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Generations of Laundry & other essays

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Honors Thesis

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The Gift

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I prayed for wealth. Whether it was right or wrong, the year I was eleven I asked Buddha to make me rich. My mother always found it amusing when I prayed for money. She held back a chuckle every time I sat in front of the little statue of Buddha in the living room. I talked to Him as if He was really there. "Buddha," I would say, "can you please give me money, so I could be rich and happy? Mom said I've been good. She said that good people are blessed by you. Can you bless me, and grant me my wish?"

At eleven, I was never content with what I had because at that age material things mattered. What I wore to school or what bike I cruised on reflected who I wanted to become. Friends started judging who I was by what I had or didn't have. So, I had to have more. I had to be the envy of my friends. When they came over to play, or spend the night, I wanted them to say, "Ira, man, you sure gotta a big house. What do your parents do?" I'd respond, "My dad's a doctor, and mom and aunt are nurses." They'd shake their heads and say, "That's so cool. You're lucky."

My father was a doctor, but not a medical one. He worked at the Kentile laboratory, a chemical plant that produced floor tiles. My father was the chief chemist of the lab. He experimented with new formulas to make a better tile. In a way, he was like a doctor—always finding better ways to make people's lives better, and houses more beautiful.

My mother and my aunt were in the business of saving lives, gearing me toward a future to do the same. They worked together as nurses. When they first arrived to America—wrestling with the instant culture clash as soon as they set foot off the plane—their first job was at an inner city hospital in Chicago. Mother said it was the worst

hospital where she had ever worked. "Hard work in verly stinky hospital," she would say. Supplies were scarce. There were more homeless people in the hospital than actual patients. "Much hotter dan Thailand. No air-conditioning to keep cool in summer. Da heat on when it ninety degree outside." To say the least, the hospital was not the kind of place they had envisioned as their first American workplace.

The city of Chicago finally decided that the hospital was unsatisfactory. When the hospital closed down, my mother and my aunt celebrated. Losing their jobs didn't concern them. Within a week they were offered much better nursing positions at a suburban hospital that paid nearly double what they earned in the inner city. The head doctor from the defunct inner city ER sent a letter to Oak Forrest Hospital, stating my mother and my aunt were the best nurses he had ever worked with. "Ms. Chintana Vacharapaha and Ms. Sumon Intudom are superior nurses. I am honored to say that I have been able to work with them. You will not be disappointed." My aunt kept a copy of the letter in her wallet. She pulled the letter out whenever things got tough.

Aunty Sue was not my real aunt, though she lived in the same house and contributed to the family as would any blood relative. She was Mother's best friend—college buddies back in Thailand. My friends often got them confused, calling my aunt my mom or vice versa. I sometimes make the same mistake, considering the two of them as one. For example, if I said, "My mom is the best cook," I never meant my real mom.

Every time my aunt reminisced about the time of my birth, a smile would spread from cheek to cheek. That day in 1976, Aunty Sue was the first person to hold me, even before my father. "Ila, you my only son," she said. Since she never married, I became her son, and she became my second mother, my Aunty Sue. I loved her so much that my first word was, "Pa," which meant aunt.

My aunt was a very spiritual person. She introduced me to meditation. Every night I watched her meditate. For hours sometimes, she'd sit meditating in her room in front of Buddha and many smeared pencil-sketched portraits of her ancestors. My aunt said meditation cleared the mind of impurity and cleansed the body. It brought her peace of mind.

No one could ever disturb her after she closed her eyes and released herself into her spiritual realm. She was like a stone statue, silent and unmoving. I pinched her once while she meditated. She didn't feel it. When she roused from her deep concentration, a mysterious bruise stained her right arm.

When I started meditating for lottery numbers my aunt thought it was cute, and never objected. "Ask Buddha," she said. "He will help."

I remember the day the numbers came. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, filling my lungs with a warm air that spread throughout my entire body. With a silent swoosh, my chest deflated, a soft wind slowly departed through my lips. *The numbers will come*, my mind whispered, *empty me*. I tightened my eyelids. My forehead crinkled like little ripples of water.

Empty me. My prior thoughts—the football game and the spelling test—were pushed to the back edge of my mind. I pulled a black curtain over my thoughts, and blocked my ears from the outside world—the constant chopping from the kitchen. Silence engulfed me. Blackness engulfed me. I existed only in my darkness.

The numbers came, hovering toward me in the black space that surrounded them. At a distance, they were tiny specks of white, but with each excited breath, the numbers grew larger to my mind's eye. *Five, two, and eight.*

In a flash the numbers disappeared, floating by and out of view.

I blinked. The black curtain lifted, and my head felt light and free. The corners of my mouth perked up into a wide grin. I uncrossed my legs, then extended them in front of me, leaning back, and resting my weight on my arms. My feet waggled back and forth.

On His mini throne, Buddha sat high above ground. His eyes, half opened, met mine. A smile of approval graced His lips.

"Ila," Aunty Sue called from the kitchen. "Did you ask Buddha?"

"Uh-huh," I replied.

Mother looked around the corner of the kitchen into the living room. She stared at me over her wire rim glasses. Her eyes scrunched together. "Ila, pood dee dee. Speak nice. Not nice to say 'uh-huh' to Aunty," Mother said.

"Krab," I sighed. Her head disappeared around the corner. The chopping sound echoed from the kitchen throughout the house.

"What Buddha say?" Aunty Sue asked.

I jumped off the ground, and pulled up my jeans. They sagged a couple inches below my waist. I clasped my hands and bowed my head toward Buddha. Two lit candles stood on either side of Buddha's throne. As I paid my respect, the candles' flames flickered higher. Below the throne lay a small cup of sand holding three lit incense sticks; the jasmine scent tickled the insides of my nose.

When I was done, I blew out the candles and walked toward the door, ready to play another game of football with the kids from the neighborhood. Mother's head, again, emerged from the kitchen. "Answer Aunty," she said.

"Five, two, and eight. I'll see you at six, OK?" I rushed out the door into the chilly wind.

The Illinois State Lottery came on at six fifty-seven p.m., WGN Channel Nine. Even though my father worked in the tile laboratory during the lottery, the times Mother, Aunty Sue and I spent watching it were our closest time as family. We gathered around our old television set in the basement and watched the numbered ping-pong balls bounce in glass boxes. Whether it was Martha, Susan or Elizabeth, the lottery hostess would enter the scene with a special smile that made us feel like we'd already won.

We sat around the TV set awaiting the magic numbers to appear, but we never held a lottery ticket. To Mother and Aunty Sue, the lottery was a game show like *Jeopardy* or *Wheel of Fortune*, a three minute game show. For those three minutes, we'd blurt out numbers, much like answering questions while watching *Jeopardy* on TV; there was no way we would ever win. We still laughed, crossed our fingers, and dreamt of a richer life. Dreaming was all we could ever do.

My mother often said for me to dream. If I believed, and prayed to Buddha, my dreams would someday come true. "Ila, dream to be doctor. Make lot of money," my mother would say. I never dreamt to be a doctor because I never wanted to be one. I had, however, dreamt of being rich. I dreamt of buying everything I ever wanted. At the

time, the thought of having enough never entered my mind. To me, more was always better.

"What numbers, Ila?" Aunty Sue asked.

"Five, two and eight. Pra Chaw said so," I said.

"Good. If Buddha say so den we have da right numbers."

Mother said, "We will be verly rich now. Louy." She mended a green shirt, but her eyes never left the television screen.

"Yeah," I said, "if you bought a ticket."

"No need ticket to dream."

The lottery hostess of the night was Martha, Aunty Sue's favorite. Wearing a red dress that hung loosely on her body, Martha gave us her special smile. A long string of pearls hung low from her neck, and her earrings dangled to her shoulders. Aunty Sue clapped her hands. "Oh, she look beautiful today," she remarked.

"You say that every night, Aunty."

"But she look exta special for us tonight." My aunt sat on the long leather couch. Her short legs barely touched the ground. Mother sat on a wooden chair I made for her in wood-shop class. I sat on another wooden chair with big soft cushions. Mother sewed the cushions together, stuffing them with left-over carpet insulation. She had taken the wooden frame of the chair from the closed-down nurses dormitory.

Martha laid her hands on the lid of the first glass box. The camera focused on her perfect hands—her dark brown skin complementing her bright red nails. She opened the lid.

And the first number of today's Illinois State Lottery is five.

