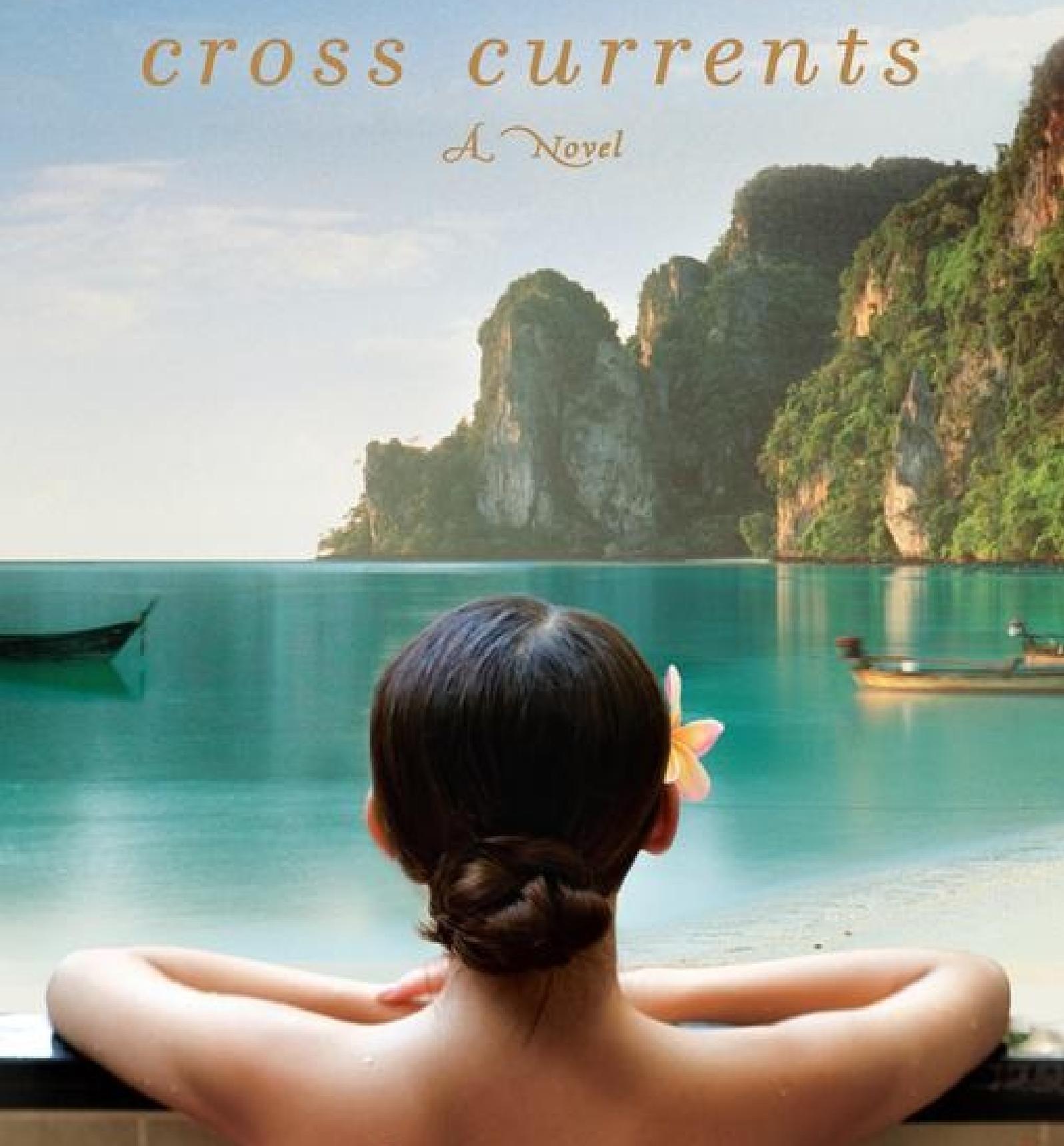


JOHN SHORS

AUTHOR OF *THE WISHING TREES*

cross currents

A Novel



JOHN SHORS



cross currents

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JOHN SHORS



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Praise for the Novels of John Shors

Cross Currents

“*Cross Currents* is about the power of nature and the power of love—romantic, brotherly, and parental. You are held in suspense, watching the love between the characters grow, knowing that this love is going to be tested severely when the tsunami hits. And when it does, you are carried away by the clash of both forces in a maelstrom of riveting action. I loved this book.”

