

THE FIRST INCH OF A SAGUARO

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Doctor of Philosophy

by

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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the dissertation entitled

THE FIRST INCH OF A SAGUARO

presented by Carley Gomez,

a candidate for the degree of doctor of philosophy,

and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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DEDICATION

For my partner, Levi Sherman, who knew I would earn a doctorate before I did. Thanks for dropping everything so that I could pursue this one big thing.

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ABSTRACT

The First Inch of a Saguaro follows three Mexican American teenagers after their father, Luis, is arrested for a drug-related murder in an Arizona border town. During Luis' trial, fourteen-year-old Javier takes to leaving home in the middle of the night and wanders the streets. On the edge of town, he finds ghostly women trapped in a cult and he desperately works to free them. Once his father is convicted of murder, Javier must navigate this dangerous cult while growing up without his father at home.

Middle child Alejandra is angry—angry at her friends, her father, and the world. Unable to cope with this world in which her father is in prison, she runs away with another boy from high school who feels he has no reason to stay after his mother and stepfather skip out. They travel the country in his van for several years—meeting other teenagers in need of help and eventually settling into a commune in California. All the while, Alejandra sends postcards to her father in prison.

Paulina, the eldest, was preparing for college when Luis was pulled from their home. Ever the dutiful daughter, she sacrifices everything to support Javier and her mother. Paulina takes on local gig work during the day, and tries to reconcile her sexuality and her religious beliefs at night.

Luis' trial is not the focal point of this novel. Throughout, his guilt is always in question. Instead, the story focuses on the way that Javier, Alejandra, and Paulina begin to grow distant as the arrest of their father destroys the stability of their home life. They face the community's condemnation and racism, and they navigate the prison visitation space as a form of borderland. Throughout the book, Mexican mythology has a prominent role in the structure of plot, and in the events themselves. The novel inhabits the points of view of the teenagers and details how they deal with the arrest and aftermath during the seven subsequent years.

The Changing Portrayals of Borderlands in pre- and post-9/11 Mexican-American Border
Literature

After September 11, 2001, the rhetorical landscape regarding Mexican immigrants in the United States changed noticeably. So did the representation of borders in fictional Mexico-United States border narratives. Troubling, racist rhetoric used by politicians and the media, such as former Governor Jan Brewer and Fox news outlets, and the militarization of the Mexico-United States border established a narrative in which the borderland's reach extends beyond the line between countries. The border is dangerous, not by virtue of its physical features, but because it is controlled by criminals. A close reading of four novels, *Under the Feet of Jesus* by Helena Viramontes, *The Tortilla Curtain* by T.C. Boyle, *The Guardians* by Ana Castillo, and *Signs Preceding the End of the World* by Yuri Herrera—two pre-9/11 and two post-9/11 respectively—will demonstrate how borders have changed in the imaginations of Americans and Mexicans. An analysis of pre-9/11 novels with a theoretical lens of borders as spaces of dislocation and an analysis of post-9/11 novels with a theoretical lens of moving borders as militarized spaces will show a key difference in the manifestation of conflicts between the two sets of novels. In pre-9/11 novels, the United States laws and labor market provide the antagonistic forces the main characters must overcome. In post-9/11 border literature, conflicts often stem from a) the various forms of stereotyped Mexican immigrants—corrupt coyotes, drug peddlers, and law breakers—or b) characters, like border patrol agents, who judge Mexican immigrants to be law breakers.

The four novels I will analyze in this essay provide a small sampling of the border literature canon. The pre-9/11 literature includes *Under the Feet of Jesus* by Helen Viramontes which is authored by a Chicana writer, while *The Tortilla Curtain* by T.C. Boyle is written by an American man. The post-9/11 border novels are *The Guardians* by Ana Castillo, who is Chicana, and *Signs Preceding the End of the World* by Yuri Herrera, who is Mexican. They depict a range of conflicts that play out along the Mexico-United States border. Ultimately these changes in pre-9/11 border literature to post-9/11 border literature are reflective of a larger turn in the American psyche as we started the War on Terror.

Pre-9/11 Literature

When analyzing pre-9/11 border literature, Gloria Anzaldúa's theoretical framework developed in *Borderlands/La Frontera* is a productive means to understand the themes, characters, and conflicts in the novels. Her theory "...applies to any kind of social, economic, sexual and political dislocation" (7) and "...establishes the border between these two countries as a metaphor for all types of crossings...and the crossings necessary to exist in multiple linguistic and cultural contexts" (Cantú and Hurtado, 6). Narratives in these novels depict culturally acceptable forms of border crossing (labor) versus unacceptable forms of border crossing (people), and characters' various experiences of dislocation.

In the novel, *The Tortilla Curtain*, which was published in 1995, Boyle juxtaposes a white couple with full United States citizenship with a couple who crosses the border illegally. América and Cándido, the Mexican couple, endure hardship as they try to make a life in the United States, their lives forever altered after Cándido is hit by an American

man's car. The conflicts represented within the novel are related to the way illegal labor functions along the Mexico-United States border. Even the far-reaching consequences of interpersonal violence are caused by the American market system which exploits subalternity to allow for cheaper labor but attempts to accept people piecemeal, as if they can be separated from their work.

Boyle writes portraits of the labor systems that utilizes undocumented migrants along the border. These are bleak portrayals emphasizing the exchangeability of workers as Boyle describes the need for labor in terms of a number of bodies. They remind readers about the undocumented labor system that exists outside of the official hiring process for citizens within the United States. Undocumented Mexican workers cannot legally work in the United States, yet here they are depicted as a necessary workforce. In "Subaltern Immigrants," Mary Odem describes this system of migrant labor, "Since the beginning of large-scale Mexican migration to the United States in the early twentieth century, Mexicans were positioned as subaltern immigrants—they were accepted as cheap, temporary workers, but not desired as permanent citizens" (361). She describes the "extensive economic reliance on Mexican labourers" (367) that exists in the United States. In *The Tortilla Curtain*, protagonist Cándido's effort to find this work, so necessary to the United States economy, is a central theme. "Twice he'd gotten work, at three dollars an hour, no questions asked—once from a contractor who was putting up a fieldstone wall and then from a *rico* in a Jaguar who needed a couple of men to clear the brush from a ravine out back of his house" (25). Not only is this not a legal wage, but, "He'd been cheated before—it wasn't the first time" (195). There is no named individual to blame for the treatment of Cándido and the others. Cándido's helplessness here is

emphasized in descriptions of wages and the systemically random nature of work—he can do nothing about this since he is in the United States illegally. As Odem points out, “The illegal status of many Mexican immigrants did not prevent the widespread use of their labour by Southwestern agribusiness, but did place them in a more vulnerable and precarious situation in the US” (364). Cándido’s position is vulnerable—he has no voice when he is exploited for labor. This exploitation causes conflict within the novel, while removing personal culpability and instead makes an accusation of inequity against the United States. This is the same argument that Anzaldúa makes that, “It is illegal for Mexicans to work without green cards. But big farming combines, farm bosses and smugglers who bring them in to make money off the “wetbacks” labor—they don’t have to pay federal minimum wages, or ensure adequate housing or sanitary conditions” (34).

Ámerica faces this exploitation as well. In the novel, she finds work cleaning figurines. Her employers don’t supply her with gloves, and she ends up getting injured. She continues her work in pain for quite some time—her position is precarious, and she doesn’t speak English, “How would she ask for gloves? In pantomime?” (134). This linguistic struggle reveals a deeper social dislocation and economic fragility in the context of the borderlands. Boyle spends pages describing how she weighs pain against fear of her employers which heightens the tension and reveals how such a seemingly-small issue—that she needs to ask for gloves—becomes a terrifying impediment in her life as an undocumented worker. Both Cándido and Ámerica are exploited for their labor yet they can do little about it. These are the conflicts that drive the narrative forward—unfair labor conditions so clearly described here and in Anzaldúa’s seminal work.

Ámerica's employer gives her gloves immediately when she requests them. Though he may be seen as callous, he is not overtly developed as an antagonist. Ámerica's pain is caused by a series of unfortunate events—Cándido is hit by a man in a car who offers to help, but Cándido doesn't accept help because he is an illegal immigrant, therefore Ámerica must get work since Cándido is injured. The driver speculates on Cándido's choice, "It was crazy to refuse treatment like that, just crazy. But he had. And that meant he was illegal—go the doctor, get deported" (19). Cándido's wounds appear life-threatening. He's unable to move and he's sick for days but the man who caused this rarely enters Cándido's interiority. Ámerica is also in the United States illegally so even though she must work to support her husband, she cannot apply for jobs with protections. She is given a job where she can't ask for supplies because she doesn't speak English and she is worried about losing her job. Anzaldúa writes about this precarious state that faces immigrants in the United States illegally and her statement is directly applicable to Ámerica, "She cannot call on county or state health or economic resources because she doesn't know English and she fears deportation" (34). It is the position Ámerica finds herself in, this subaltern state, that is the antagonizing driving force in the novel.

The acceptance of the characters' labor uses while simultaneously having their health, well-being, and rights rejected, makes for strange and perhaps illogical border permeability. In discussing the "role of convergence at the sites of borders," (168), theorist W.J.T. Mitchell emphasizes the 'transactions' "that take place across them" (168). In the previously discussed scenes in *The Tortilla Curtain*, we see the result of such transactions. In the novel, welcoming labor but not individual laborers, demonstrates

an acceptance of capitalistic ideology by the broader community and a critique of the utopian “progress narrative.” The final step of this narrative Mitchell describes as “...the happy synthesis that is convergence, in which everything becomes unified, borders are abolished, and translation becomes unnecessary since everyone speaks the same language” (168). Not only is that a narrative of conquest, but it also belies the conquerors’ desire for expendable labor. The United States cannot have both cheap, exploited labor and create a utopic union between peoples. Anzaldúa describes this hypocritical arrangement in which “big farming combines, farm bosses and smugglers who bring them in make money off the “wetbacks” labor—” (34). In these pre-9/11 novels, there are clear benefits to individuals with power and privilege to maintain these systems along the border.

There are individual antagonists in this novel—men who rape América and threaten others, for example. As the novel continues though, many long-term effects on characters are attributed to their precarious position in the United States. América’s baby is blinded because she cannot seek help for a sexually transmitted disease. The violence that Cándido experiences at the hands of the driver follows a similar trajectory in terms of cause and effect. The initial injury is clearly caused by the driver however, the injury worsens severely in the later chapters. The distance between the inciting incident and his near-death state creates an effect wherein they start to seem separate in the reader’s mind. This becomes especially true as protagonists acknowledge there is no way for him to visit a hospital or get other help. Again, things are made worse by the way the United States upholds the border: labor may enter, humans may not.

In Helena María Viramontes' novel *Under the Feet of Jesus*, which was also published in 1995, a young teenager named Estrella is the protagonist in this novel that takes place north of the Mexico-United States border. She navigates United States labor camps with her younger siblings and mother and contends with her quickly ending childhood as she develops a relationship with another young laborer, Alejo. As in *The Tortilla Curtain*, most of the conflicts the protagonists face are caused by their status as subaltern immigrants—they have very little money due to low wages and they have no recourse for their suffering because they are in the country illegally.

One of the main conflicts that arises in the story begins with Alejo stuck in the fields as pesticides are sprayed down from the biplane. Alejo attempts to escape but cannot, “Alejo slid through the bushy branches, the tangled twigs scratching his face, and he was ready to jump when he felt the mist” (76–77). Viramontes describes the way Alejo is poisoned from the spray, likening it to “tar pits.” “He thought first of his feet sinking, sinking to his knee joints, swallowing his waist and torso, the pressure of tar squeezing his chest and crushing his ribs. Engulfing his skin up to his chin, his mouth, his nose, bubbled air. Black bubbles erasing him” (78). This description of erasure powerfully evokes his status as a subaltern immigrant seen by few and known by fewer.

The person who must have flown this plane is never revealed or discussed and so their responsibility is not suggested to the reader. The plane itself is described briefly—its sound and shadow emphasized: “...its gray shadow crossed over him like a crucifix,” (76). This description seems to reference fate, or an all-powerful force, that causes the poisoning of Alejo and its following consequences rather than the human-piloted plane.

What comes next reinscribes this perception as Alejo continues to reference tar pits and the way that the characters are stuck; a metaphor for their dislocation.

The illness Alejo suffers from prevents him from working and he has horrible symptoms, “Alejo could no longer stand upright without feeling faint, his body weak from bouts of diarrhea and vomiting” (93). Ultimately, Estrella’s family decides that they must take him to a clinic to get help despite its cost. However, the nurse at the clinic is not capable of helping Alejo, “I think the boy’s got dysentery... You gonna have to get him to the main hospital in Corazón” (142).

Another conflict arises in the setting of the clinic. Estrella’s family does not have enough money to pay the nurse, “He checked a second time, looked up at Estrella. He dug into his pockets deep for coins, counted the assorted change” (145) and they still come up short. The nurse takes what they have, leaving the family with no money for gas and no way to get to the hospital. Estrella tells the nurse, “This is all we have, I think...” (145) and then offers other services in lieu of money such as fixing the toilet or recementing. The family’s offers show the way in which they see their labor as transactional. But it seems they are out of the agricultural borderland in which labor is traded freely because the offers are rejected, “I only work here. I’m real sorry, the nurse replied, I couldn’t say” (145). This willful obliviousness continues as the nurse tries to explain that she needs to leave. Estrella recognizes that “...the nurse was being stubborn” (147) and she begins to recognize this as a form of violence. Estrella’s interiority becomes a powerful tool to reveal this violence:

“She remembered the tar pits. Energy money, the fossilized bones of energy matter. How bones made oil and oil made gasoline. The oil was made from their bones, and it was their bones that kept the nurse’s car from not halting on some highway...it was their bones that kept the air conditioning in the cars humming,

that kept them moving on the long dotted line on the map. Their bones. Why couldn't the nurse see that? Estrella had figured it out: the nurse owed them as much as they owed her." (148)

The character, Estrella, recognizes the history of this space in the same way that Anzaldúa does. This land was the land of their ancestors. Family had died there, become oil there: "*Tejanos* lost their land and, overnight, became the foreigners" (Anzaldúa, 28). So, Estrella responds to this violence in kind.

Knowing that they need the money if Alejo is to live, Estrella goes to the car to get a tire iron to threaten the nurse. Initially it seems that her mother, Petra, might get involved, but ultimately, she allows Estrella to be their mediator, "Perfecto moved forward to grab the crowbar, but Petra held him back" (149). Petra and Perfecto maintain their silence, while Estrella is forced to take on the responsibility of navigating this hostile world for her family. With the crowbar in hand she says, "Give us back our money" (149). When the nurse does not return the money, "Estrella slammed the crowbar down on the desk, shattering the school pictures of the nurse's children, sending the pencils flying to the floor, and breaking the porcelain cat with a nurse's cap into pieces" (149). The nurse is terrified, sobs, and does return the money. Although a clear moment of violence, Estrella never hits the woman directly. This violence is against the trappings of this woman's life—tchotchkes like a "porcelain cat" and "school pictures" that represent a more middle class security and access to things like public school. Even in this moment of violence, the reference to the history of the tar pits and to Estrella's family's dislocation make it clear that the conflict arises from their circumstances as subaltern.

In both works, *The Tortilla Curtain* and *Under the Feet of Jesus*, the authors bring their own backgrounds and assumptions to their work which impacts certain fiction elements of their border novels. This is clear in the different representations of characters in *The Tortilla Curtain* written by T.C. Boyle and *Under the Feet of Jesus* by Helena María Viramontes. While both novels depict Mexican immigrant characters who struggle to find security and stability in the United States, Boyle's characters, Candido and América, are continual victims, going from one tragedy or trauma to the next, and they ultimately lose their money, shelter, and child.

Meanwhile in *Under the Feet of Jesus*, Estrella suffers, but also takes action. She saves Alejo's life and helps her family make money—it is not an idyllic ending, but it certainly doesn't ignore her independence. Alejo judges her for the way she acts, asking "Did you hurt her?" (152) and later "Don't make it so easy for them" (152), as if her behavior is playing into their racist beliefs. Estrella knows that the reality is not so simple as she tells him, "They make you that way" (151). This moment harkens to Anzaldúa's righteous call to "...seek an exoneration, a seeing through the fictions of white supremacy, a seeing ourselves in our true guises and not as the false racial personality that has been given to us and that we have given to ourselves" (109). Ultimately though, both novels depict a world in which the United States laws and labor market needs are the antagonistic forces.

Post-9/11 Border Literature

In "Border Wars: Translations and Convergence in Politics and Media," Mitchell discusses virtual borders and explains that physical and virtual borders are equally real. Todd Miller also discusses virtual borders in the explanation of the expanding Border

Patrol. He says, “In other words, the United States borders that now need protecting extend far beyond its national land-based boundaries to the virtual borders of its ‘national interests’...” (197). Changing the immigration narrative, new virtual landscapes, and militarization actively transform the concept of borders in the United States since 9/11.

While characters experience cultural dislocation and metaphorical crossings in many post-9/11 narratives, the antagonistic forces at work are less related to this theory, and instead reflect a contemporary American fear of race-based terrorism and the impact of the digital age on American’s conceptions of spaces. Mitchell’s theoretical framework of virtual, changing borders, and Todd Miller’s depiction of a controllable, militarized space are more pertinent to these post-9/11 literary manifestations of conflicts. The antagonistic forces of post-9/11 border literature speak to the radical, racist criminalization of Mexican immigrants and the way militarization combats American fears of terrorism.

In *Signs Preceding the End of the World* by Yurri Herrera, published in 2009, a woman named Makina travels from Mexico to the United States to find her brother who travelled there before. She intends to cross the border illegally and the story follows her journey to find him and then leave him. The conflict within this novel is depicted as groups involved in the militarization of the border. And the image of the border has changed from pre-9/11 setting descriptions—not simply a space where goods and labor move more freely than people, but a place filled with horror and home to violent entities: the United States Border Patrol agents, police, and the cartels.

Unlike *Under the Feet of Jesus* or *The Tortilla Curtain*, this story begins in Mexico, as Makina begins to make arrangements to travel North. She immediately gets

involved with a cartel; the head of one, Mr. Aitch, offers her passage for her help: “All I ask is that you deliver something for me, an itty bitty little thing, you just give it to a compadre and he’ll be the one who tell you how to find your kin” (17). The conflict of border crossing is caused by cartel fights for power. Throughout her travels, she must navigate more than one cartel, meeting with “Mr. P, the fourth top dog,” (61) who takes the package that was meant for someone else.

As Makina crosses with the help of a guide, Chucho, the story is full of evidence of militarization—not only border patrol agents with guns, but also locals who believe they have the right to keep people off the land by force. A rancher approaches Makina and Chucho as they are crossing the border, “Soon as they versed the rancher approached, revolver in hand...” (48). Ultimately, he attacks them, “The rancher shot to kill...” (49). As the rancher aims his gun at them, “Two police trucks were haring across the open country, top speed but no flashing lights” (49). Makina is shot and despite the serious nature of the wound, continues on without Chucho. Even the police officers in the United States act as if they are there to protect the border. Once Makina finds her brother in the United States, she is stopped by the police who says, “Fall in and ask permission. Civilized, that’s the way we do things around here!” (97).

Despite the difference between police violence and the negligence of privatized healthcare, Makina’s response to this police officer is reminiscent of the way that Estrella reacts to the nurse withholding money from her family in *Under the Feet of Jesus*. In *Signs Preceding the End of the World*, the police officer tells one of the men he stops to write something in order to mock him. Makina takes the paper and pencil and begins to write instead: “We who come to take your jobs, who dream of wiping your shit, who long

to work all hours...who brought you violence you'd never known, who deliver your dope, who deserve to be chained by neck and feet. We who are happy to die for you, what else could we do?" (99-100). Makina acknowledges later that "They need us" (104) the same way that Estrella recognized the way that Americans are dependent on them too. However, Makina does not reflect on her ancestral past the way that Estrella does, and she speaks of immigrant violence in a way that Estrella never does.

These may be subtle differences, but they do suggest a difference in the way the borderlands are imagined. In *Signs Preceding the End of the World*, the permeability of the border still exists in relation to labor. Now however, the border is envisioned as a space of war and violence. Citizens take up arms against other civilians, creating their own border lines. Police officers move the line of the border north to police the culture and peoples who have travelled across the initial border. The border in this book is imagined as something more dangerous than a pre-9/11 sublime desert and as something that shifts and moves based on the dominant culture's whims.

Makina's journey seems almost impossible. In the story, she is shot at very close range, "One more bullet exploded from the revolver; Makina saw the barrel head-on, saw the way it dilated the split second it spat fire and the way it contracted just as the bullet clipped her side" (50-51). Somehow, she almost immediately recovers: "The impact caused her to whirl but not fall, and as she span she took two steps forward and dealt the rancher a kick to the jaw" (50). The seriousness of the attack is described in the narration as, "The bullet had entered and versed between two ribs, ignoring her lung, as if it had simply skimmed beneath the surface of her skin so as not to get stuck in her body" (50). But then the injury is immediately dismissed, "She could see the gash of the bullet's path,

but it didn't hurt and barely bled" (50). Makina continues the journey on her own, even managing to escape the conflicting cartels without harm. Although she completes her journey successfully, the reader is to understand that border crossing is incredibly dangerous, an almost impossible venture, made so by cartels and the militarized border.

The plot in *The Guardians* by Ana Castillo, which was published in 2007, also centers on the violence at the hands of drug cartels in the border lands. The novel follows the points of view of several Mexican-American characters who live near the Mexico-United States border: Gabo, a teenager who wants to become a priest and whose father disappeared since crossing the border back to Mexico; Regina, Gabo's aunt who takes care of him; Miguel, a local teacher who is romantically interested in Regina; and Miguel's father, El Abuelo Milton. The story revolves around their attempts to find Gabo's father, Rafa, and the ensuing consequences of the search.

The violence of the region is almost immediately depicted in the novel. Not only does the narrator of the first chapter, Regina, mention that, "The problem is the coyotes and the narcos own the desert now" (4), but she also describes one result of such circumstances: "Three days later the bodies of four women were found out there in the heat by the Border Patrol. All four had been mutilated for their organs" (4). The novel is set up from the start to be a novel about the violence of the cartels along the border and the way that it infiltrates the characters' lives.

Both Regina and Gabo try to find his father independently of one another. Gabo's route to find his father, Rafa, is to ask help from a friend who is in a gang. He understands that help is not given freely and thinks "The Palominos are everywhere. 'What would I have to give in return?'..." (81). The seriousness of the request is

emphasized when the narrator in this section, Gabo, reflects on one of the gang members: “Even la Tiny Tears, who had pledged her loyalty to the gang, had come to do whatever was necessary...Tiny Tears has already killed, Padre Pío. That is what el Jesse said. And not out of self-defense. She killed enemies de los Palominos” (82). Gabo understands the consequences of his choices—violence may well come of this.

In both characters’ journeys through the story, the major antagonists are cartels and coyotes. Gabo’s deal with the Palominos alienates him from his Aunt and leads him to trouble with the police. The Palominos tell Gabo that “Those coyotes that got hold of your old man are with los Villanueva—a small but very powerful family. Ambitious. They’re pushing meth, kids, females, all kinds of sh—” (87). At the time though they don’t know where Rafa is located. And once they do know, before they’ll tell Gabo anything, they call in their favor, “*We need to brake brake (sic) out El Toro*, the note said. *You have to help*” (169). Gabo is picked up by the police as El Toro from the Palominos escapes prison. The deputy releases Gabo and she continues to be involved in the families’ lives. Later in the story, Miguel’s wife, Crucita, disappears as well, “The sheriff had an idea that Tiny Tears, or at least the Palominos, might have something to do with the kidnapping of Crucita Betancourt” (180). Law enforcement and law breaking are pervasive throughout. These dramatic and violent incidents feed into the post-9/11 narrative that Americans need to be protected from the terrorists, in this case drug cartles.

In the end, it is made clear that these borderlands are full of violence, militarized by police and by the cartels. The reader learns the details of Crucita’s disappearance as Miguel describes the house where los Villanueva are as, “...unthinkable. It wasn’t just a meth or crack house...After our eyes got adjusted to the dark, we realized there were two

naked girls flopped on a run-down couch...We saw right away that one of the girls was Crucita” (204). The other girl is Tiny Tears who he says “...looked possessed. That twisted face of hers chilled me to the bone” (205). Soon after, in Regina’s perspective we learn what happened to her brother: “The coyotes had my brother making methamphetamine. He didn’t die by accident. From mixing up chemicals, I mean. He died because they wanted him to die” (206). She then describes the violent way they treated him. The deputy who helped Regina goes on to explain, “even with an autopsy we’ll probably never really know what was the actual cause of his death or why they kept him captive. Sociopaths don’t use logic” (206). The generalization of ‘they’ makes what could be specific villains an antagonistic force instead—the cartel is the organization that owns the borderlands.

Gabo dies trying to find his father. He’s killed by Tiny Tears in his attempt to save her. But even Regina doesn’t act as if Tiny Tears is fully at fault. Regina goes to visit her in jail and narrates, “I believe María Dolores when she says she loved my sobrino” (209). Regina describes the circumstances of Tiny Tears’ (María Dolores’) future, “A seventeen-year-old mother who is going to trial as an adult. That wasn’t my decision. That’s the decision of the court system. My decision is to care for the child” (209). This quick note that it was not her choice that Tiny Tears be charged as an adult indicates that Regina does not fully blame Tiny Tears. She looks back at the events of the night Gabo died, “But Tiny Tears’s rage, like everything else about the monster girl that no one loved, was out of control in that house in Tornillo. Being raped every day. No food, just poison in her veins. The public defender says the girl herself is a victim” (210). And even though quickly afterwards she says, “*Victim* is not a word in my vocabulary”

(211), Regina never calls her a criminal either. Tiny Tears may have stabbed Gabo, but it is clear that the cartels are ultimately to blame.

A key difference between this novel and *Signs Preceding the End of the World*, is that *The Guardians* actually explicitly references the post-9/11 rhetoric and militarization of the border within this narrative life along the border. Early on in the novel, when Regina and Miguel first confront the coyotes, Regina reflects on the experience: “It was like a movie. In movies about drug traficantes they have women like that, in their nightgowns in daytime in gloomy rooms and living an obscure existence. And they have guys like the one who drove up just as we were leaving...” (15). Her description points to the surreal circumstances of the narrative; the borderland is a reflection of the media she’s consumed. Soon after, Miguel even considers pre- and post-9/11, “My thesis was gonna be on the School of the Americas. It was a United States Army center located at Fort Benning in Columbus, Georgia, that trained more than sixty thousand soldiers and police, mostly from Latin America, in counterinsurgency and combat-related skills since 1946. Its graduates became experts in torture, murder, and political repression... After 9/11 the government felt it could justifiably come out of its covert-training closet” (32), foreshadowing the violence that is later depicted in the novel. This militarization is not only discussed in terms of police and border patrol, but also local, so-called Minutemen volunteers: “They described them as ‘armed vigilantes’ waiting across the border to hurt them” (117) who felt “that that the border patrol isn’t doing its job” (123). This is the newly imagined border, under the control of cartels whose long reach justifies the militarization of police and even civilians who monitor the fluid, growing border.

At the very beginning of the book, the characters process the way the border has been redefined. Gabo's father used to cross the border by himself, he knew the space, it was not a mystery to him. But now he had to hire guides. He perceives that "the problem is the coyotes and the narcos own the desert now" (4). This character's evaluation demonstrates a split from the common narrative described by Anzaldúa in which Mexicans cross the border and cross back: "Some return to enact their rite of passage as many as three times a day" (34). Such explicit discussion and depiction of violence along the border represent a turn in border literature in the post-9/11 era.

Post-9/11 Rhetoric and its Impact on Border Literature

The differences in conflicts in pre-9/11 and post-9/11 are apparent in these four novels. So the question becomes, what might these changes signify? For one, these changes might imply a shift in the imagined border space within the American psyche. Mary Odem discusses some of these post-2001 attitudes and laws: "Since the terrorist attacks of 9/11, public animosity toward undocumented immigrants has intensified, fueled by the rhetoric of nativist organizations and leaders" (361). Xenophobia is not new of course, but the fears alter depending on circumstances and location. While militarization of the Mexico-United States border began in the 1990s (Odem, 367), Odem describes how there were "...renewed efforts 'to secure the border' after 9/11..." (367). Border security became a bigger part of national discourse after 2001.

The drug trade became the form of terrorism Americans imagined playing out along the Mexico-United States border. In 2016 an article on the Arizona S.B. 1070 law, nicknamed the 'show-me-your-papers-law,' Andrea Nill points out that "During a primary election, (former governor) Brewer erroneously claimed that the majority of

undocumented immigrants ‘are coming here and they’re bringing drugs’” (42). There was no truth to this statement, but “...the pervasive image of murderous, drug-carrying immigrants kidnapping, beheading, and extorting innocent Arizonans has dominated public discourse and overshadowed crime data suggesting quite the opposite” (42). This dangerously racist narrative became particularly prominent after 9/11 and Nill describes the changed measures used to address this problem by law enforcement, “Racial profiling has been accepted as a logical and necessary weapon of defense against them and the perceived threat they pose” (36). More recently President Trump continued this rhetoric, “When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best,” and “They’re sending people that have lots of problems... They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people” (BBC, 2019).

The growing militarization of the Southwest border has also changed the state of borders and their security, and the concept of borders themselves in the United States. Since 9/11 border locations have changed, moving towards the interior of the country. In *Border Patrol Nation*, Todd Miller discusses the phenomenon of the moving border and how border patrol, can “...mobilize international boundaries—and all it means and implies—to any part of the “homeland” for any given reason,” (19). David Aguilar, commissioner of United States Customs and Border Protection explains how borders take up a much greater space than before 9/11 in his speech at a Border Patrol graduation: ““You are part of a team that will protect our hemisphere, and the way of life of our people”” (Miller 22). Aguilar’s perception of borders as a way of protecting “the way of life of our people” perpetuates an us-versus-them ideology, exemplifying the issue of the

global-local binary that Inderpal Grewal raises in *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices*.

Mitchell writes, "... the border is a both a material thing—a physical place, a graphic mark on a street—and an imaginary, political-judicial concept that remains invisible to the naked eye" (167). What we see in these four books is the way in which borders are both these things—material and imaginary—and that they have changed. In the case of these four novels, the borders have transformed from the permeable desert doorway in the NAFTA era of prioritizing cheap labor that resulted in subalternity, to a fence guarded by weapons and police in the post-9/11, terror-fueled reactionism that saw violence, drugs, and invasion across United States borders, both real and imagined.

These differences are evident in other books set along the Mexico-United States border. The popularization of novels such as Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men* points to a post-9/11 emphasis on drugs and violent crime along the border that either demonstrates a growing interest in these topics, or a perception that this violence is a reality in that space. Moreover, the growing focus on these topics in Southwest border literature seems to at least propagate the viewpoint that the borderlands are spaces of drugs and crime, and that little may thrive in such a space. Gabo, whose "priest potential" (9) and youth make him a symbol of purity, does not survive in the borderlands. His father and mother both die there as well. Makina's brother survives in the borderlands, even thriving, but has to reject his heritage and his name to do so. Makina herself seems to only survive due to a set of extraordinary circumstances. What was once depicted as a complicated setting in which there was hardship but also flourishing relationships,

became a nightmarish phantasm where the excess of violence can only be wrought by perpetrators who are ‘sociopaths,’ ‘monsters,’ or a force driven by drugs and weapons.

The First Inch of a Saguaro

Part One: The Trial

The Compound

Javier

Javier stood on the edge of the dry Rio Road facing the city's detention center. The building was a disappearing sort of beige, the same color as the sand behind him, and it was smaller than his high school. There were no watchtowers, or concrete walls, or even iron bars. There was just barbed wire that wound unevenly around the facility. And he'd seen wire like that all around the city: gritty and uneven in front of tow lots, power plants, and along the Mexican-American border. From his spot about a hundred yards away, it was only a building.

He wasn't allowed to be there that day. His mamá said that there were specific times for visiting his papá, protocols and rules. She said it wouldn't reflect well on his papá if Javier missed school during the beginning of his freshman year to see him. But there he stood, gum tightening into threads every time he opened his mouth to breathe the dusty air, black sneakers beginning to stick to the asphalt. He could've stepped back into the sand, but he liked the feel of the road. The temperature around his ankles burned ten degrees hotter than the air up by his face. And every time a car went by, drove just a foot and a half from where he stood, they honked, shattering the quiet emanating from the building across the street.

People must have been moving inside, shifting on bunks as they woke up, dropping trays on metal tables bolted to the ground. Imprisonment couldn't stop people from taking a piss or drumming their fingers against the wall. But it seemed so quiet from

the outside, so still that Javier felt the building's insides must belong to another reality.

A friend of Javier's told him that they make the prisoners strip when they go to jail. There's no privacy when a guard hands someone that orange jumpsuit—the one that looks neon on TV, but in reality is more like the color of the peel of an unripe grapefruit.

He didn't imagine his papá cowering as the guards stood waiting to take the last of his belongings, his head down, his dark coarse hair facing them. His papá wouldn't cover himself with the leg of the jumpsuit while he removed his belt with a wide-fingered hand and stepped out of his pants with unbalanced feet. He would be strong and confident and would stand straight as a man is meant to in front of others who strip him of everything. Even naked, he would know his true self, his innocence. He would be without shame, his eyes unbreakably on those who tapped the turquoise on his belt buckle while they waited for the rest of his clothes.

Javier didn't think anyone could have much else when they're naked. Just confidence and the knowledge that a body shed of everything is still a body. And he liked to believe that's good enough to get through.

#

Javier and his friend, Ryan, went to Ryan's neighborhood on the south side of town after school. The boy's home was a peeling yellow trailer with a wooden porch that his most recent stepdad had put together. Ryan and Javier usually hung out in the lawn chairs that sat unevenly in the yard or they went behind the dumpster a couple trailers away when Ryan wanted to smoke. Today though, Javier wanted to go hang out at the compound near the border, so Ryan hooked a bungee cord around his worn bike seat and Javier held it in his fist as he stepped onto a skateboard he'd found a year before at a garage sale.

Ryan scratched the back of his neck where his buzz cut met his neck and he started peddling, shards of rock flicking out from the wheels of the skateboard as he dragged Javier through his neighborhood. They rode south past a gas station where two men with no car stood in front of one pump, and past a produce truck with a painted sign that sat alongside Javier's neighborhood, Barrio Espinosa. "Manzanas," it said in red, the word broken onto the next line between the 'z' and the 'a.' They rode past fast food and a Chinese restaurant that served sushi and a bus stop that sat along the quiet highway leading to the border. They turned down a side street and after about ten minutes of riding, Ryan braked in front of a large fenced property where his girlfriend, Gina, was already kicking the chain link with flip-flop clad feet. Her long, caramel hair flicked around her face.

They called the property the Compound. A dense growth of mesquite trees and prickly pear grew inside the fence, obscuring the view of about three or four dark buildings behind. Bits of the roofs were visible though; steep and crooked, they seemed to grow out of the scars of the prickly pear pads. And beyond the buildings, nothing could be seen. The darkness of the walls and the density of the thorny plants seemed to eat up all of the space in between. Even when they climbed on the fence, the three were too short to see what sat in the back of the property. Sometimes, if they squinted, they could see a corner of a metal door on the ground between the buildings.

They knew little about the property, or if people worked or lived there. Ryan said they'd seen someone once, when he snuck there before midnight with Gina. He'd caught a peek of skirts through the trees as a group moved in front of the buildings. Gina said they were ghosts, that no one really lived there. They said that the skirts looked gray in

the dark, they fluttered and hung to the ground—the material, the style, must’ve been from over a hundred years ago.

Javier felt static under his skin when they told him. He knew they couldn’t have seen ghosts. He liked to believe that there were people here, floating around at night, moving strangely in the dark. He liked to imagine that the skirts they’d seen had halos like the moon.

Ryan had been trying to prove that what they’d seen was real for a couple of weeks. In the afternoons, he and Gina would go there and throw rocks, or sticks, or litter at the roofs, or shoot BB guns into the brush, hoping to draw people out. So far no one—nothing—had stirred.

Javier stood by his skateboard, watching as Ryan shook the fence and Gina began throwing rocks.

“Anything yet?” Ryan asked her.

“Obviously not,” Gina said, rolling her eyes.

Ryan released the fence and picked a pebble off the ground. “Maybe you can’t throw for shit.”

Gina tossed a rock straight up and then caught it on the pad of her palm. “First one to hit the metal door wins.”

“You’re on.” Ryan grinned.

Javier watched and waited as they tossed pebbles over the fence. Minutes passed and he stood as still as another growth in the desert. Half an hour and Gina’s throws became more erratic. But Javier stood there, willing people to appear through the bushes.

An afternoon gone, and still nothing.

#

Javier and his two older sisters, Alejandra and Paulina, lined up beside the ten-year-old beige sedan in the parking lot of the detention center. He thought that they probably made a bizarre picture: Paulina, her long, clay-brown hair in waves, and Javier both in their church clothes, polyester and taffeta itching under the noonday sun; his mamá smoothing Alejandra's short chopped hair over the purple birthmark along her left eye and brushing her skinny jeans, as if their mamá's sandpaper-padded hand could produce something longer and nicer. All in the middle of a jail parking lot.

As they stood in between the sedan and a car with a cardboard window, their mamá ticked rules off on her jawbone. There was to be no swearing, no shouting, no rude gestures or comments to anyone there, no talking to any other prisoner if they saw any, no making a scene, only one hug each, and no crying. "Your papá deserves a few good moments."

Javier hated the next part. He hated the stares of the guards at the entrance, ranging from hostile to a patient sort of wariness. He hated the buzzing of the doors and that he had to show a bunch of strangers his school ID picture, the new one that accentuated his long nose. Most of all, he hated the searches: the metal detectors and the latex gloves and the pat downs. The guards always had to check his ankles because of the way his pants bunched above his feet, just an inch or two too long. He always wondered what they thought they'd find there. Maybe rubber-banded baggies of pot or a Swiss army knife strapped to his ankle.

He'd learned from the past two times he'd visited though. This time he'd remembered to pull his pants up high and none of them were stopped for a pat down.

They were escorted to a room with small gray tables and plastic seats. Most of the color came from a vending machine wedged in the corner, the cellophane wrappers shining under the florescent light, the neon desperately cheerful. They sat down at a table and waited.

When his papá, Luis, walked in, Javier imagined the orange jumpsuit as a green screen. The girls hugged him and Javier saw flashes of other clothes on his papá: his green-kneed work jeans, a white jacket and a bolo tie Javier had seen in wedding photos once, a tuxedo like the ones in spy movies, even swim trunks with sharks on them. Then his papá hugged him too and all Javier could think was that this man didn't smell like his papá.

Javier's family sat and talked about everything that meant nothing, except for Alejandra.

"Did you finish your applications?" Luis asked Paulina.

"Almost. Just one or two to go."

"They must have evidence. To keep you here, I mean," Alejandra said. Their mamá shushed her.

"Make sure to get them in on time," Luis said.

"Of course, papá."

"They couldn't keep you here otherwise," Alejandra said.

"How's school, Javi?" Luis asked.

Javier shrugged. "Fine."

"So what do they have? Why do they think you did it?" Alejandra said. Her voice was expanding, spreading further through the air. The couple at the table beside theirs

was staring.

“Enough, Alejandra,” their mamá said.

“I just think—”

“Just fine?” Luis pushed.

“I guess,” Javier said.

“—That they must have a reason for thinking he did it. They can’t arrest people for murder for nothing,” Alejandra finished loudly.

A guard hit the wall with his nightstick and Alejandra jumped at the clang. “Quiet down or leave.”

Alejandra began to stand, but their mamá pulled her arm down until she sat still.

Luis’ eyes finally swung to Alejandra. He smiled serenely. It was not an expression Javier recognized. “You’re right, Ali. They can’t keep me here when I didn’t do anything. I’ll be home soon, lo prometo.”

In the car on their way home, Alejandra called their papá a liar. She said that he was never coming home. She called Javier a stupid bitch for believing their papá and she yelled at Paulina to stop pretending that she believed their papá too.

“Mamá can’t help it. That’s her husband. Spouses aren’t even allowed to testify against each other in court, that’s how biased they are.”

Their mamá chanted a litany of “Calláte, shut up, shut up, shut up,” with a rosary in one hand and the steering wheel in the other. Javier could hear the rosary beads click against one another every time his mamá stopped to breathe.

“That’s not true,” Paulina said.

“I looked it up.”

“He's not lying,” Javier said.

“Shut the fuck up. Just because he's our papá doesn't mean we have to be dumb. He's a criminal.”

Javier looked out the window and thought of the word criminal, and the way it curled around his tongue. Javier's papá did not look like a criminal. He looked like a father. Like a groundskeeper. He looked like a man who took his wife and children to church on Sundays and fell asleep just after taking communion. He peeled his oranges with a knife and the rind would turn the white tips of his fingernails yellow.

He didn't look like a criminal; he looked like a person. He had a mole on his neck and a small chin that Javier and even his sisters shared. He had low hanging ears and shoulders that were always slightly too narrow for his shirts. He looked like Luis. Javier's mamá once said that Luis looked like love when he held Javier wrapped in a Lamb's Ear green blanket that his mamá had knit. She described how Luis had placed a hand on the boy's body, his palm stretching from belly to throat and said that he felt the heat of Javier's heart through the blanket and that he knew there was goodness in him.

When the police stood at the door and asked Javier's mamá for Luis, he still didn't look like a criminal. When Luis came to see who was visiting after dinner, Javier stood in the hallway watching as the police took out handcuffs. They made sharp metallic clicks and still Luis only looked like a man. When Luis asked if they would wait to handcuff him until he stepped outside, so that his wife and children wouldn't have to watch, and they said no and pushed him up against a wall, he only looked like Javier's papá. And when they stood Luis up straight and Javier saw his papá marched with restraints out of their apartment and driven out of Barrio Espinosa he still didn't look like

a criminal.

The article in the paper, the one about the body found on the property where his papá worked, the one that mentioned cocaine and the gardening equipment similar to the supplies his papá used, didn't convince Javier that his papá looked like a criminal either.

#

The night was so still, Javier found himself wanting to rip through it, to shatter it, to make it move around him. His sister's words about his papá's guilt had dug deeper inside of him, making him feel tight and slick under his skin, as if he couldn't settle into himself. He snuck out of the apartment around midnight. There was too much of everyone else permeating the living room, seeping under his bedroom door. He needed to find a place somewhere else.

He retraced his regular route without thinking, first skateboarding past his high school where the security lights turned even the cacti gray. He followed the road between his and Ryan's neighborhood and listened to plastic flamingoes creak in the yards when the wind blew. Fast food signs lit up the road around him as he passed the trailer park, and people were scarce even where twenty-four hour signs flickered. The streets were quiet except for the occasional howl of a coyote as he passed larger patches of wild desert by the roads.

Finally, after an hour wandering around, he found himself in front of the fences of the Compound. He stepped off his skateboard and gripped the chain on the fence. The metal was cool in his hand despite the heat of the night. He tried to look past the brush to see the buildings, wondering if there really was anyone back there. He wanted so badly to

see something spectacular, or even something just strange enough to think about when it got too quiet, but he didn't see anything under the moonlight. Just shadows and cacti and the squared angles of buildings inside.

He shook the lock, the chain rattling breaking the silence of the night. He wanted to shrink from the noise, but instead he leaned into it, shaking the lock harder. "C'mon! I know someone's in here! Come out!" he yelled. But nothing stirred from within the fence.

"I know you're in there! I know it!" he screamed, kicking the fence.

He rubbed his eyes and bent slightly down, trying to see beyond the plants and cacti. He caught a glimpse of silver, but realized it was only the door of one of the buildings. He heard the soft hooting of an owl and shivered as the air carried the sound closer. Branches of small trees rustled in the wind, but there was no other movement. Javier stepped back and kicked the ground. The gravel and sand barely moved around his foot. He lifted his leg to kick again, but his eye caught on a jagged rock almost the size of his palm. Without thinking, he picked it up and curled his hand around it, the edges pricking his skin. Then he cocked his arm back and flung it as hard as he could over the fence.

A small cry sounded from beyond the chain link and Javier stumbled backward at the noise. With wide eyes scanning the shadows, his gaze caught on a thread of pale blue between the buildings and the dense wall of cacti and trees. He squinted, trying to define lines in the fuzzy dark, and then under a stream of moonlight he saw a smudge of red and a bright eye. After a second, the person rose and he caught a view of their face through a larger gap in the trees. A person was hiding in the dark, no, a girl. A girl with a small

nose, bow tie lips, and eyes the color of the gray-blue moon.

For a few seconds they stared at one another, the blood across her eyebrow curling around her eye and spreading in a thick webbing on her cheek. Javier felt his heart plunging down, throbbing into his feet, drilling them to the ground. He wanted to move forward, to get a closer look at the girl who seemed to only exist under lunar light, and he wanted to run away, further into the dark until he couldn't see even the fence ahead of him. The urge to flee won out and he hopped on his skateboard. He rode home, never looking back.

#

At school, the counselor called Javier to the office just as Mr. Marlow finished drawing an obtuse triangle on the board. Javier left the room with his backpack in one hand and his pen and notebook in the other. He passed Ryan's dealer, Blaine, in the hallway by the girl's bathroom and when she called him "the psychopath cholo's son," he pretended he didn't see her at all. That he didn't notice her giggling through her teeth or the red in her eyes burning against her black eyeliner.

Alejandra was sitting in the hall of admin offices when he got there. There was a closed door in front of her with an inspirational cat poster filling the window. She was slouched on a red, padded bench; her legs sprawled almost across the entire width of the hallway, blocking access from the main office to several other rooms. Her unlaced combat boots hung off the balls of her feet and she crossed her arms over her stomach. Her purple birthmark curled under her eyebrow like a wing as she arched her eyebrow at him.

"It's family fun day," she said when he sat down beside her.

“Why are you here already?” Javier asked.

Alejandra smiled and pulled a cigarette out of her tiny jean pocket. She flipped it over her fingers and then shoved it up her black sleeve as soon as an administrator walked by. “I put one out on the bathroom counter and some blonde puta called a hall monitor.”

Javier kicked one of her shoes off of her feet.

“What the fuck, Javi.”

A door opened further down the hallway and out walked a middle aged white woman with dreadlocks tied back in a tie-dye bandana. “Alejandra, Javier, will you please join me in my office?” she said softly, waving her arm towards the door.

Alejandra stuffed her foot back in her shoe and stood up. “Of course,” she said, equally quiet, a tilted saccharine smile on her face.

The woman led them into the room and then closed the door behind them. The space was dimly lit with purple lamps, a miniature fountain made gurgling noises by the window, and a plump, gray couch sat on the wall facing a desk covered in plush toys and puzzles. She motioned for them to sit on the couch and then she pulled the office chair behind her desk closer to the couch.

Javier sat and felt himself sink several inches down until the cushion seemed to wrap around his thighs. He tried to smile politely as he watched his sister lower herself onto the armrest.

The woman introduced herself as “Catherine” and told them that this was a safe place. She said that she understood that they were dealing with something very difficult at home and that she was here for them if they needed her. Her face vacillated back and

forth from a friendly, approachable smile to a sympathetic frown, lines between her eyebrows so deep Javier thought he might be able to stick a dime in them. She finished at an odd split between the smile and the frown.

Once it was clear that Catherine was done, Alejandra told her to go fuck herself and stormed out. Javier smoothed the wrinkles out of the armrest until Catherine told him that he was allowed to leave.

#

Luis described his temporary cellmate while he wound the tube socks Paulina brought him around his finger. He told them about a man back in jail after a long stint in prison. Desperate times had made him hungry. Javier leaned forward, wondering about the people who were guilty. “He’s a changed man. Says he found Jesus. He likes when I tell him about the Saints.”

“Be careful, mi amor,” Rosa said. She sat between her children. Her head hung forward but her body stayed upright as if being held there by her children, shoulders pinned against hers.

“I am—”

“You should be out on bail already,” Alejandra cut in.

Javier rolled his eyes. Why did she have to keep talking about things she didn’t understand?

“Why did we bring her again this week??” Paulina said.

His parents ignored both of them. “He had dozens of tattoos about drugs and money. Even some curse words. And he changed them all in prison. Some of them just have lines crossing them out. But every once in a while, when it’s something small, he

changes the tattoo into something else.”

“I looked it up. You’re supposed to post bail within two days. Three tops. You’ve been here for almost two weeks,” Alejandra said.

Javier tried to block out her words. He tried to listen to his papá. He wanted to hear about the tattoos. He wanted to sit there until the guard would come out and give Luis back his clothes. He wanted to sit there until someone admitted that there had been a mistake.

“A marijuana plant became an oval peace sign.”

“They didn’t give you bail.”

“He turned a dollar sign into a wide, decorative cross.”

“Did they?”

Javier heard himself repeat her question curiously apart from his body. “Did they?”

“He turned a word into a heart.”

#

That night, Javier watched the moon light move through the slits in his blinds for almost an hour as someone cried in another room. The sound was coming from the side of the apartment near the door, so he knew it wasn’t his mamá. One of his sisters was salt-stained and dampened, and he wondered if he should feel guilty for wanting away from the sound of her. He thought of the girl he’d seen at the Compound a few nights before, the one with the web of blood on her face, who had made only the smallest cry. He thought of her unreality, her distance from his world, and he climbed out through the window in his bedroom to go find her.

