said. She sat her Tupperware containers in the prep cooler across from the fryers and went to lift Kid’s hat off her head.

“I’m going. I swear you got to learn to keep keys,” Kid said. She shuffled her way to the café door and caught the keys Karen tossed to her before she opened the door and went to open her ice cream parlor.

Ever since Anthony left to say good-bye, Karen had trouble keeping her keys. She sat them on her bookshelf, and they ended up in the bathroom. She sat them in the bathroom, they ended up in her book bag. When she locked herself out of the pagoda, she asked Kid to keep her keys for her after Kid found them on her ice cream counter. Kid mumbled something about how she hated responsibility, about how cowboys had to be free, but she kept Karen’s keys and let her in and out of the pagoda. Never told Karen she liked having to keep a watch on her.

Karen walked onto the porch of her café and waved across the street at Kid. She ran her finger with the chewed fingernail across the paint on the pagoda’s wall.

“Guess it’s still there,” she said. She pointed her finger at Kid’s ice cream parlor.

“Make her stop being grumpy.”

Karen walked back inside her café, grabbed two towels soaked in floor cleaner and water. She took off her shoes, rolled up her overalls, and put the towels under her feet, made
figure eight’s as she skated across the white tile floor with her towels. After she cleaned the floor, Karen left her shoes off and put grease paper in her burger baskets and said something to Fatty about good old Kid after the classical music stopped playing. She did not realize it was Kid at first when the door to the café opened back up, and someone stomped to the counter.

“Anthony’s dead,” Kid said. She took off her hat and walked around to the other side of the register counter. Kid waited for her words to find Karen’s ears before she held out her arms and ran her fingers through Karen’s black, black hair.
CHAPTER TWO

Anthony Morgan had one eye shut when Tina Jenkins and Millie Grayson walked out of Jack’s diner and found his body on the bench where Main Street crossed Kellogg Street. In his arms, Anthony held a half-burned crocheted rug made with strips of sheets and old shirts.

“You think he just don’t want to answer us,” Millie said. She touched the side of Anthony’s face, felt warm and cool. Her purse with the flowers on it swung back and forth into Anthony’s knee.

“No, he’s dead,” Tina said. She pulled Millie’s purse back to keep it from hitting Anthony’s knee. “Don’t disrespect him with your purse.”

“I can’t help how my purse swings. And he’s dead. He can’t feel it swinging on his knee.” Millie pulled her purse from Tina’s hands, watched as the contents from her purse—the compact, the three shades of pink lipstick, the mascara, the two packages of travel size tissue, the pocket bible in King James and New American versions, the roll of cherry antacids, the extra pair of pantyhose, the half-eaten tootsie pop with wrapper, and the handcuff keys—poured onto the sidewalk next to Anthony’s bench.

“Still cuffing Max to his desk?” Tina said.
“He’s got the mini refrigerator and the television on his bookshelf. And he’s got enough room to pee out the window. The window’s the man’s toilet all his life, and when he’s forced to use it, he complains.”

“You ever going to forgive him?” Tina said. Millie put her contents back in her purse, gave her a safety pin to pin the broken strap to her purse.

“I still haven’t forgiven you,” Millie said, “But I can’t go handcuffing my sister to her desk. People will think I’m crazy.”

Anthony’s leg slipped from the bench, hit Tina in the back of her leg. Tina put her arms around Millie then dropped them when Millie gave her that look with the pursed lips.

“Guess we better tell someone about, Anthony,” Tina said.

“I’m not telling Karen,” Millie said. She pulled her purse close to her and shook. She could still feel the quiet the kids made that day after recess. The quiet and the stares. Stares at Karen. Karen kept her hair tied back in a pony tail for the rest of that year and never looked up. She stared at her desk and whispered things about fatties and magic. Soon after that, Millie found out she was pregnant and found Tina’s perfume and lipstick on Max’s Sunday shirt. The quiet and the stares and Karen’s whispers pounded at her stomach.

Almost four months after Millie got pregnant, Karen pointed her finger and said go away, go away. And Millie sweat and felt the quiet and stares and whispers circle around the happy face banner and birthday calendar on Millie’s bulletin board. They circled until Millie joined their circling and fell to the cool of the tile floor. That night in the hospital, Millie heard nothing but Karen’s whispers as she bled and the doctors told her there was nothing they could do for the baby.
Tina knew Millie blamed her miscarriage on Karen.

“She’s got something evil in her,” Millie told her after her miscarriage.

“She’s a fifth grader. All fifth graders got something evil in them,” Tina said. She remembered how she used to pull Millie’s skirt up on the bus to show everyone her weekday panties.

“No, they all get quiet when they’re around her.”

“She’s different. You been teaching long enough. You know kids don’t like kids who are different.” Tina thought about the kids who laughed at her, then her sister to tears when they wore braces. “Besides, evil or not. Karen did not make your miscarriage happen. Doctor told you it was because you weren’t eating.”

Tina sat behind her sister and brushed her hair. She knew Millie really wanted to blame her and Max. After she found out about the affair, she did not eat, not even when she found out she was pregnant. Somehow, Karen ended up being her scapegoat. Not her malnutrition. Not Max. Not Tina. And there was nothing Tina could say to make Millie change her mind.

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“Kid doesn’t have a phone and Jack’s busy. Guess that leave Caleb,” Tina said. She grabbed Millie’s hand and marched her over to Caleb’s hardware store.

Caleb had his sleeves rolled up to his elbows, and he shook the hand of a skinny man in a wrinkled, wool suit. The man picked up his briefcase and told Caleb he would send the papers as Tina and Millie clop-clopped their high heels over to Caleb.
“Buying a new suit?” Tina said. She and Caleb held their handshake longer than they should.

“We’re not here about Caleb’s clothes. We’re here to tell him Anthony’s dead,” Millie said. She sat her purse on the counter and bought some batteries, asked if Caleb would tell Kid to tell Karen.

Caleb released Tina’s hand and rolled his sleeves up once more. He straightened his collar until it licked the bottom of his hair and marched over to Anthony’s bench with the girls. Anthony’s leg laid draped over the bench, and he still had one eye open. With his cleaner hand, Caleb pushed Anthony’s eye shut. Caleb squatted down and put Anthony over his shoulders. He knew the funeral home was not open yet. The manager of the Horn Bellow funeral home never opened up early the way Jake Martinez used to when he owned the funeral home.

Jake even gave the funeral home his last name. Martinez Undertaking. Jake liked his work. Liked making bodies up so people could remember their loved ones the way they used to be. He had a touch, and Caleb liked that about Jake. Liked the way he cared. The way he treated the dead good for the living. Caleb did the best he could for his friend when he died. He powdered Jake’s face and dressed him in the Neiman Marcus suit he could never bring himself to buy. There were always those donations to families who could not afford a good funeral that stopped Jake from buying his suit. At that particular moment when he knew the funeral home was not open the way it used to be, Caleb missed Jake all over again.

Caleb walked with Anthony over his shoulders to his hardware store, and Millie opened the door for him. She followed in after him, let the door shut in front of Tina.
“Poor guy,” Caleb said. “Met him when Fatty fell through the pagoda. He just wanted a good place to raise Karen.”

“Lot of raising he did,” Millie said. She pulled her half-eaten tootsie pop from her purse and took it out of the wrapper. Said good for him Karen never claimed him as her father before sticking the tootsie pop in her mouth and coughing from sucking to quickly.

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Kid did not shut the door to her ice cream parlor after Caleb and Tina told her about Anthony.

“Figured she’d rather hear it from you,” Caleb said. He shook Kid’s hand and told her Anthony was at the hardware store until Horn Bellow opened.

“Not like when Jake was around,” Kid said. Caleb nodded and put his arm on Tina’s back as they crossed the street to walk to his hardware store. Kid waited until she was inside the café to take off her hat, to pay her respect. Kid stroked the rest of the paint chips out of Karen’s hair and told her Anthony’s body was at Caleb’s store.

“Not my father. My adopted one,” Karen said.

Kid did not shake her head. She let Karen take what she needed from Kid’s hug. Now was not the time to argue with her about Anthony. The last time they argued about Anthony, Kid and Karen did not speak to each other for a month. Kid only cracked the door open and skipped her usual morning cup of coffee. At night, Kid waited until Karen turned off her lights before locking up. She did not stop in to say good night. She just locked the door and went over to her ice cream parlor to drink her vodka and go to bed. It was a lonely month. Karen did not need that month now.
“Leave the door unlocked. Someone might need to come in,” Karen said when Kid pulled the keys out of her pocket to lock up the café. Karen stuffed what was left of yesterday’s fortune cookies, mostly proverb fortunes, into a plastic bag. The bag swung next to Karen’s side as she and Kid walked down the steps of the pagoda.

Main Street napped that day. It always napped on Sundays. Jack, Kid, Karen, and Caleb were the only ones who ever opened on Sundays. Jack only opened his diner for breakfast; Caleb kept his hardware store open until lunch or until he and Jack finished talking about camping stories.. Karen kept the Grease Bag open until she got tired, and Kid never really closed the ice cream parlor. It was not unusual to find people in Kid’s parlor at midnight eating ice cream sundaes and drinking beer or vodka with Kid. No one really liked whiskey. No one but Mr. Henry, but since he died, Kid stopped buying whiskey from the Sundry Warehouse. If she still had some sober left in her, she locked the door before she tipped her hat over her eyes and fell asleep, boots on, in the front booth of her parlor.

After reading Alcohol: The Lethal Liquid, Karen sat down in the booth next to Kid and called her an alcoholic.

“Only two pleasures I got in life. And I stopped doing the other one,” Kid said. She smiled and sipped on her bottle of vodka while Karen continued her book-of-the-week lecture. Karen always lectured after she finished a book she bought or checked out from the library. After The Easy Guide to Painting, Karen told Kid she needed to use up and down strokes instead of side to side strokes. She showed Karen how to fold her paper napkins into grass leaves the week she read Essential Origami for Effective Place Settings. But when Kid fell off her table after Karen put black shoe polish underneath Kid’s eyes and told her to
stomp on her table and bang her spoon against her ice cream soda glass, Kid took to sipping her vodka. She did not care that *Spiritual Reawakening and the Self* said nothing about drinking.

“Think they’ll be able to take him to Horn Bellow before Monday,” Karen said. She wiped her bare feet on the welcome mat in front of Caleb’s hardware store, walked in the door Kid opened for her.

Karen felt melting ice cream when she touched Anthony’s face. His body cooled since Caleb took him from the bench’s sunlight. He wore the orange shoe laces Karen gave and held a half-burned crocheted rug to his chest. Karen bit at the nub of her fingernail, tried to find some nail to bite off. She bent over his head, her rainbow sun catcher necklace swinging back and forth, back and forth against him. Karen wiped wisps of hair from his ear and whispered something into his ear that made his body shake, shake on top of Caleb’s wood cutting counter.

Karen tugged at the half-burned rug in Anthony’s arms, but it would not budge, and Caleb would not help her pry his arms open to get it out. He did not want to upset Anthony, not now.

“He’s dead,” Karen said.

“And he died holding his rug. Let him be happy,” Caleb said. He held his mouth and coughed out the “for once” into his fist. Stuffed his fist in his pocket to muffle his words.

Ever since Anthony came back that time he left town, that time Karen brought Fatty home to meet Anthony, Karen found Anthony in bed hugging his pillow or mouthing words
she could not hear. Anthony never told Karen where he went. She never asked. She just knew he was lost. He stopped reading to her, stopped fighting her about being her father, stopped everything but stroking her hair at night. But even those sessions grew quicker and quicker until Anthony threw Karen her keys and told her he could not take it. She didn’t want him as her father, and he was out. He stayed with Kid for awhile, then disappeared in and out of Main Street. Occasionally, Karen would hear of an Anthony sighting. He bought bread at Kroger. He brought the fish he caught to Caleb. He told Ruth Phizer or any other woman “no” when they asked him to dinner. He bought a house in-between Pier’s Point and Marathon.

Karen was twelve when Anthony left. He pretty much turned into a ghost after he left. Anthony was here. Anthony was there. Anthony said this. But Karen never saw him. Not until she was twenty-three and opened the Grease Bag Café for the first time. He wore his belt cinched to the last belt hole, an old cowboy shirt of Kid’s, and a pair of jeans with the price tag still on them.

“Just came to see you open,” Anthony said. He gave Karen a box with a crocheted rug inside. Karen recognized the scraps Anthony used for her rug. His shirt she wore to bed when she was in elementary skill, the one that tickled her knees when she walked. The sheet they used to make a magic tent, so no monsters or ghosts could get Karen. The blanket Anthony bought for Karen after he decided he could not cover her in his denim jacket forever.
Karen laid Anthony’s rug in front of her register counter and told Anthony she had something for him. She pulled out the orange shoe laces from her old running shoes and stuffed them in a box before she gave them to Anthony.

“I know you like orange,” she said. Karen asked Anthony if he wanted a burger. He could be her first customer. And he was. He was also the last that day. No one came to Karen’s store. Not even Kid. She and Kid argued over Anthony and were not speaking.

After he ate his burger, licked the ketchup and mustard from his fingers, Anthony took out his old shoe laces and weaved his new ones into his shoes. He told Karen he hoped her café did well and shook her hand with her magic finger.

“Aren’t you going to say it,” Karen said. She opened her arms to give Anthony a hug.

“Tired of your answer,” Anthony said. “Whoever he is, I hope he’s good to you.” Anthony pushed on the brass dragon door handle and creaked his way down the pagoda’s steps.

Karen yelled good-byes and she was glad he finally stopped the I’m your fathers. What kind of father would leave a daughter anyway? Anthony walk, walk, walked down the street until Karen’s words stopped hitting his ears. He sat on a green bench across from Caleb’s hardware store and whistled. He could not think of anything else to do.

That night, Karen waited for Kid’s crickets to chirp and keep her company, but they never came. The sun set. The street lights came on. Karen did not know why she could not just call Anthony her dad. Everyone in town, even Kid, accepted it. But every time she saw Anthony, she denied him as her father. When he left her, left Kid to watch out for her, Karen
solidified he was not her father. And deep down, Karen believed Fatty Jackson was her father. But she never told anyone about this. Half the town already thought she was crazy after what happened to her in elementary school.

But Fatty was everything magic, everything father to Karen. He had the same tan skin, squinted eyes, black hair, and bloated feet she had. He saved her hand from the kids in elementary school. He knew what it was like to be outcast for his magic. Half the town would not talk to Karen. No one but Karen talked to Fatty.

Anthony followed Karen and sat down with her next to Caleb. Nobody said much but poor guy and Karen’s mumbled, I should have told him. He stroked Karen’s hair one last time before Lee Young and his wife came for him, held out their hands to him. He would miss her hair. Miss her sitting in-between his legs while he parted it and braided each side. Miss the way it bounced when he told her he was her father and she laughed. But he could do nothing but miss now. Lee Young told Anthony it was up to her now. She had to figure out. His wife nodded. And before he could say good-bye to Karen, good-bye to his body, Anthony was gone.

Tina put her hand over Millie’s mouth before she offered her condolences to Karen. Millie puckered her lips to keep from tasting rayon and needle pricks. Kid shuffled back to her store to get beer, and when she returned, Caleb gave everyone a sack of nails and dealt everyone a five card poker hand. Karen opened her bag of fortune cookies and offered them around. Caleb stuffed his entire cookie including fortune in his mouth and chewed. Tina Jenkins took out two cookies, handed one to Millie. Kid took the cookie at the bottom of the bag, and Karen just reached for one. After he finished chewing, Caleb pulled his fortune out
of his mouth, and everyone took turns reading their fortunes. Tina, Millie, and Caleb got Proverbs. Kid got a Mark Twain quote. And Karen got the *Remembrance comes to those who forget.*

“You should have told him,” Kid said. She swallowed her beer. “I know this ain’t the place, Karen. But it never is with you. Even if you ain’t going to believe it, you should have told him once.”

Karen saw the nod in Tina and Millie’s eyes. She saw the way Caleb turned his head, the way Kid stared straight back in Karen’s eyes. And Karen stood up, uncuffed her overalls. She said she was going to the café. She should not have come to see Anthony.
CHAPTER THREE

Karen closed the lid to her prep cooler and turned off her open sign. She did not feel like feeding people anymore today. She closed the door to her café and wished she could keep keys better. She did not feel like going back to Caleb’s hardware store and asking Kid for her keys. Karen pulled the green apron caked with fortune cookie dough off from its hook, picked dried dough from her apron. She had not washed her apron since she made her first batch of cookies. She let dough cake onto the apron’s material, let it store until she made her next batch of cookies, let it store so she could remember how her cookies tasted, how they were supposed to taste.

Karen smoothed soap around and in-between her fingers, lathered her hands, rinsed while soap bubbled and swirled its way down her prep sink’s drain. Karen turned off her radio on the shelf above her prep sink and pulled out her containers of sugar and flour from her dry storage. She found her bottle of nutmeg and the pages of her favorite books she ground until they shook out of their salt container like spice. Karen grabbed her butter, her vanilla, her water, and what was left of her tea powder. She pulled out her copper mixing bowl from underneath her bed and did not hum while she poured and mixed her fortune cookie dough. Fortune cookies took concentration, especially when she used her hands to press and fold the soft, baked dough into shape. It was important to get each fortune exactly
in the center of the dough, to fold it, shape it, pinch it closed before the dough cooled and hardened. Karen opened her Tupperware container and separated the small strips of paper she had bundled into stacks of Proverbs, Mark Twain, and Fatty Jackson. She separated each fortune, placed it in the middle of her fortune cookies, folded the dough in half, squeezed and pushed her cookies into fortune shape. She separated, placed, folded, squeezed and pushed, did not notice the paper cuts the fortunes made on her thumbs and forefingers. Karen pulled out her last batch of cookies, reached for the last of her fortunes, but there were no fortunes left.

Her cookies did not have much time before they hardened flat and circular. So, Karen folded squeezed and pushed her cookies into shape, no fortunes inside. Karen washed blood and dough from her fingers, felt her fortune’s sting as soap and water filled the gaps the paper cuts made in her hands. Karen wiped away traces of fortune cookie dough from her counter, untied and hung her dough stained apron back on its hook. She put her cookies into a Tupperware container, sat down in the corner family booth and realized how quite, how alone her café was without customers.

The Lion’s gumball machine glass sat dulled underneath all the fingerprints that tapped and shook the glass, hoping, waiting for their favorite gumball color. The fryer did not make its usual hiss and steam every time Karen dropped in a new batch of french fries. The café’s walls were yellowed from grease and dust and conversation. Karen did not usually notice how yellow the café’s walls were, but without conversation bouncing from them, giving them life, they were nothing but walls that needed a new coat of paint. The mirrors on the back wall of the café held fingerprints, reminders of absent customers. Even
the red vinyl booths showed how empty they were without customers bodies making their indentions against the vinyl. They sat, waiting to make their sigh as customers eased their way into them. But Karen’s sun catchers still shined.

Karen walked towards her sun catchers. She stood on the booth closest to one of her windows that was covered in sun catchers, looked for the unicorn in the middle. Anthony bought her the unicorn sun catcher the first time he realized Karen was afraid of the sun. She did not like the way it came through the pagoda’s window, the way it touched and warmed her skin. The way it took her sight when she looked at it. She sat in pure light for almost half an hour unable to find her way around the pagoda or to Anthony’s voice when he asked her what she wanted for dinner.

“The light,” Karen said. “I can’t see anything but the light.”

After she got her sight back, Karen stayed in the dark parts of the pagoda where the sun could not reach—underneath her bed, in her closet, behind the bookshelves. When she went to school, she wore her denim jacket, Anthony’s old denim jacket, a ski mask, sunglasses, long sleeve shirts, blue jeans, shoes, socks, and gloves. She sweated until she breathed in her own moisture and almost drowned, but at least the sun could not get to her. And when she decided she could not handle the sweat and asked Anthony to home school her, he went to the drugstore next to Caleb’s hardware store and bought the last sun catcher. A glitter white unicorn with a yellow mane and purple eyes and a horn.

Karen sat in the chair next to the turned off lamp and watched Anthony hang the unicorn on the pagoda’s wall. The white and purple and yellow caught parts of the sun and cast their colored triangles on the pagoda’s floor.
“See, they catch the light for you. Break it into colors. And colors never blinded anyone,” Anthony said. He helped Karen up to the window so she could look through the sun catcher at the sun’s light. No blindness, just color.

When the new shipment of sun catchers arrived from the drug store, Anthony made Karen a necklace from a silver plated chain and a rainbow sun catcher. To catch all the sun’s light. Karen wore her necklace everywhere the sun was, warded away its brightness with her necklace. She and Anthony picked out frogs and puppies and crosses and cars and happy faces and windmills and flowers to stick on the pagoda’s windows. And every day for almost two years, Anthony or Kid gave Karen a new sun catcher until all of the sun’s light that came through the pagoda was a mixture of colors that made small triangle and circle and square shapes on everything the colors touched.

Karen found the unicorn in-between a pencil and a bless our home. It’s white had yellowed, and there was a purple chip missing from its horn, but it was still there.

“You wanted so bad to be him,” Karen said. “Kid’s right. Maybe I just should have told you.” Karen pointed her finger with the chewed fingernail at the missing purple in the unicorn’s horn, but nothing happened.

“Guess I should have told you I knew,” Fatty Jackson said. He sat in the corner booth where it was darkest in the café. “I knew about your father.” Fatty reached, reached from the corner booth in the back of the café, reached until he touched Karen’s unicorn, made the missing purple come back. As Karen sat next to Fatty in the corner booth of her Grease Bag Café she realized for the first time, the magic powers she found in third grade never belonged to her.
“You’re magic,” Karen said. She bit her bottom lip, wiped the wisp of hair from her face. “You never told me they were your powers.”

“It’s not what you think, Karen,” Fatty put his arm around Karen’s wrist. “I don’t have powers.”

“My cut, the way it healed. Appearing without me seeing you. Fixing the unicorn’s horn. It was you, Fatty. It’s been you the whole time.”

Fatty knew what was coming next. He tried to adjust himself on the vinyl booth, but his skin stuck to the vinyl.

“And you never told me,” Karen curled and uncurled her finger, the one, until now she thought was magic.

