The Departure Lounge

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A REUNION of The Boat People Club—at least that’s what Thomas’s letter called the group—had been planned for that June, on the east coast of Malaysia, and Maureen was just now hearing about it. Rueben had held on to the letter for a couple of days, checking flight schedules and costs, then poured them some wine at dinner. A reunion, he said out of the blue: wouldn’t that be something? It had been more than a quarter of a century ago, after all, that everyone in the Club had gone to Malaysia to work with Vietnamese boat people, and as Rueben sometimes said over drinks, when you’ve worked in a refugee camp you’re pretty much guaranteed a long memory. “Oh, Miss Maureen,” he said then, plucking Thomas’s letter from his pocket and waving it over his head. “Miss Maureen, Miss Maureen.” That was what the refugees called her when they wanted something. He placed the letter on the table and stood behind her as she read. “What do you think?” he whispered. Once again into the breach? Or wait until they each had one crotchety foot in the grave?

Maureen almost burst out laughing. He sounded like a teenager lobbying her into bed, and she couldn’t resist turning around sharply and letting loose with a
mocking “Who are you?” which she immediately regretted upon seeing his serious and unflinching expression. He was sensitive to criticisms, and he sometimes picked up on implied ones to an alarming degree, but, more importantly, both of them had long ago agreed that courtesy was not something to be demonstrated only in front of strangers. In fact, Maureen held, courtesy was an underrated marital virtue and when looked at over the long haul, yes, she’d say it, a substantial and perhaps even transcendent act of love (maybe Presbyterian love, Rueben joked, but still he, too, practiced it daily). So as her husband pressed forward with his case she listened attentively, and even before he was finished she knew she would say yes. If he wanted to go so badly, then she would give herself every chance to want to go as well. He would have done the same for her.

She had to admit, too, and with some surprise, that what he was saying seemed to ignite some long-cold ember of her travel passion, which she believed had ages ago burnt itself into a perfect ring of ash. Imagine, he said to her, imagine returning to the country where they had first met each other all those years ago. Imagine seeing their UN comrades-in-arms again—The Musketeers, The Marco Polos, The Faces You Would See from Your Deathbed. How had the group ever fallen out of touch? Wouldn’t it be something, he wondered aloud, to see Thomas and Kathy and Kevin again? “And let’s not forget Stella and Tony,” he added, grinning.

“All right,” said Maureen, “them, too.” She paused. “Though they were more your friends.”

“Oh, come on now,” Rueben said. “They were second-stringers for me, too. I just knew them a little longer.”

They had never been back to Malaysia—they had not, in fact, left the confines of Washington State for more than a decade—and though Maureen didn’t say so, she felt an exotic adventure in June would be perfect for her husband. He had been teaching English to foreign students at the same language school for so long that his colleagues named the new breakroom after him. Just recently he had begun expressing disappointment over his career. Last month he asked her if she thought he was a lollygagger. Of course not, she told him, but later he asked her another question: okay, he said, how about a flunky? He would not be consoled. Last year he had stopped jogging, and now he spent his evenings on the Internet playing Texas Hold ’Em. During his breaks between teaching sessions he hardly seemed to know what to do with himself. More than once, she had found him holed up in the TV room, sleeping his day away.
They quickly dispensed with logistics and finances. She had just been promoted at Boeing—she was now a senior proposal writer—and had enough clout to swing a summer leave. (“My tutoring money?” Rueben said. “There’s five bucks we’ll just have to do without.”) They could get the Morrison boy to housesit and look after the yard. They could put the bathroom renovation on hold until next year.

The matter was settled.

“Wow,” Maureen exclaimed. “Did we just step into a time machine?” She twisted an imaginary dial and addressed the couch: “Boat-people refugee camp sighted, Capitan. Set the way-back for one million B.C.”

“I must have a different machine,” Rueben said. “Seems like yesterday to me.”

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In May the plan began to unravel—grand plans always did, Maureen asserted, they always pushed you off the sidewalk—and Maureen found herself second-guessing their decision. Thomas had come down with some unspecified but serious illness, and Kathy, now living in the French countryside, had to make expensive repairs on her collapsed roof; Kevin, never the effusive one, sent everyone a postcard from Buenos Aires with a curt Sorry, maybe next year.

That left only Stella and Tony.

But the dye was cast, and pulling out at such a late date would have been difficult. They had already purchased plane tickets and arranged to board their two dogs at Seattle’s perpetually booked Canine Retreat. And Maureen’s mother, who had originally hoped to meet up with her daughter and son-in-law in nearby Vancouver that summer, had given the trip her blessing. Going back, she told them, would be a kind of anniversary, wouldn’t it? One needed to reflect on one’s past, after all, to burnish it like a trophy, not store it like an urn. “Think how you might have ended up if you hadn’t done relief work,” her mother said. She shuddered theatrically at Maureen, and they all smiled. “You would have turned into a traffic sign,” she added, after which no one laughed because the comment seemed a little cruel and because neither Maureen nor Rueben was completely sure what it meant. “You know,” her mother explained. “Let’s stop now. Let’s yield here. Let’s use caution.”

Oh, ha ha ha, said Maureen.

Oh, ha ha ha, said Rueben.

Why, Maureen said to Rueben later, did even her mother not understand where the line was?
After overly loud phone calls to Stella and Tony—“How are you?” Rueben shouted into the receiver, both times. “It’s been forever”—Rueben mimed an orgasm by thrusting his hips forward and quivering. They laughed, then they reviewed their itinerary until Maureen put her hands over her ears and said she hoped they weren’t putting too many eggs into this particular basket.

Rueben put the plane tickets down.

“Okay,” Maureen said, “maybe it’s not the basket. Maybe it’s these particular eggs.” She had tiny hands just beginning to spot and a reedy neck her husband still found appealing, especially when counterpointed against her long, dark hair. When agitated, she had a habit of jutting out her chin and pursing her lips, and she did so now.

“Well, look,” Rueben said. “I’m disappointed about that, too. I wish everyone was going.”

“I mean Stella and Tony are fine,” Maureen said. “But I don’t want to be the third wheel.”

“Do I really have to say it?” Rueben asked mournfully, and he clasped her hand in his own. “I wasn’t tight with them. You’re my rudder. No you, no rudder. We’d all just sink to the bottom.”

It was the kind of language she had grown accustomed to hearing from him, especially in times of stress. After the fall of Saigon in 1975, Vietnamese by the thousands crammed onto leaky clinker boats and set out into the South China Sea, and by the thousands they drowned. The lucky ones followed the Dutch oilrig lights to the refugee camp on Bidong Island, just off Malaysia’s east coast, where they learned English and waited for the UN to deliver their fate.

“It’s like I told you back then,” Rueben said, yanking on the chest pocket of his t-shirt. He was tall and still bony. Lanky, he liked to say, and in a gesture Maureen recognized as contemplative, he lifted his glasses by one of the stems and scrunched up his nose as if repressing a sneeze. “We were just work buddies,” he said, “but I didn’t understand that. Then you showed up. And Thomas and Kathy and Kevin. You helped me understand.”

She had lifted the veil from his eyes, he said once. He had been the first UN English teacher on the island, working cheek-to-jowl with Stella, a social worker, and Tony, an engineer. For six months they were the day-to-day UN presence, back in a time when, as Rueben put it, the Malaysians running the camp were as likely to put a gun to your head as say hello. Then the wire services printed some devastating stories, and along with bushels of money and supplies came Maureen, also an English teacher, and the other three principal members of the Club. Sud-
denly Stella and Tony were on the outside looking in.

"Yet here we are going," she said. "With Stella and Tony."

She could not keep the edge out of her voice. She had fallen head over heels for Rueben from the get-go, and he with her, and one of the first things he did after their first night together was to distance himself, politely, of course, and quietly, from Stella and Tony. They were presumptuous and pissy, he told her. They both had some kind of I-have-seen-the-abyss Lord Jim complex. What must his life have been like in the camp, Maureen used to wonder, before she was in the picture? Before Thomas and Kevin and Kathy declared their pairing an inspiration? The question had long ago dried up. Its answer had been without consequence for so long, she had simply stopped wondering.

Rueben reached over now and touched her arm. Weeks ago, they had agreed that the trip itself was the important thing. Who else was there wasn’t supposed to be a deal breaker. "Help me understand," he said. "Where’s this reluctance coming from?"

She had, in fact, been asking herself the same thing. The trip was all Rueben could talk about lately, and she had no intention of being the wet blanket. She knew, she said, how infantile it sounded, but remembering the old days and telling the old stories was one thing—she indulged in it herself at work, enjoying the admiration in her co-workers’ eyes—but actually going back, with Thomas and Kathy and Kevin missing in action, was another thing entirely. When she imagined reuniting with the Club, laughing riotously, indulging their every whim, all she could picture was herself and her husband and the other three, sitting at a table with drinks in their hands.

But now, she told him, she couldn’t get Stella and Tony out of her head. The more she thought about The Boat People Club, the more she suspected that if not for Thomas and Kathy and Kevin—all so witty, so kind, all so accepting—she probably wouldn’t have hung out with the other two. Yet, she acknowledged, she could not even picture Stella or Tony anymore. She found herself accepting the fact of their physical existence as she did Bulgaria, as an article of faith. And that wasn’t being fair, she knew—it was childish to linger on old, half-remembered slights—but in the camp she had been subject to their disapproval. What the source of the disapproval had been she couldn’t recall, but she suspected it probably had a lot to do with the sort of girl she was back then, bookish and complicated in a gooney, perhaps trivial way. ("You weren’t gooney," Rueben said. "You weren’t trivial. Come on now.") She had been, she believed, uncommonly pliant and needy, and someone, she said, she doubted she’d even like anymore.
It was almost as if five people were going—them, Stella and Tony, and that damn ghost of herself. Crazy, wasn’t it?

“No, it’s not,” Rueben said.

“I’m babbling.”

“No, you’re not,” he said. “Talk it out.”

All those old feelings, she told him: they were like some noxious vapor rising from the floorboards. They added a dimension of uncertainty to the trip, even dread, that she hadn’t felt since going to live and work in the refugee camp in the first place. Back then, fresh out of college, she had signed on with a UN relief agency and raced headlong into a vast and terrifying unknown. She hadn’t so much left for an adventure in Malaysia as she had escaped a life of exquisite narrowness in her mother’s house. She had felt herself on the verge of disappearing. Back then she would have done anything to shuck off her own skin and leave behind all those ghastly organs, all those earnest, dumbshit bones—the whole smelly mess of her—on her mother’s spectacular veranda.

How, she asked, shaking her head at the sheer wonder of it, how could your ancient insecurities just pull the rug out from under you sometimes, as if you were just along for the ride? How could you wake up one day and feel like you were going backwards?

“We can still cancel,” Rueben said. He clutched the tickets in his fist and waved them around. “We’ll lose some money, but that’s okay. Really.”

No. She would not hear of it. She was just having last-minute jitters, that was all. She was just finding it hard to accommodate memories from a lifetime ago. All that uncertainty, that lack of control. That horrible ignorance about what was really going on.

Her voice grew confident and firm. It never ceased to surprise her how saying certain things out loud sometimes seemed to make them true. She hadn’t understood her misgivings in this way before, and in defining her anxiety, in giving it a shape and a clear, seamless contour, she felt it grow meek and small. She could manage this. Yes. That was the clarity of middle age, the power it gave you to see what would otherwise be an airy flutter out the corner of your eye.

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This is also what she saw.

She saw that her husband’s response had once again approximated hers, had the roles been reversed. He had pushed hard for her to go, yet he was prepared to cancel the journey if she found it unpalatable. That
was his M.O.—their M.O., their signature behavior—and she took quiet
pleasure in their refusal to lord it over each other. He was solicitous and
gentle—how like a teenager she felt sometimes, thinking in terms such
as gentle—and even now, on lazy Sunday mornings, she would wake up
next to him and with her index finger trace little hearts across his bare
back. Time, she wrote in her occasional journal, was both an enemy
and a friend: she was graying, as was he, but now a life together was no
longer an option among many other options. Now it had weight. It had
gravitas.

Exactly. So she was not silly, was she?—no, she did not feel silly—she
was not silly, then, to interpret their negotiations over the trip as yet
another example of the pattern they had created. No law said that a
woman on the cusp of fifty could not cultivate youthful, even magical,
connections. No number of blacktop roads and telephone wires and con-
crete slabs could assert their primacy over an invisible realm. She still
had her arguments with her husband, of course, and they both fell into
periods of testiness and exhaustion, but those moments simply meant
their blood was still pumping. Somewhere along the line, somewhere
in the midst of their mistakes and false starts, they had developed what
she liked to think of as a kind of ESP, and as was the case with all things
invisible, the more she tried to understand it, the more it seemed to
hover just beyond her grasp.

She sometimes tried to understand their connection by comparing it
to things she did understand. But even the comparisons sounded silly—
and, she had to admit, equally mysterious—so she kept her attempts at
explanation to herself, scribbled into her journal in nearly incomprehen-
sible handwriting, even to her own eyes.

The comparison she liked the best was from her childhood, when
she was ten. Her mother had lived in Sacramento then, and the back
yard spilled over into the yard of her best friend, Gloria. When the raked
leaves from the neighborhood oaks grew so high the debris swallowed
their legs, she and Gloria dared each other to leap backwards into the
piles and pretend they were dead. It was a contest. Whoever got up first
was the loser, so they filled each other’s heads with stories of scorpions
and flesh-eating moles nosing toward their privates. They stared into
the spare, bright sky, and they let their bodies go limp and smelled the
soil and leaves. They saw tiny stirrings in the pile, little quivers whose
source they subjected to terrifying speculations. They heard rasping and
grinding underneath, like paper tearing, and still they lay perfectly still
for what felt like hours, and when the moisture finally leached into
Maureen’s scalp and the cold began to burn her ears, she sometimes
cried at the strangeness of the sensations and calmed herself by speaking to her friend in a loud and rapid pig latin.

