

THE CENTIPEDE

My first mistake of the night is eating at Mrs. Fat's, a dim establishment at the edge of Ben's campus and the jungle. It's a masterpiece of minimal decor: no walls, a dark roof softened by moss, a few picnic tables, a fridge and wok. Ben and I sit on a bench, watching dun-colored dogs hump each other outside as Mrs. Fat stir-fries our garlic pork. With each whack of her spatula, Mrs. Fat's blue hairnet wags. Ben orders his meat with a fried egg on top. I eat mine unadorned. We chew. And chew. A bitch staggers past us under the weight of an admirer.

My second mistake is trying to obliterate this culinary memory with whiskey in the two-story house where Ben lives with another teacher. A small, tidy Scot with a goofy grin, Gerald has adjusted to life in Krating. He no longer eats at Mrs. Fat's. He has three years' experience conversing in Thai to our two months, and he can read the Thai newspaper. He tells us that today's headlines have proclaimed O.J. Simpson's acquittal, and we laugh for a while about how ridiculous America is, turning one man's guilt into a pageant.

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"It only took them four hours to come to a verdict," says Gerald.

Ben makes a crack about the clients in line for Johnny Cochran's mustache groomer. I didn't know Johnny Cochran had a mustache.

"I'm so glad we're missing it," I say.

Ben and I both grew up in Vermont. We got good grades. We have few job qualifications between us beyond the ability to slice white bread and spread things on it. Upon graduating college, we applied to this ESL teaching program in Southeast Asia because we wanted to experience something that was the opposite of everything we knew. He's quick-witted and sarcastic. I don't laugh at his jokes. He's Unitarian, I'm Catholic; half-Jewish, half-German; brown-haired, blonde; far-sighted, near-sighted; geology, poetry. We live fifteen miles apart at different schools: me in an all-girls dorm, and Ben with Gerald.

While he and Gerald trade more O.J. jokes, I gaze around their turquoise kitchen, envying their stove, their teak walls, the house's size and distance from the road. I live in two concrete cubes with a lidless toilet. It takes me a blazing hot thirty-minute walk and a windy ride in a pickup truck taxi to get here, the journey always punctuated by gawking boys and clouds of gnats. I make it twice a week. In the United States, Ben and I would prob-

ably live together, but our program dictates that couples be married in order to cohabit, out of respect for Thai etiquette. The rule secretly pleases me. Ben is my first love. I sleep in his bed and make toast in his wok, but I'm a free woman, too. I refuse to play house. I won't be known to everyone as Ben's wife.

"So was Nicole dead when they found her?" I ask.

Ben snorts. "Don't you remember the reports?"

I shrug. All I recall is the car chase, O.J. on the freeway in an SUV.

"He stabbed her so many times, her head almost severed from her body," says Ben.

Gerald touches my glass. "More?"

I nod. He pours me another sluce of whiskey, dousing it with bubbly water. Blue-eyed Gerald is our entire English-speaking society. Each weekend we gather in this kitchen, and he tells us the local gossip with Scottish wit. Brilliant! Grotty! He's an expert on fish in a province that doesn't border the sea.

186 I take a swig. "We should go somewhere." On the road today I noticed a new structure with a stage, some tables, and a series of cubicles rising behind them. I ask if it's a bar.

"It's the new brothel," says Gerald. "Only they haven't finished the rooms yet, so it's take-out."

Ben chuckles. "Then what are the tables for?" I ask.

Gerald cheerfully explains that the brothel is also a karaoke joint. You can just watch the singer if you want, but you also have the option to take her home. His shoulders twitch. "We could go there, I suppose."

"Yeah, right," says Ben. "The take-out brothel."

We laugh again, and there's a lull. I reach over the table for more ice. Across the dark window springs a caricature of whiteness: blonde hair, long jaw, light eyes. I realize the men are waiting for me to say something. What should I say? That I don't support the country's sex industry? Of course I don't, but I'm also secretly afraid that the women there would be prettier than me, that exposure to their charms would diminish mine in Ben's eyes. I was almost a virgin when I met him, and even though he's only one more person experienced than me, somehow this difference fills me with inadequacy.