When he arrived at the Compound, he scanned the wildlife, trying to divine flesh from the trees. His eyes snapped to a cloud of bats that stained the navy sky black. He willed the girl from a saguaro, but in half a second, she was only a saguaro once more. Undeterred, he stood there until his knees began to ache and then he sunk to the ground, the sand scraping between his socks and jeans. He listened to the wave of the owls' call and response. His eyelashes tangled as he blinked more and more, drowsiness overtaking him. But just before he fell asleep, a flutter of movement about twenty feet away caught his eyes. Great gray feathers, no, a stretch of material skimmed over rocks and he heard the scrape of branches against something softer.

Javier jumped up and pulled at his socks to remove the grit. He rubbed his eyes with the palms of his hand and squinted into the dark. The cloth disappeared from sight and he cursed quietly. He stepped forward to press his forehead against the fence and suddenly she was there. Barely two feet from him, the girl, her eyebrow split from his rock, stood on the other side of the fence.

She was draped in a long, simple dress with sleeves that feathered around her knuckles. A shapeless bonnet hung over her ears, covering most of her thin, blonde hair. She stared at him with eyes that mirrored the black blue light around them rather than shone with any real color themselves. There was no smile on her lips, no frown between her brows. She just stared at him, her head slightly tilted.

He couldn't breathe as she studied him. Part of him had wondered if he'd imagined her bleeding in the dark—what would a girl be doing here in the middle of the night?

"I hoped you'd come back," she said, her voice barely audible.

“I—” he thought about apologizing for the rock but decided not to. He felt like he wasn’t that violent reaction. He was new now. He was whatever she saw. “What are you doing here?”

“I live here.”

“People really live here?”

“Yes.”

He wanted more than a line from her, he wanted explanation. He wanted to understand what she was doing here. “Who are you?”

“Grace Seven. You?”

“I’m Javier,” he whispered.

“Are you contagious?” Grace Seven asked, her blue irises in pieces through the fence.

Javier slid his fingers up the metal. They moved like magnets towards her face, but he stopped as soon as she noticed. “Contagious?”

“Everyone is. The lord shall punish those who oppress the righteous. He shall condemn them to illness of spirit and of body, that they may never know true strength or peace,” her voice changed, inflection giving way to a pattern.

He remembered something his Catholic teacher, Juan, had taught Javier when he reached middle school: the way purity looks. The way that it makes the features soft and smooth, how it emanates light and goodness in the eyes. How you shouldn’t stain it, but if you were virtuous, it might spread over the darkness of your soul.

She was purity.

“They said that all the outsiders have boils and terrible coughs. That’s why we

have to stay here. Otherwise I'd..." she trailed off, her eyes curious and resting on the lines where his t-shirt met skin.

He pressed up against the fence and she didn't move. "If you think I'm sick, aren't you afraid of catching it?"

"There's a barrier along this fence. God rewards us for our commitment to his teachings. If I left, I'd get sick too, and if I reach through and touch you..." she reached a long pale finger toward his heart, but she pulled away just before touching the brown material. Red bloomed in her cheeks, but her eyes remained wide and curious.

Javier's heart thundered in his chest. "I'm not sick," he said hoarsely.

"How can I know for certain?" she asked, her eyes still on his skin.

"I don't even look sick," he said.

"But your skin. Sin darkens. And you haven't been purified. I have to be sure before..."

"Who told you that? About skin? It's not true," he said, his chest expanding in anger. But the fear in her eyes swallowed his fury. "What is this place?"

Grace looked back behind her and a quiet, low whistling noise sounded. Javier searched through the acacia canopies and ocotillo arms, looking for the source of the noise, but he found nothing. But the noise stretched, eerily like wind, but not. Eerily human, but not.

Whipping her head from the buildings to Javier and then back again, he caught another glimpse of terror in her face. "I have to go," she said and abruptly ducked through the trees and the brush.

Javier felt his body sag, frustrated as bits of her disappeared behind walls of

branches. But just before she was completely out of view, he could've sworn that he heard her whisper, "Come back."

#

Javier stole the letters addressed to Luis. In the hallway by the mail slot, he separated the bills and the catalogues from the envelopes addressed to Luis. He would fold the letters and stuff them in his back pocket, and when the number grew, he tucked them between his back and his boxers, covering them with a low hanging shirt. He'd drop the rest of the mail on the kitchen counter and then take the letters to his room and read the return addresses scrawled in the top left corner.

He rarely recognized the names. But when he did, he opened those in the morning before school. No one who knew his papá could believe that he had killed that man. No one who knew his papá could believe that he would involve his family in drugs. The cousins in California, his Aunts in Reno and El Paso, his nephew in Phoenix, they wrote letters, some in Spanish. Parents stuck crayon drawings of tilted houses and suns with thick rays in envelopes along with prayer cards.

If his papá were in prison, Javier knew these letters would be delivered directly to him. His mamá would send around an address as if Luis moved to a new home, somewhere someone might look forward to cutting out pizza coupons or looking through catalogues of camping gear, rather than a box with bars. But he wasn't in prison, just jail. And he'd be home soon. So in the meantime, Javier picked them open carefully and then glued them back shut to take to his papá during visitations.

The rest of the mail, Javier opened at night when he couldn't sleep. He read the hate mail where people described how Luis should be chucked over the border, or the

judge should hand him over to the Mexican drug lords, and that his whole family should all go starve in the desert. The words didn't help him sleep, but tearing them into pieces so small that they could fit underneath his fingernail helped. He would rip them apart over his bedside table and then he'd brush them into an empty can with his hand. They settled in weightlessly, without a noise. And in the morning, he would dump them in the bathroom trash with the used tissue and nail clippings.

He liked to imagine these letter writers fuming, their eyes locked into lines, their lips holding words that no one would hear. He'd like to be the one to tell them that his papá would never see what they said, that they would have no effect on his life. They weren't even a thought to Luis. And he'd like to see their anger become a pitiful unheard shout. But he doubted he'd ever meet Mary Jacobs from Phoenix, Arizona, or any of the others.

#

The air was still when Javier went back to the Compound the next night. He saw her skirt first, the material painting lines in the dirt. Then her slight form became clear as she dodged trees and thorns. Her eyes grew wide when she saw him, as if she was as surprised that he existed as he was of her.

He leaned toward the fence and she stilled several feet away. "Are you afraid of me?" he whispered.

"No," she paused and looked down at his shoes, "but I know that you are wicked."

His stomach clenched and he shook his head before he realized that he was doing it. "I'm not. How would you know?"

“There’s a ritual to purify someone. You don’t have any marks on your arms.”

He thought of words, like temporary tattoos or the charcoal on Ash Wednesday.

“Marks from ink?”

She dropped her eyes to the ground, her lids becoming shadowed under the dark.

He felt the hair on his arms rise as a breeze flowed through the trees. No, not ink.

She meant something more violent. He thought of bruises.

“Punishment. So that God will greet me after I die,” she said.

He remembered watching a video when he was much younger. A kid wearing a baseball cap and riding a skateboard had talked about how adults hitting kids was wrong, and how telling another adult was brave. No one would believe Javier if he went to the cops or his mom. They’d think he was lying.

“I can help you. I can get help,” he said, but he didn’t know what that would look like.

“They’ll...do things if they found out I was even this close to the fence,” she said.

“I can bring something to cut the fence. I can get you away from here,” he said.

She looked over her shoulder, and he watched her blue-blond hair spread into tendrils as thick as the creosote branches behind her. “I have to be back soon,” she said, her face filled with fear.

“Let me help you,” Javier said.

“They’ll know. And then they’ll hurt me and all the other Graces,” she said.

“Please.”

“I have to go.” She shook her head and turned to leave.

She paused and looked over her shoulder. “I’ll try to come back.”

He nodded, and then she ran and disappeared into the desert trees.

#

At lunchtime Javier and Ryan hopped the fence by the football field and ducked behind a short mesquite tree before the security guard noticed. Javier could feel the gaps in the tree as the sun beat down on his neck where his beige t-shirt collar left off. The dry heat didn't prevent his palms from getting slick after he hopped the fence. He would've preferred hanging out in the lunch room, but Ryan liked spending their lunch breaks figuring out plans for the end times—this week preparing for a zombie apocalypse. Javier always got roped in because he'd learned about desert life from his papá.

“What do zombies have to do with Jesus?” Javier asked, dragging his foot through the dust.

Ryan shrugged and snapped a branch off a desert ironwood with thin limbs and tiny leaves that hung down above them. He started pulling the green leaves from the branch. “He kind of is one.”

“Your mom thought of zombies?” Javier doubted it. Ryan's mom mentioned asteroids, and volcanoes, even diseases. Christ was coming in their lifetime, she'd said. But she'd never mentioned something like zombies before.

“No, I thought of them. Just to be safe. All contingencies, you know?” Ryan took a pocketknife out of his boot and began to sharpen the end of his branch.

Javier thought it seemed more likely that Ryan just wanted an excuse to make weapons and practice shooting. And he didn't bother telling Ryan that this was the wrong kind of wood for a weapon, he wouldn't listen anyway. Javier wanted to tell him that living off the desert didn't involve that many knives. The enemy was dehydration, or a

snake, maybe. Neither of those should've really involved a knife. He picked through the fruit on a barrel cactus as he watched Ryan out of the corner of his eye. "I don't think zombies would wander into the desert."

Ryan shrugged and walked off toward a netleaf hackberry. He pulled a couple berries off of the tree and walked back over, his knife open in the same hand as his branch. "Maybe if they're really stupid."

"Yeah, maybe."

He squeezed the berries until they popped, and the pulpy red smeared his fingers. "To look like blood. More intimidating."

The color was closer to citrus than blood, but Javier nodded.

Ryan smeared the red onto the sharpened stick and it snapped. "Shit," he muttered.

Ryan's desire to survive in an apocalypse struck Javier as bizarre. And not only because the end of the world would probably mean death for everyone—if Jesus was coming back it would be to end Earth, right? But it also seemed strange because if there was a chance of survival, why would anyone want to stay there? Wasn't Jesus supposed to save them from hell on Earth?

"Hey, you okay, man?" Ryan asked.

Javier looked up blankly and realized he must've missed something that Ryan said. "Yeah, sorry."

Ryan nodded and broke another branch off of the same tree as before. "Don't worry. If the world does end, the first thing we'll do is go get your dad out of jail."

#

Two nights passed before Javier saw Grace Seven again. He went every night, his hearing heightened as he shut his eyes to listen for the sliding of her skirt over the dust or tiny branches splintering across her arms, but she didn't appear. His heart sank as moments passed, but he believed with certainty that she would return. And the third night, she was there when he arrived.

He walked up to the Compound and saw her standing like a statue behind the fence. Her face was smooth, shadowed stone, except that even from the road he could tell that something about the fall of the shadows wasn't quite right. The moon shouldn't have darkened the hollow of her left cheek that way, or down her neck in spots.

He ran towards her and squinted as he drew closer. They were bruises—a wide swath on her cheek, and finger shapes on her neck. Impulsively he reached through the fence to brush her other cheek, and she jerked away.

“I'm sorry,” he breathed.

“The wives suspect,” she said. No feature in her face but her eyes moved. He was sure that there was pain there.

“About me?”

“No. That something's amiss. I forgot one of my duties.”

He curled his tongue against the roof of his mouth to suppress the anger welling up into words. How could they hurt her this way? “They shouldn't have done this.”

“They had to. I am unclean. How will I reach heaven if I am not walking the righteous path?” Her smooth face cracked and she hung her head, her lips trembling.

“No. You don't deserve this. They shouldn't hurt you,” he said, fury shaking his voice. He barely knew her, but he knew how a girl should be treated. His papá had told

him when he was little, that girls may be strong internally, but that beauty comes with brittleness. He told Javier that to be anything other than gentle was to be cruel.

“What is wrong with me that I am tempted to leave? The others do not seek such evil knowledge. I must have evil inside of me,” she said, her eyes wide.

Javier shook his head, desperately. “You should leave this place. I can help you.” He wasn’t sure what he would do once he helped her get away. He imagined a duffel bag full of money and a plane ticket somewhere might help, like in the movies, but the only people he knew with that kind of money were the dealers at school.

“I’m scared for the others,” she whispered.

“Did they hurt one of the other Graces?” he asked, trying not to falter at the strangeness of the question.

“A bit. My Grace mother. She didn’t say anything, but I saw her limp.” Her lips stilled into a scowl and she looked up, her brows furrowed in hatred. Javier stepped back in surprise by the sudden ferocity of her gaze. “They want me to see it, you know. Even if she won’t tell me when she’s hurt. They make sure I can see it.”

“I can bring wire cutters. I can get you out. Your Grace mother too,” he said. He felt suddenly large. As if he had owed the world something and would need to do big things to pay it back.

“She has too many Graces to look over,” she said.

A flash of something far off behind her caught Javier’s eye. When he looked up, for a second, he saw a pair of eyes before they blinked shut, disappearing into the night. His heart dropped below his lungs. “Someone’s out there.”

Grace’s eyes widened in shock, and then she turned and immediately ran towards

the buildings.

#

After a visit with their papá, Javier and Alejandra were sent to wait in the car while Paulina, their mamá, papá, and the lawyer met. Javier sat inside the car, trying to decide if they had enough gas that he could use the AC while Alejandra stood outside and leaned against the half open window. She reached behind Javier's seat and pulled a pack of cigarettes out from the seatback pocket.

“Most people wouldn't break the law in a jail parking lot,” Javier said.

She lit her cigarette with a blue lighter she pulled from the cup holder. “Most people are idiots. Everyone here is focused on the people inside the building, dumbass. Unless there's a breakout. But I don't look like a hombre convicto.”

Javier eyed her short hair.

“Shut the fuck up.”

A beat up black car pulled into the lot. Javier watched as a woman in a pink shirt, velvet track pants, and white flip-flops got out of the car. She was several rows over, but he could see the acne covering her face from his spot by the window. She opened the back seat of her car and pulled out a squealing baby. They walked to the front of the building, and then disappeared behind the tinted doors. He wondered if the baby's father was behind bars too.

“What do you think they're talking about?” Javier asked.

Alejandra shrugged. “Probably case strategies, but who knows?”

“Maybe Paulina will fill us in,” he said.

She laughed sarcastically and offered him the cigarette. He shook his head and

she took a long drag. “That stick up her ass has a clamp on it to keep her lips shut.”

Javier rolled his eyes. That didn’t even make sense. “Maybe they’re figuring out bail.”

“Oh Dios mío, Javi, seriously. He obviously didn’t get bail.” She flicked her cigarette and it rolled underneath another car.

He gripped the cushioning of the car seat with his fingernails. She had no idea what she was talking about.

#

Javier picked up their mail on the way into the apartment after school. He dropped his backpack by the front door and sorted the envelopes as he walked through the hallway. He pocketed the ones to his papá, and then stepped into the kitchen where Paulina was standing and eating an apple. One envelope was square and white and addressed to their family. The letters were large and loopy, and the return address was smudged.

“We all got something,” Javier said to Paulina.

“What is it?” she asked, scrolling through her phone as she took another bite.

Javier shrugged and slid his finger under the flap of the envelope. He pulled the thick sheet of what felt like photography paper from the envelope, back side up. Thick lettering was sprawled across in marker: *Fuck all u wetback bastards! U’ll go to hell for what that sick fuck did.*

A strange cold feeling slicked up the inside of his skin. He looked up at Paulina, and she paused before taking another bite of her apple. Her brown eyes blinked shut and her cheeks tightened. “Javier.”

He stared at her and felt the glossy side on the back.

“Don’t turn it over. Just set it down.”

Javier felt his hand start to turn the paper over without even thinking about it.

“Don’t turn it over!”

She dropped her phone on the counter and grabbed the paper, but it was too late, he’d already looked. Just before she tore it away from him, he saw the photo of a dead man for an instant. He saw blood and blue jeans and color on the Latino man’s skin that wasn’t any color he’d ever seen on a live body before.

She put it on the table, word side up. “I’ll call the police.”

He nodded dumbly and realized he was shaking. “He didn’t do it,” Javier whispered.

“Lo sé,” Paulina said, dialing.

“He didn’t do it!” Javier yelled.

Paulina took him around the shoulders and held him against her waist so tightly that he could hear someone answer the emergency line. “Someone mailed us a photo of a dead man,” his sister said.

#

Javier’s mamá told him that the picture was fake. She came into his room while he was sleeping and sat at the edge of the blanket and flicked on the old bedside lamp. He blinked awake and saw her sitting there, her face heavily shadowed, her gold-brown eyes worn and tired. She hadn’t been this physically close to him since his papá had been arrested.

“Are you ok, mamá?” he asked, propping himself up with a few pillows.

She reached out and touched the side of his head. “Your hair looks nice this way.

But you could grow it out a little. Maybe get a real hair cut then.”

She used to cut his hair. He remembered that from elementary school. And then his papá had taken him for a haircut when he was twelve. Now Ryan’s mom just buzzed it when she buzzed Ryan’s. “It’s easier when it’s short.”

“Ah, I see. You’re so practical.”

Javier glanced at the bedside clock. It was half past eleven. “I guess,” he paused, “Is everything alright?”

The clock ticked loudly into the growing silence. After a while, his mamá inhaled, “I just want you to know that your papá and I...we know that this hasn’t been easy.”

Javier nodded, not sure why she thought she needed to tell him this.

“You’re strong, fuerte, like him, you know. You just keep focused on school and everything will be alright,” she said.

He wasn’t sure how focusing school could make anything alright. “Is this about the photograph? The murder victim?”

She shook her head quickly. “The photograph was fake. It wasn’t the victim. Don’t think about the photograph.”

He was sure that the photograph was real, but he didn’t tell her that. She looked desperate for him to believe her. Her face was bare and needy. He suddenly realized how weak she was, how little she could do. She could do nothing for his papá, she would do nothing to stop the mail, she couldn’t even keep track of his comings and goings in the middle of the night. His sadness was diminished by the small sense of freedom that came with her inability to cope.

#

Javier bought wire cutters, a water bottle, and some candy at a hardware store on the corner between Ryan's and his neighborhoods just before they closed at eight. Then he rode his skateboard to the Compound. It was still too early for Grace to be out but he didn't care. He was tired of waiting, tired of the feeling of his insides spinning and spinning as he stood still and watched things happen in his life. All he could do was watch the expressions on people's faces tell him that his papá was a murderer and listen to his mamá lie, and stare at the bruises developing on Grace's face. He couldn't wait anymore.

He dropped his plastic bag on the ground and fished out the wire cutters. The mild traffic from miles away whirred dully, but the road Javier sat along was quiet. He looked for a patch of fence that would be visually obstructed by branches but wouldn't prevent Grace from being able to escape. After he found a good spot, he dropped to the ground so that his stomach pressed against the cooling dirt. His fists clamped tightly around the tool, he cut the piece of wire closest to the bottom and then worked his way up two feet. If it went too high, it would be easily visible from elsewhere, so he cut through pieces of wire to the left, to make a square large enough for Grace Seven to crawl through.

His arms strained from the pressure and awkward angle of his body wedged against the fence. Sweat dampened his hairline by the time he thought he had a long enough horizontal line of cuts. Then he shifted again to finish the square. He bent the remaining pointy pieces on the fence away from the hole so that Grace wouldn't scratch herself. After, he sat back on his heels and the space looked smaller than he thought he'd made it. Thirsty and overheated, he decided that she was small enough to get through, and he leaned against the fence and chugged some water. Then he sat back and waited for

her to appear.

Each moment that passed, his chest compressed tighter and the hole appeared smaller. To pass the time, he occasionally cut another piece away from the fence. The hole soon stopped resembling a square and instead was amorphous. Just as he was bending a seventh piece of wire away, he heard a shuffling noise a ways beyond the fence. He jumped up and brushed the dust off of his pants and shirts.

Grace appeared, horror filling the lines of her face as she gazed at the fence. “What have you done?”

“I’ve come to take you away,” Javier said, pushing some pieces of fence away with his foot. It felt anticlimactic to stand in front of her, dust on his jeans and the rescue a hole on the ground.

“They’ll punish me terribly,” she said, bending slightly to look at the damage.

Javier shook his head. “They won’t be able to get you from out here.”

“You don’t understand. They’ll take it out on my Grace mother if I go.”

“Don’t you want to leave?” he pressed, his eyes wide, his fingers grasping the fence.

“Yes, but—”

“This is your chance,” he urged.

She glanced back towards the dense branches behind her, and Javier realized that she still might not leave. He couldn’t watch her walk back toward the Compound buildings. “You have to come with me,” he said desperately.

She stared at him, fear and uncertainty glowing brightly in her eyes.

A bell chimed loudly and they both jumped. Men’s shouts rang out behind her.

“What is that?” Javier asked, alarmed.

“They know I’m not in bed,” she said.

“Quickly,” he urged. If they hurt her so easily before, what might they do to them if he was an outsider and she was running away?

Grace put her hands up to her head and pulled on the roots of her hair. “I...I...”

Javier shook the fence. “Please!”

Grace’s face cleared and she nodded once solemnly. A bright light glowed on from far off, and as she turned to see what it was, Javier could see an entire sky in her blue eyes. The blue was expanding endlessly. Then she turned toward the dark and dropped to the ground and began wiggling beneath the fence, her dress snake-like as it slithered out with her.

Javier bent over and grabbed her hands as soon as she was half way through, dragging her the rest of the way out. He grabbed his skateboard and she stood up. Footsteps pounded and Javier could see flashes of hair through the trees. They were coming.

“We have to go now,” he said. He grabbed her hand and pulled her back toward the highway.

She made a sound beside him and he was afraid that she was crying. He glanced at her and found that she was smiling. Her other hand held her cap in place and her legs flicked out wildly.

He had no idea where he was taking her. They could run towards his apartment or Ryan’s house. They could go to a convenience store and he could buy her a snack. He could show her his school or take her to a park. He felt as if they could do anything.

Morning would come and then he'd have to figure out where to hide her or how to convince his family to take care of her. But that was hours away. And all he could think of right then was the sky in her eyes, open and unfurling with all the possibilities in the world.

In the Prepping Shed

Javier

The first place Javier took Grace Seven was the gas station with a convenience store that sat on the highway between the border and the city. He had long since run out of water and Grace was panting heavily beside him, her moon-white hair stuck to her cheeks beneath her cap, and her gait twisting awkwardly beneath her long, loose skirt. The Compound was a mile and a half behind them, and no vehicles had followed them in the dark. The flashlight beams had peaked at the length of a football field between them and the fences. He hoped that the pursuers from the Compound had given up.

Javier readjusted the skateboard under his left arm, tugged on her wrist with his right hand, and pulled her past the gas pumps and the ripped red awning hanging over the entrance to the store. But she tugged back just as he pulled the glass door open. He looked back and saw Grace shaking her head and tucking her free hand into the waves of her skirt.

“It’s just a store,” he said.

Grace glanced through the windows, her eyes catching on a man with gray hair standing at the counter, shoulders rolled forward over a magazine.

“He won’t do anything,” Javier said.

She slowly nodded, and then Javier led her into the store. The man at the cash register eyed them as the bell above the door jingled. Javier let go of her hand and walked down an aisle to the refrigerated section so that he could grab a couple of water jugs. They had a ways to walk back to his apartment and he hadn’t figured out where to

hide her yet. When day broke, it'd get hot fast and he couldn't leave her under the shade of a tree for even a couple of hours without water.

“Want anything else?” he asked as he turned back to the front of the convenience store, but she wasn't standing in the aisle beside him anymore. He twisted around and saw her standing by the slushy machine by the checkout counter.

“Do you want one?” he asked, walking up beside her.

“What?” She didn't pull her eyes away from the machine as he spoke to her.

Javier looked at the slushy machine curiously. Crystals of colored ice swirled round and round underneath the plastic covers in blue, red, and caramel. He set the water jugs down and grabbed a neon yellow cup from a stack. “What color do you like?”

“Blue,” she whispered.

He felt her eyes on him as he filled the cup, grabbed a domed, clear lid, and then unwrapped a purple straw. Lid and straw in place, he held the beverage out to her. “It's cold,” he warned her.

She put her hand out hesitantly and bobbed as soon as her fingers touched it. Once she took it from him, he paid for it, watching her out of the corner of his eye. She walked toward the door, the straw in her mouth the whole time, a look of startled pleasure in her eyes.

He wanted to spend the whole night giving her candy she'd never tasted, showing her TV and video games she'd never seen, and learning about her world behind the fences of the Compound. But he had school in the morning and if he wasn't home when his sisters woke up, he'd be in trouble. He'd have to find a place to hide her, somewhere she'd be safe, some place where he'd look after her and teach her how to live in a town.

In the meantime, he'd sneak her into his room. She could have the bed and he would sleep on the floor by the door to make sure no one could come in despite the broken lock.

He took the change from the cashier and led Grace out the door. "C'mon, we're going to my family's apartment."

She smiled at him, the straw creased between her teeth, her bottom teeth now the same color as the slushy.

#

In Javier's room, Grace touched everything. She pressed her hand into one of his pillows and ran a finger over his shelf of books and rocks he'd collected with his papá. While he smoothed a sheet on the floor for him to sleep on, she played with a pen on his bedside table. She asked him how many people he shared all of these things with.

"Maybe if Paulina asks, I'd share. But it's mine. My dad gave me that," he whispered.

She looked solemnly at it and carefully set it down. "After he hurt you? Sometimes they gave me honey after."

"He gave it to me after I graduated middle school. He didn't hurt me," he said, trying to look in her eyes rather than the faded bruises along her neck.

She went to sleep in her outdated dress—the dirt streaks like spread burrowing owl feathers. It had taken him several minutes to convince her to take off even her shoes. And when she prayed at the side of the bed, she cried because she said that the words didn't hurt that night. He hated that he had to tell her to muffle her sobs in the blankets, but he could hear his sister's breathing falter through the walls.

After he calmed her down, she went to sleep and he lay down on the ground close

enough that he could listen to the cadence of her breath. He thought that maybe her rhythm would lull him, or that knowing she couldn't disappear without him noticing would help him sleep. But he barely slept at all. He was bursting with questions, and a fear that someone might find out about her. He knew that she couldn't stay there past the night—if his mamá found out about Grace, she might be taken away—but he wasn't sure where he could take her. He didn't have money for a motel, at least not enough right away, and he didn't want to involve anyone else. He thought of Ryan's shed, but Javier felt that she was his to care for, that she was his secret in the night—pure and delicate and his. Introducing her to others might make her too much a part of everything that was so messed up in his life. But, the shed was the only option he could think of. Ryan would have to know. Upon this decision, he finally slept, fitfully.

When he woke up he realized that for one night he had not thought about the fact that his papá was still in jail.

#

“What is this place?” Grace asked Javier as he unlocked the shed that sat behind a trailer with yellow, peeling siding.

“It's my friend Ryan's prepping shed. He's got food and supplies for the end of the world,” Javier said. He glanced over his shoulder a few times as he pulled the metal bolt off the wooden door.

“That will be necessary very soon,” she said.

“Right.” He pulled the door open and motioned her inside.

She blinked several times and his eyes adjusted to the light. It was dusty and small, the food and supplies stacked up on poorly built shelves lining the perimeter.

Alcohol bottles sat on the ground underneath the bottom shelves. She'd have enough space to lie down. That'd have to be enough for now.

"I don't want to stay here," she said.

He felt guilty that he didn't have a home or money for a room somewhere. It made him feel like he was just a kid. "It's not permanent."

She didn't say anything, she just stared at the dust on a jar of purple fruit preserves.

"I'll be here every day."

In the shadow of the shed, she almost looked like she did at night: moon yellow hair and eyes almost glowing. "I could sleep outside. I'd like to stay outside."

He imagined her face in the sun, red and peeling. He imagined her dress after days outside—hanging densely to the ground—and a cop noticing her age and the time of night. "You'd get in trouble. If someone spots you during a school day, or after curfew, you could get picked up. They'd take you away."

He left her sucking on her bottom lip and staring at the light lines between the slats of the shed. Javier went to stand behind the shade of a broken-down truck next to Ryan's trailer to wait for him. After a few minutes, he saw Ryan and Gina walk up the gravel path between fading paneled walls and old wood porches. Ryan watched the sky, his buzz cut square across his forehead, while Gina looked down, her long desert sand hair falling down to her stomach, a baseball cap blocking her face. A polka-dot backpack hung down to Gina's lower back and Ryan swung his black one side to side.

Their steps seemed impossibly slow to Javier. Glancing around first to be sure no one else was out in the hundred-degree heat, he stepped into their view.

“Did you ditch without me?” Ryan asked with a frown.

“A kid’s like twice as likely to break the rules when his father’s in jail,” Gina muttered loudly, smirking.

“Shut up,” Ryan said.

Javier ignored them. “I have to show you guys something.”

“He’s finally got pubic hair,” Ryan laughed.

“Ew. God, Ry, don’t be so disgusting,” Gina said.

Javier rolled his eyes and grabbed Ryan’s arm, guiding them to the shed that sat behind the trailer. He thought that it looked bigger from the outside. Javier pulled at the loose lock on the door.

“Man, you’re not supposed to use your key unless it’s like an end of the world emergency or something. It’s only for the apocalypse, not for snacking,” Ryan said.

“Just wait a second,” Javier said as they reached the door. He paused holding the door, “Try not to freak out, ok?”

“I’ve seen his stupid prep food before.” Gina crossed her arms.

[[]]
[SEP] “It’s not stupid,” Ryan said.

Javier shook his head and then opened the door a crack. Grace Seven stood in the center of the shadowed room. The bottles on the ground flicked light back against her shoes as Javier opened the door wider. Grace gripped the sides of her dress and her pink mouth flattened in an even line.

“This is Grace Seven. She’s from the Compound,” Javier said.

“No way,” Gina said, shaking her head.

“I knew it! I fucking knew I saw someone in there. I told you we didn’t see

ghosts,” Ryan said gleefully.

Grace looked between Gina and Javier, her fists growing whiter than the dirty cloth she clenched. She looked like she was preparing to run.

“Well, you were right,” Javier said. He moved to stand beside Grace so that she wouldn’t feel ambushed.

“It was a cult, wasn’t it?” Gina asked Grace.

Grace looked at Javier who nodded encouragingly.

“What’s a cult?” Grace asked, her voice cracking.

“A group of religious wackos who live their lives according to some crazy’s interpretation of Jesus and friends. Usually they’re all trapped in a basement or something and sometimes they have a super fun Koolaid suicide pact,” Gina said.

“It’s not a cult. It’s the Church of the Blistering Sun,” Grace said. Red spots appeared on her cheeks, like crushed cherries.

“But you do live according to God?” Ryan asked.

“As should anybody who doesn’t wish to experience eternal afterlife on the surface of the sun,” Grace said, her small chin jutting upward.

Gina and Ryan exchanged brief smiles, but Javier thought Grace looked taller than the rest of them when she did that. She might not know what a slushy was, but she seemed to be sure of the kinds of things his Catholic teacher thought he ought to be sure of.

“So, can she stay here? Just until I figure something out,” Javier said.

“I guess,” Ryan said shrugging.

“Great,” Javier said, although no one looked particularly happy about the

arrangement.

#

They decided that they would say that Grace was Ryan's visiting cousin if anyone asked. Her last name would be 'Matthews.' It would be easy enough for her to remember since it was a biblical name. Gina brought some clothes later that day so that eventually Grace would be able to go outside without others thinking that, "she'd escaped a mental institution," as Ryan put it.

"One from the 1910s," Gina scoffed.

Gina dumped the clothes out of her backpack onto the floor. With two fingers, Grace lifted a pair of black shorts from the ground. "Are these underclothes?"

"Don't say underclothes. That's weird. And those are shorts. Like what I'm wearing now?" Gina said, motioning to her purple shorts.

Grace immediately dropped them. "I may have left the Church of the Blistering Sun, but I will not dress as a whore."

"What the fuck is your problem?" Gina said.

Javier had to step between them as Grace selected two outfits that she'd be willing to wear in public: a long brown skirt with a green t-shirt and jeans with a black, long sleeve shirt.

"It's a hundred degrees during the day," Gina said.

Grace clutched the clothing she'd selected stubbornly.

"Fine," Gina said, stuffing the rest of her clothes back into her backpack.

Despite the outfits, they decided that Grace probably shouldn't go wandering around town until she knew a bit more about how things worked. If a cop thought she

was acting suspiciously, she could end up getting into trouble, or CPS could be called. She looked too young to be on her own all the time.

“Are cops dangerous?” she asked.

“They won’t hurt you, but they would be trouble,” Ryan said.

“They could hurt her,” Javier corrected. “You should avoid them.”

“What doughnut eater is going to hurt a white girl like her?” Gina shook her head and turned to Grace. “He just worries about cops because border patrol would arrest him even if his school ID was pinned to his shirt.”

“Shut up, Gina,” Ryan said.

“It’s the truth.” She shrugged.

Grace looked between the three of them, the skin wrinkling between her eyebrows.

“Don’t worry. We’ll teach you everything you need to know,” Javier said hastily.

Grace argued against being shut up in the shed for a few days, but then Gina told her horror stories about foster care and Grace quit complaining.

After Gina and Ryan left to go make out at the park and before Javier went home for dinner, he asked Grace if there was anything she liked to do, “Like do you have any hobbies?”

“Sometimes Grace One let me draw on the bottom of our drawer. She knew Pastor John would never look there,” she said.

So, he brought her back a sleeping bag, markers, and a flashlight.

That night he stayed with Grace until sunrise. First, they looked at the stars through the spacing in the slats. She told him how she had learned that each star was a

different hell. “That really bright one? That’s a bigger one. It’s for the women and girls who don’t listen to the Reverends. A lot of women end up there. And the one right next to it? That’s for women who do their chores badly. Like if you burn too many dinners or if you don’t dust properly. Did you learn about them?”

Shifting to look at her face, he hesitated, wondering how much in her world could change in such a small amount of time. “Most of us learned something different. Like I learned that there’s only one hell and one heaven. That if you’re good, even if you screw up dinner, you’ll go to heaven. Only the really bad guys go to hell.” He stopped, forgetting about the stars and thinking about his papá.

Her face was pressed against the wood and she didn’t seem to notice that he hadn’t finished his thoughts. “What’s really bad?”

“Like rapists. Or murderers, I guess. But like really bad ones.” The answer to her question would’ve seemed so much simpler a few weeks ago.

“What about the rest of the stars?”

“They’re just stars.”

After a little while, they ate dried fruit and cold beans from a can. He tried to ask her questions about the Compound, but she avoided them. And he gave up, deciding that she would tell him stuff when she felt like it, and it probably wasn’t good to push her. When she went to bed, he sat against the shelves, the wood pressing thick lines into his back, and he watched her sleep. He would keep her safe, no matter what.

#

Javier went by the shed every night. He snuck out of his family’s apartment after his older sister finally went to bed and then he skateboarded to Ryan’s back yard. It was too

strange to him that this girl he'd just saved from the Compound was stuck in a shed behind his friend's bedroom. She needed Javier, he was sure of this. He could feel it.

But he could tell that Grace was growing restless. She'd usually be pacing the perimeter of the shed when he walked in. She filled a shelf with doodles in a single afternoon. And she'd make Javier stay late, asking him every detail of his school day to learn what other kids' lives were like.

To distract her, Gina showed Grace reality TV on her phone in the afternoons and they taught her all about the internet. Javier even brought her his science textbook since she'd seemed so interested in the stars. When Ryan tried to take a picture of Gina and Grace on Snapchat though, Javier snatched the phone away. "Are you crazy? What if someone finds out?"

"What? They'll just think it's Ryan's cousin," Gina said, pulling her long hair around her breasts.

"How would they know that?" Javier said, holding the phone out of Ryan's reach.

"Because I was going to write: *Ryans cuz is in town. Lets Party,*" Gina said.

"Dude, you're acting paranoid," Ryan said.

"Yeah, chill out," Grace said. They were teaching her slang too. Anything that would make her seem normal, which Gina thought included how to pluck eyebrows, so she even brought Grace tweezers.

Javier cut his eyes to her. "Don't encourage them. I'm trying to keep you safe."

"I've been in here for so long. I want to see the town."

A week and a half didn't seem that long, but he looked around the shed and realized what an absurd picture they made. Four people sitting on a sleeping bag in a tiny

room, two of them drinking from one of the bottles lining the floor, all of them avoiding the spots where the gaps in the wood were too wide so they wouldn't be seen. But Grace, with her long skirt and green t-shirt, an odd bonnet that she wouldn't get rid of, and hair in straight, cream quill strands down to her waist, looked like she was from another planet.

Javier looked at Gina and Ryan whose faces were red from the vodka. "Please, guys, a little help."

"No way, man, this is all you," Ryan said.

Grace leaned towards Javier and put her hand on his. "Please, Javier."

Her bright blue eyes were shining, hopeful, like he could give her everything she wanted. This space was so small, he could feel that it was temporary. He needed a long-term solution, somewhere to keep her safe permanently. Or at least until she was an adult.

"You could do a test run," Gina said.

"A test run?" he repeated dubiously.

"Yeah, like with your family."

He could feel his eyebrows rising. His family felt like pieces of a puzzle that didn't fit right anymore. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"Please, Javier. Please? I want to meet your family," Grace said.

He looked at her and then away. He'd seen his mamá drinking at two in the morning the other day, she'd been listening to old voicemails on speakerphone when Javier went to the bathroom and he'd been able to hear them. It was so surprising to hear his papá's voice that he'd peeked around the corner, expecting to see his papá standing in the kitchen. But there his mamá was, by herself, the phone on the counter and a bottle of

wine in her fist. What if Grace saw something like that?

“Please.”

His mamá disappeared and all he could see was Grace’s hopeful face.

“Alright. You can come to my family’s house tomorrow for dinner,” he said.

She squealed and then covered her mouth. “Really? Really?”

“If that goes ok, then maybe during the weekend days you can start going out in public.”

She looked past him, towards the cracks in the shed. “And then, onwards, to school!”

Javier looked at Ryan, who shrugged. “I showed her a couple of comics.”

“We’ll iron out that ‘onwards’ shit in no time,” Gina said nodding.

He wondered how they would ever get her into school. It was one thing to lie to a bunch of teenagers and parents who wouldn’t know any better, but who knew what kind of documents she would need to get into public school. Did she have a birth certificate? Did the government even know she existed?

#

Javier went to his sisters’ room after school. Paulina was sitting at her desk, her pen in her mouth, looking over a notebook. The wavy, brown hair at the crown of her head looked brighter from the sunlight pouring through the window. Their mamá and Alejandra weren’t home, so the apartment was quiet. Paulina couldn’t study with any noise.

“Where’s mamá?” he asked her.

Paulina made a humming noise and put her finger at the beginning of a line.

“She’s with the lawyer.”

“Ok,” he said. He could always text his mom asking about having someone over for dinner. It had never been a problem before, but he wasn’t sure if that had changed.

“Por qué?” Paulina asked, looking up at him.

“I was hoping to invite a friend over tomorrow night,” he said.

Her golden eyes stretched in surprise and then she smiled sadly. “Sure, but mamá can’t really deal with company right now so dinner might be chicken nuggets.”

“That’s ok. I just want to hang out with a friend,” he said hastily.

“Alright,” she said.

He nodded and turned to leave, but before he did, he heard her chair scratch roughly across the carpet. “Hey, Javi?”

“Yeah?” He paused in the doorway.

“Is everything going ok? School’s fine and everything?” she asked.

She looked like their mamá, more now than ever. The black in her eyes seemed to grow; she looked like she needed to know everything, how to solve everything. And she asked him about his life as if she’d memorized the list of questions you have to ask when you’re a parent. But he remembered that she was just a teenager too, or at least she had been just a few weeks ago.

“Yeah, I’m ok.”

#

“One more time. Just the basics,” Javier said to Grace between two buildings in his apartment complex. The half-filled parking lot sat to his left and he could hear the low hum of traffic to his right, in the direction of his school. Even as the sun set, giving the

cacti a pale orange halo, the air pressed against them hot. His jeans were scratching against his legs.

Grace looked over his head and twirled her fingers in her skirt. “Javier, I have it all memorized.”

He looked at her sternly and didn’t move.

“Fine! I’m on spring break and I’m visiting my cousin, Ryan. I’m a freshman like he is and I’m from Phoenix, Arizona,” she recited.

“How exactly are you related to Ryan?” Javier narrowed his eyes.

“His mom is my mom’s sister.”

“Aunt...”

“Aunt...aunt Deborah! I said that I had everything properly memorized. I have an excellent memory. We all had to memorize a chapter of the *Divine Starscape* by the time we were eight,” she said.

“Just don’t say stuff like that,” he said, pressing his fingernails into his palms.

He walked her up the painted wooden steps to the second floor and then he pulled out his key in front of the beige door. His hand was slick against the metal when he opened the door. “This is home.”

Grace smiled and looked around the living room stuffed with two mismatched couches, a TV, and the dining room with a small white table and metal chairs. Her gaze caught on his mamá who was sitting on the smaller, lumpy couch watching the news.

His mamá stood up when they walked in. She was wearing stretchy gray pants and a t-shirt. Her normally tight bun was loose and hanging to the side on her neck. But when she introduced herself to Grace, he thought she looked enough like his mamá and

that maybe tonight would go alright. “There are chicken nuggets already in the oven.”

“I love warm food,” Grace said.

His mamá smiled absently and Javier rubbed the side of his face with his palm.

At dinner, they left their papá’s seat empty and his mamá left the news on. Voices argued over one another while Paulina’s serving spoon scraped across the plastic bowl as she served everyone mac and cheese. Alejandra stabbed noodles angrily with her fork, her dark short hair falling over her eyes, and Grace brought her face within inches of the food on her plate.

“Mamá, maybe we should turn off the TV?” Paulina asked, putting the bowl down.

Their mamá shook her head. “It’s important to know what’s being said.”

Alejandra cocked her head and glared at her mamá. “We know what’s being said. They don’t change their mind every night.”

“Ali,” Paulina said, her tone one of warning.

Javier tried to inconspicuously nudge Grace with his foot to get her to stop staring intently at the macaroni.

“Grace, is your food ok?” Paulina asked.

Grace nodded solemnly. “I’ve never eaten food shaped like this before.”

“Seriously? What kid hasn’t eaten dinosaur shaped chicken nuggets before?” Alejandra said.

“No, I meant the yellow—”

“Her parents are really into healthy food,” Javier interrupted while his mamá turned the television volume up.

“After pleading not guilty for the murder of Juan Lopez, a trial date was set last week—” the speakers blared.

Javier swung his head sharply to his mamá. “They’re moving ahead with the case? He’s not getting bail?”

“I told you that it was fucking obvious. It’s been almost a month,” Alejandra said, putting her elbows on the table.

“It doesn’t mean anything, Javi. It’s just a case with a lot of publicity so they couldn’t let him out,” his mamá said.

Grace swung her head between the four of them but sat quietly.

Javier cleared his throat, trying to make sense of what his mamá was saying. A murder trial. “So you already knew the trial date.”

His mamá’s face looked flat with crisscrossing lines. They read pain. Even the apples in her cheeks read pain. She nodded once.

He leaned back into his chair, dumbfounded.

“Maybe we should pray,” Paulina said, over the roaring laughter of a pundit on tv.

“Yeah, we should be quiet and pray,” his mamá said, looking pointedly at Grace.

“Because praying ever does any kind of fucking good,” Alejandra said rolling her eyes.

“Ali!” Paulina said again and their mamá scooted closer to the television.

“It sounds like the discovery process might drag on for some time—”

“Grace, why don’t you do the honors? Would you like to say grace?” Paulina practically yelled.

Grace looked at Paulina, her nose wrinkling in confusion.

“Pray,” Javier translated absently.

“See, this is why we need tighter immigration enforcement. Drugs coming in through Mexico are clearly causing a rise in violent crimes—”

The other pundit cut in. *“Come on, Jim. You know that the violent crime rate hasn’t risen at all.”*

“Obviously this case will have long term implications on immigration law—” the moderator chimed in.

Grace nodded and put her hands together, placing her thumbs against her chest so that they lined up with her heart and then she leaned forward until her forehead fell on the table, her white-blonde hair falling close to the macaroni. Javier could feel his scalp burning as he watched Alejandra’s mouth fall open and Paulina’s eyebrows climb.

“All-knowing, bright like the Sun but cooler than its damning temperatures God, we prostrate ourselves in supplication before you, and thank you for supplying the Reverends with sustenance so that they might provide for us and ensure that we are pure before imbibing or ingesting. We thank you for maintaining the gardens of Earth and for keeping us from the blistering Sun hell and all other hell stars that dot your sublime universe. May you deliver us to Andromeda. We look forward to living through another meal, unless you deem it prudent to expunge us from this world. May we then be rocketed to your heavenly galaxy. Amen.”

Everyone at the table stared as Grace sat up slowly, her forehead red from the weight of her head on the plastic table.

“—Racial tensions are running high and ranchers along the border can’t seem to decide between leaving out water bottles or propping guns beside their beds—”

“What the hell kind of church do you go to?” Alejandra asked, grinning.

“Well...bueno,” Javier’s mamá said.

#

After dinner, Javier’s mom went to her bedroom to lie down, Alejandra left because “she couldn’t handle the stupidity in the apartment anymore,” and Paulina began to clear the table. Javier offered to help, but Paulina waved him away, telling him that he should hang out with his friend. So Javier and Grace sat on the bigger couch and changed the TV channel to a family sitcom in which the father was an inventor and the mother was a feisty businesswoman and their three kids were nerdy, athletic, and popular respectively.

Javier watched Grace settle into the soft cushion out of the corner of his eye. She switched positions several times, first wedging her back in the corner between the armrest and a pillow, then sinking lower and turning her legs towards Javier. Finally, she ended up two feet closer to him, her feet tucked under her brown skirt, her palms rubbing the edge of the cushions. He picked at his cuticles in guilt, thinking about her sleeping bag on the floor of a shed.

“Your dad is the guy on the news, right? The one who is going to trial?” Grace asked, as a commercial for shampoo came on.

Javier stopped looking at Grace. He could hear the water going in the kitchen and dishes clacking together as Paulina washed them. “Yeah, he is.”

She nodded, and then stared intently at a blonde woman lathering her scalp. Grace fingered the tips of her hair. “I want some of that.”

“We could get you some,” Javier said.

“Really?”

“Yeah.” He’d seen the kind of hair products Paulina saved up for. He could squeeze a bit of hers in a plastic bag and she’d never find out.

They went back to watching the show. The mother tripped on one of the father’s inventions. It seemed painful, but the laugh track was on. It was strange to watch TV with Grace. He wondered what she understood, what was similar enough to her past, if this was even close to what family looked like to her. Not that this was what family looked like to him either. “Do you miss your family?” he asked her.

“I miss Grace One and some of my sisters. I hope they’re alright,” she said, watching the nerdy daughter search for a homework project.

He didn’t like to imagine that her family suffered because she’d escaped. What could he do for them now? “Not your dad?”

“I didn’t have a dad. There was just Pastor John and the others.”

He didn’t know what to say to that.

“Do you miss your dad?” she asked.

Javier shifted uncomfortably on the couch. He could feel her watching him and suddenly he wished that they were back in the shed, where nothing seemed to exist outside of it. “It’s not the same. My dad’s coming home soon.”

“Even if he loses? If he’s found guilty?”

His tongue felt thick in his mouth. She wasn’t supposed to know about all of this. She wasn’t supposed to see his life this way. “He’s not guilty. How do you even know how that all works?”

“Gina told me about it.”

“What else did she tell you?”

“Lots of things. She told me about trials and jail. That your skin isn’t a sign of evil, drugs are. What drugs are—”

He picked at a seam on the couch. “Let’s just watch TV.”

They turned back to the TV as the commercial ended and the sitcom came back on. Everyone on the show was attractive. Even the nerdy girl with the unnecessary glasses and retainer had perfect skin and teeth. Their made up flaws were insignificant and even the arguments were funny. He thought that it was a good thing they had laugh tracks because he couldn’t remember how to find any of this funny.

“I want that,” Grace said.

He looked at her and she seemed bigger on the couch. Her breathing seemed to eat up his oxygen. “What?”

“That. A family. People like them,” she said.

Javier envisioned her inside the television, sitting at a dining room table, her face between faces smooth and white as copy paper. Once she was scrubbed up and educated, she could fit there easily. He never would. He wanted to shred them up, like pages of a book. Abruptly, he said, “You can’t have it.”

A scowl twisted her cheeks. “Why not?”

“You just can’t.”

“Because I already have another family? Or because I live in a shed and before that I lived underground? Why not?”

“Because it doesn’t exist!” He changed the channel. A mountain lion prowled the desert at night.

“Maybe it does somewhere else.”

He turned the volume up louder. Branches cracked under the cameraman's foot, but the mountain lion was silent. "It doesn't."

#

When Javier walked Grace back to the shed, he could feel her energy, her impatience, it was waves of heat prickling his arm nearest to hers. Meeting his family, seeing his apartment, hadn't satisfied her. She wanted more. Even in the sunset, her bright blue eyes were stretching like sky, wide and sprawling.

At the shed, for the first time, Javier realized he didn't want to stay behind and listen to her questions about high school and college and other cities and states, ones where the ground was wet with snow or the air was thick enough to taste. He knew what these questions were: they were preparation for her to leave him.

He scuffed his foot on the ground in the doorway, impatient for her to tell him goodnight. But she wouldn't even give him that. "I can't stay here forever," she said, smoothing her sleeping bag on the ground.

His heart became concave even though he knew that right then she was only talking about the shed. "I know. It's just until you don't seem so suspicious."

"Gina is teaching me slang. And I did fine tonight," she said.

