Felix Starro (short story)

We were here to perform the Holy Blessed Extraction of Negativities on unwell Filipino Americans. Mrs. Delgado was our 153rd patient, but we treated her like the first and let her tell the story of her pain as if we had never heard it before. “It begins here”—she tapped her heart, then three spots on her stomach—“then here and here, sometimes here. Bastard American doctors tell me nothing is wrong, like I’m so old, so crazy-in-the-head.”

“Then it’s good you came to see us, ma’am,” I said. I helped her onto the massage table, laid her flat on her back. Then I lit a pair of candles, hung plastic rosary beads over the covered mirrors. A wreath of dried sampaguita flowers made the cigarette air of our dingy hotel room smell like Philippine countryside.

I unbuttoned her blouse halfway up, rubbed coconut oil on her stomach, forehead, and chin. Then Papa Felix, my grandfather, stepped forward. He rolled up his sleeves, pulled his thinning hair back into a ponytail. He put his palms on Mrs. Delgado’s belly and began to massage it, gently at first with his fingertips, then hard and deep with his fists. I closed my eyes, chanting Hail Marys over and over, faster and faster, and when I looked again Papa Felix’s hands were half gone, knuckle-deep in Mrs. Delgado’s body. Blood seeped out from between Papa Felix’s fingers, and one by one he extracted coin-size fleshy blobs and dumped them into the trash can by his feet.

“Negativities,” he said.

Mrs. Delgado lifted her head to look. “Thanks be to God,” she said with a sigh I’d heard a thousand times before—that breath of relief that there is someone in the world,

finally, who understands what hurts you.

There was a time when I might have apologized, if only in my head. But some things were necessary. “Two hundred dollars,” I said. “Cash only.”

I wiped the blood from her stomach, helped her to her feet. She reached for her purse, gave me the money. But then she did something no other patient had ever done before: she took out a camera. “When I told my sisters that Felix Starro was coming to San Francisco, they didn’t believe me.” She pressed a button, adjusting the zoom lens. “May I?”

Papa Felix shook his head: the camera flash could disrupt his spiritual vibrations, he said, which could thwart the healing of patients to come. “But for you,” he said, “OK.” He undid his ponytail, smoothed back his hair, and smiled. I moved to the right, to stand outside the picture.

In my family, the only recipe passed down was the one for blood, but Papa Felix said I knew nothing about it. “Too thin,” he said. “Like ketchup and water mix-mix.” He dipped a finger into the plastic jug of blood and held it up to the fluorescent bathroom light. “What idiot would believe it’s his own?”

Too much water, not enough corn syrup. Always my mistake. “At least it’s red,” I said, but he just grumbled about my carelessness and lazy attitude and insisted that something in America was making me different; he guessed it was the greasy food, the low-quality air of our hotel room, my terrible luck of turning nineteen in midair, en route from Manila to San Francisco. “I’m the same,” I said, but he took my shoulders and stood me in front of him, flicked my temples twice and rubbed them in slow circles, as though

what I was feeling could be diagnosed. “You’re not right, Felix.”

I was the third Felix Starro (my dead father was the second), and whenever Papa Felix said my name it meant he was serious; this time, I decided, he was just talking to himself. “You won’t find anything,” I said, and returned to the room. I took the rosaries and sheets off the mirrors, peeled away plastic crucifixes we’d taped to the walls, blew out the candles. I reached into hidden compartments underneath the massage table and carefully removed tiny plastic bags of blood, then dug through the trash to retrieve chicken livers good enough to use for the next day’s Extractions.

Suddenly my cell phone vibrated in my pocket. I looked up, checking to see that Papa Felix was still in the bathroom, then took it out. A text message read, *Buy roses. 6pm. 1525 South Van Ness.*

I left the livers where they were. I took the day’s cash from the ice bucket, stuffed it into a manila envelope. “I’m going to the bank”—my voice shook, I could feel it—“to make the deposit.” We’d found a Filipino bank in Chinatown where no one questioned large deposits of cash. I changed into a clean white shirt and my good corduroy pants, grabbed my backpack and windbreaker from the closet.

“Look before you leave,” he said. He meant that I should check the hallway, through the peephole, for anything suspicious; anyone, he said, could be undercover hotel security, ready to arrest us for our activities. But I didn’t look, not this time, and I left the room so fast I nearly collided with a maid vacuuming the hall. She was Filipina, plump-cheeked and short, younger than me. We had seen each other before.

“Excuse me,” she said in English, “sorry,” but I caught her staring at the DO NOT DISTURB sign on our doorknob. It was always there, to keep maids from finding the

batches of blood and bags of chicken livers, or barging in on an Extraction. So the room was never cleaned, and though we kept it tidy ourselves, the Filipina housekeeper looked suspicious, as if thinking, *Dirty room*.

