

Motherland

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Etsuko Nagatomi loved all three of her children, but she did not love them all the same. Being a mother had taught her that this kind of emotional injustice was perhaps inevitable.

By midmorning, Etsuko had finished everything she had to get done for Solomon's party and was sitting in her office in the back of the airy, birch-paneled restaurant. She was forty-two years old, a native of Nagano who'd moved to Tokyo following her divorce six years before, and she had maintained a youthful prettiness that she felt was important to being a restaurant owner. She wore her jet-colored hair in a chignon style to set off her lively, egg-shaped face. From afar she could appear stem, but up close her face was animated, and her small, friendly eyes missed nothing. She applied her makeup expertly, having worn rouge and powder since middle school, and the red wool Saint Laurent suit that Solomon's father, Moses, had bought her hung well on her reedy figure.

Though Etsuko would normally have been pleased with herself for being so ahead of schedule, today she wasn't. She continued to stare at the phone message from her high school-aged daughter, Hana, with an unfamiliar Nagano number (maybe a coffee shop or a friend's house since Hana was rarely at home or at school). Calls with Hana could take five minutes or an hour, depending, and Moses was coming to pick her up soon. Her boyfriend of five years was a patient man about most things, but he liked her to be punctual. Etsuko dialed anyway, and Hana picked up on the first ring.

"I've been waiting." Hana's voice was reproving.

"I'm sorry," Etsuko said. "I got the message a few minutes ago. And I can't talk

long." Even though Etsuko was afraid of her fifteen-yearold daughter, she had been trying to sound more firm, the way she was with her staff.

"Where are you?" she asked.

"I'm four months pregnant."

"*Nani?*"

Hana repeated herself, and this time Etsuko waited to speak. In her mind she could see her daughter's large, unblinking eyes. Hana resembled the girls in comic books, with her cute, lollipop head and small, girlish body. She dressed to get attention—short skirts, sheer blouses and high-heeled boots—and accordingly, she received that attention from all kinds of men. It occurred to Etsuko now that this was her *unmei*. Her ex-husband used to dismiss this idea of fate as a lazy explanation for the bad choices people made. But no matter; life had only confirmed her beliefs that there was indeed a pattern to it all. To Etsuko, this had to happen because as a girl she had been no different. When she was seventeen she had been pregnant with Tatsuo, Hana's oldest brother.

Etsuko and Hana remained silent on the line, but the poor phone reception crackled like a campfire.

"I want to come to Tokyo right away," Hana said.

"Why?"

"What do you think?"

Etsuko took a moment to breathe, for she had literally forgotten to take in air.

"Does your father know?"

"Are you stupid?"

"Hana—" Again she tried to sound authoritative, but it had no effect. Hana merely said that she'd take the next train to Tokyo. Then she hung up.

Two years after the divorce, when Hana was eleven, she'd asked if they could talk to each other like peers, and Etsuko had agreed because she was grateful that her

daughter continued to talk to her at all. Also, she agreed because when she'd been a girl she had lied to her mother and father about everything. But Etsuko found that being detached as a mother had its own burdens. She wasn't allowed to ask any prying questions, and if she sounded too concerned (something Hana hated), her daughter hung up the phone and didn't call for weeks.

Etsuko had many regrets about her life in Nagano, but what she was most sorry about was what her reputation had done to her children. Her grown sons still refused to talk to her unless it was absolutely necessary. And she had only worsened things by continuing to see Moses Choi, an ethnic Korean who owned pachinko parlors. Her sister Mari and her mother urged her to end it; they believed that his pinball business, however lucrative, was not respectable. But she couldn't. He had been a good friend to her; he had changed her life. And he was the only man she had never cheated on—something Etsuko had never believed could be possible for herself.

The spring before her thirty-sixth birthday, when she was still married and living in Nagano, Etsuko had seduced another one of her high school boyfriends. She had been having a series of affairs for almost three years with various men from her adolescence. What amazed her was how difficult it was the first time but how effortless it was to have all the others that followed. Married men wanted invitations from married women. It was no trouble to phone a man she had slept with twenty years ago and invite him to her house for lunch when her children were at school.

That spring, she began sleeping with an old boyfriend from her freshman year in high school. He'd grown up into a handsome, married playboy who still had the tendency to talk too much. One afternoon in her tiny Nagano living room, as the playboy was getting dressed to return to his office, he bemoaned the fact that she wouldn't leave her dull husband, who preferred the company of his work colleagues to hers. He laid his head between her small breasts and said, "But I can leave her. Tell me to do it." To this, she said nothing. Etsuko had no intention of leaving Nori and the children. Her complaint about her husband was not that he was boring or that he wasn't home enough. Nori was not a bad person. It was just that she didn't feel like she knew him in any clear sense after nineteen years of marriage, and she doubted that she ever would. Her husband didn't seem to need her except to be a wife in name and a mother to his children. For Nori, this was enough.

