

KEEPS ME HANGIN'

MOYE ISHIMOTO

Once again, The Supremes are stalking me. Just this week, I heard "Where Did Our Love Go?" at Albertsons, Diana Ross's voice following me down the aisle of canned beans and tomato paste. On the car radio yesterday morning, "You Can't Hurry Love" the second I turned the ignition key. Today, "Stop! In The Name Of Love" vibrating the speakers at the drycleaners where the old Asian guy always tries to talk to me in Korean. *Annyeong haseyo*, he says as I heave a pile of wrinkled clothes onto the counter.

"Sorry," I say. "Japanese?" I point to my face as if that explains everything. He grins and nods like he understands, though I know we'll go through the same routine next week.

No one believes me about The Supremes. My boss laughs, my sister, Grace, ignores me and, if we were speaking, my mom would simply shake her head.

Grace and I are sitting in a 50's-style diner called Roxy's, just off of Vermont Avenue. The opening beat to "You Keep Me Hangin' On" begins exactly as the waitress in her tight pink uniform hands us our menus. She taps her right foot impatiently to the song as we order our drinks, ice water for me and for my sister, a chocolate shake, no whip. I hate these kinds of places but when your older sister craves all things indulgent, and she's currently the only family member you're at the moment talking to, options are limited. So I sit and silently criticize the turquoise vinyl booths, the checkered linoleum floor, the chrome tabletop jukeboxes. The walls are

decoupaged with old LPs, poodle skirts, tin signs, and classic horror movie posters where hapless women cower in the arms of hairy monsters. One corner of the wall is a proud display of *I Like Ike* bumper stickers, though nowhere is the friction leading to the Civil Rights movement, still a decade away. As if the future back then was already better, the ozone layer healed over, a healthy rainforest, affordable healthcare for everyone. A utopian restaurant from a blind past.

"Do you hear that?" I ask, but Grace's head is blocked by the enormous plastic menu, which she holds up like a laminated altar to greasy food. Blue-plate specials scream out in bright, yellow explosions where her face should be. Salisbury steak! Breakfast served 24-7! I already know what I'm getting, garden salad with ranch dressing for \$4.99, so I kick the edge of her seat.

"I'm still deciding."

"It's happening again," I say. "The song." She lowers the menu, cocking her head to listen. Her short black hair, possibly the only thing we have in common, swings around the back of her neck.

"Donna Summer?" she asks, the menu flipped up again. She's thirty, six years older than me with a magna cum laude from Harvard and a law degree from USC. She prints money like all big time corporate attorneys and even from the lofty heights of her income tax bracket, she's still determined to take me down a notch whenever possible. As if me being an under-employed junior college dropout isn't enough.

But after hearing The Supremes for the fifth time this week, I think, *Please*. Diana Ross's girlish lilt confused with the sultry and soaring Donna Summer, Queen of Disco? The waitress, young, the collective weight of the 21st century on her furrowed brow, reappears. She thumps down a chocolate milkshake with whipped cream and a glass of water.

"Do you know what song this is?" I ask, and she says, "No clue," licks her thumb and flips to a new notepad page. A chunk of red hair falls over her eyes. "Ready to order?"

"The Supremes," I say, and she stares at me, her face so blank that I wonder if I spoke in English. This time, Grace kicks me under the table. Hard, then orders a Reuben, Russian dressing on the side and French fries.

I point to the garden salad, located in the saddest corner plot of the menu, wedged between the dry toast, the grilled onions and the lonely pancake. But there are six crumpled dollar bills in my wallet and it's all I can afford.

"Don't you think it's weird that I hear their songs everywhere?" I ask after the waitress leaves. I've read everything I could find about The Supremes, how they met in high school and sang backup on Motown albums in hopes of their own record deal. How they topped the charts, one of the first African American groups to overcome racial boundaries. Grace scoops the whipped cream off the milkshake and onto a napkin. I know what she's thinking, that she *specifically* asked for a shake without it, that she should have complained to the waitress, and that somehow, this is all my fault. "I need to figure out what it means," I say.

"Try putting the effort into finding a real job," she says, because every meal together needs to revolve around this same subject. The whipped cream deflates into a soggy lump between us.

