

Save the I-Hotel (short story)

The human barricade surrounding the International Hotel was six deep, two thousand arm-linked protestors chanting, *We won't go! Save the I-Hotel!* Inside, dozens more crammed the halls, blocking the stairwell with mattresses, desks, their own bodies. But it was past midnight now, fire engines blocked both ends of Kearny Street, and police in riot gear were closing in, armed with batons and shields.

“I hate this street,” Vicente said.

“It’s nothing,” Fortunado said. He stood at the window watching the protest below, his fingers between the slats of the blinds. “Just traffic.”

“I’m telling you, it’s the Chinese again. Their parade always clogging the city.” He sat on the edge of his bed, folding a thin gray sweater over his lap. They were in his room on the third floor of the I-Hotel, next door to Fortunado’s. “Don’t worry, Nado. We’ll make it through.”

Fortunado closed the blinds, wiped the dust from his fingers. “We will,” he said.

The threat of eviction had loomed for more than a decade, and now it was happening. The mayor of San Francisco approved the hotel’s demolition and ordered the removal of its final tenants, the elderly Filipino men who had lived in the I-Hotel for more than forty years. Earlier that day, protest organizers had gathered the tenants in the lobby to prepare them for the fight, and told them to stay in their rooms until the very end. “But pack a bag,” they said, “just in case.” After, Fortunado hurried upstairs, woke

Vicente from a nap, and though he meant to tell him about the eviction, he told him they were taking a weekend trip instead, just the two of them. He hadn't named a specific place, but Vicente was easy to persuade. These days, he barely recognized the world as it was: he never knew the day or time, oldest friends were strangers, and just three weeks before, Fortunado found him on the corner of Kearny Street and Columbus, only a block from the entrance of the I-Hotel, asking strangers to help him find his way home. Now, the shouting in the halls and the sirens on the street were simply the ruckus of a Chinese New Year in his mind. He knew nothing of an eviction, had no sense of a coming end.

Vicente's hands shook as he folded another sweater. Distant sirens drew closer. Fortunado thought, *This is what it means to be old*. Now, he wished youth back, and if granted, he would offer it up to Vicente, who would make better use of it. He imagined Vicente springing to his feet and running down the stairs to claim his place in the barricade, his fists raised and ready to defend their right to stay. He was, Fortunado always knew, the stronger one.

It was August 4, 1977. They had lived in the I-Hotel for forty-three years.

They never meant to stay so long.

They met on a September night in 1934. Fortunado had been in the States for five months, working fifteen-hour days in the asparagus fields just outside Stockton; this trip to San Francisco was his first chance to get away. He stepped off a Greyhound bus at the end of Market Street and wandered the grid of downtown, unable to distinguish the places that welcomed Filipinos from those that refused them. It was dark when he finally

spotted a trio of Filipino men smoking cigarettes outside a barely lit doorway, and though no one said hello, they stepped aside to let him through.

He entered a long, narrow dance hall filled with mixed couples, Filipino men with white women. A gray-bearded man with a cane circled the room, calling out, "Dime a ticket, ticket a dance," and in the corner, a half-dozen women sat in metal chairs, waiting for the next customer. A banner that read, *Welcome to the Dreamland Saloon*, sagged on the wall above them.

Fortunado bought three tickets, moved closer to the dance floor. He watched the couple closest to him. The man danced with his eyes closed, whispering into a woman's ear; the woman yawned, then scratched something from her teeth.

Fortunado put the tickets in his pocket and took a chair by the wall. This would be a night of music to enjoy alone, nothing more, and it would be enough.

A new song began, and a man with a beer in each hand stomped across the dance floor, pestering girls for free dances. "Sorry Vicente," a girl with a long cigarette said, "no money, no honey." She blew smoke in his face and walked off. "Your loss," Vicente shouted back. He finished one beer, then the other. He was tall for a Filipino, lanky in his fitted blazer and trousers. He zigzagged through the crowd, bumping into couples, then suddenly tripped over the ticket man's cane. "I'm fine, everybody," Vicente shouted, gaining his balance, "I'm just fine," and to prove it he began dancing alone, swaying side to side with some imaginary partner. He was a drunk, pathetic sight but Fortunado couldn't help but laugh.

Vicente saw him and walked over. "If I'm so funny," he said, wiping his mouth with the back of his sleeve, "then where's your girl, big shot?"

Fortunado shrugged.

“With all these fine girls around? Your head must be broken.” Vicente flicked Fortunado’s forehead twice, like he was checking the ripeness of a coconut. Fortunado swiped his arm away, and warm beer came spilling over Fortunado’s head.

“Idiot!” Fortunado got to his feet. “You want to dance so badly? Then take them.” He took the tickets from his pocket and threw them to the floor, shoved Vicente aside, and walked off.

In the washroom, he ran a red cocktail napkin under warm water, wiped his head and dabbed the beer from his shirt, the lapel of his jacket. He thought of his life in America: the hot, dusty hours in the fields, the muggy nights in the bunkhouses, all the workers who passed the time regretting the new life and lamenting the old. They were new arrivals too, most of them Filipinos, and they never stopped telling him: *nobody knows you here, just the work you do, just the color of your face*. They called America a mistake, and now the dream was to find a way back home, to the life you knew and the person you were. Tonight was meant to prove that he had been right to come.

