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**IN SEARCH OF:
STORIES FROM THE ONES LEFT BEHIND**

by

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B.A. University of Central Florida, 2003

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
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ABSTRACT

In Search Of: Stories from the Ones Left Behind introduces five young women—June, Leila, Kiss, Marianne, and Alma—who struggle to impede loved ones from abandoning them. One woman confronts her worst fears when she finds out about her husband’s affair with a mutual friend; one comes to terms with her sister’s poor lifestyle choices; another copes with her mother’s sudden marriage; and yet another figures out that in order to keep her fiancé, she must be willing to take on responsibilities foreign to her.

And then there is the story of Alma, a contemplative but naïve seventeen-year-old girl who commits a serious mistake, an act of prostitution, and when her parents find out, she’s left with no choice except to leave her hometown before high school graduation. Alma learns that when it comes to the aftermath of mistakes, women often get a double-dose of pain, plus they run the risk of being removed from the family circle.

These stories also touch on other themes: mother-daughter relationships; sibling rivalry and communion; adultery; marriage to foreigners; spirituality; atheism amongst a religious family; dependency; and also how contemporary young women deal with relatively successful careers. But the one common thread running through the heart of these women’s stories is how they confront the threat of being pushed aside or deserted by a loved one.

For Nick

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to my family and friends who continuously encourage me to keep going despite the set-backs. Ivonne, Pat, Terry, and Jeanne—all of you have given me much-needed guidance during my writing apprenticeship. Last, I'd like to thank my muse, my husband, whose ongoing love and support expands beyond the writing world.

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ON WRITING, AN INTRODUCTION

I read a few years ago that a writer's apprenticeship takes about ten years. If that's true, well, I've reached the half-way mark. Although I still don't call myself a writer in casual conversation—perhaps only a few successful authors employ such a word—I do exhibit all the manifestations and symptoms of a writer. Going more than one day without reading or writing makes me feel guilty. It wasn't always this way. In the beginning, I took up creative writing as an undergraduate and, later, as a grad student, but I wrote sporadically to meet deadlines. I'm easily distracted and bored with routines. And then I got married, broke down and confessed to my husband that I wasn't pursuing an MFA in Creative Writing because I simply wanted a teaching career, my way of escaping the inevitable, "So, what *are* you going to do with this degree?" question from concerned family and friends. I told him the truth, one that I hadn't voiced even to myself: I was really in it for the writing, which at the time sounded like a major revelation. He said, "You have to do what you have to do." And then I got into the habit of writing every morning.

Actually, no, it didn't happen that way. I wrote sporadically for another year after the breakthrough conversation. There were calls from my mother or one of my four brothers during my allotted writing period (weekdays, nine a.m. to noon), or my husband would invite me to have lunch downtown and we'd converse about some work-related issue, just a few minutes, and the momentum would be gone. There were bills to pay and chores to do around the house. Besides, I could write tomorrow morning. Sometimes a week would pass without actually working on any particular project, and then the guilt would set-in again.

At a writer's conference, I went to a lecture given by Robert Olen Butler, in which he was promoting his latest book on creating fiction. Back home, I read the book and finally accepted the fact that I needed to dedicate sufficient time to getting to know my character's motives and her world before actually worrying about plot. Although I didn't agree with all of Butler's theories and methods, *From Where You Dream* was the first book that motivated me to write every day *and* to think of myself as an artist. I wanted to be taken seriously, and I had to focus on excelling my art form. Like visual artists who spend most of their time in a studio and musicians who play every night if they want to succeed, I read more, wrote three hours a day, and helped those closest to me understand that I couldn't be interrupted. I wasn't watching television or painting my nails. I wrote with a sense of purpose, which was my greatest metamorphous while pursuing the MFA.

The not-so-great part was that I spent more than two years working on a novel which didn't blossom into the best project. The unraveling began with the issue of turning in a chapter for workshop every few weeks. At first, the comments were helpful in developing the story and working through some of the minor kinks. After the second round, however, I returned home with angry comments from people who complained that they had no idea what was going on in my story. Things got much worse in future workshops. I couldn't blame them. They were reading bits and pieces of something nowhere close to completion. We were used to the closure of a short story. And then there were the constraints of the thesis writing process. To show progress, I had to turn in a new chapter every few weeks. My advisor's constructive criticism became a haunting voice that I couldn't quiet it down whenever I sat down to write. Things got too complicated between us—the novel and me—so a substantial part of it ended up in my computer's Recycle Bin.

For months, I put down the novel. Somewhere around that time I read *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri and realized that Alma was headed down a similar path as Gogol Ganguli, a man whose parents emigrate from Calcutta to New York. As he grows up, he experiences major

conflicts with his family's culture, which nearly tears them apart. I understood then what was happening with Alma's story. She grows up in a small town where there has been a shift in cultural values, and the change came about by the introduction of Western thought and commercialism. Those struggles started to make sense to me. Alma became a much real character to me as if I could catch a flight to San Juan and drive to her beachfront house. It sounded almost crazy, but she'd sit there next to me while I ate dinner or read a book or listened to the rain from my balcony. She told me about her issues with Christianity, prostitution, and parental control. Even though, I was on a mission to complete my thesis, Alma wouldn't go away. The novel was finished but individual chapters needed more time than I had; I would have never done her story justice.

Today, I can safely say that writing workshops served a purpose in my apprenticeship, and, yet, I am glad that the fifteen plus conflicting voices are gone from my head. I can write about things that matter to me, especially about my fears which permeate most of my writing. A particular interest of mine is the subject of adultery. I read fiction about affairs and talked to people who had been on both sides of the struggle. "Corset," for example, was influenced by my favorite short story writer, Andre Dubus, and his novella, "We Don't Live Here Anymore," in which a conflicted man, Jack Lindin, has an affair with his best friend's wife, Edith Evans. I was interested in this story because the other two novellas in the collection tell the stories of Edith and her husband, Hank, but we don't hear Terry's voice. Marianne in my story, "Corset," initially came to me as Terry. But I changed a few key things. The story is set in present day times, Marianne has a rather successful career instead of being a housewife, the children are non-existent because that's how Dubus' explains why Terry and Jack stayed together, and the actual affair is less appealing. Marianne still stays with her husband, Jason, and, despite her act of revenge, she doesn't get the satisfaction that she thought was possible. In the end, she realizes that nothing will be the same in their lives.

Another writer who I deeply admire is Alice Munro. I read her book, *Runaway, Stories*, because one of my advisors saw a connection between “Alma” and Munro’s story, “Passions.” In both stories, the women are paid to disappear. In the initial drafts of my novel, Paul’s wife offers Alma a few hundred dollars to leave Cabo Rojo. She’s concerned about how the affair will affect her and her family since they live in a small town, and she doesn’t want people to know that a seventeen-year-old girl seduced her husband. Well, I thought that Alma’s motives would be lost if Paul’s wife took control of the situation. After many re-writes, I realized what Alma wanted the most. Her intentions weren’t as innocent as she first thought, and there was more at stake for her than the money she got from having sex with Paul. I sought to create a more memorable character, one that totters back and forth between being trustworthy and unreliable. Works from authors like Janet Fitch, Mona Simpson, Kim Edwards, Andre Dubus III and Chang-Rae Lee stand out to me in terms of character development. Whether told in first or third person, we get round, conflicted characters who are forced to take difficult decisions, and we see their negative and positive qualities work with and against each other as they change over time.

Last, culture and language have influenced my writing immensely. I’m a native Spanish-speaker, born in a small, western town in Puerto Rico very close to where Alma’s story takes place. My grandmother had thirteen kids, two of whom died at birth because of poor nutrition; both of my grandfathers labored intensely in the sugar cane fields; my father worked in a sugar refinery and later at the GE plant; my mother sewed jeans for Blue Bell. We moved to Florida when I was eight years old. I spent the first years in the United States stuck in Intensive English courses, which meant no basic grammar lessons for me. Although I was an avid reader, my parents didn’t understand my passion for literature. They were far more concerned with putting food on the table than providing anything more than public education. I remember begging them to drive me to the library because I

could borrow the books for free. I didn't own any books growing up. Today, my husband helps me with phrases that don't always make sense to me. I'm still learning.

Because I'm keenly aware of my ethnicity, I started graduate school with an ambition to read novels and short stories written by Latin Americans. Some authors were unforgettable like Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Sandra Cisneros. Others failed the mark. At first, I solely wanted to write about my experiences as a Puerto Rican because I had so much to say. But my collection ended up having two stories, "Poised" and "Alma," whose characters' ethnicity reflect my initial interests. I can't help noticing how much culture weighs down a writer's work. Others expect us to have something significant to contribute. It's a constant struggle, and one that I cannot ignore. An important lesson from my readings has been that an exotic setting and foreign-speaking characters do not necessarily add up to a captivating story. Instead, I kept in mind the women's deepest motivations and desires. Hopefully, that's what my readers will reflect on when they finish reading my stories.

POISED

On Thursday morning, Kiss woke up breathless, her body twisted in a blanket, sweating profusely, like a child stirred from a night terror. In her dream, she was drowning in amniotic fluid inside of her mother's womb.

Dazed but awake, Kiss picked out of her closet a well-ironed, knee-length skirt and a crisp, button-down shirt, and she threw her leather pumps in her bag because she wore flats to ride her bicycle to work. She taught Basic Spanish at a community college in Lake Wales, Florida.

As she dabbed a bit of gloss on her lips, she flicked her hair back and posed in a sultry move—chin over the shoulder. She wanted to fuel the campus rumors that there was more than met the eye when it came down to Ms. Kiss Mendez. She liked it when people called her mysterious. An astronomy professor had asked her out because of this very rumor. He had said, “There’s nothing more peculiar than a woman who wears a skirt while riding a *bicyclette*.” He was a tall French man with a gray beard, and he slurred words like “woman” and “riding” when excited. She had rejected his invitation to watch the stars from his house. Soon after, a prestigious university up north hired the professor. She remembered him with pity, even though she gave him the cold shoulder as they walked past each other in school corridors. In reality, he was at least twenty years older than her. She found it impossible to correct him because she feared that he’d say that she looked older.

When she finished dressing, Kiss stepped into her mother's kitchen via a windowless hallway that connected the bedrooms to the main living area. At the age of twenty-seven, she still lived with her mother because a car crash four years earlier left Kiss' fiancé disturbingly manic-depressive.

Diego had arrived home, high on weed, and stumbled onto the couch where she was knitting him a sweater. Out of nowhere, he threw a shoe at the TV screen. “I loved your goddamn, sexy name,” he said. “But now that I know you, shit, I think you’re a fucking bore.” She replayed the word in her mind, *bore*, put down her knitting and marched into their bedroom. Later that week, despite his promise to quit smoking, Kiss drove her beat-up car from Hialeah to Lake Wales. Kiss felt responsible; she had caused the accident. Still, there was no way in hell that she could live with a man who called her a bore.

In the kitchen now, Vilma rinsed dishes with one hand and held a cordless phone with the other. She wore oversized black pants with an elastic band that made her hips look rounder. Her frizzed red hair was pulled back at the nape.

The sun shone directly into Kiss’ eyes, and, when she was able to see more than sunspots, Kiss noticed that the framed family pictures had been stripped off of the walls. They’d been there the night before.

“What happened to the photos?” Kiss asked.

Vilma hushed her with a pointed index finger to the lips.

“Did you take them down?”

Vilma said, “*Sí, niña*,” and then continued talking to *Ándres*, her boyfriend.

Kiss poured cereal and milk into a bowl, and then she sat on a chair opposite of the china cabinet. She ate mindlessly because she was compulsively thinking about her mother’s relationship. At first, she considered it a temporary engagement to stimulate the senses. Kiss loved to see the brightness in her mother’s eyes. Despite an insomnia-inducing worry—*Ándres* didn’t have any papers—Kiss eased her fears with daily reaffirmations that the two were not meant to be together. *Ándres*, a man with a beautiful Colombian accent, picked citrus fruit in the groves of Polk County. Kiss’ father owned a successful used car dealership and was a doting husband up until six years ago

when prostate cancer took his life away. The following year, her mother sold the Miami townhouse and fled, northbound, to a town unknown to them.

Things were turning out different than Kiss had hoped. As she watched her mother lean her elbow into the kitchen counter, Kiss remembered a night when her mother wept in the living room because Andrés hadn't returned her phone calls. Kiss had said, "No man is worth you getting flustered over," because her mother had taught her to say such things in times of despair. Vilma had said in Spanish, "I miss him terribly." Weeks later, her mother's moping around stopped. In its stead, a silence crept into the house as Andrés whisked Vilma away on weekend beach trips. Her mother returned with pictures. Andrés and Vilma holding hands under palm trees, staring out into the ocean, and even one in which they shared a deep kiss on an undressed bed. Angry past the point of reason, Kiss phoned her brother, Bertito, in the middle of the night and ranted about her mother's crazed love-affair. "God only knows how many women he's fucking at the same time," she had said without a reason. "I'm not buying the romantic *campesino* bullshit. That man has other things in mind." In the stupor of his sleep, Bertito had agreed that their mother was headed towards the deep end of the pool. And then he had said, "But at least Ma can float." His partial concurrence calmed her down a bit. After they hung up, however, Kiss remembered that Bertito was the least capable of deciphering what was right or wrong in matters of the heart. Her mother should be dragged out of the pool, even if she came out kicking and screaming.

Vilma now hunched over the sink. Kiss couldn't make out much of the conversation except for something that sounded like, "I'll call my son," and then she hung up the phone.

Kiss put down her spoon. "Can I get you some tea?"

Vilma shook her head in a way that made her torso flutter.

For a moment, Kiss thought that the relationship had come to its conclusion, and that her mother would ask Bertito to reclaim personal objects carelessly left behind in Andrés' house or

apartment; Kiss didn't know where the man lived. She wasn't interested in finding out about his past—what part of Colombia he came from, what his parents did for a living, where his family lived, and what kind of future he envisioned with Vilma.

Kiss offered God a silent thank-you for answering her prayers.

Vilma wiped her face with a dirty kitchen rag. "Would you please cook your brother dinner tonight? He's coming over. I promised him a meat stew with corn and potatoes."

Kiss pushed the cereal bowl and it made a low raspy sound. "I have papers to grade." She had already finished grading, but she wanted her mother to stay home with her tonight.

Vilma showed her the sack of potatoes. "You know how to do it. Not too much water and never enough salt. Bertito is looking forward to the stew. Don't disappoint him."

"He's a grown man," Kiss muttered.

"Do me this favor without complaining, please." Vilma set the potatoes on the counter. "God knows how much more I've done for you."

Kiss stopped herself from answering back. Cooking didn't bother her as much because she was older. She could shrug off the backwards mentality behind it soon after they ate the stew.

"And why did you take down the photos?" Kiss asked.

Vilma grabbed her hair and twisted it into a tight bun. "I'm renovating. This house needs it. Paint, furniture, even the floors."

These days her mother didn't confide the details of her life until it was too late. Yes, the splintered wooden floors, the faded couches, and the peeling paint needed to be updated. But her mother wasn't asking for her input. After years of living together, Kiss felt like she was being shoved aside. Even her brother would know about the phone call before she did.

Kiss had to go to work. The school required that she be there to teach unimpressable teenagers the meaning of Spanish words that they didn't care about, and she couldn't be late.

Kiss had fifteen students in her last class that Thursday afternoon, five of whom were absent. She neglected to take roll every week, and no one in administration asked for an attendance sheet. The students slouched in their seats. One kid in the back slept on his book bag. For three years, Kiss had taught Basic Spanish as a foreign language, which was anything but foreign to her. At first, she believed in slow progression. She'd hold up colorful picture cards and ask the students to repeat after her: *mama, papa, tía, tío, casa, perro, ciudad*. In time, she thought that the ceiling spider webs, the weathered carpet, and the blank student faces would drive her mad. Since no one in administration took much interest in what she taught as long as the students didn't complain, Kiss implemented new teaching methods to break up the monotony.

As she stared back at those bored eyes, Kiss realized that they were uneventfully reaching the end of spring. The fifteen would soon exit her classroom completely unknowledgeable of the language or culture. The pre-requisite for signing-up for the class was that the student couldn't have any previous contact with the language, which Kiss found difficult to believe since Spanish was the county's unofficial language. Regardless, she couldn't fail any of them since it was not an impossible class. And those who did not pass, as Kiss knew from experience, would suddenly perk up and become their own personal representatives before a sympathetic administration who believed that the majority of students were smart, eloquent and unjustly treated by a teacher who failed to write appropriate bylaws as to how to pass the class. Kiss quickly eased her pass/fail system. In a county where most people made a living out of agricultural jobs, she couldn't afford to lose her teaching position and become an orange picker.

To liven up the class, Kiss wrote on the board, "*Las naranjas me estan mantando.*" She enunciated each word slowly, and the class repeated somberly after her. Kiss wiped the chalk off of

her hands. “This means: ‘The oranges keep me alive.’ Does anyone wish to contradict me?” She’d distorted the sentence’s meaning in translation.

The students shuffled in their seats; a kid near the back window sneezed and wiped his runny nose on his arm. Their silence was a rare reward. Even the pompous ones, like Elvis with his posh hairdo and a pen over his left earlobe, lowered his eyes. They exhibited every palpable sign of fear. Anything but to be called on by name. Kiss wondered how long she could keep the moment going. She couldn’t quiz them on words they hadn’t learned, but she could frighten them a little, which she preferred over handing out D’s and F’s.

“Write it down in your notebooks. You have until next class to translate it.” She turned her back to them. Immediately, the air conditioner’s whine was drowned by the noise of ruffled paper and bags being zipped. Before she excused them, she said, “Bring your dictionaries to class, too. There will be more phrases on the board.” She raised her hand and set them free.

As they filed out of the classroom, she pretended to be occupied. The technique blocked most student efforts to inquire about graded papers; besides, she didn’t want them to know that she had nothing better to do than examine their vocabulary lists and sentences. On a corner of the desk, she neatly arranged the books that she carried to class, and then she read a short article on motivational teaching in the latest issue of *Language* magazine.

“You have a good weekend, Miss Mendez.” The last boy to exit the room, Carl Houston, gave her the peace sign.

“You, too.” She sighed in relief once the room was empty.

Carl returned to the doorway. “By the way, do you have our grades ready yet?”

She wouldn’t pass the afternoon unscathed. “Not yet. Soon.” She returned to the magazine, but over the edge of the page, she saw Carl wink at her.

Kiss was breathless for the first time in years. Carl had an eerie way of making her feel as if she were a whole decade younger. She recalled the first time he stepped into her classroom wearing a black collared shirt and dress pants, and he sat right in front of her desk, licking his lips as if he wanted her. Hallway rumors alleged that he broke the hearts of many females, and that he preferred brunettes over red heads and blondes over brunettes, but he had an indiscriminate way of making them each feel more special than the next.

When the flutter in Kiss' chest stopped, she tossed the books and papers in her bag and turned to erase the words on the board. This was her last class of the day; finally, she could go home and talk to her mother.

“Sis, you spacing out or what?”

The voice nearly caused her to drop the bag on the floor.

Her older brother, Humberto, whom everyone called Bertito, strolled up to her desk. He wore the same baggy jeans as the last time she'd seen him and a white t-shirt with the words, “*Te quiero ahora*,” splashed above the head of a semi-naked girl holding a sweaty Budweiser bottle. Bertito read the phrase on the board aloud. “Are you teaching these kids *mierda*?”

“It's a direct method of teaching. Not that you'd understand.”

“Hold on a second. You're saying that ‘orange’ is supposed to teach a life lesson?”

“It's about skills, Bertito.”

“What kind of skill is that?” He smirked, moving closer to her desk.

She tucked the bag under her arm, trying with all her might not to lose her cool. There were more than a few instances when she wished that her brother would fall off the face of the earth, especially during the year that he had lived with them. They quarreled about little things: him leaving the toilet seat up, her not replacing the garbage can bag, him drinking milk out of the gallon, and

whose turn was it to take their mother to the doctor's. In the end, they had grudgingly agreed that their little wars made them feel younger.

Out of nowhere, Bertito wrapped his muscled arms around her neck. His breath smelled of sour milk and beer. His armpits reeked of grease and some other unnamable body odor. He was the kind of man she would've dumped on a blind date.

When he released her, Kiss said, "If you weren't my brother, I'd call you a *tecato*."

"Now I'm a drug dealer?" He held an imaginary joint between his fingers in a mocking gesture of Univision's say-no-to-drugs campaign.

"You're acting like a child," she said in a whiny voice, realizing too late that her slight measure of self-control had slipped out of her hands.

"Hey, why don't you teach your brother some skills?" He tore the bag from her shoulder.

"Give it back!" Kiss found herself screaming.

"Stop raising your voice," he said in a quiet tone. "I can hear just fine."

Kiss straightened her shoulders. In a matter of seconds, her brother had managed to make her behave like a kid in the park complaining about the bully who pushed her off the merry-go-round. Recognizing that she wouldn't win this round against him, she succumbed to calling him "a chauvinist pig," to which he responded with snorting pig-like noises in her ear. Outside by the car, Bertito opened the door for her. He inched towards her ear as if he was going to kiss her on the cheek, and, instead, he said, "Oink, oink, oink."

She handed him a silver key and said, "Get my bike." The rack stood around the corner.

"Such a demanding woman," he said. "That's why you're still single."

She opened her mouth to respond, but he slammed the car door on her face. With much effort, she rolled down the window and said, "And you're no longer married."

He stuck his tongue out first. She was incapable of controlling her response—tongue sticking out, eyes narrowed, and jaw jutted upwards as she growled like a cat. But it wasn't her brother's double-over laughter that caught her off guard. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Carl standing next to an overflowing trash can. It was too late to cover her face. The boy (or would it be politically correct to call him a *man*?) removed his earplugs, looked down at his hands, and then, as if cautiously considering his next move, he lifted his chin and offered her a nod. This was the way young people acknowledged each other, and she accepted his greeting with a courteous hand wave. He smiled back. Kiss readjusted her shoulders in an effort to recuperate her dignity. Carl stroked his bottom lip with his thumb, and Kiss swallowed hard. She told herself to look away but her neck muscles paid no attention.

Bertito returned to the car carrying her bicycle on his shoulder.

Kiss, hoping to avoid gazing back at Carl, focused on the significance of her brother's seemingly kind gesture. He never offered her a ride home from work. Bertito repaired mufflers at a car shop. Even when Kiss begged him to pick her up because she was too tired to pedal back home, Bertito said that he had one more car to finish, and she had to wait for hours. Nine times out of ten, she ended up pacing the library corridors. If she sat on a bench outside, one of her colleagues would inevitably stop and gossip about So-and-So dating the married Basic Italian teacher, Mr. Vincent, who amused the beautiful brunette students desperate to jump on the fast-track to the Dean's list. Kiss didn't belong to the gossip group because someone would eventually ask her to open up about her personal life. No one knew that she lived with her mother.

She *did* want to know why her brother was there, and, as soon as he got in the car, she demanded answers. "Why did you come pick me up? Did Ma put you up to it? What's wrong with her?"

"Chill out, woman." He gave her a fierce, sideways look.

Kiss wiped sweat off her forehead. She could sense Carl's stare grazing her face, and she didn't dare bring attention to him by looking in his direction. Her brother would never let her live it down, and, luckily, he didn't seem to notice.

"This is very strange of you," she said.

"You're the weird one." He put the key to the ignition.

"You didn't show up on Monday when I called about Ma's doctor appointment."

"Ma doesn't need you to hold her hand *all* the time."

"She's getting old."

"She's been old." He puffed out air. "And you better get yourself a dependable car soon because the rain season is coming and you're going to end up drowning in a ditch. You know that you're not twelve anymore? I mean, did we not put enough candles on your birthday cake last year? You are twenty-seven-years old. Grow up."

Bertito jerked the car into first gear.

Surprisingly, Kiss welcome the slap of fresh air. As they pulled out of the parking lot and headed up the curvy road, Carl became a tiny dot in the rearview mirror. Kiss focused on the road in front of her. Looking back could only cause trouble.

Unlike most of flat Florida, the beauty of Lake Wales lay in the rolling hills that were blanketed with evergreen trees. In the distance, Bok Tower stood tall, a marble block on a sea of green. The three of them picnicked in the garden next to the tower where they spread a quilted-blanket on the grass and watched the sun's shadow dance over the gigantic sun dial. Kiss had wished those moments would go on and on until they, The Mendez Trinity as her mother jokingly called them, grew old together.

Bertito turned left into Waverly, and they passed the trailers with hanging clotheslines in the backyard, the empty lots with waist-high grass, and more orange groves on the right. Up ahead were

the crumbling trailers where the illegal immigrants lived. On the other side of the road, workers dressed in long-sleeved shirts climbed ladders leaning up against the trees. They tossed the fruits into large black buckets, which they then lifted into the backs of pickup trucks. Kiss first saw the daily workers when she moved into town, and she had pitied them for having to survive on such hard labor. “They’re paid by the truckload,” her mother told her. “If you’ll live here, you must understand the locals.” The one day Kiss broke down and volunteered to pick fruit, she found a red-and-black-diamond snake dangling from a branch. Its beady eyes stared at her hand as she stretched out and grabbed an orange. She twisted her ankle when she jumped off of the ladder. She felt horrible for anyone who survived under such circumstances, but she wouldn’t go back to the fields ever again.

Bertito turned into a gravel road that led to their mother’s one-story home with its flat roof and an L-shaped balcony that looped around the front and side. Arches above the windows and door gave it a slight Spanish-style.

The first thing Kiss noticed was the darkness. Her mother usually tied the curtains back after her egg-and-toast breakfast, and she opened the windows to let in the hot and still Florida breeze. Her mother believed that it cooled down the house and saved them money on their energy bill.

Bertito turned off the car and stepped out. “I think rain is coming our way.”

Up in the sky, gray clouds inched eastward as streaks of lightning cut across the sky. The dry spell had dragged on for months. Most of the grass had turned a terrible mustard color. The decorative palm trees planted on both sides of the driveway grew a combination of brown and green fronds that caused some to perk up and others to bow down under the weight of the branch. A good rain would change the scenery.

“Where did Ma go?” Kiss asked.

Bertito opened her door. “Are you planning to stay in the car until you’re thirty?”

“You haven’t answered my question.”

Bertito went up to the house.

As Kiss walked across the dry grass and reached the handrail, she realized the second thing wrong: her mother played music in the afternoons, but there was dead silence today. Kiss created alternate scenarios to deflate her fears. Ma was probably suffering from a migraine headache, resting in bed. Kiss blew thoughts of car crashes and heart attacks out of her mind.

The sky was darkening fast.

Bertito unlocked the front door. He stood there for a long time before he turned and faced her. The sly smile that made him look like a prankster became a slack bottom lip.

“You should sit down,” he said.

Kiss pinched a bit of skin under the folded arm to keep her temper in check.

Bertito said, “Ma went to the courthouse this afternoon to marry Andrés.” He sighed in relief as if keeping that quiet had been a burden on him.

Kiss felt as if she’d been dressed in a heavy wet gown. She held the handrail for support. Tucking her bangs behind her ears, she eased down into the chair that Bertito placed behind her. He brought a chair for him to sit, as well, and placed it directly in front of hers. A loud breeze lifted dust off the ground. Somewhere far away, a dog barked incessantly.

“Were you at the house when this happened?” Kiss wanted to know.

“Ma asked me to come over because she had something important to say. Andrés was sitting in the living room. Lunchtime. He told me that *la migra* came around his trailer late last night with rifles and dogs and handcuffs. A few of his friends were taken away. Andrés jumped out through a back window and hid behind a dumpster until *la migra* left. He was shaking like a leaf. Man, I had to hold back my tears. Ma was walking back and forth, back and forth, saying, *Dios santo, Dios mio. ¿Que voy a hacer?* You know how she gets. Andrés told Ma that if she marries him, he could have peace.”

Kiss thought a hammer landed on her stomach. She couldn't breathe. Her world spun in circles. Lightning flashed between the clouds. She doubled-over, trying to focus her mind, willing the dizziness to stop. Her brother rubbed her back. How could her mother fall for that story? Her mother probably wanted to save Andrés. She must've thought it her responsibility to calm the worries of the man she was fond of. Her mother would stretch out her arms farther and farther past the point of broken ligaments and she wouldn't stop giving. Andrés must've caught-on quick. He flirted with her at the senior's bingo night in the community center in Bartow. Within a week, he invited himself over for Sunday brunch and then drove her on his motorcycle to Daytona. There were always flowers behind his back when she answered the front door. And when she talked to him on the phone, she sounded like a dazed teenager, whispering when Kiss stepped into the room, and bouncing lightly as if she were dancing to a *bolero* playing in her head.

Kiss' vision sharpened as if the rain had already come and gone. "Did *you* believe his story?"

Bertito smoothed his black hair. "That kind of thing happens around here. If they find him, they'll send him back to Colombia in a split second. No green card, no stay." He didn't laugh.

