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## Before You Knew Me

Isabel Ontiveros

*University of Nevada, Las Vegas*

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BEFORE YOU KNEW ME

By

Isabel Ontiveros

Bachelor of Arts in English

University of Nevada Las Vegas

2005

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

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Department of English

College of Liberal Arts

The Graduate College

University of Nevada, Las Vegas

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## THE GRADUATE COLLEGE

We recommend the dissertation prepared under our supervision by

**Isabel Ontiveros**

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Richard Wiley, M.F.A., Committee Chair

Douglas Unger, M.F.A., Committee Member

Maile Chapman, Ph.D., Committee Member

Miriam Melton-Villanueva, Ph.D., Graduate College Representative

Kathryn Hausbeck Korgan, Ph.D., Interim Dean of the Graduate College

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## Abstract

My thesis is a collection of short stories titled *Before You Knew Me*. The collection centers on people whose lives have been affected by addiction or loneliness. Families attempt to get through adversities and piece together the fragments of a life they once had. Happiness for both the adults and the children depends on their ability to resist the cycle of dysfunction and the pressures of their peers.

The collection begins with a Gothic story about an abduction. My story “Goldfish” was inspired by Joyce Carol Oates’s story, “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been,” where a young girl meets a serial killer and is taken from her home. I love the intensity of that story and I tried also to infuse that kind of dread within my own version. Joyce Carol Oates says in *The Faith of a Writer*, “Your ‘forbidden’ passions are likely to be the fuel for your writing.” Despite my concerns in writing such an illicit story, I felt compelled to push past my comfort level in order to create the most “natural” fearful environment.

Sex is a theme throughout many of the stories. Teenage girls try to get a sense of their own sexuality in the face of the examples set by their parents or other outside influences. In “You Don’t Like the Way it Sounds” a girl befriends a boy from her track team who seeks consolation after the recent loss of his mother. Despite her own curiosities about sex, she resists what she perceives as the animalistic contortions of sexual intimacy. She feels the boy is ruined by the lack of a mother and the negative influences of his father.

A teenager tries to find stability outside of her home in “So Far From Where They Were” but encounters the unwonted lives of a white family she mistakenly assumes will be better than her own. The girls are affected by the “love” letters that expose their parent’s sexual secrets. The runaway girl realizes she must go back home and confront family conflict with the fortitude she had all along.

“Before You Knew Me” is a story titled after the collection. It is about a father, addicted to heroin, who rebuilds a relationship with his daughter during a year-long incarceration. Through their letters, she finds strength to deal with problems at home. Years later, she travels by bus to a prison in Juarez, Mexico, where she finds herself in a compromising situation.

In “Cigarettes” a recently divorced woman tries to nurture a relationship with her cousin who struggles with alcoholism and lives in the same apartment complex. In an attempt to stabilize her cousin’s living situation, she inadvertently becomes her enabler. The narrator and her aunt form a bond. Her aunt is the key to understanding and breaking away from the effects of co-dependency.

*BEFORE YOU KNEW ME*

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## Goldfish

For her birthday, they gave her a Pixie Stingray. It had been handed down from a relative who was too old for it now. Lisa's father had replaced the tires and the old dingy banana seat with other used parts that looked like new. It shone a powdery blue with a miniature license plate just below the rear of the seat with her name on it. For months, she rode it through the neighborhood, over driveways, through rose bushes, and as far as the Boys and Girls club about a mile from home. She'd been scolded for going so far and the threat of not being able to ride it for a month caused her to keep closer to home.

Her parents sometimes had small gatherings during the summers, like this one, where friends and family socialized and had an occasion to laugh when often, there wasn't one. Their home was at the end of a cul-de-sac, where the children were free to play in the streets. It was a section of low-income homes, where one clothesline succeeded another along rows of identical backyards, and where the wind did not pass through them. The trees were abundant and lush, as if they'd been bedded for an affluent community.

That afternoon, the cul-de-sac was filled with cars, and Lisa and the other neighborhood kids had to maneuver around them with their bikes. It was the middle of July, the hottest month of the year, and keeping a certain pace as she rode her bike allowed the wind to cool her skin and dry the perspiration that gathered at the nape of her neck.

When the children got hungry, they went inside for something they could eat quickly. The boys drenched a flimsy paper plate with *chile con queso* and shared it with each other. They used tortilla chips to scoop up the cheese and then a moist finger to

savor what was left. Even with so much to choose from, beef enchiladas, fried tacos, quesadillas with rajas, the children preferred the saltiness and portability of the hot dogs. Ice chests were filled with flavored sodas and fruit popsicles and the other two were filled with Mexican and American beer. The unopened packs were stacked in cases next to them. There was always a reason to celebrate, a birthday, a holiday, or a going away, but in this case, there wasn't one and the idea had only been sparked in passing.

Lisa maneuvered her way through the people in order to get to the popsicles, inadvertently stepping on a plate of tacos that were skillfully filled with a little bit of everything, causing a stream of sour cream and salsa to squeeze out over the carpet. But all were in good spirits. The women sipped on margaritas and spoke in a flirtatious tone to anyone who engaged them. The men laughed at Lisa's misstep, patting her on the head to let her know: 'No es gran cosa.'

Lisa ate her popsicle outside to prevent any other accidents. At her father's request she checked in on her little brother, who sat cross-legged in the grass with children who were older than he was, sons of his father's friends. He watched without getting in the way, and when they asked him to toss a water balloon at the neighbor's cat, he did. The cat ran from him and then stopped to shake water from its paws. It looked back at him, and he looked sadly at the cat. They allowed him to hang around and took turns giving each other rides on his Big Wheel. The boys were rowdy, not mindful of the other children, often running over their feet if they were nearby.

When the horn sounded, the boys scattered quickly from the driveway, leaving her brother to shuffle the plastic tricycle with his feet instead of the pedals. An old white Pontiac proceeded to pull in slowly and weighty, like a ship into a dock. Although the

driveway had been purposely left vacant so that the children could play safely, the man did not take notice.

A child's hand reached out of the window, waiving excitedly. Lisa squinted in an attempt to make out the face of the girl but could not, so she nipped at the coconut bits in her popsicle while she waited for the people to come out. The heat from the cement made the firm rubber soles of her shoes feel soft under her feet. Her feet were sweaty squeaked with the movement of her toes. She stood at the top of the driveway, watching the car come in close. The heat from the engine felt intrusive; the gears rebelled against the weight of the car but were forced into place as it settled in.

The man held the seat forward for the girl while she stepped out of the car and shielded the sun from her eyes. It was Bridget, a girl she'd met once before but thought perhaps she might not see again. Her sundress was tied at the shoulders in perfect bows. As young as she was, her cork wedge sandals tipped her feet like a woman's in heels, making her legs to look longer than Lisa had remembered. The end of her braid rested neatly over her shoulder, fastened with a large, yellow color-ball, and a daisy in between the strands of her hair just above the ear. The man, Lisa remembered, was named Javier. He and her father were musicians and sometimes played gigs together. He was Mexican, but spoke English without an accent, and looked like an Italian movie star with a long slender face and prominent cheek bones. There was a natural shadow over the cheeks and chin from the dark hair. His eyes, drowsy and melancholic, reminded Lisa of Paul McCartney, so that when he sang his love songs, his expression was both amorous and sorrowful. Bridget, with her father's hand at her back, whispered to Lisa as she passed her, "I have to say hello to everyone." Her breath was sweet and warm.

Javier looked down at Lisa over a thick cigar he gripped between his molars with what appeared to be a smile. He had a case of beer in tow and greeted the men from which he garnered the same sort of adoration as he did from the women. Bridget's mother was still at the car unloading a casserole and two grocery bags from the trunk. She poked her head around the car and hollered to Bridget for assistance, but Bridget, standing intently in front of Lisa, behaved as if she hadn't heard the call.

"I brought you something," she said. Her skin was luminous with brown freckles over the bridge of her nose and lips.

Lisa could only half-listen, distracted by the murmurings of Bridget's mother in the distance. Her eyes lingered over Bridget's shoulder, watching the mother line grocery bags along the driveway, and then drop the sunglasses that held her hair in place. Bridget twirled a yellow daisy under Lisa's chin to get her attention. Lisa focused her eyes, while Bridget placed the daisy in her hair, touching Lisa cheek with cheek as a gesture of their friendship.

It had been a year since she'd last seen Bridget. Their fathers had met to record a music demo they collaborated on. A small studio company agreed to record the entire demo for three hundred dollars. They had been apprentices to the master musicians via used sheet music they'd purchased or traded from old records stores. And although Lisa's father studied mostly American rock music, he agreed with Javier to choose an arrangement of Spanish love songs for the demo.

Bridget's family lived in a new mobile home park that had a pool and play area. They moved frequently and had settled in early that spring. The day felt like two since

the girls had spent most of it at the pool. Their parents, mothers then fathers, alternated shifts to watch after them. The mothers sunbathed in modest swimwear and smoked too many cigarettes, but they didn't swim. The fathers stood and talked mostly to each other, and stayed only until they ran out of things to say. They told the girls to stay out of the pool for an hour while they worked on Javier's car. Lisa's father was a mechanic and could fix almost any type. The heat that afternoon was unbearable, and the people who came didn't stay long. Even the girls' parents only came out to check on them from time to time. Since they didn't know when they would see each other again, they endured the heat. They kept swimming even though they weren't supposed to and chased each other around the pool, doing back flips onto a floating raft that had been abandoned there.

"Ten minutes, señoritas. That's it." Javier held out both hands for emphasis. He had come back for them, sent by the mothers who were now busy in the kitchen making sandwiches. He put the head of a cigar into his mouth and ran a match underneath the tip, rotating it between his fingers while he took slow deliberate puffs. He savored the taste in his mouth, thoughtfully, running a hand over the sides of his face and scratching at the stubble. Removing his t-shirt and flip-flops, he sat at the edge of the pool with his legs in the water. He dipped the t-shirt into the pool and ran it under his arms and around his neck. Playfully, he splashed water at the girls when they passed then over his shoulders where they had reddened under the sun.

"Bridget, come over here," he said with two sweeping hand movements.

He held the cigar tightly between his teeth. "Lisa! Sweetie, watch this. This is a fun game. It's Bridget's favorite." His manner demanded their attention.

Bridget smiled in Lisa's direction without looking at her. She swam to her father

and he clasped her hands while she pulled her leg over his. His long, tan legs sloshed gracefully through the water, gradually increasing momentum.

“You see how she does it, Lisa?” Javier said, leaning back against his arms for support.

With squinted eyes, he peered through the smoke that came from the cigar. Bridget let go of his hands and gripped his shins with her small thighs, her hands gently swaying in the water and her body moving with the motion. He spread her legs apart by widening his own and his eyes seemed to linger in that space between them. Lisa sat at the steps of the pool, feeling the sun against her back. She looked to Bridget, who caught her eyes without any sign of distress. Javier called over to Lisa, insisting that she take a turn. Bridget, at the urging of her father, also gave an encouraging word.

Mindful not to breach his mood, Lisa trudged through the water with legs that felt like anchors, her energy draining with every step. She bit at a piece of cuticle near her fingernail until it tore loose. A thin stream of blood trickled behind her. He waited patiently for her. His face was like a photograph, a motionless image, and when she stood in front of him, his legs, although somewhat thin, seemed fleshy and thick. Standing there, she felt like a clumsy child with skinny legs and dried-out, tangled hair. His voice was soothing, melodic, and unlike one she’d heard before, so she barely noticed when he brought his legs up between hers. She tried to keep her hands at her lap, but her legs felt far apart and she was forced to hold on to his knees. Lisa was out of sync with the movement causing her swimsuit to slide up and around the right butt cheek. When she tried to swim away, he caught her with one leg and flexed his foot upward to hold her in place. She fell forward with her face against his knee. The hair on his legs

rubbed coarsely against her lips as he quickened his movement. Her chest rubbed painfully against the front of his leg, over the area where her breasts had not yet fully developed but were beginning to form. Within a few minutes, the motion abruptly stopped, and her body drifted slowly underneath the water. She felt a sting on her chest and an urge to urinate. Then, a hand on her face caused her to open her eyes, instinctively. Water flooded her eyes and nose, startling her and she began to push herself to the surface. Bridget took Lisa's hand and swam to the top, where the only sound was that of their own heavy breathing and coughing. Lisa blinked several times while she looked around for Javier and found him standing at the edge of the pool with two towels over his forearm like a maitre d'. His black hair gleamed in the sunlight, and from inside the pool, it was difficult to see his expression.

They changed out of their swimsuits with the curtains drawn and decided against a shower. Instead, they got dressed without drying off or combing out their hair, giving them a feeble appearance. Bridget's ponytail hung low against her back, her t-shirt soaking up the moisture. Lisa's bangs laid flat against her forehead, dripping water down her temples. Their skin was tight from the effects of the chlorine. The room was small with a bed pushed into the corner, adorned with a white, leafy quilt and colorful pillows in the shape of flowers. Adjacent to the door, perched on an old wooden dresser, was an antique, French birdcage that housed a riotous cockatiel. It shrieked when Lisa entered the room, flapping its wings violently, kicking up dust.

"She doesn't like visitors," Bridget said.

"Shhh...it's okay." Lisa tried to comfort the bird, but in its exasperation, it began

to pluck at its feathers. Lisa caught a small white feather that drifted out of the cage.

“No, stop that.”

“¡Pica, cálmate! Es un amiga.” Bridget pursed her lips and made a clicking noise with her tongue, calming the bird. She blew softly into the bird’s face. It twitched and raised its crest.

“That’s her name?” Lisa said, leaning in closer.

“Yeah, don’t put your finger in there.”

The bird gazed at Lisa between the thin, rusted bars. The clean-out tray had become an unintentional receptacle for the large gray feathers that had fallen there. They’d lost their firmness, and were fuzzy and downy-like at the base, as if they had been there a long time. The newspaper that lined the bottom of the cage was cluttered with smaller white feathers and a mixture of seeds, bird droppings and unrecognizable specks of brilliant orange and gold.

“Is she sick?” Lisa said. She could feel the crust of the soiled carpet underneath her tennis shoes, where the bits stuck to her loosely tied laces.

“She gets night frights,” Bridget said, pulling a feather from the cage.

Lisa looked wide-eyed at Bridget and blinked several times in response to her words.

“Is it nightmares?” Lisa said. She held her nostrils together and let out a muted sneeze.

“No,” Bridget said. She ran her fingers over the fine strands until they lay in the opposite direction. “Certain things just scare her.”

“Oh. Is that what the sheet’s for?” Lisa pointed to a thin beige sheet that partially

rounded the back of the cage. “So she doesn’t get scared?”

Bridget sunk her body into a quilted chair with clothes that hung over the back.

“Nothing helps, not even the sheet,” Bridget said. She pulled a silver flute from behind the chair and played a familiar tune from school. The bird was calm now and paced side-to-side on its perch.

“You can feed her if you want. There’s food there.” She pointed to a box of dried fruit bits. Lisa put two cubes of papaya in the bird’s feeder. The bird tilted its head, brought its wings in slowly, and waddled to the feeder with a gaping beak, where it stabbed at the fruit bits. Lisa noticed a glint of orange shine through the feathers at the bottom of the cage and so she used the sharp end of a feather to poke at it. The object felt spongy and unstable. She pressed firmly until it gave way through the rubbery texture, then she slowly pulled it through the bars so as not to drop it. She had to bring it closer to her face so she could see it. It was oddly formed, but she made out the disfigured shape of a goldfish, the feather stuck firmly in its eye. She held it out, afraid to drop it and hurt it further, but the small macerated body was finless and the scales that remained, curved upward. Realizing it was dead, she threw the feather down and gasped.

Bridget looked up at the specimen, “She eats other things too,” she said and repositioned her lips on the mouthpiece.

“Goldfish?” Lisa said, wiping her fingers on her t-shirt.

“I thought she might like them. She does, actually.” Bridget alternated her fingers over the holes of the flute as if she were going through the motions of a song she knew well. “My mother buys them for me because she thinks I like them. It’s not that I don’t, but...”

“That’s kind of mean,” Lisa said.

“Don’t cry about it. There’s more fish,” Bridget pointed her flute toward a round fish bowl next to her bed that was halfway filled with murky gray water. Lisa tipped the glass bowl toward her and held her nostrils together to evade the sulphuric smell. The water was a mixture of excess fish food and fine little orange fins. A green plastic shrub rolled loosely within the mix.

“It’s not *mean*, it’s natural. Birds eat fish all the time, Senorita,” Bridget said in a tone that echoed her father’s.

“I think fruit is better,” Lisa said. She held out a dried apple peel to Pica, and the bird, in a sudden frenzy, pecked it from her trembling fingers before she could pull back.

“Ouch!” She gripped the finger with her other hand and held it against her chest.

Bridget scolded the bird, “bad girl,” she said, and to that, the bird fanned out the small lime-green feathers on the back of its neck, leaning in to her voice with an inquisitive eye.

“Portase bein,” she whispered to the bird. “Behave yourself. Do you hear me?”

\*

It was four in the afternoon and the energy was still high. Lisa’s mother was cooking burgers on a grill that sat over two burners on the stove. The last case of beer had been opened and Javier volunteered to get more from the corner store. He went outside holding two halves of a pomegranate and gave a piece to each of the girls. He took Bridget’s half and shook it until the plump red seeds fell into his hands. He made a funnel with his fingers and poured the seeds into Bridget’s mouth, laughing when some

of them rolled off her cheek, his tongue and chin stained with pomegranate juice.

