

## ***In the Kitchen***

1.

Adam lets himself into the empty and stale-smelling apartment, puts down his things, goes to the balcony, looks down. Remembers the first time he was ever inside a work of art, when he was eight and wandered into a two-by-two installation by a New England artist his parents had bought and reassembled, near the huge kidney-shaped pool at the family's Hollywood, Florida estate, and how his mother ordered him promptly to get out. Remembers how much being inside the installation, on his parents' bespoke, landfilled property, felt like being on this balcony. The installation was a mock kitchen, complete with walls that had windows, making him feel free and caged in, at the same time.

Many years later, Adam's mom warned him not to marry Renuka. His mother always surprised him with her capricious San Francisco Nob Hill politics, same sensibility that supported gay marriage, deplored the mass incarceration of black men, had Asian-American best friends with whom she'd been in a book club for twenty years, was effusive about the enchilada recipe given to her by Mexican neighbors, thought *Mississippi Burning* and *Biko* were simplistic and inadequate stories about race, decried the mandatory minimum in drug sentencing, voted for reparations for Native Americans as well as former slaves. And yet Mom remained, one might say, *cautious* about the challenges of long-term interracial couplings, when it came to her son.

"Darling, she's never really going to let you in," his mother said. "They can't."

Adam didn't mind her. Mom was polite enough before their honeymoon and during visits after that. Not only courteous but specific, personal. Asking about the

long-ago death of Renuka's parents, the fragile health of her grandmother. Though Renuka did not want to answer his mother's questions.

Renuka's abiding wish for privacy didn't make Adam's mother rude, or intrusive, or any of the words that he could read on Renuka's face. Not that Renuka down-talked his own mother to him. It wasn't even that she talked about his mother in a bad way to her friends. More like her mind was fully occupied elsewhere.

Now Adam picks up his phone and looks at the number he tracked down from their carrier by calling Verizon when Renuka stopped answering her phone. He'd told them his wife was missing and might have gotten lost. They'd given him the last number she'd called. Then Adam tracked down the address that went with the number, a motel number in the New South, that Renuka had called while on the road.

This morning he'd flown from Miami to Charleston, South Carolina, where Renuka had stopped to rest on her way to Miami two days ago. He knew she'd had to stop there because she'd left him messages. She'd dropped everything in Baltimore to drive a thousand miles, just to meet him. But when he called her back, early morning yesterday, just after three am when he was drunk, Adam blurted out that he'd been having the affair.

Then yesterday, all day, he'd pulled himself out of the clutches of a gruesome hangover, calling Renuka perhaps a hundred times, realizing he had to come find her.

In the meantime, his wife evaded him. Taken the day to disappear, reverse her course from Miami and for whatever reason, drive back to this tiny town, Santee, with its ridiculous hydroelectric reservoir, as if to mock him and his fear of power plants. From Charleston, Adam came back here, to Baltimore, taking a nonstop afternoon flight, clocking the hour and a half with impatience, convinced that Renuka might even

be waiting at BWI airport.

The South Carolina motel was, Adam supposes, charming in its way. The dark-haired, brown-skinned guy with the ponytail who was cleaning out the pool when he drove up – polite enough. But there was something about him, a hint of insolence in the smile he gave Adam when he showed him the photograph of Renuka. The man confirmed that she'd stayed there twice. Once on her way to Miami, then for a second time on her way back, was all he said, maybe implying something more. She hadn't mentioned where she was going. "But she looked fine, man. Hundred percent fine."

"Oh, fuck it, fine," Adam mutters now, back in Baltimore remembering, wishing that his own last-minute mistress was at least more adventurous, more capable, in bed.

He'd screwed up his marriage at age forty-one, first by the cheating, then, by confessing his affair to Renuka, making her stray too – and all for what? Guatemalan *Indio* Adelina was a woman he met working in a kitchen, during his part-time job as a sous chef in three-Michelin star restaurant on Lancaster near the Baltimore harbor. The girl often looked nervous at the sight of him naked. She'd never lost herself to pleasuring him. Her eyes remained wide open and startled even long after the first time, during which she had taken him by surprise too, since she'd been a virgin. She'd been eager to lose her virginity, but that hadn't made her a natural.