I said sorry, too, then walked slowly to the exit stairs, ran all the way down.

"Do you know this place, sir?" I showed the taxicab driver the address in the text message. He popped his gum and nodded, and we sped off before I could fasten my seat belt. In minutes I was far away from downtown. For the first time in America, I didn't know where I was.

We had arrived in San Francisco three weeks before. We worked seven days a week, up to ten hours each day, making the kind of money we could no longer make back home. Once, life was different: years before, Papa Felix had been one of the Philippines's top healers. He'd made his reputation by curing Batangas City Mayor Agbayani's gout and action star B. J. San Remo's diabetes, which led him to becoming a regular Very Special Guest Star on *It's Real!! (Di Ba?)*, the paranormal TV variety hour that named the procedure the Holy Blessed Extraction of Negativities. Once a month for several years my grandfather, my father, and I made the two-and-a-half-hour drive from our home in Batangas City to the TV studio in Manila. I would sit in the last row of the live audience and watch Papa Felix in the monitors above, the zoom angles on his hands penetrating the patient's belly, like a ghost about to possess a body. When blood was shed the audience would gasp; when fleshy-blobby Negativities were extracted, they cheered.

When I was ten, I snuck backstage to watch the performance. I hid behind the edge of

a moveable wall, and as my father chanted Hail Marys into a microphone I saw Papa Felix slip a hand beneath the table and snatch something small and red—a bag of blood the size of a thumb. In an instant the Extraction began, and I felt a hand on the back of my neck. “You don’t belong here,” a stagehand said. He brought me to a boxy, white, windowless room, where I waited for what felt like hours, and when my father finally came I told him what I’d seen. He nodded slowly, stared at the ground. “Time to go home,” was all he said. Two months later, he died in a jeep wreck, and at the post-funeral potluck I heard Papa Felix tell our guests I was his one comfort, a good, strong boy who would take his father’s place: like a birthmark, the family business was mine forever.

After some years, Mayor Agbayani’s gout returned, followed by prostate cancer, and B. J. San Remo became a double-amputee. The big-shot clients were gone, and our loyal following in nearby shantytowns brought in little money; I remembered long months when we were paid with eggs and sacks of rice. “Even the peasants are ripping us off,” Papa Felix griped. And then two years ago, his old rival Chitz Gomez began performing surgeries on Filipinos abroad in Guam and Saudi Arabia, and returned a far wealthier man than before. “We can do better,” Papa Felix said. He called on old connections to help him build a client list in California, then scheduled our trip to San Francisco, where there were plenty of Filipinos in need of healing. It was true: our first patient, a middle-aged salesclerk with stomach tumors and a fear of doctors, fell to his knees when he stepped into our hotel room. “You’re here,” he said, taking Papa Felix’s hand and pressing it against his forehead, “finally.” It was amazing that there were people who remembered Felix Starro—and even more amazing that they still believed in him.

At the end of our first week Papa Felix said, “How I pity them, these Filipinos in

America. So many sick without knowing why." He was standing at the hotel window, looking down at the crowds in the street, as if they were his people. "Can you imagine, waiting and waiting, just for someone to bring you hope?"

I lied and said no.

"Buy roses" was a code from a woman named Flora Ramirez; 1525 South Van Ness was the address of her flower shop, which was squeezed between a Mexican bakery and a liquor store. On the storefront window, yellow curly letters spelled out BUHAY BULAKLAK, which translated strangely from Tagalog—it meant "life flowers" in English. I took a deep breath, but just as I reached for the doorknob I glimpsed a streak of dried blood over the ridge of my knuckles. I licked my thumb and rubbed it away, checked my other hand. It was clean. I went inside.

The store was barely bigger than our hotel room, lined with flower-filled shelves and humming refrigerators; everywhere you moved, it seemed, flowers would touch you. A woman was standing at a wooden table behind the cash register. She had a pair of scissors in one hand, white flowers in the other, and one by one she snipped them in half, letting stems fall to the floor. She was not tall, but her tailored blazer and the tight bun of her hair made her seem like a serious businessperson, someone who could get things done. Though I had never seen Flora Ramirez's picture, I knew it was she. It had to be.

She greeted me in English, like I was any ordinary American customer. I meant to identify myself but was unsure if it was safe to speak: there was one other customer, an old, bent-over woman in a dirty ski jacket with a scarf on her head, moving from bouquet to bouquet, rubbing petals between her fingers.

Flora Ramirez looked at me and said, “You want to buy roses.”

I nodded.

