

ASCENDING MANGO HILL

by

LORRI CAMUEIRAS
B.A. Florida International University, 2001

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ABSTRACT

Ascending Mango Hill is a collection of work that represents me. The intention is to connect with readers by depicting protagonists who are unable to fit in, a theme most readers can relate to. Many times the protagonist must find the courage to confront a situation rather than remain quiet. The collection is separated into two sections: The Essays and The Short Stories. The essays detail my own experiences at being an outsider while exploring the topics of family and personal growth. In the stories, characters must overcome unresolved childhood issues, recognize unhealthy relationships, and decide when to set off on new journeys.

I bring the sections together by using my travel experiences as the setting for several stories. Aspects of who I am show up in the stories through character motivation and characterization. Ultimately, Ascending Mango Hill is a reflection of the girl I was, the woman I hoped to be, and the woman I have become.

To all the angels in my life. Thank You.

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Essays

BABY PICTURES

Mother and daughter spend the summer soaking up the Miami Beach sun. The mother shimmers—golden—with lightened strands of sun-bleached hair. The little girl doesn't look like her mother. Her hair is dark and straight; her mother's curls are tight. The mother lacks the redness of her little girl's Salvadorian skin, a red that turns a dark coffee with enough sun. The pair of them prompt second glances when they walk down Lincoln Road. They do not match.

The girl is quiet and well-behaved, the type of child who, if left alone, would be found in exactly the same spot when one returned, the room and its furnishings untouched. It is this reserve that pleases and puzzles her loud Cuban family, particularly on this day, her birthday. The pictures prove it. Last year, she wore a different dress. On this day, the dress is yellow, trimmed with white ruffles.

When it comes time to sing the birthday song, the little girl bursts into a wail that no one understands. She is turning four. Her dark, stumpy legs are motionless on a wobbly chair. Her mom stands her on it to bring her up above the cake and crowd of family gathered for the picture. She looks for her mother but cannot find her. She rubs tight fists against her eyes. The faces around her are unfamiliar: distant aunts, cousins, and family friends. They try to calm her by holding up ribbons and party favors. They wave them much too close to her face. She cries. A flash. Her mother has taken the picture.

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Four years earlier, a baby girl is born in a mountain village in El Salvador. It is 1980 and the civil war is at its height. The baby is found a few months later with several other children in an abandoned house. The oldest among them is four years old. The baby girl is brought to the

orphanage, given a bath and a quick physical inspection. A social worker snaps her picture. The image captures a sad-eyed three-month-old in a yellow onesie and green booties. This is the first picture her future mother would see of her. Adoption proceedings and paperwork take five months to complete. A month after arriving in Miami, the baby girl celebrates her first birthday with new relatives in a Miami Beach hotel.

She grows up knowing where she was born, that she was adopted, that she was named after Lorri Kellog, founder of Universal Aid for Children, the adoption agency her parents used. She remembers looking through the court papers when she was younger. Today, the yellowed documents and foreign passport make her smile. Among them, her mother includes newspaper clippings about the civil war in El Salvador that orphaned thousands of children. She wants her daughter to know where she came from. The black-and-white, malnourished faces stare back at her grown daughter.

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“Mom, do you think I could take all the adoption paperwork?” the daughter asks.

Her mother hesitates. She has heard the stories of adopted children feeling incomplete until they find their birth mothers.

“What are you going to do with them?”

“Just have them. You don’t need them anymore, do you?”

“No. Go ahead, take them.”

“Thanks.”

The little girl is now a woman who is searching for something, although unsure of what. It has nothing to do with birthmothers or unknown siblings. It has everything to do with wanting

to belong, wanting to discover who she really is. This elusive feeling was stirred on a visit to Mexico City where everyone else looked like her—dark with almond-shaped eyes and the strong dark hair of Native Americans.

“Maybe I’ll visit El Salvador,” the girl says to her mother.

Her mother never understood why she spent Christmas in Mexico City the previous year. It was dangerous, far from home, and away from family.

“I read some travel sites. Alegría seems like a really pretty little town.”

“Oh, yeah? That’s nice,” her mother placates.

While sorting through the adoption paperwork of court dates, name changes, and physical examinations, the daughter finds a picture of a baby with a round face, in a yellow outfit and green socks, sitting on a dark sofa with a heavy head to one side. She smiles at the picture. She wants to comfort that baby girl, cradle her, care for her.

She flips through more of the documents and finds old pictures of a young woman in tears—it is her mother many years ago. She wears a brown dress with a matching bolero. There is a stationed airplane in the large window behind her. Her face is puffy and she’s holding a handkerchief up to her cheek. In another she is grimacing, overtaken by emotion. Tears run down her face. In the last picture, the mother is crying and carrying a round-faced baby girl in a pink dress.

The daughter takes the pictures and documents home. She cries over them. Cries because she knows what she longs for is not attainable. Her husband does not want children, it is not up for discussion. It is a dark topic she has tried to avoid, covered up with trips across the world, with work, with writing, by donating to UNICEF. The feeling nags at her, she still feels empty.

She just turned thirty. There are no pictures taken of this milestone, but turning thirty marks the start of her journey. The start of change. There are things she wants to accomplish, and if she doesn't do them now, she will never get around to them.

“Ralph, do you have a minute?”

Her husband swivels away from the computer screen. The light in the room is soft. The lights are turned off the only light is from the window. They converted this room into an office. She thought this bedroom would have been perfect for a nursery, but it is now their workspace. Closets were ripped out, book cases added, hardwood floors put in, recessed lights installed.

On the bookshelves are a collection of souvenirs from their travels. Rocks from Mexico, agate from Canada, a small glass figurine from Venice. There are no pictures of them together. Above his desk are black-and-white pictures of him as a baby, and his young parents. She hung them to make the space warmer, and because they don't print these kinds of photographs anymore.

Above her desk are pictures of her at a year old with her parents. She hung them to balance out his pictures. One frame holds side-by-side pictures of both of them as babies. She has looked and wondered at it many times. Whose chin, whose eyes, whose nose would their baby have?

“Yeah. What's up?”

She hesitates. This could be the end of their relationship. She looks at the pictures above her desk. Her mom, her dad, her baby self.

“I want to talk to you about something.”

LITTLE BIRD

I don't look like the population I most identify with. I'm brown. I have almond-shaped eyes. I have strong, dark hair. I often get asked if I'm from Mexico or Peru. I am *Cafe-con-Leche*, I am Dominoes, I am *Salsa y Merengue*, I am Calle Ocho, I am with all my heart Cuban, but when people in Miami ask me "Where are you from?" I've learned that what they are really asking is "Why do you talk the way you do, but look like *that*?" My Spanish has a distinct Cuban accent. My face does not match the words that leave my mouth.

I learned Spanish before I learned English. English is the language I was educated with, *Cuban* Spanish is the language I grew up with. It makes me feel warm when I hear it. Its staccato beat and high volume let me know I'm home, so every time I get asked this question it's a slap in the face. I'm reminded that even though I feel Cuban in every way, that's not what people see. I am Salvdorian

Growing up, I had few Cuban friends. My best friends were Nicaraguan. It wasn't until I became more confident, and/or my peers became a little less judgmental that I made good Cuban friends. I remember attending Little Bird Pre-K and feeling the hurt and confusion that came with rejection for the first time.

Our family spent the summers soaking up the sun's rays. My skin was always very dark when school started in early September and my classmates were either very pale American children with blonde hair or pale Cuban children with dark hair. I attended Little Bird for at least a year, and there's only one day that I can recall with certainty.

That day I was in a big room with florescent lights and white speckled linoleum. In the center of the room was an island of small white desks and bright red chairs. Along the walls were

shelves and toy boxes overflowing with dolls, blocks, and educational toys. This was the playroom, where we came to balance out the new knowledge of numbers and letters.

Children gathered in groups of three, sometimes four, around the room. One group played with dolls, another played with blocks and building pieces, others drew with chalk on the little desks. But one group, one group hovered around a mini-plastic kitchen station with a sink and range. There were metal dishes and utensils that went with the little kitchen. The florescent light bounced off the waxed floors and made the plastic handles and knobs of the mini-kitchen glow. It was glorious. Members of the mini-kitchen group pulled silicone pies in and out of the tiny oven. They held little plastic cups. I wanted a little plastic cup. I wanted to play with a silicone pie. I remember that pie, a perfect replica of something tasty, complete in its own metal dish. Forever baking.

I approached the group and asked if I could play. I remember asking in Spanish.

“No,” said a boy with a spatula.

“You can’t play with us. You’re dirty.”

“I’m not dirty.”

“Yes, you are. Look how dark you are. You’re dirty.”

He said this loud enough so that his kitchen-mates dropped the plastic cups and joined in.

“You’re dirty,” they teased. “You can’t play with us.”

I looked at my arms and hands to be sure. I said nothing. Clearly, they were wrong, but I walked away from the mini-kitchen to one of the small desks and started working on a coloring book—defeated. I couldn’t understand why they would call me dirty. I just wanted to play with the perfect little pie. I don’t remember any other days at Little Bird, but a knot forms in the pit of

my stomach when I think of the place. The name alone causes a stinging displeasure to rise in my throat.

I carry this feeling with me for the rest of my childhood through adolescence and even into adulthood. I feel jabs and pricks, reminders that I am not completely a part of any one group. Sometimes the reminders are completely unexpected; other times I can see them coming.

I walk into the house of a family acquaintance with my in-laws.

“Hi, nice to meet you. Come in, you’re in your house,” the host says in Spanish. He is dark-haired and olive-skinned. He moves with a Cuban swagger I see on men in the street. The older men in my family do not carry it.

“Thank you. Nice to meet you, too,” I say back in Spanish. We kiss on the cheek. I repeat the process with his wife. His wife is pale and has a pleasant moon-face with sparkling green eyes and long wavy hair. She offers everyone coffee. Neither the wife or husband speak any English. The host makes small talk with my father-in-law at the kitchen bar counter that looks into the living room. The host brings my father-in-law a beer. I sit on the couch and look around the house. The saint in the corner reminds me of my grandmother’s house with the life-sized St. Lazarus in the living room. I can hear his wife in the kitchen with my mother-in-law.

I stay on the sofa, and the host’s young son comes up to me and asks if I want to see his room. I agree, and he shows me his collection of toys, then shows me his Nintendo game system. I tell him I used to have one when I was younger. He says I haven’t seen this game and pops in a cartridge. I ask him how he likes school. He says he does not like it. He shows me how well he can play his favorite game. It’s Mario-Kart. I can smell the coffee—sweet and pungent, wafting through the air—followed by my mother-in-law’s voice, saying, “Lorri, come get your coffee.” I

tell the boy I'm going back to the living room. He nods, too wrapped-up in getting his race kart across the finish line to look my way.

In the living room, my mother-in-law hands me my cup and I sit back in the same spot on the sofa. I sip my coffee and the host asks what I do for a living. I tell him I'm a middle school English teacher. He pretends to be impressed and says he needs an English teacher so he can learn. I smile politely and sip from my *demitasse*.

“Hey, let me ask you something. How did you learn to speak such good Spanish?”

I don't understand the question.

“What do you mean? I learned at home.”

“From who?”

“My parents.”

“Where are you from?”

I can see where this is going and give my standard answer when asked this question.

“Oh, I was born in El Salvador, but I was adopted by Cuban parents when I was a baby.”

I am unprepared for what comes next. He mulls over my answer.

“So, you could never have sexual relations with someone from El Salvador because they might be your brother?”

I cannot figure out the logic behind this response. I look at my father-in-law who is still standing at the kitchen counter. He rolls his eyes and wipes his face with his hand. He brings both his hands to the counter and grips hard. He says the equivalent of “Good Lord” in Spanish.

I can see the apology in his eyes for bringing me here. I give him a reassuring glance that I am okay.

“Yeah, I guess not,” I say and finish my coffee.

The rest of the visit washes over me in waves of anger and disgust. The green-eyed wife comes back into the room to collect the finished coffee cups. My mother-in-law says something about dinner and we are on our feet and making a very welcomed way towards the door. I kiss the wife goodbye and try to avoid the host. Before I have a chance to walk out the door he says,

“Hey look, I’m sorry about that. I didn’t mean anything by it.”

“It’s ok,” I say and walk past him.

That same sick feeling makes a knot in the back of my throat while in line at the check-out counter at the supermarket. It happens in stores more often than I’d like; otherwise I’d chalk it up to the cashier having a bad day or not paying attention, or being on autopilot.

I load my groceries onto the belt and read the headlines on the magazines as I wait: “Jesus seen at an Elvis concert,” “Lose fifteen pounds in two days with this recipe,” something about a Kardashian. The headlines aren’t enough of a distraction for me. I see the cashier, a girl with wide hips, fair skin, and dark curly hair is being very friendly with the man in front of me. She speaks to him in English. He’s a middle-aged man wearing Bermuda shorts and a polo. A tourist, maybe. He pays for his food and leaves.

“Good day,” she says to him.

I expect to hear her voice in English, but she looks at me and says, “*Buenos dias*,” in that familiar Spanish.

“Hi,” I say.

Silence. She scans and bags my groceries.

“*¿Eso es todo?*”

I nod. Yup, that's all of it, and start looking for my credit card. She tells me the total in Spanish. I dig through my purse wondering if she's more comfortable speaking in Spanish. Maybe she doesn't know much English apart from a few phrases.

A young man with a tribal tattoo on his arm, board shorts and flip-flops walks up to her and asks, "Hey, you know where the bathroom is?"

"Down there," she points toward the end of the registers. He looks intently.

"You can't get lost," she giggles.

He winks. "Thanks."

I run my card through the scanner. Her smile fades.

"Debito o Credito?"

"Debit," I say.

"El PIN." She puts her finger on the screen, her French-manicured fingernail indicating where I should be looking.

I enter my PIN number. We wait as the receipt prints. I look at the *Woman's Day* magazine: "Refreshing Summer Pies." I think of Little Bird and the confusion I felt then. I don't understand why she is speaking to me in Spanish despite my responses in English. I look down at my arms and hands to be sure.

She will never know that I was in advanced classes in high school, that I graduated from Florida International University, that I teach English to students only a few years younger than her. That I was educated in this country, but can recite José Martí better than most. I am not dirty.

"*Que calor,*" she says and fans her face with a limp hand.

I nod in agreement.

“Yes, it’s very hot. It’s Miami.”

She hands me my receipt. “Buen dia,” she says.

“*Gracias.*” I take my groceries and walk out and into the heat.

MY MOTHER'S BOOKS

We didn't talk much anymore, other than the weekly phone call to see if the other was still doing the same thing she was doing last week.

"You know, I've been doing some reading," I said over the phone, thinking she might take interest in something I am reading. Maybe she'd like to hear about this book I found in the bargain bin at Borders. We always had books. When I was younger I raided the cabinets underneath the living room entertainment center. They were stuffed full of books: *Shakespeare's Collected Works*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, *The Wizard of Earthsea*, they were hers.

I was excited to tell her about my book. Science writing isn't usually my thing, but I hadn't done any thought-provoking reading in a while. The book is well-written, not with regards to prose, but so that someone like me can follow along. Mitochondrial DNA, underdog of the science world. Who knew?

"It's called *The Seven Daughters of Eve*," I said to her. "It's about the discovery of Mitochondrial...."

I knew it wasn't the kind of thing she usually read, but maybe I'd spark an interesting conversation. Instead, she said, "Oh, you know what I just read that was great? *The Da Vinci Code*. Have you read it?"

"No," I said, and breathed out slowly. "I've heard about it. Very popular."

"You'd like it. It takes place in Italy," she said enthusiastically.

I lived in Italy for six months. Now she tells people I'm a wine expert and assumes I find anything involving Italy fascinating. When I told her she should visit Europe she told me she

couldn't stand flying for eight hours. Yet, I recall her telling me how she would have liked to have been a stewardess, but at five feet did not meet the height requirement of five-two.

“Mmmm...well let me finish this one first and I'll let you know,” I mumbled, hoping to finish up the chat.

I've never been able to stand up to her. To say, “Mom, I object,” is out of the question. Her enthusiasm is impossible to conquer. She looks away heartbroken if I oppose. I can't stand to see her disappointment, so I find ways around her. When I was fourteen and nearing my birthday she began making references to my fifteens, the *Quinceañera*. The best day in any young Latin girl's life, right? At first I entertained the idea. Sounded like fun. Prance around in a big dress, take pictures, have a party. But I don't prance, never did. The whole idea eventually terrorized me so much that I looked for any excuse to get out of it. Luckily, that year my social studies teacher was advertising a trip to Spain that she was sponsoring. I brought home the brochure and a way out. I declared that there would be no party, that I would much rather go on this educational field trip across the world. She took the pamphlet and glazed over the pages. She looked at my face.

“You'd rather have this than a party?”

“Yeah. It will be so much fun. Look at that.”

I pointed to a picture of a spiraling tower in Toledo. My excitement was genuine. This really would be an amazing experience. She listened as I went on about my history teacher and the chaperons and my other classmates who would be going. The more I talked about it, the more she ignored the brochure. She watched me and smiled.

“It does sound great. But are you really sure?”

“Yes, Mom. I’m sure.”

“Let me talk to your father.”

During one of their conversations I heard them comparing costs.

“The trip to Spain is just a little over a thousand dollars. A fifteens can hit ten thousand, and that’s being cheap.”

“That’s true. We would be saving some money, and if that’s what she really wants.”

They agreed to let me take the trip, but not before forcing me to take commemorative pictures at that horrible place in the mall. The one that takes pictures of a glamorous and unrecognizable you. It was a small converted storefront crammed between Claire’s and The Sharper image. On the wall they had a series of make-up styles to choose from. I opted for the less whorey-looking style, the one with a coat of lip gloss and just a hint of eyeliner, but my mother and the consultant would have none of it.

“*That* one? It looks like you have no make-up on,” my mother quipped.

I shrugged. “I like it,” I said.

“You’ll look much better with the style I’m going to give you,” the consultant said. My mother nodded in agreement.

I bit my lip. “Fine.”

I supposed if it meant that much to her, I could go with it. I didn’t want these pictures. I just wanted to make her happy.

After getting made-up, I was shown to the studio. Really, it was camera equipment behind a hanging bed sheet. My mother had a much more amusing experience than I did. She and the photographer discussed past-life regression while giving me awkward directions on how

to position my arms and where the feather boa should go. I could feel the studio lights melting the thick makeup, as red feathers stuck to my face. By the end of the session my arms were tired, my face had melted, red feather bits stuck to my cheeks, and my morale was gone.

My mom loves the picture that was produced that afternoon. It hangs proudly in her living room. I don't notice it anymore, but a first-time visitor to my mother's house will immediately be greeted by a grotesque, poster-sized photo of a Chinese superstar surrounded by red feathers.

"Now I'm reading the book my spin teacher gave me. It's really good. It's about visualization and getting what you want. I'll give it to you when I'm done," she says to me.

"Oh, okay," I say.

I remember the first book she actually gave me to read. One that I had not plundered, *The Pelican Brief*. I read it because she gave it to me, but half way through I felt incredibly bored. It was the last time I'd read something I wasn't interested in. At some point during my childhood she stopped reading any of the books in the living room cabinet. In high school all the books I was starting to read could be found in that cabinet with old VHS tapes. In the meantime, she bought new bookshelves and stocked them with John Grisham and Dan Brown novels. Her library has since grown with the *Harry Potter* series and *The Secret*. I've always admired how my mother makes time to read. I think growing up in a house with an active reader definitely influenced me. Even if our tastes are no longer compatible.

"Mom, I'm going to get back to try and finish this book. I'll call you tomorrow."

"Okay, honey."

On her latest visit she brings me her copy of *The Secret*. On my dining room table is a copy of *Consider the Lobster*. She picks it up and looks at it closely. Her face sours.

“*Consider the Lobster?*”

“Yeah, I’m reading it for class.”

“Yuck,” she says and tosses it back on the table.

I wait for her to leave before I pick up her copy of *The Secret*. I know that I will not read it. I pick it up by the edges and open it as if the pages are sticky and toxic. I flip through a few of them. Nice paper. Big letters. I like the colors. I notice her handwriting on the cover. She has dedicated it to me. *To Lorri, with all my Love. You are the most precious gift I have ever been given.*

The next day, I take the book to the park and sit under a tree. I read about visualization and positive thought and how the energy you put out into the universe is ultimately what you get back. It makes sense to me. I can see why she likes it. I spend the day in the park, and reading the book is like being with her. I can picture her telling me the intricacies of *The Secret* with childlike excitement. By the afternoon, I have finished the book and written several notes of positive affirmations — where I see myself, what I hope to accomplish, and how to get there. I feel refreshed.

I call her that night to tell her about *The Secret*.

“Oh, isn’t it good?” she asks.

“Yes, it is.”

After we talk, I think of *The Pelican Brief*. How she handed that book to me with the same enthusiasm as this one. “You’re going to love it, it’s a thriller,” she said. I was twelve, and

must admit, did not give it the attention it deserved. There was a lot of dialogue, some of it above my head.

On my next visit home. I check the cabinet under the entertainment center, out of curiosity. I see *The Great Gatsby* and *Of Mice and Men*. Tucked in the back, sitting along a VHS tape of “Christmas ‘83” is *The Pelican Brief*. I tuck it into my purse.

The book now sits on my shelf now next to Junot Diaz and Nick Flynn. I add a copy of *Divergent* and *Unwind*, young adult dystopia is her latest interest. We talk every week.

“Did you get to the second book yet?”

“I just started it.”

“OK, I won’t say anything then. It’s so good.”

“You know, the movie comes out next month.”

“I know, I can’t wait.”

“Want to go see it together? I’d really like that.”

“That’d be great.”

SCREWDRIVERS WITH SANTA

When I think of Christmas, I think of my father. Christmas Eve, or, *Noche Buena*, was his holiday. It was the one time of the year that I would catch glimpses of his smile and hear his hearty laugh without searching for them.

In our townhouse, in the Mango Hill neighborhood of Hialeah, there's a picture of a brown, lanky-looking Santa standing in the living room. It's my dad. In the picture, my cousins and I look terrified and are scattered about the room. The adults in the picture shimmer in their polyester and Farrah-do's, all smiles and rosy cheeks full of holiday cheer.

I must have been about three years old, but there's no way I could ever forget that year. My parents couldn't afford to spend any extra money on a real tree, so my dad, in order to keep the spirit alive, took it upon himself to chop one down for us. I remember being strapped into the brown vinyl and metal car seat in my mom's old blue Chevy Impala. The car's back passenger window was missing and covered with cardboard. It had dents and scratches on the faded blue hood and fenders, and part of the interior floor had been eaten away by rust. You could hear it rattling down the street before you could see it.

My dad drove that thing down Okeechobee Road and looked for the right spot. Along Okeechobee runs a creepy South Florida canal, and on its banks was a forest of Florida slash pines in all stages of growth. Pine needles crunched under the tires. The Christmas spirit filled us all when my dad parked and switched off the lights. He came prepared with a machete. I can't recall if I was being carried or held by the hand, but I remember my mom warning my dad about being caught and his response being something like "We're not going to get caught, we're getting a tree is all. Don't worry."

The needles of a Florida slash pine are long and soft and not bristly at all. Good for petting, bad for ornaments. When my mom tells the story of that Christmas, she laughs and smiles with every word, as if the memory of that out-of-shape tree is what made Christmas that year.

“Ay, Honey, remember that year that we couldn’t afford a tree and we went to Okeechobee?” she laughs. “The damn ornaments kept sliding off the branches,” her hand slaps her leg. “*Pero*, we had a tree,” she smiles and looks at us with pride.

Sure, that year the tree wasn’t eye-pleasing, and the ornaments had to be tied to the branches with unsightly string, but we had a tree, *our* tree, and that’s where presents went and that is what mattered.

As I got older what mattered at Christmas wasn’t so much the presents as the people. Every year, Abuela Maria would bring her hand-cranked food grinder to our house and every year my mom would ask her the same question.

“*Mamí*, why don’t you grind the *yuca* and the *boniato* for the *buñuelos* in the food processor?”

But every year, grandma would say the same thing: “I like to make them this way better.”

