

A Ruptured Body

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DISSERTATION

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SUMMARY

After a brief introduction to stereotypical conceptions of the Western white male traveler, the narrator explains how his academic success positioned him in a “traditional subject position” dependent upon endless knowledge production and quests for so-called truths. Upon his first trip to Latin America, he found an escape from such a system and proceeded to travel in the region for many years. One such trip to San Miguel de Allende, Mexico resulted in the narrator’s traumatic brain injury (TBI) leaving him unable to recall the circumstances of the injury or much of his subsequent two weeks in the hospital. The narrator insists that the injury is somehow his own fault, but cannot explain why.

Part I begins in Houston, two days after the narrator has been released from the Mexican hospital to his sister and brother-in-law. The narrator visits the emergency room, where he learns the full extent of his injuries. The remainder of Part I depicts how the narrator copes with his injuries, while also sporadically recalling moments of his hospital stay. He vows to work diligently at remembering and reconstructing his time in the Mexican hospital.

Part II reconstructs the trip to San Miguel and the narrator’s first memory after being injured: waking up five days later in a hospital bed. This part of the story alternates back and forth between the narrator’s growing friendship with an orderly named Manuel and memories of his childhood and various trips to Latin America, as the narrator attempts to both remember and make sense of what happened to him in Mexico.

In Part III the narrator agrees to a neuropsychological evaluation based on a recent MRI showing brain damage from the injury in San Miguel. This Part depicts the many challenges

faced by the narrator and how he eventually comes to terms with the injury in San Miguel and the recent demise of his romantic relationship.

Introduction

Everyone knows about the traveling Western man. He's white, as am I, and sees the world the way he wants to. He tames the land, educates the masses, and begets children with native women. Such is the history of much of the Western Hemisphere, particularly Latin America. This is the destiny of the traveling Western man, where the historical legacy of colonization positions him a certain way. I was poised to take my place in such a world, a tightly-wound, obedient young man who prided himself on a stable work ethic that had earned him a scholarship to a fancy university on the East Coast. There I immersed myself in knowledge production and so-called "truths" that would orient me towards my future as a lawyer and diplomat. In such a world I was stable and composed. Properly oriented. But on the inside I was crumbling.

I could take no more.

I first traveled to Latin America at 20, a young man noticeable by my heavy leatherette suitcase gleaming gold in the sun and the charming belief – some might say naivety – that I would someday find a man who loves me. I'd come for a six-week summer language program in Guatemala, but I was shocked by the attention I'd received upon arriving in Panama. People noticed me. Some laughed, others waved, but together we smiled. They recognized something in me, a shy and studious boy, which I'd yet to see in myself. My journals tell of tedious bus trips made comfortable by men resting their legs over mine, or muscular taxi drivers making sure I was safe, comforting me with light touches to the back of my neck. I extended that trip another six months, writing each day in my journal, where I memorialized my fascination with Guatemalan, Colombian, or Peruvian men. Gradually, often imperceptibly, my emotional core

softened. I permitted others to take care of me. I wrote of secret crushes. I wanted out of the orientation upon which I'd been given. Could travel release me from the rigid subject position I'd inherited as an educated white male?

Soon, however, I bottled myself back up. Upon returning to my undergraduate life, or later as a law student and lawyer back in the United States, I quickly returned to the rigidity I thought I had left behind. Much of this text depicts the struggle to free myself from the repressive American regime of endless self-improvement and career advancement. All too often I'd emerge exhausted and alone, counting the days until my next trip south of the Rio Grande River or to the Spanish-speaking Caribbean. Eventually the unrequited love depicted in my journals turned sexual, and I spent a number of years negotiating how this love might look or what I expected to find. The man I am today is built from these erotic contact zones, or reciprocal zones of identity and influence inherent in the traveling experience.

But what happens when things veer off course?

I am no longer the inviolable male I once imagined, the whole body provoking desire on my trips abroad. My journal, April 7, 2009: *I've been broken, and I don't know why*. What if the embodied narrator stumbles and falls? What gets written? How does one write it out? What happens if the narrator stutters, never gets to the point?

Yet no one knows what happened in Guanajuato that night. That night I stumbled.

Not even me.

This book revisits that night in San Miguel de Allende, Guanajuato, or more specifically its aftermath, the days in the hospital after the injury and the years since working through my recovery. I write with several goals in mind. First, I want to figure out what the hell happened on the streets of San Miguel. Yet just as important is my desire to understand my fascination

with Latin America and Latin American men; I want to explain a world, to those unfamiliar, where men are free to show their affection for other men. It's a world that doesn't rely on gay neighborhoods or a gay identity to reach a homoeroticism between men. I know because I was there. Finally, I want to save my relationship with my boyfriend George, as the lasting effects of my injury – both physical and psychological – threaten to tear us apart. Much of my struggle I keep from George, a former semi-pro soccer player, because high-performing athletes like him have little tolerance for excuses. Men like George assign fault, attribute blame.

Maybe he's right.

For years I've assumed the injury was somehow my own fault, and that it had been building up ever since I was a little boy. Although I've pieced my body back together, I wonder sometimes if own body might have played a role in my eventual undoing. After all, it was in those contact zones where I experienced both sexual ecstasy and abject shame:

I do not know that I am worthy. I do not know that I deserve better than the smelly crackhead, yesterday, waiting outside my car window. I can smell him on my body. I smell him in my bed. He is on my hands; he has seeped through to my soul. And every time, I say it will not happen again. Every time. So when I am in my bed, postponing my disgust, raging inside at myself instead of the asshole in my bed, I want to look away and weep. I want to cry the greatest river, engender the most massive flow. If someone knew this sensation—not a shallow crevice, but the deepest chasm. This crevice is broken. My fucking ass crevice is split in two. And that's just gross – June 20, 2004

I rely on journal entries extensively in this text, as it helps to supplement my imperfect memory. Perhaps I might uncover why I was even there in the first place. Why is it I didn't want to know about the type of traveler I'd become? Had I stepped into the shoes of the traveling Western man I so vehemently opposed? And how damaged was I still, six years after my undoing on the streets of San Miguel?

Answering these questions requires going back to my first memory after the accident – *Hospital de la Fe - UCI Intermedio y Privado 4* – and an orderly named Manuel, who appeared as a mythical figure, an angel who urged me to share a story I never knew I had. Only by reliving those 12 days in the hospital can I reimagine my story. My old, well-worn journals equally provide a frame of reference to anchor my text. But I begin, instead, with the aftermath, or the wreckage of a man punch drunk on the street. May he ever be self-luminous.

Part I - The Aftermath

Chapter 1

Pond after pond. We had walked around so many ponds that my body leaned toward the water as if pulled by a cord. I squeezed my eyelids against the angry sun. I crushed fallen acorns from the Willow Oak trees, digging broken shells into gravel until satisfied with the wreckage. My mouth cracked on the humid, salty air, and I asked my sister one more time if we'd be going home soon. My brother-in-law Robert swiftly turned his head and told me I'd already complained enough: if I wanted to go to the car, then that was up to me. They intended to stay at the nature center until they were good and ready to leave. My sister Sarah looked at her husband, then back at me, perhaps unsure which side she was on. She lowered her sunglasses from the top of her head and returned her gaze to the loose hustle of water. My young niece reached out her hand, pink Ms. Kitty watchband in full view, and upturned her green-olive eyes toward mine. I lowered my hand until she grabbed ahold of my thumb, my final surrender.

"There's a bench," she pointed, raising my hand along with hers. "Maybe you can rest over there." I shuffled over brown and yellow grass, finishing the final few steps on my own, and lowered myself on a small wooden bench without a back. I sat upright and gazed at the crowd of people walking around and around the water. I heard a baby cry. Several yards away my sister and brother-in-law whispered conspiratorially, looking not at each other, but over at the water and then at me. Beside me a little boy yelped at something in the water: seven turtles perched atop a log like sisters.

Sarah and Robert insisted I accompany them to Houston's Arboretum and Nature Center because I needed to get off the couch. I wasn't getting any better just lying there, Robert had told me. I needed some sun. It's a natural cure, he'd said, as if the sun would put me back together again. They'd retrieved me from a hospital in Mexico two days prior, and on the plane ride back to Texas I started to hurt again. Perhaps the pain killers had worn off. My head still ached, although my sister kept telling me nothing was wrong. I felt like I'd been placed inside a can and crushed.

"The doctor said you'll be fine," Sarah repeated over and over the previous day. I didn't remember the doctors telling me I'd be fine. Or did I? So much I didn't recall.

All I knew was I wasn't fine now, and I didn't know why. I looked out at my niece, my right hand above my eyes to shield me from the sun. She stood with a heavy posture, perhaps sensing that her favorite uncle was not who he used to be. I gripped the bench beneath me and rocked my feet back and forth as if I were a child. I tilted my head back and opened my mouth to the sky. An older man approached, a grey-haired man with thick glasses and hair that sprouted off his head in spurts. He smiled and lowered himself next to me with an exaggerated exhale, his buttocks skimming the surface, then collapsing on the bench. I tired when I saw the man sit down. It seemed like such an effort. He crossed one ankle over his knee and fidgeted with his glasses. All I wanted to do was sleep. I nodded politely at him instead, then stood up and stepped away from the water and the bench. I fell to my knees on the ground, spreading my body forward on the cold grass until my chest touched the surface and I rolled over onto one side. I curled my legs toward my body until my knees faced my forehead, hugging myself to stay warm. I glimpsed toward the pond and saw that the sister turtles had abandoned their log. I felt the same way about my body. It had abandoned me.

I awoke when I felt my niece Emerson placing flowers in my hair and I overheard my brother-in-law ask my sister what was wrong with me.

“He wasn’t like this at the wedding,” he said.

My sister uttered a sound that was neither agreement nor dissent, but a primitive hitch and stop I strangely understood. I turned my head to smile at my niece, but when I tried to stand up, the waves rolled through my body and even the tree trunks began to move. I waited in place as if I were one of the trees, holding on to my niece’s shoulders until the kaleidoscope stopped. My niece tilted her head towards me – *what’s wrong Uncle Chris?* – keeping her lips parted just long enough to shove the Eucharist inside. No one took notice when we walked hand in hand through the grass and back to the gravel path where my family waited. To everyone else it was a beautiful spring day. Perhaps my brother-in-law was right.

Back at the house I returned to the tan couch that had become my sanctuary. I still wore the same sweatpants and grey hoodie from the park. My sister stood a few feet away making sandwiches in the kitchen. I could feel her looking at me.

“You’re just so . . .”

“What?” I interrupted.

“I mean, so—”

“What do you mean?”

She walked around the side of the couch and pivoted her body toward mine, the strawberry red of eczema on her right leg nearing. My brown blanket lay halfway over my legs and the other half on the floor. She knelt down and flung the lower half of the blanket back on to the couch, startling the cat, who quickly scurried under the table. My niece walked cautiously behind her mother holding a slice of turkey breast in her fingers.

“Your face,” she continued, bending over to get a closer look. “It’s so . . . I mean, I don’t understand how—”

I reached for the blanket and pulled it closer to my chest.

“It’s cold.” I said. “I’m freezing.” I looked out the sliding doors onto the patio deck.

My sister crossed her arms and remained still. “Hold up your arms,” she said.

“My what?”

“So skinny.” She looked behind her at my niece. “Aren’t they, Emerson? So small.”

My niece chewed on her turkey breast and bent her knees awkwardly together, SkyPants nuzzling against her legs. She made eye contact with me and returned her gaze to the floor.

“I want to see,” my sister continued, “I want to see your arms again.”

My brother-in-law chimed in from the kitchen: “Yeah, Chris, come on, let’s see.”

I turned around to see him walking toward my sister and the couch. All eyes were on me.

I lifted up the blanket and held my arms high in the air as if I were revealing some grotesque abdominal scar.

“See,” my sister said, pointing at my arms. Robert looked at her and passed another piece of turkey to my niece.

“I don’t get your face,” my sister continued.

“What’s wrong with my face?”

I reached up to feel the side of my face, rubbing my palm in circles over my skin.

“I mean . . . nothing,” she looked at Robert. She returned her gaze to me. “That’s the point.”

I let out an exasperated sigh and slouched lower into the couch cushions.

“No,” Sarah continued, her voice rising and startling my niece, who hopped up on one foot and lost a piece of turkey to the cat below. “Your face is fine.”

I felt my face again.

“Not fine,” Robert said behind her. “Will you look at it?”

My sister turned to face me.

“His face is long and gaunt,” Robert added.

“But I mean—”

“Long and gaunt.”

“What I mean is,” my sister began, her voice still high and dancing around the room.

“What I mean is that it’s all in one piece. His face is in one piece.” She looked at Robert. “No scratches. No cuts. No bruises.”

“There’s one,” my niece interrupted. “Up there,” she said, pointing at my forehead.

My sister moved closer to inspect my forehead.

“Maybe,” she said, “I mean . . . but that just seems like he scratched himself.” She looked back at her daughter.

“Like you do, Emerson.”

My niece looked at me then back at her mom. Her face seemed troubled by the entire scene. She twisted her body behind my brother-in-law.

“I’m just saying,” my sister started up again. “I’m just saying that your face is fine.” She stopped and looked at her husband. “Yes, thin and gaunt or whatever you said, Robert. But it looks like nothing happened to you.”

Robert crossed his arms and raised his eyes at my sister.

“It must have been a fall,” she continued. “Yes, it had to have been a fall.”

I was less convinced.

“Is there even a scar?” she asked.

I exhaled loudly, then felt above my right ear, the tips of my index and pointing fingers edging into a small crevice and over a smooth hump like a desert sand dune. I realized that I’d never actually seen the damage to my head. Perhaps they expected something more. Perhaps I did, too. It was as if some imaginary force had landed on my head and sucked the life out of me. At least the aliens left rows of bent corn.

“I’m just glad you’re okay,” my sister finished. “Right, Robert?” She looked at her husband.

Robert shrugged his shoulders and returned to the kitchen.

“Just glad you’re okay,” she repeated on her way back to the kitchen.

I closed my eyes and pulled the blanket over my head. They’d have to watch television around me.

“You’re going to be fine,” she said, still yelling from the kitchen. Beside me I felt my niece’s hand rest over my shoulder as I turned myself toward the back of the couch, away from the television. She asked her mother for potato chips, reminding me I hadn’t eaten all day. I was just too tired to care.

By midnight I had finally broken. The resolve I’d shown to get on the plane and make it back to Houston had dissolved. I sat upright on the couch and bent my body at the waist toward the floor. My head felt like cracked walnuts. Despite covering myself in two layers of clothes, I still could not keep warm. I awoke my sister and told her I needed to go to the hospital.

“Right now?” she said, blotting her eyes and looking at the alarm clock next to the bed.

“Can’t it wait until morning?” My brother-in-law did not stir.

“No,” I answered. “I need to go now.”

The cat crawled over Robert’s legs and closer to my sister.

“Right now.”

I stood motionless by the side of the bed, puzzled how they could sleep in shorts and a t-shirt. I’d never been so cold.

The emergency room was equally freezing, but I bundled myself in a blanket from my sister’s car. I sat there shivering and curled up in a ball, yet unlike the other patients coughing phlegm, crying, or bleeding from various wombs, I had already leaked. I’m not sure the nurses knew what to do with me. I made enough of a fuss to be escorted to an examination room by a kind black nurse with a Caribbean accent, who pulled several over-the-counter pills from her pocket and put me to sleep. It was 8:30 the next morning before a doctor saw me.

“He’s been injured,” my sister told the young doctor. “In San Miguel de Allende.”

“Uh-huh,” she said approaching my bed.

“That’s in Mex—”

“I’m familiar,” interrupted the doctor, turning her attention toward me. “So what happened?” she said in a voice as calm as water running down a stream.

I grabbed my head. “It just hurts so much,” I answered, running my right hand over my head and down the side of my face.

“So you were hurt in Mexico,” she said. “Is that correct?” She looked as young as my sister and I, but her Indian- or Pakistani-accented English comforted me. I trusted her.

“Does he have any marks?” she asked my sister, elegantly reaching for a computer tablet in her bag and placing it on the table next to the bed.

I laid down on my left side, reaching up my right hand above my right ear.

“Here,” I pointed. On my side I heard their voices, but the sound was muffled and the voices indistinct. Was it the same way in Mexico? Another sound – some humming or hissing, I wasn’t sure what – came from the same ear. “And this sound,” I added. “This noise won’t go away.”

The doctor picked up her tablet and began to review, I assumed, the story my sister had told at the check-in desk, the story about the supposed “fall.” I turned over on my back so I could hear them again.

“This noise,” she asked my sister, “had he complained about that before?”

“Before when?”

“Before he got hurt,” she responded calmly, her voice soft and clear. She wore a red cardigan under her white doctor’s coat, and I liked that perhaps it was as cold to her in the hospital as it was to me. I didn’t recall being as cold in San Miguel as I was in Houston. Did my hospital room in Mexico have air conditioning too? The doctor took her instruments out of her coat pocket and inspected my eyes, ears, and throat. She felt my neck with cold hands.

“So this noise,” she looked at me. “Does it sound like a ringing in your ear?”

To answer I had to take a step out of my own body, to disassociate myself from the pain and objectively consider the sound.

“A ringing,” the doctor repeated. “Is it coming from your head?”

I stayed silent and followed the path of the noise. “It’s definitely from my right ear,” I said, cupping my hands over my ear. I listened some more. “It sounds like when you put a

conch shell to your ear,” I told the doctor, “and you think you can hear the waves crashing somewhere far away.”

“I see,” she said.

“Except that it never seems to stop, you know? The noise just never seems to stop.”

After that I noticed a grim look on the doctor’s face. She pulled out a piece of paper and began to write. My sister asked her what she thought was wrong.

“I’m not sure,” she said, “until I get a CT scan.” She looked alternately at my sister and at me. “I’m ordering one now.”

It felt good to be cared for by this doctor, especially the confirmation that something might be wrong. Maybe now my sister and brother-in-law would believe me.

“We have something back at the house,” my sister said. She looked at me and held her hands apart as wide as the x-rays she’d been given at the hospital in Mexico. “I can get them if you—”

“No need,” interrupted the doctor. She pushed in the top of her pen and returned it to her pocket. “We can get everything we need.” She left us with a hard smile more like grey snow than the dazzling monsoons of Calcutta. At least when the water washes away in India, things left for dead might bloom again.

During the CT scan I had a vision. It’s as if I’d been there before. Except the doctor wasn’t Indian or Pakistani. Or even a doctor. I imagined a man in nurse’s scrubs looking down at me from outside the apparatus, except that when I’d close my eyes and open them, he’d alternate between being by my side and hovering beyond the X-ray machine. He spoke to me in Spanish, I’m sure he spoke to me in Spanish, but I don’t remember what he said. I felt a

pulsating sensation in my palms, which put me, I think, to sleep. Was my vision real? It's as if I'd crossed the time-space continuum. Was I in Houston or San Miguel de Allende?

I awoke a few hours later, waiting for what I was sure to be positive news. My head no longer hurt, although the sound in my ear remained. Perhaps the doctors in Mexico were right and everything passes. The doctor returned and brought a colleague with her, an older white man with a loud and confident voice.

"It's looks as if you've had quite an accident," said the man, his initial smile indicating to me that all was okay. I answered meekly and attempted a half-smile. Above me he hung a series of x-rays.

"Your right temporal bone is fractured," began the male doctor. "And the x-rays indicate a pooling of blood in the front of your head." The other doctor stood close to him but remained silent. He said the temporal bone is one of the hardest in the human body. I'd had to have taken quite a blow to my head.

"What kind of accident was it?" he asked, slowing down and brushing the bottom of his goatee, which clung to his chin under Jesus blue eyes. He lowered his voice and asked again.

"I don't know," I said bluntly. The doctor looked at my sister.

"I think it was a fall," she began, uncrossing her arms and making odd, slow motions with her face as if she were popping her ear drums. "Nothing else seems wrong with him," she concluded, crossing her arms again.

I turned my head back toward the doctor, who I noticed had identical dimples dotting his cheeks. He turned around to the doctor behind him.

"Dr. Bimini, did you say Christopher was having trouble hearing?"

She took a step backwards and cleared her throat. “Actually, he reported a kind of seashell noise in his right ear.”

“The injured one, correct?”

“Yes, doctor.”

With that the doctor approached me and put one hand atop my left ear as if calming a baby’s stomach.

“It’s the other ear,” I told him, unsure why the nice pretty woman in the red sweater couldn’t be in charge.

He pressed down on my antitragus with his index finger (just above the ear lobe) and continued to talk. I heard muffled sounds but could discern nothing else. Nothing through my other ear, the right one.

When he removed his hand, he continued to stand over me, asking what I’d heard. His voice sounded hard again, although not as loud as when he first entered the room.

“Christopher,” he repeated. “What did you hear?”

I sat in stunned silence. I’d understood nothing! I raised my left arm and pinched shut my left ear, just as the doctor had done. I asked them to talk.

Nothing.

Say Something!

Nothing.

My ear drum was not perforated, the doctor explained, but my cochlea no longer worked. I’d lost hearing in my right ear. He didn’t think my 8th nerve was damaged, as I did not display any obvious facial tics.

“So he can’t hear?” my sister asked. “Nobody told us that.”

“Not through his right ear.”

“Is that permanent?” she asked.

“Told you where?”

I listened to them, but stared straight ahead at the black television screen on the wall.

“At the hospital in Mexico.”

The doctor shrugged his shoulders.

“And it won’t come back?”

“Most likely not,” said the doctor. “Although in some cases it does.”

“Well maybe—”

“But it’s highly unlikely.”

I looked at my sister, whose mouth had closed in despair.

Dr. Bimini approached her and told my sister not to worry. Many people, she said, lead perfectly normal lives with SSD.

“SSD?” asked my sister.

“Oh, yes, sorry, of course,” corrected the doctor. “How silly of me.” She raised her right hand over her mouth. “SSD stands for single-sided deafness.”

I nodded my head in her direction.

“And it’s more common than you might think,” she added.

I nodded once again.

Thomas Edison.

Foxy Brown.

Lou Ferrigno.

“Huh?” I finally replied, unimpressed by her “Who’s Who” of single-sided deafness.

“Oh,” chimed in the other doctor, waving a folder in front of his face. “I almost forgot. It appears your vestibular tubes are compromised as well,” he said. “The thing that controls your balance.”

I instantly felt relief, this confirmation of the daze I’d been living in and felt along the ponds, as I was starting to believe my sister’s account that my lesion/scar/bump – whatever it was – didn’t amount to much.

“That sometimes happens in a TBI,” he added.

The other doctor, the nice one, quickly interpreted.

“TBI,” she said, inching her body away from the other doctor and toward my sister, “Stands for traumatic brain injury.”

“I’m sorry?” I interrupted. “What’s a TBI?”

“Uh-huh,” added my sister, turning her gaze toward me.

“I don’t think,” I began, addressing both doctors. “I don’t think I have—”

“Yes, Mr. Girman,” answered the larger doctor, who led with his chest and moved closer to my bed. “You have had a significant head trauma and we call that a traumatic brain injury, TBI for short.” He stopped for my reaction. “And now you are having or will have a series of complications. Do you understand?”

The coarseness of his beard suddenly frightened me: “Yes, sir, yes, I understand.”

“Traumatic brain injury,” repeated my sister. She remained quiet after she said it, but I could see the tears in her eyes.

“I told him,” she continued, “I told him to go there, you know?”

The doctors turned toward her.

“I told him to go to San Miguel,” she continued. “I never should have told you that, Chris.” She brushed her hand under her nose several times and turned her gaze to the floor. “It was so pretty there, you know, the buildings and—”

“No. No. No,” Dr. Bimini interrupted shuffling closer to my sister and waving her finger back and forth in the air. “It is no one’s fault,” she said, her accent intensifying as her volume raised. “It is just something that happened.”

“Yeah,” I echoed, shaking my head. “This could have happened anytime.”

“But I told you to go—”

“No.” I interrupted. “I wanted to go because I wanted to go. This could have happened anywhere,” I repeated, looking at the male doctor to my left and the women straight ahead. “I put myself in posit—”

I stopped myself before I finished the sentence, although I knew I could have easily been hurt before. I had put myself in this position. It’s amazing, in fact, that I hadn’t been previously hurt. But I wasn’t about to share too much of that with my sister. I just wanted her to know that nothing was her fault, and how grateful I was that she and Robert came to San Miguel to pick me up.

Robert seemed less impressed by the news. After we returned home, he’d pump up the air conditioning at night even though I had complained about the noise and the temperature. I wore shorts and two pairs of sweatpants to bed, but my legs were always cold. I took 30 minute showers, about which I could hear Robert complain. I took whatever blue pills the doctors prescribed, and at least I could sleep during the day. By my third day, however, I began to wonder what *had* happened to me. I called my sister into the living room.

“Everything alright?” she asked.

She wore her usual Houston Texans shirt, which hung low to the middle of her thighs. She grabbed a handful of M&M's out of the bowl beside the couch and sat next to me.

"Do you know . . . what might have happened," I asked, fixing my gaze on her eyes while popping M&M's in my mouth.

"What do you mean?"

"At the hospital," I said. "Did they tell you something in Mexico you're not telling me?"

She looked surprised and brushed her hair out of her eyes while straightening her posture.

"Like what?"

"I don't know," I hesitated. "I just want to be sure there's not something you're not telling me." The cat crawled out from between us.

"No," she began, looking at the cat then pausing. She took another handful of chocolate. "I really think you fell."

"Really?"

"Yeah, I mean maybe you were jogging or something."

"Uh-huh."

"But you don't remember?"

I shook my head.

"How else might you get hurt?"

"Um . . . I don't know, maybe a car or something."

"Like you got hit by a car?"

"Or ran into one."

She considered my question and paused. “I don’t think so,” she continued, scratching her leg.

“Maybe someone hit me.”

“Like punched you?”

“Maybe.”

“But you’d have some other marks,” she said, looking down at my body. “There would be more there.”

“Maybe they hit me over the head with a bottle.”

“You think?”

“Maybe,” I answered, fidgeting with the strings hanging from my sweatshirt hood.

“But they didn’t tell you anything else,” I continued. “Maybe the doctors?”

“No,” she responded quickly. “Nothing. That doctor just explained that your head . . . your skull, I mean, your brain or whatever, got fractured. That you’d be fine in a few more weeks or so.”

I asked her again.

“I swear, I don’t know anything.”

The cat crawled back on my lap and instantly began to purr. I stroked his black fur.

“I never noticed his white,” I said, pointing to a patch of white on the cat’s neck.

“Maybe you can ask the guy from the embassy.”

“Who.”

“The embassy guy.”

“Who?”

“Didn’t you talk to someone from the U.S. embassy?”

“No.”

She looked at the cat. “Oh, that’s SkyPants,” she said, reaching over and rubbing his belly. “Always wants that attention.”

“Why do you mean about the embassy?”

“Well, you know how everybody was speaking in Spanish, obviously, since it’s in Mexico, right?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Well this one lady, I’m not sure if you remember her, this one lady was saying that someone from the embassy came there. A really nice lady, Nurse, um, I think it was Garcia. I think her shirt said ‘Nurse Garcia.’”

“To the hospital?”

“I guess. I mean I don’t know, but I guess they, like, come to visit people who get in accidents.”

“No.”

“I think she even said you talked with him.”

“With who?”

“The embassy guy.”

“No. I didn’t talk with anyone. I mean, maybe one came over, but not to talk with me. Nope.”

“Well, maybe he just popped his head in the door and left.”

“And you don’t know anything?” I demanded one last time.

“No,” she answered. “I swear it. You were probably dancing or jogging and tripped on a giant stone and fell on your head.” She smiled at the end of her sentence.

I repeatedly stroked the cat, unsure if I had wanted bad news from my sister or whether her ignorance was preferable. I guess she didn't know the way I'd begun to travel. On her couch I'd close my eyes and stream in and out of consciousness, strung out on pain pills, trying to reach a relaxed state of mind in which memories might emerge. The stories behind the story behind the story. I fixated on the wooden beam above my sister's couch. I'd been punished for something I didn't remember. Or perhaps the same life force that had always kept me safe while traveling recalibrated toward this dramatic retribution. Perhaps it was better not to know. If I called it a fall, as my sister had, perhaps everything else might go away with it. No one gets blamed for a fall; accidents are no one's fault.

A few days later I was still in pain. The pills helped tame the headaches, but my entire body refused to move. On Saturday Sarah and Robert asked if I would babysit Emerson while they went to a party. Emerson applauded the idea and insisted we'd have the grandest of times playing tea party and her new favorite board game, *Life*. I could take on little responsibility beyond staring at the television screen or sleeping, but my sister and her husband left anyway, waving goodbye dramatically as if heading to a beauty pageant.

My niece, like all nine-year olds, is a handful. I couldn't cook the macaroni the way she liked it. I fell asleep during *Zach and Cody*. I just couldn't tolerate another game of *Life*; my own life had already overwhelmed me. I looked over at her from the couch and saw tears running down her face. I don't recall yelling at her, but perhaps I did. That's what she'd later tell my sister. She said she wanted to go to bed, but she didn't want me to tuck her in (I had asked). I just remember her looking back at me in her blue and yellow nightgown on her way to her room, face flushed and confused, zig-zagging steps, and I realized that I had frightened my adorable niece. I felt awful.

The next morning Robert woke me with the vacuum cleaner. He was cleaning the dining room floor a few yards away from me, but it sounded as if he was suctioning a Volkswagen through a straw. I waited for him to stop, but he never did. I'd never heard a noise so loud! I was relieved when the noise finally stopped, but then Robert called me into the kitchen.

"But I—"

"No really," he said. "Come here."

I lifted myself from the couch and walked toward the kitchen. He and my sister were standing over a plastic container in the sink.

"Yeah," I said. "What is it?"

Robert lifted the container from the sink. "Did you eat this?" he asked.

"I'm sorry, but—"

"No, it's okay, we just want to know if you ate from this."

I looked at Sarah, whose expression wasn't clearing anything up for me. She looked flush white in the face.

"I did," I said.

"Well. . .," Robert began, "why don't you come over and smell this for me."

I did as he asked.

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"No smell?"

I smelled again. "Nope."

He and my sister looked at each other, Robert breaking into a devious smile like a kid who'd just found his father's dirty magazine.

"You see, Chris, this is some old soup we've had in here for months."

"So it's bad?"

"Well, maybe," he said, hesitating and looking at my sister. "The thing is that I saw it here up front this morning, so I took a look, and then I smelled it, and it has the most noxious scent I have ever smelled. Noxious." He looked at my sister. "Right, Sarah?"

She nodded.

I stepped toward the sink and smelled again.

Nothing.

This, of course, set in a mini-panic, and I hurried to their master bedroom, where I sprayed perfume and cologne all over my wrists until my forearm was like the posters of the cow divided into cuts of beef: filet mignon, brisket, flank, tenderloin. But there'd be no beef for me: I couldn't smell a thing.

"And you never noticed?" my sister asked, standing behind me in the bathroom. "How could you not have noticed?"

It was a valid question for which I had no answer. "I don't even know how I got hurt," I said. "I've got bigger things to worry about than eating stale soup!"

She looked at Robert, and collectively they looked at me like I'd gone crazy. Robert resumed vacuuming shortly afterwards, and by the end of the hour I had reserved a flight back to McAllen. My sister drove me to the airport, looking awkwardly out the window as I retrieved my bag from the backseat and walked toward the double doors. I did not even say

good-bye. She would cry to Robert later that night, who told her that she'd just have to accept that the brother she knew might be gone forever and this nasty imposter in his place.

Chapter 2

I knew I couldn't go back to teaching middle school in my current condition, but I figured I could finish up the last three weeks of my graduate classes at The University of Texas Pan-American in nearby Edinburg. How hard could it be? I remember sitting in class not saying much. I'd hand my peers copies of my critique, as is the norm in creative writing classes, and then I'd say a few words in class to elaborate. Although I was quiet on the outside, however, I seethed to myself during class. If I had managed to get myself out of bed to attend night classes, I reasoned, the least the professor could do was teach me something. Not stand up there and give random tidbits of writing advice while vamping around the classroom like he worked for QVC. I was even more derisive toward my classmates – they were the worst! These once-capable writers who I'd professionally critiqued in the past now expected me to read *shit shit shit*. How much fucking longer did I have to wade through the nonsense of Mexicans trying to write in English? Even so-called “native” English speakers like Sheri Gonzalez or Brian Gutierrez didn't understand the finer nuances of the English language or the simplest of grammatical rules. I decided it was up to me to set them straight! My anger was so fierce, and so-clearly directed toward my classmates of Latin American origin (almost exclusively Mexican), that I wonder now how much of this resentment was simmering below the surface all along. Had my pleasant diversions along the border been more about romanticizing and eroticizing the “natives” than any real respect for a culture and its people? Was I jealous that I'd always be an outsider? Was this my way of striking back?

I continued taking pain pills for a month, although my effort to dissociate myself from the injury was so formidable that I never bothered to figure out what type I was on. I'd never

taken pills of any type before, so I was relieved that the pain was still gone once the pills ran out. I was weak, however, and found myself all too often on the couch. Fortunately, my drastic weight loss had given me the permission to eat whatever I liked, however, so most evenings I stopped at nearby drive-through restaurants. I'd buy chicken nuggets, a double cheeseburger, and French fries from Wendy's, then turn left for Taco Bell's pintos and cheese, and finally an M&M McFlurry from McDonalds. Then I'd watch television on the couch and, after a few hours, heat up microwave popcorn. Other than my college classes two nights a week, I rarely left the house or saw my friends. I remained vague when, noticing my drastic weight loss, they asked me what was wrong. "I got injured in Mexico," I'd tell them, but that was it. I remained cloistered in my apartment watching television or sleeping. Although I missed the last 2 ½ months of the school year, I was able to take advantage of the district emergency fund, which I had been donating sick days to for the previous three years, and received my normal salary. Like all teachers in the district, I received a paycheck over the summer for time already taught. If I were going to get hurt, at least my timing was right.

Gradually, as one might expect, I continued to improve. I moved my things into storage and flew home to Florida for a two-month stay with my mother and stepfather, who had arranged for me to visit the Silverstein Institute, a well-known out-patient facility two hours away from their home that specialized in ear and balance issues. I sat in a "rotational chair" reminding me of Star Trek as I leaned, spun, and rotated around a central axis to test the density of my bilateral vestibular system. I failed miserably, as I had expected, the things in my field of vision moving well after the chair had stopped. I left with a protocol of exercises designed to balance those, including myself, without the benefit of the vestibular apparatus, the organ of balance in the inner ear. The goal was to train the brain to use other senses, such as the vision

and somatosensory (body sense) senses, to substitute for the deficient vestibular system. I'd walk up and down my mother's gated community holding my finger to my nose while looking right and left. I'd fixate on a distant object, perhaps a tree, and move my head repeatedly from side to side. I'd walk barefoot on dirty pavement rough in structure and surface.

My father told me not to do that in his neighborhood. He said maybe the rich people in the gated communities – people like my mother and stepfather – might understand, but not in his part of town.

“You never should have been traveling in the first place,” he said. “I told you to—”

“Told me what?” I interrupted.

I stood outside the kitchen as he walked out the sliding glass door onto the front lanai. He brushed dry two patio chairs and hung the towel over the grill to dry.

“You had to be different, didn't you? Always checking out the unknown.”

“Checking out what?” I asked.

“I don't know what business you had . . .” he continued. “What business you had . . .”

As he talked, my father shuffled his feet back and forth over the lanai, bending over occasionally and picking weeds from the rocks.

“I don't know what you did to—”

“What?” I interrupted. “What I did to *what*?”

I stood over the frame of the open door space and watched my father. The man I remembered as strong and fearless looked old now, his once-ample thighs thinning out and looking lighter than I had remembered. He looked so small to me, not only because he actually *was* small – a mere 5'5 compared to my 6'1 frame – but the way in which he moved was so anxious and furious. It occurred to me then that perhaps my father had a form of ADHD well

before the diagnoses had become routine. I was interrupted by the sound of my nephew's cries. Jack had awoken and called for my father.

"You see that," my dad snapped, tossing a handful of weeds over the fence. "Now you woke up Jack." He'd ignored my question.

"But I didn't—"

"Your sister," he said, turning around to face the front yard on the other side of the fence. "Your sister didn't come home last night."

"Where was—"

"Who knows," he interrupted. "I'm so fucking sick of—" He stopped himself short and shook his head. "I'm sixty-five years old."

I followed him toward the stairs. "I'm too old to be raising a kid," he said, his voice trailing off as he went up the stairs. "Too damn old."

I stood at the bottom of the stairs and looked up towards my father. A few seconds later he emerged with Jack in his arms. My nephew had grown since I last saw him. He was nearly two and his hair had picked up the same blond color as mine when I was younger. My father smiled at Jack as he carried him down the stairs.

"It's okay," he said. "Your Uncle Chris is here."

Jack turned to look at me, but showed no signs of recognition. He rubbed his eyes and yawned. I'd forgotten the boy had dark brown eyes like my father.

"You want a donut," my father said, bouncing Sponge Bob up and down in his hand to capture my sleeping nephew's attention, who now lay on the couch. "Jack want chocolate donut?"

Jack nodded his head through his slumber, emitting a flat smile, and as I looked again at my father I noticed he hadn't aged so badly for a sixty-five year old man. His forearms were as immense as I remembered and his back still showed signs of the three-sport college athlete in Indiana all those years ago. I turned toward Jack on the couch, who was now smiling. Behind me the sliding door opened and his mother appeared, my sister Angie.

"Mommy," Jack shouted, jumping off the couch and toward my sister.

"Well look who's home" my father predictably bellowed from the kitchen.

My sister leaned over and hugged Jack, patting him on his diapered butt.

Angie, like my father, was short and squat compared to my taller, leaner frame shared by my mother and older sister.

"Uncle Chris," she said, lifting Jack to her face. "Um, yeah, I heard you were in town again."

My father rounded the kitchen counter and wrinkled his forehead at my sister.

"You knew," he began. "You knew—"

"No I didn't," she quickly interrupted.

I approached my sister and hugged her.

"Wow, you *are* skinny," she said, manipulating Jack into her other arm. "So skinny." Her frame, too, had withered, the effects of a stubborn drug addiction. I'd never been entirely certain when or how the addiction started, as my family refused to talk about certain things. I backed away from our hug and noticed how skeletal her face had become. Her eyes resembled hollow sockets and her chin had become pointier as her cheeks deflated. I'd not expected her to look so bad. Her voice was fast, as it had been for the previous ten years, although she spoke clearly and coherently this time.

“How long are you home for then?” she asked, putting Jack down beside her and heading for the stairs.

Jack, predictably, began to cry.

“Oh, it’s okay,” she shouted from halfway up the stairs. “Mum-mum just stopped by to pick up some clothes.”

I hoped my father hadn’t heard.

Jack ran by me toward the stairs, his small hand grabbing the railing on each step. “But mum-mum you promised.”

I stayed down below to help my father unload the dishwasher. A few minutes later Angie emerged with clothes draped over her shoulder and a pair of sneakers in her hands. She held Jack between it all. My father turned from the sink toward the front patio. I approached the sliding door and met my sister.

“Where do you think—” my dad began.

Jack was surprisingly quiet, but he twisted his legs and arched his back as my sister attempted to hand him over to me.

“Marc’s waiting,” Angie snapped at my father, her necklace swinging over her face as she turned toward the door. My father opened the refrigerator door, looked inside, and kicked it shut with his foot. I was, quite literally, caught in the middle. I refused to take sides, however. I carried Jack to the kitchen for a chocolate donut. It was she, after all, who had saved me. That had to count for something.

That night in front of my mother’s house I walked a perfectly straight line for at least five minutes. I was beginning to see progress. The time it took for my head to stop moving and

then the world to stop moving was getting smaller each day. I was making less progress, however, when it came to the noise in my ear. At times it might sound like a ring, as the doctors predicted, but usually it remained the same seashell noise I had experienced earlier. In the larger world of tinnitus-related sounds, some of which are so debilitating the individual can no longer work, I was probably faring quite well. Yet the doctor's imparted wisdom about me getting used to the noise seemed as accurate a prediction as that the world is flat. I slept a mere two to three hours a night, instead fixated on the noise. The doctor had suggested that I make playlist of soothing songs that might take the focus of the tinnitus, so I dutifully prepared a medley of Enya, Sade, and Billie Holiday. Nothing worked.

My mother said I looked fine to her. Perhaps I'd lost a little weight, she commented, but the "tinnitus" I complained of was probably just the air conditioner.

"It's loud in the guest room," she explained. "Your stepfather hears it too." She stood arms-crossed in the hallway, her eyes darting around the room, perhaps searching for some point of focus to understand how her only son had arrived in such a position. Perhaps her dismissal was strategic.

My interest in getting better and getting out of debt superseded any interest I had in how I had gotten hurt. After eight weeks living for free back in Florida, I received a statement from Visa confirming I had paid off my \$3,452 credit card charge for my Mexican hospital stay. I sat in the glorious humidity just outside my mother's patio flipping through my last few statements, proud that I was now debt free. I kicked my legs up on the gazebo, as pleased by the orange and pink hibiscus as I was of myself. Yet just as I was about to leave the patio for the arctic chill inside, I noticed two mysterious charges in Mexico I hadn't seen before: \$8.21 and \$11.23. The first was for Pueblo Viejo Restaurant, and the other was for La Azteca. Both

noted March 21, the same night I had been injured. A quick Google Map search revealed that La Azteca is atop Pueblo Viejo. I paused with the bill in my hands. Certain moments came to mind. I remembered eating dinner at the corner of a downstairs bar with colorful ceramic tiles on the walls. Two servers in black and red costumes – one a man, the other a woman – talked to me whenever they retrieved their drinks at the service bar. I thought the man was cute, but I couldn't recall what he looked like. I remembered him loading giant pink margaritas on his tray. The woman laughed a lot and wore bright red lipstick. I closed my eyes and tried to remember more. Upstairs a younger crowd lounged around cool couches and patio tables. These were Mexicans, not tourists like me. Yet nothing was entirely certain. My memories were as vague as those in the hospital.

Despite such uncertainty, however, the investigator in me had arisen. I took a sip of my iced tea. Perhaps I was prepared to face an uncertain truth in which I was somehow complicit in my own undoing, as my father seemed to suggest. I sent an e-mail inquiry two days later to the consulate offices in Mexico City and San Miguel de Allende in case my sister was right about someone from the embassy having visited my hospital room. I was pleased to receive a reply several days later:

Hi Chris,

I was notified by the Hospital General here in San Miguel that there was an American in the hospital, about a day after you had been admitted. I think it was a Sunday night. The nurse told me that you had been found unconscious by the city police in the street, and the police brought you to the hospital. At first they thought it was a case of too much alcohol, or possibly some kind of drug, but when you didn't get better after two days, they thought that might not be the case. The hospital ordered a test, possibly a CT scan and saw that you had a bruise on the back of your head, and a pooling of liquid on the front, where the forehead is. This could have been the result of a blow, but also could have been the result of a fall. I visited you twice and both times we had lengthy conversations; it is funny you don't remember because you were lucid at the time. –Thomas Clancey (Clancey, personal communication, 2009)

I tried to imagine this man, this consular officer for the United States abroad. Was he white like me? I realized, too, that this should have been me. I'd been hired a few years previously, right after law school, as a Foreign Service Officer by the US State Department. But during the background check, I admitted to therapy, two years of intermittent counseling to understand why I'd never had a boyfriend and always seemed anxious. Perhaps it was some form of self-sabotage. Apparently, however, our government doesn't take kindly to therapy, and they didn't take kindly to me. After four years of written exams, oral exams, and innumerable invasive personal questions, I was dumped. This other man must have taken my place, this Thomas Clancy. Instead I was out wandering the streets of San Miguel doing God knows what with God knows whom, while this Thomas Clancey drank margaritas and chewed delicious Spanish *tapas* along some rooftop balcony with his successful and eccentric friends. Perhaps we crossed paths at La Azteca.

Fuck Thomas Clancey and his bedside manners. What did he know about lucidity?

It did help to know, though, that I'd received a CT scan in Mexico. I should have figured that out, I realized, as the x-rays my sister had been given in Mexico had to come from somewhere. Yet I still wasn't sure where the images were coming from, the ones I'd recalled during my Houston CT scan. Who was that nice man? And who was this other man I remembered from the hospital? A nurse perhaps? I'd spoken to him many times, but no clear image came to mind. He'd feed me, I knew, and walk me to the bathroom. He'd shake gelatin in its square plastic bowl and jiggle his body next to my bed. Sometimes he'd yell at me for things I don't recall. I'd even begun to remember conversations with him. I remember him sitting there quietly and listening to me. I must have been talking quite a lot, because

sometimes his body didn't move. Then he'd have to run out and clean the floors. Always floors to clean.

I left the gazebo at my mother's house that afternoon knowing that it might be possible to resurrect my story or at least access a small part of it. The e-mail from Thomas Clancy clarified for me that I'd been to two hospitals, the *Hospital General* and the *Hospital de La Fe*. Even if I had no memories of the first hospital, including my conversations with Mr. Clancey, at least I recalled the CT scan, or some part of it. I also had a clear picture of my room at the *Hospital de La Fe*.

On the plane ride back to McAllen from my mother's place in Florida, I decided I needed a better understanding of my injuries. Perhaps hearing and balance were not the only things I had lost.

I started with smell. My research confirmed that 10% of patients with temporal lobe damage loss their sense of smell, a condition called anosmia. Damage to limbic components near the temporal lobe are the primary culprit, as they have connection to the primary olfactory structures of the brain. Additionally, the underside of the frontal lobe lies directly on the olfactory nerve. I wanted to know if Nurse Bimini knew of any famous people without a sense of smell as she did those who suffered from single-sided deafness: I needed to compare my experiences. Without smell things tend to flatten. I no longer enjoyed my favorite scent, vanilla bean, nor the head rush provoked by the scent of fresh brewed coffee and chocolate chip cookies. Perhaps losing my sense of smell hindered my ability to remember events from the night I was injured or my time in the hospital. More pragmatically, body odor became negligible, as did the horror of passing gas under the covers in bed. Both paranoia and

complacently set in. I repeatedly sprayed myself with adolescent Axe body spray, while I sometimes showered five times a day. I scrubbed myself obsessively. Conversely, I wore the same San Antonio Spurs grey shirt for 30 consecutive days after I returned to Texas. I did not wash my sheets for months.

By mid-summer I'd realized my most pressing concern was trying not to burn down my apartment. In an effort to ween myself from fast food, I began to eat hard-boiled eggs. I'd boil eggs several times a week, and at least once a week I'd forget I had a pot of boiling water on the stove. I'd drop the eggs in a pot of water, turn the burner on, and return to something else. Then I'd drive away to school or the store, wherever else I had to go (I was finally leaving the house!), and I'd come home to a houseful of smoke and splattered egg on the walls and ceiling as if ejected from a rotating sprinkler head. It seems I couldn't smell the burning pot, nor could I remember I had even placed eggs on the stove.

I then switched my focus, understandably, to my faulty memory. Memory is a complex apparatus, and I was surprised that no one at the hospitals explained to me how a traumatic brain injury affects a person's memory. One website compared the brain to a mail room, and the middle of the brain is where information flows before branching out like a tree to other areas. The middle brain is like the filtering system deciding what goes where. When the brain is injured, the middle areas get pressed upon because of the swelling. Furthermore, the middle brain rests on the bone of the skull, so when the brain moves forward and backward rapidly – as it does during an accident – these middle sections get sheered or torn. Memory loss occurs because the brain can't process this large amount of information when some of it has been sheared away.

But what about individual memories? Neurologists have divided memories into three categories: immediate, short-term, and long term. Immediate memory is something you spit back, as in someone saying “purple,” and you instantly repeat the word. Long-term memories have to do with things we recall after a few days, months, years, or decade. Our childhood lies in our long-term memory, as does my ability to explain the origin of Tort law in the United States, as boring as that may be. Most injuries to the head, however, involve the loss of short-term memories. This refers to the time immediately after the accident, up to several weeks beyond, but more importantly points to a habitual pattern of forgetting things minutes and hours after supposedly storing them to memory. My exploding eggs incident is an example of this short-term memory loss, while my inability to recall the circumstance of the injury or much of the time in the hospital afterwards is also categorized as short-term memory loss.

A few weeks later I agreed to have lunch with my co-worker Amy, who had driven me to the McAllen bus station to begin my trip to San Miguel de Allende. She came back to our booth at Coffee Zone with two mugs of tea and a cinnamon roll to share.

“So,” she began, “I guess you missed the rest of the semester, huh? Was that your plan?”

I placed both hands around my glass and took a sip of tea.

“Definitely not,” I answered. “Definitely not.”

She reached for the cinnamon roll and broke off a piece for each of us, reaching over and putting a piece on my porcelain plate.

“I like coffee,” I said, sipping my tea. “I usually like coffee with my cinnamon roll.”

“Oh . . . I’m sorry, I . . . um, I’ll get—”

“Oh no, that’s fine,” I interrupted. “I was just thinking I like coffee with my roll.”

She smiled and took a bite of her cinnamon roll. I sliced mine with a knife and fork.

“That’s funny,” Amy said. “I’ve never seen you do that before.” She looked down at my hands.

“Do what?” I said, following her gaze to my fingertips.

“Eat it with a fork and knife. You know,” she continued, imitating the motion of cutting with her finger. “Slicing the cinnamon roll that way.” I offered her a wan half-smile and slipped another piece of sticky roll in my mouth.

After some time we ate the entire roll.

“So,” Amy said, spreading her arms and smiling, “What the hell happened to you?”

I should have made up a story since no one would know the difference, but instead I rambled on. I don’t remember exactly what I said except that I’d look up and see Amy doing her best to politely nod. I know I kept talking because the waitress must have refilled our tea cups five times. I picture myself rambling and rambling and rambling. I talked so much that Amy would later tell a co-worker that I seemed sad and terrified at the same time, as if I was trying to figure it all out myself. At one moment I looked up and saw an expression on her face I hadn’t seen before: not quite terrified as was my niece, but a tightening of her mouth area with just enough room for intermittent puffs of air to escape. I saw myself as she must have seen me. I was embarrassed for myself.

“So you remember nothing?” she finally asked, swiping icing off the plate with her finger. “Not how you got hurt or anything?”

Long pause, then lengthy chatter.

“Not at the hospital, either?”

Continued chatter.

“They didn’t tell you how you got hurt?”

I answered that question unequivocally: “They didn’t know.”

“No?”

“No,” I echoed, but I still wasn’t so sure. The consulate’s e-mail was far too vague.

A blow or a fall.

What was it about that explanation that still left me unsatisfied? And why couldn’t I remember anything from the hospital? Or before the accident itself? Was I forgetting more than just the eggs? I stopped talking long enough for Amy to give me a hug good bye and wish me well on trying to make it back to teaching by the end of August.

Later that week I returned to my research on memory. I learned about two different types of memory loss, both classified as “amnesia.” Retrograde amnesia refers to the loss of memories prior to an accident. This might be minutes or hours before, and the classic example is the moment of impact that car crash victims routinely say they don’t remember. I’d remembered certain things, yes, certain things the day of the accident, but not enough to get me closer to the truth. I remembered a Bougainville bush and planks of wood, but also the distinct images of several carved wooden doors I had noticed after my arrival in San Miguel. Yet I didn’t know what to make of such images, and I didn’t see the need to try. How might they get me any closer to the truth? I needed to remember some moment of impact.

The second type of amnesia, anterograde amnesia, refers to the lost memories *after* an accident. As time goes on, brain chemistry normalizes and many of the memories return. No magic formula exists to ascertain how many minutes, hours, days, or months the patient must wait until certain memories return. Research and anecdotal evidence confirms how common it is for TBI sufferers who have spent several days or weeks in the hospital to only recall the last of their days, such as had happened to me, explaining why I had no memory of the first

hospital, including my “lucid” conversations with the consular officer. But what about the second hospital? When did my memories return? Had they, in fact, even returned at all? And what should I make of all the talking? TBI sufferers are known to get isolated or depressed as they struggle with their new realities, and I certainly followed that pattern, but what might explain my ramblings to Amy? And to random people I would meet at the grocery store or elsewhere? Was this connected to the brain as well?

Surprisingly, however, this new information did not propel me into a more contemplative mood. The journal entries I had cultivated over the previous 15 years stopped at the time of the accident and never resumed. I have no record of how I was dealing with the stressors of recovery. I do think, though, that had I been able to contemplate my condition more rigorously, I would have written about it in my journal. The fact that I never even bought a new journal tells me something else was going on: I wanted to pretend it never happened and get back to life. I needed one more year to graduate with my M.F.A degree in creative writing, and I planned on applying to Ph.D. programs in the fall. I needed to gain weight and get my body back in shape. If I didn’t plan lessons and grade papers, I would lose my job and have nowhere to live.

Chapter 3

My return to B.L. Garza Middle School was less than exhilarating, but at least it felt good to have a routine again. Teachers greeted me with hugs, and former students wondered where I had been and what had happened to my robust, healthy body. Most of the kids asked about my face: *what happened to your face, sir?* They were referring to how skinny I had become, and the joke was that Mr. Girman had testicular cancer. Why the balls, I don't know, but probably because thirteen year olds need more titillation than a unit of the Alamo might provide.

My hearing loss had become an issue early-on in the semester, as I couldn't tell which student was speaking and from where. I learned to distinguish voices early-on, so at least I could guess the speaker's gender. In a few cases, I mistook pre-pubertal boys for girls, which the students always laughed at. They also liked to sneak around to my right side and whisper, just to be sure I wasn't lying and I couldn't, in fact, hear. I attribute this to Ms. Arrona, the science teacher on my team, who insisted *evidence evidence evidence* at least ten times a day.

Besides the classroom difficulty, my once-comfortable lunches in the seventh-grade teacher's planning lounge became a cacophony of voices. Before losing my hearing on my right side, I used to have spatial hearing, or sound localization on the horizontal plane that all dual-sided hearers enjoy. This means if the sound is coming from the left side of the head, it will actually stimulate the left ear just a few microseconds ahead of the right side, and those timing differences can be figured out by the brain. Those with single-sided deafness, however, no longer possess this spatial hearing, thus making it nearly impossible to hear in the presence of background noise. The combination of Amy's lower frequency mumblings, Ms. Arrona's

science squeals, and Mr. Ortiz's baritone guffaws, meant I could barely hear the person next to me talking in the teacher's lounge. I instinctually looked at people's lips but to no avail; that would take a lot more practice. My solution was to isolate myself in my classroom at the far end of the seventh-grade hall. I ate lunch alone, and this further isolated myself from other members of the staff. I could have used the comfort of middle-school camaraderie.

On top of that, I was prone to outbursts. In one such incident I locked my classroom to prevent tardy students from entering. Moments later I heard the principal, a dashing-yet handsome yet equally-menacing CrossFit guru, wailing on my door and demanding I let the students in. I calmly opened the door and told him that had he or his vice-principals given a shit about tardiness, they'd be in the halls between periods hustling students into place. When I used the word "shit," I watched Luis Labato's eyes widen as if he'd seen his first naked woman. I then began yelling so loudly, Amy told me, that teachers down the hall congregated around the corner to see what was going on. I imagined Ms. Arrona smiling with one hand over her mouth, perched low around the corner like a giddy teenager sneaking into her boyfriend's bedroom window. My self-righteous anger was so palpable that I heard myself breathing heavy nearly 20 minutes after Mr. Gorena, the principal, had left.