"I do have one," I say. Sort of. A meager paycheck shows up in my mailbox, made out to a Ms. Mina Tanaka, and from the production offices of a Mr. Scott Rosen who's too busy to pick up his dog's poop or drop off his own dry-cleaning or wait for the cable technician to install a new satellite receiver on his roof. So the honor falls to me, three times a week.

"You're talking about cheesy pop music," Grace says. "It's not supposed to mean anything." She smiles at the waitress, who slides our plates across the table. The Reuben glowers at me in its greasy deliciousness, the Swiss cheese melting down the pink layers of Pastrami into a toothy grin. My stomach grumbles as the Russian dressing oozes out from between the slices of grilled Rye, as if to say, *Take that, Miss Grace*.

I ask, "What if the universe is trying to send me a really important message?" I don't say so, but I wonder, when does a series of coincidences indicate something more? Grace pauses in the middle of cutting her sandwich, like this is some fancy dinner complete with linen tablecloths and all, because my sister is a strange, neurotic being who abhors touching food with her hands. She shakes her head at the dressing now spilling onto her plate. Or at me. I can't tell.

"About what?" she asks. That's the thing, I tell her. What do The

Supremes have to do with me? For example, take “Reflections,” which played on the radio the other day. Granted, I’d dialed up the oldies station, but what were the odds the deejay, at that exact moment, would choose *that song* out of thousands while I sat caught in traffic? *Trapped in a world / that’s a distorted reality*. Maybe it’s telling me to move on. But from what? I hum along under my breath until Grace lowers her fork and knife.

“Mom called,” she says, so softly that I almost don’t hear. In fact, I pretend that I haven’t. Grace may insist on having dinner with me every other week to “catch up”—her way of keeping tabs on how far my life *isn’t* going—but I’ve counted six months since I last saw our mother, the bricks of silence building between us. A curt exchange of words that led to my angry yells and her frustrated sighs, all compounded by our dad passing away three years ago. That’s when everything I believed flipped upside down and I dropped out of school. “She wants to sell the house,” Grace says.

I drop the fry that I’d stolen from her plate. “She can’t.”

“Yes, she can,” she says. Our childhood home, the one with the green shutters and the thick bougainvillea in Hancock Park, is going on the market. The purple bathroom where Grace taught me how to shave my legs, the rusty mailbox my parents were too cheap to replace. The dining room where we’d sit through our father’s endless stories about playing golf and watching *Jeopardy*—all for sale. Not to mention his study, stuffy with the faint reek of old leather and cologne, that very room where he passed away suddenly from an aortic dissection, a tear in his heart muscle that continues, to this day, to split our family apart. Grace says, “I told her to at least hold off until the housing market improves, or to rent the place out and move into a condo if she hates it that much.”

“She’s only doing this for attention,” I say. “Like how she cut her hair and started taking Pilates classes.”

“I’m being serious,” Grace says. “She’s already talked to a real estate agent. A staging company is coming and she wants to clean the whole house out.”

“She can’t,” I repeat. She couldn’t. No matter the number of arguments or how intense the strain between us, home is supposed to be untouchable. The vintage photographs of celebrities—Tony Curtis, James

Dean, Bobby Darin—wink down at me from the walls, as if they've known the truth all along.

"I'm going over Saturday to help out," Grace says. Then her voice takes on that bossy lawyer tone. Do this. Do that. Objection. Your Honor. "Call her," she orders me, like I'm some naive paralegal.

"Whatever."

"Don't tell me you're still mad at her."

"That's none of your business."

"Listen, we can't do this alone."

"Doesn't look like Mom has much of a problem with that."

"It's her house."

"Why do you always take her side?"

"Maybe this is the best thing for her," Grace says. "So she can finally move forward."

"She already has," I shoot back. "What's next, a boyfriend?"

"Since when are you so protective of Dad?" she asks. When I scowl and refuse to meet her eyes, she leans forward. "The plan was for them to live there together after Dad retired, remember? But that's not going to happen. And it's too big for one person." Grace sits back and picks at her sandwich. "Things aren't the way they used to be."

"Wait a minute," I say, and I can almost feel the sun breaking through the clouds above my head, everything suddenly coming into sharp focus.

"That's what Diana Ross is trying to tell me. With 'Reflections.'"

"What the hell are you talking about?" she asks, her plate scraping as she pushes it away.

"The Supremes."

