The doctor arrived with the simplest of intentions—to attend a large convention of cardiologists in central Buda. Most of the doctors who arrived in Budapest that week came through the airport, were picked up in shiny limousines and taken to large, elegant hotels in Buda. He, however, because of poor last-minute planning, and a stop in Sofia to visit a retired colleague, found himself in a rather unlucky situation. After he disembarked from the 7 p.m. train, the tourism office informed him that all of the accommodations in the city were full. It was then that he and my mother crossed paths, and he was convinced to follow her home.

It was 1982, and we lived in a small two-bedroom apartment in Pest. My mother used to take in boarders that she would find at the train station. She had the schedule, and every afternoon that we didn’t have a full house, she would dress in her most Americanized clothing—a ruffled blue jean skirt, sleeveless pink shirt, and white sandals—and she would go to the train station and wait.

The last train of the day would bring the most weary tourists, struggling off the train and onto the platform with backpacks.
or suitcases larger than they were, dusty from riding next to the open window. Many husbandless women waited on the platform to accost them, grabbing their arms and pleading—a room for the night! Cheap! The travelers held their bags close, tightening the zippers, and begged off, searching for the safe harbor of the tourism office.

My mother was smart because she made a deal with Mr. Hingis who ran the tourism office. I don’t know what she gave him, but in return, he told the last passengers on the 7 p.m. train that all of the accommodations in Budapest were filled, and there were no more trains out that evening. When the travelers would emerge from the tourism office, hungry and dejected, my mother would be waiting. She would approach them with the sweetest smile, not touch them—especially not the Americans because Americans don’t like to be touched—and keep her voice low and warm as she gave her short, rehearsed speech in a language she didn’t speak. “I am happy to offer you a clean, beautiful room for the night and a breakfast in the morning. It’s close to here. I make very good French toast. Only ten U.S. dollars each person. If you wish?”

Then she would finger the small gold cross that hung around her neck, so that the tourists would be sure to see it. She would smile again and look at them in a motherly way. Most often, they would glance amongst themselves, look back at her, decide she was a good, Christian woman, and then shrug and follow her out of the train station.

She came home at the same time each evening—she knew her business well. It was a system she’d worked out years ago after my father left but when I was still a toddler, so I’d known it my whole life. She could do it almost without thinking, and I could always count on her to come back with someone—or, if we were lucky, with three, four or five boarders, all lugging their baggage up the two flights of concrete stairs to our apartment.
We lived on Leonardo da Vinci Street, which was not a terribly bad street, but a typical street in Pest that the tourists never saw. I learned, though, that to the Americans, the broken windows, makeshift curtains, and lack of landscaping looked frightening and dangerous. I could hear the boarders talking in their room in hushed, angry, sometimes panicked voices. Sometimes there was crying from the younger ones, girls who had really wanted a backpacking trip through Western Europe for their college graduation, but were somehow talked into taking the train trip to Budapest. I knew a fair amount of English then, unlike my mother, who understood nothing but the words “yes” and “okay,” and only knew how to say the small speech she had memorized for the train station as well as a handful of other phrases like, “It is a beautiful room, no?” and “You leave now.”

It didn’t seem to help much when my mother proudly opened the door to my bedroom—their room for the night—with three ornately made twin beds, bedspreads with gold filigree stitching and oblong pillows covered in damask and bound by rich yellow tassels. I did not sleep under covers such as these—they were reserved for the boarders, and folded and stored in the closet when no boarders were there.

When the doctor came, there were two Guatemalan women staying in my bedroom. They had gone out for the day in search of the Gellert spa, so my mother packed their bags and moved them to the back bedroom. She had the doctor sitting in her plastic lawn chair out on the balcony walkway, waiting with a glass of iced tea.

“Hurry, Sabrina,” she told me. I quickly smoothed the sheets on the beds to make it look as if no one had been sleeping there, pulled the gold covers neatly over the sheets, and piled the tasseled pillows into place. My mother even found a small candy and placed it on the bed on top of the towel that I had folded into the shape of a fan.
“It’s a beautiful room, no?” my mother said as she led the doctor in.