"It isn't enough, and tonight was a disaster. Paulina's going to ask me questions about you."

Even night couldn't hide the shadows on her face. "How can I do better? What will be good enough?"

"I don't know. It's just not good enough...yet."

"I'd rather sleep outside than in here." She sat down on the ground and fluffed the

stained pillow.

He cleared his throat, guilt making his saliva sour. She deserved to sleep in a bed. If he could just have a few days, he could get a job and find her a motel room. Then she'd have a bit of freedom and still be safe. He could look after her. He could bring her shampoo and notebooks to draw in. "I'll come up with a plan. Just try to be patient for a couple more days."

She nodded and lay down. He wondered if she was imagining the stars through the shed. "I want to go to school too."

"Ryan and I will figure that out too." He heard himself say it, but he wasn't sure that was possible. He could look into getting her a fake to be out past curfew, but what did he know about vaccination records and birth certificates and parent signatures?

Her eyelids fluttered closed in the dark. She looked soft, her cheeks plush and her satin hair strands splayed across her forehead. There he was, standing over her, and she was completely vulnerable as she drifted off beneath him. Her trust made his body feel small, but his heart stretched and stretched, until it was blocking out his thoughts. He would do anything to keep her safe.

For a minute more he watched her sleep, her even breath soothing him. Then he gently closed the door and walked around the front of the trailer to get home. But as he rounded the corner, the screen door creaked open and out walked Ryan's mom in a spaghetti strap polka dot dress, her skin tanning spray orange. She held a cigarette up to her lips and put a hand over her heart when she spotted Javier, waist up, over the porch.

"Jesus, Javier, you shouldn't lurk around like that. I think Ryan's out for the night. He didn't tell you? He's out with Gina."

He felt like a shadow; movement outside of his control and speaking was a near impossibility. Javier stared down at his shoes, his hands tensing in his pockets, and willed his heart rate to slow. She'd given him an out, she didn't know what he was doing here.

"I guess he forgot," he finally said.

"Do you want something to drink?" she offered.

"I'm good."

She fished a lighter out from her cleavage. It had a skull whose mouth opened when it lit, a fire shooting out from the gaping jaw. Or in this case, sputtering like a candle flame as she tried to light her cigarette. He'd heard from Ryan that his mom's newest boyfriend could make the flame really look like something. But he'd used vodka and a rag to do it.

After she inhaled her first drag she looked at Javier. She looked satisfied. Lungs full of poison that would probably kill her slowly, and from the look on her face, it was all a delicious possibility. He propped himself up on the porch with his shoulders, trying to get closer. He wanted to feed on that contentment.

"You know, it'll be ok. No matter what," she said.

For a second, he didn't know what she was talking about. Then he realized, that she was referring to his papá. His back straightened and he pushed back from the porch. He thought about his papá in a cell, unprotected. Maybe lying in bed wondering if his cellmate had made a shiv out of a new toothbrush he bought. There was no 'no matter what.' There was only the truth. "My papá will be home soon."

She smiled and leaned back in her chair, the flimsy plastic shifting under her weight. She stared at her cigarette and he thought that she believed in nothing but the

exhaled smoke. “I’m sure you’re right,” she said.

He hated her then. They were hiding a girl on her property, but she’d never know it, because she was already so sure of how the world worked. She already knew everything worth knowing. He told her goodnight, smiling, the knowledge that they kept the truth from her right under her nose burned like a match in his gut.

#

Javier brought everything he could think of to make Grace happy. He snuck baggies of bubble bath out of the bathroom at home that she could use when Ryan’s mom went out in the afternoons. He brought her sodas that Ryan’s mom bought, and he found the oldest clothes in Paulina and Alejandra’s closet and stuffed the more modest items into grocery bags so that she could change outfits more often. Even Ryan pitched in, making a call and impersonating an older man who was looking to move his children into the school district to find out how to enroll Grace in school. But that conversation was disappointing. Javier had been right, they’d need a birth certificate, and even though Ryan knew a guy, it’d be expensive.

In the meantime, Javier applied for a job. He might not be able to get her into school right away, but he could get her a place to live that had a bathroom she could access twenty-four seven. He asked Paulina to drive him to a gas station for an interview.

In the car on the way there, Paulina asked him if he was doing this for a girl.

“No,” he answered immediately.

“For Ryan’s cousin? Grace?” she pressed him.

“No.”

“She was a little odd. Very sweet, but strange,” Paulina said, stopping at a red

light.

Javier wiped his palms on his jeans. He knew it was impossible for her to figure out where Grace came from, but his heart lurched at Paulina's comments.

"I think papá would like her."

He thought so too, and wondered when they would get to meet.

#

When Javier found out that he had been hired, he went to tell Grace immediately. He'd found motels on the west end of the city with weekly rates that his paycheck would just about cover. He couldn't wait to see the look on her face when he told her that in two weeks, she'd have a new home. It might not be very nice, but it was better.

The shed was eerily quiet when he arrived though. Even as he approached the door, he couldn't hear her steps shuffling across the ground or pens and markers scratching against rough surfaces. The skin across his knuckles felt tight as he knocked gently on the door.

There was no response.

The back of his neck burned and he fumbled for his keys in his jean pocket. He unlocked the door and opened it, hoping that he'd just find Grace napping. But when he looked inside, there was no one there. Nausea spun his stomach and he pulled out his phone, texting both Gina and Ryan, *I can't find Grace*.

Javier clenched his left hand so that his nails pressed quarter-moon patterns into his palm while he stared at the screen and tried to come up with a plan. Maybe he should stay put in case she'd gone for a walk. Maybe she'd just snuck into Ryan's house to use the bathroom. He didn't have time to think for long before the dot-dot-dot popped up on

his phone screen as someone was typing.

Gina responded. *We took her to a party. Come hang out.*

His relief tasted bitter. She wasn't ready to be out with other people. How many times had he told them that?

An address popped up on his phone and he left the shed, leaving it unlocked behind him. He hopped on his skateboard and headed out of the neighborhood, the party about a mile and half northeast of his high school.

#

There were red cups on the entryway table and rap music sounded fuzzy through crappy speakers turned up in another room. As Javier walked further into the house, he saw teenage girls in tiny shorts wandering from room to room in groups. Boys stood against walls, cups in one hand, phones in the other. The house's carefully color coordinated furniture was covered in drinks and snacks and teens packed together. Picture frames were stacked in piles so that partiers would have more room to maneuver their cups or roll joints.

Javier moved quickly from room to room, his skateboard chafing under his arm. No one stopped him to ask who he was, but a few gazes lingered. He didn't recognize anyone. Everyone here went to the other high school; the private one. He hated partying on the north side of town, where houses were stacked into the side of the mountains, where you couldn't even tell that the border was just a few miles away. He ignored them as he passed the bathrooms that were both closed, with lines out the door. The kitchen was filled with kids making out against countertops. Finally, in the second living room, he saw Grace. She was sitting beside Ryan and Gina on a suede couch. But she didn't

look like her usual self. She had shed the odd skirt and shirt combos for jeans and a halter top with flowers on it. Her hair was uncovered except for a headband and she was wearing sandals. There were other kids in the room, but he could barely see them.

He felt suddenly out of place, as if he didn't belong—in this house or with these new people. And that's what Grace was: new. She was no longer Grace Seven from the Compound, with her hair shining in moonlight, stuck behind a fence and then learning in a small room surrounded by food for the end of the world. She was just some other high school girl.

His chest burned and seemed to tighten around his heart. He lunged forward before thinking, smacking a cup out of Ryan's hand. Red splashed across the tile and the cup bounced with a plastic clatter. "What the hell were you thinking bringing her here?"

"Shit, man," some kid at the other end of the couch said.

"Dude, what the fuck?" Ryan hissed, standing up. He grabbed Javier's arm and dragged him to the opposite wall, away from other teens that noticed his outburst.

"Javier," Grace breathed.

"She was bored!" Gina said, setting her drink on the ground and standing up beside Ryan.

Music muted their words and anger made his skull throb. "It's not safe! We talked about this. Someone might notice her!"

Footsteps padded around him, but he barely noticed. He could only see her face, all the way on the other side of the room. There was red on her lips. Makeup or punch, he wasn't sure.

"Only because you're shouting, asshole," Gina said.

“Fuck this. Fuck you guys,” Javier said. He shrugged off Ryan and walked out of the room. The air seemed thick and sour, he couldn’t breathe. He had to get outside. Past the kitchen, past the teenagers throwing Ping-Pong balls on granite counter tops, past the belligerent laughing and red eyes staring at them. He walked down the foyer and then burst out the door and into the night air.

The blackness sunk around him, the air warm, but thin and dry, and suddenly he could breathe again. Suddenly he could hear again.

“Javier!” He heard Grace call out.

“Javier!” She was quiet. Subdued and controlled. Even after he threw Ryan’s cup.

He stopped but he didn’t turn around. He didn’t want to see her like that. Her hand fell lightly on his shoulder and he cringed, shrugging it off. “You used to think touching me would make you bad.”

“The Reverends made me think a lot things.”

Bitterness tinged her voice, reminding him of creosote in the rain. He was so surprised that he turned around. How long had she sounded like that? How many days had gone by in the past three weeks that he hadn’t noticed.

“I can’t stay in there all the time,” she said, her voice softening.

“I wasn’t asking you to,” he said.

Her eyebrows rose and then disappeared in the dark, but she didn’t say anything.

“You just have to wait a couple more weeks. Just a couple weeks.”

“For what? What am I waiting for? I didn’t leave for that. To sit in a shed. Do you know what I think about when you leave at night? When I’m all alone in that shed?” Her blue eyes shined bright, orbs piercing the night, but fear lay in the wells of her pupils.

He shook his head dumbly, entranced by the urgency in her tone.

“I see the Church. I see the rooms underground where they told me that I was dirt, lower than dirt—that they needed to purify me. That I was evil and that too much light would kill me. I see canes and tasteless oats, and thick layers of dust you can’t ever clean up, but you have to or they’ll punish you. And I see blood. So many different kinds of blood. Blood you have to learn how to hide, blood that dries on your tongue because the air is so dry it cracks your nose and your throat.” She panted, her mouth gaping, as if the dust from underground was gagging her. Black dripped down her cheeks and he realized that she was crying.

“Grace,” he said. He lifted his hands an inch, afraid that if he extended his arms further that she might flee, or break, or disappear.

She leaned into him and grasped his upper arms, sagging against him. “Don’t tell me I have to stay there. I can’t stay there.”

He felt her hair, moon white again, wet from tears, press against his arm just below his t-shirt. “It’s alright. It’s going to be ok. I got a job.”

“A job?” she murmured against his chest.

“Yeah. Enough to get you a room. With a bathroom and a television and everything.”

She sighed, her body moving like clay against him. But he could not relax. It was only a room. What could he do for her besides give her a shitty room beside a shitty highway at the edge of a border city known for nothing but his papá’s murder trial?

#

Terrified that she would go out without him again, leaving him to wonder if she’d

disappeared or been discovered, he began to take Grace out. He snuck her into movies where his friend worked. They'd watch kids films in the morning and then stick around for the 3D ones with giant villains and rocks and debris that flew into the faces of the audience. They checked out books on his library card so that she'd have things to read at night. And in the afternoons, he took her to the park to teach her how to skateboard. He'd take Gatorades from Ryan's fridge and bring comic books to read in the grass when they got tired.

When he got his first paycheck, he was planning on taking her out for ice cream. He thought about melting vanilla one evening at sunset, when they sat clumsily down on the ground, his forearms aching from pulling Grace along the skateboard. It made him wonder if his papá got some kind of dessert in jail. He pushed the thought from his mind and looked back at Grace. Her skin was flush and even though she'd kept wearing modern clothing, her face was bare and her hair was plaited down her back.

"A couple days. In a couple days, we'll go somewhere with air conditioning," he said panting.

"That sounds great." She turned away so he couldn't tell if she was smiling.

He laid back in the grass, clasped his hands under his head, and looked up at the sky. The blue was so bright, it burned his eyes. She lay down beside him, her elbows pressing against his.

"We could go to another movie," he suggested.

She turned towards him, propping her head up on one hand. "Why do we watch all those things if they could never happen?"

"What do you mean?"

“At your apartment when I met your family. You said stuff like that doesn’t exist.”

Releasing one hand, he picked at the grass pricking into his side. “I was just mad back then. I didn’t mean all that about families. It could happen. My family’s ok. They’ll be even better when my papá comes home.”

“You think people really laugh that much in real life?”

“Sometimes.”

“I want that, you know? A family.”

He pretended to misunderstand her. “You could have kids one day.”

“No, I mean, I want to be the kid. The youngest one that everyone loves. The one that gets tucked into a squishy bed with a big comforter covered in flowers every night.”

Her face was rapturous. She was as sure as she’d been at the Compound, talking about God against the fence when he found her, but now, she was right about things worth wanting. He wanted her to want these things. He wanted her to have these things.

“I could love you. I mean, I could take care of you, and stuff,” he blurted out.

“It’s a lot,” she said.

“I can do it,” he said fiercely.

“That’d be nice,” she said, but he could hear that half of her words were just air.

“That’s what we’ll do then,” he said.

“What do you miss most about having your dad around?” she asked.

“The way the apartment felt...whole and big. Everything was just better. We’ll make your new home feel like that, I promise,” he said.

She dragged her palm across the tops of the grass blades.

“Was there anything good about the Compound, the church, I mean?”

She stilled and looked through him, frowning. “It made me dream about the galaxy, about what else might be out there. It’s strange to live in just a tiny room and then spend all your time thinking about someplace else.”

He squeezed the ground, his fingernails catching dirt, his palm damp with crushed green.

#

He ran. Faster than he ever knew he could, further than he knew his feet could carry him, he ran. His legs were figments, without pain and wound up separate from him, they kept moving. He couldn’t feel the air gushing in and out of his lungs, he could barely see gravel flicking out from under his feet, the cars driving past him, or the houses shifting beside him. All he could think of was the phone call he’d had fifteen minutes ago, Ryan yelling in his ear that Grace had gone to his mother, that CPS was on the way. So he was running.

Ryan’s trailer came into view: the yellowed slats, the rundown car sitting up against the curb, a police car parked behind it, and Ryan’s mother leaning her hip on a cracking railing on the porch speaking to a policeman wearing sunglasses. Ryan clutched a skateboard near a mesquite tree further from the house, and Grace—in her old off-white dress, a bonnet on her head—was ushered into a van by a stout woman in a suit.

Ryan spotted Javier and jogged towards him. Javier was trying to remember how to scream, how to open his mouth and say anything. He was trying to remember how to shout Grace’s name, how it formed in his mouth. Ryan reached him two trailers down, just as Grace had disappeared into the van.

“It’s too late, man. She said she ran away from home and that she’d been hiding in the shed,” Ryan said.

Javier wheezed and slowed, Ryan’s hand wrapped around his upper arm. “We have to...we have to—”

“There’s nothing we can do,” he cut Javier off.

Javier lost feeling in everything but the tips of his fingers. He suddenly knew he needed to feel Grace’s hair on his fingers; he would die if he couldn’t brush strands of her hair. He kept walking forward, dragging Ryan behind him.

“We can’t say anything or do anything. We’ll get in trouble too,” Ryan hissed.

Javier kept moving. The police officer walked down the steps to his cop car. The stout woman said something into the van and then turned back to Ryan’s mother. Javier was close now, close enough to see shadows inside the van, but the woman’s words were nothing more than murmurs lost to the hot air. The cop car started slowly down the street and then turned right and disappeared.

Shaking Ryan off violently, Javier ran again. This time there was pain everywhere, but he ignored it. He saw Grace press her head against the back of the van. Her body and face were as ghostly through the tinted window as she’d been when he first saw her through the Compound fence in the middle of the night. He heard Ryan’s mom shout something, her tone startled, just as the stout woman stepped into the van, closed her door, and turned it on.

He was close enough to see Grace’s mouth through the back windshield as the vehicle started rolling forward. She was repeating one word over and over and over. He thought that maybe it looked like ‘thanks’ or maybe even ‘love’.

As the van turned and disappeared, Javier's mind emptied. He felt himself walking toward the shed, even as Ryan's mom called out his name. He flung open the now unlocked door and found all of Gina's clothes sprawled across the ground. The sheets were shoved in a ball in one corner, and several markers were scattered on shelves, between cans of food. Her drawings though, they were everywhere. Flowers, and cacti, and houses—dozens of houses were everywhere. He could see windows peeking out from under cans of food, so he shoved the food onto the ground. Shelf after shelf, he knocked over bags of oats, and cans, and even jars of fruit that burst and shattered when they hit the ground. He felt something sharp slash at his shin, but he kept shoving things aside.

One shelf was covered with pictures of school buildings. Another had houses of all sizes. On another was a picture of Javier's room—his desk, his bed, the pen from his desk that she'd looked at. And near the floor, the bottom shelf to the right, he found a picture of himself and her, lying on the grass. Beneath it, she'd written, *Maybe it does exist.*

#

Back home, Alejandra was out with friends and his mamá was laying in her room because light and standing up and noises and talking and being a mamá and being without her husband and everything made her head feel like it might explode. Paulina was in the kitchen trying to read recipes and do her math homework at the same time.

And his papá was still in a cell a few miles away where fences and brick walls and men with guns all told him he could only see his papá on certain days of the week.

So in the middle of the night, he left and went back to the Compound where he

found Grace. His heart pounded as he thought of the men who had chased them beyond the edge of the fences as she fled, but he had no one to protect with him this time. He approached the fence, looming and gray in the darkness of night. The buildings sat like quiet mountains behind them, impenetrable and unbreakable with no windows, blocked by cacti and trees so thick and dense, he couldn't see through them to any doors or entryways that might've sat behind them.

He stood there, just watching, hot night air drying the inside of his cheeks. But then, after a few minutes, he could see the yellow of someone's eyes breaking through the shadows of the trees. He wondered vaguely if he should turn and run, if they had scouts watching for someone now. But the movement of the eyes was unhurried, and his fear was replaced with anticipation.

In glimpses through branches, he could see a white sleeve and a curve and a mouth. A woman was walking quietly towards him, her body covered in a long white dress that dragged over twigs and branches in the dark. Her form developed as she stepped through the brush to stand before him. Her hair disappeared into the blackness of night over her shoulders. Her mouth was a wide straight line. She wasn't blooming out of the night the way Grace had, she was fading into it.

"I was wondering if you'd return," the woman said.

Day of the Dying

Alejandra

Alejandra saw a dead animal on I-10 when she was ten. Road kill, except that instead of a rabbit or something small like she'd seen before, it was a dog. Her papá drove by it and when she realized what it was—that flash of red matted fur and rotated limbs—she suddenly knew that it had been an animal, a living animal, something vibrant and warm with a heartbeat. She thought there was something strange about Día de los Muertos after that—to think of a past relative as something stable and unchanged. Like something in a photo album, as if the body would halt and still just before tragedy transformed it. That was the way her mamá had described her own papá on Día de los Muertos—muscular and bowlegged with piercing brown eyes—not the man he was in the end: bent and aching, and riddled with pink patches from skin cancer.

Her mind went to the dead dog when her older sister, Paulina, pulled Javier and Alejandra from class one day in early November. Paulina then stopped in a fast food parking lot because Alejandra wouldn't stop demanding her older sister to just, for fuck's sake, tell them why she pulled them out of class.

“They put the death penalty on the table,” Paulina said as she parked sideways in the lot, her sun tinted eyes only visible in the rearview mirror.

The dog. All Alejandra could see was the dog, looking like anything but an

animal.

“What does that mean?” Javier asked, looking between his two older sisters.

“I didn’t want to do it this way,” Paulina sighed and turned sharply, her blue sundress creasing against the seatbelt.

Alejandra shook her head and clicked her teeth. Javier knew what it meant, he was fourteen, only two years younger than her. He got it. He just wouldn’t see it, so she’d have to explain it. “It means that when the jury convicts our dad for murdering that druggie, he’ll probably die too.”

“Ali!”

“What? There’s no point dragging this out. It’s the truth,” she said.

Paulina put a hand on Javier’s knee. “That’s not true. It’s just a possibility. Even if it happened, we’d be able to appeal it.”

Javier nodded and then turned toward the window. Alejandra wondered if she was wrong, maybe he was young enough to believe in their papá.

#

Alejandra grew up on the smell of her best friend’s mom’s menthols and the taste of sardines with mustard. In her own home, lemon permeated from the corners of the apartment, and she found that it made the space that five people shared much smaller. So, she frequently slept over at Jenny’s apartment where the gurgling of a fish tank was louder than anyone’s breathing in the middle of the night. Lately though, Alejandra stayed home, breathing through the screen on her window before falling asleep. And Jenny seemed less inclined to invite her over.

Alejandra had begun to put music between her and others. To stop the

acquaintances she barely knew who asked her personal questions about her papá, she wore red and black headphones that matted her short, brown hair in the packed school hallways and between the school buildings. People thought she would never catch them staring, as if listening to music kept her from seeing. The metal clash of drums could be turned up so loud that it would make her jaw vibrate. The only person that still occasionally braved her bitch-face was Jenny. Between Math and English class, she tapped Alejandra on the shoulder.

Wrapping her headphones around her neck, Alejandra paused in the second-floor hallway. Students dwindled in the hallway as minutes of passing period ended.

“I just wanted to know how you are. People are asking, you know, if you’re ok,” she said. The lace of her eggshell skirt cut a dyed Easter egg line against the baby pink hue on her legs. Her eyes were the same green as the veins in her wrist. She tilted her head to the side and nodded sympathetically.

Jenny didn’t sympathize. She and Alejandra drew tiny dicks on seniors’ cars with dry erase markers and made fun of the bouncing moans that came from the band room. Jenny licked brownie batter out of the bowl while telling Alejandra to stop complaining about her fat thighs and just eat fewer burgers. She laughed when Alejandra told her to fuck herself.

“They can mind their own fucking business,” Alejandra said. The skin on her friend’s face looked different, pity etched into places it didn’t belong. It was this look, this new face, that Alejandra wanted to stay away from.

Jenny nodded, as if she didn’t understand that Alejandra was telling her this too. “I saw this really cool line on a TV show, about how sometimes people hurt others to

protect the people they love. Maybe that's why—”

If Jenny said that her papá killed a man, Alejandra could hit her. Jenny had thin limbs that Alejandra was certain would snap into right angles if she hit the ground just right. She could claw at her face, find a way to peel the pity away. It might be true, but this girl with her white-pink skin and her bauble earrings and bubble gum lips couldn't say it. But she didn't finish the sentence anyway. “Anything else?”

“Maybe they just want to know,” Jenny said, her eyes wide with exaggerated innocence.

“They can read the newspaper. They have TVs. Plenty of people speculating on TV,” Alejandra lifted her headphones.

Jenny tweaked her blonde hair impatiently. “Don't you think some of them deserve more than that? Like deserve to know what's really going on?”

“Excuse me?” Alejandra froze with her hands at the back of her head.

Jenny crossed her arms and scowled. “I ate dinner with your family all the time and I rode in his car for field trips! Don't I deserve to know if I passed salad to a murderer?”

“Are you really that stupid?” Alejandra's fingernails pressed into the cushion of her ear padding.

“I just mean—”

“Go fuck yourself,” Alejandra said and put her headphones back in. She turned around without looking back at Jenny, but she doubted that the girl was laughing.

#

Her mamá was vomiting in the kitchen sink which was filled with festive red plates and

blue plastic cups. Alejandra could see her mamá's head bent over the sink from her position around the corner of the hallway. She could still step back. She could turn around and her mamá would never know she was there.

Alejandra leaned back to pivot away, and the floor creaked underneath her feet.

Her mamá swung her head around and gazed at Alejandra. Surprise transformed into fear in her yellow-brown eyes. Strings of gray hair pulled loose like static from her bun and she shook her head slightly, as if uncertain about what she was seeing.

“Ali,” she said, her voice raw. She gripped the Formica, hovering unsteady on her feet. Her face was wretched, twitching.

Alejandra searched for a feeling, something like compassion, but disgust pressed into a knot inside of her. The air smelled sour.

“There's no need to tell them. Javi or Paulina. Just some bad food. No les digas,” her mamá said.

“Ok,” Alejandra said, resolutely not looking at the bottle of wine sitting empty on the counter.

“They'd worry for nothing,” she said. She turned on the water and splashed some on her face.

Alejandra saw herself digging, asking her mamá if she was ok, if she could help. But her lips were clumsy and thick, and she was trying not to gag from the sour smell and the orange lipstick that made a web around her mamá's mouth. Her mamá's lie made it easier for her to breathe.

#

Alejandra was a prankster, she had been one since middle school—grabbing teacher's

glasses and hanging them from the cord on the projector screen, snagging people's school IDs and drawing horns on them. When the gray security guard with a bum hip spotted her running out of the boy's locker room with the tarantula mascot mask on her head, and the body of it under her arm, four of its legs dragging behind her, he practically tackled her. She ended up sprawled on the ground with gravel rubbed into her elbows. After he pulled the mask from her head, he eased her up and patted her shoulder.

"Everything will work out ok," he said, ushering her towards the office. Since her papá was arrested, the teachers acted as if her behavior was new, as if it was in response to life's circumstances. The guard stared at her for a while before leaving her in the hallway by the principal's office.

She sat hunched over the tarantula head on a purple bench, the body to her left. After a few minutes an older, tall boy she'd seen around school that was often wearing tie-dye shirts and what looked like old military surplus pants sat down on her right. He was jittery with long brown hair, and was always shouting in the lunchroom about some cause or another. Once he'd had a sign that had said "Eggs=Ovum=Fetuses, WOULD YOU EAT A FETUS?" She couldn't tell if it was a vegan thing or a pro-life thing. Someone would've probably messed with him for being so weird, but he had the size of a football player. A couple people called him a pussy, but it never got physical.

She tried to keep her eyes on the tarantula eyes, but she could feel this guy staring at her. Considering whether or not he was crazy enough to start something right outside the principal's office, she looked straight at him, dug her fingernails underneath a tarantula eye and pulled one off. He grinned wider than a canine and he nodded as if they were co-conspirators. His green eyes shifted from the costume to Alejandra and then back

again.

“Nice! Down with fascist public education.”

Alejandra glared at him. “Actually, I’m a furry and I didn’t have a costume, but then I got tackled for it so…”

“No right way to love,” he nodded sincerely and his knee started twitching.

“Are you for fucking real?”

He nodded.

She dropped her head onto her lap and hit the remaining seven eyes against her forehead. “I gotta get out of here.”

“Let’s do it. Fuck ‘em. They can’t keep us here. Let’s go,” he said slapping his knee.

Alejandra looked at the door of the office and then down the hallway. She supposed she had no reason to stay, but she also didn’t have a way to leave. “It’s not like I have an exit strategy,” she said, leaning back into her seat.

“I’ve got a car. This isn’t a prison—yet,” he said. He stood up and grabbed the body of the costume. “Don’t forget the last eye.”

Alejandra looked around to see if the security guard was nearby—she didn’t really want to get tackled again--but when no one materialized, she grabbed the googly eye and the mask and followed him. They ran through the office, dodging a woman holding paperwork, and ignoring a man yelling at them from the front door. They made it outside and the sun tinted everything yellow.

“My truck’s in the third row,” he said, as the tarantula legs bounced up and down on the sidewalk.

#

He took her to his home, a small house with an adobe facade near the box stores and the southern hills of Verde Canyon. The acacia and prickly pear cacti grew so thick in his yard that you couldn't see the short house from the neighborhood road. When he pulled his truck up to the front door, gravel crunching underneath the tires, her ribs tightened around her lungs. She wondered what he might want from her—this senior boy with so many causes. Her palms slipped against the seatbelt as she got out.

Inside, she sat in the living room on a blue couch patched with duct tape, beside a table with uneven legs. There were unopened bills and dozens of catalogues sprawled across the table. Detailed paintings of tigers hung on the walls and the room was lit with wooden lamps. The boy, Mark—she had suddenly remembered his name—was shuffling around in the kitchen. “Do you want anything to drink?”

“I could do with a beer,” she called and when he didn't respond, “or a Coke.”

“My mom's thirty-sixth boyfriend refuses to live in a house with Coke. But I do have Sprite,” he said. He walked in the living room and handed her a can before sitting on the table opposite her.

“Your mom has had thirty-six boyfriends?” Alejandra asked, taking the Sprite and popping the tab open.

“Nah, she's had way more than that. I just didn't bother to start counting until I was eight or nine.” He smiled, a divot forming under his left eye. He leaned down and put his elbows on his knees, bringing his face uncomfortably close to hers. Close enough to see the shades of moss in his eyes.

She was aware of his size, but not frightened. He was looking at her too closely

though—like he might fish for the thoughts inside her head. “Look, thanks for the escape and all, but why did you—”

“You’re bleeding. That security guard took you down hard,” he said, looking down at her elbows and then standing up. “I’ll grab some bandages and stuff.”

He left the room before she could word her question right. *What did he want from her?* That’s what she wanted to ask. A story? To hook up? There were prettier girls. She stood up and walked up to one of the tiger paintings. The painting stretched between two windows, it must’ve been wider than she was tall. The tiger was stretched out across a patch of yellow grass, its mouth wide in a yawn or a growl.

“Those were painted by boyfriend twenty-three. But don’t tell thirty-six that,” Mark said, walking in, carrying a brown bottle, some cotton balls, and a few Band-Aids.

“It’s really not that bad,” Alejandra said.

He gestured with his head towards the kitchen, his ponytail falling over his shoulder. She sighed, followed him in, and stood by the sink. He put the cotton and Band-Aids on the counter but held onto the peroxide. She reached for it, but he ignored her and opened the bottle.

“Lean your arm into the sink,” he said.

She did reluctantly and then hissed as the liquid bubbled down her elbow. “Why are you doing this?”

“Because you can’t reach your elbow,” he said, grinning.

Alejandra rolled her eyes. “Seriously.”

He shrugged and patted her elbow with cotton. “Yesterday, I went to brunch with an old lady I met on the bus. She was always carrying around bags and bags of stuff.

Turns out she's trying to give away everything she owns to help people before her kids try to claim it as inheritance. She says they have plenty, but they're spoiled. She was a civil rights lawyer in her day."

She winced as he placed a Band-Aid over the biggest scrape. "Are you comparing me to a crazy bag lady?"

"No," he said impatiently, "I'm just saying, why does anyone do anything?"

"Ok," she said, curious about his changing mood.

"You think I'm weird," he said, gathering the used cotton balls in his hands. She winced as her blood got on his thumb. She didn't respond and he threw the trash in a garbage can next to the refrigerator. "It's ok. I don't mind being weird."

"Do you even know who I am?" Alejandra asked him.

"There are under three hundred juniors. Of course I know who you are."

"Ok," she said again, suspicious.

"Look, I can take you home if you want to go," he said.

She thought about home. The apartment where Paulina moped in bed half of the day and Javier stole their papá's mail. She wondered how long it would be before she caught her mom drinking in the bathroom. "No, let's hang out."

#

In the middle of the night, Alejandra would wake up crying. The dampness of her pillowcase would startle her awake and she would wonder for a second why the ceiling was dripping before she could feel tears catching between a mole and her cheekbone. Paulina woke to the noise once, but Alejandra just pretended to snore until Paulina's breathing smoothed back into the cadence of sleep.

Alejandra hated that she cried in her sleep. She hated the warm liquid and the way it turned cold under the whip of the fan blades. Her face became tight and her eyelids felt like dried fruit. She thought that they must look like her mamá's eyes in the mornings, misshapen with wrinkles and raw meat pinks. The color of everything else in her mamá was leaching, she would be blank and empty soon if she wasn't careful.

But Alejandra wasn't sad, so why should she wake up crying? She knew sadness, from when her friend told her that she'd had an abortion—they sat in the grocery store parking lot and the girl squeezed Alejandra's wrist and sobbed against the window while the radio played a song about getting high. And she knew sadness from watching her mamá and abuelo through a crack in a doorway—when her mamá folded over to lay her head on her papá's shoulder, his pain wrinkling his skin like crumpled paper.

This wasn't sadness. Throughout the day, her heart would suddenly start burning and hitting her chest so hard that she thought it must have been made out something much denser than tissue and muscle. Her teeth would clash together so that she became familiar with their ridges and she could barely contain herself in silence. She was so filled with fury. But she was not sad. She was not grieving.

Yet at night, she would wake in tears, the wall blurry with water, her head aching and heavy. It was the room, she was sure of it. He was everywhere in the room. He had been in jail for over two weeks, but he was still here. She could see her papá in the sketches on her bedroom wall, in the dresses hanging in her closet, in the wall paint, in the drawer knobs, the duffel bag, the bed, the light bulbs, everything. He was in everything. He had waited for Paulina and Alejandra to argue over the color and then he painted their room in stripes, he had picked up a duffel bag second-hand so that she could

go camping with Jenny, he had changed their light bulbs just as they were reading before bed, singing all the while, and then teasing them while they complained that they'd lost their spots on the page. He was all over the room. And she couldn't stand it. She wanted him out of her space, the way she knew he would be out of her life forever. She imagined a new room with sterile, plastic furniture from Ikea catalogues, in a new apartment that sat between green, mossy trees instead of washes flush with nothing but browns. Then finally she fell asleep.

#

During lunch break, Alejandra sat alone. Jenny started avoiding her, so Alejandra sat at the table closest to the door and the trashcans with her headphones screaming Metallica. The closer she sat to the middle of the lunch room, the more people stared at her, the more whispers she could hear when she took off her head phones to untangle them. From where she sat at the periphery, the bright light of the sun highlighted gum stuck to the table and made the puddle of grease on her quesadilla shine.

She was halfway through when Mark climbed into a chair on the opposite side of the table. He set down a sign that read, "Prison work is the new slave work," and then pulled a wrapped-up burrito from his pocket. "Hey," he shouted loud enough that she could hear it over the drum solo.

"Hey," she said, looking suspiciously at the sign. She turned down her music but didn't take the headphones out.

He ate quietly for a minute, and she kept glancing at him out of the corner of her eye. She barely ate any of her quesadilla. Finally, she decided the quiet was worse than talking. She put her headphones on the table.

“Well?” she asked, motioning to him with a piece of tortilla in hand.

“Well, what?” he said, a mouth full of burrito.

“What do you want to fucking know?” she asked exasperated.

His eyebrows slid apart and he looked between her and her quesadilla. “...about what?”

“Oh, come on, that’s why you’re here, right? You might as well admit it. You want to know about my dad’s trial.”

“Nah, I’m good. If you really need to talk, I can listen, but I have class in just a few minutes anyway,” he said, stuffing a quarter of the burrito into his mouth in a single bite.

She stared at him and listened to a drop of grease from her quesadilla splatter on the table.

“I’m going downtown this afternoon. There’s an art sale fundraiser for getting kids free breakfast in schools. Wanna go?” he asked. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

“How did you get into all of this stuff?”

“Boyfriend four thought that living for himself made him empty and living for others filled him up. Guess some of it stuck,” he said.

Maybe that’s why he was trying to hang out with her. Maybe she was right the first time. It was possible she was just a charity case. She looked at him, his face open and smooth, his eyes glowing green. She couldn’t find cracks and crevices for pity to fill.

“Alright, I’ll go.”

#

Alejandra remembered family dinners, late ones starting well after nine, so that her mamá had time to shower and cook after work. Her mamá said she couldn't stand smelling like someone else's house when she was feeding her own family. So they always ate that late. Napkins folded, fresh glasses without Chapstick stains from earlier in the day, and kid's placemats that mapped out American geography with cartoons. Her mamá found them entertaining even when the three kids outgrew them.

Javier used to fall asleep at the table, his elbow in his dirty napkin, his short hair poking through his stretched fingers. Alejandra remembered her family's smiles at dinner as if they were flat—like the ones on sitcoms. And the images were starting to flicker out too, as if static was making their faces fuzzy.

Her mamá didn't cook anymore. Alejandra thought that maybe she didn't know how to cook yet without thinking of her husband. So lately Alejandra just stayed out until after dinner would've ended. Then she'd scrounge for canned food after her mamá went to her room. But that night, Paulina and her mamá were still in the kitchen talking when Alejandra got home. She tried to walk quietly through the hallway, so that they wouldn't draw her in, but Paulina said her name before she got to her room. Alejandra stepped in front of the refrigerator, her face blank.

“We need to talk about tomorrow,” her mamá said.

“Ok,” Alejandra said.

Paulina put a hand on their mamá's shoulder and then took a deep breath. “The trial starts next week.”

“I want to go,” Alejandra said immediately. It would be strange to watch her papá sitting in a courtroom—she knew that just the position in the room made a person look

guilty. But she had to watch the minutes, to see how a couple of lawyers and twelve random people would decide her papá's life, and decide her family's life as well.

Their mamá shook her head immediately. "No, no, Ali, definitely not."

"But, mamá, necesito—"

"No, Alejandra," she said sharply.

"That's it? Are you fucking kidding me? This is my life too!" She kicked the refrigerator behind her.

"Ali, we need you here. We need you to look over Javier. I can fill you in," Paulina said softly.

"Javi is fourteen. He can take care of himself."

"This isn't a discussion. You're not going. Your papá doesn't think you should either," her mamá said.

Alejandra could feel words rise like bile, words that her mamá shouldn't have had to hear, but she said them anyway. The fury from the night was eating through her chest.

"Great, well, the moment I start listening to a murderer, I'll let you know."

Her mamá sobbed, a noise that should've cut into her, but it was swallowed by her anger. Paulina said her name, but she could barely hear anything over the roaring blood in her ears. She left them in the kitchen—her mamá leaning over the counter sobbing, her sister holding her mamá up—and went to her bedroom, slamming the door behind her.

#

Mark told Alejandra stories about his mom's boyfriends and she would rate them in comparison to her own family. The guy who stole all of Mark's clothing to give to a son

he had with another woman was like a six compared to her papá being on trial for murder. Most of his stories were just odd though, and her ranking system fell apart. Nothing really compared to murder. She hadn't met his mother yet and she was curious what the woman saw in them. "They all had something interesting to give. The guy who played competitive table tennis also tutored me in math."

Mark usually had some event to go to, like a radical book club or volunteering somewhere, and she started going with him. Not that she participated much—the event coordinator would sometimes glare at her—but she really didn't feel like being in the apartment anymore than she had to be. The days passed in silence as the trial went on, as if her family couldn't remember how to speak to one another. Anything was better than being home, but Alejandra hated Mark's few shifts in the soup kitchen. She'd just stand at the counter beside Mark who doled out mashed potatoes from a bucket.

On a Tuesday afternoon, a man wearing a parka and scarf even though the December afternoon was a sunny sixty-five degrees, walked up with a tray. Mark served him potatoes and he continued down the line.

Alejandra pressed her cuticles back as the man walked to the bread bin. "This is boring."

Mark banged his spoon on the edge of the bucket and she jumped. "That's it," he snapped, grabbing the side of her shirt and sliding her across the counter until she slid off the other side.

She landed wobbly on her feet. "What the fuck, Mark?"

"Here, hand out corn," he said. He handed her a pair of rubber gloves and a hairnet. After she put on the gloves, he motioned at the ladle in the vegetable bucket.

“Fine.”

He ignored her and kept talking. “If you come with me tomorrow to the protest, you’ll have to hold a sign this time. It’s against the rally happening at the border. Everyone’s afraid of Juarez.”

Alejandra let go of her spoon. “That’s where my papá is from.”

He paused for a second, his green eyes resting flatly on her. She wanted to shrug off his gaze. “I wondered what city he was from,” he said.

“Guess the drug connection is easier to see, right? The murderer from Juarez. Not super shocking.” She heard the bitterness in her voice and part of her wished that she could smother it, while the other half curled around it, enveloped and nurtured that feeling.

“You don’t think he did it,” he said it as if it was a question.

“When the sun is out, you call it day. It’s pretty fucking obvious. I’m not gonna delude myself like Javier,” she said.

“Alejandra...”

She cut in, “One of my friends said that sometimes people hurt others to protect their family. Do you think that a person can hurt another out of love for his family?”

His mossy eyes blinked shut and she watched him shake his head. “Not unless they were trying to hurt one of you directly,” he said softly.

“Yeah, I didn’t think so either,” she said.

A woman with brown matted hair and a bandana around her neck came up to them and smiled. They both put food on her plate. “God bless,” she said and walked off.

“I gotta get out of here,” Alejandra said. She took off her hairnet and walked out of the soup kitchen without looking back at Mark.

#

In their bedroom, Paulina stood at their shared desk and shuffled through piles of papers. Her back was to the door and her long brown hair hung in shiny waves down her narrow shoulders. Alejandra sat down on her bed and kicked off her boots, watching her sister.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m just trying to clear some stuff up,” Paulina said. There was a pitch in her voice that Alejandra didn’t recognize.

Alejandra stood up to look at the papers over her sister’s shoulders. She could see clips of college names on the tops of brochures. Paulina pounded the stack on the desk so that they were even and then she dropped them in the small, wired trashcan by the desk.

“Is the trial going that badly?” Alejandra asked.

Paulina shook her head and cleared her throat. She turned around to face her sister and smiled. The look struck Alejandra as completely absurd—her gold-brown eyes slick and her face tight, a few more brochures clenched so tightly in her fist that they were folding over. “No, it’s just that when he gets off there’ll still be a lot to pay off. Lawyer fees and all that,” Paulina said.

“I don’t believe you,” Alejandra said.

Paulina brought the back of her hand to her mouth, the crumpled brochures protruding out of her fist. She shook her head and tears streaked down her cheek. “It’s just so awful. There are fingerprints, you know? Because the weapon was from the garden shed where papá worked.”

Alejandra wanted to put an arm around her sister. She wanted Paulina's tears to smooth away, but the fury was expanding. It was filling her hands and legs, like deadweight, she found that she couldn't lift her arms.

#

On the day her mamá scheduled the family to go visit their papá in jail, Alejandra snuck off to go see Mark instead. She couldn't look at her papá before the verdict, she couldn't see him in between not guilty and guilty. In the jail, with the jumpsuit, he looked like a criminal, and the evidence certainly seemed that way too. But if she saw him, with the loving brown eyes and wide smiling jaw of her papá, she was afraid she might be blinded to reality.

She went to Mark's house without calling him first, and when she realized she didn't know what time his mom got home, she snuck around the side to his room. She picked her way around a few barrel cacti with their hooked spines and cholla clumps and then found her way to the window. The blinds were open, but the sun's glare made it almost impossible to see past the pane of glass. She cupped her hands and pressed against the window to check if he was in. After a second, her eyes adjusted and she saw him sitting at his desk, turned away from her, with a guitar on his lap. She was about to knock when she realized that he was shirtless and that there were red, puckered marks on his back. Spherical scars on his shoulders.

Her heart lurched into her throat as it occurred to her what this might look like. That she was spying and invading his privacy. She had only wanted to be somewhere else, anywhere else, while her family went to the jail.

She leaned away from the glass and started backing away towards the driveway.

But she saw the faint line of his body turn around just as she was trying to duck backwards under a saguaro arm. Before she could run further away, he opened the window.

He smiled, but the lines around his eyes were filled with something not quite right. Not pity, not like the fake sympathy from her friend or the students walking down the hallways at school. Something like wariness or pain. “I would’ve let you in the front door.”

“I wasn’t sure if your mom was here...I didn’t know if she cared if a friend came over,” she said lamely.

He stepped back so that she could climb in the window. She clamored in awkwardly and he didn’t hold out a hand to help her. Instead, he turned around and grabbed a shirt off of his messy bed. She looked at everything but him. The guitar lying on top of a pile of clothing on his bed, a poster of John Lennon hanging on his wall, and his backpack and notebooks sprawled across the floor by his desk.

“What’s up?” he asked and sat on the bed. His green eyes kept glancing from her to his things, as if measuring the boundary of her body against his space.

She stood, aware of how much she clashed with the room—she had no affinity with his hobbies and every cynical thought she had was counter to his optimism. Her presence was an intrusion, she was an invasive species. “I’m sorry. I should’ve texted. I’ll go.”

He closed his eyes and wrapped his hair in a cord that he untied from around his wrist. “You don’t have to go. Seriously, it’s fine. You came for a reason, right?”

She shook her head, and then he did. It was a stupid lie, she realized. But she

couldn't stop picturing the marks on his shoulders—it was confusing the thoughts in her head. “They're all at the jail right now.”

He sighed and laid back on his bed. “This city sucks.”

She took a couple steps to the desk and leaned against it. She wanted to ask him about the scars. A burning sensation flooded her stomach and she wondered if she was no better than Jenny with her curiosity. She tried to focus on what Mark was saying.

“I'm going to leave as soon as I can,” she said.

“Same,” he paused and looked at her through narrow-slit eyes. “This one's ok, you know?”

“What?” she asked, looking down at the pens on his desk.

“Her boyfriend now. He's ok. You don't have to worry.”

She nodded. The backs of her eyes were burning too.

“And it doesn't matter anyway.”

“What do you mean?”

He reached behind his pillow and pulled out an envelope. He sat up and tapped it on his leg. “My mom left. She put this on my pillow a few weeks ago.”

“What do you mean? Like on a trip?”

“No. She's gone for good. She left me this note and then she skipped town with her boyfriend. I've just been trying to figure out when to go too. Figured I'd stay until the utilities shut off.”

But the tiger paintings, and the lamps, and everything else seemed to have a place in this house. “But all her stuff is still here, isn't it?”

“Her room is empty.”

He handed her the letter, but she couldn't read the words. Panic rippled in her stomach and she wondered if this meant he was leaving. She felt it show on her face and she didn't care. "Your graduation is next semester though."

"I'm not staying that long."

"When?"

"A week, maybe a little longer. But it depends on you."

"What do you mean?"

"It depends on if you want to come with me."

She looked up from the letter abruptly, not certain what to say. She handed back the letter.

"Think about it," he said.

She nodded and ran a finger over the edge of his desk. "What's your mom like?"

"Lonely," he smiled and the lines around his eyes were empty again, "Just like everyone else."

She nodded. It seemed true enough.

#

During deliberation, Alejandra took Javier out to Diego's Taco Shop where community college kids bought tacos as prevention against hangovers and burritos as cures. Paulina had texted her that the jury went into deliberation in the afternoon, but as of six pm they still hadn't reached a verdict yet, and Alejandra couldn't bear the way that Javier was staring at the black screen of their television. He picked a bacon breakfast burrito and she carried that and her tacos de carnitas to a plastic yellow booth by the window. Javier filled extra-large cups with cola and then met her at the table.

What passed for rush hour traffic sped south on the two-lane road, setting sunlight flickering off darkened windows and side view mirrors. In the distance, the mountains were beginning to purple in the rise of darkness. The restaurant was almost empty, but it would fill soon with teenagers avoiding their parents and preteens looking to sneak horchata into movie theaters. Alejandra remembered doing both when Jenny and she were still friends, when her father still slept at home.

Javier unwrapped his burrito and looked at it. Alejandra picked up a taco and then set it back down. Either the jury would decide soon, or they would have to start again in the morning. That much Paulina had told her.

She stared at her brother. His face was blank, but she could see the terror underneath. The stillness read like a boy who was afraid that his entire world would fall apart with a single breath blown the wrong way. She wondered if he would ever move again if they convicted their papá.

She wanted to offer him something. That their dad would get out or that she would be by his side when it was all over no matter what. But she didn't know how to lie that big. "I could get you drunk, if that would help. I know some people with fakes. We can just forget all this for tonight and then wake up and it'll be over."

"I just want to go home," he said.

"Eat a few bites and then I'll take you home," she said.

"I'll just throw it up."

She shrugged and tried to eat a bite of her taco. She'd never noticed before then that the carnitas tasted like flesh.

When they left, he vomited on the sidewalk.

“We’ll take some pm meds when we get home,” she said, patting his back as he doubled over.

He nodded and spit on the ground a few times. She handed him back his horchata, and then they drove back to their apartment.

They brought their blankets into the living room and took a Tylenol pm. Javier found cartoons online that they used to watch when they were little and they laughed sleepily at animals doing slapstick comedy. Alejandra turned the volume up loudly so that she wouldn’t have to hear her own thoughts.

She had almost fallen asleep when she heard the sound of the key in the lock of the front door. Javier and she moved upright, but neither walked to the door. After a few seconds of jingling, the door swung open and they saw Paulina holding their mamá up. Paulina was white and their mamá was shaking. They looked at Javier and Alejandra, their perfectly matching gold-brown eyes wide and filled with an uncertainty that stretched deep into the future.

Alejandra turned to her brother. “Well?” he asked, as if he couldn’t see what was right in front of them.

“He lost, but there will be an appeal,” Paulina said, her voice cracking.

The fury that had built up inside of Alejandra, that coated her insides like slick insoluble oil, seemed to stretch inside of her. It pulsed and searched for a target, but she couldn’t even decide who to hate. Her papá? The jury? Her mamá for making Paulina tell them? The drug trade that created this? Soon she would hate everything.

Javier swayed on his feet for a minute and then ran out the door, ducking around Paulina’s outstretched arm. They all called for him, even Alejandra, but he didn’t turn

back. He would return by morning though, Alejandra was certain. She had seen it in his eyes even as their sister told them the verdict. He still thought that his papá was innocent.

She looked around at her mamá who was folding over on the couch, to her sister who was spreading a blanket across her, to the doorway where her brother was searching for solace in the night. There was nothing here for her. She could feel the fury leak as she realized that this wasn't her home anymore.

#

“Are you afraid of death?” Alejandra asked her papá at the table drilled to the floor in jail. He would be taken to the state penitentiary shortly, but for a moment she could see him fully.

