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## What Others Say About Us

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WHAT OTHERS SAY ABOUT US

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WHAT OTHERS SAY ABOUT US

by

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THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at El Paso

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## Critical Preface

### Critical Framework

I have a shelf of my bookcase in my apartment dedicated to what I call El Paso literature. Really, I should probably call it literature from the Borderlands since many of the writers aren't from El Paso, nor do all the works focus exclusively on El Paso. It's taken years, and it's always incomplete, but I've added both obvious essentials, books by Cormac McCarthy, Tomás Rivera, and Rudolfo Anaya, and less obvious essentials, books by Emma Pérez, Estela Portillo Trambley, Rigoberto González.

These and other voices have shaped my understanding of the history of the border region, nestled between lines on a map, stuck between dry rivers and steel fences, oscillating among languages, hardened by globalization, drought, and armies. But, when I talk about the Borderlands as an intellectual, geopolitical, and literary space, my understanding of the term is chiefly informed by what I've learned from reading Gloria Anzaldúa. I think any sort of contention with the Borderlands is impossible without first incorporating Anzaldúa's revolutionary work, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*.

What excites me most about Anzaldúa's work is that gender and sexuality are core components to her analysis of the intellectual, cultural, social, and political examination of this place. In "The Homeland, Aztlán / El otro México," Anzaldúa writes:

"A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. Los atravesados live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome" (25).

Though she locates most of her analysis of the Borderlands in a particular geographic space — in this case, the American Southwest and Rio Grande valley; or, the Mexican desert north and Gulf Valley — Anzaldúa's definition of the Borderlands transcends a mere physical location. She seeks to examine the hybrid culture that's grown from the unnatural partition of a formerly unified

area. If that sort of analysis wasn't complicated enough on its own, she also seeks to examine this hybrid culture through the lens of people who traverse many more boundaries — her *atravesados*, or new *mestizas*. These are women and queers who blur gender roles, snub heteropatriarchal notions of love and desire, and who don't fit neatly into one racial box. These folks, Anzaldúa argues, are the truest inhabitants of the Borderlands because they simultaneously contend with the tension between (often opposing) social pressures and their personal values, while living in a place that sits between two (often oppositional) nations.

It's one of the shortcomings of the Chicano Art Movement, the cultural counterpart to El Movimiento, the civil rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s, that it didn't do enough to embrace Chicana/o queerness in its literary imagination. In fact, there existed a sometimes antagonistic attitude toward queerness within the Chicano Arts Movement, as David William Foster points out in *El Ambiente Nuestro: Chicano/Latino Homoerotic Writing*. He writes that Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzales's *I Am Joaquin/Soy Joaquin*, the seminal work of the Chicano Arts Movement, "Secures a heterosexism that serves to exclude any social identity other than that of men and women: the category of 'men' includes those who are identified by the masculinist privilege, while the category of 'women' includes those excluded from the former, whatever their biological sex may be" (Foster, 4; qtd. in R. Rodriguez, 497). David Juan Bruce-Novoa similarly discusses how Chicano/a critics and writers closely associated with the burgeoning Chicano Arts Movement tended to ignore the contributions of Chicano/a novelists whose work highlighted queer characters, finding queerness at odds with the Movement's aims of producing art that elucidated the lived experiences of Chicano/a people (69). Muri Assunço also writes about the degree of hostility that queer Chicano/a artists encountered from both a sometimes homophobic Chicano/a cultural vanguard, and the largely white art world establishment. Anzaldúa, tired of being squeezed from either end, proclaims in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, "Chicanos need to acknowledge the political and artistic contributions of

their queer. People, listen to what your *joteria* is saying” (107). Unfortunately, hers is a statement that has resonance even in today’s cultural marketplace.

Though the richness of Chicana/o literature is found in its hybridization of culture, values, nationalities, language, ethos, artistic traditions, I agree with Anzaldúa’s assertion that it is the queer, the mestiza, the dark-skinned who understands and traverses even more boundaries and borders and is the “consciousness of the Borderlands” (Anzaldúa, 128; qtd. in McRuer, 128). Without considering, even centering, queerness in the study of Borderlands literature, scholarship on that literature will always be incomplete.

Before going forward, though, I think it’s time I confess something: I actually don’t think “Borderlands literature” is an entirely useful term. At least, I don’t find it to be very specific. If Borderlands literature refers to books — let’s limit ourselves to fiction here — written about the US-Mexico border, that could include anything from Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian* to William S. Burroughs’s *Naked Lunch*; or anything from Winston Groom’s *El Paso* to Lou Dobbs’ latest racist diatribe. I’m interested in winnowing down, at least for myself, the subset of Borderlands literature that I spent my time and effort studying for this project. I focused my attention on fiction written in English by Chicana/o writers, particularly those who write about queer characters. This definition does not require ethnic origin, or even queerness, from the author. Some non-queer writers write exquisite narratives with queer characters, and writers from many nationalities write about living on the American side of the U.S.-Mexico border.

Robert McRuer in *The Queer Renaissance: Contemporary American Literature and the Reinvention of Lesbian and Gay Identities*, describes two traditions of usage of the word “queer.” On the one hand, queer literature traditionally referred to narratives that depicted same-sex (primarily male) relationships in some homoerotic way. McRuer and the New Queer Writers movement argue that queer literature should reflect a wholesale interrogation of American mores and conservative ideas of home and family. Queer narratives should refer not just to texts that depict homoerotic

relationships, but also to texts that describe additional marginalized experiences — those of “fags, dykes, junkies, hustlers, the homeless, people living with AIDS, people of color, women, and the occasional straight man” (26). This queering of the term “queer” feels very similar to Anzaldúa’s work of opening up the definitions of Borderlands narratives; McRuer devotes an entire chapter in his book to analyzing Anzaldúa’s work. My conception of queer narratives was informed by this usage of the term “queer,” which refers to narratives that complicate heteropatriarchial traditions of families and relationships.

Finally, it’s important to note that the writers I studied for this project are from the North American side of the border and they predominantly write about characters living on the American side of the U.S.-Mexico border. This is a crucial distinction to make because the North American gaze is at play in these narratives, as well as in my own stories, and that cannot be ignored.

Narratives about characters living on the Mexican side of the border would most likely be concerned with an additional, or even a totally different, set of socioeconomic and political realities, due in no small part to U.S. imperialism. Unfortunately, I do not have enough sociocultural context, nor enough fluency in Spanish, to be able to sufficiently treat books written in their original language by authors such as Luis Zapata, Cristina Rivera Garza, Sylvia Aguilar Zeleny, and so many others who write about queer characters on the Mexican side of the Mexico-U.S. border. Though the Borderlands are a place where nationality is blurred, the privileges of one kind of citizenship over another paradoxically become magnified. The narratives about queer characters on the Mexican side of the border reveal yet another complexity and hybrid culture essential to fully understanding Borderlands literature.

### **Thematic Reflection**

Sergio Troncoso rarely, if ever, writes about queer characters, but he has done much for the representation of El Paso and the Borderlands in fiction. His first collection, *The Last Tortilla &*

*Other Stories*, skillfully traverses the landscapes of El Paso and New York City and he writes with verve about characters living in each place. Still, something bothered me while reading his latest collection, *A Peculiar Kind of Immigrant's Son*. Several of the stories set up a problematic dichotomy: edification of a character is directly correlated to the amount of time that character has spent in Northeastern cities or universities. Conversely, the more time a character has spent in the dusty Borderlands and, crucially, the more they've embraced the Borderlands culture, the likelier the character occupies an antagonistic role in the story. The Borderlands natives, at least the ones who choose to stay in the Borderlands, are consistently seen as problems that the protagonists need to solve.

Troncoso writes in, "New Englander:"

"David bestowed upon her the toughness she loved in him. She in turn gave him enough love to make him whole, despite his in-laws, who feared he would whisk Jean of Concord back to El Paso. But why would that thought ever cross his mind, to go backwards in his life, instead of forward, to leave this forest that woke every sense in his body? Connecticut was where he belonged" (26).

*A Peculiar Kind of Immigrant's Son* is full of similar sentiments. The desert is lifeless, El Paso is anathema to intellectualism, and fulfilling romantic partnerships are nowhere to be found. By contrast, these things are in abundance — or are even native features — of (white) New England. An anglicized gaze evaluates the desert as inutile and the Borderlands culture and language as uncouth. For many of Troncoso's characters, civilized life didn't begin until the protagonists left the Borderlands.

It terrifies me to read passages like these and others like it because at one point I would have agreed with these characters' proclamations. For much of my life, I felt similarly with regards to the Borderlands being incompatible with queerness and queer art. I now see that this is rooted in an Anglo supremacist view of Chicano/a culture, but Troncoso's characters' longing for flight strikes me as a particularly queer experience. Still, though this ambivalence about home is crucial for the

writer to capture in queer narratives of the Borderland, I don't want to give the Anglo gaze the satisfaction of buying into its worldview. I want to echo, instead, Anzaldúa who writes:

“Though I'll defend my race and culture when they are attacked by non-mexicanos, conozco el malestar de mi cultura. I abhor some of my culture's ways, how it cripples its women, como burras... I abhor how my culture makes macho caricatures of its men...” (43).

Anzaldúa argues that, though it's fair to dissect and critique, and to even run away from, the Borderlands, the framing matters. To frame a critique of the Borderlands in an attempt to become palatable to Anglo readers is, I think, unforgivable. Fortunately, that's not what Troncoso is doing, but his approach is also problematic. Defining the Borderlands by its deficiencies, while neglecting to do the same for New England (or, in my case, Washington, D.C.), suggests an internalized Anglo gaze that should be resisted by Chicana/o writers. Contextualizing the Borderlands is key to being able to sufficiently interrogate and dismantle the heteropatriarchy that is still present throughout the Borderlands. The history of Anglo colonization of Texas and the Southwest did much to devalue the Chicana/o experience; the history of Spanish conquest did much to devalue the indigenuous, female, and queer experience (Anzaldúa, 1-23). Essentializing the Borderlands culture as simply provincial, or machista, or homophobic, plays right into the Anglo supermacist ideology, even with elements of heteropatriarchy in Chicana/o cultural production and the Borderlands at large. Anzaldúa understands this, and her writing instructs us how to make an effective and fair critique of these systems.

Arturo Islas, like Troncoso, writes movingly about a similarly complicated relationship with the Borderlands. His characters, like Troncoso's characters, sense a (real or imagined) tension between their romantic partners and their culturally conservative families; both experience an impulse to move to a big city ostensibly for higher education, but in actuality to pursue subversive art; both rebel against inherited notions of masculinity that feel at odds with their fathers' expressions of manhood. But there's something different about the ambivalence of home in Arturo Islas's *The Rain God*.

In *The Rain God*, Islas writes about the queer and terminally ill Mickie Grande:

“In some vastly significant way, he felt he was still the child of these women [his mother and his nanny], an extension of them, the way a seed continues to be a part of a plant after it has assumed its own form which does not at all resemble its origin, but which, nevertheless, is determined by it. He had survived severe pruning and wondered if human beings, unlike plants, can water themselves” (26).

In *The Rain God*, Mickie’s body literally falls apart when he moves from the Borderlands to San Francisco, where he undergoes extremely invasive surgeries to treat a rare gastrointestinal disorder which makes it necessary to carry around a digestive bag for the rest of his life. Unlike Troncoso’s David, Mickie Grande can never extricate himself fully from his roots in El Paso; there is never a clean break.

The free expression of his body is the thing that makes Mickie want to run to San Francisco, but it’s also the thing that suffers most acutely in the end. This is a cruel metaphor, I think, for the ways in which Mickie can’t ever be in one place. When he’s in San Francisco, he regularly remembers the flavors and smells of the food his family eats, the extremities of heat in the desert, the caresses of his mother, aunts, and his grandmother. While he’s in El Paso, he longs for the fog of the Bay Area and the sea salt of the air. Mickie understands something about freedom, and which Louise Glück writes about so perfectly — “I pay with my life.” An intact body is the cost for the body’s independence to love who it wants to love.

Anzaldúa also describes this fear of being unable to return home after one fully inhabits one’s queerness. She writes:

“The two lesbian students [at an Indiana university] and we two lesbian instructors met with them to discuss their fears. One of the students said, ‘I thought homophobia meant fear of going home after a residency.’

And I thought, how apt. Fear of going home. And of not being taken in. We’re afraid of being abandoned by the mother, the culture, la Raza, for being unacceptable, faulty, damaged” (42).

This statement feels like a central tenet in many queer Borderlands narratives. The tension of needing to leave in order to create (a place in the family, art, love, a truer identity), but agonizing

over the possibility of a return pops up again and again in queer Chicana/o stories. Mickie, under different circumstances, would have loved to stay in El Paso. There is, however, a machismo and a heterosexist ethos that makes it untenable for him. After visiting El Paso, Mickie isolates himself, “For several days after his return to the West Coast. To recover, to rid himself of the desert, he walked on the beach or in the fog” (89). He understands, though, almost paradoxically, that the eschewal of the desert and all the dynamism that it brings, the good and the bad, is detrimental to his personal growth. Islas writes about Mickie — short for Miguel, the indelible name he shares with his father— that, “In his arrogance, [Mickie] believed he was finding ways out of it [Catholic guilt] through his university education. He had not yet had time to combine learning with experience, however, and he still felt himself superior to those who had brought him up and loved him” (91).

What I appreciate about Islas’s novel is that it honestly grapples with the fundamental contradictions that queer people from the Borderlands know so well. He feels stifled in El Paso when he discovers his need to create art, and he feels that he must leave to pursue that passion, but when he gets to San Francisco, the only thing that he wants to write are stories about his hometown and the people who live there. He must master the intellectual pursuits to get rid of the heteropatriarchal guilt he’s internalized, but he also must heed the lessons of his machista father and his pious mother to learn how to fully inhabit his creativity and to find hope in difficult circumstances.

### **Scope of Project**

When I was 14 or 15, my father took me to a dinner party for my stepmother’s 30th birthday. She was about ten years younger than my father and of a decidedly different generation. She listened to rock music I’d actually heard of, and drove a Jeep, and said words like “damn” and “hell.” She was, up until then, one of the coolest people I’d ever met.

One of her friends at the 30th birthday dinner at Cappetto's, a Central El Paso Italian restaurant that’s since closed, was a man named Richard. He worked at the Gap, and referenced

*People* magazine articles, and had lived in London, and it seemed to me like he had walked right out of a *Friends* episode. My stepmother made an offhand comment about Richard and his boyfriend a few years later, confirming my suspicions that he was gay. Though I only saw Richard a couple more times when I was a kid and never actually spoke to the man, I still think about him sometimes when I'm writing. He was born and raised in El Paso, and he loved the place; or I assumed he did since he'd chosen to return to it after living elsewhere. In hindsight, it's clear to me that queer communities, relationships, and spaces existed when I was growing up in the Borderlands.

Queer folks have always been part of, or estranged from, El Paso Chicano families; they've always been weighing the pros and cons of leaving for distant cities, or moving into the chic neighborhoods near UTEP, or on the west side, or even just staying put in whatever neighborhood they claimed as their own. The issue wasn't that all queer life was incompatible with the Borderlands, as I once thought, but rather I hadn't yet learned how to look close enough to see that queerness was all around me.

I try to write stories about people who I might miss, either because of the jobs that they do, or because I think I already have them figured out, or because I'm too distracted to look closely. "A Tall Glass of Something Cool" is one of the stories that I wrote after I'd had enough sense to observe closely. I was waiting to board the 42 bus in Washington, D.C. one morning, and the bus driver said good morning to each boarding passenger. I saw him shake his head when only a handful of passengers took the time to return the greeting. When it was my turn, I smiled at him, paid my fare, and sat down. Then, I took out my notebook and started to scribble. I wanted to write about a Chicano, a bus driver, and the different dimensions of his home life. What did he do for fun, when he wasn't at work? What was he excited about, afraid of? The Borderlands didn't necessarily lend itself to being featured in this story, but I still think it fit with the other stories in this project because it's about a character who doesn't feel fully at home in his hometown, and who longs for connection.

“Sunroom” feels similar to me regarding the main character’s longing for connection. Though Julián feels glad to be part of an urban lifestyle, he’s also quite lonely. He can’t even speak honestly or lovingly with the one person who most cares for him. Still, he tends to ignore his gentrifier status, and lack of meaningful connection, and embrace this new, urbane locale as his inherited home. At the end of the day, though, the coastal city is not paradise.

Julián feels like the kind of character who will eventually need a massive U-turn in his life, and will return home to El Paso to induce one. “Space” actually got started that way. The week I moved back to El Paso for the start of the MFA program, I walked to a CVS down the street from my apartment almost every evening. Sometimes, it was for toiletries, other times it was for cleaning supplies. When I found out they sold red wine, I went for that. There was a friendly man who worked there at the time, and he joked about my purchases, and the idea for a story about a guy who worked in a pharmacy came to me.

That story went through numerous terrible drafts. The original draft was told from the point-of-view of Jimmy, who had just returned to El Paso and had to learn how to live in his hometown again. Those drafts felt like I was looking down on El Paso, though, as if the place lacked sophistication. It was taking the shape of an archetypical fish-out-of-water story, where the protagonist uses the strange townsfolk to learn more about himself. I switched the story to Gil’s point-of-view, and then Gil’s daughter, Nazareth, entered the story, followed by Eva, Nazareth’s mother. The new story still touched on the same issues I wanted to talk about -- family tensions, queerness, being a working-class Chicano -- but it felt more respectful of the Borderlands than the drafts told from Jimmy’s point-of-view.

When I moved back to El Paso, I was still figuring out how to write “Latino literature.” I felt a sort of expectation to write about cross-border migration, and to unnaturally describe each character’s brown skin, or to use Chicano Spanglish, but all of that felt disingenuous. I am not bilingual, and I hadn’t crossed the U.S.-Mexico border in nearly fifteen years. I knew that stories of

immigration, especially those with traumatic elements, were vital for someone to write, but they weren't mine to tell.

Since I lived near downtown El Paso, after particularly frustrating writing sessions, I'd sometimes take walks around Chihuahuita and the Second Ward, the oldest barrios in the city. I'd call my grandmother during some of these walks and I'd ask her to tell me about her childhood growing up in those neighborhoods. I'd walk past old, tiny houses on Tays ("Tay-S," as she calls it), and Myrtle ("El Calle Muertos"), and Father Rahm (or, simply, "El Quinto"). She'd tell me about being a girl in the Second Ward, and the people who populated her childhood, family and extended family who didn't always have a precise blood connection. Her tales about cows in the barrio, and stealing tomatoes from grocery carts, and skipping school to hang out at the neighborhood record store utterly fascinated me. I wanted to try to recreate my experience when I listen to her stories. Only, I wanted to add my own context and invention.

"La Vieja" is my attempt to do that. I wanted to write about an unapologetically queer person living in Chihuahuita, who missed his grandmother. I didn't want it to be sad or tragic, though, so I tried to make him funny and to create a community that, in the end, cares for its own.

In "Too Much Freedom," Benny has to decide, when the stakes are high, whether he's going to leave his hometown to build out a strange new life in California, or if he's going to continue supporting his needy family. My stepmother used to tell me stories about going to places like San Antonio and Phoenix with Richard and her other friends, to attend U2 or Pearl Jam concerts, and to shop at Abercrombie & Fitch and Pottery Barn, stores unavailable in El Paso at that time. I wanted to write a story about a man going to California to see a concert -- Madonna's *Blond Ambition Tour*, in this case -- and watch what happens.

In the earliest drafts, very little happened. I was stuck on what kind of antagonistic force I wanted to put up against Benny's perfect weekend. At that time, I read "Free Radicals" by Alice Munro for one of my classes. It's a story in her collection, *Too Much Happiness*, where she

brilliantly pits a recent widow and cancer survivor (who'd been considering ending her own life), against a sociopathic stranger who comes to her rural Ontario home to kill her and steal her car. There's a fascinating chemistry between the two of them, and I loved the way that Munro plays with our expectations about how these characters might act in a shared space. I adapted this narrative technique and tried to suggest Benny's attraction to the assailant in the North Hollywood convenience store. I repurposed the title of Munro's collection to signify my homage to Munro's story.

Finally, I've included three flash pieces that I feel fit with the overall themes of the thesis. Flash wasn't a form with which I was particularly acquainted and studying flash in this program emphasized for me the fundamentals of short fiction — story, change, doubleness of language, and compression of time.

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## Epigraph

“One must also consider the psychological importance in our lives of what others say about us, and the importance for us, of understanding and interpreting these words of others.”

- M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*,

translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist

## La Vieja

Of all the people I met in Chihuahuita in the 80s, she was by far the meanest. It wasn't just me who thought so. Everyone tried avoiding her. Kids played paper-scissors-rock to choose who'd run to grab footballs that flew over her fence. The señoras in the neighborhood never asked her to join them for bingo at Our Lady of Little Flowers. La Vieja even scolded the mailman, the only person who cared to ask about her day.

"Doña, I'm going to bring you some canned peaches tomorrow. Maybe they'll make you a little sweeter," he told her a few days before her 78th birthday.

"Ya, hombre," she answered. "Stop with that line. It hasn't worked on me for the last ten years, and it won't work now."

I was new to the country and wanted no trouble with anyone in the neighborhood, so I kept my distance. Whenever I passed her on the sidewalk, I looked straight ahead or down at my feet, and didn't try saying good morning or good evening. If we were both waiting for the 24, I'd let her take the bench and stand so far away I could barely even smell her gaudy perfume.

One evening, a few months after I'd moved into the neighborhood, I stood at the corner of Ochoa and 9th Avenue with my friend Clarisa, a chica with a pretty face, and stood at six-three. Both in transit, like all the other queers who came to the country via El Paso, were trying to save up for the move to Los Angeles — though Clarisa had been saving up for nearly ten years. Clarisa smoked a cigarette and complained about how hard it was to save money and I listened, biting my tongue because I hadn't lived in El Paso long and didn't want to get into any arguments with her.

Clarisa punctuated her laments with hand gestures and one of her bulky arms nearly hit La Vieja, who, we hadn't noticed, was walking right towards us on her way back home from Diana's Market, farther down on 9th Avenue. La Vieja slapped Clarisa's arm away with the cane she carried

to shoo stray dogs whenever she walked around the neighborhood. Clarisa turned around and said, "Excuse me," an apology I thought La Vieja accepted since she continued walking.

After a few steps, though, La Vieja turned around and shook her head in disgust.

"Por Dios," she hissed, "take your filth somewhere else. This is a public sidewalk."

Clarisa raised her eyebrows and gasped. "Forgive me!" she said. "But if I'd known you were such a bitch, I would've tried harder to hit you."

I held my breath and watched La Vieja shake her head and walk toward her house. Clarisa lit another cigarette and continued her story, but I was still shaking in my stomach. Abuelita never had to worry about me fighting on the sidewalks. I never started anything violent, not even when the boys called me every kind of name they could think of. Whenever some kid wanted to fight me, I offered them the first punch and that was enough to scare them off, most of the time.

"You should go," I told Clarisa. She kissed me on the cheek and walked south on Ochoa toward her apartment.

I went back home and took a bath, putting a damp washcloth against my eyes to forget the spat. It had dug itself in deep, though, because when I recounted the entire thing to Romero, a native of Chihuahuita who knocked on the alley door of my apartment nearly every night. I was still shaking when he was rubbing my back.

"Don't let her bother you," Romero said about La Vieja. "No one likes her, not even her son. He hasn't visited her in five years, and he only lives in Houston."

"Five years?"

"It's no wonder she's spending her eightieth birthday alone."

Only the blessed get to see old age, Abuelita used to tell me. And 80 was especially important since not everyone would get to see it. Abuelita would be there in a few years and I had it all set. I'd have enough money saved up working as an event planner in California to fly back to

Guanajuato to throw her the biggest, most luxurious birthday party of her life. I'd get a triple-layered dark chocolate cake, topped with raspberries. There'd be mariachis and brisket and so many toasts to her that she'd fall asleep right there in her chair.