“Oh yes, yes, beautiful,” the doctor said. “Now where exactly are we, again?”

My mother smiled and nodded, while I ran to get a map of the city.

He was not a handsome man, this doctor, but he was certainly American and did not wear a wedding band on his finger. He looked to be about fifty years old and had studiously slumped shoulders, small wire-framed glasses, eyes that sagged in the corners as if he’d been crying, and a nose that looked as if it had endured some trauma.

“Do you see that?” my mother told me. “He’s American! We haven’t had an American in months!”

A week earlier, my mother had been to a palm reader—a habit she indulged every few years—who had told her that a man from far away was going to change her life. “Possibly an American,” the palm reader had said. Since then, my mother had talked of almost nothing else. She was a practical woman in so many ways, so the way she clung to these words surprised me.

“He is too skinny,” my mother whispered in my ear. “He has no wife to feed him. Just wait until he has a taste of my cooking.”

She continued to fuss in his room while he pulled his suitcase onto the chair in the corner and started to unpack a few things. Hangers were procured for his use, his glass of iced tea was freshened, and the curtains were straightened. I hovered in the doorway, waiting with my little map while my mother moved him into the house.

“Find out if he knows German,” my mother whispered, though she could have just as easily done this herself.

So in a small voice from the doorway, I asked “Sprechen sie Deutsch?”

He laughed. “Well, I know what that means, but no, I don’t speak German. Or Hungarian.”
“It’s okay,” I said. “I speak a little bit of English. I can help you find some nice things to do while you are visiting here.”

***

There were games I liked to play. For instance, every boarder that came inevitably got trapped in the bathroom. There was a trick to the door. You had to pull up on the handle slightly and jiggle it gently from side to side to unlatch it. But of course they didn’t know that. So I would sit on the floor in the hallway, wave to them as they passed from their room to the bathroom, giggle with anticipation as I heard them seal themselves in tight—because Americans like their privacy—and then wait.

I tried to predict which would be the type to try and try with the door until they figured it out, and which would eventually give up and start banging on the door, cursing, until my mother or I got them out. I almost always guessed right.

The doctor would be patient, I knew, and that night, after he had returned from wherever he had gone, I lay in the hallway closet in the dark amidst the blankets and pillows that were my makeshift bed, and waited. I heard him work to shut the door, listened to the anxious scrubbing of his toothbrush, the flush, and then the door handle as he struggled with it. He didn’t curse, and he wasn’t violent with it. He simply turned and turned and turned until he got the combination just right, and then exited. When he switched off the light, I watched—squinting in the dark—to see if he would notice me in the closet or my mother on the kitchen floor.

He padded carefully in the dark, hands brushing against walls, trying to make his way back to his bedroom. I felt him touch the closet door as the door pushed lightly against one of my legs, and then he suddenly stopped and squinted in at me. I immediately closed my eyes and feigned sleep.

“Hello?” he whispered. “Hello? Are you awake?”
I didn’t respond—didn’t want him to know I’d been spying on him.

After a low “Hmmm…” he continued back to his room, and then there was complete darkness as his door gently closed.

***

I’ve never liked sleep. It frightens me to close my eyes, slip away, and have the world pass on without me. Things could happen during sleep—critical things that could change your life forever. At night I could manage to talk myself into it, but falling asleep during the day there is always the shock of waking up to find that it is dark—and that when you last viewed the world, it was light and bright and the middle of the afternoon. Outside, cars collided, people fell in love in the park, new things were invented. And there you were, practically dead.

My mother preferred to sleep. She didn’t need that time, nor did it matter to her what else was happening in the world. She poured alcohol into her body, filling herself up like a decanter, leaving only enough room for her to breathe. And then she slept, a rich, full sleep punctuated by the occasional startled snort, spread across her chair, with her head tilted back and mouth open, her chin raised towards the sky as if singing a never-ending “hallelujah.”

