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### Good People: A collection of Short Stories

Molly McTauge  
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# **GOOD PEOPLE**

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*A Collection of Short Stories*

By Molly McTague

Thesis Mentor: Salar Abdoh

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\*Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree  
of Master of Fine Arts of the City College of the City University of New York.

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## Night Walking

I blew the air out my cheeks in a thin whistle and leaned against the ice box door, picking at the black ironed-on lettering of the Lord's Prayer magnet in between each jolt of the fridge as Ricky stamped his foot. My mother's pair of shamrock shakers tipped over the fresh place settings I had just laid out, leaving a peppered trail in the wake of one that rolled off the edge of the table and smashed to the floor. I threw my hand up to save the salter and then ducked out of the way as Ricky collapsed onto the linoleum in a furious heap, bringing the tablecloth and half the silverware down with him. Once he got going there was nothing to do but stand back and watch it all fall to shit.

My father tilted his head to the wall and muttered to an imaginary spot on the ceiling, then snapped off a loose thread from his workmen's jacket and said something to me that got swallowed up in all the racket. "What?" I yelled as Ricky started kicking his feet against the cabinets. "I said, 'I'm off'. He'll come round soon enough," he replied, picking at the frayed lining. "Let him run his course." He jammed his hands in the tight pockets of his dickies and turned away from us, shouldering his way out the front door. The high pitched creak of the screen's hinge seemed to pierce through Ricky's wails and he perked up, lifting himself up far enough to lean back on his elbows. An aluminum fruit bowl continued to swivel like a top across the square tiles, and as the dish spun

closer I squashed it still with the toe of my sneaker. “Damn, Rick.” I sighed, righting a chair that had gotten in the way of my brother’s flying feet and plopping myself down in it. “You gonna do this to yourself every Sunday?”

~

We lived on the ground floor of one of the four upstairs-downstairs row houses that hunkered themselves between the tenements bookending the block. My father and his younger brother Seamus had moved in after they bought the locksmith over on Isham along with two of my other uncles back in the seventies when Broadway was still a straight shot of Irish; paid cash in full after five years of muddling through rented rooms and laying guardrail for the Major Deegan on the other side of the river. One by one my they had each started to move out of the neighborhood to places like Beach Channel and Yonkers, and about a year before my mother ended up in the hospital my Uncle Seamus and Aunt Maureen got themselves a co-op out in the Rockaways. Even still, my uncle made the daily commute waking up at 4:30 every morning except Sunday to ride the A train from one end to the other to open up shop alongside my father at 7:00 and scan the papers for the latest footballer standings. On slow afternoons my mother used to bring me and Ricky down to the store with the surprise of sandwiches and coffee, bursting in the door like a wild breeze and saying with a laugh “Well, don’t stop your conversating on our account.” The pair of them would always be sitting side by side, each bent over their

own machine in earnest. “We’ll leave you two gabbers to your gossip,” my mother liked to tease with a wink at me, planting a kiss on my father’s forehead and flitting out the door before he had time to look up.

My mother told me once while we were wiping down the dishes and Ricky was rattling pots against the stove that the day she met my father he swept her off her feet. She was on the way home from work coming out the rear door of the bus when her skirt caught in one of the steps and sent her reeling. She said my father came out of nowhere and caught her just as she was about to hit the curb. “Saved me from splattering across the sidewalk,” she mused, reaching down to grab the ladle Ricky was threatening to shove up his nose. She sighed, remembering the way he smelled that day of woodchips and asphalt, and how the black quills of his beard had prickled against her neck as he gently set her down. He was quiet and handsome, with weather beaten skin that stained his cheeks red and deep set grey eyes that drank in all the dull colors of the city. When my mother went to hop up onto the sidewalk he wove her arm through his own and didn’t let it go until they had gone the four blocks to her sisters apartment. “So cock sure of himself, he was,” my mother exclaimed, fanning herself playfully with a dishrag. It was hard for me to imagine my father this way, with his thick hands and lumbering stride. I shrugged my shoulders slightly and my mother raised one eyebrow. “Oh? Don’t believe me do you? Don’t think your Da had to be a world class charmer to land this woman for a wife?” She delivered each question inching closer with a flick of the towel and I giggled,

backing away. When the last one caught me in the legs I went skidding around the table as she chased after me while Ricky clapped his hands in delight.

They were married just shy of two months after they first met and my brother came along later that same year. My mother called Ricky her angel come to Earth; said that to be able to keep that innocence we all lose when we grow up must truly be a wonder and a blessing. But when she found out she was pregnant with me she was so scared to have another baby come out wrong that she went to mass every other day for the first five months and prayed the rosary. She said that her clothes stunk with the candles and incense she lit to St. Jude, Patron Saint of Lost Causes and Desperate Cases, and my Aunt Maureen joked there must have been something in all that time spent on her knees since it was no small miracle that I didn't come out chain smoking Kents with second-stage cancer. They told me that my father cried the night I was born in the hospital; that he stood for hours in front of the glass window to the nursery with silent tears streaming down. "He couldn't take his eyes off you", my mother reminded me with a smile.

~

It was late when my father came home. It seemed like he hadn't said more than a string of words to me since the funeral two months ago and he aimed to keep it that way. Ricky had passed out right after he left, spent from an afternoon of sobbing and hurling

himself on the floor. He lay twitching on the bed with his legs hanging awkwardly so far over the side that they looked broken. I listened to the heavy trundle of my father's footsteps milling around the kitchen and saw the light filter under the bedroom door from the open refrigerator. There was a scraping sound and then the clink of glass against glass as he plucked out one of the Heinekens he layered along the bottom shelf. I heard him grunt as he rose, cracked the top off on the edge of the counter and made his way to the living room.

I climbed out of bed and slipped through the door, padding my way down the long hall to the bathroom in a pair of my mother's old house shoes I had rescued from a box that the Little Sisters had put together of her things in the Home for donation. Slowly the real pieces of her had begun to disappear, like the wisps of her hair that used to clog up the shower drain and stick like cobwebs to the ends of our pillow cases tickling our sleep. It seemed like every house cleaning washed a little bit more of her away, tossing out the expired coupons she had paper clipped together and gathering up the tubes of cucumber smelling lotions she would dab in light circles onto her cheeks that had crusted and yellowed with age. I knelt down under the sink and opened the door of the little stand-up medicine cabinet my father had taken out of the wall last month and replaced with a new one. I had decorated the inside with stickers and quotes cut out of the magazines Mayra and I always stole from her older sister who worked in a nail salon and read from back to front because the horoscopes were at the end. Next to the tin of Pocahontas band-aids was a blue kotex box that I scotch taped shut. I peeled off the piece of tape and put my



nose in the box, inhaling the loose tobacco crumbling off the cigarettes I kept stashed at the bottom. They were the remainder of my mother's cigarettes I emptied out of the last carton she had bought but never got the chance to use. I hid them with the tampons because I figured it was the last place my father would ever want to look.

It wasn't like I really smoked since I only saved them for special occasions. I carefully took one out and tucked it in my back pocket, then went into the kitchen and grabbed the set of coasters off the counter. Pausing at the threshold, I stuck my head around the corner. My father was on the lazy boy in front of the TV, the canned laughter from the MASH reruns filling the room and long shadows dancing along the walls. He looked up and met my eyes briefly, noting the coasters I carried in my hand, then lifted one finger from the neck of his beer bottle to point towards the coffee table and settled back in to watching the show. I placed the stack of them on the far side of the table and slid one down towards him, then backed quietly out of the room. When I reached our bedroom I poked Ricky awake. "We going," I whispered hoarsely, walking my two fingers playfully up the side of his leg like a spider and he snorted happily. I grabbed one foot and strapped on a sneaker, then caught hold of the other and did the same. Ricky bounced up and down on the bed in excitement and the springs groaned loudly. I tilted my head to the side listening for any movement from the couch and then put my finger to my lips. He stopped instantly and did the same. I hopped up on the radiator and undid the hinge on the window, opening it as wide as it would go. "Come on," I motioned.

The night walks had started when I was twelve, right after the first aneurism. I used to lay in bed and listen to Ricky's light breathing through the other side of the curtain that divided our bedroom and it was all I could do to keep from jumping out of my skin. My mother was in the hospital with tubes running through her nose and pink plugs clamped to her skull where they had shaved her head after the operation. I had been falling asleep in class because I couldn't settle down my mind in the nighttime where there was too much quiet and space to think. So I started sneaking out. Never far, just usually to the fields alongside the old marina. The first couple of times I managed to make it out the window without waking Ricky, but one night he had popped up in bed when I was already hanging half way out and I could only get him to shut up was by taking him with me.

Once we got into the wooded area I let Ricky gallop a ways ahead of me. He would stop every now and then to pick up dead leaves of all different colors and spear them onto the walking sticks he picked up along the path. We stopped once we reached the water and perched ourselves on the giant boulders that wedged themselves deep in the river bank. When I looked down in between the cracks I could see the old cigarette butts I had left behind on other nights. The first time Ricky saw me smoke a cigarette he wanted to try one too. After thinking about it for a minute I reached into my jeans and pulled out a long grocery receipt I had bunched into a ball earlier and smoothed it out to the edges. Since then it had become our quiet ritual.

I fished in the pouch of my sweatshirt for the piece of paper and Ricky watched me, the lit cigarette dangling from my lips, as I concentrated on rolling it up thinly and evenly. I presented it to him and he snatched it out of my hands eagerly and placed it in the corner of his mouth, grinning like the slivered moon. With his face hidden in half shadow the light glinted off his sharp cheekbones and for an instant I caught a glimpse of how handsome Ricky might have been. My throat tightened in a knot. On those walks I wondered about what thins my brother felt and all that he would never feel. I took a long pull, filling my lungs with smoke until the knot melted away. It was the only time where things between Ricky and I seemed almost normal, like as if we were any two other people that might just want to sit together to break night and see the sun rise.

~

The neighborhood had changed a lot in the past ten years. Except for my cousin Damien and the last three white boys left on the block nobody remembered Ricky from back in the day or had played with him since they were babies. Most of the Spanish kids didn't even know his real name, just took to calling him El Mudo. After a while of hearing that I put two-and-two together on what it meant, but the way I saw it was as long you had a nickname people would still more or less treat you good. Like Jungle Jim. When we were younger none of the kids messed with Jungle cause everybody knew he had come back from a war with a plate in his head that sometimes made him run around

in his underwear outside in the rain or have tea parties for the cats he lured onto the steps of his sister's basement apartment with cans of tuna. My mother's eyes used to well up when she would talk about Jungle because she remembered the way he used to be, so fine-looking and straight backed in his uniform when he came up for a visit, his oval cap angled in the crux of his arm like a precious egg.

One day I brought Ricky up to the playground because Damien had told me to come up and play ball and Mrs. Murphy couldn't watch him. Damien was the same age as Ricky and had a shock of orange that topped his head and freckled his face. He was a small time dealer with a big mouth, but since my mother had gotten sick he had been real good about checking in on us. As soon as we walked up he waved me onto the court. "You got next with me," he said, curling my head in a lock under his armpit. "How you been buddy?" he asked Ricky, sticking out his palm flat so Ricky could slap it five.

We ran three games back to back and then took a break. "Go on over the store and grab a couple popsicles," he told me, stuffing a five dollar bill into my hand. "Hey Red, ya head's on fire!" one of Damien's boys hollered over to him from up in the bleachers. "I'll light ya mother on fire!" Damien shot back without missing a beat and the others howled with laughter.

When we walked to the bodega I steered Ricky past the boys crowded out front and straight to the back where the freezers were and fished out his favorite Shark Pop. As I was paying for the ice cream he wandered outside and I perked my ears up at the sound of leering voices. "Yo, Mudo! You lost? You want us to take you back to Bellevue?" I left

the change spinning off the counter and sped through the door. The boy who stood menacingly in front of my brother had his back to me and I charged, knocking him onto the parked car. He craned his neck around, a stunned look on his face. “Easy, now - I’m not gone hit no girl!” he barked.

“But you got no problem talking shit to my brother?” I yelled, hoping they couldn’t see the way my hands were trembling. “Can’t you see he ain’t right in the head, or are *you* stupid?” The boy’s face clouded and he stood up, his fists clenched. “Maggie, everything alright here?”

I looked over and saw Damien and two of his friends standing by the stop sign, arms crossed against their chests. “Yeah, everything’s fine, D,” I said evenly without taking my eye off the boy. “Me and Ricky was just leaving. Let’s go Rick,” I tapped him on the shoulder and pointed towards home. He beamed back with lemon icy dripping down his chin and loped a few paces down the block ahead of me.

A week later on my way to the courts I passed by that same group sitting on the granite chess benches. The one I had shoved onto the hood of the car ducked a little further into the upturned collar of his coat and made like he didn’t see me, so I pretended to do the same.

~

When my mother took a turn for the worse the aunts and uncles all got together and tried to convince my father to let her go to The Little Sisters of the Poor where she could be looked after proper-like and maybe have the nuns give a hand with Ricky. My father told them no thanks very much and that there wouldn't be any more talk about putting his wife away in a home and shutting up his only son as if he were some class of leper. But by the end of summer the hospital bills had wiped us out and there was no more choice about what to do. That September my father moved her in to the assisted living center over in Kingsbridge and pulled me out of the seventh grade at Good Shepherd. He tried to put me in the public school three blocks over from us where a bunch of the kids in the building next door went but there was no room.

I ended up in a junior high on the other side of the Dyckman Houses in full-on Dominican land where all the kids kept asking me if I was Puerto Rican because my skin was so light. "I ain't no Puerto Rican," I scoffed. I recognized one or two classmates from the courts or when they had come in with their moms into the store while I was helping grind out the key copies on the machine, but for most of them I might as well have been dropped in from another planet. I didn't mind it so much though. It was nice to know that since no one knew me, for once they had no way of knowing who my brother was.

Mayra was the first person to really try to talk to me. She had a pair of arms that were scrawnier than mine and two shoulder-blades that jutted out just like a brown baby bird's wings before it has time to grow some feathers. One day she bent over the back of

her desk when the teacher wasn't looking and when she swished her head around the hair moved all at once. She had these super tight curls, tinier than any ones I had ever seen on a doll but just as perfectly in place, and as she picked at a flake of dried gel off her forehead she pouted her lips and stuck out her chin at me. "How you get your hair like that?" She demanded. My hair was pulled back with a rubber band and I hadn't even used a bristle to straighten out the bumps. I wasn't sure if she was trying to be funny, so I just looked straight past her and acted like I hadn't heard, but then she reached over and touched the end of my long pony tail and gently twirled it around her fingers. "It's nice and soft," she offered, and I squirmed a little in my seat. "Wish mines did that when I blow it out. How you get it like that?" I didn't know what she meant and wasn't used to somebody I didn't know talking so close to me. I leaned my chair back and balanced on two legs, bracing myself against the fall. "Uh, you know, I just wash it."

"No shit?" she exclaimed, her nose crinkling up in disbelief. "Those your real eyes too?" I sucked my teeth in annoyance. "What, you for real?" My eyes were light brown, nothing special like the greens and blues that ran through my family tree. I had always felt like the odd one out for having them, even before I knew what all the must-have-been-the-mailman jokes meant my uncles would crack whenever my father wasn't around. Mayra put her elbows on the desk and peered into my face. "They got real gold flecks in 'em. My sister always said she'd give her left titi for eyes like those!" We both bust out in loud laughter and after Mayra turned back around because the teacher yelled

at her to I relaxed my grip on the back of the railing and smiled. It felt good to be laughing with someone and not have to worry about who might be laughing at you.

~

My mother died on a Sunday night in August, an hour after Ricky and I had been in to see her. My father never came with us on those trips; all his spare time he spent in the store. The last time I had pulled a shift there and was doing inventory in the back I even noticed a bedroll and blankets balled up in the corner of the little stock closet, which explained where he was on those nights the tv stayed dark. That last time we had gone was the worst I had ever seen her. Even Ricky could sense something was off as we entered the dimly lit room with the lightbulb flickering weakly beneath the lampshade on the bedside table. He didn't bound over to her the way he usually did but instead tiptoed softly toward the visitor's chair that Sister Teresa always set out for us. He drew it closer to the bed and nuzzled his big head up against the silhouette of her legs beneath the comforter, but my mother remained motionless. She had gotten thinner over the past few weeks and that day she was nothing more than a shell, like the dead cicadas Ricky used to collect at the end of each summer and crush between his thumb and forefinger into flakes of ash. I wiggled a few fingers in front of her so that they made wild shadows on the wall but her eyes were unseeing and remote, like two cold planets whose suns have burnt out.



It was almost a relief when the bell chimed in the hallways announcing our twenty minutes was up and it was time to go. I bent over the pillows and pressed my lips against her papery cheek, waving Ricky over so he could gently do the same. “See you on the Dream bus,” I whispered, then turned off the lamp and backed out of the room, making sure the Jesus nightlight we had brought her glowed a fluorescent green beneath the open window.

