

# Miles from Nowhere

*Nami Mun*



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## *Shelter*

I'd been at the shelter for two weeks and there was nothing to do but go to counseling or lie on my cot and count the rows of empty cots nailed to the floor or watch TV in the rec room, where the girls cornrowed each other's hair and went on about pulling a date with Reggie the counselor because he looked like Billy Dee Williams and had a rump-roast ass. I didn't see a way to join in, but I didn't feel like being alone, either. It was cold. Outside the lobby doors, the thick snow falling made it hard to see the diner across the street. The walls in this place were too bright, too lit up in a peppermint light. I wandered down the long hallway, walked past the cafeteria and the nurses' station without saying hi to anyone, and looked for Knowledge.

I liked Knowledge. She'd stood up for me my first night—whacked a huge girl across her face with a dinner

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tray and then plunked right down on top of her. With a hand choking the girl's neck, Knowledge told her to give back my sneakers because that was the right thing to do. I actually hated those sneakers, was glad when the girl stole them so the counselors could give me a new pair, but that really wasn't the point. Nobody had ever stuck up for me before.

I saw Knowledge at the end of the hall, jumping rope.

"Okay, how about this," she said as I walked up. "What if I was to pull off something really big, something that'll change our lives forever, but I needed your help. You gonna be there?" The rope buzzed over her face as her eyes focused on some point down the hallway.

"Depends," I said, hopping an imaginary hopscotch. "You want to go play cards?"

"*Depends?* On what?" She stopped jumping. The white beads in her hair stopped jumping, too. Clenching the rope, she said, "You either trust me or you don't. We're either partners or we ain't, and believe me, you can't make it on the street without a partner covering your flat ass." She yanked up her gloves, which were really tube socks with ten finger holes. "So, you'd watch my back or what?"

"If I say okay, can we go play cards?"

"Good. That's what I'm talking about. Here, take this."

I took the rope from her and she dropped to the floor. Between each push-up, she bubbled her cheeks and exhaled real loud. "Gotta get in shape so we can bust out tonight."

I coiled the rope around my wrist to make an African

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tribal bracelet. I didn't know what she was talking about, and plus, the shelter doors were always open—we could leave whenever we wanted. Over the speakers, dinner was being announced.

“C'mon. Let's go,” I said. “I'll let you teach me blackjack.”

“At a time like this? You gotta be out of your mind.” She shot up and began running fast in place, slowing down only to deliver uppercuts.

My mom turned crazy the night my father left us for good. He had given up on us. On my mother's ways. She was getting up in the middle of the night and stepping out onto our cold, muddy yard to dig a hole in the ground. Every night for a week she worked on that one hole, as if trying to tunnel her way back to Korea. It had been her idea to move us to the States four years before, and my dad never let her forget it.

I was twelve then. It was winter. Her small spade hitting the dirt sounded like coughing.

That night, as soon as my dad's car turned the corner, she dropped the spade and turned to me. I felt the eyes of the neighborhood wives and grandmothers peeking through blinds and curtains, judging us, wondering if people like us deserved to share their skies. A gust of wind brought my mom's hair to life and, even though I knew words were coming from her mouth, it seemed as if the black, uncombed strands were the ones speaking. She ordered me

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to grab all of his things and pile them in our yard. Like his socks, underwear, toothbrush, the basement TV, his leather Bible, the briefcase I'd gotten him for his birthday which he never used, pictures of him, pictures of him and me, his half-empty jar of Sanka. While I made runs back and forth, my mom lay on the dead grass, the moon shining down on her tears and the small pile of Dad I'd created next to her. She rolled her face to the side, her ear touching dirt. "What do you think God does to people like you?" she asked the ground.

She had on only her robe, and no socks. She was naked underneath. I asked her if she was cold. Without answering, she stood up, slapped something off her knees, and stared past me and into the house. "Did you grab everything?"

