

OUR CECILIA

CeCe was an icon. They called her a generation-defining megastar, a triple-threat artist who could dance, sing, and act. But CeCe was ours before she was anyone else's. Before the sold-out stadiums, the box office hits, the multi-million dollar makeup line, the parade of celebrity boyfriends. Before her rise and fall from public grace. Before she was CeCe, she was Cecilia. And Cecilia was ours.

She came to us in October, when the heat of our island was so bad every classroom was ripe with the stank of prepubescent armpits and slippered feet after P.E. I remember the day she arrived because it was the day Ms. Roxie, the lunch lady who always snuck us extra Hot Pockets, fainted from a heatstroke in the middle of lunch duty.

We stood in the lunch line a few students behind Cecilia, quietly debating whether we should invite the new girl to sit with us. *She seems nice. She shared one of her Jelly Rolls with*

me during homeroom, Kim said. *And she's got good fashion*, Monica added. Our designation of good fashion was mostly informed by Cecilia's ability to pull off white shorts and gold hoop earrings without looking like a twelve-year-old hoochie. Then came the sudden sound of metal clattering against linoleum and the thud of something heavy falling. Amid the din of students and teachers jostling and shrieking and shouting directives, we wound up shoulder to shoulder with Cecilia, all of us craning our necks to get a look at Ms. Roxie sprawled out on the floor behind her kitchen station, her apron spattered with pieces of overcooked broccoli and carrots, a stunned look on her weathered face. The cafeteria staff did their best to cordon off the area from the press of excited students, but once the ambulance came wailing into the parking lot, all bets were off. Leilani seized Cecilia's hand and pulled her along with us in the fight to get the best view of the EMTs rolling Ms. Roxie away on a gurney.

Back in the lunch line, the excitement over, we told Cecilia she could sit with us for the rest of lunch. And she did. Just like that, she was one of us.

We heard rumors that Cecilia's older brother had gotten kicked out of the state's prestigious private school for drinking on campus. Her parents, furious and spiteful and refusing to pay the school another dime, pulled Cecilia, too. They enrolled her in our public middle school, with its peeling coats of paint, dirt crusted floors, and fuggy bathrooms. We heard rumors that Cecilia was the reason our entire campus got brand new air conditioner units in every classroom the week after Ms. Roxie's heatstroke. At recess, even though we hissed at her to shut up, Kim asked Cecilia if it was true that her parents were rich. As in annual-trips-to-Disneyland, Kahala-beachfront-property rich. Cecilia frowned. *I don't know. We don't really talk about stuff*

like that. She spent the rest of recess quiet, peeling the pink polish off her nails. When the bell rang, she walked off without saying goodbye. Leilani threw her pencil case at Kim. *It's rude to ask people about money, dumbface. You better hope she still wants to hang out with us.*

But she did. She was ours still, at least for a little while. She came to birthday parties, signed our yearbooks, told us secrets, invited us to her family's beach house for a sleepover during spring break. When Cecilia started dating Troy Tomita, we pretended everything was fine, even though Monica had been crushing on Troy since sixth grade. When Cecilia told us she let him put his tongue in her mouth and slide a hand up her skirt behind the cafeteria, we forgave her. We still couldn't believe she had chosen us.

We can still picture her at thirteen. Kim remembers the miniature black backpack she carried everywhere. Monica remembers her smell. *Like green apple jolly ranchers.* Leilani remembers the exact shape of her mouth and the perfect, high arches of her feet. I remember the look on her face when she caught Steven Pae staring at her during a pop quiz, his hand jerking behind the zipper of his jeans. *Pervert!* Cecilia had hissed, loud enough for Mr. Vega to hear and threaten to send her outside if she kept distracting the class. After the test, on his way to the bathroom, Steven brushed his fingers over Cecilia's arm. She didn't make a sound, her lips a tight line, but she jerked away from his touch and gave the back of his head a fierce stink eye. I watched the exchange in stunned silence from my seat a few feet away. *What a perve,* I whispered across the space between our desks. Cecilia nodded and rolled her eyes. *Seriously.* She never brought it up again, never mentioned it to the rest of our group. I followed suit. I carried it silently, a secret between Cecilia and me.

