On Good Friday in 1981 Rujen Keju was the second one awake of fourteen clan members and eight family members in his Army-built, concrete blockhouse on the Marshallese island of Ebeye. He was a strong man, five and a half feet tall, thick with muscles in his chest and arms and legs. He crept like a soldier or a criminal with a pellet gun in one hand and a plastic flashlight in the other. His electricity had been out for two days. No breeze had blown for three. The night before had been a night of flying roaches. Sweat slicked his shooting hand, the aim of his pistol lingering at shapes he imagined in the shadows. Grains of sand and grit stuck to the bottoms of his feet, and at every sixth or seventh step, his toes feeling their way over and between mats lumped with dark breathing bodies, he would brush his feet off on his calves and become unbalanced.

Rujen had not slept well, the night’s heat having deviled his brain into producing some feverish, seemingly crucial debate of which he could remember nothing beyond the excited rise and fall of too many voices. He woke tense, finding his hands balled into fists, not for fighting but as if he were gripping something getting away.

He ran the beam of his light like a prison’s steady spotlight along the concrete ledge, that likely place where the tin roof joined the concrete wall, but the light passed only crumbling chunks of boric acid, a bald and armless Black Barbie, and
sleeping flies upside-down on the stalks of plastic flowers in Pepsi-can vases. Farther on a small electric fan aimed at the sleepers, its blue blade paralyzed within a rusted cage. Just under the ledge and past a row of open wooden louvers was a velvet painting of Jesus Christ. Wedged into one corner of the frame was a black-and-white instant photograph of Rujen’s wife, Iia, holding a baby boy, Nuke, named after the most powerful thing on Earth. Now twelve, Nuke lay asleep on a mat beside his brother, Jebro, named after the king of the stars, the greatest hero ever in the Marshall Islands. He was born with six fingers on his left hand—a long extra pinkie without the nail. It had no strength, but Jebro boasted he could bring fish by wiggling it in the water. He called it his magic finger. Iia was dead, buried in the cemetery out behind the kitchen. In the painting the right hand of Christ cupped a radiant, floating heart, and the left, displaying its wound, pointed up through a yellow halo toward flypaper swatches hanging from the rafters. Some of the lighter colors in the painting were flourescent and the eyes glowed when the light moved away.

Rujen passed quietly through the warm sour air of his blockhouse, turning side to side with his light and gun, going slowly from the long room then carefully sideways through a bead curtain into the small room where his mother and most of the elder people slept. From there he took a long quick stride into his kitchen. His focus was broad, his eyes not blinking as they followed the course of the light, but the only life he found was a group of four German roaches who bumped into each other and then changed direction before scuttling out of sight. A trickle of water ran from a styrofoam cooler and channeled into fractures on the concrete kitchen floor, pooling under a burlap rice sack that hung from the roof by a black polypropylene rope. Behind it dead yellow termites were stuck by salt slime to a Plexiglas window that viewed a cemetery and Rujen’s silhouette amid the blurred reflection of his light. He noticed a child’s drawing of a shark smeared in the slime, its tail curved like a crescent moon around a length of duct tape that covered a crack.
Rujen wedged the barrel of his gun into his armpit so he could dry his sweaty palm on his briefs. He scratched at mosquito bites on his thigh. Somebody sneezed. A gecko chirped its alarm. After returning the gun to his hand he flung open the door to the toilet room, as was his custom most every morning, and sighted along the floor. He stayed crouched for one, two, three, four, five seconds, shining his light, but nothing moved. It had been two weeks since he shot the last rat, and although he liked not finding rats in the morning, he sometimes almost wished he did because shooting one seemed like good luck to start the day. It had to be the new poison being spread around the island, he thought as he sat on his concrete toilet. The rats were too smart for the traps, and the old poison killed only cats and dogs. After Rujen dumped a bucket of saltwater into his toilet, smelling as it did because it was connected straight to the iron main rusting to pieces just a couple feet below, he found a few moments later that sewage had bubbled up into his concrete kitchen sink. “Jesus Christ,” he said, and then he wondered why he suddenly became—or suddenly remembered that he should be—angry with his son.