"You should've reasoned her out of it," Kiss said.

He grunted because his beeper buzzed twice. He flipped it upside down and tried reading the numbers backward as if it were a cryptic message. "Maybe it's work. Let me check." He stepped inside the house and the slim screen door slammed behind him.

A breeze drifted up Kiss' ankles and settled there.

Kiss faced her reflection on the window. She felt old. Had she fixed her hair and applied the cosmetics that her mother recommended, Kiss could've passed for twenty-three instead of thirty-three. At some stage in life, the effects of age were reversed by using makeup, and Kiss came to the conclusion that she'd reached the point of no return.

Carl's face came back to her. As hard as she tried erasing the memories, she couldn't forget how much Carl reminded her of that boy in her senior year of high school. While the rest of the students danced to power ballads in the gym, Frank Devry undressed her without any shyness. She couldn't finish because they hadn't prepared for the discomfort of doing it on a run-down carpet; it had been enough for him. Weeks before graduation, she found herself at her doctor's office after she fainted in P.E. In the car, she begged her mother to stay in the waiting room. Kiss was alone when the old doctor said, "Your fling left you an offspring and something else. Something far more dangerous. I will tell Vilma what to do." It turned out that a manageable dose of pills took care of her physical woes, all of them. But no amount of medicine could rid Kiss' memory of the stern and hurt look that her mother shot at her belly the day it was taken care of. A whole decade past and neither one of them brought it up in conversation. Kiss had found it easier to handle it that way. Not even her brother knew.

Bertito returned to the balcony holding two beers. "You want one?" he asked, and then he sat down.

Kiss stood. "Ma is getting married and you're doing nothing."

Bertito's dark face turned a slight shade of red. "What do you want me to do?"

"Not sit down." Kiss ran to fetch her bike. She wasn't entirely clear what she'd do next. First, she had to find her mother in the courthouse. Next, she had to stop her from committing an atrocious mistake.

She unhooked the bike and tried to find her balance on the gravel road. Bertito followed her. He dug his fingers into her forearm, and she pushed him away. She got as far as knocking the brake pedal before he tore her off the seat. And that's when they regressed back to their pre-teens. In her mind, she saw a string of arguments: kitchen shouting matches about whose turn it was to wash the dishes and hallway fights about who messed up the bathroom. In a matter of seconds, they wrestled

each other to the ground causing the bike to tip over as if it were drunk. One of the tires bumped her leg. Gravel rocks scraped her arms. She aimed to kick his balls. Instead, she hit his knee cap. He cursed in agony and recoiled. With much effort, Kiss rolled him off of her. They were both panting.

Once she caught her breath, she said, “You might not care about her as much.”

“It’s going to storm.” Bertito cupped rain drops in his palm. “*Te vas a matar.*”

For the first time in a very long time, he sounded genuinely interested in her well-being.

Still, she raised her bicycle up off the ground. She wanted to object to the marriage. Her mother was not ‘sound of mind.’ The judge should know that no one in the family knew about the nuptials. A decent couple would’ve hired a priest, baked a two-tier cake, and handed out ceramic keepsakes with the bride and groom’s names. She would stop the insanity.

“I can’t sit around waiting for Ma to mess up her life,” Kiss said.

“Goddamn it, girl. Ma already married the guy. Don’t you get it? This isn’t about you.”

None of it made sense. “I have to hear it straight from her mouth.”

Bertito said, “I’m not lying to you.”

Kiss felt as if she were eight-years-old again. Back when her parents went salsa dancing downtown, her father ordered them a pizza and handed Bertito the money. But when they left, Bertito called the pizzeria and canceled the order. He handed her a peanut butter sandwich. If she even clucked her tongue, he promised to use the belt on her just like Pa did on him. He couldn’t get away with it, but the words frightened her enough that she quit her whining. When her parents returned, Bertito said Kiss fell asleep before the pizza arrived, and he wasn’t hungry. Later on, Kiss found girlie magazines stashed in his shoe boxes, and she used the secret to blackmail him when he threatened to expose something she was doing, like dating a boy from school. His threats all-together stopped when he dropped out of high school and started repairing cars.

“I never know when to believe you,” Kiss said.

Holding his knees like a tired old man, he said, “Ma paged me. They’re renting a car to drive to Saint Petersburg for their honeymoon. She wants to meet us for dinner at a restaurant in Winter Haven. Some other friends are going, too.”

Kiss knew she couldn’t run away from the familiar story. Andrés had little time to stay in the country and, when *la migra* found him, he’d be shipped back to Colombia. Marriage to a citizen would change everything. He’d first request his work permit, then his permanent residence in two or three years, and then he’d apply for citizenship. Foreigners paid thousands of dollars for such marriages. She knew people who endeavored into such dubious arrangements. Spanish networks devoted talk shows and newscasts to the subject. But her mother did it for free. Because she cared for Andrés. No currency should be exchanged for love and marriage. Kiss believed that, as well. She just didn’t trust the man.

“Are you going to go to this dinner?” Kiss felt the spite rising in the back of her throat.

Bertito draped an arm over her shoulders. “She’s our mother.”

“He’s marrying her for the papers. Once he gets what he needs, he’ll be gone.”

“Maybe, maybe not. That’s not our problem.” He took her hand and led her back to the balcony. He told her to sit. Even though she didn’t want to because standing helped her think, she sank into the plastic chair like an obedient child. “You remember the day I moved here?”

Kiss shrugged. “I try not to.” She recalled the sadness in his eyes when he came out of the truck. His joking, which Kiss couldn’t stand, also cost him his marriage. While the doctors operated on his wife’s infected ovary after giving birth to their baby boy, a nurse asked Bertito which name they chose for the kid, and he said, “Castro Mendez.” Once the anesthesia wore off, Carmen called him *un imbecil*. She was a Cuban expatriate. “How could he do this to his own child?” she wanted to know. To soften the blow, Vilma suggested that they call him Astro, like a star. Carmen had the

nurses kick the Mendez-trio out of the baby wing, and then she took her son back to her parent's house. Having no one left in the tip of Florida, Bertito fled north.

Bertito now said, "You don't know this but when Carmen left me with my heart sliced like a tangerine, Ma folded my dirty underwear and rented a U-haul truck to help me move here. The moment I saw you standing in the balcony, barefooted, your hair loose around your shoulders, I cried harder than when Pa died. Ma said I had to get myself together. *Componte*. She didn't give me a sermon on why it was my fault Carmen left with our kid. I was animal for naming him Castro. Ma said, *Componte*, and I dried my eyes on my shirt because I was out of control." After a short pause, he added. "We'll catch her if she falls. But we owe her the space because in silence and without demands she's done much more for us."

The wind ruffled the palm trees. Kiss stood and held on to the wooden rail of the balcony. In her mind, Kiss repeated the word, *Componte*, tried splitting it down the middle, *ponte*, put on, and she pictured a black mask, *una máscara de yeso*, with no holes for the mouth or ears and a topsy-turvy purple smile painted over the forehead. Hide her swollen face after she cried. Hide the tightened jaw. Hide the contempt in her eyes for this man while they ate dinner. Her mother flashing her wedding ring. On the table, plates overflowing with shredded pork, refried beans and yellow rice. Perhaps they'd break open a bottle of cheap champagne, too, as if they were celebrating *el fin del año*, New Year's. Like her students, Kiss knew she was learning a foreign language made up not of words but of signs. She'd move out, leave her mother to her destiny. She'd ring the door bell before entering the house. A pain rose in the middle of her chest like a fractured bone, and she leaned her head on her brother's chest beating a slow rhythm. The rain turned into a sprinkle that looked like dust. The wind knocked over her bike, and the workers in the field packed up their belongings and drove away.

Two bolts of lightning met in the sky.

Kiss didn't feel as if she had a choice. Bertito wore a black suit and a silver tie, which he'd brought over from his place. Kiss found a black cocktail dress buried deep inside her closet, pressed out the wrinkles, and dabbed some perfume on her wrists instead of taking a shower. As she finished applying eyeliner to her upper lids, she saw the last fragments of rays in her eyes disappear. Facing her mother's abandonment meant confronting her descent into solitude, and Kiss didn't know how to do such a thing.

The place turned out to be a Mexican restaurant named Las Parillas and far more festive than she'd hoped. Walking inside, Kiss held her brother's arm as if it were a stone pillar. She'd never seen a place quite like that shanty waterhole. It was once fined for serving drinks to minors, and, of course, that didn't deter the crowd from coming back. The women *meseras* wore breast-enhancing corsets, thick skirts and laced boots a la Burlesque circa 1920. The male servers were dressed in wide-legged trousers and they hung a small Mariachi hat on their backs. The wooden tables with short legs were so old that the term "antiques" didn't make them justice. The owners didn't touch the cement floors. And the walls were half-plastered with yellow, green, orange and red paint. There were framed red-tinted photos of women twirling their umbrellas in the air, dancing in a large tub full of grapes, and riding bulls, horses and donkeys. Behind the host's booth, a large black-and-white photograph of a pot-bellied man with a curled mustache wrestling an alligator hung on the wall. It was a intriguing shot like something found at a funhouse. Rifles, animal heads, and street signs were suspended from the ceiling. One of the most bizarre artifacts was a pair of woman's legs on the bench where customers waited to be seated.

Kiss found the place to be a disturbing circus, and she knew immediately that her mother picked it to distract them from conversation. As the busty hostess gathered their menus, Kiss ran a monologue through her mind in which she told her mother exactly how she felt. She wasn't a bad

daughter, and she deserved to know why she was kept out in the dark. All these years spent exchanging secrets and asking her mother for advice in finding the right man, didn't that count for something? And then Kiss allowed herself to follow with the next question: Wasn't the daughter supposed to marry first? It was a ridiculous, jealous-ridden question. Her mother deserved to find someone, but not like this.

The hostess guided them to a back room reserved for special occasions. Her mother sat at the head of the table, looking more like a sprawling goddess surrounded by admirers than a bride. Andrés wasn't anywhere in sight.

"Come here, *mis niños*." Vilma pulled on their arms, and Kiss and Bertito surrendered to the cheek kissing. "Look at my beautiful children," she said, and the guests, completely unknown to Kiss, whistled and raised their half-empty beer bottles.

Kiss and Bertito were seated on the left and right hand seats, respectively.

"What do you want to eat?" Vilma asked. "This shredded meat dish is delicious. I personally recommend it." She pointed at a menu item and then kissed her fingertips. "Order whatever you want. Order everything, if you want."

More jugs of margarita were brought out. The waitress served them in a hurry, splashing cherry-colored liquid all over the place, because the restaurant was crowded. Everyone ate out of individual plates, but these people shared their dish with their neighbor and drank off the first glass their hand reach. The party had long started because Bertito and Kiss were the only ones sober.

Someone shouted a toast to *el gallo*, the rooster. Kiss wasn't sure about the reference since no one was eating chicken. Andrés strolled up to the table, stroking his belly and drinking a Modelo. The guests shouted the toast again. Some of the men made rooster sounds. Andrés raised his drink, and then Kiss knew that they were congratulating him.

The waiter tapped her arm, and Kiss flicked the warm hand away.

“The oranges are killing me,” the waiter said.

Kiss gazed over her shoulder. There stood Carl, the boy with the wink.

“Welcome to Las Parillas. Wasn’t that a perfect translation?”

“Not bad,” she said.

His hazel eyes fixated on her chin. “What would you like to eat?”

She showed him what she wanted out of the menu items: a beef stew with a bowl of white rice. Her brother asked for a second order of the same dish, and Kiss was pleased that he remembered what their normal lives would’ve been had their mother not screwed it up.

“Can I bring you something else to drink?” Carl’s wrist brushed her shoulder as she handed back the menu.

Kiss shuddered. “Plain water, please. I’m not celebrating tonight,” she said softly.

Her mother heard. “You can pretend to enjoy yourself,” Vilma said.

Kiss slouched in her seat. Voicing her opinion would spark an outrageous scene. The skin on her arms flushed, and she dabbed her napkin across her sweaty forehead. All of a sudden, Kiss saw the sign that she had been waiting for all afternoon. Right in her hands, she held proof in the form of handmade napkins. These were *not* last-minute nuptials. The napkins had the couple’s married names and the date written in calligraphy.

“Who made these for you?” Kiss held the napkin’s edge.

“Don’t pace around like a begging dog. Say what you mean to say.” Vilma laced her fingers on her lap.

“Take it easy, Ma,” Bertito said. “Don’t make things worse.”

“I didn’t start.”

“Who wants another drink?” Andrés interrupted. Most hands shot up in the air. He asked Carl to refill everyone’s mugs.

“Party’s over.” Vilma stood. “*Un beso lo mató.*” That’s how her mother talked—accusing her of giving the celebrations the kiss of death—whenever she was pissed. Kiss became a simple subject.

“Ma, sit down.” Bertito draped his hand over their mother’s forearm.

Vilma, whose face looked drowsy from the alcohol, didn’t struggle to remain standing.

Kiss fought hard not to follow her mother’s drunken advice. The words bristled on the tip of her tongue. Their family was separating, again. Like the last time, her mother was to blame. She ran away from them when she left Miami. Kiss couldn’t take it anymore. Finally, she stormed out.

Bertito consoled their mother. “Let her be, Ma. Give her some time.”

Outside, Kiss stood under a bare oak tree whose trunk had suffered burns. Rain was still coming down in a sideways drizzle. Seconds later, Carl trudged outside with an empty garbage bag which he threw into the dumpster. He looked at her, up and down, as if he were sizing up her problem and choosing whether to approach her or not. She shifted her weight back and forth from one knee to another. Carl offered her a cigarette from the nearly empty box. She put up her hand, and he stuck the box back into his pocket without pulling one for himself.

“I smoke when I’m down,” he said.

“It makes me sneeze,” she said, but it was a lie. She had smoked in the past, and, although she didn’t like it anymore, she had nothing against it. It was her way of keeping the distance. Still, she didn’t want Carl to walk away thinking that she was a finicky teacher with an astringent personality. He reminded her of past lovers whose somewhat arrogant attitude she found strangely charming. She wanted his company, and she said, “You speak enough Spanish to not need my class,” but the words came out sounding like a scold and she instantly regretted it.

Carl scratched his neck. “I looked it up this afternoon. You’re going to fail me because I didn’t answer your question in class?” he asked.

Kiss placed one hand on her chest as if she were covering her heart. She didn't anticipate him taking the time to look up the phrase. "I already have your grade."

"But you said you hadn't finished."

An ambulance siren whirled past them. Kiss couldn't help feeling naked and disclosed. She shrugged because the truth had slipped out and there was nothing she could say to excuse it. Her desire for a quick conversation with Carl led her to reveal too much. And now she didn't want him thinking that she spent all of her downtime grading student papers. "Had extra time," she said.

He didn't seem surprised. Instead, he asked, "Your mom married on a Thursday. Is that common for you all?"

"Common for whom?"

"Spanish folks."

"You're over-generalizing Spanish-speaking people as being of one culture."

"You know what I mean."

She felt that she had no choice but to answer him because she swung open the door to candid conversation. "I suppose it was a last-minute kind of wedding."

"They eloped," he said, nonchalantly.

She didn't like to call it by such a term since she equated 'eloping' with what hormonal young people did when they wanted to be rebellious. Adults were expected to plan the details of certain life-altering events, even for simple affairs. Most people she knew didn't want friends and family to think that they took their vows lightly. Her mother didn't seem to care what anybody thought about her personal decisions, including her own kids.

"Teenagers and celebrities elope," Kiss said.

"And everyone else does it because they've lost their mind?" Carl lit a cigarette, and she didn't object.

“Exactly.”

“My parents eloped. Thirty years ago. Vegas. My grandparents said that they were brave because nobody liked the other’s kid. Dad was Elvis and Mom was a redheaded Marilyn. I seen pictures.” He looked at the cigarette in his hand, and then, as if remembering her allergy excuse, he put it out. “That was before they got divorced last year. They married again. Second time they did it in a church. Anyway, they moved to Colorado.” He grinned. “They brought me here to the boonies, a ten-year-old kid, and dumped me to find peace.” He licked something off his back tooth, and then he said, “I’m glad. They were driving me up the wall with the constant hovering. How old were you when your mom brought you here?”

Kiss seriously considered lying again. When it came down to confession time, she found it easier to create less-than-honest responses. But she had been forthcoming thus far. She said, “I moved here on my own.” And when he didn’t answer, she added, “Ma moved here from Miami after Dad died. She needed my company because she was alone.” Kiss felt the punch of guilt. There was something about his silence that caused her to tell him the very thing that she had avoided thinking about ever since she moved-in with her mother. “Actually, I needed her.”

The weight of the words draped over her shoulders.

Carl was younger than she was, and his parents placed a dozen states between them because Carl needed to find his independence. Perhaps her mother wanted to get rid of her, too.

Bertito came out of the restaurant. “You missed it,” he said. “Ma just plastered Andrés’ face with cake.”

“Really,” she said in a not-interested tone.

Kiss didn’t care what her mother was doing inside because she realized that a larger moment was facing her right there outside of Las Parillas. For the first time, she introduced one of her students to her family. The men shook hands and exchanged names as colleagues do. Carl asked

Bertito what he did for a living, and Bertito wanted to know what Carl was studying. Even the small talk didn't matter. Once and for all, she brought together her two distant worlds, home and work.

Carl said he had to return to the tables. He gave them the peace sign and said, "Later." Immediately, he transformed back into that cocky student who asked about his grades after every class and who teased his teacher with an unforgettable smile from across the parking lot.

"Isn't he in your class?" Bertito asked.

"Why do you ask?" Her cheeks were burning.

"I thought he said something to me in the hallway."

"What did he say?"

"Something like, 'Hot teacher in that room.' He was licking his lips."

Kiss slapped her brother's arm. "Quit being a jerk."

"I'm not kidding."

They exchanged a mock-serious, and then Bertito's lips slithered into smile which meant that he wasn't lying about the overheard comment. In any case, she didn't think she was hot. She was just glad that Carl didn't call her boring.

"You want to know how I feel about this marriage?" Kiss asked.

"I already do."

The drizzle finally stopped. A cool breeze raised goose bumps on her skin. Her lips trembled. She was the kind of girl who cried in difficult situations; she was used to letting others sooth her with calming words and stroking hands. This time she rubbed her hands together until the warmth distracted her mind. Because she was about to ask the hardest question and she wanted to make sure that he didn't bluff his way out of it, she distanced herself from her brother until she stood beneath a light post a few feet away.

Finally, she asked, "Did you know what Ma was going to do?"

Bertito shrugged. "Sort of. I had a gut feeling."

"How come?"

"Listen, kid. Telling you to leave would've hurt her more."

She didn't trust the downward stare of his eyes. She didn't press him for more answers. It was easier to believe that his knowing came from an unexplainable hunch. Kiss would let him lie to her this one time. But she acknowledged to herself that the childish way in which he kicked little asphalt stones over the white parking lines meant that the lies were tearing him up inside. She realized then that she was standing in a puddle and water was creeping in between her toes. Stepping closer to her brother, she kissed both of his hardened knuckles.

After a while, he asked if she wanted to join the party again. Kiss said, No. She had limited time. Things to finish. Clothes to pack. A decent motel to find for the night. He asked her to stay with him. She wouldn't. At an ATM, she got cash. Even though she insisted that he drop her off at the mouth of the road that led to her mother's house, he refused to turn off the car and drive away. She thought that she might trip and fall on the pebbled driveway. She carried herself with as much poise as the stones allowed. Walked and walked. The road seemed longer than before. She reached the front door and swung it open to find a darkened place she no longer recognized.

CORSET

Marianne idled behind the cash register, pretending to read the latest issue of *Vogue*, all the while keeping the woman in the shop in her peripheral vision. Marianne had stayed past closing time—eight o'clock—hoping that the lady would splurge on three or four outfits. The woman was eyeing a gold-toned corset with black laces. She must've been a double-D cup-size, and the corset in her hands was at least two sizes too small. Marianne could tell all this from her seat.

Finally, she asked, “Would you like to try it on?”

“Yes, please.”

Marianne led her to the curtained dressing room. She slid the curtain closed and went back to the hangers to rummage for the correct size.

“It's Pete's birthday tonight,” the woman said. “My husband.”

“Wonderful.” Marianne pushed an extra level of enthusiasm. She hoped that she sounded authentic. In reality, the lady could've said that she was getting it on with her cousin's boyfriend (a young woman once told her such a thing), and Marianne would've smiled just the same and said, “You look beautiful.” They wanted special attention and compliments. Anything less would turn a potential customer into a devil storming out to spread horrible reviews. Once those comments got out—because it could be that pale stringy-haired brunette with no breasts and too much blush on her sunken cheeks—Marianne's shop would be doomed to bargain shoppers with oversized handbags and plastic sunglasses who wanted five panties for the price of one.

The woman said, “I'm Cassie, short for Cassandra.”

“How did you hear about us?”

“My sister, Theresa, said that I simply must stop and look. Do you remember her?”

Marianne couldn't recall any 'Therasas, but she said, “Of course!”

“Oh, she'll be delighted to know that you remember her.”

“Tell her I said hello.”

Cassie stopped yapping, which meant that she was concentrating on loosening the corset, strapping it on, holding the breasts at just the right height, and then attempting to hook up the back eyelets before tightening the straps upfront. Those who lacked flexibility of the arms required a second pair of hands to finish the job. It usually left the wearer exhausted, out of breath, and cranky. If she succeeded, she wouldn't hesitate to buy it.

Marianne sat down again. Corsets required patience, lots of it. Before she opened Eye Candy, the name of her lingerie shop, Marianne had worked at *Frederick's* and *Victoria's*. She knew that women preferred something in the middle: brassieres, a greater variety of corsets, laced panties, stockings with designs, and, of course, *The Other You*, a wall along the back of the store in which she displayed all sorts of make-believe outfits: the naughty nurse, the Turkish belly dancer, the leather dominatrix, the blonde cheerleader complete with a wig and stuffed bra. She kept this area curtained-off.

Marianne had opened small, and, in less than five years, she'd bought the adjacent floor space and expanded. Hers was one of the few places in town—right smack in the middle of the three-stop-light downtown area—which attracted clientele by flashing undergarments in the window. Of course, the ruffled panties and brassieres were the only visible garments from the street. She'd had her run-ins with town officials who wanted her to be more discreet. Marianne pushed back, and she won. “Why should I hide in the back streets as if sex were something sought out by hookers and oversexed businessmen alone?” she said at a City Council meeting she was summoned

to attend. The whole charade backfired on them. Her business blossomed when *The Chronicles* wrote an article showcasing some of her less dramatic outfits.

After five minutes, the woman—Cathy? Katie? Cassie!—sighed. “It doesn’t fit.”

Marianne smiled at herself in the mirror. “Try this one.” She sneaked the correct size into the dressing room, and she waited. “How does it feel?”

Cassie cackled. “Pete’s going to love it.”

“You can bet he will.” Marianne hung the smaller corset back on the rack.

Cassie stepped out of the dressing room. It still surprised Marianne that some ladies were thrilled to exhibit their underwear as if it were a pair of knee-high boots under a long skirt.

Cassie did a shoulder shimmy. “Help me tie the rest.”

Marianne did. Afterwards, she nodded in approval. “Pete’s going to be a happy man.” Deep down, she hoped Pete had poor taste. Marianne wouldn’t dare comment on the bulging skin under the armpits or how the bellybutton wasn’t supposed to show. It was difficult to fit Cassie without making alterations. But Marianne resisted the urge to offer one of those corsets that tied only in the back and didn’t do this peek-a-boo belly disaster. Cassie already loved how it looked. Why mess up a sale? Every transaction depended on her being able to judge her customer’s character before handing out advice. In this case, the cost could be a little over a hundred dollars for one piece.

“Should I wrap it up for you?” Marianne asked.

“Can you find me the matching panties?”

“I know exactly what you need.” Marianne hustled to the rack, fetched the panties, and brought them to Cassie. She looked at the clock on the wall; time was moving fast. She had a date with her husband and another couple about to be married, Chris and Darlene. Marianne started ringing up the outfit when she heard something rip. It stopped.

Cassie cried, “Dear Lord Almighty, I’m so sorry.”

Marianne cursed under her breath. “Bloody idiot.” She massaged her aching shoulder muscles. She hoped it was the panties and not the corset since the latter was far more expensive and difficult to replace. She imported that one from Colombia. “Is everything all right, Cassie?” she asked. No response. Marianne counted to ten in her head. She was grateful for the curtain because her cheeks felt hot, and she knew that she’d turned the color of an apricot.

Cassie stepped out, corset and panties in hand. Her bottom lip quivered, and she was red from the neck up. “I apologize a hundred times,” she said, laying the garments on the white-topped counter. “Please don’t tell Theresa.” And then the woman turned around and literally ran out of the shop. Her car pulled out of the parking lot in less than a minute.

“Don’t ever show your face here again,” Marianne said to no one. But when she examined the garments closer, moving the pieces around with a pen, she found that it was a small, repairable rip on the side of the panties. Still, she had stayed opened twenty minutes later to score a sale. And now she was running late to meet her husband. No sale. No excuse to offer them except a crazy story of Cassie and the ripped panties. She wished that she remembered who Theresa was so she could phone her and tell her exactly what happened. Cassie wouldn’t be able to live the story down.

Marianne shrugged. She had other things to do that night. She changed into a pair of high-heel pumps, let down her hair, and applied mascara to her lashes. In a few minutes, she was transformed and ready to take on Friday night.

The coffee shop was within walking distance. She was terrified of being mugged. Her husband, Jason, said she had a great imagination, which was the equivalent of calling her a “drama queen.” Marianne had a reason, one that she attempted to dismantle and put together for her husband so that he could understand her better. Yet, as many times as she had tried explaining her upbringing to Jason, he always seemed to walk away with a look of disbelief on his face. Marianne had lived with her father in Brooklyn for a year after her parents divorced. Living in the projects had

instilled the fear of God in her. Her father wouldn't let her go downstairs alone even in broad daylight. He told her stories of rapes on terraces. "Right upstairs," her father had said, and Marianne decided she wouldn't leave her room ever again. Of course, she had to go to school and dance classes. Her father insisted on it, and he sat at a bar across the street from the dance studio as she sweated bullets in anticipation of the walk home. Walking in the dark still made her too nervous to speak. She listened to her heels click on the cracked walkway. Her neighborhood wasn't scary, but she always felt an awkward presence as if something were chasing her.

Marianne exhaled a breath of relief when she arrived at Jungle Café. Outside, there were chairs and tables set-up for customers to enjoy a cup of coffee. Darlene and Jason were seated inside, and they waved at her. Marianne felt safe again. They would take care of her.

Darlene said, "We've been waiting for you."

"A customer held me back. I'll tell you about it. Where's Chris?"

"In the little boy's room." Jason pulled up a chair for her. "What's going on?" They exchanged a peck on the lips, like always. Jason wasn't comfortable about expressing affection in front of others, including friends. A peck she got, and a peck she took. Better than nothing.

Darlene said, "Love birds," in a playful, almost envious tone.

Marianne flicked her off, and Darlene held a napkin to her mouth as she laughed. Her friend was tall and skinny with small breasts, a long neck and strawberry-blonde hair. Her lips were larger than usual and her face was radiant, defiant and angular, like Kirsty Hume, the supermodel. But Darlene couldn't model or put her face on television because at the age of nine she'd been in a car accident with her mother, and a shard of glass slashed Darlene's cheek from ear to mouth. Despite heavy make-up, the scar was easily visible. Even in the company of friends, Darlene covered her cheek with a napkin.

Jason, on the other hand, had no scars or dents. He had perfectly aligned teeth, a clean-shaven face and neatly manicured fingernails. He kept in shape by running on the treadmill three times a week. Marianne had met him in high school, and they'd married a month after graduation.

Back in high school, they knew Chris, the quarterback. Jason worked on the yearbook staff. Marianne met Darlene at Eye Candy. Darlene came in wearing a pair of ripped stockings, an oversized t-shirt, and a jean miniskirt. She bought an unflattering pair of panties—one of those grandma-sized underwear—and asked if she could take a peek at *The Other You* wall. Marianne thought she was too young and asked to see ID because she sometimes sold soft-core nudie films and the law required that she not expose youngsters to the material. It turned out that Darlene was a year older than Marianne. Darlene tried on a cheerleader outfit, laughing hard at her bulging chest, but she couldn't afford much at the time. They had lunch later that week at a diner across the street; Marianne paid. Darlene said she was visiting from Texas. In reality, she was running away from her family and an abusive boyfriend back home, and she came to town looking for a new start. Marianne invited her to a football game with Chris and Jason, and Chris wouldn't let Darlene out of his sight. They'd been together ever since.

Chris now emerged from the restroom in a blue short-sleeved shirt and beige cargo pants. He gave Marianne a slimy kiss on the cheek.

