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## Profession

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# Shivani: Profession

## PROFESSION

Anis Shivani

Their first stop was the barber shop across from his condominium at the Towers on Madison's State Street. "Well, here he is at last! Give the boy his first American haircut," Professor Arthur Fishbach instructed his longtime barber. "Try to even out the chopped-off style. Jeez, do they use cleavers to cut hair there?" Then, recalling his wife Lauren's advice not to convey frustration in front of his eleven-year-old Vietnamese adoptee, Nam Loc Nguyen, Arthur assumed his steadiest Buddhist countenance, spending the duration of the haircut whisperingly rehearsing basic Vietnamese phrases from his ambitious guidebook. The boy sat still in the chair, sorrow clouding his tiny brown eyes, never wavering his glance from the cover of Arthur's book. The barber didn't have to question where the boy had come from, because Arthur had kept him apprised of every step of the adoption process, expertly conducted by Lauren, except for the actual pickup visit to Hanoi, which Arthur had managed alone. Arthur and Lauren had spent their entire careers at this university; all these decades, the barber and Arthur had colluded in a conspiracy of innuendo against Lauren's muddled intentions, without crossing the line into outright accusation. Now the boy, unambiguous evidence of Lauren's goodness, confused the issue. "You got yourself a good one," the barber told Arthur, brushing imaginary hair from the boy's shoulders.

Back on State Street, Arthur started walking slowly toward the capitol, instead of in the other direction toward the campus. It was Saturday morning, and the Farmers' Market on the edges of the state house would be in full swing. It might be a comforting sight to the boy, Arthur thought, to witness so early in his American sojourn old-style haggling and peddling, men and women of impeccable Western clothes descending to the level of primitive market barbarians over mere cents. In the

early years of their marriage, Arthur and Lauren, both ardent Kennedy supporters, had actually held up the prolific Kennedy family as models of procreative style: the world seemed innocent enough then to populate with as many children of one's own as possible. That was before the doctors discovered, early in the Johnson years, first Lauren's, and then Arthur's, incapacity to reproduce; the ready peace they had made with their inadequacy still seemed to him testament to their total love at the time.

"We're going to the market," Arthur said to the boy, who nodded sagely. The master closest to him at the orphanage by Hoàn Kiếm Lake in Hanoi's Old Quarter had said that Nam Loc was given to the shortest melancholy spells among any of his fellows. Arthur sure hoped that was true. Lauren was not one for tolerating dejection, even for acceptable reasons.

The town's constant air of festivity—and in early October, well before the grind of exams and papers, what other mood could dominate?—had irked him for long years, until it became converted into a pleasant ache. The jugglers and musicians and tricksters had vanished with the hot days of summer; every young American was now in complete charge of his own moments of distraction and leisure. The bright, shiny smiles made him think slyly of how soon their possessors would grow old beyond rescue. In her moments of compassion, Lauren explained that Arthur was finessing his way into premature acceptance of his mortality, by way of belittling others. He missed the panhandlers, some of whom would take to outright insults and curses, even when you gave them money; those were necessary disruptions in a town so happy, so convinced of its perch on the pinnacle of humanism. Nam Loc's eyes were still narrow and sleepy; if he took offense at so much easy merriment, so much casual display of affluence and generosity, he didn't yet express it in any revulsion on his face.

When Arthur was growing up on the North Side of Chicago, he'd pretended the milkman really came to pass on secret messages to his mother, her work instructions for the day; in reality, she'd been a contented rump Hull House worker who

shunned unnecessary mystery and complexity. Now, as Nam Loc gripped his hand tighter, Arthur wondered if the boy experienced State Street's effortless traffic in similar Sherlockian terms. Did he imagine spies and double-crossers everywhere? Arthur suppressed a chuckle: over his forty years of teaching sociology, graduate students had plunged to somewhere near the level of the best high-school students of his own era; they all did indeed give the appearance of being in class only as a hobby, pursuing more dastardly designs as their core activity. The most radical-sounding manifesto became in the new students' hands a platitude to get by between ups and downs in private life. There were no more real wars; Vietnam was the last one. Why couldn't his charges see that? The world had reached an acceptable steady state, despite occasional conspiratorial moments; this was unlikely to change. Arthur's generation had become so efficient at managing their own guilt that future protest had become futile.

They should have driven to Ho Chi Minh City in the South first, before flying out of Vietnam; then Nam Loc could have seen that frenetic activity of a toying kind wasn't just an American innovation. Nam Loc's father had been a schoolteacher, his mother a nurse; probably eminently middle-class Vietnamese, and nationalists too. What would they have made of an avant-garde American female professor's gesture—for it had been Lauren's idea to adopt a Vietnamese child—thirty years late in the coming?