When we walked into the house all the lights were on and my Aunt Maureen was at the kitchen table beside my father, the cord phone tangled up by his feet on the floor and his monstrous hands hiding his face. As soon as she made a move towards me I spun around and smacked right into my brother, who had come up the front stairs slower than I had trying to avoid stepping on the many cracks. I shoved past him, sprinting down the stairs and out into the cooling night air. The street was quiet except for the pounding of my feet along the pavement and the echo of another heavier set of footsteps as Ricky followed closely at my heels. I slowed down when we reached the river, ducking under a hole in the chain link fence that led to the train tracks that ran north. We strolled along the evenly laid planks to catch our breath and so that Ricky could kick up the small pebbles that lined the iron rails, finally coming to a stop underneath the arches of the Hudson Bridge suspended above us like a cathedral ceiling. We sat down beside the railway and let our legs swing over the side of the wide wooden posts that lined the ledge of the water. I drew my knees into my chest and watched a flock of birds bobbing like styrofoam buoys near the shore. “Mommy is dead,” I told him, looking out at the Jersey

cliffs and trying to see where the land ended and heaven began. Ricky stared at me blankly and I realized in that moment it didn't matter what I said. I buried my face in my jeans and squeezed my eyes shut. I felt Ricky's hands trying to pry my arms off my head but when I wouldn't let go he shifted me onto his chest and rocked me a little from side to side, the way he had probably watched my mother do so many nights all those years before. We stayed like that for a long time, with only the lightening of the sky and drone of distant tugboats to mark the hours that passed.

~

We buried her on a Tuesday and the next day I started ninth grade with Mayra at Kennedy. My father seemed to think that it would get easier for Ricky as the time passed, but every week after we came home from church he would start pacing in the hallway, waiting for me to grab my jacket and hand him the token so he could put it in the slot when we climbed onto the bus to go see her. A couple of weeks after the funeral Mayra dragged me to her sister's baby shower that turned out to be one of the wildest house parties I had ever been to. Mayra's mother greeted me at the door and gripped me in a tight hug before I had a chance to get the grocery bags of orange and grape soda I had brought into the fridge. She sort of held me that way for a while, patting me in small circles on my back, and when she finally pulled away her eyes were wet and she was apologizing in Spanish. "Ay Mami she's ok! Now leave her be!" Mayra said

exasperatedly, leading me by the wrist into the kitchen. But Mayra's mother followed closely at our heels and pushed me down into a chair. She stepped away briefly to a long buffet table along the wall and returned a minute later, handing me a paper plate that was sagged under the weight of all the rice and chicken she had piled on top of it. "Eat," she encouraged, and gave my shoulder a squeeze. An hour into the shower the apartment began to pulsate with the sway of bodies to a merengue that was blasting out of the speakers. "Come here," Mayra gushed, yanking me off the wall and navigating us both through the sticky crowd. "Somebody wants to meet you." His name was Nelson. He smiled shyly when Mayra shoved me in front of him and leaned in tentatively to give me a greeting kiss on the cheek. He was Mayra's second cousin by communion or something and had the longest eyelashes on a boy I had ever seen.

~

The Monday after Ricky's meltdown I let Nelson walk me home. We had made out for the first time the week before in the school parking lot and I could remember the way he tasted. When we reached the house I halted outside and looked upstairs at the Mrs. Murphy's window where Ricky spent the afternoons until my father or I came to pick him up. I thought I saw a curtain twitch but when I looked again everything seemed calm inside, so I pulled Nelson up the front steps and into the house. We moved into the living room and I watched him carefully as his eyes traveled around the pictures and

ornaments decorating the shelves. “Why you gone all quiet?” Nelson teased, tackling me onto the couch. My mother used to joke that my father’s side was all the strong, silent type and that I must have gotten that much from him since I was hers head to toe in looks. Maybe that was the reason the distance between us had become a gulf since she had gone and why my father could never face me whenever he spoke. There was so much I could have said; about the ache of missing things I would never have and how it bothered me something awful, when I caught myself loving the memory of my mother more than I had ever bothered to in life. But my house wasn’t the place for such kind of talk, so I mostly buried those feelings along with the other things Ricky and I threw into the holes we would dig up along the river bed with sticks and fallen tree branches we collected on our walks. Nelson was looking at me expectantly, but I couldn’t talk about the million and one ways my family bugged me with all of them staring out at us from the different angles where they hung on the walls, so I leaned in and laced my hands around the nape of his neck, my thumbs tracing the perimeter of his shape up. “Maybe you just talk too much,” I said, and kissed him.

The splatter and chink of dominoes beneath the window outside mixed with our raspy breath and the plastic on the couch squeaked as I let Nelson push me deeper into it. He started to pull up my shirt and I let him, arching my back so that he could get his fingers around the metal clasp. He crouched over me, his hands reaching carefully beneath the elastic band when suddenly Ricky, grunting and yowling like a rhinoceros, came charging past the banister in the hall and towards the couch, knocking Nelson on to

the floor and jumping on top of him. Nelson tried to pull him off, but Ricky had already grabbed him by the neck and was shaking him. “Stop it, stop it!” I screamed, and clubbed Ricky on the back of the head with a slipper. The blow threw him off balance and even though he was bigger, Nelson quickly wrestled him to the ground with hook to his jaw and a knee in the stomach that left him doubled up. “No, Nelson, *don’t!*” I cried, grabbing his arm as he cocked it back. When he realized that Ricky wasn’t getting up, Nelson sat back on his heels and took in the scene, a stunned look on his face. As we both stood up he stepped back and stared at my brother, as if seeing for the first time what had attacked him. Ricky was sobbing and babbling to himself, a silver thread of spit dangling from his bottom lip and catching on the carpet, and after a minute I watched Nelson’s expression shift from confusion to embarrassment.

“I’m sorry,” he mumbled, taking a careful step forward to lean in behind me and put his nose in my hair. Ricky was coiled like a jumbo shrimp beneath the eave of the coffee table, whimpering and rocking back and forth. “You should go,” I said hollowly, without turning to look at Nelson. I could feel my ears burning against the brush of his lips. He lingered there for a few more seconds as if he were deciding whether or not to put his arm around me and then pulled away. Ricky uncurled himself to glare up at him, following each movement with bloodshot eyes as Nelson bent down to jerk on his boots and then turned the knob. “I’ll see you tomorrow?” he asked, as the soft street lamp coming to life shone in through the half open door. I wanted to say yes but the word

caught in my throat and all I could manage was a quick nod. I heard him drum his fingertips across the doorframe and wrap it with the backs of his knuckles, then he slid through the door and took the light out with him.

I stood frozen in the middle of the carpet. For a long moment the room was quiet, interrupted only by the slap of the dominoes outside the open window on the folding tables and the wet hiccups that spluttered out of Ricky as he wiped the snot onto his wife-beater. I reached up to the coat-stand beside the couch where Nelson had hung his hoodie and tugged it over my head. The musky smell of his Old Spice and sweat swallowed me up as I struggled to find the opening in the darkness. A panic that had been churning my insides clamped down on my chest and I couldn't breathe. After one or two misses with the arms I finally shoved my head through the neck hole and took big gulps of air until the grip seemed to loosen. When I looked up I found Ricky staring back at me with his gaping stupid face that I suddenly wanted to throw something at. He had started to scramble to his feet and was blubbering "Maaa-geeee, maaaa-ggeee", but I slammed the door before he could reach it and bolted down the front steps. I had booked it halfway down the block in my house shoes when I heard the bang of the door and saw a barefooted Ricky running like hell after me down the street in his snotty undershirt and Captain Planet pajama bottoms. "Go home!" I screamed over my shoulder, and just as he was passing the by Seaman's bodega Ricky tripped over something, maybe the turned up cuff of his too-long pants, and went sailing through the air. I heard him hit the ground hard but didn't pause to glance back until I was at a safe distance.

At that moment three boys came out of the store with brown-bagged six packs cradled under their arms and stepped over to him, like fisherman reeling in their nets to see what has washed up on deck. They were laughing and jeering as the biggest boy reached into the bag, took out a bottle and shook it violently. I inhaled sharply as he cracked the cap with a closed fist and aimed the spray in a graceful spout that arched up and then down to the pavement, washing over my brother's shoeless feet. The last thing I saw was Ricky flailing on the ground bellowing like a hurt walrus, and then the boys tightened their circle and there was no more of him to see. I cupped my hands over my ears to keep out the howls then slowly turned the corner and kept jogging toward the water's edge.

## **Benitez**

The day comes up like a match being struck along the tinder of the horizon. The suspended moment hangs in the side mirror of the truck, and the sight of a spark flickering behind the bulk of a water tower makes your mouth tingle for the skin of a blunt. A thought grips you and you wonder how easy it would be to get some new piss for the next time you got tested, but you shake it loose, hawking the taste from your mouth in a grey morning loogie out the open window and turning the key in the ignition just as the Washington Bridge bursts into flame.

You took this job so you could tell your probation officer to get off your dick and because tio Benitez owed that much to Mami for all the times she let your bumass cousin lay up on the couch to get his shit clean. Caballito was the oldest and biggest loser out of all Benitez' sons, and the last time you saw him was five years back before she got sick. He was sprawled out buck naked on the bathroom tiles while Mami flew from one room



to another like a hummingbird, trying to nail down everything that didn't move so it wouldn't end up at the Casa de Empeno the way the toaster, the color tv and three of her favorite Johnny Pacheco records did that first time he tried to kick.

You pull up to the curb directly in front of the store, still dark with the grate drawn down over the window display of mops and paint mixers and paper turkeys the kids from the elementary school down the block asked if they could put up in all the businesses lining the street. You reach across to open up the opposite door as Benitez strides over with that hard military walk of his that always looks as if he were trying to scrape blood off his shoe.

El Monstro was what the tigueres called him, though never to his face since playing with Benitez would have been about the same as teasing a full grown grizzly. He could block out the light in any hallway and had that blue-black hair your ex girl used to always say she wished she had. His beard was a barber's wet dream, and everyone knew he woke up around 4:30am each morning to keep it looking correct while blasting some AM station that only played old school boleros recorded half a century ago inside a tin can and that sounded like they were being broadcast straight from the Island. One time the guy down in 3B made the mistake of coming to the door with a broom telling him to turn that vaina off and Benitez, still lathered up and with a brush in one hand, grabbed this Good Samaritan by the throat and threw his ass down a flight of steps and then broke the broom right over his knee.

You are trying to calculate how much more pressure would be necessary to snap someone's spine in half as Benitez ducks his head and slides into the passenger seat, balancing two cafes and a copy of El Diario in each hand. The pleather squeaks, protests, and then caves on one side to his massiveness, pushing your thighs up into the steering wheel and leaving you about eye-level with his Adam's apple.

"You're late", he growls, placing the cafes on the dashboard and shoving one in your direction.

You look at the clock above the mileage ticker and see that it says 7:31am. Maybe it was on account of all those sketchy years he spent serving in the Guardia, but Benitez had a thing about being punctual to the point of always needing to arrive at least three minutes before the appointed meet time. You're not sure how the man managed to keep his blood pressure from boiling over living for so long in a country where everything but the gossip runs three hours behind schedule.

"Should be enough gas in the tank," he states, taking a carefully folded list out of the pocket of his leather jacket and handing it over to you. "Pick up in Englewood first, then go out to Patterson."

You are the chosen one for these out of state pick up trips, for no other reason than Benitez doesn't trust one of his own sons to do it lest they end up trying to sell the supplies back to the wholesaler for double the price or put the truck up for bid at some auction. For the thirteen years that Benitez had been in the Heights he had managed to

build what he considered a small empire, running a monopoly on all the ferreterias from 181<sup>st</sup> to Dyckman.

“Take Exit 3 when you get off the Bridge,”he commands, drawing an invisible map with his finger along the glove compartment as if he were drafting some secret mission or plan of attack. “And don’t stop for nothing or you won’t make time.”

The only way Benitez knew how to speak to somebody was by barking orders. There was no room for asking questions or expressing abstract desires in his limited English vocabulary, the language he demanded of everyone around him when discussing everything except women. His wife told you once over one too many beers that he’d learned mostly by reading the backs of instant oatmeal packets and easy-to-make mashed potatoes that first winter he came to New York. She told you some other stuff too, shit she definitely shouldn’t have and probably blamed on the alcohol the next day. She’s a little too old for you, about the same age Mami would have been, but you have to give it to her that for five kids and pushing forty she still looks good.

“Yarimee say she left a message for you,”he says, shifting his weight to face forward.

“Yeah, I was gonna give her a call”,you mumble. “Things been hectic lately.”

“Getting cold now, heat oughta be turning on soon. Told you to fix that pipe”, he frowns.

“Been busy”, you explain, stalling for time. “Had to go see about my case and what-not.”

You shift in your seat. “Come over this Thursday”,he tells you, his eyes fixed on the hood. “Be lots of food.”

“I’m on for Thursday”, you say, hating yourself for how much of a little bitch you sound

like throwing out these lame excuses. “Store’s closed,” he grunts between sips, steam pouring out of the cup. “Open on Friday.”

This last bit of news hangs above your head for a full minute and you try to answer but it’s as though his elephant size lungs are sucking up all the air. The best you can manage is a sharp nod, and just when you feel you are about to pass out he thwacks you on the shoulder and jams the handle down hard, swinging the door open to usher in a rush of cold oxygen. Your seat sags three inches lower as he steps out and you lean your cheek against the cool glass and take a few gulps, trying to breathe normally before he turns and lowers his face back into the cab of the truck.

“So you will come. Fix that pipe before the snow.” His back is so broad that before now you haven’t even had the chance to see his third oldest son Armando shivering behind him. He is hopping back and forth to keep the blood flowing and takes his hands out of his coat to blow on his fingers as Benitez jerks a thumb in his direction. “He coming with you,” he tells you. He hovers over Armando for a moment and Armando freezes on one foot, a dark shadow spreading over his face. Armando shrinks away from him, making himself skinny so he can squeeze into the side seat without having to ask his father to step out of the way. Benitez takes a step back from him and gives him a quick one-two, then pulls his collar up against the wind. “Do what he say,” is all he says.

The truth is you haven’t changed much in the apartment. The most you could bring yourself to do was move the white plaster lion from the front hallway back into the living room beside the radiator and take the plastic covers off the furniture. Each time

you catch yourself putting your shoes up on the couch, your whole body flinches waiting for that golpe on the back of your neck and cry of “cono, Jesse!” that doesn’t come anymore. You only light-up out on the fire escape, or crack the window and tilt the fan at an angle when it gets too cold, and you still feel weird about jerking off in any place except the shower. The Sears portrait of her in the rose-colored dress and the picture of you decked out for your first Communion are hanging in the same spot they always have, and you kept the giant, tacky chandelier she had been so proud of that day you bought it for her in the muebleria on Amsterdam and wheeled it home together in the shopping cart.

She’d always said you should try to get a job working for the City, something with a uniform and a gold-plated watch at the end of thirty five years as a small sign of gratitude. Save up a little money and maybe somewhere down the line buy a three bedroom up in Yonkers or a duplex across the river. And of course, marry a girl, a good girl, por favor Jesse, who will cook for you and take care of you and who doesn’t have to be no saint but at least knows enough about God to say the rosary in Spanish. You smile to yourself at what she might have said if you had brought home this new one, with the hooded brown eyes and small feet. Her one flaw is that she’s Puerto Rican, you could tell by the way she ignores her r’s, but you think that even Mami would’ve been able to let this slide as long as it meant that grandkids were on the way.

Just as you turn on to the upper level of the Bridge you start to wonder if the girl is even going to be there today when you pull in to the supply warehouse. You tilt your

head to see if this morning's smell of the Curve cologne you copped from the Muslim vendors yesterday afternoon is still clinging to your clothes and tuck you cross into your undershirt, keeping your eyes on the road. La Mega is prank calling some sucker and Armando is messing with the volume dial, making it jump from one decimal to about ten with sweeping turns of his wrist.

"Turn that shit off, will you?" you say with disgust.

"I'ma play whatever I feel, so you can go kick rocks."

"Who you talking to like that?" You smack his hand away from the radio and dare him to do something, shooting him the one-eyebrow-up look. "Don't think I won't toss your scrawny ass out this truck." Armando may not be the brightest, but he knows when he's beat. "I'm going to sleep," he grumbles, and slumping against the door he puts his hoodie up over his head and pulls the strings tight. You cross the rest of the Bridge in silence, thinking about the girl and whether or not she'll be behind the counter when you go to hand the order slip in, and when you hit the turnpike you step on the gas to get the let out.

You've thought about her a little each day since the first time you saw her three pick-ups ago. You've been drawing her outline on the yellow napkins left over from the take out boxes. It was only when some kid who came in asking for a couple mentas and a Phillips for his pops caught you retracing the curves of her calves and hips that you realized how gay you looked, so you jammed it into the trash bin, grease stains blurring the lines of her perfect silhouette.

As soon as you pull into the parking lot, Armando bolts from the truck and heads for the entrance to the warehouse. “I gotta take a piss!” he calls back over his shoulder. You shove the keys in your pocket and hop down from the truck, bending down quickly to brush the dust off your jeans and fix the tongue of your timbs. You walk over and slowly pull the door open where it says ‘pull’. Your breath catches like a whirling knot in your throat as you cross the threshold and let your eyes adjust to the dim light and smell of heating pipes. The Cuban guy who runs the warehouse is sitting behind the counter next to her. The girl is wearing a white V-neck sweater that make her tetas look like they’re ready to pop from underneath the red store apron. She’s reading from a text book, but glances up swiftly at the sound of the bells jingling above the door. The Cuban stands up to greet you as you move across the vinyl floor and shakes your hand. “Your uncle gave you the list?” he asks. You unfold the piece of paper and offer it to him. He looks at it quickly, then sets it back down on the counter. “Alright, wait here while I pull up this up. That kid that came running through, he with you?”

“Yeah, he helping me load today.”

“Alright, I’ll be back. Quiere’ algo pa’ tomar?”

“Sure,” you shrug. He nods at the girl, who has already moved over to the coffee pot and is walking over to you with a Styrofoam cup in her hand. She places it down and you automatically reach to steady it while you watch her pour.

“Quiere ‘zucar?” she asks.