Buñuelos are a cross between a *beignet* and French toast, made out of root vegetables, doused in molasses. In our family, Christmas Eve morning included getting covered in flour while making *buñuelos*. Grandma spread flour over a table top and we rolled the sticky, starchy dough into one of two shapes, either a figure eight (advanced) or a simple bow, one end crossed over the other, just big enough to fit in your hand. The challenge was in rolling the dough to the right consistency. Too much flour made the dough brittle and it cracked, too little flour and it was

a sappy goo that stuck to your fingers. Grandma turned it into a game — who could make the best looking *buñuelo*?

I often won the best-looking *buñuelo* game.

While the women and children made *buñuelos* in the kitchen with *Abuela* Maria the men stood around a cinder-block oven in the backyard surrounding the reason for the season, *el lechón*, the roast pig. My dad, his father, cousins, uncles — whoever — all stood around for hours drinking beer, talking trash, and checking the pig's progress. Of course, they all had differing opinions on how to cook the pig, from how long it should cook to what the pig should be seasoned with.

“You should really use wood.”

“José, you inject mojo into it, don't you?”

“Hey, what time did you put it in? You should probably turn it.”

“Give it more coal or we'll never eat.”

“Yeah, and have it come out like yours? You don't know how to cook a pig.”

Shouts and yells were followed by cackles and the clinking of Heineken bottles or, in my dad's case, tall glasses of what appeared to be orange juice. My father liked to season *lechón* with traditional Cuban flavors. He seasoned himself too. My dad celebrated the accomplishment of getting the pig safely into the oven with Grey Goose. For the pig: sour oranges and garlic. For my dad: orange juice and vodka. After all these years, he still celebrates Christmas the same way.

One year, my dad brought the fresh kill back to the house before he should have. The dead pig had not finished draining blood. He took care of it. My dad hoisted the pig up

by its hind legs over the swing set in our backyard. My brother and I pressed our noses to the sliding glass door and watched the gruesome scene unfold. Grandma kept an eye on us to make sure we didn't go outside. She tugged at our shoulders to try and get us away from the door, but we wouldn't move. My brother's shoulder dodged her hand each time. She finally gave up, but not without a stern warning, "Don't you dare go outside, you hear me?" The swing set looked like it would buckle any minute. Over its center beam was a taut vinyl rope: on one end, a large pig carcass; on the other, my dad pulling hand over fist. The higher the dead pig got, the larger the pool of coagulated blood grew. My mother yelled at my father about having just cleaned the house for Christmas Eve and now having to clean up the trail of blood winding its way through the house.

Christmas Eve dinner was served buffet-style, so we could eat as much as we wanted and mingle with whomever we wanted. Cousins at one table, giggling and making each other snort. At another table aunts showed off their sequined tops and uncles compared watches, as pork, rice and beans were scooped in generous portions and shuffled plate after plate.

After eating, my mother would push the living room furniture against the walls and turn up the stereo with Salsa and Merengue. This is how she celebrated. To this day, when I hear loud Salsa music, the deep bass and sharp horns take me back to childhood Christmases. She was the first one to start dancing and sometimes the only one before others joined in. She taught me how to dance, how to move without thinking, but with feeling.

The year I was seventeen, as the dancing hotter and Christmas Eve wore into the night, I ventured near my dad. Earlier that day, I had helped him with the pig. I stood around with the men and heard them discuss the finer points of cooking *lechón*. I slipped on leather work gloves

and helped them turn the thing. He squinted in the morning sun and asked, “How come you’re not inside making *buñuelos*?”

I shrugged.

“So, you want to be out here helping your dad with the pig, eh?”

I nodded.

He laughed and ran his rough hand through my bangs.

Through the music, I asked him if he would make me a vodka and orange juice. He eyed me and laughed. “Oh, yeah? You think you’re big enough for my drink?” He put his arm around my shoulders, I could still smell the roast pig on him, even though he’d showered and changed clothes. The smell had permeated his skin. It mingled with his Drakkar Noir.

“Today is a day for celebration,” he smiled and kissed my cheek.

“Wait here,” he said and parted the sea of cousins, aunts and uncles. I was *almost* an adult. My dad is not a dancer, but he came back with a sway in his hips and a tall glass of orange juice. He handed it to me. “Don’t tell your mother,” he said. I took a sip and kept myself from spitting it out. I sat down and watched the dancing, enjoyed the lights twinkle on the tree, and sipped my juice. He sat next to me and laughed. He had been drinking them all day. The older adults danced away. The younger kids played video games in my brother’s room. The older cousins, who were too cool for me, listened to their Walkmans. I asked my dad for another glass. He obliged. My mom noticed.

“Honey, don’t give her that,” she said.

“Hey, she’s my daughter, and if that’s what she wants then that’s what she gets.”

He winked at me. I was safe. At Christmas, there were no rules. Kids could stay up past

bedtime and do things they weren't typically allowed to do. This was such a great gift. Not Santa, not reindeer, not shiny presents. Those things weren't nearly as exciting as being able to share my dad's favorite drink, or dance to loud music, or play poker and dominoes until the early morning hours. My dad kept the screwdrivers coming that night. I woke up the next morning with a terrible pain in my gut and a sudden urge to empty my stomach of all its contents. It was violent and made me cry. What came up was orange and thick. In all of the excitement of family and my first (and last) taste of vodka, I hadn't eaten. I threw up several more times before what finally came up was greenish bile. I broke up with Vodka that morning.

That was my last Christmas as a child. The last Christmas before I started dating my husband and tensions between him and my parents took the joy out of holidays. Since then, I've spent Christmas in other cities, other countries, far away from home. I've watched the snow fall on empty plazas as the warm glow of shop windows lit up the white mounds on the ground. I've eaten fresh-roasted chestnuts that warm the hands and fill the air on Christmas Eve. I've decorated the tree with glass ornaments from Germany and Italy.

My husband does not enjoy large, loud Christmases. He persuades me with travel plans. "It's a great time to travel and see new things, to spend time together," he says. It is incomplete without the roast pork, the spray-on snow, and the loud music, but I keep that to myself.

At Christmas I drink a vodka and orange juice by the fire.

"Why are you drinking that?" My husband asks and pours himself red wine. The crackle and warmth of burning wood coming from the fireplace take me back to a backyard gathering with Heinekens and *lechón* roasting.

"I think next year we should stay home for Christmas," I say.

“Right.” My husband says. I can tell he is not willing to discuss this now.

The sting of Vodka going down my throat makes me warm. I think of my parents. I pick up my phone and dial my dad. I let it ring. Finally, I hear him. His voice is pig skin and charcoal.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Dad.”

I hear a rustle and loud laughter in the background. More rustling, I can hear music. Then a dial tone. I smile at the phone.

“Did he hang up?” My husband asks.

“He’s having fun,” I say.

My memories of Christmas cannot be relived, but I feel complete knowing that my mom is playing Salsa and my dad is drinking his Vodka and juice.

I sip my drink and enjoy the fire.

ON THE WAY TO SOMEWHERE

After spending a week in Mexico City, where traffic dominates and sidewalks are crowded, a trip out of the city to escape the sore throat and black snot brought on by millions of tail pipes seemed like a good idea. However, leaving the city required a bus trip. My destination, Tula de Allende, where Toltec ruins lay, was sixty miles from the city.

Mexico City is not like Europe, not like America. Glass skyscrapers glisten orange in the sunset over remnants of indigenous ruins. A turn-of-the-century performing-arts building swirls and twinkles with stained-glass and Corinthian columns. The remains of Aztec temples rise from the ground. A gathering of different times, peoples, cultures. Soot collects on the gables of the performing arts building as easily as on the volcanic rock that make up the temple ruins, a reminder of the amount of people concentrated in one place.

At the bus station, I find myself spinning amid a swirling mass of brown-skinned people like myself. All classes and ages, shuffle from one line to another. Young mothers with toddlers clinging to their pant legs, grandmothers in black *mantillas* fingering rosaries, wrinkled fingers sheltering secrets for which they ask forgiveness, sweaty men, bleary-eyed and tired from a long night in a hotel kitchen, teenagers in uniforms looking for some place to go other than school, a tourist looking to explore a culture unlike her own, but so much a part of her. We all stand in the hopes that we will get somewhere. I scan the lobby. Ticket windows fill both sides. "Tula," my destination, is not on any of them. I have no choice but to get in line for the yellow booth with a blue *INFORMACIÓN* sign.

I look at the faces of the people around me. They look like me. No one will think me out of place, or question where I come from. I let the feeling of belonging wash over me. It soothes years of apprehension. I will not be questioned here.

The crowd around me wears sad smiles. They are expressions imprinted by years of hard work and difficulties. Money earned, money lost by an irresponsible loved one. A job promised, a promise broken. An easy way to a means, a disgrace for a family. I've heard these stories, they cross cultural and geographic boundaries. Yet, they hide their sadness with gentle smiles, never letting on the heartbreak underneath. Every morning they try again, that hope of good fortune, that glimmer, is what lets them un-purse their mouths.

I see the same expressions in the street market, worn by women with round faces and strong arms, the result of lugging wares, setting up and dismantling makeshift storefronts, and carrying children on a daily basis. Their husbands stand watch, ready for trouble or to lend a helping hand at a moment's notice. The market is set up under a myriad of colored tarps to provide shelter from the sun.

Red cleaning buckets, blue laundry baskets, yellow house slippers, brown dried crickets, and green chiles are on display. The vibrant wonderland of items keep my eyes busy. I take pictures. I've seen all these items before, but never like this. I must show everyone back home the photos of this authentic market, my colorful Mexican adventure.

Smells of cooked meat and warm tortillas fill the air. Sounds of customers shouting numbers and vendors shouting back keep my head turning. I smile at a small boy hiding behind a table of *churros*. I look away. He runs behind his mother.

I ask her "How much?"

“Dos pesos,” she says.

I count the right amount of coins and hand them to her. She turns to the boy and says, “Give them to the nice lady.” He nods and quietly takes a sheet of wax paper and tries to grab four churros. The sugar makes it difficult for him to get a good grip on the doughy sticks.

After the trip to the market, I go back to the hotel with a mouthful of fried dough and sugar. The girl behind the counter has a stiff face like the blue polyester vest of her uniform. Although it might have to do with her severely tight ponytail, she does not release a smile. She examines my Florida driver’s license, looks me up and down, and smirks before allowing me to gain access to the elevators. When I speak, she concentrates and asks me where I am from. The question is a familiar one. In this case *I am* a tourist, staying for pleasure. Her eyes tell me I am not like her. I do not live in this city of eight million people trying to survive.

I think about her while standing in line at the bus station. I look like everyone else. I do not feel different among *this* group. The people standing in line do not wonder where I am from. I think, *If the same girl from the lobby were to stand in line with me now would she think any different of me without my American driver’s license?*

It is my turn at the information window, the woman behind the Plexiglas is in her mid-forties and looks like someone out of a 1970’s JC Penney catalog. Her dark hair is feathered and Aqua-netted to perfection, blue eye shadow hangs over her dark eyes and her glossy red lips enchant me. She is quick, but polite. She doesn’t flinch at my hard-to-pinpoint Spanish or at my ignorance of Mexican bus routes. She is working and has no time to waste passing judgment on the likes of me. I am just another person in her line. I ask my question, she gives me an answer. I am like everyone else. I bask in that feeling for a moment before moving out of the way.

I walk over to the booth she directs me to and let my pesos fall into the stainless steel nook under the window speaker in exchange for a ticket to Tula de Allende. I am worried about traveling the sixty miles in a rundown bus. I've heard stories and seen movies. I expect sticky seats, sweaty bodies, and maybe some chickens. I am pleasantly surprised when I board a modern air-conditioned bus, the type that senior citizens tour the United States in, complete with a toilet and cushioned velour seats. Red and blue geometric shapes on gray fabric never looked so inviting. I sink in and press my head against the window. With a hiss, the bus lurches forward and moves a few yards before making a wide turn out of the station's chain-linked gates. Just outside of the station, the bus picks up another passenger wearing a white shirt and pants. His face is reddened by the sun and he has a soiled white cap on his head. He is panting. He has sprinted to catch the bus before leaving the gates. He is carrying a Styrofoam cooler. I think he is a worker with a lunch. He begins singing:

“Cho-co-late with pea-nuts and with-out.”

He is selling candy bars. I understand his job now: self-appointed concessionaire. He sings up and down the aisle, but there are no takers. The bus operator lets him off before getting on the main highway. “Thanks,” he says. “Til next time.”

He must do this all day—run to catch a bus on its way somewhere, sing a song for its passengers, jump off, then run back to the next bus in the hopes that someone might give him thirty cents for a chocolate bar.

The bus ride gives me time to reflect. I avoided touristy cities, despite the warnings from friends and family. I walked among the writhing mass of people who carry a rich history on their backs. I spoke in friendly tones to the people I met, and it was reciprocated with kind gestures

and accepting smiles. I didn't cringe at the candy bar vendor. He didn't give me a second look, and no one judged me for not giving him anything. I was another passenger, a potential customer who also didn't have thirty cents. He sees thousands of people like me every day. So does the girl at the hotel.

This was another day. For everyone on that bus it was just another day. For me, it was the day I felt invisible. I didn't feel scrutinized for speaking or looking the way I did. I was comfortable. I smile at the dusty sidewalks that pass outside the window. A group of children kick a soft soccer ball between them. Wild sunflowers grow out of cracks between the street and sidewalk. A puppy with a distended belly drinks from a puddle. In the distance, the faint shadow of mountains. I am on my way.

SPEAKING IN ROMAN

I grab the small marble coliseum off the bookshelf. This one was mine. He could keep the German beer steins and Mexican ceramics. I had earned this one. I wrap the perfect little reproduction in packing tissue and place it in the box labeled “knick-knacks.”

We had spent the last ten years collecting memories from around the world. Our trip to Italy was one of the first. The little coliseum was the last thing I’d take away from that house. Despite the ache caused by dividing and packing away our lives, thinking of that trip made me smile. I gaze at the little replica and sit on the floor, surrounded by packing boxes in various states—flat, empty, full of bubble wrap. We had plans. Only six months ago we had plans. My head spins with everything that needs to happen, everything that won’t, and everything that might. I think back to that trip.

Fiumicino Airport was a swirl of gelato, pizza, and desktop replicas of the coliseum. Morning light crept in through the panes of airport glass with sticky handprints and streaks that created a diffused glow. The click-clack of Italian-made heels hurrying past terminals on marble floors echoed and magnified fresh memories and predicted those to come. My Eddie Bauer backpack was heavy. I carried it on one shoulder. The reinforced edge of the strap cut into me. I walked quickly, my legs still wobbly from the plane. The pack slid off my shoulder. The weight of it made me jerk to one side.

We didn’t pause, we rushed past gates and gift shops, until we came to a disorderly wall of people—waiting—held back by steel railings; some shouted in foreign languages, others held up signs, some looked bored.

“He was supposed to meet us here, right?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Ralph said.

We scanned the crowd. There was no sign for us. I flipped through the itinerary we had printed back home. There should have been a driver waiting for us.

“Here,” I pointed off to one side. “Let’s wait here. Maybe he just hasn’t gotten here yet.”

I propped myself against a concrete column away from the noise. We scanned the crowd again looking for a sign with our last name, our city, our descriptions, anything. Nothing. The jet lag would hit soon. I let the pack holding all of my possessions for the next six weeks slide down to the floor. We waited and looked around. We realized that we didn’t have money to make a phone call. We knew our bank cards worked overseas. We just had to find an ATM.

“Look, there’s one over there,” I said and signaled to a dingy corner.

“I’ll stay here with the bags. I can see you from here,” he said.

“Okay, but keep an eye out.”

I fumbled with my shirt and waistband to get to the hidden money pouch strapped against my body. The debit card was warm from being pressed to my belly. I shoved my card in the slot of the *Bancomat* as we would learn to call them, and selected the English menu. I was given a choice between 50, 150, 200, 250 Euros. Of course, I chose the highest number, which prompted a quick flashing message letting me know I had reached my maximum daily limit. We just needed enough to let us make a phone call. I grabbed the cash and headed for a magazine stand. I requested change in coins.

The pay phone looked like a child’s discarded toy, orange and plastic with sticky drips on the box and trails of soot on the handle. I deposited my Euros and dialed the numbers on the itinerary. I spoke slowly to the man on the other end. He spoke in broken words and phrases, but

I understood. I learned that our driver was caught in traffic, but he was on his way. The agency hadn't forgotten about us. It was just traffic. I brushed the wisps of hair that had come loose from my ponytail away from my face and looked back at Ralph with a thumbs-up.

I walked back to Ralph and leaned against the column with him.

"Are we good?" he asked.

"Yeah, he's on his way. Stuck in traffic. I told them we'd wait by the exit."

"How long will he take?"

"Not sure."

"They're not sure or you're not sure?"

"I didn't ask. He's on his way."

"That could mean hours, Lorri."

I shrugged. Not much could be done either way. I looked at the pastries of the concession stand across from where we waited. *Cornettos*, croissants, and flaky, glazed Italian goodness glowed in the morning light.

"You want to grab something to eat?" I prodded.

"I'm not hungry," he mumbled.

He didn't look at me. Somehow, I'd caused the traffic jam, I was late in picking us up. I had failed. We stood apart from each other, didn't speak. I was not with him. Twenty minutes, later a portly man in a long-sleeve shirt and a sweaty brow approached us.

"Mr. Lores?"

Ralph stood straight at the sound of his name.

"Yes."

“Hello. Giulio.” The man said and extended his hand. After a good shake with Ralph and a lighter one with me, he took our bags and walked us to the van. “Traffic a Roma, at this time very bad,” he said. We smiled politely and hopped in. Giulio drove us to the apartment rental agency to pick up the keys. We had found the agency online. They rented privately-owned apartments to tourists looking to stay a few weeks or months. The apartment owner made money and tourists got a place to stay at a decent price. A private shuttle was included in the rental fee, and with it our friend Giulio.

I was hungry and looking forward to getting the preliminaries out of the way so we could find something to eat on those gorgeous Roman streets. Everything looked beautiful in the summer sun. The cobblestone streets, the buildings, even the billboards looked inviting and warm. I couldn’t wait to get out and explore the city. Giulio dipped in and out of traffic. If there was an open piece of asphalt, he barreled through it.

He finally pulled up to a four-story office building on a tree-lined street. Ralph refused to leave our bags in the van. “What if someone breaks in?” he warned. I hoisted my pack over my shoulder and squinted at the building.

We followed Giulio through the open-air lobby, the kind with concrete plant containers and loud echoes of traffic flowing through it. It was grey. The elevators were out of order. Giulio showed us the stair entrance and climbed up ahead of us to lead the way. We climbed four flights of stairs with Giulio doing his best to make it even more uncomfortable.

“Hot, eh? It’s a *Roma*.”

“It’s okay. We’re from Florida,” I said.

“Oh, Miami. Is *bello*, no?”

Ralph didn't do small talk.

"This way, please."

He opened the glass door of an office. The office consisted of two guys sitting around watching three secretaries make espresso. Marco was one of these guys. He had gelled hair and was clean shaven. He extended his hand and we repeated the handshakes. Marco's pants shimmered the way expensive Italian pants do. He sat back down behind his desk and folded his hands. Our first payment was due. *Payment*. We hadn't counted on this. The first payment should have been charged to our credit card already.

"Okay, we have our credit card."

"No good. Our machine is no working."

"This is all we have," Ralph said, as he dropped two hundred and thirty-six Euros and change on his desk. I'd bought a magazine to make change for the phone call. Ralph kept ten.

"No problem, there is a bank down the street. You go get the rest," Marco said.

We put our heavy packs on our backs, descended the steamy June stairwell, and headed in the direction Marco had pointed. Giulio waited back in the office. During the walk I mentioned that our daily limit might have been reached. Ralph and I had separate debit cards but shared the same account. "We'll try it anyway and see what happens," Ralph said.

I was wearing a knee-length skirt and a black top. Dressing professionally gets you through customs lines faster and with fewer questions. By the time we found the HSBC Bank, sweat was dripping down my back. My lower back and shoulders were raging from carrying the backpack. I had packed it up nice and tight, never thinking I would have to carry it on my back a quarter mile. Any shred of respectability I'd managed to keep after an eight-hour flight was gone.

At the bank, we watched a customer enter and proceed through an elaborate process before deciding who would venture in. It would be Ralph. First, he had to step into a glass vestibule that closed behind him. Only one person allowed at a time. After the scanners showed he was clear, the guard on the other side pushed a button that let him into the first part of the lobby. It was a small room with lockers. The guard spoke gibberish as far as Ralph was concerned, but managed to get Ralph to take out any keys or suspicious-looking sharp objects and lock them up inside one of the lockers. I watched from the sidewalk. All this was done behind a wall of glass windows, like some sort of “performance art” playing itself out. I watched the process and gripped his bag tighter between my feet as I repositioned the heavy straps of my bag on my shoulders every so often. I saw Ralph make it to a teller. The transaction was quick. A head nod, a hand wave, and he was back outside. Ralph shook his head, kept it low.

“What happened?”

“We reached our limit. We can’t get any more out until tomorrow.”

“What do we do, now?”

“There’s nothing else we can do.”

We walked back to the office building to declare ourselves penniless and hope for mercy.

Marco sucked his teeth at the news and shook his head. He sat at his desk and crossed his hands. “Tomorrow, you must come back with the rest,” he said and shook his finger at us. He pulled open a drawer with the envelope holding the key to our apartment. He handed it over to Ralph. He nodded at Giulio and our bags were promptly carried away. The van zigzagged through tiny Roman streets, away from any famous landmarks, until we were completely lost and unsure of where we were. I caught glimpses of back alleys and narrow streets lined with

overflowing dumpsters, and cars that were parked way too close for comfort. A tiny shop here, a *gelateria* over there, screeching brakes, then we stopped.

The yellow apartment building looked different from the picture we had seen online. Giulio handed us our bags and drove off in a puff of smoke. At first, we weren't sure how the gate lock worked or even if we had a functioning key. I tried to stay positive. I pointed out the foreign cars parked along the building's wall.

“Look at how tiny, this is! Could you imagine driving this in Miami? How fun.”

Ralph assured me our lives were in danger.

“I think they scammed us out of our money and dropped us off in the middle of nowhere.”

He struggled with the gate. The key fit in the lock but wouldn't turn. He jiggled it, pulled it out some, shoved it back.

“No, that doesn't make sense. They wouldn't have given us a key,” I replied.

Finally, the lock clicked and the gate creaked open. He held the door open and I walked under his outstretched arm.

“Did you get a chance to look at the street name?” I asked.

“No. I have no idea where we are,” Ralph said.

We walked up two stories and found the door with the matching key number. The key worked. The apartment was dark and stuffy. Five hundred square feet seemed like a decent size when we booked it. The combined kitchen, living, and dining area made up the biggest part of the apartment. There was a small bath with a shower, and a bedroom with the biggest wardrobe I had ever seen. I opened the windows in the bedroom, across the street was an identical-looking

building. There was laundry hanging off the balconies, potted flowers, washing machines, brooms, and mops. I walked back to the main room, swung open the balcony doors and let the warm breeze waft in.

“Let’s sit on the balcony,” I said.

“Come here.” Ralph said.

He was sitting at the convertible Ikea table. Maps and tour books were scattered on the pine tabletop.

“We are supposed to be close to the Vatican. I don’t think we are anywhere near it.”

“Maybe we came around a different way,” I said.

My stomach growled.

“I think we’re going to have to go for a walk to figure this out,” Ralph said.

“I’m hungry.”

“We’ll find something to eat while we walk.”

He stuffed the map and tour book into a small backpack, turned around, and opened a cupboard. He grabbed a glass and turned on the sink faucet.

“Here, drink some water. That’ll help.”

I took the glass and chugged the cold water. It wasn’t food.

“Can we just find a restaurant or something, first?”

“Lorri, we have ten euros, and we need to find out where the hell we are.”

“We are in Rome, not in a war zone. There is no curfew. Will you relax?”

He threw the backpack over his shoulder and headed for the door.

“I’m leaving. You coming or not?”

The apartment was hot and there was nothing to eat. I hopped up.

“What if we can’t find our way back?” I asked.

