OUT OF WATER

by

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A THESIS

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ABSTRACT

The narrator, Jasmine, has moved recently from Arkansas to a small Midwestern town. As she describes the street she lives on, Maple Street, and her new hometown, she recalls the time, years earlier, when she worked as an English teacher and lived with a host family in a small village outside of Madrid, Spain. She describes the particularities of each new space as she tries to understand her past experiences through the lens of the present.

Jasmine relates the Spain sequence in chronological order, but offers images of her current life through vignettes, sometimes slipping off into describing the past or growing lost in her thoughts. The more she reflects, the more license she takes in filling in the gaps between what she witnessed and what she imagines to have occurred. The sections that do not take place in Spain function in dialogue with the linear story she relates. Ultimately, Jasmine leaves Spain and Maple Street behind, though she soon discovers she has not gone as far away as she had hoped.
DEDICATION

For Mom, who has always supported me, and for Ryan, my most devoted reader.

CHINESE PROVERB

There is a story about a frog who lives in a well. The frog is so pleased with his underground home that he has no interest in viewing the world beyond it. Then one day, the frog persuades a turtle, who is just passing by, to come down in the well to join him. Once there, the turtle declares that the well is nothing compared to the vastness of the ocean.
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PART I
CHAPTER 1
SNOW

The snow starts falling in November here and won’t finish up until May. Perhaps you’re a Thomas Kincaide fan in the sun-baked South where I come from. You admire the white blanket in the paintings, warm in the light of the brush. You may be tempted to call it cozy, picturesque even.

It is not so picturesque when you are plodding through it in your boots, carrying your good shoes in one hand, to the corner where the bus comes (usually late, but early just often enough that, if you show up on time, you can count on missing it). Where you wait, at the stop, for the bus, in the snow, and the wind is blowing, always blowing, the flakes as large as biscuits blowing in your face. Even if you wear a mask, your eyes are exposed—they have to be, so you can see the bus, catch the snow. And the flakes thump your eyelashes if you’re lucky, and the flakes melt your eyes if you are not. You feel the mucus on your nose hairs harden into frost.

The bus comes at last and you enjoy its warm insideness as you ride. Today you’re lucky not to sit by someone you don’t know. You don’t know anyone who rides the bus.

You don’t unzip your coat, don’t even remove your hat or ear warmers—yes, it’s so cold here you wear both each day—hardly bother taking off your gloves—though you usually pull down your hood to watch the passengers. You often see an African American man a little older than you in his black leather jacket seated next to what you
imagine is his more senior Latina girlfriend, who perms her hair and dyes it a funny shade of blond. There’s a man who sometimes rides who has tinted his hair a deep Kool-Aid pink, who wears a blue rhinestone earring and almost always has the look of someone counting to one hundred (although it sometimes comes across like a baby pooping). There’s an Asian man who waves, not at the bus driver or to anyone in particular, but possibly to the bus itself, every day, as he’s stepping off. There’s another man who wears sweater vests and reads bathtub trash paperbacks, and another, who often boards the bus when you do, a balding man from Minnesota who still can’t believe how cold it is here. There’s sometimes a girl who works in your office, on the seventh floor, who hasn’t ridden the bus in a while. She has dark curly hair that she rarely covers, no matter the weather (you’ve learned to live with hat head, having the sense to prefer it to frostbite). There’s a man sporting a black cowboy hat and headphones, who says nothing, not even mouthing his iTunes. And a woman in a headband who sometimes forgets to get off at her stop.

Today a man answered his phone and had a loud one-sided conversation on the bus. The reader-man gave him a look but said nothing. Sometimes men fight on this bus. Usually over women—let’s be honest, over girls. The bus driver, the other day, was training a young Asian woman. How funny it was to see a small girl in the driver’s seat, when you don’t even like SUVs; you find them ever difficult to park.

Later, your father listens to you complain about your new town. “Surely something,” he says, “is better there.”

“Public transportation,” you say, and he listens with horror as you describe it. The pregnant woman whose ring tone is “Sexual Healing,” who confesses, loudly, that this song explains her condition. The man whose old rice and stir fry mixture fills the bus
with rotting. You are the person other people want to sit by. The clean-looking quiet type who places her bags on her lap in her space. You were not a bus rider in your youth. You see old coats and worn shoes, long looks on unkempt faces. How does anyone manage skirts and heels? You miss the privacy of your decade-old car, and wish there was a good place near the office to park it.

This is not the bus of grade school days, at least, not at your time of the morning. There is an unspoken rule of quiet. Who wants to talk at such an hour? You are timid, too shy, even, to pull the cord and request a stop. So you get off at the bus interchange and walk a couple extra blocks, but no one watches you untangle your bags and command to be let off. Mostly, you avoid pressing the door handles—because what if they don’t open? Wouldn’t you be embarrassed?

The snow blows in your face when you step out on the curb, and a day of work begins. For which, you should be grateful. For which, you owe your rent. And yet. It is the wind that reminds you you’re a foreigner. But then, even the feeling of foreignness is familiar now.
The plane ride wasn’t bad. I sat next to this girl, she was around my age. She was about as eager to talk and about as eager not to as myself. There was a delay in New York—there always is—but on an eight-hour overnight flight you don’t notice an hour.

When I got to the Madrid airport, I wasn’t sure how I’d find them—my host family. I wasn’t even sure if they’d know about the delay. I was looking around at all the Spanish faces when I saw a photo of my American-looking self staring back at me, the one I’d sent them along with my application. My hair was long and wavy then, and I kind of regretted having it cut. But seeing my own friendly face made me relax a little. I smiled and nodded and tried to act like I hadn’t just spent the night in coach.

Arturo was the one who got me at the airport. He looks like the kind of man you would want to pick you up. Smart brown eyes, smooth skin, and a grin that would melt butter.

“Hello, Jasmine,” he said, “welcome. We hope you will be very happy here.”

I was surprised he spoke English.

“Hi,” I said. “I’m glad to be here.”

He took my bags and led me to his car. It was European—compact and practical. On the ride to his house he gave me a little lesson on the city.
“Madrid is a short bus ride away from our ranch. It is a marvelous city full of—how do you say? Charm. It has monuments, theatres, concerts, and museums. I am sure you will want to visit.”

I was having trouble staying awake when I noticed the speedometer. He was going over a hundred. Then I remembered it was measuring kilometers instead of miles.

Eventually, he pulled off on a dirt road, like the one my parents still lived on, a county road out in the country. Or my dad did, with his wife and their kid. My mom hadn’t been my dad’s wife in a long time.

Pretty soon we were on his ranch. It reminded me of home a little—the way you could see the mountains in the horizon and fields all around. The land was dry from summer, with dust trailing our car as we approached.

We passed a little one story house on the left, a collection of structures on the right that I later found out were an office, a restaurant, a stable, and a training course, until we finally made our way up the hill to the big house on top.

This time Arturo didn’t move to take my bags. I reached for them.

“No, no,” he said.

The house wasn’t much to look at. Not compared to the big estates we had back home. It was boxy with gray brick and white stucco, too plain to be called striking. It was Spanish.

I followed Arturo in through the back door, which seemed more like what you’d expect from a front door, except that it was at the rear and it spit you out into the kitchen. The house had no proper front entrance—just sliding glass that opened into the living room. The lack of a foyer unsettles me now, though at the time, I didn’t notice.
A woman was frying pork in the kitchen. She was short and muscular, with soft features and a deep tan. She had just enough time to say, “Hola,” when a little boy I took to be Cristián rushed into the room screaming, “Papá! Papá!”

On the way to the house, Arturo had said, “My son has a great vitality. He is a good boy.”

I wasn’t sure what he’d meant by that, why he’d packed the two phrases together that way. The kid looked like a typical seven-year-old—cute and a little mischievous, his dark hair still tussled from bed and one of his front teeth growing in.

Arturo spoke to Cristián in Spanish. Although I’d had seven years of it in school, I was pretty awful in translation. We’d learned Mexican pronunciation, and the Castilian lisp threw me, but I gathered that Arturo told Cristián something like, “Jasmine is your new American friend. Why don’t you greet her in English?”

Whether it was me or his father’s request he disapproved of, Cristián buried his head in Arturo’s legs.

“Cris is shy,” Arturo told me, “But he will warm.”

Arturo introduced the woman to me as their housekeeper, Graciela. She struck me as much older than myself, early thirties at least, but she later told me she was twenty-eight.

A man came in carrying my bags. He had longish hair and smelled like yard work. Arturo called him Hernando. He smiled and followed us to my room.

The room was small, so small that its smallness was the first thing I noticed. It was squeezed under the staircase, and had either been designed to serve as servants’ quarters or a storage closet. The floor was hardwood, here and throughout the house, and the walls were an earthy tone. A dingy quilt covered a tiny bed—not even as big as
the one in my college dorm room—a bed so narrow I wondered if it wasn’t meant for a child, although it was long enough that my feet didn’t dangle off the edge when I lay down on it.

There was nowhere to hang my clothes, but they’d set a makeshift cabinet in one corner and Arturo told me I could place them on the shelves. Framed concert posters lined the walls, along with c.d. and record towers. Once I’d unpacked, my suitcases would have to sit behind the door, but for now, they swallowed the room lying in its center. Someone had set a vase of red carnations on the night stand beside the bed. It seemed out of place, the burst of bright color in that dark little room.

The bedroom connected to a bathroom even more microscopic in proportion. The toilet tank nearly brushed the lip of the pedestal sink, and the sink stopped the shower door from swinging fully open. What the bathroom had going for it was a little window that let in natural light, and a deep windowsill that would make a good countertop for my makeup.

I was ready to crash, but Arturo wanted to show me around. The house was surprisingly spacious.

“I collect instruments,” he told me as we entered a side room where guitars, bases, saxophones, banjos, accordians, horns, and nearly every other music-making mechanism I could think of hung from the wall like puppets.

“I see,” I said. “Do you play all these?”

“Just this one,” he said, picking up a c.d. with a photo of himself and a few other middle-aged men on the cover. They all wore dark glasses and tried to look “cool,” not in the high school jock kind of way, but in that sleek, jazz-musician-style-cool that few can pull off and way too many try. Arturo’s sax hung from his mouth.
I thought of the mounted deer heads in my father’s den, but this room seemed stranger to me. Maybe because the deer were dead, so all you could do with them was look, but these instruments ought to be played, or at least considered in that way—as objects that could make something—music.

We made our way up the stairs. The railings were decorated with red iron curlies where you’d expect to find banisters. Iron designs also hung from the ceiling and walls.

“My wife is an artist,” he said, gesturing.

I didn’t know how to compliment the pieces. You couldn’t call them “pretty,” and “sturdy” was only flattering when the subject was shelving. I nodded. “They’re—powerful.”

At the top of the staircase, he pointed out a green guest room. It looked comfortable, with its big bed brimming with pillows and its open curtains allowing in the light.

“We might have put you here,” he said, “but this is the room of Dolores’s mother. And you have your own lavatory downstairs.”

Across the hall was an office with full bookcases against the walls and a computer desk in one corner.

“You may read anything,” he said, which was a nice offer, and I may have taken him up on it if all the books hadn’t been in Spanish.

“May I use the computer?” I asked, knowing everyone at home would worry if they didn’t hear I’d arrived. “To email?”

“No email in the house,” he said, “but I will show you where to go.”

He was already leaving the office and moving down the hall, so I followed.
He showed me his bedroom—it was also his wife’s, but since I hadn’t met her yet, she didn’t quite exist for me, except in the image they’d sent of her—a thin woman on a white horse under a purple sunset—and the dreams I’d formed of her along with Spain. Their bedroom was modern, without even a touch of femininity, but then, so was the house. The walls were white and the comforter white, the furniture sharp, square, and ebony. In one section of the room, a sink, a toilet, and a shower huddled together, as though feeling modest without walls separating them from the sleeping space.

I wasn’t sure what to think of two adults who squatted in front of each other. I looked at Arturo. His expression said nothing was odd about this arrangement, and revealed no hint of defense or even a smirk. Perhaps this effort told me more than I realized.

Finally, we entered a room that was clearly Cristián’s—it was more like two rooms, the way it was divided into an area for play and an area for rest. It had little in common with the rest of the house, and I felt like I’d entered a brand new world, the kind of small contained space you can look on admiringly but not really exist in, like the sphere of a snow globe, or a Matryoshka doll. The most remarkable feature was the bed, although I had to look twice to be sure. It was a castle—with crenelated towers on either side and a royal seal carved into a wooden double door that opened up to the mattress. The whole room had a regal theme, with deep reds and golds and blues shimmering throughout. The shelves in the play area were lined to the ceiling with storybooks, figurines, electronics, games, animals—every toy you could imagine.

“Wow,” I said, “he’s got quite the spread.”

