



“Yellowpease”

I’d never encountered a ghost before, except for the summer when I was seven years old. I’d awoken in the attic of my grandparents’ house, the August air heavy with snow-like dust that cascaded lazily down through the yellow-white sunlight angling in from a window that looked out over the back lawn, down past the chain-link fence that surrounded the blue water and concrete deck of the swimming pool, down past the compost heap filled with rotting, buzzing things that my grandfather would stoke on summer days, sweat-reddened in his straw-brimmed hat, ending at the cola-brown creek that burbled along the border separating the thick grass of the property from the dark hills that rose up then dove down again into the unseen waters of the Allegheny River.

My gym socks, browned on the bottoms, scuffed lightly along the floorboards as I walked to leave the room, trying not to wake my mother. The only sound that broke the morning stillness was the plastic click of numbers turning on an alarm clock that rested on the bedside table. I waited at the top of the stairs, turning to look back again to see that no one was yet up, and rested my weight on the wooden bannister. I didn’t want to wake Gypsy, my grandparent’s clumber spaniel, who slept at the foot of their bed and who’d chuffle and growl at anything that disturbed the Saturday morning silence. I placed my feet carefully on the thick carpet of each stair, descending toward the front door, the boards of the house dry and creaking beneath me.

As I reached the foot of the stairway, I turned the corner into the living room, where portrait and sepia photos of family, both living and gone, hung in Sears frames around a large wall mirror. The room was, like everything else in the house, quiet and washed in a light that streamed through the bay windows looking out across the narrow highway and up toward Bubba's house, where I'd go later in the day to crack at her dish of rainbow candy, fused together in a wavy mass, while she cooked chicken soup and watched *All My Children*. Spider ferns potted in white plastic were suspended from ceiling-hooked macramé hangers; my grandmother's tabloids and Readers' Digests, glossy-covered, lay atop the glass base of an end table; the tomato and cheese smell of pizza burgers cooked the night before still hung faint in the morning air. I crept past the kitchen, my feet now cool against the linoleum, and turned to face the door, towering white and framed with green-striped wallpaper, which led to the basement where I would go down to watch Saturday morning cartoons.

I listened again. I could hear Gypsy snoring from inside my grandparents' bedroom. I reached up and turned the brass knob of the basement door and pulled it outward, looking over the steep stairway that plunged down into shadows and darkness. And then, from below and around the corner of the stairs, from somewhere beyond the bar that my grandfather had built and stocked with beer and ginger ale, I heard a woman's voice, one that I recognized, softly speak my name. It came, faintly muffled from the murkiness, as if passing through glass, like someone calling to me from a far-off forest. I pulled back, bone still, my toes still jutting over the edge of the top stair where I'd stopped, my hands stretching up and bracing my body, suspended and backlit in the doorframe. My voice, high and breaking, spoke back into the darkness. *Who's there?*

* * * * *

Aunt Eleanor stood across from us, light glinting down from the red frames of her eyeglasses, sending ripples along the rock-candy glass of the table-top, already glittering from the tan streams that poured from the Pennsylvania sun, refracted through a glass of iced tea. Uncle Pete stood far away at the property's edge talking with a neighbor, his arms folded, the grass reaching what seemed to be halfway to his knees. The churchlike echo of "Delta Dawn" played from a transistor radio wedged atop the sill of the kitchen window next to the yard. I sat on my mother's lap, her moist arms surrounding me, my pink hands spread out on the newsprint in front of us. *Watch this* she said from somewhere behind and above me, her warm breath clouding over and tickling the back of my neck *go ahead, Joshua, read* and I did, my voice still the singsong of a three-year-old, and all else from my vision disappeared other than the black words and glossy gray of the page in front of me. I looked up and saw Eleanor smiling, her eyes like my mother's, their voices far away as my attention turned to the chirrup of a black cricket caught by a gray kitten splayed out on the lawn.