My mother tried to be sufficiently drunk to completely miss the stickiest part of the afternoon. The kitchen was the coolest room in the apartment, and this is where you could find my mother, prostrate on the cool tiles in only her white sleeveless shirt and black nylon underpants.

While she slept, I sat, too, in my underwear on the cool tiles, waiting for the boarders to return from their day exploring the city. One of the boarders had left a small German-English phrase book, and I spent afternoons drilling myself on the English words that I still didn’t know.
When my mother was awake, she often told me stories about her youth. Her stories never fit her; I suppose it was the alcohol running through her words that made them less credible. Somehow the delicate pixie of her memories who floated around Pest like a fairy as boys tried desperately to grasp at her translucent, glittering wings could never be this massive woman, rippled with cellulite, who sat half-naked on the kitchen floor, breath foul with gin and decay.

Despite the fact I believed they weren’t true, I loved her stories, and often aspired to be like that girl who needed no one and made her way confidently towards a brilliant future. It was easy to dream. Besides paging for the millionth time through the American fashion magazines previous boarders had left, there wasn’t much else to do during those slow, sweltering, school-free afternoons while the boarders were out. My body, far from the pixie in my mind, was rounding into the robust, hearty Hungarian woman I would become. With this body came disappointment, unhappy husbands, and a cloudy feeling that there was never enough of something.

***

The morning after the doctor’s arrival, my mother did not return to her chair or the kitchen floor. She sent me to the store to pick up ingredients for my favorite dish, chicken with dumplings, and all the way to the bakery near the Danube to get a selection of freshly made marzipan. When I returned, I found that she’d gone through the closet in the back bedroom—the one that held dresses she hadn’t worn for years—and chosen a black wrap dress that was laid out on the bed with large crystal earrings and a fake gold necklace. Her face, I could tell, had been wiped clean of some experiments with make-up.

“When he returns, ask him if he’ll stay for dinner tonight,” she told me.
I thought about the Guatemalan women, and the ferocity with which my mother would shoo them out the door if they dared to attempt to be part of this small dinner celebration.

From the cabinet above the sink, she pulled down three ornate crystal goblets.

“Wash these until they sparkle,” she said. They were chalky with dust.

I stood at the sink and washed each glass carefully as my mother watched from the stove. We only had four glasses—if I broke one, there would be no end to her fury. All afternoon we cleaned, my mother cooked, and the house was readied.

When the doctor returned around five o'clock, the apartment invited him with the smell of a rich, hearty gravy and egg-filled dumplings. My mother had bathed for the first time in days and had managed to fit herself, however precariously, into the black dress. Gold shone from her neck, and she greeted him at the door with a glass of champagne and a smile that made me start to believe her stories that she had been quite the catch in her youth.

The doctor stepped back with a look of surprise, but he quickly composed himself, smiled, and accepted the glass of champagne. He wore a badge around his neck and I could see his name—Michael Rosen, MD, FACC—which he removed once my mother had taken his bags for him.

“I hope you had a nice day,” I said, looking out of place in shorts and a t-shirt.

I truly meant it. There was something about this man, and the way his facial features had been squeezed together and placed on his face, that made me want to hug him. For some reason, his happiness was very important to me. I wished I had something for him as well.

“Yes, yes,” he said. “Very nice.”

My mother stood in the hallway with her own glass of champagne, still smiling at him. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d seen my mother engaged in so much activity—especially
activity outside of our daily norm. I was starting to wonder if perhaps the whiskey soaking year after year into her body had softened her mind. But she was suddenly so alive I didn’t question it. I didn’t want to disturb the momentum of her happiness. The doctor seemed at a bit of a loss—as there was no place to sit besides the bed, and we had cornered him in his room as if waiting for him to entertain us.

“We don’t wish to disturb you,” I said, “but my mother wanted to know if you’d join us for dinner.”

He looked at his watch, and then said “Well, yes—that would be delightful. It smells wonderful in here.”

I gave a slight nod to my mother, who nearly toppled over in her high heels in delight. “Oh gütt!” she exclaimed, and she moved off to the kitchen to finish making the meal.