“Who wants to come to the store with me?” Javier said.

Bridget and Lisa looked at each other with an unintentional enthusiasm.

“Remember you wanted that crunchy candy, Bridget?” he says.

Bridget creased her brows trying to remember.

“Honey, it’s one that pops in your mouth like fireworks.” Javier uses his hands to animate the eruption.

“Oh, yeah.” She slid a pomegranate seed off her tongue. “Yeah, I wanna go.”

“Lisa?” he said.

“I can’t go. I have to look after my brother.” She pointed to him, happy to see his toothy smile as he rode past them on the Big Wheel. Her brother pedaled faster, relishing the attention he was getting.

“What’s your favorite, Sweetie? You like chocolate?” Javier asked Lisa, holding her chin upward with his fingers.

“Now or Later’s.” Lisa said and smiled.

“Now and Later’s, yes, those are my favorite, too. But listen, next time, you’ll have to come with us to get your candy. That’s the deal, okay?”

Lisa nodded. She crouched down to tie her shoes and watched them drive away, Javier leisurely dangling an arm out of the window and Bridget’s head swaying with the car’s movement. Lisa turned to the sound of her brother’s voice. He begged her to push him on the Big Wheel, and for once, she agreed. She felt content with him at that moment. He was not a hindrance, but a good boy.

The paisley orange apron that Lisa’s mother wore was now spotted with grease

from the burgers. It was thin and barely protected her clothes, but she liked the way it looked with jeans. She waived the spatula in the air as Lisa's father passed by, and he kissed her near her mouth. Her cheeks flushed as their friends applauded and whistled at the gesture. Javier joined in on the excitement and came behind her mother, loosening the apron, "Come on, it's dirty," he said.

Surprised, she laughed loudly as a way to brush off the inappropriateness of his actions.

"Rosa! Look at your husband, he's such a showoff," she said playfully to his wife.

Rosa nodded but did not look up. Her bell-bottomed corduroys rubbed briskly between her thighs as she emptied cans and paper plates into a garbage bag. Her hair shimmered with highlights that were more yellow than golden and gave her a youthful appearance from behind, but her face cast patches of an uneven tone, and the circles under her eyes gave her a gaunt look that drew the energy from them.

Lisa's father threatened to send Rosa after Javier. "Rosa, I'll hold him down and you can kick him in the balls."

"We can take turns," she said as she gazed hotly at Javier.

That evening, Lisa's mother drew a warm bath for Lisa to soak in while she got ready for work. Her mother worked late nights at a downtown casino as a cocktail waitress. It was their special time together before she had to leave. Against her mother's wishes, she filled the bath with her dolls and the dolls' blow-up swimming pool and kept the smaller accessories, like sunglasses, comb, and a lipstick in a cup on the

floor so they wouldn't go down the drain. She played and watched her mother in the other room as she put on her makeup, always heavier than normal when she wore it for work, with fake eyelashes and silken red lipstick. Lisa's voice echoed in the bathtub when she dialogued the dolls actions or called out to her mother for more bubble bath. Before long, her mother was slipping on her hose, smoothing them out evenly.

Lisa's little brother had already fallen asleep on the couch and was put to bed, so she had her mother all to herself. It took fifteen minutes to get the tangles out of her hair, but her mother gently combed her hair until it was done.

"Mija, did you have fun today?" her mother asked.

"Yes, but I'm not tired yet," Lisa said.

"Well, just fall asleep when you get tired then, and I'll kiss you goodnight and tuck you in when I get home."

"When the second *I Love Lucy* is over?"

"Yes, when it's over. Your father is already asleep. He had too much to drink today. So, please, don't turn up the TV too high, okay?" She put lotion over Lisa's arms and face, then helped her to put on her pink button-up robe over her pajamas. Her mother gathered her things and stood at the door to primp one last time. Her uniform was like a swim suit with sides that came up high over the hips and tapered down around the backside. Lisa followed the silky lining of the uniform with her finger over her mother's hips. Her mother tousled her hair and wrapped her body in a belted cardigan sweater, pursing the lips that shimmered like water. She knelt down and hugged Lisa tightly, kissing the top of her head, while Lisa buried her face into her mother's chest where the scent of her perfume was the strongest. It always remained on her own skin long after her

mother was gone and comforted her when she lay awake in her bed.

“Lock the door when I leave,” her mother said.

Lisa locked the door and listened to her mother’s heels on the walkway. She pressed her forehead against the window and watched the block taillights of the Mustang fade down the street and around the corner. She went back to her bed, resisting sleep, and positioned herself toward the television, unaware she had already started dreaming.

She couldn’t see her parents but she could feel her mother’s warmth at her ear, her soft hands over her eyes, and she could hear the remote sound of her father’s voice.

“You have to guess what it is,” her mother said.

“A hula hoop?” she heard herself say.

“It’s your birthday. It’s better than that,” she said.

Lisa felt her father kiss her head and say, “Mija, it’s not new, but it almost is. I made it pretty just for you.”

“You made it pretty for me? I think I know what it is. What’s the color?”

“Well,” her mother said, “it’s blue, like on the days when there aren’t any clouds and the birds look like spears in the sky.”

“Mamá, can I say what it is?” Her voice was nasally and indistinct, from the pressure of her mother’s hands. She tried peeking through the space between her fingers, but she could only see glimpses of trees and sky.

“Does it have my name on it?”

Her father laughed, “Yes, it has your name on it.”

“It’s my bike!” she tried to wiggle out of her mother’s hands.

“Maybe it’s not a bike, maybe it’s something else,” her mother said.

“Deja la, don’t tease her.”

Lisa heard the gravel under her father’s work boots as he put the bike down in front of her. “Okay,” he said. “You can open your eyes.”

When Lisa woke up from her dream, the echo of her father’s voice was still in the room. She blinked several times to adjust her eyes to the television, where she could hear the sound of low laughter. *I Love Lucy* was on, but she couldn’t tell if it was the first episode or the second. Lucy seemed to be looking back at her with wide, mascara-thickened lashes, her mouth ballooning with chocolates to the point of asphyxiation, small, heart-shaped lips, almost clownish looking, mouthing something serious and funny at the same time; the heart lips getting tighter and tighter until finally, she released the chocolates into her apron. It made Lisa thirsty to watch it, but not enough to go into the dark kitchen for a glass of water. When she heard her own laughter, the room suddenly felt empty and she thought of her mother.

Headlights shone through the curtains that started at one side of the room to the other. It must be her mother, she thought. There was the sound of a car door then she listened for her mother to come through the front door, but there was only silence. After a few minutes, she stood on her bed and pulled back the curtains. The driveway was empty, and after looking around at everything that moved outside, she noticed a white car parked outside of the neighbor’s house. The car was partially obscured by the tree in her front yard. There was a sound like clinking glass. Her eyes caught movement coming from inside the car. A man emerged from the front seat. He sat up as if he had been

lying down, and after flattening out his hair in the rearview mirror, he looked directly at Lisa. He waived to her and with the change in his demeanor, she recognized him—it was Javier. Frightened, she closed the curtain and backed away. It suddenly occurred to her that he might be there to see her father, so she pulled down the sleeves of her robe and carefully stepped off the bed. It wasn't easy for her to leave the room, but she had to see her father. She walked on the balls of her feet trying to avoid the chill of the floor and stopped to look into her brother's room. He slept contently on his stomach, wearing only a Spider Man top and a diaper. His blanket had fallen to the floor. The light from her television dimly illuminated the hallway, giving her just enough courage to pass the living room. She avoided looking into the darkness, but felt the coolness of the air as she passed. The door to her parent's bedroom was closed so she knocked lightly, barely emitting the sound.

“Papá?”

There was no response. She looked back toward her bedroom. Her stuffed toys were lined at the foot of her bed, the giraffe's head slumped over the frame. The voices from the television were barely audible, except for the high pitch of Lucy's voice.

“Can I come in?” Lisa said with her mouth at the corner of the door.

Her voice cracked and felt as though it had come back to her. She turned the doorknob and pushed the door with too much force, causing it to bang against the wall. The room was dark except for the moonlight that shone through the curtain. Her eyes moved over the silhouette of furniture and lingered over the darkest area, where the closet door had been left open. When her eyes adjusted to the dark, she was able to see the outline of her father lying on his back with one arm over his chest. There was a sense of

relief, but she didn't want to wake him. She stood next to the bed, fiddling with the pink pearl button of her robe, hoping he would sense her presence until she heard the clinking sound again, closer this time, and deliberate. She steadied her foot on the bed frame and hoisted herself onto the bed, where she knelt next to her father, who seemed to be barley breathing. She lifted his hand to rouse him. His skin was coarse and familiar and comforting, but he could not feel her. Her hands gently held the sides of his cheeks as she watched the flair of his nostrils. The alcohol on his breath fluttered against her eyelashes and stung the tip of her nose.

“Wake up,” she said, trying to shake an unyielding shoulder.

He took in a deep breath and lifted his head to look at her. He was confused, and his voice came out in a whisper, half dreaming.

*“¿Dónde está tu hermano?”*

“He's sleeping. But I want you to wake up...please,” she said.

“In a little while. I have to sleep, Mija...I have to sleep.” His arm slumped over his chest *“Duermase,”* he said, his voice trailing off.

Lisa's anxieties intensified as the clinking turned into tapping, which she was sure, now, was at her bedroom window. She placed her ear to her father's chest, his heart beat slow, but strong. The light outside her parent's window momentarily eclipsed. She slid backwards off the bed and onto the floor, and even though she didn't want to know what it was, she listened intently to distinguish the sound. There was nothing else. She considered for a moment that it might be her mother, that she could have forgotten her key and could be trying to find a way in. The thought of it left her desperate for an answer. She stood up and reached for her father's hand, placing her cheek in his palm,

resting it there until she could decide what to do. She calmed herself and somehow found the courage to leave his side. Scurrying to the living room, she called out to her mother, and the anguish in her voice caused her alarm. She stood alone in the dark, nothing in front or behind her except flickers of dancing light that came from the bedroom. After a few minutes, there was a knock at the door. It was barely audible.

“*Lisa...soy yo, abre la puerta.*” It was Javier’s voice. It was distant, even though it came from just the other side of the door. “Your mamá, she told me to come and pick you up,” he said.

Lisa did not respond. She stood there, frozen, as if the door was transparent and he could clearly see her.

“She said your Papá was sick...I have her things, *see?*”

Lisa peered through a small opening in the curtain without touching it, but she couldn’t see what he had in his hand. She held her breath as she carefully moved the curtain with her finger. Javier jerked his head at the movement.

“*See?*” Javier said, holding the sweater close to his torso.

It was similar, she told herself, but somehow different, smaller. She wanted so desperately to see her mother, and it had been long past the usual time of her arrival. Lisa gripped the dead bolt and turned it slowly so as not to announce its release. But he knew. At once, Javier opened the door, pulling the bolt from her fingers. She was seized by the immediacy of his presence.

“*No tengas miedo,*” he said, catching his breath. He stroked her chin with his thumb to calm her, then took her hand, encouragingly, and in her eagerness to be with her mother, she went willingly with him down the walkway. His pace quickened and she

began to stumble over her own feet, grunting with the force of each step. Although somewhat disoriented, she caught sight of her bicycle that lay nearby, and as they approached, she allowed her legs to go limp while she reached for it. She clutched the tire as the bike spun around, dragging behind her. Javier persisted, his eyes on the car and body leaning forward with the weight of the bike. Lisa held on tight, causing the pedal to grind in the dirt, unearthing patches of grass and soil. Frustrated, but without saying a word, he pried her fingers from the tire and tightened his grip at her upper arm, nearly lifting her off the ground. Then he set in motion once again. The wind blew strands of hair across her face and into her mouth where it felt dry. She could feel the dust accumulating on her face and under her feet. There was no sign of her mother anywhere. Javier mumbled words, a sort of goading before he opened the car door. Bridget did not look at Lisa, but only pulled in the hem of her nightgown to make room for her.

“It’s just a sleepover, Honey,” he said to Lisa.

“*Verdad*, Bridget?” Javier looked to his daughter, who lowered her eyes out of annoyance.

“Where’s my mom?” Lisa said.

“She’ll pick you up at my house, Sweetie,” Javier said in a soft voice as he helped Lisa tuck her robe underneath her legs. He looked at her feet, noticing the alternate shades of pink and yellow on her toenails, and gently took her foot in his hand, “*Mira tus pies tan hermosas. ¿Quién te pintó sus uñitas?*”

He wanted to know who painted them so pretty. The sweet scent of cigar was heavy on his breath, like chocolate and dried leaves, and it lingered at her mouth even when he did not speak. It was the same scent, she remembered on Bridget’s skin and

hair. He leaned in to Lisa's face for her reply, but the tone that he used to convey the compliment made her feel too ashamed to answer him. With the street lights over his head, she could not see his eyes.

“¿*Tienes vergüenza?*” he asked. His voice was immediate.

Lisa nodded to imply that she wasn't embarrassed, even though she was. She could hear him smile as he put her leg back onto the seat, then he closed the door. She kept her eyes on the house as they drove away, feeling the sting of tears welling up in her eyes. When they turned the corner onto the main road, Lisa saw headlights moving toward her street, low and far apart, like her parents' car. She strained her eyes to look out the back window and saw that, similar to their car, one of the taillights was out.

“It's her.” Lisa said aloud.

When she turned back around, Javier was lifting up in his seat to peer at her through the rearview mirror. She knew, then, that he had seen the car, too. She stared into his eyes pleadingly, but he lowered himself back into his seat and broke their gaze. They drove in silence most of the way. Lisa watched Bridget, trying to induce a response from her. From the side, her face appeared haggard, with creases around the mouth and near the eyes, and she did not acknowledge Lisa's efforts. Bridget's skin glistened under the moonlight from the heat, and her hair fell loosely down her back. Lisa lowered her head and listened to the sound of the cars as they passed.

A piercing screech came from underneath the sheet when they walked into the room. Bridget left the light off and spoke in whispers as they passed Pica's cage.

“You should go to the bathroom before you go to bed,” she said.

Lisa not knowing if she had to go, went anyway. Her chest felt tight and her palms were damp. She sat on the toilet and urinated longer than she thought she had to, looking around the bathroom that looked different than it had the day they went swimming. The window above her head was wedged shut with a fitted piece of hardwood. When she was done, she checked the other windows, but they had been secured as well. She saw herself in the mirror: a pale face and eyes that no longer looked like her own. When she reached down to turn on the faucet, her hand dipped into water that already filled the sink. The water was level with the counter and gathered at the edges, where drops of it fell onto a vinyl floor. Spindly orange fins and tiny unrecognizable organs floated in the stagnant water, hearts and livers. There was a pink waste bin underneath the vanity filled with used tissues and disposed goldfish parts, the bodies cut unevenly into rectangular pieces.

“She won’t eat them whole,” Bridget’s voice came up from behind her.

“Please, I want to go home,” Lisa’s whispered.

Bridget continued to speak over her plea. “The water keeps the organs moist. She won’t go near them once they’ve dried out.”

They heard the bird rustle in its cage and squawk, then shortly thereafter, Javier was at the bathroom door.

“It’s late. You girls need to get to bed,” he said.

He looked over at the carnage in the sink and furrowed his brows.

“Bridget, what did you do?”

“It’s for Pica,” she said, standing defiantly in front of her father.

“They were a gift from your mother,” he said with a wave of his hands in the air.

Bridget's eyes remained mute toward his remarks.

"All my *mother* does is sleep. She doesn't care what I do," she said.

Javier knelt down to Lisa and said, "It's important that you girls keep quiet. We don't want to wake Rosita."

He put his lips to her forehead for a moment, breathing heavily through his nostrils. He left the room without another word.

The girls were quiet for a moment, then Lisa spoke: "I think I saw my mom back at the house. When we were leaving, she was there."

Bridget held Lisa's head with both of her hands and said, "Moms-don't-matter."

Lisa began to wail.

"Quiet! You'll wake Rosa."

Lisa's crying turned into heaving, but she fought hard to get it under control.

Bridget wiped the tears from Lisa's face with the palms of her hands, and said, "Listen, everyone does it like this. It's weird at first, but...try to focus on something else."

When Lisa's cries began to subside, she felt lightheaded. Her eyelids were heavy. At that moment, sleep felt as though it could fix everything. Bridget brushed her teeth and put another slather of paste on the same toothbrush, holding it out for Lisa. It was difficult for Lisa to open her mouth wide enough to brush because her face had swelled.

The only light in the bedroom came from the moon outside the window. Bridget pulled back the white sheets and motioned for Lisa to get in. She lay flat on her back with the pearl buttons of her robe fastened up to the lapel. She was still, with her arms at her side and her dirty feet exposed. Bridget lay down next to her, and when she drew the

sheets, Lisa could smell the scent of dried leaves come over her. Bridget lay down beside her with her hair spread out over the pillow. They held hands and lay there without saying anything.

“Close your eyes,” Bridget said, looking toward the ceiling.

Lisa closed them tightly, letting the tears trickle into her hair without wiping them. She linked her fingers in between Bridget’s and listened to the silence for what seemed like hours. Her mind was so fatigued that it drifted in and out of sleep. She dreamed that the sun had come up and was shining over her face, warm and calming. The sound of the bird flapping its wings was real, but she did not open her eyes. She allowed herself to dream that the bird flailed so wildly, it broke through the cage door. It flew overhead through the wide open windows. The breeze floated high above her, and her eyes never left the bird. It opened its beak, but all she could hear was the sound of its wings.