There was no acceptable excuse for her behavior. She knew that. But at night, when

Nori sat at the kitchen table to eat the dinner that had gotten cold because he'd come home late once again from another company gathering, she waited for something to come, some insight, some feeling. As she watched him with his eyes locked to his rice bowl, she wanted to shake him because in all her life, she had never expected this kind of loneliness. Around that time, someone had handed her a pamphlet as she came out of the grocery store. On the flimsy cover, a middle-aged housewife was pictured as half skeleton and half flesh. On the bottom of the page it said, "Every day you are closer to your death. You are half dead already. Where does your identity come from?" She tossed the pamphlet away almost as soon as she got it, but the picture stayed with her for a long while.

The last time she saw the playboy, he gave her a sheaf of poems that he had written for her. As he left through the kitchen door, he confessed that he loved her only. His eyes pooled with tears as he told her that she was his heart. For the rest of the day, she ignored the housework and read and reread the maudlin and erotic poems. She couldn't say if they were good or not, but she was pleased by them (she marveled at the effort they must have taken) and reasoned that in his own showy way, he did love her. This one affair had given her what she had wanted from all the others—an assurance that what she had handed out in her youth had not died.

That night, when her family was sleeping, Etsuko soaked in the wooden tub and glowed in what felt to her like a victory. After her bath, she dressed in her blue-and-white *yukata* and headed toward her bedroom, where her innocent husband was snoring gently. One thing seemed clear: If she needed all the men who had ever loved her to continue loving her, she would always be divided. She would always cheat, and she'd never be a good person. It dawned on her then that being a good person was something she had not given up on completely after all. In the morning, she told the playboy not to call anymore, and he didn't. He just moved on to the next pretty housewife in town.

But a few months later, Nori found the poems that she should have destroyed, and he beat her for the first time in their marriage. Her sons tried to stop him, and Hana, just nine years old then, screamed and screamed. That evening Nori threw her out, and she made her way to her sister's house. Later, the lawyer said it would be pointless for her to try to get custody of the children since she had no job and no skills. He coughed in what seemed like politeness or discomfort and said it would be

pointless also because of what she had done. Etsuko nodded and decided to give up her children, thinking that she would not trouble them anymore. Then, following a want ad for a restaurant hostess, Etsuko moved to Tokyo, where she knew no one.

Etsuko wanted to believe that being with Moses was changing her. That she was sexually faithful to him she took as proof. She had once tried to explain this to her sister, and Mari had replied, "A snake that sheds its skin is still a snake." And her mother, on hearing that Moses wanted to marry her, said, "Haven't you done enough to your children?"

She came to believe that the penalties incurred for the mistakes you made had to be paid out in full to the members of your family. But she didn't believe that she could ever discharge these sums.

At noon, Moses came to get her. They were going to pick up Solomon at his school to take him to the Immigration Control Bureau. The government required all Koreans born in Japan after 1952 to report to the Bureau on their fourteenth birthday to request permission to stay in Japan for four more years. This practice was required every four years until the Korean died or left Japan for good. Moses had told her all of this a week before, and he had also asked her then to go with them.

As soon as she got in the car, Moses reminded her to put on her seat belt. Ever since his wife had been killed in a car accident when Solomon was four years old, Moses had only bought fancy German cars with advanced safety features. His chauffeur, Yamamoto-san, was even a former driving instructor. His gray Mercedes was built like a truncated submarine; inside, the thick steel plate and tinted windows enveloped them, and it felt as if they were traveling beneath dark, quiet waters.

He asked if everything for the party was ready, and Etsuko said yes. She was still thinking about Hana. Before she'd left, she had phoned the doctor, and the procedure was scheduled for the morning after next.

Moses wasn't very good-looking, but his face had strength to it, and his gaze was direct. She had never been with anyone Korean before, and she hadn't known many

Koreans before him, but she imagined that his squared-off facial features were traditionally Kankoku-his wide jawbone, straight white teeth, thick black hair and the shallowset, narrow, smiling eyes. He had a lean, slack body that reminded her of metal. When he made love to her, he was serious, almost as if he was angry, and she found that this gave her intense pleasure. His physical movements were deliberate and forceful, and she wanted to surrender to them. Whenever she read about something or someone Korean, she wondered what it would be like to go to North Korea, where his parents came from. Would people there be like him somehow?

She noticed that Moses was holding a wrapped present the size of a block of tofu. He handed it to her, and she tried to look happy. Beneath the silver foil paper was a box from the jewelry store where Moses bought all her gifts. Inside it was a gold-and-diamond watch nestled in dark red velvet.