We shuffled down the staircase and out the tight lobby door. There was barely room for one person to get through. If a tenant was retrieving mail from one of the mailboxes, it was impossible. I was relieved we would not be carrying our travel bags. The warm breeze on my back was welcome and almost refreshing. We walked out the creaky door and into the alley. Cars were parked alongside the building, Fiats, Peugeots, and BMW’s. I brushed against the colorful metal and it seared my skin. We turned a corner, another alley, more cars. We made a third turn and found ourselves on a main avenue. I looked to street corners for a sign but, there was nothing.

“Do you see a street name anywhere?”

I shook my head. Then I remembered the street signs were not on metal posts at the intersections of streets like back home; they were on the stone plaques that clung to the buildings. I looked for a ridge, a sign of a stone frame along the building across the street. Nothing. Ralph stopped on the busy sidewalk and reached deep into his backpack. He pulled out a map of the Rome city center. He looked up at the building across from us. It was framed in scaffolding and draped over the metal frames were layers of advertising: scantily clad girls with full lips and wet hair. He studied the map. The hot air smelled of gas. Vespa horns beeped as they zipped between Peugeot and BMW’s. Air brakes hissed on a city bus and took me back to the busy Miami street my grandmother lived on.

“I can’t find this street on here,” he pointed to the crumpled map.

“How do you know which street it is?”

“Come, let’s walk a bit further this way.”

The sun was burning my shoulders. I could feel my skin turning colors as we stood on the sidewalk. Ralph walked in front, determined. He shuffled past old women with metal shopping carts, mothers with children, and older gentlemen wiping the sweat off their brows with linen handkerchiefs. I followed, occasionally getting lost in the sights and sounds of this foreign city alive with novelty. A child with worn sneakers and a sweaty face cupped his hands under a small cascade of water pouring out of a stone pillar in between two streets. I stopped to watch if he would drink it. He did.

“Lorri, stay close to me.”

“Where are we going?”

He walked back to where I was standing and pulled at my wrist.

“Whaaaat.” I protested.

“Look.” He pointed to a plaque on the corner of the building in front of us. He pointed to another plaque across the street. I read the names: *Via Aurelia*, *Via Manfredi*.

“Is that on the map?”

“I can’t tell. Let’s go back to the apartment. We can look through the other travel books.”

“Can we get something to eat?”

“This is more important.”

“We can go into a grocery or something.”

“Where, Lorri?”

“I don’t know. Ask somebody.”

He threw me a look that stung. I secretly hoped we would stumble across a little *trattoria* with charming waiters and the smell of roasting meat in the air. We stood in the middle of the busy sidewalk, both too stubborn to move out of the way. Ralph grudgingly walked over to an older man and asked him in broken Italian if there was a grocery store nearby. The man nodded enthusiastically and pointed, down the street perpendicular to us with his hand. Ralph thanked him. I caught a glimpse of his victorious grin.

“He said there is one down the street.”

“Great!”

“We can get some water and bread or something,” Ralph said.

“Yeah, okay.”

I didn't care what we bought, so long as it was edible. We walked in the direction the man had pointed and the busy avenue became white noise. The sidewalks grew narrow and the empty stretches of rubble between buildings became more frequent. Vacant lots stood still on one side of the street. Wild flowers and weeds grew tall. It looked like the area was in the process of being developed. I looked at Ralph.

“This doesn't look right. You sure it's this way?” I asked.

“That's what the man said. We'll walk a little more and see.”

Sweat beaded on my brow and upper lip. My arms and face stung the way they do after a long day at the beach. I was still wearing the strappy sandals I had worn on the plane and my toes were complaining. Ralph's red shirt was marked with patches of sweat. The light backpack he had brought with maps and a phrase book bounced against his back. The graffiti on the

unfinished buildings was more frequent now. I couldn't make out what they said, but the swastika was clear. We had walked about twenty minutes.

“Let's turn around. I don't like the way this looks,” Ralph said.

I did not look forward to the defeating walk back, but I didn't want to go any further. I did an about-face. The dust from the vacant lots and halted construction caked in the creases of my elbows and corners of my mouth. I wanted to throw up. We walked toward the increasing sound of cars and chatter in robust tones. Without discussion, we walked back in the direction from which we had come, back down the busy street. We found our way through the winding alley of cars and sidewalks. Ralph opened the gate-lock and we climbed the stairwell to the apartment.

I let the safety of the space take over me. I saw things I had missed earlier. The kitchen table doubled as a bookshelf, the rack over the sink could be folded away to allow for large pots, the fridge was tucked neatly under a nook in the wall. Everything we would need could appear and disappear at our whim. This would be our home.

I pulled the sandal straps from my heels and kicked them into a corner. My feet were swollen and sunburned with a crisscross pattern. The cool tile floor was a relief. I opened the cupboard, grabbed a glass, and turned the faucet on. Roman water is cold, cold and delicious straight from the tap. I gave Ralph a glass. He chugged it, I chugged mine and he refilled them both. I let myself fall onto the inflatable blue couch in the living area. Inflatable rafts on the beach are made of the same material. I could have floated off to a distant island on that couch. Ralph let his weight drop onto the raft couch and I bobbed up and down. It forced us to smile at

each other. He turned his body to face me and his bare sweaty arm rubbed against the vinyl making an awkward, rubbery squawk. We drank our water.

The delight of cold water and being out from under the blazing sun kept me composed enough to finish my glass. I swallowed the last gulp loudly. We only had ten Euros. My feet were throbbing, and we were technically still “lost.” Back home we had riddled our map with circles for all the famous sites we wanted to visit, along with the supposed location of our apartment. Time wasted. I looked at Ralph and the tears came.

“I want to go home,” I said and wiped away the first few tears. He gave me an *are-you-fucking-kidding-me* look, which only made it worse.

“Don’t be stupid, you don’t want to go home.”

“Yes, I do.”

“We just got here.”

“I know,” I said. “We have six weeks here.”

I looked for something to blow my nose with. “I want to go home.” I grabbed my shirt collar and blew.

I had said the unthinkable and ridiculous. Ralph got up off the couch. I sunk into the blue vinyl and cried. He handed me another glass of water and reached for his backpack. He pulled out the maps and studied them. He looked down at me.

“Well, these are useless.” He tossed the folded maps onto the small pine table. “Go change your shoes, and let’s get some food.”

The third glass helped quench all that I had lost. I walked to the bedroom, my cheeks wet from tears, and hauled my travel bag out of the wardrobe. I pulled out my cushioned leather slides and walked out into the living area with trepidation. I wiped my nose and sniffed.

“Okay,” I said

We took the same route as before, passed the point where we had turned for the phantom market, and into a major intersection. There, we found a small market under tarps. Ralph scanned the stalls. He took off into the middle of the market.

“Come,” he said.

“Where? Why?”

“I think I see something that might help.”

He walked through the aisles without looking at the cleaning supplies or brassieres, or *Pyjamas*, directly to a table lined with books. He must have seen the *Libri* or books sign from the sidewalk. Behind the table of books, a wall of maps. I was dizzy from the heat, exhaustion, and hunger.

“We might find a good map here,” Ralph said to me.

I nodded and let Ralph do the talking.

“*Mapa di Roma?*” he said to the man behind the table. The man smiled. He was in his forties and wore a brown fifties-style bowling shirt.

“*Grande,*” Ralph said.

“*Si, si,*” the stall merchant said. He pointed proudly, pulled one off the wall and opened it. He showed it to Ralph, studied it, then promptly closed it. He shook his head. This happened a

couple of times before he finally pulled out a map, opened it, and pointed excitedly. Ralph paid close attention. The man motioned to Ralph assuredly.

Ralph said a few words back. There was an exchange of coins, a handshake, and a nod.

“We got a map,” Ralph said. He waved it at me.

“How much?” I asked.

“Two.”

“Oh.”

I was too disappointed to state the obvious: We were down to eight euros. We walked a little further. There was a closed jewelry shop with graffiti on its metal security door. Then a small pharmacy, the glowing neon green cross above the entrance was the only sign there was business down the dark little alley. I was about ready to turn around again and face a slow, steamy death back at the apartment when I saw the sign. A sign that would bring any American hope and the promise of happiness. Those beautiful golden arches. They gleamed on a red background. An arrow pointed the way and beneath the arrow was how close we were to salvation— sixty meters. I pulled at Ralph’s arm. I pointed at the sign, and ran in the direction the arrow pointed. He followed.

The McDonald’s was the entire first floor of an apartment complex. It was small, no marble or Murano glass fixtures like the one near the Spanish Steps. This McDonald’s looked like all the red plastic fast food chains of my childhood. The tile was brown, the chairs were thick and swiveled on square metal pillars. There were posters of Grimace and Ronald McDonald. In one corner was a large plastic statue of the Hamburglar. I looked at the menu. We had eight Euros. The Big Mac meals were three euros each. The choice was easy. For an extra

Euro we could make it a “Grande.” Ralph sprung for the extra fries, and we shared the bounty. I rarely ate McDonald’s back home. The coating that sticks to the roof of my mouth and the back of my throat after eating value meals is not something I look forward to. I grabbed a French fry off the tray while Ralph handed over our cash. My mouth surged with fluid as soon as the crispy, salty goodness touched my tongue. I rushed over to a table. I couldn’t wait. I had to sit down and try to get as much in my mouth as quickly as possible.

“No, over here, by the window,” Ralph said holding his tray.

Ralph had a way of being inconvenient at the worst moments, like the time I waited twenty minutes in the freezing rain while he set up his camera so that he could take a picture of me with the lighting just right. We had just hiked a steep trail in the Smokies. I’d been tired, wet, and hungry then, too. That picture was for not. I ended up scowling in the photo, but the fog and gray light around me was spectacular.

I reluctantly got up, looked down at the fries on the tray, shoved a few in my mouth and walked over to the table he was at. I felt like a child who had been promised a Happy Meal if she was good. We *had* been good. I was excited. I grabbed another handful of fries and stuffed them into my mouth. The mush of salt, grease, and starch entertained my senses long enough for me to unwrap my Big Mac. I’ve never had anything more satisfying. The meat in Italian McDonald’s is definitely better than the meat back in the States.

We watched people pass by the window as we ate and drank. There was little conversation between us, but enough satisfaction. We stayed and refilled our sodas until it started to get dark. There was pride in knowing we overcame heat, exhaustion, starvation, and possible homelessness in another language. It could have been a fast food chain anywhere in the world.

The walk to the apartment was easy. I knew where the market was, where the boy drank water, where the street to the phantom grocery intersected. Turns out, the grocery was only a few blocks farther from where we had given up and turned around. We ended up shopping there frequently. I paused at the *gelateria* window on the way back to read the flavors: *Straciatella*, *Capuccino*, *Cicolato*. We found our way through the tight alleys that turned one after the other, street lamps casting their warm glow. We knew where we were going. We were not lost or looking for an address on a map. We were going home.

LETTER TO A STRANGER

I dreamed of you the other night. I had written you a letter. You stood in the middle of our backyard over the fire pit you had built with granite. You set fire to the letter. It was a history of us. You didn't read it but you knew what was in it. As it burned, the flames turned colors, as if the ink contained the brightest, most volatile minerals. The colors were predictable, an unstable rainbow starting with red.

A deceitful red- When I found your email to her and didn't know what to do. My insides curdled and the tears came. I was wrong for invading your privacy. You were wrong too, but you brushed it off. Just flirting, you said. Nothing would come of it. Except something already had. You convinced me that you loved me and would never hurt me. You lied.

A bittersweet orange- I loved you deeply. You were my first love. I wanted you to be the love of my life. You made sure you wouldn't be. We got married for tax reasons, one day after work. I wore a flower print skirt. I bought my own corsage. I thought, *how sad not to have anything commemorate this day*. I should have known. Your mother took a picture of us in the yard, afterwards. I was beaming. I held our cat like a baby. You had your arm around me and looked impatient.

#

In the bedroom of my apartment I wake-up from the dream. I feel for you in bed. Your side is cold and I am overcome with relief and sadness. The dream is still fresh in my head. I close my eyes and try to forget it, only to find myself back in it.

#

We traveled around the world, the country, the state, and made fond memories. Those trips kept us together much longer than we would have otherwise. The trips covered up the truth. We wanted different things. I wanted a family. You wanted to explore the world and others without me. I was a weight you hadn't asked for, the child you never wanted. I was trapped by the love I had for you and my inability to break free.

A stagnant yellow—your quirks were endearing at first. The way you walked on your heels, cartoonish, in a way. Like the old black and white funnies with characters with oversized feet. The way you ate—you enjoyed your food so much you smacked your lips with each bite and let your mouth open before swallowing. Your fascination with butterflies. Beautiful specimens, iridescent blues and greens pinned to canvas, trapped behind glass.

You were older by several years, but spoiled and mean, for no reason. The child who has it all, but finds joy in plucking the feathers off a baby bird because no one said he couldn't. I was barely an adult. I was quiet and sought the approval of adults, of you. I was compliant and trusting. You wanted more.

A hopeful green—I came to you one afternoon, unsure of how to begin. To my surprise, you listened. I suggested spending time apart to make sure we were certain of our decisions. I was certain I wanted children, you were certain you did not. Rather than anger I saw worry. You wouldn't hear of it. You asked me how I planned to get on without you. Not so much emotionally, but financially. I was in no position to raise a child on my salary.

Later, you said you had given the topic of children some thought, and if that would make me happy, it might be a possibility. You had grown you said. You'd be willing to enter into this

adventure. I was skeptical, and feared that years later you would resent me and the child. You assured me this would not be the case.

A deep blue—so many times I looked out that kitchen window as I washed the dishes and cried. I felt trapped, wanting so desperately to spread my wings but feeling the sting of metal any time I tried. It was difficult to approach you with what I wanted. It would mean upsetting everything we had created in the last twelve years. It would mean starting over.

A complicated purple—despite your promise of what I wanted most, despite the love I had for you, I knew there was more out there. I was tired of feeling the pressure of your thumb on the top of my head. The excitement of having control over my future made the hair on my arms stand on end.

As the fire burned you stayed and watched the flames. I walked away and felt the warmth on my back grow colder with each step.

#

I pull the sheet off your side and wrap myself in it. I rouse just enough to see the blue light of early morning creep through the window. I stay awake.

BICYCLE CHAINS AND TATTOO GUNS

I'll never forget the purple Huffy I rode as a kid. It had a shimmery purple coating and black streaks, a gear switch on the handle, and a very sharp seat. I rode around my block, to my friend's house, to the convenience store down the street. Whether I was riding aimlessly or I was trying to get somewhere, or it was raining, or it was blistering hot, I enjoyed time on the bike and I looked forward to having that again.

My husband and I were living in Monterotondo, a little town twenty minutes outside of Rome. We didn't have a car, so we walked, hitched rides with friends, or used public transport. Our Italian friend, Massimo, had been keeping a couple of bikes in his garage and he offered to lend them to us. These bikes would let us go where we needed to with childhood enthusiasm. I couldn't wait, couldn't wait to ride my bike to the pharmacy, the bakery, the market. I imagined riding over cobblestones in a sundress and sandals, a basket of sunflowers hanging from the bars and my hair lifting in the breeze as I whizzed by. "*L'Americana! L'Americana!*" residents would point and yell. However, reality was far from the Hepburn movie in my head.

When we came to pick up the bicycles, it was overcast. "They're a little rusty," our friend warned. He had been keeping the bikes in his garage where he kept his wines and prosciutto. Ralph got the first one. The frame tubing was thin, the tires were thin, it was a road bike. The handle bars sat low so the rider had less resistance. It was Italian-made and like all things Italian-made, sleek and sexy. "Wow," I said straddling the matching partner to Ralph's bike. I gripped the leather handles. This was going to be great.

The bike seat poked my lower back and I realized that it was too high. I brushed it off. *Do I really need to have a seat at the right height?* I leaned the bike to one side, struggled back onto

it, and pushed off. For a few seconds, I was balanced. If I could keep the bike moving I would be alright. Besides, I would have plenty of time to practice from the safety of our little street before having to take it on any major roads. I stopped the bike, let it tip over, and jumped off.

Massimo offered to give us a ride back to the apartment. I was about to climb in his back seat, when to my horror Ralph turned him down.

“Nah, it’s okay,” he said. “We’ll get to practice this way.”

I pulled him over to one side.

“I don’t know if I can,” I whispered.

“What? Why not?”

“I think the seat is too high.”

“You don’t think you can ride it?” I could see his eyebrows furrow.

Rather than give a disappointing answer, I tested myself. I got myself up on the bike again and pedaled a few wobbly feet in Massimo’s gravel driveway. The tires skidded on the unstable surface. I struggled with the handlebars. I could feel Ralph smirking behind me.

“I can ride it, but if I have to stop I won’t be able to reach the floor,” I yelled back at him.

“You won’t need to stop,” he said.

Massimo sent us off and waved from the gate. “Be careful, you two,” he said. We pedaled down the driveway on a slope that led out into an alleyway. I pedaled down the long drive gaining unexpected momentum. I lost my footing. The pedals whirled uncontrollably. It was a childhood nightmare come true. I came out onto the alley at full speed, legs splayed, pedals spinning. I could hear Ralph behind me: “Lorri! Lorri, stop!”

I couldn’t.

At the end of the alley, before opening up onto the main street, were three large plastic dumpsters. I veered in the direction of the dumpsters that finally brought the bike to a stop with a loud, hollow *thud*. I was mortified, but I refused to show it. Ralph pulled up beside me.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m good.”

“Maybe this isn’t a good idea.”

“No, it’s fine. I can do this.”

He wanted us to ride our bikes home. We were riding our bikes home, damn it. He gave me a look as if I had just bitten a kitten’s head off.

“You sure?”

I gave him my idiotic but firm answer,

“Yes!”

When I was a kid, I rode my bike on long stretches of perfectly flat Florida terrain and empty streets. To get back to our apartment we had to ride a mile up a winding two-way street with no sidewalk or bike lane, in heavy traffic. The winding death hill also had a steep drop-off and sharp curves. The cars took them at high speeds, and the large buses that traveled up and down the street forced cars to make way, leaving little space.

“All right, let’s go. I’ll go in front. You follow me,” he said.

We pulled out onto the main street. I immediately felt dread. My tires trembled. The hill got steeper, and I struggled to pedal. The steeper the hill got, the more I struggled, and the more I veered into the traffic lane. *I can’t ride like this all the way back to the apartment*, I thought. A Fiat rushed by, close enough that I could feel the exhaust on my leg. Its side mirror came inches

from my handle bar. I stopped. I let the bike tip over and hopped off. Ralph was almost at the top of the hill when the same car went by him. He looked back.

“Wait for me,” I yelled.

A car honked and whizzed by. I walked the bike up the hill and met him there. He straddled the bike and leaned on the handle bars.

“Lorri, you need to hurry up. The slower you are the worse it’s going to be.”

“Forget it. It’s too high. I can’t ride it all the way back.”

“Why didn’t you say that when I asked you?”

“I thought I could”

“You know how ridiculous this is?”

He looked away from me, up at the rushing traffic. He unstraddled his bike, let it fall, and threw his arms up in the air. He walked away from me. I stood and watched. I didn’t know what to say that could make the situation anything but worse. We were still on a dangerous stretch of road. I walked behind him, not knowing if he was pissed enough to just leave his bike there and walk the rest of the way home or if he would turn around any second and berate me. We were still a good two miles from the apartment. I wanted to get back on the bike and pedal my ass home, not only to prove to him that I could, but to prove it to myself. Only now I was too scared to do anything but walk along the road pushing my bike along.

He turned around and walked past me without saying a word. I didn’t bother turning around. I kept walking my bike. I knew the way home and so did he. He walked passed me with his bike. We trudged the mile back to the apartment defeated, pushing our bikes all the way. I let the idea of sunflowers go. He walked in front and mumbled under his breath the whole way.

When we reached our apartment building we tucked the bicycles away in the garage and locked the door. I called Massimo, thanked him, and explained the situation. He chuckled in disbelief. It was the last time Ralph and I rode bicycles.

#

A few weeks ago, I told Ralph I was getting a tattoo. He looked at me and shrugged “Cool,” he said. *Cool?* Last year, he told me it was stupid. He couldn’t understand why I would mark up my body. I had just turned thirty. We were talking about maybe having a baby. He was noting the pros and cons, I remained hopeful. I was also starting grad school. It would symbolize a new chapter in my life. He didn’t want to hear it.

“No. No way,” he said with his dark brow.

I couldn’t understand *him*. It was *my* body. I was a grown woman. After tears and door slams, he agreed with a grunt. He shook his head and demanded it be small, no bigger than a quarter. “It’s still dumb,” he said.

A year later, after we are no longer together, I get my tattoo.

When we were younger and we spent our nights awake, the incompatibilities meant little. They were always present but like a grain of sand in your shoe, insignificant. As time passed, he grew comfortable and I grew up. The grain of sand was in our eyes. We were tired of each other. The quirks that were once all consuming were irritating. His inability to relinquish control and my inability to speak-up when I should have were our downfall. Interspersed were moments of tenderness and discovery, it was those moments carried us.

I made up my mind to get a tattoo during our last trip to The Museum of Natural History in New York City. In the pre-Columbian exhibit there was a glass case full of little gold shields

with Mayan designs imprinted on them. They were beautiful. We had seen similar shields in the Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City. That time, in Mexico, he danced for me in the hotel room while I was sick. He was silly and light and happy then. I loved him.

After we separated, I searched for Mayan designs that would represent this transitional time in my life. I found *Lamat*. The design was simple and clean. A four-point star with a small circle between each point. It was symmetrical and balanced. It represented fertility, abundance, and self-love. I kept the design, saved it on my desktop, and filed it under “someday.”

I sent Kevin, a childhood friend, a picture of what I wanted tattooed. He was apprenticing as a tattoo artist. I found him on Facebook and we laughed at each other for being active on the site. We messaged each other with details about the size and placement.

I wanted him to do it the next time I took a trip back home. It took months for me to finally commit. He sent me the address of his shop and we settled on a time. I hadn't seen him in fourteen years. I told him I was getting divorced. He told me he was married with three kids. He also told me about the difficult times he and his wife have overcome. Kevin understood where I was coming from. I discovered that the *Lamat* symbol also helps overcome loneliness.

A few weeks later, when I visit Miami, he greets me at the door of the tattoo shop where he is working. The shop is located in a little strip mall with a *cafetería* on one side and *Estrella Insurance* on the other. The parking lot is packed with old Cadillacs and Impalas, many of them upholstered with purple and red velvet interiors. I pull my little hatchback in between them. The windows of the shop are blacked out. In big graffiti letters is written “Midnight Owl Tattoos.”

The door swings open. His face has not changed. His goatee is thicker and more filled out than that of a teenage boy and his long hair is pulled back, but his gestures and mischievous

smile are familiar. His arms are different, though, more colorful. We hug and he shows me inside.

The shop is basic and not as dark as I expect it to be. A long wooden counter divides the shop in two. The walls are paneled with the same wood as the counter and decorated with posters of death metal bands and tattoo art. The florescent light, white tile floor, and wood veneer give the place a sterile but warm feel. A black pleather couch for waiting customers faces the counter. Hanging out on the black couch are a couple of guys playing a video game. They all have colorful sleeves and facial hair. Kevin offers me a seat on the couch.

“You can have a seat while I get things ready.”

“Um, I’m good. Thanks,” I say.

He chuckles and nods.

“Okay. Come on back, then.”

“Sorry, if I was ever a jerk to you back in the day,” he says as he leads me back to his station.

“Nah,” I reply.

Behind the counter is a row of partitions, each station is equipped with a reclining chair and supplies. We walk into the third one. He wipes down the black vinyl chair and gets his materials ready. We talk about married life and catch up on the statuses of our friends from high school. I sit on the rolling stool. On the knuckles of Kevin’s right hand the word FEAR is spelled out. One letter on each finger. I watch him assemble his tools.

“You know, I remember the last time I saw you. It was in clinic in Coral Gables,” he says throwing disinfecting wipes in the trash.

“Oh, yeah? I don’t remember that.”

“Yeah. I didn’t know what to say to you. It’s not like you talked much back then,” he says.