## **You Don't Like the Way It Sounds**

He says our relationship is getting serious, but he doesn't have a mother and that complicates everything. It's Saturday at track and field, and we're murmuring again about where we should go from here. I make sure to out run him every time as a way of telling him he doesn't have a say in what I do. He doesn't know it, but I come out to the field during the weeknights to practice. Sometimes my competitive spirit gets in the way of my honesty. He says he wants to make love to me. I tell him it sounds weird when he says it that way, so he says *fuck*. I tell him I don't like that word; he says *sex*. I make a face; then he grunts and says, "You don't like the way it sounds because you haven't done it yet."

"Lies," I say.

"It's time to do this. It's been what? Three months?" he says.

"I don't think it's been that long."

We walk over to the water cooler, away from the others. The water has an aftertaste, like the acrid flavor of ice cubes after they've absorbed odors from the freezer. I readjust my ponytail and swish and spit water out of my mouth onto the grass. He moves close to me and whispers in his subtle Kansas drawl, "It's the same as putting my fingers down there. You like that." His eyes are warm and sincere, the way a young boy pleads to stay up past his bedtime. The top of my head tingles, and I laugh through my nose. I try to remember again what it was my mother told me, but her voice is distant and I find myself longing to be with him.

They eat shrimp and steak most nights at a nearby steakhouse. Scott and his father

rarely eat at home and try to limit themselves to pork tenderloin or grilled lamb on the weekends. They went to dinner early, and I'm hopeful that we'll get to see a movie together. I sit attentively on the couch. His father does not look at me, nor I at him, but I know he's paying attention to my behavior around his son. This is their time. I watch them play video games, mesmerized by the violence. Hours pass, and without knowing it, our eyes have adjusted to the darkness of the room. The blue light from the television pulsates against the walls and over our eyes, dehumanizing us, creating a blithe disregard for one another's presence. I realize that now I am slouching with my chin resting against my clavicle. I sit up straight and feel an urgency in my bladder. The living room is quiet except for their periodic bursts of playful rivalry toward the television and each other. When I look around the room, the darkness seems to have encroached around us, and I blink several times until my eyes adjust to the clock on the wall. It's not as late as it feels, and I'm hoping to spend time alone with Scott. I cross and uncross my legs, and he, feeling my restlessness, caresses my thigh, enticing me to stay longer.

His touch lightens my mood, and I begin to imagine soft plaid and warm skin. I rub the side of his arm, careful not to draw attention to myself. But I lose him again to the game, and I begin to lose my patience. Because we are not alone, I find roundabout ways to make him aware of my frustration. I move his hand from my leg and go to the restroom, where I fuss with my lip gloss and take out my ponytail, letting the natural dark waves fall down to my back. I dawdle around with my blond tips, checking for split ends and then checking the time. When I return, he welcomes me back with a raise of his brows, and I yawn. His dad is at the door, greeting his girlfriend. I get jealous because I think the girl is here to see Scott. She looks young, not much older than me. Her legs are

slender and doe-like, with a natural grace. Her hair is as long as mine, only dark blond with highlights, and her little brown marble eyes are accentuated by lashes thickened with purple mascara. He introduces us, and when we shake hands, her bracelets sound off like chimes.

Over this past summer, Scott and I had discovered that our parents were moving into the same apartment complex. He was new to town and didn't have many friends. Since we moved in on the same weekend, we spent the day helping our parents unpack, and at night, we agreed to meet by the fountain. The nearby pool was illuminated and cast shadows against the legs of the children who played there. Their voices were hollowed out by depth, as if they were at the bottom of a well, causing the chatter to echo throughout the complex. He told me about his life in Kansas, and by the time he was done, I felt I had been there, too. I knew the friends who were like siblings and neighbors who were like parents in a community that held together. I saw the way his mother made early dinners out on the porch, setting the pinewood table with bowls of sickle pears and plump mandarins and mason jars that overflowed with willow-leaf sunflowers and yellow primrose. She grew pomegranates every summer and sold home-canned peaches during the winter. Instead of grocery store birthday cakes, she made lattice top blackberry pies with fresh cream; it's what he missed the most. She died three years ago, and he and his father grew weary of the rotted pomegranates that multiplied in the backyard after she was gone. They sold the house and everything in it and moved to Las Vegas. He said that after a year and two apartments later, he hadn't yet adjusted to this city, even though he felt it had begun to change his temperament.

He took me to his room to consider the changes. It was late and his father was at work, a professional poker player, Scott told me. It sounded glamorous, even to someone who had lived here all her life. The walls were bare, except for a target board, and the carpet blotched with dark stains that carried an acrid smell, the remnants of territorial cats. The blinds were dusty with edges that bent in different directions, making them difficult to open, but the room did not face the sun and would never get enough light. A futon was the only other accessory. It had a fitted bed sheet and a faded 49ers throw blanket that reminded me of one a child would have.

“It’s missing something,” he said in earnest.

He looked from wall to wall, scratching his chest around the small hole in his favorite green t-shirt (the one he wears to school most days). It had become a reflexive action during decision making; the hole, a result of his indecisiveness. In the closet, he had button-ups and polos, a suit and tie, all of which I’d never seen him wear.

I thought of him more as a friend than anything else. His neediness was sometimes a burden to me. I had always wanted relationships to be easy. Not effortless, but not oppressive either. I took him to the mall the next day to look for posters for his room, but we spent three hours testing and selecting video games instead. I told him I was dreadfully bored and hungry, so we went on to peruse the food court. We took more than our share of soy mirin chicken samples because the boy holding the tray recognized Scott from school. Ultimately, we decided to buy snacks instead of a meal. I bought a pretzel and flicked off half of the salt before I realized I should offer Scott a bite. Eager, he leaned in and crushed the salt granules beneath his elbows.

“Doughy,” he said, paying no mind.

He began to use a plastic fork and knife to eat his cinnamon bun, but I fussed and insisted he use his hands instead. He pulled the layers apart with ease and let the icing run over his fingers, feeding it to me, fingers and all.

I used a wipey to clean his fingers afterwards. We talked about our plans for school and he said, “No I’m joining the Air Force. I hate school.”

“What’s to hate?”

“The time. I figure I could train to be a pararescue jumper or an aerial gunner within a year or two. My dad says they look like the best fuckin’ jobs in the world.”

He was animated in his desire to get air force training and to learn various combat techniques. It reminded him that he wanted to buy a new set of cold steel throwing knives, which would be our last stop after the mall. He needed, also, other accessories, and I had some items in mind. I told him I’d found the perfect painting for his room. He smiled brightly at me with a smear of icing still over his lip, and when he kissed my cheek, I felt it there.

I took him to a kiosk outside of the mall, where a man with dusty tan skin and mussed hair sold discounted paintings. I chose Gustav Klimt, *The Kiss*, stretched over a wooden frame with bulky staples that held it together. The man in the painting had a neck that was somewhat skewed, so we got a good deal on it. We browsed other kiosks, where we found a plaid comforter and low thread count sheets on the cheap. Everything changed after that. Against my better judgment, we began to form a bond.

I still love the painting; it puts me in a romantic mood. Scott removed the thumbtacks I used to hang it above the bed three months ago, and used a leveler and nails

to maximize its effect. It stays put now during heavy make-out sessions, which I've tried to subdue, but with his dad gone most of the time, it has become difficult. We made plans to meet today, since I've been too busy with school to see him. Ever since he found out he would need college credits to get into the air force, he has directed his attention elsewhere. His dad's second job, gold mining investments, has caught his interest and he has decided to take part in the cause. There's a poker tournament at Bally's, a \$200 buy in for a payout of \$6800. After he leaves, we go out for pizza, bowling, and a night walk. We spend the rest of the evening at his apartment and rent a movie. We watch one about the Mexican drug war, but it is watered-down by celebrity actors and diluted sex scenes and killings. We begin to kiss halfway through the movie under a halo of gold leaf tendrils. Before long, I'm down to my bra and panties, and Scott, in his green t-shirt, boxers, and socks. His skin smells like me and like him, warm and delicious. After a couple hours, he tires of fondling and rubbing our bodies together because he knows nothing will happen. We lay there, exhausted and disheveled, his arm resting gently over my breast, while I braid the ends of my hair, my virginity scarcely intact. Famished, we assemble a picnic on the bed with Oreos and chips. We eat more than we should, the excess sugar and salt, an excellent reliever of stifled energy. I feel myself going beyond my limits, but I ignore it. We fill the rest of the evening with music and idle chatter well into the night.

I wake up startled because I've fallen asleep and stayed later than I should. I know my mother must be worried. *What does it look like when a girl stays at a boy's place too late?* And I won't have an answer. *It only means trouble.* And I won't believe

her. I lean over and kiss Scott on the nose. I tell him I have to leave, but I have to pee first. He says to leave the lights off in case his dad is home and to bring him water on the way back. I know my way around so it isn't hard to do. The restroom is dirtier than usual or maybe it's my senses, heightened, because of the hour. The toilet is running water. Crusts of hard water stains line the rim, and a yellowish-brown film has settled at the bottom of the bowl. I squat over the toilet, holding the towel rack for balance. The back of my calves rub against the exterior of the bowl, where urine stains have become powdery and sticky in some places. I try to flush but the handle only rattles. There are specks of black mold around the metal fixtures of the sink and the only soap, a sliver, sits in a puddle of water. I use it to wash my hands and legs and I dry them with a bath towel that makes them feel dirty again. I turn off the light before I open the door and walk gingerly to the kitchen to get Scott a glass of water. The air conditioner blows a gust of cold air over my head, chilling my bones and flattening my hair, and I can hear the ceiling fan, also at its highest setting, rotating in erratic circles. In the dark, I open the cupboard and have to reach for a glass on the top shelf because most are still in the dishwasher. I hear a sound and I think it's my name. I look down the hall to see if it was Scott, but it wasn't. The father's bedroom door is open, the lights are off, and I can't tell if he's there. I quickly pour warm tap water into the glass, not waiting for it to turn cold. I hear the moaning of a cat, the sound it makes when it's hungry or lost. I come around to the living room and I see silhouettes of two people, shapes contorted, almost artistic, moving in swift, frantic motions. I hear the sound of flesh in the way that a human mouth ravishes a peach. I realize it's Scott's dad. He sounds peculiar, a guttural drone without language. And the girl I envision like a wounded doe with broken limbs. I walk back to

the room, leaving them unaware of the intrusion.

“What’s the matter?”

“Nothing.”

“Come here,” he says. He holds out his arms. “You should stay.”

We’ve made this place our own, his room feels like our room, and I want to stay here with him like this. And I want to be with him in the way that he wants me. He seems more gentle than his dad, but is he really? If I gave him what he wanted, would I be broken, too? We are in this space where parents don’t exist and that penetrating voice of a mother cannot bleed into consciousness, where it has the ability to change everything.

It’s a Friday night, and their stomachs are filled with the charred loins of some docile creature. They’ve just come back from an early dinner at the steakhouse, where his dad gave him ‘the talk’ about the similarities between women and money. He tells me that his dad has always dated twenty-somethings, and I look at his father with curiosity as to why they would. He has a sharp nose and chin, deep set eyes, kinked hair, and narrow shoulders; features that feel like arrogance and a lack of humor. It is only from a distance, when he saunters around in sunglasses and stylish clothes that he seems appealing. Maybe he once was, but now, it is the image he creates himself, an impression of significance and good character. Scott seems altogether spawned from a different seed: tall, broad shoulders, strong jaw, bright blond hair. It’s all that’s left of his mother.

They’re on their third hour of *Call of Duty: Black Ops*. His father is full of energy, cursing the television, and using the controller to hurl grenades at Vietnamese soldiers. He is gunned down. A red glow radiates from the screen, an indication of diminishing health. His girlfriend rubs his back and neck to relieve his stress, but he

pounds his fist on the coffee table, causing her arm to fall to her lap. A part of her inner thigh that is visible beyond the length of her skirt is bruised. She pulls down her skirt when she sees I've noticed it. Even though the day is beautiful, they keep the shades drawn, stifling the atmosphere. I run my hand over the back of Scott's head. His hair is still wet from an earlier shower, and beginning to frizz at the ends, the soft, straight texture showing signs of change. He looks to his dad, marveling at his extensive knowledge on espionage operations.

My mother's number flashes on my cell phone, and I get up to take the call in the kitchen.

"Mom?" I pull up the shade to look out the window toward my apartment. Her voice feels like a tonic with its happy and worried tones. She asks me if I would go with her on a hike like we used to. She says fresh air would do me good, and that the snow in the mountains has melted and the creeks are full. With one hand on the remote, Scott signals for me to come back to him the way a soldier motions to his comrades in the line of duty. I turn away. My mother waves to me from our window. In her eagerness, she struggles to lift the blinds and blows me a kiss with both hands. The day looks so bright from in here. It feels as if I have been depriving myself of it.

"I made sandwiches. The kind you like," she says. She breathes in to say something else then pauses for my response. Even with our distance, I know she's looking out for me. I thought she'd given up.

"Wait for me," I say.

## **So Far From Where They Were**

Before she left home, Miriam tried writing a letter to her mother, but all the things she said, she took back. It was her words that would be used against her because that was what a mother did when she destroyed everything. She was a mother in the habit of communicating her grievances to friends and family who were her best sympathizers.

Once Miriam was gone, and once the lines between mother and daughter had been blurred, a distortion of the truth could begin. With a towel over her shoulders to take up the dampness from her hair, and with blotches of mascara near the hollow of her eyes, she would make the first call.

“Can you believe it?” her mother would tell them.

“That girl. Nothing but problems,” her supporters would say, her friends who were not friends, but passive participants. Taking in more information than they needed to, they gave nothing in return but their useless sympathies. And by the time she was done with the theatrics, she’d have exhausted herself and had to lay down for a nap.

With her mother’s voice behind her, Miriam ran. The insoles of her shoes were heavy with water as she headed toward the road that merged into the state highway. She began to doubt that Stacey would find her. Had she recognize her voice? But in the far distance, she heard the percussions of AC/DC blaring out of the open doors of her Jeep Wrangler. Stacey switched the headlight on and off to signal her arrival.

Without turning down the music, she yelled, “I knew it was you. Get in,” and they drove away.

Miriam had never lived with a white family before. They were different, she thought. Despite their eccentricities, they ate dinner at a dining table instead of the coffee table and used napkins instead of a communal dish towel. The family portraits that hung over the couch were not of faces, but silhouettes of identifying features: the steep curvature of Stacey's nose, the slack of her father's jaw line, and the roundness of her mother's cheeks. Miriam liked the black and whites in the hall of grandparents and of aunts and uncles and the large wedding photo of Stacey's parents with Susan in a layered organza dress, wearing cat eye glasses and sharp lipstick lines, and Glen in a white tux with a stylish pompadour. There were other pictures that were browned with age, of the family opening presents by the Christmas tree or of Stacey posing like a roller queen on skates, that were markedly similar to her own memories in that everyone was so far from where they were now.

It was too hot to walk anywhere that day, so they sat on the back porch smoking Virginia Slims, eating dollar store chicken pot pies. They were on their last pack, and in desperate need of cigarette and gas money, which stirred their ingenuity. A garage sale always yielded enough money for the things they wanted. Since there wasn't much left from the last sale (three weeks ago), Stacey had to forage the house for other expendables. She searched through drawers and closets and took clothes that her parents still wore but might not miss.

"You have to see this," Stacey said. "Listen for the garage."

Stacey balanced herself on a stool that teetered over the sole of her mother's slipper, while Miriam stood watch at the parents' bedroom door. The thing she looked for

was at the back of the closet, behind the Lucky Strikes bowling attire and winter sweaters. With the tips of her fingers, she dragged a large Christmas cookie tin to the edge of the shelf and brought it down. She stopped to look out the window then motioned to Miriam to sit with her on the bed.

“My parents are freaks,” she said.

Miriam was fond of Stacey’s parents and would be mortified if they were caught snooping, but at the moment, it seemed the most important thing to do. Stacey pulled out a pair of thigh-highs with small black bows that ran down the backs of the legs. She slid out a red babydoll top that was still wrapped in logo tissue paper. The top was made of satin and black lace trimming, perfumed by a sachet of dried lavender inside the tin.

“There’s pictures,” Stacey said.

She kept shuffling through a stack of them until she found what she was looking for.

“This one.” Stacey held out a Polaroid picture and bit her lip in a coy manner.

Miriam looked longer than she should have at the image of a naked black man sitting on one thigh with his arm stretched out over the other knee. His penis hung over his inner thigh like the horn of an elephant. Because she knew she was being watched, she tried to appear indifferent, but her eyelashes stuck together at the corner of her eyes, causing her to open them wide.

“My mom’s boyfriend,” Stacey said.

Her smile widened, making the gaps between her teeth more noticeable. They were cigarette-stained and created the illusion of a freckled mouth.

“Your mom has a boyfriend?” Miriam looked at the picture again, careful not to

touch the penis with her thumb.

Leaning into the bed on her hands and knees, Stacey put her face in front of Miriam's and whispered, "They're swingers." Her lips were pink and smelled like Dr. Pepper, and her turned-up nose moved like rubber when she spoke. Miriam tried to process what she thought she knew about the word. Frustrated with the blank look on Miriam's face, Stacey rolled her eyes and said, "They screw other people."

