

Dave Kim

FOX

Jo sent her son out to the school bus that morning but didn't watch him board, distracted by a broken plate and an eggy mess on the floor. An hour later the special ed teacher called—Chris was supposed to hold the state flag in assembly that afternoon and would he be showing up later? There was an awkward exchange, Jo's panicked broken English versus the iceberg calm of the instructor, who assured her that it would all be fine, that he was probably just wandering the halls or playing in the sand under the bleachers. She promised to scour the campus and call back. Then someone rang the bus dispatcher, who radioed the driver, who called Jo directly and said he'd waited the standard three minutes and left without the boy.

It was a little after nine when she dashed out to her car, still in her house slippers. Chris couldn't have wandered far, being a slow walker who had the odd habit of taking off his shoes and clapping the soles together every few minutes. He was a neighborhood celebrity, the kid with Down syndrome who'd halt strangers on the sidewalk with a military salute and chat them up until they sheepishly excused themselves. But none of the neighbors had seen him when she made her rounds, nor was he at any of his favorite hangouts. So Jo paid a visit to the seer.

The seer ran a produce and herbal remedies shop on the west side of town and was present no matter what time of day one went. When she entered he was perched on a crate and peeling a persimmon with his bony fingers.

Dear seer, Jo began in a formal Korean. My youngest son has gone missing.

The old man said nothing and finished skinning the fruit, tossing the orange flaps onto a flattened cardboard box. The store was dimly lit and kept cool to fend off the arid Southern California heat. In front of Jo were glass jars of dried licorice roots, cassia seeds, and bark shavings curled up like strips of old wallpaper. There were no signs for prices; they varied depending on the buyer and the seer always knew the fairest number.

The spirits are taking all my good fruit and leaving me with duds, he said to Jo. Like this last one.

The persimmon was a tad overripe but looked fine otherwise. Its flesh was soft and wet, like the inside of a cheek. She had enjoyed them like this once, though now, at forty-five, she preferred them crunchier and less sweet.

I'll give you three bottles, the man said. The first

contains thorn seeds. The second is full of water, and the third, fire. Use them in this order.

Jo shook her head.

Please, you must help me find my son, she said. He's a special child.

The old man was silent and his gaze seemed to invite her into the mysteries within. His eyes were tiny, clinched in thick, leathery skin, but entire worlds opened up when she looked into them, as if everything that could both protect and harm her son were contained there, and it was up to her to choose appropriately. She didn't know how to proceed.

With three small bottles clinking in the front seat, Jo drove for an hour in concentric circles around the neighborhood. Then she went home and called the police. She was shaking so badly she had to dial twice.

Two officers came to the apartment, a man and woman who, if they hadn't been in uniform or worn such staid expressions, might've made a good-looking couple. They took down Chris's height, weight and clothing descriptions and asked what he liked to do for fun. How severe was his disability? Was he capable of using public transportation? Was he on medication? Could he state his name and address? How responsive was he to oral commands? Did he understand traffic signals?

She showed them photos. She showed them his bedroom, his old guitar and box of toys. He was sixteen but played best with six- to eight-year-olds.

He likes army stuff, she told them. He is little bit troublemaker. He cannot speak well but memory is quite good. No medication.

The policewoman stayed with her. She was a wiry brunette of about thirty who spoke with a slight Spanish accent and wore a nameplate with "S. Fausto #323" stamped on it. Jo wanted to get back in the car and continue searching but this was out of the question. Behind the wheel in her state of mind, Fausto explained, she'd be a danger to herself or others. The best thing to do now was to keep her phone on and remain calm.

Where's Chris's father?

Passed away, Jo said absently.

The cop pointed to the sofa and told her to make herself comfortable. There was tea on the coffee table, cooling under the breeze of an open window. Jo didn't remember making it but surely the officers wouldn't have rummaged through her cupboards and brewed it themselves. When had she done this? She tried to drink some, spilled most of it on the rug, and then called her oldest son Dale, who was a freshman at a college up north and seemed cruelly calm after hearing the news. He asked,

in English and with a spacey tone that was new to her, what the hell he was supposed to do about it four hundred miles away. She could sense that she'd interrupted something. He's probably just exploring, said Dale. He'll come home when he feels like it.