"Ah, you see Marta know we will win today," Aunty Sue said.

Martha moved to the second glass box.

And the second number is....

"Two," I whispered.

...Two.

Mother stopped mending the shirt. She took off her glasses. The needle rested midway in the green cloth; the line of thread drooped and looped into the little hole of the

needle. Aunty Sue said nothing. She, like Mother, was absorbed in the program. I lurched forward off the soft cushioned chair, and lay my belly on the floor. I supported my head with my hands under my chin. My eyes were glued to the TV. I didn't blink.

And the last and final number of today's Illinois state lottery is....

The balls danced round and round, bouncing off the glass and bumping against one another. Martha slid open the tiny door; the door that let out one magic ball, the last one. They fought within the box to see which would be freed from its confinement. Finally, one popped out. The number lay half hidden. Martha's fingertips touched the round, white surface, guiding the face of the number toward the millions of people holding their lottery tickets, and the one family without one.

...Eight.

Everything seemed far away. I felt the quick *thumpthump* of my heart in the tips of my fingers. I felt a redness spread over my cheeks, and the stickiness of my palms resting under my chin.

Above all the feelings that surged through my body, I felt special. Buddha had told me the numbers. He had sent them from heaven and bestowed them upon me while I meditated. I sat and breathed, concentrating on nothing, thinking of nothing. I was the one he picked. He gave *me* the numbers. He gave *me* the three little digits that could've changed my life.

As I basked in my glory, I realized it was for nothing. After all, we didn't have a lottery ticket. My heart sank. I released my hands from under my chin, and banged my head on the floor. *Why does He give me the numbers when He knows we never have a lottery ticket? Is He picking on me?* He wasn't picking on me. *Mother's picking on me. She's always picking on me.*

"I told you!" I yelled.

"Stop yelling," Mother said.

"No! You never buy a ticket, and tonight we would've won. We would've been rich." I sat up. My hands curled into tight little balls. "You always talk about money. You always say to dream of a richer life. If we had a ticket we could stop dreaming!" I expected Mother to rise out of the chair and drop the green cloth to the floor. I expected

her to pull me up by my ear, and drag me up to my room. I expected to spend the rest of the night locked in my small bedroom, reading a book, something I would've done anyway. But she didn't. She continued to thread the needle through the green cloth.

"Next time I buy ticket," my aunt said. "Ask Buddha again, K?"

I sighed and pushed myself up. Brushing the blue fuzzys from the carpet off my T-shirt, I whispered, "We should've won today." I stomped upstairs to my room without glancing back

"Ila, where you go?" Mother asked from below.

"Upstairs to read."

"You have a gift," Mother said to me one day at the dinner table. "Grandpa give you da gift. You speak to Buddha, right?"

"I don't know."

"Of course you don't. Still too young to understand." She added a spoonful of sugar to her noodle soup. Twirling the sugar crystals in the bowl, she looked at me with a little smile. "Too young, but still have da gift. Aunty Ta have gift, too. She win lotaly in Thailand. She say Buddha come in her dream and give her da numbers."

"Did she have a lottery ticket?" I asked with a smirk.

"Not important." Mother blew on the steaming spoonful of soup. She then slurped it down, and winced. "*I-ya*. Still hot."

Mother said *we* had a gift. We meant the entire Vacharapaha family. Grandfather was the first person who displayed the gift. Mother told bedtime stories about him. She said Grandfather knew if the spirits were around. He sensed the dead.

"Your grandpa was verly wise man. Know evwyting. He see da old ancestors. He talk to Buddha in his dreams," she said before kissing me goodnight.

Indeed, Grandfather was a special man, even if Mother's bedtime stories weren't true. He raised eight children—three boys and five girls—in the hot sticky climate of Thailand. Even though they paddled a little rowboat three miles everyday to get to school, the family was happy. There was a picture of the family taken when my mother was only nine. It hung on the wall next to Buddha. She and her sisters and brothers sat

on a dirt ground around Grandfather. He sat on a chair, chin up with a pipe in his mouth, smiling. The twins, Aunt Jume and Aunt Jeem, the youngest children of the family, hugged Grandfather's legs. They both had missing-teeth smiles. Every time I looked at the picture, I couldn't help but smile myself.

The family was poor. They lived in a small wooden shack with two rooms. One room was Grandfather's and grandmother's, and the other was crammed with eight children. Even in the worst conditions, Grandfather always kept his wide toothless grin. "He see da light in evwyting," Mother said.

Working from sun up to sun down in the rice fields, Grandfather always came home happy to see his children. His hands had little cuts on them from the small knife used to free up rice grains. Small insect bites covered his ankles. Yet he never complained. Instead, he sat with the children until it was time for them to go to bed. They talked the night away, Mother said. There was not a day, at least none she could remember, of dry conversation. Grandfather always had a story to tell, or the children themselves had stories. "Tell storly all da time. Ghost storly. Verly scary. Funny storly. We laugh all night," Mother said. "He never mad at us. Always happy."

Except for the time the children wanted to work. "Your grandpa did not let us work," Mother said. "He say go to school, so life will be easy and we would not work hard like he." The children wanted to help their father earn money, but he would not allow it. Mother said it was the only time he had threatened to strike them with a stick.

When the oldest son graduated from high school, he established the Vacharapaha shrimp farm. The tides turned. Money was not a sparse commodity. The farm put the daughters through college. The brothers worked on the shrimp farm, expanding to other locations throughout Thailand. Grandfather bought land in Bangkok. The land would be used by the children when they were older, but it was now inhabited by a homeless family. Mother never bothered asking them to leave.

Grandfather had a gift. Mother found out about it after she graduated from Siriraj Nursing School, when Grandfather told her about his dream.

"My oldest daughter," Grandfather said, "Buddha visited me last night. He floated down upon a Lotus flower. I saw the youth in his face, his long dangling earlobes. He said to let you go, my daughter."

"Go where, Father?" Mother asked.

"America. Make use of your gift, your knowledge to heal."

"Why does Buddha rush me away from you?"

"My oldest daughter, you will see me again. Do not fear. You will be back in ten years, with a son. You will say good-bye to me then. A new flower will blossom when you return. A flower that will light up the darkness. Buddha bestowed this knowledge in my dreams." When Grandfather dreamed, the family believed.

Ten years later, Mother returned to Thailand with a son—a three-year-old child named Ira, or to my family, "Ila." We didn't visit the golden temples when we got off the plane. We had no time. Uncle Loon waited for us at the airport. He looked like he didn't sleep much. There were red lines traced all over his eyes. Mother kissed his cheek and whispered in his ear. He smiled, picking me up into his large arms, and said, "Pau, couy." *He waited for you.*

We jumped into a taxi cab, and drove to a hospital. The whole family was there. Aunt Ta flew over from Germany; the twins, Aunt Jume and Aunt Jeem, received time off from their busy schedule of stewarding flights; Aunt Jeeb did not have classes to teach; and Uncle Cha and Uncle Chi tore themselves away from their busy schedules at the shrimp farm. They stood around me; each of them took turns kissing my cheek, and hugging me tight. The only sounds of laughter in the intensive care unit came from my family. When the family was complete, the family was happy.

Mother wiped away her happy tears, and looked at Uncle Loon, the oldest of Grandfather's children. "Pau?" she asked.

Uncle Loon led her into a room, while the rest of the family waited outside. I held onto Mother's hand tightly. "Pau," Uncle Loon whispered, "louk sow ma lawe." *Father, your oldest daughter is here.* On the bed lay an old man, with IV needles in his arms and a big clear tube in his mouth. The old man barely moved. His labored breathing was

heard over the *beepbeep* of a machine that stood beside the bed. I hid behind Mother's legs. "Pau," Uncle Loon said again, "louk sow ma lawe."

Mother held the old man's hand. He turned his head, and blinked his eyes. A rough gurgle erupted from his throat, a laugh. Mother smiled, tears streamed down her face. "Pau, louk chi nue ma doi mauyn pau bok ," Mother said. *Father, my son has come just like you said.* She let go of Grandfather's hand, and lifted me in front of her. I looked at the old man, not believing he was human. I turned away, huddling my face against Mother's shoulder. He lifted a trembling hand and reached for mine. "Ila, this is your grandfather, Coon Ta." Mother pushed my hand forward, as I began to cry. "Shhh...mi pane li. He will not hurt you," she said. The old man's hand was like a piece of wrinkled brown cloth covering only bones. I took his hand under my loud sobs. When I turned to stare at his face, I saw a skull. I could not look at him. I could not will my three-year-old eyes upon the old man, the skeletal figure who was my grandfather.