This morning, after a long bath and a full breakfast, Nam Loc had conveyed in his rudimentary English that he wanted to forget his past, his homeland, his whole previous life, and start with a fresh slate. It had been an astounding statement. Where had he learned such a complex and mature thought? Had his master at the Hanoi orphanage, where Nam Loc had managed to thrive for two years after his parents died, trained him to say this to his new guardians? Lauren would know what to make of this near-Gothic eruption. Although nominally a professor in the English department, where in the affluent sixties she had held forth on the silences of the female-authored

Victorian novel, Lauren was all over the place now: pulp fiction, Hollywood, sitcoms, billboards, and internet chat rooms. In the age of cultural studies and theory, it was what one did, to maintain currency.

Lauren's newest passion was the presumed desecration of the vanishing female body in Haruki Murakami's novels. When her star graduate student, a woman with the looks of a model who Lauren said reminded her of her own impetuous youth, committed suicide last semester, Lauren went into a frenzy of output that had yielded a *Times Sunday Magazine* front cover article on corpulence as a defense mechanism turned inward under late capitalism's severe regime of discipline. True, but couldn't it be as simple as some people just eating too much and getting fat? Arthur's "common sense"—as he unfashionably called it—made no headlines these days, was directly responsible for declining enrollment in his classes, while Lauren was the academic star in the family: exactly the opposite of the situation at the start of their careers. Arthur no longer felt that the institutions responsible for integrating and assimilating average people were as oppressive as the popular thinkers of the fifties and sixties had presumed. While desirable female colleagues at best only tolerated Arthur as an eccentric past his prime, so many male colleagues crowded into Lauren's personal space these days that Arthur had to try to stop obsessing about their evil intent toward his still petite and pretty wife. Maybe when they performed Marxist hermeneutics on the Mexican restaurant's menu, they weren't acting from romantic motivation; maybe they were as boring as he took them to be on the surface.

On Johnson Street, a music store that sold used tapes and CDs side by side with new ones seemed to hold Nam Loc's attention. Arthur said, "Want to go in?" and when the boy smiled with crooked teeth—the braces wouldn't have to wait long, if he knew Lauren—they found themselves immersed in a small, overheated room. A disinterested attendant with long, dirty hair waved at Nam Loc. The rap music conveyed jarring protest against women and cops. "You like this?" Arthur asked

Nam Loc, and wasn't surprised when the boy broke into a rare genuine grin. This didn't mean he couldn't yet be turned into a world-famous mathematician or physicist, under the high-powered accelerated guidance of two of Madison's most able professors working closely with him, day and night. The lost years at the orphanage could be made up. Nam Loc folded his clothes neatly every time he discarded an outfit. He hadn't yet spilled a drop of anything. He bowed good morning and good night. He ate oatmeal and other food "good for him" without complaint. Arthur was convinced all this suggested not a naturally conformist personality but one trained to smooth out unnecessary friction. Now Nam Loc was swaying his head to the rapper's escalating lament about police brutality. The attendant seemed to have gone to sleep. "Let's go then," Arthur said, and as quickly as if he'd been in a dream, Nam Loc surrendered and stopped moving his head back and forth.

In the week he'd been in America, Nam Loc had seemed to warm up to Lauren more than he had to Arthur. Arthur tried to be mature about it. Sure, he'd been the one to make the dreary trip to Hanoi, but whereas his own demeanor was heavy and dragging, Lauren's was lightweight and swift. How could a growing boy not respond to Lauren's aura of benign neutrality? Lauren readily admitted she wasn't exactly motherly, but she did perform the de facto functions of motherhood, catering to necessary needs without caving in to them for her legions of fans and followers—so why couldn't she do the same for this innocent boy? The public school teachers in Madison were used to dealing with issues of language and cultural transition; Lauren knew, despite her critique of the devouring ways of late capitalism, when to step aside and let established institutions do their job. She would be fine. The boy would be fine.

They were waiting among a swarm of cheerful undergraduates in bright clothes at the light at State and Dayton.

"Well hello, if it isn't the international man of mystery! You've been to *Hanoi*, Arthur? Oh my, what a cute boy."

Gretchen Tolliver, blonde, buxom, and distinctly Southern

despite having lived in the North since her college days, bent to ruffle Nam Loc's newly shorn hair, and to kiss him on his cheeks with the enthusiasm of a Victorian governess in love with her brutal master's neglected offspring. Her massive bosom rested on the poor boy's head.

"You heard then," Arthur said.

"*Everyone* has," Gretchen said, unbending. "It's awful noble of you, Arthur."

Arthur didn't see the nobility in it; weren't all voluntary acts ultimately selfish, or at least pragmatic? Why had grown-ups who ought to know better suddenly adopted the language of romanticism and martyrdom? Gretchen was in Lauren's department, and taught Chaucer. She too was a Madison lifer. In the early seventies, when Arthur had come closer to infidelity than at any other time, Gretchen had seemed to him the very antithesis of the Connecticut old-money aloofness into which Lauren could easily slide. Gretchen could consume whiskey like a World War I soldier and utter imprecations against the high culture figures around campus. He'd sat in on her class once, in the late Nixon years, and was motivated enough to reread all of Chaucer. Lately, Gretchen too wrote papers in the mystical argot of Cixous and Kristeva, poor Chaucer's invention of language but an afterthought to whatever unintentional havoc he'd wrought on women's bodies through all-too-masterful manipulation of signs and codes. That is, if Chaucer could even be said to be a discrete author in the first place, rather than merely the intertextual expression of the zeitgeist of his times. At least Lauren hadn't started off acting in the lifelong role of untouchable debutante, and jumped on the theory bandwagon only when it became professionally suicidal not to do so.