After I'd sat in silence for a few moments, he said, "Don't let her get to you."

Romero left my house around midnight, but I struggled to fall back asleep when I woke up at 4 a.m. It didn't make sense trying to fall back asleep, anyway, since the breakfast shift at El Taco Tote started at seven, and I had to be there by 6:30 a.m. Not the most glamorous job, sure, but it paid my rent and allowed me to save up for California. Instead of lying back down, I got up and made myself some coffee and toast with peanut butter.

I blamed Abuelita for my inability to sleep through the night. When I was a boy, she'd wake up so early that it hardly even counted as *madrugada*. My uncle, and later my older brothers, left for work before sunrise and she'd wake up even earlier to make them breakfast. I knew that only because I, the youngest, shared a bed with her and could feel the cold air that took her place when she lifted the blanket from herself to start the morning. She'd shush me if I stirred and told me I had time to sleep before I had to get ready for school. Each morning I lay between life and dreams, waiting for her to come back once my uncle, and later my older brothers, left for the day. When they finally did, Abuelita would come back to bed and hold me and the breath that came down on top of me was thick with black coffee and cinnamon and forever after, even the slightest taste of a strong cup of coffee made me think of her arms near mine.

Around 6 a.m., I locked my front door and turned to see La Vieja standing on her porch across the street, already dressed for the day. She stood, hands on hips, looking around the empty street. I turned my head so we wouldn't make eye contact and could see, in my periphery, that she picked up her newspaper and walked back inside her house.

I remembered her argument with Clarisa, and what Romero had said about her birthday party, and felt guilty. I imagined what Abuelita would've wanted me to do. So I took a deep breath and crossed the street. At the very least, I'd offer to have cake and coffee with her on her birthday while we sat on her front porch to watch the nightfall.

The house had no doorbell and I knocked on the wrought iron screen door. She didn't answer. I knocked on the screen door again and when she didn't come out, I figured she didn't want to talk to me because of what happened with Clarisa. As I turned to walk away, the front door opened to expose the dark interior and I could feel the cool air rushing out through the screen door. Only after La Vieja pushed her face against the screen did I see her, and did she ask what I wanted.

"Good morning, Señora," I said. "I know it's early, but I saw you getting your newspaper. I wanted to come by and apologize for my friend yesterday. She doesn't notice the craziness coming out of her own mouth sometimes."

La Vieja didn't move, nor chastise me. Honestly, I wished she had. Rudeness would've made sense with everything Romero had told me about her and everything I'd ever witnessed from the woman herself. I would've preferred if she called me a mariposa and demanded I leave her porch instead of making me wait in silence, trying to decide what shape her face was making behind the screen door.

"It must be a hard life she lives," La Vieja said after a few moments. She unlocked the screen door and opened it. "Come in," she said.

She'd just brewed coffee and offered me a pumpkin empanada. I told her I had to get to work soon, but she ignored me and led me to her kitchen table. Though the sun was already rising, it was dark inside her house with the curtains shut and the thick insulating walls, a trademark of well-built houses in that neighborhood. She served me coffee in a mug shaped like a cat's head and added a spoonful of sugar and Price's whole milk without asking how I took it.

"So," she asked when she finally sat down, "Are you sick of Chihuahuaita, yet?"

"Well, I've only been here a few months."

"That's long enough to decide if you like it."

The neighborhood didn't sit well with me. The city, not much either. The dry air, the unforgiving sun, the low wages for brutal work. My grandmother told me when I left that if I was going to break my back working, it might as well be in the United States. When I go back, I'm going to take all the money I make here to buy her a new house and make sure the only thing she has to worry about is where at the kitchen table she wants to sit when her friends come to gossip.

"Whether I like it or not, it's best for me and my grandmother."

"Where is she now?"

"Guanajuato."

La Vieja closed her eyes for a moment, probably to picture the map of our native country in her head, and where exactly my city was in relation to her own. After a few seconds, she nodded and said she'd visited once before when she was a girl. "A beautiful place," she offered in sympathy.

I kept expecting that any moment she was going to wake from her sleepwalking and resume her awful self, like a mean teacher who forgets she can't laugh at one of her student's funny jokes, but we continued talking about the neighborhood. At 6:15 a.m., an antique clock in the living room chimed to mark how late in the morning it was getting. I relied exclusively on the buses which, despite being funded by the richest country in the world, were just as slow and irregular as they were in Mexico, I hurried to the purpose of my visit.

"Señora, I came over for another reason. A friend of mine told me it was your birthday soon. This Saturday, no?"

"Which friend?"

"That's not so important. I wanted to see if you have any plans to celebrate."

She bristled at the question and cleared my plate, scraping the ends of my empanada into the trash can. The running water from the kitchen sink muffled anything else I had to say.

"So you came over here to make fun of an old woman?" La Vieja shouted over the water.

"You're worse than your friend. At least she had the decency to do it right away."

"I'm not trying to make fun of you."

"No? Then what?"

"I want to help you celebrate. My grandmother used to tell me getting older was a blessing. And 80 isn't an age everyone gets to see. She's going to be there in a couple of years, my grandmother, and, well, I want to offer to do something special for you. A party, or just some cake on the porch. Whatever you want."

La Vieja stayed quiet for a moment and looked outside her kitchen window. The sides and back of her deep brown neck glimmered with sweat, even in the cool room, and right as I was about to tell her to forget the offer if it made her feel uncomfortable, she answered.

"Thank you for the offer, but it's been so long that I don't even remember how to celebrate birthdays anymore. It would just be a hassle for you, and I have no money to throw a party."

"Don't worry about that. If you want a party, I'll handle everything."

"I'm sorry," she said, shaking her head. "Maybe next time."

"Señora, it would mean a lot to me. When I was little, my grandmother used to throw birthday parties for me and the rest of the kids on the block each year for my birthday. They weren't elaborate. Some beans and rice, maybe some picadillo if there was money. And people usually chipped in a little when they could. Everyone would be outside in the yard with music playing and my grandmother would bake a cake. We had so much fun."

She stayed quiet for a moment. "We'd do something similar for my son. With jumping balloons and hamburgers and all the kids on the block showed up. A lot of the viejitas from the block came, too, but back then they weren't so grouchy yet. My husband was still alive then."

"Please, Doña," I said, "let me do this for you."

She dried the plates and cups we'd used and put them back in their proper place in the cupboard. When she was through, she sat at the kitchen table and looked at me.

"Nothing too crazy," she warned.

"I promise," I said. "Leave it all to me."

She stood at the kitchen sink and thanked me formally. I told her I was happy to help and that I'd come see her again, but I had to go to work.

It was 6:45 a.m., and I'd almost certainly get written up for getting to work late. I'd stayed at La Vieja's breakfast table, convincing her — someone who had never said a nice word to me in my life — to let me throw her a party. I imagined what Abuelita would tell her when I spoke to her at the end of the month. She'd probably laugh into the phone, ask if the cake was chocolate.

After work, I sat at my kitchen table and wrote a list of the things I'd need for the party, and who I'd ask to bring them. Luckily that weekend was between paydays and most people couldn't offer much more for their families to do. A party with an entrance fee of a pot of beans or three-liter bottle of Shasta would be better than watching television at home. I went first to Father Ornellas at Our Lady of Little of Flowers and asked if the church would be willing to donate some change to buy a cake for La Vieja, a faithful parishioner for over forty years. The old man shook his head, said if the church donated money for one old lady's birthday cake, it would have to donate money for at least a hundred others. "We'd have to start selling our communion wine on Friday nights just to be able to fix the roof," he said, dismissing me with a handshake.

I went to Araceli Venegas, who lived next door to La Vieja, to ask if she'd bring potato salad. She stood in her doorway with rollers in her hair and said, "Angel's working late, and we always fight whenever I go out without him. Count me out." Araceli's sister, a muralist who lived in the apartment next to mine, and who dated La Vieja's son in high school, said her hands ached because of the rain forecasts for the following week. She wouldn't be able to make banners for the party and doubted if she was free. Yorman and Hilda Zavala rented folding chairs and cheap card tables to people in the neighborhood, but said they were babysitting their grandchildren all weekend and couldn't go, even if they both had fond memories of La Vieja's late husband. I knocked on four other doors that afternoon, but the neighbors inside had probably already seen me walking up and down the block because not one of them answered.

"I don't know why you offered to throw her a party in the first place," Romero said after I'd told him my plan was falling apart. "Just be glad people went through the trouble of coming up with an excuse."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I'm just saying. Around here, people only go out of their way for family."

"But this is important."

"It's an old lady's birthday. Sure, eighty might mean she's closer to her last, but give it a rest."

I felt my blood rush to my neck and face and told Romero to leave. He looked at me like I'd pushed him out in the middle of the street without his pants, but I didn't care. I shut the door on his face and put a pot of water on the stove to boil.

¡Fíjate! It was just like American men, really, to talk about things they have no idea about. An old

lady's party. What did he know? I poured the boiling water into a mug and stirred in a spoonful of coffee.

I wanted to call Abuelita. It was late, nearly midnight, and she would be snoring away in her bed by that hour. Even so, if she had a phone in her house that could receive international phone calls, or if I had more money to add minutes on my calling card, I would have dialed just to hear her say goodnight. I turned on the television, instead, and lay down. Normally, I watched American sitcoms because Clarisa told me it was the best way to learn white people English, though I found them all so boring. Instead, I left it on one of the channels that broadcast from across the river, in Ciudad Juárez. I wanted at least to hear Mexican Spanish as I fell asleep.

Two days before the party, I stood outside my house, smoking a cigarette with Clarisa. I'd spent twenty minutes lamenting the neighborhood and all the people in it, and she looked at me with raised eyebrows.

"Wow, I didn't know you could get so bitchy," she said. "I love it. You must be a fire sign."

"I just don't get it. If this was Guanajuato, and an old lady was spending her eightieth birthday all alone, the neighbors would do something. Even if she was a mean old woman."

Clarisa finished her cigarette and stomped it out with her size twelve heels. She looked at me and smiled.

"I know that face," she said.

"What face?" I touched my own cheeks.

"You're wondering if it was worth it. Coming all this way." It was a ridiculous question.

What luxury did any of us have to think about whether it was worth it? But before she let me answer,

Clarisa took out another cigarette and said, “Just don’t let your face look like that for too long. You’ll get wrinkles too early.”

Just then, a group of señoras from the neighborhood walked by on their way to bingo at the church. Laughing about something, they held onto each other’s arms for support as they moved along the cracked sidewalks. Clarisa and I stood on the street to let them pass.

“Good afternoon,” one of them told Clarisa.

“Good afternoon, pretty lady,” Clarisa told one of them. It was Hilda Zavala, the woman who rented the chairs and tables.

“What do you want now?” Hilda asked Clarisa. The group of señoras stopped walking.

“I can’t just give you a compliment?” asked Clarisa.

“You can, but you never do. What is it?”

“Come to the party, Hildita. For La Vieja. I’ll be there. And I’m bringing my famous potato salad, the one that’s delicious but won’t make you gain too much weight. And who knows? I might even give you the recipe.”

Hilda Zavala looked over at me and then back at Clarisa. “Even if I came, I couldn’t bring the chairs. My husband would never let me hear the end of it.”

“Come on, Señora, like you ever let your husband tell you what to do.”

“Why do you even care so much? I thought you didn’t like her.”

“I don’t. But we both know she wasn’t always like that,” Clarisa said.

Hilda leaned on one hip and then rolled her eyes. “Fine. But only because her son and my son were friends when they went to Bowie. But you have to come over to scrub the tables and chairs, because I don’t have time.”

“As you wish,” Clarisa said.

“And bring that recipe with you,” she said as she and the other señoras continued to the church.

I squealed when they walked away and I hugged Clarisa. “Thank you,” I said. “I owe you.”

“It's true. My thirtieth birthday is coming up again and I want a ball,” she said, ashing out her cigarette.

Later that same day, Romero called. He must have been worried about me kicking him out of my apartment because he said he talked to his mother and she said she'd make a pot of pozole. I went to Señor Lucas, that same afternoon and asked if he'd be willing to make adobo chicken or carne asada, and before he could refuse, his wife Aida touched her husband's arm and said La Vieja had loaned her twenty dollars once and that she'd make picadillo, though someone else would have to bring bowls and tortillas. I went to Bowie Bakery, and the owner agreed to sell me a cake for \$10 if I promised to do a deep clean of her shop. Another family said they'd bring paper plates and napkins; another, chips and toothpicks. Once word spread that the party was happening, even the cholos who'd heckled me from their cars said they'd bring tequila and beer if beautiful women would be there. I nodded, promised they would be there.

The morning of the party, I walked to Bowie Bakery to pick up the white sheet cake, decorated with orange and yellow sugar flowers and pink cursive writing. It was so big, it took me forty minutes, walking slowly in chanclas and jean shorts, to get it to La Vieja's house. My hands were full when I got to her front porch, so I yelled for her to open the door.

"My goodness," she said when she opened the screen door. "What is that?"

"It's the cake for tonight."

"How many people are coming?" she asked.

"A few more than I thought, but that's OK. I took care of it."

"You uninvited them?"

"No, everyone's going to bring something to share. Like a Pachanga. Would you open the door?"

La Vieja opened the screen door, and I went inside and put the cake on the kitchen table. It took up nearly half the table and I grinned knowing the decent price I'd negotiated.

"Where do you keep your cleaning supplies?" I asked La Vieja, who hadn't said much since she'd seen the cake. "We should clean a little before the party."

She grumbled about having to wake up so early on a Saturday morning, even though she woke up early every other Saturday, and said her back hurt and she couldn't do any cleaning.

I told La Vieja I'd take care of the cleaning and started sweeping the kitchen floors. But she stood there, watching me. When I swept the dirt into the dustpan, La Vieja grabbed the broom from me and said I was doing it wrong and demonstrated the proper way to sweep her house. When I started mopping, she pointed to different spots on the linoleum she claimed I missed. She covered her ears when I turned on the vacuum and said the sound was giving her a headache. When I scrubbed her bathroom, she said I was doing a half-assed job and that she should've just done it all herself.

"Señora," I finally told her, "you can yell at me today since it's your birthday, but when your guests come you need to be in a better mood."

She sucked her teeth and said I was foolish to think anyone was actually coming.

"The whole block has already agreed, and they're bringing food and music and tequila, so don't give me any of that pity party."

"No'mbre! Tequila? With my diabetes? You shouldn't have even bothered."

"Oyeme, Señora, I went through a lot of trouble planning this party and you don't seem very grateful. No 'thank you,' nothing."

"Why should I thank you? This is your fault. I just wanted to be left alone!"

"You must be tired," I said, rising to lead her to her bedroom, but she pushed my arms away.

"Go! I don't want you here anymore. You can forget about this party," she said.

"But it's your eightieth—"

"If you want a grandmother so bad," she said, "go back to Guanajuato. But leave me alone."

I threw down my mop and huffed out the front door. I yelled that if she wanted to cancel the party so badly, she'd have to tell everyone herself when they showed up on her front porch. At home, I took a long bath and listened to Juan Gabriel songs and drank a mimosa – anything to keep from thinking of the cranky old woman across the street. It must have been too generous with the champagne because I didn't even realize I was falling asleep.

Several hours later, I woke up to the sound of cumbias playing outside my window. I looked out the curtain and it was already dusk. Down the street, in front of La Vieja's house, a dozen people were setting up for the party. Everything was progressing just as planned. They'd already picked the best songs to blast from the car and were cleaning the tables to receive platters of food. Had she changed her mind? I would've woken up if I'd heard the phone ring, so I knew she hadn't called.

My chest beat like an ambulance light, and I could feel my blood turning to poison, as Abuelita used to say. If La Vieja wanted me to stay away from her party, I would be happy to do just that. I'd stay away from her, her party, Chihuahueta, El Paso, and anyone else in the country who didn't want me around.

I closed the curtains and went back to bed when I heard someone knocking at the back door that led out to the alley. I got up to open the door and saw Romero standing on the fire escape.

"Romero, why aren't you at the party?" I asked.

"Aren't you coming?" he asked.

"Me? Not if you paid me! La Vieja was horrible today."

"I just came from her house. Everyone keeps asking about you. People have spilled out onto the block because La Vieja won't let anyone inside her house, not even to use the bathroom. She says she won't come out until you get there."

"What does she want with me?"

"She says if you don't go to the party, neither will she."

I felt a swirl in my throat and chest and didn't know what it meant, but, as tirado as I looked in chanclas and jean shorts, I marched out of my apartment and walked over to La Vieja's house. I was surprised the police hadn't shut the whole thing down, because there were people all up and down the street and sidewalk. Cars couldn't even pass.

When I got to her yard, everyone parted for me, like I was a celebrity. The cumbias were still playing, but everyone stopped moving to watch what I'd do. I walked up to the porch and knocked on the front door. "Señora, open the door," I called. "These people need to pee. And you need to come out to thank everyone who brought food to share."

And before I could say anything else, La Vieja opened the door. She was dressed in a two-piece red velvet outfit, the top frilled with black and gold beads, and had on brown leather wedges and gold dangling earrings. Her hair was curled and sprayed to stay, and she wore blush and light red lipstick.

She smiled and asked, "What do you think?"

I couldn't explain why exactly, but I started to cry. She looked so beautiful and happy, and there half the neighborhood was standing in her front yard, and it was exactly how I imagined every abuela's eightieth birthday, whether in El Paso, or in a tiny pueblo just outside of Guanajuato. I hugged her tightly and she patted my back and chuckled and said, "Ya, ya, ya."

She gave me a tissue and I wiped my eyes and blew my nose, and everyone was watching to see what was going to happen next. I put my hands on my hips. "You're trying to get the mailman's attention, huh?"

The crowd erupted in laughter and people continued their cumbias. Clarisa and the other women behind the food table yelled for people to pick their tortillas quickly so others could eat, too. Guests stormed La Vieja's house to use the bathroom and fill water jugs, while others crowded around to greet her and wish her a happy birthday. Throughout the whole night, La Vieja held onto my arm while we visited with each of her guests.

And even when the police came, which naturally they did, La Vieja offered them tacos al pastor, and beans, and rice, and they stayed to help sing happy birthday and cut the cake. After dancing a cumbia or two, they took their food and left without issuing a single ticket since they could see there were only good things happening there that night.

## A Tall Glass of Something Cool

After waiting at the stop on Mt. Pleasant and Lamont for twenty minutes in the 90-degree morning, the 42 bus finally arrives. I swap out with the driver, who doesn't say anything to me while he collects his bags from the compartment behind the driver's seat. He doesn't even warn me of heavy traffic on the route, and I've been watching the cars crawl all the way down to Columbia Road, so I know there's something to report. Instead he just nods and goes on break.

After I've settled into the driver's seat, I let the passengers board. They swipe their SmarTrip against the farebox and take their seats, older ones in the front, youngest ones in the back. The last man waiting at the Mt. Pleasant and Lamont stop swipes his card, but the farebox buzzes for insufficient fare. He pretends not to notice and tries to take a seat.

"Try it again," I call after him.

The man comes back to the farebox and asks, "How about you let me ride, just this once? I'm only going a few blocks and it's hot as shit outside."

I open the front door and shake my head. If I let him ride for free, I'd have to let everyone else who asks. And I end up getting in trouble when the fare revenue is low. He calls me a little bitch when he gets off the bus and I close the door, pull away from the curb.

The Mt. Pleasant-Metro Center via Adams Morgan route is the same one I drive every Wednesday, Thursday and Saturday. The route begins as a narrow traffic stream from people and cars visiting the bodegas and botánicas on the north end of Mt. Pleasant. From there it slinks along Columbia Road, the crooked spine of Adams Morgan. The route passes onto Connecticut Avenue — by now a loud flush of cars — near the embassies and dress shops and expensive bistros that seem to be the only things that last now in this part of D.C.

I know this line well. My sister, Landis, and I used to ride the same route downtown whenever we went to the movies, or to take lunch to Mami at the hotel where she worked. I think she

resented how much time Landis and I spent on the bus, not really caring if it arrived on time. Mami would come home from work and start yelling as soon as she walked into the house. “I clean up after strangers all day, and then I have to clean up after you? I don’t think so.” She yelled at us for laughing too loudly, or for not having dinner ready, or for not wanting to watch telenovelas from her country.

It was always her country. Even the way that we talked about it. We’d say, “We don’t want to go back to your country this summer, Mami. Can we go to California instead?” or, “You can’t just walk out in the middle of the street like that, Mami! We’re not in your country anymore.” We were her ungrateful American children who knew the city because we rode around on the trains and busses, using passes she paid for. We knew this country by its people and its music and food and the thousands of words in English that just didn’t translate into Yucatecan Spanish. We even laughed at her because she still kept pressed and dried flowers from the flamboyant tree that grew in front of my grandmother’s house in Quintana Roo. Mami said that, besides the smell of sea salt in her skin, they were the only things she still had from her Yucatán.

Around 2:30, a driver swaps out with me at the R and Connecticut stop, and I get to take my lunch. It’s only thirty minutes, but I walk to Dupont Circle to eat my lomo sandwich and make lists of all the cafes and little bars that I intend to try. Eventually. The list makes me sad sometimes, though. I haven’t kept up with many people from Roosevelt High School and a lot of the people who work for WMATA aren’t interested in hanging out. Landis is my closest friend now, and even so we don’t get along so great.

But there isn’t much time to get all up in my head like that. I have to get back to my shift and I leave that mental conversation with the pigeons swimming in the rear admiral’s fountain. I’m not

like Mami or Landis that way. If I have an ache, I ice it. I don't complain to the rest of the house or expect them to fix me. I know there isn't a person who could do all that for me.

At the bus stop, passengers crowd the Connecticut and Q Street stop and start arguing about who was first in line. I can barely stand to listen to them. It's too hot and the small of my back is wet with cold sweat and the only thing that keeps me from closing the door in their faces and leaving without them is imagining the moment when I can sit in my room with some Willie Colón playing, eating a big bowl of fresh mango, and just relaxing with a glass of something cool.

The moment I'm about to pull away from the curb, I see this dude run up to the bus and slap the sides. For a moment I think he's going to jump in front of it. Usually I don't stop for people who aren't waiting by the stop with their SmarTrip out and who don't make eye contact with me or flag me down. It slows down the schedule otherwise and I'm stuck working past my shift. So, sure, maybe I saw him from the side mirrors and he looked cute when the men who want free rides definitely don't have that going for them. But maybe it's also because I feel for him since it feels like a swamp outside and he looks like he needs a break. Either way, I wait and let him on.

When he sees the bus slow down, he does too, and walks with the rhythm of a steel drum. The dude could be Cuban or maybe from the mountains near Mayagüez. He smiles at me, a tired kind of way, when he gets on the bus. When he tries to pay his fare, the farebox buzzes because there isn't enough money on his SmarTrip. I'm not about to let him on for free, but instead of asking he reaches into his pockets to pull out some change and drops the right amount into the farebox. The dude steps behind the yellow line and looks at the map that hangs near the driver's seat and rests his elbow near the top of the map and I can smell his deodorant and see the thick black hair that grows on his underarms.

The dude's tall, like past six feet. His ears are pierced and he's got tattoos from his wrists all the way up to his neck. His white muscle shirt shows off his biceps and the dark brown color of his skin beneath his tattoos.

“Oye, what's the easiest way I could get to 64th Street SE?” he asks.

“U5 gets you close, but you gotta walk a bit. Only problem is getting back, of course. After eight, the only return bus comes twice an hour. You could try, though. I'm not an expert.”

“You seem like you'd be the expert. You're dressed like one.”

He starts talking to me about the city, how hot it gets here, that he likes how a lot of the neighborhoods are small, that the people seem nice enough. Pretty soon he asks how long I've been on the route, do I drive different routes, do I like driving a bus. I utter short responses.