He tightened his grip, forcing my frightened eyes to his bony face. I slowly turned to meet his gaze. He had beautiful green eyes, like Mother's. Grandfather did not blink as he stared at me, creating one last mental picture before passing away. His green eyes made me feel warm, like a soft embrace. Gripping my hand firmly, like the grip of a strong young man, the corners of Grandfather's mouth raised into a smile. The plastic tube curving from in his mouth could not stop Grandfather's radiance. My loud sobs were now soft, silent tears. My fear subsided. He was not a skeleton, not a monster. After a few brief minutes, he was my grandfather.

Grandfather blinked. His beautiful green eyes disappeared into the shadowy depths of his concave skull. He turned his head away, releasing his, again, trembling hand from mine. Mother let me down. Uncle Loon pulled me away, leading me out of the room. He nodded to the rest of the family, and they all entered. Grandfather died shortly after my exit. He died minutes later while I clutched Uncle Loon's back, as we whizzed through the cramped streets of Bangkok on his speedy motorcycle.

I watched from a distance, hand-in-hand with Mother, Grandfather's body burned to ashes. The smoke, his soul, rose upward toward the cloudless blue sky, upward toward heaven.

The next day, as Grandfather prophesied, a new flower blossomed. A flower that lit up the darkness. Aunt Jeem bowed her head in front of an old, brown-robed monk. She wore a woven crown of flowers; the flowers laced themselves between one another—a tangle of white, red, and yellow. Beside her sat a young man, also bowing his head. He wore a similar crown around his head. A white thin rope laced around Aunt Jeem's clasped hand into the man's clasped hand. The white rope symbolized purity and togetherness. When they bowed their heads to the feet of the monk, they bowed together in unison. Nothing separated them.

My mother smiled while watching her little sister marry Taw. "Handsome boy. Crooked nose, but verly sweet smile," Mother said.

Later that night, we went to the edge of the Jowpaya River and released two bowls made of leaves into the water. The bowls were filled with flowers, candles, and incense sticks, one with some food and coins. It was the family's way of mourning their father, and celebrating a marriage. The bowls would float their separate ways—one to heaven, and the other along the river and into the sea where it would hopefully stay adrift forever. We watched the bowls drift away side by side, the candles' flames flickering against the black night's water. We watched them until they disappeared into the distance.

"Meditate, Ila. I will buy ticket," Aunty Sue said. "Remember breathe in, *poot*, breathe out, *toa*. Say *poot toa* and Buddha give you number."

"OK." I lit two candles on either side of Buddha's throne. Sticking three incense sticks into the little glass filled with sand, I took one of the candles and lit the incense left to right. Clasping my hands together, I knelt down and bowed three times; each time, my back arched into a shell. My fingers splayed on the ground, while my forehead touched the floor. I whispered a prayer in homage to Buddha, my lips moving silently.

"*Ala hung suma sum puto paka wa put tang paka wung tang api wa tae mi.*"

When I finished, I told Buddha my wish: "Pra Chaw, please give me the numbers, so I can be rich and happy. Please." I bowed my head in respect, then sat Indian style. My hands draped over my knees. My back was straight. I concentrated only on my breathing.

"*Poot*," I inhaled. "*Toa*," I exhaled. I repeated each word with each slow breath. My mind was an empty slate, except for the occasional excitement that danced in my head. I pushed it away.

The longer I sat the more excited I became. The anticipation of the numbers thrilled me. I couldn't wait to be rich.

Nothing broke through the clutter in my brain. My breathing became uneven. The words *poot* and *toa* were rushed. Instead of inhaling *poot*, I exhaled it. Instead of exhaling *toa*, I inhaled it. Buddha did not float down on a Lotus flower. He did not send the numbers. I could not pull down the black curtain that blocked out the outside world. Too many thoughts scurried in my head. *I can't wait to be rich. Where are the numbers? What will I buy first? Is He coming?*

Sweat bubbled on my forehead. My lips quivered. I closed my eyes tightly, so tight they formed tears. I tried hard to concentrate. I tried to kick out my rambling thoughts. My head felt heavy; my neck muscles tensed up.

Empty me. Where is He? Empty me. The numbers? Empty me. How?

My eyes popped open; my back slouched over; my head spun. I squinted, feeling as if I'd read too long.

"What numbers?" my aunt asked from another room.

When my breathing evened out, I said, "He didn't give them to me." I walked upstairs to my room, closing the door behind me with a silent thud.

"Ila?" Mother said, knocking on the door. "It almost six-tirty. Come watch lotaly."

I sat on my bed, staring at the green walls. "Not today."

The door cracked open. I saw Mother's hair hang through the space. "Ta mi?" she asked.

"Because I don't want to today." My back rested against the bed post. I clutched my knees together, hugging them to my chest.

Mother peered from behind the door. "What wrong, huh?" She looked at me, examining my posture, the crinkles in my forehead, the pout on my lips.

"I have no gift," I said.

Mother smiled. She opened the door, slipping into the room. She stepped over the mounds of dirty clothes, and sat on the bed next to me. "You have gift. Try too hard, caw chi lau plaw?"

"No. I *don't* understand. I want to be rich and happy."

"You no happy?" Mother asked. She rested her back against the wall, under a picture of the family taken when I was six. My hair was plastered to my head in the picture; my father had used Vaseline to keep my colic down. "Ta mi, mi happy?" she asked again.

"Because I didn't get the numbers. Now we can't be rich."

"Not so easy. Must work for money. Must work to be rich."

"But you can stop working. Aunty can stop. Dad can stop. We'd be happy."

"But we all happy. You make us happy." Mother patted my knee. Her smile eased me.

"But I have a gift. Why didn't it work? Why didn't Buddha help me?"

"Buddha help only those who need help. We do not need it. We are rich family. Rich in love, caw chi? You still have gift. You radder have Buddha help us, dan poor family with no home?"

"I suppose not," I said.

"Patient, and you will see. You will be rich because you smart boy. Smart boy dat have gift alway be rich. Patient." Mother stood up. She looked at me with a wide spread smile. Her green eyes sparkled. "Watch lotaly?"

"Go ahead," I said. Mother nodded, weaving her way to the door, picking up a couple articles of clothing on her way out. She opened the door, and left the room.

The numbers never came again. At six fifty-seven each day we gathered in front of the television, but no one took notice of the lottery anymore. It came on every night, but

we talked right through it. It was just a brief three minutes—a prelude to prime time television. A brief three minutes that came and went, leaving our lives unchanged.

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Generations of Laundry

Every Saturday morning, Mother emptied all the laundry baskets into an extra large potato sack. She entered my room when the sun cast early morning shadows onto pale blue walls and moved lightly to the far corner where the laundry basket lay. Quickly and quietly, she emptied the basket without dropping one article of clothing.

Sometimes, perhaps unknown to Mother, I lay still and watched her, pretending to be asleep with half open eyes. Mother was beautiful then. It was a different kind of beauty, purer, untouched by time. She did not have sags under her green eyes, nor were the under sides of her arms hanging like dead flesh. Back then, she did not wear the thick wire rim glasses she wears now, nor were her smile lines confused as frowns. Her skin was smooth and her movements were soft.

After Mother placed all my clothes into the laundry sack, she hefted it into her small but strong arms and carried it out the door. Before she left the room, she turned to me and smiled. I smiled back through the thick comforter that covered half my face.

The older I became, the longer I slept on Saturdays. Mother still came into my room, but I was never awake to witness the morning ritual. Every Saturday, however, when I awoke to the clanging of pots and pans downstairs in the kitchen, my laundry basket was empty.

Mother did everyone's laundry on Saturday: mine, my Aunty Sue's who has lived with us since my birth, and my father's before the divorce. During winters and on gray, wet days, Mother dried all the clothes in the laundry room. On hangers and clothespins, the clothes hung together on a line extending from one end of the room to the other. Though our house came equipped with a dryer, Mother never used it. She said, "It like monster wid hot breath. Da hot breath is bad magic. Make da clothes shrink. Make a

noise like a head in it. I think who head it is, you know?" Mother loved to watch horror movies, so the image of dead heads in the dryer didn't surprise me. The dryer's only use was to lay out socks and underwear on its smooth, white surface.