With pig latin, you felt you had stumbled onto a secret code, one that worked not only for child words but for adult ones as well, and even for the words you made up and said only to yourself. That was what she had with Rueben: a secret, middle-aged code. It provided comfort and calm, and though it had never been put to the test, she indulged her fancy and assigned it talismanic powers. There was a mystery to the code, of course, just as there had been when she was a child. But the parameters of both were essentially the same. You didn’t want to announce you were using a secret code any more than you wanted to explain your jokes, or to say why some things moved you to tears while others didn’t. If you did, the magic was lost (just as saying certain things sometimes brought them into existence, she suspected that saying certain other things could make them disappear).

So the existence of the code, then as now, had to go unspoken. It had to be accepted as a gift. If she sat smartly at the table, her face smiley and receptive, and told Rueben their negotiations over the trip formed a pathway into a magical and delightful pattern, then their future exchanges might grow self-conscious. A certain falseness might creep into their words; a certain expectation, one that could not always be met, might develop. A certain magic might be lost.

They resumed checking their travel itinerary. Not everything thrived by being said. That was another thing middle age clarified for you: what should be said out loud, and what shouldn’t.

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They flew for two days, and over the Pacific, Maureen told her husband that all the time zone changes made you wonder if you were coming or going. Move the hand forward, move it back. Watches didn’t make a lot of sense when you were traveling.

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Stella and Tony were already in Malaysia, in the coastal city of Kuala Trengganu—the agreed-upon meeting site—and they had apparently marked their presence by telling the city’s waiters about the imminent arrival of their friends. “You are Mister Rueben?” asked a plate-laden Chinese waiter, eavesdropping. It was still morning, and Maureen and Rueben sat drinking iced coffees in the open-air Han Sui Restaurant,
trying to recall some forgotten detail about the camp. Rueben looked up
from his glass and acknowledged he was indeed said Mister. “And this is
my wife, Maureen,” he said, nodding across the table. “Ah,” the waiter
answered, smiling hugely, but when his eyes roamed her face he cocked
his head to the side as if presented with a question.

It had been a wonderful morning until the waiter’s intrusion. Their
bags were safely tucked away in their hotel. They were hungry and
buoyant, and the sun hadn’t yet turned so hot their scalps would itch.
Over the horizon from the city was Bidong Island, thirty nautical miles
out, and even from the confines of the Han Sui, well up the steep hill
from the harbor, they smelled the dank water and the diesel soaking
into the peeling green walls of the shopfronts. It was one of Maureen’s
sharpest memories of Kuala Trengganu—the oily, burning-rubber odor;
the ruined exteriors of the open-air restaurants—and when she breathed
the fragrance, she recalled the name of her favorite Chinese noodle shop,
where they now sat and drank iced coffees.

Maureen leaned in. “So they mention you, but not me.”

Rueben waved his hands around a bit and almost knocked over
his drink. “Don’t you think you might be jumping to conclusions?” he
asked.

“Easy for you to say, Mister Rueben.”

“Granted. But don’t you think you might be putting a lot of weight
on some waiter’s expression?”

He was right, of course. She was being peevish—slap-me trolling.
Rueben had once called it—hunting for insult until she found one. And
that was a shame because she found the heavy tropical air and the colo-
nial-style buildings and the languorous, lapping sounds of Malay in the
restaurant intoxicating. She found herself delighting in the chicory-laced
coffee and the ridiculous wall portraits of the state sultan and his wife,
bedecked in medals and jowly as frogs. So she thanked her husband. In
return, he nudged her under the table with his knee, and equilibrium
was once again re-established.

The trip, she felt, had actually been going well. Surprisingly so. Had
it just been two days ago that they arrived at Subang International and
took a taxi into the capital? She wished they could have stayed in Kuala
Lumpur longer, reliving their luxurious R & R leaves from the camp.
She likened their itinerary to rushing down the basement stairs: the far-
ther you went, the less certain your footing. They had stayed in Kuala
Lumpur just long enough to book passage north. Now here they were in
quiet Kuala Trengganu, recalling how they used to leap from the camp
supply boat onto the city’s harbor docks. Tomorrow, who knew? Stella
and Tony were supposed to meet them in the morning down by the harbor. Then they'd all rent a boat and head out to Bidong Island to see what was left.

She ordered another iced coffee. How odd: if she was heading down the basement stairs, then her husband seemed to be heading up. It was a curious feeling, bumping shoulders with him as they passed. But perhaps, she felt, she had allowed a lingering uncertainty to cloud her perceptions. Perhaps she hadn't given herself the chance to appreciate that now was no longer then.

In the capital, they had gone straight from the airport to the long-distance bus terminal and purchased tickets to Kuala Trengganu. Driving in, she couldn't stop looking out the window of the taxi. The old city, the city she remembered, had been replaced by an amusing tableau of ham-fisted ironies. Hawkers sold dried snakeskins in front of glass-plated high-rises. Women in tarp-like religious garb drove by in BMWs, mouthing rock songs (“Oh, hey,” she said, “she's playing air guitar”). There was no litter on the streets now, she said, anywhere. How was that possible? She pointed: there, right there, can you believe it, a Baskin-Robbins?

Rueben had murmured agreement, though he seemed dismayed by the absence of certain ancient landmarks, certain oddball items that struck her as vaguely and unpleasantly charged with masculine fantasy. That was a side to him she hadn't expressed in a long time, and though she knew she should be encouraging, she also felt his revival and romanticizing of all things dead and gone to be—well, she'd tell him if he pressed—a tad perverse.

But perhaps, she felt, she was in some way partly to blame. Perhaps she hadn't paid enough attention to his recent bouts of withdrawal and self-loathing. Perhaps she hadn't lingered with him enough in the back yard, a glass of wine in her hand, interrogating him about Malaysia and the refugee camp, pre-her. Back when she hadn't been in the picture. Back in his Ur life, when it was just him and Tony and Stella and about a million boat people.

In the taxi she made a mental note to do more of that sort of thing, even though it was sometimes hard to endure the camp stories he told to anyone who asked. It was all she could do at those times not to interrupt him with news of the latest outrage from their mortgage company, or to soften the mood with a funny anecdote she had heard at work. When you thought about what shaped you, after all, didn't right now count for as much as way back when? Wasn't plain old yesterday as meaningful as yesterday plus twenty-five or more years? Surely lots of things, not just their exotic year in the camp, went into explaining her interest in
soccer, or her expertise with Vietnamese pho and vermicelli noodles with duck sauce, or her liberal politics and confounding sense of realpolitik, or her refusal, even now, to show too much skin in public. For crying out loud, she said to him once, in a fit of pique: they weren’t refugees. They just worked with refugees.

A few blocks from the buses, she caught her husband frowning. She prodded. After a rain back then, he told her, staring out the taxi window, the truck tires for some reason smelled like hothouse sex. So did the food. He couldn’t even breathe in Kuala Lumpur years ago, he said, without thinking about open-heart surgery, or innards rotting in a pail. Malay women flirted outrageously with him, he said, leering at his wife and laughing. Giant spiders crawled into his shoes and left behind squirming egg sacs the texture of sponges. Mornings, old Chinese men with neck goiters walked the sidewalks, carrying hot spiced dumplings on poles strung across their shoulders. The city’s finest hotels posted “No Spitting” signs in their lobbies. Wonderful, he mumbled. Erotic.

At the terminal, watching the driver unload their bags, Maureen asked him about what he had said. “Was that wistfulness speaking?”

Rueben snorted, then pointed to their idling bus. It was enormous and spanking new, with TV monitors hanging down from the overhead racks, as on an airplane. “Look at that thing,” he said. He heaved his bag at the feet of the harried-looking bus driver, loading bulky items into the luggage bay. “Wistfulness,” Rueben said then, searching the ceiling of the station. “That’s a Heathcliff-on-the-moors word, isn’t it? I’m still in the game, sweetcheeks.” He grabbed her bag by the strap.

“Of course you are,” she said.
“We are,” he corrected.
“You bet we are.”

His hand lingered on her luggage. “Would it be too obvious,” he asked, “just to say a lot’s changed around here?”

“A first kiss can happen only once,” she said brightly.

Her comment did not go over well. He snatched up her bag a bit too insistently, she thought, a bit too rough. She didn’t press the point.

They arrived in Kuala Trengganu around dawn, bleary-eyed despite the deep, comfortable seats and reasonable air-conditioning. She knew they had arrived when she looked past Rueben, out the coach window, and saw the giant tin-plated statue of a leatherback turtle along the ribbon of highway, a landmark that even way back when marked the city’s southernmost approach.

“Tommy Turtle’s still here,” Rueben announced, pressing his face against the glass. She nodded, but said no more. Once, she had taken a
night bus from the capital to Kuala Trengganu with Rueben and Tony, up the same highway. Tony had become indignant when they passed the landmark. He had started a loud diatribe, within earshot of their fellow passengers, about Malaysians caring more for the sea turtles that came ashore than for the boat people. Then Rueben had chimed in, equally indignant and loud. Embarrassed, she had curled up in her seat and pretended to nap, and perhaps in remembrance of that moment, she gave no reply to her husband and instead folded her arms across her chest.

Within minutes, Rueben was beaming. The city had changed much less than the capital. There had always been an outpost quality to Kuala Trengganu—the low-lying skyline, the grand blacktop roads leading to empty fields, men in sarongs and dusty songkat hats—and Rueben announced, with approval in his voice, that much of that remained. At the bus terminal they flagged down two trishaws to take them to the new South East Asia Concord, which, according to the brochures (she had put her foot down at the suggestion of backpacking it), was a four-star hotel with a swimming pool and indoor sauna.

They bounced over rubble and freshly painted walls, clutching their suitcases, passing so close to Indian laborers they could have reached out and wiped the construction dust from the men’s arms. “Matsalleh,” Maureen heard. White person. The term was not friendly. Its source was a group of schoolboys on the corner, smoking and spitting. Some things are constants, Maureen thought, some things eternal, though she quickly admonished herself for the mean and small satisfaction the thought produced (the satisfaction, she concluded, was unacceptable: it implied a flattening of sensation, a kind of mummification, as if the boys had been placed under glass decades ago).

Up ahead, Rueben lifted his t-shirt and wiped his face on the material. He turned around in his seat, smiling, and pointed: to the right was the cobblestone road that led to the docks, where they’d meet up with Stella and Tony the next day. It was hard for her to imagine now, but the docks had been the scene of many emotional departures and arrivals. Back then, Bidong had had been considered a hardship posting, and they all received lots of leave time—three weeks on, one week off. If you turned one way on the docks, toward the water, you boarded the camp supply boat that delivered you back into hardship. If you turned the other way, up the hill, you trishawed to the taxi stand, then piled into a roomy backseat and roared off to R & Rs of such pleasure she sometimes cried when they had to return.

Something about clutching her luggage, glimpsing from her seat the back of the driver’s bare soles—they teased, playing peek-a-boo in his
flip-flops—something about the jostling sensations made Maureen sure she had been on this very road many times years ago, in the back of a trishaw.

She pictured the trishaw rides clearly, more clearly, she realized, than she could picture her life in the camp. She would step off the boat with Rueben, haggard from three weeks on the island, and they’d both be bursting at the seams to indulge their every passion. There was a weight to their anticipation, and it was crisp and tingly: the heft of their backpacks, the citrusy smell of their clothes, the mercantile greetings from the bean-juice vendors—all seemed infused with special meanings and rewards. They’d trishaw to the taxi stand and head south, toward the capital, which sometimes meant chilidogs and Baked Alaska at the Continental, sometimes afternoons in the butterfly parks, or root-beer floats along Batu Road, or Bollywood films at the Lido. They ate flaming steaks at wainscoted colonial restaurants and planted their faces inches from rattling air-conditioners. At night they lay naked on a clean duck-feather bed and giggled and stroked each other’s skin, and their hands and mouths melted into blurs, and when the motorcycle cowboys roared in the early morning down the wide, empty avenues, they awoke sticky with sex and fanned themselves with the sheets.

Where Tony and Stella went on leave, she was never sure. She had heard stories they slept together, even on Bidong. If the stories were true, then their behavior was tawdry, full of shrieking and grunting, offensive to Vietnamese sensibilities and, she had to admit, her own. Once you got past the librarian clichés, sex and propriety were not necessarily opposed, and the interplay of the two, in fact, created a sensual yin-yang effect, the existence of one always present in the other (even now, she followed certain unspoken protocols with her husband, certain fetishes of omission and commission that had over the years taken on a ceremonial flavor). Back then, she had insisted to Rueben that they not hold hands on Bidong. They were to appear as colleagues; they were not to invite gossip and spectacle. Pshaw, Rueben had replied, joshing, but he complied with her request.

An image came to her then: dozens of flip-flops sticking out of the mud, just outside Tony’s quarters on Bidong. There was concertina wire around the relief workers’ compound, and the flip-flops had appeared as if by magic one morning, on the refugee side of the wire. The footwear, one of the British doctors told her, must have belonged to the Vietnamese Pervert Patrol. He claimed that Vietnamese boys often sneaked in the middle of the night to the compound wire and listened to the white people in their bungalows. The mud was so thick, he said, it sucked the
flip-flops right off their feet. “Picture this,” he told her. “Tony and Stella in Tony’s room. Humpy-humpy on the bed, loud as you please. I’ll bet it was standing room only outside the wire.”

What a thing to recall, Maureen thought, clutching her travel bag: a story about Tony and Stella going at it like wild beasts, a line of silent Vietnamese boys listening at the wire. Had the doctor been correct? The only part she knew was true, even now, was the aftermath. That Swedish social worker with the lilting English, what’s her name, had begun crying, mysteriously, at the sight of all those flip-flops sticking out of the mud. *Too much death*, the Swede kept saying. *Too much. I cannot stand it.* A few days later the Swede got shipped off the island.

