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1856–1866

When I was nine, in the city now called Kyoto, I changed my fate. I walked into the shrine through the red arch and struck the bell. I bowed twice. I clapped twice. I whispered to the foreign goddess and bowed again. And then I heard the shouts and the fire. What I asked for? *Any life but this one.*

I was named Aurelia for my grandmother, Aurélie Caillard, who worked in Paris as a laundress. She had two children, my uncle Charles and my mother, Claire. My uncle was clever with books and won scholarships to Jesuit schools, where they puffed him up, my mother said, with dreams of power and glory in faraway lands. When he was twenty, a priest already, the Order transferred him to New York to shuttle between Irish and Italian immigrants downtown, using the office of school principal as a base from which to consolidate the Catholic vote. The post was less than he had hoped for; he petitioned regularly for transfer. My mother stayed in Paris, working as a maid in a convent. Uncle Charles said she took up with a wicked man, but—I admit my

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bias—I think someone at the church forced himself on her: she was fourteen. My grandmother offered passage money to New York and closed her door.

In 1856, when my mother arrived on Mott Street to wash her brother's floors, my uncle Charles pronounced her a young widow and gave her dead husband the surname Bernard. Early that May she gave birth to me. *Aurelia,* Uncle Charles insisted, not Aurélie. *An American name.*

We lived at Prince and Mott, my mother and I, across from the churchyard, in an attic apartment above Saint Patrick's School. My mother had black hair and black eyes like mine; her round face dimpled on one side in a private smile. Every morning, before even setting water to boil for Uncle Charles, she would lift me up to the sill of the garret window. I loved seeing the high sycamore leaves up close, and far below, the red brick wall around the churchyard, loved wrapping my arms and legs around her shoulders and waist. She was most my mother at the edges of the day; she was a radiant mantle folded around me. She would comb my hair back with her fingers and sing the jaunty song she loved: *Auprès de ma blonde, il fait beau, fait beau, fait beau.*

"But my hair is black! Can I still be your *blonde*?"

"You are my little blond crow," she would assure me.

"Your blond licorice?"

"My blondest black plum."

And then she would set me down and change her song: *Frère Charles, Frère Charles, Dormez-vous? Dormez-vous?* And with that she would pack up her dimpled smile, fold up her radiant mantle, and become, not my mother, but her brother's *bonne.*

Uncle Charles had his office—which doubled as his apartment—on the fourth floor, just downstairs from us. He had arranged our quarters this way because he disliked the smells of cooking. He also disliked climbing stairs, but living any lower than the fourth floor would have forced him into more frequent contact with pupils than he preferred.

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Uncle Charles's features were small and his hands were large; his skull tapered like a fez at the back of his head and he flushed easily. He spoke only in French to my mother and—for my own good—only in English to me, his voice an oboe to my mother's cello. On Sunday afternoons when I was very small, after saying mass for the nuns and eating lunch with my mother and me, he would retreat with me from the spartan back half of his apartment (bedroom, dining room, untouched kitchen) to the nest of his office in front (hundreds of books, one enormous armchair). He would sit me on his lap in the burgundy velvet chair and teach me how to read the English Bible, just as he had taught my mother how to read the French one when they were children. He covered the bricks of tightly printed letters with blotting paper so that only the letter, only the word, only the line before me was visible: *Heaven and earth. Le ciel et la terre.*

Aside from those Sunday afternoons, three times a day we laid out Uncle Charles's meal on a tray, set it on a stand beside his armchair, and ate on our own upstairs. After breakfast, we would clear away the tray and do the shopping, me translating between rapid French and pushcart Italian-English, and then we would come home to make Uncle Charles's noon meal, the richest of the day. If Uncle Charles planned to be home in the evening, we would serve a soup made up from the lunch ingredients, together with bread, cheese, and wine. If he dined out, we would clean his apartment (quickly in back, slowly in front) and borrow his books. At night my mother would read to me, *le cigale et la fourmi;* and when I was old enough, I would read to her as she sewed, *If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.*

In the afternoons, once the dishes were washed and the soup assembled, my mother would rest until the schoolbell rang and the pupils clattered home, then go downstairs to mop the classroom floors. All I wanted was to follow her, so she made me a toy mop of my own from a broken broom handle and a tied-on rag, and together we danced with our obliging partners, noisy in the empty classrooms,

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quiet in the ones where the nuns lingered, bent over their students' papers.