Miriam tried to take it all in, but when the images of Susan and the black man began to take shape, she forgot her words, so she nodded. Her lips were dry from the summer air, but she felt that licking them at that moment might be mistaken for sexual arousal.

"But your parents are so..." Miriam tried to find the right word to describe them. *Nice*, she thought. But what did being nice have to do with anything? "Does he make her do it?" she asked.

"She fuckin' loves it. Read this." Stacey handed her a three page letter and began to gnaw at the tips of her fingers.

Miriam pulled her hair behind one ear the way she did when she presented a report at school, clearing her throat, but then read the letter to herself. "*...I love the sound between your legs when we get going. It tortures me... You know I try to think of something else, but it sounds so good, It just makes me go faster. I hear myself going in and out of you and I know it's coming.*"

Her eyes were dry from not blinking, so Miriam had to look away from the letter. Stacey, who was still gnawing at skin, had been reading her eyes, envisioning the words on the page that she already knew by heart. Miriam skimmed through the rest, which was

more of the same. It was confusing to think of parents as pretenders, sensible people who left the house everyday well-groomed and always on time, who looked sagely into the eyes of their children and told them to ‘do good.’

*“My wife found stains on the back seat of the car. I know you told me to check, but shit, how could I think straight? She doesn’t want to do this anymore, I can tell.”*

“My dad has a friend, too,” Stacey said. She handed Miriam a wallet sized photo of a blonde woman wearing a modest silk blouse, buttoned at the neck and cuffs. The woman had large eyes, colored from lid to brow with blue eye shadow. The eyes bulged slightly, producing a frightened look, but despite them, she was attractive.

“It’s the black guy’s wife. She’s in love with my dad,” Stacey spoke without breaking her gaze. “That dumb bitch wants to marry him. There’s no fucking way I’m going to let that happen!”

Miriam opened the letter from the woman. She said she wanted to leave home and she wanted to know if Glen would leave Susan, too. *“He really doesn’t care, Glen,”* she wrote, *“He’d give me to anyone if I let him.”*

Stacey wrenched the letter out of Miriam’s hands.

“My parents don’t know I know. They’d fucking kill me,” she said. She gripped an unlit cigarette between her thin lips, while she put everything back into the tin without regard to the order of things. She slid the tin back until she heard it tap against the wall and arranged the sweaters and bowling balls as they were before. Stacey laughed dryly and took a lighter from Glen’s bathroom drawer to light a cigarette. She held it between her fingers in front of their mirror and watched herself slowly exhale. She touched her pinkie to her thumb and tilted her head to her shoulder, assessing her own sex appeal,

comfortable in her own skin as if no one else was watching.

“What are you doing?” Miriam asked.

Stacey rubbed at a smudge of eyeliner under Miriam’s eyes with a clammy finger and said, “Let’s kill this before they get home.”

That evening, Glen and Susan retreated to their room shortly after dinner. Stacey cleared the dinner plates, creating a sludge of mashed food in the garbage can, while Miriam rinsed and set them in the dishwasher.

“She won’t let me go anywhere when I get back,” Miriam said. She planned to go home the next day.

After a month, she felt she had out stayed her welcome. She knew more about Stacey’s family than she wanted to, but that’s what happens when you stay in one place for too long. Her mother said she would come in the morning.

“We’ll still see each other at school,” Miriam said.

After the dishes were done, they felt like a smoke. They opened the window and removed the screen so they could see the stars. It was one of those nights where Stacey had the sensibility of a seductress and decided to phone boys she knew from school. She dialed several numbers. In some cases, there was no answer, and in others, the boys had not picked up on her signals. The one who finally succumbed to her antics was the one they least suspected: the Know-It-All. He was an only child who had a frantic need to garner the attention of classmates and teachers with his insights on the latest technology.

With the cell phone on a pillow between them, the girls listened. At first, it made them laugh to hear the kind of honesty that came only in the twilight hours of a summer

night when everyone was restless. Thinking she was alone, he spoke of his loneliness and then of the erection that pained him. The girls remained quiet and attentive, anticipating the outcome, wondering just how far he would take it. Stacey kept her eyes toward the ceiling, cool and unaffected, breathing in smoke and releasing the sound of crackling ash.

“Oh yeah? How hard is it?” she said. She held the smoke in her lungs.

“It’s like a rock. Really, if you touched it, it’d shoot all over you.” he said. His voice quivered.

“Where all over? My tits? My face?”

“Yeah, tits and a wide open mouth...” His words stopped abruptly as if one more breath would set him off. He breathed out slowly the way woman does when she is in labor.

“Do you want to see this thing or what?” he said.

The girls looked at each other. Miriam, with her eyes wide, mouthed “no,” but Stacey only laughed silently. And before she responded, he sent the picture.

Stacey put her hand over the receiver. “Lock the door!” she whispered.

With their mattresses side by side on the floor, Miriam’s feet got tangled up in the sheets, but Stacey held her by the arm to get her attention. Each of them kept a hand on the phone, trying to get a better look. His body was feeble, almost anemic, but his penis stalked outward from his pelvis, firm and pointy, like a branch from a tree.

“I told you it was hard.” His mouth was pressed to the phone. “You like this don’t you?”

“We both do. Say hi, Miriam,” Stacey said, leaning into the receiver.

“What did you say?” The boy’s voice was still low and scratchy.

“Miriam wants to...” Miriam slapped the fatty part of Stacey’s arm.

“Oww!”

The phone made a plunking sound, indicating that he’d hung up.

“Why did you tell him?” Miriam said.

“Because he’s a fucking perv.”

“He sounded sad,” Miriam said. She imagined the boy alone in his room, surrounded by his favorite things, a telescope pointed toward the stars, lying cold and disgraced in sheets wet with semen.

“You would think he’d know when someone was messing with him.”

“I’m sure he’s done it before. That horny little shit.”

They shared one last cigarette to help them sleep. They lay with their heads to the window, the moon shining on their faces. The air was so fresh and cool; it was like they were someplace else.

“So you’re going back? What’s at home?” Stacey said.

“I don’t know. I have to finish school, and then, I don’t know after that.”

“We should get a place together, next summer.”

“I’d like that.” Miriam put her arm over her forehead.

“Try to stay put until then. Don’t let her get to you. None of them know what the hell they’re doing. You know that, right?”

“I’m beginning to see it.”

Miriam packed the few things she bought during her stay, and put on her own clothes, placing the ones she borrowed from Stacey in a duffle bag. She lifted the sheet

from Stacey's head and whispered, "I'll bring them back after I wash them."

Stacey grunted and turned over in her pillow, her hair still crisp with hairspray. She had the face of child when she slept, peaceful and pale-faced. She put the sheet back over her face and went to the kitchen to wait for her mother.

Susan was up early, making breakfast and listening to a radio talk show. Everything was different now and Miriam could only stand in the hallway, watching her mix a pancake batter, feeling like a voyeur. The batter was thick and Susan made a low grunting sound at the weight of the bowl. She turned abruptly toward Miriam, sensing there was someone there and Miriam took a step back.

"Come have breakfast," Susan said. "This is grandma's recipe. It'll stay in your gut for a while."

Miriam sat at the table with her hair in a ponytail, legs shaved, and skin scented with vanilla. She said, "I've decided to go back home."

"Yeah, I figured. I saw your things by the door," Susan said. She wiped the table in wide circular motions, her hair still moist from a shower, and her breasts moving freely under a thin white tank top. Small clumps of deodorant accumulated in the creases of her arm pits, where they were red and razor burned.

"You like hotcakes, don't you? 'Course you do."

"I used to make them for my sister," Miriam said. She rolled down the sleeves of her denim shirt and used them to wipe the wet parts of the table. "We used to go to church on Sunday's and my mom would buy *menudo* after service, but Emily wouldn't eat that."

"You miss her?"

“Emily? Yes, very much.”

“I’m sure they miss you, too. Got to.”

Glen shuffled in with his cowboy boots and tapered brown slacks. He leaned into the heels of the boots when he walked, scuffing the floor. Susan stood with a hand on her hip, observing the trail. She sucked her teeth.

“Huh,” she said.

Glen twitched his lip at the sentiment, but kept his stride.

“This fresh?” he asked. One front tooth was longer than the others, and when he spoke, it came out like a wet lisp.

“You think I’d be up this early and not have a fresh pot of coffee? You’re mistakin’ me for someone else,” Susan said.

Embarrassed by the remark, he made a sideward glance toward Miriam.

“Mornin’,” he said.

Miriam crossed her legs. They were strong with a faded tanned and a beaded anklet around the one she swayed. Glen sipped his coffee, his eyes moved up the length of her legs.

“You leavin’?”

“Yeah... Yes,” Miriam said.

“Probably best,” Glen snorted, clearing his sinuses.

“You gonna yap all mornin’ or eat breakfast?” Susan asked.

He said he wasn’t in the mood for hotcakes so he ate toast with jalapeño jam. He flipped through the pages of the newspaper, clearing his throat after each bite. The emulsification of toast and coffee between his teeth was the only sound. Miriam thought

of the woman in blue. She thought her too delicate, too broken inside to be a “swinger.” Did he even love her? Did he and Susan still love each other? From the letters it seemed that, for both couples, discretion was the key to making the whole thing work. Swinging had its own set of rules just like anything else. And as long as there were rules, they could maintain decorum.

“Don’t miss out on those hotcakes, girl. Grandma knew what she’s doin’,” Glen said, almost shouting.

With saliva at the corners of his mouth, he kissed Susan on her temple and mumbled a few affectionate words before he left for work. Susan set a butter dish and a bottle of corn syrup on the table. She lit all four burners with a match, striking a second one halfway through.

“That’ll warm things up,” she said.

She rubbed the excess water from her short blond hair, and checked her reflection in the window. The whistle from the tea kettle came to a peak, and she poured boiling water into a mug with a tea bag that looked like little sachets.

“Drink this. It’s citrus and lavender.”

They reminded Miriam of the sachets from the Christmas tin. She held her nose over the mug and breathed in the floral scent. She had never had tea but didn’t mind something new. It was hot and bitter on her tongue, making her thirstier than she was.

“Oh Miriam, put a little honey in that. Just needs a little, it’s very sweet.”

Miriam drew up the wooden dipper that sat in an open ceramic jar.

“Twirl it,” she said.

The honey drizzled down in thick waves, and when it thinned out, it released a fly

that had been enshrouded in between the ridge of the dipper.

“That’s it. Now hold it over your cup.”

Miriam did what she was told, but the honey only made her tea taste both bitter and sweet.

“Don’t you drink tea at home?”

“Sometimes. I make it with a lot of sugar, though.”

“Huh, you’re one of those. Sweet tooth?”

“I think so.”

Susan turned and leaned her backside against the sink with a dish towel over her shoulder.

“What was so bad you had to leave, anyway?” she asked. Her apron shifted to the far right with the movement, and through the white top, Miriam could see the outline of her breast. With a nipple the size of a small button, it curved upward like a cornucopia. Its awkwardness unsettled her stomach.

“I gave up on my mother.”

“Gave up on her?” Susan held the hotcakes on the spatula and tried to look into Miriam’s eyes, but Miriam resisted her gaze. “Well, I guess you did.”

She slid the hotcakes onto Miriam’s plate. They were soft and fluffy, like fresh baked bread, only the butter was oily and didn’t absorb well.

“You can’t run away from problems. You’ll be runnin’ away your whole life if you do that,” Susan said.

She made more tea with sweetener instead of honey and sat with Miriam until she had to leave. She spoke of her own problems with her mother when she was Miriam’s

age and told her how she got through them.

“Tenacity,” she said.

Stacey slept through breakfast, but Miriam enjoyed the time alone with Susan.

And then it was over. Neither of the mothers cared to meet the other.

Her mother sat in the car with the engine running, her hands firmly on the steering wheel, expecting but not beckoning her daughter to get in. They drove in silence. Miriam looked to her mother for reprieve, but the squint in her eyes, partly from the sun, and partly from her discontentment, caused her to keep silent. In the morning light, her features looked harder, sharper. It heightened the stone of her cheek bones, and the unevenness of her nose, which had been broken in an accident as a child. The way she chewed her gum created a sort of exaggerated gesture like a jaw that was pulling against the force of rubber bands, meant to send off waves of negative energy. It was not in her mother’s nature to hold back her words, but she anticipated an apology from Miriam in which she would be prepared to return a litany of complaints and disappointments.

Miriam’s high school was on the way home, and when they turned onto the main thoroughfare, they came upon runners who were sprinting on the road, two by two, in red and black jerseys. They were people from her cross country team. She felt a surge of melancholy, but at the same time, Miriam was elated. It gave her energy to see them. They pressed through the agony of exhaustion with measured breathing. Their skin and hair were bronzed by the sun, muscles toned, which bore a likeness of well-being. She felt the warmth of her breath on the window as she silently cheered them on until they were out of sight.

Her mother turned on the radio and let the scan button run its course— Country, Tejano, Country, Country, Country. The air conditioner blew cold against her legs. Repositioning the vents, she turned her body away from her mother and leaned her head against the window. She tried to close her eyes and quiet her thoughts, but with the volume louder now and the radio suspended on the rhythms of Ranchera music, she could feel the timbre of trumpets pounding against her temples.

When they got to the house, Mrs. Vargas, a friend of her mother who lived next door, was watering her yard, an invariable morning routine that made her privy to the neighborhood happenings. She had a menacing arched brow and high pitched voice, and looked like the Queen of Hearts standing within a cluster of red roses that disjointed the landscape. Miriam ducked her head behind the rose bush in an attempt to avoid her.

“*Malita.*” She used the word “bad” as if it were her name.

Miriam entered the house with her mother at her heels. The house was immaculate, with glistening floors and polished furniture, and the couch with its primed pillows sat like a display in a museum. She looked at her shoes that were grimy and water-stained and treaded lightly on the white floors.

“Hi, Miriam.” She heard a phlemy little voice come from the kitchen. It was Emily. She cleared her throat and said it little louder, “Hi, Miriam.”

It was a voice so sweet it pained Miriam to hear it. Her sister sat at the kitchen table eating breakfast, the usual soggy corn flakes swimming in sugary milk. Emily smiled wide with her spoon held upright, dripping milk down the handle onto her fingers. Already dressed for school, she tapped her pink glitter shoes against the legs of the chair.

“Hey, you,” Miriam said. She bent over to hug her, putting her arms around the

half-empty Barney backpack. She kissed her forehead. “I missed you,” she said.

“Me, too,” Emily said with sweet cornflake breath. Her bangs were uneven on one side from getting haircuts at home. Miriam sat at the table with her bag at her lap and listened to Emily talk about first grade drama at school.

Miriam smiled at her father, who was simmering a pot of *chile colorado* and letting a tortilla burn too long on the grate of the stove. The familiar smell of charred tortillas and spices, the kind of aromatic chile spice that tickles the throat during various stages of roasting, was comforting to her.

“Un abrazo,” he said and held his arms out for a hug.

“Papá, it’s good to see you.” Miriam embraced him. It hurt her to hurt him in this way.

Her father held her face with both hands, indicating his concern, wanting answers, but knowing it wasn’t the right time to ask for them. “You’ve been gone too long.”

“I’m sorry. I really am.”

“Cuidese, Mija,” he said. “You have to take care of yourself, eat right, go to school. That’s all you have to do.”

She held her father for a long time, telling herself that his love and kindness would be enough to make up for her mother’s lack of it. And it would be.

“Can I have one of those?” Miriam said, pointing to the tortillas.

“*Con mantequilla?*” he asked.

“Yeah, lots of butter. And fold it tight so it doesn’t drip.”

Emily raised her hand, “I want one, too.”

“Pero tú no tienes dientes,” her father said, teasing her about her missing teeth.

She put a finger to a tiny canine, “Here!” she said.

Her mother said in a sharp tone that was meant for Miriam, “You’ll be late!”

Emily tried to scuttle out of the chair, but her backpack got caught. Miriam lifted her out of the chair and Emily whispered to her, “I left something in your room.”

“You better go,” Miriam said. She patted her sister on the bottom.

Her mother picked up Emily’s backpack and lunchbox with one hand and rattled the keys in the other, her pantyhose sounding like sandpaper between her legs.

“Things are going to change around here,” she said. She closed the door without waiting for a response.

“She’s hurt,” her father said.

“She’s angry. Always at me.”

“As much as I know you want to give up on her, you can’t. It isn’t right. When they’re gone, you always want them back.”

“No one tells her it’s wrong. All those brothers and sisters of hers, and no one says anything.”

\*

She never meant to hurt her mother. But sometimes these things happen out of necessity. With a burden of a love affair she carried in heart, her mother raged with discontentment. It took from her the things her family loved the most: her humor, kindness, thoughtfulness. In her own searing pain, she did not know that the disappointment came from inside herself. It was Miriam who finally confronted her about these things. So when she argued with her mother that day, and when Miriam hurled the

bucket of dish water at her, everything changed in that moment. They stood there soaked in water and suds, both of them in disbelief. Miriam was no longer willing to be her mother's doormat. This instigated her wrath, and she leapt at Miriam like a winged demon. She pulled her to her knees, wildly slapping the top of her head and the sides of her face. Her mother's cheeks were flushed and her lips turned white, and soon, the slapping turned into punching. It was as if no one had ever let her speak her mind and the years of torment had created a flood of anguish. I caught glimpses of her porcelain capped teeth that came together sharply as she released a string of expletives. Miriam could not feel anything but the pulse of her temples. *Cheater, liar*, she wanted to say. *You are the one who doesn't know herself. I didn't do this to you.* And she dug her nails into her mother's calves to set herself free. She picked up the phone and called Stacey, who paused before saying hello to take a hit of her cigarette.

