안 사랑
프랜시스 파크

ahn love

frances park

Winner of the Foreword INDIES award

'A stunning gestalt.'
—SEAN COLLINS, journalist

'Absorbing and utterly human.'
—MARIA KARAMETOU, visual artist and professor





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PENGUIN BOOKS

AHN LOVE

Frances Park is a Korean American author of novels and memoirs published around the globe. Her books have been praised by *The Straits Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Korea Times*, *USA Today*, *The Times Literary Supplement*, *The London Times*, *The Korean Quarterly*, *The Taipei Times*, *National Public Radio*, *Voice of America*, *Radio Free Asia*, *CNN*, *Newsweek*, and *Good Morning America*.

Her stories reflect an identity born of two worlds. In her novel *Blue Rice*, a Korean woman who survived the war must acclimate to 1960 White America as she senses her husband's desertion. Her poignant novel *The Summer My Sister Was Cleopatra Moon* portrays the spiritual deformity of two Korean American sisters growing up in Washington, DC suburbia in the 1970s. *That Lonely Spell*, a memoir-in-essays, was praised by *Kirkus Reviews* as 'a fresh take on the Korean American memoir by a writer from a generation whose voice has seldom been heard'. Her award-winning short stories and personal essays have appeared in over fifty magazines including *O*, *The Oprah Magazine*, *The Massachusetts Review*, *The Columbia Journal*, *The London Magazine*, *Arts & Letters*, *The Bellevue Literary Review*, and *The Chicago Quarterly*.

The theme of losing her father young haunts much of the author's work. In *Ahn Love* she imagines him today, had he lived to the ripe old age of ninety.

Frances lives outside Washington, DC. Visit her at parksisters.com.

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ADVANCE PRAISE FOR *AHN LOVE*

‘What if the voyage that defined your youth still steered your life decades later? In Frances Park’s sweeping new novel, a daughter’s visit to her aging father rekindles the story of a fateful Pacific cruise—a journey of family betrayals, fleeting romance, and choices that ripple across the years. The haunting pull of the past animates the lush and lyrical prose of *Ahn Love*.’

—Danielle Ofri, MD, PhD,
editor of *Bellevue Literary Review*, and
author of *What Doctors Feel*

‘Frances Park steers us through the moving waters of a Korean American family’s tale—first love, loss, betrayal, and redemption. Park’s lush writing is a seamless voyage between past and present, between a Virginia suburb and a fateful Pacific cruise, that reveals the secrets held within the ebb and flow of the human heart.’

—Dana Tai Soon Burgess,
author of *Chino and the*
Dance of the Butterfly: A Memoir

‘Absorbing and utterly human. Through the eyes of Margaret (“Monkey”) with her lost dreams and her lost young love, Frances Park unfolds the bittersweet and at times humorous story of the Ahns, a Korean family in America. The memorable and moving prose invites readers to travel with the Ahns not only on an SS President Roosevelt adventurous cruise across the Pacific but also to join the author as she takes us on a fifty-year journey across “this dreamy romp we call life”.’

—Maria Karametou, visual artist,
professor, and author of *The Amalgam*

‘A lot can happen in seven days at sea: A misfit uncle can find his purpose. A mother’s fate can be decided. Two people can fall in love for the first time. Over the course of this epic cruise and a father’s 90th birthday

weekend, *Ahn Love* stirred up all kinds of emotions in me—nostalgia, sympathy, sorrow, hope, delight, and awe of Frances Park's scintillating storytelling. I loved Margaret and her family, and I love this book!'

—Suzanne Kamata, author of
Cinnamon Beach and *River of Dolls*
and Other Stories

'*Ahn Love* will make your eyes weep, your heart sing, and your soul ache. A stunning gestalt.'

—Sean Collins, journalist

'Frances Park's *Ahn Love* is a deeply moving novel that explores the intricate bonds of family, the enduring power of memory, and the unspoken dreams that shape our lives. Through the eyes of Margaret, the youngest daughter, we witness the push and pull of the Ahn family, particularly the relationship with her widowed father and the mysterious Uncle Bong. Park masterfully weaves together past and present, blending reminiscences with the bittersweet realities of human frailty. This beautifully crafted story is a testament to the resilience of the human spirit and the ways in which love, even when tested by time and tragedy, endures.'

—Bill Adler,
author of *Outwitting Squirrels*

'*Ahn Love* is ultimately a story of love, both familial and romantic. Buoyant, bittersweet, heart-stirring.'

—Scott Saalman,
author of *Vietnam War Love Story*

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Frances Park

Ahn Love



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To Mom and Dad, alive in my heart

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Prologue

There were times I found myself wandering around Blue Stone Circle, taking notes of all the side streets, which served as points on my mental compass, if you will, aware of my place in the world, where I was in relation to the house and the lake. Like always, I would miss the first clue that I wasn’t really in Blue Stone but a fake Blue Stone where time was neither twilight nor dusk but nether time, a circular hell that took over dreams. Branches would shudder. The air would grow abstract. Unholy, even. Wanderers would pass by like ghosts. They couldn’t see me; they couldn’t hear me. Houses morphed into the sky and now the side streets had no names.

No names?

Terror struck.

How would I find my way home?

Who would help me?

Once in a blue moon, I’d see him. My dad, coming around a bend. Whether it was the Sam Ahn of today or yesterday, I could never remember. That part never recorded. He was always stone-faced, in a hurry, but would abruptly stop, break into a grin and do what you would never expect such a dignified man to do.

A jig.

Yes, a jig! And not just any jig, the silliest damn jig you’ve ever seen. Lasting but a few seconds, they were the most precious and carefree seconds a man ever spent under the stars.

So, were there stars in nether time?

A cha-cha-cha later, the jig and dream were over.

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Winter 2019

Like every home in Blue Stone, the Ahn family residence was a stunning wreck, so deeply buried in the neighbourhood that after taking the third or fourth curve in, there was no turning back; imaginary ghost-gates clanged, banged, and locked behind me, and I got the feeling I was here for the winter, like it or not. Were it true, my father would do his little dance one more time and never let me go. A happy jig, a cha-cha-cha. Say his famous last words: '*You can write here! It's not too late!'* I never had the heart to tell him that the dream, like his jig, died with Mommy. Now it was his dream, not mine. But let's backtrack to the ghost-gates that began this knotted string of fantasy; there were none and I wasn't staying for the winter. Having packed only enough for the weekend, I planned to race back to New York on Monday for an early morning Tuesday meeting at work, my other reality, and was only here long enough to sing 'Happy Birthday' and present Sam Ahn with a token gift he would accept like the gentleman and scholar he was, at birth and at ninety. But that wasn't what my widowed father, who lit up at my visits and dimmed when I left, wanted to hear.

Whenever I was home—and in every realm that mattered, Blue Stone would always be home—I found myself wishing things were different. The

scope of everything; past, present, tomorrow, if there was one. Would fall asleep in a wink if my dad would make room for Uncle Bong in his heart and in his house. Just like the old days.

That said, I knew better than to bring up a younger brother who long lived under his wing. Sam Ahn was crowned First Son, and he felt that duty deeply. He was his protector, forever. But that was then, before his wing was broken and their legacy destroyed. Before the Whisper that marked the end—mysterious to me, haunting if I let it. The last time I'd brought up Uncle Bong seemed to crater him. My father's eyes grew perilous with betrayal. Can't forgive, can't forget.

He's dead to me.

Bull. Don't even tell me the love isn't there. Even after half a century, Ahn love never dies.



No key or doorbell—his antenna went up whenever I walked up the driveway. It was a gift he got late in life, a kind of melancholic magic. Once a globetrotter, now unchaining, unlocking, trembling.

Monkey is here!

Do the jig, Dad. On the beach, night falling. You were in heaven, remember?

The white hair always shocked me, at first.

'Margaret,' he cried, face pinched. *Mar-ga-ret*. No chintzing on the English language. No *Monkey*, either—regrettably refrained but not forgotten. I would always be Monkey over Margaret to him. The name was always on the tip of his tongue. *M-M-M* … Whenever he thought *Monkey*, the past came alive.

'Happy Birthday, Dad!'

Only *Mar-ga-ret* gets a kiss, a quick flutter on the lips, gone like butterflies. Korean men were not kissers, but I was his youngest—eternally

five or ten or fourteen. Monkey in tortoiseshell barrettes, winning a first-place ribbon on the balance beam, a second prize trophy at the Science Fair, straight As in French. Monkey was Madame Curie, Rosa Parks, Pearl Buck, all rolled into one and destined to become the preeminent author, Margaret Ahn.

Uh-uh. Sure.

'My birthday is tomorrow, Margaret, not today.'

'Of course.'

And on his birthday, he would stand over Mommy's grave, alone, while Mrs Lim, his part-time caregiver, waited in the car. Asked, he might describe his private ceremony with Mommy as 'a fine winter ritual'. Surely, he would talk to her, still tortured, still wondering why one day she just up and got her driver's license when nothing gave him greater pleasure than being her number one chauffeur.

Why would he wonder forever?

Because he never learned the truth.

Given our history, a walk was in order.

If you think of Blue Stone Circle as a clock, the Ahn house sat at ten o'clock; and legs willing, we'd make it to one o'clock. Ninety degrees northeast, in compass terms. Either way, a short arc. For Sam Ahn, it was less a walk than a shuffle, a far cry from his cha-cha-cha in the moonlight with Mommy so long ago, like he owned the ship and the sapphire seas. Now *that* was a night, set against the vast Pacific Ocean. Picture me, just a girl, taking it all in. Paradise a-go-go. First love, first kisses, lovesick drama that would kill me today—and I mean that in a good way. Yet Mommy's accident a decade later would always eclipse my teen story. Rightly so.

Out of a stuffy house, the cold air was reviving. I took my father's arm, detected a tremble. Winter, you know. Old Bones. Even the strongest were just the sum of their days.

'Ready?'

‘Yah,’ he said.

Our boots crunched on ice. One step, two step … our widowed walk. I got the feeling he wanted to bring up Eggman but held back. Afraid the earth might crack. Well, this is what happens when your world’s gone over a cliff. Everyone fears you’ve fallen into some really deep-shit bad dreams. True, that. Thank God I was in Blue Stone with my dad, and all was well. That minute, anyway.

‘*Mar-gar-et?*’

‘Yes?’

‘How long are you staying?’

Now, if only it was spring. Once you got off the main drag and entered Blue Stone, you were greeted by a flutter of butterflies that in a blink vanished, if they were ever there. Blink again and you were under its spell, a perfumed fusion of corals, lavenders, and aqua blues; fallen yellow leaves that carpeted the sidewalks so richly you smelled old money in the midst. We, the Ahns, were the exception; we counted our pennies and our lucky stars; split our popsicles and napkins, anything with a seam. But Blue Stone in bloom was for every person, bird, or leaf, more a dream than a place, a paradise gone *poof*. Even in my daydreams, I found myself wandering around the circle, checking off the side-streets: Purple Rock Road is southeast; North Cliff Drive, northeast; Magnolia Way, northwest at eleven o’clock, seven hundred and seventeen steps from the Ahn home. Kidding, of course; I never counted steps. But I did know Blue Stone by heart, the markers on my clock or points on my compass, take your pick, all grounding me: the petrified tree trunks we hopped across like frogs, the weather-battered wooden sign ‘*Beach Area Straight Ahead – Residents Only’*, precisely north at high noon or midnight, up to you. You always knew where you were in the world. Your footing. You could not lose direction.

Granted, a long-winded way of saying: Were it spring, I'd be tempted to linger.

Still, this time of year—January—was its own fantasy. Bare trees exposed a private lake opulent as a moon-huge pearl, centring you. *Now* you knew where you were: on Blue Stone Circle. The round lot pattern became crystal clear, as did the beaches, three down and counting, and the homes, some perched high, some low, all naked without all the *flowery fuss* as my father used to call it—most teasingly—when Mommy was queen of our yard. Now he was the one watering day and night in a floral Hawaiian shirt—weather permitting, on both counts. Sam Ahn: emperor of the gardens! He could think out there. Speak to his dead wife and their magnolias, his boxy back full of orchids, turned from the world. Orchids looked good on him. They deceived the lonely grey of his winter.

Oh, screw Tuesday's meeting. I'd rather be here with my dad than in a stuffy conference room with stuffy lawyers even more senior than me who refused to retire lest their names be removed from the masthead. The only ones wearing smiles were being comfortably cooled by Preparation H. Besides, what did I have to go home to? Legal work and laundry could wait. Dinner with friends was a big fat yawn, as was I—nothing *Sex and the City* about ordering expensive wine by the glass when you're missing your husband in a sea of faces at the party. One drink down and you grow quiet, wishing you were anywhere but here; two down and you can't find your way back from the ladies' room.

Damn it, Eggman. Weren't we supposed to grow old together? Move to Cape Cod and do dreamy things and relive the day we met until the day we died, preferably in each other's arms?



I am trip, trip, tripping on the sidewalk; you catch my arm before I fall and the next thing I know, I'm having coffee with a stranger. Composing

myself. Trying, anyway, because I get the feeling we're having a moment and life's about to change. When you mention you play the fiddle, I tell you I'd take a single fiddle over an orchestra any day. What I really mean is that I love your messy brown hair, and I'll take you over any man in the universe, bar none. I know that before my first sip. All these thoughts I'm having while you're being so casual and cute.

'Em, I can fry a mean egg. Don't believe me?'

And Eggman was born.

Yet where were you now? I couldn't hear your fiddle playing, I couldn't hear our hearts beating. Who was here to catch me? Every day, another grey hair appeared to remind me of something: I was growing old without you.



'What if I stay until Tuesday?' I offered my father. Saw some knock-around clothes in a dresser drawer upstairs.

His silence stung.

Ah, got it. Sam Ahn was counting on more than one birthday bonus day. After all, you only turn ninety once.



In Blue Stone, no two homes looked alike. They shared being in perpetual, varying stages of renovation and decay. However, a glorious decay as these weren't shacks by the water but displaced little castles after nearly a century of elemental ruin—wind and spray and sand from the lake. In '66, when spanking new cookie cutter split-levels with white wall-to-wall carpeting and enclosed garages became all the rage, vintage Blue Stone fell out of favour, retreating into a forgotten forest of wildflowers and vines gone mad. Lucky for us, for one little cracked window of time, homes were bargain-priced and—ta da! guess what? The Ahns moved in! Before long, we were the Korean family known for our broken-down cars (a Pontiac Tempest station wagon, a Ford Falcon), for reusing tin foil till it tore, and chopsticks

from Ding Wow's carryout until they frayed and left splinters in our lips. To this day, whenever I walk by a fragrant Chinese hole-in-the-wall, I think of Ding Wow's duck in orange sauce, only four dollars for a large carton.

'You think they stole the ducks from the lake, Monkey?'

'No, Dad, don't say that or I won't eat!'

'Let's go down to the lake and count our feathered friends …'

'Dad!'

Sam Ahn, scholar, and a comedian, too. However, mention Ding Wow's today? Not funny.



When Mommy was alive and all four kids—Holly, Peter, Vivian, and me—were still living at home, the family walked as one troop, full circle. Can't forget Uncle Bong who slept in the converted attic with a single porthole of a window for light, but in its own way was the best quarters in the house for privacy if you didn't mind the cramped, rickety stairs, which he didn't seem to, running up and down like a humble servant with those short but mighty sumo legs that bowed with each step.

Creak, creak.

Uncle Bong stayed far from the madding crowd, only comfortable around us, his family. That said, when he announced that he'd be working the lunch shift at Ding Wow's, the news rang like a bell tower over Ahn Land.

'Uncle Bong got a job.'

'Uncle Bong got a job!'

'Uncle Bong got a job?'

Sam Ahn was proud. Ecstatic!

'Gang, we celebrate at Vinny's Pizza tonight.'

It wouldn't take long before I realized that Uncle Bong's boss, Fred, the assistant manager, was a dick.

On a good day in a good mood:

Fred: *‘Hey, Hop Sing, how about an eggroll on the house?’*

Uncle Bong [bowing]: *‘Oh, thank you, sir! Thank you!’*

Fred: *‘I can’t hear you!’*

Uncle Bong [still bowing]: *‘Oh, thank you, sir!’*

On a bad day in a bad mood:

Fred: *‘Someone barfed up egg foo young in the bathroom—get your Village Idiot ass in there!’*

Uncle Bong [bowing]: *‘Oh, sure, sure, right away, sir!’*

Uncle Bong, Uncle Bong …

Quit bowing!

That loser didn’t even know his name.

My uncle went overboard treating customers like royalty. He’d run from behind the counter to help young mothers with babies—‘*Oh, miss! Young miss!’*—and old ladies with canes—*‘Ma’am! Oh, ma’am!’* He’d run after anyone who forgot a measly nickel on the counter. Uh-huh, everyone felt bad for the lowly Ding Wow worker humiliated all day by a boss who got a kick out of making him stoop with shame, but their food was getting cold. It all made me cringe and feel murderous. If I could go back in time and kick Fred dead, I’d do it.

Ding Wow’s stood between the ABC store and the five-and-dime store Ben Franklin in Blue Stone Plaza adjacent to our entrance. Even now, the memory of Ding Wow’s makes my stomach growl for everything pineapple-sweet and salty on their soy sauce-stained menu, which I can still recite in my sleep. Sometimes after school I’d get off the bus one stop early and surprise Uncle Bong with a visit, just to dart Fred dirty looks, as if he cared. Seeing the hop in Uncle Bong’s step whenever he saw me was worth the hour of homework lost. Besides, I always had my journal du jour to keep me busy—when you’re fourteen, no one else’s happenings mean more than your own, so I was journalling as I was living,

you might say. Under my bed, bound in paisley or daisy or daffodil prints, slept stacks of dog-eared journals to prove it.

'Monkey! Sit, sit. You want tea?'

'No, I'm okay.'

'Monkey, we have broken fortune cookies in the back. Wait here!'

Broken fortune cookies.

Won't even go there.

'I'm fine, Uncle Bong. I don't want any fortune cookies.'

Who knows the thousand ugly things that went on when I wasn't there, but hundreds happened when I was, like the time they bumped into each other like knuckleheads and Uncle Bong dropped a container of moo goo gai pan on the floor. Like Fred, it was a stinking mess.

'That's coming out of your paycheque, Hop Sing! Mop it up now or get your cross-eyes outta here!'

Journal entry:

> What a goon to the moon! I HATE him! He gives him eggrolls that probably fell on the floor. Also, I don't care what ANYONE says—Uncle Bong is NOT cross-eyed!

Were you to ask me about Fred on a Monday in my office in mid-town, I might go blank. But whenever I was back in Blue Stone, it all came back. One life replaced another.

Around four-thirty, Uncle Bong and I would head home and share moments deep and blue on our beloved terrain that was Blue Stone Circle. Sometimes I'd repeat a joke I'd heard in school that day, and he'd smile in a half-sorry, half-fake way and I wasn't sure he got it. Sometimes that cool Volkswagen Bug—sunshine yellow, black top—would spin by us and he'd stop in his tracks and sigh, not an ordinary sigh, but an audible-to-the-sky sigh. He wanted that Bug so badly he drove it in his dreams. That was common Ahn knowledge.

Journal entry:

> Today, I asked Uncle Bong if he COULD drive the Bug, where would he go? He said, 'Maybe I'd just drive and keep driving.' I said, 'You mean, take off and LEAVE us?' 'No, Monkey,' he laughed. 'I'd never do that.'

Other times, we'd just watch our shadows, not very talkative and certainly not a word about Fred, who was dumb as they come but smart enough not to bully the wrong people like Mr Sam Ahn whenever he went in to pick up our Sunday carry-out.

'Mr Ahn! Keeping your food nice and warm here. I tossed in complimentary almond cookies for you and your family. Oh, and two extra cartons of rice. Enjoy your dinner!'

Princely airs carry weight.

Uncle Bong, Uncle Bong …

Stand up straight!

Hold your head high!

You're not a pauper!

You're *not* Hop Sing!

For the longest time, I never questioned or wondered why he was the way he was. The way he was, well, it was all I knew: Uncle Bong, always at our disposal, helping everyone, and desperately wanting to please. Ahn legend had it that when he finally passed the written test for his driver's license—on the third try—he was so excited only a pot of *boricha* (barley tea) settled him down. He was *that* happy. Whenever my dad was at work or overseas, Uncle Bong became the designated family chauffeur. But shuffling us around from here to there was only the tip of the iceberg. He might be on his knees helping Mommy in her garden, a shadowed presence, digging up dirt, planting; helping Holly carefully cut out her Butterick patterns; helping in crises like when Peter got seriously sick and was quarantined. He was always there for us. Helping, helping.

One day, who knows what day, it occurred to me that he wasn't like other uncles. Other uncles came for short visits from other places with their own wives and kids, but my Uncle Bong was different. Maybe it was strange for a grown man not to forge his own path in his own world, instead following his big brother's family around Blue Stone Circle—hanging out with all of us, including ragamuffin me, the youngest, the tomboy—as he walked and bicycled, afraid to veer off like he was marching to the saddest song ever sung. His job at Ding Wow's was his first step outside the Circle, if you can call straying a few hundred yards an independent move. And even though Fred fired Uncle Bong several weeks in, applying for his first job *was* a step, a baby step, and in retrospect, maybe a symbolic step.

'Dad, the manager hated Uncle Bong.'

'What are you talking about, Monkey?'

'He called him names.'

'What names?'

'Hop Sing. Village Idiot. Bowlegged Bozo. Cross-eyed clown. And he fired him for no reason!'

My father said nothing, but his face caught fire.

The next thing you knew, Fred was gone, too.

After the Ding Wow fiasco, Uncle Bong retreated from the real world to an attic that was his island-for-one and where the smiling stopped. My only peek into that portrait was when I'd go up to get him for supper. He'd be looking out his window and singing Sinatra so hushed you could hardly hear him even though he seemed to be throwing his whole hidden sad soul into it, like a crooner on *The Hollywood Palace*. Escaping somewhere. I didn't know where he went or who his phantom audience was, but he seemed content with his performance.

'I've got a crush on you, sweetie pie …'

Journal entry:

Poor Uncle Bong has the WORST voice I've ever heard. When I asked him if he ever wanted to be a singer, he said, 'No, Monkey. Don't worry.' Good thing!

A miniature Sony television my dad had brought back for him from Tokyo whisked him away, too. The screen, no bigger than a deck of cards, wobbled on collapsible metal legs. Whenever *Hawaii Five-O* came on, Uncle Bong got swept up in an emotional wave that landed him in a paradise of pineapples, palm trees, and pretty hula girls. Soon, he was Hawaiian at heart, even dragging me to Ben Franklin, and once, spending his last Ding Wow paycheque on three tropical print shirts in shades of sky blue, green apple, and mango.

Later, eyes half-closed:

'You know, Monkey, in Honolulu, everyone is happy. The hotel bellhops and parking attendants wear Hawaiian shirts on duty and are always smiling. People treat them like kings! Don Ho isn't the only one singing Hawaiian songs—even cab drivers wake up whistling and go to bed singing. Everyone is equal, everyone is respected, in sunny moods, no need to take pills. It's much better to live the island life, surrounded by waves and the sound of ukeleles. Maybe someday I will.'

I didn't want to remind him that if paradise life was anything like *Hawaii Five-O*, murders were as common as waves. Or ask the obvious: How could he possibly move or live there? That said, his *Hawaii Five-O* fantasy brought him more joy than the real world. He'd snap his fingers and wade into Bobby Darin like he was the headliner at some Waikiki cocktail lounge.

'*Somewhere beyond the sea …*'

And lately, there were whispers of an Ahn family vacation heading towards that side of the globe.

Squint, smile.

Uncle Bong, Uncle Bong …

How could he be Sam Ahn's brother?

Besides their height, comparisons were comical. My father was somewhat slight, only slightly sinewy, while Bong was a hulk of walking

muscle, a Korean Popeye minus the pipe. My father seemed born cultured, a man of letters, sophisticated as James Bond if 007 stood five feet five. Meanwhile, Uncle Bong, at least two inches shorter thanks to his bowlegs —or was it just the way he walked?—seemed more Americanized, preferring hot dogs and fries over a bowl of seaweed soup. Both brothers, unlike Mommy, spoke
near-perfect English, but Uncle Bong lacked his older brother's Ivy League diction and delivery. '*The diplomat and the dunce*,' I overheard a neighbour say to her companion. Ah, the things people mutter under their breaths, even if half-true. Still, despite the age difference—seven or eight years—a stranger could tell Sam Ahn and Uncle Bong were brothers. Besides both being Mommy's personal drivers, they shared something you couldn't quite pinpoint with the naked eye.

Ahn blood.

On walks with the family, Uncle Bong's posture improved, steadied, and Blue Stone's only bachelor expertly put on a happy-go-lucky act for the neighbours, waving when we did. And bowing to every Tom, Dick, and Harry.

No one knew Uncle Bong's name, of course. He was someone but no one.

'Don't bow, Uncle Bong!'

Walking, walking.

All over Blue Stone, the Ahn pulse could be felt, if not heard, by the leaves in the trees, their trunks, their roots, right down to the core of the earth. Maybe our hearts beat harder back when the US Census Bureau need only come to Ahn dinner table for a Korean head count in our Virginia burb.

Years later, after Uncle Bong disappeared from our lives, the troop dwindled down as the kids moved out one by one, me last. We siblings would go to the ends of the earth for each other but there comes a time when you mark your own trail. On the occasion we all got together and

went walking, some of us would inevitably splinter off Blue Stone Circle down the side streets and meet up back at the house. Soon after Mommy died in ’79, I exchanged my writing plans for law school and whenever I came back to visit, only my father and I fell back into the Blue Stone Circle step. We, of the loner spirits. Whatever my path, he was my faithful fan.

Naturally, the earth felt different now. Tilted. The sky, the ground, the trees, me—hollow. Our steps, our breaths, too. Wherever we were, we drifted towards each other like rafts.

If I was lost at sea, he would find me.



I usually took the train home but sometimes, a long, quiet drive was an elixir—that day, four hours forty minutes door to door. Single, married, or widowed, I visited my dad at least a dozen times a year for holidays, three-day weekends, every birthday on the books. It sounded like a lot of father-daughter time but not when I pictured all the mornings that he woke up alone and all the walks he took with Mrs Lim, not me. My siblings stayed in the area, and I was grateful for that peace in my heart. Still, whenever I turned my face a certain way in a certain light, or looked up from eating and noted that, once again, my father’s face had grown silken with memory, I knew what was coming: that stab in the heart.

‘You look just like Mommy.’

Our weeks apart were lost years.

But see, I had a life. Maybe not the life I’d once dreamed of, but who does? I grew up and found love and practiced law, gave everything my all, married someone whose

fiddle-playing was so sweet, so earthy, it sawed through my heart, but when he died, my work and everything else grew dull. No kids, no real regrets. Yet, what I’d do to be Monkey again, spellbound by a boy on a boat, even for just one hour. Not for the boy. For the dream.

When we fall for someone, we often believe we've found our One Great Love, not the Lesser Love it usually is. But don't quote me. I'm not Colette.



He steered himself like a rickshaw over rocks. No matter, Sam Ahn will always revert to the Kodak stills, the dad with shiny black hair combed back to show off his intelligent melon-sized forehead and the noble twinkle in his eye. He was considerably compact and nicer than many dads of that era around—I'd heard stories, not to mention the yelling, through rooms, through windows, from our backyard where I swung high and low on a squeaky swing set. Then there was Mr Ahn. He treated his children like precious heirlooms. And if his heirlooms addressed their parents as 'you guys …' or answered a question with an 'I dunno …' his face would turn a sudden and scary shade of scarlet, followed by a firm yet gentle reprimand, '*Now, kids …*'

I often wondered whether those ill-tempered fathers still had wives who poured their coffee in the morning while my dad poured his own, as he had for forty years. Light trickling in; quiet, so quiet. Long, lonely meals, washing dishes. Most Korean men of his generation, accustomed to wives who picked and flicked the meat from their bowls into their husbands' bowls, would've have contacted a matchmaker as soon as the coffin closed. My father was a rare breed.

Sheer dream power had ploughed Seum-Young Ahn through a childhood where fly-swatting contests were merciful diversions from hunger; and into Harvard graduate school in the '50s where few Korean faces besides his were spotted on campus unless the weather was dandy and his pregnant wife decided to take a stroll around Harvard Square with their cartoon-skipping kids, three down and counting, plus Uncle Bong, who had followed his big brother here from the outskirts of Seoul, like it was the law of nature.

Actually, it was. Uncle Bong's nature, anyway.

As Ahn history goes, when the family moved from Cambridge, Massachusetts to Falls Church, Virginia, my father got it in his head that it was his duty to secure his younger brother a livelihood, even though he could probably predict every outcome. First, he enrolled Uncle Bong in community college, who went on to woefully flunk every class, one by one. Then he signed Uncle Bong up for electrician school, then plumbing school, then auto-mechanic school, only to watch him get kicked out, one by one. Next stop, barber school, then cooking school, and every other trade school my father could think of. To the naked eye, Uncle Bong's only talent was to fail famously at everything, which meant a so-called profession was not in his future.

But I knew he was good at other stuff. Really good.

A natural athlete, Uncle Bong could swim with dolphin grace, faster than any creature in Blue Stone Lake, passing the required swimming test for a lifeguard position with flying colours. Alas, not the written one.

Uncle Bong, Uncle Bong …

In his sleep, he could leapfrog eight, nine, even ten feet, not to mention kick a kickball into the next orbit. Alas, no paycheque for such feats.

Uncle Bong, Uncle Bong …

He could imitate dancers on *The Ed Sullivan Show*—Uncle Bong, showbiz style!—tapping and gliding without a second thought. Still, I couldn't imagine my dad ever signing him up for lessons at Arthur Murray's Dance Studio.

Uncle Bong, Uncle Bong …

With no practical ambitions or passions to speak of, Sam Ahn officially gave up on Uncle Bong, and in time, grew used to, even comfortable with, his younger brother's doomed existence as a family fixture. A pet, a couch, a mascot. As long as he was happy. A jack of all trades with no trade.

Uncle Bong, Uncle Bong …

Some people had intellectual gifts, some didn't.

Our father would deny his brain played any part in his rise out of family poverty despite his scholarly poise and conquest of language, any language. Foreign tones went into his ears only to spring natively from his lips. In those days, interpreters were gold and wherever he went, his skills paid the rent. Yet, he always chalked himself up to an average man with a formidable philosophy: Dream power made you invincible. Miraculous.

Mommy's death tested his philosophy every day. Try as he might, he could not bring her back to life. Next best thing, their children.



He wished aloud. 'Why not stay a little longer this time?'

I mulled it over. 'Maybe I will, Dad.'

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2

Winter 2019

Buoyed, he bragged to the earth and any listening creature: ‘My daughter wants to spend time with her old man! And she’s a big wheel attorney who calls all the shots!’

BFD, I mentally carved on a tree. Besides, what shots? ‘All I do is read documents all day long.’

‘Are they interesting documents?’

Add OMG. ‘No, Dad.’

‘You see, I wish you had become a writer instead. Like Pearl Buck—noble *and* Nobel. The famous author Margaret Ahn. What a nice ring.’ He sighed. ‘It’s not too late.’

+ LOL 4-EVER.

Okay, there was a time I wanted to write my heart out—the book of all books!—but that didn’t happen, so I took another road, and it led me somewhere and it led me nowhere. Besides, a book can be something, but it can also be nothing. And it’s certainly not the answer to everything.

Plus, I was no Pearl Buck.

‘At least I’d have one reader. You.’

He smiled like a flower would if it could, then held my hand with crushing emotion. As we walked on, father-daughter, I felt the huge hole in his heart. Winter was a low point for him. Couldn't get out and do yard work, which Mommy would like. Lost his tan, which had projected a glow of happiness and health, especially against lavender orchids—the ones on his shirts. Real orchids he couldn't grow like Mommy did. The present-day neighbours admired him from the sidewalk, like a bronze lawn fixture you couldn't see up close for fear of trespassing. '*There's Mr Ahn, out gardening again. He had a wife who died a million years ago. And a brother who fell off the face of the earth.*'

'*Hello, Mr Ahn!*'

Blinking out of a dream: '*Hello!*'

His loyal friends from college were dead, too. Strokes came early to those who smoked and drank, had second wives, spent years plotting against post-Rhee regimes, and ate salted dried minnows like popcorn. My father chose another life, in another capital. Here, Seum-Young Ahn became Sam Ahn, and his Korean soul went suburban. Now, he was who he was.

Tan, golden; glow, false.

Something worked its way through his brain to his lips, a primitive earthworm crawling to this moment. 'Why did you drive, Margaret? I said Peter could pick you up at the airport. The roads are too slippery.'

'Dad.'

'Girls are not good drivers.'

I couldn't and wouldn't argue with him. Once upon a time, the Ahn girls were forbidden to operate so-called dangerous machinery like cars and lawn mowers. Washing machines were okay. Dishwashers, too. Holly's Singer sewing machine drove him crazy. Egg beaters and blenders and garbage disposals, not good ideas. Too easy to lose a finger or a hand or worse.

Darkly: 'I told Mommy not to drive, remember?'



Mommy was buried in National Memorial Park, not far from Blue Stone. Twenty minutes in clear weather, thirty minutes in the rain, and it was always raining. In the early days, it seemed like an unlikely burial ground for her. A Korean name on a plaque was out of place in a sea of American names and dates echoing other eras—Queenie, Lucas, Charlotte from the Civil War, the Great Depression, transplants from other graveyards. In the decades following Mommy's death, Korean and Vietnamese sections began to crop up, flagged by miniature stone temples and pagodas. But by then it was too late; Mommy was not to be disturbed. Not that she really belonged in an Asian temple, either. A Korean mom pioneer, she raised her four children who came-of-age in lily-white suburbia. Mommy did her best on foreign soil, so perhaps her final resting spot was fitting after all.



Around us, little castles, however decrepit, stood proud. Majestically ancient, like Sam Ahn.

'The air feels good out here, Margaret. I can breathe.'

'The dry heat in the house must be bothering your skin.' Every winter, jars of aloe dotted every counter.

'I'll survive, but not the orchid plants. They need moisture.'

'Still no luck?'

'No luck.'

'Why are they so hard to grow?'

'That is a myth, Margaret. Orchids can grow anywhere. But I don't have Mommy's magic touch. Do you remember all the dead plants she brought back to life?'

'I do.'

Mommy was the original orchid-lover who had a way with her whispers and watering can. You almost wondered where the love came from. When my father took over, all the orchid souls in the house perished one by one, as if in mourning. Over time, he developed a faith healer's zeal, which only

seemed to make them madder and killed them off quicker. ‘*Margaret, I am cursed!’* It was all somehow surreal, not natural—his obsession, their wither. You got the feeling Sam Ahn believed that the day he revived a dying plant, both he and Mommy would come back to life.

And that the orchids were aware.

‘If Mommy were here, the orchids in the house would all bloom by tomorrow morning.’

‘On your birthday!’

‘Yah.’ He took a breath and exhaled a sentiment I’ve heard many times before. Variations of, anyway: ‘Maybe I am in a coma, and I will wake up on my ninetieth birthday and see Mommy.’ He might’ve called it a coma, a deep sleep, or a bad dream; he might be sixty-two or seventy-five, you get the picture. A bird dipped down, squawked, and seemed to pick the spirit from his soul.

‘Imagine that, Margaret.’

I could not imagine that. Mommy could rekindle dead plants but not herself. This is where the ritual, the path, ended. Talks of comas unnerved me, as did her clothes still hanging in their closet. Her stuff was his heartbreak, the way she remained living, like the plants—dormant until the orchids bloomed. I accepted her death long ago. And, frankly, we could all be in comas. But my hunch was that my father grew old alone.