By the time we got to high school, she had outgrown us. High school introduced Cecilia to friends whose parents could afford tickets to concerts at the Blaisdell Arena, friends who spent more time at Sephora and Bath & Body Works than Borders. And by high school it had become abundantly clear that Cecilia was a particular kind of beauty. Her loveliness hadn't suddenly burst into full bloom. She had always been pretty, the genes gifted her from her Chinese-Hawaiian-Filipino mother mixing beautifully with those from her English father. But while we dealt with acne and braces and the predictable onslaught of teenage awkwardness, Cecilia was taking voice lessons to sing the jingle for Aloha Airlines' latest ad campaign. She was headhunted by local modeling agencies during weekend trips to the mall. Our parents waved the Sunday paper in front of our faces, Cecilia's smile printed across the ad section, and pointed at the television when her commercial aired, said, *Isn't that the girl who came to your birthday party? What ever happened to you and her? Is she still your friend?*

No, she was not.

We told ourselves it didn't matter, that she never really mixed well with us anyway. We had more important priorities than makeup routines and boyfriends. On our crueller days, we told ourselves we were too smart for her, all of us on the honors track and planning for college. By high school we were already dreaming our way off the island. Monica had her shortlist of universities picked out before freshman year was even over. Leilani took up volunteering at Queen's maternity ward on weekends, already on track for nursing school. I was dreaming of escaping to Korea as an English teacher, teaching myself hangul on the weekends and spending all my Christmas money on imported K-pop magazines. Kim, with her acting aspirations, took

up a job at the sushi spot as soon as she turned fifteen, vowing to save up enough to move to Los Angeles after graduation.

The restaurant became our after school hangout, conveniently just a few stops away from campus on the city bus, which we all rode on a daily basis, as accustomed to the brown lizards scurrying along the rock wall of the bus stop and the sound of the bus wheezing around the corner as we were to the ceilings of our own bedrooms, the sound of rain coming down from the valley. At the sushi spot, Kim snuck us tamago and spam rolls from the kitchen while we did homework and griped about our parents and the fact that there wasn't anything interesting to do on our tiny island. We made vindictive plans to fly away and never come back, though we knew we always would, even back then.

When we arrived at our junior year, we were band geeks and extracurricular junkies. We stayed after school for hours rehearsing for the marching band and planning highway cleanups with the Kiwanis Club. Cecilia was singing the state anthem before the homecoming game, sitting with the seniors during lunch hour, walking through the hallways in perfectly applied makeup and a new outfit every week. She pretended we didn't exist and we pretended we didn't care. We exchanged no words if we passed in the hallway. Eye contact was avoided at all costs. Our middle school friendship was an embarrassing fact of our past. And so when we spotted her waiting in the empty parking lot after school one day, we surprised ourselves by saying hello, by asking her what she was still doing at school. *Waiting for my brother. He's my ride.* Leilani suggested she ride the bus with us. *You still live behind the university, right? There's a stop nearby on our route.* She surprised us when she said yes. We guessed Cecilia had never had to

ride the city bus in her life. We saw her arrive at school each morning, riding shotgun in her brother's shiny black Audi.

The whole walk to the bus stop, I silently prayed for a witness, for a senior to pass by and wonder who those girls were walking with Cecilia, so they could stop us in the hallway tomorrow and ask me, *Hey, are you friends with Cecilia?*

At the bus stop, we chatted about nothing, the biology quiz tomorrow, whether or not the cafeteria's breaded chicken patty was worse than the pork adobo. Cecilia smiled and laughed at all the right moments. We inhaled her presence until we were high and giddy. We weren't ready for the bus to arrive, brakes whistling to a stop in front of us, the high of the moment slipping away.

I can spot you, Leilani said to Cecilia, unsnapping her wallet and pulling out a bill.

How much is a ticket? Cecilia asked.

A dollar and twenty-five cents, Monica said, the only one of us who didn't have a bus pass and always paid cash.