"Come get me!" Miriam shouted before the phone went dead.

Miriam took her purse and ran out the door. The sun never felt as good as it did that day. She took in its light, letting it fill her lungs and unburden her thoughts. She ran and did not stop.

After her father left, the house was empty. There weren't any sounds from the outside, no car doors slamming, no barking dogs or children playing. The note on her bedroom door from her mother said, *Keep room clean! I'm not your maid!* Miriam wanted to do everything her mother said would make her happy, but she knew it was only an illusory sense of happiness. To keep it nourished took more energy than she had, and it left her with no strength inside to propel herself forward.

Inside the room, there were others. They lined the walls like a banner. *When will you listen, no one ever listens... You're not the only one who's miserable here... You're just like your father, always messing things up ...you think you're perfect, you'll make all the mistakes I did, just wait and see...*

Her mother had ripped her posters from the wall and replaced them with her notes. Miriam could see their edges were still attached underneath the thumbtacks and tape. Minnie Mouse Valentine cards were spread outward at her feet as though they had been slipped under the door. Each card had a message written in Emily's best handwriting: *To Miriam...I love you... Are you there? When are you coming home?* Miriam tucked the cards in at the corners of the dresser mirror. They would help her to make better decisions in the future.

She noticed a paper that had fallen behind the dresser. It was a race number bib: 429. She'd worn it during a regional cross country meet, when she placed sixth among hundreds. Despite obstacles at home, she managed to attend all of the practices and competitions last year. Running was euphoric. It was the destroyer of limitations. She used the safety pin to tack it to the wall then emptied the contents of her bag onto the bed. Her dirty clothes reeked like cigarettes and began to overpower the room. She pushed everything off the bed and lay there with her eyes closed, but her head made a buzzing sound, or at least it felt that way. Miriam reached over the bed for the cigarettes and went to the window, opening it as far as it would go to allow the sounds to come in. The commotion from the birds in the tree and the passing of the cars down the street made her feel as if the earth were full again and she was not alone. She took the package and began to crush the cigarettes. She bent them forward and backward and rolled them between her

hands until the tobacco leaves trickled down like wood shavings onto the sill.

## **Before You Knew Me**

*My father looked as if he didn't belong there, with a woman who had black pearl eyes and ashen skin. It had been a year since I'd seen him last. My mother stayed behind, but told me I'd find him in this place. They shared a room together at the Blue Angel motel. I stood at his door in a white pleated dress with a pink barrette that held back my hair. I brought him a gift to keep him warm, wrapped in brown paper and twine. I held my umbrella and listened to the groan of the revolving angel that hovered overhead.*

*The woman let me in, she spoke softly with a heavy tongue. Her dress was worn at the shoulders, her hair disheveled from lack of sleep. She fed me chickpeas in sweet syrup and smoked a cigarette by the window. Her children lay on the floor near the television, playing with dolls with no arms and scratching at their skin. I worried that he might love them, too and that there would be nothing left for me.*

*My father sat in the chair next to me with motor oil on the cuff of his sleeve. He smiled with his eyes, and had the smell of rain on his skin. We spoke of the weather and of my time in school, but I couldn't remember why I came. I told him I had a dream he was outside my door in the snow. He had come back to tell me he was leaving. He gave me an envelope with the faded words of a place he'd been to, and on the back was a picture of Dylan's hand reaching out to his followers. He told me to write to him, and I promised him I would.*

*He listened closely to the dream as though it sounded familiar, and when it was time for me to leave, I didn't want to go. He told me to wait for the snow, it would come again, and I would find him at the steps of the Juarez Cathedral.*

He'd been in prison once before, in the States. It was the time my father lost his

citizenship. Even upon hearing of his recent reincarceration, I felt relieved when I found out he was looking for me. No matter where he was, he always managed to find me despite the fact that I could never stay in one place. His connections to the outside world were remarkable. When I least expected it, I would get word through a friend of a distant cousin or some other unlikely source. In my adolescence, I'd hand written letters to family and friends as a way to keep connected. I used my maternal grandparents' address to correspond with them, since I had left my mother's house. My mother had tired of me and I of her, and so I left the state to travel with friends for the summer. When I returned home, my grandmother contacted me about letters she had for me from my father. She welcomed me with a kiss, her lips like silk against my cheek. She asked me if I was hungry and fed me a baked potato with warm grainy skin that tasted like it came from the earth. We talked for a while, but mostly, she listened. She knew I had run away from home and wanted to make sure I knew I was loved, if perhaps that's why I had left. I held her hands. They were the shape of my mother's, only softer and warmer. She wrapped the letters in a cloth napkin and tied them with ribbon, reminding me to come back in the spring when the bougainvilleas will have bloomed. With the visit to my grandmother's house and the retrieval of the letters, I could feel my heart whole and at peace again.

I did not share the news of the letters with my mother. When I walked in the door, I felt the weight of her reproach at my back, since we hadn't yet discussed my recent hiatus. I closed the door to my room and spread the letters out on my bed. The envelopes were decorated with his hand-drawn imitations of Fernadad Léger paintings and sealed with a stamp on the back that read: *Warm Springs Correctional Center*. He had been put

away for drug possession, heroin, the same as now, but since he had managed to stay sober or at least off heroin for so long, I was taken aback when I found out he was using again. He wanted to change. He was getting older, and recently, I had the sense that it embarrassed him still to be struggling with his addiction. The U.S. was supposed to be a better life away from the hopelessness of Juarez and the addicts he grew up with. But they *all* wanted a better life, and they all came here together, or eventually, and they inevitably created the same environment.

Now that we had known where to find each other, for the time being, we corresponded by mail on a regular basis. He attended life skills courses and bible studies and opened his heart and mind to a new way of thinking. He listened to my usual complaints about home, and when I explained problems I'd had with friends and a boyfriend, things I felt were minor issues and would have never have mentioned before, he responded with great interest and even offered me helpful advice. Strangely, our relationship had never seemed so normal. I stayed in school and raised my grades, spent time with family and friends, felt free to live a normal teenage life because I knew he was safe. I hung his drawings on my wall, and for that year, I lived my life through those letters.

My confessions, I suppose, urged him to open up to me. He spoke of his regrets as a father, and apologized for the things that hurt me and my mother the most: his irresponsibility, his absence, his indecency. Because he was an addict, we made exceptions for him. If he had been a sober man, we could have seen the inappropriateness in his actions, but we saw them differently, my mother and I, it was a forbearance that came from our subconscious. So even though I felt I didn't need an apology, and that

maybe my mother needed it more, the words reached deep, mending the dispirited parts of my soul.

*Hadland Park was the only park on 28<sup>th</sup> Street, but it doesn't exist anymore. My father and I spent the afternoon there, and when the men came, he took me to the sandbox to play by myself for a while. I swung my feet high until my toes touched the leaves of the tree and the chains of the swing rattled on my descent. My sandals dangled between my toes and my hair brushed along the sand. Within a palisade of trees, I could smell the oak, and feel the grit of sand under my feet. So preoccupied with my fantasies, I was jolted by the blare of the police sirens. Disoriented, I tried adjusting my eyes to the direction of the sound. At such close range, the screech of the siren wielded a languid sound of torment. It howled past me over the grass and around the benches. The police cars came to a halt, encircling a group of men who stood a short distance from where I was. I left the sandbox in search of my father. People congregated in the distance, too far for from where I was to distinguish their faces, but none of them called to me. Without knowing why, I walked toward the police cars, because even though I could not see him, I knew he was there.*

*"Papá," I tried to shout, but it came out as a whimper.*

*I had interrupted the policeman, startling him, and he scolded me for getting too close.*

*"Get away from here!" the policeman said.*

*I had nowhere else to go, but I was too frightened of him to say it. I stared into his eyes as if he were speaking a language I didn't understand, which made him think I*

*didn't speak English.*

*"That's my kid," my father said.*

*"Are you fuckin' kidding me?"*

*He pounded his fist on the hood of the car and removed the handcuffs from my father's wrists so he could send me away. My father gently lifted me into his arms, and I leaned my cheek against the coarseness of his beard. My eyes never left the officer, who was also watching us. He placed me back in my swing, but now I did not want to be there. I put my arms out to be taken back, but he nodded. He had never refused to take me before, his eyes were not the eyes I knew, and I could feel tears welling up inside me.*

*"You'll be safe here, Mija. I'll be back for you," he said.*

*The metal loops were cold and smelled like rust in my hands. I kept my legs still, watching their gestures, trying to get a sense of what was going to happen to us. I was certain we would go to jail, but the policeman was furious and that meant he might not let us go together.*

*The policeman berated my father. He spoke with a voice that resembled the sirens, and he did it for a long period of time, as if it were in his nature and all the parts inside of him were knotted up.*

*'It's a mistake', I wanted to say, he's not the person you think he is.*

*I began to fear I would not see my mother again.*

*After some time, the men who had met my father there were driven away in a procession of police cars. The red and blue lights pirouetted silently above cast down heads, and it worried me that their families might not be able to find them. My fear began*

*to abandon itself and reveal an overwhelming sense of exhaustion. Even the policeman seemed to be talking in circles. I got the courage to leave the swing. I wiped the black streaks from my hands on the hem of my dress, leaving my sandals buried in the sand. The grass was cool under my feet, and I walked quietly to where they were. I stood behind my father's legs, leaning my head against the pocket of his jeans. I was not sent away. I could not take my attention away from the hard features of the policeman's gun: a black steel revolver with its nose pointed sharply toward the ground. He caught my eyes and re-latched the holster, then without looking at me again, he motioned in my direction with the nod of his head as he gave his final words. My father's weathered hand reached for mine, and we walked together in silence. The park was empty now, and though I couldn't hear them before, the birds chirped sweetly in the trees around us.*

*I pointed to where my sandals were and he dusted them off. In my eagerness to leave, I wedged the strap between the small toes and began to walk awkwardly in this way. He knelt down, his hair draping forward like a boy's, and secured them properly onto my feet. He held my face in his hands with my hair swathed around my cheeks like a bonnet. The creases around his eyes came together, and he searched mine as if he were looking through a window at the person on the other side. He kissed my forehead. He was beginning to look more like himself.*

In prison, my father took a woodshop class — his specialty — and he asked if I would send him a book of stamps so he could mail me a gift. When I came home from school one day, it was sitting on the kitchen table inside a white box dented in at the corners. In it was a wooden, heart shaped jewelry box. The middle of the heart was

carved out and set with tinted glass in the shape of a keyhole with a small butterfly etching. It was a reminder of the time the monarchs came to visit me. I told him how I'd been standing at the screen door of my grandmother's house watching the rain, when I saw a constellation of butterflies that had begun to gather in the apricot trees. The earth stood still for them. The rain and wind ceased and the sun came out and they fluttered their wings as if to shake off the dampness. I walked among them while they flooded the skies with streaks of coral and the air carried the hum of their wings like phantom reverberating chimes overhead. It was winter so they were headed south. And later that spring, I stayed with my grandmother who kept the windows open for me, knowing I was watching and listening for them, but they did not find me again.

I spent a long time fiddling with the heart box, placing items in it that I might want to keep safe. There was a knob on the curve of the heart that when pressed in, pushed out a drawer on the other side lined with red velvet inlay that had my name sewn onto the fabric. This gift made me feel like a child with a renewed sense of worth because of all the detail he put into it for me. I decided not to attenuate the box with earrings or charms, but instead, it became the keeper of invaluable things.

He took English classes to improve his use of the language. The letters he sent contained the usual phonetic spellings, but now with the addition of "ye's" and "thee's" partly influenced by his active bible studies and a renewed interest in Bob Dylan's evangelical album. They were filled with his best intentions and fatherly advice, which I respected and appreciated. For the first time in a long time, his thoughts were lucid; he was sure of what he wanted for us and for himself. I read the letters more than once, so that they would stay with me and carry me through a difficult time. The letters all

concluded in the same way: 'Take care of your mother and tell your brother to write to me.' Selfishly, I thought, *why me?* He wanted me to take care of her, the one who didn't need me at all, and to keep his son, who was very young when he left, from forgetting about him. *Hadn't he heard the things I told him about my mother?* I would put the letters away in my heart box, but his words would never leave me.

December's letter came in an envelope with a picture of Santa sitting in a jail cell with a chain attached to his ankle. After a year in prison, he was getting restless and his letters began to reflect this. There was a parole hearing fast approaching, so he stayed busy familiarizing himself with the bylaws of the courts. He developed a dogmatic view on the social injustices of a U.S. prisoner. He exercised his rights while he still possessed them, plead "guilty by insanity" to the courts, and asked friends and family to write letters for a pardon. We did. Before long he was out of prison but had to be deported back to Mexico.

I was living in Vegas and could only visit him once a year. He lived in the house that his mother owned. Alicia and her husband and their kids lived there, too. There was a section at the back of the house, where my father and his two brothers lived from time to time. I always enjoyed my visits to Juarez to see my family. My grandmother wore her beautiful gray and white hair in a braid that almost reached the back of her knees. With as little as they had, she and Alicia loved to spoil the grandchildren, and I was no exception. They were the most generous and kind people I had ever known. And that house, a memory of my childhood visits, was always filled with love and the comings and goings of three generations.

It was nice to have my father in one place again. It hadn't been that way since my

parents' divorce, and my visits with him throughout my childhood depended on whether or not he was well enough to see us. My mother would only take me and my brother to see him when he was sober. Although the violence was escalating in Juarez, and drug smuggling showed no signs of subsiding, he was here, in the town he grew up in. He was surrounded by family who loved him. He'd had a year of rehabilitation and had been clean for just as long. It wasn't going to be easy. It could never be easy in a place like this.

\*

I came home from work that day and found a note taped to my front door.

*'Your dad's very sick. He's looking for you and your brother. Call Alicia as soon as you get this.'* It had been ten years since he was at Warm Springs. He had recently been using heroin again, but I had been so busy with my life that I hadn't heard anything of it. He had done so good for so long that I couldn't believe it. It felt like I had closed my eyes for just a moment, and when I opened them again, everything had changed.

We drove through the desert for more than thirty minutes. I pressed my cheek against the window of the bus to get a glimpse of the prison but a sheath of dust obscured the view. The sun shone, even with the dust, warming my face with its rays glistening at the tips of my eyelashes. The driver made a sharp turn and bounced in his seat while passengers' heads swayed side to side. I looked to Alicia, who was already looking at me; she smiled and rested her forearms on the paper sack in her lap. It carried the things

my father asked for. I wanted to ask her questions, because she knew her brother better than anyone else, but the words would not come to me. My Spanish had weakened over time and my sentences lacked cohesion. Once in a while, I forced out intermittent phrases and used erratic hand gestures in order get my point across, but at the moment, it felt good just to be still. My father had always been my interpreter when I visited Mexico, so for now, I had to rely on Miguel, who was sitting toward the back of the bus having an intense but pleasant conversation with his girlfriend, and I did not want to interrupt them. My father and Miguel were more like best friends than cousins. Miguel was familiar with the prison systems because it hadn't been long since his own incarceration, and my father knew Miguel could get us there safely. Out of all the cousins, he had the most tattoos, which meant the most prison time. His skin was deeply tanned and the tattoos ran up his arms and neck, contrasting against a bright, white smile. I wanted to tell Miguel that I didn't have a passport but he was too immersed in the exchange. At the time, having a passport was not a requirement in Mexico, but we were headed further south, to the middle of the desert, and I didn't know what to expect.

After another twenty minutes, our bus lined up behind the others and the driver waited for clearance before letting us out. We were led by foot for less than a quarter mile before we reached a citadel of white stucco walls with black letters that read: Centros de Readaptación Social (CE.RE.SO).

The line was long to get inside the prison. It was Thanksgiving in the States, and visitors had come prepared for festivities. Young, burly Mexican men in cowboy shirts and blue jean jackets carried large metal pots of menudo, one man at each end, their boots digging deeply into the gravel. The women, most of them petite and portly, carried bags

of tamales packed in freezer bags, their long coats and scarves sweeping the ground. Other family members brought trays of enchiladas, pre-cooked turkeys under tented foil, and then boxes of pizza and buckets of KFC. I regretted that we hadn't brought my father any real food, but my aunt Alicia said he would only be able to tolerate sweets and liquids. His brothers nicknamed him 'Flaco' because he had always been skinny and never much of an eater. He disliked turkey and couldn't see the logic of a yearly celebration centered on it.

They packed us into a room with two rows of conveyer belts and metal detectors. This turned out to be a lengthy process, because the guards had to search the food, (mostly, they sought after the things they craved) and the women, mothers and wives stood aside to engage them in a friendly conversation. They asked about their wives, sending their regards as they rationed out portions of the food into plastic containers. Alicia said it was easier for the people to do the exchange at the checkpoint before they got into the prison, and that we would have to be patient with the process. The women worked quickly and discretely in hopes of ensuring a longer visit and the well-being of their family member. One of the guards, watching the transaction, traced his hand over the orbit of his belly with subdued satisfaction. Miguel explained that there was little to gain for the people who had to wait in these lines. These guards had little to no power. We'd seen two or three beautiful women in short skirts and stilettos escorted directly through the lines and into the building. The real exceptions were made within the prison, where gang members and the drug cartel demanded and received the best hospitality.