“Every king needs his castle,” said Arturo, half-smiling. And I couldn’t tell whether he was joking.
I felt a tap on my shoulder and let out a squeal.

“Hamburger?” asked Graciela.

I nodded dumbly.
I live in a small old house with translucent insulation and a basement that was
designed to leak. You’ll find this house in a “revitalizing” area just north of downtown—
the first neighborhood built in this area, in fact. Look no further than my backyard, and
you’ll see tracks dividing my house from what is known as the wrong side of town.

This is not actually my house. We rent, you see, my husband and I. We rent, so
we pay too much for a house that is much too little. The house is white with red—almost
pink, think: the color of a new pencil’s eraser—accents (meaning the window shutters,
the lattice-work, and the front door). The paint is peeling, and I’d like to rip off the
jagged lip that juts out over the front porch, as I’d tear away a dry piece of sunburned
skin, or a wilting leaf from a blooming plant, but I’m afraid of losing our deposit. Nails
poke out from the side of the house, pointing along the pathway to the car lot and the
trash bins. We tore a few new shirts on them, so my husband decided he’d better
hammer them in. The nails sag now, their sharp edges facing the ground.

In this old house in this old neighborhood there are old doors. When I close the
door to the bathroom, I see a tiny gap between the edge of the door and the frame. My
husband can press his face to the hole and spy as I empty my bowels. When the dog
peers through the crack under the door he, too, can peek. I hope no guests will figure
this trick out.
The house across the street used to be white. Now it’s mustard yellow. Every day, before they painted, I’d look out the window and think how much nicer the street would look if someone would fix that place up. The bottom floor wasn’t lived in before, but the top’s always had two renters. It was about to fall in on itself, in which case, I guess you’d be better off living on top. Now that the house is yellow, with forest green trim, our block looks worse than before. Like Sherwin-Williams had a fire sale, or the guy who tries too hard to cover his bald spot.

In warmer months, our neighborhood is noisy. Unlike where I come from, it’s cool enough here to sit on the porch—and people do, too, to save on electricity. The bugs are sparse, except for mosquitoes, and although the locals complain about the humidity, it’s nothing compared to a summer spent in Arkansas.

The children—black and white—own this neighborhood. On their bikes, with their balls, blasting their rap racket from their jalopies with rims. They are fearless, moving back and forth across the streets, running and screaming and scurrying after dark.

This is a Midwestern town. Midwestern in the sense things don’t happen here—it’s known as a good place to raise a family. A town of shrubs instead of flowers. The people drive compact cars with bike racks, wear sweat suits in public, recycle. The houses are old and the streets are ancient, some of them still laid in cobblestone. Folks here are real and kind and good and quiet; they’ll help you change a flat, and will otherwise mind their business. Yes, everyone says this is a great place to raise a family. But we don’t have anyone to raise.
So it turns out they’re not too good at cooking hamburgers in Spain. At least, Graciela wasn’t. I wound up with this pan-fried gray slab of meat between two pieces of cold white sandwich bread. She’d been nice to make it for me, so to be nice back, I tried to eat it. I think she forgot to season it, though, or maybe she just didn’t know how. I asked for ketchup, but it turns out they don’t really do that in Spain, either. So I asked about cheese. All they had was a block of something dry, white, and smelly.

After a few bites, I tried to say, “I guess I’m too tired to eat,” but because Graciela spoke no English, and because my Spanish was rusty, all I could actually say was, “Thank you, I am very tired,” which seemed, even to me, like a non sequitur.

I was standing up to go to my room for a nap, when a little girl carrying a baby entered the kitchen, smiling. It was the most genuine smile I’d seen in a long time, and I felt myself offering back my best imitation.

Graciela took the baby from the girl, which was when I realized it wasn’t a doll. She spoke to the little girl in rapid Spanish I couldn’t understand. The girl responded, smiling.

Graciela looked at me and spoke slowly, elongating her Spanish as though speaking to the baby, “My daughter, Fe, wants to meet you.”

“Hola,” I said, with a heavy accent, “Me llamo Jasmine. Mucho gusto.”
Fe giggled. Graciela clucked at her for a minute, and then Fe added, “Yo también.”

“What’s his name?” I asked, pointing to the baby.

“Jorge,” said Graciela.

“He is very precious,” I said. Then, “Buenas noches,” I added, walking to my room.

In my cot of a bed, I wondered how Fe, who looked the same age as Cristián, could be responsible for a baby. In second grade, I’d been more likely to slug my sister than to care for her, and my mother hadn’t trusted me to pour my own grape juice.

Lying there, I wanted to be home. I imagined myself watching TV on the hideous Western print sofa, with Mom thumping around doing laundry downstairs, talking on the phone so loud that I had to turn up the volume to hear Olivia Benson speak soothingly to the family of a Law and Order victim. I wanted this irrationally—knowing while I wanted it that had I been there, at home in my pajamas, I’d have been at least just as discontent.

*I*

I got up from my nap in that awful mood where I feel indifferent to anything that happens and irritated that anything would dare disturb my groggy stupor. If I’d been at home, or if this had been my second night in Spain, I wouldn’t have moved. They say the best way to fight jet lag is to stay awake until the time you would ordinarily go to sleep in your new time zone. I say do the opposite. Go to bed however early you want, only once
you’re there, don’t get up until morning. Why wear yourself out the first day? But given the impression Europeans tended to have of Americans, with our Cowboy President, our gas-guzzling vehicles, our fast food restaurants, convenience stores, lack of fashion sense, and condescending attitudes, I figured getting up that night was a minor act of patriotism.

I headed straight for the kitchen in hopes of finding something caffeinated. Arturo sat at the table reading the paper.

“Ah, americana,” he said. “You are awake. It is time to go to the city now. We will meet Dolores.”

“Sure,” I said. I wanted to ask for a Coke first, but he was already rising to go. It was odd, feeling that although I lived there, I needed to ask for things I’d normally help myself to. I wished he hadn’t been sitting at the table.

I fought a headache as I followed him into the living room.

Cristián lay on the brown leather couch watching cartoons. He ignored his father’s, “Cris, Cris, CRIS,” until he could ignore his father no more: two hands reached around and lifted him up, and he immediately started whining. Arturo set him down on his feet, and then he ran upstairs, presumably to his bedroom for his shoes.

“That was his favorite show,” Arturo explained, escorting me to the car. He said he’d be back with the kid in a minute. It was actually more like ten, but eventually they both appeared, Cristián carrying handfuls of plastic soldier figurines, Arturo carrying Cristián’s shoes by the strings.

“You will like this restaurant,” Arturo told me in the car, “The tapas here are very good.”
In the back seat, Cristián maneuvered his figurines across the window sill. I noticed he did not wear a seatbelt.

“It is close to the hospital where Dolores works. She is a doctor.”

“Oh,” I said. Then, after a pause, “When we get home, would it be all right if I send some emails?”

Behind us, Cristián knocked the soldiers off the window ledge. They plunged to the ground.

“Of course,” Arturo said.

Cristián rolled on the floorboard, making dying noises for his fallen men.
CHAPTER 5

ARKANSAS: 2004

They move together along the glowing street. And she thinks—and I think still—that it is cool for a June night in Arkansas. And although we, she and I, would like to hold his hand, we settle instead for the occasional brush of his fingers on our back, guiding us forward, stopping us from veering too far to the left, toward the well-lit bars and restaurants loud with music, laughter, and bickering, or too much to the right, where we might collide with smokers, or worse, a moving car. And she is tipsy—and when I think of this night, I, too, feel tipsy—remembering how it felt to be twenty-one, in love, and leaving.

*

She goes tomorrow. She has slept little these past few weeks. After college graduation, she moved back in with her mother to wait out the days. Her mother took three years to master “the email” and believes that dial-up is just as good as high speed (and at half the cost). So what could have taken seconds takes minutes, and the minutes, hours, and the hours, days. The girl takes tonic with her gin.

Her future is unpredictable, so she plans as much of it as possible. She searches various discount travel websites for weekend excursions. She buys a train pass, gets an international student ID card.
* 

“I’ve just realized I love you,” he tells her that night, the cool tipsy glowing night in June.

This when she thought they would break up. When breaking up would have been a swift kick in the European direction.

Now what can she do but cling to this man on this night the day before she leaves?

I recall thinking, when I was her, how it seemed like everyone else was going. How funny, when, of course, I was the one leaving them.
One morning, as I am waiting for my bus, I notice a man watching from across the street. It is after eight, and yet the road is empty, save for the snow.

When I look at the man, he does not look away; instead, I see that he is mumbling. He moves toward me, and I don’t know whether to avert my gaze or to keep an eye on the man at the end of Maple Street.

He is old, I think, sixty at least, and his legs wobble as he walks. He stands in the street now, nearing, and still the cars don’t come, the road as quiet as the snow.

Should I run? I wonder, but surely I could outrun this old man, if I had to. I can smell him now that he’s crossed the street, as he stands before me, close enough to touch.

“Wanna come over?” he asks, slurring his words, his breath smelling of days-old whiskey, the rest of him thick with B.O.

“No,” I say, hoping to silence him, to push him away from me with the teeth of my tongue.

“The things I’m gonna do to you,” he says, wrinkling his grey-brown forehead.

I cannot repeat the words that came next—the whirlwind of filth until finally, the leaving. And all this time the street is silent, white snow falling, its dwellers—renters and owners, locked away in heated rooms.
The bus is late, so I stand waiting, across from the house at the end of Maple Street.
The first thing I noticed about Dolores, as she rose to greet us, was that she
looked at least ten years older than her husband. She was a straight, wiry woman with
long, coarse hair, which, in spite of its darkness, made her look older by framing her
wrinkles and emphasizing the colorlessness of her features. Her scrubs hung from her
like a flannel shirt on a scarecrow.

She kissed her son on the forehead, kissed her husband on the lips, and kissed me
on either cheek. Her dry mouth scratched my face, like straw.

“Mucho gusto,” she said in rapid Spanish, and it was only because we’d
memorized the phrase in school that I was able to understand.

For a few minutes after this introduction, I felt like I was watching a foreign film
with the subtitles turned off. I wondered what they said, this little family reunited. For
all I knew, they were discussing me. Criticizing me outright and laughing at my idiocy,
the way parents spell out words in front of young children, words they don’t want the
kids to understand. Listening to sounds without meaning, my mind wandered. Why had
I ever wanted to be here doing this?

The waiter interrupted to take our drinks. Cristián ordered ice cream, I asked for
water, and Arturo insisted on ordering wine. I caught Dolores staring at him, but when
she noticed that I noticed, she looked away.
The night moved in slow motion, with sleep deprivation and an empty stomach creating a merry-go-round effect on my senses. I watched Dolores hold the cone to Cristián’s mouth, watched his small tongue lick cream off the top. I sipped wine and nibbled tapas, too tired to enjoy either and too polite to refuse.

* 

After dinner, I just wanted to send emails before I collapsed, but Cristián was eager to swim, and Arturo asked me to join them. He would take me to the computer tomorrow, he promised. So we changed into bathing suits and drifted out the sliding glass door to the pool. The moonlight was unnaturally bright, transforming midnight into dawn. The water glowed from within, revealing light as though through a window. The guys jumped right in, smiling through shivers and splashing small drops of cold water on my goosebumped legs. I held my towel closer.

“Try the jacuzzi,” Arturo said.

I dipped my toes in the water, and finding it warm, decided to step in.

In my striped bikini, I sat in the tub and lay my head back, filling my ears with warm water. It was easy to ignore the sounds Arturo and Cristián made.

“Americana?” Arturo said, and I could tell by his tone that this was not the first time he’d said it.

“I think I’ll fall asleep out here.”

“You can sleep when you are dead,” he said. “Tonight you must enjoy the moon.”

Arturo climbed out of the pool to take a dive. His body was soft but firm, without a trace of the fuzzy beer gut typical of American men his age.
Out of the corner of my eye, I saw that Dolores was home from work. She stood staring out the kitchen window, looking over us like a lifeguard or a god.

Arturo asked me to get in, but I couldn’t bring myself to step into the pool. The water gushed into my ears as I lay back in the hot tub.

Soon Cristián tired of the watery games, and we all decided to call it an evening. Dolores came out, as if on cue, carrying warm towels.

She handed two to Arturo, then approached me with the third, calling out a command I couldn’t interpret. She repeated herself, but spoke so rapidly I couldn’t understand. I reached for the towel but she refused, and only then did she slow down.

“Take off your swimsuit,” she was saying, “and wear this.”

While I watched Dolores, Arturo had removed Cristián’s wet trunks and had wrapped the boy up in a towel.

I felt all eyes on me as I refused. “No thank you,” I said, moving again to take the towel.

“This is the house rule,” Dolores told me slowly, “to keep the water out.”

When I realized she wasn’t offering, I tried to hide behind the towel she held. I struggled to slip my wet suit off quickly, but it clung to my body in the cool Spanish air.