Adam's sure that Renuka slept with that Cherokee guy working in the motel. Many generations descended from warriors but humbled and ordinary now, by casino lucre, by having nowhere else to build.

It's not without excitement that Adam pictures Renuka with the dark indigenous man. Like an erotic novel Adam had read once, the title of which he cannot remember, where wealthy American men could pay to see tableaux of young brown Southeast Asian

men and women – really, boys and girls – bringing each other to climax with poise and surety.

Renuka sleeping with someone else means the thing with Adelina must have hurt her, and if she can be hurt by Adam's affair and confession, she's not indifferent. When she called that Indian man, she'd been on her way to Miami, to reunite with Adam, before he blurted out the things he'd done. She hasn't called him since, but hasn't for certain shut him out. The money's all still there, in their one joint account, and by tomorrow, Renuka will have to report again to her job as a resident at the hospital.

And there *is* a beauty to it, isn't there? His wife with the stranger. Adam contemplates it now, like art – Renuka's compact, exquisite, nude body alive, coated with sweat, moving on the muscular brown man with excitement, the two of them ecstatically immersed in the moment. If she did that, she must still be a creature of desire, and Adam, confident, remembering that he is taller, in better shape, more educated and elsewhere more impressive than that guy who works in the motel, smiles now remembering Renuka's libido on their honeymoon. If sex can still pull her like that, all the way out of medicine, at last out of her preoccupation with responsibilities – well, Adam has got this contest in the bag.

For a moment, the simplicity, the crudeness, of these emotional – calculations, for lack of a better word - shames him a bit. But not for long. "It *is* simple," he mutters, the same words he'd used some seven years ago to his mother, over the phone, by way of explaining why he was going to marry Renuka and no other.

Most of it is simple, but not all, he thinks now, drawing the balcony screen door shut tightly behind him, so that cool air could enter through the mesh; opening up the windows in the kitchen and living room and airing out the place, another part of his

mind pleasantly pondering what feasting dishes he might cook, what delicate morsels to tempt her, so when his wife comes home, as she has to, there's food in the freezer and fridge for her to eat, for her to even take to the hospital with her for lunch when she goes to work, so that he touches her body in that one trustworthy way, through food, without Renuka swallowing her pride and asking him.

Adam had first wooed her using food. Not his own food – he'd played modest at first saying his chef skills were still “under development.” Like waterfront real estate still being developed, ha. No, he had taken her out for expensive dinners. There at a cramped, but upscale table, he exulted in feeding Renuka. Spooned creamy sour cream sorbet into her mouth, not telling her that he had helped the chef invent the recipe. Renuka's dark lips had been free of lipstick. Now Adam wishes he could remember more details from the first night of their lives as lovers. All that was left was an image here, there another, sometimes the two colliding when they came, preventing him from savoring either one. Making Renuka elusive even in his mind. The flash of her hair under the light. A thick blur of primitive silver at her wrist. Or just the brownness of her skin, which by surfing and sleeping in the sun, Adam has tried for years to match or at least come closer to being, but hasn't yet.

2.

Adam's plan for restoring the Everglades is this: take the ecosystem back to the way it was not just before the 1940s floods, but before the attempts to drain the watershed in the first place. Before the earliest disasters, when what was plentiful was left to grow, riotous. When ways of living were developed in order to bend to the chaos. In the 1830s, Confederate soldiers stumbled on the Everglades while tracking Seminole

warriors. Sawgrass and limestone bloodied the white Southern soldiers' feet, even as they hunted the Seminoles without remorse and killed them or forced them to clear out of the land. To whites the Everglades were as impenetrable and unsettling as the unsettled Congo. The long, rigid, exposed roots of mangrove trees, clawing at swampland through the murky water, were portents to young white prospectors in precarious canoes gliding through the Everglades. The hard roots looked like skeletal hands that promised punishment for all the Indians they'd killed. Gunfire, even canon-fire, in response to threats that might be sensed more easily than being seen, in all that overgrown gloom, could be muffled by the swamp sounds. Haste and fear propelled southern Americans' promises, to convert the torrid landscape to temperate farmlands. American soldiers who hated everything about the Everglades, according to letters Adam read out loud to Renuka, copying passages from the originals in the Hopkins libraries, moved thousands of Seminoles by force. They bore down on Seminole chiefs, sometimes failing to force their people out. But soon enough their most determined chiefs, like Aripeka, whom Adam's grandfather's dog was named after, were mostly defeated, and eventually brown faces occupied the blank space marked on maps as *Indian Territory*. Rice paddies, sugarcane plantations followed soon in Florida. Florida with its Asian heat still used American slaves to work its plantations.