He looked in the mirror. The shoulders of his borrowed blazer were wider than his own. The sleeves fell past his knuckles. *Fool*, he thought to himself.

The door opened and he saw Vicente in the edge of the mirror. “Never pay for dances,” he said, setting the tickets on the edge of the sink, “that way, you find out which girls want your dimes and which ones really want to dance with you.” He reached for Fortunado’s lapel. “Messy boy. Wear mine.” He removed his jacket and held it out, a peace offering.

“I’m fine with my own.”

“Suit yourself.” He lit a cigarette, introduced himself, then asked Fortunado his name. It was a question Fortunado had not heard since he was hired in the fields five months before. In his life now, weeks could pass without ever hearing his name.

So he told him.

“*Fortunado.*” Vicente shook his head, exhaling smoke. “Too long. I’ll call you Nado.” He stamped out his cigarette on the wet, crumpled napkin and stepped toward the door. “This place is dead, Nado. Let’s move on.” He held the door open, and though Fortunado didn’t move Vicente continued to stand there, waiting. Fortunado realized that Vicente had come to The Dreamland alone too.

They walked up and down the streets and Vicente named them: Kearny, Washington, Jackson, Clay. Certain blocks felt more familiar than the rest, those lined with small eateries and shops named Bataan Kitchen, the Manila Rose Cantina, the Lucky Mabuhay Pool Hall. Up and down the street, Filipino men smoked, laughed, and drank from silver flasks, hollering for each other and darting across the street, as if this city had been theirs from the beginning. And sitting on the top step of an apartment building was the oldest Filipino that Fortunado had ever seen in America, gazing at the moon as if it held the face of the one he loved.

“Manilatown,” Vicente said. “Our small place in San Francisco. Just like home, eh?”

Fortunado shook his head. This was better.

They continued walking, and Vicente told his story: he came here alone from Manila at the start of ’33, scrubbed toilets and floors for a miserable half-year before finding better work as a bellhop in The Parkdale Hotel, a decent job with barely-decent

pay, but the best you could do in times like these. “It’s hard out here, sometimes,” he said, slowing his pace, “you get lonely, you get scared.” His voice trailed off as though these were his final words for the night, the truth he finally had to admit. But then he stopped, turned to Fortunado. “So be tough, okay?” He smiled, then punched Fortunado gently on the arm.

Hours passed, bars and restaurants closed, and they found themselves at the end of the city, and walked along the Embarcadero. “Look there,” Vicente said, pointing toward the water, and through the dark Fortunado saw it: the beginnings of the Bay Bridge. It would be the longest steel structure in the world, eight miles connecting San Francisco to Oakland. For now, it only a line of towers rising from the black water, half-hidden in fog, and Fortunado wondered when it would be finished, if someday he might travel across it.

“I don’t want to go back,” he said.

“Then don’t,” Vicente said. “What’s in Stockton anyway?”

Nothing. Just the hard, thin mattress Fortunado slept on, the canvas bag filled with the few clothes he owned, and more days in the fields with the kind of men he dreaded becoming.

They made their way to 848 Kearny Street and entered the I-Hotel, where Vicente kept a room for six dollars a week. He offered his floor for the night and Fortunado accepted, rolled up his coat for a pillow and used Vicente’s as a blanket. It was his best sleep in America yet. The next day, Vicente loaned Fortunado twelve dollars for two weeks’ rent, and he checked into number 14 on the third floor, next door to Vicente’s and exactly the same: a small, narrow space with a twin bed, a corner sink, a three-drawer

bureau, and a single window that looked out on the 800 block of Kearny Street. Below, Fortunado could see two Filipino groceries, a barbershop, a Chinese laundry, and on the rooftop across, an unfinished billboard with a half-painted picture of a crate of apples, the word *new* written in yellow letters beneath.

“Not much of a view,” Vicente said.

Fortunado opened the window, letting in a breeze. “Good enough for now,” he said.

Fortunado was twenty years old that night they met. Vicente was twenty-four.

Now, Fortunado was sixty-three. Vicente, sixty-seven.

Neither of them married. No one in the I-Hotel ever did, and when they wanted to, the law forbade them. No Filipino could bring a wife or fiancé to the States back then, and there were no Filipinas here. Marrying white women, even dating them, was illegal, and always dangerous. The same week he arrived in California, a Filipino field worker was beaten to death for swimming in a lake with his white girlfriend.

The law changed in 1967. “I’ve been alone this long,” Vicente had said, “what would I do with a wife?” He was fifty-seven by then, too old and too late to bother with marriage. “She’d want a bigger place, something expensive. No thanks, I’m fine where I am.” But during their Saturday afternoon walks through Chinatown, the sight of a wedding banquet in a Chinese restaurant made him silent, suddenly tired and irritable. He would hurry back to the I-Hotel, pour himself a shot of Du Kang, the gold-colored Chinese liquor they drank as young men, and pace the short distance of his room as

though trapped inside it, then finally sit at the window with his hands on the sill, staring down at the slow-moving traffic. From the sidewalk below, Fortunado would watch him, knowing Vicente's regrets—the years of come-and-go women, the time and money wasted on prostitutes, the better life he might have lived had he been brave enough to try. And Fortunado would think, *I'm sorry*.