And then, four years later, after sledding in the late afternoon through the cornfields behind our house, the night air inking to dark blue while all the neighborhood kids still glided between ice-hardened stumps left by corn stalks cut two inches above the frozen earth, I slid near the barbed wire and iced-over puddles at the bottom of the field, clomping back through the snow where black mounds of dirt rose

like islands in the whiteness. And when I went back to the house, kicking off my fur-lined rubber boots on the back porch and shedding my wettened socks and snowsuit on the dining room floor, everything was warm again and I ran to the TV room and dug my toes down deep into the pomegranate carpet with my back to the fireplace, feeling the heat send tingling prickles into the skin of my legs.

My mother brought me a cup of hot chocolate simmered on the stove too long, a filmy skin at the top of the mug clinging to my lips as I drank. She sat on the edge of the sofa and asked how it had been outside. I spoke, my mind already thinking of tomorrow. It was Sunday, and school might be snowed in and then we could build an ice fort in the front yard and camp out all day. Then my mind shifted back and she was telling me about Aunt Eleanor, how when my mother was younger Eleanor found her a job at the soda fountain in Pittsburgh and that was the place where she eventually met my father, then she asked if I remembered the picnic at Eleanor and Pete's house last summer, when we walked to the park after and listened to bands play and watched the Fourth of July fireworks. My mother sipped her own hot chocolate from one of the ceramic mugs she'd made in the basement kiln, and I could see that she was crying. I felt afraid but couldn't think of any reason I should be. The heat began to feel painful and I pressed at the tight skin of my legs as I moved them away from the fire. I sat cross-legged, feeling the roughness of the carpet against my hot skin. Your Aunt Eleanor had cancer, she died last week my mother said, and before I could do anything, she put her mug down and hugged me, crying harder.

* * * * *

Who's there, I said into the darkness, my lips quivering, wetness pressing up behind my eyes. The darkness said nothing in response. But I already knew the voice and knew the Who that was there couldn't be. *Who's there?* Again from atop the tall stairs. And then, in reply, a single word. My name. Maybe it is only from a vantage point far away now, after years have blurred and distorted and cracked the edges of memory, that I think that my first instinct was to rush downward into the darkness and into whatever arms were there to receive me. To feel her presence again, to tell her I loved her. But then, just as in later years when faced with the choice to either let myself fall into the unknown or to shuffle back from the ledge of uncertainty, I did something that would later cause me a lingering feeling of self-disgust. I turned and ran away.

It was years later that I would be there for the death of my own mother. As I sat next to her, the orange Utah sunset glimmering like streaks of water on the fake wood wall paneling, her eyes shut and me not knowing whether she was asleep or not, I looked out the window, beyond and through the yellow grass and slated desert hills until I found something else – the pasture where cows stood silent like everything in the world at that moment – remembering the cornfields of Pennsylvania outside the kitchen window when I was six, sitting at the breakfast table while she simmered something warm on the stove. But that was a world away now and it wisped into nothing like the June morning fog, and everything in the room again felt flat and hollow. The television, fuzzed over with light dust, sat perched in mute blackness. The

fruit in the wooden bowl had been here too long. I thought of what my grandmother would do with the brown-stalked flowers and sagging balloons after the room had been emptied.

Where would you most like to be right now? I wanted to ask my mother, perhaps in a soft voice that would hang in the stillness of the late afternoon. Soon the November sun would be gone, already moving through gradations of light and color that led from the softness of yellow and pink into the underwater tones of blue, purple, and black. Everything in the room would soon pass out of visibility into night. The box of Kleenex would remain, perfectly centered on the nightstand, the satiny white plastic bag emptied of used tissue when I left tonight, wiping away any evidence that I or we were here.

* * * * *

And so years passed, and I slowly moved westward like the sweeping wreck of history, leaving behind the traces of childhood memory, eventually arriving at the place where it would all wash over me again. My life during the previous six months in Thailand, after I'd moved for the job in pharmaceuticals, had been a blur of alien experiences. During my first morning jog in the city as I circumnavigated the lake park, I watched as monitor lizards slithered from drainage pipes, tongues whipping the air lazily in front of them. Midway through my run, all the other bodies around me stopped, frozen in motion, and I came to a slow stop too, turning to look at their blank faces. From loudspeakers came a low crackle, then the sounds of the national anthem. My first weekend in the city, walking at night through the bustling narrow side-streets of Sukhumvit, propelled along by an ocean of foot traffic, I weaved past the puffs of steam that rose from the food stands and felt something rubbery below my foot. Half-jumping, I watched as a fattenend street rat ran from underneath my shoe and scampered away along the broken pavement.