Laundry day always made Mother happy, especially on hot, sunny summer days when she could hang the clothes outside. The family's clothes all hung on two separate clotheslines that V-ed out from a fence post to two ten foot poles twenty yards away. The two poles were the supports to my basketball net.

The backdoor opened to an array of wet clothes. The clotheslines stretched over six steps leading down to the door, and, sometimes, if I was not careful when coming outside, I would plaster myself against a bed sheet or two and come out on the top step Downy fresh. Behind the basketball net, Mother's flower garden blossomed into full bloom every first of June. Mother said they were Thai flowers—that she had brought the seeds from Thailand. Queen Sirikit roses twined in and out of a white wooden fence. Their large, bright yellow heads craned up at Mother while she watered them. Marigolds and varieties of dahlias sprouted up from the fertile ground in a palette of colors: yellows, oranges, reds, and violets. Mother was proud of her little garden. She watered it in between loads of laundry.

Since my birth and before, Mother carried on the laundry tradition without pause.

During my three week visit to Thailand when I was sixteen, I changed clothes every time I bathed, which was about five times a day. The laundry hamper was always filled to the brim. Mother collected it as she did on Saturdays in the states. Laundry day in Thailand, however, was everyday. She carried our basket of clothes to the backyard of my aunt's home. There she sat and talked with her sisters while scrubbing the clothes in a soapy water barrel, a grove of coconut trees surrounding the parameter of the yard. Sometimes I would join her in the backyard, not to do laundry, but to search for snakes with Pokey and Bo Bo, the house dogs. Sometimes I would sit under an umbrella, sipping Thai ice tea, savoring its sweet creamy taste.

Mother and her sisters sat in a tight circle around the barrel and talked about old times. The soap bubbles frothed around their hands and arms. They rolled their pant legs

above their calves so water would not splash down on them. If I wasn't searching for snakes, I listened in on their conversations.

The one I remember most was about Mother's old boyfriends. I never pictured Mother being with anybody but my father. After their divorce, Mother shut herself off from the outside world. She seldom went out, even to church. She spent most her time sitting by the living room window overlooking the neighborhood. Her sewing machine rested on a wooden table next to the window. She sewed every day.

When my aunts saw me creep over to listen, they invited me to join their circle. "Come sit here. We have much story to tell you about you mom."

"What stories?" I asked, folding up my pant legs.

"You mom pretty girl long time ago," my Aunt Jume said.

"Not pretty anymore?" Mother asked.

"Too old to be pretty," Aunt Ta said. Out of all my aunts, Aunt Ta spoke English clearly with an accent more German than Thai; she had lived in Germany for twenty years.

"We are *all* too old to be pretty," my aunt continued. "But back then, your mamma was the prettiest girl in the village. She had handsome guys like you knocking on her door every day. Sometimes they come three or four at a time with flowers in their hands like trained monkeys."

"Go, mom," I said. Mother shook her head and smiled. "Did she go on dates?"

"What date?" Aunt Jeem asked. The skin between her eyes furrowed together, and she tilted her head to the side like a confused dog.

"Auk pi teuw doy gan," Aunt Ta explained.

"Ahhhh...she all da time on date."

"But your Grandpa did not like it," said Aunt Ta. "The oldest daughter was suppose to take care of the family, but she goes and has fun with the boys all the time."

Mother smiled. She was not wearing her dentures and all her back teeth were missing. "I take care best I can. You all bad. Run and fight all da time."

"Did my mom have a boyfriend? Like, for a long time?"

My aunts whispered to one another in low tone Thai. I barely understood the words, and even then I was not sure what they meant. Mother leaned back on her arms

and looked into the sky. She waggled her feet back and forth, waiting for an answer as I did.

"We remember one boy. His name, I think, was Upone. Right, Pe Nit?" Mother nodded her head yes. "He was the handsomest boy in village," Aunt Ta said. "All the girls, including all of us, liked him. But he liked your mom."

"Most pretty," Aunt Jeem giggled.

"Really? Tell me more about him."

Mother said, "Nothing much to say. Teenage love, dat all."

"No, no, no. Not all at all," Aunt Jeem said.

Mother began scrubbing one side of a shirt against the other vigorously. White bubbles foamed between her hands with each quick, hard scrub.

"Upone come over every day, and every day your mom walked with him to the lake. They sat and talked till night time. Then she came home with a big smile and floaty eyes."

"You mean mom was swooned? My mom? Mom?"

"What you think, I never young?" Mother asked. "You think I mamma forever?"

"Yeah."

"Nope. Your mom is like any other young girl. She has feelings like young girls, and strong feelings for a young boy, right Pe Nit?"

Mother replied, "Dat's right. I young before." She swung the shirt over a clothesline directly behind her.

"What did he look like?"

Aunt Ta began, "He had—."

"Brown eyes," Mother interjected. "Verly short black hair like new style now. Tom Cruise hair. Tom Cruise smile, too."

Aunt Ta continued, "Very skinny with round glasses. Glasses like old people wear. What are they called?"

"Bifocals?" I said. I moved closer to Mother and leaned against her. She placed her foamy hand on top of mine.

"Yes, bifocals."

Aunt Jume asked, "What bifocal?"

"Wen tah," Mother said.

"Oh yes. Round like moon," she giggled.

"Mom, what did you really do at the lake?"

"Only talk. Upone verly smart boy. He study to be doctor." Mother rolled our already dry socks into little balls. She stuffed them in the corner of the hamper. "One time we talk about future life. We talk to almost midnight. Da star and moon out over the lake. Verly pretty dat night." Mother looked away. She seemed to breathe in air from the past, letting it linger longer in her before exhaling.

Aunt Ta said, "Daddy did not like you staying out late. He waited for you, remember? He was so angry, but he never yelled, just said to come in earlier next time."

"Did you ever kiss him, mom?"

"Why you ask dat?" Mother turned to me with urgent eyes. "Do not remember."

I glanced at Aunt Ta and the others. They said nothing, but their smiles answered my question.

My father's clothes were piled near the bottom step in separate but neat mounds—dress shirts in one pile, pants in another, and tubed underwear and sock balls near the front door. It was not the first time I found my father's clothes on the bottom step. Actually, it had been the second time. The first was when I returned home from high school one afternoon and his clothes were scattered all about, not in neat piles. My aunt informed me that they had the same argument again, the do-you-like-sleeping-with-that-woman one. She said Mother, in a angry frenzy, began throwing my father's clothes down the stairs. My father just left, saying very little and drove to the "other house." Though it wasn't the first time his clothes weren't found folded in his drawers, it was, however, the first time his clothes did not make the Saturday morning wash.

I was fifteen then. As I walked through his clothes, I thought to myself, *We're making progress.* Not any progress toward a reconciliation between my two arguing parents, but progress toward an end, an inevitable divorce that was meant to happen six years before. In the years in between, I was their delay.

When the fighting started, I used to cover my ears and stain pillow cases with tears. Like most nine-year-old boys stuck between two disenchanted parents, I blamed myself. I blamed myself for their voices jolting me out of sleep at night, for their harsh words spoken in hushed tones whenever I was near, for taking sides—and later, I blamed myself for not taking one. They stayed together because of me. Because one time I ran away from home at night in cut off sweats and a thin T-shirt, making clouds with my breath as I ran down a dark street. They followed me in the family van, sitting next to one another, yelling at me to get in the car.

"Fuck you! Get the hell away from me!" I said.

My mother leaned over my father—the closest I remember her being to him in the last years. She pointed her finger at me, screaming with a red face, "Git in now, you hear me? Git in now!" And then I saw my father's stern eyes pass over me before I turned into someone's yard, leaping over someone's wooden fence in bare feet.

I ran until my chest hurt. When I stopped running, I climbed into the hull of a rocket ship slide in an empty school playground and wished for the rocket to take me away to a better place. A place where my father didn't sleep with another woman. A place where my mother didn't hit my father so much. A place where I could be nine.

And then I fell asleep. And for a brief moment the rocket flew me to that place and brought me back home, and I found myself in my bed and not recalling how I had gotten there and never asking.

But I was nine then, and years later their fights became part of my life, like a fly that didn't go away but kept buzzing around my ears. I wished for them to be apart. I wished for the divorce. Finding my father's clothes in piles at the bottom step Saturday morning led me one step closer in having my wish come true, one step leading to the last a month later. My father's clothes were packed in two dark suitcases; his pants and shirts buried framed pictures of the family and of Mother.