I nodded and looked down at the slippers he'd bought me, wondering if they were supposed to go into the pile. Before I could ask, she walked off into the garage and came out seconds later carrying a small can in each hand. With all the lighter fluid, the pile lit up fast, the flash instantly warming my face. I stood there and didn't try to stop her because I loved her too much then. I knew it wasn't good to burn all of Dad's things, but how can you not love someone who lets you see them in all that pain? For the first time, I saw her clearly, as if I were inside a dream of hers, watching all her thoughts. She wasn't putting on an act. She wasn't being a nurse. She wasn't being a mother or a wife or a good Christian. She was just dropping to her knees, inches from the fire, and sliding her thin arms into the flames. If I screamed I didn't hear it, but I did pull her back, grabbing

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a fistful of her bathrobe, fully understanding that I was now playing a part in that dream.

When the fire trucks and the ambulance came, I left her and ran into the house. I locked all the doors, turned off all the lights because we had revealed too much of ourselves. Crouching under a window that faced the yard, I heard two neighbors saying how they'd never seen such a thing. A man asked my mom how she felt.

All she said was, "I'm starving."

In the cafeteria, Knowledge said to me, "Life's only as bad as you make it out to be. It's got nothing to do with the way it is." After three quick shovels of mashed potatoes, she mumbled, "You get me?" Her knees rattled under our table. I folded and unfolded the paper napkin on my lap and drank my milk before telling her that I didn't, and that I didn't understand most of what she said.

She nodded. "I like your honesty. I do. I demand it, actually," she said, and patted my back. "Here, for your bones." From under her sweatshirt she pulled out a half-pint of milk and sneaked it onto my lap. "You know, I never knew a Chink before."

"That's okay." I packed the mash and the Salisbury steak inside my dinner roll.

"I didn't even know Chinks ran away from home."

"We can do a lot of neat things," I said, swallowing. I liked hearing her laugh. And I didn't care that she'd called me a Chink, though I wanted to say that Chinks were for

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Chinese and that Koreans had their own special name. But that was another subject, and I liked the way we were talking right then.

“Hello, ladies.”

I’d seen Wink walk up to us—strutting past the tables, looking to see who was checking him out. He could’ve been Chachi’s younger brother, dressed in tight jeans with a red bandanna tied around his thigh.

Knowledge pointed her plastic fork at him and yelled, “Don’t even start aiming your ass for the bench.” She didn’t like boys talking to me, especially Wink. To her, boys were either weak or evil—and Wink was both.

“You’re the boss,” he said, and sat down next to me anyway. I admired that about him. He could really annoy people, but at least he was stubborn about it. And he didn’t seem to care what anyone said behind his back, even after the whole counseling incident. I only got the story from Knowledge, but during Wink’s first rap session, some guys I guess sobbed and told their runaway stories, and when it was Wink’s turn, he admitted that he’d been on the streets for almost a year because his mom used to heat up a coat hanger and beat him with it when he was little. Then she was sent to Bellevue for trying to hang herself *and* him. Anyway, he cried, too. After the session ended and the counselor left, the boys cornered Wink and pushed him down, stepping on him and laughing. They told him that they’d all made up their stories, and how they rolled queers like him for kicks. Knowledge then told me that Wink was a prostitute, that he was whoring before he came to the

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shelter and he sure as hell was gonna be whoring after he left. I didn't even know they had boy prostitutes.

You couldn't tell any of this by looking at him, though. Always in his shiny Members Only jacket with the sleeves scrunched up, Wink walked around the place like he was the president of money.

"Hey," he said, just to me. "I wanna show you something." He took out a baseball from his jacket pocket, and I was about to take a closer look when Knowledge elbowed me in the ribs. "Don't tell him about tonight," she whispered.

"What about tonight?" I whispered back. She just waved her hand and shushed me.

Then Wink said something.

"What?" I turned to him.

"It's autographed, see?"

He propped the baseball against my tray. Big capital letters, spelling out WILLIE MAYS, slithered across the ball, every letter strung together like some penmanship exercise. I could tell he wanted me to pick up the ball and say something nice about it, but from my right side I felt Knowledge's eyes burning a hole in my cheek.

"Hey, you gonna be here on Christmas?" Wink asked, taking back the ball.

I told him that I didn't know. With a spoon, I mashed my mashed potatoes and tried my best to feel comfortable sitting between these two.

"That's cool because . . ." Wink juggled the baseball from one hand to the other. "Because I got you a gift."

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“Oh.” I bit into my sandwich.

