A Ride out of Phrao

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In her last week in America, Shirin sells or gives away all her possessions, returning to the same small parcel she carried when she first arrived—a purse full of dried fruit and extra underwear. She feels thirty again.

She is happy to be leaving Cedar Rapids—a place that, in fifteen years, never grew to fit her strange edges—and to be sent closer to home. She is moving to a village somewhere in northern Thailand. Iran isn't on the list of Peace Corps countries, after all, and this is a comfort. She has been away for too long and is a stranger now. Why go back and ruin the beautiful image her Tehrani relatives have of her? Still, she misses the East. She writes a letter about it to cousins in Tehran, emphasizing that the Peace Corps is a great honor, leaving out any hint of her lack of options. Months later, she suspects she misspelled the name—*Peace Core,* she remembers writing, a place that carries peace at its core. Is that not the meaning?

She often reminds herself that to be accepted to the program you have to be American. As a citizen, she qualifies, though now and then it feels like a deception. Sometimes she repeats every detail of her application to

herself. Was any of it a lie? No, no, it was not. At first there was some question about her age, but the man on the phone said that she had the enthusiasm of the young and that many older people volunteer every year. To this she replied that she was only forty-five. *Yes, of course,* the man said, which made her dislike him and look down on his so-called peace keeping organization. But, for Shirin Khalilipour-Anderson, the Peace Corps is a solid, respectable way out of town. No one will have to know about the bankruptcy, the loss of her house, or the series of demeaning bureaucratic jobs for which she was overqualified and whose titles she often changes for her Iranian friends. *Doctor of New Research*, she calls the last one, in which she was paid slightly above minimum wage to sit beside three bleary-eyed researchers, filing their work according to a needlessly convoluted system.

She was fired for doing too many "extra" things: for making suggestions to the other employees; bringing baghlava for everyone; tuning out when the boy who hired her spoke. The boy called it downsizing, apologized, then made a backhanded recommendation that she seek work someplace that would appreciate her special kind of initiative. At the next meeting of her church's widows group—an organization she joined despite the very alive state of both her ex-husbands—Shirin told the other ladies that she had quit her job because of exhaustion. She added that she had spent a week training her replacement—which wasn't strictly true, but she would have done it, if they had asked.

After a short training program in Washington DC, she travels to Phrao, a village two hours outside the big city of Chiang-Mai. She lives alone. There are no other Peace Corps volunteers in this poverty-stricken town of barely two thousand. She chafes against her new living standards—a hut, no furniture except a small table and a sleeping mat. No air-conditioning. She works under two young Thai bureaucrats, offering medical services in a one-room clinic. Soon she will begin a second job teaching children a few words of English a day. She begins to relish the rigors of it. The Thai people are strange, their every custom a struggle, but Shirin enjoys their company. They seem cold at first. She learns that they aren't naturally effusive to strangers, as Iranians are. To Persians a dramatic show of unearned love—hugs and kisses and empty offers—aren't falsehoods so much as necessary illusions of warmth and community. Privately, Shirin finds it tiresome, though she would never betray her native culture by saying so. Besides, there are the good parts; the face-saving parts—Iranians give each other room to pretend. (Yes, I have a second home in Shiraz. Yes, my son has a PhD. Yes, yes, yes.)

Thai people are restrained. No hugs. They bow and bow.

American, she says when introducing herself to her new neighbors and they nod, easily accepting this. They ask, *New York?* She smiles and says yes. It's close enough; her daughter lives there. She misses Leila, twenty now and

studying Psychology in the world's top city. It's a shame none of their Tehrani relatives can see the woman Leila has become, her beauty and charm, her ability to relate to Americans, to make them love her so easily. Leila has many men, and Shirin overlooks this, though it is a sin. The girl is just like her father, so addicted to being adored that he stayed in Tehran among his many lovers rather than risk exile, knowing that a new land would spit him out.

Oh but Leila… she succeeded at becoming American in less than one year. What a thing to have done! Fifteen years and Shirin has yet to complete this task. And so she wants to show Thailand to her New York daughter—here she seems to have clicked into place somehow. She has written her daughter several times, inviting her to visit. Leila has never written back, and in truth, she hasn't spoken to Shirin in a year. But that isn't important—they've had a fight, that's all. Leila often overreacts when Shirin doesn't spell out every detail in a way that Leila considers 'candid.' Now Shirin doesn't even remember what she is supposed to have lied about—something small like the value of her house, or how many credit cards she had before the bankruptcy. At least a small part of it was over the decision to move to Thailand. *Running away,* Leila called it.

Young people often travel to Thailand—maybe she will come. Shirin wants Leila to notice that the villagers don't hear her accent, and, at work, her bosses defer to her because she is older. And if she makes suggestions, they make a

show of complying. She marvels at this. How could it be so easy? Later, when her Thai is better, her neighbor, a tiny speckle-faced woman, asks her about her history and she mentions having been a doctor in Iran, then a housewife in America, and then a *Manager of Advanced Research*. From then on her neighbor calls her “Dr. Rin,” which is a wonder for so many reasons.