In the months that followed, I would go out sometimes early in the morning to Soi 11 to remind myself of what I'd left behind in America. At that hour, walking along the narrow sidewalks, there were trash bags everywhere, stacked like sandbags on a beachhead. All along the street, an electronic pinging echoed from garbage trucks, punctuated by the sounds of breaking glass as workers heaved each bag into the hopper. Shopkeepers poured soapy water at storefronts and scrubbed away the detritus of the night. Sporadically, a motorcycle taxi would buzz by too close on the vacant street. Conversations dribbled out of the one or two bar patios still open at five a.m., slurs of speech in international accents coming from ruddy-faced *farangs* who clutched at the bases of tall pilsner glasses and talked at one another.

And then, after the few minutes it would take me to walk the length of the soi, after I'd remembered enough, I'd cross the main boulevard and walk south past Chuvit Garden, turning onto a side-street to walk over the wood-planked bridge and into the park, black branches of the trees above me spiderwebbing as I looked up into the still-darkness. Now, only a few blocks away from the main road, I was distant enough that, turning back to the streets where I'd just walked, I could sometimes see a glow from the streetlights rising like mist under the iron sky, and in the half hour before the other morning walkers appeared, I would feel alive again.

It was on one of these mornings, returning from my pre-dawn wandering, when I first saw it. I was to be at the sales office by nine a.m., which gave me enough time to shower, to have coffee, to half-listen to the international news, to check my mail and begin sorting messages in descending order from 'top priority' to 'ignore.' I arrived at the 31st floor of my apartment building just before seven a.m., the morning foot traffic already jostling past me on the sidewalks below, the street dogs just beginning to saunter, heads low, to sniff around the breakfast stands and scavenge for thrown aside meat. I walked slowly past the windows overlooking the park where I'd just been, the shadow of my reflection walking beside me, no echo in the hallway from my feet as I shuffled silently along.

There was a click and whoosh of the front door as I entered, the space still cool from the air conditioning I'd had on the night before, chilling the room like a mausoleum, and after switching on the lights, I turned to face the refrigerator door.

It was at an office Christmas party six months earlier that Ana from the Philippines had given me my secret Santa gift, small and wrapped carelessly, a tangle of Scotch Tape and cheap paper creased asymmetrically. I opened it to find a tube of alphabet letters in bright primary colors, the outlines of each rising in plastic ridges as if they could be used as miniature cookie cutters. Refrigerator magnets. Doubles of each letter of the alphabet, with extra vowels added. Perhaps it had been re-gifted from a family member, a simple stocking stuffer, a rushed gesture Ana had made with little hope or care to mollify the recipient for 500 baht or less. In the seasons since, I would occasionally scramble the letters on the refrigerator door, forming them into tiny single messages in the mornings before leaving, the beginnings of ongoing conversations I would have with me alone, questions or pronouncements that would linger in solitude in the apartment until I came home to see them again. *Shine boldly. Why wonder. Eat mango. Fight wild.* The message I'd come home to last night, sweating and drained of energy from the job and the July heat, was *roam softly*, and it had still been there in the pre-dawn darkness when I'd grabbed my bag to go outside. Now, as I returned to the whiteness of morning and the silence of my empty rooms, I looked to find a different message. *Whos there.*

I froze in the static silence of the moment, the faraway city outside abuzz. I turned it over in my head. Had I changed the message before I'd gone out? No. I'd rushed to put on jogging clothes, I'd had a cup of coffee, I'd walked back to take my phone and loose change for water. Then it occurred to me that someone from the cleaning staff must be playing a joke. I stood adrift in silence, staring at the letters, then reached forward to muddle them quickly back into meaninglessness.