In the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of Graciela, a figure in the distance, lit by moonlight, turning away. When I looked at Arturo, he, too, was looking away, but the movement of his chin I thought I detected made me wonder if, a moment ago, he hadn’t been. Cristián stared at me as I undressed, and no one instructed him not to.

After what seemed like forever, my wet suit was in my hand and my chilled body was wrapped in a towel. As I headed inside, I heard Arturo say to Dolores, “Would you hold my towel, my angel?”
The summer I turned ten my hair turned green. I swam every day and the bleaching of my already blond hair from the sun, in conjunction with the chlorine in the pool, proved more than my poor hair could take. Mom’s stylist recommended some expensive de-greening shampoo, and I used it reluctantly, hating its smell and hating the five minutes I had to wait in the bathtub while it soaked in even more.

Although it had been days since I’d had a good night’s sleep, I decided to rinse off in the shower before going to bed. I turned on the water and waited for it to warm. It was 1 a.m. here, which meant it was 6 p.m. at home. I wondered what they were all doing there, especially Simon. I worried we’d break up. We’d broken up several times before, and yet each time the breakup didn’t stick. And I was glad each time, and each time I thought, this time will be different, and each time, eventually, it had all been the same. And I was stuck in it. Until now.

I moved my hand under the stream of water and realized it was still cold. I moved the knob in the other direction and waited again.

A minute later and the water was just as cold as before. It was too late to ask Arturo, who had already gone to bed. Even if he were awake, I wouldn’t have asked. As quickly as I could, I rinsed my hair in cold water. For the second time that night, I felt goosebumps.

* 

After showering, I decided to call my mom. I found my calling card and walked into the kitchen. I was surprised to see Dolores, still awake, filling an enormous bottle with milk. It must have been for one of the colts, I thought.
“Hi,” I said in Spanish.

She didn’t respond, but kept pouring the milk carefully, guarding every drop.

“I call my mother,” I said, “with a card.” I held it up to her to demonstrate, feeling like a teenager again.

“No,” she said. She stopped pouring. “Demasiado caro.”

I held out my card a second time. “I pay,” I said.

She shook her head. “Even still,” she said, “it costs a fortune.”

“My mother is worried,” I said.

“Mothers will worry.”

*

I couldn’t fall asleep. I remembered the gifts I’d brought, including the coffee I’d meant to offer upon my arrival. Maybe tomorrow, I thought, and continued to lie there. After fighting exhaustion for so long, my body didn’t know how to give in. I got out of bed, opened the bag of trail mix I’d packed, and inhaled the peanuts, raisins, and chocolates. When I finally felt full, I lay down again. Before I knew it, I was alone with my dreams.
My neighbor, the new one who just moved in, she’s twenty-two and has two kids, a boy and a girl. Her husband’s twenty-six and has two of his own. They don’t have any kids together, yet, but they’ve only been married since December.

Today she was taking her kids on a bike ride. It was a good day to be outside—a little warmer, with lots of sun. Before they left the block, the kids wanted to pet my dog, so I brought him out of the house to see them. Kids are so pretty when they smile. Even the ugly ones. But these two are dolls.

Sometimes I want to be a mother. To have my very own little creatures. One who looks like Ben, my husband, and one who looks like me. I used to be content to have a dog. Don’t get me wrong; I love my dog.

Money is the problem, the problem is. When you’re struggling to pay the bills for two, wisdom tells you not to make a third. And yet they say don’t wait til you can afford ‘em. You never think you can.

You would think, considering the number of diplomas between us, my husband and I could support a kid. But I learned a while back, it doesn’t take a couple of master’s degrees to go broke.
I watched Graciela scramble eggs. She stirred them, added pepper, then stirred them again. It reminded me of my mother—and my grandmother—cooking breakfast. While she cooked, we talked. I found out she was from Bolivia. I also found out she was married to Hernando.

“We came here to become citizens,” she said, slowly, so that I could understand.

“Do you like here?” I asked, hearing the immaturity of my Spanish.

“I like to eat,” she said, laughing humorlessly.

I didn’t expect the honesty of her answer and it stung a little—her hardship.

“You miss your family?” I said.

“I haven’t seen them in two years.”

“Too expensive?”

“If we leave, we can’t come back.” She scraped egg off the bottom of the skillet. “I wish we could go to Florida,” she said, “take our kids to Disney.”

“When do they leave?” I asked, imagining a palm tree Christmas.

“Next month.”

This stung for a different reason. “They take me?” I asked.

Graciela laughed again, again without humor. “You’ll stay with Dolores’s sister,” she said. Then she moved into the living room, yelling, “Cris, eat.”
Cristián remained planted in his spot on the couch. Graciela sat down beside him and scooped up egg on the fork. “Open,” she said. He didn’t move.

Graciela shoved the fork in his face, stopping just short of piercing his lips, but he still wouldn’t eat. She set the fork down and pried open his pursed mouth, took egg in her fist and shoved it in. Then she clamped his lips together so that he couldn’t spit until, finally, he swallowed. He parted his lips just so slightly that she could push the fork through and place egg on his tongue. The boy chewed slowly and swallowed again, before opening his mouth for another bite.

* 

Mom called that afternoon.

“Why haven’t you called?” she said, right after I said hello. Then, “Thank God you’re alive.”

“Someone would have told you if I died,” I said. “You shouldn’t have worried.”

“Well, it’s good you’re keeping so busy and liking it there,” she said. She has this habit of jumping to conclusions.

I didn’t say anything. I worried Dolores would find out I’d used the phone.

“Please let Simon know I made it,” I said. “And Dad.” She said she would.

* 

That same afternoon, Dolores called to check on Cristián. They talked for ten minutes. I noticed the shift in his tone—the shift from child to baby. “I love you, mama,” he said, like a toddler learning to walk.
When Arturo got home, he said, “Ah, americana. The email,” and walked me down the driveway to the office, restaurant, and riding club. We passed a chicken coop that didn’t smell as bad as the ones back home, probably because it was smaller.

Outside the office, tables and chairs sat beneath a canopy next to the building. In a fenced area, horses trained.

Arturo called out, “Eduardo,” and a short, weary-eyed man in his early fifties spun around.

“Eduardo will let you email,” Arturo said to me in English, and to Eduardo, in Spanish, he said, “The American girl needs your computer.”

Eduardo nodded and pulled out the office key from his jeans pocket. He pointed to a small house across from the building. “Bring it back when you’re done,” he said.

“Yes,” I said, “yes, thank you.”

I emailed Simon first. I’d already talked to Mom, and anyway, I missed him the most. I think I said something like, “I’m here,” followed by a recap of what had happened. I sprinkled in the “I miss you’s” and “I love you’s” a guy would expect from his girlfriend, and meant every one.

I knocked on the door to Eduardo’s house, but when the door opened, a young man stood behind it. He was dark-haired and brown-eyed—a little short, with
mischievous eyes—and I’m afraid I stared at him a few seconds too long before trying to cover my surprise with a smile. I held out the key.

“For Eduardo,” I said. I forgot to speak Spanish.

“Thank you,” he said, in English, brushing his fingers against mine as he took the key and closed the door.

I barely noticed a couple of old men on the way to their cars as I walked back toward the clubhouse.

“Chica pobre,” the first one said, which made me look up.

“Why?” I asked, wondering if he thought I was someone he knew.

“El chico es un diablito,” said the second man, and I turned to look at him.

“Cristián?” I asked, and the men laughed. I laughed with them. I decided “diablito” is a term of endearment.
PART II
CHAPTER 1
THE NEIGHBORS

My other neighbor sets her garbage by the curb. Not in the container provided by the city, but next to where the container would be if it were Friday—trash day. The garbage men here only come once a week. Must be a Midwestern thing. Each family is allotted only so much trash.

It’s all right for me and my husband. We’re a family of two, and we got rid of a lot before we moved in. It doesn’t work out so well for my neighbor. Although it’s just her and her youngest now, her other kids and their kids and her sisters and their kids and their kids’ kids are always visiting, making more trash. And she—Renee—my neighbor—she’s moving on, too, or working on it. She wants a smaller place with a lower light bill. Who can blame her, when she paid $600 a month for three months last winter to keep her house lukewarm? Try keeping up with that when you’re working at Sam’s Club.

So my neighbor sets her garbage by the curb, and scavengers, animal and human, pilfer it day and night. The animals look for scraps of food; the people, for scraps of treasure. Each finds value in my neighbor’s trash. My little dog barks at the noises they make; his job is to protect our street’s garbage.

Once, I made the mistake of waving to one of the scavengers. It was a weekday morning, and I was wearing my pajamas. I was taking the dog out to pee on the shrubs
when I saw a guy standing next to my neighbor’s curb. Without thinking too much, I waved, imagining it was my neighbor’s oldest son, or nephew, or daughter’s baby daddy.

“Well how *you* doing today?” asked the man, at which point I realized he was too old to be any of them.

My dog recognized him for a scavenger, and growled, then yanked on the leash to attack, barking at the man on the curb. I didn’t have to answer, just said, “He’s my little watchdog,” and locked myself inside. Can you imagine? A scavenger who makes small talk with the neighbors.

My neighbor told me she would pick up her trash. “I don’t mind people going through it,” she said, “but they make a mess and leave it all over the place. And that makes *me* look bad.” She assured me, running her acrylic nails through dyed hair, she’d clean it up after she moved. I doubted she’d still care how the place looked when she didn’t live there.

Then she said, “Moving sure would be easier if I had a pickup.”

My husband has a truck. I said nothing.

We don’t set our trash out by the curb. We’re good about putting it in the Klean-Way. My husband puts the container on the curb, though, every Friday morning. I sell the rest of our junk on Amazon. You don’t get rid of stuff as quickly that way, and there is the inconvenience of having to mail it, but you get a lot more for your unwanted stuff. Amazon skims a bit off the top, but they don’t charge a listing fee. Like your average crooked lawyer, they don’t make money unless you do. I guess what they do, too, is scavenging, but it sure attracts fewer flies than our neighbors.
CHAPTER 2
A BOY OF SPIRIT

I sat beside Cristián on the living room floor. He watched TV—cartoons, I think. I watched his eyes flicker. They were brown and looked older than seven years somehow.

“Let’s play UNO,” I told him, first in Spanish, then in English. I started divvying up the deck.

When I handed him his cards, he wouldn’t take them.

“In English,” I told him, “UNO is ‘one’. Can you say one?

Instead of replying, he gazed at the TV.

Enough, I decided, having baby-sat far too many spoiled children. I stood up to shut off the box.

As soon as I’d punched the power button, he ran at me. He pounded me with his fists, shouting, “Hijo de puta,” and other phrases I did not recognize.

I caught his hands and held them at the wrists.

“No,” I said, which is universal.

He pulled his hands away and ran upstairs.

I heard his bedroom door slam, and then, from the kitchen, I heard Graciela sigh.

*
I was locking up the office when a female voice said, “You must be the English teacher.”

I turned and saw a heavy-set woman with long grey hair. She explained that she was Eduardo’s girlfriend, Camila.

“Nice to meet you,” I said, and handed her the key. I turned to go.

“You made quite an impression on Andres,” she said.

I looked back. “Andres?”

“You might have fun going out with him tonight.”

I didn’t understand the nuances of the phrase “going out” well enough to know whether she meant a date or simply the act. “I have a boyfriend,” I said.

“With friends,” she said. “Meet some people.”

“I must ask Arturo,” I said.

She laughed. “What are you, a teenager?”

“I am twenty-one years old,” I said.

She laughed again. “Un bebé.”

*

When I got back to the house, Arturo was sorting mail at the kitchen table. I sat down across from him.

“How are you?” he said in English, and I realized it was the first time I’d heard my language spoken all day. He glanced back at the mail.

“I’m fine,” I said, then changed my mind. “Good, really good.”

“How are the lessons coming?”

I paused. “I’m actually having a little trouble,” I said, “teaching Cristián.”
He looked up again.

“Today,” I said, trying not to speak quickly, “I tried to teach him to play cards—this game—UNO. I thought I would teach him his numbers. In English.”

He nodded as if to say, “Very well.”

“And I tried. But he wouldn’t play. So I turned off the TV. And then—he hit me.”

“Ah, americana,” he said, “Cris is a boy of great vitality—of spirit. You will get to know him. He is a good boy.”

“I don’t doubt,” I said, “his goodness. But I think he needs a little discipline.”

“You cannot push a child,” Arturo said. “He must decide.”

I considered saying more.

“It will be all right,” said Arturo, who had already gone back to sorting the mail.

“May I go out tonight?” I said.

“Of course,” he said. “You made a friend?”

“Andres,” I said, which seemed to confuse him. “Eduardo’s son.”

I thought he frowned at that, but all he said was. “Have fun.”

