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Silver Lake Adjacent

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by
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To Chon
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Sighting El Viejo

I knew El Viejo had ended up on this side of the border, and I had the feeling I might run into him someday. But for the most part, I just didn’t give him much thought. I’d gone thirty years without him in my life, and I could go another thirty. And besides, this side or that, what difference did it make?

Growing up, El Viejo, otherwise known as my father, was one thing you just didn’t mention around our house, not if you knew what was good for you. Still, I got reports on the sly from los tíos en el otro lado every now and then, telling me there had been a Viejo sighting in Juarez, or somewhere else in Chihuahua State.
“He’s shrinking, Antonio. Tell your mom she wouldn’t even recognize him anymore if she saw him,” my Tío Fernando told me one day during a rare cross-border phone call. “I ran into him at a tailor’s shop in Cuauhtémoc. He was getting his charro suit hemmed. First he becomes the world’s oldest mariachi, now he’s the shortest.”

Fernando knew I wouldn’t’ be passing that information along. That’s why my mother had picked us up and moved to Los Angeles in 1971 when my sister Alma was six years old, and I was still a mocoso in diapers. So she wouldn’t have to run into him, or hear anything about anything having to do with him. “I hear you’ve got a new half-brother,” Tío Fernando said that day, tickled by the possibility. “That makes number two hundred and one.”

It wasn’t such a huge exaggeration. Word was El Viejo had at least three dozen children clear across the northern part of Mexico, and twice that many grandchildren. By now, some of the grandchildren, the ones that were almost as old as me, were scattered throughout the southern states of the U.S. The Clan of Aztlan, I used to call it. My mother and Alma were not amused by my joke. “Como un perro,” my mom always said. “A dirty old dog.” I personally always thought it sounded more like what you would expect from a stray cat, but that’s just me.

Even when he hooked up with my mother thirty five years ago, El Viejo was too old to be messing with her. She was barely old enough to be messed with, truth be told, but that’s how they used to do things. But I heard her say once – the only time I ever heard a positive word about him – that it was his eyes that stole her heart. Those eyes of
his must have already been collecting hearts like stamps for decades by the time he met her.

After that phone call with el tío, I did the math and figured El Viejo to be about seventy seven years old. About six months later I heard he’d hopped the border and found himself a Chicanita to nest with somewhere in Albuquerque. Maybe at seventy eight he was finally ready to settle down, but I doubted it. I’d probably be getting an update about a new girlfriend soon.

That’s why I finally settled down with Mari, if the truth be told. I wasn’t going to turn out like him.

I wanted to be there for my son when he came and, besides, Mari was the one who could’ve done a lot better than me. I was the lucky one, and if anyone called her my ball and chain, I set them straight. Mari wasn’t tying me down. She was my muse. She turned me into a real musician. Before she came along, I was just a barroom brawler who could kick out the occasional song on demand. I went from opening for nothing bands to headlining small clubs in Hollywood, with the nothing bands opening for me. It was a living, just barely. With my gigs and Mari’s job, we did all right. I was hanging in there. But at least I was playing my music.

I thought everything was working out. But if there’s one thing I’ve learned it’s that things fall apart when they’re resting on a weak foundation. It’s what’s underneath that counts, and I hadn’t bothered to look down there in a while. Who does, right? Life goes on, we get up, go to work, come home. Repeat. But as any contractor will tell you, it’s all
about the foundation. You don’t have a good one of those, everything is subject to fall apart.

That’s where El Viejo comes in. When I finally found myself face to face with El Viejo, I couldn’t remember all the things I wanted to say to him, how much I wanted to punch his wide indio nose and make him pay for all the times my sister had cried. The day I finally met him was the same day I signed with Hades Records, and I just had too much else on my mind, I told myself later. If it had been any other day, I would have made him cry some real tears – not mariachi tears – for the way he had treated my mother. Instead, I just brushed that encounter under the rug, and set my sights on my future as a rock n’ roll star. I was too busy repeating his mistakes to notice I was in danger of turning out just like him.

*

Right about the time I ran into El Viejo, Mari was starting to get thick around the middle and we were getting worried about all the bills that were piling up. We had been trying to figure out how we were going to swing it once the baby came. She kept telling me there’s always her dad’s mechanic shop, and I was starting to resign myself to it. I’d already told my manager Danny to start booking me for fewer shows, hoping to make it easier when I had to stop playing altogether. But then, after months of auditions, and then no word from Hades Records, then dealing with this A&R guy and that one, then an exec from New York, the offer for a record deal came, right when I least expected it.

When I came home with the advance check, it was burning a hole in my pocket, and my girl had been picturing a pregnancy in her sister’s second-hand maternity dresses.
I felt like I owned Echo Park. Even if Mari still had her job at Vons and I hadn’t been able to pitch in for much more than groceries for months, on that day I felt like I was the bread winner. I won’t lie. It felt good.

I told her, “Mari, we’re going out for lobster tonight – or whatever you want – and you can’t tell me no.”

She let loose with a big grin. “You did it? It’s done, then?”

“That’s right. You are now looking at the newest act on Hades Records, the first guy you know who’s going to be on the David Letterman show, the Leno Show and the Don Francisco show, too.”

“Oh my god! You’re kidding! I can’t believe it! Is this for real? Honest to God? You got signed!!!”

“Do I lie? What are you waiting for? Get dressed. I’m hungry!”

She put on her shortest skirt that still fit her and I couldn’t imagine, watching her change and noticing how round and pretty her legs looked, that things could get any better.

Later, when El Viejo came up to us at Barragan’s, wrinkled like a dark brown raisin, I had just taken a big bite of my chile relleno. I was floating on a chile high, almost as high as if I’d taken a monster bong hit. Before he even got to our table, I was already waving him away, hoping he’d leave before the rest of the mariachis came over and started playing las mañanitas or something and demanding cash from us. I hated the way they always did that while you were trying to eat, coming over all suave and playing for you without even asking.
Instead, this old man was trying to talk to me.

“Señor, usted se appellida Arroyo?” he asked. Just like that. Walked right up to me and said my last name, then stood there while I tried to figure out how the hell this old mariachi could know my name.

I must’ve bitten into a big pocket of chile because next thing I know my eyes started getting all watery and my tongue was stinging like a motherfucker. That was when I recognized him, the thick eyebrows, the mouth like a straight line. Like a squashed up version of the man in the picture. El Viejo. Motherfucker.

Mari looked over at me, and then at El Viejo, and asked me, “Honey, do you know him?”

“Su esposa?” he asked me, his voice thick under his mustache. He held out his hand then, bloated and round, with yellowing nails almost as long as Mari’s, and I just looked at him, trying to swallow the bits of tortilla that were stuck in my throat.

“Mucho gusto,” he said, his hand moving toward Mari. “Ricardo Luis Arroyo a su servicio.”

“I’m sorry,” Mari said, glancing at me quickly, putting her hands under the table. “Yo … no… español.”

“Gringa?” he asked me, with a familiarity that made the little hairs on my arm stand up. I couldn’t get a word out, and Mari was staring at me, expecting me to say something. Pocha that she was, she needed me to translate.

“Tony, do you know him?” she asked again, getting annoyed. I could tell she was a little freaked out by the man. He looked vaguely troll-like, and his eyes seemed to go
right through you. The familiar look on his face was creepy as hell, and Mari didn’t have a clue what was going on, or why I wasn’t speaking. Truth be told, it was more the shock of finally running into the old man in my neck of the woods, freaking Echo Park of all places, that had me tongue-tied.

“No, I don’t know him,” I said, finally, forcing the food down my throat.

“Señor, usted está equivocado,” I said to him, with as much weight as I could get into my voice, hoping he would understand my meaning, You are mistaken, now get lost old fart.

He looked me in the eye for a long second, and I tried to hold his gaze. Then he said, “Perdón,” and walked away. The metal ornaments on his pants legs clinked as he moved.

I felt a wave of relief flood over me then. I had not been prepared for a moment of confrontation with the man who had abandoned my mother and sister and me, the man who had treated us like nothing more than one of many litters of offspring, animals he happened to contribute sperm to. What could I have said to him that could even begin to address all that?

“Tony, what did you say to him? Who was that?”

“He thought he knew me. I told him he had made a mistake,” I said, a little too harshly. “Where’s the waiter? I need some more water.”

* 

When I was still in high school, I’d spend a lot of time lying on my bed listening to my mom’s old Beatles, Dylan and Doors records. Then, I could imagine El Viejo fitting
in with the bad boys of that era, only vaquero style, with his pistola around his waist and spurs on his boots. His was a life for real men, always traveling, never getting too connected to any one city, or to any one group of people. I liked to think he was like Bob Dylan in that way, always on the move, like a rolling stone.

Thing is, he left a string of miserable women behind wherever he went, not mention his screwed up offspring. My sister, Alma, and I grew up with nothing more than that picture of him my mom kept in her dresser drawer, and that one letter he sent asking Alma for some cash in the late 1980s. Someone must have told him Alma was doing alright, or else maybe he guessed she would be the one to turn out right and I would be the one to turn out like him. Anyway, that letter sent Alma into therapy for years.

“A boozing, guitar-playing loser,” my mother yelled at me when we fought. “You’re turning out just like him.”

Taking up the guitar was the worst thing I could have done in her eyes. When I brought home my first Fender Squire, she didn’t talk to me for a month.

Thing is, no matter how much she hated him, I couldn’t stop myself from doing things just like him. I had been trying to stop for years, ever since I realized I was following in his footsteps, in a way. I had a habit of moving from girl to girl—before the first one knew it was over—drinking too many Tecates, and getting into too many fights after a show. And then there were my fingers which, if you believed Tío Fernando, were as quick on the guitar frets as El Viejo’s. Almost, anyway. His guitar playing was known through Mexico. A guitar genius, people called him. Un genio.
You can’t say I didn’t fight it. But that was before I knew you can’t run from your nature. It finds you, just when you think you’ve lost it for good. It catches up and next thing you know you’re doing just what you thought you’d never do. I’d been running from El Viejo. Only trouble is, I was running right in his direction. The farther from him I tried to get, the closer I ended up, till one day he was standing right in front of me, reminding me that I had some business to take care of, like I had been neglecting my duties, trying to forget about my place in the big picture.

After that night at Barragan’s, I was pretty shaken up. I kept looking over my shoulder everywhere I went, expecting El Viejo to appear. I didn’t mention it to Alma or my mom. I told myself it was because I didn’t want to freak them out, but now I realize I wanted to keep the information to myself for different reasons. What if it turned out I really was exactly like him? I didn’t think I wanted to find out.

After a couple of months, I got so busy I was able to stop worrying about it. I was practically living in the studio, working on my album, and me and the engineers were getting close to finishing my debut album, “Lost Angeles.” I didn’t have time to think about anything else.

“You’re going to blow Chris Isaak out of the water with ‘Lost Angeles,’ man,” Danny kept telling me. He was always comparing me to that gringo. “It’s going gold, man, I can feel it.”

Mari had started complaining that she never saw me anymore and, in truth, I missed hanging out, just watching TV with her. I decided to slow down so I could spend
more time at home. The album would get finished. This was my future wife here, and she was carrying my baby. Maybe I could slow down.

The same day I make my decision to slow down, Danny calls to say we have a gig booked at the Spitfire. Only it was for Friday, the same Friday as Mari’s baby shower. She’d been looking forward to that party for months.

“I can’t go, man. This shower thing is a big deal to Mari. Her whole family’s gonna be there.”

“No, my friend. This is a big deal. Hades Records organized the whole show. They’re calling it a showcase, and it has to do with getting you booked on gigs for the tour. You can’t bow out now. This one’s important, and there’s some good money in it for us, too.”

“For me.”

“Right, for you.”

“Nah, I can’t, man. She’ll be real pissed.”

“Dude, you know how I feel about that. Business is business. Am I right?”

“Sh—it. I dunno.” I could feel my insides moving around then, realigning themselves and tightening up as if bracing for a disturbance.

“I said, am I right? And besides, that cute PR chick’s gonna be there. She said she’s looking forward to seeing you perform,” Danny said. Just then, he let out a howl.

“Auuuuuu! Esa gringita’s got a thing for you, man!”

“She said that?”

*
On the way to the Spitfire that Friday, Danny got lost, and we ended up getting to the club late. When we finally got there, we raced through the back door. The stage manager was this big, bald black dude. He came out and asked me, “You the Chicano Chris Isaak?”

I looked at Danny, then back at him. “It’s Tony Arroyo…”

“Yeah, that’s what I like to call him,” Danny said to the brother, cutting me off.

“You’re on in two minutes. Equipment’s already set up. You better change,” he said, opening the backstage door for me before leaving.

“Danny, what did the brother call me?”

“It’s nothing, man. Just something I mentioned on the phone. For mental picture purposes, you know?”

“That’s the lamest thing I ever heard.”

“Just play along, bro. Esos gringos,” he laughed.

I found a mirror, then slid on my two-tone jacket, slicked back my hair with some Tres Flores pomade, patted my sideburns down and picked up my lime green Les Paul. I ran my tongue over my teeth for good measure. “What do you think, Danny? Am I the man?” I asked, giving my best country boy wink.

“Tony, you the man!” he said, pulling finger guns out of his pockets and pointing them my way.

I listened for my cue. The announcer shouted, “Let’s hear it for the Chicano Chris Isaak, Tony Arroyo!”
“Pendejo,” I muttered as I walked out on stage. The place was packed and it felt good to have the lights shining on me again after three months in the studio.

The crowd was in a pretty good mood, already shouting and hollering. I figured they must be a home crowd, must’ve already seen me before, most of them. I scanned the place for familiar faces, but couldn’t make any out. Then I said my usual hello, fixed my eyes on a front-row cutie, winked, and broke out into “Barrio Soul.”

Me and my Les Paul went to another place then, and I could feel the music filling me up, taking me places far away. I could almost believe Danny now. I was starting to feel like a real star.

When I was done, the audience cheered loudly. It felt really good, and I couldn’t wait till I could hit the road with the new material.

The MC came out and grabbed the mic from me. “Let’s hear it for our Chris Isaak!”

The crowd went wild.

“Let let’s hear it again for Elvis and Neil Diamond!”

I looked around. From behind the curtains came these two dudes. One of them was an Indian or Pakistani guy. He was wearing tight black jeans and had fluffy hair—I think it was a wig—and sideburns like mine. Someone handed him a mic and he started singing “Kentucky Woman” to the left side of the audience.

Then a brother come out in a sparkly white jumpsuit, with a jheri curl pompadour. He broke out with “Jail House Rock” on the right side and started swinging his ass around in wide circles, bumping me once.
I just stood there, looking around me at the pendejos. They looked like a couple of drag queens. The MC handed me the mic and whispered, “Well, what are you waiting for? Are you gonna sing or what?”

I don’t remember what I said to him, because things get kind of fuzzy right around here, but next thing I know I’m punching the motherfucker like I’m Oscar de la Hoya and he’s Julio Cesar Chavez, and he’s face down, eating stage.

Somehow I made it out of there in one piece that night, even though I was seeing more red than a bull. I just ran out of there and happened to see a bus going by. I hopped on the bus, and I was off. I could see security coming after me, but they were too late. I was pissed though. I couldn’t believe what they were trying to pull, parading me out of there with those freaks. Pinche Danny. It was all because of that Chris Isaak bullshit.

When I started singing in the local clubs, the girls would go wild. I was one smooth vato, and sometimes people would compare me to Chris Isaak. But I was no cover act. My songs were from the heart, original music, not covers of someone else’s crap. That pout-ass gringo had nothing on me.

When Danny first saw me play, he was working as a bouncer at the Eagle’s Flight. He came up to me after a set and said, “You’re the smoothest Chicano crooner I ever saw, and if you work with me, I can get you a record deal. I got some connections.”

He talked like that, Danny did. Like a dude out of a movie. But his connections worked out all right. For being the meaty empty-headed-looking former car club boy that
he was, he knew what was up. I had money in my bank account, I couldn’t argue with that. And I had an album coming out. What more could I want, right?

Only I was beginning to get the feeling it was going to cost me to be a star.

*

On my way home, still pissed as hell about what had happened, I decided to stop over at The Lodge for a beer. It wasn’t my usual hangout—too many gringos there—but my Teresa, an old girlfriend, worked there, and I really needed to see a friendly face, especially one as friendly as Teresa. The place was full of the usual gringo trust-fund babies pretending to be broke slackers, but I was able to get a spot at the bar with no problem. Some payaso was singing a Johnny Cash song to a hot-ass guerita and for a minute I wished I could get some of that action.

Then I saw Teresa. She was frowning, but she still looked good.

“Hey, baby. Don’tchu got a smile for me?”

“Hey Tony,” she said. “You got money? Cuz I can’t give you no more free drinks, OK?”

“Relax already. I haven’t asked you for a free drink for almost a year. Why so serious, baby?”

“Estos cabrones,” she said, motioning to the dude singing like a little bitch, and his friends. “They come in here and act like their mother never taught them manners. And then they don’t tip for shit.”

“You want me to have a word with them?”

“Nah, don’t worry about it. It’s not such a big deal, Tony.”
“Alright, you just let me know, honey.”

And just like that we started talking like it was the old days. I told her about my record deal, and she sounded impressed. She laughed that laugh for me. I started to feel better, and when she made her way around the bar serving drinks, I watched her little ass move in her tight jeans. I must’ve had about four beers, and then Teresa poured me a few freebies—rum and cokes, I think.

I should’ve known it was going to happen and left before closing time, but Teresa asked me to hang out till she got off and, like an idiot, I did. She didn’t live too far away, over in Frog Town, and I found myself walking through her front door, taking off my jacket and making myself comfortable on her caca green flowered couch.

We ended up spending some quality time on the couch, right there, without even going into the bedroom. After it was over, I slinked my way out of there and she didn’t ask me when she would hear from me. She knew I had Mari, though she didn’t ask if we were still together. I guess she didn’t really want to know too much.

When I got home, Mari was already asleep. I just undressed real quiet, crawled into bed and wrapped myself around her. I should’ve felt nervous but I didn’t. It’s like I knew that I wasn’t going to get caught, not now or ever, because Mari was the one and this couldn’t turn sour. I hugged her real tight. Outside the window, I could hear the cats screaming. They kept me up for over an hour, until I finally drifted off to sleep.

* 

The next morning, Danny called to do some damage control over the gig.
“Man, I had no idea they were going to pull that! I swear to you. Nobody told me about those other payasos.”

“Look, Danny, I don’t care what the suits think of me, as long as they treat me with respect. You tell them that. Tell them I get respect, or I walk. Better yet, I want an apology or the whole thing’s off.”

“Tony, man, I can’t do that. You’re just lucky they’re not pressing charges. But listen. Let’s get real. You know we signed a contract. We finish, and then you go on tour in January, and we get rich. It’s a done deal. Are you with me?”

“January?”