A female guard took me by the arm toward a private partition. I looked to Alicia and she nodded to reassure me it would be okay. The guard removed my coat and

sweater, placing latexed fingers under the lining of my bra then inside my pants and around my panties. Without saying anything, she poured out the contents of my purse onto a table, spreading out a debris of crumbs, tampon wrappers and broken pieces of gum. She handed me my sweater and told me to get dressed, while another woman came in behind me already partially undressed, and spoke to them with the familiarity of a family member.

It was four in the afternoon when we finally made it to the reception center, which consisted of a man in a window speaking through an old intercom system. We told him who we were there to see, and he said my father was still in the courtroom for a bail hearing. We were instructed to sit in the courtyard until he was done. I found a place next to Miguel's girlfriend and started a conversation with her. She was beautiful, and reminded me of a girl I knew in school, the way she wore her hair and the shape of her eyes. She spoke English well and told me she had known the family for a long time. Her parents knew my grandparents and she and Miguel went to school with each other years ago. I felt relieved, because I wanted to feel comfortable around her during the visit.

It had been three hours since our arrival and we began to worry that we wouldn't get to see him. We sat mostly in silence, trying to keep warm on concrete benches near a grassy area. We could see prisoners in the distance walking in the courtyard behind a metal chain fence. Other men, who Alicia said were also prisoners, sauntered past us in street clothes. They spoke with authority to the ones who shuffled behind them, smelling of musk and leather. They paraded their wares—designer shirts, blue jeans, and snakeskin boots—along the vast row of visitors. They were inmates, too, but occupied a large sector of the prison which they governed freely.

Our nerves were on edge because of the time. A boy who stood next to his mother and another woman repeatedly tossed a coin into the air, trying to catch it inside his mouth. At the last toss, he tilted his head back farther than before. The stiff, stray hairs at the top of his head fluttered like a peacock's feathers at the feat. The women were busy talking and didn't notice when it finally lodged in his throat. He stomped his feet with a reddened face and held both hands around his neck. We gasped and got up from our seats, but the mother thumped him on the back with great force, sending the coin bouncing toward Miguel. The women laughed at the boy for crying and he scoffed at them, kicking up a cloud of dust. Miguel kept the coin underneath his shoe, and once the boy regained his composure, he stood like a matador at his feet. An authority came out to inform us that my father was ready for visitors. We gathered our things, scrambling for items left under our seats. The boy seized his coin and sent it reeling into the air but I did not look back.

We were escorted into the visitor's area, where guards stood like military personnel holding semi-automatic weapons. The room was airy with white brick walls and windows that overlooked the courtyard. Loose gravel rasped under our shoes as we shuffled in toward large wooden tables heavily coated with brown paint that looked like it had been poured on. The visitors had already set their holiday tables and the women were busy serving food. There was a drone of chatter and a clattering of pots and pans. Alicia put the brown bag at the center of the table, leaving its contents inside.

The warmth of his eyes reached me as soon as he walked into the room. I motioned my hand to get his attention.

"I knew you'd come. It's so good to see you," he said.

When he embraced me, I could smell the desert on his clothes. He looked fatigued in some ways, but otherwise, he looked okay.

Miguel came up behind him. “*Oye, Cabrón,*” he said. He put his arm around his neck. *¿Qué páso, wey?* What the fuck happened?”

“*Pinche chota, me jodieron.* They’re trying pin it on me. Said I was trying to sell to an undercover.”

Alicia got everyone to sit down. They were eager to hear the events that lead up to his incarceration. I was being watchful for signs of distress, because it was still not clear how serious the situation was. The visit felt rushed and though I had an urge to cry, we were not accustomed to displaying that kind of sentimentality around each other, and especially not in front of the others, so I held it in. And for the rest of the visit, we went along in this manner, even when all I wanted was to be alone with him, to know he was going to be alright.

My aunt got right to business and began to discuss our plans to get him back home. He glanced at me and breathed out quietly, still nodding at her instructions to show he was listening. When he tried to initiate a conversation with me, the others drew their attention toward us in anticipation of a heartfelt exchange, maybe something that would cause my father to change his behavior. This is what they pleaded with me before we left Alicia’s house that day.

“Talk to him. He’ll do it for you,” Alicia said.

But since it was the first time they ever spoke openly about his addiction, I didn’t know how to respond. They said if he could find the strength, it would be for his children. But my brother wasn’t here and I had to figure things out for myself. It was complicated

and it would take more than my father wanting to change for us. It was heroin. And he lived in Juarez, where most of the men he knew were addicts, and there was no such thing as rehabilitation. They knew it and I knew it, but it meant some kind of hope. My aunt smiled her beautiful smile at me and my father, but we kept things simple.

The vinyl jacket he was wearing looked small, like a child's. The sleeves gripped at his arm an inch above the wrist. He sat cross-legged, in jeans torn at the knees, like the hippie he had always been, with an intricate drawing of a woman's face on the pant leg. They said he had been suffering through terrible withdrawals, but he made an effort to look composed for us, swaying the leg that was crossed and running his hand through his hair a few times. He asked Miguel for a cigarette. The smoke drifted between us, creating a relaxed atmosphere, and it felt as if we were sitting at the kitchen table. My aunt opened the bag and began to set out the items: five king sized Snickers bars and several bottles of lime Gatorade. He drank while he listened to Alicia and Miguel explain the events that transpired after his arrest. It turned into some kind of normalcy that they had known, and I felt out of place and found myself reluctant in the effort to allay the situation. The message I received about his incarceration expressed urgency, but I didn't get a sense of that now. Because they loved my father and loved me, too, they always tried to shield me from seeing him at his lowest point.

*It was those dreams that kept me looking for him even when I didn't know where to find him. I would wake to the sound of thunder and find my father standing near the window. I could see he was speaking to me because his mouth and hands were moving, but he looked like an image cast from a video projector without sound. I asked him what was wrong and as hard as I tried to listen, his words did not reach me. He began to melt*

*in my hands and I told him I loved him, but he didn't remember who I was. In the days following, I'd cling to my father and try to explain the details of the dream, but it sounded childish the way I said it. But I think he understood because I remember he took me to out to the lake, where he showed me how to catch guppies with a plastic Coke bottle. The bottoms of our jeans were heavy with water and we lay in the sand until they dried or until I was thirsty again. And when we left, I made him take the longest route because I wanted to feel as though we would never find our way back home.*

The mood had significantly lightened. He looked better than when we first arrived. His eyes were focused and his voice sounded stronger. The conversation ended with funny stories and laughter, the way they always ended, but it was getting late and visiting hours were almost over. We got up to stretch while my father and I walked around the room and into the hall where other prisoners were sitting and lying along the floor, observing the visits. We didn't get any time alone, there was no place for us to go, but I remembered feeling content walking in that room with him. We tried to keep a short distance from the others, intervals of stopping then moving again. And yet, that's all I remembered. I think I tried to forget everything else about that day.

We gathered our things and I stood at the door, watching him talk to the others. It would take another few weeks and a few more paychecks before everyone could get the full amount for the bail. He and Miguel did their handshake-hug with a pat on the back. I stalled so I could be the last to say goodbye and walk with him a little longer. I wrapped my arms around the puffy vinyl and squeezed until it flattened against his torso. The men on the floor watched as we all said our goodbyes, hugging and kissing until the

authorities said it was over.

A few days before my mother's arrival, I received a call from Alicia, who told me the bail money had been stolen by a man who was considered a friend of the family. So many people had pitched in from savings and paycheck advances, and now it was all gone. My father was in prison, trying to hold on, and we would never see that money again, and would have to start over. This man was battling his own heroin addiction. He was off somewhere in a state of euphoria, unbound by remorse, far from what we were all feeling.

On the day of her flight, I waited impatiently for my mother to arrive. The flight had been delayed by a half hour. I wanted to leave and let her find her own way, but I knew, with her fears about traveling into Mexico, she would not go alone, and he would be disappointed. I was disheartened with the whole situation and fought feelings of frustration toward my father. I wanted him to take care of himself so I could also take care of myself, too. But my fear was that if he knew I felt like giving up, he would want to give up, so I did my best to keep up my energy.

When she finally arrived, I could already feel the weight of these afflictions begin to lift from my chest. I wanted to hand all of these anxieties over to her, but she was married now, and he was not her responsibility anymore, I knew we would have to work together. She wanted to have breakfast despite my concern about the time. I couldn't tell if she was trying to reach out to me in another attempt to mend our relationship or to aggravate it. Entangled in the usual tension, we found ourselves arguing over whether to order a decanter of caffeinated or decaf. It was going to be a long day and I tried hard to

refrain from quarrelling with her because it always unsettled my stomach and ruined my mood. But like a godsend, she came prepared with most of the money that was needed for the bail, and we discussed details of what we needed to do before leaving the States.

At the house, she changed into jeans and tennis shoes, and put on a visor the way she did when we went hiking. The money she had was from the jewelry she pawned, gifts from her current husband, diamond earrings and such. She fanned the bills to make sure they were in good condition because it was the only way they would be accepted. Her eyelashes were thinly coated with mascara, and her lips were rouged with lightly colored gloss that brightened her face. The phone rang and it was Miguel's voice on the other line.

"Michelle?"

"We're on our way now..." I said.

"I have bad news."

*He was transferred*, I thought.

"Michelle, your dad died this morning."

I felt suddenly as if I'd been struck by a blunt object. The air left from my lungs. I looked at my mother, who was looking at me, still with a bright face. *wait*. I wanted to tell Miguel. *just let me get there. don't say anything until I get there, until I see him because they won't let me see him anymore, not like this*. My mind back-tracked through that morning. The eggs turned in my stomach. Words stuck at the back of my throat.

My mother's eyes now fixated on me, and without emotion, I said, "He died."

She wept with her hands at her face, smudging her palms with gloss. Black tears gathered at the creases of her eyes. Miguel and I remained quiet over the phone, with my

mother crying behind me.

“Are you there?” he said.

I kept listening to my mother, wishing I could cry too.

“Everyone said he would be okay, that he’d made it through the worst part and now he was going to be okay,” I said.

“I know it. He was keepin’ it together, but he messed up. He bought bad heroin from someone on the inside. There’s no telling what he got. He probably ODeD. We went back to see him a few days ago and he could barely stand up. We had to help him to his chair. He asked for you, but it was late and we told him you would be coming soon with your mom. Those fuckers didn’t even have the decency to call us. The neighbor heard it over the radio. They said a prisoner had died, and then they said his name. She ran over here to tell my tia. We called and they said it was true.”

\*

I remembered I couldn’t see the color in his eyes that day. They were hazy in the way that a cataract obscures the iris. His hair was knotted as if he’d been tossing all night, but still, he sat with us for the visit. There were stories and he was smoking, and I was watching him. We walked ahead of the others. The men on the floor were watching us. It seemed everyone was watching us. He leaned into me to speak.

“I need a favor from you,” he said.

“Yes.”

“The guards make me mop the floors, but you know I’m in no shape for it. I can

give them money.”

And suddenly I realized that everything we were doing was wrong. He was suffering now, and we were making plans to help him later, and all he could think about was how to make it through this day. There would be no methadone, like in the States, no one to bring him a glass of water, and no privacy. This was Cereso, and in this insensate facility, he would have to find a way to endure.

I searched every pocket. There was ten dollars left over from lunch and an old dollar bill that was faded and looked like a small handkerchief.

“Eleven,” I said.

I knew part of his story was true, but the particulars of that day were obscured by my own sentiment. There were two certainties: law enforcement relied heavily on bribes because they got paid very little, and it was infeasible to make a living solely on their wages, which is why they would take just about anything. Officers would create a disagreeable situation in order to incite a premise for the bribe. They targeted those who found themselves in compromising situations, moments of weakness, when concessions to their demands was likely.

I had also known that this particular prison was self-governed by the drug cartel, which meant, unequivocally, he could purchase drugs from the inside if he had the means. With the onset of desperation, I thought even to buy it for him. But how did one buy heroin here? *Effortlessly*. If I got caught, where would they take me? I would never survive a place like this. Violence and hatred sloughed off the skin of the people who brushed past you. So when he told me he needed the money, I gave him what he asked

for. And now, I couldn't tell if what I regretted was giving him the money or of not giving him enough. If I had skipped lunch or brought another twenty or fifty, would it have afforded him something better? With eleven dollars what could he get? I didn't know exactly. One fix. Or would it be something tainted, a thing that would harden his veins or inflict some kind of noxious bacteria. In our desperation, we made that decision, the one that would come to haunt me. I didn't tell Miguel what happened that day and I wouldn't tell him for a long time.

I stood over my father, wanting to touch his hands and his face, but the casket was sealed in glass. It was common practice in Mexico to bury the dead in this way, and it upset me, also, that the casket was too small for his body. His shoulders were slightly raised, but the lines around his eyes had softened since I'd last seen him. He looked peaceful, and younger than he did when he was living.

The funeral parlor began to fill with relatives and friends of my father's. I took my seat at the front pew. I listened to the voices in the room. The sound of my uncle's voice resonated with the same pitch and tone as my father's. It came from the back of the parlor, where he stood speaking to my mother. It was easy for me to close my eyes and imagine my father there, consoling her the way my uncle was doing now. It was a delusory notion, but the sensation of his presence comforted me. I wasn't ready to let go, even though there was nothing left to hold on to.

When my mother returned to take her place next to me, her thigh touched mine, and I scooted away just enough to convince myself that she hadn't noticed. It had become reflexive to blame her for everything. It was never fair to her. And despite

knowing this, that her only intention was to protect me from this life, I still gave all my bitterness away to my mother. Maybe it was him I wanted to blame, but I would never say it if it was. His struggle with heroin started before I was born, and I spent most of my life protecting him, or wanting to.

I was greeted and given condolences by the men who knew him that I hadn't seen since childhood. They stood in line to pay their respects with grief stricken faces and lowered heads as if they knowingly awaited their own fate. Many of the others had died long before my father. Some would die within the next few years, a slow and violent death. Juarez became such an integral part of their being, that even when they came to States, and in many ways lived a better life, they had long been ruined by its corruption. It was a certainty they carried on their skin and in their bones.

We laid him to rest him on the other side of the funeral grounds— a plain dirt lot where my grandparents were buried. My mother used the bail money to pay for a headstone with a dignified epitaph that validated his existence on this earth. I would not be able to express my gratitude to her until I was older, when I'd had time to work through my grievances.

The custom was to bury relatives one atop the other, but my grandparents' lot was at capacity with the recent burial of my youngest uncle. He had been an addict too, but with a far more precarious appetite for alcohol and illicit drugs in any form and from any source. By the time he reached thirty, his liver had turned to stone and his brain had nearly liquefied. He spent the last few weeks of his life confined to a hospital bed, spooked by images of spiders on the walls and floors of his room.

It was so cold, and there weren't any structures around the cemetery to shield us from the wind. Dust began to accumulate in my hair and in the ducts of my eyes. My lips developed small fissures from the dry air, causing them to burn, and my compulsion to moisten them ceased. The priest gave a perfunctory eulogy that was drawn out and ritualistic. There was no hope in the voice of the rector or in the faces of the parishioners. I said my own prayer under my breath, for him and for us, clasping my hands together to gather warmth from the cotton gloves my mother gave me.

When the funeral ended, I asked Alicia if any of his belongings had been sent over from the prison, but she said there wasn't anything. I felt a terrible longing inside to find closure: a letter, a note on a gum wrapper, an underlined bible verse, anything. I was sure he would have left something for me, knowing that I was coming back. But I would never see it. The authorities would have discarded everything in the cell. To them, Cereso was not a place that detained human beings. They considered them animals like the dogs that roamed the halls and nothing to them was worth salvaging. Alicia feeling helpless, told me to go back her house to look for the things I wanted.

The ceiling in his bedroom was water damaged and hung low over the bed. On a single shelf were books on astronomy and philosophy, books he'd always encouraged me to read. I sat on his bed and looked through them all. In the drawer was a package of white socks with the plastic ripped apart at the center and one pair missing. It was the thing he had always asked my mother for during parental visits. Depending on his sobriety, the visits were only a couple of times a year. My mother always made them pleasant for me and my brother. I looked forward to them, and I knew she did, too. If it

happened during the winter months, she would take me to the store and allow me pick out a jacket for him. I would contemplate my choices carefully, and my mother, never rushing me, would attest to my final decision.

“He’ll like that one,” she’d say.

The process had a calming effect on me. They made the visits seem interminable and permanent somehow.

Perched on a stand at the corner of the room, a guitar looked as if it had been abandoned. It was the guitar I wanted because it held my best memories of him. I placed my fingers over the right chords and strummed the only song I knew, careful not to shift the strings that had begun to unravel at the base. Books of sheet music were bound together with electrical tape and stained with coffee semi-circles and cigarette burns. I chose albums I hadn’t seen since I was a child, like Dylan’s ‘Slow Train Coming’ and ‘Street Legal.’ Their images were a reminder of a time when he had a steady presence in my life. It was the first five years before my brother was born. I took only a few of them to leave some for others who might remember him in this way, too. I placed them in a small stack near the door.

Nostalgia began to propel my curiosity, and I searched the closets and underneath the bed, where I found a shoebox. It was filled with pictures of familiar and unfamiliar faces of a life lived with and without us. He had kept a Garfield Valentine card I had given him years ago. It had my inscription on the inside and his thumbprint embossed in motor oil on the right.