“Un chin,” you say, concentrating on her lips to keep you from staring at the other parts. It’s probably because you’re trying your best to focus you don’t hear her asking you “dime cuando?” until about half the sugar bowl has ended up in your cup. “Ya,” you say, blinking hard, trying to get your mental shit together to sound normal, nonchalant. Like you normally drink café with eight pounds of sugar in it. “Tha’s good. Thanks,” and as she turns to walk away you swear you see her cheeks glow a little bit redder with a smile. Just man up and do it, you tell yourself. Stop being such a pussy.

“Hey, what’s your name?”

“Leidi,” she answers, lightly tapping the orange name tag pinned to her shirt, her nails filed neatly with the edges evenly rounded off. And it’s how she says it, warm and inviting, without any attitude or anticipation of some sort of wisecrack that she would’ve gotten every day going to school around the way, you know she must’ve grown up out in the campo somewhere. You gulp down the rest of the café and grip the cup so tightly it cracks in two. Do it, you think.

“Leidi. I was wondering if I could, like, take you out some time?”

There is a long pause. Someone leans on a horn outside and the sharp blast makes your skin jump. “Thursday,” she finally says, taking a pen from her apron pocket and turning your hand palm side up. She’s lefthanded and her handwriting is thin and slanted, the digits squished between your ring and index finger.



You think about the set of Benitez' jaw and the way those words had stayed bubbled in the air above you after he'd let them go. But then your next thought is: fuck Benitez. The man signs your paycheck not your permission slips and you can do whatever you want.

You knew what the Thursday invite was really about anyway. He could front like he was doing this because the two of you were family, but its not like he was calling or coming around last year when you and Mami were eating the turkey sandwiches and busted up morro you made at home and smuggled in to the hospital in some green tupperware. "Thursday," you murmur over the top of her head, and after she caps the sharpie she holds your hand for a second longer than she probably needed to before she lets it drop. "Chevere," you say, and when you smile it's for the first time in a long while.

It's late by the time you and Armando finish up in Patterson and head back across the Bridge. You pull the truck around to the back of the store and reverse it into the loading dock. "Tell you what," you say, watching Armando rub his eyes with the sleeve of his sweatshirt. "Too late to do this now. I'ma hold onto the keys and we unload all this tomorrow morning before Benitez come in." Armando grins, "Bet."

You slide out of the truck and cut through the side alley to the front with Armando following close behind you.

"Y mira, he'mano," you turn to look him full in the face so he knows you're not playing.

"If you don't get here on time –"

“It’ll be both our asses!” Armando mimics in the same baritone as Benitez, and then draws a line with his finger across his throat. You can’t help but bust out laughing. “Ya, tu sabe’,” you say simply. “So be here.” At the corner Armando sticks out his fist to give you a dap and then turns on his heel and heads up the block, his shoulders hunched against the first few snowflakes that are starting to drift down through the streetlight. It’s after midnight when you walk into the apartment, and you’re too tired to heat up the pollo guisao and maduros Dona Elena cooked for you and left in a covered dish on the stove yesterday. You untie your boots and stick the laces inside, and as soon as you hit the bed you knock out before you even have a chance to take your belt off. The heat must have been blasting full force soon after, because you wake up around 4:00am in a sweat and push the covers down to the end of the bed. You’ve kicked off one sock in your sleep and when you reach over the side to see where it went you are met by Mami’s empty slippers staring back up at you, like two sockets that have lost their eyes.

It’s the little things you never noticed before that hit you like a linebacker on a blitz; two slippers, a piece of hair entangled in an old bristle brush, her smell inside the dresser drawer. You had managed to box up all of her clothes so you wouldn’t always have to see them waiting for her on the closet shelves. Most of it you sold to the thrift store, since after the hospital costs and the funeral, money was more than tight. Dona Elena had helped take up a collection with some of the neighbors and the congregation across the street at La Virgen de Guadalupe that covered the burial service and casket, but there were still bills to pay for all the treatments and tests. It was on your way out one

day carrying three cardboard boxes of Mami's coats and cold cremes that the buzzer sounded. You nudged the door open with your knee and peered around the boxes to see who it was and there, looming in the doorway, was Benitez. Your jaw dropped slightly as he took a step closer and the floorboards creaked. You let the boxes fall on your foot and stared up at him, the fluorescent lights shining around his head. It had been nearly six years since he'd stood in front of you, and now the air was thick with the scent of his aftershave. "Got an opening at the store," he said brusquely, as though he was re-entering a conversation you and he had started yesterday. "Yours if you want it."

The last time you saw him Benitez had stood in this same spot after nearly breaking down the door with his fists, and you remember the terrible look he had given Mami before he shoved her against the wall and brushed past her, a mixture of disgust and betrayal contorting his face. He had dragged Caballito by the ankle from where he lay sprawled next to the toilet out into the hallway and kicked him until the blood shot out his ear. "I tell you to keep away from this piece of shit, you don't listen," he'd snarled at Mami. "He's sick," Mami had gasped, crouching down to the floor and grabbing Caballito under the armpits to try and lift him up. Caballito had groaned something into the carpet, a bubble of red spit growing from his lips and Benitez stepped over him. "I'm done with you," he'd said without turning around, and then left, slamming the door in his wake.

"What makes you think I'd like working for you doing some fucking two-bit job?" you throw at him, trying to mask the waver in your voice. Benitez' eyes widened

with surprise, and there was a flash of something that might have been respect before they darkened again and narrowed to slits. “You don’t gotta like it,” he said quietly, anger dulling the notes of his voice. “But if you decide, it start Monday.” He backed away from you and sidled over to the elevator, punching the down button with his thumb. “And Jesse...” He sized you up and down as you leaned against the door, lowering your head in defeat. “You will never disrespect me like that again.” The elevator dinged and rumbled open. “Don’t be late.”

You wait for the clock to read 7:00am, then slowly dial the number still smudged on your hand. “Leidi? Hey... it’s Jesse.”

“Jesse!” Her voice is surprised and a little husky, and you wonder if she’s had a chance to change out of whatever she went to bed in. “I was calling cause... Well, I can’t do this Thursday. Something came up at the store and I gotta handle this thing with my uncle...”

“Oh,” she answers, a little too quickly. You listen to her light breathing on the other end of the line and something like a siren whistles in the background. “You’re busy, it’s okay,” she says. For a second your heart quickens with hope thinking that she’s disappointed she’s not going to get to see you, and your next thought is to ask her if she’s not too busy to go out Friday, or Saturday, or any other damn day of the week, but instead you hear yourself say, “Tato, I’ll call you sometime.”

You hang up first so that you don’t have to hear the dial tone and slam the receiver down with such force it sends the old cord phone toppling over the side of the end table.

The stack of red flyers advertising the opening of the new store on Nagle that you've forgotten to hand out is teetering on the top ledge with Benitez' falsely smiling face staring back up at you. You study the picture of him, the flash of teeth and perfectly manicured facial hair, thick arms folded across a three piece suit plastered next to the promises of being best in quality and mas barrato. Nothing but a blunt is going to settle the sticky sweetness climbing into your spit. You head to the kitchen to grab a glass of water and the rest of your stash out of the cereal box, and return to the couch. You grab one of the flyers off the table and place it in your lap, emptying the contents of the dime sack and burying Benitez in a thin layer of green. The rest you shove over the edge, sending the newly printed papers hurtling around the room like a gust of so many dead leaves.

### **A Person of Not Much Importance**

“Lemme get a pack of Newports,” the boy said, tapping his key against the thick glass of the display case. The store keeper’s eyes remained downcast and his fingers moved deftly over the counter, dragging each coin to the ledge and letting it fall into his cupped palm. “Ey yo, Habib?” the boy snapped. “You deaf or something? I said gimme a packa Newports.” But Tesfaye Teklefariam was a patient man, and not to be distracted from his task. His lips moved slightly as he counted out the carelessly scattered change of the previous customer. And as he let the last dime drop into the tin of the cash register with a loud clink, Tesfaye sighed inaudibly and looked up.

“Regular or menthol?” he asked, each word carefully delivered in crisp syllables. The boy met Tesfaye’s unflinching gaze and stopped grating the bottle opener on his keychain against the crack in the countertop. “Don’t matter,” the boy offered in a more

conciliatory tone and took a small step back. “How much for them regulars?” He reached deeply in his pocket and pulled out a money clip stretched wide with one dollar bills. “Eight fifty”, Tesfaye told him, motioning to the piece of cardboard propped on the shelf behind his head listing the week’s prices for tobacco and dairy products. Every Sunday morning he tore off the tab of one of his delivery boxes to make these signs, writing out his numbers and symbols with a sharpie in the slanting Catholic school script he learned while watching his youngest daughter practice her penmanship lessons each night huddled over the kitchen table. He collected her old workbooks and kept them in a drawer beneath the candy display case, taking them out between the ebb and flow of customers to scratch in his own work alongside Beza’s neatly copied lettering. He had mastered nearly all of the alphabet and punctuation marks, though occasionally his dollar signs more closely resembled musical clefs.

“Eight fi’ty!” the boy cried in indignation, all humility wiped from his face. “You bugging, Ach!” He sucked his teeth and glared defiantly up at the offending sign, drumming his fingers against the counter while Tesfaye waited coolly. “Aight,” the boy finally relented. “Gimme a coupla loosies and a dutch too.”

“What flavor?” Tesfaye asked.

“Purple,” the boy said shortly, peeling off three singles and shoving them across the counter. Tesfaye collected each bill and then placed the items in the boy’s outstretched hand, sallow in complexion and free of the callouses that marked his own. In the stubby lines that stretched half way across the palm, Tesfaye could read the short story of a boy

who demanded much, but did little. The Yemeni store keepers on the adjacent corner had encouraged him to install a revolving bullet proof window that would limit these kinds of hand to hand exchanges. “Don’t be foolish,” they cautioned. “In this way you are asking for trouble.” But there was an impersonal quality to it that disturbed Tesfaye somehow.

“Eight fifty for a pack, hunh?” The boy tucked the dutchmaster in his shirt pocket and stuck the unlit loosie between his lips. “Now that,” he muttered, wedging the other cigarette behind his ear and readjusting the brim of his hat as he sidled toward the store’s entrance, “is some serious bullshit.” The bell jingled as he crossed the threshold and the door slammed shut. Over the rim of his reading glasses, Tesfaye’s eyes followed him keenly down the street through the sheets of rain. A sudden gust of wind blew the boy’s hat from where it was perched high atop his head, and as he ran to where it had landed by the curb another gust picked it up and carried it further down the block. The boy ran frantically to keep up, and his friends clustered under another awning doubled over in raucous laughter at the sight as Tesfaye stifled a laugh of his own. Few things in this world looked sillier, he thought, than a man chasing his own hat.

Tesfaye understood the virtue of patience. It was a lesson he had learned bellied-down in the tall grass and muck on those star-filled nights he dozed with a rifle butt in his cheek and a poison capsule between his teeth. The corner boys who frequented his store all carried themselves in a similar attitude, but Tesfaye was unmoved by their insolence. He watched them day after day through the window, arranging themselves in different postures against the same wall. They spoke with one fist grinding into an open palm for



emphasis. They laughed loudly and fought easily, eager for any chance to prove their power. They were boys desperate to be men.

Tesfaye glanced down at his watch and saw that it was nearly time to leave. Both Mariam and Akaste had admonished him his morning for not coming to church, but he had promised to close the store down much earlier than usual so he would be on time for the family's Ethiopian Easter feast. He removed the handkerchief from inside his shirtsleeve and fell to rhythmically cleaning the watch face in smooth, circular movements. The girls had presented it to him one night last summer as he dropped into the sagging armchair after a particularly long day at work where the freezers all short circuited and the power had gone out.

“A present?” he exclaimed when they crept up behind him and plopped the rectangular box topped with a red bow into his lap. “But it is not my birthday! Rahel, you and your sister should not spend your money on such things.” Beza climbed up the side of the arm rest and Rahel stood tensely with her arms crossed, staring at the box. “It's for Father's Day,” Beza told him, teetering back and forth on the chair's edge. Tesfaye stared down at the present and gently picked it up, examining the wrapping. “Well go on, Daddy – open it!” Rahel burst out, unlacing her arms and sitting down beside her cousin Dagem who slid to the side to make room for her. Tesfaye removed the lid and inside found a silver and gold plated wrist band with a watch face that was jet black except for a minute hand and minute cut diamond that told the time. He lifted it off its bed of cotton and felt the full weight of it between his fingers. “When we were on Fordham the other

day we saw a stand and they were selling these really nice watches,” Rahel chimed in, moving in closer to turn it upside down. “See, this one says Movado.”

“Whoa, fancy,” Dagem said, eyeing the watch as it glinted in the television’s light.“

That’s the taxi-cab driver special!” He kicked out his feet and threw himself across the couch in peals of laughter.

“What is that?” Tesfaye asked in confusion, looking up as Rahel helped him to fasten the clasp. “Never mind,” Dagem said, waving his hand and peering in for a better look. “It looks really nice on you, Uncle.”

“I picked it out,” Beza leaned in and whispered.

“This is a most beautiful gift, my Bezie,” Tesfaye told her in an equally low voice, cradling the back of her head and then giving a gentle tug to one of her thick braids. “I will wear it every day.”

~

By four o’clock the floors had been swept and all of the items were neatly arranged in their appropriate rows. He folded over the envelope that held the bills that day from the register and slipped it into the slit he had made in the lining of his jacket. Drops of rain had clung to the windowpane and shimmered like stained glass as the early glow from the streetlights began to grow. Tesfaye closed the door firmly and as

he reached up to pull down the grate, he fumbled for the keys dangling from his waist. “Mister T! Salam, Mister T!” A young woman with a C-Town grocery bag tied over her head full of rollers came hurrying down the street pushing a stroller with the clear flap pulled down over the front. “Salam, Mister T, I almost forgot you said you was closing early today so I had to run.”

“Salam Tanya,” Tesfaye greeted her warmly, smiling at her use of the word he had recently taught her and helping her to steer the stroller around a puddle. “What brings you out in such weather?” Tanya reached up to tighten the handles of the bag she had tied around her head as a makeshift scarf and deftly brushed off some of the water that had dripped down her forehead. “I almost forgot you said you was closing early today.” She looked up at the grate and then peered quickly into the darkened store. “I just needed some more pampers for Tashi,” she added, apologetically. Tesfaye quickly ducked his head under the gate and reentered the store.

In the darkness he moved nimbly through the narrow aisles and plucked two large packages off one of the top shelves. He slipped quietly back out of the door and crammed the diapers between the handles of the stroller. As he knelt down to adjust the weight, he glanced at her feet, barely covered by the plastic house slippers and soaking in a shallow puddle. He pointed at them. “You must take care of your feet,” he scolded her, standing slowly. “The feet take you everywhere.” She smiled up at him and reached into her bag, untwisting the cap on an empty baby bottle with a roll of quarters stuffed inside.

“No,” he said, as she began to tip the money into her hand, and Tesfaye patted her arm.

“The register is closed.”

The rain had finally let up, and as Tesfaye listened for the distinct click of the padlock the last few remaining droplets that had caught in the iron rungs of the riot grate dripped onto his collar. He began the long walk home which he preferred even in bad weather to the drone and crowds of the subway. He turned left onto Broadway with the shadows and clatter of the passing train overhead and waved a hand in greeting to the Dominican cab drivers huddled around folding chairs in the dispatcher’s window, slurping coffee and slamming their thick hands against the formica table. “Oye miralo! Pedro! Pedro Martinez!” The cabbies squawked good-naturedly, and Tesfaye bowed politely. He took a swing at an imaginary ball sailing through the air, which was met with raucous whistles and applause from the other side of the street, as was a part of the daily routine. One day several months ago when Rahel had come by the store at closing time and taken the walk home with Tesfaye, he had asked her what the men were always screaming at him so excitedly, and if he had done anything to offend them. Rahel had burst into peals of laughter. “No Daddy!” she shrieked. “They’re saying Pedro – Pedro! You know, like the baseball player?” She clamped her arms together and swung them from right to left. “They think you look like him!” Tesfaye had become accustomed to the joke, just as he had become accustomed to being mistaken for a Muslim or an Egyptian or an A-rab, as many of the boys who passed through his store referred to him. But today as he trudged homeward on what should have been a happy occasion, he

couldn't help but wonder if someday soon someone might recognize him for who he truly was.

~

Tesfaye was just sixteen when the Party recruited him, but he had already been working in the fields like a man for the five years since his father had passed and taking care of his younger brothers. He himself had never cared for politics. What one man said and did in the Capitol had never seemed to make a difference to putting an end to the droughts that plagued the southern provinces. Not even an Emperor could make the rain fall, Tesfaye's father was fond of saying when they were young, no matter how close to God he claimed to be. And in the time since his father's death, the Derg had proven to be no different.

Tesfaye and his brothers had grown up on the farm of a modestly wealthy family their father had worked for since he was a boy. So when the Derg began redistributing the land of the larger landowners where Tesfaye and his brothers had worked as hired-hands, they were turned out of their homes and left with nothing. When the crops were harvested

they were collected by soldiers of the Derg, leaving the villagers to starve. It was Tesfaye, along with two other young farmers who came up with the plan to organize a raid on all of the granaries in the surrounding areas. They then buried the seized seeds in the caves up in the mountains where they could be safely stored for later planting seasons. The Revolutionaries came to their village that same harvest year, asking to use the caves as part of their base of operations. They had been using guerrilla style attacks mostly in the Capital, but as Mengistu gained more power and the Derg began to double its efforts of killing and torturing any one who opposed it, the Revolutionary Party had begun to fan out across different parts of the country in search of more support.