"Stop. Just stop it. There is *no* connection," Grace says, her voice now in full lawyer-badgering-the-witness mode. "They're singing about love, not selling houses. If they were singing about you, don't you think their lyrics would be about not having a job? Or a boyfriend? Getting paid to walk dogs? If you're looking for a sign, then start listening to me. Diana Ross could care less."

I stare at my plate, a tangle of wilted iceberg lettuce, chalky carrot shreds and a cherry tomato. Grace draws her breath in sharply, as if an

apology were blossoming on her lips but already vanished into the same dismissive heart she shares with our mother. She waves at the waitress, who slowly shuffles over with our check. Grace rifles through her bag for her wallet, I dig a quarter out of my pocket and flip the song titles on the miniature jukebox, the pages like wings behind the curved display glass. Fats Domino, "Ain't That A Shame." The Beach Boys' "Wouldn't It Be Nice." The Righteous Brothers, "Unchained Melody."

The Supremes nowhere in sight.

By Saturday, our home already looks different. I pull my car into the driveway and take in the changes: the bougainvillea, usually a pink explosion above the front windows, now a manicured, orderly L-shape. A heavy ornate mailbox, snobby and condescending, as if only the most important letters stopped here. As expected, the front door no longer groans when I push it open.

My father used to joke about the noisy hinges, what he referred to as the "cheapest security system in the neighborhood." Handymen came and went without a fix, but I liked how each evening, that low whine announced my dad's return from his job at Cargo Express, Grace back from her SAT class. Mom ushering in the paramedics who arrived too late. I shake my head. Now, anyone can sneak in.

"Hello?" I call out, slipping my sneakers off next to a giant potted plant, which I've never before seen, the living room nearly anonymous. Gone are the framed family photographs on the mantelpiece—Grace with her law school diploma, me in my Girl Scouts uniform, our parent's wedding—and the familiar trail of keys, mail-order catalogues and knick-knacks that my mom leaves on the coffee table. *Hey, life, look at me. / I can see the reality.*

"You came," my mother says, making her way down the stairs. "Grace said you were going to call." She's taller and plumper than I remember, and yet, she glows, her hair cut short like my sister's, a wreath of black waves, her fuchsia workout clothes so bright and cheery and unwidow-like.

"Nice outfit," I say, which is easier to say than "I guess we're talking again" or worse, "I'm sorry." I walk over to the fireplace. "Where'd all our

pictures go?"

"I packed them up, don't worry," my mom says. "The agent recommended no personal items out during the open house, so I thought I'd get a head start."

"Isn't it a little too soon?" I follow her upstairs, her feet barely making a dent in the thick carpet.

"We got started on Daddy's stuff," she says. "Grace is in the bedroom. Look at you." She stops to squeeze the top of my arms. "Too skinny. Is everything okay?" I notice that she's not wearing her wedding ring, a small trio of diamonds that I used to name for the three of us. "What about Daddy?" she'd ask, and I'd point to the gold band that circled her finger.

"I'm *fine*," I say, and pull away and stride down the hall, because suddenly I can't take her being so nice, so protective, this mother of mine, who somehow forgot that the last time we were in the same room, we yelled unforgivable things at each other. *Nothing but heartaches / Oh, nothing but heartaches.*

"Glad you finally showed up," my sister says. She sits cross-legged on the floor of my parent's bedroom, rifling through a nest of silk ties. Dad's old suits and button-down shirts are strewn across the floor between half-filled garbage bags and cardboard boxes. The empty shelves and racks look forlorn in the yellow light of the walk-in closet.

"Can't stay long," I say.

"You have to work? On the weekend?" my mom asks, and I offer up a half-smile. Grace raises an eyebrow, like she can see straight through me, that the only reason I have to leave in a couple hours is because Mr. Rosen needs his dry-cleaning picked up. That I'm here to help, not make amends.

"Not a big deal," I say, and before Grace can say something rude, I grab a striped blue polo shirt my dad used to don when he golfed.

"Untangle this," Grace says, tossing me the ball of ties. I duck. "No clue why you kept these for so long, Mom."

"Oh, stop," our mother says, and picks up the ties from the floor. "Your dad worked hard to put these in order." She rubs the patterned silks between her fingers.

"So, you want to keep those? Or trash?" Grace asks impatiently. Our

mother sighs and then tosses the ties towards the biggest pile in the room.