"It's a mistress watch," he said. When she looked surprised, he said, "I bought it yesterday, and I showed it to Kuboda-san—" Kuboda was Moses' new manager at Hiro.

She frowned at him, still not understanding his meaning.

"He said these fancy watches are what you give to your mistress because they cost the same as a diamond ring, but you can't give a ring to your mistress since you're already married." He started to laugh.

For the first time since she'd gotten into the car, she checked to see if the glass partition separating them from the driver was closed all the way; it was. Her skin flushed with heat.

"Make him stop the car."

"What's the matter?" Moses took her hand, and she pulled it away. She wanted to say that she wasn't his mistress, but instead she burst into tears.

"Why are you crying? Every year for five years, I bring you a diamond ring. Each one bigger than the one before it, and you say no to me. And I go back to the jeweler, and he and I have to get drunk. Nothing has changed for me," he sighed. "You're the one who says no. Says no to the *Kankoku-jin* gangster."

"You're not a gangster."

"I am *Kankoku*."

"You know that doesn't matter to me. It's my family."

Moses looked out the window, and when he spotted his son, he signaled to him with a quick wave.

Etsuko straightened her posture. The car stopped, and Solomon got in the front passenger seat. The glass partition opened, and he said hello. Etsuko reached over to straighten the rumpled collar of his white dress shirt, which he let her do. He said to her, "*Arigato* very much," one of the jokes they made about mixing up words in different languages. Then he closed the partition so he could talk with Yamamoto-san about the previous night's Yokult Swallows game. They were loyal fans of the perennially losing baseball team.

Moses took her wrist and clasped the watch on it. "You're a funny woman. I bought you a gift. Just say thanks. I never meant that you were a—"

The bridge of her nose hurt, and she thought she would start crying again.

"Hana called. She's coming tonight."

"To the party?" He looked surprised; then he nodded like he understood. "Yes. To see Hiromi-san perform. She likes him?"

It had never crossed her mind to invite her daughter to Solomon's birthday party. Her daughter and Moses' son were only a year apart, but they'd never met one another. Etsuko went to Nagano twice yearly to see her children. They did not come to Tokyo.

"Uhtmn," she replied. Etsuko had no idea if Hana liked music. As a child, she had not been the kind who sang or danced. Etsuko stared at the back of the driver's gray-streaked head. He nodded slowly when Solomon talked, and their quiet gestures appeared intimate to her. She wished she had something like baseball that she could talk about with her daughter—a common subject they could visit without subtext or judgment.

Etsuko told Moses that Hana had an appointment with a doctor. When he asked if she was sick, Etsuko shook her head no.

What could she say? This was how life had turned out. Her oldest son, Tatsuo, was twenty-five years old, and it was taking him eight years to graduate from a fourth-rate college. Her second son, Taro, a withdrawn nineteen-year-old, having failed all his college entrance exams, had taken a position as a ticket collector at a movie theater. She had no right to expect her children to hold the aspirations of other middle-class people—to graduate from Tokyo University, to get a job at the Industrial Bank of Japan, to marry into a nice family. She had no right to expect them to make her proud.

Etsuko unclasped the watch and put it back in the red leather box. She laid the box in the space between herself and Moses on the white, starched doily covering the black leather seats. He handed it back to her.

"It's not a ring." His voice was firm. "Save me a trip to the jeweler. Do that for me."

Etsuko held the box in her hands and wondered how they'd stayed together five years, with him not giving up and her not giving in.

The Immigration Control Bureau was a giant gray box with an obscure sign. The first clerk they saw was a tall man with a narrow face and a shock of black hair buzzed off at the sides. He stared at Etsuko shamelessly, his eyes darting across her breasts, hips and jeweled fingers. She noticed then how overdressed she looked compared to Moses and Solomon, who wore button-down shirts, dark slacks and black dress shoes. They looked like the gentle Mormon missionaries who used to glide through Nagano on their bicycles when she was a girl.

"Your name . . ." The clerk squinted his eyes at the form Solomon was filling out. "Solomon. What kind of name is that?"

"It's from the Bible. My grandfather was a minister, and he named me. Solomon was a king in the Old Testament. A man of great wisdom." Solomon smiled at the clerk as if he was sharing a secret. He was proud of the things he remembered about his Korean grandparents, who had come to Japan as laborers from the north country

before the war and then stayed on, since there was little for them to return to.

"Great wisdom? A king?" The clerk snorted. "Koreans don't have kings anymore."

"What did you say?" Etsuko asked. His snotty tone reminded her of all the temperamental cooks she had fired.

Quickly, Moses put his hand on her arm and pulled her back.