Somewhere close, glass shattered. Vicente looked up from his packing, turned toward the door as if to investigate, then he brushed his knuckles against his jaw. "I want to shave before we leave," he said. He went to the sink and turned on the faucet, waited for cold water to turn hot.

Fortunado went to the door, looked through the peephole: protestors crammed more furniture into the stairwell, others hammered wood planks over windows already boarded up, and at the end of the hallway, three men chained themselves to exposed pipes running down the wall while the rest cheered them on.

Fortunado double-checked the locks, tugged at the knob, and made sure the door would hold. "It's just the parade," he said.

Fortunado had left Stockton with no money and no plan, but in the beginning, San Francisco worked the way America should: he had a friend, a room of his own, and soon after, a bellhop position at The Parkdale Hotel.

Vicente lied to get Fortunado the job: he told his boss that a cousin with three years' experience as the houseboy of Seattle's ex-mayor had just arrived in the city, looking for work. "I told them I've known you my whole life," he explained, "so try to act like it."

The following morning, they caught the first cable car on the California line, rode to the top of Nob Hill and stepped off at Powell and Mason. Straight ahead was The Parkdale Hotel, seven stories high, twenty windows across, and from where Fortunado stood it seemed the rest of the city had vanished behind it. Inside, a dozen marble pillars held up the lobby's mahogany ceiling, a brass staircase spiraled upward, and in the copper elevator doors, Fortunado could see his reflection: his bellhop uniform fit tightly and made him stand up straight, his pomade-slicked hair gleamed under the light, and the dozen buttons on his coat could be mistaken for gold.

Those months in the fields stooped over in the dusty heat, the brim of his hat casting an unending shadow on his face—that was someone else's anonymous life. Now, when Fortunado crossed the lobby, he would welcome guests in his best English, and they, in turn, regarded him with courteous smiles. But the best times in the day, those moments when he believed he was where he belonged, were when he passed Vicente in the hallway or on the stairs: Vicente would nod with a quick smile of recognition, and sometimes, when no one was watching, he would reach out and punch Fortunado on the arm, just below his shoulder.

At the end of Fortunado's first month in the city, Vicente raised a bottle of Du Kang to the night sky and said, "To Nado, the finest houseboy in all of Seattle." He took a swig, and passed it over. Fortunado drank, swallowed slowly to ease the burn.

They were on the third floor fire escape of the I-Hotel, too tired to change out of their uniforms. They sat for hours, laughing as they reminisced about the night they met, as though it had happened years instead of only weeks before. But as the night grew

darker and colder, their faces turned serious, their voices quiet. “It’s good that I found you,” Vicente said, “finally someone I can talk to who doesn’t whine about life.”

“You can’t listen,” Fortunado said. “They’ll get you down.”

“But it’s tough. No family. No wife. No home of my own.” Vicente brought the bottle to his lips but didn’t drink.

Fortunado put his hand on Vicente’s shoulder. “Those things will happen. I promise.”

“It’s better here, yeah? We were right to come?”

Fortunado leaned in, so close he saw Vicente’s eyes glisten, and said yes.

They let moments pass in silence, and a solitary car drove down Kearny. “I’m drunk,” Vicente said, setting the bottle of Du Kang by Fortunado’s feet, “what’s left is yours.” He rested his head against the brick wall, blinked slowly until his eyes stayed shut. He was shivering, so Fortunado took off his jacket and draped it over Vicente’s shoulders, tucked it under his chin. His hands were just below his jaw; then a finger, at the edge of his lip. He had been this close with others before: those few flirtatious men back home, who at some point became willing. But it was never like this: below the street was empty and silent, every window and doorway was black, and the sliver of moon cast no light. These were signs that the world was offering up this moment, a chance to understand what it was like to kiss the one you knew, perhaps loved. *Good-night*, he told himself, *that’s all it means*, and moved closer until their faces touched. He kissed Vicente, and when he meant to pull himself away he felt Vicente kissing him too.

Then Vicente turned away. “It’s late,” he whispered, eyes still closed, “time to go back.” He got to his feet and climbed through the window, and Fortunado watched him

walk down to the far end of the hallway, where he unlocked his door and shut it behind him. It was almost light when Fortunado finally returned to his room. He sat on his bed, back to the wall, listened to Vicente on the other side, breathing and turning in his sleep.

Later, just before work, Vicente opened Fortunado's door, already dressed in his uniform. "Come on, slowpoke," he said, snapping his fingers twice. He made no mention of the night before, only that his head still buzzed from the Du Kang they shared. Then he hurried down the stairs and Fortunado slowly got up, and when he saw his face in the mirror above the sink, he remembered how this would go: as it did back home—with silence and forgetting, the only way he knew.

All that became of their kiss was longing. Fortunado began counting off days and weeks since it happened, believing that enough passing time would blur the night into one that perhaps never happened at all. But it only brightened in his mind, and when months dragged into a year and then another, it was an absolute truth: once, long ago, they had kissed. On nights when Vicente caroused in bars with easy women or purchased hours in a Chinatown brothel, Fortunado would lie awake in bed, so restless that he kicked away his sheets, dressed, and walk down the empty blocks of Manilatown to the Embarcadero, where he would stand by the rail and look out at the Bay Bridge. Almost finished, its progress was evidence that the world still turned forward, leaving behind a night when he was truly happy, and the moment he was utterly and finally known.