But what the hell did I need them for? I only had a year left to graduate, and I'd be on my way to a dissertation program somewhere far, far away from the border. I would spread my seed wide like a senior honors student and apply to ten different creative writing programs. I sent out an e-mail requesting a letter of recommendation from several professors, most notably Jose Skinner, the man I studied under for both classes – fiction writing – the previous spring. My letter request, however, did not go exactly as planned:

You may put me down as a reference, though you should remember that I am mostly familiar with your post-accident work, which at times got a little

incoherent, and I might have to say that. Of course, if your thesis reveals your former lucidity, then I can forgo mention of that temporary crisis (which also, as you may remember, resulted in some in-class outbursts which I welcomed until they became repetitious). But you're an excellent writer and, except for that lapse, which I trust was temporary, a very valuable asset to the classroom. JS (Skinner 2009, unpublished communication)

Apparently I had not kept my mouth as shut as I had imagined. Yet I now needed to keep myself in the good graces of Jose and others who would serve on my thesis committee.

Still on my agenda, however, was some way to deal with the crippling tinnitus noise that, despite what I was told, had never abated. I began popping zinc pills after I read how zinc is essential for the body's immune system and taste/smell receptors. I added ginkgo biloba to increase blood flow to the periphery of my body, while B12 deficiencies were found in a number of tinnitus sufferers, so I added about 2000 milligrams a day in tiny blue pills. The only thing this helped, however, was in turning my urine a psychedelic yellow.

Tinnitus is the perception of sound in the absence of an external source, and it has many causes. While it's often referred to as a "ringing" in the ears, it can be perceived as a number of sounds, including clicking, hissing, or whispering. Some report their sound resembles the whistle a coach blows in PE class while others, like me, describe it, in addition to a wavelike sensation, as a "whoosh" noise resembling the sound a plane makes as it taxis down the runway. Such noises have been reported for thousands of years and across many cultures. The Assyrians poured rose extract into the ear through a bronze tube in order to reach the sound, while medieval Welsh physicians recommended increasing perspiration near the ears by cutting a hot loaf of bread in half and tying a piece over each ear.

But where does the sound come from? I would have insisted it came from my ear, as I asserted to the veterinarian that the clump of cat litter I'd brought to the lab was feces and not urine, yet recent research classifies it as a ringing across the brain. The American Tinnitus

Association's (ATA) website explains how sound causes our eardrum to vibrate, which cause nerve hairs in the inner ear to vibrate, sending electric signals along the auditory nerve to the brain. Specific neurons in the auditory cortex process specific signals, yet when the injured nerve cells no longer send signals, such as what happened to me when my cochlea was damaged, the neurons start to "eavesdrop" on their neighbors. They fire in response to other frequencies and even fire without *any* incoming signals. Such a process ends up in a self-sustaining loop as the brain's feedback mechanism gets rewired. ATA's website reports that there is no cure for tinnitus, and instead of risky surgeries, for example, they urge that tinnitus sufferers monitor their diet, avoiding alcohol, caffeine, and sodium, and keep clear of stressful situations, as these have been shown to increase the volume and frequency of the noise. Because I taught middle school, avoiding stress was not an option. I could, however, avoid coffee and packaged food containing sodium (especially soup!). As for drinking, I had not touched alcohol since my injury.

The same goes for sex. No more driving across the border at 3 a.m. and searching for a man to love me. No more pulling over in downtown McAllen, too drunk to drive, and wandering the streets until I'd be noticed. No more misdemeanors for public intoxication. Simply put, I was afraid of sex. Beyond that I felt awkward about my new, thinner body, still twenty pounds under my pre-injury weight and stripped of all muscle. My body, it seemed, could not put on any weight. Who might want a man as skinny as me? I was embarrassed at my own appearance. I decided, instead, that I'd stick to crushes on my middle school students, a harmless way to pass the time when going across the border wasn't an option. Besides, better the boys since I'd never learned how or where to date a man, as caught up as I was in coaching middle school sports or continuing my M.F.A. program, just as I was "too busy" during law

school. I'd never dated a man for more than a month, and now didn't seem like the time to start. I even isolated myself from friends Gamaliel and Sergio, as it exhausted me to hold conversations over the crash and clamor of restaurants or bars. As for meeting in quieter locations, such as my house or coffee shops, I was too tired after a long day or week of teaching and thesis writing to do anything other than watch television. The energy required to drown out distant conversation or control my balance used up whatever reserves I had left. Besides that, the tinnitus prevented me from achieving a good night's sleep. I was often just plain tired.

Although my sleep was disrupted, cutting out sex and sodium, as well as caffeine and alcohol, helped me to keep the tinnitus noise manageable on most days. Yet I still longed for an easier and more effective solution. I returned to ATA's website and discovered an article on "bone conduction surgery," a procedure shown to minimize tinnitus symptoms. Doctors drill a titanium screw into the bone behind the ear and attach an electronic sound processor to the tip of the screw, which transmits sound waves across the bones in our skull – a process known as bone conduction – to the cochlea on the opposite side of the skull. It sounded like magic to me! The next day I researched the procedure more extensively in my classroom during lunch, eventually making an appointment for the following week in Houston, the closest place that performed such a surgery.

In Houston I explained to Dr. Maxwell that I'd recently lost my hearing. He nodded and explained to me that his own technicians would be the judge of that. He never asked why or how this had happened, but simply looked up and peered into my ear with his otoscope.

"Uh-huh, uh-huh," he began. "Yes, what do we have here?" He pulled out his tool and wiped the end with his finger. Then he sniffed his finger.

“I was in Mex—”

“Looks like you have a lot of earwax,” he interrupted. “Maybe it’s just earwax.”

“Earwax?” I repeated.

“Lots of it.” Then he immersed himself in my other ear, punctuating his squinting expressions with guttural noises indicating, I guessed, that he had begun to connect the dots. When he had finished cleaning this other ear, he dramatically shook his right elbow and resumed his inspection of my injured right ear. After a few minutes he pulled his body up from his squatting position and gave me the news.

“Nothing,” he said. “Entirely healthy.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes sir.” He leaned back against the small built-in desk. “And you still can’t hear?”

“Nope.”

“Nothing?”

“Not out of this ear,” I answered, pointing at my right ear.

“Then let’s get you tested,” he said, standing up. “Follow me.”

The tests confirmed my single-sided deafness, and an hour later I was back in Dr. Maxwell’s office. I sat on the chair wondering how he had chosen dark wood shutters for an office in one of Houston’s most modern skyscrapers. He entered the room carrying an odd contraption resembling something Brittany Spears straps over her head at concerts.

“So what the hell happened?” he asked, sitting down behind his desk and placing the thing in front of him.

“I’m not sure.”

“You’re not sure?”

“No one knows.”

“You don’t remember?”

“Nope.”

“Did you get in a fight? Were you drunk? How can you not remember?”

I shrugged my shoulders. “I don’t.”

He responded with an extended “hmm,” a grim expression spread across his flattened lips. “Seems suspicious to me.” He rose from his desk and repeated “suspicious” several times as if I’d purposely left something out of the story. “Here,” he continued, approaching me from behind and placing the device from his desk over my head. It ran the length of my head like old-fashioned headphones, but with an arm attached for what appeared to be a microphone. Once I was suited up, he dumped his skepticism and smiled like a giddy teenager.

“Close your eyes,” instructed the doctor. “Close them.”

I did as he asked, but not before I saw him lean over my right ear.

“This is what it will sound like,” he whispered. “With the device.”

I squinted open my right eye to see if he were still there. *Was this possible? He’s whispering and I can still hear him?*

Then he started whispering nonsensical stuff about Shakespeare. Then he moved on to Tiger Woods. Then potassium. When he was done I repeated what he had said.

“So it’s like,” he concluded, “it’s like still hearing out of that ear. The Baha is the best bone-anchored aid out there.”

“Baja?”

“Yeah, but with an ‘h,’ instead of a ‘j.’ Bone. Anchored. Hearing. Aid.” He lifted the device from my head and returned behind his desk.

“But will it help my tinnitus?” I asked him while stroking a dangling plant leaf from the ivy hanging over his desk.

“Well, it’s not designed—”

“It’s just always there,” I interrupted, dropping the ivy. “The noise.”

He remained standing but continued to stare. “It could,” he finally answered. “It could take the focus off the noise.”

“Yeah?”

“It *could*,” he repeated, tapping his fingers together.

That’s all I needed to hear.

I stood up and shook the doctor’s hand over the desk. I could get this device and stop obsessing over the noise. On my way out of his office, I looked out over Houston’s impressive skyline and imagined would it would be like to hear properly again. I’d just received my acceptance letter to a university in Chicago, and I was knock-me-off-my-feet happy with the thought of leaving the children behind for a Ph.D. program in the city. Half my face reflected in the window, and I was surprised to notice a smile I hadn’t seen in months.

Chapter 4

My college students ask about the screw sticking out of my skull. I tell them it's made of titanium, and like Superman it enhances my hearing and gives me superhuman strength. It has been five years since the Baja surgery, and I'm a graduate instructor at the University of Illinois at Chicago. I teach freshman English as part of my Ph.D. program. The sound transmitter works nothing like the futuristic contraption Dr. Maxwell placed over my head in Houston. Instead it amplifies sounds several feet or yards away, making it difficult to hear the voice right in front of me. The screw sits just over my right ear so it's impossible for me to see when I'm looking head-on into the mirror. Yet my hair no longer grows in a one-inch radius from the center point of the screw, so it's clear to the world that things aren't as they should be. I look like that spot on a cat's fur after it has been shaved for surgery. I could grow my hair longer to partially close in and around screw, or even the entire sound transmitter that snaps into the screw, as many females do, but then I'd be just another graduate instructor and no one would know anything is wrong.

It's important for me that people know something is wrong. I am wrong. The screw serves as a place marker, some physical reminder that other people can see. I'd been wrong before the injury as well (how many thirty five-year-old lawyers have never had a boyfriend, teach middle school instead of practicing law, or screw themselves out of a kick-ass Foreign Service job by visiting a therapist?) but I had no other way of marking my condition. I'd run away, instead, to act out my misery. Although I can't currently hear well or smell, no one looking at me knows this or has any reasonable explanation for why I might sometimes veer into a wall. At least the screw serves notice.

Students in my cramped 8 a.m. composition class used to place bets on how many times I'd lose my balance and back into the handicapped button that automatically opens the door. One morning I opened the door seven times.

"Your butt," Ankit Padamar noted, "is feeling a bit promiscuous today, isn't it sir?"

But it hasn't been all bad. The doctor was right about my body getting used to the noise in my head. I hardly notice it all anymore, except for right now when I'm writing about it. It's the same seashore sound as before, although occasionally it escalates to the plane-on-a-runway vibration if I forget to ask for decaffeinated espresso in my morning Americano. Such round-the-clock-tinnitus, I've since learned, is manageable compared to others' more debilitating intermittent ringing. George rarely asks about the screw. He says it looks like an ear-piercing in my skull and makes me look sexy. I think he looks sexy. When he smiles, which he often does, I see a world of goodness spreading across his lips. Among all the other men, I'm shocked he's picked me. I just know I'm going to fuck this up.

I began my Ph.D. career with the best of intentions. I even went to the school's disability center, on the advice of a random woman I met on the bus who'd asked about the titanium screw, to document any challenges I expected to face and any so-called "accommodations" I'd need to facilitate my learning. The truth is that I didn't need much help, but instead yearned for some type of recognition that I wasn't quite whole, but more like the muffin from which someone had taken a bite.

At the office a spiky-haired young blond woman named Deborah explained all the challenges single-sided deaf people encounter. Did I need a note taker? More time on my exams? She spoke softly to me and explained that being newly disabled can be daunting. I nodded my head but felt like an imposter. It reminded me of a boy in law school, Matthew

Simpson, who typed his exams in class and turned in papers late. He was an amiable young man, hard to feel any anger toward, but I never understood the nature of his illness. He drank with us at the bars and crammed for tests. Sometimes, though, he'd disappear for a few days and come back stoic and pensive. Or perhaps merely quiet. I never knew what to make of it. But me? Accommodations? On my way out Deborah hopped away from the door and allowed me to pass, but in doing so handed me a pamphlet about traumatic brain injuries. I don't recall if I read the pamphlet; if I had, perhaps I would have understood better the challenges I faced. TBI's are real, I now understand, although I left that office unsure that I mattered despite Deborah's efforts to gently nudge me into taking care of myself.

Instead, I was determined to break away from injured man I hoped I'd left behind in Texas. I decided I could do everything! In addition to my graduate instruction, I critiqued essays on-line for one of the giant education corporations. In one half hour, I was expected to read an essay, some more than 10 pages, and make five substantive comment along with a page of recommendations. Essays were timed online, and I'd receive warning e-mails notifying me of my average time and threatening job suspension if I did not lower my numbers. I also found a job tutoring rich kids in their homes for their ACT and SAT college entrance exams. While the job paid \$35 an hour, between the time spent driving to the home and preparing for the session, I made closer to \$8 or \$9 an hour, barely complementing my \$12 hour on-line grading salary. The tutoring company, however, charged \$135 an hour, and for my most of my time tutoring I felt like a fraud. No way was I worth \$135 an hour.

In class I was exhausted and unsure of myself around brilliant 25 year-old so adept at cultural critique. I resisted their academic nomenclature as mere artifice and made limited

friends. A few outbursts returned, and before long I felt like a *persona non grata* around departmental and campus events.

But then I met George. He wore a black Texas Longhorns cap that framed his dark eyes and round face. Beneath his wide nose rest a smile so symmetrical and sincere, a smile so unlike my own, that it surged off his face like high tide. His thick body and dark skin reminded me of several middle school students I had taught down in South Texas, and although George was Mexican, he spoke with no accent, except perhaps with a Texas drawl. Every so often George would smile and make me wonder what it would be like to kiss his full red lips.

Soon we began dating, but I lacked a reference point for what dating might be like. I worked hard and played hard, or that's the story I told him, although I hadn't "played" in nearly three years. There was some truth to the "work hard" part, however, as my four academic degrees and counting (B.A., M.A., M.F.A., J.D., Ph.D.?) had taken most of my time, I told him, so when the semesters ended or during breaks I was off alone to Latin America.

He asked me if I preferred Mexican men.

I told him I didn't know.

We spent the next several weekends in my small apartment watching television and playing games. He loved sports almost as much as I did. We'd meet on a Friday night, with plans to spend only one night together, but then neither of us wanted to see the other go. I'd cook him breakfast and lovingly watch him eat. He fixed things around my apartment. On Monday morning I'd drive him to work, and I'd wait for the days when we could be together again.

After two months we still hadn't had sex, and I knew I'd have to explain. I don't know the truth of why I waited so long. Perhaps I was nervous after three years of self-imposed

celibacy, a clone of my younger self too nervous and lacking the self-confidence to approach men who might reject me. Yet I knew George wouldn't reject me. Most of my sexual experiences had occurred while drunk, and perhaps I feared how the experience might feel when I was sober. I'd had sober sex, of course, but not with someone to whom I was attracted. And then there was George's voice, a little "floaty on the cadence," as I'd read somewhere before, the gay voice loaded with pronounced S's and a nasally cadence. On the contrary, I was attracted to strong men with deep voices. I associated George's voice with the shame of being gay, and not having one meant that I was somehow above at least one other group on the social (gay) hierarchy. But aside from this condescension, I wasn't sure if I could sexually perform. Could I maintain an erection? And what about my injury? I still hadn't processed that with any degree of clarity, instead pretending that it didn't happen, yet wanting affirmation that I wasn't as stable or composed as I might seem. Telling George about the accident would force me to think about a story better off ignored. My story. Something, I was sure, that had to do with sex. Whatever story left a man alone and hurting in the middle of Mexico.

I told George, instead, simply that I was damaged. He held my hand and told me he was damaged too. His parents had disowned him after coming out as gay, and in place of the hurt he became promiscuous. He'd slept with dozens and dozens of men just to feel better about himself. In the layered world of sexual dysfunction, it seemed I had nothing to worry about. He was far worse off than me.

Soon after we'd begun making love, however, I began to worry about his aggressive sexual disposition. While I was still feeling my way through sober sex, he rode my cock in the bedroom as if he were on a horse. He devoured my penis in a way I'd never experienced, his mouth wrapped around my body without the least bit of shame. It got me to thinking about all

the other men he'd been with and how I might measure up. It forced me, too, to think about my own sexual story. How did I end up nearly forty and single? Why was I so terrified, disgusted even, to eat his ass for the first time? Hadn't I "come out" nearly 15 years before? Where had I been?

Over time I became comfortable making love to George. I learned to enjoy his ass. It's the strongest, most perfect ass I've ever touched. If I finish inside him quicker than I'd want, I know it's because I love it so much. In some ways I'm eighteen again, that rush of adrenaline and the surprise of how marvelous it feels to ejaculate inside someone you love. Perhaps I'm making up for lost time.

But I know our relationship might soon be over. I've begun leaving the oven on again. George says he's going to light a candle one night and blow himself to smithereens. It's the hard-boiled eggs all over again. The other night he awoke to a burning pan on the stove. Moments go by when I can't remember why I've entered the room or the numbers of my most basic internet passcodes. I repeat myself so I don't leave anything out. I ask the same thing twice. Then again. I ramble. I stutter. I veer off in unanticipated directions. Against a wall. Across context. George must be sick of me. Worst of all, the outbursts have returned, usually fueled by alcohol. One minute I'm playing Jenga with George, and the next thing I recall is yelling at him for joining another soccer league or texting his sister so much. I'm jealous of a friend named Steve Mulac, and I just can stop. I can't stop myself. I tell him he was a whore before, and he'll be one again.

I'm not sure how consistently I'd exhibited such behaviors before meeting George, however, because I wasn't hanging out with anyone in Chicago before him. Perhaps I'd been stuttering all along. And surly I'd left the oven on before. Yet for things like drinking and

relationship jealously, I had no reference point. I hadn't drank in years and I'd never had a boyfriend to be jealous about.

Yet I know I might never finish my dissertation if I can't get myself organized. Post-Its line the walls above my computer like drooping palm fronds and stacks of one-inch binders pile up on the windowsills. I have so many documents and folders on my computer labeled "dissertation" that I can barely find what I'd written the day before. My funding runs out at the end of next semester, and I'm not sure what I'll do. If I'd been able to finish law school with minimal issue, I assume I should be able to finish my dissertation too. On top of all this, George hasn't initiated sex in months. Likewise, I'm jealous of his corporate recruiting job, making 65K a year (nearly 3 times my salary!) although he only finished his undergraduate degree with a few on-line courses last semester. While I work hard teaching college and struggling to finish my dissertation, he checks his Facebook and sends his friends cutesy Snap Chats. I'm jealous of his so-called success, particularly in comparison to my many years on the stationary bike.

I told this all to Dr. Linda one day during therapy. She seemed most concerned, like George, about me blowing myself up. She recommended I get an MRI for my head.

"To see about any lingering effects of your injury," she suggested.

I scoffed, told her that was five years ago.

She pulled out a pamphlet for traumatic brain injuries, the same pamphlet I remembered Deborah giving me years earlier. This time I promised to read it.

I fixated on the verbs "crunch," "rip," and "shear" to describe how a TBI affects delicate brain tissue as it bangs against the skull. According to the pamphlet, unprovoked aggression, memory loss, and mood swings are the most frequent symptoms of those with

temporal brain injuries. Frontal lobe injuries, meanwhile, provoke a generalized “personality” change as well as the persistence of a single thought. That last point about obsessive thoughts sounded like an exaggerated version of how tinnitus makes people focus on a single song so much that days later the melody remains. I’d experienced such persistence, including my obsession with Steve Mulac. Looking at the pamphlet was like looking in a mirror, in some sense, yet I wasn’t certain if I’d become a hypochondriac, discovering symptoms only after I’d uncovered what to look for. After all, who hasn’t been aggressive before or talked too much at times? We all have our mood swings, and forgetting is a simple human fault. No one likes to hear about their partner’s previous promiscuity.

“Just take the MRI,” Linda urged after our next meeting. “What harm can it do?”

“It’s not the harm,” I said. “It’s the foul.”

“What?”

“Suppose they find something’s wrong,” I said. “What then?”

Linda looked puzzled.

“Is there anything I can do about it?” I asked.

“Well,” she began, tossing up her hands to her feathered grey hair. “I’m not sure—”

“I mean . . . what am I supposed to do?”

“What you can do,” she said, putting her hands to her cheeks, “is begin to forgive yourself and slow down.” She fixed her gaze on me more intently. “There might be a reason you’re having such a hard time of it,” she continued.

I was in no position to forgive myself, as the constant stress of the Ph.D. program and keeping tabs on my social-butterfly boyfriend were exhausting. Besides that, George clearly wasn’t attracted to my body anymore, or else he’d initiate sex more often. I attempted to

remedy that by joining an intense CrossFit regimen, but after six months I injured my right hip, yet another MRI revealing a torn labrum, bone spurs, and an impossibly small joint space pointing toward arthritis. I could not be gentle on myself, it seemed, because deep inside I suspected I'd been the culprit all along, as my father and mother, even the Baja doctor, seemed to suggest. No damage to my head was ever going to convince me that this all wasn't my fault. My body told me as much.

I agreed to take the test anyway, however, and as I crossed my arms over my chest on my slide into the MRI machine, the technician told me in a thick Eastern European accent that I ought not to worry.

"You just relax," she said, and for a moment I envisioned my grandmother years ago rubbing vodka on my knee after falling from a tree. The technician added that the brain is a hard, yet delicate, apparatus and the more we know, the better the doctor might be able to help us.

I nodded from beneath the machine that I imagined as the top bun of a submarine sandwich. Inside the noise was deafening, and I noted the irony of the technician insisting I use ear plugs even in my ear that didn't function.

"Oh you be quiet and put these in," she said.

I did as I was told and, as I expected, the ear plug fell out of my functioning ear but stayed lodged like a cork in my malfunctioning right ear. I wasn't surprised. Inside I wondered what result I expected. What result did I want? Was it like going to the doctor for a horrendous cold and emerging with nothing more than instructions to eat chicken soup and get lots of rest? Like most patients, I wanted to be told that something specific is wrong and given a remedy. Or at least an explanation for whatever it is that ails me. All I knew was that

meeting George and his many friends had enabled me to get out of the house and outside of my head. I didn't want to screw that up. And most certainly I had. I just hoped someone could tell me why.

In the dressing room mirror afterwards, I paused to look at my body, something I rarely do. I wore a pair of blue and white half-spandex, half cotton underwear that rode up my thighs as I sat on the small bench, so my legs looked much bigger and stronger than I had ever noticed. The top muscles of my abdominals were visible, and what I thought were love handles appeared more like natural curvatures complementing the thickness of my thighs. My chest surged from the half-open robe like Superman. My hair had flattened, and together with my closed-mouth demeanor, I appeared part lawyer, part underwear model, two attributes I'd never associated with myself despite my law degree and former athletic physique. George and I even made love in the dark! I stared into the mirror, completely stunned. Perhaps I hadn't given myself enough credit. I took a selfie, actually two. One with my robe covering my sides, the other without. I wanted to memorialize this moment, as it had been some time since I felt this good about myself.

Turns out Dr. Linda was right. My temporal and frontal lobes still showed significant damage.

I'd need to schedule neuropsychological testing in a few weeks.

"I suspected it," Linda told me in her office.

"You did?"

"For some time."

"But you never—"

“*You* never,” she interrupted. “You never told me about what happened to you in Mexico.”

“Yeah, um . . . I di—”

“No,” she barked. “All you said was an accident in Mexico.”

“It was.”

“But never about the severity.”

When she mentioned “severity,” tears formed in the corner of my eyes. I guess I had forgotten.

“I mean, Chris, your brain is compromised.” She paused. “Yeah it could be much worse, but for the last few years you’ve been fighting against yourself. Against your body.”

I told her about the picture I took in the dressing room.

“Yes, of course, that’s great. I’ve always told you how handsome you are. Told you that. But from what I gather, you’ve always been this way but never knew it. Am I right?”

I nodded, tears welling up in my eyes, although not yet dropping to my cheeks.

“Chris, are you okay?”

“My body,” I said. “It took so long to get it back.”

Linda reached across and handed me a tissue.

“But you got it back,” she said. “You got it back.”

I bit my lower lip and nodded.

“It’s about more than your body,” she continued. “It’s about you.” She pointed to her heart. “It’s about what’s in here.”

This time Linda handed me the entire box of tissue.

“You’ve got to stop blaming yourself,” Linda continued. She reached over and tapped my knee, then placed her entire hand atop my knee and squeezed. “For the injury, for your struggles in this program, for whatever else came before.”

I wiped tears from my face and looked at Linda.

“It’s not your fault,” she said. “Whatever’s the matter with you is not your fault.”

“But I—”

“It doesn’t matter what you say,” she continued. “It’s not your fault.” She repeated it three times until I calmed down.

I left the office wondering if I should tell George. If I told him about my MRI results, I might have to tell him about the accident. And was I prepared to relive the accident? I really just wanted him to tell me everything was okay. That I’m okay. And I wanted some excuse to clarify my outbursts or unexplainable bouts of jealousy. That way I’d be easier to forgive.

Later that night I sat next to George on the couch, at least three feet between us. I had ordered in my mind the way I wanted to tell him about the MRI. Instead I unleashed a hodgepodge of disconnected thoughts that I still don’t recall. I remember talking and talking and talking, just as I had with my teacher friend Amy at Coffee Zone. He listened quietly while I explained.

“It’s not like this is that bad,” I said. “There’s no way of knowing, you know, there’s no way of knowing.”

George stared at me from the other side of the couch.

“What causes what, no way to tell . . . not like ‘my brain is hurt here so this is going to happen’. Not like—”

“So what you’re telling me is *what?*” George asked, a still expression on his face and no movement in his body.

“I’m saying . . . like Dr. Linda told me I’m doing great, like how many people can do a Ph.D. program and dealing with all this, so, like, she actually said I deserve some congratulation.”

“Congratulations?” He said it ugly with an emphasis on the last part of the word while raising his back off the couch and twisting to face straight ahead. “Have you even scheduled a dissertation date yet? Do you even think you’re going to graduate?”

“No, I mean, not congratulations,” I backtracked. “I mean, like it’s just saying I’m working hard, you know?” I paused. “And my dissertation—”

“So why haven’t you told me this stuff before?” he interrupted, lifting off the couch. “About any of this?”

“I didn’t know,” I said. “Honest.” I stood up and took a step toward George. “I didn’t know what was going on.”

George walked toward the kitchen and poured himself a glass of water.

“There’s something you’re not telling me,” he said.

“What do you mean?” I’d followed him into the kitchen.

“About this.” He drank from his glass. “About all of this.” He continued, opening his hands toward the room. “About your accident. Everything.”

“I don’t remember—”

“Spare me,” he interrupted. “You remember some things, but you don’t . . . you don’t want to say.”

“Why would I—”

“Beats me. Why would you start yelling at me for no apparent reason?” He paused, leaned back against the sink. “Do you have an answer for that?”

I didn’t.

If I am going to make any progress with George, I realize, I’ll have to be completely honest. I’d hesitated on the couch before, and now I understand I won’t be getting any of the affirmation from him I so desperately need. Yet I have as much interest in “neuropsychological testing” as a lion would a refrigerator. I’m like a little boy lost in the estuary. Perhaps I need to reaffirm myself. The truth is that I’ve been recalling bits and pieces of my second hospital stay for some time now, perhaps a few years, particularly a series of conversations I had with an orderly named Manuel. He was interested, as is George, in my story. Could *he* be the one to help clear my good name? That night I watched George harden his eyes into mine and dump the rest of his water in the sink. He approached the door, anxious to leave me for yet another of his soccer leagues, this one – of course – where he and Steve Mulac played defense together. I stood in the middle of the kitchen, my tongue snug against the roof of my mouth, watching George slam the door and leave. What I still don’t know, however, is where that leaves me.

Part II - San Miguel de Allende

Day 1

I think my sister exaggerates.

“Cobblestone streets wind like serpents between colonial buildings exploding with color,” she said, nearly breathless. “All beneath the burning pink San Miguel sky.”

“Really?” I asked into the phone. “You can’t be serious.”

“Yes,” she insisted.

“Sarah?”

“You have to see the iron rails,” she continued. “Tell me you’ll see the iron rails.”

I told her yes, I’d certainly see the rails; excuse me, yes, the *iron* rails, of course I’d see the iron rails. She pointed me toward some plaza, a picturesque plaza with children singing and thick milky drinks, and restaurant balconies covered in purple bougainvillea. And beneath the bougainvillea – I hoped, for my sister’s sake – more iron rails with some semblance of a story. Why else might rails excite her if not for the story they tell? Yes, I assured her from my comfortable couch in McAllen, I’d visit the plaza and look for the shoeshine boy with the thick and pulpy face.

I set off three weeks from the McAllen bus station, dropped off by the same Ms. Perez (a.k.a. Amy) who’d later stare back at me bewilderingly from the booths at Coffee Zone, but who for the moment wished me luck with a pleasant hug and instructions not to come back fat or married. I bought my ticket inside the station and boarded a bus going south across the border to Monterrey, Mexico. I’d made that trip at least a handful of times, and within minutes I’d fallen fast asleep, awoken only by the bumps along the border and the vendors selling their

wares to the passengers waiting in line on the other side of the bridge, the one leading back into the United States. On my side, however, no one seemed to care about my trip into Mexico, and that was perfectly fine by me. I wanted a quiet trip so I could finish my fiction portfolio and maybe some time to decompress after a long semester with my seventh-graders. I'd finally made it to Spring Break!

In Monterrey I switched busses for the lengthy trip to San Luis Potosí and then onward to San Miguel de Allende. No one sat beside me on the bus from Monterrey, but across the aisle sat a little girl with neatly-braided black hair pinched in ribbons. She curved her tiny hand like a claw and ran it down the length of her hair. Outside, the skin-peel of flat desert stretched for miles. The man beside the little girl sat low in an oversized hoodie, arms crossed, his head covered in patches of black hair, which ran sporadically down the sides of his neck. They obviously didn't belong together, I reasoned, but this was Mexico and anything could happen. I fell asleep thinking how odd that the color ribbon in the little girl's hair – baby blue – matched the man's shoelaces, the only thing about them that seemed to correspond.

I awoke to the bus driver's deep voice as he stood over me and explained that we were stopping for ten minutes.

"And not a minute longer," he added, before climbing down the stairs and joining some of the other passengers outside in front of a white stucco church trimmed in pink. Behind the church appeared several bland-colored buildings atop a steep incline. *How long had I been asleep?* The man and little girl, I noticed, were no longer on the seats across from me. I returned my attention out the window, where a woman on horseback approached the bus.

"*Jugo*, she said, pointing at a wicker basket astride the horse. "*Diez pesos.*"

Plastic bags of canary-colored juice rest peacefully in the basket. Inside the bus I felt the breath of an old woman in a brown-fringed shawl as she leaned past me over the window and handed the woman a shiny silver coin. A baggie of juice flowed between them, the two women exchanging easy, familiar smiles. I snuck glances at the two of them as if they were bathing nude in a river, and I – a little boy in the middle of Mexico – was waiting patiently for his cousins to dry themselves in the sun. And where, this boy wondered, was the little black-haired girl with baby-blue ribbons in her hair? I wanted to buy her a baggie of juice. Yet when the bus roared over gravel on its way out of town, neither the man nor girl remained.

The road to San Miguel spit orange sand, thick particles I could feel in my lungs. I pulled my shirt up to cover my mouth and lowered my body so my knees rest high against the seat in front of me. I took deep breaths. I sat this way over the newly-paved road from San Luis to San Miguel de Allende until the bumps become more frequent. Vehicles rattled. Feet shuffled. Voices converged. The bus circled a plaza, around the plaza circled the bus, and boys played tag beneath a bushy Sycamore tree. Buildings glistened like the fireflies of my youthful summers in Indiana. Along the plaza, two grey-haired ladies walked arm and arm, pausing once to face each other and smile. They clinked purses like champagne flutes and kissed each other goodbye. Beyond the plaza I saw a line of parked busses, where I assumed we might disembark. I lifted my large canvas bag from the overhead compartment and prepared for arrival. I looked around and checked my pockets. Beside me the woman in the brown shawl pushed her thin fingers into my arm and smiled, wishing me a pleasant trip. I nodded slightly, smiled back, and moved one foot forward toward the front of the bus. My fingers expanded over my *Lonely Planet* guide book, and like a silver coin flicked in the air, I

stepped off the bus and toward the scent of freshly-baked bread and cinnamon. My marvelous week had begun!

The next thing I remember is a giant wooden beam. The smoothest mahogany beam I had ever touched! I made it off the bus to the youth hostel recommended by my *Lonely Planet* guidebook, and it was there that I fingered the giant wooden beam on my way up the stairs. I followed a wrinkled old woman – this *indigena* I'll call Epiphana – who lowered my arm from the shoulder and took her hand in mine. She led me to a room of bunk beds and dusty window sills. An elaborate pumpkin-colored backpack rest atop a lower bunk. Without letting go of my hand, she pointed her finger at the top bunk, the one above the backpack, and leaned her wrinkled face toward mine: "I'll take care of you."

Then she walked me down the stairs, below the mahogany beam. How could I keep my fingers from reaching up and caressing the beam? Such an exquisite beam! At the bottom I gave her my laptop computer and the key to my room, as is customary in Latin America, this trust I'd come to savor. She hung the key among others along a shimmering blue wall with dried flowers draped upside down as if from a lover, and told me not to worry as she glanced at my computer in her hand. "I'll take care of your computer," she must have said, but I heard instead the same refrain: *I'll take care of you*. Epiphana insisted I take a tour of San Miguel's famous doors in the morning. The doors, she said, that open up to unexpected stories, perhaps our deepest desires. I placed two shiny silver coins in her outstretched hand and wondered about the threshold of desire. What might it feel like to cross those doors? I thanked Epiphana and pinched the receipt into my wallet.

The rest I hardly recall. But I can tell you what the bougainvillea saw later that night, the bloody tamarind bougainvillea atop La Azteca's rooftop terrace. I remember it as some of

us recall our earliest childhood memories. I was eating fish tacos with slivers of purple cabbage when I noticed the beautiful bloody bougainvillea spread across the balcony rails. So beautiful. So natural. I approached the bush, rubbed my fingers across the flowers – how could I stop myself? – and then it pricked, I pricked, we pricked. I turned around, but my tacos were gone. Instead I saw a Jägermeister machine behind the bar – the kind where you tip the bottle upside down and wait – and I wondered at the oddity of a pricked finger atop a bar in the Mexican state of Guanajuato staring at an upside-down bottle of Jägermeister. A thin rivulet of blood wound down the side of my hand. Then I remembered the doors, the carved, the wooden, the painted doors, and I couldn't stop smiling for my glorious Sunday morning surrounded by doors. I removed the receipt from my wallet, caressed its smooth surface. The doors, the doors, the doors. I wondered about the story they'd tell.

I don't know where I don't know where

me duele la cabeza

please *se quebró la cabeza*

El DOLOR! El DOLOR! El DOLOR! El DOLOR!

No sé. . .

El DOLOR! (The Pain!)

El DOLOR! (The Pain!)

El DOLOR! (The Pain!)

El DOLOR!

El DOLOR!

El DOLOR!

Day 5

I awoke in a narrow hospital bed with cold silver rails. I extended my arms into space, unsure if they were mine. My forearms looked frail, the rounded end of bone visible beneath the skin of my wrists. I felt the bristle of facial hair against my fingertips. *How long had I been there?* A man and woman, both wearing white, stood above me and spoke in quiet tones. I discerned nothing from their facial expressions nor the limited movement of their lips. The man looked at the woman, down at me, then pointed at something behind my bed, his cruel white skin laughing beneath the dense black hair on his arms. He walked toward the door and left me with this thin-lipped woman who had no story to tell, but instead inched closer and lifted my arm. She poked a needle beneath the skin and held my arm still in the air. She did not smile. I felt her circle me as the seagulls circle bread from the fingers of my younger self until the pressure loosened from the side of my head and I watched the woman carry bloody gauze out of the hospital room as if she were flying a kite. I wished for the strength to stop her. To ask her who she was. Where I was. But all I did was stare.

Outside the door I saw a man, *este hombre que me salva*, this man in white who hovered over the speckled floor and circled me, lifted me with his falcon's toes, and floated me off the bed in his arms.

Se quebró la cabeza.

I know, he said.

Then I felt the strength of his forearm push against my armpit as he sunk me onto a plastic chair in the bathroom. He placed a towel over my shoulder and lowered my head backwards until I felt the back of my head on the sink. I wanted this man to cut my hair.

First came a steady stream of water cascading over my head – I imagine it now coming out of a porcelain gravy bowl – and settling, I could feel, in the space between the white towel and my neck. I turned my head to the left. In the sink I saw a sliced gallon jug of pink powder. The man dipped his fingers in the jug, then rubbed my hair. He rubbed and rubbed and rubbed some more so that I felt my heavy body floating in the air. I became *Quetzalcoatl* soaring through the skies. He bore his fingers into my scalp, this modern-day *Huitzilopochtli*, my Aztec god of war, lowering himself into me with the crescent crook of his arm. I saw my Gods as dark, freckled men with wide foreheads and odd-shaped ears curved like cantaloupe rinds. This man whose name I did not know touched my hair and swirled my hair and loved my hair until I cried.

I know, he said.

Then he reached over my head and down my face, smudged tears with his fingertips, until I settled in his arms the way pink powder nestles against the banks of gallon jugs. My mucus rest transparently across his fingertips, his fingertips, across his fingertips like bark settling into tree. For a moment the pain withdrew. I wonder now about the man who may have harmed me, if he looked the same as this man, or if I felt as comfortable in his arms.

If I were whole, I'd genuflect for you my story the way an altar boy holds the Holy Book in front of the vicar. The way I did for Father Gainer, who never even glanced down at the Bible nor sideways towards me. You'd bless me. That I expected to be hurt in the arms of another man is no surprise. I stuff my face with soil so desperate for something to grow. I have a good vocabulary and bad joints, a doctor once told me, but what I really want is for fingertips to stitch me whole again. Again whole me stitch.

My father wasn't entirely wrong: I've always been fascinated by the unknown. Each month my mother paid \$4.99 at our local Winn Dixie – the home of cheap groceries and the early 1980's baby-blue polyester uniform my older sister would one day wear at her first job – for one volume of a complete encyclopedia set. Gradually the books accumulated on our mahogany shelf above the television. I fingered their glossy spines whenever my older sister took a book off the shelf and headed to the dining room table. I was most fascinated by various black-and-white photos of people and objects that looked so strange to me. For hours I flipped through photos of African musical instruments, poisonous snakes of the Amazon, and women in Polish Czapka or English Pageboy hats. But I couldn't wait until my mom purchased the final volume (Va-Z) and the fabulous colored globe would be mine! Several globes sat high atop the encyclopedia display at the store, and I'd stare at them as if they were magical orbs. The gold base and wrap-around copper arm sparkled even in Winn Dixie's dirty fluorescent lighting, and I could see the state of Florida colored brown, an obviously misaligned color for the peach and violet hues I was used to off our canal dock in tiny Cape Coral. Finally the day came when the manager climbed atop the elaborately-arranged volumes laid out like a house of cards, and handed me one of the beautiful spheres. I took hold of the object as if it were a pirate treasure.

I'd already learned the US states and their capitals, so I was most intrigued by what laid beyond. So much of the earth was covered by water. Then I wrote down the name of each country and its corresponding capital. I had so much to learn! If I saw an object in the encyclopedia, I quickly turned to my globe to spot its country of origin. Sometimes I'd close my eyes and lightly place my finger on top of the globe while I spun it around with the other hand. Colors swirled before my eyes! When the rotating ceased, I'd look down upon my

finger, which pointed me toward my new home. I imagined myself high in the Himalayan Mountains or in a purple-colored country in the middle of Africa. Sometimes I ended up in the ocean and moved my finger to the closest chain of islands. I liked imagining my life in another place, far from our chaotic house with its incessant quarreling and filled instead with these strange-sounding, friendly people who ate new things and welcomed me with their odd hats and pretty music.

During summer hurricane season I tracked the storms meticulously. Winn Dixie printed maps of the Gulf of Mexico and Caribbean Sea on the back of its paper grocery bags – complete with longitude and latitude markers – so concerned adults and excited little boys like me could imagine and track the massive storms. I envied their ease of movement. I stuck push-pins into my globe to mark the all-important eye of the storm. I looked longingly into my paper-bag maps wondering about the mysterious Gulf of Mexico so near our home. On the globe it looked like a ring of water surrounded by land. Did New Orleans or Houston on the other side of the water share our swampy topography? What about this giant island called Hispaniola or the other islands I saw on my globe? Did the palm trees rise as high in the air or the water reach unimaginable depths? The Western Hemisphere became ingrained in my soul. I saw cities like Tampico and Veracruz on the Mexican coast. Geography, it seemed, contained few boundaries. My tiny thumb could even touch Cape Coral, Havana, and Cancun at the same time!

But I was just a kid, and so so far away. Just a skinny blonde-haired boy with farmer-tanned arms wrapped around the globe as if it could point me to my future. Perhaps my mistake was coming inland, to the dry air and sandy mountains of Guanajuato. I should have trusted my tiny thumb. Perhaps If I stayed near water, I'd be whole again.

A-h-h-h-h-h-h-h-h-h-h-h-h-h-h-h!

O-w-w-w-w-w-w-w-w-w-w-w-w-w-w-w-w!

Porque nadie

I don't

A-h-h-h-h-h-h-h

Alguien me dice

me dice

Alguien me dice

me dice

WHY THE FUCK WON'T SOMEBODY TELL ME WHAT'S GOING ON?

Ow!

Ow!

Ow!

Ow!

Ow!

Ow!

Ow!

Day 6

“What they say is true then,” said Manuel, the man who’d washed my hair the previous day. “What they told us from the other hospital is true.” He sat on the edge of my bed, his hand pressed atop my knee, which rest beneath a white sheet. “Always yelling at everything.”

Then I remembered screaming. Screaming so loudly I hardly recognized my own voice.

Screaming!

Screaming!

Screaming!

He told me I hadn’t spoken anything but Spanish since I’d arrived, except when I was angry.

“And you are angry often,” he added. Apparently I cursed in a mixture of Spanish and English. “You don’t sound like an American,” he said, letting go of my knee and standing up. “Not like all the old Americans, anyway.” He looked toward the door. “Your accent is all jumbled up.” We continued to speak in Spanish, as we would during my entire stay in the hospital.

He told me his job was to keep the hospital clean and help out where he could.

“The nurse didn’t want to deal with you anymore,” he continued, again checking the door, which I assumed opened directly to the hallway and perhaps to a nurse’s “station,” as I had seen on television many times in the United States. “Nurse Garcia,” Manuel continued. “She said she’d had enough.”

I looked at him but said nothing, unaccustomed as I was to such accusations. I didn't even know who Nurse Garcia was. Didn't he know that?

"Yeah, you pissed her off," he continued, shaking his head in a manner that resembled real disappointment. "Screaming and such."

"I wasn't—"

"Made her so mad I finally volunteered." He turned his body away from the door and looked me directly in the eyes.

"How long have I been here?" I asked, my voice hoarse and weak.

"Hush," Manuel answered.

"But you said I'd been to another—"

"Volunteered to look after you."

He pushed two fingers over my lips.

"But—"

"You've got to tell me," he interrupted, pulling the white sheet down from my feet and off the bed, "before you piss all over yourself."

I peered down at my now-visible hospital gown, which looked neither dirty nor wet. I didn't smell or see urine – nor did I feel it over my body – and therefore didn't realize I was covered in piss just like I hadn't realized I'd been to another hospital. But the jerking motion Manuel had used to yank away the blanket propelled me into the back of an ambulance, which I remembered being roughly loaded into from a hospital bed and driven off to x-rays. Perhaps to the CT scan, I now realize, mentioned by the consular officer. I recall the excruciating pain, like biting threads of metal. Accompanying me was a slender man in bright blue pants and a mismatched navy shirt – that man I'd later imagine in Houston – who pushed his thumb into

the palm of my hand and told me I'd be okay. They were going to find out what was wrong with me. Then he pressed his nail firmly into my palm and kept repeating the motion until I'd quieted down. Perhaps, then, I passed out. How long, I wondered, could someone endure such pain?

Back in the hospital, Manuel turned me to the side and lifted my dressing gown over my face. I lay sideways like a mummy, feeling a towel along my inner thighs, then pressure against the back of my legs and ass. I struggled to uncover my face. Manuel turned me toward him as if rotating a hot dog on the grill – by this time he was sitting on the bed, my body draped halfway over his – and dropped a small towel over my crotch. I felt like a baby in his arms.

“Dry yourself,” Manuel said, picking up and dropping the towel over my genitals once more.

I tried to speak, but I didn't know what to say. We remained that way for several seconds. Finally Manuel reached down and pressed his hand over the towel, drying my genitals with a firm press of his hand.

“Lift up your arms,” he said, backing away from me and mimicking the suggested motion by lifting his arms in the air. I did the same, my gown still tied together over the back of my neck and draped up over my shoulder like curtains, towel covering my exposed genitals. I closed my eyes as Manuel lifted the dressing gown over my head, and kept them suspended in the air until I felt Manuel's fingers around my back tying closed my new gown. As he lifted up the towel and lowered the gown over my body, he asked how a man ends up alone in the middle of Mexico. Then he looked me in the eyes again and he repeated his question.

All alone in the middle of Mexico. . .

It's then I saw his eyes as dark as tamarind pulp, and perhaps that's when I first remembered the bougainvillea and the Jägermeister machine, some touchstones to grab, something tangible upon which to weave my story.

"Do you know where you're at? Manuel interrupted, his voice quick and sharp like the uncorking of a wine bottle.

I reached up to touch my lips, feel their dryness: "San Miguel de Allende."

"You are," he responded. "And can you tell me why you're here?"

I couldn't. Yet something made me sit up straight, which Manuel must have noticed.

The wooden beams?

"What is it?" he asked, inching closer to my bed.

"I . . . I—"

"What is it?" He sat on the bed next to me. "Do you remember?"

"Nothing," I answered. "I remember nothing."

"But you know where you are, no?"

"Yes."

"So you remember something?"

"Yes."

"But not," he continued, "about how you got here?" He lowered his voice. "Here in San Miguel?" He did not look empty at me, as did the thin-lipped nurse, but instead stared intently, leaning his body forward and extending his face toward me as if it were a serving platter.

If I blinked or stared straight ahead I do not know. What mattered is that this man see something in me other than this dressing gown. Without these pool-stick arms. No piss

running down my leg. If I could just remember, he urged, if I could just remember something about myself. That way there might be somebody to call. Somebody to take care of me.

On my mother's 19th birthday, my grandmother clipped off her faux pearl earrings and told her daughter Janie she needed to get a job. She shoved my mother on the South Shore Train Line west to downtown Chicago. Six hours later my mother returned to Hammond, Indiana as the new receptionist for the Wrigley Corporation. Her job would pay her more in two weeks than my grandfather made in a month as a carpenter. My grandmother quickly began siphoning most of Janie's earnings through "rent" deductions and a variety of suspicious charges upon which my mother never fully elaborated. Aside from a limousine ride with Phyllis Dillard – who smelled atrocious, my mother said – my mother shared little of her time in the world of Wrigley, except that she was forced to quit, a few years later, when she married my father.

I know nothing of their early marriage, but I assume it resembled the marriage I did know, that of a belligerent and drunken man, who I loved dearly, married to a timid woman unsure of herself or her place in the world. He called my mother horrible names, yet the one that stuck out the most was when he said she looked like a "schoolteacher." She looked down at little boy me with such horror that I expected her fragile face to break into a million tiny pieces. Then my grandparents came to visit us in Florida. My grandfather said my dad was a bad man, but my grandmother said Janie had made her own bed, and now she'd have to lie in it. My mother did end up in a bed, at the Charter Glades Memorial Hospital, well-before anyone understood the intricacies of postpartum depression and how a bad man throwing insults and the occasional lit cigarette might cause a person, now patient, to lose her mind. I knew it wasn't a normal hospital because at school we'd joke that that's where the crazy people went.

My mom wasn't crazy, I knew, but maybe just a little bit tired. On one visit I saw how her face had whitened and withered. But the men who give things names never bother to tell a child what's going on. Those rich, smart, and powerful men. Perhaps this woman – my mother – did not matter to them. But it mattered to me. A child knows.

Still, my grandmother refused to allow Janie to return home to Indiana with her three kids in tow, so the five of us settled into some strange accord. My mother remained confined to her bedroom on most days, barely having the strength to cover her “chi-chis” when my younger sister Angie and I would visit her room. When she did manage to hold herself upright, she'd try on bathing suit for hours, staring at herself in the mirror and incessantly combing her hair. My older sister locked herself in her bedroom. My younger sister bounced between us all. As for my father, he'd usually come home just after bedtime, but I liked to stay awake and see if he would share a piece of his submarine sandwich with me. On most nights after finishing, he'd strip down to his underwear and rest on the couch. I stayed on the floor so it was easier to change the television channels for him. He looked so strong and muscular back then, and I wanted so badly to lie next to him on the couch. A father and his son.

Like the doctors, my father told me nothing about my mother's condition. But everything else he knew, and told me so. His truth was THE truth. Cars should be hand-washed, the Soviets are stupid, and *Barney Miller* and *MASH* are the best shows on television. I imagined an extra encyclopedia volume for the letter B, his name: Bill. Together with the other volumes, these books could answer all my questions. The world and its secrets were knowable and mappable, just as my cherished golden globe could attest with its distinct set of boundaries and colors. Such an incredible burden for an innocent boy like me who longed to speak his own language in this world, but had already been oriented a certain way.

After my story Manuel suggested I make a chart of all the people I knew who might be able to retrieve me from the hospital. I told him that's a good idea, but I was sure I'd be fine. I was perfectly capable of managing myself from the hospital bed to wherever else I might want to go. He looked at me skeptically, walked out the door, and returned with a green meal tray. He handed me a piece of paper on which he had written "*mamá*" and "*papá*."

"I take it they're still alive," he asked.

I nodded.

He added their names – Jane and Bill – and drew a happy face next to each one.

"And what about your sisters?"

The younger one, I said, uses drugs. I'd hardly known where she was.

"Because of your parents?" he asked.

"My what?"

"Your parents?"

I paused, looked puzzled toward Manuel.

"Didn't you tell—"

"Yes, yes," I quickly agreed, my head shaking as a lantern in the wind. "Right."

I blamed my parents for Angie's problems. On his weekends with her, my father would leave my 8-year-old younger sister alone at the apartment while he crossed the street to the bar. Something was never right about her on Sundays when she'd return. It's as if the shine had been rubbed off the apple, the plunge from the front overturned. She'd return greasy and savage.

"Anyone else?" Manuel continued, his hand on the pen in front of him.

“I guess Sarah,” I said. “My older sister.” He picked up the pen. “The one who said I should come here to San Miguel.”

Manuel leaned from his chair over the bed, our foreheads close enough to touch, and quickly drew elaborate lines of long vertical length, curled up at the ends, and scrambled horizontal lines like the rungs of a ladder. A closer look revealed a hasty, but rather impressive picture of a girl with flowing dark hair and a hump at the bridge of her nose.

“The lips are too small,” I corrected, my hands reaching up to feel my own lips, which felt cracked and frayed like rope.

Manuel leaned back into his chair and shrugged his shoulders. He looked momentarily at the door.

“You can draw?” I asked.

“Of course I can,” he answered, a surprising severity in his voice. “You can’t?”

I shook my head.

Seeing this, he backed out of his chair and stood up, rolling up the sleeves of his white uniform. On his arm rest a simple black-lined bird, its beak extending down and to the right. Above its head two wings soared toward the sky, each extending in three points like a crown.

“It’s from Chipas,” he said, rolling up his sleeve several more times. “It’s a bird of life.”

I inspected the bird.

“From my people.”

I rubbed my fingers along Manuel’s forearm to just below the inner elbow, where the tattoo appeared.

“I like it.”

“Yeah?”

“Uh-huh.”

“I drew it myself.”

I looked up at Manuel and smiled. “It’s very nice.”

He stared some more at his homemade tattoo, then flexed his arm up and outward, rolling down the sleeve to cover his forearm. I’d never been to Chiapas, but I had recognized Manuel’s indigenous features, particularly his russet-colored skin and high cheekbones nibbling at the corners of his flat eyes. He looked small and efficient. I wasn’t surprised I’d be forced to recover with the type of man I’d fallen for in the first place. The type of man I’d longed for in Guatemala all those years ago – short, dark, and stocky – men who looked like my father when I was a little boy. Perhaps I’d been given another chance. Yet I greeted his request for my father’s phone number with the silence of a stone carver, the swift silence of a hand that takes to mallet. Nothing, I recall, came to mind.

While a boy expects his mother to take care of him, what he craves the most is a father who shows him what it’s like to be a man. A head thrown back, throat-forward type of man. Boys aspire to be loved and respected by their fathers, even if it’s the pockmarked kind of love our American culture expects between men.

I first started throwing the baseball like a girl when I was 12. My dad would yell at me to extend my arms and pivot more from the waist. I tried, but I didn’t understand exactly what he meant. At school Peter Johnson said I walked like a “pansy.” I stopped carrying my books in both hands in front of me and instead folded them in my arms along my side. But Peter still accused me of doing something wrong. *Very wrong*. He said my tall skinny legs made me look like a stork. He also said real men listen to Motley Crew. I didn’t want to be so sensitive.

I remember once when my dad called me a “pussy” when I changed the television channel during a timeout from a football game. I wanted to see a video by Swingout Sister, a British group with a lead singer in bright red lipstick. It wasn’t fair. I liked football, too! It’s just that I was sick of hearing about his damn Chicago Bears and Jim McMahon. But I would have done anything to be like either McMahon or my father. I wanted hair on my body like I saw on my dad and his muscles too. In the shower his penis looked so big to my little boy eyes! I wanted to grow up to be a man Peter Johnson or my dad would never make fun of.

For as long as I can remember, I’ve lived a regimented life. Before school I made the beds, cleaned the kitchen, and confirmed the towels were straight in the bathroom just in case the realtor showed the house during the day. When my older sister moved out with my dad, the child support went with her, and the bank began foreclosure proceedings on our house. Angie and I stayed with our mother, with weekend visits to my father’s apartment. My older sister ended up at the University of Florida to be a marine biologist. Or a television producer. Today she runs the media department for the Houston Independent School District.

In high school most of the kids, including my older sister, drove to the edge of the swamp and had bonfires on the weekend. I never attended. Instead, I worked at the Elk’s Lodge – the biggest Elk’s Lodge in Florida – on Saturday nights. The old ladies would dress up in bright colors while their husbands, the generation of older men who fought in WW II, hiked up their pants and danced in slick white shoes. When I’d see all of the men’s gaudy silver jewelry, it was hard to imagine them landing at Normandy or surviving the Bataan Death March, as did my history teacher, Mr. Leavitt, minus all the bracelets and chains. He told us a story of sun-burning his butt when he and a group of his platoon buddies sunbathed naked atop a roof in Saigon. Before the North Vietnamese took over. I imagined this 70-year-old man

young and fit, horse-playing with his friends days before his life would take such a dramatic turn.

By the end of high school I'd been crowned salutation, newspaper editor, district tennis champion, and a National Merit Finalist. Another title I'd earned was "Most Likely to Succeed" in my high school yearbook. Shanti Harkisoon and I posed together with a high stack of leaning books in our hands. Yet in that yearbook another picture stood out: a head shot of me staring straight into space as if the camera wasn't there, my lips slightly parted, hair disheveled, and my eyes large and unfocused. The caption read, "Spaced Out!" And I was. All head. No heart. No time for distractions. Who else would meet Angie at the front door after school with her favorite juice and two cinnamon Pop Tarts? I can still see her long blonde hair and the way her cheeks turned red when she got excited. I'd do anything for her.