After work that day, I stopped by the supermarket halfway down my street, buying bandages for the medicine cabinet and vegetables and spices to boil down into stock. It was not yet dark as I reached the lobby of my apartment building. Long emerald leaves, jutting out from above a golden Buddha perched atop a white concrete platform next to the entrance, rose and fell on the first cooling winds of summer. I went to the bank of elevators and waited for the ping, entering amid the brass and mirrored panels, and ascended to my floor. I opened the door to the apartment and entered, only semi-conscious of the sun descending on the horizon outside my windows. Remembering the morning, I turned back to look at the refrigerator door.

The plastic letters, jaunted in odd directions as if a child had hurriedly jumbled them together, formed a single word. *Yellowpease*.

* * * * *

I stayed awake most of the night, having kept the television and lights of my apartment on. At work the next morning, I sat distracted for hours. Alone at my desk, the hum of the office quickly faded into the background. I stared at the laptop screen in front of me and typed, searching for something that would make sense of the word. *Yellowpease*. I found nothing. Close mismatches, mechanically-generated lists of every variation as the heading to ghost-accounted email addresses, photos of yellowed peas. The longer I searched, the longer I found no discernible logic or clue, and the deeper sank the feeling, knotted up in a ball that pressed between my lungs and spine, of panic mixed with curiosity. It became a sickening nag that followed me, like an ear infection, only welling away into formless dread as the days laced together into a series of weeks and the petty responsibilities of daily life acted on me once again as a slow morphine drip.

The late rains of early September brought no respite from the glowering heat of the city, and I began to go out less and less. The exotic pull of everything around me dulled into routine, and I became locked in a circuit of repetition, circling through the deadened rituals of life, driven forward as if by insect-like reflex. My phone calls home to family, at one time occurring every Sunday after I'd first arrived, were placed with less and less frequency. One evening, I arrived home late in a *tuktuk*, dazed from the endless spreadsheets that wallpapered my days, and stood at the bank of windows in my apartment, looking westward over the city. There was lightning over the Bangkok skyline, the reflection of my body from the window staring back at me mute as I stared past myself looking at the shadows outside flash into life, the high-rise buildings bleached like bones, the far-below trees of Benjakiti Park like toy props on a railway set. There was a click above me then a whispered hum of air coming through the ventilation panels, the gauzy voices of a cable news show reporting on the war, and the *thrum thrum* of blood thrushing through my skull. I hit the mute button on the television remote and turned, half asleep from the monotony of the day, and slouched toward the already steaming shower I'd turned on ten minutes earlier.

The water poured off my back, cascading down like the summer rains that sometimes came during my runs through the city streets, when I heard something outside the bathroom door. I stopped singing softly to myself. Was it the sound of the bell at the front door? Maybe they'd sent Tun up from the front desk to drop off papers from the office. But no, that wouldn't be it. I'd told him to leave things until tomorrow morning, that the insurance claim could wait. I listened more closely, but there was now only the sound of water drops on the tile floor.

Then I heard it again. A jangling, like keys, or like marbles clinking slowly in a turning glass. I leaned forward and looked out through the glaze of the thick shower curtain, my vision interrupted by jelly-colored fish and seaweed imprinted on the plastic, my eyes focused on the closed door. *There's someone in here*, I thought, and I noticed that I hadn't taken a breath in during the ten seconds since I'd last heard the sound. I let the air leak out steadily from my chest and reached back, feeling for the shower knob, finally touching against the cool hollow of the tiled walls, then pushed

the handle in slowly. The sound of the last water dribbling through the showerhead above me finished, followed by a liquid gulp gurgling through the drain below, and then nothing but the soft sound of light buzzing inside the bathroom.

It must have been the change dish getting knocked over by the wind outside. I'd left the sliding glass door of the balcony open. But I hadn't, had I? My thoughts tumbled backward, playing through all the actions I'd taken since I came back in from work, the feel of a panicked rabbit lurching around in my chest as I reached up to pull the curtain back, the metal rings chinging against the bar of the shower rod. My hand jumped out to grab a towel hanging on the rack, and I clotted the water off my hair then stood silent again.