There was one man who stood a head above the rest when he spoke and whose booming voice sent the three-legged beggar dogs hobbling away from him in a hurry. “Mengistu does not practice what he preaches” he thundered, bringing his fists crashing down onto the make shift podium of a sawhorse for emphasis. “He claims that we are now all comrades, that our successes and our sorrows will all be shared as one. But yet there he sits in the same luxury of the Emperor he unseated, drinking from his golden cup and sleeping in the same fine bed! Mengistu is a fraud!” This was Asrat, and it was he who approached Tesfaye one night as they dug new holes into the packed dry earth to fill with boxes of ammunition. “You are Tesfaye,” he said. “Some of the men have told me about you. Tell me,” Asrat said, pausing to rest on the handle of his shovel. “What future do you see for yourself?” Tesfaye looked up from his work for the first time and, without

stopping let out a short laugh. “Future? The future is a luxury for those who have time to think about it,” Tesfaye told him, attacking the ground furiously with his spade. “I must spend my days thinking about how to fill my stomach. The only thing I can afford to suppose about my future is that I will be tried and hanged as a thief and a traitor.”

Tesfaye replied cheerfully, as he wiped his glistening forehead with the back of his hand.

Asrat hesitated, then drove his shovel into the dirt and crossed over to where Tesfaye stood, knee deep in the ground. “That may have been true,” Asrat mused, reaching in his back pocket and fishing something out. “But now,” Asrat added with a wink, tying a bandana with the colors of the movement around Tesfaye’s slim neck and placing a handgun in his palm, “you will be remembered as a Revolutionary.”

In the months that followed, Tesfaye was trained under Asrat’s watchful eye. On every ambush or recon, Tesfaye shadowed him closely, learning how to move through the low plain grasses without being seen and gather intelligence about the Derg’s movements from the local villages. One night while Tesfaye and Asrat lay in wait along with a few of the other men to intercept a convoy of ammunition bound for the Capital, Tesfaye told Asrat how his father had died of a fever that had swept through the village after the wells had dried up and the water had become contaminated. “Twenty years he broke his back for that family, working their land making them money,” Tesfaye recounted bitterly. “And they couldn’t even pay for a doctor. One day, Asrat, I will make something of myself and I shall never have to worry about money again.” He shifted in

the dirt and spat into a nearby patch of grass, clearing the knot in his throat. “Money is not everything, Tesfaye,” Asrat admonished gently. “Money is freedom,” Tesfaye replied fiercely. “And how do you know so much? Surely this cannot be the talk of a farmer’s son.” The night air was very still, the only notable sounds being the swells of the crickets in the tall grasses and the occasional soft murmurs of the other men scattered nearby in their sleep. “I was a professor in the University,” Asrat said quietly. “After the coup, my wife and her family fled, to Italy. It has been several years since we spoke.” Surprised, Tesfaye turned over on his back to look up at Asrat’s black silhouette against the night sky brimming over with stars. “And you chose to stay here, instead?” Tesfaye asked, struggling to imagine Asrat in a suit and tie, giving lectures to students, seated at the head of a fine dining table with clean linens and heavy silverware. Asrat, the professor, Asrat the husband. Tesfaye scratched the stubble of his three day beard. Asrat shifted his weight and withdrew a little more beneath the lowest branches of the tree, the jagged shadow of the leaves falling across his face. “There are many things I did not choose for myself, Tesfaye. Many things were chosen for me, for the person my family thought I should be. And at your age, I was not nearly as sure of myself as you are. But the path I choose now is mine alone. I cannot live someone else’s life.”

Six months later, Asrat was taken captive in an ambush thirty miles north of Adis Ababa on one of the rare days Tesfaye had left his side to oversee a delivery of weapons. He was executed the following morning his body left to hang from a streetlamp. That



same day Tesfaye was given new orders to retreat to a safe house near the Eritrean border to ensure the protection of a high interest target that would be in need of protection from the Derg now that Asrat had been identified and hung as a traitor. The target, Tesfaye later learned, was a boy named Emmanuel. He had recently returned from boarding school in Italy, and, the letter stated in its final sentence, was Asrat's only son. This news had sent a greater jolt through Tesfaye than the news of Asrat's capture – to think that Asrat had a son! A stab of jealousy flooded through his chest as Tesfaye collected his bed roll and packed ammunition into a rucksack for the several day journey ahead, mostly on foot. At dawn the next day as he set out towards the remote compound, Tesfaye noticed an odd black and white bird casting a shadow near his own as it seemed to move along beside him, high overhead. It emitted a forlorn caw that seemed to echo the dull ache spreading across Tesfaye's stomach with each step he took towards the Gondar province in the drought incurred dust.

When Tesfaye arrived he entered the house to find a lithe figure sprawled out across a divan reading a thickly bound book. The boy stood up but did not make a move forward to greet him. Tesfaye surmised that they must have been about the same age. The similarities between the two were jarring. Tesfaye was a bit broader in the shoulders from the years of hard labor but both had the same coppery skin pulled taut over jagged cheekbones, with bushy static eyebrows crowning a seriously drawn face. His wildly unkempt Revolutionary's beard was one of the only things that separated one from the other, and as they studied each other warily Tesfaye secretly wondered if this was why

Asrat had cared so deeply for him. “I knew your father,” Tesfaye began apologetically, a knot tightening in his throat, but something that shifted behind the boy’s eyes made him stop from saying any more. An uncomfortable silence floated in the yellow air between them until it was broken, quite suddenly by the trill of the black and white bird gliding in a circle high above the house. “Well at least someone did,” Emmanuel remarked coolly, and with that he turned and swept out of the room.

The days passed slowly under the broiling sun, and by the third evening Tesfaye began to feel that he too had been banished by his own comrades. He did not see why he should be here protecting this useless, spoiled boy who was defenseless as a woman. The other three men would patrol the flat open land that stretched out around the compound while Tesfaye was left to guard the house since the boy refused to go outside. The two barely spoke in their time together, and neither seemed bothered by the silence.

The bird that had followed Tesfaye from the first leg of his journey to the outpost had remained close by, circling the house and letting out an occasional squawk from its perch in a scraggly tree a hundred meters from the house. “It’s a frigate,” Emmanuel said one evening at twilight, startling Tesfaye from his trance as he watched the bird doing elaborate dips and dives in what almost seemed to be a dance bidding farewell to the sun. “They are seabirds, I’ve seen them along the Italian coast.” He sighed deeply. “It doesn’t belong here. I can’t imagine what it is doing so far inland”. Tesfaye stared coldly at the boy and wondered if he too, felt out of place in a country that his father had given

everything for but that meant nothing to him. The next morning as the sun began to rise over the dusty plain, Tesfaye scanned the horizon for some the familiar arch of the frigate, but the sky was empty. The frigate did not return and Tesfaye wondered if it had flown back to where it had come from or if it had succumbed to the bleak landscape and died of thirst. The sun continued to beat mercilessly down onto the cracked earth and sent ripples of heat up into the air that blurred Tesfaye's vision and made it seem as though the world itself was floating away from him.

By mid-week the men had run short on supplies and decided it was safe enough to make the half a day's walk to the nearest safe house, leaving Tesfaye and Emmanuel alone together. While Tesfaye stood guard near the entrance of his room, Emmanuel rifled through a stack of papers he was holding in his hands as he stood before an opened trunk. He motioned to Tesfaye with a hand that held several pictures. "Come," he commanded, "I want to show you something." Tesfaye hesitated for a moment, anger seething within him at the thought of taking orders from this boy. Then he reluctantly put down his rifle and leaned it against the empty doorway. The smaller handgun that had rested on the floor by his feet he picked up and shifted to the back of his waistband as he slowly crossed the room to where Emmanuel stood.

Emmanuel held out a worn photograph of a woman that was cracked and bent at the edges, as if it had been taken out and examined many times and passed it to Tesfaye. "Beautiful, no?" he asked him, his eyes searching Tesfaye's face for a betrayal of some

envious look. “She has been living in the States. Our mothers grew up together and both of our families wish to be united. We will marry when all of this,” he carelessly waved a hand over the land and in the eastern direction of the mountains “is over with.” The girl was beautiful, Tesfaye noted. She stared back at him with huge, calm black eyes and red burnt skin the color of aristocracy. Her slender wrists were covered in several gold bangles and her long, graceful fingers interlaced her hands that folded neatly in her lap. Emmanuel watched Tesfaye linger over her oval features for what he must have suddenly perceived as a moment too long, and he abruptly he snatched the photograph out of Tesfaye’s hand and began to toss each article back into the enormous heap. “Do you write to her?” Tesfaye inquired, trying to sound polite but indifferent. He noted the countless pages Emmanuel stuffed carelessly back into the hand decorated envelopes he received plastered with American postage. Emmanuel shrugged. “Not often, but for what? Mariam will be my wife soon. It has already been decided. There will be plenty of time to get to no one another once I join her in America.” A new realization began to dawn on Tesfaye. “You will not stay in Ethiopia then?” he asked, incredulous that this could be the actual son of the man he had fought alongside of and worshipped like a father. “Stay?” Emmanuel laughed bitterly, slamming the lid of the trunk shut with his belongings inside and then sidling over to where Tesfaye balanced tensely against the wall. “My father was a romantic,” Emmanuel snarled, pointing a finger dangerously close to Tesfaye’s angular nose. “And only a fool falls for a love story.”

Later that same afternoon Tesfaye crept into Emmanuel's room and snapped up the latch of his trunk. He rifled through a leather satchel and found a passport, traveling papers and a set of plane tickets. He poured over the photographs Mariam had tucked between the pages of her letters. Scratched on the back of each were dates and names of places, this one at a graduation of some sort, the other at the party of a christening. He turned the picture marked July 4th over in his hand, tracing with a ragged fingernail the curves of her silhouette; from the sharp slope of her cheek down through the isthmus of her waist. She stared back at him with huge, calm black eyes and red burnt skin the color of aristocracy. "What are you doing?" Emmanuel demanded coldly, suddenly appearing in the doorway. Tesfaye got to his feet, some of the papers spilling from the side of the satchel he held in his hands. "Put that down. That is mine," Emmanuel commanded. Mine. Tesfaye hesitated, and then slowly lowered the satchel, placing it on the edge of the traveling trunk. Mine. The word sparked a match to something burrowed along the inner wall of Tesfaye's brain, and once lit the fuse was quick to run out. Mine was the assertion that everything in the world that he wanted Emmanuel would have, because the world was made just so and for some people things would always work out the way they wanted. In that moment Tesfaye felt a hatred for him more intensely than any other feeling he had felt in life and with one swift movement he lifted his gun from his drawstring waistband, aimed, and fired.

The shot echoed in the small room and Emmanuel was blown backwards by the force, too surprised to emit a sound. He hit the ground an instant later with a loud thud and lay completely still. Tesfaye remained frozen to the spot. From where he stood he could see a gaping hole in the place where Emmanuel's right eye and brow bone had been. Then, swiftly, he knelt down to collect the loose papers that had fluttered to the ground and rummaged under the bed for the passport with the plane tickets pressed inside. Tesfaye opened up the front cover and studied the ID for a long time. When he finally snapped it shut, he had already made up his mind. Getting his hands on a change of clothes and a good razor would be one of the first things he would have to do before reaching the Capital. If he felt before night fall and cut through the mountains leaving very little time to stop and rest, he would be there within a week's time.

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Tesfaye awoke before the alarm in the chill gray dawn. He lingered in bed for a moment longer, feeling the slight rise and fall of his wife's body curled beside him and then reluctantly swung his legs over the side, padding quietly across the floorboards and down the hall. Tesfaye set a pot of water to boil on the stove and turned on the oven. He removed the freshly washed shirt that Mariam had left hanging on the wall hook beside the telephone and with fingers stiff from the cold he closed each button all the way up to

the neck and quickly stepped into his wool slacks. Stooping to peel off his socks and place them on the warming oven rack, he marveled at how the dampness had buried itself into everything. He hopped back and forth on one bare foot as he waited and bent down to plug in the portable electric heater he had bought two weeks ago at the supply store down the block from the subway station. There was a refurbished dishwashing machine being shown in the front window, and Tesfaye had already worked out the calculations of how much longer it would be before he could bring it home, paid in full, and present it to Mariam.

With his toasted socks and loafers on, Tesfaye poured the bubbling water into a cup and crushed in some of the mint leaves he plucked from the small plant perched on the windowsill. As he sipped his tea his eyes traveled across the refrigerator door, crowded with the cards that had been exchanged and Polaroid pictures Rahel had taken with the camera she received from Akhaste at the Easter celebration the night before. He removed the photograph of the girls and Dagem making silly faces at the camera from its magnetic grip and fished out his wallet from the inner lining of his jacket pocket. Holding it by the corners to keep it from smudging, he eased the picture into the plastic covered space generally meant for an identification card. Satisfied with the job done, Tesfaye closed the flap and put the wallet back in its place for safe keeping, moving down the hall in the dawn's early darkness and closing the front door softly behind him.

There was no one out on the street as Tesfaye began the walk to work, but he welcomed the solitude that drifted up from the steaming man hole covers and muted the thrum of the passing El overhead. As he reached the storefront Tesfaye tucked the lunch packet of leftovers under his arm and fished out the padlock key that hung from a chain in his belt loop. The riot grate groaned loudly in the still morning air as Tesfaye yanked it up with his free hand and then proceeded to unlock the plate glass door. He flipped the sign around to “Yes, We’re Open” and crossed the floor, placing his lunch on the counter and then knelt down to power on the switches for the lights that illuminated each of the narrow aisles. As Tesfaye crouched he heard a noise, like the pattering of a mouse. Before he could react a metal barrel pressed beneath the shoulder pad of his tweed suit coat and an agitated voice just deepened into manhood growled, “Run your shit, A-rab.” Tesfaye straightened up slowly. “The register is empty,” he replied, gently turning around.

The boy was wearing one of those nylon ski masks that Tesfaye always kept in stock and on display behind the counter during the colder months. Only his dark eyes, darting back and forth beneath the brim of his baseball cap, remained visible. “Then gimme that Movado right there,” the boy commanded, motioning to the watch peeking out from beneath Tesfaye’s downturned shirt cuff, and as he did the hand holding the gun shook slightly. Tesfaye glanced down at his wrist and caught a glimpse of his own reflection in the glint of the black face. The tiny diamond that told the hour pierced



through the mirrored image of his right eye. Tesfaye could not be sure if it was his pulse or the memory of the warm pressure of his Beza's fingertips adjusting the clasp that suddenly flooded through him, but when he looked up again his own face had become a mask.

“That is mine”, he said, drawing out each sound with the same practiced care and precision he used when tracing the squiggles and lower cased t's of old text papers beside his daughters in the late evenings. Tesfaye turned squarely towards the boy and studied him with a steadfast expression. For several seconds the boy stood frozen, puzzled by this turn of events while Tesfaye wondered vaguely if all of his days since that fateful afternoon, punctuated by the moments of happiness he had stolen from another man, had not been leading up to this one. A click from the watch broke the silence, marking that the minute had passed. A new flash of anger lighted in the boy's eyes. At the recognition of that look Tesfaye's pursed lips broke into a grim smile. And then the gun went off.

## Crush

He wasn't like the others that lived over by us and all along P Street. He was black black – the color of the leather armchair in Fredo's Thrift Shop window, except shiny and smooth, the way Mr. Brother's Buick looked after a carwash. I liked his white grin and how the corners of his eyes crinkled up like the crushed velvet sleeve of my favorite sweater. I said his name for a whole week after he told me, whispering it in the bathroom mirror to see how the word looked on my lips. I twirled it around in my mouth, like a Tootsie Roll you slowly unwrap with your tongue. His secret name. Not the one everyone else called him because of his Coca-Cola skin and too-loud laugh that snapped and crackled. Pop pop pop. Like a can of sodapop.

“Ey yo Pop Rocks, where you goooiin? Tell whoever hoopin I got next!”

He didn't stand around all day waiting for cars to slow or people to slide money into his palm like those boys that slouched against the riot grates. Pop moved real cool and straight, with a sleek neck and shoulders that met in a perfect right angle at the tip of his spine. I'd watch him from the stoop when he passed, studying the way he bit his lip at the grown ladies voices that fell like merengue notes out of the upper windows.

“Oye Negrito, donde tu va solo?”

He'd duck his head in between their inviting drops and jog past the viejos perched on overturned milk crates in his warm-ups, the swish of the nylon cutting through the heat like the rustle of dry leaves. “Tu ve' ?” the men would squawk, smiling and nodding to one another, each remembering the last time he had widened a woman's eyes. “Boy be walking around here like he royalty.”

That was the summer Pop seemed to bloom from the concrete. We'd grown up on the same court at the end of Q Street and there had always been things that stood out about him; the way he swiped his hand along the bottom of his sneaker to keep his hand hot, or how he twirled the ball twice in his skinny pencil fingers before a foul shot. But that year I only saw the twist of his hips when we played shirts and skins, was almost afraid to touch him when he brushed up against me and drove down the lane, June's hot air whistling between his legs. “You not playing him close enough,” Rico panted on the timeouts. “Don't let him get big on you, push back.”

Sometimes when Pop wasn't nowhere to be seen I'd go over with Rico to the Chino shop where Victor worked and we would wait outside for him until his shift let off, watching Victor's friends playing spades and saying dirty things to the pretty third grade school teacher who walks by everyday at 4:25 from the bus stop on Avenue E – the one they call the Lady of Spain. The Lady of Spain wears freshly pressed linen with a yellow flower scrunchie in her hair. She has metronome hips and see-through stockings to cover her gorgeous legs that walk her everywhere and part men's lips like the Red Sea. Not like mine – my too long legs that look like seagull stalks and carry me in none of the directions I want to go. My walk wasn't ever going to turn anyone's head, but I didn't want to be one of those girls who needed a novio with fat pockets to get her tips filled and hair done every other week. And I wasn't Nina, who couldn't turn around without one of the boys trying to give a ring pop or a quarter water.

