

Time Machine: Stories

An Honors Thesis for the Department of English

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1. Lucia

Lucia Garcia had a Cuban ass like a planet. It was big. But, as any ass aficionado will tell you, its beauty was attributed not only to its size but to the way in which, much like a planet, it seemed to defy gravity. A great mass suspended in atmosphere, a cosmic marriage of physics and anatomy for which many old lecherous men were grateful. It first sprouted when Lucia was thirteen. After years of the family-given nickname *flaca*, she soon found that her hand-me-down jeans no longer fit. In her favorite pair of leggings, her ass would stretch the elastic to translucence. Carrying, no, *lugging* it around became a chore. Almost overnight, Lucia's walk had become more of a waddle, each step resulting in a palpable jiggle. "Earthquake!" the boys at school would tease as she walked past, a flimsy mask for their attraction. "A seismic miracle," the nerdy, soft-spoken boys muttered, "Sexy, sexy tremors."

But she was just a girl then, and her grandma Zoila would be damned if some eighteen-year-old hoodlum *cagalitroso* caught sight of her baby's ass and decided he wanted to drive a flagstaff into the terrain, claiming the planet his own. So Zoila went to work. She would make her rounds at the thrift stores every Wednesday and haunt the crowded rows of clothes for the ugliest shit she could find. Her short black curls would frizz after hours of skilled sifting in the musty shops. Zoila would join the lines at Miami Thrift with a hodgepodge of hairy sweaters, floor-length skirts. For a thirteen-year-old, the stuff of nightmares. But Zoila was sure of her granddaughter's love. Lucia wasn't one of those young girls, *desgraciada*, ungrateful for the sacrifices made for her. Lucia knew it had not been easy for Zoila, taking care of her after her mother died, single-handedly raising a girl on the shit wages of a waitress at *Palacio de Los*

Jugos. Lucia brimmed with respect and, more importantly, guilt. Zoila would come home to her granddaughter, her personal shopping cart filled with bags, lift each horrid, bulky item, display it in all its glory and say, “Look what I found for you at *la pulgera*. Cute, huh?” Once when Zoila unfurled and displayed baggy, bell-bottomed jeans, Lucia wondered whether the clothes felt ashamed at such sudden and full-frontal exposure. *The pants have been pantsed*, she thought and repressed a giggle. Though her eyes shone with horror, each time Lucia would hug her grandma and say, “Yes, abuela, thank you.”

This continued for two years, until Lucia was fifteen earning some money babysitting. Grateful and sweet as ever, she gave Zoila half of her earnings to help with bills. But the other half was hers to spend. The girls in her classes wore black miniskirts and skin-tight tops with words like “BEAUTIFUL” emblazoned across their breasts in rhinestones. They look *cute*, Lucia thought, imagining herself in the apparel. After showers she had seen herself naked in the bathroom mirror and had a sneaking suspicion that something spectacular was going on. If anyone could wear self-aggrandizing phrases on her boobs and pull it off, Lucia could. So, week after week, another twenty dollar bill would flutter into her savings jar atop change that had sat there for ages. She dreamed of the day when she would have enough saved up, of the day when she would no longer confuse her peers by dressing half of the time like a cat lady and the other half like a truck driver. It wasn't much longer than a month before Lucia could finally buy some normal fucking clothes.

That was where her grandmother's training proved useful. Thanks to Zoila's counsel, Lucia could furnish herself an entirely new wardrobe with one hundred dollars. With a coupon

over here, a clearance section over there, and a two-for-one in that corner, Lucia reinvented herself. Mini-skirts, stretchy pants, and tube tops littered the floor of her bedroom.

“You can buy that shit all you want,” Zoila said, “But it’s another ten years before I let you out of the house in it.”

Lucia now practiced getting up early for school, waving goodbye to Zoila in her sweaters and shapeless dresses, and slipping into her purchases in the school bathroom. Lately, in an attempt to soften Zoila’s adamant stance, Lucia had taken to wearing her new clothes around the house, an action met with no reaction. Lucia took this as a good omen and devised a plan that, if well-executed, would lead her grandmother to let her out of the house in a miniskirt. Lucia would have Zoila wait an immeasurable amount of time for Lucia to get ready for an outing, and once Zoila lost her patience, finally announce she was ready. Zoila, so Lucia supposed, would be so wrapped up in her frenzy to leave that she would not notice what Lucia was wearing. Lucia gave this plan its first test run on the second Saturday of September, the day of Zoila’s most reverently observed ritual. As a five-year-old, Lucia had called it “Cemetery Day,” the date on which Zoila brought Lucia along with her to Memorial Gardens Cemetery to wash gravestones. But despite, or perhaps because of, Zoila’s religious attachment to that day, Lucia’s scheme failed.

“No, no, no, no, no, no,” Zoila said upon seeing Lucia leave her room in short shorts and a camisole. “Baby, I already told you, when we go out in the streets you don’t wear that stuff. *Mira*, why don’t you wear *ese skirt que tia Mariella te dio para Christmas?*” Zoila stood, barely five feet tall, her tan arms folded. Lucia still marveled at Zoila’s uniformly black hair. At age sixty, there was not a gray hair in sight.

“Abuela, that skirt is too long. Why can’t I just go like this?” Lucia asked, defeated.

“*Con ese culo?* No way. Go change. You’re a young lady, not *una puta* patrolling forty ninth street.”

Lucia knew the argument was hopeless. She shuffled over to her room.

“And make sure the shirt has long sleeves,” Zoila yelled after her.

Lucia stared at the contents of her closet, nonplused. The dulled shades of itchy fabric ran together, and Lucia scowled at the thought of them hanging on her body like a hairy cloud. She was torn between the urge to obey her grandmother and the urge to defy her. Zoila was overprotective to a fault, Lucia thought. No reign rivaled that of her protective hand. Once again, Lucia reminded herself that her overbearing parenting style was out of love and out of fear of experiencing yet another raised-fists-to-the-heavens, knees-scraping-the-gravel loss of one of her babies, her *princesas*. Lucia reminded herself that if Zoila held onto her so firmly, it was only because she was all her grandma had left. She reached for her extra-large purple and orange sweater dress, noting once again that the cinching belt which belonged to the loops on the dress’s side was not-so-mysteriously absent. Zoila knew best.

The gravestones sat flat in the grass, dulled bronze and dense granite squares of names, dates, and semi-wilted bouquets created a sparse and bleak garden. Lucia and Zoila had parked at the funeral home at the entrance to the cemetery and walked the long way to their family’s three gravestones, passing plots and sections rife with six-foot monuments, sculptures of crosses, obelisks, and angels in prayer. “*Que exagerado,*” Zoila scoffed, with excessive harshness Lucia interpreted as repressed desire. Now they stood in front of three modest plaques lined side by

side. Lucia held a bucket in one hand and a bottle of *Fabuloso* miracle cleaner in the other. She squinted at the purple liquid.

“It looks like grape juice,” Lucia mused, swishing the lavender scented cleaning fluid about in the sunlight, wondering how many times it had been accidentally ingested.

“Don’t drink it,” Zoila said absentmindedly, situating herself on the grass in front of the leftmost gravestone, setting down her enormous purse.

“Abuela, I know not to drink cleaning fluid. Especially this stuff.” Lucia shook the bottle. “It smells like pain.”

“Sorry, you know how I worry,” Zoila said. “Five dollars at Sedano’s for that bottle. *Cono*, like it’s Bacardi or some shit.”

“I think Bacardi would be less corrosive. Are you sure it’s ok to put this on stone?” Lucia asked. She was currently in an Earth and Space Sciences class at school.

“We’ve been doing this all your life and now is when you ask that.” Zoila said, “Look at the graves, they’re beautiful. If it was gonna eat these rocks it would’ve happened a long time ago. Sit down. Hand me the bucket.”

Lucia did as she was told and watched Zoila dump out the contents of the bucket: two water bottles, two plastic bristled brushes, a washcloth, and a jar of coconut oil. She emptied a water bottle into the bucket and added two capfuls of *Fabuloso* to it. Lucia sat beside her grandma and grabbed one of the brushes, dunked it in, and went to work, softly scrubbing the grave in front of her in small circles, starting at one corner and moving to the next. It’s like coloring, Zoila once told her when she was young enough that coloring was at all relevant, you first fill in the edges and then the middle. Lucia currently scrubbed the grave of her great

grandmother, Abuelita Antonia. Lucia was five when Antonia had died and only remembered visiting her house at Christmas, where Antonia would whisper to her that she had a special Christmas surprise for little Lucia. Every year, Lucia wandered with Antonia through her house, marveling at the tall ceilings which reminded her of Sunday mass, anticipating a gift just as wondrous and mystical as Abuelita's labyrinthine home. Always, it was a set of seven underwear with the days of the week sewn into the cloth. "*No son lindo?*" Antonia would ask, year in and year out. "*Si, Abuelita,*" Lucia would say and hug her great grandmother, "*gracias.*" Even then Lucia suspected that Antonia had long ago lost her mind.

Lucia finished scrubbing the gravestone and rinsed it. She looked up at Zoila, who had finished cleaning and drying Lucia's great uncle Geraldo's gravestone. Zoila now dipped the tip of her washcloth into the coconut oil and massaged it onto the bronze. The idea was that, even if only for a while, her family's gravestones would shine as others did not. Lucia forgot her work and watched her grandmother rub the oil onto the raised letters of Geraldo's full name, Geraldo Alejandro Guzman. His death was the most recent, quiet and painless. Lucia remembered his enormous glasses, his constant smile, and the way his feet always scraped the carpet when he wore the Cookie Monster slippers a five-year-old Lucia had chosen for him one Christmas. Because he was Zoila's brother, she frequently dropped Lucia off with him when she went to work. His house was small and cluttered, one of four efficiencies which the complex's owner rented out. As a child Lucia would maneuver between his huddled furniture, occasionally camping out in her favorite nooks. When she'd emerge, Geraldo would offer her peach rings and Santa-shaped chocolates that he and his wife Elena inexplicably provided all year round. Zoila lifted the washcloth from the stone. Finished with Geraldo's stone, Zoila had moved on to

Lucia's mother's. Zoila scowled and pursed her lips almost imperceptibly. She touched the bristles to the stone gently.

“Pass the washcloth,” Lucia asked. She oiled Antonia's stone mechanically and recalled the story of her mother's death, as recounted to her by Tio Geraldo. She remembered none of it herself. Eleven years ago, Geraldo said, Zoila's daughter Suzy, twenty-two and gorgeous, had asked her to look after Lucia for the night. She had a date, the first since Lucia's father. They were going to Molina's, a Cuban restaurant down the street. Zoila was spending the night catching up on the week's events with Geraldo and Elena but was happy to oblige, as she loved nothing more than spoiling her granddaughter with macaroni and cheese and chicken nuggets. The four were sitting at the dinner table when the phone rang. Geraldo picked up. Lucia would later imagine Geraldo cheerily insisting that Zoila stay seated, his smile fading quickly once he picked up the phone. “We have to drive to Molina's. There's been a shooting,” Geraldo said. Zoila sat up and asked if Suzy was okay. Geraldo told her he didn't know. They left the house, leaving Lucia with Elena. When they arrived at Molina's, Geraldo raced out of the car ahead of Zoila. He wanted to be a buffer to any bad news. Geraldo met a tall officer, was asked to identify Suzy's body and, when he left the restaurant saw Zoila rushing toward him. “What happened?” she demanded. Geraldo skimmed on the details at this point, but Lucia had imagined the scene many times. In the cinematic acuity of her daydreams, Lucia saw Geraldo hold Zoila's arms gently against the wall, at first, and firmly once the news was delivered dissonant in Zoila's ears. Pinned against the wall, Zoila would wriggle and shriek at no one, at God like a small bird caught in an electric fence until she fell limp against the wall and slid to the ground, silent.

When the three graves were cleaned and polished Lucia tossed the empty water bottles and other supplies into the bucket. Lucia and Zoila, guiltily leaving ghosts behind, walked the seven minutes to the parking lot while Zoila interrogated Lucia about her grades (always good.) On their way out of the gates, past the funeral parlor, two middle-aged men in suits, presumably taking a smoking break from the funeral they were attending, stared at Lucia, turning their heads in a fashion some describe as “broke neck.” Lucia blushed, noting that despite the largeness of her dress, the cloth was still tight around her ass. It was getting bigger.

Time Machine

Abuelo pooped in the yard this morning. I wasn't there when he started but I walked outside when he was in the middle of it. I wanted to use the Time Machine. I invented the Time Machine. The Time Machine works like this. You set the dial that I made to however many years you want to go back in time. Each time you walk around the shed in the backyard you go back that many years. This time I had a hat that I'd found in Tia Lourdes' old room. It was an old hat like in *Singing In the Rain*. Today I planned on running around the shed the five times, which would take me back fifty years. I was gonna put on the old hat. I was gonna take Abuelo with me and he would be impressed by how far back in time I'd gone. Then he probably would have wanted to join, especially when I was in *Singing in the Rain* times because I think that's his favorite movie.

I was ready to play and show off my great idea but when I opened the back door I saw that Abuelo had his pants down and was pooping. He was doing it right in the middle of the lawn in front of the shed where I'd have to walk by whenever I went back in time. He wasn't even hiding behind a tree or anything. Of course I asked him why he was pooping but he told me to come back later so I went back inside. I watched TV and *Avatar the Last Airbender* was on. It was a great episode with a lot of bending I had never seen or thought of. In one part Katara uses her water bending to throw icicles. I hadn't even thought that water benders could control ice before but it makes sense now that I think about it. Abuela was sewing in her sewing room while

I watched TV. I could hear the sewing machine going. When she left her room and saw me she asked me why I was watching TV because she thought I told her I was going outside. I told her I did go outside and then told her about Abuelo and how he'd told me to come back later. She said *ay dios* and went outside. By the time she went outside I was pretty sure Abuelo was done so I went with her. Abuelo was collecting mangos that had fallen from the big tree and Abuela angrily asked him if he had pooped in the yard. He looked surprised and then laughed. He said he never did that. I pointed to where the poop was in front of the shed and I said but look that's your poop. Abuela told me to go inside even though I was just trying to help.

When Mom came in the evening after work to pick me up Abuela called her into the kitchen and I heard them talking for a long time while I played with my toy animals. In the car on the way home I asked Mom if they had been talking about Abuelo and she said yes. I asked if that was why Abuela was all serious and Mom said yes. I knew that pooping in the yard was gross but I didn't think it was a big deal.

At home Mom made me chicken nuggets and some of the yellow rice Abuela gave her in a big container. She tells me she's sorry about what I saw earlier. Mom's hair is very straight and perfect and it hangs in front of her face when she looks at me. I wish my hair were like that but instead it's always tangled. I have ketchup and honey mustard for my chicken nuggets but they're not mixed. I eat one nugget with ketchup and then the next with honey mustard and I switch until I'm finished. This way it feels like I have two meals at once.

Dad is on the couch watching TV. He likes cartoons and magic too and sometimes he watches Avatar with me. He also introduced me to Star Wars. Mom tells Dad about Abuelo

pooping in the yard and Dad says well I guess he really had to go and they laugh. I laugh too because Dad made a funny joke and it was kind of funny to see Abuelo poop even if Abuela didn't see it that way. Mom sees me laughing and gets up from the couch to hug me. She sits with me until I finish eating and then takes me to my room and says goodnight but I'm not sleepy.

I have a lot of energy so I decide to practice water bending. I can't turn on the light because then Mom will know I'm not asleep so I practice in the light of my nightlight. In Avatar Katara teaches Aang how to water bend by showing him the basic moves and these are the moves I practice because I'm just a beginner and I've never successfully bended. In Avatar there are fire, air, water, and earth benders. You don't get to choose which one you want. You're just born as one depending on where you're from. I don't know for sure what kind of bender I would be but I think I'm a water bender because I look more like the people in the Southern water tribes. Sometimes I practice other bending just in case. While I practice my moves I'm very quiet. This is easy because my room is carpeted. I have no distractions when I practice at night and it's very zen. But soon I am distracted by Mom in her room. I can hear her through the wall and it sounds like she's crying. Dad is with her and I can't hear what they're saying. I keep practicing long after they fall asleep.

Mom drops me off the next morning at Abuela's house again. I'm excited to play Time Machine with Abuelo since I've been waiting since yesterday to show him my new ideas. When I say hi to Abuela she asks me if I had breakfast. I tell her yes Mom made me scrambled eggs and I had Lucky Charms. She asks me if that was enough. I tell her I'm really full but she asks me if I

want pancakes anyway. I might want pancakes for lunch but for now I just want to play so I tell her this. She scratches her head with her shaky hands and there are bumps in the brown skin on her arms. She tells me not to ask Abuelo about yesterday at all and I say I wasn't going to although I probably would have.

I get the hat and run outside. Abuelo is in the little tomato garden and he asks me if I want to help him. I tell him I'll help him later but that I have to show him something cool. He smiles and claps and some sweat drops fly from his hands when he does this. Even though he's in the shade of the mango tree it's still really hot outside. I can tell he's excited and knows it's gonna be good. I explain the Time Machine to him and ask him if he wants to use it. He says of course he does because it sounds brilliant. I know he's old but he doesn't seem like it most of the time. I tell him to follow me to the yellow shed and I'm hiding the hat under my arms. I set the dial to ten years per lap and start walking around. When we're in the 80's and 70's Abuelo skips with me and sings songs he knows from those times. Mom says Tia Lourdes was an "eighties kid" so I know some of the songs because of Tia Lourdes. For example Everybody Wants To Rule the World.