The name catches on, and she lets it.

Her early days are spent gradually acquiring this and that. Pots and pans. Sanitary pads. Proper spoons. Conditioner. Toothpaste without salt (salt in toothpaste. What a repulsive thing!). A rice cooker is easy to find. She adapts easily to the Thai style of eating rice, happily slicing mango in her bare hands, letting the sticky yellow juice flow through her fingers as she relishes the strange new taste of consuming dry rice, no butter, with fruit. She wipes her hands on her Thai clothes, cheap cotton tunics made for soiling.

She surprises herself each time her sticky hand reaches for her shirt hem as it would a dishrag. At her widow’s group meetings she often wore her nicest silk blouse, a lavender Chanel piece that she had preserved for ten years, ironing it for fifteen minutes after every hand wash. The blouse had an ugly seam just above the hip, an imperfection she took great care to hide, tucking and re-tucking it into her skirt every so often.

Never let your seams show, she used to tell her daughter when she was young.

At church functions, she turned down every good appetizer for fear of soiling that blouse. Now she thinks that this is the greatest sign that she was a stranger there. *They're not your people until you share a meal with some ease.* She has never been comfortable eating with Americans. In Iran friends and neighbors ate together on a cloth on the floor, spending hours in one another's company. They interacted with food and with each other in the most basic and intimate ways.

She finds that Thai stores have all her Persian spices and utensils. Barely any bread though. When she asks people where to find bread, they say, eyes full of sympathy, "Don't you have rice to eat?" This makes her chuckle. She answers in clunky Thai, "Just my strange American tastes."

Her house stands just off the ground, on short stilts hidden here and there by patches of shrubbery. It has a roof shaped like a straw hat, so that from far away, the hut looks like a squatting woman, head down so that her hat falls over her eyes, her skirt of shrubs lifted, exposing her bare legs in two or three places. The image amuses her. It seems to signal the house's greatest difficulty—the toilet is a hole in the ground, like in Iran. But her bladder is American now and

so it takes an hour of squatting to squeeze a few drops. Afterward she's elated with herself, adapting like a young person.

Most of the meat here is pork. She's no Muslim, but don't the Thai people realize that this vile animal eats the flesh of its own species? Evil. A lot of things in Thailand carry the sensation of evil. She doesn't like the Buddha shelf in her house. She considers Buddhism idol-worship. And every morning she wakes up under her mosquito net, eye-to-eye with a new kind of enormous lizard. On the first night she killed one. Its guts are still on her bedroom wall. Each night she scrubs it, in a strange ritualistic way that is starting to feel like penance, and so she has come to a kind of truce with the creatures. The Thai people often talk of demons. Maybe her pretty new house has spirits and they visit her in an endless line of lizards. Now one is dead and the others mourn it, a reptile community, arriving every night to that same spot, flicking their wretched tongues, taunting her. *You asked for this, didn't you?*

"Filthy little beasts," she answers, when she is alone and sleepy and she wants to hear the music of Farsi words, even the ugly ones, spoken aloud.

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On the morning she begins her job at the local school, a hot rain soaks the village and she glimpses her neighbors eating a wordless morning meal on the floor. Their window is barely three feet from hers, so that she can examine their food, hear some of their whispers, breathe in the sharp scent of their incense. The rain blurs the lines of their faces and bodies, and their movements become dreamlike. They remind her of her parents, the way they broke fast quietly, always on the floor, and as a teenager she often gave them fifteen minutes before she joined with her cup of tea.

She eats breakfast alone, black tea and purple sticky rice with mango and banana. She adds some coconut milk and mung beans, thinking, *how authentic it seems*. She has allotted too much time for breakfast, so she peels rambutan and mangosteen, not because she's hungry, but for the pleasure of peeling. She is enthralled by the strange, sensuous fruits of this country. When you peel a mangosteen, for example, it is impossible to stay clean because there are inner membranes to remove. If you cut it sloppily, you will get a mouthful of the foul along with the sweet. In almost all her favorite fruits, a sticky seam divides the best from the worst. It reminds her of the persimmons of Iran, with their four watery petals tucked inside a bitter stinging jelly, the thin skin between them the difference between an exquisite flavor and a repellent one. Separating the two parts is an art, requiring a steady hand and a tiny spoon.

In early mornings when she misses Iran and the knowledge of a long impending loneliness hits, like a brick suddenly falling into both arms, she forces herself to think of her early years in Cedar Rapids. She was married then—to this man who gifted her with *Anderson*—for only six months when she was a new immigrant, thirty and lonely and clueless about how to relate to an American husband. *Why did he marry me*, she wonders, thinking of herself in those days, how hopeless she seemed with her five-year-old daughter and her damaged hair and her ragged tote full of dried fruit and extra underwear in case at any moment she should need to flee the country again. *What did he want with such a mess of a woman?* After a while, she always dismisses this question and gathers her backpack of Peace Corps essentials. She was very beautiful then—of course.

