

## CHAPTER TWO

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THE ROAD TO THE embassy was choked with traffic: cars, motorcycles, tricycle rickshaws, buses and jitneys filled to twice their capacity, a procession of wheels and limbs all fighting for space in the midafternoon heat. We nudged forward a few feet, stopped, found an opening, stopped again. Our taxi driver shooed away a group of boys who were hawking gum and loose cigarettes, then barely avoided a motor scooter carrying an entire family on its back—father, mother, son, and daughter all leaning as one into a turn, their mouths wrapped with handkerchiefs to blunt the exhaust, a family of bandits. Along the side of the road, wizened brown women in faded brown sarongs stacked straw baskets high with ripening fruit, and a pair of mechanics squatted before their open-air garage, lazily brushing away flies as they took an engine apart. Behind them, the brown earth dipped into a smoldering dump where a pair of round-headed tots frantically chased a scrawny black hen. The children slipped in the mud and corn husks and banana leaves, squealing with pleasure, until they disappeared down the dirt road beyond.

Things eased up once we hit the highway, and the taxi dropped us off in front of the embassy, where a pair of smartly dressed Marines nodded in greeting. Inside the courtyard, the clamor of the street was

replaced by the steady rhythm of gardening clippers. My mother's boss was a portly black man with closely cropped hair sprinkled gray at the temples. An American flag draped down in rich folds from the pole beside his desk. He reached out and offered a firm handshake: "How are you, young man?" He smelled of after-shave and his starched collar cut hard into his neck. I stood at attention as I answered his questions about the progress of my studies. The air in the office was cool and dry, like the air of mountain peaks: the pure and heady breeze of privilege.

Our audience over, my mother sat me down in the library while she went off to do some work. I finished my comic books and the homework my mother had made me bring before climbing out of my chair to browse through the stacks. Most of the books held little interest for a nine-year-old boy—World Bank reports, geological surveys, five-year development plans. But in one corner I found a collection of *Life* magazines neatly displayed in clear plastic binders. I thumbed through the glossy advertisements—Goodyear Tires and Dodge Fever, Zenith TV ("Why not the best?") and Campbell's Soup ("Mm-mm good!"), men in white turtlenecks pouring Seagram's over ice as women in red miniskirts looked on admiringly—and felt vaguely reassured. When I came upon a news photograph, I tried to guess the subject of the story before reading the caption. The photograph of French children dashing over cobblestoned streets: that was a happy scene, a game of hide-and-go-seek after a day of schoolbooks and chores; their laughter spoke of freedom. The photograph of a Japanese woman cradling a young, naked girl in a shallow tub: that was sad; the girl was sick, her legs twisted, her head fallen back against the mother's breast, the mother's face tight with grief, perhaps she blamed herself. . . .

Eventually I came across a photograph of an older man in dark glasses and a raincoat walking down an empty road. I couldn't guess what this picture was about; there seemed nothing unusual about the subject. On the next page was another photograph, this one a close-up

of the same man's hands. They had a strange, unnatural pallor, as if blood had been drawn from the flesh. Turning back to the first picture, I now saw that the man's crinkly hair, his heavy lips and broad, fleshy nose, all had this same uneven, ghostly hue.

He must be terribly sick, I thought. A radiation victim, maybe, or an albino—I had seen one of those on the street a few days before, and my mother had explained about such things. Except when I read the words that went with the picture, that wasn't it at all. The man had received a chemical treatment, the article explained, to lighten his complexion. He had paid for it with his own money. He expressed some regret about trying to pass himself off as a white man, was sorry about how badly things had turned out. But the results were irreversible. There were thousands of people like him, black men and women back in America who'd undergone the same treatment in response to advertisements that promised happiness as a white person.

I felt my face and neck get hot. My stomach knotted; the type began to blur on the page. Did my mother know about this? What about her boss—why was he so calm, reading through his reports a few feet down the hall? I had a desperate urge to jump out of my seat, to show them what I had learned, to demand some explanation or assurance. But something held me back. As in a dream, I had no voice for my newfound fear. By the time my mother came to take me home, my face wore a smile and the magazines were back in their proper place. The room, the air, was quiet as before. . . .

It was in this context that I came across the picture in *Life* magazine of the black man who had tried to peel off his skin. I imagine other black children, then and now, undergoing similar moments of revelation. Perhaps it comes sooner for most—the parent's warning not to cross the boundaries of a particular neighborhood, or the frustration of not having hair like Barbie no matter how long you tease and comb, or the tale of a father's or grandfather's humiliation at the hands of an employer or a cop, overheard while you're supposed to be asleep. Maybe it's easier for a child to receive the bad news in small doses, allowing for a system of defenses to build up—although I suspect I was one of the luckier ones, having been given a stretch of childhood free from self-doubt.

I know that seeing that article was violent for me, an ambush attack. My mother had warned me about bigots—they were ignorant, uneducated people one should avoid. If I could not yet consider my own mortality, Lolo had helped me understand the potential of disease to cripple, of accidents to maim, of fortunes to decline. I could correctly identify common greed or cruelty in others, and sometimes even in myself. But that one photograph had told me something else: that there was a hidden enemy out there, one that could reach me without anyone's knowledge, not even my own. When I got home that night from the embassy library, I went into the bathroom and stood in front of the mirror with all my senses and limbs seemingly

intact, looking as I had always looked, and wondered if something was wrong with me. The alternative seemed no less frightening—that the adults around me lived in the midst of madness.

The initial flush of anxiety would pass, and I would spend my remaining year in Indonesia much as I had before. I retained a confidence that was not always justified and an irrepressible talent for mischief. But my vision had been permanently altered. On the imported television shows that had started running in the evenings, I began to notice that Cosby never got the girl on *I Spy*, that the black man on *Mission Impossible* spent all his time underground. I noticed that there was nobody like me in the Sears, Roebuck Christmas catalog that Toot and Gramps sent us, and that Santa was a white man.

I kept these observations to myself, deciding that either my mother didn't see them or she was trying to protect me and that I shouldn't expose her efforts as having failed. I still trusted my mother's love—but I now faced the prospect that her account of the world, and my father's place in it, was somehow incomplete.