When we pass the front door of the shed I notice that the poop is gone but I don't mention this to Abuelo. Every time we pass through the shadowy part with all the bushes under the mango tree lizards scatter away from us. Abuelo points them out to me one time but I tell him to ignore them because I'm not sure that there were lizards in the 70's. Finally when we get to the 50's I pull the hat from under my arm and put it on. I turn to Abuelo dramatically just like I planned and say look I'm Gene Kelly. He gets it immediately just like I thought he would and he starts singing the song and doing his funny version of tap dancing. He sings it funny too because

his English isn't perfect but I like it better when he sings it anyway. I know about half of the words and I sing along.

When he's done with the song he tells me that he has to finish bringing the Christmas decorations from the under-house because he didn't finish doing it yesterday. I turn the dial up to fifty so that he can go back to the present after only one round. He says bye to me and tells me to have fun in the past and to let him know if I ever visit the future. I see him run over to the under-house. His light jeans are really baggy on his skinny legs. The under-house is not a basement. I once told Ashley, the neighbor who sometimes plays with me, that we keep stuff stored in the under-house. She asked if I meant a basement. I told her no I know what a basement is because I've seen them on TV and this isn't as big as a basement. It's an under-house. Ashley is kind of stupid. I see Abuelo crouch through the little door and disappear in the under-house. I think about decorating the Christmas tree and wondered what presents I'll get this year. Christmas must be about a month away if Abuelo and Abuela are already decorating.

I turn the dial up to the max which was 100 and go back in time until I see dinosaurs. I became tired after a while and take a nap in Tia Lourdes' old room. When I sleep there I sleep facing Tia's dresser which has old pictures of her from high school. She has a picture of herself at her college graduation with Mom, Abuela, and Abuelo. I look at this picture a lot because Abuela looks young and beautiful in a green dress. She's smiling without showing her teeth. Everyone else looks happy and kind of silly with their mouths a little open. It looks like someone told a joke and Abuela is the only one who remembered not to laugh for the picture.

When I wake up I don't change out of my nap T-shirt because I'm comfortable. It reaches past my knees because it was Tia's when she was a teenager. I go to ask Abuela if she still wants to make pancakes. When I walk out into the living room I see her crying and Abuelo has his arm around her asking her why she's crying. He says he doesn't understand who would make such a wonderful person like her cry and he wants to know who did it. That just makes her cry more. I wonder why everyone is crying so much and I think it can't be about the poop. I run back into Tia's room before they see me because I don't want to interrupt something important.

While I wait I play with my animals. I take each animal and slide it along the curly bars that make up the headboard. I think it's like a water slide for them but then it makes more sense if they're at a waterfall because they're wild animals. After all of the animals have had a chance to ride the waterfall I climb onto Tia's desk to look out the window into the back yard. I push the thin curtains out of the way and see my grandpa in the tomato garden. I leave to ask Abuela for pancakes again now that I know she's alone. She's still on the couch and she's not crying anymore but she's looking straight ahead at the wall and frowning.

I climb onto the couch next to her and sink in a little bit. It's a very big couch and it feels like its made not of velvet but something soft like velvet. She looks at me and I can tell she's trying very hard to smile. She asks me if I want anything and I wonder if it's still ok to ask for pancakes. I decide to ask for them since she asked me if I wanted anything but then I ask her what's wrong. She doesn't say anything for a minute and then tells me that I might not understand but Abuelo is sick. This is why he pooped in the yard. I ask her what she means by sick because I've been sick before but the weirdest place I've pooped is only my pants. She says that he's sick in a different way and that sometimes he does things and doesn't remember them. I

ask her why she's crying and she tells me that Abuelo got really mad at her about why she was looking out the window and he yelled at her. Then she said something that stuck with me the most which was that he wasn't himself when he did things like that. She said that he would get worse and worse until he couldn't remember our names. I laughed because I thought she was exaggerating to make a joke. But she didn't laugh and she told me she was serious. I couldn't help it and I started crying for a long time. Abuela looked like she wished she never told me anything and apologized and said it would be a very long time before Abuelo got that bad. Then she went to make me pancakes. After I was done crying I looked at the floor and thought about the under-house and the dirt and bugs that must be down there and I had an idea. I told Abuela that everything would be ok and I gave her a hug which seemed to help.

Last night I practiced my bending again with a cup of water Mom leaves on my window sill. I once almost drank the water but Mom stopped me and told me that it was to keep the bad spirits away. I think it's ok to try bending it because I could always put it right back. I couldn't water bend but I knew I saw the water moving at one point and I thought that's a start.

When I get to Abuela's house I tell Ashley about my plan and about everything I figured out. We are sitting in the front yard watching lizards run around and jump on Abuela's rose bush. Ashley has a stick that she is using to poke the lizards even though I asked her how she would feel if some giant person poked her with a stick. I tell her that I have seen mind control happen all the time in different shows and movies. There's the Force, and in Harry Potter there are controlling curses and in Avatar there's blood bending which is a form of water bending. It's a classic. I tell Nat that Abuelo wasn't acting like himself because he wasn't himself and I make

sure to explain it really well to her so that she doesn't ask a million questions as usual. It's so simple that my grandma didn't even think of it.

Nat asks me what I'm gonna do about it. I knew she would ask this so I practiced my answer in bed last night. I tell her that I've been practicing my bending and it looks good. She says that bending isn't real. She is hopeless but I expected her to say that so I'm not mad. I just tell her that I water bended a little bit last night and then she stays quiet. Then I tell her about how both times Abuelo did bad things but then couldn't remember them it was after he had left the under-house. So I know that whatever is making him sick is down there. I just have to find it and get rid of it. I tell her that I brought my orange water bottle from home to use the water on it. She looks at me and says that even if I get the thing that hurt Abuelo it wouldn't matter. Whatever the thing was it already had a hold on Abuelo. It had already made him sick. For once I think she has a point.

I may not be the best bender yet but sometimes things come to you when you need them and you focus hard enough. Like when Toph the earth bender was in a metal box and no one thought anyone could metal bend. Everyone thought it was impossible but then Toph invented metal bending in a desperate situation. So I think I have the passion and the desperate situation to bring out my powers. Plus I'm the one in my family with the most practice so this is my responsibility.

I go to the shed and I set the dial on the time machine to one year. Then I walk around the shed once. I take my time because I am kind of scared but I also feel powerful. Then I go across the yard to the small wooden door that is just my size that goes to the under-house. I move the

little sliding bar that keeps it locked and I push it. It doesn't move easily so I kick it again and again and it opens little by little. When I finally get it open I bend down a little bit to get through the doorway. It is really dark and the ceiling is low and the floor is made of dirt like I remember. I walk around looking for the thing. I see some flamingos by the doorway but I know they are harmless. I can't see very well so I'm walking quietly so I can get the thing by surprise. There are boxes here and there and the spiderwebs on the ceiling are close to my head. It's a good thing I'm not afraid of spiders.

Finally I see a shadow that is shaped like a person and I walk to it slowly. When I am near enough to see it well I recognize it. It is a heavy Santa Claus statue. Abuela used to put it in the front yard as decoration but I hadn't seen it this past Christmas or two. I looked at its face and I remembered that it always creeped me out. His eyes are opened too big and look crazy and his smile doesn't seem happy. Now I knew that was because he was evil the whole time. He must be mad that he didn't get brought out like the other Christmas decorations. I thought he must be cursing Abuelo out of revenge. Before he could make his move I open my water bottle up and do the move I had been practicing. I stomp and push my arms forward. I must have earth bended by accident because something like a big rock moves in the dark really quickly past the Santa and knocks him over. His head breaks off when he hits the ground.

I know he is dead already but I tell him nice try but you can't take Abuelo. And I think what a glorious feeling because it felt good to get back at something that tried to hurt me and made Abuela cry and made Abuelo mean and weird. I rush out of the under-house and use my whole body to close the door and then lock it. I am so excited that I almost forgot to come back to the present before going inside the house. I run around the shed forwards in time once and run

straight to the back door. Inside, I look for Abuela and Abuelo. They are in the sewing room. Abuelo is telling her something but Abuela isn't looking at him at all. She must be focused on her sewing. I'm going to tell them what I did but then I think that I must have changed the past and they don't even remember the bad things because the bad things haven't happened to them and will never happen to any of us. I look at both of them and smile like I can't help it because I have changed the past and know what they don't. Everything is gonna be fine.

2. Nathalie

Lucia's European history teacher grinned across her cluttered desk. Her dark thinning hair stood, teased and puffed, vaguely reminding Lucia of an amiable death god from her favorite anime. By some schedule conflict, Lucia could not take the advanced placement section of world history. Because she still intended on taking the AP test in May, she supplemented her regular level course with weekly discussions with Mrs. Rodriguez over lunch. Mrs. Rodriguez kept her classroom door open as a sort of daily office hour. Lucia had been Mrs. Rodriguez's only visitor since she'd taken AP Art History her sophomore year.

Lucia prodded her cheesy spaghetti and garlic bread with a spork and wondered how the school cafeteria managed to produce such perfect spheres of spaghetti. As she broke off a piece, she imagined pounds of pasta, overcooked to ensure maximum stickiness, in a device not unlike a trash compactor, squeezed into an economic cube of sustenance to be served with ice cream scoopers.

Though Lucia always came to these meetings prepared, with questions on the terra-cotta army and the pharaoh Akhenaten, the academic discussion almost always devolved into regular conversation. Lucia didn't mind. She appreciated Mrs. Rodriguez's dark humor. There was a certain level of decorum and censorship Lucia had come to expect from teachers which Mrs. Rodriguez had long ago deemed unnecessary.

"How do you stay stay sane?" Lucia asked in reference to Mrs. Rodriguez's earlier lecture.

“Oh, I don’t.” Mrs. Rodriguez said.

The lecture was on ancient Rome. Mrs. Rodriguez stood at the front of a dark classroom, lit only by the powerpoint projected onto the white screen. The classroom was nicer than many others the students were used to, the building having been added to the already large school five years earlier to accommodate growing numbers. The desks were largely untouched by the banal carvings of love struck teenagers. One exception being Lucia’s desk which sported the carving “B+H” in a short, fat heart. “Bitches plus hoes?” Lucia’s friend Nathalie had joked on the first day of class.

Mrs. Rodriguez stood in her heels and gray blazer. “These are crucified Christians,” she said, moving on to the next slide of her thorough presentation, “and these are crucified Christians on fire.” Lucia and Nathalie had been the only ones who laughed as Mrs. Rodriguez, deadpan, inched through the remaining slides. Occasionally, she would make such addenda, a litmus test of sorts to determine exactly how small a proportion of her class was actually listening. “Art critics often refer to this Byzantine rendition of Jesus as ‘succulent.’ Those of you who are writing that down, please don’t.”

“Who’s Jesus?” one girl asked, over a notebook page scrawled with what looked like either poetry or song lyrics.

Very rarely in Mrs. Rodriguez’s career of tirelessly lecturing classrooms of thirty or more students, slideshows she had spent hours on going largely unseen, and tests she administered returned to students with dismal percentages, was she surprised. Upon hearing this question, her bored expression twisted into concern. “Jesus...of Nazareth?” she stuttered, “Jesus Christ?”

“Oh,” the girl said. She looked back at her notebook, finished with the discussion. Mrs. Rodriguez stood wide eyed and silent for a moment before moving on to the next slide.

Mrs. Rodriguez unfolded the saran wrap of sandwich, chicken breast adorned with pretty vegetables. Like all of Mrs. Rodriguez’s lunches, it looked as though it had been pulled from a food magazine, crisp and colorful. Mrs. Rodriguez saw Lucia’s eyes linger on her sandwich. “Do you want half?” Mrs. Rodriguez offered. “That spaghetti doesn’t look appetizing.”

Lucia smiled, embarrassed. “No thanks,” she said, dislodging a piece of meat from the spaghetti glob and casting it away into the corner of her styrofoam tray. “It’s really not that bad. It’s mostly cheese.”

“If you say so.” Mrs. Rodriguez chewed slowly. “How are you managing your workload? Are you pacing yourself like I advised?”

“Pretty well, yeah,” Lucia said. Lucia was beginning her Senior year and spent a lot of time studying. Between her three AP classes and considerably demanding theater class, her head spun so that she couldn’t remember a monologue from a molecule. Due to Zoila’s surveillance, she couldn’t do much of anything that involved leaving the house. She had taken to filling her time with novels. Abuela refused to spend money on cable when the channels she had already provided her with enough telenovelas. She scoffed at the advertisements that arrived in the mail, “Fifty dollars a month *para una mierda* MTV *o que coño.*”

Lucia had started a decent personal library by accompanying Zoila to Miami Thrift and the Goodwill near the community college. After each visit she’d come home with three or four

books that looked promising. She'd recently scored a copy of *The Lord of the Rings* for fifty cents and was nearly finished with *The Fellowship*.

After some small talk, Mrs. Rodriguez offered to clarify any parts of the day's lecture that had been glossed over. Lucia opened her notebook and searched for the questions she had prepared in the margins.

"Have you thought about colleges you want to apply to?" Mrs. Rodriguez asked when lunch period was nearly over.

"I think I can definitely get into FSU," Lucia said. "It's kind of far, which my grandma won't like. But there's shuttles to Miami and stuff. It shouldn't be hard to visit. I've already written my supplemental essay if you want to help me edit it, by the way."

Mrs. Rodriguez nodded. "There's a lot of good colleges coming here to put on some presentations in the media center. I think Stanford is coming tomorrow and Columbia is next week. You should go to both."

"You think I can get into Stanford?"

"I think you have a good chance. Yes. The presentations are during last block?"

"Mr. Miralles."

"Great. He shouldn't have a problem with you missing part of class. I'll write you a pass."

Mrs. Rodriguez scribbled a note for Mr. Miralles on a yellow pad. Lucia had never considered schools outside of Florida, much less any Ivy League, but she thought it would be nice to skip a couple of Calculus lessons.

After school, Lucia changed into a men's large Mountain Dew t-shirt and a pair of basketball shorts. She walked across the courtyard of the older building. Sweat beaded under her hairline and she thought that even if it weren't for Zoila, she would still change into loose clothing before her walk home everyday simply to avoid the awful sensation of peeling off sweat-soaked spandex.

Lucia and Nathalie met after school every day to walk home together. Their houses were two blocks away from each other. They were old friends, though Lucia and Nathalie began their friendship in middle school. As Lucia waited for Nathalie by the statue of the school mascot, a thoroughbred, Lucia picked her dark shoulder length hair up into a bun to expose her neck to the wind. But there was no wind. Lucia wished the hallways of her school were indoors and air-conditioned like the ones she saw in so many sitcoms.

Soon Lucia saw Nathalie walking toward her. She dropped her eyes when she saw who Nathalie was walking with. It was Eduardo, or Eddy, a friend Nathalie made in her German class last semester. He was laughing at Nathalie's spot on impression of Walter Mercado, the Puerto Rican astrologist on Univision's news show.

"I swear *abuelas* fucking love that doofy guy," Nathalie said as she reached Lucia. "Lucia knows what I'm talking about, right? Zoila makes us listen to Walter Mercado whenever I'm over their house."

"She would also be horrified if she heard you call him by anything other than his stage name 'Shanti Ananda.'" Lucia said, glancing at Eddy in time to see him smile. During one of their sleepovers, Lucia may have mentioned thinking Eddy was cute. She wasn't sure if she resented or appreciated Nathalie for bringing him along to their after school meeting place.

“Maybe our grandmas are right,” Eddy offered, “Maybe we should really respect that guy. I mean, he communicates with the constellations and whatnot.” He towered over the girls. He must be six foot two, Lucia thought.

“And those robes,” Nathalie added. “Those robes really demand respect. Where’s he from again? Atlantis? ‘Cause those clothes are nothing short of majestic. Some may even call them pimpin’.” Mercado wore satin capes and emperor's clothing in turquoise and gold.

“I knew you’d say that, Nat, so I already bought you his entire wardrobe.”

Eddy laughed at this, although Lucia knew he was unaware of its origin. At some point in middle school Lucia decided to indulge Nathalie’s preference for flamboyant period clothing despite the fact that this preference did not exist. This decision had led to many strange thrift store purchases on Lucia’s part, decoy gifts for Nathalie on her birthday and Christmas. The first time Lucia did this, Nathalie lifted a velvet and tasseled wizard’s hat out of the box she had unwrapped and pretended to love it, putting the hat on immediately and giving Lucia a bear hug before she could reveal the actual gift.

“You know me so well,” Nathalie smiled.

“Shit,” Eddy said, “Who does Walter Mercado look like? It’s always bugged me about him. He looks like someone but I can’t pinpoint it. Like, I don’t even know if it’s a person I know or if it’s a famous person.”

“Joan Rivers,” Lucia said. “I’ve thought about this too. He literally looks exactly like Joan Rivers.”

Nathalie gave Eddy a strange smile and announced her need to use the bathroom before scurrying off. Lucia wished she would be less obvious. She was sure that Nathalie was not going to the bathroom at all, but hiding behind some pillar, spying on Lucia's inept attempts at flirting.

Lucia didn't quite know how to speak to an attractive boy. So she didn't. She grabbed the drawstrings of her backpack, swung them back and forth and looked off in random directions, eventually landing on the granite around her feet.

Eddy poked Lucia in the shoulder, forcing her to look up at him, and said, "Hey, nice outfit. We're matching." He gestured downward to his t-shirt and basketball shorts.

She finally looked into his large eyes and her wit fled. "Shut up," she said, and rummaged her word bank for something more to say, "My grandma doesn't know I try to look cute sometimes." Lucia immediately regretted the statement. She didn't mean to call herself cute.

"I think you look cute in both outfits," he said.

