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## Conflation

D has been dating A for three weeks; tonight is the night he hopes to finally make love to her. He has a couple hours to tidy the place up before she arrives. John Coltrane's *A Love Supreme* is spinning on the turntable and the apartment smells like Windex.

He changes the sheets on his double bed, from white cotton to red satin, and fluffs the pillows before laying them just so. On the nightstand closest to his dresser he places a bottle of chilled green Gatorade, an energy bar, and an unopened value pack of ultra thin condoms. The way he figures it, A deserves nothing but the best—the sweetest, gentlest, most passionate sex. And though he would like to be the kind of man that thrives off the cuff, he knows that spontaneity is not his style and never has been.

He rolls up the shag carpet in the living room and takes it outside. It's full of hair and crumbled leaves and stale potato chip crumbs. Just shaking the rug isn't enough. He asks the Vietnamese man next door if he can borrow a vacuum cleaner. The man smiles and nods. They're not friends but the man does at least recognize D as a friendly person.

There's nothing D covets more than this recognition of friendliness; nothing more valuable to him than the currency of popularity.

After he vacuums and dusts, he turns off all but the kitchen light adjacent to the living room. He lights a Yankee Candle, flips to side B of *A Love Supreme*, and sits on the leather sofa just opposite the speakers. The album is his own personal aphrodisiac. It jostles his imagination and animates his memories.

When he was twelve years old, his best friend's older sister (sixteen at the time) irreparably altered his conception of "spending the night." She tasted like yoghurt, anchovies and cigarette smoke. When it was over, she said, "You're welcome," even though he never thanked her, or said any other word for that matter. She made him promise not to tell a soul and though he never did, he still remembers how strong she was for a girl.

He's had many lovers since—a middle-aged woman with a fresh scar from her C-section, both a woman he met on the Internet and a woman he met at the YMCA, a Miss North Carolina finalist with 32DDD's and a Mexican maidservant that regularly mailed her earnings back to Irapuato to pay for her children's dental bills. There's no one else he's been more intimate with than these women. And though none of them have stuck, he doesn't complain. Hell, he hardly ever expresses his emotions to anyone.

But he's recklessly confident that A will be different. She's agreed to come over—maybe not under the best of circumstances, but agreed nonetheless—and he's sure that he can show her how much he cares.

\* \*

It all started on a Monday.

He placed a glass to her right and a roll of silverware to her left and said, “Hello ma’am, how’re you doing tonight?” He addressed all women in the restaurant as “ma’am,” even those as young as her.

She looked up from her drink menu, smiled, and looked back down.

Thirty minutes later, after she’d finished a couple cocktails and most of her entrée, he approached again. “Still enjoying everything?”

She leaned back and squinted. “Enjoying is one word, I guess.”

He frowned. “Can I interest you in a box, maybe?”

“Maybe you can interest me in more than a box. I guess it depends, though. What’s your name?”

He told her his name.

“Do you have plans tonight?”

He shook his head and looked around, in case his manager might be watching. He often worried that the wait staff considered him lazy. She noticed his glance and said, “Get back to work,” winking. “Oh, and another thing—I’m going to need a refill soon, please.”

He took her glass, found her waiter, and tried for the next few minutes to avoid eye contact. But he could never entirely avoid the sight of her. She wore no apparent make up and had brown eyes as soft as her hazelnut hair was straight. There was nothing gaudy or show-offish about her outfit, but when he felt her gaze he felt substantial.

Half an hour later, as the restaurant was winding down, she called him over to ask for her check.

“Sure, right away.”

“Wait, don’t go yet. Are you a student?”

He shook his head. “No. I’m taking a break from that.”

Her grin stretched almost ear-to-ear. “Well if you don’t mind going out with a student, I think maybe we should get a drink when you’re done.”

He took this offer to mean sex and said, “Yeah, okay. A drink would be nice. I’ll be done in just a few minutes.”

After he clocked out, she led him to her favorite bar, two blocks south. She ordered a mojito and he an old fashioned. Waiting for their drinks, she asked, “Are you a democrat?”

He laughed. “Yeah. I am.”

What little tension that had been in her face seemed to melt away. She then proceeded to ask him all kinds of other personal questions—where are you from, why’d you drop out, what’re you going to do with your life?

He explained that he was born and raised in Brooklyn, the shared property of divorced parents, with as much career ambition as a geriatric sloth. “School just wasn’t for me, I don’t think. I saw pretty fast that there weren’t any classes to answer the questions I had.”

She nodded and muttered to herself. “Perfect, yes, perfect.”

“But what about you?” He watched her carefully, felt as the bourbon began to watch him.

“I come from Progress, Tennessee,” she said. “Town with more churches than stoplights. Yeah, I shit you not: Progress. Except that the people there’re more backwards than a gymnast.” He nodded along as she continued to recite her spiel, what amounted to

the worst sales pitch ever. He could tell that this wasn't her first time giving it. "My family's no different," she said. "Old fashioned kind of people. Very conservative, very religious."

"And you're not?" he asked.

She shook her head and mimed a prayer. "Praise the Lord that I haven't been smitten yet." For a moment, he had to resist the urge to reach out and touch her cheek.

She continued to do most of the talking (and talked mostly about her parents, with whom she seemed to disagree with on as many points as possible) until closing time. He paid both their tabs with the tips he'd earned that night and offered that she come back to his apartment. She smiled but shook her head.

"Oh, okay. Well do you think maybe I can see you again?"

She seemed to think it over. "How about this weekend?"

"Perfect." They exchanged numbers and stepped outside, into the early autumn night.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" she asked.

"It is." He craned his neck ever so slightly towards her.

But she gave no sign of noticing, staring intently at the empty street before them.

\* \*

That weekend they went disc golfing at the University's outdoor education center. It was a clear day with lots of sun and a thin breeze. Though she'd never thrown a Frisbee of any kind before and though she required far more coaching than he could possibly offer, he seized on every opportunity to study her form.

On the third hole, he lost his own Frisbee to a wild slice deep in the woods. They searched for thirty minutes without luck when she suddenly began cheering.

“Did you find it?” he asked.

“No,” she said, “it’s called positive visualization.”

And yet no matter how hard they tried to coordinate their positive visions, they eventually had to give up and walk the rest of the course without competition. “So what do you like to do when you’re not at work?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” he said.

“Oh come on. Don’t be coy.”

But it wasn’t coyness so much as genuine honesty. “I like music,” he said. “All kinds, and I’m not just saying that.”

“You play any instruments?”

He nodded. “French horn.”

She smiled and inhaled deeply through her nose, as if to begin caging the stratosphere. Such was the power she seemed to hold over her surroundings.

As they finished their walk, with the sun hanging in the sky behind them, he watched their shadows move side-by-side. If we could just melt into one larger shadow, he thought, and again he had to resist the urge to reach out and hold her hand.

Back in the parking lot, she said, “I’m sorry you lost your Frisbee.”

“That’s okay. It was worth it.”

They climbed into the car and sat silently for a moment. “This might be a crazy idea,” she said, “but do you want to get dinner with my parents next weekend?”

He turned to face her, carefully choosing his words. “It’s not that I wouldn’t like to. But don’t you think—”

“Too early?” she asked.

“Well, yeah.” He exhaled, unaware that he’d been holding his breath at all. “I mean we did only *just* meet.”

She nodded. “Can I be honest?” Without waiting for his response, she continued, “I want to show you off. I think you’re great. Such a free spirit.” She laughed. “I think it would be awesome if my parents saw me with you.”

He felt his face warm at the flattery. And so triggered, the words fell out. “I would love to.”

“Sorry?”

“I’ll do it. I’ll meet them.”

She smiled triumphantly. “Perfect. I can’t wait to see what they think of you.”

After a pause, or as if after some thought, she leaned over the gearshift and kissed him. “Consider that my ‘Thank You’.”

He tried to kiss back, but she quickly pulled away.

“There’s more where that came from,” she said, “If you’re patient.”

Later that night, as he stared at the shadows on the ceiling, he considered two possibilities. First: that for all her talk, she was in fact no less conservative than her parents; and second: that it was only a matter of time. But he completely missed the third option, the only option that really mattered—that though she enjoyed his company, he would only ever be a supporting cast member in her story, temporarily fetishized for his difference.



\* \*

The following weekend, she picked him up thirty minutes before dinner, dressed in the most scintillating outfit he'd ever seen: a low-cut shirt spun from a high-transparency fabric, a push-up bra, and a tight red skirt. He was surprised to see how much make-up she was wearing. And though he couldn't say whether it was the nose ring, or the jet-black nail polish, or the mascara, she seemed darker than before; impossible to miss, lugging around the kind of deliberate sex appeal that registers on images taken from outer space.

He swallowed. "Should I change?"

"No. Please don't."

So he wore his usual: a backwards baseball cap, a wrinkled polo shirt, and cargo shorts that he's owned since middle school.

They met A's parents at an Indian restaurant, where she'd insisted they go.

At first glance, A's father reminded D of a poor man's Santa Claus, squat and bald with a white goatee and a big stomach. A's mother, on the other hand, had the curliest hair he'd ever seen, all tangled up like a big blonde weed. Neither of them were particularly intimidating. He shook their hands enthusiastically. "It's a pleasure," he said.

They asked him several questions as they waited for the food, but not nearly as many as A had asked that first night. In fact, it seemed A was ready to answer many of their questions for him.

"He's not in school, you know," she said. "A kind of beatnik, lost in time."

Her parents nodded blankly.

She then began recounting some of the things he'd told her about growing up in the city.

"It really wasn't all that," he said, smiling politely. "Anyways, what's it like in Progress?"