I helped him pack.

It was six in the morning. The sun's gleam pierced through the white curtains, lighting the dust particles in the laundry room into specks of gold. Outside, Mother hung

clothes on the line. I knocked on the backdoor window and smiled. She waved to me as I opened the door and entered into the hot air.

"Swad dee, ja," Mother said.

"Good morning, mom."

"Nice hot day. Good day to hang clothes." She hung her white nurse's uniforms one next to another—corresponding pant to corresponding shirt. Behind hers were my aunt's.

"Did you finish washing, mom?"

"No. Two load more. Many clothes. You wear once and throw in hamper. Still have nice smell, but when you throw in hamper, it mix wit da smelly clothes, den smell like da smelly clothes."

"You know I hate wearing an outfit more than once. It makes me feel unclean. Do you want me to help hang?"

"Of course I do," she said. "Good boy today, huh?"

"Good boy every day, mom."

The second line was bare. I began hanging my ragged T-shirts along it, each shirt a half inch apart from the next. I snapped two clothespins on each shoulder.

When all the clothes were hung, Mother sat on a stool and hummed a Thai song. It was a tune sung by Sutate, the Thai equivalent of Frank Sinatra, a Las Vegas-type lounge singer who charmed the ladies with his thick baritone voice and words of love. Sutate came to America once and sang at our church—his worldly tour covering all Thai Buddhist communities across the country. It was a fiasco of hoot and hollers, as sixty-year-old women climbed over one another to have a simple touch of his hand. While watching him perform, I understood for the first time the power of music. The Beatles' long shaggy hair and thick English accents helped make them popular. With Elvis, it was the seductive sway of his hips. But Sutate was bald. And his hips stopped swaying when he turned twenty, thirty years ago. His words were his charm. His charismatic walk in a belly-shaped tuxedo was his allure. At the end of every concert, Sutate searched for a lucky middle age woman to serenade; he strolled in between tables and batted eyes with

overdressed, shiny-faced women. Mother was lucky that day, and two years later, she was still envied by every Thai woman in the state of Illinois.

Midway through the song, Mother asked, quite unexpectedly, "You still boyfriend wit Vewonica?"

Feeling quite uncomfortable, I cleared my throat. "Veronica and I are dating, Mom."

Talking to Mother about the American relationship was as painful as dental work. When I was a child, Mother always said, "You have Thai blood from two good parent. Remember who you are. You not like dem." After the divorce, Mother said, "You have Thai blood from *one* good parent." The rest was the same.

Mother raised me to be Thai, and in the first eight years of my life, she never spoke a word of English to me. English was a forbidden language. She never knew how the other kids at school treated me; how they'd push me to the ground because I talked funny. Back then, the suburb I lived in was predominately white. My family was the first non-Christian, non-white to inhabit the south suburban neighborhood, fifteen minutes from Chicago.

One day, a group of sixth graders held me down while one of them punched my stomach. I was walking home from school. I was in second grade. No one stopped to help. When I arrived home—tears streaming down my face and grass stains on my shirt and pants—I vomited. After that day, Mother integrated English into her Thai. She would say, "Ila, auk pi ting ca ya. Now, you hear me? Ta mie watch TV?" And I'd respond in English without being reprimanded, "Mom, let me watch this show please. I'll take the garbage out later."

Mother often criticized the "Amereecan woman." She would say, "Amereecan woman verly forward. Too sexy. Thai girl not like dat." To her, a relationship with one always ended in heartache.

During my junior year in high school, I had a nervous breakdown in math class about a girl who broke my heart. She happened to be American like the rest of the country. After I whipped my books against the blackboard, Mr. Samenos, my math teacher, escorted me down to the school psychiatrist. He said: "Talk to the shrink, Ira.

She can help you." So I did, and like most psychiatrists, she said, "Tell me about your mother." "Why is this important?" I asked. "Do you talk to your mother about your feelings?" "No." "Well, I think you should." I explained to the psychiatrist Mother was from another country (sometimes I think from another world), and she would not understand. The psychiatrist insisted that Mother was no different from any other mother. "They all have experiences with life's ups and downs."

After an hour, I became tired of the whole thing, and said, "OK, I'll talk to her," but I really had no intention to. When I arrived home, however, Mother waited by the door with pursed lips and crinkled eyes. I knew the school psychiatrist had called her.

I told her about the girl who broke my heart. She told me to find a Thai girlfriend. I told her I loved the girl. She told me there was no time for love—that I should concentrate on school and go to college. After college, *then*, I could concentrate on love. General Mao of China concentrated on ruling a country, she said. I told her General Mao was a communist. I was sent to my room.

"You know Vewonica not Thai."

"Really, Mamma? I hadn't noticed." I plopped on the ground; my legs spread in opposite directions. We sat in between the two lines, surrounded by fresh smelling clothes.

"No, she no Thai. You will marry Thai, yes? Thai girl verly pretty. I think you should call Kat. She verly pretty girl," Mother said.

"Do you realize how old Kat is?

"She almost in high school. Only couple year difference," she said. "You are seventeen. She is fourteen. No difference at all."

"I just got my driver's license and been in two accidents already. She's still hitching rides with her mom."

"No matter. She Thai. She pretty. She good cook." That was Mother's formula for the perfect wife.

My wife had to be beautiful so I would not lose face whenever out in public. Men would look at my wife and say, "Lucky S.O.B., I wish I had me a wife like that." She would have long, lustrous black hair—hair that flowed down her back like a glistening moonlit river. And her eyes had to twinkle in the dark, so I would never lose her. And if I

wrapped my arms around her, I could do it twice if it were possible, for she was slim but generous.

On top of that, she could cook.

When I was a baby, not yet able to walk, Mother said, I threw up Gerber banana mush, and ate pre-chewed rice and fish sauce. Now, the thought of eating already chewed food makes me squirm, but I believe it was the beginning of my love for Thai food. I don't think I could live without having a spicy, sweet noodle dish, or a steamy bowl full of jasmine rice topped with a coconut milk soufflé. When I'm away from home for a long period of time, my stomach growls for Thai food, missing the combustion of flavors. Being able to cook was one thing; being able to cook Thai food was another.

We sat and enjoyed the warm summer morning. A breeze swayed the clothes back and forth, spraying tiny drops of water on us like misty rain. After a comfortable silence, Mother rose from the stool and walked to the garage for a watering bucket. She filled it with water and added seven drops of liquid plant food.

"Do you like Vewonica?"

Startled, I replied, "Yes."

"Be careful. Amereecan girl verly tricky. Dat why Amereecan people divorce all da time. Don't want heart to be broken like last girl. What her name?"

"Jean."

"No more of dat, OK?"

I nodded.

The yellow roses seemed to glow more brilliantly in the sun. A speck of water domed over the tip of a rose petal and reflected as a six point star. The dahlias swayed to the rhythm of the wind, tilting to the right and nodding to the left like a group of back up singers.

Mother said, "Friend call you yesterday, I think."

"You should take messages, Mom."

"Can not keep up wid dem. Talk too fast like they are in hurry to go. I get tired. But girl call and I say you out wid Vewonica. Dat where you at, right?"

"No, but that's OK."

"So you were not out wid Vewonica?"

"No."

She lowered herself to the ground next to me. Periodically, Mother cocked her ears toward the backdoor, checking whether the second load was done.

"Not having sex?"

I struggled to breathe. "Oh god."

"Oh Buddha."

"Oh god."

"What wrong wid you?" she asked.

"What made you say that?"

"I find a condom in wallet when I check da pockets of da pants before washing. Trojan. Why you have condom?" she calmly asked.

I couldn't answer.

"Sex is not love. If find someone special, dan maybe, sex is dan love. But girls meet in bar, no, dat not love. Dat dangerous."

"I don't like bars," I said. "I can't even get in them."

"So you not having sex?"

"No, I'm not."

"Good. You old enough to think for yourself now. Responsible for own body and mind."

"I know."

Mother looked off into the horizon, miles away from where she sat. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, her chest rising and sinking slowly. When she opened her eyes, she said, "I have a good son."

"The second load's done, Mom."

Mother walked to the backdoor, avoiding all the hung clothes. I sat on the ground, twirling a piece of grass in between my fingers. The sun shone down on me; its hot rays warmed my skin.