"Thanks," Lucia said, not sure what to do with a compliment that wasn't veiled with bullying.

Nathalie showed up then, signaling their time to part ways. The girls walked toward the street and Eddy walked in the direction of the basketball courts.

"So, you might hate me for all of that," Nathalie said, "'Cause it looked pretty awkward from where I was standing, but I ran into him during lunch while you were with Mrs. Rodriguez and we hung out. And he kind of admitted that he has a crush on you based on like, probably your butt. I mean he didn't say that much but, you know. And I knew you probably wouldn't actively seek him out 'cause that might be too forward. I don't know. But he's interested."

“In me?” Lucia asked. Her heart fell in her chest. She thought of Gandalf, suddenly whipped off of the bridge of Khazad Dum, plummeting into a dark canyon illuminated only by the fiery Balrog he wrestled.

Lucia and Nathalie stopped at a stuffy Cuban cafe on their way home from school. It was in a small shopping center, cramped between a dollar store and a pawn shop. They were drawn by the flashy new sign. “Chico’s,” the sign read, “Latin Proud.” Lucia wondered aloud whether the sign meant to say “Latino Pride” or “Latino and Proud.” She concluded that the grammatical error was not an error at all but a deliberate fuck you to assimilation from the *viejitas* who probably ran the place.

“That settles it,” Nathalie said. “That sign is amazing and we’re going in.”

Lucia’s purple sneakers, secondhand hi-top Converse, squeaked under the slow rotation of a ceiling fan. The sun pierced the glass storefront, and people crowded in line for Wednesday’s four dollar meal deal.

Lucia thought the crowd a good sign. The place was too small for tables but offered a small section of bar seating parallel to and mere steps away from the display case. Lucia dropped her backpack next to a stool with an alarming thud.

“Your nerdiness is gonna give you scoliosis,” Nathalie said, “Seriously, what are you carrying in there that you couldn’t leave behind for six hours?”

“I brought my Calc textbook just in case I felt like studying during lunch. Plus *Lord of the Rings*. It’s the copy that’s all three books together. I admit it’s a bad combination.” Lucia massaged her own shoulders.

Lucia and Nathalie approached the register and ordered their favorites from the tall woman behind the counter, a *medianoche* and a Cuban sandwich respectively. The woman wore a puffy hairnet and appeared to be working alone. She took five orders at once and turned to place pre-made sandwiches in a hot press then spoon rice and beans, plantains, and pork into sectioned styrofoam containers. She paused only to dab her sweaty forehead with a dish towel. Lucia nudged Nathalie and pointed to the woman, “She’s got skills. This is gonna be good.”

When their sandwiches were ready, the woman placed them on the counter and yelled the order. “*Mi amor*,” the woman said to Lucia as she approached the counter, “*si hay problemas, me llamo Cati*, okay?” Lucia thanked Cati and brought both sandwiches to her place at the bar.

Nathalie gazed out of the storefront at the two o'clock traffic on Palm Avenue and rolled her eyes at a car with a single spinning rim. “That can’t be normal,” she said, “buying them one at a time like that?”

Lucia laughed and picked the toasted bread from her sandwich. Using her pinky, she prodded the ham. It was a habit. In every identical, cramped Cuban cafe she dissected the contents of her sandwich and assessed the warmth of its core. Nathalie teased her every time. “Why bother?” she asked. “We both know you’re too shy to ask them to reheat it anyway.” She was right. Lucia would never insult the woman behind the counter by suggesting the food she prepared was imperfect. But Lucia had found the sandwich inspection technique to be an accurate gauge of cafe quality. At subpar cafes: scalding on the outside, lukewarm on the inside, usually served within three minutes of ordering. A rookie mistake, favoring timeliness over perfection. At excellent cafes: sandwiches were evenly hot throughout, usually served

approximately six minutes after ordering, the cook having waited until all three slices of cheese were molten together in a tart goop.

Nathalie picked a few crunchy potato sticks out of her Cuban sandwich and nibbled them. “What’s the verdict, Lucia Garcia: Sandwich Detective?”

“Hot enough in the center. But how does it taste?” Lucia placed the sweet bread back in place and took a bite. She chewed with her eyes closed as though in prayer, placed the sandwich back into its red basket, and lifted it into the sunlight. “This,” she said, “this was made with love.”

“I can swear I see tears in your eyes,” Nathalie said.

Lucia shrugged. “I enjoy a good sandwich.”

“So what do you think of Eddy? Are you gonna say yes if he asks you out? ‘Cause he kind of told me he was gonna ask you out. But it’s one of those things where he won’t do it unless I tell him that you told me you’re into it.”

“I guess I have no reason to say no. Except that I kind of don’t want to?”

“But you’re the one who was shitting your pants about talking to him not half an hour ago.”

“I know. That’s the whole problem. Now that I know that he likes me and he’s like, looking at me all the time, it makes me feel really weird.”

“Ok, but I don’t think being nervous around a hot guy is a reason to call off a date. You’re both a couple of hotties. Just go with it.” Nathalie began to slow dance in her seat and sing an unidentifiable song, something like a mash up of Air Supply’s greatest hits.

Lucia laughed. She thought of being alone with Eddy and felt for the first time in her life as though she might go for a run. Although there was nothing about him that she found particularly interesting, the thought of someone being interested in her gave her a strange energy.

“You alright?” Nathalie asked. “You’re kind of smiling at your sandwich. I know it’s delicious and all but this is weird even for you.”

Lucia realized that she had in fact been grinning at her sandwich. “Sorry. I was just imagining how that lunch would play out.”

“Well, I advise you to not direct your stares at your food on the potential date.” Nathalie said. “Or who knows? Maybe you could pull it off. Make it cute. I can’t pretend to know how these things go.”

Nathalie rarely alluded to her romanceless state. “I’ve lived in the friend zone for years, or at least long enough to construct a map,” she’d half-joked on the night they’d decided to try getting drunk together their freshman year. They had each snuck a bit of Nathalie’s grandmother’s rum. Neither had any idea how to apportion alcohol and had decided that splitting a mug of the stuff between them would probably be enough. The result was a deluge of half articulated bits of that insufferable squishy stuff: feelings.

Nathalie had directed her unfiltered anger at a creepy porcelain doll, a gift from her father when she was six. She yelled her rant at first until Lucia reminded her to keep it down. Nathalie then continued at a lower volume with the same intensity. She said in a passionate whisper, arms flailing, “You wanna get to Rejection? It’s quite a distance away, but it’s pretty straight forward. Just drive on past First Meeting and Misinterpreting His Smiles and Playful Punches. Then you wanna make a right at Fishing For Compliments. No, never mind, that’s a dead end. I meant take

a right at Too Much Makeup, then that will convert into Too Tight Top To Pique His Interest. Eventually you'll see Giving Him Girl Advice. And congratulations! There you are!"

Lucia had told Nathalie in earnest that she didn't understand the phenomenon, Nathalie being so funny and smart and wonderful and all.

"Funny," Nathalie had said, "is not fuckable."

They hadn't directly discussed the night since. Since then, Nathalie's self-deprecation had snuck into her speech as afterthoughts.

"Seriously, though," Nathalie continued, "it's nothing to freak out and talk to your sandwich over."

Lucia frowned. "But what if I just talk about Doctor Who for like, way too long to be considered appropriate, and he's just like 'Wow this girl is a cutie with a booty but what she has in ass she lacks in all other aspects.'"

"Well, that one ass-pect, if you will, might be enough to keep him interested. Let's be honest. And don't fucking worry about stuff like that, Lucia. Like I always say, 'A man who dislikes Doctor Who is not the man for you.'"

"You've never said that."

"Well I'm saying it now. Crochet that shit onto a pillow 'cause I'm pretty sure it's wisdom." Nathalie said. "Anyway, you can always rest easy knowing that guy over there finds you interesting enough." Nathalie pointed to a man leaning by the register and leering at Lucia. He was thin and leathery, a reptile in a white undershirt. Despite his yellow eyes and general zombie-like demeanor, his wink at Lucia let her know he thought himself quite a prize.

“Ugh. Let’s go,” Lucia said, wrapping the remaining half of her sandwich in wax paper and stuffing it into her backpack.

“What, you’re gonna pass up his offer? Are you not blinded by his confidence?” Nathalie said, positioning herself between Lucia and the man to block his view.

“*Buenas*,” he nodded at Lucia on their way out.

“*Buenas*,” Lucia mumbled, eyes on her destination, the concrete outside. Nathalie raised her middle finger and said, “*Metelo por el culo.*” Then, to herself, “Ruining a perfectly good sandwich.”

Lucia turned to Nathalie after they’d traversed the small parking lot. “Thanks,” she said, “For the pep talk, I mean.”

Nathalie smiled before turning onto her street. “I have to correct any idiot who doesn’t speak highly of you. Particularly when that idiot is you.”

Many Worlds

Richard says she's not that type. Says he's seen her tucked under a tree at lunch with her books that aren't even for school. He says she stares at guys all angry when they try to talk to her. I first saw her sophomore year when she walked into my chemistry class to drop off a form or something. After that I saw her everywhere. She has her hair cut really short. It doesn't pass her chin, which I don't usually like on girls but it doesn't even bother me on her. And these big eyes. My friend Molly says her eyes make her look like a frog but I don't see it. She just looks good to me.

This semester I have the good fortune of sitting behind her in German class. I mean, it's not so much good fortune as it is my deliberate choice to sit one seat behind her and one seat over, attaining what I call the optimal angle, but you get me. From that vantage point I can see when she smiles at my jokes, which is not often but I'm working on it. There are other advantages to the optimal angle. Let's say that if she ever starts wearing thongs, I assure you, I'd be the first to know.

Richard says she made him nervous at first, so nervous that he couldn't even talk to her directly. So he sent our buddy Roly over as an envoy. She was eating lunch by herself on a bench in the courtyard when Roly approached her. He asked her if she would be interested in a date with the fine young gentleman standing by the water fountain. (Cue Richard, in a pose he thought to be both alluring and nonchalant.) She barely looked him in the eye before saying no thanks. She went back to her spaghetti after that, Richard said, and put her sweater on.

I've never pursued a complete stranger before, at least not outside of my fantasies. I usually need the setup of a party or a mutual friend to start me off and even then I'm sometimes

so shy that isn't enough. I know this sounds predatory or desperate or something but I'm just a person. Don't act all like a beautiful ass has never rocked your world. Anyway, she's completely out of my circle being in honors classes and all. If I don't force an interaction I'll never have a chance. And an ass like that demands at least one attempted pass.

"I'm telling you, Jorge," Richard says during lunch. We're sitting in the shade near the cafeteria's entrance. "As much as I'm rooting for you, it's not even worth it. She didn't even look at me first, man. To check out the goods."

"No shit," I say. "You, one of the creepiest motherfuckers I know, send over possibly the only motherfucker on the planet who is actually sleazier than you are to talk to this girl and you wonder why she didn't pause to consider the pros and cons of dating you."

"Fuck you. How am I creepy?" he asks, bringing his hand down from his neck. Sweat droplets fly from his fingertips. His thin white t-shirt is soaked in patches.

"First of all," I start, "Why are you always so sweaty? Seriously, I can draw a detailed topography map of your nipples based on what I can see right now. Second of all, you openly stare at her tits whenever she walks by. You have to be more discreet about it."

"But how else will she know she has great tits?" He says.

"She doesn't need to know what you think. That's the point. If she's aware of you staring at her like that, she'll cover them up and avoid you forever and then you won't have another chance to check her out."

Richard shakes his head. "I don't understand and therefore refuse to take your advice."

"Trust me. I know what I'm talking about. I've learned the hard way by scaring tons of girls away. It's about not acting like you want her or even care that she's there."

“Ok, Rico Suave. We don’t all jerk off to our mom’s porny paperbacks so please excuse our ignorance,” Richard says, bowing at me.

“You know I can’t read Spanish that well,” I laugh. “Anyway, she’s exactly my type.”

“She’s hot,” Richard says. “She’s everyone’s type.”

“I admit that’s a fair point,” I say. “But you don’t have to be such a hater.”

“I’m not hating,” he insists. “I got plenty of ladies trying to ride my dick, anyway. I can’t afford to be like you, spending all this time worrying about one of them.”

“Trying to ride your dick? Dude, trying implies that failure is a possibility. Is there any girl out there that you’d refuse?”

Richard burps.

I continue, “Look. I’m gonna talk to her after school today. And I’m gonna talk to her myself instead of sending over a messenger boy.”

The bell rings for last block and Richard wishes me luck as I walk to class.

I sit in the back row during English so that I can lean my head against the wall when I need to nap. Mrs. Fernandez collects our homework, a worksheet on the novel we’re reading this week. She does this by walking up to each student individually and taking their papers. She started doing this after the first few weeks of class, when she discovered that asking us to pass our papers forward yielded a pretty sad stack. She says its supposed to remove anonymity from the situation. In other words, it make us feel ashamed when we have to explain that we have nothing to turn in. This system probably works on a lot of kids. Not on me, though. I admit it’s kind of embarrassing to be confronted like that, but not enough that I wanna do the work instead.

She finally gets to me and of course I didn't do the assignment but I sift through loose papers in my backpack anyway. I tell her I did it this time, I swear, but I must have left it in my room. I've gotten so good at this that sometimes even I believe I've done the homework. She tells me I can bring it in tomorrow. Mrs. Fernandez has been teaching for a long time so she probably knows as well as I do that I won't turn anything in tomorrow. It's nice of her to give me a chance, though.

I spend the rest of last block doodling. I draw a distorted face with elongated and droopy cheeks, a guy who sort of looks like he's melting. Mrs. Fernandez goes on and on about *Brave New World*, which I read the first couple of chapters of. I actually kind of liked it. Soma seems fun. People in my class were acting all superior about the drug dependence. They did the same thing about that one Kurt Vonnegut story with the box. I was like please, as if none of you fuckers have ever done any drug. It was the first time I'd spoken in that class.

I think maybe I'll share that insight with Lucia once we start talking regularly. But I'm jumping ahead. I have to take this one step at a time. Plus, she doesn't seem like the type to be down to even get drunk. First, I have to plan what I'll say to her today. I can impress her with my more intellectual material later. My opening line has to be good. It has to be smooth and casual. Nothing like Richard's shitty approach.

I spend the rest of the period scripting possibilities.

After school I sit at the steps to the main entrance. This is where where everyone convenes, waiting for their rides or hanging out a bit before they have to walk home. On any other day I'd meet up with Richard and Roly at the bottom of the steps, but I'm on the lookout.

Plus if I meet up with the guys while I wait, they'll just give me shit and make me nervous which is a death sentence when it comes to this kind of thing. Confidence is key, or so I've heard.

While I wait I pull out my notebook and draw what ends up being a silhouette of her hair, though it could be mistaken for a helmet. Hair isn't my forte. I lack the finesse it requires but I'm working on it.

I look up every once in a while hoping to spot her. When I do, she's leaning against a palm tree reading a fat paperback. She's wearing jeans and a baggy orange tank top. As usual, I can tell she isn't trying to look good, but she does anyway. She looks toward the stairs and I'm worried she sees me staring, but she looks back at her book too quickly for me to tell. It occurs to me that I may seem creepy, but I'm just being paranoid. It was probably nothing. People accidentally make eye contact all the time.

I sit in place for too long, wavering between twelve different potential scenarios and hating myself in every one of them. I should act way interested in everything she says. If you make girls feel special then they remember you. I should say something like, "That's fascinating" or "That's just genius." No, not that. That'll make me sound like an asshole. But it might be impossible not to sound like an asshole in this situation. Whatever I come up with is gonna sound robotic and overthought. Fine. If I want the whole thing to seem unplanned then maybe it should actually be unplanned. I'll just walk up to her and see what happens. It's like with the homework. If I can just convince myself I'm being honest then it'll seem honest. It'll be kind of like method acting if I'm right about what method acting is.

I slide my notebook into my drawstring backpack and walk down the stairs towards her. There's a crowd but I'm tall enough to see over everyone's heads. She isn't going anywhere.

She's just reading. I do my best to keep my head blank. I resist planning and remind myself that this is all organic and not at all something I've been contemplating for hours.

I'm in front of her and she looks up at me. I guess I was walking faster than I thought. I know I should talk before I get nervous but my hearing is fuzzy now and nothing is coming to me. I wish I had a plan.

She says hi like it's a question.

I say, "I was just wondering what you're reading." I don't sound confident, but I can work that as an advantage if it makes me seem shy and cute. Maybe she'll think I'm sensitive. She wordlessly holds up the book so I can read the cover. *Einstein's Dreams*.

"Oh, cool. Never heard of it," I could be doing worse. "Did Einstein write it?"

"No," she's confused. "Alan Lightman wrote it. It says it right here on the cover."

And just like that I've convinced her that I don't know how to read. Can I rebound even from this? Maybe she'll pity me and offer to tutor me. Private sessions at her house. That can get sexy fast.

She's looking over my shoulder to find a route of escape or something. This isn't working. I'll go with something I planned. "That's fascinating," I say. "That's just genius."

"Is it?"

"What?" I manage.

"That's kind of where the author's name typically goes," she says. "On the cover of a book."

"Yeah, of course. I didn't mean that."

“Then why did you say it?” She sounds impatient. Like she wants me to finish up whatever it is I’m trying to do. This can’t get worse. I have one chance to get what I want and I figure I’ll try for a Hail Mary.

“Because I think you’re pretty and I wanted to say something to you but now you think I’m illiterate so maybe this wasn’t my best idea.”

“Oh,” she says, looking for a way out again.