It became clear as they spoke that they were not the stupid, backwards people that A had made them out to be. In fact, they seemed like a truly happy couple. Whenever one of them spoke, the other listened carefully, always ready to provide support. And so despite all of A's squirming in the seat beside him, he almost wished that these could've been his own parents, loving partners.

Outside afterwards, A's dad said, "Well I sure hope that we get to see you again."

D smiled. "It was really nice to meet you both after hearing so much."

A let both of her parents hug her while she said goodbye, standing as stiffly as the Indian papadum flatbread inside. And then they were on their way, each pair walking a different direction on the cracked sidewalk.

"They really liked you," she said, shaking her head.

When she dropped him off, he asked if she wanted to come in, maybe have a drink, listen to some music? She checked her watch. "No, sorry, I think it's too late."

He sat for a moment longer, trying not to stare. "Are you mad?"

She shook her head and unlocked the door.

"I didn't do anything wrong, did I?"

She shook her head again and began readjusting the rearview mirror.

\* \*

Three days passed without word from her. He continued to call, convinced that her inaccessibility only made her more valuable than the others, and that if she just gave him a chance they could truly make love. On the third day, he was so distracted that he dropped a tray of wine glasses at work.

On the fourth day, she finally answered. Her voice sounded weightless, impatient on the other end of the line. “Look, I know what you want,” she said.

“You do?” He remembered thoughts of touching her face, holding her hand, seeing her smile.

“Yes, I do. And you can have it—it really doesn’t mean anything to me. I just have one condition.”

Neither of them spoke for a few seconds.

“I’ll come over tomorrow, but only if you promise to stop calling.”

He nodded. “Okay.”

“I mean it,” she said. “Promise.”

“Yeah, okay. I promise.”

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*A Love Supreme* ends and the stylus lifts with a hiss and an airy pop. He’s always felt that Jazz was the ultimate lovemaking music and if there’s a difference tonight it’s only a matter of magnitude—a matter of showing her just how much he cares.

He’s on his feet as soon as he hears the knock. He unlocks the deadbolt, removes the chain, and swings the door open. Her expression is flat. A large purse hangs from her

shoulder and moonlight spills across her hair, her leather jacket, and her dark military style boots. “Let me in,” she says.

He stands aside.

She grabs his wrist roughly and leads him to the bedroom. Her boots thud against the hardwood like hooves. When they get to his bedroom she says, “Don’t speak. Okay?”

“What’re you—”

“Quiet,” she says. “Another word and I’ll leave.”

She places her purse at the foot of the bed and unzips it quickly. She pulls out a pair of handcuffs and a blindfold, and begins to undress, folding her clothes as she takes them off. She puts the boots at the foot of the bed, and her folded clothes beside them. By the time she’s done, standing naked before him, he isn’t sure what to do. The worst part—the most frightening part—is how small she suddenly seems to him. How easy it would be to break her. As he feels her glare, he feels fragile himself.

“Isn’t this what you wanted?” she asks.

He frowns, the word *Romance* stuck deep in his throat.

Her tone is bone-dry. “Oh come on. You think I didn’t see the way you looked at me from the start? You think I didn’t know what you wanted? *All* that you wanted?”

He knows from the movies he’s seen and the books he’s read and women he’s known in the past that his heartbeat should be pounding as proof of his arousal, but it’s doing just the opposite. This isn’t the way it was supposed to go; perhaps she’s right—perhaps this *is* what he wanted—but never like this, so cold and calculated an exchange. Everything is slowing down. The present is making way for the events of the past three weeks, as they rush by him like fireflies surfing a brisk breeze.

“You’re a sex-crazed deviant,” she says. “It’s clear as day, everyone can see it.”

But if I’m a deviant, he wonders, what does that make her? The handcuffs, the blindfold—what is she trying to prove? Can she not stand to look at me, to feel me?

Her pubic hair is shaved in a way that makes her look like a child. It reminds him of his own childhood. At last he says, “I think maybe you should leave.”

He steps back into the living room, blows out the candle he lit earlier, and turns on the lights. A couple minutes later she comes out. She walks past him and opens the door. He knows that he’ll never see her again, but he doesn’t look up, even after she slams the door.

Hours after she’s gone, the accusation still clings to his mind: *sex-crazed deviant. Clear as day*. He wonders if this might be true, if all the women he’s been with have sensed this. And if so, why? Why should I be damaged? Do I not have a choice? Do I not love just as fully? Or even more?

Eventually he goes to the turntable and lifts the record from the platter. It feels light in his hands, as if made of nothing substantial. The grooves look dull from overuse. He takes a deep breath and bends the LP until he feels the vinyl snap.

Soon, he vows, I will start a new collection.

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### The Final Anniversary

Mami always flies up from Ft. Lauderdale to visit me three times a year—Christmas, Thanksgiving, and August 4<sup>th</sup>: the anniversary of my father's death. We inherited the tradition almost by accident, in the hours between the funeral service and her return flight, when we discovered that nothing lubricates fond reminiscence like a shared bottle of Brugal and a tall pot of *sancocho* with its boiled green plantains, yucca, and savory beef broth. And yet the accident became ingrained. Because if there's one thing I know about Dominicanos, it's that our traditions are sacred. Nothing gives us greater pride.

Except, perhaps, our fathers.

The second year we made *yucca con huevos, chocolate de agua, y mangu*. All prepared in my tiny kitchen, with as much love and *aceite* as we could manage. Once

again we doused ourselves in Brugal, and once again we celebrated the man that died of liver cancer. We laughed about our lives both before and after we moved to the states. About the time he kidnapped and sold the neighbor's incessantly barking Chihuahua, the time he fell asleep halfway up the hill on his Yamaha RX 100, and the time he stood tall in the *tipco* and demanded better pay for *los Haitianos*. We remembered how tall he stood, and how far the shadow was cast.

We didn't go to bed that night until well after three and even then I couldn't sleep.

Every year since, we've made a new Dominican feast, both for him and for us. But this year is the big one—a day I marked on my calendar months ago—the tenth anniversary.

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"Mi amor," she says, smiling and stepping into a hug, burrowing nose-first into the crook of my armpit. The tangled curls of her hair tickle my neck. They've long since turned gray at the roots and every time I see her she feels a little more brittle in my arms. I pat her back and breathe in the smell of soil and warm summer rain in the garden—a reminder of my Floridian childhood.

"Why didn't you call from the airport? You know I could've picked you up."

She tuts and shakes her head. "Honey that car is dangerous. How many times have I told you to get something new?"

I smile and hug her again, more tightly this time. "Come in."

She follows me through the living room and into the kitchen, where she sits down on a chair too dark to match the table. The kitchen is clean and without decoration, apart from the photos of her and Dad on the wall. I lean against the refrigerator.

“How’s work?” she asks.

“Same old same old.”

“Nothing interesting at the office?”

“I got a raise. I guess there’s that...”

“That’s great!” She clears her throat. “Did you ever look anymore into getting a job in Florida? I know I asked before, but did anything ever come of that?”

“I don’t know Ma. It’s just that I have all my routines here. There’s a comfort to it.”

She holds her hands in her lap and stares at the sand-colored linoleum between her feet. Her fingers move restlessly. “Are you going to vote?” she asks.

“Probably not. You know, politics, politicians, they’re just so... disconnected. They’re not like us. I have *real* things to deal with. Like this dinner, Ma, let’s talk about that.” I grin in her direction but her eyes are still fixed on the floor. “I know it’s kind of simple, but I was thinking maybe we could go with a classic: *arroz de coco y gandules con ensalada de papa*. Maybe grab some *tostones* from Mami Lupitas? Dad’s favorite. Are you listening?”

“Yeah, yeah. Of course. But baby, there’s something else I want to talk about too.” She finally looks up and into my eyes. Beneath the makeup are crow’s feet, lines I’ve never seen on her before.

“Okay... Go on.”

But she doesn’t.

I leave her to her thoughts and get out the ingredients. Fresh from my trip to the store yesterday: three russet potatoes, two beets the size of fists, two carrots, both a



yellow and a red onion, a green bell pepper, a head of garlic, half a bunch of cilantro, slightly less oregano, a chicken bullion cube, mayonnaise and white vinegar, a can of gandules, of coconut milk, of tomato paste, and a sack of long grain white rice.

I scrub the potatoes and beets with the red hand brush I keep under the sink. Against the firmness of the bristles, some of the skin comes off with the dirt. I rinse them in the sink before getting out the peeler. It has a sharp and pointed end that's perfect for gouging out any growth in the potatoes. After I've done that, I flay the rest of the skin and wash my hands.

"I got HBO," she says suddenly. "I've been catching up on all the classics I've always heard about. The Wire, The Sopranos, Six Feet Under. That one's my favorite: Six Feet Under. Anyways, HBO has some great shows, honey."

I almost laugh. "*That's* what you wanted to talk about?" I get out my biggest knife and start dicing the potatoes.

"I've been reading too," she says, ignoring me. "One book a week, alternating between fiction and non-fiction. You know, when you were a kid you used to read so much. You used to love it. Especially that science fiction and fantasy stuff."

"Yeah, I know." I fill a large pot with water and toss in the diced potatoes. "Remember how Papi used to read to us every night before bedtime, back when we first moved to Miami?"

She nods but doesn't match my smile.

"Remember when he read *The Hobbit*?"

"Yeah, I remember." She sighs. "Honey, have you gone on any dates recently?"

I grunt, turn on the stove, and start dicing the beets. “You know I don’t *need* someone to be happy, right?”

“Yeah, I know. Of course you don’t. It’s just, well, I sometimes worry about you. That’s all.”

By the time I’m done with the beets, both my hands and the cutting board are stained a dark purple. I scrub my fingers under the faucet but the color doesn’t entirely wash off. Next, I slice the carrots and toss them in.