Adam was convinced that a real restoration would be to go back to before sugar was king. Go back to the crops that the land knew. Corn, squash, beans, but also fragrances, flavors, that Adam could imagine using in dishes he'd help to invent - pumpkins, sumpweed, chenopodium, pigweed, knotweed, giant ragweed, canary grass, amaranth, and melons. Bean vines winding themselves around corn stocks. At the restaurant where Adam worked as a part-time, amaranth grain was cooked so it

resembled caviar and tasted like wheat berry, fresh-baked bread. Chenopodium was just quinoa, now mainly from California but capable of feeding the region, supplying both upscale and chain restaurants, if it was planted on the elevations alongside the Tamiami Trail, a faux-“native American” name that just mashed up Tampa and Miami. And canary grass, the meals for thousands upon thousands of birds, who disgusted the white settlers for how abundant they stayed, even when the settlers brought down entire skies of those dark birds.

The money to pay for the whole Everglades Recovery project was there, a straight two billion that Adam’s parents had connections to. His grandfather had donated to Jeb Bush’s campaign; his parents, to make up for it, donated to Michael Moore’s Fahrenheit 9/11 budget. But Adam physically resembled his grandfather very much, and so was a favorite of the golfing man, who used the words “land development” to vow prosperity to his descendants. A land developer himself, a robber baron of wet soil, with no trace of shame, no hesitation despite the evidence, not even disputed by most Republicans, the Teddy Roosevelt variety, that straightening out the Kissimmee River with canals destroyed it in the 1970s.

When his grandfather died earlier this year, Adam dropped everything, begged Renuka to come with him to Florida for the funeral.

Five months ago. Adam had flown alone to Miami then too. He hadn’t cheated on his wife till he returned. But that was when it started, his dream of Miami, a dream that excited and scared him, because it had no place for Renuka, who hadn’t gotten accepted to any residency training programs outside Baltimore.

In Miami, Adam found heat and life and families. People pushing at each other for space, talking excitedly, aggressive gestures turning into fast, laughing dances Adam

knew from going out salsa dancing after work sometimes with kitchen workers from the restaurant he was interviewing at down there. It didn't matter that Miami's people were overwhelmingly brown and he wasn't. Renuka didn't speak a word of Spanish, versus Adam who was fluent, from the uniquely-effective combination of his junior year abroad in Costa Rica and the tender way of talking that his Guatemalan nanny, Marta, had.

Marta, the descendant of Mayan lords, hadn't been able to have children of her own, despite her generous hips and ham-hock hands. Secretly sometimes, Adam was glad that Renuka's body hadn't gone through the changes of childbirth, and so didn't resemble Marta's pillowed, used-up body yet.

Renuka hadn't come to the funeral either. But Marta's family was there, the vital branch of it that worked for his grandfather, ten or so women and men who did the gardening, cleaning, cooking, upkeep of Grandpop's entire mansion in Palm Beach and also of the much smaller bungalow in Wynnwood, Miami, where Adam's father used to live, before he married Mom, and while still in his twenties, settled out West in SF. In Wynnwood, his dad used his trust fund to support himself as assistant curator at a gallery, buying up barrio art, using the Spanish he'd learned too, in undergrad, Harvard, to learn about the edgiest Cuban and Dominican expatriate work long before any of it got bought at Art Basel. The walls in Wynnwood exploded with candy colors. Their murals contained huge dominating black-rimmed images like sanctioned graffiti.

Walking in Wynnwood late at night, eating fish tacos and drinking Coronas, to escape the solemnity of the funeral and to not dwell on the money he'd receive, Adam *knew*, rather than made a decision, to come back to Florida where his inheritance had first been built. To stake a kind of settler's claim in Everglades Recovery: to leverage wealth and workers, science and faith, budgets and visions of a splendid past.