“If you want I can walk you home,” I interrupt. “We can stop at McDonald’s and I’ll buy you something? You live that way, right?” I point in the direction of McDonald’s.

“Um, no thanks. My ride is here,” she says. Then she jogs across the street. Her messenger bag bounces against her hips. I watch her until she disappears behind the house on the corner. I don’t see her get into a car.

I take a strange route home to avoid Roly and Richard. I know that they’re waiting for me at McDonald’s, thinking I’ll be there for my daily double cheeseburger. I do want the cheeseburger, but I don’t feel like talking. And I definitely don’t want to relive that whole fiasco. Or deal with their jokes. I know they’ll just be like, “Rico Suave did what?” or, “Damn, Fabio. I thought you were irresistible?”

I can’t believe I just let her know that I knew what direction she lived in. I might as well have said, “You may not know me but I stare at you from a distance all the time.” Maybe even Richard’s strategy would have worked better than that. I stare at my shoes the whole way home without noticing the storefronts I walk past. My basketball shorts feel too loose at the waist. I need a pair of real pants. I should have dressed better. This being the big day and all.

When I'm almost home I see one of my neighbors, Humbertico, out in his front lawn. He's always there. My mom says he's schizophrenic but I'm not sure if she made that up. She doesn't always check her sources. It seems like a fair diagnosis though. Sometimes he sits in a chair and somehow rocks back and forth even though it isn't a rocking chair. Today he's doing his standing and pacing routine. He does loops in the lawn. There's a ring of dead grass in his lawn, he paces so much. He flings his arms up all angry, grumbling at who knows what. He shakes his head and his cheeks jiggle. He babbles, mostly. But he'll occasionally enunciate choice words. He stops, smiles, and says hi as I walk by. I wave to him from my gate and step into my yard.

The path to my doorstep is always dark. The front yard is crowded with trees my grandmother refuses to get rid of. It's like a small rain forest. Not that it bothers me. I loved it when I was a kid. I'd pretend I was an adventurer. I used to swing a rusty machete that I'd found in the shed at the bushes and hanging palm fronds. It's weird that my mom let a five year old play with a machete but now if I leave the house for thirty minutes she calls six times. Now the trees are good cover to park my car under and get high.

The front door is wide open but the grate in front of it is locked. I see my grandma sitting on the couch in her nightgown. I shout over her telenovelas for her to let me in. She shuffles over and unlocks the door. She tries to hug me and kiss me on the cheek. She's being sweet but the Vaseline on her lips grosses me out. I tell her this every day. If she wants to kiss me when no one's around that's fine. But she has to ditch the Vaseline. I stop her when she's a foot away from me and hold her there. I ask her why it's always so hot in here and she tells me to ask my mother since she's the boss.

“Hi, sweetheart,” my mom yells as she leaves the kitchen. “Oh my goodness, you are so handsome.” She wipes her hands on her apron and walks towards me. Then she goes in for the same thing my grandma did but I hold my arms out in defense. She doesn’t do the Vaseline thing but she’ll try to squeeze my face with her hands that probably smell like raw chicken. I ask her why the air isn’t on when it’s nearly a hundred degrees outside.

“That’s why the door is open,” she says. “So we don’t need to put the air on.”

“If it’s hot outside,” I say, “then on what planet is an open door a solution to a hot house. Plus there’s no way you really believe that works because you’re sweating.”

“Well, it’s warmer in the kitchen ‘cause I have the oven on. Your room is probably fine. You just need some time to cool off from your walk.”

“Mom, if I’m too hot in my room in the middle of the night why would I be comfortable at three PM?” I’ve said all of this to her so many times.

“Ok,” she scowls. “If you want to turn on the AC you can. But when the bill comes in a few weeks you also get to pay it.”

“*Comunistas,*” Humberto yells next door. He’s got that right.

“*El pobre,*” my mom says. Then she looks back at me and gets mad again. Her face creases in a lot of places when she’s angry. She has pale eyes. I think she might have been very pretty once, before Abuela pulled her out of school to take care of her uncle in Cuba. After he had meningitis his brain was fried and he couldn’t put on his own pants or say much more than Mom’s name. At least that’s how Abuela tells it. I don’t ask Mom about her past. I brought it up once and she got all hateful about Abuela. Which was awkward because Abuela was within earshot. I know she can’t speak English but she understands some stuff.

“Plus,” she says, “I don’t know why you always blame me. It’s your grandma who’s always freezing.”

I turn and walk to my room.

“I got you Pizza Rolls at Costco if you get hungry,” she yells after me.

“Thanks,” I say. When she’s back in the kitchen I turn on the AC. She just pretends to be mean. She’ll never charge me for anything.

In my room I hear Humberto’s muffled voice. If I stayed here long enough I bet I’d go crazy too. The view from my only window looks onto the street. So much of this city is grey. The roads, the sidewalks, the sky. Even the houses look washed out. Their coats of paint are so chipped and old and dulled by the sun. I wonder if it’s like this everywhere. Sometimes my dad takes me to Broward on his days with me and it’s a little nicer there. The houses aren’t grey, at least.

I’m glad I asked for bright green walls in my bedroom when I was a kid. It’s a good contrast to outdoors. Reminds me of elementary school. Everything was bright and interactive to trick you into learning. I was my teachers’ favorite kid then.

My phone buzzes in my pocket. I know it’s Richard. He’s the only person who ever calls me. I flip my shitty phone open.

“Hey,” I say, “What do you need?”

“Hey” I hear cars zooming by him. “Roly went home and my mom’s not gonna be able to pick me up until late. I’m coming over.”

“Alright. I’m about to roll. Do you want any?” I’ve learned not to fight Richard when he wants to hang out. If I told him not to come he’d show up anyway.

“Obviously. I’ll see you in like two minutes.” He hangs up.

I kneel in the small space between my bed and desk and reach under my bed. I keep a my dad’s old briefcase there that I found when I was a kid. I thought briefcases were so cool and I still do because they’re such a throwback and look so professional. I sit at my desk and open it up. My supplies aren’t organized but I find things alright. I unroll and gut a white grape flavored cigarillo, using a sharp fingernail to slice a perfect line in the leaf. I dump the tobacco into a tissue that I bundle up and toss in the wastebasket. I inspect the ten piece Lazaro sold me this morning before breaking it up. It’s good weed, coated in crystals and little orange hairs. My fingertips are sticky after I break it up and arrange it in the tobacco leaf.

This is the hard part. The part that established me as the best at rolling in our friend group. I take the leaf in both hands and roll the blunt wrap back and forth between my fingers until the weed that it cradles has even thickness throughout. Richard skips this step, so his blunts are bumpy and full of air pockets. I seal it by licking it and put it in a hollowed out fat pen that I keep in the briefcase.

“*Hola,*” Richard says from the living room. He thinks speaking Spanish makes old people love him. His Spanish is as terrible as mine, though.

Richard walks in and closes the door quickly. “Jesus, man. Lock your door when you’re doing this shit. Your mom would kill you if she saw all that.” He gestures at my supplies.

“Oops,” I say. “Dude, the other day she used my car without telling me and she was like ‘Your car smells like cigarettes. The previous owners were so disgusting.’”

“And you said, ‘Previous owners. Cigarettes. Indeed.’”

“Exactly.” I toss everything back in the briefcase.

After I put away the evidence we walk out to my car. Abuela has stopped asking where we’re going when we leave for forty minutes at a time. I don’t think she suspects anything or else I’d never stop hearing about it. I guess she believed me when I said I really liked my sound system.

I turn my car on when we get in so we can listen to music and enjoy the AC. Not long after I light up I feel it. “Slow Country” by the Gorillaz comes up on my ipod.

“Gorillaz, man. Doesn’t is sound like infinity?” I ask, passing the blunt to Richard.

“That doesn’t mean anything. What does that mean?”

“You know when you’re in a bathroom and there’s a mirror in front of you and behind you and you can see endless iterations of yourself.”

“You sound like an asshole. I’m leaving,” he says. But he doesn’t go anywhere. He just takes another hit.

“No, I’m making sense,” I insist.

“I get it. Infinite bathrooms. A toilet for every clone. You should write that down, Einstein.” He reclines the seat as far as it can go. “So how did it go with that girl? Did she profess her love for you and give you her number?”

“I humiliated myself. I more or less babbled until she got scared and ran away.” I tell him the specific, embarrassing details.

“Told you. She’s like scared of anyone who’s not a teacher.”

A Strokes song plays. “I should have just talked to her about music. At least I have something to say about that.”

“But what? Would you just walk over to a stranger and say ‘so how about that music.’ She’s always holding books. It makes sense to ask about them. You shouldn’t blame yourself for that part.”

“Her messenger bag says something about The Watchmen on it. I’m pretty sure that’s a band. I could’ve started there.”

“Nah, that’s a book.” Richard blows smoke out of his nose.

“How do you know that?”

“I don’t know. It’s like a popular comic book. I must have seen people post about it on a forum or something. There making a movie out of it.”

“I guess it doesn’t matter, anyway.” We sit quietly.

I stare at my feet, entranced. There’s still sand stuck my car’s rugs from that time me and the guys went to the beach. We meant to meet up with this cute group of girlfriends but when we got there they had already left. So we ended up smoking and getting pizza before coming back to the shore. Roly got really intense about building a sandcastle. Roly gets really competitive but he admitted defeat when he saw the details on my spires and the defined window panes.

Richard doesn’t bring Lucia up again. I wonder what Einstein’s Dreams is about and then think I should have just asked her that.

I look at the window to my living room and see that the curtain is slightly pulled and my grandma’s peeking out of it.

“Fuck her,” I say. “I don’t even understand how you get so nosy.”

“She’s just bored, man,” He always defends my grandma because he doesn’t have to deal with her. “And you gotta admit that sitting in a car for a while and then coming back inside and eating a hundred Pizza Rolls is pretty sketchy.”

I turn to him. “How do you know my mom got Pizza Rolls?”

“She told me,” he says, putting out the blunt and throwing the roach in my ash tray. “In case I wanted some.”

“She offered you my Pizza Rolls?”

“Dude, she bought them. By the way, I’ll buy next time. Bud, I mean. not Pizza Rolls.”

“Thanks,” I say.

I fish the roach out of the ashtray and put it in my pen. I open my sunroof and air out for a few minutes before going back inside.

My grandma is waiting at the door to give me another hug. This time I know she’s just trying to smell me. I sidestep her and go straight to my room. I’m too high to deal with her.

“You see what I mean?” I say while locking the door. “She just tried to smell me. And now she’s gonna try to just walk into my room even though the door’s closed which is clearly a signal that I want some fucking privacy.”

The doorknob rattles. She walks away.

“That’s pretty annoying. I guess I’m glad my mom pretty much leaves me alone.”

Richard sits at my desk. “She’s going to Puerto Rico for a couple of weeks, by the way. So we can smoke in my backyard without worrying about any parents.”

“That’s great. If my mom visited family in Cuba she’d probably force me to go.”

I sit on my bed and lean against the wall, facing the medals that hang above my desk. My mom put them there a few months ago. One is for honor roll in second grade or something, the other is from the National Junior Honor's Society in middle school. Irrelevant stuff like that. They piss me off. When Richard's gone I'll take them down. I can hide them somewhere my mom can't find them again.

"Do you wanna play Halo?" Richard asks.

"Yeah," I agree automatically. This is what we always do.

I don't know why my mom thinks I'd want those on display. Any asshole can be outstanding at addition. It's pathetic. Like she's forcing herself to be proud of my bullshit. Or she's trying to tell me something. Trying to give me some signal about my potential.

"Hey," Richard says, handing me a controller. "What's up? Are you still bummed about that girl? It's not personal. We've been over this. If she's not interested in me she's probably not interested in anyone."

"Nah, it's not that," I say. I pick up the wireless controller that's already on my bed. I see the worksheet on *Brave New World* behind Richard. It's creased in a bunch of places. I couldn't turn it in even if I wanted to.

Richard turns on my Xbox and says, "Sure it's not. You should have just told her you need help in German. God knows you need it."

I should have done everything differently.

3. Zoila

Zoila's manner would have frightened Sauron himself. Sitting at the kitchen counter, she didn't answer when Lucia knocked. Nor did she look up from her magazine when Lucia's keys rattled in both locks and the door made its strange smacking sound when opened. Lucia wondered what was wrong this time. Her grandmother was prone to dramatics. Lucia thought maybe Zoila had just finished watching a pivotal moment in one of her favorite telenovelas, and was experimenting with her own theatrics.

This is the last thing I need, Lucia thought. Today she'd fumbled for an answer during economics when randomly called, and spent the rest of the period wondering how obvious her flushed cheeks were on her dark complexion.

And since Natalie was absent, Lucia had walked home alone after being accosted by some boy who was passable, physically. He was tall and his face was inoffensive. But god, he was stupid. He was the kid who thought it was cute in German class to answer every one of Frau Klaus's questions with, "*Je ne sais quoi.*" It clearly tickled her classmates, and Lucia may have found it funny the first time he said it, but didn't it get old? He reminded her of the little boys next door who would come over with their mother to visit Zoila, who in no appropriate context would yell a punchline, giggle for a minute, and repeat the joke.

"Hi," Lucia said. She dropped her backpack on the couch and fished in it for her book.

Zoila stood, took a glass from the cupboard and filled it with mango juice from a carton on the pantry shelf. She placed the glass on the counter placement opposite hers. "Sit," she said, finally looking at Lucia.

Lucia couldn't remember doing anything wrong recently. She sat and saw that Zoila had not been reading an issue of *Vanidades*, but Lucia's promotional booklet for Columbia.

Zoila picked it up and brandished it with a scowl. "*Y que pinga es esto?*"

What the dick, indeed.

"It's a pamphlet," Lucia said, curt and terrified. She regarded her room-temperature glass of mango juice. *Chamas*, she remembered, *poison administered by food. Chamurky, poison administered by drink.*

Zoila turned an ear toward Lucia.

"For a college," Lucia offered. She focused hard on making the curve of her palm best approximate that of the glass. It was too warm and too sweet. "Why don't you keep this in the fridge?" Lucia asked.

Zoila glared from across the counter. "What are you gonna do with this? Huh? Tell me, *mija*, what's the point?" She flourished the book once more, "Huh?"

"I'm gonna read it," she said, instantly regretting the matter of fact answer that Zoila would doubtlessly call 'fresh.' "And the point...the point is I guess is to see what's out there? You know? There's lots of colleges and I should find out as much as I can before I just choose one."

"Is this where you wanna go?" Zoila asked.

"I don't know. Most of the ivy leagues are visiting our school this semester. They give out informational things like this and an alumni or admissions person comes in and tells us all about the school. So far I like that one."

"Ivy *que?*" Zoila asked. The word was sour to speak.

“Ivy league. Like the best schools.”

“Ah, *como* Harvard?”

“Yeah, like Harvard,” Lucia said. She smiled, hoping the prestigious name would gain Zoila’s approval.

Zoila regarded the booklet suspiciously. “So they give these to the whole school? This is in everyone’s backpack, no?” Zoila, supposing that every high school student underwent such flights of fancy, hoping that Lucia was going through a phase. It was just like Lucia’s obsession with the J-rock in middle school. It was absurd and it would pass.

“Not everyone. The presentations are in the library, which is pretty small. They can fit maybe thirty kids there. So they let us sign up for the presentations like a first come first serve kind of thing.” Lucia said. “Not that the list ever fills up anyway. They aren’t well advertised.”

“How did you find out about it, then?”

“I pay attention to the morning announcements,” Lucia said, “Plus Mrs. Rodriguez told me to sign up. She said I probably had a chance at getting in, especially if I applied to a bunch of schools.”

“Is that your teacher?” Zoila asked.

“One of them, yeah.” Lucia shifted in the tall wicker chair. The woven reeds stung her, leaving an indented cross-hatched pattern on her ample thighs. “You met her at the open house. She’s really nice. She’s the one you talked to about Holguín for like half an hour.”

“She was nice,” Zoila remembered. She had hoped for a more despicable nemesis.

“*Preciosa*, have you read the part that says this place is in *casa carajo Nueva Yor*?” Zoila hoped it news to Lucia.

“Yeah, of course. Columbia is in New York.” And before she could stifle it, “Everyone knows that.”

“*Bueno, fresca,*” Zoila began, eyes narrowed, “apparently not everyone knows where it is because *as de ahora,* I was under the impression that Colombia was right between Ecuador and Venezuela. *Pero no me importa* if you wanna go to *Nueva Yor* or South America *porque* honestly, *los dos son lejo con pinga.*” Her volume increased as she slipped into Spanish.

Lucia could not look Zoila in the eye. She stared at the large vase across the dim living room. From it spouted an arrangement of strange plants. Lucia could never tell if they were petrified and spray painted or merely plastic. The arrangement included curling twigs, feathers, and curious sticks with what looked like a chunk of a hive’s nest stuck to their ends. *Why have I never noticed how weird that is?* Lucia thought, *What is it supposed to be?*

“You wouldn’t actually go there?” Zoila said, her voice not without a warble.

“It’s definitely a possibility,” Lucia said. “I mean, why not?”

“Why not? Why not, you’re asking. Because, *mama,* why would you go so far from home, so far from your family and your friends, *quando* Miami-Dade is at *la esquina?*” Zoila pointed the booklet with her entire arm in the general direction of the community college in question.

“Because Miami Dade isn’t a good school, Abuela. I get good grades and stuff, you know? I can get into a better school than a community college.” Lucia felt guilty. She always felt guilty when she felt superior.

“Fine, baby.” Zoila relented, “You want a better school, you wanna travel a little, *vete pa* FIU, *que* it’s a half hour drive away *y es un* University or whatever the difference is. *Ya* we have enough saved to get you a good used car.”