My mother, though she hid it from them well, did not like nuns. I heard it in the lugubrious way she said the word *nun,* the way she sniffed at their wet wool habits drying on the roof next door. *Les nonnes.* I never learned what her life was like before I was born, when she cleaned for the convent in Paris. Though I was baptized, and sat in the back of the chapel on Sunday mornings when Uncle Charles said mass, and even took my First Communion with a holy shudder, my mother never joined me. She slept or sewed. The morning of my First Communion, when I asked her one last time to come, she said, "Aurelia Bernard. Who is this Bernard, tell me? The Church hates truth, and the nuns hate it most of all."

"Do you want me not to go?" I asked, confused.

"My dear, you need the Church as much as I do. At least until you're grown. You don't have to *bite the hand*"—she said the phrase in English—"but you don't have to lick it, either." *Lick* is *lécher* in French; the word pooled out of her mouth like honey, obscene.

I think she hated having no choice but to feel gratitude. We did need the Church; it fed us, it sheltered us. And in time, it educated me: my mother gave me a Saint Claire medal and my uncle gave me a tartan uniform; I put on both and joined the girls at Saint Patrick's, helping my mother in the afternoons. Once I started school, French became for me, not half my spoken life, but a secret language shared only with my mother as we glided across the floors.

All the girls in my class were Irish but me. Some of their fathers had been killed in the War between the States; some had killed policemen in the Draft Riots the summer I was seven. They were tough, those girls. I liked them: their games and the up-and-down way they talked, like horses and the sea, the way they laughed with each other in secret after the nuns beat them. *She took the ruler to me hand, the cow.*

But one day when I was nine, one of the nuns from another class-

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room came to show us a book of etchings of the Vatican. She asked my name. "Aurelia Bernard? Oh, I didn't recognize you without Claire," she said, holding an imaginary mop in both hands, gesturing. "Please give my regards to your mother."

I don't think she meant me harm, but at a desk nearby I saw one of the Irish girls take up the gesture and laugh. And after school a chorus of girls giggled behind me, their fists stacked one on the other in front of them, their arms circling as they cried, *Mopper! Mopper!* Our ballroom afternoons sounded grubby in their mouths. I walked stiffly upstairs, and a last girl called my name. I turned and saw piefaced Maggie Phelan laughing with her friends. "Please give my regards to your *mopper*!"

"Leave me alone!" I said.

"Leemie alone!" she mocked as I turned the corner, forcing myself not to run. I climbed upstairs and crawled into my mother's bed to hide. I pressed my face against her warm back: it was a comfort, her smell of soap and lemons, the purring stutter of her breath. My mother's afternoon naps were getting longer and longer, I noted, trying to be patient. I wanted so badly to tell her, to be reassured by her, defended. My mother stirred, coughed into a handkerchief, and petted me. "You look sick, *ma petite,* what's wrong?"

I opened my mouth to tell her, and couldn't. Instead, I heard myself saying, "I don't really help you so much, when we clean together downstairs. What if I did some of your morning work in the afternoon instead, like bringing in the water and the coal?"

"Hm, then maybe we'd have time to shop together in the morning before school," she mused. "I think Mrs. Baldini is cheating me." I wanted to protect my mother from all the Phelans and Baldinis in the world; I wanted the coarse, chewy English words to be easy for her the way they were, miraculously, for me. She looked reluctant for a moment, and then embraced me tightly. *"Ma petite,"* she said, "carrying such heavy things. It isn't right that a young girl should work so hard."

"I don't mind," I said. "I'll make lots of little trips." As she nodded

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slow assent, I felt as if I had gotten away with something: with not having to be embarrassed by her and not having to hurt her, either. My love and calculation formed a black wad in my throat. I held her close and said, "I'll start today."

Exchanging my school uniform for a smock, I made my mother's bed after she went downstairs to the classrooms. I poured the stale water from the kettle into the dishpan and brought down the next day's fresh water from the barrels upstairs: it had rained recently, and the roof was closer than the tap outside. I took the scuttle to the cellar and brought up all the coal I could carry. I took the chamberpots downstairs and emptied them into the outhouse, washed them at the tap, and brought them back again, panting my way up to the fourth and fifth floors. When I returned Uncle Charles's pot, he looked up from his armchair. "Tell your mother I'd like you both to join me at dinner tonight," he said. His urine smelled worse than ours, I reflected on my way upstairs; I would have to ask my mother why. I explored our apartment when I was alone in it: brushing aside a handful of crumpled handkerchiefs, marked as if with rust, I dug out the basket my mother kept hidden under her bed. It held a pretty brown half-sewn dress, I discovered, just my size, with brown velvet ribbon at the waist and cuffs. Beneath it lay a rag doll wearing the same dress, made of white cotton with drawn-on features—brown eyes like mine—and a velvet kerchief in place of hair. Wriggling with delight, I returned the dress and doll to their hiding place, scattering the handkerchiefs again to cover my tracks.