‘Dad, is there a reason you want me to stay longer? Did you need me to take you somewhere? A doctor? How are your eyes these days? Less blurry? What about your peripheral vision?’

He fought the urge to slow down. ‘My eyes are fine. But Mrs Lim tells me there is a new Korean restaurant in Annandale where the waitresses are vicious.’

‘Translation?’

‘The food is superb.’

Chuckle.

‘Do you know what their slogan should be?’

‘I don’t know—“*Drop dead, motherfucker*”?’

I couldn’t believe I said that. But Sam Ahn chuckled like it was nothing.

‘Good guess, Margaret. “*Service without a smile*.”’

This time, my father laughed so hard it scared me. Then he stopped to take a breath, not an easy task when you’re still laughing. Not quite a jig but as close as he’s going to get in the waking universe. Good enough for me.

‘Maybe Mrs Lim and I will go there,’ he said.

Without Mommy—who kept our kitchen aromatic with garlic and hot peppers, and scallions, often in a bubbling brew—eating Korean cuisine meant dining out or carrying out. During high kimchi-making season, Mrs Lim would bring over a jar or two of her fiery finest that required a carton of milk to extinguish. Mommy never made her batches that hot; the pepper would burn her hands, even penetrating through those thick yellow Playtex gloves.

In the mood, Mommy might dote on her daughters, brush our hair or chuckle over our lack of sweet dumpling-making skills. How well a pair of young female hands could mould rice flour, salt, and water around a dab of sweet bean paste to create Korean rice cakes was an art and, more importantly, determined the beauty of her future daughters. Mommy’s dumplings were floral perfections, but our clumsy Americanized hands could only form globs that landed with a splat on wax paper followed by her uncharitable laugh. We guessed her talent was a compliment to us and our inability to sculpt dough an insult, but no matter how you took it, it was Mommy’s way of gathering her daughters like flowers.

Sometimes, Holly and I would pull our hair back with scarves and help her with the savoury *mandoo*-making. Mommy would set down a big red plastic bowl of filling—a hand-made paste of ground beef, tofu, cabbage, bean sprouts, garlic, onion, and ginger—two packages of wonton wrappers, and a bowl of fork-whipped raw egg. Dip your finger into the egg and line

the wrapper. Drop a teaspoon of filling in the centre of the wrapper and fold over into a triangle. Pinch each side shut and lay on the floured wax paper. Like our sweet bean-filled dumplings, our mandoo could never compete with Mommy's. A good reason not to have ugly daughters.

But back to the question: Why not stay a little longer? It's true that whenever I left him, I found myself longing for the vanished and regretting everything here and now.

'Why don't we give Mrs Lim a week off?' I suggested. My other life could wait. Walking into an empty apartment could wait forever. 'And we can try out that new Korean restaurant. Service without a smile—here we come!'

Fuelled, my father shuffled all the way to Blue Blossom Road at two o'clock. Hey, that's an Old Man Ahn record!

As we headed back home, he got tangled up in a web of nostalgia.

'Why did you stop writing, Margaret? It was your dream.'

Like orchids, dreams wither and die. Now, it was only Sam Ahn's dream.

'It's still not too late to write a book,' he continued. 'A beautiful book! You can write even when you are ninety years old like me. In peace and quiet. What a wonderful thought, Margaret.'

'Dad, my dream was just a young girl's dream. Not a dream for world peace or a cure for cancer or even me, the adult, not to mention when I'm ninety. When's the last time you saw me with my journal?'

Not listening. 'Why did you give up the flute?'

'I was no good at it.'

'No, you were good at everything.'

Sam Ahn in a nutshell.

Were that true, I'd still be playing the flute and jotting down thoughts in a bedside journal into my golden years instead of staring at the ceiling. Hey, sometimes you just have to give up on things and be done with them, damn it.

Some stars stay lit. Some don’t.



One long ago night, on an ocean liner afloat the high Pacific seas, three Ahns stood in a triangle of heaven. I was on the upper deck, leaning over the railing to spy on my parents below on the promenade deck. No one could rock a Polynesian princess look like Mommy, especially with a flower in her hair and a Mai Tai in her hand. Apparently, they’d just won some Samba Contest in the starlight room. Mommy, really, she had the moves! But my father had his own moves that night. So euphoric he could kiss the sky, he broke into a silly, ridiculous, unforgettable jig. It was … divine.



Sam Ahn lost his wife, his life, in a car accident. Once, openly devoted and now, private about it, he’d been praying for years for sacred intervention as if he could shake up the universe like a snow globe in his widowed fists so that all the molecules that one fateful day in 1979 would fall into a different place. And it would’ve gone one of two ways.

In the first scenario, the preferred universe, Uncle Bong never did what he did. Thus, no need for Mommy to get her driver’s license, after all. A decade later, Uncle Bong was still chauffeuring Mommy wherever her heart desired in his dream car, that yellow Volkswagen Bug he finally afforded after years of working as assistant manager, then manager, at Ding Wow’s —yes, they hired him back, promoted him, and, besides, Fred was dead. Okay, that part was my Fred-fantasy, let me keep it. Anyway, all that being the new reality, the atoms of choice would’ve scattered like stars in very different directions and therefore, what happened wouldn’t have happened. No crash. Mommy would’ve come home that afternoon and made herself a delicious ice coffee with two sugars before preparing a Korean meal for her family.

In the second scenario, a parallel universe, Mommy took another route out of the neighbourhood, headed clockwise onto Blue Stone Circle, and circled the lake the long way. By the time she pulled out of Blue Stone in the green Torino (a luxury car by Ahn standards, a first), a certain truck would already be two minutes down Columbia Pike. Hence, the driver of that moving truck—who had been reading a map and ran the red light at the intersection of Columbia Pike and the Blue Stone Circle entrance two minutes earlier—never hit her, never killed her. No story to tell. We would still have Mommy. And orchids galore!

But let's backtrack to another intersection of sorts.

Even in her pale green chiffon dress with the silk sash, so dreamy a sigh might knock her over, Mommy was, I suspect, more resilient than she appeared. Anyone who could chop beef ribs with her deadly whack was no delicate orchid. If need be, she could still follow marked territory by moonlight in the border mountains of North Korea as she did in her Great Escape of '47—true story. Even slip through the clutches of Communist soldiers and guards who captured and beat her, although being struck repeatedly without a fight (for fear of rape, electrocution, or both) is something a pampered girl from a wealthy northern family could never forget: denigration, dishonour, no control. Yet, until what happened one summer *happened*, Mommy lay low like an animal in wait and let her husband lead by giving him the gift of a certain silhouetted joy: His wife on his arm.

There they are.

Two orchids!

Sam Ahn's myth: No harm would come Mommy's way—he would protect her forever! But here's the thing: he never knew what happened to her in a place thick with Spray N Starch and Clorox Bleach near the bottom of the ship while he relaxed on Deck.

Myth dispelled.

Because the story’s origin goes back further, to a man aboard SS President Roosevelt the summer of 1969. In a
way, if you can think of the car crash not as a singularly tragically-timed event but as a snake-like series of events—a dream, a dance, a decision—then this man, not the truck driver, is the one responsible for Mommy’s death, and it wouldn’t have made a whiff of diff whether Uncle Bong was part of the picture or not. Because once she’d caught the eye of the devil, she couldn’t escape it.

Mommy swore me to secrecy.

‘You never tell Daddy about bad man. You promise me?’

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3

Summer 1969

From the main deck of SS President Roosevelt, the Ahns—my parents, older siblings Holly and Peter, and Uncle Bong in tow—along with hundreds of other lei-draped passengers, tossed rainbow confetti and streamers down to the San Francisco harbour where a maniacal crowd was waving and yelling, ‘Bon Voyage!’

We didn’t know a soul below, but on both sides, everyone was yelling, so monkey see, monkey do—me with the least enthusiasm.

‘Bon Voyage! Bon Voyage!’

It was a breezy day, or maybe it just felt windy as the luxury ocean liner began to leave shore on rocky waters. The deck tilted to one side—*whoa!* We—everyone—rolled about like dice. Hats were flying, muumuus were flapping. My brand-new banana yellow sunglasses were cock-eyed, my hair was sticking to my chapstick-y lips, and a flip flop got away. I was a mess! As the ship passed under the Golden Gate Bridge, the wind went really nuts, the earth topsy-turvy, and there I was, clinging to my journal for dear life, pages flapping as I scribbled, unanchored, at the mercy of the wicked sun and any seagull that might dive down and pick me up.

Journal entry:

I don’t want to be here, I don’t want to be here, I don’t want to be here. Do you hear me, world? I DON’T WANT TO BE HERE!

But there I was, out in the open. Months ago, while Mommy studied a brochure that read ‘Ship and Travel in the Presidential Manner’, my father announced that we, the Ahns, would be sailing on the warm Pacific seas for seven days and nights and when evening fell ‘*the stars will be ours’*. Sure, it sounded teriff, but I wasn’t a fan of vacations, not when they took me so far from home.

I’d miss my friends Carol and Barbra who viewed me as a typical American girl like them even though a mirror would beg to differ. We had fun talking about boys—‘Gomers’ we snickered, for their gawky growth spurts—while spinning 45s at slumber parties and leafing through *Co-ed* magazines. Taking the bus to Seven Corners and window-shopping at Garfinkel’s, while security guards inside gave us the evil eye.

I’d miss my shiny silver bicycle, riding like I was flying around Blue Stone Circle, Uncle Bong parallel to me on his shiny blue bicycle—English racers, no less! He played badminton and ping-pong with Peter and nothing with Holly or Vivian as they were into fashion, not sweat. But cycling was our thing. Note: In an extravagant, if not naïve moment, my father had surprised both me and Uncle Bong with these English racers. Once he realized why they were deemed ‘racers’, he regretted his purchases, but it was too late to return them. Our bikes and paths were scuffed.

‘Stay in the first speed, Monkey! Please! Otherwise, do you want to give your Mommy and me a heart attack?’

I always petered out, huffing, puffing, long before Uncle Bong who wasn’t as prone to crashes and bang ups, taking curves like a freewheeling, no-handed daredevil. Whenever my racer clashed into his, he’d gracefully break his fall while I’d sail into oblivion leaving my mark: blood on gravel.

Oh, but it was all worth it, our silent shadows in sync, our rhythm unspeakably beautiful, our own ballet, as if we cut out a world that couldn’t catch us.

Riding, riding.

Round and round.

‘One more time, Uncle Bong?’

‘Oh, sure, Monkey!’

Zip, zip!

Above all, I’d miss the moment I could burrow my way back home, back down to the library—my father’s mecca—in the basement where everything was dark and cool, just the way I liked it. Hurry, hurry, to a poorly lit room lined with dark leather-bound books and their curious metallic insignias. I didn’t read them; I just felt them and smelled them. Nice. Nor did I read the small, glossy science books about gems, stones, fish, planets, etc. But the photographs and illustrations were luminous and made me happy. Books, books. Can’t forget the one-volume *Columbia Encyclopedia*, which housed the knowledge of the universe, everything from the Gettysburg Address to how to count to ten in Samoan. Five *Brittanicas* in one, the encyclopaedia was olive green with bronze lettering, so massive it claimed its own podium. Whenever I opened it up, wrinkles of genius claimed my face.

Besides books, also home to: musty odours and spider webs that spun gauze over everything; utter silence, if I was lucky (oh, but I did love the sound of Uncle Bong playing ping-pong with Peter in the adjacent rec room —*ping*, *pong*, *ping*, *pong*—hypnotic as rain); spotting kickball shadows in the high-up windows; the Underwood typewriter I faced for hours on end, my hands perfectly still on the cool keys, waiting for words to fly off my fingers, daring myself, do it, do it … O the hundreds of half-poems and vignettes I composed! But they were handwritten things, hidden in a manila folder under a heap of books unworthy of shelf space. If only I could shuffle them together and—voilà—a book! But, no, they were merely schoolgirl scrawls. Virgin cries! For so long I’d been working up the nerve to type a real page that resembled something from a real book, not a doodle-

filled journal. Something worthy of watermarked onionskin paper, something so beautiful it could make you cry.

Journal entry:

> Then people will read that page, MY page, and think, 'What a marvellous writer, that Margaret Ahn!' That's my dream, my secret dream. And I'm going to make it come true … if it's the LAST thing I do!



Vivian, the oldest sibling, a sophomore in college, was home for the summer but staying behind to intern at *The Falls Church Independent*, a local newspaper. We, her ever-loving family, secretly twinkled with relief. This way, we could leave our dog Goldie at home instead of a kennel. Plus, Vivian's evil queen temper could cast a cloud over the Ahn household whether we were home or at a bayside motel at Ocean City, eating tangerines and Fig Newtons for breakfast. She didn't mean to be a bitch but couldn't help herself; the Ahn blood was tainted, and my father took full responsibility. Vivian was Vivian, a tigress like his second cousin who was rumoured to have killed her mother-in-law with one hard whack. Of course, Vivian was tame in comparison and her famous triple-decker club sandwiches held together with festive firecracker toothpicks meant *meow*—she was sorry. And she was, she really was. Until next time.

My other sister, Holly, however, was on board, at the far end of the deck past the pool. In a rare shining moment, she looked like she was engaged with other teenagers. Were some … foreign looking? Like us? From here … yes, some. Peter hovered awkwardly nearby. My brother was taller than our father but still smaller than his classmates with a pretty boy face that would make him look twenty at forty, but at fifteen, didn't do him much good. Two bouts with tuberculosis, first contracted in Korea when Peter was going into the seventh grade, left him so timid it killed us to watch. In those days, TB stood for taboo, too.

While I held onto the railing for dear life, Uncle Bong appeared but faded from my scene when my dad found me and scooted up to me. We always found each other, didn't we, Dad? Even now, my mind splinters off to a neo-world where he paddles up to me in the darkness, waving the way he used to wave before he was widowed.

'Monkey!'

'Hi, Monkey,' he said, amused by his melodramatic daughter. 'Cheer up, okay?'

Three years of gymnastics and I was Monkey for life. Was that my fate? I didn't want my father to call me Monkey any more, especially in public, but didn't have the heart to tell him. Instead, I pouted out to sea.

'This is Mommy's dream come true, Monkey. We never took a honeymoon.' Only his youngest was spoken to in this tone: 'Be a good girl and smile for her.'

I didn't then but I can now—see him, in full view. He was young, crazy young to my ageing eyes today. A twig of a man in white pants and a peach-coloured shirt against a dangling blue lei and Kodak camera, no hint of the boxiness to come. Every strand of jet-black hair in place, thanks to Brylcreem. We stood together, me facing the Pacific Ocean, him facing my scowling profile. It was hard for Sam Ahn to understand any sulking on the part of his children. We, who had everything! My father's airs and impeccable diction were deceiving—he grew up poor and, in his heart, would die poor. 'Please. For me, Monkey.'

I held power over my dad and him, me.

'*D'accord,*' I said.

'*Bon,*' he replied.

And then Mommy's voice, still yanking at my heartstrings:

'Margaret!'

There she is, there she is, there she is … Alive!

In 1969, Mommy was, like her husband, shy of forty, and still radiant to the world. Neighbours called her the exotic Elizabeth Taylor. As a child I couldn't really see it—she was just our housewife Mommy—but as I came of age I could, and can, see it now. Before my eyes: a beaming, dewy-faced woman with a flower firmly planted in her bouffant black hair. Unruffled. Admittedly, she was a little too plump for her muumuu now, having helped herself to one too many slices of her own strawberry shortcake. Although she protested gravy and mayonnaise as too rich, she had no gripes when it came to whipped-cream American desserts.

'Hi, Mom!' I shouted above the waves and the gaiety.

A live band, five Copper-toned guys in white jackets, began to play bossa nova in an open glass-enclosed room on the main deck—the starlight room, I would later learn. On cue, every adult on deck was holding a tropical drink with a tiny umbrella, including my parents. Even Uncle Bong. Yes! If you told me he'd never had alcohol before, I'd believe it. Two sips, and he was flying like Peter Pan.

'Monkey, Monkey, Monkey,' he gushed, 'ooooh … this taste so good!'

Cocktail hour at two o'clock??

I'm between my father and Mommy. They're sipping Mai Tais, they tell me, they're swaying like palm trees in the breeze.

They had ten years left.

Tick-tock, tick-tock …

'You like ship, Margaret?' Mommy asked.

My dad winked at me, confident his Monkey would say the right thing.

'It's nice,' I said. 'But when can we see our rooms?'

'They are put our luggage away now. In hour, I think,' she replied dreamily. 'Look how blue water is!'

'*Tres bleu*,' I remarked.

My father added, '*Et tres belle.*'

'Hey, no French yakity-yakity around me!' Mommy joked.

Her English was far from perfect, yet I couldn't imagine it any other way. If she spoke Oxfordian English like my father, she wouldn't be Mommy. She could be accidentally clever—*horoscope* was always *horrible scope*. And preciously innocent when she would translate her husband's very personal postcards to her from places such as this one from Egypt: *I was ride a camel but now my 'peanuts' hurt*. (Who but the early Ahn kids giggled over a jar of Planter's?) Mommy's voice was always alive with punctuation, but, sometimes, we just couldn't understand her, nor she us. And then, there was this very odd phenomenon: While she sometimes struggled with what her own children were saying, she could often decipher those we couldn't. Rednecks from the hills who came to the door offering to cut down trees; the TV host of *Hee-Haw*; Henry Kissinger; Zsa Zsa Gabor; even John Lennon and Yoko Ono at their bed-in.

'Bong, come, come, you take picture now of Margaret and Daddy and me in front of ocean. No dilly-dally! Right now!'

Fumble, focus—

Click!



The promenade deck was several steps below the main deck and ringed around SS President Roosevelt, perfect for stargazing when the main deck was a zoo. A flight above the promenade deck were passengers' cabins; a flight below the promenade deck was the dining room, a very formal place with a dress code, we were told, even at breakfast—first shift (us), 7 a.m. Lower, yet not as low as you could go, was a laundry room, a gift shop, and a beauty parlour. Beneath that, the mechanical bowels of the ship. The rest of the big boat, certainly much of it, remains a fog in my brain. Embellish, I can't, I won't, for this story is nothing if not as real as I remember it. Still, how many decks were there? Were there cabins below the promenade deck, too? If so, did the fish peek at passengers through portholes? And the ping-pong room was located where? It all existed. Once.

Ping, pong, ping, pong …

The heart I can feel like yesterday; the eyes are a blur.

The Ahn family claimed three cabins—one for Holly and me, one for Peter and Uncle Bong, and larger sleek quarters for my parents complete with a vase of fresh flowers and a basket brimming with fresh fruit every day. Our cruise was mostly courtesy of the International Monetary Fund in Washington, D.C. where my father worked as an international lawyer. The IMF sounded like a rich place to work but its mission was to help the poor. One perk: tax-free income. Another perk: home leave, granted every three years. All first-class expenses to Korea for his wife and Americanized brood—from Pan Am jets where a spiral staircase led you up to a spacious lounge, to a full day and night in Honolulu, to the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo where breakfast for six was two hundred American dollars—paid. Uncle Bong's expenses were often extra, but wherever we went, he went, and while he could share rooms with Peter, they couldn't share meals or squeeze into the same airplane seat. That's when Sam Ahn opened his wallet.

Once a First Son, always a first son.

Our father made a good living but with that title came the obligation to support a big worthless cast of family characters in the suburbs of Seoul; ingrates, all of them—Uncle Bong being the sole exception—like that horrible Uncle Duk who, on our last visit, infected our Peter with tuberculosis, leaving him pinker and paler than his sisters. Anyway, with college tuition for one, and three tuitions on the horizon, we were used to no-frills living, scooping up extra rice to stretch out a sweet and sour pork dinner from Ding Wow's.

But every third summer, we vacationed like millionaires.



Compared to the grand exterior of SS President Roosevelt, our cabin was a matchbox, albeit a pristine matchbox. It housed a bunk bed, a desk, a well-

lit many-mirrored bathroom, a Princess phone for calling between rooms, and a porthole with an ocean view.

Holly, oh Holly, at sixteen, slipping into a magical little striped dress like she was slipping into a dream she would never take off—dinner was soon to be served, and the dress code was 'formal attire'. Her dress, her dress … I recognized it from a Butterick pattern, the striped fabric spread out on the living room floor, Holly pinning and cutting, crying and cursing, all in the name of popularity.

'*The stripes aren't matching up!'*

'The darts are too high!'

'The hem is still crooked!'

Finally, perfection.

'Zip me?'

Holly was the prettiest sister at this axis in time. A Korean Holly Golightly. We all would have our turn at 'prettiest' but none of the Ahn sisters would ever match Mommy, her enchantment. Being enchanting, it seemed to me then, was reserved for women born in another period, earlier in the century. Or rich girls, which Mommy was before the war bombed the north and half her family to smithereens—only she escaped, pushed out the door by a mother in frail health. Once rich, always rich, and sometimes enchanting. Middle-class girls of my day could be cute, they could even be beautiful. But enchanting? Not like Mommy.

That was my teen take, anyway.

Still, the summer of '69 was Holly Ahn's moment of bloom and blush. Overnight she was Holly-esque: her hair long and luxurious, her ears pierced, her eyes sequined with the help of Jade Pearl eye shadow. A part-time job at Dart Drug in Falls Church Plaza, a strip shopping centre a few bus stops down Columbia Pike, allowed her pocket money and discounts on makeup, much to Mommy's moans. In two years, my sister would pretend to ban all this nonsense—shimmery eyes, pearl-studded earlobes—and join the ranks of hippies at Columbia University. But her hoop earrings and

embroidered gauze tops couldn't fool anyone—she was the most fashionable flower girl on campus. Eight years later, she would lose all colour after Mommy died. Indeed, she would psychically drown. Yet, on this June evening, she was Holly-a-go-go, modelling a new pair of sandals for me, and soon, the world.

'Holly,' I posed, 'do you like it here?'

'No, I *love* it!' Her little hula struck me as sad. 'Don't you?'

I shrugged. 'Where'd you get those shoes? Baker's?'

Now that she could afford nice things now and then, Holly sniffed at Woolworth's and Zayre, where cheap shoes were heaped high in bins like dead fish.

'No, Thom McAn. I couldn't decide, yellow or pink, pink or yellow. Yellow matches this but pink goes with my black bells and polka-dotted top. What do you think?'

We were manifestations of our names: Holly, light; Margaret, dark.

In the name of smooth sailing, I quipped, 'I think you made the right decision.'

'Do you? Well, good!' Her voice dove low and apologetic. 'Monkey, you can't wear those cut-offs to the dining room. You better put on a dress or skirt or else.'

'Or else what?'

'They'll toss you overboard.'

The notion of neon life below us, deep-sea jellyfish and other weird critters, was cool in an abstract way—that summer, we were just on water. I followed Holly's lead and laughed along with her. As sisters, we were not exactly peas in a pod, but here we were. Peace was paramount in our family where, Vivian aside, even raising your voice was an act of treason. So, Holly and I wouldn't dream of fighting, not in a million years. While I was rummaging through my suitcase, Holly picked something up from the desk. A red booklet with a gold emblem.

‘Lookie here, it’s the passenger list, all four hundred and twenty-six names,’ she said. ‘There’s this one boy …’

‘Even us?’ I wondered. Not everyone saw the Ahns as equal, a cruel reality sewn into my young soul. ‘Are we listed, too?’

Holly flipped to the front of the booklet. ‘*Mr and Mrs Samuel Ahn of Falls Church, Virginia,*’ she read aloud. ‘*Three children. Miss Holly, sixteen; Master Peter, fifteen; Miss Margaret, fifteen. Destination: Honolulu.*’

‘What about Uncle Bong?’ I gasped. ‘Did they forget to include him?’

Didn’t everyone?

‘They’ll think he’s a stowaway!’ I lamented, adding, ‘And I’m fourteen, not fifteen.’

‘You’re *almost* fifteen.’

‘Everyone will assume Peter and me are twins.’

‘I wouldn’t worry about that,’ Holly chuckled absently, flipping forward, mumbling, ‘Poor Uncle Bong.’ No one wanted to see him humiliated. Midway through the passenger list, she stopped and ran a frantic finger down a page until a little gasp caught in her throat.

Ding, ding, ding!

The early dinner bell was ringing through the hallways. My sister’s hand flew to her heart.

‘Hurry up, Monkey!’

The dining room was pure MGM. Amid the velvety glamour of dripping chandeliers, a classical quartet, silver baskets of bread and flowers everywhere you glanced, tuxedoed waiters showed two hundred gowned and groomed people to their assigned tables. A dress code meant coats and ties for both men and boys and if I didn’t know better, chiffon for women. By pure lottery, I suppose, we were escorted to what was deemed the ‘captain’s table’; centre stage and visible to all, crowned with a glittery chandelier to outdo all glittery chandeliers, and place settings for ten. Our

waiter was Head Waiter Max Blossom, a tall, charcoal-haired gentleman of irrelevant age and of such comical pomp and so valiant his mere presence set the entire dining room in motion.

Sam Ahn introduced his wife and children to the towering waiter the way proud patriarchs do—as if we were all deserving of a Nobel Prize. Max Blossom bowed to us in turn, lavishly praising our dad, head of the Ahn Dynasty, for having the loveliest silk muumuu-ed wife on board, a well-mannered napkin-in-his-lap son and '*two charming flowers at the table'*.

'Hello, Holly-Blossom! Hello, Monkey-Blossom! Stop the ship—I'm in heaven now!'

Holly seemed distracted, but I was all eyes.

Journal entry:

> Max Blossom is the coolest! He's so tall his head nearly knocks into the chandeliers! Speaking of chandeliers, I hope ours is bolted in good because if the ship starts rocking again, we could be smashed to SMITHEREENS. Hey, where's Uncle Bong?

'Where's Uncle Bong?' I asked aloud.

'He go to bathroom first,' Mommy replied, spotting him. With her trademark wild-arm waving: 'Over here! Over here!'

Unlike other male diners looking ready for the opera, Uncle Bong made a colourful entrance in a pineapple print Hawaiian shirt and white shorts, bowing with every step, his face still flushed from the Pacific Ocean sun, not to mention the second Mai Tai he had downed earlier like Hawaiian Punch.

'Sorry, sorry!'

Wincing, Sam Ahn made his final introduction. 'Max Blossom, my brother Bong.'

'Oh!' Max Blossom reacted, wrinkling with concern. Like our neighbours in Blue Stone, maybe he saw what everybody saw, a stooge next to a scholar, but was here to serve everyone equally and cater to all. 'Mr

Bong, I don’t see your name on the dining room directory. Bong, Bong, Bong,’ he said, running a pen down the list.

Uncle Bong closed his eyes like a shrinking violet, ready to be booted off the ship. My parents looked concerned.

‘Don’t worry, Uncle Bong,’ I voiced. ‘You’re with us.’

‘Oh, wait! Here you are, at the bottom—what nerve, they asterisked you!’ Our Head Waiter laughed. ‘Well, guess what? That entitles you to all the desserts you can eat with double the whipped cream, rainbow sprinkles, and a mountain of cherries on top!’

Such kindness from a stranger, and a striking one at that, washed over Uncle Bong like a glorious Diamond Head wave, evidenced by the widest smile I’d ever seen cross his face. When my father began to quietly chastise him in Korean for not following the dinner dress code, his joyful moment began to sag, but Max Blossom evidently had a nose for what was up.

‘Rules smules. Let’s loosen up,’ he said, his tone diplomatic, launching into the twist as if the dance was still all the rage. Even my father grinned. ‘Nothing wrong with making a splash, right? You look splendid, Bong-Blossom. Ready for a luah! By the way, where is it? Am I invited?’

Just then I witnessed something else foreign to my fourteen going on fifteen years: Uncle Bong, not a castaway, but sitting high. ‘You are first on the guess list!’ he replied.

And Bong-Blossom was born!

Not paying attention was Holly. She was elsewhere, glancing around coquettishly. The dining room was her Paris where waiters balancing platters of fancy food were busy weaving between tables like figure skaters.

‘Excuse me,’ I asked our new friend.

‘Yes, Monkey-Blossom?’

‘Will the captain be sitting with us?’

‘No, the captain and his crew always eat late, at the second shift,’ Max Blossom explained. Then he flared a nostril, raised a brow, and pretended to

whisper, ‘They get the leftovers.’

The Ahns barely had time to laugh.

‘*However …*’

Silenced, we put our water glasses down.

As if the safety of the ship was on our shoulders, Max Blossom put on a deadpan face. ‘You *do*, however, have a very important job to do for the captain and his crew while you’re here.’

‘What?’ we wondered. Even Holly turned her attention back to the table. ‘What?’ we repeated.

‘Why, warm up the seats!’

Every Ahn cracked up. Uncle Bong, the loudest and longest.

A continental menu meant we could choose from prime rib, filet mignon, or lobster in butter sauce. Or, we could have it all! We, who added extra water to our cream of mushroom soup, and split cans of Shasta, adding twice the ice. Max presided over us during much of our meal, explaining to us kids what consommé was and how it was *supposed* to be served cold; placing rolls on our bread plates with long silver tongs; refilling our glasses with opulent flair; picking up Peter’s napkin two if not three times from the floor and chatting about everything under our suns. We loved it. His gift: treating people like kings and queens as if in line for his own coronet. Quick as a finger snap, he understood our family dynamics and who we were. Our father’s attentiveness to once-spoiled princess Mommy; her leaning on him when it came to choosing whether to have peas and pearled onions or French string beans almondine, not because she couldn’t make up her mind but for the benefit of a husband who relished his role in this unlikely poor-boy-meets-rich-girl union and the power of his chivalrous aura; Bong-Blossom, the curious brother and uncle; Peter, the benign creature and mama’s boy; Holly, older daughter-flower, picking at her plate, hungry to socialize with the teen beat, not eat; and me, younger daughter-flower, real name Margaret, scrawling away.

Journal entry:

Max can read people like a book. I bet he knows why Holly's not hungry. And he's soooo funny!

'Holly,' Mommy said, 'you wear too much green on eyes. You look like Catwoman.'

Peter stifled his laugh with a cough.

Uncle Bong, who'd been chuckling and conversing far more than usual went mum, more likely to set himself on fire before criticizing a family member, especially sitting in a circle on a special night. Besides, under Ahn law, no arguing was allowed, especially with Mommy in the room.

'I'll tone it down,' Holly promised, particularly compliant. She paused, licked her lips. 'Dad.'

As Max refilled his wine glass, Sam Ahn delivered an impish, 'Yah, Holly-Blossom?'

'This guy's a fast learner,' Max laughed.

A round of Ahn family merriment turned heads. Little did we know two people were already watching us from opposite corners of the dining room. Two men, one young and beautiful with a British accent; the other, none of those things. Strangers, but not for long.

'Can we go to the Coketail party tonight in the moonlight room?' Holly asked. The plea in her voice was telling. That night there would be a party with teenagers from around the world. She could walk into a room called the moonlight room without her brave mask; walk in, Korean features and all. And for a girl from Virginia, it would be a first. Like all of us, by the time we entered kindergarten, Holly learned that the world without her parents by her side was often not a friendly place. So, she held her own and hid her quiver with a steely chin. Faced every room, pool, teacher, student, even the Good Humor Man, with her head held high. A world hostile to a five-year-old face is unforgivable but the Asian kid in white suburbia has been done to death and I won't go there.

Mommy scoffed. ‘Cocktail party? No.’

‘I said *Coke*tail party, Mommy.’

‘I said, No!’

‘*Yobo* …’ our father spoke to his wife tenderly in Korean, explaining how the ship scheduled teen activities from noon to midnight for the week-long voyage. Movies, games, parties, no drinking; a piano in the moonlight room meant Peter could practise. My siblings and I could understand some Korean but curiously couldn’t speak it. Max, too, it seemed—our new friend was winking confidently at us. To the party, Holly would go.

‘Oh, *Coke* …’ Mommy was saying. ‘Piano there …’

Our father often said that in life there was a time to have fun and a time to buckle down. This was not one of those buckling-down times.

‘Yah, you go. All you kids go. Peter and Monkey.’

‘Do I have to?’ I whined.

Midway through the meal, several passengers began leaving their tables one by one, literally foaming at the mouth. Food poisoning?

Max let out a distasteful sigh. ‘Seasickness.’

Apparently, the aftermath of rocky waters, Mai Tais, rich food, and wine with dinner had mixed up like a deadly cocktail for those with more delicate stomachs. Amid the chaos, not far from our table, a matronly lady in pearls looking ready to hurl her caviar was in a panic, blindly seeking the exit—over here, over there, where, where?—only to knock into a waiter whose dessert platter went like a flying saucer. In a cartoon manoeuvre, Uncle Bong swan-dived from his seat, miraculously catching the lady’s fall *and* the platter in mid-air, his back landing perfectly on the floor, one hand holding up each and both unscathed.

Holy moly!

What just happened??

Fantastic or mundane, life’s recordings are always in question but there’s a page in a journal somewhere, a journal with a faded paisley print cover,

that can prove that what happened, happened.

Journal entry*:*

I mean, EVERY jaw in the house dropped. Including mine!

After a long pause of collective shock, Max Blossom took a deep bow in Uncle Bong's direction, proceeding to clap very slowly and steadily, then ramping it up until the entire dining room erupted in an applause that nearly capsized the ship.

'What a performance!'

'You're an acrobat!'

'You should join the Ringling Brothers!'

Max Blossom joked to the Ahn gang over the clapping. 'I'm afraid Bong-Blossom won't do. How does King Bong sound?'

I could almost hear Don Ho singing 'Tiny Bubbles'. Tiny magic bubbles. If I had to pinpoint one gleaming moment when Uncle Bong emerged like a clam out of its shell, its pearl buried in the ocean for eons, this was it. Uncle Bong's echo was other-worldly.

'King Bong?'

'Yes, and I hereby appoint myself President of the King Bong Fan Club!' Max Blossom added.

Uncle Bong's expression, his every bone, his very core seemed changed. Uncaged. He'd just had a taste of something he'd never tasted before. Something new and exotic that put every Mai Tai to shame.

Something tropically divine.

If the near accident had never happened, or even if his heroic act had gone unnoticed, Uncle Bong, the same old Uncle Bong, only older, might still be with us, maybe even creaking around Blue Stone Circle with his revered brother. In that sense, I don't know whether what happened that first night was a good thing or a bad thing. It depends on whose lens you're looking through.

When the clapping died down, my father leaned towards Mommy's seasick face, listened to her, then got up to escort her out of the dining room, soon lost in a throng of scurrying diners. She took his arm; he steered.

There, right there.

My parents, immortalized.

Afterwards, Max handed Holly, Peter, Uncle Bong, and me fizzy ginger ales in champagne goblets with a pang of regret and glamour down the toilet. 'This always happens, the first night.'

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Winter 2019

Variations of my recurring dreams abounded: Once, my father veered off Blue Stone Circle, raced down to a beach and performed his jig down there for only the moon and me. Another time, through dream-ruins, he was heading in my direction. Stony as ever, rushing as always, out of Blue Stone and onto Columbia Pike. The next thing I knew, we were standing on opposite sides of a crosswalk. The sign blinked *'Don't Walk'* but he stepped into the intersection, undaunted. At midpoint, his face wrinkled with glee and then—

Cha-cha-cha!

More often, they would take a nightmarish turn, beaming me out of Blue Stone and into a city of zombies I seemed to revisit, so familiar I thought it must exist in some alternate urban universe where the windows of office buildings turned kaleidoscopic before busting out, and cab drivers were holograms, and not a warm drop of human blood existed. My very own apocalypse now.

Somebody.

Anybody.

Help me.