Lucia fought a sigh. The bribe was tempting, but Zoila simply did not understand. She did not understand the swelling in Lucia’s chest at the glossy pictures of students in a Socratic circle on a verdant quadrangle, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in their laps, concentrated deeply on what seemed like an entirely voluntary intellectual discussion. Never mind that she, Lucia, had never shown an interest in philosophy or read a word of Nietzsche. She would do the heavy reading once she got there. Zoila did not understand the appeal of a sprawling city, heterogeneously peopled, every exotic nook of every *felafel* shop and book store holding a latent experience, waiting just for Lucia to finally unfold.

“Eh,” Zoila prodded Lucia for an answer to the bribe.

“I don’t know, *abuela*.” Lucia pushed her thumbnail into the padded doily in front of her. She inspected the crescent shape she’d left behind. “We visited FIU for a research project in AP psych once and I don’t know. It’s not what I want. It seemed like high school, the sequel. The kids there were all the ones who graduated last year and I don’t know. They don’t take school seriously. They don’t really care.”

“And what do you care if they care, huh? Are you them? It’s not the school, *mi linda*, it’s what you choose to take out of it. *Mira pa* Jenny across the street. She went to FIU and she’s a doctor.”

“She’s an x-ray technician,” Lucia corrected, against her better judgment. “And based on what you’re saying, the better the school I go to, the more I can take out of it. Doesn’t that make sense?”

Zoila jumped at another discouraging point, “Ok, so how would we pay for this? I saw on TV that Harvard costs *cincuenta mil por ano*. You know there’s no way I can do that.”

“You don’t have to!” Lucia straightened up. The wicker seat squeaked. “There’s financial aid. You fill out a FAFSA and they determine how much you can afford and that’s what you pay. Honestly, I’d be surprised if you’d have to pay anything. And obviously I’d get a job and stuff if I have to. And there’s work study, which is...”

Zoila cut her off, “Are you reading this off of a cue card I can’t see? Are you brainwashed? They’ve really convinced you that this nonsense is worth it, huh?”

“They? There isn’t some shadowy confederacy out there somewhere plotting the best ways to get kids into good schools like it’s some huge trap. How do you think the world works?”

Zoila pointed at Lucia, “All I know is that before today you never mentioned this stuff to me and now you suddenly want nothing to do with your home and think that you can just move to New York and be fine like that’s easy. Sorry to burst your bubble but it’s not. It’s not easy at all and you are too young to live on your own somewhere.”

“First of all, I never said that about leaving home and second of all, maybe I never mentioned this stuff to you because I knew you’d be all dramatic about it.” Zoila was bouncing one leg restlessly. “And it looks like I was completely right. And third of all. Not old enough to live on my own?” Lucia raised her hands in disbelief, “I’m almost eighteen!”

Zoila put her knees together and clutched her crotch in laughter. “*Me matas!*” she heaved, one syllable at a time, “I’m going to pee.”

“Go pee, then. Jesus Christ, you’re so dramatic.” Lucia turned away from Zoila’s quivering, laughing frame. “There’s no way you found what I said that funny.”

Zoila recovered and wiped her eyes. “Ok, then. So this is really where you wanna go? *Nueva Yor?*”

“I don’t know,” Lucia said, “It’s really hard to get in. But if I did it would be great, you know? It’s a whole new place I’m not used to. Plus it’s beautiful. And there’d be so many people with my interests.”

“You’re gonna move to *Nueva Yor* to meet people with your interests? Isn’t that what the internet is for? *Metete en un sci fi blog* and type to strangers about *ese Estar Guars* or whatever stuff you like.”

“For the fifth time, abuela, Star Wars is not the only science fiction that exists. And I want to hang out with people in real life. I want to make new friends and meet new people.”

“People? What do you need other people for? When the people who love you, who’ve always taken care of you are right here? Now at the first chance you have *vas a dejar todo el mundo que tu conoces?*”

“*Todo el mundo?* Who exactly is ‘everyone’? All I have here is you.”

Zoila raised a thin eyebrow. She put the booklet in front of Lucia and, with poorly concealed wet eyes, said, “Ok, *desgraciada*. You figure it out since you seem to know everything. You’re almost eighteen, after all.”

Zoila walked to her bedroom and closed her door. Lucia went to her bedroom across the hall from Zoila's. Over the sound of her own racing heart Lucia thought she heard sniffing. She wasn't sure if her grandma was a master of guilt or if she really was *una desgraciada*.

In her room that night, Lucia scanned the webpages of ivy leagues for acceptance rates and average accepted SAT scores, scribbling the information in her mother's notebook. Lucia thought that she was merely seeking betterment. Zoila believed she was fleeing a tyrant. Lucia wondered whose assessment was most accurate.

Candela

It's too early for me to be around children. I'm walking to work and I'm a stage short of full alertness, in that half-naked state of waking where I'm a mess and spilled coffee can either make me laugh or cry. I have to be in at seven in the morning. It never bothered me much. I'm a morning person. Except now I notice all of the parents taking their children to the elementary school by my house. They have to drop off their kids before they walk or take a bus to their respective jobs. I used to smile and wave at the kids who stared wide-eyed at me whether I knew them or not. I still do but now there's a lag.

I look as far off as my vision allows, past the families and toward the distant warehouses. I hope work goes well today. Yesterday I forgot to sweeten a man's *cortadito* and he spat his sip on the takeout counter before ordering me to make another. I'm not all there sometimes. I guess I've never been.

I see Raul walking little Adori. Raul is a family friend. I remember when I was a kid, he let me try a shrimp dish he prepared for my parents and laughed when I was overwhelmed by the spice. I've avoided Haitian food ever since. Raul waves and when I approach him he asks how my parents are. I tell him they're good. Though he's probably seen them more recently than I have. My visits have dwindled since the accident, not that I blame them for what happened to Julie. It's just hard for me to see them and their car.

Adori's hair is done in dozen or so braids that are sealed at the ends with plastic bow-shaped clips. I tell her that I love her braids and that they must have taken a long time to finish. She smiles and grabs a braid in each hand and I feel I've been punched in the stomach.

This is the first time I've seen Raul since the accident. When I say bye, he says that he's sorry for my loss in a whisper so that Adori can't hear. I can't think of anything to say. I dumbly watch them walk away. Adori suddenly adopts a silly walk, balancing on her tiptoe for each step. The skirt of her blue uniform jumper bounces and I remember the three identical jumpers hanging on small purple hangers at home.

I clock in at *Cafeteria Delicioso* only three minutes late. Gaby, the cook and the owner, has been here since five, prepping the pre-made food. She's placed the food on trays on the counter and I load them into the display case. It's the standard Cuban fare: *medianoche* sandwiches, *croquetas*, guava and beef breakfast pastries.

Mari is counting the register. She's standing with all of her weight on one leg, the way Gaby tells her not to because it makes her look like she "has an attitude." Mari smiles at me and points to the clock. "*Sin verguenza*," she says. I shrug and tell her I'm a rebel like that.

I didn't get out of bed early enough to make breakfast so the shiny guava and cream cheese *pastelitos* are tantalizing despite their familiarity. I used to take *pastelitos* home to Julie after every shift. Her favorites were the ones stuffed with cream cheese and coated in sugar. One evening after finishing both of the pastries I'd brought her, Julie claimed she could eat one thousand *pastelitos* without stopping. I asked her how long she thought that would take. She touched her plate, stared at the sugar crystals stuck to her finger and said, "Probably about twenty hours."

It's just me and Mari working the front today. Delicioso's flock is as usual. Men from the surrounding warehouses come in for lunch. The bells that signify the front door is opening chime and we see Junior's crew from the Autoparts across the street walk in. Mari whispers, "*Come mierdas,*" and I tend to agree. They're a pack of idiots to be polite about it.

They take a seat at the largest table, even though there's only four of them and Reymundo, the fat one, whistles for one of us to come over. Mari brings them waters and takes their orders before I think to move. Everyone treats me gently and I wonder how long that'll last. She's been handling most of the customers because lately her service yields better tips than mine. I might be peeved if I had to pick up someone else's slack but Mari's a champ. She leaves the customer-free aspects of the job to me when she can.

Mari holds her pen and pad, waiting for the men to order. She's memorized their usuals, but as they order, she feigns note-taking. Instead free she associates using each man's face as a focal point. Her order pad is filled with creative insults.

Reymundo puts his hand on her waist and she smacks his arm with an order pad and calls him "*sucio.*" As she walks past the register toward the kitchen to put in their orders, she slaps her notepad on the table beside me. Larger than the other words, she's written, "*Traga huevos.*" Some things still make me laugh.

While the guys wait for their food they talk. It's the same stuff every day. For the hundredth time while they are fifteen feet away from us they discuss the merits of a composite body, my boobs and Mari's thighs, my eyes and Mari's straight black hair. They think we can't hear them or they don't care. They agree that the mutant hybrid would in fact be sexy and Jose

points at me and asks for a Heineken. His voice is nasal and his head is too skinny. He reminds me of a muppet. I give him his beer but forget to open it for him.

“That ain’t a twist off, mami,” he says. The pet name is a barb when he says it.

I turn and see Antonio laughing. Antonio is the biggest asshole of the group. You can tell because he wears so many rings. I know very little about machinery but sometimes I imagine one of his rings slipping off into an engine and getting caught in some rudder, causing a hot explosion that singes his mustache.

I grab the beer, intending to open it using the bottle opener on the wall behind the counter but Antonio holds up a cheap Captain Morgan opener attached to his keys and says, “Why you going all the way over there for? Come here.” He scratches his second chin. The grooves in his fingers are caked with dirt and oil.

I’m not stupid. He wants me to bend over the table. But I’ve opened enough bottles that I don’t need a table for leverage. I walk over to him, take his keychain, and pop the cap off while holding the beer in mid air. I aim well enough that the bottle cap hits Antonio on the cheek and hooks onto his beard. I hand Jose his beer and as I walk away I hear them laughing and calling me “*candela*” and saying it’s no wonder I’m single.

When Julie was in kindergarten I was called to the assistant principal’s office because she had gotten into a fight. A boy in her class had asked her what color her underwear was while they were standing in the lunch line. When Julie called him gross he squatted and pretended to peek under her skirt so she pulled his hair and didn’t let go until he cried. I wonder which of us got it from the other.

The thing about Julie dying is all the free time I have now. I used to stop at the after-school care at her school's cafeteria at six to pick her up. I used to neatly fold a dollar bill into a little square pocket just the right size to fit two quarters for her lunch money. That way the coins wouldn't rattle around and fall out of her pockets. For a while I woke up extra early to pack her lunch box. When I asked why the change of heart she told me she loved Mami's cooking. Later she revealed that one lunch lady scolded her for taking an extra piece of garlic bread. She was too ashamed to show her face in the lunch line again and got around it by bringing her own lunch. Cunning for a first grader. I used to make sure she brushed her teeth and ate her beans and finished her science worksheets. I thought I was doing pretty well.

My parents call sometimes but I don't answer. Occasionally, my mom shows up at my door unannounced with large tupperwares of yuca or *arroz con pollo* because she's worried that I don't eat enough. When she brings up Julie I try but I can't listen. I grab her hand across the kitchen table and just squeeze. It sounds to me like she's speaking from underwater but I know that she's apologizing for inopportune timing and leniency regarding a seatbelt and the way Julie cracked the windshield with her growing bones.

These days I watch the seven, eight, nine and sometimes ten o'clock news absentmindedly reaching an arm or leg between the couch cushions, testing the depth. I can make a whole limb disappear.

The men leave and aside from a few customers at the To Go window *Delicioso* has been pretty dead. I'm packing cleaned silverware and napkins into their paper slips when the cans of

guava paste stacked on a shelf totter in my peripherals. By now I know it's a benign hallucination but I have to do something whenever it happens.

I use a step stool to reach the backmost part of the shelf and push the cans as far back as I can. Mari doesn't do this. She puts the cans where she can reach them without a stool. Which is probably fine, but I feel better if they're not so close to the edge. I know Mari hates it when I do this. I wish I had a choice.

The doorbell chimes and a man comes in holding hands with his little girl. He's tall and has a diamond earring. I find this endearing. Mari tells them to sit wherever they'd like and the man tells the girl to choose a table. She's maybe four years old and her hair, which reaches her hips, flies behind her as she runs to a table against the mural wall. Gaby got a family friend to paint a map of Cuba on the wall. It's not bad. The major cities are pinpointed, named, and some even have small pictures drawn above them.

"*Mira Papi,*" she says, kneeling on her chair and pointing at Cuba, "it's the alligator."

I remember my parents pointing to a map and describing Cuba as the country shaped like an alligator. I described it likewise to Julie. "It doesn't look anything like an alligator," she'd protested. *Candela.*

"I lived in Camaguey," the man says, pointing to what would I guess would be the alligator's stomach.

The girl sits on her knees. "And Abuelo?" she asks.

"Santiago de Cuba," he says, "all the way at the tip of the tail." The girl considers this.

Mari takes menus to them and compliments the girl on her long curls. The girl asks Mari if she wants to see a trick and pulls down on one of her curls and yells "boing!" when she lets go

and it springs back into place. I turn away before they order and continue sliding cutlery in sleeves. One fork, one knife, one napkin, seal. Repeat, repeat, repeat.

Mari yells an order of *arroz imperial* and a *pan con lechon* to Gaby from the doorway to the kitchen. Then she asks me if I could fill the water glasses while she heats up some *croquetas* for the girl. I fill a pitcher and bring it over. I try to be invisible and do my job wordlessly but the man is friendly. Not friendly in the way Reymundo's crew is. I get the sense that even if he hadn't brought his daughter along he wouldn't ask me where we purchase our melons. He asks me where I'm from and I tell him I was born in Holguin but it really doesn't count since I was brought to Florida when I was two. I have no memories of Cuba.

"You're pretty," the girl says. "Which part is Holguin?" I point at the tail.

I'm pouring the water with shaky hands when she says to her father, "Maybe we can fly there. We can ride a plane." She looks at him with this pleading face and the pitcher slips. The water only splashes the man's knee before clattering on the tiles. Rivulets eddy around the flat ice cubes and run, slower and slower, down the grooves in the tiles. One current snakes its way toward my sneakers and almost reaches my toes when Mari slams a mop on it.

I look at her, expecting reproach, but she looks worried. She snaps her finger in my face, grabs my elbow and jiggles my arm a bit. "*Hermana*," she says, "take a break."

I try to answer but I see what I've done and all I can let out is a high pitched cough and then like many times before it's all coming out. As Mari guides me to the back stoop I'm dimly aware of the little girl crying too.

Mari and I sit overlooking the parking lot while Gaby watches the restaurant. “I’m sorry,” she says, “I wasn’t thinking. Like, that didn’t even occur to me but it’s so obvious.”

I tell her she’s the last person who should apologize. It’s not as predictable as it seems, all these things that remind me of Julie.

Mari offers me her cigarette and her lighter and says, “*Para los nervios.*”

I take it and thank her though I haven’t smoked since high school.

“*Bueno,*” she says, opening the back door. “I’m going back to work but you stay here as long as you have to, ok?” The door clicks shut.

I take a drag and let out a phlegmy cough. The asphalt is too bright to look at this time of day so I stare through a chain link fence into the yard across the street at the chowchow that must be seventeen years old by now. He lays in the shade moving only to raise his head disinterestedly at passerby or birds.

Julie used to think she could fly if she practiced enough. “Open a window,” she once said, “This can work if I get some air.” She was standing on the arm of the couch with one of her blankets wrapped around her neck like a cape. She had spent the past hour jumping and furiously flapping her blanket wings while I flipped through one of her chapter books. I opened both of the windows in the room and suggested that instead of flapping, she keep her arms open and try to glide like batman. Who was I to tell her what she couldn’t do?

Beast

Mami doesn't like it when I tell stories with sad endings. "*Me pongas mal,*" she says. I put her in a bad mood. Like the time when I was really little, Mom says I had an imaginary friend named Eddie and when she asked me about him I said he was a werewolf. Which was fine and a normal enough thing for a kid to say, but I followed it by saying he'd left his family. He ran away from home because he was afraid of hurting his parents and his brothers during a full moon. I must have gotten the idea from something my sister was watching on TV. It was really nothing. Little kids pick up on more than you'd think. Most of the time when they whisper something creepy like "The end is tonight," chances are they just saw it in a trailer for a horror movie. But Mami treats it like an omen. If we could have afforded something like a therapist she would have hired one.

So when I get home after picking up eggs and yucca for her and I try to tell her about the old man at the store she just waves her hand and says, "That's enough." She continues making fried rice, which she makes often because she can make huge batches and save the leftovers for the rest of the week. She doesn't like to cook but she's good at it. And I'm always making runs to Sedano's to pick up food because Papi prefers her not to leave the house. "What am I gonna cheat on him at the supermarket?" Mami sometimes says.

"Don't make me sad, Vince," she says, "Or else this rice will make everyone who eats it depressed like in that movie. *Como se llama?*"

"*Like Water For Chocolate,*" Lydia yells from the couch. She's lying down and watching a movie.

“I love that movie,” Mami says. She pronounces love like “loaf” and puts her hand on her chest.

“You just like the guy who plays Pedro,” Lydia says. She then does an impression of our love-struck mother shaking her head and saying, “*Tremendo guapo*. Don’t tell Papi, don’t tell him I said that!”

“*Callate ya*, or you aren’t getting any of this rice,” Mami fake scolds, waving a wooden spoon. She raises her eyebrows at us. Her brows are nearly hairless but she fills them in with brown eyeshadow. She works as a beautician part time.