Victor was too tired to notice that Nina didn't come home anymore. I'd seen her sneaking over to the jungle gym with Rico's older brother Darius when she thought no one was looking. I'd watch them and wonder what things he could say to make her chin tilt all the way back, or why she came in an hour later with a button missing from her favorite shirt. There's always been something about my sister that people wake up to, like the smell of coffee – men and women both. Their eyes get sharper when she sweeps by and things stir inside them. My sister is like wind. I have thought about asking her how she gets her hair to sit neat like that, or how she makes her eyes even bigger with the little

brush she flicks over the lids, but then I remember that since she turned fourteen she hates to be reminded that I'm her sister, so I don't say nothing.

It was in the middle of the week that I forgot my key. Rico and I were pressing on all the buzzers until Dona Elena came shrieking over the rusty intercom that we'd better stop or she was going to get one of her sons to come down there with the watermelon machete. Rico said it was too hot to wait outside the Chino's, and why didn't we just go kill time by the pool until Victor came home. "C'mon, let's go," he pulled my arm and tugged his undershirt over his head. I planted my feet and shook my head. "Why not?" He turned and looked me full in the face, one eyebrow climbing up. I hadn't wanted to get wet all week and Rico was starting to act suspicious. When he'd tried pushing me into the flood puddle from the open hydrant on K Street the day before yesterday I had socked him so hard his muscle did a froggy jump. "Damn, I was only playin'", he'd whined, rubbing his shoulder while the bicep shimmied up and down his noodle arm. I shifted in my seat, trying to unstick the corner of the paper towel wad I'd shoved down my pants an hour earlier from one of my thighs. "Said I don't feel like it, is all!" I felt my ears getting warm, so I pushed him down a step and started to mess with one of the knots in my Knicks shoelaces. Rico shrugged. "Aight, but you gone be blazing out here." He turned and hopped down the stairs, leaving me doubled over hugging both knees to my chest.

The night it had started I thought I was dying. Everyone was squished together on the couch watching Roots and I'd made a run for the bathroom while it cut to a

commercial break. I'd peeled off the clothes and switched into a pair of Rico's baggy shorts, stuffing the Sunday days-of-the-week underwear on my side of the bed in between the mattress and the box spring. When I woke up the next morning still alive and with Nina snoring next to me, I reached down and balled the underwear up in my fist, running past my brothers who were sprawled out asleep on the couch to hide them in the neighbors trash bin outside the front window. I wasn't sure what it all meant but I knew it was nothing good, so I stuck with the Marcal paper towels and pretended everything was the same.

The afternoon light mixed with the hot air and sent ripples swimming up from the pavement. I heard the bamata-bamata of the basketball bouncing down the sidewalk and felt a shadow fall across my leg. "Hey, girl." I lifted my head and saw Pop standing over me. "What you out here by yourself for?" I pushed some of the stray hairs back from my forehead and smoothed a wrinkle at the cuff of my shorts. "Everybody else by the pool... How come I ain't never seen you over there?" I asked, hoping to shift him onto the defensive. He lifted one foot onto the stoop and flexed his calf. "Can't swim. Scoot over. You can?" I slid to the left as many inches as I could until the iron railing dug into my spine. "Only a little," I confessed. "I stay up in the water." He wove the ball in and out of his knees like Jerry West and then rested it in his lap, leaning his face against it so he could watch me sideways. He ran his hands up and down the Spalding, tracing the smooth black lines as he talked, and I laughed because I did that too sometimes when no

one was looking. “Feels like the cool spots under your pillow, don’t it?” I told him. His hands fell still and he sat up. “That’s just what it’s like. How’d you know that?”

We waited, watched as the sneakers strung up like Christmas lights across the avenue turned pink and the two scoops of sun melted behind the ConEd plant beside the river. “How come it sink like that in the summer?” I supposed aloud. “Like somebody tied a rock to it and just threw it off the bridge.” The falling sun winked once and then dipped behind a building. The light blazed around the edges and it looked like flames were licking at the fire escapes. “Sun’s closer to the earth this time of year.” He said keeping his head fixed forward. “Earth’s on a different axis, so everything feels closer, bigger. And when it sets, it just – drops.” He turned to face me, and I thought I could still see the orange flecks trapped in his eyes. He blushed a deep purple. “Got a book that tells you about that stuff. You know how they got those ten cent sales over at the liberry?” I admitted I didn’t. “Oh, well, they do.” He ducked his head out of the last shaft of sunlight and picked at the gold lettering along the side of the ball. I nudged him with my elbow. “Think they got any about the stars?” I asked him. “I always wondered about stars.”

They’d closed off the street, and only an unmarked cutlass crept like an elephant through the sticky traffic of babies and plastic Bacardi bottles. Pop pointed to a dark patch of sidewalk in a small square a ways down the block and leapt up, grabbing my hand and a hanger that was sitting on top of the trash can. I stayed back for a second and

he pulled harder, grinning at me like we were playing a game. He yanked me up with one arm, untwisting the hanger with the other as we went, and I prayed no red drops had soaked through. “See,” he said as we knelt down. “Still wet.” He wound his fingers around my wrists, pressing them down gently into the cement. I watched as he did the same, laughing at how much older his hands seemed sitting next to mine. He made quick marks with the hanger that looked like dizzy chicken feet, and as my name appeared like magic I pointed to the letters that he scratched out beside it. “Mine,” he explained. I had never thought about him being anything other than Pop. “Huh,” I said, and then whispered it, trying not to roll the “r” and say it the same way he did. He turned and looked at me, and I felt the tingling on my wrist were his fingertips had been. “My mother called me that...after my father.” His voice was low and I felt his breath close against my cheek. His eyes were cast downward and he drew a line through the name with the straight end of the wire. “Sometimes even I be forgetting.”

When we finally ran out of paper towels and had gotten down to the last square of toilet tissue I came clean to Nina and begged her not to make a big deal about it. “Make a big deal about what?” she asked innocently. Later that afternoon we set out for the store to pick up the things Nina said I needed. We had turned onto the Avenue E and gone about half a block when I saw Pop jog through the open vestibule door and come loping down the stairs. It was one of the rare times he didn’t have a ball hugging the slope of his hip and his gaze, instead of being fixed on his feet to measure each stride, met mine as he hit



the bottom step. “Hey,” he said. We had both stopped and Nina had kept on, not realizing that she had left me behind. “Where you going?” he asked, and I jerked my head in Nina’s direction by way of explanation.

By that time my sister had turned around and was watching us with an expression I didn’t like one bit. “Hold up a sec, I gotta give you something,” he said quickly, and then bounded up the steps and back inside the apartment. I waited, digging the toe of my converse into the ground, and tried to decide what to do with my hands. I glanced at Nina a couple houses down and saw she had began talking to a boy with one hand on her hip, the other leaning against a lamppost. I didn’t have any lamppost to lean on, so I shoved both hands in my pockets and fixed my eyes on the mural Pito had finished putting up last week for the little boy from that drive-by a month back.

Pop suddenly reappeared, bolting down the steps and holding out something flat as he landed in front of me. “So…” he said, a smile spreading over my face as I read the cover of the raggedy book he’d placed in my hands. “I’ma see you in the tournament next week?” I quit thumbing through the pages of “Beginners Guide to the Galaxy” and snapped it shut. “Yeah.” I nodded, biting the inside of my cheek to keep from cheesing too hard. “I’ll see you,” I squeaked, and then half ran, half walked down the block to where Nina was tapping her foot and playing like she was annoyed with whoever was trying to rap to her, blowing her bangs out and wagging her fingers so that the fresh coat of “sugar daddy” glinted in the light. I reached her and she laced her arm through my

limp one, turning her back on the boy who was reaching behind his ear for a pencil and practically dragged me the remaining few paces to the corner store.

“So tell me,” she said breathlessly, pushing me through the door and past the giant fan that was sputtering on the floor. The bodega smelled like old bananas and bleach. “Tell you what?” I asked in the same mocking voice she had used on me earlier, and started to move deeper down the aisles. “Well,” she said, in that tone she used when she was trying to sound superior. “You know what they say: The blacker the berry the sweeter the...” She trailed off and gave me a grin. “The wha?” I asked, as she made her way down the crowded aisle past the detergent and bags of rice. “You know,” she continued, bending down to scan the lower shelves, “that boy is *black* but he sure is fine. I just hope y’all babies don’t come out lookin’ like burnt cookies.” She picked something off the shelf and stood up triumphantly. I grabbed her wrist and swung her halfway around. “NII-naaa,” I hissed, trying to pry the box out of her hands. “Why you gotta be so nasty?” She brushed me off and began to move toward the front of the store. “Wha-at, you a wo-man now,” she said, enunciating each word with a jab of the Kotex. “We should talk about these kinds of things. Hey how much for this?” she said loudly to the men who were counting out lotto tickets behind the bullet proof counter. And when the one we called Moreno snickered at the sight of the aqua green box I wanted to die right there with the rest of the bodega collapsing in on top of me.

The day of the tournament must have been a Tuesday. The piragua cart was parked at the end of the block and everyone was hanging from the chain link fence like sleepy orangutans, chattering away with purple and blue tongues. It was game point, team to win by two. “I got fives on Pepsi!” yelled one of the older boys, and everyone whooped. The whistle blew and I came off the bench, tapping Rico to let him know he had to sit out. Pop watched me from the other end of the court and tossed me a private nod, one side of his mouth turning up, and I felt my face get hot. Cars came and went along side the curb. The runners fanned themselves with their hats, and every now and then one of them signaled to another to reach up and grab the grocery bag stashed in the full branches of the only tree decorating our street, a little guanabana Rico’s uncle said to reminded him of home. Then, over the hum of the heat came those two words that Ray Ban screamed, splashing over all our heads and freezing in our ears: “GET DOWN!”

I dropped like a can of beans, my body rolling up into a caterpillar ball as soon as my nose hit the ground. The sky tipped to one side. And maybe because he was in that other world that he went to when he laced up his Jordans, he didn’t hear the krrraka-rakkita sounds that drowned out the ice cream bells and spit in the links of the fence. All I know is that it was like Pop was just up in the air one minute, and then he caught that funny feeling that hurts and makes you laugh at the same time when your mind tricks you and you think there’s another step at the bottom of the stairs. That bad kind of surprise when your heart hiccups and your body feels tired all over.

“Oh shit, son! You seen that?!”

“Everybody alright? Anybody catch one?”

I saw the back of the boy running away, the tinted car with the door still swinging open peeling off down a different street. I got slowly to my feet and moved closer to the half court line. Pop stayed down. I stared at the tear in his skin where the Kool-Aid juice was pouring out underneath his arms and onto the blacktop. Tiny rivers of red were traveling down through the cracks, and I jumped to get out of their way, my back crashing against the fence. My sneaker crunched on the loose gravel, and when I lifted it I saw that one of the small black pellets wrapped in a green label had rolled under it. I bent to quickly pick it up before anyone could see.

They began to stream out of the houses then, like giant ants moving silently with many legs that all carried them to that same spot. A few of the runners who had been posted up against the mailboxes took a quick one-two of the scene and started to slink away, knowing a mistake had been made. His mother wailed only once and shook her fist at the nearby fat cloud while his sisters tried to scoop up what was left of their brother from the cement.

“Who that? Who they get?”

“It’s Pop! They kilt Sodapop!”

I watched them crowd around him, stretched out like some panther taking a nap and felt his secret catch in the back of my throat. When I tried to let it out, to tell them that wasn't who was laid out on the ground at their feet, it only came out in a long hiss of air that floated up past the curious faces leaning over the fire escapes. I rolled the warm shell casing around and around with my thumb and pressed it to my lips. A red chalky outline oozed around the neon windbreaker, and it was like looking at the broken pieces of a 7-Up bottle with the bubbles fizzling away. His eyes were still open, like bright Milky Way dust, but already cold, already thousands of years away.

## **Good People**

I was just about to drop off into the good dream, the one where I chase Alondra through the sprinklers with her white t-shirt all soaked from the spray and I catch her by the arm and pull her against my chest, when Chicho's piercing crow cut through the open window and jerked me back. I turned my head to the side of the bed and opened my eyes, letting them adjust to the dark. Maldito pajaro, I thought, pushing the pillow out from under me and slowly rolling over onto my back. As long as that rooster was around I was never going to bust a nut. I snapped the waistband of my boxers and swung my legs over the bed, trying not to wake Eric who lay beside me, snoring lightly beneath the arm that covered his face, his body loose with sleep. The clock on the floor blinked 1:26 a.m. I got

up and pressed my face to the screen to look down into the courtyard, just as Chicho let out another ear-splitting squawk.

In the summer almost everything below our fifth floor walk-up was covered in a thin canopy of green. If you peered through the leaves and looked down closer to the ground you could see the skeletons of couches that we sometimes sat on, the rusted wire mattress frames and tossed out teddy bears, the million and one kinds of Styrofoam takeout that had been thrown from the kitchen windows during the winter months when people were too lazy to make the trip in their slippers a few flights down to the dumpster. There were some cheap beach chairs left out on the cement strip that encircled the courtyard and a trail of empty beer bottles leading to the card table with the cup holders that was pulled under a fire escape to keep the felt from getting moldy in case of a thunderstorm. I strained my ears for any sounds of a party coming from the third or fourth floor or a fight breaking out a little further down the block. There was only the faint drone of a radio tuned into La Mega somewhere in the background, the whine and ping-ping of a bachata drifting slowly up through the thick air. Except for Chicho, everything was surprisingly quiet. And I had to take a piss.

I made my way down the hallway and passed the door to Mami's bedroom that was tightly shut. It was the only room in the apartment that had AC and as I crept by it I felt the cool air escaping under the threshold tickling my bare ankles. Judging from the turned down sheet of the empty bed in our room I knew my sister was in there with her. Yamira had gotten her period for the first time a few weeks ago and ever since then had

been acting like a bigger brat than usual. Last week when it had been my turn to go to the store for groceries I had taken the list down off the fridge and seen she had added pads to it. *Pads*, with little hearts and stars drawn around the word. When I had turned around she was leaning against the door jam with her hands folded over her flat chest, this smug-ass smile stuck to her face.

I told her hell no I wasn't getting that shit and tried to worm my way out of it with Mami, saying I didn't know nothing from pads, that I might get the wrong thing and come home with Pampers and wouldn't that be a waste of everybody's time and money? But I had picked the wrong moment to plead my case. There was an unwritten rule that when Mami walked through the front door after pulling a ten hour shift at the Marriott we couldn't bug her about anything. She didn't want to answer nobody's questions about what was for dinner or where were the double D batteries for the boom box, didn't want to play referee or know nothing about who did what to whom. All she wanted was twenty full minutes of peace with her feet resting up on the coffee table in front of the TV to watch the news on Univision and catch up on the trailers for the latest episodes of her novelas. Eyes glued to the screen, she waved her hand impatiently in my direction like I was a flying buzzing around her head, told me to take a ten out of her purse and sent me packing.

As I reached the living room a floorboard creaked loudly and I glanced over to see if Marcos had moved. He had been staying with us a lot ever since school had let out mid June and his older brother had come home from that hospital place he had been holed up



in for a few months. Marcos lived down on the second floor and had been my running buddy since pre-K in Titi Rosa's day care over on Nagle. His mom, Jacelyn, and mine had landed in the Heights around the same time and both started off working in a bakery. Mami used to tell us when we would growl about getting up for school that by 7:00 a.m she and Jacelyn would have already been halfway through a shift of kneading dough. She was the one who had gotten Jacelyn the apartment downstairs after her husband had left her and the two boys to run off with that cuero from the Bronx who worked in his brother's sports bar.

I thought he might have heard me but Marcos was in heavy-weight knock out mode on the Rent-a-Center pullout sofa. He had been sleeping on it most nights for the past month ever since his older brother Nelson had come home from whatever hospital he had been court ordered to serve eighteen months time in for cracking Marcos in the head with a metal toilet paper dispenser while he was asleep. He and Marcos had never gotten along so good, and from what I remembered he had always been kind of a dick. I can remember how Marcos had looked when he staggered downstairs to our house the blood streaming down one side of his neck and dying his wife beater a bright crimson. My mother had flown into action, pouring half a bottle of rum on the wound and the rest into a taza that she told Marcos to drink. We pressed an oven mitt against his head to stop the bleeding while we guided him down the stairs and across the street to the meth clinic to see if one of the visiting doctors could stitch him up. I edged past him and he let out a giant snore, probably dreaming of Rafelina from fourth period gym, his hard-on leaning a

little to the left like a three-pole tent beneath the flammable blanket somebody swiped on the last flight home to DR before the airlines went nearly belly up and started doubling the price of every maleta we tried to pack stuffed with blenders and lightbulbs and brand name sneakers somebody's Abuela bought on Fordham that became some half cousin's prize possession for the next three summers til they were so dicked the toe leather flapped up like the little nothing tissue paper dresses Rafelina wore to all the cookouts that made Marcos' tongue sweat.