“Karen, you know. You’ve always known,” Fatty said, but Karen slid out the other end of the family booth and kicked at a mustard stained napkin on the floor. She kicked the napkin all the way to the door and told Fatty she wanted him to leave. Don’t come back again, but it was Karen who opened the door to her café and creaked down the steps of her pagoda. Karen who did not bother to put her shoes on before she creaked down the pagoda’s steps. She sat on the edge of the fountain in front of her pagoda and watched her neon butterfly sign flicker open, open, open. Karen splashed her face with water from the woman’s jar in the middle of the fountain, scooped up a piece of concrete from the fountain. Karen saw the cracked place in the fountain someone had made with their car. She wet the crack down with water from the fountain, told it to get well. Then, Karen got up from the fountain and walked down main street. She walked past Kid’s ice cream parlor, past Tina Jenkin’s Dress Shop, past what used to be Linda Wright’s photography store, past the drug
store, past Jack's Diner, past Caleb's hardware store. Karen turned her necklace around as she felt the sun hit her back. She turned on to Kellogg street and walked until she got to the road that led out of Pier's Point.
CHAPTER FOUR

The skinny man in the wrinkled, wool suit sat his briefcase in the passenger’s seat of his rental truck. Inside the briefcase, pens, a cellular phone, a calculator, and the draft papers for purchasing Caleb and Crew Hardware store and rattled as the man took back roads—dirt and gravel roads—to the highway that led to Midland/Odessa airport.

But Max Garret did not have Caleb and Crew Hardware Store on his mind. He had nothing but Winkering on his mind. Winkering, Texas, population 1145. The department of transportation wanted to build a highway from east to west. East to West. The department of transportation wanted to connect East Texas to West Texas. That’s what the members of the transportation board told Max the day they sent him to Winkering. The board members sat behind their conference table and adjusted their ties and told Max they needed to go through Winkering to make their final highway connection. And once that connection was made, the highway could get started. Winkering was the last western town before the transportation board could start connecting East Texas to West Texas, but no one from Winkering had responded to the board members’ letters, letters that asked the residents to sell their land so the highway could go through. The board members thought the residents did not want to sell their land. They thought the residents did not understand what a highway connecting East to West would do for the West.

But Winkering residents knew exactly what the highway meant. They saw it happen to Alpine when residents let the department of transportation build Highway 45 through their
Main Street. Saw how highways pushed the town further and further from the highway until a person had to be looking for the town to find it. How family businesses and local restaurants died when the highway allowed Conoco’s and Exxon’s with their car washes and convenience stores to grow next to the highway. How Wal-Marts and Targets and McDonald’s and Burger Kings bought land to plant their stores along exits near the highway. Winkering residents knew how Alpine slowly died until there was nothing but a couple houses, an abandoned gas station, a diner with laminated menus and grease-spotted walls at every table, and a post office to prove the town once existed. Those Alpine residents who could moved in with families, with friends, and mourned their town. Those that had no one nearby moved to Winkering, moved away from the highway and all its convenience.

But Max Garret never saw how highways destroyed small towns, made new highway towns. Max believed in highways in expansion, in anything that helped make things more convenient for small towns. Max grew up in Ft. Hood, Texas, before he went to Hardin-Simmons University. Before he contracted land for the department of transportation to build more highways. Max knew about small town Texans. Knew about driving for an hour to go see a movie besides the one Lee’s Theatre kept for two months at a time. Knew about waiting for six to eight weeks for the post office to deliver his mountain bike since there was no store besides his parents’ general store in town. And Max knew what it was like to have the only girl in his graduating high school class of three to choose his best friend over him. Max was small town Texas to the department of transportation. He was the one with chapped lips and hair full of dust and dirt. The one with the suit jackets that had so many patches his bosses had trouble finding any jacket material. The one who, instead of women,
fell in love with highways and what they could do for people. Max was the kid from Ft. Hood who was pushing his mid-thirties but still kept his freckled face and his freckled talk. And this was important to the transportation board. Max Garret knew how to talk to small town Texas, how to make friends with them, how to get them to sell their land to him. And Max thought he was helping to build something. He thought he was helping to make new towns out of old town. Helping to make new life.

But even though Max thought he was helping make new life with his highways, he did not want to touch West Texas. Even though he wanted to help small towns grow, there was something about the West he did not want to touch. One of the members of the transportation board bit his lip while he waited for Max’s answer about going to Winkering. Another member leaned back in his chair towards a map of Texas hung up with push pins on the conference room bulletin board. He rested the back of his bald head against pink post-it notes, the Gulf of Mexico, and the bottom part of Texas.

“I don’t understand why you want to connect East to West,” Max said. He rubbed his hands together, tried to warm them in the air-conditioned room.

The board members fanned themselves with copies of Max’s Winkering contract. They fanned and told him they wanted to connect the untouched parts of West Texas. They wanted a scenic kind of highway. People could leave the east and drive into the sunsets. They could see the mesas and plateaus through their car windows, and they would not have to worry about getting dust of bugs stuck in the back of their throat. Dust and bugs were too inconvenient, and the department of transportation did not want its drivers inconvenienced.
The board member with his head rested against Texas leaned his chair forward, but the map stuck to the back of his baldness for a moment. A pink post-it note with East Shore Drilling written on it stuck to the back of the board member's head, pink on flesh, but he did not move his hand to take away the note. He told Max the department wanted him to go to Winkering and buy the land they needed to build the highway. The highway depended on Max to get Winkering's land for the highway so it could make things less inconvenient in the west.

Max rolled his truck window down on his drive to Winkering. His eyes dried and turned red as he took paved roads and dirt roads and rock roads and oiled roads when highways ended. And when he got close to Winkering, he was convinced a highway would make the west more convenient. Winkering was all the department of transportation needed to make the west more convenient, but there was not a Winkering that needed convenience.

Everything in Winkering had choked on dust. The street sign at the town's main street was covered in spray paint and weather and dust until all that the sign said was Street. The buildings on the main street sucked the dust into their windows and held nothing inside except for small traces of paper and plastic wrappers and old milk cartons and boxes that said fragile and this side up. Some of the buildings had sucked in so much dust and collapsed to piles of concrete and wood Max could not tell they had ever been buildings. And there were signs full of broken words that hung from or around the choked buildings. Told how each building lived.

Winkering United Church.

Winkering Post Office.
Harold’s Grocery Store.

Fuller and Son’s Self Serve.

Community General Store.

Samson’s Shoe Repair.

Winkering Memorial Library.

Winkering Town Hall.

The light bulbs in the street lights were burned out, and black burn marks inside light bulb glass pressed themselves against the glass, begging to join dust. The newspapers in the newspaper stand held last year’s paper that announced the end of Kid Hanson’s rodeo career. And there were no sounds of footsteps anywhere.

Max pulled his truck off from Winkering’s main street and rolled his window up as the wind started to pick up the dust and wave it in sheets through the air. He took the gravel road he thought he used to drive into Winkering, but the dust covered all the road signs, refused Max’s windshield wipers. Max ended up on the road to Pier’s Point, stopped his car at the edge of a concrete fountain. Max saw what he thought was a pagoda in front of the fountain. The pagoda held its breath, refused to let the dust inside. A green neon sign in the shape of a butterfly that said Grease Bag Café Open hung over the black doors of the pagoda. The neon light bled into the red and black paint on the walls of the pagoda in such a way Max thought the Café bled green blood. The Café held its breath too long, and it’s blood had turned green. Max put his patched jacket sleeve over his mouth, squinted his eyes and walked through the waves of dust towards the café. He put his hand around the cold, silver
door handle and pulled on the pagoda door, but it would not open. The neon sign made a
humming noise as he pulled on the pagoda door one more time. There were no sounds.

Sheets of dust blanketed Max’s jacket and nestled in his hair. Max felt his way back
to his truck, locked the doors, put his key in the ignition, but did not drive. He had to wait for
the dust storm to pass. Max turned on his radio and searched for any music to drown out the
dust, but the radio signals would not reach through the storm. Max said nothing for what
seemed like hours, and when the dust storm finally went away, Max Garret breathed through
a purple-stained sheet he found underneath the driver’s sheet of the truck. His tears ran down
his face, made mud when it mixed with the dust on his face.

Max started his truck and drove towards the nearest place with a light on. He stopped
at Caleb and Crew’s hardware store.

“Look like you could use a shower,” Caleb said when Max asked to use the phone.
His cellular phone would not work.

“Just taking in the dust,” Max said. He made a cloud when he shook his wool pants
and the patches on what used to be his wool jacket.

Caleb had not seen an outsider in over a month. They were always covered in dust.
Always complaining about dust storms. But everyone in Pier’s Point had grown used to the
dust. Dust did not even cling to them anymore. Or they had grown used to its feel.

Max told the transportation board Winkering had crumbled to dust. There was no
Winkering left. Pier’s Point was the closest town.

Max argued on the phone about Winkering. It was not there. He saw its absence.
Max was so intent about Winkering, Caleb did not bother telling Max Winkering had not
crumbled, it moved. After residents from Alpine moved to Winkering, everyone voted to move the town. They moved it to the other side of the Davis Mountains so people could get out, but had to be a resident to know how to get back in.

“No one looks for Winkering,” Caleb said after Max handed him the phone receiver. Caleb wiped away Max’s dust prints from the phone receiver onto his jeans. “You with the census?”

“Department of Transportation,” Max said. He told Caleb how he wanted to build a highway, how he wanted to help Winkering grow. He wanted to help it get more money from visiting traffic. Money that helped pave city roads and repair houses and public buildings. Money that helped give small town residents new jobs, new money.

“No one to sell to you in Winkering. Pier’s Point’s the next best thing,” Caleb said.

“We’d have to build it around Main Street,” Max said.

“Or we could build Main Street around the highway.” Caleb told Max he was looking to retire. Looking to leave the store in good hands. Since all his crew, his wife, his son moved to Dallas, he did not have use for a hardware store anymore. “Just habit to keep it open. But I’m tired. Just want to sit back and drink coffee in the mornings instead of stock hammers and nails. Want to get old and smell old without sawdust and paint in my hair, on my hands.”

Caleb’s hands were starting to wrinkle, but most people did not know if it was from age or from mixing so much paint for his customers. And he had to get one of the high school kids to help him lift bundles of shingles, sheets of wood. But high school kids banged and dropped too much merchandise. Bruised it before it had a home. Caleb waited year
after year to find someone to take over so he could retire, but no one cared about hardware anymore. Still, he was graying and collecting dust. If he sold his store to Max, he could move all his hardware away from Main Street where there was not so much business, where he could close once and awhile and be the one to come visit on Sundays instead of host the visitors.

Max told Caleb he understood. He said with the highway, Caleb could have peace. There might even be someone from out of town who decides to stay, decides to take care of the store. Caleb and Max drank beer from Caleb’s cooler while Max drafted the purchase agreement. They bet on whether or not the Pier’s Point Panthers could beat the Kent Wildcats at regionals. They sat and talked and drank and did not notice the dust blanketing outside. Did not notice anything until Millie Grayson and Tina Jenkins walked in to tell Caleb Anthony was dead.

Max shook Caleb’s wrinkling hands, told him he had to go back to Austin for approval. But on his drive back to Midland/Odessa airport, Max still thought about Winkering. How everything had choked on dust and died. How Caleb did not notice the dust. How odd it was that one man was winking up at something he saw from his bench. Max did not see the big rock in the middle until he heard it pass underneath his car. His passenger door flew open, and Max reached but could not grab his briefcase before it flew out his truck.
CHAPTER FIVE

Caleb, Tina, Millie, and Kid were too busy playing spades to notice when Karen disappeared down Main Street and onto the road that led to Marathon. It was a beautiful day for a walk to Marathon. Last night's rain washed and cleaned away the dirt from everything, even Kid's old motorcycle she bought the day Fire Baby died. Grasshoppers were busy chewing on any newly washed prairie grass they could find. When they ate their fill, they hopped and hopped and tried to hop higher than any other grasshopper. Karen picked up a grasshopper near the side of the road. She liked the way it tickled the insides of her cupped hands as it tried to figure out where it was and how to escape. Her hands were yellowed and browned from working in the cafe so long, and she did not realize how much dirt she'd collected in her fingernails until she held her cupped hands around her grasshopper. She lowered her hands back down to the side of the road, set her grasshopper free.

Karen had not been to Marathon in over five years, and she forgot how long the twenty-three mile walk was. Karen did not own a car. She did not even know how to drive. She never had much use for a car. She got everything she needed from the drugstore, from Caleb's hardware store, from Tina Jenkin's dress shop, and the Sundry Warehouse delivered her cafe supplies. What Main Street did not have, Karen ordered by mail, but the mail took so long, she forgot why she ordered what she did when it arrived.

Karen tied her denim jacket around her waist. Both cuffs were fraying, and a brown Karen did not notice until now stained and filled in the parts of Karen's jacket that were not
blue. Her denim jacket belonged to Anthony. The jacket he wore when he boarded the plane with Karen from Seoul. The jacket he wrapped her in and carried her in when she was a baby. But Karen knew nothing about the jacket’s history before it was her jacket. She just remembered always wearing it. The way it almost touched the tops of her knees when she was in elementary school. The way the sleeves swallowed her hands. The way her arms pushed further and further through the throat of the sleeves until the cuffs touched the bottoms of her hands.

The jacket carried dust from dust storms Karen never noticed anymore. It carried fortune cookie dough, her sweat, ice cream sundae, spilled soda, french fry grease, and ink. Karen stopped washing it the year before when the cuffs started their fray. She was afraid of losing her jacket. And she did not know why. But she kept it and wore it and slept with it under her head despite the way it smelled, the way it felt from no washing.

There was something familiar about the road to Marathon, but Karen could not remember what it was. The department of transportation painted new stripes on the road two years ago, and the paint had still not begun its fade. Karen did not remember the shrubs or the cacti or the animals who looked up enough to see the road’s visitor. But she untied and tied her denim jacket around her waist like she remembered the road’s heat.

There was always heat after a dust storm. Dry, sticky heat. Sticky enough to make dust and dirt stick to the roof, to the back of the mouth. Dry enough to make it impossible to swallow enough saliva to wash away dust and dirt. Sometimes, there was not enough water to make dust and dirt go away. Even if there was, heat made dust and dirt stick to everything. Skin, glasses, toothbrushes, plates. People got used to living on dirt, to living with dirt. To
having dirt make a small film over their skin until they no longer noticed the heat, noticed the
dust.

But today, Karen felt the heat, felt the way it crawled in her pores, how it trickled
down in her beads of sweat. She licked heat and dirt from her lips, from her teeth, and for the
first time in awhile, Karen felt dirty, felt dust cover her skin. It was not the heat Karen
remembered. It was the road itself. Walking on the road to Marathon. But Karen blamed the
way the hair on her stood up and rippled memory through her body on the heat. Deja vu was
always swallowed easiest when there was heat to blame.

Karen licked and swallowed until she had no moisture left to lick and swallow with.
Heat started attacking even the soles of her feet, and Karen wished she wore her shoes. She
took off her overalls, and bit and tore the material into cloth shoes. Karen untangled her
rainbow necklace from her tee-shirt, wrapped her white tee-shirt around her head, tied her
denim jacket back around her waist and stuffed a fortune cookie without a fortune into her
mouth. She spit the fortune cookie to the roadside as soon as she chewed it. She had no
moisture left to swallow the cookie.

By the time Karen was almost halfway to Marathon, she thought she felt the cool of
the heat, the cool just before another dust storm. Karen sat down next to what was left of the
shade from a dried up prairie shrub. Karen unwrapped her tee-shirt from her head, sucked
what moisture she could from the shirt, then wiped her face, her arms with the shirt. There
was just enough moisture to make dust collect together and cake on her skin, to pull her skin
tight so it cracked in places. Karen waited for the cool of the heat to overtake her, waited for
it to make goose pimples on he skin. But Karen never really felt the cool of the heat on her
skin, she felt heat stroke coming on. She shook and fell asleep, face first against the dried up prairie shrub.

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Karen smelled of nothing but sauces and steam and rice. Sounded of nothing but violin voices speaking music Karen could not understand. Music she could not dance too. Karen breathed in steam, breathed in moisture until her lungs hurt. Karen woke with her head pressed against the soft part of a woman’s belly. Her denim jacket laid at the foot of the futon she slept in, and Karen was clothed in clean and frog pajamas.

The woman’s honey-colored hands rubbed warm and wet into Karen’s arms, and for the first time, Karen remembered her skin was honey-colored too. Not the tan or brown she had when she was covered in dirt, in grease, in mud. Karen closed her eyes and laid as still as she could in the woman’s lap, in the soft part of the woman’s belly. Karen felt honey hands against hers. The woman’s warm and soft drifted Karen away from the dry, from the stickiness of outside heat. She drifted until she was floating in a sea of honey.

The woman violined her way through a sentence Karen did not understand. She shook Karen and pointed to a bowl of noodles on a table level with the futon. Karen sunk further, further into the sea of honey. Sunk away from the woman’s warm and soft. The woman looked with her teddy-colored eyes straight into Karen’s eyes. The woman looked like the women in The Learn About the East book Karen checked out from Pier’s Point Library when she tried to find out how to paint the pagoda. She especially looked like the woman on the porcelain plate Karen saw underneath the brown and garlic sauce her broccoli
and beef bathed in. Broccoli and beef and sauce no one in Pier’s Point liked when the
carnival set up on the outskirts of Pier’s Point.

“If I wanted bite size pieces, I’d cut my meat better,” Caleb said after he sat down in
the Chinese hut and women in trapeze costumes served him beef and broccoli on porcelain
plates.

Karen did not like the beef and broccoli, but she like the yellowed porcelain plate it
came on. On the plate, a woman with braided hair and eyes looked out from the porcelain.
She held a parasol and face that neither smiled nor frowned. She reached out her hand for
Karen, but the women in the trapeze costumes took the woman before Karen had a chance to
reach back. The woman on the plate was the same woman who looked at Karen now. The
woman with the soft belly.

That night, the woman held Karen’s hands until she opened and closed her chopsticks
well enough to grab pieces of meat, strands of noodles. Sauce dripped down the sides of
Karen’s mouth, but she did not lick or wipe sauce away from her skin. She let it drip and fall
towards her bowl, towards the table while she ate.

When Karen finished her meat and noodles, the woman poured water that smoked and
steamed into porcelain cups with no handles. The woman filled two cloth pouch with leaves
and flowers. She tied the cloth pouches shut and pressed and rolled it underneath her hands
until the leaves and flowers made no sounds. The woman then handed a small spoon and a
pouch to Karen and showed Karen how to drop the pouch in the water and press it down with
the spoon until the water turned black.
With their spoons, the woman and Karen pulled their pouches from their cups, rested them on saucers next to the cups. Karen coughed and choked as her first sips of tea washed years of dirt and dust from her throat. Years of Pier’s Point clogged and caked in her throat. Karen sipped until she felt the pools of cool that rippled through her as she swallowed, as she exhaled.

Afterwards, the woman took their saucers and cups in honey hands. Karen opened small jars with white lines painted around the sides. Crushed flowers and leaves lay in each jar, kept their smells hidden until the woman crushed them in her cloth pouches. The woman’s skirt swished between her legs when she walked. She wore no jewelry except a jade butterfly bracelet. The gray in the woman’s face and hair softened as she closed away moonlight with her indoor shutters, as she hummed a movement from Vivaldi underneath the light of her paper lanterns.

The woman unrolled a blanket, a sheet, for Karen, sprayed it with something that reminded her of Kid’s ice cream parlor before it was Kid’s ice cream parlor. Karen looked through her folded denim jacket, her overalls, her tee-shirt for her pack of fortune cookies, found them underneath her jacket. She held out a fortune cookie, held it above the woman’s shoulders, and broke it softly so crumbs would not fall on the woman’s floor. Karen pulled out her Remembrance comes to those who forget fortune inside the cookie and set it on the table next to the futon. The woman broke her cookie in half, stuck her finger in each half, but pulled out no paper. Karen put her cookie halves in her mouth and chewed. The woman did the same and chewed. When she finished her first cookie, she pointed to the bag again, and
Karen offered her another one and another one until there was a pile of Mark Twain quotes, Proverbs, Fatty Jackson saying, and a bag with fortune cookie crumbs.

The woman smiled at Karen with her brown lips and cookie stained teeth. She pointed at a scar on Karen’s arm, a fortune cookie scar that grew in the same place she was cut in fifth grade. Karen forgot about the scar, thought it had disappeared. But it was just hidden underneath the grease and dust that filmed her skin. Karen did not know how to tell the woman about her scar. The woman rubbed her warm and soft into it until it opened up and bled onto Karen’s blankets. But Karen did not feel her blood, she just felt warm and soft and a sea of honey rising, rising, rising.

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Karen shook the blanket of dust from her body. Her tee-shirt and her overall shoes were gone, and her hair was full of shrub twigs and wind’s breath that knotted and braided her hair into the twigs. Karen sat up and stuck her arms through the wrinkled sleeves of her denim jacket. She stuck in her hands in her pocket to keep them from the morning’s cold. Karen felt something press smooth against her fingertips. She pulled out a broken jade butterfly bracelet. Karen clasped the broken butterfly around her wrist, remembered once more the soft and warm from the woman who was already fading from her memory.

Karen picked up her bag of fortune cookie crumbs and sprinkled a trail of them along the highway until there were no more left. At the end of her trail, reds and yellows and purples and greens and blues and oranges fell down in patches on Karen’s arms and legs. She followed the colors until she found a house made out of sun catcher glass in the middle
of cacti, prairie shrubs, and nothing. Karen wiped her feet on the crocheted welcome rug in front of the house and said hello, Anthony, before opening the house’s door.
The crack in the pagoda’s fountain grew bigger. It reached the water level of the fountain, then, dove deeper, longer until water dripped and pooled at the base of the fountain. The woman in the middle of the fountain stood and held her water jug just above her hips, poured water from her jug. When the crack in the fountain grew, the woman wept water, mouthed water, bled water, until water filled and flowed over the sides of the fountain, pushed and seeped out the crack, out the crevice, out the hole.

That same day, the manager of Horn Bellow Funeral Home caught Fat Jesus making a log cabin out Jake’s sampler coffin handles. Fat Jesus held the walls of his log cabin with his tanned, fat hands, looked over and winked at the manager with one of his squinted, Fat Jesus eyes. Fat Jesus was waiting for Jake. He did not know Jake had died.

Jake’s madre had hid him from Fat Jesus. She put Jake on the nearest bus to West Texas and told him to find the town that nobody looked for. Fat Jesus would not find him there.