“Good to see you,” Marianne said. She couldn't wipe off the kiss right away. She'd wait until he wasn't looking because he'd make a big deal about it. Other than his kissing strange women on the mouth when he was drunk, Marianne liked Chris just fine. Darlene would cover her eyes as if she didn't know him.

“Cappuccinos,” Jason said when the waitress arrived at their table. They gave him a thumbs-up, and the waitress grabbed the menus and strutted away. Chris had his eyes on the girl's ass. Jason shook his head. Marianne noticed the exchange but said nothing.

Darlene clapped her hands. “We found my dress!”

Marianne had chauffeured Darlene to the bridal shop at lunchtime a week ago.

“When *is* the wedding?” Jason asked.

Marianne apologized on his behalf, like an older sister, and she realized a second too late that her voice sounded maternal. He would confront her afterwards, at home, in bed. And she had her answer ready: He knew better than to bring up the ‘wedding day’ issue. Chris and Darlene hadn’t settled on a date. Darlene would run to the courthouse tomorrow morning. Chris seemed to be waiting for something to happen, a change, or some other detail that he didn’t share. In private, Marianne wondered if Chris was expecting a raise, as Darlene said, and he wanted to honeymoon in a fancier place than cabins in the Adirondacks. When she told Jason, he blurted out, “You’re so naïve,” and then went on a rampage on how fickle Chris was. “He doesn’t *want* to marry Darlene,” Jason said with a finality that couldn’t be argued. Marianne had said—screaming—never to voice that opinion in front of them. “Darlene would go ballistic,” Marianne said, to which Jason had responded, “You really think so?”

To break up the silence, Marianne told the story of the ripped panties. “She had huge breasts. I mean, not Dolly Parton huge, but larger than average. This lady picks up a size B, a 36B. I mean, Darlene’s bigger than that. Can you believe it? I’m worried that she’ll break the corset. Nobody will buy a damaged one. Anyway, I’m standing near the curtain, waiting. Finally, she says, ‘Yeah, this will not fit,’ and I hand her the correct size—”

“—did she show you?” Chris interrupted.

“They always show me.”

“And did it look good?”

“Breasts are fat.” She said ‘fat’ as if she was spitting, and she didn’t correct her tone because no one at the table was overweight; otherwise, she wouldn’t have been as frank.

Chris laughed. "You sure know how to entertain a fantasy."

"Let me tell you, that woman's belly would've squashed anyone's fantasy. The whole thing was so inappropriate. You know, for her to show me what it looked like and ask for my opinion. What was I going to say? So, she asked for the panties, said she would wear the outfit home to her husband because it was his birthday, and then I hear something rip."

"The corset?" Chris asked.

"No, the panties."

Chris hooted. "She *was* big."

"Needless to say, she ran out of the store empty-handed."

"Like someone was chasing her?" Chris snorted his laugh.

"You got it." Marianne laughed without restraint until her belly hurt. It felt good to release some tension. She could be pissed, or she could let go. She always chose the second.

Jason and Darlene didn't quite find the story amusing. Marianne squeezed Jason's hand, and he shrugged her off. She swallowed her smile.

"Loosen up, baby," Marianne said.

Jason leaned back on his chair. "I don't see what's funny. What I find strange is that we come here on Fridays, sip coffee, and talk 'wedding.' For two months."

Chris said, "We skipped over the wedding talk."

"Is there going to be one?" Jason asked.

"Of course," Darlene said, staring at Chris who was sprinkling salt on the mahogany coffee table. "We're tying the knot in a month."

"*A month?*" Chris snorted. "You've both screwed up my night."

"You said we would." Darlene squealed like a small child irritated at her mother who wouldn't buy her a pair of coveted shoes.

Marianne wanted to tell Darlene to shut up. Nobody must've taught her when to continue a slippery conversation in the privacy of one's home. There were personal details that other people, including close friends, shouldn't know about a couple. The whole situation reminded Marianne of women who flaunted those barely-there garments. She should've been used to it. Lingerie looked enticing on skinny models and mannequins. Real people were ugly. Even she wouldn't bare it for anyone but her husband.

The waitress served them the steaming drinks. "Careful. It's hot," she said, and then she moved on to a couple sitting outside.

Marianne blew into the mug. The four of them drank the cappuccinos slowly.

Chris asked, "When did I say we'd marry in a month?"

"Three nights ago." Darlene's voice sounded quiet, a bit contrived.

This wasn't right, Marianne thought. No one should be coerced into marriage.

"Was this before or after sex?" Chris asked.

Darlene puffed. "Why do you have to be nasty?"

"Yeah, I thought so. Let's put the cards on the table right now. You know in bed I'll say whatever you want. But you don't know me that well or else you wouldn't cling to it as if it were a promise. We can't even prepare a wedding in a month."

Darlene put down her cup. "I believed you."

Chris stood and checked his pockets. "Where are the car keys?"

Jason interrupted. "Come on. You don't have to leave—"

"—I am not. I just can't find the stupid keys."

Darlene sighed. "I have them in my purse."

"Stop being a dickhead," Jason said. "Marriage isn't so bad. Darlene's a great girl, and she loves you more than anything."

“Don’t pretend that you don’t know what’s going on.” Chris gulped down the rest of his cappuccino as if it were a shot of scotch and not boiling coffee.

“It’s called cold feet, man,” Jason said.

Rhythmically, Chris tapped the cup on the glass table, and, after much deliberation, he said, “You’re not quite the money-maker. Marianne wears the pants, and she wears them quite well. Your album-selling dreams aren’t bringing the—what do they call it?—the bacon home. All these dreams of a fancy wedding, a honeymoon across Europe, new appliances, and babies flooding the house don’t take Visa or MasterCard. It takes cash. Hard-earned cash. Don’t be upset, Jason. It’s not a man’s world anymore, and love doesn’t even buy a drink.”

That’s how Chris talked when he got offended. To control himself, Jason picked up a *Car and Driver* magazine off of the table and browsed the pages. Marianne knew by the way Jason twisted his lips that her husband couldn’t ignore Chris. Marianne tapped her fingernails together to also control herself. As long as Jason found happiness in making music, she didn’t care that he didn’t bring home a dime. They were fine with what she made at the shop.

Darlene got up. “I wish you loved me enough to want to marry me.”

Chris stroked Darlene’s dangling hand. “I gave up a whole lot for you, pooch. It’s the concept of marriage that I don’t like.”

Marianne shifted her weight in her seat. Usually, they didn’t interfere with Chris and Darlene’s arguments, but they were dragging Marianne into it. She asked Darlene, “How did you convince him to marry you?”

“I threatened to leave.”

Chris rolled his eyes. “She can’t leave. I’d die without her. Why can’t you get that through your head? Not wanting to marry doesn’t mean that I don’t want you around. I’ve been committed to you ever since we met. I don’t do strip clubs or hookers, and I barely drink anymore. Hell, I’m

sitting at a coffee shop instead of hanging out with my buddies at Rock's. That's serious commitment. Isn't it, Jason?"

Jason shut the magazine. "I'm married already."

"Always non-committal," Chris said.

"What are you insinuating?" Jason asked. "Come out and say it."

Marianne had enough. "Take your marriage concerns home." She gripped her husband's wrist and pulled him up out of the seat. Jason didn't resist. He followed her out to the car. This was supposed to be a break from the work week, a respite. She didn't like Chris as much anymore, and she wasn't sure she would feel any different next week. No, she wouldn't invite them out for a week or two.

Back home an hour later, Marianne leaned on the Cleopatra couch while Jason showered, and she couldn't wait for him to step into her arms. In the car, Jason had said that he didn't want to talk about *them* anymore tonight. Marianne agreed. They shouldn't allow a troubled couple to ruin their night. They decided they'd have sex instead. It had been a week since they last made love.

Of course, sex meant preparation. Showering, dressing, and, for Marianne, lingering the process. Jason liked it fast. Marianne had opened a lingerie store knowing that behind closed doors not even the kinkiest of outfits—she envisioned a V-neck, velvet gown hanging near the cash register—could arouse a man if he was not in the mood. Ambiance could drive sex from okay to orgasmic, and a sexy outfit could help. She didn't like extreme measures, like threesomes or painful positions, but slipping into an erotic role with a baby doll or a corset pushed the envelope. They'd had intimacy issues when they first got married. Back then, she'd been discreet even with simple things like moving her legs around him. He told her not to worry so much, but it took her months to adapt to being absolutely naked. This was before she opened her lingerie shop.

Marianne waited for Jason to finish primping: shower, brush teeth, floss, apply deodorant, blow dry hair, and use the toilet. The downfall of marriage, she'd confessed to Darlene, was that familiarity dismantled most fantasies. Keeping it fresh became a task rather than a reward. Still, Marianne tried. She put on a hair piece to create an elegant pony tail, a pair of diamond-studded stilettos, a silk baby doll, and she sprayed spicy perfume on her wrists. The ensemble made her feel elevated as if she'd been asked to strut on a Manhattan runway show.

Jason came out looking tired. He stretched his arms over his head. "You look good."

"How tired are you?" She patted the couch for him to sit.

"Not *that* tired." He eased on over to her and sniffed her hair.

She trembled. "Want to know what's that smell?"

"Not really, no. I like me a mystery."

They were on the bed a second later. He straddled her, frog-legged. She breathed in his scent as she focused on the feel of his muscles, his back, the way his hair prickled her skin. And then he yanked the baby doll off. Over her head.

"Take it easy," she said, bringing his hands behind her neck and off her breasts.

"Not there. Here." He grabbed her hard. Too hard. Jason pushed her knees to her chest.

She winced. If she stopped him too soon, he'd quit. Marianne sucked in her lips to not moan in pain. Her insides burned. "Could you slow down?" she asked him.

He stopped thrusting and pulled out.

"Jason, don't be like that." She reached for his hands.

"Forget it." He shoved her legs to the side as if he were appalled to see her privates.

Marianne buried her face into the pillow. She couldn't understand what had happened. Two or three minutes passed. A car with a blaring stereo drove-by. It rattled the paper-thin walls. She

couldn't bear to lie next to him feeling so uncomfortable. She coughed into her hand to break the silence.

"Would you like some ice cream?" Jason asked.

"We don't have any." They needed to shop for food that weekend.

"I'll go to the store, if you'd like."

"I don't care."

He sighed, and then he bowed his head on a pillow. "This sucks."

She didn't want to bring up her own disappointment. Not talking about it made it less painful. But she did want to know when he'd started wanting aggressive love. The question was on the tip of her tongue, and she couldn't come out and ask.

Her baby doll lay on the floor, like a mangled limb. "Thirty-seven dollars for nothing."

"You have more in the closet."

She was on the verge of yelling, "What's wrong with you?" when the phone rang in the living room. Jason curled into a ball. He had new moles on his back; she was once curious about their shape and consistency. He didn't like her stroking or picking at them anymore. For a few seconds while the phone rang and rang outside of their bedroom, Marianne saw her husband's back as that of someone entirely unfamiliar to her. She decided then that she wouldn't barrage him with questions. She'd wait for a more opportune time when they weren't as worked up. She needed an explanation from him, and she shouldn't avoid the discussion much longer. Just not right now, she said to herself. Not tonight.

The answer machine came on. No one spoke. A second later, the phone rang again.

Jason blurted out, "Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. What do they want?"

"I'll get it."

"The hell you will. I'll set them straight."

As he swung the door open, stomping out naked, she couldn't help noticing his muscled back and arms, the curve of his shoulder blades, and how his waist narrowed until it met his buttocks. Even the untamed curls on the back of his head were attractive.

The nights when they made love, when it was good, he'd lie naked on top of the covers while she stroked his chest until he fell asleep. She couldn't do the whole *al fresco* thing. She imagined a fire starting in the kitchen and having to run down three flights of stairs while the neighbors stood nearby, astounded at her bony legs and protruding belly. Even worse, she had visions of a stranger pummeling through their front door at two in the morning. The streamed thoughts could keep her awake for hours. Jason called her paranoid, and she did not call on him for an apology. She signed-off these disturbances as a central part of her personality, as if her psyche had already been programmed, and she blamed her father for the uncontrollable fears. She had to blame someone.

Jason answered the line. "What's the matter with you?"

Marianne sat up. The hallway that connected the living room to their bedroom was as dark as a tunnel. She pictured someone sitting on the couch, waiting for one of them to attack them as they reached for the fridge door. The break-ins, the muggings, and the violence lived inside her mind. Of course, she read horror stories on the news, but they were broadcasted because they were rare and captivating. She shook her head to clear out the thoughts.

Jason lowered his voice. She heard him say, "All right. I'll be there." He hung up.

"Who was that?"

"Darlene needs a ride home."

"Where's Chris?"

Jason found a pair of jeans hanging off the laundry basket and slipped into them. "I don't know. She needs a ride and not the third-degree."

Marianne looked at her watch. “It’s almost one in the morning.” Something fluttered inside her stomach.

“Precisely.” Jason pulled a shirt over his head. “Should we leave her stranded outside in the middle of the night?”

Marianne shook her head no.

“I’ll sleep on the sofa tonight,” he said. “I don’t want to disturb your sleep.”

“Please—”

But Jason slammed the bedroom door behind him before she finished saying, *Come to the bedroom*. From under the covers, she followed his actions through sounds: keys swept up off the foyer table, alarm disarmed, door locked, and then footsteps running downstairs. She felt strangely small in their king-sized bed. She had wanted to upsize from full to king so that they wouldn’t knee each other while sleeping. And now they were drifting apart. He left without kissing her on the lips like he used to do when they first married. This large bed, tangible but inanimate, was the culprit. She blamed it, and it didn’t talk back to her.

She ran her fingers over the thin, cold sheets. She pulled the comforter over her shoulders. Her Jason had changed. He used to be attentive, and he’d ask for her advice in everything from picking out a good hair cut to matching his morning outfits for work. When they met, Jason worked at a record store but he quit when Marianne opened the shop with her father’s financial help. Jason took a midnight job as a bartender and DJ at a club. The gig lasted a year. He went on to get his real estate license to sell commercial properties. Six months later, he quit. Lately, he’d been taking singing lessons to perform with a hard rock group. “Four guys and a girl. Top notch,” Jason said. “We’re going big, baby.” Marianne went to a couple of recitals to show support. Honestly, they were out-of-sync because the lead singer, a redheaded girl who relied more on her curvaceous figure than

on her vocals, screwed up all of the songs. Jason would give up soon. He had already skipped rehearsals.

His dissatisfaction affected other parts of their life. Recently, when she asked whether they should get sheer curtains or velvet ones, he had said, “Why do we need curtains? We’ve got blinds. You just want to spend money.” The comment had waged a war on their spending habits; *her* business allowed them to enjoy vacations, concerts, museums, and shopping sprees. They didn’t need to live frugally, as he had suggested. As a matter of fact, they could afford a house instead of renting a third-floor-apartment with thin walls. And now that Marianne remembered his suggestion, she recalled how much real estate school had cost, how little money he’d brought in when he worked as a DJ, and how right now he made zero dollars with his dreams of record label contracts and gigs around a ghost town that didn’t give a shit about hard rock.

Chris was right: Darlene shouldn’t push marriage. “Look at us,” Marianne said out loud. “Jason shoots me short answers, grunts, raised eyebrows. He used to laugh at my stupid jokes, but now he pretends to be creating music in his head when I talk.”

Marianne punched the pillow. Tomorrow morning she’d ask Jason to find a job or else. Or else what? A divorce? Separation? No, Marianne couldn’t live alone in the apartment. Her love for him ran deeper than ocean ridges. The line made her smile. In the beginning, they’d lie in bed together, legs intertwined beneath the sheets, and they’d create superlative statements about their never-ending love for each other. It was a contest of words. My love for you is wider than the Former Soviet Union. My love for you can take us to from Earth to Mars a billion times. My love reaches Andromeda. All the stars in the universe can’t match my love for you. The game had been deliriously funny at the time. And then it stopped. Marianne couldn’t remember why or how. It just did.

She'd speak to him tomorrow. They'd get breakfast at the Jungle. Pancakes topped with whipped cream and berries for her, and Jason would order cinnamon-sprinkled French toast. Her mouth watered. She'd forgotten to eat dinner. None of it would matter tomorrow. Marianne closed her eyes and willed herself to ignore the pesky noises—banging doors, screeching tires on the parking lot, a lonely dog barking out on the balcony—and she welcomed sleep.

Marianne woke up intermittently throughout the night. The dog on the balcony was finally rescued by his owner. “You want a trip back to the pound, Bessie?” the man yelled. At some point, a downstairs neighbor pumped up the volume and the walls reverberated to the sound of hip hop. A couple of teenaged voices carried throughout the apartment hallway. The A/C unit whined when it shut off. Her next door neighbor yapped on the phone before the sun rose. Marianne tossed and turned until she gave up—the sheets felt like buckets of ice on her skin—and she got out of bed.

On auto-mode, she peed, brushed her teeth, combed her tousled hair, and washed her face with bar soap. But something was amiss. Indeed, the apartment was actually too quiet. Marianne called out Jason's name. Vaguely, she remembered a snippet of conversation from a few days earlier when he said he needed to pick up hinges and screws at the hardware store. Their bedroom door needed to be tightened. Marianne had insisted that he call Maintenance and force them to fix it. “That's why we pay eight hundred a month, baby,” she had said, to which Jason had responded, “I'll do it myself.”

Marianne shut the medicine cabinet. The bathroom had a second door that opened to a hallway, which led back to the living room. Both couches looked a bit ruffled but neither looked as if they had functioned as a bed. Jason didn't pick-up so early in the morning.

The wall clock said eight-thirty.

The A/C came on again. Marianne shivered. The thermostat didn't seem to be working correctly. Marianne shut it off. She'd call the management office herself. But Marianne couldn't move from the dark hallway that connected the bedroom to the living room. She saw her surroundings as if through a prism—the tousled bed in which she'd slept alone all night, his disarrayed shoes behind the closet door, empty coffee mugs and glasses half-full of water on top of the nightstands, fluffy handcuffs and her baby doll abandoned on the floor. Under normal circumstances, she would've started cleaning. She didn't open the store until noon on Saturdays. But she couldn't change anything until Jason returned. She did get dressed (black trousers and a long-sleeved blue blouse), and she sat on the carpeted floor. It couldn't take long to pick-up hinges and screws. Or would it?

A knock on the front door made her jump. She envisioned a police officer handing her horrible news about a car crash. She told herself to quit imagining. Standing behind the door, she asked who it was.

Chris' voice echoed back. "We need to talk. Open up."

She opened the door, hesitant, and he stormed inside. "Goodness," Marianne said. "You're going to give me a heart attack." She asked him to sit, but he wouldn't.

"She didn't come home," Chris said. "She said that she was starting a job bartending last night. Extra money to pay for the wedding. I know she's lying. Jesus, I've been up all night."

"You're talking crazy. Darlene called here and said that you left her at the coffee shop."

Chris pounded one fist into his palm. "Why do you think I took so long to propose?" He rubbed his neck with both hands. "She lives a second life, and I'm not entitled to know about it. Now she's gone."

"Sit down, Chris."

He sank into the love seat. He had dark circles under his eyes. Marianne believed something was wrong, but Chris could tell wild stories. Marianne had fallen for his storytelling before. He'd told Marianne that during Jason's bachelor party, Jason had hooked up with a stripper by the name of Diddy. Chris described her as having a voluptuous chest, a flat ass, bad breath, and a nose longer than the leaning tower of Pisa. Jason said Chris liked to make up shit. "I wouldn't touch a hooker with a pole," Jason had said. His friends did get him wasted, and he remembered a woman dancing on his lap. He promised never to do it again, and they left it at that.

Chris now sat up straight. "She said you girls were shopping for invitations today."

Marianne was surprised that Darlene had involved her in the schemes, and, then again, she could understand Darlene being furious about Chris' half-assed proposal. Engagement, yes. Marriage, let's wait.

Marianne got up and went to the kitchen to brew a pot of coffee. "She ordered the invites from a catalog."

"Don't I have a say?"

"You have every say, Chris."

"Did you try to reason her out of it?"

"There's no reasoning with an angry woman."

"You got that right."

They stopped yelling over each other. She hadn't quarreled with Jason in a long time. She enjoyed raising her voice without being told that she was being childish.

Marianne tapped her fingernails on the countertop. "Should we call the police?" she asked. She really didn't know what else to do.

"They'll give us the twenty-four hour crap." Chris moved to the kitchen. "I drove by the doughnut place that she loves for breakfast on Saturdays. I went by the pharmacy because she said

that she was running low on birth control pills. Drove past the church, the dollar store, the dry cleaners, the post office, and then went to the club where she was supposed to be working. The manager said he didn't have a Darlene working for him." Chris released a burst of air. "And where's Jason?"

Marianne didn't want to mention Jason was MIA, too. "He's at the hardware store."

"They don't open till nine."

"Not true." She tried recalling the store's hours stenciled on the glass door. Marianne opened the cupboard and brought down two cups. Not meaning to, she slammed them on the counter. They had chips on the edges, and one of them was missing half of the handle. Had they always been this damaged? One day the cups looked perfect, and the next they were drinking out of perforated edges.

Chris poured the coffee because Marianne's hands were shaking. Steam wisps rose out of each cup. He took his black. Marianne added milk and sweetener. They leaned against opposite counters. The coffee maker percolated the rest of the water.

Chris set down his cup. "I saw it coming. One day she'd leave, and she did."

In her mind, Marianne composed consoling sentences: She'll be home soon. Stop fretting. She loves you more than the world. How could Darlene leave you? The words sounded like lies. The worst part was rationalizing why. No note, no goodbye, no telephone number to reach her. Marianne had seen that kind of breaking news on Headline News. A woman terrified of marriage to the point that she got into her car one morning, shifted into gear, and drove away from her hometown as if she were going on a planned road trip. Marianne could see the headlines: Darlene the Runaway Bride. Damsel in Distress Leaves Groom. Beauty Disappears without a Trace.

"Do you think that she planned to do this?" Marianne asked.

"No. They acted upon something."

“They who?”

Chris tapped his forehead on the fridge door. “Okay, look. I don’t usually go through her stuff, but I had a gut feeling something was wrong.” He put his hands in pockets and it took him a minute to pull out a folded piece of paper from his jean pocket. “This is from Jason and Darlene’s online chat the other night. They’ve been doing this for some time now.”

Marianne’s world caved in on her. She pictured herself as if she were a gown about to be ripped apart at the seams. She thought: I’ve been blind like Eve in Eden. I couldn’t distinguish between good and evil until a serpent offered me a fruit, a simple fruit, one hanging from this tree for years. Rotten? Worms? I don’t care. I will take it and I will see both colors of the world. She read the note. The words on the paper sounded like teenage rambling. There was no mention of an ongoing affair, of betraying a beloved spouse or spouse-to-be, or of running away together to live elsewhere. The poorly written lines were innocent renditions of each other’s likes and dislikes, actions and wishes. But there was something suggestive about Saturdays. Jason wrote, “Mornings we clean.” Darlene agreed. “Chris mows lawn. Rakes leaves. No excitement there.”

Jason had done painful things in the past. Senseless things. Easy to forget. Nothing dramatic. She did not add contempt without basis.

Marianne folded the note. “It’s not right for us to be reading this.”

“There’s been more than one chat.”

“He wouldn’t hurt me like that.”

“Where is he, then?”

She wanted to contradict Chris. But maybe he had a point. Jason had left in a hurry last night. Marianne heard all kinds of noises throughout the night. She would’ve woken up when he opened the front door.

“Was his car in the parking lot?” Marianne asked. Before Chris responded, she walked out of the kitchen, crossed the living room and opened the door to the balcony. Jason’s black pick-up wasn’t parked outside. She spotted the empty space next to her convertible. He hadn’t returned. She said to Chris, “We’ve got to find them.”

The morning sky looked gray and bleak. The whistling wind ruffled brown leaves up over the trees and swept them across the crowded parking lot. Her neighbors had finally given into sleep. Marianne hated them more than ever before.

Chris drove. Marianne couldn’t because of her nerves.

At a Winn Dixie, they got *The Chronicles* from a newsstand. Chris skimmed the first section for local news. Nothing registered a disaster; no body found in a ditch, no local woman arrested for DUI, and no unnamed couple discovered naked at a park. Local and state politics blotted the headlines. Their small town didn’t always have media-worthy news.

Back in the car, Marianne asked the inevitable question: “Where would they go?”

Thin drops splattered the dirty windshield.

Chris scrubbed his cheek with an open palm. “Some place where no one would know them.” He rolled down his window and adjusted the rearview mirror. “What do you think?”

Marianne didn’t want to think. The numbness had intensified, and if she could carry out the rest of the day without purposefully thinking, she might be able to manage. But if she had to think anything through, she wouldn’t make it without losing her mind.

“I don’t know,” she said.

“Me neither.” Chris rolled the car out of the parking lot very slowly.

First, there was the matter of finding the two of them—Jason and Darlene—together or separate somewhere in town. Maybe something had happened: a mugging-turned-vicious or a car

broken down in the road. These things did happen. Second, if they couldn't find them, heaven forbid, Marianne and Chris would have to contact the police and wait the required time before a search team was released. Because both were missing, the police would consider it a planned escape and categorize it as 'persons dissatisfied with marriage or a partner.' Case closed. Get therapy, get over it.

In fact, Marianne couldn't shake off the most likely scenario—the two of them were still in town and something had possessed them to seek each other's company through the night. And there was one place in town for such encounters. This was the side of town that Marianne avoided at all costs. Where hookers jounced businessmen for a hundred or two. Where the shrubs reeked of piss and sweat, and where empty bottles of cheap rum lined up the streets. Motel alley. Marianne couldn't envision finding them sleeping on one of those cockroach-infested beds, and she didn't want to image them together on a single bed, but the truth was that neither one could afford an inn on the other side of town. This would do. No reservation needed. Always vacant, always cheap. There were six motels on either side of the highway that led out of town.

Chris stopped at the first one—Motel Sun Dust—and drove around the parking lot in search of Jason's pick-up. Except for a beat-up Chevrolet and a bicycle leaning against the metal-link fence, they found no trace of them. After half an hour of driving, Marianne spotted Jason's pick-up parked at Star Motel. The marks—a quarter-sized dent on the driver's door, a sticker that said "Fearless" splashed on the back window, and the green Mardi Gras beads hanging from the rearview mirror—more than suggested that it belonged to her husband.

Marianne kicked the glove compartment. It popped open. Chris reached over her legs and closed the compartment door.

"Pull it together," Chris said, and then he got out of the car.

Marianne felt weak, but when she looked through the side mirror, she saw a golf club in Chris' hand. Something deep inside her gut dropped. She shrieked. The windows were closed. She fumbled with the buttons on the door until something clicked and she was able to get out. As she yelled, "No," at the top of her lungs, she felt herself empty out.

Upstairs, a door flung open. Marianne turned to look. It was Jason, *her* Jason, still dressed in the same jeans and shirt he wore the night before. Behind the curtain, Darlene showed her face. The sight of her caused a dark emotion to shift inside of Marianne. Next thing she knew, she was following Chris up the stairs to the room. Jason shut the door. Marianne knocked on the glass window as Chris slammed the golf club on the knob over and over again. Chris whacked the door handle so hard that it fell off. Covering her breasts with a t-shirt, Darlene sank low into the carpeted floor. Chris lunged forward into the room and grabbed her by the neck.

Jason shoved his hand in between them. "Don't do this, man."

But Chris elbowed Jason's head, knocking him back on the bed.

Marianne pushed her hip into the corner between the wall and the door. She wanted to punch Darlene's mouth to stop her from yelling, "I'm calling the police" over and over again, even though she wasn't moving. All these years—five years, to be exact—that Marianne had befriended Darlene, introduced the girl to someone, offered her relationship advice, and she didn't stop herself from fucking Jason in a motel room.

"We're adults," Marianne said, finally. "Let's talk through this."

Chris grunted, but he let go of Darlene's neck.

Jason sat on the edge of the bed, holding his head in his hands, breathing hard. His lips looked swollen and bruised. All along, she thought that if Jason strayed he'd confess the details of the affair in private. Adultery happened; she wasn't naïve enough to think it impossible, but Marianne had hoped that the other woman would be single, young and unattached. Jason would beg

forgiveness, and she'd grant it with the condition that he'd never stray again. She wouldn't overlook a second betrayal.

Minutes passed. It could've been an hour. Marianne didn't know what to do next.

Chris spoke up first. "How could you cheat on me with *him*?"

Darlene finally put on the shirt, but it wasn't long enough to cover her lacy boy-shorts. "You made me so angry when you said you wouldn't marry me." Darlene's voice cracked, yet her statement wasn't an apology. She was suggesting that Chris was responsible for their behavior.

Jason held his elbows. "I'm sorry we hurt you."

His voice could've pierced her insides. Marianne wanted to hold him. She crouched as low as she could there in the corner between the door and the wall.