—Karl Marlantes, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Matterhorn*

“John Shors has a great feeling for Thailand. The beauty of its geography and the pliant strength of its people are in every word of his novel *Cross Currents*, which is set in the days just before the tsunami. The suspense around what will happen to his characters (each with a vivid history and set of troubles) makes for a supremely readable tale.”

—Joan Silber, author of *The Size of the World*

The Wishing Trees

“An affecting and sensitively rendered study of grief and loss, the healing power of artistic expression, and the life-altering rewards of travel to distant lands. I was deeply moved by this poignant and life-affirming novel.”

—Wally Lamb, bestselling author of *She’s Come Undone*

“Shors’s fourth novel is a moving, emotional story about coping and coming to terms with loss. Anyone who has lost a loved one will relate to this poignant novel.”

—*Booklist*

“John Shors has made himself a reputation for re-creating exotic landscapes that surround heartwarming stories with captivating details. *The Wishing Trees* is no exception, as he replaces what might be a standard tale of recovery from loss with an alluring travelogue filled with colorful details of these chromatic countries.”

—*BookPage*

“Poignant. . . . Country by country, their odyssey transforms into a journey of worldly healing and renewal, nurtured by the wisdom and compassion they discover in the cultures they pass through, and by the realization of the commonalities—hope, death,

love—that bind all fathers, mothers, and children.”

—*National Geographic Traveler*

Dragon House

“A touching story about, among other things, the lingering impacts of the last generation’s war on the contemporary landscape and people of Vietnam. In a large cast of appealing characters, the street children are the heart of this book; their talents, friendships, and perils keep you turning the pages.”

—Karen Joy Fowler, bestselling author of *Wit’s End*

“A wonderful novel.... Shors transcends politics and headlines and finds the timeless and deeply human stories that are the essence of enduring fiction. This is strong, important work from a gifted writer.”

—Robert Olen Butler, Pulitzer Prize–winning author of
A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain

“Amid the wreckage of what’s known in Vietnam as the ‘American War,’ Shors has set his sprawling, vibrant novel. All of his characters—hustlers, humanitarians, street children—carry wounds, visible or otherwise. And in the cacophony of their voices, he asks that most essential question: ‘How can we be better?’ ”

—David Oliver Relin, bestselling coauthor of *Three Cups of Tea*

“There is a tenderness in this moving, deeply descriptive novel that brings all those frequently hidden qualities of compassion, purity of mind, and, yes, love—the things we used to call the human spirit—into the foreground of our feeling as readers. This is a beautiful heart speaking to us of the beautiful world we could and should find, even in the darkness that so often floods the world with fear.”

—Gregory David Roberts, bestselling author of *Shantaram*

Beside a Burning Sea

“A master storyteller. . . . *Beside a Burning Sea* confirms again that Shors is an immense talent.... This novel has the aura of the mythic, the magical, and that which is grounded in history. Shors weaves psychological intrigue by looking at his characters’ competing desires: love, revenge, and meaning. Both lyrical and deeply imaginative.”

—Amy Tan, bestselling author of *The Joy Luck Club*

“Features achingly lyrical prose, even in depicting the horrors of war. . . . Shors pays satisfying attention to class and race dynamics, as well as the tension between wartime

enemies. The survivors' dignity, quiet strength, and fellowship make this a magical read."

—*Publishers Weekly*

"An astounding work. Poetic and cinematic as it illuminates the dark corners of human behavior, it is destined to be this decade's *The English Patient*."

—*Booklist*

"Shors has re-created a tragic place in time, when love for another was a person's sole companion. He uses lyrical prose throughout the novel, especially in his series of haiku poems that plays an integral role in the love story, and develops accessible, sympathetic characters.... A book that spans two and a half weeks, set on a deserted island, easily could become dull and redundant. But Shors avoids those turns by delving into the effects of war on each character, causing readers to attach themselves to the individuals yearning for home and the ones they love."

—*Rocky Mountain News*

Beneath a Marble Sky

"[A] spirited debut novel.... With infectious enthusiasm and just enough careful attention to detail, Shors gives a real sense of the times, bringing the world of imperial Hindustan and its royal inhabitants to vivid life."