Ladies, I don't got all day. The bus driver peered down at us over the top of his shades.

I've got enough change, Cecilia said, stepping onto the bus before any of us, not a word to Leilani, who still had the dollar bill pinched in her hand.

We boarded the bus in a rapidly sobering mood. And whatever giddiness remaining in the pits of our stomachs evaporated as we looked for open seats and saw none save the one beside the old haole man wearing black mesh jogging shorts. A sudden cold flooded our insides.

It had been years since we'd seen him. Since we'd encountered him in middle school. His sunglasses and beaky nose had been the first things we noticed as we climbed onto our seats, the

knots of varicose veins on his legs the second thing, the shiny pink bulb of flesh between his thighs the third thing. We looked away and tried our hardest not to look back. At thirteen, we'd never seen genitalia on a real life man before. But what else could such a fleshy thing be, nestled between his legs. We were embarrassed for him. We thought he had dementia, or maybe forgot his bibidees and didn't realize he was exposed. But he returned a week later, boarding the bus a few stops after us. We recognized the beaky nose, the same black mesh shorts. We couldn't help ourselves. We looked and saw him again. It was just a small, gross thing, we told ourselves, even as the shame calcified in our stomachs. We told no one. We pretended it never happened.

His existence had been wiped from our consciousness until this moment. We huddled together in the aisle of the crowded bus, the fear and the frigid AC raising chicken skin along our arms.

Then Leilani pointed her chin in his direction and told Cecilia, *There's a seat over there. It's okay, we don't mind standing.* Cecilia said thanks and sank into the open seat. We held our breath. We registered her lacy pink skirt, the way it left the tanned skin of her slim thighs exposed. We saw the bulb of flesh between the old haole man's legs and a fleshy limp worm bowing down to kiss the faded black fabric of the seat cushion.

We looked away, staring out the plexiglass like we were waiting for something interesting to come into view.

At the edge of my vision, I saw Cecilia stiffen in her seat, her hands pressing together in her lap like she was praying. If I had looked closely, I know I would have seen panic skittering across her pretty face. I expected her to stand, to shout *Pervert!* and yank the stop request cord and go sprinting off the bus. But in the ten minutes it took to reach her stop, she didn't move,

didn't do more than breathe and look dead ahead. When we reached the university, Cecilia nudged past us. *See you guys later.* She pushed through the doors as soon as the bus hissed to a stop.

We all watched her walk away, her head bent, her hands gripping the straps of her backpack, her long hair fanning out behind her. As the bus lurched back into gear, we shuffled away from the old haole man, to the very back of the bus. I dared a glance at him. He was moving a fisted hand between his legs in a steady, stroking motion. I tried to gauge if the others had seen what I'd seen. I couldn't tell. We glared out the back window in silence until we reached our own destinations.

We lost track of Cecilia after high school. We shuffled her into our collection of faces and names of the people from our lives Before. Before we left home, Before we became adults, Before we didn't know what we didn't know.

After high school, we scattered ourselves across the country. If we left the island, we spent those first weeks calling home incessantly, missing the taste of saimin, begging our parents to send care packages of kakimochi, crack seed, packets of li-hing powder to dust the popcorn we would stress-eat during midterms. If we stayed, we frantically found ways to fill our schedules, trying to color our lives a different shade, partying all weekend in the bowels of Waikīkī and befriending sunburnt transplants from cities with names like Albany, Osh Kosh, Bakersfield, whose sole purpose seemed to be to bake on the beach more often than they attended class. I was laser-focused on shipping myself to Seoul or Busan or Daegu after serving my time at the state university, up to my neck in Korean textbooks and burning my throat on

shots of soju with the Kyung Hee exchange students. If we thought of Cecilia at all, we pictured her living at home with her parents, foregoing college to work as a sales clerk at Forever21 or some other retail shop, still working her way through a revolving door of boyfriends.