Her friend Caroline Von Maas (née Kim Chae Yeon), who'd worked with her at an old job before marrying one of the executives, drove down from Palos Verdes. She brought a box of clementines and a bottle of plum wine that the cop promptly confiscated. The friends sat and hugged for a few minutes. There was nothing to worry about, Caroline insisted in her countrified Korean. How far could Chris walk, being such a slowpoke? Every cop in the city was on the lookout and Chris often chatted up uniformed patrolmen anyway. He'd be home in an hour, tops.

Jo told her what the seer had said and brought out the bottles. She held them up to the sunlight.

They're from an old folktale, Caroline said. The Fox Sister. My dad always wanted sons so he'd tell me that story just to piss me off.

I don't know it, said Jo.

It's about a young girl whose older brothers find out she's a fox in disguise. I only remember bits and pieces—I think she wipes out the family's livestock and has to eat people's livers to become human.

So violent, these folktales.

I blocked a lot of it out. One of those cautionary tales against women, how deceptive they are and how you're better off with sons. Classic sexist bullshit. They don't even tell this story back home anymore. Leave it to that old seer to—

The story, Jo said. What's the story?

Her friend made a prunny pout with her lips and swiveled them to the left side of her face. Jo knew this gesture, having seen it whenever Caroline lost a game of *godori* or when her husband Robin teased her about her miserable English. She set the bottles in a neat row on the coffee table. Each wore a yellow "Best Price!" sticker, and in the space where a dollar amount should have been written was a Chinese character.

Like I said, continued Caroline, I don't recall much. An old monk gives the brothers three vials to defend themselves. At some point there's a chase and the oldest brother starts throwing the little bottles at his sister, who's, like, starving for livers. Thorns spring out of the first vial and scratch the girl up pretty bad, but she transforms into a fox to break free. The next one lets out a whole river and nearly drowns the fox. It barely makes it across.

Can foxes swim in these folktales? asked Jo. I thought they tricked other animals to get rides across rivers.

You're thinking of The Fox and the Turtle. In this story

it can swim, though it's in horrible shape when it's back on shore. Then the brother throws the last vial. Fire rushes out of it and the fox burns up.

And then?

That's it, I think. Some versions have her turn into a mosquito after the fire, you know, 'cause if a woman's not a bloodthirsty fox, she's a bloodthirsty nuisance. I'd like to meet the bastard who came up with that.

But what does it mean? asked Jo. What do I do with these bottles?

It's just a story, her friend said, peeling a clementine. That old crank is trying to sell you junk.

He didn't ask for money, said Jo.

There were false alarms. An Asian boy wearing a T-shirt just like Chris's was caught shoplifting at the mall. Another who "looked like he had chromosome trouble" was seen feeding sparrows in a supermarket parking lot. Conflicting orders were issued and descriptions revised, all in a maddening code of letters and numbers designed to keep stress-prone citizens like Jo in the dark. She had to leave the room.

At two, they brought in the K-9 unit. The dog was a well-groomed German shepherd that seemed to understand exactly how grave the situation was. It had none of the nervous twitches she saw in other dogs. She wanted to wrap her arms around it and ride on its even keel. More than anyone she'd met that morning, the dog seemed most capable of putting her at ease. It looked straight at her when she knelt in front of it with Chris's favorite jacket and shoes. The dog smelled them briefly, no more than two whiffs per item, and then it was off.

While they waited, Jo thought hard about what might have gotten into her son to make him wander away. She suspected it had to do with this new mood she'd noticed in him, a gruffness toward a generally sweet-toned and over-jovial public. He acted as if he not only understood his uniqueness in the world but now resented it. She watched him at his class's Saturday programs with the Parks and Rec, where he would rail at kids who made innocent mistakes and flatly ignore the ones with more severe disabilities. The local teens over on the basketball courts would let him take a shot or two, but Chris had to watch from the sidelines whenever they played games. She could sense his jealousy in these moments, his grasp of life's injustices, and Jo was secretly grateful that she could write it off as an inkling, that he couldn't verbalize this in a way that would make it clearer to her.