I'm not dumb. What's really gonna happen here? He's going to fall in love with me and I'm going to suddenly get fit and we'll end up married and when he gets drunk he won't be sloppy? No, I'm not going to read anything into his *Hey*. People get all messed up in the head when they pay too much attention to little words like that. Landis got pregnant off a *Hey*. Mami moved to this country because of one.

“Sir, I need you to sit down. It gets crowded down Connecticut,” I say.

The dude just smiles at me; I can see it in the mirror. “Alright, I'll catch you tomorrow, though. Same time, same place.”

He sits beside two dudes in the back of the bus and starts talking — about his day, the weather, money, the police, his kids, everything probably. When I get to 7th and G streets, the end of the line, the man waves goodbye to me and I forget to wave back. It's hotter than I've ever seen it in the city and I'm sweating through my blue shirt, but I don't mind so much waiting for all the passengers downtown to board. I even put my hand over the farebox, say it's broken, and let them on for free. After all, it hasn't been so bad a day, and it is hot as shit outside.

Week after week, Abel — he introduced himself officially — greets me when he boards the bus and the days I drive the 42 become the best parts of my week. Sometimes he has on a long-sleeve shirt, but mostly he wears a white or black muscle shirt and faded haircut and taut arms and says, “Hey.” He tells me about the Cypriot mezes he preps at his restaurant, that his ex is controlling — “So glad I’m not messing with her,” he said the second time we spoke — that he used to play percussion in a salsa band, and he practices capoeira in the park on Sundays. I let him talk.

When I found out he had kids and an ex-girlfriend, I was upset at myself for being disappointed. I knew that was likely his situation. When I imagined the reasons why he worked such long hours, it was only logical he had kids to support. I couldn’t hold it against him, and talking with him became easy when I knew we could just be cool. I let him stand in front of the bus and tell me his stories and sometimes I even added quick facts about myself, like how I always wanted to try going vegetarian or that I wished our work uniforms were black or brown or even yellow since those colors look better on me than blue.

But then Abel starts coming at me with coupons for free coffee and buys me mango con chile from the vendor’s cart next to the bus stop where I pick him up. Then he starts telling me about some of the women he’s sleeping with and the things he likes them to do to him in bed, and I get so distracted. I miss one stop at Connecticut and R, and a lady standing by the rear doors starts yelling for me to stop. I jump a little in my seat and pull up to the curb to let her out, and she calls me a dumbass when she steps off.

“You’ve got to sit down,” I say when I start driving again.

He laughs and says it’s too hot for any of that anyway and goes to sit in the back with the other guys going downtown to work in the restaurants.

The thing is, I like that he feels comfortable around me. I can imagine him slapping my chest in a friendly way and hanging out in the neighborhood. He'd tease me playfully and trust me with his philosophies. I can imagine feeling close to him.

One Saturday, Abel boards and swipes his SmarTrip across the fare box. It usually buzzes for insufficient fare and he usually adds more money. But this time he curses and says he doesn't have any change and asks if I can let him through. "Of course," I tell him, and he stands behind the yellow line huffing like he's just run a mile. I ask if everything's all right and he says it's his daughter's third birthday.

For a second I'm confused because I don't know why that's a thing to be upset about but then he explains that his ex-girlfriend is taking the kids up to Connecticut to spend the weekend at their grandmother's house. The last time Abel went with them to Connecticut, he'd just split up with his ex-girlfriend and broke the old woman's porch light after she called him a bum. Instead of visiting his daughter for her birthday, he's now on his way to work.

I keep my mouth closed. I've heard the other side from Landis too often to know how dangerous it is to assign a right and a wrong in these kinds of situations. I don't offer to say his ex-girlfriend sounds like a bitch and I don't say it doesn't matter since kids don't remember turning four anyway.

He asks if I want to go to El Brindis, a little bar uptown, with him at eight, around the time he gets off. It's a small place I've never heard of, but he says it's cheap and doesn't get so crowded. He looks at me through the mirror and I realize that, other than letting him on the bus without paying, this is the first time he's ever asked me for anything.

"Sure," I say.

"I'll see you tonight, then," he answers.

The rest of my shift drags and dinner — pupusas revueltas, takeout from Ercilia’s — takes even longer. When I start getting ready, Mami asks me a dozen questions about why I’m getting all dressed up. She wants to know why I’ve gotten my haircut and why I’ve ironed my shirt and why I’ve shaved my face. I want to tell her to mind her own business and go hold a bag of frozen corn on her wrists to treat her arthritis, when she starts asking me who I’m taking out and how come I have money to date girls but I never have money when she needs to pay her bills.

“Ya dejame, Mami.” I give her my SmarTrip and \$25 so she can go buy Popeye’s Chicken.

She goes on, asking who’s going to help watch Landis’s son and daughter and I close the door to my room and turn on the radio. I unwrap the bottle of cologne I picked up from the Macy’s downtown because I had only those cheap smellies the dudes sell on the Metro and because I’m a grown man making a grown man’s pay and if I want to buy some cologne, so what? And I also bought new underwear that fits me a little tight because why the fuck not? I carefully put on my clothes and leave my shirt for last. I end up looking pretty fresh in the mirror but look away before giving myself second thoughts.

When I walk outside, I head to the bus stop. It’s a humid evening and a string of taxis pass me while I wait. It’s seven-forty already, and I know how the buses run on the weekends, so I hail a cab instead. The driver starts the meter when I tell him the address and I try to watch people instead of looking at how fast the numbers on the meter seem to climb. I lower the taxi window to let in the air rinsed by the August rain while the old man talks to me. In a few months we won’t have any of this and some of us will forget it was ever hot at all.

The cab gets to El Brindis and I pay the man who seems to have found every red light along the way. Inside’s quiet except for the television showing a soccer game. The air conditioner doesn’t really work all that great and I sit down at the bar, dressed for another place entirely. The bartender doesn’t say anything rude when he notices the green and blue striped button-down shirt I’m wearing,

expertly ironed around the collar and cuffs, out of place in the bar where most people are wearing soccer jerseys, and I'm surprised. In a good way. I order a Presidente and leave him a two-dollar tip.

Abel walks in halfway through my second beer, and he looks like he's just gotten off work. He wears the same jeans he wears on the bus and a white t-shirt that's stained near the collarbone. His hair sticks up in the back and he doesn't bother trying to smooth it down with his hands, and I begin to feel at that moment that he'd never think to wear a similar kind of shirt to this bar just to meet me. He nods and sits next to me. I can smell the grease on him from the kitchen and when he holds up his hands to his face, I see they're burned along the edge of the knuckles. He asks if I want another beer.

"Don't worry about it," I say.

"No, let me get it. Please."

"OK. But I'll switch to whatever you're drinking."

He orders two Cuba Libres and talks about working in a kitchen. It's not anything a man can grow old doing, he says, but it's good enough to pay the bills and send some up to his kids. Most of the time, at least. It's steady work if you make yourself useful, and it's easier to start closer to the top here than it is in New York. Pretty soon he's finished with his drink and orders another and asks if I want to go upstairs.

He notices my shirt and doesn't change the way he acts, just like the bartender. "Sure," I tell him, and he pays for our second round.

Upstairs, a covered rooftop patio with a few cheap card tables and some hard plastic chairs, a wooden counter runs along the perimeter of the bar and a screen that fences in the entire patio. We're on a hill so we can see the tops of some of the buildings down the street. I take a seat on one of the tall stools near the edge of the patio and he stands facing me. It's still a warm night and I already feel some sweat dripping down my back.

We talk a bit about his family and he says the only thing he regrets about leaving New York is not being able to take his kids. It was a hard choice, truly getting away from his ex-girlfriend or being in his children's lives more regularly. He had to leave, though, and he knew not seeing them was a risk. There's still a bit of light from dusk and the evening feels thick with summer rain. I remember these kinds of nights when Landis and I used to ride our bikes up and down Georgia Avenue and tried to avoid the cicadas that fell. When he finishes talking, we stay quiet and listen to the radio playing boleros behind the bar.

"Hey, man, thanks for coming out tonight," Abel interrupts. "I really appreciate it."

"It's nothing."

"No, I mean it. There aren't many people willing to hear me out. It's nice."

He looks over at me and there's this suspended second when, if the world were a little different, he might have kissed me just to see what it felt like. If we lived in a world where kissing another man wasn't such a marker of the rest of one's life, I think he could find that desire somewhere in himself. In that suspended moment, I stare at him without sipping my drink, even though my throat is trying to scratch its way out and it is hot still, this late, and sweat is gathering in my tight underwear. I feel my body shaking like it's forty degrees out. He touches my shoulder and pinches the collar of my shirt and in that moment, I plan a life. I'd let him ride the bus for free, and he'd stand and talk to me as I drove him to work, and I'd make it a point to pick him up again if he promises to cut mangos and pour ice water for the both of us. And before either of us can say anything more, two guys walk up the stairs to the mostly empty patio and shout when they see us.

Abel backs away from me and then turns to face the men. He jaunts over and embraces the two guys and they greet one another in a mix of Spanish and English and Kreyòl. At first, I imagine Abel's drunk or delirious, but then I see that the men greet him just as joyfully. I think that maybe they're essentially strangers who come to this bar often, but they pat one another's cheeks playfully

and Abel puts one arm around each of them as he walks them both over to me. One of the men carries a tin of dominoes in his hands, and Abel introduces that guy first, and then the guy with a Knicks baseball cap second. He tells me they're friends visiting from New York.

"This is a good friend of mine here in the city," he tells the two newcomers, putting his hand on my sweaty back.

I feel as if I were interrupted before exhaling, and it's hard for me to do anything I know I should do. The three of them are smiling, and their excitement smells like sweat, and they don't for a second look down at my shirt. I know that I should try to shake their hands, put some certainty and bass in my voice, and try to remember the rules of how to play dominoes. But my face feels red and my eyes are hot, and there's a weakness in my wrists that makes me think I'm going to drop the glass in my hand. These guys aren't the interruption in Abel's evening.

"You down to play?" Abel asks me. He looks just the tiniest bit nervous, though I don't know why. Nothing actually happened between us.

In an attempt to keep myself from falling flat on my face, I nod and follow them to a nearby table. The guy carrying the dominoes takes them out from the tin and shuffles them. We each grab seven. The two New Yorkers pair up, and it's me and Abel on the other team. It's been a while for me, and they're patient while they explain the rules, and jibe me when I don't call my point, but we're not really keeping too much of a score. We play about a dozen hands — at least three games — over a couple of hours. The friends laugh and tease each other and every so often Abel gets up and brings me another Cuba Libre, squeezing my shoulder when he hands it to me.

He looks relaxed, as if he were hosting us in his living room, and I realize that I've never seen his face for this long of a time before. Normally, I'm watching the road and I don't know where he's looking. He could be watching me watch the road, or else looking straight ahead, too. Seeing Abel's face so close, and seeing it shine while he jokes with his friends from home — because New

York is still his home — gives me a glimpse of what he’s really like, and it’s different than what I had in mind. He seems younger, freer, like he’s the kind of man who can burp beneath his breath and say excuse me without being embarrassed. He smiles at me when he scores 25 on a play and I notice gaps in his teeth, and the way he smacks his lips softly after he’s taken a drink, the way he tongues the sharp tooth on the right side of his mouth when he’s thinking hard about a move — things these guys have probably already noticed a thousand times before and probably don’t notice anymore. It really is a treasure to see.

Around eleven they finish their last drinks and we put the dominoes away. The guys talk about going back to the apartment to change before going to a place that plays salsa until late and where beautiful women like to dance. They smoke a few cigarettes outside of the bar while trying to hail a cab that’ll finally stop for them. One eventually does, and they go up to the driver, give him the address, and the driver nods. Abel turns and looks at me.

“You coming?” he asks.

I shake my head. “I think I’ll head home.” All of the alcohol has made me thirsty and I feel like I could drink a gallon of mango juice with ice.

He comes back to me, smiling, and hugs me.

“Thanks for coming,” he says. “I owe you.”

“It’s nothing,” I say.

He pats my cheek and runs back to the cab, and I can still feel his hand there after he leaves. The other guys wave at me as they get inside and Abel rolls down the window as the cab drives past. “I’ll see you Wednesday!” he yells. I wave and watch them go until I can’t see the car anymore.

I walk up the street to wait for the bus that will take me to Dupont Circle, where I can take the 42 back home. It’s late and buses don’t run but every half hour late at night. I wait for it, though.

Ten, fifteen, twenty minutes. Each minute I spend waiting, I think about just hailing a cab. But each minute I wait, it makes less and less sense since the bus is closer than ever to arriving.

After forty minutes of waiting, the bus shows up. It's a route I've never driven before and I wonder if I'd like it. Something new, I think to myself. I'd have to learn to pay attention to street names again and get to know the shops in this part of the city. I'm the only one who boards and there aren't many passengers on the bus. I take out my wallet and swipe it against the fare box, but it buzzes loudly. I forgot my card with Mami.

"It's not catching your SmarTrip," the bus driver says. I've never seen her before and I assume she must be new.

"I work for Transit," I protest.

"Then where's your pass?"

"It's at home."

"And your work badge?"

"That, too."

She looks at me blankly and I open up my wallet to take out a dollar bill, but there aren't any left. I hold it up for her to see. She shakes her head and sighs, closes the door behind me.

"Go ahead," she says.

"Thank you," I say.

"But just so you know, you won't be able to get a transfer," she warns.

"That's fine," I say, moving to take a seat towards the back. "I'll figure it out when I get there."

## The Mint Plant

I've let another one die, and we pick up a replacement at the Ardovino's farmers market. "We gotta nurture this one a little bit better," you tell me, giving the green thing it's water and sticking it on the kitchen windowsill.

You repeat these exact words before you leave the apartment for work on Monday, and remind me to give it a little bit of plant food and moisten the soil with lukewarm water on off days, and bring my face real close to it, immerse myself in its jagged leaves, ingest the oiles, beg the fucker to grow.

But I don't do any of that. Partly because I truly do just forget when I get caught up in the Internet, or my writing, or daydreaming, or more likely worrying about a violent dream I had five years before and deciding whether or not I should hide our paint thinners or if that would just be another compulsion and make things worse. So, I often leave the apartment without giving the mint plant it's requisite care.

That can hardly come as a surprise. I've been responsible for nurturing myself for a full 12 years now, and I've not learned how to do it well enough to avoid therapy, or to avoid hurting you, or to avoid thinking that I'd be better off somewhere else entirely. If not dead, then maybe living in Siberia, or a place that feels like Siberia, like Reno. Or maybe Provo. Yes, somewhere I can escape a future and a past and simply go to the grocery store and pretend that I've only ever existed in Provo. That my name is Provonese for "Comes from Provo," and when I'm waiting in the checkout line and someone asks where I grew up, I can say, "Just right here."

Though, that's just the purest form of running away, I guess.

And I do like this west El Paso apartment, and we've got a good thing going now, even if the mint leaves turn a little brown and you just kind of shake your head and add a little water to it and ask if I can at least move it to the bay window sometimes so it can get more light.

That I can do. I like watching the leaves soaking up its sunshine. It reminds me of an easy way of living.

And truth be told the mint plant is a worthwhile thing to keep alive. Because sometimes when it's raining and it's nice and cool out, we set up two chairs in front of the big open bay windows. You ask me to cut off the ripest leaves from the plant and split them between two mugs. I pour in hot water, and a lemon wedge, and a sprinkle of brown sugar to cover up the bitter taste from the browning leaves, and we listen to the rain fall while we drink our hot drinks. You say the tea's good for digestion, good for neuroses, and I believe only the part about digestion because it's the only part I've ever seen proof for.

The puny thing looks even smaller after I've raided its leaves, but I'm grateful for the contents in my cup. We sit by the open window, bits of rain lapping at our bare feet touching at the toes. How else to describe all this but nurturing?

## Too Much Freedom

Before he left, Benny checked the tire pressure and oil levels of his Jeep Wrangler. It was 7:00 a.m. and his mother stood by the driveway, arms crossed, watching him work. She was up earlier than usual, and standing on her own. A good sign.

Several months before, the day his mother went into the hospital for her last chemotherapy treatment, Benny spent his morning on the phone with the Los Angeles Memorial Sports Arena box office. A small part of him believed he was willing her recovery with the purchase, committing money to a future and not worrying whether she was going to be in it. After two hours on hold, he was patched through to an operator. “Just one. For Blond Ambition,” Benny said, and charged the \$75 to his credit card.

Benny finished checking the Jeep and walked his mother back inside. The usual smell of rotting bananas in the kitchen had been replaced that morning by a thick smell of anise from the café de olla on the stove. His sister, Birdie, sat slouched at the kitchen table, drinking a cup and reading the paper.

“You’re sure everything’s ready?” his mother asked.

“Car’s fine. I’ve got an extra map in the glove compartment. Motel’s booked.”

“You hungry? I can make some eggs before you go. There’s some stale sweet bread from yesterday, but you can dip it in the coffee.”

“I’ll get something on the road.”

“Make sure you eat. I don’t want you coming back looking like you starved the whole weekend. Also, don’t drive so fast on the highway.”

“I won’t.”

“And don’t come back a father, huh?”

“Really, Ma?”

“And if someone tries mugging you in L.A., just give them whatever they want.”

“No one’s going to mug me,” Benny said.

“Never know,” Birdie said, not looking up from her paper. “Just read about a lady driving to New Jersey. Picked up a man she met at a gas station. Drove through ten states together, and when they got there, they were arrested. Turns out he was wanted for murder.”

“Glad you’re not driving to New Jersey,” she said.

“I should head out,” Benny said.

“I’ll walk out with you.”

“No, Ma,” Birdie said, looking up from the paper. “Poor air quality this morning. Can’t risk more exposure.”

Benny rolled his eyes. Hadn’t Birdie noticed? The house didn’t smell like rotting fruit anymore. Their mother had been standing on her own by the driveway and, though she still looked as fragile as a bird, she was gaining weight.

“Call me when you get there,” his mother said.

Benny hugged his mother, her shoulder blades weak as crushed paper. Birdie offered an anemic wave goodbye, and he answered with the same. His mother walked Benny to the front door and watched him from the living room window. He could tell she was crying, and it made his face flood with warm blood. His mother rarely cried before her cancer, and now she did anytime he left the house and she was awake to see it. He backed out and drove toward the Interstate.

When Benny finally made it to Los Angeles, the sky was the color of blueberries and the air smelled like jasmine and, if he paid close enough attention, car exhaust and wildfire. On the radio, 95.5 FM played Madonna songs, and felt like he was watching the pinnacle of human achievement:

California in 1990. Leading up to the trip, he'd spent hours studying the Los Angeles Spartacus guidebook. Sometimes, if it was late, he even began recognizing his face in the photos of men at Aleph, A Different Light, Ginger Rogers Beach. At least, he imagined his own face mimicking their light expressions, their great, stirred eyes, the lips upcast knowing they'd made it to the coast.

Benny found the Sleep N' Suite, located off Victory Boulevard, a few blocks beyond the Hollywood Freeway overpass. The discount motel was announced by a neon palm tree touting vacant rooms and free cable. His room was a simple one: queen-sized bed with a comforter that smelled like wet cigarette smoke, and dim light that came from a single lamp atop the nightstand.

Birdie was probably waiting for his call, their mother already having gone to bed. He picked up the receiver and dialed the number, using a calling card he picked up at a gas station in Arizona. She picked up after two rings, answering in a voice rusted with rest.

"Benny? Are you there?"

"At the motel."

"How was the drive?"

"Done. How's Mom?"

She talked about the day, about their mother's midday nausea, appetite at dinner, twilight bedtime. It was 10:00 p.m. in El Paso. A typical Friday night for her. Him, too, with a few exceptions, like the time, nearly a year before, when he'd stayed out until 2 a.m. to see Book of Love play at Joteria's. During the show, he stood at the edge of the crowd and was surprised when a man with wide eyes came over to stand next to him. He was probably in his thirties, bearded, straight teeth.

"You having fun tonight?" he asked after standing beside Benny for a few minutes.

"Loads."

He smiled and they talked during the song breaks, the stranger putting his hand on Benny's shoulder blade whenever he bent over to yell a question in his ear. *What do you do for work? You got a boyfriend? Where are your friends tonight?* Benny couldn't remember the answers he or the man gave, but he did remember it felt electric. Music filled their chests and his feet wanted to dance. Twice the stranger went to the bar and brought back an extra Tecate. Eventually, the man asked his last question:

"You wanna head out?"

Benny's jaw felt stiff, and he could feel himself shaking at the possibility.

"Sure, let's go," Benny said.

"We'll have to go to your place," he said.

He imagined Birdie waiting up for him, eating cereal in front of the television. For a moment, he almost wished he'd invited her to the concert. She might've frowned through the whole thing, but she would have almost certainly agreed to go.

"We can't go to my place, either," Benny said.

The stranger shrugged his shoulders and lifted his hands in helplessness. The man's answers became less and less frequent, and started answering with headshakes or raised eyebrows instead of words. Eventually, they just stood next to each other, as if they'd never spoken in their lives. They looked out at the crowd, avoiding the appearance of being together, and gradually parted ways by the end of the second set.

At home later that night, Benny joined his sister with a bowl of cereal and watched muted TV coverage of the falling Berlin Wall.

"We're living in a new world," Birdie whispered, slurping her milk. She wiped her mouth with the collar of her UTEP Miners t-shirt and sat hunched over the living room coffee table.

"Yeah, Birdie, it's something else."

He and Birdie were never going to be close — and not because Birdie might disapprove of Benny going to places like Joteria’s, though she very well might. She’d probably get over that, and even if she didn’t, there were limits to her outrage (though, the same couldn’t be said about their mother). After all, they couldn’t make rent without his help.

No, Benny didn’t invite her to Joteria’s because he disapproved of her. She was only 25, but she already had diabetic black bands on the back of her neck and graying hair at her temples. Every morning she woke with bags beneath her eyes, and had a bad knee that made it difficult to walk far. Birdie and Benny used to joke that their mother’s bone cancer onset six months before, when Benny had just turned 21 and when Birdie should have started her third year at UTEP, was their mother’s last-ditch effort to keep both of them home. It worked. Benny scrapped plans to move out of his family’s house on Frankfort, and Birdie quit school to nurse their mother full-time. The illness demanded a communal approach to life and work, misery and money evenly distributed. He couldn’t imagine a man coming up to him at a Book of Love show with Birdie frowning at his side.

“You must be tired. I’ll let you sleep,” she said over the motel phone.

“Night, Birdie. Tell Mom I called.”

“Will you call again tomorrow?” she asked.

He’d planned an entire day’s worth of activities before the concert the next day. He had too much freedom to waste any of it on long calls home.

“Hey, Birdie?”

“What?”

“Even the air smells different here. It’s exciting. Like anything might happen.”

“That’s something else, Benny,” she said after a moment’s quiet, and hung up.

Parking in East Hollywood, he'd read, was a pain and he parked three blocks away from Aleph. He got out of his car and crossed onto the west side of Lexington, where Benny noticed two men standing close together in the shadow of a shuttered storefront. *Maybe we were meant to be together even though we never met before. We got to move before the sun is rising and you'll be walking slowly out the door.* The men wore FILA jackets, though it was already May, and muttered to each other. One of the men smoked a cigarette and looked down at his feet, dirty sneakers, while the other man's eyes met Benny's.

They were brown eyes, and skipped from side to side, down and then up. He had brown skin, black hair, chin and cheeks sporting a week's growth. The man didn't shift his eyes away from Benny immediately. Instead, he nodded and Benny mirrored the same. They looked at each other in a way that, Benny assumed, meant they were cruising. Sweat pooled around his neck and underneath his arms, and his heart groaned like an upset stomach. It felt necessary to try and touch him.

Before turning to cross Westmoreland, Benny turned back, to plead with the man to follow. He even shortened the length the man had to walk by stopping at a corner store on the next block. Inside, the shop owner sat behind the checkout counter. The shop owner watched Benny as he walked to the soda cooler, which almost made him want to laugh, as if he were honestly going to risk his freedom to rob such a shitty store.