“Roses are on sale. Seven for seven dollars. Red, pink, yellow, white. What is your preference?” She put down her scissors, stepped around the register, and slid open the refrigerator door. Cold, rose-scented air floated toward me, and suddenly I feared her text message was no code at all, that our meeting truly was about flowers and nothing else.

“Red, pink, yellow, white,” she said again.

“Yellow,” I said.

“Yellow means friendship.” She took seven yellow roses from the refrigerator and carried them to the register. She wrapped them in cellophane and rung them up, then handwrote a bill on a small pad of paper. She tore it off, handed it to me. It said, *$2500*—the initial payment.

“Everything is fine.” She smiled, and something about her perfect teeth let me know that I was right to seek her out. For twenty-five thousand dollars, Flora Ramirez could help illegal Filipinos stay in America—months or years, forever if they wished. I didn’t know how she did it, only that she could: two years before, she had given TonyBoy Llamas, my girlfriend Charma’s favorite cousin, a new life. He was vacationing in California before returning to the Philippines to join the seminary when he met and fell in love with an amateur Mexican boxer. His parents disowned him, his brothers, too, so he and the boxer sought help from Flora Ramirez. Six months later, they were living in what TonyBoy called a Mediterranean-style apartment complex in Las Vegas, earning good money dealing blackjack. So when Papa Felix began planning our trip to America, I knew this would be my chance: I made contact with Flora Ramirez and started a yearlong

correspondence of coded e-mails and text messages, coordinating cash amounts and payment dates and when, where, and how we would meet. These were risky, secret dealings, but in times of doubt Charma would tell me, “If my homosexual priest cousin and his Mexican boxer boyfriend can make it in America, why can’t we?” We were no different from them, she said, or any other person in search of a good and honest life in America.

Flora Ramirez tapped her fingernail twice on the receipt. I unzipped my backpack, took out the envelope of cash, handed it to her. She slipped it underneath the register drawer, then tied a black ribbon around the bouquet of roses. “Better selection tomorrow,” she said, “you come back then. Same price.” She nodded toward the door.

I left the store and walked to the corner to hail a taxicab. My heart was pounding; people on the street stared at me, as if they knew who I was and what I’d done. But it was merely the roses in my hands that caught their attention. They were lovely and bright; I could imagine pressing them between the pages of a heavy book, a souvenir that would inspire me to look back on this day, the first of my new life. But now they would only make Papa Felix suspicious, so I left them on top of a trash can for someone else to take.

Whenever I called Charma, I’d stare at postcards of famous San Francisco landmarks, images of which she would download online—the Golden Gate Bridge, Coit Tower, the famous crooked street. It was like taking in the same view together, despite the distance between us, and she’d say the pictures were glimpses of our future. But now, I was calling from the backseat of a dented, lime-green cab, staring at a lightning-shaped crack in the window.

She picked up on the fourth ring. “I bought roses,” I said.

First she giggled, then she gasped. “You really did it? Truly?”

“First payment was today. Second tomorrow. And then—”

“Pay it all now!” she said. “Pay it all now and send me a plane ticket tomorrow and let’s be together forever.”

“That’s not how it works. Flora Ramirez has a process.” I reminded Charma that it might be months, maybe longer, until I could send for her; though Flora Ramirez had connections with people who could help find me work and a place to sleep, it would take time to begin a life. “Just have faith in me,” I said.

“Always. What about the old man?”

“He doesn’t know anything. And once I get my papers, there’s nothing he can do.”

Then she said, “How will you go?”

There was static, silence, then an awkward moment when I caught the driver’s eyes in the rearview mirror. He seemed dubious, though I was speaking Tagalog. “Are you there?” Charma said, but I had no answer, not yet, despite the exit scenarios playing in my head: I imagined going to the airport with Papa Felix, then backing away into the crowds as soon as he crossed through security. Or I would take my seat on our return flight and then, minutes before takeoff, tell Papa Felix I’d forgotten something in the terminal bathroom, and make my escape from there. Sometimes I didn’t even imagine the airport; I simply left in the middle of the night.

“How will you go?” Charma repeated.

“I’ll leave a note,” I finally said, a good enough answer for now.

Back at the hotel, Papa Felix was sitting on a chair in the bathroom, staring at the mirror, a paper cup in his hands and a bottle of Cutty Sark by his feet. “You forgot me,” he said. “I’ve been waiting.” He was wearing a white trash bag like a poncho, and a box of hair dye was on the edge of the sink. At home, I colored his hair twice a month; here, once a week. “A good healer should look ageless,” he always said, “like Jesus or Dick Clark.”

I hung my windbreaker and backpack in the closet, stepped into the bathroom. “Long lines at the bank.”

“Cut in line next time. Receipt?”