*

As it turned out, Andres did not have plans with his friends that night, but he was good enough to entertain me anyway. I can only imagine the scene that must have led to our outing. After work, Camila would have told him she had invited me to join him. He may have been pleased or he may have been annoyed, but, perhaps out of sheer boredom, he agreed.

Since we hadn’t technically met, we introduced ourselves.

“I’m Jasmine,” I said, in English.
“Andres,” he said.

He looked right at me, and I felt myself smiling as I looked away. That was the extent of our conversation before he handed me his helmet. We mounted his bike and he drove us down the mountain into the village. It was my first time on a motorcycle. Part of me loved it, holding onto his waist and feeling the hot wind against my face. Part of me couldn’t stop thinking how upset my mom would be if she knew what I was doing. And part of me wondered if I should have gone out with him at all.
CHAPTER 3
CARNATIONS

Carnations are the national flower of Spain, but I’d been in the States for eight months before I first went out with my husband, Ben, and wound up taking one home. It wasn’t a date. We were coworkers who shared a mutual appreciation for beer and pizza. Both of us had been dumped. But we two were moving on.

We went through a couple of pitchers, the first of Newcastle, the next of Guinness, and a very meaty pizza pie. This was not the first time we’d shared a meal, but it was the first time I felt nervous about chewing it.

We had a couple pieces of pizza left when a man came by peddling red carnations. We were eating outside, see, so the solicitation laws did not apply. He approached nearby diners one by one, “Pretty flower for a pretty lady?”

No one was interested. The man was sweaty and, what mattered more in these parts, black.

He reminded me of the men I met in college. When I was volunteering in soup kitchens and interviewing homeless people. You went where? Did what? Knew who? How on earth did you turn out like this? The last always implied.

At first I gave money. But I was told that cash gifts were not sensible. So then I gave food. I’d usher a man into the restaurant I’d just eaten in, tell him to order, then
pick up the tab. I paid for these meals, mine and theirs, by baby-sitting for children with stay-at-home moms.

When the man approached, Ben said, “No, we don’t want any flowers.”

I held out our pizza. “Are you hungry?” I asked.

He paid me in flowers. “A carnation for the pretty lady,” he said, handing it to me and taking the food.

My husband smiled. He tells me this was when he knew.

I hate carnations. Did I mention? During our meal, before Mr. Carnation Man came, I told Ben that if a man I was dating were ever to give me carnations, I’d tell him, right then, that was it.

When Ben drove me to my car, which was still parked at the office, I left the red flower lying on the dashboard of his truck. It wilted, and shrank, and turned black pretty soon in the hot Southern sun.
We ordered wine when we reached the bar. He ordered it. Something red and Spanish. It was served chilled instead of at room temperature, the way we always drink it in the States.

“So what do you do?” I asked in English.

Andres grinned. “I don’t speak English,” he said in Spanish. “But I’m trying to learn.”

“What is your job?” I asked in Spanish.

“I’m a mechanic,” he said. And suddenly I pictured him in *Grease* as John Travolta/Danny.

“You’re amused,” he said.

“No,” I said.

“And you’re an au pair?”

“A teacher,” I corrected.

“How’s that going?” This time he laughed.

I wasn’t sure what to say, so I smiled and nodded.

“You’re not having trouble?” He sounded surprised. “With the kid?”

“No,” I said, looking away, wondering if that was an international signal that I was lying.
A couple bottles of wine later and we were both feeling good. I set my hand on his and demanded, “Another one. Teach me another.”

“Hijo de puta,” he said.

This time I didn’t laugh. “That is a very bad word?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“Cristián says to me this morning.” I hated speaking in the present, but conjugating verbs in past tense is just too hard when you’re trying to hold a conversation in a second language. And drunk.

The bartender interrupted, telling us time to pay up; they were about to close. He handed Andres the tab.

“Two tickets?” I asked.

“That’s okay,” Andres said, “I got it.”

The bartender looked me over. “You wanna come back tomorrow, honey? Drink on my tab?”

“She’s a friend of mine,” Andres said. The bartender took his money and walked away.

“If a guy like that hits on you when you’re alone, you tell him, ‘Vaya joda su madre.'”

“Vaya joda su madre?” I asked, hoping I’d heard him right.

He laughed. “That’ll keep him off.”

*
He drove me home, and there was that awkward moment—the one that lasts only a minute in real time but seems like forever while you’re living it—that time when you both know you should say goodnight, though you realize that neither wants the night to end. If this had been a date, I’d have kissed him, or let him kiss me, but it wasn’t, and there was Simon.

“Doing anything tomorrow?” he asked.

“Are you?”

“I’ll meet you at the club around seven.”
Yes, here in the Midwest, in this new town of yours, Wal-Mart isn’t even the cheapest place to shop.

Nothing in your new town is new, except the people. The University draws them here for a few years, before, like you—you hope—they go back to where they came from, or on to something better.

People don’t make eye contact when you pass them on the street. They see you, but pretend they don’t. You haven’t mastered the pretending yet, find it hard not to glance, especially at the dark moustached man who sometimes waits with you at the bus stop, who looks like he might be hiding a knife, or knife wound, under his trench coat.

The accents are nasaly here, harsher and sharper than the sweet prolonged words you grew accustomed to back home. You hear yourself (intentionally?) sounding Southern against the grain.

You are wrong to think rednecks live only in the South. You just saw a child in a trailer park lying on a tire getting pulled around on a four-wheeler by her father. And the sign at the speedy oil change center says their oil is number one when yours looks like number two. You wish their clever words would melt the ice.

There aren’t many good restaurants in your town. The food is bland, with every place serving the same old pub fare. Your favorite, or at least your most frequented, is
the Journeyman. It’s good because it’s cheap. Pitchers of Old Style are five bucks. Peanuts are free. If you want to splurge, get yourself some mozzarella sticks for $4.50. At prices like that, even poor folks can drink all night.

You’ll run into a lot of people at the Journeyman. Locals, grad students, hardly ever any undergrads. You’ve seen a woman, a couple of times, must be in her forties. She wears a midriff top and painted on jeans, a large belly ring and heels. Sometimes she walks right through the bar yakking on her phone. She is alone; you see, the Journeyman isn’t that kind of bar. You go there to drink with your friends, and while you might end up going home with one of them, it’s completely lacking in the meat market department. Think: sports bar without the cheerleaders.

Another thing that’s missing from the Journeyman are the waitresses in short skirts and low-cut tops bending over for bigger tips. You’ll see the young girl or two serving drinks, but you’ll also find the middle-aged man who just needs to earn a buck. The Journeyman’s bartenders are a mixed bunch, too. There’s one who’s gone bald prematurely. He’s A.B.D. on his History PhD., and, as far as you can tell, he’ll be that way indefinitely. There’s one who looks like Shaggy—remember him? From Scooby Doo. The one who won’t cut his hair. And an older, white-haired man, who looks like he should grow a moustache. They’re good at doing what they do here. They’ll pour you a beer and leave you alone.

The Journeyman is every man’s bar—and good enough for beer-drinking women, too. Hoity-toity, valet parking, vegetarian-types watch out. This shit ain’t for you.
Graciela made hot breakfast for me the next morning. I’ve eaten cereal for as long as I can remember, but I recall thinking, I could get used to this. I missed Diet Coke, but Graciela made coffee in an old percolater and I got my caffeine fix in that way.

“Is Cristián a bad little boy?” I heard myself blurt.

“He’s no angel,” she said.

“Yesterday,” I said, “he hits me and calls me son of a bitch.”

“You wouldn’t be the first girl he’s run off.”

“No?”

“Last one lasted a week.”

“Only one?”

“She ran away without telling. One before her made it two days.”

“Really?” I asked.

“He’s a little devil.”

There it was again: “diablito.” I recalled the old men’s words.

* 

That afternoon, I decided to try again. If this arrangement was going to work, even dysfunctionally, I was going to have to teach the little brat some English. I thought
again of the toys and books in my suitcase, presents I’d intended to give him, presents I never would. The same was true of the gifts I’d brought my host “parents.”

I was starting to feel helpless. I was out here in the middle of nowhere, and to get to a bus stop I’d have to cross an interstate. I’d seen almost none of Madrid and I had nothing to do. This was not the Spain I’d pictured.

I moved through the rooms of the house calling Cristián’s name. I checked the living room, the study, the dining room, and the kitchen. I walked upstairs and searched the guest room, the bathroom, Cristián’s room, the library, and the master bedroom.

I went back downstairs and rushed outside. I checked the pool and the hammock. I ran down to the riding club, my worry growing with every step. I looked in the stables, and to my embarrassment, interrupted a teenage couple in the early stages of making out. Finally, I walked into the restaurant, and spotted Cristián watching a movie with some other children in a side room.

“You can’t run away!” I yelled. “You scare me! I need to teach you!”

“Go away!” he screamed.

“Come to home!” I yelled back.

I reached for his hand. He slapped it and moved away.

“I’m watching the movie, stupid,” he said.

The other children and their chaperone were watching the scene, the same way I find myself catching Jerry Springer on a sick day free afternoon. I decided to end it. I left.
Although our last conversation did not go as planned, I confronted Arturo. I figured he was my best bet, even if my best bet was a long shot.

He had just poured himself a glass of wine, when I said, “Cristián ran away today.”

“What?” he asked.

“He went down to the restaurant without telling me.”

Arturo smiled. “Is nothing. The children in Spain—they are free. In the States, you watch the children all the time. In the Spain, the children explore the world.”

“I can’t teach him if he’s not here.”

Cristián entered the room. “Papa, can we play with my train?” he asked in Spanish.

Arturo touched his son’s shoulder. “I brought you a surprise.”

“What?” Cristián said, as though he’d been expecting it.

I left the house again.

I waited for Andres at the club. Waited and waited. He didn’t come. The regulars stared as they walked by. If I looked at the men, they smiled and greeted me with enthusiasm. I was sure they’d heard rumors about American girls.

Finally, Eduardo approached the table. “Andres can’t come tonight,” he said. “He has to work.”

“Oh,” I said, embarrassed by how much I’d looked forward to seeing him.

“He’s a hard worker,” Eduardo said.
I nodded.

“Maybe you could meet him tomorrow?” he said.

“I have plans,” I heard myself say.

“OK,” he said, shrugging. “Do you want the key?”

“Gracias,” I said, taking it.

*

From the office, I used my card to call Simon. I figured the business would absorb the cost, and Dolores wouldn’t find out I’d made the call.

“So it turns out Cristián has a history of running off his teachers,” I said.
CHAPTER 7

PHONES

When I was fifteen, my friends all got cars with their cell phones. They turned sixteen in fall and in winter and in spring. When summer came and I turned sixteen, I got a gold and silver watch.

When I was eighteen, I went to college. The girls in my dorm all had cell phones. So they could call their boyfriends long distance. Long distance lasted until October. For girls with cell phones. And for me ("con" calling card).

When I was nineteen, I was thankful not to have a cell phone. I had two roommates. But my mother, by that time, decided I needed one—for emergencies. The cute little flippy ones were too expensive, so I inherited her old bag.

When I was twenty, I got my first real cell phone. I talked on it so much I’ll probably get cancer.

When my youngest brother turned twelve, he got a cell phone.

I wonder, now, what life would be like without them. Without worrying whether the guy standing next to you is schizo or just talking on his blue tooth. Without mothers tracking their kids and husbands with the GPS device. Without friends going to bars together and texting distant crushes while pretending to hold a conversation with those of us around.
CHAPTER 8
NEW STUDENT

Cristián watched TV on the couch. I sat on a nearby chair in the living room, reading a book I’d brought from home. I figured maybe he’d get used to being around me and decide he may as well enjoy living with me.

The kitchen door creaked and soon Dolores, who’d been working late all week, appeared.

“Mamá!” Cristián yelled, running to meet her and then hugging her tightly.

She spoke to him in Spanish, so rapidly that I couldn’t make out every word, though the general gist was that he was to go to bed and she would be up in a minute.

As soon as she heard his feet on the stairs, she said to me, “Come into the kitchen. We need to talk.”

In the kitchen, she began filling the large calf-sized bottle with milk again—the same milk we humans drank.

“I’m worried you don’t get along with Cristián,” she said.

“Cristián does not want to learn,” I said.

“You’re wrong,” she said. “You’re trying to be his teacher.”

“I am his teacher,” I said.

“No,” she said. “Be his friend.”

“No soy niña,” I said.

“He needs rules,” I said. “He acts bad.”

“You are not his mother.” She took the bottle and moved toward the stairs.

*

I waited until she’d been gone a few minutes, then decided to follow. I snuck up, careful to move slowly so the steps wouldn’t creak. When I reached the second floor, I peeked into the bedroom. I saw Cristián lying in bed, with Dolores sitting beside him, feeding him from the bottle in her hand. I moved slowly toward the stairs, but as I sat my foot down, I heard the floor boards give. Dolores looked up.