"I hate the bus," Vicente said, sorting through a pile of mismatched socks. "The seats hurt my back. No buses, Nado." He never wondered where they were going, only how they would get there.

“We won’t take a bus,” Fortunado said. He stood at the dresser, gathering their California ID’s, Social Security cards, and passport, then slipped them into a yellow envelope, along with a letter from the West Oakland Senior Center, where tenants would be temporarily housed if the eviction happened. There was no plan beyond that; some might return to another San Francisco facility, others to Daly City or San Jose.

“Amtrak is faster. We’ll take Amtrak, right?”

Fortunado sealed the envelope, wrote their names across the flap. “I’ve got the tickets,” he said, “don’t worry.” He looked up at Vicente, and realized he had shaved just the right side of his face. He was careless with his grooming these days: he might remember to change his undershirt but not his underwear or socks; when he showered, he would forget to rinse the soap from his body, then go through his day with white streaks of dry soap on his arms and neck. “You didn’t finish,” Fortunado said.

Vicente looked in the mirror above the sink, brushed his thumb against his cheek. Beneath the light bulb above, his stubble look thorny and white, as though painful to touch.

“Here,” Fortunado said, “I’ll do it.” He filled the sink with water, took out a disposable razor and shaving cream from the shoebox beneath. He lathered the left side of Vicente’s face, wiped his hand dry, then stepped behind him.

“Don’t cut me,” Vicente said.

Fortunado shook his head. “I won’t.”

The sirens were much louder now, police shouted threats of arrest through their megaphones, but in the hall, the protestors continued: *Block the front door. Check the roof. Hurry.* But when Fortunado leaned in, he could hear the razor slide gently down

Vicente's skin, the drops of water trickle from the faucet, and the night was quiet again. When he was younger, he had longed for this closeness, ached for it, and now that Vicente could no longer care for himself, these were the necessary gestures of their everyday lives. And Fortunado welcomed the responsibility, secretly cherished it. Duty fulfilled desire, as best it could.

Vicente flinched. There was no blood; Fortunado had barely nicked the skin. But as Vicente wiped away the shaving cream from his face, Fortunado saw a spot of red, reflected in the corner of the mirror: the time on the digital clock, its numbers backwards and inverted, urgent and glowing. 12:03am. The next day already, and Fortunado realized he hadn't packed a suitcase of his own.

1936. June. Two years in the city and nothing had changed. "What a life," Vicente said, passing a bottle of Du Kang to Fortunado. They were on the fire escape, exhausted from a double-shift, and he was drunk. "Two hotels. One where I work. One where I live." Fortunado drank and passed the bottle back, but instead of drinking Vicente turned the bottle upside down and let the rest spill through the grate. "How can you stand it," he said, and climbed inside as if he didn't want to know the answer.

Then, only a day later, there was a girl.

Her name was Althea. Vicente was on the seventh floor of The Parkdale, hurrying to the elevator when a maid called out, holding a gold button between her fingers. It had fallen from his blazer, and she insisted on sewing it on for him. "Guess where she fixed it," Vicente said to Fortunado later that night, "in the Berlin Deluxe." He spoke like he was bragging: the Berlin Deluxe was the hotel's grandest suite, but still

under renovation after a room fire two years before. “She had a maid’s key, and sometimes she goes there just to smoke a cigarette and look at the view. We sat by the window, for almost an hour. No one even saw us.”

Except for the Berlin Deluxe, Fortunado had entered every guest room in The Parkdale, but just far enough to unload bags and luggage. He was never invited to look out the window, to gaze at the hotel’s famous city views. “What was it like?” he asked.

Vicente looked at him and shook his head, as if what he saw was beyond Fortunado’s imagination. “You could see everything,” he said.

The following Sunday, coming home after another double-shift, they saw Althea on Columbus Street. She was standing in front of a Chinese clothier, looking at the window display, a mannequin clad in black velvet, surrounded by boxes wrapped in silver paper. Behind it was a framed map of America, and Althea stared at it, as if studying all forty-eight states. “Planning a trip?” Vicente asked.

She turned toward them. Her red hair fell past her shoulders, and a lime green scarf was tied loosely around her thin, pale neck; she was like no maid Fortunado had ever seen. “I’m just looking back at home,” she said, tapping her finger on the window. “Toward the middle, right there. Wisconsin. That’s where I’m from. Mount Horeb. A tiny place.”

“Do you miss it?” Vicente asked.

She shook her head. “Girls back there get married, have babies, and then they’re stuck. If I’d stayed, that’s what I would have become.”

Vicente took a step forward. “And what are you now?”

She tilted her head, smiled as though Vicente had asked a trick question. “I’m new,” she said. “Like you. Like everybody here.” She took a small tin box of mints from her purse, and offered one to Vicente. “What about you,” she said, “do you miss home?”

Vicente took a mint. “I don’t really think about it,” Vicente said. Only when Fortunado said hello did Vicente finally make proper introductions.