But we imagined wrong. While we hurled ourselves into all-nighters and tunneled through coursework, Cecilia was making a name for herself. As the countless documentaries and interviews would later recount, it started with a cousin. The cousin played Cecilia's home video demo for a Los Angeles producer. The dazzled producer summoned Cecilia to the studio. Introductions were made, phone numbers exchanged. She worked her way into all the big nightclubs and afterparties and networked like her life depended on it. She managed to find an agent. Then promises evaporated, contacts fell through. She landed ass-first on her cousin's couch in the middle of Gardena and got a brief but lasting taste of what it meant to hustle and hurt for the first time in her anointed life. But it was a brief taste. Eventually her inventory of rubbed elbows and stroked egos paid off. One connection led to another, then came the offer for a featured verse on a record that blew up and shot her into stardom.

Her first single came out in winter, when we were three years deep in pursuit of our own grand plans. When we first saw her face moving across the screen, we were in a dorm room in Cambridge, cramming for finals. We were holed up studying in Claremont, or in a Makiki apartment getting ready for a night out. We were in our parents' living room, clicking through music videos on YouTube on a Saturday night with nothing else to do.

They called her CeCe.

Even though there was no question, her face, her mouth, her doe-like eyes unmistakable, we called each other anyway. *That's her; that's Cecilia, right? Our Cecilia?* We could talk of nothing else in our group text for a whole week, sharing links to articles and screenshots from her social media accounts, all newly verified with a bright blue check mark. We tracked the exponential growth of her Instagram followers. Five hundred thousand one week, then a million the next, the numbers growing by the day.

In the early interviews, she never claimed our island as home, but our island claimed her. Our parents emailed us local news stories about Cecilia, updates from the local airline vying to plaster her profile across the tails of their newest commercial fleet. That last year of undergrad, CeCe was everywhere. She had three songs on the Billboard charts, an ad campaign with Apple, her first feature film had just been announced. And every chance we got, we let people know we knew CeCe. *I went to high school with CeCe*, we told our driver if her latest hit came on during the cab ride to the bar on Friday night. *She came to my thirteenth birthday party*, we told the old lady who was ahead of us in the grocery line, flipping through a magazine with Cecilia's painted face splashed across its pages.

During our holiday get-togethers back on the island, we found her picture on the wall of bars and restaurants: Cecilia, tanned and smiling, sandwiched between cheesing hotel managers, sushi chefs, bartenders. We sat on metal stools at our favorite Chinatown dive bar, me muttering prayers for my EPIK application, Monica rehashing her LSAT scores, Kim grumbling about her fruitless job hunt, all of us circling our fears of the future like nervous vultures. Cecilia's voice would come crooning through the speakers, pausing then shifting our conversation to memories

of her. *Remember the day at Waimānalo Beach, when we all got sunburn? Leilani got stung by the man-o-war. You think she remembers that? You think she remembers us?*

In our twenties, Cecilia became our living patron saint. Kim hung a laminated photo of Cecilia on her rearview mirror like a rosary and joked that she prayed to it before every audition. When I moved back in with my parents after two years of deadends in Busan, I told myself I was made of the same stuff as Cecilia. We had choked down the same school lunches for years, drank the same fountain water, breathed the same air. We, too, had been raised by local Asian mothers who taught us to be respectful to our elders, to call them aunty and uncle and never by their names. And Cecilia had broken into Hollywood. Cecilia had created her own Cecilia-sized niche, I reminded myself as I cycled through job rejection after job rejection. Cecilia must have put up with worse, I told myself the day a hiring manager tongued donut icing off his stubby fingers and suggested I close the door so we could finish the most important part of the job interview. He pushed his chair back so I could see the bulge in his crotch, his hand already moving to release his zipper, me already rising to leave, fear and rage zipping through me.

The year I moved away from our island, this time for good, to Seattle for an entry-level secretary job at a university and desperate for change, Cecilia won her first of what would be eleven career Grammys. We careened into our late-twenties, the threat of thirty lurking around the corner.