I received a scholarship to The George Washington University, continuing my academic success with straight A's my first two years at college. I majored in International Affairs just blocks from the State Department and White House! I even studied for my economics tests on the cold marble steps of the Federal Reserve, obtaining inspiration, I suppose, from a certain amount of penance. I took copious notes at the Smithsonian museums, and even spent my Saturday evenings studying history in the 24-hour study lounge. No one prepared himself better for his future. I worked hard to orient myself toward what was expected of a bright boy like me.

In two years I put on 40 pounds of muscle. I worked out all the time. Me and the weights. My next-door neighbor told me that people in the dormitory talked about my chest. "How defined," he had said, fingering the decline between the two halves of my chest. Yet I never understood what he meant. Nor his other intentions. My self-consciousness continued. I

never even looked at myself in the mirror. Not since a bad Prom photo in which Sarah Hill and I looked like Beauty and the Beast. My braces had just come off, and perhaps I had forgotten how to smile. I still don't know how. So when everyone else in college was laughing after class or waiting in lines for croissants and coffee from Au Bon Pain, my part-time job, I made sure to keep myself guarded. I couldn't smile, no way, or else they might find out I'm not what they expect me to be.

Yet even with my contained disposition, I still noticed the looks I'd receive from customers at the bakery. What did they see? They didn't know this body was the physical manifestation of some emotional armor, the "baggage" stuff my creative writing professor always talked about. As in the emotional baggage SHIT, she would always say. I cringed when I heard a curse word. I could never say that. Could I? No, I was far too obedient. I remained a melancholy young man floating through campus as if looking for my soul. I may have memorized facts and mastered monetary policy, but I never acquired a voice of my own. So I had this great big hunky body, but I didn't have a clue what to do with it. I'd look in the mirror and not see whatever it was that others saw. Disembodiment. A word I learned later in graduate school. Like the ghosts or something. If I knew what those others saw, I might have known what to do with that body. But I never did. At least not back then.

Yet something changed the last week of spring semester my sophomore year when I overheard two college students – *happy* college students, unlike me – talking on the train about coffee cooperatives, Central American dictators, and the Dole Corporation pillaging the Guatemalan countryside. I had heard about American exploitation (who *hadn't?*), but something far more important grabbed my attention. The girl on the right spoke in a thick Boston accent about some language program she had been to in Guatemala. "The *best*

experience of my life,” she had said, and while I might have turned my eyes toward the girl, I was far too shy to interrupt their conversation. Shortly I returned my stare back to my economics book, much as I had done for most of my life, this bookish child studying at the kitchen table. When they stood up to leave, however, I felt words pressed into my tongue, and I moved to stand up. Instead the words tottered over the seashore of my mouth, and I stood motionless as the three girls exited the train. I closed my mouth over this inexplicable sense of yearning; I imagined my return to something or someplace or someone I had never known. I couldn’t get that encounter off my mind as I tried to study for final exams the following week. My normal academic discipline had succumbed to daydreams of this other place. I wasn’t sure what was going on, but for once in my life I wanted to do something about it. I hadn’t felt this way in years, not since I last saw my father sleeping naked on the living room floor.

I’ll never remember exactly what I said to Manuel – certainly nothing about my naked father – but I imagine it was scattered and disconnected, as had become the norm in my life, post-injury, this penchant for the winding roads and digressions through which we recover the past and piece our thinking selves back together again. Manuel thought it odd that I went to a college named after our first president. He said he knew about George Washington because a street in his hometown of San Cristóbal was named after him. He called it an *avenida*. I knew about *avenidas*, as I had spent much time along the Avenida George Washington in Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic, but when Manuel said it – Avenida George Washington – I thought it was the funniest thing I had ever heard. *Avenida George Washington!* I couldn’t stop laughing, and Manuel laughed with me until Nurse Thin-Lips appeared out of nowhere and told him he needed to go. Floors needed cleaning, she’d said. She looked at the two of us

as if we'd done something wrong, a look so full of judgment I remembered it long after she had left the room. She pushed more tiny orange pills into my hand and demanded me to swallow them in a voice so harsh I expected my ears to crumble. On his way out Manuel glared at her with a resolve so strong – tight jaw, fixed eyes – I thought her hair might burst into flames, the same look my mother gave the day she announced she was divorcing my father.

After hearing the girls' conversation on the train, my emotional vulnerability lasted beyond the spring semester and into my summer break in Florida, where I was reassembling displays at Eckerd Drug Stores. One afternoon my high school newspaper sponsor, Mrs. Craig, came into the Immokalee store with her Panamanian niece, who was visiting her for the summer. Ana and I became fast friends, and before long she had invited me to stay with her and her family in Panama when she returned at the end of July. I declined her offer at first, but then I remembered the girl on the train talking about Guatemala as if she were explaining what it felt like to fall in love for the first time. I'd visit Ana in Panama City, I decided, before moving on with her to her hometown of Santiago, three hours away, then take a bus north to Quetzaltenango in Guatemala, where I'd begin a six-week language program and be back in time for the fall semester.

In Panama everything changed. I tripped the light fantastic as the skin on my belly loosened and I returned to the same vulnerable, gregarious little boy I used to be. The Jimenez family home in Santiago offered a sanctuary I had never experienced. They accepted me as one of their own. We visited cousins in Colón, Santiago, and David; floated down the Cricamola River; toured the Panama Canal Zone; and brunchd at the fancy Sheraton Hotel in Panama City for three dollars and twenty-five cents. I'd never seen a table of fruit so opulent! I

laughed together with Ana and her friends on the nearby Isla del Rey as the tide trapped us on an inlet. Another time I told Sr. Jimenez that Ana had certainly *not* stayed with me and other male cousins in an apartment in downtown Panama City, although she certainly had! Her brother Tito and I lied to protect her honor (He, a seminary student studying to become a priest!). In return Ana told me that the teenage boy, Julio, who slept in the old maid's quarters behind the kitchen, was the son of her father, Sr. Jimenez, and a teenage maid they'd employed fifteen years earlier. Drama and intrigue. Love and loyalty. I was finally part of a real family.

I'll never forget the Orange Crush Julio bought for me after the neighborhood soccer game. That quarter was reserved for him, but it went to me instead. He looked up at me, shielding his eyes from the sun, told me it was a good time, I was good, and he wanted to give me his soda. I'd never seen a fourteen-year-old boy so nice – this Jamón, as they called him – always playing with the neighborhood kids like a big brother. He looked up at me with his soft brown eyes, a look of admiration I recalled from my younger sister, pleased to have an older playmate who, unlike the others, did not judge him or his mother. This Cristóbal of the blonde hair and funny American accent.

In those two short weeks in Panama, I realized that people liked me. It did not matter how I looked, what grades I earned in college, or how carefully I swallowed my emotions. It was expected as a guest that I would interact freely with the extended Jimenez family. It seemed I had no other choice. Yet what mattered most is the way this exchange felt reciprocal. In my journals I called it a “mutual recognition.” I felt cared for, especially by men, which made it easier to return such generosity. I had reoriented myself. What emerged was a young man looking forward to extending himself in space, as I hinted at in the following poem, “Canal Zone,” written in my journal in July, 1993:

*“Are you an American?”
I asked the fair-skinned man
only a few years older myself.
He turned around,
unconsciously flexing his biceps,
rubbed a hand across his short
blonde hair, and said “yes, I am.”*

*And so I unbuttoned
his shirt, pressed hard against
his inflated chest, took notice
of his stern demeanor,
and began, for the first time,
to make love to my country.*

I didn't want to leave Panama, especially all the friends I had made. Yet I also yearned to use this new emotional repertoire. The American soldier I imagined in Panama was a lot like me: short blonde hair, inflated chest, stern demeanor. Perhaps I had begun the process of loving myself. I finally understood and acknowledged my sexual attraction to men. Yet the sexual took a backseat to appreciating how these men cared for me on a physical and emotional level. While such interaction among family or friends may have been commonplace to Ana's cousins David or Juan Carlos, it was new to me. I was sad to leave all the people I had met, these family members I spoke of in my journal: Ana, Vicente, Yanelly, Ana, Tito, Fely, David, Juan Carlos, Louisa, Era, Sr. Jimenez, Mamá, Damarisa (maid in Panamá), Maruja (my favorite), Abraham (guy who owned the apt. in Panama City), Mercedes, Jasmine, and so many more. I should try to make one of those family trees of the Jimenez family, I wrote in my journal, later determining I'd have lots of time on the bus to Guatemala.

On the bus I thought of Ana's cousin David, an entry to whom I titled “To David-My Lover on his Horse.” Yet he was gone, and I was on my way north through Central America. For all my attractions in Panama, none of them escalated to a physical level. The most I'd done with David is feel his hand on my ass as he helped me mount his horse. Juan Carlos may have given me a hug as he left the bus station in Santiago.

That soon changed, however, three days later on the bus from Guatemala City to Quetzaltenango, where I first experienced that tangible touching of bodies. I met a young man

name Wily, who was about my age and wore black Rebooks and Ocean Pacific jeans. Wily was about 5 feet tall, I told Manuel that afternoon, and reminded me of him.

“Me?” he said, feigning surprise, his hand over his chest.

“Yes, you,” I smiled.

“You should tell me about him,” he answered, explaining to me again that he wanted to know everything about me.

Manuel’s cheekbones rose and set as he talked, as did Wily’s, and both possessed a copper skin tone so different from my own. A cross dangled from Wily’s neck much like the silver cross worn by Manuel. I told Manuel that I’d been overcharged for my bus ticket to Xela (as the locals called Quetzaltenango), and how I sat there fuming on the bus, my knees pressed against the side of the seat, my head broken against the bus window. I nodded as Wily sat down next to me, and although I may have attempted some conversation, the thing I remember most is Wily’s wide, pure smile. Before long, once we had left the station and were maneuvering our way through the city, I felt Wily’s head against my shoulder, and then across my body, his tiny hands resting over my chest.

It was then that Manuel imagined me young and strong, taking hold of my arm. “You had muscles,” he said, squeezing my arm. “Didn’t you?”

“I didn’t look like this before I came—” I looked down at my arm, wondering where the muscles had gone.

“No, no,” Manuel interrupted, waving a finger in front of me. “Tell me about the boy. The boy on the bus.”

I remember that boy because I associate him with two Mariah Carey hits – “I don’t Want to Cry” and “Vision of Love” – two songs continually playing from my Walkman

cassette player on the bus from Panama City to Quetzaltenango. Occasionally I hear the songs again, and I'm instantly transported to the place where our bodies first touched, Wily's soft body against my own. I wanted to stay that way forever, I told Manuel, who nodded silently and continued rubbing lotion over my skin. I'm not sure now if I ever finished the story, but at least I have the journal entry to substantiate my feelings:

He isn't much more than five feet tall, and he is definitely Indian. He wore black Reeboks and even had Ocean Pacific jeans. We talked about places I should see in the country, as well as music, our families, and my trip so far. Although I only understood about one half of our conversation, I could sense his sincerity and genuine interest. What I remember most is that he fell asleep on my shoulder; it was as if he was telling me I was welcome here. I should not be afraid to touch and be touched. With him on my shoulders, the soft sounds of music on my Walkman, and the beautiful, rising pine trees outside, I didn't care about the price of my bus ticket. I just wanted to stay like I was for the next four hours. – August 9, 1993

I understand now that Wily was an omen. He forced me to loosen up my hard body so he could more comfortably relax. His small hands felt nice resting on my thighs. I remember the way his hair tickled the side of my neck.

Others touched me in Guatemala, too, especially my host family and a German I called by his Spanish name, Estéban. Carlos and Chiqui were a young married couple with two children, Hans, and Wilhelm (Billy). The kids were named for Chiqui's German side of the family, yet the boys looked like their father Carlos, light skin with pointed chins. Both were skinny, particularly five-year old Billy. I'd pick him up to lift him over mud piles on the street. It was like lifting a blanket, the way he nearly flew out of my hands. Nothing but bones and that brown striped shirt. I remember how his parents would yell at him in Spanish: “*Cóme Billy, cóme Billy. Cóme!*” Eat Billy; Eat Billy; Eat! But he'd sit there with his sullen look sliding soggy corn flakes through the opening blocked only by his one front tooth. During lunch and dinner the family and I talked about what happened during the day or what was going on the

next day. They talked slowly and enunciated almost every word; if they thought I didn't know a word, they would always stop and ask. Even the kids did their best to talk slowly.

As in Panama, I was expected to become part of the family. Most mornings I took Billy up Calle Rodolfo to the nearby sports complex to meet his dad and play games with his father's students. The Indian woman behind the counter (I did not yet know the troubled history of the word "Indian" and therefore used it to refer to local people) smiled an affectionate smile and laughed a little as she gave us two cupcakes. Billy led me through a dirt road surrounded by a small corn field, which these Indian men and women tended with hoes and rakes. I took Billy's free hand (the other being occupied with a cupcake) as we crossed the street, reprising my role of big brother I had left behind in Florida. We played three innings of baseball with Carlos's students, whose batting stances resembled someone about to swat flies. I inched the boys into proper position, and a few of them even made contact with the ball. Together we cheered.

The boys were better at soccer, but not nearly as bloodthirsty as the Panamanians I'd seen or the boys back in the United States. Some of these children in Xela wore homemade shoes. They played with such joy, seemingly disinterested in the competitiveness I'd noticed in Panama and in the United States. I wonder now about their Indian-ness, that sense of community growing from the economic and political displacement suffered by Indians in Central America and Southern Mexico. High cheekbones. Dark skin. Full lips. Not Indians, but indigenous men like Manuel and Wily. Short dark men with brown eyes like my father. Not me, whose lean body and fair skin resembles my mother's Russian-Polish ancestry, unlike my father's more suspect Slovak and Turkish roots. In the end we all walked home together:

Carlos, Hans, Billy and I, Billy nervously telling me not to tell his father about the cupcake. I told little Billy not to worry. It was our little secret!

The first time I fell in love was with a German guy traveling through Guatemala: Estéban. Estéban wore his bangs so long that he pushed them aside and over his forehead. In his bulky traveling backpack he saved space for a hairdryer. He wore glasses, but on him they looked sexy and sophisticated, as I wrote in my journal: *The glasses that rest like a foggy daybreak and the lips that part in a puff*. He taught me how to drink tequila and roll the letter “r” off my tongue as if flicking a pair of dice. On certain nights in cold Quetzaltenango, when we were both far too drunk to leave each other, I would pull the wool blanket over our heads in the bed we shared, and we would talk half the night. He’d tell me how he’d been to Cuba and fallen in love with mulatto women. How every time he sips a cup of coffee it reminds him of Agata. I liked hearing about the women he loved. It meant he could feel love, and maybe one day he could feel it for me too. The last time I saw him was out a bus window outside Tegucigalpa, he waving and smiling, his bangs hanging over the side of his face. I remember how he hoisted his drooping backpack atop his shoulders and threw his lit cigarette into the street. A small boy behind him tugged at his backpack, but then the bus turned the corner and Estéban was gone.

Stop the stop

¿que es ese ruido?

Por favor the noise the noise

Deja de hacer ese ruido!

FUCK FUCK FUCK ME FUCK

EL RUIDO (The noise!)

EL RUIDO (The noise!)

EL RUIDO (The noise!)

EL RUIDO

EL RUIDO

EL RUIDO

Day 7

The next morning I awoke to Nurse Thin-Lips standing over my bed with another man in black, thick-rimmed eyeglasses wearing a stethoscope around his neck. The two of them spoke in whispers, and I could tell by the man's tightly-contained lips and fixed expression that this was probably the annoyed doctor Manuel had warned me about. It might even have been the same man standing over my bed when I'd originally woken up. His puffy, frosted grey hair looked like something Farah Fawcett might wear in *Charlie's Angels*. He walked around the back of my bed toward the X-rays hanging darkly in the corner, while the nurse wheeled a large metal apparatus in front of me. She looked at the doctor, who was walking toward us with a large x-ray in his hand, and then flipped up a metal switch that lit up the plastic screen atop the machine. I was hoping, instead, they'd tell me something about the noise in my head or explain all the beeping around me. Everything sounded so loud! The doctor moved to her side and placed the x-ray on top of the light. While I wouldn't call the movement a dance, it was orchestrated enough so neither lost a step nor wasted any physical or emotional energy. I returned my gaze to the light in front of me and the profile of someone's head, presumably mine.

"As you can see," the doctor began in English, pointing at the x-ray. "You have a large fracture here." He moved his pen toward a grey object somewhere in the back of this disembodied skull. I didn't see what he was pointing at, but focused instead on the extreme whiteness of the bone, not simply a light color against the dark background, but a brilliant crayon white. The wholeness impressed me, this x-ray's ability to filter through the white noise – the tendons, ligaments and cartilage, all that flesh – and get to the center of things.

“Do you see it?” the doctor said, pointing again. “Do you see the crack?”

He slid the entire apparatus closer to me and asked again.

I reached out to touch the x-ray, its surface smooth against my hand in contrast to the hitch and stop of flesh.

“And here,” he said, taking down the profile x-ray and replacing it with a head-on view. “You can see we have a pooling of the blood.” He pointed to the front of my head, my actual head, the tip of his pen grazing my forehead.

I looked past him at the giant white mass of brain on the screen in front of me.

“These are from a couple of days after the injury,” he continued, returning his gaze to the x-ray. “That the blood was still there is quite revealing.”

“A couple of days?”

“Yes.”

“So—”

“I wasn’t at the *Hospital General*,” he quickly interrupted. “So I’m not sure why it took them so long.”

“So long?”

“To x-ray you.”

I stared at the x-ray, and for the first time I considered the gravity of what might have happened. I knew I hurt, obviously, but I hadn’t yet considered why. He went on to tell me the temporal bone is the hardest bone in the human body.

“Uh-huh,” I said, tapping my forehead. “Up here.”

“Well . . . no, um, not there.” He replaced the x-ray with the side view, touched its surface, and returned his vision to me. “Here,” he continued, reaching out over me and

pointing at the side of my head. Then he ran his finger in full circles and up and down the length of my head. He paused before backing away from the bed and continuing his assessment.

If my injury had been a little more to the right, he said, my brain could have been damaged. “Like a stroke,” he added. “Your motor skills might have been compromised.”

“As in speaking?” I asked, imagining my friend’s mentally retarded brother.

“Speaking, yes,” said the doctor. “But also the facial nerve.”

“Facial nerve?”

“Yes.” He stiffened his posture and simulated a facial tic by stretching his jaw and quickly jutting out his head to the side. There he stood with elongated face and neck craning like an aquatic bird, telling me I could have suffered partial facial paralysis.

“Wow.”

“Still might,” he said.

I jerked my jaw from side to side and touched the bristly facial hair along my chin. I asked him again why it took so long to get an x-ray.

“So long?”

“Yes. You said a couple of days.”

He switched off the machine and tucked his pen back into his white coat pocket. “Ah, yes,” he said, buttoning his jacket carefully. “Most temporal bone fractures involve simultaneous intracranial injuries.”

I stayed motionless because I had no idea what he was talking about. My head shook slightly, which he must have noticed.

“What this means,” the doctor began, removing his pen from his jacket, “is that

they probably had to worry about other stuff first, like the blood pooling in your brain.” He poked at the front of my head with his pen. “You are very lucky,” he added, nodding and saying the same to the nurse in Spanish until she returned his nod. “Very lucky.”

Lucky? I certainly didn’t feel lucky.

“If everything is fine,” I asked. Then what’s this noise in my ear?

Without hesitating, the doctor answered “Yes,” he had heard it was quite impossible to keep me quiet at the San Miguel General Hospital. He must have been thinking about someone else, I reasoned, the flashbacks so amorphous I wasn’t sure what or who to believe. I’ve never been a burden on anyone.

“Screaming and screaming about the pain or other nonsense. We’re in a hospital,” he continued, peering over at the nurse, then back at me. “Even the public hospitals have rules, you know.” He chuckled as he said it, although this time Nurse Thin-Lips didn’t mirror his reaction.

I wondered about this man of whom they spoke. What did he have to do with me?

“Just the worst little trouble maker,” continued the doctor. He flashed his teeth as he smiled at the nurse, whose freckled face registered a flatter, tempered smirk. All the while the beeping from outside the door – or inside, I really couldn’t tell which – seemed to be getting louder.

“That noise,” I said, shifting my body toward the door. “What’s the—”

“Payment,” interrupted the doctor as if I weren’t speaking. “We still need to discuss this matter of the bill.”

“I have the money,” I shouted in Spanish. “The money. The money. I have it.”

“No need to—”

“I. Have. The. Money.”

Nurse Thin-Lips had changed from fidgeting with the bed to standing side by side with the doctor, an allegiance I found distasteful.

“Yes,” began the doctor. “We have your credit card.” He looked at the nurse and appeared to laugh again. “If we could just authorize—”

“No,” I interrupted, sitting up and shoving the metal apparatus across the room. “Tell me about this fucking noise.” I jerked my arm forward even though no one held me back. “Tell me why the beeps and buttons are so loud, but why I can’t fucking hear you, doctor. Can you tell me that?”

The doctor backed away from my bed, but the nurse came closer as if she were about to slap me. I’ll slap her first! As I raged, the noise grew louder in my ear.

“I just want to get out of here,” I screamed, pulling the gown straps over my head to free myself. “Can someone get me out of here?”

The annoyed expression never left the nurse’s face, but she backed away from me long enough for the doctor to inch closer and extend a hand across my shoulder just as I had risen out of my bed.

“We went over this before,” he began. You have to be released to someone. You can’t just walk out.” He leaned over to the nurse, and spoke to her in Spanish as if I didn’t understand. “But you’re not wanted here.”

I’d never before been looked at like that. I imagined myself a rabid dog, yet the man’s expression held more disgust than fear. Exhausted, I cradled my face into my hands and sat down on the edge of the bed. I stayed that way until I heard Manuel’s soothing voice, his arms over my shoulders.

“Here, here, Cristóbal,” he began. “It’s time for your nap.” From the space between my folded arms I watched him nod at both the doctor and nurse, who left after Manuel told them to print out my hospital bill. He waited until they both had left before shutting the door.

“Not making many friends, are you?”

“No,” I said, a surprising chuckle falling from my lips as I lay down and grabbed the back of my head. “It hurts again.”

Manuel reached his hand toward my head but stopped.

“Come to the bathroom,” he said, wiping his hands on his gown. “I am going to wash your hair.” He stood between me and the bathroom door. “It seems no one cares much for you.”

I waited for him to help me off my bed, but he didn’t move any closer.

“Come,” he repeated, his brown eyes looking earnest and serious.

“But I—”

“I know how much you like it when,” he began, moving toward the bathroom, but looking back at me, “when I wash your hair.”

Right he was, but stubborn was I. I hesitated before curling out of bed and placing one foot on the floor.

“You can do it,” Manuel cheered, a few steps ahead of me. “Come.”

I slid both feet off the bed and gripped the railings. The bathroom was only a few yards away, but it might have been miles. I took a step forward and surprised myself by not falling down. I repeated the process until I reached the bathroom.

“Sit,” Manuel finally said once I had arrived. “Not everyone has the luxury of a private room.”

I looked at the red plastic chair that I now noticed was cracked and faded. “You say ‘luxury’ like I should be so excited,” I responded, sitting in the chair and facing the mirror this time. “Have you seen me?”

“Oh, I’ve seen you,” Manuel answered. “I’ve seen you and heard you and wiped down your dick. I’ve definitely *seen* you.”

“I didn’t mean to—”

“Shush.”

From his uniform he pulled out a purple bottle of shampoo with pink lettering and a photo of a smiling blonde woman whipping her hair every which way. “An old lady left this last week,” he said, wetting my hair with a damp towel and squeezing shampoo into his hands. “But I don’t think I’d like my wife as a blonde,” he continued, smiling and pointing at the woman on the bottle. We made eye contact as I leaned my head back in the chair.

“Never imagined I’d be using it on you,” he concluded, softly working his hands through my hair. He continued speaking, but I could not hear. The noise had overtaken my every waking thought, and I was many months away from describing it as something as soft as a seashore or visualizing my nephew in the sand lapping guava paste from my fingertips. The noise! The noise! The noise!

I knew bad things would happen to me in Mexico, I told Manuel after he’d finished washing my hair, the day I hit a red Volkswagen in Reynosa and drove away. Karma’s a bitch, I reminded him, saying it twice because it felt so nice to say it in Spanish: *Karma es una mierda*. *Karma es una mierda!* I eased myself from his grip around my waist and into the red plastic

chair he'd moved from the bathroom into the corner of the room and watched him strip the bed sheets while I told him some version of this story:

A young woman with gorgeous blonde curls hopped out of her *Passat* and rushed to the back of her car, distressed, nearly catching her long straight pants in her heels. Probably on her way to work. Her cheeks were polished over with pink rouge, and she paced back and forth, back and forth, with a dazed expression on her face. I noticed her navy blue blouse with darker lace around the collar. I exited my car, which was behind her *Passat*, and nearly converged with her as she bent over to look at her rear bumper and back tire. Under different circumstances we might be friends.

I waved my hand toward a small side street ahead of us.

"It's better if we talk over there," I told her in Spanish. "Away from all the traffic."

I pointed at the street again. She nodded, and I drove to the corner and waited. I knew that in Mexico they sometimes impound cars after traffic accidents. Did my insurance cover damage over the border? A few more seconds passed. To my right an old woman shuffled by with a cane and tiny purse. I took another sip of my beer. What would I tell the nicely-curved young woman once she rounded the corner? What would I do?

I drove away.

I started slowly, as if pulling into a parking space, but then I turned left at the next street and sped through a neighborhood. A kaleidoscope of colors whizzed by me, painted homes with iron bars, corner stores with chipped paint and fading signs, pay phones covered in graffiti. I obsessively checked my rearview mirror. Someone was coming to get me! Finally I made it back to the main road and the morning rush of cars waiting to cross into Texas. Each speed bump reminded me of my transgression. I checked behind me. Along the

sidewalks merchants hawked carved figurines and leather belts. A woman carried a large metal board with fruit-shaped magnets attached. Rows of watermelons and tiny peaches stared accusingly into my car window. A man selling plaster green iguanas smiled. I grabbed 25 pesos from my glove compartment and prepared my exit tax. I'm not the man I appeared to be. My legs trembled. The coins teetered in my hand. When I approached the booth, the man barely looked up at me. I had fooled him. He handed me a receipt and a five peso coin. I crossed the bridge into the United States. More cars. More speed bumps.

The guard on the American side of the bridge told me my license had expired. Did I have any other form of identification? *Look at me*, I said, *I'm as American as apple pie*. I stared at my reflection in the guard's silver sunglasses. Did I have another form of identification? No. And suddenly I imagined myself trapped in this no-man's land, the space between who I imagined myself to be and what I had become. Perhaps the young woman with the perfect curls called the police. I couldn't go back.

Just look at me, I repeated.

The border officer took off his sunglasses. His eyes were brown as old pennies. He rest one arm against my rolled-down window and peered inside my car. His eyes paused over the empty beer cans and bottle of *Presidente* brandy in my backseat. Beside me, several women carried bags of stuffed animals through the pedestrian entrance. A yellow Tweety Bird hit the pavement. I waited for the women to turn around. The officer walked back to his booth. A few moments later he returned, handed me my license, and asked how much I'd been drinking.

"I, uh . . . came to see a movie and—"

He interrupted me, told me he didn't care. "Just as long as you're a U.S. citizen," he said.

"Of course."

"But watch out for the cops in Pharr," he continued as I slowly rolled up my window. "They can be a bitch."

Behind me the calm Rio Grande River faded in the distance. A young woman with beautiful curls tells her parents about the American man who hit her car and drove away. Her father will smooth her hair and make things right because he knows how these things work: karma's a bitch and the man will get what's coming to him. Tomorrow his daughter will pull those curls tighter than normal and curse the drunken man who promised her something and left.

"So I think that girl did this to me," I told Manuel after finishing my story. I looked down at my body. "Did *this* to me."

I waited for some burst of wisdom, but instead he asked me what I was doing on the border.

"It's where I live," I said.

"In Reynosa?"

"On the other side, in McAllen."

"So you're a Tejano," he answered, stripping off the last of my bed sheets. "I should have known."

I smiled from my seat in the plastic chair beneath the hanging x-rays.

"A Tejano with emerald eyes."

It felt nice to hear something good about my body, particularly from Manuel, a man I'd grown to trust and depend on. It might even have authenticated me on some level; I'd never been mistaken for a Texas-Mexican.

"Yes," I said. "Emerald eyes."

"So you think that girl had something to do with your undoing?"

"My what?"

"Your unraveling," he answered, turning toward me.

"Not her. The way I handled her."

"Handled her?"

"What I did to her," I answered.

Manuel wiped down the mattress with his hand. "It's just how some of you Americans act with us." He unfolded a new sheet in his arms while standing up and facing me. "I hope you like orange," he said. "I thought you could use some more energy in here."

"Thank you, Manuel."

"You know . . . that's the first time you've used my name," he continued, wrapping the sheets around the bed and smoothing out the creases. "I used to work in an American-style retirement home," he continued. "All the old Americans taking the benefits of our health-care system. We make, say, a few bucks an hour compared to *what* in the United States?" He looked at me for an answer.

"More," I quickly responded, embarrassed by my country's excesses. Embarrassed by my own. "A lot more."

"And we clean their beds and rub their legs and make sure it's all smiles and our practiced English: 'Good Morning, Sr. Jones!' So Sr. Jones and his old bat wife giggle and

giggle at these people, these *kind Mexicans*, who really just are the best they've ever seen, and *oh my goodness*, let me buy you a few drinks, Mr-whatever-your-name-is, for happy hour, yes a few happy hour drinks, the siestas you Mexicans like, so it's all *ha ha ha ha ha has* and *ja ja ja ja ja jas*, and then I go back to my cement and brick little house with bars on the windows and dogs on the roof and women hawking chicken eggs to feed their children or sewing buttons for next-to nothing for rich old American women with stiff cardigans and hair-spray hair."

I figured it was best to let Manuel finish. I'd never seen him so animated.

"So I know why you didn't stop and tell her you were sorry. You stopped and left, stopped and left, and you know why it is?"

"Because I don't care," I blurted out much louder and quicker than I expected. I'd become the American I was warned about. "I didn't care about the Mexican people."

"What?" Manuel shot back quickly, jutting out his head in an awkward motion, then offering me his hand to lead me back into bed. "Now that's funny."

"But you said—"

"You didn't stay," he continued, pulling back the sheet for me, "because you were scared. Because you didn't know what the fuck the Mexican police might do to you. Scared and maybe embarrassed."

"Yeah, embarrassed," I agreed, a bit tired after my ten foot trek of shuffled steps back into bed. "But not by my driving."

"No," he agreed, "not by your driving." I remained quiet. "But by whatever is was that drove you there in the first place. And let me tell you, it wasn't a car."

"Not a car," I repeated, too tired to fully engage, but aware how Manuel was connecting dots I'd only recently realized were even on the page.

“No one moves to the border unless they’re from there or passing through on their way to somewhere else.”

“But I lived—”

“You were going the wrong way. You ended up going—”

“They call it the ‘Rio Grande Valley,’ I interrupted. “Where I live.”

“You can change the name all you want,” he continued, his voice raising. “Change our river from the Rio Bravo to the Rio Grande if you want. I’m not from the north anyway. But I know for some reason you crossed the river that night and you made it to this ‘Rio Grande Valley’ for probably the same reason.”

Miguel gathered phlegm with a lengthy hock in the back of his throat and spit forcefully into the knee-length trashcan next to the door. I remember because some of it landed on the wall.

“And if you figure out why that is,” he finished, wiping his lips with the side of his white sleeve, you’ll probably figure out how the fuck you got here and what the fuck you were doing.”

Manuel was right. I’d never been called out like that before, and I wondered what had happened between my idealistic coming-of-age crushes in the Central American Highlands to a man sipping beer and brandy tucked inside the border during eight a.m. rush hour, a man who’d leave a pretty young woman to fend for herself with a bent back fender dripping indigo in the middle of *Álvaro Obregon* street. Yet I wanted Manuel to like me. I needed him to understand that I wasn’t such a bad guy.

So I was happy later that morning when Manuel entered my room and asked about Estéban, the German I had fallen in love with in Guatemala.

“So you cared very much for this, uh, this Estéban, no?”

I shifted gelatin in my mouth as if gargling tapioca pearls.

“And the other boy, too, that one on the bus?” I was flattered by Manuel’s probing questions.

“Yes, I did,” I said. “I liked them both very much.”

Manuel nodded and scooped me another spoonful of red gelatin.

I’d been thinking about why I moved to the Texas border in response to Manuel’s observations. Then I realized I’d been finding a way to visit Latin America or find Latinos in the United States since the moment I stepped foot on Panamanian soil.

After the language school in Guatemala, I made the return trek south to Panama and boarded a plane to Cartagena, Colombia, where I began my 3 months traveling through South America. I dropped off the golden yellow suitcase I’d used earlier at Ana’s place in Panama City and purchased a backpack similar to the ones I’d seen the Europeans, such as Estéban, carrying on their “holiday” travels in Central America. My university agreed to “freeze” my scholarship for a semester, and my father agreed to continue paying me the \$300 a month he had sent my first two years of college.

Like most travelers, I experienced the highs and lows of constant arrival. In Cartagena, street vendors cut and squeezed oranges into bowls before funneling the juice into plastic baggies punctuated with colorful straws. I marveled at their efficiency and beauty. Moments later I exchanged dollars for Colombian pesos with a man in a back alley instead of at the bank,

as my *Lonely Planet* guide book warned me *never* to do, and as vigilant as I imagined myself to be, the man slipped and folded purple Colombian pesos bills so quickly that I emerged happily, then horrified, down the street not with the 100 dollars I had traded, but 17 dollars' worth of Colombian money. I narrowly missed bus hijackings in Calí, but arrived on a foggy Saturday morning on a pilgrimage to the Santuario de las Lajas, the awe-inspiring cathedral spanning the distance between two mountains and over the Guaítara River. My nineteen-year-old self could barely contain his excitement:

The road from Ipiales to el Santuario de las Lajas provides a most curious sight: a seemingly countless number of people running or jogging along the mountainside, and through the valley to the cathedral. They looked like they were running from an erupting earthquake! The church itself is simply astonishing – Gothic in design and nestled above a deep valley between two towering green mountains. Inside the church is a giant rock, the side of the mountain really, which is said to have contained an image of the Virgen Mary. The singing filled the valley with holiness and only a devilish soul could not feel the presence of God. Needless to say, the inhabitants of Ipiales are physically fit, and it was hard to keep my eyes off such nice legs. Outside the church, nailed or stuck or taped to the rocks were thousands of plaques and signs thanking the Virgen Mary for some type of miracle. It was truly a holy Sunday morning that will remain in my memory forever. – October 18, 1993

Ecuador brought the runs at a bus-stop bathroom, my legs firmly-planted in the cement footprints and my buttocks hovering over the hole in the ground as foul-smelling feces collected around my ankles and vomit leaked violently, then casually, from my mouth and forward onto my body. Outside the stall the bus driver waited, asking if I needed anything and passing me a bottle of water under the bathroom stall.

“For your mouth and your shoes,” he laughed, mentioning that the other passengers had agreed to wait.

As in Guatemala, people went out of their way to help me. I stayed in a private home in Trujillo, Peru, invited by a Chilean man I had met on the bus on his way home from Quito. As

I traveled further south in Peru to Lima, the men became darker, shorter, and more muscular. I noted this in my journals, particularly their friendly dispositions:

Men bond very easily in these countries with a high indigenous population. On the bus from Quito I sat next to a man a few years older than myself; he was well-dressed and wore a gold watch and rings. Since the seats were so small, it was almost impossible not to touch each other in some way or another. There are those types of people who become sheerly [sic] terrified in these types of situations. They tighten up, squeeze their legs together, have trouble breathing and altogether become a lump of trembling fear. I used to be that way. This was, however, not the case this time. I don't believe we made eye contact even once, but there was a type of friendliness in the way we each allowed our legs and arms to touch other without the least bit of conflict or nervousness. Again, it was as if he was welcoming me to Ecuador by allowing me to unite with its people. He made a point to say goodbye, nod his head, and smile. That unspoken tenderness was there and it felt truly genuine. Sometimes I really need that. – October 22, 1993

In Lima, taxi drivers became the object of my erotic fantasies, and I was pleased to receive a handsome driver's strong hands over my shoulders or rest my leg against dark-skinned men on long bus trips as had happened in Ecuador. In Arequipa, Peru I was shown to my hotel room by a stout young indigenous man with dimples and robust black hair, a man I consciously realized my attraction to as he sat on the bed and talked with me about the city:

In Arequipa, I stayed at the Hotel Ejercito, appropriately named since the place was filled with young, virulent, brown-skinned men. One of the inhabitants was a shy indigenous youth, about my age, that seemed to take an interest in my travels. He had the exact indigenous attributes that I had come to admire – shy, humble countenance; wide smile; short, but perfectly proportioned body; and a chest of liquid gold. He told me I should rest a bit since I seemed tired, and that we would talk again later. Once again I decided this was going to be the night, and I prepared myself ostensibly for the symphony, but in reality for him. My willingness is beginning to become more than a little apparent, like when I touched his stomach, although I made it seem more like a friendly gesture than an invitation. Unfortunately when I returned from the symphony, he was nowhere to be seen, and I was just too tired to continue waiting. I left the light on while I slept, so he would know I was inside. But it made no difference. – November 12, 1993

After I'd arrived in South America, I figured out how to travel for three months on the limited income my father provided. If I were ever to get laid, I realized, I owed it to my father. My hotel rooms were more like boarding houses, most costing less than five dollars a night. I tried staying in youth hostels, as Estéban had introduced to me, but I preferred to be closer to these men I found so attractive, and not the European travelers smoking weed (as they all seemed to be doing) on holiday. My rooms, therefore, were located on the seedier parts of town: Bosa in Bogotá, for example, or Comayaguela instead of Tegucigalpa. I became the atypical tourist, as I figured out local public transit systems or ate from street vendors for as little as 50 cents a meal. I ate Ceviche along the northern Peruvian coast with a group of primary school children after we finished touring the Chan Chan ruins and sat, a month later, on brick streets with other Uruguayans warming our hands around a mug of mate in the traditional calabash gourd and silver straw. I don't know if I appreciated or understood how privileged I was to take such a journey, as my youthful self and sense of adventure contrasted with older, more financially-secure tourists, about whom much of the touristic literature speaks and against which I'd begun to measure my experiences after I'd returned to graduate school. At the time, however, I knew little of that and merely wanted to 1. Find a cheap hotel 2. Eat a meal that wouldn't make me sick and 3. Get laid. It's hard to feel "privileged" when you're scraping oats out of a tin cup with your finger, afraid you've wasted your six dollar-a-day food allowance without eating any eggs for a third day in a row. I'd not yet heard of Peggy McIntosh's invisible knapsack, where white privilege is supposedly contained.

After Peru I continued south to Chile and across to Argentina, two much-more expensive countries. I paid \$18 a night for a bed and breakfast in Santiago, Chile, after nearly collapsing in Santiago from what I assumed was altitude-induced asthma. My well-being was

supervised by a teenage girl, the daughter of the bed and breakfast owners, who made me bread and coffee each morning, taking the time to spread jam on the bread and mix my coffee exactly as I liked it before bringing up the tray to my room. Soon I traveled to Florianopolis, Brazil, where I met a young Brazilian who took me to the town's beaches and invited me into his small apartment, where we shared a bed for two nights. I still have the pictures I took along the beach, and I am shocked by the amount of weight I lost along the way. A photo of me standing below and mimicking Rio de Janeiro's Christ the Redeemer statue, where the 100-foot tall cement Jesus stands, arms spread, 2400 feet into the air atop Corcovado Mountain, reveals just how thin I had become, my arms like toothpicks and the outline of my ribs visible beneath my shirt. It's a position I hoped never to revisit, that emaciated frame I'd left behind as a child, but returned to later in San Miguel de Allende, my arms on most days palms up and spread wide against the bed rails.

I continued my trip with stays in Paraguay and Bolivia, surprised by the number of Koreans in Asunción and the relative ease in which I approached and entered the presidential palace. In Bolivia I acquired my fondness for cow-heart kebabs topped with a broiled potato and the delicacy of French fries covered in mayonnaise, the latter of which I still enjoy.

I returned through Bolivia to Lima, where I met a group of friends, including two Peruvian girls, Mia and Maria. I was surrounded by a group of Lima's elite, including a sculptor who now lives in Paris, an indigenous guitar player, and a cocaine-sniffing painter. Joining this group was Maria, my initial friend Mia, and a few other Peruvians. The rest of the world was represented by a Swiss mechanic, a German tourist, and two more Americans besides myself, one a woman from California who made strange faces. Maria and I bonded instantly as we passed the night dancing to both Andean and more "Westernized" beats. Both

her and Mia (“the incredible, dark-skinned, dark-haired, red-smiling goddess of charity, chastity, and style,” as I wrote in my journal) thought I was a good dancer, which probably owed itself to my lugubrious mental state. For once I was drunk! Maria and I locked arms as we moved along, about 1:30 a.m., to a reggae club down the street. Then someone knocked on the bathroom door. I opened it and said “*un momentito*,” or just a minute.

He knocked again, so I opened the door and let him in. I opened the door for my lover and he invited me to share a beer with he and his friends. Although he was noticeably drunk, something about the way he stared at me told me about his intentions. I understood nothing he said, save his eyes and that occasional smile. I can still feel his strong hands around the back of my neck, bringing my head forward to speak into my ear. His fingers are forever rustling against the end of my hair. I remember thinking that if I died in this position, my head like a football in his arms, I would be content. But I had to return to Maria, although the dancing had become unbearable. I didn't want her when he told me he was leaving. I said, “que lástima.” But I decided to go also, or at least I wanted too [sic]. The others were suspicious of him, I don't know why they were watching us. I went outside, and they soon followed. A group of new friends wondering my intentions, concerned with my safety.

“Do you love him?” one of my new friends said jokingly. Maria watched out of the corner of her eye, waiting for my reaction. My first time shouldn't be with a drunk, while drunk, especially when he could even be trying to rob me. He certainly looked like the suspicious type but a night in his arms would have been wonderful, might have given me something to fantasize about until I break down again and search for a quiet refuge with a soft chest and strong, deliberate thighs, like his. –November 9, 1993

I rely on such journals now to substantiate what I remembered feeling all those years ago. My journal entries confirm my innocence and earnestness, my fragile longing to weave intimate with a man I found attractive. I became more and more vulnerable as the trip continued, willing to put myself in nearly any position for the possibility of intimacy: *my restlessness is so encompassing that I actually wandered around the dangerous streets of Palmo looking for someone to talk to . . . and considering there's no lock on my hotel room door – the little girl in blue wandered in yesterday asking if I could give her any clothes – I'm a little worried that*

someone might enter my room this evening. Although, depending on who it is, I might not ask them to leave.

I wanted Manuel to know I was poor like him, staying in fetid hostels in the worst side of town, where my own security was threatened both inside private quarters and outside in the streets. I wanted him to know I was no well-off tourist. I thought he might like my younger self.

I piece together my story today just as I attempted to do in San Miguel. I wish I could have shown Manuel my journal entries; then I'd be sure that he believed me, or at the least honored the emotions of which I wrote. But even then, at nineteen, I recognized the fragility of my own dreams: *Happiness is ephemeral, that fleeting moment when a flower arranges itself to the sun as in a painting, a glance at the stranger who disappears, the initial burst of chocolate. Happiness is soon overcome by a cold Ecuadorian wind that sends it slicing in all directions. The remaining task is to pick up all the salvageable pieces.*

In any event, I returned home a virgin in January having lost 30 pounds, but gaining an experience that would change my life forever, and set in motion a life that pointed me towards the hospital bed in San Miguel, the place I'd been destined to end up. Even in the hasty unions and departures of travel, I learned to talk freely with strangers and consume each minute as if it were our last. Many of my most memorable friendships on my travels lasted merely a day or two, yet these souls have not gone forgotten. Likewise, no longer was I physically guarded; instead, I welcomed a tired thigh against my legs or a handsome cab driver's rough hands along my shoulders. I wanted more, however, and as I practiced falling in love with men, particularly in my journals, I was preparing myself for the romanticized and eroticized mutual recognition that I craved. The teenage boy who became numb as a way to preserve his own emotional

well-being had opened up. A crack had surfaced; no longer was I so stable and composed.

“The sleep had lasted for centuries,” I wrote in my journal, a quote from the book I was reading by the famous Filipino patriot Jose Rizal, “but one day the thunderbolt struck, and in striking, infused life.”

¿Por qué los susurros?

Siempre los susurros!

Susurros . . .

Sussuros . . .

Sussuros . . .

Stop the gossip!

SUSURROS (Whispers!)

SUSSUROS (Whispers!)

SUSSUROS (Whispers!)

Ay!

Ay!

Ay!

A good man

I am

Day 8

However the thunderbolt had previously infused me with life, it was now siphoning that same life out of me after more than a week in bed. I hadn't seen Manuel all morning, and Nurse Thin-Lips dropped my dry toast and jelly on the table next to me as if I were a contemptible French revolutionary off to the guillotine. I'd expected, perhaps, some attempt at solemnity. I reached over for the bread but noticed the pain in my wrist was worsening. I gave up trying to spread the jelly across the toast, which I noticed was Rye for the first time, and broke off a piece of bread, which I matted in the plate of jelly and shoved into my mouth. I hadn't eaten much on my own, nor did anything seem to have much taste, a situation most likely attributed to my inability to smell – which I still hadn't noticed – but equally owing to the very exhaustion of chewing. I was hardly the prodigal son or daughter down in the Lowcountry for a feast. I was worried, too, that I couldn't quite remember what I'd told Manuel about that first trip to South America. I'd had no journals to aid my recollection in the hospital bed, so God only knows what came out of my mouth. I only know I wanted him to like me, as I've said many times, and perhaps I emphasized my enthusiasm for the Andean countries too much after hearing Manuel was from Chiapas, a place I had never been to, but whose people, primarily indigenous like Manuel, were looked down upon with the same contempt the Peruvians of Spanish heritage reserved for their indigenous Quechuans. I wondered how Manuel made it north to San Miguel in the first place.

Around noon Manuel arrived in his street clothes. It was the first time I'd seen him without his white uniform. He wore blue jeans and a white tank top under a black long-sleeved shirt rolled up at the wrists. His shirt collar hung loosely around his neck, his silver cross

nestled beneath the delicate cartilage of his neck. Behind it a larger, thick silver necklace rest along the shores of his clavicle. He reached over and took a piece of toast.

“Ay, Cristobal,” he began, engulfing the bread in what seemed like one giant gulp.

“What have we here? Not eating today?”

“I was . . .”

But before I could answer he wiped something, probably grape jelly, from the corner of my mouth.

“I take that back,” he continued, sucking on his finger as he walked toward the window.

“So you’re not working today?”

“I am,” he said, turning around. “Sort of.” He pulled apart a brownish yellow curtain and held it open to the side of the window. “Maybe some light in here,” he continued. “You could use some light.” His voice was more melodious than usual, sing-songy, and I noticed by the uneven hair around his neck and face that he hadn’t shaved, which made his face seem exceptionally large for some reason, emerging as it seemed from a cave or deep slumber. His teeth protruded more than I’d noticed before and looked sharp as swords. But I could tell he was in a good mood by the swagger in his step and the carefree way he had snatched up my toast. I wanted to tell him one more story, an important story. I trusted Manuel with stories I thought he might understand.

Fuck, it was cold! Along the shores of Lake Atítlan, two hours south from the language school in Xela, I lay huddled on a dirt floor with my new friend Estéban. Our teenage guide Pedro told us we’d be sleeping there for the night. I was so in love with Estéban I counted the number of times I wrote “Estéban and I” in my journal: 31 times. When he looked at me with

his blue eyes, I saw the same softness I once saw in Wily's dark eyes. Estéban's blonde hair hung over his forehead and into his eyes. He carried a small hairdryer in his backpack, the enormous backpacks with all the pockets, the kind all the Europeans carry. I, on the other hand, carried my little golden suitcase around Guatemala as if I were some innocent abroad in the 19th Century. Estéban took a few minutes every morning to tip his head upside down and cover it in sticky gel. I wore shorts that night on Lake Atítlan – fucking pastel-colored plaid shorts – that that made me look ridiculous.

We had met twelve-year old Pedro after his older sister Graciela invited us to stay “with a real Indian family” in Santa Catarina. “The hotels in Panajachel are for tourists,” she'd said, looking behind her at Panajachel's large outdoor market. “We give you good price.” Then we piled into the back of a pick-up truck with a dozen indigenous women wearing the same purple skirt and blue denim blouses. Each had a blue ribbon tied in her hair. I looked at Esteban, and he looked at me. We smiled. Then we drove over mountain roads so treacherous neither of us wanted to look outside at the mass the bodies in the truck. Our bodies careened together, but no one said a word. I felt Pedro put his small hand on my knee and direct my gaze toward the mountains in the distance. “We're going there,” he said, pointing to a group of buildings halfway up a green mountain across a wide valley floor. He pointed left toward a road that zigzagged through the valley and along the lakeshore. Then I looked up and saw rings of clouds surrounding the distant mountains; Pedro smiled at me, then at Estéban, and I knew something special had happened. I felt like Wily had guided us.

But then we ended up on that dirt floor, my knees cradled to my chest so I wouldn't freeze to death.

“We should go inside,” Estéban said, sitting up. “To the other house.”

I turned toward Esteban: “Where?”

“The place where we first got here.”

“That we ate at?”

“Un-huh.”

“But I’m not sure—”

“That’s probably where they sleep.”

“Isn’t that the kitchen, right? Where we ate before?”

“Yep,” he agreed. “Where the mom was cooking and stuff. With the stove.”

The truth is, yes, I was cold, but I didn’t want to leave. It felt good sitting next to Estéban on the bus there from Xela, sitting close enough so our legs touched.

“I think we should stay,” I said, “maybe warm each other up.”

Estéban looked down. Then he lifted his head so fast his hair swung over his eyes, and before I knew it he was standing by the hanging blanket covering the entrance.

“I’ll be with the others around the stove,” he said. He looked around and continued: “Just don’t end up like the mummies we saw at the museum.” He lifted up the blanket and ducked out toward the main house down the street, the place the mother had prepared our dinner a few hours ago with the rest of the family. The place where Pedro and Graciela probably slept, I imagined. I was left alone, and I remember thinking that at least the mummies had someone to care for them after death. So fucking cold . . .

I stayed that way all night – freezing and frustrated – until light finally made its way into the room, and I realized that someone had covered me during the night with a heavy blanket. Behind me I felt a body. Back on back. I turned around to see the black mane of Pedro’s hair spiking out of the blanket, which I now realized covered us both. I turned around

so he was curled up in front of me, and I reached out my long arm and pulled myself closer to him. He either slept or simply didn't move. I kept my arm around him and smelled his musty hair. His shoulders rose and fell with each breath, and I could have stayed like that forever.

But then I heard a voice.

"Pedro!" someone yelled.

I turned around and saw how the room's cinder blocks couldn't possibly have protected us from the cold, damp air. Furthermore, the blanket hanging over the front opening did little to keep the warmth inside. Graciela stood at the doorway, holding the brown blanket to the side, so the sun covered the cinder blocks with a beautiful saffron hue. Pedro uncurled himself from the folded blankets and raised his head toward me without opening his eyes.

"Wake up," Graciela warned.

The boy turned toward his sister.

"You two look like a pile of dead fish," she said.

I reached from my blankets and tightened my arm around Pedro like a tiger protecting its cub.

"Pedro!" she screamed again. When the boy tried to rise, I brought him down with my long arm like captured prey.

"Get up!" Graciela repeated. "Get up!"

"Get out!" her brother yelled back.

Graciela stood there with both hands resting on her hips. "Just like boys," she said.

"You two look like two whores from Panajachel."

She said *puta* loudly.

"*Festival* whores," she reiterated.

I laughed, unexpectedly, at Graciela's fury. Pedro slipped from my grip and sat up beside me. "*Buenos días*," I said to Graciela, turning toward Pedro and then back at his sister in front of me.

"We're sleeping," Pedro yelled beside me.

Graciela looked at me. "And Cristóbal?"

I looked at Graciela, then at Pedro in his olive military jacket, then at my own orange and yellow plaid shorts, the string untied in front and dangling.

"*Buenos días*," I repeated. "Hola, Graciela."

When I smiled, she smiled too, and she gave me a sweet look as if I were running water. Then I remembered how she'd been flirting with Estéban and me the previous day. I looked down and noticed that I'd taken off my shirt sometime during the night. This, despite the cold.

"Mamá says to buy some eggs," she told Pedro.

"Eggs?"

"Yes, eggs. Are you sleeping or deaf?"

Pedro fell back down to the floor next to me: "Sleeping."

"Mamá says you can't go to Panajachel if you don't help set up the tent today," I heard Graciela say, but I was too busy flicking Pedro in the ear. I flicked. He laughed. Graciela hollered.

That's when Graciela bent down to the floor, her knees close together, slightly bent, like a debutante at her first cotillion, and emerged with something metal in her hands that she threw towards Pedro. His beloved headphone radio exploded loud against the cinder block walls.

"*Loca!*" Pedro screamed, scrambling out from the floor next to me.

"It's not yours," his sister yelled back, hands just above her waist. "It's Señorita Hilda's."

“She gave it to me.”

“No, she didn’t.”

“Yes, she did!”

“Did not!” Graciela screamed, her face as distorted as a carnival mask. “You’re not going to Panajachel.” She was so hysterical I thought her face might splinter, but instead she started to cry. Tears fell quickly down her cheeks. She dried the tears with the back of her hand, then looked directly at me before turning her attention to Pedro, who looked amused by the entire scene. She began to fidget with the blue ribbons in her hair.

“Watch your stuff,” she warned, lowering her hands to wipe the wetness from her mouth. “My brother has thief’s hands.”

Pedro stood in front of his sister and held his hands in the air, palms facing his face, then at her.

“They’re the hands of God,” he said. “*El Dios!*”

On her way out Graciela threw an empty plastic bottle at us and yanked down the blanket covering the front entrance. She tripped over some metal cans and stumbled out the door.

Pedro quickly turned to me and called her the craziest girl he’d ever seen. When he said it, though, I fixated on the whites of his teeth. “She wants you to be her husband,” he added, smirking now like a teenager boy. I’m not sure what else he said as I was deeply moved by his mahogany skin, beautiful mahogany like the carvings I had seen in Panajachel. Only now I, too, felt like I was made of wood. Then I noticed the bruise above his right eye.

“Papá,” he said, pointing at his eye.

I lightly touched the purple lesion. “Your father?”

“Yes.”

“But why—”

“Quiet,” he said, holding one finger to his lips. “He’s coming.”

Andres entered the room with his long-sleeved shirt unbuttoned to the navel.

“Quetzals,” he said, walking towards me with an outstretched arm. I looked at Pedro, who looked at me. His father repeated: “You owe me quetzals.”

I opened my wallet, my side eye glancing toward Pedro, who put his hand to his mouth and pretended to drink. Of course! Andres walked toward me and rest his hand on my shoulder, our faces as close as tortillas on the *comal*. He flashed me a crooked, drunken smile, my eyes fixating on the sinister gap between his teeth. I took one step to the side and towards him, then extended my arm over his shoulder, pivoting around so quickly I moved behind him, hugging him and running my chin along the back of his neck. I held him in my arms much like I had held his son earlier that morning. His breath smelled like stale vomit.