“And I’m telling you so you have time to get me one,” he said, and laughed a little.

“Don’t you know it’s rude to whisper?” Knowledge thwacked the back of his head, which made Wink jump out of his seat.

“Don’t touch me, you crazy dyke.” He pulled his arm back, looking to beam the ball at her. Knowledge didn’t flinch. She just stood up, bumped her chest into his, and stared him down. “Jesus fuck,” he said. “Why can’t you act like a girl for once?”

A few kids had gathered around us. “A fight, a fight, a nigga and a white,” one girl sang but we all knew Wink would back down. Beat up a girl or get beaten by a girl, either way, it didn’t look good.

“This is bunk, man. I’m outta here.” He tucked the baseball back into his jacket pocket. “I’ll see you later, my Korean empress,” he said, and gave me a wink. As he swaggered out of the cafeteria, practically all the girls booed him, calling him a white ass honky trick baby.

It was lights-out at ten. Knowledge slept in the cot next to mine and, as usual, she cried in her sleep. I got to know her best during these times. On most nights, she called out to someone, and by the way her lips trembled, you could tell the person never came. I thought about who this person could be, and I thought about my mom, how heavy her eyes had looked the night my father left, how her bathrobe

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smelled like gasoline. After the sirens faded and the neighbors went back into their homes, I rummaged through our house all over again, this time to see if my father had left me a note. Or maybe a phone number. Nothing turned up. The house was quiet for the first time in months. I dragged my blanket into the living room and watched TV, but mostly I kept thinking somebody would call—the cops or the hospital. No one did. I did see our next-door neighbor Mr. McCommon pacing his driveway with eyes to the ground. He didn't come by, either. I didn't feel sad or lonely, just numb. I opened up a package of dry instant noodles, dipped chunks of it in peanut butter, and stayed up late to watch *Midnight Kung Fu Theater*.

Knowledge mumbled something. I rolled to my side to look at her—her short thick lashes upcurled so tight. I liked watching her like this—I liked that there was nothing between me and her. Not even her. But then she scrunched her brows, which made her look more scared than usual.

“Hey.” I leaned over and nudged her arm.

She opened her eyes really big and didn't blink.

“Did it seem real?” I lay back down, ready to hear out her dream, ready to fall asleep to it.

“Get up,” she said. “It's time.” She sat up and launched her legs into her pants.

“Time for sleep, right?”

“Hey, you trust me or what?”

“Not really,” I said. Knowledge didn't laugh, though. She was too busy putting on her T-shirt—her head popping up first, then both arms sprouting out together.

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“Okay, this is what’s gonna happen. I’ll cause a distraction. But you gotta get past the Pigs by yourself, all right?”

“What pigs?”

“And you gotta hurry, Joon.”

I sat up. “What’s happening to your brain right now?”

She rolled her eyes in disgust. “Just look around the room, idiot.”

I looked around. Four walls. A piano nobody touched. Rows of green cots, each with a lump of a girl.

“Do I gotta say more?” she asked, making her bed.

“If you want me to understand you.”

“Exactly.” She shot a look at the door. Her eyes were working so hard solving some geometry problem in her head, it seemed more dangerous to interrupt her.

“Wait for me at the Greek’s across the street. You got until the count of five. *That’s* your distraction.”

“Distraction for what?” I asked, but she was already sprinting out of the room, screaming, “One! Two! Three! Four! Five!”

Outside, I could hear her running back and forth, yelling, “Deck the halls with boughs of holly!” like she was demanding you to do it.

“Crazy ass motherfucker,” a voice said in the dark.

I got dressed.

In the front lobby, Reggie sat with his feet up on the desk, the toothpick in his mouth twirling a little as he mumbled into the phone. I considered waving goodbye to him but

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decided to just go. He probably didn't even know who I was.

"Your bed ain't gonna be here when you come back," he said, covering the mouthpiece. He really did look like Billy Dee Williams.