I finally made it to the bathroom and flipped up the seat, stretching out my arm and extending it palm first to rest against the cool tiled wall. I felt my body temperature drop by a few degrees as goosebumps popped up on my arms. In the dead heat of July our bathroom was the second best place in the apartment to be. The moon was pouring in through the slit of a window we had above the toilet, illuminating the fake flower petals that rested at the bottom of the crystal bowl we had all chipped in and gotten Mami from the Mary Kay catalogue last Mother's Day. Next to it on the narrow windowsill was a basket that she kept filled with all these expensive little bottles and lotions and samples of bath beads that she took out of the rooms she cleaned right after the hotel guests had finished checking out. It was one of the few things Mami loved about the Marriott. I shook myself off and rinsed my hands under the faucet, then doubled back and dropped down the toilet seat so Mami wouldn't fall in like she had that one morning very early on her way out the door to work, waking up the whole house with her shrieks.

I tiptoed back down the hall and climbed into bed, glancing at the clock once more as I swung my legs over Eric's sleeping body. 1:31 a.m. I settled back onto my side and pulled the sheet against my chest, a warm current spreading down my spine. By this time tonight, I thought, I will be getting some ass. It was the summer before me and Marcos were starting ninth grade at G-Dubs in the fall, and I was pretty cut up from all the karate and training I did over at my uncle's gym. The school football coach had already come by the house once asking if I would be at two-a-days when they started a few weeks before Labor Day weekend. I was a lot bigger than the other boys I had come up with and when I walked by women on the street now, they noticed. Alondra and me had been going together on and off for a while but she wasn't about giving it up no time soon. The last time I had tried anything had been after our Eighth Grade Prom. She had on this dress that one of her aunt's had copied and made special for her out of some magazine, and with her hair all done she looked like the Dominican Princess Barbie. After the dance we had gone to the Mofongo House on 181<sup>st</sup> and when I had suggested we head back to my place she had put up her hand, the Promise ring on her finger catching the light and glaring at me like a STOP sign. Her Moms had shipped her down to Santiago for the whole summer and my older cousin Kevin and his boys had convinced me to get in some practice while she was away. "Cono primo, gotta give yourself a chance to take off the training wheels, que no?"

A muffled screech from Chicho traveled up to the window, but my eyes were already drooping with sleep. And as they completely closed suddenly there was Alondra,

still at the sprinklers with both hands on her hips like an angry teakettle and a smile wet with water droplets, waiting for me. I made my way towards her slowly drinking in each step, about to boil over.

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Nobody seemed to remember how Chicho came to live in the courtyard. Some think it could have been the time that Crazy Lupe who was always lurking around the back entrance to the meth clinic on Ellwood smoked something bad and got it in her head to break into the Vivero shop down under the El train and free all the livestock locked in cages destined to become somebody's sancocho dinner. For weeks there were random sightings of the scattered animals; a pig grunting through the garbage dump, a goat getting its horns twisted between the iron bars around the elementary school from craning its neck to graze off the pathetic strip of grass lining the perimeter of the building. Others say that he was probably a part of the prize fighting ring that the Super of the building next to ours used to have in the basement and would charge two dollar admission before that got busted up one Friday by the cops, leaving most of the men in weekend lock up only a few of the birds to escape with their lives.

Whatever the case, Chicho had been with us long enough to forget how he found us in the first place. He was kind of the pet that people slowly started to love since it seemed that nothing could make him leave. We left him scraps of burnt rice and

blackened vegetables and soon he was fat enough to fight off the stray cats that prowled the courtyard and poked through the garbage cans. But he hadn't always been alone. There were two other chickens that used to peck around him but one day they got into some rat poison and keeled over, their scrawny feet sticking stiffly up in the air like two sets of radio antennae. It was around this time that Chicho started to lose his sense of time and possibly his mind.

One Saturday morning a few years earlier Yamira and I had spilled out of our room grumbling and red eyed from a night of bad sleep that had been punctured with Chicho's cock-a-doodling each painful hour that passed. "Somebody oughta shoot that bird," I mumbled, returning the shove Yamira had given me under the table for taking her seat next to my father with the bigger cereal bowl set out on the place mat and picking a sticky Cheerio off of Eric's face as he slammed his hands against the high chair tray. "Ay," my mother said with a dramatic sigh, holding the ladle against her heart, "he's lovesick." My father snorted, pushing himself back from the table with one hand and spooning the rest of the mangu into his mouth with the other. "What that bird needs," he said with a grin, pointing the spoon in the direction of my mother's backside as she bent slightly over the sink and giving me a quick wink, "is some ass."

That was one of the last memories I had of Papi in our kitchen. The next day the Feds picked him up outside the Jimbo's on Dyckman while he has eating a chimi wrapped in aluminum foil from the truck. The men who were there told me later on how my father had gone down swinging, hurling his sandwich at them and stunning one with a

slice of tomato to the face. He dropped a solid right hook and a few shots to the body before the agents managed to wrestle him to the ground and put the cuffs on him. They had torn through our house too; small, suit-wearing tornadoes, ripping through drawers and overturning the framed family photographs with a rosary hanging over the corner on my mother's bureau. They took Papi upstate for a three year stretch at Woodbourne on a counterfeiting charge, and a week after he finished the full bid INS came knocking and shipped him back to the DR for good.

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I woke the next day with the pillowcase sticking to the back of my neck. The clock read 12:43 and the morning sun had slid out of view, leaving only a slat of narrow light on the bedroom floor. "Shit!" I exclaimed, popping up out of the bed and practically breaking my neck on Eric's aluminum baseball bat and cleats he had left in a heap in the middle of the floor. "Marcos, get up. It's late, man," I called, rubbing my toe and hobbling down the hallway. I turned the corner to flick on the overhead fan and saw Marcos, already awake and sitting on the freshly made up sofa. He had folded the sheets into a rectangle and placed them neatly on the side arm, sipping a cafecito from Yamira's favorite Disney Princess mug from the dollar store and pouring over the local free paper they handed out in front of the subway with one leg crossed over the other at the knee like an old man. "Bueno, tu ta bien comodo, Manito," I said with a laugh, dropping my

voice as low as it would go so it sounded like the men who did nothing but hang around all day drinking Palo Viejo cluttering up the benches outside of the cigar shop. I folded my arms across my chest and stuck out my lower lip, nodding my head with joking approval. “Why not put your feet up and I’ll go get you so slippers and a cigar?” Marcos looked up with a grin. “Your Moms left us food,” he said, motioning to the plate of mangu and over easy eggs piled up on a plate on the foot stool in front of him while he circled some ads on the last page of the paper. I walked over to the sink and rinsed off a spoon that was lying at the bottom of it, drying it off with the hem of my boxers as I made a beeline back to the couch and scooped up the plate with my free hand.

“What you doing that for?” I asked between mouthfuls, piling the spoon high with mangu and shoveling it into my mouth. “Ain’t you already got a job?” Marcos shrugged, then drew another large red circle at the bottom of the page and shaded it in with the Sharpie. “Lemme see that,” I said, twisting the paper around so that I could read the caption he had highlighted. “Nanny?” I scoffed. “You tryna be a professional babysitter, B?” Marcos gently took the paper away from me and bent it along the crease in half, placing it on the floor by his feet. “Ito, I need the extra money,” he sighed. “Yeah but, but,” I stammered, “ain’t that some shit females do? Besides, those rich white people gonna take one look at you and think you there to rob the house.” Marcos shook his head and stood up from the couch, lifting his arms way over his head in a long stretch. “They ain’t that rich if they live on 218<sup>th</sup> Street,” he pointed out. “Just rich enough to hire

somebody else to watch they kids. Bet they even like it if you speak Spanish. I could be like a tutor or some shit.” I snorted, and half a red onion almost came out my nose. “Yeah, right. Spell tutor, man.” Marcos picked up a pillow and chucked it at my head and then shuffled down the hall towards the bathroom.

I picked up my bowl and headed over to the sink. There was already a stack of dishes at the bottom of it, probably left by Yamira from last night when it was supposed to be her turn. I reached down to search for the sponge and a roach popped out from between two of the plates. I balled hand into a fist a quickly smashed it with the side of my palm before it could slip away down the drain. I flicked the water on and ran my hand under the faucet until what was left of it had washed off and then reached for the soap and began to chip away at the dirty pile. While I was washing, I started thinking about Damarys’ lips and how she had tasted, the way she had looked up at me and licked them slowly as pushed her hand through the slit in my boxers. The only reason we had left the last time before finishing what we started was because the Super of her building had come through the back entrance of the building and found us in the boiler room. He had started screaming at me in Russian or something and waving a four foot aluminum pipe, so we booked it out of there so quick I left my belt behind and had to half run holding up my jeans by the loops. She told me she had found a place where we could hook up tonight. The door that lead to the roof of her cousin’s building was always unlocked, and somebody had had the dope idea of dragging a couple of chairs and a rubber mattress up



there. I asked her if she had a friend for Marcos and she said most definitely, that Marcos looked good enough and that her cousin would be down to kick it. Crismerolin was one of those super quiet girls who put her hand over her mouth when she smiled to hide a chipped front tooth. Her parents had shipped her over from La Capital when she was twelve as their shining hope and money ticket for the future, but in three years she hadn't learned how to say much more than "hi", "bye", and "is very happy to meet you" in English. "She's good, she's cute," Damarys assured me, putting her hand on my arm and giving it a light squeeze.

I turned away from the sink and glanced at the fridge while I dried the last of the glasses off with the towel. Mami had been dreaming in numbers again. The note on the fridge under the Pico Duarte magnet had three different combinations, two that I didn't recognize and the one that she played faithfully every evening that was a combination of me, Yamira and Eric's birthdays. I never remembered my dreams which Mami said was too bad for me since they were supposed to bring you luck. I took the note and put it in my pocket. Underneath the note was a postcard that Alondra had sent from a resort a few days after she had landed down there. It was from some resort in Puerto Plata that she and her family had probably gotten day passes to and taken all of the aunts and uncles and first and third cousins for the day to flash some of that US money and make it look like they were doing better than they were. On the back of the card was a picture of her, in a sundress that's a little see-through so that you can see the outline of her white bikini

beneath it. She's holding a monkey that's got one tiny hand wrapped around her finger and she has this megawatt smile on her face. Alondra had written most of the card to my moms in Spanish, but at the bottom of it there was my name and then a few lines scribbled out in English which she knew Mami wouldn't be able to read. She talked me about the stars at night and how nice it would be if I was on the beach with her, in the waves. "I can't wait for us to be together again," is what she ended with, and then a whole bunch of "xoxos" and a small heart with an arrow through it. Mami had already started calling Alondra her daughter-in-law when talking to her friends about me and the novia, how she doesn't understand why a girl like that would give a malcriao like me a second look but only God knows the answers to such things.

I started to feel a pang of guilt as I stared at the perfect symmetry of her face but then I shook it off, putting the postcard back up on the fridge. Damaris is just a summer thing, I reminded myself. Alondra won't be back for another three weeks. I tucked it back under the magnet trying to hold the picture, some coupon clippings and a Prayer Card with la Virgen's hologram face shining back at me all together in one place. "Cono, loco," I stuck my head around the corner and yelled down the hall. "Ya no terminaste cagando? You gotta warn me before you go in there and blow it up, bro!" There was a double flush and a creak of the door opening. "I ain't taking a shit!" Marcos shouted back down the hall, "I'm flossing. Something you don't know much about with them mossy teeth." I moved to stand in front of the enormous gold sculpted framed mirror that hung

on the wall in the living room and scraped at the front of my tooth. A fine layer of white gunk appeared under my fingernail and I wiped it quickly on the wall. “Well c’mon, I gotta go pick up a check. And play the numbers Mami left. Was supposed to do it this morning but we could still do it on the way, just play ‘em for the later drawing.”

We took the trash down in one hand and in the other the last of the toasted bread, slathering it with a spoonful of the margarine that we scooped out of the giant plastic tub. Marcos lifted the metal lid on the trash container at the back of the building while I threw in the overflowing bags. Before he let the top drop with its usual loud bang Marcos motioned that I should look behind me. I turned and saw Chicho, taught with concentration, his neck bent towards the ground, pecking at the remains of a banana peel that he had resting between his claws. Marcos mouthed to me “On three”. We counted out silently on our fingers and on the last number Marcos let go of the trash lid and it landed with a booming crash that made my ears ring. Chicho jump an inch off the ground. In fact, he barely looked up from his banana peel but kind of tilted his head to one side as if to ask a question. I kicked at the ground and a little cloud of dirt swirled up and drifted towards him. “Actin like he run shit,” I muttered with disgust. “Bet you we could catch him now,” Marcos said, as Chicho glared at us unblinkingly out of the side of one black eye. The last time we tried had been a few years back when my father had put Marcos and me through one of his boot camp from hell sessions, preparing me for some competition or another and thinking that chasing Chicho down would somehow improve

my speed and foot work. “In the campo they do it with no shoes!” Papi had said in exasperation the first time we had come back empty handed and out of breath. I looked from Marcos to Chicho, who seemed to be locked in some sort of a staring contest. “You might be right about that, but I ain’t about to look like the only asshole tryna find out and then eating the dirt like you did that one time.” Marcos waved off the memory that left him with two claw scratches on his forehead and his pride in shreds. “Man, that bird older than we are,” Marcos said, tearing a small bit of the crust from my piece of bread and tossing it at Chicho’s feet.

The first stop we made was at the lotto store so I could play Mami’s numbers for the evening drawing. There was no breeze as we turned the corner and made our way down the block. The hydrant was open and a bunch of little kids were stripped down to their underwear and splashing each other with the deep puddles that collected in the grooves of the uneven street. A couple of our boys were lounging outside the bodega or leaning against the giant ice machine and we gave a round of daps before stepping through the glass door. White Rob was standing just inside the store directly in front of the AC and lifting his T-shirt over the vent, letting it balloon up and out. “What up?” He said letting the shirt drop and stepping into the aisle and giving a pound to me and then Marcos. “What you got there?” he asked motioning to Marcos’ other hand in which he held the ad flyer. “It’s nothing,” Marcos said quickly. Rob yanked the paper out of Marcos’ hand and twisted it around several times before looking at it the right side up. He read the words at the title, his mouth moving slowly while mumbling the sounds to

himself, and then looked up, his face incredulous. “Marcos man, you gonna get paid to be somebody’s bitch? But you do that so well for free already!” He bust out laughing and let the paper fall. It drifted through the air like a leaf shaken from the top branches of a tree, and land on the floor near the tail of the store cat, a black and orange tabby that got fat off of all the mice it caught in the back stock room. “Why don’t you get off my dick, Rob?” Marcos muttered as he knelt down on all fours and extended his arm under the counter searching for the paper. “Language, language!” Rob said mockingly, in the same nasal voice that Ms.DeMarco, our sixth grade science teacher, used to use when someone would drop an f-bomb or go off . “Diablo, Marco, you gonna talk like that to the kids?” I took the ticket receipt and finished paying for the sodas, then walked towards the door where Marcos leaned against the freezer and handed one to him. “Where mine at?” Rob asked punching me lightly in the shoulder. I looked at him coldly. “Oh, where your money at? I don’t see you working for it. Talk a lot of shit for somebody that’s livin’ off whatever their moms give ‘em.” That seemed to shut him up, so I signaled to Marcos with a raise of an eyebrow and we both filed out the door. We walked on to the end of the block in silence and then I turned to him and asked abruptly, “Why you let him shit all over you like that? I don’t get it.” Marcos just shrugged and took a long last gulp of his soda can and then rolled it under a car and into the gutter of the street. “Lemme run in here and see if they got any cash for the hours I put in yesterday,” he said. Stepping over to the entrance of the barber shop on the corner he called over his shoulder, “I’ll catch up with you in a few.” I crushed my can in one hand and let the last few drops drip along the

sidewalk. “Yo, and see if he’ll hook you up with a cut for later!” I reminded him. “We can’t be woofin like our we are now when we see these girls.” Marcos nodded and shot me a grin, then ducked inside the store, the blast of air-conditioning and blaring dembow music smacking me in the face, and then disappearing as fast as they had come as the door slammed shut behind him.

Marcos had found himself a part time for the summer sweeping up at the barber shop down the block from where I taught karate to the six year olds in the white and yellow belt classes. I had been going to Dyckman Karate since I was the same age, and when all the other kids had gone home for the day Sensai would let me stay late and help me train for the test to get my second black belt. It was one of the weird things Papi had insisted on when I was younger. Maybe it was because of all those low budget kung fu movies with the Spanish subtitles he grew up sneaking into at the Cinema on George Washington and the Malecon back in the DR, or maybe he just wanted me to be different from every other kid on the block with a bat put in their hand and mirage of the Majors in their heads. Whatever the reason, Papi had always been crazy about me doing karate. If we needed a go out of state for a tournament, Papi would find a ride, and the money for the entrance fee would always somehow magically appear. “Strength and discipline”, he would say on the early morning car trips, counting those two things off on his thick thumb and forefinger and holding them so close to my face that the long black hairs on the backs of his knuckles would tickle my nose and make me want to sneeze. “This is what I am giving you”, he would remind me. “This is what you will thank me for later.”