A tear seemed to roll down Gretchen's cheek; her inability to find a real gentleman to sire her children had long ago ceased to be a source of concern, or even amusement, among her colleagues. It was what one chose to do; without compromise, there was no family.

"We don't see each other enough, Arthur. Here—" she started

scribbling on the back of her visiting card. "I've moved to a new place in Shorewood Hills. Come to dinner with the boy, and Lauren, any night."

"Sure. I'll ask Lauren. His name's Nam Loc, by the way."

"Nam Loc. How pretty! Oh, he's adorable!" Gretchen again smothered his head with her vast bosom. She expressed a desire to visit Southeast Asia; Arthur said there was nothing to be seen there that couldn't be experienced in rural Indiana in the middle of winter: Hanoi had given him the impression of being a permanent ghost town, having fought history to a draw.

"Oh Arthur, you're ever so much the romantic!"

"No, I never was, Gretchen."

Gretchen would have started a long discussion of the difficulties of adoption in Third World countries, but Arthur determinedly looked at his watch and lied that he had to meet Lauren in about an hour, after doing some necessary shopping for the day, for lunch at the University Club. He'd had no intention of bothering Lauren on a busy conference day, but why not? She would be pleased to see Arthur and Nam Loc—dare he say, father and son?—extracting the maximum from a Saturday morning in the most livable city in America.

"About Lauren—Arthur, I'd like to speak to you—soon. I'm worried about her." No doubt she wanted to exercise the absurd rumors that so many in Humanities were massaging: that Lauren's unpredictable bursts of rage, her unknowably vicious putdowns of luminaries, were somehow related to a neurological disorder that had better be investigated soon. Lauren was fiercely resistant to modern doctors, whom she thought of as executors of a diseased gender-based separation between the utilitarian and the ideal, the Cartesian duality gone haywire. Gretchen was wrong about Lauren's state of health, even if she was the least likely to be motivated by mere envy. It was called growing old, entering the charmless silent zone long past menopause when approachable figures from the past bunched together into constituents of myths and fairy tales, and had to be either hated or loved. Unpredictability followed.



"Soon, Gretchen, soon."

"Okay, then. Bundle him up more next time for such a cold day." Gretchen was pointing at Nam Loc's jacket. Yes, it wasn't very thick. But Hanoi must have gotten cold enough. Nam Loc was supposed to have stayed inside too much. The usual way of learning English was to catch its rhythms from television shows; Nam Loc had sweated over grammar books and dictionaries for two years. He was theoretically a "boat person" who'd never seen a boat, of that kind, up close, which didn't make him any less a boat person. There, Arthur was indulging in essentialist categorization—or was it binary opposition?—as Lauren would have it. But then, why not, like the others, appropriate a derogatory term, and vaporize its offensiveness away?

They moved up State Street. He was glad nothing physical had ever happened with Gretchen; where would his life be now if it had? Lauren, like all educated feminists, was more possessive of the male than untrained housewives caught up in the allure of detergent and bug spray. Lauren would have been unforgiving; she would have left him. Early on, he used to congratulate himself, on days when Lauren froze him out of human consideration, that she constantly motivated him to reach for the stars, to enter realms of scholarly thought he'd have been too abashed to go near, but for her unrelenting pressure. "Why can't you be the department chair in five years?" she'd asked him in 1965, when the nightmares of bureaucracy had not yet become real. "Why can't I? Because I'm the humble son of a small-time doctor, who never so much as posted his awards on the walls." And she'd playfully kick him in the back, and they'd roll in lovemaking: Lauren was never so passionate as when she planned for the future.

Ah, the charming Farmers' Market was at hand: out-of-season smokebush and honeysuckle, asparagus and zucchini, strawberries and cranberries, all that was primary and tropical and indispensable was to be had here, everything that in other countries at this time of the year would be unavailable, or too expensive, or simply unheard of, all at bargain prices, mere

fractions of what could be had at the conglomerate grocery stores. The vendors were soft-spoken, polite, unassuming, not following the trend of bedlam wrought by sellers in similar venues in other civilizing American cities. Under clean white canopies, buyers and sellers talked about abortive hernias and overachieving offspring. Lauren never came; neither did most university students. They preferred their organic food in the safety of modern supermarkets.

