Memorial

Benson and Mike are two young guys who live together in Houston. Mike is a Japanese-American chef at a Mexican restaurant and Benson's a Black day care teacher, and they've been together for a few years – good years – but now they're not sure why they're still a couple. There's the sex, sure, and the meals Mike cooks for Benson, and, well, they love each other.

But when Mike finds out his estranged father is dying in Osaka just as his acerbic Japanese mother, Mitsuko, arrives in Texas for a visit, Mike picks up and flies across the world to say goodbye. In Japan he undergoes an extraordinary transformation, discovering the truth about his family and his past. Back home, Mitsuko and Benson are stuck living together as unconventional roommates, an absurd domestic situation that ends up meaning more to each of them than they ever could have predicted. Without Mike's immediate pull, Benson begins to push outwards, realizing he might just know what he wants out of life and have the goods to get it.

Publicity enquiries: Kirsty Doole

Tel: 020 7269 1621 Fax: 020 7430 0916

Email: kirstydoole@atlantic-books.co.uk

Sales enquiries: Isabel Bogod

Tel: 020 7269 0249 Fax: 020 7430 0916

Email: isabelbogod@atlantic-books.co.uk

Atlantic Books

Ormond House

26–27 Boswell Street

London, WC1N 3JZ

Tel: 020 7269 1610 Fax: 020 7430 0916

Email: enquiries@atlantic-books.co.uk

Memorial

Bryan Washington

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For A, D, and L

Everybody everywhere, I think, is always talking about the same shitty thing.

—RACHEL KHONG

The world is wonderful, terrible.

—ANDRÉS NEUMAN

Does love need a reason?

—MASAO WADA, *TERRACE HOUSE*

Benson

1.

Mike's taking off for Osaka, but his mother's flying into Houston. Just for a few weeks, he says.

Or maybe a couple of months, he says. But I need to go.

The first thing I think is: fuck.

The second's that we don't have the money for this.

Then it occurs to me that *we* don't have any savings at all. But Mike's always been good about finances, always cool about separating his checks. It's something I'd always taken for granted about him.

Now he's saying that he wants to find his father. The man's gotten sick. Mike wants to catch him before he goes. And I'm on the sofa, half listening, half charging my phone.

You haven't seen your mom in years, I say. She's coming for *you*. I've never *met* her.

I say, You don't even fucking like your dad.

True, says Mike. But I already bought the ticket.

And Ma will be here when I'm back, says Mike. You're great company. She'll live.

He's cracking eggs by the stove, slipping yolks into a pair of pans. After they've settled, he salts them, drizzling mayonnaise with a few

sprigs of oregano. Mike used to have this thing about sriracha, he'd pull a hernia whenever I reached for it, but now he squeezes a faded bottle over my omelette, rubbing it in with the spatula.

I don't ask where he'll stay in Japan. I don't ask who he'll stay with. I don't ask where his mother will sleep here, in our one-bedroom apartment, or exactly what that arrangement will look like. The thing about a moving train is that, sometimes, you can catch it. Some of the kids I work with, that's how their families make it into this country. If you fall, you're dead. If you're too slow, you're dead. But if you get a running start, it's never entirely gone.

So I don't flip the coffee table. Or one of our chairs. I don't key his car or ram it straight through the living room. After the black eye, we stopped putting our hands on each other—we'd both figured, silently, it was the least we could do.

Today, what I do is smile.

I thank Mike for letting me know.

I ask him when he's leaving, and I know that's my mistake. I'm already reaching to toss my charger before he says it, tomorrow.

• • •

We've been fine. Thank you for asking.

• • •

Our relationship is, what, four years old? But that depends on how you count. We haven't been to a party in months, and when we did go to parties, at first, no one knew we were fucking. Mike just stood to the side while whatever whitegirl talked her way into my space, then he'd reach up over my shoulder to slip a finger into my beer.

Or he'd sneeze, stretch, and wipe his nose with my shirtsleeve.