***

The doctor stayed dressed from his day, and my mother sat across from him, resplendent in her clothing and happiness. It was 5:30 p.m. in the height of summer, so outside it felt like afternoon, but in our dining room—formal with porcelain pieces handed down through generations, heavy mirrors and thick draperies—we had candles lit and crystal laid. Napkins had been folded intricately and caught in place with sparkling black napkin rings. China, redolent with lemon-scented dishwashing detergent, was proudly displayed at three place settings.

The meal filled the table. To a casual observer it might look like Christmas dinner for twelve, but it was only the three of us.

With heavy silver serving spoons, my mother scooped generous portions of gravy-drenched dumplings, chicken, spinach casserole, and dill tomatoes. When she unfolded the cloth napkin lining the bread basket, the smell of warm, yeasty, home-baked bread filled the room. All of my mother’s hopes had gone into the making of this meal. If it didn’t impress, the doctor was certainly a fool.
I waited, with hands politely folded on my lap, secretly picking at my cuticles until the doctor was served and then my plate was filled.

“Do you cook like this every night?” the doctor asked.

My mother smiled at him and then looked to me for translation.

“Oh yes, my mother makes all sorts of things!”

I didn’t mention that usually we ate potato pancakes, cold from the refrigerator, still soaked with cooking oil. Our meals didn’t usually include the clink of silverware against plates. Often there was nothing for me to drink unless I remembered to bring myself some water, since my mother was always taken care of with her glass of whiskey.

When my mother finally had her own plate filled and she sat down, I reached for my fork and broke gently through one of the dumplings. The dumpling evaporated on my tongue, leaving just a light film of butter in its wake. My mother was truly a genius.

She ate delicately, dabbing occasionally at the corners of her mouth with her napkin.

“This is a wonderful meal,” the doctor said.

My mother looked at me hopefully, and I couldn’t help but feed her more.

“He says this is the best meal he’s ever eaten,” I told my mother in Hungarian. The worried, careful look on her face immediately dissolved into a beaming smile.

“I’m so happy you like it!” she said, which I translated to “My mother is happy—she enjoyed cooking for you today.”

The bottle of champagne was finished and then a bottle of wine was opened and poured into different glasses that I’d washed and shined earlier. The doctor drank a little bit, and didn’t seem to notice that my mother finished most of the bottle herself.

“Ask him if he has a wife,” my mother said.

“He’s not wearing a ring,” I told her.
Instead, I asked him about the convention, and if Hungary was anywhere close to as nice as America. He told me that Hungary was far more beautiful because of its age—and he couldn’t wait until Thursday when he had a break from his conference and could spend the day exploring the city and taking photos. Though my mother didn’t understand a thing, she was transfixed, not taking her eyes from him, smiling and nodding as if she were following along perfectly. And he, politely, let his eyes rest on her exactly half the time, to let her know that he was speaking to both of us. I translated here and there, but it became cumbersome, and I was so happy to have someone with whom I could talk and practice my English.

“‘I want to live there some day,’” I said. “In America. I have all of the magazines that many of the other boarders have left, and I watch so many movies. I want a dog and a backyard. Do you and your wife have a dog and a backyard?”

He laughed. “I don’t have a dog, a backyard, or a wife.”

Pleased with myself, I hurried on. “I’m learning English so I can go one day.”

“And you will go!” the doctor proclaimed. “Your English is excellent. You will be very successful there.”

I felt my face flush, that this important man had confirmed that my dream could become a reality. Turning to my mother, I saw the question in her eyes, as if she sensed something had happened.

“The doctor says that we will go to America! And he does not have a wife!” I said.

The moment it came out of my mouth, I felt a little bit sorry. I knew what I had done to the words, felt them twist as they came through my lips, but it had sprung from my excitement. I could almost feel the vibrations of her excited heartbeat reverberating through the table.

“It’s what I’ve always wanted!” she exclaimed.
Truly, she had no interest in America, but for a rich man to care for her—she would go anywhere. Perhaps the palm reader had been right. It had been so long since I’d seen my mother smile a genuine smile.

