

Hiding in Full View
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It wasn't until she left behind her home that she became an American, and the system truly swallowed her.

Pit-stops, barrooms, and the highway were all that was left. The structures she had learned to operate within, that had brought her success and safety in her new land, crumbled as she drove with shaking hands, in the Eldorado, covering the distance between remaining and barging ahead in whatever fashion – forgetting dignity, getting away. Body soul and beyond.

All of America opened up in front of her, but she followed signs that promised west and south. She saw that it was possible to do anything, go anywhere.

She moved into the backyards of America, staying within the gaps: highways and parking lots; in-between the satellites where average life took place; family homes, shopping malls, schoolyards, suburbia. Where she roamed was unsafe and unregulated and outside. It was like being on the wrong side of the set divider, she thought, recalling her television days: it was where spiders and dust balls skittered and the black tortured knots of cables and wires rambled.

She felt no loneliness or sense of danger, and drove without hurry, allowing anyone to pass. She stopped for gas and food, usually at diners, preferring the lack of curiosity of their clientele and the solicitous friendliness of the waitresses.

The first time she got out of the car after New York was when the gas was about to run out on the outskirts of Philadelphia. Following a long, deserted service road flanked by shuttered warehouses she came to an intersection with a service station and an attached diner.

After filling the tank she entered and chose a booth in a mirrored corner in the back, next to the swinging doors to the kitchen. She turned her back to the restaurant and ordered an omelet from the menu printed on the plastic place mat. In the mirror she observed a woman, perhaps a bedraggled twenty-five but possibly a carefully cultivated forty-five, come in alone and sit down. The woman's breasts were bursting out of a modest green stocking dress, her shoulders sloping a little from shyness.

A face appeared in each of the porthole windows on the swinging doors, to stare at the woman. The men, one wearing a chef's hat and the other a white beanie with a brown smudge on it, smiled as they watched the woman and exchanged delighted glances.

As the chef turned away, he saw her looking him and he winked before disappearing from sight.

Kusipää, she thought in Finnish. *Asshole*. She ate her omelet and hash browns diligently. It would be her only meal that day and she emptied the entire plate then wrapped the four triangles of toast and the tiny packets of soft butter and grape jelly in her napkin.

Returning to the Eldorado she plucked out two garment bags from the backseat and deposited them into the trash bin next to the diner. The time for fancy dresses with plunging necklines was over.

She drove through the days starting out as grainy mornings, watched them turn grey, then blue. Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, it didn't matter, she was on the road. Moving outside of things she had finally ceased to be the outsider; on the highway no one belonged any more or less than anyone else. At a truck stop, everyone was on foreign soil.

In the warm cocoon of the car she kept her eyes on the blacktop above the red dashboard lights. At night when the reflective painted lines of the road, the concrete barriers and the oncoming flow of traffic began to dissect and the geometrical lines and ropes of light got jumbled, she braced herself, blinking and tensing the muscles along her back and legs and arms, and forced herself to stay alert and not give in to the lure of the undulating streaks of paint and light, sneaking her slyly in the wrong direction.

It was only when she and the car no longer seemed to be in direct contact with the road and the boundaries of physics began to fail, she stopped for the night. She took the nearest exit and looked for a roadside tavern near a motel, a place with trucks and traveling salesmen.

She sat in those bars reading old newspapers and answering the occasional question. Where was she headed? Was she on vacation, travelling to visit family? The silence began to form during the long days and weeks of crisscrossing the country. Each time she spoke, her own voice surprised her, disrupting the smooth quality of her new reality and it was easy to make do without speech in bars, stores and gas stations; it was not necessary to talk to order a drink or take care of business.

She drank until too exhausted to sit up; then drove to a quiet place, an unused-looking side road, a parking lot, a flat bend of a river. Sleeping stretched across the seat she pressed herself against the backrest and pulled the blanket she had bought at a rest stop up to her chin. Her eyes closed, her mind seethed, jittery with the alcohol turning to sugar in her veins. She was unable to deny the images that were nudging, one here, one there, until finally a picture slid through, emerging wetly from the inky pool of memory.