Or he'd fondle my wallet, slowly, patting it back into place.

Once, at a dinner, right under the table, he held court with a hand in my lap. Running his thumb over the crotch. Every now and again, someone would look, and you could tell when they finally saw. They'd straightened their backs. Smile a little too wide. Then Mike would ask what was wrong, and they'd promise it was nothing, and he'd go right back to cheesing, never once nodding my way.

We knew how we looked. And how we didn't look. But one night, a few weeks back, at a bar crawl for Mike's job, all it took was a glance at us. He works at a coffee shop in Montrose. It's this fusion thing where they butcher rice bowls and egg rolls—although, really, it's Mexican food, since unless your name is Mike, that's who's cooking.

They'd been open for a year. This was their anniversary celebration. Mike volunteered us to help for an hour, flipping tortillas on a burner by the DJ.

I felt miserable. Mike felt miserable. Everyone who passed us wore this look that said, Mm. They touched our shoulders. Asked how long we'd been together. Wondered where we'd met, how we'd managed during Harvey, and the music was too fucking loud, so Mike and I just sort of shrugged.

• • •

I don't say shit on our way to the airport to pick up his mother, and I don't say shit when Mike parks the car. IAH sits outside of Houston's beltways, but there's always steady traffic lining the highway. When Mike pulls up to Arrivals, he takes out the keys, and a line shimmers behind us, this tiny constellation of travelers.

Mike's got this mustache now. It wavers over his face. He usually clips all of that off, and now I think he looks like a caricature of himself. We sit beside the terminal, and we can't have the most fucked-up situation here, but still. You have to wonder.

I wonder.

I wonder if he wonders.

We haven't been good at apologizing lately. Now would be a nice time.

The airport sees about 111,500 visitors a day, and here we are, two of its most ridiculous.

Hey, says Mike.

He sighs. Hands me the keys. Says he'll be right back with his mother.

If you leave us stranded in the parking lot, says Mike, we'll probably find you.

• • •

It took all of two dates for him to bring up Race. We'd gone to an Irish bar tucked behind Hyde Park. Everyone else on the patio was white. I'd gotten a little drunk, and when I told Mike he was slightly shorter than optimal, he clicked his tongue, like, what took you so long.

What if I told you you're too polite, said Mike.

Fine, I said.

Or that you're so well-spoken.

I get it. Sorry.

Don't be sorry, said Mike, and then he boxed my shoulder.

It was the first time we'd touched that night. The bartender glanced our way, blinking.

I just hope you see me as a fully realized human being, said Mike. Beyond the obvious sex appeal.

Shut up, I said.

Seriously, said Mike, no bullshit.

Me Mifune, he said, you Yasuke.

Stop it, I said.

Or maybe we're just fucking Bonnie and Clyde, he said.

• • •

Three different cops peek in the car while Mike's in Baggage Claim. I smile at the first two. I frown at the third. The last guy taps the window, like, What the fuck are you waiting for, and when I point toward the airport's entrance, all he does is frown.

Then I spot them on their way out. The first thing I think is that they look like family. Mike's mother is hunched, just a little bit, and he's rolling her suitcase behind her. For a while, they saw each other annually—she'd fly down just to visit—but the past few years have been rocky. The visits stopped once I moved in with Mike.

The least I can do is pop the trunk. I'd like to be the guy who doesn't, but I'm not.

Mike helps his mother adjust the back seat as she gets in, and she doesn't even look at me. Her hair's in a bun. She's got on this bright blue windbreaker, with a sickness mask, and the faintest trace of makeup.

Ma, says Mike, you hungry?

She mumbles something in Japanese. Shrugs.

Ma, says Mike.

He glances at me. Asks again. Then he switches over, too.

She says something, and then he says something, and then another guy directing traffic walks up to my window. He's Latino, husky in his vest. Shaved head like he's in the army. He mouths at us through the glass, and I let down the window, and he asks if anything's wrong.

I tell him we're moving.

Then move, says this man.