From my pocket I pulled out an ATM receipt I’d found on the sidewalk a week before. He squinted at the small paper, as though his old eyes could actually make out the tiny numbers. “Good work, good money,” he said. “And just think: What did we come with? Nothing. Now look at us.” He finished his whiskey, poured another. “Maybe we’ll come back another year. New York next time. Maybe Canada. Where are the Filipinos in Canada?” He named other countries and continents we might visit; the way he talked, the whole planet was full of ailing Filipinos far from home, waiting for us to heal them.

“Someday,” I said, “maybe.” In the mirror, there was an odd, faraway look in Papa Felix’s eyes, like he was trying to remember something long forgotten. I realized he was watching me. I reached for the box of dye and tore it open, pulled out the bottle and plastic gloves, and I found him still watching, like he was studying my face for a twitch or new expression I’d adopted, some clue to who I really was and what I was planning to do.

“When we’re home,” he finally said, “you’re on your own.”

“My own.” I didn’t understand.

"You're nineteen now. A man. Your father was sixteen when he first extracted on his own. It's your time." He emptied and refilled his drink, then set a paper cup on the counter and poured one for me. "Two of us working, side by side. Double Felix Starro, double business." He lifted his cup, toasting a future that would never happen.

There was only one thing to do. I took the whiskey, drank it in a single gulp. I felt its warmth, then its sting.

He nodded, drank his whiskey, poured another. He settled back in his chair and looked at his reflection almost admiringly, then pointed to his roots. "All this silver," he said, "make it black."

Four cups of whiskey made Papa Felix drowsy. I poured a fifth that put him to sleep. It was barely eight o'clock when I tucked him into bed, but he snored thunderously—someone from the next room pounded on the wall, as if that could quiet him down. "Are you awake?" I whispered. I crossed the room and spoke again. "Can you hear me? Wake up!" His sleep only deepened, and I knew it was safe.

I went into the closet, unlocked my suitcase and opened it, unzipped the lining. The money was there, paper-clipped in flimsy stacks. It was almost a disappointment, how little twenty-five thousand American dollars could look; it seemed mathematically impossible that so small an amount could guarantee my next life. But back home, it could keep a family stable for several generations, or get an entire province through a difficult year. Half asleep on the plane from home to here, I'd dreamed that I'd refunded every person Papa Felix had ever touched; in that same dream my father told me, *Go, go*.

I picked up two stacks of cash and put them in my backpack for my second visit to

Flora Ramirez. I locked my suitcase, closed the closet.

I went into the bathroom to prepare for the next day. I made the blood first—I poured corn syrup into a plastic jug, mixed in water, then thirty drops of red dye. But the lid to the jug was missing, so instead of shaking the jug to make the mix, I rolled up my sleeve and stirred it with my hand. Long ago, Papa Felix made it the same way; because my hands were small, my job was to squirt the liquid into tiny bags and knot them up. We'd stay up all night, diligent and silent, as though our work was truly blessed and holy.

I finished making the bags of blood and liver, tied them shut, and stashed them in the foam cooler beneath the sink. There were streaks of blood along the counter and faucet, red fingerprints on the doorknob and toilet seat. Our nightly crime scene, but not for long, not for me. I cleaned up fast, then showered, and under near-scalding water I scratched dried blood from my wrists and fingers, the backs of my hands, my knuckles and the skin in between.

Back in the room, Papa Felix was still snoring. I walked over, sat on the edge of my bed, an arm's reach away. The Cutty Sark was on the nightstand, so I unscrewed the cap and drank from the bottle, thinking of the note I told Charma I'd leave behind, all the things that could be said—a quick apology maybe, the hope he would understand, a promise that we would both be OK. The more I drank, the more the note went on—it would have been pages, had I truly written it. But then the pounding on the wall started again, so I pounded back and told whoever it was to let my grandfather sleep.

We performed twelve Extractions the next day. Most who came were elderly, complaining of arthritis, swollen joints, unending fatigue. But the last patient, a woman

named Maribel, was just thirty-two years old. She'd come with her little boy, who sat on a pillow in the corner. Despite his video game, he watched us the whole time, the fear plain on his round face.

After, as Maribel got to her feet and buttoned up her blouse, I noticed that her right breast was gone. She caught me looking. "If only you'd come sooner," she said, blinking back tears. She gave me the money, and I took it.

"I'm sorry," I said, and then I heard giggling. I turned and saw Papa Felix sitting on the edge of his bed, entertaining the boy with a vanishing coin trick. He'd done the same with me when I was that age, making random objects disappear and reappear in his hands—a spool of thread, a mango pit, even a newborn chick. Then he would say, "Tell me how I did that," his voice heavy and grave, as though sleight of hand could save a life instead of fool one. But I couldn't explain it; all I could think about was the time and space between the vanish and return, where a small thing went in its moment of absence—I pictured some dead, barren planet without weather or sound, and I'd lie awake at night, determined not to dream of it.