—*Publishers Weekly*

"Jahanara is a beguiling heroine whom readers will come to love; none of today's chick-lit heroines can match her dignity, fortitude, and cunning.... Elegant, often lyrical writing distinguishes this literary fiction from the genre known as historical romance. It is truly a work of art, rare in a debut novel."

—*The Des Moines Register*

"An exceptional work of fiction . . . a gripping account."

—*India Post*

"Highly recommended . . . a thrilling tale [that] will appeal to a wide audience."

—*Library Journal*

"Evocative of the fantastical stories and sensual descriptions of *One Thousand and One Nights*, *Beneath a Marble Sky* is the story of Jahanara, the daughter of the seventeenth-century Mughal emperor who built India's Taj Mahal. What sets this novel apart is its description of Muslim-Hindu politics, which continue to plague the

subcontinent today.”

—*National Geographic Traveler*

“[A] story of romance and passion . . . a wonderful book if you want to escape to a foreign land while relaxing in your porch swing.”

—*St. Petersburg Times*

“It is difficult to effectively bring the twenty-first-century reader into a seventeenth-century world. Shors accomplishes this nicely, taking the armchair traveler into some of the intricacies involved in creating a monument that remains one of the architectural and artistic wonders of the world.”

—*The Denver Post*

“[Shors] writes compellingly [and] does a lovely job of bringing an era to life.... an author to anticipate.”

—*Omaha World-Herald*

“A sumptuous feast of emotional imagery awaits the reader of *Beneath a Marble Sky*, an unabashedly romantic novel set in seventeenth-century Hindustan, inside the warm sandstone of its Mughal palaces.”

—*India West*

“Shors . . . creates a vivid and striking world that feels as close as a plane ride. Most important, he manages to convey universal feelings in a tangible and intimate way. Shah Jahan’s grief isn’t just that of a man who lived centuries ago; it’s a well of emotion felt long before Mumatz Mahal ever lived, and is still felt today. Shors’s ability to tap into that well, and make it so alive, renders the novel as luminous a jewel as any that adorn the Taj Mahal’s walls.”

—*ForeWord Magazine*

Also by John Shors

Beneath a Marble Sky
Beside a Burning Sea
Dragon House
The Wishing Trees

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For Allison, Sophie, and Jack

author's note

IN LATE DECEMBER 2004, ONE of the largest earthquakes in human history occurred off the coast of Indonesia, creating a series of massive tsunamis that struck countries bordering the Indian Ocean. Waves varied in height, some reaching almost one hundred feet. It is estimated that 230,000 people, representing forty nationalities, died in the catastrophe.

Ko Phi Phi is a beautiful, butterfly-shaped island off the coast of Thailand—an island that has long been a prized destination for tourists. The center of Ko Phi Phi, where people live and work, is about six feet above sea level.

Two waves struck Ko Phi Phi—one from each side of the island. One wave was ten feet high, the other eighteen. The waves met in the middle of the island, pulling restaurants, hotels, schools, and people out to sea. Approximately one-third of Ko Phi Phi's ten thousand residents and visitors died.

Yet, miraculously, thousands of Thais and tourists lived.

Cross Currents is inspired by my multiple trips to Ko Phi Phi, before and after the tsunami. It's a fictionalized account of this calamity—of what happened and of the tragedies and triumphs of that day.

A leaf before the eye hides the mountains.

—Thai saying

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 18

consequences



Lek opened his eyes, though his body remained as still as the gecko on the ceiling. He watched it, as he often did, admiring its patience, aware of its seemingly perpetual hunger. The creature was the length of his forefinger, and the color of mahogany. Lek enjoyed gazing at the gecko, though he was jealous of its speed. If a moth landed nearby, the gecko moved as if lightning filled its veins. Yet in the absence of insects, the gecko was without motion, a silent sentinel that protected Lek's home from airborne invaders.

As he did every morning, Lek studied the mosquito net that covered him, his wife, and their baby daughter. The old net had been patched in several places, but today no such work was needed. The net remained intact and impenetrable—a necessary barrier between their skin and the denizens of the hot, humid air.

Lek looked at his wife, Sarai, who slept facing him, their daughter between them. Sarai's small frame seemed as still as the gecko. Like most Thai women of her generation, she slept in her bra and panties, which were visible beneath thin cotton pajamas. As usual, she had pulled back her shoulder-length black hair and bound it behind her head. Reminding Lek of the moon, Sarai's face was full and round and somewhat flat. Her skin was the color of wet sand. Laugh lines bordered either side of her mouth—a sight that pleased him as much as any.