Chris asked, "Why did you stay overnight? Were you planning to escape?"

The word 'escape' confused Marianne because she'd never thought it possible that Jason felt like a caged dog waiting for the door to open. She took pride in not suffocating her husband and allowing him enough space to do what he pleased. Escaping their marriage had far more serious implications than surrendering to a quick, unexplainable desire.

Darlene brought her knees up to her chest. "I was scared."

Marianne thought her mind was playing tricks because Darlene's face seemed to morph before Marianne's eyes. The jutting angles of Darlene's face—the features Marianne once described to Jason as 'jealous-inducing beauty'—made the girl look cheap and hungry.

"Scared of what?" Marianne asked.

"Of coming home." Darlene nested her chin between her knees. "To a normal life."

Marianne had heard enough. She grabbed the golf club up off the floor and left the three of them behind. She threw the club over the rail so that it wouldn't be a problem anymore. It landed on the parking space next to Jason's pick-up. Marianne had an extra set of car keys in her purse. It

was time to leave. But there were footsteps chasing after her. She was distraught that it was Chris, not Jason, standing behind her.

“We can get whatever we want,” Chris said. “Think of it.”

“I’m going home.”

Chris grabbed her arm. “You’ll take him back. I know you will. But what happens when either one of them feels weak again? Maybe they don’t have the urge again in a week or two weeks. They’re scared shitless now. Give it a month or a year or a decade. Once you start, you can’t stop craving the rush. That’s why I walked away from bars and strip clubs. I had to make a choice, and I chose Darlene. Because I love her.” He spit on the ground and then wiped his lips. “I’m telling you, Marianne. One day we’ll be back here again. Except that they’ll be smarter next time.”

Her head felt as if she had a band squeezing tighter and tighter. The light hurt her eyes. She wanted to drive back home and rest under a thick blanket in a dark room. Jason would massage the knots on her shoulders. Marianne was sure that he’d return home. They had a life together just this morning. Jason hadn’t been unfaithful before, and she couldn’t imagine a life in which she worried non-stop about some woman straddling her husband. But she hadn’t seen the warning signs, and she didn’t believe that she could keep him from doing it again.

“I can’t control him.” She ran towards until she reached the guardrail.

Marianne hurried downstairs, jingling the pick-up’s keys in her hand. But when she saw her husband’s pick-up, she realized that she was on a mission; she couldn’t walk away without him. She hadn’t cleaned the apartment because she wanted every detail left in tack until Jason showed up, and when Chris showed her the scraps of chat room conversation, she knew that she wouldn’t let Jason get away with it. She had chased him down. Here she was in a motel’s parking lot littered with soda cups and burger wrappers. Her husband was still upstairs. Marianne wouldn’t leave empty-handed.

“What are you suggesting?”

“Revenge. That’s all.”

Something about his precision in using the word *revenge* made her march back up the stairs. Her knees hurt, and the headache had turned into a migraine. A part of her feared that Chris could hurt somebody if she left the motel. He had brought the golf club upstairs. Perhaps a measured revenge wasn’t a bad idea. They could be done with it. Quickly. They’d call it even. Otherwise, her marriage would be unbearable.

“What’s your plan, Chris?”

“You decide.” He leaned against the rail.

“Me?” She closed her eyes because she couldn’t think straight. She had a vision of Darlene’s naked body draped over her husband’s. Marianne grunted. She opened her eyes and the fierce sun shone straight above. She allowed the perverse thoughts to cross her mind until her wanting to hurt Jason overtook her reasoning. Of course, she wouldn’t make love to Chris. She hardly found him attractive. They’d kiss, perhaps. Hug and make out. She’d let her pain to echo throughout the room and, perhaps, Jason would want her again.

“Something suggestive.”

“Brilliant,” Chris said, wryly. “Like a stripper dressed in nothing but a thong.”

Marianne was taken back by his comment, but he grabbed her by the wrist and pulled her back into the room. Standing next to Chris, Marianne felt her thighs and knees shaking, and she thought that she might collapse. It amazed her that she had enough strength to stand there ready to confront her husband.

“What more do you want?” Darlene asked, holding her forehead.

“Nothing from you,” Marianne said. She knew the results could be self-destructive. As they position themselves on the bed, she was able to pinpoint his unattractive facial features: bushy eyebrows, knobby nose, elongated face, dry skin, and scars from a past acne problem. Still, her rage

ran so deep that she peeled off her blouse in front of the. She barely recognized her own arms. Her breasts looked as if they had been plastered, like an afterthought, on a mannequin's body. The mattress creaked as she struggled to harmonize her body with Chris' bulky limbs. Marianne kissed him on the mouth. His breath reeked as if he hadn't brushed his teeth all morning. The awful smell made her feel sick to her stomach.

"I'm a bloody idiot, Marianne," Jason hollered. "But don't do this to yourself."

Jason knocked over the lamp on the nightstand. The thud startled Marianne as if she had been slapped back into a conscious world. Her migraine dulled as she pushed Chris off from her.

Darlene locked herself in the bathroom. Chris scrambled off of the bed, threw Marianne's blouse on the floor, and pounded the bathroom door. He shouted for her to come out or else he'd open the door himself. Darlene said, "No, no, no," like a small child. Chris banged harder. When that didn't work, he threw a coffee mug at the door causing the mug to shatter into pieces.

Jason picked up Marianne's blouse. "Get dressed. Quick. They're going crazy."

Marianne fumbled with the buttons. She couldn't breathe, and she couldn't think straight. All she knew was that she had to take her husband's hand and follow him out of there. Before getting into the pick-up, she picked up the golf club because she was terrified that Chris would come downstairs and find it. They went home; nothing fixable remained in that motel room.

Neither one of them wanted to talk about what happened. In the following weeks, they passed each other in the hallway on the way to the bathroom and said hello as if they were strangers living under the same roof. Jason stayed. He didn't ask her to forgive him or beg that she take him back. He just didn't go away. He slept on the couch, and he didn't ask to sleep on the bed with her. She managed to sleep alone despite the constant racket her neighbors made throughout the night. Her heart didn't jump whenever someone next door slammed his or her door shut. She didn't have

to turn on the lights and check her surroundings when the apartment walls creaked. Jason was sleeping on the couch, like a guard.

The weather warmed up enough that Marianne started planning a vacation for the two of them. She wanted to fly south to the beaches of Key West. They needed to get away from this town that held such vicious memories. In time, they'd fold their nightmares away like a winter sweater.

Other things changed. Jason got hired at a real estate office selling residential properties. His band got a gig playing Jazz at a hotel—a classy hotel and not a dingy hole-in-the-wall—one night a week. It made Jason happy. Marianne went along with the group to watch them play.

As an unspoken rule, he started calling her in the middle of the day to tell her where he had lunch and with whom. Every night, he detailed out his life for her from the moment he left their apartment to the moment he showed up at the shop. It was almost a miracle.

On a stormy Friday night a month after they last saw Chris and Darlene, Jason arrived one hour late to the shop. He hadn't called to explain his late arrival. They were having dinner together because that was a part of their new routine.

Marianne paced the shop's floor, back and forth, thankful that not a single client was there. Otherwise, they'd find her chewing her nails.

Jason parked his car and ran inside.

“Where have you been?” Marianne asked. “I missed you,” she added because she didn't want to sound desperate.

Jason held a greasy paper bag. “Sweet-and-sour chicken or chicken tempura?”

“Sweet-and-sour, please.” She locked the door behind him and flipped the sign that said, “Back in Fifteen,” so that they could have a few minutes of privacy.

Jason gave her a peck on the cheek, and then he served the hot meals on plastic plates. He brought a two-liter coke, paper napkins, forks, and soy sauce. As usual, they dined in the back room

where she stored the extra stock. He looked lively and carefree. He was dressed in his clean shirt-and-tie, and he smiled as if he hadn't seen her in a long time. Marianne thought it was his new hair cut that made him look handsome, younger.

She said, "I haven't had Chinese in ages."

With the back of his hand, he wiped sauce off his lips. "Best in town."

They ate the rest in silence. She had another hour before closing the shop for the day. She had done more sales than usual, and she was on a high.

A customer knocked on the glass door. Marianne resisted the urge to see who it was. Panties and corsets could wait.

"You should open up," Jason said between bites.

"We're not done with dinner."

"I'm almost done."

"I'm not," she said with such force that Jason lowered his gaze to his plate. "Sorry for yelling." She didn't want to apologize, but she felt that she must. To keep the peace.

It hit her at that moment. She wished it weren't true. She willed the feeling of insecurity to go away. What had he done with that whole hour? Picking up Chinese couldn't take more than fifteen minutes. Or could it? She couldn't be certain. But what she did note to herself—a quiet observation that she dared not share with her husband—was that they couldn't possibly think that they had escaped the hell of infidelity completely without a scratch.

She wanted to invert her thoughts into something positive to stop the desperation from asphyxiating her lungs. She found the perfect outlet. A mannequin on the back wall was wearing her favorite new piece: a red heart-shaped corset with gold stitching. In private, Marianne had tried it on several times before she closed for the night. Jason would love it. And if they tried to reconcile their physical love, perhaps they'd rescue something stolen—his admiration—by that woman whose

name Marianne wished to erase from her memory. But Marianne didn't know how to bring up the subject without sounding forced.

"We don't have any cups," she said, hoping he'd get up to find some.

Jason swallowed hard. "There's some in the bathroom."

"Do you mean the paper cups we used to gargle?" Marianne rolled her eyes. How much they had changed over the past month. They had come down to drinking soda out of disposable cups.

"Could you get them?" she asked because he was licking grease rolling down his hand from the egg roll instead of paying attention. She didn't have a chance to get up; Jason fetched the cups in mere seconds.

At last, she decided to give it a straight shot. "How about I try on that piece for you?" She pointed at the corset with her chin.

Jason stopped chewing. After a long silence, he put down his fork and cleared his throat. "But it's for sale." Slowly, he placed both of his hands on his lap.

Marianne was offended that he was making excuses, but she didn't want to let on. She stuffed the paper napkins into the take-out box, and then she went to get the door.

"Are you mad at me?" Jason asked.

The customer knocked on the glass door again, and Marianne allowed the disruption to cut short their conjugal break. She had to take a long, deep breath to say, "Someone's waiting for me."

Something on her chest was constricting her air pipe. She reached for her bra hooks and loosened them up a bit. It was a cup size too small but it made her breasts look large and firm under her plain white blouse. She wouldn't take it off; she'd just readjust.

GLITTER IN THE DIRT

Three weeks ago, Leila's sister, Monica, a twenty-four-year-old mother of three and a woman who had never worked in an office setting before, arrived at Leila's office with a resume in hand. "Any job will do," Monica said. "Find me something, I beg you." Leila read the few poorly written lines about her sister's high school babysitting gigs and sales abilities as a Mary Kay girl. A bad reference was worse than hiring a dingbat off of the street because it could potentially ruin Leila's own reputation, and she was afraid of things like that. Still, Leila talked to the office manager, Sharon Truce, a flamboyant lady with over-processed blonde hair and thin dark eyebrows. Within hours, Sharon offered Monica the only job available: an office gofer. Monica reluctantly took it. Leila was beside herself with joy because she now worked side-by-side with her sister. Well, not really shoulder-to-shoulder, but close enough.

That first day, during a coffee break, Monica asked Leila if she could move in with her for a couple of days. Monica and her husband, Matt, had been growing apart after six years of marriage and three boys. In high school, they were prom royalty. He played varsity football, and she won cheerleading championships. "The thrill died the moment we graduated," Monica had said as she stirred boatloads of sugar into her black coffee. "We thought those moments would carry on for the rest of our lives. Weren't we an enviable couple?" Leila had not dared interrogate her sister's collapsing marriage. "You're always welcome at my home," Leila had said, and Monica had made a face as if she had swallowed a slice of lemon and was pretending to enjoy it.

At lunchtime that Monday morning, Leila heard her stomach rumble when someone walking past her office said that they were getting lunch at a sandwich shop. Leila logged off her computer and turned away from it.

Outside her window, construction cranes lifted an entire slab of wall up to a tenth floor of a building. The skyline of downtown Orlando was changing. The office buildings were growing taller. Condo-housing sprang up in every direction. She felt almost lucky to have a bird's eye view of it all, even though she hardly had time to look out the window.

Leila worked for Hills and Audobon, Attorneys at Law, a medium-sized law office with fifty attorneys. After a year in Records and three years of secretarial work in Probate, Leila got the promotion she had been praying for: a Real Estate paralegal position with a considerable salary increase, a 401K, and a decent-sized Christmas bonus. With the extra year-end cash, she planned to expand the rose garden in her house. She also wanted to buy her three nephews a new PlayStation console because it kept them busy and out of her sister's hair whenever they came over. And, if Monica enjoyed working at a law firm, Leila would offer to pay for a handful of secretarial courses at a local community college. It couldn't hurt anyone.

Leila dialed Office Services. She would take Monica to lunch.

A man with a thick Spanish accent answered. He snorted when Leila asked to speak to Monica. "She not here," he said and then hung up.

Leila quietly counted her fingers. *Breathe*. She was learning to control her temper because stress directly affected her blood sugar levels. "I'll go find her myself," Leila said, tucking strands of black hair behind her ears.

Rising on her tip toes to reach the top cabinet, she snatched her purse, and then she switched her phone to Do Not Disturb and walked to the elevators.

The attorneys at Hills and Audubon rented six of the twenty-one floors. Corporate, Litigation and Labor and Employment each had their own floor upstairs. Probate and Real Estate shared the fifteenth floor. Hills also rented additional floors for Technology and Finance. Office Services was on the same floor as Accounting, the eleventh floor, but each floor had a support station. Her sister could be anywhere in the building.

The elevator doors slid open and Leila found herself face-to-face with half a dozen attorneys from other floors. One of them glared down at her because she was taking a second too long to get in. Crowded elevators made Leila nervous. She pivoted on one foot and turned away until a cold hand landed on her shoulder and shoved her inside the elevator.

Leila was somewhat relieved to find Sharon standing behind her.

The men in the elevator were surprisingly younger than Leila first thought. Actually, she was certain that they were the new Litigation associates, the ones welcome in an email about a month ago. Some of them were probably law clerks or what Hills called ‘interns’ because it was more politically correct. Sharon called them ‘fresh meat’ because they were young, starving, and willing to work for practically nothing at all. It occurred to Leila that the cute attorneys did not roam her floor. Maybe that was the reason why she hadn’t had a date in a long time. Actually, she hadn’t had a serious boyfriend ever since Jeremy, her college sweetheart, left her for Purdue University.

“Well, isn’t this nice?” Sharon said to Leila. “We get to ride down with the boys.”

From the back, an older male voice said, “We love going down with girls.”

“I bet you do.” Sharon flicked her hair back.

Leila recognized the man’s voice immediately: Peter Oliver, managing shareholder, a playboy until death stripped his title away. Because of his position, the younger attorneys laughed nervously. They were breaking company harassment and sexual innuendo rules. None of them would complain if they wanted to keep their jobs.

The slow elevator lighted up the number five.

Sharon asked, "How is your wife?"

She was addressing a young attorneys whose name Leila couldn't remember. He was quiet, lanky and his lips were rosy like Jeremy's. She'd seen this man before at the coffee machine. He'd always do a double-espreso with three shots of sugar. Whenever she asked him how he was doing in her casual way because they were standing next to each other and she didn't like ignoring people, he'd speak with unwarranted cheer as if they were longtime friends.

"The wife's fantastic," he said. "Our baby is a month old. Hungry all the time."

"You had a baby?" Peter asked.

"His *wife* had a baby." Sharon hissed.

Finally, the elevator bell dinged and the doors released the swelling tension. Leila exited first. She was glad to be out of the cramped space.

In the lobby, Peter said, "There are too many of you and just one of me."

"He has a point," Leila said, not meaning to sound sarcastic.

"You already got a promotion," Sharon said.

Everyone within earshot laughed. Leila's head pulsed. An unspoken rule between office staff and shareholders was that the lower of the two didn't ridicule the one with power. The same rule applied to other employees in subordinate positions, and Sharon had established herself as the most authoritative staff member. Like Sharon, Leila didn't give a hoot about office hierarchy. She made Hills too much money. But in situations such as these, Leila played the role of an underling.

When the attorneys had walked out of the building, Leila said, "You owe me."

Sharon laughed. "Let's do lunch."

Leila remembered that she had been on her way to the eleventh floor. "Sorry. Next time. I need to find Monica."

Sharon rolled her shoulders back. “Precisely who we need to talk about.”

By the dip in Sharon’s voice, Leila knew something had gone awry.

Sharon hurried across the street to a café near a park; Leila trailed behind.

Inside the café, a smooth jazz tune played from the café speakers. Someone carried a plate of sweet smelling bread rolls, and Leila’s sugar craving started immediately. Her doctor had warned her to watch the sugar intake because of a condition he called pre-diabetes. He talked of diabetic comas, mood changes, and weakening immune systems. If she paid careful attention to her diet—meaning avoiding sweets, including fruit—he said she could avoid the daily glucose-leveling pills and insulin injections. According to current medical science, patients could avoid developing the illness. Her grandfather’s diabetes led to glaucoma and years of dialysis because of weakened kidneys. The family history scared her enough to abstain from sugar.

After ordering salads, they chose a table near a window. Outside, a young woman walked a Papillion dog across the lawn. She wore shorts, a white polo shirt, and her blonde hair tied back in a ponytail. She looked as young as Monica, except that she didn’t have any kids in tow.

Sharon crossed her legs. “We’ve been looking for Monica. Have you talked to her today?”

Leila’s stomach turned. “We don’t keep close tabs on each other.”

“You know how Hills works.” Sharon leaned forward and lowered her voice. “We can’t keep her unless there’s been an emergency of some sort. Was she feeling sick this morning? I could talk to her supervisor and we could keep certain things hushed. I’d do it for you.”

Leila shook her head. “I appreciate your concern. But I don’t think she’s sick.”

Monica was on probation for three months, a time in which employees could be released because they sneezed too loud. Bottom line: no slack for ninety days. Leila tried to explain the concept to Monica who didn’t grasp the endless bylaws in the corporate world.

Sharon sighed. “She’s young and has too many kids. Is one of *them* sick?”

“Honestly, I don’t know. My sister’s life is complicated.”

Leila wanted to tell Sharon the truth about Monica. Ever since grade school, their mother held Leila responsible for making sure that Monica didn’t skip lunch to play with little boys under the monkey bars. Monica’s teacher sent home letter after letter about the girl’s chit-chat during class. She skipped detention. She threw away her report card. Leila felt such a sense of relief because she was sister-less through middle school. But in high school, their mother wanted Leila to report everything that her sister did. Monica stole the teacher’s grade book. She skipped class to listen to music in some kid’s car. She got suspended because she was dared to flash her breasts on the bus. Rumors spread that she went down on a boy in a locker room. Leila had had enough. She introduced Monica to the cheerleading squad and told her that if she wanted to be something in life, she had to get involved. Monica listened. She fell in love with the sport. She went away to competitions. She brought home B’s. She got to wear whatever outfits she pleased. And then someone introduced Matt and Monica. Leila was living in Jeremy’s apartment in West Florida. Their mother showed up one afternoon clutching a picture of Monica in a ruffled prom gown. Leila knew their efforts had gone to hell. Monica got pregnant and dropped out before graduation. The couple married against everybody’s will. He gave Monica a silver ring studded with a black onyx. Upset, Matt’s parents used his college funds to buy a new Corvette. Leila’s mother said they couldn’t give up on the girl. She begged Leila to talk some sense into Monica. Leila was tired of talking. Monica was eight months pregnant the next time they saw each other again. There was nothing left to say.

Those memories washed over Leila like cold water splashed on the spine.

Sharon picked at the almonds in her salad. “Have you called home to see if she’s there?”

Leila dialed her number. The answer machine picked up, and she cringed when she heard her own whiny voice. “Nobody answered,” she said, hanging up on herself. She pushed the vinaigrette-scented salad away. Her chest felt heavy. She wanted Monica to have a better life.

Despite all the mistakes she'd done, she didn't have to put her life on hold in order to raise her children. And Leila couldn't help feeling as if Monica had wronged her. She'd done so much in the last few weeks for her sister.

"I can't believe she did this to me," Leila said. "I thought she was more responsible." She tossed her napkin on the table. "She hasn't changed. She wants something and I get it for her and she doesn't care that it's me who has to clean up after her."

"Go home," Sharon said in a motherly tone. "I'll tell your boss you've had a family crisis. You getting all upset here won't do us good. I'm not going to fire her if she's sick."

"You don't owe me anything."

"This is about taking care of our own—family *and* friends."

Leila got up. "I'm sorry for getting worked up."

"Stop it. You're human, and that's why I like you more than anyone else at Hills." Sharon squeezed her hand.

She couldn't help smiling. Calling someone human in a sea of money-craving, soul crushing hell-hole was a compliment. Leila left her untouched salad on the table. She got her car from the parking garage and drove home through the crowded one-way streets, careful not to run over distracted pedestrians, and past the hospitals and rows of doctor's offices.

She was thankful to hear Sharon call her a friend. In the past five years, she'd barely made any friends outside of Hills. And her family was either too far physically or emotionally. Her mother moved back to California, and Leila had to spend Christmas with Sharon and her family. It was a challenge to take time off from work. Everything piled up on her desk and her email inbox. She'd rather visit her mother during non-holiday weeks when the airports were not crammed with screaming toddlers and grumpy flight attendants.

And then there was the issue of her mother not visiting Florida anymore. Her mother said she couldn't afford a flight because of the high rent in Southern California, but Leila knew that her mother was afraid to lose her cool and tell Monica off for putting up with her husband and for getting pregnant three times. That was not how their mother intended them to live. She wanted them to be single until thirty, childless until thirty-five, and retired by fifty-five. It was an ambitious, unattainable plan, but their mother was willing to finance their education, their wedding, and even a down-payment on a house as long as they didn't rush into marriage before twenty-five. Neither Monica nor Leila saw a dime of their mother's alleged money, but their reasons for not getting funded were completely different. Monica wasn't eligible, and Leila refused her mother's help.

Back when Leila was living with Jeremy, she talked nonstop about owning a house. After sex, lying in bed with a bottle of rum on the nightstand, they'd envision a three-bedroom house with a rounded pool, a fireplace in the living room, state-of-the-art kitchen appliances, and television sets in every room. She designed a pet room because she didn't want babies. But a month after graduation, Purdue sent Jeremy an acceptance letter. Despite the resentment, Leila hugged him briefly. That's what he wanted, and she wouldn't stand in his way. In the madness that followed his departure, Leila invested her father's trust account, all ten thousand dollars, on a house down payment. When Jeremy called months later saying that he was back in town and that he'd love to see her new place, Leila told him to forget they ever knew each other. He had his dream, and she had hers. Staying friends with an ex-lover translated into wasted time.

The house became her true love because it provided endless comfort and safety. She loved the oak trees with their heavy moss hanging from the thick branches, and the lush St. Augustine grass that took her months to cultivate. She liked having a driveway and a garage to park her car. No one cut her off for a parking space anymore, like they used to do at the apartment. No more

landlord knocking *and* opening her front door as she was about to step into the shower. The redbrick house belonged to her. No one could take it away.

Leila entered it and flipped on the light switches next to the front door. She kept the air conditioner set at sixty-five degrees during the hot summer, and she liked how the cool draft raised the hairs on her skin until her body temperature adjusted. The freshly mopped tiled-floor felt cool under her feet. The couches were free of magazines, clothes, towels, shoes, socks, makeup, work documents, bills, writing utensils and laptop. Her house was impeccably clean, a miracle performed by her sister because Leila didn't have much time to tidy up the place.

She walked past the living room and knocked on the guest room door before opening it. The quiet and dark room smelled of raspberries, her sister's favorite scented candles. Monica's red suitcase sat flat on the quilted bed. Leila fingered the metal zippers. The hangers in the closet remained frozen and useless.

The guest bathroom door was wide open. The faucet dripped a muted sound into the basinet. Slowly, she ran her hands under the cool water. It reminded her of family winters in a cabin in Vermont where it was impossible to bathe under a steady stream of water.

Never before had Leila heard so much silence in her own home. She hadn't shared her space since Jeremy, and he was the one sharing with her. Her sister's arrival had felt like a blessing. Every night, she was greeted by the smell of cooking spices, grilled food, and fresh vegetables. They enjoyed a late-night talk, sitting frog-legged on the bed like teenagers with their whole future still ahead of them. Hoping to shut down those longing thoughts, Leila turned off the faucet and then closed the bathroom door behind her.

She headed towards the kitchen, which was next to the living room. From the corner of her eye, she saw a figure in the backyard. Monica kneeled on the grass in front of the rose garden bed.

She wore a yellow skirt and a white tank top. Her small, bare feet grazed the dark dirt. Her curly hair had been tamed by a flat iron.

Leila stepped outside. “What are you doing home?”

“It’s nice to see you, too.” Monica wiped the soil off her hands.

Up until then, Leila thought that she would find Monica ill in bed. Even though she saw the suitcase on the bed, she imagined that a horrible tragedy kept her sister away from the office.

“Sharon wanted to know what happened to you,” Leila said.

“What does she want to know?”

“Why you’re not working, and why you didn’t call.”

“Oh.” Monica scratched her eyebrow.

Her sister looked vulnerable like a child caught skipping school. Still, Leila wanted a quick and concise answer.

Monica stood up with great leisure. She ruffled out her plump yellow skirt and grass leaves fell on the ground. She shrugged. “I was at the doctor’s.”

“Are you sick? Is something wrong with you? What did he say?” Leila lost her patience.

“Easy, easy. Nothing’s wrong. Are you hungry?”

Leila bit her lower lip. “I had lunch with Sharon.” She recalled the salad.

“Well, I’m starving.” Monica walked past her. “Have a second lunch with me.”

Leila felt as if she had no choice and followed her sister into the kitchen.

Monica acted as if she was at home, and Leila was torn because she liked how the vivacious twenty-four-year-old carried herself with great command in the kitchen. Monica brought a new spirit into the once-abandoned space. She set-out the ingredients to make gourmet sandwiches: bread, mayonnaise, lettuce, tomatoes, onions, Dijon mustard, honey ham and Swiss cheese. She arranged

everything in a perfect line, and then she started spreading condiments and slicing things with a precision and patience that Leila did not own.

Leila poured iced green tea into two glass cups. She took a sip of the unsweetened tea. These days she was all about healthy eating, working out, and keeping her temper under control. In the past, the heavy work load caused her to gain weight, which worsened her as yet undiagnosed condition. Now that she knew, she paid particular attention to counteract the stress caused by ongoing projects. The doctor said to cut sugar from her diet, and she didn't argue with him.

Monica washed the cutting board at the sink. "Were you worried about me, too?"

"Why didn't you tell me you were going to the doctor?"

"You have to work."

"I can take time off."

"Is that true? Because from what I see, you can't stop working. It's your life."

"Relax." Leila reached out to touch her sister's hand, but Monica flinched.

"There's no time to relax." Monica sliced the sandwiches in to halves. From the highest shelf—the one that Leila couldn't reach unless she stood on the countertop—Monica removed two plates. "With three boys and a husband, how could you possibly expect me to wind down, have a glass of wine, take a bubble bath, and soak my feet in hot water like some rich, spoiled wife from L.A.? Give me a break, girl. That's not how real life works."

They both sat at the table, muted. They were finally ready to eat. A bowl of decayed apples and pears served as a centerpiece. Leila appetite's was gone again. She couldn't remember why she hadn't thrown out the fruit.

"They must be one hell of a project," Leila said, referring to the children.

"And there's a new project on the way."

Leila's vision blurred. How did *this* happen? When Monica moved-in, she mentioned something about Matt being on depression medication, which made it impossible for him to maintain an erection. Or so her sister said three weeks ago. Ever since she turned nineteen, Monica had an average of one child every year and a half. Maybe she planned this one, too. That was why she visited the doctor. Leila wanted details, except that her most pressing question was self-explanatory. Matt could still get it up. And Monica didn't use dependable contraceptives—pills, condoms, rings, patches—because she relied on the basal temperature method. She claimed that it had the least side-effects save for the perpetual pregnancies, of course.

“You think I'm crazy,” Monica said.

Leila pressed her back against the metal chair's frame. “You found out today?”

“Doctor said so.”

She wasn't thinking clearly when she said, “I know a clinic we can go to,” and she automatically regretted the words. It was her sister's decision. Yet, another part of her questioned how her sister would be able to feed and rear another child. She pictured Monica standing at the welfare line, a baby girl on her hip and three boys in tow. And then the babies multiplied. Eight, twelve, sixteen. They were springing up everywhere. One of them ripped papers off the bulletin board, and a shoeless boy sat on top of a lidded trash can.

Under the table, Leila punched her thigh and told herself to focus.

Monica sighed. “Matt's picking me up soon.”