The schoolroom is stifling and ripe with a sour milk smell. Rows of eight-year-olds with greasy bluish black hair giggle and stare at Shirin, overwhelmed by her foreignness. She has been told that the Thai people are suspicious of strangers and that it is important to answer all their questions, even if they seem nosey. Often as she bikes through rice fields, wearing her straw hat and wraparound fisherman pants to blend in, fellow bicyclists stop her and ask strange things. *What is your name? How old are you? What have you eaten today?* Though at first she thought she had

misunderstood, now she presses her hands together as in prayer, greeting them with a *sawat-dee kha* before answering simply, *I am Shirin. Forty-five. Much rice today. All is well.*

She doesn't lie about her age—this is how they decide how much respect to show.

The schoolchildren ask the same intimate questions as their parents. *How old are you? Where did you come from? How much was your tunic?* In the weeks that follow, she teaches them English words by talking about Leila, showing photos of her life in New York and describing each item: woman. Books. City. Man with glasses. Man with yellow hair. Man in jeans. The children love Leila's photos, fighting over them as if she were a starlet.

One child, Boonmee, always lingers by the wall. He has a sleepy expression, his eyes so small they are obstructed on both ends by fleshy cheeks and heavy eyelids. His thick rosebud lips seem ever swollen, as if he is constantly having an allergic reaction. He rarely smiles. He sits in a corner by himself, saying nothing. When he laughs, it is always in strange moments, as if at his own thoughts, his eyes opening suddenly just a crack like an oyster shell so that she can see the dark glimmer inside. Shirin comes to like him best.

Each morning she asks in English, "Boonmee, how are you?" He never answers, so to illustrate, she answers herself, "Fine, thank you."

One day, Shirin finally hears Boonmee's voice. When a new child points at Shirin, and shouts, "*Farang!*" the Thai word for foreigners, Boonmee looks up from his corner and speaks for the first time: "That is no *farang.* That is Dr. Rin!"

She imagines this is the beginning of a secret understanding between them. Somehow, this boy knows that foreignness is her burden.

"Thank you, Boonmee," she says in Thai. He shrugs and looks away.

In her fourth week of teaching, Boonmee is absent twice. Then, on the third day, he shows up hand-in-hand with the regular schoolteacher, Sawat, the only person in town who can speak decent English. He hangs his head, his chin tucked so that she can only see the black of his hair and the outline of his cheeks. He refuses to look up, his gaze fixed on his sandals. "What's wrong?" Shirin asks.

Sawat kneels beside Boonmee and speaks in Thai. The boy doesn't look up from his feet. Then Sawat wipes her thick bangs from her forehead, smiles at Shirin in that deferential way, and—never taking her hands off Boonmee's shoulders—says, "All fine. Let's learning English?"

All through class Shirin can't keep from glancing in Boonmee's direction. He seems to be hiding something, slumped and folded over himself, his right side turned toward the wall. His breathing is strange, his stomach contracting

and expanding in a sad tempo. When she can no longer tolerate the mystery, Shirin tells the class to practice copying letters from the board and goes over to him. She tries to turn his face, but his body goes rigid and he pushes against the wall. A strange noise, like a chirp or a high-pitched howl, escapes his throat. Sawat gets up from her chair, whispers in Thai, "Let's go outside." She takes Boonmee's hand and leads him away from Shirin. This annoys her, angers her, like Sawat has just taken her own child from her arms.

She follows them into the half-covered walkway outside where the rain has soaked the orchids, blending the sweet scent with the stench of a nearby aloe tree. Something about the way Sawat kneels beside the boy, the condescension in the act, reminds Shirin of her own parents, who never knelt but always sat. So she drops down onto her haunches on the concrete, cross-legged as if ready for a night with the water pipe. She tries again to turn Boonmee's face toward her. She can see that whatever he is hiding is shameful to him, in front of the foreign *doctor*. "It's okay," she says. "Let me see." When he finally looks up, his rosebud mouth is quivering and a yellowish bruise covers half his right cheek and his upper neck.

Sawat whispers, "His father has a demon."

Yes, there are demons here. There are crafty lizards and Buddha shelves, and everything is a lie. You are told every day to smile, even if you have no joy in your heart.

Sawat says the man's name, Khunpol, and Shirin thinks she has seen him in the village. He has an outdoor restaurant—three plastic tables and a pot of noodles—that she often visits. Khunpol is a smallish man, with a hard-set face, yellow teeth, high cheekbones like a woman's, and two missing fingers. He makes a very good *Pad See Ew*. He has no wife. Does this boy, then, have no mother?

In Thailand, there are rules about greeting strangers, rules about touching, about older and younger. Hands together, bowing. But Shirin pulls the boy into her arms and presses him hard against her chest, so that she can easily feel his tiny pulse speeding up, fast and faint, like the heartbeat of a bird in the hand.