She had left a note underneath the keys on the dining table at home and had sent a text to her brother. She would keep her phone as long as she could afford it, and when she couldn't, she'd be sure to keep in touch with Javi through pay phones. Her duffel bag—the one that her papá bought her—was in Mark's truck and he was waiting for her in the parking lot while she said goodbye to her papá.

“I'm afraid of not seeing you,” he said, putting his chin on the back of his broad hand so that she could see his palm.

She looked at the lines in his hand and wondered if they would tell her the date that he would die. “You know how on Día de los Muertos, everyone pulls out photographs of the dead from when they were young and beautiful?”

“Yes, m'ija?”

“Do you think the dead return to that? Do you think they look like that again?”

“I think it doesn't matter. You'll recognize my spirit.”

She touched the bottom of the partition. "I'm leaving, papá."

He smiled indulgently, like she was a child once more. "Is he good to you?"

"Who says I'm leaving with a boy?"

"Aren't you?"

"Sí, but not because of him," she said.

"Good. Are you going to marry him?" he teased.

She wanted to laugh, but her throat wouldn't open that way. "I barely know him."

His smile grew wide. "Liar. Be sure to put out a beer for me."

As she walked out, she realized she didn't know if he meant to put out a beer for him at the wedding he envisioned or on the next Día de los Muertos. She stepped into Mark's truck and he reached over and squeezed her wrist before putting his hand back on the steering wheel. She closed her eyes as he drove out of the parking lot, not wanting to envision the fences similar to the ones that would surround the place he'd live until he died. Instead, she imagined her papá with brighter eyes and darker hair, stronger and taller, so that she would recognize his spirit when it came.

Part Two: The Years Between

The Mourner

Paulina

Paulina and her mamá walked out of the church courtyard and into the dirt parking lot towards their car. The congregation dawdled behind them and Paulina imagined that their eyes followed them, as if even their religion was a performance. She held her mamá's elbow, a deep purple shawl making her fingers slip as they scuffed dust with their heels. She remembered her mamá as a sturdy woman who wore her graying hair in tight buns at the nape of her neck, but after Luis was arrested, she had begun to stoop. Paulina wondered if this premature aging would last.

“Fickle women,” her mamá said abruptly before they reached their beige sedan.

“Mamá, they might hear you.”

“No me importa. Do you remember before? Everyone was so certain he was innocent.”

Paulina bit her tongue between her molars. She hated the word ‘innocent’—what could it possibly refer to? If she'd learned anything in the past year and a half, it was that innocence and guilt meant nothing to everyday life. Even if innocence existed, only perception mattered. She pulled her keys from the small purse that hung down to the hem of her pale pink dress. “I remember.”

“All the food they brought? They called Luis a kind and gentle soul,” Rosa said shaking her head.

The car beeper was broken, so Paulina manually unlocked her mamá's door.

Paulina did not remember anyone who said that about her papá. She did remember the food. Piles and piles of it filling their freezer. Meat in every cranny and shelf. She couldn't even find her vegan burrito because there were so many dishes in the way. "It was a lot of food."

The conversation was repetitive; her mamá would make a comment about what her church friends used to think about her husband, then she'd come up with an example of their kindness, then finally, she'd criticize the way they behaved after Luis had been convicted of murder. Paulina didn't blame her mamá for the nature of the conversation, it had been months and the women still whispered about the trial in the church courtyard.

She got in the car and checked to see if her mamá's seatbelt was buckled. By the time she had started the car, the women in the courtyard were finally starting to disperse.

"They were all so certain. Then some made-up story from those damn lawyers and they all expect me to just condemn my husband. Dios sabe la verdad."

#

Paulina drove her younger brother, Javier, to school before going to work. She longed to go to school too, to enroll in community college courses until she could save enough money for the university. But without her papá's income as a groundskeeper, they didn't have enough money to pay for food, clothes, and bills, even after Alejandra had run away.

The drive was quiet. Her brother had always been introspective; he spoke so softly that she wasn't sure if he intended to be heard. And after their papá got arrested, he only withdrew more, and she found herself wondering what he was thinking. Sometimes she worried that he was hollow, that without their papá to breathe purpose into him,

Javier might drift through life empty and without convictions, until he woke up one day and asked himself if this was the man he envisioned himself becoming. But then he had moments of lucidity, moments of observation in which she imagined his eyes porous and absorbing everything around him.

Javier was fifteen, still on the shorter side but somehow gangly, and had a buzz cut through which you could make out the tan skin on his scalp. Paulina and Javier shared a long nose and gold-brown eyes, but his eyes were softer and wider. As she pulled up to the curb by his school, avoiding the students walking unconcernedly into the road, he fixed his eyes on her. “Shopping or a bridesmaid today?”

“Neither,” she said, smiling at him, “it’s a mourning gig today.”

He nodded. “I saw a couple tea bags in the cabinet yesterday. I think they were underneath a box of oatmeal.”

The tea bags helped her eyes after crying. “Thanks, Javier. I’ll be back at three to get you.”

“Don’t worry about it. I have my skateboard,” he said. Javier opened the car door and pulled out his black backpack and his old skateboard. Then he shut the door without saying goodbye.

Paulina watched him disappear in a group of kids and then she drove straight to the funeral home on the northeast side of town. She liked to spend a few minutes reading up on the client’s notes before the job. After she pulled into the parking spot furthest away from the intricately carved doorway, she let the car idle and turned on her mourning music—a list of songs her friend, Sarah, helped her compile mostly by brainstorming sad movie scenes. She smoothed her black skirt and opened the blank manila folder to read

up on Dr. Nathan Stewart.

Dr. Nathan Stewart was a cardiologist who played piano and liked to hunt on the weekends. He filled his private practice office with the mounted heads of various animals and only spent time with his children who hunted as well. Mrs. Stewart had told Paulina this. That, and he was not a well-liked man. Mrs. Stewart said that because of his arrogance and general obnoxious demeanor, many people would be amused by the irony that he had died of a heart attack. “Funerals are no place for irony—amusement isn’t dignified, sadness is. That’s where you come in, dear.”

They discussed various roles Paulina could play and finally settled on the daughter of a long time patient whom Dr. Stewart had saved. No one would know for certain that this was a lie since he’d had so many patients.

The final note Mrs. Stewart had given Paulina was that her husband cared little for love. “He venerated respect and decorum above all else.” Paulina would be able to employ soundless tears and would be sure to touch up her makeup immediately after the service. She closed the file and put it in the glove box, and then skipped to the last song on her mix, something by Chopin. She checked her black nylons for runs. The clients in this area paid for perfection. After a few seconds of deep breathing she turned off the car and walked to the ornate doorway where Mrs. Stewart was welcoming guests.

“I’m deeply sorry for your loss,” Paulina murmured softly, pausing to grip Mrs. Stewart’s hand.

The woman’s hazel eyes flickered nervously over Paulina’s face. It wasn’t unusual for a client to get cold feet and Paulina found that in those cases, it was best not to linger. She stepped into the room and the muted light cast shadows on the burgundy-

cushioned benches. After spotting space near the front, she sat down and began to gaze pensively towards the podium. Once the room filled and relatives began to speak, Paulina pictured a day when she was ten-years-old. Her papá showed her a black and white photograph of a young boy sitting by a man with a mustache in front of a small shack. “That’s me in Juarez when I was your age,” he told Paulina, pulling her onto his lap. Paulina remembered thinking that the large mustache was funny, but she tried not to laugh.

“Who’s that?” she asked, pointing to the older man. She could see the white buttons on his shirt even in the small photograph.

“My papá,” he said, smiling, smoothing his eyebrows with his fingers.

“Where does he live?”

“He’s still in Mexico. He helped me escape and then there was some trouble, so he stayed behind.”

“We could go to Mexico, and then help him escape too,” Paulina said, looking up at her papá.

“Maybe one day,” he said, kissing the top of her head. She knew by then that those words made things fuzzy, nebulous—improbable if not impossible. But she just nodded along with him.

Paulina allowed herself to think of the little things. The moments when her daughterhood was simple. The moments when she began to understand what words like ‘trouble’ really meant. These moments made for soft, dignified tears. She didn’t think about the big moments, like when someone mailed them a picture of the victim’s body or the phone call Javier got from their sister when she decided she wouldn’t be coming

home. Those moments made for uglier tears. The wake of an insecure woman's dental hygienist husband for example, or maybe for someone who had lived too quietly too far away to really make any kind of impression, required uglier tears.

#

At the wake, Paulina sipped wine to blend in with the crowd. She listened to the hunting stories of Dr. Stewart's bragging acquaintances. She consoled an elderly man who considered Nathan to be his favorite nephew. It was a particularly smooth job. People weren't suspicious of her, many of them wanted to be reassured in believing that despite Dr. Stewart's pompous and unfeeling demeanor, he made up for it because of the lives he saved.

Just after Mrs. Stewart told Paulina that it would be acceptable if she left, a young woman with pronounced features and black hair walked up beside her. Paulina had a picture of this woman in her file. This was one of the daughters. Alexis.

"I know who you really are," the woman whispered in Paulina's ear.

She had been so close to walking out the front door. Paulina tilted her head and formed an expression of sympathy, "Let's speak outside for a moment."

Alexis took long strides ahead of Paulina and led her out the front door. Paulina grabbed her black shawl on the way out, hoping she wouldn't have to return after she dealt with this confrontational daughter. The woman leaned against a cream pillar, the color contrasting sharply with the black lace dress she wore. She leaned her head back and clicked her tongue. "My mom hired you, didn't she?"

Paulina didn't say anything. She'd seen a direct lie cause as many problems as confessing the truth.

“God, what a joke. Even after he’s dead my mom is still trying to pretend that they have a perfect life. Don’t worry, I won’t say anything. You can relax,” she said.

“I’m truly sorry for your loss, Alexis,” Paulina said.

Alexis’ green eyes flared wide. “How do you know my name?”

“It’s my job,” Paulina said apologetically.

“Right. Do you mind if I ask you a question?”

Paulina gazed at her car for a fraction of a second. She was feet away from AC and a bottle of diet soda, but she turned back to the woman. “Of course not.”

“Hmm. Why this job?”

Paulina pressed the bottom of her foot down hard until she felt the heel of her shoe bend a little. She hated this question. Only rich people asked such a question. “I’m a failed actress.”

Alexis nodded, but Paulina could see that she didn’t believe the answer. She wondered if this woman would press her. People in mourning rarely followed convention, but Paulina wasn’t sure if this woman was in mourning. After a few seconds in silence, Alexis turned and walked back into the large house, shutting the door behind her.

#

Luis’ jumpsuit looked like plastic through the glass partition. His face shined, but was sallow, the skin beneath his brown eyes was tinged with blue, and he had let his facial hair grow to become disheveled. Paulina missed seeing him without a screen between them, she missed his heartbeat against her ear as she hugged him, but in that moment, she just wished that she could comb his hair and smooth and trim his beard. She sat down in a plastic chair across from him and smiled, hoping that he would believe it was real.

“Que bonita,” he said through the phone when she sat down.

She smiled and pressed the phone harder against her ear.

“How are you?” he asked.

“Good. Finished a gig this morning. How are you?”

He didn’t answer her question. He never answered that question. “Did you enroll in classes?”

“I will next semester.” She’d said that last semester too.

He smiled. “Aren’t we a pair? How’s your mamá? It’s been a while.”

Paulina bit her tongue between her molars. She knew her mamá hadn’t visited in a while and she didn’t encourage visits either. At least, not until after Javier graduated high school. After each visit, her mamá would forget how to be herself. She had to relearn how to wake up in the morning. How to move and drive without drinking.

“I’ve thought about divorcing her, you know,” Luis said softly.

“She would be devastated.”

“And she isn’t already?”

“This is suffering. She’s good at suffering. Like any good Catholic, she understands suffering,” Paulina said lightly.

Luis’ mouth was blocked by the phone, but she thought he might’ve smiled. She thought it was strange how she could only ever see part of him now. Either he was speaking and she couldn’t see half of his face, or he was leaning back, his legs blocked from view. She tried to decide if her reason for why he shouldn’t divorce Rosa made sense.

“The church. All she has is the church. You can’t take that away from her,” she

expanded.

“Alright.”

“Did you get another postcard?” Paulina asked.

He nodded. “Your sister’s somewhere in New Mexico.”

“Ok,” Paulina said. Maybe she should drive out to New Mexico. She thought about that a lot, tracking down her seventeen-year-old sister—even though Alejandra was legally old enough to be on her own. But what would Paulina be bringing her back to anyway?

Some visits, Paulina wanted to ask him if he did it, if he killed a man, just to hear him deny it. Truth wasn’t concrete and it wasn’t what she was looking for, she just wanted his conviction to reach through their lives, to make her feel safe, but she knew that the question itself was an insult. So she asked a different one. “Do you regret coming to the US?”

Luis looked down and she stared at the brittle gray at the crown of his head as he answered. “I wonder about the family’s safety from in here. I worry that Javier might call home in the middle of the night, drunk at a party and needing a ride home and I can’t be there to pick him up, or to ground him.” He lifted his head and smiled.

Paulina wondered how much his helplessness burned, if it made holes in him, if it fragmented him. “I’m sorry—” she began.

“But,” he continued, “it’s rare that I worry that one of you is dead, or worse.”

She nodded as if she understood, but she only really understood his answer in theory. When they were younger, he used to start telling stories about the gangs in Juarez, but he’d never finish them. He ended his anecdotes with words like ‘violence’ or

‘trouble’ so that neither she nor her siblings ever really understood what happened to the young girl who stopped going to school to care for her dying grandfather, or to the aging woman who tried to send her son away before his voice dropped and he started to notice which direction all the money in town was going. Paulina hadn’t been born there, so she could only imagine the color he said dirt underfoot was when it turned red from butchers, or run-over strays, or maybe even people. But the ground underfoot outside could change; the concrete in his cell never would.

His love seemed larger than she was, spreading out on top of her and she felt guilty for it. She checked her watch and realized that Javier would be home soon. “I have to go.”

“Enroll in some classes,” her papá said as she stood up.

“One day,” she said.

“When I get out, you won’t have any more excuses.”

“One day,” she smiled.

#

There was a shuffling noise coming from the hallway again. Paulina blinked and checked the time on her phone. It was after one in the morning and even with the light coming from her phone, she couldn’t see much further than the tops of her sheets.

The muffled sound grew louder and then started to dampen again. It was Javier. She was sure of it—it happened a few times every week. She lay perfectly still, listening for other noises, and sure enough, seconds later, there was an unmistakable click from the front door opening. He would leave now, and not return before sometime between two and four in the morning.

She didn't want to be his mother and she didn't want to tell theirs. But she had searched his room once after the first few times he'd disappeared like this. She'd checked the bottom of every drawer and in between books and under his bed. There hadn't been any alcohol or drugs. She didn't find evidence of stolen goods, or anything else like that, so she had no idea where he went every night. Maybe he just walked around the city or maybe he met up with a girl. If the worst thing he did was break curfew, she had no intention of stopping him.

Some nights she was relieved he left. Not because she didn't want him in the apartment—he was so quiet anyway—but because she felt like she was always searching his face for damage. She was looking for the mark their papá's imprisonment, their mamá's drinking, and their sister's leaving, had left on him. When he withdrew and became quieter, she worried the scarring might be deeper. But when he broke the rules, she could tell herself that this was it—this was the reaction to the pain.

Her phone dimmed and the top of her sheets disappeared into the darkness. She thought about checking out the window, just to see which direction he went, but she decided she didn't want to speculate. She was too tired. She let herself fall asleep, knowing that she would awaken in a couple of hours when Javier came back in through the front door.

#

Rosa's bedroom was growing bare. Paulina stepped in and realized that the stack of blankets at the foot of the bed was dwindling. The antique rocking chair that once sat in the corner of the bedroom was missing. There was no dresser, just a bookshelf filled with clothes. The sheets on the bed were threadbare. Everything else had been sold, Paulina

was certain of it.

Rosa stood next to the bookshelf and sorted beaded necklaces and gold jewelry into piles.

Paulina stepped up beside her mamá and covered her hands with her own. Rosa's skin was rough and yellowed, and a faint chemical-cleaner smell emanated from her hair. "I got paid for the funeral job."

"It won't be enough," Rosa said.

"Yes, it will. I have a shopping gig too," Paulina said.

Her mamá looked up at her, her brown eyes bleary. "We got another red one."

"Just the electric? Your paycheck should cover that," Paulina said, releasing her mamá's hand.

Her mamá's hand trembled and she reached for the cross on her neck. Paulina touched her own reflexively and watched her mamá shake her head slightly.

"You were fired again?" Paulina found herself adding the bills in her head before registering any kind of emotion.

Rosa said nothing and went back to sorting her few pieces of jewelry.

"You were drinking again," Paulina said. She wanted to be angry, but her anger only made her feel ridiculous.

Her mamá abruptly walked to the bed and sat down on the floor against it. She looked like a child, her head sticking up only slightly past the top of the bed. "Do you remember me before?"

"Yes," Paulina said. She sat down on the bed and untied her mamá's hair from its bun. Then she began to comb it with her fingers, working the small knots at the base of

her scalp.

“Some days I wake up and think, I can be her again. I can be a buena madre and a buena mujer. And then time moves and the strength goes away, and I’m just...this again.”

“You’re still Rosa,” Paulina lied.

Her mamá’s breathing became shaky. “Some of me is.”

#

That night, Paulina couldn’t sleep. It was Friday and the week was blurring through her mind in a series of tasks she could barely keep straight. Then she picked through the past month, and the month before that, and the whole year as she spent day after day trying to stabilize her mamá and brother’s lives. She felt as if she could understand her mamá’s fear of not being herself because lately Paulina wondered if the pieces of her that she didn’t use might disappear.

In the dark, she tried to picture what she was two years ago. She could see herself running through the desert path in gym class. She remembered hating chemistry equations but being intrigued by the periodic table. She remembered playing with her friend’s cats and riding along in her papá’s truck looking for furniture to sell on the weekends. But she couldn’t feel these moments. She couldn’t reach them.

Impatient with her melancholy, she threw off her covers and decided to go out. There was a club that she knew about from high school that was in the next city over. No one would know her that far away. No one would see her and tell her mamá that Paulina had been in a gay bar.

She took off the cross hanging around her neck, put on black pants and a tight shirt, and found heels to strap on just after she slipped out of the apartment. It took forty-

five minutes to get to the club, and once she parked, she walked to the entrance and paid the fee before she could change her mind. It had been months since she'd gone out. It had been longer since she'd been in anyone's arms.

The club was dim with twinkling blue lights and R&B played from the speakers. A few people hung around the entrance and a dozen or so sat along the bar on the right side of the room. Mostly, couples and groups gyrated on the dance floor. The bodies were packed tightly enough that Paulina couldn't see stage light peeking between people's limbs.

Paulina's heart thudded and seemed to match the beat of the music. She walked immediately to the bar and ordered a whiskey. Then she sat on a ripped bar stool, sipping the burning drink, and watched women move on the dance floor. She told herself that she would stay for one drink and watch, only watch, the women rolling their hips on the dance floor. Then she would leave and try to forget that she'd been here at all.

When she finished her drink, though, a woman stepped in front of her view. She was tall, with black hair and pronounced features. Her body was tightly wrapped in a blue dress. The woman was familiar.

"You're the woman from my father's funeral," the woman said.

"Alexis," Paulina remembered and panic bloomed in her stomach. She drove so far to keep from being recognized.

The woman smiled. "I tried to find you, but my mother refused to admit that she hired anyone."

Paulina only stared at Alexis. How strange it was to see someone she knew exist in this place with her.

“Tell me your name,” Alexis said.

Paulina shook her head. Alexis was beautiful, but her entitlement gleamed through her clothing and her eyes. The second time Paulina had seen her, and so far all this woman seemed to do was want things—things that weren’t hers.

“Dance with me,” the woman demanded, her green eyes flickering blue in the moving light.

Paulina felt the woman’s fingers on hers and she realized that she wanted to. Just a dance couldn’t hurt. She stood up before she had agreed and Alexis smiled.

When the song ended, Paulina told herself just one more dance. She did that again and again, her body pressed against Alexis, hands on arms, on thighs, on back, until the music stopped playing and Alexis invited Paulina to her apartment. “I’ve got a telescope,” she said.

Just the stars, just to see the stars, Paulina told herself. And she did see them. She saw the stars outside on Alexis’s balcony and then she saw the inside of Alexis’ dark bedroom where they made love on top of sheets smoother than any Paulina had ever lain upon before.

#

In the early morning, they shared a cigarette on the balcony. Paulina wore Alexis’ satin black robe and Alexis wrapped a mauve sheet around her breasts. Traffic was slow to start below. Paulina sat silently, trying to remember what small talk looked like the morning after.

Alexis talked about how loud the traffic was and scrambled eggs for a moment. Then, “Do you do other things? Besides mourning?”

Paulina inhaled so deeply that the smoke pressed into her lungs painfully. She wondered if she could make them burst. She would never see this girl again. Finally, after a few seconds, Paulina shrugged. “I’m a personal shopper too.”

“God, I could use one of those,” Alexis said, reaching for the cigarette.

It sounded somehow violent to Paulina, this way that Alexis could separate Paulina from the things that she did—as if making a living was ever just work, as if the work didn’t ache and exhaust. Paulina realized that she had never even given the woman her name. She looked behind her and through the glass door to see carved dressers and paintings of dancers that hung on each wall. She could see a Jacuzzi bathtub through the sliver of doorway to the bathroom. And on the floor right by the door was a cashmere sweater Paulina had seen in a Burberry store while she’d been shopping for a client.

She nodded along as Alexis chatted through the last drags of the cigarette, and then Paulina slipped out the front door while Alexis was in the shower.

#

The next mourning job went like this: an old man died and the family hired mourners because the wife could comfort no one and very few people would be coming to the service. Only, this time, Paulina wasn’t sure she had anything left to give. She felt dry and empty. She couldn’t listen to the sermon or the relatives who could barely speak for they were so heartbroken. So she closed her eyes for just one second.

For one second, she blocked everything out—the elderly with their falling faces, the dark gold cross standing at the front of the room, and the flower arrangements that were an uncomfortably cheery yellow. Instead, Paulina focused on an imaginary moment: at the last minute, the defense team found a piece of evidence that linked another person

to the murder. Her papá was released with apologies and from there Paulina's world spiraled outward into an infinity of possibilities. Her sister stayed and they shared phobias and embarrassing stories in the middle of the night. Her brother joined the hiking club in school and stopped wandering around in the middle of the night. Her mamá left alcohol untouched except for Easter parties. And Paulina looked at college brochures—the one with pictures of unrealistically diverse students and trees greener than those that grow in the desert—with her papá while they discussed the pros and cons of getting the basics out of the way at community college.

When Paulina opened her eyes, an old woman, the widow with a black veil, was telling Paulina to sob louder. That the room was too quiet and she needed to hear something more than her husband's last words echoing in her head.

“Please, please, cry louder,” the woman begged.

So she did.

Traveling to Aztlán

Alejandra

Mark and Alejandra had traded the truck for a Korean church van by the time they crossed the Utah border. They removed the back two rows of seats and put in camping mattress pads and a couple sleeping bags in neon colors because those ones were on clearance. They bought a generator and sat it on the floor between the first two rows of seats. Mark told Alejandra that it was in case of emergencies, but she thought it might've had something to do with the DVD player she'd seen stuffed in the pocket behind his seat. A cooler, a bag of toiletries, several flashlights, a can opener, and a few survival handbooks that Mark seemed to be itching to use sat by the generator. His guitar was stuffed underneath the seats behind theirs and some used books shifted around the ground as they drove.

They'd travelled down highways and through national parks, Mark dragging her out of the car to don sunglasses and walk over dunes and shine flashlights into oddly shaped caves. Occasionally they used maps, looking for campsites with showers. Mostly they drove. For well over a year, they'd been traveling. They bought canned food and ate with a shared spork. Whenever they ran out of money, or needed a new car part for the van, they'd pull into the nearest small town and look for work.

Mark would do ranch work—he knew how to muck stalls from boyfriend number eleven—or even under-the-table construction jobs. Alejandra waited tables at a

“Broadway Diner,” a “Bob’s Diner,” and a “Barney’s Diner.” So many of them started with ‘B’ that she started keeping count in a notebook. Once in a while she handed out fliers in costume for cellphone stores and themed restaurants. In the early weekday evenings, when Mark was off on a job, Alejandra would bum cigarettes off busboys in the alleys behind restaurants. When they asked where she was from she’d lie. She was running from rich parents in Sante Fe. She was saving money for an abortion. Sometimes her lies were more outlandish and she’d spend the entire smoke break convincing them that she was just passing through to go to Alta where she was going to ski professionally. Once she said she was running from the cops for selling drugs. They didn’t believe her until she pulled out a switch blade.

She could only get work about half the time that Mark did, but she didn’t like to dwell on why.

Mark would stop whenever he saw protests too—wanting to join in and help. Whenever they caught news on the radio about a cause, like a business developer trying to build directly through sacred land, he’d change course saying that he knew he had to help. When she asked him why, and reminded him that it was far, or in a completely different direction, or might be over by the time he got there, he said that he couldn’t just drop out. “It’s not enough.”

She’d shake her head or start an argument about how it would never make a difference. But by the time they got to whatever town hall or people facing down wrecking balls, she’d just read in the front seat, her feet bare and propped up on the dashboard, just in case she’d have to help him make bail in the late afternoon.

The truth was that the random changes in direction, each new mile, new places,

took her further away from her fucked up family. They distracted her from the way the lines in her mamá's face looked like a map of her tragedy, or the way her sister was willing to just dump everything she cared about for their family, or her brother's stupid, stubborn innocence. She didn't want to think about that. And she certainly didn't want to think about her papá and how she read once that evil is born in prison, not outside of it. But each night, even after Mark fell asleep and she pulled his arm around her, she started thinking about them again.

#

When Alejandra was a child, her mamá told her stories about Aztlán. She'd say that travelers in Mexico would look for a new home after they had lost their houses to weather or debt. Sometimes the hero was a salesman with chiles in his wagon. Sometimes she was a woman dressed as a man running from her cruel father who wanted to marry her off to a farmer twice her age. On their journeys they would meet tricksters and prophets. Coyotes would lead them off their desert paths and the trickster, Pedro de Urdemalas, would scam them out of the little money they had to make the journey. In despair, they'd wander until a spirit would send them a vision of an eagle landing on prickly pear cactus, a snake writhing in its mouth. There they would find their home—their freedom and safety.

Once the traveler found their way to safety, Alejandra would touch her mamá's face. She thought that Rosa must be a spirit. Beautiful and kind, her mamá must have known the way to freedom and safety. Alejandra would fall asleep dreaming of the woman dressed in men's clothing. The woman who bested coyotes and Pedro. The woman who was strong enough to travel on her own.

In middle school, Alejandra learned about the Aztecs and discovered that her

mamá's tale was one from centuries ago. She went home and asked her mamá about the bedtime stories and the Aztecs.

Her mamá paused while folding sheets and smiled. "My friend's padre was in the Chicano liberation movement. Aztlán was a dream of Chicanos based on Aztec myths. To have a homeland, to take back the Southwest."

Alejandra had wanted to know if they succeeded, if they had a homeland. But maybe this was the homeland and she just didn't know it. She'd looked out the window to the parking lot and thought of the tamale guy who set up his truck by the grocery store, and the Catholic churches with their Spanish services, and the altars filled with marigolds and colorful candles with saints' faces wrapped around them at the sites of car crashes. She thought of the men standing around gas pumps scattering when police came and jumping into unknown trucks when offers of work approached. She thought of the nights vibrating with gunshots. This wasn't how she imagined Aztlán. This wasn't how her mamá described it. Aztlán was rich with food that belonged to everyone, it was filled with neighbors who spoke to one another in Spanish, music and the scent of spiced meat filled the night air. This was no Aztlán. This was just Barrio Espinosa.

#

On the road, Mark's favorite food was peanut butter. Alejandra watched him slather it on everything. Crackers, bread, bananas, vegetables, everything. In New Mexico, they pulled off in Alamogordo because Mark had seen the sign that bragged "largest pistachio nut" and he'd wanted to see if it was big enough to be impressive.

"It's a nut, Mark."

"*Actually*, it's a seed. And imagine if it's several feet high," he said, bouncing in

his seat.

She rolled her eyes and clicked her fingers on her armrest. “Then it would just be a fake nut.”

“Seed.”

They drove up to it and found that it was actually a fake nut, but it was big enough that Mark thought it warranted pulling over and really looking at it. After examining it, he climbed back into the van and pulled his peanut butter and saltines out of the glove compartment.

“Do you think anyone makes pistachio butter?”

“If anyone did, McGinn’s Pistachio Tree Ranch would have it,” Alejandra said, reading the sign ahead of them.

“Probably not as good as peanut butter,” Mark said, skipping the cracker and dipping his finger in the jar.

She pulled out the hand sanitizer intending to grab his hand before he stuck his sticky fingers back on the steering wheel. She usually didn’t drive, but sometimes he liked to nap in the afternoon when the sun was highest. They avoided using the AC because of gas prices so he tended to get sleepy.

“Your turn,” he said.

She groaned and rubbed the edge of her winged birthmark. “I don’t want a turn. Tan tanto.”

“C’mon, you have to pick the next destination.” So he kept telling her, but she never picked. If she started picking destinations, that would make this her trip, her life, as much as it was his. Right now she could still call herself the passenger. She was still the

guest.

“I’m good,” she said, opening the window to let the hot breeze in. Sometimes when they drove fast enough, it almost seemed like cool air.

He sighed and turned on the car. “How ‘bout east again?”

She shrugged and handed him the hand sanitizer. “Fine with me.”

#

She thought they were going to be lovers. And she even tried to come on to him one night about a month after they’d passed the pistachio. After they’d driven through a Podunk town called ‘Weed,’ where she made a bunch of jokes about trying to score some with their last twenty bucks, and after they got stuck in Carlsbad with a blown-out tire and stuck around to check out the caverns, Mark steered them North. They made it to Roswell where Mark decided to pull off a highway in the dead of night to watch the sky near the crash landing site of 1947.

“It’s not like I believe or anything. Just, what a cool thing to talk about, you know?”

It was barely after ten pm and Alejandra was bored and not at all tired. “Who would you tell anyway? You only talk to me.”

“That’s not true. *You* only talk to me. I make friends at campsites and protests and pretty much everywhere. There’ll be plenty of people to tell,” he said, getting out of the car. Moths with brown wings swarmed the dying car lights.

“Whatever,” she said, watching him open the trunk and drag a blanket onto the desert ground. “Mark! You’re covering that thing in sand! What the fuck are you doing?”

He didn’t even pause. He just dragged it across pebbles and bushes until he was a

few feet away. “I’m getting a better view.”

Sighing, she followed him out as he whipped the blanket into the air and brought it down smoothly. Even in the dark, she could see the divots in the blanket from the rocks. It was not going to be comfortable. He lay down and she watched him cringe and shift positions.

“You should’ve brought the mattress, not the blanket.”

He propped his head on his hands and looked up at the sky. “Just look at the stars.”

There was nothing but the highway and desert in three directions for miles. North of them was Roswell, whose light reached them but dimmed as Alejandra looked upwards. She pulled the hem of her shirt from her back to unstick the cotton and then let it drift back into place. After a minute, she lied down beside Mark.

It was still too hot. Her lips were dry and her back was rigid. Mark listed facts about the stars, on and on, covering up the crickets of the desert. She didn’t want to think about the stars, and when his voice began to grow heavy, she didn’t want to think about anything else, so she leaned over and kissed him.

She was almost surprised that he kissed her back. His tongue tasted like peanut butter. She stuck her hands up his shirt as he sat up and her fingers met the puckered marks he never talked about. And something inside of her shifted, she suddenly had to know what happened. She couldn’t think of the kissing or anything else, she could only think of the ridges and how they interrupted his smooth back.

“Al, do you want to stop?” he said against her neck.

“What happened to you?” Even as she asked the question, she knew she shouldn’t

have. She didn't even know if she wanted him to answer. If she just would've gone for his pants, he would've slept with her.

He seemed to fold slightly and then he leaned back. "There's no story. You know what happened. You can see it."

"That isn't an answer," she huffed, but she wished she could take it back.

His moss green eyes were pale in the moonlight and they were on her, fixated. She had to look away. "What is this? Why are you doing this? You aren't into me."

She could feel the heat of the night gathering in her cheeks. She wanted to tell him he was wrong, but she didn't know how she felt.

Mark put his palm up to the roots of his brown hair. "I don't want to be some distraction. Deal with your shit, Al."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"I am not the getaway car for you to run away in—"

"But you're running away too!"

"No, I'm not. I've got my stuff figured out. *That* is my home," he pointed at his van and then at Alejandra, "you're my partner, and I'm going around helping people. I'm not running from my memories of my family. My mom did a shitty thing, but I forgave her for it. You still can't even decide who to blame for your life."

He walked back to the van, grabbed his mattress and wandered off a few more yards into the desert. She watched him the whole time, her mouth still gaping, still searching for something to say to him, to somehow prove he wasn't right.

She hadn't tried anything again and he didn't mention that night. The next morning, they'd gathered their things and driven into Roswell. He went into a free

museum about alien dissection and she went to the gas station and bought a postcard. She mailed it to her hometown before he came out and described the color of alien blood.

That was the fifth time she'd sent her papá a postcard.

#

They picked up their first hitchhiker weeks later, somewhere outside of Palisade, Colorado. A teenager along the highway with her thumb out. She was short with a rounded stomach visible in her high-waist shorts and crop top, and had sharp, pointed ears that poked out of her short dyed purple hair that shined almost fuchsia in the sunset. She was carrying a large backpack.

“We should stop,” Mark said.

“Don't stop,” Alejandra said.

“We really should. It's hot out.”

“Seriously, don't stop.”

“I'm stopping.” Mark slowed down and veered toward the girl.

“Mark!”

He grinned at her and stopped the van. “Too late.”

“For fuck's sake.”

When Mark unlocked the van, the girl pulled open the door and jumped in without even asking where they were going. She was panting but didn't stop to catch her breath before speaking. “Thanks for stopping. I'm Kylie. What're your names? You guys look young. Are you runners?”

He'd picked up a babbler. A hyper, purple-haired girl who wouldn't stop talking within two seconds of seeing them. Kylie's face was red and she smelled like salt and

mildew. Alejandra could feel pins and needles pricking her scalp. She rubbed her forehead as if it would somehow prevent the blooming headache.

“Hi, Kylie. I’m Mark and this is Alejandra. We’re just traveling,” Mark said.

Alejandra opened her window.

“Cool, cool. This is a sweet setup you’ve got.”

“So, where are you headed?” Mark asked, pulling back onto the highway towards Denver.

“Las Cruces.”

Alejandra groaned. “We just came from that direction.”

She watched Kylie smile through the side mirror. “Good thing it’s only a day’s drive.”

Mark nodded enthusiastically. “Good thing.”

“Are you fucking kidding me? Mark, I don’t want to go back to New Mexico. We spent the last four months in New Mexico. Plus it’s after seven. You can’t drive through the night, it’ll be a two day-er.”

“Whoa, chill, chill. The border’s a good enough start,” Kylie said.

“Well that’s fine then,” Alejandra said.

“Really?” Kylie said.

“Yeah, really?” Mark asked, pulling his plastic sunglasses down to glance at her.

“No!”

The argument didn’t get Alejandra very far. Mark refused to pull over, he just turned off the highway to get on another heading in the direction of Santa Fe. For a while, the van quieted as Kylie napped in one of the seats behind them. Alejandra tried to ignore

the sound of the girl's breathing, shifting positions and crossing her legs to get comfortable, and maybe nap herself. A few positions later though it was clear that she wasn't tired at all, just agitated. She opened the glove compartment, pulled out some gummy bears, and watched the trees blur by.

"You know she's pregnant," Mark whispered.

"What?" Alejandra snapped her head back towards Mark.

"She's pregnant."

"How do you know?"

One scraggy brown eyebrow rose. Alejandra craned her neck behind her to get a good look at the girl. Kylie's arms and legs were wide, but her belly protruded straight outward—he was right. She was pregnant.

"So?" Alejandra said, but she couldn't hold her sarcastic tone. She remembered her friend getting pregnant at fourteen and leaving school. She was supposed to be homeschooled after that, but she said that all her mother would discuss was the baby and then gave her books on God's forgiveness. Everyone knew that she wouldn't ever be back in school—she'd raise that baby with her mother and aunt.

#

Kylie woke up just as Mark pulled into a parking lot that sat nebulously between two budget hotels to sleep for the night. As Mark and Alejandra climbed into the back of the van to get ready to sleep, Kylie was describing her hometown life. Her family lived down the street from a bar that her mama and daddy worked at. "It was a saloon back in the day. Closed for a long time after a quick draw went bad between the owner and some man hitting on his daughter." Her dad liked to joke about that stuff a lot. That she'd better

watch out or he'd do what Mr. Smith did to that traveling salesman to one of these punks always following her around. It was a small town; her daddy would know where she'd been.

Alejandra lay down and started to tune the girl out, she just wanted to sleep and not think for a while.

“Why do you want to go to Las Cruces?” Mark asked. Alejandra could feel his weight dipping into the mattress as he sat down beside her. He was just close enough that she could feel warmth radiating from his back. She resisted the urge to roll closer.

“The father lives there. Danny. He was only up in my town because he was stationed there for a bit,” Kylie said. Alejandra blinked and saw Kylie put a hand on her belly, which was resting against the back of the seat as she faced Mark over top of the seats.

“Military?”

“Yeah. It's so hard to get real work right now. The economy's so bad. And people coming up and taking all the jobs. Military was the responsible route. Not student loans and food stamps, you know?” she said.

Alejandra pressed her head deeper into her pillow and fisted her hands between her knees. She wished that she had a blanket covering her, that she hadn't heard what the girl said. No matter how Mark responded, it wouldn't be enough. He wasn't going to kick a fifteen-year-old pregnant girl out of the car, he wasn't going to yell at her either. He'd give her some speech and she didn't want to hear it. Alejandra didn't care that “people coming up and taking all the jobs” sounded like a regurgitated line from a local politician with an orange smile, or something the girl's father might've said while ranting to her

mother over the radio in the morning when they took her to school. It was in the girl now, and Alejandra had never seen that stuff come out for good before.

“People?” she heard Mark clarify, as if it needed to be translated.

“You know, illegals. Mexicans. And so many of them are criminals too,” the girl said.

Alejandra pulled her hands out from between her legs and grabbed a blanket.

“Shut the fuck up, chamaca huila. You don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about.”

She jumped out of the back of the van and shut the door before she could hear Kylie’s reply or Mark could chase after her. She wandered to the very back of the parking lot where the spots met up with a wash between the hotel and the highway, where no one would see her if she got desperate and had to take a piss. Then she maneuvered some small rocks around with her foot, and lay out the blanket so that she could sit again and listen only to the cars, not Kylie’s grating voice and not Mark’s reasonable explanations.

She remembered their second night on the road as she sat there, letting her eyes fall shut slowly. They didn’t have a plan or supplies yet, they hadn’t figured out where you can sneak in to wipe down your eyes and your armpits without getting kicked out. Mark had been complaining of back pain already and they decided to splurge on a motel to get a shower and some air-conditioning. They found some place close to the border of Arizona and New Mexico. The building was fake adobe and the office was attached to a bar at the edge of the parking lot. Mark gathered their stuff while Alejandra went in to ask about vacancies.

When she walked in the office, she was greeted by the smell of hot, sour alcohol and cigarette smoke. It was only six p.m. so the bar was nearly empty—two men with

buzz cut hair and leathery skin sat at the bar just a couple feet away from the doorway by the motel desk. Eggshell window shades were drawn giving the rooms an orange glow. The elder of the two men stood up and walked behind the desk as she approached it.

The man greeted her with silence.

“I need a room for one night,” Alejandra said, pulling her wallet from her jeans’ back pocket.

He pressed his wrinkled hands against the counter. “How do I know you’re not one of those illegals?”

She faltered, opening her wallet, but then she glared coolly at him and handed him her ID. “Because I have a driver’s license.”

The man at the bar swiveled on his stool to face them. “Could be a fake,” he grinned, his lips thin and his eyes still.

“He’s right. That don’t mean anything. You could still be illegal. You could be smuggler,” he said, taking the ID and looking closely at it. He put it down on the counter and shoved it towards her.

“It’s not a fake—”

“I’ll check her ass for cocaine,” the guy on the bar stool said, grabbing the crotch of his jeans.

“Shut the fuck up,” Alejandra said, stuffing her ID in her wallet.

The man behind the counter chuckled, but the other jumped out of his seat. “What did you say to me, you little bitch?”

He was tall—they both were—and suddenly it occurred to her that she had no power. She had nothing but words, and they could take those from her. Her blood pulsed

in her finger tips. Eyes still on him, she shuffled back to the door and then walked quickly back to the truck where Mark was just about finished bagging their stuff up.

“Got a key?” he asked her.

She looked away and sunk her nails into her palms trying to quell the shakiness and the hot shame that settled in her stomach. She wanted to spit on the ground, disgusted with herself. “No. They’re full.”

He rolled the bag back into the truck. “We’ll check the place a couple miles north.”

They got in the truck and drove to another motel. This time, Mark checked in while Alejandra gathered their things. When they splurged on motels, he checked in most nights after that.

After a while of sitting out under the stars by herself, Alejandra’s skin chilled. She went back to the van. She hated herself for getting back in while Kylie slept in the middle row of seats. And she hated Mark a little bit for not kicking the girl out. She hated that they both slept soundly, their faces peaceful and blank, as if the day hadn’t even taken place.

When everyone woke in the morning, they drove Kylie to Las Cruces. The entire way, Alejandra talked about Reconquista and the importance of speaking Spanish in public schools. Mark nodded along and talked about socialism as if he didn’t know that Alejandra was trying to upset Kylie. And Kylie said nothing until she had to give them directions to the neighborhood she wanted to be dropped off in.

Once she was gone, Alejandra didn’t want to look at Mark. “You shouldn’t have picked her up,” she said.

Mark didn't respond. He drove northwest, avoiding the highway back to Palisade, skirting the edges of Arizona, not asking Alejandra which direction she wanted to go.

#

Alejandra thought that the road would be freedom. They would be beholden to no one. Time would be nothing but numbers. The only technology that would control them would be in their van and Alejandra knew very little about that anyway. Mark and Alejandra would tell stories on the road where they would list things or people that had restricted and limited them in their pasts. Mark's were intimate and strange: a dream catcher that he couldn't sleep without once his mom's sixth boyfriend gave it to him after a nightmare he had about giant snakes, the clothes labels that told him how to wash clothes, his mother's insistence tap water was bad for you. Alejandra tried to think of simple ones, finding that she didn't want to discuss her papá's insistence on dresses when she was younger or the way that the TV shows she'd watched when she was little made her think that animals could be actors but Mexicans couldn't. Instead she told him about how the names of clothes made her think she had to have the correct clothing for each day and event when she was little: couldn't wear a raincoat when it was only windy, couldn't wear church clothes to a wedding party. Or how it was strange to her now that she ever thought you had to have a sink to brush your teeth or that you had to have a bed to sleep comfortably.

When they'd been on the road for a couple of days without stopping except to sleep and go to the bathroom, Mark would fill the time with rants about the failures of local government. He said that the government wanted people fat and slow, with the attention span of dogs. Sometimes, he'd bring up prisons too, but she'd stop responding to his points, so he'd move on to other things like civil suit lawyers as exploitative

middlemen. Or public schools. “They teach to the lowest denominator,” or “their purpose is to develop obedient citizens, not educated people who think for themselves.”

Alejandra had trouble thinking in terms of large institutions. They seemed too tangible—every piece of the discussion had examples in her own life. She couldn’t figure out how broad statements like the ones he used worked. Elementary school meant Sunrise Canyon to her. It meant rooms filled with bright construction paper and kind teachers with long hair in tight ballerina buns. They corrected lisps and taught her how to unroll her ‘r’s. They taught her the translation of Día de los Muertos. They gave her candy on Halloween and children described costumes that sounded better than skeleton face paint. Now it was strange to think of soft, smooth smiles and good job stickers in tandem with trying to suppress her history and family’s identity.

She knew it was Mark and this trip though—Mark was the reason she had begun to really think about these institutions at all. Before, it was just her life, it was just high school, it was just a day. The road made her realize how many things could be left behind while she still stayed who she was.

Once—after they left Kylie in Las Cruces—Mark asked Alejandra what she wanted from all this, what she was doing out here on the road with him. She didn’t have an answer other than escape and she didn’t want to say the word aloud to him. He wouldn’t like it. In the back of her head, she kept thinking about the stories her mamá told her when she was little. Where was Aztlán? Where was her home? She looked at Mark’s pale arm sprawled relaxed across the steering wheel, his green eyes steady on the road. Could she bring a gringo there?

#

A couple months after taking Kylie to her boyfriend, they picked up another hitchhiker, this one standing alongside a stoplight leading to a frontage road in Nevada about a hundred miles outside of Vegas. Alejandra didn't bother saying no this time. The teenage boy had ripped sneakers and a pretty pixy nose. He had stick limbs and a flirty smile that seemed to be filling his extra-large slushy cup with change as people drove past. When he got in the van with them, he introduced himself as Peter from Alabama. He spoke about himself in a way that reminded Alejandra of a dating app—all about what he could offer to another person, all about the entertainment he could provide.

“We went to Alabama for a few days a while back,” Mark said driving down the slow lane of the highway.

“It's not worth sticking around much longer,” Peter said, smiling. He looked about their age, but Alejandra found she couldn't guess for sure.

Alejandra snorted in spite of herself. He was certainly right about that.

“We're from Arizona. Near the border,” Mark said.

“Racist sheriffs and good tacos, right? Bet that's fun,” Peter said, his blue eyes gleaming.

“Fun enough to leave it,” Alejandra said, rolling her eyes.

“Where are you headed?” Mark asked.

“Vegas! Can't you tell? I'm gonna be a show boy,” he said, winking.

Mark looked at Alejandra and she shrugged. It was better than going back to New Mexico at least. “We can take you to Vegas,” Mark said.

Peter thanked them and told them about his acting experiences in high school productions—*Twelfth Night* with so much glitter in the makeup that he found some in his

leg hair two weeks later, an extra long leap in *Peter Pan* that ended with Wendy in the orchestra pit on top of the pianist, and a *Hamlet* cape that he couldn't help but steal. "My boyfriend thought I was *really* hot in it."

Alejandra craned her neck and laughed as he made a jerking off hand gesture.

After about half an hour, Mark pulled off the highway for gas. Peter went off to the bathroom and Alejandra bought a gallon jug of water. She set it on the floor in front of her seat and leaned out the window to face Mark. The heat and smell of gasoline wafted up to her face. "Better than the last one."

Mark tapped his fingers on the bottom of the window. "Yeah," he said slowly.

Biting the inside of her bottom lip, she withdrew back inside the car. She was startled though, when he leaned forward as she withdrew. "I can't tell you I wouldn't have picked her up had I known that she was..."

"Racist, Mark. She was racist. Just say it," she said.

She watched his adam's apple bob. "Racist. But she was maybe, *maybe*, fifteen. She needed a ride."

"She was some random girl! I've been traveling with you for over a year and a half!"

He pressed up on the balls of his feet. "She was worse off than you."

She crossed her arms and pressed back into her chair. She was done with this conversation. "Your moral compass is great for a goddamn tourist, but it's fucking shit for me."

He leaned back, suddenly still. She couldn't remember him ever being this still. Even in sleep, he twitched against her. His moss eyes were wet and spongy, and she

wondered if it was a trick of the light. She opened her mouth to say something, but she realized she couldn't without taking away the one thing he spent his time trying to do: helping others. After a second, she was saved the trouble of responding, because Peter was walking back to the car.

Peter was smiling, his eyes were half-lidded, and his nose was bright red. He jumped in the back of the car, his ripped sneakers flapping. "Ready for Vegas, bitches?"

Alejandra looked at Mark. "He's stoned off his ass," she muttered quietly.

"Yeah, he totally is," Mark agreed, closing the gas tank.

#

When they arrived in Las Vegas, far from the Strip and the flashing lights and tourists wearing skin-tight clothing and flip flops, Peter asked if they wanted to hang out under the stars for one night before he went on his way. In no hurry to get anywhere, they agreed and went to Red Rock. Once paid and parked, Peter sat with his legs out the side of the van, and Mark opened the trunk door so that he and Alejandra could get some fresh air while they sat staring at the dirt trails leading away from the campground. A couple trees dropped kaleidoscope shade over their knees.

Peter lit up, tossing pebbles at the dry campground sign. Alejandra leaned back and looked up at the painfully blue sky that gleamed bright even as the sun was falling. Cicadas hummed and Mark scuffed the dirt with his foot. "How'd you make it this far, Peter?"

Peter jumped out of the car and walked around to sit beside the other two. "How do you think?" he asked, wagging his blond eyebrows suggestively. He inhaled deeper.

Neither one of them responded. Alejandra wondered if Mark thought that there

were other ways. But there weren't. Not for Peter. Not for her if she'd been alone. Could he see that?

"What about you guys?" Peter asked. There was something dark and hopeful in him, as if he wanted them to agree with him. To say that was how everyone got here.

"Some seasonal work. Some waiting tables," Mark said.

They talked about other things after that. Mostly Peter's plans. His backup plans wherein he'd try again somewhere else. His secondary backup plans where he'd find someone to be his patron. He'd heard that rich people used to do stuff like that and he thought maybe he could find some men who'd be into the idea. Old men usually liked him.