She looked at Moses. His temper was far worse than hers. Once, when a restaurant guest had tried to make her sit with him, Moses, who happened to be there that night, walked over, picked him up bodily and threw him outside the restaurant, breaking several of the man's ribs. She expected no less of a reaction now, but Moses just glanced at the form.

"Sir," Moses said, "we're in a hurry to get back home." He paused and folded his hands behind him. "Thank you very much for understanding." There wasn't a trace of anger in Moses' voice or facial expression.

Solomon turned to Etsuko, and she flashed him a warning look.

The clerk pointed to the back of the room and told Moses and Etsuko to sit. In the long, rectangular room, shaped like a train car, with bankteller windows running parallel alongside the opposite walls, half a dozen people sat on benches, reading their newspapers or *manga*. Etsuko studied their faces, wondering if they were Korean or not. She couldn't be sure. From their seats, Etsuko and Moses could see Solomon talking to the clerk, but they couldn't hear anything.

Moses asked if she wanted a can of tea from the vending machine. She nodded yes; her neck felt stiff, and she still wanted to slap the clerk's face.

"You must have known—" She paused. "You must have warned him. I mean, you told him that today would not be so easy? Nee?" She didn't mean to be critical, but after the words came from her mouth, they sounded like criticism, and she was sorry.

"No." He opened and closed his fists rhythmically. "I came here once with my

mother to fix my registration papers. When I was a boy. And there was a nice clerk. So I asked you to come. I thought—" He exhaled through his nostrils. "It was stupid. Stupid to wish for kindness."

"No. You couldn't have warned him. I shouldn't have said it like that."

"It is hopeless, *nee*? I cannot change his fate. He is my son, and he is Korean. He has to get those papers, and he has to follow all the steps of the law perfectly." He smiled, but the smile was unfamiliar to her, as if it were denying a bitter thing. "Once a clerk told me that I was merely a guest in this country."

"That's crazy. You and Solomon were born here."

"But the clerk was right. And this is something Solomon has to understand. We can always be deported. We have no motherland."

Slowly, Moses walked away in the direction of the vending machines. Etsuko lowered her shoulders and slouched in her seat. She didn't know what else to say.

Half an hour later, Solomon returned to them. Next he had his photograph taken, and after that he had to go to another room to get fingerprinted. Then they could go home. The last clerk was a woman; she was plump, and her light-green uniform shirt flattened her large breasts. She took Solomon's thumb and index finger and with gentleness dipped them into inkpots. Solomon depressed his fingers onto a white card as if he were a child painting. Moses looked away and sighed audibly. The clerk smiled at the boy and told him to pick up the registration card at the next room. Moses mumbled, "Let's get your dog tags."

Solomon turned to face his father. "Hmm?"

"It's what we dogs must have," Moses said.

The clerk looked furious. "Sir, the fingerprints and registration cards are necessary for the government's records. There's no need to feel insulted."

"But you don't make your children get fingerprinted on their birthday, do you?" Etsuko said.

The clerk's neck reddened. "My son is dead."

Etsuko tried not to feel anything for the woman. But she knew what it was like to lose your children-it was like you had failed, or worse, like you were cursed and didn't deserve any happiness.

"Koreans do lots of good for this country," Etsuko said.

The clerk nodded. "You Koreans always tell me that."

Solomon blurted out, "She's not Korean."

Etsuko touched his arm, and the three of them walked out of the room. She wanted to climb out of this gray box and see the light of outdoors again. She longed for the mountains of Nagano. And though she had never done so in her childhood, she wanted to walk in the cold, snowy forests, beneath the flanks of the dark trees. There was so much insult and injury in life, and she felt that she had no choice but to collect what was hers. But now she wished she could take Solomon's shame too and add it to her pile, even though she was already overwhelmed.

Hana was waiting for her at the restaurant. She was sitting at the table near the bar, sipping a Coke that one of the waitresses had gotten for her. Her hair was no longer permed. Instead it was straight and its natural color, a reddish black. It was cut in one even length and splayed across her thin shoulders. She wore a white cotton blouse, neatly ironed, a dark, pleated skirt coming to her knees, gray wool stockings and flat, schoolgirl shoes. She hadn't dressed this way since she was in primary school. Her stomach was flat, but her bud-like breasts looked fuller; otherwise, there was no way of knowing that she was pregnant.

The dining room was all set up for the party. White linen cloths covered a dozen round tables, and in the middle of each stood a tall floral arrangement. A busboy stood at the edge of the room, blowing up one blue balloon after another with a helium tank. He let them all float up to the ceiling.