She holds him there for a moment and his body loosens. Sawat shifts around uncomfortably. Then Shirin feels something strange. In her arms, the boy is squirming, readjusting his body somehow. She feels his hand wriggle free and she loosens her grip but doesn't let go, thinking that this boy must be starving for affection. She whispers, "it's okay," rubs his back and drones on and on in the soothing way she once used with Leila, as if to teach him her Western

ways, *this is how we say everything will be fine*… in Iran or America or somewhere. In the universal language you may one day learn.

Then she feels his small hand on her breast, resting there, the way her daughter used to do when Shirin held her close. The boy breathes warmly on her neck, and he reminds her so much of a helpless infant, a tired baby falling asleep. But just as she is about to revisit that old motherly wound, his hand moves and she is gripped by a wicked thought. It must be wicked, because who can think such a thing of a harmless boy? It must be the evil in her mind, the influence of the Buddha shelf or whatever strange spirits live in this country. Could it be that this child is willfully touching her breast—?

She pulls away quickly, so that some hurt registers in the boy's expression.

She looks at Sawat, who only smiles. It seems she missed these small movements. She considers asking Sawat if such an action is normal, but does not. It seems shameful.

For days she obsesses over the incident. Was it the evil in her own heart that caused her to hurt a fragile boy only wanting a moment of maternal affection? Or was the child acting out of some ugly preadolescent curiosity? Was it her demon or his? Maybe he was confused. Surely she did nothing wrong in hugging the boy. Though in the end, her guilt

seems always to rest upon that moment of hurt in his sleepy eyes, when she pulled away and he looked up like a child whose spoon has been pulled out of his mouth. Does Boonmee ever get hugged in his house? Was it wrong to push him away when he was grabbing for a substitute mother?

At bedtime, she puts on Iranian music. A sad melody by Googoosh called *Nafas*, which means *breath*. Googoosh's life reminds her that even if you are beautiful and beloved by the world, even if you've conquered every mundane worry, what you do suffer you suffer alone. She makes herself a plate of fruits for dinner, saying the names out loud so that when she talks of them later, she will use the right words. There is the spiky red one, the one that looks like a baby armadillo, the one that smells like feet. She likes peeling back the thin inner lining that separates the flesh from the rough skins of almost all of them. She imagines that even the richest people on earth don't eat better than the fruits of Thailand—God's bounty on a plate.

At mealtimes alone, she has a habit of retreating deep into her own imagination, usually dreaming up what she will say in her next conversation with Leila, whenever that may be. If they were to talk today, she thinks, she would seek advice about Boonmee. They would discuss him at length, because Leila is a student of psychology. She would tell her

daughter about the poverty here, the stifling heat of her house, the neighbors she can see through her window who never talk to each other. *Leila joon,* she would say, *you don't know what they suffer here.*

The question of the boy consumes her. After dinner, she sits up with a cup of tea and wonders why she has only ever emailed her daughter. Obviously the girl doesn't check her university account. She sends four expensive text messages to Leila's phone before her ancient mobile comes to life at three a.m.—Leila must have forgotten the eleven-hour time difference. In her rush to answer, she almost trips out of bed, forgetting about the mosquito net. A lizard sticks its ugly tongue out at her. "Evil thing," she whispers.

"Leila joon?" she answers, already breathless.

"What's wrong?" Leila asks and Shirin realizes that if the matter is not urgent, Leila will be angry. They are, after all, in the middle of a cold war. Still, Leila's voice warms her through, like weighty palms pressed to a sore back.

"Oh nothing," says Shirin, "I'm just a little sick. I shouldn't have bothered you."

"No, no," says Leila, her voice tentative but concerned. "How are you?"

It seems that Leila is opening the door to a conversation and so Shirin tiptoes through. She mentions the hot weather, the watery fruits, and the Thai people's obsession with demons, how they are tied to more than just sin—"They're everywhere, Leila joon!"

Soon they fall into natural conversation and Leila tells her about school. She uses words and phrases that, after fifteen years in America, Shirin understands but will never appreciate. Leila's new boyfriend, it seems, is turning out to be *a colossal dick,* and she is thinking of *phoning in* some paper on Carl Jung. She throws psychology words into her everyday speech. Somebody has a *Napoleon complex*. Somebody else is engaging in *serious transference*. Shirin listens and waits for the chance to discuss Boonmee. What part of his psyche made him do this strange thing? Her daughter will have theories.

Finally, Leila starts to say that she has to leave and Shirin blurts it out, "One of the children at school grabbed for my breast. Is that normal?"

There is a moment of silence, and then Leila laughs, her sweet young laugh. "Oh Maman joon," she says, amused but on the verge of distraction. "It's just instinct."

For a moment Shirin forgets her concerns. She tells the story only to entertain, and Leila rewards her with gasps and giggles and clever American jokes. Then she says, as if just thinking of it, "I'm going to Tokyo for a week during break. What if I visit?"