When they came, she covered her ears against the noisiness of the memories. Greenwich Village bar rooms, fights with Steny, PR people, producer visits, cameras, lights, parties, the scrutiny... A banquet hall, opulent, crystal chandeliers, shiny floors, large crowds, a woman surrounded by a crew of men in black, all leaning forward from the waist, eagerly, drinks in hand, teeth bared. The walls were lined with mirrors, perpetuating the scene in endless reflections. Offensive mirrors – that's how she had come to think of them. Always she was being replicated, blinded by flash bulbs, spied upon by the whirring Cyclops' eye of a film camera, gaped at by fervent faces, distended eyes *touching* her.

There was no sound in these recollections, only what the eye could see. It was as if she had caught her own eye in a mirror through time, behind the shoulder of a fawning man. She looked deep into his pupils staring back. *What are you doing there*, she asked, but her own eyes looked back inscrutably.

And then there was the other past. The humming screaming silence the instant before the announcement of her name, too early, before the name of the actual winner of Miss Finland, though she couldn't believe she heard her own at all, couldn't believe the entire process.

Forget about it, you're too chubby! You're just like me her mother had exclaimed

when told about the pageant. Seeing her practicing the splits in the living room she walked by and shook her head: *You just aren't very athletic, are you.* Even though she'd had occasional modelling jobs, even though other people called her 'stunning.' She had thought, why not me? When she had ended up in the final, televised top-10, her mother had chortled angrily and made a sucking sound with the saliva in her mouth.

The initial chaos was unreal now, reporters shoving big round microphones into her face, their eyes fake-conspiratorial, hungry for her innocent half-whispers that they mangled and twisted so that she never recognised the girl in the magazines, the one they wrote about.

In the backseat of the Eldorado she admonished herself – *stop stop* – summoning other images, frantically seeking one that would bring peace. The old realities hissed in her ears like a physical awareness, and the only thing that settled their noise was to keep on driving, and close to the whiskey the rest of the time.

Passing Augusta, Georgia she saw a sign for Memphis. The romance of the name drew her west, but the city's long avenues flanked with businesses and warehouses did not bear out her imaginings. It was just another town.

I love you so much that I have to leave, and that means that I don't love you, not really, so I have to leave so I don't stay played on the radio and she thought of him. It wasn't too late, she could still go back. She could cancel it all, get the girl...

No. East was cold, east was wrong, east was the past.

She became used to movement, forgot what it was like to be in a place. The movement buffered her thoughts. Eat and sleep, empty the bladder, start again.

She stopped tending to herself, and people no longer noticed her the way they had. Seeing herself in the splotchy bathroom mirror of a bar room she knew that from now on, her facial features, her breasts, everything, were on their way down. Only in heady moments of alcoholic jubilation did her cheeks look flushed again, her eyes shine, shoulders jaunty and relaxed. Those would be the only moments of illusion from now on, and the rest, the majority, would be gravity. She welcomed it.

By the time she reached Oklahoma, the radio was abrim with predictions of *the biggest snowstorm in three decades* and a long cold front. She dipped south at Oklahoma City, imagining a straight line passing Dallas and ending in the Gulf of Mexico.

She had been thinking about Texas, curious about what else it was besides the Dallas cul-de-sac where she and Steny had once lived and where she had made her immigrant mistakes.

Look, Steny, sparks! In the grass.

That's unlikely, baby. Do you see a fire?

But look! There. And there.

He had shaken his head, wavering between anger and tolerance as he watched her crouching enthusiastically in the grass in her tight, white skirt.

Those aren't sparks, baby, those are fireflies.

Fireflies, she had pronounced, and he had pulled her up by the arm. She had followed him to the car, craning her neck to see if there were more, but all she could see were trees receding into the thickening dusk.