"If she wasn't here, Mr. Basit would be taking you." Gerald turns to Ben, and tells about his first week in this hospitable country, a parade of delicious dinners that I recognize from my own welcome. Only instead of getting

politely dropped off afterward, Gerald was invited out to a rustic bar with another male teacher. He prolongs his description of the end of the night, when a dozen young country girls lined up on wooden bleachers, and his new Thai friend offered him his pick. At some point, Gerald uses the word “livestock.”

“What did you do?” A disbelieving grin splits Ben’s face.

“Told him I wasn’t up for it.” Gerald rolls his eyes. “Oh God, it was awful.”

“But what happened to the girls?” I say, trying to picture them stepping down from the bleachers, like kids leaving a pep rally. But Ben interrupts me with a comment about Mr. Basit, who is attempting to grow shrimp in freshwater by dumping salt and prawns into a pond he dug down the road. Together Ben and Gerald roll the conversation away from me, kneading it between them, first statistics, then fish, and then somehow they return to O.J. The blood evidence was proof enough, says Ben: O.J.’s blood at Nicole’s house, her blood in his car.

I want to go. I want to go everywhere they do. Through the darkened screen door, I see Gerald’s motorcycle, a Kawasaki with black paint and pre-pubescent curves.

“Let’s just check it out,” I say.

Ben examines me, his smile fading. He is losing weight on Mrs. Fat’s fare, his limbs thinning to a teenage boy’s.

I drop my eyes. “We can always leave.”

“If *you* want to,” Ben says. Gerald is already rising, pressing out a belch through compressed lips.

We gulp the whiskey until the ice clacks against our teeth. Gerald straddles the motorcycle and kicks it to life. Over his shoulder I see the roof of the campus pig farm, the taxi stop where old wives often wait beside me, their bodies plumped by age and children. The air is cool enough for goose bumps. It smells like wet petals. I mount behind Gerald, Ben behind me. Now we are a six-legged creature. I can feel the spine of one man, the belly of the other.

By the time we reach the brothel, the wind has pulled my hair into a tangled yarn, and my eyes have adjusted to the night. Lights ring the karaoke stage, casting the tables and the building’s low wall in a purple murk, so that someone driving along the road would see the singer in bright detail, but her audience as silhouettes. All but two tables are empty. Around one, a half-dozen young guys tank up on Johnny Walker, laughing and yelling. At another, two

men slump. Their faces are so fat they look like weary babies. They seemed to be staring past the stage, to the unfinished rooms, but at my arrival they glance at me. I lean into Ben's bare, cool arm.

A woman croons into the mic. It heartens me that her shirt resembles a pup tent and she is not especially pretty. We sit down at a table in the back, far away from the other groups, and call for more whiskey. The waiter doesn't serve me until I nod my permission. When a different waiter comes, I have to nod again. The alcohol makes my veins tingle.

The woman finishes her ballad. Another singer pulls the mic down, and it emits the squeaks of a clown making animal balloons.

"Not very crowded here," I say. The men nod, their eyes on the stage. Ben regards both women with a studied neutrality, slouching back in his chair. I wonder if he is comparing who would cost more.

The dark-skinned madam passes us along the low wall. She has the face of a large aquatic bird, her profile sharp and ancient. She dives and plucks a small shape, shoving it into a jar.

188 I cross my legs and tip toward Gerald. I can smell the nautical cologne seeping from beneath his oxford shirt. "What's she doing?" I say.

He says she is collecting beetles. He calls to her and points out a big one nearby. The woman's teeth flash, and she grabs the insect. Brown bodies fill her jar, crawling all over each other. I drink some more.

Gerald and the woman exchange a few words in Thai too complex for me to understand. The beetles roil as she gestures behind her.

"What did she say?" Ben says.

Gerald laughs and reaches to his hip for his wallet, hands her some bills. "Wait till you see this."

The madam vanishes into the shadows of the cubicles.

"I thought the rooms weren't finished yet." My voice rises.

Gerald doesn't respond.

"What are you buying?" My mouth is hanging in the space just beyond Gerald's right ear.

"Just wait," he says.

Ben touches my hand. His fingers are chilly and wet from his glass. "You OK?" he says.