And turning a corner now, listening to the trishaw driver tinkle his little bell, Maureen suddenly straightened. The flip-flops must have reminded the Swede of little gravestones. That must have been what had set her off.

How could there ever have been a time, Maureen wondered, that she did not understand something so basic?

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After iced coffees, Maureen and Rueben lingered for hours in the Han Sui, listening to Malay pop songs, then walked along Kuala Trengganu’s main thoroughfares until they were sleepy. They still couldn’t shake their jet lag, and the tropical air—that big ol’ smothering paw, Rueben called it—was taking a toll. They took a long nap back in their hotel, then wandered around some more that night, finding themselves on some street they did not recognize. In the distance, the tide thumped against the giant harbor moorings. It was a moonless night, and all the streetside houses and shopfronts had been shuttered. Somewhere nearby, Maureen thought, Stella and Tony were probably drinking or walking around or doing only God knew what. She swore she could sense their presence. Were they perhaps sleeping together, even now? It was a ludicrous notion, she knew, but she could not let the image go. With Bidong Island just over the horizon, she felt as if she were nearing the basement floor, hearing throaty, scratchy noises off in the corner.

Earlier, during their midday nap, she had awakened and tried to broach the subject of Stella and Tony. On Bidong Island, she asked, had Stella and Tony actually slept together? How much had been rumor, and how much fact? Rueben told her he had heard the same stories she had. “No, seriously,” she said. “You were there longer. You knew them better.”
Then he shook his head and surprised her: Jesus, he told her, what difference could it make now? Stella and Tony had been good workers, right? Wasn’t that enough? He looked at her dully, then closed his eyes and turned over in the bed.

But now they were holding hands, grateful for the breeze, careful not to trip in the darkness over rough patches of concrete. Behind them someone gunned a motorcycle, and at the same time the air turned foul and rotten, as if they had stepped through the envelope of some giant, gaseous bubble. Maureen cupped her hands over her nose. She looked for the source of the smell, and there, piled by a sewer grate, were pulpy, dark clods the size of bread loaves. “Who died?” she mumbled through her fingers. “P-U.”

“Oh, that’s bad,” Rueben said, stepping into the street. He made a show of inhaling. He bent down to examine one of the clods. “Dead rats,” he said, screwing up his face. “How about that,” he said, inhaling again. “Just like Bidong, huh?” He leaned closer, squatting, and rocked on his heels, and the motorcycle suddenly roared forward—Maureen saw a wraparound helmet and a man with dark Malay coloring—and the driver veered his bike directly at her husband and hurtled toward him. Maureen watched intently, as if engrossed in some particularly dramatic movie scene. Rueben fell back on his hands, hard. The bike then swerved abruptly, away from her husband, and weaved slowly to the middle of the street. Rueben straightened, glaring now, wiping at something on his pants, and when the bike stopped, the driver turned his head, as if waiting for a response. “Hey,” Rueben yelled. He charged the bike, and as he did, the driver shouted out something incomprehensible, a sharp, mocking bark, and roared down the street.

“Chickenshit,” Rueben shouted after him. His hands were curled into fists. There was no movement: the storefronts remained shuttered; no one switched on a light. He might as well have been shouting at the ocean.

“That was deliberate,” Maureen said. She could not get her feet to move. She pointed toward the bike. The driver must have been doing seventy.

“You better run, chickenshit,” Rueben called out.

“Are you all right?” Maureen asked. Her voice was quavering, but she was now in control of her body and walked briskly to him. She touched his arm.

Rueben cocked his head, listening for the motorcycle’s whine. “Chickenshit’s turning left. Toward the roundabout.”

“Are you all right?” she asked again.
“Chickenshit won’t be if he comes back,” Rueben said. He shook off her hand from his arm and stood with his legs wide apart, staring down the street.

“Could you just answer me, please?”

He grunted that he was fine, but his expression didn’t soften. He didn’t look at her. “Damn,” he said, pounding his fist into his palm, then his voice seemed to explode. “That was sweet. *Sweet.*”

She looked to see if he was kidding, but he was staring beyond her, vigilant and alert.

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In their hotel room they argued briefly. Maureen poured them both a scotch, her hands shaking, and when Rueben came back to the room with a bucket of ice, he said the ice was for her. He’d drink his straight, he said. And since when did he drink scotch straight? she asked.

“Since before we met,” he said. “If that’s okay.”

He might as well have rolled his eyes. “That felt good back there?” she asked. “Is that what you said? ‘Sweet’?”

“I might have,” he said. “I don’t know. It was kind of an intense moment. I wasn’t keeping track.”

“But it felt good. Honestly?”

“This is beginning to sound like disapproval,” he said. “I sort of almost got killed.”

“It’s just you sounded weird.”

“Did you hear what I just said? I almost got killed.”

She looked at him a long time. He was standing at the foot of the bed, lifting his glasses by the stem and scrunching his nose. He seemed to be waiting. “What are we doing?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” he said evenly.

“I don’t know, either.”

“Then let’s stop doing it.”

“I agree,” she said, nodding. “Let’s.” She held her arms out wide, and with pleasure she saw that Rueben understood her intention: they *faux-ran* in slow motion toward each other, feigning cartoonish expressions.

Of course everyone was a different person after a quarter of a century. The trick was to make your desires known to the person you used to be: stay away or please come in. You had to be clear on that. But as Maureen lifted first one leg, then the other, moving in aching, slow increments toward her husband, she could not help wondering if over the years she had interfered somehow with his conversations with
himself. Even in the glacial calculus governing a life together, you were sometimes made privy to small, innocent-seeming errors you might have introduced years ago, errors that if unacknowledged might eventually invalidate the entire equation. A life together allowed such moments. It gave you the power sometimes to see right through yourself. Perhaps she had been graced with such a moment now. The lamps glowed seductively. Her skin felt on fire. Had she, she wondered, now touching her husband’s fingers, now his hand, had she out of some tenacious flaw in herself encouraged him over the years to sever a connection too abruptly?

Or was the question too simple? When the motorcycle had veered toward him, she simply stood there, a worthless sentinel, while for all she knew her husband was about to die. Shameful. She could have at least shouted to him. She could have made her presence felt. Instead she had watched the whole thing unfold with a terrifying equanimity, with an almost serene resignation; then her whole body had tingled and gone soft, impervious to command, as if injected with syrup.

And now hugging Rueben tightly, now with purpose and force—“Let’s make love,” she said. “Okay? Now?”—she felt the return of an old fear: that she lacked a certain kind of fierceness, a capacity for entanglement and blood that others—Rueben, too, yes, most certainly him—that everyone she knew back then could plumb and summon, and thereby make themselves complete.

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Maureen’s first sight of Bidong Island had been through the rain-splattered cabin window of the UN supply boat, commanded, she still recalled, by a pot-bellied Malay who removed his flip-flops and piloted the craft with his bare feet. She had stood behind him in the dark cabin, out of the drizzle, not quite believing that a man vetted by a relief agency would actually steer such a large vessel by looping his toes around the spokes of the pilot wheel. Thomas, Kathy, and Kevin—the other new UN arrivals—stood outside under a canopy of goopy, engorged clouds, leaning against the railing at the edge of the prow. They began to whoop and point. Bidong had emerged from behind some fog and was now in view. Just like that, it seemed to Maureen, nothing else existed in the world, just the ocean and the sky and the small, green knuckle of land ahead. A volcanic cone formed the peak of the knuckle, jutting up the far side of the island in a dense carpet of vegetation (she could not help thinking of an old King Kong movie), then tapering to a deep orange gouge that stretched from the ridgeline down to the beach. The near side, rising
What's Yours, What's Mine

slowly into a squat, round hill, was a blur. She saw faint ropes of smoke drifting up from a layer of scrub and palms, and hundreds of crisscrossing squares of color, like tiny regatta flags, mostly whites and blues, around which some giant dark mass seemed to wriggle.

The skipper turned his head. “You can see the people, yes?” he said in perfect English, indicating the wriggling mass; and when she stepped closer, squinting—yes, those were people, she confirmed—she saw blackened boat hulks sticking out of the sand and, off to the right, a deep cove shielded at either end by long peninsulas that ended in boulder-strewn fists angling sharply into the water. The cove was their destination. Arriving on Bidong, she had heard back in Kuala Trengganu, felt like the Charge of the Light Brigade. Cannon to the left. Cannon to the right. Cannon in front. Someone had spent a long time deciding on that description, she thought, and it had unnerved her. She made out a long, narrow dock stretching out to the middle of the cove, but everything behind it flickered into and out of focus. There were fires on the hillside, and smoke and fog obscured the trees and the lines of dark-haired people.

“Forty thousand boat people there,” the skipper said, smiling. “How many are Communists, hey?” he added, his voice trailing off. It was a provocation, not a question. He squirmed in his chair, then clutched the armrest when the boat suddenly heaved.

Forty thousand refugees. She had heard sixty thousand earlier that day in Kuala Trengganu from some pompadoured Indian functionary in a safari suit. Did no one truly know how many Vietnamese were on the island? The Indian—“I am not from Indianapolis,” he guffawed—had mentioned other numbers, too, figures numbing in their casual, rounded-off ease: the UN estimated, he said, that over a span of two years, two-hundred thousand Vietnamese had set out into the South China Sea. Of those, fifty- to one hundred thousand were estimated to have drowned or been murdered by pirates—or died of thirst, he added gravely, or of sunstroke, or of starvation. He then withdrew a document from a red folder. Someone had written RPM—Rape, Pillage, Murder—in large block letters at the top of the paper. That, he said, shaking the document over his head, was the most common code written onto refugee-history forms. Just to let you know, he said. Just so you won’t blunder about.

There would be no slow introduction. Already the musty, wormwood odor of the cabin was thickening, and as the skipper twirled the wheel violently toward the cove—he leaned back, giving his feet room to maneuver—a current of sour, tangy air filled the cabin. She flinched, then leaned against the wall, across from the pilothouse doorway. The
skipper pulled back on a lever, slowing the craft, and the waves strong-armed the hull, thumping the boat leeward, which caused him to swear and spin the wheel first one way with his left foot, then the other. Ocean spray spilled over the prow and onto her comrades. The bottoms of their pants were now dark and sopping, and even from the cabin she could see Kathy’s bra strap outlined against her soaked t-shirt. They were still whooping. Kevin raised his fist and yelled.

Deep into the cove, a long, high-keeled boat bobbed alongside the dock, and on its deck dozens of men, all thin and dark-haired, all bare-chested, lifted boxes and green bundles onto their shoulders. Off to the right were barn-like wooden structures ringed with concertina wire. She let her gaze climb up the hillside, and there were the bits of color she had noticed before, all those tiny white-and-blue regatta flags, which she now understood to be laundry hanging from lengths of pink raffia and shelters of rusting sheet metal and tarpaulin. How could so many people live on such a tiny speck of land? The island, she had been told, was zero-point-eight miles, east to west, but that fact, so precise and for some reason so comforting, seemed at odds with the unending crowds of people, all milling about (were the women actually dressed in pajamas?), some pointing and shouting, some carrying plastic jugs or sewing machines or planks of wood. A circle of men seemed to be berating someone; one raised his arm and brought it down hard again and again, as if raining down blows.

On the beach to the left of the dock, a head-high wall of color smoldered in the rain. The camp garbage dump, the skipper shouted over the din, noting her attention. It stretched all the way to the far outcropping, and when some men with hook poles began tearing at the wall, she saw a solid crust of yellow-green pineapple husks and swirling brown cabbage, then twisted red Marlboro cartons and strips of cloth and blue tarp winding in and out like ribbons, and glistening, creamy pockets of white and yellow, all supported by foundations of crumbly gray and brown. Bluebottles shimmered over human and garbage alike, and above the constant yelling a loudspeaker squawked non-stop, a whiney ching-chang, ching-chang, which she now realized had to be spoken Vietnamese.

She waved to her comrades on the prow. She wanted to be seen. She needed Thomas or Kevin or Kathy to turn around and wave back, to return her smile and to make a face that said Are we hallucinating? But no one turned around. They were all shouting and hoisting up their travel bags and backpacks. Someone was now shouting hysterically through the loudspeakers, but the shouting seemed to have no effect on the crowd—no one began running, no one even stopped to listen—and
as the skipper cut the engine and let the boat bob toward the dock, the water off to Maureen’s left suddenly began to roil, and a great sheet of white foam chattered in all directions. Maureen dropped to the back bench. She wrapped her arms around herself. She heard a loud galloping sound rise from the water, and what looked at first to be a giant, thrashing beast she then realized was hundreds of flying fish, all leaping together; and as she watched them leap and disappear back into the water, she noticed a dark, clotted line out the corner of her eye, swaying back and forth with the tide, all along the edge of the wall of garbage. She saw the tails. Rats. The island was full of them, she heard later, and when they swarmed at night they were pressed by sheer numbers off the garbage and drowned in the foam.

The tangy smell in the cabin was so thick now she put her hand to her nose. They had arrived. The boat clunked loudly against the tires lashed to the pilings, and the skipper, still seated, leaned back and shouted something in Malay out the pilothouse door to someone on the dock. The dockside man squatted and shouted something back. He was dressed in military fatigues. Hanging from his belt was a long handgun in a black holster.

Bye-bye, the skipper said to her, so she hoisted her backpack upright and began to adjust the shoulder straps. She pulled the straps tighter, then she loosened them. She tightened them again. Nothing seemed more important now than making sure her straps were perfectly adjusted. She felt her heart race, and when she looked up she found herself overcome with a sudden fondness for the cabin’s dark interior. There was a completeness to it, a harmony created by its compact fire extinguisher, strapped like an infant into a metal wall strap, and by its nicked tongue-in-grove paneling (like her mother’s den, she realized), by its movie-theater odor, its shiny metal-trimmed instrument panel, its church-pew benches, its straight, sturdy lines, its generous and maneuverable space.

