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*A RIFLE, A ROSE*

The sun of June licks Dae's toes with its hot tongue, but it is a nice tongue, like a friendly dragon's, not a mean daggery tongue like a shepherd from Germany dog's. Lying as close as a cot-mate beside her is Miss Love, Dae's camp counselor, who is the most beautiful person Dae has ever seen and the most wonderful American she's met in her ten American months. Miss Love and Dae are reclining in one-piece bathing costumes on the grass by the edge of a large lake in one of the northernmost districts in Indiana province. The bottoms of Dae's legs are flat against the soft ground and tickled by the harmless little swords of grass, which tickle also her elbows and the lower parts of her arms, which bear some weight so she can watch her new friends play in the shallows, or at least the top halves of her friends, because the legs and waists of them are underwater and so, invisible. Mrs. Dunkel, another counselor of Dae's, has brought a big watermelon to the dock, a big watermelon and a stick of butter, although Dae thinks it looks more like a huge square finger than a stick, like God's finger, but she would rather think she were eating a stick than a finger. The shallows are here called the crib, a rectangle of water incarcerated on three sides by the dock and on the other side by a concrete wall that slopes from the land into the water and looks like the battlement on a coastal fortress. The angle Dae's body is making with the warm ground would be named by her textbooks *oblique*. Mrs. Dunkel is lathering butter on the watermelon as though it were a naked pregnant belly she was protecting from the sunburn by using the Banana Boat sunscreen. Some part of Dae thinks this is a waste, since butter is so delicious and could sustain a body for so long, but she is in America now, and she fears the voice saying this to herself is a miser's voice, and misers reap the pittances they sow. If it were a real pregnant belly, Dae would feel shame on behalf of a woman who would reveal that part of herself to the eyes of the world.

Near Dae's feet, lapping lazily against the concrete wall, the lake's water's edge is frothy, like the cap of a malted milkshake. The Banana Boat is what Miss Love uses, and Dae too. While Dae watches her new friends make the sounds like a flock of happy meadowlarks in the lake, she rolls herself so only one arm's elbow touches the ground, and then the other arm's hand pats the slim stomach of Miss Love as though it were the head of a child.

There is an English word for the side of a face which Dae can't remember, and at rest Miss Love's is queenly like something from a very old European coin, but when her face turns so you can see all of it, it becomes a white heart pulsing toward you even when it isn't moving at all. Miss Love says: "Hello sugarplum," then puts her hand on Dae's

tummy before sprinting her fingers up and down Dae's ribs. Dae squeals.

When Miss Love presented herself to Dae for the first time two days ago, in the bare patch of dusty dirt outside their cabin, Dae heard her say *I miss love*, and seeing the tall magnificent American woman bending as low as she could, for kindness, to show how she was not really above Dae, and then say something so sad and intimate at their first handshake encounter, for a moment it was like a bullet through the joy of these American days of Dae's—if someone like her counselor lacked for love, what hope could Dae have? Later Miss Love dissipated her confusion, but thinking of that instant now as she huddles into a fetal knot to defend herself from Miss Love's tickling, still not dissipating altogether is the feeling she was not wholly wrong ...

Now Dae understands the butter and the watermelon: Mrs. Dunkel and other of the sixth-graders are in the water in a circle trying to pass the big belly of melon from one to the next, but it's heavy and butter-slick and slips through arms and into the water with fat splashes. Dae remembers the American saying "harder than tackling a greased hog."

The northeast corner of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea that was once home for Dae she remembers for its cold wetness, its shaggy pines heavy with rain, the weeks and months when clouds kidnapped the sun. The waters there were the Sea of Japan, black and growling, and the icy streams of snowmelt that tumbled down from the mountains, eager to devour a careless lamb or child. But the lake here in this district of Indiana is still, expectant, the way she has always imagined the Sea of Galilee to be, and every few minutes she likes to scan the brown-blueness beyond, half-hoping to see a single-mast boat with thirteen men in wind-whipped robes. Of course, in Korea, there were the kidnappings far more real than the sun's.

Dae does not know what a sugarplum is, but she imagines a treat hot to the touch and sweet and light and hot to the tongue, not like American food, which is bland and greasy and for the first months Dae was in America settled in her stomach like a poisoned rock and often made her ill. But American food is ample, and for that Dae thanks the Lord every day.

By the board for diving is the lifeguard Mr. Lemieux, clutching a rescue tube, which looks like a giant orange French fry. His hair twists together into coils as tight as mousetrap springs and as dark as wet earth. Miss Love's curls are just as dense, but are far longer and of the color of rich wood flecked with precious metals. Dae's hair puts up not the slightest resistance to gravity.

A smattering of freckles upon Miss Love's left cheek is a daytime constellation, the dark on light instead of the light on dark, and Dae's eyes trace connections to discover what it is—a rifle, a rose—but the constellation explodes as if some of its members were shooting stars when Miss Love laughs at the watermelon slipping through Mrs. Dunkel's arms and spitting up a lily of water that drenches the lenses of her glasses as though they were windshields in a storm. Some freckle-stars disappear altogether into Miss Love's dimples, like signals of sun-deaths light-years away. When Dae's father was still alive and they lived together in Korea and the night sky was clear, sometimes they would

climb a hill near their house and he would kneel and the side of his finger would kiss the side of Dae's finger and the pair would waltz from star to star until they outlined the constellation, the Bear or the Hunter or the Harp. It makes Dae happy and sad at the same time that she can see them in the American night too.

"Miss Love?" Dae asks after rolling over to her back, making their bodies once again an equal sign under the sun.

"Yeah kiddo?"

"Have you the spouse?"

After a moment's blankness, Miss Love's eyes widen, then narrow. "The position has not yet been filled. You know someone who wants to write out an application?"

Dae does not understand. "There is application?"

"I'm just kidding. But who needs a boyfriend when I have all of you?" Miss Love says, turning her wrist at the circle of watermelon-tossers, at Dae last of all.

"Do you not want the family?"

"Families are for old people." When Miss Love jokes, her eyelids disappear and her lips bud into a baby rose. She jokes.

"Can you not be a child-bearer?"

Miss Love smiles. "I can't say I've ever tried."

"I will have five children. Three will be boys and two will be girls and their names will be Sarah, Rebecca, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Orville."

Miss Love is smiling out of one side of her mouth. "Orville, huh? Like Orville Wright the airplane man?"

"No. Like Orville Redenbacher the popcorn man." Dae likes to make Miss Love laugh, and she does now, a long soprano trill that sounds like a flute. The laugh is so hard it brings the blood to Miss Love's cheeks and squeezes her eyes so tight they leak tears. Sometimes Dae's father would laugh until he couldn't breathe and his stomach muscles convulsed. The English word for it is *conniption*—Dae's looked it up.

"Popcorn—another American goodie you can't get enough of."

"The corn of the kettle is the best."

"I'm guessing Korea's not a big popcorn-consuming nation."

Of Dae's time in Korea, Dae does not know what Miss Love knows. The stories, even plainly told, sometimes turn American listeners' faces from the faces of people watching another human being into the faces of those watching the cross between an angel and a three-eyed ox: stunned admiration for Dae, horror at the awfulness of the stories, and it transforms Dae into no more than the watcher and experiencer of the terrors, rather than a person who enjoys the corn of the kettle and the playfulness of Erik Satie and the game *Sorry!* and the films of Ms. Julia Roberts. Dae does not want Miss Love to see her as hybrid of angel and three-eyed ox. [continued]