Just as I crawled out from under the bed, I heard slow feet up the stairs and then my mother returned, flushed from the work below. "You did so much, my sweet," she said. "Shall we heat up your uncle's dinner?"

I told her of Uncle Charles's strange request, and she pursed her lips, amused and quizzical. "Has Sunday come early this week?" She

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glanced at the pot on the stove. "Well, soup for all, *quand même,*" she decided. "He should have spoken up sooner if he wanted something else. Whatever does he expect us to wear?"

At Uncle Charles's little-used table, me in my tartan and my mother in her good dress, we leaned forward, fidgeting through the long blessing. Then Uncle Charles began eating with a bachelor's silent, methodical speed, and my mother followed suit, leaving me to rock in my chair with frustrated curiosity. The two of them locked into what could have been called a contest if it weren't for my uncle's tonsured dignity and my mother's wry grace. When Uncle Charles had emptied his bowl, he set down his spoon with a rap, which my mother answered instantly, and the two of them surveyed each other with arms crossed over their bellies. "Well, that was fun, Charles; I don't see how you can bear to eat alone every night," said my mother.

My uncle offered a sniff of acknowledgment and began speaking in his preaching voice. "As you know, I have for some time sought permission to serve our Lord in a capacity commensurate with the gifts He has seen fit to bestow upon His creature."

"For this I speak four languages?" my mother mocked. "I haven't forgotten."

My uncle took a deep breath to continue in this vein, but then his joy burst forth in a shuddering exhale. "This morning I received a letter," he announced simply.

"You beat out Brother Michael, didn't you?" my mother needled.

"I have been chosen," Uncle Charles said, reddening, "to follow in the footsteps of the Blessed Saint Francis Xavier. To minister to a lost flock. To convert the heathen in a land that has finally opened her doors to the West." He leaned back in his chair and sighed. "It's not for me to say why Brother Michael's prayer went unheard while mine has been granted." As he looked heavenward, my mother flashed me a

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knowing smirk, which drained out of her face as she began to realize he was serious. "This afternoon I booked passage for all three of us," he said. "We leave for Japan in six weeks."

I DROPPED MY SPOON. Japan? My mother went white. What would she do, my mother, who could not serve a Sunday meal on a Thursday? Scream at him, curse him? Fling her glass of wine in his face? But instead she slowly pouted out her lip and rocked her head to the side, as if gauging her store of flour—as if to say, *We can stretch it.* And with uncharacteristic hesitation, she asked, "Do you think it's good? For the girl?"

"What could be better than to serve our Lord? Aurelia has the gift of languages, and you have"—he paused, groping—"the gift of the hearth." My mother, irritated, closed her eyes and pressed her lips together, and Uncle Charles chastised, "It is a blessing to be called to do God's work." His ruddy face shone, and then he looked down at me. "Now, the world is full of people who can speak French and English, but if Aurelia can learn Japanese as readily—"

"You could support yourself as a translator," my mother said. I saw relief for me in her face, and something gentler than envy.

"The Church has a place for all Her daughters, even the most unfortunate," said Uncle Charles, looking at her pointedly. My mother's nostrils flared. "Any order that Aurelia felt called to would be the richer for her learning."

"Or you could marry an ambassador," she daydreamed.

"In any case," said Uncle Charles, "the Order, at my request, has given us a second copy of the grammar with which they have provided me. Learn what you can," he said, passing me a black and gilt book stamped with the word *Nippongo.*

"Aurelia, thank your uncle and go upstairs," said my mother. "I'm going to talk with him for a while. Here, take a candle."

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. . .

I PRESSED MY EAR to my uncle's closed door, almost falling in as someone opened it. "Go," said my mother, standing over me. "Now."

I LAY IN MY BED by candlelight with Mr. Nippongo's book. The blocks of text were sprinkled with drawings of parasols, pagodas, men in dresses called *kimono,* singular and plural, women in *kimono* and sashes called *obi.* The ladies were pretty as painted china plates: when I closed my eyes, I could see them in blue and white. In our pagoda, Uncle Charles would live on the ground floor and my mother and I would live upstairs, sleeping each night under our little tiered roof. Oh, to live up only one flight of stairs—and to never see Maggie Phelan again! I clutched the book to me, lighthearted and fierce.