***

The next afternoon I found my mother digging through boxes that had been stored under the bed. There were piles of things that we hadn’t used in years—things I’d never even seen—and all of this was being sorted through and separated.

“What’s this?” I asked.

She was holding a folded tablecloth, examining it closely.

“It’s time to get rid of some things,” she said. “We have too many things. We’ll only need the things that we need.”

“We’ll only need them for what?” I asked.

“For our life. Going forward.”

I went closer to examine some of the things on the bed. There was a little alabaster donkey figurine—an original Herend—that my mother had spoken about but I’d never seen, as it had been hidden away as treasures often are. Next to it was a set of miniature teacups, and at least fifty cloth napkins.

“Vigyázz! Don’t confuse my piles, and don’t touch the donkey,” my mother said.

There was a glass of whiskey sweating on the bureau. I touched it to enjoy its chill.

“You can get me some more ice,” my mother said.

She was humming, and continued to hum through the rest of the afternoon as we carried box after box of giveaways down the stairs to the street.

When the doctor returned, she sent me to him immediately.

“Tomorrow is his free day. Tell him we’ll show him around.”

I hovered in the doorway to his room, and he seemed glad to see me. This filled me with so much happiness.
“Sabrina! Tell me what new English words you’ve learned today,” he said.

It was the kind of question I’d imagined a father would ask. I hadn’t learned anything new, so I told him I’d been practicing my accent. This made him laugh, and I felt proud of my sparkling sense of humor. I said “The rain in Spain falls mainly in the plain,” in my best English accent. Last summer I’d watched My Fair Lady at least twenty times. He laughed again and I knew he’d accept our offer to show him around the city.

* * *

She was happier that day than she’d ever been. It was like one of my American magazines’ pages had come to life, and suddenly there I was—airbrushed and carefree—flanked by parents who loved me, darting through the candy-cane-colored scene, ice-cream cone in hand, smiling as if happiness were the easiest thing in the world.

“Look at this!” I yelled, racing down Andrassy Avenue past the expensive stores, carefully groomed garden beds, and sidewalk cafes. There was a statue of a man, arm outstretched, sitting on a bench. I launched myself into the statue’s arms and leaned back to pose. The doctor was laughing, and I heard the click of his camera. I could imagine us all, days later, sorting through the pictures, still damp from processing and saturated with the intoxicating scent of fresh ink. “There was the one when I almost fell into the fountain—remember?”

My mother was standing next to the doctor, beaming. In her red and white polka-dot dress, gold-colored bangles up her arms, neck and ears weighted with more decoration, she shimmered in the sun. Next to him in his beige pants and navy polo shirt, she was a garish, late-summer flower. But he paid little attention, even as she preened. He was looking away, searching for the next photo. My mother’s patience sat heavy on my shoulders, so I said something quickly to my mother in Hungarian, waited for her
response, and then turned to the doctor and said, “My mother thinks you’re the most handsome man she’s ever met.”

The doctor laughed and tousled my hair, but never looked at my mother. With all my might, I willed him to just turn around and smile at her, but he didn’t turn, so I tried again.

“Mother, what will the weather be like tomorrow?” I said in Hungarian.

This time, my mother answered my question with a hint of sharpness, followed with a mild, “Why do you ask such stupid questions?” I then turned to the doctor and, pronouncing every word’s rounded corner, said “My mother wonders if you’ll take her arm while we walk through the square. It’s our tradition here in Budapest.”

The doctor surprised us all by responding immediately, holding out his arm to my mother. In that moment, sprinkles of wonder came tumbling from the sky, and I watched my mother bloom. Her smile was that of the pixie in her stories. She stood taller as she gracefully linked her arm through his, and together they strolled through Heroes’ Square, her dress rustling against his pants in the light wind. As I tiptoed behind them, not wanting to disturb, I could hear what seemed like all of Budapest letting out a sigh of relief, welcoming her back.