After picking out a can of Coke, Benny closed the door of the soda cooler and heard a noise that sounded like neighbors banging pots on New Year's Eve. Two men had entered the store. FILA jackets. Dirty sneakers. The first man pulled the Proof Coil chain and lowered the shop's front shutter a little more than halfway. The second man, the one with brown eyes, approached Benny and grabbed his shoulders with his left arm, pulling Benny in close as if they were in a movie theater that had just darkened.

"Come on out, old man," the man told the shop owner, who had reached for the telephone.

Benny felt metal jutting into his shoulder blade. When Benny tried looking down to see what it was that poked his side, the man gripped the back of Benny's neck and kept his head staring straight ahead at the old man behind his plexiglass. He guided Benny, as though he were a blinded horse, to the checkout counter.

"I don't want to make a mess out here. And you don't want to have to clean it up neither. Come out, come out. Pretty fucking please."

The man who had lowered the front shutter kept watch at the entrance. "Hurry the fuck up," he said, jittery as an unspooling cassette tape.

The man was missing a left tooth, and his patchy beard reached all the way down his neck. Hot air, peppered with the scent of liquor and tobacco, blew against his face and a firm arm held him close. The contact almost felt like a hug, and for a moment, Benny was more worried about what the shop owner would think of him standing so close to another man.

"Walk, motherfucker," the man said, and Benny walked with him, approaching the counter.

The locked arm was tight and he felt his shoulder blade cramping, and he wanted to say, "OK, that's enough, you're hurting me." When he realized that doing so was a bad idea, and that his mouth wouldn't work to form the words, anyway, he feared for his shoulders. What was protecting them beneath the man's arm besides a Book of Love t-shirt? His body shook, starting with his stomach, and then went deep in his lungs, his breath shortening as if he were trying to sneeze but unable to exhale. Sweat pooled in the small of his back, and beads dripped from his armpits along his obliques as he tried to peel away the man's fingers. Nobody had explained what this contact would entail, or that his shoulder would be hurt, and Benny had the vague, droning sense that his mother could never know what was happening.

"Sir, please," Benny said. "My mother has bone cancer. And my sister doesn't work. I need to call them."

He didn't respond, and kept his gaze straight ahead. Benny followed the man's eyeline. The shop owner looked straight at him with a gaping mouth.

It clicked. If the men wanted whatever was behind the counter, why was the old man just standing there? Why was the assailant's arm so tight? Had that squealing come from Benny's own throat? Why was it so hot when it was only May?

The shop owner stepped out from behind the counter, hands held up. He lay on his stomach, face flat on the floor, without being told. The jittery man sprinted to tear the keys dangling from the old man's hip. He opened the cash register to put what cash there was into a black plastic bag. After, he stuffed liquor and cigarettes into a green Jansport backpack. His were expert moves. The old man shook his head over and over and over, and let him take everything.

When the jittery man took as much as he could carry, the assailant loosened his grip on Benny. "Get down. On your knees," he said.

Benny slinked to the floor and crouched, arms over head, eyes clenched, after he saw the man's weapon for the first time. He laughed and said in a low voice, "I bet you're scared right now. And I don't blame you."

The assailant slapped Benny's cheeks gently.

"I'm not lying. Please, I know I'm not. My mother has bone cancer and my sister doesn't work."

He tapped one finger against Benny's lips to keep him quiet. "Your wallet. Please. Pretty please."

"Fuck! Let's go," the assailant's partner said, his voice a sharp note in the room.

"Drink your Coke," the assailant said, ignoring his partner. Benny looked at his hands and saw a can there, and had forgotten that it had been there the whole time. The shop owner was still on the floor, shaking his head, and Benny felt as though his bladder might rupture.

“I’m not from here,” Benny said. His chest, the left side, ached with each breath. “You can keep everything I have. I’ll get you more. Anything.”

Again, the assailant touched Benny’s lips.

“Open the fucking Coke.”

Benny did this time. He opened it expertly, cracking open the seal to release enough gas before opening it all the way — the best way to keep from making a mess. He wanted the man to see how well Benny could follow directions, and to keep giving him directions.

“Drink. Please drink,” the assailant said.

Benny put the frosted soda can to his lips and watched the assailant comb his wallet and pocket the \$35. He fished out Benny’s license and studied the front.

I want Birdie. Benny thought he’d said the words in his head, but the man looked down at him and his eyebrows wilted. Benny’s face felt hot, embarrassed. He bit his tongue to postpone crying for as long as possible.

“What the fuck’s birdie?” he said. He took out the concert ticket.

“Motherfucker, let’s go.” The partner was clutching his sides and pacing in circles.

The assailant looked down at Benny again, and cocked his head to the right.

“You in town for a concert?”

Benny started crying. He wanted to tell his mother and sister that he didn’t blame California. At least he wasn’t in New Jersey. He nodded at the question.

“I’ve heard of her. She the one that dances around in that stupid bra?”

“I promise I won’t say anything. I have a bad memory. Take the ticket. Take the wallet. It’s real leather.”

“You drove all this way just to see some bitch dance half-naked?”

“I’m so sorry. Please.”

“I know a place up on Lexington, you can see the real thing, only it’ll cost you \$15. And that’s \$15 if you’re feeling generous. You interested in that?”

The revolt in Benny’s body was complete and he’d lost the battle against his bladder. Piss streamed down his jeans and puddled around him. He dry heaved and thought he was going to vomit.

“But I don’t think you’re here for that kind of show. You don’t strike me as the kind of man interested in watching a bitch dance naked.”

“Fuck,” the partner groaned. He went to the cooler and Benny heard him open up a can of something, and belch after a long chug.

The assailant still looked down at Benny and smiled a penetrating smile. He cut the ticket in half, then again in fourths, and then once more into even smaller pieces.

“This is me doing you a favor. That kind of man’s a dangerous thing to be these days.” He slapped Benny’s face again, and it left a cold sting.

“When they ask, can you all make my hair blonde? Why’s it always gotta be brown skin, black hair? Do that for me, huh? Pretty fucking please.”

The two men crawled out the gap between the floor and the front shutter, and disappeared. Benny imagined them leaving, perhaps on a motorcycle, hips-crushing-hips as they drove off. For a second, Benny even imagined himself riding with them, experts in getting away, ruthless in their freedom.

Benny, sitting in his heavy jeans, asked the shop owner, “What should we do?”

Escape? His mother’s hospital visits had shown him that, sometimes, there’s no such thing. Even so, after all the sicknesses that threaten the body, the work that turns hair gray too soon, after feeling sick in your chest when you realize you’ll break your mother’s heart when you fall in love — after all that, what else is there to do, but try to escape?

When the cops finally showed up to the convenience store, they wanted better answers. Was Benny sure he hadn't gotten a good look at the guys? Any detail was important, especially since the shop owner flatly refused to say anything other than, "What they took wasn't even worth the work."

Benny had, maybe, gotten a quick look. Not a good one, not at all. If he had to, he'd say one of the men had a red beard. Light skin. Green eyes. But he couldn't say for sure. He hadn't paid much attention to the eyes.

The next evening, Benny, ticketless, called from a payphone outside the arena. It was Saturday, 8 p.m. in Los Angeles, 9 p.m. in El Paso. She picked up after two rings.

"Birdie?" He heard his own breath in the phone receiver.

"Benny, you haven't called all day. Where are you?"

"Change of plans."

"You're not at the concert?"

"I meant about when I was getting back to El Paso," his voice vibrated in his throat and it made his jaw shake.

"Benny, what's wrong?"

"I'll be back a day later, I think. Two at the most."

He'd wanted to call after the robbery. He'd even dialed the first few numbers before hanging up again. He didn't want to hear her cry, lecture, tell their mother.

"Birdie?"

"You're joking."

He'd wanted to stay a week longer. Benny still wanted to go to the beach. Try sushi. Order a drink at Aleph. There was too much to see in California to fit into one week. Two wouldn't even be enough.

"How's Mom?"

"About the same. You sound weird, what's going on?"

If he had it in him, he could stay longer than two weeks. Pretend he didn't have a sister and mother who needed him. He'd establish a life that had nothing to do with sickness, and dance to Madonna records in his living room, instead of locking his bedroom door at night and playing the music so low to keep from waking his mother that it could hardly even count as playing. He'd find an apartment in Pico Rivera, work at the Miller's Outpost in Montebello, be the kind of man who spends every weekend finding someone with dark brown eyes. That kind of man was a dangerous thing to be.

"I've got to go," Benny said. "Show's about to start."

"Benny, are you sure you're OK?"

"See you soon, Birdie."

"Hold on," she said, but Benny had already hung up.

## Space

“The sauce is burning.”

“Nazareth, I’ve been cooking spaghetti since before you were born.”

“Mom says you can’t even cook a quesadilla.”

“Your mother says a lot of things.”

“Most of them crazy.”

“Can you grate the cheese?”

Gil and his fifteen-year-old daughter, Nazareth, ate dinner together each Wednesday, his only day off from Hierba Buena and the only day he saw her all week. Gil looked forward to the meals with his daughter who, after two years of disliking his apartment, recently exhibited a novel appreciation of his place on San Marcial and Pera. Nazareth was, if not pleasant, then certainly not hostile those Wednesdays. She didn’t stomp her feet when she walked from room to room anymore; didn’t spend the evenings talking to her boyfriend, Isaiah, on her phone; didn’t try to drown out Gil’s voice as she practiced sight-reading for her guitar class. She said more than “fine” or “OK” during their meals of spaghetti, burgers, or chicken tacos. Gil called it progress.

“She’s not all there anymore, Dad,” Nazareth said.

“All where? That’s good,” he said, taking a pinch of grated muenster. “Would you set the table?”

“Ever since she met Joe, it’s like she’s been abducted by aliens. Only it’s worse, because they’re Jehovah’s Witnesses.”

“Worse than aliens? That does sound serious.”

“Joe won’t even eat birthday cake. And they make me go to church with them all day Sunday.”

“A man who won’t eat cake?”

“Sometimes she locks me in my room.”

“She doesn’t *lock* you in your room,” Gil said, taking buttered bread out of the toaster oven.

“Does she?”

“Might as well. It’s either stay in my room and study, or help her clean the house.”

“Cleaning is not a bad thing. If you do decide to clean, can you bring me some of the photos I still have there?” Gil hadn’t thought to take any of Nata’s photos when he moved out of the house on Calais two years ago, and he still referred to them as his photos since he’d been the one to actually take the shots, though they never would have been developed if Eva hadn’t taken the rolls of film to the photo center at Walmart. He’d asked Eva for some of the photos later when he remembered, when she still answered his phone calls, but it became a point of pride for her to watch him ask for something. Eventually, she stopped answering, and Gil stopped asking her. He stirred the spaghetti sauce one last time and tapped the wooden spoon on the pan’s edge.

“All right. Bring the plates.”

Nazareth brought one plate to the stove and Gil served spaghetti and sauce. She returned it to the table and brought him the other.

“Not too much for me,” Nazareth said.

Gil ignored his impulse to ask why, or to try to understand his daughter as someone old enough to be concerned about things like her own weight. She astounded him, and he didn’t know where she picked up some of her ideas. Where, for instance, in the year 2008, had she gotten the idea to say that her only dream in life was to move to Greenwich Village — “Green Witch,” she called it — and play in coffeeshops. When she first discovered Joan Baez records, Nazareth had been disappointed in Gil’s inability to name a single one of her songs, Gil being about thirty years too late to the party and having spent the bulk of his teenage years listening to Hole and Mudhoney. When she played songs for him, he’d invariably say, “The words were sad, but you’re a great writer,” to

which she generally responded with something like, “It’s not my song, Dad, it’s Simon & Garfunkel,” or, “Don’t you know Joni Mitchell?” Sometimes it felt like the girl in front of him was actually a stranger who’d just walked in off the street.

“Can you do something?” Nazareth said after her first bite.

“About your mother? As if she’d ever listen to me. That’d be the day. They’d write about it in the paper. The headline would say, ‘Eva finally discovers her ears.’”

Nazareth had already finished her spaghetti and took some salad — chopped iceberg and chunks of overripe Romas, splattered it with dollar-store ranch dressing.

“I’m sure she means well,” Gil added, afraid he’d taken the jabbing a little too far. “She just goes a little overboard whenever she’s stressed.”

“You should tell her not to take her stress out on me.”

“Your mother doesn’t want to hear anything I have to say.”

He didn’t understand why Eva insisted on staying mad. As if she had anything to be mad about. She’d found Joe, hadn’t she? Gil couldn’t say half as much. At first, Gil had to convince her he wasn’t leaving for another woman. After work one night, he lay face down on their bed after having applied Icy Hot to his lower back and, in a muffled voice, said he couldn’t be married to her anymore. *You’re just like the rest of them*, she’d said. *One woman is never enough*. No woman would be enough. Gil came to accept that. Probably too late, but eventually. He would have left it at *I just need some space to think. A break*, but Eva pushed and Gil told her. She’d handled it well, considering. Eva even sat beside him when he told Nazareth a few months later. *I don’t think of women in a romantic way*, he’d said. *I’m not like other dads that way*. Eva cried, but nodded. Nazareth looked down at her feet, and Gil asked if she had any questions. Nazareth shook her and said, *Don’t know what I’d ask*. It had been a civil talk.

But something changed when Gil moved into the place on Pera. She grew rigid during the

times he could stop by the house to see Nazareth; then he wasn't welcome in the house at all anymore. Then she took it upon herself to tell the extended family they'd all agreed not to tell until the time — never explicitly named, but gestured toward with a general sense of the future — was right. Doña, Eva told his mother over the phone one day, *Did your son tell you why he left his family? Ask him yourself if you don't believe me.* Gil had never forgiven Eva for telling her after agreeing to let the sickly woman live in ignorance.

Nazareth took her empty spaghetti plate and rinsed it off in the sink. "You should let me live here on the weekends," she said.

Gil put his fork down and gulped down his Tecate. She'd never asked that before. In fact, Nazareth's moving in with Gil was such a remote possibility that Gil hadn't even taken the time to come up with a reason to discourage it. He put the can down and wiped his mouth.

"You don't want to live here."

"Why not?"

"There's not enough space. You'd hate it."

"I'd get used to it. I really don't need much room. Just somewhere to sleep. Maybe some space in your closet. I wouldn't even bring all my clothes. I'd be willing to donate them to Goodwill. Some of them, at least."

"How would you get around? I work weekends, remember?"

"Isaiah can drop me off."

"Nata, he doesn't even have his license yet."

"I'll take the bus then."

"It's not that I don't want you to stay here. But I wouldn't want you to be here alone most of the weekend."

Gil pulled out the chair beside him so Nazareth could sit. She sat and looked down at the

table, stray tears dropping onto the balsa surface. She rubbed her eyes and looked up at him. “I don’t mind,” she said.

Her eyeliner had smudged and she looked precisely like who she was: a girl who played with makeup.

“Listen,” Gil said. “When the time’s right, I’m going to talk to Andres about giving me a raise. I’m a certified pharmacy technician now. And when he does, I’ll save up enough money to move into a bigger place. I’ll ask your mother to let you stay with me every other weekend.”

Nazareth chewed the inside of her mouth and got up from her chair. “Fine,” she said and didn’t say much for the rest of the evening. Gil cleared the table and washed the dishes without asking Nazareth to help dry. He let her go into the living room to read her biology textbook until eight, when Nazareth’s phone rang. Eva had insisted on dropping Nazareth off and picking her up on Wednesdays. “It’s easier for me, coming from church,” she said, though it felt like control.

“Coming, Mom.” Nazareth got up from the sofa and put her books in her bag. “She’s here,” she called to Gil, who sat at the kitchen table, listening to the UTEP men’s basketball game on the radio and doing the *El Paso Times* crossword puzzle. There was a steady moan of pain in his lower back, and sitting upright at the kitchen table made it ache a little less.

“I’ll walk you out.”

“You don’t have to.”

“Yes, I do.”

Outside the apartment, a group of young men, some no older than Nazareth, sat outside on wooden stools and the concrete steps, arguing about the next Lakers season, though they were an entirely different time zone than Los Angeles. The group nodded to Gil and Gil nodded back. Out of respect and neighborliness, they ignored Nazareth entirely.

Eva’s car idled at the curb. A new Ford Fusion, Joe’s.

“Give me a hug,” Gil said.

Nazareth turned to her father, without raising her arms. He put his arms around her limp body and pulled her close to him. He could feel her relax after a moment and her head leaned against his shoulder. Gil let her go and looked her in the eyes.

“Tell me if it gets worse. I’ll talk to her.”

Nazareth nodded. “I will.”

“Be good.”

“Bye, Dad.”

He watched as Nazareth opened the car door. The car light turned on and he saw Eva’s profile. She had shorter hair and didn’t dye it anymore, despite the gray sprouting from her roots. It looked good. Better than the blonde highlights she’d insisted on for years. She also wasn’t wearing makeup, which was more unusual to see than the new crows’ feet around her eyes and indentations of age along her mouth. Not that Gil fared much better from 14 years of marriage, 1 year of separation, and 1 year of divorce. Sometimes he didn’t believe he hadn’t yet turned 40 when he saw himself in the mirror.

Eva said something to Nazareth as she buckled her seatbelt, though Gil couldn’t make it out exactly. Nazareth shook her head. The car light faded when Eva turned to meet Gil’s gaze. It amazed him that, even now, after living apart for all those months, he felt the urge to lie about something each time she looked at him, a U-turn back to the worst parts of their marriage. He swallowed and waved. Eva simply turned around and continued her lecture. Before the car took off down the road, Gil caught Nazareth’s face in the side mirror and Gil recognized the look on her face, the general exasperation in her bones, a deep desire to stop speech midair and live with only the gentle hum of a distant radio station.

It hadn’t occurred to Gil that, upon leaving his wife, he would also have to find a new job.

Not that it was much of a punishment, though it certainly was humiliating. Apart from the sinking feeling in his chest when he thought of not being able to provide adequately for Nazareth, Gil also assumed that Eva had told precisely everyone why their marriage was ending. He imagined her, like a jilted White House staffer penning a tell-all, reporting to her parents each of the countless secrets he'd offered up to her in the quiet of their lives together that dated back to when they were both 17. He never knew what exactly Eva told her father, but Gil knew that whatever she shared was enough to cause the old man to come up to him in the breakroom of Landeros Beverage Co. to say he was sorry Gil had resigned, and that he could pick up his final check in two weeks.

If Gil knew better, he could have sued. In fact, he did have some inkling that such a firing likely constituted a breach of the rules, but the energy to call a lawyer and initiate a public airing of laundry required too much money and energy that it didn't constitute an actual possibility for Gil. That was probably why Eva's father felt he could fire him with as much ease as a shave stroke. After spending 27 years driving trucks and delivering cases of beer, and crates of wine, and thousands of cans of soda to area restaurants and bars, the old man had built up enough credibility to recommend hires, prevent firings, and initiate resignations.

Gil, one of the old man's first hiring recommendations, had given the company 14 years of his life, in addition to most of the good use of his lower back. The sometimes shooting, sometimes burning pain flared up particularly whenever he was stressed, and it was this intense back pain that led him, during his last week as a beverage delivery driver, to Hierba Buena.

After dropping off a case of Mexican lagers to an upscale bistro on the corner of Franklin Avenue and Stanton Street, Gil's lumbar ached so tremendously that he had to lie face-down on the lawn of the Federal Courthouse two blocks away. After letting the tremors move through his body for a quarter-hour, he stumbled to his feet again and stopped at the drugstore on Texas Avenue for a salve, ointment, aspirin — anything shy of illegal that could balm his pain.

Later, Gil would consider it something akin to fate that, despite being distracted with trying to find a job and the ache in his lower back, he'd actually noticed the typed sign hanging in the window advertising a part-time cashier opening.

It was always intended to be a throwaway until he could secure another job doing something else. The first few weeks working at Hierba Buena cemented his non-commitment, with Gil being scheduled only ten paid hours to train with Andres's pregnant, impatient daughter. Dolores, a lady in her late sixties, worked at Hierba Buena during the mornings, from 9am to noon, when the medical counter wasn't yet open, and Andres got away with paying her \$6 an hour because he paid in cash and let her sit the entire time. Andres, soon impressed by Gil's punctuality and grateful for his quiet nature, began to schedule Gil for 35 hours each week, in addition to paying for half of a pharmacy technician training certificate at the El Paso Community College.

Gil never fathomed having a health career — career wasn't a word that he generally used when describing work — but he knew enough about the job to accept the offer. At the very least, he didn't have to deliver 75 pound beer kegs all day.

He enjoyed counting out the pills, watching Andres speak in excited, low tone to customers, asking them about their personal health facts and hearing them in unblinking nonjudgement, a rarity for a man his age. He even liked wearing the white coat Andres presented to him at the end of the certificate program, which first made him feel like an imposter whenever he moved around the store, but in time took precautions to protect the garment, removing it whenever he had to restock and taking it to the dry cleaners once a month. He even dropped off the coat at his mother's house one Saturday afternoon so she could stitch his name above the breast pocket with her crooked, shaky fingers.

He was genuinely grateful for the opportunity Andres had given him, and he returned his gratitude not in unctuous "thank yous" — he said it only once, after receiving the white jacket —

but in remaining an uncomplaining employee who finished the work of a pharmacy technician and assistant store-manager in 38 paid hours per week.

It came as a relative surprise, when, at the end of his Thursday evening shift, Gil, pilgrim of silent suffering, asked for a raise.

“A raise?” Andres asked, as if he hadn’t understood the statement.

“I’ve thought a lot about it. I’m saving up for Nazareth when she gets her car. And I’ve got some other expenses.”

“It’s not entirely out of the question, but we certainly have to take these things slowly.”

“I appreciate all that you’ve done for me, honest, and I’ve been doing a good job for you”— he touched his sciatica at this point and hissed. He smiled at an older woman standing at the checkout counter and asked if she’d found everything all right, rang her up, asked her to come back soon, and to stay dry out there. The old woman took a few moments to collect her two plastic bags, and then zipped up her jacket for the unseasonable rain.

“We’ll talk about it later,” Andres said, when the lady walked out of the store. “Start locking up.”

As soon as Andres gave the instruction, the front door chimed again, announcing someone had walked into the store. The customer was dressed in a suit without a tie, and he had thinning brown hair and a full beard. His face was burned red by the desert sun, and his skin was wet from the rainstorm. He smiled, a white-toothed grin, and raised his eyebrows at Gil standing behind the counter.

Gil smiled at the customer and, as soon as he did, looked behind him at the rows of medicine boxes that required a driver’s license to purchase. He ran his useless hands over the boxes, straightening the straight, dusting the dustless.

“Did you hear me?” Andres asked again, from inside his cubicle where he sent off orders

and reconciled the books.

“Discuss later. Right,” Gil answered, turning back toward the customer, who hunted through the aisles.

Gil pulled down the metal shutters from the side windows and switched around the typed “Open/Abierto” sign. The customer moved between the oral hygiene aisle, to the skin care aisle, to the corner where they stocked their beer and wine. He hadn’t been in the shop before, at least not while Gil was working. He surely would have remembered this man who moved through the sections with the ease of living in a new apartment — slow, confident movements. The man crouched in his suit to look at the selection of soaps on the bottom shelf.

He looked over at Gil, and Gil shook his head in embarrassment. It was too easy to watch him.

“We’re closing in a few minutes,” Gill called out to the customer. “But take your time since it’ll take me a few minutes to close everything up.”

“I’ll be quick,” the customer answered.

Gil walked back behind the counter, massaging his lower back as he moved, and opened the cash register and counted out his drawer. He was in the middle of a triple-digit number when the customer interrupted. He placed a bar of activated charcoal soap, stick of deodorant, and a bottle of cheap red wine on the checkout counter.

“Told you I’d be quick.”