I woke again halfway when my mother came in. She rustled in the room, kissed me, and blew out my candle. I heard her cough in her bed and spit into a handkerchief; it fell to the floor with a soft wet slap.

SIX WEEKS LATER I stood by her bedside. "Look, I wore my dress," I said.

"You look very pretty," my mother said drowsily. "Do you like the velvet?"

"It's soft." I nodded.

"Do you have a name for your doll?"

"Clara," I said, holding her up for my mother to see.

"Hello, Clara," she said in English.

I remember the attic, the wind in the sycamores, the vagrant bolts of light from the garret windows, the bright air buzzing with dust. A patchwork quilt from the nuns' box: red squares spreading in diagonal stripes on a field of soft white cotton. Under it: my mother. "I'll take

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the next ship out," she promised. "I'll be there before you know it." Her face was hot and flushed; her body seemed so flattened, so small in the sea of Irish Chain.

"But I could go later, with you," I insisted.

She looked pained for a moment, then merry. "I think your uncle needs you to come with him," she said. "He'll never say it, but I think he'd be afraid to try learning Japanese without you." I laughed. "No, it's true: you're younger; it'll be easier for you."

"If you'd come to New York when *you* were younger . . ." I said tentatively.

"I wouldn't have had you, *ma blonde.*" She reached with effort to finger my black hair. "You are the best thing that's ever happened to me," she said. "My *bel accident.*" She was always tender with me, but never solemn like this. I scratched my nose uncomfortably.

"Uncle Charles did the right thing by both of us," she said, out of nowhere. "Did you know, he booked two cabins on board? The cheaper thing would be to put us in the front of the ship, where all the servants room together. That's how I came to New York. It can be trying, for a woman alone; I imagine your uncle didn't want any more *accidents.*" Because she laughed, I laughed, too, uncertainly. "So you'll get the cabin we'd have shared. What do you think of that, having a room to yourself?" she asked.

She closed her eyes and lay quietly, and I cuddled under the red-and-white quilt. "I'd rather stay here with you," I said.

"My precious child," my mother began softly, and then she seemed to gather force; her black eyes flew open and she broke off, hissing, "If anything ever happened to me, you'd be at the mercy of the nuns. I can't have that on my conscience."

"I don't understand," I said, burrowing my face into her neck.

"You will," she sighed. And then, very seriously, pushing me back a little to look at me, she said, "Is there anything you ever wanted to ask me?"

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I looked her in the eye. I couldn't think of anything. And then I wriggled closer and whispered a question, and my mother laughed and hacked. "Oh, God, my Aurélie. Because he drinks coffee, darling," she said, brushing tears of laughter from her eyes and blood from the corner of her mouth.

When we had both caught our breath, she patted her shoulder for me to rest my head while she told her story. "When I came to this country," she said, "I got sick off the side of the boat so many times. All the adults did. You'd feel your stomach start to swoosh around inside you and—quick—you'd make a run for the railing. Meanwhile all the children raced around like it was Carnival. *Hurrah!*" she said, in a piping little voice. *"The boat's rocking like a pony, and our parents are too sick to keep us in line!"* We laughed again; she coughed and said, "It's better this way. If we were sailing together, I'd be so jealous—you prancing around, me throwing up—but this way I'll get to hear all about your adventures when I can enjoy them properly." We heard Uncle Charles's impatient tread up the stairs; she hauled her thin arms around me and clasped me so hard I gasped. "Now, *va-t'en,* shoo," she said, pushing me out of the bed. "I'm going to let your uncle say a prayer for me and I know you'll fidget." I shooed.

So many firsts all at once! My first trunk. My first ship, the *Lafayette,* just like the street in our neighborhood. My first telegram, before we even steamed away—Uncle Charles's, actually, but I had never seen a messenger boy up close, or his little leather satchel. My first view from the water of the pillared city where I was born. My first view, on all sides, of the sea.

My first room to myself, as my mother had promised: a tiny, windowless cell containing a stacked pair of bunks with high walls like the sides of a crib. I named the top my bedroom—my first ladder!—and the bottom one my parlor, like a fancy lady.