I pull out another pot and combine one cup of coconut milk, two cups of water, and one and a half cups of rice. While I wait for it to come to a boil, I pull out a third and final saucepan. I turn back to her. “What about you, Mami? You dating anyone?” I can’t help but grin.

I begin dicing the yellow onion, waiting for her response. But it never comes. And as the full weight of that silence sinks in, the knife slips from the onion and onto the tip of my thumb. “*Carajo*,” I shout, “fuck!”

She jumps from her seat. “What’s wrong?”

I show her the cut, and the thin chunk missing from my fingernail.

“Do you have any Band-Aids?”

I shake my head and pull a paper towel off the roll on top of the fridge. Using a piece of masking tape, I wrap and fix the paper towel to the tip of my finger. The last thing I need is blood getting into the food. While I readjust the paper towel, I turn back to her. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

She blushes. I’ve never seen her blush before.

“I thought we could talk about anything. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because it’s still so new. Really, I promise—it’s only been a few weeks. I didn’t want you to think it was serious, before it was.”

The rice pot hisses, about to boil over. I lower the heat and put the top on. Mami slowly reaches out and squeezes my cheek. “This doesn’t change anything. I’m still your same old Mami. You know that, right?”

I look back at the mess I’ve made on the countertop. “Yeah Mom, I know. And I love you no matter what. Of course I do. It’s just strange, that’s all, hard to imagine you with someone else. I mean, someone that’s not him.”

She doesn’t say anything for a while. Just nods to herself. “I’m glad that you had such a good relationship with your father. Really, I am. But that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t move on. We needed to mourn. I know that. And we needed our traditions too. But it’s been such a long time and honestly... if I look at the past five or six years, it’s pretty clear that I’ve stopped coming up here for him. I do it for *you*. And I know I shouldn’t even be saying this but, but—”

“But what?”

“No, never mind.”

“No, what? Tell me.”

“It’s nothing. I was just going to say that he wasn’t exactly the best husband. But that’s all in the past now.”

“Yeah, Ma, no one’s perfect.”

We stand silently for a while, each in our own space. Finally, she says, “Here baby, let me help finish cooking. God knows we still have to eat.”

I stand aside and watch her as she picks up where I left off. Once the rice is cooked and cooling, she opens and drains a can of gandules. She stirs them into a pan with sautéed onion and pepper and fresh herbs, lowers the heat, and lets everything simmer. The gandules look like swollen ticks. Finally, she mashes the boiled root veggies in a large aluminum bowl and mixes in the mayonnaise, salt, pepper, and vinegar. I reach around her to taste, as she mixes the potato salad, trying to find the right balance between sweet and bitter. The carrots and beets and mayonnaise combine as hot pink.

When everything's almost done, she suddenly laughs. She says, "There's no reason why we shouldn't still be able to open a bottle of Brugal, right?"

We open two.

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"What did you mean," I ask, "when you said he wasn't *exactly* the best husband?"

She holds her glass at eye level and smiles. "You sure you want to know?"

A couple hours have passed and the only light through the window now comes from a streetlamp in the parking lot. The rum supply is dwindling. The second bottle is nestled into the couch cushion between us. Our feet are propped up on the coffee table, and the empty plates are on the floor.

I nod. "Yeah, Mami, I'm sure I want to know. I accepted a long time ago that he wasn't perfect. How stupid would I have to be to deny it? I mean Christ, he was a Dominican man."

"That he was." She nods somberly. "But he had such hunger for life. Everyone always said so. You remember?"

I nod and sip from my glass.

“He was the first man that ever made me feel loved. For the longest time, I thought he was the right person for me and me alone. I thought I needed him. And deserved him too.”

“Yeah, but what about the dirty stuff?”

“Okay, okay, *calmate*. How can I say this properly?” She thinks it over for a moment, then suddenly giggles. Her dimples form perfect circles. “Let’s just say that your father had a hunger for a lot more than life. And that there’s no way in hell I was the first woman that ever felt loved by him. Or the last.”

I smile and nod, but this isn’t news to me. Dominican men and infidelity are the only sure couple in this world; and while the cause is debatable—I’ve heard culture, genetics, environment, even voodoo magic—the fact is as sure as gravity. It’s a fact that runs through my veins.

“But of course, you already knew that,” she says.

“Did the cheating ever make you really mad?”

“Honestly? No, not really. Looking back, some of it even seems funny. Some of the things he did. Just absurd.”

“Funny how?”

“Funny in all kinds of ways. I’ll give you an example. A year after we moved to Miami, he had an affair with a Puerto Rican woman named Carolina... did you ever hear about her?”

I shake my head.

“Right, that’s what I thought. I always tried to make sure he kept his dirty *morenas* as far from you as possible. Anyways, it didn’t take me long to realize that

something was off. He'd come home late some nights and go straight to the shower without even saying hello. So one night I go snooping. And what do I find, there in the pocket of that tacky denim jacket he used to wear all the time? I find this long ass letter, handwritten on yellow lined paper, like from a legal pad. And the handwriting was all pretty pretty, with big letters and a whole lot of embellishment. *Just* like a woman's writing, and all in Spanish too. Anyways, I read the letter while he was in the shower. And yes, it was Carolina. She was begging him to leave his wife, to leave his son. She reminded him that he'd promised to leave us for her. Of course, what she didn't know is that he would *never* do that. He wasn't that kind of man. He loved his family.

“But you know what he said when I showed him the letter?”

“What?”

“He said that it must've been written by your Tia Lucy. You know, the American. That's right, Carlos' third wife. He stood there in nothing but a towel, and didn't even miss a beat. He said, *coño, that Lucy wrote the letter*. Said that Lucy was madly in love with him but that he had turned her down. That she was angry now and that she was trying to frame him. He said that Lucy was jealous of me. When I reminded him that Lucy didn't speak Spanish, he accused Lucy of lying about that too. As if Lucy had this whole secret life... Can you imagine?”

I take a large gulp. “Yeah, I guess I can imagine.” He was always so quick on his feet. “But Mami, are you sure that's funny?”

She smiles to herself. “I'll tell you what I do know for sure—funny or not, it's done. It's over.” She looks up. But even though I'm the one who just asked the question,

I feel like her eyes are interrogating mine, as if it's me who has something to answer for. As if I'm not pulling my weight.

"Did you know he called me a *pariguayo* once?" I ask.

"No," she says, "I didn't."

I shake my head. "I don't even know why I think about it sometimes. It doesn't even make me angry. He was just teasing, you know, the way he always did."

She nods as if at a fond memory from her own childhood. "Hmm."

"I was eight. Sitting on Jesus's porch in Salcedo. Motorcyclists hooting and hollering as they flew up the street, winding between potholes not twenty feet in front of me. Merengue blaring from the neighbor's house, giving me a headache.

"Anyways, there we are. And he leans over to me and offers a Presidente. Just a beer, that's all. I thought about it for a second and said no."

The memory has only strengthened with time. For better or worse, as I sit on the couch beside her, it feels more real to me than anything that happened yesterday. I can suddenly feel every smell and taste every sight. I remember slapping blindly at mosquitos. I remember it being close to midnight, on a moonless night. I wasn't able to see the details of his face, at the time, but it's easy enough to reconstruct now. The sagging skin under his eyes, the tobacco stained teeth, the bushy mustache. Not handsome details, but full of warmth.

"So what happened?" she asks.

I smile. "Nothing. Not really. He just asked if I wanted a beer and I said no. But he'd already had a few by then and wasn't too shy or embarrassed to confront me on it. He said '*Pe coño, tú ere' pariguayo*'. And that was the end of it. But so what if I was a

*pariguayo*, a party-watcher, a pussy? So what if I was even worse? I still loved him.

That's the important thing, right?"

She pours the rest of the bottle and stands up. "*We* still loved him." Her body rocks in slow circles, forward and backward, like an antenna searching for signal. She speaks slowly, or else the rum speaks slowly through her. "I. Feel. Good."

"Me too."

"There's something therapeutic about it, don't you think? Putting all this out into the open. Talk therapy." She suddenly sits down again, on the edge of the coffee table, directly across from me.

"Well don't stop if you have more to say."

She pretends to stroke an invisible beard. "Careful what you wish for, *hijo mio*."

I reach out and pretend to yank the invisible beard.

She yelps like a kicked dog, but the smile never leaves her face. "Remember the apartment in The Bronx? You were only three. Remember?"

"No, Mami. Not at all."

"It was a really cheap place. Almost as many Dominicans as there were cockroaches. Your father had a few friends there, people he worked with. Professionals back home—teachers and engineers and police officers—but in the Bronx they were lucky to be dishwashers—"

"The American Dream," I interrupt.

She nods. "Exactly. More like a nightmare... So one night, your father comes stumbling into the apartment really late. I ask him where he's been. He just starts laughing."



Thinking about his laughter makes me start laughing too. There was always something infectious about it before. Still is, I guess.

“Yeah, honey—that’s *exactly* what he sounded like. And when he’s done laughing he repeats the question back to me—where’ve I been? I’ve been to the summit of Pico Duarte, highest peak on the island. He says that he’s been respected too, and that he’s been a loving son and a faithful friend and a strong community man in the *campo*. But not anymore. No, he says, shaking his head and staring me down. Not anymore. Then he starts getting angry. He shouts at me. Asks why we’re stranded in the fucking Bronx, mopping dirt in a school with as much natural light as a prison. *Where the fuck*, he asks, *have you been?*”

She stops and takes a deep breath.

I don’t know why my glass is trembling in my hand. Or why I can’t stop it.