Etsuko was happy to see her daughter appear so modest, and she nearly forgot the reason for her visit. She introduced Solomon to Hana, and they greeted each other

politely. But their mutual curiosity was evident. Hana pointed to the balloons hiding the ceiling, and before Etsuko had a chance, Solomon replied quickly, "It's my birthday. Why don't you come to the party? There's going to be dinner here, and then we're going to a disco." Without even a glance toward her mother, Hana answered, "If you wish."

Etsuko wanted Solomon to go to his house. She hadn't wanted him to come here, but he had insisted on meeting her daughter. Etsuko needed to go to the bathroom, but she was reluctant to leave them alone together; she couldn't say why exactly. Later, when she returned from the bathroom, she saw them whispering like a pair of young lovers unconcerned with their dinner. Etsuko checked her watch and pushed Solomon to get home. On his way out he said, "Hey, I'll see you at the party." And Hana smiled like a courtesan and waved to him the enticing gesture of a young woman who understood her moves.

"Why did you make him go?" Hana snapped. "I was having fun."

"Because he has to get dressed."

"I looked in them." Hana glanced at the bags near the entrance. A hundred party bags, three long rows, filled with tapes, new Sony Walkman cassette players, imported teen magazines and boxed chocolates, waited for Yamamoto-san to take them to the disco, where they'd be handed out after the party ended. "I wish my dad was a *yakuza*," Hana said.

"Hana—" Etsuko looked around to see if anyone could hear them.

"Your boyfriend's son doesn't seem like a brat. Yet." Hana smiled.

"He doesn't have it easy."

"Not easy? American private schools, millions in the bank, a chauffeur-driven Mercedes. Get some perspective, Mother."

"Today, on his birthday, he had to go to the Immigration Control Bureau to request permission to stay in Japan for another four years. If he's denied he could be deported."

"That's not going to happen." Hana looked certain of this.

"What do you know about it? He was born in this country too, and he had to be fingerprinted today like he was criminal. He's just a child."

"We're all criminals, Mother." Hana's carbon-colored eyes looked hard and ancient. "No one is innocent here."

Etsuko turned away. "Why must you be so hard-hearted?"

The steady line of Hana's lips crumpled. "How can you say that? I'm the only one who still talks to you."

"You're the only one who still needs to punish me. So go ahead. But I've said I'm sorry enough times." Etsuko tried to control her voice, but she knew the waitresses heard everything. And suddenly it didn't matter anymore.

"Listen. I made the appointment," Etsuko said.

Hana looked up.

"The day after tomorrow we'll take care of your problem. And then we're even." Etsuko looked straight at her daughter's pale face. "You shouldn't be a mother. You have no idea how hard it is to have children. You're never forgiven for your mistakes."

Hana covered her *manga* face with her hands and began to cry. A low moan grew into a shrill crying that was frightening to hear.

Etsuko moved toward her daughter. She didn't know if she should touch her or say something. It was possible that Hana might push her away. She put her hand on her daughter's head. Hana's brow felt warm, and her hair was satiny. At the touch, Hana winced, but Etsuko didn't immediately pull her hand back.

When Etsuko had lived in the cramped, three-bedroom house in Nagano, with its flat roof and leaky kitchen, certain labors had sustained her. At this moment, with a kind of pinprick pain, Etsuko recalled watching her sons devour paper-lined plates piled high with the shrimp that she had fried for dinner. In the middle of July it was worth it to stand in front of a hot tempura pan dropping battered shrimp into

bubbling peanut oil, because to her sons, Etsuko's shrimp was better than candy. And it came to her like a tall and dark wave how much she'd loved combing Hana's freshly washed hair when her cheeks were still pink from the steamy bath water.

"I know you didn't want us. My brothers told me, and I told them they were wrong even though I knew they weren't. But I clung to you because I wasn't going to let you just leave what you started. How can you tell me how hard it is to have children? You haven't tried to be a mother. What right do you have? What makes you a mother?"

Etsuko stood silent, utterly transfixed by the realization that the absolute worst that she saw in herself was actually how her children saw her too.

"But ... how can you think that I didn't want the three of you?" Etsuko recollected all the letters she'd written, the gifts and money she'd sent, which the boys had returned. And worse, the phone calls to the house to check on them when her husband wouldn't say anything beyond *moshi-moshi*, then hand the phone to Hana because she was the only one who would take the receiver. Etsuko wanted to justify herself, her attempts, and to offer proof. Being a mother was what defined her more than any other thing—more than her roles of daughter, wife, divorced woman, girlfriend, restaurant owner. She hadn't done it well, but it was who she was, and it was what had changed her inside. From the moment Tatsuo was born, she had been filled with grief and selfdoubt because she was never good enough. Yet still it had been worthwhile, she believed, even though she had failed, because being a mother was something eternal; life wouldn't end with her death.