Nothing Leila said would stop her sister from running back into that man's arms, regardless of their financial problems, her pregnancies, and the times Monica had to clean up his vomit after a night out with friends. They were linked to each other for life.

Leila held the sweating glass in her hand. “Can you do a fourth?”

With her forefinger, Monica drew circles on the glass table. “I can't do that to Matt.”

“Does he even know what’s coming?”

Monica’s eyes glazed over. Leila grazed Monica’s thin fingers. The wedding ring with the onyx was gone. Monica looked up. Their eyes connected for a second. It was as if her sister was trying to tell her something. Leila couldn’t decipher why Monica removed her wedding band. Was it significant, or was it a mistake? Leila wanted to say something moving. Her mother once begged her to talk to Monica, and she had allowed too much to pass.

“Think of your future,” Leila said. The words were not right. She had to be more persuasive. At work, she assisted attorneys in convincing wealthy clients to settle cases; she re-adjusted impossible timelines; and she responded to the demands of judges. But in talking to her sister, she was a complete failure. She said, “Think, Monica. For once in your life, think about what you really want.”

Monica threw away her sandwich. At the sink, she scrubbed her hands with soap and water, and then wiped her hands dry with a kitchen towel. “Just you wait until you love someone. Because what matters most to me is my family’s well-being. You get me?”

“Why did you come here, then?” Leila knew right away that she had fucked up her chance. Posing the question closed the door on their brief connection.

Cursing under her breath, Monica slapped the kitchen towel on the countertop. Leila wanted to steer the conversation back to the missing wedding band. Perhaps there was a clue to why her sister wouldn’t consider leaving the marriage for good. But then the god-awful door bell rang three times, interrupting the mood.

“Should I get the door?” Monica asked in a cheery voice.

“I don’t care who it is.” Leila couldn’t flip easily between moods.

Monica shook her head in the same way that their mother would, a dash of disappointment mixed with a great amount of imperturbability.

At the door, Matt stood under the overhang, wearing a pair of black-framed eyeglass and a t-shirt with a gaping hole on one shoulder and a black oil stain across his chest. He had a hand in his front pocket, and the car keys dangling from the other hand. His sweaty hair was slicked back. He could've been good-looking had he shaved and worn clean clothes. But he preferred rugged over classy. Leila hadn't seen him since the weekend that he brought the boys over so that he could go deep-sea fishing with his buddies.

"Be right back," Monica said. She pecked his lips and then walked to the guest room.

Matt stayed in the foyer. Out of politeness, Leila waved hello and he cocked his head as if she were a circus freak. She suddenly wanted him out of her property. The severed lines between her and her sister boiled down to this man. She had every legal right to kick him out, but she wasn't about to damage the relationship with her sister even more. Leila headed towards the guest room. In a swift and unsettling movement, Matt crossed in front of her and gripped her wrist.

"Listen. Convince my wife to leave me again and you see this here?" From his pocket, he removed a green cigarette lighter and flicked a flame an inch over Leila's tilted neck. "I'll burn your house down. And I'm not going to care if you're in it. Get me?"

Matt towered over her, shining the lighter in slow circles over her face. In a matter of seconds, he smiled as if nothing were wrong. He released her wrist, and then he brushed a strand of hair away from her face. Leila flinched as he made the fire dance over his own cheek. Perhaps he hadn't taken his medication. Her heart was pumping blood at an alarming rate. She scanned the items in her living room: a wooden coffee table at the center, an abstract painting above the sofa, a chandelier over the dining table to add a hint of luxury. The details of her life seem absurd. They could be gone because of a crazy man's jealous outburst. Leila inhaled sporadic breaths. Her inner thighs gave involuntary twitches.

"Are you hitting on my sister?" Monica dropped a suitcase on the floor.

Matt nonchalantly put the lighter back in his pocket. “Christ, your sister smells damn good all the time.” He picked up the suitcase. “I want to get you the same perfume.”

“I’m not wearing any perfume,” Leila said in a flat voice.

Matt grinned. “You mean that’s natural?”

Leila’s hands trembled. She wanted to scream at him that she wouldn’t let him get away with threats. Deep down, she hoped Monica saw the ogre that he carried inside.

Instead, Monica hissed in that playful tone of hers. “Quit hitting on her, you scum.”

Matt shrugged. “I could’ve sworn that was...What it’s called? Gucci?”

At the doorway, Leila clutched Monica’s tiny frame. She couldn’t let go. She wouldn’t. To rescue her sister she had to risk her own safety. If only she were strong enough, she would do it.

Monica pulled away.

“Remember what I told you before,” Leila said, pushing a bit of cheeriness into her voice.

“No matter what, I will always welcome you at my home.”

“You’re a sweetheart.” Monica followed her husband.

Leila stood at the threshold, one foot inside, the other out. She wanted to beg her sister to re-think her future, the outcomes, and the despair, but she knew that they had both already reached that destination. They were living in it.

Monica got in the car and closed the door.

Leila’s legs felt too heavy to lift; she moved as slow as a kite caught in the wind. Monica was leaving. With him. Leila couldn’t stop her. Monica would return to her family, her children, the apartment, and the self-chosen obligations of a wife. She had escaped for a moment without intending for it to last forever.

Monica rolled down her window. “Kiss me.”

Her lips felt dry on Leila's cheek. "We can take care—" Leila didn't finish saying *of it*, knowing Matt would probably cut-off all communication between them if he found out what was behind her suggestion.

"Maybe I'll call you," Monica said.

The words gave Leila hope.

Matt placed the suitcase in the trunk and then jumped into the driver's seat. Monica turned towards her husband, took his hand in hers, the one without a ring, and they kissed each other on the lips as happily married couples do. Leila faced the house as the car pulled out of the driveway. She didn't want to see if Monica stared at her or at her husband. The sound of the car's motor slowly faded away, and then Leila heard birds chirping in the oak trees.

She hurried inside and called Sharon. "She's gone."

"That's good, isn't it? You get your home back."

Leila could hear the clicking of a keyboard and a printer's whine. She cleared her throat. It wasn't like her to break down. "I'll be back in the office in an hour. Tell my boss, okay?"

"The work day is almost over. Stay home."

"I'd rather be there than moping around in my house."

Sharon stopped typing. There was a brief silence, and then she said, "Sweet child, did you really expect her to leave her husband and kids to come live with you?"

The question broke the last of Leila's defenses. She knocked her fist on the glass table. Nothing cracked, but her hand throbbed in pain. She said, "Of course," but she couldn't finish the rest, the practical, *Not*. Because there was too much to explain and she couldn't iron out her thoughts and deliver a meaningful sentence, Leila mumbled, "Good-bye," and then hung up.

She prepared a second glass of iced tea and stirred-in three tablespoons of sugar, which she drank in gulps. Leila thought of Monica's belly growing a fourth time. Her sister wasn't capable of

holding down a job at a law firm where even thick-skinned co-workers needed months to adapt to the frigid culture of serving the client's unrealistic demands no-matter the cost. Monica preferred staying home where her children's demands could be met with equal quarrelling and her husband's depression could be cinched with a pill. Monica had simply wanted to try on a new outfit, and she hadn't possessed the energy or patience to mold to it.

Leila headed outside to her garden, and she plopped down on the wet grass. The roses her mother called 'serendipity' had blossomed on their own during the spring. Leila sometimes watered them with an automated sprinkler system and fertilized them sporadically. She didn't know how they had adapted to the boiling hot weather. The humidity alone could've sucked the life out of them.

Not even a breeze caught the leaves that afternoon. The sun shone down on her neck as she cut the rose stems, careful not to touch the thorns. She'd replace the fruit plate on the dining table with the crystal vase that she stored under the sink. Leila dropped her chin to her neck, exhausted, and it was then that she saw something glittery on the ground. She skimmed her fingers over the rose bed and found a dirt-covered metal—Monica's wedding band, which she recognized because of the onyx. Monica must've dropped it. Wouldn't she have noticed the missing grip? Her sister had said that she didn't even take it off to shower. The inner inscription read, *Love, Matt*.

Leila left the roses on the ground, but she brought the ring inside and placed it on the table next to the fruits. She poured herself another glass of iced tea. When she looked up, she was amazed to see how her tears cleared up the film on her eye lenses. All the specks were gone. Monica had already slipped out of her hands. She couldn't change Monica's mind about the child on the way just like years ago Leila had been too late when her mother had asked her to talk sense into her sister. But Leila was certain that Monica hadn't simply dropped the ring. She'd been prodding the dirt when Leila found her in the garden. Her sister wanted her to find the wedding band.

Leila grabbed the ring and the car keys, and she got into her car. Before going back to work, she took a short detour to a jeweler near the office. The store had marble floors, a mahogany coffee table and granite counters. She'd been there before to bring the owner, Kenneth, confidential documents from her attorney. They couldn't even trust them in the hands of office runners. Years of family strife had left him with a smaller portion of his parent's inheritance. He had ended bankrupt and divorced.

They exchanged tidbits about their lives, and, when they ran out of things to say, he asked if she was searching for a special item. She produced the ring, which he swiftly took from her hand. He leaned on the counter and his large frame shrunk by a foot.

He read the inscription out loud. "Yours?"

"My sister doesn't need it anymore," Leila said. "Can you make a necklace charm?"

Kenneth twisted his lips together. "For a nice one, I need more silver."

Leila agreed to pay for the difference.

Kenneth ducked into his office and re-emerged with a white form for her to sign. "It will take a week. Rush delivery?"

"I'll pick it up myself."

"I see."

Leila forced a smile as she signed her name on the dotted line. Perhaps he did know.

"What about the stone?" he asked.

She hadn't considered the onyx. She couldn't attach it to the charm because Monica's husband would recognize it. She couldn't cause more trouble.

"Sell it," Leila said.

He looked confused but didn't ask questions. "Come by next week."

The door bell jingled as she stepped back into the heat. A breeze swiveled around her skirt. She was sweating profusely and her clothes clung to her skin. When she unlocked the car door and the hot vapor washed over her, she felt a little dizzy. In the driver's seat, clutching the wheel, Leila promised never to indulge in sweetened tea again. She blasted the air conditioner until the sweat drops on her forehead dried off, and then she was ready to head back to work.

WHEN JUNE BECAME SOPHIE'S MOTHER

They were going to Sophie's annual dance recital, and they were running late.

"We'll miss the beginning," William hollered from the bathroom. Sophie was his daughter.

"Her dance isn't up first," June said.

June peaked inside where William sat on the john, shirtless, holding up a hand mirror and tracing a razor around his protruding chin. He was ten years older than she, but he had a firm chest, a flat belly, and robust legs. He religiously took his vitamins, and he thought that exercise and antioxidants could make him look younger. The creases around his eyes gave away his age. But then June caught sight of her pale face in the wall-to-wall mirror. She still couldn't get over the privacy lines. After two years of living together and an engagement ring, William said they had to be totally comfortable with each other before they got married. To June, the idea sounded lofty, impossible. Who wanted to watch a man pee as he shaved?

"What's wrong?" he asked. "Your lips look pale."

"Oh, nothing," she said, stepping back into the dimly lit bedroom. June thought of how Anna, William's first wife, would've handled talking to a naked man. Anna was a melodramatic performer—on and off stage—and the reason why Sophie was enrolled in dance classes since age four. "We should hurry," June added.

"It's Anna you're worried about," William said. "She'll make a show of our being late."

June's heart pulsed. They'd make it to the recital on time, even if they got a speeding ticket. Anna would *not* ruin the night—for her or for Sophie. June repeated the line under her breath. In her head, she effortlessly said it until it seemed to be a confirmed fact. *Anna wouldn't ruin everything.*

In reality, June was tongue-tied around the five-foot-ten blonde who once modeled her skinny arms and salon-tanned skin on the cover of a swimsuit catalog. While tidying up Sophie's room, June had accidentally come across the magazine. She was searching for the girl's ballet slippers, and Sophie stashed most things under her bed. Later on, June asked William why he hadn't mentioned Anna's modeling. "She's got a pretty face and a false heart, that's all," he had said, and then he had turned over in bed and gone to sleep. From then on June couldn't shake off the nervous beating of her heart whenever Anna, sashaying her dainty hips up the driveway, came over to their house and picked-up Sophie for the weekend. There was too much she didn't know about Anna.

William entered the bedroom in a swift movement, one hand up in the air, the other curled behind his back, as if he were about to tango. June snorted, which didn't deter him. This was why they were late to parties and events: they goofed off for hours while getting dressed. Like now when he circled around her, closely, grinding his hip against hers. He slipped his fingers under her hair and she kissed his lips.

"You're a clown," she said.

"And you're delicious." He growled, and then he wandered into the closet.

He did mock dances for Sophie, too. She'd giggle and say, "No, Daddy, not like that. Like this," and then she showed him how to hold up his neck and stiffen his buttocks. They'd spin and spin until they crashed on the floor, hysterical and dizzy. June would slip her feet under a sofa pillow and fall asleep. "Lovely June can't stay up past her bed time," William would say in her ear, and June would let him scoop her up and carry her to bed. She'd lay her head softly on his shoulder with a gracefulness that she did not possess before.

In the closet, William sang, “Lovely June,” in a Sinatra-like voice.

June looked at her face in the mirror on the dresser. No amount of eye creams, facial masks, cucumber slices or avocado concoctions erased the puffiness and darkness under her eyes.

“I’m aging before you,” June said.

He stopped singing and came out of the closet. “What did you say?” he asked, and she repeated herself. He lifted her chin to him, turned her head from side-to-side, pursed his lips and inched closer and closer until the tips of their noses touched.

“Great imagination, darling,” he said. “You’re too young—an adolescent, really.” He tapped the side of her head. “Stop staring at yourself. You’ll start seeing facial lines and white hairs growing from here.” He plucked a strand of hair and examined the root.

She massaged her scalp. “Ten more will grow.”

“You don’t have white hairs.”

“Do too.”

“Do not.”

Exasperated, June examined her temples. Other than the age reduction—she was twenty-eight, and he knew it—he told no lie. Indeed, she didn’t have gray hairs in her brunette mane, which she had pulled back into a stylish, loose bun at the nape of her neck. Her hair stylist had trimmed her bangs just over her eyebrows and she hoped that she looked windswept, youthful, and effortless because Anna’s natural beauty was fierce competition.

“You’ll give yourself an ulcer.” William pulled a striped shirt over his head. “You’re worrying about nonsense. Besides, I’m older than you.”

She sat down on the bed. “They say stress doesn’t cause ulcers.”

“Who says?”

“I read an article on the paper.”

“Oh?” William hissed. “They didn’t know my granddad, then. He could’ve told you a few things about stomach pains. The old man couldn’t let his mind rest for a minute, worried about little details that didn’t make a difference.” He fetched their shoes, put his on first, and then strapped on her high heels. “Up you go,” he said, helping her up to her feet.

She held onto to him, grateful that he had picked her out of all the women he could’ve pursued after the divorce. William had proposed at a lakefront park where they strolled under the perfectly aligned trees on a landscaped lawn that felt good under her bare feet. Something in her life had clicked into place, finally.

“I don’t feel stressed,” she lied. She was nervous about seeing Anna at the recital tonight. They’d never been to a party or an event together.

“We’ve got a good life now,” William said, looking down at his wristwatch. “But we’re going to be late for the show.”

They hurried out of the bedroom, flipping off light switches in every room. June grabbed her purse from the dining table, and William found the car keys on the counter next to the stove with the cast-iron grates. In the foyer, under a multi-layered chandelier which June loved, they put on their light winter coats. Her brown leather coat with good lining and pockets was a gift from her mother. Despite William’s inconvenient past, an eight-year-old daughter and a difficult relationship with his ex-wife, June’s mother had said he was “a good catch.” June shrugged off her mother’s patronizing, saying, “Nobody is a blank check, Mom. We’re in love.” And then her mother had warned her to be ever vigilant because women like Anna wouldn’t give up easily. The very next day, June signed up for fitness classes because she had gone up one dress size ever since William started taking her out to restaurants every weekend. She’d never felt so self-conscious.

They were now standing outside of the house, locking up the front door.

June asked, “Do you have Sophie’s coat?”

William's face brightened with a warm smile. "Thank goodness you remembered." He tenderly kissed her gloved hand, and then he fetched the white coat and locked up the house.

It was the coldest night of the year. June recalled the forecaster's warning to cover the delicate plants because of a pending freeze. The purple sky looked bruised. Walking to the black Infiniti parked on the brick driveway, holding onto her love's arm, June couldn't help noticing how William blocked the chilled breeze with his back. To protect her. He held her purse and she stepped inside of the car as if she were a lady of distinction.

The recital had started before they arrived. They were lucky to be allowed inside while the dancers were performing.

A chubby lady dressed in a green caftan stopped them in the corridors. "You can move to your regular seats during intermission," the attendant whispered. She briefly shone a flashlight at their faces and then at the row of seats in the back.

June didn't mind being seated in the back because she'd rather not be stuck between Anna and William for hours. From how William spoke of Anna, June gathered that she had hardly visited her daughter until June moved into the residence. Up until then, Anna had shrugged off her right to mother-daughter time and her responsibility of driving Sophie to dance lessons. But lately, she had started calling him up every other night to ask about the girl's new choreography. William was not a man of battles; he allowed Anna to take the girl as often as she pleased. Despite June's caution that they ask the courts to settle custody matters, William persuaded June not to give it much thought since Anna could not possibly want full custody of the girl; she was a mother-by-persuasion since it was his idea—*not* hers—that they keep the baby after she was conceived. June had a hard time leaving things alone. She was convinced that Anna would try some sort of trick to wade her way back into William's life, and she had been right. When Sophie's recital tickets were up for sale, June

purchased two, thinking Anna would buy her own. Anna called William at home, demanding a ticket. In a composed demeanor, William had said, “June takes care of Sophie, too. She does things that you never could.” Over the phone, he explained how June left work a half hour early to pick-up Sophie from after-school daycare, got her ready in a leotard and ballerina slippers and then drove her to class. “It counts,” he had said. June was proud, and Anna did stop harassing them for a week. But then Anna started questioning the choreography, the music chosen by the teacher, and whether Sophie was practicing enough at home. Anna wanted to know every detail of the outfit down to the color of the sequins and if it matched Sophie’s rosy complexion. It was exhausting and irrelevant, and June had to listen to William awkwardly explain these details so that Anna wouldn’t harass the girl instead.

June’s stomach was in a knot when the curtain rose for the next performance. A handful of girls in blue-tinged tutus bounced across the stage. They shook their hips, shuffled their feet, and swung their hands to the sounds of the alphabet song. When they finished, they waved at the audience instead of taking a bow. The girls couldn’t be older than five.

June dreaded recitals. They were “cute” and “adorable” like having too much cotton candy at the fair. Each time the curtain rose, a whole new set of little girls dollied-up in rainbow-colored outfits took up the stage. They danced jazz, tap, modern, classical ballet, and even tumbling, which wasn’t really a dance but it was loads of fun for the girls.

The instructors struggled to keep everyone focused. They had to deal with the effects of stage-fright when the girls would cry, “I want Mommy,” or when they danced something completely off beat and even when they looked utterly lost as if they had been abandoned in the toy section at Sears. And the parents weren’t spared, either. The show was three-and-a-half hours long, and they had to sit through most of it to watch their little one perform for a few minutes. Recital night was

the payoff for the hundreds of dollars spent on classes and costumes. Sophie had two performances this year, and, luckily, she was a little older and talented.

A new song started. William flipped through the schedule and pointed out Sophie's first performance scheduled towards the end of the first-half, which translated into an hour or so to doze off. The song went, "When I grow up I will be a little ballet star," or something like that. June shifted her weight in her seat, crossed her legs, uncrossed them and then crossed them at the ankles. It would be a long night. Had she told her mother where she was, she would've been called a masochist. "Dancing shouldn't be torture for anyone." Those would be her mother's words, and June was certain of it because that's what she was told when she asked to join a dance academy in the fourth grade. "Tutu, my ass. You think I'm rich? Quit whining and go back to bed." June's mother had little tact. Later in life, she understood that her mother couldn't afford more than the government-subsidized apartment.

And that's the last thought June had for a while.

Next thing she knew, William shook her arm. June wiped drool off her cheek.

"She's up next." He handed her a handkerchief. "Wake up!"

For a moment, June couldn't remember where she was or why. "How long was I asleep?"

"Look!" William pointed at the stage.

Bright overhead lights flashed twice. On stage, half a dozen girls skipped in their shiny, sequined dresses and matching slippers. Silver eye-masks covered their faces. Feathers bristled over their heads. A catchy tune boomed through the scratchy speakers. June couldn't recall the name of the song, but she tapped her foot to the beat. The girls swayed forward and back. A teacher stood near the curtain to remind them of their steps. June could almost hear the woman: *Down on one knee. Arms up, down. Shoulder shimmy. Sway your head one, two, three. Up on your feet. Step, step. Kick. Step, step. Hip. Step, step. Double-kick.* The song swelled like a belly. *Look back. Look forth. Smile at the audience.*

Step, step. Lean left. Step, step. Lean right. Turn. Turn. Turn. Arms up, down. For the finale, they looked away from the audience, extended a hand up, fingers reaching to the sky, and, in a swift motion, they pulled their masks off and faced the audience, smiling.

People were up on their feet, cheering and calling out their girls' names. William jumped to his feet, too, pulling June up with him. She clapped so hard that her palms stung.

"Where's Sophie?" William clasped her hands together to silence her clapping.

"She's up there." June rose up to her tiptoes. They were seated too far back. She counted six heads on stage, but she couldn't remember if the teacher said the final count was six or seven.

"Was Anna late picking her up this afternoon?" William asked.

"No." June craned her neck. "I watched her get into Anna's car. They were going to a salon to have their hair done."

"Are you sure?" He looked at her in horror.

"Of course, I'm sure." Her thoughts were scattered all over the place, but she couldn't forget the way Anna looked her up and down that morning as June leaned against the front door, clutching her robe tighter over her chest. June had said, "Everything's in your bag, Sophie. Call me if you need anything." Sophie, caught in the middle, had simply shaken her head. Anna had grabbed the girl's arm. "You don't belong in this house," Anna had said. "My child needs nothing from you." June had felt inadequate, unable to respond. As they had walked down the driveway, hand-in-hand, June had wanted to run after Sophie and bring her back inside of the house.

"Did they have other plans?" William asked now.

She said, "I don't know what to tell you."

"Think, June. Tell me if Anna said anything strange."

"Like what?"

William grunted. "She could take her away from us and disappear."

June thought the room was spinning, and she had to sit down. William called out to the attendant, telling her what had happened. A few people stared back. The audience had quieted down because other performers were taking their place on stage. These girls wore an assortment of animal costumes—elephants, giraffes, vultures. One girl had a fake snake around her neck. For a moment, June thought it was supposed to be the Lion King.

The attendant's eyes widened. "Was she performing to that last song?"

While they exchanged information, June tried to think. A dozen scenarios raced through her mind like ballerinas on roller blades. Sophie did get sick fairly often with stomach viruses, bronchitis, headaches, and all sorts of allergic reactions to fragrances, foods, pollen. She had sniffled for a few days, but she hadn't come down with anything, yet.

"Maybe she got sick," June said, wanting to be a part of the conversation, to be noticed.

William looked at her strangely. "Where is my wife sitting? Where is Anna?" He dashed down the aisle before she could answer.

June's blood boiled at hearing William's tongue slip. Her stomach burned. The ulcer research she'd read could be wrong, she thought as the blistering pain intensified.

Up on stage, the dancers did a poor rendition of the *Jungle Book*.

Anna strolled up the corridor in a short lavender dress and stiletto shoes. June folded her arms over her chest, which she thought was bulging out of her blouse's rounded neck. Anna lifted her wrist and straightened her gold bracelet. Each move offered resistance like a true dancer.

Anna stopped in front of June. "Look who decided to show up."

June imagined a much younger version of herself without a single ounce of fat on her thighs. She wanted to crawl under the folded seat until Sophie re-appeared, smiling brightly as if nothing were wrong.

William jogged back up the aisle towards them. Panting, he asked Anna, “Where is she? Where’s Sophie?”

Anna looked over her shoulder. She switched her clutch from one armpit to the other, and then stretched her neck up like a statuette. “What are you talking about?” she said in a forceful voice.

The attendant held up her hand. “Please, quiet down.”

William ignored her. “She didn’t do her dance.”

“And how is that my fault?” Anna asked.

June felt like she was stuck in a vortex, and yet she wasn’t a part of the struggle anymore.

“Could you take this outside?” the attendant said.

June had seen the lady before at rehearsals, but she couldn’t remember her name. She was the mother of one of the girls—Diana, Mimi, Sarah, Patty? No, Rose! Yes. Rose, a very sweet girl who was a friend of Sophie’s. June could see the similarities between mother and daughter: a heart-shaped face and wavy cocoa-colored hair. She saw them every week in the studio’s parking lot.

William said to the lady, “Please, mind your business.”

June interrupted. “We’re just leaving.” She gathered the coats from the seat and handed them to William. “How is Rose?” she asked the lady.

“You’re Sophie’s mother, aren’t you?” The lady rubbed the side of her head.

Anna huffed. “I’m Sophie’s mother. Me. Not her.”

“Sorry. It’s just that we see her drop off Sophie every week. I naturally assumed—”

Anna shuddered and then strutted up the aisle. William handed the coats back to June without even looking at her.

“Where are you going?” June asked him.

William followed Anna. He placed a hand on Anna's arm. She flinched away but then accepted it. He pointed at the door and they disappeared behind it.

Meanwhile, June felt woozy. She accepted the fear that had developed over the years: she was terrified of losing him. She dreaded the possibility that that something which had made them—Anna and William—fall in love years ago could sneak back and that they'd forget their current lives. June had never seen William touch another woman. He wasn't flirtatious, except with June when they were in the privacy of their home.

June sank down into the chair.

"I thought you were Sophie's mother." Rose's mother kneeled down in front of June. "My name's Nancy. Are you Sophie's step-mother, then?"

The room darkened as the curtain fell. June bowed her head and said, "Not yet."

Over the applause, Nancy said, "If he's yours, don't stay here in the dark."

June closed her eyes. When she opened them again, she saw a crack of light slip through the doors. It made the path out of the theater house visible. She thanked Nancy, making sure to use the first name when addressing her, and wished her a good night.

June filled her lungs with the musty air, lifted her shoulders. Each step reverberated down her lower back. She pulled the doors open, willing herself to come up with a few words to force Anna to understand that *she* had a place in William's life and that Anna couldn't take it away. But when she saw them standing near the front doors, pointing at each other with accusations, June felt out of place. Anna placed a hand on her hip and the other over her heart. William's eyes had a sharp edge as if he were thinking of snapping her neck.

June waited for William to ask her to come over.

In the small vestibule, a few tired parents sipped on sodas and ate candy out of paper bags. The popcorn machine made the air smell salty. From the gum-splattered carpet to the peeling paint on the walls, the entire place was decorated in royal blue.

June stood near the flower cart, which was filled with petunias, daisies, lilies, and mums. From last year's show, she'd learned that most parents bought flowers during intermission and handed them to the girls as a silent way of saying, "Congratulations, sweetheart, you survived." June cursed herself for not bringing roses from her flower shop. They were far more beautiful than these.

Her job wasn't much except that it paid her bills, an accumulation of bad choices over the years, including moving out of her mother's home before finding a job. William had said she could quit work and go back to college, an offer that she found extremely tempting.

The curtain would soon fall for intermission. June shifted her weight from one leg to the other. The coats felt heavier. She exhaled as loudly as she could to get William's attention, but he did not turn and look at her.

Despite her wobbly knees, June stepped forward enough until she reached hearing range.

William was saying, "My job doesn't let me take as much time off."

"Your job is the very reason why we divorced, Will. So much of me was ripped apart to be with you—nights alone in our bed, dinners for Sophie and me, plane tickets shredded to pieces at the last minute because your boss needed you to work on a project. I was a good wife, then. Was I not? You said I could pursue my dream of teaching dance. But then you twisted everything. I worked longer hours because *you*—not me—wanted new kitchen cabinets, granite countertops, a yacht in the back yard, a sporty car and, oh, the best private school in town for Sophie." She counted with her fingers.

"Our child deserves the best."

"What about me? Did I not deserve to have my dreams?"

William's face flushed as if he'd been slapped; his broad shoulders sank an inch or two. His whole body appeared to be shrinking.

June cleared her throat. "Why did Sophie not perform tonight?"

They looked at her as if she were an apparition in the blue-tinged room.

Anna tapped her foot to an incessant beat. "You want to know? I'll tell you. I demanded that her teacher not allow her to dance to that silly number. Sophie has real talent. She needs a challenge. You don't know what I'm talking about, but I know what's best for her as a dancer."

"That's the most selfish thing you've ever done," William said, biting his lower lip.

From beneath the layers of coats, June touched William's elbow.