“That’s true. Wow, I really have no idea where or when that could have been.”

“He-he. It doesn’t matter.” His smile is soft.

“Okay. Show me where you want it.”

I want the tattoo on my upper right thigh, at my hip. I blush and drop my shorts. After all this time without seeing each other I stand in front of Kevin in my boy shorts and point to my hip area. It is awkward, and I am reminded of our very first encounter.

In first grade, Kevin sat next to a boy named Ricky. They both sat in front of me. A row of hollow school desks with workbooks and pencils tucked away was all that separated us. I shrank behind those desks, shrank when they laughed and made slurping sounds and gross gestures with their hands. It was disgusting. I didn’t know what it meant, but I knew it was bad. This is my earliest memory of Kevin. Probably his too.

He looks at the area I point to and nods.

“That’s a good spot.”

He walks over to a drafting table just outside his partition.

“How long have you been thinking about this?” He points to a sketch of Lamat on the drafting table. I pull up my shorts.

“A while now. Remember when I first contacted you? I was thinking about it then.”

I walk over to the table and see he has several variations of the Lamat symbol sketched out. The first is very rigid and symmetrical with sharp lines. It looks like he used a ruler and precise measurements. I don't like it. It looks painful and inflexible.

"What made you finally decide to do it?"

"The divorce. I'm celebrating the next phase in my life."

"Nice. It's good that it means something to you, less likely to regret it."

"This one is more art deco," he explains about the first sketch.

"Then there's this one." He points to a second design. The second is more rustic, looks more authentic. The lines aren't straight, and the circles are not the same size. There's a playfulness to this one.

"This one looks more tribal," he says.

I choose the second design.

"Yeah. I like that one too," he smiles.

He leads me back into his station. I sit on the reclined chair. He places a cut-out of the design on my leg. He rubs it onto my skin. It was happening. I was finally getting it done.

"You ready? I'm a little nervous," he says.

I laugh.

"No, you can't be nervous. You need a steady hand," I say.

He laughs, sits on the rolling stool, and pulls himself up to the chair. The rolling tray with needles and inks swings into position.

"Ready?"

"Yes."

I read about the pain, the burning, and seen the YouTube videos of clients screaming. I sink into the chair and drop my head back, reminds me of the dentist. He clicks the needle on. The sound of the needle buzzes so loud it is distracting. I feel pain. It is happening. I can't see him tattooing my skin. All I can see is the back of his head. He is tattooing my upper thigh, but I feel the vibrations of the needle in my toes. I stare at the ceiling. I suggest they put mirrors up there, so clients can see what is going on.

Staring at the ceiling makes me more anxious. I squeeze my hands together. The pain is familiar, like scraping skin on concrete. It radiates out from where the needle pierces the skin. I know he is tattooing a specific area, but my entire thigh throbs. It is a dull burning, every so often a sharp sting. Kevin's hands are warm and very light. His fingertips are apologetic. I catch my breath when he stops the needle to wipe-off excess ink and blood, and to check his lines. I look down in the direction of my leg, and try to position my head so that I can see around his. The area around the tattoo is red. The inked sections are raised and puffy. I bite my lip.

"Are you okay?" he asks.

"Yeah, it's fine."

I ask him about the tattoo on his knuckles to distract myself.

"Oh, that? That was the first time I tattooed myself. In middle school."

"Wow. That long, huh?"

"Yeah, it was stupid," he says, not looking at me, but at the work on my leg. "But you never forget your first tattoo."

Ralph will never see my first tattoo. I will share it with someone else, someone who stood by quietly, someone who understood why it was important, someone who smiles each time she

sees it. I share this moment with myself, with the girl who finally spoke up. I don't describe it to Ralph, and he doesn't ask details. We are strangers again, uncomfortable with details.

I am so distracted by the pain that I lose track of time, and I'm surprised when Kevin says, "You're done, girl. What do you think?"

Kevin is right. I will never forget why I got my first tattoo or how it makes me feel. I did something for myself. I didn't have to ask for anyone's permission or approval. It is the right size, the size I want it to be. The way the lines squiggle, the intentional asymmetry of the four circles, and the way a loving thumb fits perfectly within its borders give me a sense of freedom that I had not felt since I rode that purple Huffly up and down the block.

I insist on paying Kevin, but he refuses.

"C'mon, you have to let me pay you. This is your work."

"No way. This was fun for me. It means a lot to be able to tat up a friend."

"Yeah? Well, it means a lot to me too, so let me pay you."

"No, really. It's okay." He looks at his feet.

I shove my wallet back in my purse.

"How about a beer?"

Kevin smiles and looks up.

"That we can do."

We hop in my hatchback and pull up to World of Beer. There's a basketball game on and the place is packed. We squeeze our way through the crowd and find a table. There is so much noise from the TV screens and the crowd that conversation consists of single sentences delivered in each other's ears. Our arms touch. We sit in the noise ordering beers, enjoying the silence

between us. We pretend to watch the game and order guacamole. The noise washes over us rhythmically. I hog the guacamole. He double-dips. The familiarity is comforting. A large screen plays back a slow motion shot of a ball entering the basket, the crowd cheers and stands. The enthusiasm is contagious. We smile at each other. I know he has a family to get back to, and I don't want to have too many beers because I still have to drive to my grandmother's house.

"Want to head out?" I yell in his ear.

He checks his phone.

"Yeah, once I finish this," he points to his pint and looks back at a TV screen.

I nod.

Through the noise I think I hear thunder, but I'm not sure. He gulps the last of his beer and nudges my arm. I grab my purse and we head for the exit. A large group of people gather at the front door. We push our way through and make it out. It is pouring rain out. We huddle under the awning for a minute. Despite the rain and gusts of wind, there is a stillness outside. He digs his hands into his pockets. The car is at the very end of the parking lot. I can't help but laugh.

"Now what?" I ask.

"Run for it?"

I smile and run out into the rain. I run through puddles and scream all the way through the parking lot. I can hear Kevin laughing and splashing behind me. I hit the unlock button of my car well before getting near it. I rush in, close the door and let the laughter take over. Kevin bursts onto the passenger's seat a few seconds later, and his laughter joins mine. The water drips off us and collects in the seams of the seats. We let the laughter consume us. I lean back in my

seat and catch my breath. The moment slowly passes. I put the key in the ignition and turn the car on.

The drive is quiet. We are both comfortable with silence. We head back to the parking lot of the tattoo parlor, we smile all the way there.

“Hey, thanks for the beers. That was awesome,” he says.

“Yeah, it was. Thanks for the tattoo.”

“Anytime.”

I pull into the lot. He points to his car, a white eighty-eight Camaro. I park next to it.

“Well, Lorri, if you ever need another tat, you know where to find me.”

“Cool. Thanks for doing it.”

“It’s my pleasure. Keep in touch, okay?”

He opens the door and slides out. I pull out of the parking space and wave goodbye. My thigh throbs. I head down Sunset Drive lost in thought.

I think back to a sunny day on my old block. The click of my bicycle chain plays as I switch gears, just for kicks because I remain on flat terrain the entire ride. The breeze runs through my hair. I wear shorts and my favorites Keds, only this time I am on the bike as I am now—older, and excited to ride the bike again, under the right leg of my shorts a new tattoo. I am free.

Stories

SUEÑOS

He floats, carried by foam in a rhythmic dance toward the shore. Muscles crafted by summers of swimming up and down the beach at record times, arms and legs hardened by years of casting lines and dragging nets, are still. Days earlier his skin was golden, envied by the German tourists who only manage a painful lobster red.

Brown ringlets fade into golden tips and tell of a summer spent on the shore. He's been in the water a long time. The skin is changing, blotchy, gray-green now. He is face-down, eyes still open. The brown in his eyes have clouded over. They have cooked with the salt of the water. Around his ankle a blue rope drifts and sways with the tide like a lazy sea snake. The blue that filled our dreams as children carried him to the shore of a land he wanted to call home. I never saw his body or attended a funeral. But I had this dream often.

#

You could live in Miami thirty years without having to learn a word of English. This makes it difficult for me to advance in life. I have no incentive, no need to learn English. Sometimes I use it if a patron asks me a question or requests something. I get by with a few words here and there. The South Beach crowd isn't big on conversation. I am invisible to them. Get them their overpriced snapper and lobsters quickly. Don't spill their drinks while walking from the bar. Smile, then disappear. It's a life I never imagined.

I came on a flight from Cuba with the premise of visiting family. I had cousins who lived in Hialeah. I also had old family friends who lived in Coral Gables, Carolina and Manny, but I didn't contact them then. I felt too many years had passed since I had last seen them.

By the time I got on the plane, my mother was OK with letting me to go. She knew I would be all right. I sent her money and small luxuries when family visited Cuba, sometimes medicine. We talked on the phone every week. The connection was shitty and would often drop mid-sentence. Each conversation was only a few minutes, but it was enough for her. She knew I was safe. There was no chance of repeating Yariel's mistake.

Yariel's mother and mine had grown up together, so naturally he and I were very close. When we were kids, we wanted to come to Miami and catch and sell fish. YARIEL AND BENNY'S FISH SHOP. Yariel had fishermen in his family. His aunt had a fisherman husband. They couldn't have children, so Yariel was sent to them in the summers to keep them company. Yariel's father wanted him to learn a trade and fishing seemed like a good one. There was money to be made taking tourists big-game fishing.

My mother saw an opportunity here. During the summers when school was out I was sent with Yariel. The fisherman never let us call him by name. It was always *Pescadero*—fisherman. He taught us how to cast rods when we were eight. His favorite spots were the rocky outcrops covered in slippery algae on Cayo Santa Maria. I have scars on my legs and arms from those rocks. But my left hand has a moon-shaped shadow on the meaty part between the thumb and index finger given to me by the old man himself.

“Not like that. It will unravel and knot. Watch me,” he'd say.

His rough hand pulled at my shoulder and nearly knocked me to the ground.

“Pay attention.”

His rod whipped through the air, fluid like the waves. *Click, whip, whizzz*, and the line disappeared into that endless blue. A Caribbean blue, fiery like the opal. Depending on where

you stood, the color shifted from a mint-green to a cobalt blue and everything in between. The old man had collected the rods from tourists he befriended on fishing trips, who let him keep them after deciding an old broken rod was not worth the headache of fixing while on vacation. *Pescadero* mended those rods and crafted his own pieces using a cocktail of household chemicals to make epoxy. They were priceless. People would have killed for those rods, a source of money and food. We had no idea. Standing on those rocks with the sound of waves crashing and the spray of salt that engulfed you afterward was more than enough reward.

“Did you see that? You do it now,” the old man hollered. I had a difficult time balancing the rod in my hands. The reel itself was heavy and my hands were not strong enough to keep the long rod upright.

“Stop eating shit. This is going to save your life.”

He looked at me. I was too scared to explain my lack of coordination.

“Where’s the other one?”

Yariel’s rod lay on the rocks. It had already been cast. Had a big enough fish hooked the line at that moment it would have taken the rod with it. Yariel had climbed down from the rocks and was on the beach picking up shells. His skinny little arms ended in fists. I could see the shells poking out from those defiant hands. He was very small, all bones. You could count his ribs. His head seemed too big for his body. It was a mass of curls. He had so much energy he burned through more calories than he could eat, and those weren’t many to begin with.

Cayo Santa Maria, where the old man taught us to fish, is off the mainland of *Caibarien*, our home town on the North side of Cuba. The only way to get to *el Cayo* was by boat. The fisherman had a small aluminum boat that bounced off the waves with so much force that my

tailbone still hurts when I sit for too long. It was the perfect place to learn how to fish. We didn't live far from the ocean back home, but there was always someone watching. Here it was safe. The water was pristine—no resorts, loud tourists, or nosy neighbors.

When the fisherman saw Yariel's rod lying on the rocks, he rushed over and reeled it in. He cupped his hands to his mouth and yelled.

“Get your ass back here. I'm showing you something.”

Yariel looked up from the sand.

“I saw it! I know how to do it,” he yelled back.

“Bullshit. Don't bother me when you get hungry,” the fisherman said.

“Yariel, you should come here,” I said.

He did not look up at me.

“Wait. I'm looking for...”

He bent down, picked up a spiny form, and held it up for me to see.

“You're making *Pescadero* angry. Come here,” I said.

“I'll come when I'm finished. Stop yelling at me.”

I turned back toward the old man and tried to mimic his movements, but the fisherman reeled in his line, took his and Yariel's rod, and walked back toward the boat. I held my rod tight.

“We're going home for dinner,” he yelled. He didn't pause or turn around. “One hour.”

The next day, he made us carry a series of nets. We cast those nets on the shore over and over. It was repetitive and tiring, his way of keeping discipline. He didn't speak. He yelled orders. I remember getting dragged around a lot.

“Here. You, boy, get this hook on the line. Use the knot I showed you,” he said to me.

He made me nervous. When he saw I had missed a loop, he pulled my arm, the one holding the large hook.

“You turkey!”

The hook caught the skin on my other hand. In a panic, I flinched and drove the hook deeper. The blood spotted the rocks.

Those summers offered an escape from the broken life at home. My mother was always tired. My grandparents shriveled. The adults warded off hunger with cigarettes and coffee when they were available. My grandmother could make the ash of her cigarette longer than my finger and hold it there while she made *un cafécito*. Sometimes she wouldn't eat with us. She would smoke her cigarette on the back stoop during dinner and come back in time to make coffee. I realized later it was her way of making three drumsticks feed four people. Simple errands like going to the *bodega* were disappointing misadventures. Jagged streets and sidewalks, pops of cars backfiring because fuel lines had been altered and mended too many times, one can of Russian corn for a family, a missing food ration coupon, another line, a delay in the food delivery, an angry belly. Faces were gaunt, eyes were sad, the look of crushed spirits who survived only because others depended on them. The adults wore it. But fishing was good for us, for Yariel especially. It was physically demanding. The fisherman kept Yariel's attention by turning it into a contest.

“So, you think you're better than all of us, huh? You're going to have to prove it,” the fisherman said to him on the beach one day.

“How?”

“There are many steps. Some you may not know.”

“Tell me.”

“Can you cast a reel?”

“Yes.”

“Can you swim?”

“Yes.”

“That attitude is going to get you in trouble one day. Today it will feed us.”

“What do I do?”

The fisherman moved in close to Yariel.

“Listen good, you are going to cast a line the way I showed you from up on the rocks.

Then, you will run back down here to the beach, swim to that boulder where we saw the barracuda and back, then run back up the rocks and check your line. Each swim must be faster than the previous time in order not to lose. If you catch a fish and reel it in, you get to start over. Now, because these rods are precious and there is a risk of losing one, you will fish with a reel. And if you lose *that* I’ll kill you”

“That’s it? That’s easy.”

Those first few years, the swim times were a game. I swam with Yariel and we competed against each other, but it was not much of a contest. He was a stronger swimmer than I was. On certain days the air held so much salt that it hurt to breathe in deeply. Those painful breaths made for the best swim times. Yariel swam all year, even when the water stung from the cold. It was something he was good at. That satisfaction drove him further.

#

He floats, the blue rope drifts, blood drips from his hand. The red dissipates amid the blue. A wave of foam washes it all away. I am on the shore. The sky is dark. Along the shore are triton shells, elegant and spindly. I step on one, it spears my foot. Blood drips.

I wake up from the dream. My feet welcome the feel of the tattered shag carpet. The water pipes rattle and squeal, I can hear the neighbor's faucet running. I turn on the lamp and check the box. There are tritons, but none like those we had in Cuba.

#

I could never live far from the sea. The beaches in Miami come close to those of Caibarién. The blues of the water are similar, but they have no mystery, no allure. My favorite memories of those beaches are right after a storm, when the seas were rough and the sky was black. The jewels that turned up the next day were exceptional. A beach encrusted with calcium deposits, lace and glass gems. Yariel and I spent hours picking out the most twisted and colorful. We kept them in a box back at the fisherman's house, convinced they would be worth a large amount of money one day. Our treasure chest.

To think that a house only a few yards from the temperamental sea can't be made of stone, it would sink under its weight. The little house was made of wood. The outside had been white-washed. The interior wood of that house was rich in color, worn smooth by sand and salt breezes. The cottage had soaked up years of memories, fishing skill, and hearty meals. The fisherman's wife, Elena, made a delicious fish stew that could raise the dead. I could picture them raising children in that cottage.

When we were thirteen the restrictions on fishing became tougher. The Fisherman could not fish or take tourists out fishing if it wasn't chartered by a hotel. Cayo Santa Maria became a

protected national park. Our summers with the fisherman ended, but Yariel and I still fished and swam from the beaches near our home. We didn't have the same freedom. It was dangerous. Had we been caught fishing, we would have been sent to the work camps. Prying eyes could excuse two boys who might not know better, but as we got older those eyes became less forgiving. We stopped fishing all together and kept ourselves busy with other plans. Yariel kept swimming.

#

When I pulled up to the house, I thought, *¡Coño!* Manny had done it. The idiot with a rusted-up Chevy and dreams of becoming *un taxista* in Cuba, had made it in America. He was spindly and nervous in nature with dark hair, and eyes that sunk into his angular face. In Cuba, his business plan was nothing more than picking up Carolina in a rusted clunker and drinking home-brewed alcohol. Come Monday, he would sit on the stoop to debate with the old timers how to best sand off rust and procure yellow auto paint. He wanted the Chevy to look like the iconic New York cabs, so tourists would recognize him. I was little then, but I remember this detail.

He never did get off that stoop. He ended up selling the Chevy back to the same Russian he bought it from before they left Cuba. Carolina and Manny left when Yariel and I were still boys, many years before the raft. Now, here they were in Coral Gables living the American Dream.

Coral Gables was where you lived after you made a name for yourself. Cuban politicians, stars, and intellectuals fought their way into this exclusive Miami suburb with street names like Mallorca, Ponce de Leon, and Aragon. The houses on Caro and Manny's street were much more low-key than the mansions on Miracle Mile. Their little, yellow stucco house had

arched entryways, Spanish tile roofs, and lush front courtyards. Tropical plants and flowers, all pruned and mulched, greeted you on the way in and out. Something about it immediately reminded me of the shopping trips I took with my mother into the old sections of *La Habana Vieja*.

In Cuba, Carolina lived in the same stone house as Yariels's family, with her parents. The stones of that house were held together with mortar. I traced the patterns between the stones with my finger many times waiting for Yariel in our shared backyard. I lived next door. We played together in the dirt amid banana leaves and chickens. By the time I left, the small chicken coop in the yard had rotted away, and was overrun by weeds. I didn't go into the yard then. I wasn't a kid anymore.

When we were about sixteen, Yariel and I used the empty hen house to plan our escape. The chickens were long gone.

"Benny, it smells like shit in here," Yariel said, kicking over an empty bucket. The only light coming in was the glow of late afternoon.

"Relax, man. Why are you making so much noise?" I said.

"You sound like my mother."

"Grow up, then. Did you get it?"

He pulled down his pants and reached into his boxers. He pulled out the most ingenious thing I had ever seen.

"You know how hard it is to walk around with that shit in my pants? When we get to Miami, you better buy me a goddamn steak."

I laughed. He tossed it over to me and pulled his pants back up.

“Holy shit. You fucker. Did anyone see you?” I examined it. It was a roll of thick, silver tape. I had never seen anything like it. I peeled back an edge. The glue stayed on my fingers. He took out a matchbook and cigarette from the cuff of his sock.

He put the cigarette in his mouth and struck the match. It lit up his face in the waning light.

“I wouldn’t be here if they did.”

“And you’re sure this will work?”

“I’ve seen them use that for everything. It’ll hold.”

Our dream was coming true. We kept hearing about the greatness of America, of Miami. We woke to find friends and family had disappeared overnight. Days, sometimes weeks later we would hear from a neighbor, an aunt, a cousin that they had made it safely and were doing well. We paid our respects to the families of those who didn’t make it. There were never any formal funerals, the bodies were never brought back. Usually a relative in the States would claim the body and take care of funeral arrangements. We would visit the family of the deceased and drink coffee or homemade rum. If we knew the person well we would tell stories that would get everyone to laugh. Over the years, I told my share of stories.

Yariel and I knew the risks. We hoarded supplies for months and kept them in the empty coop. Things that washed up on the shore, things we bartered, things we stole. In the end, the raft measured ten feet by ten feet. It was good enough for two boys our size. We had each other.

“You know I could probably swim there,” Yariel said one night. He was so goddamn cocky.

“Don’t be an asshole.”

He looked at me and grinned.

“Aw, what? You’re going to miss me?” He poked my cheek.

“Screw you! You’re not leaving without me,” I said and knocked his hand back.

“Get your panties out of your ass. I’m kidding.”

I threw the piece of charcoal I was writing with at him. It hit his shoulder and landed in the dirt. It was getting dark, and I couldn’t see where it was to pick it up.

“Nah, man. You know I won’t.”

He walked over to a dark spot in the dirt and picked it up off the ground. He put one hand on my shoulder and handed it back to me.

“You know the dangers, right?”

I inspected my charcoal. The tip had broken off.

“You ass. Yeah, I know.”

“I’m just saying, your mom is alone here. Your grandparents are old.”

“You think I don’t know that?”

“I just want to make sure you’ve thought about it.”

“Have *you*? Your parents are getting old, too.”

“Benny man, it’s different. I can’t deal with them anymore.”

I went back to tracing over a partial map we had found on the beach close to a hotel. It had Cuba and Florida on it. Our raft would survive the journey. It was only ninety miles.

We put the pieces of the raft together a few nights before he set off. We had all the parts assembled and drawn up a detailed schematic but we wouldn’t know for sure if it was accurate

until days, possibly hours before the actual trip. Something that size in a *barrio* of nosy neighbors would attract unwanted attention. Building it in the yard was out of the question.

One night we took all the pieces down to the beach and tucked them near a cluster of sea grape. To a passerby it would look like washed up debris. No one would be able to bring charges against us. We had taken notes on what others had done, tested the buoyancy of individual pieces and charted our course. If we caught the right current we would be there in a couple of days. We had to be quiet.

The night we were to leave we went to the shore and put it together. The outer frame of the raft was made of wood planks from the hen house. On the opposite end was a collection of Styrofoam from old coolers left on the beaches by tourists. The middle section was part of an aluminum roof that we found after a storm. We lashed rope across the large section of metal to keep it from sagging into the water. The rope was brittle from being kept out in the coop. The salty air, heat, and humidity had gotten to it. We used it anyway. The rope only needed to hold for a day or so. It would be fine. For the middle of the raft we used a black inner tube. Yariel stole this from a resort; a distracted tourist had left it sitting on the shore. We reinforced it with scraps from old tires. When the sun started to come up, we decided to wait for the following morning. The raft would have to sit out in the open for a day. We did our best to cover it up with branches and twigs.

“Still looks like a pile of shit to me,” he said.

“Good. Hopefully it’ll look like shit to anyone who sees it.”

“You told your parents yet, Benny?”

“No.”

The air was calm. The water on the shore rippled and sloshed. We walked around the raft, looking for anything that might put us at risk, anything that might lead back to us.

“What the hell are you waiting for? I told my old man already.”

“What’d he say?”

“He said I was full of shit.”

“You didn’t tell him about me, did you?”

“No. I told him I was *thinking* about leaving, and he lost it, man.”

I didn’t know what to say. I had heard the fights from my window.

“Say bye to your family before we go,” he said.

“Are you kidding? They’ll never let me leave.”

Satisfied, Yariel finished tucking palm fronds in nooks of the raft. It couldn’t stay that way for long. A keen eye would be able to spot it right away. Scavengers could pick it apart or worse, use it to take off themselves.

We were teenagers. It didn’t occur to us that our families would suffer. It was unfair to ask it of our parents. Let your children risk their lives with a shot at something better or keep them here and damn them. Yariel made the decision for all of us.

There was an argument when we got back home. The sounds floated into the yard and crept in my bedroom window. I closed my eyes and tried to sleep through it. I had a tired mother too and deep down I knew how we had survived.

“Why are you getting home at this hour?” I heard Yariel say.

“Not now, Yariel.”

His mother’s voice carried traces of cigarettes, alcohol, and a long night.

“I’m sick of this,” he said.

“Son, keep your voice down.”