Something moves in Shirin's chest, a flutter, like when Leila was a child and they were friends. "Are you serious?" she says. "You can take the time off?"

"I *just* said it's break," says Leila. "I'm googling Chiang Mai right now. What street's your apartment on?" She reads the websites aloud, thrilled by the city's many restaurants and elephant reserves and massage parlors.

Shirin waits for a moment. Before she can think through the consequences of the lie, and her daily promises to God and to herself, she has already blurted, "Right in the center, Leila joon. It's very modern. Very, very nice. You'll love it."

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Sometimes the villagers offer her gifts, watery lychee and pungent durian, heavenly fruits that she knows to accept. In Iran, accepting is impolite, and it is customary to refuse three times. In Iran one must show no need, no suffering. One must always be above it. Here, it is better, simpler, to share your troubles so that the community can

help. This feels so natural that soon Shirin forgets the old ways. She puts away the last of her American clothes, deciding that the fisherman pants are far more appropriate. On the twentieth of the month, when she usually colors her hair, she tells herself that she is too busy and as the weeks pass she continues to skip it, preferring to show her true age. Her neighbors' bows grow deeper with each *sawat-dee-kha*.

Two weeks before her daughter's visit, she considers coloring her hair for Leila's sake, but decides against it.

Leila is scheduled to arrive on a Saturday morning. Shirin spends a week preparing, cooking Iranian dishes, washing the floors of her hut, finding a flowerpot for the Buddha shelf. She thinks of what she will say to Leila. *Leila joon, did you know there are water monitors here as big as a small car? Did you know that the durian is a fruit that you can only eat after it rots, its best value coming in its most decrepit state? Leila joon, let me tell you about Boonmee. I think he might have a demon, or some other kind of strangeness you might explain.* She lays out a number of pungent herbs that are supposed to ward off the lizards. They don't work. She has arranged a ride from Phrao to Chiang Mai airport in a weekly van bound for the night market. She is the first one inside, and the rest trickle in. Most of the other passengers are food vendors. In the stuffy, humid van, the smell of fish and meat on their bodies becomes a toxic vapor that nauseates her. She spots Boonmee's father, Khunpol, sitting in front, and she wants so much to confront him on the

boy's behalf. Instead she glares at the back of his neck and wishes for all the fattest lizards in Thailand to visit him in the night.

She rechecks the bus schedule, their transportation back to the village. On the return trip, she will be with Leila—the thought fills her with anticipation. At the airport lounge, she waits with a fragrant jasmine necklace that she has made. After an hour, she sees a familiar figure in the distance, her exhausted daughter, long and shapely in jeans and a t-shirt. She can barely contain her joy as she flings the necklace around Leila's neck. Leila laughs. "I missed you, Maman joon," she whispers into Shirin's shoulder.

The trouble starts on the bus, but Shirin is sure she can manage it. "It's just a short ride," she says, to a visibly annoyed Leila, who promptly falls asleep on her shoulder. She wakes up two hours later and asks how long it's been. "Fifteen minutes," says Shirin.

Leila checks her watch and frowns. "So you *don't* live in Chiang Mai?" she says this in that way she has, always accusing. Her stare pierces Shirin and she is forced to look at her lap, "You didn't have to do it again," Leila whispers, as if she's already a licensed psychologist. "I would've come either way." They've talked about the lying before, and

Shirin has tried to explain. *It's not lying. In Iran everyone knows a real lie from these everyday things. You just don't know your own culture.*

As soon as they arrive Leila falls asleep on a mat on the floor. Shirin thinks this is a good sign. She prepares some food and checks the bicycles for their evening ride. When she wakes an hour later, Leila looks around and groans, scratching her bare arm where she has been bitten several times. *So much fuss*, Shirin thinks. "Maman," Leila says calmly, "We need to talk about this situation."

Shirin ignores her and suggests they go for a walk. *What situation?* Her daughter has become too American for her own good, always alluding to later discussions. Just say it or don't say it. Though, a minute later when Leila meanders to the bathroom, Shirin thinks maybe she has raised a true Persian daughter, after all. Iranians may be good liars, but they're even better at drama. There is a phrase in Farsi, *putting the whole house on your head.* It's used to describe the moment when someone goes so crazy, so uncontrollably bonkers, as Americans would say, that they explode into a thousand sizzling pieces, their anger like shrapnel, piercing everything.

This is what happens when Leila sees the toilet.

A boycott ensues. "I will *not* even attempt to go in that hole," Leila says. "Maman joon, you *said* Chiang Mai. Why would you not give me time to plan for this?"

Leila falls asleep again, this time under the mosquito net (which, thank God, she finds charming), and Shirin sits up worrying about her daughter's colon and bladder—all the digestive problems she could develop, holding it in after twenty hours of flying. For a second she allows herself the realization that she should have anticipated this. Leila is a city girl, an American. She has always been weak in her body. Should she forgive this?