“Yeah, they just told me. They’re hooking the tour up now. Look, that gives us plenty of time. They’re gonna release the CD next month, and then we give it some time to marinate, and then we tour. It’s already decided.”

“Danny, man! Nobody told me anything about leaving on tour in January. Mari’s due in February. I can’t take off.”

“Dude, I don’t know what to say. We’re either on that tour, or we’re on that tour. A contract is a contract.”

“I don’t think I can do that, alright. You just don’t see.”

“Look, man. I see one thing. It’s your career, alright? When that bus rolls around, you’re on it or … you’re on it.”

“Honey, who’s that?” Mari asked from the bathroom.

“It’s Danny.”

“What does he want this early?”
“Nothing, Mari. He just wants to tell me something.”

After Mari left for work, I tried to go back to sleep but I just couldn’t get comfortable. I covered my head with the extra pillow, but it was no use. Finally I got up and pulled on a pair of Levi’s and a jacket. I walked to the front door and opened it. There was a ragged gray cat sitting on the stoop, scratching at the screen door. The sky was bright gray, almost the same shade as the cat, but lit up from behind like a TV set. I could tell it had been raining by the crisp, metallic smell of damp concrete.

The cat started purring and rubbing up against the door. I yanked it open, whacking the scrawny thing on the side. It yowled and bounced off the stoop, then was gone.

I went back inside to put on my brown wingtips. I grabbed my jacket and the car keys and headed out. I drove around for a while, keeping my eyes on the rearview mirror, on the lookout for patrullas and drunks.

Somehow, I ended up at Barragan’s. They say all roads lead to Rome. In my case, I was beginning to realize, all roads lead to El Viejo. Despite my attempts to ignore his presence in my life, the return of the missing father figure, there I was, seeking him out. I had a feeling he would be right where I last saw him, if the stories my uncles had told me through the years were correct: passed out in the restaurant where he last worked.

At 7:00 a.m., there wasn’t much activity at or around the restaurant, which didn’t open until 1:00 for lunch and did most of its business at dinner. I parked right in front, and walked to the glass doors. They were locked, and I couldn’t make out any movement inside. I knocked, then cupped my hands around my eyes to help me see better. I thought I could make out a light, but I couldn’t be sure.
I walked around to the back, past the trashcans and broken glass. I yanked on the metal handle on the back door. It opened.

Inside, it smelled like yesterday’s platillos. In the kitchen, the heavy scent of friend tortillas and garlic and roasted meat hung in the air. Off to the side, a dim light spilled from a doorway to what looked like a storage room. I pulled the door open, and almost slipped on the greasy floors. After a moment of blindness, my eyes adjusted to the dark inside. There, slumped in chairs around an upside down tomato crate peppered with playing cards, were three men in black mariachi pants. There was an overturned bottle of liquor on the floor. El Viejo was leaning back, his mouth hanging open, a burnt-out cigarette butt in one hand, a soft whistling noise coming out of his wide nostrils. He looked so natural and innocent like that, as if he had been born holding a cigarette butt in his fingers. I moved closer and watched him breathe, trying to find the part of him that belonged to me, that connected us to each other. My father, the alcoholic. My father, the traveling man.

I looked at him, at the deep lines on his face and the thick calluses on his fingers, his long nails. His hair was thick and greasy, mostly white now, but still full. Just an old drunk, I thought. “Pinche borracho,” I mumbled to myself.

Almost immediately, he awoke. He made as if to stand, then stilled himself.

“Hijo,” he said. A small grin began to form at the corners of his mouth.

I wanted to kick him then, knock that sly grin off his face and shake his sorry old man body until he understood what he had done to us by caring so little. I wanted to explain to him that a human being, a real man, doesn’t just spread his sperm and leave the
results behind to fend for themselves. I felt, for an instant, as though I might kill him. I knew I had to get out of there before I did something I might regret, so I turned to leave, and then I spotted something at his feet.

It was his guitar, an acoustic that gleamed a deep burgundy, lying in its open case. I bent over and slowly pulled it out. I fingered the strings and ran my hand on the guitar’s belly.

I began to strum on his guitar, and the sun began to slip in through the half-open door from the windows in the kitchen. I began playing a song I heard my uncles play back in Chihuahua when I was a kid. They said it was a song he wrote, my father the musical genius.

“Viejo,” I said to him, nodding my head at the sun.

He looked around at the bright room and at the sunlight streaking the floors, and nodded his head that yes, he saw that it was a new day.

I kept playing. I played his song to the best of my ability, trying hard to remember every note, every refrain. I played and he sat there listening. After a while, he closed his eyes.
Silver Lake Adjacent

It was the third ring that finally woke Russ Festermacher from what had been an accidental nap. He hadn’t intended to fall asleep at all. In fact, he was vaguely aware that he had somewhere to be.

He glanced at the clock radio on the nightstand next to his queen-size bed as he reached for the telephone. The phone, a cordless, was shaped like a curvy hula girl, with a fake grass skirt hanging down over the receiver.

“Yell-oh,” he said, peppily. He was in the habit of trying to hide the fact that he was sleeping from friends--it seemed to him that he was still in a state of vulnerability to the outside world for the first few minutes after waking.

Hearing his mother’s voice on the other line, Russ remembered that he had promised to meet Trina and Sam for drinks at the Lodge in Atwater at 9:00 p.m. It was 9:25 p.m. on a Friday evening, and he was at home in bed.

“Moms, hi. … Yeah, I was. Just waking up from a snooze.”

“Just waking up? What kind of hours are you keeping, Honey?”

Here he listened for a while as his mother grilled him about the recent IPO at his company and the stock options he had just exercised. He played with the plastic grass skirt hanging off the receiver. “Uh-huh. Yup. It was a long day. … Yeah, I did it. I sold it,” he said to his mother, suddenly fully awake. He sat up in bed and swung his feet off his fuzzy leopard print bedspread and onto the berber carpet.
“But how do you know this was the right time to sell, Russ?” his mother asked, undisguised alarm in her voice.

“I thought it was the right thing to do and the right time, so I sold it.”

“All of it?”

“Yeah, all of it.”

“Oh, Honey. Did you see that accountant Margaret recommended?”

“Yup. I saw the accountant the day before yesterday,” he said in a sing-songy voice.

He walked over to the bathroom and splashed some water on his face with one hand while holding the phone an inch from his ear with the other. He shoved his fingers through his scraggily, dirty blonde hair, which made him look like Shaggy from Scooby Doo. It was a look he cultivated.

“Well, did he explain all the tax implications of selling such a large amount of stock to you, Honey?”

“Yup, he did. But I decided I’d rather not wait and see what happens.”

“It could go up so much higher.”

“Yeah, but the market’s doing great now. It could also go lower.”

“So where is the money going to be?”

“A money market account. It’s an E-Trade account. It’s stable.”

“So how much did it come out to, if I may be so bold as to ask?”

“Nearly five hundred thousand.”
“Oh, dear. So much. It’s a big responsibility. Don’t go spending it all in one place, Honey.”

“Ha ha. Listen, I gotta go, Mom. Gonna meet up with Sam and Trina.”

Russ stared at himself as he talked and noticed the ketchup stain on his T-shirt. He walked into his bedroom and reached into the closet for a brown a shirt.

“But it’s so much money.”

“I know it’s a lot of money, Mom. I’m not going to do anything stupid with it.”

“Well what then?”

“I don’t know. I’m thinking about maybe reinvesting it in the market. Intel looks strong right now, but it’s undervalued, I read…”

“You’re going to use it all to buy Intel stock?”

“No. I’m not going to do it right now. I said I was just thinking about it. I’m doing some research now.”

“What about a house?”

He sighed loudly. “I don’t know about a house, Mom. It just seems so … permanent. I’m not sure I’m ready to join the ranks of the illustriously housed and mortgaged just yet.”

“Just think it over, OK?”

“OK—gotta run now, Mom. The gang’s waiting.”

“I love you, Honey.”

“I love you, too.”
Russ put the hula girl back on her stand and pulled the brown shirt on over his T-shirt, which was light blue with the word Atari in white lettering on the front. The brown shirt was a thin cotton western-style shirt with pearlized snaps and pointy collar and cuffs in a contrasting quilted, patterned material. The pattern featured tiny blue houses on tan hills. It was a perfectly ironic look.

* 

At the Lodge, Trina was sipping a mint-green-milky-frothy drink when Russ arrived wearing his curled up straw cowboy hat. Sam was in the act of opening a can of Guinness. Trina was looking girlish in a pale pink jacket, a black slip-like skirt and clunky orange sneakers with no socks. She held the handle of her pink and yellow plaid Kate Spade purse in front of her and smiled at Russ. He kissed her on the cheek and then shook hands with Sam. Sam, spiky hair sticking up above a black rubber jacket, popped the can open and poured the foamy beer into a tall glass. Russ sat down to his left.

“Buddy, pal, you’re an hour late,” Sam said. “But you see, we saved you a seat nonetheless. Trina had to fight off three potential suitors on account of this empty chair.”

“Yeah, I know, I’m late. I admit it. But good things come to those who wait, good man.”

“No matter,” Sam said, waving the bartender over. “Hey, you, Chiquita Banana, a drink for my friend here. Russ, what are you having?”

“Excuse me?” said the bartender, a thin, dark girl with blood-colored lipstick. “My name is Teresa. You can call me bartender, or you can call me Miss. But don’t be calling me…”
“I’ll have a Cosmopolitan, thanks, Teresa. Sorry about him. He doesn’t get out much,” Russ said quickly, glancing at her and noticing her hot pink lacy bra sticking out of her tight black tank top. He frowned at Sam. “So, what did I miss?”

Russ noticed the bartender checking him out before she turned to get the drink. Trina stuck her tongue out at her after she turned her back, then giggled conspiratorially at her companions, covering her mouth with her hand like a Japanese school girl.

“As you can see, we are well into our celebration,” Sam said, gulping a third of his beer and slamming it down on the bar. “It had to be so, I’m afraid. A celebration waits for no man.”

“You are, as always, right indeed, my friend,” Russ said. “Now that the Russmeister is here, however, the ministrations shall take on a whole new dimension, flames a flyin’, ladies a cryin’ …”

“Ooooh, Russ, stop please! I’m starting to perspire,” Trina said right on cue, batting her eyelashes mockingly.

“That’s right, honey chile. As Johnny Cash put it,” Russ spread his legs theatrically and broke into song in his best Cash baritone: “The taste of love is sweet, when hearts like ours meet. I fell for you like a child, oh, but the fire went wild. I fell into a burning ring of fire.”

A couple of girls sitting down the bar whooped, and a tall Chicano guy dressed in a two-tone jacket walked by just then. The guy watched as Russ sang, then shook his head and walked to the other end of the bar to sit at the only empty spot.

“You should be on stage!” one of the girls at the bar hollered.
“I already am, honey chil’. But I can arrange for a private show for you, dolly,” he said. He pushed a twenty dollar bill toward the bartender as she delivered his drink in a martini glass and winked at her.

“Friends, Romans, fellow co-workers, let the celebrations continue,” Russ said to Sam and Trina, holding up his Cosmopolitan.

“Here’s to TuneMania.com!” Sam said.

“Hear, hear,” Russ said.

“Here’s to DOT-COM-MANIA!!” shrieked Trina.

“Hear, hear,” Sam said.

The three each took a drink and slammed them on the bar in unison, three grinning, brand new “hundred-thousand-aire,” as they had dubbed themselves earlier that day at the offices of TuneMania.com. The ‘90s were ending, and they were ending with a bang, Russ thought as he gulped his Cosmo.

“Here’s to 1999!” Russ shouted. “Drinks for everyone.”

The girls at the end of the bar hooped and hollered, then came over to toast Russ with their half-finished girl drinks.

He had always wanted to say that.

*

At the 99 Cent store the next morning, Russ—nursing an epic, world-muffling headache—contemplated the candles on the shelf before him.

He had told himself that he wouldn’t change his habits once he had a little bit of cash, and that meant keeping up the tradition of 99-cent purchases every weekend.
The array of candles before him consisted of tall, glass-encased candles in jewel tones—ruby red, emerald green and sapphire blue, along with purple, cream, black and yellow—bearing the likeness of various saints. He wanted some candles for ambience. He tried picturing each color in his living room, on his coffee table, on his bookshelf, but he couldn’t decide which to choose.

“That’s what you get for drinking so much,” he said out loud. “Lost your decision-making brain cells. Turned yourself into a veritable moron.”

He picked one up and looked at the saint pictured on it, trying to read the inscription.

“You gotta get La Virgencita.”

Russ looked up to find a woman with red lipstick and black hair piled up on her head in round, twisted braids standing next to him. Her lips lifted ever so slightly in a great imitation of a Mona Lisa smile. She appeared to be about 10 years older than he was, mid-thirtyish, and a little on the heavy side. Upon closer inspection, Russ noticed that she wasn’t actually heavy-set after all, but carried on a small frame a rather large pair of breasts for such a slight woman. Kinda hot, despite her age.

She was short, about a head shorter than he was, and had on one of those shawls that the old women who were always waiting for the bus on Sunset Boulevard seemed to like. The shawl was black and ended in long fringes, which the woman pushed aside to free her hands. She took the red candle he was holding from him and put it down. She handed him a white candle.
“You seem undecided. Try this one,” she said in mildly-accented English, pointing to the picture on the candle. “La Virgencita is the protectress of all souls.”

“That’s groovy,” Russ said, smiling back. “Thanks.”

The woman bowed and curtsied, then picked up two purple candles for herself before walking away.

At home in his junior one-bedroom apartment, Russ set his new candle on the coffee table and leafed through the Sunday preview of the L.A. Post. He had always been too impatient to wait until Sunday to read the Sunday paper. He looked for the real estate section and glanced at the open houses set for that weekend, figuring it couldn’t hurt to look.

He didn’t spend too much time looking in the Los Feliz section before realizing he couldn’t afford to buy much in his neighborhood, at least not this time around.

Maybe next IPO, he thought.

He lived in a quiet, well-groomed Los Feliz neighborhood with large houses and the occasional luxury apartment building. His apartment building had underground security parking and a swimming pool. The houses around him were pricey, that much he knew.

The Silver Lake properties were a little less expensive, but still nowhere near his budget, which he had calculated at about two to three hundred grand. Of the five hundred, he knew Uncle Sam would take a large chunk, maybe as much as a quarter or third of it, and he had to keep some savings. He planned to pay off his credit card bills (about
$3,600 on his Visa), spend a good five grand fixing up his swept-wing ’63 Chevy Impala, take a surf trip to Hawaii (two to three grand) and buy himself a new laptop (three grand).

Oh, yeah, and get some new clothes, of course.

After all that, he would have a good sized chunk to play with. He had thought about what to do with the rest of his money for months and had come to a conclusion: he wanted to invest in something that would bring him a return on his cash, rather than just spend it all or, conversely, save it. He figured he could invest in the larger, more established tech companies, plus a few large-cap stocks on the S&P 500. Or he could gamble it on one company like Intel and hope to hit the jackpot down the line.

His mother’s suggestion that he buy a house had seemed completely out of the question. He was just 26, and the last thing he wanted to do was settle down with the responsibility of a house mortgage.

But if he didn’t at least look into it, he would be doing himself a disservice. He decided to go online and read up on the real estate market. He booted up his desktop and began surfing the net.

Everything he saw about investing in real estate versus other investments was positive. He read through op-eds in the daily papers, national magazines, whatever he could find. The consensus was that real estate was, for the most part, booming, and also a pretty stable investment that could, in the right neighborhoods, bring him a very nice return if property values kept going up. And everyone seemed to believe real estate was going to keep appreciating, especially in Southern California.
He paced his living room and picked at a zit on his chin as he mulled it over. If he put down a large down payment, he wouldn’t have much of a mortgage, so if he wanted to travel or leave town, he could just rent the place out. With a low enough mortgage, the place could take care of itself. Worth considering.

He picked up the real estate section of the paper again, warming up to the idea with every house he saw. The houses in Silver Lake ranged from about $250,000 to $800,000. He circled a few of the open house addresses, grabbed his Thomas Brother’s guide and headed to the garage. Why the fuck not. Can’t hurt to take a look, right? He hopped in his primer-and-white Impala and drove out.

The sky was pale and lit up with a gray, diffused light. It was a warm day, but the sun was nowhere in sight.

Even though it was out of his price-range, he wanted to know what $500,000 could buy him in Silver Lake. He found a smallish house in the foothills of Silver Lake listed at $495,000, just above but with only a limited view of the Silver Lake Reservoir from the street. It was a clean bungalow with wood siding and a pitched roof, but none of the detail of a Craftsman or Mediterranean-style house. The sign out front read “Open House.”

He parallel parked with more than a little difficulty on the steep, curving street, and walked inside.

“Hi, welcome,” a blonde woman in a tight beige blazer and short skirt said to him as he approached. “Here’s an information sheet on the property. Have a look around and let me know if you have any questions.”
“Thanks,” Russ said, shoving the tips of his fingers into the front pockets of his flared-leg, baby blue wrangler corduroys, which were a bit too tight for him. The house smelled vaguely of cake. He took the sheet and gave himself a tour of the house’s very small three bedrooms, the tight, sloping back yard and patio, the rehabbed kitchen.

His thought his mother would like this one. She had offered to fly down from Connecticut to help find a property, but he had been adamant in his refusal. He was glad he had told her not to come. If he was going to buy a house, and that was still a big if, he would do it himself.

The house didn’t do it for him, he decided, despite the hefty price tag. It didn’t even have a real yard. He walked back to his car, imagining himself gardening in his own yard. He had always wanted to compost. The day was turning out to be quite hot. He felt the heat closing in on him as soon as he got into the car, and he rolled down the window.

He picked up the paper and looked at an ad that read:

For Sale by Owner


Now that was more like it. The price was right. He recognized the street name so he skipped the Thomas Brothers guide and started up the ignition. Waves of heat rippled on the black road before him. First repair air conditioning, he thought to himself.
He found Hacienda Way and turned onto the winding street. He went up and down a number of small hills, heading east. He watched the street signs and realized he was nowhere near 1872, but he kept driving. Soon, he descended. The well-groomed Silver Lake hills turned into extended flat lands. He kept heading east toward Dodger Stadium. The houses grew smaller, the yards less verdant, the cars older and shabbier.

At the 1800 block of Hacienda Way, Russ saw that he was most definitely in, as his mother would have put it, the wrong side of town. Half-naked children ran up and down the street ignoring his car and the potential danger it posed. Three meaty guys with shaved heads sat on the stoop of a large, red brick tenement-style apartment building. The men all wore white undershirts, cut-off slacks and long, white tube socks up to their knees. They openly took hits from Coors cans and watched Russ as he scanned the addresses.

Then he saw the house. 1872 Hacienda Way.