Most of us got married. And that meant fewer trips back home to the island if you were Monica, whose in-laws lived in Stamford, dividing up holidays between her family and his, or me, married to a once-divorced adjunct professor with two young children and an ex-wife living

in a northern Seattle suburb. We all found someone in some form or fashion, but that didn't stop the bouts of loneliness or the what-if-wonderings. Late at night, when our husbands were stretched out on the couch downstairs, drifting off to sleep with the ten o'clock news, when our lovers-of-the-month were asleep after our frantic minutes of gripping and gasping and climaxing, we scrolled through Cecilia's Instagram. We squinted at pictures of her posing on the Met Gala red carpet, or reclining in a white bikini under a beach umbrella in Tulum, or kissing the cheek of her latest celebrity love interest on a Manhattan sidewalk. We double-tapped every one of her photos, wanting her to notice our names, recognize us in our profile pictures, save us even momentarily from the midlife banality stretching out before us, and knowing she wouldn't.

Monica shared a flight with her on the way home one Christmas. *She was wearing these massive sunglasses and a baseball cap, but I could tell it was her. She had a bodyguard sitting with her the whole time - isn't that insane?* At the gate, a few people attempted to approach her, getting ready to ask for an autograph or a picture, their hands digging into backpacks for a pen and paper, their iPhones already in their outstretched hands. The bodyguard stopped anyone before they could get too close. In first class, Monica, who was just a few months away from making partner at her Manhattan law firm, wound up two rows behind Cecilia and the bodyguard. On her one trip to the bathroom, Cecilia passed Monica's seat and paused. *Hey. I remember you.* That was it. Four words and a smile that could have been a smirk. In that moment, Monica, for all her brains and lawyer-ly quickness, could think of nothing better to say than *I loved your last movie*, which she blurted out as Cecilia was already turning away, already walking back to her seat and not looking back.

Even though we had a whole year of catching up to do, we grilled Monica about the ten-second encounter, huddled over cocktails in Kaka'ako. We picked apart Monica's account for every detail: Cecilia's body language, her hair style, the sound of her voice, her outfit, like a bunch of lovestruck teenagers. *Did she really look as good as the Instagram photos? I would kill for her abs*, Kim said. *How could you not have said something else to her, Mon?* Leilani rolled her eyes. *But she said she remembered you? She remembered us?* I demanded. *I mean maybe? She might've thought I was someone else. I barely recognize my face sometimes. We all just look like our mothers these days.* Monica laughed and laughed, her third martini sloshing in her grip.

In the decade stretching between thirty and forty, we kept waiting for Cecilia to run out of steam like the rest of us. At thirty-three, after years of cycling through boyfriends of varying celebrity, she finally married. Her husband was a music video producer with bright white teeth we always took note of in her Instagram photos. I fell asleep next to my gently farting husband, wondering if her grinning producer really did rub her down with coconut oil every night like she claimed on Ellen. Monica coaxed her shrieking daughters into high chairs and imagined married life would slow CeCe down, that babies would come next for her, too. But she would never have children. She kept on climbing. While Kim settled for a steady trickle of commercial gigs selling toilet paper, plumbing services, car washes, Cecilia snagged Oscar nominations. We resigned ourselves to thickening waists, softening thighs and chronically dry knees we never bothered to moisturize. Cecilia campaigned for self-care and exercise, posing lithe and fit on the covers of women's magazines. We accepted the reality that we would never return home to our island for good, save Leilani, the cost of living too steep, the career opportunities too thin, and Cecilia paid

cash for a vacation home behind Diamond Head, a hidden beach villa in Waialua. Some days we imagined the unimaginable exhaustion of her life and almost pitied her. But most days we envied her fame, her private chef and fleet of house servants, her ability to fly to and from our island as she pleased.

We turned forty, half of us scrambling after pre-teen children, half of us wrung out from nine-to-fives and quibbles with our spouses, all of us barely finding time for trips to the island. Our reunions dwindled to a once-every-two-years meet up for dinner and large glasses of wine, maybe a round of boba if we were feeling nostalgic. The year Cecilia fell from her pedestal and vanished from the public eye, our group text had flattened to obligatory happy birthdays and holiday greetings.