The man, Jaime, 36, according to his driver’s license needed for the wine, introduced himself as “Jimmy, new to the area.” He smiled, showed his white straight teeth, which indicated he had money. Only someone with money would smile so widely, so late in the day.

“Did you find everything all right?”

Gil scanned the rest of the items and put them into a plastic bag.

“Fine, thanks. This is a good place. Convenient. I guess that’s where the name comes from. Convenience store. Not that this is one. More like a pharmacy. Which it is. Sorry, my mind stops coordinating with my mouth whenever I stay at work too late.”

“You work around here?”

“Right up the street. At the old El Paso Electric building on Mills.”

“Welcome to the neighborhood. We’re the only place still open this late. If you ever need to pick up something before heading home, we’re here. And if it’s not a medication, I can probably even stay open a few minutes later.”

“I’ll remember that.”

Gil rang up the order and watched Jimmy as he swiped his credit card in the reader, which took nearly a minute to process. Jimmy chuckled as he tapped his credit card on the counter. Up close, he had a small paunch hidden in his suit and his brown hair was graying near the ears. Even that late, Gil could smell faint bits of his cologne.

It still amazed him just how logical and easy such an attraction to a handsome man could feel.

“It won’t bounce, I promise,” Jimmy said, indicating the credit card.

“The machines are shit,” said Gil, sotto voce. “I tell my boss over and over he’s got to replace them.”

“It’s OK,” Jimmy said in the same hushed tone, “I don’t mind waiting.”

Gil picked up the deodorant bar from the plastic bag and his hand shook. Breathless, bold, lightheaded. He had never done anything like it before.

“I like this brand. Smells good. Not too strong, but strong enough.”

Jimmy took it from his hand.

“I agree. It might be too much information, but I find myself going through this stuff faster

in the desert than I ever did living on the East Coast. I just moved back here last month from Washington, D.C. Ever been?"

"Never."

The credit card transaction approved, Gil handed the plastic bags out to Jimmy. There are men who invite other men into their beds. Such a fact used to blister his heart, the possibility seemingly as remote as winning the Powerball jackpot or earning a medical degree. Having the freedom to do so sometimes made Gil run out of breath and his cheeks swell with something that felt like bewilderment, or grief.

"Thanks."

Jimmy took his two plastic bags and loitered in front of the counter, seemingly unable to accept that the transaction was officially over. He offered his hand to the air, left it there for a moment and Gil answered with the same. Jimmy turned around and walked out the door, the chime announcing the store was empty again. Only then did Gil remember the pain in his lower back.

"You ready to close up?" Andres asked. He'd already snapped the metal lock onto the plexiglass shutters that encased the shop's stockpile of medicines, and was waiting to lock up the contents of the drawer in his office.

"Yeah," Gil said, handing the bag of receipts and cash to Andres. "Let's go."

She was giving him nothing. Not Dairy Queen, not Whataburger. Not the chicken tacos, but also not stovetop burgers seasoned to her satisfaction and topped with Velveeta American cheese slices.

"I'm just not hungry."

"But it's dinner time."

"Then you should have dinner."

She'd been like that since Eva dropped her off around 4:00pm. She groaned as she plopped her bag and guitar case against the door and collapsed onto the sofa with a headache. Gil offered Tylenol, to turn off the lights, a wash cloth wrapped around a few ice cubes, and Nazareth refused each one with a disgusted look, as if he had just emitted a battery of foul odors. She looked around the apartment, as if to notice it for the first time. Her grimace melted.

Asking her what was wrong, at least then, would be pointless. He'd already asked, and she'd insisted that, headache aside, nothing at all was wrong.

"Fine, we can just stay here. I'll order pizza. If you get hungry, you can have a slice. If not, then you can take some home."

"Tylenol doesn't work for me, I've tried it. Do you have any Advil?"

"I don't. I can go get some."

"How do you not have Advil? You work at a pharmacy."

"Nazareth, do you want me to go or not?"

"I don't know. I'm just going to take a nap."

That level of irritability was concerning. Sure, she still had her bratty moments, a snobbish remark on his job at the pharmacy, a seeming inability to say thank you for dinner, an absolute aversion to playing guitar for him when he asked, but Gil considered all of it relatively normal for a girl her age. But she was not spiteful, not normally. She tended toward quiet whenever she was sad, fidgety whenever she had bad news to share, but she wasn't vitriolic. Or at least hadn't been in a while.

Gil stood and went to his bedroom to put on his shoes. He picked up his wallet and keys, and walked to the front door.

"I'll be back in a few minutes. Make sure to lock the door."

"Where are you going?"

“To the dollar store.”

Nazareth sat up, looked at him, then down at her feet, which were shaking.

“I’ll go with you.”

“It’s just two blocks away. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

“No, I’ll come. This apartment smells like dirty mop water, anyway. I don’t want to be locked up here.”

The walk seemed to do her good. Gil didn’t know if it was the car exhaust that scared off the offending neurons, or whether it was the exhalation of being outdoors at dusk, but her demeanor lifted a little as she watched the women getting off the bus in their work uniforms, some carrying cleaning supplies, and the groups of kids running up and down the sidewalk in small, competing packs, and the cars, bumper to bumper, blasting out rancheras as they inched along Alameda to get home to their dinners. She walked slowly, converting that moment to memory, a souvenir she’d keep with her long after she stopped visiting him in that neighborhood, after she’d gone to college, or when she finally made it to Greenwich Village or whatever eventual big city neighborhood would turn into a good enough stand-in.

Inside the dollar store, Gil went straight to the medicine aisle and picked up a box of Advil.

“How does Tylenol not work for you? How often do you take it?”

He turned around, expecting to find Nazareth behind him, but she’d gone to another aisle. He walked through the store and found her in front of some mops and multipurpose cleaners. She studied the generic names, trying to piece together which brand the knockoffs were trying to imitate, like the piñatas or backpacks or slippers or any number of goods sold in the downtown stalls with cartoon characters that were close enough to the originals, but not quite identical, creating something new and wonderful and preferred.

“I’ve got the Advil.”

“You should get some cleaning supplies. We should clean the whole apartment.”

“I have cleaning supplies. And why do you want to clean? I clean it on the weekends, anyway.”

“Yeah, but like a real deep clean. You know, where we scrub the floors and just get every surface totally perfect. And then you can start fresh and not mess any of it up, and it’s always in a state of clean.”

It turned worrisome. Cleaning, and mopping, and starting fresh. What the hell was a deep clean anyway? He picked up a bottle of purple Fabuloso and Nazareth took a pair of rubber gloves and a two-pack of sponges with her to the register, though he made her go back to get the non-name brand ones instead. Gil paid for the items and handed the lightest bag to Nazareth as they walked back to the apartment.

Outside, it had already turned dark and Gil walked quickly, the plastic bags crinkling at his sides. Nazareth followed farther and farther behind him, and at one point he had to backtrack to meet her again. He climbed the steps up to his apartment two at a time, and held the door as Nazareth hurdled each step until she walked into the living room.

“What’s going on?”

“What do you mean?”

“What’s with the cleaning, and walking slow, and not wanting to eat? What’s the matter?”

“Nothing’s the matter. I had a headache, I told you.

“A headache?”

“It’s gone away a little.”

“Is it your mother?”

“Just leave it alone. Can we order pizza?”

She was sitting on the sofa again, enigmatic, like an insurance policy. If it wasn’t her

mother, then it was school, or her boyfriend. Of course, the occasional reminder that the fifteen-year-old mind sees everything through the prism of school and the people there.

“Did something happen with Isaiah?”

“What? No. Dad, just stop. Nothing’s the matter. You see, you’re just like Mom, you think everything is a freaking crisis.”

He’d had less of an issue with those outbursts. She’d learned that word, “freaking,” in the 5th grade. Eva hated it, grounding her whenever it slipped out during their arguments. If they hadn’t decided when she was born that they’d never use the belt to punish Nazareth, Eva would probably have asked Gil to do so then. But he was touched by this habit of saying a word that was almost reproachable, too scared to say the actual word.

“You can’t blame me for being concerned. You keep talking about cleaning instead of wanting to eat pizza. You’re a kid! That’s a little strange.”

She groaned and touched her temples. “You and Mom are the ones who always say I should help out more around the house, and now that I do you’re just yelling at me.”

“No one’s yelling at you, Nata.”

“I just want to clean —”

“Fine, let’s clean. Get the broom and start sweeping.”

He walked into the bathroom and pulled a plastic red bucket from beneath the sink, then turned on the bathtub faucet. He waited, water gushing, until it grew hot enough and placed the bucket beneath, splashing in the Fabuloso a little at a time. He stood up, dizzy from the blood that rushed to his head, when he realized how absurd it was that, hungry at six or seven, on the only day he could eat dinner with his daughter, he would instead spend it cleaning.

Nazareth was still on the sofa, watching him carry the bucket. She groaned as she got up and dragged her feet as she walked to the kitchen to get the broom. Slowly, sloppily, she brushed the dirt

from the floor from one spot to the other. After a few minutes of this mindless movement, Gil took the broom from her hands.

“Go bring the dustpan.”

Nazareth dragged her feet back to the kitchen and Gil swept the floor with vigor. He instructed her to hold the dustpan on the floor while he swept up the dirt, but she moved with the slightest force behind the broom, and the pile was ruined.

“Nata, if you want to clean, you have to do a good job. Otherwise, just sit on the sofa.”

She grumbled that no one even cared about what she wanted to do, and she lay on the sofa, facing the back cushions. Gil looked back and forth between the maudlin sight and the cooling mop water and the room that, he supposed, really did need cleaning.

He patted Nazareth’s feet and she sat up. Her hair was in her face, and her mouth was shaped like a crescent moon. He knew he shouldn’t, but he asked anyway.

“Do you just want to go to Dairy Queen?”

He didn’t think he was more permissive than most other parents, than Eva even, though it might seem that way since his permissiveness occurred all in one afternoon, rather than being doled out over the course of weeks and months and years. He doubted there would be lasting damage to her permanent personality or psychosocial development by catering to her Wednesday whims. It was, after all, just one day a week.

At the Dairy Queen on Paisano, they sat across from each other in a booth and ate burgers and soggy fries. Nazareth, in a rare move, also ordered a strawberry shortcake Blizzard. She turned to Gil, who didn’t comment, and said, “We’ll share.”

They spent a few minutes dipping the hot fries into the Blizzard and eating that way and then, when their food was finished, they sat in quiet as they watched customers come in and out of the shop.

“What was with the cleaning earlier?” he asked.

She didn’t answer at first.

“Is it your mother?”

“She’s always in a bad mood and she takes it out by trying to control me. She just has to criticize everything I like and everything I want to do.”

“Like what?”

“She said that if I really wanted to play the guitar, I should play in the worship band at church. Otherwise, I was opening myself up to corrupting influences. Her words. As if I were a baby lamb or something and couldn’t think for myself.”

He didn’t bother going into it. He knew — he knew that frustration, that feeling of being hollowed out. Her deeply unhappy mother was eating her daughter’s sleep, spreading exhaustion as if it were a virus.

They sat in the booth, not wanting to go back to the apartment. Outside, it was dark, probably close to 8pm, and the streetlamps were dim, with no way to see clearly.

“Have you heard about the raise?”

“Not yet. I’ve asked and he’s thinking about it.”

“When will you know?”

“Soon. I’m going to talk to him about it tomorrow. But cheer up. I’m going to talk to your mother and I’m going to make sure she treats you nicer.”

“OK,” she said, unconvinced, her strawberry shortcake Blizzard half-eaten. She looked at the time on her phone. Gil took their trays to the garbage can. Nazareth stood up from the booth, and threw away the rest of her ice cream, wiped her mouth and hands against her jeans and dragged her feet to the car.

Andres went on and on.

“Thirty pounds! Can you believe it?”

A customer had recently gotten off one of his three blood pressure medications, which meant he was probably doing better, the old man looking like he’d lost weight since the last time he was in the shop.

Gil half-listened as he restocked the shelves of medicinal teas, mixing up the boxes and labels, putting the jamaica where the hibiscus should go. He wondered about Nazareth, how her day in school had gone, how the evening at home had gone, and kept thinking of her until he opened the next box beside him. Deodorants.

“The hard part, at his age, is keeping it off. Though he’s not even that old, considering. Fifties.”

Gil looked up from the deodorant shelf when he heard the door chime. He turned around and his heart sank a little when he saw it was a regular, an older woman who lived on Tays — Gil could recite her exact address, given the number of medicines she picked up each month — who stopped in for some antacid and a Pepsi. He’d been doing that for days, anticipating the return of the suited stranger who used plenty of deodorant.

He flattened out the shipping boxes and walked them out to the curbside recycling bin. When he returned, Andres, presumably moved by Gil’s silence during the recounting of thirty lost pounds, waved him over to the pharmacy counter.

“We should talk. About the raise, I mean.”

Gil opened the counter flap and sat on the wooden stool they kept behind the counter, his stomach full of knots, and not necessarily from worrying about actually getting the raise. How hard, for instance, would it be to find and rent a two-bedroom place?

“Tell me why you think you deserve it.”

The question embarrassed him, and he hated to admit it, but sometimes felt like he didn't deserve to be paid more, like he'd missed his chance at a real education, and, with his bad back and his not having read a book in years, he'd be better off taking any job and the one at Hierba Buena was better than most. There was a vague, unformed fury that lived in his gut, like a ball of painful, stuck gas, whenever he thought about how, in his neighborhood, in his hometown, a \$1 per hour raise was somehow an indicator of success. Getting paid \$12 an hour, versus \$10, not to speak of \$7, could mark Gil's membership in the class of people who lived in duplexes or two-bedroom apartments, or who took summer trips on the bus to visit family in Pico Rivera, or bought name-brand soaps and were never made to feel guilty for having wanted them in the first place.

"I'm honest and good at my job. I restock without being asked and I help the older folks grab items from the top shelves, even with my bad back."

"I don't disagree. But you already got a raise when you got your certification."

"I've been dependable and consistent during all that time."

Which was true enough. Not hating the job had made it easier to be dependable. He liked learning the names and functions of the products lining the shelves. Dried bone broth powder to make hot drinks, rich in collagen, to help regrow hair and memory; fish oil pills to lower blood sugar levels; Tepezcohuite cream to soothe the sun scars.

"You've been a good employee. Respectful. On time. No girlfriend or wife calling up the shop three or four times a day. And the customers trust your recommendations. That matters."

"I'd like to stick around longer, if I can."

Andres put on his thick glasses and squinted as he looked at Gil, clenching his fake teeth together so tight his thin lips parted.

"I'll start you at \$12.50 next week."

Gil stood up, as if he were expected to suddenly begin a performance. He smiled, promised

Andres he wouldn't regret it. He nodded and moved around the shop with synthetic verve, as if he were a mariachi player in a restaurant who'd just taken a tip from a customer to sing "Amor Eterno" for the fifth time that night. He moved around as if to broadcast his deep well of energy. Agility. Life. It made him nauseous.

Still, he stayed that way, animated, working hard, all evening. He swept spots that didn't need more sweeping, asked customers again and again if they needed help, wiped down the plexiglass covers that covered the medicine shelves, rechecked the inventory, made notes of low supplies of Avandaryl, Irbesartan, and Citalopram and made lists of which other labels he needed to reprint because they were getting smudged with thumbs and time.

And he restocked with vigilance. He was in the middle of restocking the corner shelf which housed toilet paper, two rolls in each hand when the door chimed to announce Jimmy had walked in. Their eyes met and Gil, aware that he was holding toilet paper in each hand, felt a steady stream of shame flow through him. What a shame for Jimmy to find out so soon that he did, indeed, shit. Gil dropped both of the rolls on the floor and waved.

Jimmy waved back, smiled his toothy smile.

"Let me know if you need any help."

"I will," Jimmy said.

In his office, Andres peeked out into the shop, as if he were trying to figure out an inside joke he'd missed.

He went back to his office when he saw it was just a customer, and Gil bumbled as he smoothed down his wavy hair and sucked in his stomach, so much that it made him cough. He moved his tongue against his teeth to check for any food, and kicked the box of remaining toilet paper rolls to the side.

He walked back to the checkout counter to wait. Jimmy moved around less confidently. He

weaved through each aisle, loitering in front of one shelf or another, as if trying to remember what it was he'd been looking for. Every so often, he'd snap his fingers after leaving one aisle and then backtrack to pick up hair gel, or fiber pills, or dental floss.

Having no other surface left to wipe down, Gil started locking up the medicine cabinets for the evening. Andres stopped his typing and walked out of his office to ask, "Did you ever figure out if we found the rest of those bottles of magnesium supplements? I thought we had some in the storage unit in the basement, but Señora Rosales says we've been out for weeks."

"A shipment just came by last week. I haven't had a chance to put them out on the floor—" Jimmy had gotten to the counter at this point, and Gil slowed his speech — "but I'll do it before I leave."

"Got it. The Tap later?"

"The Tap?"

"To celebrate your promotion," he knocked on the pharmacy counter and went back into his office.

"Congratulations," Jimmy said.

Gil shook his head and glanced down at the counter.

"Is that everything?"

Jimmy had gray in his beard and yellow in his eyes. And seeing him smile made Gil a little sad, which, in a way, is the basis of every good love — this fear that the other person's happiness is fragile and necessary. He wanted to be with him, or to be him, when he experienced such happiness. It amounted to the same thing in the end.

"Yeah, I've got everything OK."

He scanned the activated charcoal, the hemp face mask, razors, shaving butter, Calendula face wash, the aloe-infused night gels.

“You guys have a lot of good stuff here. Natural.”

“That’s Andres for you. Bringing holistic health to the neighborhood.”

“Holistic. Do you ever get to choose what to stock in the store?”

“Me? I’m just lucky they let me count the pills.”

He laughed and right there, in the center of his straight-toothed mouth, Gil understood the flicker of possibilities. They tumbled out with his laugh, like small jewels that fell from the inner cheek where they were stowed for safekeeping. Instantaneously, Gil envisioned what it would be like to know this man, the time spent counting the freckles on his chest, and memorizing the length of his nose hairs, breathing deeply the oils of the skin that couldn’t be hidden by the morning shower, greeting eyes red with sleep and dreams.

It was impossible not to look at him and say, “If you ever want anything, to see anything in the store, I mean. Let me know. I’ll make sure we get it.”

“Thanks. That’s nice of you.”

“Just keep coming back.”

Gil’s mind was a siren and his ears burned like they did when he woke in the middle of the night and it was dark and he’d forgotten that his room was only his room, his apartment was only his apartment, and he’d chosen both.

“I’ll do that.”

They communicated more sublingually, with a certain way of smiling, and elongated glances at the teeth and mouth, and repeated grazes of a hand — an entire semiotics that had developed between men like them.

“All set,” Gil said, handing Jimmy the canvas bag — he’d added it last-minute to the order — with his new belongings. Jimmy took the bag and receipt.

Gil looked him in the eye. He wanted to say things to him: What are you going to watch on

television later? What do you dream about? Do you floss every night, or is it sometimes easier to just forget and do it in the morning, like me?

“Thanks,” Jimmy said.

He loitered at the counter for a moment and, before walking to the store entrance, Jimmy looked around the empty store. He lowered his voice and took out a business card from his front shirt pocket, as if he’d planted it there just that morning and had intended to do something the whole evening, and handed it to Gil.

“I might be wrong about, well, you know. And besides, you probably aren’t supposed to do this with customers, but if you ever want to hang out when you’re not working on the weekend maybe, give me a call.”

Gil took the card Jimmy held out and felt its weightiness, traced the raised print, the thin gold lines that outlined the perimeter and shape of the card. The weightiness in his hand meant that he was not, nor ever would be, an hourly wage earner. Jimmy waved as he left the store, and the chime announced a few moments after he walked out that the store was empty again. He put the card in his front pocket and felt the weight against his thigh as he closed. He turned over the “Open/Abierto” sign on the front of the door, pulled down the metal shutters, finished stocking the rolls of toilet paper that he’d stuffed in the corner of the third aisle, and felt the sharp corners of the card as he counted out the drawer.

Later, he and Andres walked three blocks to celebrate his promotion.

That first weekend he’d spent alone, Gil went to several of the gay bars two blocks north of the Tap. The Tool Box, 8 1/2, Briar Patch — all with the intention of bringing another man to his apartment. Standing near the ATM at The Tool Box, he drank rum and Cokes and watched men dance with one another. Soon, another man stood beside him. He started the conversation, and at the end of the night, invited Gil back to his apartment. Gil felt guilty on the drive back to his own

place the next morning, waking up with a slight hangover beside someone who, though very nice, was not someone with whom Gil could even imagine developing a friendship. Even if they were the same age, there weren't lines yet in the man's forehead, no softening in his stomach, no daughter to worry about. The concerns that likely kept each of them awake at night would not be of even the slightest interest to the other. Occasionally, Gil went to the Briar Patch, or Chiquita's, or even back to The Tool Box, but often wound up sitting at the bar, watching Golden Girls reruns — he'd been too afraid to admit he liked the show, and watched it on mute with the closed captioning sometimes when Eva was asleep — or mid-level boxing matches on the bar's televisions.

After two beers, mostly spent talking about the shop or Andres's new grandchildren, they paid the bill. They walked together toward their cars parked on 5th Street.

“I think this'll be good for you.”

“What's that?” asked Gil, trying not to sound nervous, wondering if he'd overheard Jimmy.

“This new role. I think this will be a good field for you. If you ever want to get your bachelors, we can cut down your hours but keep you at the same pay rate. It's important for men to have some focus, especially men from El Paso. When we heal, our wives and girlfriends can heal.

Men here think it's a little funny, working with the body, but that's not true.”

There was so much he wanted to say. About wanting to become a pharmacist with a heavy business card, about healing, about getting married again, but not to a woman, about picking up a customer from his shop, about all the rest of it. Naturally, he just said, “Thanks,” and shook his hand goodbye. Ironic. Andres would probably have been fine with everything but picking up a customer.

Gil got to his apartment complex in about ten minutes. He parked in the cracked, dark lot, and walked across the apartment's common outdoor area, a brown rectangle full of dog shit and overrun weeds. It was 11 p.m., and already the rectangle was empty. Generally, at least a few

people who sat outside late into the night, especially during the warm months. He looked around to see where everyone went, and noticed his bedroom light was on only when he was standing right outside his apartment. Gil fumbled his keys, picked them up, and unlocked the front door. "Nata?" he called out.

He shut the door behind him and didn't hear anything. He threw his keys onto the kitchen table and went into the bedroom. Empty. He checked the bathroom, behind the shower curtain, inside the closet. She wasn't there.

Gil walked back outside his apartment and stood on the landing. One of the young men who lived a few units down walked toward the dumpster carrying a trash bag. He nodded at Gil.

"Hey, have you seen my daughter around?" Gil asked.

"No, vato. Haven't seen her and I wasn't looking." The young man walked away and Gil closed the door again. Inside, he paced around a little bit. He turned on the water faucet and drank two glasses. He called Nazareth.

"Dad?" she asked in a hushed voice.

"Nazareth, where are you?"

"I'm falling asleep. At home. Where else would I be?"

"OK, my daughter," he sighed. "I just wanted to make sure."

"Make sure? What's wrong?"

"Nothing, just go back to sleep. Love you."

"Dad?"

"I'll see you on Wednesday. Sweet dreams."

He hung up despite her asking if he was sure everything was all right. And, he supposed, that everything wasn't sure. He only knew that he had so much to say, and he hadn't said much to anyone for a long time.

He picked up his phone again, and after the third ring the other person answered.

“Hello?”

“Hey,” Gil said.

“Who is this?”

“Gil, the guy from the store. Hierba Buena. We’ve talked about your deodorant. You told me to call.”

“You don’t waste any time.”

Gil looked at the stove clock. It was 11:20 p.m.

“Sorry, I just got off a little while ago, and I thought — sorry. I didn’t realize it was so late. I’ll let you get back to sleep.”

“No, no, don’t worry about it. I was hoping someone would call and interrupt my reading. This book of stories is such a bore.”

