

## After

Amir climbs the wooden staircase to the hayloft. The thin plywood floor smells of sawdust. Through the hayloft's open window he can see more of the island. To one side, in the far distance, there are mountains, snowcapped and sheer, the other are the forest and the sea, and ahead are waves of rolling, desolate hills, scattered brush.

Below in the yard the girl walks quickly by. He watches her head up the road toward the trees.

He has never seen a girl like her before—perhaps on television, on the American shows, but not in the flesh. He felt when he first saw her that she looked familiar, but it is only now he understands why. She looks like the illustrated girl on the canister of powdered milk his mother buys for his baby brother. They could never afford the good kind of anything, but his mother always made sure to buy the expensive powdered milk. He quickly learned you could tell the quality of a product by how Western the people on the packaging looked. White skin,

blue eyes, blond hair—these things spoke of luxury, betterment, possibility.

The girl disappears down a side road, and Amir begins to suspect she might not come back. He thought she had understood him earlier, when he explained how hungry he was, but now he wonders if she didn't at all.

Amir puts his hand to his chest. The bell-shaped locket Quiet Uncle gave him is still there. But for a thin scratch along its exterior it has not been damaged, and the tiny portraits of his mother and brother inside are untouched.

He had been there when both pictures were taken in a small photographer's studio near their home, not long before they were forced to flee. Each family member in turn was positioned before a sheet of purple imitation velvet. The photographer worked quickly and without much interest in his subjects. The whole family had their portraits taken in less than five minutes.

There seemed then to Amir an air of futility to it all. Elsewhere their neighbors were packing suitcases, hoarding supplies, securing and, if need be, forging travel documents. And yet for some reason Amir's mother had been adamant on going to the makeshift photography studio down the street and getting these portraits taken. Amir saw no use in it, and would not respond to the photographer's request to look his way and smile.

Now, observing his mother's face inside the locket—a face that projected a kind of contentment with life as it was, a calmness—he feels that when he gets home he should apologize for having been difficult that day.

Amir closes the locket. In the afternoon heat he feels

a warmth come over him. His clothes, though starched almost crisp with the residual salt of the sea, have nonetheless dried and no longer hold fast to his skin. Earlier, after he ate a few clumps of that strange sweet stuff in the nearby pot, he felt almost fully rejuvenated. But now his stomach aches and soon he falls into a stupor. He lies down and closes his eyes. But only moments later he hears the sound of a hushed conversation, spoken in his own language from somewhere outside. He stays flat on his stomach and inches toward the window to get a better look.

A couple, in their late teens, perhaps, walk cautiously toward the fallow harborberry grove to the west. The man carries a gym bag gutted open at the zipper line, its contents exposed—a few pieces of clothing, two apples and a soda can. The woman holds her phone to the sky, waving it here and there like a divining rod. They look emaciated, journey-worn. They move with slow, deliberate steps, monitoring their periphery as they go.

They appear fearful and out of place, but Amir silently rejoices at the sight and sound of them. They speak his language; maybe they know the way home.

As he considers whether to show himself and yell down to them, Amir is startled by another sound from the vicinity of the nearby house. He peers out the window to find a woman standing at the edge of the home's stone courtyard, an old hunting rifle in her hand. She points it at the teenagers and issues a command in a language Amir can't decipher. Reflexively, they drop their luggage and raise their hands in the air.

The woman looks to Amir exactly like the blond girl

who earlier offered him sanctuary—taller and older, but clearly her kin. He watches as the teenagers plead with the woman to put down the gun, each sentence a mash of languages. But she doesn't respond except to slightly tip the barrel of the gun toward the ground a couple of times. The couple get down on their knees.

A small hatchback pulls into the driveway, coming to a stop a few feet from where the woman stands. She ignores its existence entirely, focused only on the young couple. A short, slight man gets out of the car and, taking in the scene, begins speaking in urgent tones.

The woman replies with a single word Amir is unable to understand.

The man tries to respond, but she cuts him off. She turns not just her head but, for an instant, her whole body, such that her weapon momentarily points at the man. She repeats the same word. The man nods and runs into the house. As though no conversation has taken place at all, the woman trains her gun back on the teenagers kneeling in the yard.