Mami continues. Her eyes are fixed on my face, but her expression is vacant, trance-like. “For a while, I argued with him. I tried to remind him that it was his idea in the first place to emigrate. We went back and forth like that for a while. Until finally he came out of the kitchen with this big ass steak knife. I gave up the fight as soon as I saw that knife. But he didn’t seem to notice.

“He backed me up against the wall. You were sleeping just on the other side. I remember thinking to myself, don’t you dare wake him up with all your racket.

“He put a hand on my shoulder and, with the other, pressed the broad side of the knife up against the bottom of my chin. He commanded that I look at him. I did. And, as he pushed the edge of the knife against my neck, he said it again: look at me. His breath smelled like medicine. Made me want to throw up. I focused all my energy on trying not

to breathe through my nose, even after I saw the thin line of blood collecting on the blade. *Look at me*, he said. I cried. *Love me*, he said. *Love me.*”

When she’s done speaking, I open my eyes. I don’t know when I closed them in the first place. The lamp on the end table casts a dull light across us both. I lean back in the couch and look up. The edge of her shadow hovers on the stucco ceiling. And the ceiling looks coldly down on me. So does the bare piano bench in the corner. So does the blank television screen.

She speaks slowly. “I’ve thought about it a lot since then, but you know what? I still can’t say for the life of me how much time passed right there, pressed up against the wall. It sure as hell wasn’t a simple straight line. No, time’s not like that. More like a spiral, or a corkscrew, seen from above.”

Neither of us speaks for a long time.

When she finally stands, I stand. “I think I might’ve had too much to drink,” she says. “I’m getting old, you know. My tolerance isn’t as high as it used to be.”

She takes a step closer and nearly falls into my chest. I take a step backward and fall back on the couch. It hits me that *this* is the closest I’ve ever come to dancing with my mother.

“Maybe it’s time for bed,” I say. “But mom?”

“Yeah honey?”

“I don’t quite know how to say it—”

“Say what?”

I think it over. The paradox that was both my father and her husband—the fact that we knew two very different people and yet reached the same man, the same

conclusion, the same annual celebration. How is that even possible? Finally, I ask, “Do you think one person can occupy two lives?”

Through her eyes, I can see her drunken mind circling the question, looking for a way in, struggling to find one. After a while her face relaxes. “Yeah, I’d like to think that a person could.”

Or else, I wonder, maybe he didn’t occupy two lives. Maybe he occupied neither, and we only ever saw what we wanted to see—some reflection of ourselves.

“Sleep sounds good,” she says, yawning. “Can we still get tostones tomorrow, before I head home?”

“I don’t know Mami, I’m not sure if I want to anymore. Maybe we can talk about other things instead.”

I lead the way to the bedroom and wait for her to fall asleep.

Once she has, I sit at the foot of the bed and listen to her breathing.

\* \* \*

## Aceitunas

Augusto double bags his jar of kalamata olives and Nicorette in the self-checkout aisle at Bi-Rite. He swipes his credit card and enters the PIN 2935 (AXEL). It's been almost a month since Axel returned his calls. Three years since the divorce, and Maria has all but won the tug-of-war that is their son. Still, he maintains hope. Today is April twentieth, Axel's fifteenth birthday.

Outside, Augusto walks two blocks to the nearest bus station. Dirty snow banks pile above the curb and shrink the sidewalk. A passing conversation between a young couple reminds Augusto that he's an alien. There're plenty of Dominicans in Lawrence—enough that he's been able to surround himself with the Spanish language and *arroz con frijoles*—but the old industrial town is more like a colony than a homeland. Even after nineteen years, he hasn't gotten used to ice storms in April.

At the bus stop a homeless man in a wheelchair points at the bag in Augusto's hand and says something. Augusto tries to say "olives" but the L is hard. "Aceitunas," he says.

The skin of the homeless man's face clings to his skull like a wet paper towel. One of his fingers has been chopped off at the knuckle. He gestures between the bag and his own mouth but Augusto can only shake his head. He can't explain to the man that the olives are for Axel, who sucked on them like sweets when he was younger, and that even though he's fifteen now and the olives are jarred and the branch long gone, they remain a sort of peace offering.

"Wetback," the man says before rolling away.

He checks his watch once he's on the bus. 5:45, still on time. There're no empty seats so he stands in the crowded aisle. His phone vibrates in his back pocket and he answers. He's surprised to hear Maria's voice.

"Where are you?" she asks.

"Coming from the store."

"There's something you need to know before you get here. I don't want you to be surprised. There's someone you haven't met coming to the party."

"One of Axel's friends?"

"No. One of mine. A man."

He waits for elaboration but Maria is silent. Perhaps for the first time, he's suddenly able to appreciate the bus's loud and nonsensical noise. The babel has a way of excluding him, and of making him invisible, but he sees now that it also offers its own reward—for none of the untranslated conversations can hurt him. English, vulgar as it

sounds in his ears—the imbalance and clumsiness of its rhythm, the dull and heavy sounds colliding like blind dancers in clogs, the grunts and the throatiness... all of it is meaningless and therefore innocuous.

“You still there?” she asks.

“One of your friends?” he says.

“Yes. I met someone.”

“Maria, this is our son’s party, Axel’s day. This isn’t the time or place for your date. Why did you—”

“Axel invited him,” she says. “Look Augusto, I know this isn’t easy. But it’s been three years. And at least I waited until *after* we were divorced.”

He can still see snow through the windows of the bus but he’s sweating as he hangs up the phone.

He takes out the Nicorette and pops three pieces into his mouth. It’s not as satisfying as a single drag, but it’s all he has. A baby cries from the back of the bus. The woman cradling the baby looks too young to be a mother. There’s a man in a neon yellow tracksuit sleeping on one side of her and a boy with headphones on the other.

Halfway through the intersection of Andover and Broadway the driver suddenly slams on the breaks and honks his horn. Everyone lurches forward and Augusto’s bag slips from his hand. The jar breaks on impact and the olives roll out of the bag, down the aisle. The dark liquid from the jar splashes his feet and the seats around him. The briny smell clings to the air. For a moment everyone looks at him, most with pity.

He gets on his hands and knees without thinking. He reaches under the seat of an older woman. She squeals like a little girl, and lifts her legs. He slices his palm on a shard of glass.

A redheaded boy with a basketball laughs from the front of the bus. The woman sitting beside him whispers urgently. Quiet, she warns, that man is crazy. By then he's retrieved twelve, maybe fourteen, fifteen olives, he's not sure. The bus driver complains about the smell. More than one person stands up and moves away to avoid him as he reaches under their seats. He empties the first handful back into the plastic bag and keeps searching. The baby at the back of the bus has quieted down to watch him. The brine stings his palm, but he doesn't stop until he's collected all he can. When he has, he looks up.

The redheaded boy is staring at him, mouth wide open; the older woman in the seat just beside him is trying her best to ignore to him, studying her window, mapping its every smudge and smear; and behind him, towards the back of the bus, he hears someone clicking their tongue, tutting, as if to communicate with an animal.

Don't they know, he wonders, what it means to be a good father?

\* \* \*

### Independence Meal

Like so many eighteen year olds before him, he's often daydreamed about being an adult, treated as such. But today is different. Today is the actual day, he tells himself, again and again. *Today is the day of my independence meal. My independence meal. Independence Meal.* He meditates on the words silently, inwardly until the mantra diminishes completely and he's left to start all over.

He imagines his mother saying the words, simple as could be: "You're all grown up now." Maybe she'll even tell him that she's proud of him; though he doesn't set aside space in his mantra for that more embarrassing need.

He sighs, kneeling in front of the open fridge. What would Mom, with so many cookbooks to her name, say about such a mess?



Leakage from the supine sriracha sauce has formed a crusty puddle in the butter compartment. There's a box of anchovy pizza, a carton of take-out orange chicken, and enough Guinness to drown a pig. He pushes a jar of off-brand salsa out of the way and pulls out the fruit for his dessert: two cartons of strawberries, one mango, a cup of blueberries, and a banana that's starting to spot. He's not sure whether bananas are even supposed to go in the fridge.

After removing the bruised strawberries he pulls out his favorite knife. White like a porcelain doll, with an edge that's deceptively sharp and a little black handle that makes it look more like a toy than a weapon. Too much like a toy, he thinks, too much like childhood. Like arguments about PG-13 movies when he was fifteen, video games with animated sex, disallowed airsoft guns, and all the other ways she quarantined him from the growth that normal parents allowed and even nurtured.

After he destems, rinses and sets aside the strawberries, he slices them evenly from top to bottom. He fills a small bowl with the slices before wiping his hands on a stained towel hanging by the oven handle. He pulls his cellphone from his back pocket and dials Susana.

She answers on the first ring. "Hey love, what's up?"

"You on your way home?"

"Yeah," she says. Then after a pause, "Just leaving Bella's place now."

He can hear her saying goodbye on the other end. "I really wish you were here. I could use your help getting started on the dinner."

"Right. The dinner, of course."

"Just hurry, okay?"

“Yeah, I’ll be there soon. But Tim, can I say something else real fast?”

He puts her on speakerphone, down on the counter, and makes a thin incision just beneath the stem of the banana. There, he pulls the peel back.

“Tim? You still there?”

“Hmm.” He slices the banana at the same width he sliced the strawberries.

She continues slowly. “I know this meal is important to you, I really do. But not everything has to be perfect. You know, you have nothing to prove.”

He puts down the knife and takes a deep breath. “Please Susana, I really don’t want to get into this again. Not right now. Don’t you see I’ve got enough—”

“I know, I know. But that’s what I’m saying. You’ve been stressing yourself out. And for what? I mean come on, it’s like you say all the time: your mother’s toxic.”