No… She prepares a speech about gratitude and authenticity, about Boonmee. She wants to tell her daughter that she is letting her seams show, an ugly thing. She chops watermelon with a machete. She cleans the toilet, which, to be fair, isn't a hole. It's lined with porcelain, and that makes it a *style*, not a lesser thing. She imagines that she will win over her stubborn, city-spoiled daughter with lessons and beautiful words about strength of will and true beauty. Then she will teach Leila how to use this toilet and they will laugh at the silliness of it, remembering the last time she taught Leila this very skill, when Leila was two and they were in Iran, in a bathroom exactly like this one.

When Leila wakes, she is crying softly into the pillow. "I can't sleep. It's so hot," she whispers. Shirin brings her the watermelon.

"Don't you remember Iran?" Shirin says. "The villages we used to visit?"

"No," says Leila, putting on that professional stare again.

"How about a ride in the rice fields," Shirin offers. "I borrowed a bike for you."

"Okay," Leila says and takes one bite of the watermelon, then winces. She whispers, "Maman joon, you lied so so much. Why can't you stop? Why do it with *me*?"

Shirin ignores this. "Get dressed. Let's go."

For the rest of the weekend they follow Shirin's schedule: biking through rice fields, walking through the village, visiting each and every one of her acquaintances. She can see that Leila is suffering through it for her sake. On Sunday, Leila says fewer words, though it's a joy that as the hours pass, the words she does speak are mostly Farsi.

When there is little to say, they laugh at small things. "What the hell is that?" says Leila on Monday morning, as she crawls out from under the mosquito net they share.

"Don't try to kill it," says Shirin, wanting to annoy her daughter, "too much guts."

Leila rolls her eyes and suppresses a smile. Then she surprises Shirin by touching the evil creature, letting the lizard crawl onto her hand. "Hello there, little guy," she says.

After breakfast, Leila visits Shirin's school, sits in the back and listens as Shirin gives the lesson with twice her usual energy. The children sense the cause of this and flock to Leila. Later over noodles under a straw awning, Leila says, "Maman joon, that boy has a touch of autism…" She pauses. "I'll send you some books to read. Maybe if his family understood it better…" They discuss this for an hour, as they might do in a café in New York. Later, Shirin notices that Boonmee is the only topic they spoke about as friends, two adults without a bitter history or any foreignness at all.

Now and then, mostly in the hours when Leila's jet lag is strong, they suffer each other with much huffing. On the third day of the visit, the hottest yet, Leila steps outside, into the half-covered area between Shirin's house and the quiet couple next door, wearing tiny shorts and a tank top. Shirin rushes to her, hoping to get her back inside before the neighbors see. "You can't dress like that here," she says.

"It's a hundred degrees. What else am I gonna wear?" says Leila as she takes her sunglasses out from between her breasts. Shirin can see that her daughter is on edge, and that her patience is running out, but she persists. When Shirin presents her with a pair of fisherman pants—a light rose pair she picked out at the last Sunday market—Leila laughs. "I'm comfortable as is. I'll just go out by myself today. You rest here."

"Leila," says Shirin, growing angry. "Stop this. People here won't respect you in those clothes. How will I go on living here if my daughter behaves like a total *farang*?"

"Respect me? Are you serious?" Leila snaps, wiping the sweat from her arms, her skin now covered with the bites of a hundred mosquitoes.

Shirin sighs. "How did I raise such willful daughter? New York has ruined you."

Leila laughs. Then she just smirks for a moment. "You really care *that* much? Maman, they're all strangers." She says this word slowly, as if Shirin doesn't know the meaning. "Nobody gives a flying fuck what I—" Leila is raising her voice now and they are only a few feet from the neighbor's window. Shirin pulls her daughter inside, where Leila proceeds not just to put the whole house on her head, but possibly the entire village.

Shirin hurries to the kitchen window, to see if they are watching. The couple is sitting on the floor, having tea, neither of them looking up from their cups. She can see from their profiles that they are absolutely listening—such an impolite daughter, only the wickedest woman must deserve such offspring. What has the foreign woman, this *farang*, done in her life to earn such a curse, they will wonder.

Shirin too wonders things. How much face has she lost in this one exchange? Will the villagers still call her doctor? Will they listen raptly to her every word?

Mother and daughter don't speak for the rest of the day. It's as if all the tension of the last three days has struck them dumb and lame in each other's presence. Finally, just as Shirin gets up to warm some dinner, Leila meanders barefoot into the long corridor that serves as a living room. Shirin used to be so charmed by this small space, its bright blue walls and cozy shape. She was proud of it, but now it is as if the gauze has been removed from her eyes. Now, looking through Leila's eyes, it is just a walkway to connect the shameful toilet, meager kitchen, and stifling bedroom under one roof. Leila drops to the floor, presses her face against the cool, cherry-red tiles. She moans a little.