One of the teenagers says something in broken English and reaches into his bag, but as soon as he does, the woman at the other end of the yard fires. She aims for the space above their kneeling bodies, and the two of them fall flat to the ground as though the bullets had gone through them. In the outbuilding, Amir too pushes himself down against the plywood, the terrible reverberation of gunfire running through him, dragging with it the memory of every past reverberation.

They stay there, all of them, until, a few minutes later, a couple of trucks, painted the dark green of military cam-

ouffage, come racing up the road. The trucks pull into the driveway and four young-looking soldiers emerge, then a fifth man—older and more broadly built than the others, and by demeanor their superior. The man issues a command to the four, who reply immediately in unison and then make for the teenagers. Though there are twice as many of them, and all armed, the four soldiers approach with caution, spreading out and making parentheses of themselves around the couple, like trappers closing on a wounded predator.

Calmly and without a hint of doubt, the commanding officer walks to the woman holding the rifle. He moves with an obvious limp, his left foot less like a foot than a crutch on which the rest of him pivots. He says something to the woman and then lowers her rifle until it faces the ground. He puts his hand on her shoulder and smiles and it is only then that the woman seems to reemerge from her trance. She stops looking at the young couple, who, moments later, are bound with zip ties and taken away by the soldiers. They board the trucks and leave the driveway. For a while after they leave the woman just stands there, rifle by her side, and Amir is unable to tell from the expression on her face whether she's excited or frightened or feels nothing at all. Then she walks back into the house, and not long after, Amir hears the sound of fevered shouting coming from inside, but the whole affair ends as abruptly as it began.

He lies for a long time afterward on the plywood by the half-open window. The edge of the hayloft is lined with old paint cans and brushes hardened to cracking. Whoever tried to paint the interior of the farmhouse

completed only a small patch near the ceiling. Everywhere else, the wood and the stonework shine through. With utter confusion, he tries to make sense of the baffling play he's just witnessed, performed with such intensity by a troupe whose actors were barricaded from one another by walls of language and place and purpose, two opposing scripts come alive on one shared stage, its director absent or impotent or wholly uncaring.

## Before

The *Calypso* shook and sputtered. A sound like asthmatic wheezing came from somewhere belowdecks, the scent of diesel fumes filling the air. The boat moved but in the darkness the geography of movement was indistinguishable from the geography of stillness.

A storm came. Rain fell, vaporous as steam at first, then hard and piercing. The sea, for a moment, took flight, and though in the thrashing of the waves it felt like the vessel, rickety and worn, was on the verge of sinking, it remained afloat and moving, the Eritreans struggling mightily to keep the compass arrow fixed on N.

Amir settled into his small cocoon of space on the top-most deck. He hugged his shins and made himself small between the feet of Umm Ibrahim, the pregnant woman next to whom he'd sat on the ferry ride to the *Calypso*. As soon as the boat collided with the seaborne storm, most of the passengers on the top deck began to panic. But Umm Ibrahim paid no attention to any of this. She simply lowered her head and, by the small light of her

phone screen, commenced memorizing and reciting the words she intended to say on landfall.

*Hello. I am pregnant. I will have baby on April twenty-eight. I need hospital and doctor to have safe baby. Please help.*

With no one left to complain to, some of the passengers instead took their anger out on the two Eritreans who'd been drafted cocaptains. "You're already lost," one man screamed in English. "You don't know what you're doing." To which Teddy, the Eritrean more fluent in English, could only raise his arms in resignation and say, "Do you?"

Soon the storm worsened, the waves grew fiercer and the boat's vicious rocking scared the passengers back to their seats. They held on to the side of the gunwale railing, and in the dark the boat filled with the sound of pleas and prayers. Amir sank into his oversize life vest. Each wave lifted the boat high and dropped it into the preemptive crevice of the next. Feeling a sensation of the ground giving way beneath him, Amir involuntarily held on to Umm Ibrahim's swollen ankles to steady himself. He felt the woman's hands on the shoulders of his life vest, struggling to steady herself as well.