“*Por favor escuchame,*” he says, *please listen*. The Spanish words don’t quite fit in his mouth. He enunciates them slowly, with an accent, and an almost imperceptible air of condescension. Spanish is her language, not his. “I know what my mother is.”

“Okay, fine,” she says. “We’ll put this on hold. Love you?”

“Yeah, of course. I love you too. But I’m getting another call. Just *apurate*. Please, just hurry.”

He hangs up and answers the other call. It’s his mother.

“I’m in Dulles,” she says. “Just got through Customs.”

He clears his throat. “How is everything? Was the flight good?”

“Everything’s been fine so far. Just a quick layover here.” She pauses. “You sure you still don’t mind picking me up?”

“Not at all. Just please tell me you haven’t eaten too much. I’m cooking something up right now. Nothing too fancy, but I’d hate for it to go to waste.”

“Aw, that’s sweet. I’m sure it’ll be really nice.”

He takes a deep breath, waiting for a response that’s natural, easy, undisturbed. Be the bigger man, he thinks to himself, don’t let her talk down to you.

“It’s strange being back,” she says suddenly. “I know it’s only been a couple months since I moved, but it feels different somehow. Or like maybe *I’m* different.”

He tries not to roll his eyes. “Okay mom, well I’ll see you soon then. But remember—don’t eat too much.”

He hangs up before she can say goodbye, cups his hands, and begins rinsing the blueberries in the sink.

\* \*

If he were a plaintiff and this a court, he would compile a list of the ways in which his mother tried to control his life, growing up, and there would be such a wide range of items—from his decision to become a vegetarian, to his choice of girlfriend, to his wardrobe, and on and on and on—a list so tedious that any reasonable jury would find themselves unconsciously straining toward the nearest pharmacy for sedatives much like fields of sunflowers reach for the sun; and yet there’s no court for that kind of thing and so he relies, instead, on stubborn memories.

In one such memory, he was fifteen. It was October and the leaves were changing and he’d just climbed down from the school bus after kissing a girl for the first time. He had a stupid grin and a somersaulting stomach. The girl’s name was Susana and she’d

tasted like blueberry yogurt. His mom was blowing leaves on the driveway. The windy day was blowing most of them back.

“I don’t want to go by Timmy anymore,” he said. It wasn’t his chosen nickname anyways—it was what everyone had called him before he hit puberty; and after, as if by some unspoken agreement, many of them had reverted to Tim without any suggestion from him at all.

But his mom didn’t seem to notice the change.

“I don’t want to go by Timmy anymore,” he said again, louder. “Timmy” sounded infantile and, with Susana’s kiss still fresh in his mouth, he’d never felt less infantile than in that moment.

She smiled. “Sure, honey. Whatever you say.”

But she never did let go of Timmy, no matter how many times he reminded her. She held on even when he tried to get his first job, as a Wal-Mart cashier. She said, “Timmy, you’re only just sixteen. What could you possibly have to work for? *I* take care of you. You don’t need anything, or anyone else.”

And she held on to Timmy even as she joked of her so-called retirement plan. “When I’m old and completely alone, you’ll have to return the favor. You know that, right? Unless you want me to die alone. Is that what you want? Timmy? Look at me. Are you even listening?”

And so too when he dropped out of high school, a year ago. “Timmy,” she said, as if guided by the trite wisdom of a parenting brochure, “this is my house. These are my rules. If you don’t finish high school, you can’t live here. I’ll kick you out. You don’t want that, do you? Timmy?”

But the threat backfired. He was tired of her rules. He opted instead for a secret arrangement with Susana. They moved into a tiny property owned by Susana's older sister. When he finally shared this plan, his mother shook her head pityingly. "Don't be ridiculous, Timmy," she said.

Later, she demanded to see the place for herself.

There were scuffmarks on the walls and a missing floorboard in the middle of the living room. It could never have been called spacious, but nothing came cheaper. His mom stood in the kitchen and laughed. "This is what you meant by *independent*? You're going to cook for yourself? In *here*?"

From the middle of the kitchen, she placed one hand on the fridge and another on the oven. She hardly had to reach for either. Without moving, she could also reach the sink and the entire counter. "You're so goddamn stubborn, Timmy. I gave you everything, and you choose to live in a fucking *closet*?"

"How many times do I have to say it's not Timmy?" he asked. "I'm not a little boy anymore."

"Christ, Timmy," she plowed on, "you think it was easy being a single parent? And what've you done with it? Lazy, good-for-nothing dropout. You're a disgrace."

He felt the lump in his throat expand, the pressure on his windpipe increase—it was hard to tell where it came from, inside or outside. All he could do was mumble.

"Tim, Ma. It's Tim."

She stuck around for several months afterwards, circling above like an optimistic vulture waiting for her prey to fall. So that she could reclaim him, or perhaps simply to say, "I told you so." But instead he picked up more hours at work, waiting tables at an

expensive Greek restaurant. Susana got a job teaching preschool. And though it took a few months, they were even able to furnish their apartment and start saving money.

So she moved to Italy. “Cookbooks,” she said, “can be written anywhere.”

He didn’t hear from her until a sudden email, a month later. In it, she explained that she was going to be back in the states to meet with her publisher and discuss her upcoming book. Her plan was to stay with her friend George. She explained that she had a lot she wanted to talk to about. In person, if possible. She said there were things she wanted to get off her chest; things she’d been thinking about; things to clear the air.

It took him two days to compose the invitation for dinner.

\* \*

He’s carving the last of the mango when Susana comes in, but doesn’t hear her until she’s just behind him. He doesn’t turn around. “Mom’s flight just left.”

Her breath feels moist and warm against the back of his neck, and her grip gentle against his shoulders. “Relax, *mi amor*,” she says. “Everything’s going to be okay.”

The back massage is one of her old tricks. One that used to work very effectively, but not so much anymore. What should be soft and sensitive feels more like a sales pitch. It reminds him of the way he adjusts the flow of hot and cold water in the shower, cautiously turning the knobs one way or the other. And as her knuckles knead circles against the small of his back, it reminds him of checking the water for heat, as if to search for that exact moment of relaxation that’s not too hot, not too cold, but just right.

All the while he’s trying to remember how many cookbooks his mother has written. There was *Quick and Easy Recipes for the Single Mother*, *Protein-Powered Southern Cooking*, at least three others and one in the works. All of them have been best

sellers, widely translated, and hugely important in earning enough money to put food on the table back when he was growing up.

Susana whispers over his shoulder, an angel and a devil both. “How can I help?”

He checks his watch as he turns. “It’s going to take at least an hour to get to the airport. I need to hurry. Do you mind starting on the potatoes?”

She’s taller than him, with short spiky hair that she’s recently dyed purple, a silver nose ring, and a tie-dye shirt on which she’s written in large black letters: FUCK THE POLICÍA. He thinks the shirt is tacky, though he never used to before.

She reaches over his shoulder to open the cabinet and pull out a bag of russet potatoes. “How should I cut them?”

“Sliced,” he says. “But not too thin. They’ll burn if you do.”

She gets out the serrated knife and begins peeling while he goes to the bathroom to change out of his pajamas. He puts on his only pair of jeans. They don’t reach all the way down to his ankles. Using one of Susana’s razors, he shaves the peach fuzz above his lips. When he’s done, he looks himself over once more. His chest is smooth and his arms skinny enough that he can easily circle his hand around even the thickest part. His hair is bleach-blond; his haircut the kind of wild his mother never would’ve allowed.

He goes over the menu in his head, as has become his habit these past few days. All the recipes are from Gigi Martin’s famous book: *Vegan Elegance*. It’s a book his mom used to complain about to anyone that might listen. Once, even to a stranger on the bus.

“Forget about the tree hugger bullshit for just a second and think only about *style*,” she used to say, pronouncing the word style in a drawn-out way to suggest its

utmost importance. “That Gigi might sell a ton of books in certain fad markets, but look at the style.” She’d pause for dramatic effect. “It’s *completely* overblown.”

The directions were too elaborate.

The ingredient lists monolithic.

The pictures almost pornographic, always unrealistic.

And yet the point was never that Gigi Martin’s recipes were unpalatable. In fact, according to his mom, few things tasted better than Gigi’s. “It’s just totally inaccessible, that’s all. Only a professional—only someone with real skills—would get anything decent out of those books.”

He smiles at the memory.

For appetizer he’s chosen oven-baked potato crisps topped with chipotle walnut crumble and a dollop of vegan sour cream; for the main course, pumpkin gnocchi with sautéed veggies and fresh Italian herbs; and for desert, the most scintillating no-bake fruit tart he’s ever seen, with a special date-and-nut crust. All served with a pitcher of ice-cold strawberry lemonade, infused with fresh basil.

As he walks back to the kitchen, his steps follow a familiar rhythm. *Today is the day of my independence meal. My independence meal...*

\* \*

Susana has sliced the potatoes and is pulling out other ingredients. For the next hour, as they work in slow silence, he falls behind schedule.

But he follows the recipes very carefully all the same, first roasting a cup of walnuts in the oven. When they’re done, he pulses them in the food processor. He adds cayenne pepper, chili powder, cumin and a splash of lime before pulsing again. Finally,



he tosses the crushed walnuts into a large bowl and stirs in a packet of spicy taco seasoning, completing the fake meat portion of the appetizer.

Once the potato slices are crisp and out of the oven, he piles a spoonful of spicy walnut meat on top of each one. For the final touch, he whisks cashew milk, lemon juice, and vinegar until it thickens into sour cream. He refrigerates the cream and leaves the potato crisps on the oven to stay warm while he starts the pumpkin gnocchi.