Another time, I was walking out of a snake-like route from a building's garage when it turned into a mountain trail. For some reason, my shoes were off. Walking, walking, hardly a soul around. Here and there a hiker would pass but never heed my half-hello. Up, up, until I got a clear mountain view that resembled the Blue Ridge. The moment I snapped my camera to capture the picturesque trail ahead, a huge neon-orange ball of light and an avalanche of snow came rushing towards me. Time to get the hell out—but where were my shoes? Barefoot, I found myself in a grand hotel, 1930's lavish, with rooms that led to more rooms, a labyrinth of old-world charm. I sat down and saw my smiling siblings—Holly! Peter! Vivian!—at a parlour table motioning me over, but as I approached them, their faces turned to wood, and I don't mean wooden, I mean *wood*. Petrified wood.



In waking-life, three parked cars meant my brother and sisters had arrived during our little outing. Once inside, the kitchen greeted us like Seoul in summer. Like heaven, if you grew up on kimchi and pickled vegetables and held your loving nose from its growing pungency when the sun was strong, and the oven was on. Like yesteryear.

Like family.

'Say hello to Margaret!' my father announced then wandered off to fill his watering can. Two faucets in the kitchen but into the powder room he went. Sam Ahn was never a loud man, but he was even quieter now. You could almost say there was a beauty to it. Much as he delighted in his children's presence, his hours of solitude had imprinted on him and a crowded house had him slipping away from us.

Thanks to the modern era of local Korean restaurants and caterers, a pre-birthday celebration for our patriarch meant an all-day Korean feast was in the works. Trays of prepared meat—marinating bulgogi and beef ribs and

chicken wings—lay out on the kitchen island alongside a huge aluminium pan of glassy-noodle dish called *japchae*. All we needed were pans, oil, foil, and fire.

‘Hi, guys!’ I said, smiling so hard my teeth felt false.

Don’t get me wrong, there was love. More peripheral for me than it once was; not as natural as it once was. First off, you grow up into different people with shared history. Second, it was me versus Team Ahn. And the Team Ahn players—Peter, Vivian, and Holly of Ahn Properties, sporting Team Ahn sweatshirts—had the monopoly on local Korean homebuyers, not just with sweatshirts, tee-shirts, pens, notebooks, and balloons to prove it, but million-dollar homes, too. Gotta love ‘em even though, rounded up, they could be a rah-rah goody-goody bunch, cheerleaders to the puking point who showed new homes but forgot our old one.

There, I said it.

For me, in their presence, Mommy’s absence always filled the room like a ghost crying, ‘*Why no one remember me? I die in car crash!’* They rarely spoke of her, keeper of the Ahn nest, or that terrible day like she was never here, like that never happened. Like Uncle Bong had never existed to begin with, either—his fate for forsaking us.

Granted, my visits home were a different experience than their daily visits. I’d walk in and feel gobsmacked with history. Rich, sad history. Wherever I was, Mommy was often on my mind; true, maybe breathing below the surface, because, let’s face it, a human can only bear so much pain. Rarely thought about Uncle Bong unless I was in Blue Stone. My once-beloved pal stayed back, way, way back where fog settled on things forgotten.

Peter, master realtor and designated head chef, was at the kitchen grill turning chicken wings. He leaned over to give me a quick kiss, feigning annoyance in case our father was eavesdropping. It was a game we played

to please him, despite the grey in our hair. ‘Margaret, you were supposed to call me from the airport, not drive here.’

Faking my famous Monkey pout: ‘Vivian and Holly drove here, too, didn’t they?’

‘Yah, but—’ Vivian laughed, joining in. My big sister put down her orange juice and trotted over with open arms. Former tigress, now kitty cat. Her hair was dyed magic-marker black, and her plum-painted lips were simply drop-dead if drop-dead was your thing. Vivian was the sister who did everything first, and I used to lie awake at night and wonder about the juicy parts of her life. Now, the stature of being the eldest child made her shrink from mention of it. ‘You were the star.’

Peter tried to toast me with a raw chicken wing fresh from a tub of marinade. The birdie slipped from his tongs and ended up on the floor. Bending over to retrieve it, he let out a groan. Nope, we weren’t getting any younger.

‘It’s true, Margaret. You were the star.’

The four Ahn kids were shameless eunuchs when it came to jealousy. Rage, not a chance, not even Vivian any more; even a bad mood was a no-no. The evolution of Ahn rule erased whatever wilful lines nature had etched on our palms. For some of us, the week we crossed the Pacific, however, did break that law, if just for one glimmer in time.

Even with his back to me as he watered and silently begged the orchid plants on the bay window ledge to bloom, I could tell our father was grinning. My brother and sister had called me a star. Somehow that gave him hope that I’d pick up the pen again. Be that girl with a dream whose journal was her Bible. And maybe if Monkey came back, he’d wake up in an old universe and find me with Mommy in the kitchen making mandoo.

Twisted, but so is the fact that we live every day of our lives knowing death is on the calendar.

Sam Ahn stood by the window facing the now rust-eaten swing set and basked in the moment: the sun, his children, together. It was almost perfect.

‘Our Monkey is a star, how about that Mommy?’

‘Margaret?’

Holly tripped out from the pantry holding a box of cocoa mix. I always forgot what Holly was like before Mommy died, before their eyes locked that last time and shocked all the Holly go-go out of her system. Her fertile glow, too. Her boy crazy years.

Hugging her: ‘Hi, Holly.’

‘Hi, Monkey.’

‘How are you?’

‘Good, good.’

‘You look good,’ I said.

Once my sisters got older and gave up their contemporary accoutrements (Cher hair, hoop earrings), Holly and Vivian turned out to be pure Ahns like our paternal aunts, sharing a look common to Korean women. High cheekbones, slender eyes. Korean cameos—pretty, pretty, though Vivian still had diva airs. I, however, was all Hong, like our mother. Less enchanting, of course. But we both fell under the Mongolian influence with our rounder faces, distinguished by the hair of our eras.

Mommy’s, a glamorous bouffant. Mine, still longish.

‘And you,’ she fibbed, ‘you never age.’

Loving someone keeps you young, but once I lost my Eggman, I began moving around like a dead donkey. Surely my siblings noticed, but tiptoed around any Eggman talk. Oh, Team Ahn rallied around me at the time. But time passed.

‘Liar,’ I joked.

We laughed, light as air.



Peter, a walking business seminar, was the head honcho, not just when it came to selling homes but as a real estate developer with projects big and

small going up in waterfront properties in National Harbor, The Wharf, the Eastern Shore, all over the region. Vivian worked for Team Ahn as an accountant. Those two had the blissful marriages and all the kids and grands. Holly was on the payroll in a Girl Friday capacity, happy to do anything for the team, provided her duties remained behind the scenes and freed her up for her hobbies at home. Hence her Team Ahn nickname: Holly Hobby.

So long, Holly Go-lightly!

Facing the world out there could prove challenging for Holly who had watched the life leave Mommy's eyes. In one horrific, unimaginable moment, two candles were extinguished, and the one left above ground stayed dark. It was then that Holly, assistant editor at *Ingenue Magazine* one week out of college, and three years later columnist at *Mademoiselle* ('Hollyisms: Fashion Dos and Don'ts'), stopped flirting with fashion and fads and a fiancé who couldn't take it any more, came home and stayed home and never married. For years, we held our breaths in her presence. But when her colour began to return, not in living colour but in pale, subdued hues, we began to breathe again.



Whenever I returned to Blue Stone, inhaled its air, the New York me vaporized, and I was swept back to who I was, the Monkey me. Was this a good thing or a bad thing? Or a nothing thing?

'So, when are you going to retire and write that book you used to talk about night and day?' Peter wondered. 'It's been a century. Remember how you wouldn't go anywhere without that diary?'

'Journal,' Holly corrected him.

Through our patriarch, the Ahn kids kept that dream alive, not actively, mind you, just something to talk about whenever I made an appearance. Cornered, they knew I swam away from that dream, that journal, and never looked back.

But how could I forget my once-sweet descent down to the basement library? For years my Shangri-la where I was content to stay below the surface of real life, in sight of kickball shadows without participating. A happy little hermit aged ten … aged twelve … aged fifteen … Yes, following my whirlwind summer aboard SS President Roosevelt, I retreated downstairs into teenage spinsterhood and watched the shadows again and listened to the steady, somehow gratifying sounds of *ping*, *pong*, *ping*, *pong* as if nothing had changed when in fact everything had changed.

But Graham Greene was right: Only the heart decays. Too many ghosts in that library, including mine, where old journals lay stacked like ancient corpses. If you sat me down at that once-cherished Underwood, my hands would wither and web.

Vivian nibbled greedily on a sticky chicken wing, all teeth, taking great pains to keep lipstick off her teeth. ‘Yeah, Margaret.’ She nibbled. ‘That journal was your security blanket.’

Every single one held the weight of my scribbles and young dreams.

Sam Ahn found his way to me. We were still two lost rafts, still finding each other. Team Ahn clan orchestrated their schedules so that not a day went by when our father, who refused to move from his house despite open invitations from everyone, didn’t have a visitor. That would always be the gift they gave me, and I would always be grateful, profoundly so. But now he was close, so close. ‘*Monkey,*’ he wanted to say but resisted. It was right there. *‘M-M-M …’*

Do the jig, Dad. Drop the watering can and let your cha-cha-cha-spirit take over.

You’re invincible.

Remember?

‘Margaret, the good thing about writing is that you can pick it up at any age. The fire is still in you. What a warm thought. You will retire and write. Yah.’

For years, my father was in a planning-dreaming stage of retirement. It was a paradise over the horizon. He and Mommy would live in Hawaii or Vancouver. Maybe Holland, such a clean country. Remember the maid who scrubbed the stairs in the little hotel, night and day, always looking up to smile at the guests? Such nice people. Wherever on the globe they landed, he would teach, and they would live it up! But with Mommy gone, none of his retirement dreams made sense. Nothing did. The horizon was just a blank line.

Still, life in a sense had gone on. Age sixty-five came around and he retired from the IMF. Within the year he began to teach graduate-level international business courses at The George Washington University. For a decade we thought our father had found a new life there as Professor Sam Ahn. He participated in a myriad of activities associated with the School of Government and Business Administration—Friday afternoon wine and cheese parties in the doctoral conference room, foreign films in the Marvin Center—with a familiar zest we missed and were thrilled to see again. Professor Ahn liked his students, and they liked him. It was a good decade, all things considered. The start of a newfound contentment. But then he resigned from GWU, and when that period of his life ended, it seemed never to have happened.

As for my horizon, for years I’d been dreaming about growing into an old lady with a long silvery braid and living in a cottage on Cape Cod. It was borne of two sources that came together as one fantasy. The first source: an elderly woman I happened to notice in a bookstore. She was with her husband, in front of me in line. A handsome couple, academic and hippie-ish; lived in Tel Aviv or were going there. I was taken by her hair, which hung long and metallic grey down her back; a single thin braid dangled with

hypnotic decorum on the left side of her head. Not taken, *mesmerized*. Let me touch it, own it. The woman must have sensed my intrigue because at some point she stopped talking, turned around, and smiled. The second source was more metaphysical, coming to me out of the woods and the rain. My husband, then boyfriend, and I had driven up to Cape Cod after his sister's wedding in Boston. It was November; all day a dark and dismal rain fell as if to blacken our souls. At some point halfway up the Cape, we pulled over to a little bakery-café of sorts, just a cabin sitting in the woods. If not for the cars in the parking lot, you wouldn't know it was a retail establishment. Eggman got out and ran to get us coffee and lemon-poppy muffins while I sat in the heated car. He was gone for quite a spell and during that spell I was thinking of me with my own razzle-dazzle old-lady braid, living in that cottage, walking distance from this bakery-café where I could, on a snowy morning, take a break from my manuscript, step out with my Eggman for a coffee and, say, an apple croissant, not in a hurry to get back home or anywhere anytime soon. Suddenly, just sitting in the car, I felt so cosy, so safe, and I didn't want to move from this spot, ever. I smiled.



A story I'd read in the paper a few weeks ago confirmed my theory that what you take for celebration is often a disguise for a death, of sorts.

The story: The wife of a prominent throat surgeon in Norwalk, Connecticut was found dead, ironically with her throat slit. Prime suspect: her son, aged nineteen. Twenty years ago, when she first realized her period was late, her heart probably skipped a beat. Little did she know that what caused her heart to skip would one day cause her heart to stop.

Beware of the smile on your face. You could win the lottery and go on vacation, only to go down in a fiery crash. You could meet the person of your dreams and have a wondrous marriage, only for it to end too early due to cancer but, ultimately, radiated scar tissue, and I could fly with that example—in my Eggman's case, it was real. You could wish to write a book

so good angels would sing, only to have the devil suck up your soul. You could go on a cruise in paradise, only to have a man set his eyes on you and drive you to an early death with you behind the wheel of a green Torino. Beware of the smile on anyone’s face.

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5

Summer 1969

Hours ago, my only salvation on the deck of SS President Roosevelt was a pair of banana yellow sunglasses, worn low and cool. They'd been a surprise from Holly (and her Dart Drug discount) a week before we left for our trip. There she was, stepping off the bus, clutching a little brown bag I figured for a Milky Way Bar or French fries from the soda fountain, soggy but still good and salty. But, no, even better—sunglasses! '*Wow—these are movie star cool! Thanks, Holly!'* Not that I ever looked like a movie star at fourteen, or at any age, with or without shades. But at least, like Greta Garbo, I could hide from the world.

Instead, on the first night of our cruise I was name-tagged Miss Margaret Ahn at a Coke-topped table, one of a dozen, at least, in the moonlight room. Holly on my left, Peter on my right. Coketail party head count was high, several shy of puberty. Pimples a plenty. In a cosmopolitan sea, a head-bobbing buzz rose like smoke above 'Midnight Confessions' on the record player. I wished I could stare but didn't dare sans sunglasses. My sister was bolder; her eyes were searchlights. Unblinking.

Surely, Miss Holly Ahn was never going to sleep again.

I drank my Coke. A shiver shot through me.

The moonlight room was located on a smaller deck directly above the starlight room where our parents had stepped out that evening, if you can step out on a ship. Indeed, Mommy had made a miraculous recovery after eating Club crackers that Fernando the bellhop brought her. Fernando also left saltine crackers in our room, just in case, along with funny caricatures of Holly and me he had drawn on SS President Roosevelt stationary. Me, in sun-sized sunglasses. Holly, pirouetting on waves. Signed *FQ*, the sketches were so good we wondered why Fernando was a bellhop when he could be sitting on the boardwalk at Ocean City, making a fortune.

Judging by the crowd we saw earlier in the starlight room listening to live music by The Brazilian Boys, a lot of saltines cured a lot of adults, many on the dance floor. Not Mr and Mrs Ahn, though. My parents remained at their table taking in the entertainment and serenely sipping what I figured was ginger ale. Mommy, dressed to kill in her cream and gold satin dress (called a semi-formal in those days), loved to cha-cha-cha in the living room but could never convince her husband to join her. Korean men didn't dance. And they weren't Cary Grants, even in a dinner suit and an orchid boutonniere and a ravishing wife.

Moments later, over their heads in the moonlight room:

The teen programme director bent over to lift the needle off the record player. Her flowery miniskirt hiked up, exposing thick thighs and a hint of pink panty above clunky white sandals. My poor brother blushed from here to Honolulu. Before the night was over that scene would replay—how many times?—until no one took note any more, not even the boys. She was probably in her mid-twenties, and antsy like a little girl who has to pee-pee badly. At first glance: powder blue eye shadow and white lip gloss against blonde bobbed hair and a lifeguard tan. At second glance: horsey teeth and desperation.

She blew into a microphone:

‘Welcome aboard, kids! Most of us have already met but for those of us who haven’t, I’m Pamela Gleason, I go by Pam, and I’m here to make sure this is one of the *most memorable weeks of your life*! I’m also here if you need someone to talk to. Believe it or not, I was a teenager myself not too long ago, surfing on Long Beach and, well, I don’t want to bore you to death … Now, before we get started, daily activities are posted outside the moonlight room every morning by 6 a.m. so make sure you check them out before or after breakfast. Don’t forget, we’re here to have fun!’

I must have moaned, and Holly must have heard. An ever-so-slight expression of alarm went off on her face: Don’t spoil this once-in-a-lifetime evening. *Please?* She shushed me—sweetly.

I float like a ghost back to the moonlight room and see the big sister in Holly, her rule over me, however slight. She, in a party dress. Me, in a plain one. Her light, her sparkle. I miss that. Holly then: waving her pink-polished fingers to someone at a table across the way; her gasp, her sigh.

‘Monkey, don’t you wanna have some fun?’

‘Don’t call me that here, Holly—please?’

‘Sorry, but try to get in the *groove*,’ she begged me.

‘… For most of you, next Saturday will be your last night on board SS President Roosevelt just hours before we dock in Honolulu. And so, it’s only fitting that on that night we’ll be putting on our traditional Aloha Show in the starlight room …’

Peter clutched his Coke.

‘… Now, for this to happen, everybody has got to be involved here, everybody has to have a role. Each one of you will be a star that night! We’ll shake up the seven seas!’

‘Oh no oh no oh no …’ Peter gulped.

‘Girls, you’ll be hula dancers, can-can girls, and go-go dancers. Boys, you’ll be magicians, musicians, and singers. If you have particular talents, *don’t be bashful*, I’m all ears. Tomorrow we’ll have try-outs right here from

two to four o’clock. The day after, rehearsals begin, same time, same place!’

To all this I yawned. I was Sam Ahn’s daughter, not a go-go dancer—at least not in public. Granted, the two of us could be clowns singing baritone Korean hymns after a few gin and tonics (him, of course) and cartwheels in pyjamas (me, of course), purely entertaining behind closed doors.

‘First, let’s get acquainted! I’m going to pick three boys and three girls.’ Pam began pointing at heads showing no mercy, one, two, three, one, two, three … ‘Come on, ladies and gents, *scoot*, *scoot*, on the dance floor!’

Holly gazed at the chosen lot. Her face was love-stricken. Positively hypnotic. If I burst into flames, she wouldn’t have winked or blinked.

Now I knew why.

He was Asian in look, yet his dress and manner were nothing like the underfed and ragged Seoul youth of the day. Airs came off him like cultured mist; off his posture, his tailored black jacket, the dreamy way he ran his hand through his hair and sighed—nothing American, either. A mythical lad not from any land I lived in, where the royal sculptor went to work to chisel the perfect cheekbones and lips just plump enough to drive the girls crazy. Result: a dashing figure with eyes of coal burning through wire-rimmed glasses that made him look intellectual, if not for a certain schoolboy ember behind them. Tall, but not like the two other Gomers up there, shuffling, all elbows—not gangly tall. Closer to Holly’s age than mine, no doubt.

Creature.

Specimen.

Dream boy.

‘His name is Adam Kang.’ Holly swooned. ‘Isn’t he the most darling thing you’ve ever set your eyes on?’

Adam Kang.

More Coke. Another shiver shot through me.

‘Is he—?’

‘Korean, yes. But bred in London, not the Virginia sticks. His father is some diplomat. I met him earlier, on deck—Adam, that is. He’s so sweet you want to bite him. Or, you know …’

My sister, sweet sixteen and never been kissed—yet. Of my siblings, Holly’s coming-of-age life was the only one intimate to me. The other two were wild guesses. Peter, eternal virgin until maybe his junior year at Yale. Vivian naturally had done everything under the sun—guess who scraped the white gunk off the sofa in the morning so Mommy wouldn’t notice?—but with who and how many, no clue. For the most part, their private lives were lived in the shadows.

‘I think he could be the one,’ she nearly squealed.

‘The one *what*, Holly?’

‘My first love!’

Pam instructed her little dancing crew to, ‘Pair up! When you hear the music, start dancing. When the music stops, that’s your cue to go out there and pick a new dancing partner—pronto. Not necessarily the boy or girl of your dreams, *just the first person you see*. Now, the music will start, then stop again. Does everyone follow the pattern here? The night’s not over until everyone is up here rocking and rolling and we’re one big happy family!’

The lights dipped low with the sound of ‘Midnight Confessions’. The moonlight room became a discotheque of lights, music, moving shadows.

I drank my Coke and burped up desperation.

‘Peter?’

‘Uh-huh?’

‘If you get asked to dance before me, pick me on the next round, okay?’

He looked at me, seasick. Peter would do anything in the world for me except: ‘Dance with my *sister*?’

‘Peter, *please* …’ I pleaded.

‘Man alive, Monkey,’ he groaned.

‘*Please!*’

‘Okay, okay,’ he said.

Holly sat queenly in her chair. Expectant. Her eyes closed, revealing a fresh dramatic sweep of Jade Pearl. When did she do that? Holly: waiting for the music to stop, waiting to be asked to dance. Sixteen years had led up to a moment that left all others in ashes.

Thirty seconds later, a needle scratch, then silence. Under psychedelic lights, the six dancers scrambled for new partners.



My most vivid memories in life are tragic, or at least tinged, and they flow in no linear fashion. The look on our Irish Setter’s face just before the vet put her down (Goldie knew); my second grade teacher’s secret mockery of me (no birthday song); Peter’s face when he heard what happened to Mommy outside the starlight room (à la Mr Hyde); the call that Mommy was killed (me, watching a friend make dinner in his cramped kitchen, drinking wine, no higher thoughts at work); Uncle Bong’s last look at me (lips moving, ‘*Sorry, Monkey! Sorry!’*); my father at Mommy’s funeral and for months afterwards (silence). But amid horror, a gold memory-beam slips through.

Adam Kang, coming towards our table. He waded through a sea of commotion as if he was trying to get to an island that was—what? *Us?* The sight of him in all his glorified creaturehood was nothing short of electrifying. My head turned to Holly’s; on cue, her eyes opened like a doll’s. She was ready, so ready. And yet.

He was looking at me, not Holly.

My heart went high-voltage.

‘*Dahnce*?’ he said.

My lips parted stupidly. Possibly drooled. Did he say *dahnce*? The vision before me was bewitching—the Asian features and English accent, dizzying

for a level-headed girl who liked the notion of boys, just no Gomer-types. His too-lovely, too-pale face twisted with nothing short of romantic despair.

‘Please? You *cahn’t* break my heart.’

Holly and everyone partying on SS President Roosevelt may as well have jumped overboard. Like some lovestruck mermaid I got up and this vision led me to the dance floor. Swimming in shock, I’m pretty sure I would have sunk to the bottom of the sea with him.

We reached our destination.

‘I’m Adam,’ he said, so Britishly. ‘And you are?’

‘Margaret.’ Did I snort?

His dazzling smile caused the near collapse of my knees.

‘Hello, Margaret.’

‘Hello.’

‘Midnight Confessions’ resumed. Like most girls my age, I was an expert go-go dancer in the privacy of my bedroom, as Holly was in hers—despite my bookish dreams, I liked a little Hullaballoo, too. But never, not in my wildest dreams, would I have imagined that the first time I would step onto a real dance floor, it would be with a boy even remotely resembling the likes of Adam Kang.

The next moments were a spellbound, youth-drunken blur. Yet that diminished nothing—I would seal this memory forever! When our time was up—*noooooo!*—he gave me a look too British for an American girl like me to interpret but I did anyway.

Goodbye? Must we part?

No, no, no …

‘*Go, go, go!*’ Pam was yelling like she had to pee to high heaven.

Everyone scrambled again for new partners for the third round. I grabbed the first boy I saw and repeated this silly and wonderful game four times, at least. Yes, I danced like I owned the ship—after all, I had the title of being Adam Kang’s first choice! Didn’t everyone see that? All the while I was

looking for him, my admirer (!), but I may as well be looking for a ghost in daylight.

The moonlight room evolved into an hour of nonstop dancing, thinning out when a few people made a dash for the door or got Coke refills. Pam applauded our efforts and the Coketail party officially broke up. Some, like me, lingered. I was hoping for a glimpse of Adam Kang, even the back of his head on its way out. Oh, please let me see you one last time! Not to speak, just to draw out the dream I would take to my pillow tonight and eventually back to Blue Stone and to every pillow I would ever lay my sleepy head upon.

Just a glimpse to last me the rest of my life.

No such luck.

And what about Holly? I remembered her sitting at the table alone—her wishful glitter gone like a look caught on film—until at least my third dance. Then she vanished. I hoped someone, anyone, had asked her to dance but there was no way to tell. Peter, who was picked early on, got gobbled up in the crowd and I hadn't seen him since.

Teen Director Pam was a sorry sight under bright light. A soiled blob. Was she approaching me? She was! Why?

'Hi, there! Did you have fun tonight?' she asked me.

Still floating: 'Yes.'

'I'm *so* glad to hear that,' she quickly glanced down at my name badge, 'Margaret.'

I smiled mutely.

'Margaret, I couldn't help but notice what a good little dancer you are. Do you take tap dancing? Acrobatics?'

'I took gymnastic lessons.'

'Well, no wonder! You know, you'd make a perfect go-go dancer in our Aloha Show. You can even skip the audition. How *about* it?'

The magic of this evening was wearing off too quickly. ‘I don’t know,’ I said, ‘I don’t think so.’

‘Sleep on it?’



One last peek into the starlight room before turning in revealed the grown-up party was in full swing. I propped open the door long enough to hear a few beats of ‘The Girl from Ipanema’ or some such song. It sounded so heavenly, so romantic, especially to a girl about to walk back to her cabin on clouds.

Yes, we were three thousand miles and counting from home.

A lo and behold sight—an illusion?—made me linger: Uncle Bong amid the party crowd, his expression so changed he seemed a head taller than before. It was Uncle Bong, and not Uncle Bong. A lady skirted him off to the dance floor where he showed off well-practised moves like someone born in the spotlight, someone who’d had many partners when in truth, he’d never had any. Dancing or otherwise.

To my knowledge, Uncle Bong had never found romance. At least, there were never any signs or talk about a bona fide love life. Only one sad, short-lived chapter.

Journal entry:

> I hope one of these ladies brings Uncle Bong true love! Ladies from all over the WORLD! Malaysia, England, even Korea!

It all began with a small advertisement in some magazine like the *TV Guide* or *Parade Magazine* that he answered by clipping out a form, filling it out, attaching a one-dollar bill, and mailing it off to the universe—literally. Days later, he was an official member of the Continental Pen Pal Club, complete with button and pen insignia. Uncle Bong took his membership to heart, obviously proud to belong to something outside his anonymous existence.

Of his sudden popularity, too—letters stamped with colourful postage from English-speaking women from all over the world began sailing into Blue Stone addressed to Bobby Young—not his birth name of Bong-Young Ahn. Yes, he was presenting himself American style to Inge, Ling, Mei Sook, Katerina, and many others. Every day for that window of time, Uncle Bong would skip like a true suitor to one of four mailboxes around the Blue Stone clock, although compass makes more sense here, dropping letters off, even calling the one located at Purple Rock Road *my good lucky ducky lovebox*. Why? Because that's where he dropped off his first note to Betty, his special pen pal from a London suburb who made onion pies. Too soon, he began pinning his whole heart and future on her, more and more with each passing day.

Journal entry:

> Betty seems so devoted to Uncle Bong. He gets a letter from her nearly every day. Today she included a photograph of herself at some beach—homely, yeah, but with a sweet smile. If they got married, I'd be so happy for him! Even if he had to move to England, I'd be happy. Betty + Bong = True Love!! But would he have to eat ONION PIES? They sound really GROSS!!

Uncle Bong's step became light, his song merry as if these were real-life true-love dalliances. The time the mailman and the yellow Volkswagen Bug came around the corner at the same time, the latter may as well have disappeared off a cliff. For a brief while, one fantasy trumped the other.

Just as it all began, the ending came even quicker. A few of his lady friends began asking him for money. Others just stopped writing. Only Betty remained faithful, one day—in her P.S.—asking if he would send her his photograph, adding, *'It's only fair!'* I remember we went to a lot of trouble, driving to Woolworth's where he posed in the photo booth for a good hour, collecting a thin stack of strips before he chose the best of the lot. After he mailed the strip off to this Betty from London, he never heard from her again.

Uncle Bong's love life was over.

Journal entry:

I feel so sorry for him. What a HOMELY WITCH! A witch with the worst onion breath! Life isn't fair for my Uncle Bong. No girlfriend, no NOTHING.

Now I noticed my parents, in the same spot as earlier. Mommy, flushed with happiness. My father, too, but, like his boutonniere, a bit wilted. A wave of longing for them hit me—then and afterwards, whenever I would call up their image that evening in the starlight room. Before what happened, happened.

A man approached their table. I didn't like the Bossa Nova look of him and a Coke-less shiver went through me. He was their age, give or take—not young, not old. Dark, foreign, in a white suit. Casanova, Don Juan, Romeo—all those names came to mind. When he bent down and said something to Mommy with a peculiar smile, I was wishing he was dead. What? What did he say? He didn't ask her to dance, did he?

He did.

Mommy shook her head *no*, and it was hard to tell whether she was flattered, flustered, or embarrassed—most likely the latter two. Mommy loved being led, courted, but only by one man—her husband—and only in public. Otherwise, she was the boss of her world, her children, and her house in Blue Stone. A stranger asking her to dance was out of bounds.

My father smiled in that urbane way he smiled at strangers, but the real Sam Ahn was infuriated. Slapped in the face! The man whom I would code as Mr Bossa Nova bowed to Mommy, then to my father, tipping an imaginary hat before walking away.

Back in my cabin, I'd wanted so badly to describe every single detail of the night in my journal, but Holly had turned the lights off.

'Why did he ask *you* to dance, Monkey?'

'For the hundredth time, Holly, I don't know!'

My sister was drilling me from the top bunk. Her swollen red face was masked in the darkness—she'd been crying. When I asked her about the box of Kotex napkins on the desk, she said Fernando dropped them off.

'Why?'

'He thought I might be on my period. Do you like him?'

'Fernando?'

'No, Adam!'

I fibbed. 'I don't know, Holly.'

'Well, he's too old for you, anyway.'

'How old?'

'My age. Sixteen.' She waited for me to disagree with her, but I didn't. So: 'Did you tell him you were fourteen?'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'We didn't get a chance to talk.'

'Did you tell him you were my sister?'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'I told you! We didn't talk.'

'Why didn't he ask *me* to dance?'

With no ego to shatter: 'Maybe you're too pretty, Holly. Some boys are afraid of pretty girls.'

'Really?' Her voice cracked, and my worst fears were confirmed. No one had asked my sister to dance tonight. She was left at the table. Now her memory of her first evening in the moonlight room would forever be the opposite of mine—tarnished. Holly: running back to the cabin, washing her eyes of Jade Pearl, that green-eyed traitor. All her dreams, down the drain.

'I've read about that before,' I said as earnestly as I could, 'how pretty girls scare boys away.'

'Where did you read that?'

‘In magazines.’

Holly mulled over that possibility. I welcomed the quiet; if I couldn’t write, then at least I could think about—

‘But *I* was the one who met him earlier,’ she whined. ‘And I was so nice to him; nicer than I ever am, to anybody. I told him my name and where I was from. Did he forget?’

Fourteen going on fifteen-year-old girls do not have all the answers to the universe. I only knew I was sad for her but glad for me.

‘I don’t know, Holly.’

‘Well, Monkey, it’s like Pam said. No one had to pick the boy or girl of their dreams,’ she snapped. ‘Just the first ones they saw.’

Holly didn’t mean to hurt my feelings. She just didn’t want to feel unpopular. At your moment of bloom, you’re supposed to be picked, not publicly rot on the vine. So, I couldn’t and didn’t blame her for revising history: Adam Kang went blindly into the crowd and took the first girl he saw who just happened to be me.

Yet I knew the truth.

Adam Kang sought me out.

And he said, ‘*You cahn’t break my heart*.’

I would treasure those words forever!

‘That didn’t come out right, Monkey. It’s just that you don’t even like boys yet so none of this means anything to you.’

‘I do, Holly. I do like boys. And don’t call me Monkey,’ I said delicately. ‘You know I don’t like that.’

She grunted like she regretted ever being nice to me. Regretted ever buying me candy and trinkets from Dart Drug. Regretted ever calling me Monkey because it was always spoken with big-sister affection.

But I wasn’t Monkey, not under these stars. When Holly finally fell asleep, I took out my journal and blindly scrawled a few words in the dark.

Journal entry:

I’m Adam, he said, and you are?…



Like the seas, our journey would have its highs and lows, some of it magic, some of it tragic. It all began that first night when Uncle Bong began acting like someone else, and Mommy and I were asked to dance by strangers; when our lives got off course.

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6

Winter 2019

Sam Ahn got antsy and wanted to go walking again, so a-walking we would go, a second time around our sun or moon, your choice, that was Blue Stone Circle, leaving Team Ahn behind. The second walk was always shorter, a barely measured arc—we'd be lucky to make it fifteen degrees, halfway to the closest beach sign.

No one was surprised we left without an invitation to join us. True, we shared Ahn blood and Ahn history. One day we would cry at each other's funerals like we cried when they lowered Mommy's coffin into the ground, knowing we'd have to finish living our lives and meeting death before we'd see her again, if ever. Cry not with stiff upper lips but like children who needed picking up.

In their very different youths, our parents were considered liberal if not rebellious, shunning matchmakers and attending brother-sister colleges in Seoul where they were destined to meet each other at a political student rally denouncing Kim Il Sung, the North Korean dictator. My father, protected by 'bodyguard' friends, was there to deliver a speech it took him all night to write; my mother was tagging along with some girlfriends who promised to take her to a new teahouse afterwards where Beethoven played

in the background. But first, the rally. Amid screams, tears, and arrests, my father noticed her in the crowd, and next thing you know, his ‘bodyguards’ approached her with a request for a date.

Imagine the teahouse talk that afternoon!

In America, our parents weren’t exactly crazy about rock ‘n’ roll, but they were tolerant, especially for a Korean couple. Even the very few permitted by law to live here in the fifties, mostly progressive academics in Boston, it seemed, had arranged marriages and kept to themselves. Meanwhile, Mr and Mrs Ahn mingled with Americans and dined at Vinny’s Pizza, especially on all-you-can-eat Spaghetti Night. They threw three distinct cocktail parties that determined whether the black and red lacquer hors d’oeuvre tray was filled with seaweed crackers and wrapped jelly candies (visiting Korean dignitaries), fancy nuts and olives (IMF colleagues), or chips with dip and Ritz crackers with cheese (Blue Stone neighbours). Western culture was not viewed as a bad influence, the capitalistic game of Monopoly was just a game, and their children would be allowed to date Americans, especially since it was them or no one.

The Ahn kids would therefore experience Love, American style circa the sixties and seventies, which meant more opportunity for love and lovers than we could’ve ever pictured during our unwelcome childhoods in a country still reeling from Pearl Harbor and the Korean War. But we’re not wading into those waters.



Like a man out of prison, my dad emerged from his hearth-baked house; barely had his jacket on when he closed the door behind us. We looked good together, I thought. Well, as good as an elderly Korean man taking baby steps and a greying daughter could look.

‘We’re lucky, we can come and go as we please. We can escape the kitchen heat, unlike the orchid plants stuck in their pots. You know, they

don’t like ovens and grills and fireplaces all day long, either. They need moisture, Margaret. And a bit of breeze now and then. But a few times a year cannot harm them.’

My father was warm-blooded and if insomnia struck, he resorted to opening the windows, even in winter. When Mommy was alive, that meant him sleeping seasonally in the guest room, door shut, for her blood type was his opposite—cold. Mine, too. But after years up north in law school, I got wind of true winter; its fierce, blue-lipped cold. This was nothing. I breathed in and renewed myself.



Blue Stone was paralysed in a silvery-sparkly glory. Frozen barges docked in backyards. The lake, winter-still. Only the ghost-echoes of children (from when? which century?) laughing on the beach broke the silence and there I was, wrapped up in that knotted string of fantasy again where Sam Ahn might do a joyful jig for me.

