The truth: An immigrant is always lonely,
and an immigrant son will inherit that loneliness.

Ira Sukrungruang

Abridged Immigrant Narrative

Immigrant on the Run

He was quick. Years of running away from mad dogs in Ayutthaya. Years of playing ping-pong with swift-footed monks. Years in the Thai army.

Being small helped. A quarter of the size of the Polish and Irish he worked with, a sliver of their girth. This, however, he would not admit to because he talked big, chest puffed out like a preening rooster.

Roosters are hard to catch, he used to tell his son. When he was young, he chased them along the dusty road, zigzagging and leaping, stumbling and hugging his arms around air and feathers. Finally, he figured out the best way to catch something so erratic was to stay hidden until the last moment.

So when the INS chased the illegals through the steel factory in Chicago, he made himself smaller and hid in a locker until the big Polish and Irish men were caught. Standing and waiting in a locker was no different from outsmarting a rooster. Eventually, he would know when to jump out.

Immigrant Love

His mole attracted her. Some time in 1972.

Since her arrival in America, she rarely had the attention of men, except for the doctors she worked with, who complained of her broken English. She spent her time with her best friend, confiding hopes and dreams, homesickness and fears. What she did not tell her friend was that she yearned for a handsome man to take her out of the crumbling nurses' dorm and into a house where she could raise children. Her younger sister in Thailand was already had three kids. She sent photos

and letters written on thin blue airmail stationery. At the end of each letter, her sister asked about prospects.

Enter this man with his mole. She began to feel wanted and needed and desired. And perhaps she had forgotten where she was, forgotten her fears of this country while talking to the man, who was generous with compliments. She did not know he had been married once before. She did not know about the daughter he left in Thailand. She did not know he was in the country illegally. Those details did not matter because he said she had beautiful lips. He said he could read fortunes.

They sat by the fireplace at a party, plates of food on their knees. As she picked at grains of rice, he took out a notebook from his back pocket and drew lines that resembled a tic-tac-toe grid. He started asking her questions: What day were you born? The time? What animal are you in the Chinese Zodiac? After she answered his questions, he smiled. According to this, he said, we will be happy together for a long time.

Immigrant Joy

Immigrants do not experience joy. They are surprised by and suspicious of it. What is this feeling, they wonder, bubbling in their chests? Why does it feel, briefly, comfortable, like home? Why is today not as long as any other day?

Never do they allow themselves to feel, to laugh, to smile, to indulge in the sensation. Never do they let their guard down. They think joy comes with false pretenses because, to an immigrant, joy is short-lived; joy is closely followed by its opposite.

Immigrant Marriage

Their wedding was not in the familiar heat of their home country. There were no sisters or brothers or uncles or aunts or cousins. They did not walk side by side around a jeweled temple three times. Their parents did not meet to discuss the compatibility of their union. They did not kneel together in front of monks, heads bent low and praying,

while a delicate white string laced through their hands and looped into the palms of a golden statue of Buddha looming above them. They did not partake in the traditional water ceremony where both sides of the family would sprinkle water over the married couple's hands, wishing them luck and a quick baby.

Their wedding took place instead at the Cook County Courthouse. There was a judge. There were a few friends. It was a quick wedding because the line for matrimony was long that day. Behind them was a Hispanic couple. And behind them was an African couple. And behind them a Vietnamese couple and a white couple who did not speak English.

Afterwards, they had a small party at a Chinatown restaurant. A band played a version of Nat King Cole's "Stardust" and though she wanted to dance, he did not. So, she glided by alone, back and forth, pretending to have someone holding her, while he sipped a soda and laughed.

Immigrant Dreams

He took her to open houses in the suburb. Large improbable homes they could never afford. These were houses doctors or lawyers bought. These were houses for immigrants who came to America with money already. Real estate agents tried to push a sale. Imagine, the agents would say, this bedroom as yours. They did imagine themselves occupying this room that was bigger than their apartment in Irving Park. Imagine, the agents would say, your future kids running around the yard. They did imagine future kids running around the yard. They saw a garden, too, with big-fisted dahlias and roses and bitter melons and cucumbers growing along the fence.

He would tell her his dreams of getting rich: the Thai restaurant he wanted to open, the cable company in Thailand he left to a friend to watch over; the fortune telling business, which was getting more clients. He would tell her about how he would be made head supervisor at the tile factory and his salary would triple. He would tell her

that soon—real soon—they would move out of the apartment into a house of their dreams. America would make this possible. If he were still in Thailand, he would be fixing someone's car. If he were still in Thailand, he would be washing someone else's dishes. If he were still in Thailand, he would be drowning.