The next words leave my mouth before I can taste them. It's a little like gravity. I say, Okay, motherfucker, we're gone.

And the Latino guy just frowns at me. Before he says anything else, there's a bout of honking behind us. He looks at me again, and then he wanders away, scratching at his chest, wincing back at our car.

When I roll up the window, Mike's staring. His mother is, too. She says something, shaking her head, and I pull the car into traffic.

I turn on the radio, and it's Meek Mill.

I flip the channel, and it's Migos.

I turn the damn thing off. Eventually we're on the highway.

All of a sudden, we're just one more soap opera among way too many, but that's when Mike's mother laughs, shaking her head.

She says something in Japanese.

Mike thumps the glove compartment, says, *Ma*.

• • •

My parents pretend I'm not gay. It's easier for them than it sounds. My father lives in Katy, just west of Houston, and my mother stayed in Bellaire, even after she remarried. Before that, we took most of our family dinners downtown. My father was a meteorologist. It was a status thing. He'd pick up my sister and my mother and me from the house, ferrying us along I-45 just to eat with his coworkers, and he always ordered our table the largest dish on the menu—basted pigs spilling from platters, pounds of steamed crab sizzling over bok choy—and he called this Work, because he was always Working.

A question he used to ask us was, How many niggas do you see out here telling the weather?

My mother never debated him or cussed him out or anything like that. She'd repeat exactly what he said. Inflect his voice. That was her thing. She'd make him sound important, like some kind of boss, but my father's a little man, and her tactics did exactly what you'd think they might do.

Big job today, she'd say, in the car, stuck on the 10.

This forecast's impressive, she'd say, moments after my father shattered a wineglass on the kitchen wall.

I swear it's the last one, she'd say, looking him dead in the eyes, as he floundered, drunk, grabbing at her knees, swearing that he'd never touch another single beer.

Eventually, she left. Lydia went with our mother, switching high schools. I stayed in the suburbs, at my old junior high, and my father kept drinking. He lived off his savings once he got fired from the station for being wasted on-air. Sometimes, he'd sub high school science classes, but he mostly stayed on the sofa, booing at the hourly prognoses from KHOU.

Occasionally, in blips of sobriety, I'd come home to him grading papers. Some kid had called precipitation *anticipation*. Another kid, instead of defining cumulus clouds, drew little fluffs all over the page. One time my father laid three tests on an already too-cluttered end table, all with identical handwriting, with only the names changed.

He waved them at me, asked why everything had to be so fucking *hard*.

• • •

A few months in, Mike said we could be whatever we wanted to be. Whatever that looked like.

I'm so easy, he said.

I'm not, I told him.

You will be, he said. Just give me a little time.

• • •

It's past midnight when we pull onto our block. Most of the lights are out. Some kids are huddled by the curb, smoking pot, fucking around with firecrackers.

When a pop explodes behind us, the kids take off. That's their latest thing. Mike's mother doesn't even flinch.

Ma, says Mike, this is home.

We live in the Third Ward, a historically black part of Houston. Our apartment's entirely too large. It doesn't make any sense. At one point, the neighborhood had money, but then crack happened and the money took off, and occasionally you'll hear gunshots or fistfights or motherfuckers driving way too fast. But the block has recently been invaded by fraternities from the college up the block. And a scattering of professor types. With pockets of rich kids playing at poverty. The black folks who've lived here for decades let them do it, happy for the scientific fact that white kids keep the cops away.

Our immediate neighbors are Venezuelan. They've got like nine kids. Our other neighbors are these black grandparents who've lived on the property forever. Every few weeks, Mike cooks for both families, sopa de pescado and yams and macaroni and rice. He's never made a big deal about it; he just wakes up and does it, and after the first few times I asked Mike if that wasn't patronizing.

But, after a little while, I noticed people let him linger on their porches. He'd poke at their kids, leaning all over the wood. Sometimes the black folks invited him inside, showed him pictures of their daughter's daughters.