"Mediocre performances don't gain you respect," Anna said, clasping her hands together. "You'll be starving yourself for nothing because nobody will want you. Years will pass, and you'll be frozen in the same place as you watch someone else take what belongs to you."

June realized that this was the moment for her to finally respond. She recalled a night when Sophie, exhausted from a long day with Anna at the zoo, had come home, saying, "Mom said I have to take up ballet instead of jazz next year." June told her that they'd pay for both, if she wanted to sign up for more classes. Sophie had said that she wouldn't do it forever. June now told Anna the same. "She won't become a professional dancer just because you want her to."

"Yes, I know." Anna looked at June sharply, straight-in-the-eye, and not over the head as usual. "But dancing can teach a girl grace, posture, confidence, independence. You can't educate her on those things."

"She also needs time," William said.

Anna shrieked. "I *am* trying. You don't give me enough credit."

"You care more about yourself."

And then they started arguing again. June realized that they'd exchange one-liners forever because they'd pent-up too much resentment over the years. June wasn't a part of their past, and she couldn't pretend to be. She let go of William's elbow, dropped the coats on the floor, found hers, and wrapped the belt tightly around her waist. She grabbed Sophie's coat, as well. As June pushed through the foggy glass doors, she realized that neither one asked her where she was going. Their argument stopped when the heavy door shut close. It was a cool, humid night. She breathed in deep, and the cold air reached her insides. As much as she disliked being bundled up, she welcomed the silence.

Anna was right. She couldn't teach Sophie those things. She had wrestled with her weight all of her life because she hated exercise; she worked as a florist for very little money; she couldn't tell music notes apart; she was tongue-tied whenever she needed to speak up; and, ever since William came into her life, she relied on him to make her feel special. But she cared for the girl enough to forgo her personal wants. And now she had to find her because the girl's own parents were involved in a tug-of-war of words.

Outside the stage door, two ladies stood at the top of the stairs, smoking menthol cigarettes. Despite the heavy makeup, June recognized one of the ladies from parent-dancer night. Of course, she couldn't remember her name. That would've been a miracle.

"Can I help you?" said the brunette, the one June didn't know. She wore a red skirt with a slit that went midway up her chunky thigh.

June didn't dare say, "I'm looking for my boyfriend's daughter." She had a gut instinct that these women, the gate-keepers, wouldn't let her pass if she didn't utter the proper word, *Mother*. Girlfriend status offered no rights.

June said, "My little girl, Sophie. She's in there."

"Are you her mother?" the dirty blonde lady said. Her earrings came down to her clavicles.

June bit her lower lip. “Yes. I am.”

“You’ve got some serious apologizing to do.” Martha—June recalled her name!—put out her cigarette on the rail. “Sophie has been crying ever since you dumped her here. Why didn’t you come inside to talk to the teacher face to face like a real lady would?”

The brunette stepped down. “And why let her practice if you thought she was too good?” They stared at her, waiting for a response.

June could barely breathe. She had to stand there and take it or else she did not stand a chance of being allowed inside. “I’m so sorry.”

Martha said, “Sophie’s going to hate you. Isn’t that right, Bev?”

“You didn’t even bring flowers,” Bev said.

The two women stepped aside. June sucked in her abdomen and managed to squeeze pass Martha without a problem, but then she got stuck between Bev and the railing.

Bev stuck her foot out. “They sell flowers up front.”

“I promise to get some after the show,” June said without stuttering.

The two women looked at each other. Martha pursed her lips and said, “Let her through.”

Bev moved aside.

June hurried to the door, twisting it open before they regretted letting her through. She was thankful that they didn’t give her a black eye. Her heart was racing as she stepped inside and found dozens of girls lined up against the walls. Some of them applied makeup and glitter while others entertained themselves with walkmans and magazines. Some practiced their steps. They were silenced during performances, but they were allowed to talk in hushed voices during intermission. And that’s what June walked into—a sea of girls laughing and speaking enthusiastically. She recognized a few faces.

Finding Sophie didn't prove to be as difficult. Sitting in a corner, she found five or six girls consoling a sobbing dark blonde girl who had her head between her knees. It broke June's heart to find her on the floor, beaten and inconsolable. Sophie still looked beautiful. She wore the outfit for her next performance—a sequined pink top and a skirt made of layers of sheer white fabric. June and Sophie's teacher had discussed which piece would be best for Sophie, and they chose this performance because Sophie loved the musical composition and she had a natural nostalgia that stemmed from within. The piece required such emotions.

June stepped closer. “Don't cry.”

Sophie looked up. “Mom told my teacher to not let me dance.”

June extended a hand to her. “Get up. You're a dancer.”

“I hate Mom,” Sophie said, and then bit her nails.

June remembered hating her own mother because she forgot to pick her up from school. Her mother could easily lose track of time when she watched the afternoon soaps.

“Don't say such things,” June said, taking Sophie's hand. They walked behind the giant navy blue curtain. It was the first time June stood on a stage of any kind. She recalled the missed chances: debate groups, acting, sports, cheerleading. She wasn't eloquent or athletic or pretty enough. Perhaps one day William might wake up wondering why she lay in bed next to him. But he wouldn't ask her to leave. As horrible as it sounded, June knew that the key to securing William's heart was to conquer Sophie's first.

June ran her fingers down the velvet curtain. “Is this what you want?”

Sophie dropped her hands to her side. “Mom says not to give up.”

“You don't have to do what she says. Not right now, anyway. There will always be more dance classes next year. We can go get ice cream. What do you say?” June prepared for the girl to say, No, and then she'd go find her seat in the auditorium. In the vestibule, she'd purchase green

mums, violet lilies and baby wreaths from the cart. And if William and Anna were still bickering, she'd ask him to sit down and tell Anna to shut up. They came for Sophie's show, not Anna's.

Sophie said, "I don't want to anymore," and then stomped away.

June followed her. Sophie ran past the dressing rooms, past the twirling ballerinas and towards the stage door. June couldn't catch up. She was breathless, confused in the mayhem of shuffling bodies in colorful costumes, tapping shoes, tutus doing pirouettes.

Sophie cried. "You're hurting me."

Martha had grabbed Sophie's arm. "Your mother just wants to talk."

"She's not my mother," Sophie said.

Martha released Sophie's arm to June. "We told you to get flowers. That's what happens."

June wouldn't look Martha in the eye. She would explain the situation at a later time, perhaps during a parent-child dance night where June answered to being called Sophie's mother, and Sophie did not correct them.

"Stop being difficult," June said to Sophie, walking her outside.

William stood at the bottom of the stairs. Anna trailed a few feet behind. Almost immediately, Sophie quit her wriggling and cowered behind June. It was her turn to defend the girl.

Anna said, "You have another dance. Get back inside, dumpling."

"I hate it when you call me dumpling."

"Should I call you a quitter?"

Sophie didn't respond.

June stepped down, carefully, using the handrail for support, and she held Sophie's tiny warm hand in hers. William offered his hand for leverage. June had Sophie's jacket draped over her forearm, and the two of them helped Sophie put it on. Afterwards, they walked towards the car,

which was parked by the front entrance. Sophie walked in between them. Her footsteps barely made a sound on the asphalt.

Anna followed them. "I carried you in my womb. You belong to me."

June resisted the urge to run. She feared that Anna could still snatch Sophie away with a single stroke of the hand. June lifted her head to the sky; she spotted the moon on the night sky. She kept her neck lifted, shoulders pulled back, and her feet steady. They reached the car, and William opened the car door. Sophie got in first.

"You're not listening," Anna said. "You're not allowed to change mothers."

For nearly two years, June had bit her tongue to stop herself from responding to Anna. She found creative ways to focus her energy on something else whenever Anna rebuked her with statements about her inabilities as a caregiver or when Anna said June was not a permanent part of William or Sophie's life.

"No one asked to change mothers," June said. "You gave up a long time ago."

Anna's mouth dropped open. "You've been waiting like a shark."

June stepped away from the car. She lowered her voice because she didn't want Sophie to hear. "You're acting like a crazy woman. Is that how you want your daughter to remember you? She's not a toddler anymore, Anna. She's making up her mind about you as we speak."

"How dare you speak to me like that?"

William helped June into the back seat next to Sophie and closed the car door.

"You're not going to defend me, William? She insulted me."

"We'll talk later. In private. Okay?" He got into the car.

"You can't have them both, June." The engine muffled Anna's voice.

William slowly maneuvered the car out of the parking space. He had to swerve around a screaming Anna. In the side mirror, the ballerina's figure became shorter, like a dot on a costume, until she finally disappeared from sight.

Sophie rested her head in June's hands.

They drove down the expressway until they reached the exit before their house. William asked if they wanted something to eat. Sophie said, "Ice cream, please." At the candy shop, they ordered sprinkle-covered ice cream in waffle cones. Sophie asked if they could eat in front of the lake, even though the temperature had dropped.

William hesitated. "We're going to catch a cold."

"We'll sit close." They huddled together on a bench under a willow tree. June was shaking from inside.

"Look, look," Sophie said. She stood and dropped her ice cream on the grass.

"Oh, no," June said.

Sophie twirled on one foot, absentminded about the melting ice cream on the grass. She clutched the wool coat to her chest and exhaled wisps of cold air. "I'm a grasshopper." And then she widened her arms, gracefully, and leaped across the grass.

"Zip up your coat, Sophie." William hissed. "She won't listen to me," he said to June.

June shifted closer to William. "Let her be."

He wrapped one arm over her shoulders. She kissed his cheek with her vanilla-smearing lips. He winced and complained that her lips were frozen cold. On purpose she kissed his neck, and he shielded himself with both hands. She tickled his side until he switched hands to protect his side. Back and forth, she teased him until they broke down in laughter, their echoes traversing the silent park. The lake water sparkled under the moonlight. Perhaps Sophie would put the dancing gear away for good, perhaps not. It was still winter, and they had the entire summer to decide.

ALMA

If I could've spoken to my parents at birth, I would've asked them to give me a common name, like Jessica, or a name that did not sound prophetic, like Mildred. But, no, my mother named me Alma, *soul*. "That's how much you mean to us," she had said when I was in third grade. "It's like you're my soul."

I didn't know the meaning of soul back then or how much it could interfere with the living. I carried on as if nothing were wrong until one day I introduced myself as Alma Celeste Morales Valentín and a girl asked me, "Why would your parents name you *that*?" I hadn't known what to say.

When I was older, I created glamorous names and wrote these in my textbooks in splendid cursive letters: "This book belongs to *Dulce*." Ana Maria. Yolanda. Celia.

The changing of my name began on a Tuesday afternoon, mid-April. We lived on the western coast of Puerto Rico in a town called Cabo Rojo. It was a hot after-school day when I walked into the house where I had lived since childhood. On the stove, a pot of skinned potatoes soaked in water. The house smelled of cilantro.

Mom sat at the dining table, peeling layers off a thick white onion. She wore a sleeveless honey-colored dress, matching chandelier earrings, and a gold cross around her neck.

"Could you hand me a glass of lemonade?" she asked. Her deep voice sounded like water trickling between stones. When we were younger, she read us storybooks because Dad worked late nights at the pharmaceutical factory and she didn't want us to feel neglected. At the age of twelve, my sister Raquel asked Mom to stop reading to us. I didn't mind, and I was older.

I served us both a glass. “Why are you dressed up?”

“Today’s our anniversary.” She sipped on her drink. “It would’ve been a great night except that your father says that we can’t afford to wine and dine anymore.” She shrugged her elegant shoulders. “A woman should dress fancy to commemorate the day she married.”

I had forgotten about their twentieth anniversary. Usually, I bought them little trinkets: a hand-woven basket for the fifteenth year; two candleholders for the sixteenth year; a crystal vase for the seventeenth year; and a bottled sailboat for the nineteenth year. This year, I could afford a little more because I had two hundred dollars in my bedroom. I hadn’t told her or anyone else about my two-month affair with Paul, an American wildlife conservationist working at the Refuge in Cabo Rojo. We met because my biology teacher wanted us high school seniors to learn something about taking care of the island, and he believed that showing us our hometown refuge would permanently instill in our brains the value of protecting the environment. After the field trip, Paul asked me to come by his office whenever I wanted to talk. I skipped school to meet him, and he asked me out to lunch and then to dinner. Unlike school boys who were scared to touch me, Paul said that he didn’t mind me being a virgin. After we made love a second time, he drove me to a gynecologist in Vega Baja who didn’t ask me any questions when I asked for a diaphragm. Paul said it wouldn’t make me fat and cranky, like the pill. I liked him more than anyone else I had ever known. Ours was a complicated relationship. I was weeks away from high school graduation. He was married, and he didn’t promise to leave his wife. Paul also gave me fifty dollars each night that we slept together.

“You should go out tonight,” I said. “I’ll take care of it.”

Mom put down the onion. “With what money?”

“I have a few bucks,” I said.

Mom stood and motioned for me to follow her into my room. I did. Her coming into my room didn’t bother me. We had no laws, spoken or implied, that said we needed permission to walk

into the other's room. Standing in my room over the circle rug, Mom tenderly tucked a lock of my long hair behind my ear. I wanted to change out of my uniform already. I was impatiently waiting for the last day of classes when I could finally burn the navy blue skirts. Less than a month to go.

“Your father doesn't want anything special,” Mom said. “He's too concerned about turning forty-five next month, about your college education, and about other things that he doesn't tell me. He used to say that we couldn't take vacations because you girls were too young, and then he said that we couldn't go dancing because he had to work early mornings. Now, it's the retirement fund. He doesn't want to work until he's dead. The only thing wrong with that man is his bad temper, and God knows the doctors can't cure him. I grew up poor and still am. The last thing I need is for your father to remind me of it.”

We weren't poor. The front of our house faced a busy street, but our bedrooms overlooked the Caribbean Seas. Save for hurricane season, we were the envy of the town.

Mom touched my shoulder. “But we're not desperate for money, Alma.” And then she uncurled her hand and showed me the four fifty-dollar bills Paul had left me on hotel tables. The rolled bills look like perm curlers.

Breathless, I plopped down on the bed. Mom wasn't the kind of mother who spied on her daughters out of boredom. She had a job at a bakery store, and she busied herself with housework and endless errands. She volunteered at a nursing home where she read stories to the old folks. She was proud to tell her friends that her life was full of demands and she didn't have any time to meddle in her girls' business. My girlfriends were pros at weaving stories to get out of trouble, but I didn't know where to begin because my mother had trusted me too much.

“Who did you get these from?” Mom asked.

I needed an incredible lie. “I found it on my way to school.”

Mom placed a cold hand on my knee. One freshly manicured nail was bitten to the quick. She had probably thought about what to say for hours. I wanted to run away. I stood, ready to flee. She gripped my arm and we sat down again, carefully.

“When I came home from work, I walked by your bedroom and saw your clothes spilling out of the closet. You left your door open. I thought it would be nice for me to help you because you’re busy with school.”

“I can do my own laundry.” I didn’t want her to find the diaphragm.

She sighed. “Listen, I’m giving you a chance to explain.”

My stomach felt like a knot, but I said nothing.

She got up, picked up my jeans off the closet floor, and tossed the cased-diaphragm at me. I caught it with one hand. My life was over. I had been dumb in the past, but this was the stupidest thing that I had ever done. To not shut my bedroom door. To forget to hide things because I trusted Mom and Dad not to invade my privacy. I covered my face with my hands.

“That’s what I want to know about,” she shouted. “Who are you sleeping with?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.” I sounded like an idiot.

“Did you use more protection than a diaphragm?” She kneeled down in front of me. “Is this boy someone we know?” She pulled my hands away from my face. “For God’s sake, girl, please talk to me. Who adjusted that thing into your body? And when did you get it done? How could I not notice something was wrong? I thought you had to be older than eighteen to see those doctors.”

I was surprised that she was unaware of the changing times. Girls had plenty of birth control options available, and they weren’t difficult to find. As a matter of fact, we were encouraged in school to seek out professional advice before having sex. But I couldn’t explain these things to my mother. It was too late.

The front door opened, and my sister Raquel poked her head inside. She wore a green and white school uniform, and her skirt fit her hips loosely from the weight she had lost over the Christmas break. We styled our jet black hair the same, long and wavy. People asked us if we were twins, even though to me I clearly looked older. That morning Raquel had cut her own bangs right over the eyebrows, and they looked good.

“Close the door,” Mom said.

“Jose is finally getting the band together. They want to hear me sing.”

Mom grunted. “I said I’m talking to your sister.”

Raquel’s eyes widened. Mom raised her voice every now and then, and she slammed objects on counters, but she kept her temper in check most of the time. Raquel now looked at me, questioning me with her brown eyes. I shrugged, looking away. Finally, my sister closed the bedroom door, leaving me alone with my mother. In the living room, Raquel switched on the radio to a rock station. The walls reverberated, sparking an ache in my head. Mom shouted for her to turn down the volume. Raquel said, “Whatever,” but she obeyed.

Mom leaned her forehead on the bedroom door, marking the center with a glob of beige makeup. “Alma, Alma,” she said, sadly. “Who taught you how to be a prostitute?”

“The money was a gift. Believe me.”

“Don’t you get it? You took it.”

I sighed, speechless.

Mom said, “You can shrug me off, but you’ll have to answer to your father.”

“Come on, Mom. Why does he have to know?”

“Somehow your secret will leak and everyone in town will know that his daughter slept with a boy for money. Fifty dollars a night! That makes you a prostitute. And your father would never forgive me if I kept this from him.” She wiped tears off her cheeks. Sharply, she twisted the door

knob and cracked it open. In a whisper, she said, “You had a good soul once. I don’t know what happened, but I suggest you find out.” With those words, she closed the door behind her.

Mom turned off the music. Raquel slammed her bedroom door, causing mine to shudder.

I gathered the rolled up bills in my hand and sat on the floor, knees to my chest. The diaphragm lay on the floor. I didn’t dare touch it.

Dad would arrive in one hour.

On a clear day, we could see the green outline of Mona Island due west off the mainland. Some illegal immigrants living in Puerto Rico journeyed through a turbulent, shark-ridden passage to end up on the Western coast, on the opposite side of the glitz and glamour of San Juan. A week or two before, a fifteen year old girl was found dead on a raft floating near Mona. She was dressed in rags, dehydrated and alone. Her companions drowned in the sea. I couldn’t understand why a person would risk his or her life by crossing a dangerous passage simply to reach another island. Did she expect to find freedom and wealth? Mom said that they lived in much worse conditions in Hispaniola. Still, the girl risked her life, and she lost.

That Tuesday afternoon, Mom cooked dinner while we waited for Dad to arrive.

Raquel banged on my bedroom door and then busted through. “I can’t take it anymore. What’s going on with you and Mom?”

From my bureau, I removed a manila folder with pictures I had taken of Paul. I showed her one of him in an abandoned barn, the one where we first talk of the endangered animals, like the golden Coqui frogs, the red-tailed hawk which we called ‘Guaragao,’ and the Puerto Rican parrots. In the picture, Paul smiled without showing his teeth. He wasn’t a very tall man, maybe 5’8. He had a square jaw, thick eyebrows, a rugged neck because of sun exposure, and his hairline had already receded by two inches according to him, even though he hadn’t turned forty, yet.

Raquel stared at the photo for a while before handing it back. “He looks old.”

“But he has gorgeous baby blue eyes.”

“How do you know him?” she asked, cautiously.

Her fingers left imprints on the photo, and I wiped them with the edge of my blouse. I wouldn't go into details with my sister.

“You want to go to Jose's tonight?” I asked.

Her eyes brightened. “You'll help me?”

I wanted her out of the house because I didn't know what would happen when Mom told Dad about me and Paul. I said, “Of course, I will.”

She skipped into her room, got dressed, and returned in a jean mini-skirt. We weren't allowed to wear leg-baring clothes. It bothered me that she would get away with it while I stayed home, listening to my parent's lecture. But I said nothing. I would've paid half of my savings to get her out. And despite Raquel's confession that she was no longer a virgin—she had sex with a crush in a school bathroom—I knew that Dad expected us to be his little angels and preserve our virginity for marriage. Above all, we were supposed to pretend.

And then there was the threat of my mother calling me a prostitute again. I didn't want Raquel to hear those words.

“Maybe you shouldn't wear this skirt,” I said, grabbing a wet towel from my hamper and wrapping it around her little waist.

Raquel laughed, pushing me away. She fell on the bed, rolled over, and found the rolled bills.

“What's this?” she cooed. “You *are* in trouble, aren't you?”

When she wouldn't hand me back the money, I pulled her off the bed by the ankles and she landed hard on the floor. Meanwhile, she was stuffing the bills inside of her bra, and I slid my hand

inside of her shirt because it was my money. She kicked my thigh, scooting her buttocks towards the window, laughing louder than before until she ran herself into a corner.

I pinned her down with my knee. “Give it back.”

“Come on, share with me. It’s plenty of money.”

Mom opened the door, and she immediately noticed Raquel’s skirt. “What are you wearing?”

Raquel’s face turned bell-pepper red. She readjusted her skirt, pulling the seams to make it look longer. I didn’t want her to get into trouble, and I knew that Mom was already in a bad mood.

“It’s my skirt,” I said, thinking I could save her from my mother’s wrath.

Mom narrowed her eyes. I braced myself for a slap. She didn’t move right away. Mom dropped her hands to her sides, her small eyes telling me how disappointed she was without actually uttering a word. Finally, she told Raquel to step out of the skirt and hand it over.

Raquel grunted. “Can I take care of it in my room?”

“Take it off, now.”

I was embarrassed for her, and I turned around to give her a bit of privacy. But we weren’t the kind of sisters who were shocked to see each other naked. We didn’t mind being open. It was just that I felt sorry for my sister, standing there in my room, reaching for the zipper to her skirt. I couldn’t bear to watch her undress before me, and I faced the white walls.

Mom gasped. “God Almighty.”

I looked at Raquel, then, slightly apologetic until I saw the black-lettered tattoo on her back. It spelled out her name in bold, cursive letters. I couldn’t believe that she had the courage to endure a painful needle stabbing at her skin.

“Was that your idea, too?” Mom asked me, pointing at Raquel’s lower back. She believed that tattoos were the markings of Satan.

I sat down on the bed.

“No, it’s not,” Raquel said. “My boyfriend, Jose, paid a tattoo artist.”

Mom fingered the cross around her neck. She had bought the charm many years ago at a flea market, and she wouldn’t take it off except to sleep because the chain tangled up easily. I knew by the way she closed her eyes and stroked the charm that she’d want us to say a prayer together. Whenever Mom thought that we had strayed, she placed her complete trust in a God who could bring us back to our senses. She told us to drop to our knees, and Raquel obeyed quickly because she believed in God’s soul-saving miracles. I went down because I didn’t want to annoy Mom even further, but I didn’t believe in the same things that they did. Clasp ing our hands to her chest, Mom begged God to overlook our sins for we were women, imprudent, malleable and easily hooked by fleshly desires.

Raquel said, “Amen.”

I couldn’t say the words because it meant that I agreed.

“Trust in God,” Mom said, squeezing my hand. “He will forgive you.”

I pried my hand away from hers. “I don’t want to say it.” They knew about my lack of spiritual faith.

Raquel shook my shoulder. “For God’s sake, Alma, it’s not the end of the world. Say it.”

Her face had a complacent look as if a quick prayer had transformed her into a docile girl.

I heard Dad parking his car in the carport. The time had come.

Mom pleaded for me to say, “Amen,” before Dad came inside. My heart beat so fast that I had to gasp for air. They tugged at my shirt from both sides, imploring that I join them just this once. I thought that they had gone mad.

The tangerine sun pierced the scattered clouds. Drenched in sweat, I leaned over the balcony rail to catch a breeze. Raquel squeezed past me. She wore a long pair of jeans and a loose-fitting

shirt. She had eyeliner smudged over her eyelids. Mom had agreed to let Raquel walk to band practice tonight because she didn't want her to overhear what was going on with me.

"Don't let them break us up," Raquel said to me.

I told her not to worry, even though I had no idea what would happen.

Mom called me to the living room after Dad finished showering. My parents sat at the dining table. Dad believed that a table established order, and Mom must've expected me to confess as if my father were a priest.

Dad said, "You have something to tell me."

I didn't want to drag out the discussion. "I was with a man."

Dad made a fist. A crevice developed deep between his eyebrows. Mom stroked his wrist. He glared at her for a while before getting up and going to the kitchen. He rinsed out a glass in the sink and shut the cabinet door. We jumped at the sound of wood banging wood. Dad poured rum into the glass. After several gulps, he pointed at me and said, "Marry the man."

"He's already married," Mom said.

Dad paced back and forth. When he joined us at the dining table again, he looked pale and confused. "You should've taught your daughter what it means to be a woman, Inez. Are you pregnant?" He looked at me.

I shook my head. I wouldn't dare mention the diaphragm.

He turned back to Mom. "She could have a disease."

"I'll take her to the doctor tomorrow."

"No!" He finished his rum. "The last thing we need is for rumors to spread that your daughter is sleeping around with married men."

"A doctor has to see her," Mother said.

Dad held a finger to his lips. "How did you meet this man?"

Despite his astonishment, Dad seemed to take the whole issue in stride. Rum made him totter back and forth between complete rationality and utter stupidity. Maybe telling him wouldn't turn out so badly. I started with the school field trip to the Wildlife Refuge a few months earlier. Paul had said that if I were interested in knowing more, he would be happy to teach me about the preserve. A week later, I had taken a taxi to visit him and ask questions on the species he mentioned during our trip. He had taught me the names of plants and the Latin names of birds. Later, he had driven us to a diner in Joyuda Beach, a place where we sometimes went to eat as a family.

Mom covered her face with her hands, and I stopped talking.

“What is it, Inez?” Dad asked.

She laced her fingers together. “He paid her.”

I wanted the earth to open-up and swallow me whole, right then and there. I'd drag Mom down by the ankle. Make her live in hell with me. She should've kept her mouth shut. I cursed her under my breath.

Dad wiped sweat off his forehead. “Is that true?”

I bowed my head, unable to speak.

His palm opened up in the air as if to strike me. Never before had he slapped me. Mom caught his hand, told him to take it easy, and they went into the bedroom to talk. I heard banging on the wall like fists. And then their door opened and Dad walked out of the house.

In the kitchen, Mom heated water in a tea kettle. “We had to tell your father,” she said as she wiped down the counters with a dirty sponge. Her voice sounded edgy as if it were going to break at any moment. She bent over the low counter and said, “He says that you have a week.”

“A week for what?” I leaned against the wall.

“I don't know.” Mom served chamomile tea to ease the nerves.

Outside, the billowing wind played a nervous melody. The rain started with an explosive thunder. We both jumped. I had heard on the morning news that we were to expect storms to pass over town in the next couple of days. I hoped that Jose would be decent enough to bring my sister home and not let her walk down the street at night.

“Promise me that you’ll never see that man again,” Mom said.

My lips quivered but I promised, even though I didn’t know how I’d keep it. Paul had asked that I meet him the next day, and I didn’t have any way of canceling our date. I couldn’t leave a message on his work phone because he shared his desk with other people. At home, his wife would hear the machine. I’d have to go to the Refuge the next day and talk to him face-to-face.

Suddenly, Mom said she’d pick up Raquel.

“Is Dad coming back?” I asked.

“There’s nowhere else for him to go.” The front door shut behind her.

I went back to my room and stashed Paul’s money inside the pillowcase. In the semi-darkness, our neighbor’s television broadcast the news of a man who had raped a young woman up in the mountains. Outside in the street, rambunctious children laughed in the rain, playing hide-and-seek, unaware of our troubles. The rain became a trickle and the sun melted into the sea. Dozens of fishing canoes bobbed in the water, moving closer to the shoreline. Those men exposed their lives to sharks and storms in order to make a living. I didn’t think I’d have the courage to do the same.

The next night, I sat across from the man whose body I loved. He chose a restaurant named Cabo Seafood on the Gourmet Golden Mile in Joyuda Beach because it was a close drive to my house and because Paul loved to be outside. A few miles off the coast, we could see a tiny island called La Isla de Ratones. Below the deck, gigantic tarpon fishes munched on pieces of bread that people tossed at them. Paul said that these were rare to find swimming so close to the shore.

Coming to meet Paul proved to be a test: obey my parents or follow my heart. I couldn't turn my back on Paul after everything we had shared. Those moments when he made me feel like the most special person alive mattered to me. That day, I wrestled with my emotions all day at school. As my teacher discussed our graduation ceremony and my friends made plans for an after-party, I daydreamed of seeing Paul's face. We hadn't seen each other in a week. His wife could find out; he wasn't sure how to deal with her reaction. Up until then, I hadn't worried about my parents finding out. Now, I worried nonstop about the aftermath.

My father took the day off from work, claiming to be coming down with a cold. When I returned from school, Mom and Dad were watching the news. I was sent to my bedroom, grounded, like a small child. Hours passed. Finally, they turned off the television and went into their bedroom. I decided then that I would meet Paul at our designated spot—a gas station phone booth—before sunset.