I took the boy's hand, pulled him gently toward his mother, and saw them out. Then I gathered the day's cash, grabbed my things. Papa Felix was about to say something—I heard him call my name—but I left without saying good-bye: it was the best way, I decided, to go.

I arrived at Buhay Bulaklak at 6 P.M. exactly. I was about to step in when a family stepped out, a Filipino couple and their baby. They looked tremendously pleased; even the baby seemed to smile. I moved aside to let them pass, watched them until they turned

the corner.

Inside, Flora Ramirez was alone. She was sitting at the table behind the cash register, a thick, long-stemmed tropical flower in each hand, staring at a vase. “Birds-of-paradise,” she said, “beautiful, eh?” I nodded, but I felt anxious, thinking about the family I saw and the ways she might have helped them.

“I have the money.” I could feel my heart speeding up. “I want to stay here and I have the money.”

She put down her flowers. She pulled a wooden stool from beneath the table and told me to sit. I joined her at the table, handed her the envelope of cash. She slipped it into the pocket of her blazer, barely looking at it.

She reviewed the terms of our agreement, the obligations I had met so far. I’d made the first two payments (“Nonrefundable,” she said, in both English and Tagalog) and would bring the remaining twenty thousand dollars two days from now, plus an extra thousand to cover unexpected costs. This would guarantee a California ID, a social security card, various documents like school diplomas, recent utility bills, a birth certificate. “What you need to start a life. And you’re ready for it? If not, you’re wasting my time.” She was speaking Tagalog now, her voice louder than before. “Like the old people who come to me,” she said. “They want to stay, to be with their children, collect social security. Then what: they’re suddenly scared to spend their last years away from home. They say, ‘We are old, we cannot die away from home, blah blah blah.’ What’s wrong with dying here? The cemeteries aren’t good enough?” She reached into a pile of random flowers, grabbed a handful, and jammed them into the vase. “In the end, your land is just the dirt you’re buried in.”

I looked at Flora Ramirez. “I don’t care where I’m buried,” I said.

She stared at me for a moment, and I knew she believed me.

“You need a picture,” she said. She got up from her stool and stepped into a tiny office, pointed at a bare, blue wall, and had me stand against it. Then she reached into her desk for a digital camera and told me to be still.

She took my picture. “Why did you come?”

She had never asked the question before. Our months of correspondence were all business; she’d needed to know only my age and gender.

“For a happy life.” That was my answer.

She took a second picture, then the last. “Then it’s good you came to me.”

We stepped out of the office. We arranged to meet two days later, this time at her home. On the back of a business card she wrote, *La Playa @ Lincoln*, but not her actual address. “Count seventeen houses down,” she said. “I live there.” Then she took some flowers, wrapped them in cellophane, tied them in black ribbon.

I thanked her, exited the shop. People on the street seemed to watch me again; I told myself it was the flowers. But sweat was dripping down my neck, soaking my collar, and my heart was beating so fast I swore I could hear it—if Felix Starro powers were real, I would have reached inside myself and pulled it out.

On the ride back to the hotel, I couldn’t get hold of Charma. My signal faded in and out, even stuck in traffic. A text message that said *ALL PERFECT* was the best I could do.

The driver let me off two blocks from the hotel. I walked the rest of the way, and when I crossed the street I spotted the Filipina maid sitting at a crowded bus stop. I didn’t

intend eye contact, but it was the first time in America that I knew a face among the hundreds of strangers I passed every day.

She smiled meekly. “Beautiful flowers,” she said.

I’d almost forgotten the bouquet in my hand—I’d meant to leave them on a trash can again—so I offered them to her, but she was shy to accept. “They’ll die in that room,” I said.

She took the bouquet, sniffed the single rose.

Then she grabbed my hand. “Your grandfather,” she said, “he helps people?” She’d noticed all our come-and-go visitors, how despondent they looked when they arrived, how peaceful when they left. She said she knew the amazing things Papa Felix could do. “I have money. I can pay.” I told her she was mistaking us for other people, but she said there was no need for me to lie. “I know he can help me,” she whispered in Tagalog. “I know who he is.” Her grip tightened, her thumb pressing on my inner wrist like she was desperate to find a pulse.

“Stay away from him,” I said. I stepped back, slipped into the crowd, and hurried off.

In the hotel room, I found Papa Felix staring out the window. “You were talking to the maid.”

I locked the door behind me. “You were watching me?”

“Does she know who we are?” I told him no, but he rambled on with paranoid scenarios of the police discovering us, confiscating our client list, robbing us of our hard-earned money. “One mistake and we’re finished.”