Mike's lived here for years. I left my father's place for his. On my first night in the apartment, I couldn't fall asleep for the noise, and Mike said I'd get used to it, but honestly I didn't want to.

Now, Mike's mother drops her shoes by our door. She runs her hand along the wall. She taps at the counter, toeing the wood. When she steps into the foyer, Mike grins my way, the first smile in what feels like months, and that's when we hear it: slow at first, after some hiccups, before Mike's mother begins to cry.

• • •

A few years after they split, my parents took me to lunch together in Montrose. We hadn't all sat at the same table in years. Lydia had mostly cut them off; she'd moved out, and moved on, and she'd told me to do the same, but what I did instead was order a Reuben.

The week before, my father had walked in on some guy jerking me off. It wasn't anyone who matters. We'd met on some fucking app. My father opened the door, coughed, and actually said, I'm sorry, as he backed out of the room. The boy beside me made a face like, should we finish or what.

That night, after he left, I waited for my father to bring it up. But he just sat on the sofa and drank his way through two six-packs. The incident dissolved in the air. Before he drove off, the guy had asked to see me again, and I told him I didn't think so, because we probably weren't actually going anywhere. I still hadn't learned that there are a finite number of people that will ever be interested in you.

When our waiter, a skinny brown guy, asked if we needed anything else, I spoke a little too quickly. He smiled. Then my mother smiled.

You know you can talk to us, she said.

Both of us, she added.

My mother smelled like chocolate. My father wore his nice shirt. You'd have been hard-pressed to think that this was a man who'd thrown his wife against a wall. Or that this lady, immediately afterward, stuck a fork into his elbow.

Awesome, I said. Thank you.

About anything, said my mother, touching my hand.

When I flinched, she took hers back. My father didn't say shit.

That night, my father dropped me off at the house. He said he'd be back in the morning.

Not even an hour later, I texted back the boy from the other day. When I opened the door, he looked a little uncertain, but then I touched his wrist and he got the biggest grin on his face.

I let him fuck me on the sofa. And then again in the kitchen. And then again in my father's bedroom. We didn't use protection.

He left the next morning, but not before we ate some toast. He was Filipino, with a heavy accent. He told me he wanted to be a lawyer.

• • •

One day, our second year in, I told Mike all of that. We were out shopping for groceries. He fondled the ginger and the cabbage and the bacon.

Halfway through my story, he stopped me to ask around for some kombu.

He said, Your folks sound like real angels.

And you, said Mike, you're like a baby. Just a very lucky boy.

And then one morning Mike had already left our place for the restaurant. He'd forgotten his phone by the sink. I didn't mean to touch it, but it flashed, so I did.

I did not and do not know the guy whose cock blipped across the screen.

Just for a second.

But then it disappeared.

You see these situations in the movies and shit, and you say it could never be you. Of course you'd be proactive. You'd throw the whole thing away.

When Mike knocked on the door, looking for his cell, I pointed silently toward the sink.

Wait, he said, what's wrong?

Nothing, I said.

Tell me, said Mike.

It's cool, I said. I'm just tired.

You're not drinking enough water, said Mike, and he actually sat down to pour me some.

I never said shit about that photo. But I guess you could say it nagged me.

• • •

Mike figures we'll make a bed for his mother on the pull-out.

Tomorrow you'll get the bedroom, he says to her, looking at me.

His mother doesn't say shit, but by now she's stopped crying. She sets her bag on the counter, crosses her arms. We lift the mattress from the sofa, layering it with blankets that Lydia gave us, and when I slip into my room for some pillows I decide not to come back out.

The thing about our place is that there isn't much to clean. Most of what I make goes toward half the rent, and Mike spends all of his checks on food. Which, when you think about it, leaves plenty for a ticket. That's plenty of cash left over to fly halfway across the world.

They're still shouting in the living room when I settle into bed. Something heavy falls out there. I don't jump up to look. And once Mike finally comes in and shuts the door, I hear his mother sobbing behind him.

She's taking it well, says Mike.