Jake’s madre saw Fat Jesus the night before she left Mexico for San Antonio. He had black hair, tanned skin. Held cursed babies in his belly and searched for women to give his babies to so he could stop walking the streets, so he could go back to his father. And there was always an explosion when Fat Jesus appeared. In Guanajuato, he gave an ice cream cone to a girl hoeing her father’s fields. The girl sucked on the ice cream until her lips felt numb and did not hear her father’s screams as the dishes from their kitchen blew up and shattered a hole in the kitchen wall, in her father’s chest. Six months later, they found the girl with an
ice cream stained mouth and a knife in her belly she used to cut out the baby inside her. When they cut the baby out of the dead girl, they found Fat Jesus’s hand print on the baby’s scaly back, found spikes pressing their way out of the baby’s forehead.

In Mexico City, the ground exploded into an earthquake and sucked all but one of the field prostitutes into its mouth. Fat Jesus held the girl’s hand, pulled her from the earthquake, and forced his Fat body between her legs. Her baby ate its way out of her body with its dog teeth and swallowed its own placenta that pooled out from the girls body.

And Fat Jesus found Jake’s madre. Squeezed himself into her barren womb and told her to leave Tijuana or he would cut a hole through her stomach and let his child eat out her eyes. He turned on her tía’s gas stove and told her to leave before her tía lit another cigarette. When Jake’s madre crossed the border, she could not conceal the red and yellow in her eyes that Fat Jesus left her with. The Mexican guards knew about the eyes of Fat Jesus’ women and let her pass with no questions. They were too afraid of Fat Jesus.

When Jake was born, he had human hands and feet, human teeth, and human features, but American doctors could not explain the wart covered nub that protruded from the skin over his tailbone. His madre scrubbed and cleaned houses and ground fresh tortillas for the women of the houses she cleaned. She scrubbed and cleaned and ground until her hands cracked open and bled into the tortillas masa. And when she saved enough from her cleaning and grinding, Jake’s madre took him to a doctor to have his nub removed. Jake healed in two weeks, and when his madre took his bandage off, the nub and its warts had regrown.

The night after Día de Muerte, the night after Jake came back from scouting girls with his friends on the Riverwalk, Jake’s madre felt Fat Jesus’ hands feeling their way up her skirt,
underneath her panties. He scooped out the soft parts of her ovaries, her uterus, and ate them with squeezed limes and corn tortillas. And in the morning, Jake’s madre bought him a bus ticket, gave him the rest of her cleaning and grinding money and told him to go find the town that nobody looked for. After Jake boarded the bus headed to Marathon, his madre went home and mixed arsenic into the masa for her tortillas. She ate tortillas and shredded pork until she felt the arsenic begin to squeeze at her insides.

Jake got off the bus at Marathon’s bus terminal, bought a soda and asked what there was for work. The lady at the bus terminal smiled and twirled her fingers into Jake’s black hair, smoothed her hands down the sides of his stomach to his zipper.

“Whoa, Buddy, you looking for work,” Caleb Paulson said. Caleb pulled his hands out of his letter jacket and pulled Jake from the woman. “You ain’t gonna find it there. She’ll give you the clap.”

Jake told Caleb he came from San Antonio looking for work. He wanted work no one thought about much. Caleb threw his box full of screws, brackets, hooks, and nails into the back of his truck and told Jake he would take him to Pier’s Point. They needed someone at the funeral home.

“Ain’t heard much about it,” Jake said.

“Not many people do,” Caleb said.

Caleb took a six-pack of beer and he and Jake sat on the steps of the Chinese pagoda. “What’s a pagoda doing in the middle of nowhere?” Jake said.
“About the same thing the middle of nowhere’s doing with a pagoda,” Caleb swallowed the rest of his beer and shook his head when Jake asked if he knew about Fat Jesus.

Jake did not like the idea of working with dead people at first. He did not like the way their bodies lingered in his fingertips when he smelled them. The way the bodies kicked and squirmed out their last bits of life when he sewed them back up and bathed them. But Jake liked the way his customers’ thanks felt when they hugged him after seeing their beloved for the last time. Told him he painted the history of their beloved’s life into his body and helped them remember that history one more time.

Jake talked to members of the family about their beloved before he sewed them back up, washed them, painted life back into their faces. He listened to each dead person’s story and took notes on a legal pad with a pencil he always kept behind his ear. Jake asked about the dead’s hobbies, their interests, their dislikes. And when Jake finally got time alone with his bodies, he pulled out their stories, recorded them on tape and listened to that tape while he washed and prepared their bodies.

He brushed and swabbed and touched each body the way he wished he could have touched his madre’s body after he heard about her death. And after his work, Jake and Caleb sat next to each other in one of the showroom coffins and drank until Jake forgot the guilt of not preparing his madre’s body.

Fat Jesus came to Texas looking for Jake. Followed rumors about the baby with the warded nub to San Antonio, but found no Jake nor his madre. Fat Jesus traveled to Texarkana and El Paso and everywhere in-between, but could not find his son. When he finally heard
about the undertaker with the kindly red and yellow eyes, Fat Jesus came to Pier’s Point, but Jake’s madre kept Fat Jesus’ son from him. Jake had died, and the manager of Horn Bellow funeral home rubbed his eyes red as he tried to rub Fat Jesus from his eyes.

Fat Jesus draped a coffin liner swatch over his coffin handle log cabin, and blew underneath the cloth. He blew until the cloth flew up and the coffin handle cabin crumbled.

“Is there something I can show you?” the manager said. He straightened his tie and pulled his black suit coat over his shirt cuffs.

“I need my son,” Fat Jesus said. He welted the palm of the manager’s hand when he shook it.

“I understand. This is a difficult time, and my sincerest, my most heartfelt sentiments are with you during your,” the funeral manager stopped reciting his condolence speech when Fat Jesus grabbed his neck.

“Martinez. His name is Martinez.”

The funeral manager choked out He’s dead to Fat Jesus. He tightened his grip around the funeral manager’s neck, felt his body beg for air. Fat Jesus released the funeral manager and shamed his way out of the funeral home. After Fat Jesus followed the dust storm back to Mexico, the funeral manager’s car backfired when he skidded his way out of Pier’s Point.

Caleb shook Tina Jenkin’s awake from his arms, and they watched the dust cloud and skid marks trail behind the funeral manager’s car.

“Don’t think he’s coming back,” Tina Jenkins said.

Caleb nodded and asked what they were going to do with Anthony’s body.
“You fixed Jake up,” Tina said. She took a cigarette from the cigarette pack on Anthony’s personal supply shelf.

“I just washed him and told the guy in Marathon how I wanted him fixed up. But he retired to Abilene, and they don’t have anyone else. They ship them off to El Paso, and Anthony won’t make it in this heat,” Caleb said. He took the cigarette Tina offered him, let his hands linger against hers for a moment before he remembered to pull it away.

The bus from Marathon to El Paso took almost two days, and the train only ran every other week.

“I’ll keep him until you figure what you need to figure,” Kid said. She tucked her brown hair behind her ears before putting her cowboy hat on. “Figure I owe him that much.” Kid took one of Anthony’s cigarettes but did not light it. She tucked it behind her ear and asked Caleb to carry him to her store. Anthony’s body grew heavier since the last time Caleb picked him up. He and Kid picked Anthony up and sat him down four times before Kid fumbled with her door keys and they carried him inside.

Neither Kid or Caleb noticed the overflowing fountain. Noticed the way the woman with the jar bled water out her body. The way the crack Max made in the fountain was now a hole.

Kid stuffed her vanilla, strawberry, chocolate, caramel pecan, peppermint, and chocolate mint cookie ice cream from her deep freeze into her ice cream display in the front of her store. She and Caleb took off Anthony’s shoes and put him in the deep freeze until they could figure out how to get an undertaker. Caleb left Kid to organize her ice cream in her display counter. After she finished, Kid licked a scoop of vanilla from one of her ice
cream scoops and washed it down with the bottle of vodka she hid from Karen ever since Karen gave her first lecture on alcoholism.

Kid opened her deep freeze lid to make sure Anthony was okay. She stood over him and pulled off her boots one at a time. Thirty years of wearing boots, and Kid still could not find a pair that would not reduce her walk to a shuffle. Kid buttoned the bottom button of Anthony’s shirt, one of her old cowboy shirts. She remembered the night she gave it to him. She held it out while he stuck his flesh covered arms in the sleeves of the shirt. Anthony played with the buttons, could not remember how to work them. Kid worked from bottom up, buttoning his shirt then straightened the collar.

Kid did not know how Anthony wore out so many shirts, but every time she saw him, the armpits were worn away and she saw more flesh than material. But Anthony refused when anyone offered to buy him extra shirts. He wore the ones he had until they filled with his days, his weeks, his months, his years. And when they stored too much history, they faded away, made room for a new shirt. Then, Anthony stopped wearing shirts altogether.

The night Anthony came back from his wife’s house, he clutched the half-burned crocheted rug he made her before she left. His wife made him learn how to crochet before he left for boot camp.

“So you keep your hands out of trouble,” she said. She sat in back of him, legs straddled around his waist and held his hand in hers, rested her chin on his shoulder as they worked the crochet hook and yarn in and out of stitches.
Anthony did not unclutch his wife’s rug the entire time he sipped on an ice cream float and told Kid about his wife, about Vietnam, about Lee Young. About coming to a town called Pier’s Point.

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Anthony Morgan carried a laughing baby in his hands as he stepped off the bus at the Marathon terminal. He held his hands away from his body, hands that still felt Lee Young’s red and strands of her black hair. Anthony walked past the sleepers in the bus terminal and did not look as the clock above the ticket counter announced a new hour. Anthony did not shiver as morning air touched him. He wrapped the baby tighter in his jean jacket and washed his hands off with the water hose that connected to the side of the bus terminal. The baby let out one more laugh before she closed her eyes and soaked up the warmth from Anthony’s jacket. Anthony turned on the water hose and scrubbed at his hands with his fingernails. Anthony scrubbed until his hands started to bleed but he still felt Lee Young’s red and hair. Anthony dried his hands on his blue jeans he had worn since he got back into the States.

“Time to get you somewhere, kid,” Anthony said. He walked past the bus terminal, turned his back on the sunrise, and walked alongside the highway that led to Pier’s Point. There wasn’t much in-between Marathon and Pier’s Point except random beer cans and a sign that said Winkering, twelve miles.

“Morning calm,” Anthony said. He stepped onto the asphalt and walked near the white line on the shoulder of the highway.

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Drunk off the land where he thought morning calm began, Anthony Morgan carried a laughing baby in his hands, hands stained with red and adorned in strands of Lee Young’s black hair. Anthony Morgan carried the laughing baby through the streets of Seoul, South Korea, and searched for nothing. There was nothing to be found.

The Vietnam War was over. He could go home. Home. The only thing he remembered about home were spiders that lived in webs woven into the corners of his house. He feared those spider webs, the way they clung to his hands or knees or back or elbows when he brushed them down from the corners. He feared the way the spider webs felt as he picked them off his body. He feared the scent the spider webs left on his fingers, a scent only he could smell. Anthony Morgan missed those webs.

He missed those webs as he thought of the tears in his wife’s laughter after they untangled their bodies. As he held her against him and told her jokes on their last night before he went to boot camp. He missed those webs as he learned how to drive an army truck as he learned how to assemble an army gun as he learned how to be an army soldier.

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The spider webs in the corners of his house were the only things Anthony could remember as he drove his truck through the dirt roads Vietnam and prayed to anyone to keep him from driving over land mines or getting shot by a Viet Cong soldier. The spider webs were all Anthony could think of as he followed Lee Young into a room above the bar where American soldiers drank themselves into remembrance. All he could think of as he felt himself emptying inside the space between her legs. As he curled himself next to her and tried to remember what a woman’s touch felt like, tried to remember the spider webs away.
Anthony’s driving time on the dirt roads grew longer. The roads were endless. They curved and slithered through nothingness. No one but an American soldier would want to drive on these roads that echoed with the music of children’s and women’s and men’s voices as they walked from their villages into town, music that was silenced as the growing war muffled voices not strong enough to shout past death’s screech. Anthony heard all this music as he drove in silence, in nothingness. The metal beads he hung around the mirror in his truck, the metal beads his wife gave him to hold onto when he had nightmares about silence and echoes that broke that silence, were Anthony’s only companion. The beads danced and tapped against Anthony’s windshield, beat and tapped to the echoing music Anthony heard. He heard the music and was careful not to blink until he got to his camp. If he blinked, the echoing music might stop. If he blinked, he might run over a land mine. If he blinked, he might not see the figure with black eyes looking at him through a gun.

When the explosion came, Anthony’s truck landed on its side next to the road, a mile from his camp. Anthony grabbed his metal beads and blinked for the first time. He blinked again and waited for the music to stop, but it grew stronger. The sounds of children and women and men shouting and laughing and singing and crying blared as Anthony blinked red tears away as Anthony closed his hand around his beads as Anthony looked up to a voice and a face and a body he could not understand as Anthony heard the backfire from a gun as Anthony watched the voice and the face and the body he could not understand jerk forward and fall as Anthony and the stranger closed their eyes and slipped into darkness, into nothingness.
In nothingness, just before dawn, Anthony brushed a spider web down from a corner of his bedroom with a broom. The spider web, free from its corner, floated and drifted down towards eternity, but stopped on the shoulder of Anthony’s sweater, a sweater crocheted by his wife. Tight single crochets. Anthony tugged at the web on his sweater. Pieces of the web stuck to the cotton in his sweater. Pieces of the web clung to Anthony’s fingers. Pieces of the web continued their trip to eternity, but stopped when they met the hardwood floor. Anthony kicked the spider web pieces that fell to the floor underneath the bed.

In the bedroom, the rising sun pushed its beams through the bedroom window, and the beams awoke pictures of Anthony and his dog playing Frisbee two days before his father passed away, Anthony and his mom holding hands and dancing after she showed him how to hold a girl and dance with her while music played, Anthony holding his wife and dancing with her after their music stopped, Anthony and his wife holding fish they caught at Possum Kingdom Lake.

Anthony walked from his bedroom towards his wife’s whistling. He reached out to touch her waist, but she turned towards him. The sun’s beams that pushed their way into his house etched shadows of spider webs on his wife’s eyes and lips and nose and cheeks. Anthony reached to brush the shadows away from his wife’s face, but the sun’s beams took hold of him.

Anthony opened his eyes for the first time since he watched the soldier with the black eyes die. He unclenched his still clenched hand and found his metal beads were gone.
“Corporal Morgan’s awake,” the army nurse said. She did not look at Anthony as she took his pulse and told him he was in an army hospital in Taiwan. “Things are okay now. You’re safe now. Rest and relaxation. Nothing but rest and relaxation for you.”

Anthony wanted to go home. Everything around him told him he had to go home. The smell of men beaten by war lingered near the air that surrounded Anthony in his hospital bed. The sounds of men’s voices shouting for mothers and fathers and girlfriends and wives and children echoed up and down the white walls of the hospital corridors. The sight of once healthy men emaciated by war and clad in hospital gowns that gaped open and exposed their backs, their butts, the backs of their legs. Anthony looked into the crevices and corners of the hospital wall for spider webs or shadows or just a few specks of dirt. Nothing but white clung to the walls. Anthony could not remember home.

Anthony recovered from the explosion, but he still remembered the killed soldier and the music of empty dirt roads once full of people’s voices. It was the voices and the music that he remembered that got Anthony sent to an army base in Seoul, South Korea.

“You leave the war up to us,” Captain Henderson told Anthony the day he got his orders to leave Vietnam. Anthony sat down to his new army assignment and stamped and signed and typed documents that decided men’s futures. Around him, smiles and laughter in the soldiers’ conversations told him these soldiers knew nothing about roads that curved and slithered their way into nothingness. These men knew nothing about watching men with unfamiliar faces and black eyes jerking and dancing and falling towards death. These men only knew war: how to make mess hall food taste real, where to get the most fuck for their
money during personal time off, how to take five minute showers, when a penicillin shot was needed, how to get drunk and still wake up at 0500 hours.

His wife’s letters were the only time Anthony ever smiled anymore. And he had not smiled in over three months. During his personal time, Anthony took out his stack of old letters, touched the paper to his nose, to his lips, and tried to remember his wife, tried to remember home.

“Corporal Morgan,” a soldier said as Anthony tied his wife’s letters with a piece of string.

The soldier handed Anthony an unopened envelope. Anthony waited until the soldier left before he held the letter up to his nose. No perfume. No lipstick prints. No anything but a letter from his mom telling him there was a fire at his house, and there was nothing left. Anthony folded and unfolded his letter and longed for his truck, for the silence of echoing voices on dirt roads. He walked into one of the bars where soldiers drank themselves into remembrance. Anthony wore his shoes with the purple laces, the last thing his wife sent to him. He hated purple. Anthony’s hand clutched the letter from his mom. A fire. Anthony reached for his wife’s smile, her laughter, her embrace, but he could not remember her face, her voice, her touch. Webs of dust clung to every crevice of the bar’s walls, and Anthony blinked and remembered the only thing he could about home, about her.

Soldiers clad in army fatigues and soldiers clad in street clothes they bought from Korean vendors put their arms around women in silk dresses with slits that showed the women’s legs. Soldiers drank and held women underneath the red and orange lights of a bar that smelled like burnt cabbage. Women and soldiers drank whiskey and vodka and Korean
specials. Anthony smoothed out his letter and ran his fingers across the letters that formed words that formed sentences that formed his wife’s death. Anthony closed his eyes and waited for tears that would not come.

“You want something?” Anthony opened his eyes to a small woman who held her face close to his. “Want something?” the small woman repeated. She scratched the skin above her eyebrow.

Anthony traced his fingers over the words in his letter and shook his head. His bitten fingernails, fingernails his mom told him not to bite, scratched against the paper.

“You go now,” the small woman said. Anthony looked into the woman’s empty face. Her eyes, black coals set in permanent squints, echoed nothing, echoed men’s bodies, echoed war. Her flattened nose flared out as she breathed out unwanted air into the bar. Anthony made stars and hearts and circles and diamonds on his letter with his fingers. His fingers trailed off his letter to the top of the bar and traced squares and rectangles through spilled beer and vodka and whiskey and dead flies. Anthony moved his fingers to the underside of the bar and grabbed dust webs that huddled together in the crevices of the bar’s underside.

Anthony closed his eyes and breathed in the scent of whiskey and burnt cabbage and tired to remember the way his wife smelled the first time he noticed her perfume. He tugged at her skirt when he noticed her smell, told her he loved her. Anthony lingered over the way her lips parted and showed her teeth as his wife smiled at him and pulled her closer, drowned him in her perfume. But her perfume would not come to him now.

“You go now,” the small woman with the flattened nose said. Anthony brought his hand up from the bar’s underside, his fingers covered in dust webs. Anthony left trails of
dust webs on the small woman’s face as he traced over her forehead, her eyebrows, her eyelids, her nose, her cheeks, her lips, her dimple, her chin. He pulled her to him and buried his nose in her neck, but there was nothing but the smell of burnt cabbage, tea leaves, and men.

“Do you have any perfume?” Anthony asked the woman as she pushed him away from her.

The small woman led Anthony up wooden stairs half-dead from termites. As she walked up the stairs, she grabbed her dress so the hem rose above her ankles. There was no slit in her dress. With every step, her ankles wobbled in her green high-heel shoes.

“I am Lee Young. You pay now,” the small woman said as she and Anthony stepped into a room lit with a red light that hummed. The door shut behind them, cutting them off from the voices of soldiers and prostitutes, cutting them off from the voices of war. Anthony reached into his pocket past his crumpled letter and handed Lee Young green and white bills that were folded in one corner.

“American money,” Lee Young said. She exhaled through her flattened nose and stuffed the bills into a leather book with no words inside of it. Her gold bracelet with a jade butterfly swung back and forth. “What do you want?”

“Do you have any perfume?”

Lee Young frowned and opened the drawer on the night stand. She pulled out a glass bottle with flecks of orange trapped in the glass.

“You want to put it on me?” she said.

Anthony sprayed perfume onto his fingers and rubbed circles into Lee Young’s neck.
Lee Young unhooked the back of her dress and stepped out of the pool of silk that surrounded her ankles. She wobbled in her green high heels.

Anthony sat on the bed that sagged on each side. Lee Young sat next to him, and Anthony laid her down with him. He put his nose and his lips to her neck and breathed.

“You lose girlfriend?” Lee Young said, “You have one hour.” She stroked his hair while he breathed and until he fell asleep.

That night, Anthony remembered the way his slippers swallowed his wife’s feet. Her hands tickled against the skin on his neck and his back as lifted her up and his slippers fell to the floor. Her body shook with laughter as her tickles turned into strokes.

“You go now,” Lee Young said. She shook and poked Anthony’s sides.

“Please stay longer,” Anthony said. He half closed his eyes and pulled Lee Young close to him.

“You pay for one hour, you get one hour.” Lee Young sat up. The butterfly on her bracelet swung back and forth as she reached for her perfume bottle.

“I have money.” Anthony squeezed his hand around Lee Young’s perfume bottle and reached into his pocket with his other hand. “Take what you want. Just stay.”

Anthony sprayed perfume and smelled Lee Young’s body. He ran his nose up the side of her body, down her back, across her arms and breasts. When he got to her toes, Anthony opened his mouth to taste the perfume.

Lee Young laughed when Anthony licked the bottom of her foot. Anthony looked at her parted lips and exposed teeth and reached for her smile finding nothing but chapped lips that sucked on his fingers. Anthony remembered the way his wife laughed when they had
contests to see who could make the silliest faces. She wore her terry cloth robe and her brown hair fell in wet strands around her face. He remembered the way his wife touched her tongue to her nose and pulled at the bottoms of her eyes until the pink skin was exposed.

"How you feel, honey?" Lee Young asked.

Anthony eased Lee Young onto the middle of the bed. He put his head in her lap and felt her skin against his cheek and longed for her to be covered in terry cloth. Anthony circled his way into Lee Young’s navel with his finger the way he used to circle his way into his wife’s navel. He cried out as he entered into her tenderness, as he looked to empty walls and threadbare sheets and dust covered blinds and red light and flowers in a vase and black hair and a crocheted rug and cookie crumbs and a hair comb with flowers on the handle and a chipped lamp and blank paper. There was not laughter, no jokes.