The sun had set but the night was still warm, so Althea suggested a cold beer at a nearby tavern on Fourth Street. They walked down Kearny, crossed over to Third, and below Market the sidewalks narrowed as the crowds thickened. Fortunado fell several steps behind but could still hear them. Althea talked about living in San Francisco, how fast everything moved—the streetcars, the people, even time. But life dragged too: her boardinghouse room was stuffy and dim, the walls and single window unable to keep out any noise, barely a comfort after long shifts at The Parkdale. “Sometimes I stay awake all night, no matter how tired I am,” she said.

Vicente nodded. “I stay awake too.” They walked so close their arms could touch.

Fortunado stopped, and as they moved further down the block he recognized the slight zigzag in Vicente’s step. It was the way he moved the night they met at The Dreamland, and now he recognized Althea too. She could be any Dreamland girl, but there was a difference: when Vicente looked at her, she looked back at him.

They were half a block ahead now. Fortunado decided to leave, to return to the I-Hotel or make his way to the Embarcadero, to its darkest, emptiest spot. But then a stocky, red-faced man stepped out of a bar, his sleeves rolled up and shoes untied, and

stumbled toward Vicente and Althea, raving about brown men taking white women and white jobs. He grabbed Vicente's shoulder and turned him around, put a finger in his chest. Vicente stepped back, tried walking away, but the man took him by the collar and shoved him against a storefront window. He threw a punch, and Vicente fell.

Fortunado ran to Vicente, fists clenched, ready to fight. But the man was too quick, too strong, and he grabbed Fortunado by the shoulder and pushed him to the ground. He heard his name—*Nado*—and when he looked up Vicente was back on his feet, punching the man in his stomach. "I'm not scared of you," he said, "I'm not scared." With every blow he said it, until Fortunado him pulled off.

They hurried back to the I-Hotel, ran up to Vicente's room. Fortunado went to the window, checking to see if they'd been followed. "We were just walking," he heard Althea say, "that's all." But he knew the truth, and saw it reflected in the glass: Vicente and Althea on the edge of the bed, his arm around her shoulder.

The last thing left of Manilatown was the I-Hotel, and the human barricade was crumbling. Fortunado watched protestors fall to the batons of police, handcuffed and dragged away, and those still standing were not enough. A group of officers finally broke through, charged the front entrance with sledgehammers in hand. Behind him, Vicente slept atop the covers facing the wall, his coat and shoes already on.

In the hall, someone with a megaphone told tenants to keep their doors locked, block them with whatever they could move, so Fortunado went to the bureau, pushed it toward the door. But it was heavier than he thought, and he could feel his rushing heartbeat, sweat on his neck and throat. He stopped, took a breath, and just as he meant

to try again he caught sight of something he had seen a thousand times before: the empty space on the floor beside Vicente's bed. Fortunado lay there once, and he remembered how well he had slept, how Vicente's coat had kept him warm. It was their only night together in the I-Hotel.

In the street, in the hall, they continued: *We won't go. Save the I-Hotel.* He had heard it all day and night. He had heard it for years, an entire life.

He had strength left to barricade the door. To block the police out. To trap themselves in. Instead, he moved away from the dresser and undid the chain above, the lock beneath.

It was 2:11 am, and every few seconds Vicente's arm shook and his head jerked, as though fighting in a dream. Fortunado went to him, placed his hand on his shoulder, and even after Vicente became still he kept it there, pressing his fingers into Vicente's arm. This was the I-Hotel's final morning, and soon police would make their way upstairs, so Fortunado allowed himself this moment and lay down beside Vicente, their bodies back to back, touching. Then he closed his eyes but stayed awake to make the last hours feel longer than they were.

Days after the tussle on the street, Vicente would tell the story to other I-Hotel tenants. "White guy, real big," he said, "and I showed him." He punched the air as he reenacted the scene, but instead of applause and admiration all he received was a warning. *Stay away from her. It's not worth the trouble.* He called them cowards and stopped telling the story.

At The Parkdale, he began taking lunch with Althea. Fortunado would catch them by the loading docks sitting together on upturned crates, sharing the butter-and-olive sandwiches she packed each day. If she worked late, Vicente insisted on waiting for her, and together they would walk to their cable car stop. Their supervisor warned them about fraternizing among staff, guests stared and whispered, but Vicente always said it: “We’re not afraid.”

Fortunado said nothing, swore he never would.

The heat of the summer stayed through the fall. One late Sunday night, Fortunado, Vicente, and Althea sat at a corner table in the Manila Rose Cantina beneath a slow-moving ceiling fan, trying to cool themselves with glasses of pilsner. They drank in silence, ordered more pitchers than they could finish, and when they were done Fortunado was light-headed, and he could see drops of sweat fall onto the paper-covered tabletop. He hadn’t felt so warm since Stockton, during those noonday hours in the fields.

Althea undid her scarf, dabbed her face and neck. “Let’s go to The Dive,” she said, “the three of us.” Except to clean it, Parkdale policy forbade employees to be near the hotel’s pool, and it was close to midnight now, long past its closing. But then Althea pulled a set of keys from her purse and jangled them in the air; three times a week she collected towels from the changing rooms, and she had gone for a quick, late night swim before. “No one will see us,” she said. “No one will know.”