Outside there were only accusations. How, she wondered, could she climb the short metal ladder that had been lowered down onto the deck? She had never climbed such a ladder before. She had never stepped onto a metal rung from a boat. And the rough planks and pilings of the dock were oozing some kind of gooey substance into the water. What if she slipped? From the bench she could see the bare, hairless legs and feet of the Vietnamese men now swarming the deck. Then a cloud of diesel erupted from below the engine line, spitting black globs onto them all, even as the men streamed by the pilothouse door, half-naked, swinging giant tins of kerosene onto their shoulders.

The skipper twirled around in his seat and said something harsh-
sounding to her, in Malay. He seemed to be appraising. “Maureen,” shouted Thomas. He stuck his head into the doorway. Strands of hair were plastered to his forehead. “They want us on the dock, pronto.”

She nodded. Grunting, she heaved her backpack onto the bench. She fiddled again with the straps, pulling the material first one way through the stop, then the other. Then she swore, a sharp, angry yelp, and began to rummage through one of the canvas pockets.

“Skedaddle time,” Thomas shouted at her. He looked delirious. An air horn went off on shore, and he turned toward the source, then slapped the doorway trim hard and picked his way through a tangle of deck rope, toward the dock ladder. But still she remained on the bench, unzipping one of her backpack’s side pockets, then zipping it up again. She sensed the skipper staring. She shook her head at the pocket, as if in exasperation, then untied the top flap and frowned. She stuck her right hand into her backpack, but she might as well have reached into someone’s Halloween sack. She could not recognize the shapes or textures.

“Come on, come on, you gotta go.” The accent was American. She looked up and saw a tall man in glasses who identified himself as Rueben. In her right hand, she realized, she was holding a red cotton blouse. She began to unfold it, first the right sleeve, then the left. One of the collar buttons was dangling, so she lifted it gently until the thread was taut. The stitching had failed. When could that have happened? That morning the shirt had been in perfect condition. She was sure of it.

But she sensed the tall man standing over her now. The pockets of his jeans were black with mud.

She looked up into his face. “I’m frozen,” she said.

He cupped his hand to his ear. Some kind of engine was roaring to life at the end of the dock. “What?” he shouted.

She waved him closer. She whispered: “I just need to put my clothes away.”

He began to sway, just inches from her face, and she heard him and the skipper exchange a few words in Malay. He took one end of the blouse in her hand and ran it through his fingers. For a moment, the noise outside seemed to subside, and she was certain she heard him humming. He looked down at her blankly, still running the material through his fingers, and it occurred to her that he was arriving at some kind of decision. “Here,” he said then, “let’s put your shirt back.” She did as he said. She brought her end of the blouse up, and he folded the other end and let it rest in her hand. “Now let’s just lay this on top,” he said.

She did this, too, opening the flap and pressing the blouse down.
“My legs won’t work,” she said, looking at the floor.

“Okay,” he said. He clasped her shoulders and, smiling now, lifted her to her feet. “You should be one of the longshoremen,” he said. “They don’t work, either.” She understood the joke. She tried to laugh, but nothing came out. “Just put your arm around my shoulders,” he said, and she did. But still she could not walk: her legs hung limply and her knees buckled. He helped her take a step, then whispered, “It’s okay. This happens to everyone. It’s not a big deal.”

She knew he was lying. She knew nothing like this had ever happened to anyone. She knew it was a big deal, that it would mark her as irrelevant, perhaps as an object of derision. It might even get her shipped back to Kuala Trengganu on the next supply run, and if that happened, then the Indian in the safari suit would stick a plane ticket into her purse, and everyone would smile and shake her hand, and with much crocodile sympathy they would drive her to the airport and she would fly halfway around the world back to her mother in California, too ashamed for weeks on end to tell her why she was back in her living room, crying in front of the TV. But here was this man clamping one arm around her waist and dragging her backpack with the other. Here was this stranger choosing to forgive her. “No big deal,” he kept whispering. “Don’t sweat it.” They made it to the door, where he turned to the skipper. “She’s seasick,” he shouted, and she was so grateful she nodded and stepped out the door with him and into the rain and the smell and the noise.

And now in the open-air Choong Tan restaurant, which offered an unfettered view of the Kuala Trengganu harbor, she was sitting in the morning glare with her husband and with Stella and Tony, neither of whom had known anything about her long-ago arrival on Bidong Island because Rueben had never said a word about it. Now here were Stella and Tony who were so excited to see them they had leaped from their chairs and stood at the restaurant entrance, waving like signalmen. Stella had shrieked, then buried them both in a swaying, moist hug. Tony kissed Maureen’s cheek hard, holding her so tight she felt each finger pressing into her back.

They all pulled out chairs and sat at a table, immediately chattering away, laughing their heads off (“Look at us! Can you believe it? Can you?”). The welcome had been so enthusiastic that for a moment Maureen gave herself over wholly to the reunion. Stella, in fact, kept leaning over and touching her arm, as if they were long lost sisters. The morning sun had burned off the mist, Maureen blurted out then, and didn’t that make the breeze smell like cornbread? It was a foolish thing
to say, but Stella immediately inhaled with pleasure. “Oh, doesn’t it?” Stella said. Then Tony joined in. “That’s it exactly,” he exclaimed, and both he and Stella smiled with an eagerness that said she could blurt out anything—Can I punch your face? Are you a dog-faced baboon?—and they’d be okay with it. Yet even as Stella and Tony bent forward in their chairs, rocking and smiling, Maureen observed them scanning her face and body, their camera-shutter eyes shifting rapidly, jerking up and down, then across, the movements so fast and small they were probably not even aware their pupils betrayed them. What judgments, Maureen wondered, were being confirmed? What evaluations?

So perhaps out of resentment Maureen established that she, too, was holding part of herself in reserve. *Quid pro quo.* She was, she decided, using them as well as reuniting with them. They fulfilled a secret function for her: they gave her husband what she could not provide. She hadn’t wanted to talk to him earlier that morning, beyond what was expected, and on the way down to the docks she chose to lag behind. He had been quiet, and it was clear their argument the night before was still fresh in his mind. *Give him some space,* she told herself, so she feigned interest in a batik sundress on display. She’d catch up, she told him, waving him on, and when he walked away, engrossed with the Chinese shopfronts and glimpses of the harbor, she observed him closely, looking where he looked, imagining the sights through his eyes. He stopped every now and then and stared at something unremarkable—a yellowed plaster building, a section of cobblestone, a paint-chipped railing—and sometimes he’d smile.

She knew he wasn’t really recalling the past. He was measuring his sense of himself in the present against himself in the past. Could he leap the dock railings now? Could he still choke down a slice of smelly durian fruit? Could he walk for hours in the sun? And in looking at him, examining his expression when he turned his head toward the harbor, he appeared baffled, in pursuit, it seemed to her, of what was after all only a modest and homely satisfaction. He wanted only to know that he had not betrayed himself. For him, there was no need for red Ferraris, or skydiving lessons, or humiliating flirtations with waitresses (he had always been self-regulating in that way). He was not asking for the world; he was not forging other attachments by squashing what they had created together. She stuck out her arm in his direction, as if to touch his tiny image, then let her arm drop to her side. She would give him this. Completely. She would not make him self-conscious or ashamed.

With Tony and Stella sitting across the table, he seemed energized. He was waving his arms around, laughing, speaking louder and louder.
She would indulge him anything, yes. They all toasted each other, and they toasted the three missing members of the Club. They shouted out names—Mr. Duong, Miss Lai, little Chi; Roland, Nina from Norway, Johann the Shirtless—and the names led to other names, and though Maureen didn’t always follow, all her husband and Stella and Tony had to do was raise a finger to conjure up stern Task Force chief Rahim, who always lectured, or puff up their cheeks to summon that fat Bible-thumper—what was his name?—who gobbled all the meat during meals. They couldn’t get enough of looking into one another’s faces.

“To Bidong Island,” said Tony, raising his glass. “Where all the acid commandos went to party.” Tony had years ago been handsome, but even with his curly black hair, cut short now, and his faded tattoo of a refugee boat on his right forearm, he could no longer hide his paunch or his sun-ravaged skin. His teeth, Maureen thought, looked smaller somehow—everything about him seemed worn and ground-down—though he had the same appealing broad smile.

“To The Boat People Club,” said Stella, and they all raised their glasses again and clinked them together. Stella’s long blond hair, which she had always loved to sweep back from her forehead, had gone white, though she hadn’t changed her hairstyle. She looked to Maureen as though she had stepped out of a photograph from her refugee-camp days and simply strapped on a few sand packets around her waist and hips. Her thick, pug nose still leaned to the left, and Maureen swore she had worn the same white peasant blouse, with the same lace trim on the sleeves and bosom, for her going-away party on Bidong.

They all sipped their drinks noisily, and when they were finished, Tony asked them if they knew Bidong Island wasn’t even on Malaysian maps nowadays. True, he said: he had bought more than a dozen maps just to make sure. The island’s structures, its dock, the hospital, even the sewage canals—everything, he’d heard, had been torn down or plowed under. Supposedly there wasn’t a trace left. The island was now owned, he found out, by some Chinese businessman (“Fucking Chinese,” he said tersely. “Fucking Malaysians.”) who was going to open it to tourists as part of a snorkeling adventure package.

Rueben slammed down his glass at the news. Maureen hesitated, then looked at her husband and slammed hers down, too.

They drank all day, first iced tea, then coffee, then bottles of Anchor beer, and by the time the starlings came out in the afternoon, darting between the eaves of the restaurant, Maureen was ready to leave. The
other three were still going strong, laughing themselves silly one minute
and speaking with somber intensity the next. They talked as though the
past twenty-five years had been a fraud, a hologram life, as if nothing
of substance had truly occurred, and though she understood that the
extreme nature of their claims was a way of underscoring their delight,
she could not help feeling insulted. Apparently keeping a steady job and
rising through the ranks and rejoining society was not worthy of discus-

sion. Apparently maintaining a long marriage and tending to the house
you paid for with your own money counted for little. At one point Tony
checked his watch and frowned. Maureen caught his eye, and his sheep-
ish grin told her she was right: he was imagining them just returned
from leave, ready to head on down to the docks to catch the final supply
boat run to camp.

“Remember Mr. Quang?” said Tony. “The Zone F dude who kept
stealing blackboards?”

“That coconut head,” Rueben said, grinning.

“Seven years on Bidong,” Tony said. “Even the Australians turned
him down. That, my friends, was the original down, brown, and around
guy.”

“I can’t believe we’re talking like this,” said Stella. “‘Coconut head.’
‘Down and brown.’ I haven’t talked like this since we all left.”

Tony laughed. “Weren’t you the one who said Bidong was the cure
for white person’s disease? Check your bullshit at the door and all
that?”

Maureen spoke up suddenly. “I couldn’t have lived there for seven
years. One was hard enough.”

Stella touched her arm and looked at her with what seemed to Mar-
reen appalling sympathy. It was maddening, like being compared to a
blade of grass peeking out from the sidewalk—so plucky and minor, so
unabashedly fragile. Tony was no better. He continued talking as if she
hadn’t said a word. Stella laughed at something he said, then turned her
attention back to him and Rueben.

Stella revealed that she was working on a doctorate in comparative
literature and, as she put it, was between marriages. She was ready to
pack up at a moment’s notice, she said with what seemed to be pride:
let the matrons obsess over their marigolds and copper-plated wall hang-
ings. When Maureen talked about working as a proposal writer for Boe-
ing, Stella had nothing to say. Neither did Tony, who announced with
challenge in his voice that he had never left the refugee business. For
the past decade he had been in and out of Africa, working to eradicate
parasites from drinking water. Ever since Bidong, he said, waving his
hand toward the harbor, he had been home only a few times. But he
could tell you the name of every relief agency director in central Africa.
All, he said, were wankers. “Zaire, Rwanda, Burundi, Tanzania,” he said,
“you name it. Those places are hardcore and you need ass-kickers in
charge. Bidong was like a country club.”

“Tony, you know that’s not true,” said Stella.

Tony smiled. “Okay, you may be right. I don’t know. Maybe it’s just I
haven’t talked about Bidong to anyone who’s interested in way too long.
Does anyone besides me feel like only other people like me—and that
would be you guys—have even heard of the boat people?”

Stella said, “It was a quiet holocaust for the Viets, wasn’t it? All those
people drowning. That lousy camp.”

“No one remembers,” said Rueben.

“Just us chickens,” Tony added.

“What’s that line?” said Stella. “‘When history is annihilated there
can be no closure, only a hole, an emptiness, an intimation.’”

There was silence. “Ph.D. candidate Stella is very deepeth,” said Tony,
and he nudged Reuben’s arm.

“Most deepeth,” agreed Rueben.

“Yes, gentlemen?” Stella said. “Mockery?”

“That’s a mighty high horse you’re speaking from, Stella,” said
Tony.

Stella smiled genially, then looked at Maureen. “What about it, Ma-
ureen? Is my horse taller than yours?”

“Don’t look at me,” said Maureen, laughing. “I never made any claims
about Bidong. I was just the latecomer, remember?”

“My little hard-hearted Hannah,” Rueben said, patting her arm.

Maureen looked at her husband. He was smiling, and after some
hesitation she decided to return the smile.

“I joke, of course,” he said to her.

“It’s getting late, isn’t it?” Maureen replied.

No one said anything. Tony took a sudden interest in his beer bottle
and began peeling off the label. Stella waggled her head, as if listening
to music, and Rueben lifted one his bottles and stared at its logo. “I’ll
tell you what,” said Tony, looking up. “Everything’s still open. How
about Rueben and I go see what we can find out about tour boats to
Bidong?”