“Why? It’s no secret.”

“Yariel, please,” she pleaded.

A door creaked. There was a pause and a shuffle. His father’s voice was deep. I wondered what my father was like. But those thoughts often led where I’d rather not go.

“Yariel, lower your voice. She’s still your mother,” his father said.

“What do you care? As long as there’s food in your belly, it doesn’t matter. Is that it? You are both disgusting. I’d rather risk my life on a *balsa* than live like this”

It was a truth I did not want to hear. Our country’s women reduced to whores in order to feed their families. A door slammed. I didn’t hear him run through the yard or punch at the banana trees like other times. The only other sound I heard was the barking of dogs.

I was so tired I slept through the afternoon and well into the evening.

When I woke in the darkness I jumped out of bed and grabbed my shirt and shoes off the floor. I ran out to the coop thinking an upset Yariel would be waiting for me, but the coop was empty. I heard chairs shuffling and muffled voices coming from our kitchen. I knew it was near dinner time. There was never much to eat, but the rituals were kept. Sit at the table, chat about “the good old days,” and enjoy family. Soon they would wonder about me and call me out of bed. I made sure to leave out the back window before then. I thought maybe Yariel had gone down to the shore ahead of me, but that didn’t make sense. He would have crept into the yard and woken me up if he’d gone. The thought festered.

I rushed down to the shore, each step feeling more urgent than the last. I sprinted the last few yards through the darkness. There was enough light that I could see the outline of the sea grape bush when I reached the shore. I stopped a few hundred feet from the bush, but I could see right through the branches and leaves. I couldn't feel my body, my limbs, I could only hear the pounding of my heart. Rage had me rip through the bush in the hopes that I was wrong. I wasn't. He was gone.

Home became a place of disappointment and anger. I didn't go into the yard after that. I tried to make sense of it. I went fishing to get out of the house and help soothe my thoughts. I walked down to the shore at dawn, and stubbornly kept my post through the harshest times of the day. My skin stung, my lips cracked, people talked. I caught fish. I took them home. I ate them. For days everyone was fed, despite the fear. We enjoyed fish dinners for three nights. On the fourth night we did not eat.

I had been taught by the fisherman that coming home empty-handed was a bad omen. He once said, "The sea is not a mystery; she opens her legs and shows you her secrets if you bother to look." I walked into the house knowing something was wrong. It was dark except for the white artificial glow coming from the kitchen. The smell of coffee and cigarettes hung in the air.

"Benny? Benny, come in here," my mother said.

The house was quiet. I rested my rod against the wall behind the front door. Wispy puffs from the kitchen let me know she was nervous. I waved my hand through the air. She was smoking. Light from the bare bulb bounced off the wall tiles and intensified the smoke. We had three bulbs in the house. I had never seen a spare.

"What's going on?"

Her back was to me when I walked through the doorway. Cigarette butts were piled in a little coffee cup on the table. There was a second empty cup on the table.

I placed my hand on her shoulder. She held it tight.

“*Mi hijo,*” she cried and kissed my hand.

I could see now. Her face was puffy and wet from tears.

#

He floats, a triton digs into his fist, blood drips and dissipates into the blue. The blue rope around his ankle drags a mass of brown sargassum.

#

I didn’t know what to say to Carolina the day she called. I remember trying to catch glimpses of her through the wooden shutter slats from the yard. I got lucky a couple of times—dark where it mattered, and pink where it mattered most. Her voice was still lush.

“Hello. Benny?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, my. I’m not sure you remember, but this is Carolina. I knew your mother.”

“My mother?”

“I am Ernesto’s daughter. We lived next door.”

“My God. Caro!”

“Yes!” She was part laughing, part crying. “How are you, Benny? My mother gave me your number. She still talks to your aunt.”

“Of course, yes.”

“I heard you were in Miami, I wanted to see you. You must come for dinner.”

“Ay, *Benny*, *cuantos años*? Many memories, my friend,” she said.

She asked if I was married or seeing anyone. My one-word answer disappointed her, but I expected that. I was not thirty yet. I had time. I accepted her invitation. I wanted to tell her about my dreams, if there was any truth to them.

Arroz con frijoles, mounds of plantains, and *café* gathered on the table like a family get-together. Carolina had filled out some, but her face and dark hair were still beautiful. Even Manny was pleasant. He showed me the frame that held the first dollar he made on his own. His school bus company, CAROLINA BUS SERVICES, was doing very well. He started with one bus, applied for the license and drove it himself to and from Gables High out to the Little Havana neighborhoods. Within the year he had bought a second bus. In five, he owned and managed six school buses. It made them good money.

I had a couple of beers with dinner. We danced around the past a bit. Why ruin such a pleasant night? Maybe it was the alcohol, or being with close friends, or the shame of not having “made it” yet, but when she mentioned *his* name those emotions I had shoved so far down bubbled up to the surface without warning and erupted in tears. Her only reaction was to hush me like a baby on her shoulder. She held me and told me about the day they received the call letting them know Yariel had gone. Manny brought me some rum. I listened, blurry-eyed and quiet like a child.

She pulled away from me and crossed her hands in front of her to tell the story. Manny poured her a bit of rum in a juice cup. The glass cup was covered in a colorful fruit pattern: cherries, bananas, and grape clusters. Her voice cracked. She cleared her throat and began: “We lived in a rented house in Little Havana then. No courtyard, just a patch of dead grass and sand

behind a chain-linked fence. I liked the neighborhood. On the corner was a twenty-four-hour *cafeteria*. I sent Manny there to get him out of the house. It was close to the high school, and the driveway was long enough to park the bus.

It was the afternoon. I was making coffee in the kitchen. Manny had just walked in, complaining about the kids when the phone rang. I picked it up. It was my uncle, Yariel's father. He asked to speak to Manny and I found this strange. They never spoke to each other willingly. I handed over the phone but kept close.

“*¿Manny, que dice?*” I asked and pawed at his elbow. He pulled away and cradled the earpiece with both hands.

“Wait, Carolina,” he yelled like a father to an impertinent child.

“*¿Que paso?*” Something was wrong; I could see it in his face. He avoided my eyes. I ran through a list of family members in my head and hoped the telephone connection would last long enough to get the whole story, whatever it was. I leaned back onto the kitchen counter and ran my finger along the grout of the tile counter top. The terrazzo floor was cool. The floors of this little house reminded me of Cuba. I waited for Manny. He stood with his back to me across the kitchen, glancing back every once in a while. He gripped the phone tightly. With my thumb, I spun my wedding ring around my finger. Manny had bought me a second ring, this time with a real diamond. I shook my head.

I had been thinking about something like this for weeks. Every time I turned on the news, there were stories of people risking their lives. I thought of our own escape. A trip I'd rather forget. Seventy-two hours on a shrimping boat in rough seas. Too many people pushed up against

each other. Women and children kept “safe” below deck, a lack of oxygen and nowhere to turn if one got sick. I remember the fear, the smell, and the heat.

On the news they had come on rafts that looked like piles of trash. They looked that way before they set off—pieces of tarp, scraps of rope, sections of wood, an occasional oil drum, crumbled and discolored Styrofoam. That year, *balseros* were washing up every day. Some were so desperate they ventured out on the inflatable rafts tourists used to lounge in hotel resort pools. Hot pink, inflatable promises of a better life. Many lost their lives. These images littered South Florida beaches and made headlines:

CUBA’S MASS EXODUS

A SECOND MARIEL?

RAFT FOUND ABANDONED

A couple of Manny’s distant cousins had come to Miami that way. I remember getting the phone calls from relatives. Word got around in Cuba about our success and we became the contacts for anyone heading to Miami from our old neighborhood.

Manny paced back and forth, yelling questions into the phone. He wanted a straight answer and no one on the phone would give it to him. That’s family. Then there was quiet. He turned, grabbed my arm, and yelled, “*El niño!*”

I didn’t ask Carolina or Manny any questions after that. The details she offered were enough. Three empty juice cups and half a bottle of rum later they walked me out to the car. I must have been too distracted by Carolina and Manny’s welcoming hoots on the way in to notice the dry fountain in the center of their little courtyard. The fountain was ornate, made of stone, the types I knew in Cuba, scrolls holding up large shells. Three tiers, each shell progressively

smaller. I peered into the lowest basin. It was full of seashells. Some of them I recognized. They were the kind Yariel and I would pick up on the beaches in Cuba. I asked where she had gotten them. Carolina said she had been collecting them over the years. Every time she goes to the beach she brings back a few more. The first one she kept was from the South Florida beach where Yariel's body had been found. I ran my fingers over them. A sharp spindle pricked my finger and caught my eye. I dug into the shells and discovered a triton, the type Yariel had collected in Cuba. I asked her if I could keep it.

I went back to my apartment in North Hollywood. The ratty carpet had been there since the early eighties and the toilet leaked. It had no kitchen. I used a hotplate and a mini-fridge I had picked up from someone's trash pile, but I was two blocks from the beach and the rent was cheap. I kept a box under my bed. I had decided to revive that memory, that childhood dream, six years earlier when I came to Miami. I took the shell Carolina let me keep, out of my pocket. The graceful conical shape from tip to tip and the roundness of its form reminded me of Carolina. The golden color and sturdiness of the shell was Yariel. As a kid, I used to run my nail along the ridges of the opening. The sensation takes me back to the beaches of Caibaríen. I placed it in the box with the others. I have all the shells I need now. I don't have the same dream anymore.

XTABAY

The legend of Xtabay is one Anibal had heard countless times. Generation after generation told the same story. They were stories that reeked of invention, involving a woman and the soreness felt the following morning. The woman in the stories was always described the same way. She sought them out, always gave a different name, and disappeared with the morning. The legend became an escape for many humble villagers. To go to the city and return having survived Xtabay was an attainable goal. They left the village enticed by visions of manhood. After years of listening and wondering, Anibal left the village of Alegría for the city in the hopes of returning a man.

He arrived in the city with a map and a vague idea of where he might begin. It was cold and windy. The buildings glistened with innovation. The avenues bustled with lanes of traffic and agitated pedestrians competing for right-of-way. The air was different in the city. It was thick with history and car exhaust that collected on buildings, statues, and lampposts. Even the leaves on trees were coated with black residue. He spent the morning walking the boulevards with ornate lampposts looking for an address his father had directed him to. Anibal let his father arrange a job for him. It was the only way he would let him go. It comforted them both.

Amid the confusion of anxious shoppers, car horns, and unknown streets, Anibal dropped his glove down a storm drain after pulling it out of his pocket. Instead of walking away resigned to the loss, he paced back and forth and stared into the dark space beneath the sidewalk curb.

This is how she found him, distressed by the loss of a meager glove. Sometimes her name was Maria, other times Rosa, many times Lola. She introduced herself as Lourdes and consoled him over the loss of his leather glove. Her dark hair was graced by a sad carnation. The red of the

disheveled flower matched the red of her lips. She wore a sleeveless black dress. She had no coat, which he might have considered odd under normal circumstances, but his mind was elsewhere. He imagined how her body might yield under his weight, how her bare skin might feel in his hands. When she spoke, her words fluttered.

“Oh, no. I hope it wasn’t anything important,” she said.

She flitted from one side of him to the other the way a moth bobs around a lit bulb. He felt a small hand on his back.

“No, not really. Just a glove.” He shrugged.

“Your mother gave you those, didn’t she?” she asked him.

His face stiffened. She let out a satisfied grin. Embarrassed, he spoke through his teeth.

“She did,” he mumbled.

“To keep your hands warm in an unfamiliar place?” she asked, nodding.

He thought of his uncle, of Xtabay, but he remained composed.

“Don’t worry. It’s OK. I know where we can go,” she said.

She grabbed his cold hand. He let her. She smelled foreign, like the city streets. Several images flashed through his head. *His mother’s face. Graduation. Black suitcase. Crisp brown paper packaging. Words on a postcard:*

Ani-

Don’t be afraid to chase the sun. It’s beautiful!

-Tio

The place was called Los Encantos, it was the kind of place his father warned him about. It might have been a decent pub at some point, but it had been taken over by sad city-dwellers

looking for a place to comfort their disappointments. Anibal kept his gaze down, avoided making eye contact. He found courage in his shoes—brown polished Oxfords. He walked over to one of the few lit booths in the place. He was so concentrated on reaching the booth he did not notice that she had slipped away from his side. After a few panicked seconds he spotted her over at the bar. He sat and watched her, intrigued by her gestures. She stood, then sat. Her hands performed delicate acrobatics. She stood again, leaned forward on the bar, raised her legs back, and hugged the bartender. The seams of her dress strained.

He attempted to relax and take it all in, savor the experience, but the smoke in the air made his eyes water. He folded his hands on the table, tightened them into fists, brought one down, and the other to his mouth. He began chewing at a hangnail that had been catching on his pant leg.

She brought back two drinks from the bar. They were amber-colored.

“Here, you go. I thought this might help.” She held out one of the glasses.

“Oh, thanks,” he said and took the glass.

It burned his nostrils. He drank. The ice cubes clinked. His first drink outside of family. He grimaced and sucked in air through his teeth. He closed his eyes. Thoughts of Tio spun. *How had Xtabay ensnared him? Would his own experience be similar? Was she really Xtabay?* He snapped his head up and opened his eyes. She was smiling at him. Underneath the light of the hanging lamp, he was able to see her better. She was much older than a girl, but her doe eyes and fleshy lips kept her age a mystery. She swirled the ice cubes around in her glass, creating a whirlpool of honey-colored anxiety. She looked into her glass, as if her drink were more interesting.

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

He hesitated.

“Looking for a job.”

“First day?”

She wiggled up closer to him. Her hip touched his.

He found it hard to talk now.

“Um. Yes. That’s right. First day here. In the city. I got here this morning. You?”

She shook her head. “I’m sorry I—what was that?”

“Nothing, sorry.”

His throat was dry and stung. He looked over at the bar. Anibal could barely make out the bartender in the darkness, but he was smirking at him.

“Do you know him?” Anibal asked.

“I’ve known him a long time. We used to work together.”

“Really? Doing what?”

“That’s not important. You must be tired.”

The bartender tried mouthing something at Anibal, but he couldn’t make out the words.

“Don’t mind him,” she said.

She let out a deep sigh. Her shoulders drooped. She looked at her drink. Anibal watched her. She was very still, lost in thought. He kept quiet and enjoyed the sensation of her thigh flesh against his.

“I get tired sometimes.”

“Why?”

“You wouldn’t understand,” she said.

He shook his head. “Try me, maybe you’re the one who doesn’t understand.”

“No one understands you when you’re young, is that right?” she said. “It’s only when you’re old and experienced that anyone pays any attention.”

She ran her hand across the table, then casually placed it on his thigh. The nerves along his spine stood to attention.

“Do you know where you’re staying?” she asked.

There was interest in her voice. It made him smile for a moment.

“No, not really,” he said.

“You can stay with me,” she said and finished her drink. She lifted her empty glass up at the bartender. He lifted a glass back up at her, then winked at Anibal. *Does the bartender know something? Is he part of the legend, too?* Anibal wondered.

“You don’t have any cases with you,” she said, more a question than an observation. She bobbed up and down, looking around the booth, as if a suitcase might somehow materialize.

“It’s at the station. I have a key, see.” He lifted up his arm and dangled it from his wrist. The warm hand on his leg was only a distraction.

“Shouldn’t we go get them?” she asked.

The heat between their hips was growing unbearable now. He slid away from her a bit.

“No. I don’t need it yet.”

“Shall we go for a walk?”

Before he could answer, a large man with an attractive blonde sauntered in. His entrance caused a stillness to fall over the patrons at the bar. At the sight of Lourdes, the man released his

grip on the blonde's arm. He didn't look at Anibal. His eyes were locked on *her*. "Lola! My beauty, how are you?"

The man patted her cheek. Watching the man touch her made Anibal tighten his own hands into fists. The man glanced at Anibal and chuckled. He cast the blonde in the direction of a dark booth and she disappeared into the smoke. Anibal could feel the man's eyes on the top of his head, but he did not look up. He flinched when an unexpected heaviness fell on his shoulders. It was the weight of the man's heavy hands. He leaned over Anibal and whispered into his ear, "Don't get carried away."

It didn't make sense to him, but he needed to react. "Let's go for that walk," he said. He rose quickly, but kept his back to the man and his eyes on Lourdes. She blinked at Anibal's suddenness, but a smile spread over her lips. The boy tried to imitate the actions he had seen men perform for women. He made himself as tall and as wide as he could and held out his hand for her. Anibal moved fast and tugged at her arm. He wanted to escape the wave of contempt he felt on his back. The large man moved away from them "It's your life," he said before walking into the hazy darkness.

Outside, the sun was setting and the sidewalks and buildings took on a purplish-pink hue. The air was getting colder. She rubbed her bare arms. He took off his coat, the one his uncle had brought back from London, and slid it over her shoulders. Men in suits and coats bustled in a hurry to get home from work. Anibal imagined their wives would have roasts sweating in the oven, and their children would be bathed and smelling of violets when they got home.

As they walked, she clung to his crisp shirt sleeve. The crease his mother spent hours ironing in relaxed into a wrinkled mess around his left forearm. She held tight to his arm, but

jerked her head and bolted her feet every so often, so that he had to pull at her to keep moving.

He moved her along with care, passed the commuters trying to get home. They moved between the dark shapes, every so often bumping into one with an “Excuse me.” She grew irritated by it.

“You’re no better than me,” she yelled.

Her voice quivered and bounced off the surrounding buildings. Anibal wanted to run, hide his face, to quiet her. In his panic, he grabbed the back of her neck firmly.

“What’s the matter with you?” he said.

He let her go, surprised at his gruffness. She tilted her head back and let out a playful laugh. He didn’t smile. She recognized fear. Sometimes it worked in her favor and sometimes it didn’t. She brought her hands up behind his neck and kissed him on the cheek. His angry brow unfurled and his shoulders relaxed. She released the back of his neck and swept her hands across both shoulders and down the lengths of his rigid arms. With her left hand she grabbed his hand, and with her right she cupped the front of his pants. He brushed her daring hand away, looked around, hesitated, then grabbed and pulled her towards him. She broke the embrace with a suggestion that brought his wandering mind to a halt.

“Let’s go to the train station.”

“The station?”

He backed away to get a better look at her. A few creases radiated from the corners of her eyes, but were overpowered by her long lashes and spotless complexion. He could have gazed at her for the rest of his life. But he knew the story, and how it ended. He would play along to see how far he could get.

“Why do you want to go to the station?” he asked again.

“You’ll see.”

She grabbed his hand again and headed in the direction of the train station.

“If you’re going to stay with me you will need your things.”

Anibal was told that his uncle had come back from the city changed. His eyes would shift from the floor to the corners of the room avoiding faces. Anibal romanticized the scenarios that might have led to this. He wanted to know for sure. He wanted the answer and he was sure he would soon find it.

As they walked, a few men did double-takes. She laughed them off, recalling each of their names as they went by: Max, Henry, Walter. She looked up at him.

“I like you Anibal. You’re not like the others.” She grabbed his hand and held it close to her. “I’m sure your mother didn’t send you off without some money. An extra pair of shoes? A return ticket?”

He didn’t answer.

“Why such a hurry?” he asked.

He stumbled over the uneven blocks of the sidewalk. The closer they got to the station, the more discarded papers fluttered and spray-painted symbols and sayings appeared on buildings. It was an unknown form of communication to him. His village was quiet. He didn’t know what they meant. He wondered if her experience meant that she did.

The station bustled with the same figures that passed them on the way there. There was an ebb and flow of people coming and going. Young students, old mothers, and hard workers trying to get home. The sound of suitcases being rolled over concrete mingled with greetings and

goodbyes. Chicken feathers floated around their feet and a faint smell of dissolved minerals and ammonia wafted in the air. He stopped.

“Well, here we are,” he said.

“Yes, let’s get what we came for.”

“Yes, what *we* came for.” he whispered.

The lockers were housed down a murky corridor with a single tube of light overhead. He was willing to pay for the truth. He did not want to go back to the village weak and afraid. He tucked the key into the lock of the brown locker marked 539. He took in a shallow breath and released it before completely turning the key. At the sound of the final click, her face lit up.

Out of the cabinet he pulled a large black suitcase. He maneuvered the cumbersome thing through the impatient maze of passengers and emerged from the station. It was dark now. He knew Xtabay would soon appear. He moved with long, quick strides. She scurried behind him and clutched the lapels of the coat closed.

“Wait, wait.” she yelled.

He slowed his pace, but he did not turn around. She sprinted to catch up and swerved in front of him. He was forced to stop.

“You’re not better than me,” she said.

At an angle she had a darkness under her eyes and a gauntness to her cheeks. Exasperated, she grabbed his arm, the one holding the case. Her grip like a raptor’s talon around his forearm. He jerked his arm free. The uneven weight of the case made him lose his footing and stumble backward. She came closer to him and stood underneath the orange light of a street lamp. He saw *her*. The light cast shadows under her eyes. A misshapen nose altered her face. Her

mouth became a dark void. There, under the light of the lamp they held each other's gaze. His eyes moistened and his chest heaved. The darker things he had heard, but not believed were suddenly real. *Xtabay*. He instinctually kicked his legs to run, but it only caused him to move back a few feet. He was still on the ground.

She stepped out from under the streetlight and into the shadows. She brought her palms up to her face. Anibal took advantage and jumped up. He wiped his eyes, got a good grip on the case, and hurried in the opposite direction. She remained still. He heard her mumble something, "I will follow you," it sounded like. Anibal shuffled his feet. They whimpered and panted like scared animals. He forced them back towards her.

This adventure wasn't over. With a heavy sigh, he walked in her direction. He kept an arm's distance even though she looked small and harmless. Her sobs grated his ears as he got closer. He struggled to grip the handle with a sweaty palm. His arm was tiring of the case, but he thought of Tio. He needed to know.

"Is your place much farther?" he squeezed through his teeth.

She shook her head, brought her hands down and pouted.

"My feet hurt. These shoes are not very good."

They stood in front of each other now. She ran a stiff hand under her nose to soothe a sniffle. She swung one leg back and reached for her shoe. She wobbled on the other leg. He instinctively grabbed her elbow with his free hand to support her. She removed her shoes while he admired a bit of cleavage peeking out from under the coat. Her arm pulled away. Now that her shoes were off, her eyes were much lower than his.

Food wrappers, dark puddles, and discarded cigarettes lined the discolored February sidewalk. He no longer had to swerve to keep from hitting anyone. They might as well had been the last two people on earth. She walked in front of him, leading the way. Every once in a while, she shot him an encouraging smile. He let his eyes rest on her hips. They swayed like palms in the breeze and made him feel warm. He ran his eyes a bit further down. Her stockings were the old-fashioned kind with dark seams running down the back of each leg. Each time her heels struck the sidewalk, the runs in her stockings grew and spread like tentacles around the sides and backs of her legs. She held a shoe in each hand. The weight of the case was wearing on him. He shouldn't have packed so many books. He slowed his pace and created more distance between them.

She looked back at him and gave him a smile wide enough that he could see the gums of her top teeth. The corners of her eyes wrinkled with delight, there was a dimple underneath her lip. The dimple. Her dimple. It was the last thing he saw. He felt a heaviness on his shoulders and back, and a sharp pain on the right side of his face.

#

Anibal opened his eyes to the cold blueness of morning, and attempted to focus them on a soiled bit of newspaper being carried by the breeze. Its tattered edges scraped the sidewalk. The sound echoed in his head. He blinked a few times to alleviate the strain, but the motion caused his cheek, resting on concrete, to sting. He raised his raw, swollen face only to have it fall back down in painful defeat. Too fast. His face burned.

The black case had been tossed near him. The lock had been forced open and its contents were gone. It lay empty and abandoned like the shell of an eaten mussel. He lifted himself up.

The simple motion made the soreness in his arms and across his chest excruciating. He propped himself against the cold wall of a building and rose little by little. He had survived her.

Anibal gathered every ounce of determination and brought himself to stand. The coldness gave way to the warmth of sunrise — golden and pink. He rubbed his bare hands together before tucking them deep into his pockets. He thought of Tio and walked in the direction of the warm sun. The few articles he carried in his pocket remained: coins, a folded map, and a lone glove.