Anthony closed his eyes and felt his eyelids flutter, felt them struggle to open as he emptied himself into Lee Young’s body. He opened his eyes, and the memories of his wife circled and flew. Anthony sank his head into Lee Young’s hands and cast his webs and tried to remember what it was like to be touched by his wife, but her memories had flown beyond his webs, his grasp. Anthony closed his eyes and felt invisible spider webs cling to him.

Anthony spent his free time, his dreams, remembering every detail of Lee Young’s body. He closed his eyes and traced over the scar on her right thigh, the one she got when a bowl of broth fell onto her lap. His fingers moved to the mole just outside of the place he entered and emptied himself into. He moved his fingers across the scar that ran from her mole to her belly button, a gift from a dissatisfied customer. Lee Young’s cut led to the candle wax scar, the one where her mother pinned her down and dripped candle wax onto her
breasts for being a whore. The candle wax scar led to the cigar burn her boss gave her the night she fought him when he spread her legs, the night her mother wrote her a letter and told her not to come to the house again but asked her to send more money so her sisters could go to school and marry and not grow up to be like her.

Anthony’s eyelids twitched, butterflies in blankets, as he moved to Lee Young’s face. Her curved chin with one scar underneath gave way to her jaw line where her skin smelled like semen and cabbage and honey. Lee Young’s lips, permanently chapped, moistened under Anthony’s fingertips. Her felt the moisture from her nose as she breathed and he lingered over the indentation above her top lip. Anthony moved to Lee Young’s eyes. Lee Young closed her eyes and exposed the skin that felt like butterfly wings.

Anthony longed to remember Lee Young’s forehead the most. Webs of worried lines adorned Lee Young’s forehead, and Anthony ran his fingertips over and in-between those lines, reading all that was in Lee Young to be read. Webs of worried lines, trapped dreams. Anthony kissed and licked and bit at those lines of worry, but they never disappeared for long.

Anthony brushed his fingertips across Lee Young’s forehead once more and closed his eyes and dreamt of morning calm—the time just before sunset, the time just after moonlight sprinkled its dew, its juices, upon grass, the time just before the grass soaked up the moonlight’s juices and began to grow. In the midst of tree limbs with leaves that were covered in dewdrops and dust webs, a caterpillar with a green and white body made rhythm on the leaves with her feet. Anthony pocketed himself into his blankets and began to snore as the caterpillar connected two threads to a leaf branch and fastened herself in the middle. The
dewdrops on the leaves were silent as the caterpillar pocketed herself inside her threads and closed her eyes and dreamt her caterpillar dreams. The dewdrops fell onto the sleeping caterpillar and seeped through her cocoon. In her sleep, the caterpillar opened her mouth to speak her dreams, and dewdrops seeped down her throat before the dreams could take flight.

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Lee Young lifted up her shirt and showed Anthony her fat belly, a belly that reached for him. The scar that reached to her navel had stretched open and smiled at him. Lee Young rubbed her hand over her belly and asked Anthony to put his finger into her belly button the way he used to. Lee Young wobbled in flat, green shoes when she reached for Anthony’s fingers.

“Marry me, Lee Young,” Anthony said.

“You understand nothing. You think things are so better in America,” Lee Young said. She pushed Anthony’s hands away from her. “I’m not your wife.” Lee Young reached inside her bra, pulled out a post card of a red and black pagoda that said Howdy from Texas.

Anthony brushed his fingers against Lee Young’s as he took the postcard from her. His hands swallowed the post card just like they swallowed Lee Young’s when she let him hold her hands.

Mi-Young,

I cannot explain it to you. But I understand. I come home when I have rice money. I come home to you and little Lee soon.

Love,

Kee Hong
"It's beautiful," Anthony said. He flipped the card over and over. "I didn’t know."

"There is no pagoda," Lee Young said. She grabbed the postcard from Anthony, ripped the postcard in half. "Kee Hong is my father. Never comes back from America. And I can’t go home to my family because I try to feed them what he never did. Some land of opportunity." Anthony watched as the Lee Young’s postcard halves hit a bar stool, landed on the floor. She turned her back towards him and told him to go.

Anthony sat on the steps outside of the bar of remembrance. In the streets, faces he didn’t know, didn’t understand, walked, ran, danced past him. Short bodies, thin bodies, honey bodies. They all called for Anthony to listen to them, to understand them. The sea of honey bodies grabbed Anthony into its water and put his head under water as he walked back to the military base. A husband and his pregnant wife squatted down on the sidewalk near the surface of the honey-bodied sea. The husband kissed his wife’s neck and rubbed her back. He put her hair behind her ears with his fingers, and then rubbed his wife’s stomach that was just beginning to reach out. A boy and a girl held hands and rippled through a puddle made of oil and water. The puddle’s rainbow disappeared as it met the boy’s and girl’s feet. In the middle of the sea, and explosion erupted and shot honey and blood onto sidewalks, onto building windows, into puddles with oil and water rainbows, and Anthony was pushed into the current of bodies that ran from spilled honey and blood.

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The dewdrops ceased, and the caterpillar awoke and knew nothing of her dreams. She ate her way through the cocoon and found she had wings that were wet from the dewdrops and dreams. Her wings, wet with colors of blue and yellow and black and green,
dragged upon the bark of the tree limbs. The leaves that the caterpillar brushed past had no more dewdrops, had nothing that weighted them down, and the caterpillar didn’t know what to do with its new colors that weighted her down as she moved. Her mother never told her what to do. Never told her how to shake her wings and spread them out in the sunlight. Never told her how to move her wings back and forth. Never told her how to fly and free herself from tree limbs that twisted and tangled and tried to keep her. The caterpillar’s mother flew north before she got a chance to ask her mother all these questions, before she got a chance to learn from her mother how to do all these things. She had to learn them on her own. There was no one to help her. No one to teach her.

Between two leaves with veins that dripped to the leave’s edges, a praying mantis with one good eye sat on a tree limb and prayed for a companion to take away her loneliness. She lost her love, her companion. She had nothing to hold onto, nothing to save her from fading memories. The praying mantis watched the caterpillar, wet with colors, and remembered the way her love said nothing as she bit off his head and put her juices inside him. She wanted to know what it was like to be him, and she did the only thing her instincts knew, and he was gone, destroyed by her love, and she waited and watched for a new companion, any companion, to hold onto, to take her away from loneliness.

As the caterpillar walked by, her wings dry from the wetness the colors and dewdrops and dreams made, the praying mantis grabbed the caterpillar and asked her to take away the emptiness. The praying mantis asked the caterpillar in code she didn’t know, couldn’t understand, and the caterpillar squirmed in the praying mantis’ arms. The caterpillar didn’t know how to fly, how to set herself free, and she asked the praying mantis to let her go, but
the praying mantis didn’t understand the caterpillar. Don’t be afraid, the praying mantis told the caterpillar. The caterpillar looked into the praying mantis’ good eye, but didn’t understand what her eye said. The praying mantis bit into the caterpillar to calm her down. The caterpillar stopped her squirming. She was dead. The praying mantis rubbed her head against a leaf and longed for dewdrops.

Anthony scratched away dewdrops and dreams of tree limbs tangled into webs and said nothing as the officers told him the war was over. It was time to go home. Home to ashes and land that once held his house. Home to a wife that no longer existed. Home to a house full of memories so burned and faded, Anthony no longer remembered them. Anthony walked to the bar where soldiers drank themselves into remembrance. Inside, white cocktail napkins fluttered underneath the wind of the ceiling fans. For the first time since he came to Korea, for the first time since the war began, Anthony swam in seas of laughter that gushed from the soldiers and the girls that wore silk dresses. Anthony wore his purple laces, the ones his mom had sent him. He found Lee Young sitting at the corner of the bar that had no dust webs. He kissed her forehead and told her it was time to go home. Moths danced around the bar’s lampshades.

“I want you to come with me,” Anthony said. He pressed his hand against Lee Young’s belly.

“I belong here. She has a better life with me here,” Lee Young said. She pushed Anthony’s hand from her belly and

“I’m not your father,” Anthony said. He swallowed her body with his arms.
Lee Young’s butterfly bracelet swung back and forth as she pushed Anthony from her. She stopped in mid-push and held her belly. Wetness released itself from the empty space in-between her legs, and the money that Lee Young had set free, floated in her puddle. There were no rainbows that shined in the light.

The seas of laughter swelled, and in the midst of those seas, a man in a long coat and bleeding knees entered the bar of remembrance and prayed on his bleeding knees in code that Anthony could not understand, that the girls in silk dresses ignored. The praying man pulled out a gun and showered his bullet blessings into laughing sea, into himself. Seas of honey and cream skin mixed together to form red, and Lee Young joined the sticky waters, her shoes covered in red and wetness. The laughter stopped.

Wetness from her body and wetness from her blood clung to Lee Young. Silence filled the room as Anthony crawled to her, his body painted red from a freckled soldier who had fallen on top of him. Lee Young filled the silence with her voice.

“Don’t take her with you. Take her somewhere better,” Lee Young said. She pushed Anthony’s hands, hands bathed in blood, towards the space in-between her legs. Anthony took off his shirt and bound it together with his shoelaces. He told Lee Young to bite down on his shirt, on the laces. Bite down and push. Lee Young pushed until she ripped the seams of her empty opening with her baby’s shoulder, her baby’s head. Anthony pulled on her baby as she pushed, pulled on it until it was free. Lee Young filled the silent room with her voice once more, and joined with the other bodies in the bar. The moths that danced around the bar’s lights stopped their dance. The red and orange lights from the bar shined on nothing.
Anthony held Lee Young’s baby in his arms and pulled at the gold butterfly on Lee Young’s bracelet that swung back and forth and struggled to get free. The baby filled the room with its laughter. Anthony stuffed Lee Young’s bracelet in his jean jacket pocket, picked up the baby, and walked out into the streets.

Anthony stopped women in silk dresses and asked if they knew Lee Young, but the women slid past him when Lee Young’s baby screamed. No one would talk to Anthony. They were too busy walking through pools of blood, walking past pools of blood for safer places. Anthony’s footprints mixed with other red footprints as he walked up and down the streets asking if anyone knew Lee Young.

“No one wants your American baby,” an old man said. He rolled up his pant legs with his wrinkled hands.

Anthony stopped every person he saw until there were no more people to stop. Seoul’s streets were empty. Anthony saw every curve, every scar on Lee Young’s body as he looked in empty restaurants, empty boutiques, empty bars. He remembered the look on her face when he asked her to marry him, to come home with him. And he saw the black and red pagoda on the postcard that said Howdy from Texas.

“There’s no pagoda,” she said.

And Anthony felt Lee Young’s hands around his wrists, her strands of hair, the blood from her body, as she told him not to take her baby with him. She wanted her baby to go somewhere better. That somewhere better was not with him.

“You’re my baby too,” Anthony said. He brushed his hands against his pants, tried to get rid of the blood and hair he still felt. Lee Young’s baby would not stop laughing in
Anthony’s arms. The closer he held her, the more she kicked her legs, the more she beat her arms against him, the more she laughed. She kicked and squirmed when he wrapped his denim jacket around her. She kicked and squirmed when he boarded the plane back to the States. Anthony held his denim bundle further and further away from his body until his arms were straight in front of him. It was not until Anthony got off the plane and got on the bus headed to Marathon, Texas, that Lee Young’s baby stopped laughing long enough to sleep.

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Anthony walked with one leg on both sides of the white line that divided the highway in half.

“Roy Rogers,” he said. He walked and concentrated on his Roy Rogers and did not hear the galloping behind him, did not see the crickets hopping in his shadow.

“You crazy or something?” The galloping stopped and slowed to a trot as a girl in a black cowboy hat pulled her horse to the side of the road to avoid hitting Anthony and his denim bundle.

“I’m just going to Pier’s Point. Going to see if there’s a pagoda,” Anthony unstretched his arms and held the baby close to him for the first time since Seoul.

“Pier’s Point’s the place for it. What’s left of it,” the cowgirl said. “I’m headed that way, I can give you and your jacket a ride on Fire Baby.” The cowgirl brushed her hand down Fire Baby’s mane but pulled her hand back before Fire Baby bucked her head. Two of the crickets from Anthony’s shadow crawled up his pant leg.

“You sure it’s safe?” Anthony said as he handed the cowgirl his denim jacket. She did not blink or frown or twitch or move when she saw the baby wrapped in the jacket.
“Safer than walking alone on an empty highway,” the cowgirl said. She shooed away a blue and yellow butterfly that landed on the baby’s forehead. The butterfly flew towards a cactus flower and sucked out the sweetest part of the flower while it fanned its wings.

Anthony nodded when the cowgirl said her name was Kid. The butterfly hooked its feet into the back of Anthony’s shirt while he put his arms around Kid, around Lee Young’s baby. It flapped its wings back and forth as Fire Baby trotted along the highway to Pier’s Point.

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That night after he came back from saying good-bye to his wife, Anthony told Kid there were two things he regretted. Not saying good-bye to his wife and saying good-bye to his wife. He pulled the half-burned rug, all his mother salvaged from the fire, closer to his chest and whispered he was sorry. Sorry for not remembering his wife. Sorry for Lee Young dying. Sorry for ruinining everything he came close to with his love.

That night, Kid wiped Anthony’s face with an ice cream napkin she dipped in soda water. She washed ashes from each fingertip. Kid held and washed Anthony’s hand until they held no more dust, no more dirt, no more sorries. And she took her favorite black cowboy shirt from her closet. Held it for Anthony while he stuck his arms into the shirt.

“This one don’t hold so many memories,” she said. She grabbed each button in-between her thumb and forefinger and worked her way up the rows of buttons.

“I’m leaving her, Kid. While she still doesn’t think I’m her father, I’m leaving her. I don’t want to ruin her too.”
Kid rubbed the pinched parts of her feet through her boots, told Anthony he was a good father, she understood. But Kid watched Anthony walk in and out of town with his rotting shirts. Watched him sit in front of the pagoda and wait until Karen turned her lights out. But Karen had already settled into her belief. Anthony was not her father. And there was nothing he could do to change his mind.

Kid closed her deep freeze lid, grabbed her boots, her vodka bottle and walked in her socks to her favorite booth next to the door. She drank until she heard the crickets, then leaned back and tipped her hat over her head.
CHAPTER SEVEN

Karen stood in the shower and scrubbened until she was blinded with steam. She felt her way to the towel rack and rifled through Anthony’s clothes until she found a pair of drawstring shorts. Anthony did not have any shirts that were not rotted and stained, so Karen washed her tee-shirt with shampoo and water and dried it with Anthony’s hair dryer.

Anthony had five afghans piled onto his bed, two on his chair, three unfinished afghans on his kitchen table. Besides that, he had a picture of Karen, a radio, two plates, two forks, and two cups, an honorable discharge ticket, a rainbow sun catcher, and a locked box. Karen put on her tee-shirt and searched under Anthony’s afghans for the key. She found it under the purple and green afghan that was half finished. Karen had to breathe warm air into the lock before it accepted the key inside it. She twisted twice before the lock opened. The sun catcher glass from Anthony’s house dropped its colors onto Karen’s arms, her legs, her face, her hair, until her body bathed in colors, bathed in rainbows. Karen sat aside fortune strips, honor roll papers, Jake Martínez’s and Mr. Henry’s obituaries. She read the letter telling about his wife’s death.

“I told you, you weren’t,” Karen said. She gathered Anthony’s things in her hands and stuffed each one back in his box.

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Fatty Jackson sat on the steps of pagoda and watched water climb over the sides of the fountain. He loved fountains. After Karen went to sleep, he sat on the steps and watched the woman pour water out her jug. Listened to the pouring water pool inside the fountains
base. He remembered the fountain before it had the woman, before it poured water. On the nights before the fountain poured water, Fatty sat on its edge and watched Linda Wright move around in her photography shop. He liked the way she took off her shoes and pulled up a stool while she organized rolls of film and photo albums. The way she sneezed twice after she got too much dust from dusting photo frames in her nose. And then, when she finished organizing, when she finished dusting, Fatty watched Linda until she turned onto Pearson Street.

"Have a good night, Linda," Fatty said. He pushed himself off from the fountain and walked home.

He used to tell Linda good night every night for a semester at the University of El Paso. He and Linda sat by the fountain with boys and girls while they waited for their bus after their night class. Linda had tears in her voice when she talked. But she did not cry. She just sat next to Fatty by the fountain while they waited for their bus. Her red hair, fell around her face and she called him Gary. Never Fatty.

Fatty was scared of the fountain water. The way the water caught the moonlight. The way the moonlight rippled from one side to the other, tried to find its way back to the moon. But Linda dipped her fingers in the water, in the moonlight catcher. She held water, held moonlight in her cupped hands and held her hands out to Fatty.

"It doesn’t scare me when it’s in your hands," Fatty said.

"Just pretend the moonlight’s my hands then," Linda said. She sucked on the tips of her hair closest to her mouth. Fatty reached for the moonlight in Linda’s hands once more,
but their bus came. Linda dropped moonlight to the sidewalk, and it splattered and wet the concrete in front of the fountain.

The next week, Fatty put on the cologne his mom sent him for Christmas and used extra hair gel on his cowlick. He packed two of everything in his lunch box—potato chips, ham and cheese sandwiches, banana pudding, chocolate bars, carrot sticks—and put his lunch box in his backpack with the books for his evening class. Linda was not in class. Fatty did not write a word in his notebook. He just stared at Linda’s empty chair, walked and tried to look at his shoes after class. Fatty missed the bus home, but he still walked towards the fountain.

Linda wore the sweater that made her red hair glow, and she wore red lipstick that night. She sat on the edge of the fountain, had her feet dipped in moonlight.

“I’m pregnant, Gary.”

Fatty took off his shoes and socks and dipped them into moonlight with Linda. He watched the way her feet grew big underwater. The way her pink toe nail polish rippled across the water in the fountain’s pool. The way pink chased moonlight. Linda buttoned her sweater as she told Fatty about their night class professor. How he smelled like cigars and cashews. How he took her to photo exhibits. How he dipped himself into the softest parts of her body and made her feel like moonlight. Linda told Fatty the professor would not leave his wife for her, would not even acknowledge her in class. And she could not go home.

Fatty touched the tips of Linda’s feet with his feet.
“It’s okay if you want to lean on me. If you need something soft against you,” Fatty said. He ran his fingers through the red and silk of Linda’s hair as she rested her head on the fat and flesh of Fatty’s arm.

Linda’s feet looked like they were made to float. The way they loomed big in water. Fatty rubbed his toes on the soles of her feet and told her he would marry her. He loved her. The way her hair showered red down her back. The way she helped him find moonlight. The way her feet loomed big in water.

“Could we have one of those houses with the picket fences,” Linda said. She took the banana pudding Fatty offered her, licked pudding from the cup.

“And one of those dogs with the brown spots,” Fatty said. He moved his arm around Linda’s shoulder. She did not move.

“We’ll call him Gary, Jr. and he will play football and get in trouble for staying out too late.”

“And he’ll make those faces we made when he catches us sneaking kisses in the kitchen.”

“Make him yours, Fatty,” Linda said. She pulled away from Fatty’s arm and unbuttoned her sweater, fanned her hair over the tops of her breasts. Linda helped Fatty off with his shirt. His fat and skin rippled down the fronts, down the sides of his body.

“You’re just like the fountain water. My fountain,” Linda said. She ran her fingers up and down his ripples and underneath the folds of his skin, and that night Fatty felt Linda’s moonlight as they sat in the fountain and let the water pool around them.
Linda never came back to her classes. Fatty sat with his fingertips in the fountain and remembered the feel of her skin against his skin. The next semester, the semester when they shut off the fountain so the water would not freeze when it got cold, Fatty got a postcard with a smiley face stamp. The post card did not have any writing on it. Just an address label made out to Gary Jackson and a picture taken from Wright Photography of a black and red pagoda and an empty fountain in front of the pagoda.

Fatty graduated college that semester, found the pagoda in a town called Pier’s Point, Texas. When he found Linda, she told him he was too fat. She could not love anyone so fat. Fatty took freelance pictures for travel magazines, for home and garden magazines. He swallowed bottles of tanning pills and got suits sent from the Big and Tall Men’s store in El Paso that made him look thinner. But Linda kept her red hair tied behind her head, would not look at Fatty when he ordered black and white prints, color prints, double prints, enlarged prints of fountains he found in Marathon, in Kent, in Alpine.

The night Fatty slipped in a roll of their fountain from University of El Paso, Linda looked through Fatty’s prints liked she always did. Looked and felt the tears well up in her voice. Felt the tears sting the back of her mouth when she remembered the way her professor called the cops and held his wife when she went to his doorstep, screamed she loved him. Felt the tears choke down her throat as the doctor removed her baby, cut up her insides. But Linda laughed when she thought about how much she loved Fatty.

The only man who held her without wanting to touch her. The only man who wrote her love notes with his pictures. She loved the way his skin rippled down his body that night at the fountain. The way the moonlight touched his skin, made it glow against hers. The heat
from his body. The way Fatty sat on the fountain’s edge in front of the pagoda and watched her organize and dust. She wore her best shoes, put on her favorite lipstick before she got ready to organize, before she got ready to dust. She laughed when she thought about her ruined insides, about the cancer that was ruining the insides her abortion had not. She could never have a child with him, have a house with a picket fence with him, or a dog with brown spots.

Linda caught the way Fatty rested his chin on his hand while he watched her. She turned and told him she loved him from inside her photography shop, then she grabbed her keys, her purse, the pictures of their fountain. She turned out the lights and locked her store.

“Goodbye, Fatty,” Linda said.

“Goodnight, Linda,” Fatty said.

“Good night, Linda,” Fatty said. He rested his chin on his hand the way he used to when Linda had her photography shop. For the first time in years, he felt tired, felt lonely. And he wished he could talk to Karen again. Wished he could tell her the truth about her father even though he was not sure what the truth was except he was not her father. Fatty wished he had not found Karen on the playground when he did, but he was looking for the place where Linda’s house used to be when those two boys ganged up on her the way kids in elementary school used to gang up on him. And then the kids with the knife.

Fatty wished he told Karen he was not her father then, but truth was, he was lonely for company. And he liked her company. Liked the way she needed him as much as he needed her. Fatty never told Karen he was her father. He just never told her he wasn’t. It was always you know, Karen. You’ve always known, Karen.
Fatty felt the air change from dust to cool. Cool before a rain. He liked the way the wind just before a rain brushed and swept dirt and dust from things to make way for rain. He had been so busy with Linda all those years, he never had time for weather, and now that he did, he wished he had time for those other things he missed. Photographing for *Time*, watching Sunday football with Caleb and Jake, having coffee with Jack at his diner.