She did not tell him her dreams. She did not want to interrupt his excitement. She did not want to say these houses scared her because it meant they were moving farther away from her home across the ocean. She did not want to tell him that at night she would wake up and watch him sleep and think he is a wonderful man and she is undeserving of his love. She did not tell him that she listened to the Lake Michigan waves and imagined it to be the ocean. She did not tell him that when she dreamed it was always about her father and her brothers and her sisters, and they were calling her back. She did not tell him how glad she was to have found a man like him to dream the appropriate dreams for her.

She clung hard to his hand as they went from room to room, imagining, from house to house, hoping.

Immigrant Son

He was born in 1976 after 24 hours of labor and cried for days. The hospital had octagonal windows, and she remembered as she pushed him out, how the rising sun cast a shaft of light on the wall beside her, and it was the light she concentrated on, the light that assuaged her labor pains. Afterwards, the doctor put him in an incubator because he was yellow.

For three days, his mother could not touch him. She watched the rise and fall of his sunken chest. She envied the nurses who came in and out of the room and moved his small arms, listened to his small heart, cleaned his small body. They told her he was getting stronger. They told her she would be able to hold him soon. They told her they never saw a baby born with such thick hair.

His father was in Thailand to check on the cable company that

went bankrupt. He called every hour. He asked the same questions.

How is he doing?

Better.

What does he look like?

Small.

What looks like me the most?

His hair.

Over the phone, he laughed loud and proud, and it did not matter that he lost money over a defunct company because now he had a son to carry on his name.

When the nurses asked for a name, she thought of her father's. Chua. She thought about how that name would connect her son to the person never far from her heart. She thought of the smoking pipe in his mouth. She thought of his patience. She thought of how it was her father's urging that made her come to America.

In the end, a new life needed a new name. A new name in this new country. She quickly flipped through a book. "Something American," she decided. "Something easy." There is nothing easier than a name with only three letters.

Immigrant Pride

This is my son, he kept saying to anyone who would listen.

Look at him, he said.

Isn't he handsome? he said.

He will be famous, he said.

He will break hearts, he said.

See how black his hair is? he said.

See his birthmark shaped like Thailand? he said.

See how tight he grabs your finger? he said.

He likes to pull my hair, he said.

He makes wonderful noises, he said.

He watches everything, he said.

He watches my every move, he said.

I can't believe he is mine, he kept saying to anyone who would listen.

Immigrant Protection

She held him tight to her. She read that the Hmong kept their infants with them all day, attached to their chests. They never were separated. They slept with them. Ate with them. Bathed with them. This was the reason why Hmong children stuck close to home.

She did not allow anyone to hold him in fear that they would drop him. She held him so tight at times, his young skin bruised.

When her husband was away at work, she spoke to her son.

You love your mama. You love your mama. You love your mama.

Immigrant Dreams II

They moved into a house they never thought they could afford. In a suburb. Two floors. White brick. Black roof. They asked a Buddhist monk at the temple in Chicago to come and bless the home. He wore large thick glasses, and because of them, his eyes were magnified like an insect.

This scared the boy. He cried in his father's arms.

The monk went into every room and sprinkled holy water. He traced a holy symbol with wet white powder on all the doors. He said this house would protect the family from all harm; nothing bad could enter. He said he sensed only good here. He said the boy should sleep in the bedroom that faced east. He said that when the boy slept make sure he didn't face the ceiling. Only bad dreams came to those who slept looking up.

At night, the mother watched her son sleep, watched him toss and turn. He was a restless sleeper, one who could end up sideways in bed. Once, she found him so tangled in his blankets it nearly choked him. This night was no different. When he moved to the flat of his back, his mouth wide open, face toward the ceiling, she gently pushed him onto his side.

There were nights she did not sleep at all, her worry of bad dreams keeping her up. She asked Buddha daily to send only good thoughts when he slept. She asked him for his protection. She asked him why she could not stop worrying, why she felt all of this good fortune would soon disappear.

Immigrant Lessons

When the boy turned five, his father bought him a bike. A real bike. Nothing with training wheels. When the father was younger, nearly the same age as his son, his mother threw him into the middle of the river. She told him this was how he was going to learn to swim. If he did not, he would be washed away and drowned. She watched him struggle. She watched him slap at the water. She watched the river take him further away. He said the river made her smaller and smaller. That was the reason he survived. He needed to get to her. He needed to show her how capable he was. And so he swam, clumsily, back to shore. He said his body hurt. He said he coughed out water.

Teaching his son how to ride a bike would be no different. He did not steady the bike. He did not run alongside it. He simply watched the boy get on and fall. Get on and fall. The boy's knees were bloodied. The boy's face was wet.

I don't want to ride anymore, the boy said.

Get on, the father said.

It hurts.

Get on.

The boy got back on and fell. But the time between falls were getting longer now. The boy was learning to pedal. The boy was learning to fall without pain. The boy was no longer crying. Instead, his face was full of determination.

