The Invisible Line

My mother’s face shrank to the size of a teacup when she told me about the bad parts of town.

I imagined crossing an invisible line next to a fire hydrant. The traffic, footsteps and laughter around me fell away to a hum—the beginning of a moaning from the mouths of new, strange people who stumbled toward me.

“It starts at this street here,” she said, her finger accusing a thin line in the map. “On your way to the bus stop, you look the other way. You never set foot on that street.”

I never set foot. But once, I looked, and I saw a gas station where a woman in a purple dress filled her car and looked back at me. And past the station, in the thistly yard of a house like my own, a boy fixed the chain on his bicycle. He, too, looked at me and when I didn’t look away, he waved.