"Mommy joon, I tried," she whispers to the tiles, "I really really tried. But I can't stay here longer. I haven't taken a shit in three days. I'll die."

Shirin raises an eyebrow. "What have you been doing in the bathroom then?"

Leila shrugs. "I'll die," she repeats.

Oh, what drama, my Persian girl. "Whatever you want," says Shirin, thinking of all the imagined conversations with her daughter, over the ten days they were supposed to have together. So far they've only conversed once, and even that about somebody's strange boy. "I'll find you a ride to Chiang Mai." The weekly van isn't due for four days.

"You come too," says Leila. "We can travel around together. Stay in hotels."

Shirin has already thought of this. It's impossible, and why should she give in to Leila's whims? "I'm needed here," she says. "I won't follow you around Thailand."

"Don't be stubborn," says Leila, "Isn't there a teacher that can cover for you?"

"That's not the point," Shirin snaps. "I work at the clinic too. You go. It's fine."

"They have midwives," mutters Leila, because she is trying to be cruel.

Her daughter believes that Shirin has lied about being a doctor in Tehran. She believes that Shirin was actually a midwife. Shirin has tried to have her credentials sent to America, but has failed to locate them. She left them behind in the frenzy to escape the Islamic Republic. Likely they were lost or destroyed in the ensuing government lootings of her office. It is the only true thing that Shirin wishes known about herself: that she was a top doctor in Tehran. This is the truth: she once attended the best college in a big city, as Leila is now doing. She was a doctor, a very good one. But

what's the point? Her daughter believes she is a liar, and is desperate to get away. In Iran and in Thailand, children never leave their parents, not even bad ones like Khunpol.

They spend the early evening walking in silence through the tiny village—three unpaved roads snaking out of a central fish market—knocking on every door. Shirin cringes each time she has to explain to a neighbor that her daughter is sick and that they need a ride into Chiang Mai tonight. No, it can't wait, she says. Yes, she is a doctor herself but she is ill equipped here. No, she doesn't have a better explanation.

"Tonight?" the first neighbor, a young seamstress with a browning half-tooth, asks. "Really so urgent?" She doesn't have a car, but she offers to call a friend who does.

As she goes inside her hut to find her mobile, Shirin catches the eye of the girl's mother, sitting cross-legged on the floor just inside the screen door, facing outside. It is a strange place to sit, and the old woman smiles perpetually, never closing her mouth. Shirin smiles back. Leila looks baffled. She swats flies from her legs and leans against a tree stump a few feet away from the grinning mother, whose mouth just opens wider. The two stare at each other wordlessly. It's exhausting for Shirin to watch them.

Finally, the woman asks in Thai, "How old is she?"

Shirin responds, also in Thai, “Twenty.”

“Ohhhh,” says the old woman. “She looks much younger.”

“She says you look young,” Shirin mutters to her daughter. “It’s a compliment.”

Leila thanks the old woman, in Thai, pressing her palms together in an elegant *wai*. Shirin stares at her daughter, unable to keep her eyebrows from creeping upward. “*What?*” says Leila, crossing her arms. “I read the guidebook on the plane.”

The young seamstress returns, carrying a bunch of bananas. She offers them to Leila, who, though confused, accepts with both hands, bowing a little. Shirin feels a tingle of pride at her worldly daughter, but she fights it back. Because isn’t the girl forcing Shirin to go door-to-door, to give up all the respect she’s gained, just because she’s hot and needs a *farang* toilet? The seamstress motions for them to follow her to the next house, where a man in traditional Thai clothes and an old American-style cap answers. After a short exchange, Shirin thinks maybe they’ve found a ride. The man is coming outside. Maybe he has a truck behind the house. But soon it becomes clear that his only intention is to follow and observe as the seamstress leads them to a third house.

Half an hour later, they stand sweaty and furious, in front of the eighth house, with the occupants of all seven previous houses in a whispering cluster behind them. Their errand has become an *event*. “This isn’t happening,” says Leila. “Fucking unreal.”

“Please don’t speak,” says Shirin.

For the eighth time, someone asks, “You need to go to Chiang Mai tonight? Why tonight? Is everything okay?” then shakes their head and says, “Impossible!”

Maybe this won’t work, thinks Shirin. Maybe Leila will have to stay another night, and then her jet lag will be fully gone and she can see that things aren’t so bad here, that her house is quaint and charming, a window into a new world. Maybe they can bike far past the rice fields and she can tell Leila about the time she was chased by a water monitor, a lizard so big and fast, it outran her even though she was cycling. But then, how can she take Leila around the village again, after tonight? How can she present her, knowing that everyone will whisper? Dr. Rin’s spoiled daughter. The girl that yelled at her own mother in the front yard. The daughter who needs air conditioning to survive.

Each time they go from one house to the next, an act that feels very much like begging, the crowd behind them grows by the inhabitants of the last house. People ask her daughter’s name, her age and occupation. They ask if she’s

had rice today. After a while, Leila seems to recognize these questions and answers on her own behalf. She loves the one about rice. They marvel at her answers.