"Just sit down and don't move," said the thin man who earlier had asked one of the smugglers about Amir, an Egyptian who would only give his name as Mohamed.

"The sea is like this—in a minute it'll pass."  
Nobody listened, but as quickly as it started, the storm began to recede. The water calmed and the waves evened out and the rain turned once more to steam. In the dark, Amir heard some of the passengers laugh uncontrolla-

bly, a reflexive response to survival. Others applauded, though Amir could not tell who they were cheering for, and suspected that they themselves did not know. Something communal, a relief-born friendliness, now took hold among the passengers. They began to talk to one another.

A few feet across the deck from him, Amir heard a couple of men arguing. One of them stood, and a moment later Amir's small corner of the boat lit up. When his eyes readjusted, he saw the middle-aged Syrian who'd argued with the smugglers on the ferry. He stood next to a glass lantern hanging off a wooden pole that might have once served as a tiller arm. He placed a flashlight inside the lantern, and the stern of the boat lit up with shards of broken light. It did little good, but at least now Amir could see faint outlines of his neighbors, shades and silhouettes where once there was only breathing dark.

"There," the Syrian said, addressing another man, from whom he'd apparently wrestled away the flashlight. "What kind of person tries to keep light for himself?"

He returned to his seat across from Amir, a clearing in the shape of him that the others had immediately filled when he went to place the flashlight in the lantern, and which he had to elbow his way back into. He was a tired-looking man, dark circles under his eyes and a kind of shapelessness growing out from the sagging flesh of his jawline. Without knowing why, Amir immediately took him for a government bureaucrat, someone who signed papers that allowed other people to do things.

Soon the passengers began to trust that the storm had truly passed. Some took advantage of the calm to sleep,

nodding off where they sat. Others, including the Syrian, struck up a conversation, introducing themselves to the people around them.

Amir did not pay attention to the conversation, until he noticed the Syrian, who introduced himself as Walid Bin Walid, talking about him.

"Look at this," Walid said, pointing at Amir. "He's wearing a vest twice as big as he is. It makes no sense. It's a vest for a man, not a boy."

"It's not too big," Amir yelled back. "You're too big!"

"Leave the boy alone," replied another man, a slim, bald Egyptian who looked to be in his late twenties and who would, during the ensuing conversation, introduce himself to the neighboring passengers as Kamal Roushdy. "Who cares if it's big for him? Maybe it'll save his life if this piece of garbage springs a leak."

"It's about more than that," Walid replied. "These men took our money. They're handing out life vests made for adults to little kids; God knows what else they're doing improperly."

At this, Mohamed started laughing.

"You're on a matchbook in the middle of the ocean and you're talking about doing things properly," he said. "Brother, you left *properly* behind on the dock."

Walid pointed at Mohamed but spoke to the people around him. "That's their man, by the way," he said. "I knew they wouldn't send us out without a spy onboard."

Mohamed nodded. "That's right," he said. "And you better believe they have people on the other side as well, people who can find you even if you make it all the way up to Sweden, America, the moon. Now keep your mouth

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shut so I don't have to let them know you're making trouble, and leave that boy alone."

Walid turned away. "It's not right," he said, talking to himself but staring at Amir.

The boat sailed on. At times the clouds overhead uncoiled and a wash of moonlight gave the whole vessel shape. Hours passed. Amir waited for dawn, for light.

He heard a commotion coming from mid-vessel. The Eritreans had decided to work in shifts. Teddy prepared to descend to a small crawl space at the bottom of the wheelhouse to sleep while his partner steered. But some of the passengers nearby were arguing that both should stay.

"Why do you care?" Teddy said to the passengers. "I thought you said we don't know what we're doing. We'll both collapse if we don't take turns."

"They wouldn't have told you both to do it if the work didn't require two men," one of the passengers protested.

"This work doesn't require two men," Teddy replied. He waved at the throttle, the clouded compass and the splintered wheel. "I'm not sure it even requires one."

He disappeared into the crevice at the foot of the wheelhouse, curling up with his jacket for a blanket.