With some drama, I hipped the door open and flashed him a look that said, "Oh well." The snow hadn't let up. I tucked my sweatshirt into my jeans and crossed the street. I'd forgotten about the bed policy, but who cared. That was what Knowledge would've said, or something more fortune cookie-like, like, *The bed belongs to no one.*

With no money for the diner, I waited outside and watched people walk by in their long black coats, hats over ears, their lips blowing smoke. Some people ran and ducked into cabs, their bodies swallowed up in one gulp. Others vanished in sections, inch by inch, as they stepped down the subway stairs. Then there were the people up the block whose bodies turned to black strings until they thinned out of sight. All these people, rushing through the streets as if something good waited for them back home. Inside the diner, President Carter was waving from an airplane until an old waiter climbed up onto the counter and clicked the TV off. The waiter then shuffled around, flicking off the lights with the crook of his cane. Somehow, the diner going dark made the sidewalk seem colder. A diner. That was what my mom had wanted to open our first year here, a Korean one. She told us she would waitress, I would work the register after school, and my dad would have to cook because of his English. When she got to this part of

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her plan, my dad grabbed her wrists. “Who do you think you are, telling me to work in a kitchen,” he said, strangling her tiny bones.

The old waiter came out and slammed the door behind him. In a thick accent he shouted that he was closing up, and shooed me away so he could pull the gate shut. I stepped aside. The stubble on his face looked like snowflakes. “She’ll be here any second,” I assured him.

“I am very happy for you,” he said, and yanked on the padlock to make sure it had fastened.

That’s when I saw Wink. Zipping up his jacket, he strolled out of the shelter and casually jogged across the street toward me. I stopped myself from running to him, and for that long second he was my best friend.

“I thought you weren’t gonna leave,” he said, giving me a hug. I was surprised by the hugging thing, but it felt okay. We let go quick.

“Knowledge has some kind of . . . a plan,” I told him.

“Man, she stinks of trouble.” Wink was already shivering, blowing into his cupped hands. “She doesn’t care about nothing but *herself*, and *her* shit, and—Excuse me! Excuse me, sir! Can you spare some change so me and my little sister could get something to eat?”

A man bustling by stopped to search his coat pocket. While digging for money, he glanced at me, and then at Wink, who kept his head down. “You two are related, that’s what you’re telling me, right?” The man handed over some coins anyway.

Wink saluted. “Thank you, sir. My sister thanks you,

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too.” As the man walked off, Wink counted the money. “Twelve cents?” he shouted. “You fucking dick!”

He seemed different outside the shelter, older maybe. Even his eyes looked darker. I wondered about Knowledge, if she would look older, too. I didn’t have to wonder for too long, though.

Knowledge bolted through the shelter doors, screaming, “We made it!” and charged the street as if she’d just barely escaped an explosion. Behind her, Reggie swiveled in his chair with his back to us, still on the phone.

“We made it!” she hollered again, putting her hand on my arm, and I thought she wanted to lean on me so she could rest but instead she hauled me across the street, stopping traffic, and practically tossed me down into the subway.

The train rocked us from side to side.

“Who the fuck invited you?” she yelled.

“Ah, shut up. You’re just pissed ’cause you ain’t got a dick.”

“I’m still more man than you, you skanky fag.”

“Hey, guys?” I said, mostly to myself, which was why I was surprised when they both actually stopped shouting.

“Do we know where we’re going?”

Knowledge tapped her chest. “You leave that to me,” she said, and propped her legs on the seat in front of us. Wink stood by the doors with his arms folded and feet apart. “I ain’t a queer,” was all he said.

The tracks made a dry, whistling sound.

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“Give me your shoelaces,” Knowledge told us, and started untying hers.

Wink and I shared a look.

“Do you even know what a freak you are? I ain’t giving you my laces or anything like my laces,” he said, and turned to me. “Joon. What’re you doing?”

“Giving her my laces.”

“Why?”

Because it was easier to do what others wanted. And quieter. I didn’t say this to Wink, though. I just shrugged.

A few stops later, a black man carrying a McDonald’s bag came on, and our car instantly smelled of fries. He looked tired. The light behind his eyes had been turned off for the night. I liked him because of his construction boots—the mud on them made me believe he was hardworking and honest. After taking a seat in the middle of the car, he bit into his burger, stared down at it while chewing, and then looked out the window, which only gave back a darker version of him. At the end of the car, another man sat by himself, too, but him I didn’t like, especially his mustache the size of a rat. The skin on his face was too tight and too shiny, as if you could peel it off and find underneath a skull made of porcelain. Plus, when we’d first hopped on the train, he cinched up his overcoat and glared at us, as if we were looking to steal his kidneys.