I walk over to Lydia. “I thought you were asleep,” I say.

“With my eyes open?” She sits up to make space for me.

“I’ve seen you do it.” I sit next to her and put my feet on the coffee table. “What are you watching?”

“X-men.” She hasn’t looked away from the television.

“Is this the new one? With the faun from Narnia as Charles Xavier? I’ve been meaning to watch this.”

“That’s the one.” The couch squeaks as Lydia crosses her legs. “It’s really good so far. Do you want me to start it over?”

“Yeah, of course,” I say. “Isn’t it still in theaters?”

“Yeah. Mike got a bootleg copy at the DVD rental.” Mike is her boyfriend. They’ve been dating for a few months but I still haven’t met him. Lydia restarts the movie.

“Sounds illegal,” I say. X-Men is one of my favorites. Lydia’s too. I like the idea of mutation. Anyone could acquire a power no matter what their genetic makeup. It’s all up to a

random mistranslation. I like that the kids at Xavier Academy didn't seem to know what they were doing any more than I do.

I tell Lydia about the old man when we're going to bed. We're in our twin beds on opposite sides of the room. Not one piece of furniture in this room has been shifted or replaced since I can remember. Our dressers are off-white with accents in primary colors, remnants of an outing my parents made to Rooms-To-Go Kids when they still liked each other. Lydia and I share a room even though we're kind of old for that because the house only has the two bedrooms. For a while starting in sixth grade I complained to Mami about it. Me growing into a man and all, I didn't want Lydia and all her stuff in my room. "Sleep in the kitchen, then," Mami said. "Like sharing a room with you such is a fucking blast," Lydia said, "At least I smell good." Since then, we've had slippery negotiations, one of us promising to sleep over a friend's house and often failing to follow through with those plans. But these days Lydia sleeps over Mike's house so often it's like having my own room. And I admit that some nights it's nice to have someone who's forced to talk to me.

I tell her the old man had style. He could barely move, like his life was in slow motion. But he took time to comb his hair back and spritz himself with some cologne. I saw him trying to catch a bus while I was at the checkout. I knew he probably wouldn't make it because he was just shuffling along. Through the sliding glass doors I saw him trip and spill his groceries all over the place. It broke my heart. This poor old guy scuffs part of his sweet outfit and then the bus didn't even wait for him. I tell Lydia how I ran outside to help him pick up his stuff and stand up.

“You’re just like Mami,” she says. She wraps her long hair into a bun on top of her head the way she’s does every night that I can remember. When she was a teenager and reading up on beauty remedies, she would pull her hair back like that before covering her face and neck in a green clay mask. Then she’d grunt angrily and chase me around the yard, inexhaustible as the Hulk, while I cried “*monstro!*” in real terror. If Bruce Banner could really transform why not Lydia?

“I just have a thing about really old people,” I say. “*Me da una lastima, man.*”

Lydia laughs, “That’s Mami’s catchphrase.”

She’s right. Mami feels sorry for dogs drinking out of puddles, street vendors in the rain, street vendors in the sun, babies in any situation. You name it and *le da lastima*.

“*Viejitos* are my homies,” I say. “Sometimes when I take the bus home from school the other kids yell out the window at the *viejitos* we pass playing dominos and I’m just like, leave them alone. What the fuck?”

“They probably back off after that, huh?” Lydia’s referring to my size. I’m a bigger guy. Larger than average in all three bodily dimensions.

“They do, actually,” I say.

“You’re intimidating. Little do they know you’re a big fucking softy.” Lydia grins. “How is school? Are you actually going?”

“Most of the time. I’m always there before lunch, at least.” I’m not good at lying, so why try?

“Come on, Vincent,” she turns to face me. “It’s really not that bad if you just go.”

I hate it when she doesn't use my nickname. It means a lecture is imminent. I'm not failing. I get to graduate as long as I miss each class no more than twenty times. So I intend on missing each class twenty times. And this stuff is easy for Lydia to say. Doing well is easier for her than it is for most. Not to diminish her hard work but she's naturally smart. Whenever I bring up a line or a character from a movie or a book she always knows the exact phrase that was said and every detail of the context. I always wonder how the hell she remembers everything so well and how come I missed out on that gene.

"Because," I say, "I'd rather do a bunch of other things. Fuck, why do I bother being honest with you?"

"Ok, you can't get mad at me for giving a shit about. That's backwards. And what other bullshit are you doing that you can't just do on weekends?"

"Don't worry about me. I know what I'm doing."

"Really? What are you doing, exactly?"

The dogs bark in the yard and we know it's because Dad is home. He'll be tired. He'll head straight to the shower and then to bed. If we speak he'll hear us through our shared wall and neither of us want to be the reason he can't sleep tonight.

"We'll talk about this tomorrow," Lydia mouths.

I shake my head and pull my Rugrats sheets to my chin in response. The ceiling fan whirs rhythmically to the percussion of our father's heavy footsteps.

At school I get a strawberry Poptart from the vending machine. Mami says I'd have Poptarts for every meal if they started manufacturing dinner flavors. I told her they more or less do that already but they're called Hot Pockets. I eat one and save the other for my girlfriend Gina. I'll be seeing her before class. She always waits for me outside Mrs.Lopez's room in the 800's hallway on Wednesdays because my first period is just down the hall.

Gina and I have been dating for two months and I'm really falling for her. She hasn't come over the house yet but we've been together long enough that I might ask Mami for permission. She's old fashioned but she might let us hang out if I keep my bedroom door open.

My friends Marco doesn't like her but I think Gina's great. She's really loud I guess but I like to think she's passionate. Marco calls her lanky but I call her my supermodel. Plus it's not like she doesn't eat. The girl loves her Poptarts and I've seen her down two chalupas and an order of cheesy fiesta potatoes without stopping to say a word to me. My friends think it's gross but I just think it's kind of sexy. Marco says Gina is fun in small doses but she takes everything too far. That's fair. I can see how her quirks can take some getting used to. But like I said, she's passionate.

I get to Mrs.Lopez's room and Gina's not in our spot. I wait around near the open doorway and watch everyone in the courtyard finish their breakfast. They chug their chocolate milks from half-pint cartons. So many of them leave their styrofoam trays lying around on the ground and on benches even though there's trash bins everywhere.

Gina finally arrives, gnawing on a stale piece of toast. She has a fleck of grape jelly stuck to her upper lip. When she snaps a piece off in her mouth crumbs fly everywhere. Her hair usually catches the crumbs, but she has it gelled back today.

“Hey,” she says and kisses me on the cheek. “Shit, I got shit on your face. Hold up.” She wipes some grape jelly off my cheek with the back of her hand.

“I brought you a Poptart,” I say. She’s spread the stickiness all over my cheek but I don’t complain.

“Thanks,” she says. “I just ate like three breakfasts but I know I’ll want this later.” She takes the wrapped Poptart from me with her free hand and drops it in her bag.

“You don’t usually get school breakfast. Is that why you’re late?”

“Late? For what?” She breaks off another bite of toast. “I don’t know. I never gave it a chance before. But I was with these girls and it’s free so I thought I might as well try it. Then Linda didn’t want her bagel so I had that. And Vanessa didn’t like her french toast sticks. I don’t know why. They were incredible.”

We loiter and talk for a few minutes before the late bell rings.

“Look, do you wanna sneak over to Taco Bell for lunch? Just us two?” Gina says.

I say yes. She kisses my sticky cheek and walks into her class, her flip flops clapping with each step.

At the beginning of biology Mr. Cordero announces an extra credit opportunity. We can go to the Miami Museum of Science and Discovery and write a two page response paper to the current Everglades exhibit. I haven’t worked out the numbers yet but I’m sure my grade isn’t spectacular. I think it’d be cool to go to the science museum again. I was in first grade the last time I went. Everything seemed huge but that may have been because I was still small.

I’m alert in my classes today, especially in biology. Mr. Cordero draws Punnett squares on the board and I like the simple math involved. If Mami’s and Papi’s chromosomes were

reconfigured four times, probability considered, their offspring would all have black eyes, two would have curly hair, and three would be short-tempered.

Gina and I sit in a booth at Taco Bell. She picks up stray bits of cheese and adds them to each bite of her chalupa. She's resourceful.

Turquoise, purple, and white dominate the nineties decor and the restaurant is strangely empty considering how busy the drive thru seems. Besides us, there's a guy in the corner whose shirt displays three different color stains, and a lady with two little boys. The kids are lamenting the lack of playground, taking tiny bites of their quesadillas.

"You know, maybe you can come over my house one of these says," I say. "My mom is pretty strict but if I promise her we'll stay in the living room, I can probably convince her to allow it."

Gina puts her food down and says, "So, I don't really know how to tell you this. To be honest I almost texted you about it but Linda said that'd be a bitch move. I don't wanna be your girlfriend anymore."

I say nothing. Gina takes a huge bite of her chalupa. She looks me in the eyes as she chews, waiting for an answer.

"But, why?" I say.

"Well, we're fifteen, you know? You're really cute and nice and this was fun but I just wanna have fun." I suspect she chose to do this face to face rather than via text because she wanted me to buy her one last meal. She could have just told me at school.

“Oh,” I say, “That makes sense.” I’m not lying. It does make sense. I’m sad, sure. But really, I thought this would be harder. Marco was an asshole for two weeks after Evelyn told him she liked someone else. He yelled at us whenever we teased him.

“I knew you’d be cool about it,” she says. “You’re so nice. We’re still friends, right?”

“Of course,” I say. I still like her so I don’t think we should hang out. But if we did there’s a chance I’d remind her why she dated me in the first place. “You can still come over my house. My mom would probably say yes if she knows we aren’t dating.”

I can tell I’ve confused her but she says sure.

She finishes her meal while I just sit there. My attempts to meet up with her and give her stuff all seem foolish now. Like I was the only one putting in the effort but I never noticed it until now. I say bye when she leaves and stay in my seat. My food is only half eaten. I watch her walk back to school. I imagine her getting into another guy’s car. This is the first time I’m angry about

I shouldn’t think the worst of Gina. She’s honest to a fault. She would have told me if there was someone else. And even if she did want to be with someone else, that was her choice and none of my business. When I walk home I remind myself again and again that it’s none of my business.

Lydia’s in the kitchen when I get home. She’s microwaving fried rice.

“You’re home early,” she says. “What class aren’t you in right now?”

“I don’t know,” I say. I flop onto the couch and lay with my arms splayed. I examine the ceiling for patterns in the water stains. I discern an old guy wearing a top hat and a caped, anthropomorphic cat. “What class aren’t *you* in?”

“Were you not listening to me at all last night?”

“Were you listening to me?” I say. “I told you to leave me alone about it. Plus you didn’t answer my question. You’re skipping class right now, too.”

“I’m skipping Machine Learning,” she says, leaning against the sink. “And it’s not the same at all because my grade doesn’t depend on my attendance. This guy posts all of the lectures online anyway. Anyway, it would be irresponsible of me to waste Rachel’s gas, the way I see it.” Rachel is her friend who also goes to FIU. They carpool.

“Right,” I say.

“It’s just super frustrating ‘cause you’re obviously really smart and you’re usually so nice but you’re such an idiot about this stuff.”

“Yeah.” I press the heels of my palms into my eyes.

Lydia puts her bowl on the coffee table and sits on the arm of the couch. “What’s your deal? Did you get too high? You’re being weird.”

“Gina broke up with me,” I mumble.

“Shit,” she says, “I wouldn’t have given you a hard time if I knew that. What happened?”

I tell her all about it and she cringes at all the right moments.

“All I can say that might help is that the next couple of days are gonna be awful, but in a week you’ll be fine,” she says. “And I hate to be a nag but you should really be in class right now. If you hate these classes so much the first time around, why would you wanna fail and take them again?”

“That’s the most reasonable thing you’ve ever said to me,” I admit. “Cordero’s offering extra credit but I don’t think I can do it.”

Lydia asks me why not and I tell her about the assignment.

“You know, if I can get Mike to lend me his car for a few hours I don’t mind driving,” she offers. “If I tell him it’s to save you from failing he’ll definitely say yes. He’s chill.”

“Really? That would save my grade.”

“Really. But promise not to be such a shit head about school from now on.”

I don’t say anything. We look for a movie on TV. Lydia flips through channels too quickly for each channel’s sound to register. Lydia breaks the silence by laughing.

“What?” I ask.

“I’m sorry I just think it’s hilarious that Taco Bell is gonna be an old haunt for you.”

I grunt and cover my face with a throw pillow but I’m smiling a little.

Lydia and I walk to Mike’s house on Saturday. The walk is less than ten minutes but we stop at Miami Subs on the way to pick up some wings for Mike. We’re at his apartment building by noon.

Mike’s apartment is a fortress of sorts. There’s a metal grating lining the metal spokes of the gate and the building forms a square around a courtyard. No stray cat, no matter how nimble, can ever squeeze through. Lydia dials the pound sign and then his apartment number into the intercom. When he answers he sounds like a fast food employee at a drive thru, his voice like fuzzy metal.

“This is Mike?” he says.

“It’s me, babe. Let me in? I brought you some food.” Lydia lifts up the bag of buffalo wings she brought him even though he can’t see her.

The intercom buzzes and Lydia opens it. We take the outdoor stairs to the fourth floor. The stairs only have one wall which is a relief because it lets the breeze in. I'm walking behind Lydia, following the aroma of fried chicken.

We reach his door. It has a little drawing on it under his apartment number, 412, of flowers surrounding the scrawled phrase "MIKE HOUSE!"

"What's that?" I ask before my sister knocks.

"His niece drew it," Lydia smiles and knocks. "She's cute."

Before he opens the door I decide that I like Mike. He must be a nice guy to humor a little kid like that.

I smell his apartment before I see it. It smells powdery like cologne or like my grandma. We enter through the kitchen. His living room decor is sparse and impersonal like a hotel room. There's a watercolor landscape on almost every wall and there's a wallpaper crown molding with a seashell print. I assume they came with the place.

Lydia introduces me. He shakes my hand and says he's heard good things. I understand that's just a thing people say but I perk up anyway. "Same," I say.

"We brought you some buffalo chicken tenders as a thanks for letting us use the car."

Lydia places the black bag on the kitchen counter. "They're from Miami Subs. I would have made them myself but my method isn't quite as standardized. I didn't wanna risk screwing up."

"Thanks, babe," Mike says.

Mike pops the clear plastic top off the container and tears half of the meat off the bone in one bite. "These are literally my favorite. You're the best," he says.

Lydia is staring at him. I guess she's enamored by his honesty or lack of self-restraint. It reminds me of Gina.

"Do you mind if I use your bathroom?" I ask.

"Sure, it's right over there," he points to a door at the end of a short hallway.

I take longer than I have to in the bathroom just in case Lydia wants to give Mike a quick kiss even though he probably tastes like buffalo sauce. I look through the soaps and shampoos he's balanced on the edge of the tub. I pop each one open and sniff. I look through the cabinet under his sink. Mom calls this being "snoopy" but I know she does it too. Everyone does. Plus I'm just trying to kill time. There's some boring stuff. Not that I expect to find anything weird. There's backup soap, packs of razors. The most interesting thing is a bottle of Disney princess bubblegum scented bubble bath that's probably for his niece.

I figure Lydia's done with any cute talk or quick kissing by now so I leave the bathroom. Her and Mike are talking. He tells her to be careful with the car.

"Don't scratch it or anything," he says. "I take care of my things."

"Aw, but I had big plans for it," Lydia says. "Like, call AAA to tow this wreck type plans."

I'm turning into the kitchen when he slaps her. She holds her face with one hand but she doesn't look shocked. I'm lunging at him before I can decide whether or not that's a bad idea. If he slaps my sister who knows what he'd do to me? But he grabs me by the shoulders and holds me in place. He's confused and looking at me like I'm the crazy one. I've never tested my strength before now. I should have been working out this whole time. I try to move but I can't. Like in a nightmare.

“Vince, stop that.” Lydia’s scared. “Don’t do that. Don’t worry about it. Just get off.”

“Don’t worry about it?” I ask.

“Wait outside. We can go in a minute,” she says.

I shake my head, “I’m staying here.”

“Vince. Please.” She’s desperate. I leave, but not before giving Mike the finger.

Outside I grab the railing with both hands and look down at the apartment pool. There are two little kids wading in the shallow end and screaming delightedly. Kids love the water.

I can’t tell if Lydia is mad at me. I’m not sure why she would be. It’s not like protecting her was a choice. It was instinct. Lydia opens the door and says, “Let’s go.”

We walk down the stairs in silence. I don’t know what to say to her but I have to say something. “What was that?” I ask.

Lydia looks at her hands as she opens the gate. She’s walking briskly in the direction of our house. I jog ahead of her and face her.

“Lydia, come on.” I touch her shoulder. I can’t tell if she’s shaking or I am. “Is that normal for you? Like, does he do that all the time?”

“Not usually,” she says.

“Not usually,” I repeat. “So he just hits you every time you make a joke that he doesn’t like?”

“It’s happened two or three times,” she says. I know it’s a modest estimate.

“But you’re leaving him, right?” I sound accusatory and I hate myself for it.

She doesn’t answer. In the humid air, her silence is heavy.

“Right?” I press. “I mean why would you stay? Are you afraid he’ll do something to you if you leave him?”

“I don’t think so.” Lydia shakes her head. “That’s not it.” She pushes past me and walks toward the main road.

“Where are you going? What about the car?”

“He wouldn’t give me the keys,” she says. She stops walking but doesn’t turn around and says, “I’m sorry.”

“Fuck,” I sigh. I walk to her and fold my arms around her. She isn’t crying, but she leans on my shoulder as though she’s tired of standing.