Shirin focuses on a point on her fisherman pants. There's a tear there, on the knee. Has it been there all day? She tries to push away that sickening humiliation that worsens with each door and every knock—her frayed seams showing clearer and clearer. Someone touches her arm. She has been so exhausted that she has stopped noticing the individual people joining the expedition, which they are now calling "Dr. Rin's Mission." Sawat, the schoolteacher, is smiling beside her. "You need a ride, Dr. Rin?" she asks.

"Sawat," she whispers, because what's the use of holding back this one last favor she needs? They already know all her business. "How do I get them all to go home?"

"Why go home?" says Sawat, surprised. "They want to see what happen!"

Shirin stares dumbfounded. "I think it's a lost cause," she mutters.

Sawat's thin eyebrows gather. She doesn't seem to know the expression, so Shirin elaborates: "I think we failed at the mission."

Sawat laughs. "This *Dr. Rin's* mission… it is Phrao that succeed or fail."

Absurd, thinks Shirin, then chastises herself, her bitter heart, for scoffing at such a lovely sentiment. These people love her. In an hour and a half of knocking on doors, she and Leila have no ride but they are weighed down with fruits. Leila, whose fatigue seems to go in and out, is peeling lychee in a happy cluster of women her age. This too angers Shirin and she thinks maybe she's growing old and cynical. She looks back at the swelling crowd and wishes she were in her bed beside the lizards.

"I know who we ask," says Sawat suddenly. She gives a quick bow goodbye and rushes off down the road, the only direction from here.

"Let's just go home," whispers Leila in accented Farsi.

"I have to wait for Sawat," Shirin says coldly. "You can't just treat people like they're your servants, then dismiss them when you're done."

"Fine," says Leila in English, as if her Farsi has been rejected. "Just saying…"

Ten minutes later Sawat returns, a male figure lumbering behind her. Khunpol is strutting quickly, his head down as if he is counting his own steps. His walk conjures in Shirin's mind the memory of Boonmee in the school courtyard, his head hanging, and her anger flares. How could Sawat bring this man here? When the crowd sees the keys dangling

from his hand, they whisper and cheer. A ride has been found, they say, Khunpol is a good man, a reliable man—lies for which Shirin blames Leila.

She tries to calculate how much this day has cost her and, unable to do so, she decides she is finished. Her peace is gone. When Khunpol motions to the next street, where his truck is parked, and indicates that he will do the job for 1,300 baht, Shirin accepts. She wonders who will watch Boonmee while his father is out.

They load Leila's suitcase into the back of the truck. It has only two seats, so Shirin says goodbye at the door. She feels sick to her stomach, every now and then thinking that she should stop Leila. But the entire town has gone to so much trouble to find a ride. They have let it escalate too far to turn back. What a marvel, she thinks, the distance that can grow between a mother and daughter, two creatures who once shared a body. Did she give birth to this American stranger who needs to get far away from her for a peaceful breath? For a second she considers Khunpol's temper, the demon Sawat mentioned. But there is no reason to worry. This is a small community, and she a well-respected member of it. Leila is as safe with this man as with any of them.

She pays Khunpol, says goodbye to her daughter. There is no question of her visiting again. "Maman joon," says Leila in Farsi, as she settles in the front seat. "I'm sorry about that midwife crack earlier. I know how it was in Iran."

"No mention," says Shirin, reverting to Iranian pleasantries but using English words, maybe to show that she's still angry. "It was a really nice time having you here."

She almost apologizes for having lied about Chiang Mai, but she doesn't—though she plans to later. She promises herself that she will, as soon as she has found elegant enough words, about Iran and homesickness and children and her own sinful heart. There are secrets she has yet to confess, painful half-truths about Leila's father and her days in Tehran. Maybe she will, slowly, not now. The next day Leila calls to say she plans to spend the rest of her vacation in Bangkok, and this seems reasonable to Shirin.

After the truck has pulled away, Shirin passes by Khunpol's house. She peeks into the window. Boonmee is in the front garden, picking leaves off a tree, trying to blow bubbles from the sap. His rosebud mouth and sleepy eyes cheer her. And she thinks, *what a thing I thought of the poor boy who, after all, just wanted a mother's love. It was my own wickedness.* She goes to say hello and the boy bursts into unexpected laughter, his strange habit, conversing with himself. Maybe he does have a demon, and maybe that's not such a bad affliction. A demon is just another foreign thing that needs its space. When he lifts his arms toward her, a thing he would never have done at school, she wraps him up in a warm hug. Again his hand creeps toward her breast. She pulls back, searches his face for malice. She says in broken

Thai, “This is how we touch mothers.” She puts a hand on each of his cheeks. His small eyes widen and eagerly he mirrors the gesture, his warm palms on her face reminding her of childhood and isolation and the thin line of nature, like the skin inside a spiny fruit, that separates the sweet from the foul.