I wouldn’t have noticed this man again except that Wink was now walking up to him, dragging his sneakers a little since having given up his laces. He grabbed the top rail and dangled his body in front of the man’s face, pretending to

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read an ad, while the man slowly stroked his mustache, pretending not to see him.

Knowledge plopped down next to me. “You seeing this? What did I tell you?” She shook her head and gave a few tut-tuts while braiding all of our laces into one long rope. Green gems of light streaked the windows as our train went through what seemed like an endless tunnel, and Knowledge babbled about sex being a weakness and how all men were sick with this disease. The man stood up, and Wink led him toward the next car. “If you can’t control yourself, something else will,” Knowledge said, and I secretly wished for her to shut up. Using all his weight, Wink jerked open the sliding door and walked on through without looking back.

We shot out of the tunnel and all the sounds of the train turned loose in the air. I took a breath. The subway had turned into an El, and the shaky tracks reminded me of a tired roller coaster. Down below, dark bodies in fat hooded jackets walked by tenements. Some buildings were empty, some burned black. One had pretty flower planters on every windowsill, with a little white boy or a little black girl staring out and smiling stupidly from every window. But everyone knew the kids weren’t real—they were the fake window posters the city had pasted up. The front of our train curved into an S, and just like that, the streets disappeared and the apartment buildings were now only inches away. We moved slowly, and each family’s window clicked by like View-Master frames. They were so close, I could’ve

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touched every one of them—the man and his kids watching TV, the big-breasted aproned mother tying up a garbage bag, and then a girl my age talking on the phone, ignoring the Christmas tree standing right beside her. It was too cold to pull down the window but I did it anyway. I wanted to put my face out there and smell every home.

When my mother came back from the hospital, she wouldn't speak to me. She wouldn't even look at me. After a few days of silence, I tried shocking her into talking—I chopped off my hair, played Meat Loaf really loud, stared at her without blinking while she prayed by her bed, but nothing. She eventually spent her days locked in her room, and I hung out at a diner near our house, sipping Mello Yello at the counter, eavesdropping on conversations long enough until I felt I could join in. My mom and I only saw each other once in a while, in the kitchen or the hallway. We ate alone, we cried alone, we didn't answer the door. My dad never called.

One night I found her reading her Bible on the sofa. I sat next to her and begged her to say one word, just one. I even gave her some suggestions: Apple. Lotion. Jesus. Rice. She didn't look up from the pages.

This lasted six months. This lasted until the day I left.

Our train stayed in the station awhile with all the doors open. By the stairs I waited for Wink. He stood with his back against a platform column, talking to the man without

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touching him. The snow kept falling. It was hard to tell if he knew we were waiting for him, and I didn't think I could interrupt. Knowledge was jogging up and down the subway stairs, losing her patience. "We got things to do," she said during her fifth lap, and I couldn't blame her. She tugged the elbow of my sweatshirt, gentler than I'd expected, and we walked down the steps and out onto Tremont Avenue.

I looked up at the sky, and at the little snow-guppies swimming in streaks of light. It was colder here than in the city, not enough tall buildings blocking the wind. My jeans, crusty and cold, scraped against the skin of my thighs as we walked beside a row of double-parked cars, passed fire escapes ringed with bicycle wheels and windows draped with towels and pillowcases. A long car without headlights floated by in darkness. Across the street a small dog raised its leg and the wind blew its pee onto a liquor store sign that advertised CHICKEN LIVER & HOT CHOCOLATE \$2.35.

Knowledge marched with hands in her pockets, her shoulders hunched, her face chiseled with determination.

"Do you think you'll ever tell me where we're going?" I asked.

She stopped short and put a hand on my arm. "You should trust me more."

"Okay."

She squeezed harder. "No, I mean it. We can't be friends if you don't trust me."

"I said okay."

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“Okay you trust me or okay you don’t want to be friends?”

“Okay I trust you, but it’s really cold.”

“What’s that got to do with anything?”

My face felt like a crackling mask. “Can’t we just get to where we need to go?”