She had made many more mistakes and Steny had ridiculed every infraction. Like the long and silky dress she had bought, akin to a flapper frock of the twenties. When showing it to Steny he had torn his sides laughing: *a maternity dress*. Or the lovely necklace of black beads she had discovered in a trinket shop in downtown Dallas. He had howled, hobbling back and forth doubled over. *That's a rosary, baby, that's a fucking rosary!* She had never seen one; there were only a handful of Catholics in Finland and she had only heard the Finnish word: prayer ribbon.

That was the nature of immigrant mistakes. First you made one, and then it was explained to you, and you had no idea what the explanation itself meant. It was wearying and it was endless. The most innocuous events of daily life could turn into a source of limitless hilarity to some lunch counter server and his backroom cronies upon her answer to a simple question of 'Would you like broccoli with that?' and herself asking innocently, 'Excuse me, what is broccoli?' in her burgeoning Texas accent. She always smiled along but inside she memorised yet another possible mine in the field that lay between her and American life. But she had conquered it all, and now no one could place her on a map by her actions, accent or vocabulary.

After crossing the Texas state line she slowed down to savour the state, her last. She chose local roads across the expanses of fields and drylands, seeing the occasional pinwheel of a tarantula careening across the road, sent on its way by a car passing in the opposite lane. She caught up with an old tractor with a tiny old man in the wooden driver's seat and followed his ten-mile-per-hour turn into the parking lot of Gus's General Store, a wooden shed with a large hand-painted sign that said COLD BEER.

The man descended from the tractor as carefully as a cat. Once on the dusty ground he turned his head in slow motion to regard first the Eldorado, then her behind the wheel. She waited until he had gone inside and then got out. She tugged at her clothes, which had stuck to her skin during the long drive, and smelled the air. It was close with heat and the metallic scent of dust, but adorned with a humid aroma of grass and wildflowers.

Inside, the old man had sat down with man in a smashed Stetson, at a fold-up card table set in a dark, dusty corner. They were playing checkers and identically fingering their whiskers as they watched her, a stranger, entering gingerly through the screen door. She ignored them and went straight to the wooden counter facing the doorway, and without meeting the gaze of the man standing behind it ordered a tuna sandwich by pointing at one of the two slim sandwiches in wax paper in a tiny cold case set upon the counter. She took a paper coffee cup from an upside-down tower and filled it with the bleakly brownish liquid. She put down sixty cents and turned to go, without a word or glance being exchanged. If someone had asked, she would not have been able to describe the man behind the counter.

Sipping the puny coffee she avoided every sign that would have taken her to Dallas and every glimpse of the skyline. She passed tiny towns along county roads: Angus, Cotton Gin, Snook – drive-through towns where people sat on porches in one of a dozen leaning houses.

For every person there was just as surely an equal number of pickup trucks. Alive and dead, she thought, the rusty carcasses of the dead ones jutting from the wasteland behind the flimsy houses, on their way to sinking into the hand-dug ditches carved into the hard red dirt.

From their porches people watched her approach in her silver car. They turned their heads when she passed, looking straight at her, tired, curious and aloof, and she looked right back. Once in a while she caught the eye of someone – a fraction of a second was enough – and safe in her car she didn't mind these quick exchanges.

Years later, improbably, she could recall some of those gazes – a dusty little boy of perhaps ten whose eyes had been so full of unknown yearning that she had fantasised about going back; and women whose vacant eyes dared her to consider her own troubled mind.

She knew she was headed for the coast but didn't know where the road would eventually take her. The radio played Glen Campbell's Galveston and she was tempted to look for the town, but was then beckoned by a sign for Highway 77 to Corpus Christi and Padre Island.

She liked the idea of an island and drove the ten hours stopping only once, hitting South Padre Island Drive after seven in the evening, and crossing the Queen Isabella Causeway, so long and tall that she couldn't concentrate on looking at her surroundings and had to focus on driving. When she landed – and it felt like landing, descending from the bridge on the other side of what a sign said was Laguna Madre – the view at dusk caused her skin to prickle.