He checks his watch—he'll have to leave in fifteen minutes if he wants to get his mom on time. He quickly mixes whole-wheat flour with a can of pureed pumpkin. When the consistency is right, he separates the dough into sections and rolls each one into inch-wide cords. There's not enough counter space, so he uses the round kitchen table. Once all the dough is rolled out, he cuts the cords into dozens of segments and piles them onto a plate. He boils a large pot of water to cook the gnocchi. Only he needs to salt the water before he can start.

He opens the spice cabinet, wiping sweat from his brow with the back of his hand. He's not noticed it until now, but his hand is trembling. "*Coño* Susana, where's the salt?"

Her back is turned away and she's humming softly to herself, something unrecognizable, while she slices the zucchini for the gnocchi sauce.

"Susana?" he asks louder.

"Yeah papi?"

"*Donde pusiste la sal?*"

"I didn't *put* it anywhere. It's gone—we finished it last week." She doesn't look at all concerned.

“And what—” He can hear his foot tapping impulsively against the linoleum, his mind racing ahead—“you didn’t think that was worth mentioning?” Without salt, the gnocchi will be bland. And if the gnocchi—the entrée, the biggest statement of all—is bland... he speaks without thinking, muttering under his breath. “*Que estupidez. Stupid tonta.*”

She drops the knife in her hand. It rattles against the countertop. “Okay, that’s it. I don’t need to put up with this. *My voy*,” she says. “This stupid *tonta* has had enough.”

He shakes his head. “No, don’t say that. I still need you to sauté the vegetables while I go to the store. And the crust for the dessert—I’m not going to have time now. Please, Susana, for me? I won’t be able to come back after the store, but we can salt everything when I get home with her. *Entiendes?*”

She frowns. “No, Timmy, actually I don’t understand. I’m too stupid, right? A *tonta*? A fool?”

“Okay, okay, I hear what you’re saying. I’m sorry. Really, I mean it.” He feels squeezed, as if the already tiny kitchen is shrinking all around him; or maybe it’s the other way around—maybe the kitchen is unchanged and it’s him who’s expanding, like a dinner role in the oven. “But please, how many times do I have to say that it’s Tim, not Timmy?”

She frowns and takes a step toward him. There’s something fragile about her posture, as if it would take only a single finger and one gentle push to tip her over. She would fall and shatter, like an ice sculpture, slowly melting into puddles on the linoleum. He would spend a few minutes wiping up the water and that would be the end of it.

At least, that’s how he imagines it; in reality, she’s far more combustible.

She's not even fragile enough to cry. She just takes another step towards him and sighs with her whole upper body. "Tim. Won't you forget about your mom? Focus on us. What's all this?" she points at the messy counters. "Just to impress the old woman? You have flour in your hair, for Christ's sake."

He turns away swiftly. "Look, I said it, didn't I? *I'm sorry*. And I'll make it up to you later, I promise. I just need you to do this one thing, for me. Can't you do this? For me? For my independence meal?"

"For your *what*?" she asks.

"Never mind that. Just—please, don't you understand what I'm saying?"

When she finally answers her voice is blank. "Yes. Crystal clear."

"*Perfecto*." He hurries to put on his shoes without socks and leaves the door unlocked behind him. Outside, humidity thickens the air and draws sweat from the earth. Everything is still and silent, and the sinking sun gives the parking lot a dull glow that's almost beautiful.

But he doesn't have time for almost-beauty. He's already gone, key in the ignition of his '98 Honda Accord, squealing tires as he speeds out of the parking lot.

\* \*

He stops for salt at the same store his mom used to shop at, back when she still had the power to drag him out of the house on Sunday evenings and insist that he push the shopping cart. Years later, the store still gives him a headache.

Though in and out quickly, he's still late to the airport. When he pulls up to Arrivals his mom is sitting by the curb on her suitcase. Wearing sunglasses, jeans and a colorful blouse with a floral design, she waves cautiously when she sees him.

He parks the car and gets out to open the trunk. They take a couple of steps toward each other until they're almost within arms reach. As if poised at the climax of a romantic movie, like long-separated lovers finally reunited. All it would take to complete the scene is a strong step from both, a kissing embrace, and a shot that circles dizzily around them. Chris Isaak's "Wicked Game," for the complete effect.

Instead, she leans awkwardly toward him. He stands firm. Her eyes are squinted and filled with longing, but the longing doesn't register in his mind. He imagines instead that she's inspecting him for faults. "Mother," he says, silenced by the honk of a passing taxi, "is there something different about your hair?" It's looks grayer, he thinks, less like the old chestnut. And her jawline, once so strong, is somehow rounder now, with skin that hangs taut. Only a couple months and already she's changed. How is that possible? Colored like someone who's been left in the sun and forgotten about.

"Timmy," she says simply, quietly.

So maybe she hasn't changed after all, he thinks. "I meant to be earlier," he says, "I got caught up in helping a friend from high school. Here—let me help with that." He tries to take the suitcase from her.

"No, it's okay," she says. "I can do it." She tightens her grip. Their arms bump and he takes a step back. He gets into the car and tosses the salt under a shirt in the backseat.

As soon as she gets in, she starts readjusting the seat, reclining for her own comfort. "So who was this friend you were helping?" she asks.

"Oh, no one you know." He pulls away from the curb and lowers the visor to block the glare of the sunset. It's falling faster now. "I hope you're hungry," he says.

“I didn’t realize you still saw friends from high school.” The pitch of her voice seems to rise on the last two words—high school—as if to remind him that she’s still disappointed in him.

“Not too many,” he says. “I guess I’ve outgrown most of them.” He checks his rearview mirror with exaggerated cautiousness.

“How’s Susana?” she asks, smiling. “I guess you haven’t outgrown her?”

“No. I haven’t. And she’s good.”

“Look, I wasn’t going to say anything, but—”

“But what? You haven’t already eaten, have you?”

“No, no, it’s nothing like that,” she says. “It’s just...”

“Just what?”

“Well, it’s hard to say this, but if I’m honest, I was surprised when you offered to pick me up. You know George could have done it, right? I’m staying with him anyways.”

“Yeah, of course I know.”

“I guess what I’m saying is that it’s really nice of you. I know things haven’t been easy, but dinner—it’s really nice. You wouldn’t believe how happy I was when I saw your email. How relieved.” She fidgets with her seatbelt and stares at her feet.

“It’s just dinner,” he says. “So how’s Italy?”

“Easy to find expats, that’s for sure. A lot of these old American couples getting fat on pizza, wine, and shitty novels until the day they die. A lot of lazy good-for-nothings, honestly.”

“You know,” he says, “I’m being trained to be a manager at the restaurant?”

“It’s incredible you still work there. Do you like—”

“It’s different as a manager.” Only somewhat aware of how loud he’s suddenly speaking, he says, “I’ll make a lot more money. Anyways, I hope you’re hungry.”

“You know if you keep saying that I might lose my appetite.” She laughs awkwardly, more to herself than him.

He turns on the radio, to a Top 40 synthpop song that has a bouncy beat and generic female vocals. He doesn’t recognize it, and he’s sure that his mom doesn’t either, but it’s easier than silence. He gets off at the exit for his apartment.

“Wow,” she says. “The area just keeps on growing, doesn’t it?”

He nods but refuses to look away from the road.

\* \*

“My home,” he says, opening the door. There’s an office chair in the corner from a Staples clearance sale and a cat-clawed couch that Susana’s older sister was going to throw away before they rescued it. There’s a small TV. It’s not HD, or even flat screen, but at least it’s his.

“Wow,” she says. “A bit cramped.”

“Yeah, well, I have a lot of stuff.”

“Where’s Susana?”

“Susana? *Ven paca*,” he says, *come here*. He listens for movement in the apartment. “Susana? Susana!”

Nothing but the steady hum of the refrigerator.

He checks the bedroom, but doesn’t see her. From multiple angles, posters of Neil Young stare down at him through the dark. When he comes back out, his mom points at the kitchen table. “Classy.”

There, draped across the table, is Susana's tie-dye shirt. FUCK THE POLICÍA.

"Where'd she go?" she asks. She sounds concerned, but he's sure that she's pretending, that she's enjoying this. He can feel it in his gut. "Maybe she had to go to the store?"

"I don't know," he says, looking around. And yet he does. The kitchen is a mess. It looks like a hurricane swept through. The trashcan is overflowing with the contents of his independence meal: potatoes, walnut meat, the veggies she'd been slicing before he left. The knife and cutting board she'd been using are on the floor and the fruit for the dessert has been smashed on the counter. It's topped with the vegan sour cream.

There's a pad of pink sticky notes on the table. He picks it up before his mom can see what it says. Susana must have written in sharpie, because it's bled through the top note and onto the next. A simple signature:

- STUPID TONTA

He shoves the sticky notes in his pocket.

"Is she okay?" his mother asks, forehead creased. "How can I help?"

There's a slight delay before he hears his own uncontrollable laughter. Somehow it doesn't sound like his laughter, but he can hear it all the same. Out there, beyond him. Laughter delivered in short manic bursts, like fireworks. "How can you help?" he asks, gasping. "How can you help?"

"Timmy, please, what's wrong? You're scaring me."

He points at the door. "You want to help? Fine. Leave."

"But we only just—"

“Look, I don’t care. I want you to go. Call George to come pick you up. I give up, okay? You win. That’s what you want to hear, right? You feel better now?”

“Timmy, come on, you don’t mean that. You don’t need to shout.”

“How many times, how many *ways* are there to say it’s not Timmy? When are you going to—”

“Tim,” she interrupts him with the sound of his own name. She enunciates it slowly, carefully. “Tim,” she says again. A simple, solid syllable. It falls between them like a brick. It doesn’t shatter, or even shake the floor. But it falls between them like a brick nonetheless and she steps over it, toward him, and puts a hand on his forearm.