“Maureen,” said Stella. “Do you want to do a little batik shopping
while the boys are away?”

“Sounds great,” Maureen said. She scooted back in her chair.

“I need to stop by my room first and change,” Stella said, turning to
Maureen. “That okay with you? I’m sweating through my clothes.”

Maureen was already standing and counting out money for their beers.

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When they rounded the corner, Maureen saw the Ping’s Anchorage and Hotel sign and realized it was the same hotel where she and Rueben had spent their first night together. Back then, the hotel had been well-maintained, boasting cheap rooms and a lively rooftop bar where, after ducking under the lines of drying towels and linen, you could look out over the city in privacy. The building was in shambles. Some of the windows had been boarded over, and a pile of broken bricks lined both sides of the back exit. Even the hotel’s sign was faded and stained, and next door, which had been an Indian restaurant, was now a billiards room with a darkened shopfront window.

“Did you and Rueben ever stay here?” Stella asked sweetly, and something about her tone told Maureen she knew very well they had. She was testing, Maureen knew, giving her the opportunity to act the part of the possessive shrew. There was, in fact, and this was something she had always freely acknowledged, the remote possibility that Rueben and Stella might have had some brief romantic relationship, pre-her. Anything was possible—but for God’s sake, they were on their third decade together. They were still going strong. What did she care, she once said to her mother, if her husband, pre-her and thus not actually her husband, had ridden naked on the backs of giant tarantulas? She was not so arrogant as to claim his history as hers (nor, in her opinion, did white people have the right to claim the history of the boat people). When history is annihilated . . . what a clever-sounding load of nothing. Stella would have gotten along famously with her mother. “Sounds a bit chilly, dear,” mother had said about her tarantula comment. “I mean, seriously? If it doesn’t involve you then it doesn’t matter?” And now here was Stella, fishing the same waters.

When Stella opened the door to her room, the first thing Maureen noticed was the exposed wires leading to the electrical box, all painted, like the walls, a hospital green. Decades ago she had found the insides of cheap Malaysian hotel rooms calming. Nothing was hidden. Nothing threatening lurked below the surface. But now she could not help thinking of the inside of a garage. The walls were nicked and peeling. There were no top sheets on the bed. The bare fluorescent ceiling light flickered when Stella clicked it on, and bookending the dirty window slats were
torn and faded blue drapes. The sound of a running toilet issued from behind the bathroom door.

“So you’re going Bohemian,” Maureen said.

Stella laughed. “Well, originally I had planned on staying someplace more upscale. But as soon as I stepped foot in the city, I knew I wanted to feel certain things again. You know?”

Maureen assured her she did.

Stella hefted a suitcase onto her bed and began rooting through it. “Was I too high-falutin’ back at the restaurant?” she asked, tossing aside a pair of jeans. “I seem to have struck a nerve with Tony and Rueben. They thought I was being pretentious.”

“I apologize for Reuben’s response,” said Maureen.

“Well, you know what was going on, don’t you? The unspoken rule in relief work is that you don’t talk about the big picture to each other. That’s for visitors and movie stars.”

“I never heard of a rule like that,” said Maureen.

“I just mean when you truly get your hands dirty you don’t have much patience with all the blah-blah.”

“And you think that applies even now?”

“Oh, sweetie,” said Stella. “Even more now. Bidong was a central life event for all of us.” She waved her hands around. “For some of us. For me. I’m just trying to see what we did from a broader perspective now, and if that involves some blah-blah, then so be it. But I’ve always thought if you don’t remain loyal to what moves you, it disappears like everything else.”

Maureen frowned. “Is that another rule?”

“I’m sorry. I think I’ve offended you. I just take certain things for granted. I probably shouldn’t do that.”

Maureen shrugged.

“Does he talk much about Bidong?” asked Stella.

“Rueben?”

“Yes. Does he ever bring up working there?”

“Occasionally,” Maureen said.

“What sorts of things does he say?”

She looked at Stella quizzically.

“Oh, that must sound weird. Sorry. I think I’m still jazzed about being here. Motor mouth.” She returned to her suitcase and pulled out a blue blouse made of gauzy material.

“What do you think?” Stella said, waving it like a flag.

“Ooh-la-la.”

“You think I’m trying to impress Tony?”
Maureen said no.
“I had a thing for Tony back then, you know. Did you know that?”
“I might have heard rumors,” Maureen said. “I don’t know. I didn’t care then and I don’t care now. Not my business.”
“Oh, dear,” said Stella, laughing. “Okay. If you say so.”
“I do.”
“Fair enough,” said Stella. She held up the blouse for inspection. “So you think this is too revealing? Like I’m trying to act twenty again?”
“I make no judgments,” answered Maureen, holding up her hands.
Stella laid the blouse on the bed. “Maureen, you’re just like I remember. It’s like Nabokov says. Time doesn’t exist.”
Maureen shook her head. “I think it might if you choose to let it.”
“Touché,” said Maureen, approvingly. “So look, does Rueben ever mention the Vietnamese camera guy? Mr. Tan? It was right before you arrived.”
“I don’t recall,” said Maureen. “I don’t think so.”
“Really? Well, you might ask him. I’d be curious to know what he says. Not that I care.” Her smile, Maureen thought, was mocking. “Just for curiosity’s sake.”

The plan was for everyone to meet up again by the sidewalk food stalls off the harbor. Maureen and Stella had Rueben and Tony peek inside their department store bags and exclaim over the batik. Then Stella leaned back. On to the issue at hand, she said.
“Well,” said Tony, “we went to all the tour-boat places.”
“Five, wasn’t it?” said Rueben.
“Right,” Tony agreed. “You’re not going to believe this. The cheapest price for a boat out to Bidong is four hundred U.S. What you get is an early drop-off and a pick-up around five.”
“Four hundred,” said Maureen. “I thought the plan was to see it, not buy it.”
“That’s what I told the guy,” said Rueben. “They wanted four-fifty at the other places. One guy said four seventy-five.”
“I told him make it an even five and I’d pick my own pocket,” said Tony.
“There’s more,” said Rueben. “Most of them had to ask where Bidong was. One guy looked at his map and said it didn’t exist. So Tony says, ‘if Bidong doesn’t exist, then I must not exist, either.’ Then he does this little ghost noise. Hooo. Hooo. That shut the guy up.”
“You could have just shown him your passport,” Maureen said. “That’s proof.”

Everyone ignored her.

“They all said wait a year until the snorkeling trips begin,” said Tony. “Like we’re just tourists. What’d that one guy say? ‘Nuttin’ dere. Why you want to go?’”

“Know what I think?” said Rueben. “I think the Malaysian government wants to erase all signs they kept the Viets there. They don’t want bad press. No ‘whatever happened to?’ stories in the paper.”

“Too much refugee abuse,” said Tony, shaking his head. “Too many skeletons in the closet.”

“I still cry sometimes when I think about it,” Stella remarked.

Maureen spoke: “Are we sure we want to spend all that money? To go where nothing’s left?”

Stella looked at her sternly. “I for one am sure,” she said. “That’s a chapter of my life out there.”

“Mine, too,” said Tony. “It’s like Genesis. Chapter One. ‘And God created the refugees and set our asses down next to them.’”

Everyone seemed to be waiting. Rueben rubbed at something on the tabletop. He looked up and nodded. “And mine,” he said.

“Okay then,” said Maureen. She stuck her hand into her shopping bag and pressed the material down with more force than she intended. “Majority rule.”

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Tony and Stella left almost immediately to confirm the boat reservation for the following morning. Later that night, they all agreed, they’d drink lots of Anchor beer and snack on bowls of tiny rice-padi fish at an Indian place Tony had passed, just up from the harbor. Before Tony rose from the table, he turned to Rueben and said, “You two probably want some alone time, huh?” Stella made a humming noise that sounded like agreement.

Rueben gave no response, but Maureen could tell the comment did not sit well with him. He watched them walk away, all the way to the end of the block, and his mouth moved a little as if he were rehearsing snappy comebacks. She imagined what must have been running through his head: Stella and Tony gossiping about how he’d have to tip-toe around his sour wife; Stella and Tony winking at his domesticity.

In other circumstances, she would have caught his eye and shared a mocking joke, something about Tony and Stella revealing themselves as
willful children. True, she did want a moment alone with her husband, but Tony’s comment, apparently intended to demonstrate his insight into long-term unions, revealed no understanding of accommodation. It was the sort of comment she might have expected a quarter of a century ago, back when she and Rueben argued as much to influence other people’s opinions of them as to influence each other.

There was Tony’s collateral insult to consider, as well. The fact that he had dragged a caricature of her into his scenario (did he assign her image a matron cut, her longish hair clipped short and sensible?) required some kind of response, at the very least a show of irritation, which she now expressed by exhaling loudly. At the same time, she acknowledged a surge of resentment toward her husband. Granted, she could have been more enthusiastic about shelling out all that money for the boat. But he could have tried harder to support her in front of Stella and Tony. He should have. Else, he should have opened his mouth and actually said, out loud, that money and his wife’s reservations meant nothing next to Bidong.

“They’re still pissy, aren’t they?” said Rueben. “All those assumptions.” And then she understood something else. He was trying to mollify her. If he went on the boat alone, they’d think he had a sulky missus pouting back in the hotel, ready to give him what-for when he returned. It was all so juvenile on her husband’s part, so dismissive of their actual patterns, that she experienced for an uncomfortable moment a flaring of conviction and, at the same time, a retreat of certain indulgences she had regarded as bedrock.

“What are you saying that to shut me up?” she asked. “You seem to be having a great old time with them.”

He was telling her the truth, he told her, but then he had no more to say. He studied his beer bottle.

“Okay, I choose to believe you,” she answered, though she did not believe him.

They sat a while longer, watching an old Malay man pour his coffee into a saucer and drink from it. She had forgotten that particular restaurant etiquette, and she was about to comment on its survival when she put together what had just transpired between her and her husband. They had just enacted as theater, as an echo of lived events, what they had once enacted as a matter of definition. On Bidong, he had sided with her over them. Now he seemed to be hedging his bet.

Back in their hotel, she got him talking.

“I had an odd conversation with Stella today,” she said. “In her room.”
“Oh?”
“She asked me what sort of things you talked about. About Bidong, I mean.”
“What did you tell her?”
“I didn’t.”
“Loyalty,” Rueben smiled. “I like that.”
“No,” she said. “It just seemed like such a proprietary question, you know?”
Rueben nodded.
“She asked me if you ever mentioned a Viet who had something to do with cameras. A Mr. Tan.”
“On Bidong?”
“Of course on Bidong.”
“Before you arrived?”
“Yes. Are you being obtuse?”
“Sorry,” he said. “I’m just surprised she’d bring it up.”
She put her hands on her hips. “Are you going to tell me?”
“Well,” he said, “it’s not something that stands out. I’m not even sure I can remember it right.”
He did, in fact, remember it quite well. He told her that before she arrived, there had been a yellow line painted on the Bidong dock, and no refugee was to step over the line unless they had a special badge handed out by the Malaysians. Mr. Tan, he recalled, had bribed some of the guards to buy him an expensive camera and rolls of film on the mainland. He made a lot of money taking pictures of fellow refugees decked out in their finest. They all loved, in particular, to pose in front of the vessels that arrived weekly to take away the happy recipients of resettlement papers, and they proudly displayed their special badges. But to take the photos, Mr. Tan had to step over the yellow line. Normally it wasn’t a problem. The guards got a cut of the profits. It was a tidy arrangement for everyone.

But one day some asshole Malaysian colonel visited the island, and when the colonel saw Mr. Tan step over the line, he demanded that the refugee be taught a lesson, then and there. The colonel knew what was going on. He knew discipline had broken down. So the guards shoved Mr. Tan back behind the line. They rough-talked him a little, then they just stood there, jabbering, until the colonel exploded and upped the ante: whack the Viet around right now, publicly, or he’d make sure the man’s resettlement interviews got canceled.

So the guards whacked Mr. Tan around in front of the colonel and all the refugees crowding the beach. They pulled out rattans and blistered
his head. They struck him on the back with the stocks of their rifles. They formed a circle and kicked him hard when he fell, and you could hear the thump of their boots all the way down to the relief workers’ compound.

As Rueben was telling the story to Maureen, she noted that his voice was growing louder. He was moving his hands, as if pushing someone.

“Did you know him?” she asked.

“A little,” he said. Then he frowned at her. “This isn’t about standing up for a friend. It’s bigger. And you know what?”

She waited.

“I came this close to stepping in and trying to stop it. I was on the steps leading down to the beach, and you know how it was. If I’d made a big enough stink, I might have been able to stop it.”

He may have been right. Before she arrived, the relationship between the Malaysian guards and the relief workers had been complex and unpredictable. Both were backed by powerful, competing infrastructures, and sometimes the white skin of the relief workers trumped the automatic weapons of the guards. Sometimes it didn’t. You never knew. But as Rueben had once observed, in public scenes the white people often held the advantage. In public scenes you could put on your powder blue UN t-shirt and say you were going to file a report over the shortwave, and if you were lucky you could shame people into obeying you.

“Okay,” Maureen said. “But they probably would have kicked you off the island later. Where would that have left you?”

“That’s not my point. Come on. I didn’t really care about that stuff then. I ran to the top step, and I was just about to tell them to back off. Then I see Mr. Tan looking at me. His eyes are telling me no. And they’re telling me yes, too.”

She pictured Rueben charging forward, then stopping dead in his tracks. He would have understood the logic of the situation. If he tried to stop the beating, Mr. Tan would have languished even longer in the camp. If he didn’t, Mr. Tan would end up in the camp hospital. Which could Mr. Tan stand more? It must have been a difficult decision.