Paul's blue Honda was parked by the side of the road, the motor still running. "I'm sorry," he said as I buckled my seatbelt. "My wife invited herself to Casino Night. I left her at the Hilton, but I have to pick her up before she realizes that I'm gone." Blackjack at the Hilton was his excuse to escape from home. Theirs was a sour and distant relationship, and it didn't occur to him that she might want to accompany him one night. I was devastated, and I had much more to tell him.

Paul now drank a rum and coke off a plastic cup. He wore a black button-down shirt that exposed his neck, red from the sun. He sank back into his chair, lifting his gaze towards the horizon. A breeze lifted strands of his fine hair, and I reached across the table to fix it. He kissed the back of my hand. Something inside of my chest ached. I didn't want to say goodbye. Not like this. Not tonight.

"You look stunning," he said.

I was wearing a white wrap blouse with a V-neck, my favorite piece. I wanted his last memory of me to be a radiant one.

Our waiter arrived. I knew Sergio from school. He had graduated from my school the year before. We weren't close or anything, just a familiar face and name. He had grown a goatee since the last time I saw him, and he wore black rimmed glasses.

"I know you," he said to me.

"Sergio, right?"

"What's your name?"

I told him, feeling a little embarrassed.

Paul and I both ordered our favorite dish: grilled red snapper served with yellow rice and Navy beans. Sergio wrote down everything, claiming he suffered from poor memory. He smiled easily when I teased him that he looked older. Paul interrupted us by ordering another rum and coke. Sergio said he'd be back in a second.

Out of nowhere, Paul asked me, "Why did your mother name you soul in Spanish?"

I shrugged. "Maybe she thought it could save me."

"What if it doesn't?" Paul asked.

I rolled my eyes. "I'm not scared."

"Me neither." He raised his eyebrows. "But death does frighten you, doesn't it?"

"Yes. But saving our souls is an intellectual exercise, like drinking tea 'to calm the nerves.'"

"Are you kidding me?"

"Why? You're a biologist." I sipped on my iced water, waiting to see if he cleared the expression of astonishment off his face. He didn't, and I said, "Don't look at me that way. No one can say that they've roamed the earth after death. Have you ever come in contact with a spirit in limbo?"

“Quite frankly, dear, I believe in God *and* ghosts.”

“Oh, please.”

“As a matter of fact, I think women were created to remind us of those other dimensions. You women seduce us with your beauty, but you don’t accept liability. And we, men, play the fool when we pursue the unattainable. I think He enjoys watching the drama from above.”

“You’re blaming God for my existence?” I said.

“No. But I do find it curious that your mother knew your future.”

We were talking in circles and had returned to the initial point he had wanted to make. That was Paul’s way of winning an argument. Luckily, Sergio brought our food and served it with great flair as if he were a white-gloved butler. We told him that the plates looked delicious. Sergio pivoted on his heel to leave.

“Do you think a soul can be traded?” I asked Sergio.

“What?” he asked in Spanish.

I repeated the question in our language.

Sergio eyed Paul who was digging his fork into a mound of rice. His tip was still on the line, and Sergio knew it. He wiped his hands on his black apron and cleared his throat. He tucked his chin down to his chest and said, “As long as you don’t sell it to the devil, you’ll be fine.”

“And who is the devil?” I asked in English.

Paul and Sergio both looked stunned.

“I’m kidding,” I said, even though their judgment irked me.

Sergio hurried over to another table.

I said to Paul, “What did I tell you? People run scared when you talk about that stuff.”

Paul gazed out at the horizon, lost in thought.

He understood my Spanish. Sometimes in restaurants or hotels when people addressed me instead of him, Paul would pretend not to know the language. Other times, he surprised waiters and hotel clerks when he used a native idiom only known to longtime residents. He had lived in Puerto Rico for almost ten years. I learned English from cable TV, which had arrived less than a decade before, and from a neighbor who taught me basic grammar. After meeting Paul, however, I realized that I had a long road ahead of me. Paul gently corrected me whenever I messed up.

The sun dipped into the ocean, and the rays radiated off Paul's blue eyes. I was reminded of that day early in our relationship when we drove to Playa Sucia, a beach due south of Joyuda. We passed the salt dunes in Salinas, the car rattling as we drove through the unpaved road with crater-sized holes, and we parked on the beach. Up by Los Morillos Lighthouse nestled on top of limestone rocks two hundred feet above the water, we kissed for the first time. Giant waves crashed against the rocks, over and over, and I thought that they'd cave in under us. The breeze up there nearly knocked us down, and we had to hold onto each other firmly in order to walk along the edge. And now we had to end it.

I told him how my parents found out about us. "We can't do this anymore."

Paul set down his fork and knife. "Is your father throwing you out?"

"He hasn't said." From then on, I couldn't stop thinking about it.

"You should know that I'm buying a second house, then," Paul said in Spanish. He pushed his plate to the side. "Gloria and I can't live together anymore. She bought a bed and moved her stuff into the second bedroom. We haven't been man and wife for years, and ever since we started seeing each other she's become distant." He lowered his head. "Say that you want it, and I'll make it ours. Yours and mine. Your name will go on the deed."

The offer was awfully tempting. How could I refuse? My legs trembled as if I stood at the edge of a cliff. Below, the seas looked like a dark throat, thirsting to swallow my body. To own a

house in Cabo Rojo sounded surreal. I had grown up here. I saw myself being buried next to my grandparents and great-grandparents. But living in a house owned by a married man could become a nightmare of unexpected visits, a limbo-like state in which he belonged neither to his wife nor to me. He'd carry me in his arms until I depended on him the way rich old men leaned on their walking canes.

"What do you think?" Paul asked.

I fidgeted with the straw in my glass. He could've made the process less complicated by saying, "Let's stop seeing each other," because we weren't having a serious affair. Or were we? I was seventeen. My father had already saved enough money to cover my college tuition. Yet, I couldn't deny that the idea of staying with Paul attracted me. We could make it work.

"I don't want to live there by myself," I said.

Paul placed his hands on the table. His left ring finger was bare, unmarked. That's why, at first, I'd thought he was available. I hadn't realized what I'd got myself into until the first night that we slept together. He had said that he couldn't stay overnight in the hotel room because his wife had cooked him dinner. We had a vicious fight, and I ran out of the room, cursing him for fooling me. He had said that they weren't a couple anymore, just two people who shared a house, married years ago and unable to separate because of financial entanglements. It still saddened me that we had never woken up together and watched the morning sun glow around the rim of a window.

"We'll have to wait until you turn eighteen," Paul said. "To settle things."

"That's three months away."

"He can't do anything to you until then."

"And if he does?"

"Trust me. He won't."

As reasonable as he sounded, I shook my head no. I wanted to tell Paul that my father's anger stemmed from the money that he gave me. My mother's accusation—you're a prostitute—still rang in my ears. I had already accepted too much.

No longer hungry, I excused myself to use the restroom. Alone in the dimly lit ladies room, I pressed my chest against the cement wall where other women had handwritten their spite: *Maricón. Hijo del demonio. Te odio.* I didn't have a pen to scribble something on the wall. *Trapped*, I'd write.

The moon surfaced in the sky and the sinks glowed ghostly white. A short lady walked in. She wore low riders and a sequined purple shirt. She smiled at herself in the mirror's reflection. Her small, dark eyes looked unfocused as if she had already had too much to drink. I turned on the faucet, pretending to wash my hands. The woman talked out loud, telling me the story of her lame husband who had cheated on her. I left the restroom in a hurry, suddenly scared to be recognized.

On the deck, Paul leaned over the rail and tossed bread into the water.

I needed fresh air before confronting him. What did it mean? He hadn't handed me the money; he had put the fifties on the table. I had folded the bills into squares and tucked them into my wallet's most interior pocket. After collecting four, I had placed them in a jewelry box kept hidden in the closet under layers of clothes. I realized then that my mother had been searching my room. She hadn't been trying to help me.

I stepped outside. The air smelled salty, like iced shrimp. A breeze made my skirt quiver. I walked down the narrow street crowded with people and slow moving automobiles. In between restaurants, ocean waves crashed against cement barriers constructed to keep the water from flooding the road. Finally, I reached a strip of beach, hidden behind stumpy palm trees, and I stepped knee-deep into the water. A wave knocked me off balance, and my foot got stuck in the sand. I fell hard on my back. Up above, hundreds of stars pulsed in the sky. The full moon hung in the east. In the black water, the moon's reflection shifted position. I allowed the waves to wash

away my worries of returning home. The receding tide undressed the sand and revealed pebbles and shells. A pea-sized crab flipped upside down. I pushed it closer to the water and it vanished. In a few months, fishermen would catch the adult crab and sell it at a roadside kiosk.

I wiped the sand off me and trudged back towards the restaurant. I still didn't feel ready to discuss the future with Paul. I wished he wasn't real anymore. But he was. I couldn't erase him or make sense of what was happening in front of me.

Then, suddenly, Paul crossed the road, jumped into his car, and pulled out of the parking lot, shifting fast enough to lift dirt. He sped right past me as if I wasn't even there. My feet were weighted down, like boat anchors screwed to a ship. How could he leave me? I'd have to walk through a dark and mountainous road to get home.

I sat down on a bench in front of the restaurant, expecting him to return.

A woman dressed in a mini skirt and a red midriff blouse sat alone at a table. She dipped shrimps into cocktail sauce. Across the street, a group of men called out the woman's name, Sandra. "Come over here, sweet Sandra," they said. Sandra licked her fingers as she walked over to them. Her lips were drowned in deep red lipstick, and she intoxicated the men with her laughter. They fingered her long hair, and she swayed her head in semi-circles. I knew what kind of woman she was; some of them lived in the ghettos near my house. Politicians and religious groups called 'the blemish of our town' as if they were an infection invading our immune system. For the first time, I thought about how such a pretty woman could end up in a place with a revolving door. Perhaps she never had a family with whom to share the burdens of life. Maybe those that she loved had abandoned her because of her lifestyle choices. Because when the going got rough, women always had it worse. We were easily left behind, overlooked, forgotten.

A black Jeep parked on the dirt patch across the street and four young women got out. They walked with a sway to their hips as if an internal rhythm guided them. One lady wore a brown mini-

skirt, cashmere blouse, and knee-high boots. Another woman wore pink stiletto heels, wide-leg pants, and a pink blouse with white swirls and star bursts. She swung a glittery handbag. They strode past me, and the red-headed woman with the pink stilettos smiled at me as if we knew each other. The women left the air scented with the smell of rich flowers. I wanted to belong to their group, to smile at strangers as if they were long-time friends. I yearned for that kind of self-confidence to be draped over me.

At the door, Sergio greeted the ladies with a kiss on the cheek. They were famished, one of them exclaimed. He was about to sit them down when he saw me standing near the front entrance. There was no point in pretending that we didn't know each other. I waved hello, smiling politely, and he asked another server to take care of the four.

"What happened to the guy you were with?" Up close, his crooked lip looked like desire.

My heart jumped but I tried not to show it. "He had to leave."

"Is he your boyfriend?"

"A friend," I said, shortly.

Sergio shook his head. "How are you getting home?"

"My house isn't far from here," I said, even though it was a good walk.

"You live in the orange house after the river."

I was surprised that he knew where I lived. In another life, I would've come here for a late date along the beach shore, us holding hands and making out as the stars rotated above us. My parents wouldn't mind me dating a young, hard-working man with his whole future in front of him. We'd take life's grand tour together without the need to explain our pasts.

"I'll drive you home," Sergio said. "My shift ends in an hour and a half." He checked his watch and corrected himself. "Sorry. Two hours."

"Alright," I said.

He excused himself to return to work.

A part of me wanted to wait for him. I'd sit by the bar, sip on a cocktail while lovers and friends moved about the restaurant, determined to have fun on a Thursday night. Tables would be shifted to conjoin bigger groups. Plates overflowing with food would be delivered to hungry mouths. And I'd still be sitting there, alone, without a hand to hold or a voice to listen to. An hour felt like forever. My parents must've already noticed my absence, and I needed them more than ever. Paul wasn't coming back.

When Sergio's shadow was out of sight, I hurried out the restaurant's carved doors, down the busy street, headed home. Waves gushed up against the barricades. Restaurant doors pumped loud, echoing music into the street. Crowds of young people, drunk and giddy, surrounded me. Empty beer bottles were scattered over patches of dirt. My legs moved faster despite the sand caught between my toes. Finally, the walkway gave up and then the night regained territory until my body was enveloped in a suffocating darkness. Tall coconut palms screened the moon's glare. The breeze sounded like a howl.

I was out of breath when I reached the foot of the curvaceous hill. It was difficult to see until a car's headlights shone the path. The glow lasted mere seconds. In the darkness that followed, I traced the white street lines, careful not to wander into the swampy jungles where people didn't come back from. I was more frightened of the drivers swerving to avoid potholes. These streets were not constructed with pedestrians in mind. And if a cop found me, he'd probably take me for a crazy person with a suicide wish, which was anything but uncommon in Puerto Rico.

At the top of the hill, I thanked the heavens there was only one major climb. The soles of my feet burned; the stabbing pain in my thighs and calves was killing me. In the daytime, roadside vendors in old beat-up vans sold coconut juice, shish-kabobs, bananas, sugar cane, and seafood. At night there was only silence up here.

I stopped to catch my breath by a gigantic mango tree leaning over the cliff. One at a time, I cleared pebbles out of my sandals. And then I heard leaves ruffling down below and a male voice whispering, “Hello, gorgeous.” I shrieked out of pure panic. I didn’t know if the devil had found me or if a woodsman was surprised to find a young woman stranded by the road. Either way, I ran and ran as fast as my feet could. I ran so fast that my nose started to bleed, but I didn’t dare stop to clean myself up.

I reached the other side of the hills and found the dark sea shimmering under the moonlight. Miles away houselights flickered on the peninsular town of Rincón. I was glad to not hear the man’s voice echoing in my ear anymore. Walking down the hill was less stressful on my legs. Still, I didn’t slow down until I crossed the old bridge before my house.

My parents stood on the balcony, glaring at me. Mom grasped the metal bars, her frame a silver of flesh caught between the rails. My father, however, looked as tall as a cactus.

When Mom was angry, she slammed kitchen cabinet doors. She barked orders as she lined dough balls on a plate. “Get me the sugar,” she said.

I grabbed the sugar bag from the pantry and set it on the counter.

Mom poured tablespoons of it into a mixing bowl. Despite her anger, she made a show out of her motherly love as if to say that we didn’t deserve anything good or sweet but, here she was, sacrificing like always. She carelessly sprinkled cinnamon and powdered sugar over the dough.

Dad had left home the moment that I had arrived. He couldn’t stand to look at my face, he had said. Despite being hurt, I was glad that he was gone. Mom’s anger was manageable.

Raquel trudged into the kitchen, and Mom said to me, “Look at your sister’s face.”

Raquel had a gash under her right eye.

“What happened?” I asked.

“I got into a fight with this girl,” Raquel said. “The principal called me to his office late today and said he wants to have a talk with me tomorrow. I know he’s going to give me detention for ‘insubordination.’ That’s what he calls it.” Raquel brushed her bangs away from her face. “I don’t even know what it means.”

“Your father will talk to him tomorrow,” Mom said.

“I want Alma to come with me,” Raquel said. “The principal likes her.”

Years ago, I won a science project based on the endangered leatherback sea turtle whose nests can be found in Tres Palmas Beach in Rincón just a few miles from home. As a reward, the principal sent me and a teacher on a day-trip to El Yunque Natural Forest where we spent an entire day climbing the lush Luquillo Mountains until we reached the peak. I was proud that he still remembered me.

“I can skip first period,” I said.

Mom removed the last doughnut batch from the pan. “Speak to your father. I doubt that you’ll get away with it.”

“I’m just saying that she could help me out,” Raquel said.

Mom tapped her foot on the floor. “You’ll realize soon enough that what you do now will affect you for the rest of your life.” She wiped the sugar off her fingers and then stomped out of the kitchen. The pictures on the wall rattled when she shut her bedroom door.

The muggy air made me feel sluggish, and the ceiling fans couldn’t keep the heat out. I talked Raquel into joining me on the balcony where we balanced our weight on the hammock and gently rocked it by tapping our feet against the metal rails.

Raquel brought the plate of doughnuts. She offered me one, but I wasn’t hungry.

“Dad grounded me for a month because of the tattoo. No phone, movies, boys. He says that he will have someone remove it.” She rolled her eyes. “I’m not letting anyone touch me.”

“Getting a tattoo wasn’t a good idea.”

“I wasn’t asking for your opinion. Besides, you’ve got much more to confess.”

I said, “You’re not getting a confession out of me.” I couldn’t talk about Paul with my sister.

Raquel lay back on the hammock. “The principal didn’t mention your name. The truth is that Jose asked me to his house tomorrow. His mother is going to see her family in Bayamón. I’m telling Mom that I got suspended. That way she can’t bother me about homework.” Raquel licked her front teeth. “Go see your boyfriend tomorrow. What’s the old man’s name, anyway?”

I was floored. “So, who punched you in the face?”

“Some envious girl who likes Jose. I broke her nose, and the next time the witch looks at him, I’ll make her spurt out her intestines.”

“And you didn’t get in trouble over it?”

“We weren’t on school grounds, stupid.”

Looking at my sister’s skinny arms, I was alarmed to hear her violent talk. Her eyes looked like pools of dark water. This girl slept in the room next door, steps away from my pillow, and I knew very little about her life. She didn’t want to hear my thoughts on tattoos; she wouldn’t borrow my clothes because they weren’t as hip as hers; and she didn’t even sing anywhere within hearing range. I wanted to tell her not to fight over a man. But I had no standing ground to advise her to watch her step. We were both involved in dubious relationships, and she knew that much.

Not more than an hour passed before Dad returned home that night. Mom told us to go into our separate bedrooms. Inside my warm room, a breeze jingled the glass-beaded lamp on my bureau. I rested my feet on a pillow, closed my eyes, listening to the soothing sounds, and I pictured myself in a candle-lit bathroom, indulging in a thick bubble bath in a claw-footed porcelain bathtub. In my vision, Paul opened the bathroom door. He had a towel wrapped around his mid-section, and

he peeled it away slowly, seductively, until he stood naked in front of me. The towel landed on the floor and I opened my eyes because Mom barged into the room. Her eyes were smudged with mascara.

Dad placed two chairs in the middle of the room. His white undershirt had three holes on the chest, like bullet wounds. He drank straight rum from a plastic cup, and he smelled awful.

Mom said, “Do you remember Celeste?”

“Sort of,” I said, trying to remember the face of my father’s sister.

“We’re sending you to San Juan. She owns a dress shop there and could use your help.”

They were sending me away, far away, to the other side of the island where nobody knew who I was. They had come to the conclusion without asking for my input. I couldn’t even remember what Celeste looked like anymore. We hadn’t seen her in over a year. They couldn’t do this to me.

“I promise to never see Paul again.”

“Don’t say that name in my house,” Dad said.

I wanted to scream, but I couldn’t lose control. “You don’t understand—”

“Shut up,” Dad shouted.

Mom squeezed Dad’s hand. “Celeste is coming to pick you up on Saturday. We’ve already made the plans, and you don’t have to worry about anything because she’s family. She’ll take good care of you.”

“My home is here,” I said, still pleading not to be sent away.

Dad’s forehead glistened and turned a darker shade. There were times when my father scared me to death because he could keep a subdued temper as if he were meditating his next strategy. But that night, he did not stop and think. He gripped Mom’s hand and dragged her out of the bedroom as if she were a stuffed doll. I stumbled to my feet, too late. Raquel caught Mom from falling. Dad locked my door; Mom and Raquel banged on it, shouting at Dad to stop the craziness.

He looked like a wild animal. I begged him not to hurt me. My head was spinning because I thought he was going to hurl me at a wall across the room. Instead, he unbuckled his leather belt and slipped it off. I moved further and further away to a bed corner, crouching under my arms, holding my legs up to my chest and my back against the frigid wall. I wished to be translucent and able to trespass walls. I'd jump into the safe ocean.

Dad jammed a knee into my lower back and hit me with his belt. I wriggled because of the pain and also because an intense hatred grew inside of me. He once said that a father was incapable of wounding his girls. He hadn't done such a thing to me since I was eight and stole a jar of coins from his car. The memories returned as vivid as if they had happened the day before. I lay there with my head buried in a pillow and told myself not to cry or show him my pain. By the time that the belt whooshed in the air a third and final time, my body shook uncontrollably.

Before he left, Dad cursed God for sending him this many women.

Mom and Raquel rushed inside and spread a blanket to cover me. I could hardly breathe.

That night a thunderous shower pounded our roof. My sister and I huddled under a single blanket, watching the lights flicker under the duress of a strong eastward-moving storm. Drainage problems caused our house to flood at times, and our front door wasn't solid enough to keep the rain from seeping into the living room. It gave once, years ago. A bad storm ruined our furniture. Because we didn't have home insurance of any kind, Mom made sure that she took care of what little we had. She was moving fast from one room to another, closing metal windows, pulling the couches away from the walls, and disconnecting electrical equipment. When she finished, she hurried outside and wrapped the hammock around the rails so that it wouldn't blow away.

Dad had driven away, again, before the storm started. He couldn't stick around when things got rough. Naturally, I assumed that he'd gone to a tavern along the side of the road. He liked one

up in the mountains because it was tucked away in the darkness where not many people knew who he was. At least, that's what I overheard him tell Mom once.

A loud noise from the balcony, like a planter falling off a hanger, startled us. The front door squeaked opened. Mom shuffled her wet sandals back and forth across the tile.

"May the devil take you," Mom said.

"Put a towel under the door," Dad responded. "Hurry, before it floods."

He had returned. I sunk my head into my hands.

"Why did he come back?" Raquel's eyes had a terrified expression.

"I don't know." My heart palpitated. "Where else would he go?" I asked her, remembering Mom's words the day before. He could be out for a short period of time, but it wouldn't take long before the liquor wore off and he had to come back home.

Raquel was afraid, and she asked if we could go to the living room to keep an eye out on them. We crouched next to the television propped on a plain square table. Through the screened-windows, we saw Mom mop water towards the steps. Dad used a bucket to throw the water over the balcony rail. They were working against each other on slippery tiles. The slanted rain poured in through the rails.

"You let the girls do whatever they want." Dad said, sounding coherent. I doubted then that he had even stopped at a tavern and had a drink.

"We raised them together," Mom said.

"You're supposed to set an example. You're their mother."

"And what have I done wrong?" She cradled the mop handle to her chest.

Dad pointed a finger at her. "You shouldn't have told me."

Mom screamed, "Coward." She knocked the bucket out of his hand. Dirty water trailed down the balcony meeting up with the rushing rain. Mom said mean things about Dad's inability to

pull it together when we needed him most. He was falling apart—drinking, skipping work, getting angry and running away—because he didn't want to accept his responsibility as a father and a husband. To Mom, a father was divinely instituted to administer the house. He was supposed to be our savior and a refuge during a crisis. She kept going at it until Dad grabbed her by the neck.

“You have to understand,” Dad said, releasing his grip. “When I see her, I want to hurt her as much as I hurt.”

Raquel dug her fingers into my arm.

I had to call somebody. Around here the police would take hours to arrive. We didn't have family in town. My aunt lived on the other side of the island, my mother's parents lived in the States, and my cousins didn't keep in touch. My father's parents had died years ago. I couldn't call Paul. But I remembered that Sergio's shift ended in ten minutes, and it wasn't a far drive. Without hesitation, I found the restaurant's number in the telephone book and dialed. We needed help, fast.

I was dialing the numbers when Mom shrieked. She squatted on the floor, holding her hand to her cheek. The rain tangled her curls. Dad towered over her. She muttered something to him that I couldn't hear, and then he raised his hand as if to slap her. Mom didn't wait. She ran her shoulder into his crotch, and he lost his balance. Arms flailing, he reached for the metal rail, missed, and then smacked the back of his head with the corner where the rails met the cement floor. He bit his tongue and then didn't move again.

We were as still as a sail in a silent sea.

A girl answered the phone, and I said, “Sergio, please.” She passed the phone quickly.

“Who is this?” Sergio asked. His voice sounded strained. He asked the question again, and, after a moment, he said, “I'll hang up if you don't talk.”

“Don't. Please, wait.”

“Alma?”

“My father—I need to take him to the hospital.”

“Okay,” Sergio said. “I’ll be there in a minute.” He hung up.

I let the phone drop. I could barely lift my feet to walk. With great effort, I inched forward until I stood under the doorway next to Raquel. I reached for her arm but she flinched me away.

“Look at what you’ve done to us,” she said. “This is your fault.”

I was flabbergasted. She’d witnessed Mom hammer Dad down. Not me. It hit me, then. We were turning against each other. I considered my parent’s plans for me to move in with my aunt. I tried to picture myself in San Juan, in a house and a town foreign to me. Instead, I saw Paul, dressed in boxers and white undershirt, eating cereal at the breakfast table. His offer was the equivalent of selling my soul. But I didn’t know which option was worse.

“It’s not my fault,” I said.

Raquel kneeled down. “Is he dead?” she asked Mom.

I crouched down and brought my cheek to my father’s nose. A bit of blood dribbled out of his pale blue lips, but he was faintly breathing.

Mom tapped his hand. “He’s just in shock. We need to call an ambulance.”

“Alma already called someone.”

Mom didn’t ask who. “Bring me a towel. We need to clean him up.”

Raquel wouldn’t move, so I brought Mom what she wanted, a towel from my hamper, which she used to wipe blood off Dad’s face.

When she finished, she said, “Make sure you both say that this was an accident. Got it?” She handed me the bloody towel. “He’ll be all right. I promise. Go on, Alma. Throw the towel away.”

My head was spinning. The light post in front of our house flickered on and off. I was taken aback by her instructions. Mom had asked us to lie. To cover up what she’d done. I was breathing so heavy that my chest hurt.

Finally, a pair of headlights shone into the carport. A sense of relief washed over me when the car parked and Sergio stepped out. We'd get Dad to the hospital in time.

"Hurry up, Alma," Mom said.

I stumbled to the kitchen. As I closed the trashcan lid, Mom shouted for help.

Raquel stood stoic in the doorway.

Sergio didn't ask questions. He moved about with purpose and speed as we loaded Dad into the front seat, and then the three of us sat in the back seat, Raquel and me huddled on either side of Mom who sat in the center.

The next morning, Raquel woke me up. "We're late for school."

The hospital room was freezing cold, and I had to fight hard to remove the covers off me. Dad was still unresponsive. Mom sat at the edge of his bed with a cup of black coffee in her hand. The overhead television set cast a blue glare over her pale cheeks. She said, "Good morning," but her mind seemed as far away as Mona Island.

A thin curtain separated Dad from other patients. His head was wrapped in a white bandage and he had an IV taped to his forearm. His cheeks looked hollow and his skin had turned a yellow green. I wanted someone to tell me whether he'd suffered permanent brain damage. The doctors were studying him. That's all they'd say.

A nurse came in and listened to Dad's heart. "A doctor will come by in a few minutes." She stepped around us on her way out, leaving an aroma of lavender behind.

A tall, dark-haired doctor greeted us. "How are you girls this morning?"

Neither Raquel nor Mom answered.

"What did the tests show?" I asked him.

The doctor checked Dad's vitals again. "He took a hard beating to the back of his head. No permanent brain damage, however, according to the CAT scan. He had a severe concussion, which will leave him disoriented for a few days, even weeks, after he is completely conscious of his surroundings. He probably won't remember the accident or even what happened slightly before. It's just something that the brain does to cope with trauma." He put away his stethoscope and folded his arms over his chest. "He'll be okay. He should be able to work in a few weeks. Questions?"

Mom shrugged. "Okay." She looked down at her hands.

I said, "I'm sure we'll have some later on."

The doctor wrote a few notes on his chart. He put his pen back in his pocket and turned to me. "I do have to ask you something," he said to me. "Did you witness what happened last night?"

"Excuse me?" I asked.

"Were you there at the house? Did you see what occurred between your parents?"

Mom cleared her throat. "I already told you it was an accident." She glanced at me and I looked down at the whitewashed laminate floor. "It stormed last night. We were afraid the furniture would get wet. And then Alejandro fell hard. I don't remember the order of events..."

The doctor gave me a dubious glance. "Is this your version, as well?"

I shrugged. "I wasn't looking," I said because I couldn't betray my mother.

"But my daughter did call for help. A friend of hers came over."

The doctor frowned. "Did he talk to any staff members?"

"He went home after he dropped us." I couldn't even remember when Sergio left. He had been there one moment, standing next to a nurse as we filed paperwork, and then he was gone.

"That's not important," Mom said. "What matters is that Alma is a quick thinker. We got him to the hospital fast because of her. She saved her father."

The young doctor clucked his tongue. “You don’t have to be defensive, ma’am. Sometimes we have domestic disputes—violent encounters between couples—which we need to report.”