In bed that night, the three lay side by side on the mattress in the car with the trunk open. But Alejandra woke after a short time. She could feel Peter shifting beside her and then getting out of bed. He walked off a few feet and she found herself following him.

"How long have you been traveling with Mark?" Peter asked, looking up at the stars.

"Since I left home," Alejandra said.

Peter giggled, sounding like he was still high somehow. "You're lucky. It's not the same for us when we're alone."

"Us?" she asked, looking sideways at him.

"Those on the margins. Society's outcasts. Whatever you want to call it. You know what I mean."

"I don't need a protector," she lied, not wanting to admit the truth aloud to a

stranger.

He looked at her. “Sure you do. It’s harder out here for you. I can see it. It’s on your skin and in your eyes. He doesn’t even know, does he?”

Her skin prickled as a breeze blew and she turned away from him. “You’re high. I’m going to bed.”

She went back to the car and laid down beside Mark, pressing her body against his until his twitching felt as if it were coming from inside her skin.

#

In the morning Peter was gone. They checked the surrounding paths and called his name a few times, but they couldn’t find him. After a bit of searching, they found his ripped shoes a few yards down the main road and the plastic bag that held Mark’s second pair was rolled up beside them. Mark said that Peter was probably desperate. That maybe he’d taken the shoes and some water and gone off. But Alejandra didn’t believe that. Her shoulders tight and her heart pounding, she ran back to their car, not bothering to check if Mark was following her. She checked the back seat where Mark’s DVD player had been. The player was gone.

“He stole our shit!” she shouted, barely aware that Mark was right behind her.

She upended their few belongings and found that their food and a flashlight was missing as well.

“Al,” Mark said.

Alejandra ignored him and ran around to the glove compartment. She opened it and leafed through random doodles and documents, looking for the envelope that held some of their spare cash. “It’s not here!”

“Ali,” Mark said, stressing the ‘i’.

She whirled on him. “He fucking stole from us.”

“Ali, it’s ok. I always keep a hundred in my sock and I know that you keep some money in your bra. We’ll pick another town and—”

“That doesn’t make it ok! Just because we’ll survive doesn’t make it ok! We helped him and he stole from us! Why don’t you care?”

“I do care, I’m just not going to let it ruin my day or my view of people,” Mark said, bending down and untying his shoe.

“You should let it ruin your day! Why do you keep trying to help when they just fuck you over? Are you a masochist? Stop picking up hitchhikers!” She bent over him while he started taking the left shoe off of his foot.

“You don’t even care where we go! You don’t have an opinion about anything. This isn’t going to prevent us from doing the same thing we always do. We’ll just find a new town, get other jobs, and—” He pulled his sock off and shook money into his hand.

“Have you even noticed that I can only get work about half the time you do? Have you noticed that they pay me like I’m a fucking bracero? I hate this plan. I hate the days that we have to work—”

Mark stood up and grasped Alejandra’s shoulders. She could feel the paper bills pressing in creases against her skin. “Then make a plan. Pick where we go next. Pick what we do next. Don’t just say ‘whatever’ every time I pick something or ask where we should go.”

She stared at his eyes, the way his pupils were sharp black against the green, as if the rim was the trail freshly drawn on a map. Did Aztlán have trees or was it filled with

mountain topography—perpendicular beige lines and the cacti barely green?

“Come on, Al. Where do you want to go?”

She saw green, deep, mossy green. She knew where it led. “California.”

The Motel Three

Javier

Javier and Ryan put in shifts at the gas station convenience store that sat along the road with the most border checkpoints. Un putero de puercos. But men waited for work there anyway. As the sun rose before school, Javier would step away from the counter, shuffling around lopsided chip bags on metal shelves next to the window. He'd watch backlit men stand in a circle watching for pickups just off to the side of a gas pump. Once in a while, a couple of them would go into the convenience store extra early and give Javier a hard time while he unlocked the register. A man named Toni with a low brow and short fingers liked to show Javier pictures of his broad-faced daughter. He would nudge Javier's shoulder suggestively, while Javier would shrink away pointing to some candy that needed rearranging. Manny would shake his head behind Toni's back and talk about their daily prospects and which boss would bring the best wages. Since Javier turned seventeen, they both brought him in on some easier jobs over the weekend.

By about six-thirty in the morning, they'd be off on jobs or checking out another pickup spot. That's when border patrol officers would drive in. Some grabbed cellophane-covered pastries and sodas, glaring blandly behind aviators while they paid. Others knew Javier from Barrio Espinosa; they came from neighboring apartments, and joined up with the border patrol right after graduating high school. Sometimes they told him stories about what skin looks like without water. Then they'd ask after his older

sister. “She still single?” He’d shrug and ask about times when they used their weapons.

After they went on shift, the store grew quiet. Wind stirred the dust outside, sun formed blinding squares on the linoleum floor. Before he left for school at 7:45, he might see an occasional traveler in flip-flops, stretching arms overhead as they filled up on gas, not even bothering to look around because this wasn’t a destination or a lookout point, it was just someone else’s town. They were few though and there were days when he saw no one after the border patrol agents came through.

It was during that quiet that the skin between his shoulder blades and his spine grew tight and the muscles felt dry and unyielding. It was during that time of the morning when he found himself jerking his head to see past the gas pumps and the trees and cacti that dotted the road.

It was during that time that he felt he was being watched.

When he picked up his check Friday afternoon, he also felt eyes on his back. It made his stomach condense and his face feel cold. The owner, a short woman who wore too much denim, asked him if he was feeling alright while he shakily signed his name confirming that he’d gotten his check. Months of this feeling and it still made his fingers shiver. He nodded and tried to smile as he tucked it into his back pocket. “Be sure to cash that right away. Can’t get the books right if you boys wait forever.”

He left the store, a bell jingling overhead, and decided to ride his bike past the Compound before going to the motel. Just to make sure everything was quiet, just to make it easier for him to breathe through the cracking, dry heat. He looked around the gas station and couldn’t find a car in sight besides the owner’s rundown truck. The unending desert sent heat waves up into the blue sky. There were not even the scuttling noises of

rodents scurrying through the brown bushes and cholla. He unlocked his bike from the handicap parking sign and jumped on.

Hands so tight on the handlebars that his knuckles peaked white out of his tanned skin, he rode the mile and a half down potholed roads to the fenced wall of the Compound. He tucked his bike behind a palo verde tree a few yards away and then walked cautiously and behind the bushes until he could see the span of the fence and the buildings peeking out of the dense plant wall behind. His saliva felt thick and gritty, and his heart pummeled his chest. He crouched low and scanned the fence, after a moment finding the spot near to the ground that he'd clipped months ago. It had been mended, haphazardly wound back together.

For a few minutes he stood watching, trying to keep his feet unmoving against the stones and sand so that he could listen for movement beyond the fence. As seconds passed, he could hear the traffic rolling by miles away on the highways. Cicadas buzzed above his head. Still, he couldn't hear a single voice, or noises made by anything human.

When his heartbeat was softer than the cicadas, he went back to his bike. He rode into town to stop and cash his check and then he rode west of his home, leaving Barrio Espinosa to head towards the brothels and crack houses by the highway. He passed gas stations, quick loan shops, fast food, and pawn shops until he arrived at a two-story gray building with a purple roof. A large sign stood separate from the main building, by the shack-sized office, that read "The Cactus Flower Motel—Vacancies, 64 channels, Weekly Rates."

He stopped in the office to pay a man with a missing front tooth and blue cowboy boots, and then walked up the first set of stairs to room 203. Through the door he could

hear the hum of quiet conversation. He unlocked the door and was greeted by a familiar sight: three women wearing sack-like dresses, sitting around in a circle on the floor reading his science text book aloud. “See, Charity? Saturn’s rings have ice in them. They’re not even hot.”

The three paused and looked at Javier. The woman, Charity, with pink skin and red hair jumped up and pressed her lips against his cheek. The other two looked on, smiling, although one’s smile was more indulgent than serene.

“The fence has been patched,” he told them, over Charity’s head, as he closed the door behind them.

#

When Javier first rented a room almost two years ago, he’d found the short, stucco ceiling claustrophobia inducing. The one painting on the wall—an odd swirl of purples and greens and dark browns—only made the wall seem starker in its gray-yellow hue. It had been night, the darkness shrouding Faith One, her black hair splayed across her gray dress like a web of midnight estuaries. She’d propped Hope Two up against the hallway rail at The Cactus Flower Motel. Hope Two grasped the metal like a lifeline, her cap falling from an obviously shaven head. Javier opened the door and helped Hope into the room. Once she was sitting, wheezing on a bed, he looked at Faith. She was older, not so many years away from his mamá’s age. She had deep, dark owl eyes and held his gaze unflinchingly. The hair on his forearms rose as she watched him. Her mouth was lined with suppressed words.

That night had been so different from the night he saved Grace. He imagined no future, no certain path appeared in his mind heady and dream-like. When he’d seen Faith

after Grace left, he could feel the woman's appraisal of him. He would be a tool, a vehicle by which she could escape. And he viewed her much the same as he might've viewed a limping desert animal—perhaps Darwinism should have its say, but he couldn't contain the impulse to help her. But it was almost a year before they could escape—the Reverends had been on guard after Grace had left.

In the motel room that first night, he helped Faith figure out the hot water and then he sat on the ground in front of the chipped bedside table listening to Faith croon to Hope while water slushed in splashes and drips. Occasionally a word such as 'illness' or 'hell' would be audible through the wall. Mostly, all he could hear was the unending hum of Faith's low voice.

When they had come out of the bathroom, Hope was no longer wheezing. She did not look at Javier as she stepped into the short hallway. Instead, she stooped low and dragged her fingers over the wall, bending further when she could reach the bed. Her steps were slightly hobbled, and he stood up to help her but Faith was already there, hair soaking a shadowed spot down her side and back as she helped Hope slide into bed.

In the quiet, sitting by a tiny lamp, Javier had offered to call an ambulance or the police. But Faith immediately told him no. "It's one thing for one of us to escape occasionally...it's another to send in police," she said. She explained that after Grace Seven left, the Reverends warned everyone that they had taken precautions for if their church was discovered.

He told her that he would help her figure out a life here and she said it would be a long time before she'd be willing to leave and start over. She could remember her childhood. She remembered swing sets and book lights hidden under covers, and her

parents balancing checkbooks on TV tray tables. But she'd met one of the Reverends before adulthood. Now the world came at her as if it were mixed up sound waves, everything was garbled and confused.

Occasionally, it occurred to him how strange it was that after school sometimes he bought groceries for of couple women living in a motel room he paid for. If he didn't know these women, maybe the money would go toward a new tv, or a game console. It struck him once in a while as odd that he found an old telescope and tried to teach them the basics about astronomy he'd learned in class so that they wouldn't be quite as terrified of the sun. And an inch within his stomach felt cupped and empty as he went home to his mamá and sister everyday only to sneak out in the middle of the night to have this other life they would never know about.

As months passed, he realized that the women did not intend to leave—at least not in any permanent way. Faith would stare in the direction of the Compound on cloudy afternoons and Javier felt that she must have been thinking about those she left behind, even if she would never discuss them. So he bought cheap pairs of pharmacy glasses for Hope to try and they filled the room with clothing they got from a second hand store while pretending to be Javier's mamá and aunt. In the evenings he read them chapters from his favorite series of books, like *Dune* and anything by Asimov, and told them about his school lessons and his friends. Early in the mornings, when there was still no light, he'd be there to rub Hope's back when she started wheezing or to show Faith how to use the TV remote when she couldn't remember how.

#

Javier's mamá reminded him of the way that Faith had seemed to fade into the dark when

he first saw her. In the mornings when she didn't leave to work, his mamá began to blend into the furniture. Her skin's deep, vibrant tan became drab like the couch she sat in. He frequently didn't know what to say when he saw her because he was surprised by her presence. He would be at the kitchen table trying to catch up on homework and after a while, he'd realize that she was leaning against the counter, slowly washing some dish.

She used to wake him up in the morning. On Fridays, she'd ask what he was craving for dessert. She'd take him to the department store to find a nice collared shirt for Easter, pointing to things he'd never wear, "Que lindo, Javi."

Now, Paulina took care of such things. She didn't take him to buy new shirts, but she ironed his old ones. There wasn't usually dessert, but the weekends before his school tests she stayed at home and cooked so that he would have—as she liked to call it—"brain food." It wasn't the same. The apartment was stagnant now. Spots where his papá used to sit went unused. He wondered if his mamá and Paulina could tell that the walls turned a different color after his papá left.

Paulina often drove him to school too, but in the last few months, he thought she was looking too closely at his face. He'd catch her staring at his eyes at stoplights. Maybe there were circles under his eyes from lack of sleep, from counting money in a shoebox to make sure that he could feed the three at the motel, from wondering if the eyes on his back meant real danger. Maybe she had some form of mother's intuition since she'd started caring for him, and she could see the thoughts that flickered through his mind in the early morning—the ones where he saw Grace's face even when picturing Charity's body, or when he wondered why Faith did as he told her when he was certain, in the face of her severity and firm lips, that she merely tolerated him, why she never asked him to

teach her how to read maps and find a job so that they could all leave, the way that Grace had done.

Irrationally concerned that Paulina might discover his secret life, he accepted her offers for rides less frequently. At dinners when she had time to eat with him, he made up stories about Ryan and Gina, or school, so that she wouldn't suspect that his life was either empty or filled with something unusual.

#

After the bell rang for lunch, Mr. Gordon put a hand on Javier's shoulder to keep him from leaving math class as the students filed out the door. The teacher crooked a fat finger at Javier, motioning him to the desk in the corner of the room. Once the students left, he pulled out several assignments Javier had turned in. Red marks danced across the silver of Javier's pencil marks.

Mr. Gordon pulled out a seat for Javier and then shoved the papers to the edge of the desk. "There are also several missing," he said tapping the failing grades at the top of the assignments.

Only two months into his first semester of senior year and this was the third class Javier was failing. Ryan and Gina would do homework with him, but it would cut into work time, it would cut into time with Charity. He pictured a world in which he wasn't in school. One where he worked all day and then spent the evenings at the motel. He thought of Charity's soft pink skin while Mr. Gordon warned him that he would have to take the class over.

When he finally went to lunch, he told Gina and Ryan what Mr. Gordon had said while they ate hot dogs with mushy buns at a table right outside the cafeteria.

“Paulina will be pissed if she finds out,” Gina said, dipping her hotdog into a pile of ketchup.

Javier shrugged. He didn’t want to think about his sister. His stomach twinged lately when she came to mind. Maybe it was all the black clothing from her mourning jobs, that it made him think of dead people all the time.

“What would you do if you dropped out?” Ryan asked.

“Keep working, I guess.”

Ryan rubbed his jaw with the tips of his fingers. “You’d make a lot of money if you started working full time now.”

Gina rolled her eyes. “Yeah, for a seventeen-year-old boy.”

“Whatever. Do you remember what we used to say we’d do when we grew up?” Ryan asked.

Javier chewed his hot dog slowly, the sun prickling his forearms.

“We said we’d be firefighters. It’d suck in the desert though. It’s fucking hot already,” Ryan said.

Javier couldn’t remember that at all. He couldn’t remember a time when he thought that he’d be a firefighter. He couldn’t remember a time when he thought he’d be anything really. Once Ryan said it, he realized he must’ve thought about a career at one point. Before his papá went to jail, probably. Now, whenever he was supposed to remember something before that, it was like watching perfect, smooth oil paintings of himself.

“I’m gonna go for military. It’s the best job to learn survival skills,” Ryan said.

“Or for dying,” Gina said.

He smacked his hand down on her thigh.

“Ow,” she yelped giggling.

“You better watch it or I won’t teach you any skills.”

Javier looked away as they started to make out over their half eaten hot dogs.

#

Javier rolled off of Charity onto the scratchy, purple motel duvet, his chest slick with sweat. He left his palm on her belly, its round softness warming his hand. Her stomach protruded slightly, not with life or fat, but simply a swell of natural age, one of several reminders that she was over twenty years his senior. Her breathing was heavy in the silent room—Faith and Hope had taken a walk to give them privacy—and he could hear her head shifting on the pillow until she was facing him. He stared up at the stucco ceiling unblinking as she wrapped herself around his side, lulled by her familiar presence.

Charity brought a finger up to his bottom lip. “Your mouth reminds me of one of the boy’s from the Compound.”

He waited for her to say more, licking his lip and touching her finger incidentally.

“Not the shape. But the way that he’d move it while thinking. And the way he’d hold his mouth open equally wide no matter how large the bite of food.”

Javier wasn’t sure he did that at all. Charity was newer to the motel, and he wondered if she could only see things in comparison to where she lived before. He didn’t mind it, he didn’t have to worry about the weight of her words, he could just enjoy her strange comparisons. In this case, he would watch his mouth in the mirror during his next meal.

“Do you want to shower?” he asked.

“In a minute,” she said, her body sinking into the space between his back and the bed. “Ok.”

“We want to go back tomorrow. Just to check on things,” she said.

They did that once in a while, went to the highway near the Compound and watched it through binoculars. It’s how Faith and Hope were able to help Charity escape over a year and a half after they did. He thought Faith was always looking for someone specific, but she’d never say who. But he knew that Hope went there for different reasons. She’d told him once that sometimes she’d wake up and think that she must’ve imagined it all. If too many days went by that she couldn’t look at the Compound, she started to get nervous. Afraid that she might be insane.

“Someone’s been watching me again,” he said.

“We’ll be careful,” she said, shifting on the bed beside him.

“Day time only.”

She nodded.

He remembered the night that they rescued Charity. She wasn’t quiet, like Faith and Hope. In the motel room she sat on the floor in a towel next to Javier, pressed into him, like the warmth of his skin made everything real. And immediately she began to tell stories about her life underground. She told him that they were only allowed out at dusk on some days. That sneaking out wasn’t very hard, but that if they were caught the punishment was severe enough to be a deterrent. “They wanted the marks on your skin to look like the stars. To remind you of all the hells you’d end up in if you kept misbehaving.”

Her long red hair tickled his elbow, but he didn’t want to move—afraid she’d stop

talking if she realized that someone was listening. He liked her bleached rose skin. It wasn't light enough to make him aware of their difference, just plump and fruit-like.

That night she escaped, she spoke well into the early morning hours. She said that she was called 'Charity' because women who couldn't have children were always named 'Charity.' Once her name was Mercy, but when she reached eighteen and hadn't become pregnant even once, they renamed her Charity. She didn't mind. Neither one was her real name. But she wouldn't tell Javier her real name. Instead she told him about the sleeping arrangements and the food and the names of the hells and the chores and the way her skin felt being out in dusk after she'd spent weeks inside. She described the pain, and the relief, and the way her stomach burned and lungs expanded just wide enough to realize there was something inside of her besides obedience because she had smiled in the dark when the Reverends expressed their disappointment that she couldn't have children.

Finally, he realized that he had to ask. That he had to know the answer to the question that had begun to build within him since he helped Grace Seven escape years ago. "You're the fourth to escape. Why doesn't everyone?" Surely, Hope with her asthma and terrible eyesight and Faith with her tired gait weren't the most able to escape.

Charity rubbed her palms over the rough carpet. "They believe it, you know? And those that don't, well...They beat the other Graces after Grace Seven left. Worse than usual, I suppose, but how are we supposed to know the difference? I don't know. They said the other children would suffer the sins of their parents. I don't know."

She slid down his side so that most of her back was on the ground. Her head pressed into the center of his chest and there she began to doze. Even with his shoulders pressed into the wall, he thought he might be able to sleep there, but then he realized that

there were not three sets of even breaths in the silence. He opened his eyes and glanced at the bed that Hope and Faith were sleeping in. Hope's pointy right hip was barely protruding past his view of Faith's stomach. And Faith was lying on her back, her eyes blinking open and closed every few seconds.

"Are you alright, Faith?" he whispered, his eyes on Charity to make sure she didn't stir.

"You must think I'm horrible. To leave all my children behind when I know what they'll do to them because I know what they did after Grace Seven left," she paused, and he said nothing.

Just when he thought that she must've gone back to sleep, she spoke again. "I have nine children. Nine little ones I left behind."

He shook his head, but he wondered if he did think that. What was one woman's freedom worth? Nine unknowing children suffered for her escape.

She didn't say anything else though. Her eyes closed and then so did his. In the morning, she said just as little as she ever did, Charity beginning to fill the space that had been the quiet before.

#

Whenever Javier entered the prison to visit his papá, he felt as if he were stepping much further away. From the outside he knew what it was, he could picture chatting with his papá, he could remember the strange way the inside of his stomach and chest felt slick when he walked through the metal detectors, but it seemed so removed from the parking lot outside, from anything in his city and life. And though his papá was clearly aging, his temples gray and hair stiff, his mouth lined, the jump suit he wore made him seem

somehow perpetually in a single moment. Javier visited frequently, and he thought that bits of him seemed to stick on the chair when he left, despite how awful he found the prison. He tried not to think about how most of his friends remembered what their papá looked like in the sunlight.

As he sat across from his papá, he remembered that his papá didn't finish high school. Maybe that was just their family's way. Alejandra ran away before her junior year ended. Paulina finished, but she was probably the exception. "When did you quit school?"

Luis sat up, staring intently at his son. "I didn't quit. I didn't have a choice."

"Ok. So when did you leave?"

"I left because of the violence."

"I get it. But how old were you?" Javier asked impatiently.

Luis sighed. It sounded odd through the phone. "What is this? Why do you want to know?"

Javier looked away, eyeing the large prison guard standing by the door. He didn't want to explain his failing grades—he didn't want to feel guilty at that moment. He had a plan, and he was supporting three women, he could make things stable if he just quit school. "Just wondering."

Luis shook his head. "Are you in some kind of trouble? What's going on? You're no bato loco. You're not reckless. You're smart. You should stay in school."

"I was just curious," Javier muttered. But he didn't understand why working full time was reckless. His family didn't have a lot, but they had enough that they never went hungry. Without his paycheck, these women would. He could tell his papá didn't believe

him, but it shouldn't matter since his papá's voice barely carried past the glass. Yet it did, it carried all the way home. When Javier went to his room at night, at the time he imagined his friends said goodnight to their fathers, he sometimes heard his papá's voice. It seemed loudest when he wanted his papá to be wrong.

#

Javier changed out of his work shirt in the gas station bathroom, the door halfway open as Ryan talked loudly at him from the cash register. He was trying to convince Javier to buy a new game console. When Javier said no, he started talking about the graphics. "The blood splatters look fucking awesome."

"I don't have the money for that," Javier said, rubbing his hand over his dark hair in the mirror. It stood on end, static-clinging to the back of his gray shirt.

"I don't get how you don't have money. You work all the fucking time and you never buy anything," Ryan said, shuffling the take-a-penny-leave-a-penny bowl. Javier could hear the change rattling from the bathroom.

Javier left the bathroom, the shirt tucked under his arm. He tried to think of what other teenagers spent their money on. "I eat out a lot. Besides, you work a lot too. Where's all your money?"

Hopping up on the counter, Ryan rolled his eyes. "You know where, dumb ass. Supplies for the apocalypse."

"Still?" Javier grinned and walked to the glass door at the entrance.

"Has the world ended yet?"

Javier guessed not. He said bye and walked out into the noonday heat. The sun burned his eyes and he had to stand still for a second, his feet baking in his sneakers so

his eyes could adjust. Then he walked toward where he locked his bike on the light pole around the side of the building. It sat by the dumpsters so he held his breath just as he approached, key out, listening to the sound of lazily buzzing flies. But this time, as he approached, he realized that his bike seemed off kilter, as if it had slid down to the ground. Its shape seemed odd too, half twisted.

His breath left him in a whoosh as he saw that the tires were both flat and that one of them was contorted. The seat was shredded and the frame was scratched up. For a moment he thought that someone had backed into it, and then he saw a piece of paper on the ground, a rock carefully placed on top of it. His heart pressed deep into his spine as he looked down at the paper.

Jerking his head around to be sure that no one was nearby, he bent down and picked up the folded paper with shaking fingers. He opened it and swallowed sour saliva. A picture of the Cactus Flower Motel sat at the top of the paper. Underneath it, it read: *Come near us again, and we'll kill you all.*

He balled up the piece of paper, the creases sharp against his fingers, giving his nervous fingers something to do. He knew he'd felt someone watching him. He knew they'd left the fenced community—he was sure they'd done it at least once before. It was time to switch motels.

#

The first time Javier slept with Charity he forgot how old she was. They stripped under the covers of the bed closest to the window, the moonlight muted by a white curtain competing with the neon glow of the motel clock. Faith and Hope snored gently in the other bed, but as soon as Charity's lips were on his chest, he forgot that they were in the

room. When she was naked, her body may have reminded him that she was much older than him—her arms fleshy beside his scrawny ones, her hips wide enough for motherhood she would never experience—but he had never seen a woman naked before. He thought this was surely what a woman’s body was supposed to look like. Her desire, her enthusiasm, her first move led him steadily through their first night together.

Afterwards, she fell asleep, her mouth pressed against his shoulder. For a few minutes, he laid still, feeling the warmth of her slowly leaving his chest and arms. Then he sat up and snuck outside to watch the stars—afraid that sleep would somehow steal this moment from him. The warm breeze tickled his shoulders as he folded his arms over the painted iron rail. Car lights flickered on the highway across the lot, he could hear them speeding, striving for out of this town. This hurried drive was strange to him, as he felt no need to move a single inch.

The door clicked behind him and he turned, surprised to see that it was Hope stepping outside, her brown hair growing in short strands that flicked about in the breeze. She walked out in a long sleeping dress to stand beside him, her steps somehow a little crooked.

“Are you alright?” he asked her.

She nodded. “I just wanted to look at them.”

Javier glanced where she looked into the sky.

“They used to scare me. Isn’t that funny? They used to have meaning, now they’re just objects,” she said, her pale neck tight as she craned it. He could see the tips of white puckering stripes on her skin at her collar.

She reminded him of a deep pond, something clear and true that he wanted to

speak everything to. Maybe it was her quiet way that made him want to talk. “They were bright when you escaped. I could see every rock on the ground when we ran away.”

“They don’t need to have meaning. Meaning just makes people endure horrible circumstances,” she said, picking at the flaking paint on the rail.

He found himself clicking his fingers on the handrail, restless for a minute. He remembered the skateboard rides he used to take to the middle of the night to see Grace. He remembered her stilted speech and her staunch beliefs. “How...why do you sound so different from Grace? Weren’t you born there?”

“My mother hid books under the floor from when she joined. She was one of the willing. She taught me to read. Not my siblings, just me,” she said.

The Church of the Blistering Sun still seemed like a figment to him some days. He’d only seen its effects in four women. He’d only seen bits of the outer walls. It was another place that existed to the others so concretely, but to him it had a fuzzy outline when he imagined the details Charity told him. The bunker rooms moved, the men blurred.

“I have a son about your age. Faith has some around your age too. Charity would’ve had older sons, if she could’ve had any. Even if those years count differently than the ones out here, she’s still got a lot of them,” she said.

Javier shifted his hip against the railing, the ground so hard his ankles seemed to sag towards the concrete. He thought she must’ve heard Charity and him near the end. His face felt hot, but he straightened his shoulders. He tried to come up with something to say, an excuse, or justification, he couldn’t decide, but she kept speaking.

“Faith couldn’t watch her sons grow up anymore. She couldn’t watch them turn

into the Reverends. And her daughters were loyal to them. You have to understand, we had no choice,” she said, her quiet, mellow voice now keening.

He looked over at her and was shocked to see that her cheeks were shining with rivers of tears. He looked away swiftly, disconcerted. The scars, the blind stooping, the subtle limp—her tone never changed, her eyes always blank. Yet now she was crying, sounds surrounding her words so that he could barely understand them.

“She took me with her because she thought that they would kill me. She thought that they would tire of my mistakes and that they would kill me. They won’t kill her five sons—two, perimeter guards, the others, directors of the youth. They won’t kill her daughters—they sew and wash and prostrate themselves. But they would kill me.”

He watched her shoulders shudder so hard that he thought she might fall over. He wrapped his arms around her and shook with her until her body regained strength and the sky began to turn yellow-gray and the stars became less frightening as they dimmed.

#

Javier took his bike straight back to the motel, worried that the men would go there next. He left his bike at the bottom of the stairs and wrapped his shirt around the handlebars. He ran up the stairs and was relieved to find the door still locked, and their voices clear and happy through the windows. Unlocking the door quickly, he talked over Hope who was reading *Dune* to Faith and Charity.

“We have to move. Pack your stuff,” he said, pulling drawers out of the dresser and throwing clothing on the bed.

“Javier,” Charity breathed.

“What happened?” Faith said, standing from the bed.

Javier paused and glanced around for the duffel bag. “They found me at work. They threatened all of us.”

“Alright,” Faith said. Hope was already gathering toiletries from the bathroom.

They all rushed around the room, tossing things into a giant pile on one of the beds. Hope rolled shirts and pants methodically while Faith tossed items on the ground that she thought they shouldn’t bother taking. Charity began to pack the duffel bag, periodically stuffing her hand deep into the sack and smashing things down to the bottom. Javier pulled up the map on his phone and began searching for cheap motels, ones that were far enough away that the men couldn’t easily find them. As he looked at the route for something called the “Desert Trail Motel,” they heard sudden pounding on the door.

Charity gasped, Faith stilled, and Hope immediately ducked back into the bathroom. Javier’s heart jumped up into his throat and he motioned for the women to be quiet and hide. His arm shook as he pointed to the closet door. The Reverends must have found them. Maybe he could reason with them, maybe he could convince them to let the women stay. He pulled his phone out and dialed 9-1-1, ready to hit send in case they attacked.

Javier took a deep breath and then walked to the peephole to see how many men were there. But there were none. His sister, Paulina, faced the door, her large lips fishlike through the peephole. He glanced back behind him and the women were still silently hiding.

“Javi, I know you’re in there! The manager told me. Come out!” she shouted.

Realizing that they still needed to move to a new motel very soon just in case the

Reverends did come, he knew he had little choice but to face his sister. He opened the door as little as possible and scooted through the small space. He had no idea what he would say to Paulina or why she was here. Other teenagers brought girls to motels once in a while—Ryan took Gina to one once when her parents were out of town. Maybe this was explainable. Her cheeks were glowing from heat and she had a piece of paper fisted in her right hand. She wasn't his mother, but maybe he was supposed to apologize. There were moments in his life when he wished he had a script.

Paulina lifted the paper and smoothed it with her other hand. "For well over two years I've listened to you sneak out almost nightly. I've never interfered. I've never told mamá..."

"I—"

She held up her hand, the paper rustling from the movement. He could make out his name at the top of the sheet. And his school name.

"I've given up everything in my life so that you could get through high school and have a good life. I've never complained to you or tried to make you feel guilty—"

"I didn't ask you to," he started.

"You didn't have to! You know how these things work. Estas pendejo? You think you would ever have to be the one that finds odd jobs to support an alcoholic madre and a hermana? No. Of course not. But you will not fail high school." She shoved the paper against his chest and he grasped it almost absently.

"Paulina," he said alarmed.

"I don't know who you're going around with. If you've got some puta in there or what. But if you keep this up," she said, poking the sheet against his chest, "I swear, I

will put locks on the front door so that you can't get out."

He nodded, his eyes wide as she turned and walked to the stairs. How had she found him? Had she been watching him too, following him? He watched her hair float behind her for a second and then he walked back into the motel room. All three of them had left their hiding spots and watched him intently as he came in.

Charity stepped up to him and put her hands up on his shoulders. "I guess you heard that?" he asked, trying to smile. She nodded while the other two went back to packing. They somehow made more noise though, as if trying to give them a moment.

"Don't worry about it. I'm handling everything," he said, glancing down at the grades listed on the paper. The only two classes he was passing were gym and English.

"Of course you are," she said, kissing him lightly on the chin.

The three gathered the last of their belongings and walked out of the motel room.

#

They didn't even make it two nights in the new motel room before Faith told Javier that they wanted to go back to the Compound. He brought bananas and bread from the grocery store and Faith sat him down opposite to her on one of the beds, and she told him that the three absolutely must go back to the Compound.

"You can't," he said flatly, crumpling the plastic bag from the grocery store.

Charity and Hope sat at a small table beside the wall and said nothing.

"We have to rescue one more person," Faith continued.

"Dios mio, Faith! How many people are there? How many people are still stuck in the church that you're going to have to go back and save individually? Just let me call the police." He stood up and pulled his phone out of his pocket.

Charity jumped up and clasped his hand around the phone. “You can’t. They have weapons. So many people will die.”

“There are over sixty people in the Church of the Blistering Sun,” Hope said from her spot on the ground.

Javier whirled to face her. Sixty? That many? It seemed all but impossible. “But...it looks so small.”

“Of course it looks small,” Faith said, smoothing the covers by her thigh.

“So much of it is underground,” Hope said.

Charity released his hand and he sat back down on the bed.

“We have to save one more,” Faith said again.

“They’ll come after all of us. They’ll probably kill us. They won’t lose another,” Javier said. Faith’s face was rock and he wasn’t even sure that she heard him.

“We have to save Grace One,” Faith said.

Javier looked down at his hands. “This is why you all stayed so long, wasn’t it? So that you’d be close enough that you could keep trying to help people escape.”

“You act like that’s bad,” Faith said sharply.

He shook his head and remembered the way that Grace left. He pictured the three of them leaving, even Charity—walking off to some bus stop in long skirts and old duffel bags over their shoulders, and he found that the image didn’t plunge his heart into his stomach like he thought it would. It stayed steady. Shouldn’t his feelings for Charity make him ache as he imagined these women gone? He tried to envision his life after the women left, tried to think of what a normal year in high school looked like. He couldn’t.

“You won’t be safe here after,” he said, but he was sure they already knew that.

Charity averted her eyes when he looked at her, but he could still feel the warmth of her shoulder pressing against his.

“It’s Grace One. She has to find her daughter,” Hope said.

He could understand that righteous certainty in Hope’s voice. He could understand the longing for someone because you know that they should be in your life, because you know that you owe them salvation, or at least love. Javier was not even sure if he remembered Grace’s face accurately anymore, but he didn’t care. If Grace Seven was found by her mother, maybe one day, he’d be able to find her too.

#

Charity asked Javier not to help Grace One escape. She told him that he didn’t need to take more risks. He ignored her and told them not to unpack in the new motel. They’d have to leave immediately after.

They waited until evening and then they walked the three miles to the Compound. He began cutting the fence several hours into the night with the three women at his back, watching for their fourth addition. For a second, as the metal snapped in his fingers, he had a flash of a thought that this might be easy. That they could save one more and walk away without getting caught. But before any of them even caught sight of Grace, artificial light flooded the desert floor and the low alarm sounded through the brush and walls. Bats fluttered out of the trees and up into the night sky.

“Hurry,” Faith said.

Javier opened his mouth to snap at her when he saw that in the distance another woman was running towards them. She had long, moon blonde hair, her eyes were gray—the light swallowing their color—and she had smooth pale skin. He almost

stopped to stare at the woman who looked so much like his Grace. He cut the wire piece by piece until he was sure the space was big enough for her to escape.

“Gloves,” he grunted to Charity.

She handed him a pair of gardening gloves that he slipped on, peeling back the pieces of fence. He could hear Grace’s feet pounding the ground over the sound of the alarm. But when he glanced up, he saw that she wasn’t the only one outside. He saw beards and narrowed eyes through the bramble a few yards behind her.

He paused and pulled his phone out of his pocket, handing it to Faith. “When she gets through take this and run. If they catch up, dial 9-1-1, no matter what they say.”

Faith shook her head, the few strands of gray in her hair gleaming. Javier grabbed her hand and put the phone in it just as Grace One made it to the fence. The woman grabbed Hope’s fingers through the metal fence, and Hope smiled, the only smile on her that Javier had ever seen.

“Down here,” Javier said, pointing to the hole he’d made in the fence.

The woman stood still for a second as her eyes fell upon him. There was ice in her irises, but he didn’t have time to think about her. He bent low to the ground to help pull her through.

“It’s alright, Grace,” Charity said.

Grace crouched and accepted Javier’s hand to pull her through. Rocks and debris kicked up into the dusty night as she shuffled her feet through the small space. Javier looked over her head as he helped her stand, noting how close the men were to reaching the fence.

“Run,” he said, pointing the three toward town and the motel.

“Come on, Javi,” Charity said, grabbing his hand.

He nodded and ran to the edge of the road with them and then jerked his hand free. “Keep going!”

“No, Javi!” Charity screamed, but Hope and Grace grabbed her other arm and were dragging her away. Faith was ahead of them all, waving them all along.

Javier listened to their panting and then turned back to the Compound. He wondered how many would be allowed out to chase them down. He hoped not many, not because he thought he could win a fight against even one of them, but he was worried he would not provide a very good distraction for several of them. When he saw one of the men scoot under the fence, he put his hands up in fists, the way he’d seen in the movies. Two others followed through.

They sauntered up to him with long beards, wearing cowboy boots and hats, teeth slightly twisted. Two of them laughed when they saw him, but he didn’t put his hands down. He wasn’t sure what else to do.

One man stood further back, his smile cool and serene. There was no maliciousness in his face, just a blankness in his eyes, a certainty about his mouth. He said nothing as the other two moved closer to Javier.

“Boy, you don’t want to do this. Get out of our way, fucker,” the one in the front said, spitting on the ground by Javier’s feet.

Javier shook his head, his tongue like a stone. He braced himself for a fight, but his one swing did little. When the first blow landed in his gut, he forgot how to breathe. And after that he was surrounded by boots and fists and knees and he couldn’t figure out which way was up as he fell to the ground, sharp agony everywhere, his hands covering

his face in reflex, and he thought that it would never end. His body was breaking into pieces, surely. His reasoning was gone, his thoughts were like cotton, but he was just aware enough that he realized he heard someone speaking.

“Get away from him or I’ll call the police. I swear to God, I will,” a voice said to his left and the blows suddenly stopped.

He looked up through bleary eyes and saw that it was Faith, holding the phone out in one hand, her other pointer finger poised at the call button. He couldn’t move, everything inside of him felt like it didn’t fit right inside of his skin.

“Look, boys, it’s little Faithy,” one said, his voice directly above Javier’s head.

“We’ll kill the kids. All of ‘em, yours too, before the police get anywhere near here,” another said stepping away from Javier’s side.

“None of those children are mine. I may have given birth to them, but they’re not mine. You made sure of that, *Reverend*,” she said mockingly. “So don’t try me.”

“Alright, alright. Don’t be rash. No one needs to die tonight,” the one further behind with the deadened smile said.

“But, Pastor—” the one near Javier’s head started.

“Quiet, Luke. You heard me. Now we’ve got a fence to patch.” He brushed dirt off of his long sleeves, a smile still on his face. The three turned slightly toward the fence.

Javier finally gained some of his range of motion back and scooted toward Faith. She took a deep breath and tried to prop him up to a sitting position. As he made it that far up, the one who called the others off turned back to Faith and Javier. He pulled a gun from a holster that Javier had never even noticed. Javier shook through the pain as the

man pointed it at them.

The man fingered the trigger and looked at the two of them. “I don’t care about the law. I care about God. He gives me the power to defend what is mine. If anyone comes near here again, I’ll shoot ‘em and drag them onto the property so that it looks like trespassing. No one will find the kids. No one will find anything. You understand?”

Faith whispered yes, and Javier clutched at her legs.

The man’s eyes ate the light. “Bye, Faith.” The three walked back to the Compound.

Javier realized his face was wet. He didn’t know if it was from blood or tears.

“Faith,” he croaked.

“Shush, shush. The rest aren’t too far from here,” she said, pulling him up.

He could stand, but the pain was everywhere. “Why’d you come back? I thought you only cared about the others.”

She tucked her shoulder under his armpit and they began to hobble up the road. “I care about you. I just knew you were a child. A child shouldn’t have to take care of a bunch of women. We shouldn’t have needed you.”

“I’m a man, I’m a man,” he whispered as the other three swarmed around him.

#

At the Desert Path with its bathtub just tall enough that the water peaked at Javier’s waist, Charity and Hope cleaned him with gritty washcloths. He ground his teeth at the pain of it all. Charity had unlaced his sneakers, and Hope had had him bend each limb individually to check for breaks. He’d cringed when Charity pulled off his shirt, but he could lift his arms. His face felt swollen and every time he touched his own skin he

thought that it felt like someone else's.

Charity began to clear blood away from his face and Hope left the room. "Hope and I wanted to stay."

He grasped her wrist as she dabbed at his lip. Words were hard to shape, but he said them anyway. "I'll keep taking care of you both, if you want to stay."

She smiled, her red hair stuck to the side of her temples. "I remember my first year of high school. Before Pastor John found me. I wanted to be a weather girl. Do you ever think about that stuff? About what you want to do when you get out of high school?"

He thought of his neighbors who were border patrol agents. He thought of others who were construction workers or left every season to a different region for farming jobs. He remembered the graduation parties for the teenagers who were going off to college. He couldn't imagine himself doing any of that. He just saw motels and women in long dresses who needed rescuing and popular novels spread out over bedside tables so that they'd learn how to speak like everyone else. "Not really."

She filled a plastic cup with water from the tap and handed it to him. "Maybe now you will."

Once the dried blood was wiped from his face and his t-shirt was back on, Charity helped him into the other room. The rest of the women sat on the furthest bed talking quietly. The darkness outside was lifting, but it didn't matter. It was Sunday, so he could stay put as long as he liked. Charity pulled back the covers and Javier slid in carefully, trying to avoid touching his knees to the blanket and only leaning on his right side. She got in bed with him and tucked around him. Then the other three came and said their goodbyes.

Faith brushed his hair with her fingers and thanked him for his bravery. Hope held his hand and said nothing. Finally, Grace One crouched down in front of his face so that they were eye level. “What was she like when you last saw her?”

“She was...strong. Hermosa,” he said. His body felt rooted to the bed, his limbs like stones, his eyelids sinking. The pain was there, but dull to his exhaustion. She smiled and he wanted to touch her face. But she wasn’t his Grace and he couldn’t move his arms.

“I’ll find her,” she said, standing back up.

“Stay a while?” he muttered to Charity.

“Of course.”

Her warm body settled against him and he fell asleep with her lips pressed against a spot on his forehead where there wasn’t any bruising.

#

When he woke, they were gone. There were four off-white bonnets on the end of the bed, as if left in gratitude or maybe simply a remembrance of each of them. He remembered the second night with Hope and Faith, when Hope had thrown herself on the ground and begun to pray to the Pastor and the sky and the stars just as Javier pulled toothbrushes out of his backpack. Faith had jumped from the bed and wrapped her arms around Hope, shushing her and telling Hope that outside of the Compound those words were only words. He watched the bond of their understanding and had felt deeply lonely. He’d looked out the window while Faith began to sing a lullaby. The cadence and tone was familiar, but he realized he remembered none of the ones his mamá sang to him when he was a child.

As he looked around the almost empty room, the beds and the tables and lamps that were empty of the women's presence, he realized he was somehow less lonely. Today, he was just alone. No one shared his past and his pain, but there was no one there to try to share it anyway.

He eased out of bed and gathered his things. It took almost an hour to put his few belongings in his backpack because moving was painful and his limbs were stiff. He avoided the mirrors. He picked up his wallet last, now surprised by the thickness of it, wondering what he would do with the money he'd spent keeping the women alive. He supposed Paulina could use it for groceries.

At the motel office, he rang the bell on the high counter to check out early. A man with long gray hair walked out of the back and smiled at Javier, his eyes widening only slightly as he took in Javier's appearance. Javier wondered if he wasn't the first to look like this when checking out. He'd have to come up with a story to tell Paulina about his appearance when he got home. He paid his bill and glanced through the window to the side. The bright highway was empty and the parking lot held a few rusted trucks. No one was walking about and he didn't feel anyone watching him.

"I hope you enjoyed your stay," the man said and handed Javier his change.

Swimming with a Mermaid

Paulina

Paulina's mamá, Rosa, watched spiritual DVDs most mornings now: hours of meditative films of empty beaches with thick ribbons of golden sand. Through the speakers, the waves were barely audible. Instead the television seemed to shush whoever sat in the living room. A man's voice would purr over the shushing as golden beach faded to pink faded to orange and faded to gold again. *"Imagine you are lying in the warm sand. The tide rises over you, rinsing your skin, and pulling back again toward the sea, cleansing you of all your negative thoughts and feelings..."*

Paulina could listen from the kitchen as she counted the eggs left in the refrigerator. Four eggs for two days. She would have rice and beans today.

The man's voice grated on her, it clung like static to the inside of her ears. But a second cousin swore the DVDs helped her lose weight. Not that Rosa was trying to lose weight, but, "They're good for everything. My best friend stopped collecting rocks last month. Now she's engaged."

Dubious, but seeing no alternative, Paulina told her mamá about the meditation videos, lying about their purpose, of course. Rosa said she didn't feel like an alcoholic.

Paulina gave her mamá the videos in the afternoon, when her eyes were barely pink and her cheeks shiny. "They're just something to help you relax."

"I don't need to relax."

"Everyone could use some time to relax," Paulina pressed.

"When will I have time to watch this?" her mamá asked.

“Maybe before bed?”

“I’ll just forget it all in the morning.”

“On the weekends then?” Paulina suggested.

“No, no. If I do this, I should really do it,” Rosa said, looking down at the DVDs in her hand.

Paulina sucked the insides of her cheeks between her teeth for just a second. Her mamá had mostly stopped working anyway, what difference did it make? Javier could make his own way to school most mornings now that he was in his last semester of high school. So her mamá began to sit on the couch for hours each morning, listening to the man’s soothing voice, staring through the television. Some days Paulina saw the rim of a bottle poking up between couch cushions. She didn’t think this was what a cure looked like, but maybe these things took time.

Paulina looked at the flickering neon-lighted time on the microwave. Javier was going to be late if he didn’t hurry. She banged on the wall by the microwave, where his room sat on the other side. “Vamos, Javi. Apúrate!”

#

Twenty miles north of Paulina’s small city sat the peripheral upper-class neighborhood of another city, called the Foothills. Houses emerged from the mountainside, large windows and balconies appeared to grow up the sides of cliffs like thick-rooted saguaros. Iron gates blocked the roads leading to the hillside trails and driveways. To those living below, the sunrise’s orange and pinks seemed to burst out of the houses themselves. Those living up in the Foothills were among the largest group of Paulina’s clients.

One woman—a mother of three named Delilah with sleek blonde hair cut short—

had Paulina buy her lover a reconciliation gift and her youngest daughter a birthday gift. Paulina dropped off the lover's gift to Delilah's secretary—a boxed Rolex wrapped in black wrapping paper that shined like water—and then she brought the daughter's gift directly to the gated house. When she got to Delilah's home, Delilah answered the door with tangled hair and a wrinkled skirt. She ushered Paulina into the kitchen with a window view to the backyard and pool where there were over a dozen children in swim suits running about and a couple performers at the edge of the pool.

“I have to run out for a quick errand. I need you to watch the children,” Delilah said, taking the large birthday bag with primary colored tissue paper and placing it on the counter.

“Oh, I really don't think—”

“Dawn's father never made it. Poor Dawny. It'll just be twenty minutes. I really appreciate it.” She ignored Paulina and looked through a black purse and pulled out keys.

Paulina looked out at the children she didn't know and around the kitchen that was not hers. She had other work to do. “I'm sorry, but—”

“Just add it to my tab. You can take the pizza out to them when it arrives. Just don't let them inside while they're all wet. Really, you don't even have to do anything. They probably won't notice you're here, or that I'm gone. I'll be back in a few,” she said, and she left the room before Paulina could say anything else.

Paulina watched the empty doorway for a few seconds and then looked back towards the children. She could hear their shrieks and shouts as they ran around the pool. The two performers were talking to the children closest to them. Through the window and the glare of the sun, she could see that the man was a pirate. He wore a white

billowing shirt, a tricorn hat, and an eye was covered with a patch. The woman was sitting at the pool's edge, but Paulina couldn't see much through the children surrounding her—just iridescent purples and greens where the woman's legs should be.

The doorbell rang and she was pulled from her thoughts.

After paying the deliveryman, she carried the pizza outside and placed it on a long table filled with bowls of candy and chips and cookies. The air smelled like chlorine, sunscreen, and garlic, and her eyes stung under the sun. Children swarmed around her and she opened the boxes, stepping back as they immediately emptied the first box. The pirate walked up to her once the second box was half empty.

“Is Delilah out?” The man glanced around the pool deck and looked back at the pizza. He was tall and had bare feet.

Paulina nodded. “Just for a few minutes.”

“Excellent,” he said. He brushed his sandy hair away from his forehead and grabbed a slice of pizza.

Paulina glanced towards the woman sitting on the edge of the pool. With the children no longer swarmed around her, Paulina could see that she was a mermaid. Her tail was shimmering purple that turned green when she or the sun moved and it hugged her legs, giving way to a pattern of scales and skin up her stomach and ribs. She wore a strapless bikini top made from pearl-colored shells and shining beads, and her hair was sandy and pale green, crinkling in tiny waves around her bare shoulders and back. She was surreal, a mirage planted against the desert life several feet behind her. “Does your...”

“Sister,” the pirate supplied.

“Does your sister want some too?” Paulina asked.

He shook his head and swallowed. “She doesn’t eat at these events. No one wants to see a mermaid eat pizza. I should get back to her.”

“Ok,” she said, still watching the mermaid.

“Join us.” The pirate grinned and she understood how he got such a job. He was at ease, charming, and clearly didn’t mind bending the rules.