It was, indeed, a Spanish-style house on a cul-de-sac. Two stories. Impressive. It sat atop its own small hill, right at the end of the curve, next door to the apartment building. It was painted a pale almost feathery gold, with a terracotta red tiled roof and large arched windows trimmed in bright cobalt blue. The front was lined with wildflowers, tall grasses, and bright peach-colored bougainvilleas that clung to the iron fence. The sun had appeared, and now it was beginning to dip. Its rays shot out from behind the house almost as if on cue.

Not bad, he thought. Time to check it out. The only parking spot available was directly in front of the red brick building and the three men. Was he going to be
intimidated by a few cholos, he asked himself? He liked to think of himself as a bit more enlightened than that. So no. He wasn’t.

He parked, glancing briefly in the direction of the men before walking toward the house. They had lost interest and stopped watching him.

Russ reached a black wrought-iron gate with a starbust design on it. There was a round gap in the middle with spokes coming out from the center like rays. Behind the gate, which was speckled with more bright bougainvillea blossoms, he could see a garden and steps leading up to a door that was painted the same cobalt blue. He imagined painting his Impala in that color. Could be sweet. He tried the gate. It was unlocked.

“Hello,” he called uncertainly from outside the gate as opened it. “Hello?”

He let himself in and walked into the yard, looking over his shoulder at his car and the cholos on the stoop before closing the gate behind him.

“Ah, I thought I heard someone,” a woman said to him. She stood at the cobalt blue door, which was now open. “You’re here about the house?”

“Yeah, I am. Is there an open house?” Russ asked, looking back over his shoulder one last time at his car before heading up the stairs to the door.

“Oh, don’t worry, Sweety, your car will be fine,” the woman said coming down the stairs and grabbing Russ by the hand. “I’m Sofia. Sofia Fuentes.”

Russ could hear music coming from inside. He recognized Hendrix, a song from “Axis: Bold as Love.” He found himself humming along as he walked.
Once inside, on top of a short bookshelf near the door, Russ saw an incense stick burning next to what appeared to be a mini altar made up of a stature of the Virgen Mary, two large and two small candles, and a small saucer with liquid in it.

“You gotta cover all your bases,” Sofia said, gesturing to the altar. “The santos like tequila,” she said, still holding him by the hand.

She pulled him along with her. “Let me show you around. You saw the ad in the Post?”

“Yeah,” Russ said. He looked with interest at the small woman. Her hair was pulled back in two low ponytails at the nape of her neck. She wore a sparkling blue-gem bindi dot between her eyebrows, a long flowing skirt and a white peasant-style blouse with puffy sleeves. Dramatically arched eyebrows, pretty face. “You seem very familiar to me. Have we met?”

“The 99-cent store,” she said.

“Huh?”

“That’s where we met. You were picking out candles this morning. … So, this is all Saltillo tile from Mexico,” Sofia said, gesturing to the kitchen floor as they walked in.

“Oh. Right! Small world. But, you looked different,” Russ said.

“I changed my hair. I get bored easily,” Sofia said, a grin lifting her lips up at the corners.

“Crazy coincidence. We bump into each other at the store this morning, and now I’m standing in your pad!”
“I believe there are no coincidences,” she said. She didn’t smile when she spoke this time.

“Groovy. … Right. … So, you’re selling this house yourself, without an agent. May I ask why?”

“I’m moving away,” she said.

“So it says in the ad that this is Silver Lake, but it’s Echo Park isn’t it?”

“Yup, Echo Park.”

“Well isn’t that a sort of false advertising?” he asked, putting on a smile as he said this lest she take offense.

“Not at all. That’s how all the real estate agents do it. If you look through the listings, you’ll see there are hardly any Echo Park houses for sale. As far as real estate agents are concerned, Echo Park does not exist. We all live Silver Lake adjacent.”

“Silver Lake adjacent. That’s funny.”

“Funny, maybe. Also true.”

“Right. Got it. So, you’re asking two sixty-nine, right?”

“That’s right.”

“A bit high for this neighborhood, isn’t it?”

“Sweety, it’s a bargain for this kind of house in any neighborhood…” The phone, which was hanging on the wall to the right of Sofia, interrupted her with a loud ring. She reached for it. “I’m going to take this. Why don’t you have a look around. The bedrooms are upstairs.”
“Right,” Russ said. He walked back into the living room, which was crammed with books: books packed into wall-to-wall shelves, books stacked on chairs, books in the fireplace nook. The room had high raw wood-beam ceilings. It was huge.

He could hear Sofia mumbling, saying the occasional “right” and “uh-huh.” He went up the stairs and peeked into one of the rooms. It was a large bedroom being used as a studio. A painting-in-progress sat on an easel. He could make out a blue face with large, gentle eyes and what appeared to be rays of light shooting out from behind the head.

It was a calming image, and very intricate. The woman appeared to be a real painter. He saw pictures on the wall of her posing with local celebrities and at art galleries and museums surrounded by crowds. There was a framed article from the L.A. Post about her. In the photo that accompanied the story, she stared into the camera, wearing her hair in the same round braids she had been wearing earlier.

He noted the window seat at the far end of the room and the high ceiling, the crown moulding, the smooth walls. He closed the door then, and headed toward another room. From downstairs, he heard Sofia cry out.

“No!” she said loud enough for him to hear. “How?”

Russ felt uncomfortable. He already felt as if he had invaded her space by spending time in her studio. Now she appeared to be upset with whomever she was talking to on the phone. He changed his mind about looking into the other rooms and walked halfway down the stairway, unable to keep himself from eavesdropping.

“That pigs! I can’t believe they would do that ….”
A few seconds of listening later Russ decided he should get going. He approached Sofia.

“Thanks,” he mouthed silently when he caught her eye, pointing to the front door.

Sofia stopped talking. She was sniffling. She wiped her face with her sleeve. “Just a second, Frankie,” she said to the caller.

“I’m so sorry, sweetie,” she said to Russ. “Bad news…”

“Oh… of course. No worries. It’s a beautiful house,” Russ said. “I just started looking around, so…”

“Of course,” Sofia said, wiping her face again with her bare hand and placing the receiver on the counter. “Before you go, please take one of my empanadas.”

She grabbed a napkin from the napkin holder, walked to the stove and retrieved what looked like a tart from a baking sheet on top of the burners. “It’s still warm,” she said, handing him the napkin-wrapped pastry. “It’s made with strawberries from my garden. You have to come back to see the garden, OK? They’re baked, not fried. You look like you need to eat more, Sweety. You’re all skin and bones.”

“Right. Thanks for the … um… Goodbye,” he said.

He thought about the little woman with her bindi and her overly familiar ways and her big house and her tequila offerings and her homegrown strawberries, and he wondered about all the shadowy people he walked past in his neighborhood every day, about the lives they were living right beside his own. He had never stopped to think about all the brown people in his neighborhood. Now he imagined them living in a parallel
dimension, next to but not part of his world. His visit to this other world left him feeling unsettled. He turned the radio up and blasted a Ramones song.

* 

On his way home, his cell phone rang. It was Trina inviting him over for dinner.

“I am hungry, but I’m wiped too. A bit hung over from last night. You?”

“Come over. I miss you, Pookie,” she tried. So they were on to nicknames now.

Trina and Russ had just started hooking up, twice at his apartment now, and they had decided to keep it from Sam for a while. Sam had made his interest in Trina clear to everyone. Trina told Russ she just wanted to be Sam’s friend, but Russ felt like a prick for moving in on her right under his friend’s nose. He did not look forward to the conversation he had to have with Sam.

Sam was out of town visiting his folks, and Russ had never been over to her apartment alone before. He decided why the hell not?

At Trina’s apartment, she opened the door with a wicked grin on her face.

She wasted no time. As soon as he was through the door, she was all over him. Her kiss tasted like coffee, and was a little too enthusiastic for his taste, but he went with it. “I thought you’d never get here,” she said.

“Woah, Trina, Trina” Russ said. “Lemme get settled.”

She grabbed him by the back of his head and kissed him hard.

“Dinner’s almost ready,” she said, pulling him into her bedroom. “Let’s work up an appetite.”
Trina stopped at the foot of her bed and unbuttoned her shirt, tossing it on the floor. She was wearing a pink bra with red cherries on it. She wiggled out of her skirt to reveal matching panties. Then she reached for Russ’s pants. She unzipped him, and he kicked them off. She kneeled in front of him, yanked his underwear aside, and placed his penis in her mouth.

He stopped thinking about Sam.

“Lay down,” she commanded. He reached behind him and felt the bed as he let himself fall back. The bedspread, he noticed out of the corner of his eye, was printed with geisha girls in different colored kimonos.

He reached for her bra and unsnapped it.

She moaned theatrically and laughed her best wicked witch cackle, then flicked her panties at the wall. They fell onto the bed’s headboard, which was a shelf filled with plastic kitten dolls and other Japanese figurines. Russ had the feeling he was on stage, about to have sex as part of a performance. He almost expected an audience of Hello Kitties to start applauding as Trina mounted him. And it really turned him on.

Later, as they were eating overcooked pasta, Trina told him about Marcel, one of the new managers in her department who had just been hired the month before by the CEO. He was an old friend of the CEO’s who had worked with him previously, and Trina and her coworkers all resented him for showing up just in time to cash in on a far-too-generous stock option package and successful IPO.
“I swear, I wanted to walk up to him and stick a pen in his eye. He just sat there at his monitor all day Friday watching the stock price. Then he would go, ‘Now I’m a millionaire, now I’m not. Now I’m a millionaire, now I’m not.’”

“That guy lacks all class,” Russ said.

“You know,” she said, sticking her fork in his mouth and shoveling fettuccine in while he was still talking, “there’s new car money, and then there’s new house money. But some of the guys, like Marcel, and that nerd Dwight and his pals in engineering, they’re getting new life money.”

On his way home that night, Russ felt like an ass. He thought about Sam and imagined his reaction when he heard the news about Trina. He wasn’t even sure he liked her all that much. She had just made herself so … available to him. Sam was the one who really liked her.

“Aw, shit,” he said, wondering how he was going to spin this one. Could they just keep it between the two of them, he wondered? Doubtful. Trina would want the world to know. She had already insisted on meeting his mother over the phone the week before when she was over his place and his mother called. They had talked for about 20 minutes, and the whole time Russ had a sick feeling in his stomach. How in the world had he allowed this to happen to him, he wondered?

Sunday morning the phone woke him. He picked up his hula girl.

“Yell-oh.”
“Russ, Honey, you’ve got to meet with this real estate agent. Margaret asked around and says this woman comes highly recommended. A real shark with sharp instincts when it comes to real estate deals in Los Angeles. Ready to take down the number?”

“I was still sleeping, Mom.”

“At 10? Honey, up up up! You have big financial decisions to make.”

“Not two minutes after being woken up, I don’t. Besides, I didn’t say I was willing to buy a house.”

“No, but you have to look into all your options, Honey. You’ve got to be smart about this. Put the money into something safe and reliable. There’s no way a house in Los Angeles can lose its value. Real estate is the only safe and secure way to get a good return on investment these days. It’s foolproof. You’ve got to wake up and smell the coffee!”

“Well, as a matter of fact, I did go look at a house yesterday.”

“Oh, good. I knew you’d come around. Where is it?”

“Echo Park.”

“Oh, no. Not Echo Park. There’s all those gang guys and crime and so many immigrants. You need to stay in Silver Lake or Los Feliz.”

“Mom, there are gangs and immigrants in Silver Lake and Los Feliz, too.”

“Oh, you know what I mean. Silver Lake and Los Feliz are just… safer. Cleaner. A better investment. Not so many poor people running around lowering property values with their loud music and clotheslines.”
“Echo Park is practically Silver Lake. It’s Silver Lake adjacent.”

“What?”

“Never mind, Mom. Come to think of it, I just might end up marrying one of those immigrants just to piss you off. Mexican women are real cute.”

“Stop being such a smart-ass, Russ. Speaking of which, how’s that lovely girl Trina doing?”

“She’s fine.”

“Are you guys getting serious?”

“We just started dating.”

“She got stock options as well, didn’t she? Did she do as well as you did? She seemed like such a nice girl. From a good family. Her father’s a doctor. You’ve got to think about these things as you go forward and choose a mate.”

“We just started dating, Mom. I’m not even sure I like her that much.”

Russ stopped at Starbucks for his usual latte. He sat at one of the little tables and watched his neighbors stream in with their yoga pants, concert T-shirts, and over-priced babystrollers—a whole generation embarking on procreation with just as much style as they did everything else in their lives. A tow-headed toddler waddled in his general direction wearing a tiny black Ramones T-shirt. His mother, a stunning platinum-haired MILF in her early 30s wearing converse hightops and black tights scooped the kid up just as he was approaching Russ. She smiled at him briefly before joining her tattooed mate at
their table. Russ wondered, will that kid rebel by listening to Tchaikovsky and wearing three-piece suits to high school?

He thought about Trina, and one word came to mind. Absurd. How could he take a woman like that seriously? She approached everything in her life as if she were orchestrating a grand performance, a charade. In Trina’s world, nothing was worth caring about. Nothing was worth stepping out of character over. Nothing mattered. Was that the kind of life he wanted to live, he asked himself? He realized he had been on a trajectory along with all of his friends that would lead him to that exact life—one in which nothing really mattered. The thought made him shiver.

Russ decided it might be a good idea to take another look at the house on Hacienda Way. Maybe a house would ground him and give him some purpose, he thought. Maybe a house was what he needed, after all. He drove through the streets of Silver Lake and soon found himself at the starburst gate again. He plucked one of the blossoms off the bougainvillea and headed up the stairs. He knocked on the cobalt door.

“You’re back,” Sofia said a moment later. She didn’t seem surprised to see him. “Come in, please.” The sun was already getting high in the sky, its rays sharp and bright on Russ’s face and arms, so hot they brought goosebumps to his forearms.

“It’s gonna be a hot one,” Russ said, regretting the lame standby conversation-starter immediately. Second-guessing himself was a sensation he was not at all used to, and it caught him off guard. There was something about this woman that was so unsettling he found himself saying things he wouldn’t normally say.
“You know, you didn’t tell me your name yesterday, Sweety,” she said. “I’m Sofia.”


“Fenstermacher. I like that. It means opener of windows or open window, doesn’t it?”

“Something like that. It’s German. I don’t speak German.” He chuckled, lamely, and suddenly felt like a moron for not knowing what his name meant. He was sure his father had told him once, years ago, before he died, but he had forgotten. It didn’t seem all that relevant before. “So, I was hoping to take another look. At the house.”

Sofía was wearing her dark hair in loose waves to the tops of her shoulders. She had on a white tank top and a snug black bolero-style jacket with gold embroidery up and down the length of the jacket sleeves. She wore matching matador-style pants that ended at her knees. Her feet were bare.

“Come have a cup of green tea,” she said, pulling him in. Her hands were warm and very small. This time the music playing was something folksy, a woman with a high voice. Fingers of smoke swirled in the air. The scent was not entirely pleasant, but not unappealing, either.

“That’s sage you smell,” Sophia said seriously, looking back over her shoulder as they walked. “I’m burning a smudge stick. I’m using it to cleanse the air of bad energy. I’ve had some of that in my life lately. … Sit.”
She pointed to the kitchen table. Russ watched as she poured hot water from a teapot shaped like a rooster. A small statute of a smiling Buddha, round belly gleaming under the morning sun, sat in the middle of the table.

“You get good light in here,” he said, lamely. He couldn’t stop himself from sounding like an idiot today. What was with this verbal diarrhea?

“The light is one of the reasons I love it here so much. I’ve lived here most of my life and I always thought I would die in this house. But not long ago I realized it was time to go. Time to move on. I’ve been rooted to this spot for too long. And this city... well, I don’t know about it anymore. I think I’ve got to get out of here. It’s squelching me, stunting my growth.”

“Your growth?”

“Yes, my spiritual development. I need to break out of my habits and find new universes, new mentors to guide me in my spiritual development.”

“May I ask what religion you are?” Russ asked.

“All of them, Sweety.” Sofi said. She smiled for the first time since he had arrived, and Russ noticed that she had a pleasant dimple on one cheek. “We’re all, all of us humans, spiritual beings. All there is around us is light and energy and spirit. Some of us choose to call our spirituality Christianity, others Hinduism. It’s all the same. And some choose to ignore spirituality in our quest for material things, power, career success, money, but that’s OK. We all stumble onto our own spiritual path when the time is right.”

Russ was feeling oddly trapped there in Sofia’s kitchen. She placed a plate of small powdery cookies in front of him. He sensed he was being grouped in with the ignorers,
but there was nothing he could say that would prove her wrong. Was he an ignorer? And why did he care anyway?

“You have great energy, Russ. I’m glad you’ve come. I feel a connection between us, and I need all the positive energy I can get at a time like this.” She sat down next to him and nibbled a cookie.

“Is everything OK? Yesterday you seemed upset.” He immediately regretted asking, but he couldn’t help himself.

“My brother Tito just got his ass kicked by L.A.’s finest during a protest rally. They used batons and a taser gun on him. He’s in the hospital, still unconscious. You might have seen it on the news…. Tito’s a community organizer and .. it’s complicated. … They’re trying to deny undocumented immigrants emergency room care. The men and women who clean our office buildings, their children. I don’t go to those protests as much these days, thank god, or else I might’ve killed those cops.”

“Whoa. No. Sorry about your brother. Is he going to be alright?”

“The doctors don’t know. It’s pretty bad. He looked so small lying there in the hospital bed last night. My baby brother…” Sofia’s face darkened, and her eyes glittered. Russ reached out and put his large pale, freckled hand over her small hand. She looked at him and her face crumbled. She collapsed into him, and he instinctively wrapped his arms around her. He held her as she cried, and it felt strangely not uncomfortable to be doing that. After a few minutes, Sofia stood up. She grabbed a paper towel from a holder by the sink and wiped her face. Then she reached over and turned on the water, splashing her face and drying it again.
“Well, that was cathartic,” she said, smiling sadly at Russ. “Thank you. Now, come with me, please. Now I paint you.”

In her studio, the sun seemed to have followed them, like a constant companion to the odd little woman. Diffused rays streamed in from a large window and tiny particles of dust danced in the beams. Russ felt almost as warm as he had standing outside in the late morning sunshine. Sofia grabbed a smock off a hook on the door and wrapped it around her.

She pulled a chair into the middle of the room and directed Russ to sit there. She placed an empty canvas on an easel a few feet from him, then picked up her paints and began squeezing and mixing them on a well-used palette. Russ wondered why he was just allowing himself to be ordered around—sit here, go there. And why exactly was he letting this woman paint him, he wondered? He couldn’t help it. He felt compelled to obey her.

“Sit however you want, OK? It’s your eyes I really want to capture today. You have very expressive eyes. They’re beautiful.”

Russ sat still. He watched her scrutinize his face and held his breath when she walked to within inches of him. She peered into his eyes, examining them the way an optometrist might. She smelled of lemons and sage.