Everything was still for a second, and then I heard it as I stood there, the remaining drops of water shedding from my body and plunking dumbly on the shower floor. It was the sound of footsteps, each one pressing down carefully on the carpet in the bedroom. They seemed to come closer, and the only thing I could do was hold my breath again. I stared at the quarter-inch space below the door, seeing the light on the cream fabric of the bedroom carpet. It was the sound of somebody creeping toward the door, and then I saw a dark shadow blocking off the light in the bedroom, waiting outside. Three seconds passed and I bolted out of the shower, stretching my hand out for the door, desperate to push the button of the lock in, my feet thudding wetly on the tile of the bathroom floor. I heard the jingling again and saw the roundness of the metal doorknob begin to turn, almost imperceptibly, the golden sheen from the bathroom lights glistening off the polished metal.

I fell forward, my shoulder catching the top of the green marble of the sink, and collapsed two full feet before reaching the door. I scrambled up quickly, my vision unresolved. I sensed the door opening slightly during the delay, softly pushed in as if by a puff of wind, but as I rose to my knees and fell forward again, my thumb jamming into the button of the lock, the door, I saw, hadn't moved at all, had remained shut for what seemed to be the vast canyon of time that it took for me to rise again. I turned, my back flat against the slickness of the door, ready to wedge my feet against the cabinet should something try to get in. The jabbing ache in my shoulder dizzied me and I tried to slow my whispering breath to listen, to hear what had come for me outside.

I'm not certain how long I sat there before I fell asleep, the pain in my shoulder now deepening like a toothache, every inconsequential tick and barely perceptible crackle of the walls overamplified. At various times I thought perhaps I heard a muffled speaking, voices from behind the door, but invariably deduced it to be the neighbors in the hallway, the television next door, the internal echo of blood pulsing through the capillaries in my ears. At some point in the night, before I sank into sleep, I realized that the nagging itch on my cheeks that I hadn't moved to scratch was from tears, and I became puzzled as to why I would be crying.

When I woke, I stood to face the mirror fully. There had been nothing in my dreams in the night but blackness. I saw that I was bruised, the flesh below my shoulder swollen purple where I'd hit myself the night before, and I realized it would yellow, then darken, in the days to come. There was a nasty pain that had settled behind my eyes, circling up and behind me to the top and back of my skull. I looked

oldened under the jaundiced light shining down from above the mirror. As I stood, examining this body that would one day mortify into ooze and be eaten by insects, I heard nothing outside. After four seconds spent building my resolve, I yanked the door open quickly, only to see the harsher light of late morning filling the apartment. I walked rapidly from room to room, opening doors and cupboards, looking below the bed, feeling behind curtains. I saw, from behind the partition separating the kitchen from the apartment entryway, the chain, still hanging secure in the lock of the front door. I turned to look back through the room, only then seeing against the cool ivory background of the refrigerator door, like a mocking punchline, the word again. *Yellowpease.*

It took me no longer than forty minutes to pack everything. One of the security guards from reception agreed to wait at the front door while I finished checking to make sure there was nothing left behind. I moved like a scared animal, yet methodical, thinking nothing from moment to moment other than how to get out as efficiently as possible. The contract and the rent paid for the coming three months, the young woman at the reception desk told me, couldn't be returned, that I should stay, that the property would need to contact me again should there be any damage. I handed the guard 300 baht before I left. *Khap khun krab.* My later life in Thailand – and I would remain another seven years – was, in the whole of retrospect, numbingly unremarkable.

I have thought sometimes since of the ones who've died before me, the ones I once stood beside, watching as they heaved breath in and sweated and spoke and filled a place, and exist no more. Lois Hawkins. Michelle O'Brien. Charly Fernandez. Ian Sands. I feel regret, rooted deep down, like the cancer that took my mother, something that will remain in me until I become rot too. Regret at never knowing if it was one of them who tried to speak with me from behind the curtain. I feel a need to think of what they saw in their last seconds, to see what was there, if there was peace, or doubt, or surprise, or love, or disappointment. I feel shame in knowing that I won't likely have the chance again to find out, to wait out the skin-shuddering panic long enough to stay and ask. *Who's there?*

I think of death sometimes, thinking of my own. And when I sense it, sometimes just a glimpse out of focus on the far periphery of sight, waiting quietly in the shadows, I still feel great fear.