"Look at all these clothes," I say, sitting down. "What happened to Dad's UCLA sweatshirt? The one we bought for his birthday?"

"Good luck finding that old thing here," Grace says.

"We've got two piles, one to pack and the other to donate," my mom tells me, pointing around her. The second heap, the ties on top, is twice as large as the other.

"Or," Grace says, "we can just make *one* big pile and throw it all out." I hold up a pair of black socks. "Remember how he used to wear these everywhere? Even to the beach?"

"Unless you're prepared to lug his stuff around for the rest of your life," Grace says.

My mother bites her bottom lip, clothes strewn everywhere, wire hangers zigzagging around the floor. "Probably not."

"Wait, you're not going to get rid of *everything*," I say. I've been home for all of five minutes, and already the past is slipping away. I stand up, the blue shirt falling to the floor.

"What's the point of keeping it?" Grace asks.

"Mom." I turn to her, hoping for once that she'll side with me. "You're holding onto at least some of his things, right?"

"What would she do with a closet full of suits?" Grace asks. "There's no room."

"There would be if we weren't selling the house," I say.

"We already went over this."

This is *Dad* we're talking about," my voice high-pitched and loud, because it's the only way anyone will listen.

"This is Dad's *stuff*. There's a big difference."

I turn back to my mom for help, for anything, something, a sign that I'm not alone in thinking that we're not ready to let go. She only purses her lips in that same exact manner whenever my dad, at the dinner table, demanded more from me. Better grades, better behavior, a better reason for them to not feel so disenchanting with me. *Say something*, I'd mentally transmit to her, *Say that I'm good enough*, but my mom would merely nod along, squeeze my hand under the table or begin to clear the dishes. She

looks down at her clasped hands, right thumb over her left knuckles, pressing at the spot exactly where those three diamonds used to be.

Despite my mother's nefarious attempts to transform the house into a Pottery Barn catalogue, I find my old bedroom unscathed. Yearbooks, CDs, sticker albums and issues of SPIN magazine weigh down the bookshelf. I know that if I reach down beneath the bed, I'll still find my Barbie dolls and red shoebox full of tiny ceramic animals.

In the dim light, I can almost believe I'm a teenager again, my sister next door, the lamp on her desk burning a halo around her chair as she studies into the night. Me, on the bed like now, not bothering to do my homework. Followed by the solitude after Grace leaves for college, then law school while I stay put, swapping my dollhouse for a Soundgarden poster, my *Babysitter Club* paperbacks for an AIWA boom box. When it's my turn, I pick Santa Monica College because it's only thirty minutes away and moving out seems less of a hassle than simply embracing the way things were, with me always a little lost and Dad forever a little disappointed.

And then he dies in the room directly below mine, and me listening to the clatter of my mom washing the dishes, and formulating excuses to ditch English class in the morning. Mom calls his name, like it's dinnertime all over again and he *still* won't come to the table. She starts yelling my name, but like always, I don't listen. I check my email, her voice higher and higher until I tumble down the stairs to the study, where she sits on the floor, holding his hand, his face strangely gray and by the time I dial 911, it's already too late.

After the funeral, Grace solemnly sorts out the life insurance, cancels his cell phone plan, the title to his beloved Toyota. I fully expect our mother to carry on his tradition of nagging me about why I'm not at school, why I'm not doing better, where I'm going and why. Rather, her heartache manifests in levity, a slow release that lifts her shoulders and eyes. *For a feeling that's so new / So inviting, so exciting.*

Grace sees it as healthy ("When's the last time you saw Mom laugh so much?" or "It's good that she's going out more.") but even now, I scramble to piece together what our family meant and means. A lopsided table of

three. Silence whenever I returned home too late or too early. Every fickle decision—a short-lived tongue piercing, a Tuesday hangover—met with my mother's new signature cocktail of resignation and nonchalance. What else could I do but stop going to school altogether? Fewer and fewer credits each semester until I had just enough to quit. "If that's what you want to do," was her response, and that night I scoured Craigslist for a job, packed a suitcase and moved out.

My bedroom door skids open across the carpet and I quickly wipe my eyes before my mother can see. She steps in, hands on her waist like she's surveying a crime scene.

"We have to start clearing this room next," she says.

"That's really all you think about now," I say, and sit up on the bed. Down the hall comes the jingle of hangers.