"Remembrance comes to those who forget," Fatty said. He read that saying from one of the comic books he used to collect. He couldn’t remember if it was Thing from the Fantastic Four or Superman. But he remembered someone saying it, remembered not knowing exactly what it meant, not even when he offered it as words of condolence to Karen the way the super hero offered it to his audience. But tonight, Fatty knew what that super hero was talking about.

Fatty thought about all the football, all the coffees Anthony missed. He thought about the day Anthony found him underneath the porch of the pagoda. He remembered the way Karen laughed all the way to Mr. Henry’s ice cream parlor with the kid in the cowboy hat. The way she laughed when they played hide-and-go-seek in the café. The way she laughed when he chased her through the fort she used to make on the floor of the pagoda. It had been almost three years since Fatty heard real laughter from Karen. The kind of laughter that stuck to the back of her throat so she could not breathe.

"Good night, Karen," Fatty said. He got up to take his nightly walk to the Pier’s Point playground where Linda’s house used to be. "I hope you find your laughter soon."

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Karen dropped the slip of paper that fell from in-between Anthony’s letter about his wife and one of her honor roll certificates. The piece of paper had yellowed and torn at the edges, but the words were not faded.

18 March 1971—Pier’s Point Press Weekly

LOCAL MAN DIES FROM FALL

Gary Jackson, long time resident of Pier’s Point, fell through the porch of Main Street’s pagoda and died last Friday. Two men and Mayor Jenkins pulled Jackson out from a hole they cut in the side of the porch.

Caleb Paulson, Caleb and Crew Hardware Store owner, said he attributes Mr. Jackson’s fall to the porch’s rotting wood and Jackson’s weight.

“There’s some real soft spots in the porch where the wood is rotting. That combined with Fatty’s weight, and I imagine the wood just gave in,” Paulson said.

Jackson, a long time sufferer of obesity, suffered a heart attack when he fell through the porch. Doctors are unsure if he died when he fell through the porch or afterwards.

Jackson is best remembered for his award-winning photograph series entitled “Western Waters” that featured several fountains and gardeners from Zimmerman County. Some of Jackson’s photographs are featured in the Guggenheim Museum series, “Picturing the South.”
Jackson also enjoyed serving as a recess monitor for Pier’s Point Elementary.

Jackson was 35 when he passed away. He is survived by an aunt in El Paso.

“Fatty’s presence will be missed,” Mayor Jenkins said.

“I don’t believe you,” Karen said. She ripped the article in half and threw it into Anthony’s box, locked it. But Karen had read it. Fatty died falling through the pagoda.

The air cooled and pushed clouds over the sun’s light. The colors in Anthony’s house dulled and faded until there was no light in his house, just gray. Karen kicked at Anthony’s box with her bare feet. Kicked and screamed at the box until her foot bled. Karen kept kicking, kept screaming until she could not feel her foot. She bled her way onto Anthony’s bed and said she was sorry. She was sorry.

All those years she never believed him. All those years she believed in Fatty. Would not listen to the truth. Karen bled through the green and yellow afghan on Anthony’s bed. She bled and said she was sorry and coughed and choked on years of denial. She never believed him, and he told the truth. She never believed the truth. Believed what was real. But even Fatty told her she knew. She had always known. Karen coughed and choked from the dirt and dust that brushed its way past Anthony’s house. She coughed and choked until tears drowned out her coughs, until she fell asleep and relaxed her body, fell asleep and breathed.

Karen’s black, washed hair fanned out across the folded afghans at the foot of Anthony’s bed. She wrapped the green and yellow blanket around her body and felt sleep
crawl through her skin, through her muscles. She sunk back into a sea of honey and soft and warm, sunk further, further. Did not wake until a fat man with brown skin and red and yellow eyes entered Anthony’s house on a sheet of wind and pressed himself between her thighs.
CHAPTER EIGHT

Max Garrett got the same rental truck from the rental company at Midland/Odessa airport he got last time. The same purple-stained sheet was still stuffed underneath his truck, and the same dust from the dust storm still coated the truck’s seat covers.

“It’s all we got,” the blue-suited lady with the smudged, brown lipstick told Max. “And we got two others waiting for cars if you don’t want it.”

Max checked the passenger side door to make sure it would not fly open. He could not afford to lose another briefcase. Max had to draft up the potential purchase agreement of Caleb’s hardware store from memory. He drank coffee for two days straight and did not sleep as he tried to remember what he and Caleb talked about in-between the Pier’s Point/Kent football rivalry. Max did not have time to shower the dust from his hair, to take his patched jacket to the cleaners before the transportation board members crossed the clauses that said the department of transportation would pay double market value for his store and the department of transportation would purchase what they could from Caleb at market value before buying their equipment wholesale.

“He’s selling his life, his business,” Max said. He scratched at the embedded film of dirt forming on his skin.

“And we’re giving him the highway that brings him new life, new business,” the board member with the bald head said. “Regular market value, nothing extra, and everyone else has to sell too.”
The board members straightened their ties, gathered their folders before Max had time to tell them Caleb did not want new business, he wanted to retire, to grow old. Max did not know how to tell Caleb the offer for his store and his land was cut in half. Caleb told Max he needed twice market value for his store. He still owed money on his house and would barely break even after he paid the mortgage on his house, on his store, if he only got market value. Max shook hands with Caleb, told him he would draft the papers, watched the board members red ink their way through the purchase price of Caleb’s store. Max kicked the passenger side of his rental truck shut and locked the door once he got inside. He sat his briefcase in the passenger seat the fastened the safety belt around it.

The road to Pier’s Point was not much better than the road to Winkering. But at least all the back roads and side roads were paved, despite all the potholes or the occasional armadillo that made Max swerve into potholes. Max swerved four armadillos on his way to Pier’s Point. After he swerved his fifth armadillo, Max stopped at a gas station at Mentone.

Max buttoned his patched suit coat and rubbed cold and dry from his skin. He did not notice the sun or the people who walked in and out of the Conoco station in shorts and t-shirts or the trails of sweat that started at their foreheads and ran down the backs of their legs. He did not notice the boy with the dust-freckled hair and the girl with the dirt freckled face who whispered and pointed and laughed at the man with suit coat sewn around his patches. At the man with the dust-stained face and red eyes. Max only noticed the chill he felt from the wind before the rain. He pulled his coat tighter around his skinny, bent body and tried to figure how he would get Caleb enough money and get the land the transportation board needed for the highway.
The men on the transportation board called Conoco, called Exxon, called Taco Bell and Kentucky Fried Chicken. Told them, told Wal-Mart they were running the highway through Pier’s Point, and they were open for land bids.

The boy with the dust-freckled hair and the girl with the dirt freckled face grabbed hands and circled around a small tire.

*Ring around the rosy*

Max bought a cup of burnt coffee from a man named Jesús inside the gas station. Jesús reflected cold and clouds from his eyes, hid the red and yellow that stained his eyes.

The wind swept the final bits of dust away with its cool and air. The boy and girl held tight to each other’s hands, circled faster around the tire. Circled and made footprints in the dirt.

*Pocket full of posies*

“You headed further west?” Jesús said. He adjusted the nametag on his collar, kept his fingers curved to hide his dogs claws.

Max swallowed the burnt coffee and poured another cup after he told Jesús he was going to Pier’s Point. Going to go help build a highway.

The boy dug his hands into the girls hands until his nails bit into her skin. He spun faster and faster, felt nails biting deeper into her, but he could not release her from his bite. The girl screamed and laughed, afraid to let go. But she loosened her hands, could not free herself from the boy’s hands.

“My baby lives there,” Jesús said. “Going to be a papa real soon.”
Max told Jesús congratulations. Told him thanks for the coffee. Jesús scratched the scaly part of his inner thigh with his dog claws and smiled. He waited until Max got outside before he ripped off Jesús’ clothes and let his fat, let his scales breathe. He stuck Jesús name tag back onto the back of Jesús underwear and told him to have a nice day.

Ashes, ashes, we all fall down. The boy let go of the girl’s hands and she fell backwards from the tire. She cried when she saw the places his fingernails bit into her hands. He rubbed dust into her bites and told her he tried to let go. He tried. They beat their feet against the tire and laughed until they heard Jesús scream when the coffee pot with the burnt coffee overheated and shattered coffee and glass.
“This your house,” the fat man with brown skin said.

“My father’s,” Karen said. She sat up and wrapped her arms around her.

The man held Karen’s eyes with his. He told her he understood. It was okay. He just wanted some water. He had been traveling so long and he needed some water. Karen filled one of Anthony’s glasses with water from his faucet, and the man swallowed the water one swallow.

“Been traveling long,” Karen said. She offered the man more water, but he shook his head.

“Been looking for my son.”

“Lot of people looking for people,” Karen said. She introduced herself to the fat man. He introduced himself as Jesús, shook her hand with a closed fist to keep her from feeling his dog claws. Karen sat on the edge of Anthony’s bed, told him how she never believed he was her father, about Fatty, about her café, about Kid. Jesús stroked the back of Karen’s hair the way she told him Anthony used to stroke her hair and told her about his children about how the women he loved kept his children from him, sometimes killed them before he ever got to them.

Karen kissed the fat man’s lips. She kissed it with the intensity of all his lost children. And he kissed her with the intensity of a father. Kissed her and held her and called her a good daughter. A good loving daughter.
Karen felt sticky and wet pooling around her feet, around her legs. Clouds still covered the sun, still prevented it from trapping in the sun catcher glass in Anthony’s house, from blanketing Karen’s skin in rainbows. Karen did not need the sun to know what blood felt like. She could not rub the blur from her eyes, but felt Anthony’s shorts, felt her underwear missing from her legs. She felt through her blood for her shorts and underwear. Karen found nothing but what felt like grasshoppers and garter snakes crawling and slithering their way up her legs. She slapped and pulled them off from her, but more found their way closer towards the tops of her legs. They crawled and slithered in-between her legs. Antennas and tongues sniffing out the sticky part of her body. Karen tried to pull the garter snakes from her, but most of them found their way into her. The grasshoppers swarmed behind the garter snakes, and those that Karen did not slap away ate chewed and ate their way inside Karen. Karen clawed at the places she felt the garter snakes, the grasshoppers move inside her body. She clawed and kicked and sank deeper as her blood pooled. Jesús, the man with the brown skin and red and yellow eyes told her Gracias, señorita. Vive mi niño. He reached for the nearest dust blanket and rode it past Anthony Morgan’s house, stopped just outside a Conoco gas station before heading back to Mexico.

Karen awoke to Anthony’s green and yellow blanket twisted around her legs in one direction, around her arms and chest in another direction. Karen felt the dried blood stain from her foot on Anthony’s afghan but saw no other blood but what had crusted and scabbed on her foot. She put on her denim jacket and a pair of Anthony’s sandals that she strapped around her ankles. She wrapped and washed the stain from Anthony’s afghan and grabbed the blue afghan with the white polka dots, wrapped it around her shoulder to keep the cold air
from her. Karen found her way back to the highway and turned west to go to Pier’s Point, but with sleep still in her eyes and the darkened sky, Karen was unsure of her way home. She turned around and found her way back to Anthony’s but there was nothing there. Nothing but a some grasshoppers chewing at what looked like fortune strips.

Karen found her way back to the highway and headed the direction she thought Pier’s Point was in.
CHAPTER TEN

Kid had a craving for a Grease Bag burger and crushed up fortune cookies on top of a scoop of vanilla ice cream. She leaned forward and sat her hat back on her head. She shuffled her way out the door, kicked away grasshoppers that lingered around her doorstep. Kid stopped as a truck with a dented in door drove down towards Caleb’s store, sprayed water from the street on Kid’s boots. Kid shuffled the rest of the way to Karen’s pagoda stopped at the flooding fountain.

The ground around Kid’s feet was saturated. Dirt turned to clay turned to mud turned to the bottom of a pool the water formed at Kid’s feet. Kid saw a small crack in the side of the fountain, the woman pouring her water out of the jug, but could not tell where the extra water was coming from. Kid was sure it had not rained last night. She never slept in rain. But she could not figure why the pagoda’s fountain flooded. Could not see the hole the crack had turned into or way the woman bled water out her body. Cowgirls were to realistic to see bleeding fountains.

“I know we aren’t speaking. But you still got the café to run,” Kid said. She was not going to wait for Karen to talk this time. The last time she waited, it took almost a month.

Kid shuffled her way to the coffee pot, found Sunday’s coffee. Kid did not realize until she smelled the coffee today was Tuesday. She slept through an entire day, forgot to open the café for an entire day.

“You got me, Karen. No more Sunday vodka.” Kid opened Karen’s bedroom door but she was not there. She looked in the back kitchen, in dry storage, but there was no Karen.
No off key whistling of Willie Nelson tunes. No bare feet stomping around in cuffed overalls. No firecracker voice asking Kid how much she drank last night.

Kid tucked and untucked her shirt, tried to remember if Karen came back to the café on Sunday. She was too full of beer, too full of cards to remember. She knows she locked the door then shuffled her way back to Caleb’s hardware store to finish her last hand of spades before falling asleep next to Millie Grayson on a dry cement mix bag. Kid found a book of matches next to the moisturizer bottle underneath the café’s cash register. She pulled the cigarette from behind her ear, held it in her chapped lips as she lit her match. Kid ashed her cigarette on the grease paper in a burger basket. She ashed and tipped her hat and did not see the woman with short brown and gray hair push the door open and hold her brown purse handle at her side.

“You from around here,” the woman said. She shook water from her pink high heels.

Kid lifted her hat off one eye.

“Seems like it,” she said. She licked her finger, drowned her cigarette heat out with her saliva.

“I’m looking for a man. For a Fatty Jackson.” The light from the sun catchers hid the wrinkles that gathered around the woman’s face, around her mouth. Kid even noticed hints of blue in her eyes that had since faded to gray.

“About twenty-five years too late,” Kid said.

The woman tugged at her bottom lip and sat down in the booth across from Kid. The woman handed Kid an envelope from the Guggenheim museum.
“Had a heck of a time finding an address for him, but when I did, I figured I’d return these on my way to El Paso.” Kid took the envelope, told her she traveled a long way to deliver some pictures.

“How’s closed, but you’re welcome to some ice cream,” Kid said. She shut the café’s door behind the woman, pretended to lock it, but left it open in case Karen came back. Kid and the woman waded their feet to the other side of the street. Kid could not wait to fix herself an ice cream float and forget about the apology she would have to give Karen for not opening the café up on Monday.

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Fatty Jackson sat in the spot where Kid had sat. He rested his chin on his hand and looked at the envelope, tried to remember the pictures that were inside. He remembered when he got his photographs accepted into the museum for its “Picturing the South” series. He did not remember if he went to see his pictures or which pictures he had taken. But he remembered telling Linda he wanted to send photographs into the Guggenheim the night he told her good night for the last time. Linda pulled the red strand of hair that touched the tip of her nose behind her ear. She told Fatty that was nice and asked him if he had any prints he wanted her to develop. He handed her the role of film with their fountain at the University of El Paso, and Linda slid the enlarged black and white photos of fountains he photographed in Marfa.

Linda liked the Marfa fountain with the jugs that looked like they were held up by water best. She liked the way Fatty photographed the woman in the picture. The way he made the woman and her eyes and her hands look and touch the water like she was trying to
capture the light in the water. She sat at the desk in her back office, uncapped an ink pen, and remembered the way she taught Fatty not to be afraid of the way the fountain water caught moonlight.

Gary, my fountain,

I love you. I have always loved you. Ever since that night you still wanted to hold me after you found out, I have loved you, but it was not until I saw you again that I have been in love with you. I left that day because I wanted to give him a chance to love me the way I loved him. And when he told me he did not love me, when he held his wife close to him and told me he did not recognize me, I left even though I knew you wanted me. Gary, I couldn't be unfair to you the way he was to me. I did not love you then. Not that way.

But ever since that time, ever since I gave it away, since too many hands have passed over this body, used what they could, since cancer takes what was left after the use, I never forgot the soft and the folds of your skin. The way your body rippled down towards the sweetest part of you. I never regretted that night, Gary. And now, I realize the love for you I have is different. But I now have nothing to offer you. Not even myself. As I write this, I have less than three months left. So, I am leaving so you do not have to see my suffering. I am going back to my mother’s home in Abilene with hopes she will allow me to rest during my final hours.

Until my last breath, I shall never forget you nor our fountain, my fountain. My love for you pools deeper than you know.
Don't be afraid of the moonlight,

Linda

Fatty picked the fountain with the floating jugs to send in with his other photograph of the pagoda’s fountain, but he did not remember that as he sat in the booth and waited to find out which pictures he sent. He did not remember the adhesive cardboard backing he stuck his photographs to, how he sealed Linda’s letter in cardboard.

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The woman asked Kid if she could take off her high heels. She got some water inside her shoe and did not want to get her pantyhose wet. The woman soaked up the water with a napkin from the napkin holders on Kid’s table. She wiped up the drops of water that spilled on the red and white checked tablecloth. The woman sat her shoes next to her wooden bench and saw the perfectly shined bases of the stools at Kid’s ice cream soda fountain. She sat up, counted the stack of ice cream soda glasses and sundae glasses. She followed the trail of rodeo posters, the trail of men and women moving their bodies with the rhythm of their horses, back to the sign that said restroom and the Rodeo Rider pinball machine. The woman reached in her purse for some quarters. She had not seen pinball since she was a girl.

“Pinball game doesn’t work,” Kid said. She did not know how many times she had said that line in the past ten years. She got a ball stuck in the ramp and could not find a service person to fix it. Still, Kid did not have the heart to put the pinball machine in the dumpster. It had been there since she owned the ice cream parlor, and she did not know what to do with the space.
Kid opened her deep freeze for some vanilla ice cream, remembered Anthony when she saw his body curled and tucked in her freezer. She brushed some of the freeze from his eyebrows and around the sides of his ears. A sheet of ice encased the half-burned crocheted rug he held in his arms. Kid touched the ice with her hands, felt it stick to the dust in her skin. Kid shut her deep freeze and rinsed off an ice cream scoop.

Kid cut a ball out of her block of vanilla ice cream, snagged on something solid in her ice cream. At first she thought the solid was some peppermint. Her last shipment of vanilla ice cream from the Sundry Warehouse had a couple accidental pieces of peppermint. But when Kid stuck the solid in her mouth and bit down, it was not peppermint. The solid bit into the side of her cheek. She spit the solid into her hand, held up a tooth. No streaks of black, no bands of yellow, no fillings, just tooth white. Kid ran her tongue around the inside of her mouth. She had all her teeth. She held the tooth closer but did not see the purple tint Karen had in her teeth. The tooth was too white too be human, and it curved into a moon shape at the top.

***

Fat Jesus spit through the hole his missing tooth made in his mouth. He spit out the green and yellow that colored his insides. Spit and looked for the wind to take him back to Mexico. But there was no wind. Everything sat in morning calm, waiting for the rain. So Fat Jesus walked and mumbled his puta madre at the cowboy that leaned against her booth in the ice cream parlor. Did not move when he entered her parlor looking for something sweet. His brown teeth were rotting white from so many sweets, and Fat Jesus’ belly was getting
smaller. He only had one kid left. Grasshoppers and snakes slithered behind him as he walked, waited for him to fall so they could eat out the green and yellow parts of his body.

He left the funeral home, walked down the rows of stores on Main Street, but nothing smelled sweet to him. He stopped at Kid’s ice cream parlor. Smelled vodka and sugar and slithered inside the wooden door with no window. He felt his baby tugging inside his body, demanding a new body, demanding sweet, but Fat Jesus only saw the cowboy with his hat tipped over the side of his head. His short hair tucked behind his ears, and he made no movement acknowledging Fat Jesus’ presence. Fat Jesus dug his dog-clawed hand into the ice cream that smelled sweetest, into the center of Kid’s vanilla ice cream, and bit a chunk of ice cream in his hand. His side tooth rotted and broke as Fat Jesus chewed, and he spit the ball of ice cream from his mouth back into the container of vanilla ice cream. Slithered away from the cowboy in black and walked down the road that lead out of Pier’s Point, stopped when he got to the rainbow house that glowed near the side of the road.

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But Kid knew nothing about Fat Jesus. She put the moon curved tooth in her shirt pocket and scooped two scoops of vanilla in each ice cream soda glass. She filled both the soda glasses with vanilla flavored soda and handed one of the glasses and spoon to the woman from the Guggenheim.

The woman slurped and licked at the soda. Told Kid she had never tasted anything sweeter.

“And what did happen to Fatty Jackson,” the woman said.

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Linda did not open her photography shop the next day or the day after that. Fatty sat on the steps of the pagoda and waited for her until nightfall, but the lights in her store never came on. The picture frames hung perfectly straight on her wall. The rolls of film were pulled to the front and ordered by film speed and number of pictures in each roll.

When Caleb covered the windows in Linda’s photography shop with black film, Fatty knew Linda was not coming back. Caleb even told him Linda had the cancer. She went to Abilene and died a month ago. Fatty sat in his dark room for a week. Ate can cheese and Ritz crackers and developed blank film. When he developed his last roll of blank film, he took off his pants, put on the only pair of shorts he had—orange silk shorts Tina Jenkins sewed out of a bed sheet.

Fatty did not wear a shirt when he walked down Main Street in his shorts. His skin overlapped and rippled down the waist band of his shorts. He walked up and down the pagoda’s steps in his bare feet. Tennis shoes hurt his bunions.

The pagoda’s steps creaked then bent every time fatty walked up or down, but Fatty unstuck his shorts from his sweaty legs and continued walking and dripping sweat onto the pagoda’s steps. Wind blew dust from the pagoda’s walls and porch into Fatty’s face, but Fatty swallowed the dust and closed his eyes and walked up and down, up and down. After he finished climbing and unclimbing the pagoda’s stairs, Fatty jump-jumped his feet apart and together as he remembered jumping jacks from elementary gym class. Fatty jumping jacked until the pagoda’s wood creaked and creaked then broke. Fatty fell through the porch.

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“Fell through a porch,” Kid Hanson said. She felt the tooth poke at her through her shirt pocket. She took it out of her pocket and sat it on one of the red squares in her checkered table cloth.