Mother hefted another laundry basket outside. Her back arched as she took one step at a time, always leading with the right leg. She plopped the basket onto the ground.

I rose to help hang again. With little line left, we moved the clothes closer together so the second load would fit. When the third load finished, we waited until the already hung clothes dried. Mother started humming again, picking up where she had left off in the Sutate tune that always made her smile.

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I Could've Been Tiger Woods

In an old photo album, I came upon a picture of my mother swinging a golf club. Her pregnant belly shadowed the ball, as her hands started the pendulum up toward the sky. "You start playing when not born yet," my mother said. "I play when you still in tummy."

When hearing the news of my birth, my father bought an old Japanese table from a street market in Thailand. He shipped the table across the Pacific to our newly purchased home in Chicago. The table stood one foot off the floor. Against the black marble background, a hand-painted drawing of a peacock was etched into the smooth top; the peacock spread its colorful feathers into a fan as its body twined around a pole tree.

One of my earliest childhood memories was of a lone trophy standing in the middle of the table. I remember touching the trophy, running my little hands over the little gold golfer, petting its arms and legs like a doll. It was polished to an extraordinary gleam. When the sun came through our front window, the head of the gold golfer reflected a brilliant shine. It was my father's trophy, one in his entire life.

For the longest time, I've had trouble talking about golf and its effect on my life. I've often thought it was due to the distance between my father and me—how we became other people, how we live across the world with nothing between us but water.

In 1997, as I watched Tiger Woods trample the golfing field at Augusta National, winning the Masters by twelve strokes—the biggest margin of victory in the tournament's history—and shattering the four-day tournament score record formally held by Jack Nicklaus, my fingers started to twitch and a tingle that had abandoned me half a decade before ran up and down my

arms: a tingle that required the feeling of a sticky grip against my palms and power surging through my body, exploding through my wrists into a dimple-covered ball.

Moments after his victory, the phone rang.

"Hello, Mom."

"How you know it me?"

"Psychic powers."

She laughed. "You see Tiger win?"

"Yes, I did. He was awesome. No one could have played any better."

"And so cute when smiling. Like true Thai. You know, I think about you when he win. Remember how you so good?"

"I was never that good."

"*Mee Yie*, you were verly good."

My father used to call me *Mee Yie*, meaning "Big Bear" in Thai, a nickname given to me when I was five. My favorite golfer when growing up was Jack Nicklaus, the "Golden Bear"—after his gold hair and intense eyes. My nickname was self-explanatory. "Big" simply stood for my size. Through grade school I towered over most people my age. In sixth grade, my mother's friends confused me with my older brother who didn't exist.

For a Christmas gift one year, my father bought me Nicklaus' instructional video *Golf My Way*. The video remained in the VCR for months. I sat in front of the television and watched the program over and over, studying every small detail. Nicklaus captivated me; I was like a student seeking enlightenment, who doted on a venerable monk.

When he won his last Masters title in 1986, becoming the oldest to ever win the tournament, I cried.

"Last time he will win," my father said.

The shock hit me through my smiles and cheers.

"Why?" I asked.

"He old now. Things change when old."

"No. I don't believe you." But deep in my heart, I knew my father was right.

*

When my father couldn't find a baby-sitter because my mother worked overtime, he took me to the driving range under the Cicero Bridge, neighboring a truck yard. I was three, dragging along one plastic golf club. He told me to sit still on a paint-chipped bench while he hit golf balls out into the wide-open field. Each ball flew, the equivalent height of airplanes landing in Midway Airport down the street, toward the two-hundred-fifty yard marker—a distance, at the time, seeming infinite to me. I had never seen anything fly so far; it was like watching a magician. While the other players beside him flubbed balls about twenty yards in no particular direction, my father hit one after another that seemed to land in the same spot.

After hitting a half-bucket of balls, my father turned to me and said, "Hit one." I nodded, slowly walking to the mat with my red plastic club. I placed the ball on the rubber tee and tried to remember what my father's swing looked like. I even added a little grunt as I hit the ball, just like him. Even though it trickled three feet to the right, my father laughed and gave a wink of approval, and I, not knowing why he was laughing, laughed along with him.

On my sixth birthday, as a present, my father took me to a nine hole golf course.

Hickory Hills Country Club wasn't breathtaking like the pictures of courses on golf calendars; it didn't have carpet-like fairways or clean-cut putting surfaces. In fact, the grass throughout the course was the same level, the greens being only a half inch shorter. The ponds were muddy brown instead of artificial blue. Duck droppings littered the ground, and at the fourth hole, the left boundary of the course, the sounds of construction, of another shopping mall being built—rumbling bulldozers and men talking sex in hard hats—scared off chirping birds to quieter places.

But for me, it was a beginning.

My father and I woke at five in the morning when the sky was cloudless and the sun made it glow golden. I spoke without pause. "Dee, is it a pretty course like on TV?"

He nodded.

"Does it have water? I want to hit over it."

Another nod.

"What if I hit in it? Can I swim and get it?"

He grunted.

I sat back, pleased. My father yawned, rubbing the top of my head while steering the car with his left hand.

The parking lot was empty when we arrived. My father parked in the middle of nothing, no closer to the course, no closer to the clubhouse.

He said, "Stay here. Do not move. I buy tickets, OK?"

I nodded anxiously, watching him walk away, feet splayed in different directions like a penguin.

When he came back, he had two tickets in his shirt pocket and was lugging two pushcarts behind him for both our bags. He placed the skinny tube holding my golf clubs on one cart and instructed me to walk to the first tee.

While I waited, my father argued with the starter, the person who checked in the tickets and made sure everyone started without delay. My father's hands flailed in every direction. "Why cannot play? Nobody follow us. Still too early."

The starter sat in a glass box. "The rule says no one under eleven is allowed on the course," his voice rough. He lifted a cigarette in yellow fingers and dragged.

"My son can play. He can hit the ball far. Give him chance." My father's hand pressed against the glass.

"I can't," the starter said.

"Why not?"

"He looks eight."

"He six year. Do not let size deceive you. Just let him hit one ball. Let him show you. If he do not get on the green then we leave."

The starter turned and looked at me. I stared back under the great brim of an oversized visor. He took another deep drag and blew in my father's direction. The glass fogged with smoke. "One ball. If the kid doesn't get it on, you both leave."

In agreement, my father nodded.

He walked to the teeing area where I stood. "Mee Yie," he said, "hit it close to the hole."

The hole was short: one hundred yards, a dirty brown pond along the left side of the fairway and a sand bunker guarding the right front of the green. I took two practice swings, letting the three wood graze the grass. I lined my feet and the face of the club to the flag, which

drooped against the pole, signifying no wind.

I envisioned my swing in my head. I saw the ball soar high and stick firmly on the green before I actually struck the ball.

And as the foreshadow concluded, my hands led the club back in a straight line, shifting my weight to the right side of my body. When I felt a slight tug under my left arm, I knew I reached my peak—the club at its primed position. In a smooth motion, the club accelerated down. My weight moved from right to left; my hands whipped through the ball; my head lay perfectly still at impact. At the end of my swing, my back bent into an inverted C—a still pose of perfection.

"When you see in mind, it come out true. That what Jack Nicklaus say. That why he champion," my father had instructed time and time again.

The ball soared in a high arc onto the middle of the green, landing softly, divot-less. The sways of the unleveled grass grabbed the ball, however, pulling it backwards. It trickled down until it rested on the fringe, an inch off the putting surface, foiling my deja vu.

I turned to look at my father, who turned to look at the starter, who looked at the ball with a cigarette hanging limply from his mouth. For awhile nothing was said. The silent buzz of electric lines eclipsed the quacking of ducks swimming in the nearby pond.

Without question, my father began walking to the car. I followed closely behind, my head drooping in disappointment.

"How old's your kid again?" the starter asked as we passed.

"Six year," my father said.

"Go on and play, man." His eyes dropped from the green, and he smiled down at me. Deep wrinkles folded his face. "Knock the ball in the hole, you hear?"

I nodded, running down the path toward my ball and pulling the pushcart behind me.

When we finished our round, my father dragged my clubs along with his. I had become tired on the sixth hole. The starter laughed as we trudged up the path.

"The score?" he asked.

"Not so good," my father said. "Shoot three over par, thirty-nine."

"What?" His eyes furrowed together.