“Sure,” she said, whipping out the rope she’d made from our laces. “But we’re already here.”

We’d stopped in front of a building, under a fire escape ladder. She tossed the rope up several times. When it finally lassoed the bottom rung, she tugged on the ends of the rope until the ladder squealed and slid down a few inches. Without saying a word, she put on her sock-gloves, stepped back about five paces, took a running leap, and just barely caught the bottom rung with the tips of her fingers. “Pull me,” she said, after securing her grip, and I hugged her knees and pulled, which drew the ladder down the rest of the way.

She started to climb. “C’mon. I wanna show you something.”

I looked down the street, in both directions, searching for something or someone to decide for me. The sidewalk was empty, except for an empty potato chip bag skidding toward me with the wind. I could see the train tracks, but I didn’t see Wink. I wanted to look for him, but I wasn’t sure if he wanted to be found. I understood this, the difference between getting lost and staying lost. I had left home to bring back my father, and when my search failed, I knew that meant that he wanted to stay gone. Which made me

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sad. And then jealous of his freedom. So I stayed gone, too, and left my mom to live alone, inside that tunnel of grief. I didn't even go back to say goodbye.

"Pssst!" Knowledge waved me up from the third floor.

By the time I caught up to her, she was trying to open a window.

"It's unlocked," she said. "Help me get it open."

I got next to her and the two of us looked like weight lifters—our knees bent, our hands by our ears, straining to lift up a window that wouldn't budge. I felt queasy. I knew this was wrong. "Can you please tell me what we're doing?"

"You'll see," she said, and right then, the window burst open. A gust of snowflakes rushed inside, and before I could say a word, she slinked in.

I stepped onto a table, then down to a chair, then to a floor that creaked when I landed. The kitchen smelled of fish grease. It was dark but not so black that I couldn't see Knowledge opening the refrigerator. She poked her head in and turned to me, pinching her nose and shaking her head. How she could even think about food, I didn't understand. I was sick to my stomach—my whole body felt heavier, muddier, sneaking around someone else's home. I heard every sound I made as I followed her across a hallway and into a room that was blinking red, white, red, white.

And then I saw it, what she had wanted me to see—a humongous white Christmas tree that was as tall as the ceiling and as big as the tree at Alexander's department store. Knowledge stood with her hands on her hips, studying every Santa head and every strand of silver tinsel clumped

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on the plastic branches. The flashing lights changed the color of her face, and she smiled up at the tree as if the black angel perched on top were singing secrets. I didn't see any presents, though. Not under the tree or anywhere else in the living room, which was crowded with a deflated couch, a mini refrigerator, record players stacked three high, and a coffee table held up by two TV sets. Above the couch hung a poster-sized photo of a black couple. The woman had thick pretty lashes and sat with her hands folded on her lap. Behind her stood a stocky man with tinted glasses and Jheri curls, wearing a velvet suit. The picture made him look as though he had only one hand—a fat one, with a gold pinkie ring, resting on the woman's thin shoulder. I was about to point the poster out to Knowledge when I saw that she was under the tree.

“Don't worry,” she whispered, “it's lighter than you think.”

She was bent over, picking the tree up by the stand and telling me to grab the top.

“Are you crazy?” I checked behind me.

“Just shut up and help me,” she whisper-shouted.

Right then a light came on down the hallway. I didn't even think—I ran. And for some reason I thought Knowledge would, too. With one foot out the window, I turned back to find her dragging the tree into the kitchen, stand and all. I begged her to let go of it but knew she wouldn't listen, so I helped her, and we had almost half the tree shoved out onto the fire escape when the kitchen light came on.

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It was the man from the photo, only much thicker. I hadn't expected him to come out wearing a velvet suit or anything, but I was surprised to see him in his black socks and tiny underwear, his beefy stomach large enough to house the woman standing next to him. She stood with her hands covering her nose and mouth, like she was about to cough.

"Knowledge," the woman finally said.

The three of them stood frozen. The woman, with a pink curler in her bangs, stared at Knowledge. The man, with his arms folded, stared at the tree. And Knowledge, unable to face either of them, stared at the refrigerator. Me: I couldn't believe Knowledge was her real name.