“This will be my last painting in this house,” she announced, backing up to the easel without turning. She pointed a small paintbrush at the blank canvas and began applying small brushstrokes to the center. “After this, I’m not sure where I’ll end up, but Echo Park just isn’t what it used to be. It doesn’t feel like home anymore. I’m beginning to feel like a stranger in my own neighborhood. My neighbors, good people who grew up
here and who raised their children here, are being looked at as if they don’t belong here by the newest residents. Rental prices are shooting up, and landlords are evicting their poorest tenants so they can charge more. And now it’s open season on activists fighting for the working poor. I’m sick of it. En punto, I’ve made up my mind to leave by the end of summer, whether this house sells or not.”

“I’m still thinking about the house,” Russ said too quickly. He remembered a song by the band X, which he had seen Exene Cervenka sing live once. ‘She had to leave Los Angeles,” Exene had wailed mournfully.

“Oh, I know, Honey,” Sofia said, her eyes softening. “Don’t worry about it. If you decide you want it, it’s yours. I just have a feeling it’s not quite what you need right now.”

“Where will you go?” Russ found himself asking.

“I may want to go visit relatives in El Salvador first, then, who knows. I’m thinking Tibet.”

“You’re from El Salvador?”

“We’re not all from Mexico, you know,” she said, laughing at him openly. “Yes, definitely maybe Tibet. I feel a strong pull to go there.”

Tibet. For some reason, the thought of Tibet made Russ smile.

*

On Monday, Russ went to work as usual. When he left work early on Friday, he was a broke 26-year-old. Now, he was half a million richer. Though all the employees
had been offered varying stock option packages, everyone in the office was suddenly
much better off than before. Money changes everything, he thought. The offices of
TuneMania.com felt like a foreign country to him today.

Trina was already at her cubicle, looking at the stock prices. She had not yet sold
hers. He tapped her on the shoulder and said hello, then headed to his own cubical. There,
he watched his coworkers pretend to work. There was an air of stifled glee in the office.
It was as if at any moment a chorus of dancing girls was going to appear and the whole
office would join in singing, and they were all just waiting for their cue.

At one point, his coworker Margaret came by, her red hair piled high and loose on
her head, and said, “Did you hear? Dwight drove to work in a Porsche Boxter today?”

Russ decided to call it quits at 6 p.m. instead of the usual 8 or 9 p.m., which had
been a sort of unspoken mandate at this and other dot com offices. The rest of the week
went by in much the same way. Very little work was getting done in the offices of
TuneMania.com, that much was sure. Not one to engage in gossip, Russ kept finding
himself getting sucked in by the tales of excess. By the time Friday arrived, Russ was
tired of it all. The staff were putting on a disgusting display. It all made him sick. He
began to wonder if he was doomed to spending his life with materialistic assholes, these
shallow, spoiled children of entitlement with too much money to play with and no sense
of responsibility in the world. Was this who he was? Was this who he would become? He
passed on drinks with the gang after work.
On Saturday morning, after his 99 Cent store trip, he found himself driving to Sofia’s house. Before he could second-guess himself, he was knocking at the cobalt door. When Sofia opened up, he could see that she had been crying. Her eyes were bright red. Her lashes were wet and clumped together.

“What’s wrong?” Russ asked.

“He’s dead. He didn’t make it,” she said. “I buried my baby brother yesterday. Tito. It was just the two of us here since my parents passed. I can’t believe he’s gone. He was only 22 years old. I just can’t wrap my brain around it.”

It took a moment for the news to register. At first it was shock, and then he felt a stinging in his eyes and a tightness in his chest. He reached out and embraced the tiny woman, hugging her tightly. She sobbed and her whole body shook. When she pulled away finally, he reached out and held her face in his hands. He wiped her tears with the cuff of his sleeve, and hugged her to him again. She looked up at him from within his arms, and he felt himself lowering his face to hers. He kissed her and tasted the salt of her tears on his tongue. She didn’t pull away. The kiss went on.

Cat Steven’s voice filled the house.

Back in her kitchen over green tea, she told him she was leaving in the morning. She had booked a flight. “Wait here,” she said, walking out of the kitchen.

She came back with the painting she had started the week before. It was half-finished. “Take the painting, Russ. I wish I had time to finish it, but I can’t stay here a single day longer. I have to finish packing. You’ll just have to be a work in progress.”
Russ stood up and took the painting from her. He reached out to embrace her. “OK, I’ll get out of your way. Thank you. It’s amazing,” he said, gesturing to the painting, which depicted Russ with rays of light shooting out of his head, much like the blue figure he had seen before. “You going to be OK?”

“Yes, thank you, Russ.” She smiled sadly. “I’ll be OK.” He kissed her on the cheek and walked toward the living room. “I’m sorry about your brother,” he said, and then, without planning it. “I’m sorry you’re leaving. I wish I could have gotten to know you better.”

“You can,” she said.

“Do you have something to write on? I’ll give you my contact info so we can stay in touch,” he said. “Maybe you can send me a postcard when you land?”

She grabbed a pen and notepad from her countertop and handed it to him. He scribbled his info and handed it back, feeling helpless as he did.

On his drive home, the setting sun accompanied him. Pink and gold streaked the sky over the horizon. The air was still and the city seemed especially quiet to him. He could almost hear his breath as it made its way up and out of his chest and into his nostrils before being expelled. He followed his breath, in and out, in and out, and although he felt sorrow over Sofia’s loss, he was filled with a feeling of well-being and something else he couldn’t quite place.

At home in bed that night, Russ was unable to sleep. He remembered the look in Sofia’s eyes when she said, “You can.” Was he imagining it, or was there an invitation
there? He remembered the kiss, how it felt to hold her, small and forlorn, in his arms. The same feeling of well-being he experienced in the car came over him. Holding her, he had felt that he had finally gotten a hold of something substantial. Her small frame filled had felt large. She was not a frivolous woman, that much was sure. The image of her tear-streaked face came to him, and he fell asleep at last.

In the early morning, the sun’s first rays shot through a gap in his curtains and Russ Fenstermacher awoke with a start and two words on his lips.

“No coincidences,” he said aloud.

He couldn’t remember the last time he woke up so readily, and in such a good mood.

He looked around his room at his stereo, his record and CD collection, his clothes hanging in the closet. He thought about the money in an E-Trade account and pictured stacks and stacks of bills. He laughed out loud as he imagined how many strands of prayer beads he could buy with that kind of money in Tibet.

In the end, as he shut the door to the small apartment behind him, Russ carried only one suitcase full of clothes and personal documents, a rust-colored leather jacket, and the unfinished painting Sofia gave him yesterday.

He was sure that if he hurried, he would be able to catch her before she left Los Angeles.
Currency

On a day hot like an explosion of fireworks with the scent of fried tortillas and your own salty skin filling your head, you decide to go for a drive.

You head out from your house, which you are now just visiting, in City Terrace, or your house in Boyle Heights or your house in Echo Park, or your house in Bell. Just going for a drive, you shout to your mother, Ahorita vengo, you shout to your abuelita.

You drive toward Downtown, the skyscrapers in the distance huddled close conspiratorially, a conference of metal officials guarding their secrets, guarding their conference minutes on the L.A. story like territorial secretaries. We’ll never tell, they seem to be saying, as if hearing your mind’s question. We’ll never tell. You look up and over at the haze, a grayish yellow today, at the families hurrying across the street in front
of you, ruffled socks on girls and miniature jogging suits on boys, tiny faces smeared with paleta juice, red sandia, orange melon and milky white coco, eyes large and brown and wide, with wisps of straight hair for small brown fingers to push back.

You drive, looking out the window like a tourist, sucking in the streets, hungry for a fill of this city you left so many years ago, the one you left for college in Seattle, or college in Berkeley, or college in New York, or college in Michigan. It’s a city that you never saw before leaving because you were too busy looking out of it to be in it, with your eyes focused far away and on that other world, the one you weren’t in then and aren’t in still, even now.

You notice the patterns of oil stains on the road next to the curb, splotches blending into a long, winding snake. You watch the snake slithering through your rearview mirror, the snake that carries large commercial trucks and small dusty cars away, that always seems to lead away, and out, never seems to lead back, and you wonder if the snake is all there is, if the heart of the city lies there, with the snake and the leaving, and everything else is just scenery.

You drive and see the concert posters plastered to telephone posts and the open doorways leading to panaderias whose bread you’ve never sniffed and cantinas you’ve never danced in and taquerias you’ve never eaten al pastor at.

They all stream by like a red, green and white ticker tape parade.

You see a corn cob street vendor, un elotero, pushing a shopping cart that holds a large aluminum pot, a plastic bag of powdered red California chile tied to the edge and another bag full of crumbly white queso, squirt bottles of margarine resting on the child’s
seat. He could be the same street vendor you always see, and you could be the same girl he always sees. He’s the same and you’re the same, and you remember how he always calls you senorita but doesn’t really think you can speak Spanish, how he always tries to tell you the price for his elotes in English, how surprised he looks when you order Uno, por favor, con chile, sin queso.

And the thought always makes you smile as the sun warms your face.

The way it nearly blinds you through the windshield despite the visor and makes you want to sneeze. Your lungs are warm and still you wonder, but the skyscrapers hold their silence, and you look out and you think that maybe the best part of a city is the part it keeps to itself, the best part is the part you’ll never find.

Even the derelict bunched up over a stoop, face thick like leather and dotted bright pink, seems to know it. He looks up at you as you drive by slowly and he opens his mouth, just a sliver. You return the favor with a grin as you park then climb out of your car and step on the crunchy pavement, the pebbles slipping beneath your boots.

You feel fluid for an instant, smooth as a moonwalker, and you wonder if you’ll slip, but realize you won’t, it’s just part of the ride.

The elotero is chanting his song of commerce: Elotes, Elotes. And you can almost taste the milky sweet kernels like flavored ghosts, your mouth’s memory flexing.

But you walk on, toward a crowd that has gathered up ahead in an elementary school parking lot, your curiosity overriding the craving, to a rally of some kind, perhaps.

In the lot, corridos waft out of small inky speakers sitting on a two-foot high wooden stage. A pony-tailed bespectacled Chicano, thin legs and thick middle, arranges
electrical cords and metal mic stands--a backdrop of political banners, bold letters and painted symbols framing his work. You watch, and he is frozen in your mind, his activity now making up the middle of a story you’ll tell some time, a story beyond the day.

Conspicuous palm trees, too tall to blend into the neighborhood, wave delicate hellos from above. A dusty man wearing cowboy boots, tight black jeans and a muted blackgray T-shirt with a design of airbrushed feathers walks out of the lot and down the street, long hair hanging loosely on his shoulders. He climbs into a van, shotgun side, and you watch and watch as the van sits still, going nowhere.

You listen, and the song leaks out of the speakers, the guitar melody filling in the spaces between people standing together in small clumps of two or three or four, but not quite filling in the space between you and them.

A young woman with a sweet face and long wavy hair down to her waist sits behind a table handing out leaflets and flyers. She is wearing a white leather jacket.

An older woman steps on the stage, pouring well-measured anger into the microphone, her words flying like startled birds into the air, graceful but energetic, her face serious and beautiful.

You listen for a while, suck in the air and the words and the guitar strumming, then walk back out toward your car, toward the elotero who sings, still, his song of commerce his currency the sacred kernels of what the leafleters call La Raza, your currency the cold hard coins of a tourist.

Your head fills with the steam as the elotero pulls up the lid for you. You peer into his aluminum pot and you stop and look around, the warm steam still filling your
head, and you look at your car waiting by the curb and the van down the road, at the last hint of yellowish haze peeking out from between the enveloping clouds, at the skyscrapers.

You look back in the direction of home where your abuelita waits for you to return for dinner, and at the women now giggling behind the table and their leaflets, and you reach out.

You reach out for nothing in particular, for everything, but you can’t touch the crowd, you can’t touch home, you can’t touch the fading sunlight, and you can’t touch the tips of the skyscrapers that huddle, still, in the distance and refuse to offer up their answers. You look at your boots, solid and black beneath you, then over at the elotero, and say, Uno, por favor, con chile, sin queso.
Dot

There it was. The green dot just under her own gray dot, his name spelled out beneath her name in the little Gmail chat window on her computer screen. A little light. A sign of life. His presence there in real time. Just sitting there. After so long. Her son.

If she put her cursor on his name she could read the rest of the status message that was there next to his name. As it was, she could only make out the first three words. “One good thing…” One good thing. One good thing for you? One good thing for me? One good thing is all I want? One good thing is hard to find? What could he be getting at? She could find out. If she put her cursor on his name she would see a picture. A box would pop up and his photo and the full status message would be there for her to see. Just like before.

But she couldn’t. She didn’t dare. She pulled the mouse away, dragging the cursor as far from that little glowing dot as she could.

What was she doing? She wasn’t going to do this. She had decided, hadn’t she? She had blocked him from her email chat list so that she couldn’t see his name. But this morning, she was compelled to unblock him. He had made an appearance in her dreams. He was smiling at her, telling her it was alright. That he understood. She awoke with a burning desire to see him, if only through the email chat window. The thought just took hold of her and she couldn’t fight it. Would his name still be there? Or had he changed
his email address? Was he still using a status message to broadcast his every move? His week’s highs and lows? His victories and accomplishments? Was there a new photo?

On her part, there was no photo, no status message, and no green dot for anyone to see. Never had been. From the very beginning, when she first set up her email account, she had chosen to designate herself as invisible in the chat window so that no one could monitor her presence online, no one could know when she was logged in to her email. The thought of others watching her gave her a chill. The idea that she could be, this living breathing person made of flesh, visible to the world through a little green light that represented her, that beamed the fact of her existence, had always disturbed her. She preferred invisibility. It was an underrated state of being. So much monitoring going on these days. Video cameras in parking lots, peeping toms on the other side of dressing room mirrors, cameras snapping shots of traffic violations as cars careened through red lights, tracking cookies snuck onto one’s own personal property to track websites visited and ads viewed. Orwell had it right. Big Brother was watching alright.

Despite her apprehension, she had the urge back then (after they had spoken) to upload and placing her own photo there in that little box, maybe add a quote from a book of poetry she loved as her status message—something inspirational. So that he could see her name the way she could see his. Maybe start to get to know her, accept her as his real mother. So that he could reach out to her when his green dot was on and her green dot was on. (His name had just appeared there one day after that one and only email exchange. It was such a happy day for her.) But she never dared. Instead, she had watched him for a couple of months, watched his green dot, until it got out of hand. She
logged on at all hours of the day or night just to see his green light. It became too much. Hadn’t it gotten out of hand? She decided to stop altogether. That was when she blocked him from her chat list so that she wouldn’t have to see his name there every time she logged on to her email. After she blocked him, his name disappeared. No constant reminders. No reminders at all. It was for the best. She needed to leave him alone. Let him get on with his life. She needed to get him out of her mind so that she could get on with her life. She needed to stop.

Now, she took one more long look at the green dot, then closed her eyes and imagined his face. No. This was not good. She was not going to allow herself to do this again.

She quickly logged off.

* There it was again, the green dot. He was online! She watched the dot, and it suddenly went from green to orange. That meant idle. He was on another window, doing something else, but still logged in. It was amazing that she could know this, follow his actions from 3,000 miles away in San Francisco and know that he had been using his email or chat, and now was doing something else, on his computer in New York. She was a part of his life when she did this. So close. She could take a peek at his photo. See his face again. She knew it was right there. All she had to do was use her cursor to scroll over his name and that box would pop up. He would be right there. His face.

No. This was a bad idea. She couldn’t do this again.

She logged off.
No green dot today. It was gray, like her own dot. Busy doing something else, not online at all. Gray like the rain. Gray like more and more of her hair these days. Gray like a mouse in a laboratory, its tiny claws hitting the lever again and again in pursuit of more of whatever drug the scientists used to hook it.

There it was. Orange today. Hard at work, are you? Hope you’re having a good one.

She watched and waited, her eyes fixed on the little orange dot. Finally, it turned gray. Gone.

No green. Just gray.

There it was, the green dot. The partial message had changed. It said: “The truth is …”

The truth is what? She longed to know. What was he broadcasting? Surely, it was for her as well as for anyone else, that message, that broadcast to the world. She was part of the world. She counted. And more importantly, she was part of his universe. He had known her. They had spoken. There had been a connection. He had to know she was watching, somewhere in the recesses of his mind. How could he not?

She moved her cursor over his name and, in an instant, there it was.

His face.
It was the same photograph from a year ago.

His face.

Francisco!

The status message read: “The truth is, everyone is going to hurt you. You just have
to find the ones worth suffering for.” – Bob Marley

How strange. How strange that he would say that. As if he were talking directly to
her. Worth suffering for? What a concept. Was that it? Had he found her unworthy of
suffering for?

Her mouth went dry. Gritty. Her heart. She could feel it in her throat, her pulse
pounding, pounding. A heaviness in her stomach. No. Hadn’t she told herself not to do
this again? It was a bad idea.

She pulled down the options and chose “Block” from the drop-down menu. His
name disappeared from the list. Gone.

She logged off.

*

She stared at her own name in the chat window, at her own grayed out dot. She
typed his name in the search field and chose “Show in chat list.” There it was again. His
green dot. A new status message. She scrolled and read: “If I was educated, I’d be a damn
fool.” – Bob Marley

Another Bob Marley quote. Was that it? She laughed. He hadn’t been trying to hurt
her at all! He was broadcasting Bob Marley quotes. She remembered once watching an
interview with a stuffy British journalist asking a red track-suited Bob Marley about
Rastafarianism and marijuana. Marley was incomprehensible. In his own reality. A man in his own universe. As if everyone could have disappeared, the world and all the people in it, and he wouldn’t have cared one bit. He would have been just fine, that man, he was so far in his own head, in his own reality.

She felt light, giddy. She heard “Three Little Birds” in her head. She hummed along.

She stared at the photograph of Francisco now, so familiar to her. In it, he seemed about to leap in the air, even though all she could see was his shoulders and the top half of his torso. He was wearing a sweatshirt bearing the letters NYU. She loved those letters. There was so much packed into those three little letters. Images flashed through her mind. Imagined scenes. Of Francisco walking across campus, a backpack slung over his shoulder. Slumped in his desk in a lecture hall, half asleep as he pretended to listen to his literature professor. Sitting on a bench under a tree, reading a book. It was as if she had been there. She could have been. It was her choice not to be. He had reminded her of that. The little he had said to her made it clear that he begrudged her that choice. It was unforgivable. How could she? How could she? How could she?

She logged off and slammed her laptop lid shut.

* 

No green. Just gray.

* 

Nothing. Did he have a way of knowing she was watching? Had he caught on? No, it was impossible. He had probably forgotten that she had ever been on his chat list, or
perhaps he had never seen her name there. Her name was probably down at the very bottom, not even visible to him since her light never glowed green. When your light glows green, your name rises to the top of the list. When it’s gray, your name by your dot appears in alphabetical order by first name. Her name, Zara, would be at the very bottom. He wouldn’t even ever see it, if his list was long. It would be off-screen. Unless she went visible. Unless she had her own green light.