“Tim. I’m so sorry for everything. You have to believe me. I am so sorry. The silence, the absence, the lack of support—I was wrong before—I came home to apologize. You have to believe me.”

He shakes his head. “Just leave,” he says, and points at the door. “Now.”

She nods and backs off.

Through the door, the suitcase rolls clumsily behind her.

\* \*

*You’ve reached Susana*, the voice recording says, *si quieres dejar un mensaje, then just leave your message already. Go on!* After the beep, he says, “what the hell, Susana? You think this is a game?”

He sits down at the kitchen table. The uncooked gnocchi is still piled on the same plate as before. He wonders if Susana simply forgot to throw it away, or if maybe she was in such a rush to get out that she couldn’t be bothered to destroy the entire meal. Each individual gnocchi is an inch wide and a little bit longer than that. They look like



small bricks of cheese, building blocks of a lactose fortress, fantasy of bulimic mice all around the world.

After some time, he calls her a second time and leaves another message. He says, “I made my mom leave.” As if it will somehow bring her back. “*No eres tonta estúpida,*” he says, *you’re not a stupid fool.*

He wasn’t always so bad at apologizing.

When they first moved into the tiny apartment he often stepped on her toes. They were growing together, unaware of how big their bodies already were. And for those accidents, he apologized excessively. So why, he wonders, won’t I apologize when she’s had a hard month? Why won’t I apologize when it’s my fault, my obsession with this independence meal, my tunnel vision?

Only instead of a light at the end of that tunnel, he’s seen nothing but his mom standing in the kitchen, that first day, laughing at him. And though she’s gone, her question remains: “This is what you call *independence*?”

It’s a grumble in his stomach that finally snaps him out of his daydream. *Could Mom really have changed so much?* He opens the fridge for something fast but nothing looks appetizing. The anchovy pizza, the orange chicken—they are the meals of his old diet, and of sickness.

He calls Susana again, and again she doesn’t answer. He leaves a third message. Only now he’s honest, perhaps for the first time all day. “I’m sorry,” he says. “I really am. Please come home.”

He ignites the stovetop to boil a pot of water, pours in the salt, and waits. Tiny bubbles rise from the bottom of the pot. Once the water is boiling, he drops in the

gnocchi, one by one. The water nearly splashes him every time. The gnocchi sinks to the bottom and rises only when it's done. It's a process he unscientifically coins in his head as reverse-gravity. It's an inevitable rise.

When enough are done, he begins fishing the gnocchi out. Since he doesn't have a large spoon, he does one at a time, until he's finished. He serves himself a plate. The gnocchi is so chewy that it makes his jaw sore and it's way too salty.

When his phone suddenly rings on the counter beside the stovetop, he jumps from his chair. It takes him only one step and a reach. He answers without checking the caller ID. "Susana?" he asks.

"Who's this?" The voice of the caller is deep and muscular, a man's voice.

"This is Tim."

The man doesn't respond at first. Finally he says, "Sorry Tim. I must've dialed the wrong number." He hangs up before Tim can respond.

Returned to his own silence, he looks around the kitchen, breathes it all in. There's only one worn-down sponge on the rim of the sink and no paper towels. He owns no mop or broom or vacuum cleaner. But why, he wonders, should that matter? Despite everything, can I not at least claim this mess as my own?

He tries on the responsibility for the first time and, with it, feels an unfamiliar power. Perhaps, he wonders, this is the power of *true* independence.

Rather than dialing Susana again, he calls his mother.

She answers on the first ring. "Tim? Is that you?"

He clears his throat. "It is. Have you eaten yet?"

"No, not yet."

“Do you think you might want to eat out? I’m going to have to clean my place up, but maybe when I’m done? There’s a new Mexican place that just opened a couple miles from my apartment. It’s not really Mexican, I mean it’s probably not very authentic, and nothing fancy either. But I’ve heard some good things about it. What do you think?” He takes a deep breath and waits.

“I would love to,” she says.

“Perfect. I’ll call you when I get ready to leave.”

\* \* \*

## Survivor's Guilt

It's been two months since the storm made landfall and fifteen hundred miles now separate me from the shores of Mississippi, but I still can't sleep a full night without nightmares of drowning. I'm never the one drowning, in the dreams. Instead, I'm always a spectator, floating helplessly through the atmosphere above, like a balloon robbed of all gravity. Far below are the members of my old community.

How many more months and miles will it take?

There's no one else in the "Amniotic Sac"—the hottest and smallest of seven hot springs at Ouray's Clothing Optional hot springs—but I've chosen to keep my clothes. Perhaps if I were naked the geothermal waters would be more rejuvenating, as the brochure had claimed. Perhaps I'd even be reborn, but I doubt it. My legs dangle

weightlessly in the water. I'm just starting to get hungry when she sits down across from me.

She looks me square in the face. I nearly flinch at the sight of her nakedness. I can feel her gaze pass over me slowly, pausing only on my dull gray bathing suit. I wonder if she can feel my stare, too. She's about my age, thirty-something, and her eyes are electric blue. She has brown hair that's streaked blonde and cut just above her shoulders. Her breasts are large and her thighs muscular. Her smile reminds me of a desert fox I saw a couple days ago in New Mexico.

"Listen," she says, "I don't do small talk."

I nod. "Okay."

Her eyes don't leave my face, the face of a runaway—with brown curly bangs matted against my forehead, a goatee that comes in patches, bags under my eyes and cheekbones that jut out. My complexion used to be as fair as a macadamia nut; now red and peeling.

She smiles. "This is your first time in Colorado. Your first time in a place like this." She waves a finger through the air in no particular direction, a wind-like gesture.

"Is it so obvious?"

Steam rises like breath from The Sac. A bobbing thermometer by my right foot reads 114, almost twice the temperature of the autumn air. To my right is a row of Douglas firs, to my left cacti. Beyond a clump of prickly pears is an old man's ass. He's faced the other way, deep in conversation, and his whole body moves when he speaks. Behind her—backlighting her staring face and making her features glow—the setting sun sags into the San Juan Mountains. It leaves a soft blush on the jagged horizon.

I close my eyes.

“Let me guess. Road trip?”

I shrug. “I guess you could call it that.”

“So what’s your story? You out here to *find yourself*?” she asks, winking.

“No,” I say. “Not that.”

After a brief silence, she sighs. “My name’s Clara.”

I open my eyes and let her shake my hand. “Mine’s Gray.” Her grip is firm and she doesn’t let go easily. “So I guess this isn’t *your* first time in Colorado, then?”

She squints past me. “No, it’s not. Hell, I’ve barely ever left Colorado.”

“You like it here?”

She grunts. “No choice, really. I was born and raised in Ouray by a single mother. Want to guess where she was born and raised?”

I don’t respond.

“That’s right. Where else?” Her smile is gone now.

“You know,” I say, “you’re lucky to at least have a home.”

She frowns but doesn’t respond.

“I’m sorry,” I say, “if that was short, I mean. Sometimes I forget myself. So. Are you and your mom close?”

She seems to think about this for a moment before jumping up. “Don’t budge.” She turns smoothly and begins bounding toward the locker rooms. She moves with all the grace of a ballerina, as if unaware or unconcerned by her own fragility. As I imagine her falling, I feel my heartbeat quicken. I lower myself into The Sac.

She returns quickly, shivering from the cold, and hands over a photograph. “Hold it just around the edges.”

It’s an old photo, but the face is familiar. The same brown hair, streaked blonde, shoulder length; the same light skin tone; and most striking of all, the same stare.

“Mom’s older now,” she says, bowing her head toward me. “But there’s no one else left for her. I stay in Ouray to take care of her.”

“That’s really nice,” I say.

“No, that’s just love.”

I hand the photo back. She sets it aside carefully, on top of her towel. I ask, “So what, you’d rather be somewhere else?”

She ignores the question and, after a while, lowers herself into the water. She sighs and closes her eyes.

“You think it’s true that these hot springs are *rejuvenating*?” I ask.

She laughs. “Not exactly. It’s the tourists that’re rejuvenating. I come to hear what they’re up to. It makes me feel involved in their adventures. Along for the ride.”

I nod.

“So tell me Gray—why’re you here?”

I shake my head. I know that once I get going, I won’t be able to stop. I never can.

She says, “Oh, come on. You can’t clam up forever. Let’s see that pearl you’re hiding.”

I shift and look away. But there’s no escape in sight. The sun is falling faster now and the old man from before is gone. Soon the lights will flicker on above us.

“I’m a tax accountant,” I say. “Or, I guess, I was.”

She nods encouragingly. “Where from?”

“Gulfport, Mississippi. What’s left of it, at least.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Don’t you watch the news?”

She shakes her head. And for a moment, looks far younger than a thirty-something.

I go on. “I was raised in a little house with a big porch that wraps around three sides. When I had enough money I moved into the house next door. But do you have any idea—” I pause to collect the words before they can catch in my throat. I take a deep breath—“Any idea what a thirty foot storm tide will do to a house on the beach? Or gusts that hit 135 miles per hour?”

She sits perfectly still, just staring.

“When we got the warning, I evacuated to a Days Inn in Tupelo. But a lot of people stayed behind. Like they thought all hurricanes were created equal. I even had a friend, a good friend, flat out refuse to leave. We had a terrible fight the night before I left, but he just wouldn’t listen. Anyways, when I got back, he was one of the missing.”

“Christ.” She shakes her head dumbly. Then, after a while, “I’m so sorry.”

We sit in silence for a couple minutes. Slowly, at the bottom of The Sac, her foot slides on top of mine. There’s nothing playful or seductive about it, just pure bodily commiseration.