Only a few minutes passed before the K-9 officer's voice came through on the radio. The dog had followed the scent just

two blocks down the street, where the trail ended at a city bus stop. So Chris had gotten on a bus that morning. Just not the one everyone had expected him to take.



More police units were mobilized, bus schedules and maps procured. Half the county had just been added to the search area and there was no masking the urgency in the apartment now. Jo begged the policewoman, Fausto, who was still in the living room, to take her out of the house and join the search if only for a little while, if only as a gesture of effort. Caroline could stay behind and answer the house phone. The three of them argued for a few minutes but the cop eventually agreed to a quick ride down one of the bus routes. She chose the shortest of three possible lines, the 7L, which cut through the center of their coastal suburb and ended at the oceanfront. They got in a squad car and the policewoman drove at a pace that could be called leisurely, discounting circumstances, so that Jo could scan the sidewalks. They passed shopping plazas and a city park, where years ago Chris had pushed a kid into the sand and the young mother had apologized to her, as if it were the other boy's fault.

Jo took out the bottles, which she'd brought with her for good luck. Each was stoppered with a cork the size of a pencil eraser and tiny bubbles were embedded in the glass like little beads. She picked out the one marked with the Chinese character for tree and returned the others to her pocket. The officer looked uneasy.

That's not—what is that?

Not sure, Jo said and, without thinking, removed the cork.

Thorns did not engulf the vehicle or pierce its tires. The stars did not align themselves, visions and choreographies of the occult did not appear. She shook out the contents into her palm: tiny, flat seeds that looked like bits of paper left by a ticket puncher.

Korean medicine, she said to Fausto, pushing the seeds around with her pinky. There was a faint odor of machine oil but she wasn't sure if it was coming from the seeds or the traffic outside. The white specks were disappointingly plain; no revelations or clues seemed imminent. She remembered the fruit back at the seer's market and wondered if these seeds, too, were "duds" left by the spirits. What was she to do with them?

Careful not to spill any, she picked one out and put it on her tongue. Her mouth tingled with a pins-and-needles pain that moved to the back of her throat and then, curiously, became an itching behind her eyes. The car windows, through which the

midday light had been blasting, went dark.

Jo was sitting outside her in-laws' house in the South Jeolla province of Korea. Her central line of sight was fine but cloudy white crescents were blurring her peripherals. Pawing at her eyes did nothing to help this.

A short figure stood nearby with a handcart. It was loaded with sheets of *yut*, a hard rice candy that no one had sold in that neighborhood for years. She wasn't sure if she'd been pitched back to her childhood or to the final weeks of her husband's cancer, a decade ago, when they had left Dale and Chris with a caretaker and flown back to Korea. The courtyard behind her was empty and soft chants sounded from the inner chambers. She wanted a piece of candy to take away the strange taste in her mouth, but the vendor didn't seem friendly and she didn't have any money. My husband is ill, she wanted to say. He wished to die in his home country. Will you help me?

Approaching the cart, she saw that the vendor was really a fox in frayed linens standing on its hind legs. It summoned her with a jerk of its head.

You've come back, it said.

Jo thought of Caroline's folktale and searched her pocket for the bottles.

I was raised in a house just down the road, she said. The man I married grew up here.

Don't you recognize me?

It sounded disappointed. Studying the animal, its tapered ears and sleek, auric fur, Jo tried to recall the few foxes she had seen in her life and failed to make any connections. The animal was leaning awkwardly against the cart. One of its front legs appeared to be broken, drooping away from its body as if a support string had been cut. The fox's gaze was that of a disgraced relative, one who was happy to see Jo all grown up but carried the wistfulness of many lost years. Its smile made her uneasy. She wasn't sure what it wanted but was suddenly struck with a sense of betrayal, of fate conspiring against her. Sunlight flooded the street but the breeze now had the keen edge of fall in it.

You're the one who took my son? she asked.

The fox chuckled.

Welcome home, it said. You won't find your boy here, I'm afraid.

A snake slithered between the spokes of the cartwheel and stopped in the dirt a few feet from Jo. It was about a meter long and colored an unusual tennis-ball green.

You're in great danger, whispered the snake.

I am having a hallucination, thought Jo. I am not of

sound mind.