"I shoot thirty-nine," my father said again.

morning a golf course is mystical: a fog from the ponds spreads across the fairways, a slight wind carries a fine mist from the sprinklers, and there are no sounds of men guzzling beer with pocket TVs blaring out scores of baseball games, but sounds of nature stirring awake from a dead night slumber.

This was how golf was meant to be played.

I never wondered why I loved golf. I wondered why I played it. I ask myself now, why golf and not basketball or football, or something entirely different? My answer is always the same: Golf *is* entirely different.

For a time, I was happiest not when I'd hit a solid shot, but when I'd see my father smile or hear the high-pitched laugh erupting from his small frame whenever my ball soared through the air. Every Saturday, I found myself in baby cleats, sitting next to him in an electric golf cart, chasing a ball that never rested.

On Sundays, however, my father and I went to church. While he showed me off, face beaming with pride, I sat back, smiled, and waited until noon when we'd set off to the driving range.

"Ila, hit ball far as me now," my father said, shaking his head as if my talent surprised him.

"He's growing up. Pretty soon he will hit farther then you," a doctor-friend said. "Then he will beat you."

"Of course he will. He will beat everyone. He will be pro," said another.

"Pro like Jack Nicklaus. Win the Master for his daddy. Right, Ira?"

I shrugged.

"Win the Masters for himself," my father said.

They nodded their heads. "Yes, yes. For himself."

No one at church ever asked about school, or about my mother who always worked. The first words out of their mouths were:

"What was you score at Indian Lake last week?"

My father always answered for me. "Ninety-two. He hit ninety-two with two birdie." He'd describe the birdies in great detail, knowing what clubs I used, how I hit my shots, and how far the putt was before it dropped into the hole.

I became superfluous while my father told my stories.

The Thai Golf Association's (TGA) Southern Illinois / Missouri Open was played every Memorial Day weekend.

In 1985, it was held at Rend Lake Country Club—just off of Interstate 57, a half hour from Southern Illinois University. It attracted Thai golfers from across the Midwest. Since there were no age limits in each of the three divisions—men, women, and juniors—elderly men and women competed with others much younger. In my case, I battled against juniors who played golf in high school, while I finger-painted in the fourth grade.

Golf was not a popular sport among the sons and daughters of rich Thai doctors, but they played because they had money; golf was just another way of showing it off. Primarily, the TGA was comprised of doctors or well-to-do entrepreneurs. My father blended in well even though he worked at a tile laboratory and made half the money they did. He blended in because he pretended to be like them, spending his money lavishly and then complaining to my mother, the only person to listen, about how much he had spent at the course that day. But for those short moments, my father reveled in pretending to be someone he wasn't.

Out of the twenty-five junior golfers entered in the tournament, only two handfuls had the ability to play and the desire to win. Anthony Monkul was one of them. He had won the tournament before setting foot on the course that year.

Anthony ranked among Illinois' premier junior golfers, qualifying and finishing in the top five of the State High School tournament four years straight. He conducted himself like a champion, strutting confidently on the practice greens, betting doctors he could sink a twenty-foot putt for ten dollars, then going double or nothing and winning. They'd seen him hit a ball; they've only listened to my father's stories.

A storm thundered through the night before the tournament. I watched rain speckle off the window; a street lamp from the outside transformed water streaks into lines of transparent gold.

Stop raining, please, I thought.

Whenever it looked like rain, my mother always said, "Ja fa fone, ya logn hie." *Prince of clouds, please don't cry.* And for her, he didn't.

But as I looked out the window, pleading silently to the black sky as she would, the prince did not listen. His tears continued to fall.

The rain ceased in the early morning and a cold breeze swept through southern Illinois. An hour before the tournament, I hit a bucket of balls at the practice range, loosening tight muscles. My mother watched over me, always sipping from her half empty glass of water. "You always shank. You hit like dis today den you lose many ball in the trees." I shot a look at her, and she shrank back into the thick wool of her sweater. I hit another one. "Oh good shot!" she amended. I smiled.

My father ran to the clubhouse to see the pairings of the day. He returned with neither a smile nor a frown.

"They playing by IJGA[1] rules. No pushcart. You carry own bag on shoulder," my father said. "They say course very sloppy. You will be OK?"

"What group am I in?"

"First group. Playing with Tony. First to tee off."

My loosened muscles tightened.

Until then I never had to carry my clubs. When my father and I practiced, we buzzed around in little gas or electric golf carts. Sometimes he'd let me drive, in spite of the one time I tipped the cart over on its side after taking a sharp turn downhill.

My worries, however, stemmed from the thought of hitting the first shot of the day, setting the tone and the pace of the tournament. Anxious eyes would be upon me; they wondered whether my drive would travel half as far as Tony's, whether it would reflect that of a future champion. For the first time, golf became a means of measuring my worth. And for the first time I didn't want to play.

When I stepped onto the first tee, a bag slung sloppily over my shoulder, their voices carried to my ears, "Watch him. He will be great. Future star." And they did in silent attention.

My father walked to me and sat on his toes. "Mee Yie, you will do good."

"I'm nervous."

"Try the best you can, OK? No worry about Tony."

"Should I hit now?"

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[1] Illinois Junior Golf Association

"Wait till the starter call you. Then you hit."

My father kissed my cheek and winked when the starter bellowed my name through a megaphone. My mother clapped her hands.

I stuck a wooden tee into the soft, slushy ground, lining myself up to the middle of the fairway. *Hit it far. I don't care where it goes. Just get it off the ground.* Just as I finished my thought, I brought my club back in a quick, jerky motion, my hips over-rotating; my body uncoiled prematurely toward the target; my head followed my body; my hands lagged behind. Upon impact, wet dirt sprayed up from the ground, staining my glasses and leaving a divot three inches behind the ball. The ball caught the toe of the club, rolling slowly into the right rough twenty yards in front of me, barely off the teeing area.

In an off balanced pose, I closed my eyes and bit my bottom lip, resisting the urge to run into my mother's arms. I looked forward, avoiding the stares. I looked forward and saw Anthony's tee shot travel three hundred yards down the middle. Some said in silent voices, "Mi pain lie." *It OK.* "Fix next shot." My father said nothing.

He waited for me at the eighteenth green, watching me drag my golf bag behind like a lagging dog. Mud coated my yellow shirt in intricate designs and perplexed patterns, and the bottom half of my slacks were a darker shade of blue because they were wet. My steps squished and squashed, as I trudged over the last hill and onto the green.

I took very little time with my putt. I just approached and hit it. When it dropped in the hole for my only par of the day, my father cheered.

"What you shoot, Mee Yie?" my father asked.

"One hundred and eighteen, Dee."

"Only one hundred eighteen. Play good. What Tony shoot?" He wiped away a piece a grass sticking in my hat.

"Seventy-nine. I'm tired," my voice barely a whisper.

"We go back. Mom waiting for us."

He took my hand and grabbed my golf bag. Twice I fell to the ground, tripping clumsily over my feet. The second time, a sharp pain shot through my calf; my leg bent into a hard "L." I screamed. My father straightened out my leg, massaged the cramp down with his strong fingers,

then lifted me, effortlessly, in his arms, all the while saying, "Big strong boy. It OK. We be home soon."

I fell asleep on the way to the rented chateau, which was only a ten-minute ride from the course. When I woke up, I was smothered in blankets and a wet cloth lay on top of my head. Mother said I had a fever of a hundred two.

"Mom, where's Dee?"

"He at golf banquet. Be back soon. Go to sleep."

And I did, waking up when the hot sun pierced through the window and heated my body the next morning.

My mother and father were asleep on the other bed. Next to the alarm clock stood a little trophy about four inches tall. The inscription on the plaque read: *Bravest Golfer*. Excited, I woke my father and asked whether the trophy was mine. He said, "Yes. They give to you at banquet."

Years later, I learned that my father had made the trophy long before I finished my wet round of golf years back. He had ordered it two weeks before I stepped foot on the slushy course. On the bottom of the white marble base was a gold label that read: *Marquette Sporting Goods/ 95th Street/ Oak Lawn, Illinois 60453.* It was right down my street.

Things were different after my first time playing a tournament. Practice became more of a chore—a must do to keep everything in check. When I practiced, I walked eighteen holes. My legs often cramped up in the beginning—I remember one time falling to the ground after hitting a solid ball down the middle of the fairway. My father always drove a golf cart. While on the ground clutching my calf, I'd see him drive ahead, leaving me behind with my clubs as crutches. Eventually my legs carried me through eighteen holes without problems.