Watching him, Amir thought the man was descending to the lower deck, the place where Quiet Uncle and most of the passengers were penned. He'd seen them earlier, marching downward, one of the smugglers shutting the door behind them with a padlock. Of all the chaos of the passing storm and the passengers' screams and prayers, it

was the sound of people beneath the boards that frightened him most. It made the boat living, made it organic and coldly voracious, a stomach in mid-digestion. Even now he could hear it beneath him, that half-alive sound. No one else around him seemed to notice; sitting behind him, Umm Ibrahim sipped on a small vial of lemon juice to keep her nausea at bay and continued quietly reciting her foreign mantra.

*Hello. I am pregnant. I will have baby on April twenty-eight. I need hospital and doctor to have safe baby. Please help.*

"Please. Please," said a curly-haired Palestinian named Maher Chandour, who, along with Walid Bin Walid, Kamal Roushdy and Mohamed, made up the nucleus of Amir's small corner of the boat. Of these passengers, Maher was the one who had first caught Amir's attention. He was thin and clean-shaven and dressed in a shirt that looked to be about a decade older than his twenty or so years. Bandages covered the tips of all his fingers.

"What?" Umm Ibrahim replied.

"Please, not Blease. P-uh, not b-uh."

"So you're an English teacher, are you?"

Maher raised his palm. "You're right—I'm sorry." "Leave me alone," Umm Ibrahim said. "I have to learn it. They don't treat you well unless you speak their language."

Mohamed, the smugglers' apprentice, chuckled. "You want to speak their language? Take off that bedsheet you're wearing and throw it in the ocean. Their language isn't just about words."

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"We're not coming from outer space," Umm Ibrahim said. "You're telling me they've never seen a Muslim before?"

"I'm telling you the exact opposite," Mohamed replied. Amir could make no sense of the conversations taking place around him. Nor could he understand why so many people had lined up for this trip. Years earlier, Amir's father and Loud Uncle had taken him out on a small dhow. They sailed in the shadow of the massive military vessels near Tartus, keeping close to the shore and out of sight. There were only the three of them in the boat, the sun shining and the water calm. Amir had caught a fish that day, though now when he thought about it, he couldn't discount the possibility that, when his head was turned, Loud Uncle had hooked the little mackerel at the end of the line through sleight of hand. His father said he should get to know the sea because his people were of it, and although the drought had forced the Utus to abandon their orange groves and leave the coast for the cities inland, they'd always be seaside people.

But other than that one boat trip, the ferry across Aqaba and now this strange voyage, Amir had never spent time on the water. What he did remember of those two previous trips was that they had been nothing like this. On this boat the passengers pressed against one another, curled up into themselves. They sat with their faces down, pale in the light of their cell phone screens. They appeared in transit from themselves, concussed by the collision of the coming and the going, weightless as a tossed projectile at the apex of its arc.

Soon the rocking of the sea and the lateness of the

hour swayed most of the passengers to sleep. Amir sat amid darkness pierced by flashlight and silence pierced by snoring. Just above him, he caught sight of a sagging white sail hanging from one of the thick braided ropes that met at the mast. It hung limply, unmoved by the wind, and seemed to have no purpose at all; whatever propelled this ship, Amir knew, was the thing gurgling and rasping in the lower deck, the thing exhaling fumes. He could see it, almost, through a small crack in the boards beneath him, under slivers of flashlight that illuminated a tight-packed human armada of limbs and eyes, a pair of which caught sight of him and at which he could only stare back briefly before a great sense of indecency took hold and he forced himself to look away.

## After

At the Hotel Xenios the poolside restaurant is crowded but free of its usual cacophony. The tourists sit under beach umbrellas, picking at their food and nursing elaborate tropical drinks. Vänna overhears little snippets of conversation about the wreck on the beach; the incident has ruined the tourists' day, confining them to the grounds of their hotel. She hears a middle-aged couple argue about whether to demand a refund.

After she pays for four cheeseburgers, she crosses the path back to the main road that leads to her home. At the intersection, she finds her sandals where she left them, the thin foam hot against her soles after an hour in the midday sun.

Not far from where the dirt path ends, Vänna sees two military trucks come up the road from the direction of her home. She recognizes the vehicles as those used by the loose assortment of military, police and coast guard officers charged with chasing down those who wash up on the island's shore alive. She stops and watches them pass.