Over by the giant green grapes, bent double and propped by his equally decrepit wife, was old Charlie Wilson, once Arthur's foremost nemesis in the sociology department, twenty years his senior and argumentative as hell about every attempt of Arthur's in the sixties and seventies to introduce relevance into the classroom, some acknowledgment that a civil rights and women's movement was raging in the country. "Mark my words, Arthur. No one will read Marcuse twenty years from now—not to mention C. Wright Mills. The classics, my boy, the classics. Better stick to Weber." Charlie had been right. Arthur saw other dinosaurs of the humanities and social sciences coasting around the market; very few from the hard sciences visited the spectacle. He knew everybody so well that he had a free pass to acknowledge only when and how he wanted.

"This is like Hanoi?" Arthur probed Nam Loc, hoping to see signs of recognition in his eyes. Nam Loc nodded doubtfully, extending his small hands deeper into his pockets.

Of course, there'd have to be violently disturbing smells, of discarded fish heads and shrimp shells, and rotting mangsteen and rambutan, and negotiations over prices blustery enough to equal mini-wars, for it to really feel like home. Some years from now, when Nam Loc was old enough, perhaps they could talk about how the poor boy and his parents had gotten along; they must have been, to use a contemporary usage Arthur derided, excellent "role models," for Nam Loc to be so studious and disciplined. Nam Loc's parents had died not on land, but on water, their pleasure boat having capsized in the South China Sea; they had been too bourgeois to be excellent swimmers.

The master at the orphanage had translated every word of the newspaper article where the gory incident had been related. Arthur had then tried to relay to Lauren over the phone everything of it that he remembered, but she didn't want to know. It would bias how she saw Nam Loc; the boy wasn't to be objectified as a tragic figure.

"Farm fresh fruit and vegetables," he said to Nam Loc. "Hard to get in America. Pick whatever you want. What do you like?"

Nam Loc looked uncomprehending, and Arthur started miming eating gestures, feeling silly.

"Professor Fishbach? Oh my God, it's you? I almost didn't recognize you outside class? It's so lively here, isn't it? So natural—so—so pastoral. Oh, hello?" The undergraduate who'd accosted them shook hands with Nam Loc, who'd started caressing a precarious mound of nectarines, as if unnerved by their glossy smoothness.

It was Christine Marshall, from his introductory core class, which held seven hundred students, each of whom expected him to remember their name and obscure Midwestern place of origin. In Christine's case he did remember. From St. Paul, she was the daughter of a onetime colleague, an able documentarian of the Civil War, which she thought gave her extra privileges with Arthur. She'd already proposed an independent study project for next semester on early consciousness-raising groups in the upper Midwest. She was blonde and fit and rosy and happy, like all of them now. How long would he be compelled to explain to everyone who the boy was, why he was with him? "My son, Nam Loc," said Arthur. The relationship was difficult to utter; at the peak of his academic career, when his journal articles were beginning to find an audience, he'd thought the wave of freshmen each year were his true children. "My son," he repeated. "Freshly arrived in America, doesn't speak much English yet, so be warned about using your poststructuralist jargon before him." He smiled weakly.

"Oh, don't kid, please. He's adorable? Anyway, I just wanted

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to tell you I loved your wife's lecture the other night? Did you know two hundred people came?"

"Remind me. . . ."

"On the unintended transgressive consequences of corporate communication manuals? Using local, *Madison*, examples!"

Of course, using the *local* always made a pursuit more valid. The last public lecture Arthur had given was on the eve of the 1984 election, titled "The Choice Among Non-Choices: Democracy in the Age of Media." Almost no one had come.

"I'm sorry, I was in Hanoi then. Picking up my son."

Arthur still choked up over the word. Even if he hadn't been out of the country, there was a good chance he'd have missed that small blip up in Lauren's ever rising graph of appointments. Since the early eighties, Lauren had lived in her own apartment on the western side of campus, with a close view of Lake Mendota. They had weeknight dinners in their own places, and usually came together by assignation on Friday and Saturday nights. Lauren said the move to her own place had dramatically escalated her productivity; it had nothing to do with Arthur, it was her own deficiency of concentration. Certainly, she had been more productive under this setup. The predictable rumors about the oddity of the living arrangements, given Lauren's ferocious feminism, had had no staying power.

Arthur tried to describe Hanoi's dreariness to Christine: the shabby wall-sized posters of faded communist leaders, the anti-imperialist overhang which the south of the country was doing its best to forget, the ghoulish shame over corruption which was worse than its transparent acknowledgment in other Third World countries. But how much could Christine understand? Already her eyes were darting back and forth, as if in search of other fresh faces her own age.

"We'll talk soon about your independent study project."

"Oh right, right. See you then."

She was gone.

They ended up buying apples, Nam Loc's favorite fruit. "You get them all year long in America, every kind, red and green and

yellow, in every store. You've made a safe choice, my boy."

He meant to sidestep the capitol and head straight to Lake Monona—there was still an hour to go before Lauren could reasonably be surprised for lunch—but changed his mind. "Heck, why not! My boy, into the big white house. This is how we run government." Minus sensation, he thought.