The fox pounced in one swift motion. It clamped down on the snake's head with its good front leg and the two struggled for a moment, making clumsy patterns in the dirt. Then the fox got the snake's tail in its mouth and the fight was over. It swallowed about half of it before the snake stopped writhing.

Jo steeled herself to fight and looked around for a weapon. There was nothing but small shrubs and dozens of barkless trees, the empty road.

I don't want this, she said.

Please, laughed the fox. What could I do? You created me.

I doubt that.

Just after Chris was born. I've been faithful to you ever since.

I'm going to leave now, whispered Jo.

But when she turned around, the house had vanished.

All that remained was a darkness seeping toward her like a growing ink stain.

Are you hungry? The fox picked up a short chisel with its teeth, swung its head and cracked off a generous piece from the *yut* sheet. She saw a long gash appear on the side of its mouth. Quickly, it swapped the chisel for the flat yellow chip. She hesitated but the animal had already nudged the candy into her palm.

Good? the cop asked.

Jo's eyes tightened against the sunlight. She focused on the squad car's dash, finding the police radio and the AC vents. Fausto was staring at her.

Bitter, she answered.

She wiped her tongue on the back of her wrist and threw the seeds out the window.

水

They continued down the city's main thoroughfare, where rows of tall eucalyptus trees drooped and swayed like wounded giants after battle. Another block, Jo realized, and they would pass the seer's produce market. She could see the red rooftiles of the strip mall, which housed several small businesses like the seer's and a burger stand.

I'm thirsty, she said. Can I stop for drink?

Fausto maneuvered the car into the right lane without signaling. The other vehicles politely rearranged themselves and the cop accelerated hard into the parking lot.

Here, said Jo.

The seer was not there when she went inside. Working

the counter was his son, a sullen young man with a large belly, fat in a smooth, taut way that reminded Jo of a frog's throat sac. He was American-born and thought very little of his father's traditional remedies.

Anyonghaseyo, he said, and she cringed at the accent. It was almost parodic, stretched and mashed flat by a California upbringing.

Your father gave me some herbal medicine, she said in Korean. But I'm not sure how to take it. He didn't give me instructions.

Appa jigum—uh, my father's taking his nap right now. Can you come back later?

Do you know about these?

Jo took the bottles out of her pocket. She handed over the one labeled with the character for water and the man looked as though a terrible burden had been passed on to him.

My son is missing, she began and then regretted it. She didn't want to put extra pressure on the guy. If he could just give her some kind of clue . . .

He studied the vial a moment and then his thumb and forefinger tightened around the cork.

Wait, don't—

But the stopper came out and she heard a loud rushing sound in her ears. A mighty shout came from the storeroom, followed by a string of curses. Something inside her swelled, a painful tightening, and then the cold was upon her.

Jo was in a hospital bed learning about hearts and chromosomes, a sandy-haired obstetrician speaking quietly beside her. This was familiar. She knew what this was.

Her husband was silent, having already heard the news about their second child. Stop talking! she wanted to say to the doctor. Go! Perform! She wanted the whole hospital on the job, her husband overseeing the surgery from some special perch above. She imagined an errant ribbon of blood coming from the tiny leak in her newborn son's heart, its slow and delicate disaster. Chris was just a day old and already they'd have to repair him. Revisiting this scene now, she resolved not to panic like a fool or beg the doctor to explain it to her again and again. She'd only been twenty-eight when she had Chris, thirty-four when her husband died.

Mrs. Pak, please try to listen—

The fox was in the room with her. It slunk past the doctor and her husband, its claws clicking wetly on the linoleum. Glaring at Jo, at the tubes attached to her arms, it paused at the foot of her bed and then leapt onto the blanket.

What do you want? she asked.

The fox's eyes were eerily full, too large for its face. A ring of white spots had formed around one of its irises.

I have no qualms with you, she said.

There's nowhere for me to go, it replied. Why are you pushing me out?

I don't know what you're talking about, she said. You're just a fox.

The doctor stopped talking, his solemn gaze fixed someplace between Jo and her IV drip. Her husband turned and placed a hand on her forehead. His eyes were bloodshot from having spent the night and most of that day researching terms like "atrial ventricular canal defect" and "trisomy 21." The heart problem, he explained, was common among kids like Chris.