“I want to say goodnight,” I said.

I could tell she didn’t believe me.

“Buenas noches,” I said anyhow, moving away.

*

The next morning Graciela made breakfast as usual.

“Do they have no hot water? I asked.

“This isn’t Bolivia,” she said.

“I do not have hot water in the shower,” I said.

She thought a moment. “It’s possible,” she said, and stopped.

“What?” I asked. “What is possible?”

“That she fixed it.”

“Dolores?”

“To keep you in your place.”
When I was younger, I loved fairy tale stories about princesses and their princes. When serfs and servants entered the picture, I felt sorry for them, but knew that had I lived in medieval times, I’d have been a queen. Living here was showing me otherwise. Maybe I’d have been just good enough to serve as the royal nanny, and that would have put me close enough to the little princess to despise her.

Later that morning, I took my book and headed to the hammock. Along the way, I heard Cristián yelling. I turned to see him throwing rocks at a cat.

“No!” I yelled, dropping my book and running toward him, but he threw the rock in his hand, hitting the calico on the leg, which made the poor stray limp as it tried to run.

I caught his arm to keep him from tossing another. He kicked my shin, which made me let go to grab myself in pain. Then Cristián ran away, as my leg began to throb.

I limped back to the house, hoping Cristián wouldn’t be there. When he wasn’t, I found the phone number for the local agency who had placed me here. I went to the kitchen and dialed the number. After speaking to several people who couldn’t help, I was finally transferred to someone who—I hoped—could.

“I need a new family,” I told her.

“Por qué?” she asked.
I went into the many reasons, as best I could.

“Have you tried to talk to them about the problems?”

Apparently she hadn’t been listening for the past ten minutes.

“Yes,” I said. “It does not change.”

“Well, we’ll see what we can do.”

*

That afternoon, at lunch, Fe came over with Jorge. She smiled and watched her mother feed Cristián the food she had cooked, while I guiltily fed myself some of that food as well.

“Do you want some?” I asked Fe, pointing to my plate.

“No,” she said. “I had eggs.” I wondered if she had made them like her mother. And my mother. And hers.

As though on cue, Jorge began to cry.

“Did you feed him?” Graciela asked.

“It’s his diaper,” Fe said, feeling it. She turned to me. “Do you want to come?” she said. “I’ll show you my toys.”

“She’s eating,” Graciela said.

“Yes,” I said simultaneously.

So I followed her and the screaming baby back to their house, which was actually a loft above the stable accessible only by a narrow winding staircase. The stable smelled like shit, and the shit smell didn’t subside as we entered.
The place was about the size of a single-wide, dingy, and looking as though it hadn’t been cleaned in months. If your job, I thought, was to be someone’s maid, to keep their floors swept, to keep their beds made and laundry clean and counters scrubbed and meals cooked and toilets white, would you feel like coming home and doing it all over?

Fe motioned for me to follow her into the tiny room she shared with Jorge. While she changed his cloth diaper like a pro, I looked around. The walls were bare, and the room contained little more than Jorge’s crib and Fe’s mattress on the floor covered in a ratty blanket. There was a small dresser and a few toys. That was all.

“See my dolls?” she asked, pointing to the section of floor where a couple of toys lay facing us.

“Bonita,” I said, and she beamed.
PART III
On the news last night lipsticked women picked up their husbands at the airport. That’s not much of a headline, but their husbands had been serving in Iraq. Many had been gone fifteen months. Nearly every woman wore a dress, not a tight and low-cut going-out-to-club dress, but a going-to-church dress, a thank-you-Jesus-for-giving-my-husband-back-to-me-in-one-piece dress. Some may have worn the same thing to the funerals had their husbands been returned in body bags.

It’s not only the young men who are falling. Pretty girls are dying all around. Dying young and with their looks. By accident and design. Sometimes I dream of a student. The one with long brown hair and freckles and the most sincere smile. Sweet Caroline. Killed in a car crash and only nineteen. Her boyfriend, who’d been driving, taken along for the ride.

My neighbor told me he was stationed in Afghanistan when he was eighteen. He said a boy, a kid, no older than ten, pointed a gun at him there. He told the child to drop his weapon, but the boy refused. He may not have understood English, my neighbor said, but instead of dropping his gun, the kid shook it and yelled at my neighbor in words my neighbor didn’t understand. My neighbor shook his gun and yelled back, not wanting to shoot the child. When he saw the boy cock his gun, he had no choice, he said:
he shot the kid in the arm. Instead of dropping his gun, the child tried to shoot my
neighbor again, so he shot the boy in the chest, three times, to make sure he was dead.

And my grandmother’s brother also died, just last week. But when I asked, “Are
you going to the funeral?” she said she hardly has it in her to take care of herself. She’s
too old now to have the life left for grief.

I’ve often wondered what happens when a story ends. When the characters,
brought to life through thoughts, actions, and bad decisions, fall off the page? Do they
disappear from existence, trees falling in the forest without a sound? There’s no one to
hear them; why bother? Do they go on with the quotidian, the moments worth retelling
passed? If a reader imagines them a certain way, does that upset their trajectories? Can
people know, during the course of narration, that they’re being watched? That these are
the times that matter? That they may not exist after page 238. What happens after page
238, and is it any different than what will happen to me?

And whoever said a story should have three things—a beginning, middle, and
end—whoever said that must not have been a woman. A man’s shape can be drawn with
lines; a woman’s takes curve. Why should her story be different? Why should it zig up
and zag down? Why not loop around and around, acknowledging hips, drawing circles
around the things it hopes to say without impaling them?

I do not live always in the present. My life in memory demands much of my time.
I think one thing, and suddenly of something else, and before I know it, I’ve forgotten
how, but I’m reliving a moment I haven’t thought about in ages.
My memories, too, are interrupted by real time. I can’t dwell too long before something calls me back. And that, I believe, is how people live, back and forth in moments of time, here in one place, and now in another, the apparent linearity of time interrupted.

So you cannot put your finger on the person I am. You cannot point, at any second, and define someone. Once you’ve done it, they’re already gone.

Is it funny that I’m unable to think about mortality in my dog—let alone my parents, my husband, or myself? My dog looks right into my eyes and doesn’t have the self-consciousness to look away. And every day I think, it isn’t fair, the wide gap between our life spans.

It’s worse when a dog outlives his human. For the animal, death is abandonment. If I have a dog when I am old, I hope I will think to leave out extra food. If my body isn’t discovered for days and my corpse starts to stink, at least that way my pet won’t starve to death. If I die first, I’ll have to remember to remind my husband.
After changing Jorge’s diaper, Fe asked if I’d like a drink.

“No thank you,” I said.

“We have Coca,” she said.

“No thank you,” I said again.

“It’s from the States,” she said. “Like you.”

“Yes,” I said. Then, “Do you visit?”

“No,” she said, as though I’d asked whether she’d ever dropped by the moon on her way to Pluto. “I know some English, though,” she added.

“What?” I asked.

“Hi,” she said.

“Hola,” I said. “I can teach you more,” I said.

“OK,” she said. “Adios?”

“Goodbye,” I said in English.

“Goodbye,” she repeated, then giggled at herself, the foreign word sounding odd as it slipped clumsily off her tongue.

We heard footsteps on the stairs, and when Hernando entered, he looked surprised.

“I teach Fe,” I said.
“Vale,” he said. He walked over to the baby, who was lying on a blanket in the floor, picked him up, and kissed his cheek.

“How are they treating you?” he asked. I saw that Fe was watching, too.

“Good,” I said aloud. And to myself I thought, “As good as they are to you.”

*

I was tiring of my life of inactivity, but saw no alternative at the time (the idea of assisting with the housework would never have occurred to me then). So after I said goodbye to Fe and Hernando, I changed into my bathing suit and lay out by the pool. It was evening then, and the sun’s rays were low enough that I didn’t think I needed to worry about sunscreen.

After lying with my eyes closed for I don’t know how long, I heard a whistle. I opened my eyes to see Andres beside me.

I found myself covering up with the towel.

“Was this what you meant by ‘plans’?”

“I look for a nice way to not see you again,” I said.

He laughed. “You could stay out here and fry or you could come see more of Spain.”

I weighed my options.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t want to stand you up.”

“OK,” I said. “I like your bike.”

*
When I was twenty-one, life revolved around new experiences. As if the accumulation of different moments in different places with different people would somehow add up to more than the sum of its parts. As if seeing the world differently was the key to understanding it. As if life could so easily be understood.

* 

By the time I’d taken a cold shower, dressed, explained to Graciela where I was going, and convinced her that I didn’t have two boyfriends, Andres said that we couldn’t go to town because Camila was expecting us for dinner.

The meal was homey. Among other things, Camila had made croquettes, and was amused by the way I went on about how good they were (and by the number of them I ate, plopping the nuggets into my mouth one by one, like popcorn). She couldn’t believe I’d never tried them.

“Don’t they feed you?” she asked.

I laughed, but I had lost weight here.

I missed out on the meaning of much of their conversation. It was held at a natural pace that was too fast for me to follow. Sometimes I’d catch a word here or there, but for the most part I felt like a spectator again as I enjoyed my meal at the family table.

“How do you like it here?” Eduardo asked. It was the most obvious question, something everyone wanted to know.

“Good,” I said, my standard response.

But how could I have said more? Communicating what I meant would be hard enough, and then there was (always) the issue of transparency.
How well could you trust anyone? How could you read foreign attitudes and alliances?

“Ah,” he said, and nodded. But what was that nod?

*

I later found out. In Andres’s bedroom. He sat on the bed; I sat on the chair.

“My father used to own this farm,” he said.

I thought about that. Tried to imagine Eduardo’s things in Arturo’s house. It would have been different, then, I thought. Certainly the toilet would not have been exposed.

“What happened?” I asked.

I should have asked more questions. More interpretive questions. I’m not sure I understood what he said exactly, but I’ll repeat it nonetheless. I must tell you something.

“He lost it in a poker game,” Andres said. “Gambled it away.”

That would explain a lot. Why Andres’s mother was no longer married to Andres’s father. Why Eduardo looked so sad. But I didn’t know people would set such high stakes, not really, and I wondered at the veracity of Andres’s claim. Perhaps I had misunderstood. At some point, you stop asking questions. You are content to pretend you know what was said and move on.

“I have trouble with them, too.”

He was not surprised.

At the time...but no matter. Here is what I think now, looking back. What if my story had a different ending? In another version, Graciela is not my friend. In another version...
Graciela mops the floor. Enter Dolores, AKA Marta, AKA... You get it.

“Cristián will be so happy to see you,” says Graciela. And who’s to say she didn’t?

I was not there. Were you?


“It was the American girl,” says Graciela. “She got a little rough when he didn’t mind.”

“My baby!” screams Dolores, and she runs to him, her devil-child, and holds his mouth to her breast (or nearly).

“He’s not hurt,” calls Graciela, “but she scared him.”

I see Graciela’s smile as Dolores, carrying the child, runs upstairs.

She is pleased with the mischief she has caused. I’ll tell you why.

But first. In the bedroom. Back when Andres was spilling family secrets and I sat on the chair trying to ignore the wetness between my thighs.

What if Andres confesses he likes to read? He is the intellectual in leather. He is the would-be professor who didn’t have the chance. He is teaching himself my language, even. He is hoping, someday, to come to my homeland.

What if he plays that c.d.?

“Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers,” says the audio voice, as Andres chants along.

“A pack of pickled peppers Peter Piper picked.”

Wrong, but close enough.

“If Peter Piper pricked a peck of pickled peppers, where’s the pack of pickled peppers Peter Piper picked?”
Once he is vulnerable—without language, like myself—I confess to him that I miss peanut butter. And ketchup. And my boyfriend’s arms.

And wouldn’t it be easy to say, “No peanut butter. No ketchup. But I have arms.”

He says it with his eyes. With his mouth, he says, “He was crazy to let you come here alone.”

And I do feel alone. And I have felt alone. Although not tonight.

*

“The girl is not working,” Dolores tells Arturo, washing her dried-up chipotle of a face in their bedroom sink. He lies in bed, shirtless, waiting.

“She’s all right,” he would say, remembering what I looked like in that bikini.

“She scared our son.”

“Maybe you should talk to her.”

“I’ve tried.”

“I’ll try. Now come to bed.” And he would wink as he said this. Or the equivalent.

“I’m calling the agency tomorrow,” she would say. “I’m getting a new girl.”

And he would drag her into bed, hoping by tomorrow she’d forget.

“She’s trouble,” Dolores would say.

And Arturo would add, as he kissed her neck, “You are trouble, too.”

*

Whatever did or did not happen in either bedroom, what did happen was that after dinner that night I stumbled up the hill and back to a dark and quiet house. Along the way, I realized I’d forgotten to call Simon, who hadn’t once called me.
I had a mini flashlight, one my dad had given me, and I pulled it out, using it to find my way to the door.