The lead truck slows as it nears her; the passenger-side window rolls down. She recognizes immediately the broad, handsome face of the man who's been chosen to lead the island's efforts at rounding up the illegals, her mother's old friend Colonel Dimitri Kethros.

"What have you got there?" he asks, smiling and pointing to the plastic bag in her hand.

"Just lunch," Vänna replies. "Bought it from Xenios for Mom and Dad."

"Smells good. I don't suppose you bought any extra, by any chance?"

"No," Vänna says. "Just for the three of us." Kethros eyes the bag in her hand and for a moment she thinks he can see into it somehow, that he can tell she's lying and from this lie will deduce exactly what she's up to. He has that look about him, of a man in possession of exactly as much information as he needs.

He is one of the largest men on the island—not fat and only a little taller than most, but well built, solid in a way she associates with military men even though many of the soldiers dispatched to the island are scrawny and barely out of their teens. In the thick straightness of his jawline and the width of his shoulders, the inverted triangle of him, he seems to have been built to excel at work that demands uniform and insignia. But he also has a charming smile, and this, more than any other facet of what he projects to the world, is what Vänna distrusts the most.

Kethros chuckles. "You can't blame a man for trying," he says. He pats the side of the passenger door and then waves her on. "Hurry up, before it gets cold."



She waits for the trucks to drive away. It is only then she notices that the second vehicle is not a jeep, but a kind of wagon, whose covered trunk looks like the sort of thing used to transport soldiers or prisoners. As soon as the vehicles are out of sight, Vänna sprints home.

She arrives to find her father sitting on one of the wicker chairs in the courtyard, and before she can go to the farmhouse, he calls her over. She can tell he's been drinking. He has no tolerance at all, and when drunk, assumes an outward posture entirely at odds with his inward disposition, or perhaps the two are inverted and he is finally, temporarily free to be what he really is. He leans back with his feet up on the table, a small, bitter grin on his face, and she knows at once her parents have been fighting again.

From childhood she has sensed it but only in recent years has she become fully cognizant of it—this weaponized emptiness between them, a void where once there might have existed tenderness, affection, a shared stake in shared happiness. Sometimes when she observes them following one of their fights, Vänna rejects outright that her parents are or ever have been in any kind of love. She thinks of them instead now as voyeurs, indecently intimate strangers.

Vänna walks to the courtyard. Her father taps the seat next to his. He tries to put the cap back on a bottle of Harborshine but stumbles and drops it onto the stone tiles. He smiles and shrugs.

"I brought some burgers from the Xenios," Vänna says. She sets one of the takeout boxes on the table and

then picks up the bottle cap and a red plastic cup and an overturned ashtray off the floor.

"I know what you're thinking," her father says. "I'm not, though. Anyway, I wasn't. If she tells you I was, she's lying."

He is a small man, and in his smallness there is an ingrained element of youth that for years made him look a decade younger than he is. But now, in middle age, it has begun to bestow on him an air of ridiculousness, like the character in a movie Vänna once saw who aged four times faster than other children. His neatly parted hair is now slowly easing into a comb-over, but still looks strangely childlike.

Vänna sets one of the takeout containers on the table in front of him. He smiles and rubs her arm in gratitude but does not touch the food.

"I saw Colonel Kethros and some soldiers driving up the road when I was walking back," Vänna says, trying to sound uninterested. "You didn't see where they were coming from, did you?"

But her father doesn't seem to be listening at all. He stares out at the forest across the road.

"She can't tell cruel from strong," he says. "Never could."

Vänna doesn't reply. She's heard all this before, and knows what's coming next. She empties the ashtray in a nearby trash can and sets it back on the table. She waits.

"I'm so glad it was you who lived," her father says. He pauses for a response from her that never comes. It's always the same story, the story he tells her because

he can't bring himself to simply ask her to side with him against her mother.

"That's right," he continues. "There were two boys before you. They both died inside her."

She knows he won't stop until she plays along. Still, she says nothing.

"She only ever wanted boys," her father says. "She was so disappointed that the one who lived was you."