“Ay, señor,” he said.

Pedro tapped me on the arm and mouthed to me, in English, “no pay him.” His father turned his head toward me and wobbled in my grip. I was close enough to nibble on his ear. If he was drunk on corn liquor, I was drunk on power, and as I imagine it now, I licked the side of his leathery, russet-colored face with a long vertical motion as if Pedro had disappeared. In real time, however, I took a step backwards as the man leaned out of my grip and nearly fell to the floor.

“I’ll pay your woman,” I finally told him as he regained his balance and turned toward me. Pedro looked at me, then nodded toward his father.

“My woman,” answered Andres, thrusting his dried finger in the air. He looked in the direction of the other home. “Too many women.”

I leaned forward, as Pedro moved to the door, slowly following the boy out of the space, leaving his father staggering around the room and, I could hear, mumbling to himself in a language neither Spanish nor English.

A few feet down the gravel path, Pedro told me Estéban had slept, as I had thought, at the family’s other home.

“He slept as warm as a baby in her mother’s arms,” Pedro said, holding his hands in front of him and mimicking the rocking motion of a mother and child. Then I remembered my new German friend Estéban, the one I was so in love with before last night. I wondered how he slept, warm together with the women rolled up like stalks of corn. Yet all I could think about while kicking gravel down the path was how good it felt to hold young Pedro in my arms, the smell of his hair a tremble in my heart, its perfection radiating over hardened wounds like some chronology of water.

When I’d finished Manuel reminded me that I’m not nineteen anymore. He was unwrapping gauze from the side of my head, making sounds to himself suggesting he liked the way my head was healing, when he stopped and spoke: “No one here gives you a free place to stay.”

“But I paid—”

“We’re not a fucking orphanage,” he interrupted, no longer approving of either the side of my head or, from the sound of it, no longer approving of me. I wasn’t sure what had happened.

I slouched and angled my back away from him.

“Come,” he said. “We need to talk.” I felt his hand over my shoulder, the loose touch of unraveled fabric against my neck.

I turned and offered him as close to a death-stare as I could manage in my weakened state. His fingers slid down my back.

“Go where?”

“Don’t worry,” he answered, “just down the hall.”

I hadn’t been “down the hall” before, and I wasn’t sure what I might find. I wasn’t even sure if I wanted to go, but then Manuel reached for me again, his fingers touching my lower back the way wings invert the wind.

“You see that,” he said, moving next to me and tightening his hold, his other hand moving across my abdomen. “You can move just fine.” He smiled at me, a long smile, a smile suffused with a pregnant pause, then swiveled his head back to the door, in front of which stood a nurse I hadn’t seen before. The specks of her lips blossomed into a full-bodied smile, and I noticed her unexpected green eyes, emerald like mine. She backed up a step and let us out the door. On the way out I felt her hair, a beautiful auburn color spun from a web, caress against my upper arm, which leaned in for more as if an invisible umbilical cord were about to be severed. Perhaps I hadn’t realized how long it had been since I’d seen a new face.

Manuel, meanwhile, let go of my waist and walked beside me as we turned left out the door and down a short corridor. I shuffled over ugly white linoleum tiles and grey-painted walls so crisp I leaned over to smell the paint. I remember because I leaned over too far and hit my forehead against the wall, after which Manuel returned his hand to my waist and led me straight again.

“Careful,” he said, but when he tightened his grip I could feel it harden from before, matching his voice. “Wait here.”

Manuel opened a closet door and wheeled out an orange bucket. With the other hand, he held a black-handled mop. He leaned over and began to fill the bucket with water, careful not to dirty his clothes.

“So I’m going to wash the floors?” I joked.

“Exactly,” he said, not a hint of irony or mirth in his voice. He placed the mop in the bucket and gripped the black handle while pushing both toward the end of the hall. I slowly followed, shuffling my feet and taking care not to stop too long in front of the occupied rooms. I recall an old man lying in a bed, not moving but not attached to anything either, his open mouth visible from the hall, a pair of white socks shuffled low around his ankles and discernible from the end of his bed. In another room a woman with blotchy skin and glasses moaned quietly, yet steadily. I noticed Manuel watching me as I peered into the other rooms. What was he trying to tell me?

At the end of the hallway Manuel pushed down the mop fully into the water and bent over the bucket. Then he began to mop the floor. I backed up along with him for several minutes until he stopped and turned to me.

“So,” he said, squeezing excess water off the mop with a metal device he held in his hand. “Did you touch that boy?”

“What?”

He looked up at me from his squatting position and asked me again: “Did you touch him?” He clamped tightly on the metal, pressing grey water off the mop and into the bucket.

“Cristóbal,” he continued, looking at me from his squatting position near the wall. “Did you touch that boy?”

I turned to look toward my room, which we had just passed by. In the other direction I saw a few nurses congregating around a counter I presumed was a nurse’s station, exactly as I had imagined it to be. Manuel stood up and leaned his mop against the wall next to me, which smacked against my arm as it fell to the floor. A cluster of nurse’s eyes stared over and through me.

“I don’t know why. . .” I began, bending down to retrieve the mop. “I don’t know what you mean by—”

“It’s okay,” Manuel interrupted, looking toward the nurses and then at a stairwell between us and them.

So much between us and them.

“You can tell me,” he continued. He didn’t say it warm and graciously but stared at me with eyes like day-old bread. I stood weak against the wall, unsure what to say.

“And the other one, what was his name?”

“Other *what*?”

“In Guatemala.”

“At the language school?”

“On the bus.”

“The bus?”

“Yeah, the bus.”

“Estéban?”

“No.”

“Not the German?”

“No.”

“The kid.”

“Wily?”

“Yeah, him.”

“What about him?”

“You touched him, too?”

“The one who reminds me of you?”

“The one with the Reebok’s.”

“Wily?”

“You touched him, too, didn’t you?”

“Not like, no, not like . . . I mean not like that, if that’s what—”

You don’t think I see,” Manuel interrupted, his hands firmly against his hips. I noticed his silver belt buckle in the shape of a cowboy hat. “You don’t think I see what you’re doing?”

“Doing? Like doing *what*?” My grip on the wall slipped against Manuel’s accusations.

“I wasn’t *doing* anything.” My breath turned heavy and uneven. My sides itched. I wanted to hurl over the freshly-mopped floors. I refrained, of course, but not before I became a little angry. *Is that what he thinks of me?*

“Oh, you’re so innocent,” Manuel continued, jamming the mop into the bucket of dirty water. “And we’re just persons in your drama.”

“In my what?”

“Those boys are just characters in your filthy telenovela.” He stood erect, pausing, leaning against the mop handle and passing me a dirty look. The nurses stared at us. His

speech was unbending, unambiguous, the words of a man no longer as content with my story as I had imagined. My timidity returned, my body collapsing inward like a hoarder bent-over on the basement stairs.

“It’s . . . ,” I stuttered, “it’s . . . not, I mean, there’s nothing wrong with wanting a little, um, a little—”

“What?” Manuel answered. “A little *what*?”

I placed my hands on my knees and leaned forward. I glanced at the nurses, who quickly averted their eyes, except for Nurse Thin-Lips, who seemed to be staring at us, past us, in the distance.

“Affection,” I finally answered, nearly out of breath. “What’s wrong with wanting a little affection?”

Manuel looked both ways down the hallway and came closer, extending his elbow out toward me, which I grabbed.

“You don’t think I’ve noticed every one of them is Indian?” he said. “Dark skinned like me?” He turned me around and motioned at my door with his hand.

“What’s so wrong about wanting someone to like me back?” I asked, the two of us reaching the door of my room.

“Nothing, but—”

“But *what*?” I interrupted, holding his eyes in mine.

“You were young,” he says. “Very young I take it.”

I let go of his elbow and rest my body against the wall in my room.

“A man so young has needs,” he continued. “Sexual needs.” He looked down between his legs and back at me.

“But there was nothing sexual,” I answered. “I swear it.”

“So anything extra must have been incidental,” he answered, sarcasm apparent like a crease in his voice.

I stopped to catch my breath.

“Listen to me,” he said, his voice hoarsening. “Remember that little boy Jesús in Peru?”

“The orphan?”

“Yes, him.”

“And you never had sexual feelings for him?”

“In an orphanage?”

“No feelings?”

“An orphan?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Of course, feelings, but not—”

Really? Is that what he thinks of me?

“You’re crazy,” I continued. “Why would you think—”

“Or other boys?” he answered, walking with me toward the bed.

Clearly I had mentioned to him, even if I didn’t remember, the story of the orphanage in Peru. If only he could have read my journal, the innocence in these words:

These kids definitely have artistic capability, especially my precious Jesús. He colored good, but he also traced and cut a Christmas tree. I remember, too, when he played the flute. His small hands covered the holes, and for a moment he could have been the Cuban Arturo Sandoval, although I’m not sure if Sr. Sandoval ever played the flute. Jesús’s head looked like a giant bunch of crust and I’m still curious as to why, but it doesn’t matter his head. If there’s a more precious boy in the world, I’ve yet to encounter him. It was such a fine day, all the boys running and jumping on me, grabbing my legs, sitting on my lap and touching my chest.

It's true that children are a good remedy for some insecurity complex. They just felt so good in my lap, squeezing my ears and playing with my hair, especially Jesús! –12 de Noviembre, 1994 (translated from Spanish)

“No other boys in the orphanage?” he added. He tugged on my elbow as he asked it, pulling me somewhere I, surprisingly, had wanted to go. I told him about another orphan with one leg – an older teen whose name I’d forgotten – and how this boy’s face was subtle and soft atop a firm reed of forgiveness.

“But he was, I think, maybe 17 or 18,” I said. “And I barely even talked to him.”

Silence.

“I mean, sure his face was cute, you know, definitely cute.”

Brutal and complete.

“But I’m not saying I . . . uh . . . no . . . maybe fantasized, maybe . . . no, nothing out of the usual. He was like a saint with that missing leg and always smiling—”

“Uh-huh.”

“Couldn’t figure out, I mean, I couldn’t figure out how a person . . . so happy.”

“Look,” Manuel said, sitting down at the edge of the bed I’d already entered and now rest in, sheets pulled up over my chest. “A man of that age needs to have sex,” he said, moving one hand over my covered legs.

I took a deep, cleansing breath. It felt good to have Manuel touch me, even if it was through a sheet and in the midst of his tirade.

“Affection, yes,” he continued, “but sex, too.” He kept his hand heavy over my leg. “You must have had sex,” he added, his body leaning toward mine, his face close to me. I wanted to answer, but I was surprised when he deftly took my leg and raised it toward my head, the sheet falling over my face. He’d surprised me with a similar movement the previous day, but now I understood his intention: someone was coming our way. This time the squeaky

shoes came from Nurse Thin-Lips, who interrupted our feigned stretching session with guttural protests and a voice so fast I missed what she was saying. Manuel responded that he'd return to the floors later, definitely soon, but first he had to ask me something. He was stretching me, he said, so he could better ask me something. I thought he'd already asked me quite enough.

After nodding Thin-Lips out the door, and even, I think, smiling at her, he twisted my foot in the crook of his arm.

"Ouch," I yelled, "not so hard."

"Ouch," he repeated in English, one of the few times he'd spoken English. "Why you say 'ouch'?"

"It's like 'Ay,'" I explained, realizing I'd registered my pain in English.

He told me that's a good sign: my brain must be thinking in English again.

"But I'm supposed to be stretching you," he continued. "So stop complaining."

"What is—"

"More tests cost money," he interrupted. "And they don't want you costing money."

"But I'm good for—"

"I'm *stretching* you because they said it doesn't cost anything. It's F-R-E-E." He slid his hands from my feet up to the back of my knees, a gesture I might have wasted dozens of pages on in previous journals. He leaned his knee onto the bed between my legs and moved one hand atop my chest, the other remaining on the back of my knee. I let out a lengthy sigh.

"Look, *guero*," he said, shifting so he could place his chest directly against the back of my leg. "It's a private hospital and they can't keep you here forever. It costs money, you know."

“Fine,” I answered. “I’ll leave.” I put pressure against Manuel’s body, to which he just laughed.

“I can pay the money,” I said, placing my arms on the metal bed rails and trying to rise. “I told them I can pay!”

“I know, I know,” Manuel answered, my outstretched leg still in his hands. “You have a credit card. I think they charged you already. But listen: you have no cash, you have no clothes, you don’t remember what happened to you, and you don’t have anyone to call.” He gently lowered my leg. “If it weren’t for me they’d transfer you back to the public hospital. But I can’t—”

“Can’t what?”

The truth was that I couldn’t imagine myself alone again. I didn’t want Manuel to leave me.

“Look,” he said, “You’ve got to remember something. Sister. Brother. Friend. Don’t you remember something?”

I still don’t know how I remembered, or if I’d remembered all along, but a phone number popped into my brain as fast as a button snapping off a shirt: 239-938-1798.

Manuel pulled a pen from his pocket. “Are you sure?”

I repeated the numbers in English, and repeated them again and again and again until Manuel wrote them down on a pink sheet of paper from his wallet and told me I could stop. He patted my head as if I were a child.

“I should talk to the nurse,” he said, turning to leave my room. I told him it’s the number where my father still sleeps naked across the living room floor. Or was it? I wasn’t exactly sure about anything anymore.

Manuel's accusations devastated me, but the truth is that he was responding to a discourse common in male travel narratives. I was, after all, a travelling American male expressing interest in native bodies. From the early traveling accounts of Gilgamesh and Odysseus, male travelers have moved freely about space, turning their traveling narrative into what some call "male potencies," or these emancipatory and/or subversive personal quests in which native inhabitants are overcome by the traveling white male. Had my narrative voice become authoritative? Is that why Manuel expected himself to listen to my stories? If male travel narratives are marked by metaphors of penetration and conquest, what does that say about me? Was I any different just because I was young and couldn't spend money like the typical tourist? Was my goal all along to "overcome" these native Latin American men whom I found so attractive?

It's easy to see how Manuel thought I might be sleeping with those kids. Relations of unequal power often become sexualized. I represented the Western, masculine conception of power hell-bent on knowledge production, narratives of progress, and teleological quests for so-called truths. Like the old men Manuel had previously complained about. We take, abuse. Manipulate. Scorn. I'd been naïve when I later explained to other academics in my Ph.D. program how my First-World introspection was so different, how my innocent journal entries set me apart from exploitative American travelers.

"You're a danger," I was told by a classmate.

"You're better than that," offered another, who quickly pursed her lips tightly around a Starbucks Frozen Frappuccino.

I realized, then, that I'd be on my own. But why would they care about the White Man gone abroad? Why would they give two shits about the emotional awakening of a privileged

white male crybaby out of touch with the workings of a systematic oppression that had stacked the world his way?

Two Western writers have written specifically about this fascination with foreign boys, both based on their traveling experiences. The first time I read André Gide's *The Immoralist* (1902), I was stunned at the narrator's enthusiastic appraisal of the lovely ankles and "golden nakedness" of pre-pubescent Algerian boys climbing pollard palms or herding goats in the North African plains. The narrator, Michel, obsesses over "splendidly tanned peasants" and the authentic, naked flesh of local boys emerging under loose cloak or "skimpy white *gandoura*" (55). Years later William Burroughs penned *Queer* (1958), his own novel of sensual abandon, whose narrator Lee shares Michel's infatuation with adolescent boys, in this case Ecuadorian: "I saw some beautiful boys on the waterfront. The real uncut boy stuff. Such teeth, such smiles. Young boys vibrating with life" (98). Michel, Gide's narrator in *The Immoralist*, reaches an epiphany after some time in a Tunisian village when he finally realizes the analytic tendencies of his academic job have prevented him from enjoying the same sensual experiences of the golden boys around him: "I was seized by a desire, craving, something wilder, more imperious than I had ever felt before: to live!" (25). Lee, Burroughs's narrator on his trek through Latin America, shares Michel's longing for life. The Latin American boys on Lee's mind live free from the external regulation of the law in the United States, which had prevented Burroughs from taking advantage of boys in the United States. I realize now that I'd had more in common with Gide and Burroughs than I'd thought. I was not sexually attracted to young boys and teenagers, no, but I did desire to escape my overly-regulated, analytic life so full of career goals and burdens. And I did have to wonder what it was about Pedro or little Julio in

Peru that had touched me so deeply. Was my affection somehow inappropriate, as Manuel seemed to suggest?

I didn't want to tell Manuel about the name – Hilario – tattooed across my left forearm. He'd asked several times, but the story always seems pathetic to me. I seem pathetic to me. Hilario is the name of a 7th grade student I taught in south Texas. He was a trouble-maker, but a bright boy with reading difficulties. He sat in the front row of my Texas History class and always did his work. He was a cute boy, too, I admit, the type of boy who looks like a little man, so you can project how he might look ten years down the line, when he's a more appropriate age to contemplate some erotic longing. I looked at him the same way the other male coaches commented on which girls on the volleyball team, for example, would be eye-turners in college. Like most kids in south Texas, Hilario was Mexican, a feature punctuated with his dark eyes and straight white teeth that complemented his caramel-colored skin. His parents had 10 children, Hilario being the oldest at 13. He wore the same clothes most days, but wore a grey Abercrombie and Fitch jacket proudly, although rumors spread quickly about where and how and who he had gotten it from. If other teachers had problems with the boy, they would bring him down to my class, where he would spend the rest of the day. He asked about my workouts, said he'd one day like to look like me. He was a warrior on the football field, tracking down opponents and spearing them to the ground or throwing them out-of-bounds. He needed football as an outlet for this aggression.

One afternoon while taking the bus home, Hilario was attacked by a gang of high school students and injured badly. I was told Hilario had stolen some drugs. That's the last I'd heard of the boy, as he was apparently sent off to family in Oregon. The day I'd heard about the bus attack, I took off from my house to jog away the sensation that I'd lost something. Along the

way, I passed a church, a building I usually ignore, and walked in to pray. As soon as I was on my knees making the sign of the cross, I began to cry. The sobs built in me like a current under the sea. I cried for what Hilario meant to me. Other boys looked up to me as well, but Hilario was a boy with whom I wanted to be friends. He was a younger version of so many men I had met in Latin America, those rugged and strong men who move about the world as if it ought to bend to their will. It meant so much to me that this boy liked me. I had no other man in my life. It felt good to straighten out the so-called trouble maker, even if I only recently figured out the void he filled in me. I emerged with his name tattooed on my forearm in a moment of wariness after I'd first moved away from south Texas for my Ph.D. program in Chicago. One afternoon, out of nowhere, I remembered how he made me feel and rushed to memorialize it across my arm, I wanted to show the world that I was not alone. By using an urban font popular among Latinos who have tattoos, I wanted to clarify my affection for Hispanic and Latin American culture. Perhaps I really *was* alone, but I'm glad I did it. I just can't tell many people, including Manuel. At worst they think I'm a child molester, yet even at best I come across as pathetic. If I do tell someone about the boy, I add to the story that Hilario died. He didn't, of course. Sometimes I say he's a cousin. At the time, though, I knew Manuel would never understand why a grown man would tattoo a boy's name across his body, and this certainly wasn't a story to share after his recent accusations. Instead I fingered the boy's name across my forearm, asking him to watch out for me this time, as I had failed to watch out for him.

Uncovering self in the presence of so many contradictory journal entries is no easy task. Yet as I sit cross-legged on the speckled linoleum floor, cinnamon Pop-Tart on the paper towel next to

me, I'm amazed I hadn't see the pattern earlier. It's a pattern I'd continued with Manuel. Always the consummate scholar and conscientious world traveler, I'd wanted to know more about Latin American society and engaged my first few weeks of travel with several texts I brought from the United States and read on long bus trips through Central America. It seems I was fascinated with the concept of machismo, or as I quoted in my journal, "the cultural code of behavior emphasizing male superiority, virility, and control." While the term was suffused with negative associations, I experienced exactly the opposite, as I was longing for male contact on my first trip abroad, and machismo – a system basically banishing women to the private sphere – cleared the way for a male public space in which virility and control seemed more like confidence and sociability. With machismo the assumption is that men who act and appear like men – in terms of voice control, disposition, and verbal attention paid to women, among other characteristics – are presumed heterosexual and therefore enter a safe space in which intense male-male drinking/bonding/playing are freed from the specter of homosexuality and men can, quite simply, revel in the pleasure of being men. I was allowed to join the Latin version of the "good ole boys" network precisely because of my average to above-average masculine disposition. Except for his voice, George also fits into such a group. Perhaps that's why I find him so attractive.

While I understand now the dangers of such a system to women and sexual minorities, I was too enthralled back then with the cult of machismo to allow any fledgling social consciousness to dampen my enthusiasm. Over and over I devoted journal entries to the admiration of the most macho of men:

On the bus in Northern Peru looking out the window opposite the sea . . . The young Peruvian military men are half-naked in the blazing heat of the coastal desert. The big one, that large man in his underwear, is watching me watch him. Their bodies are a little darker than the desert sand, but they are much stronger

and smoother. As they buckle their belts and zip up their pants, I wonder how many of them will die in this fruitless war. How many golden brown bodies will parish?" – November 4, 1993.

It's a phenomena known as eroticizing the natives, a perspective I'd been warned about by my Spanish teacher back at George Washington. Only I just couldn't help myself, as a poem from October of that first trip illustrates:

Four Ruminations on the Theory of Machismo

*Machismo" is merely conceptual, as lifeless
And inert as the generalization "Third World,"
Until a heavy, dark-heeled boot flattens
The ground and the wind becomes mute
And anticipatory, and he unleashes
A weighty thigh in a momentous fury,
Like the colt you played with as a child,
The one that lay on you like a lover
As ponderous and conciliatory as the moon.*

*The quiet dignity and liquidity of nightfall,
That time of accentuation and excitement,
Like morning dew,
Refining his form, amplifying his strength, permeating
His skin, illuminating his features: the dark
Eyes like high tide, skin the color
And texture of bamboo, that dark and hollow
Being, and a smile that encompasses confidence,
Humility, strength, voluntud, decisiveness, charity,
Weakness, and desire, that smile
That was made to possess,
An amorous enlightened despot.*

*"Machismo" is an ancient form of enslavement
Say the neo-feminists, an invisible vapor choking
The sisterhood, that binding amalgam
Of women, prevents them from finding
A new lover, or grabbing their breasts
On a hot summer day, or sending sticky fingers
Down an itching crotch, which, God Dammit,
Everyone should have the right to do.
"Those bastards," they say.*

The yearning to submit

*Is the basic emotion,
Which is why there is God
And his son on a cross.
But they are really no different
Than this man between my legs,
As beautiful but living, that moistens
Me with my own submissiveness,
That loves me forever with golden arms,
But would kill me in an instant
If I ever took another lover.*

Yet how would I reconcile my machismo fantasies, especially this eroticization of power, with the reality of so many nice men who used their bodies to watch over and protect me, not to dominate or humiliate me? Most of it felt as asexual as an Easter basket. How might I explain the friendliness of indigenous men, in particular, from Ecuador, Brazil, and Peru? I'd spent many months on busses pressed against their bodies and many nights composing journal entries of friendship, admiration, and unrequited love. What I didn't yet know, however, is that a system such as machismo predicated on male dominance creates the conditions for its own undoing. It exists as a shroud under which admiration for the ideal macho man becomes infused with desire and a means develops in which this desire can be carried out. Unbeknownst to me, a world of same-sex erotic encounters was happening around me, even among the men I assumed had no sexual desire for other men, but I hadn't yet figured out how such a system might work way back in 1993. I'd have to sit instead with my fantasies of lower class, primarily indigenous men with whom I'd bonded, imagining the thrush of their mouths over mine.

On my lower right abdomen, not far from my genitalia, sits a tattoo of a tequila worm playing a guitar. His nose is a giant bulbous red, while his thin mustache curls up around the edges of his mouth like the tail of a seahorse turned on its side. In the bathroom Manuel rubbed my chest

and abdomen with a small washcloth dipped in an odorless liquid, perhaps rubbing alcohol, and complemented the orange and red sombrero atop the worm's head.

"That's a small worm." He rest his fingers alongside the worm and stretched the skin with his thumb and index finger. "Not sure how they got the colors in there." I felt his nail rub along the surface of my skin.

"Ah, that hurts," I yelled. "Be careful."

He eased off the tattoo and handed me the cloth to wash my genitals.

"When did you get that?" he asked.

"When I got back."

"From where?"

Manuel handed me a dry towel and took the other one away from me, holding it from his face with two fingers.

"From my trip," I continued. "In South America." I followed him in the mirror as he returned to the room. "It was funny, you know, a tequila worm playing the guitar." I pulled my cloth gown back over my body and joined Manuel.

"I got that," he said. "Americans and your tequila."

I moved my way back into bed.

"You know," I finally said, once I'd covered myself in bed. "In my journal there's a heart."

"A heart?" He finished gathering towels and dumped them into the hallway. "I'll get them in a minute," he said, looking out the door then back at me in bed in bed.

"A real little heart," I continued. "And next to it I wrote, 'It was a really good time.'" I told him I wrote it the morning after my first sexual experience in Peru.

“Peru?” he said. “How’d you end up there?”

I’d gone back, I said, to study abroad.

“Sounds fancy.”

For the first time I considered my life through somebody else’s eyes. What I’d taken as an inevitability, returning to Latin America, seemed more to me now like a series of choices. I pieced together my story the best I could for Manuel, only later revisiting past journals that both confirmed and complicated my story.

I returned to The George Washington University a changed man after my trip to Latin America. I would not only study feverishly, but I was ready to conquer the world! I obtained an internship at the Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis (IFPA), a prestigious DC think tank headed by a prominent ex-military weapons expert. I wrote glistening, carefully-crafted 10 page policy papers outlining the proper military action to the renewed Russian threat. Yet no one at the office seemed to care. My papers lined the bottom of desk drawers. Their only purpose, I realized, was to pad my resume in case I applied to graduate school. The office secretary never even knew my name.

In February I obtained a job waiting tables at the TGI Friday’s just off campus. I wore a red and white horizontally-striped shirt and suspenders covered in humorous buttons, which we called our “flair.” Flair was fun, perhaps a bit “campy,” and was intended to help us stand apart from other more traditional restaurant chains of the early 1990s and their monotonous collared polo shirts. Flair allowed us to emit a personality. One night I would wear a multi-colored jester hat with a bell at the top; the next shift I donned a Miami Marlins baseball hat. Sometimes I tied a red bandana around my neck and became a Texas cowboy. Flair helped me

to embrace different sides of myself. My co-workers, as well, were far from homogenous. Unlike the cookie-cutter, upper-class Anglos posting \$12,000 checks for a semester of tuition, the staff of TGI Fridays consisted of working-class black students from nearby Howard University, Salvadoran cooks, and career bartenders with little interest in foreign policy analysis. Working together in a busy kitchen felt like those long bus rides in Latin America, where hips encountered other hips and hands brushed bodies to prevent someone, for example, from backing up in to a plate of flaming fajitas. It was a tactile explosion, and I was right in the center!

That semester I enrolled in an advanced Spanish course in addition to all my political science requirements. Our Columbian instructor, Señora Echeverría, spoke proper Castilian Spanish and demanded an impeccable grammar I had never known. My classmates, however, had studied Spanish for several years and breezed with impunity through Miguel Cervantes's *pluscuamperfecto tense* in *Don Quixote* or managed competing clauses in paragraph-long sentences from Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *Cien Anos de Soledad*. What kind of loneliness, I wondered, could last for one hundred years? Yet I never did find out, as the books were too long and the vocabulary too rich for me to ever finish Marquez's masterpiece despite translating until dawn. Likewise, Señora Echeverría insisted that I choose *one* accent and stick to it. She called me a costume designer. "You need a style of your own," she scolded me one treacherous Monday morning. "Not a hodge-podge from all over." I knew she was right.

Later that week, after a busy Saturday night shift at TGI Friday's, my friend Ester called and invited me to visit her at her study abroad program in Venezuela.

“Maybe you can figure out your accent problem over there,” she said. “Or at least get laid.” Perhaps I’d kill two birds with one stone or, as they say in Spanish, kill two birds with only one throw. Either way, I was ready to try!

Over Spring Break I traveled to tropical Venezuela. There, in Mérida, I witnessed 12 American exchange students partying for two weeks while ostensibly “studying” Venezuelan history and culture. The students attended class in a self-contained building on the fringes of campus, but most spent their time partying with each other and the college-aged members of their host families. I had a blast. Ester lived with three brothers, all between the ages of 17 and 23, and all three treated Ester and I like members of their own family. No one cared about my attraction to men. In fact, I shared a bed, platonically, with 22-year old Carlos my entire trip. The brothers and I showered naked numerous times outside their ranch. Carlos pinched Miguel’s naked ass, while Eduardo ran his hands down my tight abdominal muscles. I’d gained back most of the weight I’d lost and felt more comfortable with my body. Carlos even dared Eduardo to touch my penis, which he did, with the back of his hand, and Miguel could barely contain his laughter. Three brothers and I, all laughing together. I may not have gotten laid, but if there ever were any doubt about my sexual proclivities, they were now gone. And were all Latin men as sexually available as these three brothers seemingly were?

I kissed Miguel; I kissed Eduardo (on the cheek, of course). Having one brother in each arm felt remarkable, at the bar, and I just wanted to melt into them both; my arms felt so relaxed and warm and I’m thinking now about how good it would feel to fall asleep on either one of them, waking up throughout the night, remembering where I am, and sliding back into sleep – March 12, 1994

A few weeks after my return to Washington DC I knew I wanted out. I’d never find three brothers here! One day at my internship, the director of IFPA had given me his ATM card and told me to buy him a cake. My choice. So not only had they ignored my

meticulously-researched papers, but now I was being asked to run their errands. The cake was to be a “good-bye” cake for someone leaving somewhere, yet even in my hasty, pissed-off condition, I wanted the anonymous recipient to like his or her cake. I picked a vanilla cake with beautiful purple flowers around the edges and tiny silver balls decorating the sides. In the middle, I had them write “Good luck on your new journey.” I tapped my fingers on the counter and waited for the cake. A female employee asked if I wanted a donut.

No, I said, I am fine.

“Well, you don’t look fine,” she responded. “Are you sad they’re leaving?”

“Who?”

“The person on the cake.” She handed me the beautiful cake over the counter. “Are you sad they’re leaving?”

I gave her the forty dollars. “I’m pissed off I’m going to be late for work.”

“Oh,” she said, lowering her eyes toward the cash register.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s vanilla”

“Yes,” I answered.

“The cake.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Maybe if you taste—”

“For sure.”

“The cake.”

“Uh-huh.”

“You might feel a little better.”

“Yes, I’m sure I would, thank you.” I nodded and walked out the door carrying the cake in my hands like a baby. I was already late for my night shift at TGI Fridays.

At the office I placed the cake in the break room and returned to Jan’s office to give him his ATM card and the change. I told him I was in a hurry.

“But the cake—”

“What about it?”

“It’s for you.”

“Me?”

“Isn’t today your last day?”

I stood there staring at Jan. He rose from behind his desk, pressed his knuckles down over a pile of papers. He was right. My internship had ended today. I fingered the crumpled receipt in my pocket. Tracy wandered in from the adjoining office.

“See, here’s Tracy to say good-bye.”

“You’re leaving?” Tracy asked. It was the second time she’d talked to me in four months.

“I am.”

“There’s a cake,” Jan said. “In the break room.”

“Oh,” answered Tracy, looking in that direction. “Should we eat it?”

“Yes, of course, yes. If you want, I mean.”

“Yes,” Jan agreed.

I looked at the clock. Five-thirty. “But I have to go.”

“Now?”

“Yes, work, um, I’m late and—”

“Well at least take a piece,” Jan said. I followed him to the break room. He used a plastic knife to slice through the purple flowers. Tiny silver balls fell off the cake and sprang onto the table.

“Here,” said Tracy, awkwardly folding a napkin around the sides of a piece of cake and handing it to me. I smiled to show Tracy my gratitude, and then I noticed Jan stooped over the cake cutting slices for the office. It still looked beautiful, and I thought about the well wishes I had felt for this anonymous person only a few minutes earlier. This man and his journey. I hoped he’d travel far enough to leave this world behind.

Dammit, that man was me!

I turned toward the door and left. My emotions at that moment were a microcosm of the entire semester. I hadn’t slept more than six hours in a night: *My life has been saturated with the exhaustion of constant activity. Classes are the major time consumers, followed by my internship at IFPA, and, after Spring Break in Venezuela, the omnipotent TGI Fridays. At times I work sixty hour weeks; at times I think it will never end; at times I wonder who I am and where I am going.*

The next day I walked into my school’s Study Abroad office. I could not survive another semester working so hard. I asked whether my scholarship would apply to foreign exchange programs. I was told it would, but only to a few direct exchange programs, not the cluster of Americans from different schools meeting up to study Spanish and party. But I didn’t care. I just wanted out of my life back in Washington DC. My choices were Spain, Chile, and Peru, and as I fingered through the brochure, my thoughts kept returning to the indigenous men I’d met in Peru. I’d go back to Lima, I decided, to La Católica University. Yet I craved a more permanent relationship. I would live with a host family and perfect my Spanish at the

university. No longer would I speak street idioms and confuse my past and perfect tenses. I'd nail down an accent – Peruvian, presumably – instead of mimicking the various Spanish pronunciations and dialects I'd heard on the streets. I would make Señora Nina Echeverría proud! I'd remain in one place for an entire semester. No more passing acquaintances; I'd make a group of friends instead. And the one thing I craved most of all – physical affection – would no longer be limited to physical contact on the bus or the amorphous flirting that sustained me on my previous trip but never materialized into something more romantic. Maybe, as my friend Ester had hoped, I'd even get laid!

Three months later I arrived in Lima utterly alone, at five in the morning, my arm clutching that same golden jeweled suitcase as if it were made of gold. Yet no one greeted me at the airport as I expected. Instead, I took a taxi to the Pueblo Libre neighborhood near the university. As in my previous experiences in Peru, the taxi driver was both handsome and helpful. He brought me to El Palacio hotel, where he unloaded by suitcase and bargained at the front desk for the honeymoon suite. He walked me to my room and showed me the mirror on the ceiling. “So you can fuck all night long,” he said. “Give your woman that big dick.” He looked at my crotch as he said it and slapped his left hand on top of his other forearm, raising that arm toward the ceiling as if it were a mighty matrimonial penis. I wished he would have stayed.

At the university I was told that my arrival was expected two days later, on August 15, and that is why nobody greeted me at the airport. I should take a taxi to Miraflores the next day. I was ready! Yet my excitement did not last long.

A middle-aged woman in a blue sweater and faded grey shoes greeted me at the Miraflores house. She explained that my \$400 rent was due on the 15th of each month, and she

expected my money tomorrow, not in American dollars, but in the Peruvian national currency. She herself did not accompany me up the stairs, but left that to her housekeeper, a heavysset dark woman who explained to me that I couldn't return too late at night because I might wake the other inhabitants.

After a few days I realized the home functioned as a sanctuary for invalids. The woman's mother, Mami, returned from the hospital and took a room on the second floor. Mami's sister, who was referred to as "la tia," perpetually rest on the sofa in front of the old television. Another old man, presumably the brother of these two sisters, resided somewhere in the home, but I only saw him when he appeared at mealtime. Meanwhile, a younger man of about forty years wandered around the home, constantly being chided by the fat housekeeper and another employee with long black hair and arms so thin I could almost see her bones. He appeared to be mentally retarded. A five-year-old boy with constant mucus hung around the kitchen; he may have been the thin woman's son.

Fate, however, was on my side. My Peruvian friend Kerry from high school had family in Lima, and she recommended that I visit her Aunt Julianne and two cousins. At their house I met another sister, Maruja, who offered me a room in her apartment with her and her seventeen-year-old daughter, Dulce. They asked for a mere \$200 a month. I'd have my own room and even a bathroom to share! I didn't even need to see the place. I was moving. As for the well-decorated house of the invalids, I would only miss one of them, as I mentioned in my journal: *I'm sad that I'm leaving la tía, the woman who watches television all day. She told me that she didn't want me to leave because she's here all day with the two housekeepers, and they are mean to her. They yell at her. They feed her shit during the day. She liked to tell me about*

the city and the things I should see. Sometimes she told me about her life. I feel bad about leaving, but I need a life too.

At my new home things were wonderful. Maruja treated me as an honored guest. In the morning I ate fried eggs and giant bowls of papaya, bananas, and strawberries. For lunch I returned for ham and cheese sandwiches and mixed salads of broccoli and carrots. At night we shared some kind of meat and fried yucca, always fried yuccas. Yet my school environment was nothing like my Venezuelan Spring Break festivities. I discovered that a “direct exchange” program meant that I merely matriculated at the university as any other Peruvian student. No official exchange program existed. I did not study with other foreign students as I had witnessed in Mérida. Instead, I took the same classes as other Peruvians. I enrolled in Peruvian Economic History, Contemporary Socioeconomics, American History II, and The Religious History of Peru. I shut the door to my bedroom after dinner and studied several hours each night. It was exhausting. I struggled to keep up with the professors, and had little time to do anything besides study. I was back to the strict schedule I thought I had left behind in the United States:

Today I had my Peruvian Economics class and didn't understand anything. I spent my last two hours reading the book, and then I tried to find a book in English to help, but that was even more confusing. And he just reads out the questions for the quizzes right there in class, and we have to write the questions down and then answer them, but I can't even copy the question correctly! Ugh...I know I have to study but I am always so tired here. Like my discipline is faltering. I'm overwhelmed with work yet avoiding my studies like the plague. Maybe I spend too much of my time staring at that one guy in class, the guy in the green striped shirt. "Excuse me, can I borrow your notes, it's just that I don't understand." Ha ha, that would be nice. The introduction of love. Although, I may need to revise it! – 10 de Septiembre, 1994 (translated from Spanish).

Yet my journals from Peru are also punctuated with an exaggerated sense of longing. A tone of desperation sets in at times:

Another night alone, walking the streets alone, looking at the couples, kissing and touching one another, but I am alone, always alone. . . . Why do I self-destruct? It's true I always choose the worst route. I'm destined for a tragic future. But I choose this destiny. It's my own fault. I'm not doing anything to change it. I'm tired of being alone. I need someone. Such a scandal! – 24 de Septiembre, 1994 (translated from Spanish)

I had entered a type of paralysis. On the one hand, I needed to do well in my classes. Yet doing so took up much of my time. I read books in Spanish that might confound me in English: Machiavelli's *The Prince* or Jurgen Habermas's *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. I studied all night for economics quizzes that mysteriously got cancelled. Perhaps I had misunderstood something in class. Yet much more was going on. The combination of constant studying, poor health, and loneliness eventually caught up with me:

To escape this horrible day I listened to some Sade, the songs that make me the saddest. As we know, that is exactly the point. The biggest problem is my health. I'm sick again. I've got some form of the flu. All my bones hurt. Me and my best friend – toilet paper. I can't take anymore. I cried before, on my bed I cried. Not too many tears, but just enough. I think I cried for three reasons. First, the frustration, confusion, and bother of not knowing a language enough. Second, for my poor health. But also, for exogenous reasons, or I mean, the very fact of my loneliness. I think this third reason would be the same even if I were in my own country. It's the loneliness of being alone, with no one, never. Each day it gets worse, more unsupportable. – 28 de Septiembre, 1994 (translated from Spanish).

But I didn't give up. I continued studying and received decent grades on my quizzes. My American History professor, a man who recommended that I write my papers in English after he received my first essay, eventually congratulated me on the advance of my Spanish writing skills. I can see my language advancement in my old journal entries, yet my progress was not limited to improved grammar and Spanish lexicon – I had begun to accept the young man I had become:

I've definitely accustomed myself better here. It's not that I have a lot of friends or that I've established any set schedule, but more that I've decided to be like I am, nothing more or less. This means that, yes, I desire a relationship with

someone; this means that I have more confidence in my ability to think and study; this means that this house is also my house; this means that at the gymnasium I can lift more weights; this means that I can wear whatever clothes at whatever time in whichever place; this means I have value and I don't have to suppress myself anymore. – 5 de Noviembre, 1994 (translated from Spanish)

This new-found confidence helped me to overcome my fears and accompany my friend Maria Luz to a local orphanage. As in my earlier travels, witnessing the joy of children playing forced me out of my self-reflexive state of mind. In cramped, second-floor accommodations, Father Orlando of the Benedictine order cared for two dozen children as if they were his own. With time my exaggerated sense of longing dissolved into the hearts and smiles of such innocent, happy children. I'd finally found someone who loved me no matter what. I realized how much I was missing by studying every afternoon and preparing for exams as if any of them really mattered. Stable, measured success paled compared to the effervescent spirit of these children. They demanded a more free-spirited young man, one not afraid to draw outside the lines or dance with reckless abandon.

While I enjoyed the company of all the boys, I bonded with Jesus immediately. I'm glad I told Manuel about him! Much of his scalp was covered with scabs from a fungus that had attacked his skin. He was small for his age and often overlooked. In many ways he was my exact opposite. My own physical presence demanded attention, eliciting flirtatious stares or respectful nods. Yet on the inside I was damaged, unsure of myself and unwilling to venture out of a restricted comfort zone. On the contrary, Jesus's dark skin and dusty appearance may have motivated pity, but his engaging smile and open heart made him so much more beautiful than I had ever been. Despite growing up in that orphanage, he looked at the world as his special friend, living each day with earnest satisfaction. I don't know how that boy did it! He, in combination with the others at the orphanage, taught me that feeling good about yourself

should be the normal state of mind, but that left alone such spirit has nowhere to go. They let me know that I am not alone, that I have much to offer, and that human beings are meant to be together. For that is where we draw our strength.

But enough of my sentimentalism – I still needed to get laid. Ironically, outside the orphanage is where I marveled each Saturday at a gorgeous, shirtless man (he was always shirtless) with incredible legs. Yet I still wasn't sure how to translate my newfound appreciation for physical and emotional connectedness to its sexual manifestation:

I can't believe how good-hearted Padre Rincón is and the older teenager Santos, the one with one leg. I adore Santos and admire how good he is with the boys. But, geez, that super hot guy that is always out front. Legs like tree trunks. ¡Dios Mios! He was looking at me, but I'm sure he only did it because I was staring at him. What might happen if I was here Saturday night instead of the morning? The thing is that I can't do anything so sexual so close to the orphanage. I bet a few of the boys have been violated before. They need a masculine figure that they can confide in. Thank God the Father and Santos are here. But, lord, that guy. . . – 7 de Diciembre (translated from Spanish)

I tried once again with the men from my gym:

Juan, Alberto, Roy, Wilhelm, Miguel, Carlos, Big Back, Legs, Smiley, and all the others. I will miss them. The men from the gym. They treated me like a friend, not a foreigner. All of them were my lovers. I touched Juan's chest; I slept between the legs of another; I licked the Big Back. And finally, I kissed the smile of the man with the great legs. Yes, I created my lover, in my head, but at least they loved me too. So friendly, all of them. One day I'd like to return with an even better body. One day. I am going to find my lover within the weights of the gym. – 16 de diciembre, 1994 (translated from Spanish)

But eventually I did get laid. His name was Victor, a small indigenous man in my economics class. We hadn't talked all semester, but on our last day of class he said he wanted to tell me something, but he wanted to do it in private. Outside the park we shared a bottle of wine later that night. I remember shaking so uncontrollably that he took my hands in his on the park bench and brought them to his heart. "I am nervous too," he said. I felt at ease with Victor. I remember the ease of his smile in between kisses. I wanted to kiss him all night:

I remember how we slept together. I remember your small and rough hands. I wanted to lie together all night like that, rolled up like food. That's when I felt the most erect, when I realized what we had done. When I touched your skin, I felt something spiritual and satisfying. You smiled when I touched your side, and then I tried to drink that smile with kisses. You have the most beautiful smile in the world. I will never forget it. I can't. And I don't want to. I don't love you, but I thank you. . . . I think of your smile, and the darkness. We didn't have a good rhythm, and the bed was loud, and I couldn't do what I wanted to do, but it was INCREDIBLE! Not because of the sex, or your dick. Or your body, or personality. You let me touch you. I got to do what I always wanted. It didn't bother you. Your body belonged to me. If that was all, that would have been enough. I finally got to show what I'd been feeling for so long. For one night, no more. No one forgets their first love. I'm no different. Thanks to you, my life can now begin. – 28 de diciembre, 1994 (translated from Spanish).

So what am I to make of my time in Peru? To what meaning must I ascribe my story?

Despite my initial surprise at the amount of work expected of me and my lack of domestic comrades in search of the nearest party as I had experienced in Venezuela, I continued the emotional awakening I had initiated on my first trip abroad. On New Year's Eve I reflected upon what Peru had taught me:

This year things have happened because of me: the desire to study in Peru, my job at TGI Friday's, the bottle of wine that led me to my lover. Most important is Peru, my destiny. There, I realized that I could love someone, that I feel better around other people. Friends. Family. Kids. Men. This could have happened outside Peru, I suppose, but for me this transformation occurred inside, in the heart of Peru. The heart of Peru. I will always remember Peru. I am never leaving, and so I'm not crying. It is always inside me. – 31 de diciembre, 1994 (translated from Spanish).

While I was optimistic what the future might hold, I was unsure what form this might take. I never expected to continue my travels in Latin America. I had no idea where my transformed self might reappear. Might something sinister be lurking behind such wide-eyed anticipation? Would I continue to have sex with Latin men? Would I become the adventurous, free-spirited Western male traveler superimposing an order – moral, political, scientific, and sexual – on supposedly backwards natives? What would become of me, and how might my continued

travels influence my future development? But for now I reveled in this new persona.

Everything I had felt, every place I had traveled, and everyone I had met, led me to this moment:

I'm looking for some type of balance and moderation. I can't kill myself anymore. Like I said to Rosemarie, I feel as if my life has just begun. I went from an observer to a participant. I learned to love myself, was honest to myself, and began to love others. Yet at the same time I feel like a big swirl. I'm not sure where I'm going, or how to get there. Everything is cloudy and confused. I know I'm happier than before, yet I don't know where this budding contentment is going to lead me." – January 8, 1995

Manuel waited to speak until I had finished my story. "About time you got laid," he finally said, pulling out a pair of silver nail clippers from his pocket. "I'm glad you finally did it." He sat down in the chair next to my bed.

"Not exactly," I answered.

Manuel reached for my right foot. "You either did or you didn't," he said, pulling my foot towards him.

"The heart was mine, but the words weren't. That's what he said to me on his way out the door."

"Who?"

"The guy I had sex with."

"Said what?"

"What I wrote in my journal, about having a good time."

"Oh."

I turned my neck to see if anyone had come down the hallway.

“Don’t worry,” Manuel answered, tightening his face while he dug into my toe nails.

“She went home for a few hours.” I rested my foot on his bicep. “It’s just you and me.”

I told him I write things in my journal.

“You don’t say.”

“Or I did, I mean.” I held my foot in the air as if he’d just painted my toenails. “I write so I know that the things I feel are real.”

“Too bad you weren’t writing something the day you got hurt,” Manuel answered, switching to my other foot. “Then we might know what happened to you.”

I told him, yes, it is too bad, but least I had a record of my own sincerity. About how I tried to drink Victor’s smile with kisses. The most beautiful smile in the world like guava paste across my gums. I finally was able to show what I’d been feeling for so long, I told Manuel. Thanks to him my life began.

“Don’t be so overdramatic,” Miguel warned. “Everybody gets laid.”

“But don’t—”

“Listen, like I said, I’m happy you got laid.” Manuel answered, turning toward the door.

“But . . .” I began rather loudly. I waited until Manuel turned around. “I have to tell you something.”

Manuel pulled at a rogue hair on his chin and crossed his arms.

“Victor asked for money after I left,” I blurted out.

“Victor?” Manuel asked, returning to my bedside.

“The guy.”

“And?”

“He said it was for a cab, so I gave him some.”

“Yes?”

“But he asked for more.”

Manuel lowered his gaze toward the foot of my bed.

“Uh-huh,” he said, picking up a pillow and placing it beneath my lower back.

“He said that’s how it’s done there in Lima. He said indigenous men like him are poor.

He told me ‘life here is hard.’”

“Hard?” Manuel said in a mocking voice. “Life? He grabbed his forehead and offered one of my most favorite Spanish phrases, “*No me digas!*”

But I wasn’t in the mood to laugh.

“He smiled and said the stuff I wrote in my journal.”

“That you drew that heart around?”

“Yes!”

“Smiled when?”

“After sex.”

“Oh.”

“When he said that thing I just told you about.”

“Remind me.”

“It was a really good time,” I answered, frustrated by Manuel’s playful tone.

Manuel finally answered after standing and staring at me for what seemed like forever:

“he meant a lot to you, huh?”

“The whole fucking world,” I answered in English.

“Yes,” he answered. “I got that earlier.”

“But then I had to pay him, you know?”

“Yes?”

“I had to fucking pay him.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Didn’t you hear me?” I asked Manuel, who was busy rolling up his sleeves. “My first time having fucking sex,” I said, “I had to pay for it.”

“You’re speaking English,” Manuel said. “That’s twice today.” He stopped rolling up his sleeves and moved closer to me.

“A lot of fathers take their sons to the whorehouse,” he said. “It’s a macho thing.”

“But it wasn’t my father,” I answered loudly, switching back to Spanish. “It was my first lover.”

“We do what we have to do.”

“But I didn’t—”

“Life is hard,” Manuel answered. “Your boyfriend was right. Just let him have it.”

“I’m talking about me,” I said. Manuel looked me over. He paused so long on my face that I wondered what I looked like. I imagined a giant scab over my face, like the one over little Jesús’s head in the orphanage.

“Why does it matter?” he finally asked.

“It matters to me,” I told him, speaking slowly now, “because I think I might know why I’m here.”

¿Por qué nadie me habla? ¿Por qué nadie no me hace caso?

ANSWER ME!

Ustedes están ahí y me miran fijamente . . .

What did I ever do to you?

Why do you all look at me that way?

¿Por qué?

¿Por qué?

¿Por qué?

TELL ME!

TELL ME!

TELL ME!

Maybe I want out of here too.

¿Por qué?

¿Por qué?

¿Por qué?

Day 9

I'm not surprised my father hung up on me. He sounded disgusted, probably drunk, told me he doesn't speak in FUCKING SPANISH! It happened the next morning in front of the nurse's station when Nurse Green-Eyes told me they'd left a message for my father, but he hadn't called back. I stood there with the phone receiver in my hand looking up at two other nurses. I yelled into the receiver and pounded it lightly onto the table. Green-Eyes told me to settle down and to get back to my room.

"This one," she said to a fellow nurse I didn't recognize behind the desk, pointing at me. "Now this one needs to relax."

I put my hands on my hips and asked what I was supposed to do next.

"Tomorrow," she said, walking with me back to my room, "an American woman from Lourdes' church is supposed to come and help."

"Who's Lourdes?"

"What do you mean?" laughed Green-Eyes. Then she looked at me more seriously. "You really don't know?"

I shook my head as she told me that Lourdes is the nurse who'd been taking care of me this whole time.

"Taking care?" I asked.

"Yes, bringing you meals and such."

I didn't want Manuel to get in trouble, so I kept my mouth shut. *He's* the one who'd been taking care of me, certainly not Nurse Thin-Lips, or Lourdes, or Nurse Garcia, whatever her name was. Manuel had done all the work!

“She’s working hard to find you a place to stay,” Green-Eyes continued, pointing me toward my bed. “And you might want to take a look at these.” She pointed at her chest toward a very clear red pin with her name, Sandra, etched on the front. “We’re all wearing these.”

I stared back, speechless.

“So in case you never get a hold of your family, sir, you still have a place to go.”

Had they really been wearing the name tags the entire time? And how hadn’t I noticed? I lowered myself back into bed and wondered about what else I’d misconstrued. What else had I completely misjudged or not even noticed?

A few hours later Manuel came in and sat next to my bed. “It’s not that unusual,” he said.

“What?”

“Getting paid for sex.”

“You don’t think—”

“I’ve done it.”

“Yeah?”

“A couple of times.” He looked out my open door. “My wife doesn’t know.”

“Obviously.”

“Just to get it out of my system.”

“Uh-huh.”

“When I was younger,” he continued, shutting the door with his foot. “When I was younger I got paid, you know . . .”

“For what?” I interrupted.

“The sex. I got paid for the sex.”

“With men?”

“Yes.”

“Ah.”

“I mean, we all did it.”

“Who?”

“As kids, you know, but later too.”

“Later?”

“At university.”

“College?”

“Sometimes the older men . . . I worked as a waiter at this restaurant, and sometimes the older men would leave a big tip.”

“A big tip here . . . in Mexico?” I felt my lips spread into a smile.

“Yeah, here. Ha ha, very funny. And all I’d have to do is go out to their car to get jacked off, maybe sucked a little.”

My surprise, I’m sure, was palpable. Not so much that it had happened, but that Manuel had shared it with me.

“I know.”

“What?”

“I mean, I understand how it works.”

Manuel fidgeted his shirt collar. I noticed he wasn’t wearing a name tag.

“So you’re saying . . . ”

“I’m saying it wasn’t that big of a deal,” he answered. I thought about this, then asked him about his name tag.

“My what?”

“Your nametag.” I answered, nodding toward his chest. “Did you ever get a nametag?”

“But—”

“I’m wondering because this morning—”

“No,” Manuel quickly interrupted. “I’ve never gotten a name tag.”

“Never?”

“Never.”

I looked over at my thin arms outstretched before me. “So to you it’s not much of a big deal.”

“Huh?”

“Getting paid,” I mean.

“I’m not as important as the others,” he said. “Enough to get a nametag.”

“I’m talking about sex. Or, I mean, whatever is pretty close to sex.”

“They’re nurses and I clean. That’s the way things go.”

“But you didn’t feel just a little bit important when—”

“Because I’m talking to you? Not really.”

“No. I mean when—”

“It gets me out of work,” he continued. “So I do it. I sit here,” he continued, pointing at the chair. “Or I pull the rails down,” he added, thrusting up on the handle and pulling down the bed rails, “and sit here with my butt all nice and warm against your shoulders.” He sat down next to me and wiggled his butt.

“I’m talking about—”

“I know what you’re talking about.” He stood up away from the bed. “Most of the time I was disgusted. Pure disgust.” His face discolored like wild mushrooms in a meadow, his angry expression morphing into a repulsion evident in his fixed eyes and mouth dragged down at the corners.

“I didn’t mean—”

“So the nametag, no, that’s just the natural order of things,” he continued, turning to wipe down the chair in the corner of the room. I wasn’t entirely sure what had just happened, but I knew I’d never wanted to anger Manuel.

“And the doctors?”

“The doctors what?” Manuel answered.

“Do they have name tags, too?”

Manuel stopped fidgeting, stood silent for a moment.

“No,” he said. “Actually, they don’t.”

“Nothing?”

“Nope.”

“So then you don’t have them,” I said, extending one hand to the left, “and neither do the doctors,” I continued, my other hand extended to the right.

“What’s your point?”

“My point is,” I hesitated, continuing, “is that it mattered to me.”

He rest his eyes along the length of my body. “So maybe, in some way, I’m not as far from the doctors as I thought. No?”

I shook my head.

“Am I?”

We smiled like two cornstalks in a field of many.

“But I don’t think I was disgusted,” I added. “I kept everything under control.”

Manuel scanned his eyes over my body. “If that we’re true,” he said, leaning toward the door, “I don’t think you’d be in here.”

On his way out I asked him how much longer it would be before I get a television.

His answer – *you kill me, Cristóbal* – put a smile on my face, and emphasized how much I’d come to rely on this man, the first person who had washed my hair and dared to wipe the tears from my eyes. That he had received money for sexual favors made our arrangement all the more intriguing, but it also might have explained how it had happened in the first place.