It was unlocked, but the lights were out inside, too. And I thought to myself, of all things, that there are things one says in songs one cannot say in words. Why?
CHAPTER 3

FALLING

He carried an umbrella. It was hardly raining. I barely even noticed the rain. But it might have started falling harder—you could tell that, even at night, by the wet and heavy air.

I remember riding in his truck, a nice one, a Ford Explorer, shiny and red, freshly vacuumed. I recalled my high school sweetheart, how he’d clean out his old Trooper before picking me up, run it through the car wash, even, vacuum it with care. Carrying a flower for every date, purchased or picked, taken fresh from his mother’s garden.

Ben didn’t bring flowers, not that night, but he carried an umbrella, in case of the rain. He wanted to protect my hair, he said. And before the rain really got going, while we were on our way to dinner, he asked before rolling down the window, as his windshield had fogged.

His first thought was a teppanyaki restaurant that rattled with knives and applause and voices. A young hostess was seating us, presumably at a table that was otherwise full, when Ben turned to me and said, “Wanna get out of here?”

And we did, as the girl walked herself to the table. And he said he was sorry, he hadn’t realized how loud that restaurant would be. But the next place we tried had an hour-long waitlist, so we added Ben’s name before leaving. We decided, finally, upon a quiet, family-owned Chinese restaurant, where we were seated immediately, served
attentively, and left to ourselves for good conversation. I ordered crab rangoon first. Ben ate two pieces, and I had the rest.

And I found out later that he hates Chinese. And I found out later that he hates crab rangoon. And I found out later how little he was making and how far his paycheck had needed to stretch. And it meant a lot to me, how he’d made that night mine.
I woke up and went to the kitchen. It was empty—the first time Graciela hadn’t been there, ready to stir up a hot breakfast.

I decided (OK, from lack of options) to make my own meal for a change. But as I rummaged through the cabinets, things didn’t look right. Nothing here was convenient, the way things were at home.

I heard a noise upstairs I couldn’t place—a giggle? A scream? It sounded like Graciela.

They didn’t own a Mr. Coffee, but I’d watched Graciela make it enough times I figured I knew how to brew some on my own. I scooped grounds into the jug and filled the basket with water. I placed it on the burner and turned on the knob. But it didn’t heat, and pretty soon I smelled gas. I looked for matches, but couldn’t find any, and if I had, I think I’d have been too afraid to light them.

I moved to the trash can, and managed to knock over a knick-knack on the counter. A brown ceramic frog. It made a thud as it leaped to the floor. I was lucky it didn’t shatter.

I heard Graciela’s footsteps coming down the stairs. Soon, she entered the kitchen, brushing wrinkles from her muumuu.
“Dolores was ticked at you last night,” she said with a chuckle that came out like a ribbet, the effort seeming to rip her throat in two. “She told me you could sleep outside with the chickens for all she cared. I had to convince her not to lock you out.”

“Why?” I asked, wanting to hear Graciela’s version of the answer I knew.

“She says you don’t do your job—truth be told, I think she’s jealous.”

“Why?”

“For the attention Arturo gives you.”

“Arturo,” I said, catching a glimpse of Cristián. “What’s for breakfast?”


*

If you hear a Southern leaning in these dialogues, even in the words I attribute to my Spanish friends, I must confess: I cannot separate the speech I grew up on from the speech of my second language. If they were Midwesterners, or Brits, it would be easier to distinguish their language from mine. Their diction and inflection would be audibly different. But in Spanish, I’m always translating: there is no one-to-one ratio. What is said must be altered internally, filtered, until it makes sense to me or can be understood. In this process of making sense of things, I rely on the words I’m most at home with, and so, to me, Spaniards speak in Southern tongues.

*

I searched the pantry for something—anything—to eat. No pop-tarts and I didn’t trust the left-out milk they used on cereal. I settled on a piece of bread, found myself
some Nutella, and spread it on. Since I couldn’t make coffee, I poured a Coke. It was the sweetest meal I’d had in weeks.

* 

Since neither Graciela nor Cristián spoke English, I didn’t worry about them being in the next room when I called the placement agency again.

“Why do you want to leave already?” asked the girl I spoke to last time. “You haven’t even been there a month.”

Don’t they take notes?

I explained again, including the latest.

“We’ll see what we can do,” she said, with no indication that at any point up to now they’d attempted to do anything at all.

I heard Arturo whistle as he made his way down the stairs. Shit. It was Saturday. “Goodbye,” I said quickly, hanging up the phone.

“Wrong number,” I said to Arturo, as he entered the kitchen in a black Speedo.

He looked puzzled, but asked, “Do you care to join me by the pool?”

* 

On my way out, Graciela said, “It must be nice to have your kind of free time.”

“I try to tan,” I told her.

To which she responded with a smile, “With your fair skin you’d better be careful. You might just get burned.”

“I wear sunscreen,” I said, slipping past her into the heat.
Arturo slept in a pool chair, sunglasses covering his eyes.

I spread my towel over another chair, not too close, yet near enough to hold a conversation.

I'd made the mistake of stepping out of my flip flops too soon the last time and had managed to scald my feet on the pavement. This time I sat on the chair and slipped them off.

“Lovely day for a business trip,” Arturo said.

I nodded, saying nothing.

“You are having a hard time here,” he said.

“Yes,” I said.

“You are homesick.”

“Something like that.”

“And yet you have this home,” he gestured, then paused. “Perhaps you will find more companionship soon.” He smiled.

I stood up. “I forgot the sunscreen,” I said, and turned back inside.
I can’t claim glamour as my reason for seeing a plastic surgeon. No implants, Botox, or rhinoplasty for me. I learned a lot about my options from the brochures in the waiting room. I was free to order any combination of procedures from the surgery menu, ranging from a mini tummy tuck to liposuction, eyelid repair, or even an upper arm lift. Looking at all the ads was enough to make me start using stay-young facial products in my twenties at sixty bucks a pop. I caught myself trying to guess which procedure the woman sitting across the coffee table was in for. I confess to prescribing some treatments myself.

I soon learned that everyone had come in for the same reason: mole extractions. To take away small things that looked harmless, but might be cancer. Most of the bad moles were a result of unprotected sun exposure. That was my culprit. Most of the patients were one-timers, in for the removal of just a mole or two, returning a week later to have their stitches out, then done with the whole messy deal. Unfortunately, that was not my luck.

I figured I’d take the worst one first so I’d have something to look forward to. I watched as the doctor drew a purple circle around the spot on the ball of my left foot. That was one of my favorites; it felt more like a birthmark than a threat. It was long and skinny and a pretty, tan shade of brown. It reminded me of my mother, who was always
surprised that it wouldn’t wash off in the bathtub. But the purple ink meant it had to go. One nurse held my leg in the air, one nurse handed the doctor shots of local anesthetic, and right away the doctor began jabbing at my foot with needles as long as ice picks.

My mother likes to tell people about my phobia. “When Jasmine started seventh grade,” she says, “I took her to get her shots for school. She bawled louder than a baby.”

The shots brought water to my eyes but this time I did not cry. I tried not to look. After the numbness settled in, I appreciated the shots. I didn’t see what Dr. Malone used to cut out that little polluted piece of me. I know it was sharp, but I only felt the pressure, then listened to the looping of the needle through my skin as he stitched and pulled the thread. Five black stitches.

The barely-pregnant blond nurse I came to know as Janet and a forty-something nurse named Bonnie, who might have been a personal trainer if she could have given up smoking, wrapped my foot up for me. The shots made me loopy, but, like a good drunk, I wasn’t about to admit it. I articulated the words in my head before saying them. I spoke like a junior high English teacher—or worse, a librarian.

The bandage turned my left foot into a q-tip. I tried not to put weight on it, but once I realized that it was numb I grew less careful. Eventually, this was a bad idea.

Thank God for Lortab. I limped for weeks after the procedure. The stitches came out a couple weeks later. The purple ink was still there, but the mole was gone. Now the scar has healed so well it’s hard to tell I’m missing something.

My other scars are more visible. The long, bunched scar on my neckline draws questions from strangers. The day they made that scar I nearly passed out. Janet stopped me from leaving the office and bought me a Coke. She gave me some peanut
butter and crackers she got from her OB/GYN that morning. We were friendly, the way you get with your hairdresser, after that.

The scars are usually covered by clothing. There are eleven newer ones and one old. As Dr. Malone would tell me each week, I look like I lost a fight to a chicken. The scar on the back of my neck is the least noticeable, usually covered by hair. The other newish ones are pink and arc across my back’s center. A couple of the moles were as stubborn as I am. Before being cut out, they were burned off twice by a dermatologist, growing back like thistles.

We hadn’t dated long, but Ben was the most attentive of wound-dressers. I remember how gently he cleaned the holes with soap, water, and Polysporin before recovering the stitches. I barely felt any pressure from his touch with the warm wet washcloth.

The mole from the oldest scar has been gone more than twenty years. I remember how upset I got that my uncle the surgeon used cat guts to hold me together. Once my parents convinced me that no cats had been harmed in the making of my stitches, I liked the idea of getting closer to the feline species. I didn’t like my uncle for years afterwards, though, because I blamed him for the pain. I wonder what I’d have thought if I’d known catgut stitches are taken from goat intestines.

My new dermatologist says my moles are cute. He says as long as they’re behaving, there’s no need to have it in for them. I hate the way they freckle my hands and dot my stomach, a constellation of cancer (so I’m a tad bit melodramatic). I’m always nicking the one below my armpit with a razor, and when I lie in bed, I plow the one above my rib cage this way and that, shifting it to one side and then the other, like
the part in my hair. They annoy me, these moles, lurking peacefully on my skin, reminding me that at any time, my body and my self are at war.
I sat in the half-dark on the narrow bed. I wondered if Simon would call. I half wanted him to, half didn’t. I mostly wanted him to care enough, though I didn’t particularly want to talk to him.

I had nothing to confess. Had done nothing “wrong,” at least, not in any definable way. But among other things, talking to him would have meant leaving my room.

I lay down in the bed, listening. I heard the sounds of Cristián watching TV, Graciela cleaning, and eventually, Arturo telling his son goodbye and leaving for his trip. I grew hungry lying there. I wondered what I could find to eat in that kitchen. Then I remembered the restaurant.

* 

I ran in to Camila as I approached, who asked if I still gave one hoot about the office key. I laughed and told her yes, but that I was actually on my way to the restaurant. At which she crinkled her face, her nostrils flaring in disgust.

“You don’t want what they’re making, honey,” she said. “Come on home with me and I’ll whip up something good.”

I didn’t want to trouble her, but she insisted.

“No problema,” she said.
I could see then that it was decided, this meal between women, at least for her. There was no reason that I should object. An objection would call attention.

*

I stood beside her as she made paella, snacking on the potato chips she offered. The chips were sprinkled with just a touch of salt, and before I noticed how many I'd eaten, the bag was nearly empty.

“There are so many nice families in Spain,” she said, “It’s a shame you got the dud.”

“I don’t know how long I can stay here,” I said.

It is natural to confide in the woman who feeds you. I felt the beginnings of tears in my eyes.

“Stay with us,” Camila said, seeing in my vulnerability, opportunity.

“I can’t,” I said, “I must teach.”

“Teach us. I want to learn English.”

“I make a problem,” I said, “with them,” and my eyes turned up to the house on the hill.

“Around here,” Camila said, “we can have any guest we want.”

“My boyfriend doesn’t like it,” I said. It was the most forceful, least impolite argument I could make. A convenient way to shift the blame from me to Simon.

Camila raised her eyes. “Your boyfriend’s in the States. You’re in Spain, honey. And I think there’s a reason.”

*
How can I separate the reality from the memory, from the theories I’ve formed as a result of experience I was too young to understand, looking back now, years removed? I believe these things happened, more or less, though I have questions about what was going on in that house at the time.

* 

The store-bought fruit tart is lovely, with its glistening peaches, strawberries, blueberries, and kiwi. Laid out in contrasting colors, the crust perfectly ridged underneath.

Graciela lifts the dessert to her nose and inhales. She picks up her fork and prepares to take a bite.

The door knob rattles as it turns. Dolores home early. Ah yes, short shifts on the weekends.

“Cristián, honey,” she calls quickly up the stairs. “Come to the kitchen and get your snack.”

“Cris?” shouts Dolores, behind her.

“Dolores,” says Graciela, “I didn’t hear you come in.”

“Mamá,” yells Cristián, running to greet her in the kitchen.

“Here you go, sweetheart,” Graciela says, holding out the tart. “Would you like me to feed you?” She pats his little shoulder.

He grabs the dessert and takes off running. Graciela watches the tart leave her sight.

“Have you fed the American?” Dolores asks.
Graciela snickers. “She’s been gone all afternoon. Probably out with Eduardo’s son.”