“She was just talking about home,” I said, and made up a story about distant relatives she had in Batangas City, former teachers at my old elementary school. Then I poured

him a cup of Cutty Sark and assured him once more: “She doesn’t know anything.”

“She’d better not. Because if she does, and if she talks, then our time here means nothing.” He picked up the fading, wrinkled ATM receipt and held it to my face. “This is our future. Don’t forget that.”

I gave him the whiskey and stepped toward the window, looked down at the street. The bus stop was at least two long blocks west of the hotel—I had to press against the glass just to see it. From where I was, the people standing there were faceless, blurry bodies. How Papa Felix could spot me with his old, bad eyes was beyond me, and a familiar feeling returned: that he possessed a real kind of power after all, some extra sense that could lead him to me, wherever I was.

He was standing over me when I woke the next morning. “I’m going with you,” he said.

He meant the butcher shop in Chinatown. The chicken livers I bought were too fresh, he said, therefore fake-looking. With one day left, there was no time for my mistakes.

He set a Snickers bar and a banana next to my pillow. “Eat breakfast and let’s go.”

On my own, the walk to Chinatown took seventeen minutes; with Papa Felix, it was twice as long. But I stayed ahead, by half a block sometimes, and when he caught up at the butcher shop he was out of breath, and he accused me of trying to lose him in the crowd. He took a seat on a bench outside the Chinese bakery next door, then gave me a fifty-dollar bill. “Just get it done,” he said.

I entered the shop, pushed my way through the crowd to take a number. They called me twenty minutes later; I paid for the livers and left. But outside, the bench was empty; Papa Felix was inside the bakery now, sitting at a corner table with three silver-haired

Chinese women. They leaned in as he spoke, nodding despite the quizzical looks on their faces. I couldn't remember the last time he'd solicited business like this, but his method was the same—he tapped their foreheads with his thumb, shut his eyes, and mouthed secret prayers to himself. It was always a bogus-looking act, but at some point I just assumed that Filipinos were somehow predisposed to believing anyone who claimed to understand their pain. And yet I could imagine these Chinese women making appointments with Papa Felix, who would insist they pay up front, then arrange for them to meet us long after we'd gone; he'd done it before. I pictured these women knocking on our hotel door, awaiting help that would never come.

I went inside, walked up to Papa Felix. "I'm ready to go," I said. His eyes were still closed and he kept on praying, so I shook his shoulder. "Open your eyes. Let's go."

He turned to me, gave a mean look that I gave right back. "I'm *working*," he said.

"I'm not." I slammed the bag of livers on the table. The Chinese women glared at me with scolding faces.

I walked to the end of the block. I tried to cross, but the light was red, and Papa Felix caught up with me. "What were you trying to do in there?" he asked.

I pressed the button for the crosswalk. "Nothing."

"The maid yesterday. Those women today. You're trying to tell them about us?"

I pressed the button again and again.

"You think I'm stupid." He grabbed my arm, squeezed it tight. "I know about you, Felix."

He was stronger than I thought. "Let me go," I said, then finally pushed him off. He stumbled back, almost fell, and the bag of livers slipped from his hands, everything inside

spilling onto the sidewalk.

The traffic light was still red, but I crossed the street. Papa Felix would be close behind me, so I walked faster, zigzagging through the tourist crowds. Police blocked the next intersection—a moving truck had rear-ended a minivan—and I couldn't continue. So I turned around, ready to face him, to say whatever needed to be said. But he wasn't there. I started back through the crowds and finally found him still on the corner, head bowed like a mourner at a grave. He was bent down and was picking up the livers from the sidewalk, one by one; a believer might have thought he was extracting Negativities from the Earth itself. To me, he looked like a penniless man gathering coins.

"Just leave them," I said. "Let's go." Standing over him, I could see the silver in his roots, all that I'd missed.

But what else could I do? I joined Papa Felix on the ground and helped him clean up. People who passed us looked curious, then repulsed by the livers in our hands. Some shook their heads, like they couldn't believe what they were seeing.

That whole day his focus was off. Twice he palmed a liver but not a blood bag, which made for oddly bloodless Extractions. Then he did the opposite with the last patient, extracting nothing but blood. He tried to explain: "Nothing is there. Nothing is wrong with you." The patient got up and refused to pay, then peeled a plastic crucifix from the wall and dropped it on the ground. He slammed the door on his way out, so hard the walls shook. And I realized I was done.

I began cleaning up, one last time, made no ceremony of it: I simply put things away. All the while Papa Felix just stood by the window, staring straight ahead at the vacant

building across the street. Only when I took the day's cash from the ice bucket did he finally speak. "Don't deposit the money," he said. "You keep it. Belated birthday gift."