Finally, the boy coasted with ease. It was as if his earlier clumsiness evaporated.

Look, said the boy. I'm riding.

When the father made it to shore those many years ago, after he

had coughed out the river's water, he looked up for his mother, but she had gone home without word or praise.

I'm very proud, said the father. You ride well.

Immigrant Borders

The immigrant comes in search of a larger world only to find a smaller one. Yes, the land is expansive. Yes, it stretches across deserts and mountains and prairies. But the immigrant only feels safe, feels free, in the space of home. There are invisible borders here. Around the house to the front of the driveway. Inside this space, the immigrant can do what he or she pleases. The immigrant can cook stinky food. The immigrant can pray in any language, to anyone. The immigrant can say aloud, "America is a peculiar place." The immigrant can raise a son any way he or she wishes.

Once, on a hot summer day, the son rode his bike up and down the driveway. The father was at work at the tile factory. The mother sewed inside, watching him from the front window. He did endless loops. He loved the sensation of wind whizzing in his ears. His lobes were long. His mother told him they were like Buddha's, and when he went fast, they fluttered. He knew the border. He knew he could not ride past the driveway and into the street. He had heard this lecture countless times. He was at the age, however, of testing boundaries. He wanted to know how fast he could go. He wanted to know how fast he could make his earlobes flutter.

So he pedaled. Hard. His muscle pulsed. Hard. He breathed. Hard. The end of the driveway came and went and he was on the blacktop of the street, his ears fluttering like a speed bag. Wind whooshed.

His exhilaration was short lived.

A car blared on its horn. Swerved. Missed. Sped away. Shouted "Fuck" out the open window.

The mother stormed out of the house. She yanked him by one earlobe. She threw him down on the grass. She hit his legs, his arms, his back, any unprotected part of him. It did not matter that the neighbors

were out. It did not matter that other children saw this small Thai woman, this small immigrant woman, hitting her son repeatedly. She was blind to their gazes.

How many times? she said. How many times do I tell you?

The boy cried. Grass blades poked his face. He promised not to do it again, but knew this to be a lie. He would do it again. He would pedal even faster next time. He liked the feeling of speed; he liked the sound; he liked the danger. He marveled at the word "fuck."

The borders expanded.

The mother knew this, which was why she hit harder, which was why she kept saying to him, Listen to your mother, and don't do that again, and I can't lose you. It was why she picked him up and held him hard to her chest, held him so hard he said he could not breathe.

Immigrant Loyalty

Question: What is the best country in the world?
Answer: Thailand.
Question: Who is the greatest man in the world?
Answer: Daddy.
Question: And?
Answer: The King.
Question: Who else?
Answer: Buddha.
Question: What language should you speak all the time?
Answer: Thai.
Question: What are you?
Answer: I am Thai.

Immigrant Dreams III

In the summer, he mowed the lawn. In the fall, he raked the leaves. In the winter, he shoveled the snow.

In the summer, she took care of their son. In the fall, she took care of their son. In the winter, she took care of their son.

Both were content. Both had fulfilled a shared dream.

When one dream is achieved, what do we do? Do we stop dreaming?

An Immigrant's Dream is not an American one. An American Dream revolves around one notion: Success. An Immigrant's Dream revolves around one notion: Survival.

Now the two of them began to dream for their son. The father wanted a professional golfer. The mother wanted a doctor. The father wanted to continue living in the states. The mother wanted her son to marry someone Thai and eventually return to his ancestral home.

The boy. He dreamed of being a boy.

Immigrant Fear

The boy stood next to his mother at the bank. He could barely see over the counter. He eyed the candy dish. He was six and wanted nothing to do with this; somewhere in his young brain, he knew this would be his role for the rest of his life.

The bank teller asked, Can I help you?

The boy stared up at his mother and then at the bank teller. He said, My mother would like to deposit some money into her account.

The bank teller looked down at the boy, smiled, and then at the woman beside him. She asked the woman, What is your account number?

The mother spoke to the boy and the boy translated. He handed the bank teller a check.

The bank teller said, This check won't clear right away.

The mother told the boy to ask the woman why.

The amount is large, said the bank teller. It will take a couple of days.

The mother frowned. She spoke to the boy again.

The boy rolled his eyes. The mother nudged him. The boy sighed. The mother cleared her throat. The boy looked at the bank teller, as if to say he was sorry for all of this. He then said, My mother would

like to know the exact date the check will clear. She would also like to have your name and number, so she can contact you if the check does not get into the account. She would also like to add that last month's statement came late in the mail, and would like to make sure that would not happen again.

After everything was settled, the boy asked the bank teller for a green lollipop, his favorite.

The boy found himself talking to accountants and waitresses and sales clerks. He inquired about bra sizes and ordered whenever they went to an American restaurant.