You hardly gave her any warning, I say. She flies in to catch you and you're fucking flying out.

That's unfair. You know exactly why.

It's not fair to her either.

It's fine. She'll be fine.

You're easy to love.

Ma's low-maintenance, he says. You won't have to do anything, if that's what you're worried about. After a few days, you won't even know she's around.

I start to say, Does she even speak English?

And then I swallow it.

And then I ask.

You're joking, says Mike, throwing off his shirt.

I'm not, I say.

I'm not gonna call that racist, says Mike. But it's fucked up. For a second there, I thought you actually gave a shit.

He kicks off his pants, toes them into his duffel. He's gained more weight, but that's nothing new. It's never been an issue, never been something I look down on, but for the first time I sort of gag.

Mike catches me. He keeps quiet.

You can teach her, he says. If you care that much. Word by word.

You're joking, I say.

I'm packing, says Mike.

• • •

My sister met him accidentally. It happened during Halloween, at a bar off Westheimer. I'd wandered away from him to take a piss, and when I made it back to the table, Lydia was stirring her Coke beside him. She wore some witchy getup, a costume with too many straps. Mike had on a toga. I'd gone as myself.

I was just talking to Mark, said Lydia.

You didn't say you had a little sister, said Mike.

They went on like that, back and forth. Lydia ordered more drinks. When I asked if she didn't have a date to get back to, she smiled and told me she'd just have to reschedule it. *This*, she said, was special. She'd never meet her baby brother's boyfriend for the first time again.

Lydia was Mike's age. A few years older than me. She wrote copy for the Buffalo Soldier Museum downtown, and if you told her you didn't know Houston had one of those, she'd say that's because it's for niggas.

But that evening, she played it cool. Laughed at our jokes. Paid for more beer.

Just before last call, Lydia gave Mike her number.

Wow, said Mike. This is a first.

Life is long, said Lydia.

Cheers, said Mike.

Later that night, Lydia texted me.

He's funny, she said.

Too funny for you, she added.

• • •

Between the four of us, my father and Lydia are the darkest. Whenever we ate out as kids, she and I always sat on the same end of the table. If we didn't, we ran the risk of waiters splitting the check, the sort of thing our father bitched about for months. We never ate at those restaurants again.

• • •

It's late when Mike touches me, and I'm not thinking about it until we've started—then we're mashing our chests together, jumbling legs and elbows.

His tongue touches mine. My nose strafes his belly button. There's a point when you're with someone, and it's all just reaction. You've done everything there is to do.

But once in a blue moon, they'll feel like a stranger, like this visitor in your hands.

So it's the first time we've kissed in weeks, and then I'm sucking Mike off, when he lifts up his knees.

I point toward the living room.

Grow up, says Mike.

And before he says anything else, I've got one finger in there, and

then two. Like I'm kneading dough. He laughs. He stops when I'm inside him.

He's tight, but I fit.

I wish it takes me longer.

Afterward, Mike waddles toward the toilet, and I'm staring at his packed duffel. When I wake up, he's back in bed, asleep, arms wrapped around his shoulders.

Now would be the time to wake him up and ask him to stay, but I don't do that.

I watch his chest rise and fall, rise and fall.

• • •

A few dates in, Mike told me a joke. I'd just let him fuck me at his place. We hadn't made it past the sofa. And it was fine, mostly, except for a few things, like his putting his thumb in my mouth, and me spitting that out, and my grinding too fast, and his saying *slow down*, and my laughing, and his coming immediately, and my taking forever to come.

But eventually it all happened.

Afterward, I rubbed a palm on his thighs. He held my head in his lap.

So, said Mike, a Jap and a nigger walk into a bar.

Hey, I said.

That's it, said Mike. That's the joke.

2.

Slamming cabinets wake me up. I reach for my pills. Then I reach for Mike, and he's not there.

His duffel's gone, too. He left the bathroom light on. It would've been too much to ask for a note, but of course I look for one anyway.