Nam Loc seemed more interested in the immobility of the speechless guards than in adoring the shiny black busts of Wisconsin visionaries and progressives, lining the halls like so many nods to charmed affinity with the guests. Confronting the larger-than-life statue of "Fighting Bob" La Follette dominating the rotunda, Arthur wished he had the language to explain to Nam Loc how significant the unwavering old liberal had been to his own sense of vocation. One day soon, one day. Arthur would be seventy-five when Nam Loc was twenty. Then he saw Nam Loc focused on a group of kids—blond and happy, half his age—and on the way the parents themselves seemed their kids' age, in innocence, lack of guile. As abruptly as he seemed to have been energized, Nam Loc lost curiosity, questioningly looking at Arthur. "You want to see Lauren? It's time, yes. I think we can safely go." The bag of apples they'd bought weighed down the pocket of his trench coat. He tried not to mind it.

In just an hour the morning's festive shopping mood on State Street seemed to have been replaced by grumpy lunchtime protest. Tromping back toward campus—he'd feel stupid asking Nam Loc if it ever snowed in Hanoi, to visualize his eventual response to Madison's true colors—he felt the aggressive extremities of underemployed graduate students and dismembered adjunct faculty inserting themselves into the charmed circle between would-be father and son. It was as if the hands pushing forth unfilled petitions and takeaway decals were resentful of the boy and him. "We have to rush," he said to Nam Loc's mystification.

Just before Park Street they ran into one of Arthur's former graduate students, Miles, who had dropped out a couple of years ago and never been officially heard from again. Miles had been

part of a jazz band—or so he claimed—on the West Coast, not to mention having done other “dirty work,” including, if you were to believe him, ditch digging. Was that even an occupation anymore? Miles had always been awkward in class, as if trying to hide his worldly knowledge from his more genteel classmates, afraid that his wisened-up interpretation of theory would give away his excess of experience. Arthur had grown fond of him, but kept his disappearance secret from Lauren, whose attitude toward such loss of talent invariably was: “If they can’t take the heat, let them get out of the kitchen.” Miles had been spotted now and then in town; he seemed to have become part of the permanent antiwar movement. This time around, it *would* be a lifetime job. “Miles!” Arthur had decided to finally confront him, addressing his dreadlocks and grimy open collar, more than his moony gray eyes. “Professor!” Miles said without a hint of recognition, as if addressing all the generic professors of the world, those who had done him in and those who were yet to. Arthur moved on.

Protest was without meaning anyway. It had none of the life-and-death value it used to have during Vietnam. It was now entirely a vicarious operation. None of these nice kids were going to suffer or die because of our policies. It meant nothing. “Don’t ever get caught up in such foolishness, my boy!” he addressed Nam Loc, who dutifully nodded. Arthur had tried not to think about the inevitable ribbing that was bound to come Nam Loc’s way, even in the rarefied Madison Metropolitan School District, for his odd accent, his exaggerated manners, his stiff obedience. On the street he looked physically like any other Vietnamese boy who might have been born and bred in Oshkosh or Eau Claire. But inside he was all different, his soul and mind were different. When exactly would he become an American boy? How much was it Arthur’s personal job to worry about such imponderables on Nam Loc’s behalf?

They were at the grand staircase of the University Club now, welcomed by the solid pillars, the walls covered with irrepressible ivy. When Arthur and Lauren first came to Madison, the club

was attended only by old fogeys, fossils past their expiration date; now the most ambitious among the young aspired to hobnob here, to catch a kind word or two from colleagues with power and influence.

The warmth inside the University Club was positively blazing. "Here's where they plan the fate of the world," he whispered to Nam Loc, as Arthur was joyfully greeted by the receptionist, the manager, and one of the master chef's European deputies, as if it was only Arthur's presence that had been missing from the serene occasion.

"Are you here for the thought or the food?" the manager repeated his old joke.

"I thought the two might go together—for once," Arthur replied as usual, and they laughed.

"Lovely boy. I heard," the manager said. "But isn't he cold?"

The one-day conference—pitched to younger faculty at the campus, and to those at other research universities in Wisconsin—was called "Welcoming the Twenty-First Century: Rehabilitative Discourse in the Era of Diminished Expectations." Outsourcing, globalization, deindustrialization, militarization, the end of the welfare state, the evisceration of privacy, all seemed to be taken as ineluctable. The only questions, judging by the program notes, were *How do we still get along with each other, How do we talk amongst ourselves so that the least of us don't feel deprived and left alone?* Arthur had to remind himself that Lauren was actually trained as a literary critic; when was the last time she'd actually done any criticism?

They slipped into the back of the crowded meeting room to catch the end of Lauren's speech. There she was, holding everyone's attention, with her absolute charisma and passion!