“Do you want to get something to eat with me?”

“Now?”

“Maybe sometime this week. Maybe tomorrow?”

“I’m actually heading back to D.C. tomorrow to close on my condo. The building super’s giving a bogus rate to repair the bathroom vent. You know how those things go.” Gil had no idea how those things went.

“How about next week?” asked Jimmy.

“That works. Any day but Wednesday.”

“How about Friday?”

“Perfect. I hope everything works out. With the condo, I mean.”

“Me, too. Friday, then.”

“Dad, you’re not listening,” Nazareth said, lying on the sofa, a bag of frozen corn pressed to her temples. “I’m not going back.”

It was the Wednesday before the dinner with Jimmy. Gil sat at the dining room table since his back was flaring up, when Nazareth unlocked the front door. He asked what she was doing at the place so early, half-embarrassed that he’d just used the bathroom and the apartment hadn’t aired out properly. She dropped her backpack near the front door and sank into the couch, groaning as she pinched the skin around her temples. She’d taken the 66 bus from school to avoid sitting in her mother’s car.

“Back where? Back home? School?”

Nata groaned, got up from the sofa, and walked into the kitchen. She dropped the frozen corn into the sink and poured herself some off-brand Sprite, massaging her left temple as she did.

“She’s legitimately crazy. Look at this,” she said pointing to her forehead. “Mothers aren’t supposed to give their daughters migraines.”

“What did she do?”

Gil tried to get her to sit down. He hadn’t started yet on dinner. They’d get a pizza instead. A \$5 box of pepperoni from Little Caesar’s, though they’d have to spend \$1.50 in gas just to get there. He filled her empty glass with water.

“She’s a total bitch.”

“Get it together. Just for a minute. I don’t know what’s going on. Should I take you to the hospital? Call the police? Talk to me.”

The day before, Eva had been cleaning up Nazareth’s room — despite Nazareth taking extreme care to clean it herself and avoid mitigating her mother’s impulse to go inside — when she realized her guitar case was sitting on her made bed. Eva picked up the case, intending to take it to

Nazareth at school, and didn't realize that the hardback case was unfastened. The guitar slid out, making a hollow gong song that reverberated in the room, and that's when she saw it, there in the corner of the case where the unfastened velvet pouch spilled out secret contents.

A half-smoked pack of cowboy killers. She ransacked the pouch and all the other compartments of the guitar case and, to her utter disgust, she saw the photos, saint-like portraits of her favorite female musicians. Provocative printouts of Hope Sandoval, PJ Harvey, Liz Phair ("I think I was born two decades too soon," she once said when he, tired of Joni Mitchell, gave her those CDs).

Eva waited until Nazareth and Joe both came home, stewing in the loveseat in the living room. Nazareth had asked what was wrong, why she was in such a bad mood, and was so off-put by her mother's comatose anger that she didn't even notice her guitar case was gone.

When Joe walked in the door, she transformed, like a pupa that's suddenly become a wasp instead of a butterfly. She called Nazareth into the living room and showed Joe the photos of the rock musicians in various states of undress. Joe put them face down and asked what was all that, and Nazareth walked into the room hearing the tail-end of their conversation. She waited until Nazareth sat down to pull out the spliffs.

"She just started going off. 'What were these pictures doing in your guitar case?' 'And these cigarettes.' 'Who gave them to you?' 'What does any of this mean?'"

"Cigarettes, Nata, really? That's like circa 1993. What the hell's wrong with you? They turn your mouth black. And they cause fucking cancer. That's not a government conspiracy theory. Who even gave them to you?"

Eva seemed to be more concerned with the photos. Nazareth's mouth stopped working properly and she muttered things her brain was churning out on her behalf, but mostly along the lines of, "I don't know."

“Nazareth, answer me. What were these pictures doing in your guitar case?”

“Where is it? Where’s my guitar?”

“No. You have no rights here. Who gave you these cigarettes? And what are these pictures doing in your guitar case? Did someone give you these, too?”

By this point, it was clear to Nazareth that she was in a hole, that it was muddy, and that nothing good was going to come out of this conversation.

“They’re just artists. I imagine that I’m playing for them. Like I’m on The Voice, and they’re rating me.”

But Eva wouldn’t listen.

“I told her over and over that’s all it was. But she’s so paranoid that—”

Nazareth paused.

“I know,” Gil said. “The world’s out to get her.”

“And then Joe —”

“What did Joe do?”

He’d been listening silently the entire time and then butted in during Eva’s lecture. “We have to pray,” and the three of them all got onto their knees right there in the living room, and Joe asked for God to deliver everyone in the family from their wicked ways, and to find peace in the only good, true thing they have. They stood again when Joe was finished, Eva lulled by the invocation, and Joe forbade Nazareth from playing the guitar anymore. At home, anyway. She’d drop it from school and, if Nazareth wanted to practice, she’d have to practice with the worship band at church.

“They can’t do that,” Nazareth protested. “It’s not right. It’s my guitar. I’ve taken care of it. And Joe’s not even related to me.”

But Eva locked the guitar up in the shed and threw away the cigarettes and rock stars’

portraits. She'd intended to pawn the instrument, but, at the penniless rate most of the shops in the area paid out, that felt ungodly, too.

"She's a foul woman," Nazareth said.

She stood and walked around the living room, surveying the apartment with her cloudy eyes. Gil imagined the possibility. A sofa bed, taking turns using the bathroom, having her take the bus home from school in the afternoon. She sat back down and Gil stood in her place. He took his phone out of his pocket and circled around the table while he dialed. It was the same number that once belonged to him when he lived at the house on Calais.

"What are you doing?" asked Nazareth.

The phone rang.

"Dad, please—"

He put up his hand, stopped breathing the moment Eva answered.

"Is she there?" Eva asked.

"She's here," answered Gil.

"Let her know she's going to be in more trouble when I pick her up. Taking the bus like some huerfanita."

"I'll tell her, but let me tell you something first. Joe's not her father. If he ever yells at her again—"

"He wasn't yelling. But do you know what I found in her guitar case?"

"Joe has no right to punish her."

"So you're OK with it?"

"He better not even raise his voice at her, or else he's going to have a problem."

They were both quiet. Nazareth watched him with eyes as big as Christmas. Eva breathed too heavy, Gil breathed too little and felt lightheaded.

“Let me tell you something,” said Eva. “If you don’t like the way she’s being raised, that makes two of us. But don’t call me again. If you do, you’ll have me to worry about, not Joe.”

Eva hung up and Gil felt like a singer who’d performed his biggest hits in concert, only to find his voice had rusted with age and abeyance. He nodded at Nazareth and, just like he had throughout her entire life, tried to make her believe he had the power to protect her. It was what any decent father would do.

“Have you heard from your boss?” she asked.

“He responded positively. Let’s put it that way. But I’ll believe it when I see it.”

“Does that mean you can get a bigger place soon?”

“I hope so. It’s looking good.”

They planned to meet up at 7:00 pm. The pharmacy closed at 6:00pm on Fridays and Gil got home with thirty minutes to shower and change. After drying himself off, he applied his powder deodorant and let it dry on his sweaty underarms while he ironed a shirt. It was a dark gray polo with thin purple stripes that he’d bought himself, almost as a dare, from the J.C. Penny downtown, before it was razed. At a quarter to 7:00pm, he trotted down the steps of his apartment complex and moved so fast that he wasn’t sure if the guys hanging out on the brown courtyard were complimenting him or telling him he’d left a light on inside.

Jimmy must have been watching from the living room window because he walked out of his Kern Place house as soon as Gil pulled up to the curb. He got out of the car and waved to Jimmy, who locked up his front door. Jimmy walked down the porch steps and hugged him.

“You want to drive, or should I?”

Gil looked at his own car and said, “Yours might be a little more comfortable.”

“Fine, but my car’s messy. Consider yourself forewarned.”

Inside, Gil could see nothing really messy about the Mercedes. Some files tossed in the back seat, a pair of dress shoes up front that made the car smell vaguely like burnt rubber, but the seats were leather, the engine was well-oiled, making the inside of the car so quiet that even a whisper from the radio felt like somebody was yelling.

“Tell me where to go.”

“What do you feel like eating?” asked Gil.

“Oh, anything really. Take me someplace you love. Someplace I wouldn’t know unless I grew up here.”

There was a place in the Lower Valley, near the Ysleta mission. He hadn’t been in two years. El Sol. Solid tacos, better aguas frescas. Cash only and the parking lot was lawless.

“Sounds perfect,” Jimmy said. “Guide me there.”

Gil regretted the suggestion as soon as they arrived at the restaurant. People turned to stare as Jimmy parked the Mercedes evenly in the parking spot, and Gil felt mortified. They got out of the car and it all came flooding back to him — the smell of petrol and rusting car parts; laughter between old friends running into one another; strangers arguing over who’d seen a parking spot first. The air was heavy with headlights and dust and the smell of barbecued meats, dressed with onions and salsas hot as the stars. And everywhere, every bit of sensory information was enough to remind him of the many Fridays he’d spent eating at that same taqueria with Eva and Nazareth, some of those nights toxic, admittedly, when he and Eva had just fought about money or sex or feeling distant, though not all of them had been bad. Some had been loving and sat well with the stomach. Gil wondered if Eva and Nazareth ever thought of those placid nights whenever they drove by El Sol, and what they’d think of him returning, like someone who’s forgotten his mother tongue and has to reach for the words he once used for *carrots*, or *limit*, or *belonging*.

As they walked inside the restaurant, Gil began to breathe quicker. He imagined everyone

in the restaurant turning to stare at Jimmy's bright blue blazer and tight jeans that announced he clearly wasn't from the neighborhood. Worse, what if they thought he and Jimmy had come to gawk, flash money in their faces? He made a beeline for an empty table to keep them from noticing Jimmy's alligator shoes, annoyed that he'd chosen to wear them in the first place.

"I'm going to run to the restroom," Jimmy said. "I'll eat whatever you order."

A server walked up to the table and asked Gil in Spanish if he was ready. Gil ordered two mushroom tacos, two al pastor, two rajas, and two aguas de jamaica. She suggested a side of guacamole and bowl of calabacitas, and he took the upsell just to get her to leave. He thought he remembered her from before.

The server took the plastic menus smudged with food and fraying at the corners. Jimmy came back to the table a few minutes later.

"This place reminds me of a spot near my apartment when I lived in Mexico City. La Tragadera," he said.

Jimmy smiled and there was a bit of plaque in between the first and second front teeth.

"You lived in Mexico City?"

"Sure. For three years. I worked as a teacher and tried writing a novel. Really, I went to follow someone I thought I could marry. But I ended up loving the city more than the man."

"When was this?"

"Ten years ago. Before law school. Have you ever been?"

"Nope. Not to Mexico City, not to law school, not to Washington, D.C."

"You'd love it. Mexico City, I mean. You could do a whole tour of the capitals of Latin America, and Mexico City, I predict, would always come out on top."

"That'd be nice."

"Wandering is probably the thing I love most. You get off a plane far from home and you

think to yourself, ‘You know, I could never leave. Just start over here.’ It’s fantastic.”

“Maybe. Someday.”

“You seem like you’d be a great travel buddy. I sense a real wanderlust in you.”

He kept smiling, totally unaware of the plaque between his teeth.

Gil imagined being the kind of man who made enough money to travel. Who’d be brave enough to leave his hometown for any amount of time at all. Brave enough to wear alligator shoes and not care if people thought him stuck-up for liking them.

He relaxed his shoulders a little and glanced around the room. No one was watching. They were eating from their red trays, drinking from their foam cups, or else waiting for someone to satiate their hunger.

“Tell me,” Jimmy said, “How do you like being a pharmacist?”

“I’m not a pharmacist. I just work there. A pharmacy technician if you want to get specific.”

“OK, how do you like being a pharmacy technician?”

“It’s nothing. I mean, anyone could do it —”

Gil stopped. Jimmy’s eyes pleaded for him to continue, nodding slightly, as if that were enough to pry open secrets, and for the first time in a long time Gil felt the depth of his exhaustion, like a fever in his bones. How hard he’d worked trying to conceal himself during those years of life— pretending he was happy when he wasn’t; agreeing when he didn’t; trying to convince himself his big break was approaching when it always felt so far away. It had taken years to believe it, and he’d never consciously admit it, but Gil didn’t even think himself a person deserving of affection, or forgiveness, or to be asked about his job. He felt barred from dreams of travel or earning letters after his name. But at that familiar locale, sitting across from a virtual stranger, he finally felt an opportunity for a certain kind of closeness. Doubt rang in his mind, but he kept thinking that maybe Jimmy spoke his same quiet language. More importantly, Gil was finally willing to talk back.

“I’d like to do more, eventually,” Gil said, “But it’s still a good job. I like counting out the pills and talking to customers. Some of them go on and on about their lives, as if I were really part of it. And I just let them. That’s part of the gig, you know, part of getting healthy.”

Jimmy nodded, and looked down at the empty table.

“Sounds like a great way to make a living.”

Before Gil could respond, the server interrupted and placed two red trays in front of them. She returned a few seconds later with their aguas frescas, and placed out paper napkins and plastic utensils. They both thanked her, and Gil instructed him how to dress the tacos — a scoop of chile, a squeeze of lime, pinch of white onion, plenty of cilantro. He suggested lowering the head to meet the taco. They bit off generous mouthfuls and nodded.

“You like it?” asked Gil.

“Very good.”

“As good as Mexico City?”

“Better, if you factor in the company.”

They both laughed with bits of food in their mouths.

They ate and Gil told Jimmy about the times his mother brought him to El Sol when his father got paid on Fridays and she didn’t want to cook. He didn’t tell him about the Fridays he’d done the same with Eva and Nazareth, instead sat back in his seat and wiped his mouth with a napkin. He picked up his cup and drank some of his hibiscus drink and surveyed the room.

And in that moment, the past and present collided. Eva, dressed like she’d come out of a Friday night church service, stood at the restaurant entrance with Joe beside her. She held onto Joe’s arm while her eyes scanned the room for an empty table. That’s when she saw him.

What was he supposed to do? Never come back? Hide in his room the rest of his life, or at least until he felt a sufficient level of guilt? Probably, but he’d get back to that another day.

He nodded his head, and Eva whispered something to Joe and they left the restaurant.

Jimmy sipped his drink and followed Gil's gaze to the restaurant door.

"Someone you know?"

Gil looked back at him, smiled, and shook his head.

"These tacos are fantastic tonight. I can't remember a time when they tasted better."

The next morning, the living room still smelled like tacos. Gil had loaned Jimmy some gym shorts and a t-shirt to wear while they sat at Gil's small table, eating cornflakes, and talked about music. Jimmy was impressed with Gil's knowledge of Kathleen Hanna's musical oeuvre.

"I was a big Bikini Kill fan once upon a time," Gil said. "I even spent too much money on a Beaverton zine I found online. I had to hide it from — well, it was way too expensive. What?"

"Nothing."

"You think it's silly."

"No, no. I love it. You should play some music."

Gil's phone rang. He stood to answer it, but stopped when he saw it was Eva calling. The rarity almost outweighed Gil's intense disinterest in wanting to talk to her that morning, and had she called again, he would have answered immediately.

She didn't. Didn't even leave a message.

"Is it important?" asked Jimmy.

Gil shook his head.

"What do you want to listen to?" he asked.

"Surprise me."

He imagined their knees bumping up against one another's beneath the kitchen table in the small apartment as they shook their limbs and hair and skin to the beat of the guitar and bass and

drums. He searched for the perfect song when he heard the front door unlocking, and before he even saw her, Gil knew it was Nazareth and for a moment it felt perfectly natural to have her walking in on a Saturday afternoon. He imagined their three cereal bowls crowding the breakfast table.

“I’m not living with her anymore, Dad,” Nazareth said, walking in.

She’d been crying, her breath profound, her bottom lip quivering. She carried a black duffel bag that she dropped to her feet. She looked at Gil first, then the other man. The look on her face reminded Gil of Eva’s face the day he left, as if upset for not already knowing the answer to a question they’d asked over and over. There was no denying any of it, of course, the things Gil and Jimmy had done last night, even just a few hours ago, and everyone in the room knew it — a democratic horror.

“Nata, what’s wrong?”

“Who are you?” Nazareth asked Jimmy.

Jimmy stammered.

“A friend, Nazareth. What are you doing here? Is everything OK?”

Nazareth looked down at her feet and, for a moment, no one moved. Gil took a step toward her, still standing in the doorway, and Nazareth looked at her father.

“Not enough space, huh?”

“My daughter, listen —”

She didn’t; she picked up her black duffel bag and slammed the apartment door. Jimmy said nothing, held his cereal spoon midair. He looked at Gil for an answer, or at least directions of what to do next. Gil sprinted out of his apartment, barefoot, and called after her. She’d sprinted, too, and was already walking up the block, toward the bus stop.

Gil ran back inside the apartment and looked for a pair of shoes. He didn’t bother with

socks. Jimmy stood up, a stupid contribution to the emergency. Gil looked for his keys and his wallet, which were not on the bedroom nightstand, where he usually kept those things but rather in the pile of clothes in the middle of the room.

“What’s going on?” Jimmy asked, half frantic.

“I’ve got to go. You’ve got to go.”

“Is everything OK?”

Gil finished tying his shoes. He hadn’t brushed his teeth. He’d been planning to do so in a few moments, before she’d walked in. His tongue tasted cornflakes and tacos.

“Or stay. Just lock the doorknob behind you before you leave.”

“Where are you going?”

Gil abandoned the apartment without answering. He started his car and drove down the street, toward the nearest bus stops on Alameda. Gil stopped his car by the curb in front of the nearest bus stop to the apartment, incurring the honks of other drivers. He jumped out of the car. A trio of men idling on the sidewalks told him he couldn’t park there.

“I’m looking for my daughter. Fifteen. This tall. I think she got on the bus.”

The trio looked at themselves and back at Gil. They shook their heads, hadn’t noticed. But a bus had just passed a few minutes ago. The 66, heading downtown. Several people had boarded it. Of course, several people across the street had gotten on the bus moving in the opposite direction. That one had just passed, too. The 25, heading to the Eastside Terminal.

Gil got back into his car. Chase scenes seemed different in the movies. There was a person to find and it was difficult, but at least the hero was endowed with a superior knowledge to know where to look for her. Speeding in a 30 mph zone, he caught up with the 25 bus, but couldn’t see Nazareth through the large side windows. He drove behind the bus and stopped when it stopped. At each point, a grownish young woman, makeup running, seemed to disembark. Each time, Gil

thought it was his daughter, and each time she was either too old or young to be Nata.

No matter. He'd follow the bus until it reached the end of its line. Eventually, everyone would have to get off. That's when he remembered the bus traveling in the other direction, the 66 toward downtown. He wondered if he could still catch the 66 toward downtown.

That bus had likely already reached the end of its route. It might even be on its way back toward the Lower Valley.

Eva would have to join the search. He called her, and she sounded frantic when she answered. Gil told her what he was doing, demanded she do the same. Eva agreed, said she'd call the cops. Gil didn't argue. It was a civil talk.

At each red light, Gil scanned the sidewalks. She wasn't there. Young mothers with their children in strollers, sure. An old man walking with his cart of plastic bottles. Trios of men who sat guarding their blocks. Not one of them was in a rush on a Saturday morning. They weren't managing a crisis. They'd barely started the day.

From outside, the house on Calais looked unchanged. Gil parked his car along the sidewalk, since both spaces in the driveway were taken, and walked past the dirt yard to stand on the portico. Eva opened the front door before Gil knocked. She unlocked the screen door and told him to take off his shoes in the hallway.

Joe was barefoot and reading the newspaper in the living room. He looked up when Gil walked in. Meat was cooking in the kitchen. Even with the smell of roasting beef, Gil immediately recognized the house's smell imprinted on the fabric surfaces, stamped on Nazareth's skin when she came over to his house on Wednesdays, a scent that had stuck to his own skin and clothes for months after he'd moved out.

Eva sat on the sofa beside Joe. Gil stood by the television.

“Anything on your end?” Joe asked, folding the newspaper neatly and laying it neatly on the coffee table. What had Gil been expecting from him? Hysterics? A beating of the bare chest, petitions for Nazareth’s safety? Or, if safety was too much to ask for, then at least a wish that she be on her way home? Surely, not crying. Gil was glad Joe wasn’t shedding a tear.

“Not yet,” said Gil.

“Cops said it was still early,” Eva said. “They’d already put some alerts out to the area patrols, but couldn’t do much else.”

“They’re trying their best,” Joe said. “We’re supposed to wait around here in case she calls.” He got up and walked through the open doorway into the kitchen, where he opened the broiler and took out a tin-foiled lump. Inside, a black hunk of meat sizzled in its own fat, and Joe stabbed the center, looking for blood. “We were supposed to smoke some beef ribs for a church cookout this afternoon. Obviously we didn’t make the cookout, but I figured the meat was fresh and we could cook it here. Eva, can you offer him something to drink?”

Gil turned to look at Eva, who had a wild look in her eyes and the vein slapped against her collarbone was raised. Her short hair was pulled back, though half of it sprang out of the ponytail and lay beside her neck. Her bottom lip trembled, something that happened only when she was furious or scared.

“Nothing for me,” Gil said. They’d gone many months without sharing a roof and air, and had done so twice in less than 24 hours.

“I talked to some of her friends from church and school. They hadn’t heard from her.”

“And the boy? Isaiah?”

“If there’s anyone to blame, it’s him,” Eva said. “He puts all these ideas into her head.”

“You called him?”

“Of course. He was the first person I called. He wouldn’t pick up at first, but after the

seventh or eighth time, he did. I asked if Nazareth was there, but he said she wasn't. He hadn't heard from her all day."

"You believe him?"

"Not at all. I called his mother and she said the same thing, that she hadn't seen her in weeks. I told her that if she was lying for her son, I'd call the cops and file a kidnapping report."

"Is that a real thing?"

"It should be."

They stopped talking, and the smoke from the broiler clouded the living room. Joe yelped from the kitchen and sucked on his thumb to soothe the burn. Eva paced around the room, hands clasped behind her head.

"I don't know what's gotten into that girl," she said.

"Really? She shows up to the apartment crying. You threw away her guitar because she likes to keep pictures in her case."

Eva chuckled to herself, "Pictures."

"It's no wonder she wants to come live with me."

"She's never going to live with you."

"Why not? She obviously doesn't want to live here."

"You see her a couple of hours a week and you think that makes you a good father? Good enough for her to live with?"

"You drive everybody from this house. Joe's probably next."

Only then did Gil realize they'd been whispering, a relic of the hushed fights they had at night in their bedroom. Nazareth's was the room over, the walls so thin they worried she could hear.

But Nazareth knew nothing — so little, in fact, that the day Gil left, Nazareth thought they were going to discuss a summer trip to California at the family meeting.

“Is anyone hungry?” Joe asked, bringing out the ribs on a serving platter. It smelled like he’d burnt them. He used a pair of rubber tongs to lift up the slab of meat and sliced them in huge chunks. Joe had failed to cut the marble belts of fat from the ribs. That, or he’d taken a discount choice from the butcher.

“You don’t want her to live with you,” Eva said. “You like being a part-time father. It lets you do whatever it is you do.”

Gil walked to the hallway and picked up his shoes. His hate for her was cavernous and revealed new things to oppose, like the smell of her skin, the way she combed her hair, the way her lipstick clung to her teeth. It also made him discover his own rounded, full feelings of acid and friction, his thoughts dragged up from the darkest wells of his mind, a consuming bitterness that, no matter how hard he tried denying it, he’d done an excellent job at making it worse.

Joe left the platter of ribs on the table and went back into the kitchen to turn off the broiler. He washed his hands and started cleaning some of the pans and utensils.

“Eva, come in here a moment, please,” Joe called from the kitchen. Eva stared at Gil, who couldn’t untangle the knot in his laces with his shaking fingers.

She walked to the kitchen, and Gil gave up on the laces, stuffed his foot in the shoe. He put on the other this exact way.