Resisting an impulse to kiss their daughter, Lek remained still. Only seven months old, Achara slept in a cloth diaper and nothing else. During the day she was almost always naked, but at night the diaper helped keep their thin mattress dry. Like her parents, Achara was slight and small boned. Lek was proud of her thick black hair, of how she smiled when he whispered and tickled her belly. Though he lived in a beautiful place, and saw splendor each day, nothing was lovelier than his little girl, or her older brother and sister, who slept together in their nearby room.

"Why are you smiling?" Sarai asked quietly in Thai, stirring enough so that the mosquito net rippled.

"She's getting bigger."

"Of course she is. She suckles like those Germans eat—as much food as I can give her."

His fingers edged forward, touching Sarai's shoulder, stroking her soft skin. "I wish I could help."

“Oh, what would you know about it? Women have suffered for thousands of years while you men have dreamed away.”

“Come outside. We need to talk. Remember?”

“I remember everything. Best that you remember that.”

He shook his head, smiling, easing out from beneath the net, changing into red shorts and a frayed gray T-shirt. Sarai put on a purple sarong and a light green collared blouse. After stepping out of their small room and into another, Lek looked at their other children, who also slept beneath a net. Their son’s arm lay across their daughter’s belly, and Lek was pleased by the proximity of their bodies. Most of the narrow mattress was vacant. A few feet from their children, under a different net, slept Sarai’s mother, who was facing the nearby wall.

Outside their three-room home, dawn was beginning to unfurl. The mountain behind them blocked the sun’s tendrils of orange and amber, and the sky was a juxtaposition of blue and black hues. The nearby bay was smooth, more like the surface of a giant cup of coffee than an opening to the sea.

Rainbow Resort, which Lek and Sarai owned and operated, was a collection of eleven bungalows and a restaurant situated at the far northern end of a long beach. The bungalows were mainly thatch and bamboo, featuring ceiling fans, showers, double beds, and hand-flushing toilets, but little else. The open-sided restaurant was part cinder block and cement, with a thatched roof and a wooden railing. Bamboo tables and chairs occupied much of the restaurant, which included a bar, a fish tank, and several ceiling fans. For the most part, travelers used the restaurant only during heavy rains. Otherwise, Sarai encouraged people to eat outside, on the beach, where she had positioned eight low tables atop colorful tapestries.

Lek and Sarai’s home was on the northern side of the restaurant, opposite the bungalows. Their sleeping quarters were only a few feet from the black, jagged boulders that marked the end of the beach. After following a path that climbed above the boulders, Lek sat down on an old teak bench, moving slowly, the bones of his right hip seeming, as usual, to grind against each other. When Sarai sat beside him, he pointed to the roof of one of their bungalows. “See how Patch fixed it?” he asked, speaking softly, which was his custom. “He climbed up there with new thatch and mended it just right.”

Sarai sighed, her breath leaving her mouth as if she were trying to extinguish a candle. “I have the eyes of a kingfisher, you know. The kingfisher sees a shiny minnow. I see a fixed roof.”

“He asked me if he could fix it. I didn’t even—”

“He’s been here for five months. Five. That makes him illegal. What or who is he hiding from?”

“I don’t know.”

She started to reply but rubbed her brow instead, sand already on her fingers. “We’re standing on top of a cliff. Do you know that? The wrong step, and down we go.”

“But we won’t make that step. We—”

“Down, down, down. We’ve got no money. And our bungalows are falling apart and mostly empty. What would happen if the police found him hiding here, working for us? You’d go to jail, and the children, my mother, and I would . . . We would have to

leave for Bangkok. We'd be destitute. Is that what you want?"

Lek closed his eyes at the thought of such a fate. "No. But . . . but my hip. I can't work like I used to. I can't fix roofs or walls or foundations. He's helping me. All he wants is a room and some food. And he's nice to the children."

"He's wonderful with the children."

"It's good for them to see a foreigner here, working hard, not just lying on the beach and sleeping. And their English. It's so amazing. They're learning for free, and that will help them do whatever they want in life."

Laughter emerged from a distant bungalow, and Sarai wondered which of their few residents were up, and what they were doing. "You're going to turn my hair gray—you know that?"

"I—"

"Is that what you want? To age me ten years?"