An expanse of salt marsh, like a map of placid pools interspersed with clusters of green reeds and grass, reflected back the enormous sky burning down into the embers of sunset, and she felt what had come before on that day already evaporating behind her.

She ground to a stop in the gravel lot of a bait shack with a Closed sign and no other cars. Getting out, she walked a few steps onto a small sandy mound to face the falling sun, revelling in the soft whiff of ocean on her skin, breathing deeply the rich smell of decaying marsh.

In astonishment, she followed the shadow of her own legs extending from her feet all the way across the bait shack's parking lot, over the road itself, and then continuing as far as the eye could see across the watery landscape. She lifted her arms – somewhere, hundreds of yards away was the end of her.

She drove on and saw that it was indeed a completely flat island – there wasn't a single rise on it. The road came to a 'T' at a small clump of buildings – another bait shack, a general store and a wooden saloon. She hazarded a guess and turned left onto State Highway 361. There was nothing after that for miles.

When she finally came upon the falling-down, weather-beaten dilapidation of the town's shabby wooden lean-tos and colourful handmade shop signs, she felt tremulous heat and excitement. It was like going back to childhood: safe yet strange, set apart yet teeming with life, and surrounded by the vastest expanse of sky she had ever seen. The end of the known world. She kept driving until there was nowhere to go, until the road let out into a parking lot, and the parking lot ended and the sea began.

She followed a brown sign with BEACH ACCESS carved into it, saw a few people standing on a long pier farther down, fishing.

The sound of the surf was like the ascending rumble of a symphony orchestra coming to life accompanied by the violin-squeaks of the gulls and another birdcall she did not recognise. The breeze burrowed into the roots of her hair, lifting it gently off her scalp like an intimate caress. Years ago she had been excited to visit Coney Island

– along with thousands of others – the beach littered with hot-dog wrappers, soda bottles, and ruined life-buoys. But Coney Island had just been a poor man’s appetiser, concealing the spine-tingling romance with this less tarnished shore.

The earth shook beneath her feet as waves crashed into the unfettered sand.

2004

At seven in the evening, the front room of her weathered trailer was dappled by the shadows of tall poppies swinging in pots in front of the window. The trailer sat high on a blustery sand dune, and when she let go of the door to reach for the lamp, the wind from the gulf heaved it back against the frame with a clap.

She found the switch for the table lamp, turned on the transistor radio and latched the flimsy aluminum door with its scratched plastic window behind her, wiping off the sheen of sweat on her forehead. Outside, the wind howled and she could hear electrical wire dragging across the roof over the sound of a big cat scratching slowly.

First, as always, she went down to the unused bedroom at the back and cracked open the miniature door, taking a quick look to make sure nothing dangerous lurked within. Through the wall, across the five or six feet of tangled brush that separated her trailer from the shipping container housing the vet’s office, she could already hear the thump of music. Shelley, the vet’s assistant had come by for her nightly check and had switched on the Corpus Christi dance music station.

She had heard Shelley at the café explaining to people that the electro-pop and the human voices of the DJs calmed and comforted the dogs at night. She herself knew otherwise: the dogs baying in tune with certain dance numbers was the biggest reason she had long ago abandoned use of the bedroom.

In the living room, she took off her sunglasses, baseball cap and shoes and stood on the creaky floor in her shapeless, long-sleeved blue dress. She peeled off her long-johns and sighed in relief, looking around the little room, bathed in green from vegetation surrounding the trailer. All of the things she needed were there: the cavernous Indian print-covered couch on which she slept, the red-top Formica kitchen table, the tiny nook of kitchen.

She took the little transistor radio from the table and opened the front door to a small porch set on top of concrete roadblocks; even with the wind gusting it was too hot in the metal box of the trailer. When she had lived up north, dusk had usually conjured up a cooling down, an easing off of the stark light and burning heat of the day. Not so in Texas, where dusk was dense with an after-burn.