It was one day last week when the Sensai assigned me fill in for the instructor of the Young Adult Beginner class that I had started talking to Damarys. Dique talking. Really, she had been the one to come up to me. She was eighteen and still technically a sophomore up at the Dub. I had seen her around the Karate School once or twice that summer and it had surprised me. She wasn't exactly the type to want to sweat her hair out, so I just figured she had been there to pick up a younger sister or something. She was on the tall side with a tiny waist and tree trunk legs that could've leveled a sumo wrestler with one well executed kick if she had stuck with karate. She only came a few times to the class since she claimed her older brother had enrolled in them because he was always so paranoid about her going out places at night. "He always is saying 'What if I get raped'," she told me with a laugh the first time we hung out after class, around the corner from the Chicarron spot. The vents from the fryer were a little ways above our heads from where we leaned against the brick wall, and when she kissed me it tasted like cherry lip gloss and pork fat. "He still thinks I'm such an innocent," she said in my ear, and I felt her smiling as she brushed her face against my collarbone. From the information I gathered, she hadn't been that for quite a long time. Damarys wasn't a certified hoe yet but she had all the makings of it; from the evil eye tramp stamp on her lower back to the running tally some of my cousin's boys were keeping of how many dudes she'd sleep with before she made it to the eleventh grade. But what made her cool to be around was the way she never sweated you real hard and still managed to make you feel like the only guy in the neighborhood she was talking to. She wasn't the type to get all crazy with

calling and coming up to you on the street when you're with your girl after you messed around.

I crossed the street to head into Dyckman Karate and ducked down to see the clock on the wall in the dry cleaning store next door. It was already heading for three o'clock and there was still so much I had to do. I figured to give Damaris a call around five to make sure we were all a go for tonight. Better to do it like that so I didn't look too sprung off of the possibility of some pussy that I wasn't a hundred percent guaranteed. I wiped my hands on my jeans and then grabbed the handle of the door to the school and pulled it open. In the reflection of the glass, I saw the sweat marks from my palms in a light stain above my pockets.

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“So, you sure he has some, right?” I asked as we jogged up the stairs to 6<sup>th</sup> floor of our building. “Cause we can't keep them waiting for too long.” The night had been going well. Me and Marcos had picked the girls outside of Damaris' house in a livery cab and had taken them to the Caridad on 174<sup>th</sup> Street. It looked to me like Crismerolin and Marcos had been hitting it off, sitting beside each other in the booth so Marcos could run his hand up and down her leg. We hadn't had a problem until the girls left to go to the



bathroom. Marcos had pulled the Ruff Riders out of his pocket that I had given him earlier and, keeping them under the table and out of sight, had point to the numbers printed on the side. “Ito, you really looked at these before? I think it’s expired.” I smiled at the waitress as she came over to our table and refilled our waters. “What?” I said out of the side of my mouth. “You lying, lemme see that.” Marcus was shaking his head back and forth and pulling at the skin on his neck nervously. “How long you had these anyway? Maybe they went bad or something.” I snatched the wrapper from his hands and examined it. “Can’t go bad...” I muttered turning it upside down and looking at the date. “Can they?” I had found them a few months back at the bottom of Papi’s drawer in the dresser that my mother refused to clean out. Ever since then I had kept one in my wallet and the rest in the shoe box under my bed with my Karate medals and the little card Alondra had given me in case she ever tried to call my bluff and say I didn’t care about all the little stuff she made or did for me.

We had gotten lucky because Damaris said Crismerolin and she needed to get make it back to her house before midnight to make Crismerolin’s curfew, but that they could sneak back out through the fire escape and meet us up on the roof later, as long as we brought some beer. That would give us enough time to get what we needed. We couldn’t go back to the apartment because Mami would be sniffing around us and wanting to know where we were running off to dressed the way we were. I had taken two of Papi’s shirts that Mami still had stored all the way in the back of the closet that had

been kept so airtight I hadn't had to do more than run the steam from the iron over them. And besides, I pointed out to Marcos, the ones I had found in Papi's stash had already gone bad, and there weren't going to be any others. "What about Nelson?" I had asked Marcos, as we waved goodbye to the girls from the back of the cab and they climbed the steps to their building. "He gotta have some, especially after being out the game so long, no?" Marcos hadn't responded right away. "Can't you go up and check?" I asked. The shadows were dark in the back of the cab, and only the occasional passing streetlight through a bright beam of light like a ripple through the glass window that illuminated Marcos' face, but I could tell he was wrestling with something. "I'll check....," he said, his voice tight with anxiety. "But you'll come with me, right?" I knew Marcos hadn't seen Nelson in a while, even though he was only a couple floors above us and things had been weirder than ever since he had been released from the hospital. The stitches they had given Marcos from when Nelson split his head open were still raised, white welts on his skull. "Pendejo," I told him, punching him in the shoulder. "I gotta hold your hand too?" And even through the darkness, I could sense Marcos smile.

"What you mean you don't have a key? What happened to it?" I asked, trying to hide the whine creeping into my voice. We stopped at the top landing to catch our breath after sprinting up the first two flights of stairs, creeping quietly past Mami's door and then picking our speed back up to make it up the last three flights. Marcos motioned for me to stop talking while he put his ear to the door. There was noise coming from the

other side, and so Marcos knocked loudly. After a minute of knocking and no one answering, Marcos turned the knob gently and pushed. The door creaked open. Marcos hesitated, then pushed the rest of the way and walked inside and I followed.

The tv was on but all of the other lights were off in the apartment. Nelson was sitting on the couch with a towel wrapped around his waist and little beads of water dripping down his ankles on to the white shag carpet like he had just come out the shower. His eyes were low and beside foot where the beads of water were dripping down his legs and making a shadow of a puddle on the carpet was a nearly empty fifth bottle of E&J. Marcos gave him a short “Hey”, and Nelson slowly looked up, dragging his eyes away from the blaring screen. “I’m a go check,” Marcos told me in a low voice. “You stay here.” I made my way over to the couch and swept some of the magazines and ketchup packets off the seat and onto the floor. I nodded at Nelson, who was looking at me blankly as though trying to place my face. “It’s Ito,” I told him and he suddenly smiled with recognition. “Holy shit, man,” he said, leaning in to give me a dap and rearranging himself against the cushions. “You grew like a foot and a half since I last seen you. You still doing that boxing shit?” He reached down for the bottle and drained the remaining liquid from it in one sip. “Karate, yeah,” I said. “That’s what’s up,” he said, sifting through the channels and taking the tv off mute. He flicked past the news and the sports and then stopped at a porn channel. “You got cable?” I asked, impressed. We had been pressing Mami to get it for months but she wasn’t having it. “Yeah, we run it in from the

apartment next door,” he said, keeping his eyes ahead. “You want me to change it?” He asked, as one girl climbed on top of a dude with a blond ponytail and overalls while another girl held her hands behind her back. “Oh, nah, I’m good with this,” I stammered. He turned up the volume and the room was filled with wet sounds and moaning.

It must have been all the food that made me doze off. I wasn’t sure how long I had been knocked out but figured it couldn’t have been more than a couple of minutes. I woke with a jolt as I felt a heavy palm pressing into my thigh. I snapped my eyes open as the hand traveled further up my leg and instinctively balled my hands into fists. I jerked away and found myself squared off shoulder to shoulder with Nelson. “What the fuck!” I shouted, furious at the way my words cracked on the last syllable. Nelson was staring at me calmly, his arms crossed over his chest as Marcos appeared in the doorway, his eyes wide. Nelson kept his gaze fastened on me for another minute before turning to Marcos with a smirk, but didn’t say a word. Even with the thick towel around his waist it was impossible not to notice his erection, and as he ambled out of the living room I saw him throw one last threatening glance at Marcos before slamming the door to the bedroom behind him. The silence came into the room and the silence lasted as Marcos just stood there, frozen and not saying anything, his face looking like it was about to crumple. I turned on my heel and bolted out of the apartment, picking up speed as I hurdled down the stairs and out onto the street.

~

“Where were y’all at, earlier? We had a good pot going,” Rob called out, barely looking up from the game of Spades he and three others were playing hunched over the card table they had set up outside under the awning of the corner store. I heard the echo of Marcos’ fast paced footsteps a few feet behind me. Tone handed me a beer and I took it, chugging most of it down right away. Marcos coughed to try and get my attention but I refused to turn around. Just knowing he was standing behind me was making my skin crawl. Goosebumps sprang up on my arms and I moved away from him to the far side of the circle where they were passing around steaming fried chicken wings out from a styro-foam box. “Ito,” Marcos tried again to interject. “Yo, your girlfriend callin you,” Tone snickered, as Marcos crossed over to me. He reached out to touch my arm and I jerked it away, spilling some of the beer over the lip of the bottle. “What you whining for?” I snapped. Marcos took a step back. “I just...I gotta...” He whispered, as if searching for words that I had knocked out of him with my anger. “Man, sometimes you do be acting like a little faggot for real,” I snarled at him, then took a quick sip of the Presidente to help pass the knot that lodged in my throat.

The rest of the boys doubled over and fell out, but underneath the rumbling of their laughter I thought I heard Marcos suck in his breath sharply. I took another long drink and gripped the neck of the green bottle tightly until my knuckles turned white.

Someone sparked a match to the edge of the blunt and the circle around it closed in tighter leaving Marcos on the outside of it. I waited as it made its way around the cipher and then closed my eyes and took a long pull. I held the smoke in my lungs until my head felt cloudy, then tilted up towards the night and exhaled slowly. I couldn't tell if it was the air or the fuzzy feeling behind my eyes but when I looked up I swore I saw millions of tiny stars trailing across the sky. When I turned again to look, Marcos was gone. I walked a little ways down the block towards where the El train rumbled along the trestle overhead. I loosened my hold on the empty bottle and chucked it up into the air, waiting for the sound of it shattering on the tracks above. A moment later I heard it splinter into a thousands pieces, raining down on the sleeping pigeons in a shower of beer and broken glass.

~

A couple hours later I picked myself up off the milk-crate outside the store. The domino game had fizzled out and one by one the others had drifted away from the corner and made their way towards home. I took a swig from the gallon of water and swished some around my teeth with my tongue to get rid of the cotton mouth. My head was pounding and I leaned one hand on the brick wall to steady myself, closing my eyes for a moment, and then everything that had happened in the past few hours came rushing back. I snapped them open to erase the image of that look on Marcos' face when we had all

laughed at him. And what the fuck was all that back at the apartment? I didn't want to think about it but it would explain why he had slept in our house almost every night since Nelson had come home.

When I reached the building instead of going up the steps to the front door I went down the narrow alley that lead to the back of the building where the garbage got put out and a running tally for the domino tournaments was kept on an old blackboard that the local elementary school must have thrown out and someone carted over in the rusted shopping cart that lay nearby turned over on its side. A fluorescent light that was twisted into place with a wire hanger hung over the exit sign above the alleyway. The bulb cast a greenish light across the courtyard, mixing with the blues and pinks in the sky that were the earliest hint of the coming sunrise, and underneath it in the plastic folding chair sat Marcos. A small flame crackled a few feet away from him, a thin stream of smoke snaking its way up past the fire-escapes that hung off the edges of the buildings like ornaments. I made my way over to him, brushed some of the dirt off a cinder block and sat down on the edge of it.

“Yo, Marcos” I began, but then I stopped. Marcos didn't turn to look at me. He was smoking a Black n' Mild and striking matches along the bottom of his shoe, then tossing them one at a time into a car tire. That July had been drier than most, and the dead vines and leaves buried beneath the scraggly patches of grass caught fire quickly. Only his hands moved as he continued to light the matches, his eyes stayed fixed on the small

flames that swayed dangerously over the sides of the tire with each breeze that blew through the courtyard. Without turning his head, he offered me the matchbox and I took it. I swiped one along the cement of the cinder block and it sparked to life. At that moment Chicho emerged from the other side of a trash pile clucking and clawing his way toward the tire. He tilted his head to one side and let out this satisfied crow, his feather all ruffled around like he had spent the night out somewhere getting ass from the pigeons in the coop. I held onto the match and watched it burn down almost to my fingertips, then flicked it towards the spot where Chicho scratched around in the dirt. His tail feather brushed against the ground and caught fire, and within seconds the flames had traveled up his back.

Chicho spun around and around in wide circles like a top, flapping his wings and screeching wildly. He looked like one of the roman candles me and Marcos used to play with on the 4<sup>th</sup> back when we were kids that Papi would buy for us on those day trips we took in the rental Civic out to PA. Papi would pull over at these makeshift stands on the side of the road and have us load up the back of the truck, then turn around and sell them back in the Heights at a profit, giving us each a pack of our own and warning us that if we got caught setting them off in the wrong place he would beat our collective asses. Chicho's squawks turned to high pitch screams but neither of us made a move to put the fire out. We watched the flames engulf his red and green feathers and turn them black



with soot. I didn't look at Marcos but I could sense him next to me breathing heavily, the heat from the fire mixing with the sweat that glistened on both our faces.

Finally, the squawking stopped. The flames began to die down and with the faintest crack of new morning light we could see what was left of Chicho, his burnt claws sticking out in front of him like brittle twigs that would snap with a strong breeze. The night's shell was breaking into the dawn around us, but we sat there bolted to the same spot with nothing to say. We watched the flames slowly die and let the smoke sting our eyes. Marcos chocked back a sob and I buried my face in the hem of my wife beater. The air was thick with the sweet smell of charred rubber and feathers.

### **Like Riding a Bike**

I watched as the clouds sagged low in the sky, too hot to do anything much but float. One fat one swollen with the pinks and reds of summer dropped lower and lower, until it seemed to snag itself on the tip of a telephone pole, bursting a hole through it so that the back sunlight bled into the laundry lines dotting the row-house rooftops.

“Shit!” Nina shrieked. She shoved me off the sidewalk and scrambled away from the red flood spreading along the cracks of cement squares towards her fresh pair of white cortexes. Victor sprang up from the curb, leaping eagerly for the pay phone outside

Moreno's bodega that was ringing for the fifth time in the past half hour. "Ma?" he asked, trying to stifle the panic that colored his voice. "Who this?" I heard through the line's static. "Put Ace on." Victor turned and one of the runners hanging on the corner sidled over and snatched the receiver.

"My juuuuicce!" Harry wailed. I looked down and saw him plopped on the ground watching the last remains of his drink drip from the over turned can of Tahitian Treat. "Real slick Harry! The hell is wrong with you?" Nina snapped, as she scanned her sneakers and saw spots staining the shoestrings. "Yo Nina, chill," I said as I saw Harry's lip start to quiver again. "I'ma chill you! Why you always taking up for him?" she barked at me, spitting on her pinky and rubbing it onto the splotched laces. "Cause you trippin'." I mumbled, cocking my leg back behind her as if I was going to boot her into the street and Harry giggled. Nina swung around and shot me a dirty look, then went back to adjusting the ruffle on her socks. "Yeah, you tr-trippin'," Harry piped up in between hiccups, wrapping his arms around my head like an octopus. His cheek brushed against my ear, a sticky wetness of tears and soda. "Just shut up, Harry," I gasped, trying to pry him off. He'd been like that since he was a baby, always trying to climb up on somebody like they were a jungle-gym. Sometimes, I couldn't stand him.

"Victor," Harry said, turning to my older brother and tugging on a busted belt loop. "I'm sorry, I said I'm sorry." Victor was scanning the street, one hand shielding his eyes narrowed by the sun. "Yeah, yeah I know," he answered, staring intently at the hot

air that was hissing up through the pavement, making the mailbox and parked cars ripple in waves. Harry was still sniffing, trying to wrap the loop around his wrist. Victor broke his gaze with the heat and peered down at him. He watched him for a minute, waiting until Harry had gotten almost his entire hand through it and then swooped down, gripping him up roughly by the back of his neck. Harry squealed in surprise and curled inward like a popcorn shrimp. “Stop cryin, will ya?” Victor growled, a grin starting at the corners of his mouth. “People out here gone think you soft.” Harry scowled and pulled his eyebrows together the way the angry hippos did on the Saturday cartoons. “I ain’t soft,” he huffed, twisting around and swinging on Victor’s arm until he could wiggle free. “Aight then, if you wanna be a papi chulo you gotta quit bawling and making them ugly faces,” Victor demanded. “Harry, wha-?” We both watched Harry squat down to scoop up loose pieces of soaked gravel with the empty can, wiping his nose with the back of his hand so that his face came up streaked with red dirt stripes. Victor looked like he was going to say something, then changed his mind and bent down to pull out the last two quarters out of his sock. In an instant the tears were gone and Harry was on his feet waiting for the money. “And...get some napkins to clean this up!” Victor shouted, but Harry had already changed into a shadow turning the corner.

~

Harry is only five and not as smart as me. Because he's still little he has to be in bed by 9:30 and asks the same questions over and over, thinking the answer will be different. "When Mami coming back? When she getting better?" Always the same, like a tape skipping in a walkman. "Soon, soon," Victor says, and looks like he's fifty two instead of fourteen. But I am ten, and by now I know how those things go. Harry counts the days, and when he gets to twelve he can't go any higher so he just starts all over again. I want to tell him to shut up, just shut up about it, and sometimes I do, but then he hides himself in the hallway closet and cries and I feel sorry for him. I try to remember that he can't help it that he's stupid because when you're five your mouth just keeps going and going since your brain still hasn't learned how to tell it to stop. "At least", Rico reminds me, "he'll be more fun when he's six." Rico wishes he had a younger brother instead of three older ones that are always either ignoring or torturing him, and I laugh and tell him that's because he was probably just as bad as Harry. But little brothers are kind of like the chicle machine at the Antillana Grocery we're always putting our nickels into – whatever you get you're stuck with, and if it's yellow, it's yellow. You can't swap it for a red.

My sister looks the way our mother did when she used to be happy, in the picture where Victor and Nina are little and she's got her arms around both of them and I am still just a bump in her stomach. I know because I've looked to see if I can find my face staring back at me from out of that old frame Victor hides in the top shelf of the dresser,

but those eyes are nothing like mine. I try to imagine the man she is smiling at on the other end of the camera and wonder if this is the person she pretends to hold against thin mattresses in dark rooms that stink like piss when she goes so far away from us - if this is the face she tries to swim back to in her halfway dreams.