“Worthless girl,” says Dolores. “Did she say when she’ll be back?”

“Wouldn’t surprise me if the little hussy’s out all night.”

“I thought she was engaged,” says Dolores.

Graciela laughs again. “If I were you,” she starts, before taking a dramatic pause.

“What?” says Dolores, leaning in.

“Well, you wouldn’t know it to watch her with your husband,” she says, leaving it at that.

“I’ve had enough,” says Dolores, as she exits the room.

Minutes later, Graciela goes to Cristián’s bedroom to check on him—and the tart.

He has finished with it, though he hasn’t bothered with the crumbs. She scoops them up with her thumb as she carries the plate to the kitchen, the sweetness of the remnants leaving a cool, sugary taste in her mouth.

*

After my talk with Camila I decided to forget the call to Simon. I returned to the house. It was still light outside. Before suppertime, before Andres had even made it home from work (like doctors here, mechanics work weekends—how else could they pay their bills?). I was surprised when I walked through the door to find Dolores already home. She sat on the rug, maneuvering toy soldiers with her son. She seemed to slant her eyes as I came in.

Graciela, who also had to work weekends, discreetly motioned to me to meet her in the kitchen.
“She’s jealous,” Graciela whispered.

“Why?”

“Arturo.”

I sucked in.

“If he was here, she’d be happy to have you out, but…” she stopped as though she heard someone coming. “She’s off work the next few days. She said there will be no more running off with the horsey man’s son.”

“No,” I said, as though Graciela were the one making the rules, “I agree to work for her for fifteen hours a week.”

“You better mind,” said Graciela, “Or things will get worse.”

As she moved her lips away from my ear, Dolores, suddenly, was in the kitchen. Around here, apparently, I would also be expected to work weekends.

“Glad you could make it home tonight,” Dolores said. “Do you want dinner?”

I had just eaten, but was afraid to refuse. I couldn’t tell what she expected me to say.

“I couldn’t eat a thing,” she said, and then, gripping her shirt. “I’ve worn this almost twenty years.” She looked at me, with obvious disapproval. “If you get hungry, you know where we keep the food,” she said, before going back to her spot on the rug.

I wanted to kill her. But when you’re a lady from the South, you drink your sweet tea and mind your manners. You learn how to act, even if, behind closed doors, you don’t act accordingly. “Nice” isn’t so much a state of being as a way you present yourself. Hardly anyone is truly “nice.” The key to being “nice” is to remember that “nice” people lie—and often. When dealing with someone who is rude to you, it is “nice” to thank her for sharing her ideas rather than asking her when she last talked a man into sleeping
with her. It is “nice” to compliment a bad hair cut, to affect a deep appreciation for the least of courtesies, to downplay your abilities, to exaggerate the talents of your peers, to add a personal touch to every conversation. But the real key to being “nice” is to smile. To smile for the camera, the stranger, the waiter, the barber, the secretary, the boss, the coworker, the friend. To smile is to say, “I care.” Being nice is deliberate. Being nice takes hard work.

So I smiled at Dolores, as I always make an effort to be “nicest” to the people I like the least, and then I slipped back into my bedroom and closed the door. Though we hadn’t voiced it, the agreement I had with Andres was that I’d meet him tonight at the club. When I didn’t show, what would he think? For a half-second I wondered if he’d dare come knocking, but I soon realized he would not.

So I wrote him a letter. How very old-fashioned. But how else could I reach him? Being on this finca was pulling me back in time. Or into a novel. Or both. But I didn’t have access to a phone, not with Dolores, didn’t have access to the internet, and didn’t have permission to leave. I tried to ignore the fact that I wrote Spanish like a child and attempted to use all the elegance I could muster in my hasty explanation of why I hadn’t shown. I requested to meet with him the following night.

Graciela agreed to deliver the letter. She smiled as she took it, folding it many times in her hands before stuffing it down her bra. Cristián and Dolores giggled in the background at a movie scene on TV, and I slid back to my bedroom below the stairs.

*  

There was a knock at my door. I tried to pretend that I was sleeping, but my lamp was on, and the light was visible through the crack between the door and the floorboards.
When I didn’t answer, the knock came again.

“Jasmine,” said Dolores, “I’m coming in.”

I propped my book on my stomach and tried to look as though I’d fallen asleep reading.

“The chicks are missing,” she said. “You will help us find them.”

I was in my pajamas. In my bed. It was eleven o’clock at night. And this was an emergency?
CHAPTER 7

HOME

In pictures, my hometown is attacked by ice. The trees bow over in deference. Their limbs block walking paths, roadways, bridges. Telephone polls dangle icicles like necklaces of bones. Glistening, preserved, frozen. Everything under ice—for three inches. Like the plastic wrap on your grandmother’s couch. Like the saran wrap covering your casserole. Like the water glass on your nightstand, the spectacles on your nose, the door that separates your shower from your tile. Only cold. Only thick. Only ice. Demolishing hundreds of years of trees. Downing power lines. Cracking asphalt between the double yellow lines. The electricity’s out and so are the schools. For days, maybe, weeks, even.

You sit in the dark in the cold. You have a candle, eat from a can. You hover by the fireplace if you have one. You hide under blankets if you don’t. Maybe tonight you are alone. Your grandmother remembers life before electricity, but in her memory, she isn’t old. It wasn’t so bad to be cold before internet, before cell phones, before TVs, computers, electric can openers. People could stand it then—almost anything. You hear a crash outside as the bullet of ice that clung to your shingles pierces through the planks of your back porch. You wish you had an old rotary phone.
In the pictures, it is easy to pretend that this is elsewhere. You are not home. You are in fact in a place much colder, though thank God your heat still works. You wish you were there—to take care of things, of people.

What will happen when the ice melts? When it’s changed. If you have not lived it you will not know. How the death of your trees, the ones you grew up below, hurts you even in adulthood. How the pain reminds you of the severance, of the distance between your roots and your life. How the broken cord calls you home. To mend. To plant. To build. The loss of what you loved beckons. And the foreignness of the images—plastered across the internet—commands you to return, to make right. But you won’t.
CHAPTER 8
CHICKEN HUNT

There were two flashlights. Cristián took the big one first, so I was left with the small one. Dolores just carried a basket.

As I stumbled about on the rocks and uneven surfaces, it became clear that my flashlight was worthless.

“I return,” I said, and headed back to the house.

Still lying untouched in my suitcase was a new mini light key chain. I had intended to give it to Cristián—before I got to know him. I unwrapped it and carried it outside. Although it was about the size of my thumb, the light was bright enough to illuminate my way.

I caught up with the others. Cristián grabbed for my light. I held it away, just out of his reach.

“I want that one!” he yelled ahead to his mother.

Dolores looked back. She said nothing. I thought about testing her. About making her strike in the open, if she dared. She didn’t blink. I didn’t, either.

I was so busy staring down Dolores that I didn’t notice Cristián reaching again for the light. I could fight him, I thought, before growing embarrassed. I let him take it, and held out my hand as he gave me the big one, as kids will spit their gum into their mother’s palm when the piece has lost its flavor.
Dolores told us which way to go and we split up. Summer had killed the grass and
dust flew into my eyes as I kicked more up with each rocky step.

Somehow Dolores, cat-like, moved confidently, quickly, without any light. I
watched Cristián carrying my flashlight. He spun it around as though it were a sparkler,
or a lightning bug. If it had been a bug, I’d have worried that he’d catch it between his
fingers and pull its butt off to watch it glow.

Dolores made a noise and Cristián and I moved toward her. She had found one of
the chicks, and it was healthy. It was surprisingly beautiful for something that would
one day become a chicken, with its peach fuzz hair, wet black eyes, and delicate beak.
She placed it in the basket and we went back to looking for the others.

We eventually found them—all four. Actually, Dolores did. I may as well have
stayed in bed. The next three chicks were also unharmed, but the last one she found was
injured. Its little wing was bleeding from a cut at the place where it ought to have
connected to the torso. When I noticed the blood, I grew afraid of what Dolores might
do. I knew that guns were not common here, but I wondered if she might leave it outside
to die. Survival of the fittest seemed to suit her. So I watched.

She carried the basket to the chicken coop and deposited the healthy chicks in
their nest. She kept the bleeding chick in its basket, and I followed as she brought it
inside. Without a word, she walked over to her medical bag. She pulled out a bottle,
some gauze, a needle, and thread. Delicately, she blotted the wound with antiseptic. The
chick opened its mouth and squirmed, but made no noise. After tending its wound, she
began to stitch the chick’s wing skin back to its body. It squawked quietly in pain. I
returned to my room, where I closed the door and tried to forget the sound.
I am troubled by the ease with which I now gain weight. I was so skinny when I was younger that I grew fond of eating, and would hate to give that up. When I look to the friends I knew in high school, I see that many of the ones who were heavy are now thin, and vice versa. If you were fat in high school, I suppose you’d want it more now.

There is a time when you realize that you’re not exactly young anymore. Your body starts to collect weight as readily as it once lost it, and the soreness you get from a workout lingers longer than it used to. When strangers meet you, they call you ma’am—or worse (Mrs.). And you discover that you are, conspicuously, all grown up. Once you’ve learned this about yourself, you begin to appreciate the waiter who IDs you for the margarita or, guiltily, the occasions when you glimpse your reflection in the mirror and find pleasure in the fact that from this angle, you still have your looks, or, on even rarer occasions, when an undergrad mistakes you for a girl young enough for him to be hitting on. These times, you see, are numbered, and you begin to fear that a third of your life is gone and you still don’t know where the rest is going.

To write is frivolous—is it not? When there are mugs to be washed and socks to be dried, planks to be swept and dogs to be fed, bills to be paid and emails begging reply, wars to be won, cars to be vacuumed, snow to be shoveled, groceries to be purchased, love to be made. How can you justify an hour spent with your thoughts? Even the need
for sleep—especially the need to sleep—presses against you with more weight than the itch of your fingers on the keys. I miss the singlemindedness I used to have, the ability to concentrate on one thing and forget the others. The freedom to say that can wait, and that, and that, and this, too, can wait. When did dishes become so important, and why?
CHAPTER 10
SUNDAY

Hardly anyone works on Sundays. Not in Spain. Not even Graciela, though I trusted she’d deliver my letter.

Sunday dragged on. We didn’t go to church—a result of Franco?—and I spent all day alone in the house alone with Cristián and Dolores. I stayed in my room as much as possible, avoiding breakfast, having only a few nibbles of Nutella-covered bread for a late afternoon lunch, before Dolores called me into the living room to help Cristián with a lesson from an English workbook. It was your standard name-that-color lesson, and Cristián was awful at it. I wondered if my Spanish sounded quite as bad.

Finally, blessedly, came the night. I turned off the light in my bedroom and lay down in bed. I was fully clothed, still wearing shoes, laces tied. I lay awake listening to the creaking of the stairs as first Cristián, then Dolores, made their evening trek up. I heard their faint voices as Dolores read Cristián a bedtime story—over a bottled night-cap, no doubt—and listened until the house was quiet.

I opened the window and climbed out. It made less noise than moving through the house and leaving from the main door. With my little flashlight, I made my way to the gazebo and waited.

The worst thing that could happen, I thought, would be if Graciela had not delivered the letter. If I waited here, and was discovered by Dolores, and Andres didn’t
ever know I was coming. Although, I realized, if Dolores had found the letter, that would be far worse.

Finally, Andres appeared. On time.

It felt like the first human contact I’d had all day. I caught his eyes and smiled as he approached. Not thinking, I hugged him. I knew that I should have let him go, that anything more than a pat was too much, but I held him, and he didn’t pull away. Finally, I moved back to kiss his cheeks.

If this had been a novel, or a movie, we would have kissed after that. We would have smiled into each other’s eyes and run away together, off to tour the Continent on a train. It would have made for a much better story.

In a few months, Simon would call our relationship futile, saying, exactly, “I love you, but it’s like you’re my sister.” He would say this a month after we’d fought about him buying me the same Christmas present he’d given his sister.

Looking back, these moments—not kissing Andres, not expecting to be dumped by Simon—are vertically integrated, fingers woven together in focused meditation. Of all stories, why is this the one I come back to? Of all moments, why were these mine?

I find myself, in this retelling, fighting the need to make myself look good with the need to express—*something*. What if I mentioned that along this journey, I engaged in disgusting habits, picking my nose, burping, pooping, puking, menstruating? If my memory is wrong, is my story a fiction?

* 

I work with a man who reminds me of Andres. He is pretty, for a man, with long eyelashes, dark hair, and soft skin. His nose points out sharply, reminding you that he is
a man. He is lean like a dancer, and like Andres, light flickers through his eyes when he smiles. He is what I hope Andres has become: happily married to a lovely woman. And yet I find him acting shy in my company. If he catches me smiling, he looks away, as though I’d just waved to him walking out of the bathroom.