Etsuko blurted out, "But I didn't marry Moses. I don't even live with him. So I wouldn't make things worse for you and your brothers."

Hana tilted her head back slightly and chortled.

"Am I supposed to thank you for this great sacrifice? So you didn't marry a Korean gangster, and you want me to congratulate you for this? You didn't marry him because you don't want to suffer. You're the most selfish person I know. If you want to sleep with him and take his money to set up a fancy place like this and not marry him, that's your choice. Not mine." Hana dried her face with her shirtsleeve.

"Mother, you don't want to be judged. That's why you haven't married him. That's

why you left Nagano to hide out in the big city. You think you're such an outcast and a rebel, but you're not. You left because you're afraid, and you slept with all those men because you were weak. Don't tell me about sacrifices because I don't believe in such nonsense."

Hana started to cry again, as if saying all this hadn't given her any satisfaction.

Etsuko sat down in the nearest chair. What her daughter said was true. She was afraid of what the people in Nagano thought and what they continued to say. If she married someone like Moses, it would only prove to them that no decent Japanese man would touch a woman like her. She would be called a *yakuza* wife. If she married him, she'd no longer be considered the tasteful owner of a successful restaurant in the best part of Tokyo—an image she only half believed in herself. She wondered what Moses thought of her. He must believe that she was a better person than she actually was. But her daughter wasn't fooled.

Etsuko picked up Hana's travel bag next to her chair and nudged her daughter to stand up so she could take her home.

Her apartment was in a luxury Homat building down the street. Halfway there, Hana had said she didn't want to go to the party anymore. She wanted to be left alone so she could sleep until the morning. Etsuko unlocked the deadbolt to her apartment and led Hana to her bedroom. She would sleep on the sofa that night.

Hana lay across the futon, and Etsuko pulled a light comforter over her thin young body and turned out the light. Hana curled herself into a C; her eyes were still open, and she said nothing. Etsuko didn't want to leave her. Despite everything, it struck her that what she was feeling was a kind of contentedness that they were together again. And in an awkward way, she had started to see that Hana had come to her for care. It made her feel thankful, like she was getting another turn. She sat down on the edge of the bed and stroked her daughter's hair again.

"You have this smell," Hana said, "I used to think it was your perfume. Joy, *nee*?"

"I still wear that."

"I know," Hana said, and Etsuko resisted the urge to sniff her own wrists.

"It's not just the perfume, though, it's all the other creams and things that you wear, and it makes up this smell. I used to walk around department stores wondering what it was. The smell of *Ma-ma*."

Etsuko wanted to say so many things, but above all that she would try not to make any more mistakes. "Hanako—"

"I want to go to sleep now. Go to the party. Leave me alone." Hana's voice was flat but more tender this time.

Etsuko offered to stay, but Hana waved her away. Etsuko mentioned then that her schedule was open the next day. Maybe they could go and buy a bed and a dresser. She kept talking, wanting to be interrupted. "Then you can always come back and visit me. I can make up a room for you," Etsuko said. Hana sighed, but her expression was blank. Etsuko couldn't tell what her daughter wanted. "I'm not saying you have to go. Especially after—" Etsuko put her fingertips across her lips, then quickly removed them. "You can stay. Start school here even."

Hana shifted her head on her pillow and inhaled, still saying nothing.

"I can call your father. To ask."

Hana pulled the blanket up to her chin. "If you want." Then she closed her eyes to sleep.

In the living room Etsuko sat on the sofa. When she had been a young mother of three little children, there used to be one time in her day when she'd felt a kind of peace, and that was always after her children went to bed for the night. She longed now to see her sons as they were back then: their legs chubby and white, their mushroom haircuts misshapen because they could never sit still at the barber. She wished she could take back the times she had scolded her children just because she was tired. She would let them stay in their bath a little longer, read them one more story before going to bed or fix them another plate of shrimp.

The children invited to Solomon's party were the sons and daughters of diplomats,

bankers and other wealthy expatriates. Everyone spoke English rather than Japanese. Moses had chosen this prestigious international school in Tokyo because he liked Americans. He had specific ambitions for his son: Solomon should speak perfect English as well as perfect Japanese; he should grow up with other young upper-class people; and, ultimately, he should work for an American company in Tokyo or preferably New York, a city Moses had never been to but imagined as a place where everyone was given a fair shot. He used to say half jokingly that his son would be an "international man of the world."

A line of black limousines snaked along the street. As the children left, they stopped Moses and Etsuko to thank them for the fine dinner they'd eaten. Neither Moses nor Etsuko spoke very good English, so they nodded and smiled. Moses lined up the children in front of the restaurant. He ordered, "Ladies first," a saying he had picked up from American movies. The girls trooped into the cars in sixes and sped away. Then the boys followed. Solomon rode in the last car with his best friends: Nigel, the son of an English banker, and Mohandas, the son of an Indian ambassador.