They entered like trespassers, went down the backstairs to the pool. Their footsteps echoed as they walked along its blue-tiled perimeter, and the water's surface shimmered green from the lights below.

Vicente and Althea undressed and left their clothes in a neat pile on the floor. They were naked and unashamed; they had been this way before. Althea entered the pool and Vicente followed, and together they swam out, resurfacing in deep end. Fortunado could hear them breathing as they stayed afloat.

Fortunado removed his clothes. He descended the three steps into the pool, the water rising slowly to his waist, his chest. He whispered Vicente's name but heard no answer, so Fortunado took a breath and held it, submerged. He moved forward, opened his eyes, and in the watery haze he finally found Vicente, swimming beneath the surface. He had seen his body before—when he changed out of uniform at the hotel, or barged into his room to borrow a shirt—but never like this, so bare and open, arms held out as if to welcome him, to beckon. Underwater, they were the only two, with no world above to interfere, so Fortunado moved closer, unafraid. But he mistook buoyancy for the ability to swim. Suddenly there was no floor beneath him, and as he sank he reached and kicked, as though trying to climb water.

It took both Vicente and Althea to bring Fortunado back to the surface, to the shallow end. They held his arms but he swiped them away, then staggered out of the pool, coughing with each breath. "I'm fine," he said, and as he gathered his clothes, he watched Vicente and Althea swim away then disappear in a depth he would never brave again.

They finished swimming, dried themselves and dressed, hurried to the stairwell. But Vicente and Althea continued past the lobby toward the upper floors. They had planned to collect unfinished bottles of wine left outside guests' doors, and drink them in the Berlin Deluxe. "I'll see you back at the hotel," Vicente said.

"When?" Fortunado asked.

"Later tonight." Vicente looked at Althea. "Maybe tomorrow."

"You're not supposed to be there."

"No one will see us," Vicente said. "And so what if they do?"

Vicente stood four steps above but he seemed much further, and Fortunado kept his hand tight on the rail, as if letting go meant falling. "You're not supposed to be there," he said again.

Vicente took one step down, reached for Fortunado's shoulder. "Go home," he said. Then he and Althea left, their footsteps growing fainter as they continued up the stairs.

Fortunado exited the stairwell into the empty lobby. He left The Parkdale, and walked down the long hill of Powell Street toward Manilatown. It was early Monday morning. Kearny Street was deserted. Buses had ended their run, no autos drove past, and the one other person was the old Filipino sitting on his top step, staring longingly at the moon.

He crossed the street and entered the I-Hotel, went up to his room. He stood by his window and stared out at the blank billboard on the rooftop across, thinking about Vicente and Althea in the Berlin Deluxe, beholders of a view he could barely imagine.

One night a week in the Berlin Deluxe became two, sometimes three, and Vicente and Althea remained undetected. They would arrive after midnight and leave before dawn, then return in uniform to The Parkdale only hours later, ready to work. But these nights left Vicente tired, which made him tardy, and Fortunado would cover for him with flimsy excuses—a stomach ache one morning, a toothache the next. Weeks of this passed, and Fortunado was done. “I won’t lie for you anymore,” he told Vicente. They were on the seventh floor of The Parkdale, waiting for the elevator.

“Sorry, Nado.” Vicente yawned, rubbing his eyes. “I’ll wake up earlier next time.”

“*Next time.* Have you gone crazy? What if the boss finds you there? Or the police? What do you think they’ll do to you if they find you with a white girl?”

Fortunado remembered a newspaper story he’d read in his first week in the States, of a Filipino field worker beaten to death for swimming with his white girlfriend. “This is your life, Vicente.”

“The police can shoot me. Throw me in jail. I’m not afraid, either way.” The elevator arrived, and they entered. “That room is good for Althea and me. A man and a woman deserve their own place.”

“You’re the bellboy. She’s the maid. You don’t live there. There’s not even a bed.”

“We don’t *need* a bed.” Vicente winked, then gave Fortunado a quick punch to the arm.

“Don’t,” Fortunado said.

Vicente laughed, tousled his hair, hit him again. “Stop,” Fortunado said, and Vicente smiled, made another fist. But now it was Fortunado who threw a punch, one so strong that Vicente stumbled backwards, and Fortunado hit him again. Vicente got to his feet, pushed Fortunado against the wall and held him there, his hands on his collar, knuckles grazing his neck. They had not been this close, not for years.

“We kissed,” Fortunado said. He held on to Vicente’s wrists, aching to tell more: how he slept close to the wall just to hear him breathing on the other side; how he kept the tickets from The Dreamland in his pocket at all times, a memento from the night they met; how home could only be wherever Vicente was. But more words felt like drowning, so he took a breath and repeated the one thing he knew to be an undisputable truth. “We kissed.”

Vicente freed his hands from Fortunado’s. “Once,” he said. There was no anger in his voice or on his face, only apology.

The elevator reached the lobby. The doors opened and Vicente stepped out, then closed again.

Fortunado stayed behind. He had never struck a person before, but there were times in his life he wondered what it might be like, and now he knew: the force of everything you are in a single gesture at a single moment; the hope that it will be enough and the fear that it won’t. No different than a kiss.