*‘We made one of those funny cakes. The kind that made you laugh because they*

*were taller on one side than on the other. We love you...'*

Underneath the photos was a green spiral notebook. The cover had phone numbers written in his handwriting. Inside were pages of song lyrics in both Spanish and English, and one by the Beatles, "Michelle," which he named me after. Somewhere in the middle I found sketches of meticulously detailed illustrations like the drawings of Leonardo daVinci's mechanical elements. It was the archetype for the jewelry box he made for me ten years prior. I realized it was the same notebook he'd had with him at Warm Springs, and I wept quietly, but deeply, on the bed, trying not to alarm my aunt and Miguel, who were in the kitchen talking to friends of my father. I slipped my fingers underneath the glass desktop in his room and removed a picture he had of the four of us. It was one of him kissing my mother, me in my favorite rainbow t-shirt with cotton in my mouth from an extracted tooth, holding out a peace sign with my fingers, and my brother sporting a Kool-Aid moustache with a popped-out belly, wearing a diaper he was too big for. I laughed through my tears at how spoiled we were.

Two hours went by before I could get the courage to leave. I knew that once I left, everything would be different, because there would no longer be a place for me to find him. They took such good care of him, like they did one another, better than relatives from the States. They never stopped hoping, the way everyone on the outside did. But in those last days, I, too, felt myself giving up. I knew that, one day, Alicia and her husband and children would make this place come alive again in a new way. But for me, I feared that with the grandparents gone and my uncle and my father gone, too, the beauty and heart of this place would be lost. It would be a long time before I could come back, and maybe never.

That December night was especially cold and windy. I found it difficult to sleep. When I closed my eyes, I felt the cold air that blew through the cemetery that day. Every thought turned to guilt: the food in my stomach and the warmth of my blankets. But I knew it was wrong, that guilt. I remembered what he said to me that day at my uncle's funeral. He had his arm around me, wearing mirrored sunglasses to conceal his grief, and in consolation, he said, "The people we love are only on loan to us. God doesn't allow us to grieve for too long."

And he looked back up at the sun as if to measure its distance from us, putting his other arm around my brother and kissing him on the top of his head. I could feel the cold, thin air seeping through the cracks of the windowpane, and I hid my head underneath the blankets, seeking their warmth. I listened to the drumming of the branches outside and then I didn't hear anything.

*I open my eyes, but I know I'm still sleeping. From the portico of the cathedral, I can see snow everywhere. It blankets the ground, weighing down the branches of the pine trees. I pull my sweater close around me and listen to the snow falling. It's barely audible, creating a silence beyond the trees that yields to the darkness. Small flecks of ice dissolve on my nose and eyes and on my tongue when I breathe them in. I hear your footsteps in the snow, moving briskly. You can't stay long, but you came to tell me where you've been and what you've seen. You walk toward me with the hood of your sweatshirt over your head, and both hands buried in the front pockets of your jeans, the way you always did. You come to the foot of the step, pulling off the hood. Your face is the way I remember it in pictures before you knew me. You say my name and smile.*

## Cigarettes

She's standing barefoot at my door with pink pajamas and a coupon for seven dollar vodka.

"Where are your shoes?" I say.

"They're at home." Marie hands me a pair of fabric shears and the rest of the newspaper. "Take these," she says.

She puts her loving arms around me and kisses my hair. The sleeves of her black tweed coat hold the warmth of mint and tobacco. She sighs and pats down the wavy strands of hair that have come loose from her bun.

"You need to eat. You want breakfast?" I say.

Her eyes examine the details of my face. She unravels a fuzzy knitted scarf from around her neck and admires the pictures on the wall as if it were the first time she'd seen them. She lingers at the one of me and Eric, thumping him on the forehead.

"Something sweet," she says, and wraps her arms around mine. "Like marshmallows. You have marshmallows?"

I find an opened bag of them in the pantry but they're shriveled and stale.

"What about French toast?" I raise my voice to reach her as she turns to the living room.

I hear a sort of laughter that sounds like crying, so I go out to see her. She's sitting on the edge of the couch watching the muted television, laughing at an infomercial about spray-on-hair.

"What's so funny?"

She tries to explain its absurdity, pointing to the man's face, but the thought of it brings her to tears and more laughter. I laugh, too. The camera zooms in, and the man, who seems more like a caricature, smiles with a full head of powdered hair that resembles coal dust. The female assistant mimics his expression and Marie falls with her back against the couch, her face reddening and mouth agape without sound.

Wheezing, she says, "I have to pee!"

This goes on for a few minutes before she is able to compose herself. She takes a deep breath and leans on my knee for support. Her arms are thinner every time I see her, and it worries me. I stop laughing when I notice a bruise.

"What happened?"

She moistens her lips to speak. "It's from the IV," she says. Her mood changes and she favors the arm. "And the diabetes," she says.

She had been in the hospital for three weeks after having a diabetic seizure in the county jail. Her boyfriend had her arrested after she tried strangling him with kitchen twine while he slept. It was the result of a year-long drinking binge and three days of fighting. She'd met him at this place, a bar, where patrons could drink all night, and then lay hunched on a stool, in a sort of half sleep, until morning. Kasey was homeless when she met him. This both attracted and repulsed her. But that night, they indulged in a surfeit of ale and whiskey as if it were the only thing they had in common. At dawn, they shared a plate of Irish bacon with black and white pudding, and she took him home, which became his home, and no one could get him to leave. It had been the eighth apartment my aunt had co-signed for her in an attempt to keep Marie off the streets. Her mother always made sure the apartments were adorned with her favorite floral prints and

good quality, second hand furniture, so that if she left, she could leave it all there or give it away. Marie loved to give everything away.

I had gone to visit her in the ICU during that first week. She was sedated with a tube affixed to the corner of her mouth. Her eyelids glistened with Vaseline, and her lashes gathered neatly in small upside down triangles like a doll at rest. The room gave off a bitter and sterile scent, as if it were filled with a gas to preserve her body. I sat and talked with my aunt, who spoke in whispers with her soft hands over mine and solace in her eyes. Eventually, solace would turn into laughter when we tried discussing the seriousness of the situation. Making light of Marie's antics had gradually become a sort of survival mechanism for those of us who loved her. Other visitors came and went, and when there wasn't anything left to say, we would just listen to Marie mumble restlessly in her sleep, letting out intermittent puffs of air as if she were sighing.

Three days later, I went to see her again. She seemed better but not quite herself. She asked about Eric, and I told her he'd come to see me. I said he'd brought flowers and my favorite wine and the new dog that I hadn't seen since it was a puppy. He asked to take me out to dinner and said he'd been depressed and lonely for some time. Marie said that we reminded her of her and Kasey, but I didn't know what she meant.

"That fag," she said.

When lunch came, she asked for more Jello. They brought her the sugar-free kind, and I watched her eat three cups and half of the cherry slushy she told me to bring. Afterward, the nurse brought little pleated cups with pills that she rattled every time she said, "okay, one more." Marie obliged, examining and discussing dosages like a medical

professional, then savoring them in her mouth as if they had flavor.

After the nurse had gone, I fluffed her pillows and positioned them so that she could watch television. She flipped through the channels, stopping only to tell me about the programs I didn't know: The Wives of this or that. But it was the travel show that caught her attention, where the host drifted idly on a yacht off the Croatian coast, coddling a simmering pot of mussels from the Adriatic Sea.

"Damn Bourdain," she said. "Who lives this kind of life?"

"Some day."

We sat through five more episodes, all of which she'd already seen. I was beginning to doze off when she muted the television. Her hand was on the remote, listening to the nurses at the station, thinking they were conspiring against her.

"What is it?" I said, but she only raised a finger to her lips and kept listening.

"You have to get me out of here," she said, finally.

I turned around and saw that the nurses were in good spirits, drinking coffee and cackling loudly. One said, "Everything alright?"

Marie looked at me and I looked back at the nurse, "Yeah," I said.

I told Marie to try and sleep. She said, "You know what I want?" She held my wrist to keep me from fluffing the pillow again. "Tell me a story. About anything. I like when you tell me stories." She sunk her head into the pillow and watched me until I could think of something to say.

I told her about the time we drove to California, to the beach, because she loves the beach. I described what the sand felt like under our feet. It was clay soft, and cold and wet. I told to her how peaceful she looked, picking up sea shells and rocks, placing them

in the fold of her sweater. Her hair was braided, the way she does it during her good days. She crouched over the colored rocks and smoothed off the mud until she had a collection of the ones she liked best. I watched her walk far away, so far, I worried that she wouldn't come back. And when she did, we sat on the pier, not talking, and not laughing, just listening to the seagulls and the waves as they lapped up to the shore.

By the time the story was over, Marie had fallen asleep sitting up. So I pushed two chairs together and I fell asleep, too. When I awoke, I found her sitting at the lower end of the hospital bed with her legs dangling over the high rail. She had wild, frizzy hair and suspicious eyes; her voice was erratic. It was like she was the possessed, preparing to thwart her own exorcism.

"I'm leaving," she said. She leapt.

The IV pole crashed down onto the monitor and she dragged it to the door before detaching its tentacles from her skin. The nurses, with coffee in hand, looked to me, and I pointed down the hall. A heavy-set black woman in a tight nurse's uniform ran around the corner like a quarterback in white squeaky shoes. She caught up with Marie near the entrance of the unit.

"You fat bitch, let me go!" Marie's voice echoed down the hall.

The nurses took her down and carried her by her arms and legs back to the room.

"And you?" the nurse said to me. "Only family," she said, "And if she don't behave, she don't get no family neither!"

They let down her feet while they set the bed. Marie stood there with a nurse at each arm, panting like an animal, her gown tussled, her breasts exposed. The catheter lay over the bed rail, dripping urine onto the floor. The nurse paced the room with agitation,

the sides of her shoes stretching beyond the soles.

“Yes, I’m family,” I said.

\*

She took me from bed when I was seven because she had no one to love her. It was early morning before the sun had come up. There was no one else on the road. We stopped to get donuts at a shop on the Strip. The sign said ‘closed’, but the door was open. She rang the service bell on the counter many times before a small Asian man came out from the back.

“Cash only,” he said.

“There aren’t that many left. Just give me everything,” Marie said.

She was wearing a leopard fur coat with a collar that looked like a lion’s mane around her neck. Her make-up was smeared from crying, and her eyes were a clear, crystal blue.

“What else?” she asked me.

“Chocolate milk.”

We got into the car. It was an old T-bird that belonged to her husband. She’d left the T-tops lying like half-moons in the lawn.

“Where should we go?” she whispered to herself. She looked sad.

I looked into the box and took out a donut with sprinkles that had mostly fallen off.

“Hoover Dam...Oh, it’s so beautiful at night,” she said.

We stopped at the corner store. The man at the register hesitated when he saw

Marie's face. He tried looking out the window past his own reflection to see who she was with, but he didn't see me. She came back with a bottle that she left inside a small paper sack.

Even though the drive felt long, I didn't care to ask where we were going. By the time we got there, I was on my second donut, feeling full and on the verge of nausea. We rounded the illuminated roadways faster than we should. I could hear the roar of the spillways and feel the sharp turns in my stomach. The donut crumbled in my hand, and the milk rolled onto the floor under my feet.

She told me her deepest regret, the drinking.

"I know I can change," she said.

Only she said it as if she were joking. She laughed and laughed. I had to turn away from her to listen. The stars streaked the dark sky like comets. I was weightless. I could hear the air but I could not breathe it in.

"You have to tell Kasey to leave, Marie."

She stares me down and belches. "Can I have one?" she says, holding an orange in each hand.

"I'll cut it into wedges."

She rolls one toward me and uses the shears to cut the peel of the other. There is an uncomfortable silence and I nick my finger with the knife. She bites into the incision of the orange, allowing beads of juice to roll over the tweed. I wrap a napkin around my finger and press tightly.

"I can't buy vodka for...."

“Yes, you can,” she says before I’ve finished saying it. Her mouth is full of juice and it sounds like gargling.

“That’s a shitty thing to do. Buy vodka for an alcoholic. A diabetic-alcoholoic,” I say.

By folding the rest of the orange in half, she is able to siphon the juice with slurping motions.

“I’ll pay you back,” she says.

“Are you crazy?” I dab her coat with a sponge. “You’re not listening to me.”

“No, I heard you. I know you can’t do it. But I love you anyway. You know I love you, right? I love my cousin so much.”

I lean back into the couch and stare at the ceiling. “What are we gonna do? I don’t ever know what to do,” I say.

It’s overcast outside and all we have is the gray light from the clouds. It shines dimly on our faces, and when I look at her, her thin little body, skin loose from all the weight loss, I think she looks tired, ready to give in to some kind of change.

“Did I show you my foot?” she says.

“What?”

“I hit it on the stairs, I got this toe right here.” She wiggles the small reddened toe. “It’s swollen. It hurts, too.”

I touch it and it feels hot, the skin dry and cracked. She crosses her arms over her chest and squeezes her upper arms, the way one does to ward off the cold. Her voice turns soft and child-like and her eyes illuminate at any sign of assent.

“We can get the small bottle,” she says in sort of a snivel. “I have a coupon.”

“Will you just go back to the hospital and get it over with?”

She wraps the orange into a napkin and puts it in her pocket. She smiles at me and runs a warm sticky hand over my cheek.

It is getting dark outside and she says she has to leave before the rain. She’s decided to walk to the store to get an ointment for her toe.

“Just wait till morning,” I say. “Can you wait until then?”

The pharmacy clerk is surprised to see us standing outside the doors before opening hours. She lets us in, and Marie walks doggedly toward the liquor isle, where a man in black slacks is still unpacking bottles of whiskey. By the time I get there, Marie is holding a half gallon bottle of vodka with the bottom flat against her stomach, while she scours the label for proof and impurities. Large block numbers tower over her head, like a dialogue balloon that reads: Vodka \$10.94.

“No, no, no,” I say, as I walk around the corner.

The man in slacks is begins to adhere lock tops to the whiskey bottles. He’s looking at me, I sense, with disgust, but I avoid eye contact with him and crouch down to look for the 50ml ‘mini bottle’ on the bottom shelf.

“It’s on *sale*,” she says from behind me. Her voice is loud and garbled and it startles me. I turn to face her and see that her eyes are beginning to droop. “I’ll pay...*back*,” she says.

I start walking to the register with the 50ml hidden behind a bag of potato chips.

“This is all you’re getting,” I tell her.

The worker has stopped locking the bottles and is watching us like a buzzard from

the perch of his ladder. Marie keeps up with me, still holding the liter. I turn to her in the food isle and whisper, "Put-the-bottle-back." I avoid her response and move with haste to the counter.

"Will that be all?" the cashier says, while scanning the items.

"Yes," I say.

"*And this,*" Marie says, placing the liter and coupon on the counter. She keeps her eyes on the cashier and ignores my gaze.

"Nope." I slide the liter off the counter with Marie's hand still gripping the handle.

The cashier holds the scanner back and peers over her reading glasses. "Sssooo just one bottle...and the chips?" she says, looking back and forth between me and Marie.

"Jen!" she says, then mouthes, *my foot*. "I'll go to that place next week. Just this one time."

"That one, too," I say to the cashier. My ears and temples are throbbing.

The scanner beeps a third time, running its red laser over the barcode and Marie's knuckles.

"Twenty-six o' three, with the coupon" the lady says.

Marie leans into the counter with her pelvis and rummages through a snap-top change purse. "Wait, I have the three pennies," she says.

I spend the next three days without a word from Marie. I work overtime at the bank and eat frozen spaghetti meals for lunch every day because they're on sale, ten for ten. The drab of the lunch hour in the employee lounge drags on longer than it should.

The inane hour of soap operas and court dramas are shrouded by the static of an old television screen, but still, I find myself engaging in their stories. I flip through outdated magazines, sniff the odorless perfume inserts and read the same articles I've already read. A guy named Allan eats lunch at the same time I do. He talks to his girlfriend, and they talk about nothing in particular, but it always makes him hum in response. "Hmm," he says. Some days, I find myself attracted to him.

It is early evening. I make myself a turkey sandwich for dinner and sit on the patio. I take out photo albums that hold vivid images of my life with Eric that now, seems so long ago. We had been in the habit of loving and hating each other. This oscillation became a regular cycle of the relationship, and the only ones who never seemed to tire of this madness, were us. We always had the energy for it, after three months, or even six months. There was always hope for each other and for this thing that wasn't working. When the dog died, I should have taken it as a sign, but it was in my nature to hold on to the things I couldn't change. It's been a year, and I told him when he came back for me that I've stopped loving him, and that I've given myself permission to let go. He cried when I said it. He was at my door with the picture of an extravagant herb garden he'd planted for me in our backyard, because when he was hurting, he was more thoughtful and more patient and giving of his time. But these gestures were only temporary. I had to put enough distance between us so I could discover who I was apart from him.

The neighborhood moved at a slower pace than it did that morning. Stray cats roam the streets waiting to be fed, and the pigeons flock the carports looking for scraps from the people who live on the second floor. They scratch and flutter at the slightest movement of my hand.

“Hello?” I hear a voice from inside the apartment.

I turn around, and even though the room is getting dark, I can see her silhouette, the bun and the stray hairs.

“Hey,” I say, turning on the lights.

“Kasey’s asleep,” Marie says. “That *asshole* won’t tell me where he put the cigarettes, and I can’t find his wallet.”

She’s barefoot again and looking into the mirror by the door. I can tell she hasn’t slept because of the lines around her eyes. She lets out a sigh of frustration.

“Have you heard from my mom?” she asks.