The disco was dimly lit and glamorous. From the high ceiling twenty or so mirrored balls hung at different heights, so the large room was flooded with tiny panes of light that flashed and swayed with the movement of the balls. They had the effect of making anyone who walked across the floor shimmer like a fish underwater. After everyone sat down, the manager, a handsome Filipino man, stood on the stage behind the microphone. He had a beautiful, round voice.

"Welcome to Ringo's." He paused for the children's cheers. "For Solomon's birthday fiesta, Ringo's presents the hottest star in Japan—one day the world: Ken Hiromi!"

The children didn't seem to believe him. The curtain rose to reveal the seven-piece rock band; then the singer emerged from the back. Hiromi looked utterly normal, almost disappointingly so. He dressed like a businessman who'd forgotten his necktie. He wore thick-framed eyeglasses just like the ones on his album cover, and his hair was neatly combed. He couldn't have been more than thirty.

Solomon kept shaking his head, looking more bewildered than anything. The band was loud, and the kids danced wildly. When the long set was over, Ichiro, the cook,

wheeled an ice-cream cake shaped like a baseball diamond toward Solomon. A girl shouted, "Don't forget to make a wish, baby!"

In one huff, Solomon blew out the sparklers that topped the cake. Etsuko handed him the knife so he could cut the first slice. A spotlight shone on him as he poised the long, serrated blade over the cake. She asked him, "Do you want help?"

He put both hands on the handle. "I think—I got it," he said.

That's when she noticed the ink under his nails. He'd washed off most of it, but a shadow of the stain remained on his fingertips. "Oh," she said.

Solomon looked up from what he was doing;

Etsuko remained silent, and she guided his arm lightly to return him to his task. After the first slice, Solomon handed the knife to her. Waiters passed out the cake, and Hiromi, who was sitting by himself, accepted a piece. Seeing this, Moses pulled from his jacket a fat blue envelope filled with yen notes and told Solomon to give it to Hiromisan. The singer motioned to Solomon to sit down. In this light, Etsuko thought, no one would notice the ink.

The party was almost over, and Etsuko felt pleasantly exhausted—the way she did after the restaurant closed every night. She found Moses sitting in a booth drinking champagne by himself, and she sat down beside him. Moses refilled his glass and handed it to her; she drank it in two unladylike gulps. He told her that she had done a good job, and Etsuko shook her head. "*Ie*."

"I think she would have been pleased," Etsuko said without thinking.

Moses looked puzzled. A moment later, he nodded. "Yes. She would have been so happy for him."

"What was she like?" She shifted her body to see his face. Little squares of light danced across his sharp features.

"I've told you before. She was a nice lady. Like you." He had never said any more than that about his wife.

"No. Tell me something specific about her." She wanted to know how they were different, not how they were the same. What would be the point of her being there with him if she was the same as someone else?

"Why? She's dead." He looked hurt after saying this, as if it was new to him. Moses watched Solomon, who'd gotten up from Hiromi's table and was now dancing with a tall Chinese girl. Solomon's forehead glistened with sweat as he followed the girl's elegant moves. Etsuko stared into her empty champagne glass.

"She wanted to name him Sejong," Moses said, "but it's tradition for the husband's father to name the grandson." He paused. "Se -jong. He was a king too. He invented the Korean alphabet." Moses laughed. "Maybe that's why my father picked a king from the Bible. To make her happy."

"Why are you laughing?" she asked.

"Because she was so proud of him. Her son. She wanted to give him the name of a king. She was like my father. So proud of everything-of being Korean, of my business and of her family. It was nice, I guess. But why?" He sounded wistful and full of wonder, neither bitter nor sad. "What do we have to be so proud of?"

"It's good to be proud of your children." She smoothed down her skirt. When her children had been born, what she had felt all three times was amazement at their physical perfection. All three times, she marveled at their miniature human form and their good health. But not once did she consider a name taken from history-the name of a king.

"One of those girls came up to me today and said Solomon looked like his mother." He pointed to a cluster of girls in the corner of the room. They wore bandeau tops and jersey skirts clinging to their thin hips.

"How could she know that?" she asked.

"She meant you."

"Oh," she nodded. "I wish I was his mother."

"No. You don't." Moses said this calmly, and she felt like she deserved that.

"You must think I'm no better than that woman clerk this afternoon," she said.

Moses shook his head as if she'd hurt him and put his hand over hers.

What had she been so proud of anyway? Her father had sold life insurance to isolated housewives, and Moses created places where grown men and women could play pinball and win tickets for diapers and soap. Both men had made money from chance and fear and loneliness.