The protest was fading. Fortunado lay on his side facing the window, the room like a dream: for a moment, he could believe that a final night never passed, and a life in the I-Hotel never happened. *What if, he wondered, that was someone else?* But then he felt

the slight shift of Vicente's body against his own, and Fortunado wiped his eyes and rose from the bed, put on his coat.

He gently shook Vicente's shoulder. Vicente turned toward him, blinked until he was awake.

There was no sledgehammer, no kick to the door; it simply opened, and in the hallway two officers stood, arms at their sides and no weapons in hand. "We're under orders to evict you," one of them said, "please come with us."

Vicente stared at them, one fist closed and ready. "I don't like police," he whispered.

"They're here to help us," he said.

"We did nothing wrong."

"Just stand up." Fortunado helped Vicente to his feet, then picked up the suitcase and led him to the door. As they passed the dresser, he reached for the envelope marked with their names, and tucked it into Vicente's pocket.

They stepped into the hallway. Protest signs and posters were litter now, and chains dangled from the banister and exposed pipes. An officer stood by Fortunado's door, knocked twice then opened it. "No one here," he said, "that's everyone."

They descended the stairs, moved carefully past small desks and mattresses in their path. They reached the lobby, stepped over wood planks and broken glass, and as they crossed the fallen door of the front entrance, Fortunado took Vicente's hand. "Don't let go," he said, then led the way out of the I-Hotel.

After the fight in the elevator, Vicente spent more nights with Althea in the Berlin Deluxe, returning to the I-Hotel only for a change of clothes. At The Parkdale, Fortunado worked the front entrance as often as he could, and whenever Vicente approached he would steer his luggage cart in another direction. After work, Fortunado would rush out to catch the next cable car back home. One night, waiting at his stop, he saw Vicente and Althea leave The Parkdale together, arms around one another as they walked down Powell Street. A light rain fell, and Vicente took off his jacket, draped it over her shoulders and held her close. They kissed.

“Disgraceful,” a man with a bushy, white moustache said. He looked over at Fortunado. “You’re not foolish enough to try something like that, are you, boy?”

Fortunado turned away, toward lit windows high above. “No, sir.”

Hours later, alone on the third floor fire escape of the I-Hotel, Fortunado drank through a bottle of Du Kang, remembering the kiss he shared with Vicente, how it happened in darkness, in silence. And he thought of Vicente and Althea’s kiss on the sidewalk, so reckless and unhidden, which perhaps was the point: Fortunado understood how difficult love could be, how its possibility hinged on a delicate balance between complete anonymity and the undeniable need to be known.

He let the empty bottle of Du Kang roll off the fire escape, listened for the crash of glass. The night was freezing now, and he imagined Vicente and Althea in the window of the Berlin Deluxe, looking down upon the city, warm in each other’s arms.

Vicente had no right to be there; the I-Hotel was where he belonged. There were rules in this world; why should Fortunado be the only one to suffer them?

He got to his feet, steadied himself. Then he climbed inside and went downstairs, walked out of the I-Hotel to a telephone booth on the corner. He stepped in, shivered as he dialed.

The Parkdale's night operator answered.

Strangers where they didn't belong, he finally said. A couple—Filipino man, white woman—hiding in the Berlin Deluxe. Hotel security could catch them. Hurry.

He hung up the receiver, stepped out of the booth. He headed toward Market, turned east toward the water, then walked along the Embarcadero, the Bay Bridge coming into view. It was finally finished, ready for use in a matter of weeks, and all year long advertisements had announced its opening. *Joining two cities!* one poster read. *Bringing the world together!* But tonight the bridge was dark and still untraveled, and the world felt more like the place it was, an endless earth in which Fortunado stood alone.

A man in a dark suit and hat approached. He stood beside Fortunado, put his hands on the rail. "Quite a bridge," he said.

Fortunado nodded.

"Nice night, too."

Fortunado looked at the fading moon. "It's almost morning."

"There's still time," the man said. Then, without asking, he took Fortunado's hand and whispered, "It's okay. I know a place."

Fortunado looked around, checking for nearby police or anyone within earshot. When he knew it was safe, they moved away from the water to a darker, unnamed place that in daylight would be impossible to find again.

The warmth he felt inside this stranger was unquestionable and necessary, and each time it happened was meant to be the last. Now, Fortunado feared a lifetime of this and little more, and he wondered how long such a life could be.

The next morning Fortunado waited by his window for Vicente's return. The Parkdale would have fired Vicente, that was certain, and their security might have dragged him out of the room, down the back stairs, and thrown him into the street. When night came and he still hadn't returned, Fortunado picked the lock of Vicente's door, went inside and lay on his bed. It was morning when he woke; another night without Vicente. He got up, smoothed the sheets over the mattress, and left the room as though he was never there.

At The Parkdale, none of the bellhops mentioned an incident in the Berlin Deluxe, and when Fortunado asked his boss if he had heard from Vicente, his boss said, "Maybe he had a toothache," then closed his office door. Once, he stopped in front of the Berlin Deluxe, rattled the door knob and whispered Vicente's name. He listened for movement, for breath, but heard nothing. After work, he checked every store, restaurant, and bar in Manilatown, even searched the crowd at The Dreamland Saloon, but the one person he recognized was the ticket man with the cane. "I know you," the old man said, and Fortunado left as quickly as he could.