“You should go now,” Eva said, coming back into the hallway from the kitchen. “In case she shows up at your apartment. Call me when she does and I’ll go pick her up.”

Hanging on the wall, he saw one of the photos he would’ve taken with her when he first moved out, if he’d remembered to take it. In the picture, Nazareth was singing “De Colores” with her first-grade classroom, and she wore a yellow sundress. He’d set aside other photos in a box in the study, intending to take those, too, had he remembered.

He walked outside and the door shut behind him, almost gently. He looked around at the

neighborhood he'd liked once, the house that had been his, too. He walked to his car and, just like the afternoon two years before, Gil drove away with nothing more than his clothes and a vague wish to burn the fucking thing down.

Gil got back to his apartment around three in the afternoon. He hadn't heard from her, nor from Jimmy, and would call both when he got inside. He parked his car, walked past the small crowd grilling burgers in the brown rectangle. He walked the stairs two at a time, his knees and chest shaking now that it was nearing dusk, and it had already been three, maybe four hours since she'd left. He got to the second-floor landing and fished for his keys from his pockets.

And there she was, sitting outside his apartment door. She had a key, still, but she was sitting on the floor outside. He didn't say anything as she looked down at her feet. No, she was sleeping.

He shook her gently, cooing her name, and when she opened her eyes and looked up at him, he started to yell. She defended herself, said she was only gone a few hours. Gil yelled some more, and she started crying, and then he did, too. But only for a moment.

He opened the front door.

"Get inside."

Nazareth got to her feet and walked into the living room, directly to a power outlet to plug in her phone. She sat on the sofa while it recharged. Gil sat beside her and stared at the blank television screen in front of him. He felt tired and didn't know how he was going to get himself up from the couch again. In the reflection of the television's black screen, he saw that the kitchen table behind him was empty. Jimmy had cleaned up before he left.

He scooted to the edge of the sofa.

"Are you hungry?" Gil asked.

“Sure,” Nazareth said. Neither of them said anything or moved for a long while, but eventually Gil stood and walked to the kitchen.

He took out the bread from the pantry and the block of muenster cheese from the refrigerator. He sliced off some butter and let it sizzle in a cast iron skillet. They’d have to call Eva, but he wouldn’t until after she’d eaten.

Gil put the grilled cheese, blackened on either end, on a plate. He poured her a glass of water and took it to Nazareth, now sitting at the kitchen table. She looked at the sofa as if it were on fire.

“It’s ready,” Gil said.

“Thanks.”

She took a bite and melted cheese bled out of the sandwich. She blew away the steam.

“Nata, where were you?”

“A little bit of everywhere. Dairy Queen until my phone died. Then I went to the library, where I called Isaiah. He picked me up in his mom’s car and brought me back here.”

“We have to call her.”

She’d finished the first half of the sandwich already.

“I know. After I eat.”

Why wouldn’t he say it? That she could stay, that he’d take the couch and she could take his room. That was the purpose of his life, wasn’t it? Being uncomfortable so she could be a little more comfortable. Wasn’t that what a decent father did? He did love her. So much, in fact, that it made him dizzy and made his throat ache when he held his breath worrying about her.

“Did you hear about the raise?”

“I’m sorry, Nata. It’s not going to happen this time. Maybe soon.”

Mercifully, she didn’t take it further. She just kept eating her sandwich, sighing, and every

so often a buzz would come from her charging phone. She bit the inside of her mouth when she was finished.

“Do you want me to make you another?”

There was a small gulf between them, Gil standing by the stove, Nazareth looking up at him from the table. It was a small one, full of cool air. Every good song is written about such a space. Gil hoped that years from now, the moment wouldn't leave an emotional scar, so much as a pool she could reach into again and again, like a well of water, to write one of those good songs. Years later, when he'd visit her in Greenwich Village, she'd play it for him.

“Sure,” she said, “We'll split it.”

She looked up at him, eyes trying to forget the entire afternoon, and Gil looked away. He took her empty plate into the kitchen. Nazareth followed and watched as he, again, melted butter into the hot skillet and sliced cheese. She folded one of the smaller slices, and ate it as she stood beside the sink.

Gil placed the sandwich onto the cast iron.

“Let me do that,” she said, reaching for the spatula.

“I got it, don't worry.”

“I do worry,” she said. “The first one was burnt.”

He watched her lower the heat, add more butter. She was judicious about when she flipped the sandwich and regularly checked to see if the cheese was melting properly. He didn't know when she'd become such an expert.

“How does that look?” she asked, turning off the stove.

She placed the grilled cheese on a plate and cut it down the middle. The muenster was completely melted, the bread golden brown on either end. Gil devoured his half in seconds.

“Was it good?” she asked.

“Perfect,” he answered.

## Hands

We stand outside the wine shop and you reach down to grab my hand, but instead of weaving my fingers with yours, I keep my hands in my pockets.

I don't hold hands with other men in public. Certainly not when children are nearby. Nor, generally, in front of old people, though that depends on the neighborhood and time of day. I also don't hold hands when it's so hot that I'd have to share palm sweat, nor when it's too cold and I'd rather keep my gloved hands in my pockets.

My problem with hand-holding is that people might notice I bite my nails and cuticles, at times bad enough to make them raw and bloody. I'd have to explain that I'm afraid of my own hands — of the diseases they might communicate, the way they're too small for some men, too big for others. And I don't tell many people this, but when I was a teenager I had a small wart on my left palm line, the one that indicates long life, and I spent two years with my hands in my pockets, or else clenched into a fist.

We've been dating for two months. My neighbors have seen you enough times that they hold the building door open for you. You're funny. You have a sweet tooth, you kiss me pretty good, and I'm thinking this is the moment when I've got to decide whether you're going to become something in my life, or else someone I think about when I jerk off at night.

You've forgotten my hand and instead we're on the corner of 14th, trying to get a cab to Petworth for a party two men are throwing to celebrate the new house they've purchased. You scan the street for an empty taxi.

"It's early. What if we walk?" I suggest.

You agree. We start up 14th Street and I slide my hand into yours and we continue that way for a dozen blocks.

But if I'm being totally honest, it still feels shameful. As if someone will see us and instantly know everything about my lengthened fricatives and lowered trap vowels. They'll know where I go on weekends, that I quote Lena Horne movies, that occasionally I don't feel like a real man, and that occasionally I like that. All of this from hand-holding. And sure, we should learn how to be proud, take a stand, learn to ignore jokes shouted from passing cars.

But sometimes I don't want to be political. Sometimes, all I want is to leave a party early and sit beside you in an empty southbound red line train, and lay my head against your shoulder, tracing the lines on your palms with my fingers, and hear you ask, "Home?" and mean mine, and know you're coming with me. My apartment is tucked away in a corner of the city and I need your help to get there. Because if I'm not paying attention when I walk up Lanier, or if it's late and I'm particularly tired, sometimes I can miss my place completely.

## Sunroom

It had taken six years for the Adams Morgan apartment to feel like home. Julián and his best friend, Martin, had, paycheck by paycheck, furnished the two-bedroom place with one eye on the new and one on the old. They picked up a \$100 settee from a Glover Park swap meet and had it reupholstered by an Otomi textile designer in Baltimore; they saved up for a farm-style table with four chairs made from reclaimed wood by a carpenter in Anacostia; they'd bought wallpaper from a shop in Alexandria to cover the pale yellow of the living room walls.

But the crown jewel of the place, the thing that made Julián and Martin, administrative assistants for the National Endowment for the Humanities and for a local arts nonprofit, commit virtually half their paychecks to rent, was a detached sunroom off the left side of the living room. It was a small room, enclosed on one side by thin walls and on the other side, a panel of windows that looked out onto Adams Mill Road. They kept the sunroom empty and each used it as a studio — Martin to call his family and design stationary, Julián to drink wine and occasionally write plays. Both adored the sunroom's coziness, and how the space belonged to neither and both of them at the same time. Martin and Julián had their very best conversations in that room.

Years later, they'd each point to the morning when Martin finally brought up the idea of renting out the sunroom as the beginning of when everything changed. Julián was lying in the sunroom, legs up against the wall, nursing a hangover. It was close to noon when Martin brought him a bottle of cold-press juice, an extra he'd bought earlier from a juice shop called Jrink. Once, Julián had made an off-hand comment to Martin about spending \$10 for a single bottle of juice. Now, whenever Martin had the craving, he simply spent \$15 to buy two and preempted any judgment about the purchase by giving Julián the second.

“On a scale of Shirley Temple to Eddy Monsoon, how hard did you go last night?” Martin asked.

“Drunk enough to wait outside Union Station for Bojangles to open. What about you?” Julián asked, in between gulps of the juice, the coolness of the bottle delicious against his forehead. The thick liquid slithered down his throat, and its purpleness settled his gut.

“I stayed home,” said Martin.

“You should have come out to Pitchers last night. It was just me and some guys on the kickball team.” Gay kickball was nothing short of a revelation at that time.

“I didn’t feel like going out.”

There were only a few reasons why Martin would choose not to go out on a Friday night. One would be if a date had gone well and he’d decided to go home with the guy. The other was if he didn’t have money to spend.

And there tended to be one reason why Martin didn’t have money to spend.

“Did you talk to your mother?” Julián asked.

“On Monday. Another \$450. Tires this time. I said, ‘Mami, didn’t you just get tires less than a year ago?’ and she was like, ‘In Kissimmee, tires are either slashed, stolen, or wind up in the swamp with the rest of the car. And I said, ‘Well, which one is it?’ But I guess when my drunk brother is the only one who takes her to her doctor’s appointments, it’s all three at once.”

“Do you need anything?” Julián asked. He got out of his yogic position and stood.

“I’m fine. Really. Or, I will be. I’m going to Urban Cheapskate to sell some old clothes. See how much I can get for killing my darlings.”

Julián walked to his own room to change into his gym clothes, and saw the way Martin, his shoulders hunched and head hung low, stared at his clothes, trying to decide which of the pieces he was willing to part with for stale cash.

Julián shut his bedroom door. He took out a few button downs from his closet and some jeans that, unfortunately, didn’t fit anymore. He grabbed a couple of belts, one made from crocodile that

he'd taken from an old boyfriend but never wore, along with four ties that he'd had few occasions to show off. Julián gathered these clothes in a pile and, after he'd tied his Nikes, went back to Martin's bedroom. Martin sat on his bed, on top of the clothes he'd sorted, and looked down at his bare feet. Julián dropped his contributions onto the bed.

“By the way, we should send the lease back to the landlord today. It's due Monday,” Julián said. The owner had raised the rent by another 5% to \$2,480 per month. \$1,240 each.

“I'll sign it later,” said Martin.

Martin looked at the clothes Julián added to the pile. He stood, clasped his hands behind his back, and stretched his arms behind him as if he were trying to pull them from their sockets.

“There's something else,” Martin said. “Something I should have told you about sooner.”

“What's that?”

“I quit my job.”

“You quit?”

“And by quit, I mean I was let go.”

“When?”

“And by let go, I mean fired.”

“Fired?”

“For stealing money.”

“You've gotta be kidding.”

“Petty cash. It wasn't even much. I was going to repay it as soon as my paycheck cleared. I've heard of other admins doing it, and it's not a big deal. But Therese, just my luck, decided she was going to reconcile the expense reports a few days before we got paid. She called me into her office on Thursday.”

Julián didn't bother asking how much he'd taken. \$450. He was willing to bet it to a penny.

“What now?” Julián asked.

“Going to find a shitty short-term gig before finding a shitty long-term one. You can get paid for doing all sorts of shitty things nowadays. Assembling furniture, pretending to be friends with someone, standing in line for people at Trader Joe’s.”

Julián stayed quiet, having enough sense to tuck away his desire to ask why he couldn’t have waited to get paid to buy his mother her tires.

“I’ve been thinking, though,” Martin continued, “about the third roommate option.”

They’d decided, when they first signed the lease, that should they ever needed the extra money, they would rent the sunroom. Julián stood with his back against the wall.

“Has it come to that?” asked Julián.

“On an urgency scale of 1 to 10, 1 being I just ate some Greek yogurt and I’m bottoming later, and 10 being, I just had enchiladas and it’s not going to happen — I’d say I’m about a four.”

That likely meant a seven. Julián had heard enough of Martin’s urgency scales to understand that there was always a handicap.

“Then it’s settled,” Julián said.

The tenant would pay \$650 a month. There wasn’t a door to the sunroom, and they planned to put up a thick curtain to create some privacy. Martin hoped the man — it would have to be a man — wasn’t a reformed murder; Julián hoped he’d be able to pay rent on time.

They sat in the sunroom and composed a Craigslist ad:

*Hi there,*

*We're two fit and fabulous friends in need of a third... roommate, that is. We're standing in the middle of the empty room now and can attest there's a je ne sais quoi about it. Maybe Nora Ephron visited here in the 70s. She did live up the street, once upon a time.*

*Shared bathroom. Kitchen to die for. Rent is \$650, due when you move in.*

*Yours,*

*J+M*

Julián left for the gym, already exhausted. Talking to Martin about money felt vulgar. Threesomes, STDs, even fears of the body's rebelling into illness or old age were easier to talk about than money, and Julián wished Martin made choices to preempt the need to discuss it at all. Walking to the gym, Julián felt embarrassed for him, like the time he'd visited Martin and his family for Thanksgiving in Kissimmee. They'd all been on their worst behavior. Calling one another by their family nicknames, failing to wipe the food stuck in the corners of their mouths, fighting over whose memory of their last trip to the coast was most accurate.

But the worst had been when Martin was washing dishes, and his mother leaned over in her seat to bring her face, flush with turkey and garlic mashed potatoes, close to Julián's shoulder. Dinner, she said, had cost her more than she'd budgeted, and she'd appreciate it if Julián could pay his own way. Julián's mother would have died before doing such a thing, and he himself would rather have canceled Thanksgiving altogether than to ask people to chip in. Julián felt at that moment a tiny, unbridgeable difference crack open between him and his best friend, who was singing along to Mariah Carey as he dried the dishes.

When Julián got back from the gym, Martin was sitting at the kitchen table. "We've already gotten a response. Can you believe it?" The response to the ad said:

*Sounds good. I'm moving from Philadelphia tomorrow, and can check it out the day after.*

*-D.*

Martin coordinated more with “D.,” whose actual name was Damián, and set up a time for him to tour the place, but a bad feeling settled on Julián’s shoulders. Maybe it was the initial one-line response, but Julian was skeptical about the potential roommate, about any roommate, really. Martin and Julián used the room every day, and it had come to belong equally to both. Renting it would rupture the delicate balance of control of the apartment. Martin could instead take a job — any he could find — to make the next month’s rent. They could keep the sunroom, as is, and bide some more time until Martin could find a suitable replacement for his lost admin job. That was Julián’s preference.

Instead, two days later, Damián knocked at the apartment door. Julián, who had called out sick from work to meet the potential new roommate, looked at Martin. Their buzzer hadn’t rung. Martin answered the door.

“Roomie!” Julián heard when the apartment door opened. “I walked in after one of your neighbors. Sorry for not buzzing.”

Damián walked into the apartment and removed his Chaco sandals. He was tall and lanky, and so thin that he looked malnourished. But what he lacked in body mass, he made up for in hair. He had long, black scraggly hair tied in a bun, half his face taken up by a full beard and bushy eyebrows. Black hair sprang up from his visible chest line and from out of his nostrils. There seemed to be hair on any visible part of his body, even his feet and toes.

“I love it already,” Damián said, looking around. “Tell me about the apartment. The history, the soul of this place.”

Martin showed off the apartment, but Damián didn't take an interest in the things any normal roommate might. Instead of taking measurements of the hallway closet space, he wanted to know what year the clawfoot bathtub was manufactured. Instead of asking about the heating and cooling issues with the sunroom, he wanted to discuss the history of Black Panthers and Jewish anti-war activists in Lanier Heights. Nothing about utilities or water pressure, but they spent several minutes discerning which building Essex Hemphill might have lived in during the late 80s.

*It's a high-class, pre-war 2-bedroom. If you've ever dreamed of a home in a historic district, then this is your place,* the leasing agent had said when she first showed the apartment to Julián and Martin, freshly minted baccalaureates. *Sometimes you can hear the ghosts of past inhabitants cackling over cocktails.* It had been enough for Julián to plead and convince an initially skeptical Martin.

At the end of the tour, Damián, Martin, and Julián stood in the sunroom, and shared a pitcher of Aperol spritz.

"Tell us," Martin said. "What did you do for work in Philadelphia?"

"Odd jobs, mostly. Flower deliveries on my bike, shelving books at the public library. Sometimes I'd make a little money playing congas in the park on the weekends."

"Boyfriend?"

"That's a generous way to put it."

"Je suis intrigué."

"He had a wife, and said he was going to leave her for years. But each time I told him he'd regret it. And when he takes her to Cabo Verde for their ten-year anniversary, I'm thinking to myself, 'You told him to stay with her. Even gave him the idea for the trip. Why are you getting so worked up?' And it hits me. I told him because that's what he wanted to hear. We both knew the minute I

asked him to leave her was the last time I'd ever see him. When I realized that, I felt so exhausted. I had to leave."

"Straight men are never going to save us, darling," Martin said. Outside, a truck started honking on Adams Mill Road, almost as if in agreement.

"I like that," said Damián. "Baldwin?"

"Yes, Alec."

Martin and Damián laughed. Julián crunched the last of his ice.

"And why D.C.?" Martin asked.

Julián walked out of the room with his empty glass and poured himself the rest of the pitcher and sat on the living room settee. Julián couldn't quite explain it, but his face felt hot, as if he were sitting on the crowded L2 bus, trying not to become nauseous at the constant stop and start.

"You've got my vote," Martin said from the other room, "Room's yours if you want it. What do you say, Julián?"

Julián needed to piss.

"Room's yours."

"I'll move in tomorrow," Damián said, hugging Martin. He walked out to the living room and hugged Julián, as well.

As they made plans for the move-in, Julián went to the restroom. He came back and Damián and Martin had made another pitcher of Aperol spritz. There was laughter, and new friendships, and house rules were explained. Julián excused himself from the room. He had to start getting ready for the week ahead. Work was going to be crazy and he was sorry he wouldn't be around much during Damián's first week in the apartment.

A few weeks after Damián moved in, Julián came home from work, khakis sweaty from sitting in a bus overly warmed against the cold November day, and noted the undeniable stench of feet. Damián's shoes were in a small pile near the front door, but he also had shoes everywhere. Chacos in the living room, slippers in the kitchen. Tennis shoes in the bathroom. It made the entire apartment smell vaguely like apple cider vinegar and soft cheese.

“Do you smell that?” Julián asked Martin. Damián was out on a shift for Urban Stems, a floral delivery service, one of several part-time gigs.

“Smell what?” asked Martin.

“It smells like sour cream.”

“I don't smell anything. Maybe you sat on something on the bus?”

Julián wasn't surprised. Martin didn't seem to notice any mess Damián made. Not the unwashed dishes he piled in the sink, nor the half-drunk beer bottles he left on the coffee table, nor the stray pubic hairs in the shower or on the bathroom floor. Martin, still unemployed, ferried up whatever enthusiasm for housework that existed deep in his marrow to clean up after Damián. He'd sweep and mop the hallway, take out the garbage and recyclables; lit scented prayer candles, because he also liked the color they gave off when the fire burned behind the painted glass.

And when Martin washed clothes, which he timed just as Damián returned from a shift delivering flowers, he'd say, “Give me your uniform shirt. It'll be clean for your next shift.” Damián, who Julián doubted ever gave much consideration to whether his uniforms had gone without a wash, would peel off his shirt and pass it on to Martin's outstretched hands. It was a testament to the profundity of Damián's earthiness that, despite Martin's regular goings-over, the apartment still felt dirty.

One Saturday, Julián and Martin walked among the stalls at the Mt. Pleasant Farmers' Market to do that week's shopping. Martin stopped at a stand that sold organic coffee creamer and cartons of fresh eggs.

"These look divine, don't they?" Martin asked.

"You don't even eat eggs," said Julián.

"I use them when I make eggplant parmigiana."

"Right."

"I'm going to get a carton. For the eggplant. You can have a few. And Damián will eat the rest, I'm sure."

Julián looked at the cardboard label — \$7 a carton; the creamer was another \$8 — and said nothing as they waited to pay.

"Something wrong?" asked Martin.

"Nothing."

"The eggs? Really? You know, they're an excellent source of protein, and I've read stories that the cholesterol scare was actually a ruse designed by the American Heart Association to keep people's scent off sugary foods, which is actually—"

"You give him way too much shit," said Julián.

Martin pursed his lips and stayed quiet for a moment.

"What exactly do I give him?"

"You clean up after him. Cook for him. These eggs. I mean, it'd be one thing if you had eggs to spare."

"Ah, I see. You think just because I don't have a regular job —"

"You don't have any job —"

"That you can get all up in my business, tell me what I can or can't spend money on."

“That’s not what I’m saying,” said Julián.

“No? Then what’s it to you if I get a carton of eggs and let our roommate take a few. I said you could have a couple, too. I said that first, in fact.”

Julián could feel the glands pulsing in his neck. Were they fighting? They didn’t fight. Especially not about eggs. A miscommunication, then.

“What I meant was, you heard why he moved to D.C. He’s still hung up on that guy from Philly. Just try not to get your hopes up about him.”

They moved up to the attendant who rang up the eggs and creamer. After hearing, “\$15 even,” Martin looked down at his purchases, almost as if he’d forgotten he’d been the one to pick them up.

“I’ll get it,” Julián said, handing the attendant his credit card.

Before Martin could object, the attendant swiped the card. She thanked him when the payment went through, and Martin put the eggs and creamer in his grocery bag.

“I’m sorry about being so bitchy back there,” Martin said as they walked to the bus stop. “I’ve been a mess recently. I haven’t heard back from any of the jobs I’ve applied to. And my mother’s been calling nonstop the last few days. At this point, I’m just delirious. On a scale of one to ten, one being meditating in Rock Creek Park, ten thinking Anne Hathaway deserved that Oscar, I’m solidly a six.”

Julián smiled and took the grocery bag from his friend.

“Eggplant on Monday, then?”

They decided to walk home instead. It was a cold morning, but the sky was clear. They talked about the job hunt, and Julián slung the grocery bag over his shoulder. Each time he took a step, it bounced off his lower back and he grew more and more annoyed for having paid \$7 for a carton of eggs.

That Monday after work, Julián expected to come home smelling eggplant and tomato sauce roasting in the oven, but instead Julián walked into the apartment and smelled burning paper. Money, actually, a cluster of half-scorched one-dollar bills in the kitchen sink. Damián stood behind the sink, his hands hovering near the faucet. Martin stood beside him.

The blood rushed to Julián's face. The neighbors, returning home after their commutes, commented to each other about the smell wafting into the hallway as they passed their apartment.

Damián and Martin looked at Julián, glass-eyed and clueless, as if Julián had intruded without knocking.

"You're back," Damián said, turning on the water and sending plumes of black smoke into the apartment. Julián coughed and pulled back the curtains partitioning off the sunroom to check if the windows were open.

"What the fuck are you doing? The entire hallway reeks."

"No worries, man," Damián said. "It's a ritual. A cleansing of past misfortunes to make way for riches in the new job."

"I don't understand any of the words that you're saying."

"This is a celebration," Martin said, clearing his throat. He was wearing athletic shorts and a t-shirt and had no product in his hair. He probably hadn't left the apartment all day.

"Celebration?"

"Starting tomorrow, I'm newly employed."

Martin had found work at the Anvil, a gay bar on 17th Street. He'd initially gone in to inquire about an open barback position, but when the hiring manager discovered Martin spoke English fluently, had a handsome face, and graduated cum laude from Georgetown, he offered him a job checking IDs at the door.

Damián turned off the water faucet, inhaled, and inhaled again, before exhaling. He stepped aside for Martin to take out the scraps of blackened one-dollar bills, about twenty or so, who tossed them into the garbage.