Raquel, who had been sitting silently next to the window, snickered. “Does my mother look violent to you?”

The irony in her voice didn’t go unnoticed to me, but the doctor seemed to take her words as a final verdict. Mom *didn’t* look as if she were capable of hurting anybody.

The doctor said that Dad needed plenty of rest, and then he excused himself from the room.

Later that morning, Mom took us to a nearby school bus stop and talked to the driver so that he’d drop us off at Raquel’s middle school. Squeezed into a row of pubescent teenagers, I tried to talk to Raquel about how she felt that morning. She wouldn’t even look at me. When we got off, Raquel pushed herself through the crowd, skipping ahead as if I were stalking her. She disappeared quickly. I called out her name, running in circles without a sense of direction, and then I caught sight of her crossing the main road in front of the school en route to a café shop across the street. I had to run to catch-up. Raquel stopped next to a black coupe car and a guy opened the passenger door. I recognized Jose from a party. The driver looked older, maybe nineteen, slim and pale.

Jose kissed Raquel on the mouth, right there in plain sight of everyone.

“Hey,” I said. “Don’t touch her.”

Jose shot me a menacing look, and Raquel told him to hurry into the car.

I probably looked like a mad woman but I wouldn’t allow her to leave with them. I stepped around the front of the car, and Raquel stuck one leg inside.

“Step back,” I said.

“You can’t stop me.”

I wasn't the type of person to make a public display. A few students dressed in uniforms stopped to watch us. I didn't want a fight. There was already too much chaos in my family.

I told the boy driving, "Leave before I scream."

The boy looked nervous, and he started the car.

"Turn off the car, Tito" Jose said.

"It's not worth it," Tito said. "The girl is going to blow."

Jose grabbed Raquel's waist. They kissed again. The kids around us were shouting their encouragement. I lost my patience, and I grabbed my sister's arm and tore them apart. Raquel resisted me, slapping my hands and elbowing my stomach.

Tito shifted into gear, saying, "Holy shit, man. I'm leaving." Tito pulled out before Jose had both legs inside of the car.

Jose shouted, "Motherfucker." The car's momentum forced him to jump in.

I pinned Raquel against the café menu sign. She kicked my shin hard, but I hugged her back.

"Get off me," she shouted.

"If you quit squirming, I'll let you go."

Raquel stopped. Seconds later, the crowd dissipated because there was no action. After Tito's car was out of sight, I walked her by the arm to her classroom, and I waited for her to sit down at her desk.

Raquel folded her arms over her chest. "So, was that guy from last night your other boyfriend?"

"Sergio? No. He's just someone I know."

She rolled her eyes. "Well, I hope Mom and Dad throw you out."

I backed away from her. "You don't mean that."

"Yes, I do. God willing."

I ran out of the classroom, panting. I felt as wounded as when Mom had called me a whore. My sister had wanted me to be her alibi last night. Now, she didn't care what happened to me. The coldness and distance growing inside of her was palpable. She blamed me for our family's problems. Her turning against me hurt more than my father's blows.

Lost in the crowd of students, I hurried down the bubblegum splattered walkway and crossed the street without looking both ways. A car screeched to a halt in front of me. The man honked, and I raised my hand in an apology. My head pulsed as I reached the other side. A bell rang in the school, causing the students to abandon their conversation and hurry inside. I was headed the opposite way. By the café, I found a telephone booth and dialed a taxicab. I needed to get my thoughts together.

The taxi driver dropped me off at the entrance to the Refuge.

Walking down the unmarked road, I felt something inside of me becoming vastly aware of the history around me. I trailed along slowly, allowing the wind to tousle my hair. On both sides of the road, past the chain-link fences, there stretched before me a different land unlike the terrain of most of the island. This place wasn't overflowing with tropical fruits, canopies of trees, birds and reptilians. Here was a barren land once used for grazing and agriculture. After centuries of hard work, the land had been abandoned. Under wildlife rescue management, the two thousand acres of grassland and scrub were being restored, cultivated by people like Paul. I didn't know much about it until my teacher had brought us here on a field trip and I had crossed paths with Paul. The land was easily overlooked, Paul had said, because to the naked eye it was a sad reminder of our past instead of the future, of what could happen if we restored it. The most memorable feature was seeing cactus trees sprouting up everywhere as if we had escaped to a far away land.

But we hadn't traveled anywhere. We were still on the island. And in my pocket, I carried the four bills he had given me. They were satisfying another lust, something budding deep within me like a buccaneer wandering the seas in search of another man's gold. As I marched under the beating sun, I understood my parent's fear then: the more that I accepted, the more that I'd want. One day, I'd be labeled a whore like those girls from the ghettos. I wondered what it would be like if I ended up seducing strangers in cars, dancing to an exotic sound in an unfamiliar room, and then, later on, banging my head on a wall for not having a warm body waiting for me at home. I couldn't do that to myself.

I wound up on the hiking trail and found Paul off the dirt path, squatting in front of a shrub. He lifted a leaf and examined the spidery underside, smelled it and then wrote something down in a pocket notebook. He dug his fingers into the dry soil. No one noticed him out here, prodding the earth, smelling endangered plants, trying to bring back to life what others had destroyed.

Paul looked at my shadow. He clapped dirt off his gloves and then removed them one at a time. He squinted at the sun as he stepped around a bush. He could've walked or stomped over them with his boots. He didn't. He moved cautiously around them, and I felt ashamed for using this place as our meeting ground.

"How long have you been standing there?" he asked.

"You left me at the restaurant. I was by the side of the road"

"My wife was waiting at the casino."

"I walked home!"

He wiped his forehead with his ungloved hand. "I'm sorry."

"You abandoned me." There. I said it.

Paul stuck his gloves in his back pocket. He rubbed his chin with his forefinger, lingering for a long time before saying, “You’ll forget about me soon, kid. In a few years when I turn fifty, you’ll find someone younger with far less problems. And then you’ll leave.”

“How can you know the future?”

He looked at me hard. His jaw tightened. “Okay. Promise that you’ll stay with me, and I’ll leave her for good. But you’ve got to commit, too.”

He had disposed of the pillow talk that he used when we slept in hotel rooms. He was serious, and I was scared. The weight of what he was asking came crashing down on me as if a stone had been dropped into my stomach.

“You can’t leave her,” I said. “You said so when we met.”

He came closer to me, then, and curled a finger around my hair like he did in bed.

I turned away from him and stomped across the tall grass, following the wet dirt path. Too late, I realized that I was headed the wrong way. I should’ve been walking towards the office instead of the old barn house. Paul followed me at a distance. He kept asking me to stop. When I reached the fence and had nowhere else to walk, I ran, turning left then right without thinking, and, finally, we reached the barn house with the windmill, once a home to the people who owned this land. I was stilled by the memories. That’s where I had first come into contact with Paul. He had been sitting on a wooden bench, eating a mango, writing down his notes. My teacher had introduced himself first, and Paul offered him a sticky hand to shake. My classmates had laughed, but I thought it was disgusting, and I told him so later on when we finished the tour. He had whispered in my ear, “You’re beautiful, you know? Come by sometime,” and then he had slipped his business card into my hand.

Thunder exploded in the skies. I wanted to hide inside of the barn, crawl on my hands and knees until the storm passed.

Paul grabbed my hand. “Your father still wants you out? Is that why you’re here?”

“No,” I said, pacing back and forth. “Yes, maybe he does. But that’s not why I came. I don’t know who else to turn to, Paul. Dad’s in the hospital. My parents got into a fight last night, Mom knocked him down. Now he’s in the hospital, and my sister blames me for it.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“I know.” I stopped moving and allowed his hug. I wanted to believe him. His shirt smelled earthy, soothing. I felt his thrashing heart against mine. For a moment, I imagined we could stay this way for a whole day. Perhaps he could leave his wife and move us into a new house. But then thunder broke in the distance again.

Paul said, “You should head home, kid.”

When he uttered the word, *Home*, I realized that we’d never share a place together. My home was still under my parents’ roof. That lofty dream he had offered me resided in his head, buried beneath the folds of his brain. We couldn’t stay together unless we were willing to break the spirits of those we loved.

My parent’s house was silent and dark when I returned.

My sister, wearing a crème-colored veil, placed votive candles on top of the piano before a framed-photo of Mary that hung on the wall. She held a black-beaded rosary in her hand.

“Come sit with me,” she said, and I did.

Her lips shivered as she prayed. Candle flames danced over the piano. I strained my eyes to read the clock; I didn’t dare disturb her prayer.

For years, I had refused to join Mom and Raquel’s church-hopping. A few years back, Raquel found a Presbyterian church she liked and when they returned home from morning worship, she asked Mom if she could convert. Mom said, “You’ve already been baptized, baby girl. We can go

as often as you like to any church. But until you are of age, no second baptisms.” I had to do dishes as a punishment for not going to church. Later that day, Raquel asked for my advice. “I can’t make friends if Mom doesn’t settle on a place of worship,” she said. “People expect you to stick around before they allow their kids to hang out with you.” I was the least likely person to give spiritual advice. I asked a sensible question. “Can you see yourself going to this church all by yourself?” Raquel shook her head. She asked if I’d be willing to tag along. “You don’t have to participate,” she said. My chest ached when I said for the first time, “Sorry, I don’t believe.” She faced the wall, shoulders hunched, her sadness like a Mexican *reboso* draped over her back. For weeks after our conversation, I wanted her to ask me again. I would force myself to change my response. Months later, when they returned from their church-trip one morning, Raquel told Mom she’d lost her hope of grounding herself in any religion. Mom squeezed Raquel’s shoulders. “Salvation comes through many means.” Raquel stood there with her arms limp and eyes wide open as she stared at me over Mom’s shoulder. I knew she hadn’t forgiven me.

My back ached from sitting on a backless bench. I rotated my neck until a vertebrae popped. Not wanting to be noticed, I snaked my legs around the side and lifted myself to stand.

“You don’t think prayer makes a difference.” Raquel curved an eyebrow upward. “It’s your soul that’s at risk, your eternal salvation.”

“Not the salvation speech again, please.” I couldn’t stand to quarrel about it.

“Beg forgiveness and it will be granted.”

I snapped. “Pray, pray, pray. The truth is that no god will hear you. You don’t have a drop of sainthood in your blood, either.” I ran across the living room and flipped on light switches. The darkness made me feel like I’d go crazy. Even the ceiling fan came on. I shut my eyes and tried hard to picture a god, male or female, frowning or turning his or her head away from me. Nothing came to me. My eyes stung because of the bright lights.

Raquel shook her head. “You really don’t believe?”

“Dad’s in the hospital because of Mom,” I said.

Raquel rose and strutted past me as if she were a thirty-year-old woman who could do whatever she pleased in life. She walked out the front door without looking back at me. I asked her to stop. I threatened to call Mom and tell her what was going on. But my sister went past me as if I didn’t exist anymore. In a matter of seconds, she was gone.

The phone rang later that night and it was Mom. “They’re releasing your father tomorrow afternoon.” She sounded exasperated. “Where is your sister? How come you didn’t come back to the hospital tonight?”

“I have homework to finish,” I lied.

Mom sighed. “Ask her to call me when she gets home.”

I hung up.

The living room ceiling fan creaked. I shuffled towards the kitchen and faced the Virgin on the wall. Her eyes followed me. At one point in my life, I wanted to wake-up in the middle of the night and rip her out of the wall. Back then, I held her responsible for being a chaste role model, an impossible goal for any girl to follow. Those were the years when I lay in bed, discovering my own body, fantasizing about some boy’s tanned arms and dark eyes, dancing a *bolero* with him at a school dance, and then my hands washed over my body and found a spot of pleasure and I massaged and stroked and then a part of me separated and floated into this intense, breathless trance. I did it often and wanted more. One day my mother caught me in the bathroom—I forgot to lock the door. When she saw my fingers below my navel, she screamed and covered her eyes, said a Holy Mary. She said, “Pray for forgiveness.” I didn’t move so she yanked me out of the water, wrapped me in a towel, and forced me down on my knees where she prayed to God to help cleanse my body of sins.

Afterwards, she lighted a candle to the Virgin and said that I needed to learn self-restraint. The Virgin was chosen because of her virtues. For a week, Mom had me wear socks on my hands and she tied my wrists in a loose rope, which she checked every morning. I wriggled out without breaking it, and then put the socks back on and re-tied the string with my teeth. At midnight when the house was silent, I sat in front of Mary feeling a different kind of guilt. I wanted something that my mother prohibited so I took it behind her back. Years later, chatting with school friends in the cafeteria, one boy joked about jerking off, the way he visualized a blonde woman with huge tits spreading her legs to him as she said, *Come*. My friends laughed, and one of them asked me to share. I lied that I'd never done such a thing. One pimply boy said, "You are a saint, Alma Celeste." Back home my resentment towards the Virgin waned. She must've struggled with the pious image all of her life. Even after death, she couldn't shake it off.

Standing back, I bowed my head to the Virgin, and then I picked up the phone and dialed Paul's number. It rang six times before the answer machine came on.

A woman's soft voice interrupted. "Who is this?" Her voice had a sort of sing-song to it and I couldn't help liking her as if she were a friend's mother or an aunt.

I scrambled for words. "This is Gloria from the Wildlife Refuge," I said, finally, in the office clerk's mangled English.

Paul's wife was quiet for a long time. "Do you need to speak to Paul? It's rather late."

"It's urgent."

Paul came on the line. "What's wrong, Gloria?"

I was relieved. "I'm home alone."

The line went silent. I was flabbergasted that he hung up on me. A minute later, the phone rang and it was him. In the background, a record played a scratchy tune, a cello and a violin. He turned up the music and lowered his voice.

“You can’t be calling here at this time,” he said.

“They’re still in the hospital.”

“Jesus.” He breathed hard. “Even your sister?”

“I think she went to her boyfriend’s. She’s mad at me for not letting her skip school this morning. Paul, I need you more than ever. Please, come over.”

“Give me fifteen minutes.” He hung up before I could respond.

In the waiting period, I took a brief shower, mopped the bathroom floor, and applied gloss to my lips and gel to my hair. I munched on the doughnuts Mom prepared the night before and drank a tall glass of milk. In a hurry, I fixed my bed and threw the dirty clothes scattered about the floor into the hamper. I flipped on light switches in the living room and paced the floor. He arrived in exactly twenty minutes wearing grey sweatpants, a navy blue shirt that said University of Colorado, a cap and sneakers. I could’ve mistaken him for a thief if I wasn’t expecting his visit. We hugged awkwardly, and then I pulled him inside the house and bolted the front door.

“Are you hungry?” I wanted to cook him dinner.

He wiped his hands on his sweatpants. “We already ate.”

The way he said ‘we’ made me cringe. Even after our lavish restaurants dinners, he had said that he always ate a meal with his wife. I dreaded the possibility that he looked forward to those intimate moments between them and to the lukewarm plate waiting for him on the table while the memories of his fucking another woman on a borrowed bed grew distant.

As we sat on the sofa, I caught sight of the Virgin’s eyes looming over us. We couldn’t make love on the sofa. Those eyes frightened me.

Paul took my hand. “I missed you.”

“Don’t.” It felt wrong to talk as if we had a future together.

I could understand his infidelity if he and his wife fought like my parents or started a relationship on the fly like my sister did. But the way he described how they met on campus while he researched information at the school library and she helped him hunt for an article on microfilm, how he asked her out to a casual lunch and she smoked menthol cigarettes and threw her head back whenever she laughed at his corny jokes, how he stroked her knee once and she pursed his lips and invited him over for dinner at her apartment the next week, how could he call our fucking reasonable when it sounded to me that they had a normal relationship? He had once said that she had abandoned their marital bed and stopped his sexual advances.

A question squeezed the air out of my lungs. "I have to ask you something. Were there others before me?"

"Let's not talk about the past." He stroked the back of my hand.

"Did you cheat on her before me?"

He rubbed his chin. "Why do you want to know these things now?"

"You've talked of a future. We can't have one if we don't know of the past."

Paul sighed. "My wife wanted me to have an affair because she slept with her ex-boyfriend a year after we got married. One night she invited a friend of hers over for dinner. After we finished our dessert, my wife suggested that we take advantage of the situation because she couldn't possibly imagine me sleeping with a woman who she didn't know, and then she drove to the store to shop for new bed sheets. I remember the woman being pretty but I couldn't touch her that night."

I felt nauseated. "Did you ever?"

He shrugged. "Five or six times later that year."

"Were there others?"

"A handful, but you're not like them."

"Picked up off the street?"

He wouldn't answer me and when I asked again, he kissed my lips hard. I pressed his shoulders against the sofa and we licked each other's lips. He tore off my bra and touched my breasts as if he had never felt a pair before. Careful and not overzealous, he squeezed them. Naked in front of him, I wanted to do it fast or not at all because I couldn't shake off the image of long-legged prostitutes baring their crotches to him. He lowered his sweatpants. I inched down to lick his earlobe, but the Virgin's eyes were hovering over the couch. Even when I shut my eyes, her eyes zigzagged behind my eyelids. I made a sound that sounded like a puppy's yelp.

"What's wrong?" Paul asked.

I pointed at the Virgin.

"I thought you didn't believe," Paul said.

We walked to the bedroom and closed the door on those eyes tracing our doings. We tried again from the beginning, but he couldn't get it in. He spat on his hand and rubbed himself furiously for a minute until it hardened.

Mary's eyes reappeared. I must've lost track of time because the next thing that happened was that he asked, "Are you ready?" before grunting. Warmth spread inside of me. I looked down at his puffed cheeks. It was over. I banged my fist on the mattress and rolled off him. Our love felt cheap.

I wanted him gone. "Leave," I said.

And then the front door opened and shut. My heart pulsed hard with uneven beats.

Paul covered his head with the bed sheet. "You said nobody was coming home tonight."

Footsteps moved about the house. The clicking of heels sounded like the devil had finally caught up to me. I wanted to jump out the window and disappear into the dark night. What had I done? Paul couldn't protect me. I shouldn't have invited him over. I couldn't think straight anymore. I hadn't had a clear moment ever since I met him two months ago at the Wildlife Refuge. Ever

since, he had slithered into my blood as dangerous as a poison, an addiction. Tearing him out of me was the hardest thing for me to do. I wanted him every day a little more.

Someone opened Raquel's bedroom door.

Paul was shaking under the sheets. I told him to hide in the closet. He slipped out of the bed and tiptoed his way across my room. The moon's glare made his naked back look bluish white. Gently, he closed the closet's double-doors.

My bedroom door opened. My heart stopped. I sat up straight, trembling inside. Mom stood in the doorway, still as a picture, holding my bra at arm's length. She strolled to the bed, hands on her hips. She bent down over me and smelled my sheets.

"Did you bring that man into my house?" she asked.

Terrified, I said, "I'm so sorry, Mom."

"You're a slut." Mom sharply turned away. Over her shoulder, she said, "This will not happen again under my roof." She walked out and left me sitting on the tousled bed.

I cried hard for the first time since she'd found out.

Much later that night when all of the lights were turned off, Paul slid out of the closet. We slept together that night. There was no turning back, and he knew he was partly accountable.

"They'll kick me out," I said, feeling numb and distant.

Paul stroked my hair as he hummed a made-up lullaby. "Sleep, my baby. Sleep. Don't you worry. I will make it all better."

I slumbered off. In my sleep, I drifted in and out of nightmares. The Virgin's beady eye followed me into both worlds—awake and asleep. When the morning sunrays pierced through the curtains, I rolled over to wake up Paul but instead found a cold pillow with a paper on top, a check from him to me in the amount of five hundred dollars.

Inside, the house smelled like eggs. Mom had slept in her room that night, and then she disappeared in the morning after her breakfast.

After a while of staring at the blank television screen, the smell of vegetable oil emanating from the kitchen made my lungs feel suffocated. I left the house, crossed the street to a strip of a beach nearby where I plopped down on the thick sand. On the horizon, scattered clouds obscured the sun. A curtain of rain moved across the sky from north to south. The wind whipped my hair around so I tied it back in a low ponytail. The ocean waves roared. Out in the water, fishermen submerged their nets into the sparkling seas.

Here on the wet sand my mind finally quieted down. Water could do such a thing. In a matter of months, my life had evolved. I was no longer that quiet girl riding a bus to and from school. I felt like a deranged woman following a married man around, even using the Refuge in our madness. A part of me wished to return to my tranquil life. Another side pressed further, asking over and over what could happen if I took a chance.

On the beach, a strong gust rustled the palm fronds. I thought someone called my name. Perhaps my mind was playing tricks on me. And then Mom jogged towards me across the sand. She wore jean shorts and a tank top that made her look younger, carefree. The wind flipped her hair in opposite directions. Her lips shimmered red. She didn't look anything like she had last night.

For a second, I thought of hurling myself into an ocean wave. If only I could float for a long time like a small vessel. I'd head towards another island, somewhere undiscovered, where they spoke a foreign language and didn't care about currency.

Mom's shadow stretched sideways on the sand. "You had me worried," she said in short, breathless spurts. "I came into the house and everybody was gone." She sat down next to me, stretched her legs out in front of her and rubbed yellow sand off of her thighs. "We need to talk about last night."

With a stick, I drew an *A* on the sand. “You want me to tell Dad.”

“No. I want to know why you’re doing this to yourself.”

I shrugged, which seemed to be my choice response these days. It required little of me.

“Fine.” Mom cleared her throat. “Let’s talk about something else. Who was the young man who drove us to the hospital?” She leaned forward and touched her toes, smiling.

“Sergio’s just an acquaintance, Mom. Nothing else.”

The smile faded off her face. Mom stared at the ocean. Her eyebrows furrowed, and I could tell that she was thinking about how to make it work between Sergio and me. She probably thought that he wouldn’t have to find out about my relationship with a married man. They could keep it a secret. Somehow. That’d be simpler, cleaner, like wiping down a dirty counter with bleach. I just had to cooperate, but I had no interest in him.

“Well, he called the hospital this morning to check up on your father.”

“Yeah, he’s a nice guy.”

She sighed. “You should at least return his phone call.”

“Why, Mom?”

“I don’t know. It could change things.”

“Like what?”

We fell silent again. My mother would always try to find another solution to the problem. It was in her nature. I wished she could understand that even though I admired her will and strength to try to make things better for me, I couldn’t comply because I loved another man.

Mom grabbed my hand and pressed it open. “You might not believe me, but these here represent a long life.” She traced the lines on my palm.

I looked hard but could only see the places where the skin folded. “What’s your point?”

She narrowed her eyes. “You see those fishermen out there? They’re risking their lives because a storm could overturn their boats when they least expect it. They’re making a living, yes, but you can’t risk a long life for a day’s bread. You, my child, are drowning, and your sister is following in your footsteps. You think the winds can’t catch up with you, but they already have. Honestly, I lack the strength to save both of my daughters.”

Cold raindrops fell on my shoulders. I crossed my arms, shielding my chest from the breeze. My mind felt empty and full all at the same time. And then a crashing wave washed away the A on the sand, and I stood up, angry, and walked away from my mother.

After the three o’clock coffee later that day, Mom brought Dad home in a wheelchair because he was too weak to walk. With one arm looped over Mom’s shoulders, he scooted onto the bed, and then she covered him with a thick blanket. She closed the door so that he could rest.

Raquel called from Jose’s house. She wasn’t coming back.

Mom said, “You’re my child. I’ll send the cops to pick you up. Don’t make me come out there.” But when they hung up, Mom said there was nothing we could do to bring my sister back.

We were incapable of surviving violent storms.

Mom sat on the piano bench, looked up at Mary and said, “Please take some of the burden away.” She wanted to bless me with Holy Water if I repented my sins.

Something in me had changed. In a way, her hope made sense. But I didn’t believe in erasing the past, so I wouldn’t allow her to touch me. Instead, I sat on the hammock, staring out at the road in front of our house which was backed up due to an accident up in the hills. People drove through the curves at incredible speeds and sometimes they didn’t make it to the other side.

In my pocket, I fingered Paul's check. The time had come to make a choice: cash it or send it back. The latter seemed more appropriated, but I didn't think myself strong enough to follow through with it. I still thought of it as being my money, rightfully earned.

Standing in the doorway, Mom said, "Tía Celeste is on her way over to see Dad."

I knew my time was up in Cabo Rojo. After a quick afternoon shower, the sky had completely cleared. The rain clouds had drifted away along with the dust particles. The landscape had cleansed and purified itself.

I thought about my father, then. His parents had died when he was still in his twenties. My father and his sister each got a portion of the inheritance, and, with that money, they built houses on opposite sides of the island, not because they hated each other, but because they had different lifestyles. Dad wanted a quiet beach town frequented by locals rather than foreigners. He didn't speak much of his sister. From the times she had stopped by to see us, I knew that she was a clothes-obsessed, fifty-year-old bachelorette who used part of the inheritance money to open up a shop in the most expensive part of the island, Old San Juan. She chose not to marry any of her boyfriends. I wondered if her parents ever thought that she was a disease and that's why she chose to move far away from them.

Tía arrived before supper, bearing gifts in the form of clothing. I went inside to see what she brought in the bags. For Raquel, a lilac cocktail dress with silver trimmings that I knew Raquel wouldn't wear. For Mom, a dazzling white evening gown. Mom complained about not being able to fit her chest into such a low-cut dress. Tía made Mom try it on. In the bathroom, they wrestled the dress until it fit.

Tía said, "Soon you'll be fifty, like me, except that I'll be older. Don't pass up the opportunity to flaunt these hips." She spanked Mom's side, laughing.

Mom flushed red. "You're crazy."

“I know.”

Because his sister insisted on it, Dad sat on the couch and watched old re-runs of the Bill Cosby show in Spanish. There was so much dubbed laughter echoing through the speakers that I couldn't tell which was real and which wasn't. Dad wouldn't speak to me, even though I sat on the dining room chair behind him.

Tía brought Dad two bottles of bourbon and exotic cheeses that couldn't be found anywhere else on the island. Mom saved the alcohol for when he recovered; Dad didn't argue.

“You're looking rather pale, Alejandro,” Tía said. “You need some sun.” She asked me to open the windows and doors, which I did without a bit of hesitation because I liked her already. Floating from one side of the house to the other, Tía talked of her blooming dress shop and the clients that she met. “You must come see it when the weather cools down.”

Dad said, “One day.”

“Just don't wait until you're fifty,” Tía said.

“That's around the corner.”

“Oh, child, please. You're miles away from my age.” Tía giggled carelessly.

Mom paced the living room floor. She called Raquel again and told her that our aunt had arrived. When they hung up, I knew I wouldn't see my sister before leaving.

I went into my bedroom where a large suitcase had been set up on my made-up bed. But I didn't feel the same dread that I had felt the day that Mom found out about Paul. A burden had been lifted off of me. She had discovered that I wanted an alternate life.

Tía carried some of my bags to the car.

At the door, Mom hugged me. She gave me a box with my graduation ring, which they had ordered for me at the beginning of the school year. She had talked to my teacher over the phone

that afternoon. I'd still graduate in two weeks, but I wouldn't come back to town for the celebrations.

"We'll send you money, okay?" Mom said. "And don't forget to send in your college application next week."

I had forgotten about college. That life seemed belong to someone else.

There was too much to say but none of it mattered. I wouldn't say that I was sorry; I supposed that's what they wanted to hear. I gathered my handbags.

Dad stood, then. His legs look like they were shaking. "Call us when you get there."

"I will," I said, unable to look at his face.

He put a hand on Mom's shoulder, and she let herself fall into his arms, crying. Deep down, she must've known that I wouldn't come back.

I hurried to the car, my heart pumping with adrenaline. On route to San Juan, Tía drove faster than either of my parents, moving around slow cars with precision and determination. She chatted about her exciting life in the Metropolis – the Broadway-like shows, the casinos, the dance clubs and music and culture.

"You'll fall in love right away," she said. "Why do you think I never came back?"

It wasn't a question but a statement. I wondered how much she knew about my past and why I was being sent away. She didn't seem at all perturbed by the removal of a seventeen-year-old girl from her parent's house.

As we exited Cabo Rojo, I felt something in me swell—a fear, a dread, a wonder—I couldn't tell what. I was silent until we reached the central mountains overlooking the ocean.

"Come on, Alma," Tía said. "You haven't said a word. What's on your mind?"

"Call me Celia," I said, slightly hesitant. "I've never liked my first name." It was a step.

Tía's eyes brightened. "I like it. It suits you. Celia and Celeste," she said over and over again, testing the rhythm between the names. "Yes, I do like." She giggled and then went on to tell me about the many party dresses that she sold, where she bought them, about the fashion shows and houses, and how she'd made a solid name for herself in a business run mostly by men.

When we drove past the green mountains, I wondered how surprised Paul would be when he received a check in the mail attached to four Ulysses Grant's bills. Because that was first thing I'd do the minute that we arrived in San Juan. My new soul couldn't be bought.

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