***

That evening, flushed and tired from an afternoon walking in the sun, we sat on a cozily lit restaurant patio overlooking the Danube eating goulash, gomolya, cold goose liver, and stuffed cabbage. All of the dishes we shared like a family, the doctor trying things he hadn’t ever eaten before, and taking photos of it all, even. For dessert, we ate flaky pieces of strudel and my mother ordered glasses of unicum for herself and the doctor, in the traditional Hungarian style. The liquor was too bitter for the doctor, but he politely continued to try to sip at it, saying that it tasted very “medicinal.”
After paying for our meal and proclaiming it a lovely day, the doctor announced that his stay was coming to an end. I waited—waited for him to tell us that he wanted us to come with him, or that he would send for us soon once our little apartment had been packed and we were ready to go. But instead, he wanted to give my mother the money for the stay.

I sat and stared at him. It’s not that I didn’t know this was coming, despite what the palm reader had said, but I wasn’t sure how I was going to translate this to my mother, who seemed so certain that the dark ages of her life were coming to an end.

“Will you ask your mother how much I owe?” the doctor said.

I turned to my mother, who had set down her glass of wine and looked a bit panicked, clearly reading the expression on my face. I wasn’t ready to tell her.

“He’d like to know how much he owes,” I said. “Just up through now,” I added.

My mother let out a breath of relief at my addition, and told me to tell him that he mustn’t think of paying. He was now a family friend, and his company was compensation enough.

I told this to the doctor, but he shook his head and insisted.

“I will of course pay you. You’ve been wonderful to me on my stay here, but you’re running a business, and friend or not, I am a customer.”

My mother snapped at me, “What did he say?”

“He wants to pay,” I said.

“Why is he being such a fool?” she said. The pitch of her voice was rising. “Why can’t he accept my generosity? Does he not feel as if he is part of the family now?”

I didn’t say anything, not sure how to continue being in the middle now. My game of hope had turned more serious, and I suddenly felt like a child again—no more in command with my English language skills and power to charm strangers.

“Is he planning to leave?” my mother asked, her voice urgent. “Ask him. Ask him now.”
“Yes,” I said, defeated. “He will leave in the morning.”

Like a fan slowly unfolding, my mother’s face changed. The panic rippled away, and was replaced with blank emptiness. “So that’s it?” she said.

There was an excruciatingly long pause while she stared at me. From the look on her face, it seemed as if her brain had just stopped. Her lips hung dumbly in a little “o.”

The first thing that came back were her eyes. In them, I could see everything she wanted to say, expressed with flawless eloquence. We had been one foot into the rescue boat, and this was the cruelest act of all—asking us to step out and wait for the next, if there was a next. The whole speech poured from her eyes silently, in Hungarian and English.

When she finished, there was another pause, in which she must have received her own answer that, despite her plea, nothing was going to change. A deep sound that started with guttural tremors escaped her mouth in a pitiful “ooh” no louder than a fork being dropped on a plate, but more shattering than twenty glasses being dropped onto the floor.

The doctor squeezed my arm. I’d almost forgotten he was there.

“What’s wrong?” he asked. “What have I done?”

His face was pleated with worry and confusion.

“You’ve done nothing,” I said. “The total for your stay will be forty American dollars.”

***

When we returned to the apartment, my mother went immediately to the back bedroom. The Guatemalan women were gone, and she slammed the door behind her.

The doctor, after asking several times on the bus ride home if there was anything he could do, was now quiet.

“Can I make you some tea?” I asked, trying to maintain the civility of the innkeeper.
“No thank you,” he said. “I think I’ll go to bed.”

He retreated to his bedroom and closed the door, locking it behind him. I stood in the dark hallway, not knowing quite where to be. It was too early to go to sleep, but there didn’t seem to be anything else to do. Finally, I settled on trying to knock on my mother’s bedroom door, and when she didn’t answer, I slunk to the ground and listened to her muffled crying and the sound of her whiskey glass filling, emptying, and being refilled over and over again. I knocked again, and my mother said, “Go away.” “Please!” I said. “Go away and go to bed,” she said. It was as motherly a response as she’d had towards me in a long time. I thought of her inside, the warm trembling folds of her piled into her chair. More than anything, I wanted to be small again so that I could crawl into her lap, feeling her fleshy arms around me. I wanted to be unable to recognize her pain, but even more, I wanted to apologize for all that had gone wrong in her life, and have her tell me that everything was going to be okay for the both of us.