The amplified shrieks of the children in the courtyard echo from the gate.

When I was really small and Lydia was six or seven Mami would let us play with bubble bath in the tub if Papi wasn’t home. If he heard us splashing or saw bubbles tossed outside of the tub he would flip out. His huge nostrils would flare and he’d turn red, saying that we had fun carelessly and he’d be the one to pick up our mess later. Mami was really the one who picked up after us, though. The only time she reminded him of that, he pounded the wall once and walked off, leaving a shallow dent that was never repaired. I must have scrunched up my face like I was gonna cry because Lydia, in her cheetah print one piece put her Mufasa toy aside and patted my head saying, “He’s just grumpy right now ‘cause he’s tired,” and then singsongy like a superhero delivering her catchphrase, “We can continue!” I didn’t know what continue meant but I echoed the words, mimicking her cadence and slapping the water triumphantly. The soapy water stung my eyes.

4. Nathalie

Lucia's bedroom looked like construction paper left in sunlight. It may have been vivid once, but time had drained its colors and left dulled yellows and oranges. It had been her mom's bedroom and when she'd moved out, Zoila never thought to clear out the artifacts from her daughter's teen and pre-teen years.

Lucia thought the small room a museum. She uncovered the same dusty relics dozens of times, placing each one back in its place after inspection lest some imagined security system be disturbed. The collection intimated no cohesive picture of her mother. A hodgepodge of gifts from well-meaning but out of touch relatives and superfluous items of the Garcia household that Zoila had no place for. Pink stationary in a small basket. An empty contact lens case. A bulky telephone. A notebook only six pages full, a repetitive journal, doubtless abandoned by its original owner because even she was bored with its contents. A plastic bag of erasers shaped like various sea animals. Lucia could still remember the names she had given each starfish, seahorse, and sting ray when she was five years old and bored during summer vacation. A shoebox of travel sized toiletries picked up from hotel bathrooms. A portrait of St. Jude. An inexplicable figurine of a camel.

Lucia's only addition to the decor was an Empire Strikes Back poster above the white, flower embroidered headboard, proudly dug out of a corner of Goodwill.

Today Lucia grabbed her mother's notebook. For a year Lucia had done her best to write an entry daily, be it pages of grievances or a line from a book she'd liked, inching one page at a time toward her mother's end of the notebook. She wrote the first few items of a to-do list, the

first item being, “write to-do list,” when she her ritual was interrupted. She heard the door opening and thought it must be her friend Nathalie who had said she’d come over.

“Lucia, come say hi,” Zoila yelled from the kitchen.

Lucia groaned, knowing that it couldn’t be Nathalie if Zoila were calling her into the kitchen. Lucia begrudged her grandma this habit, calling Lucia out of her lair to greet some stranger. Lucia had asked Zoila several times to pretend she wasn’t home. She could lie to guests and say that Lucia was at a friends house and then Lucia could avoid the whole ordeal. Zoila never entertained the idea.

Every person said the same thing and Lucia wondered if they’d read the same handbook to being an awkward adult. “Do you remember me? No, you can’t remember me. I met you when you were this tall. You’ve gotten so beautiful! But look at your body.” And depending on Lucia’s eating habits that week the commentary would proceed, “You’re too skinny. Aren’t you eating?” or “*Tremendo cuerpo*. Especially the legs!” Gross. The adults in her life seemed to believe that being over thirty was a license to comment on her sexual desirability. As though that were the key to a happy life. Being an attractive vessel for some future children.

But the woman in the kitchen followed none of the standard guidelines. She was enormous. All seven feet of her was cloaked in orange. She wore an orange linen tunic and an orange linen and loose orange pants.

“Lucia, *mi linda*,” the woman said, opening her arms for a hug. “*Un abrazo para Omaidá*.” Omaidá believed that Lucia must remember who she was. Lucia had never seen this woman in her life.

Lucia looked to Zoila for guidance, but Zoila merely scowled at Lucia for hesitating to reciprocate the hug. She approached the woman in orange with her arms raised slightly. Before they could embrace, Omaida scowled and grabbed Lucia's face in both hands and said, "*Hay*, look at these pimples."

Lucia's skin was what face wash commercials called "acne prone," and while she suspected that her pimple count was above average, she had never been told outright that her face was shocking. She didn't know what to say. Omaida did.

"I know the remedy, baby. Don't worry. You know what's good for the pimples?" She let go of Lucia's face. "Urine. You take your urine from when you go in the morning because it's really strong. And then you dab it on your face with a cotton ball just like you'd do with toner." While speaking, Omaida had gestured with her open hand to her vagina and then moved her hand to her face where she rotated it in small circles.

"Oh," Lucia said, her arms still slightly outstretched for the hug that never came.

"You'll thank me next time I come over," Omaida said. She smiled and her spiked blond hair caught the light so that she seemed to be glowing.

"I don't think I'm gonna do that," Lucia said.

"Lucia!" Zoila glared at her in disbelief. Omaida continued as though she hadn't noticed any slight. She turned to Zoila and the women filled each other in on their lives.

Lucia didn't know if she should continue to stand around and join the conversation or if her duty, displaying herself as Zoila's pride and joy, was fulfilled. She decided to back away slowly so that Zoila had a chance to stop her if she wanted to. Once she was a reasonable distance from the women, she skittered off to her room and continued writing her to-do list. She

drew neat squares by each item to be checked off later. She rotated tedious tasks with fun ones. Finish European History study guide, finish *Dune*, Calc BC problem set, watch the Doctor Who Christmas special.

Lucia jumped at the vibration of her phone.

“I’m at your door,” Nathalie said when Lucia picked up. “I’d knock but I looked in your window and there’s some kind of shaman dressed in orange talking to your grandma. I don’t wanna interrupt. But really I just don’t want your grandma to introduce me.”

“I’ll go get you,” Lucia said. She let Nathalie in the front door, hoping to bypass her grandmother and Omaidá but Zoila hailed Nathalie over before they could sneak away.

“Omaidá, this is Lucia’s *amigita*,” Zoila said. “This is Raysa’s granddaughter.”

“*La nieta de Raysa?*” Omaidá looked Nathalie up and down once. “*Estas rellenita.*”

“Um, thanks,” Nathalie said, unsure whether she had just been complimented.

Omaidá grabbed Nathalie’s forearm and pulled her close. When their faces were inches apart she said, “Listen to me. Your grandma is a beautiful person and she works hard.” She moved her hand to Nathalie’s cheek. “I know you’ll be great. I can feel it.”

“Ok. Nice meeting you,” Nathalie said as she moved Omaidá’s hand back to the table she sat at.

The girls walked to refuge in Lucia’s room.

“What the fuck was that?” Nathalie mouthed.

Lucia closed her bedroom door behind them, but spoke quietly. “I have no clue. She told me to put pee on my face.”

“Do I even want to know why?”

“She said it would get rid of my pimples.”

“But doesn’t she know about soap?” Nathalie said. “They make special soaps specifically for pimples.”

“I know. I thought she was gonna say toothpaste. I’ve heard that one before,” Lucia said. “Maybe she just likes inventing potions? She seems like she’d be into that.”

“Like she keeps her pee in weird shaped bottles on a shelf? I can see that,” Nathalie said, dropping her backpack by Lucia’s bed and sitting down. “At least she didn’t call you fat.”

“That’s not what that means,” Lucia protested. “*Rellenita* means you’re like, sexy. Filled out.”

“I think it’s a nice way of calling someone fat. Plus, I think it’s more likely she meant fat than sexy.” Nathalie frowned at Lucia’s mirror and pushed her chin into her neck, forcing a double chin to emerge.

“Ok, but you’re not fat so I don’t see why you’d think that,” Lucia said, an edge in her voice. She had said this to Nathalie many times but Nathalie never listened. “I think you have one of those fun house mirrors at home that squashes your reflection.”

Nathalie flopped backwards onto the bed and stared at the ceiling. Lucia fiddled with her laptop, searching for the most recent episode of Doctor Who and wondered exactly when Nathalie’s self-consciousness had set in. Lucia’s self-doubt had always been present, manifesting itself in tremors that began when she spoke to strangers and habitual readjustments of her skirts and dresses, lest they ride so far up those behind her could see her panties. Nathalie had always been the confident one. When they ordered pizza, Nathalie always made the phone call while Lucia insisted they order online. In groups, Nathalie commanded the crowd, initiating

conversation and constantly joking. Lucia remembered meeting Nathalie in middle school. While everyone they knew became nauseated when remembering middle school, the girls looked fondly upon Nathalie's obnoxious willingness to share her opinions and Lucia's terrible fashion choices. Those were the things that drove them together. Nathalie was drawn by Lucia's style. Lucia's Converse sneakers and a baggy men's Led Zeppelin t-shirt conveyed the appropriate message. Namely, that she preferred to wear black in some vague and not yet articulated opposition to "the state of things," and that she was nothing like all the other seventh graders who surrounded her, those brainless drones.

Nathalie, not yet plagued by the social phobia that strikes preteens, had approached Lucia in homeroom and said, "Stairway to Heaven, man." Lucia agreed. It was the only Led Zeppelin song either of them knew. Nathalie sat with Lucia and asked her what she was writing. Lucia thought that nobody would ever ask.

"It's Harry Potter fan fiction," Lucia had explained, "This is chapter three of something I've been working on. I post all my stuff on a fan fic website. I can write down the link to my account if you wanna read it?" And in the way that those twelve and under can form instant relationships based on almost nothing, they were best friends.

"Did you find the Christmas special online?" Nathalie asked.

"No, but it'll only take a second to find," Lucia said. She picked up her laptop and sat next to Nathalie. Doctor Who was later on her to-do list, but if Nathalie was over she could always save the boring stuff for later.

"Did you take Eddy up on his offer?"

“Yeah. It was alright,” Lucia answered. Lucia had gone on a date with Eddy that afternoon based on his request. Though Lucia prided herself on her efficiency, and romantic pursuits were most inefficient, she had to admit that Eddy had game. While Lucia was walking in between classes, Eddy had emerged from a hallway just as Lucia passed. She was in a rush. She preferred to be early. But Eddy had pulled her out of traffic’s way and with his sleepy eyes and smoldering look that suggested that nothing could be more interesting than whoever he was staring at, he asked Lucia to lunch.

So while Zoila thought Lucia was at an environmental club meeting, Lucia had gone with Eddy to a small Mexican restaurant across the street from their high school. He told her he liked the place because of the unlimited corn chips and green salsa. That was the high point of their conversation.

“You don’t sound excited. What happened?” Nathalie pressed.

Lucia told Nathalie that Eddy’s attempts at conversation were about as awkward as her own. He brought up television and said he liked *The Office*. But when Lucia ate her hundredth corn chip and said “I can’t believe this has no calories,” quoting an episode in a later season, Eddy had answered, “what?” Later in the meal, when she explained the premise of *Doctor Who*, she saw him lose interest when she said “Time lord.” She thought they’d finally found common ground when they each discovered that the other liked video games. But when Lucia asked him if he’d liked *Portal* or *Braid* he said he had never heard of them but had been playing a lot of *Call of Duty* lately. Lucia didn’t bother asking him about her other favorites. Never mind *Xenogears* or any iteration of *Final Fantasy*. Eddy didn’t know the difference between phoenix pinion and phoenix down.

When their food was served, Lucia made it a point not to wait between bites. If Eddy asked her something she would point at her closed mouth filled with food and shrug.

Natalie sat up and grimaced. “I thought you were doing your type A thing and exaggerating how bad the date went but that was painful even to listen to.”

“I’m not type A,” Lucia said. “Anyway, that’s not even the worst part.”

“Ok so that to-do list on your desk in freaky perfect handwriting is not yours,” Nathalie laughed. “Please tell me the worst part.”

“So I’m guessing he didn’t think the date was going that badly. ‘Cause he asked me out again.”

“I don’t think guys in our school are looking for great conversationalists,” Nathalie interrupted. “I mean, his standards for a good date were probably way lower than yours. With your butt, he probably would have asked you out again even if you were super offensive.”

“Shut up. I’m not done,” Lucia said. “So when he asked me out again he said ‘We should try Molina’s. They have such great *croquetas*.’”

“Oh no.” Nathalie leaned forward and covered her mouth with her hand.

“And I said ‘I don’t really like Molina’s,’ and he said ‘Are you crazy? Why not?’”

“Stop.” Nathalie cringed in anticipation.

“And I said,” Lucia spoke slowly and enunciated clearly, “‘Because my mom died there.’”

Nathalie’s rose her eyebrows. Her mouth hung open. “Jesus christ, Lucia. You didn’t.”

“My exact words,” Lucia said. “And he was super nice and sympathetic about it. And I was all like ‘No, it’s ok it happened when I was too small to remember,’ but yeah. I don’t think he’s gonna talk to me again.”

The girls held in their laughter for all of two seconds. Nathalie apologized while she was recovering. “I know it’s horrible to laugh,” she said, “but wow.”

“Please,” said Lucia. “It’s fine. If anyone’s allowed to laugh with me about this it’s you. Plus, I’m somehow not even embarrassed? Like, once I realized how stupid this guy was I didn’t give a shit about impressing him anymore.”

“He might still try again. But if he asks about you in German class I’ll make something up for you. I’ll let him down easy.”

“Thanks.” Lucia held Nathalie’s gaze and said, “Your grandma is a beautiful person and so are you.”

“Ugh, who even is that lady?”

“I’m not sure. She acted like I knew her. I found the episode, by the way.” Lucia placed the laptop between them on the bed and tilted the screen downward. They slumped back onto Lucia’s throw pillows.

“So it looks like Zoila’s talking to you again.” Nathalie said, before Lucia pressed play. Lucia had told her about the pamphlet fiasco and the tension that ensued thereafter. Zoila had been giving Lucia the silent treatment for a month. Lucia would arrive home from school and say hi to Zoila who, sitting at the kitchen with her head turned to look out the window, neither moved nor spoke in reply. Come dinnertime, Zoila would knock on Lucia’s bedroom door and promptly

disappear, leaving Lucia with the illusion that a ghost had knocked on her door. She'd walk to the kitchen to find her meal prepared neatly on a plate.

"Kind of. Not really," Lucia said. "She talks to me when other people are around, and she's starting to look at me once in a while. Like, she'll turn to me if I say hi."

"Baby steps," Nathalie said. "She'll get over it."

"I just don't understand what there is to get over," Lucia said. "Kids go away to college after high school. That's a thing."

Nathalie laughed. "Not in this town. I mean, who else do you know in our grade who's going somewhere further than Tallahassee?"

"Julissa is applying to Brown, I think. Anyway that's not the point. I'm technically an adult now and I shouldn't be chastised for completely reasonable decisions. Good decisions, even. She should be proud of me or something."

"Lucia, you know better than anyone else that Cuban adulthood starts at age thirty, not eighteen," Nathalie said. "Zoila doesn't even let you wear shorts. Plus, my brother is twenty-six and my mom would lose her shit if he said he was moving out."

"Ok, fine. So she has completely unreasonable expectations. But why can't she just realize she's being unreasonable? She's misinterpreting everything. I tell her I want to go away to college and her first question is 'Why do you wanna leave us?' What kind of self-centered crap is that?"

After a moment's hesitation, Nathalie said, "Well, why do you?"

Lucia spun to face Nathalie. "You too?"

"I mean, not like that. You know what I mean."

“No. I don’t.” Lucia felt uniquely disarmed, as though the tools she’d always had at her disposal were newly missing.

“You’re like, so excited to go away. I don’t know. I guess sometimes I wonder why.”

Nathalie spoke quickly, racing herself before she changed her mind.

“You don’t think it’s something wrong with you?”

Nathalie picked at her fingernails.

“No. What?” Lucia put her laptop aside and sat up, facing her entire body toward Nathalie. “Haven’t you been paying attention to all those times I asked you to apply with me? Obviously nothing would be more ideal than having you with me the whole time.”

“It’s easy to say stuff like that but I can’t just apply to Columbia or Stanford. I’m smart enough to know that I’d make a fool out of myself.”

“What?”

“Jesus, Lucia. Stop acting like you don’t know what’s up,” Nathalie snapped. “I don’t have the fucking grades or the scores or any skills that get you into a school like that. My transcript would be such a joke to those admissions people. You’re perfect and you’re almost definitely gonna get in but why would I even bother getting my hopes up?”

Lucia, seeing that Nathalie’s eyes were wet, lowered her voice. “Your grades can’t be that bad. You’re smarter than you say you are. Plus what do you have to lose? If anything you can apply to another school in New York.”

“Other schools don’t have quite the same endowment as Columbia. There’s no point in applying somewhere if they can’t offer me shitloads of financial aid.”

“Well, I want you to come with me and I wish you’d give it a shot. Do you really think I don’t wanna be around you?”

“I never said that.”

“Because that’s not right,” Lucia interrupted. “That’s not it at all. You’re my favorite person and If I get into one of these places I’ll obviously come home for vacations and I’ll be texting you the whole time.”

“Ok,” Nathalie smiled. “Cool. I get why you wanna leave. Don’t get me wrong I would too if I had that option. I hate the idea of having to stay here for four extra years.”

Lucia didn’t know what to say. She readjusted her laptop and began the episode. She leaned back, her head nearly touching Nathalie’s. As the eerie theme song played and the TARDIS whirled through space and time, Lucia thought of the future and felt sick.