“I’ll give you twenty dollars for that tooth,” the woman said. She swallowed the bite of ice cream she had and reached in her brown purse for a twenty dollar bill.
Fatty had seen Karen once before, but neither she nor he remembered it. He was too busy focusing on the dark in the porch. Fatty Jackson was scared of the dark. Of total dark. And he could not move under the porch. His arms and legs nestled into brown earth and weeds that survived underneath the darkness of the pagoda’s porch. Fatty blinked and blinked as he looked at the untouched black paint on the underside of the roof that shaded the pagoda’s porch. Not even light touched the black paint. After Fatty lost his urge to scream away darkness, he stared and smiled and felt himself sink into dirt.

“You okay,” Mayor Jenkins said. She heard the wood break from her dress shop, saw Fatty lying like he was going to take a nap.

“Can’t move,” Fatty said. He smiled and listened to Mayor Jenkins voice bounce around underneath the porch and silhouette his body.

Mayor Jenkins creaked down the pagoda’s stairs. One of the steps buckled underneath her weight, and she fell down the rest of the way. Underneath the stairs, crickets who comforted themselves from the heat hopped out from the broken step on Mayor Jenkin’s jeans. Mayor Jenkins swatted at crickets with her hands and mashed a cricket right above her left leg.

“You all right, Mayor?” Mr. Henry and Jake Martínez’s voices echoed from Mr. Henry’s ice cream parlor. Mr. Henry walked over, ice cream scoop and camera in hand. Mr. Henry did not see what he tripped over when he fell towards the sidewalk near the pagoda’s empty fountain.
“Fatty can’t move,” Mayor Jenkins said. She rubbed cricket from her hand to the side of the fountain.

“I bet Caleb has rope and a pulley,” Jake said. Mayor Jenkins took Jake and Mr. Henry’s hands and walked up the pagoda’s steps. Mr. Henry bent down on his knees and snapped a picture of Fatty. Fatty did not move when the flash went off.

Fatty watched white circles float across the black paint on the pagoda. More circles floated and fell towards him as Linda snapped another picture. Fatty opened his mouth to catch the falling circles and swallow them. He swallowed nothing but dirt and dust from the pagoda and Mr. Henry’s knees.

“Rope and pulley won’t work on Fatty,” Mayor Jenkins said. She licked her finger and rubbed at the cricket stain on her skirt.

“Fatty, you alright,” Mr. Henry said. He did not stay crouched down long enough to hear Fatty’s answer.

But Fatty said he was fine. He did not want to move from the darkness, from the falling circles. But no one heard him, and as the voices moved towards the sidewalk, he did not hear them. The circles and the darkness swirled and made a funnel that stopped just above Fatty’s eyes. Fatty felt dirt underneath his body warm, and he closed his eyes, sank into the warm.

Fatty Jackson did not open his eyes. His body sank deeper and deeper into the dirt.

“We have to cut a hole in the side of the steps,” Caleb Paulson said. “We’ll get you out, Fatty.”
Fatty’s body stained darker and darker the more he sank into the dirt. Mayor Jenkins rubbed Caleb’s shoulder, told him not to ruin the stairs.

“We just want Fatty out. Don’t destroy the pagoda,” she said,

Caleb went through three circular saw blades before he cut an opening big enough for two men to help pull out Fatty. The first saw blade hit against a concrete woman holding a water jug. She was covered in mud and mold and held her pitcher to pour. Nothing came out. The second saw blade hit against something solid, but since there was no blood, everyone was sure it was not Fatty. After Caleb cut an opening with the third saw blade, he and Jake Martínez pulled out the woman with the pitcher and felt their way under the porch to Fatty. Caleb and Jake could not budge Fatty. Fatty was dead.

Caleb got his truck with the wench in the back and lifted Fatty up enough to tie his cable in-between Fatty’s chest and stomach. Fatty made a mud ditch with his body, and Mayor Jenkins closed her eyes when she saw his opened eyes and the smile on his face. Mr. Henry closed his ice cream parlor long enough to take a look at Fatty. And even Fatty bent over his body and did not realize he was so ugly dead.

Everyone was so busy trying to figure out who would take Fatty to Jake’s funeral home, that no one but Fatty heard the clop, clop of hooves on Main Street’s road.

“Slow it up, Fire Baby,” the cowboy with short, brown hair said. Fatty would not have known the cowboy was a girl had it not been for the slenderness in her hands. “That’s a big man.”
The cowboy waited until the pale-skinned man on the back of her horse got to the ground before she handed him his denim jacket. The jacket laughed as he walked over to Fatty’s body.

“Fell through the porch,” Mayor Jenkins said. “You’re not from around here.”

The man told Mayor Jenkins he came to see the pagoda. Fatty looked in the man’s denim jacket, and saw a laughing baby. Her baby fat rippled down the sides of her body, and Fatty touched the side of the baby’s face, remembered what warm felt like.

The cowboy tied her horse’s reins around the street lamp in front of the pagoda. Her horse bent his head down, grazed on grass and crickets. She told the pale-skinned man she would keep his baby while he helped Caleb take Fatty to Jake’s funeral home. Fatty waved good-bye to the baby. Good-bye. Good-bye. He walked down the street towards the place where they were bulldozing Linda Wright’s house to make room for a bigger elementary school.
CHAPTER TWELVE

Millie Grayson uncuffed her husband from his desk. They set the table together without any words. Two forks, two spoons, two knives, two plate, two cups, two bowls. They set and reset the table until the plates sat directly in the center of her flower border place mats. Millie sat out the bowl of spaghetti, the tossed salad, the pitcher of ice tea, the garlic dinner rolls.

“You use fresh oregano?” Her husband asked. He waited for her to sit down before he seated himself.

“Too expensive. I used dried this time. But I added some fresh thyme. It finally came in the garden last week,” she said. She sat down and planned out their dinner script.

Married thirty years, and they talked dinner. Dinner, the weather, two people so close, they were strangers. And Millie watched the dinner table between them grow longer, but said nothing.

Ever since he slept with her sister, Millie just sat at the dinner table. Poked at her meat loaf. Twisted her spaghetti noodles and asked her husband how was your day dear, do you think it will rain dear. Her husband said nothing. He sat back in his chair, and she saw the outline of his body, filled in the face on his head. Two wrinkles on his forehead, the kind that disappeared on meat loaf day, reappeared during pork chops, two eyes, the color of eggplant casserole, and lips like strawberry soda in sunlight. His cheeks were day old dinner rolls, not like the hot buttered ones he had when they married, when they did not talk about dinner, the weather, when they used the table for anything but dinner. But his face grew
older, and Millie knew it would be green with mold, but she said nothing. He said nothing. They just ate their dinner, separated by a cherry wood dining table.

“Great dinner, dear,” her husband said. He sopped spaghetti sauce with his garlic dinner rolls.

“Got pretty cool last night, pretty still this morning. It’s going to rain soon. I made lemon pie. Do you want a piece,” Millie said. She picked up their plates, looked into her husband’s eyes, eyes the color of eggplant casserole, and waited for him to say no thanks, darling, I’ll watch the news and then go to bed.

Millie watched his silhouette grow smaller in dining room lights until there was nothing, nothing but her in the dining room holding two empty dinner plates. Millie took the plates to the kitchen and ate her lemon pie. Lemons, love, and cream. Millie ate her pie in silence, ate each bite to the rhythm of her husbands’ snore and reruns of “I Love Lucy” from the living room.

But it was not always “I Love Lucy” reruns and snoring husbands. Millie remembered when they ate lemon pie together. When they stuffed it into each other’s faces, onto their bodies, and ate until they got to flesh. When she ran naked through Mrs. Brown’s strawberry patch or ate overripe grapes from mama’s vineyard the day she got her first kiss. When she and her husband ate their first slice of cantaloupe together. Millie still remembered the sweet scent of their laughter, a scent like fresh fruit salad. But their salad had long rotted and browned in the sun.

Millie was used to her sister’s smell. The scent of mildew rain caressing a field of fresh-bloomed tiger lilies. And Millie knew her sister when she found her on her husband’s
clothes. Fresh picked tiger lilies, his hands lingering under her leaves, on her stem, in her stamen.

Tina had just lost her husband underneath a tangled bouquet of wires and tubes that she weeded through everyday for the past six months. And the day Millie found her on her husband’s clothes, the bouquet became too much for Tina. She could not smell, could not feel another plastic tube, another wire.

“Millie, come get me,” she said when Millie’s husband answered the phone. She hung it up before he had time to breathe and tucked her knees under her skirt the way she used to when her sister chased her through the watermelon patch.

Tina and Millie’s husband sat on Millie’s front porch and ate tuna fish sandwiches, salad and peach pie that day. She laughs until she cries over their lunch. Laughs and cries when she tells him how Millie used to chase her in the watermelon patch. Laughs and cries when dried shrub leaves land in her hair. Laughs and cries when she talks about her husband buried under his bouquet of wires and tubes. And Millie’s husband peeled each shrub leaf from her hair. Peeled away her dying husband for one afternoon with his hands, his kisses, his body.

And that evening, Millie had tiger lilies on her mind when she smelled her sister on his clothes. Had tiger lilies on her mind as she did feed their baby inside her. She handcuffed her husband to her desk until dinner and told him Tina was her sister, her sister. Still, she could not hate her sister. Could not take her sister’s love away from her husband. So, she swallowed their affair with every bite of lemon pie she could and never got angry, never forgave.
She moved her sister’s clothes into the guest bedroom when her husband died. Shopped with her, sewed with her, helped her take over her husband’s job as mayor, and never talked with her about the affair. And when Tina and Caleb first touched hands, they never touched more because Tina felt the weight of her sister on shoulders, on her legs, on her hands.

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The water from the fountain kept overflowing, but no one except Kid had noticed, and she did not know how to turn the fountain off. It flowed down the sidewalk in front of the pagoda, onto the streets, and then stopped. Let its water flood out the hole in its side and soak into everything in the street.

Caleb signed Max’s contract anyway. It wasn’t enough money to let him grow old, but he was tired of running the hardware store. Tired of never knowing more than the feel of Tina’s hands. He was tired of feeling alone when he was around her, and he had to retire before she instilled alone permanently in him. Caleb and Max walked down to Karen’s café to order two Grease Bag specials, waded through the water that pooled through the café.

But Max did not see the way the woman bled and flooded water out of her fountain. The fountain had stopped. He just waded through the pool with Max and pushed on the door of the café. The café door would not budge. Max knocked on the café’s door with his fist, but he did not hear the stomping of Karen’s bare feet inside. They walked down the steps of the pagoda, felt the wood creak underneath their feet all the way to Kid’s ice cream parlor.
PART TWO
CHAPTER ONE

No one knew why there was a Chinese Pagoda in the middle of Pier’s Point. Or why Pier’s Point was built around a Chinese Pagoda. And no one knew who the pagoda belonged to, if it ever belonged to anyone. Not even Mr. Henry, the ice cream parlor owner before Kid, remembered a day when the pagoda was not on Main Street or when Main Street was not near the pagoda. This he told to people who came to ask about the Chinese building, but only after they ordered at least one scoop of ice cream.

After Mr. Henry died, after he left the ice cream parlor to Kid, more people came to see the pagoda, more businesses sprung up near the pagoda.

Jack’s Diner.

The Lee’s Vacuum Store.

Pier’s Point Press.

Calen and Crew Hardware Store.

Tina Jenkin’s Dress and Shoe Shop.

Tina Jenkin’s Dress and Shoe Shop for Full-figured Women.

Keith Jenkin’s (no relation) Men’s Wear.

Libson’s Shoe Repair.

Wright Photography.

First United Methodist Church of Pier’s Point.

The Post Office.

The Town Hall.
People from Kent, Winkering, Fort Delaware, and Mapleton came to see Pier’s Point’s pagoda and shop on Pier’s Point’s Main Street after the city council passed a non-resident purchasing ordinance. Some people even came to Pier’s Point from as far west as El Paso, as far east as Tyler, and everywhere in-between, including north and south. People walked up and stopped and down and stopped on Pier’s Point’s Main Street to look at the pagoda. Men and women clop-clopped and click-clicked their shoes on the sidewalk the city built around the pagoda. Fat fingers, skinny fingers, wrinkled fingers, smooth fingers, tan fingers, pale fingers, touched the pagoda’s red and black paint until its paint cracked and peeled from so much touching. The owners of those same fingers walked up and down the pagoda’s steps and paced its porch until its wood creaked and splintered. The pagoda’s brass dragon door handles along with its boarded windows and brass columns were rubbed and held and poked until permanent finger stains covered the pagoda’s body.

Men and women and boys and girls ate lunch on the pagoda’s porch, licked ice cream on the pagoda’s steps, cried against the pagoda’s walls, dipped their feet into the empty fountain in front of the pagoda, had sex and fucked and made love near the pagoda’s back door. And slowly, the pagoda’s paint and wood and brass withered from so much touching, from so many stains.

No one thought anything about the pagoda’s weathering. At least not until Fatty Jackson fell through the porch, but they just replaced the hole Caleb made to get Fatty out and boarded shut the hole he fell through, boarded the stairs that broke under Tina Jenkins’s weight.
Then Anthony came to town. Then Anthony moved into the pagoda. Then Karen turned it into the Grease Bag Café. She laid white tiles on the floor, bought red vinyl booths from Jack’s diner when he decided he like tables better than booths. She painted the pagoda’s wood walls white and hung mirrors and pictures of Mark Twain on her walls. Karen painted and moved and washed the insides of the pagoda until no one gave a thought to the outsides of the pagoda except for its chipping paint that everyone thought Karen fixed when they complained.

But the pagoda was aging. Its wood was softening, and it could not go without creaking every time someone walked up, walked down its steps. Its fountain was getting old. Its clay and concrete were thinning. Even if Max had not hit his truck against the fountains sign during the dust storm, the fountain still would have cracked and bled water.

Karen never found her way back to the café. She ended up in Marathon and did not have the words to ask anyone for a ride to Pier’s Point. She took the bus to Dallas, did not look up at the buildings that reached past clouds. The snakes and the grasshoppers had eaten her blood, made everything in her grow cold. Even the rainbow she wore around her neck caught her cold, and its colors cracked from lack of warmth.

Anthony Morgan was her father. And she never kissed him and called him hers. These were the only thoughts she had as her belly stretched and pulled its way into shape to make room for the baby inside her. Karen sat on the cracked vinyl stool in the back room of the bar and waited to go on stage and give her audience kisses.

They all needed kisses. Kisses on ears, cheeks, neck, lips, shoulders. They were used to kisses on arms, stomach, back, legs, and places that hid themselves between their legs.
Kisses too full of lust, never enough love. They came to Karen for love. To fill those places that girlfriends and boyfriends and husbands and wives and lovers, lovers, lovers filled no more. They lost sight of love. Needed Karen to help bring them back. They touched every part of her, sucked the warmth from her, from her belly until she had nothing left for herself except the feeling of cold and a baby with no father.

Before the lights began, they dusted off booths at Fantasy Femmes Bar. They dusted off booths that sucked in dark. They folded their hands and waited. They who had mustard stained mustaches or pressed suit jackets that wrinkled in the back or white shirts without any sleeves so their arms had room to feel air. They who wore high heels with black scuff marks on the toes or hair laid in hair spray and curls or earrings that dangled and reached for their shoulders. They all came and dusted off booths, folded their hands and waited.

Waited for Karen to come on stage in her overalls with grass stains on her knees. Karen with the black braid that ran down the middle of her back. Karen with no shoes and only her body, her love to offer them underneath her overalls. But before she gave them herself, white and colored lights with their oranges and purples and reds and blues and yellows kissed their faces then brushed past their noses to their ears to their hair before kissing others where they needed kissing most. They couldn’t avoid the light. Couldn’t avoid the stage. Or Karen. Or her love.

Karen danced past their eyes and into their souls as she weaved in and out of the fog, braided around her pole, played keep-away from lights. She liked to see how far she could get on stage before a light caught her and kissed her and made her part of it. Karen sat on the
edge of the stage, grabbed men's, grabbed women's faces and nuzzled them deep into her belly.

She felt their dried, cracked, flaked lips as their lips started to moisten. Lips gone dry from years of forgetting what it's like to kiss with love. Lust was all they knew. All they remembered anymore. But lust was only part of love. Was the part of love that drew them to her. That drew them to their lovers. Lust was not the part that made them stay. That made them draw stick figures across their lovers skin while he, while she pushed their chests closer towards the sheets as they breathed and slept. It was love that made them stay. That made them feel all colors from a simple touch. That made them remember colors, made them remember brown and reds and whites and greens and blacks and yellows and purples when the places below their shoulders were touched. Places that had gone numb from years of forgetting love. Places Karen helped them remember.

Karen helped so many of them remember. After her night with Jesús, after remembering love and the way she drowned when she remembered she loved Anthony. Karen wanted them all to remember. So they, so she, would not forget. They came to her
dressing room, lips shining from remembrance, and Karen never turned them away. They needed the touch. The kiss. The love. They needed to feel colors again. They needed to remember. Needed to remember love.

But they did not remember Karen. Did not see her. Did not know her. They remembered girlfriends and lovers and wives and boyfriends the way they used to be before they lost love. Saw eyes that winked, hands that held, necks that sweated underneath July fireworks, noses that sneezed, ears that turned red, and lips that smiled at the thought of what happened that night in the back yard. They saw everything they needed to in order to remember. Ant that memory did not include Karen.

Did not include the way her legs braided with the pole on stage, braided with their waists. Flesh kissing flesh. Their memories did not include the way her stomach pressed tight against them, the way her toenails dug into their backs and scarred them with orange toenail polish. Or the way she helped them weave in and out of stage lights, into love, out of lust.

Karen was the only one who remembered the way her face felt against theirs underneath the lights when she released them from her belly and kissed them on her foreheads, on their eyelids, cheeks, necks, lips, shoulders. Karen was the only one who remembered how they did not touch the fortune cookie shaped scar on her wrist. How their hands felt as they talked to her belly or braided her black hair down the length of her back. Their memories did not include Karen.

And when they left, Karen walked around the stage and the floor that held the booths. She walked in her bare feet and soaked up the love their bodies and their shoes and their
clothes left on the floor in forms of dust and water and sweat and dirt. She soaked up love with her feet and imagined what it was like to be memory.

Karen looked for Anthony’s memories. Looked for the one who loved her in the crowds. But he was not there to remember loving her. But Karen danced for them, found love in their eyes, their kisses, and held them close against her the way a Daddy should. All those eyes, those bodies with folded hands that sat in dark booths and waited for love. Karen helped all her Daddies find their way back to love. But never back to her. Her Daddies never came back to her. Love was too hard. Memory was too hard.

When Karen remembered they were not her Daddy, were not the ones who loved her, she left Fantasy Femmes. Left lights and kisses and stages and the way they produced love. Leaving love was not hard. Not when she never found it. Karen walked around the bar district in Dallas. She passed Latin music and disco music and house music and country music. Each open doorway to each club breathed out the music held inside. Karen liked the way the neon lights and the lights from the dance floors edged their way out the door, then back inside again as if telling Karen to follow it. Karen stopped at the doorway with no light, no music. Stopped at the bar called Texas. She waited for Texas’ music to pulse out its door, but its door did not open.

“You going in,” the doorman said. “Look like you need a place to rest your feet.” He did not take his eyes from Karen’s belly as he opened the door, told her it was beautiful. Texas’ music played so low, the people who hummed its words drowned out the music. A man with a white cowboy hat and brown braid around the brim asked Karen if she knew how
to two-step. He held out his arms, and Karen left him to dance alone. She was used to
dancing alone, and two-steps were not for those who danced alone.

Everyone was afraid of dancing alone in Texas. The way they paired up and put arms
and hands around waists and backs and pulled chests and stomachs so close, air could not
breathe between them. The way the lights were turned so low, each couple could do nothing
but concentrate on dance and music and each other. They shuffled and tapped against the
floor. Shuffled and tapped to music that held them and would not let go. And they would
not let music go. They were too afraid. They danced and danced and the DJ played music as
long as possible. When music stopped, they still held onto each other. Palms against palms,
fingers against fingers. They walked together. Walked away from dance, from lights, from
music. And together, they shuffled and tapped their ways into night’s dark.

After Anthony died, Karen went to Marathon to look for answers about her father.
When she stopped at Anthony’s sun catcher house in-between Marathon and Pier’s Point, she
found answers. Answers that everyone already told her. Answers that led back to Anthony.
Karen got on the bus to Dallas to get away from answers. She opened herself, her body up to
those she thought needed answers most. Told them what they already knew, what she already
knew. But what she could not forgive.

That night in Texas, Karen sat on a bar stool after music, after dancing stopped and
tried moving her feet against the floor, but Texas music was too hard to dance to alone. And
Karen was too afraid to dance together. To dance with a someone who concentrated on her.
She was afraid she would not know the dance when it happened. Afraid she would turn it
away.
Karen sat outside Texas, felt her baby try to two-step in her belly, and sat against the Texas wall.

"You need some warmth?" the man with the soot covered face said. He offered Karen a spot in front of the fire he started in a barrel in the alley behind the bars. The man reached for the broken jade butterfly Karen wore, but she moved away from him before he could remember why he reached for the bracelet.

"You look like someone," the man said. He rubbed the cold from his hands to the fire.

"I always do," Karen said.

"I used to run an ice cream store," the man said. "I hate ice cream. Only kept the store for my daughter."

Karen rubbed her hands, but instead of cold, what warmth she had fell into the fire. The man told her about his daughter Eve. How she liked to eat ice cream out of the container with her hands. She slurped and licked the ice cream he bought her. She slurped and licked double chocolate fudge ice cream the day she made stains.

"You know, the woman," the man said. He told Karen how the red from in-between her legs stained through her panties, her blue jeans, and Eve told her Dad she was scared. She slurped ice cream from her hands and tugged at the bottom of her favorite tee-shirt. Her Dad's tee-shirt with a Mr. Bubble decal.

"I told her it was just her woman. But she told me she was afraid of those stains. I did not tell her I was afraid too," the man said.
“Maybe you should have told her,” Karen said. She asked the man what Eve’s period had to do with his ice cream store.

“For when she came back,” he said.

“I didn’t know she left.” Karen invited the man to a coffee shop. She poured several packets of sugar in her coffee, and he ordered a pie and ice cream with her coffee.