*

We talked for a while the night we didn’t kiss. About what I would do. About how I’d escape.

“We’re friends,” Andres said. “I’ll help.”
I try not to think about my name too much. Before I got married, I knew who I was—who I’d always been. And once I married, I added my husband’s last name to the one my parents gave me. I thought of it not as losing my identity, but expanding my name to suit my new role. Yet now when I hear my first name paired with my husband’s last name, though I know the name refers to me and I am to claim it, it doesn’t feel right for me or I for it. When I bicker with my husband, I detest him for imposing his name on me—no matter that I insisted on taking it. But it’s not as simple as going back. Now my “maiden” name suits another person, too. The sum of my names is no longer enough, but I try not to dwell on what’s missing.

It is funny, the way married people are. Separate identities sharing a life. Each spouse moving through common space on a singular orbit. Like the Venn diagrams we drew in fifth grade, with spouse number one (which is always you) on one side, and spouse number two on the other. You have your lives apart, and your lives overlapping. And depending on a lot of things, one or the other may be larger. What you share, and what you don’t, could also be charted like that.
Tonight my husband made quesadillas—kind of. He used large wheat tortillas. While they supposedly won’t stick to your sides the way white ones do, they hold no such promise with the skillet. So we ate quesadilla mush with spoons. As I chewed my chicken, I couldn’t help but think how much better it tastes, even in mush form, when you cook chicken fresh instead of reheating the frozen Tyson kind. How odd it is, that for every generation up to now, no one would have bitten into a piece of chicken and thought about how much better it was than the pre-cooked stuff. But I can’t blame my mother for feeding us frozen chicken. She was a single woman working three jobs to pay the bills, to buy us enough of the things we needed and wanted to fit in with other kids in the middle class.

My adventures in married life involve makeovers from Mary Kay and shopping for discounts at Sam’s Club. I’m afraid to walk outside at night without my husband, and when we do go out together, I’m eager to get home to our dog. I miss my old spirit. The more you have, the more you have to lose, the more you lose your gumption. Your life becomes as much about protecting as acquiring, and I can’t help but want what I’ve lost getting it.
I was suspicious when Dolores took an interest in me. She was going to the market, and rather than taking Cristián and leaving, she insisted, that morning, that I accompany them. I suspected she feared I would steal something, her only son away from home and unable to protect his inheritance.

I had intended to pack my suitcase after breakfast. As I ate the heel of white bread, which was all that was left, I arranged my belongings in my mind, packing the shoes at the bottom, then the dirty things I’d worn more than once (I’d done no laundry here, too embarrassed to hang my panties out to dry), followed by the cleaner clothes I could wear again. I rolled up each shirt, each skirt, each pant-leg, so that everything would fit back nicely in its place, unaffected by its brief sojourn in the cupboard below the stairs.

Since I would not be giving the gifts I’d brought to my host family, I began reassigning the items in my head. That was when Dolores announced it was time for us to go. I was thankful I had already dressed, with urgency, after my quick cold shower.

Dolores wore plain clothes, including what appeared to be a men’s flannel shirt, buttoned together aside from the two empty holes nearest the collar, her tan, wrinkled breastbone exposed (she had no cleavage). Her black hair was pulled back in a ponytail, mostly straight, though with kinks indicating she’d let it air-dry. She wore no makeup to
soften her sharp features or to smooth out her endless wrinkles. If she hadn’t stayed so skinny, I’d have taken her for a woman who’d given up.

Looking at her head from the back seat (Cristián rode in front) of the car, which was identical to the one Arturo drove, I wondered if I hated this woman for all the wrong reasons. I envisioned biting her, a snake in the night, seeping my secret venom into the beams of her home.

* 

At the market, I was permitted to wander freely, though I worried that if I wandered too freely, I would get left, free to wander on my own. In spite of the crowds, I tried to stay close enough to Dolores to ensure this did not happen (although leaving was what I wanted, I wasn’t going anywhere without my passport, which I had left at the house locked up in my suitcase).

We moved together through the various sections, where Dolores bought fresh bread, colorful produce, aged cheese, and some of Cristián’s special snack desserts. When we got to the meat aisle, I started to gag. Hooves dangled above us, hanging from the thighs of butchered pigs. I looked at the ground as Dolores made her selection, and finally, her purchase. Liquid filled the back of my throat as the smell of raw meat intensified my urge to vomit. Cristián pointed, telling his mother I was about to be sick. She looked away from the meat counter, her brown-bagged leg, hoof out, under arm.

“Now that dinner’s settled,” she said, patting the bag and smiling, “let’s go to the travel agent’s.”
* 

For once, I couldn’t wait to get back to the house, and I feared she’d never take me. First we went to the travel agent’s, so they could plan their trip to Disney. The hoof sat beside me in the back seat. I rolled down the window and stuck my head out, refusing to look at the freeze-dried pigskin. Then, she bought Cristián a toy at some educational shop, before driving somewhere else to buy stamps and somewhere else for God-knows-what-else. She watched me so closely that I had difficulty glancing at my watch, for fear she’d notice the slight eye movement and suspect my intentions.

Finally, somehow, she ran out of errands and took us back to the farm. I snuck off to my room, where I quickly packed up my belongings according to plan, and wrote a letter to Arturo, explaining my departure as gracefully as possible.
I’ve set a photo on my desk, of my husband and me, taken the month before our wedding. It was a sunny Southern spring, the day after a memorable night. In the picture, we sit, smiling, touching, holding mint juleps. My husband wears a tux; I’m in a robin’s egg blue bridesmaid dress. We both look at the camera, radiant with future, as though we were the ones who just got married.

I look out the window. Pedestrians slip on icy sidewalks, and dirty snow piles high.

It’s thirty below. That’s as close as I’ll get to going outside today.

I wrap my afghan around my shoulders and turn back to my computer screen. I check an email. Soon, I’m absorbed in my work.

The roads are slick. I take the bus home. The light striking the snow is a sublime shade of sepia.

I’ve forgotten my boots, so my feet are wet and frozen. I hear the dog bark as I come up the steps.

I walk through the door, and my husband hands me a drink. A sprig of mint lies floating at the top.
While I knew I had to leave, I wasn’t sure how to avoid getting caught. I had hoped to sneak away while Dolores was out, but Dolores had taken me out with her, and was probably in for the evening. I stayed in my room, listening. I heard Cristián’s laughter and Dolores’s voice. I heard Graciela’s steps moving through the rooms on the second floor. Finally, I heard the door close, and Dolores and Cristián’s voices outside my window. With Graciela upstairs, I decided this was my chance.

I had not shared my plans with Graciela, although I had been tempted. But I couldn’t risk being overheard.

With all my speed and all my luggage, I headed towards the front door. I was nearly there, when I heard Graciela’s voice calling to me from the stairs.

“You’re leaving?” she said simply.

“Yes,” I said, wondering if she would try to stop me.

“I’ll help,” she said. She moved towards me to give me a hug and to tell me goodbye, then went out the back door, to keep them distracted. It sounded like they were chasing butterflies outside.

I ran out the door, knowing it was my last time in that house. As I ran, weighed down by luggage, I dared not look back, in case I should see the small beady eyes of Dolores or her son.
I suspect, now, that Graciela exaggerated Dolores’s cruelty—and also Arturo’s affection. Perhaps running off the English teacher was a small way she could assert power in that house, a way for her to say: for all the abuse I have endured by your hand, I, too, have struck at your happiness. I even wonder, sometimes, if she wasn’t involved in an affair with Arturo herself. And if he had proposed such a thing, was she in any position to refuse?

I ran to Eduardo’s home, where Camila let me in. Andres was waiting.
CHAPTER 15

POLISH

Though I wear make-up every day, I don’t paint my nails. I admire others’ pink and red and French-tipped fingers (I’m not drawn to purples, blacks, or blues suitable only for moody junior high girls). Long, shapely, lovely nails with warm shades of color speak loudly about a woman’s charms. Or the image she wants to convey.

Manicured nails are deliberately feminine, a testament to a woman’s commitment to the ritual of beauty. Polish is short-lived as flowers. It chips easily and looks good for a week if you’re lucky. To maintain gorgeous nails is quite an achievement—with quite a price tag. There are some things women with nails can’t do, which suggests a daintiness about them. There are other things, certain shades suggest, other acts at which they are more practiced.

Colored nails are seductive assertions of class. They don’t belong at bus stops, even hidden under earth-toned gloves or mittens. They speak louder than lipstick about the place a woman comes from, her home, her kind. I am—I have always been—in awe of polished women. As a little girl, I wished to be one. To become one of them seems so simple. It’s just a little paint, I’ve thought so many times. And yet.

When I try to draw the narrow lines on my flesh-colored nail, I wind up painting my roughened cuticles a jagged pink. It would be possible for me to finance a biweekly manicure, and yet my heart isn’t in it. When I calculate the cost, the sacrifices this
indulgence would require, I can’t justify the small fortune. Each month my husband is
disheartened after the bills are paid and the discretionary income cookie jar is bare.
Each month I am thankful that the bills are paid. I take after my mother in this way, and
wonder if she’s the reason I can’t bear to have my nails done, not because I don’t enjoy
it, but because I can’t stand to fork over the cash. My mother has worked always with
her hands, and when I picture them, they seem too small for all the work they have
completed. Her hands are dry and rough, not moist and smooth in the way of polished
women. They smell like hospitals and nursing homes, of the places she has worked.

In my mind I press the palms of my hands against hers. Comparatively, they are
larger, though my fingers are thin. They are silkier, though not soft, and smell more like
expensive moisturizer and onion juice than hard work. I am not able to straighten my
fingers, never have been. They are hereditarily crooked, not stricken by arthritis, or
something rarer. There is something masculine about their length, about their
crookedness, about the way the knuckles bulge out in the center (from years of knuckle
popping?). I clip the nails regularly, so they are short, rarely displaying a white-arced tip
at their edge. I find it easier to type this way, and concern myself less with the fact that
I’m not buffing them.

In lieu of paint, I wear rings on three fingers. As if to say: I am woman. With or
without the polish.
In Eduardo’s car, Andres drove me to the train. Eduardo called Andres on his mobile phone. He said Dolores had grown suspicious when I didn’t come to supper, and had knocked on the door to my bedroom. When there was no answer, she let herself in. I was gone, and so was my luggage. After ensuring I hadn’t stolen anything, she had called the house looking for Andres, hoping to question him as to my whereabouts. Camila told her he was out with friends. Dolores demanded his phone number. Camila had not acquiesced. This, too, had angered Dolores.

Before saying goodbye, I gave Andres the gifts I’d brought, asking him to pass them out for me. An angel for Fe, coffee for Camila. I regretted not saying goodbye. I regretted a lot of things.

He told me, before I left, that he had reconciled with his ex. With the girl Camila said was too immature to launder the sheets one night after she bled on them.

For a moment, I imagined this reconciliation undone, and for a second, that he was coming with me on the train. It was nice, for once, to have a partner. Someone to travel with. Someone interested, interesting. A person to make this Continent, this world, a little less foreign, if not familiar.
EPILOGUE

We left Maple Street a month ago. My husband got a job, so we moved to a brand new town. The street we now live on has an unusual name, not the sort you’d find filling every phone book in America. But just a couple of days after we got here, I took the dog for a walk, and learned that Maple Street is only a block away.

After unpacking, my husband and I go out for an evening. While we usually eat most of our meals together, and though many of our meals are not prepared in our home by either of our hands, there is something special about this night.

Most evenings we are hurried, after working late at the office—what with having more work to do at home, rushing to make it to the gym, to get dinner going, to pick up a bit around the house or run that last errand, to prep for tomorrow, to meet some friends—that while we eat together, we may not talk a lot. We are both distracted by responsibilities, both exhausted and in need of rest.

But tonight, everything slows down. I take my time getting ready, shave my legs, smooth on lotion. Use the once-a-week facial scrub, the under-eye dark circle remover, the rich moisturizer. Spray a few whiffs of perfume—the kind he likes, even heat up the curling iron and whip out the hairspray. I try to wear something sexy, which is hard, given the contents of my closet. I pull out accessorizing jewelry and matching undergarments.
This process differentiates the evening from other, more ordinary dinners. It puts me in the mood to flirt, to discuss, to listen, to engage—with my husband of all people. To put the energy into our conversation I ordinarily reserve for acquaintances I want to impress, and strangers.

We catch a movie, one we both want to see, one that will make us think, and follow it up with a dinner that is new, different, expensive—a break from our routines of Mexican food, pizza, and hot sandwiches. We order drinks, and, one plate at a time, eat slowly, talk, drink, eat some more.

And through it all, we hold hands. I find myself twisting around his gold wedding band. I take note of the warm softness of hand and the relative coolness of metal as I spin his ring between my fingers.