His Lauren, petite, indecomposable, untouched by the debilities of age, a tight bundle of warmth and energy and empathy, with a prodigious memory for every nuance of discussion and scholarship, and the ability to finesse seemingly opposing points of view into a fluid conglomeration of

reconcilable ideas. She looked gorgeous as always, her shiny light brown hair resting on her shoulders, the glinting gold of her earrings like tiny exclamation marks to the perfection of her symmetrical face—blue eyes, thin nose, high cheekbones all in place, unwilling to muddy or wrinkle or jiggle or sag past the age of sixty. Why, she looked twenty years younger! He could imagine any number of younger colleagues—that smart-ass Yale deconstructionist Terry Simes, for one—lusting for her, over their younger actual mates, who probably had little to say except assent and mumble, if they weren't in the academic profession themselves. She wore a gray suit that did nothing to hide her femininity. Arthur almost tripped over a wire seating himself and Nam Loc, and Lauren gave him a sympathetic look from the podium.

He was glad Lauren had never been one of those feminists whose ideology seemed to intensify in inverse proportion to the degradation of their looks. But perhaps this was the new way after all. To have any influence, you must look good. He thought with pride of the enviable pair they had always made: Arthur, tall and graceful, ambassadorial in presence, still with a full head of dark hair, not yet gone leathery or rubbery in his skin despite years of outdoor activity, matched with his ever petite Lauren, smelling of precious orchids and cold spring rain. That's how they'd arrived at this campus, Lauren excited by the hothouse atmosphere of it all, which she would claim—pinned down under Arthur on warm fall nights and blissfully sanguine about the prospect of decades of harmonious sex—meant all the more because of her talented companion. Did she still think of him that way? Twice in their married life, when she was tempted to cheat, Lauren had done the honorable Madison thing, and told Arthur of her enticement, complete with the name of the offending male, before she could fall into the trap. "Gorgeous, my boy, isn't she?" he whispered to Nam Loc, and then worried that he shouldn't have passed such a remark about Nam Loc's "mother."

"In short, it isn't government that has or ever did have



the power to make or break the stability or coherence of our chosen lifestyles, or shall we say, the glory of our honorbound corrosiveness, the gestative aesthetic wherein we stew and mold and fester, like embryos in a womb, like worms—or is that too gritty a trope?—in a cocoon, sensing our eventual climax, our emergence in a world half welcoming, half suspicious, but never quite sure of the final outcome, the ultimate shape our selves will assume upon confronting the rest of creation: here I am, world, see me and acknowledge me and love me, if you will, but if you don't, well, I'll still find communities of affinity and solace, I'll make my way, so if it's the same to you, would you mind making space for me? There's that little spot at the head of the room I'd like to sidle up to—please. That's the attitude. Attitude is what it's going to take. Now, how that translates into the pedagogy of the—shall we say?—formerly imperializing gaze . . .” She'd left theory home; she was addressing the disaffected masses.

Arthur didn't mean to, but the room was too warm, and he dozed off. He must have snored, because he found the shriveled woman next to him violently pinching his upper arm, as he awoke to sounds of enthusiastic clapping greeting the end of Lauren's talk, a young male colleague or two in the front even getting up and yelling “Bravo!” and the manager of the club appearing at the doorway to announce “Lunch!” while Nam Loc seemed embarrassed by Arthur's inability to keep awake. Arthur loudly cleared his throat, feigning that he had been meditating instead of sleeping.

“Arthur.” His wife was with him, warmly kissing him on the cheeks, European style. “Oh Arthur, you look wet as a noodle, so cold, so chilled. Do you have any idea how pink your face is?” He was gratified that she attended to him first before Nam Loc. He could no longer deny that he'd had a severe case of child envy all the way until the actual acquisition of Nam Loc. He'd wondered if it was prelude to Lauren taking their separate living arrangement to its logical conclusion. Instead, Lauren's plan was for Nam Loc to spend weekdays with Arthur and weekends with her. Because of the boy they'd see considerably more of each

other. "Chào em, Nam Loc! You look wonderful, dear," Lauren said, bending to pat the boy's cheeks. "Very strong and healthy. Did you enjoy your Saturday morning walk around Madison?" Nam Loc nodded yes.

"How did you know we were walking around—"

"Oh Arthur, I've lived with you for forty years. . . . Anyway, stay for lunch, do, I've already asked them to make a special place for you at my table. The banquet room accommodates sixty. There are more than a hundred people here today."

"That's nice of you . . . er, that speech you gave, it was . . . it was . . . nice, I mean. . . ."

"Pish! That was pure bullcrap. Poppycock. Excuse me, I'm supposed to watch my language before Nam Loc, am I not? What the hey! He's starting fourth grade in two days. Sink or swim. Swim in the murkiness of American pop culture or the vultures will get you."

Another mixed metaphor. For a woman who'd read so much classic nineteenth-century literature, she sure didn't keep her tropes in balance. Was it on purpose? "You're still sure we can plunge him like that into the school system, without a transition, some help. . . ."

"The only help he needs is your and my confidence. Now Arthur, straighten yourself up and treat this as a challenge different in degree but not in kind . . . oh phooey, I'm slipping into that motivational talk again. Nam Loc will be fine. Didn't you read the reports from his master?" She had her hand on the boy's head. "He has fantastic learning skills!"