"His brother is coming tomorrow. All the way from America. Coming to help him."

Sarai shifted on the bench, listening for their baby and their children. "I like Patch. He's as sweet as sugarcane to all of us. But just because he's sweet doesn't mean that bad things can't happen. If one of our neighbors talks, if the police come, they'll take you away. Do you understand that? They'll take you and Patch away together. And then it won't matter if Suchin and Niran can speak English so well. It won't matter because their father will be gone."

"Shhh. Don't get upset. You're more than I can handle when you're upset."

She scowled. "I'm always more than you can handle."

"True."

"But you're smart to bring this up now, while I'm still sleepy and open-minded. In a few hours you wouldn't have a chance. You'd have better luck fishing for elephants."

"No one's going to talk. Everyone likes him. And nobody trusts the police."

Somewhere above, a tree frog beeped, its cry a high-pitched sound resembling the horn of a distant motorbike. "You really need him?" Sarai asked, then remembered that she had to buy fresh bananas for her pancakes. She had better get going. While she was at the market, she'd also purchase stalks of lemongrass, tomatoes, onions, eggs, cucumbers, and condensed milk. Everything else she needed to feed her customers and loved ones, she already had.

As Lek thought about his reply, Sarai studied his face, which was more angular than hers. His features were almost boyish—full lips that seemed to linger in a perpetual smile, a narrow forehead free of worry lines, hair and eyebrows as dark as oil, and shiny cheeks that rarely needed a razor.

"I need him," Lek finally replied, "at least until we catch up on all the repairs. Then he can go somewhere else."

"How long will that take?"

"A few more weeks. No more; I promise."

Her fingers tightened around his. "I don't want us to leave here. I'm so afraid of leaving. What would we do?"

"We'll—"

"The children. They'd be broken."

"We'll find a way. We always have. Once the rooms are fixed, we can raise our rates. Raise them by . . . maybe fifty baht a night."

“That’s too much. Thirty, maybe.”

“But everyone’s charging more these days. Ko Phi Phi is no longer a secret.”

She looked at a group of distant hotels, which were sprawling and several stories high. “Everyone charging more has airconditioning and satellite television and a swimming pool. Is Patch going to build us a pool?”

“We have the beach,” he replied, his thumb moving against her forefinger. “Those big places, not many are on the beach.”

“They’re a hundred feet from it.”

“A hundred feet too many.”

“For you and me, yes. But for someone who lives in Tokyo or Munich? I don’t think so. They walk farther than that just to go to the bathroom.”

“It’s better to be closer.”

Sarai pushed his sandaled foot with hers, knowing that he would always see their bungalows in the best possible light. While his sentimentality moved her, she wished that he would sometimes observe what she did—that the world was overtaking them.

As his foot pushed back against hers, she wondered how she could bring in more money. Lek would try, and he might succeed, but she needed to earn more, whether through the bungalows or her restaurant or something else. Otherwise they would have to leave the island, where almost all of their ancestors were buried, where they went to school and fell in love. They would leave for Bangkok, and the colors of her life would fade.

“We have to work harder,” she said. “Somehow we have to work harder.”

“I know.”

“The children don’t want to move either. We have to work harder for them.”

“And we will.”

“And you think Patch can make that much of a difference? He’s helping you that much?”

“He is making a difference.”

A voice emerged from below, the voice of their older daughter. “Then he can stay,” Sarai said, standing up. “For a few more weeks. Until you’ve finished the repairs. But then he has to go. Whatever he’s running from, he’ll have to run somewhere else.”

“Three weeks. Give us three weeks.”

She put her hand on his shoulder. “Don’t let the children see your worry. I see it. My mother sees it.”

“I’ll do better.”

“Your face . . . I love it more than my own, but it’s still the face of a child, so easy to read. And Suchin and Niran, they need to hear us laugh and see us smile. That’s what we must always do for them.”

Lek grinned, rising slowly, painfully. “So you still see me as a child? After all these years?”

“I’ll always see you as a child,” she replied, the corners of her mouth rising, deepening the laugh lines that he so loved. “Why else do you think I married you? For your looks? No. For your money? Definitely not. It’s a good thing for you that I’ve always seen you as a child. Because if I hadn’t, I wouldn’t be here right now. I wouldn’t be thinking about what breakfast you’d like most or about how I’m going to let Patch stay, against my better judgment, because he’ll make your life easier. So