Kim found out first. She had set a Google alert for Cecilia one drunken night, momentarily convinced that if she carefully tracked Cecilia's every move, she herself would achieve late-career stardom. She never bothered to remove the alert, and so she woke to a stream of beeps and buzzes from her cellphone at three in the morning. Four women stepping into the public spotlight in such quick succession we knew it must have been coordinated. Cecilia's bright-toothed husband stained guilty by their stories. Their stories all similar. Invitations to exclusive post-production afterparties at their sprawling Malibu property. Dark corners. Rough hands. Their accounts brought Cecilia tumbling down with him. *She was in the next room. She had her driver take me home.* Cecilia's social media accounts went silent. Her agent announced the cancellation of her scheduled appearances at music festivals and film premieres. The producers of her next movie put an indefinite hold on the production timeline.

We were stunned. We couldn't wrap our minds around it. Our husbands rolled their eyes at our obsessive consumption of every video, article, tweet that sprung up in Cecilia's wake. We picked apart shaky iPhone footage of Cecilia, swarmed by paparazzi on her shielded scurry from doorstep to private car, trying to catch a clear still of Cecilia's face. Did she look scared? Angry? Apathetic? We scoured Twitter until one in the morning. We spent our lunch breaks tucked away in our parked cars, reading every new opinion piece, every new interview. We swallowed each article like a spoonful of grease, our stomachs growing queasy, our heads aching from the screen time.

We hadn't had a group video chat in ages. We felt silly. Overdramatic. Gossipy. Cecilia hadn't died. She wasn't even a close friend. She was a stranger whose gleaming, golden life was shattering in a very public way. But still. Still, she was an islander, a classmate, a childhood friend. We needed to come together in a ritual of mourning, unnecessary as it seemed if we thought about it too long.

We logged on when it was creeping towards midnight for Monica in her Brooklyn brownstone, late evening for me and Kim curled up on our respective couches, fresh out of the showers we still took after dinner, sunset for Leilani scarfing down chicken katsu takeout and shouting at her boys to turn down the television.

Do you really think she knew what was happening?

I don't think she knew, you know? I think she would've said something.

Of course she knew. Remember what the women said? She's got two eyes and two ears, and she's a businesswoman. She knows how to pay attention.

There's a big difference between paying attention and saying something.

Well, I mean, I don't think she helped him, you know.

No way, yeah.

A silence expanded, ballooning across our laptop screens. I wondered if anyone else was remembering the old haole man from the bus.

I just feel so bad for her, I said.

Monica snorted. *Don't feel bad for her, Bobbie. She's got enough money to be fine no matter how bad this gets.*

The Post, The Guardian, The Times published piece after seething piece on Cecilia's husband. She vanished from the spotlight completely. Her social media accounts went permanently dark. Her PR agents insisted she had no comments to contribute to the hoards of reporters and journalists. Fans took it upon themselves to fill her silence, half of them championing her innocence with the hashtag FreeCece, half of them condemning her for complicity and pledging boycotts of her music, movies, makeup and merchandise. For months, the radio stations stopped playing her songs, though her streaming numbers doubled as FreeCeCe picked up momentum online. Eventually the flood of news coverage and social media commentary slowed to a trickle, then to a drip. But even after the public and private investigations exonerated her, the silence persisted. Five months later, her team quietly announced her divorce. The internet barely registered the announcement. The news had moved on to other villains by then, and no one was surprised by the divorce, least of all us.

It took us longer than the rest of the world, but we moved on from Cecilia, too. Or at least we pretended we had. We didn't mention her in group chats or during our dwindling

get-togethers. Most days we forgot to check on her Instagram or Twitter to see if she was posting again. Once, while running weekend errands, I passed her face plastered above her makeup collection. I blinked up at her image and wondered where she was right now, what she was doing in this exact moment while I stood in faded jeans and a yellowing T-shirt in the beauty aisle, trying to remember what else I had come into the store to buy. By the time I arrived at the register, I'd forgotten her again.