Try to relax, he said to her in Korean and motioned for the doctor to leave.

The hospital room grew dim, the light from the halogen lamp quivering as though filtered through a moody pool. The fox opened its mouth to say something but nothing audible came out. She was not afraid.

I'm just an ordinary woman, she told the animal. I'm the wife of a shoe merchant from Korea. I'm learning English, mostly by typing out brochures from temp agency lobbies. I have never committed a crime. I am not cruel to animals. I have another son who's in the advanced reading group at school. I am not good at making friends and so I have no enemies. I believe in the inherent goodness of humankind. I am nearsighted but otherwise healthy. Small children are comfortable around me, though I'm secretly afraid of their judgments. At night I hear music, the same song since my childhood, before I fall asleep. I'm a decent cook and I have never been unfaithful. I wish you no harm.

The fox bared its teeth, but Jo couldn't tell if it was threatening her or smiling.

I'm as much a part of you, it said, as your laughter and your dreams. Loathing me is going to harm us both.

The fox wheezed and small white pustules formed near its eyes and liverish mouth. Streams of water escaped from between its teeth and Jo smelled a sour odor, like turned milk or something worse. She looked away, wishing for clarity, for a push of reason to smooth out this strange spike in her imagination. Her feet felt very cold.

For years after his birth she would keep Chris at home, not out of shame but to shut out the world's apologies, its quiet rejections, the cruelty of rubric and milestone. Elbows out, she had shielded the boy even from those who offered to help, all the while disgusted with her own pretense of protection. What was my problem? she thought now, reliving this old scene in the

hospital. She loved her son most when he interacted with the world—when he paid for a Baby Ruth and remembered to get his change, or offered to pump a stranger’s gas and did it right.

The pustules grew larger and soon the animal was covered with them, its golden coat losing out to continents of swollen skin. Clear, sticky fluid beaded and oozed. It was breathing with raspy difficulty now, as if sand were lodged in its throat, and each gasp brought stronger spasms in its body. She slid down the incline of her bed and pulled on the sheet, but it was wedged tightly between the mattress and the frame.

Help, she said.

The doctor was gone. There was only the white of the walls, the click and nasal hum of the monitors in the corner. The fox raised its head and slid between the metal bars on the side of her bed. Jo’s relief was immediate, dizzying. She searched the room for her husband and found him by the darkened window, standing with his back to her. He didn’t notice when the fox leapt over him and vanished into the glass.

火

They went home. Fausto had walked into the store to find Jo sitting on the floor, shivering with cold, and this had scared the officer back to her senses. It was best to go back to base and stay put.

The time passed slowly once they returned to the apartment. Jo spent most of it in Chris’s room, organizing the piles of flyers and assorted pamphlets from military recruiters, who’d always humored Chris with freebies. Then she moved on to his medical documents, the most recent of which were still tucked away in their envelopes and bound with a rubber band. The sorting calmed her at first but then the lines and numbers began to blur together.

At six, she stuck her head out the bedroom door. Caroline’s husband had rushed over in his tennis togs and the two of them were calling everyone they knew in town. The policewoman’s partner was also in the apartment and something he was saying was making Fausto upset.

I cannot stay home, Jo told her, when the cop came over.

We’re still on this, said Fausto. But I need to give you a heads-up about our procedures.

After nightfall, she said, the police department deprioritized the search and sent the extra units home. Chris’s file would be turned over to the Missing Persons bureau and his name placed on a list of runaways and disappearances.

Jo said nothing. For the first time the cop looked human, wounded, and somehow this made the news easier to

bear.

The recovery rate, Fausto continued quietly, after the first twenty-four hours goes way down. He may not be on the buses anymore. But we've still got some daylight.

The woman slipped her fingers through the coils of her radio cord and made a fist. She waited to let Jo speak and stammered on when there was no response.

We'll do some paperwork together and I'll give you a case number—but it probably won't come to that. We'll find him.

I understand, Jo said. Could you give me just a minute?

The officer started to say something else but all that came out of her mouth was a rush of air. She touched Jo's elbow awkwardly and slipped out to the living room.