I’d be lying if I said I didn’t know what I was doing. Over time I’d realize that Latin America was exactly where I needed to be if I were to continue getting laid. It was the ideal sex-gender system for a guy like me. Male sexuality oozed everywhere from bus lavatories to patches of plantain trees gathered at the edge of an orchard. It didn’t matter that I wasn’t getting much myself, nor that I couldn’t as yet explain this phenomena; the only thing that mattered is that I felt it like a branch leaning over the road.

Famous feminist scholar Gayle Rubin defined a culture’s sex/gender system as a “set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity, and in which these transformed sexual needs are satisfied” (162). That’s the fancy way of saying that each society develops a specific arrangement in which sexual and other roles are determined in advance based on a person’s biological sex. A presumed and prescribed heterosexuality emerged from these sex/gender systems, as did a more deviant same-sex sexuality defined, determined, and regulated by individual cultures.

The U.S. sex-gender system mirrors that in other Western societies, as maleness and heterosexuality are prized over any expressions of femininity – either from women or men – or deviations from heterosexuality. Maleness is conceived as a distinct set of characteristics, including a man’s ability to prove his physical prowess, to accumulate possessions, to think objectively rather than emotionally, to ignore or disguise his emotions, and to conquer women. Only recently has the phenomena of homosexuality been recognized and catalogued, although men have been having sex with other men both here and abroad for as long as history itself, as proven by the depth of archaeological evidence representing two or more men in some form of erotic coupling. Most boys, like myself, know to keep that desire to themselves, even if studies have shown that same-sex horseplay, including mutual masturbation and fallatio, were quite common, even in, and throughout, twentieth-century America. Walt Whitman, as we know, was writing about many of the men with whom he was romantic. Furthermore, World War I saw a host of soldiers hooking up on barrack-beds, ships, and submarines. After the war, as Jeffery Chaucer points out in *Gay New York*, they headed to the cities and constructed gay enclaves that turned into gay neighborhoods and marked the ascension of the later gay rights and gay identity movements.

Yet the visibility of gay men, I eventually realized, actually decreased the amount of sex that men who are attracted to other men could consummate with heterosexual men. In the United States, a man who has sex with another man (including one who receives head) is determined to be “gay” by our sex/gender system. The only exceptions might be among drug addicts or the prison population, but even then these groups are referred to as having “turned” gay. Their heterosexuality has been vanquished by the act of having sex with another men. It does not matter who does what to whom, but more so that two men are having sex in some

form or another. This all-encompassing definition of homosexuality, many have argued, prevents men from forming close, non-sexual bonds with other men because of the specter of what might appear as homosexual. One only need look at the touch-feely expressiveness of American fraternity parties or anywhere else men are drinking heavily to witness men all over each other – chest bumping, hugging, ass-grabbing, etc. – freed via alcohol from the strict self-monitoring apparent in their daily lives.

Latin America differs from the United States in this regard, as men are steeped in a culture of machismo, both similar and different than American heteronormative masculinity. Machismo wears many hats. To some it is a repressive social system responsible for the treatment of women as second class citizens, either mere sexual objects or Madonna-like angels, the classic virgin-whore paradox. Mexico's famous sociologist Octavio Paz noted that in a world made of man's image, women become a mere reflection of "masculine will and desire." A 1996 ethnographic study by anthropologist Matthew Gutmann divides machismo into an authentic and false machismo. Authentic machismo is characterized by courage, generosity, and stoicism, while false machismo is about a performance of masculinity designed to hide an underlying cowardice. I witnessed both kinds of machismo of my first trip to Latin America, but the two most salient characteristics I experienced were a certain comradery among men born out of their privileged status and an obsession with sex.

When I asked Manuel why Latin American men are so obsessed with sex, he thrust his hand over his elbow and shot his forearm in the air to simulate a suddenly-erect penis.

"Because we're men," he answered quickly. "We have needs." I watched him place his hand over his crotch and grab himself so his genitals bunched up in his hand. "We're animals!" His enthusiasm seemed genuine to me, but as noted in much of the enthusiasm for sex along

my travels, these men appeared invested in their *performance* of masculinity. Still, a 1994 poll mentioned by my Spanish tutor in Guatemala confirmed that over 90% of men, including himself, admitted to having cheated multiple times on their wives.

So that's the environment in which I was thrust, and it's no wonder that in the public sphere in which I traveled – streets, busses, restaurants, boarding houses – I was surrounded by men. Like Wily on the bus to Quetzaltenango or my faux-lover David on his horse, these men made themselves available as headrests, cuddle-buddies, drinking pals, bunk mates, and Spanish tutors. Most appreciated (by me) was their desire for physical closeness, be it resting on a bus, kissing my cheek in a bar, or rubbing my shoulders after a long day of classes. I didn't know on my first trip that many of these same men are also sexually available because my definition of men who have sex with other men emerged from its monolithic representation in the U.S. sex/gender system. That is, the men whose attention I particularly enjoyed were masculine in disposition, sometimes married or having a girlfriend. That type of man, I assumed, would not be interested in having sex with another man, or at least that's what I had noted in the United States. Yet, as I've said, the sex/gender system in Latin America is different, and for all the righteous criticism of the machismo heteronormative masculinity as harming women and gays, it opens up a space for the proliferation of sexual activity between men.

It was into this system I would fall on my early trips to Latin America. Victor, my first sexual partner, was a masculine indigenous Peruvian I had thought attractive in my economics class, but had little reason to believe might be sexually interested in me. After drinking at the end-of-course party, he asked me what I liked about Peruvians. I said the women are pretty and the men are friendly, pointing at his arm wrapped around my shoulders. He joked what a

shame it would be if I had left his country only having been with Peruvian women and never having seen what the mighty Peruvian dick could do (*la gran verga Peruana!*). What I didn't understand, however, were the actual mechanics of the act. I hadn't considered who might do what to whom, as fixated as my fantasies were on the emotional connectedness of the moment. I'm not sure if I ever fantasized about the actual act of sex, either oral or anal. If my attraction was towards straight-acting, masculine men, I'd have to understand the simple things like tops and bottoms, two cliché categories treated humorously here in the United States, but taking more significant roles in Latin America. It was with some relief, then, that Victor's erect penis was about the same width and length of my index finger. It's as if I'd been branded a bottom without actually having to be one. And that was perfectly fine by me.

A large and growing ethnographic literature on sexuality and gender in the Caribbean and Latin America, and among Latino populations in the United States, verifies the cultural pervasiveness of the "active" category of men (top), or a man who engages in insertive anal sex with male partners but does not identify with non-normative categories like "gay" or "homosexual," the exact kinds of men I'd been attracted to in Latin America. Yet one should not confuse these men as harbingers for an "anti-normative sexuality": gender hierarchies are strictly preserved. These men are often described in linguistic sub-categories, such as *bugurrón* and *sanky-panky* in the Dominican Republic. *Bugarrónes* are men who engage in active (insertive) sex with other men in exchange for money or other material benefits, much as Manuel had described to me. *Sanky-panky*, a linguistic variation of the English hanky-panky, is a term for a particular masculine style associated with Caribbean men in tourist towns who hustle both male and female tourists. In either case, these situational identities emerged specifically from local sex/gender systems not associated with foreign capitalist or tourist

penetration, as my graduate literature would have me believe. Dominican men, for example, participate in a sex/gender much different than that associated in the West. I wrote about my introduction to this system quite a few years later, once I had better understood it, in my journal after a trip to the Dominican Republic:

And that was a “classic” Dominican club, right in the barrio, locals that all know each other, and the flower guy brought me, everyone dancing in the center, and that guy with the big smile stroked my dick right through my pants, and everyone could see and he didn’t seem to even care, and he wasn’t drunk, and people saw, but simply looked on, and some of the guys around us were getting hard, so that the men here just go ahead and do whatever they want and there is such an understanding that men certainly, and definitely should, engage in a deep physical (and sexual) relationship. – June 15, 2001

Researchers such as Mark Padilla point out, however, that situational sex workers must take care to retain their “masculine” position. One Dominican man who sleeps with men (MSM), Alfonso, explained that a tourist tried to give him \$500 to allow himself to be penetrated. Said Alfonso, “But I didn’t let myself be penetrated! I never want to be penetrated. Because I am going to tell you’re the truth: I’m not a *maricón*” (789). Another participant, Julio, had this to say: “I consider myself a man in sex, always a man. It doesn’t matter with whom—women, of course, and men. . . I’m not homosexual, not bisexual, not anything. I consider myself a man always in sex. Always the man. Nothing more” (788). For Padilla, these sex workers’ narratives about their stronger, buffer, masculine bodies are a way to resist their economic marginalization. Instead, they market a masculine, exclusively penetrative identity appealing to both tourist women and men.

It is interesting to note, however, that in these accounts, the seemingly disoriented Dominican is not so disoriented at all; he participates in a system in which taking the “active” position in sex does not tarnish his masculine reputation. His orientation is clear. By no means was my first lover Victor a sex worker, and his request for money was, he insisted, more about

taking a cab home than getting paid for sex. Yet the fact that he could have sex with me at all is a product, I believe, of the Latin American sex-gender system. Once I understood that men were available in such high numbers, it only made sense that I would return, wouldn't it, to the Dominican Republic, Peru, Mexico – anywhere where such a system made these encounters virtually inevitable?

Things didn't quite go as planned, I told Manuel.

“What do you mean?”

“I thought after I returned to the U.S. again, I'd use all I'd learned and have this great life.”

“But didn't you say you're a lawyer?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Sounds like a great life to me.”

“Lots of things happened,” I added.

“But it sounded like Peru was good for you, getting laid and all. The stuff you told me about finding yourself, uh, getting your stride.”

“I suppose.”

“So pessimistic you are.”

“It's different there.”

“In the U.S.?”

“Uh-huh.”

“You got to go to college and be a lawyer,” Manuel responded. “What could possibly be so bad?”

I thought at that moment how ridiculous I must seem, piecing back together a beautiful quilt of a life I was given, but destined to tear it asunder.

I understand now how alcoholism works and the legacy it leaves on the rest of us. At the time I didn't care – my father was my world. When I was young, from about the ages of 13-15, my father slept in his underwear on the living room floor. I'd wait until the snoring commenced, then slide open the pocket door into the hallway and creep into the living room. We didn't have curtains or blinds so the streetlight illuminated my father just enough so I could see if he opened his eyes or took a breath. I'd look down at my father, then up at my mother's closed door on the opposite side of the room. On most days I was scared and the outline of his sleeping penis small, but I might get the nerve to tap his underwear – so gently, ever so gently – so I could tell myself I touched the outline of his testicles or the head of his penis. Then I'd exit as quietly as I'd entered and masturbate in my room. I never told Manuel any of this in the hospital room.

On one night, however, his penis looked so big I ran out of the room because I didn't know what else to do. What was usually small and sleeping was fat and leaned over to the side of his underwear. It was the biggest penis I had ever seen! I slowly reentered the room, unsure what I might do next. I moved into position right above him, and from there I could see the outline of his penis head through his underwear. My penis was hard too, but much skinnier and less impressive than his. Because he was partially hard, I could now see the middle part of his penis, which shocked me with its length and girth. I checked the hallway behind me, then turned to look at my mother's door. Still closed. For a moment I glanced down at my father's

hairy chest so different from my own. And his thighs – *oh my lord!* – his muscular thighs were thick like the football players on television.

I lowered myself down next to his body, as I had done before, but something felt different this time. I felt no need to hurry. I moved my thumb and forefinger into position as if holding a golf ball between them, and slowly I lowered those two fingers to the top of his penis. I moved so slowly it felt like forever. Then I moved my two fingers down the length of his penis in tiny hopping motions. I alternated my glance from my father's penis, to his face, to the pocket door behind me, and across to my mother's room. Then I retuned my gaze back down to my father. I was touching my father's penis! My fourteen-year-old dick was still hard, so hard I thought I might burst.

Then the snoring stopped.

I remained still, my body in shorts and a t-shirt, bent over, my left knee between my father's outstretched legs.

But his eyes did not open. His legs did not stir. I remained still, two fingers atop my father, hoping to God he'd not wake up.

Please don't wake up!

I knew I should leave, but I couldn't stop. I waited another minute, then inched my thumb and forefinger back to the top of his penis, which was steadily rising. Mother's door was closed.

Stop this

Stop this

Stop this!

The top of his penis pressed against the waistband of his underwear.

I have to. . .

have to. . .

touch it (just once)

I lifted the waistband in the air and half of his fat penis flopped out to the side. So big. So fat. So heavy. So beautiful. I didn't know what to do. I was afraid to let go of the waistband.

I love my father. I am a good son.

By then I had forgotten about my mother's door or my father's eyes, and I began to lower my other hand towards my father's now-exposed penis. Then I touched it. It was a quick poke like I used to do over his underwear, but this time I wrapped my fingers around it. There I was, frozen, one hand still holding up my father's underwear and the other wrapped lightly around his penis.

I stayed that way for a few seconds until his left leg moved out to the side. But if I let go, if I really let go with either hand, I knew he'd awake for sure. Dad, I thought, I'm sorry you had to see this.

So sorry.

But then it was calm again. And again I waited.

I lowered his underwear with my pinkie until his entire penis popped out and stared directly up at his face. His face! And his balls – those balls I had seen at eye-level as a little boy in the shower – his balls were as massive as I remembered. Then I formed a firm grip with two fingers and began to slowly move my fingers up and down my father's dark and hairy penis. But then I wanted to go faster.

Just a

Little

Fast—

Movement.

His leg jerked to the side, pushing my kneeling leg on the floor. I fell forward over his body. Father and son entangled. We quickly unraveled ourselves, both of us standing on our knees a few feet apart from each other. My father had pushed his erect penis back into his underwear.

“Algebra test,” I blurted out.

My father stared.

“I have an algebra test,” I repeated. “Tomorrow.”

He leaned backwards until his butt hit the living room floor. I could still see his erection through his underwear.

“Can you wake me up at six . . . tomorrow morning?”

“Why were—”

“I was about to wake you up and—”

“Did you touch—”

“Was shaking your arm.”

“At six,” I repeated

I looked at my father’s tanned, broad-featured face, the stubble across his chin, the tilt of his face that suggested he’d known the evils of the world, but certainly did not want to be awakened by them.

“Okay?” I demanded.

His beleaguered face found a point and stuck to it. “What time?” He blinked half-a-dozen times and rubbed a hand over his disheveled brown hair.

“And you rolled over on me,” I continued. “Six o’clock. Rolled over me, and I—”

“Six.”

“Yeah.”

“Got jumbled up over you.”

I crawled out of the living room to the sliding door, where I stood up and walked back to my bedroom.

Of course I didn’t sleep.

In the morning dad woke me up as planned for my Algebra test. I sat at the kitchen table and turned the pages of my algebra book for almost an hour. My father, still in his underwear, poured himself a bowl of cereal and read the paper while I wrote down made-up numbers and parentheses on pieces of paper. We didn’t speak. Every so often I’d turn the pages of my book, but I couldn’t focus. I was relieved when he got up to take a shower, but soon he was standing behind me, towel wrapped around his waist, looking closely at something I had written. But my father said nothing that morning and never thereafter. From that point forward, I learned to contain myself. I’m not sure I’ve ever let it go.

Don't look at me Don't look at me

Estoy desnudo

please I'm naked

las piernas

el culo

un niño I am

PLEASE!

PLEASE!

Déjame ser.

Por favooooooooooooooooooooooooor . . .

Dé-

Ja-

Me-

Ser! (Leave me alone!)

Day 10

I returned to The George Washington University in 1994 after my semester at Católica University; my confidence was at an all-time high. I weighed a magnificent 200 pounds, as in a few short months I had dropped the extra weight but maintained a musculature I'd never known, surpassing the gains I'd put on my first two years of college. Perhaps I had escaped my self-imposed rigidity since that night on the living room floor. I knew I'd said this before, after my first trip abroad, but this time I meant it. Besides, I'd certainly come to the right place! Washington DC in the mid-1990s, for most gay men, was a wonderful place to be. Bill Clinton had just been elected president, and inaugural poet and former sex worker Maya Angelou evoked the promise of a more tolerant era, while the P street corridor teemed with shirtless men on roller blades eating bits of grilled chicken to maintain their optimum, nearly-naked physiques. The odds were in my favor! Unfortunately, I struggled to inhabit my new disposition. I waded through the morass of idealistic hearts and sweaty, near-perfect bodies from a concerned distance, munching raisins from my pocket, nearly paralyzed by the sheer breath of possibilities on my fingertips. I didn't even own a pair of rollerblades! Worse yet, DC was teeming with white guys much like me. I had lost my edge.

I spent most of my time that summer bartending at TGI Fridays and preparing my application for a prestigious Fulbright Scholarship. On paper the award was mine. I'd maintained a perfect 4.0 grade point average, held internships at the prestigious Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis and Welt Publishing, spoke Spanish with a now-admirable and consistent accent, tutored at a predominantly African-American middle school, and continued to hold the university's top honor, the National Merit Scholarship. I proposed a three-month

intensive Portuguese language course in Brazil, after which time I would be ready to head out to the streets of Florianopolis or Rio de Janeiro and become an ethnographer, chronicling the oral life histories of the most forgotten segments of the Brazilian population. In many ways I wanted to recreate the voices that had watched over me during my own travels. In particular I was interested in how poor people maintained the spirit and goodwill shown to me for many months. How men and women sharing one-dollar-a-night accommodations with me lived their lives as if they were blessed. I remembered Jesús at the orphanage in Lima or Jamón in Panama. These children lived unselfishly and cherished each day. The famed street-children of Rio de Janeiro remained in my consciousness long after I had left. Now I would be able to listen to the ways in which they conceptualized their nomadic existence. I also imagined a return to the Rio favelas, where bare-chested men with cinnamon-colored skin almost dared me to climb higher, confused why a white foreigner would wander alone in such a dangerous area. Perhaps I wanted to understand why those too-poor even for tin-roofed shacks possessed oddly disarming smiles and displayed their strong, robust bodies with neither shame nor apology. Does beauty reside, I wondered, in the most unexpected of places? And how could I access such a wealth of spirit when I, possessed of so many attributes, could appreciate so few? If I unbraided my hair, might I see the strands of beauty within?

For my Fulbright application essay I made up a story about my mother being a bird with multi-colored and multi-hued wings who protected us within the confines of those wings, but sometimes took us in her talon toes and soared above ocean and forest, desert and sea, so that we might glimpse all the variety that existed in the world. Then back in the “nest” I’d see her wings anew, marvel at the pastel hues or electric oranges I had not noticed before, and understand that one never sees home the same way – nor the people in it – after flying over,

dining in, dropping by, or some way or another experiencing cultures outside our own. Sure I'd made it up, but my mother *did* own dozens of rainbow-colored, polka-dot, flowered, flounce, and whatever other color/style of bathing suit you can think of that might be compared to a bird's translucent feathers in a somewhat intellectually-honest way. And just as birds' wings don't all share the same structural features, my mom's closet was stacked with bikinis, wraps, one-piece suits, kimonos, halter-tops, and even something called a "swimdress."

"Fascinating," said one woman on the committee.

"Breathtaking," another opined.

"Impressive," said a third.

A fourth woman was not so convinced. "This school you propose studying at," she started, lifting her glasses from her nose and looking at the committee, then me.

"Yes?"

"I don't seem to see it here on the approved list of schools." She handed a dog-eared stack of papers to her left. The woman who had called my essay "breathtaking" now took a breath of her own.

"Christopher," said Ms. Breathtaking, "pointing her finger to a certain place on the list. "That school doesn't seem to be here, Christopher."

I hesitated.

"Only approved institutions," interrupted the grey-haired woman in the glasses.

Ms. Breathtaking cast me a sympathetic eye.

"Right," I began. "Of course. The Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro is excellent in language pre—"

The grey-haired woman interrupted, correcting my pronunciation of “Universdade,” and then pulled out a sheet of paper and held it in her hand.

“Language preparation,” I continued. “They are great, um, in language preparation.

“You are looking for total immersion classes, right?”

“Um, right, immersion,” I answered. “Total immersion.” I flashed back to my experience at Católica University in Peru.

“Well,” began the grey-haired woman, “that university does not offer *any* classes for students learning Portuguese since the students already speak Portuguese.” She looked down at her piece of paper and grit her teeth so tightly on the word “already” that I could see her inflamed gum line at the bottom of her mouth.

“I understand that,” I continued. “However, it says—”

But she wasn’t finished. “In fact, the classes you propose to take,” she held up part four of my application, “don’t even exist.” I swear I heard a gasp from someone at the table. The grey-haired woman made eye contact with two other women on the committee. Ms. Breathtaking asked me to explain

“I, uh, when looking for classes, um, decided on anthropology because—”

“But this other school you mention,” said the grey haired-woman, still shuffling papers. “This Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sol, which *is* on our list,” she added, “this school that you also propose to study at, does not even offer these courses you have here in your application.”

All four women looked at me, waiting for an answer. But I had none. I didn’t know what to say. “I ... uh ... well, when I looked at the schedules, you know, for...um....last year, it said something about, ethnography, you know, the—”

“Certainly there are ethnography courses,” said Ms. Breathtaking. “Although this anthropology department may not offer the specific courses you propose.”

“There *is* no anthropology department at Universidade Federal,” interrupted the grey-haired woman, looking menacingly at Ms. Breathtaking. “I’m sure you understand we can’t let this application go through with such incorrect data.” I looked at Ms. Breathtaking for some support. She looked down at her papers. I always knew I was a fraud, and now they did too. It never occurred to me that anyone would find out.

“If I could have some time to—”

“We’re sorry,” said the grey-haired lady.

“Such an outstanding application,” chimed in Ms. Breathtaking.

“A shame,” said another.

“I just wanted to be specific,” I pleaded.

“We’re sorry.”

“So you’d pick—”

“So sorry.”

“So you’d pick—”

The grey-haired lady shook her head: *next!*

My university would not be recommending me for a Fulbright scholarship. That much was certain.

I’d relied so heavily on the Fulbright application that I did not much consider other post-graduate options. After graduation I continued bartending at TGI Friday’s, which had become a source of comfort and friendship. I also earned a lot of money. Much like my days at the Elks lodge in Florida, I worked at one of the busiest TGI Fridays in the nation. Friday

and Saturday nights were spent in the back of the kitchen in the “service bar” where dozens and dozens of chits emerged from the printer as if it were possessed. Simultaneous blenders whirled crushed ice into Rum Runners or hard ice cream into the beautiful Mudslides that had become our signature drink. I bent giant wine glasses sideways to smother the sides with layers of Hershey’s chocolate before pouring the vodka- and Kahlua-laced drink inside. I twirled whipped cream containers in my hand like fire sticks and tossed cherries as if hand grenades onto multiple melting Mudslides. It was exhausting work, but walking home at four in the morning with \$200 in my pocket felt exhilarating. On cool summer nights I’d hear scintillating jazz emanating from open windows and feel the fatigue of a job well done. I woke up mornings at noon, went to the gym, and did it all over again. In the meantime I took the LSAT, GRE, and GMAT exams to prepare for some unknown future. I’d thought as much about law school as an Eskimo had about mosquito repellant, but something inside told me that’s just what guys like me do.

Likewise, nice guys like me work hard. And honestly. I made sure to ring up each drink on the computer. I took my pour test before each shift, turning bottles over mini-filters and watching how well I poured ¼ ounce, ½ ounce, 1 ¼ ounce, and two ounce pours into test tubes. I assiduously studied over 500 drinks in the TGI Friday’s recipe book. As it said in our training manual, no drink can deviate from Friday’s award-winning recipes. Then one afternoon a tired businessman with sweat dripping from his forehead ordered a Classic Golden Margarita, our house specialty.

“And squeeze some lime in there,” he ordered.

I ignored his request.

“Some lime, buddy.”

I looked at the wire basket filled with limes that stood between the two of us.

“Maybe three of them.”

I visualized the recipe in the training manual. The recipe called for 1 ¼ oz. Cuervo Gold Tequila with ¼ ounce Cointreau and ¼ ounce Grand Marnier. Then I added 1 oz. of margarita mix into the silver tin and a squirt of water. I covered the tin with a plastic cup and shook the shit out of it. The man watched. I contemplated the limes between us. How hard would it be, I wondered, to simply cut a lime or two in half and squeeze it into his drink? He watched the entire proceedings, waiting for me to fulfill his request. But could I? Didn't my red suspenders mean anything?

At that moment two girls appeared beside the man and ordered two drinks.

“A small one,” said the blonde girl on the left. “I don't want too much beer.”

I placed down a glass in front of the man, who was now taking on his phone. I rimmed the glass with salt. The blonde girl asked again for her drink, and I knew I should probably ask for her ID. She wore a red-orange lipstick that made her skin seem paler than it actually was. She was cute, but I didn't have much time for her. I filled up her beer from the tap and placed it in front of her. She quickly took the beer and disappeared. Meanwhile, I poured the margarita from the tin into the man's glass.

He asked about the lime.

“The lime?”

“The lime.”

I pretended not to hear. I placed a square beverage napkin in front of him and then placed down his drink. He laid his giant hands on the counter next to his drink.

He looked at the limes in the basket: “Squeeze the fucking limes.”

Again I contemplated how easily I could slice open a lime, admire its effervescent scent, and squeeze it atop his drink. Yet my younger self insisted on following the rules. I remembered our strict training manual and something called the “Friday’s Way.” The man looked as if he were about to leap over the bar and grab a lime himself. But I couldn’t allow such a thing! I had positioned myself between the man and the limes when I suddenly felt a hand on my wrist. Behind me stood an unfamiliar woman in a grey blazer. In front of me I noticed the young blonde girl had returned to the bar with her beer.

“You’re under arrest,” said the strange woman behind the bar. I turned toward her, but she manipulated my arms into handcuffs before I had a chance to consider what had happened. I watched the man sip his margarita. The young girls were now smiling.

“You’re under arrest for serving underage drinkers.”

And then she hauled me to the back office and explained the procedure. I would not be going to jail, but the restaurant would receive a \$5000 fine. I’d lose my liquor license in the District of Colombia and, of course, I’d lose my job. All I could think about was that margarita. If only I’d squeezed the fucking lime. Why couldn’t I squeeze the lime?

Two weeks later I left for San Antonio. I’d always imagined myself enshrouded in orange hibiscus flowers like in our backyard in Florida, and the pictures I’d seen of blossoming purple and pink bougainvillea trees along the River Walk captured by imagination. And let’s not forget about the men: Hispanic men wherever one looked. I’d never been to Mexico, true, but at the time I lumped Latin American men into a single category: hot and Hispanic. If I had failed to shed my uptight, over-achieving demeanor in Washington D.C., perhaps the climate in San Antonio was more conducive to reactivating some openness to new family and friends. Could I find that orientation which allowed me to shed boundaries and become emotionally or

physically intimate toward virtual strangers on a bus or on the street, as I had done in Latin America? Could I imagine there the possibility of a romantic relationship that I had denied myself back in Washington D.C.?

Manuel often talked about how easy the Americans have it. The old retirees in San Miguel sip wine all day and converse in the streets. Americans on television are rich and beautiful. I can see his point.

Yet the truth is that Americans are an idealistic bunch, and frankly it exhausts me. While indigenous Guatemalan babies fight malnutrition and Dominican women (and men) sell their sexuality for a few pesos, those of us north of the Rio Grande, according to folklore south of the border, apparently lounge over colored futons, channel-surfing or perusing on-line magazines, swathed securely in our chenille wraps or imported wool blankets from some third-world women's cooperative. Yet hardly any of us sit back and enjoy the privileges of first-world economic development. Americans are an odd sort. The tireless quest for self-improvement never falters, and instead of kicking back in the comforts of a job well done, we take self-improvement to the extreme, filling in our cracks and fissures lest someone else in the neighborhood surpass our physical, psychic, or monetary benchmarks. So when we lose our way we also lose ourselves:

When I am tired I can barely speak Spanish, like right now in San Antonio, at La Jalisco, sitting at the black bar confusing everything, not knowing what taco dorado is or confusing tortillas de arena with tortillas de maiz. I know I need to go out of the apartment for a while, alone, just to relax and catch my breath. Today was long, it was difficult. Working so hard for 48 dollars. My eyelids are drooping and my back is in knots. This feeling transcends geography. Perhaps it is with me forever. – November 10, 1996

Without a car in a city as dispersed as San Antonio, I found myself waiting at bus stops for hours contemplating what had gone wrong and how I had gotten here. The local TGI Friday's agreed to hire me, but told me I'd have to wait six months before I could bartend again. I was tired, broke, and completely lost. Yet my American idealism remained. Undaunted by my Fulbright failure and TGI Friday's firing, I joined AmeriCorps – the domestic version of the Peace Corps – in hopes of assuaging my guilty conscience. Since I'd already served an underage drinker (and who knows how many more) and lied on my Fulbright application, the least I could do was give something back to the under-privileged community. That's what good white young men are supposed to do. I was happy to have another job, albeit a low-paying one (AmeriCorps paid \$560 a month), yet I approached my new job cautiously, aware that erstwhile do-gooders sometimes get in our own way. Might I replicate colonial discourses of the adventure-seeking white man spreading so-called "knowledge" to native Others? I certainly was aware of such a possibility:

As for AmeriCorps, I have several thoughts. I am still apprehensive, and it seems as if I am expecting something bad to happen. I am not sure what I can do for anyone. I do not want to feel resented. As Tracy said on the phone, you have to work with people, not above them. And certainly not on top of them. I hope my most important impact is as a friend. A true, sincere, friend that feels confidence in his principles and will try to demonstrate this life to others. I just want to be an example, but a human example. Perhaps I have not gone through much hardship in life, but I do feel something that allows me to empathize. Perhaps it is my sexual direction, maybe not. But I do know that I know what it is like to fear, to worry, to lose a love, and most importantly, to rebound, and carry on, even thrive again. – November 13, 1996

In many ways I'd resumed my foreign travel. Migrations, either temporary or permanent, involve both uncertainty and potential reinvigoration. Any hint of rupture, as I marked down in my journal, is recast as a heroic quest to educate, conquer, or defy unexpected challenges. Joining AmeriCorps gave my movement a purpose, mirroring the "knowledge" and "progress"

impulse of earlier travelers. I felt confidence in my “principles” and wanted to demonstrate them to others as if those in underprivileged communities or poor third-world countries possessed no moral compass of their own. Likewise, the exaggerated tone of my journal entry above attests to the exhaustion and self-doubt I had framed as a “challenge” I needed to overcome. Inscribe. Circumscribe. Control. Had I unwittingly assumed an orientation I knew little about?

The first stage of acquiring an American idealism is that one actually needs to mold oneself into some ideal. My body maintained its musculature, and I kept off the twenty extra pounds of avocados and crema I had taken back with me from Peru. I considered applying to the Thunderbird School of Global Management in Arizona, but I had no money. Then one afternoon I opened a manila envelope and received my LSAT score: 167! There was hope for me after all! I quickly looked up the University of Texas law school, an hour away, and discovered their dual degree program with the Department of Latin American Studies. In four-and-a-half years I could graduate with my law degree and a Master’s Degree in Latin American Studies. By the time I matriculated I’d be a state resident and save thousands of dollars on tuition. Even AmeriCorps guaranteed several thousand dollars of tuition assistance once I completed my 1600 hours of community service. The hero is reborn! Emancipation commenced!

In the meantime I dedicated myself to AmeriCorps. American idealism can hardly be described any better:

This is an impromptu AmeriCorps journey to California, a flight that knows where it is going but refuses to say. These wings are carrying me, taking me, re-directing me to an ocean-side hideaway, the soaring cliffs and falling hills of Malibu. To the shores. I am hoping to shed my cynicism this week. For once I would like to be inspired, to really believe with all my heart, with full sincerity. I hope to be overcome by an earnestness of purpose, or at least a flash of

inspiration that takes several weeks to finally burn out. Of maybe last forever like the famous candle in the Middle East. In a little more than a month, I have travelled cross-country, crisscrossed roads, and flown over vast stretches of desert. I am hoping to excel, to proceed with purpose, to work diligently, to hear about what others have done, and to learn how to serve effectively. – November 19, 1996

Before long I had immersed myself completely in AmeriCorps. I responded almost immediately to the people I met along the way. They ranged from addicts to preachers to innocent children, yet despite these differences they belonged to the same community, one in which I ventured to understand. Their voices mattered to me. These people reminded me of many I had met on the streets of Latin America. Some took their respective turns on the cross, imparting to others what they had learned from their experience. Others languished.

Yet we did more than clean up neighborhoods and board up crack houses. I worked domestic violence hotlines, accompanied police officers on Saturday ride-a-longs, translated for attorneys at San Antonio Legal Aid, ran the elevator at the children's museum, chaperoned students to San Antonio Spurs games, babysat the children of crack addicts, and urged Victoria Court public housing residents to plant flowers outside their doors. Each project brought me closer to the community

As illuminating as these experiences were, I eventually tired. The long hours exhausted me. Between the 50 hour weeks at AmeriCorps and waiting tables four nights a week, I described myself "as tired as I have ever recalled, waiting tables for a mere 30 dollars after tutoring all day at Highlands." Yet it was more than physical exhaustion. Working in impoverished communities proved mentally exhausting as well.

Clearly I cared about the community and its children, but the tireless quest to save, educate, or otherwise reorient the huddled masses in south and west San Antonio depleted my mental energy. Our sponsor Ms. Jenkins pulled me aside one day and told me I looked tired.

“I want to see you loosen up,” she urged. “I don’t know how you do it.” Of course she was right. My fellow AmeriCorps members grew up in the very communities in which they served and therefore approached their tasks with an enviable familiarity.

“Alvin used to be my uncle’s friend,” Yolanda explained as she helped scrub feces off the bathroom floor in yet another crack house. Her uncle died, she told me, “but not like this.” She smiled as she lifted Alvin’s bruised and sagging arm over the torn plaid couch and past the beat-up refrigerator, upon which a colorful picture was taped of a stick figure holding a flower beneath the sun. I imagined finding that little girl who drew the picture and carrying her out to safety.

As in Latin America, I continued my fantasies. I needed to make up my lovers in order to survive. “All invented lovers,” I wrote. “Formed in my mind so I wouldn’t fall apart.” I met one of my favorites, Officer Avila, at a training camp for youthful offenders on the Fort Hood military base:

“Give a soldier a ride,” says the sign, which is exactly what I’d like to do. So many of them, taunt as the repelling rope in those green fatigues. You are the man I want to be with because you are the man I want to be. But most of all Lieutenant Avila because his walk is a rumble, a beautiful stern stride that makes water ripple, expand symmetrically like his smile, a staggering smile that claims itself a success. Yes he is a rousing success, just like this conference. Such a splendid body that Lieutenant Avila, hopefully waiting to bring himself atop me. Hopefully, hopefully, hopefully. . . join the army family from the inside out. – March 2, 1997

I was still after a certain type of man, one steeped in a rugged masculinity. Yet the type of man I wanted to be was far from how I perceived myself:

I wish I were a man, I mean a classic military-style man who looks for a good clean fight, who lifts weights with passion, a man with a rock hard chest and shoulders that roll from back to neck. Thighs that gallop and close in around my head. I wish I were a man who keeps to himself, who does his work with pride and diligence, who loves his family more than life, a man who enjoys his free time without thinking all the time, but is really quite intelligent. I am not the man I imagine myself to be. – March 1, 1997

I idealized so many of the men I worked with during my tenure at AmeriCorps. Eventually this attraction spread to the students at Highlands High School. I could no longer control myself:

It's hard to be so close to these guys, the ghetto-talkin', smooth haired, tight brown bodies strutin' around the hallways, chests forming right before my eyes; hard to be so close when all I want to do is fuck them. That's about it, just unzip those flies and start sucking on their Latin lovmakers. No, these high school girls are not stupid for loving these guys. I'd go for two at a time sprawled out all over that black leather couch, spewin' seventeen-year-old cum all over the place. So being here basically represses me even further because I'm surrounded by even more men I can't have, both for ethical reasons and the non-reciprocal nature of the attraction. – January 27, 1997

I've returned to my journals so frequently in this section because I do not recall the isolation and sadness so rampant in my journals. I also had forgotten the spirit in which I approached the San Antonio community. Yet thankfully my journals stopped for several months. I finished my AmeriCorps assigned 1600 hours in 9 months (overachiever, anyone?) and moved two-and-a-half hours outside San Antonio to the Mexican border town of Ciudad Acuña on the Rio Grande river. I rented a cement shack for \$50 a month and attempted to write the great Latin American novel, Garcia-Marquez style: political intrigue, lies, and unadulterated passion. I woke up at 6 a.m. each morning, wrote until noon, made the same lunch of tuna sandwiches and cold black beans, then wrote again until 3 p.m. Off to the gym at 4, dinner in town, then I'd lie on my hammock until 8:30 p.m., after which I would write again for a few more hours. I never went out. I rarely drank. Every ten days I drove to San Antonio, where I worked three double shifts in a row, sleeping on my friend Michael's couch. Three-hundred hand-written pages of that novel still remain in a black binder at the bottom of my filing cabinet. I'm not sure it's worth anything, but one day I'd like to find out. What had occupied my mind so long that I stopped writing about all the men I couldn't have?

I hate to end this section on an idealistic note, but isn't that what the great American spirit is all about? I believed I could write the great Latin American novel. I believed I could change lives through my AmeriCorps community service. I believed I might one day attract one of the many, many men I described in my journals. I believed in the ideal man. Yet idealism isn't always future-oriented. Many times it looks back and assesses things in a positive perspective, as in *right now*. I know my idealism remained despite the long hours, mental fatigue, and unrequited love I experienced in San Antonio. I know because it looked like this:

Gil just left, and there was something in his eyes, like he was thinking about something; he had that still expression like I've never seen before on him, since he's usually just joking around during tutoring. I asked him if there was anything specific he wanted to talk about, but he just kind of shrugged his shoulders. But I could see some longing there, for what I'm not sure. I remember how white his shirt looked, and for the moment I wanted to grab the back of his head softly and pull him close to me. It feels good that Gil wants something from me even if I'm not sure what it is. It feels good and calm and warm and fresh. – May 2, 1997

The lonely, but chaste gay man is hardly new, I told Manuel. Or at least in the United States it isn't. I hadn't had sex since Victor, and I wasn't sure what was taking so long. I was still working at AmeriCorps in San Antonio to maintain my residency before law school. Paul Monette wrote about such chastity years ago in *Becoming a Man* when he described his own "obvious sensuality" mixed with a curious celibacy. While others lived, I wrote in my journal or ran off to Mexico to invent stories.

Manuel asked if I had any stories of my own from the border. I told him the ranch in which I resided in Ciudad Acuña, just minutes across the Texas border town of Del Rio, was home to a variety of transient visitors, mostly married men from Texas who spent evenings in one of the ranches' seven cement dwellings entertaining a bevy of young Central American women making money along the border with their bodies. Manuel livened up when I mentioned

the women. I lived in “Apartment” D, a modest abode like the others, furnished with a bed frame and mattress, three dresser drawers, a tilted wooden desk, and an overhead light bulb hanging from the ceiling. I plugged in a mini-refrigerator in the corner, atop of which I stacked cans of black beans, Pringles potato chips, a can opener, and paper plates. I hung a hammock across the covered parking area so that my outstretched hand swung low over loose gravel while I paused to consider the setting sun to my west and the nearly-dry Rio Bravo behind me, a portion of the river so low even a Chihuahua could cross without holding its breath. I wonder now why one of the ranch’s female guests did not simply walk across the river to America early one evening rather than bite her nails and watch the setting sun waiting for a ride back to Ciudad Acuña’s town center.

No man was to proposition another man’s woman. The adulterous men, I suppose, had their own logic out along the great Rio Bravo, so far be it from me to point out the irony. The neighbor on my right, Julio, often entertained a woman named Claudia, a twenty-something beauty who kept on her one pair of high heels no matter where she wandered on the premises. One morning while taking my customary outdoor shower aside the main house, a snake wove out of the grass and nearly slid across my foot. I high-stepped it out from behind the privacy fence so fast that I don’t even remember screaming, or making a sound of any kind. I must have, however, because Claudia appeared out of Julio’s room with a broomstick in her hand. She took powerful strides in her customary black pumps and carried the broomstick like a lance she might launch through the air. I stood there naked, slightly bent over, looking in the grass for the snake.

“It’s a rattlesnake,” said Claudia, by now a few feet away from me and smiling. I focused my attention on the snake. The she turned her glance on me: *muy guapo*.

It was then that I realized my nakedness.

“Oh, sorry,” I said, oddly calm for a situation – naked snake hunting – I’d normally avoid.

“I’ve seen you before,” Claudia continued. “In the morning you shower.”

“I do.”

“And you walk back to your room without any clothes on.”

“Yes.”

“Completely naked.”

I looked at her shoes; she examined my body. She then said something I did not understand and smiled. After that she looked at the ground near my feet. I thought she was looking at my genitalia, small and shriveled from the cold shower. I covered my groin with my hand.

“Your feet,” she continued. “You shouldn’t walk here because of the shit.”

“I’m more concerned about the snakes than shit.”

She laughed again, and I excused myself to get a towel from my room. Claudia followed a few feet behind me.

“You sit in here all day,” she said. “What do you do?”

“I write.”

She followed me into my room, where I grabbed a blue towel from the back of my desk chair and wrapped it around my waist. I turned around and glanced at the stack of books on the desk.

“The story starts in a ranch,” I continued. “Kind of like this one.”

Claudia perused the room, frowned, and fingered a few pieces of loose paper on the desk. I imagined she disapproved of writing.

“What I don’t understand,” she said, “is why you’d want to write about a place like this.” She walked inside the tiny bathroom and turned on the sink. “No hot water. The same as ours.” She walked past me out the bathroom door and flicked the water in my face. I followed her outside. “You know,” she said, surprisingly agile in her tight skirt and heels, “Julio sometimes can’t get a hard-on.” As she said it, she turned up her pinkie toward her mouth, the way Dr. Evil does in Austin Powers, which I assumed was a reference to Julio’s small cock.

“I see.”

“And I’ve told him about you, you know, and he says he wouldn’t mind.”

“Mind what?”

“If you joined us.”

While I did not find the skinny, mustached Julio attractive, at least someone had noticed me. I had tired of the non-reciprocal, asymmetric nature of my attraction in San Antonio.

“Yes,” I responded, unsure to which question I had actually answered.

“He says he might try it, um, with you.”

I could not contain my smile, and for once I didn’t even try. And with that she grabbed my towel and walked back to her room. So Julio wanted to do me. . .

A few days later Julio asked me to his room to inspect his penis.

“Tell me if it looks red to you.”

“Red?”

“You know, like not right.”

I sat on my bed while he stepped in front of me. His penis was, in fact, quite small and surrounded by long and curly pubic hair. He placed two fingers over the tip of his penis and stretched it out. With the other hand he pointed at a blotchy patch of skin in the crevice just below the penis head.

I moved my head closer to his penis.

So close I could touch it. . .

So there I was, my fingers inches away from Julio's rising penis, but all I did was lightly poke his penis with my right forefinger. Where was the idealistic fifteen year old who had crept right up to his nearly-naked father? What happened to the privileged youth exerting his burgeoning male sexual right on his own father? That boy would have taken Julio's small penis into his mouth. And suppose my father had woken up, yet remained still on the living room floor. Might it have been easier for me to take up a lover? Had I developed a hard emotional core in response to that early rejection? Was I waiting for men who might never acknowledge my presence, sexual or otherwise? And what function does writing serve in all of this? Why was it that I could craft crushes in my journals, yet any physical contact in the *real* world threatened the immaculate, heroic image I had ascribed to these men? There, in my tiny room in the desert, Julio's shriveled up and red penis in my hand, I had to finally ask myself *what the hell is going on?*

Rather than going after Julio, I went to the dentist instead.

"The dentist?" asked Manuel. "Why there?"

"It's what I did," I told him. "I went to the dentist."

Manuel asked me to open my mouth.

“Looks good to me,” he said, moving his head closer to mine. “Straight as gold.”

At the dentist office I was fine, I told Manuel. Pathetic, maybe, but fine. Every two weeks I’d sit in a small waiting room of linoleum and hard plastic chairs from the defunct bus station. I never saw a dental assistant, nor did I ever see anyone behind the reception counter either. In the lobby it was me and a large television propped high in the corner atop two horizontal beams holding a jagged piece of plywood. I’d come mid- afternoon, around *Telenovela* time, and usually the opening music for *El Amor del Pueblo* – single strums on a guitar and a deep female voice – radiated through the office.

In a few moments I’d be behind the white door, Dr. Silvio Flores standing over me with an incomprehensible strength. His large hands felt like forceps in my mouth. I’d be sprawled back on a brown leatherette chair, my body nearly supine beneath Dr. Flores’s large body. We had our routine. I’d lay on the chair and the doctor silently sat beside me so his shoulder was even with my head as I lay back in the reclining chair. I closed my eyes. This was a day like all the others, and I recall hearing the doctor fiddling with his metal tools. The light dimmed as he reached his arm over my face and gently tilted my head toward his chest. I felt the top of my head resting against his chest, and he positioned my mouth by guiding my jaw with his giant hands. With my eyes closed I didn’t have to worry that he is not a handsome man, but an old man; with my eyes closed I didn’t have to worry about how this might all look.

I saw the silver tool with a carved hook at the end, but mostly I noticed spurts of silver-grey hair in the near distance and fragments of his freckled brown hand. He never wore gloves. His hands were always dry, but that day I tasted strawberry. I sucked the strawberry scent from his fingers. His eyebrows were bushy too, several grey hairs squirming up like flagella. I felt the weight of his strong hands. He had never cleaned my teeth or x-rayed them. He did not

hunt for leaky gums or gingivitis. That day, like usual, he probed around with his inspector tool in his left hand, while his right arm alternated between holding my mouth open and resting over my chest.

I wanted Dr. Flores's fingers in my mouth so badly that I forgot to close my mouth. Nor did he remind me. My jaw locked open. But it wasn't the first time. We'd learned not to panic. Instead I felt the tips of his fingers massaging my cheekbones.

"Cristóbal," he said. He accentuated the stress on the "o" in my name – his way of scolding me. He shook his head. But I saw him smile. He massaged my cheeks as if buffing a scratch out of a car, and soon my mouth closed. He gently put his big hands under my jaw and set it into position. I had nothing else to do on a Tuesday afternoon, and I hope he didn't either.

But then I heard the concluding rhythm from *El Amor del Pueblo*, and I knew my time had ended. Dr. Flores released my jaw and gently lowered my head onto the chair. I paid my twenty U.S. dollars and left. On the way out I tasted more strawberry, not the artificial kind, but something more genuine.

I met Joaquin shortly after I left the office. He was sitting atop a short wall scratching off lottery tickets. He looked bored. I stared, and he noticed.

"Hey you, mister, what you want?"

I did not answer.

"I got whatever you need," he said.

His dark eyes stared me down and followed me across the street. I slowed down so he could catch up.

Marihuana

Cocaína

Ladies

A faded baseball cap covered his head. His pant pockets were ripped.

“I get what you what . . . “

I told him I am lonely.

“Lonely?”

Straggles of hair covered his face. His skin looked worn out.

“You want girl?”

His teeth were perfectly white.

“You want girl?”

“Affection,” I answered.

“*Cariño?*”

“Yes,” I repeated. “Affection.”

He made rising eyes at me and his lips gathered in a bundle, then shot out forward and upwards: *Oooooohhhhh, yes, I get you ladies.*

Me thinking: I want to rest with a man in one of these cheap hotel rooms overlooking this dirty, nasty street and he will hold me and caress me and whisper to me and we will watch *Telenovelas* until late into the night.

Me speaking: I’m attracted to men.

“*Hombres?*”

“Yes, men.”

He moved closer, pulled at my shirt. “You like man, I get you a man.”

I smiled.

He said I don't seem like a man who pays for sex. I asked him if he'd spend the night with me.

He laughed and rubbed his chin. I touched the lower part of his back as he moved closer to my body.

"No men for me," he said, still smiling. "But I can get you one."

I'd heard that line before.

"I don't like transvestites," I said.

No?

"I don't like feminine men either."

No?

"I like real men."

"Si?"

"Like you."

So then he backed up off the curb and looked down at his crotch. "You want this?"

He pulled at his dick through his pants.

"I would."

He stroked again at his facial hair.

"Very much."

I gave him twenty dollars to secure a room for the night. Mirrors on the walls. Fancy shower. Cable television.

I told him I like *El Amor del Pueblo*.

"And this dick?" he asked.

I pictured myself in Dr. Flores's chair.

“Yes,” that dick.

I wanted him to want me the same way I wanted him. But I should have known better: on the border one can't judge sincerity.

I didn't let him get too far ahead of me on the sidewalk, yet inside I wanted to believe he wanted me too. But I wasn't that naïve. So when he slipped into one hotel and tried to exit out another door, I was waiting for him along the opposite corner of the street. I didn't want him to go. Another hotel looked far too expensive. I entered the lobby with him at the next hotel, where I saw him shine those perfect white teeth, and I wondered why the hotel clerk, a pretty lady, refused him. As he talked to her, I could see the twenty dollar bill halfway out of his shirt pocket. The clerk did not look him in the eye. If I were her, I would have looked this man in the eye whom others scorn and pull him close to me for a kiss. Perhaps that's how I looked at him when I left Dr. Flores's office.

As Joaquín exited the hotel (I was close behind), I saw him wave at a man in the street. They approached each other, but I was not far behind. I didn't understand what they told each other, but the man looked behind Joaquín at me. I, the impotent American. I turned my head for something, and when I turned around Joaquín was gone. He was standing on a moving bus. He was laughing and laughing and laughing at this stupid American who couldn't move, and I wondered later that night if he had spent the money on a Honduran girl in Boystown making hearts in the sand with her bare foot. *No quiero que te vayas*. I don't want you to go.

“Something's happening,” Manuel told me later that afternoon. “On the phone.”

“The phone?”

“I think they reached your sister.”

“My sister?”

“The one with your dad.”

“Angie?”

“I guess. Yeah, her.”

“How did they—”

“Nurse Garcia. This lady from her church came and—”

“So Angie’s coming?”

“Not her. Someone who speaks Spanish.”

“Who?”

“Does someone in your family speak Spanish?”

“No.”

“No?”

“Definitely not.”

“She was talking—”

“Who?”

“Nurse Garcia. Talking in Spanish to someone about—”

“About me?”

“Yes. About where to come and how to come and how to get there.”

“What?”

“What they can do to come and get you.”

“Who?”

“Don’t know. Something about Texas. Definitely something about Texas.”

As we spoke the door fully opened and in walked Nurse Thin-Lips.

“Well,” she began. “It looks we might get our hospital clean again.” She looked at Manuel, then back at me. Manuel opened his mouth in mock smile.

“Darling,” he said, drawing his body to the side as if sweeping Thin-Lips off her feet.

“It looks like someone’s coming to get you,” she said.

My first reaction, surprisingly, was one of relief. My tooth dragged over my bottom lip, which refused to spread as it should. A misshapen smile emerged.

“Perfect,” Manuel chimed in from my side. “That’s perfect, Cristóbal, right? Perfect.”

Nurse Thin-Lips matted the back of my pillow, my cue to lift up my body.

“No more lunch breaks,” she said towards Manuel. “This will be the last one.”

“Ay, Lourdes, jajajajaja, what will we ever do with you?” he answered, moving toward my bed. He placed one arm over my shoulder, then looked toward Thin-Lips. “The ever elegant Nurse Garcia.”

I remained quiet and watched the back and forth between them. Nurse Garcia’s lips didn’t look so thin today, covered in a layer of purplish-red lipstick, a shade I associate with Easter. Her smock matched her lipstick, a vibrant color I’d not seen on her before. On the front was her name sewed on to the smock: Lourdes Garcia, L.E. I touched the top of my grilled cheese sandwich while continuing to watch the two of them flirt.

“If you’ll excuse us,” Manuel continued, walking around my bed toward Nurse Garcia, “we have some catching up to do.”

She laughed.

“If you’re not going to be here much longer,” he continued, looking over at her then at me, “I’d like to get the rest of his story.” He finished his statement with an eye toward Nurse Garcia.

She folded her arms and nodded toward Manuel, emitting the same thin-lipped smile that had made her so memorable, but this time she was flirting back and held the smile entirely too long. I didn't see a ring on her finger, either. I watched her turn toward the door, but she whipped her back towards me just as she grabbed the door handle.

"My friends at the church help you," she said softly, in English, nearly prostrating as she spoke. "They good people and talk to you family." It was the first time I'd thought of her as anything less than matter-of fact, and an image came to mind of her sitting on a crimson couch, one eye cast east on her lover skipping over pavement. I don't know why he was skipping.

I raised my head toward Lourdes.

"Thank you," I said. "Thank you very much."

She smiled at me, then at Manuel, and I knew that I had misjudged this woman.

After she left, Manuel pulled up a chair next to my bed, his legs in the air and resting on the metal rail beside me.

"So tell me about the law," he said. "How did you do at the law?"

I was relieved at the opportunity.

Law school did not leave me much time to consider questions of cause and effect or search for relevant patterns in my romantic life. Within days I was back on the hot seat, immersed in first-year Contracts and Property class, forcing me to regulate nearly every second of each day. The orange hues of the setting Mexican sun may have served as an aesthetic inspiration from which my novel might surface, but the law school's barren lecture rooms and thick textbooks covered in a dull, unreflective brown finish increased my anxiety as I fell, once again, into an ascetic and self-reflective existence: *So law school has started and I'm totally unorganized, and*

I forgot the class numbers, and the schedules, and even where I parked my car; and now I'm back to my old self-conscious self. I feel intimidated, scared that everyone is figuring out more than I am. I am withdrawn, sinking into myself.

I certainly was not the first student intimidated by the law school environment. My initial reaction, as recorded above, was to retreat into some primitive, self-conscious version of my younger self. I felt most comfortable at a distance, reticent to approach attractive male students or to form study groups with the members of my assigned small homeroom. Instead I suffered in silence:

This all reminds me so much of high school, all the self-consciousness and stuff like that, and I remember thinking that if I could do it all again – as in relive my younger high school years – it would be a much more enjoyable experience. Now I have that opportunity and it seems, no matter how much I thought to the contrary, that nothing has changed. – September 9, 1998

I had returned to that blank stare in my high school yearbook, unable to propel myself into meaningful social action. While the rest of my classmates met for happy hour socials and practiced for our co-ed flag football team, I left campus early for my Thursday and Friday bartending shifts at TGI Friday's inside the Radisson Hotel in downtown Austin. They traded elaborate study outlines, the secret to succeeding in law school, while I dutifully took notes in several color-coded notebooks both before and after my bartending shifts. On weekends I rose at 6:00 a.m., took a break for lunch at noon, and resumed studying until I worked out at the gym and then arrived to my 5:30 evening bartending shifts. Sound familiar? In all, I averaged 35 hours a week tending bar Thursday-Sunday nights during my first semester of law school.