I sway back toward him. In another era we might be married by now. He's a kind, intelligent guy with nice, wavy hair. Our families are friends.

"She fries up those beetles for snacks." Gerald speaks from far away.

But I can't stop looking at Ben in the dim, strobing light. I see the lump under his T-shirt where he broke his collarbone and it fused together crooked. When we lie in bed together, I take care not to brush that bumpy ridge. I worry that the touch hurts him. He says it doesn't, but it feels like it should.

The madam emerges from the dark with jerky steps, her hands cupping a larger jar than the one that held the beetles. Gerald cheers. She sets the cylinder on our table. I'm expecting a mass of crawling things, so it takes me a moment to see the single, segmented creature inside. Its body is the length of my forearm, the color of a bloodstain, with hundreds of feet. Its head ends in long antennae, two pincers. I can't find any eyes on it.

I hear my loud yelp. The Johnny Walker boys turn to stare at us.

"It wouldn't kill you. You'd get a nasty swelling, but it wouldn't kill you," Gerald says. The centipede raises its glossy, eyeless head. "She caught it behind the building."

"What are you going to do with it?" Ben says.

Gerald shrugs and grins. "Keep it," he says. "Look at that bastard. I have to keep it." The antennae probe the clear wall. I've heard of these giant centipedes creeping into people's beds and stinging them. Whenever I pull back the sheets, I look for the dark curl on the cotton.

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"Oh God," I say.

Ben shoves his chair back so the front legs tilt off the ground. "We can't bring that home," he protests.

"It's not going to get out," says Gerald.

Ben lets his chair slam down, and they begin to argue drunkenly, pleurably, about the fate of the insect. The two fat men wend their way to the exit, their armpits haloed with sweat. I watch keenly for a prostitute to follow them. I want to see her face. No one appears. In the parking lot, two engines roar to life. Was no girl good enough here to lie beneath their heavy bellies? Or did I miss some secret passage to the back? Would I even know what I was seeing if I saw that old black logic—that flesh can be bought and sold—unfolding with damp cash and zippers and hands?

"What are we going to feed it?" says Ben.

Gerald laughs. "Should I buy her beetles too?"

In the jar, the insect tries to climb but it can't get any traction. The feet just keep slipping and slipping.

In a month, Ben's parents will come to visit Krating. They will almost buy me a sapphire ring from a local jeweler, and then decide, murmuring in my presence, that this is too much. Earrings, then? No, instead, they will pay for a tailor to make me a black silk cocktail dress. When I try on the unfinished garment, the tailor will draw the neckline in chalk and all of them will watch—my boyfriend, his mother and father—as the man's hand descends from my shoulder to my breast bone, to show the heart shape he will cut away.

I reach for the glass, cup it, and rise, afraid every moment that somehow the centipede will escape. The jar feels lighter than it should: the weight of a knife instead of a book, the weight of a foot in the hand. The insect slides against the smooth wall.

"Let's go," I say. "I'll carry it."

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The men must see something different in my face because they stand too, Ben waving for the check. The busboy wipes our spills. Gerald throws down more bills, promising, "I'll let it free in a couple days." On the way to the parking lot, Ben loops his arm over my shoulder and squeezes, but I can't feel it. I feel my drunkenness—the way my toes don't connect with the soles of my shoes, the way my hair sticks to my face. I feel the fragile container I carry.

And then my memory of the night ends. Most of the time, I think we rode home slowly, first Gerald, then me with the jar, then Ben, past the scrawny rubber trees and the heavy shrouds of durian, under moonlight flecking the asphalt silver. When the engine died, I climbed off the motorcycle, handed over the centipede, and went to bed with my boyfriend. I woke up the next morning in a rosy, leafy Thailand; I woke up the next year in Vermont; I went on to graduate school, fell in love, married, and eventually had my own son.

But sometimes I am still riding in the dark with that glass between my legs, the red inches of poison inside. I am certain that something will break. If not the jar, then my own skin. If not my skin, then the invisible shield that I hold around myself, that keeps me from the lust and hurt of the world.

The night wind whirls past my ears, pungent with fruit blossom and jungle.