He watches her, smug with drunkenness, expectant. "I'm not taking sides," she says.

"Who's asking you to take sides?" he replies. "I'm just telling you the truth. The truth doesn't take sides."

Vänna picks up the other takeout container. "I'm going to eat in the farmhouse," she says.

She crosses the courtyard. She sees mud prints in the grass, two-by-two in one direction, many in another, a tangled mess of strangers' tracks. There's a violence to it. She walks faster.

On her way to where she's left the boy in the outbuilding, she hears her parents' bedroom window swing open. She turns.

"Why were you gone so long?" her mother asks.

"The road was closed," Vänna replies. "There was a wreck on the beach and the soldiers blocked the path."

Her mother looks in the direction of the farmhouse. Vänna follows her eyes to find a half-open gym bag on the ground.

"He forgot to take it," Vänna's mother says.

"Who forgot?" Vänna asks.

Her father laughs. "Our brave protector," he says. "Who else?"

Vänna's mother ignores her husband. She stares at the bag a moment, thinking. Finally, she says, "Take it to Nimra, to that zoo she runs in the school gymnasium."

"What do I tell her?" Vänna asks.

"Don't tell her anything, just give it to her. Go, now."

Vänna walks to fetch the bag.

"Wait," her mother says. She disappears back into the bedroom and a moment later returns with a pair of yellow kitchen gloves. She throws them down to the yard, where they land at Vänna's feet.

In the farmhouse she finds the boy sitting up in the hayloft, a towel for a blanket, curled up, fetal. And seeing each other, both express a kind of relief that transcends the border of language between them, a lightening.

"I'm sorry," Vänna says, "They had soldiers everywhere. . . ."

She stops speaking. She walks to the open jug of maple syrup and closes the lid. She climbs the staircase and sits beside him. "Here," she says, sliding the takeout container in front of him. "Eat some real food."

The boy devours the meal. The caution with which he treated her during their first meeting momentarily disappears.

"Slow down—you'll be sick," she says. But he ignores her, and she is happy to watch him eat.

When he is done, she reaches over and gently wipes a smear of ketchup from the corner of his mouth with the tail of the towel he sits on.

"Good?" she asks, giving him a thumb's-up. He responds in kind.

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She feels the afternoon sunlight against her back. She knows they have perhaps another two or three hours before dusk, and her thoughts turn to more pressing things. In the back of the farmhouse there lie in boarded stacks the makings of a twin bed. She considers rummaging around for her grandparents' old toolbox and putting the bed together herself, but quickly she decides against it.

"Come," she says. "I'm going to take you to meet someone."

She stands and picks up the bag her mother told her to deliver, then motions for the boy to follow. She opens the front door and glances outside at the courtyard, where her father sits in his chair with his eyes closed. She turns to the boy and puts her finger against her lips in a motion requesting silence; he nods.

Light as thieves, they move around the courtyard and to the back of the house. As they cross the backyard, Dadge the sheepdog lifts her head in faint recognition, but quickly loses interest. They climb over a dilapidated wooden fence and pass into the remains of the old harbor-berry grove, muddled now with weeds and otherwise barren. With Vänna leading, the two children walk in the direction of a long, tin-roofed building on the other side of the grove—once a high school gymnasium and now a temporary pen for those without country.

## Chapter Ten

### Before

It was Teddy's shift again. Amir watched him struggle in the wheelhouse. He was a short, skinny man, his slightness of frame exaggerated by the ship's oversize wheel, which seemed to turn of its own volition exactly in the opposite direction of wherever Teddy wished to steer. The boat tilted and bobbed and every few times the starboard side dropped down from the apex of a wave, a spray of mist came through the broken window. Still, Teddy held fast, and in the darkness, without any point of reference on which to fix, it was just as likely as not the boat was going where he intended it to go.

Maher looked up from his book. "You want some help?" he asked.

Teddy shrugged. "There's not much to help with." He tapped the cloudy glass-bubbled compass attached to the helm's dash, inside of which a needle sputtered wildly. "Just keep it on N, right?"

"I guess so," Maher said.

It took only a few sentences for the passengers overhearing the conversation to become aware that of those