She squatted on the floor, squeezed the boy's hands, and talked to him in reasonably comprehensible Vietnamese phrases, infinitely better than Arthur was capable of. Nam Loc agreed with her in surprisingly good English that he was very hungry and wouldn't mind meeting her friends.

"Professor Fishbach!" Arthur turned his gaze to the wide-eyed young man with shock of blond hair plastering his forehead, but the greeting was addressed to his wife. "I loved your talk. The way you interpolated localized multivalency into politicized agency,

it transformed the *idea* of insecurity into dialogic—

“Bullcrap. Poppycock.” She pivoted on her heels, still crouching on the floor, to face her admirer. “I hope you didn’t take it too seriously. Pure motivational stuff, which has its place, but . . . by the way, there’s a brilliant new theorist from Calcutta I’d like you to meet after lunch. Chakravarty is her last name. She has things to teach all of us, I do believe!”

“Sure,” said the young man, deflated, unable to meet Lauren’s eyes.

Arthur had never been able to decide to what extent Lauren took theory seriously: were all “texts” truly worth equal time? She’d given Arthur a new digital camera and asked him to take as many pictures of the Hanoi streets as he could; no doubt she would deconstruct them, read entire histories of oppression and resistance in obvious symbols, the way he never could. To him a sign for a circumcision butcher was just that.

They had seats at President Isaiah Warren’s table. He was an old warrior, too, but hid his wounds well, being the most self-effacing big-time university president Arthur had ever known. It was noted with bemusement that he preferred entomology over fundraising. President Warren and Arthur had been invited to the White House in the last days of Nixon, as part of a PR mission to humanize Nixon to his academic critics; both had refused to go, and had spent the latter part of the seventies congratulating themselves for their distance.

“This man has the largest collection of butterflies in the Four Lakes area—and beyond,” Arthur said to Nam Loc by way of introduction.

President Warren turned away from his even more diffident wife, a self-styled “homemaker,” and feeling called upon to entertain the boy, started quizzing him about butterfly species in Vietnam.

Lauren halted that strain of conversation. “You’ll have shrimp spring roll,” she said to Nam Loc, “they’re very light, but authentic.” She ordered goat cheese and apple salad for herself. It was always salad for her.

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"You had them eating out of your hands," President Warren said to Lauren. "I don't know how you retain your enthusiasm, your freshness, about the new stuff, the new . . . frankly, the future scares me."

President Warren's wife retreated more than ever in her capacious seat. Instead of making any wisecracks, Lauren let the President's remark go. That was an admirable ability of hers: to choose to engage or not to engage. Arthur was more controlled by emotions when it came to dialogue.

The fireplace behind them was burning hotter than it needed to; it seemed to Arthur that every place on campus had an excess of energy, and this in a time of supposed energy shortages. He started sweating, wiping it off his head. He could feel his wife's eyes on his plate, to make sure he finished eating; lately, Arthur had been suffering from a loss of appetite, for which Lauren had so far not forced him to see his doctor.

"Nam Loc should have some time to himself, conserve his energy," Lauren said, noting how quickly the boy was eating. "Tell you what, Arthur, let him stay with me the first week of school. I've a very light workload this semester anyway. Just a couple of evening seminars. The pleasures of seniority," she winked at President Warren, who barely winked back. "No, Isaiah, the future is brilliant. Can't you see it? The doomsayers will have their day, but the juries will return a guilty verdict in the end. You'll see. The earth isn't going to toast us all. There won't be a return to feudalism. There has to be hope to keep going. Don't you see, Isaiah?"

Arthur felt the question was really addressed to him. He obediently finished his grilled chicken. There was no beef of any kind on this menu. The food tasted of nothing, it had been so deprived of anything able to kick start you. Would physical decline suddenly arrest him? Would he be one of those who'd turn overnight to helpless decrepitude?

"I've met your teachers this week, Nam Loc," Lauren was saying. So she *had* had those meetings after all. Arthur thought they'd only been pious statements of intent. For a university

professor to deal with teachers at a lower level, for whom pedagogy consisted of nothing but mass transference of what they considered valuable information to receptive minds, was an absolute ordeal. Not for Lauren, apparently, because she consumed the next half hour, until the end of lunch, putting Nam Loc at ease about his school. The teachers wouldn't put pressure on him. They would be understanding about his challenges with the language, so he should never be afraid to ask for extra help. He was already a very smart boy; all he needed to do was learn the way things were accomplished in this system. He should never forget, he would have been the cream of the crop in Vietnam, and now that this was his country. . . .