Of course, he'd never talk in those kinds of phrases. "It's a cool thing to do," is the only thing Adam says, when asked 'why eco-restoration? Why on earth paleo-geology?' "A way to support *life* on this planet." He talks about "collectives to restore the Everglades" when what he yearns for is power.

Only a power that will be exerted justly. An artist's autonomy, able to shape chert and canary grass and water full of sludge from the river into a functioning, undamaged whole. Able to reverse shameful results of developers who were blind, greedy and blind to the life that teemed, ensnared and enchanted. The ancient life they thought they could drain from the Glades, without understanding how to harness its power.

3.

Back in his element, washing fresh shrimp in the kitchen, then dicing onions on reflex, never once needing to look at his own hands while they're working, Adam feels calm, methodical, so much so that the idea of compromise doesn't even come up. When Renuka comes home, for he has no doubt that she will, if she agrees to restore their marriage, he thinks that yeah, they should, they definitely should, because they're in love and should be together.

Except she'll have to move to Miami. Camp with him at the Everglades project. Go to ECOMB and Sierra Club meetings in the city. There is no way around it.

And that will mean Renuka won't have time to be a surgeon, fine. But would that be so bad? She can take a year off, get pregnant, come back and finish residency in a less exhausting field that will be better for her sleep than surgery.

That will be better for both their lives, and the planet.

Because what surgery could be for her, Adam's convinced, is a distortion, even a

corruption, of her original feelings for medicine.

At first, when she got into medical school, Renuka was all about “milk of kindness.” A certain tenderness persisted through all odds – the overbearing surgery resident, the bullying Oncology fellow. She *loved* patients. Loved being with them as healer. Adam is convinced she loves them still, beneath the regimes of surgery.

When she was a student, there wasn't a poem about death and dying, a diagram of human anatomy, even the crystallography images of DNA or the bold swirling, shocking pink of the dye-stained cells of different types of tissue composing the body, that she explained she had to memorize – there wasn't a particle of medical training she didn't want to absorb whole-heartedly. In fact, at times it was quite breathtaking, especially when they had first met. The naps she'd steal when he'd drive her and her alone at night out to Half Moon Bay, so she would be fresh the next morning. The way she stared at dunes of sand in the darkness, whispering to him that in her mind she could see the slides of cells invisible in the ocean. All the cells sloughed off by swimmers, thoughtless and proud, by surfers guided by an invisible discipline.

Now pasta is boiling, shrimp scampi simmering, the smell of his potion so lingering and delectable, Adam's own mouth is watering. He stirs the pot, tense, waiting for Renuka to walk through the door. Glossy pamphlets printed on recycled paper, his folders, his little glasses and the black notebook he carries, along with a silver pen – these lie ready on the coffee table he built for this apartment, when they had moved in a year ago, when they came here so Renuka could work at the hospital, to finish her transitional year and apply to become a surgeon. When all they talked of were *her* plans.

When the food is completely ready, he'll set the table the way he does at the restaurant where he used to work. He won't go there ever again, because it's where he

began cheating on his wife. Temptation is there, the touch of others too easy.

Instead he will wait here for her, working from here on his part of the plan for bringing back the glorious Everglades, staying here as long as it takes to persuade her.

From the pamphlets, Adam will read to Renuka like poetry: *The geologic secrets of the earth are visible to all who learn to recognize them. It is impossible to consider the geology of the Everglades without also considering the hydrology. Primarily consisting of limestone, the bedrock geology of Everglades National Park has responded over time to the ongoing processes of weathering, erosion, compaction of organic sediments...*

Weathering, erosion – these won't affect what they have built, he and his wife. Adam has swum through marshes, fisted limestone rocks rich with coral. Collected shells once used to ornament the hair of the Calusas, those who lived in the Everglades aware of its submerged, prehistoric monsters, making monuments to them. Alert to alligators who could drag him to the treacherous deep, Adam crunched booted feet on long grasses that once had hidden Tequestas, hunters who lived on sea-wolves and manatees lassoed from the sea, stoic warriors who worshipped a god of the graveyard. All of those other Indians ghosts now, but Renuka his Indian, living, beautiful wife.

Adam calls her again on her cell phone. It goes to voice mail. But that's because she's flying back to Baltimore. Coming home, returning to him. She has to be. She must.