"Let's go," she said suddenly, and pushed the tree out the window. She didn't care about the ornaments anymore. The angel had fallen off by the hallway.

As soon as we got outside, we tossed the tree over the railing, watched it land in the middle of the street, and scrambled down the fire escape.

"She'll be back. You watch. You'll be back!" the man shouted, his head out the window. I kept waiting to hear the woman's voice but it never came. We jumped down to the sidewalk. "And what, you think I'm just gonna give you my damn tree?" the man went on.

Knowledge looked up and shot him the finger. "You didn't give it to me, asshole. I took it from you." She propped the tree up and started skipping around it, singing, "I took it, I took it, I took it, and I ain't gonna take it anymore!"

*Miles from Nowhere*

An old lady on the second floor poked her head out and threatened to come down and wring our necks with her own bare hands, so help her God.

“You know why you’ll be back?” the man started again. “Who the hell would want you? You’re too damn ugly to get anyone else. Look at her, she don’t even look like a—”

A blur of white flew over the man’s head right then and shattered his window. The sound of glass breaking was so clear, almost cartoonish. Knowledge and I both turned to see Wink across the street, smiling at his aim.

“C’mon!” Knowledge screamed, and Wink snapped to. He ran toward us, now laughing, and only then did I see he was carrying a paper bag.

“Shermaine, call the police,” the man yelled, and, as if we were of one body, the three of us grabbed the tree at the exact same time—Knowledge in front, me in the middle, and Wink with a free hand holding up the base—and we ran as if a gun had gone off and a race had started. The cold air bit my nose, and my sneakers felt as if they might slip off any second, but by the end of the block we were laughing. Wink hollered, “Merry Christmas, I love you all,” over and over again while Knowledge screamed, “Fuck you, barber-shop. Fuck you, butcher. Fuck you, basketball court and playground,” just fuck you to every place we ran past. Leaving a trail of Santa heads behind us, Knowledge sped us through the neighborhood. “Look at them fools, running with a damn tree,” a skinny old man said, standing in front of the liquor store. “Fuck you, old man,” Knowledge shouted. And with the snow hitting my eyes, my fingers

## *Shelter*

almost numb, I suddenly felt like one of those people who walked the streets as if something good were waiting for them.

We turned a corner and ran across an entire square block that looked to have been bombed. I'd seen it from the El. Piles and piles of rubble, of broken buildings. We trampled over bricks, cement blocks, toilet bowls, and tire rims until we finally rushed into a tall, burned-out building. "Up here," Knowledge said, tugging on the tree, and we followed her to the third floor and into a room.

The room was big. We dropped the tree in the center. We didn't know what to do first, laugh or catch our breath, so we did both, and hugged and gave each other high fives, saying, "Aw man, that was the fucking best," and things like that and looked up at the tall empty tree, which seemed so different in this room. The floor was covered in sheets of newspaper, cereal boxes, liquor bottles, and dried shit. A burned mattress with spirals poking through took up a corner, and the wall beside it had a hole the size of a small car that let us see where we'd come from. Wink opened up his paper bag, which was now soggy, and, to our surprise, he handed out Styrofoam cups. Knowledge peeled the lid off and took a sip. It was hot chocolate. And not even Ovaltine, but the real thing, with whipped cream and sprinkles, at least that's the way I remember it. "Goddamn! This is good, isn't it?" Wink shouted, almost scaring me. He paced the room and took sips, one right after another. "You know what it tastes like?" He touched his chest, right where his heart was, and scrunched his jacket. "It tastes like love," he said,

*Miles from Nowhere*

and fell to the ground, pretending to have been shot. I laughed and dropped down next to him, and then Knowledge next to me. “Tastes like love, my ass,” she said.

In the new quiet we heard the El crawling by, the sound reminding me of Wink and that man, and it wasn't until the train left us for good that we realized Wink was crying. He wiped his nose across his arm and took a long sip from his cup. I imagined a lump in his throat being washed over. I drank, too, wanting to taste whatever he tasted, and soon our breathing slowed and we sat there, our numbness wearing off, not really knowing what else to say, and not seeing the room or the walls or the sky outside or even one another, but only seeing the tree in front of us, for exactly what it was.