Birthday. I had turned nineteen three weeks before, on the plane to America. But I didn't know exactly when it happened—that whole time in the sky I wasn't sure if it was today or tomorrow, which country was ahead or behind and by how many hours or days, and where I was in all of it. It made me dizzy, not knowing how old I was, until Papa Felix leaned over, in the moment before he fell asleep, to whisper, "Happy birthday."

I put the cash in my pocket. "I'll take it to the bank."

"I know what you think of me, Felix. But it's the best I could do." He was still staring out the window, but squinting now, as if the evening moon were unbearably bright. "Can you tell me the name of a man who would do any different?"

I didn't answer. I grabbed my windbreaker and backpack. I checked the peephole before leaving, but as I stepped into the hall I noticed a small, white envelope on the floor. I picked it up. Inside was a picture of Papa Felix, and on the back was a note that read, *Felix Starro and Felix Starro. Regards, Mrs. Celica Delgado*. It was the photo she'd taken two days before, and when I looked closer I saw part of me within it, the very edge of my face. But what struck me was Papa Felix's graying eyes and the sinking skin beneath, his knobby shoulders, the fading color of his old hands. And how, with the photo folded in half so that I was gone, he could pass as anybody's grandfather.

That night, Papa Felix slept even more deeply, and I took the cash from the inner lining in my luggage and packed it into a large, padded envelope, then put it inside my backpack. I slipped into bed but stayed awake. It was morning by the time I finally closed

my eyes, noon when I woke.

Papa Felix was dressed, packing his clothes. “Last full day in America,” he said.

I got out of bed. “You didn’t wake me.”

“It’s a long plane ride back,” he said. “Best to sleep now, as much as you can.”

I showered, dressed. My meeting with Flora Ramirez was at 3 P.M.; I told Papa Felix I would spend the day souvenir shopping. “Souvenirs,” he said. “Waste of money, waste of time. What’s to remember about this place?” He looked at me expectantly, as though he wouldn’t move or speak until I answered.

I gathered my things, promised to be back before dark.

The taxicab driver said that Flora Ramirez lived on the edge of the continent. “If the big one hits,” he said, “you’re out to sea.”

We turned onto La Playa, stopped in front of the seventeenth house. Metal bars covered the windows, and dried-up ivy spread over the walls, hiding the address.

I stepped out of the cab, walked to the door. I meant to knock but she opened first, as though she’d been watching me through the peephole. I followed her in, up a flight of carpeted stairs to the living room. This was my first time in an American house, but it wasn’t so different from any house back home—there was a two-person couch and a white wicker rocking chair, a small glass table in between. I’d expected flowers, but there were none that I could see, not even a vase.

The house was silent, and I wondered if Flora Ramirez had any family, or anybody. Yet on the floor, propped against the wall, was a large picture frame full of faces and bodies cut out from photos; they looked like a creature with a hundred different heads.

Closer, I saw that they were all Filipino, some smiling, some not, and I recognized one of them, a small body in the middle. It was TonyBoy, Charma's cousin. His hand was up like he was waving hello or good-bye at the camera. I wondered when my picture would be added, where Flora Ramirez would place it.

"Those are the ones I help," Flora Ramirez said. There were several brown envelopes in her hand. "Do you see how happy they are?"

"I see TonyBoy." I pointed at his picture.

She blinked.

"TonyBoy Llamas. My girlfriend's cousin."

She nodded, then put the envelopes on the table. "Check them." She sat on the rocking chair.

I picked one up, took out the ID card inside. It was a driver's license, my first ever; blue capital letters spelled out california across the top. My picture was grainy and faded, as if taken years instead of two days before, and the expression on my face surprised me, how it matched what I felt now: my eyes were focused but blank, my mouth plain and straight as a minus sign.

Then I saw it.

John Arroyo Cruz was the name printed beside my face. The signature below spelled it out, unmistakably.

"Is there a problem?" Flora Ramirez asked.

"John," I said.

"Nobody keeps a name. That's not the process."

I set the card down on the table.

She said it again: “Nobody keeps a name.”

The thing to do was nod and say, *I understand*, to accept what she had done with gratitude, without questions. But I wanted to know: “Who is he?”

She leaned back in the rocking chair, silent for a moment, like she didn’t want to answer. “A store clerk from L.A.,” she finally said. “Killed one year ago. I know the parents.”I glanced over the faces on the floor. I wondered what names Flora Ramirez had given them, and what people she had taken them from.

Suddenly my cell phone vibrated in my pocket. It was Charma. “I need to answer,” I said. “Sorry.”

She got up from her chair, said, “Be quick,” then went into the kitchen.

I flipped open my phone, moved to the corner of the room. “I can’t talk,” I whispered, “but listen: How’s TonyBoy?”