A gecko sunned itself on one of the rotting one-by-fours, catching a last triangle of sunlight. She crept out quietly so as not to disturb it and turned on the radio. The gecko fled. She stood in the vast maritime hum of the outdoors, with nothing to look back at her but the sky, her silhouette framed in the doorway by the electric light behind, facing a sea of reeds that gradually darkened as they receded toward the fore dunes.

The wind washed against her face in deliberate waves, died for a moment, then rose to greater intensity until it hardly ceased at all and the poppies whipped frantically against the tin side of the trailer. She turned up the volume on her radio as the wind mounted, letting the music swell as the air swelled until *There’s an old flame burning in your eyes* evaporated into the wind and only shreds of sound could be

heard through the din of the tropical storm.

She stood transfixed as violent gusts transformed the landscape and something inside the trailer toppled. Not even when there was a loud crash did she turn back, not even when the wind began to slash rude drops of water across her face, and even when the front of her was soaked she kept her face turned up to the sky.

She awoke to the sound of the screen door gently tapping against the aluminum door frame – she had left it unlatched. The digital clock showed 3:56 am. and her head still hummed with last night's whiskeys.

She entered the soft dark, made her way down a sandy slope to Beach Street and walked in silence through the sinking sand the few hundred yards to the water's edge. It was still dark when she slid into the waves, the lump of her clothes left behind on the sand.

The moment of skin meeting sea was familiar and old, reminding her of summers at the yellow cottage as a child. She luxuriated in the water that held her body, imagining her pores drinking in the salt, carrying the sodium to her depleted brain. The searing, nauseating ache began to recede.

In the last darkness of night she swam seaward leaving behind the hiss and hum of the surf, toward the silence of the Gulf of Mexico. Once in a while a gull floated past and called briefly, half-heartedly. She no longer had to count her strokes, as she had before learning to swim here, a grown woman, initially counting to fifty before turning back to shore. By the time she had improved enough to reach five hundred she had stopped counting.

As always when she swam she felt the vastness of the water beneath her. It was a feeling that had been with her since she had realised as a child that the narrows where their own rickety pier was anchored was actually connected to the seas and oceans beyond. She had made the discovery the day her father rowed their old wooden skiff past the Narrows Bridge, their usual turning point, laughing too broadly in that way she knew not to trust. He had been drinking and kept rowing with his strong, brown construction worker's arms. She hadn't known how to swim and was nervous about passing under the shade of the bridge, across the deep whirling eddies of greenish water created by what her child's mind thought of as the thick concrete thighs of the bridge, the structures that diverted the stream striving out to sea.

Her father gathered speed so as to pass beneath quickly, and the cold moment of being underneath and hearing the echo of water lapping against the bridge structures was brief. On the other side the sun splashed onto her face and the narrows opened and widened. She could smell the sea and it dawned on her that the shallow shore flanking the small strip of sand and reeds in front of their sauna, where she played and waded every day in summer, was part of this big, grey body of water and, ultimately, the great big seas, the same ones that she now swam in.

Her father had stopped the boat and pulled out a flask saying 'Welcome to the great big world, little girl!' Her skin had tingled with the excitement of this new knowledge, and although, when she waded into the water back on the home shore it made the cold lip of water brushing her ankles more frightening, she liked the idea that her feet shared the water with thousands of others. And fish. And boats.

She swam with her eyes closed and focused on being one with the water and air and the marvellous experience of not having to worry about which way was up or

down. It was the simplest, purest way of being she had ever known. As long as she swam, nothing else mattered. This was it. She was the luckiest person in the world.

She stopped and flipped over several times in the waves, diving down head-first and turning over like a dolphin. From sea-level she saw the lightening strip of shore half a mile away and a fringe of cloud cover approaching from the direction of Mustang Tower. The darkness was spoiling. It was time to get back before some lone surfer turned up. She made spears of her arms and kicked vigorously from her hip to get a good start for the swim back, smiling at the image of her old-woman's body emerging naked from the waves, breasts swinging.