He told Karen it was his wife that made Eve leave. She was afraid of Eve’s blood too. She was afraid of what would happen to Eve when men smelled her blood the way they smelled hers. The man loved the way his wife smelled. Like blueberry pancakes on the front lawn. The man told Karen how his wife made pancakes. How she ripped off her shirt and jeans and exposed the raw materials on her body before tying an apron around her waist. She mixed blueberries and eggs and flour and milk, made blueberry pancake batter. He dipped his fingers into her batter, smeared her batter around the valley between her ribs and her hips. And she ate batter from his fingers, swallowed it whole. He reached for spatulas, for pot holders, for measuring cups and hit mixing spoons and tablespoons and sugar spoons against glasses, measuring cups, bowls full of milk or water or batter. Their bodies stained with blueberry pancake batter and her batter and his batter. Their bodies stained each other, the counters, the kitchen floor, and he never questioned their stains.

Then they moved to Red Fox Grove, an old suburb in Marathon.

“My café’s near Marathon,” Karen said. “You heard of the Grease Bag Café?” The man shook his head. He had not been to Marathon in over forty years. Not since that night he left Red Fox Grove. It was hot the summer his wife got pregnant, so they sat on their front lawn in their underwear and ate grocery store apples. The Texas heat was too warm for
anything but underwear and apples. He liked the way his wife ate his apples. She knew where the good part was, where the apple meat was sweetest, next to the core, after all the decent parts were eaten. She bit into her apple until her cheeks puffed out on each side, and when she swallowed, he put his fingertips against the lump in her throat and followed its path towards her meat. Juices stained her chin, her legs, and he grabbed her in his arms and kissed her, tasted her lip, her love, her apple.

That next morning, there was a knock on the door from a man with a Red Fox Grove Neighborhood Crime Watch jacket. His braided wedding ring was worn smooth. The man told them people in Red Fox Grove don’t eat their apples on the front lawn. She waited for the man to leave before she grabbed two apples and her blueberry pancake batter from her kitchen. She took off her good dress and bit into the apple until juices spilled down her body. She poured pancake batter over her breasts and pulled Bill too her. Told him they couldn’t tell her, tell him, how to love.

That night, she told him she needed bread rolls for their Sunday pot roast. She marinated the pot roast with their Saturday night whiskey. She wanted their pot roast so moist, it dripped whiskey marinade out of every pore. He walked down the aisles of the grocery store looking for bread rolls. He grabbed honey wheat bread rolls and apple muffins and white bread rolls and onion rolls and swallowed two blueberry muffins on the way home. In the front lawn, the pot roast’s red and his wife’s hair stained the driveway. He made bread crumb trails all the way to the kitchen. His wife sat in the corner with crossed legs and hugged what was left of their pot roast close to her chest. Pot roast juices and blood pooled
around her and stained the kitchen floor. He found a braided wedding ring worn smooth and knocked on every house in his street until the man from the Neighborhood Watch came out. He smelled his wife’s blood on the man and punched the man until the man’s blood washed his wife’s away. And he still kept hitting. Fist on Fist.

“Stop, it. Stop. I won’t have it,” his wife said. She ran down the street in his robe and told him no more. She did not let him touch her anymore. She told him she did not like the way he looked at her when he smelled her. Looked at her like she was in heat and wanted her to scream when he mounted her. Scream until someone blamed her.

“Yes, but you have to understand how she felt,” Karen said. She poured more coffee into her sugar when the waitress refilled it.

“But I don’t understand. I never could understand. No one tells a man how to feel when his wife, the woman he loves, is raped. No man knows what his wife goes through, and he does not ask her to know he understands. He just wants to hold her, to offer her warmth. Because it’s all she can do,” the man pushed away his pie. When his wife found out she was pregnant she slipped further inside the place he was not allowed to touch anymore. So he put all his warmth in his Eve. He held her and took her to work at the ice cream parlor. She wore an apron that draped past her knees while she stood on a step stool and handed customers their ice cream cones.

His wife accused him of catching his Eve’s scent in his blood. Accused him of waiting for her heat so he could mount her and reach for her blood. But the man never touched Eve except to hug her and. at night, kiss her on the lips, then on the forehead when
she told him lips weren’t for Daddy’s. And the night Eve got her woman, his wife took her, saved her from men who might catch her scent.

“So I sold the house. Lived in the ice cream parlor. I hoped she might remember it. Hoped she might come back. I served ice cream and hoped for her, and then one day, I realized I was old. I sat around and waited and my body went and got old. So I gave the parlor to the girl who worked for me, decided to get away before any more old caught up with me.” The man thanked Karen for his coffee.

“You gave up on your daughter,” Karen said. She handed the waitress the money for their bill.

“No, I gave up on me. I let life creep by me,” he said. “By the way, my name’s Bill Henry.” The men held out his gloved hand. Karen grabbed onto the flesh and bones underneath the glove and wanted to ask if he was the same Mr. Henry. But thought against it. It was too coincidental.

Bill told Karen too watch out for old age as she boarded the bus back to Pier’s Point. She told him thanks for the coffee, thanks for the story and the moral of the story. Sometimes, the story’s moral came after the story, and there was nothing anyone could do but sit back and wait for the story to happen, wait for the moral. She bought her ticket and turned around to tell him she was glad he told her the moral, but Bill was gone. He left her in the middle of the bus terminal and gave her time to remember her café and the way it felt in the morning when her sun catchers caught light and Kid shuffled her way in the front door, told her it was time to start a new day.

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Max Garret brought Kid all kinds of offers. Kid had offers from Baskin Robbins, the Creamery, Braums, and other ice cream stores turned conglomerations, but she shook each representatives hand and told them she was not interested even though they offered her two and three times more than her ice cream parlor was worth.

“All I know how to do is ride and make ice cream,” Kid told Max when he asked why she did not take their offers. “And I’m too old too ride.”

Kid did not think it was fair either. Not fair the way no one wanted Caleb’s hardware store when he wanted to retire and how everyone wanted her ice cream parlor when she did not want to retire. She knew it had something to do with that lady from the Guggenheim. She stayed in town for two weeks. Sat at Kids table and wiped water from her shoes. Jotted things down in her leather notebook when Kid spoke. Then the article came in the New Yorker about Karen’s café. People came from all over after that article was published, and when they found the café locked, when one of the tourists fell down the steps, everyone went to Kid’s ice cream parlor.

Kid had to turn customers away at first. She hated turning anyone away who was hungry for ice cream, but she did not have enough ice cream for everybody. Anthony took up her extra ice cream storage space in the deep freeze.

“Caleb, I can’t keep him in there forever,” Kid said. She handed him a sugar cone with chocolate ice cream and told him Anthony’s skin was iced and chipping in places around his fingers and elbows. “Besides, that I don’t have enough ice cream for everyone. Had to turn one guy down five times because he came too late.”
“No one else has a freezer,” Caleb said. He licked the bottom of his cream first, then the top.

“We getting a new funeral director anytime soon,” Kid said. She turned her open sign over and locked the door. Pulled her window shades down to block out her hungry ice cream parlor customers.

“Last guy got spooked pretty bad. Made up some story about a guy with red and yellow eyes who had dog claws and scaly legs. Hasn’t been anyone yet who said they’ll take the job out here,” Caleb said. Kid opened a new bottle of vodka, swished it around in her mouth.

“Still don’t taste right?” Caleb said. Kid shook her head. Ever since she started getting more customers, Kid didn’t have time to drink. And every time she made time, it did not taste right anymore.

“Damned Guggenheim lady,” Kid said. She capped her bottle of vodka and told Caleb she knew about a taxidermist in Marathon.

“Got to be pretty expensive,” Caleb said. He remembered how much Jack got charged for each of the animals he shot and stuffed and hung in his diner. Some of Jack’s customers complained when they got their meals. They did not like the way the way the animals looked at them, the way their faces frowned, and they stared directly at his customers with their glass eyes. They did not understand why Jack could not have nice pictures like the ones of Mark Twain Karen hung in her diner. And Jack told them they were free to go to Karen’s diner and look at her pictures. He was not taking down his animals.
Sometimes Jack’s customers took his advice and went to Karen’s. Most of them came back when they found out Karen did not serve breakfast. They wore hats and scarves and looked down at their food so they did not have to see Jack’s animals. But Karen never hurt for customers when she had the café. Everyone liked Grease Bag Specials for dinner, sometimes lunch. They especially liked those fortune cookies Karen served, the ones that melted in their mouths so they did not have to waste too much time chewing. They talked about those cookies after Kid told everyone Karen took a vacation. They asked Kid every day when Karen was coming back to make cookies. And Kid told them maybe tomorrow.

By the third month, Kid herself wondered when Karen was coming back. She had not spent more than four days away from her café before this. She never needed anything from anywhere else. After she convinced everyone to leave her parlor, she leaned back in her booth closest to the door and hoped Karen was not still sore at her for telling her she should have called Anthony her father. Even if she did not believe it, she should have called him her father just once.

Out of habit, Kid still woke up and shuffled her way back to the café, up its steps and unlocked Karen’s door. She made herself a cup of coffee and hoped her friend would come back. Even if she lectured Kid every day for the rest of her life, anything was better than sitting in a cold café with no one to talk to.

Kid made her daily trek across the street to the Grease Bag Café. Her boots were particularly tight today and she was debating on whether she should wear boots any more or not. She still could not figure out how to find a pair of boots that fit. They felt comfortable when she tried them on, but as soon as she got them home, they started their pinch.
“Maybe cowboy boots aren’t meant for walking,” Karen told her on a day where Kid could not think of any word bigger than four letters to describe her boots.

Kid shook her head and told Karen she would not know what else to wear if she gave up her boots. But Kid, was beginning to wonder if Karen was right. She never remembered her boots pinching and squeezing her feet to a shuffle when she rode the junior rodeo circuit, when she spent a year making a comeback on the rodeo circuit, then retired. She had grown too accustomed to the ice cream parlor. But Kid never had to walk far in her rodeo days. She had her horses for that. Then Fire Baby, her last horse died, and she did not find much since in keeping a horse tied up in the back of her ice cream parlor, not even when she made her one year comeback. So Kid shuffled her way around town in cowboy boots that pinched her feet.

Kid looked in Karen’s closet for a pair of her shoes. She settled on a pair of sneakers, but her foot was too big for Karen’s sneakers. Kid never figured how her hands never grew much after she got in junior high, but her feet never stopped. Kid walked around in her socks on the tile floor in the café. She did not like the way her socks drug and slid across the floor, and she was not about to walk around in her bare feet. There was a reason shoes were created, and Kid was not about to test that reason. She would leave the bare foot walking to Karen.

“If you’d learn to carry less, it would not swing and hit everybody,” Tina Jenkins said. She stood back to keep from getting hurt by her sister’s purse.

“You always have to be prepared for some disaster,” Millie said. She stepped into the café, swung the door shut with her purse.
“Killed anyone with that thing yet,” Kid said. She put her boots back on, waited for
their pinch and poured herself a coffee. Did not look at the face she felt from Millie. Ever
since Kid told Millie she should stop being so uptight with her sister, at least her husband got
love from someone in the family, Kid always felt faces from Millie.

“See, she’s not here. Let’s go,” Millie said. She swung her purse around, hit Tina in
the back.

“Thought Karen was back,” Tina said. She waved her hand at Millie. Waited for her
to stomp down the stairs before she sat down next to Kid. Kid shook her head and started to
ask Tina if Millie was ever going to forgive her, then asked if Tina was ever going to forgive
herself.

“Caleb’s looking to move on when he retires,” Kid said. She sipped on her coffee
and watched Tina adjust her skirt and tell her she knew. He asked her to go with him.

“So the same without Karen,” Kid said. She put her empty coffee cup next to
Karen’s coffee pot, turned off the coffee machine and waited for Tina to come outside before
she locked the café back up.

“You going to sell your place too?” Tina asked. Caleb told her about the offers Kid
was getting for her ice cream parlor, and no one knew why she would not sell.

“No, but I tell you. If Karen sells her café, I’ll think about it.”

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The transportation board was getting impatient. They wanted to start building on
Highway 89, the highway that connected east Texas to West Texas. But Max Garret was not
producing results. Caleb was the only one who signed over his hardware store to Max. Tina
could not sell because Millie owned a quarter of her dress shop. Jack would not sell anything he had to the government, and Kid would not even think about selling unless Karen sold first. Even then, Kid was not sure she would sell.

Every other building on Main Street was owned by Karen. The owners had long since closed their businesses and moved closer to cities to make things more convenient for their kids. Most of the owners sold their buildings to Karen who let the buildings age while she thought about what she would do with them. The ones that did not sell to Karen gave her their keys anyway and told her she could figure out what to do with their buildings. And in turn, Karen put all her keys on the key ring with her café and left her keys with Kid. Karen knew she could not keep keys.

But Max told the transportation board he could not find Karen. She had been gone for over half a year. He asked why they could not build there highway through Winkering. It had already fallen. The board members told Max no. He had to finish his business in Winkering. They did not tell him Winkering residents still owned the land and refused to sell to the transportation board.

The board members met in the board room with the map of Texas without Max. They were tired of waiting for him to get people to sell. Tired of waiting for this woman named Karen. Their construction company was already starting to take bids on other roads, and the corporations they promised land to were tiring of hearing the word soon. The board member with the bald head made sure there were no post-it notes on the back of his head when he leaned back up from Texas. He moved they got a court injunction forcing everyone to sell their land. He was tired of waiting for free will, and everyone agreed.
CHAPTER TWO

It rained for two days straight in Marathon. Rained and flooded part of the road to Pier’s Point. No one got into Pier’s Point. No one got out. Rain washed every bit of dust and dirt down the gutters until they could not drink anymore, then flooded into the streets, down the roads and onto the highway. Even the snakes and the gophers were not safe. They burrowed their way out of the rain, but the rain followed them, forced them out of their homes and into the lakes it formed.

The gophers swam their way to drier parts of land, but the snakes, the crickets, the grasshoppers did not know how to swim. They held their breathe as long as they could then opened up, let water inside their bodies. Karen sat at the lunch counter at the Marathon bus terminal, laid her feet across the chair to keep them from getting wet. Her belly rested on her lap, and all she could think about was her café, her home. She thought about Kid Hanson leaning back in a red vinyl booth and tipped her hat over her eyes, pretended she slept. She could not wait to tell Kid about meeting Mr. Henry. Dead Mr. Henry. All those years and Kid never told Karen. Kid had a way of keeping secrets that Karen could never understand.

Karen was so busy thinking about how she would surprise Kid, she did not see the thinning brown man with the red and yellow eyes. Had she seen his, eyes, she would have recognized him, the man who kissed her like a father, who left Anthony’s house on a cloud of wind.
The baby inside Karen’s stomach was pushing, pushing for more room, more food, but there was no more space inside Karen’s body. Her baby felt the smooth and cool she breathed in, breathed out and wanted that too. Wanted the smooth and cool of air. It pushed and reached down where it thought the air was, and Karen forgot about surprising Kid when her baby pushed its fluid between her legs.

The lady at the lunch counter helped Karen to a booth opposite the thinning, brown man. He pulled his baseball cap further over his eyes when the lady asked him to hold her head to help her breathe in three’s. But Fat Jesus did not have the strength to hold Karen’s head. He could barely had strength left to lift his sugared coffee to his lips. He wore gloves over the nubs of his arms where his dogs claws used to be, and his feet were shriveling and curling. He only wore shoes to hide his feet from people who might question him.

The lady at the lunch counter told Karen they could not get her to the hospital. The rain made the river overflow, and there was no other way for the ambulance to get to the bus stop. Karen nodded and breathed and tried not to think about the baby inside her who was clawing its way to air. She focused on her fortune cookies and the way she thinned her dough out with spoon, the way they broke neatly in half and each fortune strip slipped gently out if she pulled it just right.
CHAPTER THREE

When the rain finally stopped, when the road to Pier’s Point again resurfaced, Karen stayed as clean from mud as she could. She kept Eve wrapped in her denim jacket and held her close to her in her arms. Everyone at the bus station was surprised how quickly Eve slid out from Karen. She slid out, took a breath and laughed after the lunch counter lady cleaned her with a kitchen rag she boiled and cooled on the stove. The lady from the ticket counter liked how pointed, how manicured Eve’s fingernails were. She had never seen a baby with women’s nails. But other than that, Eve was everything baby. Ten fingers, ten toes, a patch of black hair and skin so soft, so pale, Karen was not sure Eve was alive until she heard her laughter.

The brown skinned man put his gloved nub on Karen’s shoulder and told her congratulations. He walked as far as he could down the road towards Pier’s Point before his legs broke off underneath them. He pulled himself with his arms towards the flood the rain made, but his arms broke off after he pulled himself ten yards. A marathon girl and her boyfriend found the man with no legs, no arms lying next to a broken sun catcher. They had pulled far enough off the side of the road, they did not think anyone could see them if they got naked in the back of his truck. The girl spit her gum out the truck window and unzipped the boys pants with her clumsy fingers. The boy did not see the rock he ran over, but stopped as soon as it hit the back axle of his car. He zipped his pants, and he and the girl got out his
truck to make sure it was not damaged. Nobody knows if the boy or girl screamed louder when they saw the man’s browned and blackened body, his red and yellow tinted eyes, half rotted away. One of the man’s legs was found by a member of an Adopt-A-Highway group ten miles outside of Winkering. Both his arms were found in the Pecos River by a fisherman who thought he was going to beat his buddy in their fishing contest. The man’s other leg was never found. No one knew how the man got in the middle of nowhere with no arms, no legs anywhere near him, but no high school kid for a long time after that pulled off at No Limb Stretch, no matter how badly they wanted to get naked in the back seats of their cars or trucks.

No one knew about Fat Jesus in West Texas. Jake was the only one, and he died, took his secret with him. And the parts of Fat Jesus Karen held inside her died as she forgot about him, forgot about the way his scaly skin pressed against her legs that day in Anthony’s house. But she could not get to Eve’s fingernails in time. They stayed too pointed, never broke, not even when she chewed them.

Karen turned onto Main Street, wiped the mud from her shoes on the edge of the sidewalk. Caleb finally placed the Going Out of Business signs in his hardware store. Jack’s was closed for the day, and the rest of Pier’s Point was empty. Emptier than usual for a Sunday. Karen walked past Tina Jenkins’ dress shop and looked at the naked dummies in her display window.

“How much you drink last night?” Karen asked. She shut the door to Kid’s ice cream parlor and pulled up the shades.
“Enough to make an almost year go by,” Kid said. She unpropped her feet from her table and stood up to give her friend a hug. Karen knew Kid wasn’t much for hugs, but Kid told her there was always room for exception.

Eve spoke before Karen had time to introduce her. She unpeeled her jacket from Eve’s face and she laughed when she saw the brown hair cowboy. There was something different in Kid’s ice cream parlor, but she could not place what it was. She still had the same number of glasses, the red and white checkered table cloths she bought when Joe’s Pizza Parlor went out of business, the rodeo posters that showed smiling cowboys and cowgirls with blush stained cheeks.

“You do something different?” Karen said. She grabbed the blanket from Kid’s storage shelf and made a palette for Eve on the table at Kid’s booth.

“Got rid of the pinball machine.” Karen looked at the back of Kid’s parlor and saw no flashing lights. She remembered the way she came over to Kid’s after school to play pinball. The way the machine beeped and whistled and chimed until Kid unplugged the machine and told her to go home.

Karen thought she saw Anthony’s face. She rubbed her eyes and saw his face again.

“Funeral Director left before we could get him embalmed, so we got the taxidermist to fix him,” Kid said. She told Karen she was out of nuts and cherries. Too many customers since that damned Guggenheim lady.

Anthony wore a black cowboy shirt just like Kids’. His tennis shoes still held the orange shoelaces she gave him. But he did not look sad. His cheeks were pink were the frost
from Kid’s deep freeze bit into his skin. And his lips were parted and showed white teeth Anthony never had.

“Hello, father,” Karen said. She touched the tips of his hand, pulled back when she felt shine and glaze from the shellac on his skin.

“I didn’t figure you wanted him at the café. So I just put him here,” Kid said. She shuffled her way over to Eve, set two bowls of ice cream without nuts, without cherries on the table, grabbed Eve’s hand.

“I met Mr. Henry,” Karen said. She sat down at the table.

Kid cocked her eyebrow.

“He’s been dead for sixteen years,” Kid said.

“I know how you like to keep things,” Karen said. She let ice cream drip to her finger, held it to Eve’s mouth. “He told me all about the ice cream parlor. His wife. Losing his daughter.”

“Mr. Henry never married, Karen. Never had kids. I was it, and I didn’t meet him until after I left the junior rodeo circuit.”

Karen stared at Kid, watched her scoop chocolate syrup and vanilla ice cream into her mouth. Kid lost the freckles around her eyes, exchanges them with wrinkles. Karen knew she saw Mr. Henry. He stood with her by the fire. Drank coffee with her in the coffee shop across from Texas.

“Maybe you’re seeing ghosts again,” Kid said.

Karen opened her mouth, but the smell of sweet and cream overtook her. She ate her ice cream instead and decided she would wait until tomorrow to give Kid her boots.
Kid shuffled her boots across the street to the café, and Karen stopped at her fountain. Saw how it had stopped and dried out, how it cracked and made a hole on the side. Kid told her how it overflowed for a few days then just quit. She figured PP Water Company probably turned it off when the drove a truck through the puddles the fountain made in the street. Karen was sorry she was not there to see Millie Grayson have to walk through her fountain’s water to her sister’s dress shop. Karen shuffled her way up the steps, and Karen sat down with Eve on the top step.

“I can’t take your shuffles anymore,” Karen said. She handed Kid the box from her bag.

Kid did not know what to say when she saw the black, ostrich skin boots. They were embroidered with silver thread that weaved its way around the tops and down the seams of her boots. They even had the silver tips she used to wear in the rodeo parades before competition. Kid put the boots on and did not feel the pinch in her feet. She asked Karen if she felt like taking a walk, but Karen told her she was tired; she wanted to get inside the café. She needed the rest.
Kid unlocked Karen’s brass dragon door handles and creaked down the steps of the pagoda. For the first time since she owned a pair of boots, Kid felt air sweep under her feet when she walked. She waited for the pinch to come, but it never did. Kid walked almost a mile in her boots by the time she got home. Kid pulled one of her chairs from her ice cream parlor and sat it just outside her parlor door. She sat and waited for Karen’s light to go off. Kid never figured, and Karen never told her, how Karen found boots for Kid that fit her foot like a glove, but she thanked her friend and thought how tired she looked.