There's a text though: MITSUKO HARA

And then: MAKE SURE SHE TAKES HER MEDICINE BC SHE FORGETS

And then: IT'S MY FATHER, BEN. IT'S REALLY NOT YOU

• • •

Mitsuko's in the kitchen, opening things and looking into them and closing them back up again. Water's boiling on the stove. There's a mug on the counter. She's cooked rice, sliced a cucumber, and poached an egg when I step on the tile, and she doesn't look up, doesn't even acknowledge that I'm around.

Then she nods my way.

Do you work, she asks.

What, I say.

You don't work, says Mitsuko, shaking her head.

I do, I say. Mostly in the afternoon.

And what does that look like?

I'm at a daycare.

So you're a teacher, says Mitsuko.

More like a babysitter, I say.

And Mitsuko doesn't say anything to that. And I don't prompt her.

Mike's mother is compact, like him, but nimble. Sturdy. She finishes her bowl and turns to wash the dishes. I tell her she doesn't have to worry about that, and she doesn't even turn around.

When she's finished with everything, she wipes down the sink, setting everything back in their cabinets. I couldn't tell you where she found the rag. But as she reaches for her jacket, lifting her shoes at the door, I ask if she's taken her pills, and Mitsuko finally looks at me.

You're joking, she says.

Mike just mentioned them, I say.

Incredible, she says. That's what he tells you.

I'm sorry, I say.

And now you're apologizing, says Mitsuko.

Well, she says, you're too late.

And loud, she says.

Both of you, says Mitsuko before she shuts the door. The whole night. Like dogs.

• • •

My mother's new husband is Nigerian. He's a pastor. They've got this Pomeranian and two boys. She lives in a neighborhood with a gate, hosting potlucks and block parties, but the first time I showed Lydia their Christmas photo, the one they sent my father in the mail, she shrieked.

The *dog*, she said.

It's fucking *hideous*, she said.

• • •

I usually bike to work. Mike owns the car. It's in his name, but he's gone now, so I drive it just to see what that's like. His steering wheel's worn and warm on my fingers, and the fabric's torn against my thumb, and the seat's indented underneath me, probably from Mike's ass. I try to settle into it, but something still feels off. After fucking around with the rearview mirror, I give up, drive the whole way blind.

Most days, it's the same eight kids at the aftercare center. There's Hannah, with the straightened hair. Thomas with the twists. Xu and Ethan are twin brothers, and Marcos has a sister named Silvia. Then there's Margaret, who's a year or so older than the rest of them, and Ahmad, the lone black kid, who's something like two years younger.

I work with another guy, named Barry, who's big and white and scruffy. And then there's Ximena, who is none of those things. We're something like a team. Our boss comes by in the evenings, but she mostly just handles the money and our schedules, and unless she's handing us checks, she's generally MIA.

When I stumble through the doors, Ximena waves. She's watching Ethan and Xu on the swings. As Ahmad runs from the swings, pointing at nothing behind him, I pick him up by the elbows. He laughs. It's our Thing.

I tell Ximena about Mike.

You're joking, she says.

Nah.

Well, says Ximena, have you talked to the mother yet?

She's talked at me, I say.

At, says Ximena.

Around.

And?

I don't know, I say.

She's Mike's mom, I say.

No, says Ximena. There's mothers, and then there's moms. Then you've got ma*mas*.

Ximena lives with her mother, and they're co-parenting her kid. That's what she likes to say: that she's raising a six-year-old with her mother. She used to go to med school, but then she stopped doing that, and whenever the aftercare dads come around, they linger with her by the counter.

A while back, I asked Ximena why she entertained them at all. She asked if I'd ever seen a cadaver.

Doesn't matter if it's fifty years older or twenty, she said, a body's a body's a body.

But Ximena's getting married, again, in a few weeks. To some whiteboy who cleans teeth for a living. I've met him exactly once.

Before I take my lunch, Ximena touches my elbow.

At least there's a bright side, she says. It could've been Mike's father.

Mike could've left you with some man, she says.