The one time I slowed down, oddly, was during class. Once again, my unrequited crushes emerged in my journals, which I often wrote during class: *difficult to concentrate in Criminal Law because I have yet another crush, and I'm always staring, or sneaking glances at*

his beautiful face, and dreaming about living in the country with him, enamored of his truck or Texas accent from this Texas Tech grad, wondering what it would be like to wake up next to his side. Likewise, as I had done in San Antonio, I created an idealized image of many of the men with whom I attended law school. They almost read as some composite image purified in my mind:

I'm surrounded by well-rounded men with good intentions who soar with the self-confidence of birds on a Sunday afternoon, who try to improve themselves every day and succeed. I am surrounded by men who surround themselves with good thoughts and warm smiles, who study from a self-motivation striving for perfection, working hard and not seeming to regret a thing, poised on the cusp of something great, of occupational specialty and a series of familial charms and obligations. And their bodies seem pleased with what is to come; these bodies span forth and envelop themselves, do this thing that is uniquely Christian American, this presence that captures the outward spirit and satisfaction that is written within these charming men who are so close to me at school, yet are somehow in this other world. – January 20, 1999

Yet these glorified law-school deities shared space in my journals with some of my co-workers at TGI Fridays. While I kept my classmates at a respectful distance, more intimate moments surged among me and my co-workers. The non-sexual, yet reciprocal nature of the encounters contrasted to my idealized infatuations that had previously sustained me:

Last Friday John made me feel so good, made me feel like everything I have done is virtuous, and that I myself am worthy of someone's love, even if it's not him. Gave me big, sincere hugs at his own request, bought me drinks, just hung out with me, took me into his house, and insisted that we sleep on the same bed together, insisted, and not several feet away from each other, but right next to each other, practically touching, so wonderful because there was no pressure, because he's straight, simply because he's straight and wanted me to know he liked me anyway, and we almost touched, we were that close, and I woke up at seven for class, and I looked over and imagined that he was my boyfriend, and it didn't matter that he was skinny or had hair on his lower back, it just mattered that he had a beautiful smile and that he loved me for who I am, because of who I am, and I know, from him and from that night, that I am doing something right, at least something. – September 2, 1997

Lying in bed with John reminded me of one long bus ride from Santiago, across the Andes Mountains to Mendoza, Argentina. While his wife tended to their daughter in the seat across from us, a large man in a beautifully woven grey and brown poncho huddled in the aisle seat, facing his wife, but his back pressed against my back as I huddled low, facing the window. And when John pulled the sheet over our bodies that night in Austin, I remembered distinctly the man's wife covering us both with a purple wool blanket, its dangling black fringes swept over my head. She touched the top of my head, and I nearly cried. I missed such moments, but I was starting to encounter a group guys, the Mexican kitchen staff at TGI Fridays, who shared a similar tenderness:

I remember the blood running down my hand in constant streams, forceful and not abating, so it wouldn't stop bleeding, and pressure wasn't working; then Rick left the line and asked what happened, picked up a Band-Aid and waited, next to me, softly pulling apart my fingers, anticipating my need for assistance, resting his hands on mine, wiping the blood off, letting his thumb linger on the back of my hand for longer than necessary; I remember his concern, his thoughtfulness, his physical tenderness, his motion corresponding to his voice, like he was trying to tell me something, or show me something, moving me toward inquiry, in much the same way as Martin when he told me about his considering stripping in a gay club, or Jeff, who casually mentioned that he had been with a man before; same scenario with Rick, now, and I'm just left to wonder once again, not knowing really, what these guys are thinking besides making me feel good. – January 29, 1999.

Before long I began to seek out these moments of mutual recognition as I had previously done in Latin America. Once again, my attraction surged for short and muscular men, whom I regularly interacted with at Rack Daddy's, a bar in East Austin frequented by the TGI Friday's kitchen staff:

I remember the other guy, Alex's cousin, who was just as gorgeous as Alex as he sang, stood firm with this handsome, sturdy body, and innocent, almost playful disposition. And his cheeks were covered in lipstick, some kind of symbol, and late that evening he walked by again, and it was almost all off of his face except for a tiny part, so I licked my fingers and held his face with my other hand, and slowly and softly rubbed the rest of the lipstick off his cheek. And he relaxed and

softened, and just stood there so I felt I could have kissed his lips and swallowed his tongue if I hadn't had a sip of beer in my mouth already. And I think earlier he was watching me pick up Lori and put her on my lap, so that I felt safe in that he saw me with a woman, so I could pass off my desire as mere friendliness. He was so beautiful, with lips that leaped forward, spread out almost disconnected from his face, so I thought he was going to swallow me even though he stood there passively, and looked in some other direction, enjoying my touch, I hope, as he yearned, I wish, to escape with me somewhere else. – February 26, 1999

My success in law school was harder to judge. Without the benefit of helpful study groups divvying up court cases like pieces of a Hershey's candy bar, I found myself struggling to pass my first semester exams. Yet my perseverance rarely faltered: *such self-discipline . . . eating sweet tarts one at a time.* Despite my mental fatigue, I found moments within which to forgive myself:

Just kick back and enjoy life . . . hell, I get everything confused and waste time due to this confusion, oh well, so I don't understand Property, who cares, I'm still looking for that man, or that combination of men that move me, yes, move me, but the most important part is the search, the experience, the series of motions that propel me to this end. The real issue isn't a struggle at all – it's what life is all about. So law school? Who cares, just do what I can and move on from here. – October 1, 1999

My journal recounts a general feeling of goodwill and sense of belonging: *in a way it comforts me that I've acquired the "Austin Allergy"; it makes me feel like I'm part of Central Texas and not just an itinerant visitor.* This generalized easing of tensions was reflected, as I mentioned, in my relationship with the kitchen staff at TGI Fridays. One man, Martin, received much of my attention. I recall him reaching around me in my car one afternoon and holding a burrito to my mouth, his hand wrapped around the tinfoil, telling me to take a bite, holding the burrito delicately in my mouth until I felt a slice of green onion fall to the top of my lower lip and Martin's fingers scoop it back into my mouth. With him I found the mutual recognition I craved:

I remember that bar on the corner of Congress and Stassney, dark and spacious, and that silly shuffleboard game, and how, when it was my turn, I boxed Martin in the corner so we were touching and for the moment I was convinced it was something we both wanted. Later, as Selena sang in the background, him buying me drinks, our legs touching under the table, the moment that reminds me now, of Peru, years ago, when the man whispered in my ear, and I felt as if that moment had been the most passionate of my life. – February 8, 1999

I imagined us late-night lovers, a fantasy which nearly materialized. One night he returned to my house and walked me up to my bedroom. On the bed he rolled atop of me and pressed his heavy body over mine. I remember the way his tongue ring eased in and out of my mouth. I remember his tight black jeans and how embarrassed I felt that his penis, unlike mine, felt soft through his jeans. It was the cocaine, he said. I could have kissed him all night, but my eventual frustration was palpable:

I hate not being able to consummate an image. Like what it would be like to be with Martin. I can't complete the image, like I can't even see myself in a relationship at all. It's as if our bodies are too big to satisfy each other. Something has to give. I thought that when his hand moved down my back, that he was feeling for a lover, across my back, up over and down the duvet, trying to decide if it felt alright, in this very spot – the bed – wrestling with the thought of making love to someone almost as strong as himself. I'm just glad I didn't ask him to come over tonight, glad I'm going to wait until I feel better about myself. – January 7, 1999

All I'd told Manuel in the hospital, of course, was about my crushes in law school and how the kitchen staff at TGIF really turned me on. Nothing about Martin.

"What could make a guy so lonely?" Manuel interrupted during my story.

"I'm not sure . . . I'm not . . . I mean—"

"First the fucker who jumped on the bus, and now you're sitting there losing focus in law school." He shook his head while he spoke. "What the hell's the matter with you?"

"I didn't say," I began, "I didn't say that's how it always was."

"No?"

“Nope.”

“Then how was it?”

“How was what?”

“What you haven’t said?”

I was tired him thinking me so pathetic. I wanted him to know about my strength. About the way I once looked. About the turn my life took that may have led me here. It’s about time I told him.

One night after a particularly rough week of classes, I went down to Rack Daddy’s and ran into Martin, who was wearing the same faded black jeans as he had on the night we kissed. His ass looked marvelous in those jeans! All evening I meandered in Martin’s area as he played pool with his friends. All evening I thought about how we had spent Valentine’s Day together, three months ago, washing the bar mats at TGI Fridays until 3 a.m. and then eating like lovers at a late-night rendezvous, our legs touching under the booth. Yet I failed a Civil Procedure exam earlier that day and lacked any confidence that night at Rack Daddy’s: *I have so much to ask you, and just want to spend more time with you when I can.* Yet as I considered leaving the bar a few minutes before last-call, my friend Jeff appeared with several shots of Jägermeister. He gave one to me and walked toward Martin. I watched them hug on the other side of the bar. Then they both looked my way and approached.

“Let’s do this,” said Jeff, winking at me and lifting his shot glass in the air. Martin settled his gaze on my eyes and smiled such a disarming smile that I abandoned all reservations and imagined my lips on his. The two of them walked toward the bathroom, leaving me with three empty shot glasses, but when they emerged a few minutes later, I

felt Jeff's hand on the back of my neck, a soft question whispered in my ear: *how'd you like to drive us to Mexico, Chris?* Before I had time to answer, Martin had placed his hand on the back of my neck and pressed a quiet, stealthy kiss behind me ear. After that I had no choice.

Halfway to Laredo Jeff had passed out by my side, his head leaning on the window atop a rolled-up brown jacket. Martin lay quietly across the backseat, his large hands resting comfortably atop his groin, my sweatshirt covering his head. I wasn't sure how I'd been roped into such a scheme, but the trust my two friends had placed in me, besides the fact that they actually *wanted* to travel with me, made me feel special as I noticed how Martin's big, intrusive body rest peacefully behind me. Never before had I felt my company so earnestly requested.

On the radio Trisha Yearwood wondered how she'd ever live without some man, and I imagined myself back on the hammock in Ciudad Acuña, where I'd first been introduced to country music by the one English-only radio station crossing the border into Mexico. Although my days were scripted with the solitary amusement of writing, I did relax for two hours each night on the hammock, mesmerized by the expansive sky emblazoned with yellow and orange hues. El Diablo, a little dog with a tangled tuft of matted black hair, would quietly approach my dangling hand and gently lick my fingers. Just as silently he would disappear.

On the road to Laredo, headlights illuminated mesquite trees and wide stretches of empty land. I imagined what lie beyond the highway – over and to the side – where patches of light shone in the distance. I thought about exiting the highway and meandering

down the road. What might we find? My anticipation surged the further I drove. I awoke Jeff and Martin just before the border crossing into Nuevo Laredo. It was nearly 4:30 a.m.

“I’ve never been to Mexico,” said Jeff, as he adjusted his hat in the mirror.

“Stupid Jeff,” Martin said from the back seat, his hands brushing against my upper arms as he pulled himself upright and in between us. “Don’t no Mexican girls care about your damn hair.”

I turned toward Martin and smiled, and when he tipped the top of my cap gently with his hand I felt as if I had been meant to be here all along. Jeff in the front seat; Martin in the back. I watched Martin pull a hair out of his nostril and look up ahead at the road. I’m not sure any of us knew how we’d gotten here. I paid our \$2.25 exit toll and continued across the international bridge. Jeff sat upright, staring intently out the window, while Martin adjusted something near his waist. As we approached the Mexican side of the bridge, I felt the weight of law school release. Martin rubbed my shoulder.

“You ready, *gueros*?” asked Martin. “Time for a real Mexican like me to show you where it’s at.”

“Oh, we’re ready,” answered Jeff. He looked up at the horizontal green and red stoplights that served as the Mexican entry checkpoint. He asked why we were stopping.

“So we can wait,” I answered. Then the green light flashed and three muscular Mexican soldiers in black and white camouflage uniforms waved us through with their long rifles. I noticed Martin fumbling around with something on the floor.

“Cool,” Jeff said, looking at me like an eight-year old boy viewing his first toy rifle. “So fucking cool.” We decided to find a cheap motel and get some sleep.

Later that morning I felt Martin's legs wrapped over mine beneath the comforter. I needed to urinate, but I didn't want to move. On the other bed Jeff faced the wall, a blanket awkwardly wrapped over his body the way raw dough drapes over sausage. I remembered Martin in my bedroom several weeks earlier. I remembered his tongue ring easing in and out of my mouth. I wished for that one more time. I wrapped my body over his, one step out of my journal and closer to real life. But Martin did not awake. In the other bed Jeff shifted his position and snored. Between the beds were a wooden night stand and an ugly purple lamp with no lampshade. I was glad to have two friends who had dragged me off to Mexico. Maybe now they could see a part of me I'd left behind. I wanted so badly for Martin to like me; I placed my face close to his and quickly fell asleep.

We were awoken soon by a knocking at our door. Light flooded our room as Jeff answered the door. The same lady who had greeted us late last night now wanted to know if we'd be staying another night. Jeff looked toward Martin and me.

"Tell her yes," I said. "Just shake your head up and down." Martin barely stirred beside me.

Jeff looked at his phone. "Do you know what time it is?" he asked.

"Nope."

"Two-thirty."

"In the afternoon?"

"Yep, in the afternoon."

Martin laughed beside me. He lay on his stomach in his white t-shirt, back arched to raise his head. I thought he looked like a manatee.

"Shit," I said.

“Yes, shit.”

All three of us rose from the beds and quickly prepared ourselves for a big night out. My excitement must have been palpable by the way I fluttered around the room. Jeff told me to calm down, but the butterfly in me could not be contained. We had happened upon this room for a reason, and I wasn't about to let the opportunity pass away. Not this time. I wondered if Jeff knew the way I felt about Martin.

Of course, I should have known Martin brought a knife. Who else is stupid enough to bring a machete into Mexico? It was a large knife with a brown handle and steel blades, big, but just small enough to fold up into itself. Although I scarcely noticed through the smoky haze in the bar, the police had no trouble finding Martin or the knife. I turned around to see Martin being marched out of the club by a cop with one hand on Martin's arm and the other hand over his head. They looked oddly casual strolling out of the club together, where the cop shoved Martin towards a large blue police truck with a bunch of men standing in the back. One of the men leaned over and pulled Martin into the truck. Martin, meanwhile, looked around and smiled as if he were being escorted to his Senior Prom. Once inside the truck, he lifted two arms in the air in triumph. “I'm king of the world,” Martin cheered as the truck moved down the street and stopped at another club. We followed the truck on foot for several blocks. Every so often the truck stopped, where a police officer stood over one or two men sitting on the curb. As soon as they saw the truck, the men calmly stood up and walked toward the rear of the truck. I surmised they had done this before. Martin remained standing in his black pants and grey shirt, his wide smile visible to me from a few feet behind the truck. He seemed to be having fun.

Not surprisingly, Jeff did not share Martin's relaxed disposition. He walked a few feet behind the truck yelling to Martin.

"Just jump out. Jump."

Martin held his arms up higher. "I can't."

Jeff waved his arms at the truck, at Martin, at the police officers coming and going, circling the truck, just waving and waving and walking down the street in flip flops as if we were on a white Caribbean beach feeding the seagulls. As for me the scene reeked of an eroticism I hadn't seen since the Ecuadorian police invaded the English bar and arrested the men who dare impersonate women on Halloween night. And as in that tale of foolishness, I felt equally left out here. No one was frisking me or touching me or paying any attention, really, and I was ready – oh was I ready – so I just kept looking and staring and looking and staring, and Jeff's arms were waving, and Martin tall and relaxed in the truck, and I'm searching still, and then an officer does a figure-eight around me and I look and look and look, and he's around me, over me, and I'm staring at him and he's staring at me, and he takes his hand on my back and pushes me toward a wall, reaches down, places my hands wide on the wall and frisks me. I'm there and his hands run over my head and down my back, over my cock, and down my leg and back up the other side and over my cock again, and I spread my legs a little further, and the truck moves on and I am still there and he's not touching me and my hands and legs are still spread, to the right I see him, and he looks at me and grabs his crotch, says something and grabs his crotch, and I grab mine, and I grab it again, and I laugh and he laughs and I laugh again, not sure what he's saying, talking so fast, but he's smiling wider and wider – like Martin always does – and then it

ends and I am spread-legged against an orange-peeling wall, staring at gnats leaping from one crevice to another.

I ran after him.

“Sir,” I called, “Sir. Sir.” He turned around, asked me what I wanted, looked at me like he had never seen me before.

“Your, eh, friend is going to the station,” he said in English.

“The police station?”

“No, the gas station.”

I walked to his side. So close, almost touching. Now it was my turn to place a hand on his back.

“Where is the station?” I asked. His tight black curls reminded me of tar. “Can you take me to the station?” Then he rolled a finger through his hair, I remember that specifically, before he backed up and walked away. I noticed he was a bow-legged man, kicking the dirt and muttering something as he walked, a bow-legged walk, away. Then the truck was gone, and so was Martin, and Jeff wandered somewhere, and there I was standing still again, standing still and missing out on something. What, I didn’t know, but I was tired of missing out. I could miss out no more.

We waited at the police station (I drove), Martin and I sitting on a bench, no jail cells in sight, finally leaving outside to smoke a cigarette – so intimate – and then I realized we had just walked out of the police station. Just walked out! I went back inside to speak with one of the police officers. Back inside, in the back of the building, behind a waist-high partition, stood another officer, this one with lighter skin, a tall man with dirty-blond short hair and a look of curiosity on his face. I looked outside to see if Martin had left, but

a guard out front kept looking out the door at him. I approached the man behind the partition, but before I got there he looked up, smiled, and opened his lips and tall teeth like slivers eating me, chomping me between his teeth. I grabbed his hands over the petition. He allowed me to hold his hands, smiling even, the way a churchgoer gives himself over to the priest. I asked him about Martin, pointed to Martin outside, told him I wanted Martin out so we could fuck tonight. Then the man began to laugh. And he laughed and laughed some more, and I knew he was on my side. He laughed at the image of me and Martin fucking or maybe he'd laughed at me talking. Talking and telling him in Spanish that I want to fuck Martin.

But then his teeth closed, and his lips pursed together, slightly upturned in the center, and he told me Martin is scum.

“Scum.”

“The worst kind.”

“I’m not sure—”

“Street trash.”

“But we’re not from—”

“It doesn’t matter which side you’re on: the trash still smells.”

We continued holding hands in the center of our bodies, but he opened the partition door and moved my hands over his crotch, so it’s up and down, up and down, the back of my hand over his cock, so thick and solid. The other officer was gone, and Martin had returned inside. Martin watched us, adjusting his baseball cap, and looked some more. Then he laughed. *Fucking guero!* That’s when the officer let go of my hands, placing one of his in the air and sliding his fingers together in the universal sign for money. I took no

offense; I understood. I handed him twenty dollars, which he took without looking up at me. Martin told me he had no money. I thought back to the previous night and how I wanted Martin, and the whisper in my ear, the whisper, but now there was none. I handed the officer another twenty dollars, which he put directly into his wallet. The wallet was brown and stuffed with tiny cards, my American dollars wedge between purple peso bills. He walked away, behind the partition, but then turned around and waved his hands in the air. We could go. We left the police station for my little red car. I looked at the clock: midnight. To the hotel we would go. Me and Martin. Martin and I. I'd waited long enough.

On the dirt road back into town my headlights illuminated swirling particles appearing lovely in the light, my hand resting on Martin's large left thigh, and it was time, it was time, it was time. I was ready. I imagined the dark room and thick blankets too hot for the border, and I just didn't want Jeff to be back. I didn't want Jeff to be back. Martin told me the police did not return his knife.

He looked restless next to me in the car. He stretched his arms and kicked his legs out in front of him, but I was thinking he could stretch in bed and I really hadn't considered the logistics of it all, as in who will do what to whom, he the passive recipient of much today, me anxious for love or sex, love and sex.

Then it all went to hell.

"Duuuuuuude!" screamed Jeff from nearly in front of me, approaching my car window with a giant dark bottle of beer in the middle of the street. He'd nearly poked me with it, but I was happy to see him, happy he wasn't at the hotel. Just happy. He got in the backseat and leaned close to us: "It's a party, bro, crazy shit." Jeff punched the top of

Martin's head rest, did it so hard Martin turned and laughed. Turned and laughed. Then they both began laughing, and saying "dude," and Jeff whispered to Martin, and I was too naïve to know what about (but maybe you do), and then Jeff started massaging Martin's shoulders, not to relax him, but to prepare him for something, I could tell. So the two of them were laughing, and losing me, and losing me, and no one looked my way, and then Jeff said "here," and they both got out, and Jeff banged the top of my car, banged it and let out a loud Texas holler, went to catch up to Martin, who wandered off, just crept away from the car as if entranced by the swirling dirt. And all I heard was dude! And dude! And dude! And dude! And dude! And dude!

I drove a few blocks to the hotel, heartbroken, and parked in the guarded parking lot, giving my keys to the young hotel attendant. I wanted to be alone yet not by myself. Instead of returning to the hotel room, I wandered in the opposite direction of where Martin and Jeff had left my car. I thought about returning to the police station of the tall and handsome officer. And where was the other officer, the short and stout one with the black curls, who frisked me so intently and stared and stared and stared.

As I walked down the street considering my renewed loneliness, several cars slowed down, the drivers turning heads toward me and continuing on their path. I was a gringo walking down a lonely road. I wanted the attention. A couple of cars turned around and passed by me in the other direction. The more cars that passed, the more my loneliness subsided, replaced by an unprecedented anger. I cursed in Spanish, in English, stomped the dirt, yanked the leaves off trees, spit mucus, spit more mucus, spitting and spitting and spitting, until I had had enough and pulled off my sweaty shirt. I walked heavily over the hard streets. I didn't know what I was walking toward, perhaps walking

from, or some combination. I wanted Martin, but he would not have me. I wanted the police officer, but I didn't know how. It was if I had returned to South America, drawing the attention of so many men. Yet the wait for my ideal lover had grown tiresome. I could write no more about attractive law school classmates. I ran my hands over my wet chest. The young men in San Antonio turned me on, but rarely – never – did we consummate that passion. Now, on a balmy May evening just south of the border, I'd simply had enough. I sat on the curb and looked into the next passing car. I made eye contact with the driver. As the car passed by, I stood up and threw my shirt over my right shoulder. I continued watching the car as it passed by and continued down the road. I raised my hands in the air.

What you want, baby?

My words surprised me, particularly my tone. I mimicked something I had heard in the hallways while tutoring at Highlands High School. Likewise, I imagined Brian Damen, a man who sat two rows beneath me in Torts Class, who would run his fingers over his biceps and continuously brush the back of his hair with the cupped palm of his hand. I wanted Brian the same way he wanted himself. I undid my belt buckle and slowly pulled my belt from its loops. I stood just off the road. My self-confidence surged. A large black truck passed me on the right. A curly-haired man turned his head out the window. I heard the man whistle. He stopped the truck. I hurried my gait. I arrived near the side of the truck and opened the passenger door. The man looked so happy to see me.

In the truck the man stared and smile, stared and smiled, put his hand over my chest and abdominal muscles. I relaxed, closed my eyes for a moment. He soon began to suck my nipples, the swirls of his black curly hair rubbing lightly over my chest. I opened my eyes and politely lifted his head off my chest.

“You are so handsome,” he said.

“Thank you, yes. Thank you.”

“I pay.” He took out his wallet and held out some bills. How much was I worth?

The man resumed touching my chest. I’d never been so desired. I unzipped my pants and pulled out my penis. I slapped him softly over his face.

“Five hundred pesos,” I announced, but before I had a chance to fully contemplate the value in American dollars, the mustached man had placed a purple 500 peso bill into my hand. I rubbed my fingers over the cool, crisp bill, while the man resumed driving. He looked at me and smiled, looked at me and smiled. He reached over to touch my chest, as I had done to Martin’s leg. His contentment was palpable. As for me, I leaned back in my seat and closed my eyes. I played with my dick. Then I felt his hand around my cock, and I opened my eyes. He reached around with his left hand and stroked me with his hand turned upside down. I noticed a thick golden wedding band over his finger. I’ve never felt so desired:

In Mexico I was mauled, in a married man’s car, so his wedding ring stroked me, over and over, so it finally hurt to have my penis touched, and I wonder how long it has been since he has had a dick in his mouth. And he kept telling me “grande, grande” as he sucked it down, asked if I was a stripper when he licked my arms and put another 300 pesos in my pants, sucked me like some savage who hadn’t had water for weeks. Then he wanted to hold me, surprisingly, which I could not allow, certainly not, but at least he acknowledges he wants more in a man than a large penis and hot body, although that’s all I had to offer that night. – January 18, 2000

And then it happened again.

Again.

And again:

So I called it my corner, where I balanced myself on the steps, kept my bearings straight, a centering point, the place I most remembered, where I waited, sitting,

for someone to come and pick me up, and it happened, smoothly and quickly, with a little humor, as I pretended like I didn't speak very much Spanish, and I remember how excited that one guy looked, when I said I wouldn't fuck him, but I guess I'd let him suck my dick for a little money. He almost drove off the road, and I hope that thirty minutes will get him through another four months with his family – January 18, 2000

I realized after the third time that one of my socks had disappeared. Perhaps it had fallen off in the last man's car; perhaps I slid it off myself. The last man kissed my thighs and swallowed my balls and ran his hands through my hair while he licked my chest. I turned my head and exposed my neck to him, which he gnawed and gnawed so I turned my head the other way and that part of me belonged to him too. We were not isolated, no, his car window partially open so anyone walking on the sidewalk near his car might have heard it all. With the third man I finally ejaculated, cumming so much I nearly couldn't stop, him repeating "Ay *PAPI*, Ay *PAPI*," so I wasn't sure where to place my hands or what else to do. The semen leaked all over his face, and I rotated his face from side to side, just to make sure every part of it touched the tip of my dick.

A few hours later, as the pastel hues of morning overtook Nuevo Laredo, I thought about that man's face. I think of it now. I sat on a curb and remembered the bend of his ears and the tiny moles on the back of his neck. As he lifted his head from my lap I stared at thick puddles of semen like paint over his face. Somehow the semen had missed his wide nose. His cheeks held a darker hue than the rest of his face the way a baseball glove ages unevenly, and I wondered why he looked so thrilled to have my semen all over his face. Who would want my semen all over their face? Two delivery men across the street unloaded Coca-Cola off a large truck and into a storefront. So much happens in the early morning hours. Behind me two men lifted up a metal gate guarding a *papelaría*. I turned towards the sound. Inside I saw long fuzzy pencils and various jars of erasers, glue sticks, even pretty red bows. In a few hours

some students might walk by. What would they think of this man on the curb? Where did he belong?

Sweat had begun to drip off my hair and down my chest. I rubbed my right hand over the sweat, pushing it down toward my abdomen and into my jeans. The men continued to unload the truck. One of them smiled at me. In that smile I saw the faces of so many men I had met in Latin America. Helping men. Friendly men. Flirting men. Had I finally seen what they had all along? I rubbed my wet hand over my hair and wondered about the man across the street. Does the outsider like myself simply call attention for other, less sexual, reasons? As I stood up several bills fell out of my pocket. What did they mean to me? I found more bills in my back pocket. From my wallet I pulled out green 200 peso bills mixed with my American twenty-dollar bills. The dollars looked old, fading edges a testament to the ubiquity of American money, this distinctly American viewpoint. The Mexican bills were crisp and new. I slid one between my fingers. Another pocket held still more pesos, the crumpled up kind. Dull. Lifeless. So what was I to do?

I finished my story to Manuel sucking the juice out of orange quarters and throwing them in the trash across the room. He leaned back on his chair and opened up his arms as if he wanted to hug me.

“So that’s what you’ve been doing all along,” he began, flicking his wrist and tossing another piece of orange toward the door. “Getting paid.”

“I’m not say—”

“No, don’t apologize. I just wouldn’t have . . . so that’s why you could travel so much?”

“I didn’t—”

“And why you were so worried about paying that *indio*.” He took the last of his orange and walked the peel to the trash can.

It had always been that way, I told him. From my father, to the bus rides, to the *indio* in Peru.

“Your father?”

“Never mind.”

“My father was a mean fucker with fist the size of boulders,” said Manuel. “The father I knew couldn’t give me money to travel or anything else. I have half-brothers and sisters I have never even met.” He wiped his hands on the front of his uniform and began to unfasten x-rays off the line. I wondered why I’d been so traumatized after that night on the living room floor. Some fathers might have hit their sons. I knew of boys who’d been kicked out of their homes. I asked Manuel about the x-rays.

“The doctor told me to get them ready,” he answered, sliding the x-rays on top of each other in his hands like a giant deck of cards. Then he unfastened the cord from the wall mount and watched it snap hard against the opposite wall.

“And the dentist and the dealer,” I continued. “The girl in the Volkswagen.”

“What about them?” asked Manuel, placing the x-rays on the tiny food tray next to my bed.

“I think—”

“What?”

“I think I want attention from the places I can’t get it.” I looked at Manuel. “You know?”

Manuel paused beside my bed. “Ay, Cristóbal.” He picked up the x-rays, staring at the top one. “It looks like you got quite a bit of attention, yes?”

I didn’t answer.

“So much attention that you landed in here.”

“I wanted affection,” I snapped quickly. “Not attention.”

“Uh-huh”

“I don’t *need* attention, Manuel.” I felt bad as soon as I said it. After all, Manuel was the one man who’d taken care of me when the others at the hospital didn’t want to be bothered. Nothing was broken, the doctors insisted; my head was feeling fine. I should have been better sooner. Ready to leave. I tried to correct my offense. “What I mean—”

“No, no,” Manuel interrupted, taking his familiar seat on the end of my bed. “I knew it from the first time I washed your hair.”

I brushed my hand over my hair and instinctively brought my fingers down to smell.

“None of the women could touch you.”

“No?”

“You’d fight them.”

“What?”

“At first you were too out of it, the doctor told me. The doctor you don’t like. But then when the nurses came to feed or bathe you.”

“How do you—”

“Lourdes goes to church with my aunt. Here in San Miguel.”

I was surprised that Manuel had an aunt in town.

“And my wife.”

“Your wife and Nurse Garcia?”

“She’d said a prayer, you know?”

“For me?”

“Yes, you.”

I was overwhelmed. Nurse Garcia, the one I’d referred to as Thin-Lips in my head, had actually said a prayer for me.

“And I knew something was wrong from the moment I touched your head.”

“In the bathroom?”

“In the bathroom,” Manuel agreed. “Anything I told you to do, you did.” He’d figured out my secret crush! “The other nurses joked you might be gay. A *maricón*,” he clarified, the Spanish equivalent of “faggot,” but more playful than demeaning.

“What did you think?” I asked, fearful for Manuel’s answer. Fearful at the truth.

“No. I told them no. I know a *maricon* when I see one, and this wasn’t it.”

Relieved, I licked the dryness from my lips. I could love men without being a *maricón*.

“I just knew you were an angry white man, but the type I hadn’t seen before, you know? Why were you speaking Spanish? Why were you so angry? Hurt, I understand. But angry and more angry. I just tried to settle you down, and then you did. There you were. And we’re still speaking Spanish, like how many days later?”

For once I saw myself outside myself, and I didn’t like what I saw. I’d been confused and frustrated my entire life, it seemed, but not angry. I’d checked out emotionally as a teenager, but regained my enthusiasm in Latin America. I worked so hard each day, but with nothing to show for it. What kind of lawyer teaches middle school? What thirty-five-year-old

man has never had a serious relationship? I'd accepted my love for men at a relatively early age, but what had prevented me from dating or having a boyfriend back in the United States?

I apologized again to Manuel.

"I like what you told me," he said, "about having those men pay you."

"What?"

"About those men paying you for sex or whatever, for sucking your dick."

"You like—"

"Like I liked when you finally got laid and now you tell me about hustling those old men."

"They weren't *that* old," I corrected him.

"That's just how some men want it," he continued. "Nothing to feel ashamed of."

But that's not how I wanted it. I didn't want Manuel to think that's how I wanted it.

"Men like sex."

"But I—"

"And I guess you all like to come down here to do your dirty work," he interrupted.

"Like dying for all the old people. Sex for you."

Yet I had waited so many years to even start having sex. And when I finally did, I had to pay for it. I couldn't get that out of my head. That dynamic of exchange entered into most of my sexual transactions. I'd paid for sex before, and many times. For years I felt pathetic and ashamed, but once I figured out how to get the attention I craved, a certain power grew inside me. I wanted Manuel to see this power. How I'd learned a roundabout way to satisfy my craving for affection, to get paid for a skin color I'd been given and a body I'd worked for, each of which was both prized and rare – this white American young male body – in Latin America.

Men loved what I represented, even if not the actual man. But that's okay. I assented to sex not because I wanted it, but because I sometimes had to give it out in order to feel like I mattered to someone. In those men I saw myself. They needed affection too. Perhaps I received affection vicariously. Perhaps that's why I kept coming back for more.

"It's the power," I confessed to Manuel. "I finally felt like I had some power."

"White men have power wherever they go," he answered. "Especially white Mexican men."

But I didn't want to hear another discourse of race in Mexico and how the indigenous had suffered. I could only think of myself and how I had suffered. Yet I was starting to eat again, and I knew I'd be home soon. I wanted Manuel to know, one last time, that I'm not as pathetic as I might look in my hospital bed. But that I was never a giant whore, either. I was of an entirely different species unknown to even myself.

Upon my return to Austin from my sexual foray along the border, I was determined to make something happen. I asked the TGI Friday's kitchen staff about the Mexican clubs on the East side of town. I was greeted by a wary stare and told to be careful. I went to the clubs alone and, predictably, felt out of place. While a lone white traveler in Latin America might garner attention, an Anglo in Austin's eastside simply appears lost. This changed, however, later in the evening, when the lone white male ambling around the Hispanic part of town becomes as exotic as snowfall. I removed my shirt and took heavy steps down the road. I'd replicate the kind of men Latinos love:

The beautiful Puerto Rican, exactly what I'd want for in an evening, asking me to lift up my shirt to search for weapons, and I obliged, and I obliged, gave me twenty dollars and put it in his mouth and stopped, afraid that someone might open the door, afraid that I might rob him. Kept driving and stopping, moving

around the neighborhood. I wish he weren't so afraid, wish he trusted me more, because even if he thought I was a hustler, he could have relaxed for a few minutes. Like I'm apt to do, relax and just let someone else be in charge for once, just suck my dick and feel how my hands are tender, not threatening, like I have felt so many times before. – September 3, 2000

Other times I played role of dominatrix, fulfilling the fantasy of married men:

All I remember is saying "sure," and he kept saying "castígame, castígame, papi, otra vez," and "dame la leche," like give him the cum, so that he was almost shaking and I slapped him hard in the face, hard, with my dick, and he said I was "muy macho," and he loved it so much, and he had a great jeep, and a wife and two kids, and the money was only about \$10 US dollars he paid, but I didn't care, I got off watching it, [the cum] on his face, so I saw it coming down his cheek like a newborn breast-feeding. – June 10, 2001

Before long I'd taken on a distinct role. I exemplified such role in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic one evening when a young man who'd driven around the plaza at least a half-dozen finally stopped and asked if I needed a ride. Once I was inside, he asked how much to suck my dick. I don't remember how much I told him, but he agreed and started to drive us both to a hotel. I refused, asked him if he knew any other spot. He insisted he'd feel safer at a hotel, but again I refused. I unzipped my pants once he'd found a spot in a quiet, residential street. He knew what he was doing, but I wanted to get back to the city center to begin a night of partying. Before I knew it, however, something poked on the passenger-side door, and I opened my eyes to see a long rifle pointed toward my head. They dragged the man, literally, out of the car, while the one near me with the gun opened the door slowly as if escorting me out of the car. A big and loud officer interrogated the young man – whom I learned was named Alex – while the other, calmer officer talked to me on the other side of the road. When it was over, the mean officer who shaken down Alex for all his money turned his attention to me:

So then he turns around, grabs his ass and calls me a "bugarrón," and it's like whoa, how cool is that because bugarrón is like a Dominican word for like masculine guys who will try to get a piece of ass from just about anyone, usually

for money, and it was like, cool, cause like, a bugarrón is not gay or anything, he's just a normal guy, you know, like the other two officers, not like in the united States, when it's like this "gay" shit all the time, and I'm like, yeah, I'm finally fitting in, so there was this strange affinity for me and the other two officers, which explains why they really didn't bother much with me . . . but they were still buggin' on the other guy. – June 17, 2000

Getting paid for sex both in the US and abroad brought a surge to my self-confidence. I wrote of “beers, beans, and blowjobs” without any irony whatsoever. I was finally being noticed in a sexual way. I wanted to portray this self-confidence to Manuel and to depict my body whole, not as I remembered it, but as I needed to represent it to him:

I have that thing, I think, which transforms a man's thoughts especially in the liminal world of the border, where nothing surprises, a merging of the two worlds creating something entirely new. I don't know what some men see in me. I assume it is submerged in the sexual because I often go overlooked by women and men who have no interest in other men. The transformation I produce, then, has much to do with desire. Perhaps I present myself with passion, with possibility, the same way I look at other men, the possibility of something beyond the moment. Perhaps they merely want to fuck me – some men do, or I should say I fuck them – but I feel there is something else I've yet to decipher. How could anyone love me like that? Osiel told me he liked me better when I was drunk, that I acted “crazy,” so I think there's something to be said for those moments when I relax, briefly, and let myself be free, an unraveling of everything inside into some aesthetic presence which carries me elsewhere, a release from this prison. If I could only transform myself the way I do these men, into believing in the possibility of life's fulfillment. If I can see myself walking down a dark border alleyway and actually get excited. Perhaps I already have. – March 12, 2004

Yet sometimes such burgeoning self-confidence succumbed to an ambiguity, such as that experienced my second day of a summer-long trip to Cabo San Lucas:

I think that's what Leti (the dancer/stripper) was trying to tell me, in my room at Rocavista; she said the second man I'd made it with, the one with the strange “rocas” in his penis, she told me he's said something about how I wasn't a tourist, didn't seem like a maricón, could be a prostitute but he wasn't sure, and maybe I'd been played by her, or him, but she said, as she talked to me in my new green army underwear, she said I looked like a stripper. Indeed, I felt like one, this guy looking one way and paying in the other. – May 1, 2005

That I'd still pay while inhabiting a "stripper's body" is quite telling. A quote from John Rechy's narrator in *City of Night* (1959) copied in my 2006 journal mimics Leti's confusion:

"He was a well-built muscular man in his early 30's . . . Looking at him, I wonder why such a man would pay another male when he obviously could make it easily and mutually in any of the bars" (365).

Even if my journals, at times, recount a narrator talking himself into confidence, so many other entries depict a loneliness in which the lines between money spent and money received are blurred, or not mentioned at all. Men filtered in and out of my life, some I wanted, but who I couldn't have, and others I didn't want, but who convinced me to have them anyway:

Where is Max? Again, he knows where to find me, but he is nowhere in sight. Another Chicano man who leaves me, just as surly after he comes. And yesterday, I saw Sisti riding his bike in the neighborhood. I miss him too. And then there's Junior, and everything is just so lonely again. It is sad the way I feel about Junior . . . so mad I can't get over him and how he represents all these Mexican men – with families and such – who I can't have either. Instead, I'm stuck with Alex, and last night Chris came over and gave me head, all tattooed and smelly as usual, and then Marcos, who I'm already over, but not Junior or Juan or that guy Kirky that Leon and I met at the Aquarium. They are everywhere, yet nowhere. And it all makes me so sad, and tomorrow I will drink and try to make the pain go away. Tomorrow night I will roam the streets, drunk, on the Eastside, looking for some man to give me at least half an hour of affection – paid or not – and then he, too, will be gone. – August 2, 2006

At the identical time, then, as I was repeatedly paid for sex, I turned that same money around and sought affection of my own:

I should have told him there in my room how lonely I was and how I needed to spend a night with another man. How it wasn't really about sex at all. And certainly not the money. How I wanted to be held and caressed and kiss a man who would reciprocate. But how do you tell a man who you're about to pay that you simply want non-sexual intimacy? It seems so pathetic. – January 23, 2004

When I said in the introduction that being hurt in Latin America is no surprise to me, I must not have read carefully some of my journals. That I'd be hurt may not have been a

surprise to anyone else, including my family and all the doctors and nurses, but it certainly *was* a surprise to me:

The obvious question to think about now is why do I put myself in danger. As might be expected, I don't see it that way. I don't think "it'll never happen to me." It could. I am certainly aware of the risks, and I know full well I can't really defend myself if it does happen to me. I just think I'm smarter than that, more intuitive too. I know now that bad men don't exist. Sure, there are men who do bad things, but deep down everyone wants to be loved, respected, and treated kindly. I should mention, though, that this only applies to Latin men, at least with me. Not that things haven't happened to me: I've been arrested several times, beat up once, robbed at gunpoint, almost murdered. Nothing out of the ordinary. I know exactly what I need to do in order to survive. Always have. Ever since I was a kid. Surviving now means showing vulnerability, asking questions, seeking help. If I nod my head in deference, I am making a point: I cannot do this on my own. That's why I want Juan to return. I thought I had gotten enough from him. I was very, very wrong. – April 15, 2006.

I guess this is the privileged white male body again, the ones who comfortably roams the streets of east Austin or sleeps naked across the living room floor. Perhaps I give myself credit for the way the world is oriented. Slanted in a way to keep me safe. Even the cops watch out for me. But suppose I wasn't hurt by anyone at all? Does that make my story a success? What if it was all one giant accident, as my sister seemed to be saying about the colossal cement stairs or uneven payment? Did I deserve credit for keeping myself whole for so long? Or had I been leaking for years, ever since I was a little boy, the leaky traveler who would have been more successful at home?

Soy *intocable*

Never happen not to me

I'd never

I've never

¿Quién querría hacerme daño?

¿Quién?

Who did this?

¿Ud?

Who who who

Day 11

After breakfast Manuel handed me a bag of clothes and told me we were taking a field trip.

“I want you to see something.” He nodded at the bag of clothes. “So get ready.”

I opened the bag and pulled out a pair of black shorts. “I don’t think I’m—”

“You’ve got what, another day here?” he answered. “Now get to the bathroom,” he pointed, “or better yet, just get dressed right here.”

I pulled out a brown t-shirt and held it over my chest. “You expect me to fit—”

“One more time,” he interrupted, flicking up his chin toward me. “Get dressed.”

“There’s two pairs of—”

“One’s for the underwear.”

I looked at a pair of grey shorts, too small for a 13 year-old child. I put them on anyways under my gown.

“So demure, Cristóbal. How about hurrying up?”

I pulled the gown over my head and reached for the black shorts on the bed. “Thank you for bringing the clothes.” The brown shirt, much to my dismay, fit snugly, but comfortably. I’d never imagined I could fit in a shirt so small.

Manuel walked with me toward the door, my steps measured and slow.

“Don’t worry,” he began, as we moved into the hallway. “We’re not going very far.”

We walked past an empty nurse’s station and turned a corner, where I saw Nurse Garcia leave a room with empty wrappers in her hand.

“Manuel?” she said, smiling at the two of us, “so you’re taking Cristóbal out?” It was rare to see her smile, at least for me, but Manuel looked neither surprised nor flustered. He nodded at her and shuffled me along, but not before I peered behind Nurse Garcia’s body and saw an old, presumably American woman struggling to breathe, her face saggy and misshapen like old papaya fallen from a tree. Nurse Garcia made eye contact and frowned along with me, but as she saw us leaving she wished us a good time.

“To the old ones?” she said, although she said it in Spanish, “*a los viejos*,” a reference I didn’t entirely understand. Old people? Old friends? It could mean one or the other. Or both.

“Yes, yes,” Manuel answered quickly. “Away we go.”

A few more slow steps and we arrived at an elevator I hadn’t seen before. Manuel said I should practice taking larger steps. I looked around the small hallway in front of the elevator.

“Later,” he chided, turning his attention back to the elevator as it rang.

From the elevator exited the same doctor who’d been rude to me days before. He looked up from his papers and inspected the two of us as if we had washed ashore to an island. He raised his glasses atop his frosted hair and extended his gaze at Manuel. His face was far too smooth for someone his age, perhaps only a decade younger than the woman I’d just seen in bed, ivory skin unblemished like a slab of marble. Whatever creases he had acquired added interest, not age.

“Ah, so you’re still here,” he said to me, his English accented, yet perfect. “I heard you were going soon, no?”

I looked toward Manuel.

“Tomorrow,” Manuel answered. “His sister is coming tomorrow.”

“Ah, yes,” he said. “Blanca, the one who speaks Spanish.” He held out his hand and smiled. I wondered how he knew about Blanca.

“My sister’s friend,” I answered the doctor. Now it all made sense. “Blanca is my sister’s best friend.”

The doctor took back his hand from mine and adjusted his tie. “A lovely girl.”

“Yes,” I agreed. “Lovely.” I turned to notice Manuel still standing in the elevator door.

The doctor nodded toward him, then looked back at me. “We’ll certainly miss you,” he said, surprising me with the warmth of his voice and focused stare. I had expected weeds instead. He returned his eyes to his papers and continued down the hallway, where, I assumed, he might run into Nurse Garcia.

Manuel and I rode the elevator down one floor to the ground level. Together we walked out a nearby door, myself focusing on lengthening my strides. Manuel guided me toward a bench, thankful was I that the covered drop-off point shielded me from the sun. Unlike the colonial beauty I’d seen my first few hours in San Miguel and imagined from my hospital bed, we appeared to be in a residential district along the highway, mounds of sand and half-finished cinderblock buildings punctuating a rather bleak landscape. I was surprised to see pine and oak trees, punctuated with nearby flowering cacti in front of the hospital. I covered my eyes with one hand over my forehead and stared out at the ugly highway, wondering how, exactly, I’d made it this far away from town. This far from who I imagined myself to be.

A maroon Chrysler pulled up a few minutes later, stopping in front of the bench. From the driver’s seat leaned an old man, who waved towards Manuel. From his low-slung denim shirt appeared a flat chest adorned with several silver chains. He lowered the passenger

window and addressed Manuel with a fierce wave. I noticed an American accent as soon as he spoke.

“Get in, get in,” waved the man, his arms brown and taut as an old marine.

“We’re coming, we’re coming,” answered Manuel, his English surprising me as had the sun’s intense shine. We’d only spoken a few words of English, at least as far as I could remember.

Manuel seized the man’s hand from the open window before pulling back to open the passenger door.

“Cristóbal,” Manuel said as he ushered me into the car. “I’d like you to meet Jeffrey.”

I looked over Jeffrey, whose green eyes reminded me of my own, and outstretched my arm. “Please to meet you, sir.”

“Oh, sir, nonsense, call me Jeff . . . or Jeffrey, both are good,” said the man, the robustness of his voice matching his strong arms. His short white shorts, made even shorter by his sitting position in the vehicle, revealed stork-like legs covered in tiny moles. He warmly took my hand and squeezed it lightly. Manuel got into the back seat and shut the door.

“So I heard you had quite a fall,” Jeffrey began. He looked behind him at Manuel. “Our old friend Manny here said you might need some fresh air.” Jeffrey reached over and patted my knee.

I had no idea where we were going, but I liked the way Jeffrey ignored stop signs and blew through red lights. He had clearly been in San Miguel for some time. And me? I had a feeling I’d been on this road before, but how might that make sense? Mounds of dirt and sporadic trees ran along the highway, yet I could make out the hazy outlines of mountains in the distance. Our exit from the main road put us face to face with a square church holding up a

giant circular dome glistening pink in the daytime sun. Soon the car hobbled over cobblestone streets lining narrow alleyways of colorful buildings. Flowerpots camped over skinny doorways marked above with street addresses. I felt like I'd wandered into a Disney World façade, Jeffrey and Manuel as my intercultural tour guides. Sidewalks sloped along hillsides, running downstairs and back upstairs, spreading out into spacious plazas. Jeffrey pointed out the purple blooms aspiring over churches or beside the rooftop gardens.

"You've never heard of the Jacaranda?" Manuel asked from the backseat in Spanish. My answer, in English, that I'd never even heard of *him* before two weeks ago, brought a smile to Jeffrey's lips.

"He's got you there," he said to Manuel. "He's definitely got you there."

We slowed for some girls skipping along the sidewalk in their school uniforms, the last of which might have been the girl from the bus, the one that had disappeared. She giggled loud enough to make us all giggle, a surprise for me since I was definitely in no mood to giggle. She had gotten her shoe stuck within the uneven cobblestone street, both smiling and whining to her friends as her braid swung along like a horse's tail.

"Pretty young girls," Jeffrey whispered. "Pretty Mexican girls."

We slowed down around a corner, where I noticed a door opening on a charming café, tables eloquently poised around a central outdoor fountain. It's a place I might have studied at had my trip gone according to plan, a casual sort of work space adorned with eclectic art or soft electronica music, as was the style in Monterrey. My trip, it seems, was happening in reverse. We turned the corner and slowed down in front of a small apartment complex, its first-floor parking area big enough for four cars.

“I think they left us room,” Jeffrey said, looking toward Manuel in the rearview mirror. “Just stay in the car until I park.”

We did as Jeffrey instructed and soon were following him toward the apartment. At the door he stopped Manuel to bring inside a 10-gallon jug of water, which Manuel proudly hoisted over his shoulder. I shuffled behind Jeffrey, unsure of my purpose. As we entered, a large cheer erupted for Manuel and his water jug. Around a small wooden table sat two older men playing cards. Manuel worked his way around the table, flexing his free arm while he balanced the water atop his shoulder.

“You know where it goes,” shouted Jeffrey from the kitchen. Manuel emerged out a sliding patio door into the sunlight. I stood motionless beside the table.

“Who’s the corpse?” asked a gaunt-faced, older man perusing his cards from one end of the table.

“Oh stop,” interrupted another man next to him. He turned toward me with his paunchy stomach and green cardigan matching the backs of the playing cards. “This here is Manuel’s friend, isn’t that right?” The man held out his hand. “I’m Bill.”

The other man lowered his glasses and mouthed “friend” to the others at the table. “Oh we’re all ‘friends’ of Manuel, aren’t we, Manuel?” He looked around the room. “Hey, where the hell did he go?”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake be quiet,” Bill shot back, his outstretched arm still waiting for my hand. “You damn fairy.”

I offered my hand to Bill.

“And I’m Peter,” said the fairy with the gaunt face, his voice deliberately raised a few octaves. He reached for a plate of cubed cheese beside Bill. He looked to be about seventy.

In the kitchen a darker boy in an apron flittered behind Jeffrey, his movements like dances around a stationary Jeffrey, who fumbled with a silver martini shaker.

“Dammit, this thing,” cried Jeffrey. “I can never get the top off.” The boy, who looked to be about my age when I first traveled to Central America, took the martini shaker from Jeffrey and pushed him to the side.

“Me do it,” he said in English, the fillings in his teeth matching the silver tin.

Behind them emerged still another man, his pale legs as thin as a golf club, a New York Knicks hat loosely around his head. “I’m the magnificent Michael,” he said as he worked his way around the martini fiasco (Jeffrey had thrown the shaker in the sink) and towards me.

“Pleased to meet you,” I said, offering my hand.

“And I am Jeffrey’s maaaaaar-ve-lous partner,” he continued, one hand rising to clutch what I presumed were invisible pearls, the other pointing toward Jeffrey in the kitchen. “So what’s this I hear about you and Manuel’s friend?” he continued, offering his hand limply this time, as if displaying it for a kiss.

“I was in the—”

“Oh,” he interrupted, looking at Jeffrey behind me in the kitchen. “*You* are the friend of Manuel? Dear, oh dear, I say—”

He was interrupted by Manuel, who had returned from outside and wore a different shirt, a red Polo with a stripped purple collar: “Always the talker, *pendejo*.” Manuel approached Michael and placed a firm kiss across each cheek. I backed out of the way.

“Manuel is the man who changed my life,” said Michael theatrically, a long pause over “changed” and a throaty Kathlene Turner finale.

“*Por favor, por favor,*” Manuel said, in a mixture of Spanish and English. “I am only simple man with big *musculos*.” Again, he flexed for the crowd.

“Oh that shirt looks splendid on you,” Michael said.

“Eh, do you mind if—”

“You don’t even have to ask. It’s yours.”

“But—” chimed in Jeffrey from the kitchen.

“But what?” Michael answered. “Don’t even think about it. It’s yours.”

Manuel smiled proudly and adjusted the collar.

“That’s what you get for saving my life,” Michael continued.

“That’s how we met,” added Jeffrey from the kitchen. “Manuel took the best care of Michael at the hospital.” He turned toward Manuel. “Didn’t you, dear?”

“It was nothing,” Manuel answered in English, waving his hand to dismiss the unwanted attention. He leaned over and whispered to me in Spanish that Michael has cancer. “Or *had* cancer,” he added, “when I met him at the nursing home.”

Jeffrey yelled from the kitchen that lunch would be served in a few minutes, an expansive collection of the finest tuna, egg, and chicken salad Pedrito could muster up. “We need our protein,” Jeffrey said, eyes circulating around the room.

“Pedrito is the man who works here,” Manuel leaned over and told me in Spanish. “Like the maid.”

“Oh, he’s a giant Indian queen,” Bill quickly responded, looking at Manuel. “You know I speak the Spanish, darling.”

“But he’s—”

“And we *know* this boy’s a queen,” Jeffery finished.

They watched Jeffrey carry elegant bowls, then a fine crystal decanter, out from the kitchen to what I now realized was some sort of a central patio. I followed Manuel outside, emerging into a wide expanse of trees and flowers, a veritable botanical garden, surrounding a beautiful wooden table covered in food. Pedro, who I noticed was dressed in a black Che Guevara t-shirt, passed out small cordials for, presumably, the auburn-colored liquor inside the decanter. The thought of liquor nauseated me.

“This belonged to my father,” Jeffrey explained, placing the crystal decanter softly down on the table. “My dad was so debonair.” He asked around the table if anyone wanted brandy. “The real Rock Hudson type, you know?” He nodded at Pedro, who had emerged around the corner with a plate of various breads. “Except for the cocksucking part. No no no,” he giggled, “my dad was definitely not one of those.”

Then Jeffrey began a story about his Uncle John. “One look at my uncle, and I definitely knew I was gay,” he announced midway through his story. “So fine that he didn’t even care if his little pervert nephew watched him take a piss. Laid it out like a hose, I tell you. And me the 8-year-old with no clue what to do.”

I laughed along with the others and waited for Jeffrey to finish. Behind him a papaya thumped to the ground, noticeable only to me, it appeared, as I wondered how the fruit could take such a fall without being scathed. I’d just slid some into my mouth from the bowl in front of me. When Jeffrey had finished the story about his uncle, I raised my glass for my first taste of brandy.

“My father used to sleep naked on the living room floor,” I said, passing the cordial of brandy to my lips.

“Come again?” said Bill.

“In his underwear, I mean.” I looked toward Jeffrey. “An ass so fine on the living room floor.”

“Good God, where was your mother?”

I turned to see Manuel’s reaction, which was negligible. I figured I’d told him about the money, so why not go all the way, just as I wanted to do with my father. We spoke so fast in English, however, I wasn’t sure if he understood. “My mother?” I continued, answering Jeffrey. “She was asleep in her room.” I looked down at my sliced croissant.

“It’s all so Italian,” laughed Jeffrey, looking at Michael.

“Don’t you wish,” Peter began, looking at both Jeffrey and me. “Don’t you wish you could have just bent down and sucked his cock?”

“Peter!” Michael scolded from the other side of the table.

“Oh please, we were all thinking it.” Peter paused, then resumed his glance around the table. “Right?”

“Sometimes I’d get close enough to touch it,” I continued.

Jeffrey pointed at a flower bush beside the kitchen door. A closer look revealed hanging zucchini, ripe like my father.

“Exactly!” I exclaimed.

It occurred to me then these men around the table had once been as young as my father. Perhaps they, too, slept naked on the living room floor. I felt safe telling these men about my father, and I wasn’t sure Manuel could even understand. While I was far from my “normal self,” their camaraderie lifted my spirits. Despite the breezy tone and sexual banter, none of these men, it seemed, were interested in me sexually. That, of course, included Manuel, who was busy gnawing at his nails, as he had throughout much of the lunch.