When the boy got older, he asked the mother why she could not talk for herself. He knew she could speak English. Speak it relatively well.

She was older, gray creeping into her thinning hair. She said American people were like that one monster villain the boy was so afraid of.

Freddy Krueger?

The mother nodded. American people were like Freddy Krueger. They stole her voice.

Immigrant Fear II

The man never let negative thinking enter his brain. He did not want to admit that he was sixty and none of his plans were coming to fruition and he had been working at the same factory for years, the same factory that scarred his hands, and he was not a rich gas station owner and he did not have a restaurant. He did not want to admit that the woman he loved, still loved, did not love him as much as she loved their son. Not even close. He did not remember the last kind thing she said to him. He did not remember that last time they were intimate. He did not want to admit that on some days he did not want to come home, but rather, he wanted to drive all night through the lighted city. He did not want to admit that women at the temple still found him attractive, even though that mole had hair on it. He did not want to admit that he found them attractive too. He did not want to admit the guilt he sometimes thought about feeling, about how he left his

other family in Thailand, about how he did not treat his son well on the golf course, about how he sometimes pushed a little too hard for his own gain, about how he talked big but it was always just talk.

To admit all of this was to admit his unhappiness. He was not unhappy. He loved America. He repeated this.

I love America. I love America. I love America.

Immigrant Fear III

When the boy turned thirteen, he began making and receiving phone calls. To and from white girls. The mother sometimes picked up the phone. She would say in bad English, Who is calling?

The girls on the other end of the line would tell her their names.

It's Jean. It's Claudia. It's Brenna. It's Heidi. It's Jenny. It's April. It's Sara. It's Dalphine. It's Vicky.

She would sigh and hand the phone over to her son, and he would talk for an hour or so before hanging up.

Once, the mother quietly picked up the phone to eavesdrop on her son's conversations with these white girls. She anticipated gossip about school. She anticipated innocent chatter.

She heard: Will you be my butt doctor?

She heard her son: I have advance degrees in being a butt doctor.

She heard: My butt is in need of doctoring.

She heard her son: Let's make an appointment to fix your butt.

The mother hung up. Panic stabbed at her chest; it felt like a hundred sharp syringes into the heart.

Immigrant Regret

Throughout the course of an immigrant's life, regret is never far behind. The immigrant has feelings of regret daily, hourly, by the minute or second. Buddha teaches that regret and guilt are the worst forms of suffering because they cannot be easily erased. They follow. They linger.

The man regretted stealing his friend's student visa all those years

ago. The woman regretted leaving her family behind. Coming to America, for an immigrant, is a form of regret.

For most of their lives together, they tried to look beyond their regret and guilt. What was there to regret, they wondered, when we live in a beautiful home, in a good neighborhood, with two cars, and a son who can do no wrong? Why feel guilty, they wondered, when there is so much to celebrate?

Like their son winning golf tournaments. Like their son doing reasonably well in school. Like their son receiving the American Legion Award on graduation day. He stood on stage, in blue robes, with a plaque cradled in his arms. He was asked to make a speech. The parents waited for him to say how much he loved them. They waited for him to say that they had made many sacrifices for the betterment of his life.

Instead, he said: It's good to be an American.

He walked off the stage to roars. The parents clapped, too; they did not know what else to do.

The Immigrant Son . . .

. . . is no longer a boy. His parents have moved back to Thailand. They are divorced. He talks to his mother once a week. He talks to his father occasionally. The son goes to temple once a month, for the food, not for Buddha. He says prayers to himself, all those prayers that his parents made him remember and recite every night.

Sometimes a friend will ask about his family. Where are they living now?

In Thailand, he says.

Do you have family here in the states?

No.

Is it lonely?

The immigrant son shrugs. Says, Not really.

The truth: An immigrant is always lonely, and an immigrant son will inherit that loneliness. He will recognize the loneliness at odd

moments. Driving to work, and he will remember how his father drove to the tile factory every day, and how he must have stared beyond the road in front of him, a road perhaps that would have led to a life where all his dreams came true. Looking out the window of his Florida home and the immigrant son will remember his mother sitting by their front window in the Chicago suburb, filling her days by sewing, her hands working on outfit after outfit, day by day, the sun rising and falling.

He knows that his immigrant parents came with expectations. He knows they had expectations for him. He wonders, at times, whether he has let them down. He wonders whether this loneliness will ever go away and suddenly he will truly know what it means to be of one country but to live in another. The immigrant son understands that this tug and pull will be there his entire life. The immigrant son understands that he is trying to live two lives at once: the one his parents sought for him, and the one he sought for himself. The immigrant son understands that when his wife talks about home it is easy for her to identify, and when he thinks about home he thinks of not a place but of immigrants.

The immigrant son understands. ■