We had our own aging lives to contend with. Our children had grown into young adults, humans so vastly different from us we sometimes had trouble recognizing them as ours. They grew up high on the bustle of the mainland's biggest cities, meandering the mazes of Manhattan or navigating the sprawling suburbs of Los Angeles. They rolled their eyes at our requests that they join us on trips home to the island. *I'm just gonna lie on the beach or sit on Popo's couch the whole time. There's nothing to do there, Ma.* We gave up eventually, trading the pleasure of seeing them slurp shave ice in exchange for the absence of their inevitable whining and complaints of boredom and island fever. *You don't know the half of island fever, sweetie,* we would tell them. We let them stay home with promises to take the trash out every other night and feed the cat. We brought back suitcases full of dried mango and chocolate covered mac nuts that we wound up eating ourselves, huddled in a corner of the couch, watching the late night talk shows in the dark, our stomachs aching. We envied Leilani, long divorced but raising her three boys on our island, all of them already married to the ocean, spending every Saturday camped out at Sandys, wolfing down spam musubi between sets, their thin, tanned bodies arrowing through the water. Some days we regretted moving away from our island. Some days we thanked the heavens we had.

If we still had our husbands, we treated them like house fixtures we acknowledged with a light touch in the mornings, a brief glance in the evenings. In turn, they kissed our cheeks with dry lips, their eyes never leaving their phone screens, their laptops, the television. In our bathrooms, when we felt bold, we stared at our freshly showered, naked bodies in the foggy mirror, remembering the nights we slipped under the covers with firmer, tighter versions of ourselves and mounted our delighted husbands in the dark.

It takes years, but Cecilia emerges from her purgatory. We spot her image, aged but unmistakable, floating in the corner of the latest celebrity magazine at the grocery store checkout. We catch her name in the sidebars during our Monday morning news intake. She is playing a starring role in a new prime time drama. Nothing big. Something to test the waters of public opinion. Something to see if it's safe for her to dip a toe back into the spotlight without causing too much of a disturbance.

On premiere night, we tune in out of curiosity, even though the suburban crime drama premise doesn't interest us much. We raise our eyebrows when Cecilia steps into her first scene. How long has it been since we'd seen her in motion, in full color? She is still beautiful, her beauty more apparent without the red carpet glitter and gloss, her age granting her an elegance that gives charm to her performance. We watch and we fall in love with her character, a housewife whose teenaged children are spiraling out of control. Cecilia is us and we are her, our middle-aged lives reflected in the soapy plot of this television show. In reality, we know Cecilia knows nothing of what it means to be us, to be a mother, a wife at our age, living in the mortgaged house we will die in.

The show takes off, shattering viewership ratings and expectations. Critics acclaim her performance, hand waving away her years of silence and proclaiming her a phoenix rising from the ashes of her shame. In the interviews that follow, one after the other, she rebrands herself Cecilia, shedding her CeCe persona and the frivolity and failure associated with it. Her ex-husband is never mentioned in the interviews, the question of her complicity never broached, these omissions written into the interviews' terms and agreements, we assume.

This new Cecilia glows. Not a blinding beam like before, but a steady, burning glow. She becomes the darling of the award show season. We tune in early for the Emmys, where she is expected to win best actress for drama, the first Asian American woman, the first multiethnic woman, the first person from our island to take home the big prize. We watch Cecilia unfurl herself from the black stretch limo in a magnificent red gown, her hair a cascade of curls, her lips, her whole body, painted a bloody crimson. When she wins, the theater erupts in applause. At home on our island, Leilani hears the neighbors cheering and shrieking through the walls of her condo. Monica, in her Brooklyn brownstone, Kim in her Culver City studio, me in my drafty attic office in northern Seattle, we all creep closer to the television as Cecilia brushes her waterfalling hair over her shoulder, smiles with all her teeth, and speaks.

We hear her heart in her throat. We see her tears leaving streaks on her face and we feel tears pooling hot in the corners of our eyes. She thanks God, her fans, her parents, her director, her cast, and then her island, *our* island, and for a rising, brimming moment we think she will thank us, too.