• • •

On the seventh or eighth or ninth date, I asked Mike about his parents. I'd started spending some nights at his place. We ordered single-topping pizzas and drank gas station wine.

He looked at me a long time before he finally answered.

Ma grew up in Tokyo, said Mike. Got knocked up in the city. Had me there, moved here, and eventually she went back home.

To Japan?

Sure.

But you didn't want to go back with her, I said, and Mike made this face.

No, he said. This is where I live.

But Ma's adaptable, said Mike. That's where I get it from.

And your father, I said.

What about him, said Mike.

You didn't mention him.

I didn't mention him, said Mike.

• • •

One night, Mike told me that his father hit Mitsuko. We were watching his friends strum guitars in some band at the Warehouse. They slumped onstage, a little fucked up, tinkering at amps already way too drenched in reverb. Some kid in a mariachi suit blew into a trumpet. A sleepy crowd nodded behind us, bouncing around on the 1 and the 3.

I didn't know whether I liked this scene. Mike had told me his ex was playing. I'd tried picturing what the guy might look like, wondered which one he was up onstage, but eventually Mike yawned and asked if I was ready to leave.

Already? I said.

He saw us, said Mike. Or I think he did. He had opportunities.

So we were vaping by the entrance when he told me about his father. This couple walked their pit bull to the intersection behind us. When it growled at the two of us, Mike bared his teeth, and the dog shut up and looked at his owners, who looked at Mike, who looked at me.

Ma hit him back with this pan, said Mike. We were in the States by then.

Shit, I said.

Knocked him over and everything, said Mike. I thought she'd killed him. Then she shouted at me for not helping her. But she was yelling too fast, in Japanese, and I couldn't understand.

It was like something out of a movie, said Mike, vaping. I still don't think she forgives me.

When the streetlight turned, the couple kept walking. The pit bull nipped at a biker, who almost busted his ass.

Movies are based on life, I said.

Not always, said Mike.

• • •

Mitsuko's flipping through a magazine when I make it back from work. She stares at my shoes when I step inside, so I turn around and slip them off at the door.

I figure I have to try.

So, I say, how was your day?

How was my day, says Mitsuko.

My son leaves the country the morning after I arrive, she says.

He leaves me with I don't know who for I don't know how long, she says.

I haven't seen him in years, she says, and he's off looking for my ex-husband, who is rotting from cancer as we speak.

My day was fucking phenomenal, says Mitsuko.

I shake a little and smile. Tell her I'm only stepping into the bedroom for a minute. But then I lay down, and I fall under a blanket, and I don't get up again for hours.

Around midnight, I'm awake. The lights are out in the living room.

I start to text Mike.

I type, We're done.

I type, Fuck you.

I type, It's over dickhead.

I type, How r u, and that's what I send.

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My mother told me about her new husband first. She trusted me, or at least that's what she said. So I didn't tell Lydia. Didn't tell my father. I watched him walk in and out of his house, occasionally with a woman he was seeing and occasionally not.

Her name was Carlotta. Sometimes she'd stay over. When that happened, she'd crack eggs and slice queso fresco the next morning. She was from San Antonio, living with her brothers by the high school, always saying she wished I was straight because I'd be perfect for her daughter.

She only goes for bad boys, said Carlotta.

I'm no good either, I said.

And Carlotta considered me for a second, before she went back to chopping cilantro.

It's different, she said, grinning.

I don't know when my father found out about my mother, exactly, but eventually Carlotta stopped coming around. And then my father didn't leave the house for a while.

He mostly sat on the porch.

He started saying *please*.

One morning, around that time, the doorbell woke me up. It couldn't have been past four. These two guys were holding my father, in a tank top and briefs, slumped on their shoulders and looking uncertain.

Es tu papa? said one of the guys.

Sí, I said, lo siento.

Lo encontramos por allá, said the guy, pointing across the block and over some trees.

Es not safe, said the other guy.

Lo siento, I said again, and they handed him off.