PLAYERS

The bedroom is where she feels safest, happiest. The sliding glass door opens up to the stone patio and the large yard. They drink wine on the patio and sit by the jasmine during the summer. She and Steve watch murder mysteries on the flat-screen and plan their vacations from the bed. The only furniture in the room is the king bed. “Too much furniture will clutter the space,” Steve says.

It’s night. The lights are off, and she’s lying in the dark. She thinks of his question. It’s burned into her now, like a freshly branded calf. It’s not the hot iron that leaves a mark. It’s the injured skin, an attempt to heal that is permanent. The iron will rust and fade away. The scar will remain, rough and hard to the touch. She passes her hand over her belly and rests it on her breast. He rustles under the sheets.

She times the oscillation of the ceiling fan so that she blinks on every third rotation. Steve tosses, and pulls the sheet back. He drags his body out of bed toward the bathroom. The light flicks on. The brightness makes her squint. She stays on her back.

“Turn the light off,” she says.

She can see his backside and hears the stream. Its loudness lingers in her ears like an old P.E. whistle. He sighs, shakes, and flushes. Before he turns the light off he says,

“I might have to stay late tomorrow.”

She props herself up on her elbow. Her hair falls over her shoulder.

“What? Why?” she asks with a hint of protest.

“Because it’s my fucking job, Leyla.”

She drops back onto the bed. Her pillow makes a sound like someone has punched it in the gut. He crawls back into the bed. She stays on her back, but turns her head towards him. He gives her his back.

“Are you fucking someone at work?” she asks.

“What?”

He doesn’t turn around.

“You heard me.”

He decides to engage, and turns his body so he can face her.

“Shit. Are you going to be all paranoid now? Look, I said something I shouldn’t have.”

“Are you not attracted to me anymore?”

“It’s not that. You find other men attractive too, right?”

“Well, I don’t want to *fuck* them.”

“Bullshit. Look it’s late. Let’s go to bed. I have to be up early.”

She lets the moment pass. She realizes she’s not ready to have this argument yet and turns away from him. She looks out onto the moonlit patio. The trees cast heavy shadows. Her lack of defense tugs at her. She turns back to the comfort of the spinning ceiling fan.

“We are not done talking about this,” she says.

“Goodnight, Leyla.”

The next day at Steve’s office, housed in a large building that processes health insurance claims, he talks and giggles with his office-mate. She is a guitar-shaped strawberry blonde.

“Yeah, then we tied him down and turned off the lights. He was freaked. It was awesome,” he says.

“Oh, my God. You know that’s illegal in a million ways, right?”

She leans back on his desk. Her skirt rises. He looks up at her from his rolling chair.

“Meh.”

“Ridiculous. I don’t know how you guys get any work done around here.”

“I’ll show you how.”

He grabs her left hand and squeezes it.

She laughs and shakes her head.

“You *would*, wouldn’t you?”

“I’m certainly trying.”

“Try harder.”

They hold each other’s eyes. Grins creep out despite their best efforts. She catches herself.

“Look, I have to get back. I’ll see you later.”

Before she can walk out of his cubicle, he places his hands on her hips and pulls her onto his lap. They roll backward on his swivel chair.

“Are you crazy?”

“No one can see.”

She lets out a light, nervous giggle.

“You *are* crazy.

“About you.”

“Wow. And *corny*.”

At the house, Leyla still lies in bed. It is just after lunchtime. She gazes at the Adirondack chairs on the patio. She thinks back to that afternoon. She has not slept well since.

They sat in those chairs as the sun went down. They were enjoying a bottle of Pinot Grigio. Steve talked, and she listened. Her instinct was to drink and let it soothe her. She gulped her wine and brought the empty glass down on the armrest of the chair.

“I see,” she said and struggled up and out of the reclined chair, not as quickly as she had hoped. Before she could get inside she turned to him and lifted her index finger. She wanted to say so many things, but there were no words. She made a whimper, a gurgle of anger, then a slam of a sliding glass door.

“Fuck,” he said.

He finished the rest of the bottle in the twilight.

Now, he will be home soon. She doesn't make dinner. She decides to wait for him to get home before getting up.

Pots and skillets with splatters of red sit on the stove. The sink has some mixing bowls in it. On the counter, some knives and a cutting board. Steve carries two steaming plates of pasta to the dinner table. Leyla follows him with two glasses of wine. At the table, Steve digs into his food. Leyla watches him eat from across the table. Her mouth lingers over the rim of her glass. She sips her wine.

“Eat with your mouth closed,” she says.

He looks up at her. Silence.

“So, let me get this straight? You love and trust me, but you want to have sex with other women?”

“For fuck’s sake.” He drops his fork onto the plate with a loud clang. His body backs into the chair. He clenches his hand and rests it on the table.

“Forget I said anything, Leyla.”

“No, I want to talk about this now. I’m ready.”

She grabs her fork and waves it at him before sticking it into her pasta. She takes a mouthful. She talks and chews.

“I understand. I have impulses too. We’re animals. But what I don’t understand is how anyone could—I mean, if you really love me—I can’t picture you—I don’t know—You’re right, forget it.”

“Just enjoy your dinner. I love you. I don’t want anything else. It was a stupid thing to say,” he says.

They continue eating in silence. The silverware clinks against the porcelain plates.

The next day, she wakes up with a headache, but she peels herself out of bed to go to the store. They are almost out of milk. She writes a list of things they need.

In the store, she lingers in the aisles, reading food labels, and searching for items marked “NEW.” The cart is full. She pulls the list out of her pocket. She walks toward the deli.

A deli clerk with a green apron and hair net stands behind a case with steaming food. He smiles at her. Despite the hairnet, he is still handsome.

“Hi, how can I help you?”

She is the only customer at the deli counter. She has his full attention. She looks at the hot food and lifts an indecisive finger to her mouth. She playfully tosses her hair back off her shoulder. He waits.

“Do you still have the Provence roasted chicken?”

“No. I’m sorry we no longer carry that one. But we do have the fire-roasted. Personally, it’s my favorite.”

“Is it? I’ll have to try it.”

He smiles. She giggles.

“If you like the Provence, you’ll love this one.”

“I’ll take it then,” She gives him a satisfied smile.

He pulls a skewer out of a brown and dripping chicken. He wraps it in thin wax paper and gently places it in a paper bag with a little cellophane window. He folds over the top of the bag and grips the folds tight before gingerly setting the price sticker over the folds. He rubs the sticker on with circular motions. He winks at her and hands her the bagged chicken.

“If you don’t like it, you can come back and slap me around a little.”

The comment catches her off guard. She is not expecting confirmation. The innocence is gone, there is intent now. She laughs in nervous little gasps.

“Oh. Thank you.”

“Have a good day, now.”

Bye,” she says.

She turns away from the deli counter toward the registers, her eyes on the bagged chicken in the child’s seat of the cart. She holds back laughter. She wants to glance back toward the deli, but decides against it mid-turn. Her head flips in an awkward double take. She can feel the heat on her cheeks. She brings her hand to her face. Her cheeks are warm. At the register the cashier greets her, and she begins to unload groceries onto the belt. She leaves the chicken for last.

#

They haven't gone out in a while. Getting ready feels good, brings back memories.

"I think it's too short," she says. She looks at herself in the full-length mirror.

"Nah. It's a great dress, shows off your ass. I like that one."

"Yes. I remember how much you like it."

The mirror hangs on a long wall in the center of the bedroom, strategically placed facing the bed. A blue mini-dress hugs her curves and lifts where it should. The left strap falls down her shoulder. At the base of the strap, where it attaches to the bodice are a few loose threads. She tucks the strings into the seam. She looks in the mirror, flattens the seam and lifts the strap back up.

He peers out from the bathroom, shirtless. Patches of shaving cream on his face.

"Listen, it's going to be fun. You're going to be fine. I like him. It's cool."

She nods, avoiding his gaze.

"We're both going to have fun, Leyla."

"I know. I'm just nervous."

"Don't be. This is going to make things better—more special. You'll see."

She sighs. "It'll be fun. I know."

He walks out of the bathroom with a smooth face, his shirt unbuttoned. He approaches her, and looks her up and down as he fastens all but the top three. He places his hands on her shoulders then brings one hand to her face.

"Don't be nervous, Ley. You'll be fine. No one's expecting anything. Just have fun, OK."

He leaves the bedroom. Leyla turns and glances at herself in the full-length one more time. She runs a hand down either hip. Steve comes back with two snifters and gives her one. He clinks his fat-bottomed glass to hers.

“Here’s to the first of many.”

She shakes her head at him and gulps her drink. They head out.

#

Back in the bedroom of their square house, they switch on the lights and avoid eye contact. He reaches out and gives her ass a squeeze. She pushes him away. Steve moves toward the bed. He sits to remove his shoes. She passes the mirror. The reflection makes her pause. The blue dress still clings to her. She untucks the left strap from the bodice. The front seam that attached the strap has come undone. It hangs loose. She fingers the broken strap. She is lost in her reflection.

“Hey, Ley, remember the cruise we were on a few years ago? She took the same one. We couldn’t remember the name. Do you remember?”

He balls his socks into each of his shoes.

“Huh?”

“The cruise we took a few years ago?”

“Oh, I don’t know, Hon. It was to the Caribbean.”

“Yeah.”

Her answer makes him pause.

“How was your night?”

“I thought we weren’t going to do that,” she says.

“Just the dinner and drinks part?”

She is pulled out of her thoughts. Annoyed, she takes off her heel and tosses it in his direction. It hits his shin before landing on the floor.

“You can’t change the rules at the last minute,” she says.

He brings up his hands up to protect his face and curls his body into a C-shape. He’s relieved at her playfulness.

“I’m not. I’m just, you know, being honest.”

He stoops to grab the heel by his foot, and offers it with one hand. She doesn’t take it. She takes the other heel off and kicks it into the closet. He gets up off the bed and tries to embrace her. She bats his arm away.

“What are you doing, Steve?”

“We had dinner, drinks, talked. Then I took her home,” he says.

She shakes her head, and waves her hand against an invisible pest.

“I don’t want to know anymore.”

He gives her a big grin and throws back his arms.

“There is no more.”

“Alright, Steve. This is how you want to play? Yes—we had a lovely time.”

“What did you talk about?”

“You know, I can’t believe—”

She walks into the closet. The sharp jingle of baubles is broken by the slam of a wooden jewelry box top.

“Leyla, what’s wrong?”

“This. You are asking me this.”

She comes out of the closet. He backs himself onto the bed. She faces him with her arms on her hips. She’s still in her dress. The strap of her dress dangles.

“Ley?” He looks up at her.

“I’m going to shower. I’m not talking about it.”

She walks into the bathroom, closes the door and clicks the lock. He gets up and tries the handle. He tries again. He grips it harder and rattles it.

“Leyla, open the door.”

“I’ll be out in a minute.”

“Did something happen?”

There is silence. Steve backs onto edge of the bed. He brings his hands to his face and rubs his cheeks. One hand wipes his mouth. His other arm rests on his knee. He stares ahead a few moments and breathes. He begins to unbutton his shirt. He gets up and walks over to the full length mirror. He undoes the last three buttons. He lets the shirt slide to the floor. His belly hangs over his waistband a bit. His pecs aren’t defined anymore. His arms are pale, up until his forearms, then they go tan. He looks at his biceps and curls the right one. He slaps it with his left hand. He turns away from the mirror. He undoes his pants, but he leaves them on. He walks back to the bed and sits with his head in his hands. The bed sheets are crisp, recently washed.

PANTERA'S BALCONY

In the top floor apartment at 31 *Via Pisacane*, a Bialetti espresso maker gurgles, milk boils, and fills the air. A window rattles open. Light streams in. Leyla looks down into the courtyard. Her dark hair falls over her shoulder like the princess locked in the tower. The herbs release their fragrance in the garden below as the sun hits their leaves. From the window, she can see a grey tabby cat on a balcony across the street, pacing back and forth. Steve shuffles into the kitchen with sleep still weighing on him.

“He’s cute,” she says.

“Hmm. Who’s he?” he asks. She points and hands him a cup of espresso. He takes a sip.

“First time I see him,” he says.

“It’s getting hot. I Hope they let him in soon.”

He finishes the cup and drops it in the sink with a thud. After breakfast she loads the washing machine. Bubbles and gray water spin. She looks to see if the cat is still on the balcony. He is. The August sun is hot now. She hangs the towels from a previous load on the line and guesses they’ll be dry in a couple of hours. She goes inside, shuts the window, and turns on the air.

Back in Miami, Leyla had been going to school for nursing. Steve, being impulsive, decided it would be good for them to move to another country to have a better quality of life. So far, he has yet to find a job. Her newly printed degree is only good for work in the US. To work in Italy it is important to belong to the EU. Their American passports make that impossible.

It's the hottest summer on record in the past twenty years. On TV weather girls jiggle and stand in front of the map of Italy. The girls point to the heel and toe of the familiar boot and widen their eyes. Steve only tunes into the weather segment of the news.

Pasta smells and tastes better without the Freon of A/C, a curiosity Leyla and Steve had been oblivious to before, but firmly believe in now. The rosemary is more pungent, the garlic more flavorful. Something about "the oils being able to sweat," is what he comes up with. He chops, boils, and grates while she takes a walk down to the corner grocery. The narrow street is bright now. She looks up at their balcony. The towels wave at her from the balcony. Heat waves rise from surrounding balconies. All abandoned. She comes back with a ciabatta for lunch. They eat the pasta, break off pieces of bread, and drink *un litro*. They are used to drinking a liter of wine at a time. The air conditioner struggles to keep the temperature at seventy-five. They lie down for a nap. Just sleep. It's too hot for anything strenuous. They've been married a while. They sleep for hours.

Later in the afternoon she opens her eyes and blinks the sleep away. She looks towards the small balcony just outside their bedroom. The shutters are closed, but she can see through the slats, it's still light out. She remembers the towels. And the cat. She gets up and walks out to the kitchen balcony. She tries to avoid looking in the direction of the balcony across the street. She'd rather not see whether the cat still out there. She concentrates on the towels and decides to fold them. Steve comes out to complain to her about leaving doors open and letting cold air out. Before he goes back inside he says, "I'm glad they finally let him in." She sticks her tongue out at him, then gazes at the balcony across the way.

She wonders the cat's name. Preposterous names run through her head- *Luca, Carlo, Massimo*. She doesn't know the Italian equivalent of "Garfield." She settles on the only feline animal name she can remember: *pantera*. She imagines Pantera was found nearby, maybe close to the little bakery. The *Carabinieri* or policemen in the space adjacent to the bakery must have given him milk and bits of their breakfast *cornetto*. One of them, an older gentleman with grown children living in the city might have looked for him every morning and poured out some of his latte. How he wound up on a balcony on *Via Pisacane* she hasn't thought of yet.

"You coming back to bed? Hurry up and close the doors," he yells.

She rushes in with folded towels under each arm.

The next morning she makes espresso. The windows are open. The warm air is still bearable. She looks into the courtyard. The downstairs neighbors' dog is penned in a small patch of dirt where a citrus tree grows green. From her window Leyla tosses him a cookie. He barks up at her and sits patiently for another. She smiles at the dog and gazes diagonally at the balcony across the street at Pantera's balcony. He isn't there. She shakes her head. Steve wanders into the kitchen with his jeans unzipped and an untucked A-shirt on.

"Cappuccinos?" he asks.

"There's no milk. The store doesn't open for another hour."

She leans on the kitchen counter and sips her espresso from a tiny cup. The kitchen looks like it never left the seventies. Geometric red lines are imprinted on the terrazzo floor. The formica made to resemble dark wood is peeling at the corners of the cabinets. A large avocado-green lamp hangs over the compact Ikea kitchen table, the only object from the current decade.

"Today's Tuesday. The grocery doesn't open at all."

“Shit, that’s right. Why do they do this?”

“I’m going to see if Marianna has any milk.” He zips up his jeans and tucks in his undershirt. He is still barefoot.

“Marianna? For milk?”

“Yeah,” he says as he unlocks the front door.

She shrugs and finishes the last of the dark, syrupy coffee. She hears the thuds of his bare heels on the hallway stairs. A deep knock. Her voice. His voice. Her giggle. The door closes. She looks into the courtyard to check for Carlo’s van. Carlo is Marianna’s husband. His blue minivan is parked in the driveway. The tightness in her shoulders subsides. Steve returns several minutes later with a box of Parmalat.

“Hey, I got some milk.”

“Ugh. That’s not milk.”

“It’s all we got,” he tells her.

“You drink it. I don’t need any.”

“You’re going to have to remember about Tuesdays,” he says.

“Why don’t *you* remember? Why don’t we let *Marianna* remember?”

“Seriously?”

Leyla walks out onto the kitchen balcony to clear her mind. She looks at the street below. A Fiat, a Peugeot, and a Smart. Then silence. She looks up and sees Pantera pacing on his balcony. She watches him. She tries to position herself so that she can get a view into the apartment. *How could they leave him out there so long?* But the reflection of the opposing building on their sliding glass door keeps her from seeing inside. He interrupts her.

“Marianna wants us to come down and have some coffee later.”

“I don’t feel like going down there.”

“I’m going.” He turns and shuts the door. She tugs forcefully at the glass door and follows him in.

“Oh really?”

“Yes.”

“No you’re not. I’m your wife. I don’t want to go down there, and you are not going without me.”

“You’re my wife, but you don’t tell me what to do.”

Pantera stops pacing. He is sitting at the end of the balcony peering at the street below. Another Peugeot.

Weeks pass. It is another day. Lunch is made. Wine is drunk. Leyla falls asleep on the couch in the front room. Steve goes off into the extra room to check his emails and read the news on his laptop before heading downstairs. Leyla wakes to find herself alone in the apartment. She can hear Marianna’s giggles wafting up from downstairs like a rich *succo* that has simmered for hours. She knows where Steve is. She gets up off the couch and steps onto the balcony. The sun is hot. She can see Pantera. He is lying down. His body is pressed against the railing. He is too still. She watches him closely. His belly moves. Relieved, she looks around her own balcony. In the terra-cotta pots the basil is withered and the rosemary is releasing its powerful smell. A little water and they will recover. She takes a green watering can to the sink inside and fills it. The kitchen window is open. She can hear Steve’s voice coming from downstairs. She walks back to

the herbs. Carlo's van is not there. When the last drop falls on the basil she drops the watering can and looks for her shoes. It's nearly four o'clock. Businesses will reopen soon.

She walks to the bar down the street, the one with blue neon lights, green barstools and the fresh *cornetti*. She orders an espresso, and sips it. An older gentleman across the bar smiles at her. She looks away. She pays for her coffee, leaves the change on the counter, and walks out. Sections of the town are paved with asphalt, but some parts are still cobblestone. In the old part of town cars are not allowed down the narrow streets. Kitchen smells float and dance together in those tight alleys. Snippets of conversation betray their speakers. Clean laundry hangs on lines like flags. *How embarrassing* she thinks. *At least on the balcony my underwear isn't completely exposed.* She takes it all in, knowing these sights and sounds will form memories that will last the rest of her life. She goes in and out of stores, tries on shoes, and stops at the home goods store to browse. There are aisles, endless aisles, of everything a proper Italian household needs. She doesn't recognize much of it. On the way home she stops by the pizza place. They also roast chickens. She buys one for dinner.

Leyla walks back down Pisacane and looks up at Pantera's balcony. The cat is not there. She looks up at her own balcony. Then, directly underneath she sees Marianna hanging laundry.

"Buona Sera, Leyla." Marianna's blond hair and sleeveless dress are reminders.

"Ciao Mari," Layla grunts through her teeth.

Leyla caught Steve with a blonde co-worker once.

"Hai fatto compri?" Marianna asks.

"Si, qualcoso."

"Va bene." Marianna nods and smiles and goes back to hanging her laundry.

Leyla opens the heavy door to the building and hurries up the stairs. She doesn't want Marianna to open her door and engage her on the stairs. Leyla reaches her front door, and turns the heavy lock. Steve greets her with, "Where have you been?" She avoids his face, walks passed him and into the bedroom despite the fact that she has groceries that need to be unloaded. He follows her, "I was worried about you." She knows this is a lie. He spent the afternoon with *her*.

"I went to the store. I picked up dinner," she says.

"I don't know if I can eat again. I'm still full from lunch."

"I bet."

He walks into the bedroom and looks at the bags still in her hands. He smirks.

"What are you doing? Here, give me those."

He reaches over to take the bags from her, but she swings them out of his reach. She rushes away from him and back out to the kitchen. He chuckles after her. Her cheeks begin to warm and her vision blurs.

"I don't need you to take them. Just get out of my way," her voice cracks.

She drops the bags on the kitchen table. The glass jars of *passata* make a hollow noise when they hit the wood. She looks out the window and sees that Pantera is out now. He's pacing back and forth on the small balcony. The late sun turns his grey coat an orange color.

"Miserable fuck," she says looking up at the cat.

"What?"

"Nothing."

She takes things out of the bags and slams cupboards as she puts them away. She thinks of Pantera and his sad existence. They loved him once. The lovely M on his forehead, the tiger stripes across his back legs, a perfect tabby, then they changed their minds.

Leyla thought a life in Italy would make everything better. But she cannot get away from the past. It's her first and last thought of every day. She works out the logistics of returning home without Steve. She identifies the train line that will take her straight to the airport. She looks at the train schedules and times her walk up the hill to make it onto the first morning bus into the city.

For the past few days, the cows grazing on the pasture just outside town have been mooing in the early mornings. The sounds crept into the bedroom and scared them the first night they heard it. That was three nights ago. She can use this to her benefit. She will grab her things and shut the door under a blanket of moos. He would never know. By the time he woke up, she'd be on her way home.

The next morning she rattles through the kitchen cupboards looking for the espresso maker. He's moved it. *Why can't he put anything back where it goes? Why would he move it?* She gives up looking for it to avoid speaking to him. She steps out onto the balcony to check if the herbs need water. An Alfa Romeo comes to a stop in front of the building. That's unusual. A well-dressed man in his thirties steps out of the passenger's side. The sun is just beginning to creep between the collection of sidewalls on Via Pisacane. The man slips on his sunglasses and looks up. She recognizes the brand: Armani. On Pantera's balcony a woman glows in a yellow housedress. She's young and fills out the dress. Armani yells up at the woman and spreads his arms. "*Amore.*" The woman smiles down at him and tucks a curl behind her ear.

Leyla retreats back into her apartment. She wonders about Armani and the girl. *Is that her lover? husband?* She watches from inside. The girl turns and disappears into the apartment.

Armani signals to his driver-friend with his thumb. The trunk lifts open. He pulls out a garment bag. His heels click and echo on the empty street. The girl returns on the balcony with a baby. A fat, pink leg dangles from either hip.

Is the baby an illegitimate child? It could explain why he hasn't been around before this. Will he stay? What an asshole. That poor girl.

The girl with the baby in her arms laughs without shame on the balcony.

Armani adjusts the garment bag over his shoulder and brings the fingers of his other hand together to form a purse in front of his chest. He juts out his chin and smiles, “*Bellissimo.*”

Pantera is on the balcony.

#

Leyla washes the dinner dishes at the sink. Steve sits at the table sipping his espresso.

“They have a baby. That’s why he’s on the balcony all day,” Leyla says to him.

“What does that have to do with anything?” He grunts.

“Babies are supposed to be kept away from cats, right?”

“I don’t know.”

She turns to him with a soapy sponge in her hand.

“Hmm, maybe that’s only during pregnancy. They’ve been known to smother babies.”

She nods in agreement with herself.

“What? Never heard that. Anyway, who cares?”

“I care. That poor cat is being sacrificed. Shit, I’ll take him,” she says.

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Don’t call me *ridiculous*.”

She turns back toward the sink.

“You’re overreacting.”

He gets up and walks over to her.

“I am not overreacting.”

“Aren’t you?”

He clasps his hands around her waist and pulls her in. She struggles to push him off.

“You’re an asshole.”

She breaks away and leaves a wet streak on shirt. A few soap bubbles cling to his arm hair. He wipes his arm, then leans back against the kitchen counter and crosses his arms. She goes back to the dishes.

“Is this about Marianna?”