Our Q&As were a ritual, a path back to Mommy.

‘Are you taking walks these days?’

‘What have you been eating?’

‘Have you dined with the Kims lately? No? Why not? Peter would be more than happy to take you to Bethesda.’

No matter what the Q, the A always ended with talk of Mommy as if she was there, straight ahead on the path.

It may seem I loved Mommy less, but not true. I just knew her less. And in a way, she wasn’t fully ours to know. She belonged to our father first and when he was happy, she was happy, fanning out the remaining happiness to her children, mostly in Peter’s direction. Towards me, her love was always mixed with worry.

Journal entry:

Mommy keeps saying, ‘Margaret, why you want to be noble beggar? You are starving to death and ask us to feed you when you are forty.’ Why does Mommy ALWAYS discourage me from writing? Doesn’t she want me to be HAPPY?

As far as I could tell, artistic careers perplexed most Koreans of my parents’ generation. Unlike the engineering and medical professions, art made no sense. Once, because the population was literally starving. Now, because it was never bred. My Ivy League-educated father, a man of literary idols (Tolstoy, number one), was the exception and coaxed Mommy into being more open-minded. In the end, she was encouraged by a teacher’s praise.

Journal entry:

Guess what? Today Mommy said, ‘You must be so talent, Margaret. Mrs Owen love your paper. But better you take typing classes, too.’

Her voice, right here. Still. And yet, I had no dreams of her, no sense of her being here, no signs she was still with me.

‘Margaret?’

‘Yes, Dad?’

My father coughed; his shell cracked a bit. ‘Exactly how long are you staying? How many days?’

‘Um, I’m not sure, Dad. Is there something you need me to do? Take you somewhere in particular?’

What a dumb-daughter question! Sam Ahn wouldn’t dream of me driving him anywhere unless both arms were broken—the Ahn daughters were not allowed to get their licenses until they turned twenty and even in present day, he thought that was a bad idea. Meanwhile, while most Koreans went to church, he, no spring chicken—and despite Peter’s offers to take him—got in his car every Sunday and took 395 North into Washington, venturing across the city to take an orchid-growing class at the Botanic Garden.

That was his church, where he listened to orchid sermons.

‘No,’ he replied, fighting the urge to slow down. This was no show. This was a ninety-year-old man wanting my company. ‘On second thought, my friend tells me there is a new Korean bakery in Annandale where the mung bean buns are out of this world.’

‘Who’s this friend? Mr Cho?’ I asked. Mr Cho was a tailor in Falls Church Plaza. His too-cheery act disguised a cripplingly lonely man, also widowed. Too old to remarry—even matchmakers shooed him away. Once, we went out for Korean food and he kept his face down as if I wasn’t a real Korean but an imposter, an arrogant attorney who married an American man; American meaning *White*. Then lunch got under way. As I dug my chopsticks into small bowls of seasoned eggplant and soybean sprouts, his mood changed. *‘Ah, good, you eat banchan! Oh? And drink boricha! Very good!’* We clinked our warm glasses.

‘No, Mr Pak.’

‘The character from the World Bank?’

‘Long retired now. I think maybe they told him to get lost,’ he said jokingly of his former car-pooler. My father referred to certain associates as characters, wise guys, odd fellows, and hot shots—the ones he liked, who made him laugh. ‘Now he is a volunteer in the Asian Division at the Library of Congress and thinks I am some stay-at-home hick.’

‘Still a wise guy, I see.’

‘Yah.’

Back to the question: How long was I staying?

‘Let’s go to that Korean bakery next week,’ I said, more than happy to exchange my heels for Skechers for a while. Hell, my feet had been killing me since 1982. ‘Or next weekend. Whenever you want.’

Fuelled with joy, my father sped up and cried, ‘Good! Better call Mr Pak to let him know I’m not sitting at home.’

We walked a little and I detected something in the silence. Could read his mind. Tripping on a twig, I blurted, ‘You can say his name, Dad.’

My husband was a handsome guy with silvery brown hair, lanky and sweet. I loved the way he walked towards me with his hands in his pockets, a cast I found irresistible. What I'd do to see him, just like that, coming for me, rescuing me from those godless dreams from hell. Sometimes out of the blue, I heard myself whispering '*Eggman*'. But it always hurt my father to say it aloud.

'Eggman was just right for you, Margaret. He was a good teacher. The most popular in his school. I remember how each semester too many students signed up for his courses and had to be turned away, and how he felt so bad about that. Well, Eggman was many other good things.'

Including his fiddle-playing. The sweet melancholic notes of a mountain waltz always reminded me that I was alive, and the promise of a moon-rising-in-my-breath heaven was somewhere. God, I'd lay down and die just to hear it, hear him, again. As if my father could hear me:

'Tell me, Margaret. What precisely is the difference between a fiddle and a violin?'

'One is a thing, and one is a *thang*. One has strings and the other has *strangs*. Other than that, nothing.'

My father looked at me with great psychological concern when I was just repeating what Eggman loved to say. I squeezed his arm as if to tell him I was just being funny.

Our laughter fell like spring in the dead of winter.

'There's no difference, Dad. Except the violin is classical and the fiddle is country.'

'You know, Margaret, only you talked about his fiddle-playing. Maybe his nature was too modest to mention it. Or maybe he thought his old fogey father-in-law was too stuffy to appreciate his music.'

'He thought the world of you, Dad.'



On this walk around Blue Stone Circle, my father was more winded than usual and had to rest every few minutes. He stopped to catch his breath; he leaned against a tree. This was new to me and my heart kept breaking until I wondered how many times a heart could break before it stopped. We were only at Magnolia Way, eleven o'clock going clockwise on my mental compass.

At some point where a border of quartz stones hemmed in a family of tall, skeletal trees, our scene took on the preternatural glow followed by rustling and a sense of being trailed. Holy shit, was I back in scary land? Ten dimensions removed? No, thank God, it was just Uncle Bong waltzing into my head. Call me crazy, but I imagined him galloping out of the forest and joining my father in a jig in a place where all brothers were equal. A brotherly jig! A reunion jig! Even though Uncle Bong was long gone from the Ahn clan, possibly no longer living, his ghost was here.

Sometimes, I wished my siblings would talk about deep-in-the-forest stuff, and by that, yes, I mean ghosts. Mommy, Uncle Bong, my Eggman, too, now and then.



Like most people his age, Sam Ahn had lived through wars and horrors and famine. Like most children, I grew up half-listening, never quite catching on to what country was fighting whom and what leader slaughtered which people—it was all just a big ugly mess, and I was glad I wasn't there. His personal stories, however, drew me in and I, his hypnotized subject, would sit with him for hours on the living room couch, barely enticed by the popcorn Mommy was shaking up in the kitchen. His parents were selfish twits so I won't mention them, but he cherished a non-blood related grandmother and after a few Scotches on the rocks would speak of her well into the night, first to me, then on to Mommy when it got really late. Although his grandmother died long before I was born, I was grateful for her existence because a man like my father didn't pop out of a magician's

hat … Then there was a little sister, aged five and sickly like so many Korean children were in those days. As a boy of twelve he had offered her a half-moon rice cake, a rare treat for a poor family but it was Chuseok, the Korean harvest holiday, and a neighbour had brought them a gift basket from the church. So naturally, he let her nibble, not knowing something in the chewy delicacy was spoiled. To his horror and lifelong guilt, dysentery killed her by the next day. For years, he could hear her crying through the night and the sounds of women preparing for her burial in the morning. Deep down, decades later, he worried her ghost would take his own American daughters during their fifth year of life. Ergo, each of our sixth birthdays was a cause for great celebration.

On recent visits, I noticed that my father was reminiscing less and less about the place where he spent the first twenty-seven years of his physical and much of his emotional life. With each hair that had turned white, it seemed, another day was gone and forgotten. At some point, he took a step and walked too far away from old world Korea to ever return. Now, his main reality was the life he had with his family in Blue Stone.



Still, the scars. He rested against a mailbox, looking fully like someone who had survived the Japanese Occupation and two wars, not to mention the premature death of his wife. In mind, he was stronger now, despite certain things he couldn’t face, like how some people made fun of his children or why Mommy one day decided to get her driver’s license when chauffeuring his wife up and down Columbia Pike was one of his professed pleasures. Wasn’t it? But Sam Ahn was the whole of his days, the face I remembered looking up to. Strong.

Buoyed, he took my arm and on we walked while once more he bragged to the earth and any listening creature:

‘My daughter is going to spend some time with her dear old dad! She will put aside her important casework for a few days and sing to my orchid

plants instead. And how wonderful—your clients won't find you here!' Suddenly meditative. 'Tell me, Margaret. Did you get what they call *writer's block*?'

'Dad. C'mon.'

'You used to be a chatterbox,' he phonated with great reminisce. 'Talk-talk-talk-talk-talk about this story and that story.'

'Did I? Me?'

After all these years, he just couldn't accept the fact that most dreamers who say they want to write a book, never do.

'What happened?' he asked with that same look of concern he wore when Mommy broke the news that my SAT results were average. Then, he blamed it on a headache or a stomach ache, some ache he insisted his genius daughter must have been ailing from to perform like everybody else.

Instead of carrying the conversation further, I leaned on him and sensed his face creak into a smile.



I'm forgetting the in-between years, as if my father was only real to me when I was Monkey at fourteen and Margaret at middle-age. That said, I failed to capture a comic side of him that was twice as funny, given his outwardly dignified nature. For example, he was more comfortable sitting around in his boxers at home, especially on hot steamy summer nights when the humidity made love to Mommy's orchids but suffocated her husband. How many of our friends met our worldly father in his polka-dotted underwear? Boxers aside, he was a snazzy dresser and while many of his clothes were custom-made in Hong Kong (better value, cheaper price), he shopped high and low during his lunch hour for bargains at the downtown clothiers. The day he came home from work looking sterling in an emerald-green paisley tie, I overheard him tell Mommy he found it on sale at Raleigh's for one dollar. Later, he tried to fool me, but I got the last laugh.

'Think you can guess how much this cost me, Monkey?'

‘A dollar.’

‘Huh? How did you know?’

‘You left the price tag on, Dad.’

‘No! Did I??’

I offer you a couple of filmstrips from the cutting floor, clips that captured his comical side:

For a time in the seventies, my father and three other IMF-World Bankers carpooled so they could cruise on the HOV (high-occupancy vehicle) lanes into town. In those days, the law required a head count of four in each vehicle. But these wise guys, Sam Ahn included, liked to play practical jokes. Whenever they spotted a poised police car on the lookout, everyone, except for the driver, would duck. The sound of a siren turned four grown men with highbrow accents into schoolboys, waiting for the moment they could pop up like jacks-in-a-box:

‘Is there a problem, Officer?’

Omar Singh was one of the car-poolers he was particularly fond of, though at times my father did like to tease him for his own entertainment. They all did. For example, Mr Singh, bred in the hot Indian climate, constantly complained of being cold, even in summer. It got tiresome to point of conspiracy on the part of the other car-poolers. So, in the dead of winter, on cue, they would complain they were overheating in the car. Then, they would take a vote whether to turn on the air conditioner just to see Mr Singh’s alarmed face and hear him plead, ‘*Please, please, people, please, no!’*

Sam Ahn’s modern life in America had its funny moments. But I wish, God I wish, there more strips of film to sweep up and examine. Say, forty years’ worth.



‘Dad?’

‘Yah?’

‘Remember Omar Singh?’

‘Oh, yah.’ He twitched with memory and boyishly cracked up. ‘Did I ever tell you, Margaret, why my carpool gang went their separate ways?’

‘I don’t think so. Why?’

‘Because Mr Singh got angry at Denis McCallum, do you remember him?’

‘The Scottish guy? You didn’t care for him, did you?’

‘No, but he was a body, and we needed a fourth body. Denis was a senior economist at the World Bank. One day after work he made an off-colour remark about Orientals and Mr Singh blew up. Exploded! I think Omar had been waiting years for the right moment to pounce on him. Like a patient tiger.’

‘What did he say?’

‘Omar said, “*You cocky son-of-a-bitch, your name should start with a P not a D!*”’

My father laughed so hard it scared me. Then he stopped to take a breath, not an easy task when you’re still laughing. Not quite a jig but it was as close as he was going to get in the waking universe. Close in spirit. Good enough for me.

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7

Summer 1969

Breakfast in the dining room meant a semi-relaxed dress code—coat and tie optional, nice shoes *not*. It was a brighter, less formal affair than dinner when music and lit candles stole the air and were you of a certain age—old enough to gaze dreamily into a glass of wine—no matter how frumpy you felt you half-expected something miraculous or at least fantastic to happen the moment the candles were blown out. And if they were never blown out, so be it. On live the magic and the glass in your hands!

Now it was morning, not long after the seven o'clock breakfast bell had chimed through the corridors, *Wake up, wake up!* Some families scheduled to dine at this early shift were still asleep, yet every Ahn had rolled out of bed—the Eastern Standard clock we were still ticking on made it nearing lunchtime. Back in Blue Stone, the postman was delivering mail to our house where gourds would soon be growing on the roof, and downstairs, the library was collecting spiderwebs and Goldie, with only Vivian for company, was wondering where we were … For others in the dining room, the punching bright white sun over the Pacific had woken them out of their dreams. That or the call of free food. Not corn flakes but food for the gods, as abundant and exquisite as Caesar's black grapes.

So, there we were, scrubbed and shiny, sparkly-toothed and dressed, headed for the most prominent table while waiters began their coordinated breakfast dance. As we crossed the dining room, a round of hoopla broke out. Clapping, whistling.

Journal entry:

It was crazy! Like we were in a movie!

The star of the show, Uncle Bong, smiled and took a deep bow, miles, time zones, endless waves from Ding Wow's. Hop Sing was history, a hallucination. Uncle Bong was transforming, his step, song, and dance. If he was Jerry Lewis before, he was Dean Martin now. Korean style, of course.

Our father's normally reserved expression soon relaxed, as if to say, '*My money is well spent!'*

'Uncle Bong deserves his week in paradise,' he said.

Once seated, my family was the centre piece of the dining room.

Yoo-hoo, was there a photographer in the house?

Yes, and he was floating from table-to-table. Click, click, click! Coming our way, he zoomed in on Uncle Bong who beamed in the camera's eye.

Journal entry:

Uncle Bong was a celebrity! An overnight sensation! Being on SS President is soooo exciting!

Unlike the other waiters, busy with several tables each, Max Blossom's sole duty appeared to be to attend to the captain's table, captain or no captain—or so he led us to believe. In truth, I'd later learn that he was also the dining room manager, responsible for the operations of the entire dining room. For Max, a finger snap.

'Yesterday, after having the pleasure of serving your family, not to mention all the excitement, Bong-Blossom—

I mean, *King Bong*, you daredevil!—the second shift made for a *looong* night,' he said, setting out goblets of pineapple juice then handing us orchid-shaped menus, lest we forget our Hawaiian destination. Max, to our round of *thank you*s: 'No, I thank *you*!'

Expertly pouring coffee from a regal-looking silver pot: 'The children don't drink coffee, do they?'

Our father shook his dignified chin. 'No.'

'Too young, right, Mrs Ahn?'

'Yah, too young. Only Vivian who in college drink coffee.'

'Vivian? You mean there's *another* Ahn daughter?' Max set down the pot of coffee to hear everything about their eldest who was majoring in journalism in the hopes of becoming the very first Korean news anchor in the country.

A *Korean* news anchor?

In America?

Now *that* would be a first!

'Oh, my!' Max exclaimed, thirsty for more of this elusive Vivian. He pulled out a chair as if to sit down, then tugged on his bowtie and sighed.

If it was all an act, he deserved an Oscar.

Our father glowed with prospects for his family's day although a cloud crossed his eye. Maybe it was something only his youngest could see.

Why did that creepy man, that Mr Bossa Nova, ask Mommy to dance? With a shudder, I tried to imagine being him, a night owl on the prowl. His eyes shift to a woman at a table with her husband. They are drinking and clinking, sharing words and glances. The night is holy, their love oceanic.

Why cause ripples?

Who was he?

I wanted to wring his neck.

Mommy might have sensed it, too, the insult to her husband. The sting. She moved close to him until their outfits blended into one happy flower

garden. Her muumuu, his Hawaiian shirt. Only butterflies and bees were missing from this picture.

‘Max,’ she said, ‘you mind instead please get orange juice my husband? Pineapple—’

Her husband waved away her concern. ‘*Gwaenchanh-ayo* (it’s all right).’

‘Pineapple juice make my husband tongue so numb,’ Mommy continued in her inelegant, yet fetching, English.

‘Then it’s absolutely not *gwaenchanh-ayo*,’ Max declared with pitch-perfect enunciation. ‘Orange juice it is.’

Our father was amused and when amused, he crinkled merrily. ‘Not necessary …’

‘Fresh-squeezed!’ Max insisted.

‘No fuss …’

‘Fuss? You’re at the VIP table, Mr Ahn. And you know what VIP stands for.’

Every Ahn on board chirped, ‘Very Important People!’

‘Yes,’ he nodded, ‘who also happen to be my very own Very Important Passengers!’

The sting left my father’s face. He positively glowed.

Journal entry:

> Every hour I love Max Blossom more and more. He’s the GREATEST person who ever lived. Guess what he called us at breakfast? Very Important Passengers!

We perused our menus, our eyes like saucers. *Mon Dieu!* The choices! A simple continental breakfast or the whole works: eggs benedict, steak ‘n’ eggs, lobster omelette, crêpes suzette. Definitely VIP food with no prices on the menu. Bye-bye, Howard Johnson’s, whose salisbury steak was twenty-five more cents than my dad was willing to spend.

‘We can order anything, right, Dad?’ Peter asked.

With affectionate gusto, our father rubbed the top of Peter's head. 'Yah. Just don't waste. If you order, you must eat.'

Oh! Sam Ahn loved to rub his children's heads, especially when we were younger and asleep in bed. His accompanying whisper was rich, a loving bass, as if the excess of too-much love sponged up in that cupped hand of his, ready for any little Ahn head studying or walking by. The vision of black hair on a pillow—irresistible! Most of the time the palm-jostling woke us up, but we never let on. To do so meant an hour-long lovey-dovey conversation in the dark.

Peter whined, 'What should I get?'

'Why not one of everything?' Holly suggested.

'Really?'

She sighed. 'No, Peter.'

The morning after he had danced with girls of all shapes and sizes, I presumed, he woke up the same old Peter. Two loud brats ran by and bumped into his chair; intimidated, my brother inched closer to the table.

Despite his newly founded celebrity status, Uncle Bong defaulted to his usual self over breakfast, quiet as ever, so it was surprising when he sternly shouted:

'Slow down, children!'

Picture five gaping mouths—the Ahn table in communal shock. It was uncharacteristic of Uncle Bong to stand up to a flea much less a kindergartener. Momentarily, a woman approached him at the table.

'Thank you, sir. My boys are impossible, never minding their manners. I'm so worried about when they go to first grade; they might staple the teacher to her desk! But it looks to me like they listen to *you*.' She turned her head towards her family's table where her boys were drinking juice with their sister.

'Happy to help, ma'am,' Uncle Bong said.

After we shook off the weirdness of what just happened, Mommy's attention returned to Peter.

'Why not you order French toast?' she suggested.

Peter nodded. 'All right.'

'It say it come with "baked apple compote". What compote is?'

No one knew but Holly ventured a guess: 'The guts of an apple pie?'

'Guts?' Mommy said sickly.

Our father, the experienced world traveller, dreamer, and diner, leaned over to his wife with an explanation. Their Korean auras burned like incense.

Smoke, now gone.

Poof!

'Mommy?' Peter said.

Mommy turned her attention to Peter, eyes sleepy with love. She cradled his cherubic face like a bar of sweet-smelling soap. Peter's suffering made him more sacred to Mommy than her daughters. Holly and I understood.

'Yah, Peter?'



His first attack came on a Friday night when the family was steeped in a game of Monopoly, complete with hand-scrawled IOUs. Peter, then twelve and winning, as usual, dropped the dice and let out a blood-curdled cry as if shot in the chest. Monopoly money flew, tiny green houses and red hotels scattered—what was happening? Was he having a seizure? What? *What?* Mommy out screamed him; screamed as loud as only a mother can scream, so loud she was crazy, couldn't see he was quieting down now.

We scrambled into the car and sped to Fairfax Hospital where we, the only Koreans in the emergency room and everywhere else we went, got the bad news. Somehow you knew the American families got better reports like sprained ankles and pink eye. But our family got hit with a terrible report: tuberculosis, a foreign disease second only in scary factor to leprosy.

Poor Peter, but—were the rest of us infected, too? Our bodies, our house? We were all in Korea three weeks earlier, sleeping on the same floor, breathing the same air. Exposed! But in days to come, our blood tests came back negative, no lung x-rays necessary. Only Peter had contracted TB from our father's younger brother Duk-Young who, we later learned, knew he was contagious but stuck his wet chopsticks in the communal bowls of banchan anyway.

Mommy always deferred to our father to lead the Ahn way but this time she made a demand that would raise a few Korean eyebrows: She forbade him to ever speak to this brother again. As a First Son with duties, her husband could still provide for his good-for-nothing brother but beyond that, no communication. None. Years back, our well-connected father had saved Uncle Duk from a court-marshal and now Mommy wished he hadn't. '*Better he go to prison!'* she had wailed. Then those TB-infected chopsticks wouldn't have gotten near her precious son.

Quarantined at home with a round of medications, Peter didn't leave his room for weeks. When Peter got sick, Mommy had claimed the big corner bedroom with the grand leafy views as Peter's private domain and we bowed to her wish, now more than ever. It would always be Peter's now. The best room. From one of four windows, his birthday telescope could zoom in on scattered glitters of the lake through the leaves, and, like hope, he sorely needed glitter now. Yes, after what Peter was enduring, he deserved any room in the house.

While Mommy and Uncle Bong religiously waited on him hand and foot, both constantly disinfecting the house with Clorox, the only time I went anywhere near that upstairs corner of the house—I couldn't help it, I was a little afraid of his tubercular germs, residual or otherwise, hanging in the air—was to give a swift knock on the door at suppertime, or on Sunday afternoons to remind him that *Ted Mack & the Original Amateur Hour* was coming on. Peter, at twelve: watching television, stony but smiling.

He was cured in time for school and entered junior high shaken by the knowledge of the not-visible-to-the-naked eye scar on his lung, there forever. The next year, he succumbed again. This bout was more violent and more mysterious.

Journal entry:

How did this happen? Those DUMB doctors didn't get rid of it all!

Mommy cried in Korean for days. '*Why? Why MY son?'* No one had any answers. After another round of treatment, try as they might, the doctors couldn't convince Peter that this time he was completely cured, that his x-rays were clean as a whistle and that the TB germs wouldn't sneak back into his lungs to leave a third scar when he was sleeping. In those days he would tinker and sigh on the piano for hours on end like a failed contestant on *Amateur Hour*, and somewhere in-between the tinkering and the sighing we could hear how deep his scars really were.

Deep.

After that, we never talked about it, never uttered the word TB. To say it aloud might erupt something, and we wouldn't want that, certainly not in the dining room of SS President Roosevelt.



'Can you quiz me after breakfast?' he begged Mommy.

'Again?'

'I've got the manual in my pocket.'

'But we practise on plane all way over here, Peter. Five hour! You know answer by heart. Even I memorize! *When two vehicles come to an intersection, which vehicle has the right of way?*'

Even if it did come straight from a manual, it was strange to hear Mommy speak perfect English.

He closed his eyes. 'The vehicle to the right.'

‘*When you see a dotted line on the road, what does that mean?*’

‘That you can change lanes.’

Peter was eager to take the written test for his driving permit, which he was eligible for in August; but not the driving test until he turned sixteen three months later. Anyone could learn how to drive—but parallel-park for a police officer? In the state of Virginia in 1969, if you failed the parallel-parking requirement, the Division of Motor Vehicles sent you home sans license.

‘See? No more reason to quiz. You get perfect score,’ she said, watching her son drink his juice, the lump in his throat. Mommy was not made of stone, especially when it came to the men in her life.

‘Okay, okay.’ She relented. ‘On deck, near pool, nine o’clock. It date?’

Peter perked up. ‘It’s a date!’



That autumn Mommy would spend many an afternoon on Blue Stone Circle directing Peter in the white Pontiac Tempest. ‘*No, this way, closer to curb! Where you are going? Ssss! You hit garbage can!*’

After his test drive, they would switch places, and Peter would direct her.



On the surface, Holly was Holly-at-breakfast as usual. Astringent by Bonne Bell and a spray or two of Tabu—my nose was always keener in the morning. Her lips and cheeks were kissed coral-pink, disguising any distraught Coketail ‘hangover’ from the night before, though any mention of Adam Kang might cost me my life. She looked breezy in a pale-yellow dress that yielded the faintest print of pears. In retrospect, my own wardrobe was curiously less memorable though I do recall what adorned my feet: flip flops, sneakers, blue Dr. Scholl’s sandals and, for the dining room, white patent leather Mary Janes with little black scuff marks.

‘They’ve got blueberry pancakes, Monkey,’ she said, too sing-song, even for her. ‘Your favourite!’

My father chuckled. ‘Monkey and I seem to share the same tastes, don’t we? We like Mommy’s beef stroganoff and Ding Wow’s duck in orange sauce. And blueberry pancakes.’

‘We do, Dad!’ I agreed.

Max presented the head of our family with a goblet of sparkling orange juice fit for a king. Everything with Max Blossom was a flawless performance. He could be on Broadway; he could be in the circus. It wouldn’t surprise us if he juggled then squeezed the oranges in the kitchen himself. In a little two-step, he started off then circled back.

‘Say, kids, how did the Coketail party go last night? Did you have—oh, what do the teenagers say these days?—a *blast*?’

Holly bit her lip.

Peter shrugged.

I lip-sang, ‘*Yes!*’



Someday, I vowed, when I was a world-celebrated author writing my long-awaited autobiography, I would describe in detail what I could from that prized blurry minute: thirty seconds on the dance floor plus the moments leading up to them. The surprise, the tingle, the catch of my breath and warrior pound of my tender, young heart as perfumed confetti seemed to shower me.

Journal entry:

I’m a woman now! And what Vivian always says to Holly also goes for me. ‘A girl can never take back a kiss or her virginity—so goddamn it, be careful. And don’t let any guy treat you like a prize from some fucking fair!’ Yes, that’s REALLY what Vivian says.

By the time the sun had risen over the boat, Blue Stone hung in the darkness, already fading from my map. I was changed and couldn't imagine ever being there, ever being Monkey on the swing set again. One day, my earth-rocking experience might belong to the ages, maybe as soon as I stepped onto terra firma. And that was okay so long as no one stole this one-minute memory from me. It was mine to keep.

Forever!



Before breakfast, while Holly was washing up, I had thumbed through the passenger list as fast as my hungry little hands could go, just to confirm that Adam Kang was not a phantom but a real, live boy who had spoken to me less than twelve hours ago. I came across:

Mr and Mrs Henry Kang of London, England. Two children. Miss Isabelle, eighteen, Master Adam, sixteen. Destination: Yokohama.

Ahhhhhh!

I glanced around the dining room. No visions or vapours of Adam Kang. He was probably still asleep, his head on a pillow I would pay dearly for.

After we placed our orders, Max balanced a moon-sized platter of miniature European pastries our way.

Double *Mon Dieu*!

If Max was the Waiter of the World, a lesser waiter holding his own platter in mid-air came over and whispered something in Uncle Bong's ear. His words were undoubtedly titillating because Uncle Bong nodded giddily and, for the rest of the meal, he seemed ready to scoot out.

Meanwhile, back to the pastries Max was offering. They were either drizzled with icing, plopped with jam, or sprinkled with sugar and lined up like rows of jewels. Tres dazzling! With a pair of long, elegant silver tongs, Max pointed out and described each kind of pastry for a family who ate Pop

Tarts at home, but never the likes of Blueberry Cheesecake Danish or Almond Croissants or Apple Strudel Pockets. So, a-pastry-picking I went.

‘Max, can I have one of these and one of—’

Mommy frowned. ‘Have manner, Margaret.’

‘Max, can I *please* have one of these and one of these and one of—’

Her frown became critical. ‘So many? People thinking I’m not feed my children at home. Don’t be pig, Margaret. Everyone looking.’

‘But they’re so tiny,’ I argued.

Max bit the air. ‘Bite-sized!’

The captain’s table was in an uproar. All eyes were on us, or should I say, Mommy. Her glee lit up the dining room, especially with those perfect pearly teeth, some real, some not. No dentists in her childhood meant she couldn’t chew Tootsie Rolls or Brach’s caramels, not even her own Beef Stroganoff, unless she marinated the flank steak overnight; plus, regular weird gum operations I was only aware of after-the-fact when she would, mood cross, ask for ice and Bayer aspirin from her bed. Yet, somehow, she always emerged with a Hollywood smile.

After breakfast, Uncle Bong headed off on his own—took a detour, if you will—and, unbeknownst to us, the Ahn world tilted. While the rest of my family walked off mini-pastries and seemingly everything else on the menu, I went back to the cabin.

In the corridor was Fernando. From the first time I laid eyes on him and his cap of wavy black hair, his very cast put me at ease. He was my height, give or take an inch, and we ran up to each other like long lost comrades. Naïve me had no idea how rare and beautiful our coming-together was.

‘Hi, Fernando!’

‘Hello, Miss Margaret. Everything okay with you?’

‘More than okay,’ I said.

‘Excellent!’

Fernando took his job so seriously you would think a family of twenty back home in a Cuban shack depended on his salary. Working, working, tirelessly working. Rarely coming up for light. To see him in action delivering a dry-cleaned suit at 6.45 in the morning was telling. How he asked a question not lightly but from the burning wick of his soul, too. Part of it was his nature; part of it was something else. By the end of that summer, I would learn the truth about Fernando, hear his name in the media for years to come and elevate him to near-idol heights. *Fernando Quartez, the Diamond Man!* I knew him, I did, I really did! No wonder he was the ping-pong champ! But that week, he was our unassuming bellhop with an impulse to please.

He squinted, could pass for Korean. ‘No more Club crackers? Ginger ale?’

‘No, thanks—I’d explode! You should’ve seen my breakfast, Fernando. I ate so much I embarrassed Mommy. She was ready to lock me in the pigpen.’

Our eyes met, got giggly.

‘Well, please say you are not going to lock yourself up in your room on such a beautiful day, Miss Margaret. You are going in, then coming right back out, right?’

Already my friend of one day knew me so well. The truth was, the old Margaret would have closed the door and opened my journal, scribbling silly angst until the lunch bell.

Not today.

‘Don’t break everyone’s heart,’ he said so lyrically I could hear the Cuban song in his soul. ‘After all, a young girl like you should be out in the sunlight for all to see.’

I rocked; I swayed. How many hearts could Margaret Ahn break on one ship?

Was it possible Monkey Blossom *blossom*ed on this side of the globe?

‘I just want to change my clothes, Fernando.’

‘I am very glad to hear that, Miss Margaret,’ he said, now hopping off to run some urgent errand. To him, all errands were. ‘Don’t forget your sunglasses!’

In the cabin, the beds were freshly made, a white flower yawned out of a vase and a faint citrus scent confirmed that the maids had been here. My sunglasses weren’t on the dresser where I had left them, but on the desk, propped up on the face of the Princess phone.

That Fernando!

I slipped them on and changed. Even in the dark I could tell he had polished them. Through a pristine black tint, I smiled.



Surely, at some point, we met the actual ‘VIP’ staff of SS President Roosevelt—the captain, the cruise director, the bell captain, and so on. But whoever they were, that crew failed to put even the smallest dent in my recollections. Like the grown-ups in Charlie Brown’s world, they carried on outside my field of vision. Meanwhile, Teen Director Pam was unforgettable for all the wrong reasons.

Only Max and Fernando would figure into our lives, and far, colossally far, beyond the call of duty. For that reason, they lived forever in my heart and on SS President Roosevelt, not on dry land.



It took our family a full day of ocean-liner living to get into the groove, as Holly would say. Did we miss the seminar on how to live it up hour-by-hour on the seven seas? Did we lack nautical instinct? The Ahns, virgin darlings, would learn to navigate. For example:

For late birds who missed or skipped breakfast, homemade doughnuts were being served on the promenade deck from eight to nine o’clock, their

aroma so heavenly sweet it could put you to sleep. We had no idea! Swift as seagulls, passengers were flocking to a long table and helping themselves to coffee, tea, and juices.

A party on the Pacific!

Half-hidden, half-disguised, I spent my morning searching for Adam Kang. Just to see him, watch him move, not to speak to him, no, no way. I was too lovesick, too stupid. Whatever he saw in me last night was as gone as mist around the moon today.

The other Ahns, between breakfast and lunch:

Uncle Bong was good as AWOL, but Mommy was quizzing Peter like a Virginia state trooper for a full hour by the swimming pool while our father swam laps in the same maroon swim trunks that he wore on our last trip overseas and at Ocean City before that. Afterwards, Mommy and Holly joined a forty-five-minute tour of the ship while Peter peered into the empty moonlight room. Piano time! In the middle of his private performance of ‘Santa Lucia’, Pam appeared with a box of props. When the song ended, she clapped, she begged. Would Peter perform in the Aloha Show? Could he play songs like ‘Over the Rainbow’? How could he say no?

Meanwhile, when no one was looking, my father apparently did the unexpected: He signed Mr and Mrs Sam Ahn up for daily dance lessons at four o’clock in the starlight room.

Our father, doing the foxtrot!

My siblings made jokes about amnesia, a concussion, a love potion number nine that Max must have slipped into his orange juice.

On the tour, Holly had met the Children Programme Director Katie and volunteered to help make crepe paper costumes for the ship’s production of *The Little Prince*. Boys were her first love and sewing stylish clothes her second; making costumes fell close to the latter mark. If I was lucky, she would forget about her first—in other words, Adam—for now.



If you ventured down to the dining room at noon, you could indeed dine on lunch there but the moment you were greeted by a lone faceless waiter craving light, you sensed you were in the wrong place. We marched right back up the stairs—in our dining room clothes!—and found everyone in shorts and swimsuits, holding plates and hovering over a spectacular buffet in the starlight room, doors open to bring in the light. Again, the Ahn gang had missed the memo!

As if born for ship life, Uncle Bong was behind the buffet tables setting out plates and utensils, and folding napkins in a happy dance with the other servers, each with their own assigned duties. I never saw him look so at home.

'I'm helping out my friends!' he called out to us.

Friends?

'Hey King Bong, mind stirring the Seafood à la King?'

'Hey King Bong, mind running to the kitchen to get more warm rolls?'

It was weird to see a side of Uncle Bong I'd never seen, chummy with people he didn't know yesterday. Yet he acted like he'd been doing this his whole life, helping to run the show in a side-by-side frenzy.

Journal entry:

I couldn't believe my eyes! Or ears! KING BONG!?!? I wish that ugly creep from Ding Wow's—forgot his dumb name already—could see him now!



Mommy was right, I could be a pig, and I remember like yesterday counting a dozen stations offering every type of Western food imaginable with the exception of soup, for practical reasons. Each station was presided over by a formal bow-tied server.

My apologies if I bore you with this recital while I test my memory: There was a beverage station, an hors d'oeuvre station, a meat-carving station, a seafood station with shrimp cocktail and lobster salad, a

hamburger station, a sandwich station, a French crêpe station, a casserole station where creamy dishes bubbled in silver warming plates, a bread and cheese station, a salad station, an exotic fruit station, and a dessert station so tempting it must've been whipped up by an orgy of angels and devils. Did I forget anything?