“Yesterday. Just hello and goodbye. ”

“Don’t tell her anything,” Marie says. “She doesn’t like Kasey and she won’t help me when he’s here.” She says to the mirror, “Fine, mom, I’ll starve!”

“What do you want to eat?” I say.

We look down at her feet. She bends her toes up and down to measure the amount of swelling, then brushes away the dust and puts on my sandals.

“Can I borrow these?” she says.

She kisses me on the cheek and leaves without closing the door, her scarf a small heap on the floor. I slip my fingers between the blinds to watch her. Her pink silk pajamas flutter around her legs and the bun bobs up and down with her movement. I release the blinds and breathe in a wisp of dust.

*Something sweet for Marie.* I turn the burner on high and let the pieces of charred flakes burn away from the metal grates. Thin streams of smoke rise from the burners, making the kitchen smell of pot roast and rosemary potatoes. The small drops of water

under the pan crackle and steam until they evaporate and I lower the heat. *Something rich.* I whisk eggs and cream and vanilla in a bowl until it froths; then cut thick slices of French bread, allowing the crumbs to fall at my feet. *Something bitter.* I grate the rind of an orange and mix it into the cream. Each slice of bread absorbs more than its share. Two knobs of butter in the pan for crispy edges. They cool a bit and get cradled into a bed of white napkins with a side of maple syrup.

With her scarf over my shoulders, I knock on her door several times before the peephole goes black.

She opens the door just wide enough to put her face through.

“For later,” I say.

She looks behind her and then back at me, “Come in,” she says, and takes me by the arm, slamming the door behind me. The television is up so loud that I think something is wrong. It’s only been an hour since she left my apartment, but I get the sense that she’s doing something she shouldn’t. The atmosphere is circuslike and peculiar. It’s cold in the apartment, and the ceiling fan is revolving so fiercely that the motor swivels unsteadily from side to side. The cool night wind blows through the curtains that frame the sliding doors of the back porch. They flap and swirl in and out of the apartment. Kasey lies face down on the sofa bed, naked, but partially covered by a floral sheet. I pause before coming in further, afraid that I’ll wake him, but Marie shrugs and leads me to the kitchen. The lights shine brightly from every corner of the room: the closets, the stove, and even a flashlight, which is pointed at his head.

We sit at the kitchen table lined with empty prescription bottles. The pills were arranged into colorful piles, where she’d been sorting them into weekly-labeled pill

boxes. She slides them to the very edge with her arm to make room for the plate. She unravels the plastic wrap and licks off the powdered sugar from a slice of French toast, still eyeballing Kasey.

“Do you have milk?” I ask.

“My disability check doesn’t come ‘til tomorrow.”

“What have you been eating?”

“Pizza.”

I open the fridge and find a few condiment packets, a watered down Slurpee, and food wrapped in a napkin.

“Is this pizza?”

“It’s Bisquick,” she says. “The sauce is ketchup. You do what you gotta do, you know?”

On the counter, there are cupcakes stuck to the inside of a baking pan; the cake is hard around the edges and doughy in the middle. There’s a mixing bowl with more than one container of frosting and a swirl of red food coloring. The wooden spoon is sitting within the mix and the dropper is on its side dripping dye onto the counter.

“Those are still good, you can have one if you want, but leave some for Kasey or he’ll get on my ass, like a little bitch.” She folds a piece of French toast in half and dips it into the maple syrup, turning it slowly in her mouth.

“What’s that flavor?” she says.

“I think you’re tasting the orange.”

“Mmm.”

She stops chewing when she hears Kasey stir, and stretches her body halfway off

the chair, peering into the living room. Her arm is extended out for balance, and syrup drips from the toast onto the carpet.

“Kasey! The cigarettes!” Her body lifts upward with the force of her words.

I feel like I should leave, but I’m worried what he’ll do. I’ve only known him to be well-mannered and composed, but that feels like a lie. From here, I can’t tell if he’s breathing, but Marie is sure he is.

“I’m gonna beat your ass if you don’t get up!” she says.

His face is now turned toward us, mouth open, cheek stretched against the pillow. Her eyes have narrowed out of annoyance for his incognizance.

“Let’s just go to my place,” I say, but she brushes past me.

She takes an unripe peach from a bowl at the top of the fridge and says, “Watch this.”

She balls up the peach in her hand the way a baseball pitcher would, bringing her arm over her head.

“No!” I try to say firmly, but it comes out in a whisper.

I clench my eyes and hear the slap against his cheek, and then a groan.

Marie leans over his ear, “*Where-are-the-cigarettes?*” she says, calmly. When he doesn’t respond, she picks up the peach from the pillow.

“You want me to throw it again?” she says.

I mouth, *Marie!* She just winks at me.

“Look at me,” she says to him.

With his face still smothered against the pillow, he takes in a deep breath.

She cups the peach again and smiles at me. I think I’m holding my breath

because she begins to laugh at me, her windpipe forcing a wheeze that elongates the sound. “You should see the look on your face,” she tells me.

“Marie!” I reach for her wrist, but the peach is already in motion, and we both fall against the wall. Then the crack of his nose.

“Owww! Shhhit!” His speech is slurred and reaction, gradual. He puts his hand to his nose and tries to open his eyes with quick erratic blinks. “What the fuck’s going on?” He lies there for a moment, staring at the ceiling.

I try to pull her to the kitchen but she’s too strong. She continues to nibble on the toast, keeping vigil over Kasey. He finally sits up and pulls the weight of his legs into the denim shorts that were on the floor. His socks are blackened on the bottoms and turned up at the toes.

“Look at you!” she crows.

“Hey!” He yells but not in her direction. “Do you want me to get off this bed and kick your ass?” His eyes are focused on the floor, and he hasn’t noticed me. “Do you?” he says.

She laughs another throaty laugh at the thought of it. “You can’t even stand up!”

He tries to balance himself, following the sound of her voice as if he lacked peripheral vision.

“Let’s go,” I say, but she’s locked in like a cat waiting to seize a mouse that’s scurrying across the floor.

I move away to the kitchen, just out of sight, to see what he will do. Still unmindful of my presence, he walks toward her with clenched fists. His chest is crowded with curly blonde hair. He walks as if on a tight rope, feeling the air. He puts his face at

hers, but Marie remains unmoved with an arched brow and a cagey stare.

“I *can* and *will* beat your ass!” he says with his teeth compressed.

“Hey!” I say to him. He turns in my direction, hones in on the refrigerator, then at me.

“What are you doing?” I ask him. He stares at me with his lips apart, his tongue mimicking speech against the roof of his mouth.

“Kasey!” I say.

“She hit me... with a piece of fruit,” he says this like it just occurred to him.

“I thought you said *she* was the drunk.”

His body sways subtly from side to side, which then turns to small circular motions.

“She makes me drink with her.” He confers with himself before going on. “Yes, she says...Kasey, you dumb fuck, take me to the grocery store and buy me some fucking booze.”

I look to Marie to see if it’s true. She’s smiling.

“Why are you still here when the cops have already told you to leave?” I say.

“Because...because I pay the bills.” He talks past me toward the wall. “I pay for everything here.”

“Get the fuck out, Kasey!” Marie says.

“You want these cigarettes? Huh!” He takes the pack out of its hiding place, opens it and throws a handful of cigarettes at her chest, which fall to the floor. Marie picks them up and lights one.

“You want me to leave?” he says to the room. “I’ll leave.” He goes to the

bedroom and shoves a pair of shorts and socks in a backpack. He leans against the dresser and scrolls through his cell phone, mumbling to himself. *“I paid for that couch. That couch is definitely mine.”*

When he comes out of the room, he announces, “All these things here belong to me!”

“Her mother gave her this furniture,” I say.

Marie goes to the kitchen and he follows her. She digs a cupcake out of the pan, then dips her hand into the frosting.

“Here. You paid for this too,” she holds it up to his face.

“Oh, you think this is a joke?” he says. He paces around the apartment, saying to himself: *“I bought this bed, that T.V.’s mine, the DVD...that is my DVD, I bought all these movies.”*

He goes to the kitchen and takes out an old steak knife with a wooden handle. He conceals it with the inside of his palm like a ruffian, the blade pointing upward along his forearm, his head leaning forward ready to charge at us. It’s more comedic than alarming.

“Are you stupid?” she says.

He speaks out of the corner of his mouth with an unnatural sounding country accent, “Come on, sweetheart, you know I love you to death.” Marie looks enchanted.

“Just leave!” I say.

He throws down the knife, and rather than leave through the front door, he leaves through the patio and jumps the short stucco wall. Methodically, she follows him out to the patio, and sits at a stone table, flicking ashes into a mound of crushed filters and ash.

Kasey stretches his arm over the wall and says, “Those cigarettes are mine! I’m not going anywhere until I get those back.”

She squints in response to his words, streaming smoke from her tight lips. He paws in vain at the pack that lay just out of reach, Marie finding it humorous.

“Here,” she flicks a cigarette butt from the ashtray, striking the center of his forehead.

“This is bullshit!” He takes the sagging backpack and yanks up the sides of his denim shorts and dawdles across the street to a park, where he sits under a tree among the pigeons, looking doleful.

“What’s he doing?” I ask.

“He’ll be back,” she says.

Now that we are alone, I feel I can talk with Marie about the situation, the drinking and the dysfunction of this relationship. I tell her that they both need help and that her body won’t be able to last in this way. She listens attentively and even engages in a plan to leave him and admit herself to rehab. It is in these quiet moments that she seems most like her herself, shrewd and sensible. And pushing through my exhaustion, I’m hopeful. We hug with our cheeks pressed together and she tells me she loves me, which, despite anything else, I have always sensed to be true. The smell of her skin, and the mint, and the distinctness of her voice, remind me of my childhood. Although the signs had always been there, there were longer periods of sobriety in which I came to know her. She gave me a book of prayers with an inscription of her affection and said it would help me during my most troubling times. Within my own prayers for deliverance and grace, I prayed, too, she would find her way.

On nights when my mother worked late, and my father, who was an addict, too, was not well enough to care for me, I would stay under the care of my aunt and uncle. I'd lay awake in the bed they made for me, thinking about my mother and when she would return. Marie would look in on me and sometimes find me staring at the ceiling, crying. She'd take me to her room and tuck me in, and together, we'd say a prayer for the safe return of my parents. And then I had questions. *Are we supposed to love God more than our parents? Why did He make us? Who made God? Who made the person who made God?*

"Yes, more than our parents, more than anyone."

"Why did He..."

"I don't know about all that. No one does."

I couldn't understand it. My parents were the universe. It was because of them I could see the moon and the stars and feel the warmth of the sun. But she told me what everyone always told me: I would understand someday what it meant. And when I ran out of questions, or when she stopped giving answers to them, I fell asleep soundly in the nook of her arm until I felt my mother carry me away.

She kept her eyes on Kasey during our entire conversation. And after more than thirty minutes, a man in a truck pulls up and they drive off.

"That dumbass called his dad," she says. She strokes the thumbwheel of the lighter three times before it ignites. The flame rises and falls with each puff.

"What will you do?" I say.

"I'm sick of his shit, you know?"

“Why don’t you let me call your mom. You should stay with her. Just until you get better.”

She shrugs her shoulders and breathes in smoke. She smokes and smokes, until the last of the tobacco and paper has burned away.

“My mom hates me,” she says.

And then I realize we’re back where we started. I walk to the door to let myself out and she follows me.

“You know what? I can’t say that. She’s been good to me,” she says.

“You have to want this.” I say these words, but they sound like ones I’ve said before.

We’re interrupted by Marie’s next door neighbor, an elderly woman, who comes out in her nightgown and robe with her hair made-up. She sets down a bag of garbage just outside her door.

“Hey, Jeanie,” Marie says.

“Yes, hello,” Jeanie says loudly. The nodding of her head causes her wig to shift up and down over her forehead. “Oh.” She holds the wig in place. “I put it on to take out the trash. No pins.”

“Are we making too much noise?” Marie says.

“No, no. I turn my hearing aid all the way down at night,” she says, tapping the device. “I don’t hear anything.”

Marie crosses her arms, creating an uncomfortable silence as Jeanie retreats back to her apartment. “Okay then,” she says.

“She’s one of my mom’s spies,” Marie says.

I hear Marie gasp and she turns me around by the shoulders. “Look!”

Two men on Harleys pull into the carport. One of them is Marie’s neighbor, the biker guy from upstairs, and the other, one of his cohorts. They capture our attention with their black leather sleeveless jackets and white t-shirts, dirty blond hair past the shoulders and neatly trimmed beards and goatees. They look down at us through the spaces between the steps, treading up the stairs with the pounce of heavy black leather boots and rattling chains.

“Mmm,” I think I hear Marie say, but when I look at her, she doesn’t blink.

The friend grips a case of beer over his shoulder with thick hands and flat, four-sided silver rings on the middle fingers that make them seem immense. His eyes are serious but friendly, inviting.

“Have you met my cousin?” Marie says, using her best decorum. “This is Jennifer!”

I raise my hand hello in an attempt to counter her signals.

“Nice to meet you, Jennifer?”

The friend taps his rings against the case of beer. “It’s poker night, ladies,” he says as he ascends to the top.

Marie is awestruck with an expression similar to the man in the infomercial.

“Don’t do it,” I say.

She lights another cigarette, holding in the smoke and says, “I won’t,” then blows it out.

“Hey, did you get a note on your door about the fire extinguishers?” she says.

“Not yet, no.”

“Or maybe it’s an eviction notice. I don’t understand the letter. They use any excuse just to come in and look through your shit.”

I don’t say anything. My mind is too tired. She rolls her eyes at me and tells me I’m too serious and that I should stop thinking about that little bitch, meaning Eric. But I wasn’t thinking about him.

“Here.” She holds out the cigarette and I take a hit from between her fingers even though it’s been a year. Then I take it from her and smoke it until it’s done.

She puts a few *Red and Whites* in my pocket. “That’s for the other things you’ll miss,” she says. We say goodnight, and without turning around, she says, “Thanks for the food.”

I sleep soundly that night. One of the neighbors complains to me about the loud music that lasted until one in the morning, but I said I didn’t hear anything. When I get home that evening, I stop at my mailbox and see Jeanie holding one of the strays and posting a lost and found on the community board.

“Marie’s been evicted,” she tells me.

“How do you know?”

“There’s a letter on the door. She knocked on my door this morning and asked me for garbage bags to put her clothes in. I just gave them to her, didn’t ask questions. Then her guy friend, you know the one that lives there, he showed up, and they took what they could carry with them to the bus stop.”

“Was it Kasey? The skinny guy?”

“Yes, that’s the one,” she nods. Her hair is pinned at the sides with several bobby

pins that overlap each other. “But there’s something else,” she says.

She tells me she saw Marie coming down the stairs after midnight, wearing only a sweater and underwear that ‘exposed her tuckus.’ She said she had her jeans in one hand and a bottle of gin in the other.

“I called her mother. I thought she should know,” she says.

When I go to her apartment, only half the notice is still taped to the door. Her furniture, everything, is lined up along the walkway. The nightstand has a piece of notebook paper taped to its side that reads: *free furniture more inside*, in Marie’s handwriting. I don’t know why, but I go in. There isn’t anything except a couple of roach motels in the corners of the room, and the patio curtains and table. The sliding door is open, as if they’d left through it. The wind blew ash into the apartment and the crushed filters rolled in different directions on the floor. I find my plate and sandals at the kitchen counter next to an empty Sno Balls wrapper.

The neighbors begin to congregate outside the apartment.

“Are you having a yard sale?”

Another woman says to her, “The sign says *free*.”

“Take it. She’d want you to have it,” I say.

“Did she pass away?”

“No.” I hear frustration in my voice and change my tone. “She just doesn’t need them anymore.”

I never told Eric my feelings had changed. There was a part of me that always expected him to come back year after year, that looked for a letter in the mail, or a word

from a friend who'd run into him. That's how it always started. But when he showed up at my door, I didn't pretend to love him anymore. I had stopped nurturing an affection for him that was naturally trying to die off. I didn't warn him that things had changed because, in my loneliness, I hadn't recognized the change in myself. And how would I begin to take back the parts of myself I had given away for so long? I couldn't yet see it.

I sit on the porch, still in my uniform, listening to the evening news. I lose track of the time, and after a while, I see my aunt pull up to the empty carport in front of Marie's apartment. She sits in her car and makes several phone calls before leaning back against the headrest. Jeanie meets her at the door and they talk for a while. She motions toward the biker's apartment, and after some words, toward the bus stop, too. My aunt stays inside the apartment and emerges again just before dark, sweeping the porch. I make a couple of sandwiches and go to her. We carry a few boxes to the car of the household items people didn't take, but there isn't much. We eat our dinner at the stone table outside, and being here with her restores my strength. She tells me about a house she and my uncle bought in Idaho, where they go every summer to rake away the leaves and build solidarity with other Idahoans, the groundwork for a future permanent life.

"Every day there's something to look forward to. Something important you didn't know was there before," she says.

Before long, everyone has gone inside and we're sitting in the dark, and the only sound is the sound of our voices getting stronger. We're talking and laughing about the things Marie said.

**VITA**  
Graduate College  
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Isabel Ontiveros

Degrees:

Bachelor of Arts, 2005  
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Masters of Fine Arts, 2014  
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Thesis Title:

*Before You Knew Me*

Thesis Committee:

Chairperson, Richard Wiley, MFA  
Committee Member, Douglas Unger, MFA  
Committee Member, Maile Chapman, Ph.D.  
Graduate Faculty Representative, Miriam Melton-Villanueva, Ph.D.