~

I sat back down and thought. She'd called for us yesterday, Moreno from the bodega had said. Not her, but SweetPea. She must have been laid up in one of the houses. Told him he'd try again today. So Victor decided we all had to sit tight. If it took too long we'd take shifts waiting. Nina leaned against the glass, tipping her head forward so she wouldn't snag her smooth ponytail. "This is booorring," she sang, digging a fingernail into the button-hole on her cutoffs. "It don't take four people to pick up a phone... Victor?" She waved four fingers in his face in case he didn't realize how many there were of us all together. "You know she not gone call," she snapped. Victor grabbed her wrist, pushing her fingers away from him. "You talk too much," he told her and moved to the other side of the shade under the awning. Nina slid in beside me and nudged my knee. "Bet you a icy she don't call," she said in a low voice so Victor wouldn't hear. I dug in my pockets and brought up nothing but a couple balls of lint. "I

got nothing. Ask me tomorrow.” She flicked the lint back at me with a painted nail.

“Tomorrow ain’t gonna help me today, I neeeeeeed one! I’ll just go round the corner and ask Carlos or one of them to get me one.” I choked on a laugh. “Just like that, huh?”

I asked her. Nina shrugged. “Just like I got these kicks.” She slung one of her tan legs over mine and wiggled a foot. The scratch-less swish sign glinted in the sun. I figured that was the truth. Nina’s smile turned young boys stupider and grown men into suckers.

If Carlos and them thought that lighting each other’s hair on fire would get my sister’s attention, they’d probably be fighting over the matches. “Well, I’m a staywith Vic. Rico

coming around here with the bike in a little bit,” I told her. Nina blew her bangs out her eyes and smirked at me, then stood up and dusted off her butt. “Hunh, yeah. I’ll be back

and you’ll see – y’all still gone be sittin right here. What flavor you want?” I looked up at Nina. If it hadn’t been for the same stick out ears and matching lips know one would

ever have known we were sisters. “Pina,” I said. She straightened the tongue of her Nikes and stood up, shooting Victor a nasty look before crossing the street and switching over

to where a group of boys who went to the junior high were tossing a handball around.

I slumped back down against the bench outside the Suddz’ n Such and looked through the window at washer number four, watching Harry’s Scooby-Doo pajamas flop

around like fish caught in a net. I caught a glance of myself in the glass reflection and saw a splotch of Tahitian Treat just underneath the neckline of my shirt. I thought about

all the words I knew and some new ones I could make up to cuss out Harry with as I yanked the tee up over my head, walked through the door and over to the machines,

tossing it in with the rest of our load. When I headed back outside I saw there were sweat spots on the metal bench from where the backs of my legs had been. I smoothed out the bottom of my undershirt - that morning I'd put it on inside out – and tucked in the tag so no one could tell, then wiped the bench clean and sat back down. It was one of Nina's stupid hand-me-downs with little pink ruffles around the armholes, the kind she used to wear before she woke up one day with a body like a Barbie. "Where your shirt at?" Victor asked, moving toward me. There was a sharpness in his voice that made me sit up straighter. "Harry," I explained. He clutched my elbow and held me at arm's length, then glanced around worriedly. "You don't got nothing else to put on?" I shook my head and nodded at the washing machine. "I only got them two that's in there." I sucked in my belly so the ribcage jutted out like the kids with those flies in their eyes on the tv commercials. I closed my eyes and ran a finger down both sides, marking the time that had passed each long bone. I went up and down, up and down then back again, until finally Victor hit my stomach with a loud thwack. "You was turnin blue," Victor grinned at me.

~

One time when Tio Bipe drank enough of his brown stuff to start talking to the lampshade I heard him say that the man who would have been our father was the only

one my mother ever cared about. I hid behind the couch and made Rico lay down next to me, trying not to sneeze out cobwebs so we could ear-hustle the rest of the story without him knowing we were there. Victor always said that if our family was half-way legit, I'd probably make a great spy the way I can find a way to hide myself in plain sight. Such a waste, my Tio told the coffee table. Still young, and already so many babies to look after. Smart but cabezota, so that when they came at him the first time he should have backed down but didn't. My mother, when she saw him, shook her fists and fell to the ground screaming oh my husband! oh my life! And when no one listened she tore at her heart and beat her belly, round and ripe with a baby because there was nobody else for her blows to fall on, no one to take the blame. Then the blood came and she hoped she would die, but somebody called an ambulance and that's how I got born.

Our mother wears her sadness always, the ways the viejas keep their shoulders covered with sweaters even after the world grows warm with the sun. I don't know how the hours pass for her. Slowly, I think. Maybe she divides her time in the same way she divides her heart, between hungriness and hating. Hating us three; Victor, Nina, and me, because we remind her of him and hating Harry cause he don't. The bags under her eyes have gotten heavier this year, as if there was a vacuum inside of her sucking all of the color out of her face. Her over-shirts are always misbuttoned and three sizes too big, and everything about her seems to be shrinking but her belly. "You don't wanna be a mama then close your legs to every man that looks sideways at you," the aunts all scold her when she shows up on the doorstep with her stomach stretched tight again wringing her



hands at the sky asking what to do, what to do. They suck their teeth and stick rosaries in her pockets, steering her towards the church or the Santero up in 5B. But my mother has always gone her own way.

~

The phone was ringing again but this time we all stayed still. I let my eyes follow the blur of clothes in their even, sweeping motions. “Ay shorty!” the guy named Ace resting on the hood of the Dodge next to the payphone called out. “You Victor?” Slowly, my brother nodded. “Make it quick, y’all can’t be tyin up the line when I got deals to make.” I felt a prickle shoot down my spine and looked up to see the overheated air conditioner leaking cooling fluid onto my shoulder blade. Victor stood and wiped the back of his neck, running his tongue across his lips. The bigger boys studied him as he walked over to the corner and took the phone from Victor’s outstretched hand. “Yeah?” His voice shook a little and he faked a cough, trying to get the words out a few notes deeper than I knew he felt. The one they called Maytag pushed off the wall and broke from the group. He was blacker and wider than the rest, with short arms that looked like toothpicks stuck on both sides of a marshmallow. A burnt marshmallow. He glided toward my brother and made a circle around the payphone. “Ma?” a beat, and then Victor

went on. “Yeah, Pea, what’s going on? Where she at?” There was a stretch of quiet, and when I looked up at Victor I saw his face had twisted and gone a shade lighter than I had ever seen it before. He saw me staring and quickly turned his back to me. He leaned into the phone, trying to muffle his voice but I heard him say in a hoarse whisper, “I’m a come, just stay there. Gimme thirty minutes, thirty minutes.” And then he slammed the phone down so hard it jumped back off the hook and swung back and forth like a hung spider dangling on a thread.

~

The first time had been last Fall just when the wind was starting to knock at the window and make us wish the heat was on. Our phone had been cut off again and the electric man that we always hid from whenever he came around said he was tired of playing games and was taking the line out for good. Moreno from downstairs said we could use the payphone outside his bodega for emergencies, and that was a big deal because everyone knew only the corner boys used that one for business. He wrote the number down on the back of a yellow receipt and folded it over before handing it to Victor. “Just in case,” he added brightly. Victor took the paper from him and said, “Thank you very much, sir.” Moreno gave him a look that started by traveling over each

of us, standing in a row like dice falling, then moved down to Victor's sneakers that were bulging at the toe, and his eyes dimmed a little.

When we got home Victor had torn part of the top of the cornflake box and written the number again in bold letters with a sharpie we found behind the fridge. Then he'd wrote on the back of it "do not loose" and covered it with plastic wrap so that it looked just like one of those cardboard chips the Africans give you when you go in the dollar stores on the Ave and they take your bags from you so you can't steal anything from theirs. He left it on the table by the door with a note before we all went to bed.

Early the next morning when I was stretched out next to Harry in the living room and the first light was starting to creep in through the crack in the blinds, I heard a jangling at the door and opened my eyes to see a bony hand sliding through to undo the chain bolt Tio Bipe had put in just before Halloween. I felt Harry squirm beside me and flung my arm over him to keep him warm so he wouldn't wake up, then hunkered down under the blanket so I could just barely peek over the side. The door creaked open and my mother was standing in a halo of smoke. She teetered across the threshold and paused in front of the small table, leaning so far to the left I swore she'd tip over. She brought the lit cigarette slowly to her lips and then she reached down to pick up the cardboard chip that Victor had made, tucking it inside her turquoise bra. As she moved through the room the air filled with a sick smell mixed with tobacco and stale raisins. A chair groaned as she collapsed into it and I heard one heel clunk to the floor. I waited until her breathing slowed, then popped up and swung my legs over Harry, climbing out of the couch and

tiptoeing over to where she had sprawled out in the ripped lazy-boy. Her eyelids were half closed and the cigarette had practically burnt down to her gray fingertips, an icicle of ash dangling from the filter. When she still didn't move I picked it from between her thumb and index and put it out on the takeout lid lying on the floor, a slight sizzle escaping from the squashed Newport.

~

Victor shoved his hands in his pockets, his eyebrows drawn together with worry. "What happened?" I asked him. He stayed quiet, his eyes fixed on some place behind my shoulder. "Here come Rico," he said in a flat voice, and I turned my head to see Rico peddling slowly up the sidewalk, waving at me as he came closer. "Why don't you go on with him?" It was more of an order than a question. "I wanna stay with you," I said, but he moved away from me and ran his hand along his jaw. "I gotta go take care of this. I'ma ask Titi to watch Harry. I'll see you back at home." And before I could say anything, he dipped through the narrow space between the cars and walked briskly down the opposite side of the street. "Where he runnin off to?" Rico asked, struggling to untangle his shoelace from the bike chain as he climbed off. I bit my lip and watched his figure grow smaller and smaller in the distance, then shrugged and picked at the rubber flapping up on the seat. "Oh," Rico said, reading the answer in my face. He picked a rock

out of the back wheel and let it drop into the gutter with a plunk. “Come on,” he said, kicking it out of sight underneath the hood of the Dodge. “I’ll let you ride first.”

~

Rico and I have a secret; we’re twins. Some people know it and others don’t. Rico says that’s because we’re the kind that don’t always look alike right away. Rico’s hair might be a little darker than mine, but our teeth are the same. And how else can anyone explain how the two of us could end up born on the same street in months with the letter M, with matching chicken pox scars next to our belly-buttons and two mothers so mixed up in the head they wouldn’t remember what day it was or might just as easily go to the grocery store with two shoes and come back with one. Rico’s abuela watches him and his brothers, but she is always cooking and sending food over with him in the tupperware and having us come over on Saturdays to watch the novelas on the big set her oldest son got on sale at the Sears. She tells us to call her Titi since she’s like family anyway because she and our grandma who passed when our mother was sixteen grew up together on the Island. Rico and I have been in our own world since we were born. Titi thinks there must be a single brain split down the middle for each of us so that if one stubs their heel in the bathroom upstairs, the other one is across the street yelling conaso! She said once that me and Rico were like the sun and the moon, without ever saying which was which. But

Victor laughed and said uhn unh, that we were more like peanut butter and jelly. Rico was the jelly, because he goes down real easy. Everybody likes jelly. But me, I was peanut butter. The things I say stick to the roof of people's mouths and make them itch. I'm hard to take without the jelly.

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It was Rico's day to have the bike, we'd thought up the schedule back in June after we'd won it in a contest at the Community Center. We were going to switch off every other day, but since we were always together it didn't seem to matter so much whose day it was. Victor had said he was going to teach us how to ride since he'd joked it was a shame we were going on eleven years old and didn't know how to ride a bike, but he never had time anymore. Rico's older brothers never did anything for free unless it meant they were getting girls, even though they almost died laughing the first couple times they saw us toppling over when we took off the training wheels.

We were taking turns riding it up and down the street trying to pop a wheelie like Marcos from down the block had shown us the week before, and waiting to get in on the game the boys were playing on the hoop somebody had screwed up on the wall beside the Chino shop. When the game hit fifteen the losing team stepped off and it was our turn to get on, but then Frankie Sanchez came running across the street claiming he had called next. "You didn't neither," I told him, hugging the ball to my chest. "We called next ten

minutes ago and I'm playin." Frankie made a move to swipe the ball from me and I elbowed him in the side. "Naw, you isn't," he whined. "Yes, I AM." I said. "Ey yo, Rico!" Frankie shouted as Rico started to move over from where he had set the bike down by the trash cans. "Come here and tell your girlfriend to chill, son!" Frankie was always saying dumb stuff like that, and Nina said it was because he liked me. I didn't see how that was possible, since it seemed every chance he got he was trying to pull my hair or trip me when it was my turn to double-dutch, but I figured Nina was usually wrong about everything. My eyes flashed with anger and I shoved him. "You shut up Franklin Sanchez, you know he ain't by boyfriend!" He pushed me back and the ball flew out of my hands. "And you ain't never gone get one if somebody don't teach you how to at like a girl – everybody know your mama can't do it!" The ball dribbled down the street and bounced against the curb.

"What you said?" I asked slowly, real quiet the way Victor does when one of us gets fresh with him. And looking at the shame creeping into Frankie's face I knew he was already sorry but I didn't care. I felt my knuckles go white as I watched his mouth fall open in a small O and then I was on top of him, pounding with my fists clenched tight like rosebuds trying to rip out his eyes with my thorns. Salty tears of hurt were spattering his cheeks by the time Rico and Sherard could grab me up off him, and as I was being hauled away by the waist the high school boys were falling over themselves laughing and pointing at Frankie getting rocked by a broomstick skinny girl. "You crazy!" He yelped through puffy lips. "You crazy, and you gone turn out just like her!"

The excitement of the afternoon drained away as the streets began to empty and the familiar sounds moved indoors. My stomach snarled at me as Rico handed me a piece of ice to put on the cut beneath my ear and we both settled back against the warm stoop. Just then the two strays that we had spotted a few nights before came strolling down the street. We watched them dipping in between the cars and stopping every couple of steps to scrape their rough pink tongues along the bottom of a coffee can or turn in circles chasing each others tails. Just like us, I thought, looking at Rico sprawled out next to me with his hat pulled down over his eyes. Alone with each other but not lonely. With no gates to scratch at and no place to go, only hours of time to watch the shadows splash across the curb and lick their way up the sidewalk until they stretched into nothingness. No low whistles or rattling tin cans or noisy shouts to tell them time for dinner. No soft brown elbows leaning out of second story windows to call them home.

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Victor hadn't come back yet and I figured we ought to go find out where he was at. The last time she had called and he had gone to pick her up it had been at a house down under the bridge. He had made me and Harry wait out by the curb while he went in and I hunted around to find a stick for Harry to play with. "Think I know where he is," I



told Rico, and climbing onto the back of the bike I leaned against his shoulder and pointed in the direction for him to go.

The house sat a little apart from the others on its street. At one point someone had painted it the color of the crabs they sold in paper bags out the back of Pop's Mariscos truck beside the El train, but that was a long time ago. Since then the paint had thinned and the glass-less windows in both floors gaped open like two empty eyes. As Rico and I came closer to the house we could hear low voices coming from inside and hunkered down underneath the steps below the windowsill to listen in. "It started last night," SweetPea said in a high-pitched voice, then broke into a fit of coughing. "Said she didn't want to go to no hospital," he wheezed. Rico grabbed my legs and boosted me up so I could see in. Victor was pacing back and forth inside, clutching a raggedy bundle with rust colored spots to his chest and kicking aside the old newspapers scattered on the floor while SweetPea perched on the edge of a low boxspring that was stained red and yellow in the dim light. "Came back with some blankets after I called you but she musta up and left. You gotta get that out of here ca-cause I d-don't want no trouble," he stammered. My brother stopped moving to stare at him blankly, and SweetPea quickly cast his eyes down to the dirty floor. Victor said something I couldn't hear and SweetPea nodded, standing up painfully and following my brother towards the front of the house. "Hey, you know how it is, man" he said, scratching his arm and shifting his weight from one foot to the other as Victor turned to face him in the doorway. And when my brother didn't say anything, he tiredly shut the door. Victor jumped a little as the lock snapped into place,

then looked up and down the street before ducking down the stairs and turning right into the alley.

We followed, resting the bike on the wall and then pressing ourselves up against the bricks, straining to see into the darkness. He paused in front of a dumpster and then carefully balanced the unmoving bundle in one arm, lifting up the metal lid with the other. I held my breath and watched him gently place the pile into the belly of the dumpster, then let the lid drop back down. Victor slumped against the siding and pulling his legs into him, letting his head fall onto his knees. Both red hands lay still at his sides. A rat skidded out of the shadows and knocked over the top of an aluminum trash can, sending it clattering to the ground. It whirred around for a moment and then slowed to a stop, but Victor stayed still.

“Let’s go” Rico whispered, after what seemed like a long time. He tugged on my undershirt, urging me around the corner. I peeled my eyes away from the sight of Victor lying on the floor like a crumpled shirt and walked over to where Rico was waiting with the bike, swallowing a tight ball of saliva that was too dry to spit. I settled into the broken seat and gripped the handlebars while Rico climbed up onto the back pegs. He dug his fingers into my collarbone to steady himself and I let the pain shoot up my neck and flood my brain. I wanted to leave my brother and whatever was buried back in that alley far behind and didn’t want to think about what would be waiting for me when I got home. There was still maybe a half hour left of light in the sky and I still had puddles to glide through and races to win. I peddled slowly past the iron-faced fire escapes and the bike

wobbled under all the weight, then came right again as I gathered speed. I pumped my legs as fast as I ever had and sliced through the water that gushed from the hydrant, closing my eyes so that the world was nothing more than the tread of wheels and the water that thundered across the silent street.