“Who?” Static crackled over Charma’s voice. “Are you there?”

“I’m here. Have you heard from TonyBoy?”

“TonyBoy?” She paused. “Not in months. Maybe a year. Why?”

I looked out the window. Beyond the metal bars the ocean appeared motionless, the clouds above equally still, and on the street below there was no one, just a few cars passing by. At the end of Flora Ramirez’s driveway, a trash can lay on its side, rolling back and forth with the wind. I imagined myself in the future, walking down a similar street: If someone called out *John*, would I answer? Would I even turn around?

I told Charma I had to go, then hung up without saying good-bye.

Flora Ramirez returned, sat in her rocking chair. I took my place on the couch. She mentioned the hour, the other appointments she had today, and I knew it was time for me

to pay. I unzipped my backpack. The padded envelope was right there, plump with all the cash inside, but I pretended to search through the various compartments of my bag. “I made a mistake,” I said. I explained I had two similar bags, one for sightseeing and one for business, and I’d brought the wrong one with me. “If I could have more time”—I zipped up my backpack—“I can bring it later today.”

She stared at me for a moment; I knew she didn’t believe me. But she didn’t call me a liar, didn’t reach for my backpack. She simply rocked back and forth, like she was giving me a chance to confess the truth. “If I could have more time,” I- said again, and my heart would not slow down.

“You do what you need to do.” She looked out the window, toward the ocean.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

We stood up, and I followed her down the stairs. Neither of us mentioned my possible return, and neither of us said good-bye. I wondered if Flora Ramirez was her real name, and if not, who she had been before.

I walked to the end of the block and waited for a taxicab. I was remembering the driver’s license and the life I’d glimpsed from it: John Arroyo Cruz lived in a city called Riverside, was born two years before I was. His eyes were brown—mine were true black—and he was five feet six inches, slightly shorter than me. At the bottom of the license, I had noticed the word donor, and now I pictured myself dead, thinking, if I were not Felix Starro anymore, what would be taken from me, what would be left.

Despite my steady cell phone signal on the taxi ride back, I didn’t call Charma. Instead, I typed a text message that said, *There is a problem*. What it meant exactly, I didn’t know;

but as I hit send, the days ahead became perfectly clear: There would be sixteen hours on a plane, sitting across the aisle from Papa Felix, yet in the moments before landing I would wish for takeoff again, just a little more time in midair. Then, it would be night after night of jet lag, sitting on the edge of my bed, wide-awake.

It was almost dark by the time I returned to the hotel. I took the elevator up, and when the door slid open the Filipina maid was standing there, purse clutched to her chest. I stepped out and she stepped in. Her eyes were red from crying, but she couldn't stop smiling; and just as the door slid closed I heard it again—a sigh, that breath of relief.

I ran to Papa Felix.

The room smelled like sampaguitas again, and everything was back—the massage table, the rosaries and crucifixes, the candles. Papa Felix was at the bathroom sink, scrubbing his hands. "Was she here?" I said. "The maid?"

He looked at me in the mirror. "Liar," he said. "That girl knew all about us."

"What did you do to her?"

"I helped her. That girl is pregnant. And do you know why she came to see me? To take it out of her. She said it was a miracle that I was here to fix it." He dried his hands, then reached beneath the sink for the Cutty Sark. "Sixteen, pregnant, wanting to kill her baby. It's an ugly country."

"She thinks it's gone? That everything is OK?"

"I helped that girl, more than she knows. Someday she'll understand. You, too, God willing." He poured what was left of the whiskey, drank it down. I imagined the maid walking along the street with peace of mind, dazzled by the miracles of Felix Starro, so grateful for them. I thought how light she must feel, believing all her Negativities were

gone, just like that.

"I have to go," I said.

I walked out of the room, hurried down the back stairs, left the hotel, ran two blocks. The maid was sitting at the bus stop, purse still clutched to her chest, and I could see her bus slowly approaching. I grabbed her wrist. "Take this," I said, then reached into my backpack, into the envelope, and removed a handful of cash. She looked confused, almost frightened of me, but I told her she would need it, and I put the wad of bills in her hands. Then in Tagalog I whispered, "Everything you believed was wrong."

The bus came. I let her go and backed away, then started toward the hotel, wondering how much money I'd given her, how much I'd be short. I imagined Flora Ramirez sitting in her chair, staring at me as she rocked back and forth. I would apologize for lying, then confess that I didn't have all the money but swear to pay the rest soon. And though my heart would be beating fast, I would smile and breathe calmly, to prove that I was ready for whatever name she could give me.

I stepped to the curb and raised my hand to hail a taxicab. High above, I thought I saw Papa Felix in the window, looking down and waving hello, as though I were waving, too.