I told them about the night I touched my father's penis. I told them, too, that he *had* gotten hard and I had jerked him off for at least 15 seconds, until he woke up.

"Oh, he was so awake," Michael said once I'd finished.

"So awake," Bill agreed."

"No . . . um, he drinks a lot. I forgot to mention—"

"So what did he say?" Jeffrey interrupted. "The next morning."

"Not a thing."

"Nothing?"

"Nada?" Bill added with an exaggerated accent.

I shook my head. Manuel still fidgeted with his fingernails.

For the first time since I'd woken up in the hospital, I was actually sitting on the edge of my seat. "He just went ahead like things were normal."

"Normal?"

I told them about the divorce and my father's new fancy underwear. He'd sleep on his stomach with the door wide open, his naked ass on display in front of me.

"Sounds hot," says Jeffrey.

"And he'd walk around the apartment in his tight sexy underwear," I added. "He'd even point down toward his crotch and tell me that's what I had to look forward to."

"Look forward to?" Jeffrey asked.

"Like, when I got older, I guess. You know, like I'd have a big mound of cock and balls, too someday." It was the first time I'd told anyone about that night on the living room floor or my father's tempting nudity in the months and years afterwards. I was still so ashamed.

“He’s like one of those voyeurs,” Jeffrey continued.

“Except he’s the one that wants to be watched,” added Michael, who quickly turned his head and followed Jeffrey’s approach to the table, a thin silver tray in his hands. “Ah, yes, I believe it’s time for dessert.”

Jeffrey laid down the tray, which was covered in white rolling paper and brownish weed pinched and scrunched together like clumps of wet grass. Bill’s face turned into that of a little boy. Manuel and the other men reached into the tray, their arms stretching and retreating like the legs of Rockettes.

From the edge of the table, Pedro watched the men fumble over wrapping paper, their hands shaking like dandelions in the wind. Once the rush had cleared, he reached for the rolling paper and the marijuana, carefully constructing his joint as methodically as an archaeologist brushing off bone. While the others struggled, he pinched weed into his paper as if making delicate pierogis, eventually pushing the paper to his mouth after he had finished and slicing it horizontally across his slightly-parted lips, his tongue like a dart across the surface.

Manuel glared at Pedro and reached for Michael’s paper across the table. “I do it,” he said to Michael, who scooped the weed off the table and into his awaiting hand.

“Oh good lord,” Jeffrey said. “Help us, Pedrito!”

Pedro kept his eyes fixed on his joint.

“Yes, our little Indian,” added Peter, who had given up on the mess he’d dumped into his melting bowl of ice cream. “Come hither Indian boy!”

I’m not sure if I was offended or, looking over at Manuel, if I expected him to be offended, but neither he nor Pedro seemed to understand or care. I did wonder, however, if Manuel had somehow equated me with these old men. Is that why he’d taken me here for

lunch, because he thought this was the way I would end up? I was as feeble, if not more, than most of these men, but I needed to distance myself from them. They were not like me, I reasoned, and I was not like them.

Manuel finally got fed up with Pedro's inaction and barked at him in Spanish: "Why don't you help them, *pendejo*?"

Pedro took a giant drag from his cigarette, rose out of his chair, and handed it to Peter. "Happy?" he barked at Manuel, in English, on his way back to his seat.

Manuel stayed seated and rolled his joint, emerging from his fixed stare with what looked to be the perfect joint, tight around the edges, but fat on the inside. He asked if I wanted to smoke.

"I'm fine," I said. I'd never smoked before and I certainly wasn't going to start now, as convinced as I was that my own decadence had led me down the perilous path of self-harm. Besides, I associated pot-smoking with laziness and sloth. A distinct lack of focus. If nothing else, I was always focused.

"Oh, come on," said Manuel, standing up and moving toward me. "Smoke a little." He approached me from the side, the joint between his two fingers and coming nearer to my lips. "Take some." He inhaled deeply, inched his face closer to mine, and blew smoke towards my lips. "Smell it," he said. His lips at that moment looked as fat as my father's penis, and I was desperately, hopelessly in love with this man – another unrequited love – as frantic as I'd been for affection all those years ago in my journals. Desperate as I was wandering the streets and looking for someone, anyone, to notice. Manuel reached around my body, pressing the joint to my lips, his fingers resting across my cheeks while he waited for me to inhale. I breathed in so slowly it felt like a sigh. I breathed again so I'd know that this was real.

I stopped after one hit, but watched the other men imbibe the smoking joints as if nibbling chocolate truffles. After a few minutes Bill spoke, explaining how my story about my father – I told Bill he and my dad shared the same name – reminded him of America in the 1950s. It wasn't all this "gay shit," he said. *His* New York was working-class Italians who got married and sometimes had sex with men. "It wasn't all the screaming queens you see now," he added, his pinkie and ring finger stretched in the air as he tipped back another cordial of brandy.

"Oh good lord," Peter answered, turning toward Bill, "You *are* one." Peter put down his drink, and with his other hand fingered his wide forehead. "You couldn't be a fag like me back then."

Bill nodded. "We would have torn you apart," he said to Peter, who had reclaimed his drink.

"The worst were the cops," chimed in Jeffrey. "Now they made life hard."

Manuel looked at me.

"The arrests and all the surveillance," he continued, his voice raising. "It got to be exhausting."

"Humiliating," Peter agreed.

"Sometimes they wanted you to suck 'em," Jeffrey said, turning his head toward me.

"And then they'd arrest you."

Bill spoke up about the time he'd worked in his uncle's bakery as a teenager and the man – he thought his name was Billy – this man who washed the dishes would pay the boy a dollar to touch the boy's dick."

"And you . . ." Jeffrey began.

“Sure did,” Bill enthusiastically agreed. “Made a lot of money that summer.”

As the laughter trailed off, the men looked toward me. “So if you never fucked your father,” Jeffrey questioned, “then who the hell *have* you fucked?”

I smiled, but stayed silent.

“No, really,” continued Jeffrey. “Enlighten us.”

I looked toward Manuel, who raised the joint again toward my mouth. I waited for him to press it to my lips, but this time he lowered it toward my hand instead. I looked at him, my face surly sagging, and parted my lips. He took a drag from his joint and pulled on my chin with the other hand. Then his face came towards me and his mouth opened and before I’d known what had happened, his mouth, then teeth, closed around my lips so soon I don’t think I had a chance to open my mouth. It happened so fast I don’t recall the taste of his lips.

“Me next,” Bill said, raising his hand.

Manuel leaned back into his chair and passed me the joint. Then he took a bow. It was a performance I hadn’t expected. I took another drag, not certain how or when to exhale. I’d never even smoked a cigarette.

“But you still haven’t answered the question,” Jeffrey continued from the other side of the table,” himself puffing on the joint Pedro had rolled for him.

“What say you?” Bill agreed.

I blew smoke out of my mouth, feeling competent at the ease in which I did so, and scanned the men around the table. Michael and Jeffrey had been a couple for 27 years, not that many years less than I’d even been alive. Peter seemed genuinely happy in San Miguel, as did Bill. I, on the other hand, still couldn’t explain what I was doing there, what I was looking for.

“Cristóbal,” Manuel began, looking seriously at me, “makes the men buy it from him.” He said it excitedly as if standing at the top of a Las Vegas craps table with dice in his hands.

In my weakened state, I felt nothing like the man I’d depicted to Manuel the previous day. I felt more like the men staring back at me.

“It’s true,” I said haltingly.

“He’s a hustler,” said Jeffrey.

“So you got men to pay you,” Pedro asked. “Now how the hell did you do that?” Beside him, Michael scoffed.

Were they making fun of me? Was it so hard to believe anyone would pay for this body? I looked down at my skinny arms and knew that they were right. Peter’s gaunt face reminded me of my own. What was I doing here? What was I saying?

“He was strong,” Manuel finally interrupted. “You know, he used to be very strong.” We locked glances.

“I just, I don’t know,” I began. “I was tired of—”

“Oh, don’t worry. As long as we’re telling secrets,” Bill began. “I used to do it too.”

“Did what?” asked Pedro. “Got paid for sex?”

“We know, the baker,” Jeffrey added.

“No just him,” Bill answered. “The rich guys in their suits and stuff, wanting to get off in the subways. Just threw a few bucks in my pocket and got fucked. I was good for it, you know, it was the 60s, but I wasn’t into the all the flowery stuff. I was a man, like men used to be, you know.” He stared at Peter. “Oh, hell, you wouldn’t know.”

“Oh, I think I’d know,” Peter said. “We’re still all the same, looking for that dark piece of meat.”

“Which reminds me,” said Jeffrey. “You haven’t met our new gardener.”

“New? No more Ernesto?”

Jeffrey looked at me and explained that all the men, including his partner Michael, had sucked off Ernesto at some point.

“He’s short, dark, and lovely,” added Peter. “But he won’t fuck any of us. We’ve been trying.” He looked at me more seriously. “Believe me, we’ve been trying.”

“For about ten bucks,” Michael added. “I think I gave him 500 pesos this one time.”

“That’s like 50 bucks,” said his partner Jeffrey.

“This one time, I mean. I gave him more. Shoved my head back so hard and jizzed all over my face. I felt like Marilyn Monroe.”

“Oh, how divine,” Peter commented. “You slut.”

“And you paid him?” I asked.

Peter answered: “Look, honey, we’re old, we’re used to paying for it – or maybe some of us used to get paid occasionally – but here it’s a cute house boy or hot-ass macho gardener for a ridiculous price.” He stopped and looked at Pedro, who had moved to another room off the indoor courtyard where we sat. “They pay him, what is it, 200 dollars a month and a free place to stay? That’s a lot for an Indian like him.”

“It’s fucking paradise,” Jeffrey added. “When Michael had cancer, it was so cheap to put him in a nicer place, where we met Manuel. Look at our place for God’s sake. We pay \$300 dollars a month, and we’ve turned it into paradise.” I looked around me at the patio and noticed garden art sculptures, fountains, and fruit trees, all beneath a red and brown-bricked patio floor dotted with potted flowers and eclectic cacti. “We probably did this patio over five years. For like next to nothing.”

“You mean Ernesto did it,” Michael said.

“Right after he did us,” Peter added, pursing his lips like a diva. “And the free anti-virals, well that’s just amazing.”

“It’s the macho Mexican thing,” Jeffrey interrupted. “This macho Indian thing. Isn’t that what we’re all looking for?”

“This country has been so good to us,” Peter added, looking more seriously at me. “I’m safe,” he added, almost in a whisper. “I’m safe. The way I have sex is safe.” He paused. “But I’m not dead yet.”

“But didn’t you ever,” I began. “Didn’t you ever—”

“Ever what?”

I thought about Manuel and the gardener and disease and myself on the streets. What if I hadn’t been so apprehensive before? Did that keep me safe from disease? Should I have been thankful? And now? I’d been so wrapped up in my own pain that the threat of disease seemed far, far away. Might I have been endangering the lives of these lonely men sucking on my body as I were a pacifier, and them, in turn, bringing such contagion back to their wives? Was I really any better than any of these men?

“When I’d be out on that street,” I finally answered Peter. “It was like, I mean, it was like I wasn’t so lonely so more.”

“Uh-huh,” Jeffrey agreed.

“Less pathetic,” Peter added, nodding.

“I felt like such a man,” I continued.

“Like your father?”

“What?”

“Like you father,” Bill repeated.”

“My fa—”

“Oh honey,” Peter agreed. “You are so your father.”

“How can I be my—”

“*Exactamente!*” Manuel shouted from his seat. He continued in Spanish: “You on the street is like your father walking around in the apartment.”

“What?” Peter cried out. “What? What? What’s Manuel saying?”

Manuel raised his finger like a professor and continued speaking to me in Spanish. “You were doing the same thing your father did to you.” He clearly understood English better than I had imagined. Perhaps I should have told him more about my father. “And him on the floor,” he continued, almost ecstatic. “That was you.”

“Me?”

“That’s you on the floor waiting.”

“Waiting?”

“In the car.”

“What car?”

“On the side of the road, just waiting.”

“For what?”

“I don’t know.” He looked around the table. “Ask them, maybe.”

“What?” Jeffrey asked, after I’d paused to look at each of the men. “What’s Manuel saying?”

“He agrees that I’m like my father.”

“Well, of course,” Jeffrey agreed. “We all are.”

“Don’t you think your father wanted affection from you the same way you wanted affection from him?” continued Manuel. “Don’t you think?”

It’s something I hadn’t considered. I looked around the table and partially saw my own father. Perhaps that’s why Manuel brought me there in the first place, to show me that I’m not alone.

“He said he’s happy to know us all,” I answered Jeffrey. “Happy.”

Only recently, when looking through my old journals, I found a quotation I had copied many years earlier that explained, I think, what Manuel was trying to tell me: “I realize now that my father must have been awake, letting me fondle his feet, confident that the angry giant slept unaware. But what then would that father be thinking? Why would he let it go on? Was he pleased by the compromised intimacy that could only happen insofar as both parties pretended it didn’t?” (Donatich 142).

Yes, that explained my father. Explained it all. It’s like my open journals had appeared mid-sentence to help me make sense of things. And these old men? Perhaps I’d been sent there for a reason that at the time I could never understand. Perhaps I’d been searching for them, and for Manuel, for most of my adult life, searching for answers long before I’d even set foot in San Miguel de Allende.

Jeffrey dropped us off back at the hospital later that afternoon, but not before hustling a metal tin of brownies into my arms, the same size and shape, I noticed, as where my grandfather stored his precious peanut brittle when I was a little boy. Perhaps I’d never been as alone as I’d always imagined.

I have this itch this itch I have

Tengo picazón

Scratch

Scratch

Scratch

Puedes rasguñarme

Itch me if you can

Me voy a casa

Home

Home

Home

Day 12

My final morning Nurse Garcia greeted me with fresh-squeezed orange juice and a ham and Chihuahua cheese omelet. It's the only breakfast I'd been eating all week. Accompanying her was Dr. Bermudez, who I'd talked to outside the elevator the previous day.

"We'll give the x-rays to your sister," he told me. "They're packed up in an envelope by the front."

I took another bite of ham.

"You're going to be just fine," he said, smiling and with one hand on my shoulder. "Everything will be fine."

I'd returned exhausted from Jeffrey's and Michael's house, my throbbing head pinned to the air until Nurse Garcia gave me pills that put me to sleep. I'd woken up in the middle of the night sweating and with pain in my ear. The skin of my belly itched. I'd managed to make some low, muffled sounds, so light that no one came to check on me. By morning the ear pain had dulled a bit, but my head still ached.

Nurse Garcia told me my sister would be here in a few hours.

"She's here?"

She handed me the glass of orange juice off my tray.

"Yesterday," Dr. Bermudez intervened. "She and her husband arrived yesterday. I spoke to them both."

"She's here in the hospital?"

"I spoke to them on the phone, told her you were fine and it would be better to see you this morning."

Nurse Garcia nodded her head apologetically.

“After you’d gotten some sleep.”

I imagined my sister and brother-in-law walking through those doors and rescuing me. Taking me out of here. I’d been a rope tied in knots. Would I really be fine?

Manuel did not stop by that morning, and instead Nurse Garcia patted me down with alcohol swabs and dried me with a white cloth. I felt as if she were prepping me for the prom.

“Your sister is very worried,” she told me between swipes along the side of my face. “She’s been to San Miguel. She said she loves it.” She paused what she was doing and appeared to look out the window. “I wish you could have seen it.” She spoke with tenderness, even nostalgia. “That way you’d remember what it was like out there,” she said, nodding toward the window, “and not in here.”

For a moment I wish I hadn’t been so hard on Nurse Garcia, did whatever I did to put a scowl on an otherwise pleasant, freckled face.

“All done,” she said, balling up the last alcohol swap in her hand. “We’ll have to get you dressed soon.”

I thought about getting dressed again, unsure if I had the energy or the motivation. Where had they put Manuel’s clothes? Nurse Garcia turned toward the door and smiled. I assumed it was the doctor again.

Instead my sister appeared through the half-open door, peering in at me the way fabric gathers, then slowly pushing open the door. She looked smaller and fatter than I’d remembered, her grey- and brown-flowered blouse hanging below her waist. Behind her walked the doctor, who spoke slowly to someone behind him, my brother-in-law Robert. He wore shorts and a white tank top with surprising ease. Were they really treating this like some kind of vacation? Sarah crossed her arms and approached my bed.

“Get me the fuck out of here,” I said, a comment I didn’t remember, couldn’t have remembered, but was later verified by both Robert and Sarah. “They’re trying to kill me.”

My sister leaned back as if I hadn’t met her expectations, the avocado mushed grey beneath the skin. She turned toward Robert with a concerned expression. Robert barreled through the door and surveyed me and my bed, the entire room, as if he’d be auctioning off its contents.

My sister leaned closer. “They said you were at a youth hostel,” she said. “Do you remember where you were?”

“What?” I responded, unsure what she meant.

“The doctor says you were at a youth hostel. You told someone you were at a hostel, a youth hostel, and that’s where you left your stuff.”

“My wallet, they’ve got my wallet,” I stammered from my bed. “And my phone.”

“We’ve got your wallet and phone,” my sister answered, pointing toward Robert, who held up my cloth wallet. “The phone’s dead.”

Nurse Garcia, who had stayed seated beside me, rose up and walked toward my sister, offering a hug, which my sister readily accepted. Robert smiled and told her, in Spanish, that he was happy to meet her. They were both happy to meet her. I didn’t even know he spoke Spanish. I, however, was confused by the apparent joviality.

I told my sister about Asians and a backpack and bunkbeds and a hammock in the backyard, a single hammock. A single hammock from some kind of fruit tree. She looked at me strangely as if I’d been making it all up. Robert pulled a small ticket out of my wallet and held it up behind my sister.

She looked towards the doctor. “What’s he saying?”

I was speaking in English, so I'm not sure why she didn't understand. "My place," I explained. "That's where I was staying."

She turned around to look at Robert. Years later she'd explain how she never heard me talk so vehemently, yet so discombobulated. It's like I'd thrown all the toddler's toys in the bathtub at once.

Finally Robert spoke up. "I think we have it," he said, holding the tiny piece of paper he'd extracted from my wallet. "I think I know where Chris stayed." He held up the paper like he'd won the lottery. "Hostel Alcatraz."

Hostel Alcatraz? Was he fucking *kidding* me? "Kill me," I repeated to my sister. "They're trying to kill me."

The entire scene was far too surreal, Sarah would one day tell me, her beloved little brother looking so pale and lifeless. Looking like he'd forgotten half his body. Talking nonsense in front of this sweet nurse who'd greeted them with a smile and hugs.

In the corner by the door, Nurse Garcia and Robert looked together at the piece of paper, which I recalled – Oh my God, I remembered! – from the door tour I'd apparently never taken. Together they nodded heads like co-conspirators.

"We're going to go see about your stuff," Sarah told me, still speaking lowly and without the usual vigor in her voice. "The rest of your stuff." She kept her arms folded and moved toward the door.

I called out from my bed.

"The plane leaves in a couple of hours," she answered. "Plenty of time to get your stuff and," she paused, "get your stuff and be gone."

All four slid through the half-open door and left me on my own, which I actually appreciated.

Several hours later Manuel entered my room with a pair of black shorts and a purple Nike sweatshirt I immediately recognized as my own. From a bag he showed me my blue tennis shoes, socks, and a favorite pair of tight blue underwear with a baby blue waist band.

“How did—”

“Your sister.”

“Where did—”

“Why didn’t you tell me you were at the Alcatraz?” He placed the bag at the foot of my bed and dropped my clothes on my chest. “We could have gotten them yesterday.”

In a moment I suddenly doubted everything I claimed not to remember. Had I circled Alcatraz in my *Lonely Planet* guidebook? Had I remembered my father’s number all along? Yet that entire night was vacant, after the food and before the door tour was entirely vacant. It still is. I slowly tuned to get out of bed. I didn’t want anyone to help me with my clothes, not even Manuel. I wanted out of there.

“Now you’re shy,” he said, following closely behind me into the bathroom, the bag in his hand. He handed me the underwear. “Put these on.”

I held onto the sink and balanced myself one leg at a time.

“I know you’re ready,” Manuel said. “Ready to go home.” He held up my gown as I pulled my underwear over my body. He handed me the shorts.

As I dressed, I was startled with my own bodily inadequacies. Never had I seen my legs so pale and weak. Manuel’s upper arms, so strong and muscular, taunted me from behind. I’d

returned to the lonely little boy with scrawny arms. I looked in the mirror at a disheveled and emaciated face. I'd come so far to end up like this. Manuel watched from a few feet away, the expression on his face taking cues from the dismissive manner in which I dressed. He watched me as if I were a sullen, rebellious Emo teen.

"I think you're a fine young man," Manuel finally said, as he followed me back towards the bed." He stepped in front of me and shook my hand. "A fine young man." Beside the door my sister waited with my laptop computer in her hand.

"Surprise," she said swinging it up toward her chest. "We have your backpack, too." She nodded toward Manuel, who stood out of the way and lowered his head as he left the room. I sat on the bed, anxious to leave. Robert entered and told us the car was downstairs. We'd be driven to the airport and then fly to their home in Houston.

"Just enough time for lunch," Sarah said, finally some pep in her voice. "I bet you're hungry for some good food."

I imagined a club sandwich and French fries. I also imagined myself starving, even though I probably wasn't. I wanted the sandwich smothered with avocado.

A few minutes later Manuel entered with a wheelchair. He wheeled the chair beside the bed as if picking up pumpkins from a patch. I swung my legs around the side of the bed and stood up.

"I think I can walk."

"Nonsense," answered Manuel, taking me by the elbow and gently ushering me into the wheelchair. My sister, for once, seemed unsure and out of place. She circled Manuel and me while my brother-in-law stepped toward the door with my bag of clothes in his hands. I was glad they were there.

Manuel wheeled me down the short hallway toward the elevator. We passed a few open doors, where random legs or arms appeared like charms on a necklace. No one lingered in the hallway. Although I was in the chair, I noticed that I'd lost my breath. Perhaps the previous day took more out of me than I'd imagined. The floors were as ugly as I recalled from my initial memory in the hospital, and I kept my head down as if I had something to be embarrassed about. I wondered what the doctor told my sister about me. I wondered how much she knew.

When the elevator door opened, my sister moved beside Manuel to take the reins of my chair.

"No, no," she said. "We've got it."

Manuel answered roughly and quickly: "Don't worry, it's my job." I felt his body behind me, wheeling me into the elevator and turning me around to face the door as he'd done to wash my hair all those days ago, those days that seems like months. I remembered tilting my head back and giving myself to him. For a moment I felt intruded upon, Sarah and Robert standing beside me, Robert making faces at something he'd noticed on the elevator panel.

At the entrance awaited a white minivan labeled "Airport Shuttle" in English. Manuel wheeled me beside it and waited for my sister to get in. Robert walked around to the front of the van and sat down next to the driver. I stayed seated in the chair, unsure what to do next, until I felt Manuel's hand reach down beneath my armpit and gently urge me up, his fingers smooth over half-cracked china too afraid to weep. He moved with me toward the open sliding door, his hand lowering over my head to protect me from the roof of the car. I don't know if I ever said good-bye, my own inner grace gnawing at itself, thankful to my sister for coming so

far to take me home. Out the window I watched the hospital shrink until it finally disappeared, caught in my throat like a fish bone I'd one day need to retrieve.

Part III - Reconciliation

Chapter 5

It's been five years since I left that hospital, and five weeks since George slammed the door on my MRI results, preferring instead to go out and play soccer with his friends. We made up, of course, reconciled in that flat sort of way couples do, nothing too deep below the surface, no indelible damage done. I've stopped feeling sorry for myself and blaming George. None of this is his fault. I'm new to love, the real partnered kind of love shared by Jeffrey and Michael. I'd spent so much time in Latin America that I never bothered to settle down and try to meet a nice man at home. I'm still hoping George is that man and that I can fix what's wrong. Only then can I determine if my past had a purpose. I want to do right.

I'm on the job market now, a highly-competitive academic job market with hundreds of applications for each of a mere dozen or so creative nonfiction writing positions. Yet I've fared well, using my curriculum vitae and writing samples to secure eight semifinalist interviews, in which a panel of committee members grill the final 15 candidates on Skype or at the national Modern Language Association conference to narrow the field down to three. Unfortunately, I've not fared well on the interviews. At my worst moment, one committee member raised her hand and aggressively asked me to stop speaking. "You're using all our time," she'd said. "With these long-winded answers." Some of the interviews never had a chance, as I'd given my wrong Skype address to Franklin College (we conducted the interview over the phone instead) or never could figure out the volume on Microsoft's video chatting system for Rollins College. I was, it appeared, horribly inept. In certain interviews, however, I was sure I had fared well. The four female interviewers at the University of Houston-Downtown could not

stop smiling and nodding their heads. I spent the entire weekend on a 24-page syllabus I was sure had impressed them.

Nothing.

The same for all the others.

What, exactly, was I doing wrong? What if the interviews I thought went so well were the verbal equivalent of my scattered and disorganized dissertation, or the Post-Its and binders strewn all over my apartment? Or the way discombobulated way I tried to share my MRI results with George?

Dr. Linda reminded me that I still needed to schedule my neuropsychological exam. It would be an all-day affair, she said, so I needed to cancel my Tuesday class. I wondered how someone could be “evaluated” for eight hours, but then I remembered my Texas Bar Exam, four hours a day for three successive days. I’d passed that on the first try and I hoped for the same this time. Yet what if the way I imagined myself was far from the way I appeared to others? Was I prepared for that? And if what I thought was good had actually appeared bad – like my interviews – could the inverse be true, as Manuel seemed to suggest? Might I have been exactly where I belonged? Walking down the street in some anonymous border town or kneeling down beside my father? Could this disoriented, ruptured, and leaky man appear to others as an articulate, thoughtful, and handsome character as far from damaged as a bug is from a bear? I needed to find out.

My evaluator, Nina, was a PhD student like me. She was tall and thin, with a pronounced European accent that matched her blond streaked hair. She’d be defending her dissertation in clinical psychology in less than a month. I told her I had a few more months to go. A handsome man in a suit joined her, who softly introduced himself as Dr. Scott Langer,

Nina's supervisor. They'd seen the MRI results, but they wanted to know more about me. I had thought the testing was about saving my relationship with my boyfriend George, I told them, but looking back on my injury and its aftermath had forced me to consider that I wasn't entirely whole to begin with.

Nina pointed at the screw in my head.

"Before that," I clarified. "Certain things don't show up in an X-ray or MRI."

I was pleased to see Dr. Langer nodding his head.

"I just don't know where the Ph.D. stress ends and the life stress begins," I continued.

"Or what's in the present or in the past."

Now Nina nodded as well.

"Well, then" spoke the doctor, "I'll let you two get to it." He offered me his hand. "I think this might be exactly what you're looking for," he continued. He then turned back toward Nina: "he's all yours."

After he'd gone, Nina explained that a psychological test is a set of stimuli administered to an individual or group. Our testing was a "neuropsychological" assessment, which would measure my cognitive capabilities.

"I specialize in brain-behavior relationships," she explained.

"Yes," I nodded, "behavior and the brain."

My testing would include a series of cognitive tests measuring things like attention span, concentration, spatial perception, abstract and organizational thinking, memory, and social judgment.

“We’re looking for your deficits,” she continued. “And then we can match that up with the part of the brain that’s been injured, you know, so then we can get a clearer picture of how to move forward.”

“Move forward?”

“Yes, you know, to make your life the best it can possibly be.” She smiled so wide she nearly choked on her own sincerity. “So let’s go,” she continued, her watch snapping hard on the round table.

I smiled. *Deficits?* So once again I’d be searching for what I’d done wrong. Dr. Langer was full of shit.

“Ready to go?” smiled Nina like the tallest sunflower in a field.

I didn’t want to dim the enthusiasm of this lovely woman, who under different circumstance might very well be my friend, as I’d thought of the woman whose car I smashed in Mexico. “I’m ready,” I volunteered, doing my best to contain a skepticism that had deflated me like a balloon.

I first arranged painted blocks in a series of shapes that materialized once I put the blocks together in a prescribed order. I worked quickly and efficiently, yet the final shape I couldn’t form. I’d not be earning a 4.00! Next I had to say as many names as I could starting with the letter J: J o s e J u a n J o a q u i n J u l i o J a i m e J e s u s J e s s e J u n i o r

“You can say girls’ names too,” Nina pointed out.

J a s m i n e J e n n i f e r J o a n J a c k i e J i l l i a n J a n e J o a n n a

Then she picked another letter and asked me to name words, except names, beginning with that letter. I recalled doing the same thing in my fifth grade gifted and talented program. I was always a natural at it. Before long I was stacking colored wooden rings over sticks (I

failed the final two tries) and memorizing shapes reminding me of Chile's Nazca lines so I could redraw them on another sheet of paper. For ten minutes I clicked the computer's mouse every time I saw the number three.

By the second hour I wondered why I was there. Why on earth would it matter how many times I pushed down a wooden clicky thing in 20 seconds? Likewise, my life was fairly manageable compared to whoever couldn't recognize that orange, yellow, and green are all colors (duh!) or that triangles, circles, and hexagons are all, as I pointed out to Nina, examples of shapes. It's the more complex patterns that had given me trouble, such as the patterns in my own life.

BA

MA

MFA

JD

PhD

Why might someone pursue innumerable degrees to never use them?

Venezuela

Colombia

Dominican Republic

Honduras

Mexico.

Why seeks affection so far away from home?

Estéban

Victor

Martin

Wily

Jesús

What had I sought from each man?

To know where I was going, I needed to know where I'd been. I wasn't sure how making pictures from blocks would help. Besides, I'd never met a person with more focused concentration or attention span than me. I didn't need Adderoll – I *was* Adderoll.

On the next test Nina asked me to look at a picture and tell her what I saw. Yet this was not a cool IQ test with surrealist images. Instead, she showed me a picture of a house and waited for me to say "house." The next was of a tree. I said "tree." Then the thing used to drain pasta: a colander, Nina had to tell me, before scribbling furiously on her legal pad.

The next test involved a more expansive vocabulary, but focused on abstract terms. I defined "palliate," "insincere," and "ongoing." When I defined "alleviate," she paused, looked down, and responded in a monotone voice, "can you say more?"

"Get rid of."

"Can you say more?"

I exhaled sharply. "To lessen?"

She smiled and moved on to another word.

I rolled my eyes, instead of providing a definition.

"You'd be surprised," Nina said, her accent strong on the "i" in surprised, her face tightening as if biting hard at the dentist's office. "I've see a lot of brain damage." She paused.

"Injury works in a lot of ways."

I began to apologize.

“No, no,” she interrupted. “It’s obvious you are fine. Not *fine*, I mean,” she stammered, “but fine like you can do this.”

“Thank you.”

“But don’t discount,” she continued, “don’t discount the subtle things.” She told me I’d have something to gain by finishing the test.

My final test involved listening to a series of words and repeating as many as I could back to Nina. Then she read off another list of 15 words and asked me to repeat the first list. We did this until I was able, after 15 minutes, to name all the items on the first list. It reminded me of the LSAT for law school. Yet how could I be certain if I would have remembered any better before my injury? Lots of things had changed. I was older now, and tired after seven hours of testing. It took me a few minutes to recognize the categories of objects: fruits, furniture, instruments. It could happen to anyone.

In the last ½ hour I answered 320 questions about how I felt, or what made me mad, or what I thought about while driving, or some other nonsense I still can’t remember. I do recall, though, that I was asked if it was ever appropriate to yell at people or if I get so angry I want to drive my car into a lake. Or a ditch. Something like that. Of course I wouldn’t! The questions seemed to suggest, as well, that promiscuity was linked to brain injury. Certainly not in my case! What I really wanted was not these obvious measures of “social judgment,” as Nina called them, but some guidance as to what constitutes an “outburst,” and could any of that be attached to the brain. I’d known assholes for years, and I don’t think any of them had damaged brains. They were, simply, assholes. Couldn’t I just be an asshole and call it a day? Or does it matter that I always feel so bad afterwards? Is that what separates an outburst from an opinion?

After she'd checked my bubbled Scantron sheet, Nina handed me a granola bar and told me she'd be in touch. I wished her luck on her dissertation and suggested we get a drink one day. Perhaps I was too tired to know if I was being "socially unacceptable" or not, but I really don't think it mattered. Perhaps the tests had succeeded in convincing me that nothing was wrong. I could be the man Manuel favored, shirtless and exposed, a hot flamingo in the middle of the park, as I'd begun to see myself before my injury. Or would I revert back to the lonely, frightened child too scared to draw outside the lines? In which direction might my test results point me?

Chapter 6

A week later I received a call from Alberto, a friend I'd known back in Austin, who invited me to join him in Las Vegas for the weekend. Alberto and I – or “Berto,” as I called him – had lost touch, his wife Andrea preferring her husband to abandon his single friends and embrace her well-balanced and married female friends.

“It’s what couples do,” she’d told her husband.

I hadn’t seen Berto in six years, not since before my accident, the time when I was one of those single friends his wife had warned him about. Now we’d reversed positions, him the recent divorcee, and me, partnered with George for more than three years. It was nice to escape the tension with George, and for once I felt like I had friends of my own. Before take-off I felt my bag in front for the hard folder that contained my most recent cover letters for two creative writing positions that had recently opened up, most likely the last two of the year. The stewardess bent her body into my elbow, the third time in as many minutes, frantically snapping closed overhead bins above passengers’ suspicious eyes. I chose an aisle seat, as I always did the last several years, because I couldn’t stand the feelings of being pent up, stuck, stacked between some body and the walls of the plane. It never used to be this way. I’d traveled in the window seat for as far back as I could remember, a fish on the edge of a tank, a kitten about to pounce. Where had the expectancy gone, that hope, anticipation, the first peel of orange rind atop a little boy’s fingertips?

I worked diligently on my cover letters until I fell asleep. I awoke over the Utah and Arizona desert, confounded by its size, the rough gaps and surges of land quiet beneath our cruising altitude. Reddish-brown rock soared from the surface, block-like in some places,

skinny as phalanges in others. I thought back to my AmeriCorps trip to California, when I'd also flown over the desert. I placed my finger on the window to follow a long crease of land separated by rock on either side, its indentation like the space between my fingers. I stretched out my entire hand, traced its outline against the window. I returned my gaze to the rocky mountains below, contemplated their capitalized status – Rocky Mountains – and smiled at something seemingly out of my comprehension. Perhaps I was beyond my own comprehension.

As I re-read my cover letters, however, my whole life came into focus. I had practiced law and written books and received some of the highest student evaluations in the department. I taught Latino literature, GLBTQ history, sports writing, travel writing, and a shitload more. I judged writing contests and refereed articles for a prominent travel journal. I adjusted my new ten-dollar Walgreens reading glasses over the bridge of my nose, and for a moment I imagined myself a tenure-track professor. No more adjunct scattering from school to school in a mad hustle to supplement my meager graduate student allowance. I could do this!

On the ground, the enormity of the canyon gives way to landscape as mountains appear to encircle the gaudy buildings along the Strip. At certain angles the mountains look close enough to touch. I arrived on a clear day, the sky fading from a deep blue to a faint grey as it converged with the mountains. I became a traveler again, passing along a faux Parisian boulevard and New York cityscape on my way to Bally's hotel, where Berto awaited.

I wheeled my suitcase through the lobby, right past Berto apparently, who was sitting on a bench in front of the elevators. "Holy shit, it's Girman," I heard from behind me, turning around to see my friend, arms open, in front of the elevator. I was so happy I nearly kissed

him. He had lost weight, his legs always skinner than the rest of his body, but more aligned now, more symmetric.

“*Al-fucking-berto*,” I answered, the soft fur of his goatee rubbing against my chin.

“How the hell have you been?”

He placed a hand on my shoulder, his smile so pronounced I wondered why. Surly he couldn’t be so excited to see me, could he? He gripped my suitcase before I had a chance, nudging me into the elevator before him. Berto always knew how to take care of me.

I never mentioned Berto in my story because I had forgotten him. For years I’d bartended with Berto’s cousin Leon in Austin, both of them first generation Mexicans from Waco, about an hour-and-a-half away. Sometimes I think Leon tolerated me, the friendly hugs and shoulder rubs I’d give to him amusing our bar regulars and other staffers. He was a safe space away from the rigors of law schools and my penchant for the streets. He was easy; he was fun. He allowed me to rest a hand on his back and wanted nothing more. Berto, in contrast, was the more cerebral cousin. He was good with numbers and thought things through. Like me he was looking for love, and also like me sometimes in the wrong places. He’d married a girl from San Luis Potosí for five thousand dollars so she could get her immigration papers, yet he fell in love with her once they’d moved in together, the two of them and her brother. His second wife I liked, the one who demanded his full attention, but she treated him poorly, even condescending to his darker skin color as she herself was a light-skinned offspring of an Anglo father and Bolivian mother. She referred to him as swarthy, even greasy. Berto is dark, yes, but a good man with a calm soul and loving heart. His son, nearly two shades lighter than his dad, adores him. He’s the type of father I’d always wanted to be.

In the hotel room Berto asked about George.

“Another Mexican,” he said. “Why am I not surprised?” He shook his head and smiled.

“He doesn’t speak a word of—”

“I knew it!”

“Span—”

“Not even a lick?”

I told him George is from Dallas and speaks more in a slow Texas twang.

“No Spanish.”

Berto shook his head again, took a sip from his purple Gatorade.

“Haven’t changed, Girman. You haven’t changed.”

I roared back in laughter, grazing the side of my head with my hand and into the titanium screw. I had forgotten about it, as I always did now that I never wore the attached hearing aid. I hadn’t mentioned the accident to Berto, didn’t see the point, but the more I grasped the circumstances behind my travel and the injury itself, I realized it had become a part of me. I also understood better the importance of friendship.

We left the hotel and became world travelers on the strip, pausing in front of the *Arc de Triomphe* on our way to the beautiful Italian countryside across the street at the Bellagio, the two of us stopping at a café overlooking the beautiful inner gardens.

“I bet the pussy’s hot here,” Berto whispered, pointing outside. He flashed me a devilish smile above his tiny cappuccino. “In the summertime, I mean.”

I agreed with a clink of my equally-tiny porcelain cup. For the first time in many months I imagined hot guys with huge backs circulating the gardens in European-styled tight and tiny swim trunks.

“I can be your wingman,” I said.

Berto laughed because we hadn't done that before. Our friendship was more in the little things, his attention to my car when I was broke and in law school, or my advice on his uncle's immigration case. He and Andrea sent me off in the moving truck from Austin to McAllen with explicit, hand-written instruction how to drive and *not* to drive the U-Haul. Berto might have gone with me, I think, had Andrea not objected.

We emerged after dinner with two plastic Yard Dogs, twenty-four ounces of sugary-slick daiquiri madness, tipping them upward to our faces, staring at the surprisingly realistic painted sky atop the Venetian's indoor canal-style shopping. Berto asked me how it's going with George.

I asked him what he meant.

"You'd been saying," he began, "about how he was just, you know, not seeming into it at all."

I took a long sip of my Mango Yard Dog.

"I guess," I said after I had finished, holding the drink in front of me. "It's the constant condescension, you know."

Berto nodded.

"Not putting the dishes in the dishwasher right or breaking this or not doing this right."

Berto laughed.

"What?" I smiled.

"Well you were always kind of clumsy."

"Who? I feigned surprise. "Me?"

"Oh my God, at the bar, it was like 'um, I guess Chris did these before he left.' It was so funny." He splayed out his leg as he turned the corner.

“Did I?”

“No, no one cared. They were just like ‘he’s in law school, oh well.’ Cue Dara’s classic shoulder shrug.” He exaggerated his smile and dipped his head to the side as if he were a clown.

I smiled at his impression – I hadn’t thought of Dara in years.

“What about your leg?” I asked, watching him jiggle it in the air. “What’s going on there?”

“Old injury. Now that I’m jogging ag—”

“I was going to say—”

“Thanks. Yeah, I had gained some weight in the divorce,” he said. “Lost it.”

“Uh-huh, I was going to tell you that you’re looking good.”

“Thanks.” He tipped the remainder of his drink in his mouth and emerged with an exaggerated “Agh,” asking for another.

“In Paris,” I said. “Let’s have another on the way back to Paris.”

On the way there I told Berto about Steve Mulac, the man I was convinced George was in love with. “Now they’re on two sports leagues together.”

“Oh yeah, I remember you mentioning him,” Berto said as we crossed the street on one of the many bridges over the Las Vegas Boulevard.

“He’d spent the entire morning yesterday texting Steve,” I continued. “For something going on this weekend.”

“Uh-huh.”

“And I’m like ‘what the fuck?’”

“Oh, I get it,” said Berto, much faster and louder than his usual reply. “That’s what happened with Andrea.”

Berto explained that he found e-mails between his then-wife Andrea and an older man she worked with.

“A married man,” he said.

“Like what kind—”

“Definitely inappropriate, talking about how they were in love and how they needed to leave their marriages.” He said she denied it when he confronted her.

“So did she cheat on—”

“She denies it.”

“Yeah?”

“Well,” he continued, paying for another round of Yard Dogs from an outside bar and pausing to answer the pretty bartender. He looked happy talking to her, and I wondered how he did so while at the same time explaining his divorce.

“She says she waited until we were officially separated.” He paused again, his elbow on top of the bar. “But that’s bullshit.”

I paused for a second, then smacked my plastic daiquiri against his: “Well I’m not saying George is cheating.”

“No?”

“I mean Steve is straight, or I have no reason to think he’s not.”

Berto nodded.

“I like Steve, actually,” I told him. “I recognize that I’m partly jealous, that maybe I need more friends of my own like him. You know: cute, young, financially successful.”

“Yeah, but—”

“And what do I bring to the table?” I interrupted, him and me squeezing through the mass of people who’d arrived for a Saturday night gambling in the Parisian casino. “I’m broke, no job, I’m old, my hip is busted.”

“You have a job.”

“I guess.”

“And your hip is not busted. Didn’t you say you have a torn labrum?”

“Yeah,” I agreed, my voice surprisingly enthusiastic.

“You’ll get it fixed and get a job. Done.” He said the last word in Spanish: *Finito*

I told him the doctor won’t fix it. The MRI revealed too much arthritis, I said, so the doctor won’t do the labrum. Plus there’s the bone spurs.”

“Second opinion,” Berto said, shaking his head. “Second opinion.”

“That’s why *you’re* here,” I said, as I took a too-large sip of my drink that went directly to my forehead.

“BRAINFREEZE,” we simultaneously exclaimed, arousing or amusing or otherwise getting the attention of an old craps dealer who covered her hair with one hand and used the other to cover her giggling mouth.

On the golf course the next day I told Berto that George was probably at the bar crawl with Steve Mulac.

“It’s not just them two I don’t think. Maybe a group.” I looked at my phone. “They’re probably there right now.”

“I don’t know,” Berto said, shaking his head.

I insisted it was cool, George was only staying awhile because that night was the national championship match for Texas Women's volleyball team, a team George had followed religiously.

"He'll never miss that match," I said. "Never."

I texted George, asked him how the day was going.

I received a text back of a bingo board. Each square was some type of challenge. George or someone had circled the space that said "touch a gay guy's penis – for a while!"

I showed Berto the text.

"Why the fuck would he send that?"

I pretended not to care.

"Fucked up."

All I could imagine was Steve standing next to George at a bar table, taking a swig of beer and touching George's penis – over his jeans – for whatever constitutes "awhile."

"My God, that would be George's fantasy," I said.

"Probably."

"It would."

"It's fucked up he'd send you that knowing that it's Steve, and how you feel about him."

"Steve's not the problem. It's George."

"Oh, I get it," Berto answered, missing another putt. "I get it."

I'd been telling myself for months that I was worked up over nothing. Steve is just a friend. And a *straight* friend. Cue my obsessions. This is more about me than it is about him.

I needed to control my jealousy. Yet Berto's response that something really did *not* feel right made me even more angry.

I waited about an hour and text George to ask him if he was home yet for the volleyball game.

His response: *Not sure I'm gonna watch the first part. Having too much fun!*

Was he serious? The thing he had been obsessing over for weeks, his beloved Longhorns women's volleyball team, and he was going to throw it all away for a chance to spend more time with Steve Mulac. I'd had enough. I waited a few minutes and responded, trying to sound as casual as possible, that I thought it odd that he was once so into this and now he didn't seem to care. I found that odd, I repeated. I did not mention Steve Mulac.

I was still fuming that evening at our Cirque du Soleil show. Yet the choreographed movement of so many performers, this ebb and flow, flux and function, revived in me a gratitude for things I could never do or explain, as had contemplating the rugged western landscape from my plane. Come to think of it, the purplish red hue of a Las Vegas sunset over the strip – bronzed mountains in the background – matched perfectly the kaleidoscopic colors and textures on stage and on the bodies of all the performers. Leave George with his crush, I reasoned, as I never feared he might cheat on me, as Andrea may – or may not have – done on Berto. For a moment I watched my jealousy banish in the thralls of artistry. If only I could approximate this sentiment more often, I said to Berto, who repeated again how I shouldn't have to put up with such passive-aggressiveness from my partner. I nodded, but still thought the problem was, at least partly, me and my jealousy. Obsessing over things I couldn't control.

The next day we woke up early for massages, Berto asking me in the dry sauna afterwards how we had become soft.

“I thought I’d be partying until late,” he said, stretching his leg back and forth from his seat above me. “Especially with Girman.”

“I don’t really,” I began smiling momentarily and staring at the hair over my friend’s upper body. “I don’t really party anymore.”

“You?” He left his mouth hanging open. I reached up to his chin and pressed his mouth closed.

“I’m just busy, you know, teaching and all the job stuff.”

“And your dissertation I bet.”

“Oh shit,” I said, chuckling. “I forgot about that.”

“So you don’t go out anymore?”

“Maybe. Just with George. We have a few drinks and get home.”

“Well he’s certainly having a lot this weekend without you, isn’t he?”

Berto had been trying to get my attention, to notice something I had already noticed, but I’d wanted to be the better, bigger man and overcome.

“I’m just happy now,” I said, adjusting the hand towel over my crotch. “I mean, I’m happy with—”

“With George and the house and the cats and stuff, right?”

“I guess.”

“Sounds to me like you might be done with him.”

“What?”

“That’s just the impression I get.” He stood up and dropped his towel to the floor. “I’m going to the cold pool before I sweat to death. “Don’t worry about the towel,” he said on his way out. “I’ll get me a new one.” It was the first time I’d seen Berto naked, and it felt like a

gesture of gratitude to solidify our friendship, perhaps meant to propel it toward some intimacy the way a Cirque du Soleil artist takes hold of the swinging trapeze or another performer in gestures of both trust and alliance.

An hour later we waited in line for the Wynn's famous Sunday brunch. The large tiled marble floors and topiary extravagance extended the opulent vibe I'd been feeling since our morning message and spa treatment. Flower arrangements soared thirty feet in the air as pink and white Peonies nestled with unfurling oriental Lily's, Daffodils, Roses and succulent blue Hydrangea. A column of Hibiscus flowers, pink and orange like the trees surrounding the Florida house in which I grew up, wrapped effortlessly around a column the way a mermaid extends herself along the seashore. I thought of my mother, now dead for three years, and her love of flowers. I apologized to Berto for spending his last few hours in line for a buffet that, although succulent, was probably overpriced.

"I'm having a great time," he said. He looked around the extravagant waiting area in which we were impounded. "This is great."

It occurred to me then that we hadn't "partied" like we said we would.

"So you've have fun?" I asked.

"Yeah, sure. Haven't you?"

I told him I had, most definitely had a good time.

"It's just that with the divorce and all," I continued. "I know you thought we'd—"

"I really didn't know what I'd thought, to be honest. I just wanted to get away, and I thought of you, and how you're always ready to get up and go."

I liked that Berto saw me the way he always had, this ephemeral spirit weaving in and out of places like perfume.

“I guess I don’t party as much anymore.”

“I’m not sure you ever did, Girman.”

“No?”

“You tell stories, yeah, but I know you’ve been wanting to settle down for a while now, haven’t you?”

“For longer than I knew,” I answered, trying my best to sound melancholy, but excited that we were only a few minutes away from being seated.

“That’s why I’m pissed you’re not as happy with George,” he hesitated. “Not as happy as—”

I placed my hand on his chest.

“I am happy. Yes, I mean most of the time, I am happy. I don’t want to make it seem like—”

“Chris,” he answered, looking down at my hand. “I can tell you’re not happy. It’s in your voice, your eyes, your heart.” He looked at my chest. “But if you say so.”

“I know what you mean,” I answered. “I know.”

“You two are next,” interrupted a young and cute hostess, her black shawl elegantly flowing over one shoulder. “I hope you’re hungry.”

We smiled at the girl, each of us instinctively patting out stomachs.

“It’s been awhile since I was happy. Like, *truly* happy,” I said to Berto. “After my accident and stuff.” We hadn’t really talked about it, but I was anxious to let Berto know that I *had* suffered, even if he couldn’t see it on my body all that much.

“I can tell,” he said, standing in front of me and following the hostess to our table.

“You’ve never even brought up this,” he added, fingering the screw in my head. “Wow,” he

continued, “look at these.” He pointed at a giant pineapple and banana display made entirely of flowers, sunflowers and daisies, at arm’s length from our table.

“I can tell things are different,” he said. “But I didn’t want to say anything.”

“Well, I can’t hear—”

“That’s no biggie. I mean I can’t hear that well either, you know, and I just figured what side I needed to talk into—”

“Yeah, sorry about that.”

“Don’t be sorry. It is what is.” We ordered two mimosas from the waiter, who Berto pointed out was Hispanic like him. “We’re always the help,” he said, laughing and laughing. “I don’t know if it’s the accident or George or what, but you seem so settled now. No comments about the waiter,” he paused, “none of that urgency you always had.”

It felt nice to be psychoanalyzed by my good friend. Who needed that tedious testing when I had Berto all along?

“I don’t know,” he continued. “Maybe you found what you’ve always been looking for.”

“You think?”

“That other stuff is old. Been there, done that,” he said. “I get it – I want to be married again.”

“Yeah?”

“Not now, but one day. Married again.”

“So three times, like Ross on *Friends*?”

He laughed.

“Fuck you, Girman.”

“Pleased to meet you fucktard,” I answered, rising to hit the buffet. “Hit you back here in a few.”

“Let’s do this!” he answered, following me to the food.

The buffet was even more opulent than I’d imagined. Baby quiche in tiny tins grabbed my eye, and I followed that with thick and glazed bacon as if sliced directly from the pig out back. Crab benedict and shrimp-topped cornbread completed my first plate, followed by “Nashville-inspired” beef ribs that fell off the bone as easy as a cowboy undressing after a day on the range. We paused between courses to get drunk on our mimosas. Two hours later, holding onto the handrails to steady ourselves beneath the sculpted rose bush cathedral overhead, we stumbled out of the Wynn both satiated and inebriated, heading back to Bally’s to pick up Berto’s luggage and send him off to the airport. It was the perfect ending to a perfect trip. Perhaps I didn’t need to get back to my “old self” at all. Perhaps I never knew exactly what that was.

My plane, however, didn’t leave for another six hours, and just as I was close to buying a book and crouching low in the one of the Bellagio’s opulent Italian cafés, I realized that while I was in Las Vegas, George had “partied” more at home than me in Sin City and more than we usually partied in Chicago together. Once I had left, he was immediately at Steve Mulac’s side forgetting me and volleyball and whatever plans or sentiments he may have had, all for the chance to spend more time with Steve.

Fuck him!

I was angry and excited at the same. Why couldn’t I loosen up and have some fun? George did. I bought another Yard Dog outside Paris and worked my way down to New York New York to ride on their rollercoaster. George loved roller coasters, and why couldn’t I? I’d

braved my fear several months earlier at Six Flags Chicago with George, and now I'd ride New York's rollercoaster just to show him my commitment to trying new things. I crossed Sunset Boulevard this time, instead of using the overhead bridges, and enjoyed the crisp winter air working through my short hair.

After the roller coaster, I stayed in New York's casino and won big at roulette. I'd turned a single \$10 red chip into two hundred dollars! It was Sunday, right?

SPORTSBETTING!

I bought another Yard Dog on my way to the MGM Hotel, where my former TGI Friday's bar manager Jeff Kowalski claimed to "win big" every Super Bowl weekend. I found the MGM and risked all two hundred dollars on the second half of the Eagles-Cardinal football game, which I won, and the Nuggets-Hornets basketball game, which I lost. I came out ahead, though, a full \$100 ahead, and after several rum and cokes, I was drunk and back on the streets to Bally's to collect my suitcase before heading to the airport. I'd sleep on the plane and worry later about the syllabi and the jobs and the interviews and, I couldn't forget, the dissertation.

On the boulevard, however, something had happened. My taxi couldn't move, but the driver didn't know why. I spent a half-hour in the cab before I finally departed and began my walk. I looked at my phone, and I was in danger of missing my 11:30 p.m. plane. On my phone was a message from George, a link to a news story about a woman who had ran the sidewalk on the strip and mauled dozens of people, killing many, according to the initial report. I looked up from my phone and realized the accident had occurred just a few hundred yards from where I had stood opposite the Paris Hotel a few hours earlier. I looked down at my phone, dazed and confused, hoping to make my plane on time. I texted George that I might not

make the plane. He responded coolly and calmly, telling me not to worry and to let him know which plane I'd actually be on. He said he was glad I was okay with a happy face emoji.

I'm not sure why, but I continued to be angry at George. I reasoned that if I missed my plane, it was still my fault despite the accident. After all, I should have left the MGM sooner, should have had a few less drinks. Perhaps then I could have navigated back to Bally's. When it came to George, I always blamed myself. Maybe I couldn't load the dishwasher properly or clean the toilet to his exact specifications. After all, I had lived by myself for so many years. Perhaps I could try harder to stretch him "properly" before his soccer games. He even suggested that I was coming across poorly during my semifinal interviews.

"You really should have gotten one by now," he had said the previous week, munching on a piece of gum as hyperbolically as a teenage girl. "It's most likely your fault."

And that's how my bubble burst.

I did make my plane on time from Las Vegas, but in the car I told George that I'd had enough of his friendship with Steve Mulac. Enough texts, soccer games, bingo boards, and who knew what else.

His answer infuriated me: *Huh?* He said it had never occurred to him that the Bingo board was anything other than a funny photo. He said Steve wasn't even standing next to him at the time. An hour later, both of us lying on our bed as the sun rose behind our thin green curtain, he insisted that he'd had enough of my accusations.

"If it isn't Steve," he said, "it'll be someone else."

I denied it.

"Just like it was Max and Andy and Ray," he said, getting up from the bed.

"I never—"

“I don’t have to take this,” he said, grabbing his pillow and walking out the door. “Not from you.”

Still drunk, I rolled into my mattress, our black kitten Laney purring by my side. I’d missed our kitties. I tried to think what it was about Steve Mulac that precipitated so much jealousy. Perhaps George was right: it wasn’t Steve at all. What mattered, instead, was that he was living in the thralls of another man. And what about me? Hadn’t I been seeking attention for so many years? Wasn’t affection at the top of my list, as I’d explained to Manuel? I’d lost the consideration and *cariño* I so desperately craved. I fell asleep wondering about the woman in the car. What could make a person mad enough to roll up on the curb, over and over, annihilating anything in her path? What could make a person so enraged? I ventured she was merely sad, like me, a deeply-masked sadness disguised as anger.