"There's so much to do. Sometimes I feel like I'm never going to get the house ready in time." She kneels on the floor next to me and, for a moment, I imagine she's going to wrap her arms around my legs. Instead, she leans down and pulls the shoebox from under the bed. "Remember these?"

"How'd you know that was there?"

"I found them," she says. "Someone still has to vacuum under here, you know." She pulls off the cardboard lid and holds the box out, the miniature zoo no longer the jumble I remember, but rather in orderly rows, fitted together like a haphazard Tetris game. Kittens with painted balls of yarn. The outstretched wings of swans. Porcelain elephants with trunks raised, ceramically frozen in time.

The box jangles in my hands. "Thanks."

My mother says, "You used to spend so much time collecting these. Why'd you throw them in a box?"

I shrug. "Where else?" In truth, I'd forgotten all about them, a culmination of gift shop souvenirs and flea market treasures. I hid the box as soon as I entered junior high, a desperate measure to distinguish myself from uncool to cool.

"I remember how you'd leave them out on the kitchen counter or the stairs, even one time in the mailbox."

"A traveling circus," I say. "Well, until Dad stepped on one."

"Can you blame him?" she says. "Who'd expect a fragile little pig sitting behind the bathroom door?"

"It was a lion," I say. "And he never replaced it."

"It wouldn't have mattered, though," she says. "You would've just tossed it into this shoebox with the rest."

Because she's right, I stay silent, the shoebox a forgotten relic when I moved out, armed only with a laptop, some clothes, a couple of favorite books.

"I'll take the box with me tonight," I say. I'll find space in my studio apartment. Maybe along the windowsill or the broken radiator.

"But only if you need them," she says.

"I can—"

My mother pats my knee. "That's the problem with things," she says, and stands up, her hand now on my shoulder. "Sometimes you have to let them go."

I follow her back to the master bedroom, where Grace sneezes as she pulls out yet another pair of Dad's pants. Without a word, I join them. We open, shake out, ascertain, gather and fold, like three peasant women bent over in a field of dirty laundry. After I tie the ends of the last garbage bag, I run back to my bedroom and return with one final donation: a red shoebox that rings with my every step.

Brass bells chime as I push open the glass door to the dry-cleaners. My arms are sore from lifting and carrying and stuffing so many garbage bags into the backseat of my car.

The old Asian man looks up from behind the counter and raises his hand to greet me. *Annyeong*, he says, and when he smiles, his eyes disappear in a web of wrinkles.

"I'm not—" I begin to say but cut myself short. I'm late picking up Mr. Rosen's dry-cleaning, having lingered at home with the emptiness settling around us, Grace asking about dinner, me looking at my watch and rushing out of the house, promising to drop off Dad's stuff at Goodwill.

"No Korean, I know," the man says, then checks the paper stub I hand

him. He pushes the red button on the wall next to him and the carousel creaks into motion. What looks like a line of headless businessmen in plastic suits rotates around the store. "But still I like to say hello."

"Oh, hello," I say, realizing I've never greeted him, despite coming in here at least twice a week. He retrieves several dress shirts and a black suit.

"It's okay," he says. "Rush, rush, rush. Sometime good to stop and talk."

"Yeah," I say, and amidst the hiss and clanging of the ironing presses, music floats through the ceiling speakers. "Excuse me," I call out to where he stands by the cash register. "Do you know what song this is?"

He pauses to listen, then turns up the volume on the stereo next to him. *A feeling so divine / Till I leave the past behind / I'm lost in a world / Made for you and me.* He shakes his head.

"It's The Supremes," I say.

"Are you sure?" he asks.

"Definitely," I say. "I can recognize Diana Ross from a mile away."

"Ah, yes," he says, handing me the receipt. "Queen of disco?"

I consider correcting him, a brief explanation on the history of Motown and music during the 1960's before I deliver the laundered goods to Mr. Rosen's house. But then I hear Diana crooning over the melody of her lover's kiss, a thousand violins filling the air, our hearts beating in tune. The carousel of plastic wrapped coats and silk dresses sway a slow dance with the soft crinkle of static electricity.

"Exactly," I say, and match the grin on his face. I pay, and swinging the freshly cleaned clothes over my shoulder, exit the shop. The brass bells tinkle their farewell. Outside, the setting sun casts an orange glow on my parked car, and in the back seat, the stuffed garbage bags light up like giant paper lanterns.