At the driving range, my father threw little pebbles at me while I swung, testing my nerves and concentration. He coughed; he sneezed; he talked out loud; he said things that hurt. "You the worst golfer. Embarrassment to family. Quit now," he would say as a pebble rolled next to the ball after striking my hands. After practice, he became himself again, patting my head, saying how good practice went, leaving behind what was said and done at the range. I could not.

I won the Southern Illinois / Missouri Open a year later. Anthony didn't play. I shot an eighty-six, winning by one shot, much unlike his domination the year before, when he left the field

behind by twenty strokes.

There are three things in golf I will never forget: the first time I swung a club, the first time I beat Anthony, and the first time I beat my father. The latter two came on the same day when I was fourteen.

Balmoral Woods Country Club hosted the TGA Open. Like the Olympics, a consul decided which state would host the tournament. In past years, California outbid every state, always promising warm weather in April at a breathtaking golf course in Monterey.

In 1990, the Illinois Thai Association offered to sponsor a live concert at Wat Dhammaram, the Thai Buddhist temple of Chicago. In order to host the tournament, the church brought over legendary Thai folk singers to please the older crowd, Las Vegas-like lounge singers to impress the middle-aged, and shirtless young men with bandannas tied around their heads to excite and entice the younger populace, notably teenage girls. The consul could not pass up the opportunity. They scheduled the concert and picnic right after the tournament as the banquet.

Anthony and I were paired in the first group after a five-year absence from one another. He played for a losing Division I college team, while I had begun winning tournaments all over the state. We ran into each other in the clubhouse before starting our round. He tilted his cap. I nodded my head.

On the first hole, I drove to the right side of the fairway. He drove down the left. I birdied it; he parred. And though our shots were always on target, my putter won the match. Every ball I putted seemed to find the bottom of the cup. On the last hole, I sank a seventy-footer; uphill then down then to the right then left and up again. I let the club do the work, never lifting my head to follow the ball until I heard it rattle dead center in the cylinder.

Anthony shook his head, picking up my ball. "Can I keep this?"

"Not on your life."

"You're getting better, almost too good," he said.

"I've been practicing."

He smiled. We shook hands and vowed to see each other the next year.

I waited for my father near the edges of the eighteenth hole. Unlike me, he played in the last group. I sat for four hours watching golfer after golfer finish up his round. When the sun

sank behind the hole, lighting the sky in a fiery red, my father approached the green, his ball eight feet away from the cup.

"It breaks to the left, Dee," I said, but he placed his finger to his tightly shut lips. He bent into a squat, his knees cracking on descent, and evaluated the putt from another angle. His eyes crinkled together. He walked toward the ball, stopping to move a leaf from the intended line.

Like the swing of a grandfather pendulum, his arms and hands worked together as one, striking it solidly with a soft click. It rolled to the hole, taking its course to the right, then letting the slope of the green guide it back toward the heart of its destination. It slowed down, then the ball hung on the lip of the cup for a second that seemed infinite, before disappearing from sight.

It gurgled down the hole.

"What a pretty sound," his playing partner said. "Good birdie."

My father loved the sound a golf ball makes as it drops into a hole. To him it was like a bird chirping to Wordsworth, or a phone ringing for an awaiting love. He always said, like a Confucius fortune, that when hearing the ball gurgle at the bottom of the cylinder, a golfer could finally breathe.

My father took a deep breath.

"What'd you shoot?" I asked.

"Don't know," my father said.

As the doctor-friend putted for his bogey, my father walked to the cart and ruffled my hair. "What you shoot, Mee Yie?"

"You tell me first."

The evening wind blew through the tree limbs, scattering birds from their resting place.

"I think, eighty-two," he said. "Yes, forty-nine on the front and thirty-three on the back."

"That's a good back nine." I felt my smile stretched to its limit.

"What you shoot?"

"Seventy-six."

He closed his eyes and let out a loud laugh, screechy and high. "What did Tony shoot?"

"Seventy-eight."

Another loud laugh.

And he placed his arm around my shoulder as his friend drove away with the cart. We

walked together toward the clubhouse, leaving the sunset behind us. I smiled like the day I first swung a golf club, loving the moment, not knowing it was the last time I would feel so close to my father.

My parents' fights always made me want to cry, even when I told myself, "I should be used to it by now." Before I entered high school, my father drove me to Skokie, a predominately Jewish suburb of Chicago, after summer tournaments. I considered the trips to Skokie a reward for playing a good round of golf. I'd shoot a seventy-nine or eighty, a respectable score, and afterwards was allowed to visit my best friend at the time. Only later, I realized my visits had nothing to do with my golfing.

My father visited the single mother whose face reminded me of a Chinese porcelain doll: white, shiny, fragile. And while my friend and I lost ourselves in a Nintendo game, my father disappeared upstairs with her and came down only when it was time to leave.

Each time we arrived home, my mother stood by the door, arms crossed, eyes swelled with tears, lips pursed together. She never yielded. Her hands swiped across my father's face and body. Her words flew like the spit from her mouth; they splattered against him. I'd scream for her to stop, not realizing my father was fucking another woman. I could not fathom the thought of my father having an affair, and that I was his excuse for going to Skokie. My mother screamed at him and I heard her words, but I refused to believe.

But the pain I was causing her ate at my conscience. The hurt in her eyes made me stay in my room. I overheard the fights, even when I covered my ears with sweaty hands. "Playboy lau? Chob cee mun lau? I ha!" *What are you, some playboy? You like getting on that woman. You fucker!* These were Thai words my parents never wanted me to learn. I wish I hadn't.

"Please, no more going there. Please, for me," my mother begged of me one day.

And because I loved my mother and began seeing some sort of truth, I stopped visiting Skokie.

I never played weekend tournaments after that. My father never asked why. And I never saw my friend again. The last words I spoke to him were: "Your mom's a slut. Thank you for fucking up my life." I watched him cry and listened to him say "I'm sorry" over and over again.

When my father moved out when I was sixteen, I stopped playing golf in the off season and summer months. His absence from my life diminished my will to play. He was no longer there to grind my nose to the grass and say, "Breathe it. This is your life."

High school added new accomplishments despite my diminished enthusiasm. Like routine, I'd clock in at the first tee, hitting the first shot of the golf meet. Then I'd putt the ball into the hollow cylinder on the last green; it'd gurgle like an ill-repaired work bell, signifying the end of the day. The next afternoon, I did the same.

I shattered almost all of Oak Lawn Community High School's golfing records my freshman year. It wasn't a difficult task, given the golfers that passed through the hallways of OLCHS. My picture hangs on the high school's *Wall of Fame*. When the photographer, a gruff man with a beard in the between stages, told me to do something "golfy," I did—the club was slung over my back and I wore a "Just do me" T-shirt.

My trophies, a barrage of gold and silver swinging men, shadowed my father's lone golfing achievement, which stood in the middle of the Japanese table. Its brilliant gleam disappeared under thick layers of tarnish, and like a little tree in a Sequoia forest, it sparked little attention, withered away from lack of sun. I believe my father felt the same way.

I remember watching Jay Leno on late night TV when my father walked through the door and said, "I have to go."

"OK," I said. "I'll help you pack."

He took very little with him: a picture of me and my mother, a jacket, some clothes, and his golf clubs. With everything packed, he stood by the door, looking at me with wet eyes.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"Cannot tell you."

"Can you give me a phone number?"

"No." With that, he stepped out into the winter's night without a good-bye.

When I teed off on the first hole at Deer Creek during the 1993 Sectionals, not having seen my father for half a year, he stood a good distance away, watching me. I didn't wave. I didn't do anything to acknowledge him. I hooked my ball into the left rough and walked away.

I see my father maybe once a year now. He moved back to Thailand, and his visits brings him back to the States because of business, whatever business he's in—something to do with plastic bags. Occasionally, I get a letter. Or a Christmas card in February, or a birthday card, wishing me "Happy 19th" when I turned twenty. We try though. And I forgive him.

I guess I could say, "It was good while it lasted." Or, "It was too long." Maybe, "It stole a good part of my childhood." But the years have passed and I have made amends. I can flip on the TV and watch Tiger without regret. I can step on the course and breathe the same air from years back. And every time I see my ball fly through the air, a piece of my dream, my father's dream, flies with it, seeking nothing but a small, round cylinder called home. When it drops, I can breathe.