Most passengers took their sky-high plates out to the main deck or stepped one flight below to the promenade deck. Tables were set out, although many preferred to stand and connect with the sky and the ocean and others on board.

There was Max, orchestrating the entire show.

'King Bong volunteered, so I enlisted him. He's a natural but let's make sure he doesn't steal my job,' Max joked.

No one could do that. The ship was Max Blossom's chateau on the sea.

'Something about the sea air turns ordinary people into famished warthogs,' he uttered to me while flashing a million-dollar smile for the public. 'Look at that son-of-a-gun, piling on those devilled eggs like he's the only one in line. Tell everyone in your family to take two plates before all the food's gone …' Abruptly distracted, he tooted, 'Oh, Monkey-Blossom, I think you have an admirer …'



Looking back, how bold of me, the way I walked over to where he was standing, not inside the starlight room but on the deck, peering in at me; and how bold of him, the way his hand went for my sunglasses as if they were ours, not mine, to take off. Somehow, we and the universe understood that it would take these brash moves to bring us together. In a sense, undress us when time was at stake. So, yes, what a terribly seductive boy Adam Kang was, even though his fingers were tapered, and his touch was tender as he removed my banana yellow beauties and accidentally-on-purpose brushed my face. I never felt so naked, so beautiful.

Volcanic!

‘I *thought* that was you,’ he said.
Within the hour, we were inseparable.

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8

Winter 2019

Our second walk had worn him out and Sam Ahn eased into his cherished chair, shades of Archie Bunker. Granted, the two characters wouldn't exactly break bread, but a common thread ran through the beloved TV bigot from Queens and the Harvard grad from Yongpyong, plain as the noses on their faces, especially as they sank into their thrones. First, that sweet descent and fatigue in the eye that came from a fraying of soul. Then the teddy bear builds—once my father's belt loop began to expand a notch, or two, or three, who was counting—'*Vinny's Pizza was the best!'* Above all, they shared something that went beyond sigh and silhouette, although maybe it all boiled down to the same thing.

Heartbreak.

Settled in, perhaps one nod from a nap, my father still had Omar Singh on his mind. 'In the end, he had balls,' he mumbled, a lover of American slang. Whether or not he always 'got it' was always in question. But to feel like an enlightened foreigner, in on the slang of the day, was all that mattered.



In *All in the Family*'s heyday, my father would sit in his chair and watch Archie Bunker in his, and it was as if an atomic change had taken place and the two characters were facing each other in the same room, complete with a piano. One with a beer, one, a bag of dried fish jerky. One, a white racist, one, a Korean man-of-the-world in boxers. One had Edith, one had Mommy. Despite the differences, mirror images and mutual heartbreak.

Archie Bunker's heartbreak was archived in television history. What about Sam Ahn's?

There it was, in slides and photographs where he posed with pearly-toothed skull-faced children, mostly orphans, from Africa, South America, Asia. Often the darker they were, the harder their lives and the greater his attachment—at least, that was my take. Being poor was in my father's blood and in this sense he 'adopted' them while on his IMF travels, always coming back to them as promised, bearing bananas and candies. Yes, he catalogued their names and their posts where they peddled flowers and gum, often in airports, outdoor restaurants, and hotel lobbies, returning to them like a sea turtle to its birth waters. In slide shows to his family in Blue Stone, our father always had his arms around their bony frames like they were his real children, the ones he thought of whenever his spoiled American kids grumbled over having to share their pack of Twinkies.

'*Come back to the room, Monkey*.' He would chuckle whenever I jealously stormed out of the room during a slide show, as if these destitute creatures had stolen my dad from me. '*Look, I'm at the Taj Mahal!*'

Having heartbreak meant he chuckled harder.

It was there, as he picked the anchovies from his *kimchi* or dug into a cheeseburger. Maybe it all began with the loving grandmother who died on him, or the baby sister long gone but never forgotten even while he did a jig on SS President Roosevelt.

It was there, in Mommy's closet where her clothes still hung—her stuff was his heartbreak.

It was there, even as he sang, 'I smell cocoa, Vivian.'

‘It’s coming!’ the sweet nun sang back.

Sam Ahn and Archie Bunker, an odd couple without a dancing bone between them. Both lives, mostly mythical now. But at least my father was real, not a character whose worn tweed chair was now relegated to TV Land or the Smithsonian, whichever reality suited your psyche. My father’s chair, also worn but leather, made it better, still had a place in Blue Stone. Life was still going on, on this side of the tube. Sam Ahn’s life was partially in reruns, but a miracle might be cause for a sequel. My orchid interpretation could be challenged but there was no refuting this: His every thought went a dream deeper than most.

Still, what good was a throne in the home when the queen was gone?



‘Here, Dad,’ Vivian said, handing him his cocoa with coo and balance. These were the times I realized my treasured father was hers, too. ‘Yours is coming up, Margaret.’

The Ahn patriarch cupped his cocoa like a goblet from heaven, peering in delightedly at the generous toss of marshmallows. Tiny floating dreams. Clouds! His forehead wrinkled familiarly. Famously. ‘Our Vivian always seems to know *precisely* how many marshmallows I like in my cocoa. Do you count them?’

Vivian turned around like Ahn daughters did, still aiming to please while her silver hairs warred with Clairol, beaming as if she’d just scooped out a mound of rice for him back when *The Flintstones* were on during suppertime.

‘Our Vivian has a gift for knowing <u>exactly</u> how much rice I want on my plate every night. Do you count every grain?’

Then and now: ‘Of course I do, Dad!’

Once I got my cocoa, he settled contentedly into his steamy little cup. Life was good, Monkey was home. Television gone now, his throne beheld

a view of his three AARP-aged children in the kitchen bickering lively over global affairs, even Holly.

‘Stop for a moment, kids,’ my father interrupted. ‘The world is always going to pot and will still be going to pot after my announcement, so listen. Margaret is going to honour us with her presence for a longer visit. Like a writer-in-residence!’

He went for my head like I was five again. I ducked, blushing. ‘Dad …’

A chorus of wows and whistles followed from Peter and Vivian, silly from spirits, proof of our American roots. Koreans rarely drank alcohol at family gatherings; at weddings, big plastic bottles of Coke and Seven-Up graced tables in lieu of champagne. With friends in bars and cafés was another story.

‘Guys, please. I’ll be a daughter-in-residence, that’s all.’

Thankfully, Peter switched the subject. ‘Do you like Indonesian food, Margaret?’

‘Probably. I love Malaysian and Thai. Coconut, curry, hot peppers.’

‘Then you’ll like *bebek betutu*. It’s my specialty. A duck dish,’ Peter said, juggling yellow and red bell peppers like a clown on chianti.

‘But you hate duck,’ I reminded my brother who would quack with disgust whenever the family ordered duck dishes from Ding Wow’s. Even now, an epoch later, Peter’s quacks echoed along with the memory of Mommy yelling so sweetly I ached.

‘*Don’t be bad boy!*’

Still, she was a Korean mother, and Peter was her prized child.

‘Naw … Did I hate duck?’

‘Yes, Peter. Quack, quack—remember?’

He shrugged, flushed and merry. ‘People change.’

Our father set down his cocoa with mischievous intent, just like the old days, but refrained.

‘You think they stole the ducks from the lake, Monkey?’

‘No, Dad, don’t say that or I won’t eat!’

‘Let’s go down to the lake and count our feathered friends …’

‘Dad!’

Out of habit, Sam Ahn picked up a stone-cold pipe and tried to sniff out its ancient vanilla scent. He gave up smoking years ago, or so he claimed. Whether he smoked privately, who knew. Maybe Team Ahn knew, but not me with my own private moments in my own place.

Lost years.

Did Archie Bunker smoke a pipe? Or was it a cigar? Either way, two frayed souls, puffing, thinking.

‘Dad,’ I said, ‘what’s playing at the Kennedy Center this week? Dad?’

He had flown around the world countless times in his prime and never once suffered jet lag. Now, he had nodded off.

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9

Summer 1969

Within twenty-four hours, Adam and I would go through a whole courtship as if ship years were measured in hours and if we didn't seize the moment we'd miss the boat and a sinking rocking regret would haunt us all our lives from the minute we stepped off SS President Roosevelt to some lonely day in the future when we were old and weary on moth-eaten couches on separate continents, watching merry bicyclists from our windows. Regret, haunt, our elderly silhouettes—you grow up fast when you know you only have a week to do it, so we did …

Years later I was convinced something divine was at play, that somehow, our adult souls had lurched back in time to knock some sense into Margaret Ahn at fourteen and Adam Kang at sixteen so that we could see things in a mature light once he took off my sunglasses in a move so erotically charged losing my virginity years later would be nothing; yes, something desperate and divine grabbed our bony young shoulders and shook off all the blushing bullshit with a hiss-whisper: '*This is it, you little fools; most of life will be a long drab drive to nowhere so make this happen—now!'* Divine, like a magical compass pointing to Adam and me as we stood with our adolescent giddiness beneath a flaming sun while the rest of the ship blurred like

darting tropical fish, our coordinates miraculous yet morbid for in the end we met so we could carry this to our graves.

Our enchantment was instant, rushed, soul-stripping, no questions asked. And as natural as turning over in our sleep.

We kissed within the hour and said '*I love you'* countless times before the sun went down over a Hollywood horizon that was ours, all ours. '*I love you*' on the tips of our eyelashes while we watched *Follow Me, Boys!* at four o'clock movie hour; '*I love you*' on the secret quiver of our lips as we pined for each across the dining room at dinner; '*I love you*', our young chests in rhythm with the rise and fall of the Pacific waves while 'My One and Only Love' gushed in the background. Everything was a sigh, a murmur, a gasp, like love in the movies only it's not pukey when it's you. A lifetime of love, after all, had to be squeezed into the remaining days of this journey.

But how could I cram a life's worth of Adam Kang into one week?

Adam wasn't your ordinary boy, not by any Columbia Encyclopedia's definition. For one thing, the very vision of him—the exotic boy-god, so debonair—was beyond my girl-in-the-basement dreams. And then, to encounter it, see that it's drawn to you, was enough to give a girl heart failure.

Even now.

On the deck beneath moonbeams, I zeroed in on the dark flashing eyes behind the John Lennon specs and hung onto every word uttered from his lips as we exchanged biographical information like we were racing against the hourglass, our time runneth up.

'My real mum died when I was very small, Margaret; two, actually. I do remember her clearly, though. She was a *yangban* – '

'A what-ban?'

Adam looked wholly disappointed in me. True, I spoke little Korean, but I was no dope and defended myself.

‘What?’

Naturally, he, of a certain genteel class, forgave me with a kiss on the hand, which I didn’t need but would take. ‘You’re adorable, Margaret. A *what*-ban.’ He forced a smile that clashed with his charisma. ‘A *yangban* is a person of wealth or aristocratic birth; in my mum’s case, both. She was a descendent of King Sejong with a powdery complexion and very tall—‘

‘How tall?’ I asked, wondering how he could possibly remember her. My only memory at age two was of an orange-tinted glass piggybank shattering on the parquet floor of an apartment my family was vacating that morning, and me crying to high heaven, having dropped it. But the mind sculpts what the mind sculpts. I might have thrown it; and Adam Kang might’ve been an Asian ogre with a Cockney accent, although the piggybank glass was definitely tinted orange, not rose.

‘Five foot five,’ he said. ‘Average for an English woman I suppose but not for Korean women of that generation who stood four foot ten in their *gomusin*.’ Teasing me: ‘You do know what gomusin are, don’t you, Margaret?’

‘Of course, I do,’ I replied. Gomusin were canoe-shaped rubber shoes; in grey-hues for poor feet, vibrant for the well-to-do. ‘I’m five foot five in my Dr Scholl’s.’ I pointed to my feet just in case Dr. Scholl’s weren’t sold in England.

‘And perhaps still growing. But you were nursed on American milk, I presume. I mean, you were born in America, were you not?’ To my nod: ‘Where, exactly?’

‘Cambridge, Massachusetts. Do you know where that is?’

‘New England,’ he said in his worldly way. ‘There’s a Cambridge in *old* England, too.’

Sassy: ‘I know that.’

Adam winked at me. He was beautiful to begin with, and I was cute but no beaut, according to my bloomed sisters. Yet, I must have fed off his rays

because for the duration of the trip I would feel bewitchingly ripened by the humid air. My hair fell in Hawaiian princess waves and my lips got glossy like the girls in the Slickeringo Lipstick ads and my eyes acquired a look I wouldn't see again for years to come, a certain kohl-ish smoulder that traditionally-pretty girls like my sisters lacked.

I winked back.

'My mum towered over everyone, even most men, and she had this proud mare of a walk.' His statuesque imitation of her made me sad for him. 'Wherever she went people were in awe and couldn't help but cry, *Oma!*'

'Even in England?'

He laughed sadly—for who in England cried *oma*?—and planted an old-geezer kiss on my forehead. 'She never lived in England, Margaret. We moved there when I was four.'

'And when did your dad remarry?'

'He didn't, not officially.'

'He didn't?'

'He has two wives. Both are known as Mrs Kang. The senior Mrs Kang is with us.'

'Where's the other one?'

'Spending his money.'

'Oh …' My father's friends in Korea were the same way, with second wives or mistresses. The exception was his closest friend Mr Oh whose wife was a professor at Ewha University. They were what few Korean couples were: equals. 'You would never have two wives, would you?'

'No.' Oceanic laughter erupted from the promenade deck and Adam blurted: 'I can't believe I met you, Margaret. I didn't even want to leave England, you know. I mean, I have my mates and my cricket. And Korea is such a depressing place, the bombed countryside and downtown Seoul, which is even worse than the London slums because the children, well … they look like us, only emaciated. And it makes me sick to my stomach, the

way they stare at you like you have something to give them when you don't. Don't get me wrong, I feel sorry for them, most of all the very poorest and smallest with their hands all bandaged and bloodied, begging under those godforsaken skies—many are lepers, you know—but I can't do a thing about that except feel guilty that I'm a diplomat's son who's served crust-less sandwiches by Miss Emma at tea time made with jam that has a Golliwog face on the jar, no less, and Miss Emma, as you can guess, is a Negro.'

Crust-less sandwiches? Mommy would sooner cut off any little Ahn hand with any such ideas. You don't waste crusts in a starving world.

'What's a Golliwog face?' I asked him.

'It's like your little Black Sambo,' he said. 'It originated from the Golliwog rag doll, caricature at its worst. But as vapid as this may sound to you, Margaret, I just want to be a regular fellow who doesn't have to see or think about the awfulness of Golliwogs and little beggars. And I really wanted to skip the trip this summer now that I'm sixteen—I can take care of myself. My father had said if I did well on my exams, he would consider it. And I did, but he didn't.'

'You can give them money,' I challenged him.

'Give who money?'

'The little lepers you feel so sorry for. You don't just walk by them like some snoot, do you, Adam?'

'I do walk by them but not like some snoot.' Vacant sigh, crowned by stars. 'Please don't judge me right now, Margaret. I do enough of that myself and it's not a pretty picture.'

'So why don't you give them money if you feel so sorry for them? I always do. My dad gives all us kids money before we go out, a wad of *wons*.' Wons were paper money that made you feel rich in your pocket despite their nickel and dime worth.

'Well, my father won't allow it. He's rather … elitist.'

‘A snoot, you mean.’

‘No, a shit!’ he cried. ‘I’m sorry; I didn’t mean to say that. But must we talk about him, Margaret? This was all leading up to something else: That I didn’t want to be here but here I was and then I saw you and I was glad, grateful even, that my father made me come.’

We backed up, ducked in the shadows, and kissed for a long time. Fluttery-eyed: ‘When did you first see me, Adam? At the Coketail party?’

‘Earlier, at dinner. I saw your sister first—what’s her name?—and saw you sitting next to her.’

‘Holly,’ I said, embarrassed for her. ‘Her name is Holly.’

‘Yeah, Holly. She’s quite nice, your big sis.’

‘Yes,’ I said, ‘she’s … your age.’

‘And you’re a whole year younger.’

‘No …’

‘No?’

‘I’m two years younger.’

Our mood got off course, ever so slightly.

‘The directory said you’re fifteen,’ he insisted. ‘Miss Margaret, fifteen.’

‘It was a misprint,’ I squeaked.

‘Are you telling me, Margaret,’ his fingers slipped from mine, ‘that you’re only *fourteen* years old?’

For the first but certainly not the last time in my life, I sensed that sickening disorienting fear of losing a dream, of it slipping away from me. No, no, no … Yes, I was young, just going into high school. But what difference did it make? Did the ocean out there care? The ever-opulent moon? In any realm, we would die at approximately the same time. The dream, slipping away … I should’ve known this was too good to be true; maybe I was still sleeping in my bunk or even back in Blue Stone. No, no, no … This was real. I was on the Pacific Ocean. I met Adam who wasn’t the kind of person to take back his already-declared love.

‘I’ll be fifteen in October,’ I said without apology.

‘Oh? October what?’

‘Ninth.’

His silence was divorcing. The hour was late, nearly ten. Suddenly, maybe out of escape, with deep pang, I missed my whole family—Dad, Mommy, Holly, Peter, and, of course, Uncle Bong—scattered on the boat, coordinates unknown. A pinched guilt. Ouch. You meet someone and then lose track of the ones you love … Was that how Life worked? The moonlight room was black, but the starlight room was lit up, in full swing. The glass doors opened, jazzy Latin music wafted out and my heart roamed with curiosity: Were my parents in there and were they cha-cha-cha-ing now that Sam Ahn had his first lesson? And what about Mr Bossa Nova? Was he dead yet??? But I couldn’t venture any closer to that scene, not with Adam. Our romance of ten hours—a decade in ship years—was still secret.

Finally, my young hero took my chin and spoke with such sensuality he spoiled me for life: ‘I am in this world, and you are in this world. That’s all that matters.’

The last hour of that first evening covered another year of courtship. Adam and I touched on many topics, mindful of the hourglass. Growing up Asian in England/America (fine/fine—we’d reveal scars later). The schools we attended (Eton College, called a college but not a college at all/East Falls Church High). The music we listened to (Mozart and Cream/The Beatles). Our happiness scale in general (4/7). Our happiness scale that moment (10+/10+). Our belief in God (think not/think maybe). Opposite sex experience (little/very little). College choices (The Sorbonne/William and Mary). Second college choices (Oxford/William and Mary or bust). Our dreams (diamond tycoon aka none/write beautiful books). In days to come, revisionist histories would emerge followed by probing and minor confessions but that first night, all was splendid on this side of the earth as we spied on a few of the ship’s characters: Pam making out with the drummer of The Brazilian Boys, her skirt hiked up her lace-pantied butt and

Max smoking a cigar down on the promenade deck looking relieved to be off stage for a much-craved mute moment. Less entertaining was Mr Bossa Nova emerging from the starlight room with a blonde woman in a little black dress, cocktails in their hands.

I hated him!

Thug!

The urbane Adam wasn't alarmed. 'He's just a ladies' man; there's one on every ship. Every night it's another woman. Last night he had eyes for your mother; tonight, look, he's moved on to someone more his speed. Please don't worry, Margaret.' For some reason, I could not be comforted. 'If he ever tries to lay a hand on your mum—'

'What?'

'He's dead.'

Adam looked out, drunk on sea. 'You know, it's wonderful. Your dream, I mean. Beautiful books? Bravo!' He clapped. 'No wonder you walk around with that little notebook half the time.'

Yikes. It was out there in the open: I wanted to be a writer. Yet I had nothing to show for it. I gulped nakedly. 'It's my journal.'

'I *knew* there was something special about you. Yesterday we were tables apart—I didn't even know who you were, your name—and yet I could feel the sparks fly off your soul,' he said so eloquently he had to be quoting someone. He marvelled at me, at the ocean, as though everything was magical except for him when it was him, all him. 'You're brilliant.'

'Like a *diamond*, you mean?'

'No, like a person.' With hollow admission: 'I know nothing of diamonds, Margaret. They don't interest me in the least. I don't even know why I said that except a diamond tycoon sounds more interesting than a magistrate or a street sweeper, doesn't it? The truth is I don't know what will become of me.'

'None of us do, Adam …'

‘What have you written? Tell me.’

Did I blush? ‘Not much, really. Mostly poems. A few short stories, if you can call them that.’

‘Did you bring them with you?’

‘No.’

‘Who do you read? Chekhov? O. Henry? Kafka? They’re all masters of the short story. Colette, perhaps—virtuoso of love? Do you write like any of them, Margaret?’

D’uh. ‘Do I *write* like them?’

‘Your writing style. Your *prose*!’

‘I don’t know. My prose doesn’t have … a style yet.’

Adam’s fever peaked as if from two opposing forces—the moonlight out there and his own dark cast right here. ‘Margaret, remember earlier today when we spotted that dot of an island way off in the ocean?’

‘Yes.’ We were trying to figure how far away it was; I had guessed three hours but three hours later it hadn’t budged. When I’d joked maybe Gilligan was stranded there, he said Gilligan who.

‘Our waiter Anthony told us it will actually take two days for us to get close enough to it to see that it’s no more than a clump of rocks, three or four trees and a family of birds. But it’s there, that’s what’s important. Like your dream to become a writer. You can see it, can’t you, Margaret? The island—the dream. Oz! I can’t wait for the day you conquer the world, and I can say I knew you when.’

I squinted. I couldn’t see the island, cloaked in night. But maybe it was there. Like Oz.

As I remember this, I want to resist the temptation to sound like a Harlequin romance when I say that the stars showered me like diamonds Adam admitted knowing nothing about. And yet it was true.

I glittered.

I was brilliant.

I could conquer the world!

And so could Uncle Bong, apparently. He might have gone down in Ahn history as the-man-of-the-hour for a day, and in time Ahn life would've resumed on Blue Stone Circle with our walks and our rides and our long shadows cast on late winter afternoons. But I would find out that something life-changing happened when I was kissing Adam Kang, oblivious to the spheres around us. On my way back to my cabin, Fernando tracked me down in the hallway.

'Miss Margaret,' he caught his breath, flushed with excitement, 'did you hear?'

Only the call of love, but that's not what Fernando meant. 'Hear what?'

'Your uncle saved a little girl from drowning in the pool tonight.'

'Are you serious, Fernando? How did that happen?'

'I believe the child fell into the water when her parents weren't looking, and your uncle dove in and scooped her out like a goldfish. It happened so fast, she didn't even cry. Until later, of course.'

'What? Where was the lifeguard?'

Fernando shook his head with disgust. 'Too busy flirting with women—Miss Margaret, pretend you didn't hear that. But your uncle, he's a hero.'

Poetic justice!

Back home, after flunking the written test for a lifeguard position, Uncle Bong would only swim in private—jump the ropes and sneak into Blue Stone Lake before anyone woke up, or after they went to bed so no one could see him, a ghost in water, swimming. Now, everyone could. At least, everyone aboard SS President Roosevelt and, right now, this was the only place that mattered.

'Did you say he's a *hero*?'

'Yes, Miss Margaret, your uncle is a *héroe*.' His smile charmed like no other. 'That's "hero" in my language.'

Journal entry:

The parents of the girl who almost DROWNED, were so grateful to Uncle Bong they wanted to give him a big reward. He wouldn't take it, of course. EVERYONE'S saying he's a hero—not just Fernando! Oh, and there's a rumour going around that the little girl's parents were threatening to sue the ship, but Uncle Bong calmed them down with the promise of private swimming lessons.

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10

Winter 2019

Orchids are amazing earth creatures. They look too exquisite, too ethereal, to weather the harshness of this world. They are not dandelions, which crop back up after you mow them down. They are not clovers, which spring back up after you step on them. But they do make awfully lovely metaphors for life. Orchid plants have theatrical Madame Butterfly-sounding names like Lady Slipper and Snow Butterflies, which imply a delicate nature and was surely the reason my father couldn't keep one alive even when it arrived already in bud or bloom via a delivery man's gloved hands. Maybe someone sneezed or coughed near its pretty face, and days later it died. Not Sam Ahn, though.

Flowery prose aside, let's destroy a myth right now: Orchids are graceful little numbers but not really so fragile. Like people, they crave water and sun. Even a little conversation.

Napping, he mumbled to Mommy in their native tongue. '*Yobo, everything is okay, our kids are all doing well …*'

I set my cocoa down on a gold straw coaster whose weaved-in red symbol of happiness reminded me of where I came from. Like so many Korean *objet d'arts* (scrolls, mother-of-pearl vases) and trinkets (striped silk

pouches, painted wooden sticks for a game called *yut*) the coasters had been hanging around the Ahn household for as long as I could remember. Now, after all these years, they were fraying.

'Dad?'

Tragic-faced, still in Korean—fluency unnecessary to know what my father was saying. '*Yobo, why did you suddenly want to get your driver's license? Didn't I always take you anywhere you wanted to go? Did I ever once complain?*'

I was no longer the girl on the ship looking up into a boy's eyes on the lustiest night of her life—ever. I was not yet the old lady with the shimmery braid closing the cottage door behind her, just back from that bakery-café on a rainy day meant for writing—sweet. I was certainly no orchid, not in any way, shape, form, or twisted metaphor. What was I? And who was I? Fifteen years older than Mommy was when she drove away from this house for the last time.

'Dad!'

'M-M-M …'

Mommy?

Monkey?

Thoughts on losing a dream: Sam Ahn lost his life, his love, in a blink while mine slipped slowly away like a ship in the fog. I don't mean my sweetheart on the sea. I mean Eggman, my sweetheart on land.



From the kitchen a pan sizzled and soon the smell of sesame oil and frying mandoo revived me.

I nudged my father so gently he barely felt it. 'Hey, are you okay?'

He wiped his eyes until a contemporary snapshot came into focus: Margaret, Vivian, Peter, Holly. His family, minus Mommy. He sank a little. He was a lost raft, drifting towards me. *M-M-M* … He wanted to say it,

wanted so badly, but maybe in his drowsiness he was remembering how brutally I once yelled at him in front of God and the Pacific night sky. Even the memory stung.

'Don't you ever call me Monkey again! Never, ever!'

A half-cry: 'Margaret?'

My hand flew to his, still begging forgiveness. 'I'm right here, Dad. I'll always be here.'

'Good.'

'Why don't we eat something? Besides cocoa, all I had today were a few pretzels and trail mix in the car. I'm starving.'

Whoops, I said the off-limit word.

'Then you are *not* starving, Margaret. Please do not use that word so lightly. To a child in Sudan or North Korea, do you know what pretzels and trail mix would mean?'

Me and the ageing Ahn kids: 'A mountain of food!'

Sam Ahn cracked a smile from the old days. 'Yah. Now, let's arm-wrestle to see who gets the first mandoo.'

The formal birthday dinner was planned for seven o'clock when Peter's wife Sun-hee (aka Sunny) and Vivian's husband Mac would show up, each with a grown kid or two plus several grands who would wish their ancient grandfather a happy ninetieth birthday, everyone probably wishing the leftover pickings weren't so slim. It was always that way. We would be hogs, happy to be here hogs, at a nicely set table with free-flowing chianti. Till then, with super-sized chopsticks, Peter was heating up dim-sum portions of chicken wings, mandoo, and japchae for us to snack on. The bulgogi and chunky beef ribs had the luxury of marinating for a few more hours.

Our beloved patriarch sat down at the table with his newspapers, *The Washington Post* and the *Hanguk Ilbo*. We were used to it: the elder, wandering away from the tribe to the calling of a higher

dream/dimension/universe … Whatever soul I had left in me would have laid down and died just to see him jig his heart out.

Go ahead, Dad. We'll laugh and sing like ding-a-lings … and maybe we'll both feel better.

'Mandoo's on!' Peter shouted like a short-order dim-sum chef. My brother's wildly lucrative life today was beyond me. He worked hard for pay and play and despite his long hours, he looked so cherubic people mistook his wife for his mother. Sunny was a good sport about it, though had taken to wearing pink jogging suits and pearly barrettes lately.

Holly set out two appetizer plates of mandoo on the table. Six dumplings per plate, still sizzling. Nearby, a small bowl of dipping sauce—soy sauce, vinegar, diced scallions, and generous cracked pepper. Fragrant!

'I substituted zucchini for bean sprouts,' Holly said, 'and added a dash of wasabi.'

'They zing!' Peter warned me.

'You *made* these?' I asked Holly.

'Why are you surprised? I make them all the time.'

Whether Holly Hobby was drawing or cooking, Mommy was still dying in her arms. Beyond that, I hardly knew her.

'They're to die for,' Vivian moaned like a movie star. 'Did you freeze a batch for me, Holly? Like you always do?'

'Check the freezer.'

'Hey, what about me?' Peter asked, knowing damn well.

'Yours, too.'

The one who leaves the flock is the odd duck. That would be me. I took my chopsticks, dipped a dumpling into sauce, and devoured it whole, inhaling ginger. Eating mandoo under this roof made childhood mandoo memories come flooding back. Made me murmur: 'These are as good as Mommy's.'

My siblings seemed to live by a code: no yelling, no swearing, rare mention of Mommy. Not because they didn’t miss her, but I’m guessing because they missed her too much. One more word might set off weeping, then rain; and then the weeping would grow louder, and the rain would never end.

Changing the topic, I asked what was new in the world of Team Ahn. Their moods lightened up, and the kitchen grew into a vaudeville act. Projects: a condo complex in Old Town, a restaurant row renovation near Eastern Market, a sprawling retail-hotel complex in a place called Potomac Yards.

Yada yada yada. That was all fine and dandy, and I did ask. But this was Mommy’s home. She lived and cooked and worried and loved her family here. She should still be with us, we should still feel her, if only in conversation and tears.

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11

Summer 1969

Whenever Mommy was missing, we knew where she was, down in the bowels of SS President Roosevelt, either laundering or ironing. Here, she and her fellow starlight room glamour pusses—having woken up from their chiffon-veiled dreams—went back to being scarf-wearing mothers dealing with snotty noses, sunburns, and dirty laundry.

To get there, you had to negotiate down a steep staircase that gave you the feeling you were leaving the castle for the dungeon, so narrow you had to turn sideways with your basket. Larger ladies struggled, yearning for last night's flattering candlelight. At the bottom of the stairs, you had to turn right or left. Turning right was a brighter journey that led you to a beauty parlour and a gift shop. Turning left led you to the grey doom of the laundry room; or one door down to the ironing room. With each step, the air got more steamy and more bleached, with the promise of paradise lost, at least for two hours.

It was almost supernatural how Fernando would come to Mommy's rescue to carry her dirty clothes down and her fresh clothes back up. '*Wait, Mrs Ahn, please wait!'* Whenever her hands reached for the laundry basket, he seemed to appear out of thin air.

Except for the one time she needed him.



Our father was not a thoughtless man, but he was a man who had certain expectations of Mommy just as we were children who took her for granted as our very own raven-haired Betty Crocker. And, so, we never flinched when she was missing, when she was down, down, way down below near the grey whales. She was a wife and mother first, a lady on vacation second.

We, more than she, were at fault for not flinching. Whether she felt fine or resentful, was not our business. Mommy kept her core to herself; her children were not privy. Only after her death did I reconsider her history—who she was besides Mommy: a war victim. But squint and see—it was always with her, in her whispers whenever she stirred rice into a savoury broth to make *gukbap*. And there again, in her face, crinkly with memory whenever she gazed at the only photograph of her with her father, a stamp-sized black-and-white ancient image encased in a gold frame above a miniature Korean chest in their bedroom. They are sitting on a wooden bench or ledge, holding hands. He, with the finely chiselled face of an emperor. She, so young in the picture, before the war that would destroy everything broke out … Not until I was an adult, and she was gone, did her existence before Blue Stone come to light for me. In fact, in 1969 it barely registered in my hemisphere. Decades later, whether in tribute or to ease my conscience or just because people grow contemplative with age, Mommy's early life would glint through my conscious, like pearls once lost and scattered all over the ocean floor. Shared by my father, one pearl from a strand:

She had a beloved fifth brother, name never uttered to her loud American kickball-playing children. But in 1944, with her mother screaming, he was dragged away by the Japanese Army at age nineteen. That was the last time she ever saw him, except in her thoughts. And when she thought of him and

how he doted on her, teased her, as the youngest child and only girl in a family of eight, when she remembered his last words to her—*'So long—no more tickling you to tears until my return!'*—she would put down whatever was in her hands—the laundry, the peanut butter knife, the watering can—and pray in the Virginia suburbs.

So, whenever Mommy was sorting laundry and ironing, our father might be swimming laps or reading a paperback book in a pool chair, soaking wet with sun-squinting joy; Peter might be practising 'A Kiss to Build a Dream On' on the piano while tap dancers tripped; Holly might be in the kiddie room with her crepe paper creations and broken heart.

Meanwhile—minus breakfast and dinner times where five tables separated us like the ocean—I was always with Adam whether Mommy was holding a hot iron or not. From sunrise to sunset, he was my sweetheart and angel, til Saturday do us part. My loyalties lay with Adam as if we'd been married fifty years. He had, after all, given me a great gift: the confidence to love, and be loved. Holly, the dreaming-turned-suffering sister who, with one pursed-lip or snort might make me believe otherwise, was relegated to the background of cruise noises and squawking skies; not even the silently explosive air in our cabin unnerved me. Surely her soul was riddled with pain, silently shouting, '*You're acting like delinquents, stop it, stop it*,' but, look, I had Holly's company for the rest of my life.

I had Adam for one week.

And our time was ticking.

By Day Three, our love was out in the open. Even the sweetly dippin' seagulls knew about Margaret Ahn and Adam Kang. On ship stationary, Fernando drew a cartoon of us riding the waves on a bicycle-for-two, signed *FQ*. And when Max was officially introduced to Adam, he shook his hand with a friendly-Frankenstein warning, 'Be a gentleman or one of these days your food will taste funny. Ha, ha, ha, ha!'

On a similar axis, Uncle Bong was now the furthest thing from an asterisk on the passenger list. Indeed, he was a headliner, reaching cult status to those in the know. Climbing up the ladder to the lifeguard stand—yes, he was asked to fill in for an hour here, an hour there—and seating himself on a throne beneath the great Pacific sky had to be a fantasy come true.

I recorded it all.

Journal entry:

If there was a popularity contest today, Uncle Bong would win, HANDS DOWN!

Naturally, we would wave to each other but there was little time to waste on actual talk because destiny was calling, and unlike our parallel moves around Blue Stone Circle, Uncle Bong and I were on different paths now, unearthing our buried selves like treasure even though I knew the ride wouldn't last forever and we'd circle back together again within the border of home.

When Uncle Bong began eating his meals with various ship crew at a table relegated close to the kitchen in the dining room, betrayal crossed my father's face.

'It looks like Uncle Bong has a new family.' He hmphed.

'He just having fun,' Mommy said. 'Grown man deserve fun, *yobo*. First time, have buddy-buddy.'

'Yah,' my father supposed so.

Mommy was right. Uncle Bong had found something much bigger than his desire to cater to the family or even speed around Blue Stone Circle in a cool yellow Bug. Friends.

Journal entry:

If it zoom-zoomed through the dining hall RIGHT NOW, Uncle Bong wouldn't bat an eye!

Even though my heart was at Adam's table, I would never, ever dream of eating with the Kangs. Not only would that break my father's heart in two, but I would hear that crack for eternity. And even though Uncle Bong was a full-grown adult, frankly it was shocking to see my uncle eating with others, outside of the Ahn circle. Everything about him, like a happy orphan in a newly found home, was different if not altered. His posture, his laughter, as if our Uncle Bong had left the building—or should I say ship.

Now, officially in and out of our vacation picture, just a quick glimpse, wave or hello here and there, it seems Uncle Bong *had* adopted a new family. And something in Sam Ahn did indeed break.