I apologized later that day, but George and I kept our distance in subsequent days. I continued working on my syllabi on campus during the day while George worked from home. Evenings he spent with his friends playing volleyball or soccer. Instead of waiting up for him like I usually had, I went to bed around 9 p.m., waking at 5:30 a.m. for the gym. I was sick of the weight I’d gained both before and after Las Vegas, and I began to eat dinner without him, subsisting on tuna fish sandwiches, turkey meatloaf, and crock-pot pulled chicken. In two weeks I lost five pounds and two percentage points in body fat. I’d begun to manage my hip pain, too, beginning each morning on my hands and knees on the kitchen floor, hoisting my right leg in the air as a dog pissing against a wall. Then I’d perform side leg raises while Laney and Lucky watched. It was the best I could do.

I hadn’t been this organized or focused in years, not since I had begun dating George, but this time I wasn’t tutoring or grading on-line essays or sitting through irrelevant readings of

Karl Marx's *Das Kapital*, as I had my first two years in the PhD program. Instead I invested time toward my future, completing syllabi, writing dissertation chapters, and preparing for a final Skype interview I'd earned – at Oakland University – that might turn my latest degree into an actual job, unlike anything I'd done after law school. It had been months since George last initiated sex, and I no longer had the excess energy to try and turn him on. Nothing he said or did told me that it mattered.

Chapter 7

George is gone. On Martin Luther King Jr. Day, hours before my final Skype interview, George leaned against the couch and asked if we could talk. I stood next to the refrigerator, wondering what I had done wrong this time. We'd had another argument, once again over Steve Mulac. We'd been eating at a nice Peruvian restaurant two night earlier with his friends Lupita and Paul, and their beautiful young daughter Luna. George received a text from Steve. When I asked about it, George said they'd been planning where to take George's straight cousin Anthony when he visited Chicago from Dallas in a few days. George hadn't told me Anthony was coming to visit.

"It's no big deal," George had said. "Anthony's not coming anymore."

I tried to bottle my anger, but it seeped out back at Lupita's and Paul's apartment. I started an argument in front of his friends, he'd said, his very best friends, and then I sent him belligerent texts. He's right. I did start an argument, and when he refused to respond like I'd wanted – admitting his attraction to Steve Mulac – I left his friend's house and text him from outside. I'd threatened him after he'd refused to come down and home with me. On my last text I wished him luck on consummating his infatuation with straight Steve.

"I don't deserve to be treated like that," he said. "Not by my own boyfriend."

He'd made up his mind. He was moving out and into his friend Christina's place. He would pay his half of the bills for two more months, but then I needed to move out and he'd resume the lease by himself in April. I couldn't afford our place. He could.

"It's not like this is the first time," he continued.

He then recounted the beginning of our relationship when I had shoved his friend after that friend removed my phone from my jacket pocket at the table while I was outside feeding

coins in parking meter and sent texts – some funny, others mildly appropriately – to both personal and professional contacts.

“But that’s bullshit,” I said. “I did what—”

“And what about a week later with my cousin Vanessa,” he interrupted. “What about that?” He was referring to a flight attendant friend of his cousin who repeatedly took pictures of George after I had kindly asked him not to. I hadn’t heard or seen George give him his phone and *ask* the guy to take pictures.

“All I did was raise my voice,” I countered. “And then I apologized later.”

Next he brought up our recent tubing trip to Austin when Anthony’s girlfriend and I had drunkenly bonded at the outside gazebo while the others prepared dinner. Later George accused me of badmouthing his cousin Anthony. I remembered saying nothing negative about Anthony – nothing, I insisted – and stormed out of the house for several hours in the middle of the night, returning to sleep on the patio in the early-morning hours. As I recall, I was being accused of something I didn’t do. His family would always come first, I realized. To make matters worse, he said his own sister blamed herself for our most recent fight on Saturday night because she thought she texted him too much, perhaps too late.

“My sister should never have to worry about that,” George screamed. “Never.”

I was so stunned by his accusations – all of them – that I didn’t know what to say. Had my neuropsychological evaluation predicted such behavior? We were interrupted, however, by an echo off the computer that sounded like a warning siren. I looked at the clock; it was an hour before my appointed Skype interview time. George, who was closer to the desk, looked at the computer and told me it was coming from Oakland University.

“Sorry,” he said. “I guess it’s your interview.”

I looked down at my chest, pleased to see I wore a collared shirt even if it was an UnderArmour athletic blue sweatshirt. I quickly zipped up the collar and moved toward the computer. I couldn't understand why they'd be calling me an hour early.

It was minutes into the interview, after the third mention of "close to Detroit," when I realized I'd somehow confused the abbreviation "MI" as Minnesota instead of Michigan, as both states had cities named "Rochester," where the college was located. The call was coming from the Eastern Time Zone and, hence, an hour early. It was another of my mistakes, and I was most embarrassed because George was there to see it firsthand. I hadn't told him about my other mishaps, but this time he was there to see it. I could no longer hide the ineptitude from him, the same ineptitude, I reasoned, that misloaded the dishwasher, or locked my keys in the car, or nearly blew the house apart. Perhaps the same ineptitude that yelled at his friends or couldn't remember supposedly badmouthing his cousin. Perhaps he was right. Was it all my fault? I left after my interview, and by the time I came back, George was gone.

For three days I wondered what had happened, afraid to call or text George. Finally I composed the following e-mail, including bold-faced type for emphasis, and sent it to him:

*You leaving has rocked me to the core. I know you said we've already tried to fix things, but I didn't understand then the extent of how my jealousy is driving you away. How I expected you to love me in only the way I conceive of as love. Please let me fix that. I know I can. The threat of losing you has awakened me. I'm so sorry, specifically, for my jealousy and insecurity over Steve Mulac, but I know it's more than that. **You should be able to do whatever you want that makes you happy**, and I want to be a part of that. I want you to come back soon, if you want to, so I can begin to show you that I can love you differently. Trust you. Honor your interests. Have your back. One night or more a week you go out with your friends, do whatever until whenever. Feel comfortable texting whoever you want. **You mean too much to me to let you go away without fighting for you.** You really do make me happy. I miss your warmth in bed, and I'm sad I made you feel like you had to leave in order to be fulfilled in your life. I know you need your space right now, and I respect that. Please know that if and when you come back, things will be different. It's not just words this time. I mean it.*

*I am sorry to you, to the cats, to everything that I've lost. I will continue to work with Dr. Linda about this. **Please allow me to earn that love and respect back.** I finally understand what I'm doing and the effect this has on our relationship. **I'm just pissed it took this drastic circumstance (you leaving) to open my eyes.** You mean so much to me, and I see now how much I took you for granted and didn't appreciate enough all the things you do to show me your love. I'm sorry, and hope you will give me another chance so that your love for me may blossom once again.*

His response, in typical George fashion, always less than satisfying:

*Chris,
I just wanted to respond to let you know I have read and received your email.*

But I suppose it was something.

My e-mail makes clear how desperate I was. From the time of my injury to the time I met George, my life was empty. I'd isolated myself and worked too much, all for an uncertain future in academia. I still didn't have a tenure-track job or even my PhD. I never bothered to slow down and understand my body's fatigue as it struggled to process sounds, eliminate background noise, stay balanced, bypass olfactory cues, and tune out the ubiquitous tinnitus. And for what? Soon I'd be a 42 year-old man without a place to live: no money, no job, *and* no romantic relationship. At least I could say I'd been marginally successful with George. I'd made nice with his friends, who included me in their invitations. I'd joined my own volleyball, flag football, and kickball leagues. In each I'd improved drastically from the first week to the last. I became the starting short stop and lead-off hitter in softball. In football I could run and turn my head at the same time, as one must do to follow the ball, and as I had always done without thinking. To keep up with George I needed to step outside my comfort zone and challenge my ruptured body. Perhaps I had done some things right. It seemed foolish to go down without a fight. Manuel would have wanted it that way.

A week later George returned. He took his familiar position on the couch, myself across the room in the cats' favorite chair. I visualized us coming to some sort of understanding through which we might move forward as a couple.

"Listen," he began.

He was unshaven, looked tired, and wore my favorite orange sweatpants. I sat with my arms crossed and legs folded. As I said in the e-mail, I was ready to hear what I needed to do to make this relationship stronger. I'd been tired, too, of all the fighting. I wanted to feel like my boyfriend loved me, not how I'd usually felt, that he tolerated me. I'd spent months licking maple syrup off the bark of my love for him.

Instead George reiterated that this wasn't working. He stated what he said before and little else. His shoulders dropped and his body position became resolute, unyielding on the couch.

I responded in a bevy of promises, as I had in the letter. I, too, wanted to spend time with my friends.

"But you barely have any friends," he interrupted. "My friends are your friends."

I said that wasn't true, that I had my own friends. "I liked doing things with your friends," I reiterated. "We did stuff all the time."

No matter what I said, he wasn't budging. These promises, he said, I'd made them before.

"But that's before I realized—"

"Why should I believe you now?" he said, his demeanor stiff, his body simply going through the motions.

I looked at him and saw a heavy bird who had already taken flight. He said it was against his will, that he had cried all week.

I doubted his sincerity.

“See, that’s what I mean,” he hurried. “You don’t even trust me.”

“I trust you, yes. I trust you. The issue is that you seem more interested in your friends than me.”

He hesitated and leaned back into the couch cushion.

“Maybe you’re right,” he answered. “I want to be myself again.”

“Be yourself?”

He stood up.

“I want to stay up until four in the morning and you not make it a big deal.”

“But you—”

“And so what if I come back buzzed on a Saturday afternoon.”

“Why would I care if—”

“It’s such a chore with you,” he said. “I want to do what I want to do.”

“What are you talking about? We *always* do what you want to do.”

I followed him into the kitchen.

“Do you know how many stupid fucking games I’ve gone to just because you want to go? And how many parties and stuff, just because *you* want to go? I’m behind on my God damn dissertation because I’m so busy doing shit with you all the time.”

“And it shouldn’t be that way.”

“It shouldn’t.”

He opened the refrigerator.

“I need to be by myself.” He closed the door and looked at me, a few feet away from him. “Maybe it’s selfish, but I want to get my life back.”

“Your *life*? What are you talking—”

“That’s it, Chris, I’m done.” I frantically searched my tool chest for some way to articulate my longing.

But he was finished, a window wearing boards.

I said I wouldn’t cry and I didn’t. I returned to the couch and propped half my body on the armrest. George watched the cats anxiously weaving through the peanut-shaped coffee table and both our legs.

“I’ll pay my half of the rent until April,” he said. “You can’t afford the place, can you?”

I looked down at my feet. He knew I couldn’t.

“So you can move out by then, and I’ll move back in and pay until the end of the lease.”

My eyes remained fixed on the floor.

“Like I said before.”

He told me I could have all the furniture.

“But what about the stuff,” I raised my head. “What about the stuff we bought together?”

“I don’t want it.”

“What about—”

“Not even the bed you wanted, that we bought?”

“Especially the bed.”

I asked him about the cats.

He said I could keep them.

“But if you ever want to get rid of them or break them up, let me know, because I want them too.”

I watched the kittens, now cats, we had bought together from the shelter. I remembered last year when Laney had mysteriously gone blind. We noticed two days before Christmas and immediately cancelled our trips to be with her. George blamed me for cleaning the bathroom and leaving the door open.

“She probably licked the bleach,” he said.

He was cold to me for weeks, despite the veterinarian’s insistence that he didn’t know what had happened. Always my fault. Later we discovered that Laney’s body was fighting an imaginary virus, causing her brain to swell and affect her optic nerve. A few weeks on antibiotics and George sent me a video (I was on my delayed Christmas vacation to Florida) of Laney following his belt as he dragged it across the floor. She could see! I’d felt as if we’d survived the tragic illness of a child and our determination and love healed her. I knew that wasn’t the case, but my mind told me so. I wanted the faucet’s drip to transform into a mighty stream of love.

Drip.

Drip.

Drip.

For George, I guess, it never did.

An hour later I’d said all I could. His eyes were furtive and dismissive. I still leaned on the edge of the couch. He had stopped looking at me. He was gone.

Finally I rose and opened my arms.

“Can I have a hug?” I asked.

He rose and walked toward me, opening his arms and leaning into me. After a quick moment, I could feel his body backing up, like Lucky when he doesn’t want to be held. I wore shorts with no underwear, and I felt my penis get hard while hugging him. I was still in love with him.

He must have felt it too.

I backed my head off his shoulder and kissed him, quickly, as I had done so many times before.

He told me I smelled and asked me if I’d showered yet.

“I . . . I . . . it’s only 10, yeah, I showered last night—”

“It’s just gross,” he said, backing away from me.

He went into the bedroom and removed more clothes from the closet, while I quietly reached into the drawer and pulled out another shirt. In the bathroom I covered myself with body spray. I returned to the bedroom and asked if he needed any help.

“Oh,” he said, carrying a pile of clothes still on the hangers into the living room.

“In an interview, if they tell you that they don’t do something, like they did, you shouldn’t go on and on about how you like that thing.”

It was exactly as I had expected, why I insisted George leave the apartment during my other Skype interviews. Now he was telling me what I did wrong.

“I mean, you did great,” he corrected. “I’m sure you got the job.” He dropped the pile of clothes on the kitchen table. “Yeah . . . like you did good and all.”

It was far too late. We were over.

He walked out the door much as he had before, the catch of the brass door jamb clicking like my tongue against the roof of my mouth. I was left like an ant, breathing out the sides of my body and even in the brightest of days seeing not fuchsia or lime, but the saddest shades of gray.

For the next two hours I repeated over and over what I'd done wrong. My letter was so premature and self-deprecating because I thought I was losing the only true friend I had. I looked around the apartment, not knowing what I was going to do. My books! I looked at three separate book shelves scattered around the living room. What was I going to do with all my books? I circled the apartment like Laney around her feeding dish. How would I afford the security deposit on a new apartment? What the fuck was I going to do, drive for Uber? George was right. I had no friends, unlike him. I had no Christina in my life to give me a place to stay. I had no one.

Chapter 8

Or did I? I'd been alone in San Miguel, too, but perhaps not as lonely as I'd thought. I considered calling my friend Jody in Austin. She was a great friend, yet I knew she'd be disappointed with me. She liked George and mentioned how much happier I seemed with him. I wanted to call her, but I felt like I had let her down. And what about Berto? Hadn't he always had my back?

I called my brother-in-law Robert instead.

"Well, Chris," he said. "I'm not surprised." He had met George over Thanksgiving a few months previously.

"You're not?"

"Don't get me wrong, you and he are always welcome to stay here, but—"

"But what?"

"I just don't see you two together."

I wasn't sure what he meant. Was I about to receive another rebuke?

"I tried to fix things," I answered. "I really thought of what I could do to—"

"Oh, I'm sure you did," Robert answered. "I'm sure you did." He voiced sound calm and sincere. He spoke slowly, as if he were thinking.

"But he was just done, you know? Just checked out."

After a short pause, Robert continued. "You are one of the smartest people I know, Chris."

"Really?" I reacted.

"Oh yeah, Chris, completely."

“You think things through and assess your emotions, and check in with yourself to see where you are and everything, and he’s . . .”

“He’s what?” I asked, obviously curious.

“He’s just so *gay*, you know. Leads with his sexuality.”

“Like talking about sex. You guys talked about sex?”

“No.”

“Like in the Corvette, when you were riding to Pearland?”

“No, not that,” he laughed. “It’s hard to describe. He just seems like the type to be like ‘oh, I’m mad at Chris and now it’s over. Oh well.’ Just very matter-of-fact. He’s not going to think things through and see where he’s at. That’s too much for him. Seems a bit immature, really.”

Part of me didn’t want him speaking badly of George. He’d been mature enough to finish college while we were dating, and mature enough to find a good job, even if I were jealous of all the time he’d spend on Facebook or catching up on Netflix when he was supposedly “working from home.” I, meanwhile, had to banish myself to a coffee house to work on my dissertation, manage student work, and invent eye-catching syllabi. Was George right? Did I make him feel bad for being successful?

“I just think you deserve someone as smart and thoughtful and self-aware as you are, Chris. That’s all.”

I had no idea Robert felt that way about me. He acted as if I were the stable one and George the immature twenty-something who couldn’t pull himself away from his friends.

“If your sister had a friend like that guy Steve, no way, un-uh, that’s not cool. Tried to make it seem like it was no big deal.”

Hearing Robert talk raised me from a speck to a smudge. I felt better about myself, even proud of the man I’d become.

“And if you ever need a place to stay,” Robert finished, “our comfy couch is all yours.”

“Yeah,” I heard my sister shout from somewhere near him. “Our *casa* is your *casa*.”

I thanked Robert again and hung up the phone. So much had changed since he plucked me from my hospital room in San Miguel and offered his couch in Houston. Perhaps that imposter had gone.

Then I felt a strange urge to call my younger sister at my father’s house in Florida. I looked down at my black bracelets she had sent for George and me, the first thing she had sent me in twenty years, and hoped she might answer the phone, which she did.

She told me how sorry she was, but she didn’t think it was over.

“Me and Marc, you know, Jack’s dad, we’ve broken up so many times and still get back together.” This is a man, I should point out, who has physically abused her and once mentioned to me in our only conversation that my sister was a prostitute.

“Um, I’m not sure—”

“Trust me,” she shouted into the phone. “It’s not over yet.”

“No, I’m pretty sure it is.”

“No way.” I could hear her shaking her head.

“Yeah, he’s gone.”

“You think that now,” she continued, speaking loud and quickly, “but he’s gonna come back. I left and came back and needed space and left again and he did and left and argued came back did the same still need some space and Jack came over and we’d talk about how it didn’t need to be this way and talk some more and get back together fight and do it again oh he’s coming back. I’m certain.”

She said “I’m certain” so slowly that I almost thought she’d devised her frenetic first part for the sake of contrast. Perhaps she did. But mainly it reminded me of when she was on drugs or the methadone to get off the drugs or anytime around and between that time when her energy was like a rolling tumbleweed and her voice like a seed-shooter. It made no sense pointing out how she was wrong. Maybe she wasn’t. Why couldn’t George and I break up and get back together again like her and Marc? At that moment, though, I had a vision of our break-up as actually a good thing, as would be the break-up of Angie and Marc. Perhaps I was living in a similar dysfunction.

I called Berto, whose first words were that he’d seen in coming and he was surprised I was taking it so hard.

“I thought for sure you were going to leave,” he said. “Especially since it was obvious he wasn’t meeting your needs.”

“But maybe I was expecting him to love me in a way that I love,” I answered, echoing some of the things I’d written to George. “Maybe I needed to let him love me in his way.”

Berto answered quickly: “If you compromise you’re not going to be happy. It’s not even a compromise, Chris. You’d be giving up everything you always wanted in a relationship, right?”

I knew Berto was right, but I didn't want to admit it. It was far too early for that.

Then I called Jody, whose disappointment was obvious, but who shared the heartbreak of her first divorce and the pain after her second husband, Steven, committed suicide two weeks after their divorce was finalized.

"Use this time to work on you," she said. "Appreciate things, but move on. Finish your dissertation. Get a job. Stop worrying about him so much. I like him, but fuck George right now. Really."

Perhaps I had friends after all. The prevailing message, it seemed: move on with your life. Yet I tend to rush things, as George says. Sputter around in careless circles. I composed a message in a card, which I placed lovingly on the kitchen table atop George's mail he'd be picking up on Tuesday while I was away at school. I typed it in my phone, obsessively checking and editing before writing it into the card. At least in a card I couldn't use a bold font. I don't remember, though, if I underlined liberally. In any event, this is what I sent:

Words can't express what you have meant to me the past 3 years. You have touched me more than any person in my life before. I just want to thank you for sharing yourself, your life, your dreams with me. I am sad now, yes, but I am such a better man because of you. You've taught me to relax and enjoy life, smile more, see the positive in things, appreciate friends and silly FB posts. I've watched you finish college and excel at your career, and I couldn't be more proud. You are so special, George. I hope you know that because you are.

I'll miss hearing about your soccer games and Texas volleyball, miss our special TV shows like Scorpion and Stalker, and every time I see The Goldbergs I'll think of you. I'll miss your help on computer stuff, and talking and watching sports with you. I'll miss your love for ceviche. Miss that amazing smile. I'll miss our moments of "sexy time" too, but mostly I'll miss you by my side at night. The special life we shared together. Thank you for bringing so much joy into my life (and two kittens!). I'm a much better person for having known you and loved you, and although I know we will see each other again, I wanted to take this moment to commemorate everything we shared together. You will always have a special place in my heart, George Saldivar. Always!

The problem, however, is I was nowhere near actually feeling such things. The second problem was his response, nowhere near the thoughtful draft I had imagined him tenderly placing inside a card. Instead it was a short text message, composed minutes after he'd read my card:

I also got the card... It made me feel soo special.. Thanks to you as well! I have learned so much from you as well and will remember you for basketball Spurs and GW and every time I watch the challenge or any show hehe.... You are special and a great guy mr. Chris.. Goo Spurs! (Remember it is not the championship game, so if they lose do NOT break the TV!)

His response certainly wasn't enough, but – again – at least it was something. Or maybe it was enough, and I should have been more appreciative. The next day I e-mailed George to ask if perhaps we could go to couples therapy. Two hours later he responded that we should have done that in November, when he insists he brought it up to me. If I didn't listen to him then, he wrote, why should he listen to me now?

I stared at my computer screen in disbelief. Wasn't *I* the one who had brought up couples therapy with Dr. Linda, even though I worried he would think the idea ridiculous? And didn't he roll his eyes and ignore me? Suddenly I became angry. I looked at all my books and mess of an apartment. What about the cats? Would I really get to keep the cats? Did I even want them? I composed an angry mail, let him know that he should have clearly explained how he felt he was losing himself. I would have responded to that. Instead I had to deal with his constant crappy attitude with me, and wonder why he was responding to me that way. He needed to show ME his pros and cons list and see what I say about the cons. I told him he was taking the selfish, easy way out; he owed me more than that after three years. Shame on him. To end I told him to take his fucking full self, fight for it and honor it, but he should have done this with me, not against me.

I didn't reprint the e-mail because it's entirely too long. I see the repetitiveness and lack of organization I often see on my syllabi and in my college classroom. What did he think of my liberal use of the bold font? Would an e-mail like this just confirm my craziness? Was George right to leave when he did?

George never responded to that e-mail, and it's probably better he didn't. Yet despite my anger and momentary haze, I still believe in everything I wrote. I'd found my voice and asserted my self-worth in the letter much as I had while ambling shirtless down the streets of Nuevo Laredo after Martin and Jeff had left me. Some might judge me. Perhaps I wrote too long or repeated the same message over and over, expecting a different result. Perhaps my outbursts had gone too far. Perhaps my obsession with Steve Mulac finally undid me. But how many ways could I continue searching for affection and still end up on the side of the road? A part of me believes I was exactly where I needed to be. Exactly as Manuel had tried to tell me. Besides, what the hell did George know about Oakland University, outside Detroit; perhaps they loved me.

Chapter 9

A few days later I received another manila envelope in the mail from my sister Angie. Inside the envelope were several cards. One, placed and sealed in a green envelop, was directed to me. The cover urged me to have “Happy Thoughts and Happy Days”; inside she’d written that she was thinking of me and she was always here if I need her. She urged me to “take one day at a time.” She wrote that she missed me and loved me, two sentiments I hadn’t heard from her in some time either, although I doubt I said them much myself. The other four cards she’d specifically picked out, she wrote, because I could send them to George as a way of apologizing. Some of the envelopes were even stamped.

For my Soulmate . . .

I Am So Much in Love with You . . .

I Thought of You Today . . .

I Hate it When We Fight . . .

It was an impressive collection. Yet I knew I’d never send the cards. Inside my heart I knew George was through with me. I just didn’t know how I’d be through with him.

Oakland University, it turns out, did *not* love me.

Things continue to fall apart. My laptop busted and now my car. I’d settled into a nice routine, continuing to wake at 5 a.m. to either to do my exercises across the street at the gym or continue my dissertation on my laptop. The cats and I had eased our way into a comfortable rapport, they remaining off the keyboard and snuggled instead in my lap or curled over and around the books and scraps of paper scattered over the desk. The cats, I

realized, I wanted to keep for myself. That was easy. As for the desk and printer, hadn't George said I could keep it all? Apparently he wanted no trace of me. After three-and-a-half years, it's as if I didn't exist.

I panicked the morning my computer failed to turn on. A few hours later a technician confirmed that the hard drive was busted, its microchips and circuit board shaken like salt and pepper.

"Do you remember the computer falling recently?" asked long-haired young man, who seconds before had seemed so sympathetic, so accommodating, so certain he could fix my computer.

"No, um . . ." I stuttered, hesitating around the truth that I'd dropped the computer a few days ago when I was loading it into my backpack.

"I'm not sure if we can save the data," he continued.

"The data?" I answered, then proceeded to repeat those words to myself. "Oh my God," I said loud enough for several workers behind the counter to turn around. "My dissertation."

The technician placed his hands in his pocket and lowered his shoulder, blowing out air slowly enough to convey that he understood my situation

"I'll do everything I can," he said, glancing down. "Everything, Mr. Girman." Then he took my computer and scurried behind a partition, leaving me to wonder what else I might lose this month.

In the meantime I sat on a nearby bench and considered taking my car to the mechanic to replace a faulty bulb that forced my blinker to frenetically click whenever I activated the turn signal. I was in no mood to deal with that noise, and I needed something

to take my mind off the computer. While there I figured I'd ask them to check out why my front tire was wearing out the plastic covering between the tire and the inside front bumper. I assumed this is why my car had started shaking while I turned the wheel.

Once there I spoke with Valentino, whose name was sewn into his jacket as it was on Nurse Garcia's smock, and pointed down at my tire.

Valentino leaned down to inspect the area, returning to his standing position moments later looking like he'd seen a new species of animal.

"Man," he began. "What the hell did you do?" He looked more amused than annoyed, his eyes set wide apart and arching at the brows. His apricot hair curled over around his neck and laughed at me. "Wadya hit?"

"I don't know . . . maybe, um, the potholes, you know—"

"Doubt it's a pothole," he interrupted.

"Or this one—"

"Gonna load it up," he continued, pointing at the work space behind us. "Gonna load it up and see."

He alternated his view between the car and me.

"Maybe I ran over a curb or something," I reasoned, although I knew I'd run over *many* curbs, particularly while trying to parallel park, and just the previous month I'd driven head-on over the low concrete barrier in front of a parking space in an attempt to take the easy way out.

It was, of course, all my fault.

I awaited the bad news in the waiting area.

An hour later Valentino informed me that I'd bent the control arms, strut tower, leaning rod, and a host of other metal parts I'd never heard of. I'd need at least two new tires. He estimated the damage at \$2,000, only a slight bit less than the car was probably worth. I handed Valentino my credit card, unsure if the latest charge would push me over the limit. I stared at the tiny credit card machine, wondering how something so small could make such a difference in my life.

"Don't look so sad," Valentino said while sliding the card through the reader. "It had to be done, you know."

I shook my head.

"With suspension that bad you might not have made it too far," he continued. "You're lucky you found it here and not on the road." He tapped my card on the counter waiting for the machine to run. I, meanwhile, felt like I did when Manuel told me I was *lucky* to have a private room at my private hospital. *Excuse me, Valentino, for my lack of enthusiasm. Excuse me George for feeling angry.* What, exactly, did these people expect me to do?

Eventually the credit card machine printed something that was long enough to be a receipt. Valentino tore off the slip, turned it around, and placed it between us on the counter.

We both laughed at the amount: \$1,666.

"Not a good sign," he said.

"Tell me about it."

"We make our own luck, you know," his voice turning firm and direct.

I placed my hands in my pocket and looked up at Valentino.

“We do,” he continued. “We really do.”

“If that’s the case,” I said, reaching for my receipt. “I better get working.”

Valentino held out his hand, which I gladly took once I’d put the receipt in my pocket, and told me he’d bring my car around to the front. I didn’t mind shaking his hand, despite the cost of the repair, because he was clear what he needed from me. Besides, I’d received no such receipt from George, nor did he offer any sympathy about the breakup as Valentino had about my car. I was left standing at the counter contemplating my luck, the luck I apparently never made.

To make matters worse, the car Valentino pulled around the corner a few minutes later, my black Chevrolet HHR, forward facing and poised to exit, was as dirty as a pig in the mud. I ran my finger over the layer of dust along the car hood. I expected more for \$1,666. Perhaps I’d raised my service standards the same way I raised my expectations for a relationship once I was finally in one. I walked around my vehicle and gave it another look. A year ago I’d scraped the passenger side of my car against a pole in the parking garage at Whole Foods, once again my fault, and I’d been staring at the dent ever since. I felt the ribbed grooves of crushed metal that had sounded like the crush of an aluminum can from inside my car. Suddenly, instantly, inexplicably, I needed to fix that dent. Where was Valentino?

For another \$400 he said he’d fix the dent: “pound it, scrape it, make it look brand new.”

I gave him back my credit card.

I took a bus home and wondered what I might do about my computer. Didn’t I have a dissertation to write? I fumbled through my old wallet and found my Best Buy

credit card. I later I dropped \$700 on a Lenovo Yoga 770 Model, which left room – *this* time – for a full protection plan that I’d renew, the Geek Squad employee insisted, in another two years. She said she didn’t want to see me again, her smile skipping like stone across the archipelago until I caught it with my hand and smiled back. I refuse to see that day as a spending spree with borrowed money, precipitated by my own careless driving and needless haste after class. I look at it, instead, like a sound investment in my future. But I’d have to work quickly. The doctor finally approved my hip surgery, but I’d be having it soon – four weeks later on February 29 – which would give me just enough time for physical therapy before my campus health insurance discontinued, leaving me and my hip, Dr. Marcus pointed out, lonely, pained, and in need of attention.

On top of all that, I needed to be out of my apartment by the first week of April, and I wasn’t sure how to get the money together for a security deposit. Perhaps I really could drive for Uber. I remembered, too, my last conversation with Dr. Marcus, about how I’d need somebody with me for the surgery

“So don’t even *think* about driving yourself home,” he said.

Was he talking about Uber?

“After the surgery.”

“No?”

“You’re going to have to rely on someone,” he continued, opening the door and turning around toward me. “Sooner or later you can’t do everything on your own.”

“But I’m sure I—”

“And this is one of those times,” he interrupted, his voice as firm as Doctor Blue-Eyes in Houston trying to get it through my stubborn head that I’d had a traumatic brain

injury. He left me exposed on the examination table in my paper gown, inexplicably feeling like I'd dodged a bullet, but not sure why.

Later that week I received an e-mail from Nina. She and Dr. Lengenecker had finished evaluating my test results. I certainly could use the good news! If anything was wrong with me, I doubt it had anything to do with Mexico. I had more pressing concerns to worry about. I did wonder, however, why she recommended I schedule "ample time" for our appointment. Was there more finger tapping and another absurdly long post-test? But I liked Nina and didn't mind seeing her again. Perhaps the test could tell me something about my persistent negativity.

First Nina congratulated me on my "superior intellectual ability," as evidenced by my scores on tests of nonverbal and verbal abstract reasoning, inductive and spatial reasoning, and everything to do with verbal fluency. I smiled at her and her sidekick, Dr. Langer. She did note, however, "notable impairments," upon which they wished to elaborate. I rolled my eyes. How could such juvenile and antiquated tests tell me anything about impairment?

I'd performed poorly in three specific areas: manual dexterity and speed, memory, and something called "executive functions." Apparently I'd not done as well as I thought in the Finger Tapping and Grooved Pegboard Test (I now had the official names) – measures of "manual dexterity" – and this helped to explain, I figured, why I often seemed misaligned on the volleyball court or softball field. No one would notice the difference, Nina elaborated, but I'd know immediately if compared to my former, pre-injury self. Still, I had progressed to the starting shortstop and leadoff batter on my softball team and each week I felt more comfortable on the volleyball court. Fuck the clicky finger test!

As for memory, it confirmed what I already knew. Dr. Langer recommended behavior therapy focusing on “skills of attention deployment,” whatever that means. Maybe that’s so I can recognize the categories faster. He compared my memory to that which I must have possessed in law school, surmising (incorrectly!) that earning a law degree implied superior memory techniques of which I no longer possessed. I kept to myself that law school required very little memorization, and instead relied on superior organizational skills, or in my case the ability to choose classes that required final papers and little else. Give me thirty pages, and I’ll give you a masterpiece!

The more intriguing deficiency was in “executive functions,” which includes a set of cognitive processes such as inhibitory control, working memory, and cognitive flexibility, which work together to monitor behavior that facilitates the attainment of chosen goals. On this third category of deficiencies, the suggested treatment targets skills of response modulation, impression management, and emotion regulation, all of which I needed explained to me.

“And you got all of this from those questions at the end?” I asked Nina. “Right?”

“That,” she replied, “and through our conversations with Dr. Linda.”

Response modulation has to do with changing behavior, including speaking behavior, by processing peripheral cues that might let a person know that something might be wrong about what they’re doing or saying. I immediately mentioned my classroom outbursts.

“Exactly,” Nina exclaimed. Next to her Dr. Langer nodded.

Impression management is just like it sounds, the doctor explained, or the process of establishing or maintaining impressions consistent with the perceptions the individual wants to convey. Had George or the interviewers, as I suspected, seen something different in me than I

thought I had conveyed? Yet hadn't I always displayed an incongruent self-presentation? The handsome, yet lonely guy? The consummate scholar who was silently fuming inside?

"How much of this is brain-injury related?" I asked.

Nina responded that she wasn't sure what I meant.

"Well, I mean, can I have some of these things without even being injured?" I clarified.

"Don't other people need impression management, too, the ones I mean that haven't fallen on their heads or whatever."

They both nodded, vigorously, as if to obviate the need for further explanation.

I thought of my hospital stay and how I desperately wanted to control how Manuel may have seen me. This whole book, I realize, is an attempt at impression management. I thought, too, of the other hospital personnel who wanted nothing to do with me. I just couldn't understand what I had done or said to elicit such a response. I explained all of this to Nina.

"That's right," she explained. "That all has to do with impression management."

The same goes, apparently, for emotion regulation, which is a training designed to help initiate or inhibit emotion. I'd have to figure out when a return to the shyness and well-mannered retorts of my youth served me best, or when the best response was a more assertive disposition. I thought of my father sleeping on the floor and Manuel's comparison of him with me on the streets of Latin America. I told the doctors, but particularly Nina, about the night at Lupita's and Paul's house and the totality of my responses concerning Steve Mulac. "So it's my brain?" I asked.

"All we can say is that such behavior is consistent with the type of brain injury you had," Dr. Langer responded.

"But people with no history of brain injury might do the same things?" I asked again.

“Right,” Nina interrupted. “But the key comparison is not between you and other people, but you and yourself, before and after your injury.”

I nodded.

“And the way you described your younger self seems wildly inconsistent with some of the things you shared to Linda, or to us.” She looked toward Dr. Langer. “The way you self described.”

And there it was. My diagnosis hinged on the way I’d conceptualized my younger self. How the hell did I know what I was like?

“In any event,” Dr. Langer continued, “the battery of tests show these specific areas could use some improvement.”

I wasn’t so sure.

“So you can live the best possible life you can. Make it easier to write your books and have a boyfriend.”

Damn him! Now that all made sense.

I folded the ten page report in my back pocket and thanked the two of them for their time.

Nina walked me out of the office, smiling and reminding me about that drink I’d promised, the most impressive thing I’d heard that day.

Chapter 10

After a few days I realized that Nina and Dr. Langer only had my best interest in mind, and I'd certainly not been the first person tested with the same battery of neuropsychological tests. My results and their subsequent recommendations for treatment seemed both sensible and feasible. At the time, though, I still had to worry about who might pick me up from the hospital, and I only had a few weeks to drive with Uber before my surgery in order to make enough money for a security deposit on an new apartment. I sent in the paperwork and registered my car. On the phone I told Angie, who mentioned it to my father. He said I should come home for a visit; it had been at least 3 years. I'll admit that receiving those cards from Angie made me think of what a functional family might look like. That family, however, was not my own. Yet when my dad offered to buy me a ticket to Florida in the brutal heart of the Chicago winter, I giggled sharply and agreed.

At my father's house I watched banana trees breathe like scarecrows against the cedar fence. What looked like dense brown trunks of the banana plant were actually large leaves closely rolled up, one over the other. I dug my thumb nail into the apparent trunk, snagging nail over burlap until I'd scraped enough for my satisfaction. When I imagine Florida, I imagine my father's front patio – about the size of two station wagons side by side – and the Florida foliage I associate with sunnier days. I sat at the patio table, the same patio table we bought together at K-mart when I was 10, while he sprayed the plants with a leaky brown hose. The sides of the table had rusted auburn brown, but the chair

cushions were new, orange stripes beneath a baby blue background. My father said it reminded him of the Florida Gators' colors. I nodded.

My father still lives in the same condominium he moved into after my parent's divorce, except he now owns the place. The petite bougainvillea bushes are petite no more, their scarlet and purple flowers hovering over the fence and into the patio. In the sod along the base of the fence sit two sago palms like dwarfs, their stout and leaning trunks supporting olive-green arms about three to four feet long. I remembered those palms as rosettes of leaves coming from a stem near the ground, so small they were. Like the banana plants, the sago palm is not what it seems; it is not a palm tree, but a cycad, one of the earth's least evolved plants, showing little evolution over millions of years. Yet it had grown so much since while I was away. Only the crocus shrubs remain unchanged, their rubbery leaves broad and buttered yellow, red, and green, low to the ground and kaleidoscopic.

"You know your sister never came back last night," my father said as he wiggled the hose up to reach the furthest cycad.

I looked up from my magazine and met his gaze. The man looked perturbed, the skin around his cheeks sagging and puffy, the loose skin of alcoholics. His eyes, as well, remained fussy and unmoored. I closed the magazine and took a deep breath.

"Do you think she went with—"

"I don't know," he interrupted. "You never know with her."

My father looked warried, as if he had been harmed. I asked him if there's anything I could do.

"If it wasn't for Jack . . ."

“I know.”

“If it wasn’t for him,” he continued, looking at the sliding glass door toward the living room, where Jack lay on the couch watching Dora. “Little Jack.”

Looking at my father, I couldn’t help but think of another image, a mug shot I’d seen on the internet, his face scratched and red, a visible bruise above his left eye. Angie had called to tell me he’d been drinking scotch again and behaving erratically. He’d gotten a DUI, she said, and she had to call the police when he started calling her names and physically threatening her.

“They arrested him,” she told me over the phone, a certain mirth in her voice like a helium balloon. “You can ask Marc.”

Yet the image in the picture was of a man who had been beaten, and while he wore no bruises that day on the patio, I recognized the same look of bewilderment as I had seen in the photo. My sister, too, had been arrested several times, once for an assault charge that Marc, Jack’s father, later dropped and several other times for petty shoplifting. I found out because Marc mentioned it in our only conversation. He told me she was crazy, too. I looked on-line and discovered the arrests, yet I was pleased none of them mentioned prostitution. How could a beautiful little blond-haired girl, the one I prepared for school every morning, feel bad enough to sell her body? And how, I wondered, was her story any different from my own?

But it was.

“If it wasn’t for Jack,” my dad repeated, throwing down the hose, “I’d kick her ass out.”

He stepped over and kicked the hose before retreating through the other sliding door into the kitchen, catching himself on the vertical blinds on the way in. “Jack,” I heard him say, probably the fiftieth time this morning. What could he possibly need to tell the boy now?

I figured Angie wasn’t coming home. The previous afternoon she’d spoken on the phone to Marc in hushed tones, making still her voice when my father or I would approach. My dad must have known, as did I. Later that night, after my father and Jack had gone to bed, I turned from the program Angie and I had been watching on television and asked her if she’d be okay sleeping downstairs on the couch.

“I love it,” she answered. “I can watch TV and . . .” she darted her head around the living room, “. . . get water if I need to,” and, speaking quickly, almost frantically, “go out and smoke, you know, I smoke.” I’d never gotten used to the hyperactive way in which she spoke, a similar pace on, off, and coming down from the pills, cocaine, heroin, methadone, or whatever else she might be using. It angered me that she made me feel so uncomfortable.

I hugged Angie before I went upstairs to bed. She told me she loved me, and that she had a great night together. When I asked if I’d see her in the morning, she answered before I had even stopped talking.

“Of course,” she said, her eyes scurrying to something behind me in the kitchen. “I’ll see you tomorrow.

I retreated downstairs about a half hour later, not to check on her but to retrieve a glass of water. I opened the refrigerator, forgetting that my father did not keep a gallon of

cold water inside, but my annoyance quickly turned into disappointment when I saw Angie fully dressed, shoes on, and favorite olive cargo pants rolled up to her knees.

“Oh, um, uh-huh, just going to a friend’s, you know,” she began from the downstairs bathroom. “She’s got some problems.”

She and I had spent a wonderful evening with Jack at Hooter’s and then at a nearby mall. She declined when I offered to buy her a red blouse she had been admiring on the mannequin. She said maybe for Jack, definitely for Jack, that maybe I could take him to Toys-R-US the next day. But for her, nothing. No, she was fine.

“I’ve got Dad’s credit card,” she laughed, tossing her Starbucks cup into the trash. It wasn’t funny at all, of course, as my dad called every so often to say that Angie had charged hundreds of dollars on his credit card without asking.

“She takes it out of my wallet,” my father told me. “When I’m asleep.”

It made no sense to tell either of them what I was thinking. What use would it be to tell my father to hide his credit card or the keys to his car? What would be the benefit of risking my sister’s angry rebuttal if I urged her not to see Marc? Certain things, I realized, were beyond my control. Perhaps my father felt guilty for neglecting her when she was younger. Perhaps he knew something he wasn’t telling me. As in Mexico, I felt as if I were the last to know. My father told me *she* was the one that attacked him the day he was arrested and thrown in jail. Not the other way around, as she had insisted. His mug shot certainly backed up his truth. And her? Perhaps Marc saw something in her that made her feel special. Perhaps freeing herself from Marc, a fellow addict living in a halfway house, would leave her all alone. Or worse. All alone with my father. Two days of hearing him remind and reprimand Jack, remind and reprimand Angie – remind, reprimand, repeat –

had nearly driven *me* to the brink of explosion. How might it be to live with such a man? I watched him the previous night obsessively scrub the barbeque grill for twenty minutes. He'd asked us how the mushrooms tasted at least five times and explained the cuts of meat as if we'd be given a quiz. Maybe Marc was the least offensive option. Maybe dating him, no matter how dysfunctional, felt as good as I felt while dating George the first couple of years. Perhaps, like me, she'd been alone for far too long. As for my father, maybe he was just a little bit excited to have his only son at home.

I would not ruin our day together by asserting some brotherly privilege long since abandoned. After all, hadn't I left for college at 18 and never turned back, leaving her in the care of two self-absorbed and damaged souls? It was my burden, as much as my father's. Yet out of all of us – mom, dad, Sarah – I was the only one who hadn't turned on her. Perhaps it was easier for me, the one who lived the furthest away, so far I didn't have to live with the chaos and lies associated with drug abuse. I'd never had my car "stolen" and sold for parts, as she'd done to my father's company car, nor did I rescue her in a crack house, as had my older sister, only to watch her check herself out of rehab a few weeks later and return to the same house with the tin-foil covering on the windows. She had never broken into *my* home and stolen thousands of dollars' worth of antiques, as she had done at my mother's and stepfather's mansion in the supposedly unassailable gated community. Perhaps it was easier for me to be the one person who seemed in the middle. All she'd done to me is sell a Bed, Bath, and Beyond gift card I'd gotten her one Christmas for crack cocaine. Or at least that's how my older sister Sarah imagined it.

After my father finished watering the plants, Jack convinced him to take us to the small pool inside the apartment complex. Jack hurried his little feet across parking lot pavement.

Ouchy ouchy ouchy.

My father told Jack he should have worn his flip-flops like he'd asked. He looked at me and shook his head: "As dumb as your uncle Chris."

I, of course, was hopping over parking-lot pavement, as was Jack, the exact opposite of my father leisurely strolling across the pavement with a can of Bud Light.

Jack beat both of us to the gated pool area, pressing his little body against the rails and trying to reach over and open the latch. "Hurry up, guys," he shouted. "I want to get in and play."

I hurried up and let the boy in. Minutes later he'd corralled us into a game of catch the Frisbee, he jumping in and my father and I taking turns tossing the Nerf Frisbee that looked like one of Saturn's rings.

We continued that way for several minutes until Jack turned sullen and curled himself up over a lounge chair

"Come on, Jack" I shouted, not sure what had happened to the boy.

"Jack, Jack," my father echoed. "Let's get the dog."

"No," Jack shouted, his head buried in his hands. "I want mommy."

I looked at my father, who bopped himself up toward the stairs.

"Don't you want to see Marsha's dog?" my father continued. "Big Jake the dog." He turned around and threw the Frisbee back into the pool. "Your sister," he said, turning toward me, then lowering his voice: "Your fucking sister."

My father cradled Jack in a towel and sat on the chair next to him. Jack resisted when my father tried to dry his hair.

“Nooooooooo,” Jack shouted, pushing his hands against my father’s arms. “I want mommy. Mommy said she’d be here.” Jack pushed himself away from my father and ran towards the deep end of the pool. He turned away from us and folded his arms.

“Don’t let your Uncle Chris see you acting like a baby,” my dad shouted toward Jack, his voice no longer self-possessed as I had remembered, its death a small pile of animal meat along the poolside.

“I’m not,” Jack turned around and cried. “She said.”

By now my dad was laughing, and I was left in the pool half covered in water, half covered in air and sadness.

“Quit whining.”

“But she said—”

My father took short, quick strides toward Jack. I thought he might continue yelling, but he stopped himself instead. He turned toward me in the water and then back at Jack. I’m not sure he knew which way to turn. His son and grandson had impossible demands. He was doing the best he could. He took another sip of beer. When he reached Jack, his tone had lightened.

“Let’s go get big Jake,” he said to Jack, his body bent over, his face near the boy. I’d spent the last few moments surveying my father that I was surprised to hear Jack’s subdued, strangely-contented voice agree with my father, a wide grin spreading across the boy’s face. He looked at me and asked if I was coming.

“Well, I wouldn’t miss it,” I said, jumping up in the water and towards the steps.

“Let’s go get big Jake,” my father repeated, his towel now around Jack’s shoulders, the two of them, hand in hand, looking back and waiting for me, Jack’s dark eyes no longer full of tears and my father’s plum eyes licorice wet and pained. Together we unlocked the metal gate from the inside and strode across pavement no longer hot beneath the afternoon clouds, Jack tugging on both our fingers as if he’d never let go.

Angie had not returned by eight o’clock that night, and my father was furious. He reached for the giant plastic Dewers bottle under the sink.

“You know you really shouldn’t leave the bottle,” I began, watching him from the kitchen table. “You shouldn’t leave—”

“Mr. Big Shot lawyer,” my dad interrupted. “Here we go. Now you’re going to tell me what to do?” He clinked his ice around in the frosted pint glass, his third, he’d pulled from the freezer – a fresh glass for each new drink.

I looked at his glass. “Aren’t those for beer?”

His cheeks had become lobster red, his eyes amber and sappy.

“Your fucking sister,” he continued. “What am I supposed to do?” He took his usual tiny steps towards the downstairs bathroom, pressing his drink on the dining room table before unzipping and standing in front of the toilet. His urine hit the water like a fish into sea.

Jack had gotten up from the couch and walked towards my legs. “What am I supposed to do?” the boy mimicked my father, throwing his little hands in the air as if tossing a pizza. “Right, papa?” he continued, peeking out from behind my legs into the bathroom.

My father took his hand off his dick and impersonated his grandson. “That’s right, Jack,” he said, moving his hands up in the air and spreading out his fingers as Jack had done.

I did the same.

So there we were, there generations of men with our hands thrown up in the air.

When he’d finished my father asked if I wanted a sip of scotch. They’d be going to bed soon, he said. I shook my head.

“Suit yourself.” He poured the scotch into the sink. Ice cubes clinked against the sink like maracas.

“I’m tired,” Jack yawned, his hand on his head and looking at my father. He pushed against my father’s legs: “I’m tired, papa.”

“In a min—”

“I want to go to bed now.”

My father dumped the glass in the sink.

“*Now*, papa!”

My father looked at Jack, then rolled his eyes toward me. On his way toward the bathroom he took off his shirt and shorts and placed them inside the washing machine beside the door, leaving himself covered in a pair of old-fashioned white underwear I’d remembered from all those years ago and never wore myself.

He paused in front of the washing machine, contemplating, it seemed, whether or not to begin a load. Jack was halfway up the stairs. I leaned against the kitchen table and stared at my father. What had I seen all those years ago that brought me to my knees on the living room floor? He was old now, his paunchy stomach extending over his belly like a kangaroo. I

pictured him in a belted denim kimono I'd seen at the Gap the previous day with Angie, the length of the kimono barely covering his thighs. The thighs I remembered as strong as porterhouse steaks had shriveled into soggy hash. His chest had deflated, yet instead of hanging down, it dissolved into itself and had lightened compared to his dark arms and lower legs. Perhaps the dark father I remembered was only in my mind, as this man in front of me was lighter than I remembered, his color clearly from the sun.

My father turned on the shower and reached for the water. As he held back the shower curtain, I noticed mold between the shower tiles and a cappuccino-colored stain around the bottom of the tub. The curtain, too, was ripped from several of the top rings and sagged like a sail. This was not my father's bathroom.

"It's a mess," he said, noticing my gaze, and pointing toward a broken toilet seat. "She never cleans." He huffed out his discontent and turned back to me and Jack, who had made his way down the stairs and stood behind me. "Okay, Jack," my father continued. "Uncle Chris is going to get you ready for bed."

Jack placed his tiny hand against my leg and pushed his head into my thigh, spinning his blonde hair over and around my body and back out to the kitchen. He marched in place, emitting tiny spitting sounds from his lips and smiling in between. Inside the bathroom, my father lowered his underwear, stepping out of it and toward the shower, his penis not hard like I remembered, but small, dark, and shriveled. His thighs looked delicate and white, like a table doily, against the nut-brown of his penis and fantastic black of pubic hair. Gone is the man proud of the mound beneath the stretched fabric of "sexy underwear" he'd bought after the divorce. The man who'd parade, nearly nude, around his condominium when it was just the two of us.

“I don’t know when your sister is coming back,” he said, stepping into the water and away from me. He looked so hobbled, so weak, no longer the forty-two year old canvas upon which I anchored my longings.

“And I’m sorry about George,” he said, his words so surprising to me that I made no reaction. He rubbed the bar of soap in his hands and extended his hands to his head, lathering just as I’d remembered as a boy. “That really sucks.”

Twenty-five years had passed. My father is no longer the garbling creek upon which I feast. I have removed him from my face, this crow hovering upon both our naked bodies. As for me, my body is still hard, despite my injured hip, as his used to be. I no longer care what had happened to me on the streets of San Miguel de Allende; so much more had happened before and since. I possess the supple form teenagers imagine as old, but alighted against my father – temple to temple – I know is as far from old as paper is from dust. My father, on the other hand, had never had a girlfriend after the divorce; perhaps his sexual urges had withered as had his body. My imagination, it seems, may not be as reliable as I had thought. Yet in that moment I wanted to lay aside my ladybug shell and join him in the shower. I’d tell him things would be alright. Even we might be alright.

Epilogue

Walking on crutches is harder than I'd imagined, this thrust of furious bone over ice. A student named Juan Carlos told me I was doing it wrong, how I should glide instead of hop. He helped me to lower my crutches and watched me glide away. Another student, this one a stranger from India, took my heavy backpack in her hand and wouldn't let go until I was safely at my destination. My university is full of darker skinned, foreign bodies. They smile so beautifully, gulping down air in perfectly-timed lunges of their throats. I still exist in the thrall of dark-skinned men.

I won't know how successful the surgery went until another few months. My labrum was only frayed, not torn, but Dr. Marcus said shaving down the bone spurs and opening the joint space might relieve some of the pain. That's all I've ever wanted, to relieve some of this pain.

I'm off to Pittsburgh in a couple of weeks, earning after all this time a final campus interview. I'm one of four remaining candidates for a creative nonfiction writing position, and I still have much to do. I'm not sure what was different this time. Were my examples less redundant? Were my answers more concise? Did I more accurately explain my strengths and weaknesses?

True stories well told.

That's how I define creative nonfiction. How true is my story? How well is it told? Is that how I earned a campus visit, because I turned myself into a true story well told?

Others tell me it's just a matter of the right fit. Them into me and me into them. Trading words like special things. There's nothing I could have done, I'm told. Forgive yourself. Move on. Apply all over again.

My father sent me a \$1000 check wrapped in copy paper and folded up in a blank card. On the outside of the card is a cute beagle with its head on the carpet and the words "Thinking of You" sketched above its head. He said to use the money to put down a security deposit on a new apartment. I'll put the check on the refrigerator, where I might forget to cash it, as I've often done with his checks inside Christmas and birthday cards. I don't know what to do with his money. I'd made \$1000 with Uber in the three weeks before my surgery. I'm proud to have been so assertive. Perhaps I will buy myself a gift. I've always wanted a Tempur-pedic mattress. Maybe a sectional couch. My father wants to make sure I've been taken care of, and that means the world to me. It really does.

In a few more weeks I'll defend my dissertation and maybe move on to a tenure-track job. But I'm a realist. Odds are (75%, in fact) I'll be here in Chicago at least another year. They'll call me an adjunct professor or lecturer, and I'll scramble around on Uber for extra cash. First I need a summer job, however, and it might be back to tutoring. Perhaps I can bartend again. It feels so nice to be liked.

I won't know where I'm going to live until I hear back from the university in Pittsburgh. If the answer is "no," I'll scramble to find a year lease somewhere near my current apartment. Or perhaps I'll move to where all the action is, the north side; I can find a roommate and not always be so alone. When my hip heals, I'll join another softball team. I'm considering beach volleyball for the summer. I've almost made it through these tough times, and I think I've fared pretty well. In another two weeks I start group therapy to

work on interpersonal relationships and so-called “problem solving.” I think finishing my dissertation while driving for Uber, managing hip surgery, applying for tenure-track jobs, and looking for an apartment is pretty good problem solving, don’t you?

Thinking through my story is another attempt at problem solving, and it has made me more appreciative. It took five years for me to realize what Manuel had done for me, to understand what he was trying to do in that hospital room. This is the way I choose to remember. It allows me to recognize the moments for what they were, webs of finery upon which I’d been spun. I appreciate, too, my time with George, as I explained to him in the letter – I meant every word of it. I am a better man today because of my time with him yesterday. As for my father and younger sister Angie, I am lucky to have them in my life. I’ve no need to be embarrassed at my actions that night on the living room floor; in some way, my father already understood the direction my life would take. It is, surprisingly, somewhat like his own, this cartography of rupture. Perhaps he, too, can be put back together again.

It felt good when Manuel congratulated me on my sexual exploits. He loved it when I got laid. To him I’d been injured because I was so weak. He wanted to know what had brought me to that position, how I had ended up on my knees. He unwittingly took me back to a place where my self-confidence surged, a side-of the-road fury of teeth and knees. In some ways, however, such self-assurance forced me to forget or abandon how innocent I had been, how earnestly I craved love. I am still innocent and earnest, and for that I am proud. Perhaps I’m not a realist after all.

The story I tell is that I could have only found the attention and affection I craved in Latin America, among Latin American men. I know this isn’t true. What happened,

instead, was a chance encounter on a bus with a girl I never knew. Then I ended up in a place where my masculine disposition and skin color became instant enticements. I enjoyed the desire I provoked in others. But I don't want to travel so far away anymore. Instead I want to pluck a nearby peach, feel the fuzz on my fingertips. Eat the yellow sun.

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