***

I must have slept, but it didn’t feel like it. On the floor in my closet, I huddled under my blanket even though it was still quite warm and the air in the apartment was stagnant from the windows being closed all day. I couldn’t hear my mother anymore, which was probably a good thing, and the light under the doctor’s door was off. It seemed that if I could just sleep, everything would be fine tomorrow. My mother would make her French toast, and try her best to be civil. The doctor would leave, and we would go back to our life as usual. She would be intolerable, I knew, for weeks. Maybe even years. But school would start soon, and I would get some reprieve.

Every hour or so during the night I peeked out of the closet to see if it was morning yet. When I could finally see sun starting to make its way through the kitchen window, I crawled out and
started to set the dining room table for breakfast, careful to be quiet so as not to wake anyone. There was a terrible odor coming from somewhere, so I opened the kitchen window to see if it was coming from outside. It wasn’t.

The door to the back bedroom was still shut, and I knocked lightly and then finally decided to try the handle. To my surprise, it turned easily, and I pushed the door open.

Morning sun filtered in through the slats of the blinds, creating a striped pattern on my mother whose motionless body sat upright in her favorite chair. Her head was back, as if on a hinge, and when I moved closer I saw that her open mouth was filled with vomit, some of which had spilled down onto her shoulders and the front of the red and white dress she still wore from our happiest afternoon ever. Her heavy chest, that usually rose and fell with effort as she slept, was silent.

“Mother!” I yelled.
I shook her, and the fluid in her mouth spattered around her.
“Wake up!”
I beat at her chest, and grabbed the back of her head by the hair, tilting her head forward, hoping to dislodge whatever was there, but there was no response.
At once, the doctor was at my side.
“Call for help,” he said. I ran from the room as he put two fingers to her throat to check for a pulse.

***

“You’ve had a terrible night. Me, too,” the officer said. He was jiggling in his jacket pocket for a piece of hard candy—the third he’d eaten since arriving.

“A triple murder at the train station this evening, and then the guys with the guns were on the train and gone. I’ve been working since four o’clock yesterday and haven’t had any sleep.”

I’d been trying to stay seated upright in as adult a position as I could muster, but as his words passed through me, I felt myself
sinking back against the wall. He continued to talk; I supposed to take my mind off my troubles, but more likely because he was a man who—despite his profession—couldn’t think beyond his own troubles.

While he made notes, thick, hairless fingers pressing the pen through three layers of paper, I wondered what would become of me. He had not asked yet about other relatives and friends. It occurred to me that, in his own preoccupation, he might leave me alone here, amidst the smell of death and vomit, in a house finally empty after years of being filled with strangers.

The doctor was putting his things together in the front bedroom, folding white collared shirts neatly into a herringbone suitcase, and packing his camera bits into the complex, multipocketed black bag he’d carried with him on our sightseeing excursion. When he finally picked up the now-closed suitcase and started down the hall towards me, I wondered if I should pack my own suitcase, hoping he’d claim me as his and take me far from the crystal decanters, Borox bleach and gold tasseled pillows that held the sweat and filth of every boarder who’d passed through. Instead, he stopped when he got to me, put a warm, competent hand on my shoulder, and said, “I’m sorry.”

He put his suitcase down and I could see, crushed into his hand was some American money. He took my hand and pushed the money into my palm. Then he squeezed my fist around it, as if trying to tell me to hang on to it tight.

As he took his hand away, I kept my fist tightly clamped. He picked up his suitcase and walked out the front door.

When he was gone, I counted the money. It totaled about two hundred and thirty dollars, a larger sum than my mother brought in each month. This is how Americans show affection, I thought.

The police officer gestured towards the door.

“Nice man,” he said.