She walked over to the pool, trying to keep pace with him so that she didn’t appear too eager. She wanted to see the mermaid up close, to find out if the beads around her neck were dripping with water or if the light made it just appear that way. Her palms itched as she imagined how smooth the scales must be, how soft her hair was.

Up close, the woman’s eyes were turquoise, banded with a darker hue as if the color had to be contained. She looked up at Paulina and even though the mermaid didn’t smile, she seemed curious, interested, focused solely on Paulina. “I’m Madeline. This is my brother, Alex. He often forgets to introduce himself.”

“I’m Paulina.” Alex shook her hand, but Madeline didn’t offer hers.

Madeline surveyed the children. They were bunched in groups around the table eating. “Which one is yours?”

The children were a sea of white, smears of sunscreen on noses and shoulders, goggle rings pressed pink against freckled cheeks. Paulina looked like no one’s mother. No one had assumed she wasn’t the help before. But Madeline wasn’t the first to assume that at twenty-one, she would have at least one child. “None of them. I’m Delilah’s personal shopper.”

“And now the babysitter,” Alex said wryly and winked.

She didn't respond, still annoyed with Delilah.

"We had to put in the contract that she couldn't leave us alone with the children. She does that a lot. I'm sorry if it screwed you over," Madeline said.

"It doesn't really matter. Does she usually go out for long?" Paulina pulled her phone out of her back jeans pocket and checked the time.

"If you have to go, we'll cover for you," Alex said still smiling.

"Or you could stay for our next act," Madeline offered.

Paulina found herself needing to know what Madeline's hair looked like underwater. She swallowed and nodded. Finally Madeline did smile, her lips tipping upward like the slight rise of tide.

Alex went to the bathroom before they began again and Madeline motioned for Paulina to sit down beside her. "Can you swim?"

Paulina nodded. Words seemed redundant, the turquoise in Madeline's eyes was somehow surrounding her.

"We should go sometime." Madeline tapped a pink nail tip on her scaled thigh.

Paulina gave Madeline her number before Alex returned.

#

The first time they met up Madeline and Paulina got coffee in the evening, but in fifteen minutes Madeline convinced Paulina that they should take their drinks to go and they hopped a neighborhood fence to go skinny dip in a pool with jets and lights on a timer. Without the tail, Madeline still looked like she belonged in the water, her hair flowing out behind her, her eyes taking on the green hue of the pool-light-lit water. Madeline swam on her back, her breasts and hips cutting Lily pad shapes in the pool. She swam close

enough that her hair floated across Paulina's shoulders.

"How long have you been swimming?" Paulina asked. She leaned back and let her fingers drift over the surface of the water, waiting for Madeline's strands to flow through them. Her body shivered in the cool water and she knew that she was overeager, but if she could just be still, maybe Madeline wouldn't see it.

"I was in swim practice when I was very young, but I annoyed my coaches. I wouldn't stop swimming like a mermaid. I wouldn't kick my legs. I hated splashing." Madeline swam slowly around Paulina in ovals.

Paulina tucked her mouth underwater and laughed bubbles. Her lips broke the water so that she could speak. "So you figured why not dress up like one to make money?"

"If I could be anything in the world, I'd be a mermaid."

Paulina could hear the water in her words, the longing for a kind of permanence that didn't exist. For a second, something like disappointment made her feel heavy in the water. "You sound crazy. Or maybe like a child." She giggled to soften the words.

Lifting her head out of the water, Madeline's hair became a sea green waterfall. She closed some distance between them without moving above the water. "It's not crazy, exactly. Not any crazier than anything else that people do. It's just knowing what I want. Do you know what you want, Paulina?"

Paulina pictured images from books and television shows—grassy yards and mobiles above bassinets and food cooked by someone other than her—but these weren't things she wanted, they were things she imagined that others wanted. The only things she could think of were other people's dreams. The cool water was reaching her insides. She

grasped Madeline's nape, desperate for something that tasted differently than the flavorlessness of her own mouth, and pulled her close and kissed her so hard that she felt Madeline's teeth against her tongue.

After a minute, Paulina broke away. "You. I want you."

Madeline pressed her forehead against Paulina's. Her breath was hot against Paulina's cheek. "It's ok if you don't know."

Paulina jerked away and looked up. Her eyes burned, the stars were shifting. What was she doing here? This was just another image from someone else's life. She couldn't have this—absurd conversations about things that would never be. She had what was at home: a brother a couple months from graduating and a mamá who needed caring for.

"I have to go." She waded to the pool's edge, but Madeline's hand was around her wrist.

"I didn't mean to upset you."

Standing in the shallow end, her skin prickled in the air. She could hear the way that Madeline said the word 'mermaid' over and over again in her head. How wonderfully easy it must've been to just know what she wanted. To have just gotten it so easily. "You didn't. It's fine. I just don't know that I can do something like this. I have a lot at home."

"Is it this?" Madeline asked, touching the cross hanging against the center of Paulina's chest.

"Sort of," because it was too complicated to describe a missing but known sister, a papá who seemed everywhere but was confined to a single space, a church where

everyone would hate her if they knew her, and the way that giving freely was the same as owing when it comes to family, the way that everything was somehow different and not what she expected it to be, which everyone told her was just life, but if she stopped and thought about any of it, she might've had to go looking for a kitchen knife, and she could only start chopping vegetables midmorning so many times before someone asked her if that knife was really for her wrists.

“We can just hang out,” Madeline said.

And Paulina said, “Ok,” because the mermaid was magic, the water was an illusion, and them together was just a fantasy anyway.

#

Sometimes in the afternoons when Paulina didn't have a job, she'd go to a park and sit, holding a newspaper up to her face. She never read it, she looked over it, watching birds swoop overhead and flutter in conflict on the ground. She held the paper so that others wouldn't try to speak to her. By four, she had to go home to cook, but if she was there any earlier, she was afraid of what she might find. She couldn't imagine what her mamá did all day at home, or if she did nothing at all, and she wasn't sure which would be worse—some strange hobby or nothing.

On weekends, when her brother hung out with Gina and Ryan in their apartment, she didn't have to escape to the hot outdoors. She could just let their voices through the kitchen walls distract her. They seemed mundane enough, at least since Javier had stopped sneaking off *every* night, that she could pay attention to them as well.

But once after a Saturday mourning job, Paulina found a large patch of something like raw egg on the kitchen floor. It was yellow and sticky, but there were no shells in the

trashcan, just an empty carton. She went to ask Javier if he'd tried to make eggs and found him in the living room, sitting in front of the old computer playing a video game.

“Did you try to cook?” she asked him.

Javier clicked the mouse repeatedly and shook his head. His eyebrows drew together as if he'd forgotten something.

Paulina looked at the headphones covering his ears. “Did you drop the carton of eggs on the ground?”

Javier shook his head again.

She watched him for a second and wondered if he was happy. It wasn't something she thought about—his happiness. She thought about his health, his education, his well-being, his diet, but not his happiness.

He finally looked up from his computer. “Everything ok?”

“Yeah, everything's fine. Did Mr. Gordon help you today?” she said. She was pretty sure she smiled.

“No, that's tomorrow. I'll do my homework in like an hour. If that's what you're worried about,” he said.

She shook her head. “I wasn't. But that's good.”

He chewed on his lip and then turned back to the game.

Maybe their mamá had been cooking and had been distracted midway through. She had done that before. Not just with cooking. She'd get up and go to the bedroom partway through a meal. She'd leave the shower without turning off the water. Once when she'd been washing dishes, she'd stopped and walked out the front door, a sponge still in her hand.

Paulina went to their mamá's room where she was staring out the window. All that was visible was the parking lot and a few brown trees. "Mama, did you make eggs?"

Her mamá said nothing.

Stepping further into the room, Paulina noticed a fine layer of dust had settled on the dresser. She'd have to vacuum in here soon. "Cocinaste huevos?"

"No, no," her mamá said.

"Ok," Paulina said, but she could smell something that reminded her of wet pennies.

#

Alex was a druggie. Not noticeably dependent, just dedicated to a daily high. Paulina could see this as soon as she walked into Madeline and Alex's apartment. He dominated the living room space with his video games, ashtrays, and pizza boxes sprawled over the glass table sitting in front of a ripped, faux leather couch. When Madeline invited Paulina in, she reintroduced Paulina and Alex who, now out of his pirate's outfit, still wore an eye patch, but traded his boots and buccaneer pants for jeans and Nikes. He smiled and sat up on the couch, his one eye reddened. Pot masked the smell of chlorinated lilies and something more chemical.

Paulina wanted to ask if being a pirate was his dream job too, but Madeline guided her to her bedroom down the short hall. There was little in the room. A bed at the center, a bedside table with a glass lamp filled with dried plants and cacti, a dresser with a laptop, and a closet overfull. The walls were painted in patches of blue—uneven, without a pattern, but somehow it altogether became moving water. Once Madeline closed the door, Paulina could barely smell the marijuana.

“I didn’t know you lived with your brother,” Paulina said, sitting down on the bed as Madeline opened her laptop and pulled up a movie.

“Yeah. It saves money.”

“You guys seem pretty different. Is it hard?”

Pictures flashed on the screen. It was animated. Animals with large eyes. It’d be easy enough to ignore if they wanted to.

“We get along. He stuck up for me to our parents,” she said, turning the volume up a bit.

“They didn’t like that you were gay?” Paulina asked.

Madeline propped a few pillows up on the bed. “Yeah, and they thought I was a little odd.”

“I’m sorry,” Paulina said, scooting to the back of the bed.

“Alex is there for me,” she said, sitting down next to Paulina.

“My parents don’t know.” The words printed red on her cheeks. The movie music began to play as dancing household items pranced.

Madeline tucked Paulina’s hair behind her ear, and then pulled Paulina until she was sinking against her chest. “People usually know. They just pretend not to.”

Paulina ignored the comment. That wasn’t true, at least not in this case—her body, her life was a given. There was a map of expectations where her heart’s will might’ve been. She couldn’t hear the dialogue in the movie, it wasn’t loud enough. “They thought you were odd?”

“I stole flippers from swim class. They’re more expensive than they looked. Or maybe the school just jacked up the price. I jumped off a boat before I knew how to

swim. I'd just never seen anything so sparkling and beautiful, I wanted to be in that ocean. I wondered what fish would feel like swimming by my toes," Madeline said, her voice soft.

"How old were you?"

"Seven. I used to pour salt in my bathwater too. It didn't smell enough like the ocean, so I searched for sand. I couldn't make the water smell the way it was supposed to. They tried to make me stop, but I wouldn't. I wasn't them, you know? I couldn't want the things they wanted."

Madeline's words made Paulina's skin heat. There was no embarrassment in Madeline's litany, so she felt it for her. She looked into Madeline's turquoise eyes and saw that this woman would say everything earnestly, give every story away, every anecdote that should have been shared in the deep, when they knew where they were heading. But instead, there Madeline was bare, all her secrets as easy to give as change. Paulina's throat was tight and she wondered what she would owe Madeline in return, but she also wanted it all. She wanted to know all of Madeline's stories right then—they were fresh and outside her own life and apartment where everything was just the past expanding.

"You want to leave. Sometimes when I start talking, people want to leave," Madeline said, her fingers now between Paulina's, netting her hand.

"No, I'll stay."

Madeline smiled and Paulina wondered how other women learned to escape a siren.

#

They did not go on dates frequently, they lived in Madeline's bed, they lay in her bathtub together. Paulina introduced Madeline as a good friend so that she could bring her into her family's apartment. She tried not to cringe when she walked past the cross in the hallway, and she watched Madeline try not to cringe when Paulina said the word friend. Madeline called Javier 'little man' and pretended that Paulina's mamá was just that, a madre. Madeline spent her days off walking the malls where Paulina shopped for clients and Paulina tried on Madeline's tail in another neighborhood pool they snuck into. She held her breath and let her long hair swirl around her until she thought that maybe it could be seaweed and maybe she could go somewhere else if she just had a dream like Madeline's.

They ate leftover pizza when Alex and his best friend, Nate, passed out on the couch. Nate had a round head and watery eyes. He had large shoulders and skinny arms, and Madeline told Paulina in secret that she was afraid of him. He liked to make jokes about Madeline being a lesbian that Alex pretended he didn't hear. He borrowed Alex's money and didn't say where he worked, only told them his hours. And one night Madeline told Paulina that Alex had some money go missing from his sock drawer and she tried to tell him that it was probably Nate, but Alex wouldn't listen. He claimed it was a girl he'd slept with a couple weeks before.

Nights near sleep, Paulina thought about telling Madeline about how sometimes it seemed that air could pass right through her chest and that entire days felt like deep holes she couldn't emerge from. But then she'd look over at Madeline, naked on the bed, and on her chest, veins threaded with purple that shaped themselves like the fruit of a prickly pear cactus, and her own heart got a little lighter. And she thought that maybe if there

were enough days between herself alone and herself with Madeline the hole would shrink, like soil expanding in rain.

Instead Madeline told stories at night, like how her brother injured his eye playing soccer. The patch was something he wore because he preferred people looking curiously at him than pitying him. She told Paulina that she lived one night on the street because her brother lived too far away after her parents kicked her out. Afraid to sleep, afraid that someone might hurt her, she snuck into a bar with a fake and tried to make out with a man, picturing the way her parents' dining room table looked with orange folded cloth napkins and silver serving platters. She pictured her bedroom with her journals and music boxes and thought that maybe it was all enough to kiss a man. But then she threw up in the bathroom instead.

When Paulina realized that she didn't want to share her past with words, she pulled out the newspaper she knew that Javier kept hidden in his closet from the first day of her papá's trial. Madeline read it and said nothing. They ate frozen custard after in a shop with duck paintings on the wall, and Madeline told her how the ground felt weird on her feet. That her weight when walking never felt like *her*; gravity annoyed her. That night when they made love, and Paulina began to take off her cross as she did nightly, Madeline pressed her hand against it and shook her head. "Nothing changes when the cross comes off." Paulina felt her heart pound against it, driving it off, but Madeline wouldn't let go as they kissed. For the first time, Paulina spoke Spanish in bed.

#

Paulina saved enough money to buy Javier a shirt and tie for his graduation. She took him shopping one afternoon twenty miles north of town while Madeline was performing at a

kid's birthday party. Paulina and Javier got pretzels in the mall food court after they picked out a hummingbird green tie to go over a cream colored shirt. They shared nacho cheese that smelled like chemical jalapeños and listened to the old carousel whir on and off as the occasional child got in line.

Javier had spoken little during their outing. He'd told her the colors he liked, he'd complained when he thought the collar was too tight and the sleeves were too short, and he'd said 'thank you' when she checked out at the register. But beyond that, he'd stared out of shop windows and walked quietly beside her, his hands in his jean pockets.

At the purple food court table, he looked up occasionally at her. She tried to smile when he did, trying to draw pride into her eyes, because someone should have been proud of him. Someone outside of prison, someone who remembered what grade he was in and whose idea of time wasn't fuzzy from an alcohol haze, should be proud. And Paulina was, but she was only a sister.

"What are you going to do after I graduate?" Javier asked.

She blinked. That should have been her question. "What do you mean?"

"Since you won't be responsible for me anymore. What are you going to do?"

She covered her mouth with her finger tips so that he wouldn't notice the way she bit her lip. "Javier—"

Salt speckled his hand. He leaned forward. "I know you didn't go to school because of me. But you could start over, you know? You could still go to college."

"Javier—" she began again, but now that he'd started, he wouldn't stop.

"You're smart enough. You could save for some of the fees if I support myself. You don't have to be so unhappy anymore, I can help you now, like you helped me. I'll

find a better job and—”

“Javi,” she interrupted and then she didn’t know what to address. She wanted to tell him that she wasn’t unhappy, but that was a harder lie to say aloud.

“I’m serious, Paulina. I’m about to graduate. You won’t have to worry about me anymore.” His brown eyes were wide, believing, hopeful.

“I know I don’t have to worry about you,” although she did, “but our mamá still needs me.”

He finally paused, as if her answer was unexpected. Then, “I can help with that too.”

She shook her head. “You should figure out your next step. What you want to do after high school.”

Leaning forward and grasping her hand, she thought he was going to thank her. His face was stubbled and she couldn’t remember when he had begun to grow facial hair.

“You can’t be self-sacrificing forever,” he said.

Couldn’t she? She didn’t know what another way looked like. She knew what lies for the sake of keeping the peace looked like: an entirely different life inside the word ‘friend’. She knew what futures on hold looked like: brochures gathering dust until she couldn’t bear to look at them so she threw them in the trash and emptied coffee grounds over them. She knew what caring for her family looked like: pretending that meals and clean sheets were enough to build a happy home. But what did she look like? She couldn’t remember the color of her skin underneath the cross she wore or the way the lines around her mouth webbed together in a smile.

“I don’t want to be something that holds you back,” he said.

“You’re not,” and then she told him that she was proud of him.

#

The first time Madeline told Paulina that she was in love with her, Paulina was wiping makeup off of Madeline’s face with a cotton ball in the bathroom. Nate was pounding on the door and yelling that he had to take a piss and Paulina moved just as evenly, wiping highlighter off of Madeline’s spotted pale cheeks. Madeline’s lips were creased with lines of pink that hadn’t been cleared yet. She sat on the rim of the bathtub while Paulina bent over her.

“Can’t you hurry it up in there?” A fist pounded the door again and Madeline giggled.

“I’ll be a few longer,” Madeline called.

“Try the gas station,” Paulina suggested.

They heard his voice muddled through the door, as if he’d backed away. “What’s your sister even doing in there? Is it lesbian crap or do they just go to the bathroom together?”

“Dude,” they heard Alex said.

“It’s lesbian crap. As in, we’re two lesbians crapping,” Paulina said, her fingers tightening on the cotton ball. It folded white over her fingertips.

Madeline laughed again and the front door slammed. “I like when you’re like this. When you’re so...you.”

“I’m always me,” Paulina said, brushing Madeline’s sandy, green hair off of her cheek bones.

Madeline shook her head and the hair fell back in place. “You know what I mean.

Out.”

The cotton ball was covered in pink and greens so Paulina threw it away and reached for another off of the counter beside the chipped sink. She didn’t say anything.

“You’re the salt in my water,” Madeline said, rubbing her fingers over the painted scales on her stomach.

Paulina paused and drew back, searching the turquoise. Her heart seemed to fill the space inside her chest. “You’re a little odd sometimes. I like it. What does that mean?”

Madeline reached up and touched Paulina’s cheek. There was green paint there now, Paulina was sure of it. “You know what it means. It’s ok if you don’t yet, the future’s just been on my mind. I just wanted to make sure we want the same things.”

“I want to be with you,” Paulina said cautiously.

Madeline brought her hand down and smeared the scale underneath her left breast. Underneath, Paulina could see the bottom of her prickly pear fruit veins.

“Eventually that’ll mean telling your family.”

The green on Madeline’s skin looked like plant life now, something cracking in the dry heat above ground. Paulina wiped that off next. “My family doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter if I tell them.”

“If it doesn’t matter then why not just tell them?”

“I have other things to worry about,” Paulina said, standing up from her crouch in front of Madeline.

“It’d be nice to be honest there too,” Madeline persisted.

“I really don’t have time to deal with that. My mamá keeps wandering off. My

brother runs away in the middle of the night. I have bigger things to worry about than my sexuality,” Paulina said, her voice sounded erratic and loud to her own ears.

Madeline stood beside Paulina and looked in the mirror. “It’s not just your sexuality. It’s you. It’s me. It’s us,” she said evenly.

Paulina was already shaking her head “I can’t.”

“The lies hurt. You can’t tell me otherwise. I know the way that keeping yourself hidden hurts. Think about it.”

Paulina said she would, but her intentions were fleeting, she could feel them flutter. The stone she felt in her chest was more permanent.

#

Two nights before Javier’s graduation, Madeline was supposed to take part in a corporate party. Paulina waited in the parking lot for Madeline, intending to take her out to dinner after. But the ending hour came and went and soon guests walked through the parking lot, smiling and holding down skirts as the wind blew. Then came a woman in sweatpants and stage makeup visible from her spot in the car. Wondering if she had gotten the address wrong, Paulina called Madeline. Each ring that that went unanswered caused her fingers to clench around the steering wheel. No answer.

After a few more minutes, when people stopped leaving the building, Paulina decided to drive to Madeline’s apartment. Maybe she’d gotten the date wrong. She controlled her speeding with deep, even breaths. When she knocked on the door at Madeline’s apartment, Alex answered.

“I’m so glad you’re here—” Alex said, rubbing the back of his neck.

“Where is she? What’s wrong with her?”

He stepped back and Paulina pushed her way forward. She paused and looked at him just long enough to notice the creeping, berry red on his throat. It was deeper, darker, than the stain of his cheeks. “She’s in her room.”

Paulina stepped past him and from the hallway she could hear Madeline’s weeping. They were unending, keening sounds. Over her shoulder, she said sharply, “What did you do?”

“Nothing! She just, he just...” In his uncertainty, she wondered how guilty he was.

Ignoring him for the moment, Paulina reached Madeline’s room and opened the door. Clothes were flung all over the room, covering the bed and the few pieces of furniture in a rainbow of ocean colors. Paulina glanced about and finally saw Madeline, sitting framed by her closet doors. She was wearing white underwear and a white bra that was wet gray with tears, her hair was caught in the straps. Her face was red, her lips and nose thick. The purple veins under the skin between her breasts seemed to spread as she sobbed. She had never looked so human.

Paulina’s heart was sinking into the hole in her chest, as she ran to Madeline, looking for damage. When she couldn’t find anything physical, she stood behind Madeline, bent over her, and wrapped her arms around her. “What’s wrong? What’s wrong, Madeline?”

“My tail! My tail.”

Had it been ripped? Was it broken? Paulina looked around but couldn’t find it among the mess of clothing. “What about it?”

“Someone stole it!” her words were on puffs of breath.

“Are you sure? I can help you look for it. Why would someone steal it?” She rubbed Madeline’s back slowly.

“It’s worth over three thousand dollars,” Madeline said.

Paulina’s heart dropped into her stomach. “Three thousand?”

“Yes!”

Paulina froze and thought of the marks on Alex’s throat. Anger frothed in her chest; her hands began to vibrate. The feeling scared her, she tried to contain it by breathing, but it wouldn’t be contained. She would find a way to fix this—to deal with the person who had done this. “Don’t worry, mi amor. I’ll get it back.”

“What? How?” Madeline asked.

Paulina kissed her head and stood up. “I’ll be back in a few hours.”

She could feel Madeline staring at her as she left the room, but she didn’t stop. This, she could do. This, she could save. This, she had to save, because when Madeline stopped smiling, Paulina had to live daily inside the emptiness of nothing changing, nothing moving, nothing interesting ever happening. She closed the door behind her, and found Alex icing his neck in the kitchen.

“Nate stole it, didn’t he?”

“Look, Paulina—”

“I don’t have time for this, Alex. If you care about your sister at all then answer the question.” Her knuckles itched and she suddenly remembered a self-defense class she took in middle school. The thumb went outside her fingers if she was going to punch him.

“Yes, alright it was Nate. But he’s fucking nuts. He said he needed money now. When I told him I didn’t have any, he started strangling me. I didn’t have a choice, I—”

But he wouldn't finish the thought.

“You told him that her costume was worth something.”

He looked down at the ground.

“Where's Nate?” She stepped forward. She could see the lines in the ice cubes in a plastic bag.

“He'll hurt you. He's super fucked up.”

“Tell me where Nate is, or I'll call the cops and tell them how much stuff you've got in this place.”

He swallowed and then cringed, drawing the ice back up to his neck. “I'll give you his address.”

#

Paulina wasn't brave. She knew that about herself. She followed rules, she took on responsibilities and took care of her family. But there she was in Javier's bedroom rifling through a box in his closet looking for an airsoft gun that Javier had spray painted black so that the orange markings were covered and it looked more real. She shifted comics and old games and bandanas until her hand grasped something cold and metallic. The door opened behind her as she pulled it out.

“What are you doing?” Javier asked, his eyes wandering to the pile of his things on the floor beside the box.

“I need to borrow your airsoft gun. A friend of mine is...doing a project.”

He smiled slightly. “Fine, don't tell me. Helping Madeline?”

She tucked the gun in her purse and nodded.

“Cool. I like her,” he said, starting to pick his things off the ground. “Also, don't

get shot. Police can't tell the difference."

"Thanks for the tip. You excited to graduate?" she asked, to distract him as she felt the weight of her purse. It was heavy, maybe she could hit Nate with it as well.

"Sure," he said.

"Good," she said, walking out of his room.

On the drive to Nate's trailer home, she tried to envision some sort of plan. She considered calling the police, she envisioned threatening Nate somehow. But every few seconds, Madeline's crying face would appear in her mind and she would lose her train of thought. So when she parked behind his truck in front of the house with a tilted mailbox, she simply grabbed her purse, walked up to the front door, and rang the doorbell. It made a noise that reminded her of a friend's house that had smelled like cookies and mothballs. Her heart thundered in her chest, but the thought struck her as funny.

Nate answered the door, his bulbous head red and his eyes glazed over. He swayed on the spot. "What do you want?"

"I'd like Madeline's tail back." She stuck one hand in her purse, gripping the airsoft gun, and keeping it pressed low against the bottom of the bag.

"I don't know what the fuck you're talking about. I'm busy." There was a slur in his words and she wondered what he was on.

He started to close the door and she stepped forward so that the wood of the door bounced against her foot. She closed her eyes for a second and willed her hands not to shake, but they wouldn't stop.

Nate looked down at her foot. "Stop fucking around. Just leave."

Paulina pulled out the airsoft gun and pressed it against his chest. She hoped that

he'd never had a gun pressed against his chest or that he couldn't feel the difference. "I want the mermaid tail back."

His eyes widened through the haze. "Are you crazy?"

She pressed harder against the gun. "Just get the tail! Rapido!"

"Ok, ok," he said, bringing his hands into the air. He turned around and she kept the gun pressed against him so that it wound around his body until it landed on his back.

"Walk slow," she said.

"It's just in the living room," he said.

They walked into the house and the smell of pot was so strong she almost took a step back. His furniture was mismatched black and brown and the house wasn't well lit. The blinds were shut and as they walked into the living room, a television dominated the space. On the armrest of the couch laid Madeline's tail. It looked like a hunting trophy.

"Hand it to me. Slowly," Paulina said.

Nate grabbed the tail and held it out to her. "I couldn't even find a buyer yet anyway," he grumbled.

Gun still trained on him in her right hand, she grabbed the tail with her left. "Who did you think would buy a three thousand dollar mermaid tail in Arizona? I mean, I love Madeline, but she's a little odd, you know? Most people don't pay thousands of dollars to work at kids' parties." She realized she was hysterical and she clamped down on her tongue.

"It was all they had worth anything."

"Leave them alone, you got it?"

"Ok, ok." He stood leaning against the couch.

She backed up to the door and pushed it open with her back. Her fingers were slick on the gun and she was losing her grip on the tail. She tried to maneuver through the door and her fingers slipped. The gun clicked as she accidentally pulled the trigger and shot Nate in the leg.

He screamed, the sound high and so loud she could feel it in her bones. In his eyes she could see that he hadn't realized it wasn't a real gun yet. Adrenaline was making him crazed, making it more painful than it should've been. But depending on the high, he would figure out what she'd done soon.

Paulina dropped the gun and ran out the door. Her arm sagged under the weight of the tail, her eyes burned from inhaling so much pot smoke, but she pumped her legs until she got to her car door. Tossing the tail in the back seat, she could hear Nate yelling her name. Terrified that he was close, but more terrified to turn around, she jumped in the car and locked the doors. When she finally looked up after turning on the car, she could see him leaning against the doorjamb, still yelling, his mouth twisted in anger.

If he wasn't chasing her, she figured she had a few hours before he was sober enough to come after them. She made a mental reminder to buy a new deadbolt for Madeline and Alex, and drove out of the neighborhood.

#

Before taking the tail back to Madeline she went to the prison for visiting hours to tell her papá that she was gay.

She decided that it wasn't Madeline's prodding that was leading her to this decision, nor was it the fading adrenaline that was now making her arms sag against the steering wheel as she went to see him. Instead, maybe it was that she was always

picturing Madeline's hair turning to threaded gold and stone-turquoise under the water. That she could smell the chlorine and lilies of the woman's skin even over the reek of her mamá's alcohol breath. Was it that even when she arrived at the prison and sat on a plastic chair staring at her papá through reflective glass, she could see Madeline's canines peeking through her lips in a smile? She was everywhere, all over Paulina.

"I'm a lesbian," Paulina said, her insides suddenly, fantastically hollow. She could feel no anticipation for her papá's response. The only thing she could feel was the cross around her neck, lying softly on her clavicle.

Luis stared at her, his hand limp underneath his chin. He blinked several times, his eyes on her and then on nothing and then on her again. For a while, he stayed that way, unmoving, just closing and opening his eyes. Finally, with a blank face, "What did your mamá say?"

Paulina shifted in her seat. Guilt prickled in her fingertips and she rubbed her hands on her jeans. "I haven't told her yet."

The skin between his eyebrows gathered thickly, but he said nothing.

She wanted to get to the religious lecture, to the anger, to the part of the conversation where he told her that she was unnatural and wrong. Limbo made her tongue dry. "You're upset," she said blandly.

"I'm not a test run, Paulina."

"What?"

"I'm not a test run. I'm your papá. Just because I'm behind bars and can't be out there to have a daily effect on your life the way your mamá can, doesn't mean I'm a rehearsal." He paused and then repeated, "Soy tu padre."

“You’re not a test run.”

“But you haven’t told your mamá yet,” he confirmed.

“No.”

He grunted, a toothless noise. “Don’t expect her to be ok about it.”

“You’re not ok with it,” she wanted to ask it, but it came out a statement. It was right there, she didn’t want to be a fool.

“What about God? What about securing a future? What about nietos?” He lifted his hand as if he wanted to pound it on the table, but instead he just left it hanging in the air.

She thought she would be sad, but instead she found there was heat licking up her skin. The same heat she’d felt a few hours ago when she’d discovered that someone had made Madeline cry. “Grandchildren? You’re talking to me about grandchildren?”

He nodded stubbornly.

“And when would you see these grandchildren? Would I bring them into the prison for visits with their abuelo? Would you watch them play with crayons through panes of glass? Would you play games like ‘count the prison tattoos?’”

She watched his face slacken, his skin yellow, but she couldn’t stop. What influence could he pretend to have when he sat there just a foot in front of her, but infinitely far away? “My face through a window is all you’ll ever get besides some photographs, if there ever is anything to photograph. For your sake, I hope to God that it’s enough.”

He stared at her and said nothing.

“I’ll come back with Javier and mamá in a couple of days so that you can celebrate his graduation. But that better be all you do. Don’t make it about you or me.” Not waiting for his response, she kissed her finger tips and then pressed them to the air in front of her. Then she stood up and left the room.

#

At Javier’s graduation, Paulina wondered if her shoulders would become weightless, she wondered if her memories of dreams she’d had as a child would return as he walked down the green-brown football field to shake his principal’s hand. Her mamá sat beside her, hair knotted tightly at the bottom of her nape so that loose hair would not shake out so easily. They both wore dresses, but her mamá’s was long and had pockets. Something bulged from one of them, and Paulina hoped to God that it wasn’t a flask.

A young woman on a portable stage gave a speech about cultural pride and the battles the high school students would face beyond the school. She didn’t comment on the struggles here that were beyond hard work and overcoming laziness. Paulina remembered what it was to perform well at the school while Mexican. She remembered a call her mamá had received accusing Paulina of cheating, because a white girl hadn’t done as well. She remembered several friends and a few kids her sister’s age who had fought for their right to learn about their history and culture in the school. This girl didn’t mention the suspensions or the books that were banned. She smoothed over everything with a broad roller meant to paint houses the colors that neighborhood associations requested.

Was this her school? Was this her brother’s school? The counselor and Mr. Gordon helped Javier scrape by with a handful of ‘C’s, but to what end? The girl sat

down and people applauded. A family sitting beside Paulina began to cry dainty tears. When Javier's name was called, their mamá cried too. "Primer chico en la generación. Primer hijo en la generación."

Paulina's graduation was right after her papá went to prison. Her mamá wasn't there. Alejandra wasn't there. Javier was though. He'd taken photos on his cell phone so that they could show their papá after his appeal. She'd wished they were printed just so that she could've ripped them up.

As soon as the ceremony was over, Paulina and their mamá walked out onto the field to congratulate Javier. He wore the tie and shirt that they'd bought together and he smiled. Their mamá pulled the object from her pocket and handed it to Javier. It was a card. "M'ijo, m'ijo," she said, grasping his cheeks and pulling his face down so that she could kiss him on the cheek.

Paulina was aching for resentment, but it wouldn't come. Javier was standing there in his clean clothes, and even haircut, with limbs that were lanky, but not underfed, and she simply felt relief. She was just relieved that he could leave, that he could move forward. She was relieved that she didn't have to feel guilty for failing him. He was just her brother now. "Felicidades hermano."

#

From her spot on the bed, Paulina watched Madeline paint scales across her ribs. They sat in Madeline's bedroom, the window open so that the air smelled like hot creosote and not just pot. Alex's radio played loudly from the other room, words muffled over the beat of drums.

"Javier's going to move out. Says he wants to figure out what's next. He's going

to find roommates,” Paulina said, picking at the ends of a cream blanket lying across Madeline’s bed.

“That’s probably good for him,” Madeline said. Her sandy brows were drawn together and her chin was sharp as she bent forward to see the fish scale more closely.

Paulina took a deep breath. “I was thinking that maybe you could move in. You could have your own room even, if you’d like.”

Madeline’s brush froze between two ribs. She looked up at Paulina. “What about your mother?”

“She’s ok. Good for a few days after his graduation. But she’s been out of it again. I found hollow eggshells in her closet.” Paulina stood up from the bed and stretched her arms. Everything in her was moving, impatient.

“Hollow eggshells? What was she keeping them for?” Madeline asked, tilting her head until her hair fell over her shoulder. Strands stuck to the fresh paint.

Paulina shrugged. “She wouldn’t say. But—”

“Have you told her? That you’re gay?” Madeline cut in.

Paulina pressed her lips together, floundering despite expecting this question. “Not yet, but I will. She’s just so fragile, I wonder how she’d react.”

“Won’t me being there upset her?”

Paulina sat back down on the bed, but her desire to convince Madeline to stay made her restless. “I have to stay there. She needs me.”

“I know. I’m not saying you should leave, but—”

“And I’m selfish. I want a life too. I want you. And I’m afraid.” Her face felt swollen and she could feel tears coming.

Madeline reached up from the floor and put a hand on Paulina's thigh. "What are you afraid of?"

"I don't know what to do about my mamá. About my own life. I mean, this isn't normal, right? My mamá is hiding eggshells in her closet. She'll suddenly leave the house in the middle of chores. I don't know what to do. And I don't want to do this anymore. I'm tired of all of this." Tears were hot on her face, they were thick and damp on her collar, but she didn't care.

"We'll find a way—"

The words made no sense to Paulina so she brushed past them. "He was supposed to be the reason. Javier was supposed to be what was holding me here. I was supposed to get my life back now. At twenty-one, I would finally get to live. But I can't. She needs me. And I need you."

"You need my help?" Madeline asked, her eyes wide and sad.

"No, I mean, yes. Not exactly. I need you so that I remember that there's a next part. That I can want things some day, you know? Does that make sense? Do I make any sense?" Paulina hiccupped and rubbed her neck where the tears tickled her skin.

Madeline stood up and kissed the top of Paulina's head, pulling her shoulders against her green skin. "You make sense to me."

"Move in with me?" Paulina asked against Madeline's stomach.

"Yes."

Paulina sighed and pressed her lips to the edge of one of Madeline's scales. If the water was Madeline's true home, she would build a river in the hallway if she had to.

The House of the Witches

Alejandra

Alejandra and Mark found La Casa de Las Brujas commune after they broke down in southern California. They were on the California 86 South when they heard a popping noise and they started losing speed. Mark pulled over along the empty highway desert and Alejandra started to make a mental list of their supplies. They were miles and miles away from any town or city and the sun was strong enough to heat the wind that had whistled through their window as they drove. The cracked road was empty except for road kill.

“We have three gallons of water, a bag of beef jerky, and some bread,” she said, pushing a pair of sunglasses up the sweaty bridge of her nose.

“And peanut butter,” he said. He got out of the car and walked to the front to take a look at the engine.

Alejandra leaned out the window. “Anything you can fix?”

“Nope,” he said and closed the hood of the van.

Alejandra surveyed the land around them. Sandy desert stretched in both directions, hills and dusty haze obstructing only distance, not buildings. It was barely after noon. If they began walking now, they could run out of water within a couple of hours. They had a phone, but they didn't have the money for a tow truck.

“So we camp out here for a bit,” Alejandra said.

Mark nodded and opened the trunk of the van. His hair was flat in the dry heat

and his skin was already tinged red. Alejandra got out and they gathered some sheets and the cooler and carried it all a few yards up the road where a tree provided a bit of shade. They threw a sheet over a couple of branches and sat beneath it on a scratchy picnic blanket Mark had picked out from a secondhand shop somewhere in northern California over a year ago. He'd said that at the very least it was less itchy than the grass. Now there was no grass, just sharp rocks and thorny bushes. They made their water plan and then they simply sat and waited.

It was half an hour before they saw a single car and the first one went speeding past. Next, a few minutes after, a truck went by. They slowed down, but only eyed Alejandra and Mark suspiciously before continuing on. After an hour, when no one else had driven past, Mark wandered off to find a spot to piss. While he was off behind a patch of trees, a white van approached.

"Someone's coming," she called to Mark and stood up, waving her hands, hoping that maybe this time they'd get lucky.

The van slowed and pulled over beside Alejandra. There were two women in the van and they both had dark hair and skin almost as dark as their brown eyes. The passenger rolled down her window. "Car trouble?"

"Yeah, we could use a ride into town," Alejandra said looking the women over. They were wearing tank tops and jeans. There were glass bottles of green colored juice in the cup holders and a couple storage boxes of uncooked pasta were in the back seat.

"We aren't going to a town. But our community's up the road. We could get you help there."

Mark came up beside Alejandra and smiled through a greeting.

They looked at him and then looked at one another.

“What’s wrong?” Alejandra asked. She glanced at Mark. He was tall and muscular, but he slouched and his freckles made him look young.

“Nothing.” The woman in the passenger seat grinned. She had a large mouth and sharp eyebrows. Up close, Alejandra could see that she was several years younger than the other, mid-thirties probably.

“We’ll go wherever there’s help,” Mark said.

“Get in,” the woman said.

The back door clicked unlocked and Mark and Alejandra grabbed the bare necessities and threw them in a military surplus backpack. Once they were both in, Mark closed the door and they drove South.

The women introduced themselves as Elena—the driver—and Maria—the passenger. They were sisters, born in Mexico, and they had travelled to the United States together. Maria told Alejandra and Mark their life story as Elena drove. These weren’t stories of woe told by hopeless teens that Alejandra found exhausting, they were simply fact. Maria’s tone was flat, her stories simple, and Alejandra found herself leaning forward to listen to them.

Six years apart in age, they had problems with their neighbors in their first apartment in California—they stole the sisters’ bikes, among other things. The two took night classes together, which they found distracting, and waited tables at a college town restaurant. Elena and Maria became activists after facing the limitations of opportunity in the US. They met one of the original commune founders at a rally at UC San Diego. They got to talking and the woman invited them to the commune. Their community was called

La Casa de Las Brujas.

Mark nodded along enthusiastically to their story.

“It was all women at first. But that didn’t last very long. There’s about thirty of us right now. Not many gringos though,” Maria said grinning.

Alejandra watched the women instead of the road. They seemed relaxed, their shoulders lowered, their palms face-up on the armrest. They seemed oddly at peace for people that made it their business to try to change the world.

After a little over half an hour, Alejandra saw a stretch of cropland and the sun beat down on well over a dozen adobe structures in curved lines facing the field.

“This is it. This is La Casa de Las Brujas.”

Alejandra felt Mark’s eyes on her. He was still waiting for her to make a choice. California had been a slow drive, a stopgap journey. She knew it. He’d been patient, not forcing the issue, just watching to see if one town looked better to her than the others. So she made a choice. They got help towing the van that day and they moved into one of the empty casitas the next morning.

#

The first few months in the commune, Alejandra couldn’t stop thinking about walls when she went to bed. It had been so long since she’d had them surrounding her on a nightly basis. She couldn’t hear Mark’s breathing through the walls. She couldn’t hear the rustling of animals or wind outside. And there was a dampness she was unaccustomed to. The room smelled like plaster and soap.

The work was difficult to adjust to as well. Mark had experience working in fields and he was quickly friendly with those that worked the hours he did. But Alejandra’s

experience waiting tables didn't strain the same muscles that agricultural work did. Of course there were other things to do as well, but she didn't want to appear weak. So she stuck it out under the sun—her back straining and twitching in the long hours, sweat streaming over hair plastered to her throat. She shaved the bottom half of the back of her head in the first week and cut the rest just long enough to draw back into a ponytail. She thought about telling Mark that she wanted to leave, but where would they go next?

And then she met La Bruja Blanca.

La Bruja Blanca sat in a creaking rocking chair on the community center's porch watching the workers and the fields. She had white gray hair that fell over her shoulders and flitted across her unmoving face in the breeze. For hours she'd barely move and yet her black eyes were always open, always shifting. Maria had pointed the witch out to Alejandra as the oldest member of the commune, one of the founders. There were rumors that the founders would protest corporate greed in skyscraper lobbies while in a peyote-filled haze. Signs weren't very effective, but predictions done by a brown woman who *knew* things about the employees that they wouldn't even tell their wives startled the men into loosening their ties and fleeing the building out the alley.

"Someone from Exxon broke down in tears and started praying to Jesus because he thought La Bruja Blanca had the power to curse him," Maria told Alejandra and Mark early on.

Mark had whistled low. "Sounds like she's got some skills."

Alejandra had looked sideways at him. These weren't party tricks. It was common sense to avoid anyone who called themselves diablo whether they were or not. She avoided La Bruja Blanca, but one day the woman pointed to Alejandra, calling, "You," as

she walked to the field.

Gravity grasped her feet in place and she found herself drawn to the woman's gravel worn voice despite Mark's questioning gaze. Once she was closer to the old woman, she could see moles folded into wrinkles in her skin. La Bruja Blanca sat tall and her energy seemed to expand in space, yet the woman's frame was actually quite small. She wore a lemon-yellow dress and a blue shawl despite the heat.

"Siéntate," the woman said.

Alejandra stayed standing.

The woman waved a hand and shrugged. "Niña terca. Do you know who I am?"

"Yes," Alejandra said, and pursed her lips. Anything could spill from her lips right then. Nothing, everything, secrets. She could give them all by accident.

"Then you know that I speak the truth, verdad?" She leaned forward, her mouth slightly open, her bottom teeth slightly tilted.

"Yes."

"Your English doesn't hide you, niña. Your heart is in pieces left by the roadside in three different states. You'll have to return one day. This is only a temporary refuge," the woman said.

Alejandra kept her mind blank, afraid that the woman would see the anger behind the glass of her eye. She could not believe, but not believing had to be a silent choice. "I have to get back to work."

"Impaciente."

Alejandra nodded politely and took a step back, gravity not holding her feet to the wood anymore.

“You look like him. Un hombre guapo, that Luis.”

Alejandra’s spine was ice, but she kept her steps even. There was any number of ways she could know about her papá. Mark could’ve let it slip to someone. The internet. She could even have guessed the name.

“I’m counting days!” The woman’s words sunk heavy in Alejandra’s voice.

From then on, Alejandra avoided La Bruja Blanca beyond exchanging greetings. Some days though Alejandra could feel the woman’s eyes on her back as she checked the irrigation system in the field. And in the middle of the night, when Alejandra was counting days that her father had been in prison—then day one thousand three hundred and eighty-nine—she could hear La Bruja Blanca’s voice counting along with her.

#

Early on Alejandra would take walks around the commune with Maria. Maria liked to talk about the craziest years of the commune—which were well before her time there. She talked about the money the Brujas made selling spells and rumors, grinning mischievously. Yellow potions a gringo couldn’t tell from lemonade. Alejandra wasn’t sure what was truth and what was a lie and when she asked, Maria just combed her black hair over her eyes with her fingers and said, “It’s all truth, man,” mocking one of the only other white men at the commune who spent a lot of his time stoned. Alejandra always shook her head in disbelief, but after a while they got under her skin. They felt solid and weighted and real, and she wanted them to be true. They reminded her of how life could be random, and the way that no one could really stay on course. They made room for possibilities.

Once, on a walk past the crops, they found Mark sitting on the ground, wheat

rising above his head. He was staring out towards a patch of faraway mountains, his green eyes paler in the whitening glare of the sun. His fingers scraped over the sand at his sides, but otherwise he wasn't moving. Alejandra told Maria that she'd see her later and then she sat down beside Mark. The ground scorched her thighs and she could smell the hot sweat of his skin. He'd been there a long time, she was sure of it.

"You ok?" Alejandra asked.

He looked at her and then past her. He reached under his shirt and rubbed his back. After a second, she realized that he was rubbing his scars. Smoothing them out or remembering them?

"Are you happy here?" Mark asked.

"Happy enough. I like this place. It's strange. In a good way though," she said, laying her head on her propped up knee.

He nodded and sifted his fingers through the sand. She liked telling him the truth. It was something he didn't take for granted. "I don't know if I could stay here forever."

She wanted to shift her position, but she could feel his restlessness. It was thick and she was breathing it. And there was a small hint of guilt between his eyebrows. "I don't know if I could either."

"So this is just our home for now?" Mark asked.

"Sure," she said. La Bruja Blanca's words lingered in her ear as she imagined aging here, watching crops grow, learning how to live again.

"Good," Mark said and then stood up and smiled. He offered her his arm to help her stand and she took it. He didn't mention leaving again after that, but sometimes she

caught him staring off somewhere and she wondered if the color in his eyes was the color of the grass someplace else.

#

La Casa de Las Brujas understood right and wrong outside of the law. Weed was free-flowing, clothing was optional. Apologies were made in actions not words. Property was temporary and liquid. So were relationships. Alejandra enjoyed this system. She didn't have to pick a spot, a job, a role and stick to it. She could wander around—sometimes with Mark and sometimes not—until she settled into a task she found worthwhile.

There was a group of women in the commune who called themselves the 'Brujas Luchadoras.' They looked for inspiration from their ways in the 1960s in support of the Chicano movement and they pushed for an egalitarian agenda. Occasionally stir-crazy, occasionally staring at the crops and imagining her family back in Arizona, Alejandra joined them in her first year there.

In the mornings, they took trips to the city for supplies and causes. They met with anarchists and anti-war groups and environmental agencies. The officials in their form-fitting suit jackets and polished shoes remembered La Bruja Blanca, and what she had done in the past. The Brujas Luchadoras got meetings in offices where their rag clothing and dirty fingernails would've caused curled upper lips and calls to security officers. But these women were action. They had La Bruja Blanca's name. They had a voice. They were unity. They could make others believe that they knew the way greed unfolded on the California shores.

Alejandra enjoyed protests where logic was abandoned—who was checking their protest signs for the internal logic of syllogisms anyway? Better to just throw flower

crowns on those filling the ocean with oil and imagine the image that it all created on the six o'clock news. And Mark liked driving the getaway car. He told her that he liked the way she ran out of buildings, her gleaming lips, her wide knowing eyes. She liked the way that even in the driver seat, his fingers weren't steady on the steering wheel.

At night when Alejandra counted the day, when she counted the actions, when she numbered her shouts and threaded flowers and listed facts in bullet points, she looked for the end results and found none. She searched in the lists, in the daily deeds, in the conversations and faces she saw, for some semblance of calm to fill her ears and wrap her heart so that it didn't thud so angrily in the middle of the night. So that she wouldn't wake counting the days since her papá had been sentenced to death.

#

On Alejandra and Mark's six hundred and ninety-eighth day at the commune, they slept together before the sun rose and then Alejandra went back to her room to get another hour of sleep. He was her occasional lover but that night she thought she could taste restlessness on his tongue, as if his peanut butter habit on the road carried on when he was impatient. Or maybe she just imagined the taste when his mouth moved quicker, his hands moved rougher.

He woke her later and told her that Maria was heading into town to talk to an anti-prison group. She was still in bed when he said it, her sheet still around her chest. She said 'sure' and then willed her heart not to pump blood through her throat so fast. For a second, he stared at her and then he told her he'd be ready to go in half an hour.

Alejandra wanted to tell him not to come, but then he'd bring up her papá.

Mark was two feet behind her the entire day. She could feel his eyes when she got

into the van behind Maria. His breath was soft on her neck when she looked out the window on the drive into town. She could even feel his fingertips on her elbow as they met the anti-prison group in an anarchist bookstore. Was he protecting her or hounding her? She couldn't see the difference.

A group of them sat in a circle in the back room of the loft space. Alejandra sat in between Mark and Maria. A man—she had already forgotten his name—across from her was tapping his pen on a legal pad. He was a part of Graduates Against Mass Incarceration. He kept glancing up at her through thick black eyebrows. Beside him sat a woman wearing a red bandana.

“When are you marching against privatization?” Maria asked.

“May twelfth. I know it'll be hot, but we want to make a statement about conditions,” the man said writing on his notepad.

“Oh yeah, that's a great idea,” Mark said.

The other kept talking. “Yeah, I mean it's also meant to reference the sheriff that makes his prisoners sleep outside in the Arizona heat,” he paused and glanced again at Alejandra.