She doesn’t answer and continues with the dishes.

“I like Marianna, but it’ll never happen,” he says.

She continues with the dishes and accidentally chips a plate against another. She decides it best to stop. She turns to face him.

“Right. Just like it didn’t happened before?”

“You know, you’re not exactly innocent yourself,” he says.

He points an accusatory finger at her and gets closer. Her eyes widen. She shakes her head.

“Don’t give me that shit. You pushed and pushed for it. You talked me into thinking that an open relationship was healthy and normal. It’s not. You are a selfish pig. The only reason you ever said that is so you could have your cake and eat it too. Fuck you.”

She turns away from him, grips the edges of the aluminum sink and takes a deep breath. She does not want him to see her tears.

“Ley, that’s not fair. You’re a goddamn adult. You made your own decisions.”

“Stop talking, Steve.”

“I didn’t talk you into anything. You wanted it just as bad.”

She turns around. He is back in the same spot, propped against the counter with his arms crossed. It makes her even more upset.

“You know what. You’re right. Again, you’re right. I thought we could survive this. I thought we could forget about it and keep going. That’s impossible. I see that now” she says.

“Leyla, we are going to be fine. Nothing’s happened with me and Marianna. There’s no opportunity. It’s not like I could run away with her. You have nothing to worry about.”

#

Early one morning, a few weeks later, after he gets up to check his emails and read the news on his laptop, she carefully gets dressed. She dresses in layers. She can wear her jacket until the sun gets bright, then she can tie it around her waist. Out of the top dresser drawer she pulls out her passport and tucks it into the jacket pocket. She checks her wallet to make sure she has her credit cards. This is all she will need to buy a ticket. She can call her mother once she lands. She scribbles him a note on the hallway table.

Steve,

I'm making another decision. I'm going home. You have an opportunity, now.

-Ley

She rushes to the front door and unlocks the three bolts. He does not react.

“I’m going to the store,” she yells.

“Don’t take too long.”

She slams the door.

ANNA

It seems unwise to spend so much time in a place whose very name mocks me, but I cannot help myself. You have been my constant companion—my best friend. You know my secrets better than anyone else. You are the one unchanging part of my past and present. You have shared in my life's pleasantries and disappointments. Today, I am here to breathe in your air and listen to the bubbling that has always comforted my heart in the Giardini di Gioventù. The Gardens of Youth.

“The day that I could most use an extra pair of hands, of all days.” I sigh and enjoy the smell of camellias. I feel my age in my arms and legs. My back is tight. I lean back and let the cold metal of the bench press into me. The fountain bubbles and laughs. *My garden, my escape.*

When I was a child, I used to splash in the waters of the fountain with my brother Lorenzo. The figures of the four seasons, stained brown and green from years of algae growth, still watch over the blue waters that proved irresistible on hot days. The fountain that served as our oasis in youth sits in the center of the park and is now protected by a somber wrought-iron fence. A very long time ago, the park was actually the private garden of a medieval palace, now a municipal building that towers just beyond the grounds. The structure's original purpose has long been forgotten: A pleasure getaway? A gift of love? A capricious whim by a well-to-do lord? Who knows?

The walls are covered with the soot containing the history of our town and the immense iron gates guard the four entrances that protect our birth, death, and marriage certificates. The building often served as the backdrop to the many tales of gallantry that my father told. From the park one can appreciate the palace and its journey through time, but one can also gaze down the

hill and watch cranes and cement trucks pour the new foundations that are constantly working to expand our municipality.

My earliest memories here, in The Gardens of Youth, are of Sunday afternoons with the entire family lounging under the shade of trees, running through the gravel walkways chasing after my brother, and listening to my father's tales. Stories of knights and swords and dragons for Lorenzo, with the promise of beautiful princesses, large castles, and happily ever-after for me.

My father was a romantic. His stories and chivalrous actions would engender the girlish visions of my knight in shining armor. I used to imagine that I was a beautiful princess looking out of the balcony of the municipal building waiting for my prince, but in time I learned that no princess ever lived there, and there are no princes. Life was innocent. With age came the realization that my actions are not simply fleeting moments in time. They are permanent, and we must adapt in order to survive their repercussions. Over the years, I've become used to the harshness of reality.

My sisters, Barbara and Irene, were much older than Lorenzo and I. When I was born Lorenzo was only two, but my sisters were married women long before I knew what love meant. Barbara with her fair skin and dark hair contrasted with Irene, who had golden hair and skin that turned the color of caramel if she stayed in the sun too long. They were both so beautiful. The difference in our ages has often caused me to wonder about my parents' passions.

When I began attending primary school, Lorenzo and I were trusted enough to visit the park on our own. My brother alone was a handful. He was never still, always restless, and extremely curious. Our father assured my mother that he would outgrow it, but he never did.

Lorenzo was often accompanied by Orlando, the boy who lived up the road. We gladly

welcomed the presence of another companion. He became one more member of our troupe, an additional player in our games. After dismissal, the three of us would gather in the courtyard of the school and then walk to the park where we were free from adult supervision. We continued our school lessons under Papa's tutelage and my father attempted to instill a passion for learning in the three of us. I would eventually curse my poor father for having done such a splendid job with Orlando.

The three of us were inseparable at first. My mother treated him like one of hers, and on most nights he ate dinner at our table. Much to her chagrin I behaved in the same ways they did. We held spitting contests and wrestled on the stretches of lawn where my father told his stories. I did not hesitate to strip down to the bare minimum and join them in the waters of the Four Seasons' fountain. We splashed and tried to drown each other in two feet of water before laughter forced us to give up. When we had grown tired, our game turned into duck-and-hide. We crawled through the water and ducked below the rim, as far as we could, to hide from anyone walking through the park.

The gravel that lined the walkways crunched under shoes and alerted us to anyone coming or going. I was younger and smaller than they were, and it was most apparent when the town guard chased us out of the water. I had an easy enough time scrambling into the fountain, but getting my leg over the stone rim quickly enough to avoid a reprimand was another matter.

Eventually, we worked out a plan. If we had to leave the fountain in a rush, the boys would jump out first and then grab me under the arms and hoist me up and out. In my mother's earlier years she would never have allowed one of her daughters to run around loose through

town with boys, even if my brother was given the task of caring for me. Being the youngest, however, left me with tired versions of my parents.

When I arrived home from the park with a guilty face, in only a camisole, undershorts, and wet hair, my mother merely shook her head and took the crumpled and soggy mass of fabric that was my dress from my arms. There was never any real scolding or crying on her part at the thought of having raised an improper young lady.

The memories I have of my brother are of afternoons in the park, the days when his smile lit up my world, and his childish deviousness offered all the excitement I could ever want. I should have told my father the truth. I should have told him that I had not seen Lorenzo in school, that I had not seen him at school for weeks, but all that I ever did tell my father, when he asked, was that I had not noticed. I was only a girl. There's nothing that I could have done to keep my brother from straying, but maybe if I had given my father reason to, things could have been different.

When my brother distanced himself and let Orlando take his place as my keeper, I knew we were no longer children. Lorenzo began to live his own adventures, ones that did not include his little sister or his childhood friend.

He started visiting the country. Had he learned farming my father would have been pleased. Instead he learned how to gamble, make alcohol, his way with women. I was fourteen when he had the falling-out with my father and left home. I was asleep and woke to the sound of my father and Lorenzo yelling. Our sitting room was small, and it felt as though their bodies filled the entire room. My mother's delicate crochets and chair with the velvet upholstery seemed tarnished somehow.

“Why are you showing your face here? Isn’t there a bed for you in Mantina?”

“Those are all lies, Pop.”

“Really? Explain where you got the money for those shoes and the ruby ring on your finger. The lie about the farmer’s wife? Is that your bastard she carries? If he doesn’t kill you, I will.”

“I told you I helped the farmer with the shearing this year, that’s all. I earned the money fairly. I didn’t touch her.”

My father stretched his arm across the room and grabbed his collar. Lorenzo had grown strong, but my father was still more powerful. He pinned Lorenzo against the wall by the neck. His head hit and cracked the plaster. My mother would later cover that spot with a mirror.

“Stop. Stop, you’ll kill him,” she pleaded.

I stayed quiet, too scared to move. They hadn’t seen me yet.

“Go to the bedroom, Olivia. He wants to be a man. Let him feel what it’s like.”

My mother cried and lunged at my father's fingers. She tried to pry them loose, but his grip was no match for her bird hands. Lorenzo struggled for breath. His face turned red and his eyes watered.

My father pushed her away and she stumbled back toward the doorway where she found me. The tears ran down her face. She grabbed my shoulders and pulled me into the room with her. Had I not been there she could have stayed between them. I could hear my father.

“I should have done this long ago,” my father yelled. Those words have never left me. Through the solid wood door my mother and I heard the struggle. My mother and I cowered in a corner of the room. She gripped me tight and dug her nails into my arms. We weren’t afraid for

our own safety, but for Lorenzo's. There was a shuffling of feet, pounding against the walls, the sound of wood cracking and finally the sound of breaking glass.

My mother had enough then. She slowly opened the door. The silence scared me more than anything. I peered into the sitting room. A chair had been splintered in two. The back of the chair lay across the room from the seat and legs, sharp splinters on each end. My mother darted from the bedroom into the sitting room. My father sat in the velvet chair, his back to me. His hand hung over the arm of the chair, blood dripping from his knuckles. She glanced at him and rushed into the kitchen. I didn't dare move. My mother appeared with a dish towel from the kitchen. As she walked across the room there was a sound of gravel shifting. Like the gravel in the park. On the floor were bits and pieces of broken glass. I looked at the small wooden table next to the chair. My mother's Murano vase was missing. She held up the cloth to where my father's head would have been. They didn't speak.

For weeks afterward, my mother refused to speak to my father. She blamed him for everything that happened, and he shamefully agreed. The scandal that prompted my brother's departure was never discussed with anyone outside the family. Even among us, my father never spoke of my brother again and left the room if any of us did. The contempt that he held was not toward Lorenzo, but himself. I never believed that the little boy who was once my best friend could be capable of such things.

My father took out his frustrations over my brother on his two remaining pupils. The lessons that had once been well-intentioned were now a series of drills. A wrong answer, or, worse, an answer that lacked thought and rationale would bring on a barrage of belittling criticism that I was not suited for. On most nights, I managed to excuse myself after an hour, to

my mother's relief, but Orlando found the time with my father enthralling. He asked questions that my father had to think about before answering, wrote poetry that rivaled my father's, and shared a passion for learning that kept my mother on constant vigil. In the meantime, I struggled with school lessons. Even with Papa's help, writing proper themes was a gruesome task. My thoughts were always scattered, and putting ideas into words seemed unnatural. The reading assignments were no longer interesting. I longed for the days of princesses and dragons.

Fortunately, Orlando and I continued to spend afternoons in the park, and his presence and concern comforted me. We flipped through school books, and I pointed out the difficult passages before heading home for additional intellectual stimulation. He made valiant attempts to explain mythology, theories in science, and the histories of Herodotus to me, but the words had lost their meanings. I was too busy fantasizing about the beautiful castle where we would live and kiss and grow old together in. He didn't notice. My mother wrinkled her brow at my father over how close we had become, but in my father's eyes Orlando was merely the pupil that he was grooming for greatness. His only consolation to her was, "Let them be. What harm could it do?"

Papa was a man of little words. My father spent hours reading and smiling into his books. He was a teacher in a one-room school house, ten miles out in the country. He had been offered the position at the school as he was getting ready to court my mother. My father was preparing for a promising university career when he met her. Anyone who knew how to read and write was considered a suitable candidate to teach, especially to teach the children of farmers and field hands. He accepted the job, married Mama, and spent the rest of his adult life yearning for academic companionship.

I only came to appreciate my father's turmoil regarding the abandonment of his youthful dreams when I grew older and he explained that we all have to live with our decisions. Adults accept the consequences of their actions. A child cries and wishes for things to be different.

Adolescence left me somewhere in between. I wanted desperately to be an adult, but the child in me kept crying. I grew ever more distracted with the allure of womanhood and marriage and quietly relegated myself to kitchen duty with Mama.

Now that my sisters had their own lives, I wondered what they were like. Barbara always had a new dress and silk camisoles. Irene grew belly after belly and I wondered if she had any control over that. I was not aware of how these things happened yet. Over pots of sauce and the smell of garlic they laughed about husbands and being good wives.

“Why is that funny?” I asked.

“Oh, Anna. One day you will see,” Irene giggled.

“Maybe if you get your nose out of books you will find out.”

“Barbara, don’t tell her that.”

“It’s true. She’s not a man. She will never go to a university. What’s the point?” Barbara continued.

“Don’t listen to her Anna. Do what you love and the right man will come along,” Irene said.

“Why should she listen to you? Look how long it took you to get married.”

“Ignore her Anna. I am happy. That’s all that matters,” Irene said.

“That’s enough. You want to get married? Practice with her,” Mama said and dropped Barbara’s baby girl in my lap.

“Pretty soon, Anna. If you play your cards right.” Barbara snickered. Little did I know how soon.

It wasn't long before I became a woman and I exchanged my camisole for a bra. “I'll have to take it in for you, but it'll do for now,” my mother said and pinched the material at my back. I looked at my new form in the mirror and reveled at the sight of my new figure. I'm sure it was an immeasurable difference, but it seemed like night and day. She never did have to take in the brassiere. I grew into it.

In the months that followed, my body prepared for the rest of its life, and I transformed into a full-fledged woman. The morning that I discovered womanhood had finally come. I woke to the sound of squealing and laughter in the front room. This meant that one of my sisters was in the house. I rushed into the kitchen, and there was Irene at the table drinking a chamomile infusion with my mother. After a few smiles and hugs at my revelation, Irene offered to comfort me and took me into Mama's room.

She explained what it really meant from now on. Irene also went a step further than Mama would have ever dared and explained the intricacies of sex. My mother would have let me figure that out on my wedding night, but Irene felt it her duty to fill me in. She didn't get to marry until six years after Barbara, at twenty-four. The words Irene spoke about men and women made no sense to me. I refused to believe what she was telling me. It was impossible, there had to be some other—what Irene was telling me had to be wrong. I shook my head. She wrapped her arms around me and hugged me tight, and I began to cry. “Oh, little sister. You'll be all right. You'll see.”

She cupped her hands around my face and attempted to tame the wild mess that was my hair. I buried my face into her swollen chest and sobbed. This was Irene's fourth belly. She had come to ask a favor of us, specifically me. She needed help around the house when the new baby arrived. The oldest one spent his days at school, but when the baby came, it would be too much for her, at least until her second-oldest boy started school the following year. My father sighed at the suggestion, but this was the only reasonable solution. He agreed to let me live in her house with the condition that I finish the remainder of the school year.

Orlando and I continued our readings in the park. Only now, if our thighs accidentally touched, he quickly jerked and drew his leg away. This was the same boy who'd wrestled with me on the grass and whose wrists I managed to pin down on many occasions. I wondered if anyone had told him the things that Irene had shared with me. It was on one such afternoon that I decided to make him aware of my eventual absence

“I won't be back at school next year.”

“Why not?”

“Irene needs my help with the babies. I'll be back next year when the middle one starts school.”

He looked at the leather-bound edition in his hands and sighed. He grabbed my hand and drew it to his lips. I felt a second of elation before my desire was suddenly overtaken by fear that someone would see us. Mama would never let me out of the house again if she ever found out about this, and I could not afford to lose what little time I had left with him before I had to leave for Irene's house. I pulled my hand away knowing we would soon lose this time together. He was

startled by my seeming rejection, but I softened the impact by tucking an invisible strand of hair behind his ear.

“I have been thinking about you,” he confessed. His declaration was followed by the long silence I had taken to savor his words. “Remember when we were small and we bathed in the fountain?” He attempted to change the topic. I had remained quiet too long.

“I’ve been thinking about you, too,” I finally acknowledged in an attempt to preserve the romance. He smiled, but it left his face just as quickly as it had come. Then he looked down at the gravel. My stomach churned. I wasn't sure what else to say and wondered if I had been too forward or too meek, but somehow, without words, we reached an understanding.

We had grown and fallen in love. Our after-school tutoring evolved into devoted trysts in the months that followed. We continued reading, but paused more frequently. We paused to gaze up at the clouds, my head on his shoulder and his arm around me. We spent hours talking about things that I no longer remember, but confirmed the idea that we were meant to be together. We sat and listened to the gurgling of the fountain as we held hands. We gazed at each other and dreamed of a life together. My initial fear of being discovered wavered. One of the benches was partially hidden from view by a large camellia. The sound of the gravel would have given us enough time to compose ourselves. The circumstances would have been frowned upon, but far from scandalous.

One Friday evening, I came home from an afternoon in the park, flushed and floating on air, only to be confronted with the beginning, unbeknownst to me, of the rest of my life. The first thing that took me by surprise was that the front room had been lit. That usually meant that my parents had company. I took a few breaths on the front step, patted my hair down, and

straightened my blouse before going in. When I walked in, there sitting in my parent's front room, each with a cup of coffee in their hands, were the old butcher and his son, Ugo.

“There she is! Anna, come, dear. Sit down. You know Ugo and his father. They have come to see you,” Mama heralded. I could feel my stomach turning. I should have run out of the room at that moment, but instead my mother sat me down next to Ugo and handed me a cup of coffee. My father scanned my face for signs of uneasiness, but I gave him a blank look. I wasn't sure what was happening. My mother would have considered it rude to inform me of developments in the presence of company, but I should have protested loudly when I finally realized the purpose of the visit.

I had never been allowed to sit and drink coffee with company before. I thought maybe it had something to do with becoming a woman. In a way, it did. Ugo, who was twenty-eight, had come to declare his love for me. Of course, what this really meant was that he had come to proposition my parents. He had brought his father along as some sort of character reference. I had only seen him a couple of times from behind the counter of the butcher's shop. He seemed nice. Although, the only words I had ever spoken to him were, “How much?”

He had a round face and healthy cheeks, the result of being a butcher's son. He lacked grace. The saucer dangled from one giant meaty hand over his knee, as the other engulfed the tiny cup. I stared at the floor and took a sip, looked at the old butcher, then at my mother. She was grinning from ear to ear, while trying to keep her composure. I wished for my sisters. At that moment, I still did not fully comprehend what was happening, and I watched the rest of the evening unfold through the eyes of a child. The childhood eagerness to please my parents

betrayed me. I kept quiet and smiled, responded to my name, but only answered questions with a nod or a shake. The girl in me overpowered the woman I thought I had become.

The old butcher had on his best wool suit, complete with a vest and gold pocket watch. He held his saucer properly and gripped the small handle with his thumb and index finger. He anxiously leaned forward in the chair as much as he could, given that his belly was as big as my sister's. I glanced up at Ugo. His hair was golden like Irene's, but his eyes were dark and serious. He must have sensed that I was looking at him because he turned to me and smiled. I looked away and took a sip of my coffee.

“The boy will have everything in a few years. I am getting too old. Ugo apprenticed under me and is, dare I say, a much better butcher than I was at his age. Do not be concerned about her well-being. She will have everything she could ever want. We own the building. The butcher's shop is on the ground floor and they will live on the top floor, above us.” The old butcher smiled confidently and looked at his son.

“We would not be able to proceed right away. She has an obligation to her sister that must be fulfilled,” my mother explained. “Isn't that right, Anna?” I nodded. Then I caught myself and stopped, but it was too late. I was too terrified to excuse myself or to even move. I sat with my empty cup and saucer on my lap and stared into space. There were smiles all around. Mama beamed and clasped her hands together at the sight of us: the happy couple. My lack of opposition had been interpreted as compliance. I stared at the floor and Ugo's black patent leather shoes shone so brightly that I could see my startled face in them when he put his arm around me and kissed my cheek. I winced. Papa leaned back in his chair. He had been defeated by all my other siblings. He resigned himself and nodded.

The following day, I sat in the park by myself, looking at the sky and our town below, thinking about what it all meant. Only last year I was a girl with a crush. Now I was a woman with a serious complication. Then I heard the crunching of stones. It was Orlando. Over the years, I have come to terms with the fact that I was not yet sixteen and certainly nowhere near mature enough to have behaved any better. My only comfort is in the mere fact that I was not the obstacle that kept him from his goal. I don't believe I could ever have come to terms with that.

“There you are. I was wondering where you were.” He took my hand and kissed it.

I thought about his caresses and a tear ran down my cheek. He could tell I was upset, but he must have thought I was crying about his impending news. Our parents spoke often and it would have been natural to assume that his Mama had cheerfully revealed the information to my mother.

“We'll be fine. You'll see, everything will work itself out.” He tucked a finger under my chin and directed my face towards his. We had never been this close and his alluring breath caused me to briefly forget the previous night's developments. His dark eyes met mine, and he came in closer. “I have wonderful news,” he muttered. I drew in his words. Then his lips touched mine. They were soft and warm and smelled of him. Irene's words suddenly made sense. He pulled back, but my eyes remained closed.

“I'm sorry, Anna—I didn't mean—I shouldn't have—I was accepted to the university.” I loved him and wished for his happiness, but the words stung and jolted me back from my fantasy. University meant separation. Who would protect me from Ugo the butcher?

“But what about us? You can't leave me,” I protested selfishly.

“If you wait for me, Anna, I promise to marry you the day I finish my studies and come back. I can ask for your father's permission, today if you'd like. ”

“It's such a long time.” At the time I thought, *How could he do this?* I wanted him to forget the university, like Papa had done for Mama. I picked at a broken nail and refused to look at him, to keep from crying harder.

“Anna, look at me. I have spent the last three years preparing, never thinking I would get accepted. I have to take this opportunity.”

The child in me was angry. I wanted him to be furious too. I wanted him to realize that he was about to lose me, to grow mad with jealousy, and to tell me that he would stay. I thought of the worst thing that I could say to him.

“I'm engaged to Ugo,” I muttered.

“Ugo? When did—why hadn't you...” He stood up and walked a few steps.

“It only happened last night. If you were to propose and marry me now, then I wouldn't have to marry him,” I said like the conniving child that I was proving myself to be, but Orlando knew better than that. He saw through my attempt at manipulation.

“I can't do that.”

“Why not? Papa did it for Mama,” I whined.

“Yes, and look at him. I cannot live with that hanging over my head for the rest of my life.”

At the time, I believed that my father had heroically followed his heart and lived happily ever after. Why was that so difficult for Orlando to recognize?

“You don't know what you're saying,” I yelled. He sat back down, reached for my hands, and clasped them in his.

“Why are you being such a child? Don't you understand that I love you?”

“I understand that you don't love me enough to marry me.” He let go of my hands in frustration, stood up, and faced me.

“What do you want from me?” he demanded. His arms were outstretched and his shirt sleeves fluttered in the breeze.

“I want to get married. Not in five years. Now”

“Anna.” He took a drawn-out pause and sighed. He placed his hands on his hips and looked at me long and hard from under dark brows.

“I have been preparing for this, for years. You've watched me struggle to get here. I thought you would be happy for me. I thought you would wait for me. The time will pass quickly, you'll see. You'll be busy with your sisters and I will visit when I can, but I have to do this. Please understand.”

His words only exasperated my childhood annoyance and fell on deaf ears. I fumed on the bench while he rambled on. When he was done and there was silence, I stood, lifted a finger, and pointed it at him.

“If you don't want to marry me now, then I will marry someone who does.” I sealed my own fate.

The idiot girl had once again proven herself to be stronger. For months, I had been feeling the desperation that Irene must have felt before love found her. I no longer wanted to be the little girl that fantasized about being a princess. I wanted to be the princess with my own castle and

my very own knight. Things were changing so rapidly. My sisters were married and having babies, and Lorenzo was gone, but I felt trapped in perpetual pigtails and knee-high socks. I had finally become a woman and wanted to start living like one. It is all so painfully clear now. I was an immature child, not a woman. I've tried not to live with remorse. All I can do is embrace the life that my actions in youth led me to, but the questions of *What if?* refuse to leave me.

I turned and marched away from him without looking back. The loud gravel under my feet muffled his final pleas. "Anna! Anna, please. Don't be this way." I am still torn over the events of that afternoon, but I understand him now. Thinking about how things unraveled has shaped my life over the years, and I understand myself better because of it.