Max and Fernando were mysteries to me. Did they have lives and wives and children on land? What were their homes like? Who were they sans uniforms? I couldn't picture Max mowing a lawn or Fernando speaking out at the PTA. I couldn't picture either one driving a car to Safeway or picking up food at Ding Wow's. On separate occasions—the two men were acquainted but hustled about in different quarters of the ship—I inquired to friendly but blank-sky replies.

From Fernando: 'Miss Margaret, my life is not too lively. I work. I eat. I take breaks, like now. It is *you* we must talk about!'

'Did you ever think about becoming an artist?'

He smiled. 'No.'

'You should paint a real picture and sell it to a museum.'

This time he laughed. 'I must go now, Miss Margaret. Your brother is waiting for me.'

I thought *I* was Fernando's special friend. 'My brother? Where?'

'In the ping-pong room. We are tied two-two.'

And from Max: 'Why, I live right here, Monkey-Blossom.'

'No, that can't be true, Max. Where's your *real* home?'

‘Hmm, my real home, my real home, my …’

‘Max!’

‘Well,’ he took my hand like a cherished leaf, ‘I wish it was in Blue Stone, right next to the fabulous Ahn family! Every day would be a party.’

Eventually, I resigned myself to the fact that Max and Fernando were indeed my soul-maties—but only within the ship’s parameters.



Our parents notwithstanding, Adam and I were the young darlings of SS President Roosevelt, handholding even as we swam. We might never see each other’s homes or bedrooms, we might never walk down a school hallway together, we might never know love on land, but we knew each other the way people do when their love has a death sentence.

With no nonsense urgency.

‘Don’t cry, Margaret.’

But on night three I cried anyway, into his shoulder. ‘Nearly half our time is up! And we just met!’

The ocean was portrait-still. The night sky, too. Both would still be here, unchanged, in a million years. But not us, not Adam and me. In four days, we would go our separate ways. In decades, we’d be dead.

Clocked romance meant a doomed horizon.

‘I know,’ he said with true lament. ‘But must we talk about it? Now?’

‘You don’t even care!’

‘I do!’ He cupped my head with his hand and squeezed it all over like a luscious grapefruit. ‘Margaret, if I live to be a hundred, I won’t ever forget you.’

In a swift move, he locked himself behind me and we faced the Pacific Ocean together. How vast and magical the world looked when my eyes were new. His breath was hot honey in my ear.

‘Adam?’

‘Margaret.’

‘Why do you like me?’

‘Why wouldn’t I, silly?’

‘Holly is prettier.’

‘Well, I only noticed you,’ he softly argued—diplomatically.

‘You don’t find her pretty?’

‘I don’t find her anything. I mean, yeah, she’s pretty, I suppose. Like a pom-pom girl. But you have something else, something brooding about you. Like you smoke long cigarettes or have deep, dark thoughts.’

‘I don’t smoke.’

‘But you do have deep, dark thoughts, don’t you?’

‘I guess. Maybe.’

‘You’re going to grow up to be this sultry thing, Miss Margaret of Blue Stone. And you don’t even know it!’

‘I don’t even know what sultry means, Mr Adam of Belgravia.’

We cranked our heads—mine right, his left—and smooched a little.

‘Adam, what will you remember most about me?’

‘That you wore yellow sunglasses.’

‘And?’

‘And how red your face turned when you won the limbo contest. *Tomahto* red.’

‘Gee, thanks.’

His voice, lit and comical: ‘I’m teasing you.’

‘Oh.’

He gushed abruptly, ‘I’ll remember everything!’

And right then I wondered who we would have been had we been raised not in the United States and the United Kingdom but in Korea. We would be our Korean names, Mihei and Il-Hong, not Margaret and Adam. We would bow but not kiss. We would be other people speaking in hushed, formal tones. Stripped of Western influence, our walks and talks and gestures, the

way we chewed our food, would be Korean. Our heartbeats, too. Neither a Gilligan nor a Golliwog would mean a thing to us. We would look right at home sitting on a fishing boat waving to a National Geographic photographer. Yet, we were who we were.

'I'll remember the way your hair smells and moves and our first kiss which was your first-ever kiss,' he spoke ever-so-sentimentally.

Punishing him: 'But not yours.'

'No …'

'Tell me about your first kiss.'

'No …'

'Please?'

'And I'll remember that you were a lucky girl,' Adam wisely steered course, 'who had a dream and parents who loved you.' He propped his chin on the top of my head and a thousand times over the decades I've wished for a snapshot of that moment when I shivered like a glittering sea goddess. At fourteen! 'I have neither,' he declared.

'Adam.' I paused clumsily. 'Your parents must love you, they're just … kind of creepy about it.'

He hugged me—too hard—with a jagged laugh. His heart, his essence, was mine lock and key, but his life in England was under wraps, belonging to a sad soul all his own. In the past two days, I got fleeting glimpses of it, and it was like seeing the one you want run from you through rain and fog and you want to stop him, capture him, tell him all is well but can't because then you'd be lying. His father sounded cruel, and his mother had no mind of her own. Older sister Isabelle was too beautiful and bitter for her own good and used it to hurt every young man who had hurt her when she was a schoolgirl with a bowl haircut, leading them on only to shatter their hearts. '*Isabelle is a belle*,' Adam had said, '*a revengeful, pill-popping one*.' One so-called 'bloke' was hospitalized for depression and the day Isabelle heard the news she celebrated by skipping through Carnaby Street and buying

sequined things, her other addiction. She was here, on the ship, and by now I'd seen her in the dining room two or three times—a sullen-looking young woman with a widow's air. Without hearts to hurt here, Isabelle stayed in her cabin most of the time.

The Kangs lived in a mansion near the Korean Embassy in a section of London called Belgravia, a short stroll from Buckingham Palace. Despite their obvious wealth, their home, their servants, their drivers, and tailored clothes, despite Mr Kang's diplomat status, Adam claimed that most Brits took one look at them and lumped them in with the all the other 'Chinkys'; thus, joining the lowly ranks of 'Wogs', 'Nig nogs', 'Darkies', and 'Pakis'. Over there, name-calling, along with dental services were freely used.

During the school year, Adam lived in a boarding house at Eton even though the school was only twenty miles from his home, about the same distance as Blue Stone to my father's office in Washington, D.C. And strangely, he said he never felt an open invitation to come home and visit. No wonder he thought so lowly of himself. I was glad to hear of his cricket mates, particularly Jon whom Adam referred to as a 'rockin' wicket-keeper'. In love with an older working girl named Trudy (wild afro, designed jewellery), Jon played electric guitar in a rock 'n' roll band called The Velveteens. Adam envied his friend for dismissing the rules.

He perked up. 'Hey, I just thought of something.'

'What is it?'

'We'll see the island tomorrow, Margaret.'

My Napoleonic moment had long floated out to sea. Conquer the world? I shrugged. 'It's just an island.'

'No,' he argued gently, 'it's your Oz.' To my '*eh*': 'Look, literature is rich with symbolism. We've got the building in *The Fountainhead* and the bug in *The Metamorphosis*. In *Moby Dick*, the ocean is a metaphor for life itself.' The age and Eton education gap made me self-conscious of the ocean that separated us. Not five tables but life itself. 'Don't say an island is

an island is an island or there is no *there* there unless you're Gertrude Stein.'

Say what?

Gertrude who?

Journal entry:

> Why did I ever open my big fat mouth in the first place? A dream was a dream was a dream best kept secret. Too late. I was a fraud with a dumb journal. When I get home, they're all going in the GARBAGE.

'I've never written anything longer than a few pages,' I admitted. 'And I've never actually typed a word. I mean, I want to.' My voice faded to nothing, like me. 'I just haven't.'

'Well, you shall,' he said with a ferocity that masked his lack of. 'You'll go back to Blue Stone and take that first step. Roll that sheet of paper in the typewriter and type a hundred words, a thousand words, keep typing til your fingers cramp and you can't type any more. Promise me you will. Please? It's all I'll ever ask of you.'

I sank. Me, in Blue Stone, without Adam. Down in the library, alone. My feet turned to stone, too heavy to ever lug me down those steps again. It was so nice on the deck, so bright and lively in the moonlight. I never felt so alive.

'Margaret?'

'Okay.'

'You promise?'

'I said okay.'

'And forget what I said the other night, about conquering the world. No, no,' he changed his mind, 'don't *completely* forget it. But write for the sheer heaven of writing, too. For you and no one else.'

Fickle words from the dreamless one.

'And what about you, Adam?'

‘If my father has anything to do with it, I’m to enter the world of high finance.’

‘What’s the world of high finance?’

He sighed brokenly. ‘A *stupid* way to spend a life.’

‘Then don’t do it!’ I cried. To his ‘*tsk*’: ‘Please,’ I quietly added.

We fell silent as the ship cruised slowly under a midnight blue tent of punched-out stars.

‘And you, Margaret? What will you remember about me?’

I turned around and saw his face in a halo of light; his wire-rimmed lenses opalescent as moons. He was tall for a Korean male of his generation, standing a full head above me. Perfect.

‘Everything!’

And I did.

Journal entry:

No matter who I marry, Adam Kang will always be THE LOVE OF MY LIFE …

My parents tended to frown on our romance but having lived through Vivian’s long-haired boyfriends pulling their GTOs and Harleys up to our curb, this was a breeze. Short and sweet. Puppy love! And Adam, with his Korean features and British manners, crisply dressed from head to toe, was a sparkling prince in their eyes, not an American hippie boy. Upon introduction—Day Three, on the deck, in the moments following their second private dance lesson in the starlight room—my sweetheart declared, in Korean, how honoured he was to meet them.

‘*Oma*,’ Mommy had remarked. She fanned herself, still flushed from, let’s say, a tango.

The lesson—another good one!—had not left Sam Ahn’s bones, either. Apparently, a variety of popular dance steps were being crammed into their one-hour instruction, ranging from cha-cha-cha to samba to foxtrot to tango, everything but go-go. Decked out in his straw hat and peach-

coloured Hawaiian shirt, he swayed like Fred Astaire after a few Mai Tais. ‘Your fluency is most impressive. I hear no trace of an accent.’

Disgraced, I shuffled in my Dr. Scholl’s.

Adam refused any praise and tried to steer the conversation to English. ‘Korean is my first language, sir. I was born on Jeju Island two months before the Korean War ended.’

But my father stuck to Korean when he replied, ‘Is that right?’

I followed what they were saying until a shuffleboard disc hit my foot and knocked out all my interpretative powers. Mommy, feeling sorry for me: ‘Margaret speak French,’ she boasted. ‘So easy for her. Open book, memorize everything!’

‘Yah,’ my father beamed, ‘she was the top French student in her class.’

Don’t say it, don’t say it, please don’t say it!

‘Our Monkey is a genius.’

‘Dad!’ I cried.

Adam laughed out loud. *‘Et qui est Monkey*?’

‘*C’est moi,’* I groaned.

‘Ah! Bonjour, Monkey! Tres gentil de vous rencontrer.’

Before I knew it, my father was engaging Adam in gay Paree café conversation too rich for my blood. Eternal gent and angel, Adam humoured my father, Mr Happy Feet, who was hopping around on the deck like a bird in paradise.

Mommy and I walked off hand-in-hand in the tropical sunshine, leaving the boys to their French ‘yakity-yakity’, as she would say. Her hair, in a French twist, was unravelling and she fanned her neck, treating me to musk of Pond’s Cold Cream and Avon crème sachet.

Close my eyes. Smell her.

My father, I had decided, could have Adam for ten minutes, tops. Had I looked into a crystal ball and realized our hourglass wasn’t the only one running out, I would’ve given up my first love on the spot forever for more

time with Mommy. And had I known the why and how of it, I would never have left her side, not until we were safely docked.

My parents approved of Adam but prohibited us from kissing. I amended the law: never out in the open, in broad daylight. Little lovebirds that we were, we dove into countless dark corners. You can't imagine how many nooks and crannies existed on a ship that size! We found them all.



One would assume that the only two Korean families aboard SS President Roosevelt would gravitate towards each other. But Mr and Mrs Kang, austere and reserved, would have nothing to do with us. In their eyes, the Ahns from America were *sangmins*, beneath them, too poor to pay for our passage out of our own pockets. And my Uncle Bong, the aproned worker at the lunch buffet—hero to many, lowly misfit to them. No doubt they didn't approve of their First Son spending so much time with me. Adam never came out and said so, but sparing introductions said it all.

Naturally, Mrs Kang never had to touch a laundry basket—her husband had hired the ship's maid service. Scoffing at such extravagance, my father's English cussing was not exactly his forte:

'That son-of-a-pitch is Kang of England, not king of England!'

As far as I was concerned, Adam's parents were on another voyage, on another sea.

Journal entry:

If his snothead father so much as glances my way I'll shoot him the EVIL EYE!

How dare a man with two fake wives judge us?



Years later, my Eggman, ever the historian, wondered whether there was more to this class-division than met the eye; that politics might have come into play as both fathers were well-connected and South Korea was in turmoil in the years following the Korean War.

‘Em, didn’t the Kangs live beyond a diplomat’s salary means? It sounded that way. Did his father hold that position before the 1960 *coup d’etat* of President-elect Syngman Rhee?’

All Eggman got from me was a shrug. My time with Adam excluded world affairs.

When questioned by Eggman, who loved a good roundtable discussion, my father merely listened with a locked jaw, offering him another Scotch but no details. When it came to Korean politics, Sam Ahn never did.

‘Only Ahn politics matter now. ’ He had chuckled.

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Winter 2019

Adam had called me a lucky girl. He was dreamless, he was darling, and he was dead wrong. Life is kinder to those who never had their hearts set on one island. There are so many other islands where you can grow orchids or play the fiddle. Join a book club or take up yoga. Someone will scoot over on a couch or a mat. Make room for you. Nice! But I was exiled from that island, in some lost atlas where Nabokov was tending the butterfly exhibit at the Smithsonian and Graham Greene was an Iraqi war correspondent. Yes, Margaret Ahn, less brainy and less brilliant than such gods, long ago struck down by pen paralysis, roaming alone in her dreams in a Blue Stone removed from the real Blue Stone, in some soulless place where every tree and building and street sign warped out, morphed out, and the hope for a sweet sacred warm-honey whisper from someone, anyone, or a cameo appearance of my father and his mighty jig, just to make my once-life real for me again, was good as gone.

O the seas never changed but our lives did.



Peter began shuffling a deck of cards.

‘Rummy’s on!’

The G-rated Ahn kids took their seats with our father, the noshing spectator. Years ago, Monopoly was his game. His good fortune for acquiring highbrow properties—Park Place and Boardwalk—always put him in a playful mood, especially with a Scotch and a bowl of salted cashews. Of course, the family preferred to play when Vivian was away at school. On a winning streak, she was only too bouncy-giddy to refresh the table with snacks and sodas. But what a sore loser, throwing dice like wrath-of-God lightning.

Mid-mandoo, our father got up and hobbled off like a man on crutches. Sadly, he was getting too creaky to do the second widowed-walk any more.

Hands dealt, the Ahn kids fanned their cards and engaged in small talk, party talk, only about the living. The Good Life.

Last week, Peter’s grandson Justin began taking lessons in a ‘Tennis for Toddlers’ camp and was having a BALL. Vivian’s granddaughter, Cecilia, would be competing in a middle school cello competition in Boston next month while twin Tess placed in some junior league golf tournament and had a crush on her instructor, a former golf pro—don’t get Vivian started. Meanwhile, Holly’s cat, Heaven, was waiting for her mistress to come home and put the finishing touches on her cat-portrait. The eyes, the eyes—couldn’t get them glassy enough.

‘That kitty’s a statue,’ Vivian said, forever crowning the cat with compliments—for Holly’s sake. ‘Heaven strikes a *purr*fect pose.’

‘Such a fine feline,’ Peter said with the echo of a boy who always stayed at home like it was raining when it wasn’t. That millennium he loved Mommy more than God and all His angels.

‘Yes, unlike you two clowns,’ Holly said with refreshing laughter. To me, an obligatory explanation: ‘Neither one could sit still for their portraits. Peter was taking calls and Vivian was eating Doritos. I was *this* close to painting—’

‘Peter on the phone and Vivian eating chips!’ admitted the two guilty parties.

High five!

O the games Team Ahn played. The years of poses and cat talk and shared bags of Doritos. Frozen mandoo in freezers. Triumphant high fives.

The lost years.

Out of nowhere, my father—was he trembling?—shook his loving fist my way. ‘You can write here! It’s not too late! I promise you my ninety-year-old eyes will read slowly and savour every word.’

Words? what words?

‘Are you talking to me, Dad?’

‘Yah.’

Margaret was back in the spotlight as our round of Rummy was getting underway.

‘When you were a small girl, Margaret, seven or eight, you handed me a poem you wrote. I was busy with a work report and asked you to show it to me over the weekend. But you never did. When I later asked you for the poem, you said you couldn’t find it.’

I was twelve, actually. ‘I doubt it was any good, Dad.’

‘But children need encouragement, and I discouraged you by not reading it on the spot.’ He raised his arms like Jesus, drunk with praise and regret. ‘You could’ve gone on to win the Pulitzer Prize!’

‘If you read my poem?’

‘Yah.’

Meanwhile, Peter was pretending to sneak a peek at Holly’s hand. She shooed him away with a Joker. Vivian threw down a five of Hearts.

Backflash. Something long forgotten and blurred was developing in my brain matter like a Polaroid picture. Somewhere on the cruise ship, below sea level, there lived and breathed Las Vegas life. In our whirlwind running around, Adam and I had accidentally stumbled through the smoky lounge—

once and only once—on the way to somewhere else, who knows where. Dark and clubby with men at tables playing cards and drinking bourbon from small clinking glasses even at ten in the morning, it felt forbidden. It felt like hell. I spotted Uncle Bong in the midst, puffing a cigar, cajoling, having the time of his life. When he saw me, he jumped out of his skin and out of his seat.

'Monkey!' he cried.

Adam took my arm. 'Let's get out of here.' And we kept moving like we didn't hear him.

A clearer picture emerged when Uncle Bong began serving tables in the dining room. The story was that when a waiter had caught some nasty bug and was confined to his room, he again volunteered his services. Once 'King Bong' got the hang of it, it was obvious he was well-suited for the job, born in a tuxedo and presenting plates of gourmet cuisine with flair. Suddenly suave, bearing no resemblance to the Ding Wow's worker of just months ago. Or was it just weeks ago? Even his features grew intelligent, as if fate, once deforming, remoulded them with magic clay. His big brother, forever First Son, was more perturbed than ever.

Dad: '*He is a guest, not a crew member!'*

Mommy: '*Yobo, this is Bong's vacation. Let him have fun time. Plus, they are pay him! Make him feel good.'*

'Margaret, what do you say we go to Cafe Charming in Annandale tomorrow? After our cemetery visit.'

All eyes shot up. Our father's birthday visit to the cemetery was always a private party, no children. Only one guest of honour, Sam Ahn, would preside over the matriarch's grave with a grand but orchid-less bouquet.

'They have quite exceptional bubble tea and chestnut pound cake that tastes good and fattening. It's not too far from the cemetery, in Seoul Viet Shopping Center. The shops and restaurants are all Korean or Vietnamese-owned, even The Book Nook, where Mrs Kim purchases Korean sheet

music for her church. Maybe we can wander in there, too, Margaret. Yah, the company of books may inspire you.'

'Wait—you want *me* to come with you to the cemetery, Dad?'

'Yah. I will drive.'

At ninety? Yes, otherwise I might make a wrong turn like Mommy.

'The weather lady says tomorrow the temperatures will be milder and the sky glorious,' he said. His glow grew evangelistic. 'All will be cause for celebration!'

Or divine intervention. Certain elements would be in place for a sun-piercing miracle: Sam Ahn's birthday; his wife nearby in her casket; Margaret, known in his soul as Monkey, by his side; no goose droppings on the grounds (he always phoned the caretaker's office in advance); and, above all, coming home to orchids in bloom. Yet, in the most silent shadowy braided twist of my being, maybe I was grateful for that. Never-blooming orchids kept something alive.

Hope, however abstract.

Vivian slapped down her hand and declared 'Rummy!' with red-hot glee —proof that she still had to wear the winning smile.

Then father and son headed downstairs for a friendly game of ping-pong.

Ping, *pong*, *ping*, *pong* …

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13

Summer 1969

Neither Adam nor I participated in the Aloha Show. It would only take time we didn't have away from us, our hourglass. We had no grains of sand to offer. Now that the small but symbolic island had come and gone, it would, like us, only exist from now on in our minds' eye, lest someday we cruise once again on these mythical seas and spot it and each other—not likely. Maybe in the back of our minds—behind the curtains and clutter and bullshit—we could envision our futures as lonely still-life figures on park benches in different hemispheres, barely breathing, barely seeing, mistaking trash on the ground for pigeons; and cringed at the prospect of recalling the other as merely, '*Oh, yeah, that girl/boy, on that ship*.' Better to remember, however faint, the electric hitch in our slim hips as we walked to the dance floor, the sunglasses coming off, the innocent glitter of our faces at night, and feel a shiver of something. Anything.

Journal entry:

But in the end, will I remember any of this? Or am I just a dumb romantic?

We did spy, though, one rehearsal afternoon, from two to four. Like a friendly two-headed monster, we peered into the moonlight room where

they were taking place on the so-called stage, a dance floor sectioned off by masking tape. By now, Adam and I were Siamese in soul—his Asian Shakespearian brain-blowing beauty meant very little by now and he was just Adam, my Adam, part of me, cheek-to-cheek—and it felt like it would always be this way, despite the ugly reality that crept up every so often, like a deformity best hidden under the blanket. One would give the other a look, *the* look, and a crush of sadness would follow. We shared that, too.

Beautiful.

From what we could gather through glass, the Aloha Show production promised to be much like Pam herself. A shipwreck. One minute laughing, the next near tears, always distracted—not fun to watch. When someone went in or out of the moonlight room, the chaos of amateur can-can girls, go-go dancers, tap dancers, jugglers, acrobats, and magicians came alive. Loudly. At one point, Adam caught the door with his foot to make the entertainment last.

'Now, listen, listen up, everybody! Girls, hula to the music as you come on stage. Then line up and keep dancing. When Pedro hits his cymbals, the first dancer, Anitha, you'll step right here, no, *right here in front*, I said, please, in the middle of the stage, please—*what's the matter with you, do you need glasses, can't you see where I'm pointing?*—and solo. When you hear the cymbals again, hula back to your spot in line and, Margie, that means it's your turn to step out and hula away. Now, girls, listen for your cue! Don't start daydreaming and miss your cue or it fouls everyone up. Yes, Beth? *What is it?*'

A strawberry-blonde girl stepped forward.

'We look stupid!'

Cringing, Adam let go of the door.

'They do,' he agreed.

Day Four and two more rehearsals left, only a miracle like the seas parting would get this show off the ground. Only if the seas parted.

The ship's singer June Dickerson or Dickenson, an older woman of fifty with Connie Francis or Annette Funicello hair, whose claim to fame was an appearance on the Mike Douglas or Merv Griffith Show, was set to perform the opening and closing numbers while Peter played the piano. Otherwise, my brother was merely a prop onstage during the entire rehearsal except for the occasional finger flourish which suited him just fine. He looked remarkably at home up there. No pressure to speak of; no moving from his seat. And with his driver's manual propped up with his sheet music, he might be memorizing which vehicle had the right of way at a four-way stop or playing 'At Last' if not with heart, then dedication.

'Your sis is up there.' Adam pointed out.

'Holly?'

Yes, Holly. And she looked very eager to go-go.

Meanwhile, The Brazilian Boys didn't give a damn. Crushing cigarette butts on the floor, snickering left and right. By day they wore sheer black shirts with parrot prints, and by night, white suits. They were admittedly a devilishly handsome lot with Pedro, Pam's drummer boy, taking the cake. No wonder he had other girlfriends on board, two at least.

Adam and I saw all.

'Pam's a fool,' Adam squirmed at the very sight of her, 'to get involved with such rubbish. In the end, maybe she's no better.'

'Maybe she's just having a summer *fling*,' I said, quoting Vivian's self-described romance last Fourth of July with a lifeguard she met at Ocean City. After he wrote her one too many letters, he was recast as a pain in the ass.

'No, look at her, she's bonkers. Hopelessly. Yet she's got to know he hasn't got a faithful bone in his body. He looks at every girl with bedroom eyes, including you. Bastard.'

I shushed him. 'Adam!'

‘Sorry, but you know us Brits. We can’t help but name-call. *Bastard*’s nothing. I’m sorry,’ he teased me, ‘did the B-word make your pretty little ears sting?’

Yes, but not *bastard*, the other B-word. *Bedroom*. Our intimacy was instant and oceanic, abstractly erotic, but shaped by certain coordinates, mainly age. To me, the concept of real, live humping sex was like the International Date Line SS President was reported to cross at some point in the Pacific after our departure: I couldn’t see it. Not until years later did it occur to me that for all our ducking and hiding, Adam had his own private cabin. The thought of sneaking off there never occurred to us. Or me, anyway.

‘Just keep it down,’ I said.

‘Her mind isn’t even on the show; it’s on whether he’ll come around for her after tonight’s Coketail party. Most likely he won’t. He’ll be with Girl Number Two or Three.’

‘Or Number Four, for all we know.’

To my surprise, Adam said, ‘Don’t ever lie to yourself like Pam. That would sadden me.’

‘I won’t …’

‘I want to remember you as a girl whose dream was bigger than some horny drummer, or whatever.’

My love for him flung to my fist then his shoulder. ‘Why are you talking this way? You’re just going to forget me anyway!’

‘No!’ he vehemently denied. ‘No! Margaret!’

‘You don’t care about me!’

Adam was stunned by the first in a series of love-spats over our remaining days, spats that quelled quickly because it all boiled down to one scary reality: I had to live the rest of my life without him.

‘Why on earth would you say that, Margaret?’

‘Because,’ I began, no doubt pouting, ‘you act like we’re never going to see each other again.’

To which he stuttered while I got weepy. We fell into the shadows; that is, the shade of a big umbrella. *Don’t cry, don’t cry*, I pleaded with myself, *not now.* Too soon, I would leave the ship, leave Adam who would sail on to Yokohama. Who would he talk to, ask to dance, swim with? Our spellbinding underwater-like dream was coming to an end. Once my Dr. Scholl’s hit dry land, it was all over.

I would clomp off, alone.

‘We never will, will we, Adam? We’ll never see each other again.’

He winced. ‘I hope to, really and truly …’

‘We *must*, even if it’s years from now …’

‘The thing is, you won’t love me when you’re all grown up, Margaret. Right now, you think you will, but you won’t. You’ll see me for who I am. Or am not.’

‘Stop it! When you say such ridiculous things, they’ll start sounding true to you and you’ll start believing them.’

Journal entry:

Can you believe I said something so mature? Where’d that come from?

‘I’m not like you, Margaret. I have no real character to speak of. No hobbies or passions of my own. Maybe a thought or two, that’s it. That’s all I am.’

‘I said, stop it. Please.’

‘But I’ll write you.’ He humbly offered as someone who would, were he as regal as he looked, give up his crown but never his self-loathing. ‘Will you write to me, Margaret? Will you write me back?’

‘What a dumb question. Yes!’

‘But for how long?’

I wanted to say *forever*, wanted to say it so badly if pangs could kill, I'd be dead. But I didn't want him to think I was someone who lied to herself like Pam.

'How long do you *want* me to write you, Adam?'

Blindly, frantically, he fished for my hands. Once found, he exclaimed, 'Forever!'

Journal entry:

Yes, yes, a million times YES!!!

We split up to change into our bathing suits.

In the corridor a man was headed in my direction. Something like sirens went off in my head before I saw him. No typical dad in Bermuda shorts, he was a bronzed Casanova in white slacks and a white shirt wide open to his navel. *Ew!* His gait was flamboyant and foreign as if he was ready to break out in a samba to the theme song from *A Man and a Woman*. My brain went berserk. Mr Bossa Nova! I had never seen him this close or early in the day. Without a drink in his hand, he looked like he was missing a body part. My fourteen-year-old senses went into shock.

SOMEBODY LOCK HIM UP!

We passed each other; me, glaring, him, preoccupied.

What made him think Mommy was the kind of woman who would up and leave her husband alone at the table? Dance with a tomcat like *him*? The term *sadistic pleasure* was nowhere in my vocabulary, yet instinctively I knew this had nothing to do with romance and everything to do with harming Mommy. By the time I reached my cabin, my fever nearly set the ship on fire.

I about-faced and flew after him. Momentarily, a voice came up behind me:

'Miss Margaret!'

I kept running. 'What, Fernando?'

Fernando stepped in with me and kept up the pace, amused. ‘Why in such a hurry? Are The Beatles on board?’

‘I want to see where that man is going.’

He squinted, making out the back of a person’s head. ‘Another boyfriend, Miss Margaret?’ Worried he had offended me: ‘Just joking.’

When the man-in-question turned a corner, Fernando recognized who we were chasing. He blocked me cold in a move that would make more sense to me later. ‘Why are you following him?’

‘I’ll explain later, Fernando. Please move!’ I begged him.

‘He do something to you? Your family?’

‘Yes,’ I replied as I took off in hot pursuit, Fernando on my tail. Down the hallway, up the stairs. We were flying, flapping bats! Outside, the sun was blinding but we blinked until the image of Mr Bossa Nova developed like a negative—creepily. He was leaving the deck, heading up to the moonlight room. Fernando blocked me again, stone cold this time, as I watched Mr Bossa Nova slip inside. Away from the corridors and in the sunlight, Fernando looked different to me.

‘He asked Mommy to dance,’ I stammered.

His tic was distinctly Cuban. ‘And you are angry about this, no?’

‘I’m angry about this, yes!’

‘And if you go through that door, Miss Margaret, what do you intend to say to him?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Will you threaten him?’

‘I don’t know!’

‘Miss Margaret, I know you only a few days but already you are my dear and valuable friend, and I hope with all my heart you will listen to me.’

The way defiant girls do, I crossed my arms.

‘Enjoy your vacation and forget about this man,’ he said.

‘I can’t!’

‘I beg you.’

‘Who is he, Fernando?’ I pleaded. ‘Please tell me.’

Fernando glanced at his watch and succumbed with a sigh that said so many things. Among which, bellhop duties were calling.

‘His name is Senor Trujillo. He is the manager of the Brazilian cha-cha band. I should say he is their king. But in Cuba, we have a different word for men like him.’

‘El creepo?’

‘*Escoria*.’

‘Which means?’

‘Trash.’

Like two porpoises in the pool, Adam and I swam in sync, putting on a silly show for the sunbathers that afternoon. A splash but a world away were my parents in the starlight room. Right about now they were halfway through their dance lesson. Every minute, every move, was serious business.

Tomorrow, Night Five:

The Samba Contest!

So, we were safe. Adam Kang and Margaret Ahn, resident lovebirds, could hold hands as we swam. Steal kisses, too! But only underwater and fleetingly—Max, on an iced tea break, was watching us. Even poolside sans tuxedo, Max Blossom epitomized the ideal cruise ship head waiter, composed and on duty. The pool was his table, and the deck, his dining room.

Hello, Monkey-Blossom, he nodded.

Hello, Max, I nodded back.

Adam broke the sweet spell.

‘It was utterly insane of you to follow him,’ he said, referring to Mr Bossa Nova. Without his specs, Adam always looked bald to me at first, or like he was someone else, until I got used to it. ‘Don’t do that again, Margaret. What were you thinking?’

‘I wasn’t,’ I admitted.

A beach ball bopped me on the head, and I teased a mean squint to all culprits around the pool. Naturally, it was just Max, taking a long theatrical sip of iced tea.

We waved at each other. In the background, Uncle Bong passed by with a lively group decked out in sunglasses and straw hats. He looked cool and confident, stood taller than ever as if his bowlegs had straightened, adding inches—more living proof that one can molecularly change in a matter of days. Or maybe … it was the sunglasses and hat and when your pals slap your back over and over. Maybe that’s all it took. A confident spirit.

‘Really, don’t give Mr Bossa Nova a second thought,’ Adam was saying. ‘He’s just an over-the-hill playboy looking for kicks.’

‘Looking for kicks with *Mommy*!’

‘And every other woman over thirty,’ he said too casually.

‘Would he ever ask *your* mother to dance?’

Mrs Kang was a far cry from Mommy.

‘Touché. But Margaret, you must quit obsessing,’ he warned me, ‘or you’ll be a wrinkly old prune by the time you really *are* fifteen.’

I bopped Adam with the beach ball whereupon he declared a splashing war that didn’t die down until the lifeguard blew his whistle.

Day Five brought rain, which meant hiding for cover and catching the four o’clock movie *Cat Ballou*. We snuck out early and scrambled down to the gift shop which sold little wooden ships, brown Hawaiian dolls (*‘Good! No Golliwogs!’*), shell-strung leis, candy bars, gum, and toiletries. Then and there, Adam bought me the only thing he would buy me, a bottle of Ambush cologne. Upon purchase, we vowed we would love each other forever. Even if we married others and had children and grandchildren, nothing, no one, could compare to you, replace you, never, ever, exclamation point! The cashier, a dull biddy, frowned as if we were too young for such declarations, then went back to dusting a copper globe.

Next, we skipped down to the laundry room to see if Mommy was there and needed a hand. Nope. No wonder, it was four-thirty.

Samba lesson time.

Night Five. The rain cleared and everybody was out late like Italians in Rome. The Aloha Show's dress rehearsal had just taken place in the moonlight room under dimmed lights—Adam and I caught the tail end of it. Compared to yesterday's burlesque, impressive. Pam was in twinkling spirits, which meant that Pedro had promised her the moon, and she was gullible enough to believe him. In a borrowed tux, Peter was in there, quietly taking it all in. The go-go dancers were up.

Holly had no competition. She had the moves, and she had the shoes, yellow dressy sandals from S. Klein's, a step up from Woolworth's, on sale for $4.99. Her outfit I had only seen in the making, a shimmery white shift whose lemon and lime dots nearly glowed in the dark. Just last week, she was pinning pattern pieces to fabric in our Blue Stone living room. Now, she was pure Holly-esque with a bounce no one could compete with. Why was she bouncing so high? Apparently *The Little Prince* was a huge hit that morning in the kiddie room. And her crepe paper costumes were the talk of all the moms.

Rehearsal over, we leaned over the railing outside the moonlight room. Below us, the crowded, partying deck:

'I see your folks, Margaret,' Adam said. 'Down there.'

Owl-eyed: 'Where? I don't see them.'

'On the promenade deck, actually. You have to stretch a bit to see them, but you *are* the limbo queen. Over there.' He pointed. 'See?'

I tippy-toed and strained. To every creature in the Pacific Ocean and every star above it, Adam trumpeted:

'Margaret's face is turning tom*ah*to red again!'

There they were.

Are.

Later, I would learn that among five other couples, Mr and Mrs Sam Ahn had, just moments earlier, placed first in the Samba Contest. The prize? A gold trophy!

Journal entry:

And guess who presented it to them? Uncle Bong—naturally!

By now, my Uncle Bong was like a Beatles song, here, there, and everywhere. The mascot of SS President Roosevelt. Fortunately, Sam Ahn's face had finally relaxed into acceptance, as if he had sternly reminded himself time and time again that his younger brother was entitled to this once-in-a-lifetime adventure as it was winding down, a last hurrah—even if it meant temporarily excluding the family.

To something my father said, Mommy, clutching their trophy like an Oscar win, tossed her celebratory head back in true Hollywood fashion and how I got goosebumps from the sight of that, her hair away from her face, exposing the soul of her. She was Sam Ahn's wife.