The boy had a second order of shrimp spring roll. The chicken felt like prison food to Arthur. The glass of white wine was like water. Because Lauren was sitting with President Warren, she was secure from the politest of interruptions. The President was an old fogey; if you sat with him, it must mean you required privacy. Besides, wasn't she spending quality time with her boy, converting his global insecurities into local remedies? Nam Loc was exerting his English language muscles far more vigorously than he had all morning with Arthur. "We went to music store." He described his favorite rap singers, with whom Lauren was thoroughly familiar. She said Nam Loc could borrow her discs. He could have the digital camera too. Didn't Arthur still have it? An iPod for the golden boy would be next. Technology was going to smooth the wheels to the boy becoming American. There was Arthur's answer. The boy would become like others of his race born in Oshkosh or Eau Claire when he took his pleasures for granted, when he felt a sense of entitlement. Nobody saw the dark side of the pursuit of happiness anymore. One day soon, when Arthur became Professor Emeritus, and scrounged to collect a handful of students interested in listening to him, Nam Loc would return home from high school, to find Arthur not yet shaved or showered, wallowing in filth, reading days-old newspapers. Nam Loc would be the one to finally make Lauren implement her decrees of health and well-being with

actual force.

Arthur felt an unconquerable sleepiness stealing over him. "Tea, I need to have some strong tea." He must have abruptly blurted it out, in the absence of any waiters, because Lauren was looking strangely at him, Nam Loc had turned red, and even President Warren had a look of concern on his face. "Excuse me, I think I need to get out of here," said Arthur. "I really must. Will you be able to take care of him the rest of the afternoon? Yes, dear, please?"

Without waiting for an answer, Arthur started from the table, and left, forgetting to tip the coat checker on his way out. Feeling like a cheat, someone with *abandonment issues*, as the talk shows would have it, he guiltily traced his steps toward Lake Mendota, the watery cradle of the campus, whose crisp blueness never failed to correct his vision. He was a coward. What would Nam Loc think? His better side wanted him to return, apologize, have tea with President Warren and company, stay around with Lauren for the rest of the conference, and then take his wife and child to a movie, perhaps a reprise of a forties classic at the local art house theater. Oh God, not Miles again, was he never going to get past his ghosts this most awful of days? It was Miles in front of him, no doubt heading to the lake himself, with a satchel of unused antiwar posters in one hand, and a soggy franchise hoagie in a disintegrating paper bag in another. *You coward*, Arthur denigrated himself, his head spinning, suddenly out of breath. He wanted to sit on the steps of one of the buildings on Park Street. He was almost in sight of the empty chairs and tables on the waterfront, he must keep going. That young man who'd come up to Lauren to compliment her and been rebuffed, that was *Terry Simes*, the famous Yale deconstructionist—Lord, why hadn't Arthur recognized him from his pictures? And she'd put him down so easily! It had to do with being a woman.

Fifteen minutes later, Arthur had lost himself enough in memories for the present moment to cease to count. Face slumped in his hands, he stared unseeingly at the far horizon cutting off the blue water. Maybe a man like Miles was better

off than him: at least he thought he had something to live for. Arthur couldn't even pretend that teaching mattered. In four decades, had he been able to sway a single student to his point of view? No one could get inside another person's mind. He laughed grimly. A decade ago, it was Lauren who'd pulled out all the stops to prevent him from quitting teaching. Was it then that his real resentment of her had begun? Would he have declined much faster had he been out of teaching? Was the adoption of the child a sop to Arthur's disintegration?

"Arthur." The way the soft hand was running back and forth on his right shoulder could only mean it was Lauren. Silently, she'd crept up to him, and was now looking at the water with the same unseeing eyes as his.

"What, Lauren?" he said without fully turning around. Again, she'd known exactly where to find him. "I'm tired."

"Look who's here."

Nam Loc took the seat next to Arthur's, also facing the water, without making a fuss of the dust everywhere. "Gulf of Tonkin very blue—like this."

"I'll leave you two alone. Spend the day with him. Bring him back whenever you're comfortable. School doesn't even *have* to start Monday." Then she lightly pecked Arthur on the cheek and started leaving. "I have to put in the rest of my idiot time at the club." He thought she was going to turn around to hug him tightly as if he were a child, embarrassing him before the boy, but she only waved daintily once she was a few feet away. "Cám on," she thanked Nam Loc.

"So?" Arthur was going to make a genuine attempt to understand Nam Loc this time. Some odd sense of embarrassment had prevented him so far from asking Nam Loc personal questions about how his eleven years in Vietnam had really been like: if he'd felt betrayed when his parents died, if he'd suffered at the orphanage, if he'd had any friends there he missed. There was only a one-eyed girl with a limp who seemed to have been sad when Arthur came to rescue Nam Loc from the orphanage. Should Arthur talk about the time his own parents

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divorced when he was fourteen, which in fact turned out to be the best thing that had happened to him because he plunged himself into study, leading straight to a full scholarship at the University of Chicago?

“In Vietnam, poor people enjoy ocean, lake, river. No cost. No worry. No police.” Then Nam Loc started conjuring, as best he could, a world out of time, where people of diverse classes managed to get by on little money and much resourcefulness; where you had to be on guard all the time against theft and force, knowing however that there wasn’t much to lose to begin with anyway; and where, worst come to worst, you could always count on your family to be there for you, even if you committed the most horrible act imaginable. Arthur nodded agreeably. He was willing to be educated.