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My first meals my mother hadn't cooked. I remember how exotic it was my first day of school, how sophisticated I felt, in my plaid uniform and Saint Claire medal, eating the apple and bread and cheese my mother had sent down with me. (She did not want me eating the nuns' food, she said. I was grateful; what I saw—and smelled—of the other students eating at the Saint Patrick's refectory was one long nightmare of soggy boiled greens.) Even so, how much more grown up I felt eating roast chicken on a tray by lamplight in my parlor bunk with Clara, while Uncle Charles ate with the other Jesuits in the dining room. *So this is how it is for him. The food appears, the dishes vanish.* So easy. *Auprès de ma blonde,* I sang to my kerchiefed doll. Later, my stomach hurt.

Maybe there was some truth to my mother's idea that children could learn languages faster. When the seven Brothers met each morning to study Japanese, I was always the first to raise my hand—*this, that, the other; here, there, over there; yesterday, today, tomorrow*—until Uncle Charles asked me to stop joining them for class. "The presence of a child distracts us from our labor," he explained, and so I studied on my own in the gloomy ship library, quizzing Clara—*I gave the book to the teacher; the teacher gave the book to me*—as Uncle Charles, daily, quizzed me.

After seven days, and seven letters to my mother on French Line stationery, we changed ships in Southampton, England, for the P&O Line. We took the *Poonah* bound for Alexandria—the very ship, the captain told us, on which the great acrobat Blondin had trained for his Niagara Falls feat by walking a tightrope strung between the main and mizzen masts. A framed engraving of the event hung in the ship's library: Blondin, blindfolded and barefoot midway, smoking a pipe. In place of the solemn volumes of French philosophy on the *Lafayette,* the British ship library had Shakespeare and fairy tales. I remember thinking, that first afternoon as we bobbed in the harbor, how lucky I was, sitting with my doll and all those books in that sunny window, savoring the promise of a letter from my mother when they passed out the Southampton mail the next morning.

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At the end of the day, when I lay in my new compartment, this one even smaller than the last, Uncle Charles came in with a lamp to say good night. "There's only one bed this time," I said, rocking experimentally against the narrow sides of the new crib-bunk. "Where would *Maman* sleep?" I yawned.

Uncle Charles blinked in the darkness. Something in his face woke me up.

"What?" I asked, sitting up to see him in the light. Some unsaid anger—or panic?—scuttled across his features.

He composed himself. "The Sisters in New York sent a message," he said. "One of the Southampton Brothers told me."

My stomach twisted inside me. Of course I knew, but I wanted to make not knowing last longer. "She can't come on the next ship, either?" I squeaked. *Say nothing, Uncle Charles,* I thought.

"God took her just after we left."

I pulled the covers to my chin, and pressed my fists to my ears.

"The Sisters buried her in the churchyard at Saint Patrick's."

"No."

"God will purge His handmaiden of her sins," he said, "and draw her to His side in heaven."

"No," I said.

"I know you mourn, but you must rejoice for her immortal soul."

"Good night," I said, choking, and shut my eyes tight. I did not open them when he blessed me.

I KNOW I READ and ate and studied and slept on the *Poonah,* but I remember very little. I know we crossed the Mediterranean, took a nightlong train across the desert to Suez, and steamed off again on a new ship, but those numb winter months are lost to me. All I see is the engraving, the tightrope, the blindfold. We did not mention her, neither Uncle Charles nor I.

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I began to thaw a little on the new ship, the *Singapore,* steaming the long warm weeks from one fragrant port to the next: Aden, Galle, Madras, Calcutta, Penang. There was one Japanese person on board: a skinny young cook, Mr. Ohara, who wore his ship's uniform stiffly ironed and sharpened his cleavers each day. It was easy enough to learn from him because he said the same things every morning when he brought food up from the larder: *It's dirty. It smells bad. It's not fresh.* He kept a cat, Maneki-*san,* a one-eyed mouser I was forbidden to feed. He gave me tiny cups of pale green tea and let me practice my new words in the early part of the day, then chased me away when he set to work on the noon meal in earnest. I read fairy tales then, or played School in my narrow chamber, teaching Clara *Nippongo* from my gilt leather grammar. There was no Mr. Nippongo. The word meant *Japanese.*

My name is Clara. I am a doll. I am a foreigner. I come from New York. I came by ship. My mother is French. My mother is in New York. My mother is sick. I don't speak Japanese. I don't understand. I don't know.

I remember the soft arms of the ship rocking me at night as I prayed for my mother: sometimes that God might hold her as the ship held me, sometimes that she would get well and come soon. That her passage might be safe. That she might be, secretly, an elfin princess, and come to me across the water on gauzy wings. And every day I woke still farther from her, to *umi, tori*: the vast blinding sea, flecked with gulls.