Hours later, Fortunado made his way back home. When he reached the end of Kearny Street, he saw a light in Vicente's window.

He ran into the I-Hotel, up to the third floor. Without knocking he opened Vicente's door and found him sitting on the edge of his bed, elbows on his knees, hands clasped together. He was still in his uniform. "They found us," he said.

Fortunado stepped in, shut the door behind him. "When?"

"Two nights ago." He lowered his head and told Fortunado the rest, like a confession. He and Althea were sleeping when hotel security and two police officers forced the door open. They brought him to his feet, pushed him against the wall, shouted questions they wouldn't let him answer—*You think you belong here? Who do you think you are?* Althea stood in the corner, and Vicente told her not to be afraid, that nothing they did was wrong. "Then one of them, the bigger one, started shouting at her. The things he called her..." He shook his head. "So I hit him. As hard as I could." He remembered Althea crying, then something smash against the back of his head, three times, maybe more. He remembered falling.

For a day and a half he sat in a cell with other men who looked the way he imagined criminals did, threatening and silent, always watching. "I didn't move. I didn't want to close my eyes." He dabbed his lip with his thumb, wiped the blood on his jacket. "I was scared." Before they finally let him go, an officer asked if he had learned his lesson. He promised them he had.

Fortunado crossed over to the window, closed the blinds. "Althea?"

"Gone, maybe. I don't know." From the jail he rushed to Althea's boarding house, and the housemother told him she took the first bus back to Wisconsin, where she couldn't mix with men like him.

"You'll find her," Fortunado said.

Vicente said nothing.

Fortunado saw what looked like rings around Vicente's wrists, red as a burn. "Handcuffs," Vicente said. "They kept them on the whole time." He put his hands, palm up, on his lap, unable to make a fist. "It feels like they're still on."

He took off his jacket and let it fall to the floor. Fortunado picked it up, folded it, and tucked it in the bottom drawer of his dresser. "You were brave, Vicente," he said.

He shook his head. "I was stupid." He turned and lay on his bed, and told Fortunado to turn off the light on his way out.

Fortunado returned to his room. He sat on his bed with his back against the wall, remembering what he saw: Vicente's eye bruised purple and blue, the gash in his lower lip. And now he could hear Vicente on the other side, turning and breathing as he tried to sleep. Once, those sounds had comforted Fortunado, made him dream of them together, holding and loving each other. But now, all he heard was loneliness, Vicente's and his own. For this, Fortunado stayed awake through the night, and wept for them both.

Thousands filled the street but the human barricade was gone, replaced by squads of police who fended off protestors with batons and shields and arrested dozens more. Fortunado squeezed Vicente's hand as they moved further out onto Kearny Street, moving in whatever direction the crowds would allow. "Almost there," Fortunado shouted, as though a true destination was finally in sight. He tightened his grip, tried to move faster, but from the side a protestor rushed by, slamming into them. Fortunado fell.

The asphalt was cold against his palms, and gravel jabbed the back of his neck. Above, the sky was black and starless.

Two girls in Berkeley sweatshirts helped Fortunado to his feet. “You okay?” one asked. “Do you have someone with you?” Fortunado steadied himself, and just as he told her yes, he realized that Vicente was gone.

He could hear his name—*Nado, Nado*—but everywhere Fortunado looked he saw only strangers, hundreds, shouting and waving their signs. He forced his way through the crush of bodies, searching for Vicente’s voice and face, until he finally reached the other side of the street. He staggered up the front stairs of an apartment building, hoping the higher ground would help him find Vicente, and from the top step he caught the flashing headlights of a white van at the end of Kearny Street. It was the shuttle for the West Oakland Senior Center, and one by one, a line of I-Hotel tenants climbed inside. As the last man boarded, Vicente approached, his feet dragging. From inside the, tenants beckoned to him, but suddenly Vicente stopped, let the suitcase fall from his hand. He was standing in the same spot where Fortunado had found him weeks before, asking strangers where he was, if they knew the right way home, and Fortunado remembered seeing him from afar, pacing the sidewalk corner, a man stranded on the smallest piece of land.

There was no pacing or panic now, just the stillness of a person taking in the view before him. Vicente looked at Kearny Street, watched police beat down and drag away protestors through the aimless mass, their signs fading and torn, gone. Then, as if he had finally seen enough, Vicente turned away, picked up his suitcase, and stepped into the van. Fortunado imagined him crossing the eight miles of the Bay Bridge, speeding over water as if moving from one country into the next.

The van pulled away slowly, and then it was gone.

Fortunado would make his way to the West Oakland Senior Center later; another shuttle would come. If not, then he would seek temporary shelter somewhere in the city, and find Vicente tomorrow. For now, Fortunado rested on the top step, and across the street, the I-Hotel looked like a silhouette of itself, a darkness against the city. But higher up was a last square of light, and Fortunado realized he had left his bedside lamp on from the evening before. His was the only window lit, and in a matter of hours, daylight would make it dim and empty as all the others. But night would fall and the room would glow again, until the lamp itself finally died, or until someone turned it off.