“Now, for the final act,” Damián said, waving for the two of them to follow him into the sunroom. Floored and wholly confused, Julián felt his thighs go weak and didn’t trust his feet to hold him up. He followed them, mostly out of an attempt to understand whether Martin was serious about this ritual. In the sunroom, Julián rolled a joint and passed it around. Martin, evidently already practiced in this tradition, sat in the middle of a rug and resumed a conversation that sounded as incomprehensible as whale moans. Julián sat beside him on the floor, inhaling when the joint came to him.

Damián’s bed was in a corner of the room, his clothes in a plastic shelving unit. Several mandala prints were taped around the room, and a stack of books acted as a nightstand on either side of the bed. The yellow-tinted light in the room, reflected off the smoke in a strange way. Depending on how you looked at it, it was garish or reminiscent of spring. It made him feel dizzy, and unsure if he was really in his own home.

“— So, if you think about it, the morality of working and not working truly is a matter of your orientation toward justice. I mean, it’s clearly documented that contemporary management techniques have their origins in —”

Julián, having not smoked in months, stumbled to his feet and said he was going to his room to lie down for a second. He didn’t feel well.

“You sure,” Martin asked. “You want us to bring you anything?”

Julián shook his head, and laid down in his own bedroom, where he fell asleep by 7pm. Falling asleep so early threw off his sleep schedule, though, and he woke up around 2am, with a taste in his mouth that reminded him of gasoline. Julián went into the kitchen for some tea and cold water.

From the hallway, Julián saw the kitchen light was on and it made him seethe, thinking it was Damián being careless about his electricity usage. Instead, Martin sat at the small kitchen table. His eyes were glossy, and he smelled of body odor all the way from the living room. At Georgetown, they learned the smell of one another. Sometimes, if they had gone days without showering, they would gently suggest to one another that it was time.

“You’re up late,” said Martin. He offered out some of the lamb gyro he must have picked up at some point that evening.

Martin’s face seemed gaunt; his beard had a little bit of gray. His lighter brown hair looked like it was darkening in color and getting thinner. Just slightly. So subtle that anyone else probably wouldn’t recognize it. He looked at the sunroom, curtained off.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Martin said.

What? Had Julián been thinking aloud?

“I admit it, I think he’s cute. Is that so wrong?” asked Martin.

“Not wrong, I guess. If that’s what you’re into.”

“Well, he thought so.”

“What do you mean?”

“I thought he might be interested. It was little things, movements, parting glances, things he said. I made my move tonight, but he stopped me. Said it wasn’t a good idea.”

For the second time that day, Julián felt all the blood in his body rush to his neck and face. It felt nothing short of a betrayal. Not because Julián was jealous that Martin was lusting over another man — they’d long gotten past those kinds of jealousies, both knowing full well that, romantically, they were incompatible. Rather, it felt like a complete dereliction of Martin’s loyalty to their apartment, the home they’d spent years building, and which Julián felt abandoned in trying to protect.

“He shouldn’t stay.”

“What do you mean?”

“We’re both more stressed out now than we were before he moved in. I’d be willing just to pay the extra few hundred dollars myself in rent if it meant we could get some more peace of mind back.”

Martin stood and touched his friend’s shoulder, then put the rest of the gyro into the fridge.

“We can’t just kick him out now. I was the one who came on to him, and he does have a point.”

“We literally have no obligation to him. He hasn’t signed any lease.”

“I kind of like having him around. He knows a lot about spirits, and energy, and the mind. He makes me think. About my life. My family.”

“Overthinking is almost as bad as not thinking at all,” said Julián.

“You’ve been working on that line? I’ll use it on my mother next time she calls to tell me she’s bought her ticket.”

“Ticket?”

“She’s moving in with her cousin in Fort Lauderdale in two months. She thinks it’ll be easier to find work there. And I’ve been thinking that maybe this is a sign. Damián says Neptune’s in retrograde, and now’s the opportunity to clear some of the fog in my life. Maybe that means getting out of D.C. Start over somewhere else.”

“Fort Lauderdale?”

“She needs me.”

“She needs money. Is your brother moving, too?”

“That’s not the point.”

“No, the point is that you hate Florida, your family expects too much, and you don’t have any idea what you’d do for work. Are you really going to take planet advice from a guy who burns money and looks like he hasn’t washed his hair in five years?”

The sound of the words bounced off the otherwise silent kitchen. Even the snoring in the sunroom ceased for a moment, then started again in a soft murmur.

Neptune in retrograde. Julián had never even heard of such a thing. Neither had Martin, for that matter.

“I’ll catch you in the morning,” Martin said, getting up from the table.

“Hey,” Julián called to him, “You aren’t serious, right? About moving to Florida?”

“Who knows?” Martin said, turning around, “It’s not like anything’s keeping me here.”

Martin closed his bedroom door. Julián went back to his own bedroom with his lukewarm tea and water. He slept decently, though not deeply, and woke up shortly before his alarm clock rang. Though, when he did wake, he felt like puking.

Climate protesters linked arms and blocked Constitution Avenue, so all entrances to L’Enfant Metro station were unusable. Julián had to walk a mile in a drizzle to take the bus instead. Though it was cold outside, it was too hot inside his boots and he could smell his own feet on the 42. When he walked into the apartment, after having stewed sufficiently from the chaotic commute and his conversation with Martin the night before, he found Damián frying pieces of eggplant.

“You hungry?” Damián asked over the exhaust fan.

“Not really. Where’s Martin?”

“He’s working tonight. First shift at The Anvil.”

Julián walked straight to his bedroom and shut the door behind him. While he was changing out of his wet work clothes, the smoke detector started blaring.

“Sorry about that,” Damián said from the kitchen. “I’ll open a window.”

The scent of roasting vegetables and burning garlic was so strong that Julián couldn't smell anything else, which was possibly an improvement over the smells of the apartment in the past couple of months. He changed out of his damp work clothes and waited in his room for almost an hour, until he was certain that he couldn't hear Damián moving around anymore, before going to the kitchen to cook his own dinner. But when Julián walked into the soundless kitchen, looking to finally relax from the day, he saw Damián with an empty plate in front of him, watching something on his computer.

Damián took out his headphones and said, "I made garlic eggplant and beef Xian Bing if you're hungry. I had it once a week when I lived in northern China. I bet you didn't know this, but you're living with one of the finest tutors that King's Kids English School in Tianjin has ever hired."

"No flower deliveries?"

"Finished. You wouldn't believe the stairs I have to climb to get people their orchids. I mean, it's only flowers, sure, but the weight of them adds up. My legs are killing me."

Damián grabbed another beer from the fridge and opened it, spilling some onto the floor. He wet the edge of a paper towel and wiped up most of it.

"Grab yourself a plate, man," Damián said. "I made plenty."

The food looked edible, and there was plenty of it. He took one of the small Xian Bings and a few of the eggplant spears and sat at the kitchen table. He felt relieved when Damián put in one of his headphones to continue watching whatever was playing on his computer.

"Rough day at the office?" Damián said, alternating his attention from his computer screen to Julián.

"So-so," Julián said, not bothering to look up from his food.

"I was telling Martin this, but this is a really good season for internal changes. All that fog we see in those streets is really an extension of the fog we sense in our own minds."

“What fog?” Julián said, in a voice that made Damián turn his attention back to his computer.

The beef was spiced with white pepper and cumin. The eggplant was perfectly pan-fried and soaked thoroughly in a garlicky juice. With chile paste and scallions, the meal was delicious. Julián ate so intensely that he took a long time to notice Damián watching him.

“I was wondering when you were going to come up for air.”

“Not bad.”

“Not bad?” It’s my culinary masterpiece. Any guy I make it for always ends up wanting to marry me.”

There was a shift in the air, and Julián felt like they were rehearsing a scene in one of his amateur one-acts.

“Not that you’re going to ask me to marry you,” added Damián.

“It was rich, I’ll give you that,” said Julián, as he washed his plate. His nonstick pan, used to fry the Xian Bing, was soaking, the bottom almost entirely black. It would probably forever stay a shade of brown. Julián dumped out the water and scrubbed.

“I was going to get that,” said Damián, putting his foot on an empty chair, unembarrassed about the blackened underside of his foot.

After the pan, Julián attacked the stove, going over the warm surface until the last of the grease was wiped away. He made a plate from the leftovers, wrapped it with aluminum foil and wrote “Martin” with a permanent marker. He put the rest of the food into a glass Tupperware and into the fridge. Damián sat back, feet up, and watched his television show.

“Hey, before you go, can I ask you for a favor? It’s a little out there.”

Damián touched his knee for a second and then pointed to his feet.

“Do you think you could rub them for a minute?”

“Rub your feet?”

“It’s not the usual thing, I know, but I love it. The Philly guy put me onto it whenever I cooked him dinner. I would ask Martin, but he’d take it the wrong way. He’d want to get involved. I don’t think you would, though.”

Julián felt as though a tiny slice of clean air and fresh light had trickled into the room, like it did sometimes when he sat in the empty sunroom with the windows open. Julián was floored by the audacity of this man moving into their apartment, talking about Neptune, and Fort Lauderdale, and expecting that a greasy beef pancake was enough to turn each of them into live-in entertainment.

“Like I said, it wasn’t bad,” Julián announced, drying his hands on the kitchen towel, then putting them in his pockets. “But I couldn’t possibly eat so heavy every night.”

Julián didn’t see Damián’s face but heard him chuckle as he walked out of the room. He sounded impressed. Yes, that would be one way to put it. Damián asking for what he wanted, without even the slightest taste of shame in his mouth, was impressive.

One day in spring, Julián visited Martin at the Anvil after learning Martin had been passed over for a full-time job. Granted, the grants coordinator position wasn’t very glamorous, but it would have meant working for a major LGBT advocacy organization, having a regular 10 to 6 weekday schedule, and earning a dependable, if lean, salary.

Julián had already made it clear that he was willing to proofread Martin’s cover letters or help him practice for interviews. He even spent an hour each day going through job boards to pick out postings Martin should apply to. Martin was talented, creative, he had a good heart. He could work for a progressive senator if he made the right moves. But Martin didn’t want to hear it. Most of their recent conversations centered around the weather, or *Downton Abbey* episodes, or platitudes about how much D.C. and their neighborhood seemed to change each week. It all felt like chit-chat,

as if they were reading about one another's life in the *Express*, the D.C. commuter paper. This terrified Julián, not least because he'd heard the news about the job declination from Damián.

Julián leaned over the bar at the Anvil and asked Martin to meet him when his shift was over.

"Meet you where?" Martin asked, projecting over the Eurythmics' song and groups of men laughing at inside jokes.

"Jrink, maybe. Let's get juice. I haven't been in a while."

"Juice? I don't get out until midnight. They'll be closed by then."

"Coffee then. Come on, we should catch up."

"Catch up about what? Why are you acting so weird?"

"Me? I'm not weird," Julián said in almost a single breath.

Martin turned to a man and smiled. He took his order and turned back to Julián.

"You should go to the apartment. I'll catch you when I finish up here."

"Why didn't you tell me you didn't get the job?"

"Julián, you rely on me too much sometimes," Martin said, wiping down the bar.

"Rely on you? For what?"

"To make you feel better about yourself." He stopped moving and watched Julián, who felt stunned, as if his friend had just smacked him on the cheek or read him for filth in front of the crowd. His face felt hot and his breath unsteady. He left the bar and walked the mile and a half back to the apartment. It was a cold evening, one of the last of that wintry season, and it took the entire walk in the 42-degree evening to feel his face finally cool off.

Once inside, Julián dropped his coat on the kitchen table and stopped down to take off his boots. Damián was on the settee, watching television.

"How'd it go?" he asked.

Julián blew hot air into his hands and he rubbed them in the air, as if he were washing them. His nose was red and dripping, and he pinched it with a napkin from the kitchen. He walked toward the settee and sat on the floor beside Damián's legs, mostly bare in his gym shorts.

“I don't get it. Everything's different with him now.”

Julián tapped Damián's leg. Without hesitating, Damián put his foot in Julián's lap, and Julián didn't need any more instruction on how to smooth the hair on the top of his right foot, touch his ankles, rub his fingers lightly on the underside of his toes, take the arches in both hands and press hard with his thumbs. Julián had, that many months into the routine, gotten pretty good at it.

Martin had only talked to him like that once before, back when he and Julián first met. During one of the earliest sessions of a Harold Pinter seminar they both took at Georgetown; Julián had challenged Martin on an answer he gave on the role of dialogue. Martin had said the entire story happened on that level; Julián argued that the story was nonexistent. Martin had looked embarrassed enough to cry when Julián asked, in careless jest, if he'd understood the readings at all. They were nineteen then, and alone for the first time. Not alone in the sense of what that meant in their late twenties, when the word grew vines and sounded like rats scurrying across a room. Alone, at that time, meant something powerful, something achieved. They had made it out — Julián from El Paso, Martin via Kissimmee.

Julián apologized on the way out of class and invited him to grab coffee. Martin reluctantly agreed only after Julián promised he'd apologize in front of the class the next week. They talked long enough that afternoon to consider themselves friends by the time they parted. They met up again the next day for lunch, and the day after to share a spliff. Eventually, they were virtually inseparable, and, after college, they moved into the apartment on Adams Mill Road. Those early years, they'd work during the day and dance all at Cobalt, or Nellie's, or even Secrets sometimes, and at the end of

the evening they'd say goodnight, kiss each other's cheeks with Syrah on their breaths, and it was magic.

Damián's foot was limp in Julián's lap, and he hadn't said anything for a few minutes. Julián tapped his foot gently and Damián woke up, squeezed Julián's shoulder.

"What's your plan now? For Martin?" Damián asked.

Before Julián could answer, the apartment's front door swung open.

Julián sat back against the settee, and Damián adjusted his legs to create a crack of space between the two of them. Martin's face was confused, as though he couldn't recognize the Otomi print of the settee even after having seen it every day for almost six years. His mouth was cracked open, too, and his eyebrows wrinkled. Damián felt compelled to speak first.

"You off already?"

It took a second for Martin to register the question and he nodded his head.

"I wasn't feeling well, so my coworker took over. I wanted to talk to you," he said, addressing Julián.

But he didn't say anything else. He hadn't seen anything. Couldn't have because there was nothing to see. A shift, a sudden movement, shadows across the room, if anything.

And in that moment, Martin shook his head as if returning his attention from the astral plane. He had to shower first and asked if Julián wanted to get dinner at Annie's afterward. Julián agreed, and didn't remember hearing anything else of consequence. They must have all exchanged pleasantries, and Damián must have said something about going to his room, because he stood and walked to the sunroom while Martin closed the bathroom door. "Looks like you guys'll make it work," Damián said from his room, and Julián assumed it was directed to someone he was speaking to on the phone because he'd said it behind the curtain and it made little sense otherwise. Make what work, exactly?

Half an hour later, Julián and Martin stepped outside and silently walked along the rightward curve of Adams Mill Road. Julián raised his hand when they got to Columbia and 18th, and a red taxi stopped and asked, “Where?” and Julián gave him the address. The lights formed a single, continuous blur as the driver sped onto Connecticut Avenue (they’d taken the long way, but Julián didn’t mind). The taxi dropped them off on the other side of the street of the restaurant ten minutes after 9pm.

Inside, at a corner booth table, Martin and Julián both ordered hot tea and smiled at the waiter, who walked away from the table. Martin smiled just like the tea tasted. Weak, but warm enough.

Martin hadn’t seen Damián’s foot in his lap. Why had he done it? To make Martin jealous? To drive Damián away? He didn’t know, or didn’t want to know, and Julián packed the sense of shame he felt about the whole ordeal, and tucked it deep in his core, where it would remain, small and hard, like a kidney stone.

“I’ll be going to Fort Lauderdale for a couple of weeks, instead. I’ve already cleared it with my boss.”

“What for?”

“My brother’s sober again, and I need to be there. It’s his three-month mark.”

If his brother was going to start drinking, it would be then. Or at least that’s how it had gone the last few times. Martin’s face looked hollowed out, his eyes sunken and lost.

“Of course.”

“I’ll be back in a couple of weeks. I can pay some of the rent, but you and Damián will have to cover the rest. You can sublet my room if you have to.”

“We’ll cover it,” Julián said.

The waiter came around and asked if they wanted to order. Julián ordered a bowl of broccoli cheddar soup and a side of sourdough bread, and Martin shook his head, said nothing. Julián wanted to sit in that nothingness, the quiet between them as comforting as the sunroom had once been. He wanted to kiss his best friend on the closed mouth and automatically share what was in the other's head without having to say any of it out loud. What a gift it would be to know someone so deeply as Julián wanted to know Martin.

“I think Damián should take my room. I probably should move into the sunroom.”

“The sunroom? Why?”

“It's what I can afford. I'll have to go back to Florida a few more times before the end of the year.”

“Does Damián know you want to switch rooms?”

“Not yet. I wanted to tell you first. But I'm sure he'll be fine with it.”

Julián didn't say anything, or anything of consequence, after that. He nodded his head, half-listened to stories about bar patrons, local news tidbits that popped up in the *Washington Post*. He felt a sinking in his chest, a groan in his stomach, that stopped only when Julián remembered that Martin had told him first about the switch. Damián would be OK with it, Julián was also sure. Julián would know how to phrase the ask. And Martin appeared just as confident.

‘Looks like you guys'll make it work after all.’ It rang in his head, and it became clear to Julián. There was an entire parallel of secrets that Martin kept with Damián and away from him. Each had a turn as the lonely signal tower.

The waiter eventually brought the soup, and Julián told Martin to eat as much as he wanted, which he did, forgetful that he was hungry after his shift. Julián ordered a second bowl of soup when it became clear the first wouldn't be enough, and they sat waiting, chatting about the weather, new

television shows, dream vacations. They traded unfunny jokes and safe compliments, as they did when they sat in the coffee shop at nineteen.

Neither of them had an appetite for anything other than polite table talk. Martin would be leaving in a week, and they could take up riskier topics then. Perhaps a break would even do them good. They'd have a lot to catch up on when Martin did come home. A separation would make them eager to talk. Distant calls would finally find their intended ears, like a cold foot aches for a warm hand.

## The Jacket

It's officially the end of our first winter in El Paso, and I'm unimpressed. The spring arrived like a punctual guest at a dinner party for which I haven't finished cooking, and I'm still learning how to live without snow. Ector suggests putting away our winter clothes when I complain about it, thinking that will help me move on. He's relieved I've agreed to follow him to the desert so he can teach at the university and watch his mother's wrinkles grow, and he shows it by not arguing with me.

We sort through plastic bins and cardboard boxes and swap out long-sleeve flannel shirts and thick sweaters (mine) for t-shirts with band names and tank tops (his). While we're at it, Ector suggests I purge some stuff I don't need any more and eyes my jacket. It's a thick, brown leather bomber jacket I've had for years and it's a useless thing to own in sunny El Paso, unless a person is going to leather night at the Tool Box in the winter, but even then you'd just check it as soon as you got there. Ector tells me to consider chucking it now that we're here.

He worries I'm preparing to return to Chicago, with its snow, its ice on the sidewalks, its cold air that rattles the lungs when it goes down. The wind, when it blows there, burrows into the bones and it makes a person wonder if they've ever been warm. Back then, when Ector and I were both living on the city's North Side and first started dating, he flinched at my ruddied hands, skin chapped on the wrist, whenever I tried touching him. My hands, he said, were just too cold.

It made sense to wear my bomber jacket there. The wool lining was so warm that I used to sweat inside my coat whenever I walked the half-mile to Andersonville from the Berwyn red line stop, or whenever I went ice skating in Millennium Park back when the jacket was new and I hadn't met Ector yet and I still knew Omar.

The jacket was a gift originally meant for him, Omar, who I met years before Ector. Omar and I first started talking one night at a bar named Simon's in Andersonville. We discussed music that night — Lucinda Williams, Lauryn Hill, Liz Phair. It was a Wednesday and it was the first cold night of the season and I'd just gotten a new haircut and the whips of cold air made the bare sides of my head burn. When I told Omar I had to leave to get up early for a meeting, he walked with me to the coat peg beneath the bar counter where I'd hung my black peacoat. Omar comforted me when I discovered my jacket had been taken from the rack where I'd hung it. "I have an extra," he offered, "back at my place."

We walked to his apartment down the block, and he insisted I put one hand in his coat pocket with his own. When we got to his apartment on Foster, Omar took out the brown bomber jacket from his closet. "It was a gift from my mother. When I got the *Reader* gig, she was worried I'd freeze. She bought it when it was on sale back in June." He rarely wore it, he said, zipping it up for me later that night, and he'd gladly part with it if it meant he could see me wearing it again.

I wore it each time we saw each other that winter. It was a memorable one because I spent it doing things I'd never done before. I held hands with a man in public; I went to all-night parties at Berlin. I went to film screenings at the Music Box Theater, Olafur Eliasson exhibits at the Museum of Contemporary Art. Whenever Omar's friends gave readings at Women and Children First or at Unabridged Bookstore, Omar would lean over to me and say "You're enjoying this?" I'd nod and he'd take me to the parties where writers, and journalists, and musicians stood around punch bowls and beer carafes and asked themselves whether it worked, whether it ever worked.

There was food he made me try for the first time. Tank in Little Saigon, Harold's in the South Loop, Annapurna on Devon. Omar was convinced that there was always something to try, another place to eat, another party to go to, another book to love. It impressed me, at first, this appetite for experience.

Months passed. Then a year, then two. The jacket, having warmed me in all those winters, started showing its wear. I wore it still when Omar's appetite for experience didn't impress me anymore and it existed as fear lodged somewhere in the middle of my sternum. I wore it one evening when we'd gone to Granville Anvil and asked him why he wanted to open up the relationship. There was too much to see, he said, too much to eat, too many people to meet, for us to think that our lives at twenty-five could exist unchanged. I wore it to the party we hosted when he'd gotten accepted to an investigative reporting fellowship in Washington, D.C. and I spent most of the evening stepping out of our apartment to smoke a spliff.

And I wore it on my trip to Washington, D.C. when Omar told me he was staying in the city after his fellowship ended. I was wearing the jacket when we stood outside in the cold in front of a bar called Larry's Lounge and he said that there'd be love for me yet and I didn't believe him. But it was true; I met Ector a few years later, and Ector and I have been together since.

Though it's never quite like that first time. When I say this to my closest friends, they pity me and Ector, who I followed from the cold to a place that feels, sometimes, like the other side of the world. Don't you miss it, they ask, that sinking feeling you have when you wake up and think of someone and fall asleep and think of them again; how they barge into your quiet hours and wreck your writing? I tell them, no, not really. In El Paso, with Ector, we have a patient kind of love, a quieter kind. We argue only about the colors of the flowers we want to buy at the farmers market, and both enjoy making lists of the chores we have to finish at some point in the future, like cleaning out our home at the beginning of spring.

Though I haven't bothered going into the story ("It was a gift," I say), Ector has always hated the jacket. He looks at the faded brown exterior, the wool lining that has worn out after so many trips to the grocery store and times spent huddling while waiting for the bus, and tells me to toss it. It's old and worn and I don't need it now. He offers to buy me a new one when the time comes that I need

one. I touch his shoulder and gently rub his bald head like I do when we sit on the sofa to read. He knows this is my way of asking him to drop it, and he does.

He moves on to the boxes we've brought with us that we still haven't unpacked. They're filled with things we don't need — books we've already read, wool underclothes, seeds for plants that grow better in the Midwest — and he starts making a pile of the items we'll give away. I put my jacket away in the closet.

It'll be there, I think, the next time I might need it. Perhaps if it freezes next year, or if Ector and I ever go back to visit old friends in Chicago. I never told Ector, but when I first moved to El Paso and couldn't write, I used to wear the jacket early in the mornings while he was still asleep. I'd walk around our living room, trying to remind myself of how those old days used to feel, but they seemed so long ago that I had trouble remembering.

## Vita

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