Then, my father, euphoric in a black and lilac Hawaiian shirt, did something so shocking, so liberating, so hee-haw and ultimately immortal it would haunt me in my waking and sleeping dreams, decades later. It happened in the blink of an eye, so fast that had Adam chosen that moment to kiss me, I would have missed it. But as fate would have it, he didn't, and I didn't.

My father did a jig.

Journal entry:

He was the happiest marionette in the world!

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14

Winter 2019

Like dream wreckage, dusk fell over Blue Stone. We retired to the living room, where our father sank into his leather chair with a sigh. No more sun on the orchid plants today. No sign of bloom. But at least his dedicated daughters Vivian and Holly were here, balancing themselves on either arm of his chair.

Peter scooted close to me on the couch. His mandoo breath made me yearn for something. The past, in Blue Stone. Impulsively, I squeezed his hand.

‘So, how long are you staying,’ he wondered, adding with a grin, ‘Monkey?’

I shrugged. ‘Good question.’

‘Could I steal you away for one afternoon?’

‘Yeah, sure,’ I said. ‘And what would we do that one afternoon, Peter?’

‘I could pick you up around noon and show you what Team Ahn is up to. Visit a few sites then go for a great lobster lunch overlooking the Potomac.’ My brother, the local tycoon. His schedule for the Good Life, booked. ‘Let’s plan on Wednesday.’

Were Mommy here, she would hear how her son's voice was always a notch too self-assured, an octave deeper than God intended. And that would only make her treasure him even more, were that even possible.

'Peter, you park this way, like this, closer to curb! Policeman not gonna give you license for have pretty face, okay?'

'It's a date,' I said.

Vivian raised a bangled hand. 'Count me in.'

Eons ago, I had told myself I had a whole life left with Holly. But nothing ever turns out the way you think.

'Holly?' I said.

'Yes?'

'Join us?'

'Maybe.'

'Margaret, your sister is awfully busy with her self-portrait masterpiece,' my father volunteered.

Holly smiled, not elaborating.

'Our Holly is too modest so her old man must brag for her. You will not believe your eyes when you see it,' my father said with a money back guarantee. 'It is large as a glass church window, is it not, kids?' Not *quite*, they implied with their eyes. 'And it is painted not in Holly's trademark black and white but *brown* and white. Like a photograph from long ago. What is that method called, Holly?'

'Sepia tone.'

Black, white, sepia. Where did colourful Holly-a-go-
go *go*?

'My Holly is a genius artist,' he expressed, taking his middle daughter's hand with such tenderness that from every angle imaginable, it was painful to watch.

Holly, sweetly: 'Thank you, Dad.'

'Well, I'll have to come over because I can't wait to see it,' I said.

‘Will you?’ Her tone was half-hearted.

I would forgive Holly, always. Not because her first love became my first love but because she had to watch Mommy stricken down every day of her life. We all understood what happened that one afternoon in 1979: Two lives were, in a sense, cut short. Holly couldn’t turn away from it like us who had the luxury of shutting out Mommy’s last moments. We weren’t there. We didn’t see her eyes before they closed forever. The terror. The instant goodbye. We didn’t live and re-live and endure that horror. We could turn from the vision like vampires from light.

Thousands of times, I did.

Peter hopped up on the piano and launched into a little piano bar music for us. ‘Requests, anyone?’

‘“Moon River”,’ Vivian operatically sang.

Peter obliged and, amid her request, our father mentioned the time Eggman played the song on his fiddle for the whole family, grandkids and all. Vivian basked in the memory then blinked as if remembering who he was. My husband.

‘Eggman’s fiddling put classical music to shame,’ she said. ‘Don’t tell my grands, not after begging them to take lessons, after school and every Saturday, for years. They’d beat me silly with their cellos.’

Then, from the piano: another melody so poignant if I could hear only one song before I died, this would be it. With Eggman on his fiddle, putting me to sleep. What flew into my head: moonlit hillsides and fragrant green clovers in dirt so black and cakey I could eat them all and crave more.

‘Peter, what are you playing?’ I called out.

‘*Just following my fingers*,’ he replied.

A born diva, Vivian was making up lyrics as Peter carried on. Meanwhile our father, not a musical man by nature, closed his eyes and listened with his whole soul.

Now.

Come on, Dad.

Break into that jig.

Concert over, the optic of Peter at the piano brought back a different night when a ponytailed Holly blurted, '*Monkey, you have to go-go with us tonight!'*

Call me loony, but I got this wild idea.

'Holly,' I whistled, 'I was wondering.'

'Wondering what?'

'Why don't we go-go?'

'Go-go *where*?'

'No, go-go *dance*.'

'What? *Why?*'

'Why not? Peter's at the piano. Music's in the air. Here we are.' And to steal a few more Beatles lyrics, I'd be happy just to dance with her.

She scoffed. Or laughed. 'No, thanks.'

'Come on.'

'I can't go-go any more.'

'Sure, you can,' I said. 'You out go-go-ed me to shame.'

Tic. 'Did I?'

'God, yes.'

'But it's been ages.'

'A lifetime, Holly.'

Our eyes locked until Holly closed them, eyes once heavy with puppy love and the glitter of Jade Pearl eye shadow. Her face grew young. Fertile. Holly-esque. Then: 'What the hell. You're on.'

With a jazzy little kick, Vivian declared: 'Show time!'

'What exactly is go-go?' our father inquired while Peter took his cue and began banging out 'Sugar, Sugar', a quintessential summer of '69 dance song if ever there was one. Peter hollered over the music, 'Just watch, Dad!'

At first, Holly and I, our go-go bones long under wraps, moved like mummies after a million years. But, in time, the beat got to us, resurrected us, melted our bones and our wraps and soon Monkey and Holly Go-lightly got into the groove, as she used to say. Sugar, sugar. Holly, Holly. Sisters a-go-go! The astral sky, framed in white windowpanes, watched us dance like the girls we were under different stars until the doorbell rang and broke the spell.

Over the next few hours while a black and lilac Hawaiian shirt hung still, deathly still, in Sam Ahn's closet, spouses and kids bearing gifts and more food spilled into our home. Someone even brought carryout from Ding Wow's. The guest-of-honour nostalgically sniffed the air.

'You think they stole the ducks from the lake, Monkey?'

'No, Dad, don't say that or I won't eat!'

'Let's go down to the lake and count our feathered friends …'

'Dad!'

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15

Summer 1969

On Night Six—our farewell night—the starlight room was packed to capacity for the Aloha Show. A grand luau of an evening, it was standing room only. Good thing Adam and I got there early, at eight thirty for the nine o'clock performance and claimed a table-for-two. All week long our goodbye had loomed over us like the coming of Death. You know it's coming but don't quite believe it; it's too horrific, too final, a dirty rotten lie until it's in your face and you have no choice but to part ways. We promised to spend our last night together, figuring out the rest of our lives. The noisy starlight room didn't allow for such indulgences so it would have to wait until after the show.

'We'll talk later,' Adam promised.

Every adult on board seemed to be in attendance, a cocktail in one hand, a cigarette in the other. And every woman wore a flower in her hair, compliments of the captain, whoever he was. An orchid, I think. Well, they might have been carnations, but for resurrection's sake, let's say orchids. Yellow, pink, white orchids everywhere. No one could pull off a flower-in-the-hair look like Mommy.

I couldn't wait to see her.

In the background, from a real stage, The Brazilian Boys played come-hither songs which made me feel very grown up despite the tinny-tasting Hawaiian Punch in my hands. Around us, false eyelashes were drooping, and glasses were clinking. Everyone was dressed to kill to make lasting impressions while the ship's photographer snapped away, causing a buzz wherever he went. Even I was decked out in one of Holly's hand-me-downs, a silky rose gold baby-doll dress with an empire waist. Mommy had packed it for me in case of such a night.

For half of the passengers aboard SS President Roosevelt, including the Ahns, the adventure was coming to an end in the morning at the Honolulu port. For the other half of the passengers, including the Kangs, after a day of docking, they would re-board the ship and greet new faces that would cruise on with them to Yokohama, or even beyond to Manila or Hong Kong. Meanwhile, my family would spend one day and night in the Sheraton Waikiki, then catch an early morning flight to Tokyo and then onto Seoul's Gimpo Airport.

When I saw the towering and solitary Max, I had to choke down the emotion in my throat. *Goodbye, Max!* He would be serving us one last breakfast tomorrow but how could I eat? I couldn't and I wouldn't. Seeing him here, in this picture, on this last night, however, elated me.

Yet where were my parents? Apparently milling around, lost in all the ritz and glitz.

At a quarter to nine, Peter came out on stage and sat down at the piano, stiff as a board, looking more ill-at-ease than at yesterday's dress rehearsal. Coughing, straightening his bowtie. We were all grown-ups tonight.

'Hi, Peter!' I called out, but he didn't look over. 'What's wrong with him, Adam?'

'He didn't hear you. *Peter!'* he shouted. '*Peter!'*

My brother looked up with a ghostly gaze. Did he hear Adam? The two weren't well acquainted although Adam and I did referee a ping-pong

match between him and Fernando a few hours ago (Fernando won). Now, Peter offered us a weak little wave. We waved back.

‘He’s fine,’ Adam said. ‘Just a case of the jitters.’

At ten minutes to show time, Pam stormed on stage and over to Peter. In an ill-fitting black dress (too short, too tight), she was obviously distraught. To whatever she was saying, Peter was shaking his head no, no, no. She was pleading, he was arguing, they were both having nervous breakdowns. Then she fled the starlight room—for good, I feared. With all the cocktails flowing, few took note of the teen director in hysterics or the piano player in shock, except us. We snuck up to the stage.

Adam tsked. ‘Didn’t I say she was a fool?’

Peter laid his cadaver hands down on the piano keys then gasped: ‘Pam says she can’t host the show!’

‘Let me guess,’ Adam said, chin to the band. ‘Boyfriend problems. Now she can’t possibly be in the same room as *him*.’

Peter nodded. ‘That’s it!’

I shot Pedro a dirty look. Not just for being a cheat, but for his connection to Mr Bossa Nova.

Speak of the devil!

Look at him sauntering into the starlight room like he owns the ship. Even now I hate him.

‘Adam!’ I cried. ‘He’s here!’

Making light of it: ‘Just pretend you don’t see him, Margaret.’

Meanwhile, my brother was wailing. ‘What am I supposed to do? She left me here to run the show. I can’t do that!’

‘Actually, you can,’ Adam said.

‘What? No.’

‘You’ve been here at every rehearsal. You know this show like clockwork. Pam’s lines, the sequence of the acts, all of it. Don’t spaz out,’ Adam said, recently witness to Peter’s shaky confidence—the game of

ping-pong involved more than hitting a ball. He knew about the TB, too, but was sworn to secrecy. ‘Look, you don’t even have to stand up if you’re more comfortable in your chair. We can set up the microphone right here.’

‘I can’t.’ Peter quivered through a sea of adult faces, a restless sea by now. ‘Listen, I’ve got an idea. Let’s all slowly walk off the stage together and make a run for it.’

Nine o’clock, show time. My heart flipped. Where were our parents? Were they watching this? Us?

‘Peter, listen to me. You’re stronger than you think,’ Adam insisted. ‘You can do anything you want in this world, if you tell yourself, you can, man!’ When he realized he was half-talking to himself, he sighed with self-mockery and squeezed Peter’s arm in some brotherhood of chickens. ‘Margaret, knock some sense into your brother. He doesn’t seem to have as much faith in himself as I do.’

‘Peter,’ I blubbered helplessly as Adam set up the microphone near Peter’s trembling lips. ‘Peter …’ Past his name or a prayer, I had nothing else to say. All I knew was that I didn’t want him to live with the memory of being a coward on this most memorable occasion. The disappointment on our parents’ faces, try as they might to hide it. This was our last night; there were no second acts. His public failure might haunt him, cripple him, maybe even make him sick again. Turning points didn’t come along every day. Ask any elder sighing out the window with regret. I bit my lip.

‘Peter, I know the TB scared you.’

A silent missile, his head shot down. There, I said it.

TB, TB, TB …

‘It scared us, too,’ I added, praying like mad he would say something, anything. The crowd was growing louder. They knew something was up. Oh! There was Max, our Max, looking alarmed. *Everything okay? Do you need some help?* I did need his help, but I shook my head *no*. Peter was my

brother. ‘But it’s gone now and it’s not coming back, and you can do this, I know you can. Look, forget about the— ‘

Peter shushed me. ‘You two sit down.’

Adam and I couldn’t, actually—an older couple had claimed our table. Instead, we stood against the glass and locked hands behind our backs so only the man-in-the-moon could see. Though I had no choice but to say goodbye to Adam in the morning, that night he was my soul-husband forever.

The lights dimmed and the ceiling turned into a starry universe. My brother looked positively paralysed. All I could think was: why did TB riddle him twice? And why was he, out of four hundred and twenty-six passengers, the only one up there? I squeezed Adam’s hand, and he squeezed back.

‘Our lad-in-distress will pull through,’ he said.

But he was still, wax-figure still. Poor Peter! In time he took a deep, critical breath as if in that breath he was trying to both feel and heal his tell-tale tubercular scars or at least draw enough strength to get this party started. Then …

His fingers moved.

They drifted across the piano keys.

The adults in the audience clinked cocktails. Everyone cheered.

Years of watching *Amateur Hour* on quarantined Sunday afternoons were about to pay off as my brother got up, microphone in hand, and took over the helm.

‘Welcome to the Aloha Show! I’m your host, Peter Ahn.’

The can-can girls finished their number by hopping off stage and into the laps of six surprised men in the audience. Applause nearly sank the ship. Halfway through the programme, Peter flashed his first of many showbiz smiles.

All the while I was watching Mr Bossa Nova and looking for my parents in this glittery zoo.

Where was Mommy?

‘You’re being a worrywart, Margaret,’ Adam said, watching two coconut jugglers between acts. One of them was Anthony, his waiter. The other was Uncle Bong, which surprised but didn’t shock me—who knew he could juggle? ‘I can’t see my parents, either, but they could be here, somewhere.’

‘Sure,’ I said sarcastically. To the pompous Kangs, this was a rodeo.

‘Yeah, you’re right, they’re not. But honestly, don’t you think there’s been enough melodrama for one night? Just enjoy the show.’

I would, if I could just find my parents …

Out of nowhere, here was Holly. Hair swept up in a ponytail, she literally sparkled from the Jade Pearl on her eyes and silvery-pink gloss on her lips. Ignoring Adam: ‘Monkey, you have to go-go with us tonight!’

‘Why? No!’

‘You have to, Monkey. Please! One of the girls got stage fright and refuses to go on!’

‘So, dance with five girls! No one will notice.’

‘Every dance line has six performers. Every number is set up for six solos. One misstep and everyone will mess up, believe me. Come on, Monkey!’ Her knees bent and begged. ‘You’re dressed for the part!’

I *was* dressed for it. And I *could* go-go. I would only agree to do it if Holly forgave me for stealing her chance at first love. We never need mention it; the name *Adam* need never come up. The cruise was winding down; soon Life, like us, would return to Holly and me in Blue Stone. Things might never be the same between us, but I didn’t want her to hate me forever.

I gave her a look only a sister could interpret.

Holly nodded.

‘Okay,’ I said, ‘I’ll do it.’

She took my hand and led me backstage to a curtained-off area behind the stage. At the last minute, the girl with stage fright got her courage back. Holly barked at her.

‘It’s too late! My sister’s dancing!’

On cue, we go-go-ed our Hullabaloo hearts out to ‘Do You Believe in Magic?’

Later, I would wonder whether Holly asked me to go-go with her to bring us back together. Pedro was a playboy but not necessarily an idiot; he could have re-timed when to hit his cymbals so that each dancer’s solo was stretched out a few seconds longer. Hit his cymbals five times instead of six.

In any event, she was Holly-happy at last. The cruise was nearly over. Her ponytail bounced and reached spellbinding heights as the photographer immortalized her on the final night of our voyage. *Snap!* In the end, that’s all Holly would seem to remember.

During my minute-long solo, I spotted my parents. Finally! I was glad to see they were at a table, although I didn’t appreciate the people holding cocktails over their heads. Move away! Don’t spill a drop! My father was looking extremely pleased with the evening thus far, especially with his son as master of ceremonies. *Mommy, can you believe our Peter?* And what prospects the night held: after the Aloha Show, dancing until midnight. And guess what, ladies and gentlemen?

Sam Ahn could dance!

Mommy was not in a dancing spirit. In fact, I could tell she wasn’t herself. Normally, she stood out in any crowd like a flare in the dark. But not tonight, not even with a crimson orchid in her hair. Yes, crimson, the only one. There, like a spot of blood. How could I not have noticed it before?

While June the singer sang ‘Blue Moon’, I couldn’t get to Mommy. I was held backstage, held hostage, for the finale. Finally, Peter took a bow, as did

we, a long line of performers, behind him. With his bon voyage wave —‘Good night!’—my eternal wait was finally over.



Adam knew what to do; engage my father in a Korean conversation. Topic: World poverty.

I took Mommy’s arm, took her outside the starlight room. Now, we were on the deck, nearly the only ones there. I cramped with premonition. In a silk charcoal blue dress, tailor-made for her a few summers ago in the back of a steamy Hong Kong restaurant, she was trembling.

‘We go back inside,’ she said. ‘Daddy waiting.’

‘What’s wrong, Mommy?’

She looked stricken, corpse-like, and when we buried her ten years later, I was reminded of her face at this moment. Minus the orchid, it was the same face, in the coffin … I didn’t want to ask, didn’t want to make it real by asking. But I had no choice: ‘Was it that man?’

She snapped at me. ‘What man you mean?’

‘You know who I mean.’

‘No,’ she denied.

‘I saw him that first night, Mommy. I know about him. He asked you to dance. Don’t say “no” to me.’

For the first time, and the last time in our lives, our globe tilted, our roles reversed, and she looked at me not like I was Monkey, but her long-lost mother she was forced to leave behind in North Korea in 1947. She rarely spoke of her, but on occasion would murmur, ‘*You are from Hong side of family, so much like Mommy, only you foot taller*.’ I wouldn’t know; her mother was sealed behind the 38th Parallel, and whether our time on earth ever overlapped was a question for the ages.

Mommy pulled away and I pulled her back, hard. Yanked her. The orchid fell out of her hair, and she bent down to pick it up. Why? Why bother? The

sight of her pinning the crimson object back in—crookedly—nearly killed me. When she turned to go, I yanked her again.

‘Monkey, you too young to understand. I say, let go!’

‘I’m not too young to understand and I’m not letting go! We’re not moving from this spot until I hear what happened. Otherwise, I’m going straight to Dad.’

Mommy wrestled me with her arms and eyes and her very core. But I was younger and stronger—she failed. With nowhere to go, she sank into her own bones. ‘I do laundry today.’

She did laundry. She was alone. No Fernando.

‘And?’

‘Bad man show up.’

‘Was there anyone else there?’

‘No …’

‘What was he doing there?’

‘I think … he follow me.’

‘What happened?’

‘He say “hello”.’

‘And?’

‘I ignore him.’

‘Then what? Is that all? Did he leave?’

Mommy let out a small cry. The sky fell and we both aged. Cruelly.

‘He didn’t leave, Mom, did he?’

‘No.’

Oh-God-oh-God-oh-God any mother but Mommy.

‘He grab me …’

Oh-God-oh-God-oh-God please don’t say he raped you, please, please.

‘… and kiss me.’

‘Kissed you?’ Paralysed pause. ‘And then?’

‘I slap him!’

‘And then?’

‘He slap me back!’

‘He *what*?’

‘And he call me *whore*.’

The ship was in a tailspin. We could be off the coast of Africa, as far as I was concerned. A *whore*? The first time I heard that word was in reference to a girl at a high school football game who stood in the middle of a huddle of boys, not on the field but under the bleachers, and let all and any hands do whatever they pleased. That would not describe Mommy in any way, shape, or form.

‘So, I pinch him,’ Mommy pinched the air in a re-enactment, ‘and kick him in peanuts! And he fall down and I kick him again—one, two, three time—and I run!’

Her terror is lost in the retelling, so let me assure you that her performance was no comedy skit, more like a knee-jerk reaction to shock and horror; and no doubt the memory of cruel commies rearing its ugly head. This time, her bad man, Mr Bossa Nova, was the enemy. For a few seconds, I consoled myself with, ‘*At least he didn’t rape her*.’ But then the grotesque dawning: He slapped her. *Slapped* her! He didn’t rape Mommy only because he *couldn’t.*

Death! Death!

Kill the BASTARD!!!

My grief-shock-rage was a loaded stick of dynamite in my hands. I didn’t know what to do with it, where to throw it. How dare he even touch her? Who did he think he was?

Kill him! Somebody KILL HIM!

And then this: Mommy was attacked while her husband, her supposed protector, was la-dee-da-ing in paradise. On his fifth lap in the pool or leisurely reading Leon Uris. Mr Ahn, who escorted his wife back from the women’s lounge as if otherwise she would end up eating beef wellington at

the wrong table. Mr Ahn, who steered his wife around Safeway as if she couldn't find her own way from the canned vegetables to the Cool Whip. Mr Ahn, who never let his wife walk around Blue Stone Circle by herself for fear she'd veer off and wander off in the woods.

So why didn't my father help her with the laundry? Why didn't I? She wasn't our maid.

I hated us all!

'Mommy … are you okay?'

Her wince meant she was lying. 'I am okay.' The magnificent starlight on the seas seemed ludicrous. She sighed. 'Glad we are getting off ship tomorrow morning.' She straightened the orchid in her hair, and it was the saddest thing I ever saw.

'Monkey?'

'Yes?'

'You never tell Daddy about bad man. You promise me?'

I was furious at him but not enough to give him a heart attack. 'I promise.'

Her expression softened. 'And Monkey?'

'Yes?'

'What is *whore* mean?'

Momentarily: 'You can't go back in there,' I told her. 'He's in there. I see him.'

'Bad man?'

Mommy, staring into the starlight room. What a vision. She is, she was … my beautiful Mommy. Her profile, held up by something that could be traced back to her childhood, a certain will that kept her alive while bombs fell. Mommy: bouffant black hair kissed by an orchid possibly pink but crimson in memory. Dewy skin thanks to cold cream. Vivian, Holly, and I would all experience spells of loveliness here and there, but Mommy's enchantment was like the Milky Way. Out of our reach.

Her brow arched with recognition. From her throat, a growl only a daughter could hear. Mommy saw him, the bad man.

‘Go get Daddy. You are tell him I am sick.’

My eyes never left Mr Bossa Nova while I searched the starlight room for Adam and my father while The Brazilian Boys got lively with their rendition of ‘This Boy’.

Holly came into view first. She was talking to a young man I had seen around the ship—you couldn’t miss his white-blond hair and lanky walk. His name was Scott, and he was older, about to start pre-med, and the two would stay out well past midnight. Tomorrow, flushed from lack of sleep and a long good-night kiss, Holly would deliciously refer to him as ‘the one who got away’. Which calls for erratum—in the end, my sister would remember two highlights from her cruise: her go-go photo and ‘Dr’ Scott.

Holly was lucky. She would be spared what else happened that day.

While Mommy waited outside, I broke the news to my father.

‘Mommy isn’t feeling well.’

I always tend to recall this scene from Mommy’s line of vision not mine, as if it was me staring in through the glass when in reality she was gone by then, or at least by the time we got outside and tried to find her in the now-swelling throng of people. Maybe because I could never imagine Mommy leaving that spot, not when her whole family was inside, right there, especially Peter in all his glory. I couldn’t imagine it, but she did, she did, she *did*. It was as if she was already saying goodbye to us.

My father, bewildered: ‘Where is she?’

‘I don’t know. Back in the cabin, probably.’ Where else? I glanced inside to make sure Mr Bossa Nova was still in there and not out on the loose. Varmint!

‘Why did she come out here all by herself?’

‘She wasn’t by herself, she was with me,’ I said.

‘You know what I mean.’ His tone was sharp, just in case mine was.

‘Maybe she was queasy,’ Adam interjected, ‘and just needed some fresh air, sir.’ Yet he knew it wasn’t so.

‘Queasy? I don’t understand,’ my father said, more disappointed than worried. He was ready to samba.

I tried to bite my tongue but couldn’t. ‘There’s a reason you don’t understand, Dad. A real good reason.’

‘What is it?’

‘Forget it,’ I said.

He questioned me loud and syllabically: ‘Monkey, what did you say?’

Peter, newly triumphant, joined us on the deck. ‘What’s going on here?’ he asked, only to be drowned out by our angry father.

‘Answer me, Monkey!’

Adam’s mother didn’t have to cart dirty clothes down to the laundry room. Why did Mommy? This was her vacation, too! I lashed out: ‘Don’t you ever call me Monkey again! Never, ever!’

Sam Ahn was shocked, too silent to talk. Who was this Monkey-monster?

‘Margaret’s just tired, sir,’ Adam said, trying to play peacemaker. ‘She’s had a long day. I’ll take care of her. You go check on Mrs Ahn.’

My mind always goes blank here. All I see is the back of my father, dwarfed by a cruel sky.

Adam was my next victim.

‘You lied to me! You told me everything would be okay! You said Mr Bossa Nova was nothing to worry about! You called me a worrywart!’

‘Oh, Margaret, no …’

Peter shouted, ‘Will someone please tell me what’s going on here? Is Mommy okay?’

‘Yeah, she’s okay,’ Adam said. ‘Now, Margaret, calm down and tell us what happened. Please.’

The sky was hollow. The air, hallucinatory. I broke down and told them everything. They listened feebly. Then Adam took me in his arms, arms I

would crave countless times in years to come.

‘Bastard!’ he muttered.

Peter was rabid. ‘I’m gonna kill that son-of-a-bitch! Tear him from limb to limb! But first I need to check on Mommy.’

I grabbed him, stopped him. ‘No, no, you can’t! She doesn’t want Dad to know about it.’

Following a chorus of moans, the three of us huddled like juvenile citizens of the world holding court in the name of justice.

And revenge.

What to do, what to do?

‘We need to find Fernando,’ Peter said.

‘Why?’ I asked.

Adam knew why. ‘He’s got the keys to every cabin on board.’

Adrenaline riddled me.

‘Where is he?’ Peter asked.

‘Asleep,’ I deduced. Fernando’s day began long before the sun rose. ‘Why?’

‘Do you know what cabin he’s in?’

‘No.’

‘Max would know. He knows every inch of this ship. I saw him earlier,’ Peter said, breaking up our huddle. ‘I’ll be right back.’

‘Your mother’s a survivor, Margaret. Think of all she’s been through. She’ll be okay,’ Adam said. ‘I know she will be.’

‘Quit saying she’s okay! Who do you think you are, telling my brother that our mother is okay? What do you know?’ I snapped. He looked hurt and I slumped with apology. ‘I’m sorry, Adam. Don’t hate me. It’s just that she won’t be okay. Ever. Why is it you have so much faith in everyone but yourself?’

‘I don’t know,’ was his hapless reply.

Peter returned. ‘No luck.’

We feared we missed our chance to find Fernando until Adam happened to notice an imposing shadow below us on the promenade deck.

‘Look!’

Memory embellishes, for I always call up a Hitchcock figure in fog, slowly smoking a cigar. But this much was true: I screamed so loud I shattered stars.

‘Max!’

We found Fernando dazed but accommodating once sleep wore off and his bellhop personality came to. He blinked at us—Max, Peter, Adam, and me—and sensed emergency. No one was here to play ping-pong.

‘Yes, people?’

When we asked if we could come into his cabin, Fernando kindly stepped aside. ‘Yes, yes!’

The four males closed the door behind me in silent conspiracy: No girls allowed. I asked no questions. A part of me was relieved to be left alone in the corridor. Left in the dark, so to say. Whatever plan they might be hatching was fine with me. If Mr Bossa Nova was beaten to a bloody pulp that night, so be it. He deserved no less than the grisliest of fates. After all, if he heard Mommy was dead, he would laugh or yawn, toss his cigarette into the sea, feel its sizzle, and come alive.

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16

Summer 1969

By breakfast, we had already said our goodbyes. Five tables apart feel like drifting continents when your eyes don't meet—Adam's request. God forbid he show even a quiver of emotion in front of his father who wasn't as diplomatic as his title would suggest. Jerk. Jackass! *Escoria*! Adam and I lived in a land of poetic souls with no room for characters who couldn't comprehend a mythical hourglass in a million years, or the flush of a turquoise-tinted sky when we spoke our last words to each other. The hour was dawn, our goodbye private in the aqua-blue glow. Now, to sit beneath the same chandeliered ceiling and not make eye contact with the one you love felt like someone was carving a heart into my heart.

It hurt …

In the dining room, Max Blossom, having brushed off any memory of the night before, stood tall as a lighthouse. The breakfast head count was low this morning, so low Uncle Bong wasn't needed for a final gig here.

'Where he is?' Mommy wondered aloud.

A round of shrugs. Maybe he was saying goodbye to his friends.

Max roamed over to our table and began to toss fresh cocktail fruit in a large diamond-cut crystal bowl—merrily.

Looking back, did he know something we didn't know?

'Who wants seconds?'

Everyone went *Me!*

Except me.

'Chin up, Monkey-Blossom. You have a whole day in Waikiki ahead of you,' he said.

My father laughed heartily over a gooey stack of drenched coconut papaya pancakes. In his head, last night's storm had passed. Near land—close to paradise!—our quarrel was laughable now; Mommy was just seasick, and Monkey was just cranky.

Rough waters, however interpreted.

'Geniuses like our Monkey don't like the beach,' he said with tugged hesitation. *Don't you ever call me Monkey again! Never, ever!* Quelled: 'Margaret just wants to go home and sit alone downstairs in my library with her genius thoughts.'

Max spooned coconut-laced kiwi slices, melon balls, and mango cubes into my brother's fruit goblet. As if last night never happened, Peter was all showbiz smiles.

'Is that true, Margaret, better known as Monkey-Blossom?' Max quizzed me. 'You, Miss Social Butterfly of SS President Roosevelt?'

My parents bobbed. 'Yah.'

I shrugged. My Siamese soul ripped in two, I had no clue who I was any more, or who I would be tomorrow.

'I, for one, can't picture you holed up in a basement without a pool or her sunglasses,' Max said with more mocking affection than I could bear that morning. 'On second thought, I take that back,' Max said. 'You were a very different girl your first night here. Oh, yes, I remember you.'

I cried if not lunged from my chair. 'Where do you live, Max? Can I write to you?'

Cornered, he blushed with unforgettable bravado. ‘Why this is my home.’

Why this is my home, why this is my home, why this is my home …

‘You live *here*?’

‘Yes.’

‘On the ship?’

‘Yes.’

‘All the time?’

‘Year in, year out.’

‘I don’t understand …’

‘Why live on land when the seas beckon? Monkey-Blossom, I’m very happy here.’

‘Oh …’

‘I want each of you to know,’ Max said, finished with sentimental nonsense, ‘that the Ahns have been a Godsend for me. I would have perished on the first leg of this journey without you—believe me, the captain and his band of bores aren’t nearly as entertaining! I can only keep my fingers crossed that the next family that graces this table will be half as delightful as the Ahn family.’

In time, our head waiter shook each of our hands *adieu*, adding, ‘It has been my honour and pleasure to serve you.’ Last, but not least, I wouldn’t let go until Max planted a peck on the crown of my head and privately quivered, ‘Goodbye, Monkey-Blossom.’

Unruffled, Mommy seemed back to her old self that morning. And yet …

Before breakfast, she had insisted on carrying her own hand luggage from the cabin to the deck despite Fernando’s bid to help.

‘No,’ she politely twitched, ‘I do.’

At breakfast, our father had urged her to join him in ordering coconut papaya pancakes, yet she asserted her preference for a simple scone with jam.

Max approved. ‘Elegant, as are you.’

After breakfast, Mommy led the Ahn clan out of the dining room. We trailed behind her like baby ducks.

‘I am afraid that when next we dance,’ our father joked with us, ‘Mommy will take the lead.’

The rest of her trip went swimmingly, without incident or mention of the bad man. Once home in Blue Stone, she would resume her role of being Sam Ahn’s devoted wife, fretting by the window and keeping his dinner warm if he was late from work. ‘*Why Mr Singh drive so slowly?’* However, whether she took a conscious vow or not, Mommy refused to ever feel helpless again. She had learned the hard way, face-to-face, that her husband couldn’t always be there for her. Now, when she took his arm for a walk around Blue Stone Circle, it was clearly for show—witness her strut. She was a woman in control. And then, her announcement not long after our return: ‘I am get my driver’s license!’

Our father put up a fight but eventually gave in when he was reminded of how loud Mommy could yell when she wanted to. Soon after Labour Day, Peter was at the Division of Motor Vehicles taking his driver’s permit test; Mommy was seated at the desk right next to him with her own pencil. I can see her blackening circles as if marking her own independence and thinking, *No bad man ever catch me again*, as if a getaway car below deck was feasible.

Both Ahns passed with flying colours—no surprise. Mommy had been quizzing Peter long enough to know every answer by heart herself, whether she really understood the question or not. The two celebrated over a basket of French fries at a Drug Fair soda fountain walking distance of the DMV; then caught a bus home.

Within a year, Mommy was driving the Pontiac Tempest in and out of Blue Stone. The green Torino came later.

But back to SS President Roosevelt: Picture me on the deck behind my banana yellow sunglasses with hundreds of other passengers waiting to dock and depart. I know Adam is here, somewhere; I know, like all of us, he will be spending the day in Honolulu. On the sands of Waikiki, I might stumble upon his footprints and even step into them, albeit unceremoniously. My hero is gone already! We have already said our goodbyes; the waves are washing over the past seven days. Tonight, the Kangs will return to the boat, but not the Ahns.

It hurt, it hurt …

As SS President Roosevelt entered the windy harbour, my father, necklaced with an orchid lei and his Kodak camera, competed with the ship's roaring horn: 'We must find a good Korean restaurant in Honolulu after all this rich food! Enough crème de la crème dining! Who wants a cold bowl of *naeng myun*?'

'Me!' Peter said.

'Me, too!' Holly chimed.

'Even Mommy's famous spaghetti would do!' Peter kidded.

A family joke. When Mommy went through a phase of watering down the Ragu, she realized that stretching a dollar didn't always work. Proof: the Ahn Spaghetti Boycott of '68.

Holly giggled. 'Crum de la crum!'

Mommy, still sensitive about the memory of four abandoned plates of runny spaghetti, ignored them. 'And we go to Ala Moana for dinner!' she said. 'They have Chinese outdoor cafeteria! As good food as Ding Wow's!'

'Yah!' Our father agreed, trying his best to suppress an ear-to-ear grin. 'But their duck tastes differently than Ding Wow's! Why do you think that is so, Margaret?'

'Dad!'

I sighed in my sunglasses, wanting nothing to do with food. Didn't anyone care? I was dying! My heart was in a million pieces and sitting in

my chest like a shattered bauble.

It hurt, it hurt, it hurt …

Just as the horn and the wind died down, my father and I were both on the lookout. He for Uncle Bong, me for Adam. To Mommy, his Korean sounded grave and worried: ‘Where is he?’

I felt a tug on my arm—me and my heart twirled around with a shout: ‘Adam!’

But no. It was Fernando, dressed in civilian clothes. Like the others, last night’s drama was history to him. Gone.

‘Hello, Miss Margaret.’ He frowned sweetly, standing next to luggage. ‘Or should I say goodbye.’

‘It looks like you have the day off,’ I said, too despondent for chitchat or a proper farewell.

He gleamed under the Honolulu sunlight. ‘Yes; in fact, I do.’

‘I hate goodbyes, Fernando, don’t you?’