“Can you imagine that?” said Rueben. He paused. “He about bored a hole through my head.”

She threw up her hands as if in irritation, but she was not irritated. She was confused. “Why do you suppose Stella wanted me to ask you about this?”

“Hey,” he said. He seemed flustered. “Maureen, I don’t know. Do you hear what I’m saying? What would you have done?”

“Not a clue,” she said.
He frowned at her. “I couldn’t decide. I just stood there on the top 
step and watched the whole thing.”

“Okay. I’m sorry to hear that.”

He pulled off his shirt and walked toward the bathroom.

“What am I not getting?” she asked. “Why would Stella bring it 
up?”

He didn’t have an answer for her. He pushed up his glasses and 
shook his head. He mopped his face with his shirt. “All I can tell you is 
it bugged me,” he said. Then he was in the bathroom.

She called out to him. “What about the part where I arrived and 
everything was okay again?” But he had already turned on the water.

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The Indian place turned out to be darker and noisier than expected— 
Tony asked the waiter to turn down the sound system, but the man 
only giggled—and they had to shout across the table or lean forward 
until they appeared to be kissing. After an hour or so, Maureen looked 
around and saw the dark, alien faces staring at their table, and she was 
momentarily embarrassed at being part of the commotion, shouting and 
drinking and calling out in Malay for more beer and snacks. Years ago 
she might have whispered “you guys” to her companions and waited 
for them to look where she was looking and quiet down. But now such 
niceties seemed beside the point. She was no longer the little ambassa-
dor, influencing foreign opinion one local at a time.

She was in fact enjoying a sense of abandon, clenching the neck of 
her bottle in her fist, the way she had drunk in college. She felt touchy 
and impatient. It was her husband’s doing, and though she was aware of 
the source of her feeling, she could not help extending her mood to their 
companions. When the waiter stopped by, Stella for some reason felt the 
need to tell him that she hadn’t drunk so much in years, and Tony called 
out for a round of whiskies. The waiter looked grim and disapproving, 
and when he collected their empties, he held the bottles at arm’s length, 
as if carting away dead snakes.

“What?” Maureen said to Rueben then, leaning across the table. 
“What did you just call this place?”

They had arranged themselves into couples, Rueben squeezing in next 
to Tony, Stella nearly touching Maureen. Earlier, Stella had noted the 
pairings. Like brothers and sisters, she said. Like mirrors or doubles.

Rueben looked at Maureen blankly. “This place?” He pointed at the 
table.
“The city,” she said. “You just called Kuala Trengganu the magic portal.”

“What’s wrong with that?” Rueben said.

“Nothing.”

“Tony calls it that,” Rueben said. “I don’t.” Tony had just jumped up to remind the waiter about the four whiskeys he had ordered.

“I just heard you say it,” she said.

“Only because Tony was calling it that. And I have called it that before.”

“I’m just surprised I’ve never heard you say it,” Maureen said. Rueben thought a moment. “I have.”

“Not in my presence, then.”

“Oh,” he said.

Their conversation had been unsatisfactory for hours. What, she wanted to know, did the fanciful term mean? Her interest surprised her, but Rueben’s refusal to expand on his Mr. Tan story (it was refusal, she was sure, not inability) had emboldened both her sense of entitlement and her sense of failure. She did not recall ever hearing the term in the camp, and because Rueben was now using it with Tony, its meaning took on the aspect of a secret. Was it one Stella knew, too? Her table-mate had risen to shout something at Tony—“more ikan bilis, Tony, a big plate”—and did not seem to notice her exchange with her husband. She decided against asking. She was being ridiculous, that was all there was to it, risking embarrassment over a trifle.

Stella, in fact, seemed to have no interest in bandying about secrets. She was giddy and a bit wild-eyed, and her drinking had turned her sloppy. She sat down and spilled some beer on the table, then pressed her mug against Maureen’s arm, securing her attention. “Do you want to hear something?” she said.

She started talking crazy stuff.

People were a menagerie of past and present selves, Stella said, slurring her words, but not in the way we thought (menagerie: the word was so unexpected Maureen concluded Stella had book-borrowed her idea). Those selves lived at different metabolisms, and they had different goals. Consider a rock, Stella said, holding up her index finger.

“Yeah, baby,” Tony shouted, upon his return. “But wrong finger.”

Stella ignored him. The consciousness of a rock, she said, if indeed it had one, would be apparent to us only in geologic time, over the span of millions of years. Think about it, she said. Who was to say we understood what all our menagerie selves were thinking or doing? They didn’t necessarily share our timeframe.
“Why oh why?” Rueben laughed. “What are you trying to say?”

Stella put down her drink and stuck her erect finger onto the sudsy tabletop, as if writing with chalk on a blackboard. She said, “My point is, we think our consciousness has only one metabolism. Who’s to say our past selves aren’t still pulling some levers, just at a different rpm?” Then she said something that struck Maureen as blatantly aggressive. Show her the person who scoffed at that, she declared, and she’d show you someone whose life was turning to junk and carnage.

Maureen wondered who Stella was addressing. And when, pray tell, did normal people ever talk like that? Stella had always been a bit on the dour side, always a closet curmudgeon, always self-important, but nothing like this. In the camp, Maureen recalled, Stella had an opinion about everything, and she always managed to sound like the voice of authority. Once, she had polished off half a bottle of something and held forth on a dialect issue she knew nothing about. The British still used *whilst* in everyday conversation, she had asserted, and she wouldn’t be swayed even when Maureen read aloud from one of her English textbooks that claimed otherwise. Stella had simply closed her eyes and rattled off ludicrous examples. *Whilst* I was walking, Stella said, * whilst* I am here, the boat people are, too. *Whilst* I eat, they do, too.

“Don’t go ivory tower on us, Stella,” said Tony. He had placed full shot glasses in front of everyone. “If you’re going to dissertate, at least take your top off.”

Stella laughed. “You still know how to sweep a girl off her feet,” she said.

“You know what I mean.”

“Oh, I know. Tony, Tony, Tony,” Stella said. She swept back her hair—a girlish gesture, but there was genuine affection in her voice.

“I see what you’re saying,” said Rueben, and he scrunched up his glasses.

“Do you?” Maureen asked, but she didn’t shout it out. Rueben appeared not to hear.

“Hey,” shouted Tony to everyone. “Did I ever tell you I wanted to be a writer when I was on Bidong? How’s that for a menagerie guy? I still know what he’s thinking, Stella. Last year I entered a ten words or less novel contest, in his honor.” He nearly fell back in his chair with laughter. “Here it is, beginning, middle, and end. I quote: ‘Don’t know. Don’t care. Fuck you.’”

He laughed again. How was it? he asked. A winner, no? Thing was, he said, it didn’t matter what rpm you played words like that. If you
actually believed them, then you weren’t cut out for relief work. And if you didn’t understand them, then you had never done relief work. He did know and he did care, he always had—“but fuck you anyway,” he said—and only people who had put their money where their mouth could follow that.

“You and your acid commando talk,” said Stella.
“You and your huff ’n puff talk,” said Tony.
Rueben joined in. “Peace, oh my nutso brothers and sisters,” he said, raising his mug in blessing.

“So we’re the opposite ends of a bell curve?” Stella exclaimed in mock outrage. “We’re the narrow extremes?”

“We walked the walk, didn’t we?” Tony said. “That gives us the right to be nuts.” He turned to Rueben. “Are we or are we not the real deal?” he asked.

No deal was realer, Rueben answered. He clapped Tony hard on the shoulder.

“You, too, buddy,” came Tony’s spirited reply. The real deals, he said, were members of the Boat People Club. They were at this table.

Stella raised her hand as if she were in a classroom. “Real Deal, would that include Thomas and Kevin and Kathy?”

Tony smiled, then hunched forward, looking Stella straight in the eye. As if, it seemed to Maureen, she and Rueben were not at the table. As if only he and Stella might want to hear the answer. “Interesting question,” Tony said. “I defer to the other two members of the Club.”

Tony and Stella remained poised, locking eyes, their faces expectant and still. A techno version of some Donna Summers song boomed in the background, and Maureen was for the first time that night aware that none of them were talking. An escalation had just occurred. Tony and Stella were fishing, certainly, but more than that, they seemed to want some issue resolved, right here and now. They knew what she would say. They knew she would understand the challenge, the assumption that no matter how long she had been with Rueben she was still one of the latecomers and therefore suspect. What they wanted to hear now was what Rueben would say. They wanted him to choose: them or us? Desperate people did that, Maureen thought. Lost people. They’d raise a question they couldn’t stop trying to answer, and they’d make it your question, too. She wondered then if whatever had driven Tony and Stella for so many years now drove them into meanness and spite.

Rueben glanced at her—just long enough, she thought, to gauge her expression. She was at first approving of his refusal to engage their tablemates on such a level. But she then understood that circumspection
had nothing to do with his silence. He was waiting for her to speak. And if he would do that, if he would sit back and let her risk insult from these people, would he also then lean back afterward and deliver a more modulated response? Would he stoop to critiquing his wife’s fondness for the three absent latecomers?

She would not allow the scenario to take form. Yet she recognized, too, the dilemma posed to her husband, and she was aware of her recognition as a welcome kind of vanity. She knew things about him. She understood the long view, and when you understood that, you could make allowances. You could afford generosity and largesse.

What, after all, could his answer be?

Her husband’s situation was something, perhaps, that people like Tony and Stella, graying wanderers, people without solid and intimate moorings, could not fathom. When you had a life together, that life could survive small acts of cowardice and sabotage. That life could absorb small betrayals. (Why had Rueben not objected when she first started working on Boeing military proposals? Why had he nodded stupidly when her mother called her a dilettante?) It was when you had a life apart, when your ties were fragile, focused on a few basic connections, that some words here or there, a choice here or there, became weighted with consequence.

Answer one way, and he’d disappoint her; then they’d both recover and move on. Answer another way, and he’d disappoint them, and they might not ever let him back in. There was proportion to consider, and effect, and because of that, whatever answer he might have given would be tainted with qualifications and amendments. She knew how he felt, she knew he loved Thomas and Kevin and Kathy, and though she could and did fault him for not saying it out loud, right now, she could not claim that she would have been bold enough to say it out loud herself, had their situations been reversed.


But Maureen would not allow Stella’s provocation to draw her out. Rueben leaned into Stella. “I like my wife, too,” he said, his face opening like a parasol. Maureen did not know how to parse the comment—how much was jokey? how much boozily affirmative?—but the fact that he had chosen to speak at all was encouraging. So he had not completely opted out. It had simply taken him a while to find his bearings.

Stella seemed at a loss for how to respond, and Tony raised his eye-
Maureen took her opportunity to steer the conversation. She turned to Tony. “Why do you call Kuala Trengganu the magic portal?” she asked.

“Okay, guilty.” She flicked a hand dismissively into the air. “So what does it mean?”

It used to mean, Tony said—and he sounded dark and raspy when he spoke, unaware, Maureen felt, of the theatrical trappings—it used to mean that when you stepped from the supply boat onto the harbor docks, you walked around town like you were coming out from under one spell, and entering another. Back when Bidong was a tougher place. Back before she and the other three latecomers arrived. Before the camp had a hospital and steady supplies and guards who weren’t necessarily psychotic. It was like you were an astronaut and had just returned from Mars. You were disoriented. You got to walk down an actual street and eat in an actual restaurant, then you stepped into a taxi and wherever you stopped you got drunk and hostile and whored around until your money ran out.

“Well,” Rueben said, “it wasn’t quite like that.”

“Said the boy scout to his wife,” Tony said.

Rueben frowned. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Okay, guilty.” She flicked a hand dismissively into the air. “So what does it mean?”

“Dude. Dude,” said Tony, grinding his palm into the tabletop. “You mellowed. Don’t worry about it.”

Rueben jerked himself up from his chair, and even in the dim light, Maureen saw that his face had filled with blood. She recognized the look: his lips pressed tight, the pouches under his eyes wrinkly and distressed, his gaze directed toward some distant point. “Bathroom,” he announced—too forcefully, she thought, too abruptly—and without another word he walked toward the men’s room.

They all watched him go. Maureen was the first to speak. She would have been justified, she felt, in making a stink, in splashing Tony with her drink, perhaps, or banging her fists down on the table. “Tony,” she said calmly. “No more, okay?”

He shrugged as if he didn’t know what she was talking about. Then Stella leaned across the table and told him to knock it off. “That’s your friend,” she said.
“Apologies,” Tony answered, and he raised his bottle at Maureen, as if toasting. He seemed to be searching for something to say. Then he found it. He said, “He would have turned out like us sorry fucks if it weren’t for you.”

He was lying about himself, of course. And about Stella. They reveled in who they were and what they had done. They felt noble and damaged, and their damage only enhanced their sense of nobility.

“I hope that’s a compliment,” Maureen said.

“What else would it be?” Tony asked.

“Of course it is, Maureen,” Stella said.

More lies. But she knew she wouldn’t call them on it. She felt a little sorry for them. All their drama, their hopeless passions. They had no way forward.

“There he is,” she called out when Rueben reappeared. He seemed better, smiling and waggling his head to the music. He bounded to his seat. She wanted to slide her hand across his arm, to give him a reassuring wink, but that just would have made him feel bad all over again. Hi, she said. Hi, he said back.

“Buddy,” shouted Tony, and Rueben made a show of turning his head and looking back over one shoulder, then the other. Everyone laughed.

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Back in the hotel, Maureen cried in front of Rueben, and because the tears were humiliating she walked out to their veranda and turned her back to him.

“This is hard,” she said.

“I’ve got a history with them,” he said, but he kept his distance and spoke from the foot of the bed.

But weren’t they second-stringers? Wasn’t that what he had called them?

He held out his palms. What, he answered, did she want him to say? What could he tell her?