Jo moved fast. She slid a set of army men off Chris's dresser and climbed on top of it. The window was already open.

I'm a terrible mother, she thought as she removed the screen.

She hadn't eaten anything since morning and it took some effort to pull herself out the window. She hoisted herself onto the roof, ignoring the pain in her shoulders. Her feet hit the glass on the way up and she wondered if the smack was loud enough to hear from the living room. Lying facedown on the hot gravel, she caught her breath and waited for any sign of alarm downstairs. None came. The city was quieter from the roof, just a low and steady exhalation of traffic and wind. Jo could see the parking lot, her minivan just an easy jump and a flight of stairs away, but parked across from it was an SUV with "POLICE" stamped on the roof. It wouldn't matter even if the squad car were empty, she realized, because Reyes's partner had come out to the sidewalk and was standing by the lot entrance. Surely he would stop her were she to drive out.

It was only then when she felt like crying. Was this the best she could manage? Stuck on an apartment overhang, staring at a sea of tan and green roofs, her son drifting beyond reach?

She slipped a hand into her pocket. The third bottle was warm to the touch and the character for fire had smeared a little.

Don't do it, a voice said.

The fox was sitting on one of the roof's air vents, looking smaller than she remembered.

If I leave the bottle closed, she said, will you leave me alone?

Get rid of that, it answered, in the voice of a child who had cried itself hoarse. I'll show you where your son is.

Liar.

Come.

She approached the animal with the bottle in her hand, holding it in front of her like a dagger. She was not afraid.

Up close, she saw that the fox was in bad shape. Most of its fur had fallen out and nasty sores on its chest were seeping blood and pus. Both of its eyes were swollen, the left one completely shut. The feeling that came to Jo then was not pity but the weary recognition of vulnerability and incurable sickness. She wanted to stop all this, spare herself the sight of another expiration on her watch.

Follow me, it said and bounded off the vent. As soon as it hit the roof, it leapt again and disappeared over the edge. Jo ran after it and jumped without hesitation. She found that the air was quite solid under her feet and she charged forward over the city, pushing off building faces or church steeples for momentum. The fox led her past office parks and warehouses, schools and gridlocked highways. Anyone looking up from the street would have seen just two blurs, a tiny brown teardrop and another one, bigger and slightly lopsided, close behind it.

She followed the fox to the city pier, a giant commercial complex that stretched a quarter-mile over the Pacific. They swooped toward it, the fox barely visible against the low sun. It landed with a sharp thwack on top of a crab stand, skittering over the rafters until it stopped a foot from the roof's edge. Jo touched down shortly afterwards. She bent over, desperate for air.

Why here? she gasped.

When she looked up the fox was gone. She searched the roof but there was no sign of the animal except for a dark wet spot where it had landed. Below her on the boardwalk were some men with fishing poles, patronizing the only spot on the pier humble enough for their tastes. They sat in plastic lawn chairs, listening to the radio and sipping beer from styrofoam cups. Jo recognized one, a pudgy Chinese man who sold oysters guaranteed to contain pearls. She had bought one for Chris once and the boy had been more interested in the iridescent oyster shell than the tiny pearl inside.

Fox! she shouted. Show me where!

The ocean wind blew cold and her whole body ached, with bones in her lower back grinding against one another with every move. She nearly lost her balance from fatigue. The fox did not appear.

She didn't mean to open the bottle but her thumb, which had been pressing against the side of the cork, seemed to have decided this on its own. The glass warmed. A high whistling sound set her teeth on edge and she felt a terror that something irreversible had been done. Solid white flames spat up between two of the rafters. They spread to the edge of the roof and were contained there like holiday trim, burning steadily, unaffected by the breeze. Jo couldn't move. The bottle slipped out of her

fingers.

It wasn't long before one of the fishermen caught sight of the flames and the group began scrambling and shouting at the employees inside. A boy heaved a bucket and several dazed mackerel flew out, but the bit of moisture that made it to the fire did nothing. No one seemed to notice Jo, who had backed away from the edge and was facing the sea. The water was bright orange with tiny pink scars on the surface, and surfers idled a few dozen yards from shore. Far off in the waves was a spot of light the same color as the fire burning behind her. It was hard to tell how far away this spot was, but she knew it was much farther than any surfer or swimmer could go.