“Most of the houses were obliterated. All the stuff washed away. But you know the most unexpected part?” I ask.

She shakes her head.



“The property I hadn’t even accounted for. All kinds of shit—old trees, neighbors’ pets, the way the casinos’ lights shimmered on the gulf at night. Even the hotels and fast food restaurants.”

I stop there. Because while maybe she *can* understand what it feels like to find pieces of the pier blown miles inland, what’s the point? And neither do I tell her about the embarrassing epiphany I had when I returned home after the storm and saw what was left (if it can even be called an epiphany). Rather, the diluted epiphany: that my life doesn’t amount to much of anything. That it could be so easily washed away.

“And so that’s why I’m here. Higher ground.” I smile, so that she knows it’s okay for her to smile too.

She does. Softly, she smiles and slides around the edge of The Sac until she’s close enough to hold my hand. The pads of our fingers are wrinkled. “You’re still here,” she whispers. “Surviving.”

“I guess. If you say so.” But with nothing left, I want to ask, what’s the point? I turn to look at her. Up close, her face is kind, gentle, almost sisterly. “I’ve never told anyone else this before, but sometimes I wonder if I should’ve stayed behind and tried my luck against the storm. If maybe I wasn’t meant to survive.”

I cut off and look away, afraid that she might laugh, tell me to snap out of it, or forcefully remind me that I should be grateful, not guilty. But she doesn’t say anything at all. She doesn’t even acknowledge my embarrassment. Just holds my hand in quiet stillness until dusk has blanketed everything and the cloudless sky is thick with stars.

\* \*

“I should be going,” I say, breaking the long silence. It’s late now and I can no longer ignore the grumbling in my stomach. Our knees bump in the water as I stand. A stiff breeze blows indifferently through my core and I shiver. I don’t know if it’s because I’ve spent too much time in The Sac or if maybe I’m hungrier than I realized, but I feel feeble standing before her. My bathing suit clings coldly to my body. Outside The Sac, the temperature falls rapidly.

“Going where?” she asks.

“I should find a restaurant.”

“Gray, honey, it’s already 11. Nothing’s open.” She hoists herself out of the water and stands. Her skin looks paler than before, set against the night. Beads of warm liquid slide down her chest, her stomach, her legs. “You’ll have to come with me. There’s only one place that’ll serve you, and that’s because it’s mine.”

We agree to meet outside after changing.

She’s there before me, standing still in the gravel lot. She wears a gray hoodie. Her hips and shoulders are squared and her head tilted back. I’m not sure what she’s doing—stargazing, or night gazing, or maybe just determined to gaze anywhere that isn’t here.

“Should I follow you back?” I ask.

“No, I’m coming with you.”

I don’t know what she means. Didn’t she drive here? But as I unlock my Prius anyways, she climbs into the passenger seat without waiting. I get in and turn on the car to start the heat.

“Here’s the deal,” she says. “I have a breakfast place in the middle of town. You like breakfast, right?”

I nod.

“Good. I’ll take you there and cook up whatever you want. Free of charge. There’s just one condition.”

“What’s that?”

“I want you to come see something first. Out there.” She grins and points toward the dark landscape beyond the parking lot, in the direction opposite the town. “I want to take you somewhere, and all you have to do is *look* at it. And then you can eat all you want. Fair enough?”

I shrug. “Are there any other restaurants open?”

She laughs and shakes her head. “Come on Gray, live a little. It won’t take long at all. I’ll show you the way.”

“And is there any chance you make chocolate chip waffles?” I ask.

She nods seriously. “Always.”

I sigh and put the car into drive.

Once we’re out of the parking lot, she has me turn left on the main road. It’s the very same road I entered Ouray on, from the south, but this time we take it north, beyond the town limits, until the lights of the hot springs are nothing but a cluster of dim stars hanging low in the rearview mirror, and then farther still until there’s nothing left but the road beneath us and the river beside and the moon above, shining light on the floor of the valley.

“That’s Uncompahgre,” she says, pointing at the river to our left. “It’s an Ute word. Means *Red Water Spring*. That’s where we’re going.”

But not long after that the road and the river fork, and soon I can no longer see the river at all.

She slides down her window and closes her eyes. She says, “Don’t worry. Just keep going. We’re almost there.” She holds a hand out the passenger window, catching the rush of air as it flies by.

I turn on my bright lights. The landscape is flat and bald, apart from a few shrubs scattered irregularly. Far beyond the beams of light, beyond the valley and the mountains, I know that eventually the road will reach Grand Junction and then the eastern border of Utah.

Suddenly she holds up a hand. “Here. This is the place.”

I look around but don’t see anything.

She points ahead to a side road veering off to the left. “Turn there.”

The side road winds downhill narrowly. After about half a mile the asphalt shatters into gravel. Through her open window, I can hear the river growing closer again. Straight ahead, I see a wall of forest. With so few trees behind me, and so few throughout the rest of the valley, I can only assume that these trees owe their lives to the river.

When the road ends, I park the car. I see a wood carved sign through my window. The letters are faded: UNCOMPAHGRE RAPIDS, LAUNCH POINT. I turn to her. She holds her knees to her chest. The time glows on the dashboard, 11:56.

“Ready?” she asks.

The path is short and direct. We walk at a brisk pace. While she leads the way, I listen to the noises in the dark—the potato chip-crunch of dried leaves beneath our feet, the invisibly rushing river, and an owl, or two or three, hooting somewhere above. The hoots seem to ricochet between the trees and the earth and our trudging bodies.

When she stops at the end of the path, just above the river, I step into the empty space beside her. Together we look down on the water.

After a while, she says, “Look Gray, isn’t it beautiful?” She turns to face me. “Isn’t it miraculous?”

I don’t respond. The river is only a stone’s throw wide. The water is calm, almost still. Farther down, I can hear the rush of rapids. Suddenly she turns off the path. I follow her along the riverbank, towards the rushing sound. The undergrowth is thick and thorny. It claws at our clothing as we walk, but she doesn’t even seem to notice.

We continue for a while longer until the calm surface of the water has graduated into violence. I can’t see how far down the rapids go, but here the river tumbles over itself viciously. And among all its foam and froth, jutting rocks rise sharply. Eventually she stops and again I step in line. As I look down the steep riverbank, I can feel my heartbeat in my temples.

Her voice is soft when she speaks at last. “Want to swim to the other side?”

I don’t know whether to laugh or argue. “It can’t be warmer than 50 degrees out here. I’ll freeze to death.”

“So you acknowledge that you have a choice?” she asks. “And still, you *choose* survival?” She smiles victoriously, as if she’s just spotted a certain checkmate.

But the smile vanishes just as quickly. “Okay,” I say. “I think I’ll do it.”

“What?” The pitch of her voice spikes.

“I’m going to do it.”

“No,” she says. “Absolutely not.” She shakes her head. “Don’t be stupid.”

I slide down the riverbank, to the edge of the water, and dip my hand in. It’s ice cold and my fingers are numb after just a second.

She shakes her head angrily. “No. You’ve completely missed the point. Look around you. Nature is powerful, destructive, but beautiful too. Look at it, please. I brought you here to *see*, to choose life.”

But I ignore her. Because now *she*’s the one that’s missing the point: that if I’m meant to survive, to be grateful rather than guilty, then I need to *actually* survive. I turn away from her, to the rapids—my chance to fight back, to beat nature, to overcome the past.

I take a deep breath and step into the water, fully clothed. She shouts. Almost as soon my sneakers make contact with the rocky riverbed, I slip. I only barely regain balance by spinning my arms in tight circles. I take another step and the water reaches halfway up my shins. A dull pain rises from my feet, followed by a brief tingling sensation, and finally a depth of numbness I didn’t know was possible. If I want to make it to the other side without permanently crippling myself, I know that I’m going to have to move fast. I thrust my legs forward, one after the other, fighting with all my strength to stay standing. At the deepest point, halfway across the river, the water reaches for my hips. It is there that I slip and fall.

Up, down, forward, backward, above, beneath; all sense of direction drowns as I’m caught in the river’s pull. It’s faster and stronger than I am, or ever could be. Seconds

pass, or don't. The world cartwheels around me. When I open my eyes, I don't see any color. There is only motion. It moves like waves of light captured through the slowest of shutter speeds.

Until, quite suddenly, I'm no longer moving at all. Everything halts. Like a leaf blown flat against an outstretched arm, with a constant wind at its back, my outstretched body is pinned flat against a boulder. I hold my breath as the water rushes by. I gasp and begin to reorient myself. I turn my body so that I can use the boulder to pull up. And, finally, I stand. I don't know how far down river I've fallen, but the rapids here aren't as strong as they were above. I'm able to walk again, slowly, to the other side.

When I get there, my head is throbbing and I can't stop shivering and there's blood dripping from my left sleeve. I turn back and see Clara running downstream on the other bank, screaming. "I called the police, help is coming! You need to get out of your wet clothes and find cover from the wind."

But as I look around, I see no cover. The wind whips at my face and sets all the numbness in my body on fire. I'm too weak to stand, much less climb the riverbank. So I sit and peel the clothing off slowly, one layer at a time, until nothing is left.

Clara shouts something else across the water, something about hypothermia, but her voice no longer sounds human, and though the moonlight is bright, I can barely see her anymore. The shapes and forms of the river come in and out of focus. My breath becomes shallow and my limbs distant from my self.

I focus all my attention on trying to stay conscious, by repeating a single mantra again and again: I will survive, I will survive, I will survive. I continue the chant to myself just so, until my teeth are chattering beyond all control and the thoughts in my

head have slowed to a glacial pace. I focus on the words even still as I begin to feel a heavy warmth come over me.

And then, until I hear distant sirens come to save me.

And I know, gladly, that they will.

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