Alejandra stilled in her seat. Her heart pounded, sending heat to her skin. It occurred to her that someone besides La Bruja Blanca at the casa might figure it out eventually. Her papá's failed appeals had been in the news. She hadn't ever changed her name. But how could this random guy know?

Mark shifted in his seat and Alejandra looked to him. He was watching the man across from them, his own face blank. He looked smaller to her then. His height, his hair, both made him appear to rise above the crowds when he led call and responses. But now,

he was just a young man with his soft baby lips and blank face.

“Makes sense,” Maria’s sister said.

The man from GAMI cleared his throat. “What we could really use is a face for this issue. Someone who can speak personally about the justice system and the long lasting effects of wrongful incarceration.”

Alejandra felt sharp pain in her knuckles and she realized she was gripping her chair. The air, the air seemed to be thin, or missing, or filled with something other than oxygen. She looked straight ahead into the air but felt the eyes on her waiting. If they could just move on, if they could just politely pretend that they weren’t talking about her, then she could just learn how to breathe again.

“Alejandra, I heard about what a horrible experience you underwent as a child—”

Hearing her name, hearing the way he seemed to think he knew her, reminded her how to breathe. “Me? Are you fucking kidding me?”

The room was silent. She could feel eyes circling her, greedy to know more, to know her. “If you’re looking for someone to publicly absolve their papá for murdering someone and talk about how hard life has been, you’re talking to the wrong person.”

“I was under the impression that you didn’t believe that your father was guilty—”

“Really? What the fuck gave you that impression? Have you seen anything related to the case? No one believes that he’s innocent. Literally no one.”

He didn’t back off. He pressed his pencil into the page until the lead broke. “This isn’t about what they believe. This is about what you believe.”

“Nate,” she heard Mark’s voice.

“Don’t kid yourself. My life stopped being about what I believe a long time ago.”

And she remembered piece by piece when her life became about other things: when she was put in a white dress at six and was told that God loved women differently, when someone at school told her that brown skin was disgusting and she realized that the sun didn't tan white children this dark, when the cops came for her papá and told them that he belonged in a box, when her mamá picked up the bottle and forgot how to check where her kids were before passing out drunk.

“Your story could help people. So that they understand how important rehabilitation is.” The eagerness in his voice was endless.

“Nate.” Mark's voice was sharper.

“And how is that gonna play out for GAMI? Huh?” Alejandra said.

The woman wearing a red bandana nodded her head. “She's right, Nate. They didn't pick Rosa Parks because she was the first black woman to refuse to give up her seat on the bus. They picked her because she wasn't the pregnant teen who did it the week before. No one wants to hear about a morally ambiguous case. No one changes their mind for uncertainty.”

Defeated, Nate leaned back in his chair.

Alejandra pressed her fingers harder into the chair. She felt that if she could just sit there, more firmly and rigid against the wood and the padding, pieces of her wouldn't fall off from shaking.

#

When they returned that night, Alejandra wasn't hungry. She didn't want to sit in the dining room with its three long tables seating dozens of others, listening to the way that voices started to sound like a swarm of something. She didn't want to look at the yellow

glow of candlelight and cheap light bulbs. The smell of the wood and vegetables would stick to her hair. So, after filling her plate, she walked outside to sit on one of the benches facing a mountain range that looked flat in the shadows of the falling sun.

The dry weather brought static to her skin underneath a cotton shirt. The heat made her eyelids droop, it made shadow spots in the sand look like puddles. Moths fluttered in the sky as the sun fell. Large ones with brown wings as wide as her hand flew beside her as she walked away from the light of the community. She walked over to the benches and found La Bruja Blanca sitting at the furthest one. Alejandra had time to back away, the woman hadn't noticed her, but she kept walking toward her. She could feel some kind of neediness inside her, she was looking for something, but she knew better than to look for answers in a witch. She sat down beside the woman without saying anything. She felt as if she was suspended slightly over her seat, waiting to flee.

There was a plate of food barely touched in her hands. La Bruja Blanca stared out towards the mountains. "Sometimes I think we should've settled down in a coastal town."

Alejandra dragged her fork over a few shriveled potatoes. She didn't look at the witch and the witch didn't look at her.

"But the salt always made my skin feel swollen and sticky."

"Hmm." She wished she would've grabbed salt before leaving. The eyes in the potatoes were staring at her. She glanced at La Bruja Blanca and saw that now her eyes were closed.

"Ask me why I stopped going to the city. Ask me why I stopped going to protests," the woman said.

Alejandra lifted a potato with her finger as if she was searching the plate for

something. The eyes in the potatoes looked like inverted moles, not eyes. She didn't want to talk to anyone, but she had chosen to sit here. "Why?"

"The younger generation believes that anything is worth sacrificing for the right cause. Cierto pero I ran out of energy. I have no more strength. I ran out of things to sacrifice."

Alejandra set her plate on the ground. "Did you tell them who I am?"

The old woman laughed. "You are not the mystery you think you are, niña. Everyone's known for a long time. But you aren't the only one to want a new life. That's the irony, ya sabes? These causes? They all are for people who want a new life."

Alejandra said nothing but she heard shuffling steps behind her. She turned slightly to see who it was out of her peripheral gaze. Mark, of course it was Mark, with his constant tenacity, with his constant movement, with a body that couldn't be at peace even in the middle of the night, even mid-orgasm.

"Are you avoiding me?" he asked quietly beside her. She thought she saw him nod respectfully to La Bruja Blanca.

"I'm eating. We can talk later." She took pleasure in rolling a potato over and not moving it off the plate.

"Al—"

The name, his name for her, the intimacy, the audacity, there was a building of something hot, something tight inside of her. "Did you know?"

"What?" He bent over her and she realized how quiet her voice was when everything inside her was screaming to get out.

"He didn't," the old woman laughed again.

“Did you know that, that those people would ask me about my dad?”

“What? No, Al,” he said.

She still wouldn't look at him, but she knew his eyes were wide, she knew he looked honest. “Did you tell people here? About my past?”

“He didn't need to,” the woman said. Alejandra looked at La Bruja Blanca. She wanted to ask if there was a stain on her own skin that read like a map of her past. Could everyone see it at a glance?

“Of course not,” he said.

“Because if you knew—” What was her threat? She couldn't leave him. She didn't want to be somewhere without him. She didn't want to picture the next scene in her life without his twitchy hands and the peanut butter on his breath. She sighed and blew it out as if she'd paused for some kind of threat, instead of just blowing hot air continuously.

La Bruja Blanca sighed too and then she stood up and carried her plate back towards the dining room.

“I don't understand. This is your father we're talking about. How can you take on everyone else's cause but not his?”

“He's g—”

“Don't give me he's guilty crap because you and I both know that doesn't keep you from caring about him,” he said.

He didn't mention the postcards. He didn't mention the last time he'd brought up her father. The time when she finally admitted that she sent Luis notes. That she liked imagining him reading about her life, knowing where his daughter was. She wasn't sure

if it was punishment—since he couldn't be there too—or if it was a gift. But it wasn't indifference.

There was a reason. She knew there must be. But she didn't want to see it, she didn't want to search for it. She just wanted to count days until oblivion, until there wasn't anything left to count. Until she could remember what it felt like to just stand in one place and have a body without thinking about where that body came from or what that body could do.

“I shouldn't have blamed you,” she said so that he would stop asking about her papá.

#

For a while after meeting with GAMI, Alejandra stayed behind to do field work while the Brujas Luchadoras went city hopping around California. Mark didn't stay with her, but every afternoon when he returned he found her and worked alongside her until the sunset. They settled into habit again, into their rhythm again. He'd chat beside her on and on and she rolled her eyes like she was sixteen again and put a wall up around everything he said. La Casa felt different though. She looked at her people and wondered if they saw her papá in her. She heard them say her name and she was sure that there was something else inside the word. She tilled land and felt eyes across her back. And Mark moved too fast among them, drifting from person to person, from meal to meal. He sprinted from tasks, impatient.

One morning she woke up in his room, his sheet curved around her like the imprint of a man, but he was standing by the window, his face shadowed in the low light. She shifted and he glanced back at her. She could see the strain in him. His arms were

tight, his face was brittle like sand stone.

“You want to start traveling again, don’t you?” she asked.

He jerked his head. His skin was white underneath a light burn. There was something more.

Her heart seemed to fold in on itself. She let her face go slack. “You want to start traveling without me.”

He pushed himself from the wall and paced in front of her. “I want to tell you something.”

“Ok.” She settled herself on the bed so that it looked like she was patient.

“I remember my father’s boots,” he started. Then he told her that he couldn’t remember his father’s face. Or the shape of the man’s body. But that he remembered black boots caked in mud by a wicker rug. And when he left for good, and the boots were gone too, his mother sat him down at the kitchen table and gave him a teacupful of coffee. It tasted like sour earth, but he sipped it anyway.

“She told me, ‘Your daddy is a wanderer. He is and he always will be.’ He paused here as if savoring the memory of his mother.

Alejandra imagined an older man that looked like Mark who wore boots traveling around the country. Maybe he played guitar under fairy lights strung in the trees between restaurants. Maybe he sat at campsites with other men, sharing booze and something harder.

“Then she told me that I was a wanderer too.”

She could see that he believed that more than anything else. More than the causes, more than his pressing curiosity, he thought he was a born wanderer. She could see it in

the way his eyes travelled from space to space, searching for things, the way his body moved, ready to put on somewhere new. She wondered if this was the speech he said just so that he could leave her.

“I don’t think I can ever settle. I don’t think I can stay in one place forever.”

“I knew you didn’t want to stay here forever,” she said.

He took a deep breath and nodded. “I just think you should know all that before you leave with me again.”

So there were no sneakers scuffing sand in the opposite direction, no wind puffed shirt as he walked away from her. He was giving her the choice: to leave with him and move on and move on again, or to go off and find her own way. The lightness in her lungs made her think the choice would be easy and then she pictured the road and a town. That view from the road would always look different but be the same. Life in a town would always look the same but could be different. How long until the counting in her head drove her home?

“I need to think about it,” she told him.

“I understand,” he said and walked outside.

#

Alejandra wandered around the commune in the evening a few days later. A few people hung out on their porches, candles leaning in glass jars, but as she walked closer to the community center, the sounds of conversation dimmed. She passed the porch and saw puffs of smoke swirling out from one of the benches under the starlight. She changed course, heading for the smoke, hoping to bum a cigarette or weed.

As she approached, a bitter dry smell lingered in the air, and she saw La Bruja

Blanca sitting on the bench, smoking peyote. There were small pieces of banana on the seat to her right. The woman's back was to Alejandra. Her hair was loose over her white cotton dress.

“We used to do this mierda in a ceremony,” La Bruja Blanca said, without turning to see who was approaching.

Alejandra's skin prickled when La Bruja Blanca spoke without seeing her, but she didn't jump, her heart didn't sink. She was less uneasy around the witch now. She could feel change coming, the air was temporary. The look of the land had a movie set quality about it, like it would crack or chip at any moment. She walked around to the front of the bench and sat down on La Bruja Blanca's left.

“I didn't think you were religious,” Alejandra said.

La Bruja Blanca handed her the joint. “Ceremony and religion are not the same thing.”

Alejandra inhaled, bracing herself for the nausea. “I guess not.”

“Now I just read my own hallucinations.”

“What do they tell you?”

“They don't say much. Soy una mujer mayor. I sit. Veo the crops. Time passes.”

“Hmm,” was all that Alejandra could manage. Smoke swirled around her tongue. A fullness sat heavy in her stomach.

La Bruja Blanca reached over for a piece of banana and smushed a piece between her fingers. She smeared the fruit on the armrest of the bench.

“What are you—?”

“Just wait, espera,” she said. The banana caught on the grain of the wood, turning

the spot wet and pulpy. Then she leaned back and stared at the armrest. Her breathing slowing and her eyes became slits.

After a few seconds, a large moth flew over and landed on the bench. It was larger than any Alejandra had ever seen, with a brown wingspan longer than her hand. A white bar crossed its wings and purples and pinks shimmered across the brown in the falling glint of sunlight. Alejandra felt herself begin to shiver in the heat. It had been years since she'd seen one so close, since one had been called to her, but she remembered them of course.

“Is that a...?”

“Black witch,” La Bruja Blanca said and cackled. “Or as you would know it, Mariposa de la Muerte.”

Alejandra leaned back in her seat but her eyes remained glued to the insect. Fear sat heavy in her stomach.

“You don't need to fear a harbinger when you already know the truth, niña. It's only a moth,” the woman said softly.

She watched the pink shimmer and sat still in her seat. After a moment, the moth fluttered away and Alejandra blew out a breath she hadn't known she was holding.

La Bruja Blanca motioned to the peyote. “Make sure yours say more. Yours should say much more.”

Alejandra nodded, stiffening her body against the rolling nausea.

“I heard what happened. At the meeting with GAMI.”

“It's like you have spies.” Her attempt at sarcasm was stilted—the moth was still on her mind.

“I’ll say it again. Mark didn’t say anything to anyone.”

“I know,” Alejandra said. And she did. She believed him easily which frightened her.

“It was Maria,” La Bruja Blanca said.

“If not her then someone else,” Alejandra said, because she found she already didn’t care anymore. It wasn’t a fact one could bury. It was sifted out, it was found, it was seen.

That night, over the pounding of her sweating heart, over the rolling of her stomach, Alejandra heard a woman wailing. She watched her mamá become a skeleton. Then Alejandra searched for the wailing. She tried to find the woman in pain. But skeletons didn’t have voices, they had empty spaces where their voices should be. Alejandra placed marigolds at the base of headstones on Dia De Los Muertos and every day after because she couldn’t remember how to go somewhere else. She did this again and again for as many days as there were left until her papá’s execution. She did this until she couldn’t remember anything else. Everything blurred, everything was the wrong color.

In the early morning, just as the blue-black sky turned fuzzy with light, Alejandra woke up. She was alone except for La Bruja Blanca’s footsteps.

#

After drinking tea and cleaning her face with a cloth, Alejandra went to search for Mark, but found him asleep in her bed. She sat down beside him and counted the freckles that had appeared on his arm since they’d moved there. He was sunned, but still soft. In minutes, he woke naturally beside her.

“I’m ready to go,” she said into his blinking eyes.

“Yeah?” he asked, a yawn on his lips.

“Yeah,” she said.

“That’s great,” he smiled. He scooted up the bed, until he was taller than her.

She put her hand on top of his. “I want to stop at home first. I want to see my papá before we continue on.”

In the morning light, the green in his eyes was deepening. Tree leaves then grass then moss after rain. “Really?”

She almost smiled too, but reality had settled too deep. It made her muscles stone. “I don’t know how long it’s going to be. I want to say goodbye.”

He nodded. “Alright.”

“And I want to see the Grand Canyon again on the way back,” she said.

“Alright,” he said again and he began to talk about how they might get back

But she had already picked a route based on the number of days she thought her father had left.

Part Three: Returning to Barrio Espinosa

Marigolds

Paulina

Paulina opened the front door slightly after she heard knocking. A woman stood there in a tight skirt and pink heels; she clicked her foot on the ground repeatedly. The woman smiled softly, but not the smile of a woman sent to proselytize in this neighborhood. A smile that eats and eats.

“How can I help you?” Paulina asked. She kept the door tight in hand, not revealing the living room carpet stains or the short length of the room that encompassed the living and dining space.

“I’m sorry to disturb you, but it’s about your mother,” she said. The glare of sunlight caught on shining brown hair.

Paulina kept her head from falling against the door. “My mother?”

“Or, at least, I assume she’s your mother—I know she lives here and she looks older than you. She came into our yard, and then she cut marigolds off the window box.”

Paulina listened to her own breath, waiting to hear the rest because there was always more. Women with lips unlined and hair sleek as their shoes usually had a flair for the dramatic. Paulina wanted to tell them stories, other things to weave in their free time. What time this woman must have to come pester her family about marigolds. The world seemed so askew in the moments when people chose to take action about certain things.

“My son was in the living room. He saw her through the window, hunching over

our marigolds and cutting the flowers. The ones he waters and takes care of. I'm sure you could see how that might be frightening," the woman finished.

Paulina said she did. But she couldn't remember a time when things such as flower picking might be frightening.

"Obviously I didn't want to call the police or anything like that, but I thought you'd want to know. So that you can take care of it," the woman prompted.

"Of course. Thank you for letting me know." With a smile and sweep of her hand, Paulina shut the door in the woman's face. She took a deep breath and then walked past the living room and the kitchen to go find her mamá. As she stepped closer to her mamá's room, flower rot permeated the air, the sweetness sticking in her nostrils.

She opened the door and was greeted by a familiar sight: marigolds, rotten and ripe, were strewn across every surface. They were tied in bundles or floated loosely on top of makeup cases and jewelry. And cut pieces of paper sat between the flowers. Rosa was sitting hunched by a wall, her body facing a corner. She seemed shriveled in such a pose. Once Paulina stood over Rosa, she could see that her mamá was pressing marigolds between the pages of an overstuffed dictionary. It looked worn and bulged.

"Mamá," Paulina said.

Her mamá hummed to herself and flipped through pages looking for an empty surface for another flower. There were none. Hundreds of pages and they were all covered in flowers, the words gone from view. Alcoholism didn't look like this, did it? Paulina wasn't sure what did.

"Mamá," Paulina called louder.

Rosa turned to face her, black guilt swallowing her eyes. She stopped flipping

through the dictionary. Yellow petals molded around her fingers.

“You can’t steal other people’s flowers. We can grow some. But you can’t keep stealing. Someone saw you.”

“Ok, ok,” her mamá said, nodding along.

#

After he graduated, Javier joined the military. Another appeal had failed and although he didn’t tell Paulina that their papá’s imminent execution was the cause of enlisting, she could see it in him. The brown in her brother’s eyes was a smooth layer of paint. It reminded her of the look of her papá’s eyes when she went to see him in prison. After the appeal, Javier came to her in the evening. He said that he wasn’t like Alejandra, he wouldn’t leave forever, but that he needed to see more of the world for a while. She imagined him dead on a battlefield but said, “Sure, I understand.” Now he had a buzz cut again and his eyes were like stones that had been smoothed over by the constant pounding of the water, there was a disconcerting evenness about him. He’d always been hard to read and quiet though.

While Javier was away, Paulina would visit their papá and tell him stories about Javier’s new life in the military. Luis had long since settled down in the three years since she came out to him, his emotions and actions slow and dim. He was permanently thankful, a tangible neediness suffused their meetings. It made her all too aware of what was coming. But her mamá could only endure occasionally, Javier was absent for long periods of time, and Alejandra only sent postcards. So Paulina continued to see him as frequently as she could manage.

On a Friday afternoon, she went to see her papá. She told him that Javier was

coming home soon. That Rosa was fine. She didn't tell him that the smell of flower rot was beginning to reach the hallways. Soon she'd have to leave towels under the bedroom door. Into the silence, she almost told him about her recent mourning job, but it felt like a violation of whatever implicit rules they had developed over the years. Instead, she told him about the gifts she bought for her clients. She'd gotten to pick out a fish tank recently.

"They even wanted me to pick the decorations—coral and colored pebbles. Not that I minded, Madeline was entertained, but I think it's funny. I'm now an interior decorator for fish—"

"When can I meet her?" He cut in, his fingers flattened on the table as he pressed down.

"Who?"

"Madeline. I'd like to meet her." He had asked before, and she would change the subject. It was a bigger favor than he could understand. The thought of Madeline in this place made her muscles tighten with cold. But lately he'd become more insistent.

Paulina felt her head tilt down so that her long wavy hair draped over her eyes. She wasn't sure how much longer she could deny a man on his deathbed. "You want to meet her? Really? Why?"

"If you stay with her, I'll have met your wife," he said.

It was wonderful for a minute. Briefly, he was just her papá and she was just a woman contemplating a much longer commitment. But then just as quickly, it was morbid and frightening. They were down to the last appeal. Everything he asked for now was a last request. It didn't matter what day he came up with something to ask for, or

how soon he would die, they were all the same.

“Of course. I’ll have to ask her, but I’m sure she’ll say yes.”

#

Madeline rolled sushi on the Formica counter in the kitchen when Paulina walked in. She told Paulina once that she loved eating sushi and cooking fish, not the flavor, but the act—to dress as a creature of the water and then to take nutrients from such habitats. Paulina paused in the hallway, watching Madeline’s back—the sandy green hair light across her shoulders, its lost weight out of water, and her sway as she moved from task to task.

In seconds, Madeline looked behind her. “How did it go?”

“He wants to meet you,” Paulina said, stepping into the kitchen and gathering the few plastic cups on the counter and depositing them into the partly-filled sink.

“That’s a nice change, right?” Madeline asked.

Paulina nodded. She hadn’t told Madeline about her father’s previous requests.

“He wants to meet you sooner, rather than later.”

Madeline pushed the cutting board back and pressed her hands on the counter. She glanced about the room as if she was searching for water to dive into. “They’re pressing ahead?”

“It doesn’t look like this appeal is going anywhere. The lawyer thinks the judge might be politically pressured. His election is coming up.” She’d heard someone on the news recently discussing border reforms. He’d forgotten Luis’ name, or maybe the name didn’t matter anymore. Instead he said ‘immigrant’ as if it was distasteful, like the word could stain him.

“Alright. This is almost ready. You should see if your mother would like to eat.”

“So you’ll meet him?” Paulina asked.

Madeline nodded again. In a moment of quiet, Paulina could hear the noise of a rattling snake’s tail. It was smooth and patterned, rising louder and then falling softly, again and again.

“What is that?” Madeline asked, cutting the sushi into pieces.

It was the noise sand in the desert made when it blew over stones and skeletons. Paulina had heard it several times in the past nights—and very occasionally years ago. It was coming from down the hall, it was coming from her mamá’s room. She told Madeline that she would go look for the cause and she walked down the hall to her mamá’s room.

Paulina opened the door without knocking and found her mamá sitting in the floor surrounded by perfect, whole eggshells, a tiny hole shadowed in one end. There were dozens, propped precariously on carpet. Some were tinted yellow with bits of flower petals pressed against them. In a pink dress with wrinkled, sandy hands, Rosa was filling the eggs with sand.

Tongue dry, Paulina counted the eggs because she couldn’t think of what else to do. When Rosa looked up, Paulina’s voice returned. “What are you doing?”

Rosa spilled a bit of sand on the carpet. “I’m making cascarones.”

“Those are supposed to be filled with confetti,” Paulina said, uncertain what to think. The strange sight at her feet made her head swell.

“They don’t make any noise that way,” her mamá said.

Exhaustion made Paulina's shoulder's ache. "It's time for dinner," she finally said.

#

On Tuesday afternoon, Paulina wrapped Easter presents for several clients. She unrolled strips of illustrated rabbit paper and cut pieces of thicker paper covered in five-inch Jesuses with palms out and an unusually gaudy robe and halo, lined in gold colored foil. An elderly couple had requested the latter. They'd wanted to buy cross jewelry for everyone in their families—the children, grandchildren, siblings, and even nieces and nephews.

Paulina had gotten strange looks at a counter in one shop when she said she needed eight pairs of cross earrings, but that they all needed to look different. The woman working there who wore no jewelry herself said that they only had two kinds. Four stores later and she found eight different pairs, but then realized that she didn't know what kind of jewelry men wore and how frequently such jewelry had crosses. Several watches, rings, and necklaces later, she was in the living room wrapping each jewelry box and labeling gifts based on the description the couple gave of each family member. Tomboy Ellie got a thin cross with a gold chain that was unisex if not outright a men's item. Flamboyant, hyper Beth got turquoise earrings and so on and so forth. Bows topped the children's gifts and ribbon circled the others.

Paulina creased paper with her nails and taped even corners. A couple hours in and she realized that the cross was really a funny shape, one that really should signify many things. And wasn't it a little morbid to think about slow asphyxiation on the day of Jesus' rebirth? Come to think of it, were the brightly colored crosses hanging in her

family's living room equally morbid?

A shrill ringing pierced Paulina's thoughts and she stuck her tape fingered hands to the couch to stand up. Someone was calling the house phone. She flung several of the pieces of tape off, but one stuck as she walked to the dining room to answer. The caller ID read 'Lopez.' It was a name she didn't recognize, but they'd gotten a lot of unusual calls in the last couple of months: rights groups, prank calls, solicitations for lawyers and insurance agencies, and harassment. She wondered why her mamá was so insistent on maintaining a house phone.

She picked up the phone and pressed it against her ear. "Hello?"

No words were spoken.

"Hello?" Paulina repeated.

"Hi, Paulina." She recognized the voice. It was hesitant, staticky, but it was her sister's voice. Alejandra was calling. She pictured her sister—her short hair and stout limbs, the purple birthmark curling around her eye, although now she couldn't remember which eye.

For a second, the sound was a relief, it was evidence that her sister was fine. It was evidence of more than that, of reconciliation, of having a sister again. Paulina's hand shook, the phone bobbing in her ear. But then the years came back to her, her papá's mentions of the postcards, postcards that never came to Paulina. It had been five years. No, longer. It had been six and a half years. She hadn't heard her sister's voice in over six years.

"Paulina?"

"What do you want?" She couldn't help it. She was not a saint. She was just a

woman.

“I, uh, I just wanted to let you all know that I’m coming home,” Alejandra said.

“Hogar? Where’s home?” Paulina asked. Alejandra’s voice didn’t sound precisely right. Where was the cussing? Where was the bitterness? There were years in it. It made her an adult, a stranger. It made it easier for Paulina to dismiss the galloping in her heart, the aching need to hear words from her sister, any words.

“To you and mamá. And Javier.”

She couldn’t tell Alejandra not to come, but she couldn’t tell her anything else either.

“Before our dad—” She didn’t have to finish the sentence. They both knew what was coming.

“See you soon then,” Paulina said. And then she hung up the phone.

She stood there in the kitchen, staring at the phone she held in her hand, and wondered if she should tell anyone about the phone call. She couldn’t imagine how her mamá would take the news, whether she’d be excited or confused. And then if Alejandra failed to show up, how would Rosa react? Would she begin to collect something else, make something more? Or maybe she would become as thin as vellum, brittle and stiff, unmoving in the living room, day in and day out.

Paulina couldn’t tell her mamá. Nor could she tell anyone else. If she did, she’d have to admit that her sister was on her mind, that her sister would be back in her life, that her sister had abandoned them all in the first place.

#

In the evenings, Paulina and Madeline turned on fairytale or myth-based movies on

Madeline's laptop. They'd prop it up on Paulina's dresser and they'd get ready for bed listening to the sound that fairy dust supposedly makes and accents that couldn't be found in real life. Paulina made lists in bed, propped up against pillows, the wiring of her notepad cold against her skin that wasn't covered in cotton shorts. In one corner of the room she glanced at the movie, in the other, she watched Madeline transform from sea creature to human—cotton balls drawing skin-shaded lines across Madeline's face.

Then they'd lie down together and drift off listening to speeches about the prevailing force of love. Madeline said that the movies made her daydream about absurd scenarios in which her parents would speak to her again—that they might realize their love for her if she was in danger, or that they would ask her forgiveness once they had experienced real goodness. Paulina tried not to think too hard about what Madeline said; the hope in her voice was too sharp and clawed at her heart.

When they got ready for bed a couple weeks after Alejandra called, they heard the banging of the front door over the clanging noises of a sword fight. Paulina sighed and got out of bed, reaching for her sweatpants. Madeline paused, her face split by makeup down the nose. "It seems more often than usual."

Paulina tightened the drawstrings and then rubbed her eyes. "It is. I'm not sure how often I can do this. I need some sleep occasionally."

"Do you want me to go? I know all her usual spots by now," Madeline offered.

"No, no. You've still got scales on your collarbone," Paulina said smiling. She walked to Madeline and put her arms around her bare waist. Paulina's wrists would be green when she pulled away, but it was dark out. No one would notice.

Madeline smiled into the mirror. "Hurry home. You don't want to miss the end."

Paulina kissed Madeline's neck and nodded. Then she put on her flip-flops and left the apartment, grabbing her sweater that sat on the couch on the way out the door. The air was cool, softening as if summer wasn't imminent. The apartment complex was gray lit and there was very little movement around the parking lot. Moths circled the lights and crickets chirped nearby. When she got to the entrance of the lot, she paused on the sidewalk, listening for her mamá's cries. For a second, she heard nothing. And then a muffled noise seemed to trail on a breeze from the west.

The night air made Paulina feel vulnerable, it smelled like the desert and life, rather than gas or cooked meat. She hugged her arms around her, her hand holding her phone tight, her head up watching for her mamá and for others. She walked quickly, aching for her bed. The cries grew louder, they became continuous, wails unending, unbroken by coyote calls or by neighbors who began to stir.

She turned down Ranchero Street, which was lined with small houses in various states of upkeep. Some porches and windows were cracked, some lawns were filled with lawn chairs and small grills, and cars and trucks parked up most of the street. About halfway down the street, Paulina spotted her mamá draped in a purple shawl, her slipper-covered feet scuffling slowly along. She'd pause occasionally, turning towards the houses and searching the yards with her eyes.

Paulina ran the rest of the way to her mamá, just as a couple of living room lights turned on and a few dogs began to bark. She put her arm around her mamá's stooped shoulders, the wailing built and expanded inside of Paulina's ears. "Silencio, mamá! You'll wake everyone!"

But still her mamá would not be quiet. Thick tears were streaking down her

mamá's cheek. Paulina could feel them against her shoulder as she hugged her mamá to her. The crying was so loud, it was so penetrating, that Paulina could barely think.

A man stepped out onto the porch across the street. He was large, his eyes narrow. He was gray too under the porch light. "What's going on? Should I call the police?"

Paulina held one hand up and picked a disease that might evoke sympathy. "No, no. I'll take care of it. Just my mother. She has Alzheimer's. I'm so sorry."

"Jesus Christ. Try locking the door next time," the man said and walked inside, slamming the door behind him.

Arms tight and eyes surveying the neighborhood for others who might come outside, Paulina shushed her mamá and slowly, Rosa's voice became quieter and quieter until Paulina could hear the hiccup of breath. Her mamá's soft weight pressed against her and the two began walking the way they came from. Paulina's steps were heavy, her body ached and sleepiness made her anger sharp.

"What were you searching for?" she asked.

"No se, no se," her mamá said. She continued to cry quietly.

"You can't do this, mamá. You can't keep wandering around at night! People will call the cops. Or they'll shoot you." Maybe it really was early-onset Alzheimer's, maybe it wasn't a lie at all.

Rosa kept up her even steps and said nothing.

The sound of the quiet crying filled Paulina's head, it made it so that she could barely take the right steps toward home. It was suffocating. "And what about the marigolds and the cascarones? Why the cempasuchil? It's months until Dia de los Muertos."

Her mamá shook her head.

“Why, mamá? Why do you do this?” she persisted.

“Because I have to,” her mamá said, louder this time.

“Not good enough. Why do you leave in the middle of the night? Why do you run around crying? I really don’t know what to do—”

“Because that is all I can do,” her mamá cut in.

Paulina stopped walking and turned toward her mamá. “What?”

“All I can do is cry! I can do nothing to save your papá. I can do nothing for any of my children. No one listens to the words I say. The lawyers do nothing. The judge did nothing. The appeals do nothing. All I can do is cry!” Her dark eyes bled into the sky. There was too much grief to be contained inside of her, it bled out, it rose out.

Paulina could say nothing. She helped her mamá home and then set her on the couch to listen to one of the meditation videos. She made her mamá hot chocolate and covered her with a blanket. Paulina looked down at her mamá’s shrinking form, the lines feather-fine on her face, and knew that this would not be the worst night. This was a placeholder for something that seemed to happen forever, over and over again, every night. Waiting does terrible things to a person.

#

Madeline agreed to meet Luis on the twelfth of July, a few hours before she hosted a party for a trendy design firm a forty-minute drive away. She told Paulina that she would feel better about it if she knew she would be in the water later—it’d make her feel peaceful, at ease. On their drive over, Paulina told her not to worry. If anything made Madeline uncomfortable, they would leave immediately.

“I’m not afraid. What could he do behind a glass wall?” Madeline reasoned.

“That’s not the reason you’re nervous?” Paulina asked. She loved him enough that these words hurt.

Madeline looked out the window. Cracked branches for miles. “No.”

“But you are nervous?” Paulina said. The road ahead held only the remnants of cars: oil, rubber, and road kill.

“I’ve never been to a prison before.”

The seatbelt scraped against Paulina’s chest as she adjusted her position. Over six and a half years and all she knew was the way habits made the day softer, smoother, you could cut through it easily even if you didn’t want to. “Sometimes I forget.”

When they arrived, the prison was new to Paulina. She watched Madeline walk through the doors, she watched her at the metal detectors, she watched the shock on Madeline’s face when the doors buzzed open. It was horrible, this place. And somehow she hadn’t known quite how horrible it was until the light drained the color in Madeline’s face and the hard lines seemed to shrink her in place. As soon as she could, Paulina put her fingers around Madeline’s wrist, just to make sure her skin was still warm.

Luis smiled when he saw them. It was a quick split of the lips, no hesitation, the sight of them changed his face. He was still gray, still puckered and lined, but his face held an expression for seconds. Relieved, Paulina drew closer to the glass. “This is Madeline. And this is my papá.”

Madeline smiled. Paulina watched her deciding what to say. How did you greet a man who lived in another world?

“Thank you for coming to meet me,” Luis said.

“You’re welcome.”

Luis opened his mouth and then covered it with his hand. He shifted, moving his lips like he was learning how to speak. After a few seconds, Paulina felt his empty, silent words in the air. They hung and expanded, made the air hot. Madeline lifted her hands and then put them down.

Finally, her papá spoke, “I’m sorry. I just—this is a lot. Can we just sit quietly for a minute? Can I just look at the two of you? I know it’s a strange request, but I’ve never seen one of my children in love.”

“Of course,” Madeline said, and she slumped a little, her body relaxed, an easy smile on her face.

But Paulina could not unstiffen. His words bound her lungs. She could not stomach the pain, she could not stop seeing space where he sat. She closed her eyes for a second and refused to look past the face she saw through the glass. Opening her eyes, she counted lines on his face. She read him, felt him drinking them, felt him starving, felt the things he surely needed before he died. What did he have in there? Did he know intimacy, did he remember skin? He refused to ever speak about his life in there after the first month or so. She thought it would hurt less if she knew that there was something that looked like love back there, if they knew how to fake it at least. Faking it meant he lived with hope, with believing in the real thing.

After a while, they shared a prayer. Madeline talked about her job. He was entranced. He closed his eyes while she described her costume, and then the sea where she imagined her character lived. Paulina said nothing, afraid she would break a good moment because grief was hot in her throat.

#

Paulina felt as if she was full of words that she couldn't speak. They swelled inside of her, making her bloat, making her skin feel tight. She went to confession and told the priest things that had little to do with sins. She twisted secrets so that they became sins. Fingering her cross at her neck, she told a man she couldn't see that she was short with her mamá, impatient, unsympathetic, just so that she could tell someone, anyone, more people, that her mamá snuck out in the middle of the night, that her mamá's room smelled like raw eggs, that she stole flowers.

It wasn't enough that Madeline knew or that Javier knew the signs of their mamá's nightly disappearance because he'd done it himself. She had to tell others so that the words didn't press so sharp against her skin, so that they didn't tattoo her. She told the priest that she was lying by omission, that she wasn't sure she could forgive Alejandra for leaving. She told him about her brother by pretending jealousy, just so that she could speak freely about Javier. He let her wind herself in circles until she could make a story a sin.

Words were the solution though, which confused her, pained her. Prayers, more silent words, were absolution. She kneeled in pews quietly and breathed them out so that they wouldn't stick inside her. She was running out of skin.

Madeline picked her up from the church. She wouldn't go in—she didn't know how to have faith in an all-powerful deity. But she didn't mock Paulina for the habit. Sometimes after, Paulina could speak more freely, she could tell Madeline the secrets she'd been holding, she could share weight.

At the drive-through, so that Madeline could buy a soda—the burger joint with

the eye-catching dinosaur out front—Paulina, fresh with forgiveness, watched the bright sun spots on Madeline’s cheek. Madeline rummaged in the cup holder for change.

“My sister called,” Paulina said.

Madeline’s finger stilled. The line of cars moved forward, so she did too. “Her name is Alejandra, right?”

Paulina nodded even though Madeline was watching the road. “She said she’s coming home. To see papá.”

Until she got her soda from the woman at the window, Madeline said nothing. Once they were back on the road, “Are you looking forward to seeing her?”

Paulina touched the side of the cup so that the condensation would cool her fingers. She rubbed her hands on her neck and opened the window so that it felt like the car had air conditioning. “I don’t know.”

“Maybe it’ll be nice. Maybe you can reconcile.”

“I don’t know that it really matters.”

Madeline pulled up to a red light and looked at Paulina. “Why not?”

“I don’t even remember what it was like to have a sister.” But that wasn’t quite right. She could remember childhood, she could remember sharing a room. She could remember the stuffed animal Alejandra hid in the closet and took out in the middle of the night. She could remember the cussing, the defensive turned-out feet. The pride, the loneliness, the fears, the secrets. But those moments were sloughed off, they didn’t last on a body, they lasted in the mind. “I don’t know who she is.”

#

Paulina and Madeline found Rosa in the wash beside St. Moralez Street with a barrel

cactus spine in her shin after the final appeal was lost. The spine was ivory under the light of Paulina's flashlight. It hooked her loose flesh fish-like and there was a line of blood running down the side of Rosa's leg. She was sitting on the ground clutching rocks, her sandal-feet sandy, her eyes tight shut and puckered like the lines of citrus fruit. Somehow tears squeezed through.

"Díos mío! What happened?" Paulina asked when they found her. Twigs were broken around Rosa.

"I tripped," she said through cries.

Paulina surveyed her mamá for other damage. There were scrapes on her elbows and her feet. "What were you doing in the wash?"

Her mamá looked around as if she was trying to determine where she was.

"Everything looks the same in the dark."

Paulina didn't bother to ask about the street signs. She didn't bother to ask about the smell creosote mixed with sour alcohol makes. She turned to Madeline. "I can't get it out here."

"Let's get her home then," Madeline said. She bent down over Rosa and smoothed the hair that had come loose around her face.

The two of them, one at each elbow, helped lift Rosa from the ground. The walk home was slow and loud, their steps scraping, Rosa's cries warbling against the crickets' chirps. Along the neighborhood roads though, no one opened their doors, for which Paulina was thankful. Her mamá's skin was watery clay, giving in her hands, difficult to contain.

Paulina made intermittent shushing noises. It was a comforting noise—or at least

she thought it had been when she was a child falling off her bike or when she dropped her teddy bear and her mamá shushed her in a warm hum. Maybe though it was really just a violent request. After all, if her mamá stopped crying, her misery certainly wouldn't be less. Paulina just wouldn't have to hear it.

At the apartment, Paulina gathered gauze and tweezers and peroxide with heavy arms. Her mamá grabbed a bottle that Paulina pretended not to see and sat heavily on the couch. Madeline found band-aids in the bathroom underneath the sink. And before they could get the cactus spine out, Rosa had passed out, her face pressed sideways into the scratchy brown cushion.

“It'll be easier this way,” Paulina murmured.

Madeline said nothing, she just held Rosa's leg in place.

Paulina worked swiftly in the quiet, cleaning and rotating the hook. Blood ran fresh but after a minute, she removed it. She could feel Madeline watching her press gauze on her mamá's limp leg, but Paulina didn't look up. Her bed was moments away if she just bandaged her mamá's leg and draped a blanket over her. If she didn't talk and left the first aid supplies to clean up in the morning, she could be asleep within fifteen minutes.

“We have to discuss this,” Madeline said.

Paulina breathed deep and collected the supplies off of the carpeted floor. “I'm really tired. We can talk about it tomorrow.”

Madeline stood up when Paulina did and followed her to the kitchen. “You say that every time. She needs care. Real help.”

“I'll add a lock to the inside of the door,” Paulina said. She didn't bother to

whisper. Her mamá wouldn't wake until afternoon tomorrow.

“Listen to yourself, Paulina. This is ridiculous. She could use professional care.”

Paulina leaned over the counter to rest her legs. This conversation could go on unendingly. Madeline couldn't understand why Paulina would do this. Why she would always follow her mamá out into the middle of the night, always come find her, why she wouldn't take Rosa to the hospital. But the next answer was scripted to show Madeline that Paulina was logical, to show her lover that Paulina was reasonable. “We don't have the money for that.”

“There are programs for low income people who need help,” Madeline said.

Paulina looked over the counters at the other side of the room to the back of her mamá's head, slumped with brittle hair. Those programs were never easy to join, they were blocked with red tape, they were always difficult to access. And how could Paulina explain that she couldn't hand her mamá over to someone else? That she couldn't send her away. That she owed her mamá, or women, or herself a dream that someday something could be normal again. That when this was all over her mamá might be the woman who drew flowers on Paulina's hand with lip liner in the evening even when her eyes were tired and her thumbs still smelled like chemical lemon. And that she couldn't send mamá away because she told her mamá to be quiet. When Rosa was crying for her husband, when she was trying to remind the world of her husband's existence, Paulina told her to be quiet.

“Just give me some time to think about it,” Paulina said, walking into the hall.

Madeline followed her to the bedroom. “How much time?”

Eighty-five days, Paulina thought. But she didn't say it aloud.

#

On the phone Javier told Paulina that he was allowed to come home to see his papá one last time. She stood by the living room window, watching a man in the parking lot open the hood of his car. The sun through the window was bleaching the couch beige. She closed the blinds.

“I can be there with you all when he...,” Javier trailed off.

She pressed the phone closer to her ear. He still sounded a thousand miles away.

“You shouldn’t come.”

“What?”

“You shouldn’t come,” she repeated. Their mamá hummed in another room.

Madeline was out.

“Why not?” She couldn’t read emotion in his voice.

“He doesn’t want you to remember him that way.” These were Luis’ words. And she wasn’t sure what he was referring to—the straps, the clothes, the needle, the room. Javier had seen many of these things already. Maybe her papá was worried about his face and the way mortal fear looked. Maybe love left the face when confronted with mortal fear.

“I can come visit before then.”

But their papá already looked like a man who knew he was going to die. “He gave me a letter for you.”

“A letter?” There was the emotion, indignation. The parting gift of death was a letter.

“I know it isn’t enough. But it wouldn’t be enough no matter what.”

Javier made a noise. He sounded stubborn.

“He doesn’t want you to leave your post for this. He’s proud of you,” she said and walked to the kitchen. There were dirty dishes in the sink and a shopping list she hadn’t finished sat on the counter. Everything needed to be cleaned.

“What about you? And mamá?” he asked.

“Bien. We’re ok. We have each other.” She almost smiled. He still had kindness in him or at least familial obligation; not everything could be scrubbed out of him, even if he was frequently expressionless and had much shorter hair. His heart was too deep.

“Ok.”

“He’d like me to tell him a memory though. If you can think of one,” she said.

The line was silent.

“It’s ok if you can’t think of one—”

“He gave me a wood handled pocketknife. Taught me how to engrave it.”

“I didn’t know that,” Paulina said.

“It was a long time ago. I broke my finger in fourth grade. These boys were pulling some girl’s hair and I stood between them. They pushed me in the desert and I fell on my finger funny. I didn’t tell anyone. I went home and papá found me in the parking lot. He set it right and then I told him what happened. He said winning a fight wasn’t about who was in the most pain. He said I won the fight because I had prevented someone else from getting hurt. Then he gave me his pocketknife,” Javier said in a gush, as if it had been pent inside of him.

She couldn’t remember the last time he’d said so much. She told him that she loved him.

“If you change your mind and want me there--” he said.

And she did, but it wasn't her choice to make. “Gracias.”

She hung up the phone and closed her eyes. She had begun to forget what her papá looked like outside of the prison, who he had been. He was a man, he was a padre, she chanted over and over again in her head. He still is. But that wasn't quite right, was it?

#

The lawyer said that the hardest part was the last appeal because a lot of people couldn't give up hope until then, but Paulina thought this was worse. Things that were inevitable hurt—they were stone she tried to press up against, concrete that her thoughts, her dreams, tried to grow through. During the day she was guarded, she knew what not to think about, she knew how to focus on the faces in front of her, how to think only about the sponge in her hand as she washed dishes. She could live in the space that others made for her to grieve and love.

One morning at sunrise, Paulina woke and found pink spreading like a fan across her bed sheet from the window. Her heart lurched in her chest, sweat stung her forehead. There were no chores, no work, nothing to keep her mind stubbornly fixated on the moment. Even Madeline's sleeping face couldn't distract her. All she could think about was the prison cell where her papá was possibly sleeping now and the way that she would have to keep speaking to him as if she had a future of stories to share with him and the way that every moment in between limbo and the dug out space in which they would bury her papá was a moment when she was nothing but that limbo, that pain, and quivering in her heart, that sweat along her hairline.

Her throat was thickening, her breath catching. Her lower eyelids felt swollen and wet and soon she was crying. Quietly, her tears formed rivers down the bones in her cheeks. She choked on water and Madeline jolted up beside her on the bed.

“What’s going on? What’s wrong?” Madeline said, her words slurring with sleep.

Paulina thought about turning towards the window, hiding her face in the rising sun. But even such a movement and a lie seemed exhausting. “I want it over, I want it all over with. I feel terrible, but I can’t take this any longer.”

“What?” Madeline wrapped her arm around Paulina.

Paulina’s tears turned Madeline’s arms slick. She sunk into her, swaying slightly back and forth. “I can’t stand the waiting. I feel so terrible—”

“About what?”

She looked for something to say that was a lie, that would make her a better daughter, a better person, but she couldn’t. The truth was swollen inside of her, the weight of it ached. Paulina could feel the bite of Madeline’s moon nails. She pressed against them harder. “I don’t want to keep going to the prison. I don’t want to keep seeing my papá. I want him to just be gone so I can get on with my life.”

The world was in fragments. She could see the orange light falling on the pillow, but not the pillow, the wrinkles in the bedding, but not the sheets themselves, everything was in pieces. The pictures on the wall were separate shapes of different colors. Even Madeline’s voice came apart from words. Paulina could hear her, hear noises, familiar and smooth, but not the words. Her heart slowed as she realized that Madeline’s arms were still around her. Her eyes flickered to the pieces of her room. She breathed quietly. This was just what the world looked like today. After a few seconds, Paulina

began to hear again.

“It’s like losing someone again and again. I can’t imagine how painful that must be,” Madeline said.

“What if I can’t keep going there? What if I can’t be there when—”

Madeline leaned her chin on Paulina’s shoulder. “Will you regret it? If you don’t see him anymore?”

“No. Yes. I don’t know.”

“It’s just two months. From now on, I’ll go with you.”

Paulina turned to look into Madeline’s eyes. She wanted to tell Madeline that such an offer wasn’t necessary, but she couldn’t. “Alright.”

“I’m worried that you’re depressed.”

Paulina drew straighter, space developing between their bodies. “It would be strange if I wasn’t. My papá’s in prison.”

Madeline rubbed Paulina’s arms. “But almost seven years of depression is a long time. At some point, the reason matters less.”

“The reason still matters in this case,” Paulina said. She unwrapped Madeline’s arms and walked to the window.

“I’m not saying that it doesn’t matter that your father is in prison. I’m saying that other people in your position aren’t depressed forever.”

“Maybe they’re delusional.” The pink in the sky was fading, streaks of tangerine lingered in the yellow light.

“Maybe they’ve learned how to deal with their changed lives,” Madeline said.

Paulina could hear Madeline shifting on the bed, but she didn’t turn around.

“Maybe they’re faking it.”

“Just think about seeing someone, please? I’m not saying that isn’t reasonable for you to be sad, or that it wouldn’t be weird not to be. It’s just, don’t you want a life after all of this?”

But the past enveloped her. It was another layer of skin that she couldn’t shed. She couldn’t pretend that she could exist without the last seven years of her life.

#

Paulina sat at the dining table, watching her mamá move around the kitchen. She pulled out bowls and measuring spoons and flour and sugar and yeast and orange zest and other ingredients that Paulina stopped counting. Rosa hummed to herself. She measured flour and hummed to herself. She mixed giant bowls of ingredients, her arm muscles quivering.

Paulina had been paying bills and looking through the mail, when her mamá, draped in a cotton dress and sturdy brown shoes, her hair tied in braids down her back, had walked into the kitchen. She said nothing to Paulina, in fact Paulina thought her mamá probably hadn’t even noticed her. Her mamá’s eyes were on the ingredients and the spoons and the oven.

The last time Rosa had cooked, she had been baking a cake for Javier. He was leaving for training, but she thought that it was for his birthday. She made tres leches cake and put seventeen candles in the shape of a ‘J’ on the cake. She couldn’t remember how old he was. Javier let her sing him a song and blew out the candles, willing to appease her. Paulina had rinsed the candles in a bowl while Javier and their mamá ate cake. It was dry, he told Paulina later, but not so bad.

After several minutes of trying to focus on the bills, Paulina dropped them on the

table. She walked into the kitchen wary of the mess she would probably have to clean once her mamá had finished attempting to cook. Flour and sugar laced the counter tops, but most ingredients were in bowls. Even as she leaned against the counter by the flour that her mamá was reaching for, Rosa still didn't seem to notice Paulina.

“What are you cooking?” Paulina asked.

Rosa's eyes snapped up. She stopped stirring and dropped the spoon into the bowl. “Que?”

“Cooking, mama. Cocina,” Paulina said, reaching for a rag to clean up the flour.