Necesitas cuidarlo, said the first guy, scratching at his shoulder.

———

Afterward, my father laughed and hiccupped the entire morning, speaking all sorts of gibberish, before he suddenly, thoroughly, knocked out that afternoon.

The next day, he called me downstairs before breakfast. He said he had something to tell me. Something about my mother.

I tried to make the appropriate face of surprise.

3.

It's still dark when I'm up the next morning, but Mitsuko's mincing shrimp. She's hunched over the cutting board, beside eggs, flour, and honey.

Do you eat, she says.

I tell her I do.

We don't say shit while she's working. Mitsuko blitzes everything in a food processor. Drops the mixture in a skillet, dabbing everything with soy sauce, folding the batter gradually. I take my pills, watching her do all this, and she ignores me the entire time, working at her own pace.

When I sit on the sofa, Mitsuko stops rolling. I stand to set the table, and she starts rolling again.

Once she's finished, she fills a bowl with some pickled cucumbers, with another plate for the omelette, leaving a third one out for me. We chew hunched over the counter, hip to hip.

So, Mitsuko says, how long have you been sleeping with my son?

Or is it casual, she says.

Not really, I say.

I don't know how it works, says Mitsuko.

I think it's the same for everyone.

It isn't, says Mitsuko.

She says, I'm sure you can tell that Michael and I are very close.

We've been together for four years, I say. More or less.

More, Mitsuko asks, or less?

A little more, I say.

But just a little, she says.

Mike's better with numbers, I say.

It occurs to me, out of nowhere, that my posture is entirely fucked up. Mitsuko's is impeccable, even at a lean. So I straighten up, and then I stoop, and Mitsuko raises an eyebrow.

She snorts, and says, My son could not be worse with numbers.

After that, we eat in silence. Scattered Spanish filters in through the window. The kids next door kick a soccer ball against the wall, until their father steps outside screaming, asking which one of them has lost their minds.

While Mitsuko's focused on her food, I really look at her. It's clear that, at one point, she was a startlingly beautiful woman.

Then she meets my eyes. I blink like something's in them.

She says, I realize that this must be strange for you, too.

No, I say, it's fine.

So you're a liar, says Mitsuko.

I'm being honest. Really.

I'm fluent in fine, says Mitsuko. Fine means fucked.

Did my son tell you how long he'd be gone, she says.

A month, I say. Maybe two. I don't know. We didn't talk too much about it.

Of course not.

But did he tell *you*?

Tell me what?

How long he'd be gone, I say. Or that he was leaving?

Mitsuko looks me in the eyes. She cracks her knuckles on the counter.

No, she says. My son neglected to give me that information. But this could be a good thing. I needed to get out of Japan for a while. No sense in rushing back to Tokyo to look at a dying man.

So, I ask, you're staying here? Until Mike gets back?

My voice cracks, just a bit. But Mitsuko spots it. She grins.

Would that be a problem, she asks.

No, I say. That's not what I meant.

Then what did you mean?

I'm sorry, I say. I really was just asking.

It's enough for Mitsuko to cross her arms. She leans on the counter, and her hair slips down her shoulders. I make a point to slow my breathing, to let my shoulders droop just a bit.

Then I think staying here is exactly what I'll do, says Mitsuko. I could use the time off. Your place is filthy, but it'll work until Michael makes it back.

And that's absolutely okay, I say. Totally perfect.

Remember, says Mitsuko, you're the one who let him leave.

You're right, I say. I'm the one who let him leave.

How generous, says Mitsuko, but then she doesn't say anything else.

Once Mitsuko's finished her bowl, she drops it in the sink. She turns on the faucet. Reaches for mine. The omelette was delicious, the sort of thing Mike would cook, because he did everything in the kitchen, and I think that this could have been the problem to begin with.

Nice chat, says Mitsuko, and I apologize, but I'm not sure why.

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At some point, Lydia and I started talking about our mother's new family. I never asked when my sister found out, or from who. But she never asked me either.