“Tell me you called them that to spare my feelings,” she said. “Because you knew I didn’t like them. That’d be the truth, wouldn’t it?”

“We’ve always been careful of each other’s feelings,” he said. It was odd hearing his words come from behind, disembodied, like listening to the radio. “Is this a fault now?”

She didn’t answer, but she did invite him out the veranda to watch the harbor lights twinkle on and off, and to talk about nothing at all. It was heartening to know there was no evasion from him, no pretense of
innocence or surprise. They would communicate, she hoped, later that night in a dream (they did not, though the possibility held her to one scotch). She understood that if she came out and asked him to cancel the trip tomorrow he might refuse, and if he did then something completely avoidable would have been brought into existence, some hissing fissure would have been created where there had been no fissure before.

So she was grateful and assured—she kissed him hard—when Rueben said, Look, look, what do you think of this? After tomorrow, he said, after they got back from Bidong, they’d leave Stella and Tony to their own devices. He could tell them something had come up, some emergency back in Seattle, and then they’d quietly slip away, just the two of them, maybe up to Thailand or maybe down the coast to Johore Bharu or Singapore. They didn’t need this strife. It was like a pressure in the back of his head. In both their heads, right? Then he brought his hands to his skull, screwed up his face, and pressed hard. What was the name, he said, for where a river met an ocean? Where it got so murky you couldn’t see in front of your face? That was how he felt now.

Righto, righto, she said happily, and she placed her hand on top of his head and brought it slowly to her own, and made their heads touch. So it would be a matter of waiting them out. Stella and Tony would have their drama tomorrow, and they would probably hug and point out where things used to be, and maybe Stella would shed a few tears, and then it would be over. Rueben would clear his head. Then they could go lie around on some hotel beach, tanning, maybe rent some boogie boards and go bodysurfing. They’d have some seafood, do some people watching. They could whisper and cut up over the shave-headed French women (she could not help thinking of photos she had seen of Nazi collaborators), or the Australians who winked every time they said hello, or the British retirees who paraded around in black socks and crisp white shorts. They could tour the Batu Caves, ride an elephant up in Chang-mai, visit the Thai snake farms. They could be what they were. A couple of normal people on vacation.

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The boat to Bidong was a converted fishing trawler with two huge outboards in back. Like the supply boat, Tony said, only in miniature. Tony seemed beside himself with excitement, and in his haste to arrive early at the harbor docks, he had forgotten to bring along his snorkel and fins. Stella had too. She had been in such a state of anticipation, she said, that she couldn’t even finish her breakfast roti. All she’d thought to bring was
bottled water and a change of clothes. Tony proudly displayed the contents of his daypack: water, a flashlight, some clothesline, two lighters, a knife, a first-aid kit, and a spare pair of running shorts.

Rueben laughed—"I'm the boy scout?" he roared—then victoriously pulled his snorkel and mask from a shoulder bag that also contained Maureen's snorkeling equipment and a paperback novel ("just in case," she had told him, but they both figured she'd be reading it).

It was still early, and the sky was a band of purple and pink that seemed to carry the sounds of morning from the shophouses to the harbor water. Someone was clattering metal pots up the hill, and boys in oversized flip-flops splashed buckets of water onto the dirty sidewalks; outside the dock gate, a Sikh night watchman was still asleep in his cot, snoring. The harbor was so empty you could hear the boat's engine tappets clicking one by one.

They boarded. Maureen gamely leaped from the dock and onto the bobbing craft, piloted by a small Malay man wearing a sarong and a t-shirt. He had brought along his little boy and girl, both of whom appeared to be around ten. Rueben and Tony chatted the man up in rusty but still passable Malay, then Stella joined in. How, Maureen marveled, did their language skills remain so good? She had never learned a word in the camp. Our job, she told her friends at Boeing, had been to help the refugees learn our language. But in fact no one had ever offered to teach her Malay or Vietnamese. No one had ever entered the relief worker compound to knock on her door.

They passed the giant moorings, the vegetable women in their small canoes, the crumbling seawall, and then the ocean was flat and open before them, and Rueben and Stella and Tony stood on the prow and whooped. Maureen joined them a few minutes later, after first settling onto the bench behind the captain's wheel, as she had done so many years ago. The pilothouse had been her favorite spot on the camp supply boat, away from the prying eyes of any refugees who might happen to be onboard.

Early on, she recalled, she had purchased a snow cone from one of the harbor vendors and eaten it in the enclosed passenger area, where a Vietnamese family sat smiling nervously. Stella had sidled up to her. "Eating here, Maureen?" Stella asked, and Maureen had understood that she was not to flaunt her money and freedom in front of the refugees. She had been made to feel shame. Later, she found out that Stella had gobbled down half a box of Chips Ahoy! in the privacy of the boat's stinking bathroom. Maureen had felt it then: the encroachment of an alien code. It was oppressive and unfair, and its rules seemed to change every day.
When she joined the other three she almost said something mocking to Stella and Tony. But that would have started something. There was no need to complicate matters.

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“For some people,” said Stella, “doing relief work is like doing cocaine.”

“It’s a rush, all right,” Tony said. “I won’t deny it. What say, Rueben?”

Rueben mulled over the question. “Sure it is,” he said. “But doesn’t that ignore the flip side? We did good.”

“Bingo,” said Maureen.

“Well, right,” said Stella crossly. “That goes without saying. Yes, we did good.” They all stood in a tight circle, and their hair kept blowing into their eyes. Bidong, the skipper had said, was ten minutes away. “I’m just saying when you look closely, Bidong was more complicated than that. It’s like history has entrusted us with secrets.”

“Oh, Lady Stella,” Tony laughed. “No more. No mas.”

“Laugh if you must,” said Stella, shushing him. “But how can you explain the connection with Bidong we still feel?” She swept her hand through her hair. “There’s been no memorializing. There’s no communal memory of what happened. We’re the only ones who know the story. There’s an obligation there, don’t you think?”

“Remember how close the Malaysians came to a shoot-on-sight policy?” Rueben said suddenly. “Remember the Ranger battalion they moved into position?”

“Mane of spray, swarm of bees,” Tony said. “I still remember you saying that, Rueben. If the Rangers came, they’d buzz in on their speedboats.” Tony glided his hand through the air, bzzz bzzz bzzz, a speedboat trailing a giant rooster tail and bristling with antennae and weapons.

“I remember,” Rueben said, throwing back his head. He turned to Maureen and spoke softly to her. “The Malaysians wanted to round up the Viets and put them back out to sea.” (They had come this close to doing it, he had told her once, holding out his forefinger and thumb. She hadn’t believed him then.)

“I know,” said Maureen. It was hard not to snap. She would have to tell him later how she hadn’t appreciated him using her as fodder.

Stella turned to her. “Before your time,” she said.

“Did I seem confused?” Maureen said with irritation.

“I’m just reading your expression, Maureen. Just trying to include you, that’s all.”
“I’ve heard all this,” Maureen said.
“Okay, that’s good to know. It’s just when you new guys arrived, everything changed.”
There was a long pause.
“As in, things got better for the refugees,” Stella said. She looked to Maureen for a reaction, but Maureen did not react. “It’s just Bidong almost felt like a job-job then,” Stella continued. “After awhile, you could just hole up in your room and read Newsweek all day. Right? Rise and shine, wake up and smell the anesthesia. No more Lord of the Flies—not that that was a good thing.”
“Well, thank you, I guess,” said Maureen. “Is that what they call damning with faint praise?” She felt her cheeks burn. She had in fact spent much of her time in her bungalow, poring over the magazines that agencies on the mainland crammed into the UN mailbag. Outside of teaching classes and playing board games at night, she hadn’t found all that much to do.
“My goodness,” said Stella, smiling. “I was just using your arrival as a timeframe reference.”
“That’s fine,” Maureen said in a friendly tone. She stood and looked around, preparing her escape.
Tony spoke up: “What would you have done? If the Rangers came, I mean?”
“That’s a tough one,” said Rueben.
“They had a helicopter ready to evacuate us, you know,” said Stella.
“I wouldn’t have gone peacefully,” said Tony, with menace in his voice. “You, Rueben?”
Rueben glanced over at Maureen and caught her eye. “There was a time I might have joined you,” he said. “I don’t know. Depends what day you ask me.”
“Mister Ambivalence,” said Tony, nudging Rueben with his elbow. “But I hear you. Push comes to shove, I bet you would’ve done the right thing.”
They weren’t going to ask what she would have done, and for that Maureen was grateful. Such talk led nowhere, around and around, and she briefly entertained the notion of slapping her forehead and shouting out, “Why, golly, the personal is the political.” Or perhaps some comment about VFW reunions might be more killing. The pot bellies, the looping recollections, the posturing: there was something tobacco-stained and garlicky about the reminiscing, an apportioning of futile, fatty remains.
Had time stopped since Bidong? Maureen wanted to shout.
She walked to the railing to watch the waves crinkle in the sunlight.
What if she went up to Stella and said that if history wanted to annihilate, then she knew two sad sacks who should be the first in line? Yet she was also dimly aware that the conversation was drifting closer to home. All the talk-talk was also a hand scudding along the bottom of a table, unseen, inching toward her husband.

*You still feel it, don’t you, Rueben? Wasn’t that what they were getting at?*

— — —

There was no dock, no line of structures up from the beach, no back-alley smell, and even the giant boulders that had marked either side of the approach inlet had disappeared. No one said anything. No one wanted to admit what they already knew.

Before they waded in—the boat would return in seven hours, the skipper said—Rueben pointed to the skipper’s two children and asked if anyone minded company. Apparently the skipper had been impressed with his passengers’ language skills and Malaysian past. Would the white people mind, he asked, if his children combed the island with them? They both had had seashell collections at home, and both had come prepared with matching little buckets and plastic trenching shovels. They all looked at the kids. The boy was in shorts and sandals; the girl, the taller of the two, wore jeans and a long, thick shirt that looked uncomfortable. They seemed pleasant and well-behaved.

The children had never been to Bidong, Rueben reported, and their father said this was probably their only chance to visit the place, at least until the following year, when there would be facilities for tourists. The island was private property now and officially off-limits. But, said the skipper, who cared what rules Chinese businessmen came up with? The island was in the middle of nowhere, airy as a dream, and though construction wasn’t due to resume until the following month, the skipper said he wouldn’t think of leaving his flesh and blood there, even for an afternoon, with regular white people. But he had felt kinship, he said approvingly, with his passengers. He could tell they were good people, understanding of Malay culture, former humanitarians, and since his children wanted seashells with *cache*, shells to impress their friends with, would they mind?

Stella and Tony thought it a fine idea, as did Rueben, and the children chattered to effect, loudly demonstrating their desire to walk the beaches and find treasure. Maureen was much less enthusiastic, though she didn’t voice her reservations. To put so much faith in strangers, foreigners no less, to trust strangers with your family . . . wasn’t that like trusting
to magic? Like setting out as the boat people had done, piling onto tiny ships no one in their right mind would take around a lake, then into the teeth of towering waves? Behind that faith was another kind of faith, one that perhaps the skipper had acted upon impulsively: the belief that something good and beautiful exists beyond the horizon. Something you don’t yet understand. Something transformative and new.

Insane. Like moths to the flame, Maureen concluded. And then: like white people to the camps.

She’d have to remember that one. In case things got heated, it would be a good, clean stroke.

Rueben held back a bit, helping her through the shoals, while Stella and Tony jumped from the boat and lifted the kids down. She despised the way her companions bantered with the children—their exaggerated excitement, their avuncular jokes, their cooing—but at the same time she envied them their ease. Were they aware, she wondered, of an echo? The Vietnamese kids had loved to follow the white people around, hanging on their every word, and whenever the kids had a chance, they’d crawl under the bungalows—all the structures had been built on stilts—and watch the relief workers between spaces in the floor slats.

Big white arms and tiny brown hands. Boat people by proxy. It was disturbing.

On the beach everyone watched the boat pull away. Then the kids took off, and after a short burst they squatted by a small lagoon. They held up shells to the light, quietly assembling their booty.

Stella came up behind her. “You guys never had kids,” Stella said.

Maureen shook her head. “I read an article once that said relief workers tend not to,” she said. She did not see recognition in Stella’s eyes, so she elaborated. “Because their experiences make them hyper-aware about what can happen. They develop defense mechanisms.”

“What article was that?” Stella said, moving in close. “I’d like to read it.”

Maureen shrugged. “I don’t know. Just something I read online. Passing the time at work.”

Stella looked at her, she thought, with disgust.

“We never made copies of ourselves,” Maureen said. “But that’s only because I’ve never been into children. Not that other stuff.”

Stella didn’t say anything for a moment. Then she examined Maureen’s face closely and said one infuriating word: “Interesting.”

Maureen made no reply. Instead, she began jogging through the sand to catch up with her husband. Interesting. A roommate had said that to her once, sneering, back in college. She had been thought mulish, she knew, and the judgment had burrowed deep. Even her wildness was of
the drawing-room variety. She developed a taste for party drugs—some pot, a few long nights of Ecstasy—but only if someone else got them for her, and only if someone vouched for their ingredients. She slept with men occasionally, but only if they kept it a secret and entered her silently (as if committing incest, she realized, and the notion so repulsed her she stopped having sex altogether for a year). She stole a street sign once, and in her final year of college she climbed on top of a car and removed the “o” from the “Hello” on a church signboard. When she laughed she sometimes snorted, then pretended the snort shocked everyone. And when on the freeway one night, the gray city skyline in sight, she lost control of her car and spun around and around, and stared at headlights bearing down upon her, she sat calmly with her hands on the steering wheel and gave in to a vacant resignation: so now I will die.

She kicked some sand onto Reuben’s legs. “This really is the basement here,” she said to him. He didn’t understand. Forget it, she said. If she explained herself, she’d have to tell him that this was where the monsters were, the bogeymen, all hiding behind the boxes and mealy pallets. And that would have been disturbing to say, so she didn’t.