Etsuko took off her watch and put it in front of him. "I want a ring." Moses nodded, but he didn't look at her. He patted her hand and said they should talk about it later. She had expected from him a great show of happiness, even though she knew that wasn't his way. This time, she decided, she would wait. Etsuko rose from the table and went to hand out the party bags. It was already midnight, and the children had to get home.

Solomon claimed that he was hungry. The three of them returned to her restaurant. The place was clean again and looked open for business. Etsuko asked Solomon what he wanted to eat. "A little bit of everything," he said. He looked so happy, and it pleased her to see him like this. She could count on him to be a happy person. Maybe that was what Solomon was for her and Moses.

At the edge of the dining room, Moses sat down at a table and opened his evening-edition newspaper. He looked like a middle-aged man waiting calmly for his train so he could get home. Etsuko headed for the kitchen, with Solomon following her.

She put down three plates on the prep counter. From the refrigerator, she pulled out the tray of fried chicken and the bowl of potato salad dishes that Ichiro had made following an American cookbook.

"Why didn't Hana come?" Solomon asked. "Is she sick?"

"No." It was the second time that someone had asked her this, and she didn't like to lie to a direct question.

"She's pretty, you know." He checked to see her reaction.

"Too pretty. That's her problem." Her own mother had once said this about her when a family friend had complimented Etsuko. She tried to change the subject. "Did you have fun tonight?"

"Yeah. I still can't believe it. Hiromi-san talked to me."

"What did he say?" She put two pieces of chicken on Moses' and Solomon's plates and one on hers.

"Not much. He said his best friends are Korean. And he told me to be good to my parents." Solomon looked away from her after he said this. He was trying to tell her that he hadn't denied her as his mother, and though this should have been a nice thing, it only made her feel more anxious.

"Your father said your mother was proud of you. From the moment you were born."

Solomon said nothing.

She didn't think that he needed a mother anymore; he was already grown up, and he was doing better than most kids she knew who had mothers who were alive. But he was staring at her, and she could see that he still wanted a mother, even though he was almost a young man.

"Come to the sink. Hold out your hands."

"A present?" he joked, then he opened his palms to her.

She put his hands over the sink and turned on the faucet. "There's still ink here."

The boy asked her, "Can they make me leave?"

"Everything went okay today," she replied and continued to scrub the pads of his fingers.

"Is she pregnant? She told me she came to Tokyo to get rid of her little problem." Solomon seemed to sense that she wouldn't say anything more.

"Nigel got his girlfriend pregnant, and she had to get an abortion."

"Your friend?" She thought of the blond-haired boy who played Atari with him. He

was only a year older than Solomon.

"My children hate me," she said. She had never admitted this to anyone for fear of sounding self-pitying.

"I hated my mother too. For dying." Solomon picked at the ink beneath his fingernails. "Your kids hate you because you're gone." Solomon's face grew serious and less boyish. "They can't help it."

Etsuko bit the inside of her lower lip. She could feel the small muscles inside her mouth, and she stopped herself from drawing blood. She was afraid to look at his face, and though she had tried to restrain herself, she burst into tears.

"Why? Why are you crying?"

Solomon's eyes filled up, and Etsuko looked at the boy in front of her. He had grown so much in these past five years. She looked below his chin and saw how supple and graceful his neck was, his Adam's apple only slightly protruding.

She inhaled to calm her breathing. "When Hana was born, the nurses put her footprints on a card. They washed the ink off, but not very well, so when I went home I had to get it off. I don't think she could see anything really, because she was just born, but I felt like she was looking at me because I was hurting her, and she just cried and cried—"

"Etsuko-*chan*, Hana will be okay. Nigel's girlfriend is fine. They might get married after college."

"No, no. It's not that. I'm just so sorry. That you might have thought that I didn't want to be your mother." She clutched her stomach, and again she tried to regulate her breath. "I've hurt so many people. And you are such a good boy, Solomon. I wish I could take credit for you."

His dark, straight hair clung to the sides of his face, and he didn't brush it away. He smiled at her, but his eyes were strained with worry.

"But I was born today, wasn't I? That's what a birthday's supposed to mean—not parties, not famous singers or dancing with pretty girls. I was born today, and isn't it funny how no one gets to remember that moment and who was there? It's all what's

told to you. You're here now. You are mother to me."

Etsuko covered her mouth with her open palm and let his words go through her. Somewhere after being sorry there had to be another day, and after a trial there could even be some good in the judgment. At last, Etsuko shut off the water and put down the swollen, yellow sponge in the sink. The curved brass spout let go its last few drops, and the kitchen grew silent. Etsuko reached over to hold her child on his birthday.

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