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Karen made a palette for Eve on her bed and waited until she fell asleep before she walked back into her kitchen. She listened to the hum of her refrigerator, of her prep cooler, and the tick of the pilot light under the grill. Kid told Karen she never turned off the pilot light. She wanted to leave it on so it was ready when Karen got back. Karen washed her hands and pulled out her flour, her sugar, her eggs, her vanilla, her shaker of paper, her nutmeg and her fortune strips.

She missed her fortune cookies. None of the cookies at the Chinese food restaurants in Dallas tasted right. They were either too burned or too crisp. And she did not like the fake Chinese messages that sounded like they were generated from a machine. Karen stuck to her bible, to Mark Twain, to her Fatty Jackson quote.

Fatty Jackson had not moved in six months. He sat and stared at the envelope on Karen’s table inside the café. But he did not mind the darkness, the quiet. It was nice not to have people bump into him, to not have to share the café with anyone. Except for the cowboy, who usually sat on his lap in the mornings, Fatty was alone. When Karen walked
into the restaurant with Eve wrapped in her denim jacket, Fatty thought Anthony had come by one last time to tell Karen he was going.

Anthony had come by every day for a month, then his visits thinned out until Fatty hardly saw him anymore. Fatty told Anthony Karen was not here. He and Kid were keeping the café for him. But Anthony did not hear him. Did not see him. He was busy looking for Karen before he had to leave.

But it was not Anthony, it was Karen. Karen had cut her hair shorter than the cowboys, and she carried the same denim jacket Anthony did when he came to town on the back of the cowboy’s horse. Fatty had missed his friend. He missed the way she sat with him on the porch at night and looked over at the building that used to be Linda Wright’s photo shop. He missed the way she played her classical music after she heard Kid shuffle out the door. The way she typed her fortune cookies and read her books at night after Kid locked the doors to his café.

Fatty got up from his spot at the booth and leaned over Karen’s shoulder. She replaced her usual smells of french fry grease and fortune cookie dough with smog and vanilla oil.

“I don’t have time for you anymore, Fatty,” Karen said. She measured and remeasured the ingredients for her fortune cookies, unsure of how to make them anymore. “I found the article, Fatty. I know the truth.”

“Friends have time for friends,” Fatty said. He blew the flour from Karen’s measuring cup. She dropped the cup into her empty bowl and sealed her Tupperware dishes.
“You’re not my friend Fatty. You let me tell Anthony he was not my father all those years, let me think you were my father. And you never told me. You had the power, but you never told me,” Karen said. She made hand prints next to Fatty’s hand prints in the spilled flour. Karen knew Fatty never told her he was her father. She just believed it, created her stories around it. But Karen still could not forgive herself for the memories she denied Anthony, she denied herself.

She did remember the night she and Anthony played keep away from the sprinkler when she saw the front lawn of her pagoda. She remembered how the grass sounded underneath Anthony’s feet as she watched him walk through the grass to the sidewalk that night he came to see her when her café opened. She did not remember the way his face blushed when she asked him about boys. She remembered Kid’s quadruple scoop sundae and the sounds Kid made in her throat. And Kid did not remember the soft and musk of Anthony’s hugs when Karen needed to be enclosed in a space only a father knew how to make for his daughter. It had been so long since Karen let Anthony touch her. When she touched his statue’s hand at Kid’s ice cream parlor, his hand was cold and shellac. Karen knew too many hands like that from Fantasy Femmes. She did not want to remember Anthony’s hands that way too.

Karen grabbed her stack of mail and Fatty’s envelope from the lady at the Guggenheim museum. She sat aside flyers for restaurant equipment and the food sampler’s bizarre. Karen read through three proposals from a Max Garrett offering to buy her café and her buildings. She threw away her condolence cards from most of Pier’s Point including the
one from First United Methodist Church, the staff at Jack’s Diner, and Millie Grayson. Karen knew Tina wrote the card and made Millie sign it.

Karen never understood why Ms. Grayson never looked directly at her when she asked her questions about homework or what a certain word meant. She always told Karen to ask her father, to ask Kid. After she was her teacher, Ms. Grayson never said anything to Karen. Nor did she breathe when she passed by her. Even when Karen came by the café, Ms. Grayson never came into the café without her sister. She sat in the To Go booth and stared directly at her shoes or rifled through her purse while Tina ordered food to go. Karen finally found out Ms. Grayson thought she was a witch. And when she saw Ms. Grayson on the street, she pointed her finger at Ms. Grayson and looked at her with crossed eyes. But now Karen was not sure Ms. Grayson was wrong about her. Maybe she was a witch. The way she ignored Anthony and paid attention to a ghost had to mean she was a witch.

Karen could not change things now. Fatty tried to tell her that. Tried to tell her at least she knows him now. At least he can rest.

“And why are you here, Fatty? Did you really wait all these years for photos?” Karen opened the envelope with Fatty’s pictures. Saw the picture of her fountain before she put the woman from underneath the pagoda in the fountain’s center. Karen flipped through a lion’s hand fountain that a boy with freckles behind his ear drank from, fish who leaped and suspended in air while they shot water from their mouths into a pool of water, and a woman who dipped her hands into the water like she was trying to save something from the water. Above her, pitchers without handles were suspended in air as water spouted underneath them and out of them.
“You did good work, Fatty,” Karen said. She waited for Fatty to walk out the door, to never come back again, but he just stared at the pictures she laid out for him. He remembered the splash the fountain water made on his skin as it dove for the pool below. How it felt like Linda’s skin against his skin that night in the fountain. Karen gathered the photos, saw the faded letter with missing words on the back of the fountain with the suspended jugs.

Karen read what she could of Linda’s letter to Fatty. She read the parts about how Linda loved him. How she was going home to die. Karen laid the letter down for Fatty to look at. He folded his arms over the letter and put his face in the hole his arms made. His body rippled as he felt the comfort of dark in-between his arms. His body rippled the dust, rippled the stillness of the air until their was no more of him to ripple.

“She loved me, Karen,” Fatty said.

“You know, Fatty. You’ve always known,” Karen said. Fatty parted her hair one more time before telling her he was going to find Abilene. And as quickly as he appeared and saved Karen from those kids in third grade, Fatty left.

Karen took the picture of Mark Twain sitting at his desk from her wall. She took out the back and rolled up Mark Twain’s picture. Karen taped Fatty’s pictures to the back of the picture frame and slid it back into the frame. Sipped her coffee and traced her fingers over the light and dark in Fatty’s pictures.

Eve called Karen. Told her she was hungry.

“Good bye, Fatty,” Karen said. She kissed the fountain with the suspended jugs and turned out the lights to her café.
CHAPTER FIVE

Kid practiced her Lone Ranger walk over to the café. She would have to wait to thank Karen for her boots in the morning. She stuck her key in the lock above the brass dragon door handle and turned. The door handle had worn to a teddy bear from so many hands, but Kid still called it the brass dragon. She remembered walking up the steps of the pagoda for the first time and trying to outstare the red eyes on the door handle. The dragon’s eyes glowed shades of red, yellow, and orange, and Kid could not look at those colors anymore.

She always wore her cowboy hat to shade her eyes from the sun’s light, and she kept her hat tipped against Karen’s sun catchers. Kid could not believe Karen had a baby. She still remembered Karen when she was a baby. The way Karen laughed, just like Eve, when Kid held her in her arms that day on top of Fire Baby. Kid held Karen close to the space between her breasts and pretended she knew what it was like to be a mom.

Kid had her own mom on her mind the day she found Anthony and Karen along the side of the road that led from Marathon to Pier’s Point. She thought about her own mom as she held Karen in her arms. The way her mom smelled of whiskey and menthol in the morning and the space Mom’s breasts made in the middle. And the light. There was always
light when Kid rested her head between Mom’s breasts. It wasn’t the kind of light Kid saw. Her eyes were always closed when she rested against Mom.

Mom lit another menthol cigarette and held it to the side as Kid pressed her face against Mom’s space. They sat outside and did not pay much attention to stars. Instead, they listened to the Lone Ranger and Tonto theme song from inside the living room and the crickets that had come to cool their bodies in the night air and grass.

“Does Dad really ride wild horses?” Kid slow-danced her fingers across the scar on Mom’s knee and hummed her Lone Ranger and Tonto theme song.

“More, Kid. He dances with them.” Mom blew smoke into the air and made trails through Kid’s hair with her fingertips.

The night air shifted, and Kid felt Tonto’s horse as he rode up behind the Lone Ranger. She reached towards the black and white glow from the television and threw the glow towards the crickets.

“There is a lot of luck out tonight,” Mom said and squeezed her arms around Kid.

“Tell me about the crickets again,” Kid said. She knew Mom loved crickets. Ever since she went on her trip to Japan, she loved crickets.

“I didn’t like the way they jumped on me at first. But in Japan, one of the guides told me never brush a cricket off me, and never, never kill one. When a cricket jumps on you, it brings luck. And to brush away or kill that luck is bad.” Mom talked about how a cricket jumped on her stomach when she got off the airplane. About how she got pregnant one month later. She talked about the crickets on the hospital floor when Kid was born. How she would not let the doctors or nurses kill them.
Mom liked listening to their music most of all. She liked the thought of being able to rub legs together to make music. Once, Kid and Mom rubbed their legs together, but they just got warmer.

"I like crickets too," Kid said. She liked their music and the stories they made Mom tell. She liked the way Mom’s green eyes glowed until they were almost brown, the way she pulled Kid close when she told her stories, the way she let Kid rest her head in-between her breasts while she made trails through her hair with her fingers.

"Do you think he likes crickets?" Kid listened as the Lone Ranger and Tonto chased after bad men. She looked at the scar on Mom’s face and listened to the chase, to the music.

"I love you, Kid," Mom said. Mom rubbed her lit cigarette against the cement on the patio and threw it into the grass. The cigarette glowed and smoked before it died out, and Kid knew that meant it was time to go to bed. She walked inside the house and made trails across the living room carpet with her slippered feet. She watched as the Lone Ranger rode past mesas and off the television screen before she turned off the television and tried to catch the disappearing glow.

Kid took her slippers off and laid them underneath the dust ruffles on her bed. She waited for Mom’s kiss before she closed her eyes even though Mom’s lips were always chapped and dry and her kisses tasted menthol. But Kid didn’t mind Mom’s kisses. She liked the last opportunity to get one more story out of Mom before she went to bed.

"Does he know the Lone Ranger and Tonto?" Kid traced cricket legs into the daisies that ran down Mom’s pajamas.
“I think the Lone Ranger and Tonto ride alone.” Kid closed her eyes as the hall light silhouetted Mom’s hips before she shut the door.

Mom took his picture out from the top of her closet. She picked at his teeth while he stood in front of his white Mustang. They were supposed to go dancing the night he left. Mom watched as he smiled and pulled his Mustang out of the driveway. She listened to its engine as it galloped down the road, stopped, turned left. Left. She listened as he left.

Mom stuffed the picture back between her Harris High Sweatshirt and her leather jacket. She opened her dresser drawer and pulled out a silver and leather flask from underneath her sweaters. She drank what was left in her flask and pulled out another one from underneath her socks. Scotch dripped onto her pajamas while she took another drink and crawled into bed.

“Damned dancers.” Mom lit one of her menthols and changed channels on her television until she found an old episode of Bonanza. She rubbed the scar on her face and drank as little Joe worked up his nerve to ask the red-head to the dance. “She wants to know if you’ll teach her how to ride.” Scotch bled onto Mom’s sheets after she fell asleep and dropped her cigarette on her pillow.

***

In her dreams, Kid heard Mom’s voice echoing from across the canyon. She heard Mom’s I love you’s, her cricket stories. She watched as crickets crawled in and out of their house. She watched as the Lone Ranger and Tonto rode their horses through the canyon, rode to save whatever needed saving. And then she saw him moving around in circles, his
arms out. His silver-tipped boots made her squint until she could not see his face. Kid never saw his face. She didn’t remember enough to see his face.

“Where’s your horse, Daddy?” she said. She touched the silver tips on his boots but they were replaced by horses hooves. He rode past the mesa, past the orange and yellows that licked the tops of the plains on the horizon.

“Teach me how to dance, Daddy,” Kid said. She reached in her pocket for a handful of crickets and whispered to them before she threw them towards the plains.

***

Kid woke to the warmth of orange and yellow flames that licked at her feet. She grabbed for her house, for her bedroom, for Mom. The fireman held her in his arms and made black arm prints on her nightgown with the white horses.

“She’s gone, honey. She’s gone.” The fireman pressed his head into Kid’s hair and stained her hair with soot.

Kid screamed out the Lone Ranger and Tonto theme song. She screamed out for them to stop the flames. The Lone Ranger and Tonto never came.

But the neighbor’s came. They came and took Kid home with them while social workers looked for Daddy. They found Daddy in New York City one month after the flames. He rubbed his shiny fingernails and licked his teeth when the neighbor’s led him into their dining room. But Kid did not notice him as she drank hot chocolate and swung her feet through the space in-between the chair’s legs.

“And there were crickets on the floor, but she told them not to step on them. It’s bad luck if you step on them,” Kid drank more of her hot chocolate.
“Hi, Kid,” he said. He wore a tie with triangles on it and brown loafers. “I’m Daddy.”

“Where’s your silver tips?” Kid held Daddy’s hand as they walked out to his car.

“What are silver tips?” Daddy pulled out of the neighbor’s driveway and stopped at the stoplight.

“For your boots. So you don’t scratch them.”

“I don’t wear boots.” Daddy said. He rubbed his hands against her back and kissed the back of her neck.

“How do you ride horses without boots?” Kid pulled away from Daddy and wrinkled her mouth at him.

“I don’t know how to ride horses.”

Kid opened her car door and ran until she got to the piles of black and gray and crickets. Crickets crawled in and out of what used to be her house. In and out of where she sat with Mom and watched the Lone Ranger and Tonto. In and out of where Mom held her and told her stories about crickets and cowboys and music. There was always music.

“He doesn’t even have boots,” Kid said. She took off her shoes and dipped her feet into the ash, and one of the crickets jumped on her shoulder. Daddy pulled his car next to the curb and opened his door. More and more crickets jumped on Kid’s shoulders, in her hair, on her legs, up her shirt. They flapped wings and rubbed legs against Kid’s skin. They flapped and rubbed and made music.

By the time Daddy got to the ashes, Kid was swarming with crickets. She stuffed some of them in her pockets.
“I know where some kids go and ride ponies,” Daddy said. He stood at the edge of the ashes and brushed crickets off his jacket sleeves.

“I want horses,” Kid said.

“I’ll give you horses.” Daddy held out his hand and squeezed hurt out of Kid’s hand. Kid’s crickets jumped out of her pockets as she walked to Daddy’s car.

There were no crickets where Daddy lived.

No Lone Rangers.

No stars.

No horses.

No anything but buildings that hid the sky. No anything but a Daddy who yelled at her when she watched Lone Ranger and Tonto. Daddy who slapped her when she spilled milk. Daddy who scarred her cheek with his diamond horseshoe ring when she dropped her plate of fish sticks and macaroni and cheese.

Kid tried to feel Mom’s warmth after Daddy shut and locked her door at night. She tried to remember the crickets, the music, the light. But her pillow was cold and her room was cold. Kid tucked her covers around her body and shivered herself to sleep.

But Kid learned to love dark. She could not stand light anymore. Lights that shined on fish sticks and macaroni and cheese Daddy fixed her for dinner. Lights that showed Daddy’s face when he got angry. Lights that showed Kid’s pretty dresses and bruised arms and music boxes and a bruised back and stuffed rabbits and teddy bears with painted eyes and a slapped face and dolls that did not talk and doll houses and doll dresses and blood stains and hair ribbons and split lips and panties with flowers and purple toothbrushes and a
matching hairbrush and comb set and shiny shoes that Daddy hit her with when she scuffed them. Lights that showed everything Daddy gave her.

Daddy never gave Kid horses.

At night, Kid thought about her horses. About Broncos and Clydesdales and Stallions. She thought about Cowboy hats and Cowboy music and crickets and mesas. She thought about riding off into the oranges and yellows that licked the plains on the horizon. Sometimes after Daddy shut and locked her door, Kid wrapped her blanket around her and tucked it in-between her legs. She walked in her chaps-blanket and dropped her dolls and music boxes and dresses outside her window. She closed her eyes and tried to see stars and the moon. She tried to remember the songs and stories Mom used to tell her.

And one night, Daddy caught Kid remembering. He unlocked her door to kiss her good-night and saw the open window, the presents she dropped out the window. His hands curled tight around her arms as he pushed her against the window and yelled about presents and money and daughters who did not love. But Kid smiled while Daddy gave her bruises. She thought about horses and crickets and Mom and smiled.

She smiled until she was old enough to leave. Until Daddy slept to the news. She smiled on the bus that went to Marathon, Texas, and did not stop smiling until she fell asleep to Mom’s music and a Cowboy who danced with horses.

***

Kid Hanson had not won a junior rodeo title since nationals last year when she was fifteen. But today, she was confident. She tore down the flapping Wagon Wheel Coliseum sign next to the back entrance and shaped the brim of her cowboy hat with her fingers.
“Kid,” one of the rodeo runners said. “You’re Dad’s here.”

“Who’s that?” Kid said. She straightened her curling fingers and ground dirt with the bottom of her boot.

“He says he’s come to take you home.” Daddy stepped into the back entrance. His loafers shined, no dust.

“It’s time to go, Kid.” Kid ran towards the chutes, and closed the gates behind her.

The wind blew dust over everything in the arena. Kid tucked her short, brown hair behind her ears, put her hat on her head and held onto it. Her fingers touched the black braid on her hat as she walked towards the back entrance of the arena, careful not to get arena dirt in the space between the silver tips of her black boots.

Kid closed her eyes from the glare of the arena lights and bent down, took dirt from the arena into her hands. She rubbed the dirt in her palms, against her face and the horseshoe scar on her face. The crickets outside the arena silenced as dust and dirt and wind rose and slammed itself against their bodies and her body.

“You can’t run anymore,” Daddy said from the bleachers closest to her chute.

“You ready to dance there, Baby?” Kid said as she looked down the chute at Fire Baby’s back.

Fire Baby flared out his sides so they shined chocolate under the arena lights.

“You even put your good coat on,” Kid said. She gripped the side of the chute with her hands and waited for Fire Baby’s signal before she mounted him.

Fire Baby kicked his back legs against the metal siding of the chute. Fire Baby was famed for hating cowgirls. For hating cowboys. For hating anyone who thought they knew
how to dance. Fire Baby knew how his partners danced the first time he felt them embrace him with their legs. He felt the pulse that ran up and down his partners’ legs and knew what kind of dancers they were.

Ballroom Dancers.

Ballet Dancers.

Modern Dancers.

Country Dancers.

And Fire Baby knew his partners were good dancers, but they only knew one dance. He was tired of dancing one dance. Of dancing the dance his partners knew. He wanted to teach them something different. But none of his partners wanted to learn. *I can make you better. Listen. Listen.* Fire Baby’s partners jumped off him before he could tell them to hold on and move with him. Fire Baby hated them for jumping off. For not wanting to learn a new dance.

There was no pulse in Kid’s legs. Except for the metal buckles on her chaps that touched his sides when he flared them out and felt for a pulse, Fire Baby could not feel anything on Kid. He threw his head back towards her, but Kid moved her chest and shoulder with his head.

“Listen, Baby. Listen,” Kid said and slapped her hand against his neck.

The speakers said something about Kid’s career, but she didn’t notice. She only noticed Fire Baby’s breath and the crickets’ music.

In the corner of her chute, two crickets jumped up and down, tried to keep away from Fire Baby’s breath. They paid no attention to the speakers or Kid. Fire Baby kicked dirt into
the corner of the chute with his front hoof and crushed one of the crickets, kicked it beyond Kid’s sight. *Dance with me.* The other cricket jumped towards Kid’s hand, hit its wing against her scars around her knuckles. The cricket flew back towards the ground, shook the dirt off its body, and began to play. Kid listened to its music. It’s music hugged dust and flew up towards her ears, and she wasn’t sure what it was playing for. But it was playing music.

Fire Baby threw his head back once more.

*Ready to dance?*

Fire Baby kicked more dust towards the cricket, but it didn’t miss a note in its song. Kid sang with the cricket, not sure of the words or anything but what the cricket was playing.

“You’re coming home with me,” Daddy said.

Kid signaled for the gates to open. Fire Baby burst out of the chute and hopped and jumped and bucked and rubbed his front legs together.

*Dance. Let’s Dance.*

“Let’s dance,” Kid said. She pulled Fire Baby’s reins with both hands, and he jumped over the side of the arena and did not land until they were on the other side of Marathon’s horizon.

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Kid sat down in the middle of the steps on the pagoda. She thought it ironic how Anthony lost his wife in the fire, how she lost her mom in the fire. And it was ironic that she found a Dad full of love for his daughter when she ran from a dad full of hate. Kid looked at the faded green sign that said Mr. Henry’s ice cream parlor. She missed Mr. Henry. She
liked the way he stuck ice cream spoons to his nose and talked with his dentures in his hand after she helped him close down the store. He bought a bed for her and divided his bedroom.

“A cowboy’s got to have privacy,” he told her and kissed her good-night the way Kid imagined father’s were supposed to kiss good night.

Kid wished she could have been Mr. Henry’s Eve. She tried to act the way a daughter would to a father, but she could never be Eve. On the way to the restroom by the pinball machine, she sometimes caught Mr. Henry talking to her through the window of his ice cream parlor. On those nights, Kid tried not to shuffle her boots on her way back to bed. Those nights grew more and more frequent.

By the time Mr. Henry realized he was old, he signed the papers to his parlor over to Kid and told her he was going to look for Eve. Kid liked to imagine he found her on the nights she thought about him. But Karen told her otherwise.

Kid did not bother acknowledging the truth about Mr. Henry to Karen. The lady from the Guggenheim told her about the letter she found on Fatty’s picture, and she knew it would be a matter of time before he left Karen. Kid did not believe in Fatty’s ghost, but he kept going. And when Karen returned, Kid saw the hollow look in Karen’s eyes and knew now, more than ever, Karen needed her belief in ghosts.

Kid stepped down the steps of the pagoda and whistled the Lone Ranger and Tonto theme song as she crossed the street to her parlor. It was an ironic world, and she hoped Karen would learn how to whistle it away.