The Blacksmith

My wares are hand crafted and unique. I have the standard inventory, of course. Leather gauntlets and chainmail chest pieces. But the moneymakers are my custom jobs. On the playground, my classmates step into my blacksmith's hut under the sea grape tree. They gripe, sputtering and sobbing, their hands curled into fists as they explain their plight. I listen with my fingers laced and elbows resting on my ratty front desk. Through their hysterics, I maintain a concerned but unflinching gaze. Occasionally I tuck loose strands of black hair behind my ears and nod solemnly. I am neither purely sympathetic nor purely pragmatic, but an optimal compromise of the two. I am Brian the Blacksmith.

My contemporaries wonder how I do it. My teachers say I'm wise beyond my years. I say I'm merely dedicated to a craft. What separates me from other blacksmiths (though I am the only one in my area) is my sense of justice. I do not trade my goods for gold with any wanderer. I fashion weapons and armor only for the pure of heart. When a prospective customer gives his appeal, I turn him away if his intentions are less than noble. Otherwise, I take the supplies and information at my disposal and create a custom item. Should I ever have competition, my work would remain unmatched.

Today Adori is first in line during playtime. She's an old friend. Our fathers were close friends as children. It is said that together they adventured to this land from Haiti. Her upper lip is swollen and she is missing a front tooth that she wasn't missing yesterday.

"My mom threw her high heel at me because I threw up on the carpet," she says, "And I don't think she meant to hit me with it because she was scared when she saw she didn't miss but

I still think it's unfair of her to even get mad at me in the first place. I can't control where I throw up. Plus it was probably something she fed me that made me sick in the first place."

"I see. Go on," I say. Adori has a good case. I already picture the helm I will make her. Obsidian, perhaps. I can enchant it and add poison resistance.

"So I'm afraid that if I get sick again and I don't make it to the toilet she'll fly off the handle again. And who knows what else I'll do on accident that'll make her mad?" Adori touches her hair. One of her pigtail braids is undone and frizzes outward. She continues, "Plus I unbraided one of the braids she did on me because I was mad at her but I don't like the way it isn't shiny. That's everything. Can you help?"

"I can't do anything about the hair," I say, "I don't do cosmetic enchantments. But I can augment some equipment. I have a design in mind. But it'll cost you."

"How much?"

"One thousand gold up front," I say.

I hold out my open palm. Adori pulls off her shoe and shakes fifty cents out of it. She drops it into my hand.

"Thank you, my lady." I pocket the money in my khaki shorts. "I figure you'll need headgear a sort. Your helm shall be ready by tomorrow, Thursday at the latest."

"Milord." She bows and runs to the corkscrew slide.

I make a note on my parchment, "helmet for Adori." I've written helmet enough times that I no longer have to sound it out.

I wave over the next person in line. Omar the Small stands before me. His shirt is splattered with the dried ketchup of yesterday's lunch, hotdogs and corn. He looks like a knight

recently home from battle. He scratches his head in the place where his tangled hair sticks up. He sighs and looks over his shoulder before speaking. I tell that him that time is money.

“So, I don’t know if you saw,” he begins, “But Dylan and Alex weren’t leaving me alone today.”

I nod. I had seen them act less than noble towards Omar heretofore and expected this visit. I considered helping Omar out pro bono but if he’s willing to pay me for my time, I’ll take what I can get. The gold doesn’t come easy for a blacksmith in this village.

“I mean usually they’re bad,” Omar continues. “They always break my crayons and stuff, but that’s just stuff. And anyway I can still use my crayons if they’re broken. But today they kept going on about how small I am and that I look wimpy. So I said yeah I’m smaller than you by a little bit but to grownups we all look the same height so who cares?”

I focus on Omar’s mouth when he speaks. Milky goo collects at the corners of his mouth and crusts over. His cheeks and forehead are tinged grey from his time rollicking in the dirt. In this light, the stains could be mistaken for five o’clock shadow. He is rugged and hard working and deserves my handiwork.

“I don’t think they liked what I said because they stopped smiling and then Dylan said that I was stupid and gross. Then Alex said I was *feo* and that all I do is fart. Which isn’t even true. I don’t fart any more than anyone else does. It just made me feel bad. I want them to stop. Can you help me, Brian?”

Alex and Dylan rule the land, so to speak. And the nobility often overstep their bounds. They are the funny guys, which guarantees a spot in the noblesse in this kingdom. They charm

the pants off of our teachers and steal your chocolate milk when no adults are looking. Their power is beguiling.

“Omar the Small,” I begin, “They may be nobles but they are craven. I will help you. Come to me on Thursday. The daily battle you face demands resilient armor. It will take me some time.”

“Thank you so much,” Omar says, jumping in place.

“That’ll be one thousand gold upfront,” I hold out my open palm in my standard fashion.

Omar gives me fifty cents in dimes. He bows and says, “Milord.”

Before he can turn, I say, “We may be common folk but we are strong. Remember that you possess a warrior’s heart.”

He smiles. “Hey, thanks.”

Omar’s abilities are lopsided. He ranks highly in speed and agility and poorly in might. Standard plate armor will weigh him down and limit his movements. I’ll craft him something lightweight that allows for fluidity. If Omar is interested, some years from now I may offer him an apprenticeship.

I consult three more customers before the fair Miss Kelly calls us back into the classroom for snack time.

At home, my parents let me play outside while the sun is still out. They are companions worthy of myself and of each other. Mother is a kindly woman. Father is slight like Omar. They let me have an Xbox in my room and as long as I finish my homework before seven I am to play as long as I please. I usually play well into the night, sometimes until ten o’clock, adventuring

throughout Albion, Skyrim, and Lordran. I am a force for good wherever I roam. From Oakvale to the Mistpeak Mountains, citizens cheer my arrival.

Before I get to my backyard workspace I must don the proper attire. I tie my leather apron and wear protective glasses. The metal throws sparks when struck and I may need to dig around for proper metals and ingredients, depending on my final decision for today's items.

Mother is home from work and accompanies me outside. "What's on the schedule today, my liege?" she asks.

"I've yet to work out the details, Mother," I say. "A helm and a chest piece, for certain."

"Do you want some help?" She and father are sweet but naive.

"Someday I'll consider you as an apprentice, Mother, but today I need full concentration."

"Sure. Have fun," she says.

She sits on the back doorstep under the awning and reads a book. I set up my hut at the table under the big umbrella. Palms line the sides of the roads. Their fronds hang, immobile. The day is breezeless, which pleases me. Still air is good for making elixirs.

I decide on a brigandine for Omar. A leather doublet would provide minimal defense even after being treated with the proper augmentations. I'm a blacksmith, not a wizard. The various metal plates of the brigandine will offer more protection and still allow for movement.

I always prepare my potions before I begin the metalwork. That way I can solder while they stew. It's the most efficient strategy. I grab my ingredients bucket and forage the yard for leaves and flowers. I need poison resistance for Adori's helm and some durability enhancement

for Omar's brigandine. Both items require defense boosts. Omar's vest should also be given confusion resistance so that the stuff Dylan and Alex say won't get to him.

I gather mint leaves from the patch father cultivates for the poison charm, twigs for the defense elixir. I ask Mother to walk me to the sidewalk and help me gather pieces of the palm leaves. The fibrous strings that accumulate to form the palm leaves are virtually unbreakable. I tear strips of it and toss them in my bucket to use in the durability potion. In a smaller, separate bucket I collect the moist dark soil from father's small garden. It is the proper base for any potion. Father doesn't mind that I take it. He's usually in his garden on the weekend, harvesting tomatoes and peppers for a winter that has yet to come. When I build my armor he always tells me it's so great that I balance outside time with inside time. But I don't see another choice. If I worked from my room, the fumes would gather and blacken my face and give me a terrible cough.

Near my hut, I separate piles for each potion on the ground and grind the ingredients with my pestle. Then I scoop them into their own small containers and let them sit in water. Their effects peak if I let them sit for after about an hour. But today's heat is a catalyst, which is important to remember because it cuts my wait time in half. I have this advantage on Northern blacksmiths.

I spend the next hour welding. I go with steel for Omar's armor and bronze for Adori's. Of course they are all invisible. Visible armor of any kind would violate our school dress code and be confiscated by adults. Even by my parents who are cool.

When I'm through welding, I cast the spells on each item using my potions. My customers can request extra enchantments to increase the stats of their items at any time. But I won't over equip an object without a customer's request to do so. I find it tasteless.

My parents say goodnight to me while I lay in my bed in a snug cocoon of blankets. The armor sits near my backpack as I rest that night. Mother nearly trips over them on her way out. The metal glows, reflecting the shine of my nightlight. Tomorrow, Omar will stand a chance against Dylan and Alex, and Adori will no longer have to fear her mother. Praise the gods.

In the morning my customers are ecstatic when I hand over their goods. I do it while we stand and wait outside our classroom for Miss Kelly to arrive. Immediately after I describe each piece and its custom features, Adori and Omar don their armor. Adori's hair is in neat braids again, and when she puts the helmet on it hovers just a bit too high above her head. She doesn't notice this. She just hugs me.

"Thanks milord," she says. "Since it has the poison resistance, will eating too much McDonald's still make me sick?"

"No, but using the helmet for that purpose will wear down the resistance needlessly. You should save it for emergencies. Though if that enchantment wears off, I can always recast it for two hundred gold."

"How much is that in real money?"

"Like a quarter," I say.

"Got it."

“I’m unstoppable,” Omar chimes in. “You can break my crayons but you can’t break me.”

“Ha! Nice,” Adori laughs.

I smile, content to have pleased my customers with an afternoon’s honest work and also with Omar’s witty utterance.

Our reading lesson goes very well. I can tell that Adori and Omar are generally happy. Omar sits still with his back straight so that the small plates in his armor don’t cling together and disturb the class. His desk faces away from the whiteboard but he is turned and in his seat and very attentive. He even answers a few spelling questions, which he has never done. Later, during art, Adori renders herself in a gold crown even though we are asked to draw pictures of our favorite animal. Though I made her a hooded helm, I know the crown represents her helmet and I am pleased.

In the cafeteria we queue and the kitchen workers hand us our victuals, peas and pizza. Omar seats himself across from me at the long table. He seems taller now. His confident air may cause for a renaming. Omar the Great, perhaps. Or Omar the Powerful.

Dylan and Alex stroll up to us and sit on either side of Omar the Powerful.

“Hey *feo*,” Dylan says as he plops onto his seat, “Maybe you shouldn’t eat that pizza.”

“Yeah, I hear that cheese makes you fart,” Alex joins. “And you don’t wanna get fartier than you already are.”

Through this, Omar doesn’t look at either of them. He calmly eats his peas. The defense charm is working as it should. Omar isn’t registering verbal attacks.

“I know you can hear me, *feo*,” Dylan presses. “You should give me your pizza or else you’re gonna fart all day.”

Omar finally looks at Dylan and says, “No thanks. I’d rather have my pizza even if it does make me fart. Which anyway it doesn’t. You just made that up to take my food.”

“What did you say?” Alex asks. He always defends Dylan and I wonder if he’d even get a piece of the pizza.

“I said I want to keep my pizza. Plus, if pizza makes people fart then imagine how farty you would be if you ate two. That’s how I know you guys are lying.”

Dylan turns red like the milk-livered craven he really is. He doesn’t know how to deal with outright defiance. “Well,” he says, “how about if you don’t give me your pizza I’ll give you *un cocotaso*.”

A *cocotaso* is what all the grown ups call being punched in the head. I worry that I should have made Omar a helmet. But Omar is cunning. He stands and gestures at his gut. “Go ahead, Dylan,” he says, “punch me right in the stomach. I dare you. I bet it won’t even hurt ‘cause you’re so weak.”

“Hold him, Alex,” Dylan says, red as ever.

Alex holds Omar’s arms to keep him in place while Dylan punches him twice in the stomach with all of his might. Omar coughs a few times before he vomits up some of his peas. Dylan and Alex stand up and high five and walk to the far end of the long table. Dylan looks at me and he looks like he is holding back tears. His shirt is soiled with greenish liquid.

He looks up for me and for a moment I dread his dissatisfaction. But he says, “Man, imagine how much worse I woulda ended up without this brigandine. Plus, they didn’t even take

my pizza.” He bites into his pizza without bothering to wipe his shirt or his mouth. A true warrior.

Miss Kelly runs over to Omar and asks him what happened. She says that our classmate Robert saw Dylan hit him and ran to tell her immediately.

“Worry not, Miss Kelly,” I say. “Our fair knight was expertly armored.”

She gives me a look, as if to say “Of what nonsense do you speak?”, and asks Omar to follow her before asking Dylan to do the same.

As they walk past I hear Dylan say to Miss Kelly, most ungallantly, “But Alex was part of it too.”

Miss Kelly keeps me in the classroom for the first few minutes of recess. She says she must talk to me before I cause any more trouble. She says that I should discontinue my trade. She says that it isn’t fair to her students. She suggests that if I insist on continuing my craft, I let my customers know that I am not “the real deal.” The ends of her chestnut hair brush her shoulders as she shakes her head. My lies are a “no-no,” she says.

I hear her words. I nod and tell her I understand. But it would be irresponsible of me to waste my talents. When she releases me to the playground, I jog to the sea grape tree to meet my line of prospective customers, waiting to make their pitches. Veritable blacksmith that I am, I will forever strive to make men feel safe, dregs and gentry alike.

5. Lucia

Lucia could tell by Zoila's lingering that her defenses had softened. Rather than disappear to her room while Lucia ate, Zoila would eat across from Lucia. And rather than ignore Lucia's attempts at conversation entirely, she would respond to Lucia's comments and questions with grunts and curt answers, respectively. When Lucia told Zoila she had been accepted Early Decision to Columbia, Zoila varied in her usual responses by emitting a sound so low in pitch that it tickled her throat and she'd coughed.

On the day Columbia sent out decisions, at the start of each period, Lucia forgot her unsocial habits and asked everyone in sight if they had a smart phone she could borrow. During the minutes before Calculus began, she opened her email on an acquaintance's phone. She had barely seen the word "congratulations" in the email preview before she darted across the hall to Mrs. Rodriguez's room to tell her the news. She then sent Nathalie a text in all caps. Nathalie tackle hugged Lucia when they met after school.

At dinner, Lucia reported another hundred percent on a bio exam and received a vaguely pleased noise in response. She was waiting for an apology. Until then, Zoila's pride would win, and she would remain aloof. Zoila alternated glances between the window behind Lucia and her plate of con gris and plantains, as though Lucia weren't present. Lucia placed her fork on her plate, scooting the prongs under her rice, wiped her palms on her oversized t-shirt, and looked at Zoila desperately.

"I'm sorry," Lucia said.

Zoila's eyes moved from the dusk outside to Lucia. She opened her mouth slightly, as though to speak, but said nothing. Lucia should have known that the barest apology would not move Zoila.

"I'm really sorry," she continued. "I want to go to New York for college. And I am gonna go. And I know you think it's because I hate you or something but that's not true. I would literally be nothing without you and I recognize that all the time but that's not an easy thing to just say regularly. Even if it looks like I don't care, I really do care a lot." Lucia left out the less aggrandizing parts, the parts she said to Nathalie when she was complaining.

Zoila continued to stare at Lucia silently, but her face betrayed concern. Lucia was making progress.

"Stop with the melodrama, Abuela. I'm trying to talk to you honestly. Aren't you even a little bit proud of me? Aren't you a little bit excited about telling all the other grandparents that I got into a super selective college?" Lucia leaned forward, waiting for an answer.

"I already did," Zoila said.

"What?" Lucia thought she had at least ten more minutes of babbling to do before Zoila finally spoke.

"I already told everyone you're going to Harvard," Zoila said

"But I'm not going to Harvard."

"*Si pero* it's the same thing. And then if I say Columbia none of these *viejitos* will know what that is and I'll have to explain that it's like Harvard so I just say Harvard. *Son iguales.*"

Lucia's mouth hung open in shock. Zoila broke the silence again. "What are you afraid these people are gonna fact check my story? *Calmate ya.*"

Lucia thought an apology was due on Zoila's part. She'd expected some noncommittal, half-assed acknowledgment that Zoila had overreacted, but this was much better. Zoila begrudgingly accepted Lucia's choice a while ago and had simply not wanted to admit defeat.

"Why are you smiling?" Zoila demanded.

"No reason," Lucia said.

"I still don't want you to go," Zoila said. "I know that FSU is the same shit without the fancy name. But you're a hardheaded little *mojona* just like me. I know you're not gonna back down. So I figure whatever. You're gonna go where you're gonna go."

"But don't leave your dorm in those hoochie clothes you buy *que* I don't want you mistaken *para una puta*. And I'll know if you do because *voy a meterme en el* Facebook and I'm gonna look at all your pictures. And if you make that shit private you better believe I'm flying your ass back home."

"Ok, yeah," Lucia said.

"You know what? Just don't leave your dorm at all. *Una culona* like you walking around that college. *Esos gringos se van a volver loco, pero loco*. Stay inside, baby. You need to study."

"Yeah, of course." Lucia knew her grandmother was bluffing. She could barely open up a web browser. There was no way she could maneuver the clutter of Facebook. "Since we're talking, I need your W-2 form to fill out the financial aid stuff."

"And if I don't give it to you?" Zoila asked.

"Then I take out a million loans, I guess." Lucia frowned. She couldn't tell if Zoila was joking.

“I’ll look for it tomorrow,” Zoila said. “We have to get you clothes for the cold. You’ve never even seen snow. *A lo mejor* I’ll find something nice in *la pulgera*. I’ve never looked for coats there before.”

Lucia almost protested at the thought of making new friends in Zoila’s thrift finds, but thought better of it. “Yeah,” she said. “Maybe you’ll find something good.” They continued eating. As Lucia slowly nibbled on a plantain she thought that whatever Zoila dug up would certainly keep her warm.