* 

There it was. His light! Green was such a lovely color. The color of spring. Of life. Always had been one of her favorites. Now, her absolute favorite. Her favorite color of all. Unlike the gray next to her name. Dull gray, her dot. What if it went green, too? What if her dot was green? What if he could see her? No. She couldn’t. She just couldn’t.

* 

His green dot. Hello, Francisco! How are you today? You’re looking mighty green—and I mean that in the most complimentary of ways, of course. Me? Oh, I’m fine. Tonight? Heading over to your Aunt Lucilla’s. Yes, I’ll send my love. Yes, I’ll be careful driving. No, mijo, you worry too much. I’ll be fine.

She did it again. Jorge had heard her the other day. She had spoken out loud. Mumbled something. Her imaginary conversation gone public. Jorge turned in bed and said to her, “What?” She forced a cough then, and put her laptop on the nightstand, and coughed and coughed.

“Just got something stuck in my throat,” she forced out between coughs. Jorge had reached over and put his hand on her arm, his fingers warm and rough on her skin, the
weight of it there a good thing. He would have been a good father. If only it hadn’t been
too late by the time they found each other. He would have been a loving father to
Francisco, too, even though he wasn’t his child. He would have loved him the way she did.

She logged off.

*

No green. Just gray.

She could go green. If she went green, he could see her, and he would know that
she was there, watching. She could broadcast a message to him. What would she say?
She could put her photograph in that little box and remind him of her existence. What
was the harm in that?

She had already done that once before. She had already reminded him of her
existence that day she approached him outside his apartment building, but it hadn’t gone
well, had it? He had been so startled, so confused when she approached.

“Francisco. Francisco, wait,” she had called out.

“Yeah?” he had asked. “Do I know you?” He was getting out of his car, a backpack
over his shoulder, she remembered.

“No. I’ve been trying to find you. I…”

He just stood there. Waiting.

“My name is Zara Carrasquillo.”

He scratched his chin, looked toward his apartment building. Shifted his weight
from one foot to the other.
“I’m your mother, Francisco. I’ve been looking for you.”

His face changed then.

“I just want to talk. Get to know you.”

“No. No, I have a mother,” he said simply. “I have a mother.”

“Your real mother.”

“I have a mother,” he said again, moving away from her, toward his building.

Desperate, she had called out, “Can we talk? Can I call you?”

He stared at her blankly, and then his expression changed for a quick moment. He walked back toward his car then, put his backpack on his car roof and pulled out a notebook. He scribbled something on a piece of paper and handed it to her. “Here’s my email address,” he said. “If you have something to say, send me an email. But please don’t come here again.”

He zipped up his backpack and, casting one final glance over his shoulder, walked toward his building.

After she sent the email, which included a long apology, the whys and wheres of his conception, her decision to give him up and the anguish she had felt over it, her struggle to finish law school and pass the bar exam, her successful career as an assistant DA, her endless search for him later, her wish to be part of his life now that she had found him, he had responded with a short email. “I’m sorry, I don’t want to spend time with you. I have a mother and father. I don’t know you. You chose to give me up. Please let me live my life in peace.”

*

She could. She could.

Should she? More than a year had gone by. Surely by now he would have a different perspective on things. Surely by now he would be willing to get to know her. She was tired of being invisible to him. He needed to grow up and accept her. Maybe he already had.

She decided, in an instant, to go green. She would do it. She placed her cursor over her name and saw the list of options. She chose “Available.”

Her dot went green.

She sucked in her breath and stared. There, on her screen, two green dots. Her green dot next to her name glowing above his green dot, next to his name. So close. His face, his smile in the photograph. Her Francisco, next to her. Next to her! It was like nothing she had ever felt before, this closeness. She felt full. Lush. Rich. Drunk, almost.

Here, at last, was her baby boy, by her side. By her side! Was this what it felt like to be loved by a child? Was this how it could have been? She felt, at that moment, that all the love in the world was inside her. She was a vessel for all that was warm and bright and beautiful and good. No one could know, no one that wasn’t a mother, how this felt. She imagined his hand reaching out through the screen, reaching out to her. She would take it. She would hold it. And she wouldn’t let go this time.

As she watched, his dot went from green to gray.

* 

No green. Just gray.
* 

No green. Just gray.

* 

No green. Just gray.

* 

No green. Just gray.
White Sands

They told him he needed to remember the instructions very clearly. Plain brown paper grocery bag, tied with a piece of string at the top. Crumpled. Nothing too new looking. He was to place it beneath the bench at the bus stop on Paseo Triumfo de la Republica, right in front of Cinepolis del Pais. He was to do so at 7:40 a.m. on Friday morning, exactly 51 hours from then.

The bag was sitting in the corner of the kitchen, waiting to be filled. It was ready—all but the bills.

Gabriel watched Juanito as he chomped on his Chachitos Rokys cereal. Juanito cleared his throat, swallowed quickly. “Papa, why are we up so early? It’s not even five yet.”

“Always with your questions, Juanito. Just getting used to an early start,” he said. “Why waste mornings? We should enjoy them. Finish up. We can go for a game of catch in the park before school starts if you hurry.”

“Really? Orale!”
The boy gobbled the rest of his Rokys and slurped the milk down. He wiped his mouth with his sleeve and looked over at his book bag. “Do I need my mochila?”

“Yeah, bring it. We probably won’t come back home before school starts.” He paused, went through the list of items he had put in a satchel the night before. “Look, I got you a new ball.”

“You did?”

“Well, you see it, don’t you?” And with that, Gabriel produced a new softball from his pocket. He had the habit of wearing his pants large, always with a belt cinching his thin torso. Still, it had taken considerable effort to cram the plump ball into his pocket. But the look on Juanito’s face was worth it. He couldn’t remember the last time he was able to give Juanito something clean and unused, no holes to stitch closed or parts to hunt down. Something that wasn’t from the Yonke. The last birthday gift he gave him was a bicycle he had pieced together from rusted parts he found there. It held together for about two months before the parts started falling off. Now, it sat at the side of the house, a rusted heap of multicolored metal, rotting in the wind. He remembered how Arcelia had helped him tie a big red bow on the sorry thing and baked a cake for Juanito, how her eyes had glittered when Juanito hugged him and jumped up and down in excitement over the bicycle. He shook off the memory. Arcelia was now a thing of the past. He had to get used to that idea now.

“Papa!” Juanito lunged for the ball, and Gabriel yanked it up just in time.

“First you have to catch me,” he said, bolting for the door. Before he could reach
the front of the room, Juanito was on him, climbing his limbs like a little monkey, reaching up and clawing up his sides with more strength than he knew the boy had.

“Ya, pues! Here. Take it,” he said, handing it over. The boy held the ball like a small wonder, turning it over and over and fingering the red stitching. He looked like someone holding the secret of the universe in his hands.

**

Two days before, on Monday at exactly 2:15 p.m., Gabriel had been on a tiling job at a big house across the border when he had received the first call on his cell phone.

“We’re watching your son leave school. We will follow him home, as we have for the past two weeks, and watch him walk up to your house, take out the key he keeps on a string around his neck, and let himself in. Then we will watch him serve himself a bowl of cereal and watch cartoons until you get home from work. You will cook dinner, most likely some beans and tortillas, unless it’s Friday, which is when you bring home some chicken or beef, and you will eat dinner together. Afterward, you will help your son with his homework, then clean up while he takes a bath, and put him to bed.”

Gabriel’s heart had started racing after the first sentence. As he listened, his breath came faster and hotter, and he felt heat building in his chest. Tears burned his eyes.

The man on the other line paused.

“Me entiendes, pendejo?” A voice icy, calm.
“Si,” Gabriel said, his voice a high-pitched thing he didn’t recognize, the sound a wounded animal would make.

“Today, when you get home, your son will tell you about the nice man he met on the street, and what the nice man told him. It will be advice that you would do well to take, you hear me?”

“Si.”

“Tomorrow, I’ll call you on your cell at exactly 2:15 p.m. again. You will answer, and we will give you instructions. You know better than to go to the police, don’t you? Our boss has many friends. Me entiendes?”

“Si.” Gabriel’s mind raced. He had heard of this sort of thing happening to others across town, but he always imagined they were rich people. Not his kind. Working men. He didn’t understand, wanted to protest. But something in the caller’s tone kept him from speaking up.

The line went dead.

Gabriel ran to the second restroom, the one they had already tiled last week, and slammed the door behind him. He couldn’t think straight. He wanted to run. He had to get out of there. He had to get back home. Juanito. In his mind, the border, which normally seemed so fluid to him, flimsy almost, stretched between them like a thick, impenetrable wall. He couldn’t get to him soon enough, but they were watching him. Why him?

Gabriel splashed water on his face and dried it with the front of his grout-dusty shirt, leaving a gray streak on his cheek. He walked out to where Francisco was laying
down the mortar, and said, “Ey, me haces un favor? Juanito’s sick. I gotta get home to him. Day’s almost done. Can you do the clean-up alone today? I’ll owe you one.”

“Cabron! Me debes una cerveza!”

“Claro.” Gabriel forced a smile, then raced out the door.

Waiting to cross back into Juarez, Gabriel drummed his hands on the steering wheel frantically. He couldn’t call Juanito. They had disconnected the house phone months ago. He kept meaning to pay up and get it reconnected, but there hadn’t been a need. Now he regretted it.

The lines were moving slowly, and Gabriel felt himself grow furious when he saw the agents opening every door and checking under every seat of the sedan in front of him. Why the fuck would they examine a car coming back into Juarez, he wondered? Why today? When he finally approached, they smiled and waved him on, recognizing him as a regular border-cropper, one of the many who lived in Juarez, worked in El Paso and made the commute daily. From the frontera, he would still need to drive 25 minutes before he reached their street. And then he thought about Arcelia.

When had a day gone by that he hadn’t though about Arcelia since the morning he first saw her, nearly two years ago, the old man leaning on her as they walked into their tiny house for the first time?

He didn’t want her to be a part of this. It was better if he cut her loose now. She could get hurt. They could take her. But he needed one favor from her. He pressed the button on her contact and waited for the phone to ring.
She picked up after the third ring. Still no answering machine. Of course, she had no caller ID.

“Bueno?” she said, her voice small.

“Soy yo, Arcelia, Gabriel.”

“Hola, chulo? Que tal?” she said, a sweetness there he wasn’t prepared to deal with.

“Arcelia, I need your help, please. I’m worried about Juanito. Can you please go and make sure he’s OK, and call me back to let me know?”

“Why? What happened to him?” There was genuine concern in her voice, and alarm.

“I just need you to check, OK, please? Can you call me right back?”

“OK, me voy.” The line went dead.

He drove, and drummed his fingers on the steering wheel so hard he jerked the truck to the right a couple of times, sending it off balance. He told himself to get a hold of himself. Stop it. Just hang on. He’s fine. He’s fine.

Within five minutes, his phone rang, and he jumped. “Si! Que paso?”

“He’s fine. He’s fine. Just watching TV. Gabriel, what’s going on?”

“Gracias. Gracias. Listen, I have to tell you something. This thing, between us. It needs to stop. You have your obligations, and I… I can’t be involved with anyone right now? Me entiendes? It’s over.”

“Gabriel! Pero… no me quieres?”
“Listen, Arcelia. I do. You know I love you. It’s because I love you that I have to end this now. It’s over. Please don’t contact me again.” He ended the call then, and he felt like a man who had just lost a limb, one he chopped off himself.

When he finally did make it home, he drove his truck right up onto the weed-covered lawn and ran inside. Juanito was just coming back into the living from the bathroom. Gabriel crossed the living room in two large strides and grabbed the boy, hugging him and laughing.

“Ey, ey… Que pasa!” Juanito was alarmed, but he laughed along. He saw his dad’s smile. His dad was happy. That’s what he saw. Good, thought Gabriel. That’s all he needs to see.

“Mi’jo, como te fue en la escuela?” he asked, forced joviality in this voice.

“It was alright. You know, like always.”

“Talk to anyone new today? Like on the way home?”

“Eh? Oh, yeah. Some old viejo asked me if I had the time. I told him I didn’t have a watch. He told me I should tell my father to get me a watch on la Facebook. Crazy old man!”

**

That night, after he put Juanito to bed, Gabriel paced the small two-bedroom house. He considered all his options. They would want a large amount of money. He would have to figure out how to get them money. Maybe his boss. Maybe. Or, he could
try his chances with the police. But everyone knew that was as good as a death sentence.

No, they were on payroll themselves, they would never help him.

And then he remembered what Juanito said, the old man’s words. Facebook. Buying a watch on Facebook didn’t make any sense. Unless that was a message for him about what they wanted him to do. But why not just tell him? Why tell Juanito?

He lay in bed, eyes wide open, all night, turning the possibilities over like the facets of a stone, examining each side, hoping to see an answer.

***

The next morning, he kissed Juanito goodbye. Juanito wiped his mouth with his sleeve and said, “Ey, no mames, Papa!” Gabriel reached over and grabbed Juanito’s baseball cap, then smacked him across the head with it. He placed it back on Juanito’s head, squeezing the rim just a tad narrower than it already was for him. He had learned that all the boys in Juanito’s class aimed for the narrowest rims. It was just their thing. He kept up his smile.

“Later, Papa!”

“Later, Mi’jo!” Keep the tone light, he told himself. Just a few more seconds and he’ll be gone.

After Juanito left, Gabriel dialed his boss, praying for voice mail.

“Es que no voy a poder ir hoy,” he told him, excusing himself from work. He heard himself rushing through his story about having to take Juanito to the hospital and ended the call quickly before he lost his nerve.
At exactly 2:15 on Tuesday, as promised, the phone rang.

“Ahora me crees, pendejo?” It was the same voice.

“Si,” he said, afraid to say anything more.

“Ora pues. You will bring five thousand dollars in mixed bills, small and large, to the bus stop in front of the Cinepolis on Paseo Triunfo de la Republica, you understand? At exactly 7:40 am on Friday morning. Place the cash in a plain paper bag, the big grocery sacks, under the bench. Make sure you tie it closed with a string. And it better be an old bag. Nothing new looking. There will be an old man in dark sunglasses sitting there. You will not speak to him. You will not look at him. You will simply place the bag under the bench and leave. You understand me?”

“Si, pero, I don’t have five thousand dollars,” Gabriel heard himself say. His heart was pounding in his ears so loudly he almost didn’t hear the man’s response.

“El Facebook, pendejo! Use it. You have relatives en el otro lado. We’ve seen them on your Facebook page. Todos los gringos. They look very rich, your relatives en California, en Tejas. They will give you the money if you ask.”

A sudden pressure built up in his head. Gabriel felt like it was in a vice, and someone was tightening the screws. “Pero…”

“No buts. You get on the Facebook and you ask one of your rich cousins or tías to wire you the money today. You tell them you need it right away. You will get the money by the end of the day Thursday, and bring it to us Friday morning. Me entiendes?”
“Yes, but what if they don’t. What if they can’t?” He hardly knew those people. True, they were connected on Facebook, as the entire extended clan was now, but he hadn’t seen most of them since he was a young boy. And he hadn’t spoken to any of his other relatives since Juanito’s mother’s accident. He couldn’t bring himself to face them, the pained looks on their faces, the pity. It infuriated him. He and Juanito had been just fine without anyone, and he couldn’t imagine asking for help now.

“They can, and they will. Or your son doesn’t make it home on Friday.”

The line went dead.

**

Wednesday morning just after 4:30 am, Arcelia found herself watching from a crack in her curtain across the street as Gabriel and his boy hopped in Gabriel’s truck. She watched Gabriel look around nervously, and then toss a large blanket in the seat between the driver’s side and his son. The sky was just beginning to brighten, and the sparrows were singing.

She had been watching for two years, and their recent break-up didn’t change things—force of habit, she told herself. But she knew that it was more than that. She watched because she had no choice. And this morning, the sound of Gabriel’s truck starting up had woken her at this ungodly hour. She watched and waited as Gabriel spoke to the boy from his side of the truck, then ran back inside the house.

Her mouth went dry. She wasn’t sure why, but she had a feeling that if she didn’t do something, this would be the last time she would see him and the boy. She couldn’t
bear the thought. She ran to her closet and grabbed her jacket, then tiptoed to the front door, praying her father wouldn’t hear her.

Once outside, she dashed to the truck and opened the driver’s side door, sliding in beside Jaunito.

“Arcelia!” he said, startled. He had begun to doze, and she woke him up with her sudden movements.

“Shhhhh…. Go back to sleep.”

“Are you coming with us to play ball?”

“Yes, that’s right,” she said. “Go to sleep, Mi’jo.”

She sat and waited.

**

When Gabriel came out, he had their only battered suitcase and a small red satchel with him. He tossed them both into the truck bed, and shoved them up beside the cabin. And then he saw her head. His heart nearly jumped out of his chest.

He ran over to Juanito’s side and yanked the door open.

“Arcelia!” He was startled to hear his voice out in the empty streets. “Que haces aqui!?”

“I saw you… I wanted to know what was going on. Juanito.. and…”

“Please, get out of the car.”

“Why are you leaving?” She looked him in the eye. He looked away.

“It’s not important. We have to go, now. Please get out of the truck.”
“Not until you tell me what’s going on,” she said. Gabriel looked around frantically.

“I can’t. Please, Arcelia, if you ever loved me, for the love of God, get out of this truck right now. We have to go! It’s getting late.”

She hesitated. Love. She remembered the last time he spoke of love, two days ago when he called her saying it was over. About how his love for her meant they wouldn’t be able to see each other anymore. All the promises, all the dreams, dashed with one phone call. And not a word since then. Now, he was using her love for him to get her to leave? Why?

“You know I did. Why are you leaving?”

“Arcelia, please! We’re not coming back. Get out of the truck now!”

She shook her head no. He looked up at the sky. He looked at the boy, and back at her. She watched him, this man she had come to know better than anyone she had ever known over these past two years. His stubborn pride, his tenderness. She couldn’t figure out what was going through his head at this moment, but she wasn’t afraid of angering him.

“Do,” she said, looking down at her hands. “Still do. I’m not leaving this truck.”

She looked back up at him, holding his gaze. And in that moment, an understanding passed between them. He let the reality of her decision sink in.

“Bueno,” Gabriel said, and raced to the other side of the truck. “Ponte el cinturon!”
Gabriel watched Arcelia buckle the seatbelt across her lap. He tried to calm himself, keep his emotions under control, dampen the frustration and anxiety that was building in him. She should not be doing this, he thought. It was dangerous. And what about her father? And it was getting late! He put the truck in reverse and backed out of the yard, then sped down the narrow road. He looked in the rear view mirror, for just a second, and then fixed his eyes on the street in front of him.