“Pan de muertos,” her mamá said happily. She began to shape the dough, floury flesh eating her brown fingers.

Paulina stared at her mamá, but before she could say anything, there was a knocking on the door. She sighed and walked back out to the living room and opened the door. Her sister stood there, a backpack slung over her shoulder with a torn strap. Her hair was even shorter than she remembered, her skin darker, her brown eyes set deeper into her face, but it was Paulina's sister. Alejandra's fingers were tucked into her jean pockets and there was a wry smile on her face. Paulina's fingers itched to hug and slap her sister, so she stood still leaning against the door.

“What's going on?” Alejandra asked, tentative, quiet.

Paulina surveyed her sister. She watched her sister close and open her mouth several times. Then Paulina sighed and opened the door further. “Mamá's making pan de muertos.”

“It's November.”

“I know what month it is.”

Alejandra cleared her throat and leaned back on her heels. “Cascarones too? Marigolds tied in bundles?”

“Yes.”

Alejandra snorted. “Well, that’s morbid.”

Paulina nodded and stepped back. “Yes, it is.”

Alejandra stepped inside, squeezing Paulina’s hand as she passed her, a small smile on her lips.

“I’m glad you’re home, but—” Paulina started as Alejandra dropped her bag on the ground.

“I know and—”

A shriek sounded from the kitchen and the sisters turned to watch their mamá running into the living room with dough in her left hand. “Alejandra, Alejandra!” She hugged her daughter, the dough hitting Alejandra’s elbow. Paulina watched the tears run down her mamá’s face onto Alejandra’s shoulder. Rosa was soundlessly wording something over and over again as she squeezed Alejandra tight.

“I’ll take this to Javier’s room,” Paulina said, grabbing Alejandra’s bag off the floor.

“Thank you.”

Paulina nodded and glanced at her mamá again. She could make out the word now. *M’ija, m’ija, m’ija.*

The Saguaro's First Inch

Alejandra

Four shots of bubble gum vodka in and Alejandra thought that if she puked, it would taste pink. She sat with Paulina in the living room on the ground. The TV was on but silent, the channel showing an infomercial of an exercise DVD set whose moves looked aggressively bird-like. Paulina's eyeliner was smudged making the brown in her eyes look a bit yellow, and the strap of her sundress hung on the edge of her shoulder. Alejandra's left hand—which she was using to hold herself in a seated position—was creased red and going numb. Soon, there would be the sun, and they would have to go see the lawyer. But right then all they had was scratchy carpet and their quickly blurring faces.

“Where did you even get this shit?” Alejandra asked, pouring more in their red plastic cups.

Paulina drank from her cup and threw her head back. “Madeline loves this mierda.”

“Of course,” Alejandra rolled her eyes and then grinned. “I love that you're a lesbo.”

Paulina tilted her head to the side, her brown eyes cliff sharp. “I love that you're a cunt.”

Alejandra giggled. “You sound like me. No seriously though. To think I used to worry about what my boyfriends would try to do with you.” She could hear the slur in her

's's.

"You didn't have any boyfriends." Paulina leaned back against the wall.

"Well, eventually. Or whatever." Alejandra drank the last of her cup. The last drops were warm and made her gag.

"You have one now."

Alejandra shook her head. "We're just best friends right now."

"There's a lot of meaning in the word 'now,'" Paulina said.

"Dios mio, stop the analytical bullshit. You should be too drunk to be saying pendejadas like that. Have another shot." Alejandra said, lifting the bottle, but Paulina pulled her cup away.

Paulina groaned. "I can't drink anymore."

"Ok, ok," Alejandra said, pouring more for herself.

"What was it like out there?" Paulina's eyelids dropped, forming lazy half smiles in her eyes.

Alejandra sat back and glanced out the window. She couldn't see anything in the dark. "You think it's freedom, you know? To go anywhere at anytime. And it is, mostly. But sometimes it felt like running, it felt like we weren't allowed to stay in one place."

"What do you mean?" Paulina asked. Her cup was tilted in her hand, its clear contents moving just under the rim.

"Not a lot of places in this country like poor people. We did the work we needed to and then we moved on," Alejandra said. Her skin felt stretched suddenly, itchy. She'd wanted to drink alcohol to avoid this conversation.

"You could've come home," Paulina said quietly, her eyes wide now. Her sister's

eyes were so much like her own, she wasn't sure if there was accusation in Paulina's gaze or just in her own mind.

Alejandra shook her head. She wanted to leave the room, she wanted Paulina to pass out.

Paulina leaned forward, too alert, too awake now. "Why'd you leave?"

Alejandra could see her sister searching for reason, searching to understand, but she wouldn't find any. Fingers clutched Alejandra's wrist, and she realized that Paulina had scooted closer, had gripped her arm. The vodka was making it hard to think. "I just had to."

"You didn't just run away. It doesn't work that way." Paulina's breath was hot, the room stuffy and dense.

The skin between Paulina's fingers on Alejandra's wrist was egg white. "Well, that's what happened."

At the bite in her voice, Paulina released her and drew back, shaking her head. "You left me. You left us. You were old enough to know that leaving town meant you'd leave your family. How'd you do it? Why?"

Alejandra didn't say that she didn't stay because she was scared. Or because she didn't want to be a burden. Or because her childhood promised something different. She didn't know which answer was true. She just had to not be there anymore. There wasn't a place for her there anymore. She hadn't done anything wrong. "I'm here now."

"For a while," Paulina said. She stood slowly, her hand flat against the wall.

Alejandra crossed her arms. "It's not like you intend to stay here forever."

Paulina was already on her way out of the room. Her long hair swished against

her back behind her. “Maybe not. But I’ll stay long enough to take care of my family.”

Alejandra’s hot face prickled and she turned her head abruptly as if she’d been slapped. She wanted to remind Paulina of her age, that she’d been a teenager when this had happened. That it wasn’t her responsibility to fix everything for her brother. But Paulina could brush all the reasoning aside as if they were excuses because she’d been a teenager too and she stayed.

#

At the dining table in the kitchen, their mamá asked their lawyer if she could fill the execution room with marigolds. If their lawyer thought it a strange request, he didn’t show it. His plain face was sympathetic, unchanged at the question. As Paulina poured him more coffee, he told them that things like that were not allowed. Then he recommended that they not go at all, that they make peace with Luis beforehand.

Alejandra shifted in her seat. He was speaking from a script, she was sure, getting through it as fast as possible because even to a pro-bono lawyer like him, this was probably all in the small print of his job description that he’d hoped he’d never experience. She heard the bristling of cheap cloth and realized that he was jiggling his leg under the table.

She looked over his head at the wall because she didn’t want to watch them talk about the food or final requests or anything else. She stared intently. Was that blue spot on the gray from a marker? She heard her mamá mention something about bread and she looked down at her lap. Having only a couple pairs of jeans and a few t-shirts, Alejandra was wearing one of Paulina’s professional outfits—an itchy pencil skirt and a blouse that was too loose around her chest. She’d been trying outfits on when the lawyer came to the

door. It's an odd thing to plan for, a final visit with her papá, and she'd thought when she remembered it later the images wouldn't look right if she wore tie dye shirts and jeans.

Sitting at the table, she wondered why she even cared.

Glancing up, her mamá was crying. She'd placed eggshells on the table.

Alejandra suddenly had an absurd desire to laugh, but the sound came out like a desperate gasp for air. Nothing her mamá did made sense anymore. Marigolds, cascarnes, these things were decorations. They couldn't save her papá. These weren't last rites, they couldn't save his soul. What was the point of these things while her papá was still breathing? As far as her mamá's beliefs went, they wouldn't even make sense until after.

And right then, Alejandra believed nothing. She didn't believe that her papá would go to heaven or hell. She didn't believe his spirit would return. She didn't even believe he was innocent or guilty. He was just a man. This was just a moment. And it would be followed by another moment that was neither great, nor terrible. It was just time. And she was just minuscule, just a being that would never be understood, nor remembered, the same way her papá would shortly cease to be known. She wondered what Mark would say about her thoughts—maybe that she was a natural atheist, or maybe that she was a pessimist and to stop being so morbid.

#

“Are you going to let me meet them?” Mark asked. They'd driven the van to the dried-up bed of Verde River and Alejandra lay on a red blanket on the sand. Mark sat above her, his feet dangling out the back of the trunk. They were both barefoot with sandy toes, the heat making their skin crack.

“I don't know. Why do you want to? We'll be leaving soon anyway.” Alejandra

picked up a stick and started poking the sand.

“I’d like to. And I’ll be there for you, if you want,” Mark said, leaning forward.

His green eyes were clear, like glass, an honest surface.

Alejandra rolled her eyes. “Don’t offer something like that. You don’t know how bad it’ll be.”

“I’m serious.” He scooted out of the van and sat down beside her, tapping his fingers on her bent knee.

She stared up at the sky. There were no clouds, just blue, bright, heat-wriggling blue that burned her eyes. “I don’t want to think about all this. Can we just talk about something else?”

“Alright. What do you want to talk about?”

“I don’t know. Anything.”

She closed her eyes for a second, her eyelids blood orange red. When she opened them, Mark was grinning. “Do you remember when you spotted that tornado? The green in the distance when we were driving on the highway through Kansas?”

“You mean when you wouldn’t believe me,” Alejandra said. She pursed her lips trying not to smile. She remembered the dust in the rearview mirror, the way the sky was a sheet of gray-green.

“Yeah, and when I finally saw it, I just drove faster.”

“I kept yelling at you to pull over so that we could run and find a ditch.”

“I didn’t hear you,” he said, pulling at the hair right behind his ear.

“How could you not hear me? I was yelling.” Alejandra propped herself up on her elbows.

He shrugged. “The wind was really loud. And I wasn’t the only one who couldn’t hear.”

Alejandra drew a circle in the ground with her stick. “Peanut butter and radio sound a lot alike.”

Mark shoved her leg. “I told you to turn on the radio for information and you pulled out the peanut butter.”

“The look on your face when I opened the jar and held it out to you,” Alejandra said, snorting.

“Because who the hell hands someone peanut butter when they’re driving away from a tornado!”

“I don’t know. You always want peanut butter. You’re like an addict. Besides, I panicked! I wasn’t thinking.”

“That’s for sure.”

She said nothing back. She remembered the tornado had faded after a while, going a different direction. And then they did both eat peanut butter. Her stomach had felt like a pit. She’d wanted to fill it until it burst.

Mark’s hand stilled on her knee. He was drifting asleep. He would burn under the sun if she didn’t wake him up and make him move soon. She turned to face him and tapped him on the arm with the stick and told him to get out of the sun. Then, “Where do you want to go next?”

His eyes flicked open and he yawned. “We could go east again.”

She sat up. “I should leave right this time. Get a phone. Keep in touch with all of them.”

“That’s a good idea.” He stood up and got back into the back of the car, his feet kicking in and out of the shade.

“We could come back occasionally,” she said and stretched her arms overhead. Her elbows were stiff.

“Sounds good,” he paused and looked at the marks she’d drawn in the sand. “I’m serious, Al. Do you want me there?”

“No,” she said. “You’ll be there after. That’s enough.”

He nodded and looked out into the desert. She followed his gaze and wondered how many feet of earth roots had clawed into to find water in a dry riverbed. A saguaro tipped beside a tree. Were cracked, green flesh and drying roots really worth the miniscule growth?

#

The day of her papá’s death would come back to her later in single moments, or even seconds of impressions. She remembered watching her mamá put on her little white flats. Rosa stuffed marigold petals in the soles of her shoes. She stuffed them in her purple sweater’s pockets. Her fingers turned a dusty yellow. When Rosa caught Alejandra watching, she tilted her face up, as if looking to God, her face righteous, her straight back certain.

From Alejandra’s old shared bedroom, she could hear Paulina crying and yelling about clothing. The tone of Madeline’s voice in response was like a hypnotic chant through the door, calming. Then she heard her sister say that she knew it didn’t matter, but what else could she think about.

She wouldn’t remember the drive to the prison. She wouldn’t remember the

security guards or the lawyer, or wondering if the victim's family was in another room. She would remember the moment she hugged him, his hands on her arms, and that she thought, this is what my hands will feel like when I am his age. He did not cry when he saw her, Rosa, and Paulina, but he had a face filled with the time that pain spans, the time that his love spanned. There were years in his brown eyes and Alejandra found that air was heavy and thick and she could barely swallow it.

He said that he asked for tamales and flan and Coca-Cola and M&Ms and macaroni and cheese and steak for his last meal. He said that they gave him the good stuff. He was looking at his wife when he said this. Alejandra wondered what her mamá looked like through a dying man's eyes.

Alejandra couldn't remember how she brought up the postcards, but she did. She told him that she wasn't sure if they were meant as a punishment or if they were meant to include him in her life, because she was never sure what she felt for all those last seven years, because sometimes she remembered the peach juice that ran down her arm and the way that he wiped it away with his thumb and glued the straps back on her sandals, and the rest of the time she just remembered how metal and plastic were so exhausting but that it was all he'd see for the rest of his life.

He told her he loved her. Over and over again, he told them all that he loved them. And then he stopped and said other things, because they all knew already and their time in this room—she remembered later that it was mostly white—was limited.

At some point, Rosa pulled a flattened petal from her shoe and smoothed it against Luis' palm. And suddenly everything looked orange and was dusty with pollen, and everything—the air and Luis' hand and the expression on Paulina's face was calf-

skin smooth—and for a moment Alejandra thought that in another universe they must all be outside. Then the petal was tucked up in his sleeve and the room was just white again.

A priest was somewhere nearby. In a seat across the room maybe. He wore black and acted as though he knew them all. And maybe he did, maybe he was from their church, but Alejandra didn't know his name.

Then minutes, or maybe it was hours, she supposed it had to be hours, later, their papá had to leave with the priest. And then the three women were all in a room with plastic chairs facing a window that she couldn't remember if it was a one-way mirror or not. And in the windowed room there was a long chair and a man in a white jacket and there was a heart monitor and a table. Then the room filled with people behind Rosa and Paulina and Alejandra and she wanted to turn around to scratch their faces and drag them from the room. Then her papá entered the windowed room and the anger dissipated as quickly as it had arisen. There was nothing but the beating of her heart and the sight of her papá freshly bathed in a new white shirt, a priest at his side.

Then there was the dying—not just of her papá, but of the five of them, and of the body that had made hers, and of the pretending that futures weren't inevitable, and something inside of her was hard and frozen and she was shaking and her fingers pressed into the chair so that they bruised, and then when she glanced down at her own legs for just a second she realized that even the color of his skin was no more because he wasn't desert-sand brown like her. He'd changed colors.

After, the priest came to see them. He said that near the end, Luis had told him that the first inch of a saguaro takes seven years to grow. He said to tell his family to think of how tall a saguaro grows after those seven hard years.

#

At some point, Alejandra stopped being drunk. Her head pounded and when she looked at the clock in Javier's bedroom, she realized that although it read nine, she didn't even know what day it was. There was a water bottle on the desk across from the bed, so she waited until the pounding in her head slowed and dulled and then she got up and drank some. The water hit her sour tongue, turning her stomach, but she swallowed a few sips.

Her mind tried to take her back to the days before, back to the funeral and the smell of herbs in living room, to Mark in all black somberly meeting her family, to the curious eyes of their neighbors, their hands full of food, but she shut the thoughts out. Instead, she stared at the cracked blinds covering the window. They were burning orange from the sun. She could hear voices down the hall.

She put the water bottle down, left the room and walked down the hall, hunger filling her stomach with acid. From the kitchen she could see Mark and Madeline sitting on the couch watching television. Her mamá and Paulina were sitting at the table. There were mugs in front of them, coffee steam coiling into the air. Alejandra scoured the kitchen for a mug of her own and then poured herself a cup of coffee too. She cupped the mug between her hands, the heat prickling her palms. She sat down between Paulina and their mamá.

The weatherman was talking about the heat. He told his viewers that airplanes in Phoenix had been grounded—the air was too thin for them to fly.

Paulina was still in pajamas—a set with monkeys on them—and their mamá wore a robe. Rosa looked up when Alejandra's mug clinked against the table.

“Lo siento,” their mamá whispered.

“What?” Alejandra asked.

“I’m sorry.”

“For what?” Paulina asked. She leaned back in her seat, her hair falling over the back of the chair. The skin around her eyes was yellow.

Rosa ran her finger around the rim of her mug, her face was drawn taut, the lines there stretched to make valleys. Her eyes were filmed with water. “I loved him too much, yo se. I loved him more than I was supposed to.”

“Mamá, what are you talking about?” Paulina asked.

Tears got caught in the divots beneath their mamá’s eyes. “I-I,” she said loudly, and then stopped.

“Don’t cry,” Alejandra said desperately. There were so many tears. The apartment seemed wrung out, salty water caught in all the corners.

“You don’t have to say anything else,” Paulina said. She put a hand on their mamá’s arm.

Mark and Madeline didn’t turn around. Their eyes stayed on the television, but Alejandra was sure they could hear Rosa over the weatherman.

“I was supposed to love mis hijos more. I was supposed to love them enough to take care of them even after something so horrible,” their mamá whispered. Her face was spotted red, her eyes were cavernous and she swung her gaze from Alejandra to Paulina.

Paulina watched their mamá, her mouth a thin line. Alejandra knew that there would be a lot of time and uncertain space between them, but Alejandra shook her head. The world wasn’t as simple as all that and after all this time, her mamá should know better than that. “Who says?”

“I know what a mamá is supposed to look like. My mamá taught me how to be. I didn’t go into this blind. I wasn’t a child,” their mamá said, louder now.

“There aren’t any fucking rules for this. Don’t kid yourself,” Alejandra looked at Paulina when she said the words.

Paulina pressed her palms into the table and stood up. “There might not be any rules, but those responsibilities don’t just disappear, Ali.”

Paulina walked toward the bedrooms and Alejandra stood up, but Rosa put a hand on Alejandra’s wrist to stop her. “Let her go. She has a right to be angry with me.”

“Maybe. But she’s pissed at me too.”

“Are you surprised?” her mamá asked softly.

No, she wasn’t. She just wasn’t expecting the guilt that swelled inside of her.

#

“Is it weird being home?” Javier asked, his voice almost as quiet as the static.

Alejandra’s service wasn’t great behind the apartment. She sat on a crumbling parking curb near the edge of the lot. Her red flip-flops were sticking on the pavement and the roots of her hair were damp. She had to squint to see past the gleam of the sun. “A little bit.”

“I’m off in a few weeks. Will you still be there?”

“I was planning on leaving in a few days. But I’ll visit. I promise,” she said. She scuffed the ground and the toe of her rubber flip-flop bent.

“Will you?”

Even over the phone she knew he didn’t believe her. She supposed she couldn’t blame him, but there was that guilt again, thick, rolling up to the back of her spine.

“Yep,” she said. She wanted to sound light, but it just made it sound like she was inappropriately cheerful.

“I’m glad you were there. For dad’s, you know, time. I’m sure he was glad to see you.”

“Yeah, I think so.”

For a moment, neither spoke and Alejandra remembered living with him, shouting at him through a door, gripping his shirt when he was young to get him to follow her through the grocery store. Words moved fast and fell freely like seed pods. She wanted to curse at him just to see how he would respond. This lingering in air was much worse than anger. She thought about hanging up and pretending the call dropped later when he called back.

“I thought maybe I felt it the moment it happened,” he said.

She wanted to tell him that of course he didn’t feel it. Death doesn’t create feeling, it creates nothing. It’s the cease of a heart beat, the cease of energy. It doesn’t stir the world, it doesn’t make an imprint. When a life is over, it’s over, it can’t send a shock wave miles away. Instead, because they were not like before, she said “Really?”

“I thought what a coincidence it would be if I got shot right then.”

“That seems morbid.”

“It’ll pass.”

Alejandra tried to remember how sisters acted, what kinds of pithy remarks they might make about military life and survival. They sounded dumb in her head.

“Do you like being in the military?” she finally asked. She should’ve known the answer years ago.

“Most of the time,” he said slowly.

“Yeah?” she asked, hoping he would give her more. She was stretching to find questions, to carry their discussion.

“Yeah, I feel like I help, you know? I can see the result of what I’m doing,” he said, his tone suddenly urgent.

She closed her eyes and wondered about the ripples that he couldn’t see. “Great.”

“It is.”

She cleared her throat. Maybe she could ask about his personal life. “Seeing anyone?” As soon as she said it, she wished she could take it back.

“Not really. I got a letter from an old girlfriend though.”

“That’s nice,” Alejandra said.

There was silence between them again.

“Well, I have to go, but it was nice catching up,” Javier said.

“Yeah, this was great. We’ll talk soon, ok?” Alejandra felt like a puppet, mouthing foreign words she’d never say in a tone of voice she’d never use.

They said their goodbyes and hung up. Alejandra stared down at her phone after. So this was what it was like to not know a brother.

#

Alejandra and Mark laid side by side on Javier’s twin bed. Her sleep shirt wrinkled around her and the sheet was so tight she felt like stuffing. She tried to reposition, but everything felt twisted up. The room was thick black, she couldn’t see her arms.

“You’re fidgeting. Why are you fidgeting?” Mark said.

Alejandra lurched at the sound of his voice. “You’re awake.”

“Yes,” he said. He readjusted and she could feel a dip in the bed.

“Did I wake you?”

“You ok?” he asked, ignoring her question.

Of course she wasn't ok, but she knew what he meant in the moment. She stared into the dark. To open her eyes and see nothing made her feel as if everything in the world was quieter. “I knew this wouldn't be a fucking picnic. I knew everything would be different, but—”

“Just because you know what to expect doesn't make it easier to deal with,” he said, his breath warm near her shoulder.

She picked at her thumb in the dark. She could hear the click of her nails. “I didn't even think about this before, if I'd give a shit, if I'd even want to see them all again, but this stuff doesn't exactly get fixed.”

“Not quickly. But we can stay here longer, if you need to.”

She shook her head and then realized he couldn't see her. “No, it's time to move on. I just need to clear my head. I'm gonna go sit outside for a minute.”

“Do you want me to come?” he asked as she pushed the sheet down her legs.

“No, I'm fine,” she said.

Alejandra walked out of the room and into the hallway. From there, she could see a light on in the kitchen. She turned the corner and saw that her sister was leaning against the wall, looking out the window, with her hand idly twisting the blinds. There was no light coming through them, it was the middle of the night. Paulina looked up when Alejandra walked into the kitchen.

“Couldn't sleep?” Paulina asked.

“Not well,” Alejandra said. She took a plastic blue cup out of the cabinet and filled it with tap water.

“Anxious for your next trip?” Paulina said, her face was blank.

Alejandra set her cup down on the counter. “No. That’s generally how I spend all my time. I’m used to being on the road.”

“Being on the road,” Paulina repeated, her lips narrowing.

It seemed that her family thought her life was up for monitoring, for sinking their fingers into, for evaluating. But it was her life. “I’m not going to apologize for leaving, Paulina. I was sixteen. And this is my life. Mine.”

The blinds creaked in Paulina’s hand. “That wasn’t a life! You’ve been running. Don’t tell me—”

“I’m sorry that you felt you had to stay, but I wanted a life. I wasn’t running, I was living—”

“That’s bullshit, Ali. You’ve been running for seven years. It’s why you can’t sleep, it’s why you can barely talk to any of us. Because you are going to run again and you don’t even know why anymore. It’s just what you do,” Paulina said, her scowl making her face harsh and old.

Alejandra’s heart pummeled her rib cage. She wanted out of here, out of the apartment, back onto the road with Mark where they slept outside on cool nights and stopped for any mildly entertaining view along the way. “You just can’t understand it, but that doesn’t mean that what I’m doing is wrong.”

“Fine, I don’t care. Do whatever. But you might want to spend five minutes thinking about what you want out of life. Because it’s over, Ali. Papá’s gone, no one here

cares who we are anymore, and you're not sixteen." Paulina walked past Alejandra without looking back at her. She disappeared into the darkness of the hallway.

Alone, in the kitchen, Alejandra felt the numb drunkenness she'd felt for days after their papá was executed. There was a blankness in her mind. The future was a sea washed smooth. And when she reached for emotions, her skin prickled. She didn't want to tell her sister this, she didn't want to tell Mark this, but she had forgotten that there could be a what-comes-next.

#

When Alejandra realized what she wanted, she had been on the road again for three months. She and Mark were in St Louis listening to a traveling band and eating slim jims and she'd suddenly pictured herself at forty-two still wandering the world. There she was in her mind wearing jeans with ripped belt-loops and standing in front of another overly large nut—this time an almond—and she was just staring, intently, at the groove marks on the skin. And then Alejandra realized that she didn't want to do this forever. It wasn't that she thought this wasn't a life worth living, because she thought that Mark was maybe better than most people, helping whenever he possibly could, and she could picture him wandering forever. It was that she wanted something else.

She told Mark that she was going to use the restroom and then she wandered around the block to find a quiet spot to call her sister. Paulina answered almost immediately.

"I want to go back to school," Alejandra said. The words felt flimsy and she felt her stomach clench with nerves as soon as she said them.

"That's great. Does that mean you'll be coming home again?" Paulina said.

Relief made Alejandra's shoulders fall. "Not right away. I'm going to study on the road."

There was a pause on the other end. "Don't you get sick of living in a van?"

"Not really. But one day, maybe." Alejandra glanced around the corner. Mark was still sitting on the edge of a planter, his head bobbing to the bassist.

"He might not ever change," Paulina said.

"I know. And that's ok. But for now, this is all I need," she said. Mark looked in her direction and smiled when he saw her, his green eyes like fireflies in the dark. She smiled back and put her phone away. Her plans could wait. Right then she could put her arm around Mark, feel the weight of him against her shoulders, and listen to the folk music as the moon rose.

Finding Grace

Javier

On leave, Javier got piss drunk and fell down the steps of a western themed bar along the highway just east of town. He didn't intend to get that drunk, but there he was, one knee higher than his hip, his arm above his head on the railing, and his papá's bolo tie twisted on the side of his shirt. He heard someone's steps behind him over the squeal of a violin.

"Come on. You're too heavy for me to lift you by myself," Gina said. She wrapped her arms around his chest and pulled.

Javier's arms strained and his fingers tingled just on the verge of numbness, but after a few seconds of grunting he was standing. The world was twirling and the street lights and bar signs streaked through the air. He pictured his bed and almost sat back down. "I should go home."

"I've got your keys. I'll drive you," she said, pulling his arm. Keys jingled against her leg and he followed her with heavy-footed steps to the car.

Once he was buckled in and they were on their way to his apartment, he looked over at her. Her long brown hair was crimped and fell around her face, her large eyelids were covered in sparkling blue. "Your eyes look like stars."

"Why'd you get so fucking drunk?" she asked, but she was biting her grinning lip.

"You always tell me I need to have more fun," he said. He swung his head to the window. He hadn't reminded anyone what day it was. Paulina called earlier to check on him, but he'd brushed her off so that he didn't have to think about it. He wanted to tell

himself it was just a day.

“Yeah, because you walk around like there’s a military rifle permanently stuck up your ass. But I called to hang out for a reason. I wanted to talk to you,” she said. She had both hands on the steering wheel. He knew this was serious. She pulled off the highway and drove down neighborhood streets in the Barrio Espinosa. They were close to his place.

“I’m listening,” he said, focusing on the dark old clock on the dashboard. He could barely make out the numbers. It was after two in the morning.

“Christ. This wasn’t the way I wanted to do this. But fine,” she said and sucked air.

He rolled his head to look at her and tried to nod, but his stomach rolled with the movement.

“I don’t know how this happened, or I do, but...Ah fuck it, I’m pregnant,” she said as she turned into his parking lot.

He looked between her and the window, back and forth. His apartment complex looked flat at night, the beiges dropping on one another like shadows. He remembered that he was supposed to say something, but he wasn’t sure what that was.

“Javier. Did you hear me?” she asked.

They pulled into a parking space by the building closest to the road. He was on the second floor, sharing an apartment with two other Army officers. “You’re pregnant.”

“Yep.”

He looked at her stomach where she was unbuckling her seatbelt. She looked the same, her black sweater flat against her, her arm thick and able. His mind was numb from

alcohol and her words arose nothing in him immediately. But he remembered something almost a month and a half ago, a slip in her bedroom, his hands down her pants, and then all their clothes gone. “Is it mine?”

“No. Don’t worry, its Ryan’s,” she opened the door and climbed out.

He realized under the fog shrouding his mind that she could be lying. Or she could be wrong. He would never know. The night air felt thick and hot, he wanted out of the car, out of the desert. He wanted to lay in his bed and not think for hours.

“I’ll help you up,” Gina said, opening his car door. They walked slowly up the stairs together and then she helped him fumble with the keys. She guided him to his bedroom in the dark. His roommates were light sleepers. Once in the bedroom, Gina unceremoniously stripped him of his jeans and his bolo tie and pushed him into bed.

“Thanks,” he said on a yawn.

She threw a blanket half over him. “I’ll text you tomorrow.”

He nodded and she walked to the doorway, but then the conversation become clear and sharp. Hers was a half-confession, partial information. “What are you going to do?”

Gina sighed and opened her fringed purse. After a minute, she dug out a cigarette. She lit it and sat down at the end of his bed. The smoke rose into the air, but she never drew it to her lips. “Get rid of it.”

He couldn’t decide if it was strange to find out about a new life and its end on the anniversary of his papá’s death.

#

Javier went to his sister’s apartment for dinner on Sunday. When he walked in, his mamá

was sitting on the blue couch (they'd gotten rid of the brown one when they'd moved), knitting and humming absently. She didn't knit anything with form, but long strips of soft color. The news was playing on the television, but she wasn't watching.

Madeline was already half made-up when she'd answered the door. Her blue-green eyes were eerily glowing when shrouded in shimmering pinks, golds, and greens. "Paulina's almost done cooking," she said, shutting the door behind him.

As he walked into the kitchen, he could smell the roasted peppers sizzling. "Five minutes," Paulina said over her shoulder. Her hair was in a tight bun at the base of her neck. It reminded him of their mamá a long time ago.

He set the table as she served tamales and called everyone to the dining room to eat. Their mamá sat at the end so that she could face the television and Javier sat between Paulina and Madeline. They asked him about his apartment, his roommates and his friends, when he'd go back, what it was like in the military, if they made him keep his hair that short. His mamá told him that he looked handsome, but that he should wear pants to dinner, not jeans. He spoke through bites of beans to keep up with their questions, but he didn't mind them.

"How's Ali?" he finally cut in.

"Fine, I think. I haven't heard from her in a while," Paulina said.

Javier nodded through his rice and looked out the window. Ali hadn't called him in a while either, but she'd go through months like that, months where she didn't want to think about her home town. A monarch butterfly caught his eye outside, fluttering by a milkweed plant. The black of its wing looked purple in the sunset light. He couldn't remember if they migrated both ways.

He looked back at his sister who had barely eaten anything on her plate. Their younger mamá was in her face. She was finely-lined, young for the feathering on the soft skin at the edge of her eyes. All her smiles had an inch of some pain that wouldn't give. The sadness was rooted and entrenched in the black of her eyes, it had nowhere to grow. He looked for it because he'd noticed it in his own eyes and was afraid that others saw it too.

A 'Breaking News' sign flashed across the television screen and Javier looked past Paulina's face to the flickering screen. They cut to a picture of a few buildings in the desert. They looked familiar—brick peeking out of dense desert surrounded by tall fences. But there were cars and swat members along the street in front of the fences.

"I can turn it off. I know it's distracting," Paulina said apologetically, motioning to their mamá.

"It's ok," he said slowly, leaning forward to listen. The hair on his forearm stood on end. He remembered now. It was the Compound, but the images were taken from the South. His sister said something, but he didn't hear her. All he could see was the television, all he could hear was the sirens and noises from the video of the Compound.

An anchor spoke as the videographer went from filming the swat team and then the buildings. *"...they alleged that illegal weapons were on-site. Again, the hostage situation began at seven-thirty this morning and they have yet to make contact with anyone from inside. The police are afraid to act because there have been reports that there are children in the buildings..."*

"I know that place. We used to go there on a dare when I was in middle school," Paulina said.

Javier looked at his sister, willing his face blank. His heart battered his chest. He remembered what the Pastor had said about the children—they were willing to kill them, they were willing to die. He had a sudden urge to go out there, to see the situation unfold firsthand. He pictured children who looked like Grace in a darkened room, dusty, afraid, as men circled them with guns. But he could do nothing for any of them.

#

Javier went to a house party with Ryan and Gina later that evening. The hostage situation had continued on after nightfall and he couldn't stop imagining Grace's face. Her white blond hair shrouded the pages of the book he tried to read. Her eyes' blue color filled the water he drank. He remembered her skin smelled like creosote the first night and then something daisy-like after. He wondered what she looked like now.

Gina, Ryan, and Javier sat outside in the yard far enough from the beer pong table that all they could hear was the occasional shout. They sat in short lawn chairs. Ryan kicked his feet out in front of him and thumbed his tangled beard with one hand and pulled a baggie out of his pocket with the other. "You up for it?"

Shrugging, Javier pulled out a lighter. He was afraid that he would start imagining the feel of Grace's skin, the softness of her lips, that this phantom from when he was young might haunt him through the night.

Ryan rolled a joint and Gina sat back in a lawn chair staring up at the stars. Javier offered Ryan a light and the tip of the white paper burned orange ash. After taking a hit, Ryan handed it to Javier, but he passed it on to Gina. She twirled it through her fingers and then brought it to her lips.

"Shouldn't you not be smoking?" Ryan asked, smoothing his eyebrow with a

finger.

“Why not?” She inhaled and then held onto the joint.

“I don’t know. Maybe because you’re fucking pregnant,” he said quietly.

Javier leaned back in his chair.

“I’m getting an abortion,” she said. She stared at him as she took another toke, the shadows in her face absorbed by the night.

“Whatever. I’m gonna go get a beer,” Ryan said. He stood up and walked away, his footsteps heavy until he reached the beer pong table.

Javier sat quietly while Gina continued to smoke. They looked out past the fenced yard. A light over a parking lot turned the pavement and cars gray and a fast-food sign read ‘24 hours’ a block or two away.

“You know what fucking bugs me?” Gina asked abruptly.

“What?”

“That he just doesn’t fucking care. He has literally no opinion about what I’m gonna do.”

“Really?” Javier shifted in his seat. He should’ve gotten a beer too.

“He just wants me to stop talking about it.”

“Maybe he doesn’t want you to feel pressured,” Javier said, but he knew that wasn’t right. Ryan didn’t think about things like that.

She shook her head and threw the joint on the ground. “Yeah, right. He hasn’t even offered to go with me.”

“You could ask him.”

“He’d say ‘no’.” She toed dirt over the joint and then pressed on it with her heel.

Javier didn't bother arguing. He was never a great liar.

He didn't stay at the party long. Gina barely spoke once Ryan returned and Ryan pretended she wasn't upset. After about an hour, Javier said that he had to be up early and went home. When he got there, he took his clothes off and lay down on the bed, the sheets cool from the ceiling fan. He turned on the TV and turned the volume down so that he wouldn't wake up his roommates. Nothing on caught his interest, so he switched over to the news. The anchor was interviewing the head of a SWAT team. The hostage situation at the Compound was over.

#

Time on leave was slow, nothing in the world seemed to move the right speed when he wasn't on base. There were plenty of boring moments, plenty of downtime when he was in Afghanistan, but there the other soldiers felt it too. In Arizona growth was slow, people moved without precision, but no one seemed to notice. He found it tiring to spend full days with others, so he took to hiking. He carried an army backpack with a radio, water, beef jerky and other food, and an extra pair of socks if he felt like crossing the flooded creeks at the base of the canyon. Being outside early in the morning—the air cool enough that the first sunrays were a welcome presence—reminded him of catching tadpoles with Alejandra and their papá.

Now, as he began to climb the rocky hills of the canyon a quarter after five in the morning, he saw such a moment from his childhood clearly. Similarly from when he was young, the sun had crested over the jagged rocks above. The boulders turned blue in the shadows, and the water dribbled lazily just beyond sight. A puddle from the early morning monsoons sat in his path, just as they had so many years ago—the brown sand

pocketing green water, black wriggling tadpoles clinging to the miniature sandy beach. They made a wall in flux. But back then, his sister and he had pulled out glass jars, raking in sand and as many tadpoles as they could to take to the main river. By midmorning the puddles would dry and any tadpole left would not survive.

Javier watched them for a moment as they scattered like thrown black pebbles and then he walked on, quad muscles burning as he picked up speed. He walked for a couple of hours and then settled on a boulder to listen to the news on his radio and eat a late breakfast of beef jerky and an apple. He scrolled through absently as he bit into his fruit, the juice crisp on his tongue. After a moment, he came across a piece referencing the hostage situation. Someone had conducted an interview with an escapee from the Compound. The title read, “The Anonymous Tip that Led Police to the Church of the Blistering Sun.”

The name of the church raised the hair on his arms. His forgotten apple limp in hand, he slid his thumb over the beginning and jumped to the middle of the interview.

Interviewer: ...you escape, Samantha?

Samantha: A couple of other escapees and a boy helped me escape.

His blood roared in his ears and he turned the volume up. The words of the escapee were too quick. He couldn't determine the voice.

Interviewer: Other escapees?

Samantha : Yes, you see, it actually wasn't that difficult to escape. It was difficult to know what they'd do to the people you left behind. After all that time there, it was also difficult to convince yourself that you wouldn't go to hell if you left.

Interviewer: What about the boy?

Samantha : He was s civilian who knew my daughter—the first ever to escape. He risked his life, in fact he ended up badly hurt, to help free me. And I believe he was her age or a little older. Sixteen or seventeen when he rescued me.

Javier dropped the apple. This was Grace Seven's mother. He was sure of it.

Interviewer: How brave. Let's discuss your daughter because this is how this all began, isn't it?

Samantha : Yes. After she escaped, I realized how much I wanted to leave as well. But I had other children to look after. When the youngest was thirteen though, I realized that I couldn't stay. You see, they—

She had begun to cry, loudly, her sobs unapologetic over the radio.

Interviewer: I know this must be difficult. Take your time.

Samantha: Alright. (Deep breath.) Anyway, they marry off your children. They indoctrinate the boys. So I knew I needed to leave. And so I escaped and I began my journey.

Interviewer: To find your daughter?

Samantha: Yes. I figured she had been in foster care so I went looking for records, but they were sealed. No one would give me any information. I realized that I would need a lawyer to help me. I didn't have my daughter's birth certificate; I had no record of her existence. I would have to go to the police. It took me years, but I finally worked up the nerve.

Interviewer: So you told them about the cult.

Samantha: Yes. I've since been reunited with my daughter...

Javier could no longer hear her words. Grace Seven's face was filling his view,

filling the gaps where his senses should've been. Grace Seven was found. Grace Seven had reunited with her mother. And if her mother could find Grace Seven, he could too.

He rolled up his bag of beef jerky, the crinkling sound sharp in his ears. He turned off the radio and put his water bottle in his backpack. When he came back down the path, he tried not to look at the tadpoles that were now black ink stains on the desert sand.

#

In the middle of the night, Javier's phone vibrated on his bedside table. He woke up slowly, trying to determine the source of the sound, then after a moment he grabbed his phone and answered it. "Lo?"

"Javi?" A woman's voice asked urgently.

"Yeah, yeah. This is Javier," he said, suppressing a yawn. The room was dark except for a line of orange light from underneath his door. He usually forgot to turn off the hallway light.

"I need you to come get me."

He recognized the voice. "Gina? Is that you?"

"Yes," she said impatiently, "I need you to come get me. I don't have a lot of time."

Javier moved his face away from his phone for a second to look at the time. It was 2:23 in the morning. He groaned and pressed his face against the screen. "Where are you?"

"I'm in jail. I need bail money."

He felt his eyes widen and suddenly he felt completely awake. "What? Why? Are you ok?"

“Yeah, I’m fine. I’ll explain everything. And I’ll pay you back. Just please come get me.”

After reminding him where the jail was and telling him how much money she needed, he hung up the phone and went to find his shoes.

It didn’t take him long to get to the detention center. The roads were nearly empty and the traffic lights he hit were green. But once he got there, he waited over an hour for her to be released. He did not like being there, the man behind the desk glancing up at him suspiciously every few minutes, the harsh lights reflecting off shiny surfaces. It had not changed much since his papá had been held here over eight years ago. Javier hadn’t spent much time in this area, but there was something about the color and the smell of chemicals hiding something more foul that gave him vertigo. He felt as if he was fourteen again, as if the world was becoming spongy beneath his feet.

When she was finally released, she was wearing a sundress and sandals, her eyeliner was smeared, and her long hair was pulled over one shoulder. He guided her to his car without saying anything. Once they were both buckled in and he began to drive, she spoke without prompting.

“I ran over Ryan’s shed. That dumb shed where he keeps all of his end of the world gear. Jesus fucking Christ that’s all he cares about, you know? He’s testing that dumbass beard to make sure he won’t get too used to modern tools like razors. That’s only after he tried sharpening a straight edge on a stone and shaved with that first. Since that went so fucking well he decided to stop shaving instead. And do you know why the fuck I know all this?”

She paused, but he didn’t say anything. Javier had watched Ryan become

obsessed. Still living with his mother, all he did was accumulate supplies. Ryan was thinking about joining the military too just so he could learn survival skills, but he was afraid to leave all his shit behind. Javier could see Ryan's hobby becoming life for him.

“Because every time I try to talk about Ryan and me or me getting pregnant or literally anything, he brings up his goddamn prepping stuff. So finally, I just couldn't take it. He and I argued over the phone and then I took a drive so I could calm down. You know, open road or some shit. But I just got angrier and angrier. And before I knew it I was in front of his mom's trailer. And then I just sort of floored it and ran it over.” She giggled hysterically and then groaned.

Javier realized his mouth was open. He closed it and swallowed. “I bet Ryan was pissed.”

“Who do you think called the cops?” She said putting her head in her hand, her hair draping through her fingers.

“Really? Ryan?” he asked, glancing at her long enough to decide if she was serious.

“Yes.”

He whistled and then drove through the last intersection before Gina's shared house.

“Did you really run it over? Or did you just sort of dent it?” He pulled along the curb by her house and looked over at her.

She looked up at him guiltily, a small smile drawing her lips out. “I smashed part of it. Wall panels came down on the hood of my car. Cans and alcohol were crushed. A lot of it won't be usable now.”

For a second, he smiled at the image: the cans rolling everywhere, rice bags exploding. He could picture Ryan seething on the porch of his mom's house, though, years of work and money in pieces. "So it's over with you guys."

"Oh yeah," she said, her smile fading.

He squeezed her shoulder. "I'll go with you to the clinic."

"You're sweet. But I'm gonna go to Nevada for a while. My mom's family is there. I'll get it done when I get there," she said, patting his hand.

"You're moving?"

"Yeah. I'd been thinking about it. But then after tonight..." she trailed off.

"Right," he said. He wasn't sure what else to say. He wanted to say that she was half of his childhood, and that he would think about her all the time. But she'd been fading, like a piece of the past that didn't belong in his life for years—since he was seventeen. He'd clung to her. He'd clung harder when he slept with her, hoping to keep her a part of him, but it hadn't worked.

"Keep in touch," she said, opening the door. She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek, and then she was gone.

#

He couldn't figure out precisely why he needed to find Grace Seven, why he needed to see her again. Part of it was lingering childhood love maybe, a curiosity about who they might've become together—if she was still as he imagined her. But another part of him wanted to know that she was alright, that the girl he had saved but then failed to protect, had survived intact.

It happened through Charity, who had become a pen pal while he was in the military.

He wrote about Grace first, but when she didn't respond within a week, he called her. In his bedroom with the window open he found a piece of paper with her phone number and unfolded it.

After a few awkward hellos, he decided he didn't want to wait any longer. "Why didn't you tell me that Grace's mom found her?"

"I didn't know," she said.

He wondered if he came across accusatory, as if he thought she would hide it from him because of their past. He tempered his voice. "You didn't know."

"I lost touch with Samantha—or Grace One—for a while. She kept searching for her daughter and I just wanted a life. I contacted her when I heard what happened though."

"Does that mean you know where she is?" His heart seemed pressed against his throat. He could barely speak.

Charity paused. "She's near Phoenix. But you should know that she has a life now. She may not want visitors that remind her of her past."

He shook his head automatically even though Charity couldn't see him. He was different. He wasn't from the Compound. He was the one who helped her escape. "I'm not from the cult."

"I know. You're right. Just don't get your hopes up."

He convinced Charity to give him Samantha and Grace's address, but then he lingered on the phone to chat. Hers was a maternal voice now, it made him slightly uneasy and yet he felt himself drawn to her. He hadn't heard her voice since they'd lived in the motel. Since then they'd only written. Yet it struck him suddenly, how superficial

all their correspondences had been.

“Why’d you keep the name?” he asked suddenly.

“Because the old name didn’t fit anymore.”

The heavy sadness that leached his energy across the phone line surprised him. He remembered her softness, her lightness from before. What a difference years must make.

“I’m sorry,” he found himself saying.

“I bet yours doesn’t anymore either.”

He thought about his last name. The name he shared with his papá. The name that had brought hate mail and harassment. He couldn’t decide if what she said was true.

#

Grace’s front door was yellow. He walked up to it carrying daisies. When he rang the doorbell, they felt odd in his hands, their stems slick on his sweaty palms, and he worried that they would appear childish. He thought about chucking them behind him, but then the door opened and a woman stepped in front of him. She wore a long flowing skirt and a blue tank top. She had moon blonde hair down past her shoulders and pale blue eyes, with pupils like pebbles at the bottom of a well. Her lips had thinned, her cheekbones had sharpened, her skin was sun touched, but it was Grace Seven.

“Javi?” she asked, her voice catching on the second syllable. She gripped the door and stood completely still.

“Yes,” he nodded his head. His tongue was pinned against his bottom teeth.

Her eyes widened in recognition, but still she didn’t move. His heart sunk and he realized that Charity must’ve been right—he must be a reminder from a painful past. He would go if she asked, he could give her that much. He kept his smile in place and

straightened his shoulders, readying himself for her dismissal.

Her thin lips stretched, and she was the girl he remembered again. She flung the door back and lunged against his chest, wrapping her arms around him.

Relief made his fingertips prickle. He clutched her back, the daisies pressed against her hair.

“What are you doing here?” she asked against his neck. She was warm, soft, her hair liquid over his arms.

He leaned back a little bit, looking down at her, faltering at the question. “I wanted to see you, Gr—”

“It’s Leigh now,” she offered as he paused.

He mouthed it expecting it to feel off somehow, but it didn’t. “Anyway, I heard about what happened and I... Well they’re tearing the Compound down and—” but he still didn’t know the whole reason.

“I’m glad you’re here,” she said and led him by the hand to a porch swing.

They sat down together, the unfinished wood creaking beneath them. She looked fresh out in the sun, her body firmly situated in the air, not ghostlike.

“I thought about going back to find you too, but I didn’t want to see everything from before,” she said, picking at the armrest with her fingers.

“Did you—?” Get everything you wanted? Did you find a family? Were you a child again? “Were you ok with where you ended up?”

“Yeah. My foster family were kind people. They taught me that a star was just a star,” she said.

He smiled, relieved. She felt surreal beside him, but right. “I’m saving money for

a telescope. Maybe one day after I buy it I can show you how to use it. I only live a couple hours away.”

Leigh looked out across the street. The houses on the other side were short with yellow-grass lawns. “You saved my life, Javier. Without you this whole other life I’ve lived wouldn’t have been possible, but I don’t think so. I’m sorry.”

He stared at her face, willing her to look at him. “We could do something else. Get food or coffee or something.”

She shook her head, but still she didn’t look at him. “It was nice to see you today. I’m so glad you found me. But I can’t do this. It’d be like starting my life back at fourteen-years-old again. I hope you understand.”

Pins and needles filled his palms and he felt a desperate need to touch her, to wrap his arms around her shoulder, and tell her that such a feeling would be temporary. That they were different people now. But what good would that do? They were either both young again or both two completely different people. His heart was heavy and seemed incomplete, like windswept sand. But he told her that he understood. And that maybe someday, if she felt differently, she could reach out to him.

The smile and her nod in response waned after he left, while the ice-hard certainty that she would not call in her frozen sky blue eyes stayed with him. In his car, he pulled out his father’s pocketknife and flicked the blade open and closed. He had rescued her, he had saved her life. He supposed knowing that was good enough to get through.

#

Javier stood outside the fence of the Compound, his boots dusted with sand, and his hat shrouding his eyes as he looked out at the falling walls of building. Reddish brick

tumbled through dust clouds of gray-orange. Men in hardhats stood around the mounting debris, an excavator tore at the walls of the building now visible through the cut down brush of the desert. It looked like any other construction site and the thought ripped space inside of him.

There were no women in white dresses sneaking quietly through the cracking branches of desert trees. There were no men with guns and serene smiles, searching for those they thought belonged to them.

And he realized then why he'd needed to find Leigh. Because no one else understood the loss of something so strange and so terrible. And no one else could feel the odd sweetness he'd found buried deep as he thought back to his time with these women.

He grit his teeth flat and watched as the piping and wiring of the buildings were exposed. There was so much crumbling down and yet none of it spoke to the women and their time inside. It was just a building.

Turning around, he closed his eyes for a second, letting the summer heat pour down on his body like rain, letting the inside of his nose become coated in dust. He listened to the stone cackling and the men yelling. After a moment, he opened his eyes to leave this area that was already some place he had never known.

But then there she was, the girl he'd known as Grace, now a woman cutting through the sunlit sky, ready, hopefully, to watch the end of the Compound together.

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