I'll make you a deal, someone whispered.

She spun around.

Where are you?

I'm hiding inside you, said the fox. It's the only way I'll survive this. But I can't stay in here for long.

How are you doing this?

You're exhausted. Your defenses are down.

Jo could hear it breathing then, each gasp and sigh staggered between her own. She shook her head furiously as if to shake the animal loose.

Save your strength, it said. You'll figure it out soon enough and I'll have to leave.

I wish you'd go now.

That last bottle did me in. I need another body to stay alive.

You promised to take me to my son.

I need you to help me first.

What do you want? she asked. I have nothing left.

Your son's body. Let me have it.

The wind was blowing hard and shouts rang out from below. Someone had pulled out a hose from inside the crab stand, but the water stream wasn't going anywhere near the flames no matter how they pointed it.

You must be crazy, she said.

No harm will come to the boy. I lived inside you for sixteen years and didn't cause any trouble. I'll bring him back safe and sound.

You're a liar and a killer, she flashed, but she had to crouch down to stave off a sudden dizziness.

How will you find him otherwise? it asked.

The police are close, she shouted. We're so close.

She heard a wheezy laugh that tickled the inside of her ears. The sun was fading fast into the horizon and there was an ominous wash of purple above it.

He'll be just the way he was, the fox promised.

But she knew this was a lie. She knew he'd return full of hate and loneliness, bound by a force that he could neither conform to nor stand up against. It would open a wound as it had in her, a slow but savage breaking of will that she could never allow on her boy.

Is there no one else? she asked.

Your other son is much too stubborn. And I can already feel you pushing me out, though you don't know it. I can't stay in here much longer.

Jo exhaled hard out of her nose, sending watery mucus down her chin. She stared straight ahead at the ocean. That small spot of light was still there and she wondered if it was the fox's body, burning up among the waves.

Come down off this roof, said the fox. Take a taxi home or call your friend Caroline. When you get home, your son will be waiting and I'll be living inside him.

What if I refuse?

The fox sighed and the sound tickled the inside of her ear.

Then you can leap into these flames. They'll burn the fear out of you and your worry will be gone. You'll never hear from me again but as for Chris—you'll have to take your chances with the police.

Will they find him?

I really have no idea, said the fox. But the recovery rate, after the first twenty-four hours—

Yes, I know.

It's down to something around 9 percent. And keeps dropping from there.

Those are my only two choices?

The fox didn't answer. She was quiet a while, considering her options. Resentment flared up in her but disappeared just as quickly. Her appendages felt drained and wobbly, as though a crutch had been kicked away. She understood then that the fox had indeed been a part of her, a habit as reliable as pain, kept over the years because it was, in its darkness and culpability, something for Jo to hate. Now it was leaving her for good.

Down on the pier, the commotion had died down, and everyone was staring at the fire, which hadn't spread any further. The faces in the crowd resembled the fox's as it had been in the beginning, poised and expectant, glowing with curiosity. She imagined Chris among the bystanders, weaving away with his back to the flames, and suddenly felt a swell of love for her son. She could picture him walking the length of the pier in his presidential strut, passing all the shops that would normally draw him to their windows. He crossed onto the street, where commuter traffic was building and an empty city bus waited at

the curb. Wait! she wanted to shout, a great pain opening in her chest. The world is new and dangerous! But this vision of Chris didn't hesitate as he boarded, nor did he turn back to see who might be watching. He saluted the driver and marched straight to the last seat on the left, his usual spot. The bus pulled away with a bearish roar and she stayed with Chris as long as she could—his pudgy nose to the glass, his almond-shaped eyes on the world outside—until the phantom vehicle was just another set of red lights in a long stream.

Jo wiped her face clean. Her body was tense, gripped by the last of the fox's strength, which had cemented her as a dream will sometimes tighten around the dreamer's body to prevent waking. Clouds had invaded the sky, their edges ragged and wine-tinged, securing their places for the long night. The crowd was quiet. She wondered if there would be another stop before home, if time would rebel against her, and, as she turned to face the fire, if it would hurt.