He reached for the luggage—two green suitcases, one big, one small. ‘Life is a series of hellos and goodbyes,’ he said, his voice dipping like the wings of a seagull. Suddenly he seemed so worldly. ‘But I am very glad we had our chance to say hello.’

‘Me, too,’ I said. Something in the way he held the suitcases told me they were his. ‘Fernando …?’

‘I must go now, Miss Margaret. Goodbye.’

Abruptly, to five Ahns: ‘I wish you a wonderful vacation, a safe journey home, and prosperous lives! Goodbye, goodbye!’

‘Fernando?’

He vanished into a throng of people on the dock. In a sense, we never saw our trusted friend again. In another sense, we saw him many times—on our television set.



And then, it happened.

Like a figure we barely knew any more, Uncle Bong appeared.

‘Where your luggage?’ asked Mommy.

My father’s tremor told me he already knew the answer. Had nursed brewing suspicions.

Against a background of ships now honking nonstop in the harbour and passengers shouting loud, emotional goodbyes to new friends:

‘*See you in Singapore!’*

‘See you in Chicago!’

‘Until we meet again on dry land!’

A nervous Uncle Bong offered an explanation in Korean to my parents. Their faces, still as stone, confirmed some awful truth. Then, he delivered each Ahn kid a long look, vast as the sea.

‘Peter … Holly … Monkey … I am staying here. On SS President Roosevelt.’

Our shocked chorus: ‘You’re not coming with us?’

True, Uncle Bong had already stepped away from us, distanced himself so that he was more a silhouette or shadow or flash going here, going there, not the living, breathing Uncle Bong, always at our service. But we always assumed he’d come back around. Come home.

‘You see, the captain offered me a position as assistant head waiter in the dining hall. Apparently, passengers told him I have charisma. *Charisma!* Kids, can you imagine me in a tuxedo every day?’ Uncle Bong tried to chuckle.

‘You’re *not* coming with us?’ we each repeated.

Uncle Bong looked down, growing teary. Until a week ago, his loyalty to us was all we knew. ‘I am sorry, kids.’

Out of desperation, my father blurted, ‘Did you know your ex-boss Fred has been fired? If it is a job you want, surely they would rehire you at Ding Wow’s.’

Uncle Bong nearly choked with laughter, incensing my father who launched into a heated, half-Korean, half-English gibberish, a language the Ahn kids could somehow interpret, at least this morning, even above Mommy yelling, '*Stop! Stop! I say, stop!'*

'I looked after you your whole life! I gave you a nice room! Nice meals three times a day! And now you desert the family? Exchange us for another family?'

'I am grateful, but I belong here,' Uncle Bong began, exhibiting the deepest cut part of him to us. 'I want to be my own person. This opportunity is a dream come true. Be happy for me. Let me go in peace, please. I am somebody here. I am in paradise here. I am not a joke here. I have respect here! Back home, I am no one. Here, I am King Bong. Can you understand? Don't leave angry,' he implored us.

Sam Ahn ridiculed his nickname under his breath, '*King Bong, King Bong, King Bong'* followed by explosive Korean cursing. 'You are Bong-Young Ahn not any King Bong!'

'Listen! Stop now!' Mommy was screaming. 'You have stroke!'

No doubt my father couldn't accept that his brother, who had failed at everything stateside, had finally found his calling on the seas and found more joy rubbing elbows with strangers than with us, his family. SS President Roosevelt was Uncle Bong's magic lamp. Everything he wished for came true. It was then that Sam Ahn cornered him, whispered something the family wasn't privy to.

No, no, no, Uncle Bong reacted.

'If you don't come with the family now,' my father threatened him, 'you are not welcome back home. Ever.'

'I deserve a good life. My own life! I am not Hop Sing! I am not a Village Idiot! Don't leave the ship angry with me. Please.'

'You are a traitor!' were my father's last words to him. To the family: 'Let's go.'

‘I love you all!’ Uncle Bong gave up, delivering a silent message to me. *Sorry, Monkey! Sorry!*

Journal entry:

> It was AWFUL. A horrible, awful scene. The WORST. I will relive it over and over until the day I die. And what did Dad secretly whisper to Uncle Bong? What was that all about?

The next morning, in a first-class suite in the Sheraton Waikiki, after an evening of blind rage towards his brother, our father woke up in a strange calm. Not as if Uncle Bong was dead, more like he never existed. Mommy was frantically shaking her head—*no, no, don’t!*—when I started to ask what would happen if Uncle Bong grew tired of cruise life, or maybe just missed us and wanted to come home, even just for a visit?

My father overheard, gave me a look, and that was that. A blink later, he got into the Hawaiian swing of things: ‘Time for fun in the sun!’

Indeed, he was all set to peel a glorious pineapple onto laid-out newspaper Peter was spreading out on the table. None for him, but small pleasures for his family delighted Sam Ahn, and he grinned spectacularly.

‘I will *dole* out our pineapple. Get it, kids? *Dole*? Like the factory we visited the last time we were here?’

‘Hold on, Dad,’ Peter said—something had caught his eye. ‘Look who’s in the *Honolulu Advertiser*!’

Our father squinted and nearly dropped his knife. ‘Girls, come here!’

We galloped to the table, Mommy, too, and wedged our way in.

‘It’s Fernando!’ we yodelled. ‘On the front page!’

Our bellhop was snapshot at the Honolulu harbour, just moments after our farewell. On either side of him were businessmen in dark suits, pushing away photographers and Hawaiian-shirted men with microphones.

For years that newspaper article hung around the Ahn household like a Korean trinket, in that drawer, in that recipe book, in an envelope, in a

photo album; until one day the clipping disappeared, or we forgot about it, or it got too dog-eared to keep—most likely, all of the above. I can only paraphrase what made the Ahn kids yodel that morning:

> Fernando Quartez has just emerged from travelling incognito aboard SS President Roosevelt from San Francisco to Honolulu. Out from behind his catcher's mask, the twenty-eight-year-old New York Yankee was posing as a bellman during a dispute over his contract. 'I let my agent Mickey Black hammer it out.' Mr Quartez, known to his legion of fans as 'The Diamond Man', felt it was in his best interest to go underground—or 'underwater' in his words—for a week to escape the hounding media not to mention the stress. He is reportedly very well rested and ready to play ball.

While there would be little mention of Uncle Bong over the years, Fernando, the best and most beloved bellhop on this side of the equator, was the talk of our family for years to come.



'How did you deal with no Uncle Bong in the house?' Eggman had wondered. He knew every page of Ahn history, but not necessarily the emotions between the lines.

For a long time, Uncle Bong's absence was a quiet shock to my system, a big black tent that loomed over the house. Part of me thought he'd come back someday, like when I'd spot our rusting English racers and remember him trying to fix busted chains with that hapless grin, and I'd get a feeling, or at least a flash of a feeling, that we would ride round and round Blue Stone Circle again, our shadows side-by-side, making figure eights. Maybe one day, I'd hear him going up the creaky stairs to the attic and my heart would jump, knowing he had come home. But no. Those days, like mine with Adam Kang, really were history.

For a longer time, I wondered what became of Uncle Bong. Did his days remain glorious, did he marry someone on the ship, did he become a father?

Or did life go south, did he spend too much time in some poker lounge and become a drunk and a gambler?

Eggman had guessed I was more affected by my uncle's loss than by Adam's. He was right.

'You expect to say goodbye to your first love but not a relative who was always around; for all intents and purposes, part of the nuclear family. That must've been so strange, Em; you kids must have felt abandoned, on some level. Your dad must've felt … rejected. I bet he was never the same, right?'

'Not quite.'

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17

Summer 1969

Meeting Adam proved to be a magical interlude to an otherwise uneventful adolescence for me. Without the humid Polynesian breeze, my hair flattened, my lips shrivelled—not a single boy noticed me for years. Nor I, them. But in this loveless state, I did do what Adam had begged me to do: Write. Courage is a crazy thing; it came word by word; first in long inked blue airmail letters to Adam, then in type on onionskin paper to Adam; until I went beyond letters and beyond Adam and, like the words, writing became who I was, however painful; the flip side of that heart carved into my heart. Deep. Yes, I would go back downstairs to my father's library, back where I belonged with the spiders and their webs, the kickball shadows and ping-pong sounds, back to the girl I was before I met Adam.

But at least I had the memory of him and the cinema of our final moments together.



With no time to figure out the rest of our lives the night before, with no time to talk about what happened to Mommy, we had met at the break of dawn to fulfil an impossible promise. Adam was waiting for me on the

promenade deck at our most heralded spot, noted as where we were standing when the symbolic little island first came into view. Cool air shot up my sundress.

‘Adam!’

‘Margaret!’

FLASH!

Everything—the sky, the ocean, the horizon, the deck, the shadows — took on a turquoise cast. Not like God threw a bucket of paint or sprinkled blue and green glitter on our sphere. It was more transparent. Ethereal.

Blinking, Adam and I stood side-by-side, so close our souls locked one last time.

‘Margaret, would you mind putting down your journal for a moment? I’m trying to tell you something and I need all of you here. Thank you.’

I could barely breathe.

‘I feel like I’m in a surreal dream or painting, Margaret. Or underwater. Yes, that’s it—underwater! Do you feel it, too? Do you see it?’

‘Yes,’ I murmured.

‘This can’t be happening.’

‘Adam?’

My sweetheart closed his suffering eyes. ‘Don’t, Margaret. I asked you that first night not to break my heart, but you are, Margaret, you are …’

‘Why can’t we meet in Seoul?’

The Kangs were spending nine more days on the ship and then it was on to Korea. Our time in Seoul would overlap by nearly two weeks. Two weeks!

‘We’ve been through this before, Margaret. I can’t. This isn’t London where I can just board a bus by myself and meet you; I’d have to have permission from my father to arrange for a driver and … it’s just not going to happen. He’s not going to let it happen. Please don’t ask again … not unless you want to kill me.’

My voice trailed. ‘Maybe we’ll pass each other on the streets of Seoul …’

With an artificial nod: ‘Maybe …’

‘Or we could make a *secret* plan, Adam,’ I said with a sudden, stupid girl-chirp. ‘I could plan to be in front of the Bando Hotel on a certain day and if you could somehow make it there, then, well …’

His fallen face told me otherwise and I whispered uselessly. ‘And if you couldn’t, well, then, you couldn’t.’ My eyes shut, rimmed with tears. ‘I’d understand. I would.’

‘Please don’t cry over me, I’m not worth it. I’m nothing,’ he said so very tenderly, proof that kindness can kill you. Only then did I note his rugged appearance at this serene hour: He was unshaven, uncombed, beautifully wrecked. Had he not slept? Still, we spoke nothing of the night before. Whatever happened to Mr Bossa Nova, happened. I could live in ignorant bliss.

‘Don’t say that, Adam. Promise me you’ll never say that again as long as you live.’

He laughed and shook his head fuzzily; and I’ve always wondered what he was thinking. Then, reluctantly: ‘I promise.’

However precious and ticking, the next few seconds were necessarily silent.

‘Speaking of promises, don’t you dare break your promise to me, Margaret. Go home and write. Conquer the world, don’t conquer the world; the important thing is to write your heart out like you’re writing your Last Will and Testament. What I guess I’m very poorly trying to say is, make the dream mean something. Will you do that for me? For you?’

I couldn’t imagine going down those steps to that Blue Stone basement and harbouring any dream that didn’t include Adam Kang. I liked it up here, with him.

‘I promise.’

‘Good,’ he said, his work done. ‘In the meantime, I’ll be expecting little previews in the mail from Miss Margaret, fourteen, soon to be fifteen.’

In the turquoise glow we split a stray cocktail napkin and took turns jotting down our addresses—one pen, his. His instructions were precise.

‘Write to me here at Eton once school starts. But until then, write to me at Trudy’s flat—she’ll pass your letters on to Jon who’ll pass them on to me. If you send letters to my house, I can’t predict their fate. You know what always happens in the movies.’

I only knew what was happening here. We were about to swim our separate ways. I got jitters. Death jitters.

‘Here’s my address,’ I said. ‘Don’t forget the zip code; in America the zip code is *very* important …’

‘Let’s say goodbye now, Margaret,’ he said, all heat and regret. ‘Not in public, not in front of my family. Promise me we won’t look at each other at breakfast. We’ll be there but not …’

‘Not *there* there?’

‘Something like that.’

‘Adam?’

‘Margaret?’

My teeth began chattering and I could feel the skull of me, Margaret Ahn without the long hair and Pacific dreaminess in her face. A morbid thought hit me like a guillotine: One day we would be nothing but bones in far-apart forgotten graveyards. Oh, my God! I cried, so scared.

‘I don’t want to say goodbye.’

‘I don’t want to say goodbye, either.’

Our old souls lurched back in time to save us from breaking down in tears like the children we actually were. We clasped hands, we steadied ourselves. Life was a bitch; learn it now.

‘I love you, Margaret. I won’t ever forget you.’

‘I love you, too, Adam. I won’t ever forget you, either.’

‘Maybe someday,’ his eyes fluttered with shame, ‘you’ll write about me, and I’ll have some small place in the universe.’

I couldn’t address his statement then; it was too big, too tragic. But I would, in letters to come.

‘Adam?’

‘Margaret?’

‘We never figured out the rest of our lives.’

‘No,’ he lamented, ‘I suppose our lives will figure it out for us.’

‘Do you hope we see each other again?’

‘God! More than anything!’

And then, in the cool dawn, so moody and aqua-blue my memory cannot possibly do it justice, we kissed for the last time.

‘Goodbye, Margaret!’

‘Goodbye, Adam!’

Our hourglass was up.

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18

Winter 2019

In Blue Stone, the Ahn sisters played musical chairs with their bedrooms upstairs, so every room bore some nostalgia, to some degree. The rooms were of varying shapes and sizes with varying views and Mommy let us move around whenever the mood struck us, or should I say Vivian—Holly and I never argued with her. Only Peter stayed put. Pressed, bet I could list which years I spent in which room, but such useless information would lack the delight of, say, the tantalizing buffet offerings on SS President Roosevelt, which still come to mind when there's nothing in the fridge.

So, there I was, lying in bed in a guest room, once a bedroom. Beneath wool blankets, I felt like a crushed crab. If I was lucky, maybe I wouldn't fall asleep and succumb to climbing the stairwells of a skyscraper under construction where fake earthlings posing as workmen on every floor hollered 'no exit!', or on a bicycle that went through and around an arc of mirrors not a reflection of Blue Stone Circle but an imitation Blue Stone Circle. If I was lucky, dream or no dream, maybe somehow, somewhere, someone would come for me, and I could forget I was ever lost.



During his birthday celebration, Sam Ahn had expertly smiled through half-torment like he always did. *Thanks, everybody! Look at this! Ha, ha, ha*, he laughed when all he really needed was a single orchid bud sighting for his birthday. The whole while we were on the same raft, floating, dreaming, and I could read his mind:

> *I told Mommy not to drive. Why did she suddenly insist on driving when I always took her wherever she wanted to go? And whenever I had to leave the country, didn't I alert the neighbours who were more than happy to lend Mommy a hand? I never understood why she decided to drive one day.*

By any court's definition, Mr Bossa Nova did not rape Mommy. By a daughter's definition, he murdered her.

'I am get my driver's license!' she had proclaimed.

In the end, that's what took her life. My father's, too, really. Now she was long in her grave, and he was alone in his bed.

Around midnight, I called Peter.

'Were you asleep, Peter?'

'No. Actually, yeah.'

'Sorry, listen.'

'Why are you whispering? Is everything okay?'

'I have something to ask you.'

'Okay …'

'Remember Mr Bossa Nova?'

'Mr Who??'

'The guy on the ship.'

'What guy on what ship?'

'SS President Roosevelt. Think back.' I give him time to think back. Swim back. A trillion waves ago when the seas were different waters. Hypnotic. 'You know who I mean, Peter.'

'Margaret,' he cracked, remembering the night he came of age and rage. Gloriously. 'Margaret. That was a long time ago.'

‘What did you do to him?’

‘Hold on,’ he said joylessly. I heard the creak of a door closing. ‘You mean, what did *we* do to him. Me, the bellhop, the waiter … and someone else.’

‘Adam.’

‘Right. Your British beau. Hey, whatever happened to him?’

Journal entry:

> No matter who I marry, Adam Kang will always be the LOVE OF MY LIFE. I’ll think about him twenty-four hours a day. I’ll honour him until the day I die!

Once penned with gushing certainty. And while that would prove untrue, I’d never erase a word.

‘Don’t change the subject, Peter, just answer me: What did you all do to Mr Bossa Nova?’

‘Man alive, Margaret, why are you bringing up ancient history? At this hour? You know, you haven’t really been the same since Eggman … passed away.’

‘Look, Peter, I just need to know.’

‘Give me a minute. Let me shake awake here,’ he said. ‘Okay. The bellhop had a key, and we broke into the guy’s quarters … but the room was empty. We waited in there for quite some time, wearing dust masks the bellhop got from the maids’ closet. Wait, why do I keep calling him the bellhop? He was Fernando Quartez! The Diamond Man! I guess I never put two and two together: me, brothers in crime with a famous baseball player. Wow.’

I grew impatient. ‘Go on.’

‘So, there we were, four masked dudes. And where were you all this time? I remember you were there, then you weren’t.’

I had gone to the deck to clear my head while the so-called ‘masked dudes’ carried out their plan. Eventually, I went back to my cabin and tried

to fall asleep, almost praying to hear a splash in the sea.

‘Anyway,’ Peter recalled, ‘the guy eventually returned to his room but not until after midnight. Stumbled in, dead drunk.’

‘Did you all kill him, Peter?’

‘*What?*’

For a long time, especially after Mommy’s death, I pictured a certain skeleton lying at the bottom of the Pacific, anchored by a now-immortal piano bearing Peter’s fingerprints. Deep down, I knew better, but still pictured it.

‘You’re joking, right? Is that what you thought all these years? Holy shit, Margaret, if we killed him, all of *Hawaii Five-O* would’ve been looking for us the next morning. Sent out bulletins, roped off the island. No, we didn’t kill him. God!’

‘Did you at least hurt him? Maim him?’

‘Look, we just scared the crap out of him. Roughed him up, gagged him, handcuffed him with his own bathrobe belt. Threw his stuff around, too.’ Dormant disgust: ‘He had a small ivory statue of the Virgin Mary sitting on his dresser. Even drunk as a skunk, he begged us not to break it.’

‘And?’

‘Well, I wasn’t going to hell for him, but I remember rubbing his blessed Mary in his face. If he’d fought back, who knows, maybe I would’ve broken his nose or something.’

For all my morbid fantasies, that’s all I could’ve really hoped for? A broken nose, *maybe*? I murmured, disappointed.

‘You’re not impressed,’ he said. ‘Come on, Margaret. It’s not like the guy killed Mommy.’

Peter may be a big numbers man but when it counted, he never put two and two together.

‘Wait a sec,’ he said, stepping back into a fifty-year fog, back into Mr Bossa Nova’s room until the fog cleared, and everything became vivid as

yesterday. ‘Something … else happened … Just as we were about to sneak out, your friend did an about-face and began pummelling the guy. Margaret, we literally had to pry him off.’ He breathed incredulously. ‘I never saw so much anger in a pair of fists.’

Don’t give a hoot where the anger came from, Adam will always be my young hero.



Adam never let on. We corresponded devotedly throughout our teens, a letter a week at the very least. Once in college (The London School of Economics/William & Mary), our devotion waned. Now we stood a little taller, but our scopes were smaller, dating those around us because the ocean was still out there, but we were not. Still, our love was special, we vowed, global like the seas that separated us; that is, until our letters trickled to one, then none, a year. Perhaps our aged portraits, hunched and rocking in chairs set near bay windows, said: Enough.

While I never saw him again, I did hear from Adam decades later. Apparently, he was racing through the English countryside to visit his daughter Heather when he caught part of a Korean American author named Margaret Kim being interviewed on the radio. He wondered if that might have been me, using a married name.

Back in London, after some digging, Adam discovered that the Ahns were still listed in Falls Church and made a phone call across the Atlantic. He spoke to my father who remembered the British-accented boy not so much from the ship but from all the love letters that sailed in the mail from ’69 to ’76. Vivian, over for a visit, got on the phone and gave Adam my email address.

There was a time when I clung onto Adam’s every word, sigh, and eye flutter. But I was no longer that girl showered in turquoise, gushing with love. So, when Adam emailed me, my newly widowed heart was no longer beating, and when he called me, all I heard was a voice from the grave. We

spoke for an hour and took turns summarizing our lives. Kind as ever and very sad to hear about my husband, Adam was an investment banker on his second marriage to a Scottish woman. His father's health took a poor turn long ago, and his parents moved back to Korea; he rarely saw them. His sister Isabelle had straightened up and worked for some media conglomerate in some important capacity before retiring to Spain. His daughter lived in East Sussex with her boyfriend. Self-loathing still sparked his monologue: *Sometimes I fear I'm not fit to be a father … You were the talented one* … In closing, he offered his deepest sympathies upon hearing of Mommy's untimely death, and asked me why I hadn't written to tell him back when.

Why?

Again, the ocean was still out there. We were not.

Then, Adam and Margaret were spoken to one last time, feebly yet firmly: Enough, enough.



After talking to Peter, I sank into bed like quicksand, back in dystopia before my head hit the pillow. My first sign: streetlamps shattering over my head as I roamed through a town growing eerier with every step. Dad-doing-his-happy-jig might be happening on some sweet, earthy plane, but not here.

A car pulled up with the promise of a friendly ride home. Like some wide-eyed amnesiac, I always fell for it. Because when the window rolled down, a sea of reptilian eyes stared back, ready to eat me alive. I ran past funhouse mirrors, in and out of doors, in and out of buildings, on this street, on that street. Soon, dead to everyone, I found myself in a saloon at a round wooden table across from two male figures. One spoke abstract mumbo-jumbo to the air. The other was, yes, it was …

Eggman.

In my waking life, I would have lunged across the table, clutched him with everything in me but, in this life, rigor mortis was setting in. By the time Eggman stood up, my lips were stiffening, unable to spit out anything intelligible as he vanished out the door. Out of my mind, I busted through paralysis, screaming down swept-of-life streets.

'Eggman, will I ever see you again?'

Gone.

I floated in black waters, looking for someone, anyone to help me.

Leaves shuddered.

Molecules danced.

Everything was shrouded in mystique.

Something was up.

'Eggman?'

Is that you?

No.

It was Mommy.

'Mommy!'

Captured in time, she appeared like a dreamy sequence in a film, her black bouffant adorned with a crimson orchid that floated to the ground and found its way back, over and over, blooming and withering in place. Sensing icy vapours, I approached her, not sure if it was her or her essence or her hologram, not even after I wrapped myself like a blanket around her figure, so cadaver cold I cried. But soon the long-forgotten scent of Pond's Cold Cream made me melt with memory, rekindled embers from forgotten flames.

Mommy, how could I have forgotten how much I missed you? Forgotten what it was like, to be so close to you? Where did our time go?

Reading my mind, she began to chant a strange tongue in my ear, and I heard a thousand stories of love. Ahn love. Everything was perfect now. I would never let go; I would stay in this embrace for eternity.

‘*Right, Mommy?’*

Her nodding bouffant bobbed up and down like sea waves as a circle of mist enveloped us. This time I knew what it was, who it was. Afraid to scare him off, I whispered.

‘Eggman, will I ever see you again?’

What I’d do, what I’d do …

From somewhere his hands cupped my face, his voice broke through all tragedy.

‘Of course you will.’

And with that, his fiddle and its melody, so bittersweet every bone in me broke, danced over Blue Stone. Not the cryptic illusion but the Blue Stone I still cried for when all the Ahns were happy and accounted for and the dream of Eggman still lay ahead.

O Eggman … You’re catching my arm; you’re scurrying back with coffee and lemon-poppy muffins, scurrying back to me, to us. This, all of this, was no illusion, I knew it, I knew it, I knew it.

I was finally found.

‘Music,’ Mommy breathed.

‘Music,’ I breathed back.

Then I took Mommy’s hand, and we followed the sound of Eggman’s fiddle. We followed it like candlelight home.

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19

Winter 2019

Vignette: One starry night three Ahns formed a triangle of heaven. My father, a-jig, so triumphant he could kiss the sky. Mommy, forever the mirror of his mood. Me, at an acrobatic angle above; a boy breathing in my ear. Sometimes I was still there—spellbound—waiting for the next move.

The encore.

Were Mommy alive, she would be cooking breakfast in the kitchen downstairs, birthday or no birthday. Breakfast at the Ahns: French toast or seaweed soup, your preference. *'Come get it!'* But the stove was stone-cold that morning, her voice, a vanished flame.

Like Archie after he lost Edith, Sam Ahn was up, shuffling around. Not poised for a jig. Watering orchids, no doubt. Drinking coffee, for sure. He made his own every morning and he made it stronger than Starbucks—that I could smell. By now, he knew that he was not in a deep sleep or a snow globe. But at least the weather was nice. That was no hallucination.

Dry cemetery grounds. What a concept!

I closed my eyes; saw Blue Stone Circle in its wintry glory. All around, the naked-face decay of suburban castles, stark yet gorgeous without gaudy gardens to hide behind. Little castles still standing; all in all, ageing better

than me—any day I could walk by a window or a mirror, catch sight of a long luminous old-lady braid and wonder when that happened.

Still, we had a couple of good walks yesterday, didn't we, Dad? You got a bit winded, but we had some laughs. The air was clear and crisp, a winter tale, a tonic.

In the stuff of Hallmark movies, we'd be hunting around for a dreamy ending here. Let's see: the character (me) might come across the passenger list from SS President Roosevelt; or a tarnished gold trophy; or a crimson orchid crushed between its yellowed pages; or an autographed sketch of a boy and girl riding the waves on a bicycle-for-two; or a threadbare cocktail napkin-halve with a fading address; or a near-empty bottle of Ambush cologne and inhale it with rapture. Naturally, trumping such relics, picture the pageantry of my dad waltzing down to the main floor and being greeted by a home in orchid-bloom.

Time to get up and say 'happy birthday'.



My token gift was a recording of Eggman on his fiddle. How many times, in my husband's absence, through barely cracked-open windows in the apartment, would I listen to that fiddle and cramp up like a girl in love? Only Eggman could make 'happy birthday to you' sound so soulful, so heartbreaking it might drive a man to jig. Wishful thinking!

With no orchids to give, what else do you give a man like Sam Ahn for his birthday?

On our first and possibly only birthday walk around the sun or moon that was Blue Stone Circle, I dared to consider bringing up the sore if not shelved topic, the one that could crater him again. But sometimes, the time and place feel right, even if you have no idea why. The road was clear of rain, snow, and ice; still, in addition to cemetery plans later, it felt like a one-jaunt day that, right off the bat, was requiring more steering and

navigating than the day before, as we bravely embarked on our journey, lucky to make it twenty degrees on your compass or to just past eleven on your clock—your preference. As the sun played peek-a-boo with a cloud or two, I thought to myself, *What the hell*. Frankly, for all I knew, Uncle Bong had died at sea.

‘Do you ever wonder about Uncle Bong, Dad?’

No reaction, really. Just a murmur or two. Maybe my father was just tired, even of the Ahn archives. Or maybe, as an official nonagenarian, it was time to get over it.

Naturally, I’d googled Uncle Bong’s name over the years. No shock to the US Census Bureau, there were plenty of Bong-Young Ahns now, but mine was no media guy or digital specialist on LinkedIn. It’s as if Uncle Bong, my Uncle Bong, never existed; his imprint and glory on SS President Roosevelt washed away by forgotten ancient waves, all his bicycling around Blue Stone Circle worn down by tires and footprints. And time.

‘Yah.’

‘Yah what, Dad? You *do* wonder about him?’

Though his voice was quiet, it came through like a foghorn.

‘I saw him, Margaret.’

Head spinning: ‘You *saw* him?’

‘Yah.’

Uncle Bong, Uncle Bong …

‘Why didn’t you ever tell me?’

‘You never asked.’

I spat out nonsense then lost steam. ‘Tell me the story, Dad. Please.’

Chin up, Sam Ahn was trying to save face, proof that being born First Son ran deep. It wasn’t easy to talk about a younger brother who fiercely depended on him for every crumb of food, only to desert him for greener pastures.

‘It happened ten, eleven years ago. He was … very sick.’

‘From what?’

‘Cancer.’

Sooner or later, it got all of us.

‘How did you know?’

‘One day, the telephone rang.’

‘It was him?’

‘No. A hospital in San Francisco.’

‘Why? Wait—were you his emergency contact?’

‘Yah.’

San Francisco, cancer, obviously no close friends or family to speak of. What happened to him all those years; years we weren’t privy to? It all made me feel weird and sad. Some stars stay lit like Eggman; some dim like Uncle Bong. Indeed, whenever I thought of my uncle, whenever I recounted the strange yet colourful chapter to Eggman, it was more like a memory of a memory, a journal that disappeared one day.

‘You flew there,’ I gathered.

‘Yah.’

‘Alone?’

‘Yah.’

Like our skies, our walks and talks blurred into one. I’ll always think back on them as our days, our wonderful last days, whatever the weather, of this dreamy romp we call life. Yet on that day, assuming I wasn’t dreaming, the sky grew an unforgettable deep marbled blue.

‘You know, Margaret, he began smoking those evil cigars on the ship.’

Ah. Sam Ahn wanted to blame SS President Roosevelt lifestyle for Uncle Bong’s cancer, lung cancer, presumably, as if that’s what happens when you trade one fate for another. Ultimately, the decision to sail away without us prompted Mommy—our Mommy!—to become more independent and drive herself that day, a fatal decision. Four decades after the fact, my father

remained in the dark, shielded from the backstory. And as we promised Mommy, the truth would stay there.

‘How long did he work on the ship?’ I wondered.

He shrugged. No idea.

‘What about later in life? What did he do?’

Another shrug.

‘Well, what did you two say to each other? After so much time, there was a lot to talk about, right? Or … couldn’t he speak?’

‘Margaret, he didn’t know who I was.’

Oh no. ‘Dementia?’

‘Yah.’

Cancer *and* dementia. Why doesn’t that surprise me? Once Uncle Bong hit dry land, maybe his luck ran out and his legs bowed back, and his confidence shrank; maybe only the sea was his friend; maybe he long basked as King Bong until they retired him.

‘He died, Margaret.’

‘There? In the hospital?’

His pause told me that in the still of many dawns and many dusks, more than my heart could number, Sam Ahn had wept over his younger brother’s demise.

Uncle Bong, Uncle Bong …

‘Yah.’

‘And you stayed with him until the end?’

‘It was only two days.’

Our pause was more tragic than long. But it was long.

‘Tell me something, Dad.’

‘Yah?’

‘Right before we got off the ship, you said something to Uncle Bong. You whispered something. What was it? Do you remember?’

Sam Ahn waded back to that terrible scene for a split-second before acknowledging, '*Ah*, *yes*.' The Whisper. The ocean then was not the ocean now, and at ninety years old, he could almost laugh at his faux pas. Or regretfully chuckle: 'I tried to bribe him.'

Process, process. 'Bribe him with what?'

'A new car.'

'You mean … a Volkswagen Bug?'

'Yah.'

'Sunshine yellow, black top.'

'Yah.'

A car, a ship, take your pick. I shared in the sad chuckle. I mean, come on. Uncle Bong made the right choice.

Silent, my father seemed to have nothing more to say. I was wrong.

'*Mar-ga-ret*?'

'Yes, Dad?'

'I asked your Uncle Bong to look for Mommy in heaven. To take care of her. Do you know what happened next?'

Every bird, every twig, my every cell, froze.

'What happened?'

Wishing the weight of the Ahn family was still on his shoulders, he choked up. After all, First Son and husband and father were roles Sam Ahn was meant to play, not lonely widower wandering around with a watering can.

'His hand moved, Margaret. Reached towards my arm. *Touched* it. So perhaps he could hear me. Understand me.' Sam Ahn halted in his tracks, wishing his stories had different endings. My father: once fuming, now sorry. 'Perhaps he knew who I was. Perhaps he heard me apologize.'

Process, process, process. A decade earlier, a dying Uncle Bong had touched his arm. In my eyes, that was as heartbreaking as heartbreaking gets. But guess what? It was better than any brotherly jig, in any realm.

‘Tell me, Margaret …’

‘Yes?’

‘What do you think?’

‘I think he knew *exactly* who you were, Dad.’

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Winter 2019

Sam Ahn shuffled towards the powder room with his watering can. Time for a little orchid lovin'. Meanwhile, I headed upstairs to change out of thermal gear and into some knock around clothes until mid-afternoon when we would go out to the cemetery. Mid-step, something stopped me and like a raked over seed, I realized something. Unlike people, orchids thrive on *benign neglect*—that's gardener talk. And you know what? Sam Ahn was over-watering his orchid plants.

Drowning them with love.

'Dad?'

Faucet on, he couldn't hear me, so I leaned over the railing just like I did one night when all appeared right with the world.

'Dad!'

The faucet went off: 'Yah, *Mar-ga-ret*?'

I said it before I thought it all out, said it as those ghost-gates locked behind me.

'Tell Mrs Lim to take some time off! And tell Mr Pak you're no stay-at-home hick! I'm hunkering down for the winter!'

Given my mood, I could've quit my lawyer life in a New York minute. Stayed here forever.

The commotion below would haunt me long after my father was gone: the tinny bang of the watering can hitting the kitchen floor; the footsteps coming towards me, quick and sudden—no easy feat for a man celebrating ninety years on this dream we call earth. We met in the middle of the staircase like rafts lost for a half-century in the Pacific.

And that's when I saw it.

There, in his eyes.

Our lost years.

Our lost dreams.

A little cha-cha-cha.

'Monkey,' he cried, 'what did you say?'

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Author’s Note

Years ago, I had a haunting dream: My long-dead father and I were standing on opposite sides of an intersection in our hometown, waiting for the *‘Don’t Walk’* sign to change. My eyes peered into his, hoping for recognition, but as always in my dream life, his face was stone. Finally, the *‘Walk’* sign lit up. As we were crossing paths, he stopped in his tracks and did something he would never in a million years do in real life:

He broke into a little jig.

The next day I could not let the dream go, recounting it to anyone who would listen, even the disinterested. Yet the jig meant something—didn’t it? That weekend, my friend Koomo and I went over to visit my widowed mother whereupon I showed her, *performed* for her, the jig in question. *Ta, da!* Even she, who loved the mysterious, gave me a look and turned back to the TV.

‘Movie almost over,’ she said.

The scene on the screen featured a man on a beach at night. You couldn’t really see the face, just a figure that quite suddenly broke into a jig. My jaw dropped. My friend shot me a look.

‘Oh … my … God …’ he muttered.

‘Who is he, Mom?’ I needed to know.

‘You mean actor?’

‘No, no, I mean, the character. What character is the actor playing?’

‘Oh, he is ghost or angel.’

It turned out that the film my mother was watching was *The Legend of Bagger Vance*. And after some research, I learned that the character, played by actor Will Smith, was a spiritual guide who happened to break into a jig.

Just like the dad of my dreams.

This novel is a work of fiction, but like most writers, I occasionally draw from my own life. And sometimes I wonder—even pen—how life's scenes might have played out had fate not gotten in the way. In *Ahn Love*, I reversed my parents' fates, with my father long surviving my mother. This is what he'd be like in modern times, had he lived past the age of fifty-six. Or so I imagine.



Excerpts from *Ahn Love* have appeared as short stories in *The Bellevue Literary Review* (Fall 2019) and in *The London Magazine* (Oct/Nov 2016).

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Published by Penguin Random House SEA Pte Ltd
40 Penjuru Lane, #03-12, Block 2
Singapore 609216



First published in Penguin Books by Penguin Random House SEA 2026

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eISBN: 9789815368789

www.penguin.sg

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