That Sunday, my eldest sister Barbara had come, as usual, with the children. "How wonderful, Anna!" she said and hugged me. I gave her a loose embrace, crinkled my brow, and sighed. I was still angry and hurt. She didn't seem to notice, but continued to gush, and cheerily announced, "I brought my dress. I think it will fit you perfectly." I wanted to go back to sleep, but the mandatory Sunday mass would be starting soon. I sat through the church service enveloped in a thick fog of love and hate. By the time we got back to the house, I was exhausted. I excused myself from kitchen duties, but not before my mother forced me to try on Barbara's wedding dress. I refused to speak. I had nothing more to say. As soon as the dress was slipped over my head, I felt like ripping the thing off, but I spared Barbara the sight of her gown, the one that represented her happiness, being torn to pieces.

When I was finally able to take it off, I ran to my bed and sobbed into the pillow. Papa heard my muffled cries and walked in. I wanted to cry into his shoulder and ask him to make it all better, but I couldn't form the words. In the spirit of adulthood, I had taken an active role in

ensuring the awful developments, and it would have been childish and against everything I believed to ask for my father's help. Self-imposed martyrdom. His aging hand petted my hair and he sat and stroked it until I fell asleep. When I awoke the next morning, a bundle wrapped in brown parchment was sitting on my bed. I figured it was some bridal accessory my sisters had delivered, but when I opened it, I discovered my father's handwriting on several composition notebooks. They all had the same title: POEMS FROM THE SOUL. The oldest one was dated forty years earlier and the most recent one, only a year ago. The poems chronicled my father's life from the time he was sixteen. "You are the only one who would appreciate those properly." He told me. They were his wedding gift. It was all he had.

In the months that followed, Irene had her baby. I lived in her house and distracted myself from the mess I had made of things by tending to the children and preparing meals that her husband enjoyed when she was too tired. Ugo patiently waited for me, and time passed quickly just as Orlando had promised. In between household chores, I was fitted into Barbara's dress several more times. Ugo brought me flowers and choice cuts of meat for Irene's family. We were married the following June. The dark simple church was decorated with sprays of white roses and peonies. The warm air intensified their fragrance. Neighbors and friends made up most of the crowd. My father walked me down the aisle. I blushed as I passed well-wishers. I was a fraud. I was two months shy of seventeen.

My first night in my new home with my new husband was not the fantasy I had once envisioned. I felt numb and useless, but Ugo was kind and tried to be as gentle as he could with his large butcher's hands. I did not feel like a wife. I still felt like a silly girl. A girl that needed to be told what to do, what to think, what to say. Every day for weeks after we were first married I

cried into my pillow after Ugo had gone downstairs to the shop. Ugo and his father would alternate between tending to the customers, while the other cut the meat. Ugo's mother ran a small luncheonette adjacent to the shop, which brought in as much money as the shop on some days.

Eventually, Ugo sensed the sadness in the house and suggested I spend some time with his mother. In an attempt to be a good wife, I agreed. Ugo's mother, Maria, was a stocky round woman with thick arms and legs. She ran the place with the diligence and severity of a navy admiral. She greeted you, sat you, took your order, cooked your meal and served your food in what seemed like one breath. If there was enough demand she did not hesitate to move you to a different table in the middle of your meal. If you complained, you might just be asked to leave and never return. Just watching her move made me feel exhausted. Every day the luncheonette opened at noon and closed at four. In the beginning I was only allowed in the small dining area, never in the kitchen. I was given the responsibility of clearing tables, refilling bread baskets, serving wine, taking orders and charging customers. The menu was simple and changed daily depending on the cuts of meat our husbands had prepared. Now that there were two of us working there, patrons moved in and out much quicker. I was first allowed in the kitchen when I began to grow with my first belly. I think my hard work running the dining room impressed her enough that she finally trusted me with her recipes, or it could have just been the fact that I was carrying her first grandchild. Either way, she showed me how to prepare her best dishes, quickly and according to specific instructions.

After long days of learning how to cook my mother-in-law's food, I walked to the park. I found myself much closer to the park than when I was a child. It was around the corner from our

building. The park that represented my childhood and adolescence now took part in a new chapter in my life. I sat on the bench and rubbed my growing belly. The fountain bubbled and I thought of the summer, a few years earlier, when I had walked away from Orlando. He kept in touch with my father for the first couple of years while he was away. Orlando was the son my father had lost. I knew they exchanged letters, but during the years that I was learning to be a proper young wife, I made it a point never to ask about Orlando or his progress. Idiotic pride. I later discovered that around the time that I was rubbing my first belly and learning how to run the luncheonette, he had also moved on with his life.

Ugo and I kept so busy with work that I really did not talk to him much. After a few months of marriage, I still did not know him. He lumbered in after long days of handling meat and troublesome housewives and went straight to the bath. He was always scrubbing his hands and paid particular attention to the area under his nails. A habit that remained with him even after he was no longer a butcher. I prepared dinner as best I could. Sometimes he would eat it in silence, before he retired for the night and I was left to clean up, other times all I would get was the plate of food pushed across the table and a complaint. "What is this, woman? I'm going downstairs." The hours he spent downstairs in his mother's kitchen were a godsend. I escaped my reality as his wife by reminiscing about the past on my favorite bench and during the day I did my best to stay in the downstairs kitchen as long as possible, until I got so big that I kept knocking things over.

The year after I had my son, Claudio, I kept away from the kitchen and enjoyed motherhood. I spent the day breastfeeding to the sound of silverware scraping plates downstairs and attempted to prepare dinners that Ugo would eat. During this time, the old butcher finally

retired and left Ugo the shop. Shortly afterward, my mother-in-law relinquished the luncheonette, claiming her rheumatism had taken its toll. When I returned to the little eatery, I found myself alone in the kitchen for the first time. I tried to run the place according to my mother-in-law's standards. Within days the regulars were back. They had given it the unofficial name of *Zia Maria's*, and to this day I still hear the name on patron's lips. I kept the prices low and stepped into her place in the kitchen. The baby was watched over by his grandparents, and my husband struggled to keep his shop doors open.

Life went on, and on days when I was able to pause and sigh, thoughts of what could have been crowded my head in much the same way the visions of castles did in my youth. The park remained my escape when I longed for the deep and thoughtful eyes of my disregarded love over the soulless glances lavished upon me by my husband. Ugo and I did not share the happiness that I had known with Orlando, but I concentrated on the family and my new world of creamy cheese sauces, braised rabbit with garlic and mushrooms, stuffed suckling pig, grilled chicory and Veronica broccoli.

Sundays were still reserved for my family. We attended mass, and Barbara and I prepared lunch, but it was no longer held in Mama's kitchen. Our families gathered for Sunday lunches in the little luncheonette. After lunch, while the children ran on the gravel paths and hid in the shade of the large trees, I thought of my brother and what had become of him. Memories of splashing in the fountain and wrestling in the grass were still vivid, only when I opened my eyes, it was my children who were splashing and running. Three years after Claudio, I had my daughter Sandra. Any attention that my husband had once directed toward me, he now half-heartedly directed at the children. Every now and again, he would raise his voice and his hand at

them, but I never interfered. The thought of my father's words kept me from blinking whenever Ugo disciplined the children. He never seriously hurt them. I would never have allowed it to go that far, but he lost his temper often. Ugo had his own demons, and in time, we began to understand each other. We both watched, and it was this triviality that kept us at each other's sides.

Ugo had once envisioned a fulfilling life as a chef. He had studied at the academy for one full term, before his father called him back to help him run the shop. The large animal carcasses were too much for an aging butcher on his own. Ugo had wanted to take over the butcher's shop as soon as his mother opened the luncheonette, but his father refused.

“Papa, I do most of the work anyway,” he reasoned.

“You still have a lot to learn. Besides, you're not even married. When you find yourself a proper girl, I'll consider it.”

Ugo spent his money and evenings at the local bar with the more colorful females in town. At first, it was only a few nights a week, to ease his sorrows about having to abandon his dream of becoming an accomplished chef. However, when he didn't come home for three days and returned in a drunken stupor, this behavior was too much for his poor mother to take, and his father gave him an ultimatum. Either get married and settle down with the shop or walk away from everything and don't bother coming back. Ugo made his choice, but he never came to grips with it. His father suggested our marriage because our families had both lived through some form of scandal— my brother's departure and Ugo's indiscretions. We would be on equal playing fields. My father could never throw anything in the butcher's face and vice-versa. Ugo had never

really wanted to marry me, it was the only way for him to move forward, just as marrying him was my way of moving forward.

During the summer months when my daughter, Sandra, was out of school she would help me refill bread baskets and serve plates. She was only seven and her small fingers struggled to carry one plate, but she learned quickly. The butcher's shop never recovered and in its final years lost more money than it made. Luckily our families were comfortable, and we had our apartment, so when he made the decision to close the shop it had little effect on us. The impact was also softened by the fact that the luncheonette was bringing in a decent amount of money. It did not bring wealth, but it certainly kept us from going hungry.

One day, while I was busy grilling in the kitchen, Sandra tugged at my apron and whispered that a man was there to see me. Thinking it was a collector, I took my time and finished the plate I was preparing. Then started on the next one. When I finally stepped out from behind the beaded curtain, I caught a glimpse of the mysterious man as he walked out the door. I recognized him immediately. A series of emotion ran through me.

I wanted to run to him, slap him, ask him questions about his life, yell obscenities, tell him about my children, but I couldn't leave. The place was full and it would have been too much for Sandra to handle. That afternoon when I was done for the day I walked to the park with her and watched her play in the fading sun. Then we walked down to my parents' home. Mama chided me for being mindless enough to let Sandra roam without a sweater and gave her warm milk. I sighed and went out to sit with my father on the front porch. He puffed on a cigar and stared up at the smoke rings.

“Papa.” He looked over at me and rested the hand holding his cigar on his knee.

“Um?”

“Papa did you—have you...” I wasn't sure how to ask, but he knew what I wanted to know. He smiled and softly brought his heavy hand down on my head.

“He was here today. His mother passed away. He said he might stop and see you. I didn't think you'd mind. It's been so long.”

Questions ran through my head. *What did he want? How has he been? Will he stay?* But all that I managed to ask was, “When did she die?”

“Tuesday.” It was Thursday.

“He arrived last night for the wake.”

“Why didn't you tell me?”

“What if I had? You had not seen his mother in years. What would have been your purpose there?”

“Just because I have not seen them in years doesn't mean I stopped caring.”

“Anna, don't let the past keep you from what's in front of you.”

There was a long silence. I remembered Papa's notebooks. He never asked me what I thought or whether I had even read them. I would have been too ashamed to give him an answer anyway. At some point Claudio and Sandra had used the pages to create flowers and three-legged dogs in waxed crayon. I rose, kissed him on the forehead and took Sandra home. That night after Ugo and the children were in bed I searched for the forgotten notebooks. I looked under the bed, in cupboards, the chest of linens, and then through tears and faint sobs, I found a lone notebook in the corner of the children's room. I locked myself in the bathroom and cried, hugging my

father's remaining legacy. It was dated from the years I would have been twelve through fourteen.

I read through the first few lines:

You are what is left of me.

Your cheek has become my dream,

Your laughter has become my passion.

I live only for you, my love.

Desires from my past, pale in your light.

You are what is left of me.

I saw myself in his words. Orlando had been right. I knew Papa was right, too: there was nothing I could do. I had made decisions, and now I had to live with them. I was not the first person to go through life with heartache. Nor would I be the last. I only slept an hour before I had to get up and start preparing the kitchen downstairs, but I felt so rested it made no difference. The idea that my father had struggled with the same questions brought an unexpected peace.

When I closed the doors that afternoon we walked directly to my parent's house. The sun was still warm and Mama only raised an eyebrow at Sandra's bare shoulders. Papa was at his usual place on the front porch. He was puffing another cigar. He was smoking more than usual and, I suppose, I gazed at his cigar for too long because he put it out before I sat down. "Something to look forward to later," he said. I felt the sudden urge to hug him. I sat down and rested my head on his shoulder. I had found the familiar spot I had claimed as a child. He chuckled and kissed my forehead. I was a girl again, not the woman with two children and a

waiting husband. I longed for the careless days of my youth when my biggest worry was whether the town guard was near the park.

“Did you get to go to the wake?” I asked. He remained quiet for a few moments and then sighed.

“Do you remember the night I left you my poems? He came to the house that night, while you were sleeping.”

He looked down at me. I stared back in disbelief. *Why hadn't he told me this before? Why was he telling me now, when I couldn't do anything about it?*

“What did he want?” I asked firmly. There was a long silence.

“He had come to tell me that he had been accepted and would be leaving the next day. It's what he had worked so hard for.”

“Did he say anything else?” I pressed.

“Should he have? What more was there to say? I told him I was proud of him and to keep me informed of his progress.”

I struggled against the urge to move my head off his shoulder. “Did he?”

“He did for a couple of years, but he stopped after he became engaged.”

“Did he ever ask about me?” I had asked the question that I had so desperately fought back all those years.

“He did, and I told him. You had married Ugo and were expecting your first child.”

He stopped and looked down at me again. I could feel his eyes on the top of my head, but the unsettling idea that my father had once held the future of a young couple in love in his hands had established itself, and I couldn't bring myself to look back up at him.

“What about *him*?” There was no point in holding back now.

“Well, like I said he became engaged to a girl that lived near the campus. They got married and have two children. He's a professor and lives in the city. He took his father to live with him. They have the room and he felt his father shouldn't be here alone.”

I raised my head up off his shoulder. “I thought you said—you met them?”

“His family? Yes. They are lovely.”

The tears ran down my face and I tried to wipe them as quickly as they came. He kissed my forehead again.

“Things happen the way they are supposed to, Anna. We just have to live with that.”

I sat with my father for a while, and I thought about the past. Now that I had asked my questions and received answers, I felt uneasy. I felt bruised. I was better off not knowing. It felt permanent now. The childish glimmer of hope that I had—any remnants of my girlhood fantasies—had been crushed. I never expected anything to come of them, but I had been so carefully preserving them. They are what got me through the long days and lonely nights that had become my life. I stood up and called for Sandra.

“Mama, we have to go.” I kissed my father goodbye and hugged my mother.

“You'll be down on Sunday, yes?”

They were aging so quickly. Mama's hair had lost its darkness. Silvery strands covered her head. My father had lost his strength. His chest had sunken in, and the arms that were once as strong as steel now felt fragile.

“Of course,” Mama said.

While I walked back home with Sandra, I realized that her steps were in-synch with mine. She did not scuttle behind me. Her stride was just as long as mine and I realized once again, just how quickly time passed. It seemed only moments ago that I was her age and running after my brother.

She was thirteen when Papa died. I had been dreading the day when I would lose one of my parents, but I was prepared for it. Barbara took Mama to live with her and our Sunday lunches stopped. Mama could not bear the thought of Sundays without my father. I went to the park after mass on Sundays, sometimes with the children and Ugo, most times by myself. I sat there with my thoughts and memories, and hopes for Claudio and Sandra.

When Claudio was about ten years old the teachers became increasingly worried about his behavior. I immediately thought of my brother, but the concern with Claudio was not that simple. After four years of school he still had trouble with the basics of reading and writing and he slurred certain words. He had gone through the first few years of school without raising any real concerns because his symptoms were subtle. The adults simply figured that he was lazy and not completing lessons at home or just not paying attention. It was only now that he was preparing to enter secondary school and working with more difficult subjects that the teachers detected a problem.

We were told that Claudio suffered from a mild case of mental retardation. The news devastated my husband and he was never the same after that. He refused to talk about it then and still recoils at the mention of it. Ugo made the decision to withdraw him from school without consulting me, and one day I came home to find school books strewn about the table and Claudio practicing his letters. "We're going to show them. Eh, Claudio?" Claudio grinned from ear to ear.

He had spent the day tutoring his son, while I was busy cooking. The most that was ever accomplished was that Claudio wrote two paragraphs about his favorite candy and Ugo read him the first few pages of Pinocchio. I thought of my father and his shortcomings. After Ugo's failed attempt, I took Claudio downstairs and he picked up Sandra's role. Ugo protested loudly and claimed that I was making his son do woman's work.

“That's perfect. Not only is he retarded, but now you're turning him into a waitress.”

He had started drinking again. The vice from his youth had come back with a vengeance. I ignored it at first. It was a lot for him to handle. He was living through his own personal hell.

We were living in a time and place where a man was supposed to be the head of his household, but Ugo was being kept by his unloving wife and his only son was incompetent. I went through the days trying not to think about anything, because I knew that if I did I might not stop crying. I switched Claudio's role and I brought him into the back. At first, he swept up the messes around the kitchen while I thought up new ways to keep him busy. My husband didn't seem to mind, as long as he was kept out of sight and away from wagging tongues. Claudio enjoyed the work and never made any mention of school or his classmates again. When his sister shared our work in the summers, he was overjoyed. I watched them together and was often reminded of the friendship I had shared with my brother. By the time Claudio was a teenager he was my dishwasher and took out the trash, unloaded food deliveries and did any heavy lifting that needed to be done. He had his father's hands and lack of grace, but his eyes were like my sister's: determined.

When Ugo's father died, he finally stopped drinking for his mother's sake. He kept her company during the day, much to my relief. My own mother died the following year. After the

burial, I walked to the park with Sandra and thought about that afternoon several years ago when she no longer had to run to keep pace with my stride. We sat on the benches and let the spring breezes run through our hair. I looked at the girl sitting next to me, and for a brief moment, I saw the young girl that I had been so many years before. The cautious wonderment still flashed in her eyes, and I knew that soon it would be completely gone. Soon she would realize that we were merely beasts of burden for time. We sat in the park listening to the sound of the bubbling fountain and the occasional crunch of gravel.

A few years later, Sandra was a woman and she knew more than I ever did at her age. It troubled me at first, but I just figured that's the way things were now. She continued to help me in the summer months and had nearly completed all her schooling when she came home flushed one afternoon. I recognized the signs immediately and the possibilities raced through my head. I remembered the love I had felt in my youth and decided to let her be. I did not bother to bring her father into the picture because over the years he had grown oblivious to the children and fallen victim to an even more sinister addiction than alcohol: self-pity. His mother had died and the brief period of peace was over.

When my daughter reached the troublesome age that I had been when I left school I made her promise that no matter what happened she would finish her schooling. I didn't want her to have anything hanging over head. I was too foolish to see myself through school, but I was going to make sure that one of my children would surpass my half-hearted efforts. Barbara and Irene called me naïve and couldn't understand why she would need any more schooling. My sisters only ever thought of school as a convenience, and failed to see its importance. My father never explained the benefits of a good education to them.

After years of trying, the luncheonette finally ran with as much precision as my mother-in-law had once mandated. It was not something I could have learned, nor could she have taught it. I ran the place like someone running out of time. I felt an urgency much like the one I'd felt in youth, only this time there was a valid reason for it: my daughter's future. Someday this place would be Sandra's and I wanted to leave her something worth owning. I didn't expect her to stay and run the place, but I wanted her to have something of value that would keep her from having to marry the first person that came along. The luncheonette and the way I ran it, was my attempt at ensuring her happiness. Claudio began to make meal-deliveries for me. At first, it was for the widows who refused to walk further than a block in a given direction, but I picked up a few more patrons this way and eventually established a daily route that wound its way through town. Claudio kept any money he collected. I also threw out Ugo's liquor and let him know that I would get rid of any bottle I came across, and, if he didn't like it, he could find himself another woman who would put up with his misery. Things settled and my visits to the park were joyful again.

After Sandra finished school, she did not move away or learn to be a hairdresser as Irene had suggested. She stayed with me and continued the work that she had learned over so many summers. With the two of us running the place, things moved faster, the way they had twenty years earlier when my mother-in-law had first brought me into her world. Sandra's cheeks and eyes betrayed her every so often, but I never asked, and she never felt it necessary to reveal any information. She was old enough to decide for herself and I trusted her.

One day, she came home and sat us down. She held up her hand. On her left ring finger was a gold band with a simple setting and a small stone. Ugo frowned and huffed.

“No one asked me anything. As far as I'm concerned there is no wedding.”

Sandra rushed out of the room in tears, and I calmly asked Claudio to follow her out. I had made the mistake of keeping quiet before, and I was not about to repeat it. I grabbed his arm. He was going to listen to me. I grabbed hard enough that the pressure hurt my hand.

“It doesn't matter what they say—they are not important—your daughter is. If you can't see that, then you can stay here and rot. I'm going to my daughter's wedding and if you are not there, then expect to die alone. You're being foolish and selfish.”

I let go of his arm and slammed the door on the way out. I headed to the park. When I got there her face was red and puffy and she was sniffing into Claudio's shoulder. They were sitting on the bench behind the camellia. The one I knew so well. I smiled. I had done all that I could to keep her from a fate such as mine and the ring on her finger proved it. She was able to enjoy her youth without feeling the intense eagerness that I had felt, despite the fact that her cousins had been married and had families of their own for years now. She was twenty-six. My parents had agreed to my marriage, not out of malice, but to ensure the best possible future for me. I'm sure my father also saw it as an opportunity to secure my future and guarantee Orlando's, as well. I have come to interpret the actions of my youth with optimism. I was presented with a situation that I was not prepared for and I made immature decisions, but I have learned from them, and consequent decisions have been made with those mistakes in mind. In the end I am content with the life I have lead. Had I lived a different life, a life without errors, then I might never have felt the satisfaction that I feel today. As my father said, “Things happened the way they were supposed to.” I truly believe that now.

“Sandra, you can bring him on Sunday. Just tell me what you'd like to prepare ahead of time.”

Her head perked up and she gave me a skeptical look. “What about Papa?”

“He's fine. It's going to be fine, you'll see.”

She hugged me tight. In the months that followed the wedding was planned and the luncheonette bustled on Sundays again. His name was Leo and he was a local boy that had once been at school with Sandra. Now, he was a surveyor and working on the extension of the church. He assured us that the municipality had future plans for the expansion of several other public spaces, and there would be plenty of work for years to come. Sunday afternoons were, once again, spent in The Gardens of Youth. The family, which now included Leo and his parents, sprawled out on the lawns, and I sat by the fountain with my son and let the familiar sound take me back to the days when I was younger, while Sandra and Leo enjoyed the bench sheltered by the camellia. By October, the church expansion had been completed and my daughter was married. They moved into the apartment that her grandparents had once occupied. The years passed without any mention of children, and my sisters made it their mission to constantly remind me that Sandra had waited too long.

I no longer wish to be like them. My sisters' beauty has faded into memory, and their children have moved away. I know that, soon, I will lose one of them, but I try not to think of those things. I keep busy in the luncheonette and look forward to the laughs I share with my granddaughter. My sisters were wrong. She is now the same age that Sandra had been when she began working with me in the summers. Every year Sandra and her family vacation on the coast for the last two weeks in August, and this is where I find myself today. She had asked me to close

the luncheonette while she was gone, but I refused. Old age makes you stubborn. She was right, though. I am too old and too tired to carry on as I had in the past. I used to think admitting defeat would bring me one step closer to God, and I am not ready to meet him yet, but, after today, I don't feel it is up to me anymore.

After a long and tiresome day, I could think of nothing better than to sit here. Every corner holds a smile, a whisper, a tear from somewhere in my past. I look at my hands, wrinkled and spotted, and I do not recognize them. These hands are not my own, they can't be. It would mean that I am—that I have run out of time. The days that I have left to sit in your shade and listen to your sounds are finite. My only salvation is my granddaughter. I will live in her eyes. Old age has made me sentimental, and perhaps years of living with Ugo have brought me to pity myself. I don't think there's enough time left to change that now. This will be the last time I run the luncheonette alone. I fear that I may not survive another day like this again.

What happened to the girl who sat under the shade of your trees? The girl that threw gravel and wrestled on your grass? Why couldn't she be preserved like your fountain or the wrought iron of your benches? Is it so another girl may come and create memories that will comfort her in old age? I smile at the thought of my granddaughter's daughter running up and down your walkways. I only wish I were here to see it, but I realize that this is a childish thought. I must go. The sun has set, and the air has chilled enough to send an old woman home. I depart with a smile at the sound of gravel under my feet.

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