Arcelia sat starting straight ahead, with that look on her face, the one he loved so much. She was not a frivolous woman, his Arcelia. She was responsible. Solid. Perhaps he could keep her safe. Perhaps she could help keep them safe, too.

Gabriel drove, maneuvering through the familiar streets of Juarez in the dark, heading to the frontera. His thoughts raced ahead. Once they passed Las Cruces, they would hit the white sands, a sea of gypsum dunes. It was a beautiful sight, the rolling hills of fine white powder like something out of a science fiction movie. It was a shame there wasn’t time to stop and let Juanito slide down the dunes, watch Arcelia sift the warm sand through her fingers. True, it was actually a missile range, a place where destruction and death loomed, but it was beautiful.

Gabriel began to sweat profusely as he approached the border. Arcelia and Juanito were curled up against the passenger door, snuggled under the blanket, and he hoped the guards would wave him on without noticing the sleeping passengers huddled next to him.
As he approached the guard station, he could feel his heart hammering in his chest. The guard looked at him, and was about to wave him through, when he suddenly stopped and looked at him again. He stared at Gabriel, scrutinizing his face. He seemed to be assessing him with the eyes of a detective. Could he see the fear there, Gabriel wondered? Could he count the beads of sweat on his forehead? Could he hear his heart slamming in its cavity?

Gabriel sat there, awaiting the verdict.

The guard said, “Espera un momento.” He walked back toward the stand, and had a brief conference with his partner. He came back, his flashlight already waving Gabriel’s truck to the side. But then his walkie-talkie flashed. He spoke into it, and grew animated. He took a step back and continued speaking, more rapidly now. Gabriel waited, his shirt becoming soaked with his sweat.

Finally, the guard approached him again. He waved him on, then ran back toward the stand and his waiting partner.

Gabriel put the truck into gear and crossed the border.

**

He drove for two hours, past the white sands.

At 7:45 a.m., his cell phone rang. Gabriel stopped the car by the side of the road, and tossed the phone onto the pavement on the shoulder. He put his truck in reverse, and, and drove forward, aiming his left tire for the phone. He heard a pop and a crunch. He
reversed his truck, then drove over it again. He only heard a mild crackle that time. He drove over it one last time as he veered left back onto the road and picked up speed.

They had a long road ahead of them, over 1,000 kilometers and 12 hours if they didn’t stop for more than quick meal here and there. Gabriel figured Denver was just far enough away from the border, and just far enough away from any of his relatives, that they just might be alright there.
The Space Between

The sun appears in bursts on the buildings I pass on my way to work. It flames and fans, marks my path and keeps me company. It reminds me to look up at the blue above, the birds that trek across the sky, the clouds stretched thin like gauze over the blue.

In the parking lot, I glance one last time at the light as it plays on the sidewalk and then up at the sky before walking into the office--with its fluorescent lighting and refrigerated air--where I spend so much of my time these days. I head over to my cubicle and click the monitor on. It sputters for a second before brightening up. I sink down into my chair and have a look. A report I was working on last night is open on my desktop. Where else would it be? It’s overdue, and it is, currently, the bane of my existence.

Michele saunters by with a cup of coffee steaming from her hand.

“Morning, Florencio,” she says, the usual flirt in her voice.

“Hey, morning,” I say, clearing my throat. I turn back to the monitor, trying to muster the resolve to settle in and get to work. Maybe another cup of coffee is what I need. And a donut. I consider whether I can handle that much caffeine so early in the day and decide instead to log onto my Facebook account.

There’s a message in my inbox.
Do you remember me?

Abrazos,

Adriana

The information takes a full minute to set in. It’s Adriana. It hardly seems possible. Adriana moved away to Mexico when we were still teenagers so many years ago. I wonder if someone’s pranking me, but no, there she is, a tiny photograph of her smiling from my inbox. It’s unmistakably her. The last time I saw her we were 13 years old. A girl still, though she had just begun to sprout curves. Now here she was, 18 years later, all grown. Still beautiful. Of course, still beautiful. What else would she be?

I feel a prickling in my armpit, and my mouth is suddenly dry. I can’t think what to say. So I just type the answer to the question.

Yes. How could I forget?

Florencio

My right hand is moist and a little shaky. I hit send anyway.

**

Like the sun, Adriana was my absolute center. From my earliest school days, she was always there, and I would navigate my way around the neighborhood in relation to her house—by whether I was moving closer to or farther from it. Later, even after she
was gone, I kept doing it. I gauged my place in the world by where she had once been, the spot in South Gate where we met and where she left her mark on me. As the years went by and I moved away from our neighborhood as well, she remained my center. The place I came from. The start of me.

I remember how the news of her impending move had shaken me, and weeks later, how the reality of it had left a gap inside of me, an emptiness I could never fill. We had just started holding hands on the way home from school, had just presented each other with the gift of our tentative first kisses. There was still so much left to discover, so many more moments to share on the road ahead of us. It seemed so unfair that she would be yanked away from me. It hadn’t been enough time. Of course, we had no say in the matter.

After she left, I couldn’t help but compare her to every new girl I met, and, later, to every woman I began a relationship with. It was a losing proposition. How could anyone ever come close to Adriana with her serene smile and wise eyes? Her unwavering solidity. Her innocent beauty?

Throughout the years, Adriana was always there, a regular in the cast of my dream life. A constant visitor to my subconscious mind. My missing muse.

And then I met Carmen, who came into my life with the force of a tornado, whipping me up into the frenzy of her being and placing me squarely in the center of her universe. Carmen with her passion and her endless cheer and her boundless energy. Carmen, with her enormous family and infectious optimism. Carmen, who was so sure she wanted me that she created a desire in me to want her.
With Carmen, I had a path and a purpose. She left no room for doubt, and no time for backward glances. Carmen and I began to build a life together, and I was happy. Carmen took center stage and filled my days with babies and the loud comforts of a busy home. And while the memory of Adriana never actually faded, it did finally begin to recede. It took its place in alongside my other happy childhood memories, and I re-categorized her and our love as the stuff of children.

**

Carmen is out front when I get home, sweeping the concrete walkway from the sidewalk to our front door. Miguel and Pedro are just inside—I can hear the bleeps and zoinks of Super Mario Brothers on the Wii from the driveway. Carmen pushes the broom energetically across the walk and dust rises and falls around her in swirls. She looks regal to me, a queen of the dust.

She’s absorbed in her task. I call out her name, but she doesn’t hear me. I call her again, and when she finally does look up at me there is something in her eyes. A hardness that wasn’t there this morning.

“Miss me?” I ask, and I duck in to kiss her on the cheek.

“When don’t I?” she says, the hardness replaced by her usual air of mischief. A figment of my imagination, I decide. Relieved, I trap her in a bear hug and yank her up off the ground. She is soft and very curvy, a small round woman a whole head shorter than me. Like they say, black beans and rice didn’t miss her. I spin her around in circles, manhandling her the way I imagine a bear would. She squeals and struggles, laughing and screaming so loudly the boys come out to look.
Later, as she’s clearing the table, I come over and put my arms around her, my fingers grazing the bottom of her breasts. “Wanna show me how much you miss me?” I whisper into her ear. She glances over at the boys, who are still sitting at the table, and up at the retro kitchen clock on our wall.

She clears her throat and, looking back at me with a sly grin, she says, “OK, boys. If you’re done with dinner, it’s time for a bath. Get upstairs and pick out your clothes for tomorrow and, Miguel, don’t forget to pack your cleats in your bag. You’ve got practice tomorrow. And don’t forget to floss.”

“K, mom,” Miguel says. He chugs from his glass of milk and slams the empty glass on the table. To Pedro he says, “Race you?”

“You’re on,” Pedro says, running out of the room and getting a head start on his big brother.

That night, after the boys are asleep, Carmen and I make love, and I notice a difference in her. She seems energetic. Enthusiastic, almost. Afterward, I kiss her on the cheek and say, “Been to the gym lately? You’ve got energy.” I flick on a light to read. She laughs and turns over in bed, facing away from me. But instead of reading, I lay in bed thinking about Adriana. I’m remembering her the day we said goodbye so many years ago--her serious eyes--and the final hug she gave me before running into her house, the screen door slamming behind her. I remember wanting to do something. Make the situation go away. I remember feeling helpless. Mexico seemed so far away. Impossibly far. So many miles separating it from Los Angeles, creating such a large space between us. A canyon.
For years, my biggest regret was that I hadn’t made more of an effort to stay in touch, to make sure that I didn’t lose her. It didn’t occur to me, back then, that I would ever hear from her, or that I could ever see her, again. And now she was back in my life, sending me a message over the Internet. It was unbelievable.

**

I’m back in the office, and I find myself typing without thinking, attempting to unload years of longing into one message. I’m giddy after finding a response from Adriana in my inbox this morning. It read:

_Florencio, I’m glad you remember me. I’ve always wondered how you are. Please write back and tell me about your life. What do you do? Are you married? Do you have kids? Tell me._

_Abrazos,_

_Adriana_

_P.S. I’ve never forgotten you and how sweet you were._

I’m playing the movie of her life in my head, imagining the years Adriana spent thinking about me while I was thinking about her. Suddenly, I want her to know how she affected me. I need her to know.

_It was so hard on me when you left. You were always on my mind. I wondered where you were and what you were doing. I thought about you all the time._
To answer your questions: I work for a TV network, in sales and marketing. I’ve been married 9 years. We have two boys.

And you?

I think about deleting that part about missing her, but I don’t. I send it anyway.

**

Carmen is in one of her rare moods when I get home. She’s yelling at the boys and banging pots and pans. The kitchen looks like the site of a murder scene--red sauce splattered on the backsplash and the countertops, dried spaghetti all over the floor, an overflowing trashcan and a mound of dirty clothes in the corner near the laundry room.

“What happened in here?” I ask, unable to stop myself from sticking my foot in my mouth.

“What happened? What happened was I’m trying to feed your family, that’s what happened. How about a little gratitude for your wife who comes home after a long day of work to these *cochinos* you call your sons!” She leaves a streak of red on her cheek when she pushes a strand of hair off her face. I want to laugh. She’s sweating and with the sauce on her face and a pair of long metal tongs in her hand, she looks like a mad, murderous scientist. I back out of the kitchen and into the living room, where the boys are planted on the sofa, flicking away at their game consoles, popcorn all over the place, dirty socks and soccer cleats on the floor.

“OK, that’s enough guys. Let’s clean up this mess and do some homework before
dinner. Your mom’s had a rough day at work, so let’s not make her mad.”

“She’s already mad,” Pedro says, snorting and nudging his brother.

“Yeah, Dad. Didn’t you get the memo?” Miguel seconds. They chuckle and continue playing their game. I don’t know where they hear these things. The memo. What would they know about memos, I wonder.

“I’ll memo you,” I say under my breath. I reach over and grab the control out of Miguel’s hands. “I said that’s enough. Homework time. Now!”

“Awww, man! Come on!” Pedro says.

“Don’t make me hide this thing,” I say.

**

_That day you kissed me at the park, I didn’t think it was possible to be happier._

I’m typing furiously, the keyboard clacking loudly. Michele appears, her usual coffee in hand, and comes over to my desk. She peers over my shoulder.

“Hard at work on that report, huh?”

She can see I’m logged into Facebook, and I feel encroached upon, my privacy invaded. What the hell is she doing in my cubicle?

“No, you can see that I’m not. I have something I need to take care of first. Do you mind?”

“Me, mind? Not at all. I’ll leave you to your … um… work. I just thought you
might want to know there are donuts in the kitchen, that’s all.” She giggles.

After Michele leaves, I reread the message that Adriana sent me overnight.

I’ve been living in Juarez. I cut hair at a salon. I’m really good at it. I was married. Not anymore. I have one little girl, Martita. Things here are … different. I miss L.A. I have been out to the old neighborhood a couple of times, though, to visit my Tia. She moved into our old house when we left. She’s sick. I’m coming again next week to see her. She needs some help with some things. Maybe we can see each other when I’m in town?

Abrazos,

Adriana

I look at the words on the screen and at the response I had begun composing.

That day you kissed me at the park, I didn’t think it was possible to be happier. You have been so important in my life.

Did I ever tell you how in awe of you I was back then? Remember how you used to help the other kids with their work? The ones who needed help with their English? Remember how you used to help the teacher?

And then, like diving in, I type the last two sentences.
Of course, I would love to see you. Just name the time and place.

I hit send and I feel, suddenly, that my life is about to change. And I am helpless to stop it.

**

When I get home that night, Carmen’s niece, Marissa, is over babysitting.

“What happened to Carmen?” I ask, dropping my keys on the table by the door.

“Hell if I know,” Marissa says, looking over her shoulder. She’s got one hand in a bowl of popcorn, and the other on the remote control that sits in her lap. “She just asked me to pick the boys up. Said she was going to be late. I assumed the gym, que no?”

“Yeah, she might have mentioned something about a cycling class,” I say. And I suddenly do remember her saying she was going to be starting cycling classes at the gym.

“The boys?”

“They’re out back. Carmen said you could order a pizza for dinner when you get home.”

“Yeah, OK. Thanks. How’s things?”


“Nah. Nah. We’re alright. Why do you ask?

“No reason.”

“Really? No reason? You sure?”

“Yeah.”
“OK…. Um…you like sausage on your pizza? Onions?”

“Flo—don’t you know me? I like it all.”

“Just checkin’, just checkin.”

“Oh, and she said you should pay me, too.”

**

We agree to meet at noon in the old park, the spot where she first kissed me. I’m sweating through my shirt, but I wore my jacket, so it’s OK. I’m sitting on the bench, and I keep looking up every time someone walks by. Adriana doesn’t have a cell phone, so I just have to wait. She’s 10 minutes late.

Finally, a thin woman in a white sundress approaches. She pushes her hair out of her face and smiles.

“Adriana?”

“Florencio?”

I stare in awe as she walks over and hugs me, then plants a kiss on my left cheek.

At first all I can think is, She’s so tiny.

She’s petite. Short, and small boned as well. A tiny woman, hardly bigger than a girl. It’s as if time stood still and kept her exactly the same size she was the last time I saw her, while I grew nearly two heads taller. Her shoulders are narrow, and she seems frail, like a sparrow. Those curves I remember noticing seem to have disappeared.

“Hola! Mira que guapo!” she says, eyeing me up and down. I blush, surprised by the compliment. I’ve put on a lot of weight, and my stomach strains against the buttons of my shirt. I’ve always been self-conscious about my big belly, but now I’m even more so.
“No,” I say, smiling. “I’m fat.”

“Ay, no!” she says in an accent, nodding her head vigorously. “You look good, Florencio.”

I don’t remember Adriana having an accent when we were kids. It’s like she picked it up in Juarez. An American girl learning, instead of a new language, the accent of the people from another country when they try to speak English in America. I chuckle to myself.

“No. You. You … you look great,” I say. And she does. I look into her eyes and it’s her. She is beautiful. Still. I laugh. There’s an awkward silence as she sits down and puts her purse down beside her. We peek at each other, and then I turn to her and take her hands in mine. “Wow. Look at you. Adriana Veloz. After all these years. I don’t know what to say. I can’t believe it’s you.”

“Me, too,” she says. She’s blushing. Her skin is flawless. Smooth and lovely. Her eyes are the same. She’s more beautiful than ever. I realize that my palms are sweating, and I let go of her hands.

“So… how’s your Tia?” I ask.

“She’s not doing so good,” she says. “She .. um….. you know, she’s getting old. Not doing so good. I don’t think she’s got so much time, you know? But I’m here to help so hopefully things will be OK for her. Martita is at home with her abuela, and I’ve got some time off work, so I can help. Well, to tell the truth, I lost my job, so I don’t have a job anymore, but I was hoping to maybe find something here. Something to do to make some money while I’m visiting my Tia, you know?”
Adriana talks fast, and I feel like I’m on a used car lot. I flinch a little at her fast-taking, and wonder how that happened. How did my Adriana become this other person? This grown woman with a Mexican accent and a fast talk. This stranger.

I shake the feeling off.

“How long are you here for?” I ask.

“Oh, um. I don’t know yet, you know. It just…. Depends. You know, on how things go. What happens. With my Tia. With a job. I don’t know, really.”

“Ah. Right.” I say.

Another silence. I look around the park, and then down at my feet. Adriana stares down at her hands.

I glance over at her, and at the hands she is rubbing together. There’s no ring on her ring finger. I take a deep breath, and reach over for her hands again. I turn to face her, our hands in between us again. I exhale loudly, and make a decision.

“Adriana, those things I told you in the message. They were true. I never forgot you.”

“I never forgot you either,” she says quickly. She reaches into her dress and pulls out a thin brown string. At the end of the string is a tiny scapular, a picture of La Virgen covered in thick plastic, about the size of a postage stamp. It’s something I had given her when we finished catechism classes. My first gift to her. We were about 10 or 11. My mother had given it to me. I decided Adriana should have it.

“You still have that?” I ask, amazed. She still has it. It’s incomprehensible.

“I’ve kept it all these years to remind me of you, Florencio. I’ve thought about you
all these years, too.”

She still loves me, I think to myself. She still loves me! I stare into her eyes and for a moment, it feels like we’re back in the 7th grade. She’s the same and I’m the same, and all these years in between were just a dream.

I lean in, and she leans in, and our lips meet.

I kiss her, hungrily. She kisses me back just as hungrily. I can’t get close enough to her, there on the park bench. I can’t get a good hold of her thin shoulders, and I feel myself clawing at her. We push and pull against each other there on the bench, kissing like teenagers with the Southern California sun shining down on us.

I’m euphoric. This can’t really be happening, I think. This isn’t really happening. But it is! It is. I’m kissing Adriana Veloz. Again. After all these years. We finally pull apart. We smile at each other. I’m beaming, and she’s beaming, and then she pats her hair down. And we’re grinning like school kids. I actually have that thought, We’re grinning like school kids. I laugh.

“So, Florencio. You’re a TV man now? I’m so proud of you. You were always so smart. I knew you would be someone important.”

I’m embarrassed, because it occurs to me then that she never had a chance to go to college. I wonder if she finished high school, and think of asking, but then change my mind. I think I know the answer. “Thank you. I’m not so important. I just work in an office. It’s nothing special. And you? You’re a hair stylist? Sounds like you enjoy that. And you have a little girl? Sounds like you have a good life.”

“Yes… but no. Juarez is… Juarez. You know. You see the TV news. It’s true. It’s
… a lot of killing. *Los narcos*, you know. They run the town. My boss had to shut down her salon because the narcos threatened to burn it down if she didn’t pay them ten thousand dollars. So she just shut down the salon and went back to Mexico City where she was from. It’s much safer there, she tells me.”

“Oh, Adriana. That sounds… just terrible.” Juarez, a border town run by drug lords and kidnappers. The place where so many young women have gone missing and turned up dead. It’s a horrible place. I imagine living under siege—doors shuttered and windows blacked out. I picture a world of darkness. My heart hurts for her. For her little girl.