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The Chun Fatt Company had bulldozed the eastern side of Bidong, where most of the refugee shelters had been, and their giant yellow earthmovers and their random trench work now littered the island the way boat spines and rusting engines had way back when. All the old shit canals, cleared by men with hook poles, had been plowed under, and the base of the vast orange gouge that led down from the volcanic cone, where the refugees had felled trees, was now alive with white roots and sea beetles and butterflies that alighted on the deposits of lizards and small rodents.

They walked the beach slowly, peering at the rocks, at the slope of the land, inspecting, as if at any moment some wispy-haired Vietnamese man might stumble out of the foliage, the way Japanese soldiers still sometimes emerged from jungle caves. Tony and Stella took off their flip-flops, and their weight left holes in the sand that quickly filled with seawater bubbling up from beneath.

Soon they all spread out, walking singly, and the kids went their own way. They quietly regarded the seagulls and the occasional fallen coconut, and every once in a while they heard rustling in the treeline and stared with much anticipation into the foliage. But mostly their walking led them to more of the same, to other gullies, other glistening rocks,
other arrangements of palm and scrub. Behind them, the small waves fell
in a continuous sheet, breaking at one end of the beach, then traveling
to the other, and each time the water withdrew, it filled their air with
a hissing sound. Hundreds of tiny sand crabs rippled in senseless pat-
terns, then burrowed into the beach, only to re-emerge when the water
receded.

They walked around looking this way and that, barking something
loud every few minutes, announcing some tree or slope that looked
familiar, or maybe, when they thought about it, wasn’t familiar but
reminded them of a particular morning or afternoon. They put their
hands on their hips. They pointed. They kicked over small rocks and
stared at the trees and up into the rock face.

Her poor husband. And poor Stella and Tony, she amended. They
were all Odysseus returned to Ithaca, now ruined, Penelope gone miss-
ing, her loom broken in a corner of the Great Hall. After so many years
their memories had begun to feed on themselves, generating sandals and
string and plastic wrappers, drawing a vial of blood from a woman sell-
ing pickled bats, filling the still, quiet nights with a clanking generator,
adding a squeak to the planks by the guards’ dockside pillhouse.
The shout, the echo, then nothing. Where, she wondered, could all
their passion go? All their insistence?

Tony spoke up behind her. “Are you still in touch with any refugees?”
he said. He sounded like he was ready to cry.

“Oh, you know how it is,” she said, turning. “They want to get on
with their lives.”

He shrugged. “Okay,” he said. He had no more to say, which made it
clear to Maureen that his question had not been a real one. He shrugged
again and took off jogging. Had he actually wanted to speak to her, or
had he been trying to fill the silence, distracting himself from the disap-
pearance of his island? There was another possibility, too. Had Rueben,
perhaps, started rambling, talking nonsense, all to avoid acknowledging
his own disappointment? Had he unwittingly told Tony the truth?

She had never received any letters from refugees.

It was something she could not say to Tony, especially since he and
Stella had been wildly popular in the camp. During their going-away
party—Stella and Tony left together, on the same morning—the Viet-
namese played Tony’s favorite song, Steppenwolf’s “Magic Carpet Ride,”
over the loudspeakers. The night before, a delegation of them had stood
outside the wire to the relief workers’ compound and serenaded Stella.
When Tony and Stella left the next day, a huge crowd jammed the beach
to see them off. They presented Tony with a model refugee boat made of
coconut husks and equipped with small pearl lights. Stella had received a white and green *ai-doa*, hand-sewn from silk smuggled in by black marketers.

The morning she and Rueben left the island for good, she had boarded the supply boat empty-handed. The Viets didn’t like her, she whispered to Rueben. She didn’t mean anything to anyone. Only to him.

No one had come to see her off, and Rueben pretended that the model boat he had received was for the both of them. “They made it big because it’s a two-fer,” he said, and she accepted what she knew was a lie, a clumsy one at that, one he surely knew wouldn’t fool her. But that was okay: they both agreed to it, and because of that the lie became less of a lie. Now the boat sat on top of Reuben’s bookcase, and if anyone asked about it, they repeated what had now become the truth.

She kept walking, passing silently into what used to be Zone D, scanning, and then she started up the hillside, into brush and dense stands of palm. Rueben was nowhere to be found. They had all gone their separate ways. In the distance, the sea seemed to quiver, lit up by the sun into giant strips, and the wind carried small crackling sounds whose source she could not fathom. She climbed, pushing aside fronds and swollen vines scaly as snakeskin; she tripped over the knuckly roots and scratched herself on the brambles and jagged points of stripped trees. And then she was headed down, holding her arms out like a surfer, sliding across smooth boulders and mossy inclines. She began running, unable to slow her progress, and then she felt herself crash through a wall of foliage. There was dust everywhere, and Maureen, reaching now for branches to slow her descent, plunged her hand into something that felt like soft wax, then continued running and sliding, coming to rest only after grabbing hold of tree stump. She swiped insects from her arm.

She had to find Rueben. She had to give him solace.

There, sitting on a small bluff, were her husband and Tony. She approached them from behind, downwind, and in the breeze their words arrived clear and sharp, as if snipped from their tongues.

When you’re up in Thailand, Tony said, we could meet you guys in Bangkok.

Good, Rueben said. See you there in two days. Just don’t say anything, okay?

— — —

She imagined rushing forward and pointing an accusing finger in his face. She imagined slapping him, though she knew she never would. Instead,
she turned away, replaying his words, trying to find some way for the words to not mean what she knew they meant.

She hit on something then: he was keeping Bidong alive, his Bidong, the only way he could.

But his betrayal had been large, not small, and something like panic crossed her face, only it wasn’t panic, it was feverish and blinding and when she looked around and saw no one there she whispered, How could you? How could you? She began climbing again, pulling on sapling limbs, yanking herself up. She looked for footholds in the flat rocks, leaning forward and probing with her free hand for tree roots. She lost her balance. Her paperback slipped out from her hand, and she cursed under her breath as the pages flapped and tumbled down the slope, coming to rest in a dry streambed. Her skin stuck to her shirt. Her lungs hurt.

Later, when she saw Rueben again, he was walking out into the water. Strapped to his head was his snorkel. The sun had begun to drop, and the horizon had taken on a metallic, bluish hue. It was almost time for the boat to return.

“Are you going out there alone?” she asked.

He tugged on his mask. “Just out to the rocks,” he said. “See some fishies, then back.”

She said, “It’s angerous-day i-bay yourself-ay.”

He jerked the breathing tube from his mouth. “What?”

“I said, ‘it’s dangerous by yourself.’” She pointed to the water, as if gesturing would prove her point. The water was shallow and calm all the way to the outcropping.

Rueben shook his head. “Jesus, Maureen,” he said evenly. He slipped the mask on again and turned, moving out into the water, and then he was wading. She watched him for awhile. He seemed to make a point of not looking at her.

She listened to the birds overhead, to the gravelly rumble of the waves, and she pictured the camp sinking. Zone by zone, she made the tarpaulin shelters disappear. She made the hospital fall, then she imagined the UN bungalows quaking and dropping into sinkholes the size of buses. The Buddhist temple lay under rubble. Out by the dock, circling men clacked over the still-trembling tiles of the Task Force barracks. The bluebottles, the wilting brown cabbage, the jars of fermented sea slugs and baby iguanas, the loudspeakers nailed high in the palms, the phosphorescent tree where suicides left their notes—all trembled and fell. She felt the whole camp sink, and as it sank she tilted her head this way and that, encouraging the sudden lurchings and the even more sudden collapses, watching as from an airplane the funneling of planks and rusted
tin roofs and homely food stalls into vast cleavages of earth and water. And then it was over. The ocean was glassy and smooth; the land was dark with furrows, the horizon flat and clear, and a dry, chafing wind from the back of her mind whispered the camp’s oblivion.

“Miss,” she heard then. The voice was panicked. “Miss, please. Miss, miss.” It was the girl. She was out of breath. Maureen bent down and asked her what was wrong, but the girl’s eyes darted around, and she began speaking a rapid Malay.

“I don’t understand,” Maureen said. “English? You speak English?”

“No, no,” the girl answered, then she said something incomprehensible. She grabbed Maureen’s arm and turned, beckoning her to follow. Something was wrong. An emergency. Maureen jogged behind, unable to keep pace, but she followed the girl into the treeline and crashed through some underbrush, then walked over a log laid over a muddy rivulet. She heard Tony shouting something, then a child’s wailing.

She arrived at a clearing, the girl panting beside her, and saw Tony and Stella fiddling with Tony’s clothesline, then tossing a length of it down a hole obscured by loose scrub and palm. She knew immediately what had happened. The girl’s brother had fallen down one of the island’s ancient wells, dug by Vietnamese men before the water barge brought regular shipments. She found herself staring, as if she had a seat at some theater-in-the-round, and she experienced then a kind of removal, an awareness of her own small presence, one dwarfed by the scrub and palm and the drama being played out before her. At the same time she reproached herself for not rushing forward, for accommodating her own nature too willfully and completely.

What happened, happened without her. Pull, Tony shouted, pull, pull, and she could see the veins bulging on his neck. The clothesline was taut now, and Stella, in the front position, spoke in a loud and commanding voice into the hole. Maureen saw the boy’s hand then, like something out of a horror movie, a corpse come to life, then his head. The boy emerged with the clothesline knotted tightly around his chest, cutting into his skin. He was crying, and there was some blood on his arm. She told herself he was just scared. Nothing serious. He seemed to be moving just fine.

Don’t just stand there, Stella screamed, but Maureen only looked at her in response. She noted the bright green colors around the clearing, the spiky fronds, the dappled sunlight, the way the hole seemed so artificial and out of place. And then her head was filled with reasons for why she did not move. There was no danger to the boy, not anymore. She didn’t know first aid. She couldn’t speak Malay. What difference would
another person make? But Tony and Stella, they loved every moment, didn’t they? They loved losing themselves in something vast and public and dangerous. They were ghoulish, weren’t they?

She heard a whistling then. The sound rattled through the brush, near her head, and when she saw Tony staring at her, she knew he had just thrown a stone. At her. He had thrown it hard. He patted his chest, up down, up down, as if his hand held a beating heart. “You got anything inside?” he shouted. “Are you alive?”

Sunlight laced through the branches, and for a moment she had the sense she was transparent. The light seemed to shine all the way through her. Did one simply go from dream to dream, unable to wake? Under that thought was another, and she clenched her fists when she acknowledged it. She had never laid claim to a larger life. And she knew then, with certainty, why Rueben had sided with her over them all those years ago.

She had not been a question he could not answer, a secret he could not fathom. Not like them. Not like Mr. Tan.

The girl was whimpering. She grabbed for Maureen’s hand, and they touched briefly, Maureen and the girl, and then Maureen looked down at her in confusion. I should stroke her hair, she thought, though the thought was wooden, as if she were reading from a script someone had just thrust into her hand. It was too late. The girl had already surged forward to join her brother.


So she did. She picked her way back to the beach, stumbling, her mind racing, and when she reached the beach she began jogging. There was a yellow earthmover off to her right, buried up to its treads, and as she passed, she saw something. She stopped. On the other side of the machine, leading to the water, was a narrow, deep trench covered with weathered palm. Through spaces in the palm she saw a line of steel rods pointing straight up through the trench water. Camouflage. The trench was just wide enough to snare a trespasser’s leg. Someone, perhaps the absent driver, had taken it upon himself to disguise the danger. Someone callous had decided to guard what was his against all comers.

Rueben was just around the outcropping. She was about to go to him, to yell for him to come quick, when she saw Tony running toward her. He was running so hard she could see the fury on his face. She knew what would happen. He’d run past her and straight to Rueben. He’d tell her husband what they thought of her. It would all come pouring out, all
their contempt, and Rueben would fall silent or make a show of defend-
ing his wife or deflect the accusations with jokes. But something would have started, some fissure would have been created, and in the slow metabolism of a life together, the fissure would either remain a crack or the fissure would open into a dark and treacherous gap. He’d mull things over in his quiet and solicitous way, and in Bangkok Tony and Stella would talk and talk, and they’d make his head rumble with questions, and a month or a year or a decade down the line, the questions would either fade into nothing or grow louder and louder until all he could hear was the ground giving way.

Tony was running straight at her, along the treeline, so she moved toward the water, directly behind the trench. His trajectory followed. She stepped back a few yards and yelled for him to run faster. “This way,” she shouted. “Follow me.” She waved her arms over her head. “Run,” she yelled, summoning what sounded like panic in her voice. She waved him on, and as he drew nearer she shouted for him to run even faster—“there’s no time, fast, fast,” she yelled—and Tony picked up his speed, churning his legs in the sand, and she began to jog now, too, sweeping her arm through the air, signaling for him to close the space. “There’s no time,” she shouted again. “No time. Run.” He ran and then his feet did not touch the ground, and his right leg dropped into the trench while the rest of him tumbled forward. His head slammed down hard and mud spattered in all directions. There was no sound at first. Then Tony began screaming. He yelled so loud he drowned out the waves collapsing onto the rocks and sand.

Rueben was where she had had left him, floating in the water. His back was to the sky, and the black stem of the snorkel stuck straight up in an attitude of finality. He wasn’t moving. The current pulled at his hair and a length of seaweed sprawled over his calf. She feared the worst, but just as she about to run in after him his whole body quivered. There was a splash then, and he kicked his legs up violently and went under. For a moment he was nearly vertical, like a boat going down. He disappeared for a long time. She hated standing there while Tony was crying out, but she knew that when her husband emerged he’d look to her with questions. She’d want him to know that Tony and Stella would be occupied with doctors and hospitals for awhile. She’d want to make sure he understood what had just happened.