“Sometimes it can be. A little. But it’s OK,” she says, brightening up. “Juarez is… what it is. If you live there long enough, you just get used to it, you know?”

“Yes.” I look down. She looks down. A new silence fills the space between us. I suddenly think about the time. “Well, I hate to say this, but I’d better get back to work now,” I say.

“Yes, I have to get back to my Tia now, too,” she says. She stands up, and I stand up. She reaches up to hug me goodbye, and I wrap my arms around her thin torso. I want to lift her up and carry her off with me. When she’s done hugging me, I don’t let go. Her arms hang by her side, and I just hang on to her.

We stand there like that for a good five minutes before I finally let go.

When I look at her again there are tears in her eyes.

Suddenly, I find myself saying, “Adriana, I want to see you again. Can I see you again … tomorrow?”

**
That night, I work late. I email Carmen to tell her I have to work on that report. Instead, I sit at my desk staring at photographs of Adriana and her daughter on Facebook. I stay at the office until 9:30, and then head home. As I make my way down the road, I notice the streetlights are covered in a soft glow. They twinkle and almost seem to glow, coming alive for me when I pass. I remember I’ve been meaning to get my eyes examined, and make a mental note to call the optometrist in the morning.

The lights are out at home. I let myself into the dark house, trying to not to make too much noise with the keys. I settle onto the sofa and flick on the TV, immediately hitting mute. I sit and watch the actors interact with each other silently on the screen. That skinny actress who plays a doctor is arguing with her lover. He reaches out to her, but she turns and walks away angrily. The camera zooms in on his face. The actor attempts to look distraught. I decide he looks constipated, instead.

**

The next day, I head back to the old neighborhood during my lunch. I knock on the door to Adriana’s old house, the house I remember walking past so many thousands of times growing up. The center of my universe. Adriana opens the door wearing a teal sundress with spaghetti straps. Her hair is loose and it hangs in waves on her shoulders and I can’t believe how gorgeous she looks. She reaches in to hug me hello, and she smells amazing.


“Ay, thank you, Florencio. You’re so sweet…. Come in. Come in.”

I look around. Vinyl covered furniture. Pictures of religious scenes on the wall.
Lace curtains. It’s hot. No air conditioning. “So, how’s your Tia? All’s good?” I ask.

“Yes, yes. She’s at the … what do you call it? The … um… seniors center. They send a bus to pick her up every week and they take her over there to play bingo with the other viejitos. She really likes it. She doesn’t even have to leave her wheelchair, you know? They just put it on the bus and take her with her wheelchair and everything.”

“That’s nice,” I say, because I can’t think of what else to say to that.

“Sit, sit. What do you like to drink? A soda? A beer. I think we have a beer in the fridge.” She looks nervous. Unsteady, almost, in high heel sandals.

“A soda. No, the beer. If you have it. That would be nice. If you have one. If not, the soda’s fine.”

I sit on the vinyl-covered sofa and wait, sweat trickling down my sides. I’m wearing a jacket again, and it’s warm in the house. Adriana returns with a can of Budweiser and a napkin and sits next to me. She hands it to me, and I take a long drink from it before putting it down on the coffee table. I clear my throat. “So, Adriana. About the other day… I…”

“Yes. The other day,” she says, interrupting me.

“I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you,” I say, quickly, before I lose my nerve.

“Me too,” she says, a shy smile on her lips. She looks up at me. I look down at her. We lean in and then, just like that, we’re kissing again. I’m holding her hair in my hands, big handfuls of it, and my lips are on hers. She kisses me back, just as eagerly, her arms around my neck.
“Adriana. … Adriana,” I say between kisses. She pulls away and stands up. She pushes one of her shoulder straps down, then the other, and wiggles her dress down her hips. It falls to the ground, and she’s standing in front of me in her bra and panties. I reach for her and pull her onto my lap. My hands are on her breasts, reaching into her bra, shoving it aside to expose her nipples. She unbuttons my shirt and pushes my jacket off my shoulders. We get tangled up, our arms at cross-purposes. We stand up. Soon we’re standing there in her old living room, me in my boxer shorts, she in her panties, kissing. She pulls away again and steps out of her panties. She pushes me down on the vinyl covered sofa and I catch a glimpse of the popcorn on the ceiling before she yanks my boxers down and lowers herself onto me. And it feels so right, despite the heat and the sticky vinyl underneath me.

I try to hang on but I can’t. It’s too much. I’m done almost immediately. I’m embarrassed, but she laughs and kisses me long and deep, working her tongue into the edges of my mouth slowly and swirling it around mine, and it’s the nicest kiss I think I’ve ever had in my life. I feel myself sinking, falling into a place I didn’t know I could go. It’s unfamiliar but warm and I don’t want to leave it, this place. When she pulls away, I let my head hang back and my mouth unhinges, the air cooling the inside of my lower lip as I inhale and exhale. I can’t believe this is really happening. I’m still not sure.

Adriana puts her head on my chest and wraps her arms around me. I look down and see her hair is plastered on her forehead, so I blow on her face, fanning her with my breath. She looks up with a smile and giggles, and I reach down and kiss her. I’m so happy I want to jump up and click my heels together. I kiss her again and before I know
it, I’m saying, “Sabes que te quiero?”

She looks up at me with that serious expression in her eyes, the one from so many years ago. I laugh. I grab her left hand in mine and start playing with her fingers. I feel drowsy, but I rouse myself. Suddenly, I see an imaginary clock hanging above me. Tick tock.

“Adriana, I’m so sorry. I have to get back to work now,” I say, softly, quietly, almost a whisper.

“I know. It’s OK. You should go,” she says.

**

When I get home, Carmen’s all smiles. She’s got dinner on the table and she says to me, “You’re just in time. I made your favorite honey pork chops.”

“Great,” I say, avoiding eye contact. “Lemme get… my um.. I’ll be right back,” I say. I take the stairs two at a time and bolt into our bathroom. I lock the door behind me and put my hands on the countertop. I look around for a washcloth, and start to soap it up. Then I change my mind and drop it in the sink. I take off all my clothes, then turn on the shower and hop in.

Downstairs, Carmen doesn’t seem to notice I’ve showered and changed into sweats and a T-shirt. She hardly looks at me, and doesn’t ask about the pre-dinner shower. She spends the entire dinner asking the boys about their day, and I’m so relieved I silently thank the heavens above.

**
At work the next day, I message Adriana.

*Linda, Hermosa, when can I see you again?*

I avoid working on my report, and find other back-burner work to keep me busy all day. I keep logging into Facebook and checking for a reply. I see one near the end of the day.

*Tomorrow at 1? My Tia has an appointment to do some tests at the hospital. She’ll be gone all afternoon. Will you be able to come?*

I shoot back a response.

*With bells on. :)*

**

When I get there, Adriana has a snack set up for me. Cheese and crackers, a Budweiser. I stuff the crackers in my mouth and down the Bud.

“All done,” I announce, like a toddler finished going potty. She laughs, and then we’re kissing. I glance down at the vinyl-covered sofa and over at her.

“Is there anywhere else we can, you know?” I ask.

She smiles. “Ven conmigo mi amor,” she says, pulling me into a bedroom.

This time, I’m masterful. I tease her and delay the main attraction. My tongue traces every line of her body, explores every crevice. She trembles like a little flower in
my hands. When I finally enter her, she’s hot and wet and so tight I feel myself slipping into a state of nirvana. But I focus and bring myself back to the moment and her pleasure. I hang on and on and on and she orgasms two times before I finally allow myself to let go. I decide that this must be what heaven is like, finding yourself in bed with your first love, giving each other pleasure in the middle of a hot summer afternoon when you’re supposed to be doing something terrible and monotonous. Escape.

As she lies in my arms, this time she looks up at me and say, “Mi amor, te quiero.” I’m giddy. I kiss her again.

**

The next morning, there’s a new message from Adriana in my Facebook.

Florencio, I’m so happy. But I have important news. I have to go back to Juarez this weekend to see my Martita. She fell and broke her arm, and now I have to go take care of her. But I’ll be back as soon as I can to be with you. In the meantime, we can talk about our future together. Maybe you’d like to meet Martita? I could see about bringing her with me. I’m so happy we’ve reunited.

I stare at the message. My stomach starts doing flips, and I’m not sure if I’m happy or nervous or feeling sick. I don’t know how to respond. I stare and stare at the message, as if doing so will yield the answer to how I’m feeling and what I’m supposed to say. I keep staring at the word “reunited.” What could she mean by that? Does she think we’re
together together, I wonder? Future together? Could there be a future together? It hadn’t even occurred to me that she would want that. Did I want that? I have no idea what I want.

Michele comes by for her usual morning greeting.

“What’s cookin?” she asks.

“Michele, how is it possible you’re always so cheerful in the mornings? Haven’t you heard, most people hate mornings?”

“Too bad for you, chubby man. Cause I likes me my mornin’s,” she says, and pinches my belly on her way out of my cubicle.

“How’d you like it if I did that, huh?”

“Try it and see fatty!”

After she’s gone, I look back at the message. I really don’t know what to say to Adriana. I decide to wait before responding until I know what I want to say. I’m agitated. What have I done, I wonder? What have I done?

I log out of Facebook and pull up my report. Yes, work. Put this all out of your mind for now. I set to work with renewed vigor, and spend most of the day plugging away at it. I work through lunch. By 5:30, I’m done with the report. I feel masterful and competent. I email it to my boss and flip off my monitor. I whistle, “If you’re happy and you know it,” on my way out.

I dial the house from the car and Carmen answers. “Tell me you haven’t made dinner yet.”

“Nope. Just about to get started,” she says.
“Great! Let’s go out tonight. I’ve really been craving Mario’s. Whaddaya say?”

“Um… OK. OK, how long will you be.”

“I’ll be home in two shakes,” I say.

“OK.”

After dinner, the boys go upstairs for their showers and Carrmen and I are sprawled on the sofa. I look over at her and take her hand in mine. She pulls it away, and stands up. She sighs heavily. My heart speeds up.

“I know,” she says simply. “And I want you to stop it. You need to stop it, for the sake of your boys.”

She walks up the stairs.

**

The next morning, there’s a new message from Adriana.

Florencio, mi amor. Me estrañas?

Abrazos,

Adriana

I sigh. I know what I have to do. I start typing.

Adriana, it was so wonderful seeing you. What we had was so special. I’ve always had a place for you in my heart. But you know I’m a married man. My wife and sons,
they’re my whole world. I know you understand, having a daughter yourself.

I’m so happy we reconnected and had those special moments. It was wonderful seeing you again, but I don’t think we should see each other again.

I simply can’t.

I hope your daughter recovers from her injury. Be well.

Abrazos,

Florencio

**

The following morning, I check, but there’s no response from Adriana. It’s just as well. She’s busy with her daughter and has no time to think about an old childhood friend, I tell myself. What I don’t tell myself is that I have just broken my first love’s heart, and destroyed any notion I ever had that I am a decent man. Those truths sit just beneath the surface, and I do my best to keep them there, submerged.

**

As the weeks go by, I think about writing Adriana a note to check in, but I decide against it. I find myself wondering about her as I go about my life, how she navigates the dangerous streets. Does she drive, or does she take the bus? I picture her walking the streets of Juarez, and a masked man yanking her into a parked car. I shake the image from my mind.

**
It’s been a month since I last saw Adriana. I still can’t believe we reconnected. I’m amazed at how human beings can invent technology to bridge the gaps between us and bring the whole world so close together.

The sun still keeps me company in the mornings on my drive in to work. I don’t tell anyone about this—the way the sun seems to follow me. At best, they’d think I need glasses. At worst, well. I’d sound like a nut, wouldn’t I?

I'm grateful for the sun. Without the sun, I might forget her.

Adriana.

She was once my center. I was lucky to know her. I am a damn lucky dog. That’s all I can think. I’m a damn lucky dog.
Yarn

Fibers are flying through the air, tiny squirrel-brown wool whiskers landing silently around her. Her fingers work steadily, keeping pace with an internal clock that tocks in her head. She’s trying to to focus, ignore the sounds that surround her. The giddy Disney Channel voices coming out of the flat-screen. Her girls fighting in the background, one of them calling out to her.

Maya wonders if the yarn she chose, an undyed aran-weight wool, will be too scratchy for a hat. Too late. She’s nearly half finished. She continues working, stitch by stitch, allowing her mind to wander for just a second before yanking it back.

She brings up her mental checklist. Wool beanie for her cousin, silk scarf for her mother, wool/silk stole for her grandmother, leg warmers for her best friend’s daughter. If she can just work a little faster, she just might finish them in time. She glances at the clock. Almost time to start fixing dinner. She’ll give herself five more minutes.
The metal needles are shiny and slick they move in and out of the growing fabric with ease, clicking softly with every stitch completed. She wills her fingers to move faster, knit quicker, finish this hat now.

**

The buzzing of the alarm clock enters her dream. She reaches over and pushes the snooze button. Mike is awake, sitting up in bed looking at his iPhone. It’s Thanksgiving morning.

“What’s this $70 charge in our account for Trans something…” he asks.

“That’s for my college transcripts.”

“So now it starts?” he asks. “You’re just going to spend all our money on grad school applications? You don’t care what I think about it? I have no say in the matter?”

“I told you I was going to apply even though we’re still talking about. So I could have the option in the Spring if I got in. I told you last week.”

“How much is it going to cost you to apply? Three, four hundred dollars?”

“Don’t start, please.”

**

At her mother’s house the day after Thanksgiving, there’s talk at the breakfast table of going out shopping. Black Friday.

“You’re not buying anything,” Mike tells her, butting into the conversation

“Yeah, I know we’re broke right now,” she says.

To her mother: “We’re waiting on a bonus check before we do our shopping.”
To him: “We’re just going window shopping.”

“It’ll be fun. The outlets aren’t nearly as crowded as the malls. Let’s go,” her mother says, addressing him directly.

“Maya said she wants to go to Barnes & Noble to buy that new Sara Palin book,” her stepfather interjects, winking at her.

“You’re not going anywhere to buy any books,” Mike says, his voice louder than it should have been, a tinge of undisguised anger in his voice.

Maya is embarrassed. She glances at her stepfather, who had just been asking her why she didn’t care for Sara Palin—he had just been poking fun at her—and smiles. And then she feels the anger.

“You know, you don’t have the right to talk to me like that, Mike,” she says, not caring suddenly that her mother and stepfather are in the room. “You don’t have the right to tell me what I can and can’t do.”

Maya gets up and says, “Give me the car keys. I’m going for a drive.”

“No, I’m going for a drive,” Mike says, moving past her and toward the front door.

“And you can find your own way home.”

Maya follows him to the door. “Is this because of the transcripts? Are you serious?”

**

When he comes back a couple of hours later, Mike says to her. “I shut down the Chase account. And I’m going to start parceling out the money our main account. You can’t just spend money on whatever you want, spending the girls’ college money, being irresponsible like that.”
**

Back at home, they hardly speak for two days. Maya heads out to the market to run some errands. Once alone, away from the girls and the laundry and the dishes, tears threaten to run down her face.

Mike. He has no idea how close she is. She goes through her options again. If he tries keeping his paycheck out of the account, she’ll have to go back to see the lawyer and file those papers. He’s close to forcing her hand. But she frets over all the things she has been fretting over for over a year. She has seen three lawyers and has been going over possible scenarios for too long. Still, she feels that the ability to leave him is just out of her grasp. Where will she live? Will they have to pull the girls out of the school they love? Will they have to give up the house so that they can support two households? Will the alimony and child support be enough to supplement her meager income? She’s filled with panic at the thought of everything changing.

She’s stuck.

She sees no way out of this situation, this life. It would be much too difficult to finally take the steps to leave Mike, even thought she has wanted to for two years now. She allows herself some self-pity, and then shakes it off. Too much to do. The girls. Getting the house ready for Christmas. She’s got some knitting to finish at home. She hurries through the grocery shopping.

**

At home, she pulls out her knitting. The hat is just about finished. A few more rows and she will be done. Her wrists are tender. She wishes she could just blink and be done.
**

At work the next day, the tears come again. She’s staring at her computer screen and they start pouring out. She soaks them up with a tissue and stares straight ahead, hoping no one can see them. She blows her nose and picks up the phone.

“Mike. I want to talk to you. What are you doing?” she asks, softly, seriously.

“What am I doing? What are you doing? What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean. Do you see what you’re doing? You’re pushing me away. Is it worth it? Over a grad school application? You know, I may be wrong. You may be right. This might not be the best choice for our family. Or we might both be right, just have different perspectives on the matter. But I’m not willing to limit my options while I consider them all. And you’re willing to push me away over this? You’ve been talking like someone who wants a divorce every time the subject comes up. Talking about withholding your paycheck. Telling me I’m on my own if I go back to school. Calling me an irresponsible mother for considering it. You’re pushing me away. You’re talking like someone who doesn’t care about my feelings at all. Is that what you want? Really?”

There is silence on the line.

“OK. If you want to do this, do it. But I can’t take this anymore. I’m tired of crying. I’m so tired of crying all the time. Do you want me to set up counseling so we can start working out the details of a divorce? Because I’m not going to change my mind just because you try to throw your weight around.”

“No. I don’t want a divorce,” he says, finally. After a long silence. “I love you.”

“You don’t act like it,” she says.
**(The stole. The never-fucking-ending-stole. Why did she start this project? The yarn is so thin for this project that it’s taking her longer to finish than any other she’s ever started. She sighs heavily and puts the needles down. Her wrists hurt again. Impossible. It’s impossible. She will never be able to accomplish it all. She curses the day she decided to make Christmas gifts instead of buying them. All that yarn already bought. All that money already spent. Shit. She glances at her yarn stash, balls of alpaca and cotton and silk and linen yarn piled up in bins on her bookshelf. So much possibility there. There are half-finished projects all over the place—on the coffee table in the living room, in her bed, there’s even one on the bathroom counter. Tiny fibers fly through the air as she moves from room to room gathering her knitting projects. She tosses them all on her bed, needles clacking against each other as they knock together. She assesses. “Fuck it,” she says to the projects more than to herself. And then she begins to rip. She pulls the needles out of the unfinished green scarf and tugs on the working yarn. The stitches come undone easily. Bumpy yarn comes out of what was once knit fabric.)**
The feeling is unexpected. Maya is exhilarated. She fills her lungs with air and continues ripping, pulling, tugging. The fabric unravels before her eyes, disappearing into a long thread, magic.

She grabs another unfinished project. The leg warmers this time. Rip. So easy. A mass of yarn begins to grow on her bed beside the dwindling pile of unfinished projects. Tans and sea greens and pale blues. A lovely petal pink, kettle dyed and dappled. Tangled. Mangled.

She remembers a childhood fever dream then. An odd nightmare. A long, cool, smooth line, like a string, sits in her line of sight. It begins bending and twisting. It’s uncomfortable. She wants it to stop, but it continues, speeding up. A loud screeching noise grows in her ears. She grows hotter and hotter, and the sight of the twisted, mangled string is unbearable. Then she awakes.

She had that dream over and over for years, always when she was sick with fever. It was the worse thing she could imagine, that tangled mess.

Now she looks at the mess on her bed and realizes, it wasn’t a nightmare. It wasn’t a nightmare at all. This yarn. This unraveled mess.

It’s exactly where her life has brought her. It’s exactly where she is meant to be now. Ripping. Tearing. Pulling apart the stitches she worked so hard to make.

She laughs then, and tears slip down her cheeks.
Remembering

Olivia, hair pinned up and tucked into what she hoped was a passable messy up-do, shuffled toward the store in her lime green rubber flip-flops, smoothing down her gray, all-season wool skirt and cream-colored silk tank. The sun's rays bore down on her shoulders, and she shivered from the all-too-present September heat. She glanced at the list in her hand and read out loud: "Cotton tank tops; cotton skirts, loose; sandals if they're on sale, and … oh, shit. The coupon."

She turned around and walked back toward her dented Civic. She unlocked the door the old fashioned way, fiddling with a manual key, and reached in for the 20 percent off coupon, which was sitting on the center console right where she had put it so that she wouldn’t forget it.

Walking back toward the store, she continued reading her day's To-Do List: "Career Woman Magazine, 2411 Wilshire Blvd., Suite 15, 2:30 p.m. Ask for Miranda. Don't forget resume, suit jacket, change into heels. … Check gas gauge. OK." She tucked the list into her purse and entered the store.

Inside, the icy air triggered goose bumps on her arms, and every hair on them stood on end in a chilled salute. She wiggled her shoulders to counteract the shock, and walked swiftly toward the clothing section. She was in dire need of hot-weather clothes. It took
her half the summer to realize her wardrobe was missing key pieces, and the temperature was rising with every week that went by. Looking around, she spotted some racer back tanks, and reached up to grab one of each color--white, cream and gray--and glanced briefly at the sizes on the labels. She scanned the racks around her and walked toward the back wall, where she found a selection of cotton print skirts. Shuffling through them, she pulled out a navy print, a solid white and a brown. She placed them against her hips to check the waste band. Nodded yes to herself.

"OK. That was painless," she said, and shuffled to the front of the store with the clothing items. She waited in one long line that fed into three check stands. Her turn came up and she approached the check stand. The cashier was tall, about 6' 2", with dark, indigenous skin, a neat, trim haircut and a pleasant, youthful face. She pegged him to be between 22 and 26.

"Well hello. How did those boots work out for you last time?" he asked her as she handed over her items.

"Sorry?" Crap. She had forgotten to look for sandals. Oh, well. Too late.

"The boots you bought in June. How did they work out for you?" He asked, chipper as a boy scout.

"You remember helping me? You've got some memory. You must deal with thousands of customers who come through here," she said.

"Just two hundred and thirty seven so far," he said. “I haven’t worked here that long. And I’m only part time.”
She laughed. "You're funny. You should try stand-up." She glanced at his name tag. "Ah, Nelson Rivera."

"I'm serious," he said. "Today, you are my two hundred and thirty seventh customer. Well, actually, if you account for repeat customers, you are my two hundred and nineteenth customer. I've had eighteen repeat customers like you."

His fingers moved deftly as he scanned the clothes and folded them neatly on the countertop. "Would you like to keep the hangers?" he asked peppily.


"I can't help it," he said, fingers working.

"Wait, that's ringing up at $49.99?" she asked, pointing at the last skirt, which he was in the process of folding. "The tag says it's on sale for $29.99."

He dragged the skirt’s tag over the censor again and pointed at the screen in front of him. "It's coming up at $49.99. Hmmm. Let me call for a price check." He flicked a switch and a red light sticking up from a pole lit above the check stand, and for the ceremony involved in the gesture one would have thought he was summoning the leader of the free world.

"You can't help it? Counting?" she asked, still skeptical.

"No, not counting. I can’t help remembering, actually. I remember everything. I have a photographic memory," he said, and smiled at her. A winning smile.

"Isn't that supposed to be extremely rare? A true photographic memory?" She was eyeing him now with a tinge of worry, for him, for his sanity.
"I don't know. Is it?" That smile again. Without a care in the world. No agenda, apparently.

"Yes, I believe it is."

"Hmmm. Well, all I know is I have one."

"Um-hum. That must have been very helpful in school, huh?" she said. And hence, you work as a cashier, she thought.

"Well, let me put it this way. If the teacher said it was going to be on the test, I remembered it."

"So you must have been the school valedictorian then, right?"

"Not exactly," he said, smiling that same guileless smile at her. "I didn't do so great in school."

"You're kidding right? Why not?" she asked, trying to keep the sarcasm out of her voice. This was an earnest one, she could tell. Maybe younger than she originally guessed. No reason to be rude to the poor kid.

"Don't know. Just didn't," he said. A plump woman with long black hair in a tight ponytail approached and he said, "Price check on this skirt, please, Sandra." He handed Sandra the skirt.

"I'm sorry, but what makes you think you have a photographic memory?"

"Let's see. The day you came in and bought the boots, you paid cash. They were the chestnut browns with the three inch heels. On sale for $69.99. You were wearing a teal sundress with skinny straps, a gold necklace with a tiny diamond in the center and little gold vines with leaves coming out of it, like it was a berry or fruit. Your hair was in a
ponytail, with little wisps hanging down across the front. You were wearing lip gloss. A corally color. And the weather outside was about 80, 82 degrees outside. How's that?"

"Are you kidding me? Is this some kind of candid camera prank? This is where the cameramen jump out from behind the wall over there, right?"

Nelson laughed, the delighted giggle of a small boy. He shook his head back and forth energetically. "Nooooo."

"You're serious?"

"Yes, Ma'am. I'm totally serious." He glanced up at the red light, which was still lit. Looking back at Olivia he said, "Oh, and I'm sorry for the wait, Ma'am."

"That's alright. I'm… wait. I actually have somewhere to be. I've gotta run. Shit."

"Should I cancel the price check on the skirt?"

"Forget about the skirt. I have to go!"

"OK, then. Let me just finish ringing this up for you," he said, unruffled, smiling.

"I'm a journalist, Nelson. I'd love to talk to you some more about your memory. For a story," she said, watching his face for a reaction.

His expression didn't change. He smiled at her and said, "Sorry. I don't think so."

"Nelson. You just convinced me that you have a photographic memory. People should know about this. It would make an amazing magazine story. Please let me just ask you a few questions."

"No, I don't think it's a good idea."

"But… Please. Nelson. Do me this favor. Be a good sport. Do a good deed. I'm an out of work journalist. I need a good story."
Nelson ripped out the receipt and handed it to her. "I don't … know."

"Please. Nelson. Look, here's my number," she said, reaching into her purse and handing him a cream-colored business card. "Can you call me when you get off work, if you don't have plans? I'd love to buy you a cup of coffee. Just to talk. I promise, if you want, we can always change your name. For privacy. I really, really need a good story. You'd be helping me out tremendously. Call me, yes? I have to run now, but I'll be expecting your call. Please!"

She ran out, losing a flip-flop at the door. Rounded back, slipped her foot in it, turned and smiled at Nelson one last time, then bolted toward the lot.

"Shit shit shit shit shit!!!"

**

"So how does it work for you, this remembering everything?" Olivia was leaning forward on the table, elbows down, face in her hands. The disastrous job interview--the fact that she had not, in fact, changed out of her flip-flops and had shown up without her suit jacket, dark sweat stains on her silk top visible for all the world to see--was now forgotten. The coffee shop she chose for their meeting was just down the road from where Nelson worked. A lumpy thrift store sofa, mismatched chairs, and scuffed floors contributed to the bohemian ambiance. Olivia had hoped it would be less crowded and noisy than the Starbuck's across the street.

"How does it work. How does it work... OK, well, if it's something I saw, the image stays in my mind, like a projector image on a screen," Nelson said, holding the wide cup in front of his face and sipping his hot chocolate timidly.
"That happens to everyone, for a while at least, doesn't it?"

"Yeah. But with me it doesn't fade." Blowing on the surface of the hot liquid.

"I see. And where do all these images go, once they're in your head? I mean, do you have a filing system, or?"

"I dunno. They're just there. In there."

"All of them? At the same time?" she asked, scribbling into her notebook in messy, loopy script.

"Um… well, let's see. No, they take turns coming to the front, and then just fade to the back." Here he paused. He attempted another sip of his drink. "Except…"

She was still scribbling. Caught up. Noticed the pause. Looked up at him.

"Except?"

"Except for one, actually, that never goes away. That one stays."

He gulped his hot chocolate now, filched. Put his cup down. "The others come and go, but they're always there for me to call up, or else they come up when something triggers them. Like when I saw you again today, the image of you buying boots in June came to the front. And then I remembered everything from that moment. The music that was playing on the speakers. The scent of perfume a customer before you had left in the air, even."

"Unbelievable! I can't imagine. To remember everything. That's so… earth shaking. Isn't it?"

"I don't know." He shrugged his shoulders, holding them in the up position a little longer than most do.
"That would be so amazing. Take me, for instance. I can't remember anything. If it's not written down, I won't remember it. Not a thing."

"Hmmm."

"I mean… my memory was always … not great. But now. I’m getting older and, these days it's just … terrible. There are so many things I wish I could remember. And that I may not even know I've forgotten. But the ones I wish I could remember, oh, wow. It would be so amazing to be able to get any moment in time back, you know? I would give almost anything for that ability. You don't know what an amazing gift you have, Nelson!"

"I suppose. You could look at it that way. If you wanted to."

"Yeah. Yeah. But this. It’s just that I... my memory has been especially terrible lately. It’s so serendipitous that I ran into you, you know? Maybe your ability will rub off on me. A little bit of it, anyway. Anyway. Sorry. I get carried away. OK, so, back to the images.” She scanned her notebook, reread the last paragraph she wrote. “OK. An image comes to the front, and then it goes away, right? But what about this other one? The one you said doesn't go away?" she was writing and watching his face. His smile faded for just a second. And then it was back. She stopped writing.

"Um… let's see." Nelson grimaced. He looked around the cafe, which was full of lap-top users, mostly. A heavy-set woman with a toddler was seated next to them, and she was feeding the little boy chunks of banana bread. Nelson watched them for a moment, and then looked back at Olivia. "I'm not sure, actually," he said finally.

"What do you mean? Didn't you say there was one image that was always there?"
"Yeah, well," Nelson looked over at a young couple who had just walked in. He watched as the man, a short, stocky African American, reached over and put his arm around the woman's shoulders as they stood at the register ordering. It was a casual gesture, not protective or proprietary. The woman, a thin red-head who was about the same height as the man, leaned her head on the man's shoulder. Olivia watched Nelson watch them. "It's not important," Nelson said, finally turning back to Olivia. “So … what are you going to do with this… um… interview?"

"I don't know yet, really," Olivia said. "I'll figure that out after I've done some more research. And then I'll probably pitch the story to a magazine. Not sure which one yet. Depends on the outcome. You know how it is."

"No, not really," Nelson said, smiling again. He was sweet. So eager to please. That was how he walked the earth, apparently. Is that what having an endless memory does to a person, Olivia wondered?

**

Later that night, Olivia fired up her Mac and began composing an email.

Dear Dr. French,

I hope this email finds you well. I’m not sure if you remember me. We met when I was writing the story on prisoners. I'm writing now to share some exciting news. I met a young man working at a local big-box store who claims to have a photographic memory. Upon further questioning, it appears that this young man does have an exceptional memory. My sense is he is a true hyperthymesiac. But of course, that’s just a lay-person’s guess. Would you be willing to meet him, and possibly conduct some tests to confirm or
refute his claims? I’d like to write a magazine story about the process and the outcome. If published, if he is a hyperthymesiac, I think the story could really help shed light on your research.

Sincerely,

Olivia Vargas

Olivia stared at the words on her screen and typed one last line.

P.S. It would be great to see you again. It’s been too long.

She stared at the sentence and then highlighted it. She hit the delete button, then sent the message, without the P.S.

He didn’t need to know that. What good would it do? He probably didn’t even remember her or that night. She had interviewed him a decade ago for a story on psychiatric disorders in the prison population. She was instantly smitten by the young psychiatrist. He was so handsome, and so authoritative. Their interview had spilled over into dinner, and they had ended up back at her apartment. She had had one too many margaritas. Couldn’t quite remember how things went. Just remembered being terribly hung over the next morning. Two calls from him later that week that she couldn’t bring herself to return. Then nothing.

The worst of it was that she didn’t remember what she had said, what they had done, exactly. Regrets, she had a few. She had been following his career. Checking his
website at the University where he taught. There was one story in the paper a few years back. And now, a chance to talk to him again. But what was she expecting? A recap? A blow-by-blow? Silly. Maybe now, they could start again? She could apologize for not calling back. Put the past behind them and hit reboot? The possibility thrilled her. Dr. French.

Now, she clicked into her sent box and pulled the message up again. Reread it to make sure she had, indeed, deleted the P.S. Relieved she had, she began closing the laptop when she decided to check for new mail. There was a new message, from Nelson Rivera. Her email address was on that card she gave him.

Dear Mrs. Vargas,

I don’t think I can make our next meeting. I’m sorry. I can’t talk to you about my condition anymore.

Sorry again.

Sincerely,

Nelson


Olivia sat and reread the message, searching for hidden clues. She hit reply and wrote back:

Nelson,
Was it something I said today? If it is, I’m truly sorry. Please. Let’s discuss this. I didn’t mean to make you feel uncomfortable. Please. Give me another chance. I’m sorry for whatever it was I did. I really need to do this story. Please.

Olivia Vargas

She hit send and shut her laptop. She climbed into bed without brushing her teeth, remembering at the last minute, as her eyes were beginning to close from exhaustion, that she was still wearing her street clothes.

**

Running into the store, Olivia scanned the check stands for Nelson. Didn’t see him. Walked up to a cashier, a bony-faced woman with hair the color of a squirrel’s tail. “Is Nelson Rivera working today?”

“Uh, no. I don’t think so.”

“Do you know when he will be?”

“Uh, yeah, I think he’s opening tomorrow at 10,” she said.

She walked out into the lot. A mirage of sorts met her. Waves of heat coming off the blacktop. Warping the paved parking lot surface. Like a wormhole, she thought. That must be what they’re like. Ripples in space-time. Gaps you can slip into to go back in time. That would be a way to relive better days. Find yourself back when you were at your peak. Back when you had more confidence. Back when you had not yet developed crow’s feet, when your whole life was ahead of you. Before the memory loss started
working its tricks on your brain the way they had with your abuelita. Back when you were still on your way up.

Or you could just conjure the sensation up again, like Nelson. Just replay the movie of those days. Relive and relive and relive until you remembered what it felt like when you weren’t a failure.

**

At home, Olivia checked her email. Nothing. No response from Dr. French. No response from Nelson. She clicked compose and started a new message.

Nelson, I really need to talk to you. Please. Call me. Tell me what went wrong. I’ll fix it.

Sincerely,

Olivia

She looked around her spare one-bedroom apartment. There were stacks of newspapers near the front door, magazines covering her kitchen table. It was clean enough, she decided. She turned on the television set and watched reruns of “Friends” until she fell asleep on the couch.

The next morning, Olivia awoke later than usual. The sun was already high in the sky. She checked her email, hopeful. Nothing. She got up, showered, and ran out the door. She arrived at the store just as Nelson was getting out of his car. The air was hot and muggy, and she felt like she was walking in slow motion as she approached him.
“Nelson. Hi. How are you?”

He didn’t seem surprised to see her. “I don’t know, actually, now that you ask.”

“Nelson, what is it? What happened?”


“What do you mean?” He was starting toward the store’s front doors. Olivia ran in front of him, jogging backwards. “Please stop. Talk to me for a second, Nelson. I want to understand.”

“Just go away, please. You can’t understand.”

“Can’t understand what, Nelson?”

“That I can’t forget. I can’t forget her. Can’t you see?” He stopped walking. He looked into Olivia’s eyes with an urgency now. He was trying to explain. OK. This was something, Olivia thought. Something. He wanted her to understand.

“Her. OK, who, Nelson?”

“My Gia. I can’t stop them. The images. Her face. The dimple on her left cheek. The way her nose wrinkled up when she laughed. The way she looked when I kissed her for the first time.”

“Memories are great, Nelson! What I wouldn’t give to be able to remember those sorts of things. I’ve lost that ability to recall events, even important events. That’s terrible. What you have is a gift.”

“Hardly. I’m crippled. That’s what this is. A defect. I sit at home and stare at a wall all day, watching Gia. I watch her day and night. The images are always there. I don’t
have to call them up because everything reminds me of her. The other day, talking to you in the coffee shop, the little kid with his mom, that couple at the register. The way you wrote in your notebook. Everything reminds me of her. And her face is there all the time. Her laugh. Her scent. The memories. They won’t stop. I can’t do anything. I can’t think about anything. It’s torture. I just … want to forget. I don’t want to remember anymore. And I don’t want to talk about it anymore.”

With that, he pushed past Olivia, his shoulder rubbing against hers as he made his way forward again. Olivia, still hopeful, called after him. “Nelson, let’s talk about this. Maybe you can call her? Reconnect. How long has it been since you’ve seen her? I can help you track her down. I’m really good at that sort of thing.”

He stopped. Didn’t turn around. Still facing the store, he said, “She’s gone. There’s no reconnecting, OK? No tracking her down. She died when we were 13.” He headed back toward the store then, leaving Olivia behind, her response caught in her throat.

So that was it. Olivia felt terrible then. What kind of person was she? Why was she out here, hassling a poor kid? What had happened to her? What had happened to him? None of it made any sense. None of it. The sun had risen in the sky, and the heat pricked Olivia’s armpits. The parking lot quivered before her, the heat mirage starting again. She felt dizzy, as if rocked by the waves in the mirage. She reached down to touch the blacktop, burning her fingertips in the process. She fell forward and ended up on her hands and knees, stray pebbles pricking the skin on her legs, the pavement uncomfortably hot. She looked up, toward the store. Nelson had already gone inside. The waves around
her continued to gyrate, pulsing now, the heat mirage persisting. She felt dizzy and nauseous.

“OK, Olivia. Just breathe,” she said aloud to herself. She fell back on her heels and looked up at the sky, the brightness stinging her eyes.

The sun blazed down on the parking lot, sparks of light glinting off the chrome on the car fenders. She pushed herself up, and dusted off her legs. She began walking toward her car, her legs wobbly. She reached into her pocket and pulled out her keys, fired up the ignition. Her heart was racing, and her mouth was dry. Her fingers shook as she grabbed hold of the steering wheel.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “OK. OK. It’s OK. Try to remember what it felt like to not be afraid, Olivia,” she said. “Just try to remember.”